# Beakers and Bloodstones

by [wyntera](http://archiveofourown.org/users/wyntera)

## Summary

They are nothing but words on a page, black ink on white paper, but something deep inside Carlos feels like it's just broken open as he reads the name.

Night Vale.

## Notes

See the end of the work for [notes](http://archiveofourown.org/users/wyntera/works/1079111/notes).
"—and it's going to be a chilly one out there today, folks! That's right, the National Weather Service has issued a Winter Storm Warning for our area, lasting for the next thirty-six hours. There's a cold front coming in from the west, and you can expect heavy cloud cover for the next four days at least. Temperatures should drop into the low thirties by early this afternoon, and you can break out the snow shoes because the whole of Massachusetts will be covered with it by nightfall. Whatever you need to get done today, get it done early because this one will be here for a while. We'll keep you up-to-date with the situation as—"
the warmth seeping into his bones. After all these years he still can't seem to handle winter weather. He lets his eyes fall closed, memories of dry heat under an unforgiving sun filling him with nostalgia. He can imagine running across well-packed soil, the rocks shifting under his feet, the smell of earth permeating the air. He feels a pang of loss at the memory. Life in Mexico might not have been optimal at times, but it certainly hadn't been this frigid.

The faint smell of mint and lavender hangs in the air as Carlos quickly washes and dries himself, scrubbing furiously at his mop of wet hair before throwing on several layers and taking a quick glance in the mirror. He really ought to take more time with his appearance, he supposes, but now isn't really the time. No one to impress at the university, not when it looks so miserable outside. He does run his fingers through his unruly hair, trying to give it some semblance of a style, but his heart really isn't in it. He had never put that much effort into it in the past, and now that he has premature gray at the temples, there is even less of a reason. Fingers trail down to the scruff on his jaw and creeping down his neck towards his Adam's apple. No, in this case more facial hair is probably the way to go. He might look like a hobo, but at least he'd be warmer. He takes a handful of minutes to make two slices of toast before shoving them both into his mouth. Throwing on his heavy wool coat and grabbing his wallet and newsboy bag, he locks up and heads down the uneven staircase and out into the brisk New England air. He briefly considers taking his hybrid coupe, but he's not sure he should risk getting it stuck at the school. Leaving it parked in its space, he sets out on the five block journey toward campus.

The walk is pleasant enough, the typical erratic traffic to dodge indicative of all college towns, Arkham no exception. Though, Carlos can't help but notice that it seems a bit busier than usual. He passes a good number of residents scrambling to bring in lawn furniture. The old man that lives on the corner of Third and Evans is slinging an absurd amount of salt onto his walkway, giving Carlos the stink-eye as he walks by. A group of twenty-somethings looks to be packing up their SUV at the sorority house off of Second Street, a blonde in bright orange screaming up the front steps about being on the road in fifteen minutes. Some people just flee at the first sign of bad weather. Not that Carlos is particularly looking forward to the possibility of being snowed in for the weekend, but he's been through worse.

Miskatonic campus is even worse; every student that Carlos passes on his way to the science complex is full of talk of the upcoming storm. It makes Carlos pause, wondering if maybe he hasn't given this storm much credit. It isn't like he's been paying that much attention to the weather lately. His Tuesday-Thursday class had turned in their first major paper of the semester, and it felt like he had done nothing but write disapproving remarks in red ink for the last three days. He knew better than to get his hopes up for anything less than graduate-level work, but it wasn't like that class was some introductory geology course. They really should be putting more effort into their work. No, he figured not a single one of them would continue on in that field, unless there was some hidden gem just waiting for a topic to spark their interest. Glancing at his watch, Carlos picks up the pace, and manages to make it to his classroom with two minutes to spare.

Not that it seems to make a difference, he realizes as he walks through the door. More than half the desks are empty—not totally unusual for the class size—but the ones that are there crowd around the windows that line one wall. They're excited, that much is obvious. Carlos mentally shifts his
lesson plan for the day to something a little less in-depth. "Take a seat, please, we still have a class to get through," he says, and they all amble to their desks.

He gets about forty minutes into his lecture, but the whole time he is painfully aware that none of them are paying attention. Their eyes are constantly cutting over to the bare windows, glances being traded and text messages being less-than-discreetly sent. Not subtle at all, really.

"Alright, I can see that nothing I'm saying is sinking in today. You all have places you need to be?" Carlos asks. Most of them manage to look somewhat contrite.

"We're sorry, Professor. It's just supposed to be a bad one, yeah?" says Lindsey, smacking on her gum as she talks. "My parents want me back home before it gets here."

"Yeah," Luke pipes up. "Yeah, yeah, some of us got to commute, ya know? Like, I don't wanna get stuck here, ya know?"

Carlos tenses in irritation, though he's not sure if it's because of Luke's horrible grammar or because he knows for a fact that Luke lives on campus and therefore isn't the least bit concerned about travel. He doesn't call him on it, because it simply isn't worth it. Instead, he addresses Lindsey, "I understand, and I don't want to put you in danger just for a lecture. You can all head home now to beat the snow, but that just means you should have plenty of time to read chapters five and six." There's a collective groan from the students at that. "This is the price you pay for leaving early. Expect to have your graded papers back on Tuesday. Everyone, be safe, have a good weekend." There are murmurs of acknowledgment as they leave the classroom, Lindsay calling back a thank you as she exits the room, and Carlos is left alone.

He sighs. This just goes to show why he shouldn't be allowed to teach undergrads, and really, teaching grad students is questionable as well. Maybe he should have fought harder for them to stay. Though, he's never really had the patience for students that aren't all that interested in science. It's always felt like such a waste of time—forcing students to learn a subject they'll never show a real interest in, just because it's a requirement for general education. Not that he is against students broadening their interests, but the handful he just dealt with were obviously there to mark off a science credit from a long list of necessary evils. If they don't want to be there, then he can't find it in himself to care.

Gathering his things, he makes his way down to his tiny office. It's in the basement, which used to annoy him until he realized that students were less likely to seek him out down here. It's on par with the cramped smallness of his apartment, shelves full and boxes stacked precariously around the room. Two years in this office and he still hasn't managed to unpack. He is vastly relieved to see that there are no students waiting in front of his locked door.
Collapsing in his desk chair, Carlos logs on to the school network and sets about the task of alerting his students for the rest of today and tomorrow that his classes are canceled due to weather. He can only imagine that time will only increase their restlessness, and he has no desire to deal with it. In fact, having an open door would certainly give the impression of wanting company.Quickly rectifying that situation, he checks his email, responding to student questions and university politics. He gets rather involved in responding to one of his graduate students, Kendol Jackson, a bright young man that has a lot of potential in the study of radiation if he would stop taking the opinions of Professor Aldridge as gospel truth and start questioning even the scientists he admires. Not that Carlos feels that Aldridge is worth admiration. His jaw clenches tight at the mere thought of that pompous ass, but his opinion isn't what matters here.

Several hours later, Carlos is still tucked in his office, having moved on to grading more abysmal papers that make him want to weep for the future of science, when there is a quick rapping at frosted glass window on his door. It's abrupt enough in the silence to startle him. "It's open," he calls, expecting a wayward student that wants to discuss improving their grade.

Instead, he's greeted by the head of the department opening his door. "Carlos, why am I not surprised you're still here."

Carlos moves to stand. "Professor Kendrick, I, um. Yes. Still here, I'm afraid. Is there somewhere else I should be?"

The graying man shakes his head, "My boy, you do know that it's snowing pretty heavily outside, don't you? I'd hate to see you stuck here."

Carlos grimaces, "Ah, time must have got away from me. Did they cancel classes across campus?"

"Of course they did. You'd think they'd be used to it now, after the winter we've had. But what can you do, liabilities and what not. I'm just heading out myself, but I wanted to talk to you about something before the weekend." Carlos motions for Kendrick to take a seat in the only other chair in the office, but Kendrick waves that off. "It's alright, this won't take long. First, are you still interested in field work?"

A spike of excitement surges through Carlos at these words. "Of course, Professor. I've been trying to get on a team for years." It's a struggle to keep the hope out of his voice. He's wanted to do nothing but field research and hands-on lab work since he got his PhD. No, he's wanted this since the first time he knew what a scientist was, if he's honest with himself. Since he found a chunk of obsidian in the dirt behind his grandparents house, and his abuealo told him how the world was made.
Unpopular opinions and wild theories go a long way of keeping you from the things you want, though. Carlos had been on but one field team since becoming a graduate student, and he was the only member who wasn't completely wasted by six o'clock every night of his three month trip to Peru. He had almost single-handedly excavated a set of ruins, only to discover that the lead scientist’s theories were completely false. Even worse, the main artifact was irreparably damaged, and although Carlos didn't know how it could have happened, the whole debacle had been blamed on him. The entire trip had been a waste, in the end, and the stigma had stuck. Combine that with the controversy that usually followed any paper that he wrote, and no off-campus team would touch him. Carlos often thought Miskatonic would get rid of him, but being the youngest recipient ever of the National Academic Scholar Award for Scientific Achievement went a long way toward keeping him on the payroll. It didn't do much to further Carlos' career, though.

Kendrick knew all of this, of course. He was the one that hired Carlos in the first place. Kendrick had fought for Carlos' place on the faculty multiple times, making enemies in some circles, and it couldn't just be to lure in parent's and their wallets. Sometimes Kendrick would look at him and say things, cryptic things, that made Carlos wonder if there were other reasons he was being kept on the payroll.

"That's good to hear, very good! I know that teaching has never really been your forte, and I think that this," and at that Kendrick holds up a manilla folder he'd had in the hand not carrying his briefcase, "will be much more to your liking." He hands the folder over, and Carlos is surprised by how thin it is. "There's this small town in the southwest that has agreed to let us come in and do some research into some unusual seismographic activity in the area. What little we've gotten so far has been fairly extraordinary."

Carlos doesn't bother with the first few pages, instead flipping to the attached seismograph readings, feeling his eyes widen at the long swooping arcs across the graph paper. "These indicate tectonic movement on the scale of a 7.4 earthquake! Why didn't we hear about this?"

Kendrick grins, "That's the thing. No one felt it."

"What do you mean, no one felt it? There would have been mass destruction, possible loss of life, I mean, people should have felt this for hundreds of miles."

"And yet, no one felt so much as a tremor," he replies. He leans one heavy shoulder against the door frame as he talks. "We had some research students out in the desert and they got a little off course. Seems that they had stopped to camp for the night and one of them decided to do some maintenance on their equipment. They wouldn't have gotten those readings at all if not for that. They quadruple checked the machine, sure that it was malfunctioning, but no. Perfect working
order. And the readings fluctuated the whole night, but never dropped low. No consistent pattern, no indicator of aftershocks. Just a series of high readings. The only reason they stopped was because morning came and they had to move on.

"They marked the location on every map they had, and planned to come back after they reached their destination. But when they tried, they could never find that spot again. They spent a full week out in the desert along Highway 800, and what they did find is a good dozen more of them, all with similar readings. Every time they got too far south, though..." Kendrick paused to make sure Carlos was looking at him and not the papers in front of him. "Carlos, every time they got below a certain latitude, something forced them back."

Carlos' brows crease in confusion, "What do you mean?"

"It was different every time. The first day, their head car went from an almost full tank of gas to practically empty in five minutes. They had to abandon it and go back. The next day, three flat tires. The day after, the assistant team lead became violently ill. After that...well. They started going on about weird occurrences, strange visions. Nothing coherent. Doctors claim heat stroke." As Kendrick speaks, Carlos can feel the hair on the back of his neck and arms stand on end.

"You don't think it's heat stroke, though?"

A sudden shout of laughing students from down the hall makes Kendrick pause. He takes a quick glance out the door before closing it almost completely behind him. When next he speaks, it's in a hushed tone. "The team members were interviewed separately, and all their stories ended the same way. That a police car pulled up to their campsite and a man in a dark mask and wearing a sheriff's uniform stepped out. He told them that they needed to head back to wherever they came from. That they weren't welcome, and if they didn't clear out they would be taken in for something called re-education. The team lead explained to the man, this sheriff, what they were doing out there was perfectly legal, and went to hand the man a business card. Doctor Turpin suddenly dropped to his knees and started screaming."

"Turpin? That's what happened? I thought, well. He was always so passionate about his work, it seemed a bit odd that he would just suddenly take a sabbatical like that."

"Check the file near the back," Kendrick replied. Flipping through the papers in his hands, Carlos finally found the file, a medical report. Carlos brought the file closer to his face, adjusting the thin metal glasses perched on his nose as he took in the picture paper-clipped to the top. The man in the image looked deranged, deep circles under sunken eyes and lips curled back in a snarl of terror. The gray-scale shading of the picture just added to the creepy feel, and he would almost assume that it was some sort of hoax, but the man confined in the straightjacket was clearly Doctor Franklin Turpin.
"I don't understand. What happened to him?"

"Some sort of mental break. They're trying to say it's some combination of exposure and stress."

Carlos gives him a skeptical look, "But you don't think so."

Kendrick nods, "There's been a handful of other events throughout the years, all of them mysterious in their own way, but together it seems like too much to be a coincidence. I'd already been keeping this place on my radar, but this incident with Turpin has brought it to the attention of the rest of the scientific community. The thing is, this place is very close-knit. There have been reports of people moving there only to leave days later, visitors that never come back, and no one is willing to talk about what they've seen. And then, I got a letter from their City Council. Seems they are willing to allow a team of scientists to take up residence within city limits, but only from Miskatonic University. Seems one of their members is an alumni, though they didn't say who. But this would give us, and only us, an in-road to what could be the most scientifically interesting community in the nation. Possibly the world, depending on what we find."

Carlos closes the folder again, setting it carefully on his desk. "That's really great news, Professor. What, um. What would I be doing on the team? If I got selected, that is. Seismology? Radiation? General work?" Kendrick knows he has an extensive background in several scientific fields, so he's fairly sure he can fit whatever role they need of him. Surprisingly, Kendrick just laughs.

"Carlos, you don't understand. I want you to lead it." The wide-eyed, blank look that Carlos levels back at the older man just makes Kendrick laugh all the more.

"Me?!?"

"Of course! There isn't anyone better suited for it on staff, arguably anywhere. You're our leading expert on geology and I know if that wasn't your first love you would have given Holtz over in chemistry a run for her money for that position. You've got enough of the other disciplines covered that I am confident you can lead a team from diverse fields. And, I think we can both agree that you are one of the more open-minded of the staff, at least when it comes to these types of things."

Carlos felt a flush spread on his cheeks and ducked his head to hide it. Yes, he did enjoy investigating the more unlikely theories in the scientific community, and he had always been so poor at subterfuge. His colleagues had him pegged as a flake, someone that couldn't possibly be taken seriously.
"I can't imagine this would go over well with the rest of the faculty," Carlos mumbled, one fist clenching and releasing on top of the file folder underneath.

"Then it is a good thing this decision isn't up to them, is it?" Carlos still looked reluctant, and Kendrick sighed. "Look, you don't have to take the position. I just thought it would be a good opportunity for you, something you can really sink your teeth into. But if it's too much, I can open it up to the science department as a whole and take applications for team lead. I'm sure that Studwick or Aldridge would be interested."

Carlos narrowed his eyes at Kendrick. He knew he was being played even as the words were coming out of his boss's mouth, but that didn't stop the prickle of irritation from traipsing up his spine at the thought of Aldridge or his stool pigeon Studwick leading this expedition over him. Kendrick knew that he knew, as well, and Carlos hated being able to be read so openly. The old man certainly knew how to push his buttons.

"Can I at least have some time to think about it?"

"Of course! Take the weekend, get back to me on Monday. Do some research on your own, if you can. It would be for at least a year, depending on how things go. I know that is a big commitment, so give it some serious thought. I have to get going if I'm going to make it home before the bulk of the storm settles in. You get out of here, too! I don't want to hear that you spent the weekend holed up in this office." Carlos stands and shakes hands with Kendrick, thanking him for the opportunity and watching him make his way towards the stairs at the end of the hall before retreating to his cold office. He hadn't realized just how chilly it had become down here until now.

There, sitting innocently in the middle of his desk, sits the folder. The silence feels heavy with the weight of what's just transpired. He rounds the table, settling back into his squeaky chair and flipping open the cover. He begins to skim over the preliminary information, but his eyes stall on the name of the town. They are nothing but words on a page, black ink on white paper, but something deep inside Carlos feels like it's just broken open as he reads the name.

Night Vale.

Three hours later, he's still tucked behind his desk, files spread across the tiny workspace and more than two dozen tabs open in his internet browser. The aged yellow legal pad he keeps in his side drawer is quickly running out of pages as he jots down a string of theories for each instance the
town's name comes up. It's kind of thrilling, really. When Kendrick had mentioned there wasn't much information available, Carlos had assumed there was a healthy amount of exaggeration. After all, a town can't exist and not leave traces, but even a cursory check of the Wikipedia page lists Night Vale as a small community in lower New Mexico, close to both the Arizona border and Mexico, and not much else. There's not a map or any images associated with the article, and there are headers listed down the side of the page with no information underneath. Trying to access an official town website had led to a black screen with a little logo of a penguin in a hard hat, the words "Under Construction," flashing brightly underneath. The last updated date at the bottom of the screen lists May of 1999, which Carlos counts as a bad sign.

Carlos takes another bite of the candy bar he'd found in the pocket of his bag. Everything beyond those pages were from the odd newspaper article or police report, some unsettling blogs on a few conspiracy websites and one positively glowing review about the local pizza place. Literally, the words on the screen let out an eerie lime green glow. It seemed that there were hardly any other communities in that area of the state except some town named Desert Bluffs, and the only information he found about that was it's overly cheerful website sponsored by some company called Strexcorp Synergists. He makes a note of it anyway, never knowing what might come in handy, and clicks on another open tab.

"Hey, sir?"

Carlos jumps in his seat at the sudden loud noise. One of the campus security officers is standing in his doorway. "Sorry, sir. They're closing down the campus, you're going to have to head out."

Carlos glances at his watch, shocked to see how much time has passed. "Oh, of course, sorry. Is it bad out there?"

The officer's face turns to a grimace, "The only reason I'm still here is because I live so close. I hope you didn't drive."

Carlos haphazardly stacks his papers together and packs his things. "Thanks, I'll get out of here right now." The man gives a wave as he moves on to check the other rooms, and Carlos locks his door and sets off for the side entrance. Outside the snow is falling heavily, and the wind has picked up to the point that he can hardly see down the block. Pulling his coat tighter around his body, he sets off into the storm.

He almost breaks his neck sliding on the icy ground, his jeans and shoes are soaked through, he can't feel his fingers or nose, and he thinks his toes might fall off, but he finally makes it the five blocks back to his apartment. He wishes he had taken a hat because his shaggy hair is damp and cold. The heat has finally caught up with the temperatures outside, but the moisture in the air makes it muggy as he sheds his soggy clothes. Luckily his bag is well insulated and all the papers
inside have made it intact. A quick change and he goes about the process of boiling water for ramen on the stove top in his cramped little kitchen. He props his hip against the counter to wait on the warming process and look out the little window above the sink. Outside, the sky is far darker than it should be at this time of day, and he just barely see the houses across the street. He's glad he got home when he did.

The water in the pot begins to boil and Carlos adds in different ingredients, stirring occasionally to keep the noodles from sticking, and lets his mind wander to the folder now nestled in his bag by the couch. After the initial apprehension, this really did seem like something right up his alley. The data he was given filled him with more questions than answers, and he had a gut feeling that there was a lot more going on in the town of Night Vale than just odd seismology readings. If he investigated just one of the events that he had researched today, he could be busy for months. Yes, there was a lot scientifically to be found in this town.

But could he really be responsible for a whole research team? He could barely deal with students on a daily basis. These would be fully qualified scientists and research assistants, with their own strong opinions and, well...Carlos had never been very good at discussions that didn't involve pure scientific fact. He couldn't help but imagine it, though. A whole team of researchers under his watch, no office politics, no university bureaucracy, no pesky students. Just the data and the truth.

The smell of simmering spices pervades the air, and he takes a moment to inhale the savory warmth before spooning a healthy portion into a bowl. He's about to turn for the area of the apartment he considers to be the living room when he glances out the window. There, through the snowy upheaval and encroaching darkness, is a man standing on the opposite sidewalk. Carlos blinks repeatedly. It is clearly a man, dressed in a dark suit. He's facing Carlos' apartment but his features are obscured. It's a bit shocking—who could possibly be out in this weather wearing nothing but a suit?

Concerned, Carlos throws on his boots and jogs down his apartment stairs to the front door. Opening it, he peers out to where the man was standing.

The sidewalk is empty.

"Hello?" Carlos calls, looking up and down the sidewalk to try and catch a glimpse of the man. What if he's homeless? Carlos can't just leave a man to freeze to death out here. "Hello? Is anyone out there? Do you need any help?" He takes a couple steps out into the storm, but is quick to pull back. Dressed in just a t-shirt and pajama pants, he's already shivering. Shaking his head, Carlos turns and heads back up the stairs.

Ms. Finch is waiting at the top. She looks down at him from the second floor landing, her stubby nose turned up. "What are you doing out there, boy? Did I hear you calling for someone? You
know I don't want you bringing in anyone, this isn't some hostel."

"No, Ms. Finch. Just thought I saw something in the storm." Carlos moves past her on the landing and heads up the next flight of stairs.

"That's right, you better not be bringing any of those, those illegals into my building, you hear? I'll turn you in to the government, if I catch one glimpse of—"

"Yes, I am aware, Ms. Finch. Have a good evening," Carlos grits out through clenched teeth. He makes a point of putting extra weight into each step, stomping up the stairs and perhaps shutting his door a little louder than necessary. As glad as he was to find an apartment so close to campus, Ms. Finch's blatant racism was worse than the faulty heat system. Carlos was just reluctant to change apartments again. It seemed he couldn't find a place where he could really settle in this town.

Grabbing his bowl from the counter, he took one last look out the window, but the man was long gone. It was a little disconcerting, but he let it go for now. Nothing to be done if he can't find the man. He sits on the couch and after pushing most of the random collection of papers and samples that littered his small coffee table to one side, pulls out the Night Vale file and spreads it out in front of him. It's really not a lot to go on, all things considered. For most university-led projects, there would be well over a hundred pages of documented preliminary research. This was just a few files on a few random cases, and his own hastily scribbled notes.

Honestly, the lack of clarity was surprisingly freeing. He could shape this project in whatever manner he saw fit. There were no backers or grant funding that had specific goals in mind. From the prospectus, it was simply to find out more about Night Vale. Pretty open-ended, lots of room for experimental study, and a surprising lack of deadlines. The only stipulation was monthly reports to be submitted in order to justify the expenses, and that all pertinent findings would be under the Miskatonic University name. All in all, Carlos couldn't imagine a better deal for field work.

There was also the thought of some other scientist taking this opportunity over him. If the rest of the department knew about this, Carlos would have no chance of getting this shot. They would fight dirty, if necessary, playing their connections to either gain the spot for themselves, or at least ensure he wouldn't get it. It had happened before.

If he doesn't take this chance, will he get another one? Doubtful, Carlos thinks. If you don't get enough experience in your younger years, they never send you out into the field when you're older, even to supervise. Too much of a liability. No, it was now, or possibly never. A year, though was a long time. It's not that he had it awful here. Could he really leave for that long?
It is as he is pondering that question, that the power goes out.

Now plunged into darkness, Carlos closes his eyes and counts to ten, trying to breathe in and out slowly to curb his irritation. Opening his eyes, he sees a single shaft of light inexplicably coming from the one street light that still seems to have power. It falls in a beam across his coffee table. Carlos doesn't believe in signs—doesn't believe in much of anything other than pure science and mathematics—but if there ever was one, this would be good evidence. He leans over to scrounge through his bag for his cell phone, and quickly pulls up his contact list. As he listens to the ringing through the earpiece, he rubs a hand over his face before looking down at the paper again.

"Hello?"

"Yes, Professor Kendrick, hi. This is Carlos. I'm sorry to bother you at home, but—"

"Not at all, not at all. Is anything wrong?" Kendrick asks, sounding worried.

"No, nothing's wrong. It's, just. About the Night Vale project."

"Yes?"

Carlos lets his fingers drag across the words illuminated in golden light, and a smile can be clearly heard through his next words. "I don't need the weekend to think about it. I'll take the position."

The school stays closed until Wednesday, and Carlos spends the much needed time catching up on his grading and laying out plans for the Night Vale assignment. Having never headed a research team before, much less set up a facility from scratch, he's given himself a basic crash course through internet research. Kendrick, and perhaps some of his less opinionated colleagues, might be willing to impart some wisdom, but the former hasn't been in the field in years, and the latter...well, he isn't counting on help from that arena.

Kendrick had specified that the current semester would need to be finished before he could head to
Night Vale, which was understandable even if Carlos wants to get started right away. He would need to secure lab equipment, set up procedures, locate space in the town and possibly residences for his team, actually recruit a team, finalize the parameters of the research (even if they were extremely vague), and a hundred other tasks that had to be completed before even setting foot in the desert community. This on top of his current projects and teaching obligations. All of that adds up to not being able to leave until mid-June, but Carlos supposes it could be worse, and he's glad he at least has the time to plan for it. One step at a time, he thinks. For now, he just needs to get through this staff meeting.

The science faculty meets once a month, and Kendrick said he would be announcing the opening of their laboratories in Night Vale as well as Carlos' appointment as head of that office. Personally, Carlos thought a department-wide email would have been easier, but he had a feeling Kendrick wanted to see the looks on some of the more outspoken members' faces. A small part of him feels the same way. Unfortunately it is being smothered by the much larger part that hates being the center of negative attention, and this was most definitely going to cause an uproar. People were going to argue, and he had already run through all the likely versions he was going to hear in his head. His age, his experience, his background, his theories, all of it would be called into question.

What they didn't know was that the papers were already signed and submitted to the University legal department. There was no going back, now.

Carlos takes a few deep, calming breaths in the safety of his car as he sits in the parking lot. If he's going to get through the firing squad, he's going to have to keep his head. It won't do any good to get into petty arguments with faculty members. No, he was going to be a calm, professional, reasonable human being and no amount of goading or insults would sway him. No matter how much Carlos would love to punch Aldridge right in his massive chin.

Almost all of the science faculty has already arrived in the lecture hall by the time Carlos walks in, making his way to the far side of the room and finding an unobtrusive seat behind Dr. Haruki Watanabe. She turns and grins at him when he sits down. "Hey, did you hear?"

"Hear what?" he asks, glancing at her as he pulls out a notebook from his bag.

She motions for him to lean down, and as he does she half-whispers, "You know Mason, the TA for Gibson? The one with the nose ring?" At Carlos' nod, she continues, "He had to go by Kendrick's office this morning, and he heard him on the phone talking about some sort of new lab!"

"Oh?" Carlos replies. He can feel his eyes widen though he tries to keep a neutral expression.
"Oh? That's it, oh? Come on! This is awesome! I really hope they're planning on rebuilding the bio lab. It's looked pretty run down lately, and I hear they never did get all of that one fungus out of the air ducts. Sterling thinks they're going to add an auxiliary facility to the physics lab, but they just got a renovation last year! But you know him..."

His eyes follow hers to where physics professor Dr. Sterling Aldridge sits along one of the lower rows. He's lounging back with his arms thrown over the backs of the seats on either side of him, with a small collection of younger professors and teachers' assistants gathered around him. Carlos can't help but think he resembles a king holding court, particularly with his own personal jester, Zane Studwick. There isn't a worse sycophant in the entire department, perhaps the entire school, and the man must think that Aldridge walks on water, despite his background in applied physics. Haruki scrunches her nose in annoyance. "God's gift to science, if you believe in that sort of thing. Anyway, if Kendrick doesn't bring it up, I'm sure one of us will. What do you think it is?" Carlos has a moment of internal panic at the question, brain stalling and his mouth falls open in what he's sure is a rather undignified way. Luckily, whatever answer he is about to utter is cut off by the silence that falls over the room as Kendrick comes through the door.

"Sorry to keep you waiting, everyone!" he says, sitting his things on the table near the front before facing the group. "I know some of you have obligations at the job fair this evening over in Campbell Hall, so we'll get through this quickly so you can head over. Now, first, where do we stand on..." Carlos lets the voices wash over him as the meeting wears on. He's never been particularly interested in most of the tedious details of academic administration, and the more time he listens to talk of scheduling and budgets, the less he can pay attention. His mind wanders to his equipment list that he's been compiling, and starts jotting down more ideas. What size autoclave should they shoot for? And how many? At least three, he thinks, and on the large side. Deserts are awful dirty, it will be harder to keep things sterile. Could they find a facility with a built in freezer, or will they need to put one into the space? A walk-in would be for the best, but maybe that's asking too much. Is there a store in town or near the community where they can resupply? Shipping prices must be ridiculous for a town so far out of the way that people can't even find it. They would be taking a lot of samples, after all. He can't very well expect to not run low on test tubes and petri dishes. Will he need to make sure there are enough microscopes for each scientist, or should he confer with his team on what they might need once they're chosen? That isn't very feasible, in that he doesn't even know what exactly they'll be working on. Maybe just a broad spectrum of lab equipment, then?

"There's just one more announcement that we need to cover before I let you all go," Kendrick says, and Carlos glances up and realizes that the meeting is drawing to a close, almost an hour having passed. Adrenaline surges through his system as he realizes what this means, and he quickly shoves his notes back into his bag. "I'm sure some of you have heard rumors circulating about a laboratory being built here on campus, and as lovely as I'm sure that would be, that is indeed just a rumor." There's a collection of dismayed groans throughout the room, and Carlos watches Haruki fall back in her seat with a huff.
"Now, now, don't be too disappointed. What we are doing is opening a new field facility in southern New Mexico." At Kendrick's words, everyone perks up with interest. "I'm not sure how many of you may be familiar with the phenomenons of the Night Vale area, but we have been in contact with city officials, and a research laboratory is scheduled to be fully operational by the end of summer. There is a great deal to be learned from the area, and the team lead will be looking for individuals from all disciplines to participate." Murmurs broke out across the room, most of them saying they had never even heard of Night Vale, and wondering what could possibly be in New Mexico that warranted an entire field office. Some of the more seasoned members of the faculty had already moved on to more pressing matters.

"I don't get it," says Professor Walsh down near the front. "Why now? Why us? There have been plenty of groups trying to get into Night Vale for years, and not just on the university level. Companies with unlimited resources at their disposal can't get a foot in the door. And now, all of a sudden we're opening a whole lab there?"

"I can't say for certain what might have changed their minds, but we're not about to turn down the opportunity," Kendrick replies, neatly sidestepping the question and leveling Walsh with a look that Carlos can't interpret. He has no time to dwell on it, though, because Studwick's next question brings all conversation to a halt.

"So, when will you be choosing the team lead? When would you need proposals by? I think I can have something put together by the end of next week, but I'd like a little more time."

Carlos can see Kendrick take in a deep breath, and can't help but mirror the action. This might just turn ugly.

"That won't be necessary. The team lead for this project has already been chosen. We believe that Doctor Abaroa will be the perfect person to run the Night Vale laboratories." Just like that, roughly thirty pairs of eyes were trained on him, and Carlos feels his mouth go dry. There is a light smattering of applause, and Haruki turns in her chair to look at him incredulously and gasps, "Carlos!" before smacking him on the leg. Her smile of support is more helpful than she realizes at the moment. He clears his throat. "Yes. Thank you, everyone. I-I'm quite honored for the opportunity. I will be accepting applications for team members, and I hope to send out a formal email with more information by the end of the week. There's ten positions available, possibly a few more after a couple of months if we have the space and funding. If you're interested you can feel free to go ahead and call or email me and we can set up a time to talk. We're hoping to—"

"Abaroa?" Aldridge interrupts, loudly. He looks like he's swallowed a lemon. He turns back to Kendrick. "You're giving Abaroa a lab? What, none of us get a say in this? None of us get to put our name in, you just, decide to hand it over to him without a second thought?"
Kendrick's face becomes unreadable as he replies, "This decision wasn't taken lightly; many of you were up for consideration. I only offered my recommendation on this. The decision was jointly between myself, other members of the School Board, and members of the Night Vale City Council." He makes eye contact with Carlos. "We needed a candidate that all parties were comfortable with, and ultimately, the Night Vale representatives were more pleased with Doctor Abaroa's profile. Of course, he had my full endorsement."

As pleasing as it is to hear that his credentials had made a lasting impression on the government of the town, Carlos feels a cold twist of dejection. He can read between the lines. The School Board had been against his appointment to this post, and the only reason they had agreed was to appease the Night Vale City Council. He wonders how much influence Kendrick had to exert just for his sake, or how long it will be before they try to get him replaced.

No, Carlos thinks. He's going to hold onto this with both hands, as tight as he can. He won't let this chance go.

Meanwhile, Aldridge has worked himself into quite a tirade. "—can't believe that just because some ignorant backwoods townsfolk pick him, that you're all just going to go along with it! We all have just as much a right to that position as Abaroa! This is not how things are supposed to be done, not at this school!"

"I'm aware that this isn't how we usually handle this sort of thing, but the fact remains that these were special circumstances. There will be other opportunities in the future, I am sure. And I'm not sure why you're so upset, Sterling. You have far too many responsibilities here on campus to even consider it," Kendrick replies. Aldridge flushes in anger, but keeps any further comments to himself. "In the mean time," he says, addressing the entire room, "I will be looking for faculty that will replace Doctor Abaroa next year for seated classes. He will be continuing some coursework online, and his lab will be available for field work credits for higher level classes. Keep this in mind for your students come fall, those of you that are advisers, as I'm sure some of them will be interested. If you can drum up some interest in some of the graduate students, that would be helpful. I think many of them would be thrilled with the chance to do their thesis based on Night Vale research." He glances at his watch. "Oh dear, we've run late, I do apologize. Keep an eye out for that email, and thank you for coming, everyone."

Most of the faculty begins to talk among themselves while making their way out of the lecture hall, but several teachers come over to congratulate Carlos and offer well-wishes or mostly-unwanted advice. Several of them even mention graduate students that may be interested. Haruki is waiting on him, though, so he does his best to get through the social graces quickly, and finally they find themselves alone.

She laughs at his harassed look. "I have to hand it to you, Carlos. You have never done anything by halves." He shrugs, looking unrepentant, and her face loses some of its humor. "You've rocked a
lot of boats today, you know?"

He nods. "I knew it wouldn't go over well with everyone. I expect Aldridge and Studwick will be on their way to the School Board right about now to file a formal complaint. Maybe even Kremer and Sullivan. But it's a done deal. And they already hate me anyway; it can't get much worse." He paused. "You're not upset, are you?"

"Me? No way. I, for one, like to live somewhere with more to the weather than heat and more heat. I hope you plan on investing in a really good air conditioning system."

Carlos' eyes widen and he bites his lip, saying, "Oh. Oh, I hadn't even thought...that's a good point..." He digs through his bag for his notebook, and she laughs. "Hey, no, this is great! I mean, I've mostly been thinking about lab equipment but you do bring up a really good point."

She crosses her arms, grinning, "You never have done well at remembering basic things like proper eating and sleep habits. I'd hate for your team to suffer."

"Do you have any recommendations for the team?" he asks, looking up at her. She looks thoughtful.

"I have two or three graduate students that would probably be interested. One, definitely. She's got some pretty innovative ideas in plant biochemistry, though I'm not sure how much plant life will be available for her to study."

"I'm sure there will be something. If not in the town proper, then most likely in the nearby canyon. Tell her to contact me for more details. I want to get the team nailed down as quickly as possible." He repacks his bag and shoulders it, before giving her a lopsided grin. "You sure you don't want to come with me? I could take all the competent workers I can get. I could settle for you." She rewards him with a barking laugh and another smack to the arm.

That night, Carlos finishes a carefully composed department-wide email that gives some basic information about the project and instructions on how interested and qualified parties can contact him. He hits send, hoping that enough people are interested to warrant the ten positions he thinks the budget will allow.

Two days later, he has well over a hundred emails in his inbox.
It takes him almost two months to narrow the list of possible team members down to ten, with a list of alternates. Luckily, half of the original interested parties were not remotely qualified and could be immediately discarded. Another handful backed out once they found out one detail or another about the location or the length of stay, deciding they didn't want to leave Arkham for that long, at least not for some place that most likely had little in the way of night life. Carlos has to roll his eyes at the concept of letting your social life dictate the direction of your career, but he has never claimed to understand such things.

Once he has the list down to a much more manageable twenty-six names, he begins interviews. It ends up being much more difficult than he wants it to be, but the normal course of events doesn't seem to apply. None of the candidates have any proposals of what they want to study, because they have no prior knowledge of Night Vale or what they might find there. He finds that the more diverse the candidate's background and areas of study, the better suited they would be for the assignment. He ends up delving much farther into their personal lives that he would have liked, asking what other languages they might speak, what hobbies they have, if they have any survival training, anything at all that might prove to be a valuable skill.

The time goes by swiftly, and Carlos finds himself spending every spare moment preparing himself and his team for Night Vale. All communication with the town is done exclusively through email correspondence, as he hasn't once found a working phone number to any business there. He is pleasantly surprised to find a three-story facility in town that used to be a laboratory, though he is warned that it is in need of repair. He manages to squeeze an amazing amount of equipment out of the budget, which he knows pleases the School Board. All in all, things go much smoother than he anticipated, solutions to problems seeming to appear out of thin air, everything falling into place like dominoes. Before he's really aware, the end of the semester is upon him.

It's on a Friday in May that the last of his students walk out of his classroom, and he can't help the grin that steals across his face, releasing a gusty sigh of relief. He still has to grade the finals, something he had begun days ago for his other classes, but it still feels like the hard part is over. From now on, he'll only be teaching students that have the drive to learn, with people he can consider colleagues. No more stuffy classrooms and boring bureaucracy, just science! He allows himself a little victory dance, right there standing at the front of the classroom, before gathering his things and heading for the side stairs. He has a meeting with his team in the afternoon to finalize paperwork and travel plans before June, and is just considering if he has time to run over to Warren Hall for lunch when he overhears his name echoing up the stairwell.

"—I'm not saying Abaroa won't do a good job! I'm just saying, is this really the sort of thing you want to risk on him? I mean, this is Night Vale! We've been trying there for ages, and—"

"I see that Aldridge has been talking in your ear," says another tired voice, one that Carlos recognizes as Kendrick. The hallway is surprisingly empty, so Carlos makes his way quickly and quietly over to the propped-open door to the stairwell. It seems that the two men are standing on the landing between his floor and the one below, and he presses his back against the wall next to it. The second speaker isn't doing anything to dampen the volume of his voice, so Carlos doesn't even
have to strain to hear his forceful words.

"Aldridge isn't the only one, and you know it! Everyone is up in arms about this, and you just walk around like everything is just...just perfect!"

"Because I'm not the one that thinks everything is going straight to hell. You're all making mountains out of mole hills on this, and I don't have the energy to argue with you about it. Again."

"Mountains out of—are you serious? This isn't some weekend field trip to look at some artifact found at a yard sale! This is the big one! Night Vale! This could be the single most important scientific investigation of our lifetime—of a dozen lifetimes! And you're sending some kid who can barely—"

"He's hardly a kid, and he's more than qualified to handle this. More qualified than most of the candidates you wanted, and you know it." Carlos leans around the door frame, just enough to get a quick glance at the men standing on the landing. Kendrick seems to have been on his way up the stairs, but a well-dressed man with dark hair is blocking his path. He's recognizable as one of the higher-ups on the School Board. Carlos leans back again, trying to place a name to the voice and the profile he saw.

"We could have found others, we could have hired someone else, anyone else! Hell, you could have gone yourself!"

Kendrick lets out a derisive laugh. "Please. I'm not the man I used to be. Besides, it doesn't matter who else you try to toss their way. There might have been a lot of static, but the City Council made it abundantly clear, or were you not listening to the same phone call I was? They fell in love with his resume."

"Did you even send others? I bet you didn't give anyone else a chance!"

"Don't be ridiculous! They wanted options, so I gave them options. But they also wanted to know my professional opinion, and I believe he is the best person for this post. And they agree. They want Abaroa. It's him, or nothing. They won't accept anyone else."

"I don't care what they say, they don't know anything about how these things work! He doesn't know the first thing about running a real expedition! And you know what happened down in Peru!"
"You know damn well that wasn't his fault; Shaffer was a piss-poor archeologist and he had no business leaving that whole mess to Carlos. The man made do with what he had."

There is a sudden loud bang that makes Carlos jump. "Damn it, John! His reputation is so deep in the mud, you'd have to dig him out with a shovel! What the hell is it that these people see in him that is so damn special, huh? And I don't get you, either. You've given that boy more chances than he deserves. How do you know he isn't going to muck this up like everything else?"

