Strange Magic

by DontOffendTheBees

Summary

“Seriously?” he mutters, offering his arm.

“But of course,” says Dirk, looping the silk around it, just above the elbow. “It’s traditional, is it not? A favour for my faithful knight.” He ties the fabric off with a secure but sloppy bow, patting it down proudly. “There we go! For good luck.”

Then he takes a hold of both Theodore’s arms and pulls him firmly, decisively, into a kiss that takes his breath away.

“And that,” says Dirk afterwards, with the gentlest peck to Theodore’s nose. “Is to make sure you come back to me.”

With the freedom to indulge his every whim, the love (or at least toleration) of his subjects, and the affections of the loyal Sir Brotz, it seems the sun shines down upon the its prince’s fortunes. But that’s about to change, an ill-wind blowing in the form of a tournament to decide his future husband. No more childish abandon, no more adventure. And perhaps most
importantly, no more canoodling with his favourite elfin knight. Desperate times like this call for a quest; but will they find a solution, or just more questions they never thought to ask?

In which Dirk is a prince, Todd is his knight, and it may well be the two of them against the whole of Wendimoor.
Prologue

Chapter Notes

IT'S A MEEEEEEE, back with the longest fic (or possibly piece of writing in general) I have EVER written; TA-DAAAAAAAA!!!

I have been working on this since uhhhh March? And not sharing any of it has been *the* biggest struggle- but I think it just may be worth the wait! I know it's long af, but I am... legit proud of this. I poured my blood sweat and tears into it, and I hope you love reading about this world as much as I loved creating it <333

Before I get started, a few thanks: to Kieren, for always being supportive of my writing and enabling my hubris (and contributing a certain idea for a scene involving a meadow and lots of flowers...), to a little fellow in a world for being the *best* beta an overambitious writer could ask for and keeping me sane, and of course, to the strangewhite, for creating a delightfully monstrous Bart piece for this monster of a fic. And as the current sole mod of this event, also big thanks to all you wonderful participants, who have worked hard and supported each other through this process; you guys are the lifeblood of fandom, and the reason I plan to continue running these events for as long as I am able <333

And huuuuuge thanks go finally to you, the reader; while I'm sure many other writers I know will agree that we do this for the fun of doing it and to put the stories that we want to read into the world, all the editing, formatting, and making this shit readable? That is a *real* labour of love, and we do it so others can read and enjoy the ideas we have. And we do it for free and will continue to do so, because we do it out of love; but leave your local fic author a comment today, and you really will make all of the grunt work that goes into preparing a fic for general consumption worthwhile. And myself and my fellow Big Bangers have been pouring our souls into these fics for the last four months, so show some love, y'all!

Anyway, that's about all I've got to bore you with, so. All relevant warnings are in the tags, so if you've made it this far, read on my friends; and like a (hopefully non-creepy) Willy Wonka, allow me to lead you to a world of pure imagination!

Enjoy <333

Other Media for this fic:

The Wonderful Art of the strangewhite <333
Spotify Mix
Pinterest Mood Board

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Once upon a time, in the land of Wendimoor, there was a cliff. A cliff, legend had it, that was fantastically fashioned out of fallen stars. And atop that cliff, hewn into the mighty rock face and standing proud above the land, was a palace of golden stone.
The cliff became known as Star Rock, home to the Starfall Citadel, and it is here that our story begins; or rather, just below here.

You see, at the foot of that mighty monument, softly encircling it in a tender embrace, lies Clifftown. A beautiful settlement, bathed in the light that bounces off the golden bricks and cosmic rubble, blessed with the bounty of a thousand springs. In Clifftown, the people live in peace and plenty under the protection of the sun and the watchful eye of the Moon himself.

Or at least they do generally, until one particular royal gets a ridiculous idea in his head.

On the day our story begins, the townsfolk watch as their peace is shattered by none other than his Royal Highness, Sun Prince and heir to the throne of Starfall Court, Herald of the Cosmic Winds and Defender of Light.

Although he prefers to go by Dirk. That first one's a bit of a mouthful.

On this particular day, his highness does not walk alone. In fact, he does not walk at all- he rides, sat astride the broad back of the stablemaster's prize rhino as she stampedes, stomping a trail of destruction through the peaceful streets. A course of action that confuses her as much as the townsfolk; a hand-reared creature of her pedigree knows better than to make a such scene. But Dirk, it must be said, is not always a good influence. Which isn't to say that he is a bad one, just that he lives rather too chaotically to group his behaviours into either category. Anyone or anything who spent too long in his company was rather liable to forget the intricacies of social living. Just as anyone who had lived in Clifftown for more than a couple of years was liable to forget that princes, generally, did not cause preposterous ruckus in their realms every other day.

The denizens of Clifftown, it must be said, have developed rather a high tolerance for unusual hijinks. Those who had not the stomach for it- and there had been many- packed their bags and departed, for the chances of Prince Dirk growing out of his capricious whimsy are slimmer than a prickle pear needle.

Fortunately for those remaining, the chances of Dirk being left to his chaotic devices unattended are even slimmer.

As the young prince tears a swathe of merry destruction through the town, heads turn to his wake. There, sure enough, they find him; the prince’s elfin knight, his right hand, his moon.

"Sorry!" he cries, mutters, huffs, scampering on the tips of his curlicue boots to catch up to his wild charge. His hurried apologies are a familiar chorus to the townsfolk, an endless ambience to the shenanigans of his prince. Some watch his display of penance on behalf of the royal with disdain, or annoyance. Others with amusement, or even fondness, despite the considerable property damage he chases. And yet more, as always, gaze upon the spectacle with barely curbed intrigue.

Sir Brotz is an enigmatic character, to say the least. Little is known about how he, an elf from the outlands, had come to find himself in the service of the Starfall Court, trusted above all others with the protection of the sun prince. Some say he had simply wandered in from the woods, a young refugee of a desolated home, and been granted sanctuary. Some believe he had been given as a gift by the elf queen herself, as a gesture of goodwill, promised from his earliest youth to be the prince’s protector. The result is the same, however- the elf had grown to manhood alongside the prince, and will likely die beside him, too. It is, after all, the honour and duty of a knight to lay down his life for his lord, and the privilege of one held in such high esteem to stand at his side as confidant and protector as long as one or both might live.

And Sir Brotz is, without a shadow of a doubt, held in the highest esteem by the prince. Too high,
some might even say. Some, but not all. You see, the shortsighted among the people believe that the relationship between the prince and his knight is strictly a professional arrangement. The wiser believe they hold each other in high regard as friends and confidants.

And the wisest—yet, ironically, oft most ridiculed—believe the two have been entangled not only in duty but in heart and soul for years. A partnership of romance as well as fealty, bonded body and mind in secret away from prying eyes of king and country. Clandestine lovers, hiding their relationship in the shadows until such a day as they choose to bring it to the light. Of course, whether such a day exists is another matter entirely; as the cynical often point out, the prince’s family remains rooted in age-old tradition, and will likely never see the heir to the throne married below his station.

Whether one believes in rumours of secret dalliances or not, there is but one thing of which everyone can be certain; that wherever the prince may go, his knight will follow. Always and forever, a tail to his comet. The moon to his sun. To the ends of this world and back.

But to the next world? That, dear reader, remains to be seen.

Chapter End Notes

(The rest of the fic isn't in this style dw, just a prologue- although expect plenty more whimsy, and your old fave characters but not quite how you might remember them!)

Comments are the moon to my sun <333
“You absolute hoopty frood,” Theodore mutters, cussing out his wayward charge with vim as he tows him from the chaos by the front of his shimmering toga. He can feel the tips of his sensitive ears burning with shame under the scrutiny of the rubbernecking townsfolk, gazes amused and judgemental alike tickling the back of his neck. “What kind of cuckoo stunt was that?!”

“I thought it would be fun!” Dirk whines, utterly unrepentant. As always.

Theodore has some choice words to say to that, but the furious yells of old farmer Slarti in the distance tell him it’s a conversation they’ll have to have on the move. “Well, the man who’s darn rhino you swiped doesn’t think so,” he mutters, tightening his fist and picking up his pace. “Let’s go.”

The prince, thankfully, doesn’t question this assessment. He does, however, take issue with Theodore’s method of escort, swatting away his hand in favour of tapping his elbow meaningfully. Theodore acquiesces on instinct, lifting it enough for Dirk to drape his own arm through the crook of his all prim and proper. It’s a far cry from a pleasant amble in the palace gardens when they’re hoofing it from the scene of a crime, but Theodore wouldn’t be much of a knight if he paid no heed to his lord’s fancies.

“In my defence, she looked like she needed a walk,” says Dirk haughtily, his ornate sandals slapping rhythmically on the cobbled pavement. “That enclosure isn’t nearly spacious enough for a lady of her stature.”

“So you broke the fence down?” Theodore snorts, amused despite himself.

“Very easily, with her help. A blatant design flaw.”

Another grunt of laughter escapes him. It halts in its tracks when he realises it is drawing further attention from the general public, and his ears burn anew as he clamps his mouth firmly shut. The reproach is a familiar sensation; the prince’s subjects accuse Theodore of encouraging his escapades, he is well aware of that. They quite simply don’t know Dirk like Theodore does. If they did, they would know the man needs no encouragement whatsoever to run around playing fortune’s fool. Of course, Theodore has grown quite accustomed to their judgement by now. After all, one doesn’t swear one’s life to a noble like the sun prince without being prepared to become accessory to foolishness, even in attempting to put a stop to it. But the practice does little to banish the heat from his cheeks.

“That was… dumb. Even for you,” he says under his breath, soft enough for Dirk’s ears alone. Fool or no, it won’t do to let his disrespectful address go overheard. People will talk. “I thought I’d seen it all, but a rhino rampage-”
“It wasn’t a rampage!” his affronted prince argues. “It was a… vigorous stroll.”

Under the sincerity of his scandalised protest, Theodore cracks. Only for a moment, but the laughter spilling forth is enough to attract the distaste, confusion and intrigue of a nearby cluster of merchants righting their upset carts. Hastily gathering himself, Theodore hurries Dirk along, biting his lip against the giggles threatening to break free.

Meanwhile, seemingly oblivious to their disapproving audience, Dirk has eyes only for Theodore; he watches him with the pleased puzzlement of a bewildered puppy, evidently unaware what he said that was so funny but quite content to reap the benefits. Theodore shakes his head and enlightens him.

“You’re just… so full of baloney,” he says. Even to his own ears it sounds fond.

Dirk tsks, giving Theodore a tug on the elbow. “Todd,” he says, loftily. “That’s hardly any way to address your prince.”

If he’d wanted Theodore to believe he was in trouble, he shouldn’t have used his secret nickname; that name has no place outside their private moments, uttered softly between tender kisses and playful teases, breathed across warm skin and the narrow stretch of a rumpled pillow. No, if his goal was to make Theodore feel ashamed, he failed impressively.

If, however, his goal was to make him blush like a coy carp, then evidence of his success is no doubt written in luminous green all over Theodore’s face.

“No fair,” he grumbles, ducking his head. A difficult task when Dirk is glowing so bright Theodore wants nothing more than to bask in it.

“You love it,” Dirk teases, patting Theodore’s arm and trailing his long fingers down the length, ghosting light and yet unmistakably deliberate over Theodore’s wrist. Unmistakable to them, that is; to any passers by it would appear unconscious and fleeting, innocently devoid of the weight of flirtatious promise it carries.

Dirk is getting far too good at walking that line.

In token protest, Theodore quickens his stride. It doesn’t faze Dirk for long- sadly, his prince has longer legs than he- but Theodore takes petty pleasure in the momentary stumble.

“Hmph. Rude,” Dirk chides, bopping his hand lazily. “It’s unbefitting, you know, such boorishness in a knight of your standing.”

Todd looks at him sideways, raising his eyebrows as he sarcastically parrots: “You love it.”

Dirk doesn’t appear to have an immediate comeback. If Theodore weren’t so preoccupied by the pricking awareness of the unwanted attention of passers by, he’d have found that highly suspicious. As it stands, what follow are a few brief minutes of silence between them, comfortable save for the ever-present mindfulness of onlookers. It’s that mindfulness that keeps him from breaking the silence, from filling it with words or gestures that could invite speculation from the outside. That keeps him from pointing out the turquoise cat he spies in a window to Dirk just to see his face, or twining their fingers and allowing their hands to swing freely between them. But what he can’t have in open conversation or connection, he’ll happily take in quiet companionship. Besides, the sun-drenched streets of Clifftown would possess a certain romance, under the right circumstances. He can’t say for certain that they don’t even under the wrong ones. There’s a certain charm in the peace and quiet.

That is until a short while later, when Dirk hauls him swiftly down a shaded alleyway and pushes
him against the wall. It may be quiet, but it’s far from peaceful; Theodore knows from experience that a racing heart is an inevitability at the wandering hands of Dirk Gently.

“You’re right,” Dirk whispers, hands trailing down Theodore’s leather breastplate and eyes alighting on his lips intently. “I do love it.”

The sun on Theodore’s skin has nothing on Dirk’s lips, burning on his own like embers in the shadows. Day turns to night with the prince’s bright, nimble fingers flitting over his body like fireflies, a second draws out into an eternity and still, still, it’s not long enough. But then, it never is.

“Dirk,” Theodore breathes, turning his head to the mouth of the alley, Dirk’s next kiss falling, thwarted, to his cheek. “Seriously? Here?” It doesn’t come out as annoyed as he’d hoped, but it is an attempt at reason at the very least.

“Why not?” Dirk counters, swooping shamelessly in for another and aiming true this time.

Theodore gives in, of course- but only for a moment, which he’s pretty proud of himself for. “Because,” he says, breathless, hands on Dirk’s slender neck and holding him slightly back. “Someone could see us, dumbo!”

“Hm. Unfortunate,” says Dirk with a shrug and another stolen kiss. “But not a dealbreaker.”

Theodore rolls his eyes, right hand sliding up to tangle in Dirk’s hair; to push him away or pull him closer, he isn’t entirely decided yet. “You’re impossible.”

“Impossible,” says Dirk, smug and silly and shining so brightly he is at risk of waking the sleeping bumblebats in the overhangs. “Or too good to be true?”

“Shut up and kiss me, Your Highness.”

Dirk groans, bestowing a gentle bite on Theodore’s neck. “Unfair,” he mumbles into the crook, tugging aside his emerald tunic to nestle in deeper and decorate the hidden flesh with more visible ‘gifts’. “Who said you could call me that?”

“Technically everyone, My Lord.”

Dirk silences him with a fierce kiss. “Temptress,” he scolds, one hand cupping Theodore’s jaw, the other forearm braced on the wall beside his head. As compromising positions go, it’s pretty up there. And if Theodore were better at his job he’d be putting a stop to it.

“Floozy,” he returns instead, delivering the playful (yet truthful) insult between presses of lips and gasping breaths.

Laughing, bright and warm and still a little raspy from the kissing, Dirk runs his shimmering fingers across Theodore’s cheek. “Oh, Todd- how dull life would be without your impertinent mouth!”

“And how peaceful mine would be,” says Theodore, heat rushing to his ears, Dirk’s glow and gentle teasing warming him to the bone. “Without you there to cause trouble.”

“Please,” Dirk scoffs, hand sliding down to fiddle again with the disheveled collar of Theodore’s tunic. “You’d be bored as can be without me there to keep you on your…”

He closes his fingers in the fabric and tugs, causing Theodore’s back to arch and his heels to lift until he’s standing, precariously balanced between his prince and the coarse clay wall, on the tippy-tips of his toes, the sculpted leather curls of his boots bowing to the pressure.
Dirk smiles, batting his eyelashes oh so coquettishly as Theodore quite literally hangs on his words and his hands.

“Toes,” he breathes.

Darn him to heck.

Theodore surges forward, capturing those teasing lips in his own to a hum of smug satisfaction from Dirk. Oh, he’ll get him back for that later. Mark his words, he’ll give the arrogant flirt a run for his money tonight, when they’re truly alone. But for now he’ll settle for a biting kiss and a few muffled insults.


“Dingus,” Theodore grumbles, pulling his hair.

This time Dirk has no rejoinder save for a chuckle and a sound of pleasure bordering on a purr. Sometimes Theodore thinks he gets off on the argument as much as the intimacy; nothing gets his prince hot and bothered faster than a soft touch and a verbal skirmish.

And nothing frustrates him faster than interruptions.

“Wha-Theodore!”

“Keep up, my lord,” Theodore calls over his shoulder, brushing off his tunic in some semblance of nonchalance as he leaves the spluttering noble in his dust. “Wouldn’t want people to talk.”

He rejoins the main street with a spring in his step, pleasantly surprised that he managed to get his revenge earlier than anticipated. And what’s more, there’s not a thing Dirk can do about it, not publicly. The perfect crime.

Of course, Dirk will do something about it, later on. But that’s a punishment they can both look forward to.

“You, Sir Brotz, are a certified meanie,” Dirk complains over the hasty clap of his sandals as he jogs to catch up. “I’ve half a mind to discharge you from duty.”

“You’ve been saying that for twenty five years,” says Theodore, unimpressed.

“Well, today might be the day!” Dirk insists, even as he’s once again taking Theodore’s arm like the proper little gentleman he pretends to be.

“Doubt it.”

“And why’s that?”

“Because I just saved you from getting thumped by old Slarti,” says Theodore, meeting Dirk’s eyes side-on with an eyebrow raised in challenge. “And because you’re gonna need someone on your side when your father flips out.”

Dirk opens his mouth. Then closes it. He furrows his brow and squints. “...Fair point.”

He sounds so put-upon, so petulant. Theodore doesn’t know if it makes him want to kiss him or kick him. “Hey,” he says, quietly, for discretion’s sake. They have just turned onto Keep Street, and there’s no shortage of lollygaggers loitering for a whiff of royal gossip. “He’s got a right to be worried, you know.”
Dirk scowls, kicking a loose cobblestone— which turns out to be not as loose as advertised and gives him a nasty stub. “Ah, *jiminy*- stop laughing!”

“I’m not!” Theodore laughs.

“Agh, that was an accident— and so was the *thing*, earlier, of course he won’t see it that way. He is—he is utterly ridiculous. I’m not a *child!* I don’t need him looking over my shoulder every time I—”

“Go on a rhino rampage?”

“You keep using that word,” says Dirk, dismissive. “I do not think it means what you think it means.”

“It definitely does. Look, Di-*Your Majesty,*” he corrects, caught by the interested gaze of a passing candy apple seller towing his cart full of ripe, rich treats fresh from the orchard. Any other day Dirk would have insisted on stopping for one; it speaks to his level of distress that he lets the man depart without a second glance. “You’re… you’re his family, you know? He worries about you.” He pauses, watches Dirk’s disinterested face, and takes a gamble. “And… I guess… I worry about you, too.”

He keeps his eyes trained ahead, feigning interest in the cliffside gates and the guards either side. He already knows who is on duty today, but there’s no harm in pretending otherwise. Better than opening himself up to Dirk’s particular brand of intense observation. Sometimes the way the prince looks at him, as if Theodore is a complex equation he’s determined to solve, can feel rather daunting. Even more so when the confusion clears, and he puzzles him out easy as two plus two.

“...Well,” says Dirk, quietly, thumb lightly tracing Theodore’s wrist. Theodore knows that voice well— every happy, bewildered, disbeliefing, *self-satisfied* cadence of it. The voice with too much inside. “I do believe that to be a rather large portion of your job description, Sir Brotz.”

Theodore snorts, lightly hip-checking his prince. “You know what I mean, dufus.”

“I do,” says Dirk, voice so warm it puts his sunlight skin to shame. “Thank you, Todd.”

The tenderness in his voice, the care with which it wraps around that one simple syllable; never in his life has Theodore beheld a sound more beautiful. “Whatever,” he mutters, ears burning in the intimacy of the moment. He clears his throat. “So, uh. Yeah. Cut your dad some slack, I guess.”

“I suppose,” says Dirk, still not sounding happy about it but at the very least displaying a shred of understanding.

Theodore glances at him, smirking. “I’d ask you not to do it again, but I know how far that would get me.”

Dirk beams, literally and figuratively glowing. “You know me so well.”

“Can you at least promise me you’ll take better care of yourself next time?” Theodore tries, half-hearted.

“I hardly see the need,” says Dirk, placing his other hand Theodore’s arm with a little private wink. “I’ve got you to do that for me!”

“I hate you.”
“And I cherish your company,” Dirk responds merrily. “And your commitment to duty. And you enviable capability in the diplomatic arts-”

“You want me to deal with the guards so you don’t have to talk to Hermit, don’t you?”

“Tremendous assisting, Sir Brotz.”

Theodore sighs, a smile tugging at his lips despite his best efforts. “Very well, My Lord.”

“Highly inappropriate, Theodore.”

“Calling you by your proper titles is inappropriate?”

“When you do it? Yes.”

“Deal with it.”

Dirk looks decidedly unhappy about this- or to be more accurate, he looks a little too happy for public decency- but he would just have to keep a lid on it for the sake of the guards; that Hermit is the definition of by-the-book. He probably co-wrote the book. If Theodore can do anything to avoid a lecture, he’ll do it.

And if his promiscuous prince has to do an awkward randy shuffle in front of the churlish old crab, the more so the better.

The journey from the cliffside gates to the citadel itself takes barely ten minutes- fifteen, perhaps, if the wind is high and the terrain treacherous. The king, however, keeps only the most reliable cliff frogs on climbing duty, born and raised in the unforgiving Pop-Rock Swamp, and it takes more than a bit of rain to truly faze the beasts. No, the journey itself can be bumpy, but it is nothing if not swift.

Although sometimes between talking to the guards, getting through the gate and making sure Dirk doesn’t plummet to his death mid-climb, the ascent feels much, much longer than ten minutes.

“You rode a rhino today,” Theodore exclaims, reaching over to fix his prince’s disarranged toga- it is currently leaving very little to the imagination. “How do you still nearly fall off at that last hop every time?”

“Those frogs are very slippery, Theodore,” Dirk defends, fussing with his hair. Much like his toga, it has become bunched and ruffled in interesting ways, and appears to be in the process of absorbing his gilded circlet.

“That’s what the saddles are for, genius,” says Theodore, chuckling. Once the initial terror of seeing his friend and charge nearly plunge from a cliff face has passed, it has its entertainment value.

Dirk pouts, nudging Theodore with his elbow as he straightens the circlet. A relatively modest one today; a delicate golden band, fine metal strands twisted and fashioned into a single sun motif at the centre of his forehead. The prince has more crowns than Theodore has fingers and toes, one for every conceivable occasion. Not that he wears them for the occasions they are intended for, but he supposes that’s pretty harmless as his prince’s quirks go- even if the enormous ceremonial piece does poke people in the eyes at breakfast from time to time.
Even with his present crown set to rights, his hair still looks a bit like a cracklecrow nest, but he seems a little happier for it. “None of this would be a problem if you’d just ride with me, Todd,” he says, voice low but lilting. “Give me something proper to hold on to…”

Theodore blushes and glances furtively aside. Fortunately, the palace halls are deserted at this time of an afternoon, staff bustling about elsewhere in preparation for the evening’s food and entertainment. Their only companions at this moment are the glow worms in the wall sconces, and the faint, mercurial glimmer of Dirk’s glow, playing off the colourful imperfections of the cosmic rock walls either side of the carved-out corridor they traverse. “That’s… not a good idea,” he mumbles, reaching up to fumble with the tip of his pointy ear self-consciously, wondering if he can blame the budding green flush on the sun pouring through the great arched windows.

“People will talk, I know, I know,” Dirk grumbles. “Moon knows Hermit would have a thing or two to say about it, miserable crustacean. I’m sure that man gets crabbier every day.”

“You’d be snippy too, if you were stuck with Newt day in, day out.”

“Oh, don’t be rotten- Newt’s lovely! Bubbly little fellow.”

“And a slippery customer,” mutters Theodore, bitterly. He probably is being too tough on the man- for the most part the amphibious junior guard seems good-natured, if slightly manic on occasion, and never short of a smile. Especially for the prince, despite Hermit’s disapproval. He never fails to get a laugh out of Dirk, or to enthrall him with the iridescent patterns on his well-muscled arms. ...Alright. Perhaps his mistrust was a lot more personal than entirely appropriate.

Dirk eyes him, face splitting into a grin, and Theodore knows he has reached the exact same conclusion. “My, my, Sir Brotz- jealousy is a most ignoble trait.”

“I’m not jealous,” Theodore protests, unconvincing even to himself.

“Are you sure?” says Dirk, flicking a thumb across Theodore’s cheekbone to an answering flood of warmth. “I’d say you’re positively green with it.”

Theodore ducks his head. “Never heard that one before,” he mutters impotently.

Dirk swings his arms above his head in a stretch, humming casually as if to make it plain that no, he is absolutely not puffing out his chest and strutting like a peacock, nor is he putting himself on display for Theodore’s perusal. Perish the thought. “Oh, don’t be embarrassed; it’s a rather charming colour on you.”

“Dirk Gently!”

Both prince and knight all but jump out of their skin, scared straight out of it by the boom of the impatient voice as it echoes off the high stone walls. Dirk gapes towards its origin- namely the great copperwood doors at the end of the hall and the throne room beyond- and then at Theodore in betrayal.

“Theodore!” he whines, wounded. “I can’t believe you tattled on me!”

“When would I have done that?” asks Theodore, offended by the accusation. He may be many things, but a snitch he is not. “It was probably Hermit. Or, I don’t know, one of the hundred other people who saw you take a rhino for a joyride.”

Dirk has the decency to look contrite- if not entirely convinced. “Oh, fudge.”
“Yep.”

“Ooh, he’s definitely not happy with me, is he?”

“You’re so grounded,” Theodore snickers.

“You’re not helping!”

“Wasn’t trying to.”

Dirk groans, running his hands down his face in defeat. “Oh, shoot. Suppose I’d better just get it over and done with, hadn’t I…”

Snorting, Theodore gestures to a vacant guard post by the door. “Well, you know where I’ll be.”

“Aren’t you forgetting something, Sir Brotz?”

Theodore furrows his brow.

Rolling his eyes, the prince tilts his head and taps his cheek with a slender finger. “For luck,” he says sweetly.

Face heating, Theodore glances at the door again; closed thankfully. The other guard post stands occupied by Gino who, true to form, appears to have dozed off against the alcove- taking her position seriously, as always. They are, for the time being, totally unobserved.

Well. It wouldn’t be the most compromising position they’ve been in today.

Deciding ‘what the heck’, Theodore risks it. He rocks up on the balls of his feet and graces Dirk’s cheek with a dry, fleeting kiss. Though an act many would consider perfectly innocent, even chivalrous, he backs away afterwards feeling as he would had he pushed the prince up against the wall and deflowered him right then and there. Far too much has transpired between them, he thinks, far too many illicit trysts, far too much tension of secrecy; no act can be too innocent when every day he starves himself for even a taste. To get such a taste in broad daylight, so close to discovery feels downright voyeuristic.

And if the way Dirk watches his retreat with a twinkle in his darkened eye is any indication, he feels much the same.

Recovering his composure somewhat- it wouldn’t do for a knight of the Starfall Court to be seen looking like he’d just been taken three times in the pantry- Theodore clears his throat, fiddling with the items on his belt. Checking for the presence of his boomerang as if he wasn’t aware of it at all times, as if he hadn’t checked it a mere handful of minutes ago. “So,” he says, finding his footing with raised brows and a gentle tease. “Will that be all, Your Highness?”

Groaning, Dirk’s eyes flutter closed a moment. “Oh, you’re a bad, bad man, Sir Brotz,” he laments, hauling himself away with what appears to be considerable effort on his part.

“Have fun!” Theodore chuckles, treasuring every second of the withering glare and wistful once-over the prince gives him on his way to face the music.

“Stupidhead…” Dirk mumbles, without heat. Giving Theodore one last lingering look- to pass judgment on his knight or to draw strength for himself, Theodore may never know which- as he places his hands on the heavy door, Dirk takes a deep breath, sets his shoulders, and pushes. “Ahoy, father dearest!” he sing-songs, slipping under the arch. “Beautiful day out there- fancy a picnic?”
The rest of his diverting ramble is cut off by ten inches of reinforced copperwood swinging closed over it.

Laughing under his breath, Theodore marches himself to the vacant post, settling himself comfortably in the alcove. Not as comfortably as Gino, perhaps, but he may as well make the best of it. He could be waiting quite some time. Enough time for the king to give Dirk his customary lecture, at any rate. Not that it’ll make a blind bit of difference, as they all know from experience.

But that’s okay. Theodore may give Dirk a hard time about it, and of course he worries, but… it’s Dirk. He is who he is, and he does what he does and truth be told, Theodore wouldn’t have him any other way.

Not that he really has him, anyway.

It leaves a bad taste in his mouth to think on, but it’s a truth he won’t be able to avoid much longer. Dirk isn’t just some ridiculous man he happens to protect and serve, he’s… he’s the sun prince. He’s an only child and heir to the highest court in Wendimoor. One day he’ll have to step up to the plate; be a ruler, a role model, be a king.

Be a husband. To someone who deserves him.

Theodore inhales sharply, trying to settle himself; somewhere along that train of thought he forgot how to breathe.

Mother of pearl, he’s pathetic. He’s gonna have to grow up, lickety split. Dirk is already past thirty, it can only be a matter of time. He’s got to get used to the idea that things will change. This thing that the two of them have, it’s… a placeholder. It’s a way to kill the time, until something real comes along. For Dirk, that is. It’s hard to imagine such a thing happening for the both of them. Theodore worries often that these years with Dirk, these stolen minutes and secret meetings, all these ingenious ways to make the nights fly by… he worries that he’ll look back on them in years to come, when he’s old and gray and standing guard over Dirk and his future husband and new family, and realise these were the best days of his life.

But they’re nothing. In the grand scheme of things, everything they have on the side is just… fun. A little game, and a secret Theodore will have to take to the grave. For Dirk’s honour, as well as his own position. Any husband would be wary if such a dalliance came to light, if Dirk’s most trusted knight turned out to have been more in the past. He couldn’t bear to have aspersions cast on Dirk’s character for keeping him on after the fact; and most of all, he couldn’t bear to be let go. To be discharged, demoted, even exiled, to see Dirk only in passing or, Moon forbid, never again…

No. He’ll be okay with the way things have to be. He will learn to be okay with it. Learn to put memories of what they were in a locked box, learn to throw away the key. Learn to let go of thoughts of Dirk’s lips, his body, his perfect golden heart and those eyes that can make even a nobody like Theodore feel like the most important person in the world. He’ll learn to live with him once more as a master, a prince. Maybe, if he’s very lucky, a friend. They were friends before, long ago before they started growing into themselves, before curiosity and isolation drove them to explore uncharted territories of intimacy together, surely they could be again. They would have to be.

Because if the alternative is to resign his position, to hand off Dirk’s safety to another, to give away the time in his company and watch from afar as he lives a new life without Theodore in it…

Well, not to be dramatic, but he’d rather fall on his own boomerang.

He sighs, glances down. Observes his faint reflection in the gleaming golden tiles.
“You idiot,” he murmurs, closing his eyes and clenching his fist. “You really are a stupidhead…”

Perhaps Dirk’s most marked skill—besides a delightful singing voice and an impeccable sense of style—is that of distraction. He seems to have rather a talent for it. Which is incredibly fortunate, as he seems to also have a talent for attracting ire wherever he goes. He prides himself on being able to take furious or even threatening advances, and turn them to modest irritation or bewilderment. It’s not foolproof, of course, but it tends to buy him the time he needs to scarper to a safe distance. Or, in the case of his darling Todd, to distract him entirely with a kiss or a whispered promise. The key is, quite simply, confidence; launch into unrelated blather with sunny conviction, keep smiling, and one will soon have a rather dazed ex-angry person who’ll be too charmed to strike out, or too thrown to give chase.

“Fancy a picnic? I’ll have Theodore pop down to the kitchens, collect us something refreshing! Ooh, I do believe I spotted Whijo harvesting the bonberries this morning—perhaps some summer fruits, perfect on a day like—”

“Son.”

Dirk halts in his verbal and physical tracks, sandals scuffing on the ornate mosaic floor. Sadly, some people are not so easy to divert. He looks up, eyes wide in affected innocence all the same; he’s nothing if not a trier. “Yes, father?”

Needless the say, the king remains unimpressed, frowning beneath his stately moustache. “Son,” he repeats, and he doesn’t sound angry, just… disappointed. Somehow that’s worse. “A rhino?”

“…She started it?”

“Dirk.”

Dirk flinches, fidgeting in place. He isn’t scared of the man, that would be absurd—as the benevolent king’s son, he’d wanted for nothing his entire life, lovingly raised in the lap of utmost luxury. But even from his position of mutual affection, there was a line one did not cross; and that line was playing dumb to that tone of voice. “…It was just a bit of fun…”

Though a man of stocky build and advancing years, King Rigamarole Blackfeather—Lord of the Sky and Stars, Consul of Constellations—cuts an imposing figure when he rises regally from his ebony throne. Whether through careful cultivation or confidence in his birthright, his presence is undeniable, and his fortitude legendary.

Somehow, the fact that Dirk calls him Riggins and has seen him before his morning jabbajava does little to cramp his style.

“Dirk,” he says, softer this time as he descends from his dais. His black cloak ripples out behind him as he walks, white hot pinpricks of distant light winking out from the folds. “Have you any idea of the ruckus you caused? The people—people you have a responsibility towards—could have been hurt, and so could you.”

“Oh, it wasn’t all that—”
“There’s a reason we keep rhinos in pens, son,” the king says, and though he doesn’t raise his voice it settles heavy as stone on Dirk’s shoulders. “And a reason we don’t ride them around like jumping frogs, at least not without considerable training.”

Sighing thunderously, he steps forward, hands held out to Dirk like olive branches. He places them firm and sure upon Dirk’s upper arms, with a fatherly squeeze of reassurance. “You could have been injured, or worse,” he says quietly, meeting Dirk’s eyes with a steadfastness he has no choice but to return. “And you might not have been the only one.”

“I’m sorry,” says Dirk, with sincerity. He truly hadn’t meant to hurt anyone, or destroy anything. That sort of thing just… tends to happen, around him. “I just… wanted to help her. She looked so bored, so cooped up.” And I know how that feels, he doesn’t add. Now is not the time to get into another quarrel about his father’s curfews.

“Well, I’m sure she’s had more than enough excitement now,” says the king, and though there’s a twinkle of amusement in his eye he seems… tired. “And so have you. I really would rather not bug you with this again, son, but you do have a responsibility to carry yourself with a certain measure of decorum—”

Dirk narrowly refrains from rolling his eyes. Oh, goody. Time for ‘the talk’ again.

“- you are an example to many, and sole heir to this throne, it is vital that you nurture an image of dignity and a relationship of respect with—”

Etcetera, etcetera. Hickory dickory dock, he must have heard this speech over a thousand times. It’s engraved in his memory like a nursery rhyme; he doesn’t even need to listen anymore, he simply tunes it out and occupies his mind with more important musings, making noises of comprehension at the appropriate moments.

“- now is not the time for childish indulgences—”

Hm. Riggins’ moustache looks a tad dishevelled today. Must have been fussing about with it in his worryment.

“-there are people who look up to you, and people who will laugh at you—”

He probably shouldn’t be quite so cavalier about this, he supposes. But they both already know this won’t be the last time they have this discussion, and he must cut corners to save his own sanity somewhere.

“-and it’s not that you shouldn’t be enjoying yourself—”

What he’d really enjoy right now is to go out and collect Theodore, spirit him away somewhere nice and quiet. They have unfinished business to attend to…

“-but there’s a right way—”

He wonders if the mark he left the other night is still there, the blue-green bruise of his teeth on his knight’s pale hip…

“-and a wrong way—”

The one he turned into a smiley face with a few dabs from his quill, while Todd was fast asleep. Wonders if the man’s even taken notice yet- if not, he’ll have a marvelous time pointing it out…
“No one can say that I have not been fair, son, not been patient. But I’m afraid I can no longer turn a blind eye to these antics—”

Perhaps in the armoury, that’s rather close by! Although, rather a spiky place to be… hold on. He hasn’t heard this bit before.

“–something must be done, and I’m afraid you’ve left me little choice; but I assure you it’s for the best. And if you think on it, I believe you’ll see that, too.”

“Um, beg your pardon,” Dirk laughs thinly, trying to keep his attitude light and his tone respectful so as not to jump to conclusions- or give any indication that he hadn’t been listening. “I think I may… may have a spot of stardust in my ear, um. What, pray tell, is this thing that’s ‘for the best’?”

Riggins gives him a look that says he’s utterly unconvinced by Dirk’s excellent acting, and reiterates. “I believe it is time to send word out to the other noble courts of Wendimoor that you are ready to marry.”

“I’m ready to what please thank you?”

The king casts his eyes to the stars as if taking patience from the Moon himself. “I merely think the time has come to stop leaving you to your own devices- clearly you have no idea what to do with yourself.”

“No, father, that’s a bit extreme-!”

“It’s been on my mind for quite some time, son,” he says, squeezing Dirk’s shoulders once more before breaking off to return to his throne. “It’ll be good for you. And you needn’t worry about your tastes not being met- I’ll make it quite clear to our noble peers that they need send only sons, I’m sure the daughters have plentiful other prospects. You’ll have your pick of the finest men in Wendimoor, princes of high esteem and good nature.”

“But I don’t want a prince,” Dirk insists, voice rising in panic. He’s sure his father has only the richest, most handsome men in mind, but that is precious little comfort. “I don’t want to pick the man I marry from your shortlist!”

“Hm. I suppose you are rather indecisive- a tournament, then,” says the king, clicking his fingers to summon a scribe as he sits, missing Dirk’s point altogether. “They can compete for your hand. It’s only good and proper that we find a husband capable of protecting you, after all.”

“No, that isn’t what I-”

“Son,” Riggins cuts in firmly, waving his courier raven to silence as it swoops to a landing on the back of his throne. “I’ve considered this at great length, and my mind has been made up.”

“And what about my decision?” Dirk fumes, light flaring as he takes a challenging step forwards. “Don’t I get any say in this?”

Eyes flooding black, the king raises his hand, banishing the encroaching light with a wave that sends Dirk recoiling.

“You’ve had your say, child,” he intones, clenching both hands on the arms of his throne. “I’ve given you power over your own life and you’ve squandered it on foolishness and chaos. If you cannot take care of yourself, then I must find someone to do it for you.”

Dirk stands silent, frozen in shock. For the first time he feels… cold. He doesn’t have to look down
to know his shine has been tempered, extinguished even by fear and surprise; Riggins may be strict but he’s never raised a hand to him before, never made him feel so small.

They stand at an impasse for what feels like an age, Dirk certain that the sun must be going about its merry turn in the sky and letting days, weeks, months pass them by in this stone crucible. It isn’t until the silence is broken by the whistle of the Forever Train as it chugs through the sky outside that time seems to reassert itself.

The king sighs once more, slumping back in his throne. His eyes flutter closed, and when again they open reveal only the kind brown irises of Dirk’s memory.

“This is what is best for you, son,” he says, weary beyond words. “A loving husband will… calm you. I see you every day, burning brighter. I know you long for more, I know how much you keep inside.”

He looks to Dirk with sadness. “I know how lonely you feel.”

Something catches in Dirk’s throat. “I’m not lonely…”

“You do not have to lie to me, Dirk.”

Dirk frets, conflicted. He wasn’t lying, but to admit so could be to reveal Theodore’s involvement, and that could be catastrophic for the both of them. Besides, loathe as he is to admit it, his father is not wrong. He is lonely, sometimes. Just not in the way the King implies; he wants not for romantic companionship, he has all he could ever need in that regard. Their circumstances may be less than ideal, but he considers himself lucky in love, considers what he has with Sir Brotz to be true, lasting and pure. He has no need of another lover- but, perhaps on occasion, he longs for a friend or two. Though he has the best of friends in the man who holds his heart, it would be nice, he muses, to feel that the two of them were less alone in the world. To have connections, to feel a part of something bigger than themselves.

“You won’t be married to just anyone,” says Riggins into the heavy silence, softly insistent. “Only the best of the best will come close. And the man you marry will love you dearly; he will keep you safe, be a loyal and true companion to you.” He smiles sadly. “You will be happier, son, with a person to call your own.”

But what if I already have one?

He has to bite down the thought but oh, he wants to shout it, wants it to echo to the Moon and back that he, Dirk Gently, is already in love with the most brave, most loyal, most kind and beautiful and grumpy little man there is and that is all there is to it.

That man, however, also happens to be in the employ of the king, trusted with the sacred duty of protecting his beloved son. If Riggins were to make assumptions on the nature of their relationship, if he were to cast judgment, the ramifications for Theodore could be steep. Dismissal, exile- potentially, even death. That’s not generally how the king likes to resolve matters, but there has to be a first time for everything.

Dirk may care little for his own safety at times, but he will protect Theodore’s with everything he has. Even his freedom.

Unable to think of a word to say that implicates neither of them, or a single non-specific argument that he is yet to utilise, Dirk does the only thing one can do when faced with defeat at the hands of a parental figure.
“Dirk? Dirk!”

He goes to his room.

“We will speak more on this tomorrow,” the king calls out, resigned. “But my decision is final.”

Dirk doesn’t need to turn to know that wretched bird is wrenching out one of its inky quills, preparing to take dictation. Preparing to craft the message that will spread throughout Wendimoor in a matter of hours; the message that will decide Dirk’s future for him.

But not if he decides it first.

*Sorry, father,* he says silently, jaw set in grim determination as he feels hot light blooming in his palms. *But I’ll be choosing my husband, thank you very much.*

It’s a reasonable condition, he thinks. And his requirements for such a person are hardly beyond the wit of man. For starters, he’ll *not* be marrying someone he has never met. Or who doesn’t live in this very castle. *Certainly* not someone who isn’t an elf and who’s name doesn’t start with a ‘t’. They’re *specific* requirements, granted, but lucky for him he just so happens to have the perfect candidate in mind. Make no mistake, he has *ideas* about what or, more accurately, *who* his future involves, and this setback simply will *not* do.

Looks like it’s time to take his fate into his own hands.

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Theodore has grown quite accustomed to his prince’s dramatic entrances and exits over the years. He has also come to expect a certain amount of frustration as a result of his meetings with the king; to say father and son don’t always see eye to eye would be a *doozy* of an understatement.

That being said, he has never seen Dirk burst from the throne room with light and ferocity akin to an actual *comet* before now.

“Dirk!” he calls, following in his wake like his very own fiery tail. “Dirk, what’s wrong? What happened?”

“Oh, where do I even *start*?” Dirk exclaims, throwing his hands up in the air. His incandescence flashes off the vaulted ceilings and kaleidoscopic walls like fireworks with the motion. “I said he was ridiculous but this, *oh,* this just takes the flipping *cake!*”

Servants, knights and nobles alike throw themselves aside as the irate prince rockets through the narrow halls like a blazing pinball, all but ricocheting off every twist and turn. Theodore offers a few mumbled apologies, as per usual, but his heart isn’t in it; something is genuinely upsetting Dirk, eating away at him, and until he finds out what it’s hard to muster any interest in inconvenienced aristocrats. “Dirk- what the heck is going on?” It can’t be anything as simple as house arrest- though he has a tendency to go stir crazy, he’s not hard to distract and usually warms to the idea of a week locked inside. If he can hide out in his room and has Theodore there to ‘chaperone’ him, of course. No, this is worse by far; he’s never seen him so wound up, not in all his years of friendship and fealty.

Dirk doesn’t respond beyond another string of curses. Theodore vaguely hears the word ‘bobo’ in
there amongst others of a similar flavour, and though he enjoys listening to his prince swear in that prim, clipped way of his, he can’t imagine storming around the castle with it will do him any favours when he’s already in hot water with the king. “Jeez, Dirk,” he hisses, lunging forward to grab Dirk’s shoulder and draw him to halt. “Inside voice, dufus!”

The prince whips round, catching Theodore’s hand and holding it in front of his chest. “Todd,” he says, nearly firm enough to bely the fear in his eyes. “You trust me, yes?”

“Wha- yes, of course I do,” says Theodore, watching his fingertips green under his lord’s radiant palms, feeling his face warm to match. His prince is running hot, hotter than he’s ever seen him- if it weren’t for the fast absorption of the light into his elfin blood, Dirk’s hands would surely burn like brands on his skin.

“And if you had to choose between me and your duty to my father-”

“Dirk!” Theodore blurs, fidgeting and glancing aside for eavesdroppers. He can’t see anyone, but he’d really rather not have this potentially treasonous conversation in the middle of the corridor. “Oh, my- come on, idiot…”

He ducks his head and walks, dropping his hand to Dirk’s lower back. A familiar gesture, for sure, but easier to pass off as plain old chivalry than outright hand holding. Dirk, thank the Moon, allows himself to be steered- but even through the silk of his toga he is hot to the touch. He’ll probably burn the thing right off if he doesn’t cool down pronto, and then the court will really have something to gossip about.

Thankfully, Dirk makes it to his chambers in silence- and, more importantly, with his clothes intact, although Theodore can see wisps of smoke beginning to rise. As soon as they make it into Dirk’s plush, familiar chambers, Theodore shuts and bolts the door behind them- and then pushes his prince against it.

“Dirk,” he whispers, cupping his cheeks and drawing the dazzling glare into his palms. “I don’t know what this is about, but you already know my answer; you are my responsibility, and my… my friend. And if there’s something that you need, then the king can take a hike.”

Dirk’s aggravation is fading, the corona of heat and light from his body dims to more manageable levels as his big blue eyes take in Theodore’s face, hopeful, trusting. “Promise?”

Theodore’s still not certain how in the heck he came upon that trust, but he is determined to deserve it. “Knight’s honour,” he murmurs, stretching up to press a chaste kiss to his beautiful lord’s parted lips. “I’m yours, Dirk Gently.” In every way, in any way, forever.

Catching his breath, Dirk seizes Theodore’s hand, pressing a kiss of his own to the vivid green of his revitalised palm before clutching it to his chest like a shield. He sighs, a puff of defeated steam slipping from his lips as his head thunks against the door.


“Father dearest,” says Dirk, dry as the Dig ‘Em Desert while he drops Theodore’s hand and side-steps him to get to the bed. “Has decided, in all his ‘infinite wisdom’, that the time has come to marry me off.”

And just like that, Theodore feels like he’s the one who needs grounding against a copperwood door. “What?” he whispers, still turned facing the empty space so his prince won’t see him pale.

“Absurd, yes? Wouldn’t even listen to me, but of course it’s not like I could tell him that-”
But Theodore isn’t listening, not anymore, too caught up in the current of his own cascading thoughts. So. It was happening. He’d known it was coming, of course, been mentally preparing himself all this time, but… he isn’t prepared, not even close. If only he had more warning. If only they had more time.

“Theodore! Do stop dilly dallying and pass me my cloak!”

Theodore snaps himself out of it, though his hands shake on the fine woolen garment as he retrieves it from the ornate- and overburdened- stand by the door. He turns around holding it, and realises belatedly that Dirk has an array of clothes, hair accessories and trinkets scattered across his bed and is in the process of cramming them into a large hinged picnic basket. “What… what are you doing?”

“Packing, obviously- what does it look like I’m doing?” says Dirk, exasperated, throwing no less than three hair brushes into his ‘case’.

“For… what?”

Dirk gives him a withering look, gesturing wildly at the clutter on the bed. “For travelling, of course- I’m not going to find a solution to this by just sitting around in my chambers.”

“A solution?” Theodore mumbles, lost.

“Yes- keep up, Todd,” he says, rolling his eyes and making grabby hands at the cloak. “I’ll not be married off without my say so, thank you very much.”

Theodore laughs, part amused, part some hideous foul-tasting cocktail of bitterness and sorrow as Dirk rips the garment from his hands. “Right, yeah. And, uh, what’s your plan for that?”

“I’m… still working on that bit,” the prince mutters, pulling the cloak over his shoulders and fussing with the clasp. “But there’s got to be someone on this infernal disc who can help me out of this predicament.”

“And if there isn’t?”

Dirk scowls at him. “Excellent attitude, Theodore, tremendously helpful.”

Theodore sighs, running his hands through his hair. “Sorry, sorry. This is just… a lot.”

Though still frantic, Dirk softens a little, rounding the bed to stand at Theodore’s side and take his hand. “You’re telling me,” he says, chuckling sadly and twining their fingers. “And in answer to your question, if no one can help I’ll… run away to the Knick-Knack Highlands. Or go and live in the woods, go off the map, start life anew as a… a uniquely elegant macho lumberman.”

Theodore doesn’t have the heart to tell him that he is too recognisable to go unfound, or that he shines too bright for a retreat to the shadows. “I doubt you could pick up an axe, let alone aim it,” he says instead.

Dirk tsks lightly, flicking a curl from Theodore’s forehead. “Lucky for you, I have more pressing matters than dealing with you and your impudence. Now, help me fasten this; I can’t seem to make head nor tails of this silly clasp.”

Although his hands fly up on his lord’s command, Theodore hesitates in his task. “Wait. What are you putting your cloak on for, it’s high summer out there.” He pauses. “Also, aren’t you basically the sun?”
“I need to go incognito, Theodore,” says Dirk, as if he were explaining his ‘brilliant plan’ to a small child. “I can’t have people recognising me when I’m on the lam!”

“On the- Dirk,” says Theodore flatly, hands on hips. “Are you seriously suggesting we sneak out?”

“I- well-”

“Just so we can go on a crazy wild goose chase all over Wendimoor.”

“It… might not be a wild goose chase…”

“This sounds like exactly the kind of cuckoo-bananas not-plan that’s gonna get us both killed.”

“Well,” mumbles Dirk, squirming. “Technically, it’s only going to get me killed, so-mmf!”

Theodore doesn’t even think about breaking the kiss until he had well and truly shut the royal dufus up. He stays close when he does, hands on his lord’s stupid dumbstruck face and their breath mingling hotly in the space between.

“Like you’re going on this half-baked quest without me,” he murmurs, eyes closed. “Moron.”

Dirk sighs, melting in his hands like candle wax. He laughs- a quiet, relieved little sound- and presses his forehead to Theodore’s. “I, ah. Didn’t want to assume, but… I’m glad. Thank you, Todd…”

If he doesn’t look at him, doesn’t speak, doesn’t think about anything but the points of contact smouldering on his skin or the softness of his Dirk’s voice, it’s almost easy to think that this will work. That they’ll find something compelling enough to put a stop to the king’s matchmaking plans, win back Dirk’s freedom; that they can be together at least a little longer, until Dirk falls for someone all by himself. It’s almost easy to hope, to believe.

Dangerous thing to indulge in, belief. But he never claimed to be anything but a masochistic mess of a person.

“Dirk,” he says, carding fingers through his prince’s soft hair. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Always,” Dirk murmurs, bumping their noses tenderly.

“Why are you packing your getaway kit in a picnic basket?”

Dirk starts, glances at his bed as if he’d quite forgotten what he was trying to do, and laughs breathily. “Oh. Um, well, I’ve not exactly travelled before, suppose I’m a tad ill-equipped.”

“You really haven’t thought this through at all, have you?”

“Nope,” says Dirk, cheerily. “Still tagging along?”

Theodore doesn’t dignify that with a response beyond an uptick of his eyebrows. “Well. You can take out two of those hair brushes for a start,” he instructs, lifting the fancy cloak off the prince’s shoulders. “And there’s no way you’re sneaking out in this; it’s too recognisable.”

“Well, what would you suggest?” asks Dirk, bending over to scoop up the aforementioned brushes and look between the three of them, comically conflicted.

Theodore honestly isn’t sure. He’s not certain Dirk could keep his glow under control long enough to pull off any disguise. Even if he could, there are too many checkpoints between here and freedom, a whole castle and a cliff descent, guards at the gate and the bustling streets of Clifftown. Glow
notwithstanding, there’s no way the two of them could go unrecognised that far, and if they looked
like they were trying to the king would be alerted faster than they could say ‘purple pelipup on a
pogostick’. No, sneaking out wasn’t going to get them anywhere.

He crosses his arms, casts his eyes about the room, and they alight on Dirk’s impractical picnic
basket escape pack.

“I…” he mutters, brow furrowing. “Might have an idea.”

Dirk looks up from his brush dilemma, hopeful as a puppy. It is altogether too cute a look on him,
which Theodore’s train of thought does not need.

“I don’t know how far we’ll get, but it’s our best shot,” says Theodore, dragging the basket closer
and tossing out some of the more frivolous and impractical garments. The last thing this bonkers
quest needs is his preposterous prince treating it like a summer vacation. “We’re gonna sneak out in
plain sight- tomorrow morning I’ll tell the king I’m taking you out for a picnic to lift your spirits.”

“Tomorrow?” exclaims Dirk, taken aback. “Time is of the essence, Theodore!”

“You think you can sneak out in the dark?” he snorts, throwing a stupidly ornate pink toga over the
prince’s head. He shines through the material like a paper lamp. “Sure, let me know how that works
out.”

Dirk snatches the thing out of his face, pouting. “Fine. Tomorrow. But what makes you think father
will even allow that? He might suspect what we’re really up to!”

“Because you’re gonna be so impossible to bear that he’s going to beg me to take you out,” he says,
glancing up at Dirk with a wry smile. “Think you can manage being a whiny brat to everyone for the
next twelve hours?”

Grinning, Dirk tosses the toga over his shoulder like a feather boa and winks. “I think that can be
arranged.”

“Dork,” Theodore laughs. It’s still a dumb idea, and he’s pretty sure they won’t make it past town.
Even if they do, they’ll be back empty handed within the month, and that’s being optimistic- a week
is far more likely.

But whether it’s thirty days or thirty minutes, any more time he can buy with Dirk is worth the risk.

“So,” says Dirk, drawing out the word, stretching out his arms above his head and the toga
between his hands. “Tomorrow, eh?”

Something in his tone of voice tells Theodore that they’re about to get very off-topic. “...Yeah.
What’s your point?”

Humming in patently false nonchalance, Dirk steps forward and brings his arms down on
Theodore’s shoulders, trailing his hands down his chest and looping the soft fabric behind his neck in
the process. “Oh, nothing. But, you know… tomorrow’s a good few hours away, yet, and I’ll have
plenty of time to annoy people over breakfast,” he says suggestively, tugging the loop- and by
extension, Theodore- closer. “How ever will we pass the time?”

“How about packing?” Theodore suggests.

Dirk hums indulgently, and reaches over to pick up one of the hair brushes at random, throw it in the
basket, and slam down the lid with a brittle thwap. “All done! Now, any less boring ideas?”
“Good to see you’re taking this seriously,” Theodore grumbles, smirking and tilting his head back as his incorrigible prince nuzzles in under his jaw.

“Well, you did tell me to be a… what was it again?”

“Okay, okay…”

“I do believe the word *whiny* was used…”

“Just get on with it, dingus.”

Dirk laughs, releasing the fabric in favour of wrapping his arms around Theodore’s waist. “*Now* who’s the brat?”

Theodore can’t be bothered with a comeback; not when there are better things they could be doing with their mouths.

Even if it *is* just passing the time...

Chapter End Notes

Comments are gifts from a courier raven <3
Day Two

Chapter Notes

And the real adventure begins!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Surprisingly enough, they had managed to pack their things with time to spare—even though they wasted much of it on fun distractions. ‘Wasted’ being Theodore’s word, of course; as far as Dirk is concerned, any time used in service of taking his obstinate knight apart piece by piece is time well spent.

Even more surprising, however, was that Theodore’s plan went off without a hitch. Over breakfast, Dirk had taken great pleasure in making an utter nuisance of himself; he’s especially proud of the bit where he complained about the inferiority of joopleberry jam to razzberry and illustrated his point by crying into his toast. Totally improvised, would you believe it! While he was musing on his missed calling to the performing arts, Sir Brotz took the king aside and asked, oh so pragmatically, if he might escort Dirk on a little picnic outing to lift his spirits. Though he insists he did not include the addendum ‘and to get his whiny butt out of your way for a few hours’, Dirk has no doubt that he implied the absolute heck out of it.

But regardless of their underhanded or discourteous means, Dirk and his knight were packed, mounted, and out of the town by noon, the Forever Train whistling overhead as if to bid them good luck on their travels. Shortly thereafter the ride alongside West Comet Creek took them to the Inglenook border forests, which welcomed them into their vibrant fold as the chimney pots of Clifftown faded from view like a dissipating mirage.

“I can’t believe that actually worked,” mutters Theodore, glancing back over his shoulder for the umpteenth time.

“Well I, for one, never doubted us,” Dirk lies, sitting proud atop his steed. Reginald, being a dodo after his own heart, fluffs his well-groomed little wings boastfully, and Dirk gives the curve of his feathered neck an affectionate pat.

“Pants on fire,” says Todd, justly cynical. His own bird— a rather short-tempered thing by the name of Crawley— bristles in agreement.

Dirk gasps in false affront, clutching at the loose neck of his shimmering toga like a string of pearls—though he’s loathe to take fashion advice from Theodore, he did choose one that drapes over both shoulders at his suggestion. It certainly seems a more practical choice for a potentially dangerous journey, as are the leather breeches he wears underneath. Bare legs are probably inadvisable under perilous conditions, no matter how fun it is to tease his knight with them. He did, however, refuse to budge on the sandals; along with one of his smaller, more tasteful circlets, they really complete the look. “Theodore! Would I lie to you?”

“Without hesitation,” Theodore deadpans, with one last cautious look over his shoulder.

“Hmph. Slander.” Dirk sniffs, plucking a low-hanging acorn from a nearby tree and flinging it at Theodore’s head.
Naturally, his knight catches it with ease and a wise-guy smirk. “I’m duty-bound to speak the truth, My Lord.”

Dirk has quite a few responses to that—both the sass and the unfair deployment of the provocative name-calling—but instead finds himself simply watching Theodore. Observing in delighted wonderment as the palm cradling the acorn flushes green, as the seed begins to softly glow at his touch. When the first fine shoot begins to break free from the shell, Theodore reaches out and drops it into the undergrowth to take root. There’ll be a sapling springing forth from the neednettle patch before the day is out.

Dirk smiles, reining in Reginald to fall into step beside Theodore and his steed. “Having fun?”

Theodore ducks his head bashfully. Even the simple act of channeling his natural magic has smoothed away some of the tension from his features. “It’s good to be outside,” he mumbles, fingers trailing over the coarse trunk of a pricklepine as he passes.

Hanging back to follow his example, Dirk barely feels the bark under the soft moss that sprang to life at the elf’s touch. “It’s good to see you outside,” he agrees softly, a small knot of guilt in his stomach. “I know the palace gardens are rather small once you get used to them…”

“Not like I have time for them anyway,” says Theodore, smiling crookedly over his shoulder. “Someone’s got to keep you entertained.”

“Which you do a stupendous job of, I might add,” Dirk returns with a bat of his eyelashes. “Last night was most diverting…”

Theodore scoffs. “Not everything I say is meant insinuate stuff, you know.”

“If the shoe fits,” says Dirk airily. It’s true, of course, that when it comes to behaving, Theodore is rather more patient than himself—a fact they’ve put to good use in many a fun and steamy context. But if they must be on their best behavior in public, Dirk will take what he can; and a gorgeous green blush in response to a cheeky allusion is about as good as it gets under such restrictions.

Although thinking about it, he’s not certain that riding through an uninhabited stretch of wood precisely counts as in public…

“Theodore,” he sing-songs, drawing Reginald to a halt. “Might I borrow you a moment?”

Frowning in confusion, Theodore also slows to a stop—and then dismounts with a groan when he notices Dirk drop to the forest floor. “Great. Guess I’m gonna have to give you a boost back onto him no-”

Dirk silences his complaints with a kiss—the good, deep, messy kind that they can indulge in when they’re alone. He tangles his fingers in his knight’s soft, wavy hair, tugging insistently in the way that never fails to make Theodore moan. It is still, he happily observes, one hundred percent effective, and he greedily swallows down the sound.

“Dirk,” Theodore rasps, scarcely slowing enough to get the word out.

“Todd,” Dirk replies cheekily, reveling in the full-body shudder the name elicits.

“We-we shouldn’t do this,” Theodore murmurs between kisses, though he sounds annoyed with himself for even saying it. “Anyone could see us…”

“Who?” says Dirk, running a hand down Theodore’s back to settle on his hip. “There’s not a soul for
miles, worrywart…”

“As far as we know,” counters Theodore, pushing Dirk away lightly with both hands on his chest. “We have no idea who might be lurking round here.”

“It’s not the first time,” Dirk teases, nuzzling his nose playfully. “A certain meadow springs to mind…”

“That- that’s different. We- I did p-perimeter checks, and-”

“And we did a lot more than just kiss, if you recall.” Sighing, Dirk drops his head to Theodore’s shoulder and nips gently at his neck. “But I’ll check again, shall I? Wouldn’t want you to get a fright, little rabbit.”

Theodore gives him a shove, glaring in that way that generally means he’s titillated and cross about it. “Jerk.”

“There you go, mispronouncing my name again,” Dirk sighs, leaning back to give the surrounding woods a cursory glance for their peace of mind. “I really would have thought you’d have got the hang of it by…”

He trails off, prickling with unease. Is it his imagination, or were those twirlyblooms facing in different directions before? Now they’re all standing to attention, and facing right their way. And it seems they’re not the only ones. Every nearby plant with an ounce of flexibility, from the fickleferns at their feet to the slender hanging branches of the whistling willow up ahead, seem to be bowing towards them as if in anticipation. Or observation.

“Todd,” says Dirk in hushed tones, gripping his knight’s waist. “Don’t be alarmed, but I think we’re being watched.”


Hand going to his belt and boomerang, Theodore slowly glances from side to side. Apparently seeing nothing untoward, he turns to look to his rear- towards Reginald and Crawley where they’re badgering an ambling teatoise- and then, moments later, back to Dirk in confusion. “The birds?”

Dirk rolls his eyes. Honestly, his darling knight can be unobservant as a brick when it suits him. “Them!” he reiterates, waving his hands all around because it’s tricky to choose a target when they’re literally surrounded. “The plants!”

Theodore gives him a look that says ‘you’re a buffoon’ and, with characteristic flatness, mutters: “Seriously?”

“What?” asks Dirk, wounded. “You should never underestimate a plant, Theodore- I hear the ones in the Knick-Knack Highlands eat people!”

His knight only snorts in amusement and takes his hand. “Okay. Okay, look…”

“What are you- Theodore!”

Dirk struggles, screwing his eyes shut as Theodore drags him left a few paces and guides his hand towards the twirlybloom bed. “Theodore! They might bite me! Or, or drag me in with their stems and
“They’re not going to do anything like that, dufus,” Theodore chuckles, holding Dirk’s hand just above the nearest flower. “Look.”

Dirk peeks out through one eye, regarding the plant with suspicion. He notices now that its trapezoid petals are spinning faster, delicately thwipping through the air, his light casting rippling patterns as it bounces off their iridescent sheen. He opens both eyes and watches, hypnotised, as the other flowers turn towards his hand to bask in the glow in a whirling riot of colour.

“See?” says Theodore, softly. “They just like the sunlight.”

Blinking, Dirk pulls his gaze from the mesmerising flowers to watch Theodore’s hand as it carefully holds him in place. Watches the even more mesmerising sight of his knight’s calloused fingertips going green at their points of contact. “Seems they’re not the only ones,” he murmurs, pulling his wrist free to lace their fingers properly.

When the green spreads to Theodore’s cheeks, Dirk simply has to kiss him. And this time, safe in his own appraisal and softened by the tender moment, Theodore melts into the embrace without comment or complaint.

Sighing into the kiss, Dirk enfolds his diminutive knight in his arms, hand cupped at the nape of his neck and teasing at the flyaway strands at his hairline. Oh, how he loves Theodore like this- open, demonstrative, every prickly barrier dropped. He could never find adequate words to describe him; his care, his devotion, his warmth. And what’s more, no one would believe him if he did. Who would believe that the grumpy, gloomy, cuddly-as-a-cactus elf could be capable of such sentiment? He can scarcely believe it himself- and he has the benefit of first-hand experience and a lifelong friendship. But perhaps that’s good. Though it feels a crass thing to admit, he likes that he is the only one who gets to see this side of him. Likes being the sole recipient of his affection, his trust. He likes feeling that a piece of Theodore belongs to him, just as he knows a piece of himself- his entire heart, in fact- belongs to Theodore. His knight, his friend, his love. His Todd.

How could he ever let this go? How could he ever live without it?

With a bit of luck, he’ll never have to find out.

“Todd,” he breathes, squeezing every ounce of reverence, every bubble of joy fizzing up inside into that simple, beautiful syllable. “I-”

Which is about as far as he gets before something large and squawky barrels into him with considerable momentum.

“Aah!” Dirk yelps, hands ripped from Theodore as he goes down under the force. The thing, whatever it is, flumps down on top of Dirk heavily, pinning him at the chest with his back to the ground and his dazed eyes to the sky.

He hears Theodore calling his name, hears the familiar wooden snick of a boomerang sliding from its sheath, the squawks and flaps of distressed riding fowl. And on top of all that, louder and more immediate, another voice; a raspy, wild voice, crooning half-intelligible babble in his ear, vaguely recognisable words and phrases, the most frequent of which being:

“Shinnee!”

Dirk blinks a few times, clearing the stars from his vision just in time to see something rise up in front of his face, eclipsing the cloudy grey sky through the forest canopy.
“Booty!” the creature crows, curious ridged face bobbing and weaving across his line of sight. Every strange bump and pattern, every daub of charcoal black tint framing wide eyes of kaleidoscopic colour is illuminated in Dirk’s own glow—right down to the individual matts in the figure’s multicoloured hair. “Booty boy!”

“Um,” he mumbles, decidedly wrong-footed by this turn of events. “Can I help you?”

“Dirk!”

Turning his head, Dirk catches a glimpse of weak sunlight on polished wood and spies Todd just beneath, braced and ready to fling the lethally gleaming boomerang at the slightest provocation. Eyes widening, Dirk shakes his head—despite the unorthodox introduction, he can’t help but feel the creature means no harm. “No, no, Theodore, it’s quite alright, I think—” he looks it up and down, and takes a guess—“she…? I think she means well. I’m fine!”

Theodore appears unconvinced, but makes the concession of lowering his weapon slightly. “O-okay…”

Peering up at his enthusiastic assailant, Dirk feels a twinge of vague recognition. He has to wrack his brains for the source, but the memory begins to vaguely resurface; memories of an old book, an educational one with uninspiring prose and fascinating pictures. “Oh! You’re a… Theodore, help, rambling forest species, begins with ‘b’?”

His knight, evidently recalling the material with far more accuracy, nods in agreement. “A boogle.”

“Yis!” the boogle concurs, bouncing. Dirk winces—she’s putting rather a lot of weight on his ribs, actually. “Beast,” she says, thumping her own chest twice before extending one grubby finger to prod into Dirk’s. “An’… Bibbit.”

“Um… it’s Dirk, actually.”

The boogle named Beast frowns, nose wrinkling. “Bibbit betta. Pretty.” She lifts that finger again and, with utmost deliberation, boops his nose. “Cyuute.

“Ah. Well, Dirk is what’s engraved on all the busts, so…” he chuckles nervously, wiggling a little. “Bit stuck with it. And quite fond of it, if I’m honest. Um, not to be rude, but would you mind awfully if I asked you to… unhand me, so to speak? This is very fine silk we’re rubbing on the ground. And breathing is a bit of a bother, presently, ah…”

Beast makes an incomprehensible noise, and then all of a sudden Dirk has unrestricted airflow to his lungs once more. He gulps some down and sits up, rubbing his ribs ruefully. This is a meeting that will leave its mark; but in fairness, he can’t fault her enthusiasm. “Thank you,” he says politely.

Now crouched before him, furry boots buried in the cogver bed, Beast gives him a wide, yellow-toothed grin. “Happy? Bibbit happy?”

“Quite, thank you!” He looks up to Theodore, smiling and beckoning. “Todd! Stop standing around like a lemon and say hello!”

Theodore approaches warily, boomerang still not entirely holstered. “Uh. Hi.” He carefully sidesteps their new friend and reaches out to give Dirk a hand up.

Beast, however, seems disinterested in the knight—her attention is riveted on Dirk. “Shinnee!” she reiterates, reaching out to pet his bare arm fondly. “Shinnee boy! Booty boy!”
“Huh,” says Theodore, apparently at ease now. “Those plants really aren’t the only ones who like it.”

“I’m sure it’s at least partially my effervescent personality,” says Dirk, heaving himself to his feet on Theodore’s proffered hand. “Ah, thank you, Todd.”

The crouching boogle watches him rise, still delightedly mesmerised. “Booty boy,” she cooes, lurching closer to rub against his leather-clad legs like a large, amorous cat. “You wan’ be my boyfren, Bibbit? We live in woods, I brin’ you yums and watch you grow old…”

“Ah. Right. Coming on a tad strong perhaps, dear Beast,” says Dirk, looking in betrayal at Theodore- who has passed the point of wariness and hurtled headlong into barely restrained mirth.

“Ahh, strong,” she repeats, bobbing up to give Dirk’s bicep a squeeze. “Yis, strong Bibbit- build house!” She stretches to her full height, almost reaching his face as she grins right into it. “House for Bibbit an’ me! Tree house, way from bad ‘uns. House with… jakoozi!”

Theodore, hand pressed over his mouth against his rising laughter, nearly crumples. In fact, on this particular occasion he’s being about as unhelpful as elfly possibly.

Dirk rolls his eyes. “Right, yes, that isn’t quite what I… oh, leaping lizards, look, as um… flattered as I am, I’m afraid it’s not possible for me to be your ‘boyfriend’ at this point in time.”

She looks up at him, lips pursed in a disappointed pout. “Bibbit no like me?”

Dirk softens immediately under the sad regard of those big rainbow eyes. “Oh, no, darling, that’s not it at all, I do like you, you seem lovely! It’s just that…” He glances sideways at Theodore, and decides he’ll bally well make him helpful. “I’m already spoken for!” he says, wrapping his arm around his knight’s waist and holding him tight against his side. “See?” He pops a kiss to Theodore’s forehead for good measure. “Off the market!”

“Oooh,” Beast croons, nodding sagely. “Boy belong te Booty Boy…”

Theodore, of course, takes immediate issue with that phrasing. “Hey, I don’t belong to any-!”

“Yes! My boy,” Dirk agrees, cupping Theodore’s irate little face in his hand. “And he gets ever so jealous, so I’m afraid it’s simply not to be, my dear.”

“It’s oookay,” she says, giving his arm two friendly- yet painful- thumps. “Bibbit be happy.”

He smiles, patting her fur-clad shoulder softly in return. “Bibbit very happy, thank you. But we simply must be on our way. It was lovely to meet you, though!”

“Lo-luhyah,” she attempts, grinning proudly. “Luhyah! I luhyah!” She nips up on her tiptoes to pop a quick, friendly kiss to his cheek. “I luhyah foreevah, Bibbit!”

“Likewise,” he chuckles, briefly petting her tangled hair. “Bye bye, Beastie!”

“Bye bye, Booty Boy!” she says, scampering back a few steps and giving Theodore a decidedly heavier stare. “Be good te shinnee,” she rasps, baring her teeth threateningly.

Theodore, suitably scared and embarrassed out of his mirth, nods. “Uh- yeah. Yeah, I will.”

She returns the nod with one of her own, coupled with an intimidating squint and a motion of two crooked fingers that says ‘I’m watching you’. Dirk glances at Theodore, smug.
By the time he looks back, the boogle has already disappeared into the shadows of the woods.

“Well,” says Dirk lightly, patting Theodore’s side. “That was… interesting.”

His knight gives him a long, withering look. “Why do you always attract the fruity ones?”

“Present company included?” Dirk teases, bestowing a little kiss on Theodore’s nose. “Obviously I’m just approachable- unlike some.”

“If being ‘approachable’ gets you tackled by wackos in the woods, you can keep it,” says Theodore, extricating himself from Dirk’s restraining arm. “C’mon, we should get moving, I want us to get someplace safe by night-fudge!”

Dirk jumps, blinking in shock at his tiny explosive knight. “Beg pardon?”

Theodore grabs his shoulders, spinning him round to face their birds- or rather, the place their birds were. Now all that greets him is an empty patch of trampled cogvers, their interlocking leaves squished into soup by anxious claws. Beyond that, not a trace- those creatures can be fast when frightened, and surprisingly light on their feet.

“Oh, shoot,” Dirk curses, hands on his hips. “Reginald had my picnic basket…”

“And my bow,” says Theodore, fists clenching at his sides.

“Oh, I’m sure it’ll be fine- you’re quite handy with that boomerang,” says Dirk absently, peering into the gloom. “Anyway, they might come back! Reginald! Crawley!”

“I’m so stupid,” Theodore mutters. “So frogging stupid, I should have tied them up, or watched them closer or-”

“Now, Todd, that hardly seems… Todd?”


“Todd,” he tries gently. No results, save for a slight widening of his knight’s blindly staring eyes. Oh, dear.

Dirk, cursing quietly, steps in and gathers Theodore to his chest, rubbing his back. They’ve been known to afflict Theodore on occasion, these little episodes. It’s not serious, they don’t think- the court physician certainly never ruled him unfit for duty. But he never found an exact cause, either, so it is quite simply a thing Theodore must live with. Of course, Dirk eases his burden when he can.

“Oh, Todd,” he murmurs, kissing his little tousled head. “It’s alright. You’re safe; I’ve got you.”

For a minute or two Theodore stands in his embrace, stiff as a stone and nearly as cold. But he comes back to himself by degrees, shaking hands slowly tangling in Dirk’s toga and breath escaping in one long, ragged sigh.

“Hello, stranger,” says Dirk, soft as can be.

“Did I…?”

“Yes. For a few minutes. That was a long one- are you alright?”

“Yeah,” Theodore murmurs, squeezing Dirk’s sides before slowly releasing him.
Dirk, however, resists his escape attempt. “Ah-ah. You’ve just taken a bit of a turn, Sir Brotz- only right and proper that I escort you.”

“I don’t need *escorting* anywhere-!”

“Prince’s orders,” Dirk sniffs. But he releases Theodore’s waist in favour of taking his hand; far more practical. “Besides, we’ve a long walk ahead of us.”

Theodore groans. “Oh, *drat-* the birds…”

“Let’s not start that again- I’m sure we’ll manage tremendously without!”

“So we’ve got to do the rest of this phoney-baloney quest on foot?” Theodore snorts, shaking his head. “Good start.”

“Oh, it’s not so bad,” says Dirk, swinging their joined hands between them. “Nothing quite like a romantic stroll in the woods. And it’s a lovely day for it!”