Whatever Kendrick is going to say is drowned out by the door at the base of the stairs being thrown open and the loud talking of a group of students ascending. Carlos quickly backtracks through the hallways to another set of stairs and makes his way down to his basement office. Once safely ensconced behind closed doors, his head falls into his folded arms on the surface of the desk. He allows himself a moment to contemplate what his life might have been like if he had just taken a job at one of the pharmaceutical companies that had offered after he got his Masters degree in Chemistry, but only for a moment. He never would have been happy there, he knows, but perhaps it would have been a lot less confusing.

What is he supposed to make of that? So, he was hand-picked by the Night Vale City Council. Why? What did the city of Night Vale see in him that was better than the others? Not that he wasn't flattered, of course, a warmth blooming in his chest at the thought. That warmth was dampened by the fact that it was now abundantly clear how many people were expecting him to fail. Was Kendrick the only one who thought he could do this? It just gave him more questions than answers, and he really didn't need more to stress over.

Whatever the reasoning, he's here now, and he has a job to do. He gives himself another few minutes to wonder about his life choices up until this point, takes two Aspirin, and gets back to work, suddenly not hungry at all.

The night before Carlos leaves for Night Vale, Kendrick invites him for a drink and quick chat at the Starbucks on the other side of campus. It's on the tip of his tongue to decline the offer; there's still enough of his things to pack that it's worth worrying about, and he has to be up at four in the morning to get on the road. Something in the stilted way Kendrick asks makes him pause, though, and thirty minutes later he finds himself situated in a small chair by the back window, a chai latte by his elbow, scrolling through his email on his phone. There are a few last-minute questions from members of his team, and he's engrossed in replying—for what must be the twentieth time that no, he has no knowledge of what pharmacies operate at their destination, and they should have gotten all their needed medications before now—when Kendrick takes the opposite seat.
"Thanks for meeting on such short notice," the older man says. Carlos gives him a distracted smile as he finishes up his message and hits send before giving Kendrick his attention.

"I have a little time, and it sounded like it was important," he replies. His eyebrows come together in confusion as he looks at the table. "Aren't you going to get something to drink?"

Kendrick looks down at the table, and the lack of a beverage, like he too is surprised. "Right, a drink, yes. I'll just-no. No, I'm fine for now."

"Are you sure? I can get you something," Carlos asks.

Kendrick shakes his head, "No, I'm good. Just wanted to check in with you one last time."

Carlos shrugs, "Everything that I could do ahead of time for the lab has been done. The first week will be pretty hectic, getting everything set up, but I think we'll manage. I've also exchanged some emails with the City Council on having a town meeting once we get down there, let the citizens know why we're there. When we were in Espinar, the villagers were very suspicious of us. I don't want that to be the case in Night Vale."

"I heard you had a run-in with Sterling," Kendrick says, fiddling with the sugar packets someone left on the table. Carlos' face turns sullen so quickly that his companion chuckles. "That bad, huh?"

It was worse, but Carlos doesn't mention it. The truth is, he and Aldridge had gotten into a screaming match when they ran into each other at Target, and the only reason it hadn't came to blows was because of a calm but insistent security guard.

"I just don't know why he won't leave well enough alone. He's such a jerk," Carlos says, taking another long draw from his coffee cup.

"Well, you won't have to put up with him for a while, at least," Kendrick reasons. "Are you ready to head out tomorrow?"

Carlos takes a moment to check and answer an incoming text—No, your fuel expenses will not be paid for by the school, you have to handle that yourself—before responding, "Just about. I shouldn't have waited so long to pack up my clothes. I won't have to pack as much cold-weather gear, but it has to get a little chilly at night, and I would like to make some time to study some star charts while I have the chance. No light pollution that far out, you know?" He watches Kendrick
nod absently, and his concern grows. "Are you alright?"

"What? Of course. I'm sorry, Carlos, I've just got a lot on my mind today."

Carlos isn't fooled, though. His companion's eyes are darting from the door of the shop to the window, then around to the customers, then back to the window, and back again. Carlos fights down an urge to look around himself. "What's wrong?" he asks, sitting up a little straighter in his seat. "I've never seen you like this."

When the older man finally meets his eyes, it's to give him a hard look. His voice drops low and quiet, "I know I should have been upfront with you from the beginning, but I had to be sure you were in this for the long-haul before...well, it doesn't matter. I have some information you need to be aware of."

Carlos leans forward, now clearly worried, and says, "Okay...um, w-what is it?"

Kendrick hunches forward, and speaks so low that Carlos can barely hear him, "Everything I've told you, everything that I gave you in that file, is true. I didn't lie to you about that. But you need to know that there are people here that have an agenda when it comes to Night Vale. And they are not happy with you."

Carlos can't help but huff out a laugh at that, saying, "No one is ever happy with me. You'll need to be more specific."

"Yes, well, this is a little more than workplace competition," he replies, taking another look around the coffee shop before speaking again. "There have been people sniffing around campus, dropping in on members of the faculty and the School Board. It started happening right after Miskatonic managed this deal with Night Vale."

"What kind of people?" Carlos asks.

"Some corporation. I haven't been able to figure out who, and if anyone has figured it out they aren't talking to me. See, the academic community isn't the only group that's been trying to get a foothold in that town."

"I don't understand. Why wouldn't they just go there like any other business and...oh." Kendrick
gives him a knowing look. "What exactly is this...corporation trying to do?"

Kendrick shrugs, "There's no telling. They might know something about Night Vale that we don't. Whatever their reasons, they were trying to get someone on the payroll as the head of this expedition, and instead it's you. I imagine they would see that as a set-back. Has anyone approached you about this?"

Carlos shakes his head, "No, not at all. I mean, not anyone like that, I'm sure. The only people I've really talked to about it are the team members and the ones that didn't make the cut."

"Then I suggest you keep a close eye on your team, Carlos," he replied, checking his watch. "It's not unheard of in the scientific community, after all. Most scientists don't live a life of luxury, and secrets from Night Vale would most likely go for a hefty price. As much as I would love to trust our students and faculty, I'm going to take the realist's approach."

"Have you spoke to them?" Carlos asks.

At his words, Kendrick's eyes cut back to the window, and he stares out for a long moment before answering, "Yes. The day I offered you the position. And today, about an hour ago."

The itching need to assess his surroundings finally proves too great, and Carlos whips his head back and forth, becoming aware of just how few people are in the coffee shop. His own eyes dart out the window, trying to see anyone that might be suspicious. He turns back to Kendrick. "Should I, uh. I mean, am I in some sort of, of danger?"

"No, no, nothing like that. At least, I don't think so," he says. At Carlos' incredulous look, he backpedals. "No! I didn't mean—look. I just wanted you to be informed of the situation. I thought for sure they would have given up by now, but the man today was awfully pushy, and I didn't want you to be caught unaware. They can't actually do anything but act menacing, but if they got to anyone on your team, there could be trouble down the line."

The younger man rubs hard between his eyes, feeling the beginnings of a migraine. "I have to be able to trust my team. And now you want me to go into this already suspicious of them?"

"It might be fine, Carlos. You just need to be careful about your findings, at least at first. And remember, it is completely within your right as team lead to terminate their position there early if you suspect foul play. Chances are, even if they are some sort of corporate spy, they'll have a lot
more to worry about than that. If the stories you've been investigating are true, that is."

Carlos glances out from between his fingers and asks, "I have no idea what I'm in for, do I?"

"Carlos, I've seen a lot of things in my life. Seen and done things that you wouldn't believe, all in the name of science. Some overly-friendly-yet-insistant gentlemen in suits aren't going to ruffle my feathers, and they certainly won't ruffle yours. You're made of sterner stuff." Then, he leans back in his chair and gives Carlos a sad smile. "Night Vale is a different beast entirely. I don't envy you."

They part ways shortly after, exchanging a firm handshake and Kendrick wishing Carlos a sincere good luck. There is something disturbingly final to the whole exchange, like closing a book after the last chapter is read. It settles like a heavy weight in his chest as he treks back through campus to his apartment, and it's almost enough to suffocate the feeling of being watched that makes the dark hairs on the back of his neck stand on end.

Almost.

Chapter End Notes

If you like what you see and want more, or just want to chat, you can find wyntera on tumblr. Please, be gentle on this new writer, as she bruises easily.
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

Cecil flicks his dying cigarette into the dirt and snuffs out the embers under his show, resigned. "You're looking for the perfect man, Cecil. And there's no such thing."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"Там нет души в звездах, ни один звонок в Пустоту. Вы будете выживать сей день, только если это случайное случайность Вселенной позволяет ему быть, и у вас мало надежды на это. Не допускайте ударов против Совета или полиции, потому что они мудрый и справедливый, и вы жалким голосом илана Дело в том, как самый маленький из Скулит в кричащих торрента. И теперь, когда мы идем в нашу религиозную час с Фрэнком Зун—"
delicious smell of dark Sumatran has filled the kitchen. His first cup of the day is always black, and he downs it in a matter of minutes. The next he fills with several heaping spoonfuls of sugar and a splash of cream, taking the time to savor it as he pulls a small red package from the bottom drawer of his refrigerator.

Coffee in one hand and red meat in the other, he wanders back to his bedroom. Some people insist on completing the morning rituals before doing anything else, but Cecil has never noticed a difference between right out of bed and right after his morning coffee. Really, how can anyone function well enough to accurately chant without a good dose of caffeine in their system? He unwraps the parcel of bloody goat meat and kneels down within the ring of bloodstones that form a perfect circle on the floor in the corner of the room. The rituals that praise the gods of old and offer up sacrifice to the void itself he can do by rote, and though his prayers are no less sincere, his mind is already being drawn to the errands he needs to do before his broadcast.

The buzzing of an incoming text message on his phone draws his attention to his nightstand. There's already seven text messages on his phone from where Cecil forgot to turn the ringer back on after last night's show. "Drat," he mumbles to himself, thumbing through the backlog. Three of them alone are from Intern Liam. Apparently Intern Chad never showed up for work this morning. Cecil had sent the young man to the Used and Discount Sporting Goods store on Flint Drive to buy a tennis racket, and to investigate if the store was actually a front for the World Government, but that was only yesterday. No need to start worrying about his safety just yet. Perhaps he was just sick today, or playing hookie, as young adults sometimes do. He couldn't very well report him missing for at least twenty-four hours anyway, so no use worrying about it for now.

There is a text from Big Rico asking if Cecil can mention their new flavor—shrimp and egg, deep dish—on the show tonight; another from Teddy Williams to remind Cecil about the charity bowling tournament this coming Saturday; still another from Earl Harlan asking if Cecil would be attending said charity bowling tournament, and if he wanted to share a lane. He answers each text in turn, the final one from Steve Car— "Nope!" he exclaims to the room, deleting the offending text without bothering to read it.

Cecil makes his way to the bathroom, stripping out of his loose pajama pants and tossing them in the hamper before turning the hot and cold water nohs in opposite directions five turns, then back three, then forward two. It had taken a good month and a half after Cecil had moved in to learn the exact sequence that would consistently produce clean, clear water instead of any number of other substances. Stepping under the lukewarm spray, he indulges in the delicious feeling of the water sluicing down his body. Sometimes, when he's feeling particularly whimsical, he wonders if he should have been born somewhere other than a desert, what with the way his body constantly seems to crave moisture. He occasionally dreams that his beloved desert churns before his eyes, transforming into a vast sea of cobalt and navy, surging up and swallowing him whole. It seems that the dream should be foreboding, but instead he just wakes curiously chipper.

He picks one of the many body washes that he keeps in the corner of the tub—coconut and pineapple—and hums to himself as he washes and plans out his day in his mind. He hasn't had his
mandatory slice this week, so Big Rico's is on the menu for lunch. After that, he has to head out to John Peters' farm on the edge of town. He had called yesterday during the show, going on and on to Intern Liam about setting a world record, but the static had been so terrible that he hadn't been able to understand much else. It was easier to just ride out there and see for himself, and while Cecil would normally assign such a routine task to the interns, he had a bit of a soft spot for the old farmer. There had always been a job for Cecil in those peach orchards, even if they never produced fruit, and John Peters had taught him a lot about hard work. The farmer had certainly overlooked the glaringly obvious fact that Cecil wasn't really cut out to be a farmhand, and it had helped pay his way to college, and Cecil would always be grateful.

He would humor John Peters, no matter how senile the old man had become.

Cecil dries off, scrubbing the fluffy lime green towel through his short two-tone hair before drying it completely with a hairdryer. A quick application of styling gel and he sets about shaving the light stubble from his face. All this without the aid of a mirror, which hangs ominously over his bathroom sink covered in a light sheet. He doesn't spare it a glance, the motions so ingrained that it no longer occurs to him to think it odd, and besides, it's been years since he last looked in a mirror.

Wandering nude to his overstuffed closet, he chooses a crisp light aqua dress shirt, black slacks, and a peach tie with matching suspenders. As he dresses, his tentacles slowly merge back with his body, slithering across his skin to loop around his shoulders and ribs, hips and thighs, once again becoming dark plum-colored tattoos. They drift into place lazily, only a hint peaking over the edge of his collar. The sleeves of his shirt are rolled up to expose the open eyes and geometric lines on his arms, the only tattoos he's ever committed to flesh through needle and ink. He closes all three of his lilac eyes and takes a deep breath, and when he next opens them there are only two. He smiles to himself—ready and professional, and as human as possible.

He's just grabbing his messenger bag, wallet and keys when his cell rings. Cecil answers it with a sigh.

"Liam, I'm on my way out the door right now. Can't it wait?"

"Sorry, Mr. Palmer, but things are crazy here. I don't know what to do," says the weaselly voice of his current intern.

"Please, you can call me Cecil."

"Sorry, Cecil, uh, sir. I know you aren't supposed to be in for a few hours, but there's been, like, eighteen faxes this morning, and the guy who reports the morning traffic, Mr. Halifax? His car was
Cecil held his phone to his ear with one shoulder as he grabbed his bright purple bicycle from the entryway and locked up. It was inconvenient to haul it up and down three flights of stairs, but it was safer than leaving it locked outside where anything could happen to it, and it was too beautiful a day not to ride. He tries to use it whenever he can, since he's cooped up in the radio station most days and doesn't get a chance to stretch his legs. Conditions in Night Vale just aren't always very conducive.

"Cecil. And what have you been telling the callers?"

"Telling them?"

"About the traffic."

"Uh..." Liam draws the syllable out, and Cecil grits his teeth in annoyance. "I didn't really know what to—"

Cecil cuts him off, "If something like this happens, you have to tell the callers something to keep them from complaining to Station Management! Anything will do. Something about there being no traffic today because it's been canceled, or traffic being a state of mind and the startling realization that you will never reach your destination no matter the conditions of roads and their alleged existence. You're going to have to learn to think on your feet, Liam. You're making us seem very unprofessional."

Liam's voice rises indignantly, "But Mr. Palmer!"

"Intern Liam, do I need to remind you of the agreement you signed when you joined our station? You had to donate quite a bit of blood to fill it out, so surely you remember."
If you no longer wish to be a part of our little family, then I suggest you report for re-education right away. Otherwise, get back to work. I expect anything new to be waiting for me in my office when I arrive, and get those phones cleared."

There’s a long moment where all Cecil can hear over the line is a muffled banging sound—Station Management really is agitated—and then, "Yes, Mr. Palmer."

"Good. The next show starts in about thirty minutes, and it's five hours of Gregorian chanting. Just make sure the recording is pulled up and started on time. I'll be there in a few hours, surely you can hold down the fort that long." With that, Cecil hangs up the phone. He can't even find it in himself to feel sympathetic. When he was an intern, he never would have spoken like that to the station employees, and he certainly would have put forth more effort in a tight situation. Cecil has a feeling that Intern Liam won't last too much longer at the station, but he can't deal with that right now. He has lunch to eat and a story to get.

Cecil arrives at Big Rico's Pizza about ten minutes later. The chalkboard by the counter advertises the new Shrimp and Egg Deep Dish special, and he takes a seat in an empty booth by the front window. Shrimp isn't really to his taste, at least not on pizza, but he orders a slice of that as well as his usual—green pepper and essence of dittany—and enjoys his soda while he waits. Letting his gaze wander out the window, his attention is drawn to the lot next door.

The large, three-story facility has stood empty next to Big Rico's Pizza for well over thirty years. Cecil vaguely remembers that it was once used as a laboratory, maybe as a medical facility. He isn't really sure anymore, it's been so long. The building is rather nondescript on the outside, and Cecil normally wouldn't notice it at all if not for the fact the parking lot seems to have been cleaned of debris.

That, and the For Sale sign that has been out front for the last thirty years is suddenly missing.

"If it isn't Night Vale's favorite radio host!" booms a voice from behind Cecil, jolting him from his thoughts. A massive hand slams down on his shoulder, and Cecil barely masks his grimace with a grin at the rough treatment. "Mr. Palmer, so good to see you!"

Cecil looks up at the bulk that is Big Rico himself, apron slung around his wide waist and bushy mustache smiling down at him. "Good to see you, too, Rico. How's business?"
"Fantastic, Mr. Palmer, just fantastic, thank you for asking! Can I top off your drink for you? Get you anything while you wait?"

"Oh, no. No, thank you. I'm fine. Say, Rico, do you know what's going on next door?" Cecil asks, pointing out the window.

Rico quirks one eyebrow at the radio host. "You haven't heard? I thought you were the man in the know, Voice of Night Vale."

"Ha, ha. You're hilarious. It's not like I can see the future." Much, he thinks. "Anyway the sign—"

"Hold that thought," Rico replies, almost knocking the little swinging doors off their hinges as he heads back to the kitchen. Cecil can't help but smile at the mountain of a man. Rico has always treated him like family, but he rarely knows his own strength. A few minutes later he returns with Cecil's order and a basket of bright blue fries. Cecil grips the table tight as Rico squeezes his massive frame into the other side of the booth, trying to keep the table edge from digging into his ribs. "Eat up, now. You never eat enough! Always too skinny, my Maria says. Make sure that boy eats, she says. And I say that you do but you are always so skinny! She never believes me."

Cecil can feel his cheeks heat with embarrassment, and tries to cover it by digging into his meal. "You know I eat everything you put in front of me, Rico."

"That you do, that you do. So, what do you think of the special?" he asks eagerly.

Cecil chews the pale colored pizza slowly, trying to really get a feel for the flavors, and finally swallows. "Sorry, Rico. It seems like there's something missing. It doesn't have a lot of seasoning in it."

Rico's lips twist in resignation, "No, no, don't feel bad. Maria said the same thing. Your taste buds have never steered me wrong before. I'll work on it and we'll give it another go next week."

Picking up his other slice, Cecil continues, "So, you were saying about the. . ."

"Oh, yes! Next door! Yes, well, it's the strangest thing. We'd been keeping one of the old cars over in the lot next door for years, ever since we stopped delivery service. No one seemed to care, and it's not like it was being used for anything. Then, earlier this week, some lady comes by with Night
Vale Realty. I forget her name. Short, about here or so?” Rico makes a vague hand motion to approximate the woman's height, which Cecil thinks is actually pretty average, but to Rico everyone seems a bit short. "Brunette, pretty little smile, not as pretty as my Maria, of course, but..." Rico must sense that Cecil is really not interested in the attractiveness of the realtor, and presses on, "Anyway, she says we have to move the car. Says, the space has been bought. By an outsider."

That's enough to make the broadcaster pause mid-bite. "An outsider?"

"Not just one, either," Rico replies before shoving a handful of fries into his mouth. At least he is aware enough to not speak with his mouth full, but wait until he's swallowed before continuing. "A whole group of 'em. She said she couldn't go into a lot of details, but we've been watching. That lady's met moving crews there four times this week! Taking out old equipment, bringing in packed crates, all in the back. Some of 'em packed special. Lots of 'em marked fragile. And then Faye saw in some of them, well, Faye, our new waitress—have you met her yet?” Cecil shakes his head. "Oh, you have to meet her, she's just a bright young thing, so good with the customers. Yes, she's sharp! Just the other day she—"

"Uh, Rico? What did Faye see?"

"Oh! Well, she said she was sweeping necrotic ash out the back of the kitchen on Monday...uh, I'd appreciate it if you didn't mention that on your show, of course,” Rico says, looking chagrined. At Cecil's nod, he continues, "She saw the movers unloading some big equipment into the screened in area at the back. After they left, she went over there and looked in, and most of 'em have the same label on the side. Miskatonic University."

"Miskatonic? Isn't that...in New England somewhere?” Cecil asks, confused.

"Massachusetts," Rico replies. "Near Boston, I think. But yeah, lots of serious equipment. Couldn't tell what any of it was, though. Building that size, that much stuff, it can't be for just one person, can it?"

Cecil is spared an immediate answer by the sound of the bell at the entrance ringing, and Rico's face morphs before Cecil's eyes into a form of reluctant hospitality. "'Scuse me, Mr. Palmer. It appears I have another customer I need to deal with," and he slides out of the booth. Cecil turns his head sideways just enough to catch a glimpse of a tall man with broad shoulders in a hunter green polo shirt and light brown hair before he's jerking his head forward and shoving his food down as fast as possible. Maybe, just maybe, he wasn't spotted, if he can just get out of here before—
"Cecil! Just the person I've been looking for!" Cecil's eyes close for just a moment, and after a fortifying breath, he opens them to find a new companion has seated himself across the booth.

"Steve Carlsberg," Cecil intones, voice tight. "As you can see, I'm just eating my lunch. So if you could just—"

"Oh good! Then you aren't busy!" Steve settles in with a slice of roasted garlic, onion, and curried sardine pizza—the absolute worst item on the menu, and Cecil has begged Rico to get rid of it—and a thick stack of paper. Cecil knows what it is before Steve opens his mouth. "I've faxed and mailed a copy of my report to the station, but when I talked to your secretary, she said that they haven't received it!"

Cecil grits his teeth in annoyance. "Just because a female answers the phone does not automatically make her a secretary. That's sexist. Besides, I don't have a secretary, or an administrative assistant, which would be the proper term. We have interns at the station. Besides, all interns have strict orders to promptly destroy anything sent to him by one Steve Carlsberg. It's even in the employee manual.

"Oh," Steve answers, cocking his head to one side. "Just interns, huh? Money must be tight in radio these days, what with everyone getting their news from the internet. That must make the day so much harder for you." Cecil's mouth falls open in indignation, shocked that Steve would say such a thing, but the man continues, "You should tell your interns to be a little more mindful of their incoming mail, then. They really are doing you a disservice if they can't even check a fax properly. But I brought you your own copy! I know you probably won't have time to get it read before the show today, but maybe by tomorrow? It's just the kind of hard-hitting news that you need, and the citizens of Night Vale need to know the truth!"

"The citizens of Night Vale already hear the truth, Steve," Cecil grits, pulling out his wallet and slipping his payment and an eye token under the napkin holder.

Steve scoffs, "The truth? Please. You only report what the City Council mandates, and you know that the government is spinning lies to the people of this town! They just want to control us, and manipulate us! It's all a conspiracy! And I'll prove it! If you would just read my—"

"Tell me something I don't know!" Cecil hisses, leaning forward aggressively. "Of course its a conspiracy, Steve! They don't exactly make a secret of it! You aren't bringing me anything newsworthy; you're just wasting my time! Half of them are things every citizen already knows, and the other half are ridiculous exaggerations without any facts to back them up. We're a community radio show, you know, not Steve's Irrational Ideology Hour! And I report nothing but the truth as it has been given to me, I'll have you know. If the City Council or the Sheriff's Secret Police gives announcements, I have to read them, you know that. There's only so much investigating I can do in
"And that's why I've done it all for you! If you would just look at—"

Cecil cuts him off by yanking the document out of Steve's hands. "Fine! If I take it, will you just drop it? I have things to do today."

Steve gives him an exaggerated sort of smile that makes Cecil wonder if badgering his audience is how Steve normally gets his way. "I knew you would come around, Cecil! My number is on the front page if you have any questions or need me to clarify anything before your show. I know some of the concepts might be a little deep for you. But you already have my number, right?"

Cecil is already out of the booth and through the door before Steve finishes speaking. He's glad that Rico knows him well enough to not expect him to hang around for a goodbye, not when the bane of his existence is in the vicinity. Mounting his bike, Cecil makes a show of putting Steve's manuscript into the front basket. As soon as he's out of sight, however, he rips the report in half and stuffs it harshly into a trashcan.

The ride out to John Peters' farm is just long enough to calm his irritation toward Steve Carlsberg, but not quite long enough to prepare himself for the disappointment that greets him once he arrives.

"I understand that it's a very big ear of corn, Mr. Peters, possibly the biggest! The point is that it's...well...imaginary."

"If you measure that there cob, you'll see! Biggest this town e'er seen!"

"You don't understand. There is no verifiable way for me to measure it. So I can't definitively say that it's a record-breaking imaginary ear of corn."

"I'm tellin' ya, it's goin' in the record books!"

Cecil takes off his glasses and scrubs at his eyes in frustration. They've been going around in circles on this for almost an hour, and he really can't waste anymore time here. "You're certainly
right, Mr. Peters, and I'm sure everyone will want to, um...see it. I'll make sure to mention it on the show tonight. It will surely bring a boom to sales of your imaginary corn crop!"

"Oh, thank ya kindly, son," Peters says, turning and heading back into the house through the screen door on his porch. "You always do right by this old man. You stay right there, now. I gots something for ya. Don't ya go runnin' off!"

From within the house, Cecil can hear the clatter of glass and wood. He sighs, letting his gaze fall on the empty porch floor, where there is supposedly a record-breaking ear of imaginary corn. Peters is right; it is an awfully big cob, but as far as Cecil knows there have never been any records kept for imaginary corn crops. It's such a rare grain, something only found in Night Vale, and John Peters kind of has a corner on the market, seeing as he's the only man who knows how to grow it. "It will make him happy, Cecil," he says to himself, turning and looking out at what should be a series of dry, barren fields, but is actually a thriving imaginary corn crop.

"Here y'are," Peters says, slinging the door back open and carrying a glass bottle of orange milk and a slightly crumpled brown paper bag. "Fresh this mornin' an' full of what ya need. You ain't eatin' right, Cecil."

The reporter can't help but laugh, "You're not the only one who thinks that today." He takes a look inside the bag and sees nothing, despite the fact that there is clearly something weighing it down.

"You kids are always eatin' at that Rico's, it ain't good for ya!" he grumps.

"Well, it is City Council mandated. We don't really have much choice," Cecil intones.

"Once a week!" Peters replies. "You lot are there all time time, eatin' nothin' but fat n' grease. Ya need some healthy, home-grown food in'ya. Ya ain't gettin' soft on me, eh?"

Cecil laughs again, "Never, Mr. Peters. Thanks for the food, really. I have to get back to the station now. I'll make sure to mention your...record-breaking achievement on the show."

Peters nods his thanks to Cecil and makes his way around the side of the house and out of sight. Closing the bag again, Cecil turns and begins to make his way down the porch steps, thinking that, all things considered, he's making pretty decent time getting out of there today. It's when his foot hits the dirt below the last step that all the colors shift, the horizon tips, and the world grays out.
The next thing Cecil is aware of is a buzzing near his left ear and pain in his knees. He blinks hard and fast, everything around him flashing red and white, taking in nothing. It feels like he's been staring at the sun, and his retinas are saturated. When the light finally equalizes, he becomes aware that he's kneeling in front of John Peters' porch and a bug has settled on his shoulder. There's glass broken on the ground in front of him, and enough time has passed that some of the orange milk inside has evaporated.

Written in the earth before him are a series of runes.

He looks around quickly, embarrassment flooding through him in a hot wave, but he's relived to see that no one is around. It's not the first time he's entered an unintentional trance, but it's been years since the last episode, and certainly the first time it's happened when out in public. Pulling his phone from his pocket, he's relieved to see he was only gone for about twenty minutes. He doesn't recognize the writing on the ground—it's not even a language Cecil thinks he knows, but he's done stranger things in a hypnotic state—so he takes several pictures with the camera feature before pocketing the phone and getting to his feet. Old Woman Josie is a bit of an expert on runes of all sorts, so maybe she'll know what they mean. There is grit under his nails and his fingers are dusty and stained, and the knees of his slacks are filthy, but he supposes it could have been worse. Mounting his bicycle, he heads back for town, deep in thought.

Using his second sight is something he usually limits to the broadcast booth, as he's never been the most adept at interpreting his visions. He had taken all the required classes for those with the Gift, but his control was awful in a classroom setting. It had eventually been diagnosed as a form of telepathic dyslexia. It wasn't until his late teens that Cecil was finally able to control his second sight and understand the things he could see with his third eye. Back then, he hadn't known what he should and should not look at, certain as he was of his place in the world. All he had wanted was to see the happy future he was sure would take place. After the first shocking and ultimately disappointing realization, he delved no further into his own future. Clarity only seemed to come to him once he became the Voice of Night Vale, something about the focus of the recording booth and the resonance of the radio waves centering him in a way he could never find anywhere else.

Cutting through the winding paths of Mission Grove Park, Cecil slows to a stop near a park bench in one of the more secluded spots. Once he gets to the studio, he won't have a moment to himself until after the show, and he really needs a chance to calm his nerves. He rifles around in his bag and finds his pack of cigarettes and a light, settles on the lonely bench and takes a deep drag. The sigh following it is deeply satisfying. It's one of his guilty pleasures, but he tries to keep it to a minimum.

Tilting his head back, Cecil tries to remember anything about his trance. It's always more difficult to remember when they are involuntary, his brain slipping across the answers like they are covered in ice. Closing his eyes, he tries to settle into the mental exercises he learned as a teen, chipping
away at the metaphorical ice around his thoughts. If he just remains calm, remains focused, maybe he can discern just what—

What can only be described as a screech rips through the air, jarring Cecil from his thoughts violently. A young woman comes running down the path screaming with laughter, her boyfriend fast on her heals as they careen though the sparse trees. Cecil watches them collapse to the ground, laughing and horse-playing in the grass.

The sight makes him ache inside.

He takes another drag from the cigarette, letting the smoke burn in his lungs for a long moment before releasing it. That was him, once upon a time. Back when things were simple. It brings back memories of wild red hair and awkward limbs covered with freckles, and late nights spent gazing up at the void. Well, at least one of them was. Cecil had always been looking upward; Earl had always been looking at Cecil. He wonders if he would have ever noticed the difference if he hadn't used his clairvoyance. Maybe they would still be together today if he had just kept his head down and eyes closed. At least one of them might have been happy.

No, he thinks. He knows that isn't true. They would have made each other miserable. As sad as it makes him, though, he cannot find it within him to regret ending it, even if Earl never really understood why. Earl had always turned to Cecil like a flower seeking warmth from the sun, but Cecil could never be that for him. He is the moon and stars and void. He is vastness stretching forever into the distance. He is the warmth of a dark blanket, not a blinding light. He...

Cecil buries his face in his hands. He is pretentious, from the sound of it. No, he is just a man, a man that wants someone just as motivated as he is, who has their own interests, whose interests don't involve being a boy scout master of all things, and who doesn't need or want Cecil to be involved in every little aspect of their life! He wants someone who doesn't think the Voice of Night Vale has all the answers, that questions and dreams all on their own. He wants someone that can keep him on his toes, and he can in turn do the same to them. He wants someone to feel passionate about. It's been so long since he's felt passionate about someone. He's not sure he ever has, and the need for it burns bright inside.

He wants someone that looks up at the stars the same way he does.

Cecil flicks his dying cigarette into the dirt and snuffs out the embers under his show, resigned. "You're looking for the perfect man, Cecil. And there's no such thing." He contemplates lighting up another one, but he's really wasted enough time contemplating his sad social life for one day. He still has to compile a script for the show tonight, and who knows what sort of anarchy awaits him at the station.
Liam is slumped against the outside wall next to the side door when Cecil rides into the parking lot. The left side of his face is splattered with blood, though it doesn't appear to be his own, and he's gripping a thermos like a life line. The side door itself has a rather large dent near the bottom.

"What happened?" Cecil asks, pulling his bag from his bicycle basket.

The intern jerks his head up like he has just realized he is not alone. "Mr. P-Palmer?"

Cecil walks over and takes a hard look at his intern—his only intern, if his suspicions about Chad are true. One of his eyes is bloodshot, and while one pupil is pin-prick thin, the other is blown wide. "What's in the thermos?"

"C-coffee and bourbon...I took it from your desk drawer. I'm s-sorry Mr. Palmer, I just, j-just, I—" Liam's voice cuts off as tremors take over his body, arms shaking erratically and Cecil can tell he can no longer grip the thermos properly. He kneels down and reaches out to steady him, tipping the container so that Liam can take a hearty gulp.

"That's fine, that's quite alright. Steady yourself. What is it the City Council says?"

"If you s-see something, say no-nothing, and drink to forget," he replies immediately.

"Very good," Cecil replies. He watches Liam take several more deep drinks from the thermos, his sight settled somewhere in the distance between them, unseeing. Guilt creeps over him at his early thoughts. He knew this one wasn't going to last much longer; he really should not have left him alone that the station that long. "Liam, I know you were very excited when you started interning for the station. You really showed a lot of enthusiasm in the beginning, and your attendance has been superb. Very commendable, all things considered. There's room for improvement, but you are just an intern, so nothing that isn't expected. But, I have to say, I haven't really seen you actually...enjoying, working here. I think we need to consider that you just aren't cut out for radio."

Liam's eyes finally focus on Cecil's, but they immediately well up with tears. He's silent for just long enough to think that Cecil's said the wrong thing, before he erupts, "I'm sorry, Mr. Palmer! I'm so sorry! I th-thought-t that this was what I wanted, b-but I just—this is so—I don't know what I'm doing, and I can't—I just wanted to work at the station! Everyone at school applied, and I just wanted to work with you, Mr. Palmer! But-but I—I hate it! I hate talking to listeners on the
phone and I hate doing interviews; I'm not good at this! Everything I do is wrong!" He dissolves into sobs, and Cecil pats him on the back, warm yet awkward.

"It's alright, Liam, it's okay. Calm down, just breathe." Cecil urges him to keep drinking from the thermos, and the kid—because really, he is still just a kid, barely out of high school and not knowing what to do with his life—slowly begins to quiet down. "You haven't done anything wrong, Liam. No one expects you to know all the answers right away. So you gave this a try, and it didn't work out like you expected. And that's okay! Now, you just have to pick something else and give that a try. And it's not like you haven't learned anything while you've been here; some things you've done extremely well. I'd even be willing to give you a letter of recommendation for wherever you head next."

Watery but hopeful eyes turn up to him. "Really, Mr. Palmer?"

"Of course. Don't worry, we're not going to leave you in the lurch. Now, I still have a show to do, and I would really appreciate if you could at least finish out this last day for me. I have a feeling Chad won't be showing up at all today, and I'm without a backup. Can you hang in there for a few more hours?" Liam nods, and, after securing his bike to the rack by the door, they make to head inside. He is only mildly surprised to find a pool of blood immediately across the threshold. Long smear marks stretch down the hall and to the left down another. Suddenly the indentation at the bottom of the door makes more sense.

"Station Management?" Cecil asks.

Liam nods, "Mr. Halifax, sir. He said he got a job offer from some television station out of town. He came in for his paycheck"

"Not the smartest move on his part," Cecil replies. "Should have just waited for it in the mail." He neatly sidesteps the wet stains on the floor, not even glancing down the hall where the red liquid leads, and makes his way down another hall to his office. Cecil spots a stack of papers resting neatly in the center of his desk, and flipping through them yields a bright sticky note on each one, bullet points summarizing each story. He is glad to see that at least one thing is going right today. He turns back to Liam, who hovers anxiously by the door. "This is good work, Liam."

The young man shifts the thermos in his clenched hands and manages a smile. "I like doing research, sir. It's just...when I have to talk to people or make decisions for you, I get all...flustered."

"Have you considered trying at the Night Vale Daily Journal?" Cecil asks. "I think that would be an environment you could thrive in."
"Do you really think so?"

"Sure. I can give Leann Hart a call. She's the current editor, and can tell me if they have a position over there. I think they still have an intern program, but maybe we can swing you a paying gig."

"Thank you, sir!" Liam beams. "Thank you so much, and I'm still very, very sorry about, well, all the trouble."

Cecil settles in behind his desk, quickly arranging the articles in a format for the show. "It's fine. If you could clean up the mess in the hall, I would appreciate it. Then, just man the phones. I'll let you know if I need anything else."

Once Liam is out of sight, Cecil's smile drops off his face, and his forehead to the surface of the desk. Losing two interns in one day has to be some sort of record. Now he'll have to go through the waiting applications, do interviews, as if he doesn't have enough to do with his day...

Jerking up, he suddenly remembers what he originally planned to do when he got to the station. He composes a short message and texts the pictures of the runes to Old Woman Josie. Hopefully she can get back to him before his show starts. That errand out of the way, he settles in to write a script.

It used to take him all day to compose something to his liking. He would painstakingly consider each word, each turn of phrase, the enunciation of each word and stress of each syllable. He worked hard to give his words a presence, to make them heavy with meaning and utterly unignorable. Back then, every broadcast had to be perfection. He had something to prove, to the town, the listeners, to his classmates that had said he would never make it in radio, make it anywhere...

Now, he still strives for perfection, but it comes a lot easier, and he isn't as filled with the crippling fear of failure. Now, he is only out to prove things to himself.

Cecil remembers his own intern days with equal parts fondness and terror, what parts he can remember. Some days he remembers with perfect clarity, but at other points entire weeks seem to blur. He supposes that he's choosing to remember only the important parts, but it's quite possible those memories have simply been re-educated into obscurity. Not that they ever go away entirely, of course, but he doubts there are any events worth digging through his brain to find from that time in his life. What he does remember is a lot of grunt work and dedication, and enjoying even the
dangerous and deadly aspects that went hand in hand with internship at Night Vale Community Radio.

It has been quite some time since then.

Several hours later, Cecil has a script up to his standards. It isn't the most exciting script he's written lately, but the news day seems to be a bit slow, and he's filled it in with a colorful editorial and an announcement of a new opening for internship at the radio station. It will get the job done, and be entertaining enough. He'll just have to make sure tomorrow's show is more exciting to compensate. Luckily, Station Management has recently fed, so a slightly lack-luster show won't cause too much of an uproar. He's pleased to see he has enough time to get Liam's discharge papers filled out, and he'll have to contact the Sheriff's Secret Police for any possible re-education he might need, but that's all standard procedure by this point—Liam is not the first intern to not make it in this business, and he won't be the last.

He briefly considers sending Liam on one final doughnut run before the show, but his phone buzzes with an incoming message from Old Woman Josie. Thoughts of glazed pastries flee when he reads what she has sent him: Elder Futhark! STAR. MAN. GOD. Very old. Brunch 10AM tomorrow?

Cecil's brow furrows in confusion. Elder Futhark? What is that? Cecil's never heard of him...that...whatever it is. He replies in the affirmative to Old Woman Josie's offer; perhaps she will be able to help him interpret the vision. Plus, she makes such lovely foods whenever he comes to visit. In the meantime, he grabs Liam's paperwork and heads for the front desk. He's glad to see that the intern successfully cleaned most of the blood from the floor. What was splattered up one wall will be harder to get out, and Cecil knows he will have to come in early one day to clean it himself. He makes a mental note to get that done within the week—contract negotiations are coming up, and he can always use more bargaining chips with Station Management.

His intern is in the reception area, looking happier than Cecil has seen him in a month. "I just have a few things for you to sign," Cecil says. Liam takes the paperwork and gives it a quick once-over before picking up one of the quilter's needles they keep in the top desk drawer. He pricks his ring finger and blots a drop of blood onto each of the marked lines. Cecil does the same with his own. "There you are, freed from your duties. I am sorry that things didn't work out, but you can feel free to drop by anytime for a visit."

"Thank you, Mr. Palmer," he replies, relief evident in his voice.

"Please, call me Cecil. There's no need for formalities."
"Yes, Cecil. Sorry. So, um, do you need me to stay any longer? I-I don't mind watching the front until you're done."

"You don't need to stay the whole time, but I would be grateful if you could just stay until about halfway through the show. Just in case we get a few callers or last-minute news. Anything after that and it will probably have to wait until tomorrow."

"Sure thing Mr. Pa-I mean, Cecil."

Cecil reached out and shook the young man's hand firmly before turning to head back through the building, stopping at the doorway to lean back. "Oh, and don't forget to report to the Sheriff's Secret Police in the morning. They'll be expecting you for mandatory re-education no later than nine sharp. I'll make sure to call you in a couple of days about that letter of recommendation in case you don't remember." Cecil catches the smile falling off his now ex-intern's face before he makes for the side entrance. When he passes by the dark hallway, Station Management makes roars in an oddly questioning way—Cecil does have a lot of practice interpreting them now—and rattles something metallic against the door.

"I'll start looking for a new intern in the morning." Cecil calls down the corridor. Then, "Sorry to hear about Halifax."

Apparently satisfied, the shadow through the frosted glass moves out of sight.

He enjoys one last cigarette in the fading evening sunlight, savoring a few moments peace, then makes for the recording booth. He is pleasantly surprised to find a hot cup of coffee waiting by the microphone.

The time right before his show starts is always a flurry of activity. He does a quick equipment check and makes sure that he knows exactly which dials lead to any pre-recorded segments. He also takes the time to make sure his notes are in order, even though he rarely uses them; they are more of a back-up than anything, and sometimes he just likes the feel of holding and straightening them as he talks.

When Cecil gets his one minute warning, though, everything slows down. The gleaming silver microphone sits in front of him, cool and solid, the letters of the station's call sign etched into the metal. His hands are folded before him, almost as if he is in prayer. He closes his eyes and takes a series of deep breaths, and when he opens them again, a third gazes unblinkingly forward. Cecil's awareness is heightened tenfold.
The on-air sign blinks to red. Two breaths, and then:

"Now and then it's good practice to pause in our pursuit of happiness and just be happy. Other times, it's good practice to fast forward to the end of the pursuit. Ejecting is not recommended. Welcome to Night Vale."

He triggers the intro music, and he's off and running. He makes sure to remind everyone of their weekly government-mandated slice of Big Rico's pizza, mentions that the construction on the corner of Earl and Somerset appears to be almost complete, talks about John Peters' possibly record-breaking ear of corn and then waxes poetic about the struggles of the American farm in a primarily arid climate. The show goes smoothly, no breaking news or unexpected announcements from City Hall, no dire warnings from the Sheriff's Secret Police. All in all, a fairly slow day, to be sure, but a welcome one. As much as he enjoys his job, Cecil has come to cherish the slow days, as it signifies a rare time when nothing threatens his charming little desert town, at least nothing knowable. There are always unknowable threats lurking just beyond the horizon, after all. Just this once, however, he is content to know that his listeners are as safe as they can be in an uncaring universe.

During the weather—an odd combination of alternative metal and swing with rather upbeat lyrics about antacids—Cecil refreshes his coffee in the break room and digs out his stash of intern applications. In the morning, he'll weed out the old ones and start making phone interviews. He likes to have at least two interns on staff at a time, three if he's lucky, and being down to zero is going to put him under a lot of pressure. It isn't the first time he's had to make do on his own, but he simply can't be at the station all day and track down interviews and attend all the official functions he's required to attend as a member of the press. Now he'll have to add on new intern training to his already busy schedule.

"Stay tuned, listeners, for eight hours of the sound of marshmallows being thrown against a tin roof, interspersed with dripping butterscotch. Goodnight, Night Vale. Goodnight."

The red light flickers off as Cecil flips the switches to the next broadcast, and he leans back in his chair with a sigh. The day is finally catching up with him, fatigue settling in his muscles. Gathering his things, he swings by his office for his bag, shouting good night to Station Management. It is a warm, quiet night, with the howl of feral dogs in the distance, crickets chirping in the air. The streets are bare but for traces of a creeping blue fog in the darkness, the citizens of Night Vale sleeping—or pretending to sleep—under the watchful eyes of the Sheriff's Secret Police. The ever-present void looms above him as he rides home. It's all rather beautiful.

His apartment is dark when he opens the door. The moment it closes behind him, Cecil groans as the tight control he's held all day loosens, and his tentacles manifest and slip out from beneath his
dress shirt. It always leaves his shoulders stiff to keep them hidden all day. A carton of Chinese takeout later, and he collapses on his couch, ready to watch something mindless on television until he passes out. Unfortunately, every channel he flips to is nothing but static or graphics requesting that he please stand by, technical difficulties. Great, he thinks. Another night of government enforced entertainment blackouts. He wonders if his show was censored tonight, but doubts it. They usually let him know on those nights, so he won't put in too much effort. The shadowy government agencies are actually quite polite in most situations.

Taking this as a sign, he shuts off the television and gets ready for bed. Teeth brushed, a small prayer to his bloodstones, glasses back on the nightstand, he strips down to his boxers and slides between the cool sheets. An hour later, however, he's still wide awake. He's too tired to do anything productive, and too awake to sleep.

His thoughts keep circling around his unexpected bit of psychography and the interpretation Old Woman Josie sent him. Star, man, god. Nothing pops out at him as interesting or important about the words. They are too vague to glean anything of importance from them, and he can't remember any vision he would have had during the trance. He can tell the memories are there, but he can't quite reach them. It's really quite frustrating, and he tosses and turns in irritation. He can't help but think if he just had better control over his second sight, if he could just focus...

Closing his two normal eyes, he concentrates on ridding his body of tension, opening his third completely. If he can just reach the point of—

There is a car speeding down the highway, golden light from the desert sun bearing down. The dust and glare obscures details. The driver is weary from travel. Day turns into evening, evening into night, the hours ticking by on a digital clock. Eyes droop as hands grip the wheel, determined to finish this long journey. They are just about to fall closed, for just a moment, just one small moment of rest, when the world flashes golden and bright. In the distance, a light blinks red. On and off, on and off, a beacon in the darkness. The light shifts, crimson much closer and shining down from above. Even brighter and more vibrant are the churning, glowing lights, part of the void, the night itself breaking open like a kaleidoscope, illuminating them both. Them? A dark hand gently grips his knee. A voice murmurs to him, but the sound is muted, distant, like being submerged in water. He tries to raise his head but it is so heavy, the colors blurring together and rearranging into an unfamiliar bed, plum sheets crumpled beneath him and another man, sitting cross-legged and glowing. It's so bright, light streaming in from everywhere. Swirls of saffron and a glimpse of white teeth flashing behind a clever smile, and—

Cecil jerks back into awareness, breathing heavily and sheets sticking to his now sweaty body. Elder gods, what was that? He's had confusing visions before, but there was always at least some point of reference to work with, some familiar element. The only thing he recognizes without question is the blinking red light of the radio tower. Everything else is a mystery. Was the car green or blue? Maybe it was gray? Was that really him under the red lights, or someone else? Was he projecting into the body of someone else? Had he ever been in that bedroom before? He doesn't recall, but then, most of the details are hazy. Remembering the smile, the hand, Cecil realizes this
is the same person from his dream last night. Who exactly is this man in the vision?

Cecil climbs out of the bed, shaking slightly. Despite gaining no real answers, it can be considered a successful use of his second sight. The excitement over this development fades when he realizes he has no one to call and share the news with, no one that he trusts to tell. His features aren't exactly a secret, but they aren't something he generally advertises either. He can't even share this personal growth with his listeners. Telepathic abilities tend to make the listeners uncomfortable.

He resolves to investigate the imagery of his vision when he's better rested, and, shoulders drooping, he heads over to the bedroom window to close the curtains. The view stops him, though. There it is, his town, his beloved Night Vale, laid out before him in all its glory in the light of the moon. He can see the dome of City Hall, the water tower, the Arby's sign, the desert in the distance stretching forever. Over it all shines the red light of the radio tower, looking down over the citizens like a distant god. It's beautiful.

He rests his head against the window frame, weary. How is it possible to be surrounded by everything you love, and still feel so alone?

Chapter End Notes

Russian Translation:
There is no soul in the stars, no call to the void. You will only survive this day if the random happenstance of the universe allows it to be, and you have little hope of that. Do not strike out against the Council or the Police, for they are wise and just, and you are a pitiful thing whose voice is like the smallest of whimpers in a screaming torrent. And now, we go to our religious hour with Frank Zun--

If you like what you see and want more, or just want to chat, you can find wyntera on tumblr. Please, be gentle on this new writer, as she bruises easily.
Carlos startles, jerking the steering wheel hard as he's temporarily blinded by the sun peaking over the horizon, searing light directly in his face. The car swerves violently as he over corrects, and he skids onto the shoulder before stopping completely. He's now wide-eyed and awake, adrenaline flooding through his system in a wave of nausea.

"Mierda!" he gasps. He pries his white-knuckled hands from the wheel and puts the car in park, before pushing the hair out of his face and scrubbing at his eyes. Choosing to forgo another night in a hotel had clearly been a mistake; no man was meant to drive all day and night, no matter how much caffeine and sugar you lace your veins with. Though, it is odd that he doesn't remember the approach of morning at all. Last Carlos recalls, it was just after midnight. He remembers that fact specifically, as that had been when the last of the spotty radio signals had finally given away to static and empty airwaves, and he thought it odd that he hadn't seen another vehicle in well over an hour.

It had just already been such a long trip, starting two days ago, before the sun had even risen. Carlos and his team had begun their journey as a caravan, matching speed through unfamiliar twists and turns, but the further south and west Carlos had traveled, the more excited he had become. Every mile felt that much warmer, mountains and forests and lakes falling away to rocky outcrops and cactus and endless expanses of space. He never realized how claustrophobic Arkham had seemed until he was far away from it all. Something about the opening sky let him breathe deeply for what felt like the first time in years. His team had fallen behind somewhere along the way, and though they kept contact by phone, they had not pushed themselves quite like himself. With every yawn, he reminded himself that it was just a few more hours.

Breathing finally coming easier, he looks up to take in his surroundings, and is surprised at what he sees before him. Not twenty yards ahead of him is a bright green mile-marker sign. Night Vale, 10 miles.

Carlos can't help the smile that breaks out on his face at the sight. He won't lie and say that he wasn't incredibly nervous that he would end up just like Doctor Turpin or his students, suffering heat stroke and hallucinating or committed to a mental institute somewhere. Or, if he's really honest with himself, his main fear had been finding out that the whole town was nothing more than an elaborate hoax. He won't let go of that one until he sees Night Vale for himself.

He throws the car in drive and pulls out onto the emptiness that is Highway 800. There is nothing to see in any direction but rocks and scrub. Making his way down the road, he can't help but notice that the sky color looks a little...odd in the rising sun, but he can't quite place what's different. It
seems oddly...saturated? He vaguely wonders if there's some form of natural gas or pollution gathering in the area that would alter the atmosphere so greatly. It's something he'll have to look into once they get established.

The first thing he sees of the town proper is the blinking red light of a tower to the south, the City of Night Vale emerging out of the horizon like a second sun. It isn't as small as he had imagined, and looks to be an interesting combination of old-fashioned and modern for a town in the middle of nowhere. A giant billboard in slightly faded purple greets him as he crosses the city limits, exclaiming "Welcome to Night Vale! Home of the Spiderwolves!" in white lettering. Spiderwolves? That's a creative mascot, he thinks. Much more interesting than others he's heard of, certainly. Carlos pulls out his printed directions—his one successful email exchange with the town had been with the police force, and they had warned the GPS data was a bit sketchy in that area—and tries to find his way to the laboratory site. He only manages to get lost once, his directions pointing him to turn left at a road that simply isn't there. The streets themselves seem fairly deserted for this time of day, he thinks, though maybe this is one of those towns that doesn't really wake up until mid-morning. All in all, though, the town looks rather normal. It is with that thought that he finally arrives at his destination.

Well, they weren't lying when they said it was a bit of a fixer-upper.

The three story building sits like a big rectangle in the dusty gravel parking lot, a rather dull gray concrete and metal structure that looks to be fifty years old or more. There's a sign next to the mailbox by the road that reads Ni--t Val- -aborator--s in faded blue print. Climbing out of his car, he stretches and shakes out his limbs before grabbing his carrier bag and digging out the key he had been sent in the mail. Carlos is pleased to see that the glass-and-metal front door is in good condition, and the thick metal door directly behind it is solid. There is a little foyer between the two doorways, just big enough for a handful of people. He assumes this might have been where visitors once signed-in. On the wall is a faded and peeling radiation warning sign, which puts him on edge, but Carlos figures from the age and dust it must be from the fifties. He has to put his shoulder into it when he opens the second door, but it finally gives way with a loud groan of unused hinges.

Stagnant air rushes out at him from the main room. It's thick and musty, but luckily dry in the desert heat. He hates to think what this room might have smelled like if this were a more damp environment. He briefly wonders just how long it's been since this building has been used.

Carlos pauses on the threshold to take it all in. The main room on the first floor is a large, open space with a raised ceiling that opens up into the second floor. Sunlight streams through second story windows down onto built-in cabinets along several walls, doorways heading into other parts of the building, and two metal tables and a handful of stools, all covered in a thick layer of dust. A lonely radio sits on one of the shelves leading toward the back rooms. It's not terribly dark, but he flips the light switch and more than half of the fluorescent overheads light up, a few blinking irregularly. He explores the rest of building—the five rooms on the first floor, including a walk-in freezer and a bathroom with an industrial shower, six rooms with a kitchen and communal
bathroom (and another radio) on the second floor, a staircase in the front corner of the building connecting the floors—with wide eyes and barely contained excitement.

Opening the back door reveals a screened-in back porch and crate upon crate from Miskatonic University. It's nothing that couldn't survive normal shipping, all of the more sensitive equipment carefully packed in moving trucks being driven here right now by his team. The small porch is filled to the brim, boxes stacked to the ceiling and some larger crates outside.

He is surprised to find a tightly spiraled wrought-iron staircase at the end of one hallway, completely incongruous with the rest of the building. It leads up to an empty apartment space that dominates the third floor. It isn't very large, perched atop one side of the building and an obvious addition after-the-fact, but it has a kitchen space and its own bathroom and a bedroom separate from the living room. In the bedroom, he notices that the back wall is covered in decrepit curtains that glow with light behind, and, curious, he pushes one aside and gasps. Floor-to-ceiling windows and a door along the back wall, dirty at the moment, open out onto the roof, the city and desert and bright orange and cloudless sky stretching out beyond. Turning back to survey the room, a laugh escapes him at the sight of yet another radio, this one sitting innocently in the corner on the floor.

Carlos can't help but be pleased. He had been happy to find a building that was already designed for their purposes, even if it needed work. Finding a laboratory that could also house his team had been a stroke of luck. Finding all that and a space that would be entirely his own had been a miracle, if he believed in such things. He can already imagine where certain pieces of equipment will be set up, where best to perform certain experiments, what they would need to adjust for, a to-do list already forming. Walking back down through the facility, he opens one of the windows to let in fresh air, and ends up covered in dust and dirt for his efforts. He digs through his bags until he finds something to keep his clothes clean from all this filth—the first thing he finds is one of his white lab coats, and he really isn't picky—and heads back in to finish opening windows.

After a failed attempt at calling his team, he begins unloading his car. It takes him the better part of an hour to haul everything up to the third floor, and Carlos is imminently grateful that he has never lived in a building with elevators so he never had the opportunity to get too out of shape. He's still out of breath after a while, and his muscles are pleasantly warm by the time he's carried the last duffel bag to his rooms. It is with no small amount of dismay that he finds the air conditioning doesn't work, and makes a mental note to have someone come out as soon as possible to fix that problem, if their team can't figure it out on their own. He's just contemplating heading out into town to find a convenience store and something cold to drink when his phone buzzes in his pocket. When he answers, its his very lost team.

"Carlos, I swear to you, we've followed these directions word for word, and we can't find anything!" Billy exclaimed over an unstable connection. "We've been on Highway 800 for hours! And it's, like, two hundred degrees out here, and our AC died a couple of hours ago. We've been driving with the windows down, but Abbey's getting sick!"
Thoughts of Turpin and heatstroke cause Carlos to worry more than he normally would. "Alright, keep her calm, um. I can drive out and meet you, somehow, or I can find someone here that can help, do you have any—"

Carlos is cut off by a voice in the background of the call, and then Billy is saying, "We see a sign! Hold on, let us just...yeah...yeah! It says we're about ten miles out."

"Well, that's good," Carlos responds, relieved.

"Yeah, sorry; didn't mean to worry you. We got on the road kind of late this morning so we were worried you'd be mad that we'd wasted most of the day driving."

Frowning, Carlos looked down at his wristwatch. "It's only nine-thirty."

"What? It's, like, six! We aren't that late! It isn't even dark out!"

"No, I mean it's nine-thirty. AM," Carlos replies.

"You need to check your watch, boss-man," is the answer he gets before the call cuts out. Carlos frowns down at his phone, which clearly shows 9:38AM. Comparing it to his watch shows the same time. He shakes his head in annoyance. He at least thought they would get to the site before they started trying to mess with him.

About thirty minutes later, a caravan of vehicles pull in the lot in front of the laboratory. Carlos makes his way out to greet his team as they stand stretching and squinting in the bright sunlight.

"Wow, we got here fast!" Rebecca "Becky" Higginbotham, zoologist, jumps up to Carlos and gives him a great bear hug, her bushy red hair making a valiant effort to get in his mouth. Carlos doesn't know if he'll ever be used to Becky's penchant for hugging, but he appreciates her enthusiasm. When she leans back, she gives him an appraising look. "Breaking out the lab coats already? Nice. Making a fashion statement early." Carlos is about to correct her assumptions, but is interrupted.

"What are you talking about?" asks Billy. William "Billy" Odell, meteorologist and climatologist, slams the driver-side door of the U-haul truck he had been driving. He has a soaked white towel draped around his neck, and it glares blindingly white from under his dreadlocks and off his dark skin. "We should have been here hours ago."
Carlos moves forward with a bottle of water and hands it to their engineer, Abigail "Abbey" Novak. Her skin is a violent red and what blonde hair isn't plastered to her skin is thrown in a haphazard pony tail She gives Carlos a grateful look before downing half the bottle in one go. "How are you feeling?"

She gives him a haggard smile, and sarcastically replies, "Fantastic."

"You're breathing is elevated. Let's get you out of the sun," says Harris, already digging through one of the cars for a cooling pack from his bag. Harris Lattimore, immunologist and the only medical doctor among the group, ushers Abbey inside and the rest of the party follows. Other than Harris, who pulls a stool into one of the cooler corners and sits Abbey down on it without so much as a second glance at his surroundings, everyone pauses just inside and takes in their new workspace in a long moment of silence.

Aarav Dhawan, physicist, rolls his eyes towards Carlos. "It's certainly not the campus labs..." Carlos feels himself flush in embarrassment—funny, he thinks, how he has been here less than two hours and he is already attached—but luckily his skin is already flushed from the rising heat and exercise. He opens his mouth in defense, but he doesn't get the chance.

"Oh my God, can you not? We've been out of the car five minutes, Aarav. Can you not go five minutes without some sarcastic little comment?" Joanna Embry, biochemist, crosses her arms and glares at Aarav from beneath the dark-brown fringed bangs of her pixie haircut. From the nods of agreement from Gwen Vogt and Tim Kaplan, chemist and astronomer respectively, Carlos can gather exactly who was in the car with Aarav. The physicist mumbles something under his breath in response, but luckily no one hears the words clearly.

"Do we have time to set up our beds before nightfall? Abbey needs to lay down and rest," Harris says, supporting Abbey's weight as she leans against him.

"It's only just past ten in the morning, but we can get something set up for her while the rest of us do the more heavy lifting," Carlos replies, and suddenly there are half a dozen voices speaking.

"It's almost seven, what are you..."

"No way, it was just two o'clock..."
"I was hoping we would get dinner first..."

"That's crazy, sir, it was just...."

"Heavy lifting? But we've been driving all day..."

"You need to get your watch checked..."

They all trail off together, and then all eleven scientists are checking watches and phones for the time. Each and every one of them is completely different from the other. Lei Yang, social anthropologist, has three separate devices on him that tell time, and between the three, he has eleven in the morning, two in the afternoon, and nine in the evening.

"This isn't possible..." mumbles Aarav, staring down at the numbers in disbelief. Everyone is talking out-loud, causations and variables and hypotheses flying back and forth. Despite her fatigue from the heat, Abbey has already taken her own phone from her pocket and opened the case to look for anomalies.

Matthew "Matt" Page, geneticist, turns a look at Carlos, about to ask if high levels of radiation might be a possible factor, but Carlos is staring ahead, eyes focused. "Carlos? What is it? What's wrong?"

Carlos glances at Matt before staring straight again. "We need to start setting up the lab immediately. Harris, find one of the cots and set it up for Abbey so she can rest. Then you and Lei head into town and get some heavy-duty cleaning supplies. Matt, Joanna, Gwen, after you sweep out most of the dirt on the floor, you three start arranging the lab space into sections and unloading some of the more delicate equipment. Make sure to ask about specialty equipment before setting it up. Billy, start cracking open the big crates, and you and Matt can move in the larger machinery. Abbey, when you're feeling up to it, see if you can take a look at the air conditioning unit, and let me know if we need to get someone out here or if we can fix it ourselves. Aarav and Tim, get the bed frames and mattresses up the stairs; we all want to be able to sleep in a bed tonight. Becky, start carrying everyone's things up to the second floor rooms—you'll all need to decide who you're sharing with, because there aren't enough rooms for everyone."

For the entirety of his direction, Carlos continues to stare at the far wall. Now, everyone else is looking, too. An ancient clock, glass cracked and fogged, hangs lonely on the bare gray wall, it's black hands ticking slowly around the face. Counter-clockwise.
Carlos shivers in anticipation. "Let's get started."

They spend a good portion of their time cleaning, sorting, and assembling. It isn't perfect by any means, but between the eleven of them they manage to get beds in place, the major equipment plugged in, and the smell of decay mostly aired out. The air conditioner is still broken, but only because it needs a part replaced that isn't easily found because the air conditioner was made so long ago that it's been discontinued, so Carlos adds a new unit to his list of things they need to buy immediately. Also on that list is two refrigerators—one was supposed to come with the building but the one they found was dead on arrival—and a washer and dryer. He's hoping he won't have to spend too much money on major appliances, but if he's going to be here for the long haul, he may as well be slightly comfortable. As much as the group was sweating through their clothes, Carlos figured they didn't need the added insult of hauling all of their unmentionables to the local laundry mat.

Other than some good-natured ribbing, no one makes comment to Carlos about his third floor apartment, for which he is grateful. He had been worried that there would be some animosity from certain team members on that front, but really, he was the head of this research center, and he was spending a bit of his own money on the project—not that he had told anyone that fact, of course. Also, he really didn't know if he could handle sharing a room with another person. He hasn't shared a room with anyone in years, and he had no desire to relive his undergrad experience.

Shortly after a shared lunch Lei picked up from the pizza place next door, Carlos is helping Billy carry a particularly heavy filing cabinet through the back hall when Matt leans his head around the corner and says, "Carlos, I think you should get out here. There's...someone here that wants to talk to you." The pause and the tone are enough to make Carlos pause, and Matt gives him a significant look before disappearing back around the corner. In the main lab, the air is thick with nervous energy as everyone has stopped working and is staring at the figure just inside the door.

The man is dressed in dark navy and black from head to toe. Literally, from head to toe, as his head is covered in a black balaclava, the only skin visible around his eyes and mouth. Even his hands are covered in smooth leather gloves. Hanging from his belt is a nightstick and radio, a blow dart bandolier is visible from beneath a black short cape, and in his hand he holds a dark clipboard.

"Doctor Carlos Abaroa?" the man asks. The tone of authority the man uses sends a spike of fear through his core; memories of a not-so-innocent adolescence are littered with voices just like this one. Carlos gives the man a tentative nod, and surprisingly, the masked man smiles. "May I speak with you outside, please." Thrown off by the polite response, Carlos hesitates just a moment before following out the door.

"I don't mean to keep you from your work, Doctor Abaroa, so I will make this brief," the man says
once they're outside. "I'm Officer Erwin, and I will be your primary monitoring officer for the
duration of your stay in Night Vale. What we ask is that—"

"Wait, my...my what? Monitoring officer? But I haven't done anything wrong," Carlos interjects,
becoming more concerned with each word. What could he have possibly done in the handful of
hours he's been here?

"Of course you haven't sir. If you had done anything wrong, I would have already engaged you
accordingly. This is standard procedure for all Night Vale residents in order to make you feel safe
and welcome in our humble community," Officer Erwin smiles in a placating manner. It occurs to
Carlos that this is something the officer has memorized. "As I was saying, what we ask is that all
citizens follow the laws laid in place by our City Council and enforced by the dedicated men and
women of the Sheriff's Secret Police." Carlos opens his mouth to question this phrase, but Officer
Erwin keeps on with barely a breath.

"You will be monitored at most times, for your safety and the safety of the community. Please
speak at a reasonable volume and refrain from whispered conversations unless socially appropriate.
You and your companions will need to apply for several permits and licenses specific to Night
Vale and the surrounding area, including but not limited to those included here," and at this, Officer
Erwin removes a stack of papers from the clipboard and hands it to Carlos. "You have 42 hours to
return this paperwork to the City Council's office for review and approval. The City Council
reserves the right to revoke any and all permits and licenses at any time. Directions to the City
Council’s office and other important Night Vale landmarks, as well as helpful information about
our town, are here," he says, handing yet another stack of papers over to Carlos. Then he reaches
down to the ground where a brown sack rests against the outside wall. He's sure that it wasn't there
when he walked outside. "Here are your standard-issue bloodstones for this residence, which
should be arranged in a common area. It is recommended that individuals purchase their own set of
bloodstones for their personal space, and that bloodstone circles are cleaned and maintained on a
bi-monthly basis. Personal bloodstones and bloodstone cleaning accessories can be purchased at
specialty shops in town or at the Ralph's on Third. An up-to-date listing of all Night Vale laws,
policies, procedures and forms are available on the City of Night Vale website, as well as at the
Hall of Records. We encourage you to consult these sources if you are uncertain of any activities.
You may also speak your question out loud wherever you may be, and an officer will contact you
immediately. Failure to follow the statutes laid out by city council may result in fines,
incarceration, and re-education. Now, I have been informed that you will be addressing Night Vale
citizens this afternoon?"

Carlos gapes openly for a moment before his mouth clicks shut. The man before him looks content
to let him gather himself. "Um, I-I am?"

Flipping through his clipboard again, he pauses a few pages in. "Town Hall meeting, 3:30pm,
Miskatonic science team?"
"Oh," Carlos says, nodding. "Yes, but, I had not set up anything with the town, we just got here this morning..."

"It would be for the best if you and your team address the City Council and the citizens today, to avoid any unwanted confrontations with the locals. I would also recommend that you take extra precautions when securing your facility tonight; the first night in town, the Hooded Figures tend to get a little aggressive." He flips back to one of the earlier forms on his clipboard and pulls a navy crayon from his hip pocket. "Just for clarification, what kind of doctor are you, sir?"

"Oh, um, I-I'm a scientist, actually, not a medical doctor. I have PhD's in chemistry and geology." Carlos watches the officer mark several boxes on a form before pulling a self-inking stamp from his pocket and marking the top of the page.

"Thank you. Please have your forms filled out and returned to us on time, the workers at the clerk's office get a bit anxious when it comes to late forms. And, we've still got carpeting down there, and no matter how many times they have to clean the blood out, we can't get the funding to put in new flooring. Anyway, do you have any questions for me this evening, sir?"

Carlos, still trying to wrap his mind around the last sentence, stammers out, "Are you—are you with the Night, uh, Night Vale Police Department?"

Officer Erwin smiles a bit more openly behind his black balaclava. "Not quite, sir. I'm with the Sheriff's Secret Police. And please, if you need anything, just say so. We're here to serve and protect." He nods his head politely, and turns on his heel to walk to the corner of the building. Just before he turns, he looks back at Carlos. "Oh, and make sure you turn on your radios tonight." With that, he is gone, leaving Carlos standing there with an armful of papers and a thick burlap sack. He follows the path the officer took around the building, but when he looks, there's nothing but desert sand in the shadow of the building.

"What was that about?" Matt asks when Carlos goes back inside. Almost everyone is gathered in the main lab, curious.

"It was the Sheriff's Secret Police," he answers, placing the paperwork and burlap sack on one of the tables. "Whatever that means. We're under some sort of surveillance."

"Surveillance? They can't do that. We have a right to privacy," Lei's voice echoes from the back hallway, followed by the sound of four hammer strikes. "What do they think we did?"
"It's not a punishment; apparently, this is 'standard procedure' for all residents," Carlos says. He moves over to the radio they had moved to the counter, plugging it in. Nothing but static blares out from the speaker, so he starts turning the dials, slowly looking for a working station. He has just about reached the end of possible stations when one comes in loud and clear, what sounds like steel drums playing over...well...Carlos isn't sure what the noise is, but he turns the volume down low enough that his teeth no longer feel like they are vibrating.

"Wow, look at these," Carlos looks back at the table, where Joanna and Matt were busy flipping through the paperwork. Billy is holding a black stone in his hands, the burlap bag laying untied in front of him. Carlos makes his way back over and takes another stone from the sack. "What are they, boss-man?" Billy asks.

Carlos holds the smoothly polished stone gently in one hand. What he originally thought was black is actually a very dark green, red inclusions speckled throughout the rock like scattered leaves. "Heliotrope. Also known as blood jasper, xanthus, and bloodstone, a form of chalcedony. Shouldn't be common for this area...but perhaps they have a mine nearby?"

Billy is pulling out more of the stones from the sack, over a dozen of them piling up on the table. Joanna leans forward to look closer at the specimen in Carlos' hand, "What are they for?"

Carlos frowns at the rock, testing its weight and turning it this way and that in the light. "The police officer, Erwin, he said we were supposed to make a bloodstone circle in a communal area."

Tim, who had been quietly calibrating some equipment on the far side of the room, pauses in his work. "Is this some sort of...religion thing?" His hand creeps up to the silver cross that hangs around his neck.

"I'm not sure,"Carlos says. "He didn't really explain. If they are monitoring us, we don't want to upset them over their religious beliefs. We can set it up in the corner of the break room. Just think about it like you would an expedition to visit natives in a jungle—recognize their rituals for what they are." He gives Tim an amused look. "You don't have to go native, just...don't disrespect them either. Anyway, it sounds like something you can look into, Lei," Carlos calls into the other room.

Lei finally emerges from the back hallway, his bright blue bangs plastered to his forehead. "Random obscure religion? Sounds like fun." He picks up one of the other stones. "You said they're placed in a circle? Could be some obscure form of paganism, some offshoot of Wiccan culture. Though lots of religions have ritualistic circles in some of the older customs. I wonder if they have a house of worship..."
"I didn't come down here to join some freak cult," Tim mumbles as he goes back to his calibrations. Lei rolls his eyes and takes a deep breath.

"Anyway," Carlos says, recognizing a rant in the making, and quickly intervening, "the town meeting that I agreed to has been scheduled for this evening, at five. Lets head over there early, and everyone clean up at least a little, throw on a lab coat or something. I'd like us to at least look half way professional." There's a round of laughter at that.

"Before we head out, there are a few tests we'd like to run, if that's alright?" Aarav says, several of the others nodding in agreement. "When Lei and Harris went out for supplies, they heard a few things."

They all turn their eyes to Lei, and the younger man grins wryly. "You know me, always the social butterfly. Anyway, I mentioned to the cashier at the store that we were scientists, and asked if she could think of anything scientifically interesting. And she says there's a house out in Desert Creek, which is some new housing development on the other end of town, pretty nice place, fairly well-to-do neighbor—um, the point is, she said there's a house out there that doesn't exist."

Carlos looks at him blankly. "What does that mean?"

"Just what she said! It doesn't exist, like, at all! She said it's been there since they built the place, and that the police cordoned off the area. So, I'm thinking, no way, she's pulling my leg, you know? Pick on the scientists, that sort of thing. But she had an address for it and everything, so me and Harris think, okay, we'll play along, go check it out. And it was really there! Or, you know. There, but not there."

At the disbelieving looks, Harris pipes up, "No, it's true. He isn't making this up. And guys, tell him about the earthquakes." They all grin at Carlos' much more focused look. They should have known that tectonic movements are the way to his heart.

"We dropped off one of the smaller seismology monitors at an abandoned monitoring station on Route 800—speaking of, we should find out if we can rent that space, it would be a good outpost. So, we dropped off the monitor, and, well, look at these readings," Billy says, handing over a printout. Carlos flips through it, a thoughtful look settling over his features.

"Wait here," he says, jogging up the stairs to his room. A minute later he's coming back, two sets of readouts trailing him instead of one. "They aren't identical but...well, that's to be expected, given the location...maybe a grid pattern? Or a radial configuration..."
"You want to share with the class, Carlos?" Matt asks, and the lead scientist spreads both reports on the table side by side.

"Take a look at this," he says, gesturing to the papers. "The one on the left is from Dr. Turpin's readings from over a year ago. The right, today's." Half of the group looks suitably impressed, but the others just look confused. "They're not identical, but they're consistent. And violent. These readings..." He sighs, "We'll have to do many, many tests to verify, but according to these readings, this building and ever other building in this town should be leveled. I want to know why that is not the case."

They agree to check out both the house that doesn't exist and drop off a few more pieces of seismology equipment, just to get some more preliminary readings, before heading to the meeting.

Carlos heads up to his apartment, stripping down to his boxers and grabbing a towel out of his luggage. He didn't think it was possible for there to be smaller bathrooms than the one in his apartment in Arkham, but it appears he was mistaken. The little shower stall is barely big enough to fit in. He leans down to turn on the water, and—

"Shit!" Carlos screams, reeling backwards and colliding with the sink. He scrambles back to the doorway, but doesn't take his eyes off the creature in the shower stall. "Becky! Becky, get up here, please! And bring a beaker! Or a jar! Something with a lid!" He can hear her footsteps pounding up the stairs, and then she's pushing past his defensive position in the doorway.

"Whoa!" She exclaims, easing into the room. "That spider is huge!" The spider in question is an exceedingly large brown tarantula, tucked up under the shower faucet. Becky manages to out-maneuver the arachnid and get it in the jar, screwing the top on and holding it up for Carlos to see. "Look at this, Carlos! This is the biggest live tarantula I've ever seen. And look! Look at the utricating hairs on the abdomen! They're green! And huge! Oh my god, I think this could be a completely new species! Did you see any more? It would be great if we could collect more than one—oh." Becky suddenly looks up at Carlos and realizes that her boss is most definitely almost naked and holding the towel to his chest in embarrassment. "Sorry, I'll just let you get back to your shower, yeah?"

"Thanks, appreciate it," he says, sarcastically, and she grins before heading out of the rooms, calling back over her shoulder, "Watch out for this little guy's brothers and sisters!" Carlos blanches, and, after weighing the pros and cons, decides to just rinse off at the sink.
With a minimal amount of bickering over the limited bathroom space, Carlos and his team are clean and presentable by the time they need to head over to Town Hall. Carlos takes one of the back seats of Matt's SUV, jotting down some notes on an index card so he doesn't get off topic when addressing the crowd. That's assuming anyone shows up; Carlos isn't sure that the general populace will find a group of scientists all that interesting.

He isn't really paying much attention on the drive, focused as he is on his notes, and doesn't notice the approach to their destination until the car slows down, the other passengers growing silent. When he raises his head, he's shocked. There has to be over a hundred people gathered outside Town Hall, milling about on the sidewalk as they wait to go inside. There's enough traffic ahead to bring the car to a stop, and Carlos looks over the crowd. At first glance, it looks like a relatively normal grouping of people. Then Joanna, from the front seat, tentatively asks, "Um, guys? Does that guy over there have three arms?" They all crane their necks to look out the rear side window, and see a man carrying two toddlers, one in each arm, and holding the hand of a third child on the ground.

"That shouldn't be possible!" Matt says, arm thrown back over Joanna's seat so he can turn for a better look. "He would have to have extra neural pathways, an entire extra branch to his nervous system, and—does that girl have green skin?" Four heads turn in unison toward this new sight, and sure enough, a teenager with blonde pigtails stands with her friends, the bubble from her gum standing out bright pink against her emerald skin.

"Oh my God, guys, that guy has a mailbox sticking out of his shoulder! What the hell!" Abbey shouts, and Carlos grimaces when a few people standing near the vehicle look over at her open window.

"Keep your voice down," he says, looking around while slumping a little lower in his seat. "We really don't need them to see us gawking at them. Try to contain yourself." Carlos is just about to go back to finalizing his notes when he sees him.

There's nothing immediately apparent that should stand out about the man, standing with his back to the scientists' car. He's not too short, and he's not too tall, though taller than Carlos, if he was to guess. He's not too fat, and he's not too thin. No extra limbs or other features outside the realm of normal human parameters. His hair looks to be cut short and two-toned, a light blonde, almost white, over dark gray-brown neutral color that Carlos can't quite identify. Carlos' eyes wander over the breadth of his shoulders and back, covered in a lilac dress shirt and gray vest, tapering down to his trim waist. The man is gesturing wildly to a group of teens, who are all looking at him with excited awe, and he shifts his weight onto one of his long legs, cocking his hip. Carlos feels a surge of heat as his eyes follow the movement and drift lower.

Those dress slacks do wonderful things for that man's ass.
Suddenly, the SUV jolts forward as Matt moves with the traffic, and the man turns mid-word to look over at the vehicle. Carlos' breath catches in his throat at the striking features. He's far enough away that Carlos can't make out details, and his eyes are hidden by the sun glaring off his glasses, but the scientist can make out high cheekbones and the flash of teeth behind a wry grin. Then he's disappearing behind the crowd as the car moves out of sight.

Carlos lets out a breath he didn't know he was holding. He can feel a blush jump to his cheeks, and he discreetly glances at his companions to see if they noticed his attention was elsewhere, but they are all preoccupied with the diverse crowd. Good, he thinks. The last thing he needs is for his team to catch him ogling some stranger. It's not that Carlos keeps his preferences hidden, but he is a professional. Dropping his eyes back to his notes, he tries to put the man out of his mind.

After all, he didn't drive across country to the middle of nowhere for his social life. He's here to work.

Cecil watches the red SUV pull around the corner, feeling the prickle of unknown eyes tickle his skin.

"Mr. Palmer?"

"Sorry," he answers, turning back to the group of prospective interns gathered around. "As I was saying, if you're interested, feel free to drop by the station and fill out an application. If you have a resume, we'll gladly look over those as well. Remember, we hang on to your information for a year, so if you don't get an accepted now, there's a chance you will later."

"My cousin Katie used to be an intern at the station," says a short dark-skinned girl in a navy hoodie.

The bright smile dims a bit on Cecil's face and his voice slips a little lower as he answers, "Katie, yes, I remember her. She had a very bold interview style. I am sorry for your loss." The others in the group look confused but Katie's cousin nods her head in acknowledgment. Family members of station interns are well aware of the dangers of the job, and prepare for loss accordingly.

"Actually, I have my resume with me," she says, digging through the backpack slung over one shoulder. "Would you like to look it over? I'll still come by the station, but if you'd like to see it
"Certainly," Cecil replies, flipping through the file, smile dropping off his face completely. "High school graduate, attending Night Vale Community College, yearbook committee, debate team—this is very good. What degree are you going for?"

"Communications. I'm also taking a lot of creative writing classes," she says.

"Good. Very good...would you have any scheduling conflicts with your classes? We do require our interns to do some legwork, tracking down leads and doing some interviews. We would need you to be available for that."

The girl looks caught off-guard, but only for a moment, and her voice is nothing but confidence when she answers. "We're out for the summer right now. Most of my classes are at eight or nine in the morning, though, and I try not to have class on Fridays. I know it won't be a problem."

"And you're aware that this is an internship, not a job? You won't be paid. If you make it through the internship, you will be considered for a position if one is open at the time, but we make no guarantees." The girl nods, her riotous black curls bouncing from their perch atop her head.

Cecil looks back through her resume one more time before folding it in half and tucking it in his bag. "Well I am quite impressed with what I've seen, Dana Morris. How would you like to start right now?"

The others standing with them all adopt looks of indignation at this. Dana pays them no heed, grin wide and easy as she replies, "Really? Thanks, sir!" She holds out her hand to and they shake.

"Please, call me Cecil," he intones, and motions for her to follow him through the slow-moving crowd, heading for the entrance of Town Hall.

"Cecil," she says, trying the name out. "Cecil. So, Cecil, what are we doing?"

"We are going to make notes on these outsiders and what they're doing here, and then we're going to head back to the station. I won't have much time to edit my show, but this is big news and the people need to have accurate information. Do you have a phone capable of note taking?" As he talks, he shoulders his way down the tightly packed hallway and into the meeting room. They
manage to snag two seats near the back, and Dana has to sit with one leg folded under her to see over the crowd.

"Of course," she replies, diving back into her bag for her phone. "It's a lot easier than writing with paint."

"Yes, I was so glad that they finally made smart phones available here. You can imagine how much trouble I had before that was an option." Cecil understands the reasons City Council placed a ban on writing utensils within city limits, but that doesn't mean it isn't incredibly inconvenient, especially for journalists. "All I want you to do is take notes, as thoroughly as possible, please. We can only type so fast, but between the two of us we should be able to get the pertinent details. You never know what is going to be important for the show. I'll go over some techniques that will help you later, but for now we'll just wing it. Just open your mind, like a sea sponge, and let it soak up everything you see, hear, taste. As much as you can."

The noise of the crowd swells when one of the side doors open and a group of men and women in white lab coats file into the room. A man that Cecil recognizes as a representative of the City Council leads them up to the raised platform at the front of the room, and he calls for silence. Cecil doesn't pay much attention to the opening comments—its the same scripted introduction they always use at these meetings, with the standard reminders to the populace. Please remember to eat your mandatory slice of Big Rico's pizza once a week. Please remember that all writing utensils are banned by the City Council. Please remember to keep your phone conversations interesting for the Sheriff's Secret Police officer that is monitoring the call. None of it out of the ordinary.