Theodore peers up through the forest canopy, brow furrowing; no doubt finding it as bleak and grey as Dirk had from beneath an enthusiastic boogle. “Well,” his knight mumbles, tracing his thumb over Dirk’s luminous skin and watching the golden patterns it paints over their surroundings. “I guess down here it is.”

“That’s the spirit!” says Dirk brightly. “With that attitude, we’ll get there in no time!”

“I don’t even know where *there* is,” Theodore complains. “You haven’t told me a thing about this miraculous quest I’m supposedly assisting you on.”

“And yet here you are anyway,” says Dirk anyway, proud and fond.

Theodore rolls his eyes. “Of course I am, stupidhead. I’m just saying, it would be nice to know where we’re going. That is, if you know where we’re going.”

Normally the answer to such a query would be a cheerful and resounding *no*. On this occasion, however, Dirk *does* in fact have an inkling. “Well, I’ve heard stories about about someone; she’s supposed to be very powerful, very wise. Wakti Wapsomethingorother- a witchykookoo. People seem to believe she resides somewhere in the Inglenook forests, on the other side of the lake.”

“A witch? Seriously?” says Theodore, brow furrowing. “You’re really going to try and, what, _magic_ yourself out of this?”

“If needs be, yes,” says Dirk simply, squeezing his hand. “And I don’t see _you_ coming up with any cunning plans.”

Theodore sighs, eyes turning moonward. “Fine,” he mutters, bending down. When he pops back up he’s holding Dirk’s circlet in his hands, having retrieved it from the undergrowth. “But don’t get your hopes up; problems don’t go away just ‘cause you wave a wand at them.”

Patting down his hair with a small exclamation, Dirk hastily grabs the wayward accessory- he hadn’t even noticed! That could have been embarrassing. “*That you know of,*” says Dirk under his breath, smoothing his hair and the circlet back into place. At Theodore’s pointed looks he simply beams, abandoning his own hair to smooth out his pessimistic knight’s wrinkled brows with his thumb. “Either way, let’s just enjoy the walk, shall we? Isn’t it nice to get some fresh air, cough up the stardust once in a while…”
To his relief and delight, Theodore does not take long to succumb to pleasant conversation. It begins with a smile at Dirk’s turn of phrase, then an anecdote or two. Before the hour is up his darling knight is right there with him, bright and happy and so heartwarmingly *home* in their vibrant surroundings it is all Dirk can do to resist kissing him every thirty seconds. Maybe one day, when time is a non-issue and urgency a thing of the past, they’ll be able to while away days, *weeks* in the woods if they so choose. Maybe one day; on that beautiful, magical day in the future that this entire quest, that Dirk’s entire *life* is in service to.

Maybe one day, they will stop living for *one days*.

But for now it is enough just to see Theodore happy, smiling, comfortable. It’s enough to take his hand, to make the most of the solitude. To be alone, together. Enough to soothe the soul. Almost enough, in fact, to make one forget about the cause and purpose and stakes of this excursion altogether.

*Almost.*

The Starfall Citadel is truly magnificent to behold; carved by master stoneworkers into the very cliff itself, it stands proud and unshakable atop the craggy cosmic cascade, fused geometric boulders upholding it to the heavens. The inside, too, is a work of art in of itself. Though the excavated corridors are narrow, they tower above all who have the honour of traversing them, arched like the rising sun and braced upon an intricate latticework of gleaming copperwood struts. Some say the patterns tell the story of the kingdom in a language long since dead; that if one were to follow the pathways correctly, one might read of the root of civilisation in Wendimoor and even follow through to the end of it all, the destiny of the land as told by the stars generations ago. It is a shrine to the past and a monument to the future, its very walls gleaming with the cosmic majesty of its creation, its very floors paved in rich history.

Suffice it to say, it does little to calm Silas Dengdamor’s nerves.

Rounding another corner, he bites his tongue in frustration as he spies yet another portrait he’s already passed. Whoever designed the alleged writing in the rafters should have included a map instead; these winding warrens have been taking him in circles for a good hour or more. He doesn’t know whether he wants to curse or cry.

...Who is he kidding. He’s a crier, through-and-through.

Fast approaching the point of desperation, he embarks once more down the hallway past the painting, hoping against hope that he might spot some sneaky hidden passageway that will take him straight to his destination. Truth be told, he hadn’t wanted to set foot in this palace in the first place—even its silhouette was intimidating. But, seeing as he was visiting the kingdom on royal business, he had thought it only right that he announce himself properly to the king.

And even if he hadn’t, he is under *very* strict orders to that effect.

*“Formal introductions, Silas. Politeness and decorum always, but for Pete’s sake be bold.
Confidence above all else- you are there to win, not to simply participate.”*  

Silas gulps, worrying the hem of his glove. How he is supposed to muster a modicum of confidence
under the weight of such uncaring ancient stone is anyone’s guess. Frankly, this whole ordeal seems like a fool’s errand.

“Do not. Embarrass me, Silas. Make a fool of yourself and you make a fool of our kingdom; you render the very Dengdamor name foolish.”

But then again, perhaps it is only a fool’s errand because it is his to complete.

Oh, if only it had not taken several hours to ride here. Perhaps then he would not have had time to dwell on it all. Who knows where he could be now- possibly in the throne room greeting the king of this place with dignity and poise- if he had not been forced to think, to dread, to hear his mother’s cutting words with every clickety-clack of the carriage wheels.

“If he were only old enough, I would send Farson in your stead,” she had lamented, not even making eye contact. “But alas, time is of the essence, and you are all the Dengdamor court has to offer- Moon help us.”

“P- perhaps we could simply let this one pass us by,” Silas had tentatively suggested, squirming. He couldn’t tell what was worse- submitting to her scrutiny like a prisoner under interrogation, or being ignored like he was no more than an insignificant humbeetle. “I’m sure there will be other opportunities to make alliances…”

“Out of the question,” she had stated, cold as ice. “The Starfall court produces but one heir in a generation; and to forge ties with them is to hold this world in the palm of one’s hand. It would expand our hold, quadruple our riches, and that is to say nothing of what it would do for our reputation. No, this is too rare an opportunity to let slip by.”

When she had finally looked at him, he would have given anything to be once more beneath her notice. “I only wish that you were not my only asset.”

He has to rest his hand on the wall a moment, his eyes prickling with the threat of tears to come and his breath coming in short, sharp stabs.

“This is your chance, Silas; your chance to pay your dues to this family, to make a contribution to our legacy that counts for something.”

He screws his eyes shut, bracing his free hand on bent knee as he doubles over wheezing.

“If you hold any love for your kingdom in your heart, if there is even a shred of family honour inside you-”

His heart pounds like a drum, marching in time to the blood rush in his ears.

“You will not. Disappoint me.”

One, two, three, four…

Silas numbers the seconds in his head, fingers flexing on unforgiving stone as he counts himself back into his body, counts his lungs into breathing, his heart into slowing. Five, six, seven. Bit by agonising bit, the world stops moving under his feet, the deafening roar in his ears gives way to a distant ring and then finally, blissfully, to silence. Eight, nine…

Ten.

He comes back to ground on a shaky exhale, forcing a flood of nervous tension into the warm palace
He’s grown rather adept at counting himself down from his little moments, but he still finds himself weak at the knees on re-entry; even the unyielding cosmic rock under his feet feels hollow and wobbly as a barrel bobbing down a river, and his legs as flimsy and fickle as a baby reindeer’s.

But if he waits for sure-footing, he’ll be waiting all his life.

Sighing heavily, he straightens his back, releasing his knee and the wall from his death grip in turn. He immediately misses the solidity, the realness of them. Misses the tether to the world, the here and now. Now all he has is his feet on the ground as, determined, he walks. That and the information of his ears, for he has not found the courage to open his eyes.

This, as it turns out, is one hobknocker of a bad idea.

Something tall, warm, and unignorably firm is colliding with him, with purposeful force akin to a battering ram, and he doesn’t stand a chance on his shaking legs. He goes down with an undignified yelp, fortunately catching himself with his hand on the floor before he can break anything really important—although were it not for his gloves, the intricately engraved stone would have taken his skin with it.

“Leaping lizards!” he curses, politeness temporarily forgotten. Of course he regrets the lapse before it has even passed, head flying up as fast as his hands fly to his mouth. “Oh my-! I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean- I, I should have been looking where I was-!”

“No, no, it’s- it’s quite alright, my fault-”

His unforeseen obstacle looks up at the same time he does, a silky shock of pastel pink hair falling back from eyes of immaculate blue, and all at once Silas finds himself breathless for a whole other reason.

Their words trail off at the same time. Silas stares, open-mouthed, at the dumbfoudingly handsome man who has, quite literally, fallen into his lap. The handsome man does likewise—although probably not for the same reasons. Where Silas is gobsmacked by the sudden appearance of the most attractive man he’s ever seen, this poor fellow is probably just unaccustomed to being bowled over and rudely gaped at by strange men with their mouths flopping open like a fumble flounder.

“...Going,” Silas finishes, lamely.

“Entirely,” finishes the handsome man, once more not a step behind.

Startling as their words trip over one another much as their feet had, Silas laughs nervously—and that, too, rings out in harmony with the laughter of his new acquaintance. His own laughter is short lived after that, if only because the rich, alluring perfection of the other man’s is enough to make his own sound like the braying of a dune donkey in comparison. Clearing his throat, Silas fidgets in place; though a more than pleasant situation in theory, he anticipates that having a man of such appeal in his lap has a strong chance of turning very awkward, very quickly.

“I, ah, I do apologise,” he mumbles, attempting to wiggle out from under the weight of the man without... jostling anything. A horrendous misjudgement, as it happens, given that his movement opens his legs slightly and tips his new friend directly into the vee of them,

“Oh, that’s quite alright,” the man says, cheerful and apparently quite unconcerned by this state of affairs. “My sister always tells me I should look before I leap- or launch myself down unfamiliar corridors, as the case may be.”

Silas giggles, internally panicking. Of course he’s funny, too. Of course he is. “That, ah, seems like
“It is,” says the man, springing upright effortlessly and holding out his hand to Silas with a sly wink. “But don’t tell her I said so.”

Silas knows he must be blushing like a buffoon. He only hopes his complexion might mask it somewhat; if he and his ‘friend’ were to exchange pallors, he’d no doubt be red as a tomaytotomahto. Of course, now the thought has crossed his mind he can’t help but picture the man’s sculpted face dusted in rosy pink, and the image does little to aid his clarity of thought. “Oh, um, thank you,” he squeaks, taking the proffered hand- and, unsurprisingly, finding it warm, firm and yet gentle in its grip.

Smiling, the man tightens his hold and pulls Silas to his feet, steadying him with a thoughtful hand on his shoulder. “The pleasure is all mine,” he murmurs, grasp lingering a second longer than necessary before he steps back to a respectable distance. “Panto Trost,” he declares, sweeping down in a dignified bow and peering up at Silas through his eyelashes. “At your service.”

Trost. Oh, barnacles, this just keeps getting better and better.

“Oh, um…” Silas mumbles, eyes darting about for an exit. He considers giving a false name in return, but… he’s a terrible liar. “Silas Dengdamor,” he admits, timid as a doormouse.

Silence follows his admission. Then, shortly, a brief and clipped: “Ah.”

Panto straightens from his bow, and golly is he tall. He regards Silas with wariness, and Silas returns the gesture in kind; if there was one thing that sunk in after all his mother’s diatribes, it was never, ever, trust a Trost. No matter how tall or polite or… dreamy they may be.

It occurs to Silas then, that this situation is not weighted in his favour. He is trapped in a foreign place, lost in the twists and turns of a vast and unforgiving stronghold. He’s still shaken from his episode and the ensuing shock, and even if he weren’t it is no secret that he fights like a baby. And he is completely alone with a long-standing enemy of his family who, in addition to being tall and well-muscled and disarmingly beautiful, is also rumoured to be the greatest swordsman in Wendimoor.

He is, to put it indelicately, fudged.

Far too busy trying to figure out what his chances are if he runs for it now- in search of help or perhaps a closet to hide in- it takes a moment to process that Panto is saying something. “Sorry?” he says, refocusing.

Panto, confusingly, gives a smile that can only be described as kindly. “I asked if you were here for the tournament,” he says, patient as can be.

“Oh,” Silas breathes, nodding rapidly. “Yes. Yes, I am.”

Panto nods, placing his hands on his hips. “As am I. I suppose we shall be seeing a lot of each other.” He cocks his head with a teasing smirk. “Who knows; perhaps we will meet again next time in combat.”

As if Silas weren’t already out of his depth. “M-maybe,” he forces out, feeling faint at the mere prospect; he has no doubt in his mind that this man could snip him to shreds without breaking a sweat.

His imposing new acquaintance nods again, and gestures behind himself. “The throne room is that...
way, in case you were wondering.”

“Oh! Thank you,” says Silas with a breathless laugh.

“Think nothing of it,” says Panto airily. “I spent long enough searching for it; seems a waste not to share my hard-earned wisdom.”

“You got lost too?” Silas blurts, taken aback- Panto seems like the type of person who isn’t fazed by anything.

“Oh, helplessly,” Panto confirms, chuckling. “This place is a labyrinth- I’ve been spelunking all morning!”

Silas laughs, the sound coming out rather manic. Even knowing what he knows now, Panto is... charming. Perhaps even more so than before Silas knew the man could kill him with a single look.

Panto smiles at him, eyes crinkling with it. It’s soft, and Silas is at an utter loss as to what to do about it. “Well,” says Panto, stepping aside to give Silas room to pass. “Follow this corridor. It’s two rights and a left at the first turning.”

“Two rights and left,” Silas repeats seriously, committing it to memory. “Two rights and a left…”

“That’s correct. And if you need more help,” his eye twinkles and he reaches into the pocket of his breeches, emerging with a stump of pink chalk. “Look out for my arrows.”

Silas gapes at him. “You drew on their walls?” he hisses, feeling another manic laugh coming on.

“Well, if they will insist on not providing a map,” he says, ever unflappable. “Besides, I thought others might benefit.”

He’s walking the line between gentleman and bad boy so finely that Silas finds it hard to believe he isn’t reading from a script. Or that this isn’t a very fanciful dream. But if it were, he probably wouldn’t have had such a painful fall. “Oh, um, well… thank you.”

Panto smiles warmly. “Anytime.” He clears his throat, gesturing for Silas to go first. “I had better not keep you- you wouldn’t want to tarnish your chances with tardiness.”

“Oh! Yes,” says Silas, pulling himself together hastily- he’s already wasted far too much time running around this castle like a headless chicken. He shuffles past Panto with a bashful smile, nodding his acknowledgement. “Thank you, um… Your Highness.”

“You’re welcome, My Lord,” says Panto, velvet smooth and low enough to wake butterflies in Silas’ stomach.

Blushing furiously, Silas scampers- if he spends any more time alone with that voice or its charismatic owner, he’s liable to do something highly inappropriate. Not to mention unforgivable, given the circumstances.

So. The eldest son of the Trost line, Silas’ sworn rival from birth, happens to be a sweet, chivalrous, devastatingly handsome man. That is… certainly information he could have done without, and now that he knows it he quite simply cannot unknow it. Even now, mere seconds after the encounter he wonders if he should glance around, take one last look. Wonders if Panto might even look back…

“This is your chance, Silas; your chance to bring honour to your family name,” Frija’s voice echoes, cutting through his musings like the cold, steely snip of a scissor sword. “Do not screw it up
like you screw up everything else.”

No. No, that’s… not something he must even allow himself to consider.

Picking up his pace, putting distance between himself and the daydreams and the subject he just knows is still behind him, he clenches his fists and reminds himself of his goal. He was not sent here to flirt with handsome men in corridors, and certainly not to fraternise with the enemy. No, he was sent here for one purpose; to fight in the tournament, to earn his family’s respect and the Starfall court’s alliance. To win the hand of the sun prince.

To marry Dirk Gently.

If he were feeling more uncharitable towards himself- as he so often does- Sir Brotz would have continued to take the blame for the hiccup in their quest squarely on his own shoulders. But instead, after assessing the situation, he’d come to realise that this sort of setback was only to be expected where Dirk was concerned. Theodore didn’t need a boogle attack and a couple of lost birds to know that Dirk Gently was, quite possibly, the unluckiest man alive.

The timely appearance of the bedbug, however, serves as a reminder that he is also, contrarily, the luckiest.

“And you thought we’d have to do this entire journey on foot,” says Dirk, smug as all heck.

Theodore rolls his eyes. A good six hours riding had done little to diminish his lord’s unearned sense of superiority. “Well, this isn’t much faster,” he grumbles, referring to the leisurely shuffle of the creature’s six brass feet.

“Far less effort, though,” says Dirk, petting Theodore’s hair. “And leagues more comfortable.”

He has to agree with that- silently, of course, lest he feed Dirk’s ego. The comfort of a wild mattress is unparalleled, in Theodore’s experience. And though the lack of pillows can be a cause for stiff necks, his own folded cloak is quite sufficient. Chivalry, of course, dictates that he offer it to Dirk. But that suits him just fine, given that his prince offered him his own chest in return- his steady heartbeat under Theodore’s ear a soothing metronome amid the strange and unpredictable sounds of the forest.

There are much, much worse ways to travel.

Humming in noncommittal concession, Theodore closes his eyes and nestles in further; one pointed ear pressed to his prince’s undulating ribs, the other alert and ready to detect anything that might threaten their safe passage. So far, the amorous boogle has been their biggest obstacle, with other curious forest creatures scurrying with a sharp ‘scramola!’ from Theodore or a rattle of the helpful bedbug’s metallic carapace. For all intents and purposes, their journey has been smooth. Pleasant, even.

Too pleasant.

“Theodore,” says Dirk, a musical note of fondness in his voice.

“Shut up,” Theodore grumbles, turning his face into Dirk’s chest as it quivers in quiet laughter.
“Oh, stop it, I can feel you— you’re wound up tight as a jack-in-a-box,” says Dirk in a soft voice, thumb stroking over Theodore’s forehead. “All that stress is bad for your complexion, you know.”

“Can’t have that,” Theodore deadpans, following the glancing touch with every fibre of his awareness.

“Certainly not— what kind of impact would that make, my best knight looking all ashy and wrinkly like a chalky old ogre? I think your lines are rather distinguished, personally, but one must give a thought to first impressions.”

“Right, ‘cause you care sooo much about what people think of you.”

Dirk’s fingertips trace along Theodore’s ear and the line of his jaw, light and tender and warm as sunlight and soft as his voice. “I care what they think of you. Even if you don’t.”

Theodore screws his eyes shut, hiding his face in his lord’s chest as it glows, golden as his heart. “…Shut up,” he mumbles again, pathetically.

The prince chuckles, but thankfully falls silent afterwards. There’s only so much emotional vulnerability Theodore can take at one time. Dirk understands this about him, fortunately; just as he understands everything else about him. It’s easy to forget sometimes, when his idiotic prince is gallivanting around in wilful ignorance, that he sees Theodore. For all that he is; for all that he tries not to be. For all that he feels, but pretends not to.

He wonders how Dirk will look at him, when marriage puts an end to their secret courtship. Hopefully with fondness, or nostalgia. Theodore doesn’t think he could bear it if he looked on him with pity, but he supposes he must prepare for the possibility; he must know, surely, of the intensity of Theodore’s feelings for him. And those feelings will render him a piteous figure indeed, when he is no longer permitted even the scraps of his prince’s affection.

But he’ll take pity over nothing at all.

“Todd! Todd, look!”

Theodore reluctantly removes his face from Dirk’s silk-wrapped chest as the prince sits up to point ahead. Theodore follows his finger over the bedbug’s darting eye stalks, and blinks in surprise. “Is this…?”

“Yes! We’re here!” Dirk babbles, bouncing in place- and patting the mattress apologetically when the vigorous movement inspires a grumpy rumble. “Oh, you clever critters, you found it!”

Theodore surveys the scene before their steed’s headboard warily, hand twitching towards his boomerang. The wild forests that they’ve grown so accustomed to have thinned out into a clearing, the surrounding trees festooned in riotous colour in the form of criss-crossing ropes and garlands around naturally occurring balloon berries and marshmelons. Signs of life litter the space; a basket of harvested berries beneath a particularly heavy crop, a rope between two trees draped with strange furry clothes drying in the hot summer air, hula hoops and skipping ropes scattered amidst the foliage. And beyond all that, standing proud and protective over the little land, a structure; wide, squat, its tall entrance draped in ribbons and beads knotted into elaborate curtains, rough terracotta walls arching up like a dome and coalescing at the top in a broad, natural swirl like a shell. A snail shell, to be specific.

“Witchykookoo,” Theodore mutters, glancing around warily.

“Oh, relax, Theodore,” Dirk scoffs, scooting his butt in preparation to dismount. “I’m sure she’s
perfectly- eep!"

“Jeez!” Theodore yelps, recoiling much like Dirk from the thing poking its head up over the side of the bed. “Oh, my-!”

The creature babbles at them, petting their steed as it hops on board, noises mingling with the contented floopy burbles of the mattress and the pleased chittering of the bedbug. Scooting closer to Dirk it ahhhs at him, the prince’s light reflecting off its crystalline goggles and wild, tufted hair as it reaches out one gaudy striped hand to touch him.

“Ah, hello to you, too,” says Dirk, rigid as a board while the creature plays with the neck of his toga.

Theodore rolls his eyes. “Are we gonna get jumped by rainbow creatures this entire time?”

“No, they’re…” he shakes his head. “Uh, sorry, can you say that again?”

They repeat themselves, slower this time as if conversing with a confused child. Theodore wants to take offence, but truth be told it is helpful to his unpracticed ear.

“Oh, oh! Bofuki Napoo, yeah, I remember…”

“Well, well,” Dirk teases, nudging Theodore with his elbow. “We are uncovering some repressed knowledge today, aren’t we?”

Theodore rolls his eyes. “You’d have known that too, if you paid any darn attention in class when we were kids.” Not that Theodore had paid much heed to their tutor himself, but he’d always had a moderate interest in forest languages; sometimes in that big stone castle, a few elvish storybooks were all he had to feel connected to his roots.

“Clearly you were paying enough for the both of us,” Dirk beams. “Be a dear and ask this fellow if Miss Wapnasi’s home, would you?”

Before Theodore can even start trying to string that clunky sentence together, the excitable Napoo is leaping from the bedbug’s back and calling out, hands cupped around their mouth like a bugle horn. The rapid volley of consonants is too dense for Theodore to make much sense of, but he thinks he makes out the witchykookoo’s name and something that sounds like ‘friends’. Before he can decipher it further they’re being beset by more overlapping chatter as the rest of the Bofuki Napoo emerge from hiding, creeping out from behind rocks and trees and the great shell to gather in a curious gaggle at their bug’s skittering feet.

“Oh, my, there’s… a lot of you,” says Dirk, clinging to Theodore’s arm and whispering: “They, ah-they don’t seem annoyed, do they?”

“No…” says Theodore, uncertain. They seem harmless enough for the time being, but there is absolutely no doubt now that himself and Dirk are outnumbered ten to one. He’s just patting his prince’s hand and wondering how many of these guys he could bop with one boomerang throw, when another voice joins the clamour.
“Hush and shush, my friends; calm yourselves, or our visitors may scurry away!”

Theodore looks up towards the entrance of the shell, hearing Dirk’s gasp as he does likewise. Emerging from within, parting the knotted blinds with four gnarled hands, is a creature quite unlike anything he’s ever seen. Greyish and slimy and decked in garlands and trinkets much like her home, she slithers slowly into the light, a sluggish figure of sackcloth and unearthly tranquility, the towering tufts and horns of her ornate hat almost scraping the very ceiling.

Dirk clutches Theodore’s arm for reassurance. “Um… Wakti Wapnasi?”

“Yesssss,” she sighs, cupping all four hands to her sack-swaddled chest. “That is certainly the noise people make to address me…”

“Uh… cool,” mumbles Theodore.

“Oh, good,” says Dirk, shuffling towards the edge of the mattress. “We came to see you; we were wondering, well, hoping that you might be able to help us with a spot of bother. Are you open for business, so to speak?”

“Open… for… business,” she repeats, slow and ponderous. “My, my… I suppose I might be, though the opposite may also be true. Perhaps I am somewhere in the middle- most people are, you know. We are always and only as open as we choose to be.”

“So…” says Dirk, nose wrinkled in thought. “...May we come in? To your home,” he clarifies, probably wisely; the witch seems like the type of to dodge a straight answer any which way she can, although perhaps unintentionally.

“My home is all around us, my friends; you are already sitting in it,” she says, proving Theodore’s hunch correct. “But perhaps, a little peace; come, travellers, step into the shelter. There is much to discuss, and you have wasted quite enough time already.” She gives an amused trill. “A bird in the hand is worth more than two on the run in the bush, wouldn’t you agree?”

With that parting remark she retreats back into her shell, her delighted vibrato mirrored by several nearby Napoo as she leaves Theodore and his prince gaping after her.

“How did she-?” splutters Theodore. He looks to Dirk, expecting to find matching confusion on his face, but finds only a grin of ecstatic wonder.

“I think,” says Dirk, giving Theodore’s arm a last squeeze. “We may have come to exactly the right place.”

Without further ado he is scrambling to the ground, giving the bug and the mattress a cheerful stroke of thanks as he goes, and Theodore has little choice but to follow his prince through the clutch of curious Napoo and into the dingy unknown behind the witch’s beaded curtain.

Sometimes he regrets ever taking that blasted oath.

“You have been running for so long,” Wakti Wapnasi croons, ten crooked fingers dancing across the surface of the pool in the centre of the chamber like pond skaters.
“It’s, um, been a day, actually,” says Dirk. “And I wouldn’t say running, it’s been quite leisurely as a matter of fact.”

The prince is shuffling about awkwardly on the patchwork pillow he’d been ushered onto. At least he was luckier than Theodore, who had made a beeline for what looked like a beanbag and found it to be a blanket draped over a rock. Something tells him this witch doesn’t have company round very often. All the comfy seats in the room seem to be occupied by her kooky pals. Theodore thinks he’s heard of these guys; the Santi Santigo, if he’s not getting mixed up. He’s never been entirely sure what they do. Having sat in a room with them for the last half hour, watching their strange geometric faces twitch and listening to their boops and beeps and rattles, he still isn’t. Theodore rolls his eyes at Dirk’s dumb comment, prodding him with the hand not wrapped around his pungent tea. He’s not usually much of a tea drinker, but he’s almost finished his cup; spicy as woodsmoke and tingling pleasantly on his tongue, it’s unmistakably a forest blend. Though the comfort arrangements leave much to be desired, the bubbling liquid in this lumpy clay cup feels like home. A small bubble of warmth and safety in the dark and unfamiliar. Clinging, of course, to the side of the big bubble that is Dirk and his soft glow and his restlessly tapping fingers on his own cup.

“Figuratively speaking,” Wakti continues, unfazed. “But to what end?”

“I already told you,” says Dirk impatiently, anxious tapping intensifying. Despite being the biggest tea-fiend Theodore has ever known, he doesn’t seem too keen on the witch’s special blend. “I need to get out of this wedding, somehow. Perhaps you have a spell, some kind of… memory spell for my father. Or a ‘stop trying to marry off your son’ spell. I’m game for just about anything, provided it’s not too… killy.”

“Yeah, yeah, if we could uh, not do the whole ‘dark magic’ thing,” Theodore agrees, eyeing the pool warily as it ripples purple in her wake. “That would be… better.”

“So much better,” says Dirk, nodding so emphatically he almost dislodges his circlet.

“‘Dark magic’?” The witch chortles, to an amused chorus of assorted sounds bings and bongs from her companions. “Why, there is no such thing; magic is but an extension of the self, an arm.” She raises both her arms to her chest, all twenty fingers fanning out. “A helping hand, hm? It is only as dark as its wielder’s intentions, which mine are not.” She pauses, head tilting thoughtfully. “I do not think…”

“That’s… reassuring, thanks,” Theodore mutters.

“Right, well… if you might have a well-intentioned solution to offer, that would be excellent,” says Dirk, dropping the pretence and pawning his tea off on Theodore. “I can pay, of course! I mean, I didn’t remember to bring any money, per se, but once I get back to my kingdom I’m sure I can arrange-”

"I have no need of your pretty jewels, pretty prince," says Wakti, voice light in musical whimsy. "And I have nothing to offer in return."

Theodore can feel his prince’s heart sink. "Wha- you don't?" says Dirk, deflating. "No spells, or…?"

"No spells," she confirms cheerfully. "Magic will not right this wrong; and certainly not my magic."

"But- but you're the most powerful witch in Wendimoor!" Dirk insists, leaning in across the faintly glowing pool. "If you can't help me, then what chance could I possibly have?"

"All the chance in the world, of course!" she trills. "Fate and chance are not mutually exclusive, little
prince; a future may be carved on the face of the dice, but it is the flick of the wrist that decides our path. It is up to you whether you take that roll. Take your turn or pass, but run you must not; fate is patient, and it catches up to all of us."

“That’s all you’ve got?” Dirk whispers. Theodore can feel the tension in his demeanour, can almost hear the creak of leather where he squeezes his knees in a white-knuckled grip. “Just… sit around and wait for fate to catch up to me?”

“Sit and wait, yes, or meet it head on,” she says. “Either way, you will meet it on your own terms, Dirk Gently.”

They both start, Theodore hissing as he spills a drop of scalding tea from Dirk’s nearly full cup on his leg. “I, Dirk stutters, shuffling a little closer to Theodore’s rock. “Didn’t tell you my-

“Names are commonplace, little prince’ although yours is more special than most,” says Wakti, keeping with her theme of making no goshdarn sense. “A collection of syllables is easy to come by, but sometimes we must look beyond the name- what is a title? What is Dirk Gently, what is a prince. What is a knight?” she looks briefly to Theodore, and he feels for the fleeting moment as if she is looking down into the depths of his soul. “Mere pretty embellishments. Who are you, Dirk Gently?” She leans in, head swivelling owlishly as she levels that piercing gaze on Dirk. “Who will you be?”

Theodore is so riveted by the intensity of her words, so enthralled that it takes a moment for him to glance back at Dirk. From there it takes barely a second to see that his prince’s wide blue eyes are glistening with unshed tears.

“With your help,” says Dirk, choking the words out as firmly as presently able. “Doomed.”

Before Theodore can reach out to take his hand or offer any reassurance, Dirk is up and leaving, fists clenched by his sides as he storms from the chamber. Or at least, he pretend to storm, but Theodore has seen no sign of steam from overheated skin; that in itself is enough to tell him that his prince is beating a retreat to hide his tears, even though he doesn’t need to. Not from Theodore.

“Dirk!” he calls, springing to his feet unmindful of the tea that slops from his cup. “Dirk, come back!”

To his relief, Dirk pauses. But only for a moment, and just to look over his shoulder at Theodore with tears in his eyes and a tremor in his voice.

“Thank you for aiding me, Sir Brotz,” he says, blinking rapidly. “I’m sorry it was a waste of time.”

And with that punch to the gut he is gone, one of Wakti’s many beaded curtains rattling shut behind him.

Theodore stares after him, rooted to the spot. He needs to go after him. Needs to make sure he doesn’t do something dumb, like run out into the woods in the middle of the night, or say something offensive to the Bofuki Napoo. But all he can do is watch the empty space where his prince once stood, the image of his tear-tracked cheeks engraved in his mind and heavy on his heart. He can’t stand to see him so distraught, so defeated. It goes against everything he values, everything he holds sacred in his position as the prince’s protector and friend. For all the pain it causes him to see Dirk so wounded, it may as well be his world that just came to an end. He can almost feel it slipping away now, the ground fading to insubstantiality beneath his feet, his vision narrowing to a fine, fine dot where once was his lord’s glistening blue eye. And soon even that is blurring, fading, his last tether to the physical world disintegrating along with it and he’s floating, he’s falling, suspended in the dark as he stares down the yawning void and it, patient as the night, stares back.
“Now is not the time, Theodore Brotz.”

Wakti’s voice creeps from nowhere, worming into his ears and tickling his awareness. He shudders as it creeps down his spine, but the startle snaps him back to reality, finding himself once more slap bang in the centre of the room with dim phosphorescent light in his eyes and the taste of woodsmoke on his tongue. He looks around, wide eyed at the Santi spectators and the miscellaneous witchy clutter in the shell, and meets Wakti’s patient gaze. “I- I was-”

“Elsewhere,” she says, light as a whisper. “Yessss, you went far, far away. But I fear you shall have to go much further, yesss, much further yet.”

“Dirk,” Theodore blurts, head whipping once more towards the doorway. Shoot. He needs to get after him, make sure he hasn’t gone and got himself lost in the woods. Oh, he could just kick himself-zoning out and having an episode with his prince in such a state. He doesn’t even have time to be concerned about having two episodes in such a short stretch of time; he has to do one thing and one thing only, and that is assure the safety of his charge. “Jeez, I have to- I have to find him.” And not only that, he has to fix this, somehow. He can’t escort Dirk back to the castle with his heart so broken, he can’t let this be the start of a long, miserable chapter of his prince’s life, he has to do something. He has no idea what, he barely came into this with a Plan A, for Pete’s sake, but… he has to try. He’ll try and he won’t stop trying until they solve this, until they win Dirk’s freedom.

Until he finds a way, any way, to make him happy.

“Be careful, faithful knight.”

He starts again, looking back over his shoulder at Wakti- when did he get so close to the door? His feet must have marched without his mind’s permission. “Uh- excuse me?”

She looks at him with patience and wizened understanding, and in that moment she seems older. More tired. “Happiness is not always clear cut, Sir Brotz,” she says, voice lilting in meaningful dips. “It is not always what we expect, and it does not always come easily. A choice will need to be made, little elf. I hope you are ready to make it.”

Theodore doesn’t know what she means. Doesn’t know how she knew what he was thinking, how she can cut so quickly to the core with a comment that’s cryptic at best and nonsense at worst.

He is certain of one thing and one thing only; that he’s far too much of a coward to ask.

Chapter End Notes

Comments are the sugar in my forest tea <3
Day Three

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

A night in a too-small Bafooki Napoo hammock had proved to be… draining. Exhausting in about the least enjoyable way possible. Quite apart from his own inner turmoil, the fact of the matter was that his ‘bed’ was made by and for a forest-dwelling species who had little experience of mattresses that didn’t move, as well as significantly fewer inches in height than Dirk himself.

At least Theodore would have fit right in.

He sighs. Nope. Not even poking fun at his dearest Todd is enough to distract himself today. Quite the opposite, actually, given the nature of his plight. Turning over his crown in his hands, watching his light glimmer off the delicate golden filigree, he can’t help but wonder if things would be different, without Theodore. Had Dirk never met him, grown to know him, fallen head over heels in love with him, would he have reacted differently to this development? Would he still be out here seeking his freedom or would he be back home, eagerly awaiting the attention of a parade of visiting princes, curious about the outcome? Excited, even? He just does not know.

Sometimes, he hates not knowing

Groaning, he places the circlet back upon his head, if only to free his hands to bury his face in. All the bright colours and inane babble of their hosts are giving him a humdinger of a headache. He can’t make sense of the peculiar creatures- all they seem to do is chatter and play with hula hoops and groom one another. Then again, they’re not concerned with arranged marriages or royal responsibility, so perhaps they have the right idea. Maybe he should just live here, paint over his glow and live out his days peacefully as a… babbling goggle monkey.

Quite tempting, now that he thinks about it.

...Maybe. If the uniform is negotiable.

“Hey.”

Dirk glances up, offering his knight a weak smile as he joins him on the woven swing seat. “Good morning, Sir Brotz,” he murmurs, making room.

Fortunately, an elf of Theodore’s stature doesn’t need much of it, especially with the bulk of his armour still tucked away from the night before. He scoots up to Dirk’s side, ducking his head under the top of their cradle of plaited branches. “How did you sleep?”

“Oh, well… terribly, actually,” he says, rubbing his neck- that teensy hammock gave him the most abominable neck crick.

Theodore looks up at him with a sad smile. “Jinx.”

Dirk huffs out a laugh, and after a moment’s thought drapes his arm over Theodore’s shoulders- if they truly have come to the end of the road, he’ll not waste a second more of this remaining time with his knight. Besides, he looks so soft all dressed-down and sleep-mussed; how is a man to resist?

“So. This is a bit of a drag, isn’t it?”

Snorting, Theodore reaches up to take his dangling hand and lace their fingers. “Guess you could say
Eyes flitting closed a moment, Dirk presses a kiss-chaste, yet lingering-to the worry lines on Theodore’s forehead, tucking a flyaway wave from it with his free hand. “Thank you,” he breathes, tugging gently at Theodore’s earlobe as he goes. “For all your help, Todd, I… I’m sorry it was all for nothing.”

To his surprise, Theodore ducks back out of his hold, and Dirk’s eyes open to a look of disbelief.

“Seriously? That’s it?” says Theodore, incredulous. “You’re giving up just like that?”

“Well,” Dirk fumbles, confuzzled. “Well, we did just ask the greatest witchykookoo in the land, so… not sure where we go from here, to be frank.”

Theodore regards him a moment, seemingly conflicted. He looks at their intertwined fingers, muttering softly in that grumpy way of his as he holds a little debate with himself. Dirk awaits the outcome patiently; after all, he is in no hurry to pack up and go home.

“There…” Theodore turns his gaze moonward, and sighs. “There may be someone else we could try.”

“Try?” Dirk looks up. “Beg pardon?”

Theodore leans back, resting his head against the sloping wicker seatback. “I was talking to the Bofuki Napoo-I mean, I was trying to, but I guess my forest languages are pretty rusty. I picked up some stuff, though. They say-I mean, they think-that there may be… another witch.”

“Another one?” says Dirk, startled. Well, that’s news to him-as long as he’s lived he has heard of only two truly magical people in Wendimoor; the wood witch, and of course the dreaded Mage. The assorted abilities of others in the land amounted to little more than parlour tricks in comparison.

“An elemental, somewhere in the Marshmallow Mountains,” says Theodore, hesitant. “They call her the Witchykokoo of the Whispers. But no one’s ever seen her so, there’s no way to be sure if she even exists or not.”

“Well that’s… not ideal,” Dirk gripes. Jiminy crickets, must all these magical types be quite so slippery? All he wants is a straight answer and maybe a tiny little spell, and yet they insist on giving him the runaround.

“Nope,” Theodore agrees. “It would be dangerous, and dumb, and possibly a total dead end.”

By all accounts it sounds like a bad idea. A waste of time liable to get both of them killed, which is exactly what he expects Theodore to say next.

His knight, however, simply sits. Head back, eyes trained expectantly on Dirk, steady and patient as the night.

In the end he doesn’t have to say a word, his stoic silence speaking volumes. The lift of his brows that says ‘your move’, the set of his jaw that says ‘whatever you need’. The gentle pressure of his thigh against Dirk’s, his hand in his hand, the warmth of understated intimacy that says ‘I’ll be by your side.’

Oh, this man. This strange, wonderful man. All the gold and jewels in Wendimoor could not hold a candle to the value of his trust, his loyalty. How Dirk had come to win such a prize is beyond him—he hadn’t asked for it, certainly hadn’t earned it.
But by golly, he will move the Moon to keep it.

Catching his knight by his angular jaw, Dirk surges in for a kiss — and though the embrace is brief, it is heavy, deep. It’s a thank you, and a promise; a silent oath. He breaks away breathless, caught momentarily in adulation of Theodore’s matching gasp before he runs his thumb across his knight’s sun-dappled cheek, transfixed by the dancing green under his skin.

“Pack what you can,” says Dirk, softly, watching Theodore’s eyes drift closed as Dirk’s breath kisses the fluttering lids. “We have a long haul ahead of us.”

“I’ll say,” Theodore chuckles hoarsely, fingers tangling in Dirk’s silk robe. He nudges Dirk’s foot with his own bare big toe. “And you need to borrow some boots.”

Dirk glances at a nearby Napoo, wincing as it shuffles its stumpy booted feet in some approximation of a dance. “Must I?”

“Well, I’m not picking your clumsy butt of the ground when those sandals drop you on it in the snow,” Theodore states, smoothing out the front of Dirk’s toga primly.

“Hmph. Fine,” Dirk sighs dramatically, brushing a speck of pollen from his knight’s emerald tunic. “I suppose if it’ll put your little mind at rest.”

“Gee, thanks,” Theodore mutters, flicking Dirk’s collarbone.

Dirk catches the offending hand, holding it prisoner by the wrist as he leans forward to retaliate with a nip to Theodore’s vulnerable neck. Not even because the half-hearted assault hurt — which it didn’t. More because the opportunity is there, and he loves to make the grouchy elf yelp on occasion.

“Dirk,” says Theodore, evidently making an effort not to sound affected — and failing quite miserably. “Are we gonna-ah-are we gonna make out or are we going to go find this dang witchykookoo?”

Dirk emerges from his cozy little place tucked into Theodore’s neck, peering up at him hopefully. “...Both?”

Theodore rolls his eyes and mutters something unflattering about entitlement in the monarchy. It would have been much more effective, had he not also been gripping Dirk’s hair and tugging meaningfully in unmistakable Todd-speak for ‘come hither’.

He simply must have another word with his knight about mixed signals, one of these days.

For now though, as long as he has Theodore soft and sleep-mussed and willing beneath his hands, he’s happy to just capture him in another deep kiss and press him into the swing seat, loosely woven wicker creaking with the motion as they sway together a while, all thoughts of quests and witches and hideous boots banished for the time being. All the better to enjoy one another, breathe each other in.

All the better to remind themselves what it is they’re questing for.

The postponement of the tournament was a nuisance, for sure. And concerning, given that no reason had been offered; ‘unforeseen circumstances’ had been the explanation from the court, with no room
for query. Panto still isn’t quite sure what to make of it. Perhaps the prince had been taken ill, and his recovery period indefinite. Though the ambiguity of the king’s chosen statement suggests that something darker might be at the bottom of this; something the Starfall Court wouldn’t like to bring to light in the lead-up to such an illustrious event.

Panto Trost, however, is no detective. And given the circumstances— and given that the king himself could not be reached even if he had wanted to offer assistance— it seems the delay is quite out of his hands, and his visit to Clifftown indefinitely extended.

Nevertheless, it is in Panto’s nature to look for the silver lining.

It does not take him long to realise this hiccup may be a blessing in disguise. After all, now he has the tentative promise of a reprieve from his overbearing father, and a chance to explore his strange new surroundings. Now he has a break before charging into a marriage (if he wins. Which is not guaranteed, but he certainly likes his chances) to bid farewell to a few of his less ‘desirable’ habits. A handful bets and bottles down at the local tavern, a few spontaneous adventures in and around the quaint little town around the cliff. Nothing scandalous, of course— nothing that could find its way back to King Rigmarole or, Moon forbid, his own father back in Inglenook. Nothing that could sully his reputation or his chances. But given that his future husband— whom he has yet to have the pleasure of meeting— could turn out to be a tremendous bore, it seems a reasonable precaution to take this opportunity for what it is; a last chance for some harmless fun.

And training, he supposes. Not that he’ll be needing it. Panto has not lost a duel since he was knee-high to a jimmy cricket, and he highly doubts that he shall break that streak now. Not for anyone but the finest swordsmen Wendimoor has to offer. He may not hold a lot of personal investment in the prize of this tournament, but he does not intend to leave this event with a tarnished record. And if upholding that reputation nets him with a husband, then… well. His father will be happy. That is the important thing. Panto is sure he will, too, in time. He is not opposed to the idea of marriage, per se. He had just always envisioned his own being somewhat less… political.

But that is life, is it not? Politics and pantomime; and he has long learned to talk the talk and hit his marks, even if the dishonesty leaves a bad taste in his mouth. Given the choice, Panto would always rather be truthful than tricksy. And he does what he can to that effect, within the confines of his duties as a baron prince, as a brother and a son; walks that fine line between wants and musts with the utmost care and dexterity.

Still, that is not to say he does not occasionally daydream of breaking character. Of tearing the script to pieces and scattering it to the winds like stuffy confetti.

That is an extreme solution, though, and not one he entertains in any seriousness. Frankly, he would settle for a challenge. One truly good fight, something that keeps him on his toes, breaks his well-trodden patterns.

Sadly, he doubts he will find that here.

Confidence in his own abilities aside, he must admit that the competition for the prince’s hand is fierce indeed. The visiting nobles, of which there are at least an even dozen, have all brought their best to the plate— with the exception of the odd layabout, of course. But even the weakest of the hardworking bunch, such as the portly eldest son from the highlands with the cautious tread of a scholar or scientist, are undoubtedly throwing their all into the competition, training hard in the makeshift barracks while the carpenters construct spectator stands in the field adjacent. Pushing themselves until they’re beet red and breathless for the barest ounce of improvement, upping their odds minutely with every dogged swing.
And then, there’s Dengdamor.

“Do you think he’s... held one of those before?” says Panto, quietly amused as he comes down from his seventy-eighth push-up.

His current training companion- Uri, the lithe and deadly second son of the Blizzard Bluffs lineage-laughs, rich mahogany skin barely breaking a sweat as he lifts into seventy-nine. “I doubt it- that’s not how they Dengdamors do things.”

“Oh?” Panto raises his eyebrow along with his body, just starting to feel the deep, rewarding burn in his biceps.

“New nobility, the lot of ‘em,” his companion clarifies, grinning in good-natured challenge as he drops and switches to one arm for eighty. “Bought their way in. S’all money to ‘em; they want somethin’, they buy it. Fat lot o’ good that’s gonna do ‘em this time.”

“Perhaps the King is partial to bribes,” Panto points out, matching the snow prince’s motion stubbornly- and then switching from his whole hand to two fingers for good measure.

“Not when it comes to the prince,” snorts the man, following his lead- Panto, however, can see his arm tremble with the strain, sweat beading faster at his pearly white hairline. “Man’s protective as can be, so’s they say- wouldn’t be surprised if he has this whole contest rigged in favour of his choice.” He nods over to Silas, smirking. “Tell you somethin’ for nothin’- if Dengdamor there wins, we’ll know for certain the whole thing’s a fix; that, and ‘is Majesty’s got blinking awful taste in son-in-laws.”

He laughs at his own joke, dropping to the grass in relief after his big one hundred. Panto doesn’t join him in either action, mouth silent and arms taut as he hangs a moment, eyes lingering on the distant figure across the training field. Silas Dengdamor is, perhaps, the clumsiest and most ineffectual fighter Panto has ever clapped eyes on. So far in all his ‘spars’ with the other competitors, his chief tactic has been to flail, get disarmed immediately, and then hightail it to the other end of the field. Even now that he’s abandoned the one-on-one in favour of the straw training dummies, he appears to be constantly on the verge of fleeing should an unexpected breeze set it twitching. He is, quite simply, painful to behold.

And yet, strangely captivating.

Finally letting out a snort of his own, Panto climbs out of his crouch and brushes off his tunic, wrinkling his nose when he realises the lightweight white cloth has become dirtied with sweat and grime from the field. Shrugging, he pulls it off over his head, wadding it up and using it to dab away the sweat from his neck while his other hand reaches for his blunted training scissors. “Press on with your next set, friend. I’ll see you at the tavern this evening, will I not?”

“I should think so- oi, where you off to?”

Panto smirks, sheathing his blades with an artful twirl. “To do my good deed of the day!”

“Wastin’ no one’s time but your own, Trost.”

“Perhaps if I had an ounce of competition I’d be anxious,” Panto half-teases, swinging his shirt over his shoulder and stretching his arms above his head as he walks, the sound of his acquaintance’s laughter fading to background noise in his footsteps. Before too long its replacement floats forth in the form of Dengdamor’s grunts and performative exclamations, and the weak thwack of his own training blades colliding impotently with the dummy.
“My n-name is Silas Dengdamor,” the clumsy prince mutters, tripping over his words as well as his feet. “You-you stand between me and my tr-true love! P-prepare to-!”

“Canny,” Panto comments.

Silas, suavely, yelps and flings his sword at the dummy, tripping back a few paces. “What in-?” Seemingly realising that it was not in the fact the dummy that spoke, he wheels on Panto and nearly capsizes himself in the process. “Wh-don’t sneak up on me like that, dufus!”

Panto raises his eyebrow. “Merry meet yourself, my lord.”

Catching up to himself, Silas blushes. The combination of that and the sweat-stuck curls on his forehead is, in Panto’s opinion, rather a becoming look- even if his eyes are a tad on the manic side. “I-I’m so sorry! I was so immersed, I-”

“Oh, I can see that,” says Panto, smirking. “I was just admiring your… enthusiasm.”

Silas breaks eye contact, ducking his head bashfully. When that only serves to deepen his blush, Panto looks down himself and remembers his state of undress. “Ah. Do forgive the indecency,” he says apologetically, toying with the idea of putting his filthy shirt back on. The idea makes him wrinkle his nose, so he dismisses it. “Training is messy business, I’m afraid.”

“That’s, um… okay,” Silas mumbles, apparently not sure where to look.

Panto can’t help but smile. The man’s coyness is altogether too endearing. “You look like you’ve worked up a fair sweat yourself,” he says, eyes flicking from Silas’ damp hair and pink cheeks to the dark ring where his olive green tunic sticks to his slim chest.

“Well. You do enough f-failing,” says Silas quietly, mouth twitching, a smile playing at the corners as he bends over to fumble for his sword.

He laughs, surprised. If the shyness was endearing, it is nothing on the good humour. Panto has always appreciated self-awareness in a person; even though he sometimes lacks in it himself, or so his family say. “You’ll take home the prize for effort, I’m sure,” he teases, unsheathing his own scissors and leaning on them like a cane. “But perhaps you might care for some technique to pair with it?”

When Silas straightens up, clutching his blades like a safety blanket, he looks at Panto with confusion. “S-sorry?”

“I can instruct you a while,” Panto clarifies, tapping the handle of his blade. “Give you some tricks of the trade, if you like.”

Silas squints suspiciously. “I… thought you just came over here to laugh at me.”

“But at all,” Panto assures him. “No, that’s just a little bonus. I merely thought you might benefit from some guidance. Sadly, the art of swordsmanship is seldom so simple as taking a swing and hoping for the best.”

That coaxes a half-laugh out of the anxious man, though he still looks ready to bolt at a moment’s notice. “You… you don’t have to. I’m sure you have your own preparation to do.”

“I’ve been doing that all day,” says Panto with a shrug. Truth be told, he hadn’t needed to do any. But it wouldn’t do to come across as complacent. “I imagine I’m as ready as I will ever be.”
Silas looks at him- really looks at him- and Panto finds himself lost in the boundless dark of those wide, watchful eyes. “Why would you help me?” Silas asks quietly, Panto struck silent by the honesty in his tone; as if he couldn’t separate his words from his heart if he tried. “We’re competing for the same thing, we’re-” he glances about furtively, lowering his voice to a fervent (that is to say loud) whisper- “we’re enemies!”

Panto, quite unintentionally, breaks the tension by bursting into laughter.

“It’s true!” Silas protests in indignation. “If- if my mother found out-!”

“It’s not an affair, Dengdamor!” Panto snorts, reaching out to pat the flustered prince’s shoulder. “There’s no conspiracy, this is merely… good sportsmanship. Entirely noble and above-board practice, I can assure you; besides, we won’t make a good impression on the king by spitting at each other like bickering wildcats, will we?”

“I suppose,” Silas mumbles, unconvinced.

“And as for the competition, well…” Panto raises his hands. “I may be a good fighter, but I am no teacher.” He smirks. “And I am most certainly not a miracle worker.”

Silas gapes, splutters, and smacks Panto’s arm with all the fearsome might of a limp herring. “You egg!”

Laughing, Panto catches the man by his flailing wrist and hauls him into a playful headlock. “Rule number one” he chuckles, giving the flustered noble a good-natured noogie. “Don’t let your opponent get under your skin!”

“Geddof,” Silas squawks, wriggling like a moleworm. Panto releases him, out of courtesy- and because all of that warm, soft weight against his own bare skin is rather distracting. Silas stumbles back out of his grip, glaring at Panto as he rights himself, hair even more ruffled than before like the puffed-up plumage of an incensed guineapigeon.

Every time Panto thinks the man cannot possible get more adorable…

“So, in short,” Silas huffs, with a token attempt at smoothing out his tunic. “You’re helping me because I’m not a threat?”

Panto beams, clapping him on the shoulder. “Darn tootin’! Now, let us begin- I promised someone a drink later, and royalty cares not for tardiness.”

Silas raises his eyebrows, but transfers his training sword to his leading hand all the same- offended though he clearly is, at least he seems convinced at last to take Panto up on his offer. “Is that your tactic, then?” he says, falling into a precarious facsimile of a fighting stance. “Drink your competition under the table?”

Chuckling, Panto sticks his own sword in the ground and steps forward to correct his stance. “Only the ones who’ll put up a decent fight,” he jokes, nudging Silas’ elbows into a better arrangement. He allows his fingers to trail along Silas’ arm as he steps behind him, standing as close as decency will allow when he steadies the smaller man’s slender hips with his hand and knocks his knees further apart with his own. “Or the ones I can’t seduce,” he murmurs, a playful grin teasing at his lips.

Silas nearly drops his sword. “Jerk,” he mumbles, ducking his head. Panto is unavoidably aware of his body weight leaning into his touch, however, his voice a breathy gasp.

If it were anyone else, Panto might suspect him of being enticing on purpose; would suspect him of
reciting the lines and choreographing the steps, just as Panto himself often does. Silas, however, has the manner of a man who’s never purposefully flirted and probably wouldn’t know how. It would probably be awkward, fumbling. Embarrassing to watch.

But Panto wants to see it. Wants to be the target of it, no less; wants to respond in kind, match those tentative advances with openness and interest, be brazen enough for the both of them. See how much reciprocation it takes for Silas to become bolder, to take risks. How long it takes for him to match Panto touch for heavy touch, for coy glances to become words whispered in ears, for a drink in a crowded tavern to turn to a quiet room, a locked door, hands on skin and lips on hungry lips…

Quashing the dangerous thoughts, he steps back hastily and clears his throat. “Much better,” he praises, patting Silas’ back chummily. “We’ll make a duelist of you yet!”

Silas looks at him over his shoulder, wary. “Really?”

“...Well,” Panto concedes, bobbing his head. “We shall make a moving target of you, at the very least!”

Snorting, Silas turns and elbows him. Panto evades with ease, of course, but the attack draws a laugh from him. “Not bad! Keep that up and you may even get in a couple of scratches, little kitten!”

Silas, eyes alight with determined mischief, stumbles back to shakily level his sword as Panto’s chest. “If I’m a kitten, good sir, I think you’ll find I’m a desert sand saber- quick, deadly, and able to survive through long periods of drought on cactus juice alone!”

Panto blinks, thrown. “Beg you pardon?”

“Um,” says Silas, shuffling his feet. “That was... I was intimidating you?”

“With lengthy animal facts?”

Silas blushes. “Sand sabers are scary…” he mumbles.

Panto’s face hurts from grinning. “I suppose we’ll have to practice that, too.”

“Much appreciated,” says Silas, a bashful smile of his own crinkling his warm eyes at the corners.

Before Panto can get utterly distracted by the sight, he clears his throat once more and raises his sword. “Shall we dance, Your Highness?”

Though his eyes widen in anxiety, Silas nevertheless nods bravely. “After you, My Lord.”

The clang of their dull training swords rings out in the fine summer air, a spark of familiar pleasure crackling up Panto’s spine. No matter how many years he fights, how assured he becomes in his own victory, the spark of excitement at the start of a duel will never fade. And this spark is fanned to new intensity at the sight of his foe, of brown eyes dark and pretty as a doll’s staring him down along the bridge of pitted steel between them.

Until Panto disarms him half a second later, that is.

Silas looks down at his weapon, strewn uselessly on the ground, before turning his beseeching gaze back on Panto. “...Best of three?”

Panto grins crookedly, using his own sword to flip Silas’ off the ground, catching it artfully and holding it out. “I’ve got all day.”
Of course, he doesn’t need all day to know that Silas, for all his earnest commitment, is most assuredly not a threat to Panto. Not in the tournament.

He does, however, sometime after Silas warms up and nervously casts aside his own shirt for the remainder of his training, realise that the man may pose a considerable threat to his concentration and judgment. And, quite possibly, the continuation of his scandal-free streak.

Well, he muses, eyes following every move of his bewitching protégé’s slender frame. So much for harmless fun.

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It took Theodore a lot more bugging to get Dirk into the spare boots he’d found, and naturally the prince was complaining about them before they’d even taken a step out of the village limits. He’s been whining non-stop about the heels being too tight, even though Theodore personally got on his knees and fitted the darn things himself. But it hasn’t slowed them down, so Theodore lets him have his discontent- Dirk is more than capable of walking and whining at the same time.

“They clash with everything, Todd,” he laments, using the hated garments to kick aside a fallen branch. “I don’t have one outfit these hairy monstrosities would match- and that was even before the birds ran off with everything!”

“Have you been stung by neednettles once since you put them on?” Theodore demands.

“Well, no, but—”

“You’re welcome.”

Dirk pouts, tripping gracelessly over a tangled root in his distraction. Theodore catches him automatically, hauling him back to his feet by the back of his ridiculous toga. “A-ha, see?” Dirk crows, clumsily righting himself. “That wouldn’t have happened in my own shoes!”

Theodore pauses to stare at him, incredulous. “Seriously? Have you met you?”

“Hmph,” comes the articulate response, Dirk tangling his fingers with Theodore’s as he butts his head against his shoulder like a cat. “Well, I’m rather out of sorts just now, Sir Brotz- it’s a very warm day-”

“You’re a sun. You’re literally a-”

“And I’ve been wearing the same clothes for over twenty-four hours,” Dirk presses on, brushing Theodore’s rebuttal aside carelessly. “I’ve never gone this long without changing before, Theodore, I’m all sticky, and my skin feels too tight.”

“You don’t say.”

“It’s awful.” He flops, chin perching on Theodore’s shoulder as he awkwardly shuffles his feet to keep pace. “And my legs feel funny, this one-” he kicks lightly at Theodore’s shin with his right foot- feels longer than usual.” He gazes at Theodore with wide, pitious eyes. “I think I may be contracting some ghastly jungle virus.”

Theodore meets his eyes, unimpressed. “I’m not carrying you again.”
Dirk pulls a face. “Meanie.”

Shrugging his clingy prince off, Theodore swings his boomerang to dispatch a close clump of vines in their path. “Kinda got my hands full.”

“I’ll take over hacking duties!” Dirk offers, making grabby hands at the weapon. “Give you your hands back.”

“So you can swing it around my face?” Theodore snorts, yanking it out of reach. He wouldn’t trust Dirk with such a weapon even with the wooden blade guard in place. “As if. Look, if you wanna be useful hold that compass steady- it’d be way too easy to get lost in these parts.”

Dirk, muttering in displeasure, lifts the little bronze contraption and holds it flat in his palm. “Right… what am I looking at?”

Rolling his eyes, Theodore stops to point at the small mountain engravings along the rim. “South edge. Basically opposite to the way the arrow’s pointing.”

Glancing at the twitching arrow, Dirk frowns. “Sooo…” he turns a few degrees. Then a few more. “Um…”

Theodore grabs his shoulders before he can make himself dizzy again, manually turning his hopeless prince in the right direction. “There,” he says, gesturing to the arrow as it points straight at Dirk’s chest. “See?”

“Ah. Tremendous,” Dirk chirps, spring back in his step as he sets forth as indicated. “We should be there in-fpfttt!”

“You were saying?” Theodore laughs, dragging his prince out of the dense brush he just hurtled face-first into.

“Blargh,” Dirk mumbles, spitting out a mouthful of leaves. “Stupid traitor bush!”

“Get behind me, dumbo,” says Theodore, pushing Dirk out of the way to resume clearing the path. “It’s only gonna get thicker from here on out- there’s a reason no sane person ever goes this way.”

“And what does that make us?” says Dirk, brow quirked as he plucks leaves from his crown and tangled hair.

“Desperate idiots with no time to waste,” Theodore answers readily, wiping the sweat from his brow. “This is the most direct way- even if the woods slow us down, it’s three times the distance to get to the mountain road in the marshes. At least this way we’re under cover; the king’s probably got the whole of Wendimoor out looking for you.”

“Looking for me?” Dirk protests, hanging so close behind that Theodore can feel his breath in his hair. “You don’t think he’ll have eyes out for the rogue knight who spirited me away, then?”

*Trying* real hard not to. “*Please.* I’m telling him it was all your idea.”

The prince chuckles humorlessly. “*Right.* As if he’d believe I’m smart enough to pull this off.”

Frowning, Theodore turns to meet his gaze. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Come on, Todd- you know as well as I do what father dearest thinks of me,” he says, fiddling with the engravings on the compass. “That’s the whole reason we’re *in* this mess; he thinks I’m an
immature simpleton who needs a big, strong man to look after me.”

Theodore glances between the prince in his impractical toga and the boomerang in his own hand. “... I mean…”

Dirk scowls and flicks his ear.

“Jeez, I’m kidding!” Theodore complains, rubbing the stinging tip ruefully. “Look, I… I know you’re not exactly… physically gifted-

“Rude.”

“… but you’ve got other stuff going for you, y’know? I mean, you’re clever- sometimes. But you hide it under your dumb jewellery and your stupid flighty bullpoop. Is it really any wonder your father worries about you?”

“I just wish he’d listen to me, just once in a while,” says Dirk, groaning and pressing his forehead to Theodore’s shoulder wearily. “But as soon as I say something he doesn’t want to hear he just… pretends I’m not talking.” Theodore can feel Dirk’s fingers unconsciously fiddling with the straps of his armour. “It’s not even a discussion…”

Throat tight, Theodore reaches up to place both hands on the back of Dirk’s neck. “Hey,” he murmurs, rubbing small, comforting circles with his thumbs. “We’ll make him listen. I promise.”

Sighing, Dirk bestows a tiny kiss upon Theodore’s neck as he stands up straight. “Well. Suppose we’d best not dilly-dally, then.” He nods towards the semi-slashed thicket with a wry smile. “Carry on, good sir knight.”

“As you wish,” Theodore huffs, giving his pinhead prince a dry kiss of reassurance before he turns back to his work. “Son of a bush, we’re gonna have to blaze a whole new trail through here,” he says, kicking at the wild undergrowth catching round his feet.

“Are there really no existing paths?” Dirk asks, peering at the compass as if it can give him an answer.

“In the Wayward Woods? No. Think that would kind of defeat the purpose,” says Theodore dryly, pulling back for another swing. “And this isn’t even the worst of it. I met a hunter from these parts once; used to set his snares in the Bramble Rambles.”

“Well, that sounds… prickly.”

“No kidding,” Theodore grunts, tearing away a weakened knot of branches. “Thorns as big as your head, he said. We’re going to have our work cut out for us getting through, but at least no one will find us.”

Dirk shudders. “Delightful.” He lets Theodore wrangle the cloying overgrowth in silence a while before piping up: “Is there anything I can do to help?”

“That depends,” Theodore pants, the edge of his boomerang sinking with a thwack into yet another tangle. The lush greens are beginning to give way to coarse, wiry brown, twigs and vines alike intertwining into a nigh-on impassable portcullis. Already Theodore can feel his arm complaining. “You got anything big and sharp on you?”

“Yes…” He hears Dirk rummaging in the (surprisingly spacious) folds of his toga. “Ah, not that I can… I have this?”
Theodore glances over his shoulder and snorts. “Yeah, I don’t think that’s going to help a whole lot, Dirk.”

The prince shrugs, looping the string around his finger and letting the daffodil-yellow yo-yo spin out towards the ground. “Thought I’d offer.”

“That thing hasn’t come in useful once,” says Theodore, levering the boomerang out of the freshly-carved notch for another swing.

“That’s just blatantly untrue,” Dirk protests, now apparently in the process of making a cat’s cradle in his fingers with the string. “It keeps my hands busy.”

“Oh, of course- that’s what you want in a weapon,” Theodore chuckles. The king bought him the deadly little thing years ago, something about not wanting to send his only son out into the world without a last resort means of self-defense. Fortunately it has never come down to that as Dirk, predictably, never once tried learning to use it as anything more than a diverting toy.

“I should think so- I have you to fight for me,” Dirk beams.

“Not for much longer at this rate,” says Theodore, short of breath as he takes another swing. “Cheese and crackers…”

“Todd?” Dirk asks, a new layer of concern in his voice. “Todd, are you sure there’s no other-?”

“It’s fine,” Theodore cuts in, offering his prince a weak smile over his shoulder. “I’m fine, just…”

He takes a deep breath as he lifts his weapon, but the air sticks in his throat and lungs like treacle. The perfectly balanced boomerang suddenly feels heavy as lead, every exhausted muscle in his upper body fighting to keep it aloft, bones locked and condemning his body to the motion even as his muscles scream for respite. He barely has time to think ‘oh no, not again’ before his world once more fades to claustrophobic tunnel-vision, Dirk’s dancing light on a knotted vine his only pinpoint of contact with reality as the rest slips away to cold, unforgiving dark. As the sound of the birds and the eaves and even his beloved prince’s anxious voice recede to muffled ambience and eventually profound, impenetrable silence. No light, no sound, no air; just quiet. Just void.

And then, from somewhere within the chasm of bottomless shadow, a distant, anguished scream.

Theodore, ironically, comes back to ground just in time to feel it drop from under his feet.

“What the-?” Theodore shakes his head, the muzzy vestiges of the darkness clinging like cobwebs to the cortex. When his vision clears he turns it straight to Dirk, finding his prince’s face contorted in panic as he clings to a nearby knot of gnarled vines for dear life.

“I don’t know!” Dirk cries, yelping as a passing branch nearly knocks his block off. “One minute
you were cutting away- and doing an excellent job of it, I might add- and I was admiring your hacking arm and, and then the next thing I know you’re having one of your little turns and the bloody ground is gone! Coincidence? Perhaps, but flipping suspicious- you haven’t developed any superpowers I ought to know about, have you? Because as awful, terrifying happenstances go this seems abso-tively bonkers, enough to make one wonder if perhaps everything is con-

“The ground isn’t moving.”

Dirk blinks at him, clutching on tight, face paling as he glances down. “What?”

Theodore shakes his head, ducking it as the thickest layer of branches yet brushes past. “Dirk, the ground isn’t moving, we are, this-” he tugs on the knot of vines- “is taking us somewhere!”

“Well, what do we do?” Dirk pleads, a manic quaver in his voice.

“I- I don’t know!”

“Oh, well isn’t that just wizard!”

“Shut up!”

“Oh, I’m sorry, I’ll fly to certain death more quietly, shall I?”

Trust Dirk to be a sarcastic bonehead to the end. “We’re not gonna die, Dirk, I just- I need to figure out what we’re…”

He pauses, squints. Peers a little closer at the reddish-brown vines in his hands. They have sort of a twisty texture, each vine made up of three or more strands interlocked messily. But it goes deeper than that; each individual strand is close-textured, scored lengthways with fine lines. Lines that that lift in individual, separate fibers if tugged. Fibers like thread, or…

Or hair.

Theodore’s blood runs cold. “Dirk. Dirk, we’re on a-!”

The words abandon him as they breach the forest canopy.

“Oh, my…” Dirk breathes, voiced snatched away on the wind.

Theodore finds himself similarly speechless. Below them the woods spread out in a verdant emerald sea, the windblown whisper of the eaves a quiet yet cacophonous chorus. As they travel higher and higher the edges come into view, untamed forest dwindling into the golden fields of the Trost farmlands, distant windmills twirling lazily in the foreground of the Dengdamor castle’s elaborate spires and the faraway slithering silhouette of the Forever Train. Beside them the Lunar Lake shines, the great crescent a perfect mirror to the Moon himself- who looms now closer than ever before, almost close enough to reach out and touch- and beyond that, past more ambling woods and the winding silver snail trail of Comet Creek…

“Oh,” says Dirk with a feeble laugh. “I can see my house from here…”

Giddy laughter feels like the right reaction. Even at a distance, Starfall Citadel asserts its commanding presence over the land. From so very far away, the shapes of the individual bricks and boulders give way to mere glimmers of late afternoon sinking sunlight glittering on cosmic stone, igniting the stronghold like a blazing beacon, its light touching the land for miles around in shining fingers of dazzling gold. Awe-inspiring, even as a mere pinprick on the horizon.
“It seemed like we’d come so far…”

Theodore frowns, casting his eyes to Dirk. Even with his light dimmed in fear, his prince shines brighter than any fallen star. “We have,” Theodore murmurs, reaching out to take his hand but falling short. “And we’ll go as far as we need. To the edge of the world and back.”

Dirk looks back at him, glowing face marred by the scratches of the trees and a single silver tear track, and reaches out to bridge the void.

Unfortunately, another hand finds Dirk first.

Theodore watches, horrorstruck, as five fingers the size of tree trunks wrap around his prince, grubby digits encasing him neck to toe. “Dirk!” he cries, voice raw.

“Todd!” his prince screams, arm between two great fingers still reaching, even as the hand retreats and takes him with it.

“H-hold on, Dirk, I’m coming, I’m-argh!”

But he moved too hastily. As he loses his handhold on the matted locks he careens forward, hands grasping at empty air. For a split second he feels his stomach plummet three hundred feet to the forest floor- but the knot of hair his ankle is caught in narrowly prevents his body from following suit.

“Oh, my- Todd!”

“I’m-I’m okay!” Theodore yells, wriggling. “I, I’m gonna do… something, I-”

But there’s precious little he can do, hanging upside down from a single strand like a fish on a line. Swinging helplessly on his hook, he can only watch from afar as Dirk is raised in that colossal hand, like a tiny grape to a hungry mouth.

The world falls quiet. Not episode quiet, no blissful void of non-awareness; Theodore is acutely aware of everything, from his own blood rushing in his ears to Dirk’s distant, panicked breathing as he stares his fate right in its colossal face.

All those almost sounds, all that white noise, bows and breaks under the voice.

“Huh. Weird.”

Loud as a thunderclap and coarse as a boulder, the voice tumbles over them like a rockslide. Dirk winces, closer to the source and yet unable to cover his ears.

The hand turns him round ponderously, inspecting him like a shiny brooch. “You’re kind shiny, huh? I ain’t never had no shiny ones before.” The thumb prods his cheek- though the tip is at least three times the size of his face. “Kinda funny lookin’.”

“Ah,” says Dirk timidly, fidgeting. “So sorry to inconvenience you, we-”

“Wha’?!?” the giant exclaims, darn near imploding Theodore’s eardrums in the process. “You talk?”

“Y-yes,” Dirk squeaks, shrinking under the roar. “W-we certainly do, now if you could just-”

“Oh boy, there’s more o’ ya? Hang on, lemme…”

“Just the two of us, actually- wait, careful-!”
Which is about as far as he gets before another hand is fumbling around, dislodging Theodore from his precarious position. He cries out as he drops, arms windmilling and Dirk’s terrified face rushing out of his peripheral vision.

Before he can make it much further, something else is taking hold of his ankle—two somethings, in fact. Theodore looks up, heart racing, at the two enormous fingers pinching his entire foot and half his lower leg as they winch him up, up, upside down until his head is level with Dirk’s anxiously kicking feet, the fur of the controversial Bofuki boots ruffling in the wind. Blinking and breathing heavily, Theodore looks into the slumberous blue eyes of their captor.

Wrinkling her enormous, snub nose, the giant inspects the two of them side by side. “Aw. You ain’t as pretty. And you’re both real… funny. I ain’t never had ones like you before.”

“Ones… like us?” says Dirk, weakly.

“Youse guys are louses, right?”

“What? Eugh, no!” Dirk hastens to assure her, and Theodore doesn’t need to be at his level to know he’s shaking his head like a madman. “No, no we most certainly are not— we’re people! Look— two arms, two legs! Would have considerably more of those if we were… louses.”

She snorts like a rupturing faultline. “Wha’ do I look like, a bug doctor? Ey, ‘ow comes youse glowin’?” She grins excitedly at Dirk, revealing her crooked, yellowed tombstone teeth. “You like a glowbug or somethin’? I like glowbugs— real crunchy.”

“N-no!”

“Or like a genie? ‘Chu do wishes?”

“Ah…”

“I ain’t never eaten a genie…”

“I-I’m afraid I’m not a genie, Miss… what’s your name?”

Her immense brow crinkles in deep thought, like she has to dredge up the disused answer from under six feet of brain clutter. “Uhh… Bart. Yeah, that sounds right.”

“Right, well, Miss… Bart. As a matter of fact I am a prince—Dirk Gently, although most people call me Your Majesty or something similar. I’m from right over there—” a pause follows as he no doubt flails his arms towards the distant Citadel—“and this less-shiny man is my faithful knight and, ah, close personal friend, Sir Brotz. We were just trying to navigate ourselves through the woods when we got ourselves tangled in your… lovely hair, quite by accident. Sincerest apologies, utterly unintentional— we’ll all be laughing about it soon, I’m sure! Won’t we, Todd?”

“Uh…”

“Like this!” Dirk bursts into fake, frenzied laughter above him. Theodore, for lack of anything better to do, does likewise.

Bart the giant squints at them, but settles after a long, awkward moment of phony laughter on Dirk, her voice a low, threatening rumble. “You talk. A lot.”

“Yes,” Dirk squeaks. Theodore’s hand twitches towards his boomerang; he can whack her in this
eye if she starts bringing either of them too close to her ginormous mouth, but if she drops them or gets mad… no, he can’t risk it. Not yet.

She cocks her head, and shrugs her mountainous shoulders. “‘S nice,” she mumbles. “First thing anyone’s said to me… ever. Usually it's just screamin’, cryin’…”

I wonder why, Theodore thinks. He doesn’t dare voice the thought.

“Nice to hear someone else talk,” she says. She turns her attention to Theodore. “You talk too?”

“Y-yes, Ma’am.”

“Ma’am?”

Her incredulous outburst sends fear coiling in his gut. “I, I mean-!”

“Ha!” she cackles, grin splitting her face in two. “Ma’am, boy… ain’t no one ever ma’am’d me before.” She nods. ‘I like you, Greeny. Hey, why’s your face that colour, anyway?’

Theodore blinks, the question getting sort of lost on the way to his brain.

“Ah- Miss Bart, Ma’am, he’s been upside-down for an awfully long time,” Dirk’s voice floats down. “Could you…?”

“Oh. Yeah, ‘kay.”

For a moment the world lurches, then the clamping fingers round his leg loosen and Theodore is deposited on his back onto something broad and warm. He gasps as circulation returns to his legs, clutching at his tingling skull and screwing his eyes shut as equilibrium reasserts itself. Moments later he feels a dip in the soft, broad thing, and when he opens his eyes he is greeted by two faces; the wide, familiar eyes of his prince, and behind him the looming monument of Bart.