Instead, Cecil tries to get a good look at the clustered scientists off to the side, wishing he had managed to get a closer seat. He can only see a few of them clearly; a woman with a rather tall and fluffy hat a few rows ahead makes getting a visual difficult. Cecil can see two of the shorter ones, a young Asian man with blue-dyed hair and a thin waif of a girl with pixie black hair, leaning over and whispering to someone out of sight. Leaning to the side, he tries to get a better look, but it simply isn't working. If he had to guess, he would say the tall one near the front of the group is their leader, the man with the cropped dirty blonde hair and polo shirt. Or, he thinks, maybe it's the blonde girl with the tight pony tail. She has a no-nonsense look about her.

"And now," the City Council representative is saying, "I would like you all to give a warm welcome the scientists of Miskatonic University." There is a smattering of applause as he moves off to the side, and the scientists move forward. One of them steps forward from behind the rest and clears his throat just as the woman with the fuzzy hat sits up straighter. "Um. Hello, everyone, and thank you for your kind welcome," says a nervous albeit pleasant voice. Cecil leans left, then right, trying to see the speaker, a little thrill going through him at the sound. "My name is Carlos Abaroa, and I and my colleagues are research scientists with Miskatonic University in Arkham, Massachusetts. We've come to Night Vale because...um..." Cecil gets one leg underneath himself and rises up, just enough to look over that hat. His eyes land on the man at the front just as he glances back at the other scientists, and they give small nods of encouragement. He faces the audience again, and says, "Night Vale is by far the most scientifically interesting community in the
United States. And, and I—we, we just had to come study just what is going on around here." He grinned, and everything about him was perfect.

Cecil's hand flutters up to press against his chest and feels, beneath the skin and bone, his heart beat hard. "Oh."

Two and a half hours later, Cecil has a pile of index cards crumpled and ripped in a pile on his desk, and he's running out of time. He buries his face in his hands. It is truly a rare occurrence when Cecil Palmer has writers block. This is ridiculous. There's no reason for it!

Now, that's not true, he thinks, raising his eyes to look at his pitiful script. Doodled into the margins in red food coloring are looping, curling hearts, drifting up the page like smoke. "You're pathetic," he says aloud, forehead bypassing his arms completely and hitting to desk.

He'd made a right fool of himself in front of his brand new intern. The scientist's meeting had lasted all of forty-five minutes, and Cecil had taken down not one word—not the introductory words, not the names or specialties of any of the...however many scientists there had been, not even questions posed from the audience. Thank the Old Ones that Dana had been there to take notes. Cecil had just sat there, trying to control the urge to manifest and having an internal panic attack.

The man, Carlos, Carlos the scientist, had been simply beautiful. His skin was a beautiful brown, like melted caramel, or the way Cecil's coffee looks when it is late at night and he adds a touch too much cream and sugar, sweet and delicious. His voice had been like silver, like gold, like other precious metals, light and smooth and heavy and rich all at once. And his hair! His hair was absolutely lovely, dark and thick, and it had shined like the glowing lights that shoot through the void under the bright lights of the meeting hall.

It has been years since Cecil's felt like this. No, that's not right. He's never felt like this, not so deeply effected, so quickly. Never has he felt the urge to manifest so strongly for a positive reason—in public, no less! He had maintained a white-knuckle grip on the sides of his chair and taken slow, deep breaths, and the need had slowly passed. Still, it had been a close thing.

Picking up Dana's phone, which she was so nice to leave with him, he scrolls through her notes again. They're good, all the information simplified down to the most important. She even picked up on some of the less obvious details that he would have taken down if he had been giving this meeting proper attention. After the meeting she had followed him back to the station, and now she was handling the phones like she had been working there for months. All this, and she had seemed
to sense that something was off about him, and left him alone after just a few questions. Yes, this one was a keeper. He sincerely hopes she makes it more than a few weeks.

He makes a few more changes, but quickly realizes it is useless. Even though Cecil is no stranger to improv, as radio requires a certain amount of flexibility and creativity, he doesn't care to go into a show without a solid base script. Tonight is going to be interesting.

A quick check-in with Dana and a cigarette break later, and the show begins.

"A friendly desert community where the sun is hot, the moon is beautiful, and mysterious lights pass overhead while we all pretend to sleep. Welcome to Night Vale."

Cecil talks briefly about the new dog park that's opened on the corner of Earl and Somerset, which he had been planning on going to check out earlier. The town meeting had pushed back this investigation, and the City Council's ban on entering, looking at, or thinking about the dog park had put it off indefinitely. He makes mention of Old Woman Josie's alleged encounter with angels, and then, quite without knowing it, he finds himself talking about the scientist.

"A new man came into town today. Who is he? What does he want from us? Why his perfect and beautiful haircut? Why his perfect and beautiful coat?" His eyes widen as he realizes what he just said. What is that? That has nothing to do with anything. Get back on track! "He says he is a scientist. Well...we have all been scientists at one point or another in our lives. But why now? Why here? And just what does he plan to do with all those breakers and humming electrical instruments in that lab he's renting—the one next to Big Rico's Pizza? No one does a slice like Big Rico," and Cecil lets his voice slip into something sinister. "No one."

Good save, he thinks, moving on to scrubland child safety. A few more stories, and then, seemingly without any input from his brain, he starts talking about him again.

"That new scientist—we now know is named Carlos—called a town meeting. He has a square jaw, and teeth like a military cemetery. His hair is perfect, and we all hate, and despair, and love that perfect hair in equal measure." What are you saying, Cecil? You're talking about his teeth! He looks down at his notes, for something, anything else. "Old Woman Josie brought corn muffins, which were decent, but lacked salt. She said the angels had taken her salt for a Godly mission, and she hadn't yet gotten around to buying more."

"Carlos told us that we are by far the most scientifically interesting community in the U.S., and he had come to study just what is going on around here. He grinned, and everything about him was perfect, and I fell in love instantly."
The moment the words leave his mouth it feels like Cecil's heart seizes in his chest. Did he...did he really just...say that? Out loud? On air?!

Knowing that he can't recover completely, not from that glaring blunder, he glances through Dana's notes and continues, "Government agents from a vague, yet menacing government agency were in the back, watching. I fear for Carlos. I fear for Night Vale. I fear for anyone caught between what they know and what they don't yet know that they don't know."

Cecil goes through the rest of his stories, even those that mention Carlos, with minimal personal commentary, the whole time berating himself for saying those things. After all, he's a total stranger! He's never even said hello to the man! This is truly mortifying.

When he cuts over to the weather, he slumps down into his chair, third eye slamming shut with the other two. Once he gets home, he's hiding there forever.

There's a knock at the door to his booth, and Dana peeks her head inside. She gives him a winning smile before saying, "Cecil, um...you have a visitor that would just love to speak with you." He cocks an eyebrow at her and nods, sitting upright in his chair. Then, she throws the door wide.

Cecil's eyes—luckily just the main two—go wide as he spots Carlos standing in the doorway. "Oh!" he exclaims, leaping to his feet, his chair rolling erratically away from his legs. "Oh! Hello!"

Carlos looks equally surprised, though Cecil isn't sure why. He's holding a notepad in one hand and juggling two machines in the other. One of them is letting out a rhythmic clicking noise, the other covered in wires and tubes. Carlos is looking at Cecil with wide eyes. "Hello. I-I'm sorry to, uh, to interrupt. Should I come back later, or...?"

"No, no, you're not interrupting. Not at all, we actually have a few minutes. I'm just playing the weather. How can I help you?" Cecil fights a cringe at the way his voice has jumped an octave. Carlos looks at him for a long moment before shaking his head slightly and looking back down at the little machine.

"Yes, well, I suppose I should introduce myself. I'm—"

"Carlos!" Cecil cuts in loudly, then abruptly wishes he hadn't. "I mean, Carlos Abaroa. You're one of the scientists from Miskatonic. You're here to investigate our little town."
"Yes," Carlos says. He looks a bit surprised that Cecil would know, but it shouldn't be a surprise at all. It's Cecil's job to know. "I'm afraid I didn't catch your name."

"Oh, of course, I apologize. Cecil Palmer, the Voice of Night Vale. Lovely to meet you," Cecil says, finally getting his voice under control and pouring on a little of his radio charm, his smile broad. He holds out his hand and Carlos manages to get everything balanced enough to return the shake. The scientist's hand is warm and pleasantly weathered, and Carlos gives Cecil a nervous little smile that softens his face in the most delightful of ways. This close, Cecil can now see all the features he couldn't see at the town meeting. Carlos' eyes are a light golden brown, whiskey or bourbon or Armagnac, and his lips are full and plump and Cecil yearns to lean forward and—

This really isn't the best time for these thoughts.

"Nice to meet you, too." They stand there for a long moment, neither letting go of the other man's hand, and it is just bordering on awkward when they let go simultaneously, looking anywhere except at each other.

"So," Cecil says, drawing out the syllable for a moment and scrambling for something to say. "You wouldn't be interested in giving an interview, would you? You could let more people know about your work, reach a broader audience than those willing to come to a town meeting."

Carlos blanches. "No! No, thank you, I don't—I don't really do public speaking. I mean, I did today, but that was special circumstances, it's not something I'm good at, and I just—I'm sure you're much better at it."

"Thank you, but, well, it is my job, after all," Cecil replies, feeling like an idiot. He is standing with his headphones around his neck, after all. "I know you haven't been here long, but have you discovered anything interesting in your stay so far?"

"Yes, actually." Carlos looks down at his watch with an odd look. "The sun didn't set at the correct time today."

"I didn't realize that the sun had a set time that it set," Cecil says.

"It does, and it's something that should not change, yet it set ten minutes later today than it should!" Carlos paces back and forth for a moment before refocusing on Cecil. "Tim thought for
"What do you think caused it?"

Here, Carlos looks simply perturbed. "I don't know. None of us know. We just...sat around staring at Abbey's desk clock." He looks off to the side, mumbling to himself for a moment, clearly lost in possibility, but he snaps back quickly.

"I'm sorry, I'm wasting your time. The reason I'm here is because one of your former interns, Leon? Linwood?" He looks down at his notepad. "Liam! He approached me after the meeting and suggested I come take a look at your radio station. He said there has been some odd occurrences here in the past, and some of it sounded like possible radiation exposure?"

Cecil frowned at this, confused. "I'm not sure what he would be referring to. Any occurrences we have tend to be fairly normal, as far as I can tell."

Carlos eyes one of the machines again before stuffing the other halfway in his lab coat pocket. "All the same, do you mind if I just take a few readings? I'll be out of your hair in no time." Cecil nods in agreement and moves out of the way.

"What exactly is that?" he asks, gesturing toward the yellow clicking box.

"A Geiger counter," Carlos replies, moving it slowly around the edges of the room. "It measures ionizing radiation in the atmosphere. The other one," he says, gesturing to his side, "measures the air for other dangerous materials." Carlos moves to stand by Cecil's broadcasting equipment, and the clicking noise increases in frequency. He waves the machine back and forth, the readings falling and rising accordingly, before he slowly moves it to the microphone. Cecil is surprised when the clicking becomes near constant and is accompanied by chirping.

"This isn't right, these are highly toxic levels," Carlos says, the look he gives Cecil clearly alarmed. "You haven't been feeling any adverse effects? No sickness, vomiting, hair falling out, rashes?" His eyes drop down to scan Cecil's body before jumping back to his eyes. "Extra limbs?"

Cecil blushes and reaches a hand up to smooth the hair falling onto his forehead. "No, not at all. Isn't that a rather personal question?" Carlos doesn't seem to notice Cecil's embarrassment, as he quickly retreats to the hallway.
"You need to evacuate the building; it's not safe."

"Oh, that's just silly. I'm not evacuating! I'm perfectly fine. Besides, I have to finish my show."

"You don't understand, this should be killing you!" Carlos takes another step backwards, further down the hallway, and Cecil can see Dana beyond, looking from around the corner.

"Well, it's not, dear Carlos, and it hasn't in quite some time, I assure you. There are plenty of things here at the station that can kill me, but the microphone hasn't been one of them in a while." A light on the soundboard flickers warningly. "I really have to get back to the show. I'm sorry that I couldn't be more help..."

Carlos looks frustrated that Cecil is moving back to his place behind the microphone, but Cecil doesn't know what to say to ease that worry. "Oh, here!" Cecil digs in his desk drawer and pulls out one of his business cards, jotting down his cell number on the back in the purple food coloring he keeps in there for notes. "Take my card. If you need anything at all, for the radio or...not...just give me a call." The man comes back into the booth to take the card and nods his thanks, making a hasty retreat back out into the hallway. "Really, Carlos, anything at all."

The man pauses for just a moment, clearly worried, but he flashes that same little smile from before. "Thanks, I'll keep that in mind. And please, leave the station as soon as your done?" Cecil nods and shuts the door when Carlos is out of sight, the entire encounter feeling like a blur. He doesn't think he made too much of a fool of himself, but it was hard to tell. Carlos was a hard man to read. Cecil sighs, wondering if he'll ever hear from the perfect-haired stranger again, and moves back to his chair just as the weather segment ends.

Ten sets of eyes settle on Carlos as soon as he opens the lab door and steps inside. "Hey guys," he says, turning back and locking all three locks on the inner door. "You'll never believe the readings I got from the microphone at the radio station. I'm not sure, but I might need to decontaminate, the radiation numbers were so high! I'm thinking we can go back this week with some hazmat suits and take some readings. Also, the intern there, Dana? She made some comments about the management there that makes me think that's another point of interest. But I thought the Geiger counter was going to—what?" He finally notices that none of the scientists are doing anything, just sitting and staring at him with slightly amused faces. Actually, more than slightly. They seem to be fighting to keep a straight face.

Billy breaks the odd silence. "I'm guessing you didn't listen to the radio tonight?"
Carlos looks briefly confused, but then remembers the comment Officer Erwin made earlier today. "Oh, yeah, I was a little distracted. Why, what's up?"

Lei is unhooking his iPod from his laptop, and hands it over to Carlos. "Here, boss. You'll want to listen to that tonight."

"Yeah, it should be very...enlightening for you," Becky says, and Gwen lets out half a giggle before biting her lip.

"You might even find something...scientifically interesting," says Matt. "Something worth studying here in Night Vale..."

"...or someone," Billy finishes, elbowing Matt in the side, and they smirk in unison at Carlos' increasingly confused features.

"Come on, guys, let's hit the hay. It's been a long day," Matt suggests, and the others clamor to their feat and head up the stairs. Carlos looks around himself at the quickly emptying laboratory, the forms from earlier still spread out on the table, then down at the iPod in his hands, and sighs. Well, at least he can listen and work in his new rooms. Gathering the paperwork, he double checks the locks on the door before heading up to his apartment.

He thinks about the rather handsome radio host he met at the station while he is brushing his teeth. It took just seconds to connect the attractive man he had seen on the street outside Town Hall with the man who had introduced himself as Cecil Palmer. He had looked delightfully flustered when Carlos had showed up on the threshold, his pale cheeks coloring delicately. It was a sharp contrast to his deep voice, which Carlos had not been prepared for in the least. Every time the radio host spoke, Carlos' eyes dropped to the man's lips, his bobbing Adam's apple, the hollow at the base of his throat. His hair had fallen haphazardly over his forehead and into his eyes. And purple! The man had the most unique purple eyes, large and luminous behind purple framed glasses.

Then the man had turned and leaned over his desk to fetch a business card, and Carlos had been abruptly reminded of one of the first features he had noticed about the Voice of Night Vale, and it hadn't been his voice at all.

It isn't long before he's settled into his sparsely decorated bedroom, piles of forms spread out around him on the bed. He puts in his ear buds and hits play on the file simply titled "Welcome to Night Vale—Episode 01." He's just beginning to fill in the first file when a deep, sonorous voice
fills his ears. Carlos feels a blush bloom in his cheeks, and he can tell immediately that he won't be able to do this paperwork and listen at the same time. He tosses his pen—which he learned today is actually illegal, but he isn't sure how much stock he puts in that yet—down on the bed and leans back against the pillows, settling in to listen.

By the time the Cecil murmurs his parting words, Carlos is acutely aware of just what the rest of his team found so amusing.

He removes his ear buds and turns off the iPod, frowning down at it in his hands. Teeth like a military cemetery. Perfect hair? And I fell in love instantly? How was he supposed to take that? Was it...was it some sort of joke? Carlos feels a flood of embarrassment followed by an angry heat in his stomach at the thought. He'd been the punch line of plenty of jokes in his time, stemming from all aspects of his personality, his race, his profession, even his appearance, but to be mocked on live radio...

The feeling fades just as quickly, though. This radio host, Cecil...he isn't like that. Carlos doesn't know why, but something about their interaction at the station makes him believe that this wasn't intended as a joke. But, that means it is something else, and that something else might be that he could genuinely mean these things.

The thought makes Carlos squirm. He almost wishes it was a joke. It has been years since Carlos dated properly, even longer since he dated anyone meaningful. Not since undergrad, and that had ended terribly. Dating is a scary business, one that often leads to a toxic mixture of unhappiness and heartache, and should be avoided at all costs. Besides, people didn't want to date him. He was just too...flawed.

None of this matters, he thinks. He's here to do a job, and dating isn't part of the deal. He can't afford to get distracted by a voice on the radio, no matter how deep and velvety it may be. Carlos put a lot of time and effort into this expedition already, and there is a mountain of science to do. Cecil Palmer is an unexpected variable, nothing more. Filled with resolve, Carlos sits up against the headboard and begins the tedious task of filling out paperwork.

Carlos jerks awake, eyes darting around the unfamiliar room. It takes a few terror-filled moments for his brain to supply the pertinent information: Night Vale, new laboratory, third floor bedroom, your new bedroom. The dinky little bedside lamp that he'd brought from his Arkham apartment is still glowing softly on the cardboard box he is temporarily using as a nightstand, its golden glow casting odd shadows about the room. He breathes out a sigh of relief, flopping back against the sheets, metaphorically boneless, still so very tired. The crinkling of paper makes him realize that he had fallen asleep while completing the City Council's forms, and he makes to sit up and gather them when another sound catches his attention.
His first thought is that it must be the old radio, the one that had lain abandoned in the corner upon arrival. He had propped it up on a pile of boxes across from his bed, but it still wasn't plugged in. Looking at it now, it was obviously not turned on. Then where was that crackling static sound coming from? Turning his head, Carlos froze.

There, in the window, was a hooded figure. Silhouetted against the glow of street lights from below, it was standing in the center of the floor-to-ceiling glass windows that led out to the roof. Carlos can't make out any features, dark as it is, but to be fair he isn't really trying. He sits, frozen in fear, staring out at the unmoving form, when it raises one limb. Carlos will never know if it was going to wave, knock, or claw its way through the glass and rip out his throat, because the next moment he finds himself tearing through the apartment and down the stairs, heedless of the fact that he can't see a thing. He manages to descend the stairs to the first floor without losing his footing, though it's a close thing, and is just checking that the locks on the front door are secure when he hears a piercing scream from the second floor. This leads to a collection of shouts and stampeding scientists, and Carlos rushes up the stairs to quiet them.

"Shh! Keep it down," he hisses, getting their attention, and they all fall silent. "What happened?"

Aarav, clutching his Lord of the Rings Anduril replica sword by the hilt, whispers from the corner, "I heard something outside the window! There was someone, but I couldn't see them, it was too dark!"

"You're on the second floor, you dork," Joanna says, rolling her eyes and not bothering to keep her voice down.

"No," Carlos says, low. "I saw it, too. On the roof. Someone in a hood, just looking in the window. Everyone make sure your windows are secure. Tim, take Billy and check that the back door is still locked, and I'll..." He huffs, taking Anduril out of Aarav's clenched hands. "I'll go see if he's still on the roof. Calm down, it's probably just some locals having fun at our expense."

"What, did they climb the building? It's sheer on the sides! They'd need a ladder or ropes from the roof or..." Abbey says, trailing off as she tries to work out the mechanics. She's the only one carrying a flashlight, and briefly blinds Carlos and half the others before lowering it to the floor. Carlos looks quizzical for a moment, then counts the group. "Where's Lei?"

"Crap," Becky says under her breath, and she ducks back into the room she shares with Lei. They can hear her inside, whispering his name with increasing volume, before they hear a smack, a thump, and the muffled sounds of dubstep. A few moments later, Becky and Lei emerge, the latter rumpled and not nearly as awake as the rest of them. "I forgot; he relaxes to the gentle sounds of a
"It's too late or too early for your unwanted commentary on modern music," Lei says, rubbing at his eyes. "Why are we all standing in the hallway?"

Carlos leaves them to check the other entry points and explain the situation, taking the longsword up the stairs to his apartment. The main room is dark, and he moves cautiously toward the light shining through the bedroom door. Looking through the room to the windows, he no longer sees the dark figure. He moves forward, pressing his face close to the glass and seeing nothing on the roof. He checks to make sure the door is locked, but something makes him pause, hand hovering over the handle. It's just some kids trying to scare them, he repeats to himself, cursing his insatiable curiosity as he unlocks the door and eases it open. The roof itself is covered with gravel, making Carlos sharply aware that he's venturing out wearing nothing but jogging shorts and a t-shirt, but he presses on, hefting Anduril in a defensive stance. Once out on the roof, he can clearly hear the same crackling static sound from before, coming from the street level. He eases his way to the edge of the roof, and his eyes widen at the sight.

There are five of them, these dark-robed people, pacing back and forth under the glow of the streetlamps in front of the laboratory entrance. Though, pacing might not be the best description. Pacing implies that they are taking steps, but they do not appear to be walking at all, more like gliding across the ground. One, moving slowly on the far side of the street, seems to take notice of him, raising its hooded head in recognition. Carlos braces himself in anticipation of any aggressive behavior, but the hooded figure just emits a loud buzzing noise. The other figures stop their sweeping movements and face him, the same buzz echoing from each one. It dawns on him that this might be a greeting.

"Carlos! What are you doing? Get back here!" He glances over his shoulder, the other scientists waiting anxiously just inside his bedroom, Joanna holding the door open just enough to squeeze her head through. Carlos looks back down at the street and rests the longsword by his side.

"It's alright," he says, keeping his volume low. "I think...I think they're just here to say hello." The scientists move forward onto the roof with him, all looking down at the scene below. The hooded figures resume their circuit of the street in front of the lab, and the team speaks in quiet whispers as they follow their movements. Opinions are divided evenly as to whether or not they are human or some other creature, and if it would be safe to approach one for further evidence. Carlos vetoes that idea quickly—they are relatively safe observing from the roof, but he can't condone approaching an unknown and possibly dangerous creature without more information. Becky points out that the Hooded Figures managed to get up the third floor and their position represented only the illusion of safety, but they stay on the roof nonetheless. That is, until a movement just out of range of the streetlights draws their attention, and the attention of all on the street.

All five of the Hooded Figures stop and face the same point in the darkness, and Carlos thinks he
can see something, maybe a little bigger than a large dog, rifling through a dumpster near the road across the street. The silence that falls at the abrupt end of the buzzing noises is pregnant with tension—even the ambient sounds of the desert are missing. And then—

All eleven men and women on the roof grab at their heads, covering ears as a series of shrill noises assaults their senses, a feeling not unlike a wave of electric energy crackling over their skin. The painful feeling is luckily over quickly. Down on the street, the Hooded Figures rush into the darkness, and Carlos watches with shocked horror as they descend on whatever animal attracted their attention. He sees flashes of limbs flailing in the darkness, though nothing clearly, and the sounds of struggle are intense but brief. The whole thing lasts twenty seconds at most, and then, to the scientists' horror, a pool of blood spreads out from the shadows into the glare of the streetlight. Carlos thinks he can hear the sounds of flesh rending from bone, and leans forward to try and see better—this is an excellent opportunity to observe these creatures feeding! Because it is obvious that they aren't human, whatever they are. A group suffering from mutations, possibly from excess radiation, but certainly no longer fully human, just humanoid shaped. Perhaps they can rig up a camera to—

Before he can contemplate a better method of observation, a hand grips his bicep tightly and he is pulled back into his bedroom where the others are waiting, clearly frightened. Aarav doesn't even wait for the door to close completely before he becomes hysterical, speaking at such a pitch and volume that Carlos fears for their ears. Harris and Lei try to calm him down, but there is no stopping the stream of panicked words. Tim rounds on Carlos, his face fierce.

"What the hell was that?" he snaps. "Wh-what, what where those things?"

Carlos shakes his head, still lost in thoughts of motion capture cameras and tracking beacons. "I don't know. They might be some sort of mutation caused by radiation, but it may also be possible that—"

"Did you know?" Tim demands, advancing on Carlos. "Did you know that they were here? That there were...things like that in this town?" Matt and Billy shift closer, as if to step in if Tim and Carlos come to blows, but there is no need. Carlos can tell that Tim is not a threat.

"I didn't know about those specific creatures, no. I shared everything with you, all of you, once you were on the team. You need to calm down, Tim I know that was surprising, but—"

"Surprising? Surprising! You call that surprising! That wasn't 'surprising,' Carlos, that was insanity! Those things aren't natural! Those were some sort of, of demons!"
"Come on now, Tim, don't start," Joanna says, rolling her eyes, but Tim isn't listening. He lashes out, grabbing Carlos by the neck of his t-shirt.

"Where in God's name have you brought us, Carlos?" he screams. Matt reaches to grab for Tim, but Carlos has already grabbed Tim by the shoulders and shoved him back.

"That's enough," Carlos says, his voice taking on a hard edge, sharp enough for the room to fall silent except for Tim's heavy breathing. "As I said, I know that was surprising. But you were told that this was a potentially dangerous assignment from the beginning. You knew there would be unknown variables, and you accepted the risks. We're just going to have to deal with things as they come, and adapt."

Tim says nothing, shouldering his way past Carlos and treading heavily down the stairs. Aarav's panicked ramblings have quieted to whimpers, and Harris leads him gently from the room as well. Matt gives Carlos an encouraging smile. "Don't worry about it, man. Tim's always got a stick up his ass. And Aarav will get a grip. It will all be fine in the morning."

By the time Carlos descends the stairs the next morning, there is one less car in the parking lot, and Tim and Aarav are gone.

Chapter End Notes

If you like what you see and want more, or just want to chat, you can find wyntera on tumblr. Please, be gentle on this new writer, as she bruises easily.
"Maldita sea todo al infierno..." Carlos mumbles to himself, pulling back the pericardium to reveal another vibrant red heart. He carefully severs the arteries and lifts the organ into his hands, inspecting it from all angles, but he already knows there is nothing wrong with it. It is perfectly healthy in every way, and he aches to throw it at the wall. "Another one. Any luck over there?"

Becky grunts a negative, picking up the bone saw on the tray next to her and leveling a critical eye on the boar carcass. At the next table, Harris is leaning over the open cranium of a longhorn sheep. Using a scalpel, he cuts a cross section of the cerebrum in the occipital lobe area. He places it in a container of clear solution before looking up at Carlos. "Sorry, Carlos. They all look perfectly normal."

"Yeah, it really doesn't make sense," Becky says, beginning to cut through the sternum while speaking. "There's no...apparent cause...of death...for any of them! Not even...natural causes...or blunt...force...trauma!" The saw finally breaks through, and she sets the tool aside to pry open the rib cage. She huffs a breath. "If they were alive when the Glow Cloud dropped them, they would at least show damage from the fall."

"All of these animals were in good health and show no signs of trauma in any way," continues Harris. He rounds his own table to look inside the open chest of the badger at Carlos' side. "It's like they all just...decided to stop living."

Carlos drops the badger heart onto the table with less care than he normally would and yanks off his latex gloves, half irritated and half intrigued. "Don't bother dissecting anymore for this; there's nothing to find. If you need anything for another experiment, go ahead and get it now."

"What should we do with the rest?" Harris asks, gesturing toward the bulging plastic bags on the floor.

"Incinerate them. We don't want to attract vermin...or anything else." Becky and Harris nod in agreement.

They've been in Night Vale a little over two weeks now. After that first disturbing night, finding two empty beds had not been all that shocking for Carlos. Having team members leave for one reason or another isn't all that uncommon at these remote locations; the fact that they didn't last the
first night was a surprise but just barely. There had been doubts in his mind from the beginning about Tim Kaplan and his attitude, but Carlos had been willing to give him the benefit of the doubt and was prepared to keep him in check. He really had been the best candidate in his field.

Aarav's breakdown had been unexpected. It is simply impossible to tell how someone is going to react in an unknown and stressful situation, and there was no way to prepare for the display they saw that night. Secretly, Carlos was pleased—their desertion landed Carlos the Lord of the Rings Anduril replica sword Aarav had left behind in his haste. It leans against his bed frame now, and sometimes he brandishes it about while thinking out scientific quandaries late at night.

The others had been upset the next morning, at first worried that something had happened to the two missing scientists, but once they saw the missing suitcases and empty parking spot, realizing they had fled in the night, it had quickly turned to anger. Carlos had intervened, getting their focus back on the job at hand and beginning experiments straight away. Since then, they have begun more studies than he can keep track of, and he is grateful of the fact that all the remaining members of his team are independent enough to work unsupervised and with minimal input on his part.

Carlos had tried to call Kendrick and alert him of the situation, but any long distance calls produced only static, no matter where in town he tried. Instead, he sent off an email to the department head and two replacement scientists, and hoped for the best. Two weeks later, he had seen no sign of the replacements, though Kendrick said he was working on it. He also sent along a dozen or so student profiles for consideration. The school is requiring the Night Vale Laboratories to host at least a few students, and Carlos secretly hopes he'll be able to pawn them off to his colleagues when they arrive.

Now, half of his team is out in the field, collecting data or making observations at various places around Night Vale, armed with reinforced umbrellas just in case the Glow Cloud reappears. The only hard evidence they have to work with to determine what caused the odd occurrence is the pile of animal carcasses that the cloud dropped, but the bodies tell the scientists nothing useful. His stomach rumbles, and he realizes he has not eaten at all today. He had skipped breakfast to make the rounds to his seismology monitors that he has situated around the town.

"I'm going to get a bite, anyone need anything?" They wave him off, and Carlos heads for the break room they set up near the back door. It's filled with snacks and easy-to-heat meals, and an old refrigerator that looks like it is right out of a sitcom from the 1950's. He takes a sandwich out through the back porch and chats with Joanna and Abbey who are in the process of assembling a small greenhouse against the back fence. It had become apparent that the quick-assemble greenhouse they had brought with them wasn't nearly big or sturdy enough for Night Vale's unpredictable weather patterns, so Abbey had jumped into designing something appropriate. Now she's decked in protective gear and up until five minutes ago was welding together the rods that will form the frame. The next five minutes are filled with colorful and offensive language, but Carlos and Joanna are used to it—engineers have a mouth on them. Finally, she gets to the point.
"This is the fifth time in the last three days this thing has broken down," she says, kicking the machine with her steel-toed boot. "I don't know if it's the sand getting in it or something else, but it's something different every time." She pries it open with a flat-head screwdriver and messes with the parts for a moment.

"Let me know what you need, I can grab it while I'm out today," says Carlos, leaning over her shoulder to watch. He gets an elbow to the stomach for his troubles.

"Here," she says, handing him a warped piece of metal. "Get me a handful of these, in case it happens again. How long will you be gone?"

He looks down at his watch. After carefully monitoring all of the timepieces in their possession and some extra they picked up in town, they had determined that Carlos' wristwatch was the only one that kept proper time. All the others either ran fast or slow, or backwards, or even random speeds completely. "A couple of hours at least, sorry."

"It's alright, we've got plenty to do in the meantime," Abbey replies. "You might want to change out of that lab coat, though."

He looks down. Sure enough, there's a nice splatter of badger blood smeared and speckled across the front. It looks like he's killed someone. "Damn."

A fresh lab coat later, Carlos heads out shortly after on his bike, pedaling past the newly painted Night Vale Laboratories – Miskatonic University sign they painted their third day in town. He's found that he enjoys travel by bicycle in Night Vale; it allows for easy avoidance of obstacles that he often sees in the street. It's also much better than his car for doing science out in the desert. Today he plans on riding south, marking distance and street names in his journal. None of them were able to find a decent map of the town, with large blocks missing or marked, "Redacted," in bold print. Other parts were clearly mislabeled, the information from years ago and never updated. So, Carlos took it upon himself to make an accurate map. It turns out the ban on writing utensils was not a joke, and the second day in town all their pens and pencils had been confiscated.

Okay, that's not true, he thinks. They took all the ones they knew about. Carlos has a box tucked neatly behind a loose brick in the back wall of his closet—the other walls aren't brick at all, but Carlos chalks it up to some quirk of the architect—where he's hidden away an assortment of writing utensils, among other things he'd like the Sheriff's Secret Police to not find.

For now, he's using a chunk of charcoal wrapped with a strip of leather for writing in his journal. It's messy, and he isn't sure how this doesn't make it a writing utensil, but Officer Erwin had said it
was perfectly legal. Maybe because it isn't a traditional pencil shape, but more of a lump? He'll have to experiment with that hypothesis.

He makes good progress that day, sweeping back and forth through the southern end of town and marking the information he needs. Carlos only sees one Hooded Figure, and it pays him no attention as it makes its way up the opposite sidewalk. The first time he had seen one after that first night had been outside the post office, and he had to curb his knee-jerk reaction to flee the area. People had been giving it a wide berth as they moved in and out of the building, and it was ignored for the most part. Following their lead, he had cautiously skirted the sidewalk around the Hooded Figure, and it had continued to look through the periodical it was reading and paid him no attention at all. Now, the scientists considered the Hooded Figures an intriguing yet dangerous enigma that they would investigate as soon as they could feel reasonably safe doing so.

So, not any time soon.

The stop at the hardware store is uneventful but expensive, and he makes a mental note to ask Abbey if he has been cheated—surely some little metal part only a few inches long doesn't cost $12.99 a piece—before turning left at the next road. The radio tower looms large at the end of the street. It's actually the last building in this direction, the desert stretching out behind it in a beautiful natural backdrop. There's really no reason to head this way...no reason at all...

Maybe he can put in a seismograph machine down here. It's on the edge of town. Practically the southern most point. It makes sense. He's just trying to be practical.

Carlos pedals down toward the station.

He's listened to Welcome to Night Vale every day since the team arrived. It was discovered that there is some sort of schedule for when the show comes on, but it seems to be different depending on the day of the week or the phase of the moon, maybe even the orientation of Venus in relation to Saturn. Whatever the code, they haven't cracked it yet. Not that it's a big deal, as the radios in the laboratory can turn themselves on without any help from the humans in the lab. Abbey had spent an entire day taking apart one of their radios and putting it back together, adjusting different parts, only to find that when plugged in they immediately settled back to Night Vale Community Radio. The other scientists listen to it in the lab while they work, and in the break room, and out on the back porch, and play it through the car radios while they're out in the field. Matt says that they're listening for interesting scientific phenomenon to discover. Gwen says they want to be kept aware of any new ordinances they should follow. Lei says it helps him understand the native culture of the citizens.

What they're really listening for is Cecil talking about Carlos again.
Which he has, repeatedly, over the past two weeks. Never anything as lengthy or effusive as that first broadcast, but little comments here and there that elicit cooing and cat-calls from Carlos' team and butterflies in his stomach. Asking them to stop was met with raucous laughter and his own face burning, so he has settled for the noble art of ignoring them and not giving it any attention at all, cutting off feeding them like the vultures they are.

The front door opens quietly into the small lobby, a speaker hanging in the corner pumping out the current broadcast—even warped as it is, Carlos recognizes Pink Floyd's *The Wall* being played backwards and at half speed. There is no one behind the front desk. He isn't sure if he should venture further into the building or not, but he thinks he can remember the route to Cecil's booth, and if no one is here to greet him...

He takes five steps down the hall beyond the lobby before someone walks out in front of him.

"Whoa!" the woman shouts as she reels back.

"Sorry! Sorry, I didn't know if anyone was here," Carlos apologizes, stepping back into the lobby. "You're...Dana, right?" He asks, feigning innocence.

"Yes, I'm surprised you remember," she jokes back, a hand tangling in the thick curls stacked on top of her head. They've talked a handful of times over the past two weeks since that first station visit, but he quickly gave up the attempts at getting the employees of Night Vale Community Radio to evacuate their irradiated building. "Cecil's not here."

The unexpected statement makes Carlos stall on his next sentence. "Uh, I-I'm not here to see Cecil, er, Mr. Palmer, I mean."

Dana gives him a knowing look as she walks past him to the front desk, a smile playing at the corners of her lips. "Sure. Of course you aren't. What was I thinking?" There's a stack of mail in a basket on the raised portion of the desk that he picks up, flipping several advertisements and a bright yellow flier with a triangular design into the waste basket at her feet. She grabs a small can from the bottom drawer of the desk in her other hand and turns back toward the hallway. "Follow me, if you don't mind? I've got to get this back there." She moves on without waiting for an answer, so he follows a few paces behind. He's a bit surprised when she turns into the men's room, and hesitates outside the door.

"Don't be a prude," echoes her voice. "You'll probably want to see this."
Feeling terribly inappropriate, Carlos pushes open the men's room door. The fluorescent lights overhead shine bright on the white tiles that line the room, and the smell of lemon disinfectant and floral air freshener hangs strong and heavy in the air. None of this really registers, though.

"That's a floating cat," Carlos states, mouth hanging open slightly at the sight.

Dana laughs, "No shit, Sherlock. Tell me something I don't know." Carlos gives her a dirty look, and she laughs harder. "I thought you'd want to see him. I'm fairly sure this qualifies as scientifically interesting."

"You're right about that," he replies. He gestures at the cat. "May I?"

She nods. "Let him sniff your hand before you try and pet him. He can be vicious if he doesn't like you."

"He hasn't scratched you, has he?"

"No, but Jerry, the new intern, he got sliced pretty good. Eighteen stitches."

"Ouch," he says. Carlos thinks that she doesn't look very upset by this, and vaguely wonders if there's a lot of competition among Night Vale Community Radio interns. He remembers how cutthroat grad school was, but something tells him that was nothing compared to the radio station.

The cat, which Carlos knows is named Khoshekh from Cecil's show, is floating about four feet off the ground next to the sinks. He's a dark gray tabby color with black and purple stripes, and large, luminous green eyes. Not the skinniest cat, either, though it is hard to tell how much of his bulk is from body mass and how much of it is thick fur. The cat regards him with the same cool look of disdain most cats level at anything new. Carlos does as Dana suggests, holding his hand palm down and fingers curled, easing it closer to Khoshekh's face. It sniffs at him, stretching toward Carlos from his suspended position. After a few cautious moments, Khoshekh rubs his face against Carlos' fingers and lets out a rumbling purr not unlike the sound of a puttering dump truck.

Carlos begins to pet the cat, and is amused when it turns over on its back mid-air and makes little grabby motions with its hands. "Well, you're not so bad, are you little guy?" Khoshekh purrs louder and twists so that Carlos is rubbing his belly.
"Wow, he didn't even warm up to Cecil that fast," she remarks, moving over to the sink and pulling the tab on the can of cat food she was carrying. Khoshekh rotates around and meows at her, the sound grating on the ears. "Alright, alright, here," she says, setting the food down on the counter within reach. He gulps down the wet food as fast as he can. "We feed him twice a day, but he acts like we're starving him. Cecil's spoiling him." She reaches up to join Carlos in petting him, but the cat growls menacingly. "Now that just isn't fair."

Carlos pats Khoshekh gently on the head. The cat finishes off the strong smelling meat in a handful of bites, then immediately curls back around to rub against Carlos' scratching fingers. "I don't know why he likes me," he says. "I haven't had a pet in...I don't know. Twenty years?"

"How old are you, anyway?" Dana asks.

"Old enough to resent you asking," he replies, deadpan. He really doesn't care if she knows or not, but he can't resist giving her a hard time. So far, most people in Night Vale that he has spoken to have either looked at him in awe or with mild suspicion, and Carlos suspects the awe is the direct result of Cecil's commentary. Dana does neither of these. He likes that Dana gives him a run for his money.

She turns on the sink so Khoshekh can get some fresh water. "You must be real old then, what with the gray hair and all."

"Hey!" he laughs, and she flicks water at him with her fingers. The truth is, he's thirty-two. The touch of gray at his temples is premature but not wholly unexpected. He remembers his abuelo had a full head of thick salt-and-pepper hair, more salt than pepper, and his abueala had long white hair almost always pulled into a loose braid. He doesn't know about his father, but he hasn't lost any hair yet, so at least it looks like he won't be dealing with male pattern baldness. "No picking on the old man and his hair!"

Dana leans one hip against the counter and crosses her arms in front of her. "So, you say you aren't here to see Cecil..."

"I'm really not," he interrupts.

"...then what are you here for?"
Carlos doesn't meet her eyes, keeping his focus on Khoshekh and avoiding getting scratched. "Just wanted to ask if we could leave some equipment out here to take some measurements."

"Uh huh. And you couldn't call and ask that?" Carlos frowns and opens his mouth, but Dana cuts him off, "I can ask him if you'd like, but if you want to wait, he should be back any time now."

"I should probably head back..." he says, but he doesn't move from his position playing with Khoshekh, scratching him gently under the chin and triggering a gaping yawn revealing long, serrated teeth. Dana leans down to check the supplies under the sink so he can't see her knowing smile.

"Dana! Are you here?" shouts a deep voice from down the hallway. 

"Feeding Khoshekh!" she calls back, a huge grin breaking across her face. Suddenly the men's room door is banging open.

"Dana, I was just at a press conference about Hiram Mc—Oh!" Cecil cuts himself off, shocked to see Carlos standing in the bathroom. "Carlos! My goodness!"

"Um, hi," Carlos says, unsure of how to act being caught playing keep-away with what is essentially Cecil's cat. Also, Cecil is wearing a waistcoat covered in smiling daisies, which would throw anyone off.

A wide grin spreads across the taller man's face. Is it Carlos' imagination, or is his smile awfully...toothy? "Why, Carlos the scientist! How good of you to drop by. I see you've met Khoshekh."

"He's amazing," Carlos says, gladly turning his attention back to the purring creature at his fingertips. "I would love to study him more closely. This localized levitation is worth a detailed study. There's no apparent force working against the Earth's gravitational pull and nothing obvious in the area like magnetic or electrostatic or acoustic sources that would only make Khoshekh levitate. Anything like that would cause a similar reaction in you and I, all of us, and possibly even any non-living matter in the room. I would also be really interested in doing some tests on his vocal chords as well. Making sounds like that, he certainly isn't a normal cat. His larynx must be truly fascinating, perhaps with...well, that's neither here nor there. I would have Becky come in to evaluate anything from that angle. The levitation has far more implications. But, if I can determine the source of the levitation, I might be able to end the effect on Khoshekh, and possibly replicate it in other objects. The applications would be staggering. And, I-I think, um, I think we get along pretty well..." he trails off, letting Khoshekh curl around his hand affectionately. It occurs to him
that he's been rambling pretty hard about science to two people that probably have no interest. The warmth of embarrassment fills him at the thought. He finally raises his eyes to look at Cecil, and catches him giving Carlos a soft, affectionate look before schooling his features into something more professional.

"I'm sure we could work something out, maybe during the hours when no one is live on-air. As long as Station Management says it's okay and Khoshekh is happy." Cecil turns to address Dana, pulling out his phone and handing it to her. "I just came from the press conference about Hiram McDaniels. The notes are on here. There's a couple of leads at the bottom of the list I'd like you to look into. Make a few phone calls and let me know if you need to leave the station. We can regroup and write the story later."

"No problem. I'll leave your phone on your desk when I'm done." She gives Carlos a little knowing smile. "Carlos has been waiting on you, by the way," she calls over her shoulder as she opens the men's room door.

Dana rounds the corner and Cecil smiles, delighted, but just motions for Carlos to follow. The scientist gives Khoshekh a parting scratch to the ears, wondering what he ever saw in that girl, and moves to follow the broadcaster. They both hear the cat's unholy meows as they exit to the hallway. Cecil leads Carlos the opposite direction from his office, turning into what is clearly the break room. "So what can I do for you?" he asks.

Carlos looks at him blankly, having forgotten what he came for in the first place. "Oh! Oh, yes. Well, perhaps." Carlos pushes his hair out of his eyes as he watches Cecil pull two mugs from a shelf and fill them both with coffee. The hair immediately falls back in his face. He's going to need to get a cut soon. "Actually, I was wondering if you would mind us placing a piece of equipment on the property? We would like to broaden our points for collecting data, and you are all the way down here on this end of town."

A series of emotions flash across Cecil's face, but it settles into a frown. "I'm not sure. Don't get me wrong, I would love to let you put any piece of scientific equipment you would like in, around, or through the radio station. Any placement in space, really. But...well...there's contract negotiations coming up. The next few weeks, Station Management will be pretty irritable. I can ask, though, if you really need me to."

"I don't want to get you into trouble," Carlos says. The man looks like the blood has drained from his face at the offer. Goodness, Cecil's boss sounds like a beast.

"Would you mind if I ask after? It's in two weeks; if you can wait that long I'd have a better chance..."
"That would be great," he replies readily. "Whatever you can do, I would appreciate it. There's no rush, though, really." Carlos moves forward to fix the cream and sugar the way he likes it, thanking Cecil for the cup. They both take a long drink from their respective mugs, awkward now that the reason for Carlos' visit has been dealt with. "So, uh, you were at a-a press conference?"

Cecil cradles the mug with long fingers, propping one hip against the counter. "Yes, but it wasn't very informative. The Sheriff’s Secret Police still hasn't caught Hiram McDaniels, who's still wanted for insurance fraud. I'm supposed to put out a more accurate description, but come on. How many eighteen-foot tall, five-headed dragons do they think live in Night Vale?"

“I imagine not many?” Carlos asks. A week ago he would have said none at all, but apparently he would have been wrong. The very existence of Hiram McDaniels is both terrifying and exhilarating. What scientist wouldn't want to study a dragon, no matter how many heads it has?

“Not five-headed ones, anyway. There used to be a lovely dragon couple on Holland Street, newly weds. They had the most vibrant crimson scales! And Francine, the female, she used to make and sell jewelry. I think I have a choker she made, somewhere...” Cecil trails off, lost in thought for a moment. “From what I understand the husband took a job overseas. Wish they would have stayed, though.”

“They sound nice,” replies the scientist. “Um, sorry your press conference wasn't that interesting.”

“They usually aren't,” he whispers low. At normal volume he says, “That's alright. I also had to run by Old Woman Josie's. She wanted to borrow my big stock pot. Says she wants to make something special for the angels—the angels which are a lie and do not exist,” he ends more forcefully than the rest so that the Sheriff's Secret Police can clearly hear him denying their existence. "Angels aren't real, you know."

Carlos nods in agreement, and not just because it is illegal to acknowledge the existence of angels or their hierarchy. Old Woman Josie claimed to have angels, all of which are named Erika, living in her house. While Carlos doesn't believe in angels in the traditional sense, he can't deny the beings he saw accompanying Old Woman Josie at the Ralph's. His eyes had refused to settle on their forms, but they had been tall and bright and intimidating before they vanished from sight. They are just one of the many mysteries he plans to investigate.

The way Cecil mentions it, Carlos is pretty sure he's seen them too. A shame they can't talk about it.
"What's with the stickers on the coffee pot?" Carlos asks, eyes catching on the red circles.

"Today's Dot Day, of course," Cecil says, like that explains everything. Something in Carlos' face must show confusion, because Cecil explains, "Red dots on what you love, blue dots on what you don't. Mixing those up can cause permanent consequences. Don't they have Dot Day where you're from?"

"No," he replies, his eyes noticing the other stickers in the room—one on the container of sugar, one on the microwave, another on one of the counter drawers that has a padlock closing it. "I've never heard of it anywhere, actually. Where does it originate?"

"I think back in the 60's. Stickers were a big thing back then in Night Vale. Luckily most of the sticker-related laws have been fazed out, it got pretty difficult to keep track of what all the different colors meant. But Dot Day has settled into a lovely tradition that the citizens appreciate. Your dots should have been delivered to you earlier today."

"I've been out in town, I must have missed it."

Cecil takes a sip of his coffee. "Well, when you get back to the lab, make sure you place your dots." He pulls a sticker sheet from within his pocket and peels off a red dot, pressing it to the side of his coffee cup.

"Hey Cecil, can you come in here for a minute?" Dana calls from down the hall.

"I'll be right back, make yourself at home," Cecil says, patting Carlos on the back before striding from the room.

Carlos looks around the break room with interest. There's a bulletin board on the far wall that has "In Memoriam" written at the top, with many pictures tacked underneath. He walks over to it, looking at all the young faces, all of them wearing a Night Vale Community Radio t-shirt. It only takes a few seconds to put it all together. "Trabajo áspero," he says to himself.

Dana returns to the break room, looking apologetic. "Sorry, Cecil really needed to take that phone call. He's probably going to be a while."

"It's alright, I probably should head out anyway," he says again, drinking down the rest of his
coffee and sitting the empty mug in the sink. He takes another look at the wall dedicated to former interns before facing Dana. "Do me a favor, and don't end up on that wall, okay?"

She smiles, full of confidence, and leads him out to the lobby. "Don't worry about me. I plan on being on the radio one day."

Fifteen minutes later, Cecil finally hangs up the phone and turns to find Dana leaning against the door frame of his office. "Did he already leave?"

"Yeah, he had to get back to the lab, the others were expecting him. You know," she says, drawing out the word, "Carlos had a nice, fresh red dot right in the center of his back. I wonder who could have possibly put it there."

Cecil raises his chin defiantly. "I have no idea what you're talking about, but I'm sure it was someone that cares about him very much." Dana raises an eyebrow, and they hold straight faces for just a few seconds before they break into laughter. Cecil takes off his glasses and buries his face in his hands. "Oh my god, he's just so handsome and cute and...just...perfect, Dana! I always feel like such an idiot when I talk to him."

"No, hey, I'm sure you did good this time!"

"No, no, I never know what to say or how to act around him. All I ever do is ramble about things I'm sure he, as a scientist, has no interest in. And I couldn't even do what he needed me to do! I must have disappointed him..." Cecil sighs dramatically. "He probably hates me."

"Are you kidding? He's totally got the hots for you!" Dana exclaims, giving his arm a playful shove.

"What? No, that's...no. No?," he asks, shooting Dana a hopeful look.

She nods encouragingly and begins to tick off her fingers. "He rode all the way out here to talk to you about something he could have easily called to ask about. He was reluctant to leave when I said you weren't here, and he waited on you. He gets all flustered when you come in the room. And he was totally checking you out."
"He was not!"

"Was too!"

"Was not!"

"Was too!"

"Stop!" he laughs, pulling his chair up to his desk and sitting up straight. "Enough, enough! We can debate what did or did not happen later. Sit down, we have to get this story sorted out." Dana takes a seat in the little guest chair that Cecil keeps in the corner, scooting up next to him and looking down at the notes he has taken. There's a few moments silence.

"He was not."

"Was too!"

Carlos gets back to the laboratory just in time for Billy to serve up his specialty: a big pot of spaghetti with canned sauce and buttered garlic toast. Everyone takes their bowls and wanders off in groups of two or three, and Carlos takes a bowl up to his apartment. He knows he should spend some time checking in with the others, get a status report on their experiments, but Carlos can't find the energy to socialize after riding around town on his bicycle all day.

While he was gone, the scientists decided to participate in Dot Day, much to his chagrin. Lei had a long-winded explanation about how Dot Day is a way of visualizing our emotional attachment to material objects, while also learning just what is really important in life, but Carlos doesn't listen too carefully—he was never big into psychology. There are mostly red dots scattered throughout the lab, making the whole area look like a polka dot monstrosity. The break room looks the same. He laughs when he spots a smattering of blue dots on some of the more finicky equipment. Passing Tim and Aarav's room he sees eight blue dots clustered in the center of the door. He's glad to see they didn't mess with his own room other than to lay two rolls of stickers on his living room table. He picks them up and sighs. This is ridiculous, he thinks.
Peeling a red sticker from the roll, he looks around, contemplating what he would classify as something he loves. Is it supposed to be literal, or metaphorical? He doesn't love the bed frame, but he does love sleep. Does that count? Carlos decides that's probably acceptable, and adheres the little red mark to his headboard. He moves around his rooms, placing stickers on the few personal objects that hold meaning, and when he takes his empty bowl back down to the shared kitchen, he swings by the lab and puts a few more on the equipment down there. He hasn't used nearly as many stickers as the rest of the team, he's sure, and wonders what that says about himself. Going back up to his room, he removes his lab coat, flinging it over the arm of the couch.

A flash of red catches his eye. Lifting the coat back up and holding it at arms length, he finds a red dot on the back of his coat. He remembers a friendly pat in that exact spot, hours ago, given by a hand with long, spider-like fingers.


Cecil growls deep in his throat, leaning up to pound the shape of his pillow before flopping back down on the bed. He's been tossing and turning all night, ever since his wall had begun to ooze a glowing gel-like substance that flickers randomly like a faulty bulb in an old lamp. The chanting began an hour ago.

"I'm going to write an editorial," he grumbles, shifting around in the sheets. "I'm going to complain to the landlord, and I'm going to write an editorial. A scathing, harsh, honest editorial. And everyone is going to know what rude, insensitive, un-neighborly jerks they are. I won't say their names, but they'll know. Everyone will know. People need to know that this, this! This is unacceptable! This is truly," his eyes squeeze shut as he yawns, "unacceptable."

Unthinkingly, Cecil turns on his right, and hisses with pain. He quickly flips back the other way, putting a protective hand on his thigh. It has been over a week since contract negotiations with Station Management were finished, the week long event finally over and the two opponents left to lick their wounds. His haven't healed completely. The long gash that ran from mid-thigh up to his hip was now almost a third its original size, but it still aches constantly and stings with pressure. He has a deep purple lash mark across his middle back, and a handful of other bruises that will only heal with time.

He couldn't complain, though; he had done much better this year than in the past. After the dust had settled, he had a raise and three extra sick days, and Station Management had been uncharacteristically quiet ever since. He counted that as a win.
What he isn't keen to do is spend his sick days nursing a headache due to lack of sleep. The picture frames and scented candles on his dresser begin to clink and shake as the floor begins to vibrate in a steady rhythm.

"That's it," he states, rising from the bed. He faces the glowing wall and knocks hard. "Hey! Cut it out!" Nothing happens, so he tries harder. "It's three in the morning, shut up!" The chanting, the vibrating, and the glow persists, and Cecil huffs. Suddenly eight tentacles sprout from the top and bottom of his sleep shirt, bunching the fabric around his arms. They curl themselves over their ends, balling up before unleashing a series of harsh strikes on the wall like beats on a drum. "Shut the hell up!"

That seems to do the trick, as all noise ceases, and the glow slowly dims to nothing. "I'm still writing that editorial." Satisfied, he eases back into bed, but sleep continues to elude him. Sometimes your thoughts keep you awake just as much as your noisy neighbors.

Once again, he had made a fool out of himself on air, to the whole town, over his infatuation with the beautiful and strange scientist. Old Woman Josie later told him that he had been perfectly justified to incite a riot to run Telly the Barber out of town, but Cecil feels incredibly awful about the whole thing. Not because he thinks that Telly didn't deserve everything he got, of course, just that he should have never used his influence as the Voice of Night Vale to manipulate the townsfolk. His position affords him certain privileges, and personal vendettas against the perpetrator of such a heinous yet legal act is not one of them. Also, from what he understands, Carlos hasn't been seen around town much since then, sending the other members of his team out into town and staying cooped up in his lab. Maybe he doesn't like his short hair any more than Cecil does?

What Cecil would give to ensure Carlos never snipped a single hair from his head ever again...

Though, if he is honest with himself, Cecil has to admit that Carlos does look just as handsome with shorter hair. Without it, he can't hide the tapering line of his neck, or the light dusting of hair at the base of his skull, or the delicate skin stretched across his jugular vein.

Still. He cut his hair.

Turning his head to one side, Cecil's gaze catches on the chipped and bloodied coffee cup sitting on bedside table. He lost intern Jerry to Station Management during negotiations this year, which isn't all that uncommon but he still blames himself. Jerry had been with them for less than a month, and really, the kid had the survival instincts of a gnat. Approaching Station Management's office during contract negotiations? It didn't get much worse than that. Cecil really shouldn't have hired
him in the first place, but he had just been so damn eager, and his example work from the school newspaper had shown promise. Dana had warned him the kid wouldn't last, though. He should have listened.

Dana Morris. Now there was an intern that had staying power. It had been a stroke of luck to meet her when he did. Cecil was incredibly impressed with her showing so far; she took to every aspect of the work like she had been doing it for years. She was fearless, but practical, going after a lead with all the determination of a midnight cactus-badger, but the cunning of a spiderwolf. She had even joined him at the PTA meeting tonight and not only survived the pterodon attack, but managed to grab some of Diane Crayton's delicious double fudge, double chocolate dipped cookies that she always brings to meetings. They were most enjoyable while huddled behind an upturned recycling bin in the school hallway.

Best of all, she was actually a pretty neat person, and they were becoming fast friends. Actually, maybe that's part of the reason he can't sleep, he thinks, throwing an arm over his eyes in frustration. She is becoming important to him, something he tries to avoid on principle, and let's face it: Night Vale Community Radio interns have a fairly high mortality rate. He really doesn't want to have to bury her with all the others.

Cecil casts those thoughts aside. Sleep! He has to sleep. Think about something comforting, something happy. Think of something...beautiful. His mind drifts to the little tidbit of information Old Woman Josie shared with him earlier this week. There had been a meeting earlier that week that he had not been able to attend. The City Council had voted to remove the large lead-plated door from the northeastern-most crook of Radon Canyon—the area pulsing with green light and sotto voce basso humming. Old Woman Josie had gone to the meeting, concerned citizen that she is, and given her opinion on the matter. Apparently sweet, lovely Carlos had been there as well. Oh, of all the times to need a gum leach removed from his back molar, it had to be during that meeting!

Old Woman Josie had sat next to Carlos. She said he smelled of lavender chewing gum.

A small sleepy smile blooms on his face as he lets his imagination run. Carlos, lying next to him among the ruffled blankets and pillows, his midnight locks (the beautiful hair from before his disastrous run-in with Telly the Barber) spilling across the pillows. No, across Cecil's chest, his head resting just over Cecil's heart. He imagines Carlos' breath ghosting across his skin as he dreams of science. Cecil would run his fingers through that gloriously perfect hair, and breathe in the sweet smell of lavender...

“And listeners, Night Vale is an ancient place, full of history and secrets—as we were reminded today. But it is also a place of the present, full of life, and of us. If you can hear my voice speaking
live, then you know: we are not history yet. We are happening now. How miraculous is that?

Goodnight, listeners. Goodnight.”

Cecil signs off, switching the station over to the one-hour special, “Morse Code for Trumpet Quintets,” and collapses back into his chair, tossing his headphones onto the desk and hooking a finger into the knot of his pink and orange tie. By the elder gods, he's tired. The disastrous night he had thanks to his worthless neighbors was just the tip of the mythical iceberg. The pterodactyl situation—and damn it all, they had originally reported pteranodons, and Cecil hated having to make corrections—had taken up a good portion of his day. Running around from source to source, none of whom seemed to be by a phone today, trying to get the story without getting killed by some ancient flying reptile, a random Hooded Figure in his recording booth that had to be shooed out during the weather, and the whole while his leg throbbed with pain from his injury. Let us top it all off with the fact that he had ridden his bike to work this morning, thinking his leg was better, and it's Dana's day off.

Terrific.

Cecil gives a brief thought to the couch in the break room, but balks at the idea. Today is actually one of his early shows, ending just as the sun sets (sometimes), and he doesn't have to be back in the studio until after lunch tomorrow. He spends enough time here as it is, he thinks. Surely he can make it home; its not that far.

He pulls himself to his feet, keeping a hand on the wall as he makes his way out to the employee entrance. The pain gets worse with each step, the muscles cramping tight and warm as he reaches the door. “Shit,” he hisses. He eyes his bike warily. There's no way he'll be able to balance on that, even if he uses his tentacles, which he won't. He can count the number of times he's manifested in public on two hands, and this hardly counts as an emergency worth the paperwork. Looks like he'll be walking.

One and a half blocks later, and he is sure he has never walked this slow in his life. Leaning against a phone pole, he digs his cellphone from his pocket and is scrolling through his contacts trying to think of who would be willing to come pick him and his bike up when a pair of headlights shine over him. Looking up, he sees an unfamiliar old green Ford rolling slowly toward him on the street. As it rolls to a stop next to him, he recognizes at least one familiar face in the passenger seat.

“Carlos?”
The scientist leans one elbow out the window and smiles. Cecil tries not to swoon. “Hi, Cecil.” There are two other scientists with him, a woman with frizzy red hair tied haphazardly in a yellow checkered bandana behind the wheel and a tall dark-skinned man with dreadlocks who kneels over an object under a very large tarp in the back of the truck. They both greet him by name with big smiles. My, scientists sure are friendly.

“We were just listening to your show!” The woman exclaims, throwing the truck into park and leaning into Carlos' window, shoving him back into his seat and practically lying in the man's lap in her haste to talk to Cecil. Cecil bites back the little surge of jealousy and concentrates on what she's saying. “Did you really try to interview a Hooded Figure? What was it like? Can you describe it in detail? Did it really levitate? How far off the ground? Did it try to eat you?”

“Becky!” Carlos exclaims, annoyed, shoving her back and off him and shooting an apologetic look at Cecil. “Sorry, she's been itching to study them since we got here.”

“It's not a problem. It was friendly enough, but we did have to shoo it out with a broom.” The man in the back of the truck laughs at that, though Cecil isn't sure what's funny about it. Most Hooded Figures respond to Cecil's broom waving, though there are an occasional few that are resistant to such scare tactics. Those he squirts with water from a spray bottle.

Cecil shifts his weight, and something of his pain must come across on his face because Carlos' smile is suddenly replaced with a look of concern. “Are you alright?”

“Um...yes, I'm fine. Really. Nothing worth worrying about, really, nothing at all. Don't let me keep you,” he says, looking everywhere except at Carlos.

“Are you sure?” Carlos shares a look with Becky before he opens the cab door and climbs out. Moving forward, he looks closer at Cecil in the dim light. “Cecil, what's wrong? What happened?”

“It's nothing!” Cecil can hear his voice climbing in pitch, and tries to control that along with the violet flush along his cheeks. “I mean, it isn't anything serious. I just...hurt my leg, earlier, and I need to get home.”

“We can take you home,” the other man says without hesitation. Carlos startles but quickly nods in agreement.

“Are you sure?” Cecil asks.
“We'll just have to make it quick; we have to get back to the lab before there is too much decay,” Carlos replies. Cecil doesn't understand what that's supposed to mean, but he's distracted by the other man hopping out of the truck bed and striding up to Cecil on long legs. “Here, let's put your bike in the back.” Cecil watches as he easily lifts his bicycle over the side and into the bed next to the tarp-covered lump taking up most of the space in the back. Actually, now that he's paying attention, the mystery thing is sticking out the open back of the truck bed, the tarp dragging lightly on the ground.

“Where am I taking you?” Becky asks from behind the wheel.

“Echo Garden Apartments. Take a left on Cliffrose Drive, and it's the tall one on the left with the yellow sign and the Sphenopsida in the front.”

“Sphenopsida? That's...” Carlos' focus drifts into the middle distance as he thinks. “I can't recall that plant. What is it exactly?”

“Big, pretty bright green, twirl of leaves around it? It's pretty tall, but I'm not sure how big they're supposed to get. The landlord is a bit of a gardener. I think he orders from a catalog.”

“You two can sit on the tailgate, I can hop up front with Becky,” the other man says once the bike is secure, moving to the front quickly and getting in the cab. Carlos opens his mouth as if to retort, but closes it quickly, offering Cecil a nervous smile.

“Sorry about Billy, he's...well. Never mind. Um, here,” Carlos says, pushing a bit of the excess tarp to the side so that Cecil has somewhere to sit. He hobbles around to the back of the truck and eases himself up onto the tailgate, keeping a tight reign on the whimper that wants to escape. Cecil can tell that Carlos is watching his movements even as he looks elsewhere, and once Cecil settles, Carlos makes a space for himself on the other side, the bulk under the tarp forming a short barrier between them.

Carlos gives the side of the truck two hard smacks, signaling for Becky to start driving. They aren't traveling very fast, and Cecil thinks it has something to do with whatever is riding next to him. Before Cecil can ask, Carlos speaks.

“So, what happened to your leg? If, uh, you don't mind me asking.”
Cecil looks down at his leg, which luckily hasn't started bleeding through his pastel pinstripe slacks. “Just remnants of contract negotiation. It's always something, every year. Nothing too serious, I wouldn't worry about it.” He can tell from Carlos' face that worry about it is exactly what he plans on doing, so Cecil changes the subject. “What's under the tarp? Something very scientifically interesting, I hope?” He knows he asked just the right question, because Carlos immediately brightens.

“Well, we were riding around all day trying to catch sight of one of the pterosaurs that—“

“Pterosaurs?” Cecil interrupts, growing irritated. He can't seem to get the story right today. “But I thought they were pterodactyls, and then pteranodons! Or, was it the other way around? I have been getting such conflicting information on this.”

“Don't worry, you're not necessarily wrong! Pterosauria, or pterosaurs, is just a broader classification, since we aren't sure exactly what we're dealing with here. Referring to a specimen as a pterodactyl or a pteranodon, or anything else, before being properly identified is a common mistake outside the scientific community. Sometimes inside the scientific community, if you talk to those less inclined to fact check their work. I don't know who's been feeding you information about these things, but they just don't have the background to be making these distinctions.”

“The Sheriff's Secret Police are the ones that issued the press release...” Cecil considers the scientist for a long moment. “You know, they could probably use your help from time to time. Er, you and the other scientists, I mean. Not that they don't do a fine job of protecting our upstanding community, of course. But, they do not have your knowledge of science and...science related fields.”

Though Cecil smiles happily at the thought, Carlos looks decidedly less enthused. “That's certainly...an interesting thought. I would help if they asked, I suppose.”

“Oh, I interrupted you so rudely. You were saying, about earlier?”

“Right, so the pterosaurs came from the PTA meeting last night...I mean, you obviously knew that, you were there and all, and you've been reporting on it all day, and...” Cecil nods in understanding, so Carlos continues, “...and so, first thing this morning we headed out to try and find one. We've been riding around all day, trying to figure out where they were headed based on the sightings you reported. But we heard on your broadcast that the last of the pterosaurs had been caught and sent back through the portals, and we thought, oh well, we missed our chance. It had been a long day, so we started to head for home. And then, I'm just looking out the window, and I see this shape sticking out from behind that thrift shop, over—“
“Miss Maupin's Consignments?” Cecil asks. “I love that store! She has some great finds. That's where I got my sharkskin vest.”

“Right,” Carlos replies, derailed by the thought of sharkskin and how uncomfortable that sounds on the skin. “Um, so, yes, it was lying in the parking lot behind the shop. We asked the lady there—”

“Miss Maupin,” Cecil supplies.

“—and she said she had no use for it, and let us take it! So,” Carlos pats the tarp affectionately, “we have our very own pterosaur.”

Cecil drops his eyes to Carlos' hand on the covered animal. The skin on the back looks delightfully thin and soft. “Wow!” Both men grab the sides of the truck as Becky turns onto Cliffrose Drive, centrifugal force pushing them to the side. Once they settle, Cecil asks, “Can I see?”

The one hundred watt smile Carlos gives him makes Cecil think Carlos was the type of child that brought frogs and lizards in shoe boxes to school for show-and-tell. The scientist lifts the edge of the tarp up and off the side nearest Cecil, and he really can't help the gasp that escapes at the sight.

All the dinosaurs that Cecil has seen in movies or books have always been massive beasts, bulky and roughly scaled, and all dark greens and browns. This creature, though not small by any means, is none of those things. He can only see the head and part of the upper torso and one wing. The skin, a pale blue-gray like the gravel in the empty lot behind the Ralph's, is stretched across hollow bones, thin as paper and he can see the darker blood vessels beneath. Slender, long and lean and aerodynamic, it's neck looks like a delicate flower stem supporting a crested head in a bright, blood red. Though the long snout is closed, Cecil can see the tips of several long teeth peeking out from behind the seam of its mouth. The eye he can see is partially lidded, an oblong pupil surrounded by a brown iris, and it stares unseeing off to one side.

Carlos stays silent, watching Cecil look his fill at his pterosaur and gauging his reaction. Cecil doesn't bother to hide the wonder he feels and reaches out with a tentative hand to hovers over the crest. “May I?”

“Sure,” Carlos replies. Cecil lets his fingers stroke the skin. “It's so soft!” They share a smile as they ride down the street, a millions-year-old creature between them in the bed of an old Ford, the street lights flashing over them as the truck rolls on, and Cecil thinks he wouldn't mind doing this every day. “So you don't know what it is exactly?”
“I'll need to run some tests before I determine what species it is; I'm not really qualified in this area to make a judgment based on a cursory look. Becky thinks it might be something new entirely.”

“That's exciting,” Cecil says, wishing he had something more insightful to say. He might not know a lot about science, but finding a new species of anything sounds pretty important. The truck rumbling to a stop saves him from his lack of words.

Cecil eases himself down to the ground, a throb of pain shooting up his hip with the weight, but it has settled into more of a dull ache than before. “Thanks for the ride, I really appreciate...it?” When Cecil turns to address the three scientists, none of them are looking his way. All three are staring, slack-jawed, at his apartment complex. Well, more accurately, the plant growing out front.

The trunk, segmented every two feet or so and bigger around than Cecil can reach, towers over them, almost to the top of the four story building. Broad branching lime green whorls of fern-like leaves spiral out of thin branches curling up to the top. It stands at one corner of the building, the yellow Echo Garden Apartments sign hanging suspended from a post next to it in the small but well cared for lawn.

Both truck doors open and all three scientists gather on the sidewalk, still looking up at the massive plant, and all three begin to talk simultaneously. Cecil stands, slightly separate from them, wondering if he should say anything or just leave them alone. He's not sure if he has anything worth adding.

“Look at the size of that stem—”

“No, no, no, I can't believe what I'm seeing—”

“It must have an extensive vascular system—”

“—we have to get Joanna out here, she'll want to know about this—”

“—it isn't possible, something like this couldn't survive in an arid desert environment, there isn't nearly enough water to support—”

“Forget that, this thing shouldn't be here because it's extinct! You'd have been lucky to find this in a rainforest four hundred million years ago!”
“Excuse me,” Cecil says loudly, and all three scientists jump. “If someone could get my bike down, I'll get out of your hair.” His eyes can't help but drift to the neatly trimmed black locks atop Carlos' head at the words.

They have the grace to look contrite. Carlos lifts the bicycle out of the truck bed and leads it over to Cecil. “Sorry about that, it's, um, not every day that you see an extinct...” Carlos' eyes cut over to the truck and the clearly extinct creature laying in the back. “...plant.”

Cecil nods. “It's quite alright. Thank you for the ride.” They stand there awkwardly for a long moment. Cecil's vaguely aware that the other scientists have climbed back into the cab of the truck, still talking excitedly. “I would invite you up, but I don't think I'm up for visitors at the moment,” he finally says, gesturing to his injured leg.

“Oh, of course,” Carlos replies. “Do you need help with your bike?”

“No, no, I've got it, thank you.” Carlos turns to head back to the vehicle. He watches as Carlos climbs back into the bed of the truck and sits with one foot planted on the tailgate and the other dangling above the asphalt. It suddenly occurs to him that Carlos is about to leave. “Wait!” He hobbles down to the truck again. Think, Cecil, say something! “I—I mean, the station is going to start adding some more educational programming to the schedule, targeted towards our younger listeners. Would you be interested in offering some clarity to some of the segments? Perhaps even contributing to the content? After the misinformation that we sent out today, it would be nice to have a knowledgeable pair of eyes look over the more complex stories. I know that everyone would be thrilled to learn from a real scientist.”

Carlos chews on his bottom lip—which is full and plump in a way that Cecil really needs to stop focusing on—and is silent for just long enough that Cecil thinks he's made a mistake when the man answers, “I could help, some. I can't let it distract me from my work, you understand. But...I guess just a little help every once in a while won't hurt. Or maybe one of the other scientists if I'm busy. We are representing a place of learning, it wouldn't do for us to let you report false scientific data.”

“That's great!” Cecil says, gripping his bike handles hard to keep from gesticulating. “Should I just...call? Or...”

“Oh, right. Here, let me,” he mumbles, digging his wallet and wrapped charcoal out of his pocket. He finds a scrap of paper and starts to write. “This is the main phone line for the laboratory. Someone should answer that sometime every day between eight and five...or, around then anyway. If no one answers, just leave a message and someone will get back to you.” He hands the paper—a receipt from the gas station nearest the lab—with a phone number written in dark gray. Cecil
thanks him again, and the two scientists in the cab wave out the window as the truck drives away. From the truck bed Carlos raises a hand in farewell, and Cecil mimics it back, watching until the man is out of sight.

It's a slow process, but Cecil maneuvers himself and his bike up the steep stairs to the third floor and manages to get into the apartment with minimal fuss. He doesn't even bother to change into anything more comfortable, nor does he make the effort to pray at his bloodstone circle, just kicking his shoes off and collapsing on his bed with a loud groan. Thoughts stray to his medicine cabinet, but he knows there is nothing in there strong enough to take the pain away, and at this point he would rather suffer in the horizontal position than make the trek to the bathroom. He pulls the slip of paper from his shirt pocket and contemplates the charcoal marks. Cecil's own handwriting has always been large and flowing with little flourishes, and on occasion, written with the calligraphy set he secretly has stashed beneath a sigil under his bed. Carlos' writing is small and precise, efficient. Short little lines that convey information as quickly as possible. It is how Cecil would imagine a scientist would write.

Could the man be any more perfect?

Cecil smiles to himself. He supposes he'll have to add a segment about adding a science to his show now. No one but the Sheriff's Secret Police needs to know that idea was a brilliant piece of improvisation, and he mentally pats himself on the back for not letting those theater skills go to waste. He places the phone number and his glasses on his bedside table and drifts off to sleep, and dreams that he is a flying lizard, reporting the news from high above the clouds and swooping down to pick up Steve Carlsberg and fling him off the side of Radon Canyon.

When Becky, Billy, and Carlos arrive back at the lab, the rest of the team is already gathered and waiting for them. Billy had called and told them about their find, and the group had pushed several of the work tables together as well as prepare tools and containers in preparation for their time-sensitive specimen. It takes almost all of them to maneuver the dead animal through the two front doors and up onto the makeshift work station. Carlos defers to Becky and Harris' expertise from then on, the only two with solid backgrounds for the task at hand. Becky begins to bark orders and there's a flurry of activity: blood drawn, samples of skin, tissue, and bone taken, measurements charted. Lei takes pictures of the whole process and assists where he can.

They work well into the night. It's nearly four in the morning before someone finally asks the question that everyone has been thinking but no one could muster the courage to ask of their leader. Matt is the one that cracks.

“Carlos, what are we going to do with it? It isn't going to keep forever.”
Carlos sighs, rubbing the sweat from his forehead with his arm as his hands are covered in filthy latex gloves. He looks around at their faces, and he hates himself for what he's about to say. “We can't keep it here, guys. We just don't have the resources to keep it fresh enough to work on, not all the way out here. We'll pack it, as best we can, figure out some way to keep it cool on its journey. And then we have to send it back to Miskatonic.” They all groan at that. “I know, I know, it's our find and you all want to work on it, but we just can't. Besides, we have a lot of other work to do, we can't spend all our time on...” He looks longingly at the animal on the table. “…on a dinosaur.”

Inside him, the little boy that had declared he would be a scientist when he grew up lets out a very unmanly shriek.

The next day, they do indeed pack their newly discovered pterosaur (Becky confirms that it is a new species, matching no previous fossil records, and they will spend many hours arguing over the scientific name they will name the thing, as is their right as the discoverers) in a crate lined with dry ice packets and send it on its long journey back to Miskatonic University.

Three days later, Carlos opens the door to a bright, beautiful day, the smell of walnuts, and a crate, badly scratched and with burn marks on one side, marked “Return to Sender,” sitting on his doorstep. The seal on the box is unbroken, but when they pry the lid off, they find a perfect, pristine skeleton, and nothing more.

Chapter End Notes

Translations

Spanish
Maldita sea todo al infierno. – Damn it all to hell.
Trabajo áspero – Rough job.

Latin

Great gods, greater is the old time, Thou grant us, we beseech Thee, and its own strength, to resist, and I will feed our enemies. Great gods, greater is the old time, Thou grant us, we beseech Thee, and its own strength, to resist, and I will feed our enemies. Good, major—

This will be the last Chapter posted before January 1st, as I am visiting family and then I'll need to get a good deal more written. Keep a look out for more come the new
If you like what you see and want more, or just want to chat, you can find wyntera on tumblr. Please, be gentle on this new writer, as she bruises easily.
“Look straight forward, please,” Harris says, shining his penlight into the boy's eyes at different angles.

“Смотрите прямо вперед, пожалуйста.”

After a few moments he holds up one finger. “Now, follow my finger...good...now forward again...very good.” Carlos repeats each phrase in Russian as they are uttered. Harris makes a note on the medical chart with a thin paint brush. It has taken him a lot less time to adjust to the ban on writing utensils than the rest of the team. Carlos suspects it's one of the many advantages of Harris' surgical background. He returns the paint brush to its place before turning back to the young man sitting on the metal table. “Alright, same with the other head.”

Michael Sandereaux shifts his body so that the head on the right is more forward, and Harris repeats the test.

Two days ago, the teenager spontaneously grew a second head. This sort of anomaly is just the sort of thing the Miskatonic scientists want to investigate in Night Vale, and they probably would have contacted the family for an interview and subsequent examination as soon as they found out. Luckily they didn't need to as the night after his second head appeared Michael's mother, Rhonda Sandereaux, contacted the Night Vale Laboratories requesting a full evaluation. Apparently she has some grudge against Night Vale General Hospital, the reasons for which she wasn't willing to elaborate on over the phone. She had just made an unflattering honking noise and changed the subject at the mere mention of Night Vale General. Regardless, they agreed to an evaluation, and she even gave permission for the scientists to use any findings gathered from her son's examination in whatever way they saw fit, provided his identity is kept anonymous. Carlos considers pointing out that her son is the only teenager who has randomly grown a second head, but for all he knows that sort of thing happens all the time in Night Vale, so keeps that thought to himself. He's just pleased that he hadn't needed to talk her into it in the first place—when he tried to talk to the parents of the three-armed teenager he met a couple weeks ago for a possible evaluation, he had just rambled about scientific theory and possible medical anomalies, and they hung up on him after a few minutes. It was not one of his finer attempts at speaking with the general populace.

Lei found it hilarious.

Carlos finishes laying out swabs and sterile containers for Harris and then moves on to readying a syringe and vials for blood samples. He's playing the role of assistant today; some laboratory heads
would insist on taking the lead on an evaluation like this, but not Carlos. He's always believed in utilizing one's strengths, and medical science is certainly not one of his own talents. He has a general working knowledge of the procedures Harris is performing, but the other man is a medical doctor first and foremost, much more qualified to work directly with the public. Also, he's confident that if anything is wrong with the subject—other than the second head—Harris will have a better chance of catching it immediately.

“No, keep your eyes forward...don't move them around, just stare straight ahead...please stop moving,” Harris is saying, voice strained, his patience clearly wearing thin. Carlos can't really blame him, as it has been like this every step of the way.

“Вы бы остановить это? Он просто пытается помочь,” the left head says.

“Man, why can't you just talk American like the rest of us,” the right head replies, completely ignoring Harris' attempts to test his eyesight in order to glare at the other head.

The left head rotates toward Carlos, shooting him a wounded look. “Мне очень жаль, доктор.”

“Там нет ничего для вас, чтобы извиниться за, Михаила. Это не ваша вина. Мы сделаем все от нас зависящее, чтобы получить вещи в нормальное состояние,” Carlos says comfortingly. At the boy's incredulous look, he allows himself a half-smile. “Ну, может быть не нормально.” It really is a stroke of luck that of all the languages this new head speaks, it happens to be one of the ones Carlos already knows. As a young and eager undergrad thirsty for knowledge, Carlos often spent time reading case studies and scientific journals, which would lead to reading the books mentioned in the resources and footnotes, which then led to encountering entire works written in languages he couldn't read. Rather than constantly searching for translations, or worse, paying for a translator, Carlos took it upon himself to learn the languages himself. His colleagues had always thought picking up a Master's degree in Linguistics was a waste of time, but it actually comes in handy far more often than anticipated, and in the most interesting situations. In the end, he had enjoyed it more than he ever thought he would, beyond his scientific endeavors. There's a shelf of old classics and poetry in his apartment back in Arkham, and a few well-thumbed favorites in a box under his bed here in Night Vale. Not that he's had the chance to read for pleasure since he arrived, and he isn't sure that any of them are on the City Council Approved Books list, but just knowing they're there is a comfort. He was already bilingual—growing up in both Mexico and the United States ensured that—but now he has a firm grasp on French, German, Latin, and Russian. He's actually thinking about taking some classes to learn some of the Weird Spanish that he's heard the locals use. It doesn't sound too far fetched from his native version of Spanish, and he wonders if maybe it's just a dialect change and not so much an entirely different language. Maybe that's something Lei should look into, if he doesn't mind another project piled on top of all the others.