“Todd,” Dirk breathes, hands fluttering over Theodore’s chest. “Are you alright?”

Theodore nods- and immediately regrets it. “Yeah,” he mutters over the headrush, fumbling for Dirk’s hand. “I’m fine. Just- help me up.”

Steadied by Dirk’s hand on his back, Theodore slowly sits up and surveys the scene. What they’re sitting on turns out to be an enormous outstretched palm, grubby and calloused much like the rest of its owner. From here he can get a better look at the giant herself; the hair they mistook for snarled foliage erupts from her head in a long, matted shock, interspersed with bits of debris that could have been unintentionally accumulated or put in as some attempt at decoration. He thinks he can see a wagon wheel with a broken spoke in there, and just above it a shattered brass oil lamp. He pretends not to see the dried-out half a horse skeleton in there. Beneath the unkempt mass her shoulders and torso are clad in dirty white tarpaulin- a quick scan of the ‘seams’, the metal eyelets strung haphazardly together with rope, reveals the pieces to be ragged old ship sails. He wonders if they were out of use or if she had to strip them herself like petals from a flower, possibly while the vessels were still occupied. He decides he’d rather not find out.

“You okay there, chum?” Bart inquires, reaching up with her now free hand to pet the top of his head with one gigantic fingertip.

“Y-yeah, thanks,” Theodore mumbles, keenly aware that she could squash him like a bug with just a
little more pressure.

She grunts in acknowledgement, withdrawing the finger. “Why youse guys in these woods, anyways?” she asks, squinting into the setting sun. “Most people like, avoid ‘em, ‘s why I nap there sometimes. You lookin’ for a quiet nap place, too?”

“Actually, we’re on a quest,” says Dirk excitedly, grinning up at her. Now that they’re both together he seems stupefyingly unconcerned that this giant woman could crush them with her pinky. “We were on our way to the Marshmallow Mountains to change my destiny!”

“Huh. Cool.” Scruffy brows drawing together once more, Bart lifts Dirk and Theodore up and to the right and loosely points behind her with her free hand. “You mean those things?”

Theodore leans sideways at the same time Dirk does, peering over Bart’s gargantuan shoulder- but keeping a wary eye on her mouth, just in case she decides she feels like an afternoon snack. Distantly, hazily outlined in icy fog, the flat tops of several clustered cylindrical peaks faintly reflect orange in the sunset. Behind them, dissolving into the mist, the dark silhouette of the continuing range and somewhere, hopefully, buried deep within, the answer to their prayers.

“Yeah, that’s…” Theodore gulps, shivering at the mere sight of the snow-cloaked slopes. “That’s them, alright.”

“Real cold over there,” Bart cautions, lifting them closer to her face. “You sure that’s where you wanna go do your destiny thing?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” says Theodore.

“Yes indeed!” says Dirk simultaneously, and with triple the enthusiasm- and Theodore hastily yanks him back when he steps a little too close to her teeth for his liking. “This quest is of the utmost importance- besides, I’ve never seen snow before, except in pictures. Do you know what it tastes like- no! No, don’t tell me; I’ll find out!”

The giant snorts, a puff of air from her cavernous nostrils nearly knocking them clean off her hand. “Ha. You’re weird. ‘Kay, I’ll put you there.”

“Wha- really?” Theodore asks while Dirk’s busy gaping. “You’ll take us there?”

“Yeah. I got nothin’ else goin’ on, so…” she shrugs, bouncing them in her palm like jumping beans with the motion. “S gonna take a while though. We gotta get through this real spiky bit, hurts my feet if I step on it wrong.”

“I suppose you must struggle for shoes that fit,” Dirk commiserates, gesturing to his own hated boots. “I’d offer you mine, but I suppose they might be a tad on the small side.”

Bart, however, looks intrigued. “Wait, those things come off?”

“Um… yes?”

“Heh. I just thought your toes was real fluffy.” She stares at them, transfixed. “They look… soft.”

Dirk nearly rolls off her hand in his haste to get the boots off his feet. “They’re yours! Obviously they’re too small for your feet, but you could craft them into something, possibly? A stylish little accessory of some description.”
He holds them up, smiling brightly at the giant as she reaches out to pet them with a calloused forefinger. She snickers at the sensation, flashing her teeth and darn near triggering Theodore’s fight-or-flight response. “How’d your feet even fit in those?”

“They barely do- honestly, these things have been giving me grief all day.”

“Don’t start,” Theodore mutters.

Dirk sticks his tongue out at him before turning his grin back on Bart. “Just a little thank you for all your help- perhaps we can fashion them into something on the walk!”

“I uh, don’t know nothin’ ‘bout making stuff…”

“Oh, not to worry, I’m quite clever with my hands,” says Dirk, casting a wink at Theodore. “Wouldn’t you agree, Sir Brotz?”

“Sure,” Theodore agrees, rolling his eyes. “And pretty things are all he thinks about.”

“Heh. I like this, youse guys are sayin’ all kinds ‘a stuff,” says Bart, lowering them to her shoulder. “You sit your lil’ butts down here and I’ll getchu where you goin’.”

“Much appreciated, my good lady,” says Dirk brightly, clutching a strand of her wild hair for support as he hops onto her shoulder. Theodore follows quickly- the better to catch Dirk before he sends himself toppling off the other side- but cautiously, determined not to take his eyes off the giant’s hands or teeth until he’s totally sure that he and Dirk are out of reach of both. “I must say, running into you was a most fortuitous turn of events- my dashing knight here was intending to hack our way to the mountains single-handedly!”

“Shut up, dufus,” Theodore mutters, helping his ungainly prince to sit down safely on the giant’s shoulder- or as safely as once can be sat down on a bloodthirsty giant’s shoulder. Moon, he hates everything about this situation.

Beaming, Dirk pulls Theodore close and presses a kiss to his cheek. “Valiant effort, darling.”

A low shame simmers in Theodore’s gut; the knowledge of what could have befallen his prince had the giant not proved to be (mostly) harmless hangs heavy in his head and his heart. His poor judgment, his weakness could have cost them dearly. Who was he to think he’d be enough? Who is he to act like he can protect his prince, his love all on his own? They could be lost in the woods, or tangled in the brambles or ground up to make this giant’s bread by now, all because Theodore thought he could solve their problems with a boomerang and a pair of old boots.

“This was stupid,” he whispers, looking wistfully at the citadel gleaming on the horizon. “I can’t believe I… we should turn back.”

Dirk gives him a look of wide-eyed disbelief. “But- no, Theodore, we’ve come so far already and we-”

“I- I can’t protect you out here,” says Theodore, clutching his prince’s leather-clad knee. “I don’t know what I’m doing, or where we’re going or if this witchykookoo even exists- what if there’s nothing waiting for us, and we just starve to death in a frozen wasteland a hundred miles from home?”

“I’m trying rather hard not to think about that, actually,” says Dirk, placing his hand at the small of Theodore’s back and fistig it in his tunic. “I suppose we’ll cross that bridge when we come to it.”
“What if it’s too late when that happens?” Theodore snaps.

“That’s too late,” Dirk rebuffs, meeting Theodore’s eyes, his steadiness of voice belied by the desperate fear in his eyes. “But… at least we’ll know we tried. I need to know that we— that I tried. But, I suppose if you want to go…”

“Dirk…” Theodore gazes back imploringly. “Is it worth it? Really? This quest, is it… is it worth staking your life on?”

Dirk smiles, soft as a whisper, and cups Theodore’s cheek in his palm. “Without a shadow of a doubt.”

When he leans in for a kiss, Theodore hasn’t the will or the strength to deny him. Instead he holds on tight to his prince, taking warmth and assurance from his touch, drawing courage from his confidence; taking a moment to think, to breathe, to remind himself that he isn’t falling anymore.

“Ey, whatchu guys doin’ with your mouths?”

Oh heck, that’s right, giant.

Dirk giggles as Theodore startles out of the kiss, and continues to hold him close despite his skittishness. He rests their foreheads together, the intricate sun motif on his circlet pressing warmly into Theodore’s skin. “Oh, nothing, this is— this is Theodore’s thank you,” he says, thumb grazing along Theodore’s cheekbone as he grins down at him. “He doesn’t much care for fashion.”

“Huh,” Bart snorts, entire shoulder rocking, lifting her ginormous foot with a cacophony of snapping branches as she starts to walk. “You people are nutjobs.”

Theodore chuckles, burying his face in his prince’s shoulder as it shakes with quiet laughter— sharing with him in a cocktail of fear, disbelief, giddy excitement, dizzy affection and sheer, coursing adrenaline.

She’s not wrong.

Chapter End Notes

Comments are the happy talking bugs on my shoulder <3
Day Four

Chapter Summary

There's some slightly creepy body-horror elements in the mountain sequence of this chapter, but it's brief and not gory! If you need to brace yourself though, I will say: beware the rabbit.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Given half the chance, Dirk always has and always will roll out of his comfortable four-poster bed at a respectable noon and greet the sun at its highest, rather than faff about with that cold dim nonsense at the beginning. The title of sun prince does not a morning person make.

So it makes sense that today, when he is for once both awake and aware of the rising sun and said cold dim nonsense, it is because he never had a bed- or even a too-small hammock- to collapse upon in the first place.

“Gosh, I miss my bed,” he sighs wistfully, twisting the rope in his hands. As it turns out, the chaotic jungle of the giant’s hair is littered with potential craft materials to play with. “I’ll never take my bed for granted again- I had such fun in it. So soft, so supportive. Truly an unparalleled location for all that lovely sleeping, and… other activities. I miss him, so…”

“I’m?” Bart grunts, her voice booming in his ears.

“Yes, he’s a he, I’ve decided. We make quite a team, my lovely bed and me.” He glances at his bedraggled knight. “And Sir Brotz makes three!”

Theodore rolls his eyes from his perch. Ill-at-ease with the rocking of the giant’s enormous shoulder, he’d instead woven several thick strands of hair into a makeshift nest for them to sleep in. When it had become apparent that Dirk was far too jittery to sleep, Theodore had simply settled there to hold his crown and to keep a quiet, watchful eye on him, lest he fall off in his quest for craftable debris. Honestly, the man is such a relentless Nervous Nelly; not even the strand of hair Dirk had tied around his own waist like a safety line had been enough to convince the knight to get some sleep. Sometimes, Dirk thinks he must enjoy stress; he’ll be a lot less keen when he goes grey as a goose from it.

“I ain’t never slept in a bed,” Bart rumbles. “They don’ make ‘em big enough.”

Dirk, wincing, smacks himself in the forehead. “Oh, bother, I forgot- I do apologise. And here I am, whingeing about a couple of rough nights.”

“She okay,” she says, quietly- for her, that is. From Dirk’s perspective it still sounds like a natural disaster. “I kinda like hearin’ about it. Sounds nice…”

Dirk peers up at her ear- the only part of her face currently in his line of sight- and frowns sadly. Despite her unkempt (and borderline nightmarish) appearance, and the somewhat tasteless jokes she makes about eating them from time to time, she seems… nice. Pleasant, even- abrasiveness aside,
she’s rather a relaxed sort, easy to get along with. Her directness, though disarming and blunt and frequently terrifying, is very refreshing; Dirk appreciates people who say what they mean and mean what they say. Moon knows he doesn’t meet a great deal of those in his position. But it is apparent that she hasn’t had any opportunity to practice her social skills- and though she has told Dirk several times now that she doesn’t mind the people running and screaming, he’s not convinced. She’s lonely, pure and simple. Dirk knows what that looks like, what it feels like; and this poor behemoth doesn’t even have a Theodore to call her own. Dirk finds himself wanting to do something, help her in some way, as ridiculous as that sounds when he is little more than an interesting insect in her hands. He wants to say something, or give her something, that might make her feel less alone.

She’s not having his Theodore, though. Not after the pains he’s gone through to hold onto him.

He sets back to work on his alternative offering, wrinkling his brow as he attempts to wrangle the frayed rope into submission. He’d rather liked the idea of turning the boots into earrings for his gargantuan friend, but had abandoned that prospect when he realised he’d first have to convince her to pierce her ears- and he didn’t much like the idea of that conversation, nor the ensuing ordeal of trying to drive a quick and painless hole through an earlobe the approximate thickness of a mattress. But on scavenging through the maze of her tangled hair, he’d stumbled across some odd lengths of rope. Not enough for a necklace but perhaps, when combined, a simple ring of some description. Joining them is the tricky part, but he has found tying knots in the ends and slipping the strands through each other has been working rather well thus far; really, it’s no different from the daisy chains he makes in the palace gardens. Although this exercise, of course, does not come with the added benefit of making something pretty to drop on Theodore’s head when he’s least expecting it. But at least it’s for a noble cause- and it means he can fob the ghastly boots off on someone else, so it’s a gift that keeps on giving!

“‘Ey,” says Bart, enormous chin bobbing above him as she nods her head. “We’re nearly at your place.”

Glancing up from his work, Dirk inhales sharply. Looming up close, towering over even Bart herself, the dazzling white slopes of the Marshmallow Mountains shine brilliantly in the morning sun. A few more giant paces and they’ll be standing right amongst the mighty foothills.

“My thoughts exactly,” Dirk breathes, raking his eyes across every sparkling inch. He can feel the cold air crackling across his skin before his glow brightens to balance it, feel it dancing in his lungs. He can’t help but grin giddily at every tiny prickle before his own internal heat flares up to compensate- he’s never felt honestly, physically cold before! As the air warms in his lungs and he releases it, he squeals in delight as it dances like dragon smoke in front of his face. “Oh, my- that’s brilliant!”

“Speak for yourself,” Theodore mutters, and Dirk turns to see the knight shivering and nestling deeper into Bart’s hair.

“Todd, what happened to your cloak?”

“In my pack, dumbdumb- ran away with the birds.”

Dirk frowns. Well, they’ll have to do something about that- if Theodore is already shivering in the shallow foothills, he’ll be a Toddcicle by the time they reach their destination. Quickly lacing together his last strands and tying a decisive final knot, Dirk hangs the hula hoop-sized ring across his chest and stands, clinging to his lifeline for safety as he begins to once more negotiate a path through the giant’s hair. “Bart?” he calls, using a matted tangle as a handhold. “Might we borrow
“Another of your, ah, adornments?”

Unsurprisingly, he has to reword that request a couple of times; but she seems quite game once she knows what he’s talking about. Humming in satisfaction, he scrambles up the knotted web of her hair towards her scalp, just behind her right ear. He could’ve sworn he saw-

“A-ha! Bingo!”

“This is stupid.”

“Granted it’s not my finest work, but I think you have to give me points for ingenuity,” Dirk sniffs. Some people are just so picky.

Theodore glares at him from under the folds of his new cloak. Admittedly, calling the ratty sheet of abandoned tent canvas tacked haphazardly round his knight’s shoulders a ‘cloak’ is a tad generous. It is rather ill-fitting, and in appearance more akin to some sort of poncho. But he’s shivering less now, and that is the most important thing; and at least blue is a nice colour on him! “How come I can’t put you in a goshdarn pair of boots, but you can dress me up in whatever the heck you feel like?”

“Because you’re a practical sort, Todd,” says Dirk, fussily adjusting the big, uneven fold constituting a collar. “I’m sure you’d rather look a bit frumpy than freeze, yes?”

Rolling his eyes in annoyance, Theodore nevertheless gathers the fabric close against the chill. “I hate you.”

Dirk beams, bobbing forward to kiss his cheek. “Such a gentleman.”

“So, uh,” comes Bart’s voice from overhead, somewhat tentative in a way Dirk hasn’t heard it sound before. “Where d’you guys want down?”

“Um…” Dirk mumbles, looking to Theodore for help.

Snorting, Theodore climbs gingerly to his feet, keeping a grip on his lifeline as he hands Dirk his crown and carefully hops out of their hair nest, abseiling to the giant’s shoulder. Dirk resituates the circlet and watches Theodore with fondness as he plants his feet and scans their surroundings, ever-diligent, like a fantastic little meercat.

“There!” Theodore calls out, giving a quick (but hopefully careful) tug on Bart’s hair and pointing. Following his finger, Dirk spies a tiny winding mountain road disappearing into a deep crevice between two tall plateaus. “That’s our best way in.”

Grunting in acknowledgement, Bart takes a great, slow pace towards the path- which, Dirk now sees, is marked with a small wooden sign at the top, but he can’t read what it says from this distance. It is closing in fast, though, so he gathers himself and clambers down to stand at his knight’s side as they close the final distance.

“So…” mumbles Theodore, gaze dead ahead.

“So!” Dirk mirrors, breathy with anticipation.
Theodore looks up at him, cheeks pink and wind-chafed, and smiles nervously. “Are you ready for this?”

“Absolutely not,” says Dirk, reaching out to lace his fingers with Theodore’s. “But we may as well get on with it!”

“Can’t believe you’re going to rule a kingdom someday.”

“Yes, I am a bit worried about that.”

Theodore laughs, small and sarcastic- a cynical little thing, just like the man himself.

Enamoured, Dirk holds him tighter.

Standing right next to the path now, Bart stoops, and in doing so brings the ground rushing up to meet them. Dirk braces himself against her neck and his knight, eyes watering as the cold air whips sharply past them. In his peripheral vision, Theodore squints against the same sensation. The gust, fortunately, is short lived, Bart’s crouch reaching its lowest point after a few harrowing seconds, and before they can blink the moisture back into their eyes they’re already meeting the yawning expanse of the mountain pass head-on, just a few short feet from the ground.

“Phew,” Dirk breathes, giddily giggling. “Well, that was an adventure!”

Theodore is looking rather green- and not in the good way. “Let’s get the heck off.”

“Agreed,” says Dirk with a nod, clutching his lifeline. Though not as green in the gills as his darling knight, he finds himself rather eager to feel the ground under his feet once more. “Together?”

With a weak smile, Theodore nods and squeezes his hand. “Together. On three; one…”

“Two…” adds Dirk, still clutching the giant’s hair for safety.

“Three!”

Dirk’s stomach flops as they lurch momentarily into freefall. Despite his better judgement (otherwise known as Theodore Brotz), he closes his eyes.

When his sandal-clad feet collide with soft, cushiony snow, he jolts in surprise. “It’s warm! What on-”

“Dirk.”

Cracking one eye open, Dirk looks and finds a grumpy Theodore watching him. “What?” Dirk blurts, quite fairly assuming that he is seconds from a telling-off about looking before he leaps. “That was scary!”

Raising his eyebrows, Theodore glances down at their feet. Following his example, Dirk takes a peek himself. “Ah.”

Beneath Theodore’s curly boots, instead of fresh white snow, is a familiar craggy palm. Turning his gaze upwards Dirk meets the sad regard of a pond-sized blue eye.

“Hey, uh…” Bart mumbles, eyes darting. “D’you… wanna stay a while? Like, I dunno, hang out ‘n be best friends?”

Dirk’s heart all but breaks. “Bart….”
“S just… it’s real cold out there, y’know? Youse guys could stay, y’know, keep warm. It’ll be fun!”

Dirk runs his fingers through the strands of his lifeline. “There’s truly nothing I’d like more, my friend, but—”

“So let’s do it!” she cuts in, grasping at the olive branch. “We can go places- not places with people, I guess, but y’know places- an’, an’ just hang out.”

“Bart…”

“You wan’ some food? I dunno what youse guys eat but uh, I can find you like, a tree with stuff in it.”

“Bart, please!”

She falls quiet at last, her breath gusting across them like a prevailing wind. Sighing, Dirk wraps her hair round his foot and glances at Theodore meaningfully. “Just a tick, Sir Brotz.”

Theodore, though clearly concerned about this course of action, nods in understanding and takes a step back. Bidding farewell with a soft smile, Dirk takes a deep breath and begins to climb the strand. Though he struggles with many overly physical pursuits, he is an excellent climber- well, most of the time- and the knots and matts in the giant’s neglected hair make for excellent hand and footholds.

“Bart?” he says cautiously as he nears her face.

“Hey, Dirk,” she mumbles, blowing him aside slightly as she speaks.

Grunting as he hauls himself up the final metre or so, Dirk eventually finds himself with short breath, sore arms and a direct line of sight to Bart’s enormous eye as he dangles in front of it. “Bart,” he huffs, bracing his foot on her cheek. “I’m so sorry we can’t stay, but the truth is—”

“But you can stay!” she argues, shaking her head a little and swinging him like a pendulum.

“No, we can’t—”

“Well, why not?” she thunders, moisture glistening in the corner of her eye as her shrub-sized brow crumples in anger. “I said you could so why dontcha? Why shouldn’t I just, just pick you up and take you anyway, huh? I can just scoop youse up and we can go-!”

“Bart, I can’t come with you,” Dirk implores, pressing his hand under her eye as he stares into it, willing her to understand. “I’m on a quest!”

It gives her pause, her foot-long lashes tickling his chest and face as she blinks. “But… you can just, like, blow that off, right?” she sniffles.

“No,” he says gently, petting her cheek. “I can’t.”

She stares at him, pleading, and he sighs. Glancing down, down at the anxious little face of his knight observing him from far below, he meets Bart’s eye and leans in close.

“Bart, old chum,” he murmurs, soft but serious. “We have to go. This quest is my only chance of changing my destiny. A happy ending, for myself and my one true love, depends on this.”
The eye widens. “You mean… this is your happy ever after?”

“Yes,” he breathes, nodding frantically. “It absolutely is- and we haven’t any time to waste!”

She watches him in silence for an impossibly long moment, Dirk hanging- literally- on her response. After a while his heart starts to race with worry that she’ll say no; with a few quick steps in her vast stride she could have them across the woods, a full day’s journey from the mountains, and it’s a miracle they’ve gone uncaught this long. If they dawdle much longer they might return to that icy pass and find a search party waiting in ambush, or find their elusive witchykookoo long gone having scarpered from the attention. And that’s if Bart doesn’t grow offended by their escape attempts and decide to eat them both, which would be an incredibly anticlimactic end to all this quest business.

But eventually the giant grunts- a sad, resigned little hurricane- and nods. “I, uh… I guess I don’t wanna get in the way o’ no happy ever afters, so…”

Dirk sighs, relief flooding his calming heart. “Thank you,” he says, petting her cheek once more.

She shrugs. He vaguely hears Theodore yelping as the motion knocks him off balance. “Whatever.”

He briefly tenses as he feels two of her enormous fingers pinch his shoulders, but understands what she’s asking. Slowly releasing her hair, he takes the precaution of leaving it tied around his waist until she lowers him and he feels his feet make firm contact with the ground.

“Oh!” he squeals in delight as his bare toes sink into the snow and he gets a brief jolt of cold, fluffy dampness before his glow flares to counter it. “Chilly!”

Seconds later a mirroring crunch in the snow signals the arrival of Theodore. He looks rather disgruntled about the near kidnapping- and no doubt crabby about the cold. On the upside, his makeshift poncho-cloak looks rather dashing against the wintry backdrop. “Thanks,” he grumbles, miffed.

“Well,” says Dirk, shrugging coolly. “It was nothing, really, just a spot of negotiation-“

“I was talking to Bart, bonehead.”

“Ah. Yes, that makes sense.”

The giant in question stares down at them sadly from her squat, chest level with the hill she has deposited them on. “So. Guess youse guys are goin’, now…”

“I’m afraid so,” says Dirk, reluctant. Though he is keen to complete their quest- and get out of the giant’s musty-smelling hair in the process- he can’t help but feel bad for leaving her so soon. It is apparent that she doesn’t make friends easily, and the idea of leaving her to wander the woods alone again leaves a bad taste in his mouth. “You could always come with us,” he offers.

Bart shakes her head, lifting a mighty hand to point at the pass that will take them into the mountains proper. “I don’ think I’ll fit,” she says, crestfallen. “It’s too cold round here, anyways.”

Dirk hums in agreement. It was about what he expected- a person of her stature would be considerably harder to clothe against the cold than his pint-sized knight. Still, he wishes there was something he could offer; some token of friendship and thanks that she could take- “Oh!” he exclaims, fumbling the rope ring in his haste to get it off his shoulders. “I almost forgot- this is for you!” He holds his handiwork aloft for her inspection.
“Uh. Thanks,” she mumbles, colossal nose wrinkling in bafflement. “...What's it do?”

“It doesn’t, ah, do anything exactly,” says Dirk, apologetic- of course she would have preferred a more practical gift! Oh well, not much to be done about it now. “But you wear it and it... looks nice. And feels nice! See?” He transfers the object to one arm and pets the main feature- the Bofuki boots, tied and gathered into a soft knot on one side of the ring like a tactile gemstone. “Here, pop your hand down and let's put it on!”

She complies- warily- and lets her right hand hover just above the snow. Dirk scurries from finger to finger, tutting as he holds up the ring and attempts to find the most likely fit. Settling eventually on her pinky, he slips the loop over her fingertip, and gestures at Theodore to pull down the other side. “I had thought about making a bracelet,” he says conversationally as he and his knight work the accessory into place. “But I would have needed considerably more rope- there we go, easy does it, Todd... there!” He stands back, hands on hips to admire the result. “Lovely!”

Bart lifts her hand slowly, peering at its new adornment. She remains silent until she reaches up with her left hand to run a finger across the boots, upon which she snickers in glee at the sensation.

“Huh,” says Theodore quietly, brows arched. “She actually likes it.”

“And you’re surprised by that?” Dirk teases, elbowing him.

Theodore rolls his eyes. Honestly, they’ll tumble right out of his head if he keeps doing that.

“This is nice,” Bart rumbles, petting the ring as she speaks. “No one ever got me a present, before.”

“I only wish I could give you more- unfortunately we had a bit of a mishap the other day, so we’re travelling light. But you simply must visit us at Star Rock one of these days- I can get you all sorts of things there!” Dirk babbles, bouncing on his heels. “Oh, do stop by when this has all blown over- we really must keep in touch!”

“I, uh, I dunno,” she says, voice low. “I don’t really go place the people are. Gets real messy.”

“I’ll tell them I know you- oh, do at least consider it,” he pleads.

It takes a minute and a lot of meaningful eye contact, but she grunts in acknowledgment. “I'll, uh. I'll think about it.”

Dirk smiles and nods. “That’s good enough for me. Thank you so much, good lady- this quest would not have been possible without you!”

“Thanks,” mutters Theodore. Dirk pats his shoulder but otherwise pays his jealousy no further heed.

“S’okay,” says Bart like a friendly thunderstorm. “Was kind of a nice change.”

“Suppose we’d best be off,” says Dirk, glancing at Theodore and finding his knight ready with a nod of agreement. “But quite honestly... thank you, Bart. For all of your help.”

Bart smiles down at him; and it is a melancholy thing, but he draws reassurance from the smallest sliver of her terrifying teeth. “Kay. Bye, Dirk. Bye, Toad. Youse was the weirdest louses I ever found.”

“My name’s actually-”
“Farewell, fair Bart!” calls Dirk, hand on Theodore’s wrist and towing his bad-tempered knight up the mountain path before the poor giant can make them any sadder- or she can change her mind and try to kidnap them again. “Remember- Star Rock! Come and see us!”

“Yeah,” the gloomy rumble of her voice follows like a desolate, lonely earthquake. “Maybe…”

Dirk sighs, glancing sideways at Theodore. “She’s not going to visit, is she?”


It’s peculiar, being on solid ground once again. No longer is their journey accompanied by the gusty giant breaths in their ears, or the distant thunderous thud of feet as they hit the ground with a ripple effect of snapping trees like lightning cracks. Dirk, of course, had been scrambling up and down Bart’s hair for much of the night- but Theodore, who’d opted to remain safely nested, is showing discomfort at being thrust back into movement. Then again, that may just be another side effect of the cold.

Ooh, that’s right! Snow!

Dirk looks down, only to have his excitement quashed when he realises his glowing feet are melting the snow around them before it even gets a chance to touch his skin. “Oh, sugar. Well, that’s disappointing.”

“Are you seriously complaining about not freezing?” mutters Theodore, glaring over the folds of coarse tent canvas he has gathered up about his chin for warmth.

“Are you seriously complaining about being able to make snowmen?” Dirk counters.

“Moron.”

“Hmph. Sir Brotz, I do believe this chill has rendered you even more of an insubordinate grouch than usual.”

Theodore snorts, wrestling his wrist from Dirk’s grip- but, Dirk happily notes, only so that he can hold his hand instead. Already his little palm feels so chilly against his own. For once, Dirk feels that he may have to be the worrywart of the two of them; he can scarcely bear to see his brave, beloved knight so cold, and they’ve barely left the woods behind.

He supposes he will just have to keep him safe and warm himself.

“Pixiedust Pass…” Theodore mumbles.

“Beg pardon?”

Theodore nods and points with his free hand, and Dirk follows it to find the sign he’d glimpsed from Bart’s shoulder standing before them, weathered copperwood post driven deep into the snow. Sure enough, the words ‘Pixiedust Pass’ are picked out on the rough-hewn plank, definition misted by accumulated frost. The end of the plank, cut jaggedly into the shape of a pointing claw, indicates the pass itself- a sight for which Dirk was quite unprepared. What seemed at a distance to be a fairly narrow alleyway into the mountains actually looms at half Bart’s width and at least twice her height, and with the snow-capped points of jutting rocks fanning from the sides gives the impression of a vast, yawning mouth; rows upon rows of deadly teeth ready and waiting to gobble up any and all who dare seek passage through the icy maw.

Dirk gulps. “Do you, ah… think it’s too late to revisit the ‘running away with Bart’ idea?”
They both glance over their shoulders, to the giant still watching them from the edge of the forest, her enormous arms folded atop the hill. Catching their eyes, she waves.

“Last chance to turn back,” Theodore murmurs, squeezing his hand.

Oh, boy, is he tempted. The woods were one thing but this… bleak, isolated death maze is quite another. Perhaps they’d be better off taking their chances as the personal shoulder parrots of a lonely giant.

But his Theodore deserves a better life than that- and maybe, just maybe, so does Dirk.

Returning the wave sadly, Dirk tugs Theodore closer and kisses his forehead. “Together?” he says once more, breathing in the rich woody scent of his beloved elfin knight.


And, together as promised, they take their first step out of the sunlight, and into the frozen unknown.

Silas allows himself to believe, in his more fanciful moments, that this ‘indefinite postponement’ might evolve into something permanent. Perhaps whatever led the King to stall the tournament will prove difficult or even impossible to rectify, and Silas will be sent home with an apologetic missive to give his mother which will tell her that whatever went wrong this time, it was entirely, absotively, one hundred percent not his fault.

In those moments, of course, he likes to imagine the delay comes from the sun prince running away to join the circus, or something similarly merry and whimsical. Silas would feel just terrible if he was enjoying a private fantasy based upon a simple cold taking a fatal turn; he wouldn’t wish harm on anyone, even in absent daydreaming. Really, it is best not to think too much on it.

Besides, it is all academic; the tournament is going to happen. He can feel it in his bones. Any day now, probably. Any day now he fights, and either he comes out on top with a new husband he knows nothing about or, more likely, he gets knocked out in the first round and returns to Inglenook in shame and dishonour.

Neither option is particularly tempting. Indeed, it is the kind of predicament that could drive a sane man bananas- or a sober man to drink.

Which, incidentally, is what brings him to Clifftown’s leeward district to stand nervously outside an unfamiliar tavern by the name of The Homing Hammer, fidgeting like a man with a bee in his bonnet.

Silas is not a drinker, far from it; he scarcely touches the stuff! But given the circumstances- and the absence of a soothing balcony garden to tend- he needs a little something to calm his nerves. The odd pint of sunflower soda isn’t utterly foreign to him. This type of establishment, however…

Well. Suffice it to say, he needs that drink now more than ever.

Steeling himself with a deep breath of cool evening air, Silas strides forth and pushes the weathered oak door.
And then he pulls it, because as it turns out that is the way it opens. “Good start,” he mumbles, hoping against hope that no one observed him through the leaded window. Having hastily corrected himself, he pulls the door wide open and strides boldly in, hoping to craft a veneer of confidence for the benefit of whoever looks his way.

Which, as it happens, is no one, so there really isn’t anyone to say he was unsuccessful.

Hovering in the entryway a minute, Silas gradually relaxes with every beat that passes unobserved. Though the tavern is busy and the air thick with the warm, musky crush of bodies, no one seems interested in a newcomer from the street. They all seem to have their own things to think about—be it their friends or their games or just the bottoms of their bottles. Truly, not one of them could care less about him.

This, at least, is familiar territory.

Letting out a sigh of relief, Silas picks up his feet and begins wending his way towards the bar. Carefully—he doesn’t want to make a scene by spilling the wrong person’s drink. It is actually a rather lovely place—he thinks, though granted it is a little hard to tell through the crowd. But he knows for sure that it is cozy, flickering lamplight dancing across warm redwood walls, illuminating the collection of esoteric curios which adorn them; among which are a variety of portraits of a succession of people with blue eyes and yellow hair. A family business, he’d wager. Now, this is the sort of family legacy he could happily shoulder; a legacy of familiarity, of hospitality, just four walls and a roof and three generations of goodwill. Although personally, he’d do away with the taxidermy. He gives a stuffed lateralligator head a pat on the snout as he passes it, shuddering a little at the sight of its glassy eyes and motionless spinal cogs clogged with dust. Perhaps it was already old and poor? He’d certainly like to believe as much. He averts his eyes from the unfortunate creature, but such a sight is hard to avoid in such confines. All around him, scattered across walls and shelves are other such creatures who have met the same fate. All shapes and sizes, from all corners of the land and all colours on the spectrum—from royal blue to cotton candy pink.

He darn near has a heart attack when the pink one moves.

Yelping, he stumbles backwards and consequently has to apologise profusely to the woman who’s back he bumps into. Scarpering before she can get a good look at him, he finds himself much closer to the pink thing. Which, as it happens, is not a creature’s head but a person’s, and still very much attached to a body. A familiarly distracting body.

Blushing, Silas stands rooted to the spot as Panto Trost laughs, head thrown back and exposing the column of his neck (his beautiful neck…) for all to see. And though on this occasion he is clothed—in a loose white linen tunic under a pair of work-scuffed denim dungarees strapped carelessly over one shoulder—Silas’ imagination is more than capable of filling in the gaps. He admonishes himself for the indecent thoughts, of course, but they are nothing if not persistent.

This… is not what he needs tonight. He does not need to be confronted with the object of his confliction—especially not with lips loosened by liquor. No, he has to leave this place, find somewhere else to drink or simply abandon the idea altogether. Regrettable, yes, but it’s for the—

“Silas!”

He jumps, blinks, and inwardly curses. Shoot. While he was busy dithering, Panto had looked up from his game of jacks and directly at him. Except… he wouldn’t look at Silas with such enthusiasm, surely? But he had said his name, and on glancing behind himself Silas can see no one else paying the prince’s call any mind. He turns back to Panto and gestures to himself, hand over his chest and brows raised in question; to which Panto’s answer is a smile and a cheerful wave. Timidly, Silas
returns it, hoping that now they have acknowledged one another they can simply go about their evenings and- oh, sugar, he’s coming this way.

“Silas!” Panto repeats, much closer now and grinning like Silas is the best thing he has seen all night- which is totally unfair and does funny things to Silas’ insides. “Well, this is a pleasant surprise- didn’t have you down as a bar bug!”

“Oh, I’m n-not, but,” Silas laughs nervously- and quietly reprimands himself for being able to pick out Panto’s earthy aroma out amongst the crowd as he approaches. “Long day.”

Panto beams, patting Silas’ shoulder heartily as he comes to a standstill before him. “Well, it’s good to see you; I didn’t catch you on the training field today!”

“Yes, well I was…” curled up by the river having a panic attack. “Indisposed. Um, news from home, my brother he… hit his head and it, um… exploded.”

“His- excuse me?”

Panto looks to be caught between condolence and confusion, and Silas immediately feels bad for lying about something so serious; and for being so utterly unconvincing about it. “Oh, no, that’s… that’s just, our family term. For having a headache. He’s fine! Shaken, but he’ll live.”

Panto regards him with fond bemusement, seemingly biting his lip against laughter. “Well, that’s good, then. I’m glad your brother is feeling better,” he says, with emphasis on the implication that he doesn’t believe a word of it.

“He is,” says Silas, heart thumping under the gentle scrutiny and tacit endorsement of his ludicrous lie. “Much better, thank you.”

Nodding meaningfully, Panto removes his hand from Silas’ shoulder- has it really been there all this time? He hadn’t felt anything abnormal in the slightest. “Well. Now that your brother is out of the woods, perhaps you might care to join me for a drink and a-”

“Trost!” bellows an impatient voice from Panto’s vacated table. “You’ve still got the bleedin’ ball, you geezer!”

Frowning, Panto opens his palm and chortles at the tiny rubber ball he finds settled inside. He glances back to Silas bashfully. “And a round of jacks?”

“Oh, um,” Silas laughs, rubbing the back of his neck apprehensively. “I’m not sure- I don’t have the quickest reflexes, as well you know.”

“Hm, that is true,” says Panto, steering Silas closer to the counter by his elbow, signalling the barkeep with a complex hand gesture to Silas can’t even begin to decode, and meeting Silas’ eyes with a flirtatious smirk. “Well, you could still sit in; you can be my good luck charm!”

Oh, boy. “Do you… need good luck?” Silas deflects, looking anywhere but at that charming face.

“One can never have too much luck,” says Panto, dancing neatly around the question and the excuse. “So, what’ll it be?”

Silas risks a glance and finds that hypnotically daring smile still in place, burning his skin. It feels… intoxicating. The way Panto is looking at him, like at this very moment Silas is the centre of his world; like he is patiently awaiting his move. Silas has never felt anything quite like it. It’s new, and strange and intense.
And he wants more of it.

He licks his dry lips- and clocks the way Panto’s eyes follow the motion, a little thrill fizzing down his spine. “How… how do I know you’re any good?” he teases, shakily, before his brain can entirely recognise and reprimand him for the fact that he is flirting back. With a Trost.

Panto’s eyebrow quirks, and his face blooms in a wide, slow grin. As the barkeep deposits their tankards on the counter Panto reaches into the pocket of his dungarees- and emerges with a fistful of gold pieces, a silver brooch, and a monocle. He flicks two of the coins, the hulking blonde barkeep catching them as Panto slides a pint to Silas and states, smoothly: “This one’s on me.”

Silas has to restrain himself from giggling hysterically. “Um- getting me drunk, huh? F-finally consider me strong enough competition to need sabotaging, Trost?” he says, stumbling a little at the start but proud of himself for landing on his feet. Already he can feel a certain unfamiliar confidence bubbling up inside him, a spark fanned to a flame by the handsome prince’s undivided attention.

“Maybe,” says Panto, drifting closer, one arm leaning on the countertop as he reaches for his drink, the other curled hand ghosting lightly up Silas’ arm. “Perhaps I just want to get on your good side,” he murmurs, close enough to tickle Silas’ cheek with his exhale. A sensation strange and alluring enough to render Silas breathless all on its own.

Panto leans back a little, piercing blue gaze flitting across Silas’ face as if drinking him in. “So… how about a kiss for luck?”

Silas freezes, caught like a rabbit in the torchlights. Is he… is he serious? They… they can’t, not, not here, in this crowded place- what is he thinking, they can’t anywhere, it would be… wrong, and horrifyingly inappropriate, not to mention downright scandalous and-!

“Silas?”

Jolting abruptly out of his rabbit hole of rumination, Silas blinks in the face of Panto’s quiet query. “Sorry?” he squeaks.

Panto smiles slyly, and holds up his closed hand. Spreading it palm-up, the tiny red rubber ball rocks gently back and forth in front of Silas’ face.

“Kiss for luck?” he repeats, eyes wide in false innocence.

It is a blatant diversion from an obvious tease, and frankly it is so bad it’s good. Silas, for the life of him, can’t think of anything to do in the face of it but laugh.

Panto, unperturbed and even delighted by this reaction, grins in return. “My, my,” he says softly, tossing the ball in the air and catching it between his thumb and forefinger. “That’s a rather good look on you.”

Silas, cheeks burning, ducks his head. Catching sight of the ball once more, he hesitates; then, boldly, bobs forward to graze a glancing kiss across the surface. He preens in delighted satisfaction at the sound of Panto’s intake of breath.

“For luck,” he mumbles, pulling back and hiding his face behind his tankard. “But only because you’ll need it.”

Panto laughs, hale and hearty, and closes his hand around the ball. “With you there, my lord?” he says, leaning in close to breathe the words across Silas’ ear. “I think I shall be the luckiest man in Wendimoor.”
With that statement hanging in the air between them he steps back, takes a long sip of his drink—over which he meets Silas’ gaze with consistency and a brow raised in some sort of challenge—and turns to walk away, light as a dancer on his feet as he picks his way back to his table and his impatiently caterwauling companions.

Before he is even out of his sightline, Silas can feel an invisible thread joining them, beckoning him, urging him to follow. He briefly considers defying it; making a run for the door, for clear air and common sense.

Then again, it would be a shame to waste a perfectly good pint.

Silas glances at the drink in his hand, curious. Come to think of it, he isn’t even sure what Panto ordered him. He lifts it to his lips, sniffs, and gingerly takes a sip.

Sunflower soda.

He bites his lip against a rising grin, fingers tapping on the tankard.

Well. Perhaps just one round couldn’t hurt…

It could, as it happens. It definitely could.

“You bobo!” Silas gasps out, giggling despite—or perhaps, perversely, because of—his slowly ebbing terror. “You rabble-rousing hothead!”

“It’s not my fault no one has the first idea how to play a decent game!” Panto laughs, hauling Silas round the corner and out of view of the tavern—from within which a chorus of crashes and yells can still be heard floating through the otherwise peaceful streets. “Rather sad, really, how fast a pack of mediocre gamblers will resort to accusations of cheating.”

“You could have just given them their stuff back and we could have avoided all of this,” says Silas, bracing himself against the wall to catch his breath.

Panto looks deeply offended. “I won those fair and square, good sir—and I shan’t be bullied out of my spoils!”

Silas shakes his head, breathlessly exhilarated. “Dufus.”

Complaints notwithstanding, he does allow Panto to take his hand and tow him away. A dufus he may be, but Silas would much rather take to these streets by his side than strike out alone with a tavern of drunkards baying for their blood.

“I truly am sorry,” says Panto softly, when they’ve put a few short streets between themselves and the disaster. “My behaviour tonight has been… unseemly.”

It has. But Silas would be lying if he said he hadn’t enjoyed it immensely. “It’s quite alright,” he says, waving his concerns away.

“I don’t believe it is,” says Panto, stopping him in the street and rounding on him, hand cupped gently under Silas’ elbow. “I have been somewhat drunk on freedom, you see—no father, and so far no prospective future husband either—and I’ve been getting… carried away. It’s unseemly, and I’m
Oh, *Moon*. Just when Silas thinks he has this man figured out, has his attraction under control he just has to go and say something so very… *sweet*. And, as always, catch Silas *entirely* off guard. “I… I really don’t mind,” he stammers, hand itching to reach up and cover Panto’s. In the end he doesn’t dare. “But… thank you.”

Panto nods, hand trailing down Silas’ arm to scoop up his hand. Slowly, without breaking eye contact, he presses a chaste yet lingering kiss to the back of it- which, somehow, makes Silas blush more than even pressing his half-naked body against him in training could. Those eyes on his feel electric, those lips sending a thousand tiny sparks dancing across his skin. Tracing his thumb across the space he just anointed with his kiss, Panto smiles a smile just for him. The type of smile that could make a man go weak at the knees.

Which he does. Very briefly.

“Whoah, there!” Panto chuckles, other hand on Silas’ shoulder and steadying him before he can topple too far. “I think you may have had one too many, highness.”

“I’ve only had one,” Silas scoffs, blushing and righting himself.

Panto smirks. “Exactly.”

Silas snorts unattractively. Walked right into that one. He isn’t drunk, though- he has a pleasant buzz for sure, but it is no more than the resting hum of an ambling bumblebat. No, if he is having any issues with finding his feet, it is *entirely* the fault of the man determined to sweep him off of them. Which is… worse. So much worse.

He clears his throat and takes a step back, reluctantly breaking the points of contact. “I, um. The castle, is back up—” he gestures vaguely to the street behind him—“there, somewhere. I should probably skedaddle.”

Panto nods in understanding, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. “Sadly, I’m that way. I prefer to stay at inns, observe the local colour. But I can take a detour, if you’d like me to walk you—”

“Oh! No, there’s, there’s no need for that,” says Silas hurriedly- but Panto’s consideration does make something warm and wonderful flutter in his belly. “It’s not very far.”

“If you’re quite certain,” says Panto, not sounding entirely set in it himself.

“If you’re quite certain,” says Panto, not sounding entirely set in it himself.

“I am,” says Silas- but that warm feeling won’t go away. He smiles, regarding the pink-haired prince wistfully. “Thank you.”

Panto smirks at him, soft as a whisper. “Anytime, my lord.”

Silas feels certain, in that moment, that neither of them is going to turn to leave. That they’re just going to stand there, in the middle of the street, gazing at each other like starcrossed losers ‘til the sun comes up. He thinks he would even be happy to do so- *more* than happy.

Panto’s shudder, however, breaks the illusion somewhat. “Are you cold?” Silas asks, startled. He *shouldn’t* be, really, there is a nip in the air tonight. But Panto just seems to *unflappable*. It is hard to believe he could be affected by anything so mundane as a nighttime chill.

Chuckling in embarrassment, Panto fiddles with the loosely hanging shoulder strap of his overall-
and it is at that moment that Silas abruptly realises he came out with nothing else on top of it. Either that or he had to abandon it in their haste to escape. He stands now with only two thin layers of cotton and denim between him and the windward chill, and that, Silas decides, will not do.

“Here,” he clucks, shrugging out of his jacket. “Take this. It’s cold out tonight.”

Panto is already shaking his head and taking a step back. “That really isn’t-”

“Shush,” says Silas, holding the garment out expectantly. “Take it.”

“You’ll be cold,” Panto argues, evidently not willing to make this easy on himself.

“The citadel is just up the street,” says Silas, a small smile teasing at his lips. “And I’m tougher than I look.” When Panto remains unmoved, he takes a new tack: wide-eyed beseeching. “Please?”

Panto’s chivalry, as it turns out, is easily his most exploitable trait. He steps closer with a sigh, reaching out to take the jacket from Silas’ hands- and the brush of their fingers as he does so is almost as electrifying as the kiss from before. Silas is a little surprised to see that he drapes the jacket over his shoulders like a cape instead of looking for the sleeves, but then again there is a fair size difference between them and it probably wouldn’t fit as intended.

Wrapped in Silas’ jacket and already looking warmer for it, Panto gives him a wry- yet grateful-smile. “Thank you.”

Silas smiles, reaching out to smooth the brocade panels over his chest. “Anytime, my lord.”

They share a smile, a look and a long, long second. But it comes, as all seconds must, to an end, and before long Panto is stepping back out of his reach, slipping through his fingers. “Moonbeam on the morrow, my lord,” he murmurs.

“Moonbeam on the morrow,” Silas returns, soft and sad. Something inside him aches as he watches Panto retreat- perhaps the same something that preens in satisfaction to see him wrapped up safe and warm in Silas’ clothes. Something that feels, he thinks, like a ginormous mistake waiting to happen.

But perhaps the bigger mistake would be not to let it.

“Panto!” he calls, surprising himself.

Equally startled, Panto turns around, aquamarine eyes alight with curiosity.

Silas, not sure what he’s thinking, just let’s his mouth talk. “May I… see you again?”

Panto blinks. “I…”

“Tomorrow,” Silas blurts, hoping he doesn’t look as manic as he feels. “Can I see you tomorrow? For…” he fumbles. “…breakfast?”

Panto hesitates, his fingers tightening on the hem of Silas’ jacket.

Then, like a radiant dawn, he smiles. “Yes,” he says softly, rosy hair fluttering on the wind that carries his voice. “I’d like that very much.”

Silas feels a grin taking over his face before he even knows what to do about it. “I’d like it too.”

He isn’t even aware that they’ve fallen once more into prolonged staring until Panto politely clears his throat. “So… do you have a time in mind? A place?”
“Oh! Um…” Shoot, he hadn’t thought about that part. “No. But I’ll, I’ll send you word in the morning- look out for a parrot!”

“I think I can manage that,” Panto smiles, eyes crinkling beautifully at the corners.

“Good. Good…”

Silence once more falls between them- not quite the comfortable kind of earlier, but a charged kind. Full of things unsaid, of things still to come.

When Panto leaves this time, Silas doesn’t stop him. Just watches him go with his heart fluttering in his chest, and a witch’s brew of guilt and nerves and bright, intoxicating hope bubbling in his belly.

And this time, he doesn’t have to wonder if Panto looked back.

Loathe as he is to admit it, Theodore is improbably grateful for the tent cloth poncho Dirk had browbeaten him into wearing. It’s not much, and nowhere near as practically designed as the Starfall cape which was kidnapped by their vagabond dodos, but it at least softens the impact of the cutting gale. Just their luck to have to enter the mountains through what is essentially a cold and merciless wind tunnel. Not even Dirk, who had been utterly enamoured by the snow when they set out, seems to be enjoying himself anymore.

“It’s rather… bleak, isn’t it?” says the prince, sounding disappointed. “Once the novelty wears off.”

Theodore snorts. ‘Bleak’ is a gross understatement; he couldn’t have imagined a more inhospitable place if he’d tried. Pixiedust Pass manages somehow to be cavernous and claustrophobic at the same time- its height dwarfing their meagre bodies, and its jagged walls seemingly closing in like hungry teeth with every step.

“I have to say, I rather expected the Marshmallow Mountains to be somewhat…” Dirk runs his fingertip over a jagged icicle hanging from a protruding rock, his touch melting it to a fine point which snaps and falls, disappearing into the thick powder snow. “Softer.”

“It’s only called that for the p-plateaus,” Theodore explains through his shivers, a little alarmed at how much his teeth are chattering.

“Ah. In that case, someone really ought to build a system of traversing those, a few rope bridges and the like… Todd?”

Theodore looks up sluggishly, finding his prince peering at him in concern. “Y-yeah?”

“Your lips…”

“Really?” Theodore huffs. “Now?”

“They’re blue,” Dirk scoffs, rolling his eyes as if he’s never made an innocent statement unduly sexual in his life.

Dirk *tsks*, muttering something under his breath. Theodore wants to call him out on it, but it feels like too much effort with his lungs full of frigid mountain air.

“Oh, for- *come here, you dunce.*”

His prince is at his side before his chilly brain can even puzzle out the words, pressing up against his side. Theodore actually shivers and recoils against the sudden heat on his body, but when Dirk pins him tight with an arm at his waist he has no choice but to acclimatise. Once he does, he groans and sags into his prince’s side in relief, allowing his sunlight glow to thaw him out and bring colour dancing back to his skin.

“Next time,” Dirk teases softly. “Speak up *before* you freeze to death, yes?”

Theodore grunts in noncommittal agreement, too relieved to offer anything more articulate. Already Dirk’s touch is chasing away the chill from his blood, warming him right down to the marrow. When he feels Dirk drag their feet to a halt in order to wrap both arms around him, Theodore is powerless to protest. The quest, the witch, everything can wait, just as long as Dirk doesn’t let go.

With the return of the blood flow to his brain, and with nothing to do in this moment but nestle into the quiet safety of his prince’s arms, he is free to think about how much he will miss this.

It’s a cold and unpleasant thought, but impossible to shake once it has sunk its claws in. If there is no help waiting at the other end of this icy pass, if Dirk must return and face his fate, this will be the last time they can be truly alone, truly open with one another. And even if they *do* find help, it can only postpone the inevitable; one way or another, Dirk will marry someday, be it to the man of his father’s choice or a love he finds all on his own. Either way, Theodore will have to bid goodbye to these moments of intimacy. He won’t be cuddling up to his prince on trips anymore; not when there’s a husband in the picture, waiting patiently for their return. Dirk wouldn’t do that to another person, he’s too… *nice.* Too good. Oh, he’ll have his fun, keep everyone on their toes but in matters of faithfulness, when a heart is on the line, he’ll be true. Always and to the end.

But if for some reason he *wasn’t*, if he were to come to Theodore for more… No. No, he would… Theodore would *hate* himself, never be able to look in the mirror again if he let his prince betray his values like that. If he let himself become the reason for Dirk to carry a dark mark of dishonour on his heart. If he became a reason for Dirk to feel shame, a reason for him to lose sight of who he is, Theodore could never forgive himself.

Although thinking about it… would he truly have the strength of will to *refuse*? To turn his prince away if he were lonely, desperate? To put his foot down and not take the encounter for what it could be; a moment of comfort, a measly scrap of affection from the man he loves…

He doesn’t want to dig deeper for the answer; he has a feeling he won’t like what he finds.

“Better?” asks Dirk, pulling back a little to run his hands down to Theodore’s, his palms pressing hotly through his inadequate canvas cloak.

“Yeah,” Theodore lies, voice a timid rasp. Physically, at least, he supposes it must be true. He may be at war with himself, but at least he can feel his fingers.

Dirk cocks his head and watches him thoughtfully, and Theodore squirms under his inspection. Sometimes Dirk is *too* observant, capable of cutting right through to the root of Theodore’s insecurities, and he does *not* want to talk about this. He can’t admit what he just realised about himself, nor can he burden his prince with it. He just wants to bury it; lock it all away in a little box to deal with later, alone, when he knows for sure that his charge is safe. Or better yet, when it
becomes relevant- he’ll burn that bridge when he gets to it.

“Come on,” he mutters, stepping out of the warm circle of Dirk’s arms with a shudder. “We need to keep moving.”

“We- Todd, slow down!”

To his credit, Theodore manages to get a respectable few paces ahead before Dirk catches up to him. But the prince has an unfair advantage, seeing as the cloying snow melts around his feet, clearing a path while Theodore must trudge through ten inches of sticky powder.

“Hold your horses, Sir Brotz,” Dirk admonishes, slinging one arm over his knight’s shoulder. “We can’t have you freezing again, now, can we?”

Wouldn’t be such a tragedy, Theodore thinks grimly. But he doesn’t argue; frankly, the warm press of his prince is too good to refuse.

That doesn’t bode well for his self-control, either.

“Todd?”

“Yes?” Theodore mutters, bracing himself for an uncomfortable conversation.

“...Do you see the suspicious cloud, or is that just me?”

Theodore springs to alertness, dragging Dirk to a standstill and taking a protective step in front of him as he scans the snowscape. At first he sees nothing out of the ordinary, and wonders if this is going to be the ‘spy flowers’ all over again. But then it catches his eye; a tiny snow flurry in the clear air, seemingly drifting at odds with the wind direction, floating lazily of its own volition. Narrowing his eyes, Theodore flips up the edge of his poncho, hand hovering over his boomerang.

“Stay back,” he orders.

Dirk snorts. “What are you going to do, bop it on the head? How exactly is that going to work?”

Theodore shushes him in annoyance, stoically not acknowledging the very valid point his sarcastic charge raises. He’ll figure something out- and at least Dirk’s glow may keep him safe until he does. “Who goes there?” he calls, firm as he can manage.

A formless whisper fills the air, snatches of long-lost words dancing on the wind. Theodore startles, glancing at Dirk. “Do you hear that?”

Dirk nods, wide-eyed, and Theodore breathes a sigh of relief. Not an episode, then- he’s grown wary of mysterious noises in his head. He turns his full attention back to the encroaching… thing, and notices that as it draws closer the snippets of words grow clearer, longer.

-not supposed to be here-

-it’s so different-

-so bright-

Dirk fidgets, clutching Theodore’s shoulder. “It’s, ah… it’s talking about me, isn’t it?”

“Unless you see anything else glowing round here,” Theodore mutters, squinting. If the thing can
talk, perhaps it can be reasoned with. “Keep quiet, let me do the talking.”

“Is that... really such a good idea?”

“Hello!” Theodore calls, deciding to ignore that quip. “We- we were just passing through. We have important business in these mountains. Are you the guardian of this passage?”

A new flurry of scattered whispers follows, several of which sound like giggles and none of which make any darn sense, but getting closer and closer by the second.

“Show yourself!” Theodore attempts, hand settling on his boomerang just as panic settles in his gut.

To his surprise, the snow cloud actually does something. In a heartbeat the flakes have drawn together in a tight ball, which hangs suspended in the air a moment before, almost comically, dropping into the loose snow on the ground with an anticlimactic *twitt*.

Theodore blinks at the small pit in bewilderment, taking a cautious step closer. “Uh... hello?”

“Todd, be careful!” Dirk whispers, dragging him back. “It could be a trap!”

Not to be dissuaded, Theodore carefully shakes Dirk off and takes two steps forward. “We, uh... we mean you no harm. Hello?”

No answer comes, and Theodore is practically on top of the pit when he peers down at it. Just a hole in the snow. No more, no less. He glances over his shoulder at Dirk and shrugs.

“Must have run a-”

**Rarrrgghhhhh!**

The force of the sudden explosive roar stops Theodore short, and knocks him on his butt in the snow to boot.

“Todd!”

“Dirk, stay back!” Theodore yells, drawing his boomerang and looking around wildly. “I don’t know where it-!”

The ground before him erupts, spraying powdery snow over him. He wipes his eyes furiously, blinking into the epicentre.

And directly into the glacial eyes of the hulking white bear.

“Mother of-!” he yelps, scrabbling backwards.

“Todd! Bear!” Dirk squawks, voice pitched high in terror.

“Yeah, I can see it!”

“You made a bear!”

“Wha- no, I-”

“Undo it! *Undo it! ” Dirk shrieks.

Another deafening roar interrupts his prattling. Theodore springs to his feet, boomerang in hand,
backing away as best he can with his feet in the snow and his eyes on the beast. “Stay- stay back!” he yells, voice trembling. This thing is… big. Todd’s head doesn’t even reach its shoulder, and that’s with it advancing on all fours. “I don’t want to h-hurt you!”

The bear takes no heed, slowly lumbering towards him. Theodore- figuring he gave it a fair chance-plants his feet, flicks off the blade guard, and flings the boomerang; aiming first for the shoulder, as a warning.

His aim is true. The boomerang somersaults through the air, cutting effortlessly through the prevailing wind and colliding with the beast’s great white shoulder. But instead of rebounding or slicing through a surface layer of solid flesh it carves right through the entire joint like hot knife through butter, carrying on its original trajectory unimpeded. Theodore catches it on muscle memory alone, eyes riveted on the deep gash in the creature’s shoulder; no blood. No torn flesh, exposed bone, no nothing, just… white.

Cold, glistening white.

“Oh, you have got to be kidding me,” he mutters, sheathing his weapon. It’s no good here.

“What is it?” comes Dirk’s anxious voice, drifting closer as Theodore backs up towards him.

“It’s snow,” says Theodore, almost tripping in his haste to return to his prince’s side. “It’s made of snow.”

“How can it be-?”

“I don’t know!” Theodore grimaces, and hauls Dirk in front of him. “But you have to do something!”

“Me-?”

“My weapon’s no good against it,” Theodore explains hurriedly, rubbing Dirk’s arms trying to call the dread-dimmed light back into them. “You need to melt it!”

“Melt it, r-right,” Dirk stammers, shaking like a leaf in Theodore’s hold. He screws his eyes shut in concentration- or maybe so he doesn’t have to look at the advancing monster- and draws a shuddering breath inwards. “Right, right, melt the bear, easy enough, just a spot of glowing- easy peasy lemon squeezy, do it all the time! Without trying, usually. Oh, Moon, how does it work?! Think- think shiny thoughts! Um, ah, fireflies! Those are shiny! Um, glow worms!”

“Fireworks,” Theodore offers, eyeing the creature. It’s getting closer…

“Fireworks, yes, excellent, um… gold! Jewels! Satin! Todd’s eyes! Crowns- all the crowns!”

“C’mon, c’mon,” Theodore mutters. Dirk is barely a shade brighter and the thing is nearly on top of them.

“I am under a lot of pressure here!” Dirk snaps, eyes opening and ire morphing into abject terror. “Oh, my giddyaunt-!”

“Don’t stop! D-don’t look- think shiny thoughts, right?” Theodore pleads, gripping Dirk’s arms for dear life.

“Crownsjewelsgoldsilvercrownsjewelsgoldsilver-!”
The bear roars, Dirk screams, and Theodore acts.

Letting his body take over from his brain, he shoves his prince aside and throws himself in front of him; arms spread, eyes shut, and body braced for the tearing to start.

*I'm sorry, Dirk, I'm so, so sorry…*

“Todd…”

Any second now.

“Todd.”

Maybe it’s already started and he’s disconnected himself from the pain somehow. That would be nice…

“Todd, look!”

Suspicious about the lack of pain he’s in- and figuring he probably has nothing to lose- Theodore opens one eye a crack.

No bear.

He blinks. “Wh-where-”


Theodore does as he is told, and comes face to face with- “A… rabbit?”

The tiny snowy bunny *chuffs* softly, shiny nose twitching along with its slender ears.

“One moment it was a bear, and the next…” Dirk murmurs, scrambling nervously to his feet and righting his crooked circlet.

Theodore frowns. Is it… toying with them? It could have killed them by now… “What…?”

The rabbit looks up at him, and Theodore has to catch his breath at the intelligence he sees behind those glazed eyes.

“What… who are you?” Dirk breathes, evidently seeing the same thing.

It twitches to a perfect halt, still as a statue.

Then, light as a snow flurry once more, it begins to levitate, no impressions of its long bunny feet in the snow they leave behind.

Dirk takes a step back, tugging Theodore along by the straps of his armour. Theodore follows, but observes the floating ice rabbit in terrified fascination.

When it reaches eye level the critter halts in midair. Then it jerks, ears falling flat and back paw twitching fitfully as it writhes in place like it is a part of some morbid puppet show. Dirk whimpers, clutching tighter to Theodore. “Bunny?” he mumbles worriedly, entranced as Theodore is by the gruesome spectacle.

It pays them no heed, beady eyes staring blankly to the sky as snow from the ground swirls up to meet it, gathering flake by flake, layer by layer on its little body. Before long the animal is little more
than a featureless ball about the size of Theodore’s head, yet more snow building up on the underside until a solid, shapeless pillar has formed between it and the ground. All that remains of the critter then is a bumpy, person-sized snow lump.

Theodore and Dirk share a glance. “Ah,” says Dirk, with a little wave at the lump. “Are you alright?”


Turning their attentions back to the lump, Theodore clicks his fingers at it as Dirk tries again to communicate. “Bunny? Here, bunny, bunny-”

At the third snap of Theodore’s fingers the lump daintily bursts, shedding its outer layer of powdery snow like water droplets. Taking a simultaneous step back, Dirk and Theodore watch as the cloud clears, settling on the ground and revealing the shape within.

Two feet- perfect little ice sculptures- wiggle their toes experimentally in the snow. Crystallised ripples in the frozen water traverse up two slender legs, interrupted by the flutter of a skirt; glistening white snow, spun fine as gossamer. The garment continues into a straight-sided dress, cutting off to reveal two icy arms and a neck, sculpted hands cupped over a hidden face, delicate strands of white hair dancing in the wind around them.

As those hands move, revealing a face round and pretty as a statue and eyes cold and clear as a frozen lake, Theodore can do nothing but stare.

And the ice lady, when she blinks her frosty eyelashes and views them properly, returns the stare with a shy smile.

“heloooo…”

“Oh… hello!” Dirk replies, voice softening at the airy murmur.

She cocks her head to observe them- it goes just a little further than it should, nearly tipping upside down. “You’re so different…” she whispers, crystal eyes glimmering inquisitively. She drifts closer- her feet, though realistic enough, seem to be largely for show, trailing lines in the snow with her toes as her body floats gently along- and speaks in a hushed, serious tone. “Did you come from out there?”

“Oh, well, yes, I suppose so,” says Dirk, bemused but apparently unconcerned. “We’ve come from far, far away!”

Hovering a scant few inches from Dirk’s face, the ice lady gasps softly. “Did you see any snails?”

“We did, as a matter of fact,” says Dirk excitedly. “The biggest in the land, even- she’s the reason we’re here!”

She squeals in joy, clapping her delicate hands with a clink of colliding ice. “I like snails!”

“Oh, sorry,” Theodore interjects, glancing between the two of them. “But… what exactly are you?”

“THEODORE!” Dirk scolds, slapping his arm. “Impolite!”

“Oh, it’s okay,” she says, voice a whistle on the breeze. “Well, I can be a horse… or a bee… or a bear-”

“Yes, we noticed that one,” Dirk mutters.
“I can be all kinds of things,” she murmurs, a little smile curling her blue lips. “I’m a wildling; I can be anything that lives wild and free!”

“And… do you have a name?” asks Dirk.

The wildling sighs, strange glassy eyes gazing into nowhere. “Nobody gave me one,” she whispers, quietly forlorn. “I don’t know what I’m supposed to be…”

Dirk smiles softly. “I’ve been having a spot of bother with that, myself.”

She giggles like tinkling wind chimes. “What is your name? I suppose you have one!”

“I most certainly do; my name is Dirk Gently- there’s a title that goes with that, but it’s a bit of a mouthful.” He pats Theodore heartily on the shoulder. “And this here is my charming knight, the loyal Sir Brotz!”

She gapes at Dirk. “Are you a prince?”

He preens. “Well, as a matter of fact…”

“That’s why you shine so bright!” she breathes, awed. “Tell me!”

“Ah- tell you what?”

“Your story,” the wildling pleads. “It’s been so long since I’ve been out beyond these mountains… tell me your story!”

“Our story?” says Dirk, grinning. “Well, our story starts three days ago- in the far away kingdom of Starfall; it’s a tale of betrayal, intrigue, rebellion- and, let us not forget, roma-”

“We’d, uh, love to tell you stories,” Theodore interrupts, giving his dramatic prince a withering look. “But we’ve got to move on, right Dirk?”

Dirk pouts. “Hm. I suppose you’re right. It’s already getting rather dark, and this is hardly an easy place to set up camp for the night.”

“You’re leaving?” whispers the wildling, crestfallen.

“Regrettably,” says Dirk, looking about as sad as she does. “We’re on a rather time-sensitive mission, you see…”

“Are you going back outside?”

“Oh! No, no, we’ve just come from there- we’re on our way into these mountains. To find a witch; perhaps you’ve heard of her? The so-called Witchykookoo of the Whispers.”

“Is she the one that lives in the crackly cave?”

“The what?” asks Theodore.

“The cave. The blue one that goes;” she conjures a sound that startles them both; a raw, riotous electric crackle. Shutting her mouth and cutting off the noise, she looks at them expectantly.
Theodore and Dirk share a look. “Well,” says the prince with a shrug. “Seems as good a place to start as any.”

Glancing at the wildling, Theodore leans in close to Dirk and lowers his voice. “Do you really think we can trust her?”

Dirk nods, reaching out to take his hand. “I think so.”

Theodore fidgets uneasily. He is not convinced. Turning to face the wildling, he speaks up. “Hey, can I ask you something?”

She cocks her head even further than before, upside-down eyes watching him like an owl.

He shudders, but takes it as an affirmative. “Okay- when we first got here, why did you turn into a bear?”

The wildling wrings her fragile hands. “I… thought people liked bears…”

Dirk stares at Theodore with the biggest puppy dog eyes under the sun.

Theodore sighs. Fine. “Can you tell us the way to the… crackly cave, please?”

Seemingly brightening, the wilding nods rapidly, frosty bangs rippling around her face. “I can take you there!”

“Oh!” says Dirk, delighted.

“Yes! If… you tell me your story on the way?”

Dirk beams, holding out his hand. “Agreed!”

When the wildling reaches out to take it, however, the surface of her icy hand begins to liquefy. Dirk jerks his hand back, mortified. “Oh, my- I’m so sorry!”

She looks sad, but unoffended. “Oh, it’s okay. I guess I’ll just have to think of some other way to carry you…”

Theodore frowns. “Carry us?”

“A quiet rumble follows her outburst, creeping in from all directions and growing steadily. It is not so much a rumble as a long, continuous crunch, a neverending footfall in the snow. Theodore looks around anxiously, but thankfully doesn’t see any more giants or bears. He does, however, spy something dark and rugged poking out of the snow a little ways off. Followed by another, and another- a small collection of islands rising from a snowy sea. They begin to move closer, pushed by waves of rolling snow to gather at the wildling’s feet.

“Oh,” says Dirk, pleasantly. “…Rocks.”

The wildling smiles and closes her eyes. Before either of them can ask more questions she goes limp again, jerking much as she had during her rabbit to human shift, and once again snow collects and ensconces her- and simultaneously pushes the rocks into a close circle at her back, stacking them one atop the other like bricks in a circular wall. As it builds it fans out, curving into the lower hemisphere
of a great stone globe before closing out the top as such, a single large opening left in the side as the stones firmly interlock their jagged edges. Theodore watches in confusion right up until the ice encases the globe in a decorative swirl, and the wildling’s snow cocoon drops away to reveal a broad, flat belly, and an eyeless head waving its antenna in excitement.

“Climb on!” the giant snow snail whispers—somehow, despite not having a mouth anymore.

Theodore eyes the heavy shell warily. “Uh…”

“Oh, this is just lovely,” Dirk gushes, grinning at her strange head as he bounds towards the little entrance she left. “You clever thing, you!”

That jubilant musical giggle floats through the air again; which is a very weird thing to have to correlate with the enormous, slimy creature before them now, but it is still only in about the top ten weirdest things to happen to Theodore this week. Sighing, he follows Dirk, cautiously mounting the rocky shell and finding to his surprise that it is oddly well designed inside; a little stone bench at the back like a carriage seat, a little funnel-shaped chimney in the top to let off Dirk’s excess heat. Fold Theodore’s cloak up on the bench, and it may well be their most practical and comfortable ride since the bedbug.

He taps the curved wall by the entrance. Seems pretty solid. “Not bad.”

Dirk smirks at him and addresses the wildling. “He loves it.”

Theodore snorts and unwraps his tent cloth poncho, folding it roughly before draping it across the hard seat. “My Lord.”

The prince blushes and flicks his ear. “Not on our new friend, you little minx,” he says, settling himself primly and patting the spot by his side. “We must have some boundaries!”

“Since when?” Theodore mutters rhetorically, sitting down and scooching as close as possible- he can only keep warm on residual adrenaline for so long. He sighs in satisfaction when he finally has Dirk’s warm body pressed up against him, melting into the comforting heat and sunshine glow.

“Hold on, friends!” the wildling squeaks, the entire shell lurching as she begins- markedly quicker than your average snail- to slither. “I’ll get you there real fast!”

“You’re a star,” Dirk beams, patting the wall affectionately.

“You can tell me your story now? Please?”

“With pleasure: Once upon a time, in the land of Wendimoor, there was a cliff. A cliff, legend had it, that was made up of fallen stars. And atop that cliff, hewn into the mighty rock face and standing proud above the land, was a palace—”

Theodore kind of tunes out, chuckling lightly. Knowing the sun prince, he’s going to spin this whole experience into a dramatised yarn, probably exaggerate and romanticise a fair bit of it, too. But to be fair, he does have some pretty bonkers source material to work from now. It is almost tempting to listen in, see which bits Dirk chooses to focus on- and which bits he overtly lies about- but that would take attention he doesn’t have to hand right now. Holy cow, is he tired; a night staying up worrying about his pinhead prince falling to his death from a giant’s head will do that. He is not going to feel like he can sleep again until he has the bobo fool home safe and sound.

But it is warming up in here, and the gentle rocking of the shell is pretty nice, and Dirk’s happy voice
is babbling like a brook in the background. It’s enough to make a man’s eyelids heavy.

...Maybe just a couple of minutes couldn't hurt.

Sighing in defeat, and knowing that this is one battle he is happy to lose, Theodore nestles into his prince’s warm neck and surrenders to a deep- and hopefully dreamless- sleep.

Chapter End Notes

Comments are the musical giggle of a snow snail friend <3
Day Five (I)

Chapter Summary

This chapter's largely Panto and Silas centric, as after this we will sadly be leaving them for a couple of chapters, so cherish 'em while you can!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It isn’t in Panto’s nature to get antsy over details. Plans in general, he finds, are neither his strength nor his comfort zone. He has always taken a more improvisational approach to most things in life; combat, work, diplomacy. Though his sister may complain and his father may roll his eyes, Panto maintains that in life- or at least, in his life- spontaneity is key. And generally speaking, roma- ah, seduc… fraternizing? Whatever this is, should be no different.

And yet here he is, alone atop a hill overlooking the higgledy-piggledy sprawl of Clifftown, fretting over his choice of flowers for the occasion.

He toys with the stems of the roses in his hands. Still fresh, picked by his own hand (from somewhere he shouldn’t have, but he’d wanted the best of the best, of course!), petals full and plush and still beaded with morning dew. They are the loveliest he has ever seen, of that there can be no doubt, but are they really… Silas? Perhaps he should have picked up something a bit gentler; something white, for instance. Or yellow, orange, bright and warm like the Dengdamor heir himself. Something a little less audacious. He can’t help but worry now, looking over the voluptuous overlapping petals of crimson velvet, that giving these to his breakfast companion will come across as something of a proposition, which was not what he had in mind- despite the fact that he has made no secret of his attraction. It would be forward, even for him, and Silas of all people deserves to be courted slowly, carefully, savoured like a fine bubble wine. Besides, a shrinking violet such as he may run a mile the second he catches a whiff of such a suggestion, and that is the last thing Panto wants.

Or, he may take Panto by surprise- as he is wont to do- and meet the unintentioned advance with eagerness, and then what will Panto do? Dispense with all of his efforts, leave the food to fester and simply ravish the man on this picnic blanket?!

...On consideration, that seems like the opposite of a drawback.

Pull it together, man, he scolds himself, shaking a collection of tantalising but ultimately unhelpful images out of his head. He puts the problem bouquet aside and takes stock of everything else, hoping a spot of simple inventory will calm his racing pulse. He smoothes out a corner of the multicoloured woven blanket that was already smooth, he carefully re-adjusts the baguette poking out of the basket into a more aesthetically pleasing angle. He’d had to buy most everything from scratch this morning, his own bags and belongings from home seeming rather too drab and utilitarian for the type of morning he wants to give Silas. Fortunately, Clifftown houses a thriving (and more importantly, early-rising) marketplace, and Panto is not short the means to pay for something more suited to the occasion; wouldn’t be short even without the added winnings from the previous night’s games and gambles, but he likes the idea of treating Silas with the fruits of their first night spent together as friends. He has set up a nice little retreat, if he does say so himself; plenty of good food and fresh
juice, a quaint little picnic with a view. Not too extravagant, not too modest, and hopefully only as presumptuous as his company wishes it to be.

Why, then, do the butterflies in his stomach not desist?!