The chance to stretch his linguistic legs aside, the novelty of speaking to a human with two fully functional and cognitive heads wore off about an hour ago. Michael Sandereaux's original head—
the right one—is a spoiled entitled punk as far as Carlos is concerned. The boy had been quick to point out his position as quarterback of the high school football team, the Night Vale Scorpions, and brought it up *ad nauseam*. A jock, that explains it, he thinks, and then immediately chastises his inner bullied nerd for being judgmental. Isn't that what all those bullies did to him for a variety of reasons? No excuse to do it now.

No, Carlos thinks this kid is just a jerk all on his own.

Michael's medical history indicates that he had cerebral palsy and a missing hand before a lightning strike cured both afflictions, and even though the rational thinker in him balks at the idea of this being true, Carlos can't argue with the facts. With such good fortune after a hard life, you would think the kid would be more grateful, but no. The right head is arrogant, conceited, and, in Carlos' professional opinion, an idiot.

By comparison, the new head is a delight. Polite, humble, and far more intelligent than his counterpart, he has followed Harris' instructions to the letter once translated through Carlos. That both heads speak completely different languages is just one anomaly on a mountain of anomalies, and he wishes Lei was here to speak to both heads, but Lei is out interviewing some people at a gas station that claim to have seen Rita Hayworth. Carlos told him that was a fools errand, and nothing would come of it, but he thinks Lei secretly wants to go flirt with the mousy brunette that works behind the counter. As bright and flashy as Lei is, he is always attracted to the shy ones. They've only been in Night Vale for two months and the boy has already had a crush on the girl that works the snack bar at the Desert Flower Bowling Alley and Arcade Fun Complex, the boy who does landscaping at some of the nicer properties two blocks over, the young Sheriff's Secret Police officer that monitors the comings and goings at the Post Office in the afternoon (and Carlos has no idea how he managed to even find the man, much less strike up a personal conversation with him and then get banned from the Post Office for the rest of his current life on Earth) and now this gas station worker. He's been the punch line of many a joke since their arrival, as every single one of his interests has been wary one of Lei from the beginning. Most people in town are wary of the scientists. Some are outright aggressive. Of all the outsiders, though, Lei is the most persistent. He eventually landed dates with each one—where he promptly ruined everything. They're still trying to get the stories out of him.

Plus, the townsfolk aren't wary of *all* the outsiders, if he's completely honest. Carlos himself has encountered very few people not willing to talk to him. He has a feeling as to why that is, but he tries not to dwell on it.

In the lulls between working on one head or another, Carlos has been chatting with Michael's left head, as none of his family or friends actually speak Russian. The head (and really, they should come up with another, temporary name to call it instead of just the left head) had been incredibly pleased to finally find someone to talk with. Physically, the two heads aren't perfectly identical. The left one (hereafter known as Head B) has sharper cheek bones, smaller ears, less baby fat clinging to his face. They would more likely be mistaken for brothers than twins. Most striking is Head B's icy blue eyes, different than the first one's (hereafter known as Head A) chocolate brown
and quite the contrast against his mocha skin. It could perhaps be said that he possesses more attractive traits than his counterpart, but Carlos knows that isn't a measurable trait and is far too subjective a description to include in the study. Instead he sticks to the quantitative statistics and variables. All of this, and a hundred more measurements and observations, Carlos has already recorded for later analysis.

“Сэр, вы думаете все можно сделать по этому поводу? Я не уверен, что хочу провести остаток своей жизни, подключеного к ... ну, к нему. Или ... Я не собираюсь умирать, я?” Head B asks, panic sneaking into his voice near the end.

“Нет, вы не умрете,” Carlos says, shaking his head. “Мы собираемся сделать все от нас зависящее, я могу обещать вам, что.”

“What are you two saying? Are you talkin' shit about me?” Head A demands, jerking his face around from the hold Harris had it in to keep him from fidgeting. His glare jumps back and forth from Carlos to the second head, but Head B just rolls his eyes heavenward and sighs. They still haven't figured out exactly how Head A and Head B manage to breathe separately while sharing the same set of lungs. Harris shoots Carlos a sharp look as he reaches for the first of the swabs.

“Just talking about the tests we're running,” Carlos replies diplomatically. He moves around to the other side of the table so that Harris can reach the instruments on the metal tray.

“I'm going to take all the samples I need from the left head first, if you could let him know what I'm going to do?” Harris asks. Carlos explains each procedure in flawless Russian, making sure both Head A and Head B keep pressure on the bandage on his left arm before removing his gloves and leaving the room to speak with Rhonda Sandereaux.

When mother and son arrived, Carlos had taken Michael's mother to the break room and made a large pot of coffee, urging her to make herself comfortable as she would be there a while. She was dressed almost like she was going to a job interview, but wasn't used to wearing such clothes. Her black hair had obviously been styled that morning but stress and fidgeting has skewed it so some locks stick out at odd angles. Carlos recognizes the look of someone who wants to make a good impression, but doesn't think she can. He thinks this must be how he looks when dressed in formal attire, as Carlos has always felt uncomfortable in anything more formal than jeans, flannel, and a lab coat. He had given his abuela such a hassle trying to get ready for church when he was little, often sneaking off to the cemetery and managing to get covered in dust and mud before mass even began.

Now, Ms. Sandereaux is sitting at the break room table flipping idly through last month's Popular Science magazine with a full cup of coffee cooling at her elbow. She jerks out of her daze when Carlos enters the room. “Well? How is he?”
Carlos begins to fix his own cup of coffee, letting the smell of roasted beans fill his senses as he speaks. “From what we can deduce from just the physical exam, he is perfectly healthy for a boy his age. Heart rate, blood pressure, temperature, everything is normal. The x-rays we took are processing, and some of the blood tests won't be ready until tomorrow, but I'll be sure to contact you with those results when they are done. Doctor Lattimore and I will need to review the findings and possibly contact some of our colleagues out of town for their opinions. Until we get all the data and a little time to evaluate it, we won't have any solid answers for you.” At her crestfallen look, Carlos takes a seat with her at the table, trying to pull from memory the sorts of things you're supposed to say in these situations. Damn it, this is something Harris is far better suited for. “I'm sorry we can't give you anything more than that, but we aren't going to start guessing when it comes to your son. If we can't help him, we'll find someone who can.”

“Thank you, Doctor. Thank you so much for this. I just can't take him back to that hospital. After the lightning strike, Michael...well. He wasn't very polite to the nurses and doctors that were so kind to him growing up. I'd hate to think how they would treat him if he had to go back. The staff at Night Vale General doesn't let go of grudges.” Something about that last sentence resonates with his memories of Cecil's show. He wouldn't be surprised if that exact phrase wasn't murmured over the radio waves some time ago. But where Cecil's voice would dip into something dark and liquid and sinister, Rhonda's is more wistful. She turns her coffee cup back and forth on the table, looking a little confused at the writing on the side reading YGOLOHCYSP in bold black letters. “I just don't know what I'm going to do in the meantime, Doctor.”

“Have you come up with any way to communicate with the new head?” Carlos asks.

“Well, we've been using Google translate for the most part, but it isn't perfect. Sometimes we've made some mistakes, but we make do. The new head gets lost and confused, but he's so patient! The hard part has been with the original Michael. He isn't taking to sharing his body very well, and tends to make things more difficult for...himself. Michael's never been good at sharing. If this is a permanent thing, I don't know how we're going to cope. They really shouldn't be together like that.”

Carlos nods in understanding. “I don't want you to lose hope, but I'm not going to lie to you, so you should know: there's a better than good chance that if you try to separate one of the heads from the rest of the body, one or both of them might not make it through the procedure. We don't have a suitable way of sustaining a head on its own. And there is no way for the removed head to survive without a host body. Not with current technology, anyway. There have been some studies, Poland and Australia did a join study...anyway. We aren't even sure we can transplant an entire head to a new body at all, and if we did, the body might reject the head completely. That doesn't mean it isn't possible, in theory, but it will take time. There are a lot of factors that need to be considered.”

Rhonda's eyes drop to the table top. At first, Carlos thinks she is going to start crying over the potential death of her child—well, part of her child anyway—and he curses his complete lack of social skills in these situations. He has enough trouble communicating to calm, sane people, much
less someone upset or hysterical. Then she bites her lip and looks at him with an odd expression on
her face. He's never been good at reading people, but he thinks it might be guilt. When she speaks,
her voice is just above a whisper. “The day after this all happened a man came by the house. He
said...well, he said he could help us. Said there was a facility, at one of the businesses there, in
Desert Bluffs, that could fix him. But he said we'd have to stay there, and Michael would have to
stay at the facility for a long time.” She shook her head, dismayed. “We don't have the kind of
money to just uproot the family like that; even if I had the money, I can't just move with no
warning. Cheri, my little girl, she's just starting middle school. That's a really hard time for a child,
you know. And Dion, he's just turned seven, and they say he's going to need glasses, and I have a
good job, here in Night Vale! A single mother can't just go off to some new town, especially not
Desert Bluffs, with no prospects! I mean...it's Desert Bluffs! They're terrible!” Her voice has been
steadily climbing with her anxiety. She leans forward and extends the hand that hasn't been
clutching a handkerchief the whole visit, grasping Carlos by the wrist. “But what if this is my only
chance for my boy? What if this is the only way?”

Carlos places his own hand on hers, hoping he comes off comforting. “I'm sure it's not. And he
didn't actually examine him, did he?”

She sniffs, eyes watery, and shakes her head. “No, he just left a card.”

“Then he is just saying what he thinks you want to hear. He has no idea if he can help Michael, I
guarantee it.”

“Then why would he say that?” she asks, bewildered.

Anger twists at Carlos' gut at the question. He has no proof, of course, but he has a pretty good idea
of what a business—a for-profit institution—would want with an almost-adult with a rare medical
condition, one that is vulnerable and willing to believe whatever they say if it means getting better.
It isn't all that uncommon to hear about incidents like this in the medical community, though
usually it isn't anything as fantastic as a two-headed teenager, and more than half you hear about
are nothing more than wild rumors. Still, predators are always lurking in the shadowy underbelly of
the scientific community. Predators with large bank accounts, expensive lawyers, and no scruples
when it comes to their test subjects. “There are lots of possible reasons,” he says, then side-steps
the question and asks, “Do you mind if I take a look at that business card?”

She reaches into her massive handbag and pulls out a slightly crumpled business card, stark white
against her midnight skin, and hands it over to him without hesitation. On the front is a simple
yellow “S” in a triangle. The back says, “StrexCorp Synernists Incorporated – Believe in a smiling
God,” followed by a phone number with only eight digits. Something about it triggers a fleeting
thought in Carlos' memory, but he can't place where or when. “Ms. Sandereaux, what was this man
like? The one that gave you this.”
“Let's see...he wore a very nice black suit, and his tie was yellow, like the card. Fairly average height, brown hair...not very interesting. He did smile a lot, friendly. A little too friendly, if you ask me. Practically invited himself in, said it was rude not to have visitors come in for a drink. And he kept saying that the way I arranged my furniture in the living room was...oh, what did he say. Inefficient! Inefficient, indeed!” She chuckles to herself at the memory. “What the hell does some snooty businessman know about arranging furniture, anyway? Other than that, nothing really interesting about him. Just kept insisting that I contact them when we decided to come, like he knew we would or something.”

“Hmm,” is all Carlos can say to that. It isn't much to go on, really, but it's better than nothing. “And he didn't give a name?”

Rhonda shakes her head, thinking. “No...but surely he did, right? But...no, I can't remember.” She's quite lost in thought for a few moments. Then, “I didn't even see the other man until he left.”

Carlos meets her eyes again. “Other man? What other man?”

“When I showed Mister Friendly out, there was another man, across the street. He was just standing there, staring at the house.” Rhonda's forehead wrinkles as she thinks back to that day. “I don't even know if they were there together...I don't...I don't remember them getting into the same car. I just remember him standing there, and when the other man pulled away, he wasn't there anymore.” She shakes her head as if to clear it. “You must think I'm crazy.”

“No, not at all,” Carlos replies, an uneasy feeling settling just below his ribcage, but he manages to keep it off his face. When he tries to hand the card to her she pulls her hands back.

“No, you keep it. It's better not to have the temptation.”

Footsteps from the hallway echo into the room as the door opens and Harris ducks his head in. “All done,” he says.

“Thank you, Dr. Lattimore. We'll be right out.” Carlos stands and Ms. Sandareaux follows suit, but his movement toward the door is halted by a firm grip on his elbow.

“Doctor,” she says, hesitant. “I have to know. About what you said, about, about how maybe only one head would survive. If...if we have the chance to make Michael normal again...will we have a
choice on which head we keep?” Carlos gives her a confused look. “What I mean is, does it have to be...does it have to be Michael's head? Or can it be...the new Michael's head?” His look creeps from confused to horrified, and she rushes to add, “I mean, you've met the boy, haven't you? Wouldn't you want the new head?”

Carlos reigns in his personal opinions on the matter, even though the thought makes him nauseous. “I think it's too early to speculate either way,” he says neutrally before turning and leading Ms. Sandareaux back to the main laboratory space. Michael and his mother leave shortly after, the right head giving a farewell as sarcastic as the left's is sincere. The moment the door to the lab slams shut, Harris lets loose a string of swears that makes Carlos proud. He lets the other man vent, cleaning up the examination area while Harris paces.

When Lei walks in about five minutes later, Harris is still on a roll.

“Don't get me wrong, Carlos. I took the Hippocratic Oath; I know my duties as a member of the healthcare community. But that—that...sorry excuse of a punk needs to have a rusty scalpel shoved up his—” Harris cuts himself off when he sees Lei stroll up. The other man grins.

“Please, don't stop on my account. We all love a good Lattimore monologue.” Lei gets an unused tongue depressor thrown at him for his trouble.

“So, how goes the hunt for Rita Hayworth?” Carlos asks, skepticism heavy in his voice.

Lei sighed, “Wrong race, wrong body type, and, oh! Not dead. That's a biggie.” He throws a plastic bag on the lab table next to them and empties out an assortment of snacks. “Almost a complete waste of time.”

Harris elbows Carlos in the arm. “Almost, huh? Almost, only because you spent the whole time ogling...what's her name?”

“Yasmine,” Carlos supplies.

“Yeah, Yasmine,” agrees Harris, chuckling.

Rather than get defensive, Lei just looks smug. “Yes, Yasmine, and she is lovely. And, if the peanut gallery wishes to know, she is so lovely that we are going out Friday night. That should be
enough to silence you naysayers.” The others laugh and lean over to steal from the snack pile. “By the way, your boy was there.”

Carlos pauses in the act of opening a bag of pretzels, scowling at Lei and Harris' matching smirks. “He’s not my boy.”

“Only because you're too much of a wuss,” Lei laughs.

“Really, Carlos, none of us mind,” adds Harris, popping a handful of honey-roasted peanuts into his mouth. “You spend every waking moment either in the lab or out in the field. You're allowed to have fun you know. It's not like you don't know he's interested.”

“The whole town knows he's interested,” supplies Lei around a mouthful of sticky bun. “And probably a couple towns over, depending on the strength of that tower.”

“I'm just not interested,” Carlos specifies. The others share a bored look. “I'm not!”

Lei takes a drink from his soda. “Dude, you totally are.”

Picking up his bag of pretzels and a candy bar, Carlos heads for the staircase. He stops with one foot on the first step, then turns to pace back. He wishes his face wasn't quite so red and telling. “I am not. And even if I was, I am not here to...to date.”

“Who said anything about dating?” Lei laughs, but Harris smacks him in the arm. “Dude!”

“Not everyone has meaningless sex, you ass.”

“Oh, spare me the sex ed talk. We're all adults, here.” He turns back to Carlos and is about to speak but Carlos cuts him off, growing increasingly embarrassed.

“I'm not here for...for that either. I am here—we are here to work. I suggest you get to it.”

He starts up the stairs, and Carlos can hear the laughter in Lei's voice as he calls up after him,
“Cecil said he's going to do his first Children's Fun Fact Science Corner tonight. I'm supposed to remind you to listen!” Carlos huffs audibly, but otherwise doesn't answer.

Carlos is dialing the number for the radio station before Cecil even finishes his sign-off.

A familiar voice answers. “Night Vale Community Radio, how can I help you?”

“Dana, hello. It's Carlos. I need to speak with Ce—Mr. Palmer.”

She must sense something urgent in his voice, because she doesn't give him a hard time for the slip. “Oh, uh, sure. He's just finishing up. Give him just a minute?” She puts him on hold before he has a chance to answer. In the minute and a half it takes for the broadcaster to pick up the phone, Carlos paces back and forth in his apartment, moving from bedroom to kitchen to living room and back again in jerky, angry movements.

Finally, Cecil picks up the phone. “Hello, this is Cecil Palmer, the Voice of Night Vale.”

“Cecil, it's Carlos,” he starts, and Cecil cuts him off.

“Carlos! Hello! How lovely to hear from you. Dana didn't tell me it was you on the phone, or I would have answered sooner! Thanks, Dana,” he says, and Carlos gets the feeling that Dana is getting a dirty look. It would be funny if Carlos wasn't so livid.

“I heard the science segment.”

“You listened to the show?” Cecil asks, voice rising higher than his radio voice. “Carlos, that's wonderful! I wasn't sure if you did!”

“Yes, but the Children's Fun—“

“Oh, I was so hoping you would get to hear it! Was it up to your standards? I tried to contact you to get your take on it before the show, but whoever answered the phone each time said you were very
busy and couldn't come to the phone. I imagine whatever you were doing was very important.”

Carlos really can't tell if that's supposed to be sarcastic or not. Cecil's voice always sounds so sincere. He also feels a pang of guilt at that. It is true that he was often busy running experiments when Cecil called, but...not every time. A few times his nerves just got the best of him, and he told whoever was holding the phone to make excuses for him. It really wasn't fair to Cecil—he had promised he'd help with the segment. It throws him off. “Uh, yes. I was. Busy, I mean. Sorry. We had an interesting reading coming from one of the monitors out past—” He realizes he's getting off track and feels his temper flare. “That is not the point. There was absolutely no science, none, in that segment! You just, just talked!”

He hears Cecil chuckle. “Well, of course I talked, Carlos. I mean, it is radio...”

“That is not what I meant!” Carlos can feel his voice rising, his words starting to spiral out of control, but can't seem to stop himself. It's science. “You can't just say whatever random thoughts come to mind and claim it's science! That isn't how it works! Science is about the facts. Facts and evidence and results that can be measured and replicated in experiments and, and, and...things! Things that lead to the truth! You actually asked if anyone knew what the moon is! Cecil, we have been to the moon, there have been actual people on its surface that brought back real rock from its surface. Of course we know what the moon is. And it doesn't disappear, it falls behind the shadow of the Earth as it orbits us. Just because you can't see it doesn't mean it's gone! And it's a rock, Cecil; don't anthropomorphize it, it's just going to confuse kids that are listening to—are you even listening to me? Cecil?”

The garbled sound of yelling comes across the line, and Carlos thinks he recognizes Dana's voice, but he can't tell what she says. “Is she alright?” Cecil's voice is muffled, like he's turned his face away from the phone as he speaks to the distant voice, and then, concerned, “bring her inside.”

“Cecil, what's wrong?” There's a lot of conflicting noises, and Carlos hears a woman scream. “Cecil! Cecil, what is it?”

When he speaks next, there's urgency in his voice. “Carlos, you need to get down here. It's one of your team, Abbey? The blonde? She's hurt, Carlos. It looks pretty bad, she—oh gods! Lay her down on the floor, I'll—Carlos, get down here, now!”

The line goes dead.

“Cecil? Cecil!” Carlos looks down at the phone, and then the implications of what he's just heard hit him in a cold wave. He takes off at a run down the stairs. “Harris! Lei! Becky, everybody!
Harris, where are you!” Becky sticks her head out of her room as he runs by but he doesn't stop. “Emergency, get downstairs, now!” Becky drops the book she had been reading on the hallway floor and follows him down to the main lab. They find Harris and Lei out on the back porch, feet propped up and relaxing to the Japanese flute solo playing on the radio.

“It's Abbey,” Carlos pants out as soon as he bursts out of the back door. “Something happened at the radio station. Cecil said Abbey was hurt. Let's go.” He turns on his heel and runs for the parking lot, and he hears the rest of the team following close behind, Harris grabbing the emergency kit he keeps stocked in the lab at all times.

“What happened?” Harris yells. “What do I need?”

Carlos' answer is in a growl. “I don't know. I just don't know.” They rush out to Carlos' car, his lab coat catching in the door as he slams it shut. The car skids as he peels out of the gravel lot. “I don't understand what she was doing near the station. She said she was heading out with Joanna and Matt into the desert today. Has anyone heard from them? Or Gwen? Billy? Someone try and call them.” Lei is already dialing Joanna's cell.

“I'll call Billy,” Becky says, pulling out her own phone.

“Did she mention anything this morning before they left?” Harris asks. Carlos shakes his head.

“No, nothing.”

Lei groans. “It's going straight to voice mail; they must not have a signal out there. Or,” he reaches into the front seat and grabs Carlos shoulder. “What if something happened to them, too?”

“Cecil just said Abbey. He would have said otherwise.” Carlos takes a turn at an intersection harder than usual and everyone shifts to the left.

“Billy! Oh thank God, Billy, where are you?” They all strain to hear the distant voice on the phone, but Carlos is driving too fast for anyone other than Becky to hear. “No, don't. There's been an accident with Abbey. No, we don't know yet. At the radio station. No. No. Is anyone with you? Okay, call us when you're close, we'll let you know.” She hangs up the phone and addresses the other passengers directly. “He's just finished setting up the weather monitoring equipment out at Razor Point. He's coming.”
“No one else was with him?” Carlos asks. Becky shakes her head.

They all jump as Carlos suddenly slaps hard at the steering wheel, anger snapping. “Joder!” he shouts, pressing the gas pedal harder.

Screams echo through the radio station as Cecil grabs one of the shock blankets they keep in the employee break room and runs to the front lobby where Dana is cradling the injured scientist's head in her lap and holding her bleeding arm out of direct sight. He leans down to start wrapping the blanket around Abbey, his first aid training from his time as a boy scout and as an intern kicking in. It isn't until he slips the cloth behind her back that he registers the missing left arm, severed just above the elbow. He can't actually see the wound as Dana is holding pressure on it using her Night Vale High sweater, which is quickly becoming saturated with blood.

“Keep that pressed tight,” Cecil says, pulling off the sweater vest he wore to work that day and ripping a strip off the end. He ties it tightly around the upper arm, as tight as he can to cut off blood flow, and Abbey screams even harder than before. “I'm sorry, I'm sorry! Just hang in there. Carlos is on his way.” The last he says to Dana before he pulls his cell phone and dials for an ambulance. They might already be on the way, but sometimes the Sheriff's Secret Police won't call for emergency services unless specifically asked. One too many complaints from false alarms and interrupted voluntary mutilations, Cecil supposes. The dispatcher on the other end of the phone greets Cecil by name and says help is en route, so he hangs up and kneels next to Dana, pressing with his own hand to help stop the blood loss. Abbey starts to choke on her own screams, out of breath but unable to stop the convulsions of sobbing, and Dana wraps an arm around her torso from behind to steady her while Cecil tries to get her to breathe evenly.

Lights flash through the glass doors as Carlos' car flies into the parking lot minutes later, the four additional scientists filling the small lobby and swarming the three on the floor. Harris already has a syringe filled with an anesthetic that he injects Abbey with almost immediately, though by this point she has already slipped into physiologic shock.

“What happened?” Carlos asks, adrenaline making him sound out of breath.

Dana looks up at him from her position behind Abbey. “The Shape in Grove Park, er, I mean, the Shape formerly in Grove Park, uh. Well, the Shape. She was here to fix one of the machines you guys left here when it showed up, so she thought she would observe it, maybe take some pictures. It started pulsing like it did before it killed Leland, and I grabbed her and pulled her inside but I was too late. I'm so sorry.” She has guilt written all over her face.
“It’s not your fault; you did all you could,” Cecil says, his voice slipping into the calming cadence of his radio persona without thought. He eases back so that Harris has room to work. “Did you see where it went?”

“No. I didn’t even think to look.”

“There was nothing out there when we pulled up,” Becky provides, going to the glass doors and looking out at the parking lot.

Cecil looks to Carlos. “We called an ambulance. They should be here any time now.”

All but Cecil and the now unresponsive Abbey startle at the grating screech that reverberates from within the building. Carlos looks to Cecil, concerned. “What was that?”

“Shit,” Cecil mutters to himself. Out loud, he says, “If they don’t get here soon, we’ll have to carry her outside. Station Management can smell the blood.”

No sooner have the words left his mouth when the lobby fills with flashing red and white light and two emergency medical technicians come through the door. Everyone but Dana and Harris moves back to make room, and within a few minutes the EMTs have Abbey loaded into the ambulance. Harris climbs into the back with them, calling out, “I’ll meet you at the hospital!” as the doors close.

The scientists head for Carlos’ car, but he pauses at the station threshold. “Thanks. Both of you. I have to...” Carlos gestures toward the car.

“Go, go!” Cecil says, helping Dana to her feet from kneeling position on the floor.

“Okay. Thanks!” Carlos calls over his shoulder. Cecil watches him for just a moment, white lab coat trailing behind the scientist as he jogs to his car, before turning to Dana.

“Are you hurt?” he asks, taking her shoulders in his hands and looking her over. Her Night Vale Community Radio polo shirt is covered in bloody smears, her arms are dripping with it, and her face and hair are splattered red. Despite all this, she barely looks shaken.
“I’m fine. Wish I could have pulled her in a little faster, but we didn’t have much warning.” She sighs and looks down at the stained floor. “I guess I’ll go get the mop.”

“Leave it,” Cecil says. “Go on home and rest. I’ll take care of it.”

“Are you sure? You’ve been at work all day, I don’t mind...”

Cecil shakes his head and gives her a wry smile. “It isn't the first time I've cleaned blood off these floors, and I doubt it will be the last. I can handle this.”

Dana switches her polo for one of the free promotional t-shirts that they keep in the supply room and washes the excess blood off her arms before leaving for the night. The station is unusually quiet in the wake of all the excitement, like the silence has a weight to it, and it sends a chill down Cecil's spine. He takes his time, scrubbing the gray tile flooring as best he can with bleach. He can't quite get all of it out from the white grout, but there have been enough random fluids spilled across this floor over the years that it isn't really noticeable. A glance out the door prompts him to wipe the bloody hand prints from the glass and handles of the lobby doors. The entrance mat is rolled up and thrown into the dumpster out back. Station Management is restless the whole while, but Cecil keeps himself quiet and once the lobby is back to a state of professional cleanliness, no more noise comes from behind the door. After, he takes himself to the men's room, removing his ruined shirt—which reminds him that he also lost his sweater vest—and washes the blood from his hands. He doesn't think he has blood on his face, but since the mirrors are covered he washes it anyway. Khoshekh blinks at him from his position near the sink, meowing pitifully at the sight of all that blood, but Cecil resists those giant sad eyes. “Sorry, pal. You've already been fed today.” Years of experience has taught him to always leave a change of clothes at the office, so he puts on a maroon and light green plaid work shirt from his stash in his office.

Then, he goes back and gives Khoshekh one of the chicken and viscera treats his neighbor recommended. Khoshekh has really turned him around on the whole cat thing. The purr he receives in return sounds like a diesel engine, and does wonders for his mood.

It's far later than usual when he finally locks the station doors and heads for his car. He slides the key into the ignition, but doesn't turn it. Sitting behind the wheel, he thinks about his broadcast today.

If he had not snapped out of his existential crisis on the air, the events following his show certainly would have forced it to happen. For a moment, he had been so sure that his job, his town, his very life, was nothing more than a figment of his imagination—or the figment of some other independent being's imagination. He has episodes like that from time to time; one moment he is going about the daily grind, and the next he is unsure of everything he's ever known. Most of the time he snaps out of it within an hour or so, but if the feeling strikes when he has a day off, or
hasn't heard from another person in a while, it can last for days. A lot of Night Vale citizens have similar experiences, but Cecil seems to have them more often than most. He thinks his second sight makes him more vulnerable to feeling so disconnected from the world; sometimes when he uses it, he looks too far, sees things he shouldn't. Sometimes, if he isn't careful, he ends up far away, beyond anything he knows in Night Vale, somewhere beyond the void, and it's a struggle to come back. It's a place he's never talked about, not with anyone. Those glorious and horrifying sights stay with him long after he closes his third eye.

Cecil starts his car and pulls up to the road. Left takes him to his apartment. He really should go home, fix himself something to eat, relax in familiar surroundings. It's important to surround yourself with familiar things after an episode like that. He needs to look over the intern applications again, or maybe he could read the library book that he knows is due soon, curled up on the couch with a glass of Armagnac. Maybe he should just hit the bed early.

Cecil turns right.

At the hospital, a friendly nurse points him to a waiting room on the fourth floor where he finds Carlos, Billy, Lei, and Becky. Lei and Becky both have red-rimmed lids and streaks down their faces, clutching hands across the armrests of their seats. Two chairs down from Becky, Billy sits with his elbows resting on his knees, hands clasped between them, a tense set to his jaw. Carlos is pacing back and forth in the small space, his hair standing in tufts from where he's gripped it. Cecil ignores the urge to linger on the sight of those dark locks, instead focusing on the issue at hand. For a moment, he is unsure if he should speak, if he should just turn around and walk back to his car, drive home and put it out of his mind. People get hurt in Night Vale all the time. It isn't his place, not with these people. They don't need him here. He'll just be in the way. Then Carlos turns and spots him, surprise flitting across his unshaven features, and Cecil knows he can't turn back now.

“Cecil,” Carlos breathes, and says no more. Becky and Lei give him weak smiles, and Billy nods an acknowledgment.

“How is she?” Cecil asks quietly, acutely aware of the not-quite-silence that permeates this place.

“In surgery. She needed transfusions for the blood loss. They said there was nothing left to do but close the wound, since there was no limb to reattach. Harris is in there with her.”

Cecil nods, trying to look reassuring. “Don't worry, Night Vale General has excellent surgeons. They get a lot of practice. I assure you, she's in good hands.” It's only after the words leave his mouth that he realizes how inappropriate that saying is, and he cringes. “I mean, she'll be well taken care of...um...sorry.”
Carlos waves him off, then, looking around at the others, gestures over to two of the empty seats, and they sit. “I'm sorry if you felt like you had to come...”

“No, I wanted to. I promise.” Cecil looks around. “Where's the rest of your team?”

“We aren't sure, exactly. They went out to do some tests near Radon Canyon, I think. We haven't been able to get a hold of them since they left this morning.”

“We left messages on all their phones,” Billy says, voice rough. “As soon as they're in range, one of them will get it.”

Silence falls over the group, and Cecil struggles to think of something to say. He's had to comfort a lot of families and friends over the years, friends who have lost loved ones, the families of interns injured or killed in the line of duty. Cecil has never been on the other end of things, but keeping vigil with others’ loved ones is a role he is quite familiar with. Night Vale might be his home and he would never dream of living anywhere else, but it is not kind to the health of its citizens. These people, though, are outsiders. They are different, ill prepared, for Night Vale. Well, maybe not Carlos, he thinks. So far, Carlos has seemed rather resilient. He hopes it lasts.

The longer no one speaks, the more sure Cecil is that he should not be here. He's just thinking of making a discreet exit, when Lei's stomach makes a loud gurgling noise. There's a second of shock from everyone in the waiting room, and then a bubbling laugh escapes Becky's mouth at Lei's embarrassed face. It breaks some of the nervous tension in the room.

“I'm guessing none of you have eaten?” Cecil asks. There are collective mumbles of being busy, working on experiments, and Cecil thinks scientists forgetting meals is probably a regular occurrence. “I know where the vending machines are. You guys wait here and I'll bring you all some snacks.”

Carlos moves to stand with him. “I'll go with you.” Cecil leads the way, winding through the halls like it's his home. When they get to the vending machines, they each dig through their pockets for dollars and change and start making selections.

As Carlos presses the buttons for E-3, Cecil looks over at the tired scientist. “Are you okay?”

He takes a deep breath, letting it out in a long slow exhale and scrubbing his free hand over his unshaven face. “I have to be, for their sake.” He leans down to get a packet of crackers out of the
slot of the machine. When he stands up, he goes back to staring at the possible selections. “We'll just have to get through this. She'll go back to Massachusetts to recover, and the rest of us will just have to carry on.” Three more quarters are slid into the machine, the buttons for H-1 pressed. “Science waits for no one.”

This time when his selection drops, Carlos doesn't lean over to pick it up. He just keeps staring at the machine. It takes Cecil a moment to realize he's staring at his own reflection. Or, maybe, he's not seeing anything at all. “Hey,” he says, putting a hand on Carlos' upper arm. It makes the other man snap back from wherever he had gone. “It could have been a lot worse, Carlos. Just focus on that. One thing at a time. It's what I do with the interns.”

Carlos' eyes widen at that. “Oh, oh Cecil! I completely forgot! You lost Leland today...oh, I'm sorry!”

“Yes, well. Weep for the living, not the dead. The living still have much to suffer. I think that's how the saying goes. Anyway, you have your own crisis to worry about.” Cecil bends down to get the peanut butter M&M's Carlos had picked from the slot. “Let's get this stuff back to the others. You'll all feel better once you've got some food in you.” Carlos follows Cecil's steps all the way back to the waiting room, glad to let someone else do the leading even for just a minute. Cecil hands out snacks to the others in the room and takes a seat, declining their offer to share. They talk quietly for another twenty minutes between bites, and then they hear the echoes of foot falls across the floor. Matt, Gwen, and Joanna burst in, and the group erupts into discussion relating the events up till this point.

For some reason having the whole group of scientists together is more intimidating than just the four, and Cecil suddenly feels like an intruder. He decides its time to make that retreat. “I'm going to head out; I have to be on the air early tomorrow,” he says, rising from his chair. They all thank him and bid him farewell, Billy going so far as to shake his hand. It makes Cecil feel uncomfortable, but he isn't sure why. Carlos stands and walks with him to the elevator. “Let me know how she's doing?” Cecil asks.

“Oh of course. I'll call the station tomorrow.” The elevator doors open and Cecil steps in.

“Oh, um, sorry about the Children's Fun Fact Science Corner. I know you were disappointed.”

Carlos makes a pained face. “I shouldn't have said those things, I—“

“It's alright,” Cecil says, and the doors start to close. Carlos' hand shoots out to stop them.
“Next time, I won't be busy,” he says. He's looking Cecil in the eye, sincere, and there is a definite weight to his words. It makes Cecil feel warm inside. His smile stays respectfully small until the doors slide shut, then it breaks out into a grin. He'll have to plan to have Children's Fun Fact Science Corner more often.

Chapter End Notes

Russian translations for Michael Sandereaux:

Смотрите прямо вперед, пожалуйста. - Look straight forward, please


Мне очень жаль, доктор. – I'm sorry, Doctor.

Там нет ничего для вас, чтобы извиниться за, Михаила. Это не ваша вина. Мы сделаем все от нас зависящее, чтобы получить вещи в нормальное состояние – There's nothing for you to apologize for, Michael. It's not your fault. We will do everything we can to get things back to normal.

Ну, может быть не нормально – Well, maybe not normal

Сэр, вы думаете все можно сделать по этому поводу? Я не уверен, что хочу провести остаток своей жизни, подключенного к ... ну, к нему. Или ... Я не собираюсь умирать, я? - Sir, do you think anything can be done about this? I'm not sure I want to spend the rest of his life connected to the ... Well, to him. Or ... I'm not going to die, am I?

Нет, вы не умрете – No, you will not die.

Мы соберемся сделать все от нас зависящее, я могу обещать вам, что. - We're going to do everything we can, I can promise you that.

I apologize if the translations aren't exact, I tried my best!
“I hate to break this to you, but you are not, in fact, Iron Man. You don't have to subject us all to AC/DC for hours on end.”

“As long as Matt and Lei keep whining about it, I have to keep playing it. Put the solder along the edge.”

“Where, here?”

“Yeah, but don't go too close to that wire. And I am more Iron Man that you will ever be. But with a good dash of bad ass Pepper Potts thrown in.”

“You do rock the stilettos with startling efficiency.”

“Jealous?”

“Abbey, I have as much appreciation for a man in heels as the next guy—“

“That isn't very much. Or did you grow up somewhere a lot less bigoted than me? Because I'm pretty sure most of the dude-bros I went to school with—“

“Okay, I have more of an appreciation for a man in heels than the next guy, but I'm self-aware enough to know that we are all better off with them on the feet of other men, and not my own.”

“Spoken like a man with experience. Any sordid stories worth sharing?”

“You couldn't get me drunk enough to share my sordid stories with you.”

“That, sir, sounds like a challenge. I'll keep that in mind if we can ever get you out on the town for
the night. Weld those to the casing there, there, and there.” There's a crackling noise and a small shower of sparks. “Nice. Are you sure you haven't secretly become an electrician or a welder on the side?”

“Clandestine engineer? I think I would remember that.” Another explosion of light, longer this time. “There, how's that?”

“Flawless. Seriously. This is really good for a first-timer. When did you learn this?”

“I did some reading while you were in the hospital, borrowed some of your books. I hope you don't mind.”

“With welds like these? Hell no, I don't mind. I might just hire you full time. Now, help me strap this thing on and we'll give it a whirl.”

The casing around the circuitry closes with a snap and Carlos pulls off his welding gloves and goggles before checking that all the edges fit together smoothly. Beside him, Abbey pushes her stool back from the workbench and takes off the loose t-shirt she’s wearing, her skin prickling with goosebumps as she sits in her sports bra in the cold workroom and presents the remnants of her left arm to Carlos. He looks at the layers of wrapping doubtfully.

“Are you sure we can put this much pressure on your...stump this soon?” Carlos asks, barely stumbling over the word this time as he gestures to where the prosthetic arm will press against her bandages. In the hospital waiting room he and the other scientists had discussed just how they should refer to Abbey's missing limb once she woke up. Harris had insisted that anything other than 'residual limb' would offend her, but Lei had countered that Abbey was probably the least easy to offend out all of them and would most likely laugh at them for even debating the issue. Carlos had secretly agreed with Lei—Abbey was more likely to offend someone else with her own inability to feel shame than to be offended by descriptors. It was all for nothing in the end, as she cleared up that question within ten minutes of waking up and realizing what had happened.

“Guys, I'm going to need a sketchpad and someone to keep it steady while I brainstorm. No, never mind, just get me a clamp, you lot probably wouldn't be able to hold it still, anyway. This stump's going to be the base for the most amazing mechanical arm you've ever seen, and I need to get started.”

Abbey nods at Carlos' question, “It should be fine; there's plenty of padding and I'm still on painkillers. I'll tell you if it hurts.”
Carlos picks up the prosthetic arm gingerly, though there's hardly a need to be gentle with it. This one, Prototype C, is temporary, just something Abbey can use in the interim as she designs something more in line with her taxing standards. Prototypes A and B had each had their share of problems, either unwieldy or uncomfortable. The metal, wood, and plastic parts of Prototype C have all been appropriated from the first two prosthetic limbs, lab equipment, appliances, a few parts from the hardware store, a thing or two donated from Cecil and Dana, and a rather difficult to find part that only turned up because Cecil asked his radio audience for help. He can't pretend to understand all the mechanics that went into the piece, having learned each concept and principle as they went, and he's never been happier to be a quick study. Carlos thinks the cobbled together arm looks like something from a steampunk cosplay, a comment that earned him a wide and delighted smile from Abbey when he first mentioned it.

For now, he helps Abbey ease the prosthetic arm onto the end of her real arm. She holds it in place while he wraps the canvas straps around her torso, tightening each one to a comfortable but secure position before fastening them in place with safety pins. It's crude but effective.

“How does that feel?” Carlos asks.

“Not bad. A little tighter there?” After he pulls the strap at her back and reattaches the safety pin, he moves back so he can get a good look at her. She moves her arm and the prosthetic follows, jerky but responsive. The elbow bends and the hand raises to wave at Carlos, the fingers crooking at the joints, and they break into matching grins. “It works! I can't believe it!” She jumps forward and gives him a hug, the prosthetic jabbing him in the side but he is too pleased to mind.

“This is just the beginning,” Carlos assures her. “We'll send out for better materials, whatever tools you need. I know you're bent on doing this yourself, but I don't want you to be stifled by our resources here. Or lack there of.”

“Well, I wouldn't have it much better back home, anyway. I might be closer to Iron Man, but I could really use Tony Stark's bank account.” She surveys the scattered debris on the work bench, then tries to pick up a flat head screwdriver, but it slips from between her new fingers. “We might need to add a coating that helps with grip.”

Carlos nods and makes a note with a toothpick dipped in ink on one of the many sheets of paper strewn about the messy workspace. Abbey's portion of the lab is set apart from the rest of the scientists due to the often loud, messy, and highly flammable tools she uses. Her space is a smaller room just next to the back porch, though her work often spills out into the back of the lot. Since her return from the hospital, Carlos has found himself spending most of his free time back in this little room, engrossed in helping Abbey build her prosthetic limb. He even cut some of his lab time short, something unheard of for one Doctor Carlos Abaroa, and the other scientists look at Abbey
with something akin to awe over the achievement. Abbey's disability made it impossible for her to use a good portion of the heavy equipment, so Carlos has been doing the manual labor in the construction of her prosthetic. He is determined to get her as self-sufficient as possible. The only one more dedicated to the cause is Abbey herself.

Frankly, Carlos is just glad she lived.

Harris and the surgeon had come out to speak with the group about an hour after Cecil left the hospital that night. The amputation of Abbey's left arm may as well have been done with a scalpel, the Shape from Grove Park destroying the flesh and bone with startling precision. She had gone into shock because of extreme blood loss, but the medical team had been able to save her with the help of a lot of transfusions. Well, according to the surgeon, a series of incantations and the sacrifice of a young calf had also been involved. Harris confirmed this, but refused to believe that it did anything other than waste their time and put her more at risk. He had been too relieved and exhausted to do more than gripe over that particular Night Valean oddity, though, still smiling when they delivered the news. The doctor had insisted that the group go home and get some rest, as she wouldn't be awake for hours, and all but Carlos and Harris had taken his advice. Harris privately whispered to his boss that he refused to leave Abbey in the hands of an inferior medical staff before stalking off in the direction the surgeon had gone, leaving Carlos alone with his thoughts.

That first tremulous night, after the elevator doors slid closed on the sight of his exhausted team, Carlos had sat alone in the waiting room and let the fear he'd held at bay finally wash over him. The only other time he had ever seen something like that had been in the dorms back in undergrad, when one of the upperclassmen tried to jump the rail in the stairwell and clipped the corner of the railing on the flight below with his stomach, sending him crashing to the bottom floor. That time, the only screaming had been from the group of freshmen he'd landed in front of, as he had blessedly been knocked unconscious. Carlos, who had been at the back of the group and trying desperately to get the tall boy that lived across from him on the fifth floor hall to notice him, had been shocked but had not screamed, instead darting forward to check the boy's pulse and shout for someone to call 911. After, he had washed the blood from his hands with a sort of clinical detachment, his thoughts more focused on the fact that the boy from across the hall had vomited at the sight of all that blood than the fact that he was covered in someone's lifeblood. It had just been a random occurrence, and it had been exciting but not emotional—nothing like this.

This was personal, and deep, and Carlos was not sure how to handle it at all. He had not lost anyone close to him since he was twelve years old. Not that he would call his and Abbey's relationship close, of course. They are colleagues, he'd even go as far to say friends at this point, and Carlos is her boss for the purposes of this appointment. If something like this had happened in Arkham—but let's be honest, nothing like this would ever happen in Arkham—it would be shocking and sad, but Carlos wouldn't think much on it beyond that. She would just be a fellow scientist that had an unfortunate accident. In fact, he would probably be more interested in investigating the root cause, rather than Abbey's well being.
Here, in Night Vale, so far removed from anything normal despite their efforts to make it so, her injury means far more than the unfortunate accident of a colleague. This little group, his team, has bonded in ways that Carlos never expected, especially after the early desertion of Tim and Aarav. He thinks of them all as his own, now. They are his responsibility. That, he thought as he sat in that waiting room gripping his hair tight enough to break, might be a very dangerous responsibility to have in this town. He thought he'd been prepared for that, before, but Night Vale has a way of making you second-guess a lot of things you thought you knew.

The night had eventually passed into day, his team had come back to stand vigil over their fallen friend, and Abbey had awoken, groggy and disoriented but alive. No one was more relieved by that than Carlos.

It had been the assumption of everyone involved that she would be sent back to Arkham, but Abbey had outright refused. In fact, she had been adamant in her decision, and lashed out at anyone who so much as hinted at it, shut them down before they could even formulate a response. There had been a lot of curses thrown, even more shouting, and one thrown and shattered flower pot. Carlos had watched and listened to all of this in silence before telling everyone to let he and Abbey speak in private. Laying in her hospital bed and covered in bandages, her face had been full of rebellion. So had her voice.

“I don't care what any of you say! I didn't come all this way to be bullied out! If you think for one second I'm going to let you send me off to—“

“I'm not sending you anywhere,” Carlos interrupted, calm and quiet. His demeanor had derailed her righteous indignation, and she stalled with her mouth open. When she didn't answer, he continued, “According to your contract, I have every right to send you home. You're injured, compromised, and it isn't safe for you here. When I report this to Miskatonic, they'll want you home immediately. Demand it, in all honesty. The lawyers will say you're a liability.” He cut off her protests with a raised hand. “That being said, the only thing you are is injured, and injuries heal. I don't believe you are any of those other things. You are an adult, one that can make her own decisions. You are also a dedicated scientist, which you have proved to me a number of times since you've been here. You don't strike me as the type that would let this or anything else stop you. You're also loud, and stubborn...and you make bad decisions. You wouldn't be in Night Vale otherwise.” That startles a laugh out of Abbey, a shaky one she can't keep down. “If you don't want to leave, I can respect that. I know if I was in your position, I would feel the same way.”

Carlos moves forward and sits in the chair next to her bed. His voice becomes deadly serious. “You need to be sure, though, Abbey. No one will fault you if you go. You can go back to Arkham, get the care you need, see specialists, rest somewhere safe. The University will take care of you. Or, you can stay here in Night Vale and take all that comes with it.” He lets that sink in, before continuing, “So, I'm asking you. What would you like to do?”
Abbey's eyes slide to the window along the side wall as she considers Carlos' words. He can't help but notice that the window is covered in bars, and he vaguely wonders if this used to be the psych ward or if all the windows at Night Vale General are covered like that. After a few minutes she looks back at him with tears standing in her eyes. Her voice is just above a wavering whisper when she next speaks. “I didn't get this far by making good decisions.”

They share a small, private smile, and Carlos nods, decision made. He gets up and makes his way to the door.

“I know...a lot of people that lose, er, that have a disability...people think they're done. That they can't do anything worthwhile anymore. Or they give up because it's too much.” Her voice hardened. “That isn't going to be me.”

“I know,” Carlos replies, and that was that.

The only one who had pushed the issue was Harris, verbally and at great volume, but he couldn't make Carlos send Abbey home, and he couldn't convince her to leave. For now, he and Abbey are not on speaking terms save for the few minutes a day when she allows him to check her wound for infection. If it goes on much longer Carlos thinks he will have to intervene, for the team's sake as well as his own.

Carlos stretches and glances at his watch. “Ugh. It's after four. Do you want me to help take that off so you can go to sleep?”

“Nah, I'm not tired. Too keyed up, I think.”

“Yeah, me too. Try to pick up this bolt.”

They've both hit that odd stage where you're physically exhausted but mentally wide awake, energized but nowhere to focus the excess energy. Carlos finds himself picking up objects at random for Abbey to practice grabbing with her new arm, and the conversation jumps randomly from subject to subject.

“So, you can appreciate a man in heels, huh? Any man's? Or just one in particular?”

Carlos groans, “Come on, not you too...”
“Yes, me too! He does have long, long legs. I bet they'd look great in—”

“Don't. Just don't.”

“—heels, maybe pumps! You could get him matching stockings!”

“Hey!” Carlos says, loud but not angry. “I have to look this man in the eye, you know!”

She lets out a gusty sigh. “You're just jealous he brought me flowers,” she says with a dreamy smile, gesturing toward the now-wilted bouquet sitting in a vase near the cloudy little window on one wall. Even Carlos, who has never really given much thought to flowers or their beauty beyond the beauty all things possess from a scientific perspective, could admire the speckled white and red blooms on their delicate black stalks. Cecil said they were called Hecatomb Lilies, and they really were quite lovely if you overlooked the fact that they looked blood-splattered. Several of the blooms were removed from the vase for analysis on the day Cecil and Dana dropped them off at the hospital, along with a Get Well Soon balloon and a card signed by both of them and a paw print courtesy of Khoshekh. Cecil had also said that Station Management sent its regards, and apologized for its blood lust—there's a reason they don't allow massive blood loss in the station, after all. It's in the employee manual.

“I'm not jealous. That's...that's ridiculous. I mean, they're just flowers, they aren't even—and how many times do I have to say that I'm just not interested?”

“When are you going to admit that is a complete fabrication?”

“It isn't!”

“Carlos. Please. Lei and I took that seminar on reading microexpressions that they offered last year from that guest lecturer, Williamson. You can deny all you'd like to the others, but we can read you like an open book.” She watches Carlos' mouth falls open, shocked and embarrassed and momentarily speechless. “You aren't exactly good at hiding it.”

“But I—you can—really? You can really tell?” Carlos splutters.
Abbey laughs, delighted. “No! Of course not! But you just told me!” Carlos' face contorts in outrage and he flings a filthy oil-stained rag at her.

“I am never talking to you again!” He drops his head into his arms on the table top, his shoulders shaking with silent laughter. His exhaustion has left him feeling giddy and horrified and exposed all at the same time. Maybe it's the lateness—or earliness if you want to argue, time being relative—or maybe its just this place, the way Night Vale leaves you raw and vulnerable in the oddest ways, but Carlos finds he doesn't so much mind that Abbey can read him like a book, with or without involuntary facial ticks. He's been holding this in since that first day, and he might not be ready to admit it completely, but it is nice to acknowledge it, if only in the wee hours of the morning, if only a little. He can always blame it on exhaustion. So he raises his head and peeks at her from over the line of his lab coat sleeve, and he can see her giving him a fond grin at his embarrassment. “Okay...so...maybe.”

“Maybe?”

“Just...maybe.”

Abbey reaches over with her good arm and ruffles his messy hair. “It's a start, at least. And I won't say anything to the others, I promise. No pushing.” Her voice is warm and welcoming, but he still looks at her with a raised eyebrow, incredulous. “Okay, minimal pushing. And if you ever want to talk about it, just say the word. We can take some piece of machinery out into the desert and do some tests,” she says, making air quotes with her fingers. The movements of the index and middle fingers of her left hand are a few steps behind those on the right. “I'll bring the science, you bring something absolutely delicious from that kitchen of yours, and we'll go out and gossip about men with long legs and tight asses.”

That shocks a laugh out of Carlos, and despite feeling that the whole endeavor would be much more humiliating for him than for her, he nods his head in agreement. “You've got a deal. And I'm really not that good a cook. I don't know why you all think that I am.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? You're like some sort of Mexican Morimoto!”

“Mori...what?”

“Masaharu Morimoto? From Iron Chef?” At Carlos' blank stare, she gasps. “You've never seen Iron Chef?”
Carlos shakes his head. “No, I don't usually watch cooking—“

“We are watching this right now!” she shouts, grabbing Carlos by the arm and dragging him up off the stool. “Come on, move your ass! Upstairs! We can watch it on my laptop while you make us breakfast.”

“Breakfast? But—hey! Ow, don't pinch!” She apologizes, realizing her prosthetic had grabbed him a little too hard by the skin. Abbey manhandles him up the stairs, trying to keep their giggles to a minimum as they swing by her room for her laptop on silent feet, aware of their still-sleeping colleagues, before climbing the stairs to Carlos' apartment. She makes herself at home at the little island that separates the kitchen from the living room while he stands at the open fridge, looking lost for a moment. “Any requests?”

“Something cheesy? I don't care, you always make something good. As long as it isn't that green shit Harris keeps trying to force feed me.” One of the many points of contention between the two, Harris has been trying to get Abbey to eat healthier since she just suffered a major loss of limb. He has spoken at length about how a healthy diet will help...well, the most thought Carlos has put into the healthiness of a meal has been to check that the expiration date hasn't passed on milk. He generally tunes out most of the things Harris starts to lecture about if it isn't life-threatening. This includes the myriad of recipes he's forced them all to try, one of which is some sort of health smoothie that Carlos knows tastes of Greek yogurt and grass clippings. On the other end of the spectrum, Abbey is convinced that a brush with death means she should eat as much unhealthy food as possible—live life to the fullest and all that. A cheesy vegetable omelet is a good compromise, he thinks, and he's pleased to see he has the ingredients to make it happen. She clicks through her bookmarks while Carlos pulls out a carton of eggs and a bag of cheddar cheese, putting them on the counter before going back for peppers, onions, tomatoes, cilantro and some fruit that Carlos picked up at the Ralph's that he thinks might be related to a lime. After giving the vegetables a quick wash, he pulls out a cutting board and begins to chop. Abbey watches the rapid movements of his hands with the same look of fascination all the scientists adopt when watching Carlos in the kitchen. Even Harris, who is unerringly precise with a scalpel. “Do you need any help?”

Carlos looks at the knife in his hand, then at Abbey's prosthetic limb. “Oh no. I don't think so. You're going to have to get a little more practice in before I let you use a knife.” She scowls at him, and he relents, “You can attempt to crack some eggs, but if you mess up too many you owe me a carton.”

Abbey jumps to her feet and takes a bowl down from one of the cabinets. She has to have Carlos help pull her long blonde hair into a loose pony tail before she starts. “Maybe I should get my hair cut; it would be a lot easier until I get used to this thing.”

“I'm not sure where you'll get it done,” Carlos replies, running his hands through the short locks of
hair atop his own head. “The only guy I knew about is out of business.”

“And out of town,” she laughs. “I can't believe they ran him off like that, just because of something Cecil said.”

Carlos wrinkles his nose. He had felt awful when he heard about what happened to Telly the barber, but really, his haircuts left something to be desired. He really had cut it far closer than Carlos preferred, and it was lopsided. It had required Carlos to come home and trim it even more so it would be even. “At first I thought it was just a joke, but he's really gone. I feel bad. Maybe he just moved away.”

“I heard that he was driven mad and is out in the desert somewhere. There has to be someone else, they can't just have one person that cuts hair in town. Surely there's a salon somewhere...” Abbey trails off, concentrating on the arduous task of cracking eggs like a child with a new toy. She doesn't make a complete mess of it, and Carlos is pleased that when she shatters one between her mechanical fingers, yolk flinging in every direction, she laughs rather than treating it as a failure. Once a sufficient number of eggs have been released from their shells, he hands her a fork for whisking, which is a task she doesn't need much practice to master. After that she retreats to her stool to watch him cook two large, fluffy vegetable omelets that ooze cheese when she cuts into hers. He tops both plates with a scoop each of salsa and sour cream. They sit at the little bar eating breakfast and Abbey introduces him to the wonders of Iron Chef as the rising sun shines in through the thinly curtained windows.

Two and a half hours later, they've stacked their plates in the sink and moved to the couch, the laptop propped on the coffee table. On the screen Morimoto is creating stained glass sushi.

“That is beautiful,” Carlos mumbles before falling silent again. Abbey can't help the pleased smile that alights her features, knowing she has successfully converted Carlos to being an Iron Chef fan. In her lap is one of Carlos' boots which she has untied for the purposes of practicing with her prosthetic. Luckily she's seen every episode of Iron Chef, some multiple times, and can put most of her focus towards manipulating her mechanical fingers.

They watch for a few more minutes before a thought crosses her mind. “Hey, did you hear what Cecil said yesterday about the blackouts we're supposed to have today?” she asks, trying to hold the strings in a loop.

“Yeah, that was...weird.”

“Do you have your pictures?”
Carlos scoffs. “Abbey, please don't tell me you're buying into that.”

“If you would have asked me two months ago, I would have said he was making things up for the sake of an entertaining show. But he hasn't been wrong since we got here.” Abbey huffs when the string slips from her grip and she has to start over.

“Three days ago he said if listeners didn’t replace their hair conditioner with tomato paste they would be possessed by malevolent spirits from beyond the known universe,” he says, deadpan. The silence stretches just long enough for him to look up at her guilty face. “Oh. Oh, Abbey, tell me you didn't!”

“Better safe than sorry, Carlos! I've had enough bad luck recently, I didn't want to take any chances!” She fingers her hair self-consciously. At his continued stare, she relents. “He said the next day that it was an error on the part of the City Council, so it's not his fault. He hasn't been wrong about most things.”

Carlos looks back at the laptop screen, watching Chef Symon's team make asparagus doughnuts, and the only sounds for a little while are the clatter of pots and pans and the timbre of Alton Brown's voice coming from the little speakers.

“I don't have any pictures,” Carlos says, seemingly at random.

Abbey looks at him in confusion, having forgotten the original question. “What?”

“For the blackouts; I don't have any pictures.” He turns to look at her and catches her sad expression. “Hey, no. It's fine. I mean, I might have had something packed away back in Arkham, but I don't...you know, dwell on things like that.”

“You don't even have one? Of your parents?”

“No,” he says. There's a note of finality to it that he hopes Abbey picks up. This is not a subject he plans on sharing with any member of his team, no matter how chummy they might be getting. Judging by her sudden interest in the hem of her t-shirt, he thinks he succeeded a little to well. “What about you?” he asks instead, dropping the icy tone. “Do you need to get some from downstairs?”
She pulls out a flip book style photo album from the baggy pocket of her sweat pants. “Here, want to see?” Abbey scoots closer and Carlos is introduced to Mark and Jessica Novak, Grandma Ethel and Grandpa Irving, and a slew of uncles, aunts and cousins that Carlos has no chance of ever remembering. The apparent joy that Abbey has when looking at her childhood photos is contagious, though it becomes obvious that both her parents are no longer living. There are no pictures of Abbey and her immediate family from after her high school graduation, and she refers to them in the past tense. His curiosity flares only slightly, though, and he keeps his questions to himself, just as she had. Some wounds don't need to be reopened.

Abbey is just launching into a story about her cousin Carmine, who she is so proud of for skipping a grade and who Abbey not-so-secretly hopes will go into science, when they hear a sharp shrieking noise overhead and everything goes black.

Carlos blinks at the harsh lights, eyes adjusting to the sudden brightness. No, adjusting to the return of light, the presence of light after its absence. Carlos. He thinks that's his name. He isn't certain. His hands feel...odd. He looks down at them. They look like his hands, or are they too large? No, too brown? Or not brown enough? Was he always this dark-skinned? Or is it light-skinned? He rubs the skin of his fingertips together, the sensation feeling much more heightened than he can remember. Can he remember ever feeling his hands before?

His head feels dizzy and light, and he is hyper aware of the hair brushing the tips of his ears, the weight of his jeans on his thighs, the scratch of the upholstery at his back. His mouth feels tacky, held closed for too long and an odd aftertaste coats his tongue. The room feels too big, or too small, too something that isn't right. Maybe it isn't the room at all, he thinks. Maybe it's him, his presence in the room, that's incongruous. Standing on shaking legs, he's vaguely aware of the sounds coming from the laptop on the table, someone else in the room, but these details are of no importance. He stumbles as he moves through the apartment, possessions that are his and yet not his swimming before his eyes in a riot of color, his balance shot—is this what it's like for a blind man to suddenly see? Is that what this is? Was he blind, before this very moment? Everything looks and feels so much more vivid, so real compared to this body he's in. It can't be his own, can it?

Carlos practically falls through the door to the roof, collapsing to the ground as the bright morning light makes every color that much more saturated. It's the way he thinks being drunk must feel, if he's ever been drunk, which he can't remember. He makes his way to the building's edge on hands and knees, looking out at the unfamiliar town sprawled out below, a collection of buildings he should know but does not. It's almost nauseating, the disconnect between who he is now and who he thought he was, and he ducks his head to suck in air just beginning to thicken in the desert heat.
Is he back in Mexico? No, no, he hasn't been there in years...or was he never there at all? Pinpricks of panic dance up his spine, the hairs on the backs of his arms standing on end at the thought. What if...what if none of that was real? What if his abuelos...what if they aren't...what if they were never...

He thinks he's hyperventilating.

“Por favor,” he gasps, unsure of the language or if the words he's speaking are even really words, casting about for someone who knows, who can tell him if he is who he thinks he is, but he is alone on the roof. His heart rate is skyrocketing out of control. “Por favor, alguien! No puedo...” Carlos grips hard on the edge of concrete under his fingers, sucking in breaths like a man drowning. To the south he spots the blinking red light of a radio tower in the distance. It blinks in a steady, even rhythm. On. Off. On. Off.

_Focus, Carlos._

His heart is just beginning to return to a normal rhythm when someone touches his shoulders, gently. “Carlos?” So, he was right about that. He turns and looks at a blonde woman, concern written all over her face. He's distantly aware that the sun has moved higher in the sky. “Carlos, it's me. Abbey. Are you okay?”

_Abbey, Abbey Novak from Maryland, Abbey the engineer, Abbey who has good taste in music, Abbey lost her arm and it's all my fault, Abbey._

He shakes his head. No, he is not okay. Nothing is okay. “¿Quién soy yo?”

“Oh, Carlos, please,” she says, shaking her head. “I can't speak Spanish, oh please. Can you remember English?”

Right. Right, he can...he can speak English. He can speak six languages, fluently. He can feel his muscles tensing as he concentrates, determined to get the words out right. “Who...where are...?”

She takes him by the hand and helps him stand. “You're a scientist. From Miskatonic University in Arkham, Massachusetts. Do you remember?”

A scientist? Really? That sounds right but it doesn't at all, but he's wearing a white coat. A lab
coat? It must be true, then, right? He doesn't feel like a scientist. Shouldn't a scientist be able to remember things like this? Shouldn't they remember facts and statistics and equations and...surely that isn't him? “A scientist?” he asks, accent heavy, voice nothing more than a tremor of the vocal chords.

“Yes, a research scientist. We're in Night Vale. Remember? You brought us here, for research. See?” Abbey points out with her mechanized arm, a sweeping motion that encompasses everything beyond the roof’s edge. “Do you remember Night Vale?”

His eyes look back at the town, Night Vale, he now remembers. Night Vale, New Mexico, or so they think. That's his car in the parking lot, collecting dust. There's Big Rico's, they have to eat there once a week, it's council mandated. There's the radio tower, over everything, Cecil's tower—

Just like that, it all comes back, as cliché as a light bulb turning on over his head. He'll hate himself for that comparison when he's done appreciating feeling whole again.

Carlos breathes out a relieved sigh, the corners of his mouth tilting upward. “N sub t equals N sub zero e to the negative minus lambda t,” he says, relishing in the certainty, the comfort of knowledge settling around him like a blanket.

Abbey gives him a worried look. “Please tell me you know where you are, because if I can't speak Spanish, I damn sure can't speak whatever that was.”

“The formula for radioactive decay. And I'm okay, I'm alright now,” he replies, rubbing his eyes wearily. They feel like he's been staring at the sun, and he vaguely remembers watching the radio station’s tower light for a while. He wonders how long he went without blinking. “How long was I out of it?”

“I'm not sure,” she says around a yawn. “I sat there looking through the photo album for a while, but it seemed like forever and no time at all. And then I talked to you for a bit before you acknowledged me.”

Carlos stretches his shoulders, wishing he had gotten some sleep that night. “We need to check on the others,” he says. Together they head downstairs in search of the rest of the team. On the second floor, Billy is standing in the doorway to his shared room, gripping a framed photo of his girlfriend back home in one hand and the door frame in the other, his chain and dreadlocks tangled together from running his hands through his hair. He looks tired but pleased. “Are you okay?” Carlos asks when they draw near.
“Y-Yeah, just...a little disoriented,” he says. “Matt snapped me out of it.” Billy moves back so that they can look into his room. Matt sits on his side of the room, wearing a pair of boxers and a fantastic case of bedhead.

“Hey!” The blonde man shouts, yanking his blankets over his lap. “Warn a guy, yeah?”

“Son of a bitch wasn't even awake during the power outage. Woke up just fine.”

Matt grins cheekily at them, laughing. “Years of sleeping past the alarm clock finally pay off. Now, get the hell out of my room so I can change.”

“Prude,” Billy snarks before closing the door behind him.

They find Gwen and Becky huddled together in their room, the floor between their beds littered with pictures and photo albums, their families and friends intermingled. Becky keeps running her fingers over the image of an Australian Cattle Dog (who they later learn was Watson, her childhood pet and the reason she wanted to be a veterinarian when she was little) while Gwen keeps running her fingers through Becky's hair. Harris is down in the lab, curled in a corner with a stack of medical books in his lap, reading anatomical terms out loud in what almost sounds like a trance. He snaps out of it quickly enough when Carlos starts asking leading questions about their recent cases, Michael Sandereaux’s in particular, and Harris’ sheer irritation at the boy brings him back to reality.

“Has no one seen Joanna or Lei?” Carlos asks to the scientists gathered in the lab.

“Joanna said something about leaving early this morning and heading out to the Sand Wastes,” Gwen says. “But I don't know if she left before the power went out.”

“Okay, someone call her, see if you can get a hold of her. Or look around, she might not have made it out of here. Everyone else look for Lei.” The group shuffles off in different directions, some of them still not entirely awake. Carlos and Matt head up the stairs and check Lei's room, but there isn't any evidence that he is missing.

“His phone is still here,” Matt says, picking it up from its place on the bedside table. “It's still charging. He wouldn't leave without it, no matter who he imagines he is.”
It's then that Carlos catches the sound of running water through the wall. “Shit,” he curses, making his way out of the room and over to the next. He knocks on the bathroom door. “Lei! Lei, are you alright in there?” he calls. They listen intently, straining to hear any movement on the other side. “Lei!” Carlos calls again, knocking harder. Nothing but the sound of the shower answers. He tries the knob but the door is locked.

“Move back,” Matt says, and when Carlos is clear, he slams his shoulder into the wood.

“Lei! Lei, answer us! Lei!” Carlos shouts. It takes Matt another five strikes for the door to give way with a loud crack and he tumbles into the bathroom, cutting his hand on a wood shard. The mirror is foggy and steam hangs in the air as Carlos forces his way past Matt and over to the shower cubicle. The communal shower is an enclosed tiled space with a glassed-in wall and door. Through the frosted glass, Carlos can make out olive skin curled small in one corner. He opens the door without another thought.

Lei sits, nude, knees drawn to his chest and arms wrapped tight around them in a white-knuckled clutch. His face looks ashen under the soaking wet bangs plastered to his forehead and covering his closed eyes. On the ground by his feet is an open bottle of shampoo, oozing clear gel onto the white tile flooring as the water sprays down. His body shivers violently, and Carlos realizes that the water has long run cold.

“Shit, Lei,” Carlos says, reaching to pull the man out of the freezing shower, unmindful of the water as it soaks his clothes to his body. Lei comes willingly enough, though Carlos isn't actually sure that he is aware of what's going on. The skin beneath Carlos' fingers is like ice and he reaches for the bright aqua towel Lei brought with him into the bathroom. “We have to get him warm, he's going to get hypothermia,” he says. Looking over at Matt, he sees that the other man is pressing a wad of toilet paper to his hand that is quickly saturating with blood. “And you need first aid, I see. Go get Harris.”

Matt grumbles as he leaves, and Carlos turns back to Lei, rubbing hard with the towel to generate some friction. “Come on, Lei. You've got to snap out of it. Hey!” Carlos gives the man a soft shake, his dark eyes finally focusing on Carlos' own lighter brown. “Listen to me. You're Lei Yang. Okay? Lei Yang, originally from Los Angeles. Your parents are from Taiwan but I...I can't remember their names. You have an older sister, um, Mei, Mei-ling? Yes, Mei-ling! She's a...a lawyer of some sort. She used to pick you up, turn you upside down and tickle you, and you hated it! You said you talked to her online a few days ago, and she had a big surprise she wanted to tell you about, but only when you came home to visit. And...and...and you're a cultural anthropologist, and you moved to Arkham two years ago to work at the university there. Miskatonic University. And now, you're here, in Night Vale, with the team, because y-you talked your way onto the team, you just wouldn't-wouldn't shut up, with the phone calls and the emails and randomly showing up at my office. You r-really didn't need to do that, though, I really didn't need that much persuasion, because-because you're a good scientist, really, even if I don't understand a lot of the social
sciences, or any of them, actually. But the work you presented was really good, from the beginning, and...um. Are you hearing any of this?”

The room is silent in the wake of Carlos' rambling echoing speech except for the sound of dripping water and Lei's stuttering breaths. Still, he's kept his eyes on Carlos, and recognition slowly settles into his eyes. “You r-r-eally think I'm a-a g-good-d scientist?” Lei asks, voice a jumbled mess as he shakes.

Carlos laughs and grabs another towel, one of the generic white ones in the cabinet, and throws it over Lei's head. “You weren't lost at all, just fishing for praise,” he jokes. Lei laughs in a jittery sort of way, pulling the towels tighter around his naked body. His hands are clenched so hard that he can't seem to relax them, and says as much to Carlos. “Come on, let's get you warmed up.”

Harris comes up the stairs as they exit the bathroom, Matt following behind now with gauze pressed to the cut on his hand. Lei's feet make wet slapping noises on the floor as Harris herds him into his bedroom and under a mountain of blankets. He fusses over both injured men, as he is wont to do, so Carlos slips out of the room. His clothes are now uncomfortably stuck to his body, not to mention filthy from the previous day and night, so he dashes up to his apartment and changes into something clean. Billy, Gwen, and Becky are waiting on him when he comes back to the first floor.

“No answer from Joanna,” Gwen says, rubbing her arms in a gesture that Carlos has come to recognize as a nervous tick.

“Yeah, and one of the cars is not in the lot,” adds Billy. “Would she even be affected all the way out there?”

“We don't know if she made it there at all,” Carlos says, bracing his hands on his hips as he thinks out loud. “First, we're assuming she's the one who took the car. If she was in it at the time of the black out, she could have driven anywhere, and afterward abandoned it completely. And since we don't really know what's causing this...momentary identity displacement...we can't assume she would be out of range.”

“I can head out there and look for her, but the Sand Wastes are huge. Does anyone know what she went out there for?”

Carlos looks at Billy blankly for a moment, then turns and strides back toward the stairs. “Change into field gear; we leave in ten minutes. I think I have an idea.”
“How much further?” Billy asks, keeping his eyes on the uneven terrain ahead of them. In the passengers seat, Carlos struggles to keep his homemade map open in the gusts blowing through the open windows. It's proving to be difficult.

“She should be about a mile further,” Carlos replies, folding the flapping papers over again so that only the Sand Wastes are visible. “I think. My measurements started getting unreliable out here. The coordinates kept transposing themselves when I recorded them. Just keep your eyes open.”

“Fucking police,” Billy mumbles, and they share a dark look. Neither of them have had the best of experiences with law enforcement outside of Night Vale, and although the town's unique police department hasn't been aggressively discriminatory like the two dark skinned men are used to, they aren't exactly the most helpful at times either. At least the Sheriff's Secret Police are unhelpful to everyone in Night Vale equally. A quick chat with Officer Erwin revealed that the scientists could not file a missing person's report until exactly twenty-five hours and eighteen minutes passed since the person in question was last seen, though he was helpful in pointing out that Joanna left the laboratory under her own cognition at approximately 6:04 a.m. heading west.

He also revealed that the Sheriff's Secret Police do not monitor the citizens as closely in the Sand Wastes as they do in town. Apparently the mortality rate of those who often visit the Sand Wastes makes sending officers out there to do surveillance a waste of resources. While Carlos is happy to hear that there might be somewhere in the area he could have a little privacy, the downside of a high death rate is making the news far less exciting, especially given the current situation.

Their truck bounces over some larger rocks as they make their way through one of the rougher portions of the desert. It's incredibly hot in the Sand Wastes, almost like the sun has focused every photon on this swath of dirt and rock. Carlos looks out the window at the cloudless sky. It is much bluer out here in this part of the desert, much closer to a normal atmosphere than back in Night Vale proper. There's still an odd tint to it, this time a slightly orange overlay to the light that doesn't add up with the rest of the atmospheric conditions, but so far Carlos hasn't found any direct cause for the ongoing odd sky coloration. For now, he wouldn't care if the sky is patterned in green and pink houndstooth, if there was only a cloud to cover the damn sun.

“No chance of rain today, I'm guessing?” Carlos asks the meteorologist at his side.

Billy huffs out a laugh. “I just study it, boss, I don't make it happen. At least it isn't humid.” Carlos can't help but agree with that. One of the things that Carlos missed first when he moved to the United States was the dry heat of the Mexican town he lived in from age six to twelve. The moisture in the air after that had added a heaviness to every breath, and for a few weeks Carlos
imagined it would suffocate him. Well, the situation at the time didn't help that feeling of drowning...

He shakes off those thoughts. That is all behind him, and the only thing he needs to worry about now on a humid day is his hair frizzing. He assumes. Maybe Night Vale has it’s own version of a hellishly humid day that puts the ones he knew to shame.

“There!” Billy says, pointing out his open window. In the distance, Carlos spots two vehicles parked at the base of a ridge—one the car Gwen and Becky drove off in, the other Joanna's missing vehicle. The closer they get, the more apparent it becomes that something is very wrong. Gwen begins to walk toward their truck as soon as she sees them, sobbing and hysterical. Jumping out of the car once it's in park, Billy pulls her into a hug and tries to calm her down, ask her what happened, but she's too distraught to speak. Carlos walks forward, taking in the little details as he goes: the still-running car, the open passenger side door, the dented and broken piece of equipment on the ground. He takes a closer look and thinks it might be a portable liquid scintillation and luminescence counter, but it's so mangled that he isn't positive. There are signs of a possible struggle on the ground, and dread pools in his stomach as he climbs to the top of the ridge.

Cacti, for miles and miles, as far as he can see stand tall and ominous. The earth spreads out in a flat plane before his eyes, reaching out to a horizon that shifts and wavers through the waves of intense heat. Above, the sky stretches forever, brilliant in its endless beauty. Carlos sees none of this. There is no way he could have prepared for what draws his eyes when he crests the hill. Only the years of dealing with the more disgusting side of science keeps the bile down.

The amount of blood and viscera is extensive. Handfuls of flesh, pink and red and glistening fresh under the yellow sun, litter the ground and are smeared across the soil. Globs of it cling to every rock and succulent in a fifty foot radius. The wavering hum of thousands of insects fills the air, swarming and feasting. Carlos covers his mouth and nose as a horrendous stench hits his nostrils—the smell of decay warming in the morning sun.

Becky stands a short distance in, and looks back at him briefly before turning to look at the landscape again. It takes a dozen carefully placed steps to make his way out to her. He notices she has a rag pressed to her face. “Carlos...” she says, at a loss for words.

“This—” Carlos begins to speak, but has to dip his head and cough, the smell overpowering. He raises the neck of his t-shirt to cover his mouth. “Madre de Dios, Becky, what is this?” Carlos asks once he's got his breath back. She must sense its rhetorical, as she says nothing, just shakes her head, tears standing in her eyes. Squinting as flies try to land on his face and arms, he gestures wildly. “No, no, no. No! This—this can't be what it—I mean it just can't—”

He falls silent, because he knows exactly what, who, this is. Was.
“What is...fuck!” Carlos and Becky turn in time to see Billy's face screw up in realization, hunch over, and vomit onto the sand and rock at his feet. Carlos looks away, but it doesn't help the nausea; there really isn't anywhere safe to look at the moment. The other man expels everything in his stomach and tries for more, dry heaving only to take a deep breath, smell the odor of death, and gag again. Becky picks her way back to the ridge and eases Billy down the hill, helping him sit out of sight of the gruesome scene.

Still holding his shirt to his face, Carlos calls out to her. “Someone needs to drive back in cell range, call the police!” When there's no answer, Carlos shouts, “Is he okay?”

It's silent for a moment, then Becky's bushy hair peeks over the edge. “We're okay. They're going to drive back together.”

Carlos can hear them talking but not the actual words, not that he's really listening. Now that the initial shock of the scene has passed, he feels he should at least try and figure out what happened. An animal attack, perhaps? He walks forward, treading carefully between piles of flesh and smears of blood, and heads for the closest cactus; perhaps there's some clue hidden among all the gore that might tell what happened here.

At first, he sees nothing unusual about the towering Saguaro, other than the fact that it is covered in remains and it is not even native to this particular stretch of desert. The fact that there are hundreds of them as far as he can see seems to dispute that fact, but he digresses. No, there is nothing unusual about the plant at first glance. In fact, he would have dismissed it completely had he not two days ago listened to Joanna go on and on about the majestic qualities of the Saguaro cactus.

You don't understand, Carlo s, the Carnegiea gigantea, or Saguaro, was so important to the Native Americans in some parts of Arizona! Food, tools, even construction! They used the ribs to build roofs for their shelters! Even their spines were used as sewing needles! Isn't that awesome? And to find so many of them, right here in the Sand Wastes, so far from their known region...

Spines long enough to use as sewing needles? Carlos leans closer to the cactus, then reaches for his glasses in his shirt pocket when he realizes he's struggling to see. Where he expects to see spines two or three inches in length, he only sees the barest hint of thorn-like structures, the ends blunted. Carlos reaches out and runs the pad of one finger gently against the tip, and, finding that it doesn't prick, grips one and yanks it out. Holding it up to his face, he sees that it isn't sharp at all. Looking back at the cactus itself, he sees a few faint markings on the stem, long dragging marks that skip and bump over the surface.
He walks a few yards further. The next closest cactus is the same—spines much shorter and blunter than normal for a cactus of that size. Looking around, all the cacti show this same trait. “But what would cause that...” Carlos mumbles to himself. It's then that he notices something just in his peripheral vision, something the color of a clear blue sky anywhere other than Night Vale.

Once he's close enough to see clearly, Carlos closes his eyes and bites his lip, the confirmation a hot ugly burn in his stomach. He squats down, tucking the tail end of his lab coat into his pocket to keep it from touching anything moist, and sighs into his t-shirt. Dark brown, almost black locks of hair curl innocently on the ground in little tufts intermingled with shreds of what used to be a paisley bandana and pink bloody bits of what he assumes is scalp. The blood is actually the only thing keeping the hair from blowing away, weighed down and sticky with fluid.

“Fuck...what happened to you, Joanna?” he asks, words quiet. He hears footsteps crunching on the rocks behind him before he hears Becky's gasp.

“Carlos, is that...? Oh my God.” Becky stops a few feet behind him, looking at the remains. They are silent. Carlos doesn't know what to say, if there is anything he can say. It doesn't feel real. He distantly hopes that it isn't. “Carlos, we need to go back to the truck.”

He looks over his shoulder at her, careful not to lose his balance. “Why?”

Becky looks around, eyes flitting about nervously, and she lowers her voice. “This isn't all...Joanna. There's too much...everything. It can't all be from her body. And I don't want to be standing here if whatever did all this comes back.”

Carlos' eyes widen at that, realizing how foolish it is to be kneeling in the middle of all this when he has no idea what caused it. Becky offers an arm and he gets to his feet, and they are a little less careful as they make their way back toward the ridge. “The cacti are missing their spines,” he whispers as loud as he dares. She gives him a puzzled look, and he elaborates. “Or, not missing, but all the spines on the cacti are shorter. I think they've been cut. Almost like they've been...”

Becky realizes that Carlos is no longer following her down the hill and turns, sees him standing wide eyed and afraid just atop the ridge line.

“Shorn,” he says.

He can see the moment she figures it out, her own eyes filling with terror. “Oh God, Carlos!”
He turns back to look at the horror scene behind him, focusing on skin of the cactus, razor burned.

“Telly.”

Chapter End Notes

Just a passing mention of Cecil in this one, but don't worry! Everyone's favorite broadcaster is out there somewhere, his silky voice soothing the town of Night Vale.

It doesn't look good for our little group of scientific misfits, does it? Stay tuned to find out just what the heck is going on in this crazy burg!

If you like what you see and want more, or just want to chat, you can find wyntera on tumblr. Please, be gentle on this new writer, as she bruises easily.
Chapter 7

“You have got to be joking,” states Harris, anger heavy in his voice.

“No, sir, the Sheriff's Secret Police does not joke. Not about people's lives.” Officer Erwin says this with the air of a man who has said it many times before, and that just enrages Harris all the more.

“Let me—no really, let me get this straight.” Growing more hysterical with each word as he paces back and forth before the group, Harris begins to wave his arms wildly to punctuate each point. “You're trying to tell us that Joanna isn't dead. That everything over there is *not* Joanna, despite all evidence to the contrary, despite the fact that every single piece of evidence points to the undeniable conclusion that Joanna is *dead*. Not only that, but you're trying to say that she's gone, what, mad? Insane? And run off with one equally insane barber? A barber that your town drove insane in the first place? You must think we're the mad ones, because that is crazy! That is the fucking craziest thing I've heard since we've come to this town! Do you think we're stupid? You must! You must think we're fucking stupid!”

“I'm going to have to ask you to calm down, sir,” the officer says, stern. “There's no need for that type of language.”

“Harris...” Carlos says warningly. While the others have been looking at the man's features through the holes of his balaclava, Carlos' have been trained on the officer's fingers which have been inching towards his police baton every time someone raises their voice. He really isn't inclined to witness police brutality today, much less whatever Night Vale's version of it would be.

“Carlos, he's saying that wasn't human! That it was raw rabbit, for Christ's sake!”