...The flowers. It must be the flowers.

Eyeing the sumptuous blooms mistrustfully, Panto picks them up and stashes them out of sight behind the picnic basket.

A few seconds later he puts them inside the basket, propped attractively beside the baguette.

They change position a few times over the following minutes; Panto experiments with holding them, displaying them, and simply hiding them but no matter what he does with the blasted things, uncertainty churns in his belly with the butterflies.

“Tartar sauce,” he curses, finally giving up and flopping to the ground, bouquet clutched to his chest. He must look like he’s practicing for his own funeral. He groans and squeezes his eyes shut tight until he sees sunbursts inside his eyelids, a stark contrast to the sky’s own uninspiring cloak of pre-dawn grey. He only hopes his own efforts won’t prove equally uninspiring. Moon, is this what anxiety is? This uncertainty, this lurking, looming feeling of apprehension? Is this how Silas feels, when he fumbles a swing or talks about his mother; this gnawing sense of inadequacy twisting in his gut? It’s gross- how does he cope?

Panto barks out a laugh, running his hand through his hair. Oh, if Litzi could see him now; getting himself all tied in knots. Well, it’s certainly new. He supposes he should value the experience. But it is also, well, worrying. And silly and needless and unprecedented; never in all his years has he been driven so completely and utterly doolally by a boy before. Never ever. He’d seen this sensation before, from afar, in whispering circles of friends and farm hands, in the blushes and titters of his peers. He’d even been the target of it a few times- he still remembers with amused fondness the day he smiled at Westley the farm boy and inadvertently sent the poor chap stumbling into a haystack. But though he himself has felt attraction, fondness, want even, he has never felt dizzy from it before. Never felt that a mere smile from the object of his affections could knock his entire world off-kilter.

But there is just something about Silas…

Oh, what a terrible idea this is. A secret meeting, in a private and picturesque spot, with the man who has captured his attention and fondness so completely. A man who he did not come here to win; the man who blood and circumstance dictates must be his rival.

Opening his eyes, he glowers at the Moon, meeting his staring eye and grinning teeth in powerless defiance. “Oh, you do have a wicked sense of humour.”

The Moon, of course, does not respond. He never responds. In all honesty, Panto suspects that he and many others ascribe too much to the whims of that old thing. More than likely it is just a rock-nothing more, nothing less- gazing down on them just for the heck of it. He has no say in their decisions, no hand in their assets. He simply has nowhere else to look.

Panto sighs, toying with a leaf on one of the roses. “Well. I suppose we must be entertaining at the very least.”

He sits up, eyes turned helplessly back to the flowers he still hasn’t the faintest idea what to do with. If there is one thing for sure, it is that he does not have time to go in search of more suitable ones; Silas will surely be arriving soon. In fact, if Panto is reading the sky correctly, he should have been
here half an hour ago.

The realisation sets his stomach churning anew, and he springs to his feet to pace the fresh onset anxiety out. Perhaps Silas is having second thoughts. Perhaps his messenger parrot had been intercepted when Panto had sent it flying back with confirmation of his own attendance; he hadn’t thought on it before, but maybe there were rules in place to prevent prospective grooms from mingling amongst themselves as a matter of decency, a preventative measure against the sun prince’s union being sullied before it has even begun. Once again- and for a far more unsettling reason than before- Panto finds himself at a loss for what to do now. If Silas is merely getting cold feet about the whole idea, then the respectful thing would be to leave him be, yes? Let him sort out his own thoughts and come to Panto when he is ready, rather than chase him down and interpose himself into his time of reflection. But if Silas is in trouble, somehow, what then? What kind of man would Panto be if he stood by and did nothing?

He is but seconds away from sprinting to Silas’ room at the palace- not to pester, of course, just to check that he hasn’t been spirited away or clapped in the stocks- when a soft and oh so welcome voice breaks his spiral.

“Good morrow, My Lord.”

Panto whirls around to face the origin, and his face breaks into a daffy grin before he can do anything about it. “Silas,” he breathes, restless feet stilling at last.

Silas smiles shyly, fiddling with a button on his fancy waistcoat. In typical Silas fashion, he is well-dressed in the sharpest Dengdamor finery; albeit a brighter, more cheerful shade of emerald than his standard black or olive. He does, however, look uncommonly tousled this morning. With the exception of their brief (but unforgettable) training session, Silas had always managed to look composed, even when he didn’t necessarily act like it. Today, however, is a different kind of Silas altogether; not pressed and proper, nor breathless and energized. Just gently mussed, his short, curly hair in mild disarray and his freshly-pressed shirt buttoned slightly wrong. And with a voice as soft and bleary as his smile he apologises for being late, as if he hasn’t made Panto’s morning just by being there, no matter the time or place.

Panto takes in the sight, a warmth he can neither name nor contain flooding his chest. “Not a morning person, Highness?” he teases, gesturing helpfully to the problem buttons.

Following his indication, Silas mutters something under his breath and hastily fumbles at the garment. “Um- no, I… not especially.”

“I’m surprised you suggested breakfast,” says Panto, taking a measured step forward- trying not to let on how ready he is to close the distance with a single bound. “Would lunch not have been more appropriate?”

“I…” his tawny cheeks glow with a flood of bashful warmth. “Just… said the first thing that occurred to me.”

Panto laughs, stepping close to pat down the harried prince’s unkempt hair.

And in doing so, realises he quite forgot to do anything with the flowers.

“Ah,” he mumbles, quietly cursing himself. If the widening of Silas’ eyes is any indication, he just blew his chance at hiding the things. Recovering hastily with a smile he hopes comes across more winning than flustered, he holds the wretched bouquet out for Silas’ inspection. “Yes, I- these are for you.” He takes a moment to himself to panic a bit. Even if he had decided on presenting the risky
offering, he would have much preferred to work up to it a while longer, soften Silas up with food and conversation, lessen the risk of him running for the hills.

“Are these…” Silas breathes, awestruck. “Forever roses?”

Panto blinks. He doesn’t have the foggiest idea. “…What do you think?”

Silas laughs, bright and beautiful, and snatches the bouquet from Panto’s hands. “Oh, my- these are gorgeous!” he gushes, tenderly running his finger across the curve of one silken petal. “I’ve never seen one up close- where in the world did you even get these?”

*From the palace gardens when the groundskeeper was looking the other way.* “I… know a man.”

“Oh, these… these are amazing,” Silas continues in unabashed glee, peering at the flowers’ every detail as he talks. “Do you know why they call them that? I’ve never seen it for myself but, well, the books say that they never die. Isn’t that wonderful? Even without their roots, or leaves or thorns, in darkness or draught. Supposedly, if even one solitary petal remains, they’ll always grow back- bigger and more beautiful than before! I even read a story once about a man who got lost in the desert; all he had was a single rose, and he survived for years on the dew! Isn’t that incredible?”

“Yes,” says Panto softly- though his eyes are not on the roses. “It is.”

Silas, remembering himself, looks up at Panto timidly. “Sorry,” he laughs, clutching the flowers a little tighter to his chest. “My mother always tells me that if I spent half as much time studying the sword as I do prattling about plants, I’d be a master by now.”

Panto scoffs. “Swordsmen are ten a penny, My Lord,” he says, gesturing to himself and delighting in the giggle he draws forth from his company. “I think your way is far more interesting.

“You…” Silas gazes at Panto with wide eyes, disbelief as well as cautious hope warring in their umber depths. “You really got these for me?”

Smiling, Panto sweeps down in a low bow. “And I would bring you a dozen more, Silas Dengdamor,” he declares, looking up at Silas through his lashes and, confidence restored, throwing him a flirtatious wink for good measure. “Say the word, and it will be done.”

Silas chuckles breathlessly, face redder than the roses. That pretty smile on that pretty blush- oh, Panto just cannot get enough of it! He’ll ransack the Citadel’s entire rosebush for even another glimpse. “Maybe, ah,” Silas mumbles, lifting his other hand- which, Panto now notices, is clutching a fancy basket, covered in a silk cloth emblazoned with the Dengdamor insignia. “We could have some breakfast, and then discuss the, um, dozen roses idea?”

Panto grins, and holds out a gentlemanly arm. “As you wish.”

Draping his own arm gingerly through Panto’s, Silas allows himself to be escorted to the pre-prepared picnic spot; and as he does so, a flimsy finger of dawning sunlight finally breaks the grey morning, illuminating Silas’ warm, tender face and the crimson cluster of his beloved flowers in happy, hopeful gold.

Panto watches, dazzled, as Silas greets the dawn with eyes soft in sleep but wide in wonder; watches the rising grin on his face shine brighter than even the most glorious morning sunlight.

*On my word, Silas Dengdamor,* he silently vows, past misgivings be darned. *I will spend every second of this tryst in service to that smile.*
When Dirk awakes, he does so to a crick in his neck and an ache in his back from the shifting press of lumpy stone. But considering that means he’d managed to fall asleep in the first place, that already puts this uncomfortable night up in the previous two.

The soft, snuggly shape of his knight pressed close is also a strong point in its favour.

Yawning, Dirk stretches the stiffness out of his arms, and then looks blearily down upon the sleeping elf.

Theodore dozes on, head in Dirk’s lap, unaware of his movement. Dirk isn’t about to change this; these past few days have been just as hard on his Todd as they have on himself. At least those dark, haggard circles under his eyes have somewhat receded with rest. Dirk reaches down to trace them tenderly with his thumb, smiling as dapples of vibrant green flock to his touch, his knight’s body fighting for warmth and light even in sleep. He has always been such a tenacious little thing, stubborn to a fault. And responsive. Reactive, in both the best and the most unhelpful ways imaginable. By turns a volatile little baobomb, or conversely a blushing bundle of bashful affection. Small and strong, soft and sharp, as cynical a man as Dirk has ever met and yet devoted, loyal to the last. A thousand contradictions in a suit of leather armour.

He’s perfect.

Dirk smiles, heart fluttering in his chest. It is a rare occurrence indeed to be awake before Theodore; though neither of them are ‘morning people’ by any stretch of the imagination, his knight usually beats Dirk to it by merit of being trained from youth into a routine of vigilance, and consequently manages to be functional early in a way Dirk has never had to be. Dirk is generally quite happy with this arrangement, especially on the days when Theodore utilises the extra time to bring Dirk breakfast in bed, or to squeeze in a quick morning workout- the sight of his handsome knight shirtless and doing push-ups in the sunlight from the window is a more than welcome one first thing in the morning. But seeing him like this, all soft and peaceful, sharp edges and worry lines smoothed out in sleep… Moon, it is almost enough to make a man want to change the habits of a lifetime. He traces Theodore’s lax features, feather-light lest he wake him from slumber, memorising the planes and contours of his face as if he has never touched them before.

Or never will again…

As if sensing the downward shift in Dirk’s mood, Theodore’s expressive brows twitch, eyes flickering warily into wakefulness. They find Dirk’s effortlessly, latching on in a heartbeat as though they were the first thing he looked for, as if Dirk is the only one on his mind. He looks up, beautiful blue eyes blinking like a newborn in Dirk’s light. Laid out in his lap, all blues and greens framed in silky curls of raven black hair, he bears a striking resemblance to an oil painting; or perhaps a dream made flesh.

Dirk leans down, cupping his sleeping beauty’s cheeks and bestowing a sweet kiss upon his forehead. “Good morrow, Sir Brotz,” he murmurs, smoothing out his knight’s knotted brows with his thumbs.

Theodore smiles up at him- in that delightfully open way of his, guard still lowered by sleep- and covers Dirk’s hand with his own, thumbs skimming across his knuckles. “Morrow,” he mumbles.
Watching the blood race to Theodore’s fingertips at their contact, Dirk chuckles quietly. “Sweet dreams, greenthumb?”

“Uh… weird dreams,” says Theodore, blushing at Dirk’s little tease but otherwise letting it slide. “But I guess that’s… He glances around at the magically bound confines of their ‘carriage’, ice and rock shifting minutely with the movement of the great snow snail. “...to be expected.”

“Yes, it has been a rather odd few days, by all accounts,” says Dirk, nodding sagely and carding his fingers through Theodore’s hair.

“You’re handling it pretty well,” says Theodore, begrudging. “Considering.”

“Aren’t I?”

Theodore snorts, toying absently with Dirk’s fingers. “I miss my bed,” he mutters, closing his eyes and sighing as if enfolding himself in the soft sheets of memory.

“Oh, it’s your bed you miss, is it?” Dirk teases. “Not the rather attractive four-poster? With the devastatingly handsome prince inside?”

“Your bed’s been missed enough,” says Theodore with a characteristic eye roll. “You were waxing lyrical about it all day yesterday.”

“It’s a good bed!” Dirk defends, pinching Theodore’s ear lightly. “Deserves appreciation.”

“We’ll ‘appreciate’ it plenty when we get home,” says Theodore with a suggestive smirk. It flickers away quickly to a fretful twist and a scrunch of his brows. “If we get back.”

Dirk tuts. “Oh, don’t be such a gloomy guts. We’ll be fine! We’ve made it this far, haven’t we?”

“By the skin of our teeth,” Theodore mutters.

“I’m sure it’ll all come right in the end,” says Dirk cheerily, petting Theodore’s little green cheek. “It always does!”

Theodore meets his gaze, and though he remains tense with worry the twinkle returns to his eyes. “And who do you think makes that happen?”

“Exactly! As long as I’ve got you, we’ll be right as rain.”

Theodore laughs under his breath, head rocking on Dirk’s thigh as he shakes it. “Dork…”

“Rude- and after I paid you such a lovely…”

Dirk trails off, frowning at Theodore; all of a sudden he seems awfully quiet. Still.

Oh, fudge.

“Compliment,” Dirk finishes on a sigh, scooping Theodore’s head into his hands, lifting it up and leaning down to press their foreheads together, leaving nothing but the finally wrought golden circlet on his own between them. Up close to his knight’s glazed, staring eyes, they are wide as lagoons, and similarly unsettling in their stillness.

“Todd,” Dirk murmurs, gently massaging Theodore’s scalp and searching his eyes for a glimmer of awareness to latch onto. “Come back…”
Nothing. Not even a flicker. Dirk frowns and lightly tugs his hair, but doesn’t push too hard; he trusts Theodore to return, when he’s ready. But these episodes of his seem to be getting longer. Deeper. Frankly, Dirk doesn’t want to think about what that could mean. He has a horrible vision of his beloved knight one day falling so very far, trapped inside his own mind, so deep as to never see the light of day again. It doesn’t bear thinking about. It’s all Dirk can think about.

“Darling,” he breathes, beseeching. “Come back to me…”

Perhaps by coincidence, or perhaps tethered to reality by the sound of Dirk’s voice, Theodore snaps back to awareness with a soft gasp, clouds in his vision parting to leave only clear blue skies in his eyes.

“Hello, stranger,” Dirk sighs, relieved beyond all reason as he presses a light kiss to his knight’s nose.

Theodore looks up at him, fear and confusion mingling in his gaze. “How-” voice hoarse, he clears his throat and tries again. “How long?”

“Just a minute,” Dirk assures him. “Barely even that.”

“Good,” Theodore sighs, eyes drifting closed a moment. “That’s good…”

“These… episodes,” says Dirk, cautiously. “They’re very frequent, at the moment, is everything…?”

“It’s okay,” Theodore brushes him off with a shake of his head. “It’s stress, that’s all.” He opens his eyes, meets Dirk’s with a wry smile. “Like you said: odd few days.”

Dirk smiles, with as much reassurance as he can muster. “Odd few days…”

Which, rather fittingly, is when their new wildling-turned-snail friend slithers to a stop, and her tiny, girlish voice floats towards them on the howling mountain wind.

“We’re here…”

Chuckling, Theodore turns his head, burying his face briefly in Dirk’s belly. “Great. Guess it’s time for the next weird thing.”

Dirk pets his little head with a matching chortle. “You could always stay here,” he says, glancing through the roughshod entryway in the wildling’s stone shell at the bleak wall of whirling snow beyond. Sometime overnight, one humdinger of a blizzard had whipped up. “If we’re right outside our witchy friend’s abode, I’m sure I can handle myself for a little while- you might as well sit tight, catch up on your beauty sleep.”

Theodore doesn’t answer verbally, but the look he gives Dirk has ‘you’re an idiot’ written all over it.

More relieved than he’d like to let on, Dirk props his knight’s shoulders and helps him sit. “Thought not,” he says softly, kissing Theodore’s cheek as it comes level with his lips.

“Let’s just get this over with,” Theodore grumbles, face flushing prettily at the touch. He stands and pulls Dirk up behind him, accepting the folded cloak Dirk offers and tugging the sleep-warmed canvas over his head. “Before anything else jumps out of the snow at us.”

“I’m sure the critters in the snow have more interesting things to be doing,” says Dirk, watching with fondness as his dutiful, chilly knight alights first to assess their surroundings. Evidently spotting nothing untoward, he turns back to hand Dirk down from the stone carriage, carefully supporting
him as his sandalled feet sink into the squishy terrain. Dirk once more encounters a brief flash of cold before his body acclimatize and his rays banish the snow. Unlike in the shallows of the pass, however, his feet do not meet long-frozen rock but instead carry on sinking, sinking, sinking-

“Shoot,” Theodore mutters, releasing Dirk’s hand.

“Todd, what are you-!”

Within the space between heartbeats, Theodore has his arms under Dirk’s body, sweeping his legs out from underneath him in order to hold him against his torso away from the thawing snow like a blushing bride.

“The snow is deeper here,” says Theodore, apparently quite unaware that Dirk is now far more interested in his knight’s strong arms than he is in the silly old weather. “Geez, this better not be an ice cave…”

“No ice,” comes the dainty voice of the wildling, and Dirk tears his gaze from the attractive line of tension in Theodore’s neck long enough to see a snow cocoon forming around the snail’s head in preparation for another transformation, the dome of stones where they had laid their heads crumbling behind her like a house of cards. “But lots of blue!”

Wrapping his arms around Theodore’s neck (for safety, of course), he follows his knight in squinting through the cascading snow. Sure enough, glimmering faintly in the blizzard, he spies an undulating flicker of brightest blue.

“Ah,” says Dirk, mouth dry with trepidation. “Crackly cave…”

“Guess so,” says Theodore, sounding similarly apprehensive.

“I can’t go inside,” says the wildling, reappearing by their side in the form of the ice lady once more, hovering weightlessly above the lightly steaming pit left behind by Dirk’s feet. Both her head and her voice carry a sad downward slant. “The lights scare me…”

“Oh,” says Dirk, crestfallen. He’d grown rather attached to their frosty new friend over the course of the night; her enthusiasm in listening to Dirk’s stories is quite unparalleled. Besides, a sweet girl-turned-snow bear could have been very useful if this witchykookoo had turned out to be bad news. But he supposes they’ll just have to make do. “Well. That is a pity. But thank you for bringing us this far, truly! Your service will be remembered, good lady- and rewarded! Anything your heart desires, say the word and it shall be done!”

“Anything?”


Everything falls silent, calm. The wind, the storm, it all slows to a standstill- but only for them. All around the blizzard continues to rage, but it skates harmlessly around their position, as if these six square feet are sacred ground. Dirk gazes, enraptured, at the invisible walls of their little inverted snowglobe. A world holding its breath.

“Will you…” whispers the wilding, soft as a snowflake. “Come and visit me?”

Dirk looks at her delicate features and clutches Theodore tighter, wishing he could only embrace her
so easily. “Of course we will.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely!” Dirk promises emphatically, ignoring the withering gaze of his knight. Granted, it isn’t exactly an easy journey, and Theodore will likely end up doing most of the hard parts, but that is something they can deal with at a later date. “That’s what friends are for, yes?” He frowns, and glances to Theodore. “...Yes?”

The knight sighs, but his eyes and voice are soft when he speaks. “Yeah.”

“Yes!” says Dirk, emboldened, and grins brightly at the wildling. “Yes, it is- we’ll come to see our friend! Of course we will!”

Outside their bubble of tranquility the wind whips in excitement. Amongst the buoyant babble float snippets of words, of ecstatic whispers, flooding the frigid air and vibrating on the ear, a cascade of disjointed happy syllables. Dirk mentally traces the shape of the ones he can hear, the ‘oh’s and ‘ah’s and ‘mo’s- “Mo...nah…”

Theodore gives him a look of bewilderment as Dirk, inspired by the brilliant idea he just had, bounces in his arms.

“Mona!” he exclaims, grinning at the owlishly tilted icy face of the wildling. “That could be your name!”

“Mo-nah…” she breathes upon the wind in crystalline wonder.

“It suits you!” Which isn’t mere platitude, it really does; something about it just feels right in a way he can’t quite put his finger on. “Doesn’t it, Todd?”

“It’s…” Theodore offers, after some nudging and meaningful head twitches from Dirk. “Pretty.”

Her musical giggles flood their little snowglobe. “Mona! Mooooonaaaaaaaaa!”

Dirk grins at his knight. “I think she likes it.”

“Not bad,” mutters Theodore, adjusting his hold on Dirk with a strained huff. “I mean, it’s no ring made of old boots, but not bad. Now can we please get moving? You’re heavier than you look.”

Though Dirk squawks in indignation and slaps his churlish knight’s chest, he has to admit that they’ve been standing around in the snow longer than they strictly ought to. Theodore’s little feet must be freezing. “You are a meanie, Sir Brotz, but I daresay you have a point.” He sends the newly dubbed Mona a small grimace of apology. “I suppose this is where we bid each other farewell. Thank you for everything, Mona.”

“Be careful, Dirk,” she whispers, cracks as fine as silk spiderwebbing across her delicate face. “The voices never lie…”

And with that the faultlines rupture, and Mona the wildling is but a formless flurry again, swirling playfully once, twice about Theodore’s legs before drifting once more on her merry way through the frozen wilds of the mountains.

“Goodbye, friend,” Dirk murmurs, squeezing Theodore’s shoulders. What a sweet little soul. A sweet, lonely soul. Seem to be a lot of those about at the moment…
“Hey,” says Theodore softly, hiking Dirk a little closer to his chest. “She’ll be alright.”

“Yes, I daresay she will be,” Dirk replies, tucking his cheek against his knight’s snow-damp hair. “I only wish I could do better by her than just ‘alright’…”

Which is precisely the moment the departed wildling’s blizzard barrier gives up the ghost, and they are once more at the mercy of the elements.

“Jiminy-” Theodore curses, stumbling under the weight of Dirk and the full force of the wind.

“Crickets!” Dirk agrees, hand flying to his face against the icy barrage.

Theodore staggers a few steps towards the distant, indistinct blue light in the storm, eyes screwed up in the face of the buffeting snow. “Hold on,” he grits out, his grip on Dirk never wavering. “We’re almost there…”

Dirk’s heart glows in his chest. Oh, this man. This brave, wonderful, impossible man. “Almost there…” he echoes.

Oh, how he hopes this time that it’s true…

Something wet lands on Dirk’s cheek and evaporates with a hiss.

“Dirk,” says Theodore, amusement tinging his haggard voice. “What are you doing?”

Squinting through the fresh, warm mist, Dirk watches bemusedly as his glow- now radiating for several feet around much as Mona’s barrier had- turns the pelting snow to thick, warm droplets of tropical rain on contact. “Um… helping?”

Theodore laughs, and picks up his pace. His feet are starting to sink a little deeper into the snow with every step. “At least I can see now- but we’re gonna get trapped and drowned if we don’t get off this snow, I have no idea how deep it gets…”

“Ah, yes, let’s not do that,” Dirk yelps, holding on to his knight for dear life.

Despite the merry downpour in their eyes and the slick slide of melting snow at Theodore’s feet, the source of the light soon comes into full view; a tall cave, mouth wide at the base and jutting upwards, slicing sharp and jagged through the steep, snow-caked cliffside and tapering off fifty feet up like a lightning bolt. And that is perhaps the least intimidating thing about it.

“Blimey…” Dirk breathes as the cave- and the snapping, roiling mass of blue electricity licking out like lizard tongues from within- draws closer. And higher- the snow seems to be melting away faster with every step, threatening to drop them both far below the mouth of the cave before they can reach it, and possibly half-drown them in the process.

“This is so stupid,” Theodore pants, but quickens his pace nonetheless as more snow creeps away under his feet. For all that Dirk’s glow has been diminished by anxiety, the chain reaction is well underway, leftover sun-warmed slush bleeding into the soft snow and thawing it between Todd’s every footfall.

He pales, tugging on Todd’s neck. “Perhaps we should-”

“Too late.”

“Theodo-ahhhhhhhhhhhhh!”
His knight springs, launching himself and Dirk across the final feet of rapidly melting snow in a flying leap, and there is little for Dirk to do but hold on tight and quietly shriek into Theodore’s windswept hair and just keep shrieking-

“Dirk!”

“Ahhhhhh…” Dirk wails, quieter now.

“Open your eyes, dufus.”

He does so, reluctantly, peeking through one from the safety of Theodore’s hair. amazingly, he does not find them immediately seared by blazing blue light. “Are we still…” he gulps. “You know… with the living people?”

“Yeah, more or less- I’m going to put you down now, okay?”

Dirk clings a little tighter. “Is, ah- is that quite necessary?”

Theodore snorts. “Yes, dummy, I need my hands back. Come on.”

“Hnn…”

Making noises of fearful complaint the entire way, Dirk warily finds his feet, clutching onto his knight for support. He is relieved to find solid stone beneath his sandals as opposed to treacherous snowy slurry. Settled on his own two feet with Theodore’s steadying hands on his waist, he finally takes in their surroundings, heart galloping in his chest.

“Well, this is… welcoming.”

welcoming-coming-ing-ing

His voice bounces back at him from the high stone walls, eerily hollow. He shudders, peering briefly at the towering ceiling, the jagged expanse semi-masked by each sharp ledge until eventually disappearing from view altogether, tall and shadowed like a chimney shaft. He does not let his gaze linger there long, unsure if he can hold his nerve under the narrow, oppressive crush of so much uncaring mountain rock. Besides, the deeper recesses of the cave are rather more eye-catching.

“Oh, my…” Dirk breathes, mesmerised by the skittish, fizzling coils of blue lightning swarming the cave walls like caterpillars. Interlocking, overlapping, sometimes faster than the eye can see in an infinite myriad of patterns, a never ending dance.

Even Theodore seems lost for words. “Wow,” he says eloquently, leaning in for a closer look. “It’s…”

“Ow!”

And just like that, Theodore is back on high alert. “Dirk! What-?”

“Oh, it’s nothing,” Dirk dismisses, waving away his concern. “‘Twas just a little- ouch!”

“It’s shocking you,” says Theodore, squinting.

“Well, shocking is a little strong,” Dirk grumbles, swatting fruitlessly at his head- they all seem to be gravitating towards it, the little electric nips. He shudders to think what the static could be doing to his hair.
Theodore inspects him a moment longer, before his eyes light up and he snaps his fingers. “Your crown!”

Dirk looks at him blankly. “What about it?”

“The metal- it’s attracting the electricity, conducting it- ouch,” Theodore hisses, glancing worriedly towards the inner cave and the increasingly dense swarming tongues of blue as he feels at his own side, where a spark of electricity is dancing across a metal fastening on his armour. “Dangit…”

“Oh,” says Dirk, fingers hovering over the circlet. “So I suppose I have to…”

“Yeah,” says Theodore, sounding rather reluctant himself as he flips aside his poncho and starts fiddling with the straps on his outer leather plating. “I’m sorry, I know you don’t like…”

“No, no it’s… it’s quite alright,” Dirk mumbles, in a vain attempt to comfort himself. “It’s only a crown, after all. Just a teensy little priceless heirloom of my family, at the end of the day. Not deeply tied with my sense of self in the slightest, that would be rather pathetic, wouldn’t it?”

“Dirk,” says Theodore, soft and solemn as he abandons his armour and holds out his hands. “It’s okay, I can take it.”

“But then you’ll get-”

“I’ll deal with it.”

He seems so sure, so bloody minded in that moment that Dirk almost hands him the crown without question. But soon Theodore will have little protecting him but his armour’s modest underlayers and some old tent canvas, and no room in his Bofuki pack unless he jettisons important supplies; and perhaps the one thing more ridiculous than being reliant on a silly piece of jewellery would be to make his beloved knight suffer for it. “Thank you, Sir Brotz, but… I think this is where we leave it.”

Theodore, though clearly concerned, simply nods and steps back to tackle his own armour once more and give Dirk some space. Not too far, mind; Dirk can still feel him nearby by, ready to hold him, catch him. See? He silently consoles himself, fingers coming to rest with a slight electrified zing on the crown. You’ve already got something far more precious than this silly trinket.

It is not the first time he has removed the crown during their quest. Between almost-sleeping, climbing giants and boogle attacks, it has already spent a fair amount of time off his head and in the care of his hands or those of Sir Brotz. But there is no doubt that something feels very different, very final about this particular occasion. Fingertips stinging at the touch of it, he makes short work of removing the crown and placing it, gently, on the rocky ground at the mouth of the cave.

“We can get it on the way back,” Theodore offers, amongst sounds of his larger armour plates hitting the ground with soft, leathery thumps. It is mere placation, of course- he no doubt knows as well as Dirk does that no such treasure will be left alone for long. Between the howling wind and the curious creatures of the mountains, it will likely have been spirited away well before their return; and that is if they return.

“Oh, of course,” Dirk agrees nonetheless, hands hovering wistfully over the crackling crown. It is a nice illusion to maintain.

He feels a strong, steadying hand on his shoulder. Theodore does not say a word, but then, he does not need to.
Dirk watches the crown, still warm from his own sunlight glow, melt the encroaching snowflakes a moment before he stands up straight, his knight’s hand keeping him company the whole way. “Is it daft that I feel naked without it?”

Theodore presses up against his back, rubbing his arms. “If it helps,” he says quietly, breathing the words into the back of Dirk’s neck. “I’ve seen you look way more naked with it.”

Dirk snorts, surprised and charmed. “Very true.” He places his own hand over one of Theodore’s, leaning back into his comforting presence. “We have had some fun, haven’t we?”

His knight’s silence lasts longer than anticipated. But the moment is gone before Dirk can turn and investigate it. “Yeah, we have,” murmurs Theodore, squeezing Dirk’s arms once before using his hold on them to turn him around. Speaking now to Dirk’s face, he smiles through tight lips. “But if we ever want to have fun again, we’d better get out of this cold and find some answers.”

“Ah, yes. Righty-o,” Dirk concedes, looking over Theodore’s shoulder at the writhing, hissing mass of sizzling energy clamouring across the cave walls. “Suppose we should… make ourselves at home.”

Theodore, despite now wearing his Serious Face, smirks. “Yeah. Real cozy place.” He flinches as a particularly bold tongue of electricity whips towards them, and draws his boomerang; though he wisely leaves the blade guard in place, lest the metal draw further attacks. “Stay close to me.”


With a small huff of laughter, Theodore squeezes his hand. “Ready?”

Dirk looks down at his loyal knight, and draws courage from his enquiring eyes. “As I’ll ever be.”

And with one last glance back at the cave mouth, at the gleam of polished leather and the glitter of gold against the blinding, brilliant white, Dirk takes his first step with Theodore into the electric depths, and the belly of the best.

Sunrise comes and goes, melts into the pristine blue of high noon to the soft grey-pink of dusk. Sunrise, sunset, another day ambling away.

Silas scarcely sees it go. It feels like barely five minutes have passed when he looks up from the boundless blue skies in Panto’s eyes, and realises that the stars are coming out to play. A whole day gone, in the blink of an eye.

“Golly,” Silas laughs breathlessly, eyes raking across the star-studded velvet stretching out above them to infinity and back. “Time certainly flies up here.”

“It does,” Panto agrees with a matching chuckle. “Though personally, I’d put it down to the company.”

Silas, face warming, toys absently with a corner of the picnic blanket. “Yes, there is that…”

The world falls quiet, then. For the first time all day, in fact; once Silas had struggled past his initial nerves, conversation had begun to flow between them as easily as wine to a glass. To his surprise
and cautious delight, he and Panto had found a great deal of common ground. Just as Silas’ interest in botany had fed off of Panto’s experience on the farm, Panto’s adventurer’s curiosity had fed off of Silas’ long-studied and hard-earned knowledge. For every obscure fact Silas had to impart on the deadly denizens of the Dig ‘Em Desert that captured the prince’s interest, Panto had an anecdote of times spent tangling with the piranha plants that had Silas in stitches. As the day had progressed, as good food and good company lowered his guard and loosened his lips, he’d come to realise that conversing with Panto Trost, befriending him, is the easiest thing in the world. Without any of the uncertainty, the inferiority of conversing with his mother, nor the responsibility of Farson, he feels his thoughts and feelings flowing free as a babbling brook. And not just to beat against the rocky shore of Wygar’s stoicism, but to twist and bend in a thousand directions, mingle in playful eddies with Panto’s and carry them both somewhere new and exciting every time like it is the most natural thing in the world.

Gosh, he can only imagine what Wygar would have to say about this situation.

“I’ve never been alone this long,” Silas blurs, the dams of polite conversation well and truly broken.

“How so?” Panto inquires, voice light and free of judgement.

“I…” He huffs and flops onto his back on the blanket, allowing those glittering stars to fill his vision. “I… was supposed to be accompanied. By Wygar. He’s a good friend, he’s… I suppose he’s my best friend. He works for my mother. Used to be one of her finest- head of the Royal Guard, in fact. But when it became apparent that I could not fight for myself, it became his duty to watch over me. He is my knight, in a sense. My bodyguard, and he is fearsome. But I think that, to my mother, he is little more than a glorified nanny.”

Panto remains patiently, understandingly quiet, but Silas can feel the slightest shift of grass and cloth as he takes his place lying by Silas’ side.

Silas, feeling liberated in this rare moment, carries on with his eyes to the skies, speaking his buried words directly to the Moon. “I don’t think I shall ever know why she chose him. He tells me it is his honour to protect me, that he takes it as a mark of my mother’s trust. His calling and his privilege, he says. But as the years go by, I see him watch the other men so wistfully through the window. I see mother’s disappointment, her contempt for me bleed onto him like poison and I can’t help but feel that he is being… punished. That’s what I am to him, to mother, to everyone just, just a punishment. A burden.” He laughs, the sound as hollow as his chest has begun to feel. “He could not accompany me here. It was so sudden, and I’d convinced mother to let him assist the other knights in resolving a conflict in the outlying villages not two days before. I just wanted him to spend time with his friends for once, friends his own age that he doesn’t have to babysit. She did not seek out a replacement for my detail. I think, perhaps, that if I do not win this tournament…”

His words stick in his throat, biting like broken glass. “I think, that if I do not return victorious… that she would rather I not return at all.”

Though the confession hangs heavy in the air, it is incomparable to the weight now lifted from his chest. The serrated snag in his throat is gone, and air flows as free as that proverbial babbling brook to his starving lungs.

“Did you send word to Wygar?” asks Panto, gently, after a moment’s thoughtful silence. “About the tournament?”

Silas simply shakes his head. He has done quite enough talking- possibly too much.

“Perhaps you should.”
He turns his head to look at Panto, questioning; and regrets it when the sight of Panto’s pale skin and pastel hair cast in silver moonlight renders him breathless all anew.

Panto, handsome face open and compassionate as can be, offers a soft smile. “He would come running to be by your side.”

“But that’s the problem,” Silas counters, looking away again lest that beautiful face drive him to distraction. “He is finally out doing something else, something that he wants to do. I won’t be another chore for him to hurry home for.”

“Somehow I doubt he would view it as a hardship.”

“You don’t—”

“No, I don’t know that,” Panto intercepts, chuckling under his breath. “But I’ve spent quite some time today learning about this man. He is, I take it, the ‘friend’ in many of your stories?”

Silas, curling up in embarrassment, nods.

“As I thought,” says Panto, amused but thankfully not caustic. As if he is laughing with Silas, not at him. “That settles it, then. You needn’t worry.”

“And why might that be?” Silas mumbles, fidgeting in place. He feels exposed, in this moment, more so than he has all day, stretched taut by this earnestness.

He almost jumps out of his skin when he feels Panto’s hand cup his own.

“Because,” Panto murmurs, allowing Silas time to withdraw his hand if he so chooses. Which he does not. “From what you have told me, it’s clear to me that he loves you very much.”

Silas closes his eyes and shakes his head. “No, he’s… he’s doing his duty.”

“So am I when I shepherd father’s gargoyles, but that doesn’t make me enjoy it any less,” Panto reasons, smile evident in his voice as his calloused thumb traces circles in Silas’ open palm. “Anyway, grown men don’t spend their afternoons catching frogs in the forest for mere duty, Silas. Nor do they build treehouses in their queen’s prize willow so the little boys in their care have better places to watch the birds. Those are the things that uncles do for nephews, or fathers for sons. I know this. I may not have had some of the luxuries you did growing up—my father never did believe in throwing money at a problem unless there was no other solution, and fancy toys and tutors were not atop the list of his priorities. We have not always seen eye to eye, but for all his faults, I know he has always cared for me. Tried to make me happy.” he nudges Silas with his elbow, playful. “Just as yours did.”

Frowning, Silas turns to Panto and opens his eyes. “I didn’t have a…”

“Family is more than blood, Highness,” says Panto, meeting Silas’ confusion with gentleness. “Blood is… fickle. The ones who birthed you, who share your name, sometimes that is all they share.” A shadow crosses his face, of a story not ready to be told. Silas squeezes his hand like it is habitual, offering comfort the easiest thing in the world; easy as the smile Panto gives in return before continuing his thought. “I believe there are many ties that bind us, Silas, and the bonds of family are stronger than mere blood. The people who raised you where others failed to, who shaped you, who support you through thick and through thin. The people who entertain your whims and celebrate what makes you different, those people are infinitely more precious. They are your family; the truest family there is.”
He cocks his head, regarding Silas with a knowing smile. “Now tell me, who springs to mind?”

Silas merely stares, speechless.

Panto, nodding, turns his face to the sky in satisfaction. “As I thought,” he repeats, under his breath.

Silas does not follow his eyes, taking the chance instead to run his gaze along Panto’s strong profile. He looks every part of what he is; the handsome prince, the charming farmboy, the rakish adventurer and dignified swordsman. But under the cover of darkness, in the perceived safety of Silas’ company he appears to open out like a flower, a thousand quiet qualities the world has little interest in observing laid out under the pale, honest light of the Moon. A worldly wisdom, a careworn tenderness, authenticity pure as the driven snow. Everything bright and beautiful. Everything Silas is scared to dream of. Perhaps he is a dream. Either that, or he is the stuff such dreams are made of.

If Panto is a dream, Silas hopes to never wake.

Intrigued by his silence, or perhaps feeling the weight of his gaze, Panto turns again to look at Silas, who meets his eyes and can feel himself falling to their depths. “Silas?” he whispers, fine brows knitted in candid concern, quiet confusion.

When Silas places his free hand upon Panto’s cheek, light as a butterfly, the understanding that takes hold instead is as instant as it is exhilarating.

Silas licks his lips, heart hopping like a hare in his chest as Panto’s beautiful, searching eyes follow the motion. As Panto covers that hand with his own, those eyes asking a silent question.

A question Silas answers in kind; silently.

He shivers, the soft press of their lips a point of static, igniting his nerves and singing in his blood. Within moments the kiss deepens, Silas arching into Panto’s touch with a whimper when it still feels like not enough. It will never be enough, he thinks, as Panto releases his hand to instead cup his neck. Every inch of skin that Panto cannot touch cries out in longing, just as Silas burns to reach every part of Panto in turn. To map out his body, his face with his fingers; to hold his very heart in his hands. To pepper kisses to his dexterous fingers, to his brilliant brain- every piece of him he’d ever admired, as well as all the bits he could not see. He wishes to know him, inside and out; wishes to be known in return. He feels, somehow, as if they already do- kissing Panto, holding him close, feels as familiar and comfortable as it does new and invigorating. As if their souls are old friends, as if all that remains is for their bodies to catch up. It feels old, and new, a question of infinite complexity and an answer as simple as breathing.

It feels like the adventure of a lifetime.

It feels like coming home.

Even when they break apart they stick together, when their lips pant for breath they drink deep from the same air. Though the kiss may be done the connection remains, humming between them like electricity in the closed, happy circuit of their entwined bodies. A knee between legs, a foot atop a foot, hands in hair and pressed to a neck, a spine, a chest, every point of contact sings in satisfaction. Tied together as such, wrapped up in the safety of Panto’s embrace, it is hard to remember a time when he was not so. Hard to remember how it feels to be alone.

This, he muses, wonderstruck, as his eyes flutter open to behold his prince in all his moonlit glory.
This must be what true happiness is.

Panto opens his eyes in kind, and the smile he has for Silas and Silas alone is more magical than the
stars.

So this…

His heart feels too big for his chest, his smile too big for his face.

So this is love.

Panto sighs, catching Silas’ hand and pressing a kiss to the heel of it. “I’ve wanted you to do that since the moment I met you…”

So have I.

Though the acquiescence sits on the tip of his tongue, it does not pass his lips in time. Not before the memory of that day- the dawning realisation, the ensuing guilt and fear- worms its cold, oily way into the happy fog of his awareness.

The realisation that this beautiful man, the man he had wanted the second he saw him, is Panto Trost; sworn enemy of his family, rival for the sun prince’s hand.

The toiling, twisting guilt of knowing that he wants him anyway.

The fear- vast and vicious and cloaking his heart in dread- of what might befall him if anyone were to find out.

And now, now to top it all off the new, terrifying realisation that this has gone far, far beyond simple wanting.

“Silas?”

Panto’s voice seems to come from far, far away, and Silas is quick to put more distance between himself and it, pushing off from a firm, warm chest until he can no longer feel the heat of Panto’s body nor the comforting embrace of his limbs. Until he is alone again, adrift in the cool, dark sea of untamed hillside grass, untethered, untouched.

Drowning.

“Silas- Silas, look at me!”

Silas shakes his head, scrambles to his feet. He can feel the panic overtaking, filling his lungs like icy seawater and he can scarcely breathe, let alone speak. He stands to the sound of Panto’s muffled voice, humming under the rush of blood in his own ears and the-

Crunch.

He looks down, and for a second the world falls deathly silent. Silas lifts his foot, but the delicate stems of the forever roses remain a crumpled shambles, snapped in twain and strewn incriminatingly across his own boot print in the grass, petals gleaming black as blood in the moonlight.

The tears come unbidden with the tremble in his hands.

“Silas, please look at me…”

When he slowly, sluggishly does as requested, his heart buckles anew to see the fear, the worry, the earnest and soul-deep caring on Panto’s face.
“Silas, it’s alright,” Panto says, distant and deadened, as if he is speaking underwater. “I’m here for you- please, just sit down, let us talk about-”

Oh, he wants nothing more. What he wouldn’t give to curl up back in Panto’s strong, safe arms and hide, but therein lies the problem; Panto is not safe. Panto should not be safe.

And Silas’ soul should not be crying out for him.

Silas shakes his head, eyes burning and Panto beginning to blur before him behind the mist of unshed tears, and with his last ounce of breath he chokes: “I’m s-sorry…”

And with his last ounce of strength, he flees.

“Silas! Silas!”

He pays the call no heed. He cannot afford to; if he lets his sentiment, his weakness get the better of him, it could ruin everything. Everything he has ever known, his family name, gone, renounced in the blink of an eye. It would be devastating. It would be quick.

And easy, easy as breathing.

So he runs; away from the choice, away from temptation he knows he is too weak to resist, away from pleading voices and broken roses.

His tears flow freely as the babbling brook.

Chapter End Notes

Comments are the petals on my forever roses <3
Another familiar face this chapter- one I'm *very* excited about, and I hope you will be too <3 But also our first real foray into some proper Dirk and Todd angst, so brace yourself!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Time seems to stand still within the electric depths; set aside from the ice and snow, from the light of the sun and the gaze of the Moon, crawling with its own intrinsic, mystic power, it is as if reality has a weakened hold upon the place. Traversing the cave system feels like exploring another world, or a time long since gone.

Shivering at the darting jolt of a nearby static tongue, Dirk squeezes Theodore’s hand tighter, clinging to his only familiarity in this alarming alien warren. “How far down are we, do you suppose?”

Theodore shoots him a grimace over his shoulder, lifting his hand to indicate a step in the floor as he carefully descends it. “Probably better not to think about it.”

“I daresay you have a point,” Dirk grumbles, following gingerly in his footsteps. “Although it hardly fills me with confidence.”

“At least these caves seem stable,” says Theodore, tapping his boomerang against the wall in demonstration and receiving a strong, healthy echo of solid stone in response. “And aerated, so we’re not going to get crushed and suffocated any time soon.”

“Oh, what a relief,” says Dirk dryly. Theodore’s serious face briefly breaks into an impertinent little smile, and Dirk bats at his shoulder and huffs in retribution. “Oh, put that away, you little terror.”

“Just looking on the bright side, My Lord,” says Theodore like the little smart alec he is. “Isn’t that what you’re always telling me to do?”

“Well, you’ve picked a smashing time to develop a sense of optimism,” Dirk mutters, before yelping and flinching away from another brazen lightning tendril. “Jeepers creepers!”

Theodore, dropping his little bit, mutters some profanities and hauls Dirk closer to his side, giving him a quick once-over for injuries. “Surprised this place hasn’t fried us…”

“Is it… likely to?” asks Dirk, in a somewhat higher voice than intended.

“Stupefyingly likely.”

“…Actually, I take it back, I prefer the optimism,” says Dirk meekly, clutching his knight’s arm. “Let us bring that back, please.”

“It would be… quick?” Theodore offers. After a pause and some expressive scrunching of his
brows, he appends: “Probably.”

“Tremendous. Well, that’s quite enough encouragement for one day.”

Theodore snorts, but thankfully allows the moment to pass and silence to fall. In a manner of speaking; the cave can never fall truly silent, given the wriggling, writhing, hissing coils of blue electricity crowding the walls like creepy crawlies, the crackles filling the empty spaces between Dirk and Theodore’s echoing footfalls. The more Dirk observes the skittish lightning tongues in their perpetual dance, the more convinced he becomes that they are alive, in some respect, and keeping a wary eye on the interlopers in their nest. But the thought does little to calm Dirk’s already heightened nerves, so he resolutely dismisses it as a trick of the mind. Sometimes, having an active imagination is a most undesirable trait; there is little more detrimental to peace of mind than the mind itself.

“Moon, how many miles have we walked?” Dirk groans, distracting himself with the mindless comfort of complaining. “My legs hurt.”

“At least a dozen, I guess,” Theodore answers absently, peering suspiciously at a rocky overhang as they pass under it. “But probably more. If I could see the sky maybe I could actually take a wild guess at how long we’ve been going…”

Dirk huffs. “I’m afraid your guess is as good as mine.” Theodore gives him a look. Dirk rolls his eyes. “Yes, alright, probably better.”

Theodore’s lips quirk in amusement as he turns his attention once more to the winding path ahead. “Well, it’s probably going to get dark out soon. We’ll stop and rest next time we find a good spot.”

Stomach grumbling in support of that idea, Dirk nods his assent. Some hours (minutes? Days? Who knows?) ago they had happened upon a chamber, wide enough that they could sit in the middle with minimal risk of shocks from the walls—fortunately for them, the electricity politely refrains from spreading to the floors. They had stayed a little while, to rest their legs and pick at their food and water supplies from the Bofuki Napoo, but Dirk had readily agreed when Theodore suggested they continue; he had no desire to lurk in the claustrophobic tomb any longer than necessary. Besides, he had to avoid polishing off the rather delicious s’moreberries in one sitting somehow. His stomach, however, remains wildly aware of their existence, and with his aching feet joining the revolt he believes another stop shall soon become a matter of necessity. “Perhaps there’ll be another past that next turning?” he suggests hopefully.

Theodore, rather than pointing out how horrendously unlikely that is, smiles and offers a non-committal: “Yeah, maybe,” understanding as he does that this is all Dirk needs to hear. Just one more turn. And then another. Every time, just one more. It is a child’s trick, but fortunately hungry tummies and achy muscles are dummies—and Theodore is anything but. Most of the time.

Dirk, sighing, nudges his face into Theodore’s hair and inhales. Woodsy, earthy. Just a teensy bit singed from the electricity, but still familiar. Solid. “Nearly there…” he mumbles.

His knight, nodding slightly and tickling Dirk’s nose with his hair, agrees softly. “Nearly there.”

It is only when they round that famous next corner and the path widens out into a broad, sloping funnel, that Dirk realises that they actually are.

“Theodore?” he whispers, clutching him tight as they take in the new space. It could just be another random formation, of course, but something feels different about this one. Important. Call it a hunch, but… well, Dirk has learned the hard way to always trust a hunch. Particularly his own—and, on occasion, Theodore’s.
“I know,” Theodore agrees under his breath, raising his boomerang. “Hold onto me.”

Dirk is only too happy to oblige. “Do you think the witch-?”

“Shh,” says Theodore, squeezing his hand.

Since his knight hasn’t got a free hand to accompany that command with a dismissive wave or finger to his lips, Dirk grudgingly lets him off the hook for the rudeness and does as he is told. Soon the only sounds in the cave are the whisper of their breaths, and the crackle of the ambiguously conscious lightning worms.

And, distantly, the hurried, ceaseless *scratch-scratch* of something scraping, scribbling upon a hard, rough surface.

Dirk and Theodore share a look, and a nod, and then a tentative step towards the source. And another. On and on, *just one more* until they are approaching the funnel’s widest point and the sound is clear as day. Scribbling, *definitely* scribbling. Which is certainly better than all the images of sharpening claws and gnawing teeth that Dirk’s all-too-vivid imagination had been supplying him with, but *does* send that imagination reeling back to bygone times instead; to Madam Frootmig’s blackboard, and hands busy folding a secret note into a crooked paper bird to fling at the reclusive, babyfaced Theodore while their tutor’s back was turned. Oh, simpler times...

Dirk looks to his knight now, mouthing a bewildered ‘chalk?’ at him and receiving a confused nod in return. Unsure quite what to do with this information, Dirk simply presses a finger to his lips; he knows not who or what is scribbling now, but knows from experience that talking over a teacher’s scribbling is tantamount to classroom treason.

Theodore, in full agreement, nods and ushers them a step closer, until they reach what appears to be the end of the passage, shrouded in a strange curtain not dissimilar to Wakti’s bead and cloth concoction- although on further inspection, it appears to be largely comprised of thin, flexible roots jutting directly, impossibly from the rocky ceiling. Sharing a glance, Dirk and Theodore huddle close, and with one hand each carefully part the veil.

Whereupon Dirk, promptly, almost gives them away with an audible gasp.

The stone funnel, already vast by the standards of the cave system, utterly *pales* in comparison to the cavernous space beyond the natural curtain. Domed at the top and bottom in an almost perfect sphere, the cavern rises steeply up and drops sharply down from where they are standing- another careless step through the roots and they would have toppled right in. Dirk wagers that the cavern would have been indistinguishable from further back in the tunnel even without the addition of the curtain, given the vastly increased density of the writhing electricity, clouding shapes and drowning out any defining shadows. Even now, standing right on the precipice, it is difficult to make out forms within the space amongst the crawling, crackling tongues. But it becomes easier, with blinking and prolonged exposure, to pick out outlines. The cave, as it turns out, is not just an open space but is criss-crossed with stone walkways and winding stairs, as well as the occasional platform or subsidiary burrow hugging the curving walls. At the top, presiding over all, hangs a wide platform like a small floating island, of which they can only make out the craggy underbelly. At the bottom, far, *far* beneath their feet, the energy swirls and coalesces into a blinding vortex, lapping against the confines of the cavern walls like a captured whirlpool.

And in the middle, suspended perfectly between the two on a scaffold of twisting rock, hangs a small island upon which stands a tall, granite blackboard. Standing before it, back turned to the cave mouth and arm scribbling in a blur of untiring motion, a slender figure clad in sackcloth, leather and a woven hood.
Glancing at Theodore again, Dirk falters. He feels they should announce themselves, but it seems rude to interrupt. Besides, for all they know this person, or thing, could be dangerous; perhaps they would be better off retreating to the tunnels a while, considering the best approach-

YOU GUYS GONNA STOP JUST STANDING THERE, OR WHAT?

Blast.

“Ah,” Dirk fumbles, glancing worrily between the figure and Theodore’s wary face. “We, um. Wouldn’t want to intrude…”

TOO LATE- I CAN HEAR YOU GUYS THINKING FROM HERE.

The voice is not necessarily loud, but it is unignorable- it seems, despite supposedly originating from a person a good fifty feet away, to be pressed right up against his ear drum, possibly even inside his own brain. Which only makes its previous statement all the more worrying. “You can…?”

FIGURE OF SPEECH, DWEEB, the figure snorts- or at least, he thinks it’s a snort. But considering the voice is something more of a strange, echoey jumble of a thousand voices, it isn’t necessarily easy to tell. BUT SERIOUSLY. YOU’RE ALL ANXIOUS AND IT FEELS GROSS.

“Um… Sorry?”

SAY YOU’RE SORRY BY COMING OR GOING, DORK- I CAN’T CONCENTRATE WITH YOU LURKING LIKE THAT. The figure briefly lowers their head, voice spilling forth in a cacophony of whispers, quiet in tone but deafening in volume. TOO MANY POSSIBILITIES…

“Ah. Well, um.” Dirk looks to Theodore, shrugging. “Shall we?”

Theodore, taut as a bowstring, gives a cautious nod and casts his gaze around for the best route.

“Okay. But stay behind me.”

“No arguments here.”

Holding Theodore’s hand tight, Dirk carefully follows him onto one of the wider stone walkways leading to the island, and looks down. Oh, flipping heck, that is a long way down- a long fall to a possibly very shocky landing in whatever that vortex is.

“Don’t look down,” Theodore advises.

“Oh, excellent- where was that little nugget thirty seconds ago?” Dirk snaps, clinging tight to Theodore lest his sudden vertigo unbalance him.

Theodore, rather insensitively, rolls his eyes. “We were on a giant’s head yesterday, it’s just like that.”

“No, we had a lovely canopy of trees to fall into, then,” Dirk argues, putting his sandalled foot down and finding himself wishing now of all times that he had kept those infernal boots. “I’d much rather that than jagged rocks and some sort of horrifying electric maw.”

“Dirk,” mutters Theodore. “Come on- those trees would have snapped your neck every bit as easy as a rock can.”

“So comforting,” Dirk hisses, pinching Theodore’s ear.

JEEZ, DO YOU GUYS EVER JUST STOP?
Dirk looks up guiltily and realises to his pleasant surprise that they are much closer to the island than anticipated. That is the good news—the bad news is that the island’s inhabitant has now finally turned from the blackboard, and is facing them with annoyance written all across their face. And it is a striking face; female, he assumes (though he is prepared to be corrected), round and pretty, translucent skin etched through with veins of blue like the lightning that surrounds her, a harsh jet-black slash of fringe framing eyes as round and white as pearls, with curiously broad, misshapen pupils. Like three ink splashes in milk, bleeding into one another in a strange conglomerate, tiny black islands much like the one she stands on. Actually, exactly like the one she stands on; it is difficult to make out from the same level but it seems, unless Dirk is very much mistaken, to bear a similar three-splotch shape to the woman’s curious pupils. The whole set-up is, to put it mildly, rather odd.

"Do forgive our intrusion, good lady," says Dirk politely, clinging to Theodore as they traverse the final stretch of pathway to stand upon the island, heart hammering in anxious anticipation. Does he dare hope…? "But we seek a witch, to aid us with a matter of the utmost importance. You… wouldn’t happen to be the Witchykookoo of the Whispers, would you?”

She watches him a second, but those staring eyes seem to skate right past at any opportunity, as if finding countless more interesting things to watch in the space around his head. MAYBE, she says unhelpfully—and her mouth, it seems, does move with the words, even though they still sound like they’re coming from inside Dirk’s own head. She turns back to the blackboard to resume scribbling before he can inspect the phenomenon any closer. THAT SOUNDS LIKE SOMETHING THEY WOULD CALL ME. Not the most confidence-inspiring response, but he’ll take it. “Fantastic—we’ve been travelling for days looking for—”

I KNOW. Dirk hesitates, wrong-footed. “You… know?”

The witchykookoo gestures with her free hand to a corner of the board, to a small clump of equations. Though the entire board is covered in numbers and symbols that may as well be interchangeable to Dirk, it is easy enough to differentiate between groups of separate workings by virtue of them being written from different angles, in different speeds and sizes and slotted together like a slapdash mathematical patchwork. THAT’S YOU. FORTY-TWO TO ONE THAT YOU’D SHOW. EIGHTY TO ONE THAT YOU’D BOTH DIE TRYING. NINETY-SIX TO ONE THAT JUST THE LITTLE GUY BIT IT.

“Hey!” Theodore protests, looking rather pale.

I DON’T MAKE THE MATH, DUMBO, says the witch, scribbling away as if they aren’t even there, as if speaking simultaneously does nothing to impede her flow. I JUST WRITE IT DOWN TO SHUT IT UP.

“Shut it… you mean, these aren’t yours?” asks Dirk, bewildered. He is certainly no expert, but complex mathematical equations seem like the sort of thing one might need to give some conscious thought, not just fling around like heart-shaped doodles on school parchment.

NO WAY—I’M NO GEEK, the witch pseudo-snorts again, just as she scrawls out a formula that makes Dirk’s brain hurt. I JUST WRITE WHAT THEY TELL ME TO WRITE.
Dirk nods, slowly. “And by ‘they’, you mean…?”

She slashes a decisive line under her latest work, and starts anew beneath it. THE UNIVERSE, she says, simply, as if she’s talking about the weather. I’M ATTUNED TO ITS ENERGY.

“Its… the energy of the universe?” says Theodore, incredulous.

YES, she says icily, turning round to brandish her chalk at the knight threateningly. ALL OF IT- SO QUIT BUMMING OUT MY CAVE WITH YOUR BAD VIBES, I CAN’T HEAR SQUAT.

Theodore, chastened and affronted, crosses his arms with a huff and takes a step back from her space. Dirk, however, is growing more intrigued by the minute. “You can… hear it?”

IT WHISPERS TO ME, she murmurs, pushing her hood down and tucking back her flowing raven hair. Two long, pointed ears quiver delicately on either side of her head- similar in shape to Theodore’s, but twice as large and thin as lily petals. Actually, she does rather remind him of Theodore; all small and fiery with the black hair and big eyes. They would probably get along famously, if this peculiar waifish girl hadn’t taken such an unfortunate dislike to him. MY EAR IS PRESSED TO THE BEATING HEART OF REALITY, AND LET ME TELL YOU; IT IS NOT DOING SO HOT RIGHT NOW.

“What do you mean?” Dirk breathes, stepping closer and peering at the board. It is all gibberish to him, of course, but he can’t help but feel a certain… something when he looks at it. Something older than memories of tyrannical tutors and paper birds, much older.

IT’S… GAH! she yells, startling Dirk with her abruptness as she wheels round and slams the chalk so forcefully into the board that the little white stick snaps in two. IT’S ALL WRONG! She whirs on the two of them, eyes wild- literally wild, her inkblot pupils appear to be splitting off into smaller fractals with her mounting frustration. SOMETHING IS WRONG AND I CAN’T- I DON’T KNOW- ARGHHH!

“Woah, okay, take it easy,” says Theodore, quickly putting himself between Dirk and the furious witch. “Let’s all just slow down and-”

A growl, deep and fierce and raw as the electricity on the walls, cuts him short.

“Um,” says Dirk, glancing worriedly at Theodore and then back to the witch. “Don’t suppose that was you, was it?”

But the witch’s already limited patience appears to have run out for them. YOU GUYS BETTER SKEDADDLE, she says dispassionately, conjuring a new chalk from somewhere in her clothes and doggedly returning to the board. THE BOYS GET PRETTY ANTSY AROUND STRANGERS.


Awooooooo00000000000000!

The howl jolts like an electric current down Dirk’s spine, terror igniting his very blood. He is abruptly possessed of the overwhelming instinct to flee, and is barely saved from tripping right off the edge of the island in his haste by Theodore’s iron grip on his toga. “Todd- we have to go!”

“But this is what we came here for!” says Theodore through gritted teeth, boomerang poised and eyes scanning the cavern for threats.

Dirk whimpers, but stands firm by Theodore’s side. He hasn’t clung to him this long just to leave
him behind not. “What is that?!”

Another howl sounds; and this time one, two, three more join the fray.

Theodore gulps, and plants his feet. “Trouble.” He squeezes Dirk’s hand, but does not risk looking at him. “If this goes sideways, run and don’t look back.”

Dirk shakes his head frantically. “Absolutely not- not without you.”

“Dirk-”

Another growl sounds, so close that it tingles on the back of Dirk’s neck. He stiffens, heart in his throat, and feels the radiating tension as Theodore does likewise. Sharing a wide-eyed look and a moment of silent understanding, they turn as one to the sound.

“Flipping…” Dirk breathes.


The hulking, crackling mass of blue energy shaped like a wolf says nothing, and simply growls low in its throat menacingly. The great, shaggy muzzle hanging at easy eye level with Theodore bares its teeth, and something tells Dirk that a bite from those would do considerably more than sting a bit. Such a beast won’t need anything as common and corporeal as claws or jaws to make its mark. Whimpering, Dirk clutches Theodore’s hand for dear life as the creature regards them with red eyes; real-looking, human eyes, set improbably into its incandescent face and sizing the two of them up for supper.

TOLD YOU TO SKEDADDLE, the witchykookoo mutters, still scribbling.

Snarling, the beast exposes its blue gums in threat, and Dirk tugs desperately on Theodore’s hand. “What do we do? Todd, Todd, what do we do?!”

“I- I don’t know!”

A chorus of yips and yowls and growls join in, and quick as a flash there they are; the entire pack. Three more wolves of varying sizes and temperaments, all hissing like condensed electrical storms, all circling Dirk and Theodore like sharks. The tallest one, static coat shining lighter in a patch around its right eye, springs back and forth in wary play-pounces, snapping at their heels. The stockiest watches, patient yet twitchy, from afar. The smallest- a lean creature with huge pup feet and a ruff of wild fur following its spine- darts around, yipping in excitement and sniffing at them. It seems to be altogether the least intimidating of the lot, but that doesn’t mean Dirk wants it crowding him. The first wolf- presumably the leader, with a ruff similar to the pup’s and vaguely oval patterns around its eyes, continues to observe them with mistrust and a barely contained desire to pounce.

“Um… n-nice doggy?” Dirk attempts. The snap of teeth he receives tells him how well that went down.

“Hey, back off!” Theodore snaps back, pushing Dirk behind his back and facing off against the creature, as if he fully intends to start a territorial scuffle with a monstrous being of pure energy. “Pick on someone your own size!”

Dirk has no time to comment on his bravery, his stupidity or his inaccuracy before a small jolt of static stings his fingertips. He looks down to find the cub nosing at his hand, a look of intense concentration on its fizzing face. “H-hello,” Dirk stammers, standing perfectly still and hoping it doesn’t mistake his fingers for tasty sausages.
The cub investigates him avidly, sending little shocks through him at every bump of its snout. Before Dirk knows what’s happening the tall wolf is joining in, sniffing at his shoulder, and the stocky one at his legs. Even the pack leader, previously engrossed in its little snarling match with Theodore, seems to be eyeing Dirk with curiosity, which makes him feel incredibly uncomfortable.

“Todd,” he hisses, eyes darting anxiously between his observers. “They’re all… looking at me.”

Theodore takes stock of the creatures, brow furrowed and fingers clenched around the boomerang for all the good that does them. “Maybe… maybe it’s your glow again?”

“M-maybe- do they think I’m one of them?” says Dirk, panic elevating. “Oh, sweet Moon- do not let them take me, Theodore, I would be a terrible wolfchild, I’m accustomed to a certain standard of living, I don’t think I could-”

WHAT ARE YOU?

The witch’s voice startles him out of his spiral. Realising he has quite forgotten her presence in the kerfuffle, Dirk turns (carefully) towards her, and finds her writing hand stilled and her inkblot eyes trained on him. “P-pardon?”

WHAT. ARE. YOU? she repeats, slowly, each word punctuated with a step closer. WHY HAVEN’T MY BOYS RIPPED YOU TO SHREDS?

“I don’t know but I’d rather not jinx it,” Dirk squeaks, shuddering at another zap from the stocky wolf.

Watching warily, the witchykookoo wrinkles her nose as if Dirk has personally offended her by not being ripped to shreds. She advances on him, inscrutable eyes searching, practically scouring the flesh from his bones with her gaze, unconcerned with Theodore’s defensive advance; which, eerily, she halts with a wave of her hand.

Staring at his knight- who stands rooted to the spot, still as a statue, protective rage frozen on his face and eyes unmoving- Dirk feels his heart drop. “Please don’t hurt him,” he blurts, forgetting for the time being about the wolves.

CHILL. HE’S FINE, she grunts, stepping past the petrified elf to stand before Dirk and peer into his eyes with that penetrating gaze. The wolves immediately flock to her, their playful nuzzles seemingly holding no ill effect on her blue-tinged skin. She scans Dirk once, twice, eyes narrowing. WHY DID YOU COME HERE?

“I- I need help,” he says, fidgeting as the leader wolf bares its teeth. “With my father- he means to marry me off against my will and I-”

NO.

Dirk blinks. “Ah. No, what?”

THAT’S NOT WHY YOU’RE HERE, she says, squinting suspiciously. IT CAN’T BE. YOU’RE… IMPORTANT, SOMEHOW. NO OFFENCE BUT MY BOYS WOULDN’T SPARE YOU OVER YOUR DUMB FAMILY DRAMA.

He bristles. “Excuse me, it is not-”

I HAVE YOUR ANSWERS.
He snaps his mouth shut. The witch smirks, absently petting the head of the tall wolf.

**OH YEAH. I'VE GOT ANSWERS. BUT YOU’RE ASKING THE WRONG QUESTIONS.** She clicks her tongue and the wolves come to heel. **YOU WANT THE TRUTH? FOLLOW ME- BUT YOU MIGHT NOT LIKE WHAT YOU SEE.**

Leader wolf growls, and the witchykookoo pets its head before clambering onto its back. *How* she manages to sit astride the creature without falling through or getting fried is anyone’s guess, but Dirk hasn’t a chance to question it before the witch and the wolf are off, bounding towards the back of the island, the pack yapping at their heels. Dirk watches, rattled and baffled, as they make short work of a narrow spiral staircase of twisted stone, disappearing quick as a flash onto the topmost island without so much as a ‘by-your-leave’.

And Theodore, released from his binding spell, promptly stumbles into Dirk’s arms.

“**Todd!**” Dirk breathes, fussing with his knight’s rumpled tunic. “Are you alright?”

“W-where are they?” Theodore demands, still valiantly waving his boomerang.

“Upstairs,” says Dirk, gesturing to the underside of the floating island above their heads. “And supposedly, so are the answers to our prayers.”

Theodore looks at him, prudently dubious. “**Seriously?**”

“**Apparently,**” says Dirk, tucking a stray hair back from his knight’s scrunchy forehead. “And she hardly has any reason to lie- she and her little *band* have had every opportunity to kill us already.”

Theodore, though clearly in agreement, does not appear to like it. “I don’t like it.”

“Me neither,” Dirk agrees with a grimace. “But I don’t fancy leaving empty-handed, either.”

Giving him a searching once-over, Theodore sighs and sheathes his boomerang. “We have to go up there, don’t we.”

“Well, *I* certainly do,” says Dirk, patting his knight’s shoulders and taking a step back. “You might as well wait here. I won’t be a-”

“Dirk,” says Theodore, voice flat and eyes fond.

“I’m just saying-”

“Dirk, I am not leaving your side until this is all over,” says Theodore firmly, reaching out to capture Dirk’s hand in his own. “I made a promise; you’re not doing this alone.”

Oh, Dirk could just kiss him. ...Actually, he *could* just kiss him.

“**Dirk!**” Theodore chuckles against his lips, shoving lightly on his chest. “**Seriously?**”

“So sorry. Couldn’t resist,” says Dirk, utterly unrepentant and not much caring who knows it.

Though he rolls his eyes, Theodore *does* swoop in with a small, dry kiss of his own before putting his grave face back on. “Come on. Let’s go fix this dumb mess once and for all.”

Dirk looks at his determined little knight, really drinks him in a moment. Allows himself to imagine
flowers in his hair, a ring on his finger. Takes a moment to remind himself just what is at stake.

“Yes,” he says, taking his love’s left hand and tracing the spot he’ll one day adorn in the finest diamond. “Let’s.”

Getting Dirk up the stairs is, without question, one of the most harrowing experiences of Theodore’s life so far. A man of the prince’s limited physicality has no business whatsoever being on a steep, narrow, uneven spiral staircase; even less so when the man is wearing impractical flashy sandals and the staircase is suspended above a mysterious twisting vortex.

And to think Theodore used to worry about the idiot taking a tumble off a darn jumping frog.

“Honestly, Todd, I am fine,” Dirk whines, carefully taking the next step. “There is really no need to coddle me.”

“I’m not coddling you,” argues Theodore, somewhat unconvincingly with his hands clasped tightly around his prince’s waist for balance from two steps behind. “I’m just… being helpful.”

“Hmph,” returns the prince, unconvinced. “Well. Perhaps you should put your hands a little lower,” he suggests, wiggling his behind with an undeniable smirk in his voice. “Make yourself really useful.”

At least Dirk can’t see Theodore’s blush from there. “Shut up,” he grumbles, staunchly pretending the idea hasn’t already occurred to him several times in the last few minutes; just as he pretends he isn’t seeing a lot of distracting stuff under Dirk’s toga at this angle. Those leather leggings are… shapely.

“If you’re going to hover about me like a hummingbird, Theodore, we may as well both get something out of it.”

“You’re impossible.”

Dirk gives him a sunny smile over his shoulder, voice lilting. “Yes- I’ve heard that before.”

Theodore’s foolish heart hops in his chest. He resolves to give it a piece of his mind later, when they’re standing in a less precarious position. “Just… shut up and let’s get this over with.”

The prince, thankfully, does not tease him further- it’s hard to talk when one is picking one’s way up a bannisterless flight of stairs the approximate width of a brellabramble, with one’s tongue stuck out in concentration. Theodore might have teased him about the tongue, but truth be told he is in full support of anything that keeps Dirk alive and quiet. With his full attention (however limited that may be) on the task, it is not long before they reach the top of the staircase, Dirk setting a securing hand on the floating island as he steps within reach. Not for the first time, Theodore wishes he had gone up first to get a lay of the land and assess for threats, but between that and making sure his clutzy charge didn’t plummet to his doom… it’s a tricky one, but he thinks he made the right choice. He hopes he did.

“Oh, my…” Dirk breathes, sounding pleasantly wonderstruck. 

Definitely the right choice.

His prince glances over his shoulder to stick his royal tongue out at Theodore childishly, but continues his ascent shortly after. It isn’t long before he has both feet on solid rock, and Theodore himself gets his head above the new ground level- and an eyeful of just what has Dirk so impressed.

“Whoah.” He hauls himself up the final steps without looking as he takes in the sight before him.

The upper island is, in some ways, reminiscent of Wakti Wapnasi’s shell den. A compact, sheltered space, domed around a shallow central pool. The dome, however, is a swirling interlocked cage of fossilised copperwood tree roots- not unlike those at the mouth of the cavern but older, much older- protruding from the apex of the cavern, fizzling with electricity like a thundercloud. Or perhaps a great, monstrous jellyfish; beautiful and strange and deadly in equal measure. Beneath a central knot of gnarled roots lies a pond, similar to Wakti’s, but glowing blue much like the surrounding energy- though it is clear that the light is its own and not mere reflection. Glancing at Dirk to check on him, Theodore notices that blue playing on his yellow sunshine glimmer, dappling his skin and the surrounding space in vivid greens.

Following his gaze curiously, Dirk laughs. “Look, Theodore! We match!”

YOU CAN SAY THAT AGAIN.

The voice of the witchykookoo takes them both by surprise- stupidly enough, Theodore had almost forgotten she was there. He looks away from Dirk to find her perched on the edge of the pool, one of the electric wolves- the tallest one- curled up in front of her legs as she pets its luminous fur. The others have taken up residence around the pool, scattered and observant in a similar fashion to the Santi Santigo, keeping a crackling, growling vigil over their master and guests.

GOOD CHOICE COMING UP HERE, she says, echoed voice playing among the static noise of the twisted canopy above her head. BUT THE HARDEST PART IS YET TO COME.

“What is this place?” asks Theodore, eyeing her warily with a hand on Dirk’s shoulder; for the prince’s stability, as well as his own peace of mind.

She smirks, spreading her arms wide. WELCOME TO THE POOL OF CLARITY, DUDE.

“She… um, alright,” says Dirk. “And what is it… for?”

WHAT DOES IT SOUND LIKE, DUMMY? the witch chuckles, skimming her wiry fingers across the water’s surface. THIS IS THE PUREST WATER IN ALL OF WENDIMoor- THE PUREST IN THE Universe. THIS WATER IS CLEAR, UNTAINTED. THIS WATER CAN WASH AWAY ANYTHING; FROM THE BLOOD ON YOUR HANDS TO THE CLOUDS IN YOUR JUDGEMENT. SUBMERGE YOURSELF IN THE POOL, Dirk Gently- AND YOUR TRUTH WILL BE CLEAR AS DAY.

“But- but I know the truth,” says Dirk, shaking his head. “That isn’t the problem- I know my reality, what I need to find is a way out of it.”

YOU KNOW A REALITY, counters the witch, lifting her hand to allow the water to trickle through in shimmering rivulets like cascading diamonds, sparkling in the electric glow. LIKE I SAID, I CAN’T GIVE YOU ANSWERS; NOT UNTIL YOU ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS. AND TO ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS, YOU NEED THE FULL PICTURE. AND TO DO THAT- she smirks and tilts her head, long raven hair dancing above the water’s surface- YOU ARE GOING TO HAVE TO WASH AWAY SOME PRECONCEPTIONS. THAT, I CAN HELP
“Hop in’?” Theodore repeats, incredulous.

She nods, simultaneously solemn and snarky. HOP IN.

“Hop in… to the scary mystery pool?” says Dirk, face white in worry.

AFRAID SO.

“Right,” Dirk gulps. “And this is my only possible course of action, is it?”

THERE IS ALWAYS ANOTHER COURSE OF ACTION, YOUR HIGHNESS, she says, somehow making the title sound even more sarcastic than Theodore does. He doesn’t know whether to be offended on behalf of his prince, or impressed by the feat. YOURS, I THINK YOU’LL FIND, INVOLVES TURNING BACK, GOING HOME, AND WINDING UP RIGHT BACK WHERE YOU STARTED.

Dirk nods slowly, looking pained. “So… what are the odds of me taking that course?”

A HUNDRED AND NINETY-SEVEN TO ONE, she says, regarding him speculatively. AND RISING.

“Oh,” he says, seemingly both scared and pleasantly surprised. “Well. Seems I’m braver than I thought.”

YES, THAT’S ONE EXPLANATION, she says, eyes turning to Theodore with a knowing smile that makes his skin crawl.

“Well,” Dirk chirps, taking a shaky inhale and then a step forward. “I suppose there’s no time like the-”

“No.”

Theodore’s own voice ringing out is as much a surprise to himself as it is to Dirk. “Todd…?”

“No,” Theodore repeats, the word- and his plan- solidifying in his mind and stomach like a stone. “No, you’re not going in there.” Is this happening? Yes, yes it is. “I am.”

Dirk’s alarm is as vocal as it is immediate. “What? No!”

THERE IT IS… the witch mutters, nodding sagely as if this is the outcome she expected all along. Which, he guesses, it was. Darn it.

“Sir Brotz, that is out of the question,” Dirk proclaims, light surging in his determination. “Besides, if it’s me that has to see something, I’m sure it wouldn’t even-”

OH, IT WILL WORK, the witch interjects, looking between the two of them with growing understanding. YOUR TRUTHS ARE ENTWINED.

“See? Entwined truths, exactly,” Theodore agrees- not really understanding but happy to use it in his favour.

“Theodore, you are not-”

“My Lord.”
There is no teasing in his voice, now, he makes sure of it. No flirtation in the formal address. It tastes strange on his tongue, but it convinces Dirk to listen—albeit with heavy breaths and a jaw set in a hard line of denial.

Hoping against hope that he can match and magnify that denial with determination, Theodore puts his hands on Dirk’s shoulders and speaks clearly, directly to his face, choosing his words with care. “My Lord,” he repeats, voice softening the title. “It is my sworn duty as your knight to protect you from harm; and my choice as your friend. We don’t know what could happen in there, and I won’t let you walk blindly into what could just be a sneaky witchykookoo’s trap—er, no offence.”

NONE TAKEN, the witch shrugs, petting the tall wolf’s crackling flank absentely. PROBABLY SMART.

“Even if it isn’t that, we don’t know what effects this could have,” Theodore reasons. “And I’m not going to let you take that risk.”

“And why should I let you take it?” Dirk argues, stubborn as a mire mule.

“Because it’s my job.” Theodore gulps dryly, and takes Dirk’s face in his hands. “And because I’ll do whatever it takes to keep you safe.”

Dirk inhales sharply, and after a moment’s hesitation covers Theodore’s hand with his own. “You do not play fair, Sir Brotz,” he murmurs, beautiful blue eyes wide and shining.

“Neither do you,” says Theodore softly, tracing under those eyes with his thumbs.

“I…” Dirk falters, finding his words and his breath. “But I want to keep you safe…”

Theodore smiles through his breaking heart. Selfless idiot. “How about I keep you safe…”

Dirk smiles at him, sad and fond. “Bit late for that, isn’t it?”

Sharing a laugh, Theodore rests his forehead briefly against his prince’s shaking chest, drawing comfort as warm arms wrap around his shoulders. Tucked up against Dirk’s fluttering heart, it is so very easy to swear himself to its safeguarding. So easy to lay his life on the line for it, each and every time the need arises. So very, very easy to love his prince; wholly, fiercely, unconditionally.

And too easy—far too easy— to imagine that Dirk returns his devotion.

But that is not what this it about. It never was. This is about Dirk; what will make him happy, make him free. And if Theodore has to dive headfirst into a wacky mystery pond to find it, then so be it.

This may be Dirk’s quest, but it is Theodore’s pledge.

He pushes back, reluctant to leave the sanctuary of his prince’s arms but knowing that he must. This is what they came her for, and he can’t back down now, not when the end is within reach. “Dirk,” he says, smoothing down the soft golden silk over his lord’s chest. “I’ll be okay. I promise.”

Dirk meets his gaze, eyes wide and worried, and slowly raises his right hand, curling all fingers but the littlest into his palm. “Pinky swear?”

Theodore smiles, and reciprocates. “Pinky swear”
“Cross your heart?”

Right hand still locked with Dirk’s, Theodore traces the promise on his own chest with his left. “Cross my heart,” he vows, unswerving.

Breathing out raggedly, Dirk finally nods his assent. “Very well,” he says, quietly begrudging. He draws Theodore in tight by their linked hands, until they stand forehead to forehead, and closes his eyes. “But if you die,” he says, reaching up to squeeze Theodore’s shoulder. “I shall… dismiss you.”

Theodore snorts. “You’ve been saying that for twenty five years.”

“Yes, but I am deathly serious this time,” says Dirk, opening his eyes to meet Todd’s in earnest. “So you had jolly well better take care, mister.”

“I will,” Theodore replies easily, releasing his prince’s hand with reluctance. “I swear.”

GUYS, comes the withering voice of the witchykookoo. IT’S LITERALLY A BATH. ARE YOU DONE WITH THE TEARFUL FAREWELLS, OR…?

“Oh, buzz off,” grumbles Theodore.

“Respectfully, miss Witch!” Dirk chimes in, waving at her nervously.

In a gesture that feels eerily familiar, she snorts and crosses her arms. DORKS.

Theodore chuckles uncertainly, shaking his head. “Somehow, this still isn’t the weirdest thing that’s happened to us.”

Dirk mirrors his laugh. “Yet. Oh!” He pulls back abruptly, leaving Theodore confused and alone a moment as he reaches down. “Almost forgot…”

“Dirk, what are you-”

Riiiiiiiiiiippp

Startled, Theodore watches Dirk tear a long strip from the hem of his toga, leaving the garment- one of his favourites- with a raw, ragged edge a fair distance above his knee. “What the-?”

“Ah, there, that should do it,” says Dirk cheerfully, lifting the long, rough-edged golden bandage up with a satisfied smile. “Arm, please!”

Understanding dawning, Theodore blushes. “Seriously?” he mutters, though he offers his arm nonetheless.

“But of course,” says Dirk, looping the silk around it, just above the elbow. “It’s traditional, is it not? A favour for my faithful knight.” He ties the fabric off with a secure but sloppy bow, patting his handiwork down proudly. “There we go! For good luck.”

Then he takes a hold of both Theodore’s arms and pulls him firmly, decisively, into a kiss that takes his breath away.

“And that,” says Dirk afterwards, with the gentlest peck to Theodore’s nose. “Is to make sure you come back to me.”

As if he would do anything else. As if he could. “I’ll always come back to you,” he rasps, heart pounding.
Dirk smiles, squeezes him tight. “And I’ll always wait for you.”

And for a dizzying, delirious moment, Theodore wholeheartedly believes him.

Drawing strength from that belief, and courage from the lingering taste of Dirk on his tongue, Theodore turns to the witch with determination and a purposeful nod of assent. “I’m ready.”

The witchykookoo stands, eyes black as night, and raises her hands. ABOUT TIME.

And with a curl of her fingers, the ground drops away from beneath Theodore’s feet, and the water rushes to meet him.

FULL DISCLOSURE, comes her voice in his head, echoing apologetically in his skull. THIS MAY STING A LITTLE.

Yeah, he returns, screwing his eyes shut. I kinda figured.

It is his last thought before he hits the water, and the world as he knows it is washed away.

At first there is cool, calming water, gliding across his skin soothing as a salve.

But when the purity of the water begins to sluice the dirt and wear from his skin, the fog from his mind, it turns sharply from balmy to blistering.

Out of Theodore’s throat rips a silent scream, air bubbling forth from his lips as the water fills his lungs. And yet even then, somehow, he continues to breathe, his cries never short of fuel. The water is everywhere, flooding his nose and mouth, belly and chest. It scrubs his body clean, of everything-every spec of grime, every callous and scab. Wounds made fresh burn in the onslaught, raw and open to the stinging force of the onslaught. His skin lies fresh and pink at its mercy, tender as a newborn. Anything superficial, everything that isn’t woven intrinsically into his being is pried loose and washed away with his screams until he can feel every last true inch of himself, scrubbed and scoured into hyperawareness.

And as the veneer upon his body is wrung out and cast away like grime against a washing board, so too is that upon his mind.

Bright eyes, a brighter smile, skin glowing like the sun; a boy, a prince, joyful and curious. “Hello, Theodore!”

He can feel every facet of the memory- feel the way his own childish heart had leapt, the way his words had stuttered. An old, old memory, beaten and scuffed by the sands of time, now clean and restored and vibrant as the day it was made. The memory of the day he first met- and, unbeknownst to himself at the time, fell irrevocably in love with- the sun prince.

“Hiiiiiiiiiiii!”

Theodore startles, the voice cutting across the memory. Across all memories. A voice he knows well, loves well, but shaped and inflected in a way he has never heard before.

A falling bag, an open window, yellow, yellow, bright yellow, a brighter smile.
The image, so foreign and murky and confusing, looms larger, larger, sharpening, superseding even the precious first memory in clarity and intensity, his previous remembered feelings of joy and fascination mingling bitterly with fear, confusion, anger.

“You don’t need to stutter so much, silly- I won’t throw you in the dungeons! Father says I’m not allowed…”

“Do you attack everyone that comes in here? Seems like a weird thing to do, but, live and let live…”

He tosses his head, clamping his hands over his ears, vainly praying that it will stop the memories, stop the twisting, conflicting thoughts tripping over one another. But they flood in regardless, contradicting one another in an endless, ever-tightening spiral of madness.

A gangly prince of sixteen years, tripping over rocks, throwing back his head, laughing, tugging Theodore’s hand, running through the palace gardens, dandelions glinting in his glow.

A trailing white curtain, screams, smoke, two, three loud bangs that make his blood run cold.

“Stop…” Theodore chokes, but the water swallows his words.

He can feel them. Every scenario, some familiar, some not, ringing true to his body, to his heart if not his brain. Dirk in a glittering crown flickers to a strange, artificial animal face perched grotesquely atop his head. Gold fades to yellow- then green, blue, orange, purple, so many colours, shapes and colours, body clad in leather like armour over his delicate heart, but like no armour Theodore has ever known. And through it all that face, that smile anchor him in reality, in truth.

But what is the truth?

“This isn’t real,” he mutters, even around the water in his lungs. Why isn’t he drowning? He should be drowning. Is this what drowning is? “This can’t be real!”

But his body, his soul scream otherwise.

“Have you noticed an acceleration of strangeness in your life?”

“-from the pattern and web of the whole!”

“I’m from a totally different place…”

“-take control of your life, Todd!”

“And then it’ll just… take me somewhere new…”

“-a holistic detective…”


It’s real. It’s all real. He can feel it in his bones, these new memories, they’re not new they’re old-buried, so deep he could never have known.

“Look, I- I’m sorry, but I don’t understand. You’re… What do you want? Why are you here?”

“I’m here because I’m your friend.”

Dirk Gently; his friend. His best friend.
“Besides, I don’t wanna miss out on when the next case starts.”

Theodore cries out as his head stabs, splits at the influx of new-old memories. A life, a whole new life, forced into his mind alongside the old one. Another time, another world. He remembers carriages without horses or birds to pull them, remembers the particularly flashy blue one that Dirk himself drove like a madman. He remembers a magic mirror in the palm of his hand, communications and moving pictures, a strange, incorporeal world at his fingertips. Cars. Phones. Words he never knew, never had reason to say but that settle now comfortably into a familiar part of his brain along with a plethora of others. He remembers family, a sister, a familiar sister, it’s… the witch? Yes, the witch; adorned in black, so much black, and spikes and leather and with black traced around her eyes like elegant warpaint, shoulders weighed down by an inescapable, indefinable pain. With her comes music, music he has never heard the like of in Wendimoor; on his radio, at his fingertips, strings and keys and dials and the turn of a record. And tangled in amongst it all, writhing like snakes, feelings he has never felt so intensely; recollections of a past muddied with mistakes, and a present encumbered with remorse. Cold, loneliness, tobacco and alcohol to numb the pain and guilt, to fill the void. Dark, grey. Quiet, impotent rage. Hopelessness drawn tight around his body like a heavy cape, anger hardening his skin like armour.

And then, there he is. Breaking through the dark like sunlight.

Always him.

Their connection feels… different, here. Not deeper, not lesser, but different. A bond of tentative trust, forged in a crucible of adversity and bizarre happenstance over a short time, too short, but he can still feel that connection burning bright, strong. Their relationship is not what he is used to- he can salvage no memory of kisses, caresses, bare skin and stolen touches but it doesn’t matter because he can still feel it, feel them, the bond between them, different and new and cautious though it may be. Even without that particular dimension in place he can feel the belonging, feel the magnetic pull to be by Dirk’s side. He knows, just knows, that Dirk came out of nowhere and turned his life around. He knows Dirk.

And now… now, god, he knows everything.

Farah Black. He can see her, in his mind’s eye- beautiful, deadly, neurotic Farah Black. She is still there, somewhere in this past life. So is Tina Tevetino, Sherlock Hobbs. They’re in trouble and he can feel it; displaced in time and space, bleeding out on the scorching Bergsberg dirt. And they’re just the beginning; in his gut he can feel the sickening lurch of a reality off-kilter, a universe unchecked and missing one of its most vital pieces. More than one- the wildling, the giant, he can see them, but smaller and less… well, no, okay, really no less weird, but different weird, and they all play a role, too, in this other world. And at the center of it all, there’s Dirk. Stupid, ridiculous, impossible Dirk Gently; the most important puzzle piece. The missing link. The linchpin in reality- in a reality, not the one they occupy now but the one they came from. The real reality.

“My, my, Sir Brotz; if I didn’t know better, I’d say you were being deliberately impudent…”

Which would mean…

A brush of fingertips in the ballroom, a clandestine kiss in the pantry, rumpled bed sheets and lush, shining meadow grass, sun-dappled flowers and whispered praise and acres upon acres of happily glowing skin waiting to be explored.

That none of this…

No. No, it can’t all be… how would that even work? How do you fake an entire life?
Then again, if someone out there can make an entire world—because that’s what this world is, he remembers now. Remembers Dirk’s excited spiel, remembers the way he paced and waved his hands and spoke so dramatically about a boat, and a boy, and a drawing on the wall—the drawing that would become the world as they know it. If someone, a child, can do all that, then who’s to say what else they could conjure up, fabricate with a snap of their fingers.

But how could anything fake feel so real?

Maybe he just wants it to be…

His head hurts, his heart hurts, he’s been skinned alive and wrenched open and he has never felt so full and yet so very, very hollow. An entire life, a full life, crammed into his skull, warring with the one he thought he knew and they both feel so real. This water, this magic, it’s supposed to show him the truth; so which is it? What is he supposed to do—who is he supposed to be? Sir Theodore Brotz; knight of the Starfall Court and sworn guardian of the Sun Prince, or…

Or Todd Brotzman; liar, mess, loser.

Oh, fuck, it’s that one, isn’t it?

...Well. At least he remembers the word fuck, now.

Get it together, Brotz…man. Okay. He grits his teeth and closes his eyes, trying to focus in on the facts, in their simplest form, trying to piece them together like…like clues. Shit. Okay. Probably should have sent Dirk for this. So, two worlds.

He runs through the basics in his head, compiling a list of sorts. Two worlds. Two Dirks, two Todds, both one and the same—a new prince where one wasn’t before, a hole where a holistic detective should be. An uneven exchange, and a universe off-balance. That has to be it—the witch, Amanda, she was saying her equations weren’t adding up. She’s missing a piece of her calculation, but he isn’t, not anymore.

That’s what Dirk is. The one variable. He’s the most important piece in the game, and right now he’s not even on the right board.

They have to go back.

It feels right, the longer he turns over the thought in his mind. It feels clear, in a way that this cascade of conflicting memories definitely hasn’t been. He has to get Dirk back to the other world—their friends, their universe depends on it. Moon, of course no one had answers for Dirk’s marriage problem—he was never supposed to be in that situation in the first place!

And if Todd plays this right, he won’t be much longer.

Conviction spurring his weightless body into motion, Todd strikes out for the surface, fighting through the burn on his skin and the wildfire in his mind. He has to get out, has to tell Dirk everything he knows, make him believe it. He has to get him back to reality—their old reality. It’s the only way to restore balance, normality. It’s the only way to fix everything.

Almost there, Dirk, he vows, kicking out for life, for truth, for the goddamn strength to see this crazy adventure through to the end. We’re almost there…
Todd emerges feeling like he’s been swept along a raging river, beaten against every rock, spat out over the lip of a waterfall and flayed alive by the process. And yet somehow, it’s his brain that hurts most of all, still burning under the pressure of a surplus of information and confusion over what the hell to do with it.

“Theodore!”

At first the name doesn’t quite take hold, which Todd pretty much puts down to the fact that he’s still bent double, retching fiery water from his lungs while his overburdened mind continues to steep in it. But even when he hears it once, twice more it doesn’t seem to sit right.

“Oh, my- Todd, are you alright?”

That latches on. Spluttering, Todd cranes his neck and finds himself face to anxious face with Dirk- a Dirk who looks even more camp than usual, on account of the golden toga.

Except… no, wait, that’s just what he wears. He’s always worn those. Or not always… oh, fucking fudge his head hurts. “Dirk,” he rasps, grateful that the name, at least, is the same whichever reality they happen to be standing in. “Fuck- shit, Dirk, I-”

“Theodore, you’re not making any sense,” says Dirk, rubbing Todd’s back, helping along the jagged passage of water from his throat. “Are those- are those magic words? Is that how we get out of this situation? Well, it is a tad unorthodox, but I do love new words!”

“No, no that’s not… fuck.” He doesn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “Fucking… heck this is such a mess…”

“Theodore,” says Dirk seriously, tilting Todd’s chin up to meet his eyes. “What did you see, darling?”

Darling.

Todd’s head spins, the word settles heavy in his stomach. That’s not a thing they call each other, there. They aren’t like that. But… he must have wanted to be, right? How could he possibly know Dirk, his Dirk, and not be head over heels in love with him? No. He must have been, even if he didn’t know it. But there’s no way of knowing- what if that’s just this life, the fake life colouring his judgement? Why else would they not be a… a thing, over there? Unless Dirk just…

Dirk.

Yes. That must be it. This Dirk, Prince Dirk, it’s not like he’s in love with Todd, after all. All of the extra pieces of their relationship just came out of companionship, convenience. Maybe that just never occured to the other Dirk, or they never got round to it. Or he just plain wasn’t interested. Hell, who’s to say whether this Dirk is in his right mind?

Stomach turning, Todd flinches away from his prin- his friend’s touch, crawling back on his hands to put distance between them. Dirk looks after him, wounded, but doesn’t give chase, hand hovering right where Todd rejected it. Todd feels the guilt of putting that expression on his face twist like a knife in his gut, but knowing what he knows now… well, what else can he do?

“Todd,” says Dirk, worried and tentative. “What in the world happened to you?”

“I’m… still not super clear on that,” Todd mutters, shaking his head. Okay, okay, focus. He has to
keep his head on straight and tell Dirk about the tournament and… no, no, that’s the one they’re in now. Okay, no, he needs to tell Dirk about- “I saw… us.”

“Yes?”

“But… not. Us.”

Dirk blinks. “…You might need to elaborate on that, Sir Brotz.”

“Okay, okay, it’s- *fuck*, this is hard,” he grunts, rubbing his eyes. Even now his two realities are tripping over one another, fighting for space in his skull. “Look, you and me, we used to be *different*. I- I think. This, here, *all* of this is… it’s *new*. I, I don’t know *how* new, exactly, but… Dirk, this is gonna sound *crazy*, but we… we had another life. In another *world*.”

Brow wrinkled, Dirk looks at him like he’s gone totally out of his mind and honestly, Todd can’t even blame him. “Another… beg your pardon?”

“Moon- look, Dirk.” Todd stands, shakily, and sets to pacing the rough stone floor as he tries to arrange all six-fucking-thousand thoughts in his head into some order that makes even a lick of sense. “This- I *know* how fucking bananas this all sounds, but… I am *not* Theodore Brotz. I’m- I’m Todd. Brotzman. And her, look-” he gestures wildly to the witchykookoo watching them in silent curiosity from the edge of the pool- “her, she’s from there, too! Her name’s Amanda, she’s my *sister!*”

“Your…” Dirk looks between them- and Todd’s actually sort of *glad* that he still looks disbelieving, because the witch- *Amanda*- doesn’t in the slightest and that’s somehow *more* unnerving. “…Well, um. I suppose I could see a resemblance, but- Theodore, you understand this is *quite* a lot to-”

“I- I’m not Theodore,” Todd mumbles, and he can’t even put words to the conflict of feelings the words leave behind. He knows they’re *true*- already he can feel the way that name is slipping away from him, feel the disconnect growing, but if he can already distance himself so easily from that piece of himself… shit, he doesn’t even *know* what that means. He doesn’t want to think about it too much. “And you,” he blurts, turning on Dirk and changing the subject quickly. “You’re- well, okay, you’re still Dirk Gently but you… weren’t always? Or something? And, and you’re not a prince- you’re a detective! Like a, a *psychic* one, or something.”

“*Psychic?*” Dirk laughs. “*Me, a… psychic detective? Theodore, really-*”

“It’s true! I *swear*! I, I couldn’t believe it myself, but it’s all *true*- and you’re, like, *crazy* important-”

“Well,” Dirk preens, toying with his hair.

“No, no, not just like, *royal* important,” says Todd, and the words come out as a dismissive scoff without him even intending them that way. He suddenly has a lot more *opinions* about that kind of thing now, it seems, and not many of them favourable. Which is probably gonna cause some problems down the line, since he also knows for a fact that he can recite his knight’s oath word for word and mean every syllable, but that’s a mess to detangle some other time. “I mean, like, *cosmic* important; I don’t know how, or why but the universe- *that* universe, it’s falling apart, and it’s because you’re not there!”

“I’m… Sir Brotz, I don’t-”

“I’m *not! Sir Brotz!*” Todd yells, clenching his fists. “This isn’t me, this isn’t *you*, it’s, it’s a *lie!*”

Dirk staggers back a step, wide-eyed, and Todd immediately feels like shit for snapping at him like that but he guesses there’s no taking it back now. “*Why… why are you saying this?*” Dirk murmurs,
looking and sounding so very lost it takes all the self-control Todd has not to rush forward and pull him into a hug. “This… this is cruel, Sir Brotz.”

“I’m not… I’m not trying to hurt you,” Todd rasps, feeling his prince’s pain like it’s his own. God, Moon, it’s so easy to fall back into thinking of him like that, so natural to want to do everything in his power to stop him from hurting. Did he always do that, the other him? Or is that just another way that he was a failure? “It’s the truth. All of this is… I’m not sure why we’re here, or how we’re here, but it’s not real. The real world, it’s out there, and it needs us. You. It… they need you.”

When Dirk just keeps on staring in silence, fear and hurt written into every line of his face, Todd turns to the witch- to Amanda- and the look on her face is so alien that he has to fight down a scream of frustration. “Please, you- I know you believe me, tell him!”

THE WATER DOESN’T LIE, she says, face impassive as her inkblot eyes turn him over like a puzzle box. BUT THIS IS… BAD. IF WHAT YOU SAW IS THE TRUTH, THEN…

The wolves whimper at her feet, the electricity in the room seems to burn brighter, higher, setting her long hair whipping wildly in the static storm. THEN THINGS ARE WORSE THAN I THOUGHT…

Todd feels drawn to her like a bug to the zapper (is that a thing? From the other world? Did he make it up? Fuck, who knows). Even through the scary lightshow he feels recognition, protectiveness- Jesus, how could he not have known? “Amanda…” he breathes, the name smooth and familiar to his mouth as… okay, well, maybe not his own anymore.

Amanda looks back at him, and the lack of recognition in her eyes smarts worse than the water. MAYBE, she whispers in her electric echo. IN ANOTHER LIFE…

He shakes his head. “No, no you… wait, can’t you get in the water?” he says, stepping closer eagerly. “Then you’ll see, and you can-”

THE VOICE OF THE UNIVERSE IS MINE TO HEAR, she cuts in, holding up a crackling hand to halt him. BUT NO ONE BEING CAN BE BOTH EYES AND EARS.

Todd looks at her helplessly, but she holds her ground, stubborn as a statue. Classic her. He makes a noise of discontent and turns instead to Dirk, desperate. “Okay, but you can- Dirk, I promise if you do this you’ll see-”

“No.”

Todd freezes, caught unawares by the hardness in Dirk’s voice. “Dirk, what do you-”

“No,” Dirk repeats, and though he sets his jaw and clenches his fists Todd can see the underlying tremor.

“Dirk,” says Todd, softer this time as he takes a step closer. “Dirk, I- I know it’s scary, and I’m not gonna say it doesn’t hurt, but once it’s done you’ll underst-”

“No, Theodore,” Dirk exclaims, shaking his head vigorously. “I don’t understand, I- this is preposterous, and I won’t be part of whatever nonsense this is. I don’t know why you’re being like this, but I shan’t indulge it.”

“I’m not… I’m not being like anything, Dirk, I’m trying to tell you the truth, I- come on, what have you got to lose?” he can feel his exasperation bubbling into a tempest, crackling in time with the electrical storm surrounding them. “If you just give it a try-!”
“Theodore, stop!”

Todd freezes, heart lurching, blood cold. Dirk- his gentle prince, his best friend- is looking at him with power rolling off his skin, searing sunlight pouring forth and illuminating the cavern’s deepest, darkest recesses, beating back even the witch’s lightning. His eyes burn gold like ethereal fire as he fixes Todd with a gaze unlike anything he’s ever felt before, scalding him where he stands.

“Dirk…” Todd breathes, raising a hand in front of his eyes against the light- and watching the answering green creeping into his skin like he’s never seen it before. Like it belongs to someone else. “Dirk, please, this isn’t you…”

“This is who I am, Theodore,” says Dirk, words practically blistering on Todd’s skin. “This is who we are!”

“Then what could it hurt to try?!”

The words douse Dirk like a bucket of ice water. He fizzles out, light dropping to a lethargic, lifeless shimmer on his skin like oil as he pants out a long, steaming breath of superheated air, and his eyes- blue again now, and wide, wider than Todd’s ever seen them- prickle with tears.

Stepping closer, chest aching, Todd holds out his hand to him. “Dirk… if you really thought I was lying, you would have proved me wrong by now. I know you would.”

Dirk stares at his hand as if it’s poised to bite like a deadly rainboa. “Please,” he whispers, a tear trailing down his cheek- his skin’s so cold it doesn’t even sizzle. “Todd, I want to go home now…”

But where even is that…?

“Dirk,” Todd murmurs, stepping closer still. “I’m not trying to hurt you- I just need you to understand. Farah Black, remember her? Tina Tevetino? They’re back there, I know it- and they’re in trouble. And, and so is the rest of the damn universe if we don’t go back, soon.”

The prince, the detective, just stands there, staring at Todd’s outstretched hand with with fear and mistrust that cuts Todd like a knife.

And then, with a choked-off sob and a turn on his heel, he’s running.

“Dirk!”

Todd rockets after him as fast as he can but it’s no use- Dirk has a head start on a very, very short run.

It all seems to happen in slow motion, playing out exactly as Todd would’ve, could’ve expected if he’d only had a split second longer to think about it.

Dirk’s impractical sandal skids on the top stair, his leg slips out from under him and his body topplies over the side. His hands, for the barest instant, grip onto the edge of the island, before a rogue tongue of lightning flicks out and bites at his knuckles, fatally loosening their death-grip on the rock.

And finally his fingers slip from view, and his voice quickly, too quickly from earshot, plummeting to the cavern floor and taking Todd’s heart with them.

“No!”

Todd throws himself down on the rock, unthinking of the hard scrape of rough stone and the sting of
electricity on his body as he looks over the edge, stomach twisting in painful knots as he watches the distant, flailing form of his prince, arms extended and mouth open in the choked-off remains of a final scream, disappear into the electrical nexus at the cavern’s deepest point.

It is only the sharp, stinging bite of electric teeth at his ankle that stops Todd throwing himself in after him.

“Let me go!” he screams, kicking out at the snout of the monster and turning the snarl at it. The wolf, leader wolf, just snarls around his ankle in return, bite tightening in threat and sending a burst of static up his leg. “Let me go, I have to-!”

HE’S ALIVE.

The voice of Amanda cuts, somehow, through the deafening roar of panic in his skull. Feeling wild and probably looking it, he meets her eyes desperately.

“Where is he?” he pleads, voice hoarse.

WHEREVER HE TOOK HIMSELF, she says grimly, her spidery hair falling about her face as she bends over him to look down at the twisting miasma. THE PORTAL TAKES US WHEREVER OUR HEARTS DESIRE, WHEREVER WE MOST LONG TO BE. HOPEFULLY, HIS SAFE PLACE ISN’T THE HEART OF A VOLCANO.

“P-portal…?” Todd stutters, fighting for breath. So Dirk isn’t dead. He isn’t dead, he isn’t dead he isn’t- “Can- can I follow him?”

ONLY IF YOU KNOW WHERE HE WENT, she murmurs, looking at him with her staring eyes softened by pity. AND WISH YOURSELF THERE, TOO.

“H-how do I-?”

YOU TELL ME, SIR BROTZ, she says, blinking slowly. YOU KNOW HIM BETTER THAN ANYONE, DON’T YOU?

Todd swallows, nods, glances down at the wolf still clutching his leg. The beast steps back with an expression of quiet skepticism, snarling once more before padding away to be with its pack. There’s something familiar about those things, now Todd really thinks about it. Especially in the judgy way the pack leader looks at him. But he kinda has more important stuff to do than figure it out right now. Standing up shakily, Todd regards the witch, and she regards him in turn.

“You look…” he shakes his head. “What happened to you? To us, I…” his hand snaps up, feeling the tip of his pointed ear self-consciously. It wasn’t always like that, was it? No. That’s new. But why? “I don’t…”

NEITHER DO I, BUT I’M WORKING ON IT, says the Not-Amanda, gazing at him with open curiosity in those freaky, freaky eyes. AND IF THE TWO OF YOU GET OUT OF THIS ALIVE, YOU KNOW WHERE TO FIND ME- MAYBE NEXT TIME, I’LL HAVE THE ANSWERS YOU REALLY NEED.

Todd decides not to think too hard about the if you get out of this alive bit, and clenches his fists. “I… I think it’s really in trouble. The world we came from, I…” he closes his eyes, cussing under his breath. Everything is all so clear in his mind, memoires vibrant and fresh but they’re tangled in with all these falsehoods and variables, new memories bleeding into old, muddying the lines. “I think if I don’t get him back, things get…”
She raises one immaculate eyebrow. ‘FUCKED’?

He wants to laugh, but he’s not sure he has it in him. Instead he just nods, squirming in place. “What-what happens if I can’t find him? Or can’t convince him, I, I don’t know what I’m supposed to-”

YOU’LL FIND HIM, she says, no hint of uncertainty in her voice as she gives him a long, thoughtful look. SOMETHING TELLS ME YOU TWO ALWAYS FIND EACH OTHER.

“But what if-”

JEEZ, WHAT IF, WHAT IF- HOW ABOUT YOU GET YOUR BUTT THROUGH THAT PORTAL AND FIND OUT, LOSER? she grumbles, smacking his shoulder and giving him a minor electric shock in the process. PRINCES AND UNIVERSES DON’T JUST SAVE THEMSELVES.

“Fuck, you’re right, shit.” He turns round, the tips of his boots- his fucking stupid curly boots, who the hell put him in these?!- poking over the edge of the island, over the edge of the unknown, and hundreds of feet below the portal that just guzzled Dirk whole twists and roars like a living, ravenous thing. “Okay, okay think, where would he go, where would he… he, he was upset, and scared, and he wanted to go home- the castle! Wait, no, no he… he doesn’t always feel safe there, his dad, and he was… he’d wanna go somewhere no one would…”

Oh.

He looks over his shoulder at the witch, breathing raggedly. “I… I think I know where he is.”

ONLY ONE WAY TO FIND OUT, she says, not unkindly.

Todd takes in her face for just another moment- the blue-veined, electrified, otherworldly face that’s somehow as familiar as the back of his own hand- and nods. “I guess so…”

He looks down, down into the vortex, and a strange calm overtakes him. Everything falls quiet- the lightning, the portal, the whimpers and snaps of the wolves. Nothing permeates but the sound of his own heart, pounding steady in his ears. Quick, scared, but steady. He can do this.

He has to do this.

One deep breath. Then another. He closes his eyes on the third.

Don’t. Panic.

And then he takes the leap, off of the island, into the open air and the dangerous, crackling call of the void. In his mind he pictures Dirk- the Dirk he’s known up until a few minutes ago, the Dirk who wore silly crowns and sang to the pikka birds and put daisy chains on Todd’s head when he thought he wouldn’t notice- happy, and carefree and peaceful away from the attention of his castle, his father and subjects. Grass beneath his hands, blue skies above his head, Dirk his own perfect little sun in the middle.

His last thought is of the prince’s smile when the portal, soft as the pure water and no less sharp, embraces him like an old friend, and the world within the witch’s cavern slips away to an onslaught of endless, excruciating static.

Chapter End Notes
So... so much for that alternate universe tag, eh?

Comments are my electric companions <3
Day Five (III)

Chapter Notes

Warning: This chapter contains violence, some blood/gore, and *hella* angst. All of fairly canon-typical levels though I'd say- if you were okay with that dude getting his fingers cut off and with Dirk and Todd's more heartbreaking fall-outs, you'll survive, and I'll make it worth your while one of these days!

(It also opens on the vague description of/afterglow to some very sappy sex, so enjoy that!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Flowers. Grass. Boundless blue skies. A rich, natural wall of trees, a shelter from the outside world. A buffer from expectations, from decorum. Bare back damp with dew and sweat, gasps mingling playfully with birdsong, laughter and the sounds of lips upon lips, skin upon skin. Peace, happiness, languid rapture building up, up, up to something bigger, something more intense, and then…

More flowers?

“Theodore,” his prince giggles, peppering playful kisses up his neck and reaching out with one clumsy, sweaty hand to pluck a vibrant yellow daisy from the ground. A daisy that was definitely not there before.

Blushing furiously, Theodore turns his face away, burying it bashfully in the newly bloomed flowerbed. “That, uh…” he mumbles, face heated from more than mere exertion now. “That… happens sometimes?”

“When you…?”

“Yeah.”

“Can I…” says Dirk, light as the breeze. “Expect it to happen every time?”

“Dirk-”

“No, no, no judgment here- I think it’s delightful.”

“Yeah, you would,” he grumbles, screwing his eyes shut.

“Todd…”

Powerless against that voice- those soft, open tones his prince saves just for him- Theodore looks up into the eyes of his lord, his love, and finds them bluer than even the sky as his backdrop, framed in the luminous gold of sunlight skin glowing brighter than magic.

Dirk looks down at him, face as soft as his voice, and gently slips the daisy behind Theodore’s ear, cupping his face in his warm, tender hand.

“Suits you,” he smiles, whisper-soft and sweet as can be.
Theodore’s foolish heart thumps in his chest, body turning to butter as his prince leans down, capturing his lips once more in a kiss; slow, sincere and patient. As if they have all the time in the world. As if there is nowhere else that he would rather be.

As if they need never say goodbye.

If there’s one thing Todd is good at, it’s getting up after being knocked down. He has to be- for all that he ribs Dirk for being clumsy, he can’t argue that he’s no better himself. He’s more practical about it, usually has a faster recovery time, but he goes over every bit as much as his pri-uh, his friend does. It’s all about getting back on your feet, in the end, and he’s got pretty good at it- ten seconds max, that’s all he needs to find his footing.

But when the vortex chews him up and spits him out onto the ground with the force of a speeding bullet, he figures he should take at least an even thirty.

“Fuck,” he grits out, hugging his side. He opens his eyes, meaning to glare at the portal for being such a bitch, but finds nothing but a starry sky overhead as he eyes meet the Moon’s. He blinks, processing- how much time has passed? When is he? Where?

Gingerly, he pushes himself up on his hands, wincing at the eruption of pain from his scraped-up side, and casts his gaze around. He has to take a moment to adjust to the gloom, but it doesn’t take anywhere near as long as it should, which he puts down to his weird new elf eyes. It feels strange now, but up until about ten minutes ago he was pretty used to those slitted pupils and the way they could dilate to freaky proportions. He picks out a jagged, dark line under that night sky where the trees break it, makes out patches of deeper, darker black underneath, where gaps between the closely-spaced trunks lead deeper into the woods. And if he really squints by the light of the grinning Moon, he can see splashes of lighter tones across the ground he sits upon. Flowers. Including, some feet away, one particular elf-sized patch of them. Blood rushes to his face.

“It worked,” he breathes, hauling himself to his feet and taking a staggering step closer. Then he pauses, frowns, and glances around once again. “Dirk?” he calls, tentative, before sucking it up and trying again a little louder. “Dirk!”

No answer. Todd’s heart sinks. Either Dirk is still feeling betrayed and pretending not to hear him, or he was never here. Shit, maybe he went somewhere totally different. Maybe he is at the castle, or…

Snarling, he shakes his head. Calm down, Brotz...man. If that portal takes you to ‘your heart’s desire’, or whatever, he’s gotta be safe- he wouldn’t have portaled himself to the middle of the desert.

Figuring he has nothing to lose by looking, Todd walks to the treeline and paces the perimeter of the meadow, glancing between the trunks and shrubs as he goes. He feels ridiculous, but if anyone was going to hide in a shrubbery to avoid a difficult conversation, it was Dirk. That seems very on-brand for him. All of him. Both. Shit.

Todd sighs, pausing to rub his forehead tiredly. God, this is such a mess. He doesn’t even know what’s real anymore. He’d felt so certain before, submerged in that water and having that other life played in front of his eyes but now… was he imaging things? And if not, did he get the wrong idea? Maybe Dirk is supposed to stay here. He doesn’t really have anything to go on besides a gut
feeling that Dirk staying away from that world would be… bad. Did he just freak him out and scare him off for no good reason?

He doesn’t realise his restless pacing has resumed, doesn’t realise he’s changed course until he hears a soft crunch beneath his feet. Looking down, he finds that he’s put his stupid leather boot down right in that flower bed, bending and cracking a handful of stems. Guiltily, he steps back, crouches down and brushes his fingers along the petals, watching the flit of delicate energy across his skin as it rushes out to mend what he broke.

It takes him a hot second to really check in to the fact that he is using actual magic.

Todd flinches back, staring at his hand as the glow recedes. A part of him knows that this is nothing new, he’s done all this and more before. But a new part of him- a sad, cynical part used to a certain background mundanity- watches the display with terrified awe like it’s the first time he’s ever seen it. Which he guesses it kind of is. How can a piece of himself feel so familiar and so foreign at the same time?

Shaking out the last tinges of power, he puts his hands on his knees to straighten up, figuring he’s wasted enough time looking at flowers. But as he shifts, something else in the flower bed- something smooth, shiny, half-buried beneath the petals- catches his eye. With dread scratching at his awareness like claws on a chalkboard, he reaches out and, shakily, closes his hand around it.

“Oh, no…”

Lying on his palm, small and innocent and unspeakably terrifying, is a very familiar yo-yo. Faintly yellow in the moonlight, string half-unwound and a tangled mess, scuffed and dirty and stained with a droplet of something that looks black in the dark, but which Todd just knows is red. Blood.

Dirk’s blood…?

Shaking with fear and rage, Todd springs to his feet, scouring the clearing for any sign of struggle, even a twig out of place. He finds that his own previously broken stems aren’t the only crumpled part of the flower bed- a good third of the area has been crushed flat, patches of the surrounding grass scuffed up and ripped out in clumps. There’s no more blood, thank the Moon, but it paints a grim picture. Struggle, brute force. And following that, a trampled trail into the woods, the faint indents of two, three pairs of booted feet across the grass, and snagged on the scaly bark of a pricklepine at the treeline…

A tiny, shimmering sliver or torn golden silk.

Todd’s heart stops.

Bandits.

“Dirk! Dirk!”

Honestly, he doesn’t know what he’s hoping to achieve doing this. Running through the woods, searching frantically for more tracks, screaming bloody murder for a friend who probably can’t answer. But after the initial slip-up whoever took him got better at covering their tracks, and Todd is running out of ideas. He’ll scream his goddamn throat bloody, just so long as he’s doing something.
Just so long as he can tell himself that he isn't already too late.

"Dirk!" he croaks, catching himself on a low-hanging branch as a misplaced foot sets him rocking sideways. "Jesus, Moon, Dirk, please-

An obstruction in his throat breaks his words. He freezes, confused, convinced that it's nothing but also knowing that it's undeniably something, reaching a hand up to run his finger along his clavicle, up the taut line and across his Adam's apple. There's nothing there, but…

When the black dots start biting at his vision, understanding dawns.

"Not now," he hisses, clutching onto the branch with white knuckles as the blackness spreads, as awareness of his body slips away, inch by inch. "Please, god, not now..."

The episode creeps up slowly, eating him away piece by piece. He shakes his head in a last ditch effort to dislodge the black fog, but that does nothing but make his vision swim faster. Shit. No two ways about it.

Prying his hand away from the branch, Todd stumbles into a nearby bush, shoving aside leaves and branches and the creepy crawly bodies of the resident bugs as he burrows down as deep as he can, hoping and praying that he's out of sight. If those bandits come back and capture or kill him while he's helpless to fight back, it would ruin any chance he has of bringing Dirk back alive. Buried deep in the scratchy, gloomy nest, he closes his eyes and wraps his arms around his legs, curling into as tight and small a ball as he's able, willing the episode to pass quickly, quietly.

Talk about timing. Just his fucking luck.

Maybe it's not having Dirk there to distract him, or pull him back, or maybe it's just a side effect of his mind still racing from all the new information he's just had crammed into it, but as the void gnaws at his perception he finds himself... thinking. Clearly. Which isn't great, honestly- it gives him plenty of time to think about that scream when it sounds again. From a great, great distance, echoing in the hollow caverns of his mind like a distant, agonised plea for help. He has enough awareness to really think about that voice, that...

...Hang on.

He listens with bated breath as it sounds again- closer this time, but still separated as if by a wall of inky water. Muffled, but familiar. Horribly familiar.

It's his voice. His own voice, screaming in agony. Jesus, when has he ever screamed like that? He doesn't remember screaming like that once in his life.

Unless...

Shit. Wrong life.

It creeps back to him beneath the screams, as his mind sifts through all the new memories churning in his skull. Recent memories, of pain and terror, of pills and anxiety and things that aren't real. A disease, one he pretended to have- until one day it was no longer pretend.

Pararibulitis.

Is this...?

He doesn't know how, or why. How he can be in so little pain right now, why the attack seems to be
blocked by some kind of mental wall. Being aware of it doesn't bring the pain back, it just makes the screams seem louder. But he guesses he shouldn't complain- anything that makes him less likely to scream out loud where anyone could just stumble across him is what he needs right now.

There’s no way of knowing how long it lasts. Ten minutes, an hour, who can tell- with no one there to pull him out of it, he could while away days in his cocoon of unawareness for all he knows. But when the void starts to recede he wastes no time, clamouring zombie-like out of his head and out of the shrub that lent him shelter, squinting through the blotchy darkness in his vision to take in his surroundings. Still dark, so hopefully not too much time has passed, but with no way to see the sky under the forest canopy he has no real way of knowing.

However long it was, he has no more time to waste.

Finding his feet clumsily on the uneven ground and stabilising himself on that same tree trunk, Todd shakes out the last of his stupor, gritting his teeth. There's no time, no goddamn time. He doesn't even know where he is right now- those bastards had enough self-preservation to conceal their tracks, and even his eyes can't pick out that minute a detail in this darkness. He doesn't know where to go, how long he has, if Dirk is even still alive. It's hopeless. Totally, utterly, insanely-

"Bi...bit?"

Todd isn't proud of how loudly he yelps. Spinning around so fast on unsteady feet that he nearly capsizes, he peers in the direction of the voice, eyes picking out a shape in the undergrowth- a fluffy, hunched, curious little shape. He blinks. "...You?"

Beast squints at him suspiciously, taking a loping step closer. One of her hands trails out behind her, clasped around two ratty lengths of woven forest rope. "Boy. You no look aftah Bibbit?!

"What? No! I..." he winces. "That's... jury's still out, on that. Have you seen him? Do you know who took him?!"

"Bad 'uns," she says lowly, voice a quiet, frightened rumble. "Take teh Bibbit, into woods. Make him scared. I see, from-" she gestures behind her at the clustered shrubberies, giving a tug on the ropes. "I look for Bibbit an' Bibbitses boy; you forget birs."

He blinks. "'Birs?'"

She grunts, tugging the rope again. "Birs!"

With a discontented squawk, the ends of the ropes come into view- attached, haphazardly, to the harnesses of two ruffled and indignant dodos.

Todd gapes. "Crawly! Reg!" He darts forward, brushing past Beast to pet the creatures' grubby beaks, checking them over as best he can in the darkness. They look bedraggled, a bit filthy, but otherwise unharmed. He looks down at Beast incredulously as he pets Crawly's feathered forehead. "You found them?"

"In woods," she says, scowling. "You stoopid baboons."

Todd bristles. "Hey, they ran away from us."


"How do you-? Nevermind, nevermind," Todd grumbles, patting Reginald's neck and taking a step back, gathering Beast's makeshift leashes in his hands. "Main thing is they're safe."
Beast, however, doesn't relinquish them that easily. She levels Todd with a look. "Wha' boy say?"

"What?"

"Wha' boy say?"

"Uh..." he fumbles, taking a step back from her ferocious demand. "...Thanks?"

She nods sternly, dropping the leads. "Goo' Bibbit Boy."

He returns the nod, wrong-footed. "O-kay. Well, uh, now that's done- Dirk. Uh, Bibbit. Which way did they take him?"

Beast makes a series of unintelligible grumbles as she considers, swinging her head slowly to and fro. Eventually she makes a decision and points her crooked finger through a dark, close gap in the nearest trees. "Tha' way."

Todd raises his brows at her, skeptical. "You sure?"

With a look of displeasure and a frustrated gurgle, Beast lopes off in the direction she indicated, knuckles dragging on the forest floor. Todd, unsure what else he can do at this point, follows with the birds in tow.

To his surprise, she stops after barely ten feet, hands playing across the leaf-strewn ground. Todd pauses behind her, bewildered. "What are you...?"

"Ha!"

He jumps a little at her sudden shriek. "What the-?"

She looks up at him, grinning broadly- and to his mind pretty smugly- as she shoves aside a handful of leaves, gesturing to the concealed boot tracks underneath. "Thisss way," she repeats, sounding real pleased with herself.

And Todd, well, Todd's not gonna argue with results.

"Okay," he mutters, nodding slowly as he turns over ideas in his head. "Okay..." he meets her eyes seriously. "How do you feel about starting a fight with a bunch of people?"

Beast, with a crooked grin, bounces excitedly in place. "Yiis. Figh' bad 'uns, rescue Bibbit- Boy an' Beastie!"

Todd, despite his fear and apprehension, returns the smile. "Boy and Beastie."

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"It’s easy, right- we send the king a note-"

"What king?"

A loud smack rings out from the motley crew by the campfire as someone’s head gets bopped and a sneering voice joins the fray. "The King of Starfall, keep up, hoopty-frood."
“Yeah, yeah like I said, we send the king a note, tellin’ ‘im we got his son the star prince-”

“Sun prince,” Dirk chimes in wearily.

“Cork it, twinkle toes!” crows the sneery voice, setting off a string of sniggers from his little gang. Simple minds and their simple pleasures.

“Anyway, we tell him we got princey up there, demand a ransom, right-”

“A what?”

Dirk closes his eyes, quietly praying to the Moon to give him patience.

“Y’know, money, in return for princey’s safety an’ that.”

“Oh.”

“Imagine a Starfall royal, out here all alone in the middle of the night,” muses another bandit- one who doesn’t sound quite as thick as the others, in the same way that a ship’s mast is not quite as thick as the whole bloody tree. He is, however, easily the most malicious of the bunch; Dirk mentally dubs him the Meanie. “Reckon he’d have some bodyguards- I hear their family’s the most powerful in the land…”

“And the richest!” says the first voice- a gruff, semi-female voice that Dirk considers the Mouth, given that she’s been talking non-stop since hours ago. “Cash in that lil’ slip of a thing and we can bloomin’ retire!”

“But I’m not tired,” says voice the second, ironically dubbed by Dirk as the Brain.

“Retire, you dingus,” says voice the third, the sneery and obnoxious Clown, setting off another ripple of laughter.

“Ain’t none of you worried, ‘bout finding him out here?” says the smallest and heretofore quietest voice of the lot, the appropriately nicknamed Mouse. “Seems like a trap to me…”

“Uh, yeah- for him,” scoffs the Mouth, over the sound of another head smack. “As if them prissy castle types is gonna mooch round ‘ere. Lil’ princey probably took a wrong turn catching butterflies.”

“I’ve been on an epic quest, actually?” says Dirk, indignant. “To the edge of the world and back? Through dangers unknown and hardships unnumbered?”

“Yeah, sure you have, pretty boy,” snorts the Clown, and Dirk feels something collide lightly with his head. It takes him a moment to realise one of the ruffians just lobbed a popcorn kernel at it. “Quit yappin’, lil’ pup, or I’ll muzzle ya.”

“Oh, what’s the darn point,” Dirk mutters, crossing his arms and sinking deeper into the uncomfortable nest of his woven rope net. Naturally, the scoundrels hadn’t bothered to prioritise comfort in an object intended to string up hapless princes like floppy flubfish. No matter how he twists and fidgets, he has at least two knots digging into him at any given time, and sticking his feet out through the mesh gains him a bit of knee room but does nothing for his dignity.

The ruffians return to their little gossip circle, and Dirk is quite happy to tune them out. After he exhausted his begging and pleading reserves to no avail, he found the best course of action to be just to leave them to it. Perhaps if they all drop off to sleep and forget about him, he can find some way
out of this blasted net; so far his glow had failed to rise to the challenge and burn it away, his heart too heavy to muster more than a spark. But he doubts these buffoons are bright enough to leave anyone on guard duty, so perhaps he can worm his way out in another fashion.

But then what?

He sighs, slouching forwards and planting his head between his knees. He’s so woefully unprepared for anything like this. He hasn’t the faintest idea how to survive in these woods alone, or how to navigate his way through them. Even from the familiar meadow that scary portal had dropped him in- which was a simply stellar way to rub salt in the wound of his and Theodore’s newly formed schism- he hadn’t the foggiest. His knight always used to do the hunting and navigating. And the fighting. And just about everything else, now that he thinks about it.

*Goodness,* when did Dirk become so… helpless?

This has been, quite probably, the single worst night of his life so far. First Todd- his Todd- insists that their entire life together is a lie and Dirk has some big, grim destiny elsewhere. Then he falls headfirst into a terrifying rift in space and time and gets spat out ungracefully in one of his favourite places in the whole world, where he and Theodore first made love, as if the universe is mocking him. *Then* he gets manhandled and trussed up by this gawking gaggle and, *and,* as the cherry on top of the hideous pie, he loses his blasted yo-yo in the process- *whilst* trying to defend himself with it, as it turns out, though the only damage he’d managed to inflict was a split lip. On himself. It wouldn’t have done him any good to keep a hold of it, evidently, he’s proven himself well and truly useless with the thing, but even having something to do with his hands would somewhat alleviate the direness of the situation. As it stands all he has to do is toy with the big ugly knots of the net, and run the torn hem of his toga discontentedly through his fingers. What an absolutely horrendous mess.

Dirk reaches into the folds of his toga, and pulls out a flower. Just a little yellow daisy, just like the one he’d tucked behind his beloved knight’s ear all those years ago- he’d plucked it back in the meadow, shortly before being ambushed, shortly *after* bursting into frustrated, heartbroken tears. So many years have passed since they’d found time for a pilgrimage to the spot, and yet still that patch of soft grass where he and Theodore had lain together- the first time and many since- blooms bright and plush with life. He can’t say the same for this particular unfortunate flower; in all the chaos of his kidnapping it has taken rather a beating, the stem crumpled and the petals falling free. Nothing Todd couldn’t fix, mind, if only he were here.

As metaphors go, it is very on-the-nose.

“Shut up,” he scolds it, tucking the sorry specimen back into his pocket. If he looks at it any longer, he may well cry again. No good can come of dwelling on the past, or making himself sick with longing over someone he may never see again.

Where is Theodore now, he wonders? Did he follow Dirk into the portal? If so, where did it take him? He could be anywhere. He might be back at the castle, safely tucked up in their- in Dirk’s bed. He might still be in the witch’s cave, catching up with his ‘sister’.

Dirk still can’t understand, even after all these lonely hours in his net mulling things over, just how things could go so utterly topsy-turvy in such a miniscule space of time. How his knight, the man he trusts most in all the world, could lose his mind so completely.

Nor does he understand why it feels like it would be easy- so easy- to just believe him.

“No,” he mutters, closing his eyes and covering his ears as if he can block the traitorous thoughts out that way. “No, no, we are not even touching that- it is preposterous. Another life? Another world?
Honestly, what a load of… sheep.” He laughs, hoping the sound will dispel the idea once and for all.

It doesn’t.

“...Sugar.”

Groaning, he draws his knees up and wraps his arms around them. Stupid Theodore. Stupid brave knight with his stupid loyal heart and his stupid big eyes making Dirk want to stupid trust him, implicitly, no matter how ridiculous the truth may be. No matter how painful.

But it is all academic now, anyway. He couldn’t listen to what Todd has to say, even if he wanted to—his knight is Moon knows where, and Dirk is trapped in the middle of the woods with this babbling, bumbling band of baboons.

Although that being said, the babble seems to have quietened down considerably…

Dirk raises his head and peeks over his knees. It’s hard to make out much detail through the dense, tangled mesh of his prison, but he can still see the flicker of the campfire. If he angles his head very carefully, he can even pick out the silhouettes of his captors against it. One, two, three, four… Where’s five?

Pressing his face to the uneven mesh, Dirk peers through an almost face-sized hole at the assembled gathering. Nope, no number five. Must have stepped into the bushes to relieve themselves, or collect more firewood. Which ruffian is it, he wonders?

“Whatchu lookin’ at, pretty boy?”

Well, whichever one it is, it is not the Clown. Unfortunate, but at least he seems to have settled on one of his more flattering insults. “Four people in dire need of haircuts,” Dirk quips. He receives another handful of popcorn to the face for the slander.

“Feisty one, innie?” the Mouth sneers, lobbing a toasted marshmallow at him— which backfires considerably when Dirk catches and eats it, but the gaggle seem altogether too lazy to come and give him trouble over it. “I thought all royals was s’posed to be polite.”

“To people, yes,” says Dirk haughtily, settling back into the net with his arms crossed. “I was never taught the protocol for conversing with monkeys.”

“Why, you lil’-!”

“He said four…”

The others all fall silent a moment, the quiet voice of the Mouse hanging in the air. “Wazzat?” asks the Meanie, voice low and dangerous.

“He- he said four people,” murmurs the Mouse. “Where’s…”

“E went to take a whizz, you muppet,” grumbles the Mouth, over the sound of another smack.

“That… that was a long time ago…”

“Prolly,” the Clown sniffs. “But his body ain’t right, is it? Reckon it’s all those beans.”

“Shut up,” hisses the Meanie, over the sound of steel sliding from a sheathe.
“Oi, boss,” says the Mouth, sounding amused. “It ain’t nothing but a-”

“Yoodere!”

Dirk jumps almost as high as the bandits do—figuratively speaking. In his position, it’s rather hard to jump anywhere. “What the-?!” roars the Meanie, spinning towards the source of the garbled squawk.

Hastily pressing his face back to the gap, Dirk scans his limited view hopefully. Whatever that is, perhaps it could be his ticket out of here. “Help!” he calls, thrashing about in his net to rattle the tree branch it hangs from. “Help! Prince in distress! Heeeeeel-!”

“Shut it, bobo!” the Mouth shrieks, dashing over to the net with wild eyes and a furious scowl. “Shut your pie hole, or I’ll- argh!”

It all happens so fast—one moment the Mouth is right there, advancing on Dirk’s prison with intent. And the next something thin and shiny is darting through the air, quick and fluttery as a mumble moth, and knocking her soundly round the head, sending her clattering to the ground like a coconut. The object then continues on in a broad arc, almost taking out the Clown—who just barely dodges out of the way—and felling the Mouse with a swift bop on the noggin, before disappearing back into the trees whence it came like it was never there in the first place.

Before emerging once more, clutched firmly, purposefully, in the hand of—

“Todd!”

Theodore smiles at him, flipping the boomerang, eyes soft in the flickering firelight. “Sorry I’m late, my Lord.”

“Oh, no you-!”

Dodging swiftly out of the way of the stampeding Meanie, Theodore rolls sideways and kicks the ruffian’s feet out from under him, bringing him down like a jenga tower. The Meanie, however, is not yet down for the count—and behind the brawl Dirk can see the Clown advancing on Theodore with his needle lance drawn and a murderous gleam in his eye. “Todd, look out-!”

“Bad ‘un!”

Something large, loud and colourful catapults into the Clown from behind, fur-clad limbs wrapping around him like a fluffy octopus and tusk-like teeth nipping at his ear. “Beast?!’” Dirk squeaks, confused but altogether not complaining.

From her struggling perch, Beast sends him a grin around the Clown’s chewed earlobe. “Bi-bih!” she spits through her clenched teeth.

“Beast, head in the game!” Theodore yells, wrestling the Meanie’s vicious-looking serrated scissors out of his hands.

Grunting in assent, Beast gives Dirk an apologetic look, and promptly bites the Clown’s ear right off his head.

“Oh,” Dirk hisses, flinching as the ruffian screams and presses his hand against the considerable bleeding, and drops to the ground under Beast’s kicking, biting weight. “Oh, dear…”

“Give it up, pipsqueak!”
Dirk turns his attention back to the other brawl, and pales. Theodore, though still kicking and scuffling for all he’s worth, has been separated from his weapon and is undeniably pinned by the Meanie’s bulk - and a sitting duck for the boulder-sized fist currently lifting in the air, ready to come down on his tiny elfin head.

“Todd!”

“Dirk,” Theodore chokes, fumbling in his pocket with one hand as his other claws at the great strangling fingers around his throat. “Catch!”

The thing flies at Dirk so fast he barely even registers it - but the Moon must be smiling on him, because he snags it nonetheless. Something round, and smooth, and familiar as can be.

Clutching the well-worn string in his hand, Dirk swings the yo-yo like a lasso, building momentum over three, four, five sweeping arcs, and with his breath held and his eyes (inadvisably) closed, releases it.

“Oof!”

The thwap of the yo-yo connecting with flesh and bone pales in comparison to the thud of a body hitting the floor.

Dirk can’t breathe, can’t look as the sound of scuffling resumes, though he hopes and prays that this time the odds are weighted heavier in his knight’s favour. He doesn’t dare see for himself.

When the next thud comes, it comes with a sense of finality, and still he doesn’t look.

“Dirk.”

He exhales sharply, nearly sobbing in relief at the sound of his knight’s voice. “Todd…”

“Dirk- Dirk, it’s okay, you can open your eyes.”

He does so, tentatively. Two silhouettes before the fire swim into focus - the hunched figure of Beast, apparently rifling through the possessions of Dirk’s erstwhile captors, and the small, stalwart frame of Theodore. “Todd,” he rasps once more, extending his hand out through the mesh of his prison. “Oh, my- I didn’t think you would-”


Breathing raggedly, Dirk nods, withdrawing his hand with reluctance as Theodore reaches for his boomerang.

“Did they hurt you?” Theodore asks softly, sliding off the blade guard and clutching a strand of rope to begin sawing through it. It is only then that Dirk notices the inside of the rope looks slightly charred, letting off thin wisps of grey smoke on contact with his brightening skin.

“They left the odd bruise,” says Dirk dismissively, shifting his leg out of Theodore’s way. “Mostly on my pride.”

Theodore snorts, shaking his head. “Reprehensible.”

“Are they…?”

“They’ll live,” says Theodore, darkly. As if he’d much rather that wasn’t the case. “But they’re
Dirk clings tightly to the mesh as Theodore succeeds in cutting through a thick, tangled strand. Thanks to the shoddy bandit workmanship, it doesn’t look like they’ll be here all night— with one strand cut the net is already beginning to unravel. “I suppose I can live with that. They weren’t very nice.”

“No shit, Sherlock.”

Dirk frowns and cocks his head. “What does that mean?”

“I… never mind,” Theodore mutters, shaking his head and snapping another strand. “Hold onto me, I’ll get you down.”

Seeing no reason to be anything but obedient on this occasion, Dirk reaches through the new gap in the net to place his hands on his knight’s shoulders, skimming his palms across them as his arms wrap around his neck. It takes some fussing and manoeuvering, and a bit of kicking to free his foot of a tangle of rope, but eventually he finds himself cradled in Theodore’s strong arms, his knight’s hands under his legs and body much as they had been this morning in the mountains— though that now feels like a lifetime ago.

“Ah, yes— thank you, Sir Brotz,” he mumbles, hurriedly twisting out of Theodore’s arms to find his own footing, stubbornly ignoring the pins and needles in his right foot. “Excellent rescuing. Very gallant.”

“It’s cool.”

“It’s cool,” Dirk parrots, bewildered and disapproving. “I wonder if that water didn’t just wash away all your manners.”

“Sorry, sorry, I’m…” Theodore sighs. The shadows under his eyes look more pronounced than ever before, somehow draining the blush from the rest of his face. “It’s… a lot to take in.”

“Yes. I suppose it is.”

Silence hangs between them. Not a comfortable one, the kind to which they’ve become accustomed, but something stilted and cagey. Absolutely beastly.

“Bibbit!”

Oh, speaking of…

“Hello, darling,” Dirk greets politely as his colourful little saviour bolts forward, wrapping her arms around his waist and nearly bowling him over in the process. “Oof. Yes, um, very… scrappy. Thank you.”

She grins up at him, and Dirk blanches slightly at the flecks of blood around her lips. “Bibbit happy?”

His heart lurches. But he forces out a smile, tucking her matted hair out of her face. “Close enough, pet.”

“Dirk?”

Dirk looks up to his knight and swallows dryly. “Yes?”
Theodore looks at him, sadness in those beautiful eyes. “I… think we need to talk.”

He looks so small. So tired and afraid and guilty but still, even beaten down and brokenhearted, still he forges on. A new weight has settled upon his shoulders, it seems; and Dirk fears, more than anything, that it is a weight he simply cannot carry for him.

But he owes it to him to try.

Heart heavy and jaw tight, Dirk nods. “Yes,” he whispers. “I believe we do.”

Words can’t describe how relieved he was, to find Dirk alive and well. Just like they can’t describe the anger he felt towards those bandits for threatening him; or at himself, for leaving him alone, for not getting there in time to prevent it.

But whatever relief he’d felt, it wasn’t to last. Not with the prospect of the hardest conversation they’d ever had hanging over their heads.

Todd watches, wistful, as Dirk bids goodbye to Beast at the treeline. As he pets her hair, delicately wipes the blood off her face with his handkerchief, and sends her on her way with his thanks and a dazzling smile. He wonders if all those times he thought Dirk had done similar for him—bid him good luck on his patrols, tended to his wounds—were all just wishful thinking. If this is a new reality for them, when did it start? How many of their memories are manufactured?

“What have I told you about worrying too much?”

He rolls his eyes automatically, shuffling aside on the fallen log he’s settled atop beside their sleepy dodos to make room for Dirk. “I don’t care about forehead lines, Dirk.”

“Hmph. Well, it’s a good thing you rather pull them off, then,” Dirk huffs, sitting gingerly beside him.

Todd chuckles, ducking his head and looking at the half-assembled stack of kindling at his feet. He’d thought about lighting a campfire, just so he’d have something to occupy himself. But he can’t really rationalise it with Dirk sitting next to him being a walking, talking sun, and they’re probably better off not getting too cosy in case the bandits track them down again. Instead he just rests his elbows on his knees and looks down at his hands, rubbing his left palm with his right thumb and wishing he could magically conjure up the right thing to say. “So…”

“So,” Dirk agrees seriously, stretching his legs out in front of him and crossing them at the ankles. “…Odd day.”

No shit. Todd nods, scratching at Crawley’s neck as he nuzzles in for attention. “Odd day.”

“Oddest yet, do you think?”

“Probably.”

He doesn’t really know where to go from there, and it seems like Dirk doesn’t either. For the moment, neither of them really do anything but stare ahead and pet their disgruntled birds as the dark sky above them begins, almost imperceptibly, to lighten with the dawn.
But then Dirk sighs, cuddling Reginald’s head to his chest, and Todd knows that they’re gonna talk about this whether they like it or not.

“Well…” Dirk murmurs, shoulders tense and eyes on the skies. “I daresay you ought to tell me about this other world of yours.”

He tries- God knows he tries- to lay it all out as cleanly and logically as he can. But it's difficult when he himself is still tripping over the memories, having not had time or peace to really sort them out and get the story straight. The important thing is he tries.

"-when a kitten went off and set off a shark explosion."

Some of this stuff sounds batshit crazy even to himself, but he doesn't really know enough about their past life to dispute it.

"And that was... a case?" says Dirk, brows furrowed as he tries out the unfamiliar terminology.

"Our first one, yeah," says Todd. "The next one... well, I think that's the one that got us here, somehow. It had to do with Wendimoor, but I still don't know exactly what set this off."

"This', of course, being our entire lives as we know them?"

It sounds weird and sucky when he puts it like that, but that doesn't make it any less true. "Yeah."

"So we just... what, finished our case and then took a thirty-three year holiday in a fantasy land? How did we turn back into babies?"

"No, I... I don't think we've been here that long," says Todd, squinting as he sorts through his memories of this place, trying to find something that feels like a natural cut-off point between real and fake. Of course it's not that easy- nothing's ever that easy. It’s like there’s something getting in the way of that part, some block the water couldn’t wash away. "I-I'm not sure exactly how long we've been here, but before that I think all our memories of this place are..."

He can't say it. He doesn't want to say it- he's having a hard enough time even believing it.

"Fake?"

Dirk's voice is small, wounded. Todd wants to comfort him, somehow- it would be the most natural thing in the world to wrap him in a hug, kiss that sadness away. Or it would be to Sir Brotz. Todd Brotzman, however, has no idea where the fuck he stands with Dirk right now and isn't overly comfortable with any of this shit, and so just sits and stares ahead so the sight of Dirk's face doesn't break him. "Yeah," he mumbles, ducking his head and rubbing the back of his neck. "Something like that."

"So... that would mean that..."

He trails off, and Todd risks a look at him. He immediately wishes he didn't, because Dirk looks like his entire world has just crumbled under his feet.

"That would mean that..." says Dirk, swallowing dryly. "That this isn't real. None of it is. Everything we've ever known, it's all just... a lie."
It's getting harder to breathe. "I guess it does."

Crawly trills in agitation, butting against Todd's hand. He pets him, staring into his beady bird eye. Jesus. He has a fucking pet dodo. A giant dodo. Of course none of this is real- it all seems so fucking obvious in hindsight. How was he ever fooled into thinking that any of this was normal?

"What about us?"

Todd frowns, looking back up at Dirk and finding himself pinned under his searching stare. "Uh- what about us?"

"Are we real?" Dirk presses, lightly pushing Reginald away, oblivious to the bird's complaints. "You and I, are we- are we together? In the other world?"

Todd's heart aches. "No," he says softly. "Not like this. I mean, we're friends- best friends, actually, I, uh, don't think I told you that enough..."

Dirk takes a few moments to process that, looking down at his hands. Todd only needs to glance at them to see that they're shaking. "So..." says Dirk, so quietly that Todd almost misses it entirely. "That's my choice then, is it?"

"Your choice?" Todd repeats, confused.

"Yes, my choice- the choice you were so eager for me to make earlier, Theodore," Dirk snaps, and Todd can't help starting a little at his anger. "Either I stay here- in this perfect, magical world, with you, or I go back to a world I don't even remember, where I appear to be little more than a lonely tool of a broken universe. That's about the size of it, is it not?"

"I..." God, Todd doesn't even know how to argue that.

"Hm. Well, this is a head-scratcher- what ever should I choose?"

"Okay, look, I get it but... I mean, this world isn't all that great, right?" Todd attempts, waving his hand broadly. "I mean, come on, we still didn't find any other answers for why we even came out here in the first place! As soon as you go home, your dad's going to get you hitched to some guy you've never even met, and we won't even be together anyway- we're barely together now, I mean... this is all temporary, right? One way or another you're gonna get married someday- hopefully to someone you actually, you know, know, but it's gonna happen."

"Well, obviously that was the flipping point of this entire venture, Todd!" Dirk exclaims, throwing his hands up in exasperation. "To get out of this blasted wedding, so I could buy more time to wear my father down because there's no way in heck that I will ever marry anyone but you!"

...Wait. What?

Nothing moves, nothing speaks, nothing but silence follows the prince's declaration- not even Todd's heart dares to beat. He stares at Dirk, uncomprehending, and Dirk stares back, unyielding.

"...What?" Todd rasps, barely enough breath to speak.

Dirk just looks at him like he's lost his damn mind. Which he might have done, if he really thinks he heard what he just heard. "Why did you think we were doing this? I've hardly been coy about my intentions towards you, Theodore."

"I..." Todd shakes his head. He springs up, ignoring the disgruntled squawk of his bird as he paces
the length of the log- he can't sit still any longer. "We- we were gonna get you out of some crappy arranged marriage. Get you your freedom back."

"Yes, my freedom to marry a man of my choosing," says Dirk, slowly, as if speaking to a child. "Which is obviously you."

"In what fucking universe is that obvious?!" Todd cries, turning on Dirk with wild eyes.

Dirk, for his part, looks a little sheepish. "Well- granted, we haven't discussed marriage, as such, but I hadn't fully planned out my proposal and I rather wanted it to be a surprise-"

"I... Dirk, I don't..."

"I mean, obviously you don't have to say yes!" Dirk hastens to assure him- as if that's what's fucking wrong with this picture. "I'm perfectly aware that it might be one of those 'institutions' that you're not fond of, but I wanted to ask nonetheless- if you said no, I was going to suggest something a little less traditional, we don't have to get legalities and ceremonies involved if you'd rather not, although Moon knows I do love a good ceremony, I already had my crown selected for the occasion-"

"Dirk- why would I have thought we were gonna get married?"

That finally catches Dirk off guard. He looks up at Todd in bewilderment, brow pinched. "Well... I'm very open in my affections, Todd. As are you. I thought it was a given that we were both rather in it for the long haul."

"I... no, Dirk, this is crazy I'm your knight," Todd argues. "I'm your servant, I- this was never gonna be it for us. I've always known that- I thought you did, too."

"I always knew it would be difficult, yes- but you know what they say, traditions are just peer pressure from dead people! I'll get my father's blessing somehow- and if I don't, well, I suppose eloping is another option."

"And why the hell do you think I'm a person you should be marrying anyway?"

Silence falls, even thicker than the last, as Dirk looks at him dumbfoundedly. "Why... because... you're you," he says softly, reaching out to touch his fingers to Todd's. "You're Theodore, of course I want to-"

"That's... that's just, the dumbest idea I've ever heard."

"Todd..." says Dirk, hand dropping away.

"I mean- seriously, me?" God, he almost laughs- except he feels a lot closer to crying right now. "I- I'm just... me, I'm, I'm not cut out for... Jesus, what do I even have to give you, Dirk? You're the prince! You're gonna be the most powerful man in Wendimoor one day, and I'm just..."

"Todd, you're being unreasonable-"

"Oh, no, I am being perfectly reasonable," Todd cuts in, running his hands through his hair as he resumes his pacing. "God, I- are you kidding? I can't do that- you're talking about me, what, being a prince? Or a lord, or... Jesus the kid who made this place really doesn't know how titles work, I- whatever, I, look, you can't seriously expect me to be good at... that, right? That's, that's not me, I'm not... I'm like, the last person anyone should want running their fucking kingdom. I'm the last person you should want carrying half of a fucking marriage. Do you seriously think I'd be a good husband? I'm barely a good knight, I nearly let you die, like... so many times, I can't- it wouldn't work! It just
couldn't, and if you don't see that then you must be even more naive than everyone thinks you are!"

The words fly out of his mouth fast as a throwing dagger, and cut twice as deep- he wants to take them back the moment they leave.

But he guesses even fairytale lands can't be that easy.

Dirk stares at him, open-mouthed and stricken. But before Todd can say anything Dirk is closing his mouth, distress morphing into defensive anger even as his eyes well up.

"Well," he says, voice thick with unshed tears. "I suppose this was rather a waste of time then, wasn't it?"

Todd doesn't know what to say. He's already said too much.

Dirk laughs, a humourless, watery laugh, and stands up from the log; Todd doesn't miss the way he clutches onto Reginald's neck for support. "Might as well pop off back home then, hadn't I? Serves me right, I suppose, for not having this discussion a week ago, but such is life."

"Dirk..."

"No, no. It's quite alright." Dirk steps shakily around to the dodo's side, clutching onto the saddle. "My fault entirely. But I suppose I might as well go and see what prospects father dearest has dug up now, mightn't I? Hardly any reason to dilly-dally in these woods any longer."

"Dirk, please..."

"Enough, Theodore."

Todd freezes. Even through his tears, Dirk's voice cuts through him- firm, authoritative. Imperial. He's never had it directed at him before- not like this. Dirk's voice has never sounded so... cold.

His prince looks at him, and his eyes are wounded but his voice is impenetrable. "You have said quite enough."

Turning back to Reginald, Dirk clutches tight to the saddle and attempts to haul himself up, wheezing and cursing in exertion. That, at least, is enough to break Todd from his stupor and pull him forward.

"Dirk, here, let me-"

"I don't- hng- need your help!" Dirk snaps, dropping heavily to the ground and waving Todd away. "I am perfectly capable of- judge- no!" He growls and tugs the bird closer to the log, climbing on top of it to give himself a leg up. It takes a couple more minutes of awkward flailing, in which Todd finds himself physically aching to step in, but eventually Dirk makes it into the saddle, sitting astride the dodo with a thunderous expression of annoyance on his face that does nothing to detract from the tear tracks on his cheeks. "There. See? I'm not utterly useless."

"I never said you were-"

"Let's not dwell on who said what, now, shall we?" says Dirk in a clipped voice, gathering up Reginald's reins. "Probably best I get a move on- I'm not wild about the idea of carrying out my walk of shame in broad daylight, so time is of the essence."

"Dirk..." says Todd, jogging up to put a restraining hand on Dirk's steed. "Look, I'm sorry, that... that
"I would appreciate it if you would unhand my bird, Sir Brotz."

"Jesus- what about the other world, huh? What, you're just gonna let it collapse, just because you and me had a falling out?"

The prince glares down at him, and Todd feels himself torn between wanting to glare back in defiance and bow his head in apology. It's getting harder and harder to separate the thoughts between the warring versions of himself.

"The world isn't ending, Todd," he says flatly. "Or if it is, I hardly think it's anything to do with me. I think you vastly overestimate my importance in that respect."

"What, you think I'm lying to you?" Todd demands, bristling. He's kept some things from the prince in the past, but this-

"Maybe," says Dirk, turning his face away as if looking at Todd is too painful. "Apparently, the other you does that rather a lot."

Todd flinches, physically struck by the words, his blood running cold. "Dirk..."

"Please, Theodore," Dirk whispers, blinking rapidly. "I... I don't want to speak of this anymore."

Todd knows that there's more to say. That there is still a whole conversation to be had, a lot of apologies to exchange, if they're ever going to salvage anything from this wreckage.

But he doesn't know how to start; and it's clear that Dirk won't start for him.

Throat tight and stomach knotted, he nods. "Okay," he rasps, reaching sloppily for Crawly's reigns. "Let's get you home."

"I can manage on my own, thank you-"

"Dirk."

No arguments. Not on this. He's protected Dirk this far- oath bound or otherwise, he's not going to leave him to get lost or killed at the last leg. With his jaw clenched, Dirk nods tightly, and waits as Todd mounts his own steed before urging his into a brisk pace, not even looking back to check that Todd is following.

But follow him he does. Hell, he's already followed him to the ends of the not-earth; may as well finish the job.

Even if his heart sinks like a stone in his chest with every clawed footfall.

*You've ruined everything, Brotzman.*

*You've ruined everything...*
always. A familiar ritual, even displaced as it is to a foreign land, comforting in its predictability.

And yet until he sees Silas, it feels cold and unfamiliar as a distant mountain.

He attempts to smile, and thinks he even manages to make it somewhat cheerful. Comforting, insomuch as he is able to comfort with a smile alone. He attempts to catch the other man's eye across the field, make a connection of some kind, mend the bridge so hastily burnt.

But Silas Dengdamor will not even meet his gaze.

Brushed aside and brokenhearted, Panto goes about his training numbly, focusing all his attention on the fight to come; trying, desperately, to ignore that which he has already lost.

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It's kinda quiet, all the way up here. Was it always this quiet?

Bart sighs, knocking over a teeny tiny tree with her big toe. The crash gives her something to listen to, and then all the squeaks and squawks that come with it. It doesn't last long, though. It never does. Soon all the lil’ critters have skedaddled, tucked away in new little holes and nests and things with their lil’ critter friends.

Something damp hits her nose. Two somethings. Three. She looks up at the sky, and scowls at the grey clouds right above her head. There's a storm comin'. Great.

Yanking her holey canvas hood over her head, Bart sits her butt down heavily on some meadow, yanks her knees up to her chin, and wraps her arms around them as the rain starts to fall and her fingers trace the tiny, soft circle of rope and fur on her finger. Even the rain is quiet. Cold, and quiet.

She could sure use a talking louse or two right now…

---

It must be cold. It sure looks cold. She's never actually felt the cold, though, so she supposes it must be alright.

Or maybe she is always cold, and what she's never known is warmth.

Mona tilts her head really far- she likes this shape, it's the only shape that can move its head like this- and shakes out her wings. She has really big eyes like this, and she uses them to peer at the snow all around her. It's soft, and pretty, like it always is. Such a pretty view from all the way up here, where she can only go if she wears her wings. But it's a cold view. This must be what cold looks like- she doesn't know what it feels like, but she sure knows what it looks like.

And warm, she thinks, must look something like that pretty shiny prince.

She looks out on the pure, pretty snow, and wonders, wistfully, if warm will ever come to play again.
It won't add up. It can't add up.

Snarling, the witchykookoo hurls her chalk at the board, splintering it. It rains like hail down upon the cave floor, like the countless ones before it. It crumbles under her foot, and there is nothing but dust in her wake.

Just like the universe will if she can't make these darn numbers work.

Her boys growl and whimper at her feet, electric fur bristling with agitation. They know. They all know; soon all this will be over, and there's nothing they can do but wait for her, their so-called pack leader, to find the answer.

But something tells her the only answer they were going to get just fell through that portal.

It makes sense that they reach Star Rock quickly, he supposes. That nostalgic meadow isn't far out of the kingdom's bounds, and the portal did much of the arduous travelling for them. But it feels wrong, somehow, that a journey of how many thousands of steps should end so swiftly back where they started. As if it never happened. As if nothing has changed.

Everything has changed. The life they had is gone; and Dirk hardly had time to see it go.

He keeps his eyes fixed ahead as they break through the treeline. Clifftown glows with the many captured flames of its denizens, a constellation to mirror that which fades slowly from view above their heads as the vendors, farmers, blacksmiths all rise with the dawn, a thousand lamps shedding light on their preparations. Above them stands the Citadel; proud and majestic, reflecting the beginnings of the rosy glow of dawn. It will surely shine dazzlingly in the sunrise.

The sight fills him with familiarity, comfort, but also a pang of uncertainty. What will await him within those walls, he wonders? He has never had a knack for predicting his father's actions, and he has little idea what to expect. Best case scenario, his running away has taught the king a valuable lesson about parental pressure, and he gives Dirk a hug and a slap on the wrist and calls off the whole marriage affair altogether. Worst case scenario...

"You don't have to go back."

Oh, how he wishes he could still draw comfort from such a statement; how he wishes he could draw comfort from the voice that delivers it. But alas, on this occasion his beloved knight is a source for his anxieties, not an antidote. "And what would I do instead, Sir Brotz? Take my chances in the mountains? Live in Bart the giant's hair?"

Theodore's dodo trots up beside him, the knight watching Dirk with wide, sad eyes. "You could come with me."

Dirk swallows, ducking his head. "And where are you going?" he asks, though he fears he already
"To the other world," says Theodore, confirming his fears in a quiet voice, killing him softly. "I... I have to do something, Dirk. If what I saw is true, if Farah and Tina and Hobbs are really out there, dying in a ditch someplace... I have to help. Somehow."

"And how are you going to get there?" Dirk demands, embittered.

"I'll try Wakti first, and follow her lead," answers Theodore, sighing. "I guess I may have to go all the way back to Amanda, but... guess I'll figure that out as I go along."

"So your plan is to wander alone through the woods and swamps and mountains until you die or you find something?"

Theodore looks at him, fondness twinkling in his eyes. "It's not the dumbest plan I've heard all week."

Dirk can't look at that fondness; he can't bear it. He turns back to the castle, clutching tight to Reginald's reins to stop his own hands from shaking. "Well... I would tell you to look after yourself, but I don't see you changing the habit of a lifetime."

His knight snorts. It is quite a joyless sound; evidently Theodore is having as hard a time looking on the bright side as Dirk is. "Yeah, well... No promises."

Swallowing thickly, Dirk fights the urge to rub his eyes, or bury his face in the warmth and safety of his steed's feathery neck. He mustn't show weakness; if he gives himself the opening, he's not convinced he won't latch onto his darling Theodore and follow him once more to the edge of the world.

Except he is not my darling; or my Theodore. Not anymore.

"Well," he rasps, blinking against the tears threatening to spill forth. "I wish you good fortune, sir knight."

He can't look at Theodore's face. He just cannot. He isn't strong enough.

"...Yeah. You too, Your Highness."

Theodore has never spoken his title in such a way before. There is no teasing, no flirting, no biting sarcasm; it is simply a statement, a melancholy formality, tinged with softness but hanging in the air as cool and impersonal as a handshake.

It breaks Dirk's heart in a way it had yet to be broken.

Keeping himself together is a challenge greater than any they have yet weathered, but he does so nonetheless. He does not look back at Theodore as he speaks. "Moonbeam on the morrow, my liege..."

And unable to bear hearing his knight's reply, he spurs his steed into movement, setting off at a brisk canter to cross what little remains of the distance between himself and the pile of bricks and stardust he once called home. Leaving his Sir Brotz, the alleged Mr. Brotzman, his Todd, behind.

He knows without a doubt that he leaves his heart with him.
Good things are round the corner, friends, bear with me...

Comments are the flowers in my meadow <3
Tournament Day

Chapter Summary

Some non-lethal violence this chapter, as you might expect from that title. And, hopefully, something that makes all the angst I just put you through worthwhile.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Naturally, there had been fanfare. Dirk would expect nothing less of his return; he only wishes that return had been in any way triumphant.

The fanfare wasn’t the first response, unfortunately. No, that honour went to Hermit- who had glared at him like he was trying to remove his royal head from his shoulders with his eyes, and then snippily left him in the bewildered company of Newt to storm off and tell Dirk’s father. Then of course there had been the rubbernecking townsfolk roused by the kerfuffle, the armed escorts- and, finally, his Majesty the King himself.

He, as expected, had not been best pleased.

It would have been quite terrifying, or possibly even funny, if Dirk had felt in any way prepared to experience emotions besides the cold, cloying sadness that had settled in his lungs since early this morning. King Rigmarole was, almost literally, hopping mad, and it had taken quite some time for the black in his eyes to dissipate and that rage to give way to his usual tired, patronising reason. If he and Dirk were to swap powers, he would have had steam hissing out of his ears. But he cooled off (figuratively speaking) eventually, and returned to a more time-honoured manner of reprimand: the lengthy lecture. And it was a doozy. A good hour at least, by Dirk’s reckoning, and Riggins’ face kept its furious beetroot tinge for much of it.

Dirk had scarcely paid attention. He had made noises of agreement in the appropriate places, of course, lest the whole tedious process drag out longer than necessary. But truth be told, he had far more important things on his mind than the chastening of his father- which had lost its edge the second Dirk had safely assessed that it was not going to result in time spent in the dungeons, or being hurled off the battlements.

It was, however, doomed to result in a wedding no matter what. And at the time, he had struggled to remember why he should care.

The morning had passed in something of a blur. Apparently while Dirk himself was being pushed and pulled around by servants, bathed and scrubbed of the past week’s accumulated dirt and dressed up in his finest silk, his father had been hard at work elsewhere setting up and spreading word that the tournament was back on. It was actually rather amazing that he had brought it all together in such a short space of time- but then again, he had been gifted an unexpected week of extra time in which to make the arrangements. All he’d been missing was the reward.

Dirk had only had minutes to behold himself in the mirror before the festivities began; and he was quite something to behold. All plucked and primped and prettied up like a prize hog, a fine shimmer of golden dust applied to his skin to compensate for his currently lacklustre glow, seemingly every
jewel he owned encrusting his hands and neck, even circling prettily around his bare ankles. A week’s worth of filth scrubbed away; an adventure’s worth of cuts and scrapes papered over with make-up and pretty things. It was like he’d never left.

And then one of his ceremonial crowns had been placed atop his head, and several of Starfall’s finest had arrived to shepherd him to the event; he was the guest of honour, after all.

The crown had felt heavier, somehow. He’d worn it countless times- often on occasions where it was inappropriate or impractical- but today it felt like it weighed a thousand tonnes, pressing down on his neck as he had stepped out into view. The hastily assembled audience had cheered, roared, all eyes on him giving him all the attention and adoration and yet, for once in his life, he would have given anything to be invisible. To just slip into a pauper’s clothes and be a nondescript face in the crowd.

But he had smiled, and waved. Just as he would continue to smile and wave at every moment it was deemed appropriate, even to this minute, a good two hours later. He cares not that the motions are soulless facsimiles of themselves; let the people draw what conclusions they will. It makes no difference to him. Who cares what they think? It will not change the outcome of this event, nor would it matter. Nothing matters.

Goodness. He sounds like such a misery guts; wallowing in gloomy rumination, mask plastered in place, rebelling against no one but himself. He’s starting to sound just like…

“Son.”

“Hm?” Dirk mumbles, toying absently with one of the many ornate rings on his fingers.

“Son; congratulations are in order, don’t you think?”

Dirk looks up reluctantly, and finds a quite unremarkable sight awaiting him in the arena. One man standing proud- sword held high, helmet under his arm, a grin for all his adoring public- and another crawling away with his tail between his legs (literally). Same old, same old. One by one his suitors have been falling, giving way to the strongest, the most resourceful. Moon only knows what ghastly muscle-bound clotpole he’ll be left with at the end. But given that none of these men hold a candle to the man he thought he would marry, he supposes it hardly makes a difference.

Under the scrutiny of his father, Dirk offers the victor a tight smile and a wave. The man, apparently convinced by the flimsy pretence, responds with a sunny beam before turning back to bask further in the attention of the crowd. “Great lunk,” Dirk mutters to himself, without heat. He has little fight left in him, but even in his deflated state he has energy to complain.

“Dirk.”

A familiar flicker of worry ignites upon his father’s chastisement, but is swiftly extinguished. If nothing else, his fear of the man has vastly diminished; what more does he hold over him? What power does he have? He can scarcely ruin a life that has already ended. Unfortunate, really, that freedom from his father’s judgment should come at such a hefty price.

Riggins sighs, running a hand down his face as the court’s loudest squire- who appears to be enjoying the attention even more than the battling princes- announces their next competitor. “Son. Pay attention; you should be present for this. It is your future they fight for.”

Dirk snorts, kicking his heels against his chair. “They can have it.”

The next chap- a man with pink hair and chiselled features- steps forth. He’s been up a few times already, from what Dirk can recall of his disinterested spectating. Defeated every foe he’s come up
against. Dirk supposes he’s good-looking, in a… predictable sort of way. He certainly seems to be a crowd favourite, ladies and gentlemen alike visibly swooning at the sight of him, lauding his victories with vigour. He’s alright, Dirk supposes. A marriage to a fellow like that would certainly make his father happy; he seems like everything a prince is supposed to be. Strong, self-assured, skilled. Probably has an ego the size of the Moon, but he’ll make a decent enough king one day if he finds someone to take him down a peg. Perhaps Dirk could have been that someone, if his heart were not already spoken for. Perhaps he, too, would be charmed by the man’s looks and skill, pleasantly lust-addled at the ripple of his muscular frame in the heat of battle, intrigued by the hint of untouchable mystery in that crowd-pleasing smile, and actually rather looking forward to his near-inevitable victory. A challenge, wrapped in poise and talent and a conveniently scrumptious outer shell—what’s not to like?

But his forehead is not within easy reach of Dirk’s lips at any given moment for impromptu kisses, so honestly what is even the point?

“He is a good man,” his father states quietly, over his polite applause for the pink fellow and the most recent victor as they take to the battleground. “Respectable family—farming family, actually. You do like animals.”

“So you’re saying I ought to marry him for his sheep?” Dirk snorts, crossing his arms. “And they say romance is dead.”

Riggins sighs again. Seems all he’s done in Dirk’s presence today—aside from yell—is sigh. “I am merely suggesting that he would be… good to you. Good for you.”

“My knees are weak—do be sure to catch me when I swoon.”

“I am trying my best, Dirk,” says Riggins, withering. “Do you prefer someone else? If someone has caught your eye, son, say the word and this whole exercise can be forfeit.”

Dirk hesitates, staring at his father in surprise. “I… excuse me?”

“I only suggested this tournament because I knew you would never make a choice on your own,” Riggins mutters, casting a withering look towards Dirk. “But if your heart is set on one of the defeated competitors, I’ll not force you to settle. Which is it? The delegate from the mountains, perhaps?”

Oh. Of course. Dirk wilts in his seat. “No father,” he mumbles. “No one here has caught my interest.”

“Hm. Well, if you are quite certain. I would like to set you off on the right foot in your marriage, son.” He settles back in his seat, attention diverted from Dirk by the ringing clash of swords on the field. “You have two more battles in which to speak up, it would seem,” he says quietly, nodding towards the battle now in progress. “Only three men left standing.”

Dirk considers it a moment, fiddling with the signet ring he’d had foisted upon his finger. It is certainly more leeway than he thought his father would give him, especially after all the fuss and bother Dirk had caused him over the last week. He could take the offer, pick someone harmless out of the mix. His mind wanders to the sweet Dengdamor boy who had been knocked early from the running. He’s smaller than a lot of the other great lugs in this contest, softer, and seems to be just as reluctant to be here as Dirk is. He isn’t Dirk’s true love by any means, but perhaps they could be… comfortable.

But how can he possibly settle for ‘comfortable’? After loving and losing his soulmate, how can
anything else compare?

He sighs, closing his eyes and shaking his head. “It makes no difference,” he murmurs, toying with the ring. It is one he had planned to gift to Theodore, one day; in case the wedding and engagement bands were not enough to cement his status as family. Wearing it now stings like salt in a weeping wound. “Choose who you will.”

The king, thankfully, falls silent. Reluctantly, Dirk opens his eyes; he doesn’t want to attract any more judgement from his father for not paying attention. He looks to the arena just in time to see Prince Charming disarm his competition in one fluid motion, sending his foe’s sword flying and his own scissors to his chest, stopping just short of a fatal blow. The crowd, predictably, erupts into applause, and the defeated prince’s face falls as he realises his winning streak has been cut short. The pink-haired victor, to his merit, does not gloat, choosing instead to clasp his fallen foe’s hand in a good-natured shake. He also does not seem quite as overjoyed as one might expect, but perhaps he is simply too modest to let such a thing show upon his handsome face.

“Gentlefolk, reigning victorious once again: His Majesty, Prince Panto Trost!”

The audience roars their approval at the squire’s announcement. Panto casts his eyes briefly about them, smiling and nodding in polite acknowledgement, before his gaze alights upon Dirk in the royal box.

Credit where credit is due: he does have the second most beautiful blue eyes in Wendimoor.

*Perhaps in another life, Prince Trost,* muses Dirk apologetically, with a feeble smile and a small wave. *I could have fallen for you.*

Panto Trost meets his eyes steadily, and returns the smile and the wave—both of which look rather silly on a man of his stature and confidence, but which tug a reluctant smile from Dirk’s tight lips nonetheless. Something about the gesture feels… *knowing.* A little spark of understanding, of *connection.*

*Who broke your heart for you, Panto Trost?*

“Ladies, gentlemen, fairfolk, the time is now; only two noble princes remain!”

The king graces Dirk with a sidelong glance. “Last chance to speak your will, Dirk.”

Dirk watches Panto dab the sweat from his brow, considering. Perhaps he should take his father up on his offer, choose Panto now and put an end to it. Perhaps in the absence of a marriage of love, they can forge a companionship of understanding. An exclusive little lonely hearts club for the two of them.

But the idea of choosing anyone who is not *Theodore,* even out of practicality, sours on his tongue like a betrayal.

He sets his jaw and stares ahead. “I have nothing to say.”

Riggins looks on him in uncomprehending sadness, and waves his hand for the squire to proceed. “As you wish, son.”

*Oh, my wish is not yours to grant, father,* thinks Dirk bitterly, settling back in his seat with a sigh. With a little bit of luck, Trost will put the competition out of his misery swiftly; though Dirk is in no hurry to walk down the aisle, he would very much like to leave this place now and wallow in private, while he still has some privacy left. He imagines such a commodity is hard to come by as a
married man.

Dirk tunes out the announcement of the final duel. Panto’s name he already knows, and the other man’s is likely irrelevant. A quick glance reveals him to be the one who has refused to remove his helmet even between battles- the one who stands a good foot shorter than most everyone else except Dengdamor, and has only made it to the final by the skin of his teeth. He just about held his own against the others, but against Trost he won’t last thirty seconds. Or at least Dirk hopes that be the case; he does not much like the idea of being married off to a man who won’t even show his face. He sighs, leans his head upon his hand, and drifts out of focus to wait for what may come next.

The first strike of metal, however, draws him back in. It is loud, brutally loud, and he looks up in time to see the fleeting expression of surprise on Trost’s face as he fends off a no-holds-barred lunge from his opponent. He artfully deflects further strikes, of course, but the man is not easily discouraged.

“Good grief,” Dirk mutters, blinking at the merciless onslaught.

Riggins hums quietly, giving his moustache a thoughtful stroke. “It seems someone is quite eager to win your hand.”

Dirk knows little about combat- and frankly doesn’t much care to learn- but even he is drawn in by this particular fight, and not just because his own future is the prize. Every skilled, graceful strike of Panto’s, his opponent matches with dogged, bloody-minded ferocity. When Panto’s blows make contact, he recovers in a heartbeat. When he is knocked down, he springs back up no matter the severity of the injury, or the dents in his armour. He forges on, unyielding, in a display of idiotic, bullheaded stubborness that could rival-

“Father,” Dirk demands, batting at the king’s arm frantically. “Father, what is that man’s name?”

Riggins, thankfully, does not berate Dirk for his lack of concentration, greeting his tacit admission of such with merely a disapproving frown. “Prince Baggins, of the marshes,” he says patiently, brows wrinkling in thought. “I met him earlier this week. I have to say, I’m surprised at his competence- I believe he has spent much of his time in this kingdom down at the tavern, drinking like a fish. But I suppose people can surprise you.”


Prince Baggins is swift, there is no doubt about it. But Panto is swifter. While Baggins recovers from a hasty counterstrike, Panto reaches out quick as a flash, knocking the tenacious prince’s sword from his hands and his feet out from under him. Baggins goes down like a tonne of bricks, and this time Panto is on top of him before he can recover, blade to his throat. Baggins, only halfway to sitting when Panto caught him, lies with his short, swamp-brown cape strewn carelessly to the dirt behind him, exposing the armour-clad arm that props him up from the ground.

And the tattered, dirtied scrap of golden silk tied carefully around his bicep.

Dirk does not think, does not hesitate; his legs are standing, his lips are moving, and his voice is flying out to the field and taking his heart with it.

“Todd!”
The day passes in a blur; too fast to perceive and yet slow, slow as a snail. He knows not exactly how much time has passed since that fateful moment on the hill; only that within that space the world seems to have reset, and his brief, promising reprieve come to an end. The sun prince had returned, and the tournament was due to go ahead presently. Only a few measly hours of regular training had passed before he and his competitors had been urged towards the wings in the steadily filling arena, excitement bubbling; if it weren’t for the elevated anticipation rolling off the crowd and competitors in waves, it would be as if this past week had never happened. Now once again, Panto is but one in a sea of hopefuls, and Silas Dengdamor but a face in the crowd.

Silas...

He has tried on several occasions to catch his eye. Silas, however, always manages to be looking the other way, oblivious to Panto’s efforts- and yet, Panto thinks, not as unaware as he would have him believe. Panto has seen him, just once or twice, turn his face away in haste as Panto’s eyes flicker to it, tawny cheeks darkening in a soft blush. He is clearly mindful of Panto’s presence, his attention; but he does not engage. No matter what Panto does, how many smiles he sends his way, Silas does not return them.

Well. Never let it be said that Panto Trost cannot take a hint.

Unable to offer anything that Silas will accept- be it encouragement before he takes to the arena, or consolation when he faces his first and final defeat- Panto retreats into his own head, surrenders to the muscle memory of the fight. He comes when called, smiles and waves for the crowd, cuts down his foes quickly and efficiently. There is little flair to his fight now, little fire in his feet; how is he to imbue his technique with any flourishes, any artistry when his heart is all the way across the arena, pining for a man who will no longer give him the time of day? A man for whom the fight has already been lost?

The clash of steel against steel is a welcome distraction, something to drown out the racket of his conflicted thoughts. This, at least, is something he knows how to do. Something he can do right. Hearts, it seems, are hard to translate and prone to grievous miscommunication; fighting is technique and instinct, and a language in which he is fluent and loquacious to fault. Be it night or day, he can always fight; whether or not he knows what it is he is fighting for.

For all that the day is extraordinary, it is also predictable. Silas, despite all his hard work, is ousted from the running in his first foray after a sound defeat at the hands of one of the more unpleasant Highlands nobles. Panto, despite his struggle to muster any feeling for the fight on this occasion, had taken a certain amount of petty pleasure in trouncing that particular prince in return. Petty? Perhaps. But it is perhaps the last thing he has to offer Silas, and the only thing the man cannot outright reject, so he had pounced upon the opportunity. Besides, he was going to win anyway.

But that’s just it, isn’t it? He knows what is going to happen. He’ll win, in the end. He doesn’t need an inflated ego to know that- he has seen what those other princes can do in training, and they truly are no match. Victory will be his in one, two, however many fights remain, and he will walk away with the prize; the sun prince’s hand in marriage. A wondrous prize, to be sure, certainly illustrious, and the man is handsome and pleasant enough from what little Panto has seen of him. It is exactly the outcome his family had hoped for; exactly the prize he came to win.

Why, then, does it feel like the true prize is out of reach?

Slash, parry, thrust- and another one bites the dust. Panto wishes he could feel even a twinge of satisfaction. The clash of steel is replaced by the clamour of the crowd as he goes through the
motions, helping his defeated foe to his feet with a gracious smile and a shake of the hand. He offers his audience smiles, waves, nods of acknowledgement and hopes that none of the gestures look as mechanical as they feel. And last but not least, of course, he turns to acknowledge the sun prince himself.

The prince who, it seems, is just about the only person as reluctant to be here as Panto is.

It takes a nudge from the king and some inaudible cajoling to make the prince meet Panto’s gaze, and he does so with good grace, a small wave and a smile that is clearly just as thin-stretched on the surface as Panto’s own. He does have truly lovely eyes- possibly amongst the loveliest in the land, blue as a summer sky.

They couldn’t be much further from Silas’ if they tried.

Panto offers the prince a smile and a wave in return. Something tells him the full charm offensive would not be well received, and he is not sure he has it in him anyway. The prince’s face sweetly softens, though his smile still fails to reach his eyes. He looks, as he has done for much of the tournament so far, like his mind- and indeed his heart- are somewhere else entirely.

Now, here sits a man who knows a thing or two of heartbreak.

Panto looks away, and allows his mind to wander a while as the Starfall pages prepare him for the next fight- the final fight, as the squire seems all too keen to announce. Moon, has it really come so soon? The whole affair really has passed in a blur. One more quick victory, and it will all be over.

Perhaps it isn’t the worst thing. The sun prince seems sweet enough, and evidently Panto will not be the only lovelorn fool in their union. Perhaps they will bond through commiseration, build a trusting and honest relationship with one another, make the best of an unfortunate situation.

But it is hard to look forward to the prospect, knowing they both could have so much more.

Don’t be a greedy guts, Trost, he scolds himself, taking a deep gulp from a proffered waterskin. Be grateful for this opportunity, and take heart. You fight today for your family, for your future.

He hands the flask off to a passing page, flexes his shoulders, and passes his eyes over the crowd as he gives his scissors a restless twirl of anticipation. His gaze skims across mothers, fathers, children, lovers, friends; excitable spectators, bitter defeated rivals.

Brown eyes, soft and sweet as chocolate.

This time, it is Panto who averts his gaze. No sense in breaking his heart any further.

He takes a deep breath, gathers himself, and strides purposefully out onto the field; one way or another, it will be the last time. He allows himself to tune out the squire’s introductions- he knows his own name, and that of his opponent; though he has seen a great deal less of this man than of his other competitors, given that over this week Prince Baggins has spent little time in the training field, and altogether too much in the tavern. Panto waves once more to the crowd, to the royal box, and offers his hand sportingly to his final rival.

Prince Baggins- a short, quiet man with his helmet visor stubbornly in place- returns the gesture, and though his handshake is firm it is clipped and standoffish. Probably hungover. Panto’s eyebrow twitches. Well. If nothing else, it’ll be nice to teach this lout some manners.

He offers a nod, which is barely returned, and breaks their hold to fall back into a fighting stance, sword held high. The crowd whispers, the squire cries, and the time for pleasantries is over.
Let us end this. Once and for all.

Panto expects it to be much the same as his prior victories. A few minutes of polite, thoughtless duelling, learning the patterns of his rival, followed by a swift and decisive offensive to take the tournament.

The foremost and ferocious strike of his rival’s sword puts those expectations to bed.

Eyes widening, Panto hastily blocks another brutal strike, and then another. The vibrations through his blade are so strong as to almost jar the weapon from his hand, and after each blow another swiftly follows. It is hardly a skilled onslaught- Panto could pick out a hundred errors in his foe's form alone- but the sheer ferocity of it catches him utterly by surprise.

Falling belatedly into the swing of the fight, Panto artfully parries another brutal blow and quicksteps into the offensive, taking lead of the dance. He observes his foe, really observes him, curiosity piercing his melancholy. What he previously labelled loutishness, he reconsiders as a certain stoicism; the man may appear surly and unforthcoming, but there is no denying that amongst the posturing of the other competitors (aside from Silas, of course) he is practically humble. It would seem he had been saving his energy for this fight, giving his all to a barrage of messy, artless strikes which make up for what they lack in artistry with sheer, bloody-minded tenacity. Panto must give credit where it is due; the man fights with purpose, dedication. Even when Panto manages to knock him down- several times, in fact- he bounces back to his feet with barely a second's hesitation. He has clearly made it this far on determination alone- and his stamina may even be a match for Panto's.

He might even win.

Panto raises his eyebrow. Well. While meeting Silas may have dampened his investment in the outcome of this battle, this simply will not do. His heart may be broken, but his dignity is intact; and he has a reputation to uphold.

Flipping his hair from his eyes, and his sword to his dominant hand, Panto doubles down on his attack, and his foe does not stand a chance.

Snick-a-snack-snip, and his opponent's sword is out of his hand and cast uselessly to the ground. Barely a second later, his armoured butt hits the ground with a matching clatter, and Panto's own blade is leveled, steady and true, at his throat.

Forgetting himself a moment, Panto almost grins, opening his mouth to bid his felled opponent better luck next time.

"Todd!"

Panto blinks, risking a glance away to look for the voice. That was neither king nor squire- someone in the audience, perhaps? But who in the world is-?

He finds the source of the voice, though he does not quite believe it. The sun prince himself, standing from his seat, hands clasped tightly upon the carved wooden barrier of the royal box and eyes wide with worry and disbelief, fixed unflinchingly upon...

Panto looks back to his fallen foe, frowning. Slowly, giving the man time to scuttle back if desired, he catches his helmet on the tip of his blade and lifts it aside, letting it clatter to the floor and roll away.

The first thing he notices is the response from the crowd- confused mumblings are largely dwarfed by gasps and excitable whispers as all take in the mystery prince unmasked.
The second thing, is that the man appears to be somewhat smaller than even his armour would indicate.

Tilting his head, Panto regards the man- no, elf- on the ground, and two huge, resolute blue eyes regard him in return. His face is flushed a curious green from exertion, the tips of his long ears appear to be sore and chafed from the impact of the ill-designed helmet, and though his brow is lined and his eyes shadowed in weariness he stares back unwavering, jaw set in a hard line of determination.

Whoever this man is, he is most assuredly not Lord Baggins of the Marshes.

"Declare yourself, good sir," Panto demands, eyes narrowing.

"I'm To-" the elf bites his tongue and shakes his head, clenching his fists in the trampled grass. "My n-name is, uh, Sir Theodore Brotz."

The murmurings of the crowd increase in volume. Panto raises his eyebrow. "You stand in the place of a noble prince, Sir Brotz; why do you fight in his stead?"

"Uh, well, he- he was drunk when I found him and, uh, I figured this was the only way I could..."

He trails off, green cheeks darkening. "Could what?" Panto prompts; gentle, but firm.

Sir Brotz swallows and raises his chin, meeting Panto's gaze unavering. "Fight for the man I love."

Gasps, mutterings, cheers abound. Clearly, a large portion of this audience is very invested in this turn of events. Panto racks his brain; Sir Brotz, Sir Brotz, where does he know that name from...

Oh.

"You're his knight," he says quietly, eyes flicking to the sun prince- who looks like he is moments away from vaulting the royal box to join them.

Sir Brotz nods. "I am. Was. I, uh, kinda don't know exactly where we stand on that."

Panto considers him a moment, mind racing. He has heard things, of course- spend enough evenings in a local tavern, you'll hear all sorts. He has heard about the gallivanting prince and his dedicated knight, always at his side through thick and thin. Many a word has been used to describe Sir Brotz; rude, callous, surly, stoic, though even the worst words were frequently said with affection. The old piano man at the pub had it in his head that the two were more than mere knight and prince, and several nodding heads had agreed while others had scoffed.

Perhaps it is a good thing Panto decided not to bet against it.

He looks Sir Brotz in the eye, hand still tight on the hilt of his sword and aim still true. Sir Brotz looks back at him steadily, and though his face is stoic his eyes are wild- like a starving man fighting for scraps, fighting for his life. Not just his love. As if the two are one and the same, one impossible without the other. As if his prince’s love is the air in his lungs.

Admiration floods Panto's chest. Admiration, and just a splash of envy- to fight against such incalculable odds, against the skills of those trained from birth, against the circumstances of his own birth, and to come so very close by merit of tenacity alone...

Panto may have made some mistakes this week, mistranslated the mysterious language of the heart to his own detriment, but he is no fool.
He knows true love when he sees it.

Sir Brotz looks up at him uncomprehendingly as he pulls the blade from his throat—his confusion only deepens when Panto thrusts it into the ground, razor point harmlessly buried, and turns to face the royal box.

"Your Majesties," he declares, bending double in a sweeping bow. "I concede this fight to the rightful victor."

He pays no mind to the uproar his simple declaration causes, exclamations enraged and ecstatic alike pouring forth from the assembled crowd. Instead he turns back to the bewildered Sir Brotz, offering him a smile and an outstretched hand.

"Well fought, Sir Brotz," he murmurs. "Good victory, well deserved."

Eyes wide in disbelief, Sir Brotz takes his hand shakily, allowing Panto to help him to his feet. "I, uh—"

"Think nothing of it," Panto interjects, steadying the diminutive knight and brushing off his shoulders, leaning close and lowering his voice as he does so. "But if you wish to thank me; never take for granted what you have been fortunate enough to find."

He pulls back, and claps Sir Brotz on the shoulder with a meaningful look. "Fair terms, Sir Brotz?"

Tongue apparently tied, Sir Brotz nods dazedly.

Panto smiles and nods. "Good man," he murmurs, releasing his shoulder and gesturing grandly to the royal box. "Now go; I do not believe I am the prince you should be talking to."

Sir Brotz glances at the royal box, and gulps. "I... kinda screwed things up, last time we talked, I don't even know if he..."

"Will you take you back?"

The elf nods, shamefaced and yet somehow disgruntled. "It's... complicated."

Chuckling, Panto gives the man a friendly punch— it nearly sends him toppling, but he seems otherwise unharmed. "I've caught His Majesty's eye a few times this day, good sir, and I do believe he has been waiting for someone. So; best not keep him waiting any longer."

Breathing in deeply to steady himself, Sir Brotz flashes grateful eyes at Panto. "Thank you."

Panto inclines his head graciously, and watches the elf turn and, with purpose in his tiny frame, march towards the royal box to claim his reward; or face the consequences. Though it feels improper to gawp at what will no doubt be an intimate and important moment for the knight and his prince, Panto keeps a hand on his sword and an eye on the proceedings; a knight marrying a royal is not as unheard of as, say, a guardsman or commoner, but there is every chance that Sir Brotz has yet to face his hardest battle.

It is quite a novel feeling, actually; to know so little of a man, and yet know himself to be wholehearted in support of his cause. After all, what more noble cause is there? Panto, he came here with a good cause in mind, too; he would do anything for his family, even at the sacrifice of a few personal freedoms. Reputation, stability, both are worthy pursuits for sure, but...

True love? Now, that... that is the sort of thing a man can truly believe in.
He watches the knight approach the royal box, watches the play of shock and worry and boundless
love play across his prince's face, and tilts his head in thought.

Sir Brotz picked his battle; chose to fight for his love, even against impossible odds.

Panto casts his gaze aside, to the other defeated competitors- where money is changing hands and
sore losers slink away to drown their sorrows- and easily, he finds him.

Silas, for the first time today, meets his eyes.

Smiling softly, Panto nods.

Eyes wide and tongue tied, the young Dengdamor returns the gesture.

Perhaps Panto's own battle is not yet lost…

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I can't believe I'm doing this. Am I really doing this?!

Todd gulps thickly, fighting to keep his head held high as he marches across the battle-worn grass. A
huge part of him- the logical, cynical part that's been ruling his stupid brain ever since his world was
turned upside down yesterday, and probably long, long before that- is telling him to fucking run.
This is stupid, this is dangerous. Best case scenario, he and Dirk get to be together, but sooner or
later one or both of them realise their feelings are just a product of this weird new world and things
get messy. Worst case scenario, the king- shit, who is the king? He can't be Dirk's actual dad, right?
Shit, wrong thing to focus on right now- executes him before he even says a word to his precious
prince. And somewhere in between those two fun options there's also torture and rejection, so really
he should just cut his losses and run for it

So why in the ever-loving fuck is he still walking?

Heart in his throat, he raises his head higher; and finally looks Dirk dead in the eye.

Oh, he thinks, heart stuttering. That's why.

He's... beautiful. It feels kinda weird to say, now, juggling all these words that the new him thinks all
the time, words that the old him would have been too embarrassed to even consider, but it's true. He's
not just like the sun, he is the sun; everywhere he goes he brings light, brings life. Todd's really only
starting to make sense of all the new information in his head, but he knows, somehow, that
everything truly good in his last life, everything he had to do to stop feeling like such a shitty excuse
for a human being, is because of Dirk Gently. He showed up in his life and brought him light.

Maybe they never got too far, back there. Maybe they have a lot more to talk about, a lot of reasons
to take it slow, but Todd knows one thing; the feelings he, Sir Brotz, has for the sun prince... they're
not made up. These feelings aren't conjured, they're real; whatever he felt for Dirk before, what they
are now came from it, grew from something that was already there. All this new world, all the fake
memories did was... give them a push. Thirty years- give or take- of made-up memories must have
come from somewhere. He doesn't know who made them, or how or why, but he's pretty sure you
don't just pull feelings this strong out of thin air. They were already there, buried under guilt and fear,
and they never had a chance to just spend time together, unearth them, explore them.
He's done wasting time.

Todd stops, a good few feet from the royal box. He doesn't dare step further. His knight's training and years of make-believe ingrained memories tell him he should address the king, but this isn't for him, whoever he is; this is about Dirk, and Todd, and where they go from here.

Shit, where do they go from here?!

Todd opens his mouth, but words don't come. Dirk looks back at him; frightened, confused, blue eyes wide with worry and soft with... hope?

"I, uh..." Todd flounders. "...Nice crown."

"Oh," Dirk murmurs, reflexively tucking a strand of hair back into the thing. It's not the biggest or most ridiculous one he owns, but definitely ceremonial- and the orange light of the setting sun is glowing on the intricate gold like embers. "Thank you. I, ah, didn't choose it."

"S nice," Todd mumbles, cheeks burning. Fuck. What is he saying?

"I, uh... Yeah. So, I came back."

"Yes," says Dirk, tapping his fingers on the wooden partition anxiously. "It would seem so."

"Son," booms the king, but thankfully he sounds more confused than outright angry. "What is the meaning of-"

"Oh, shush, father!" Dirk blurts, light flaring as he glares at the monarch. "We are having a moment, here!"

King Rigmarole sputters indignantly, but the element of surprise must be in their favour because he seems too shocked to do anything. Yet.

"He, uh, might kill me for that, you know," Todd murmurs, glancing worriedly at the flustered king from the corner of his eye.

"Then he'll have to go through me," says Dirk matter-of-factly, leaning down towards Todd. "So... you were saying?"

"Oh. Yeah, okay um... shit, he should have written this down. He's not always great at... words. "So about... what I said, earlier, I..."

Dirk looks at him expectantly, gaze shrewd and searching as always. Man, even without his memories of it, the man's still a detective through-and-through- albeit kind of a lousy one, sometimes. It actually comforts Todd, sort of- bridges the gap between this Dirk and that Dirk, anchors him in reality, both realities. He knows he's right about his own feelings, knows he's not making them up; little things like that give him hope that maybe, just maybe, this is every bit as real for Dirk as it is for him.

He guesses there's only one way to find out.

Taking a deep breath, feeling somehow as though it might be his last, Todd speaks his mind, and prays that words won't fail him now.

"Dirk... I said some really cruel things to you. About you, and... and about me. I was a jerk, okay? I, I'm not gonna say I didn't mean it, because well, I kinda stand by what I said, about me not being the type of guy you should marry. I'm... Honestly, I think I'd be lousy in a normal marriage, I can't even
imagine how lousy I'd be in a royal one. If I were you, I wouldn't ask me for shit. But I'm not you. I'm me- whatever the hell that means, now- and what I really want to ask you, is...

He swallows. It feels like his heart is in his throat. He sinks to his knee, the slow drop somehow scarier than a fall from a floating island and a giant's back and giant fucking jumping frog combined, blood pounding so loudly in his ears it almost drowns out the gasps and mutterings of their assembled audience. Almost.

"I... I'm not saying I deserve this," he says, mumbling more than he'd like to. But Dirk will understand- he always understands. "Deserve you, but... but I want to. And I'll do whatever it takes. I mean it; I'll fight for you every day, if that's what it takes, because I want to be better, and I want... I want you. I always have- even before I knew it. And I'm not gonna sabotage myself anymore. I'm not going to screw myself over just for the hell of it; I'm not going to deny myself what I want, especially when it's what... what I think you want too, so. So screw that world. And screw this world. I don't care what world we're in, as long as we go together. Dirk...

His mouth is dry. The crowd is deathly quiet. The world stands still. He raises his head.

"Dirk," he says, and the words are soft but his voice feels heavy; it is the most important question he'll ask in his life, after all. "Will you marry me?"

It's not a question he ever thought he would ask. Not in his old life, because marriage is a bullshit institution. Not in his new one, because he could never ask the one person he wanted to. And you know, maybe both of those stances were right. Maybe this is nothing more than a pointlessly expensive piece of paper, and maybe he'll get fucking executed for asking for it within the next few minutes.

But he thinks he understands, now, why it means so much to Dirk. Why it probably would have meant a lot to the other Dirk, too, further down the line, to be asked even if nothing ever really came of it. Something about choosing another person, promising to stand by them. Something about starting afresh, and choosing your own family.

Something about being publicly, unconditionally, inarguably loved.

The silence that follows Todd’s request is fraught with anticipation, and not for the first time Todd really wishes they'd had some better way to do this than outside in front of the entire kingdom, but, well, he'll take what he can get.

And when Dirk- eyes glistening bright as his smile- clutches softly at the golden fabric over his golden heart, the entire kingdom falls out of sight and out of mind anyway.

“Oh, Todd,” he breathes, body and voice awash with sunlight. “Of course I will…”

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It would be a moment to go down in Wendimoor's history; a moment of such perfect romance as to be told in wistful sighs for decades to come. Ask anyone alive at the time, and they could surely tell you where they were the day Sir Brotz and the sun prince became engaged. Many, regrettably, were miles away in other kingdoms. A few that you have already made the acquaintance of were, sadly, sequestered in locations far too remote to be present.
But if you were to ask the same of a Starfall resident, they would tell you with glee that they were there. That they witnessed Sir Brotz’ unmasking, Prince Panto Trost's concession, and the proposal that would be a story for the generations. Depending on who you asked, they might even smugly state that they had bets placed on whether the prince and his knight were an item for years. Some might tell you, also, that they happened to see Prince Trost not a few minutes later; edging towards the wings, greeting the young Dengdamor heir with familiarity and, to the eagle-eyed, gentle affection and a lingering brush of fingers as he leaned down to whisper something in his ear—something that brought a blush like no other to the gentle man’s cheeks.

And a couple, those who were not utterly enraptured by the sight of the sun prince clumsily vaulting over the royal box partition to scoop his knight into the kiss of a thousand lifetimes, might even tell you of King Rigmarole Blackfeather; and the way his eyes had turned black as night, and his face heavy and dangerous as a storm cloud.

Contrary to popular belief, this moment was not the happy ending the Sun and his Moon had been fighting for...

Chapter End Notes

There's still three chapters left...

Comments are the favours on my fighting arm <3
The Betrothal

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It would seem that there is one thing the citizens of Clifftown love more than a good fight; and that is a royal wedding.

Dirk looks on, bemused and delighted, as the staff and residents of the Starfall Citadel bustle up and down the high arched corridors, coursing back and forth like blood pumping to a harried heart. He sees flowers, thousands upon thousands of them, and garlands, and confetti by the barrel. And at one point, tantalisingly, he spies a cake—the biggest he's seen in his life, and apparently still growing if the barking demands for more frosting are to be believed.

Despite the general frenzy, he has to admit that it all appears to be coming together in a brisk and brilliant fashion. He is rather amazed by that, and not at all convinced that it won't fall flat at the last minute. But then again, he had thought the same of the tournament itself; it would seem that his week-long absence had given a horde of excited underlings and tradesmen an abundance of time in which to make their preparations, and all they had required was his return to set the wheels in motion. If the chitter-chatter of the chambermaids is to be believed, his wedding will be all set up no later than tomorrow morning, just a day and two nights after the proposal. His may well be the shortest betrothal in the history of Wendimoor.

But considering his father has been looming like a stormcloud ever since the tournament, perhaps it is best they move things along quickly before he has a chance to interfere.

“Dirk!”

Oh, that voice; will his heart evermore sing at the mere sound of it?

Smiling before he has even made the decision to do so, Dirk turns around— and Theodore, carried along by the marching tide of wedding-planners, flies bodily into his chest. “Oof,” Dirk huffs, ribs aching but smile unmoved as he wraps his arms around the flustered elf.

“Sorry,” mumbles his knight— his husband-to-be. Gosh, even thinking those words is enough to send a little thrill of elation up Dirk’s spine. Theodore— no, Todd, he prefers to go by Todd, now— pushes lightly off from Dirk’s chest and looks up at him, and Dirk can’t help but chuckle fondly at the sight of him. Todd looks rather harassed this morning, and Dirk is willing to bet that a handful of his own servants are to blame. He is dressed in a fine black silk shirt with pins in the cuffs, shoulders and waist, and matching breeches that bunch around his ankles, flopping too long over his bare feet. A surprise fitting, then. Just as well; as much as Dirk loves a man in armour, he rather fancies seeing his knight in something a tad more stylish for a change. And so far the style is perfect— clearly, they’ve reference his own notes and sketches on the subject! Someone has even boldly attempted to comb Todd’s hair— and only attempted, given that the comb is currently lodged somewhere near his scalp and jutting out like a sword from a stone.

“Todd,” says Dirk sternly, reaching up to carefully extricate said comb. “You shouldn’t be walking around barefoot like that— you’ll catch your death of cold!”

“It’s— it’s summer,” Todd protests, gaping. “And it’s my job to— ugh, nevermind. All my boots here are those dumb curly things. And I had to get out of there— your handmaidens are… handsy.”
“Perhaps that’s why they’re called that,” Dirk jests, tucking the comb neatly into the pocket of Todd’s new breeches and patting it flat, if only for an excuse to pat his lovely thigh. Todd rolls his eyes, of course, as he always does in response to Dirk’s charming witticisms, and Dirk must resist the urge to softly kiss the little scrunch that forms between his knight’s expressive brows.

Then he remembers that he doesn’t have to resist the urge anymore, and goes for it.

“Uh,” says Todd, seemingly dazed by the gesture. “I was gonna… yeah, uh, hey, can we talk? Someplace a little… quieter?”

“Talk?” asks Dirk, seriously. “Or talk?” he adds, in softer tones and with a wiggle of his eyebrows.

Todd’s already flushed face goes a little greener, the tint spreading to the tips of his delightful ears. “Uh, the first one.”

“Hm. Well, I suppose- because it’s you.” Leading Todd away through the bustling corridor is not unlike swimming upstream like a sand salmon, but Dirk perseveres. It will be nice to have a few quiet minutes with his knight away from all the hubbub; even though thoughts of what Todd could possibly want to talk about tie his stomach in knots. After all, the last time they talked, things had gone rather spectacularly pear-shaped. But he tries not to fret too much about it; after all, Todd would hardly propose to him only to break his heart the very next day, would he!

...Would he?

Oh, don’t be a bobo, Dirk Gently, he chides himself, squeezing his soon-to-be husband’s little hand tightly. You know he would never hurt you on purpose.

With a note-to-self to really listen this time before jumping to any defensive arguments, Dirk leads Todd off down a narrow splinter corridor, leaving the chaos of the castle-wide wedding planning committee behind and guiding them both into the quiet, seldom-traversed warren of disused pathways beneath the main thoroughfare. Much like the rest of the castle, up until the recent upsurge of visiting nobility these passageways have scarcely seen a human footfall since Dirk’s own childhood. He has never been quite sure of what exactly their purpose is- he supposes the dusty bedrooms and strange empty spaces would be put to use if their family was wider, if cousins and partners and children were in residence. But as it has been just Dirk, Riggins and the servants for as long as he can remember, these rooms rarely see the light of day. A fact that he and Todd had taken advantage of many a time- first as friends in search of secret places to play dangerous games and eat their pilfered treats from the kitchens, later as lovers looking for respite from the prying eyes and eager ears of the court and the king. If these walls could talk, they would have quite some stories to tell!

Pleased to note that even now this quarter is nigh-on deserted- evidently the remains of the visiting nobles and princes would rather be goggling at the wedding arrangements or ingratiating themselves with the king- Dirk ushers Todd around another corner, the noise of the castle now a dim, distant hum. “So! What are we talking about?”

Todd leans back against the wall with a sigh. He’s had more of a slump to his shoulders ever since that day in the mountains. Is this how he always lived, in that supposed ‘other life’ of his, mooching around with the weight of the world on his shoulders? Dirk doesn’t like it. Not one bit. “I guess I just… I mean, before I came back yesterday we kind of went off at each other, and I guess I just wanted to tell you… where I stand. On the whole…”

“‘Other world’ business?”
“Other world business,” Todd snorts in agreement, tipping his head back until it lightly thumps against the dusty stone wall and his eyes meet Dirk’s. “I just… figured we should clear the air. Since we’re about to be…” he chuckles breathily, running a hand through his sleep-mussed and half-combed hair. “Married. God, that’s… weird to say.”

“Second thoughts?” Dirk jokes—except it’s not a joke in the slightest and he is very worried about what the answer may be.

“No! God, no, I just…” he shakes his head and scratches his chin. “Just never thought I’d be… it’s good, it’s good just, uh, kinda unexpected, I guess. Look, all I wanted to say is…”

After a heartbeat’s hesitation that feels like an age, he sighs and reaches out a hand. Dirk takes it without further prompting, letting their joined hands swing lightly between them as Todd draws strength from the contact.

“Dirk… I understand, if you don’t wanna go back. I do. The other world… I mean, I’m still only piecing it together myself but I know it’s not always… nice. It’s hard, there, and your life’s harder than most. And it wouldn’t exactly be nice for me, either, I mean—those episodes, that I have sometimes? Turns out over there they’re just way, way worse. My life there’s pretty much a shambles, too. I think you’re pretty much the only good thing about it. Well, and Amanda, but there’s something going on, there, I uh, I don’t think we’re talking at the moment. Look, my point is I… get why you don’t wanna go back. I’m not so sure I want to, either, I just feel like if there’s a chance in hell that we could save our friends then we should… try. But—” he tugs Dirk in closer when he starts to pull away, putting his hands on Dirk’s neck and pulling until they stand forehead to forehead, Todd peering up into Dirk’s eyes—“it can wait. It can all wait. I’m serious. When you want to go—if you want to go—we’ll go, and not a minute sooner. And until then, I’m with you. Okay? I’m not… I’m not leaving you again. I swear.”

Dirk, having quite forgotten how to breathe at this point, closes his eyes; looking this deeply into Todd’s is proving rather too intense for his delicate constitution to take. “I—I don’t need you to put those worries aside for me, Todd,” he says softly, clutching the front of his knight’s shirt and not much caring if he dislodges a pin or two. “If you really feel the need to go… I’ll wait for you. And I will not try to stop you again. I know you wouldn’t leave me without good reason.”

“No, Dirk, I… I want to stay.”

He opens his eyes, tentative. “You do?”

“Yeah. I mean, not here, specifically. I don’t really care where we are, I just…”

Todd swallows, closing his own eyes and taking a deep breath. “We can stay. Or go. Or go someplace else way, way away from here. I don’t care. I don’t care as long as I’m with you.”

“…Oh.” Dirk blinks, the words hollowing out a home in his mind just as Todd’s heartbeat etches itself on his palm. “I… really?”

“Yeah, dummy,” Todd breathes. His brow crinkles in consternation. “I mean, asshole, I mean…” he laughs quietly, shaking his head. “God, sometimes it’s just like, where even am I right now…?”

“You must teach me what some of those new words mean, sometime,” says Dirk, warmth spreading in his chest and bleeding to his skin in a brightening glow.

“They’re not exactly flattering.”

“All the better.”
Snorting, Todd opens his eyes, placing his hand atop Dirk’s to move with the rise and fall of his own chest. “Actually… that’s another thing I wanted to talk to you about.”

Dirk frowns, cocking his head. “Bad words? I think I wrote a rather comprehensive dictionary of them once upon a time, perhaps we can add to it—”

“No, no, I mean about… there,” says Todd, squeezing his hand. “Dirk, I mean it when I say I’m not gonna force you, or leave you- we never have to go back to the other world again if you really don’t want to. But I… if it’s okay, I want to ask you for something else.”

“What?” asks Dirk, wary. Certain that he’ll do whatever it takes to make Todd happy, but anxious about what that may entail.

Todd meets his gaze seriously. “I… I want to go back to talk to Amanda. And while we’re there… I want you to see what I saw.”


“Yeah.” Todd doesn’t look any happier about it than Dirk does, which sadly only makes Dirk more certain that he will do exactly as asked; it is apparent that Todd would not be asking if he didn’t think it vitally important. “Just a look, just so you can, uh, make an informed decision, I guess. And also so I…”

“…What?”

Todd sighs, running his free hand through his hair. “And so I… know for sure. Whether this is… real.”

“Whether what’s real?”

“This. Us,” says Todd, looking up at Dirk with wide eyes, imploring him to understand. “We- Dirk, we weren’t together in the other world, and I don’t know how long we’ve been here. I wanna be with you, but if someday we’re gonna find out that you don’t really feel that way, I’d… I’d want to know before it’s too late. I don’t want you to regret marrying me, and I don’t wanna… I dunno, take advantage.”

“Todd.”

“I’m serious! Dirk, I- I know twice as much about you as you do about me, now. I know who you were before whatever happened that made you- us into this. I don’t want you to run blindly into this, and I don’t want to drag something out if we’re both gonna get hurt by it. I just- I know that this didn’t come from nowhere, for me, but I’m not gonna be able to relax until I know it didn’t for you, either. Okay?”

Dirk opens his mouth to argue, but nothing suggests itself. It is a difficult stance to argue; to do so would be to argue against his lovely Todd’s quest for peace of mind, and why in the world would he wish to sabotage that? He wants Todd to be happy with him, not second-guessing every minute of their married life. It’s a small price to pay, really; a tedious excursion and a moment’s pain, in return for the final, clinching proof that Todd needs to know that he is loved, and worthy of love.

Well. Sounds like a no-brainer, when you put it like that.

“Alright,” he says, nodding tersely. “Very well- the day after tomorrow, then. We’ll pack our bags and set out for the mountains. Properly, this time; as we will no longer be on the run, I propose a full carriage and a comfortable ride along the marsh road for as long as we are able.”
“The day after- wait,” Todd sputters, dropping Dirk’s hand in surprise. “Don’t you think we should-I mean, before we get married? Just in case…?”

“In case what?”

“In case… you don’t…”

“Love you anymore?”

Todd flinches as if struck, but nods grimly. It is perhaps the most saddening thing Dirk has ever laid eyes upon.

Sighing, Dirk pulls Todd to his chest, burying the elf’s surprised squawk in his shoulder and holding him fast. “Todd,” he says, gently finger-combing his knight’s soft hair and murmuring into it. “Not only am I certain that I will love you no matter what, I am so certain that I intend to marry you tomorrow, and remain married to you as long as we both shall live regardless of what I may or may not find out about my… other self.”

Todd has gone suspiciously quiet.

“You’ve given me your conditions, and now I’ve given you mine,” Dirk presses on, nuzzling slightly into Todd’s hair. “I will go on your little quest, as your husband, and you…” he bestows a small kiss to the top of it. “You will just have to trust me. Trust that I love you, and let me show you just how much- because frankly, I do not intend to waste any more time not married to you. I’ve waited too long to put it off a second longer than necessary…” he trails off when he feels dampness seeping through his toga. “Todd?”

“Mmf.”

With great care, Dirk releases Todd from his arms and nudges him back, bringing his face up to inspect with a cupped hand under his chin. His breath catches when he sees moisture glimmering at the corners of his eyes. “Oh, Todd, you’re-”

“Shut up,” Todd rasps, choking a little. “Not a word.”

Dirk’s heart gallops in his chest. “Are you…?”

“M fine.” Todd rubs roughly at his eyes. “M fine.”

“Shh,” Dirk bids him, taking that hand and tugging it away from his face, replacing it with a soft, careful swipe of his own thumb. “Oh, goodness. I will not be popular with Madam if I let you make your eyes all puffy before the wedding…”

Todd laughs dryly, hiccupping a little, and Dirk’s heart does a curious lurch. “Yeah, well… you should quit being so… nothing. Nothing. Doesn’t matter. I, uh. Sure. If you wanna get married first, I’m…” he nods slowly. “Yeah. Let’s do that.”

Dirk smiles, honey-gold warmth unfurling in his chest. “Excellent. It would be a shame to let everyone’s preparations go to waste, after all. Besides, I’d very much like to take a short breather before we go gallivanting off again; two more nights in a proper bed.” He smirks and lets his hand trail down, slipping swiftly underneath the back of the hilariously ill-fitting shirt to rest lightly on the curve of Todd’s backside. “I’m particularly looking forward to the second…”

Sniffling slightly- and clearly pretending not to be Todd wraps both of his arms around Dirk’s neck, burying his face in the crook of it. “…” he gulps, squeezing a little tighter. “I love you.”
His words are faltering, tentative, as if he is scared to put them out into the world for fear of rejection, or worried he might somehow shape them incorrectly. But there is a certain surety underneath, that recognisable tenacity that gave him away on the battlefield, that guided Dirk through the most dangerous days of his life thus far; quiet, assured, solid as a rock and constant as the sea.

Basking in the glow of those words, his own sunlight burns paltry in comparison. “Oh, Todd,” he breathes, anchoring himself to the firmness of his knight’s fealty, throwing himself gladly upon the rocks of his unwavering affection. “I love you, too…”

Sadly, he could not hide with Todd in the furthest reaches of the castle all day - however much he may have wanted to. Shortly after their little heart to heart, Dirk’s tenacious stylist troupe had tracked them down and hauled his beloved knight away to finish his fitting. And Dirk, quite unwilling to be similarly press-ganged before he’s quite ready, thank you very much, had fled for the palace garden to seek sanctuary. The gardeners, in his experience, cared not for royal events, and would happily allow him to lay low in their potting shed in return for his vow not to tread on the grass - and perhaps a magical favour in the form of his light or Todd’s green thumb.

Thankfully, the garden is peaceful today with everyone occupied elsewhere. Even the gardeners are nowhere to be seen, presumably having been called in to sort out floral arrangements for the morning. Free to wander the grounds unaccosted, Dirk ambles along the winding cobbled path between ornate topiaries and vibrant flowerbeds and hanging pots, smile widening with every specimen that cranes its leaves or petals to his light. He’d never taken notice of the motion, before - always too preoccupied in watching his knight take his first breaths of fresh air and drift effortlessly, weightlessly through the carefully maintained trappings of pure nature, as if he had lived among them all his life. Dirk wonders if arrangements have been made already for the wedding night, and if it’s too late to simply request that everyone be banished from the gardens ‘til daybreak. For a variety of reasons, he enjoys Todd best when laid out in the lap of nature; and with a long, dry carriage ride ahead of them the next day, he imagines Todd would be appreciative of the grass at his fingertips, too. The man does get ever so cranky when cooped up for too long.

Trailing his fingers along the supple branch of a silver cherry tree as he rounds a winding bend in the path, Dirk is just weighing up the pros and cons of tents versus picnic mats on a romantic wedding night under the stars when he realises he isn’t quite as alone as he’d thought.

“Oh,” he breathes, blinking and squinting towards the arched wooden bridge over the winding creek; and the squat, curious figure lurking at the bridge’s apex. “…You?”

“‘You’... maybe!” sings the melodic voice of Wakti Wapnasi, smiling in bemused delight as she pulls another handful of confetti from the folds of her clothing and scatters it to the water. She doesn’t appear to have changed clothes since Dirk last saw her; she has, however, festively festooned her fantastic horned hat in flowers and ribbons. “You, me, she, he- it is all relative, hmm?”

Dirk snorts as he ambles closer. Evidently, she's still as helpful as ever. "Well. I suppose you're not wrong." His eyes trail warily from the tip of her horns to the hem of her skirts, hand alighting on the ornate carved bridge banister. "If I might be so rude as to ask... what are you doing here?"

With a trill of amusement that might have been her version of a chuckle, she sweeps one of her peculiar double hands wide, sending another fine rain of confetti onto the water. On closer inspection, it appears to consist of flower petals in a chaotic rainbow of colours. "The wedding, of
course! I have not been to a wedding in..." She cocks her head, sending a further cascade of loose petals from her hat into the creek. "Hm. Perhaps I have never... at least, not this time."

"You knew about the wedding?" he blurts. "How? I got engaged less than twenty-four hours ago!"

"I saw you," she says cryptically, hands passing slowly over the creek just as they had over the pool in her own abode. "The water remembers..."

Dirk shudders. Benevolent though she may be- and he's at least eighty-five percent sure of that, at this point- there is no denying that she's a creepy customer. "Right... well, if the water's been so chatty I daresay you know the good news, about the groom," he says, sidling up to her and resting his elbows smugly upon the banister. "About myself and Sir Brotz."

"Yessssss," she croons, reaching up to pat Dirk's cheek with two grey palms. "Wonderful!"

"Um. Yes," he mutters, flinching a little at the brush of ten long, gnarled fingers across his face. "So. All worked out, as you can see, so. As it turned out, I did have a choice!"

"Hm. So tell me, little prince; did you run, or did you wait?"

"I..." He hesitates. "Um. Bit of both, I suppose. But I didn't have to accept my fate, as you put it." He grins, bouncing on his heels. "Todd... he came back for me. And surprise surprise, no one has thrown him in the dungeons, yet!"

Trilling delightedly, Wakti claps her many hands. "Yessss, as I thought."

"As you... Um, not to be rude, but you rather gave me the impression that my fate was already sealed," Dirk argues. "I left your house in a frightful state, if you recall, and now you're telling me you knew everything would be alright?"

"Oh, there was every chance it would not be," she says liltingly. "But as I said before; fate and chance are not mutually exclusive. And choice overlaps both."

Dirk sighs, bending over to let his forehead thunk on the banister. "Darn witchykookoos..."

"Of course, your choice has yet to be made."

"... Beg pardon?"

Chortling, she scatters more confetti. “But of course. For you, Dirk Gently, love was not a question but a certainty. It was never a question.”

His heart skips. “It… it wasn’t?”

“Are you surprised?"

He thinks on it a moment, and reaches a startlingly obvious conclusion. “I… no.” He laughs breathily, covering his mouth with his hand. With all the upset of the past few days, it is almost easy to forget that just hours before it all went wrong he had been planning on marrying Todd, and convinced that his knight would say yes. He is actually rather ashamed to have let his faith become so shaken. “No, I suppose not. There was a moment, when it… but it’s all alright now. I think.”

“You think?”

He ponders it again, and nods. “I know.”
“As I said; no question,” she sings, patting his cheek once more. “The real question is much, much bigger.”

Dirk stares at her, wide eyed and worried. “The… real question?”

Humming lightly, Wakti pins him with her wise green eyes. Shuffling to face him head on, she uses her fingers on his face to tip it down, until her own forehead can come lightly to rest against his and those eyes can peer into the windows of his soul; crinkled with kindness, heavy with sadness, filled with the all the depth and untold mystery of the wildest jungle.

“Dirk Gently… It is not too late to stop running.”

She closes her many fingers around his hands, squeezes them, and for a moment Dirk wants to succumb entirely to the strange sense of safety under her gaze. Wants to lie down at her feet, cling to her skirts and draw comfort from the musical lilt of her cryptic declarations. Alarming indeed, when up until now he has remained quite adamant that he finds her sinister and unsettling. But perhaps this new feeling of ease is a result of being held so close to those watchful eyes, squinting into their depths and finding nothing malicious lurking there. No wilful cruelty, no cold, bloody secrets. For the first time it occurs to him that perhaps, just perhaps, she does not try to be cryptic; perhaps her visions, her knowledge is flawed. Perhaps she is stumbling through just as blindly as everyone else. Trying to put into words concepts that are presented to her incomplete and utterly ineffable, and struggling to put them out into the world as anything more than an incoherent jumble of alphabetti spaghetti.

For some reason, the realisation comforts him. Calls to him. He hunches his shoulders, drawing her gnarled hands just a touch closer to his body. “I… thank you.”

Wakti inclines her head graciously, pressing his hands back to his chest and giving them a light squeeze before leaving them there, clasped together in a ball. "I wish you and your betrothed every happiness," she trills, patting his shoulder as she slowly begins to slither past it. "Perhaps we shall meet again, one day..."

"I- oh, um, you're not staying?" he asks, surprisingly crestfallen. "For the wedding?"

She sends him one last, knowing glance over her shoulder. "Maybee... it depends."

"On what?"

"On your choice, of course. Moonbeam on the morrow, pretty prince!"

He could easily chase her down, of course. She is hardly the swiftest snail in the cabbage patch. But something tells him he is unlikely to get any more than he already has out of her; and though the daffy old slug may have grown on him somewhat, he isn't about to subject himself to more of her half-answers and confuzzlement than necessary. So he merely watches her depart in silence, the curious cloak of her swamp-coloured garb swishing lightly to and fro, concealing the bulk of her body as it slithers and slimes towards the cobble path he himself had just vacated. And if she plucks a few leaves and petals from the bushes here and there to restock her magic supplies, well, Dirk isn't about to tattle to anyone. Only right that they serve a practical use to someone.

He turns back to the river with a sigh as the eccentric snail disappears into the shrubberies, watching the remains of her confetti bob and flit across the surface. He lowers his arms to rest them on the banister- and quite abruptly realises that something is lightly tickling his palms. Curious and wary, he opens out his hands.
A small handful of her peculiar confetti sits innocently in his palms. He turns it this way and that, the strange petals catching the light in interesting ways. The colours are bold and varied- yellow, green, blue, orange, the odd purple and pink, even a black or two- and they are shaped rather oddly. Not quite as petal-like as he'd originally assumed from a distance. In fact, with the faintest outlines of veins decorating the surfaces and the tapered ends, they look rather more like tiny, gaudy leaves-though they are, like petals, soft and silky to the touch. Beautiful little things, they are, but delicate, short-lived, already beginning to wilt at the edges. He doesn't imagine she gave them to him as a wedding present to keep for all times. Shrugging, he gathers them in one hand, and catapults them into the air.

Their beauty is magnified in motion; flitting this way and that, fluttering delicately like butterfly wings, catching the light in dazzling flashes of perfect colour as they tumble merrily to the water. One in particular- a large, perfectly formed yellow leaf- flits right past his face and catches his eye, spiralling beautifully downwards with a sort of dainty chaos. He finds his eyes riveted to it as it lands softly upon the water's surface, still shining bright even against the dazzling brilliance of the perfectly clear stream, and like a little canoe begins to follow the current. Gently down the stream it goes, to-ing and fro-ing, rowing and rowing, tossed this way and that by the delicate currents as they weave betwixt sticks and stones, but away it goes merrily on that choppy ride nonetheless, not bump nor graze strong enough to diminish its shine.

He watches it go until he can watch no longer. Until the leaf has been whisked towards the small, barred grate in the garden wall, and sent with the rest of the water to cascade down the cliffside; down sharp rocks and gritty sand, through stomach-dropping plummets and bone-crushing bounces. And if it survives that, to Comet Creek below; along the well-trodden paths of the farmers and tradesmen, along the familiar footsteps of a thousand secret afternoon trysts with his beloved knight. Maybe even as far as Lunar Lake, and after that... who knows?

Will it make it further than they did, he wonders? Will it find its way on the winds and waters to the tangle of the giant's hair, or freeze at the footsteps of the wildling? Will it meet its end at the lightning tongues of the witchykookoo's cave; or will it go further than anyone has ever gone before and topple off the edge of the world itself? Oh, the fears it could feel, if it only had eyes to behold and a body to bruise.

And the things it could see…

If Silas had thought the kingdom was hectic in the lead-up to the tournament, it was nothing on the lead-up to a royal wedding. Especially one that, as it turns out, has been much anticipated amongst a sizeable chunk of the populace for years.

A prince and his knight, muses Silas, watching contemplatively as the tides of people in the street part like curtains before a clicking carriage; a carriage bearing more flowers than he has ever seen in one place. Who'd have thought?

He had been entertaining similar thoughts ever since the dramatic scene in the arena yesterday. Sadly, he'd not had the luxury of getting swept up in the romance; instead he had observed with bated breath the reactions of the less-enthusiastic spectators, the jilted suitors, and indeed the king himself. What could have been no longer than five minutes passed in a five hour crawl as he waited with terrified anticipation for the other shoe to drop.
But it never did.

The grumpiest of spectators- and there hadn't been many- had eventually just sidled off to grumble in peace. The smaller but more vocal approving quarter roared their support to the skies, and the vast majority of bewildered but entertained civilians joined the chorus. And the king, though he'd brooded like a heavy fog over the proceedings, had simply stood with his upset rolling off him in indolent waves as the lovers embraced. Too startled to react, it would seem; underneath the reflexive anger there had been confusion, incomprehension. The man is clearly poised on a tentative middle ground. Silas only hopes his approval will blossom forth as understanding deepens, it would be heartbreaking if he were to fall to the other side of that knife edge and cause problems for the newlyweds. But with the exception of a few cold fish, the prince and his betrothed's reception had been warm- jubilant, even. It was certainly... food for thought.

And that was before he'd met Panto's eyes across the arena.

This is stupid, he tells himself for the thousandth time, fiddling anxiously with the hem of his glove as the scene plays over again in his mind. This is the opposite of helpful...

It had all happened so quickly. One moment Panto had been there- far across the arena, the picture of dignity and grace as he'd stood aside to grant true love's passage- and the next he had been close, the closest he'd been since that fateful night upon the hill. Not touching Silas, not drawing attention to their proximity amongst the crowd of disgruntled and bemused suitors, but close enough. Silas could feel his words tickling his earlobe as he had whispered. The warmth of those whispered words, of Silas' answering blush, of Panto's fingers as they'd traced lightly, fleetingly across Silas' own before parting and slipping away with the man himself into the crowd, had nearly been enough to melt Silas like butterberries in the hot summer sun.

"Don't leave town just yet, My Lord," Panto had whispered, soft and sincere in his subtle vow. "I think you and I have matters to discuss."

Nothing more specific than that, nothing more helpful, and yet nonetheless a request that Silas felt powerless to refuse.

Concerned with the way his mind is once more whirling back unhelpfully on conversations long gone, he attempts to refocus his attention on people-watching. Unsure what else to do- and not sure he was emotionally resilient enough to revisit the site of his and Panto's ill-fated picnic- he had opted to remain in the street outside of Panto’s inn, leaning against the sun-drenched wall as he watched the kingdom bustle about in excitement. All day people had been shuffling back and forth, bearing supplies for wedding preparations or gifts for the happy couple. Even those less intimately involved in the proceedings had seldom shut up about it, chattering excitedly about the event as they passed by in bubbling throngs, discussing what they would wear to the event- or more importantly, what the prince would wear. Apparently, the man is rather renowned for his bold sartorial choices. Silas has even caught whiffs of the odd betting pool, placing wagers upon which crown the prince will show up in.

Despite the anxiety that comes with awaiting a pivotal conversation, Silas finds himself melting into the babble and excitement. There's something comforting about seeing so many people- different people, with different opinions and outlooks from a thousand different walks of life- come together for just one day. For just one cause.

That the cause is love, well, it... it tugs upon Silas' heart in a way he cannot quite describe.

Silas has not seen many of his fellow former suitors amongst the throngs. Most, he imagines, have retreated with their wounded pride. Not all of them, but those remaining are probably lurking around
the castle itself; probably trying to salvage something from their defeat by offering their aid in the
wedding preparations, ingratiating themselves with the royal family. Silas probably ought to do the
same- he already shudders to think what state of rage and disappointment his mother will be in once
news of his early defeat reaches her- but the idea of loitering around such a joyous and important
occasion for the sake of personal gain leaves a bad taste in his mouth. Besides, he has more important
tings to do than schmooze with the courtiers; or at least, that is the hope. It feels terrible to even
think, but truth be told Silas is indifferent to the wedding. Perhaps not to what it represents, but at the
end of the day he does not know the prince or his knight. But he does know a different prince- a
prince with cotton candy hair and the bluest eyes in Wendimoor- and it is this prince who holds his
heart and mind captive on this fine afternoon. For better or worse.

But probably worse.

"My Lord..."

Panto's whispered words still echo in his mind, sending a shudder of nervous anticipation through
him just as they had when they had first been uttered. Happy though he was for the newly betrothed
couple at the forefront of the proceedings, he had scarcely been able to take his eyes off of Panto for
the duration of the joyous scene. His eyes had been drawn to him like a magnet; a quivering compass
needle to truest north. A magnetism he could not have broken even if he had wanted to when Panto
met his gaze and advanced, picking his way through the crowds to stand improperly close to Silas,
his breath tickling his ear as those strong, work-worn fingertips ghosted across his knuckles. He had
said nothing more than those ten little words, but his eyes had spoke of words yet to come;
confessions yet to utter.

To do anything other than nod in tacit, breathless agreement would have been unthinkable.

Now, though, he cannot help but worry that he was a little... hasty. Or at the very least careless; he
should have pressed for more, specified a time and a place to meet, asked what Panto wished to
speak of. He suspects he already knows the answer to the last question, but he would hate to be
presumptuous- or to get his hopes up unduly.

But he had not thought to do any of that, so preoccupied in the noise and confusion and sweet,
simple balm of Panto's voice, and so now he finds himself quite at a loss for where to be. Perhaps he
should go up to the citadel for the wedding preparation after all- Panto seems like the helpful kind
anyway, and he had somewhat facilitated this union in the first place, there is every chance that he is
aiding the proceedings. But alternatively, with everyone occupied in the planning, perhaps Panto will
take the opportunity of peace from prying eyes and ears to meet somewhere entirely different. Silas
has to consider, worriedly, that Panto may have returned to the hill; and if so, whether Silas has
courage enough to return there also. After the realisation that had shaken him to his core and the
subsequent scene he caused, he is not sure he's brave enough to face that place again. He wonders if
Panto will come looking for him when he does not appear, or if he will take it for a rejection and
leave the kingdom without another word. How long might Silas be waiting without even realising
that his reason for waiting has long gone? A day? Two? Three? Will Panto stay for the wedding, at
least? Will they spy each other across the venue, exchange smiles? Words? A dance? Too many
possibilities, some wonderful; others unthinkable.

As it happens, he does not have time to think on them at all; not before a tall, cloaked figure sweeps
past, catches his hand in a strong gloved grip, and tows him quickly from the main thoroughfare and
down a shaded side street.

"Ah- hey!" Silas squawks, tripping over his own feet as he follows helplessly in the mysterious
figure's wake, too startled to put up a fight. "What are you-!"
"Shush, dumbo," an achingly familiar voice murmurs from beneath the cloak. "You'll blow our cover."

Sila's heart skips a beat. "Panto," he breathes, squeezing his unexpected captor's hand. "I- I thought perhaps you had already..."

Panto walks them a good distance down the alley, waiting until they are safely ensconced in shadows before turning to face Silas and pulling his hood down. Even in the darkness of this quiet alleyway, his eyes shine lagoon-bright between delicate, happy crinkles. "Likewise," he says, voice hushed, reaching out with his free hand to cup Silas' cheek. "I feared I may have missed you."

"I'm still here," Silas says, and immediately blushes. What a dumb, redundant statement when Panto can very well see and feel that himself.

Panto's smile widens, his hands tighten. "Thank the Moon."

And then both hands are on Silas' neck, pulling him closer, and Silas' sighs in relief as Panto's soft lips find his own.

It feels like years since they last had this; even though the first and only time happened but two short days ago. With the warmth and rightness of Panto's kiss filling his lungs with light, he realises just how heavy and dark they had felt since he left Panto on that hill. Realises just how hard it has been to breathe without his tender embrace. Panto's touch is air in his lungs and wind in his sails; lifting, life-giving, natural as the act of breathing.

"Silas," breathes Panto between kisses, voice ragged and wanton. "I..."

"My Lord," Silas returns, delighting in the shuddered intake of breath his address provokes in the impassioned prince. "Perhaps we could just... stop talking. Just for a minute."

Panto chuckles throatily, teasing his fingers through the short hairs at Silas' nape. "Finally speaking my language..."

If anyone were to ask Silas later how long they simply remained like that- kissing in the shadows, not a word passing between them but gulping gasps and giggles- he is sure he would have no idea. It could have been minutes, hours. All he knows is that when they both come up for air the sky is still bright, the bustle of the crowd distant, and Panto's handsome face still cast in shadow by the stout Clifftown structures- though now the back of his head (and indeed, the rest of his body) is pressed up against a sandy brick wall. It takes Silas a moment longer to realise it is his own hands holding him there. Blushing, he releases his hands from their tangle in Panto's cloak; or what he thinks is his cloak. "Oh," he says, blushing deeper as he smooths down the familiar green brocade. "This is my-"

"So it is," Panto laughs breathlessly, before his eyes turn uncertain. "Oh. Yes, sorry, I should-"

"No, it’s..." Silas stops Panto's hands before they can shuck the garment and offer it back. "It's okay. It... looks nice. And..." Can he say it? Does he have the courage? "And I... I'd like you to have it." Why not? "To remember me by."

Panto's face softens, his eyes twinkle. "Thank you." He appears to be deliberating with himself much as Silas had been only moments ago- though how a man like Panto Trost could be as insecure as Silas is a mystery. Then again, he supposes he gave him reason enough with his vanishing act on the hill... "But I hope... that I will not have to remember you long."

Silas' stomach drops. "I...!"
“That is to say… fudge.” Panto laughs sharply at himself, running a hand through his perfect hair. “I apologise; I have a tendency to lose my senses around you, my dear. What I meant to say is… I hope we shall meet again. Soon.” His fingers graze across Silas’ cheekbone, soft as a whisper. “Before this fallible mind of mine butchers the memory of your face. A jacket is a wonderful token, of course, but I would much rather study from the source. If… if that is something you want?”

Silas cannot quite believe his ears- or his luck. His formerly heavy heart now feels but moments away from beating right out of his chest. “Yes,” he blurs, unable to keep his voice and his eagerness in check. “I… I want that. Very much.”

Over the course of their short acquaintance, Silas has borne witness to many of Panto’s expressions; more than most people, he likes to imagine. Happiness, longing, smugness, excitement, disbelief. But he has never seen anyone, let alone this collected man before him, look as relieved as he does in this moment, a release of tension lifting a decade of age with it. It makes it nigh on impossible to not lean in and steal another kiss from his grinning lips.

But he supposes a kiss is fair trade, for the heart Panto has stolen from him.

“Panto,” he whispers, breathing that precious name across his handsome prince’s soft lips. “I…”

“Yes?”

Words are dancing on the tip of his tongue; words he knows, logically, it is too soon and too dangerous to say.

But where would the two of them be if they never took a risk?

Silas holds Panto’s face tenderly in his hands, and lets the words flow free. “Panto Trost, I… oh, Moon help me, I am in love with you.”

Panto’s intake of breath is sweet as a songbird’s melody. “Silas-”

“And you don’t have to- I mean, I know it’s fast, and maybe I’m just being daffy but-”

“I love you, too.”

Now it is Silas’ turn to gasp. He holds Panto tight, worried he may slip through his fingers like a dream at any instant. “You… you do?”

Panto kisses him soundly upon the lips, a firm gesture and a sweet promise, before peppering further pecks across his cheek, his nose, anywhere he can reach. “I do,” he murmurs, the words tingling across Silas’ skin. “More than I ever thought I could. More than words can say. I love you to the Moon and back, Silas Dengdamor; on my word I swear it to be true.”

When Panto’s broad, strong hands gently hold Silas, cupping him close like he is something immeasurably precious, it makes Silas believe him wholeheartedly; as unbelievable as the words may sound. Makes him feel safe, and warm, and loved. Makes him wish he could stay here in this moment for all times.

But therein lies the problem…

“Oh, Panto.” Silas carefully breaks away, just a little, just enough to gaze up into Panto’s hooded eyes, anxiously questioning. “What ever shall we do, now?”

Blinking himself back into clarity, Panto offers a sad smile and a small shrug. “Beats me, my love.
Perhaps we should run away, begin anew in the swamps or the highlands."

*My love.* Oh, Silas will *never* get used to that; but the opportunity would be a fine thing indeed. “I do believe Wygar would track me to the edge of the world, even if… even if mother would not.”

Panto presses a gentle, comforting kiss to Silas’ forehead, threading fingers through his hair. “Wygar will want you home safe, as will your brother; and my sister will want the same of me, I’m sure. Not that she would ever say so.”

Though it is strangely, pleasantly intimate to share in each other’s space as they speak of their respective families, it does push the cruel nature of their circumstances into rather harsh light. “I suppose we both have people to go home for.”

“It’s strange; every other time I’ve travelled, I have always run home to tell Litzi of my adventures.” Panto gently rests his head upon Silas’, looping his other arm around his shoulders to hold him tight. “I suppose this is one adventure I must keep to myself. For the time being, at least.”

“For the time being,” Silas echoes, heart heavy. Will there ever be peace enough between their families for their love to come to light, he wonders? If not, will Silas ever find the courage to reveal it nonetheless and weather the consequences?

“Silas, darling, look at me.”

Guided by Panto’s hand, Silas looks up to meet his eyes, finding them gazing back full of warmth and tender reassurance- and behind that, a steely glint of determination.

“I am under no illusions that this will be easy, my love,” he murmurs, gentle and sure. “There are challenges yet to face, battles yet to be won, but I know one thing; I know that what you and I have found is worth the risk.” He presses a kiss to Silas’ nose with a besotted smile, making him blush. “You are worth the risk. And I may not have the luxury of a tournament to fight in your name, or the opportunity for a grand gesture, but I swear- on my life, on my family name, on the Moon himself- that I will fight for you and I.”

Panto draws back just enough to slide his hand between the two of them, and traces his fingers in a fluid ‘x’ over his own chest. “Cross my heart.”

Silas swallows. “And hope to die?”

“Oh, absolutely not,” Panto scoffs, grinning impishly. “Not now I’ve got something so divine to live for.”

Silas’ heart feels light, his chest full to bursting; so full of the love and connection pouring forth from Panto’s it is a wonder he hasn’t split at the seams. He has never been looked at in such a way before; with surety, devotion, unbridled affection. Somehow, when Panto says they will make it through this, his confidence is infectious, his argument convincing.

Somehow, when he says that Silas is worth fighting for… he believes it.

“Panto, I…” Throat thick and tight with emotion, it takes some effort to let the words escape. “I will, too. Fight for us, that is.” He laughs breathlessly. “I mean, I can barely swing a sword, but I’ll give it the best I’ve got!”

A short, yet passionate kiss follows his declaration, Panto grinning into it like a big dope. “Silas Dengdamor,” he breathes, chasing the first smooch with a tamer but no less effusive peck to Silas’ forehead. “If I had my way, you would have no call to lift a sword again as long as you should live.”
Butterflies flutter in Silas’ stomach. Oh, he should love nothing more than to live the life Panto wishes for him; to hang up those accursed scissors once and for all and direct his time and effort to more rewarding pursuits. To while away his days peacefully in a little garden somewhere, tending to the plants and critters in his care, safe in the knowledge that they live under the love and protection of the finest swordsman in Wendimoor. His swordsman; the only one he would ever need, or could ever want.

But while such a life hangs out of reach, he shall make do; maybe he’ll even pay more attention to Wygar’s advice, try and pick up a trick or two. He finds now that he does not mind it so much, the prospect of more tedious afternoons in the training barracks, more blisters on his hands and bruises on his knees. It is worth it, all the pain and exhaustion, the whole slow grind. It does not seem quite so hopeless now. Finally, he has a drive, a reason.

Finally, now and forever, he has a love worth fighting for.

“Yeah, yeah, I’ll be back in a… yeah. Um, just gotta do… something. So. Later.”

Todd slams the heavy door shut, drawing the bolt before his stalkers can barge right in behind him. He’ll get back out there, he will, he just needs to… not, right now. He backs up into the room, running his hands through his hair- and cringing when they come away sticky with whatever gunk they’d been styling it with. “Ugh. Gross.”

He hasn’t had a lot of time today to think about the two lives stuff, which he guesses is a good thing. But he’s slowly starting to sift things out, draw the lines between the here-him and the there-him. He knows that the there-him likes coffee, and the here-him has never had a chance to try it. He knows that the here-him is a cat person, like Dirk, and the there-him isn’t really an anything person- as far as he knows. The differences are subtle and he’s not really sure what they tell him, but it feels good to isolate them; feels like he’s solving something, instead of burying his head in the sand and ignoring it.

There is, however, one thing he knows for sure; neither version of him likes being crowded, prodded and manhandled by a gaggle of lackeys with sewing needles and hair products.

Sighing, he turns round and leans against the door. He has to laugh when he realises which room he’s locked himself in. “Of course.” He kicks the crumpled pink toga on the floor. The one he’d had playfully wrapped around his own neck a week ago, before Dirk had hurried him to the bed and declared all clothes banished. He supposes Dirk must have slept here last night, but he hasn’t done a thing to tidy the place. Actually, considering there were always chambermaids doing the rounds of these rooms, he’d probably messed it up anew this morning for no goddamn reason. Go figure.

Todd hovers uncertainly by the door, heat rising to his cheeks as he looks at the messy bedsheets. He hadn’t been allowed to sleep here last night, all his new hangers-on chattering about propriety and tradition as they’d herded him to his own now unfamiliar quarters. If he had been, he probably would have had a hand in rumpling those sheets.

He remembers them so vividly; all those times with Dirk. In this bed, in closets and corridors, in the gardens- that darn meadow. How many of them really happened? Why make up memories like that? He thought the meadow was the first time, but when was it really? Not in the other world, surely, it’s not like they ever got that far.
Then again, there was that one concert…

*Rat-a-tat-tat.*

Todd damn near jumps out of his skin, lurching away from the door. He eyes it warily, wondering if it’s worth pretending he isn’t home, when a familiar voice follows it.

“Knock knock?” says Dirk hopefully, muffled through the sturdy copperwood.

Knot in his chest loosening, Todd jumps to unbolt the door and yank it open. He blinks at Dirk, scanning him quickly. “You—there’s confetti in your hair.”

Dirk juggles the two large boxes in his grasp to one hand, the other flying up to feel around his scalp and circlet. “Oh, bother, really? How much? Do I look silly? Is my hair a mess?”

“No, you— you look great,” Todd mumbles, shuffling his feet. He isn’t lying—it looks like Dirk’s had a run-in with the styling team himself since Todd last saw him. Now he’s wearing something that neither version of Todd has seen him in—not a jacket, and not a toga either. Well, he guesses it technically is, but it’s a lot longer than what he usually wears, nearly sweeping the floor. It’s almost a dress—hell, maybe it is, it’s not like Todd knows shit about fashion. It’s also white, which is pretty unusual for Dirk, and split up the side to show off one leg which is… less unusual. It fits him well; honestly? A little too well. The sight of his chest and arms peeking out of all that perfectly snatched and draped sheer silk is… distracting.

Brightening, Dirk steps over the threshold and closes the door behind him, thoughtfully locking it. “You scrub up nicely yourself, Sir Brotz.”

Blushing, Todd fiddles with the collar of his shirt. It’s higher and softer than anything he would put on himself and he’s not sure how to feel about it. “Uh, thanks. What are you doing here?”

“It’s my room.”

*Shit.* “Oh. Yeah.”

Dirk dumps the mysterious boxes on the bed, and tugs Todd into his arms by the hand. “Well, and a little birdie told me you might be hiding in here. I wanted to check in on you, and…” He swallows, throat bobbing dryly. “Have a little chat with you about something.”

Unease settles in Todd’s gut. “Oh.”

“But first,” Dirk declares, picking up the smaller of the boxes and thrusting it into Todd’s arms. “Special delivery!”

Todd peers at the package suspiciously. “Um.”

“Oh, put those away,” Dirk tuts, smoothing out Todd’s furrowed brows with his thumb. “It’s not going to bite.”

Figuring he’s probably right— and that he may as well get this over and done with— Todd tugs at the silky green ribbon, letting it tumble to the floor as he puts the box down on the bed and lifts the lid. A flash of rich, midnight blue velvet catches his eye. “What is…?”

“Well, you didn’t think you were going to marry me in just that, did you?” Dirk snorts, gesturing to Todd’s tailored but simple new ensemble as his other hand fiddles with the ribbon on his own box. “It is a special occasion, Todd. Only the best for my betrothed!”
Pushing the lid aside, Todd picks up the velvet thing gingerly. More fabric unfolds as he pulls, a good few feet of it. It’s kind of hard to make out what the thing is at first, ’til he recognises the clasps on the shorter side. He snorts. The old him wouldn’t have imagined himself getting married at all- let alone wearing a fucking cape for the occasion.

“You don’t like it?” asks Dirk, crestfallen.

“Wha- no! I mean yeah, yeah I do.” He gathers the fabric to his chest; it grazes softly against his chin, softer than any fabric he’d ever felt, possibly in both his lives. “I just- sorry, I just wasn’t expecting… thank you.”

Dirk smiles shyly, tucking his hair behind his ear. “Well… I tried to make it something you would want to wear, of course. It is your wedding, too!”

“You made this?”

“Oh, goodness, no, I’m rubbish at needlework. I just designed it.”

Todd spread out the garment on the bed, tracing his fingers over the intricate moon motifs embroidered along the hem. “When? When the hell did you have time for this?”

“Oh, I didn’t draft it up yesterday,” Dirk laughs, pulling something feathery out of his own box. “I had it lying around, designed it ages ago.”

“…Really?”

Dirk ducks his head, scrunching the feathery thing restlessly between his fingers. “Do you like the lining?”

Frowning, Todd folds over a corner of the cloak. The inner layer shimmers in Dirk’s glow from across the bed, rich green satin rippling like a forest canopy between the delicately stitched quilting of vines. “Dirk…”

“I thought it might be, um, nice. If you had a little piece of home with you. Of course, if I’d known then what I know now, I suppose I would have chosen something a little more representative of… you know. The other place. But I really had to give Sal those designs as soon as possible, I didn’t have time to make adjustments-“

“Dirk.” Todd looks up at him, not even caring that his own eyes are tearing up and he’s smiling like a fucking sap. “I love it.”

“You do?”

Todd nods, running his hands reverently across the material. A newly uncovered part of him cringes at the idea of wearing something like this, even though for the part of him that was a knight his entire life a cloak is as familiar as a second skin. But both parts, regardless of taste, are pretty fucking messed up by the intimacy of the gesture right now anyway. “It’s… perfect.”

Dirk’s skin brightens with the force of his smile. “Well, go on, then- try it on!” he pesters, bouncing excitedly on his heels.

“Oh! Yes.” Dirk quickly shuffles behind the ornate privacy screen across the room, calling out a
cheery ‘no peeking!’ over his shoulder.

Chuckling, Todd wanders over to Dirk’s mirror as he arranges the cloak over one shoulder and clasps it at the neck. It fits perfectly; snug but not constricting at his throat, hem hanging level with his hip. He runs the velvet through his fingers thoughtfully, wondering why he never really wore blue before this week; wondering how Dirk knew, back when he designed this, that it would compliment his skin and make his eyes pop.

The there-him wore blue.

Todd stares at his reflection in the mirror- kind of for the first time, with these new eyes. If he concentrates real hard, he can make out impressions of that old him, overlapped with this new version like two sides of an old fashioned thaumatrope, flicking back and forth so fast they blur into the same image. Where this him is green, that him is blue. Blue jeans, blue flannel. A blue denim jacket, well worn, well loved and covered in patches for bands and artists he’d forgotten existed up ‘til a couple days ago. So much blue. “Why’d you pick this colour?”

“Hm?” Dirk’s voice floats pleasantly out from behind the screen.

“The blue. Why blue?”

“Oh, no real reason- I’ve just always thought you would look rather nice in it.”

Huh. Maybe memories of that old world aren’t as deeply buried as he’d thought. “Hey, Dirk?”

“Yes, darling?”

Todd hesitates. Maybe he should just enjoy the peaceful moment while they’ve got it. Then again, he’ll just stress himself out if he gives himself time to speculate. “What, uh. What did you wanna talk to me about?”

For a moment, only silence answers from behind the screen. Then, slowly, the rustle of feathers and fabric resumes, and Dirk seems to choose his words very carefully. “Well, I was chatting to… someone, in the gardens, and it got me thinking. About this, ah, other world of yours.”

“Yeah?”

“Yes.” Dirk sighs, and taps the screen. “And… I think we should go back.”

Todd freezes, blinking at the reflection of the screen in the mirror. “Wait, seriously? You want to…?”

“Want might be a tad strong a word, Todd.” Todd watches Dirk’s fingers pop out one side of the screen, holding onto the frame and tapping anxiously. “It sounds unappealing in a multitude of ways, to be perfectly candid. But I was thinking about those friends you mentioned, and all those helpful people we met on our travels missing their memories, and I think it would… be the right thing to do.”

“Are you sure?” asks Todd, turning to face the screen. “Because I’m gonna stay with you no matter what.”

“I know.” His voice comes out so soft Todd almost doesn’t hear it through the thin sheets of wood separating them. “But I… I think perhaps this is the way it’s supposed to be. I’ve got sort of a… a feeling, like a…”
Todd’s lips twitch. “A hunch?”

“Indeed.”

“Dirk?”

“Hm?”

“Can you, uh. Come out from behind that thing?”

He’s half convinced, for a second, that Dirk’s gonna pretend he didn’t hear that. But the hand on the side of the screen grips a little tighter, then releases, and before too long the rest of him floats into view; wearing perhaps the most extravagant thing Todd has ever seen on him, in either life. A floor-sweeping cloak, gold and gossamer-thin, catching and refracting his light like amber. The cloak cascades down from an intricate metal mantel, delicate gold filigree fanning out from his shoulders like rays of the sun; and anchored between the two, covering the upper portion of the fabric, a thick, lustrous layer of feathers—snow white at the stem, dipped in pure gold at the tips.


Todd’s newly widened vocabulary supplies the word camp.

“You look… incredible.”

Amazingly, both are true.

Dirk’s grin is even more luminous than the rest of him. “Do you think?”

“Yeah, it’s very… you.”

“I’m choosing to take that as a compliment.”

Todd smiles. “It was.”

Preening, Dirk drifts forward, cloak sweeping the floor behind him. “And how about you, darling? Feeling dashing?” He straightens out the neck of Todd’s cape, running his fingers along his skin more than he really needs to. “Because you certainly look it!”

“I feel…” Todd laughs dryly, smoothing down the feathers on Dirk’s shoulder. “Way out of my depth, but… I’m good.” He looks up at Dirk’s face, and feels his own heart start to beat in doubletime. “I’m… great, actually.”

Dirk’s fingers graze Todd’s jawline as he cups his cheek, thumb tracing under his eye and drawing heat to the surface. “So am I.”

He leans in, and Todd closes his eyes; shutting out everything but the warmth of Dirk’s light on his skin, and the slow, deliberate slide of his lips against his own. God… how did the other him live without this? How could he spend time around Dirk— and all his stupid, irritating, irreplaceable, irresistible Dirk-ness— and not constantly fantasize about touching him everywhere, getting his hands on his skin, his lips on his lips?

...Did he? Fantasise about this?

Did Dirk?

Shit, how much time did they waste not doing this?
“Todd,” Dirk grumbles into the kiss. “You’ll ruffle my feathers!”

“You’re one to talk about ruffling feathers,” Todd gripes, but he loosens his grip on Dirk’s shoulders all the same- he’ll have to put up with his whining for the rest of their marriage if he messes up his wedding clothes.

“Hardly my fault- you’re just so delightful to ruffle.” Dirk pulls back, leers, and drags his fingers sloppily through Todd’s newly styled hair. “See?”

“Bastard.”

“One of those unflattering words, I take it?”

“Real unflattering.”

“Tremendous.”

Todd snorts, and leans his head against Dirk’s chest. He’s so solid, so real- god, he’s the only thing in both worlds that Todd’s sure of, anymore. He doesn’t know how long he’s known Dirk in real life, fake memories not included- two months? Thirty years? Anywhere in between, he doesn’t know, but he knows that he’s a fixture in his life, now. Both of them. Todd’s never been a believer in all that soulmate shit- not even as his sappy elf alter ego- but with Dirk he’s found something damn close. Something that feels right.

They had to get dragged into some crazy acid trip renfaire nightmare to find it, but hey. It’s gonna be one hell of a story to tell.

If they get out of it…

“So,” he says carefully, smoothing his hand across Dirk’s plumed shoulders. “The other world, huh? You sure about this?”

Dirk nods, chin grazing the top of Todd’s head. “Yes. I… I think so. I think it’s the right thing to do. I’m sorry I didn’t, um, when you first asked me-”

“No, no, I… I wasn’t exactly selling it.”

Dirk chuckles softly, wrapping his arms around Todd’s waist. “Yes, you do need to work on your pitch a bit. I suppose that’s why I’m the head of that detective agency, and you’re the… sorry, what is your role in all this, again?”

“Fuck knows.”

God, Moon, it feels so good to hear Dirk laughing again. Feels so good to laugh along with him.

But he guesses they can’t stand around laughing all day and expect the universe to fix itself.

“So, uh…” Todd reluctantly backs up, looking Dirk in the eye. “I guess… I guess we go back to Amanda, right? I mean, the witch- she said she would help figure out how to get back… there.”

“Yes, I suppose,” Dirk hums noncommittally, rubbing the hem of Todd’s cloak between his thumb and forefinger. “Although there is just one thing we have to do first…”

Todd rolls his eyes. “Yeah, of course. Priorities.”

“Todd,” says Dirk sternly. “Marrying you is the highest of priorities. Until we’ve tied the proverbial
knot, the universe can jolly well wait.”

Blushing, Todd nods and leans up to press a kiss to the corner of Dirk’s mouth. “Okay. Wedding first. And then…”

“Amanda, yes. And I rather hope she has another memory or two for us,” says Dirk, brows wrinkling in thought. “I’m very curious to know who or what foisted this daydream upon us in the first place.”

“You won’t be needing the witchykookoo.”

The new voice in the room freezes Dirk in his tracks, and makes Todd’s blood run cold to boot. Grabbing Dirk by the shoulder and stepping defensively in front of him, Todd looks to the door and finds it ajar- no sign of the bolt he remembers Dirk sliding, like it never existed. And standing in the doorway, heavy and threatening as an encroaching monsoon…

“King Blackfeather,” Todd greets, heart pounding. “Uh, good evening… Sir.”

The king’s eyes bore into him, black as night.

Fuck. They’re in trouble.

“Hey, uh…” Todd swallows, gathers himself, and draws himself up to his full height- which isn’t as impressive as he wishes it was. “Look, man. You had your chance to say something about this. The whole kingdom’s getting ready for a wedding, so unless you want a- a riot on your hands, you really oughta-”

“What do you mean we won’t be needing the witch?” Dirk blurts, tugging Todd back against his chest anxiously.

Todd hesitates, blinks, and glances over his shoulder at Dirk. “Actually… Yeah. What he said.”

“You never needed her for answers,” the king intones, dark and dangerous as the black of his eyes begins to bleed down his cheeks. “You only had to ask the right questions.”

Todd stumbles back, wedging himself and Dirk against the mirror in panic as the king lifts his cosmic cape, the black void of fabric obscuring his face and body and hanging suspended in midair like an ethereal veil. Todd can do nothing but stare as the fabric ripples, churns, as Dirk’s fingers grab at his cape and his anxious breaths rattle in his ears.

And then the fabric drops, the veil parts, and like a kid at a magic show Todd finds himself staring at something incomprehensible with no idea what the hell to do about it.

The small, black-haired boy that now stands in the king’s place looks at them with eyes of unfathomable black, and clenches his tiny fists by his sides.

“Rise and shine.”

Chapter End Notes

Hoo, boy, we're in it now...
Comments are life-affirming confetti showers <3
He doesn’t even figure out he’s awake, at first. It’s been so long he barely remembers what awake is.

Loud. Loud is what it is. And crowded. He hasn’t even opened his eyes yet but he just knows it’s crowded, he can feel them- people here, there, everywhere, scurrying round in his head like hamsters. Yelling, gasping, crying- noise.

“I’m glad you came to us from outside, mijo.”

The memory of her voice is tinny and quiet, all muzzy, old and stained like those treasure maps she helped him make with coffee grounds and newspaper. He follows it, but something tells him finding her isn’t gonna be as easy as ‘x marks the spot’.

“With Arnold there was so much noise- it’s noisy, having a baby! Everyone running around, shouting things; it’s no wonder poor Arnie cried so much in the beginning.”

Maybe that’s what this is, this loudness and pain. Maybe he’s been born again.

But… he doesn’t remember seeing a stork anywhere…

Her voice is gone, scarpered like it got caught in the wind, and now he’s all alone again but that noise won’t stop. If this is being born, he’s glad he forgot it the first time- or maybe he never even had it. They always said he wasn’t like the other little boys. His head hurts and his heart thumps and he just wants to go back to the quiet, warm place he was in. For the first time in forever he can feel his entire body and it hurts; it’s so much taller than he remembers, and weaker. He’s shaking like a fraidy cat and his stiff, achy knees don’t wanna carry him no more. He tries to cover his eyes with his hands but they move so slow, stuck in stiff, painful claws with his dry bones all locked up like puzzle pieces. All his bones feel dry and hurt, and his skin’s stretched tight over the top of them like a drum and he hates it. He hates every new feeling he’s feeling and he wants to go back to when there was nothing- or the part just before the nothing. The part where he was closer to the ground, and his bones worked, and his mom stroked his hair and sang him silly songs. He wants to feel warm again. He wants to feel safe.

Then he remembers the yelling and the scissors, and why not even Mom is safe anymore.

He doesn’t wanna cry but he’s gonna- like a big baby, says his brother somewhere in his head. But he just doesn’t know what else to do. Nothing makes sense, and everything hurts, and he doesn’t have Mom or Dad or even Arnie to hold his hand for him. And even if they were here, they’d be fighting. They were always fighting. He can still hear them yelling in his head, and crying and cussing and suddenly it’s all he can hear and he can’t move or breathe or think-!
“Dream it into something nice… Make it go away…”

Nice, nice… he can do nice. He remembers nice. Before the big sleep, and the big fight and the scissors there were nice parts. Like Mom’s hugs, and the pancakes she made on Saturdays. Like his crayons, and Arnie by his side, drawing all over the wall and making a whole new world, just for them. Like Dad’s smile, super hard to find and the best thing in the world when it showed up.

As he thinks of those nice things he can feel the aches and pains going away. Just like he can feel the weird feeling of his arms and legs getting shorter. But it’s better than being too tall and too dry, so he keeps dreaming of the nice things.

He’s busy thinking of that rare smile, the one Dad gave him in return for a picture he drew of his favourite cow on the farm, when a new voice pops into his head.

“-and he said he was proud of me!”

This voice is small and excited, and it has an accent kinda like those old timey kings and queens on the TV. He can’t see a face that goes with it.

“He actually said that! And he gave me a new book, too.” A little laugh happens. “It’s by someone called Enid. I’ve never met an Enid, have you? Almost doesn’t sound real. But it’s about these friends who go on adventures and solve mysteries together- and they’re only my age, so I don’t know what all this ‘too young’ nonsense is about. I mean, he gave me the book, surely he must have read it!”

It doesn’t seem to stop talking. Ever. But he kinda likes it. As this boy- he thinks it’s a boy- yaps and yaps, he uses all these big words like he swallowed a dictionary, and they all sound fun and interesting and sometimes he stops to define them, as if he’s bragging about knowing them. He just talks and talks about his book, and all the adventure’s he’s going to have once he finds some assistants-

“-or even just one assistant. I’m clever enough for five people! You can be my assistant, if you like. It’s easy, you just have to listen to all my brilliant deductions- and you’re a great listener!”

The voice is starting to drown out the other noises, and he’s happy to let it. He still can’t see the boy’s face- just a cloudy, shapeless blot in the middle of a sea of weird greyish red stuff. But it’s just so easy to grab onto his bubbly, happy babble and just get lost in it.

“You can come with me, when I start my agency! I’ve already got a name for it and everything, it’s…” The voice gets closer, real close, and drops to a whisper. “Dirk Gently’s Holistic Detective Agency.” And then it gets real… sad. Sadder than a boy like him should sound. “I’m… I’m not supposed to use that name. He doesn’t like it. But it feels like my name; my real name. I’m sure he’ll use it when I’m older, and he realises it’s not a game- he doesn’t like me to waste time on silly games. I don’t, but, well, he’s not to know that, is he? How serious I am. I happen to think I’m very mature- he just doesn’t see that yet. He will one day, though. I’ll be a real detective, and then he’ll see how mature I am! And then he’ll be proud of me every day!”

He thinks about his own dad’s smile as he tacked the cow drawing up on the fridge. Thinks about being smiled at like that every day. It would be… amazing. The bee’s knees. He wants it for himself, every bit as much as he wants it for his new friend. And this boy, this Dirk, seems so absotively positive that it’s gonna happen no matter what, and it makes it so easy to believe that it will. One day he’ll finally be good enough.

Maybe they both will.
Nice dreams, nice dreams…

It gets way easier to pick out pieces like that in all the ruckus, once he’s had some practice. There’s lots more of Dirk, yapping away all happy as a clam about this man- who’s not his dad but is a dad, somehow, he’s not really sure how it works and he can’t ask him any questions. Although he thinks maybe this dad-not-dad comes into his own room and speaks to him, sometimes. Sometimes with Dirk, sometimes without. His voice is calm, and patient, with that little hard, stern thing in the back of it that only dads can really do. And there are other voices, too- all with no faces, all just dark smudges. He figures out, after a while, that it’s because he can only see blurry shadows in the bright light through his eyelids. He can’t open them; he’s forgotten how.

“-and ‘e told me to put down the stick ‘n I didn’t really wanna. So I kinda threw it at ‘em…”

“-they want me to be a person. Imagine that, when there’s so many things I could be!”

“-I mean, I didn’t throw it hard, but his head just kinda fell off. It was real gross, and loud-lotsa folks screamin’ ‘n cryin’ about it…”

“-I could be an owl, or a bear, or some slugs and snails and pretty little creepy crawlies…”

“Stuff like that happens, when people make me do stuff. Dunno why they don’ just lemme do my own thing, ‘way from other folks…”

“-but all they want me to be is a boring old person…”

Those memories aren’t even happy, he guesses. Both his faceless friends- one who calls herself Mona, one who gets called Marzanna when someone finds her in the room and yells for security, although she mumbles another name to him before she disappears- sound real sad. But being talked to, feeling a person in the room, it stands out from the rest of the dark, quiet nothing and holds his hand, pulling him out of his head like Mom used to lead him over the crosswalk. The voices are like colourful strings, sliding between his fingers as he follows them into the light.

Follows them to the mouths they came out of.

He knows they’re all there before he even opens his eyes- Dirk and Mona are close, along with some people he doesn’t know, and Marzanna is out there, too. Not in the room, but in the world. In his world.

A world gone real, real wrong.

Wendimoor is his again, at least. He can feel it all around him, in his heart and in his tummy, connected by a thousand million pretty green strings. But some of those strings are frayed, or snapped, some of them burnt black and limp.

And some of them- a lot of them- red and shiny with warm, sticky blood.


He whimpers and reaches out for the strings, tries to knot the broken ends back together but they keep slipping through his useless butterfingers, limp and heavy with blood he can’t scrub out.

And amongst all the strings of people’s lives, all the bloody shreds, he can’t find a single one that he knows.
He searches again, desperately, squinting at the bits and pieces in his hands, looking real close at every thread. But only one is there the way he made it, one lonely little life that’s almost exactly how he remembers- Wakti Wapnasi. Except she’s broken and bloody too, and he can’t figure out how to fix it. He holds the pieces of her string tight anyway, holding onto the one soul in thousands that he remembers making. There’s a couple more that he remembers, but they’re… different, somehow-aside from being dead and bloody. And then around them, everyone else- nearly everyone in the world- is just… new. Some of them still have the names of people he made before, same hair, same eyes. He finds Oaks, and Slartibartfasts and Dengdamors- one of those is all broken, bloody, and tangled up with a Trost, but not quite the same way he tied anyone together when he made this place. But those people are not the ones he made, and he can’t find those ones anywhere. There’s no sign of Maree, or Arypp or Franjynn. Just new people, or old people gone all weird- and, if he squints real hard, loose, dusty remains of strings that don’t connect to anything anymore.

This… is not the world he made.

Cuddling Wakti’s broken string like he used to cuddle her doll, Francis opens his eyes to light, and ruins, and to more eyes staring right back at him.

Dirk- it is Dirk, with the yellow jacket and flapping hands and the accent like no one Francis ever met in real life- still talks just as much as ever. Maybe he doesn’t know how to stop.

“-And then Mona told me to find the boy, which, as it turns out, is you- who’d have thought? Of course, it would have been nice if I had known that while I was in Blackwing with you, but live and learn, I suppose…”

Francis doesn’t know how Dirk can talk so much, with all his blood gone. It’s still dripping from his leg, staining his pants like it stains the broken strings of Francis’ beat-up world. He could probably do something about it, but he feels queasy just looking at it.

He’s kind of figuring out who these people are, he thinks. The jacket wasn’t a jacket at all, he could feel that right away. It was actually Mona, all wrapped around Dirk for safety, but now she’s person-shaped again and holding him up like a crutch- she could probably turn into a crutch, if she wanted to. Or a peg leg. And then next to them are two more people he’s never seen before- two small, dark-haired, kinda grumpy people, one in Wendimoor clothes, one in a sorta-white jacket and holding Francis’ old air gun. There was also a blonde lady a minute ago, with a creepy black crown and blood under her eyes, but the second he’d spotted her black, oozing string, he’d tied it to his flying train and sent her there; she had the blood of hundreds of his new people on her hands, and he wanted her to go far, far away from him.

“Dirk, just- geez, slow down, you’re gonna make it worse…”

One of the little guys with black hair, the air gun one, is fussing over Dirk like a mom. And Dirk, between all his rambling and waving, is looking back at him with the biggest, most dopiest smile on his face.

“The new guy, Todd… is perfect.”

It must be his new assistant. His string is blue, sturdy, and tightly wound with Dirk’s bright, buzzing yellow like a friendship bracelet, knotted there nice and snug while threads of Dirk reach out far and
wide like a big old spiderweb, connected to about as many different things as possible. Francis pulls
them both close, gathers them up with the remains of Wakti’s string for safekeeping—along with
Mona and the other girl, just in case. He doesn’t really know anything about her—except that her
string is electric blue and connected in loads of places to Todds—but Dirk seems to like her, which is
good enough for Francis. Dirk and his friends are just about the only people he knows in this new
Wendimoor, and he ain’t letting them go for anything.

“Would have been nice to know about all the other things, too—like that Suzie woman, and Priest,
and the Mage—” Dirk gasps loudly, smacking at Todd’s arm. “Oh, my god, we forgot about the
Mage—!”

“He’s gone,” Francis mumbles. Not only is the Mage’s string split, charred and still a little on fire,
it’s stretched far, far away from the rest of Wendimoor where it should be. While his new friends
chatter about where the Mage is, about who could have dealt with him, about a Farah person that
they all whisper about like a superhero, Francis brushes the Mage aside and digs around for more
familiar strings, looking closer at the ones he passed over. He finds four just outside the ruined walls
of his throne room, all tangled together and frozen in time. He feels something like a memory when
he touches them—hears something that sounds like wild, distant howls echoing through white walls
and his own skull, yelling out together for freedom. He picks those strings up, too, and finds another
much, much further away—red, blood-soaked but not split, surrounded by a whole mess of cut
strings. He knows her, too. Knows her voice, all rough and gruff. She looks like a villain, but feels

This little handful of strings is everything familiar in the world right now; and he holds onto them
with everything he’s got.

At least he isn’t alone…

“We have to get back there—she could be hurt, or—”

Francis’ belly ties itself in a knot. “No."

Dirk looks at him with big eyes, clinging tight to Todd’s jacket and squeaking like a mouse.

“Sorry?”

“You’re not going back.” Francis shakes his head, gripping onto the arms of his throne. The old
stone is cold and dusty under his hands, moss peeling under his fingertips. How long has this place
been abandoned? How much of his world has he missed? “It’s not safe.”

“No shit,” Todd cusses.

The girl thumps him on the arm. “Dude.”

“What? I’m just saying, we’ve nearly died like, how many times this week already? What’s one
more?”

Francis feels sick. “No, no—no more dying.”

“Todd,” Dirk hisses, tugging the little man’s sleeve.

“Sorry about my brother, he’s… a dumbass,” says the girl, stepping in front of both the boys and
Mona with her hands held out. “Look, all he’s tryna say is… dude, we got this. We’re gonna be just
fine, we always are, right, guys?”

Dirk and Todd look at each other, and then back at Francis with a couple phoney-baloney grins.
“Right!”

Why do grown-ups always lie?

“No.” He tries to sound confident, like the girl. The stone throne cracks under his hands. “No. It’s too late for the other world— you should stay here.”

“Too late?” Todd blurts, loudness cutting into Francis’ ears. “What do you mean too-mmf?”

A quick wave of Francis’ hand shuts him up. “I don’t like yelling.”

Eyebrows scrunching like caterpillars, Todd starts picking grumpily at the three big pink band-aids that have appeared over his mouth.

“He does that a lot,” says Dirk, watching his assistant’s struggle with a little nervous frown. “He doesn’t mean anything by it. He, ah, he does have a good point though, um… ‘too late’?”

“It’s…” Francis glances over at the other world, real quick. Around the Mage there’s blood and broken strings, there’s chaos and destruction, there’s strings unraveling and a thousand loose ends. He stops looking when he finds people all around his old house— people just like the ones who took him the first time. “Bad.”

“Well, then we have to go help,” says the girl, like it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “My boys are outside, the five of us can go grab Farah and—”

“It’s no use.” Francis doesn’t know how to talk to this girl— she’s loud and stubborn, and has magic bubbling up in her blood like soda. She could ruin everything. “There’s no point— there’s no happy endings there, no matter what we do…”

“That’s… dark and depressing,” mutters Todd through the corner of his mouth he’s managed to free from the band-aids.

“Not to mention bullshit,” says the girl in front of him, power crackling on her skin. “So, what, you see some bad crap and give up on the whole universe? On Farah? That chick’s probably carrying the whole goddamn world on her back right now, and if you think we’re not gonna go help her then you must be freakin’-!”

“Enough!”

The scream explodes out of him, throat burning up like a volcano and the entire broken castle shaking and quaking with it. Dirk and his little friends all wobble around on their feet like bowling pins, Dirk landing on his bad leg with a whimper.

Francis freezes, the room stops shaking, and the blood from Dirk’s leg drip, drip, drips onto the dust and dirt.

“I-I’m s-sorry,” Francis whimpers, clutching the throne so hard the cracks turn to crumbling pebbles. “I- you’re hurt, I-”

“Kid,” the girl says, a lot gentler than before but still stubborn as an old ploughhorse. “He needs to go to a hospital. We can look after him, if you just—”

“No.”

Her jaw goes all tight and angry, but Francis isn’t gonna back down this time. He knows what he’s
got to do, now more than ever. All of these people, his friends—or the closest thing he’s got—they’re so flimsy. Dirk went back to the other world for minutes, and now he’s broken and bleeding and he can’t just wish it away.

But Francis can.

“You’ll be safe,” he whispers. “I’ll keep you all safe…”

Dirk fidgets, and raises his finger. “Um, while that sounds very nice indeed, it does rather leave us with the matter of—”

Another wave of Francis’ hand quiets him down, but not with band-aids. This time he just closes his eyes, plucks Dirk up out of the world, and tucks him away in the back of his mind; safe and quiet.

“What the-!”

“Hey!”

The girl and the assistant both holler about it; Todd even picks up the airgun and points it at Francis’ head. But it doesn’t really matter, because Francis tucks both of them away, too—and, with a sad smile, Mona as well.

And then, just to be safe, the boogle with the rainbow hair who jumps out of hiding and spits at him like a cat a second later.

He turns her over in his mind a little. She belongs to his world, but she wasn’t made here, she was born. Sometime in the last thirty years, while he wasn’t even here.

That’s why there’s so many new people. They’ve been making more, all the people he made moving on, living lives, having babies of their own.

No wonder there’s so much yelling here, now.

He shakes his head, clawing at the thousands of new strings. He doesn’t like this. He wants his people back, the ones he made, with Arnie. He wants the friends he’s been dreaming of all this time, and not just the ones he made from his bed in the big sleep. His old friends. The ones from before everything turned to crud.

Maybe he can just… pull things back a little. To when those friends were still here.

He fumbles around, but it turns out he can’t just pull one string, not for this. He has to grab everything—this world, the other one, everyone and everything. His head hurts, his blood is pounding, but he pulls and pulls and pulls, centering himself on Wakti’s broken thread and trying to move everything else with her.

And somewhere in the land, slow, confused, and to the dread of all other timepieces, a hand on a clock ticks backwards.

Blood.

Why is there always blood?
The entire ceiling is spinning, but... maybe that’s just his head. Everything around him is just cold and stone, stone and cold, and everything inside of him is lava.

A week. One stupid week. That’s the best he could do, as far back as he could drag the universe before it, or his head, exploded. As far as he could pull before the cracks in reality stretched too wide. He can taste the blood on his lip, dripping from his nose. If he tries going back even another minute...

So. A week. None of the old people are back. It’s just him, this weird, scary new world, and the handful of people hidden away in his mind for safekeeping, waiting for him to let them out into the world.

Waiting for him to make them happy.

He puts his face in his hands, and cries. He doesn’t care about being a wimp or a crybaby, he just doesn’t. It’s not like there’s anyone left to call him names. Just like there’s no one left to dry his tears, or kiss him better or stroke his hair and tell him he’s okay, it’s all gonna be okay.

“I’m sorry…”

His tummy hurts, his skin is sticky, his mouth tastes like metal. “Mommy…”

Blood, flowers, scissors.

He digs his fingers into his eyes.

Red, yellow, silver.

The stone floor crumbles under his fists, the scream tears his throat to smithereens.

“Stop!”

It does.

Everything does.

People start to look real funny, if you pause them when they’re not expecting it. They pull some real weird faces.

Francis doesn’t know how long he’s been just walking around, looking at funny faces. Thing about freezing time is you kinda don’t give the clocks a job to do. But that’s okay- as long as time isn’t moving, he has lots of it to think, and no one’s getting hurt. And there’s a lot more people alive now then there were before he rewound time, so whatever wiped out a bunch of them, he must have skipped over it; he’s just glad he can’t see all the bodies he felt grossing up his world before.

He finds those few people he knows but doesn’t, in his travels. Just a couple of them. And he can see now why they felt so different from a distance- they don’t look like he remembers them looking. They don’t look like how he drew them. There aren’t too many of them left, and not one of them is a kid anymore- Heck, none of them are even Mom or Dad’s age. Some of them are just starting to get some wrinkles on their faces, and some of them look like wizards- Slarti has a way, way longer
beard than Francis ever drew him with, and hunches over so bad he looks like a question mark. Francis doesn’t know if seeing them alive like this makes him feel happy or sad, so he mostly just leaves them alone.

There’s a few people he can’t find, too, ones who should be here- he can’t find the Mage anywhere. Maybe he got stuck in the other world. Maybe it’s something to do with that crack Francis just made in the universe trying to fix time for everybody.

Whatever. This world’s better off without him, anyway.

He’s found his way to the farms, now, and petted every sugarsheep and cocow he’s seen. Now he’s sat on a big round bale of hay, watching a man with pink hair as he stands frozen mid-swing in a fight with… some kind of weird scarecrow. With targets painted on its head and chest. He stares at the man’s sword for a long time; two blades, two round handles, stuck together in the middle.

Francis doesn’t remember making those, but they give him the creeps.

He does remember the pink hair, at least, but not on this person. But he does kinda look like the other Trosts he made. Not as old as Hectamin, probably, but way older than Arypp. He looks like them for sure. He’s the kinda man who Mom would look at and say he ‘has his father’s eyes’. Francis drew those eyes, once; but in the faces of a different man, and a younger boy. And he drew them a lot less… angry.

This world isn’t happy. It’s less unhappy now than it was when he woke up- since he jumped back to before the big thing that left everyone all dead and bloody- but it’s still unhappy, dangerously so. And he’s found people with weapons, scissors and needles and even some things that shouldn’t be in this world at all. Guns. Big ones. He has a real bad feeling about the thing that killed everyone- and that feeling is that it was everyone else that done it. Somehow, for some reason, all these new people in his world are killing each other- and if he doesn’t change things, they might do it all again. Real soon.

How can he make an entire world happy?

It’s so stupid. This is what this world was for, when he made it. Sure, there’s killer plants and bumblebeasts and all kinds of creepy slippery things, but those are just to make it interesting. Everything else is supposed to be brilliant- if hamburgers growing on vines don’t make the people happy anymore, then what will?

And he can’t just take it back to when it was happy, neither. He nearly exploded himself bringing it back this far, even gave the darn universe a headache- something broke the first time, like a piece of reality coming loose, something he should probably be real worried about. He doesn’t know what it is or how to fix it but he knows he doesn’t wanna try and do it again. He can’t change time again, it could wreck everything.

But maybe… maybe he could change what people remember.

It can’t be that hard, right? He made time go away, he can do it to some memories. But he can’t just leave people with big holes in their heads- he has to put something else in there…

But… he doesn’t know any of these new people- how the jiminy is he supposed to know what memories would make them happy?

He looks at the pink-haired man. Gives him a little nudge. Maybe, if he just puts the start of something, maybe… he’ll just make up the rest. Like a dream.
“Dream it into something nice…”

That’s it! He’ll wipe away all the new memories, leave them a really good one, and let them dream up the lives they like the best! That must have been what happened the first time, right? All his people lived lives without him and he left a lot of details out- they must have made lives and memories all on their own. He’ll start them off on something real good and let them do it again! But better this time. He can stick everything back together, make Wendimoor good and happy and his again.

And this time… this time he’ll make room for his new friends, too.

There are so many people here, now, more than he ever made the first time. And except for a little handful of them, the oldies leftover from his drawings, he doesn’t know anything about them. But that’s okay- because there are some things that must make everyone happy, right? Like pets, and food, and dads who smile at you. So he tries to give everyone at least a couple of those memories, and hopes they’ll build nice things around it- he dreamed up a whole bunch of people with lives before, he can do it again.

Now all the crummy old stuff is gone, the shiny new stuff is ready, and there’s only a few people left.

Francis sits down in his new throne, looking out the window to the sky as the Forever Train chugs past. He didn’t wanna stay in the old castle, all dusty and broken with the drawings on the walls he’d rather forget. But this one has a nicer view anyway; this high in the sky, he could have a staring contest with the Moon.

Dirk would like it too, right?

He closes his eyes, feels his old friends in the back of his head; sleeping snug as a bug in a rug. Before he wakes them up, he’s gotta put them somewhere real nice. But they’ve talked to him before, so at least he knows how to make them happy!

Bart doesn’t wanna be told what to do- he’ll make sure no one will want to.

Mona doesn’t wanna be a person- he’ll put her someplace where she can be anything.

The angry girl… well, he doesn’t really know what she wants. He knows she’s friends with the howling boys, though, so that’s something, right? If he puts them together, someplace she can use her magic without scaring the other people or spoiling things, she’ll make up the rest.

And Dirk…

Oh, boy, he knows lots about Dirk.

He knows he likes fancy clothes and bright colours. He knows he likes stories, especially the ones that have drawings in them. He knows he loves his new name, and his new books, and he always misses the sunshine when he’s locked away too long.

And, and, he knows he already has the perfect assistant.

It’s not super hard to make up the rest- actually, it’s probably the easiest one of all. He can’t make
Dirk a detective, of course, because there won’t be crime in his new Wendimoor, but he thinks he’s found a great slot for Dirk and his Todd all the same. He gets them all settled and then leaves them to fill in the blanks; if they were friends before, they’ll make up the rest. They can be best friends forever, safe and happy in an amazing new world, and everything bad they ever knew can be gone! They can have everything they ever wanted! A happy ending.

And he...

He...

Francis stares at the sky, the Moon stares right back, and Francis loses the contest by blinking over a question he hasn’t had to ask or answer in a real long time.

What does he want?

Where does he fit?

He could make a new mom, he supposes. A new dad, a new Arnie. Try and make them happy this time.

Except... he doesn’t want new ones. He wants his family back. But Mom and Dad are gone, and Arnie... Arnie doesn’t want him. He gave him to the bad men because he didn’t want him, he was scared of him. Why would he want any of this? He doesn’t want Wendimoor, he doesn’t even wanna think about it. He doesn’t wanna be Francis’ brother anymore, and maybe... maybe Francis isn’t supposed to be his. Maybe he was never meant to be a brother, or a son- he wouldn’t have been either if no one had picked him up, and they always wished they didn’t.

So if he’s not a son or a brother, what is he? What is he supposed to be?

“I’m going to do brilliantly again tomorrow, I just know it!”

He doesn’t know where Dirk’s little kid voice is coming from after being quiet so long, but he likes listening to it, so he just put his chin in his hand and listens, closing his eyes to the happy bubbling memories of his friend.

“And then he’ll give me another book! Oh, I hope it’s a mystery- or a romance! Those ones are silly sometimes, and they’re always about boys who like girls which... I don’t understand, actually. People say I will when I get older, but I think... maybe not? Is there such a thing as boys who... like other boys? Oh, don’t tell Riggins I asked you that, he’ll be livid. But, um, yes, they’re silly, and a little hard to relate to but... I do like the romances. I like the ones with the weddings...

“...He... he will give me books again, won’t he? If I do well, I... I’m going to try. I... I like it when he says I’ve done well. And... and not just for the books.”

Francis hopes he got given more books; and he thinks he understands why they’re not the only thing Dirk cares about.


Maybe... there is one other thing he could be...

He lifts his hand, concentrates on every tiny bit of it from his thumb to his pinky. Watches them get longer, fatter, older. Turn into hands that are gonna ruffle hair and pet and play catch and pin drawings to every fridge in the land, and do it better than any adult ever did, and he smiles.
And they all lived happily ever after…

Dirk has absolutely no idea what he is supposed to focus on in this very confusing moment. Could be the small boy, morphing slowly into Riggins in front of his very eyes. Could be the flood of memories pouring in from said boy, semi-explaining why he is turning into Riggins before his very eyes.

Or possibly, just possibly, it could be his own memories from a life long forgotten, rolling in like a tidal wave through the broken dam of his mind.

It is, to put it lightly, a lot to take in.

“Dirk!”

Good god, is that a voice for sore ears. “Todd,” Dirk gasps, fumbling blindly at his side. “Todd, I-”

“Geez, Dirk, I, I just saw the- are you okay?”

A hand finds his own, and Dirk looks into wide, worried eyes of blue.


Dirk squeezes his hand. “Better, now…”

His wonderful, clever friend’s eyes flash in recognition, and Dirk can see that he knows, somehow. He must be able to see it in Dirk’s eyes; a sudden surplus of life.

“I’m not your Watson, asshole!”

“It’s real, isn’t it? It’s all real. You really are what you say you are, some kind of… holistic detective.”

“It seems like a bunch of unconnected, spontaneous and unlikely coincidences, but it’s not, right?! Everything is actually connected!”

Oh, Todd Brotzman… how on earth could I forget you?

“I only wanted... to keep you safe.”

Oh, yes. That’s how.

Head heavy and fuzzy with an overabundance of information he hasn’t time to sort through just right now, Dirk turns to Riggins- or rather, the boy. “Moloch,” he breathes, clinging to Todd’s hand for dear life.

The not-Riggins’ moustache twitches- actually, it seems to be a rather bigger moustache than Dirk remembers- and his eyes flash black. “It’s Francis.”

“Francis Cardenas, the boy,” Dirk babbles, nodding madly. “Yes, yes, I remember- I’d only just brought you back from Blackwing when- y-you-”
“When you kidnapped us,” Todd snaps, dropping Dirk’s hand and advancing a challenging step. “What the hell, man?!”

“You wanted to go back there,” says the boy in Riggins’ clothing. It’s profoundly bizarre- the longer Dirk looks at him, the less he looks like the Riggins he now remembers of a life previous. He is too short, and too rotund, his moustache too full, his face too… soft. He looks like Riggins but sanded down, simplified, upped in overall appeal. A Riggins as described to a Disney cartoonist, perhaps. “I had to-”

“No, no, you erased our lives!” Todd’s cheeks are flushed green- green!- with anger.

“I saved your lives!”

A flagstone by Dirk’s feet cracks. An ornate, flashy flagstone. He glances up to confirm his hunch; the throne room. Somehow, Francis transported them all to the throne room, as if to show them his memories of the place in real time. Or at least, somewhere that looks like it; but Dirk can’t help thinking that he keeps catching flashes of grey through the glitter and gold. Something drab, and dusty and crawling with creeping vines.

He steps up behind Todd and grabs his shoulder for stability, staring in terror at the boy wearing a facsimile of Riggins’ face. Already he finds himself rather nostalgic for the days when that face was just a fussy, overprotective father. The associations and connotations it now triggers in his newly expanded mind are… less than pleasant.

The imposter looks back at him with more anxiety and remorse than he imagines the real one has the capacity for. “I just wanted to give you your happy ending,” he says gently, and he sounds like Riggins but his voice is thick, choked. “They don’t exist there. They never did. But you can be happy here! Everyone can!”

“Except not everyone.” Todd argues. “Not the people in the other world you left for dead.”

“And… well, not to be rude, but I think several of your happy people have… grievances.” Dirk pats Todd’s arm, screwing his eyes shut as a flurry of tangled data in his head vies for attention, for connection. “Todd, I- I think I remember now, the people we met; Mona, Bart-”

“Amanda, yeah. And, uh, her crew. Pretty sure they’re dogs, now.”

“Ah. Well, point is, I, ah, think ‘happy ending’ may be a bit of a misnomer.”

“I gave them what they wanted,” the erstwhile king of Starfall insists. “I gave everyone what they wanted-”

“How do you know what they want?” Todd snaps. “Have you even talked to them?”

“They talked to me!”

Dirk gasps. “Oh… he’s right.”

Todd looks up at Dirk, uncomprehending. “Dirk, you said yourself- he’s been in a coma since-”

“And we used to talk to him,” Dirk murmurs, pieces slotting into place; which is a blessing considering the rest of his brain is- as a certain anxious, hapless Blackwing employee would say- a warzone. “At least, I did, and I know Mona did- I never knew about Bart and the others, but… every now and again, they let us sit in his room and talk to him. Separately, of course. I-I suppose they wanted to see what would happen…”
Todd’s face is softening in understanding- although Dirk finds himself, bizarrely, fixated on his ears. They are… long, at the moment. He’d been ever so used to that up until a few minutes ago, and yet now it seems frightfully bizarre. “So… this is when you were-”

“A child. Yes.” Oh, in between goggling at his elfin friend, Dirk is constructing a hypothesis and it is horribly tragic. “Well, and once when they brought me in recently-”

“You sounded different,” whispers the not-Riggins, sounding more childlike by the moment. “But I knew it was you; talking about your mysteries and adventures and perfect assistant-”

“Ah, ah, that’s- that’s quite enough detail, thank you.” Dirk chuckles nervously, looking away from Todd with a blush as the knight’s face swivels fully towards him, its expressive eyebrows arched towards the sky.

“I gave you everything you wanted- I gave you your happy ending! And now we can all be happy here, together!”


“He does rather have a point, I’m afraid,” says Dirk, apologetic. “Not really a happy ending if we don’t know what ended, is it? And, um, respectfully, I don’t think it’s up to you; none of us were all that happy being controlled at Blackwing, were we? And I don’t much like the idea of being controlled elsewhere; even in a fairytale. Although it is a considerable step up, I’ll give you that. At least, I think. I’m not sure.” He groans, pressing his palm to his head. “Don’t suppose we could pick up this discussion after a stout cup of tea and a little sit down?”

“But- but look,” the not-Riggins protests, gesturing to his own body- the illusion of which is beginning to flicker with alarming frequency. “This is everything you dreamed about- I can be him! I remember his voice, and how he talked, and, and I remember what dads are like, I can be him for you- a-and then, we don’t have to be lonely, and you can have what you always wanted! He’ll love you, and be proud of you and-”

“I don’t want that anymore!”

The world grinds to a standstill. For a few long seconds the facade falls entirely, leaving just a small, scared boy stood alone in a vast chamber of ancient, crumbling stone. But before long the protective veneer is plastered back in place, Riggins’ head materialising over that of the boy’s and shaking. “N-no. You were always so happy when he… you wanted-”

“I… I used to…” Dirk admits, bowing his stinging head. God, what must be running through Todd’s mind right now? He’s too scared to look. He’s not sure he ever told him, he can’t find that memory- does he even know who Riggins is? He has no idea, and right now he hasn’t the time or space to figure it out. He’s amazed, frankly, that he is vocalising his thoughts as clearly as he is. He supposes life-threatening situations have a way of focusing the mind. “When I was young, but then I- I realised what he was, and… well, to be honest, I… I still wanted him to love me. I think. For a long time. But he… he never did, and now I know that it was all just- just tactics, to him. It was all lies. He was never going to be proud of me, or solve my problems, he- he wasn’t going to fix anything! He was never going to make me happy- the closest I ever came to happiness in that bloody mess of a world was years after I left him behind, when I went out and looked for it myself and I found-”

His mouth dries up, the urge to bottle up the rest of that thought and lock it away safely in a little box rather overwhelming. He fights through it, however; he thinks, well, he hopes, that after two cases, a quest and a proposal, that they might be on the same page in this regard. “When… I found Todd.”
It’s the truth. It’s possibly the most honest thing he’s said in his life; he still has a lot of memories to sort through, a lot of information to organise, but his feelings for Todd haven’t been weakened. There are new layers now, new unforeseen complexities, but he can feel it in his stomach like a permanent hunch; a little tug to Todd, a little tie that binds.

“We’re meant to know each other!”

Todd inhales sharply beside him. Dirk risks a glance at the soft surprise in his eyes, and smiles weakly; and Todd’s hand, thankfully, finds his own without further prompting.

And to think Todd had been worried that Dirk would love him less…

“You can have Todd!” the not-Riggins blurts, nodding that ill-fitting head frantically. “I didn’t get that, before, I- I thought he was just your assistant, but he can be yours- he can be a prince, too! If that’s your happy ending, I’ll make it, here. I want you all to have happy endings, and this- this is how I can make them happen, ‘cause in the other world they… they won’t. They never will.”


“Also, hey, you can’t just- give people to other people,” Todd interjects, bristling. “That’s not how people work, kid.”

The not-Riggins looks legitimately dumbfounded by this. “But Arnie… he called those men…”

“The… what?”

“The men in black,” he whispers, brows furrowed. “He pointed at me and they…”

Dirk shares a glance with Todd, swallows a lump in his throat, and takes a careful step forward. “Um. About that…”

Already shaking his head, the not-Riggins talks over him. “No. No, it- it doesn’t matter, you wanna be with him, you said-!”

“Yeah, ‘cause I chose him,” says Todd, squeezing Dirk’s hand. “I don’t need other people choosing for me.”

“Neither do I,” says Dirk, drawing confidence from his assis-knight and holding himself with pride. “And neither do our friends, or the people of this land; so undo whatever you’ve done to everyone’s memories, and we’ll help you get everything-”

Not-Riggins flickers sharply to Francis, then back again, shaking his increasingly distorting head as tears well in his eyes. “N-no.”

Giving Todd a meaningful look- that he hopes conveys ‘stay back, I have this under control’ and not ‘please run madly at this godlike child and try to knock him out for me’-, Dirk releases his hand and takes another cautious step forward alone. For all his power, Francis is only a child, maybe he can comfort him, somehow. Calm him. “Francis…”

“No!”

Somehow, Dirk avoids getting bowled over by the booming flash of purple magic that rockets forth from the not-Riggins’ outstretched palm. Alarmed, he skitters from side to side like an antsy crab; before realising there is absolutely nowhere to take cover in this patchy amalgamation of two rather chic open-plan throne rooms, and nearly tripping on his cape in the process. “Ah- don’t suppose I
could go and change-?"

Another blinding spell clips his ear.

“Nevermind,” he squeaks, gathering up the excessive train of the garment in one hand. Wedding clothes it is, then.

At least he will make one fabulous corpse.

“You can’t go back!” the not-Riggins screams, voice youthful and inhumanly piercing; his image is fading like perished celluloid. “You can’t leave me!”

Dirk yelps as another blast of roiling elemental magic soars over his head, knocking his crown clean off.

“Hey!” Todd yells, reaching for his boomerang- and finding nothing but his fancy wedding belt. “Shit. Fucking Jiminy- hey, stop! You can’t just-!”

Not-Riggins looks to him with eyes of blackest night, and waves his hand.

The agonised scream that rips out of Todd as he falls to the floor will surely haunt Dirk to his dying day.

“Todd!” He hesitates, not sure if he should run to Todd’s side or continue towards the volatile boy. He looks to the not-Riggins in panic. “What have you done to him?!”

“Nothing,” he answers, voice scarcely monotonous, image flickering back and forth to Francis a few times. “I just let him have his pain back.”

It takes Dirk a precious few seconds that he doesn’t have to spare, just to sift through his more recent other world memories- and when he finds what he’s looking for, his blood runs cold. “Pararibulitis,” he breathes, watching horror struck as Todd screams and writhes and claws at invisible threats. Too many. How many attacks has Francis blocked for him here? How many cumulative attacks is he experiencing right now?

Dirk whips round and advances on the boy, desperate tears burning in his eyes. “Stop!” he pleads, running and running but somehow advancing at a dreamlike, painfully slow rate. “Please, please, stop!”

“This is what I’m trying to save you from!” the voice- a nightmarishly mutated mix of Francis and Riggins- booms. “This is what happens in the other world- pain and crying and, and bad things!”

“Francis- Francis, please,” Dirk chokes out, closer and yet still not close enough. “Please, you’re killing him-!”

“You wanted this!” the distorted voice shrieks, overlapping another gut-wrenching scream from Todd’s convulsing body. “This is what the o-other world is- w-why don’t you want what you want? I made this w-world for you- for all of you- why won’t you just be happy?!"

He is a waxing, waning, chaotic mass, now, his voice and facade twisted and tormented and wild as a raging whirlwind, significantly harder to calm, Dirk wagers. Unreachable. Untameable.

But what else is there to do but try?

Oh, bloody hell… I wish I was better with children...
Dirk—out of run-up, and out of ideas—throws himself the final distance, and into the embrace of the storm.

It bucks, it twists, it screeches and blares but he holds on tight, refusing to be expelled. He plants his feet—thanking god and the Moon and whoever is listening that his wedding sandals have been crafted with secure, practical straps—and stands his ground, screwing his eyes shut against the kicking, clawing mass of magical rage in his hold. Refusing to bend or bow; refusing to be kicked down, or to stay down.

He hopes that somehow, through all his pain and misery, Todd is watching right now and glowing with pride at his tenacity.

“It’s okay,” Dirk whispers, enfolding the howling, trembling heart of the maelstrom in his arms. “It’s okay, old friend— I’ve got you. It’s all alright…”

The storm subsides, but the rage does not. Still something strikes out at Dirk, hammering into his back and sides, but the pain becomes easier to bear; quieter, weaker, smaller. The noise of all that churning, stormy air tapers off into cries, smaller and smaller by the minute, and finally to heart wrenching sobs.

By the time he next opens his eyes— a minute, perhaps a lifetime later—there is no longer a storm in his arms, nor a not-Riggins, but a boy. Small, and scared, and weak as a kitten.

Francis sobs into his shoulder, tiny fists battering his sides in angry desperation. He is mumbling and muttering under his breath, quiet as a doormouse, and Dirk has to hold him tighter and bend his own head closer just to pick out the words.

"-happy, why aren’t you happy, why won’t you just be happy—"

Dirk blinks rapidly against the hot, stinging tears prodding at his eyes. “I know, old friend,” he whispers, squeezing the distraught child tightly. “I know…”

“You could be happy here,” Francis sobs brokenly into his shoulder, with another weak strike that hits with all the impact of a gentle breeze. Dirk notes, with relief-tinged-worry, that Todd’s distant screams have tapered off into quieter groans and whimpers, which… he certainly hopes is a good thing. “I did e-everything I could to make you…"

“I know, I know- I’m sorry,” says Dirk, closing his eyes and tucking his cheek against the storm-tossed mats of the boy’s raven hair. “I know how hard you tried, but… we’re not the people we were, all those years ago. We were only children, then. I-I can hardly believe it myself, sometimes, but while you were asleep we…” he gulps dryly, squeezing the boy tight in his arms. “We grew up.”

Francis chokes and sobs, and lands one last hit with both his hands—before letting them curl into Dirk’s cape and cling like a limpet as his little body shakes in his arms. “I… I don’t…”

“What… what made us happy then,” Dirk continues, voice ragged. It’s hard enough getting his own thoughts in order, let alone arranging them into words that will make sense to the child, but he has to try. He has to give him something, has to help him understand; he knows very well the pain of not understanding. “Isn’t the same as what makes us happy now. I know that doesn’t, I mean, I know it’s… difficult. But… I don’t need him, anymore. I don’t need Riggins, or Blackwing, and neither do the others, and neither do you— we never did.”

The boy is softly crying, his own heart is quietly breaking; but he feels a certain… clarity. A certain closure. The words are coming together in a rush, and his diction and confidence leaves much to be
desired, but something about seeing two whole lives back to back, something about being forced to define them in the heat of the moment is... enlightening. There are words coming out of his mouth now that he’d never thought to string together in this order before, but he believes them. He wonders, briefly, if he isn’t just reassuring himself- but as long as Francis finds some benefit, well, who the words are directed at is really neither here nor there, is it?

“I, I still get lost from time to time- a lot of the time, actually- but... I know what my path is. I think.” He wrinkles his brow. “Vaguely. And it’s back where I came from. That world is... complicated. It certainly hasn’t done me many favours, but... it’s mine. I think... I think I understand that, now. I have to go back, and you...”

Sighing, Dirk pats the boy’s trembling back. “You have to let us go.”

Somewhere in the background, Todd’s low whimpers trail off into silence. Dirk holds his breath, heart in his throat; is he...?

Then he hears a gasp, and a cough, and his tension releases. Still with us, then, Sir Brotz...

“I...” says Francis, meekly. “I wanted...”

“I know,” says Dirk once more, with a sad sigh. “I do know what you were trying to do, Francis. And I appreciate it, I really do, but... I don’t need a fantasy land, or a throne.” Gingerly, he pushes the boy back a little, just enough that they can see eye to eye, and he meets a watery gaze with one of his own and a small, brave smile. “I have my happy ending, and it’s... it’s wherever my friends...” He laughs breathlessly, thumbing a tear away from the corner of his eye. “It’s wherever my family is.”

Something... crystallises, in that moment. Somehow, amid a torrent of conflicting memories, a deadly emotional monsoon and a desperate, fumbling search for words of comfort, his own life feels much clearer, in comparison. The constants of his own present- and, hopefully, his future- put into stark relief against the chaos. He isn’t alone. He has Farah, and Amanda, even the Rowdies. Bart, when and if she appears from whatever hidey hole she lurks in between terrorising hapless detectives. And he has Todd, oh, Moon, he has Todd; and he’ll have him for a long, long time. He can feel it.

Call it a hunch.

Soft footsteps pad up behind him, a hand settles on his shoulder. He glances at it, and sees chewed nails and a pale wrist, intricate veins standing out under the skin, green as envy.

Dirk takes a deep, shuddering breath, rests his head against that wrist, closing his eyes.

Thank god you’re safe...

“...No one’s the same.”

Francis’ voice is small, unsure. Dirk slowly opens his eyes to look at him, and the boy looks back, tear tracks scoring his pale cheeks.

“The people here, now... they aren’t the ones I made.” Francis sniffs, rubbing his eye roughly with his tiny fist. “Almost everyone I made is g-gone. They all- all had babies, and died and they left me here. All these years, everyone I ever knew just g-grew up w-without me...”

Todd shifts, and Dirk sees him approach Francis slowly, carefully, holding his hands out and silently asking permission for something. The boy is hesitant at first, but slowly nods, and Todd kneels down
by his side and draws him close, wrapping him safely in his arms. Dirk happily relinquishes him to Todd’s brotherly experience, simply patting the boy’s back as Todd holds him tight and expertly soothes him.

“Hey,” says Todd quietly, voice still hoarse from screaming. “Look, that’s- that’s real sad but, if you think about it, it’s also… kinda amazing, right?”

“It’s wonderful,” Dirk chimes in, catching his friend’s drift. “Francis, you made these people so brilliantly, made them so human and complicated that even without you here they went and lived full, human lives. Isn’t that superb?”

“Yeah,” Todd agrees, flashing Dirk an encouraging half-smile over the child’s shoulder. “You made an entire world full of people, dude. With personalities, and feelings, and then they all went out and lived and fell in love and had kids of their own. That’s… that’s crazy, man!”

“They may not be the people you left behind, Francis,” says Dirk, petting the boy’s tangled hair. “But they’re still yours, all of them. They’re practically your grandchildren- you are responsible for their existence! And do you know what I think?”

Francis sniffs, turning from his hiding place in Todd’s shirt to fix one teary eye on Dirk.

Dirk beams, and prods his little shoulder. “I bet they can’t wait to meet their king properly.”

The child gives a watery laugh, turning his face back into Todd’s chest and sniffling.

But eventually, after a silence one could cut with a knife, he nods, and carefully wiggles out of Todd’s arms.

Dirk hurriedly steadies him with a hand on his arm, but Francis is a young, nimble kid, and he finds his own feet quickly enough. And when he does he turns to Dirk, wiping his nose with the back of his hand. “I…” he mumbles, blinking rapidly and shuffling his little bare feet.

The moment of uncertainty passes, and when he looks up he meets Dirk’s eyes with a newfound courage. “I’ll miss you.”

Chest nearly collapsing in relief, Dirk gives the boy a giddy smile and prods him again. “Oh, I’m sure you’ll see us again. Can’t get rid of me that easily- wouldn’t you agree, Todd?”

“Nope,” Todd cheerfully attests, straightening up from his crouch. “He’s stubborn like that.”

Dirk quirks an eyebrow. “Oh, I’m stubborn?”

“Yeah, astonishingly.”

“Pot, kettle, black, darling- oof!”

The impact of a child-sized cannonball whacking into his midsection briefly winds him. He looks down in surprise to find the little arms of Francis Cardenas wrapped in a vice grip around him, the boy sniffing slightly into his now rather grubby white toga. “Oh, um. Yes. Quite.”

Todd snorts. Dirk sticks his tongue out at him.

“W-where will you go now?” Francis asks quietly, hiding his face.

“Hm. No idea,” says Dirk brightly, patting the small child’s head. “I’m a leaf on the stream of creation; I’ll go wherever the current takes me, I suppose.”
The boy pulls away, looking up at Dirk unhappily; but before he can open his mouth to complain, he is startled by Todd’s hand on his shoulder. Dirk looks up to Todd’s face himself- and his heart gives a helpless hop in his chest.

He dimly, vaguely, in the jumbled collage of memories from his past life, recalls comparing Todd to an action hero before; but he’s sure that whatever he saw to prompt the comparison could not hold a candle to the sight before him now. His friend, his assistant, his knight, garbed in black linen and blue velvet, storm-torn and scraped, bruised and blue to match his cloak, and yet bright eyed with determination. Solid, faithful. Dirk’s love, his rock. His moon.

Oh, bloody hell… he loves him more than all the big, fun words in the world can say.

Todd looks down and meets the child’s eyes seriously. “Kid,” he says, wartorn voice rasping. “He’ll be fine; I promise. I’ll look out for him.”

Francis doesn’t look convinced.

Todd, sighing, holds out his pinky finger. “Knight’s honour.”

The child holds his gaze for a long, long moment, serious as the plague.

Then, slowly, his tear-streaked face breaks into a cautious smile, and he returns the pinky swear. Todd looks like he’s trying not to look honoured. “You were right,” says Francis quietly, looking to Dirk and giggling. “He is a better assistant than me.”

Dirk tuts, prodding him in the chest. “Now, now, don’t do yourself a disservice- I only employ exemplary assistants!”

Francis laughs and blushes, batting his hand away. “Shuddup.” He glances at Todd one more time, assessing. “He’s… he’s good. He’s real good.”

And then he looks back to Dirk, and smirks with that certain devilish innocence that only a child can truly master. “He’s a lot shorter than I thought he’d be.”

Amid the throes of Dirk’s laughter, Todd’s hands fly self-consciously to his rather fetching new elf ears, eyes narrowing. “Hey-!”

“Oh, don’t fuss,” Dirk chastises, swatting Todd’s hand away to replace it with his own; and relishing in the familiar, yet oddly exotic sight of his slight shudder as Dirk traces the sensitive shell with his thumb. “I think it rather suits you.”

Good grief. That green blush is… really quite something.

“I… I’ll call in the others;” says Francis quietly, drawing Dirk’s attention sharply back from his charming knight. “The ones from your world. I’ll give them their memories and… and I’ll let them decide.”

Dirk sighs, smiling down at him. “Thank you. And the people who already lived here…?”

Francis hesitates, but he nods eventually. “Yeah. I’ll give them their memories back, too.”

“Good,” says Dirk approvingly, mind flashing in all its chaos back to a certain pink-haired prince- a prince who, by all accounts, should not have been fighting for Dirk’s hand, of all people’s. “Yes, good… I do believe there were a few happy endings already in progress.”
“What if… what if they all start fighting again?”

“Oh, I shouldn’t think so.” Dirk grins, and lightly pinches the boy’s shoulder. “They’ve got their wise and powerful king back, don’t they?”

“So… you can send us back?” Todd cuts in, looking restless.

“Yeah, I- I think so,” says Francis, squinting. “I mean, something went… funny, when I changed everything, but I think I can do it.”

“Well, that’s alright then; we’ll get on our way and find- shit!” Dirk grabs Todd’s arm, panicked. “Farah! Is she- I mean, do we still have time to-?!”

“You can still save her,” says Francis, checking his watch- a rather charming purple plastic contraption which Dirk is fairly certain just materialised for the purpose. “I moved time back about a week when I started. By now you should be just in time to find her.”

Dirk blinks. “So… that’s really all the time we’ve been here?”

“A week?” exclaims Todd, echoing the sentiment.

“Yeah- I set things rolling right before you set out on that cuckoo quest.” Francis looks at Dirk sternly, expression briefly eerily reminiscent of Riggins’. “You scared the crap outta me.”

“You tried to arranged-marriage him, dingus,” Todd grumbles.

Francis does look a tad sheepish at that. “He… you said you liked romances, with weddings…”

“And indeed I do- but preferably with my choice of groom,” says Dirk.

The boy shrugs. “M sorry.”

“Hey, for real, though,” Todd chimes in, brows knotted. “You were, like, super hard on Dirk sometimes. Why were you…”

Francis ducks his head, fidgeting in place. “Well… the second I kick-started time, he stole a rhino and destroyed half my town. I didn’t think he’d be so…”

“Intrepid?” Dirk offers.

“Dumb?” Todd supplies.

“Uh, yeah. Both of those.”

Todd snorts. “Yeah. You kinda have to learn that the hard way.”

“So…” Francis claps his little hands and rubs them together, bright purple sparks of magic flaring up between them. “I guess you guys wanna go home, huh?”

“Guess so,” says Todd, running a hand through his hair. “We’ve got, uh… shit to do.”

“Oh, bugger, yes, friend saving,” Dirk agrees, springing to attention. “Wait- where are they? How do we-?”

“I’ve got ‘em,” says the boy, eyes wide and staring, as if he’s looking at something beyond Dirk- far, far beyond. “They’re… not doing so good. I’ll make you something to help them; but it’s gonna be
the last thing I make in your world, so you better use it well.”

“We will,” Todd promises.

Francis glances once more at Todd, and then back to Dirk, and for a split second his eyes focus back in on him; twin dark pools of sorrow, relief, gratitude and a thousand other feelings his tiny body is surely far too young to handle. But, well, Dirk knows that feeling intimately. He feels, in some way, rather connected to this lost boy; feels, in that moment, a sort of understanding between them, filling in the spaces between spoken words. He might even go so far as to call it a telepathy, if he was psychic. Which he wasn’t.

“Good luck, Dirk,” Francis whispers, magic fluttering in his hands. “I hope you find everything you’re looking for.”

*I hope that world treats you right.*

Dirk smiles back at him. “I hope you do, too.”

*I’m sorry it wasn’t kinder to you…*

The boy nods, his eyes black out, and his power flares.

There is resistance, at first. Resistance that makes the boy’s brows scrunch, makes sweat break out on his forehead as he pushes and pushes until something gives. Dirk feels that give in his belly; feels the deafening creak of a door being opened. A door, bizarrely, that ought not to exist.

And then the pathway is open, the magic is dazzling, and the world as they knew it drops away.

The last thing Dirk knows as his feet abandon the ground is the roar of power in his ears, the brilliance of the universe unfolding before his eyes; and before it the fuzzy, familiar outline of Todd’s hand reaching out to his, holding him fast. Holding them together as they hurtle as one through the fabric of reality; one world to the next, one life to another, burning through the cosmos like twin comets, leaving the life they knew behind to the realms of dreaming.

*Rise and shine...*
Epilogue: The Real Happily Ever After

Chapter Notes

And now to make up for all that angst with perhaps the fluffiest fluff of my career.

(And before you tell me something's OOC plz remember these boys have now mentally lived 30 years side by side in a child's fairytale world while hopelessly devoted to one another plz and thank)

The song snippet, and title of this fic, is Strange Magic by ELO <333

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It’s not that Todd was expecting inter-dimensional travel to be smooth, but… he’d kind of hoped it would be less than painful at the very least. Which was a stupid thing to hope for, apparently, since it pretty much felt like being shoved through a too-small door that was trying real hard to close on his head and crush his skull. It had felt… wrong. Wrong in a way that sticks with you. He’s not sure he’s qualified to judge how wrong it felt, though; for all he knows, all forms of travel through crazy dimensional rifts feel like getting clubbed over the head by a Gibson stratocaster.

Honestly, though, he could take it- hell, he’d had that Gibson comparison ready from personal experience, it wasn’t the first time he’d taken a beating.

Truth be told, the moment they came back to earth, he was worried about one thing and one thing only: Dirk. Who, somehow, was back in the modern white shirt and khaki pants he’d been wearing the day before they got inserted into their new lives. He was also screaming and retching on the dirt because the leg wound that had supposedly been magicked away on day one had reappeared, coupled with a headache of, quote: “bad bad universe hurt no good” proportions.

Of course, it was about that time that Todd had seen the prone, bloody shapes of Farah, Tina and Hobbs on the dirt a few feet away, and quickly gained three more things to worry about before his own stupid headache.

Fortunately, Francis had made good on his promise. The sight of the white, hearse-shaped car with ‘amboolents’ haphazardly painted on the side hadn’t exactly filled Todd with confidence, but it did the job; trust a kid with godlike powers to fill the back of a fake ambulance with dinosaur print band-aids the size of coasters. But they were apparently thick and strong enough to roughly patch together bullet wounds, so it was sure as shit better than nothing, at least until Todd could get everyone to the nearest hospital- or whatever was left of it, after all the Suzie bullshit he dimly remembers from a life before Wendimoor.

In the end, he didn’t really get time to appreciate being back in his own world, in his own red-blooded human body. At least not that first day. No, that day was mainly spent shuttling screaming, groaning friends to barely-functioning hospitals, answering about a thousand million questions from local doctors and nurses- who, up until a few days ago, barely admitted anything worse than a skinned knee or a bad hangover- and drinking his bodyweight in crappy vending machine coffee in the interim.

But hey, at least coffee was a thing he could get again.
The following days were… easier. Sort of. There was less blood, less screaming, less imminent threat of death, which was definitely a plus. But under the constant monitoring of the hospital staff and auxiliary police force- who’d been shipped in from a near-ish town while all two of Bergsberg’s finest were bedridden- there had been barely any time to catch their breath. Never a clear moment to just talk. And, well… they all had a lot to talk about.

Plus there was the whole ever present, all-encompassing dread that at any moment they might get jumped by the Blackwing thought police and locked underground in little concrete boxes. That kind of thing really put a damper on any conversation before it could get started.

But as days went by, as one week turned to two and no one wound up with black bags over their heads, by some unspoken agreement everyone started, slowly, to stop waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Todd had pretty much been in charge of keeping an eye on stuff, obviously. Not for a lack of trying from Farah, who’d decided the second she graduated from bedrest to a wheelchair that she was ready to be James Bond again. Every time she tried to covertly wheel herself out of the hospital grounds Todd, resolutely, wheeled her back in and dumped her on Tina and Hobbs in the hopes that they’d keep her occupied. Which they did, mostly; although he kinda suspected that was more on Tina than Hobbs. He was getting… vibes. If he ever got to see Farah distracted from trying to get back to her stash of spy gear, it was because her eyes were on the deputy.

Between foiling Farah’s escape attempts, making sure Dirk had enough snacks and books and puzzles to keep him busy, and keeping eyes out for anyone else returning from the other world, it felt like Todd never got a damn minute’s peace to just stop and think for a while. Then again, maybe that was a blessing in disguise; there were some things that, when he finally got round to thinking about them, would then need to be talked about. And he didn’t really feel like having those conversations with friends who were all recovering from grievous bodily harm.

So instead he keeps track of everything around him. As distractions go, it’s pretty effective.

He hasn’t seen or heard from Bart since they left. He wonders what she chose; would she have decided to stay in Wendimoor, given the choice? Would he blame her? He doesn’t know. Whatever she decided, he just hopes it doesn’t come back to bite them in the ass. And that she’s… happy. He guesses. And preferably not killing people, but if she chose to come back then that’s probably kind of a tall order.

He knows what Mona decided. She was the first to come back, in the end. She showed up in the world about two days after he and Dirk did, drifting through the window of Dirk’s hospital room as a fuzzy bumblebee and narrowly avoiding getting swatted by a jumpy nurse. After that she shifted again and kept Dirk company through the rest of his stay, draped across his lap as a soft crochet blanket, which was kind of a relief; Todd really didn’t wanna have to make up some backstory about her being Dirk’s sister just so the nurses would let her hang out at the hospital. He’d already had to get kinda creative just so he could stick around so much. But he wasn’t lying lying about himself—technically, he and Dirk had been a day away from getting married, at one point. Husband wasn’t such a stretch to put on paper. Or at least it wasn’t for the dorky, fantasy land part of him that looks at Dirk eating his jell-o cup and thinks sappy, Hallmark-card worthy words like ‘bewitching’ or some bullshit. The him that took a week-long nap and woke up thirty years later already head over heels was taking some getting used to the idea.

And then, a few days later, there was Amanda and her ‘boys’- all five of them.

“A gift! I get for yoo, Bibbit!”
“Oh, um.” Dirk, bemused, lodges his crutch firmly under his armpit and takes the traffic cone from the doting rainbow cave lady. “Thank you.”

Todd snorts, rubbing his forehead and turning back to his sister; who looks back at him, comfortably, with normal brown eyes and a knowing smirk. “So,” Todd says, nodding behind her towards the van full of re-humanised Rowdy boys in their shiny new early-2000s grey ensembles. “Guess you guys are hitting the road.”

“Yep,” she says, scratching under her ear. Her perfectly human, non-pointy, non-twitchy ear. “Figure we’ll just drive, see where it takes us.”

He nods, shoving his hands in his sweatshirt pockets. God, it feels good to wear sweatshirts again. That leather armour was… a hassle. “Are you sure? ‘Cause you could, y’know… stay. I mean, Farah’s gonna be back on her feet soon- she’s been online scooping out some office spaces. We’re gonna set up shop somewhere for a while I think, see what happens. You could, y’know. Stick around, help, whatever.”

“And be your receptionist? No way. That job has you written all over it.” Amanda smirks, punching his arm. “Don’t worry, I’ll be back- you let us know when the grand opening is, we’ll bring booze and trash the place.”

“I’ll, uh. Bear that in mind.”

“Seriously, bro, I’ll be fine. I… something tells me I’ve got a lot of work to do. Someplace else.” She nods towards Dirk. “There’s more like him- like me- somewhere, and I think… I think I’m supposed to find them. We’re gonna need them, someday. Probably soon.”

“Do you… When you could hear everything over, y’know, there, did it say…?”

“I got… scraps.” She shrugs. “Feelings, mostly, nothing concrete. Guess that would be too easy.”

He huffs. “Yeah. Guess so.”

“It’s something, though. Sure, it’s just a feeling but it’s… it’s a good feeling. Feels good, feels organic, y’know? Solid. I’m gonna stick to it a while, see where it takes me- I’ve gotta be someplace, I know that much. I’m not sure where yet, but… guess I’ll find out.”

“You think so?”

“Yeah. I really do.” She seems to space out a little for a moment, peering at something he can’t see, and for a moment he swears he can see the shadows of symmetrical mandelbrots in her brown eyes. “I’m… a leaf. In the stream of creation.”

“Jesus,” says Todd, with a wry smile and an attempt to dispel the unease in his stomach. “You’re as bad as Dirk.”

She stares at him then, in that intense, unavoidable way of hers, and leers. “Sooo… You and Dirk…”

Despite his best efforts not to give her anything, he blushes. “I dunno what you’re-”

“Dude,” she laughs, punching him again. “Don’t play dumb with me- I saw you, over there, he like, sucked your face off-!”

“Amanda!”
“What?” She tosses her ponytail and smirks. “You telling me there isn’t anything going on there, now? Nothing at all?”

“We…” Ah, hell. No point lying. “Haven’t… talked about it.”

“Well, do you want there to be?”

He doesn’t answer. Which is pretty much an answer in itself, but at least gives him his favourite thing: plausible deniability.

Amanda’s face softens a little, and the next punch is a lot gentler than the ones before. “Hey. I’m legit not tryna psyche you out, man- I think it’s great. I really do.”

“Yeah?” He’s kinda mad at the way his voice comes out; all quiet and needy, like he’s hoping for her approval. Which he is, but he’s not supposed to admit that.

“Yeah- dude, it’s Dirk. He’s…”

Todd doesn’t know why he’s hanging on her next choice of words. Maybe ‘cause he has no idea what type of words they’ll be- there’s easily over a thousand that you could use to describe Dirk, and not all of them are all that flattering. He wants her to say a good one; because she’s his sister, and goddammit he cares what she thinks. He doesn’t want her to say a bad one, because the mostly dormant Sir Brotz inside him may just challenge her to a fucking duel or something and he’d never live that down, not in a million years.

But she smiles and rubs his arm, and his tension lifts a little. “He’s… kinda perfect for you. In like… a way I never would have seen coming.”

“Yeah.” He chuckles, disbelieving, at the truth in that statement. “He… he kinda is.”

He doesn’t know if it’s because she’s taking pity on him, or being mindful of Dirk nearby in eavesdropping distance, or she just has places to be, but for once she doesn’t keep digging. She doesn’t even call him dorky or smitten, even though he clearly is, and right now he’s pretty grateful for that; he thinks maybe he and Dirk should talk some things through before they invite the world to make jokes about it.

Instead she just squeezes his arm, and reaches into her jacket. “Hey, I’ve got something for you. The Rowdies picked it up forever ago, back at the Ridgley.”

She holds out, of all things, a lightbulb. Todd reaches out to take it on automatic; and recognition dawns as it flares to life at his touch, casting their hands in yellow light.

Light, everywhere his hands brush. Light pouring from fair skin, brightening with every playful touch. Endless, effusive, self-perpetuating light.

Todd holds the everbulb tight, and smiles. “Thanks…”

He doesn’t know how, but he thinks that maybe she knows where his mind just went. But she doesn’t comment, doesn’t even chuckle; just relinquishes the bulb and takes a step forward, arms open.

Todd doesn’t need telling twice.

She slots into his arms, familiar as she’s ever been; even though in his mind it’s been at least thirty years since he last held her. She smells like leather and cigarettes; and somewhere, underneath it all,
something… electric. Something like the dense, humid air before a storm. But maybe that’s just his mind playing tricks; with all the new stuff it’s been crammed full of lately, he wouldn’t be all that surprised.

“I love you, Todd,” she murmurs, voice soft and vulnerable and hers, not an echo to be heard.

“I love you too, sis,” he responds, easy as breathing. Even though she hasn’t been his sister for mental decades. Even though a small, startled part of him wants to flinch away from the power coiling under her skin.

She’s still got it, somehow. He doesn’t know why, or if it’s exactly the same as what he saw but… there’s something inside her now that wasn’t there before. Or maybe it was, somewhere deep down where even she couldn’t find it, but it’s awake now. Awake, and buzzing like microphone feedback inside her. Something’s changed; she’s stronger, now. Wilder.

Something tells him she’s going to need it.

Amanda breaks the hug first, of course. Todd probably could have kept it going all day. She gives him a last smile, and a final punch. “Go work things out with your man,” she says, thankfully quiet enough that Dirk probably can’t hear. “Don’t be a dumbass.”

“Thanks,” he snorts. But he nods anyway, jerkily. “I will.”

She grins. “God, I am so glad I’m leaving town,” she breezes, turning on her heel. “I do not need to be around for the honeymoon phase.”

“Fuck you.”

She flips him the bird. Todd feels… loved.

Watching her get in the van with her gang is kinda bittersweet. It’s great, obviously, seeing her so… complete. She’s confident, and strong, and surrounded by people who get her, and who’ll keep her safe. But… shit, he worries. He’s always gonna worry, it’s his job to worry. He wants her to be safe. For all the amazing things he’s seen and done, a part of him just wishes, sometimes, that the fate of the universe had landed on someone else’s shoulders. He doesn’t want to carry it, and he definitely doesn’t want his little sister to. Even though she can definitely handle it, it’s… it’s scary. This universe-saving shit, it’s a thankless job, he’s seen that much, and maybe he kinda wants better than that for her. Something that deserves her.

But if there’s anyone he’d trust with the universe… it’s her. It would always be her.

And Farah. Obviously Farah.

“Bye bye, Bibbit!” bellows the Beast, hanging out the passenger side window like a dog as the van drives away. “Bye bye, Bibbitses’ boy!”

Snorting, Todd waves. “Later, Beast.”

He watches until the ripple of Beast’s rainbow hair is far out of view, the hulking silhouette of the monstrous van bumping away into the sunset like the weirdest fucking final shot of a western movie ever, and tells himself that it isn’t goodbye. Not for good.

“She’ll be alright, Todd.”

Todd turns to Dirk with a weak smile. “Yeah. I know.”
Dirk returns the gesture, with a lip bite and high shoulders. The yellow jacket formerly known as Mona shrugs with him. Moon, he looks… different. Which is weird in itself, since he looks pretty much exactly the same as he did when Todd met him, give or take some bumps and bruises. But, well, some images are hard to shake. Like the image of your best friend wearing a crown, glowing like the sun, and all dressed up like a high-fantasy Elton John for your imminent wedding.

Damn, they… really should talk about some stuff.

“Do you, uh…” Shit. He doesn’t even know how to start. “Do you think, uh… the cave lady from fairyland is gonna be a problem?”

_Chicken._

“Oh, obviously,” Dirk scoffs, leaning back further against the hood of the car with his bad leg still conspicuously propped out in front of him. “I daresay we’ll be cleaning up that mess, eventually. I’m sure there’s a rule somewhere about that; people winding up in the wrong worlds.”

“Kinda caused some shit when we tried it,” Todd agrees, leaning up on the car next to Dirk and bumping their shoulders lightly.

“Yes, quite,” says Dirk with a small smile and a bob of his head. But his expression quickly turns serious. “Although, ah… I think perhaps a well-meaning wayward boogle is the least of our worries.”

“You think?” There’s some kind of anxiety brewing in Todd’s stomach and he doesn’t like it.

“Something…” Dirk’s brows are furrowed, and he’s inspecting the dirt at his feet like he’s gonna find the roadmap for reality scratched into it. “Something is… off. About all of this. Did it feel strange, to you, when Francis sent us back?”

“It wasn’t just the displacement, it… it felt forced. Felt like…” Dirk has that look in his eyes; that look like he’s trying to follow a tricky movie before the scenes have been put in the right order. “Like… we got pushed back into a universe that shouldn’t still exist.”

“That sounds… bad.”

“Well, maybe that’s not exactly it. I mean, it exists, sure enough. Feels pretty darn real to me, but perhaps it just… doesn’t exist quite like it’s supposed to.”

Todd lounges back a little further on the car, crossing his arms and looking at the sky, silently praying it doesn’t fall on them. “I was kinda thinking… it’s weird, right? I mean, by rights everything about this last week’s changed- you and me weren’t here, neither was Panto Trost if he was back in Wendimoor fighting in that tournament. There was no massacre, no sign of the Mage on our end but still everything here is just… how we left it. Everyone remembers it. Tina and Hobbs remember us, but they shouldn’t, right? We didn’t even come to Bergsberg, we were in another dimension, so like… what gives, man?”

“Exactly,” says Dirk seriously. “Like I said; this universe shouldn’t exist. Or at the very least it’s not the one we should have come back to. Everything here happened exactly as it did the first time, and yet…”

“It couldn’t have.”
“Indeed.” He nudges the ground with his toe- wincing as he realises he did so with his non-weight bearing leg. “You and I, Todd Brotzman, are standing right on top of a sizeable paradox.”

“Guessing that’s gonna come bite us in the ass at some point, too.”

“Oh, undoubtedly.”

“Great.”

He looks at Dirk, and Dirk looks right back.

And then, for some fucking reason, they both burst into laughter.

“God,” Todd wheezes, reaching into his sweatshirt pocket and finding a new, full bottle of pills inside. He takes one out and pops it, just in case; his newly reestablished attacks have been fickle as a fainting fern these past two weeks. Doesn’t take much more than a giggle to set him off sometimes.

“Are…”

He looks up to Dirk questioningly, and finds gentle concern looking back at him. “Are you okay?” says Dirk softly, shoulders drawing up a little further.

That’s… a big question. With a surprisingly simple answer. “You know what?” Todd murmurs, smiling back up at him. “I really am.”

Dirk bites his lip at scratches his cheek. “Good. Still, ah, rather… odd week, wasn’t it?”

Are they gonna talk about it? Is this when they talk about it?

Todd hesitates, tapping his fingers on top of their weird new car, picking his words real carefully. “It… feels like longer than a week,” he says quietly, risking a glance at Dirk. “Feels more like-”

“A lifetime?”

He nods, angling to face Dirk properly. “Yeah, pretty much.”

Dirk awkwardly mirrors him, burying his hands even deeper in his jacket pockets as if anchoring himself. “Quite a life, eh?”

“Yeah,” says Todd, barely above a whisper. “It really was.”

“We, um…” Dirk, for once, seems to be struggling for words. “We both said rather a lot of, ah, things, at the end there. I wondered if, well… obviously, I would understand if being back here has you reconsidering, but I thought we had reached a sort of mutual agreement vis-a-vis… us.”

“Do you…” Shit, why is this so hard? “Do you still, uh. Want that?”

“Do you?”

Ah, shit. He was gonna have to put his cards on the table. “Yeah. You- you know I do. I was… I was me, when I said those things, Dirk. All of me. I just thought, maybe, now you remember everything you might feel, uh. Different.”

“So you were… waiting for me?”

“Uh, yeah. Basically.”
Dirk frowns. “Is that why you haven’t kissed me since we got back?”

“Oh.” Todd blinks, blindsided by the directness of that question. “Yes?”

“Todd.”

“Hey, I was just tryna be considerate!”

“Oh, yes?”

“Yeah!”

“Well, then- consider this!”

“What d’you-mmf!”

The kiss is… honestly, not great. It’s messy and clumsy, and Dirk is wobbling round unsteady on his one good leg and his hands are pulling Todd’s hair, and not necessarily in a good way.

But goddamn if Todd doesn’t just melt into it all the same.

When Dirk breaks away, lips kiss-pink and breath ragged, his voice comes out kinda like the voice of a man who just got full-on banged against a wall. “Jeepers-”

“Creepers,” Todd agrees, bobbing up for one more. And then another, just ‘cause. He’s giggling before he can initiate any more. “Fuck, I can’t believe we just said that.”

Dirk joins in the giggling, a little manic, hands sliding down to Todd’s neck. “Old habits.”

“New habits,” Todd mumbles, punctuating it with another kiss. “Technically.”

“Well, everything is relative.”

“Oh, is that your new thing?”

“Todd, stop being facetious and kiss me.”

“Alright, alright.” A fun idea pops into his head, and he smirks wickedly. “As you wish, My Lord.”

Dirk shudders, just like Todd hoped he would, pupils dilating even further. “That… is still unfair.”

“Didn’t you hear?” Todd jokes, huffing and threading his fingers through Dirk’s hair. “I’m a bastard, now.”

“Oh, that was never in question.”

“And, and, not your knight- so good luck trying to order me around, asshole.”

“Well, technically you are still my employee-”

“Huh. Well, unless we want H.R. on our backs I guess I’d better quit kissing you.”

“Oh, no you don’t!”

Jesus, Todd can’t remember the last time he felt this… light. And it’s crazy, since they’re still pretty much fucked in an incredible number of ways; sooner or later they’ll have to deal with Blackwing, and the universe and a fuckton of fallout from this investigation. There’s still Amanda to worry
about, and his pararibulitis and whatever crazy bullshit the next case is gonna throw at them.

But right now, leaned up against this stupid toy car, just kissing Dirk and laughing with him and
talking absolute shit, Todd just feels honest to god happy. Feels like, for the moment at least,
everything has fallen into place just the way it was supposed to. Like they were always supposed to
wind up here, making out like a couple of dorky teenagers on top of a fake ambulance, with a
headful of fake memories and thirty extra years of relationship buildup.

If this is what’s gonna pass for ‘normal life’ from now on… hell. He’s a lucky elf. Man. Man, he’s…
a lucky man.

Shit. What a mindfuck.

“Todd?”

“Yeah?”

Dirk hums, and parts their lips properly with one last quick kiss. “I… can I say something to you that
I regret not saying much, much more; when I was rich, and you were green?”

Todd snorts, letting his head fall to Dirk’s shoulder and nodding against it. “Sure. Why not.”

“I…” He can feel Dirk’s dry gulp by his ear. “I… love you. Very much, in fact.”

They’ve said it to each other a hundred or more times, a hundred or more different ways. Rarely
verbally, which sucks ‘cause they could have avoided some pretty messy misunderstandings, but that
doesn’t mean they never said it. Todd knows he used to say it to Dirk all the time; a hundred or more
little actions, above and beyond his duties as the prince’s knight. And now that he’s looking back on
it with his head out of his own ass, he can see that Dirk was doing the same thing all along. Telling
him loved him everytime he tied a token round his arm before a fight, every time he wheedled the
kitchen staff into fixing them a picnic so Todd could get out in nature. A hundred or more little
confessions.

Still, maybe it’s just ‘cause it’s the first time Todd’s hearing it with these old ears, but it settles all
warm and right in his skull and sticks there.

He wraps his arms round Dirk’s neck with the ease of thirty years practice, and if he closes his eyes
he can still feel his blood singing in response to that sunshine glow. “I love you, too…”

Dirk kisses the top of his head. “Well. Glad we’ve got that all straightened out, then.”

“Kinda seems like the opposite of ‘straight’, honestly.”

“Oh, hush, you little terror.”

Laughing, Todd returns Dirk’s kiss with one to his neck that has his prince, detective, whatever
shuddering a little. “Or what? You’ll fire me?”

“I might!”

“You’ve been saying that for twenty five years.”

“And I’ll say it for twenty five more,” says Dirk, voice soft and giddy. “If it’s all the same to you.”

“Can’t wait.”
Dirk sighs, hugging Todd close. “God, that Francis… has awful timing.”

Todd pulls back with a frown, meeting Dirk’s eyes. “What?”

“Well.” Dirk pushes a curl back from Todd’s forehead with a cheeky smile. “He pulled us out of that world before I even got to see you walk down the aisle!”

“Watch me walk dow- go screw yourself!”

His complaining probably would have worked better, if he wasn’t also smiling and laughing like a ginormous fucking sap. But he’ll let it go, just this once.

It’s hard to stay mad at an honest to god happy ending.

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Time, for Dirk, always has been and always will be a rather confusing and foreign concept; and that was a stance he had held even before he’d lived 30 years in half a second and lived the same week twice. Nonetheless, he attempts over the weeks following their return to the ‘correct’ (hopefully) universe to keep a vague track of where the time is and what’s happening with it. He knows that about four of them pass before he can manage tentatively off his crutches for short stints. He knows it’s closer to six when Farah, Tina and Hobbs are released from fulltime rehab- still weak, but ready more or less to return to life without constant monitoring and physical therapy. He’s still counting down the weeks until he hears anything from Bart; despite the double edge of fear that comes from remembering the numerous times she’s pointed guns at his head, the part of him that sat on her shoulder and chatted and who’s heart went out to the lonely giant wants to know that wherever she is, she’s happy. Or at least happier.

And it is at roughly the two month mark that a strange and mysterious text from Todd lights up his new phone and sets his detective brain a-puzzling.

Meet me at the boat at 4? Got something for you

Another follows, barely thirty seconds later.

Two things, actually- check Hobbs’ closet

Frowning, Dirk sends a string of affirmative emojis in response before investigating said closet, turning over the mystery in his mind. It is unusual for Todd to be so vague- he doesn’t care for being kept in the dark, and is a to-the-point texter if ever Dirk met one. It’s also the first time in quite some weeks that he’s texted Dirk to ask him something. Usually he just does so in person, given that they more or less live together at the moment anyway. Not in any official capacity, but Hobbs had graciously offered them the use of his cabin while he was in rehab (and later staying with Tina to keep an eye on each other) in return for a promise to keep Mustard the cat well fed. And there was no point in one of them sleeping on the sofa when there was a perfectly sizeable bed going empty. Sadly they had done nothing but sleep in it, barring the odd lazy kissing session. Todd has been rather insistent on giving Dirk time and space to recover before they attempt anything else; despite Dirk’s assurances that he doesn’t mind lying back and letting Todd do the legwork. Somehow, that generous sacrifice hadn’t charmed him.

What was he thinking about again? Oh, yes! New case!
He finds Thing #1 in the closet, as indicated. It’s hanging in between Hobbs’ spare uniform and Todd’s hideous blue and white ‘drug rug’ hoodie, wrapped in an opaque dry cleaning style suit bag with ‘Dirk’ scrawled on the front in Sharpie and Todd’s familiar, slightly slovenly handwriting. Curious, Dirk hastily unhooks it and spreads the bag out on the bed to inspect it better as he peels aside the plastic.

The black leather jacket that greets him bewilders him, at first. It’s not that he dislikes black, it just rather surprises him that it’s a colour Todd would pick out for him. He can certainly imagine Todd wearing a black leather jacket (in fact, he can picture it vividly, and will probably continue to do so for quite some time now that the thought has occurred to him), but Dirk has always much preferred to dress himself in something a little bolder. Done with the years of his life when bright colours were out of the question, he much prefers to wear things that make a statement; the statement, of course, being that he is a man with impeccable taste in both clothes and colours. Black has never been one he feels particularly compelled to become acquainted with.

But then the right shoulder of the garment comes into view, and his attitude softens. “Oh…” He stares at the six thin tripes for a long, long time. Well, he thinks he does. Yellow, green, blue, orange, purple, red, stacked top to bottom in a neat little column. Ordered like no rainbow he’s ever seen on flags or clothes or even the whimsical Wendimoor skies, but familiar to him nonetheless. They must have been custom made; he wonders if Todd sent this jacket to a tailor, or if he hunched over it himself at some point, attaching the stripes like he must have attached all those curious obscure band patches to that ratty old denim jacket of his. Dirk runs his fingers over them lightly, feeling the slight raised edges of the leather, smooth with no topstitching. Glued, then. Or painstakingly blind-stitched. Either way they stack beautifully, and feel like they were built to last. And they’re not alone; as he pushes the plastic aside and the left arm comes into view, he grins like a loon at the sight of one more applique detail on that side. A patch, made of the same yellow leather as the top stripe, cut into the palm-sized shape of a six-pointed sun.

Excitement bubbling, Dirk hurriedly slips the jacket from its hanger and unzips it; and his breath catches when the silky, shiny golden lining is revealed. It looks and feels almost exactly the the togas he’d once favoured, sliding over his bare arms luxuriously as he slips the jacket on over his pyjama top (i.e. a spare t-shirt pilfered from Hobbs’ stash) in his eagerness. It fits perfectly.

Maybe he could get used to black after all…

Brimming with fresh enthusiasm for the mysterious case of the cryptic text, Dirk reluctantly shucks the jacket, and after reverently laying it aside bustles about trying to piece together an outfit worthy of it from the mismatched piles about the room.

He can’t wait to see what other surprises his miraculous assistant has in store.

Getting to the Infant, Male, Pollock, Francis from Hobbs’ cabin, he realised quickly, was going to be easier said than done. He’d briefly entertained the possibility of once more commandeering the sheriff’s bike, but decided he probably wouldn’t get terribly far on his leg- which, though largely recovered, still gets a tad tender under stress. He was just about on the verge of calling Todd to pick him up for this mysterious surprise when another means made itself known; in the form of a cat that Dirk couldn’t recall Hobbs introducing him to trotting out through the open front door, and promptly turning into a rather conspicuous horse-drawn carriage once outside.
As Mona’s signals go, it was really rather blatant.

The carriage ride is short, and largely uneventful, but Dirk doesn’t mind. It’s quite nice to simply sit and take in the dry Montana beauty for a while. It is a very different beauty than that to which he has become accustomed, for sure; he rather misses the enormous rainbow that used to pop up every now and again, but he thinks he can live without the Moon. Truth be told, he always found that fellow rather… spooky. Plain though this view may be in comparison, there is a certain appeal to it. The landscape is a coarse, arid desert of tall, sun-bleached grass, rippling in the temperate breeze like sunlight on shifting sand dunes. In all his made-up memories of Wendimoor, Dirk had never visited the infamous Dig ‘Em Desert; he wonders if these are the childhood sights that inspired Francis to create it. Then again, he had been rather keen to leave this world behind. Dirk supposes any beautiful view can grow stale with familiarity or unpleasant associations; he himself always did prefer to look at Todd than the view through his restrictive castle window, any day of the week.

That is, perhaps, the one thing that could improve this view. Todd, in the seat at his side, glowing healthy and happy in the late afternoon sunlight.

...And the rainbow. Dirk really does miss the rainbow.

When the boat begins the appear above the horizon, it looks for all the world as though it’s sailing once more atop a golden sea. Dirk leans into the rocking motion of the carriage to maintain the illusion, grinning like a dope. He’s half tempted to ask Mona to shift into some sort of land raft, or maybe even a pirate ship with some colourful crewmen. When the details of the boat begin to slide into view, however, he rudely forgets about Mona altogether.

Now. Granted, Dirk never got the chance to see the boat himself- after his so-called assistant neglected to inform him of its existence- but, from the rather grainy photo he’d seen, it had appeared to be a rather ramshackle old thing. Rusted, neglected, worse than useless after fifty landlocked years, as one would expect. The ship he approaches is not that ship. It shines dazzling white in the afternoon sun, painted like new, and from its tall mast fly flags in a myriad of colours and patterns, rippling like an aurora in the inconsistent breeze. The topmost, he notices with delight, bears a sun insignia rather similar to that on his shiny new jacket, emblazoned across a field of forest green. As the carriage closes the distance more details swim to the fore; such as the streamers and fairy lights strung along the sides, the mismatched picnic chairs and tables dotted around much like the houses of Clifftown clustered about the mighty Starfall Citadel.

And right there, in front of it all, the small but unmistakable motley crew that he is lucky enough to call his friends and family.

Grinning, Dirk stands in the moving carriage, clutching the railing for support with one hand as he enthusiastically waves with the other. A couple of the waiting people wave back; he identifies Tina and Hobbs as the wavers, Farah huddled close to them, and a little off to their left- “Amanda!”

“Hey, Dirk!” the former witchykookoo yells, joining in the waving. Her, and about seven other people- four Rowdies, a Beast, and two as yet unidentified hangers-on.

Practically bouncing in excitement, Dirk clambers down from the carriage the moment it draws level with the boat crew. “What are you doing here?”

“Farah called me,” she laughs, eagerly squeezing him in a hug. “Hey, nice jacket!”

“Why, thank you very much- my knight in shining Converse gave it to me.” He pulls back, pats her shoulder brightly, and looks up to her little assembled gathering as the five familiar Rowdies yap and babble amongst themselves. “You seem to have acquired a couple more of those, yourself.”
“Oh! Yeah, dude- Dirk, this is Fitz,” she introduces, gesturing to a rather, tall dark-skinned man with an attitude much smaller than his stature, and then to petite woman with almond-shaped eyes and a rather charming oversized peacoat. “And Patch.”

“N-nice to m-meet you,” stammers the the anxious Fitz, adjusting the glasses on the bridge of his nose and pushing back the cascading mop of his tightly-curled hair with his palm.

“We’ve heard a lot about you,” adds Patch, in a strong accent that Dirk, with his unfortunate lack of experience in all things East Asian, cannot quite place.

“Oh!” says Dirk pleasantly, shaking both their hands. He mentally corrects his initial assessment of Patch when he spies the small ‘they/them’ pin badge on their coat. “Thank you! I have heard absolutely nothing about you two but I’m very keen to!”

“Oh, dude, we have so much to catch up on,” says Amanda, punching his arm in that friendly way of hers. “I’ll fill you in later- and you guys should really talk. You have a lot in common.” She looks between Dirk and her two new friends meaningfully. “If you get my drift.”

Dirk looks between the strange new duo also, something tickling his awareness. Something like… recognition. “Oh. Yes.” He grins slowly. “I daresay we do.”

“Bibbit!”

He bursts into laughter as a forceful bundle of colourful energy flies into him. “Hello, Beast!”

The affectionate boogle pouts up at him, her yellow shades knocked crooked on her nose. “Miss yoo, Bibbit.” She pats his cheek meaningfully. “Miss teh shinnee.”

“I’ve missed you, too,” he says, patting the top of her head. “Been having plenty of adventures for me?”

“Yis! Make frenz, figh’ bad ‘uns!”

“Excellent.”

“She’s a real scrapper,” Martin drawls- and Dirk notices, belatedly, that he and his aimlessly scampering boys have flowers similar to those decorating the boat tucked into their buttonholes, pockets, hair and-slash-or beards.

Dirk surveys the scene in confusion. Seeing Amanda and her entourage after two months of silence was bewildering enough, throw in the apparent docility of the Rowdies and the flowers and it made for a truly bizarre sight. He looks to the others for help; which only heightens his confusion as he finds Hobbs looking clean and neat in a pressed pastel blue shirt, Farah dressed sharply in a tailored suit, and Tina hanging off her arm in something that is almost a matching suit, except with what look like home-customised little shorts and a sparkly orange tube top. Even Mona, having apparently abandoned the carriage appearance, had conjured up her human body with a great deal more florals than her standard. “What on- um, Amanda, sorry to harp on about this but… why are you here?”

She grins, and punches his shoulder. “I didn’t wanna miss it, dude!”

“Miss what?”

“Amanda!”

The hiss comes from a little off side, and Dirk turns a bit further towards the boat- and his already
rather splendid day *immediately* improves at the sight of his beloved assis-boyfriend approaching his sister with a flustered glare. While dressed, Dirk might add, rather *delectably* in a well-fitted blue plaid shirt that brings out his eyes, topped off smartly with a black waistcoat and tie which Dirk would bet money that someone else picked out for him. Whoever’s idea it was most certainly deserves a gift basket, one with lots of chocolate and some sort of delicious-smelling soap.

“Chillax, dude,” Amanda chuckles, patting Dirk on the arm and taking a step back. “I mean, I’m guessing you planned to tell him *before* he walks down the damn aisle.”

“Before I what the *what*?”

Shooting Amanda and her snickering squad one last glower, Todd catches Dirk’s elbow and takes him aside. “I, uh…” He looks… *sheepish*. And altogether too endearing. “I, uh, know it’s no royal wedding, but… hopefully it’s big and, uh, *fantastical* enough.”

“Todd,” Dirk breathes, grabbing his knight’s hand. “Are you- I mean, are we…?”

“I just…” Todd shrugs, blushing- blushing *pink*, like humans do, like Dirk is very much *not* used to seeing on his diminutive partner but which he very much hopes to *get* used to, preferably over a long, *long* time. “I thought we should, uh. Make it official. Since we didn’t get the chance, before… yeah.”

“Todd,” says Dirk once more, stronger this time, tugging that hand to his chest and *attempting* to give Todd a stern look- and probably failing because he cannot for the *life* of him stop smiling. “Are you suggesting what I *think* you’re suggesting?”

“Geez, you want me to propose again or something?” says Todd, cheeks burning prettily. “Yeah, I’m… *suggesting*. So… what d’you think?”

He thinks it might be the most brilliant idea in the history of mankind.

“Oh, well… it’s a *very* big ask, Todd,” he clucks, fussing with his flustered fiancé’s- fiancé’s!- tie in *patently* false nonchalance. “And I do wish you’d given me a little more time to think about it, or at *least* procure a more suitable outfit-”

Dirk’s unconvincing complaints are cut off rather sharply by Todd’s hands in his new jacket yanking him down, and Todd’s lips on his own silencing his cheeky evasion.

Dirk, for what it’s worth, is only *too* happy to be silenced.

“Just… shut up and marry me,” Todd rasps between kisses, eyes beautifully dark. “*My Lord.*”

“Why, Sir Brotzman,” Dirk mumbles, dazed and delighted and grinning like a loon. “How in the world- either of them- could I refuse?”

“*Gay!*”

Todd rolls his eyes. “Shut up, Tina.”

Tina- who, Dirk notices, has managed to worm her arm around Farah to tuck her hand in the back pocket of that sharp suit and appears *very* pleased about this fact- grins back impishly. “Just happy you guys figured it out, man. The sexual tension was really *somethin’*.”

“Ugh, please don’t talk about my brother’s sexual tension,” says Amanda, nose wrinkled in distaste. “…I mean, you’re *right*, but I don’t wanna *think* about it.”
“No comment,” Farah mutters. At the assorted glances—questioning to amused to withering—of her companions, she shrugs. “I mean, technically, I’m their boss, now. It would be… inappropriate. To comment on their, uh—”

“Blueballs?” Tina offers, to Farah’s sputtering embarrassment.

“Their relationship—god.”

“C’mooooon,” Tina wheedles, propping her head on Farah’s shoulder— all the better to gaze up at her imploringly. Oldest trick in the book- Dirk himself has successfully utilised it many times. It has at least a thirty percent success rate. “You can’t take a vow of silence, man— you gotta report back to me when y’all are back in Seattle, or wherever the heck you wind up. You’re my inside man!”

“Oh, I don’t think we’re leaving just yet,” says Dirk, quite without planning to.

Todd looks at him, startled. “We’re not?”

“Doubt it,” Dirk continues. He certainly hadn’t expected to be making such promises, but it feels… right. It doesn’t feel, at least at this moment, like a promise he can’t keep. “Something tells me we ought to stay put for now.”

“That, uh…” Todd’s lips twitch. “That a hunch?”

“Big hunch,” Dirk concurs, nodding seriously. For Todd, it seems to be all he needs to hear.

“So… y-you think we should set up here?” asks Farah, sounding bewildered and, to Dirk’s ears, just a tiny bit hopeful. “In Montana?”

Dirk hums noncommittally, not really feeling like trying to explain the feeling he has right now that they have reached a relatively small, sluggish eddy in a still-moving stream. “For the time being. Don’t you worry; I’m sure our next case will find us.”

“Well, maybe it’ll give us a damn minute to catch our breath this time,” Todd grumbles, squeezing Dirk’s hand. Such an intuitive gesture of familiar affection makes the lonely old Dirk smile giddily, and the prideful new Dirk preen.

“As do I, Sir Brotz,” comes a new voice to the proceedings, level and tinged with polite mirth. “I do believe you two have more than earned your honeymoon.”

Eyes widening, Dirk spins to the new voice— just as Todd does the same with alertness and a hand flying automatically to a phantom boomerang on his belt. “….You?!?”

Panto Trost smiles broadly, sweeping a low bow for the assembled company. “Greetings, My Lord; it is good to see you. I had hoped to find you well. It seems I have arrived at a rather festive time!”

Unthinking, Dirk releases Todd’s hand and springs forward to enfold the pink-haired prince in a hug— baffled to end up with his face buried in a strong chest. Evidently, he needs more tall friends. “It’s so good to see you!” he babbles sincerely. Though he and the prince have never had a chance to grow close, in either world or timeline, Dirk can’t deny that he’s grown fond of him; not to mention grateful for the part he played in his and Todd’s reunion. “But what are you doing here? How did you-?”

“Sent here by King Cardenas himself,” Panto states proudly, eyes twinkling in amusement. “Or rather, we were sent. But my companion became rather distracted by your lovely floral arrangements.”
“Your compa-?”

“Panto, have you seen these?” comes a familiar voice, floating over excitedly from the other side of
the boat. “I’ve never seen anything like it! How many new flowers do you suppose this world has?
Do you think they would thrive in our soil? Oh, if only I had brought some pots along with me…”


“Oh! Oh, sugar, yes, sorry-”

From behind the ship’s prow emerges the young Dengdamor, smiling sheepishly at them as he
scurries to Panto’s side and takes his hand. “My Lord,” he greets, nodding effusively to them both.
“Sir Knight.”

Grinning, Dirk pats his shoulder brightly. “Merry meet, Prince Dengdamor!”

“So,” says Todd, Dirk fondly noting the smile in his voice. “You guys found each other again, huh?”

“Indeed,” says Panto, tucking Silas into his side. “Before His Majesty even restored our memories, as
it happens.”

“Still glad to have them back, though,” Silas adds, to Panto’s nod of silent agreement. “It would have
been a tragedy, all those years of good memories, gone for good.”

“Yes,” says Dirk softly, imagining what it would be like to lose his memories of their alternative life
now. It may not have been a hundred percent factual, but he cherishes it nonetheless- not least for the
new understanding he and Todd have found through it. “Truly tragic.”

“Ah, but we are not here to speak of tragedy,” says Panto, reaching into his cloak and retrieving a
small, sealed envelope. Sealed, it would seem, with bright purple wax and the insignia of a grinning
moon. “We are simply here to extend an invitation.”

“What for?” asks Todd warily- though he takes the envelope nonetheless.

“Oh, it is no event, good sirs,” Panto chuckles. “Just an offer.”

“From King Cardenas,” Silas adds brightly. “Oh, but don’t open it!”

Todd, fingers loitering at the edge of the seal, blinks in bewilderment. “Uh, sorry?”

“He told us you mustn’t open it yet,” Silas clarifies, brow furrowing as he recalls his instructions.
“He said only to open it ‘when you are ready’.”

“And we’ll be ‘ready’ when…?”

“When you wish to return to Wendimoor,” says Panto, with a knowing smile. “That is if you ever
wish to return.”

“So,” says Dirk, in awe. “This will… take us back?”

“If that is what you choose,” says Silas, reaching out to pat Dirk’s arm. “Although he said he would
understand if you do not.”

“That’s… goodness,” says Dirk, rather dumbstruck, taking the envelope from Todd and peering
down at the seal that could change their path. This is… certainly unexpected. An unforeseen twist in
the stream. Or perhaps, more accurately, a fork.
“Yeah,” Todd quietly agrees.

They share a look. A look worth a thousand words in a language of their own invention, question marks in the arc of eyebrows, full stops in the line of lips.

Dirk smiles, and tucks the envelope into his inside jacket pocket. “Please give His Majesty our thanks,” he says, dropping his hand to take Todd’s. “But we’re quite happy where we are, for now.”

Panto grins, releasing Silas to clap them both on their shoulders. “It would be my honour, friends.”

“I’m so happy for you both,” Silas gushes, darting forward to give a startled Todd a hug.

“Oh, you two have to stay a while!” Dirk exclaims, bouncing on his heels. “Can you stay? Your timing is just spot on; how’s this for a coinkidink, Todd?”

“What he means,” says Todd, laughing and rolling his eyes. “Is we were, uh. Kinda about to get married. If you guys wanna…?”

Silas gasps, and Panto gathers him under his arm. “I had planned on attending your first ceremony,” says the pink-haired prince, nodding graciously. “It would seem our timing is fortuitous indeed.”

“We’d be honoured,” Silas exclaims, grinning from ear to ear.

Beaming, Dirk sweeps a hand to indicate the rest of their assembled friends- who appear to have been watching the proceedings with a range of emotions from delight to wariness to outright confusion. “Well, then, I daresay you and the rest of our ‘congregation’ ought to take your seats- I just need a moment with my betrothed, if you don’t mind.”

“Of course,” says Panto, smiling down at Silas and nodding towards the gathering. “Shall we, my love?”

Silas, smiling at Panto like he hung the stars, nods and walks arm in arm with him to join the bewildered throng at Dirk and Todd’s back. They fall into step with Amanda, who stops to give them a friendly greeting before marshalling her ragtag band of misfits towards the back of the boat and around to where, presumably, the ceremony half of the proceedings will be taking place. The non-Rowdy contingent, however, hangs back a moment, Hobbs and Mona tailing behind Tina and Farah as they come closer.

“I…” Farah begins, shaking her head. “God, I-I still don’t understand half the w-weird stuff you told me about, uh, that place, but… I’m glad you two… figured things out.”

Todd blushes rather adorably, and steps forward to give her a quick, one-armed ‘bro hug’ of sorts, which she returns with equal stoicism. “Thanks… Seriously, thanks. I know the last few weeks have been, uh… weird.”

“Yes,” she agrees emphatically. She steps back to look Todd in the eyes, and Dirk can feel the new respect from where he’s standing. “But… I’m glad you’re back. And you’re so…” She gestures vaguely. “You know.”

Evidently, open emotional communication is still not her forte.

Fortunately, she and Todd have a history of that in common. “I know,” he says, reaching out and squeezing her shoulder. “Me too. And thanks. Y’know, for being my best man.”
“Well, y’know,” she mutters, shrugging. “Someone had to make sure this crazy plan of yours came together.”

“Um, excuse,” Dirk interjects, hand on Todd’s shoulder. “Not to interrupt the lovely moment, but I couldn’t help but hear the phrase ‘best man’ being used, which is wonderful, obviously, but does rather have me wondering—”

“Where’s yours?” Todd finishes, looking altogether too amused.

“Precisely.”

A series of light giggles follows, and Dirk looks up to find Mona approaching with a happy blush and a little wave.

“Oh,” he says, immediately softening. “I should’ve known.”

She bounces on her bare heels a moment, taking Dirk’s hands and swinging them. “I’ve never been to a wedding before,” she says, quiet as a mouse. “I hope I do it right!”

“Mona, my dear,” says Dirk, squeezing her hands. “You can’t go wrong!”

Giggling again, high and airy like windchimes- or the delicate clink of icy fingers- she abruptly disappears. Dirk’s hands, suddenly, are full not of other hands but of a bouquet; a huge, otherworldly bouquet of white daisies, yellow daffodils and some very animated snap dragons.

He beams, and cuddles the bouquet close to his chest. “Perfect,” he praises, giggling a little himself as a couple of snapping petal jaws tickle his neck.

“Here ya go, man,” says Tina, thrusting something into Todd’s hands with a smirk. “Your somethin’ borrowed.”

Todd opens his hand, and promptly gives her deadpan look. “You’re kidding.”

“What are— oh!” Dirk squeaks, snatching the little things from Todd’s hands and holding them to the light, Mona’s little dragons snapping at them curiously. They’re small, intricate things, made of twisted silver wire and shaped into curving arcs, doubling back and tapering off into leaf-like points. “I love them! ...What are they?”

“Not happening,” says Todd, grabbing them back with a deep blush. “Just— just Tina’s dumb idea of a joke.”

“I used to wear ‘em all the time for festivals, dude, they’re super comfy.”

Dirk peers at them a little longer, and understanding dawns. “Oh, my— Todd! They’re elf ears! Oh, that’s adorable!”

“It’s dumb,” Todd argues, trying to shove them back at Tina who point-blanc refuses to take them. Dirk grabs one out of his hand instead, holding it up to Todd’s round ear. He bounces on his heels delightedly. “Oh, they’re perfect!”

“Dirk—” Todd sputters. “Who’s side are you on?!”

“Whichever side gets you wearing these, they’re delightful.”

“Dirk...”
“Please?”

Todd pauses, glowering up at Dirk through the fine lattice of wire across the little trinket. Dirk, naturally, makes his eyes as wide as possible when gazing back.

It has the desired effect.

“For fuck’s- fine,” Todd grumbles, snatching the cuff back reaching up to angrily fit it over his ear. “Geez…”

Beaming, Dirk waits until it’s snugly in place to bob close and kiss Todd’s cheek. “You look beautiful.”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” says Todd, making a valiant effort to appear unaffected by the compliment.

“So, something borrowed,” says Farah, evidently biting back a smile at the ridiculous situation. “Uh, something new…?”

“Got that one covered,” Dirk beams, proudly adjusting his jacket. “Ooh, what about something old?”

Todd raises his eyebrows, and gestures to the boat.

Dirk rolls his eyes. “Fairly sure it’s supposed to be something we can carry on our persons, but I suppose I’ll allow it. That only leaves…” He grins, grabs Todd by the arm, and plants a kiss firmly on the bridge of his nose between his wide, bewildered eyes. “Something blue!”

“I mean,” Todd mumbles, gesturing down to his very blue shirt meaningfully.

“Hm, yes, I suppose you have that, too,” Dirk murmurs, tilting Todd’s head back and pressing a lighter kiss first to Todd’s left cheekbone, then the right, beneath each lovely blue eye. “I can’t say I noticed.”

“Dork.”

“So, guess that’s everything, huh?” says Hobbs, evidently struggling to contain a grin of his own. “You fellas all set?”

“Yes- oh! Wait! Who’s going to-” he turns to Todd worriedly. “Do we have a priest? Or- or a rabbi, those are your ones, are they not?”

“I, uh,” says Hobbs bashfully, fiddling with his collar. “I am, sadly, neither, but I am ordained, by the power of the Bergsberg county clerk, to perform wedding ceremonies in the state of Montana.”

“You… really?” asks Dirk, bewildered.

“Yeah- it’s, ah, a long story. My brother had a situation with his fiancée and, uh, time was kinda of the essence. But hey, the upshot of that is I can step in for you guys-” he looks to Todd, putting a gentle hand on his shoulder. “If, uh, you’re sure you’re okay with… like I said, I don’t really know squat about Jewish weddings, I’m don’t think I’m even qualified-”

“It’s fine, Hobbs, really,” says Todd, rubbing the back of his neck and glancing at Dirk. “Uh, honestly, we… might have to do that later. I mean, do this again but more… by the book, I guess. If my parents find out that I didn’t have a Jewish wedding-”

“Or invite them to it,” adds Farah.
“Yeah. I’ll uh. Be pretty screwed.”

“So I get to marry you twice?” Dirk beams, looping his arm through Todd’s. “Well, I’m certainly game!”

“Yeah, I mean…” Todd blushes, looking down at his feet. “I couldn’t even get you a ring, so…”

“Todd?”

His husband-to-be looks up at him, uncertain. “Yeah?”

Dirk leans in, eyes fluttering closed. “I could not care less.”

He is vaguely aware of the sound of the Mona dragons giggling, of Hobbs ‘awwww’ing, of Tina mock-gagging, but he couldn’t care less about those sounds, either. All he cares about, in that moment, is the soft, open slant of Todd’s lips against his own, and the warmth of his body pressed up to his side. Everything is Todd, and everything is good.

All outside distraction tuned out, Dirk pulls back from the kiss and allows himself to simply to look at Todd a moment; his friend, his fiancé, his assistant, his knight. Allows thirty years of phantom memories to wash over him, leaving in their wake thirty years of very real love condensed, handily, into a matter of weeks that he would not trade for the world.

Todd looks back at him, and his uncertainty melts into something softer, something peaceful. Something for Dirk’s eyes alone. Something he’s seen a thousand times in a face tinted green, shining new and brilliant on a fresh canvas marbled in warm tones.

“So,” Todd breathes, hand stroking across the coloured stripes on Dirk’s arm. “I guess… I guess we’re ready, huh?”

He holds that hand out in invitation; and Dirk, happily, places his heart in it.

Ready…

Todd can’t even say it’s not how he expected to get married. Honestly, he never thought he would get married at all; he couldn’t give a shit about the institution, and it’s not like any of his past relationships had lasted long enough to change his mind.

But even if he had once been a kid with a scrapbook full of future wedding ideas, he’s pretty sure it would have looked nothing like this.

He’s pretty sure, for example, that it would have been officiated by a rabbi or a cantor or something, under a canopy. Not by a Montana sheriff who struggles to get through his lines without crying, under a curtain of lights and flowers strung haphazardly from the side of a boat in a field. He’s pretty sure the bouquet in his betrothed’s hand would have been an actual bouquet, and not a sentient shapeshifter with a fondness for pastel pink snapdragons that actually snap. His best man probably would have been Amanda, or someone from his band; not a hot, neurotic ex-bodyguard rocking the Janelle Monae tux look. And he’s pretty sure the people attending would have been family, college friends, old friends from the synagogue that he invited to keep his mom happy- definitely not a handful of mixed psychics, a gang of anarchist vampires, two princes and a cave lady from fairyland,
and a deputy sheriff who won’t stop catcalling them like they’re getting married on a Kiss Cam at a baseball game.

But hey, it’s not like you can make this shit up. And he wouldn’t trade a single crazy detail of it for anything.

Especially not the weirdo standing next to him.

_God,_ he thinks, meeting Dirk’s eyes and his blinding grin with one that probably looks awful similar. _And I thought you were glowing, before…_

It’s a _beyond_ sappy thought, and one he will never share with another living soul if he can help it, but it’s true; Dirk Gently doesn’t need crazy fairytale solar magic to light up a room. He does that just fine all on his own.

“And I now pronounce you,” Hobbs chokes out, visibly fighting tears. “Uh-”

“Prince and Knight?” Dirk suggests, so full of happy energy he looks like he’s about to vibrate right out of his skin with it. “Detective and assistant?”

“Let’s not use that one,” Todd adds, but he can’t even make himself scowl.

Hobbs blinks, laughing wetly and scrubbing his eyes. “Heh. I now pronounce you _partners_; now and forever.” He claps them both on their shoulders. “Go on- kiss ‘im!”

Todd doesn’t know which of them he’s talking to. And honestly, he doesn’t care.

They crash together like tides, Todd wrapping his arms around Dirk’s neck and allowing himself for a moment to not care that he’s standing on his tiptoes, or that people can see his feet leave the floor when Dirk leans back to scoop him into the air. He doesn’t care that he’s getting spun round like a forties dame reuniting with her wartime sweetheart, or that Tina is distantly crowing ‘get it, girl!’ at them while a dozen onlookers woop and applaud. He doesn’t care about any of it.

Right now, anything and everything in the world that isn’t Dirk can go screw itself.

In his mind, beyond the confetti and fireworks, a confused little human part of him that never pictured marriage scratches its head. Somewhere else, a wistful elf that never thought it would be possible jumps for joy.

And somewhere right in between the two, between knight and bellhop, between lover and loser, Todd Brotzman kisses the love of his life in front of his new family, and puts a thousand preconceived notions to rest for good.

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_“You’re… walking meadows in my mind…”_

_Making waves across my time…”_

Dirk hums into Todd’s hair over the song. “Did you choose the music?”
“Yeah.”

“Hm. Less depressing than I would’ve thought.”

Todd snorts, and Dirk feels him nuzzle a little further into his neck as they sway to the slow, dreamlike song. “Yeah I, uh. Figured the Smiths wouldn’t go down so well.”

“I did miss the music,” says Dirk, cupping Todd’s hip a little tighter to sway him with a touch more vim. “All the harps and lutes and whatnot where nice, I suppose, but you can’t really beat good old fashioned Earth music. No Britney in Wendimoor.”

“Britney,” says Todd with the dread of a pirate’s curse, shaking his head. “Jesus Christ, what do I see in you?”

“I could very well ask the same thing; never imagined any husband of mine would be such a killjoy,” Dirk teases, pinching his waist. “And yet here we are.”

Todd chuckles. “Here we are…”

Sighing in contentment, Dirk props his chin atop Todd’s head and lazily surveys the remnants of the wedding party through the cosy illumination of camping lamps and fairy lights. Mona, thoughtfully, appears to have turned into a large, plush sectional sofa, upon which the majority are sprawled in varying states of sobriety and undress. Amanda naps drunkenly, sprawled across the three laps of Martin, Fitz and Patch; the latter, Dirk can’t help but notice, appears to be rather immersed in finger-combing Amanda’s hair and gazing down at her adoringly. A little further off to the side Farah, the picture of sobriety, cuddles a dozing Tina against her side with a look of bewildered serenity; carefully slipping the half-empty bottle of grape soda out of the newly sober deputy’s hand before it spills on Mona’s cream velvet. And on Tina’s other side- twice as asleep, snoring on her shoulder and uncaring of the red wine stain on his pastel shirt- Hobbs dozes contentedly like a bear in a deep, peaceful hibernation. Still on their feet stand the remaining Rowdies, including the boisterous Beast, capering joyously across the dry, brackish grass clearing that constitutes the ‘dance floor’, utterly out of time to the pace of the song and not seeming to care in the slightest. And finally, drifting between that band of merry men like rocks parting a restless ocean…

“I’m glad they found each other,” Dirk whispers, eyes briefly following Panto and Silas on their turn around the floor. He needn’t worry about being caught staring; it’s obvious the two only have eyes for each other. They’ve seldom looked at anyone else since Silas fumbled catching the bouquet at the ceremony- and Panto, quick as a flash, caught it instead.

Todd lifts his head and turns it slightly, glancing over his shoulder. “Yeah,” he murmurs, obviously fighting down a smile of his own. “That’s some fairytale shit.”

Dirk chuckles, tucking Todd’s waist in close to his own body. “Lot of that going around, it seems.”

“Yeah. Everything…” Todd laughs dryly. “God, everything… everything actually worked out this time, huh?”

Dirk thinks of Francis, acclimatising to a new life devoid of familiar faces. Of Bart, wherever she is now. “Well… For most of us.”

“Dirk?”

He meets Todd’s quizzical look, and sighs. “He… he will be alright, won’t he? Francis.”

“I don’t know,” says Todd honestly. “I think so. I hope so, but… it kinda depends on where he goes
from here. So long as he’s got, y’know—” he nods towards Panto and Silas—“people looking out for
him, he’ll be okay.”

“Yes, I suppose,” says Dirk, furrowing his brow.

“It’s Bart, right?”

He double takes. “How did you-?”

“You’re not subtle,” Todd snorts. “And she’s the only one we haven’t heard from yet.”

Dirk huffs in frustration, looking out across the inky Montana night. “Panto says he doesn’t know if
she stayed in Wendimoor or not, either. I… is it ridiculous that I wish she was here?”

“I mean, she did try to kill you a bunch of times.”

“Yes, yes, I know, it’s silly—”

“But,” Todd adds, cutting in. “She did help us out back there. A lot. And if her, y’know, thing is
anything like yours… I’m guessing she ends up doing a lot of stuff she doesn’t wanna do. Y’know.
*For the universe.*”

“For the universe,” Dirk repeats bitterly, sighing. “I… wish I could’ve helped her more. I think- well,
I know, now- that in another life, where she wasn’t hellbent on killing me… we could’ve been
friends. We have a worrying amount in common.”

“Hey.”

Dirk meets Todd’s eyes, finding them staring back at him in gentle determination.

Todd squeezes his arm round Dirk’s shoulders. “We’ll find her.”

Dirk gulps. “D’you think so?”

“I do.” Todd gives him a dry smile. “Or she’ll find us. But… she won’t be alone, Dirk. We’ll catch
up to her, one of these days. And hey, maybe this time she’ll remember us from over there and, uh.
Not try and kill us so much.”

“Hm.” Dirk smiles slowly, and prods Todd’s forehead. “You know something, Todd? You… are
surprisingly optimistic for a grumpy guts.”

Humming in withering amusement, his husband’s eyes flicker to Dirk’s lips; which is about all the
prompting Dirk needs to change the subject altogether.

Dirk wonders, with the ever-racing part of his mind that isn’t utterly immersed in what they’re doing
with their mouths, whether kissing Todd will ever lose its spark. He supposes it must, one day; then
again, they’ve managed to keep it kindled for thirty years so far. Thirty largely imaginary years,
granted, but Dirk is proud of the streak nonetheless.

But perhaps it would not be such a great tragedy. As much as Dirk cherishes every electric touch,
every burning ember of passion in their relatively youthful love affair, a part of him is rather looking
forward to the part that comes next. The part where they’re older, and wrinklier, and don’t have the
energy or libido of healthy men in their early thirties. The part where they live, mostly, in that serene
inbetween state, finding a myriad of less steamy ways to occupy their time together and yet never
feel unsatisfied, or uncertain. The part where they both know, beyond any shadow of a doubt, that
they were made to last. There is, he thinks, a certain strange magic to that kind of intimacy; a kind
Dirk has yet to fully experience. But he thinks he will, one day. With Todd.

Actually, he’s certain of it.

“Hey,” Todd murmurs upon breaking the kiss, following it with another small peck for good
measure. “You wanna get out of here?”

But in the meantime…

“Lead the way,” says Dirk, cupping Todd’s cheek and waggling his eyebrows. “Mr. Gently.”

“We, uh, didn’t actually talk about names- ugh, whatever.”

In the meantime, there’s plenty of other things he can think to do with his gorgeous husband on their
wedding night; and most of them involve making him forget his own name altogether.

Dirk is rather baffled when instead of taking them to a car or carriage, Todd leads them round the
side of the boat to the fairy light-illuminated ladder rungs bolted to the side. Climbing certainly
wasn’t something Dirk had anticipated doing on his wedding night- given their height discrepancy
and preferences, that tends to be more Todd’s area- but he’s always happy to try new things!

The pieces start to fall into place when Dirk reaches the deck and notices the warm yellow glow
through the newly-cleaned windows of the cabin. “My, my, Todd- what have you been up to?”

“I, uh. I know it’s no palace gardens,” he says, hauling himself up to the final rung. “But I figured it
was more, y’know, Wendimoor than the Motor Inn.”

Dirk turns around, raising an eyebrow as he gives Todd a hand up onto the deck. “I don’t recall ever
telling you about the garden plan, Theodore.”

“Gino saw you skulking around muttering about picnic mats and tents, I kinda connected the dots.”

Grinning, Dirk gives Todd’s cheek a little smooch as his husband leads him towards the cabin door.
“Tremendous assisting, Todd. We’ll make a detective out of you, yet!”

“Thank you, my liege,” says Dirk primly, sweeping aside an imaginary cape as he ducks down to
step into the small cabin with a passing smirk at his sarcastic husband. However, he quickly drops
the smirk in favour of a gape when he pauses to take stock of the interior. “Jiminy crickets!”

However many days or weeks of work have gone into sprucing up the boat, it is apparent that the
majority was spent in this cabin. Any hint of rust or decay has been scrubbed away, old floors
layered over with a loose cozy patchwork of plush carpet pieces, walls freshly painted and draped in
shimmering fabrics. Any lingering smell of said paint that hasn’t been aired out is now instead gently
masked by the aroma of the numerous scented candles, dotted safely in jars about the space; Dirk
makes out hints of honeysuckle, rose, various other mingling floral scents. It doesn’t quite match any
of the flower smells of Wendimoor, but it’s a good and thorough approximation. And dominating the small room, occupying at least half of the floor space sits a broad, low pile of mismatched cushions; big enough for two and just begging to be luxuriated upon.

“Yeah, uh… I wanted to get a mattress in here, but obviously-” Todd gestures to the small doorframe- “that wasn’t gonna happen.”

Dirk spins round and plants a kiss on him before he can denounce his hard work any further. “Hush, you- it’s perfect.” He steps further in to admire the set-up properly, picking up a candle to take a big inhale, allowing the scent to transport him to long lost meadows and a soft bed of magical daisies. “When on earth did you put this all together?”

“I, uh, had some help. Hobbs and Tina needed something to do while they’re still not cleared for duty. Farah, too; it’s kinda because of her that this place is even safe for us to be in. She would’ve straight-up banned us if she wasn’t convinced the floors were up to code.”

“Well, I’m touched that you all went to such effort,” says Dirk, holding the candle close to his chest. “Bit miffed that I missed out on the group bonding, mind.”

“Don’t be- when Tina wasn’t bugging Farah to make out she was bugging me for details of our sex life.”

“Hm- interesting question, when you think about it,” says Dirk, putting the candle down and lounging back on the cushions. “I suppose if you exclude whatever we made up, the only time we’ve ever done that was-”

“The night before we left on that crazy quest,” Todd finishes, visibly blushing as he closes the door and slides a relatively new-looking bolt across. “Yeah. I remember.”

“Didn’t feel much like a first time, as I remember it,” says Dirk softly, beckoning him closer. “Felt like something we’d been doing for years.”

“Guess it was, from our perspective.”

“Do you… regret, that it happened like that?”

Todd opens his mouth, then closes it, then shakes his head minutely. “No. I don’t think so. It…” He laughs humourlessly, running a hand through his hair. “Honestly, as first times go it’s… it was better than my actual first time, for sure. And it was with you, so. I’ll take it.”

“Do you wonder, at all? How we constructed this so… thoroughly?”

“I, uh.” Todd hesitates, but takes Dirk’s hand when he offers it. “I figure maybe at least some of it has to do with… do you, uh… remember Sound of Nothing?”

“Vaguely. Although I have to say that sorting out all the memories that got dumped in my head in one fell swoop has been quite the undertaking.” He tugs on Todd’s hand sharply, spilling the smaller man into his lap with some indignant spluttering. “What do you remember about it?”

“Uh, up until I took a dive in that pool, not much,” Todd admits, shuffling about until he finds a comfortable position- which, lucky for Dirk, happens to be straddling his lap. “But then some stuff came back. We didn’t… not much, just kinda… fooled around, I guess. But I figured maybe that… affected the stuff we made up. Subconsciously.”

“As good an explanation as any, I suppose,” Dirk agrees with a hum, taking Todd’s face in his hands
and pressing a little kiss to his wrinkled forehead. “Do you know what I’ve been thinking?”

Todd looks down at him questioningly, hands wandering up to tangle in the hair at the nape of Dirk’s neck. “What?”

“I was thinking about what Francis showed us; about how he made up the new lives from a handful of memories and let the rest sort itself out. And how surprised he was when he found out about us. It, well, it got me thinking that… we made this.” He runs his hands down Todd’s neck, to his shoulders, up and down in calming motions. “He handed us a script, and without any prior discussion you and I just…”


“Spectacularly! How in the world did that happen?”

“Guess we just can’t help being a pain in the neck,” Todd laughs, leaning down to press their foreheads together. “I dunno, I guess… on some level, you and me must have been…”

Dirk squeezes his shoulders, lets his hands wander to the dip of his waist. “On the same page.”

“Yeah.” Todd smiles, eyes flickering in the candlelight; not even Wendimoor could improve upon the blue of those eyes. “How about that?”

*God,* he’s perfect. A daydream wrapped in a nightmare wrapped in a tiny, grouchy outer shell. “How about that,” Dirk echoes softly, tugging his husband closer.

Todd smiles- a soft, beautiful thing that has Dirk feeling like the luckiest man in the worlds- and wraps his arms around Dirk’s neck properly. “I, uh… I never thought I’d say this, but…” He laughs quietly, ducking his head. “I’m real glad you got kidnapped into some kid’s fantasy mural with me.”

Dirk returns that smile openly, heart soaring. “So am I.”

And then he swoops up to kiss his husband properly, shuddering in delight as the smaller man melts in his hold. Just as he remembers him doing a thousand times before in the dream world they made; just as he hopes to make him do a thousand times more in the real future they’ll build.

He traces his fingers along Todd’s jaw, claiming and memorising every inch of him anew, and hums cheerily when he grazes the pretty wire cage masking the soft, rounded shell of his prominent ear. “I will miss the pointy ears.”

“Shut up,” Todd half-laughs, blushing pink as a flamingoose.

Dirk kisses him again, compelled by that gorgeous complexion, mentally comparing that rosy pink to the vibrant green of memory, and quickly deciding that he cannot pick a favourite.

Besides, he would love Todd Brotzman to the Moon and back in every colour of the rainbow.

*The End*
Damn... that was somethin', huh?

Thank you, if you've made it this far, for coming on this journey with me; these versions of the characters have grown very close to my heart, and I hope I did them justice and made an entertaining and fulfilling story with them <3

I wanted to give them a slightly open ending- make it feel like an alternative s2 finale and not like, a *show* finale- but I'm not sure I'll ever get round to writing that alternative season 3. Do they find Bart? Did she stay in Wendimoor? Do they go back to Wendimoor? Do they fix the universe? It's up to you! I will give you two little tidbits of info though, about our new arrivals- Fitz is based on Chidi Anagonye because I love that dweeb, and Patch is the 'human bomb' and will likely have a, uh, *explosive* connection with Amanda in future ;)

While this may be the end for this storyline, it hopefully will not be the end for the fantasy versions of these characters. As I was writing I had two thoughts that A) I had lots and lots of ideas for little scenes between them that I couldn't fit into the narrative and B) I was sad beyond words that I couldn't feature Farah and the other earthbound folks for plot reasons. So one of these days, I'd very much like to write a few side stories. These actually *will* be set in an alternate universe, where Dirk and Todd always have been and always will be these characters, and they'll be exploring their relationship, having adventures and hanging out with some of the awesome people who sadly could not join them on this journey. I have no idea when I'll get round to writing any of these stories, but I'd like to! In the meantime if anyone else feels inspired by this world and these versions of the characters and wants to write, draw, moodboard, playlist or *whatever* about them, please do- and please mention me because I wanna see everything!!!

If you want to read more fic from me- and if you've read Start at the Beginning- I will be posting weekly updates of the sequel, Stuck in the Middle starting fairly soon! Also, if you're curious about my headcanons for the time at Sound of Nothing where Dirk and Todd 'fooled around', I wrote a one-shot of it once and it's one of my fave things I've ever written lmao.

So, that's that I guess! Once again huge thanks to the people who've worked with me and helped me along, to the other participants of the Big Bang, and to you, the readers-especially if you've been commenting and interacting, even if only on this last chapter! I truly love you, and wish you all the best happily ever afters <333

Until next time <3

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!