“Rabbits are not what they seem to be,” comes the cryptic reply from Officer Erwin, and Harris makes a high pitched noise somewhere between a shout and a strangled groan. Everyone starts talking at the same time, dissolving into facts and statistics and sheer incredulous wonder at the deductive skills of the Sheriff's Secret Police department, Harris loudest of them all.

That's about the time Officer Erwin's fingers graze the nightstick handle at his hip, so Carlos intervenes. “Harris, everyone, let's just...just head back to the lab for now.”

“Carlos, we can't just...I mean, it's Joanna,” Matt says.
“I know, we’ll talk when we get back,” Carlos replies. The other scientists, sans Lei and Abbey who didn't make the journey out to the site, reluctantly start shuffling for the cars. Well, most of them shuffle—Harris sort of stomps indignantly and slams the back passenger side door of the car. Carlos lingers for a moment at the behest of Officer Erwin.

“I know that this is upsetting for you and your scientists, but people having a crisis of identity and fleeing their homes and everything they know isn't all that uncommon in our community. Especially during power outages. She should have never been out here by herself without at least a wallet-sized picture of a sibling or some sort of memento from childhood. Very unfortunate, and we with the Sheriff's Secret Police will do all we can to assist her should she ever choose to return to society.”

Carlos wants to argue, because he knows what he saw and knows that had to be Joanna, but he also knows the futility of arguing with Officer Erwin. Then he really processes what the man just said. “What do you mean, should she ever choose to return? You're not going to go and find her?”

“Absolutely not, sir,” the officer says, almost sounding shocked at such a suggestion. “We do not know what her intentions were when she came out to the Sand Wastes. If she decided to live a life of solitude in the wild, that is her decision and we must respect that decision, even if it is one that we wouldn't make ourselves.”

“But you don't know that! She wouldn't have...I mean, she did not do this voluntarily. We can't just leave her out there with that...that...Telly!” He really couldn't believe what he was hearing. First, they claim she is really alive, and now they won't go look for her? The cynical part of him thinks that's awfully convenient.

“Well, the thing with the barber and shaving the cacti, that's a new one for me,” Officer Erwin says, chuckling to himself. “I'll have to ask the other officers if they've ever encountered something like that before. And we'll have to investigate into the rabbit remains; it has all the looks of a wasted ritual sacrifice, or maybe some just kids being kids, but everything else is par for the course. I'm sorry we can't do more for you, sir, but Ms. Embry is an adult and is free to come and go as she pleases within the confines of the law. As I said, if she decides to return to civilization, we'll be sure to help her transition back into society. It's standard procedure.”

The sound of a rough cough comes from over the ridge, and Officer Erwin glances behind him before giving Carlos as sincere a look as one can through the eye openings of a balaclava. “I will do everything I can to look into the matter, but I must insist that you head back to town and go about your day, now. There's nothing left to see here. And I suggest that in the future, if you or any of your scientists head out into the desert, arm yourselves. Basic survival skills, honestly. You'd think a scientist would know that.” Carlos is too distracted looking over the man's shoulder trying
to catch sight of whatever might have called the officer's attention to be offended by his words, but all he sees is dirt and rock. The scientist watches Officer Erwin ascend the hill and disappear over the ridge, the same ridge that he and his team were all herded from an hour ago when the Sheriff's Secret Police had arrived.

Matt and Harris had been called directly after emergency services, and had actually arrived before the Sheriff's Secret Police despite the fact that the police arrived in a series of helicopters. No explanation was given for the delay, and Carlos didn't expect one. Harris was another matter entirely, browbeating the Sheriff's Secret Police for their slow response time and poor investigating practices, and Carlos and Billy had to drag him out of earshot before he was silenced more forcefully. He can't help but think that Harris must have never had a run-in with the police in his life. Did he never watch the news?

Now, Carlos turns to see that only the green pick-up truck is still there, Matt sitting patiently behind the wheel waiting for him. He watches Carlos climb into the passenger's side as he shuts his door with much more care than Harris showed his. They sit together for a few quiet moments with their eyes trained on the ridge, the tops of shaved cacti peaking over the edge at them, before Matt turns the engine over and puts it in drive. They ride past three silent and still helicopters, navy blue and so out of place next to the natural browns and reds of the desert. It's several miles before Matt ventures to speak.

"Harris managed to keep one of the samples that he took before the police arrived. Maybe we can get a better idea of what happened up there, prove what all that was for certain...get some real answers," he says, tentative, but Carlos doesn't need the reminder that all of their samples—flesh, blood, bone fragments, hair, scraps of bandana, slices of cactus—were confiscated immediately by the Sheriff's Secret Police upon arrival. He doesn't look over at Matt, instead keeping his eyes trained on the scenery out the window. "We might be able to go to the city, petition for a real investigation. Or contact the government, the FBI or someone, someone from outside of Night Vale. They could come and...um..." At Carlos' continuing silence, Matt changes tactics.

"This isn't exactly what we signed up for, is it?"

"I wouldn't say exactly, no." Carlos pulls out his journal from his bag and begins to make a few notes about the events of the day and what little he was able to learn before the police arrived. He doesn't want to forget any details to time and distraction. There's also the distant hope that Matt will take this as a sign that Carlos doesn't feel like talking. Unfortunately, he doesn't get the hint.

"This isn't your fault, man. You didn't know how crazy this town was going to be. Hooded figures, unknown masses that can vaporize living matter, homicidal barbers? Really, Kendrick should never have sent you here with so little information. It's unprofessional. He didn't give you anything to go on, and he had to have some idea of how dangerous this place was. It's his fault for saddling you with this kind of responsibility. I honestly don't know why you haven't just marched back to
Arkham and told him where to shove it.” His eyes cut across to eye Carlos, but he still gets no response. Carlos actually stopped listening after the bit about how Kendrick should have never sent him to Night Vale. Like that's really what he wants to hear right now, four scientists down—no, three and a half, Abbey would maim him if he said otherwise—and a phone call to Kendrick he's really not looking forward to making. How is he going to explain that one of his scientists is either dead or gone insane, and he has no way to find out which? But really, she has to be dead. All that evidence, everything points to that conclusion.

Does it, though? Carlos isn't so sure, now. It's true, all the evidence points in that direction, with metaphorical glowing and blinking neon signs a hundred feet high in the sky. Still, he has never been one to take the simplest and most logical explanation at face value. He and Occam's razor have never seen eye to eye. He wouldn't be in Night Vale otherwise. No, with even the smallest of chances of there being an alternate theory, the chance that Joanna might be alive, he can't just leave it at the obvious. He has to be sure. The problem being he has next to no evidence, and the only way to know for sure would be to find Joanna herself. No small feat, to be sure.

He's drawn out of these thoughts by Matt. “What do you think Kendrick is going to say?”

He feels a prickling of irritation at the question. Carlos isn't in the habit of sharing his discussions with his superiors with others. “I'm sure he won't be pleased,” he says.

“What if he pulls the plug on—”

“He won't,” Carlos says, his voice brooking no arguments. It is the only thing he is sure of today. There's no way Kendrick, or anyone else at Miskatonic, will pull funding and leave Night Vale. It is far too important and there's too much at stake. It is an indisputable fact. Now, whether or not Carlos himself gets pulled from the project is another matter entirely. He isn't sure what he would do if that comes to pass.

“Before we get back, you should know that some of the others are thinking of leaving,” This actually catches Carlos' attention, and he fights his drowsiness to look at his driving companion.

“What? Who?”

Matt drums his fingers on the steering wheel. “Gwen. Billy. Maybe Harris, I'm not sure. It's just been talk, after everything with Abbey, and I thought they had dropped it. But now...I don't know if they actually would, but...I mean, I don't blame them.”
“Shit,” Carlos mumbles, rubbing at his eyes hard. He's exhausted. He's been awake for almost thirty-six hours now, not the longest he's gone by any means, but too much has happened. Add to that the fact that he hasn't been sleeping well recently, and his body simply has no more adrenaline to flood his system with today. “Alright. I'll talk with them when we get back, try to...circumvent the problem, if I can.”

“Well, if they leave, maybe we can get some others with more staying power. I'm sure we can find some people a little more hardened. Might have to go outside of Miskatonic's usual candidate pool, but we could do some real good here if we could just—“

“You let me worry about that,” Carlos says, fighting a yawn. His mind is too fogged by fatigue to concentrate on anything at the moment, and Matt's words swim out of his consciousness within moments. “Swing by a Starbucks on the way, alright? I've got to get some caffeine in me.”

“Sure thing,” Matt says, and Carlos is content to drop both the discussion, and his heavy eyelids. They have another twenty minutes until they reach town—just enough time for a quick nap.

By the time the green Ford pulls back into the laboratory parking lot, Carlos has downed three-fourths of his Venti Breakfast Blend courtesy of the oddly octagonal shaped Starbucks near the Target. Not his usual brew, but he had been dozing when they pulled up to the drive-thru, so Matt took it upon himself to order for him. At least he'd had the good sense to order it black. It's with some trepidation that Carlos leaves the vehicle and follows Matt inside the lab.

“Matt! Good, you're here!” Harris shouts as soon as they clear the threshold. Other than the doctor's presence, the main lab appears to be empty, and his voice echoes around the space so that Matt jumps in surprise. The man is bent over a microscope in his workspace, Matt's DNA analyzer humming quietly beside him. He glances up and registers Matt's look of irritation, and waves him off. “It isn't your DNA analyzer, it's Miskatonic's, you'll get over it. I snagged one of the blood samples we took and hid it between my belt and my jeans. Now, come here. It should only be a few more minutes before we can get a look at the results.”

Matt pulls on a pair of latex gloves, careful of his bandaged hand, and grumbles, “You better hope you didn't mess up the collection process or contaminated that sample, Lattimore.”

“Please. With as many samples as I had to take from the Glow Cloud's droppings, I've got this down pat.” They give each other a small smile over that shared experience—Matt had showed Harris and Carlos the ends and outs of the DNA analysis machine and how to understand the readouts, and they had practiced on those Glow Cloud samples for hours just to make sure they
could get it right. The three of them could collect and perform a DNA analysis in their sleep at this point.

Carlos tips the last of the fortifying coffee into his mouth and throws the cup in the trash. “I want to see those results as soon as they're done. Where's everyone else?”

Harris shares a nervous look with Matt before turning to Carlos. “Upstairs arguing. Last thing I heard was the girls screaming, but I couldn't really understand it. They were all talking over each other. I think Lei went next door to Big Rico's.”

Matt laughs. “He had the right idea.”

Wishing he could find more humor in the situation, Carlos stretches his arms over his head, managing to crack his back and send a tingling sensation up his spine. “What about Billy?”

“Upstairs, too. Hiding out in his room, I'm guessing” Harris replies.

Matt shakes his head. “You know he's on the phone with Claudette. Prepare for the waterworks.”

Carlos sighs at that. It was an ill-kept secret among the scientists that Billy and Claudette's relationship was tumultuous at best. Carlos did his best to not learn too much about the love lives of his team, even though they seemed hell bent to learn about his own. As long as it did not interfere with their work, Carlos could care less who his team dated. But he was hard pressed not to hear every little detail when it came to Billy. From the beginning, Claudette has been a distant but irritating thorn in everyone's side, even before the team left Arkham. For all of Billy's confidence and contentment with every other aspect of life, all of that—and his backbone—seems to disappear when it comes to his girlfriend. His decision to apply for and accept a position with the Night Vale team seems to be his one act of defiance in the entirety of their relationship. Naturally, Claudette hates that, hates Night Vale, hates Miskatonic, and of course, hates every one of the Night Vale scientists by association.

She is also very vocal about it, to the point that Billy takes his phone calls in privacy. She does scream quite loudly, and her voice manages to carry even through the intense static that always permeates any phone call from outside of Night Vale. The team does their best to not mention it, and allow Billy some small amount of dignity.

“Do I need to worry about...either of you?” Carlos asks, unsure how exactly to find out if they're
planning on abandoning ship.

Matt shakes his head and crosses his arms. “No way. You know we're in it for the long haul.”

“Yeah,” Harris says, sitting back from his microscope for a moment and adjusting the dials. “I knew it would be dangerous before I came. That's one reason why you brought me along, after all. As long as there are scientists here, I'll be here.” He coughs, feeling awkward, and ducks back to look through the lens.

Carlos gets a small amount of relief at these words, and feels sheepish for doubting them. “Thanks, guys.”

They all jump as a shrill voice from the second floor screams, “You bitch!” It's followed by the loud crash of something heavy and breakable that shakes the vials and beakers set up on some of the lab tables. Another voice shouts, “Fuck you!” and there's a series of thumps before a door slams shut.

Abbey comes storming down the stairs, tear streaks clear on her face but no longer crying. Instead she looks furious. “If you need me, I'll be in my lab,” she says, not sparing them a glance. There's a crashing noise once she's out of sight, and then all they can hear is the sounds of electric guitar and the angry rhythmic pounding of a metal striking metal.

Matt and Harris turn in unison and look at Carlos like he's a man about to face a firing squad. “Maybe you should let them calm down first?” Matt suggests.

Every instinct tells him that he should leave the three scientists upstairs to themselves, at least for the time being, but he knows he needs to diffuse this situation immediately. “No, I have to stop this. You two keep working, I'll handle it.”

“You sure you don't need any help?” Harris asks. From the look on his face, he'd rather suck on a lemon, but Harris has never been anything but helpful.

“No, I've got it. Just...wish me luck.”

“Good luck,” Matt says, far to chipper for the situation.
Harris lets out a more humorless chuckle, and he gives a mocking salute with two fingers. “You're going to need it. If you're not back in twenty minutes, we'll call 9-1-1 for you.”

Carlos is halfway up the stairs before he mutters to himself, “Not that the police in this town would do anything...” The moment the words leave his mouth he grimaces and looks over his shoulder, hoping he kept the words low enough that Officer Erwin, or whatever Sheriff’s Secret Police officer currently monitoring him, couldn't hear them. In the second floor hallway there are what appears to be trading cards scattered all over the floor, spilling out of a box seemingly slung out of one of the doors on the right in order to hit one of the ones on the left. On closer inspection he recognizes them as Magic the Gathering cards, which he used to play on occasion. He's pretty sure he has some back in his Arkham apartment somewhere. Picking one up at random, he looks at the card's face.

Altar of Dementia. The flavor text reads, “It is not that you will go mad. It is that you will beg for madness.” —Volrath

Not exactly the most encouraging words considering the current circumstances.

He isn't really sure who is mad at who, or who is even behind which door; there are five doors in the hallway other than the bathroom and the one that leads to the third floor. They're all shut tight at the moment, and Carlos wonders if this is how people on game shows feel. Except on television there is a chance of something good behind the mystery doors. Carlos hasn't seen any Night Vale game shows—or really, any Night Vale programming on the television at all, just old movies and shows from the fifties and infomercials, if anything at all—but he imagines that this might be what something produced in this town might be like. The chance to pick your own doom.

Screw it, he thinks. Let's see what's behind door number one.

Carlos knocks on the one to his immediate left, Billy and Matt's room, the one that doesn't currently have a box leaning against it. There are sounds of movement on the other side, a hushed voice, and the door cracks open. Billy holds the door open just enough so his torso fits in the space. “Hey, uh. I'm on the phone, right now,” he says, hushed and looking harried, his cell phone pressed tight to his chest to muffle the noise.

Carlos nods. “I need to talk to you when you're done, alright?”

Billy gives his own nod of acknowledgment, then promptly shuts the door in his face. Carlos rubs
his mouth and the scruff on his jaw. He is so done with this day and wishes he could just go and
sleep for about eighteen hours, but moves on. The next door is Harris and Lei's room, and then the
door with the box of Magic cards before it, Abbey and...Joanna's. He distantly wonders what they
should do with all her things, if she has family they should be shipped back to, which reminds him
he still has that phone call to make. Maybe that can wait until tomorrow. He also thinks maybe
Abbey should move into one of the other rooms. If her roommate is dead as they all suspect, he
doesn't want her lying in there at night surrounded by those memories. She already has enough to
worry about.

Making his way to the door he knows to be Gwen and Becky's room, he raises his fist to knock but
the wood is jerked open before he can follow through with the motion. Becky is gripping the
doorknob and is momentarily distracted by his presence, but quickly shifts back to anger. “Excuse
me,” she says, slipping past him.

“Becky, wait!” Gwen follows fast on Becky's heels. “Just listen to me!” She grabs at the redhead's
arm, but Becky twirls about and yanks out of her grip.

“Don't! Don't even try that with me! I've heard enough.” She points at the brunette, but her eyes flit
to Carlos. “She's leaving! Can't take it here, can't handle it. And she's trying to drag me with her!”

“It's not safe!” Gwen turns and pleads with her boss. “I'm sorry, Carlos, but it isn't safe enough
here. None of us should be here, this place shouldn't be here.” Carlos opens his mouth, to say what
he isn't sure, but he's cut off.

“Yes, apologize to him, because you're abandoning him and everyone else here, just like Tim and
Aarav!” Becky says with a wave of her arm, condescension heavy in her tone.

“Don't you dare compare me to them! This isn't like that!” She takes another step toward Becky.
“How can you want to stay here? After what happened to Joanna, Becky!”

“People are crazy everywhere! She could have been...murdered,” Becky's voice wavers on the
word, but she continues, stronger and full of conviction. “She could have been murdered anywhere.
Or, whatever they want to say happened. It could have been an animal attack! You don't know!”

“I know that you'd be safer if you'd just—”

“These things are dangerous, no matter where you are. You, you've never done any field work at
all, cooped up in your little lab on campus! The most dangerous thing you've worried about is your own hand mixing chemicals wrong. Now that you're out in the real world, doing real science, you can't hack it. Not enough control for little miss control freak? Can't have everything all neat and orderly just so? Can't have things perfect, so you run!"

Gwen's voice jumps an octave, and Carlos cringes at the shrillness of it. “That's different! I've been doing important work, not gallivanting around the world looking for beasts in the wilderness! Becky, just listen to reason! This isn't some jungle, where you have some idea what might come out of the dark to get you! This place defies all logic! I can't just leave you here!”

“You're not my mother, Gwen! I know you somehow got it in your head that I, I don't know, can't take care of myself or something? But I don't need you trying to tell me what to do all the time! Just because you're scared doesn't mean I'm going to turn tail and run back to Arkham!”

Gwen surges forward, hissing low but not low enough for Carlos not to hear, “You know why I can't leave you here. You know I care about you, Becks.”

“Stop!” Becky practically snarls in her face. “We messed around a little, and now you act like we're picking out china patterns and adopting two point five kids in the suburbs! It was just a little fun, and now it's over, so leave me alone!”

Becky is down the stairs before Gwen can reply, so she leans over the railing and screams after her, “Fine! Get yourself killed! I don't care!” She rounds on Carlos, who by this time has backed himself into the far end of the hallway. There was obviously more to their fight than just the Joanna incident, and he has no idea what he should say right now. He never has been very good at confrontations. He had honestly been sure they were going to come to blows. Carlos tenses, unsure of how she will react to his presence now that it is just the two of them.

Luckily for him, it seems her anger is mostly focused on Becky. Her face is tear-streaked and splotched red, but she's considerably calmer as she takes a deep breath before addressing him. “I'm sorry, Carlos. I can't stay here. Not...not after all this.”

He knows he should fight for her, try to convince her to stay, yell and scream. It's what he should do, but he doesn't have it in him. Not after the day he's had. He may be standing in the darkened hallway of the lab, but all he can see are those brown curls of hair intermingled with clots of blood and skin and sand under a bright desert sun.

“Alright, I understand. But I don't want you to make any rash decisions. Just...sleep on it, tonight. You're...obviously upset, right now, and I want you to be in a good state of mind when you decide.
She nods. “Okay, I'll...think about it,” she says quietly, but she doesn't meet his eyes. Carlos doubts she'll think too hard about it. After the door closes, he takes another look at Billy's door before heading back downstairs. There's no telling how long he'll be on the phone with Claudette.

As he's coming down the stairs, he looks down to see Harris and Matt huddled next to one of the computers. Matt is holding a readout, but instead of looking at the results, they are both staring at him with eyes like saucers. The only noise comes from Abbey's muffled rock music.

“So...” Matt says, drawing the word out. “How did it go?”

“When will this day be over?” Carlos asks rhetorically. Or maybe not—yesterday the sun set three minutes and fourteen seconds earlier than scheduled. “Well? What's the verdict?”

“You're not going to believe it,” Harris says as Matt hands over the printed readout from the computer. Carlos scans the sheet, focusing in on the pertinent information.

“You have got to be shitting me,” Carlos murmurs under his breath. There it is, in bold black text above all the data on alleles and matching percentages.

Species: *Sylvilagus audubonii*.

“Rabbit. Rabbit?” Carlos asks, full of disbelief. “I...what?”

“Desert Cottontail, to be exact,” Matt says. “Very common for this area. Nothing particularly special about them at all. You know, other than the fact that there's a ton of them smeared into the Sand Wastes.”

The two scientists are quiet as they watch a thoughtful Carlos wander back and forth between the tables. All of them have noticed over time that Carlos tends to pace and talk to himself when he's working a problem out, and have learned that it is best for everyone to let him think in peace. They often try to listen to his ramblings, at it gives them an amazing insight into how his mind breaks down a problem and works toward a solution. Today, however, seems to be a quiet day, as all he does is pace and move his lips to silent words.
Abruptly, he spins and looks at them. “Follow me,” he says, and walks down the back hall. They scramble to follow, surprised when they stop in Abbey's workshop. Carlos sweeps in like he owns the place—which he doesn't, but to them he might as well—but the other two crowd in the doorway when they find it occupied by more than just Abbey. Lei, back from his trip next door, sits perched on one of the worktable surfaces, wearing long sleeves despite the desert heat. He must still be chilled from his earlier stint in the shower. Abbey and Becky appear to be having a seated mock sword fight using a flat-head and Phillip's head screwdriver, respectively, while Lei keeps commentary. A corner of his mind is amused to see Becky sitting on the same stool that Carlos himself sat in just this morning, and he really can't believe it is still the same day, it's been too long a day and all he wants to do is sleep. But first, science.

“Rabbit. It was all rabbit, it wasn't Joanna at all. It wasn't her.” They all sit up straighter at that, and he can see the little sparks of hope lighting in them, and he hates that he might have to smother that ember. “Don't get too excited. All it means is that the remains were not her, or at least what little we could sample. But we still don't know where she is, why she's there, or if she's alive. That's what we're going to find out.”

“How?” Matt asks from over Carlos' shoulder. “The Sheriff's Secret Police ran us out of there. They aren't going to let us in on the investigation for this.”

Becky scoffs, “If there even is one. Something tells me there won't be.”

“You're right, but that doesn't mean we have to sit idly by,” Carlos says, back straightening, shoulders squaring. It is like his whole demeanor shifts as he slips into scientific mode. “Our first hypothesis was incorrect—Joanna did not die on that ridge. Or, at least, she wasn't what we found on the ridge. We need to discard that first idea and move on to the next hypothesis. What else could have happened?” The others are suddenly struck by the fact that Carlos is not only a research scientist, but also a professor, no matter how much he shies away from the teaching side of his profession. They all shift nervously. No matter what age, something in the manner of the questioning reduces them all to feeling like children trying to impress their teacher.

“Um...she never made it to the Sand Wastes?” Matt asks, unsure. It seems the weird feeling of putting your neck out first in class doesn't go away no matter how old the pupil.

“Then how did her car, her hair, and her bandana get out there?” Carlos replies. The response makes Matt frown.

“She was attacked by an animal?” tries Lei. “It somehow managed to hurt her, rip her...scap off...and...dragged her body away?”
Carlos shakes his head. “Interesting, but unlikely. We would have seen some evidence of it. A trail leading off, more blood—head wounds tend to bleed a great deal more than elsewhere on the body. There was a lot of blood but we have no proof that it was from Joanna, nothing pooled in one spot, no drag marks. And, if it was an animal, why all the fresh meat left to rot?”

“Maybe something was wrong with it. Sick or rotting? Poisoned or something,” Abbey says, but Becky shakes her head.

“No, no, there wasn't anything wrong with it. It was fresh, like it was freshly slaughtered, and healthy. I mean, maybe some sort of poison, but why? There isn't really any reason. Besides, there wasn't any fur or bones, nothing but the meat. That sort of thing doesn't just disappear. It had to have been placed there, on purpose. This wasn't just happenstance.”

Carlos leans back against the workbench by the small window so that he can see everyone clearly. “So, what does that leave us?”

They're all silent as they think through not just the probable, but also simply the possible scenarios that could have led to the scene they stumbled upon that morning. It's Harris that gets it, groaning while thumping his head against the door frame. “Please, please, please tell me we aren't actually considering what I think you're considering.”

“What? What are we considering?” Lei asks, lost.

Harris addresses Lei, but he watches Carlos as he says, “That Officer Irwin wasn't lying. It really was Telly the Barber that met up with Joanna, but he didn't kill her. She's out there with him, right now.”

Carlos points at Harris, nodding. “Exactly.”

“Come on, that's preposterous,” Matt says. “That was just some story the Sheriff's Secret Police pulled out of their collective ass to cover up whatever really did happened out there.” Tension ripples around the room at his statement, and it's quite for a long moment as they wait to see if anything happens. When nothing makes any noise other than the electric buzz of the overhead fluorescent lights, Matt continues. “If we're going off that, we might as well say...I don't know, the five-headed dragon did it! Snatched her up and left only her hair, dropping a pile of rabbit meat behind. It's pointless.”
“I know, it doesn't make sense,” Carlos concedes. “It seems ridiculous. But at the risk of sounding cliché, we aren't in Kansas anymore. Or Arkham. Or any point in space where these things make sense. We're in Night Vale now. It isn't ridiculous in this town, and it isn't ridiculous to these people. To them, this is...every second Tuesday. We have to start, not necessarily thinking like they do, but anticipating it. We have to look at things on their level, as well as our own. We have to adapt. It's one of the things scientists do.”

“We can't go off following every little story they try to feed us,” Matt says, skeptical.

“I'm not asking you to. But this is the only lead we have for now, and we're going to explore it until we either find Joanna, or something else presents itself.”

Matt props one arm over his head against the door frame so he can lean his forehead against it. “And how are we supposed to do that?” he asks, exasperated.

Carlos turns his attention to Abbey. “Can you rig up some motion-activated cameras, some that would only register the movements of something around the size of a human? More or less?”

“If you can get me the parts—”

“You want to litter the Sand Wastes with monitors, try and catch sight of him? Like a wildlife cam, only lots of them?” Becky interrupts. She has the grace to give Abbey an apologetic look after.

“Yeah,” Lei says, catching on to the idea. “If we can at least get sightings of Telly, or Joanna, even if we don't get to them immediately, we might be able to track them!”

“Precisely,” Carlos says, pulling one of the blank sheets of paper from Abbey's workspace and beginning to sketch a crude map of the area with his charcoal stump. “The Sand Wastes are too big for us to search, even if we had the help of local government, which we don't. We'll try to determine the more likely places someone living out there might visit, any sources of water or shelter, and in some sort of grid pattern out in barren areas. We won't be able to put too many cameras out there, but we can squeeze as many as we can out of the budget. We can concentrate in these areas,” and here he marks several points on the map, “and we'll look through Joanna's notes for more spots where an abundance of cacti grow. Anything that might give us some insight.”

“The cameras will have to be able to transmit the images wirelessly—we certainly can't lay lines
down all the way out there. With the signal problems out there...” Abbey drums her mechanical fingers thoughtfully on the metal tabletop. “I might be able to make some sort of signal booster, or a hub or something, like a miniature satellite just for the town, but...I would have to find somewhere to mount it. We can't exactly send a satellite up into space.”

“What if we attached it to the highest point in town?” Carlos asks, marking the map. The scientists crowd closer to see the small triangle where the radio tower would stand in town.

“It could work,” Abbey says. “If I can make it so it won't interfere with the radio waves it sends out. I'm not sure we can get permission from the station, though.” Here, she smirks knowingly. “Someone will have to go and convince them.” The rest of them muffle their snickers as Carlos shoots her a betrayed look, but she looks unrepentant. He can't really fault her, though. As the head scientist, he really should be the one that approaches them...

But there is no point in thinking on that right now. He's tired, he's already lost one scientist today, and there's still two scientists he has to worry about losing tonight. At least, he hopes it's only two. “Listen, guys. About today, I—”

“Don't,” Lei interrupts. “You don't have to do that, Carlos.”

“You just need to know,” he says over their objections. “I, I understand. This isn't what you thought it would be, and if you go, I will understand. I won't hold it against you.”

“Well, that is a load off our minds, but you can stop worrying about us,” Becky says, throwing an arm around Abbey's shoulders. “We aren't going anywhere.”

“Against our better judgment,” Harris says sardonically. There are nods and murmurs of agreement, and Matt gives his shoulder a playful shove that is just this side of too hard. Their good humor is disrupted by the sound and vibration of something large being moved one floor up.

“That would be the dresser,” Becky says, dropping her head down to lean against Abbey. “We moved it diagonally into the corner of the room and put the TV on it so it could reach the wall plug. Also because it would hide this really weird stain on the wall. She must be trying to reach the outlet—damn, it's her television.”

“Do you mind if I room with you tonight?” Abbey asks.
Becky squeezes the blonde's shoulders. “We'll take over Tim and Aarav's old room, do some rearranging in the morning.”

It is just about then that Carlos' stomach makes a loud, gurgling noise, clearly heard over the humming of electricity in the equipment. They all laugh, and Lei slides down from the tabletop. “Jeez, boss, when did you last eat?”

“I don't know, this morning? It was early,” Carlos says, his cheeks warming in mild embarrassment.

“Come on, let's get some food in you. Can't have our fearless leader starving to death,” Harris says, herding the group toward the front entrance. They all falter when they reach the main lab, however. Billy stands at the foot of the stairs, clearly nervous.

“Can I speak with you? In private?” Billy asks.

Everyone but Carlos makes to move past the other man, a few gently pulling on Matt's arm to get him moving. “We'll bring you something back, Carlos. Be back soon.” Harris says as they slip out the front door.

Carlos sits down on one of the work stools and motions Billy to take one opposite. He's firing on one cylinder at this point, fighting down a constant stream of yawns, and knows that this is probably the worst time to have this conversation. It doesn't really matter anymore—he knows what Billy is going to say before he even opens his mouth.

“Claudette means everything to me, Carlos. You have to understand that.” Yep, hit the nail on the head, Carlos thinks. Billy looks at him like he expects an explosion. He says nothing. “I've been with her since high school. We went to prom together, we went to the same church. Same college. She's been there through everything. I was going to, well, I was going to propose, when I went home next to visit. I can't lose her—I won't lose her. This isn't worth it.”

Carlos feels a frisson of irrational anger and annoyance at that. Not worth it? This is everything to Carlos. What, this study isn't good enough for him? Night Vale isn't good enough for Billy and his precious Claudette?

Still, he keeps his peace on that subject. That isn't what Billy's really trying to say, after all. Still, it makes Carlos' words come out harsher than intended. “I understand,” he says, which is a lie, but he
lets that go. “You have your priorities. I just don't want you making any rash decisions. I suppose you've thought this all through? No sense in asking you to sleep on it like I did Gwen?”

“No, sir. I've made my decision.” When it becomes obvious Carlos isn't going to speak again, Billy shifts his weight nervously and continues. “I have copies of all my notes, and I'll leave them and all my experiments for...whoever takes over. Claudette...she wants me heading home tomorrow. I'll leave in the morning.” He holds out his hand to Carlos. “I really am sorry.”

Never let it be said that Carlos can't take the high road. He shakes the proffered hand. “So am I. You did good work.” Billy nods, and there is an awkward moment where neither man really knows what to do before Billy nods again and walks back toward the stairs. “Billy,” Carlos calls after him. When the man turns, Carlos motions towards the ceiling. “When you leave in the morning, take Gwen with you. She's fairly upset, and I would rather she didn't try to travel alone. If you don't mind.”

“No, I can ask her. I thought she was going to think about it.”

“Does that sound like someone who's thinking about it?” Carlos asks. Right on cue, another muffled banging noise can be heard—the sound of a box toppling from the high shelf in the closet. They share a tentative smile, but Carlos' is cut off by another yawn. “If I don't see you in the morning, take care of yourself.”

“You too, sir,” he says, then disappears out of sight.

Carlos putters around the lab for a few minutes on his own, checking on the experiments that he's neglected all day, but everything seems to be in order and he can barely keep his eyes open. The windows are growing dark, and a glance at his watch confirms that the sun is setting. He briefly considers trying to wait up for food, but he doesn't care what they say; that is the slowest group of eaters he has ever encountered, and there is no way they are back in less than an hour.

Trudging up two flights of stairs, he doesn't bother to turn on any lights as he stops in his kitchen to make himself a glass of water—filtered, as they found out early on in their stay that the water itself is full of hard metals, trace amounts of chemicals, and at least eight separate species of parasite—when asked, Cecil said they were the friendly kind, whatever that meant. It didn't make them feel any better, and special filters were attached to each water source in the building. They all carry clean water with them about town as a result. One of Gwen's projects was analyzing the water on a daily basis for contaminants, noticing any patterns, and trying to track the sources. He supposes he'll have to take over that one, now, since he's the only one left with a strong chemistry background.
In the bedroom, he flips on the radio. There's a woman talking animatedly about something in a language Carlos isn't familiar with, but he does catch her saying the word, “marwolaeth,” over and over. He would look it up but the bed is right there, so he decides against it, pulling articles of clothing off and dropping them haphazardly on the floor. Nude, he flops down on the bed and just manages to wrestle his way under the blankets when what he assumes is the speaker's sign-off music starts to play. It's rather lovely, for sign-off music, he thinks dazedly. There's a long beat of silence, and Carlos wonders how Cecil will start his show tonight.

“Rabbits are not what they seem to be. Welcome to Night Vale.”

Carlos flies to a sitting position, unable to believe what he just heard. On the table, the radio sits innocently, playing the Welcome to Night Vale theme song.

The others don't bother to wake Carlos in the morning, knowing he desperately needs the rest, so he misses Billy and Gwen's departure. Lei eagerly fills in what he missed, specifically another spectacular row between Gwen and Becky, complete with screaming, tears, and unfounded accusations. Personally, Carlos is glad to have missed it, and though it leaves them all in a tight spot with their experiments, he's glad to see them go. If they aren't going to put their all into this project, he'd rather they not be here at all. It's a shame about Billy, though—if he would just grow a backbone and stand up for himself, maybe he wouldn't be running ragged all the time for a girl that really does hate everything Billy loves, except herself.

He rises rejuvenated and filled with a sense of purpose, a new hope that today just has to go better than the day before. So, after a hearty breakfast for one, he and Abbey talk out the specifics of their idea, dub it the Sand Wastes Monitoring Project—or S.Wa.M.P. as Abbey has taken to calling it—and head over to the radio station to plead their case. Carlos is insistent that Abbey join him, and she is tactful enough not to call him a chicken, at least not where the others can hear. It isn't until after they're in the truck that it occurs to Carlos that Abbey might not want to visit the location where she lost her arm. He should have known better than to bring it up.

“Honestly, Carlos, it's just a building. The thing that did it isn't there. Stop being such a drama queen.”

As it is, they have the good sense to call ahead of time, and Cecil meets them at the employee entrance on the side of the building. They plead their case to Cecil, who doesn't need much convincing and Carlos isn't sure he fully understood just what they wanted the cameras set up for, but he agrees to present it to Station Management anyway. Waiting in the employee break room while Cecil goes to yell through Station Management's door makes them both anxious, but a few minutes in Dana joins them in their vigil.
“Cecil sent me in here, he says to keep you company, but I know better. He wants you to be kept safe.” She digs through one of the lower cabinets and pulls out a large container marked flammable. From her pocket she pulls a rather intricately etched Zippo lighter, which she places on the table in front of her.

“Safe from what?” Abbey asks, her good arm reaching up to rub self-consciously at the skin of her opposite shoulder.

“Station Management, if it decides to leave the office. It should be fine, but since you're still healing,” she says, gesturing to Abbey's arm, “we just want to be careful. It tends to get riled up by the scent of blood.”

Abbey stands, casting a reluctant gaze at Carlos. “Should I leave?” There's a tremor in those three words, and Carlos knows she doesn't want to be outside by herself, no matter what sort of brave face she puts on. He shakes his head.

“Best we stay together. I'm sure it will be fine.” Dana agrees, and they make small talk until Cecil appears in the doorway, using a handkerchief to wipe sweat from his brow.

“Station Management agreed! As long as it in no way interferes with the signals we put out, and I'll have to make an extra offering in the station bloodstone circle once a week. But other than that, it won't be any problem! So,” he turns his bright gaze to Carlos. “What do you need to know about the tower?”

“We'll need to go up and take some measurements, if that's alright,” Carlos says.

“Certainly! Dana, keep an eye on the phones for me?” He leads the scientists to a door near the back which opens into a dark and narrow stairwell. He has to move a few rotting cardboard boxes out of the way before they can start climbing, one of which makes a sharp hissing noise like air escaping from a tire. “I can't remember the last time someone other than an intern was up on the roof. Other than myself, of course. I come up every now and then to make sure everything is in working order. Station Management doesn't care much for outside contractors, so I had to learn a little maintenance.” His voice echoes in off the concrete walls, seeming to come from everywhere.

“You do all that by yourself? But that's so dangerous!” Abbey asks with an air of disbelief.
“Someone has to,” he says. At the top of the stairs Cecil has to put all his weight into forcing the door open, but it finally gives and they walk out onto the radio station roof. The tower is situated so that one side stands flush with the back of the station, an enclosed space housing the power source and other electronic equipment. The foot holds of a ladder run up one of the struts that's easily reachable from the roof.

“Here it is, the Night Vale Community Radio tower.” He looks up at it reverently. “Tallest point in town and broadcasting to the greater Night Vale area.”

“It's impressive,” Abbey says. Carlos isn't paying that much attention, trying to pry his eyes away from Cecil's shirt. Under the fluorescent lights of the station it had read as just a yellow pinstriped shirt, but out in the midday sun, it practically glows a rather distracting neon. The contrast makes his eyes seem even more violet than normal. It also isn't buttoned all the way at the top, letting Carlos see the barest hint of skin at the hollow of Cecil's throat. But, if asked, he's going with the shirt.

Abbey nudges him with her elbow and he stammers, “Yes, very impressive, very, um...symmetrical,” He can tell that Abbey is rolling her eyes at that, but Cecil just beams at him so he figures it couldn't have been that bad.

“So, what do you need to do?” the broadcaster asks.

Carlos drops the duffel bag he had been carrying at his feet, and Abbey begins to dig through it while he explains. “We need to get a few readings on what sort of signal output the tower generates, and if there are any other types of signals we need to keep in mind when we build our device. We'll also get an idea of how big we can make it without interfering with anything up there.” Abbey hands Carlos a measuring tape and a small silver box with several dials on it, then pulls out a rope and harness with a large clip on one end. She starts to wrap it around herself, but Carlos shoots a hand out to stop her. “What do you think you're doing?”

“Safety first,” she replies.

“No, no, no. You're not going up there.” Carlos starts to pull the gear from her hands but her grip tightens.

“Excuse me, I am going up there. I'm the engineer.”
“No, you're not.” When it looks like she's going to argue, Carlos presses on. “You've had a working prosthetic limb for a little over twenty-four hours. Yesterday you could barely grip and hold a bolt, which weighs 3.2 ounces tops, and now you think you can support either this signal scanner, or your own weight with it?”

“If you're not going to let me do my job—”

“Climbing a radio tower isn't in your job description. I will let you do your job, and for now that involves staying on a flat surface and using your head. Which you won't be able to do if it falls to the ground.” It belatedly occurs to him that after yesterday that might not be the best way to word it, but it gets the message across. She lets go of the harness and Carlos strips out of his lab coat which Cecil offers to hold, a little eager to be of use. He folds the fabric over one arm and pets it gently, watching Carlos wrap the straps around his torso.

“Are you sure you should go up there?” Cecil asks. He makes an aborted hand motion to help Carlos with the straps before stuffing his hand in his pocket.

Carlos yanks on the connection, satisfied that it will hold. “I'll be fine. How far up do I need to go?”

All three of them tip their heads straight back to look up at the tower. It certainly looks much larger this close up than from Carlos' laboratory roof view. Abbey fiddles with the controls of her little signal scanner, then hands it to him. “As far as you can go before one of these bottom two dials spikes. Let me know as soon as one of them does, and that's where we'll work from.”

He nods and reaches forward for the first handhold, but Cecil places a hand over his to stop him. “Maybe I should go. I've climbed the tower before, I know it better than you.”

“I'll be fine, Ceec, don't worry,” he replies, patting Cecil's hand. He's about ten rungs up the ladder before he realizes just what he said to Cecil, just what he called Cecil, that he actually initiated physical contact, and he doesn't miss a step but it's a close thing. Suddenly his heart is pounding a lot harder, and not because he's so far off the ground. It takes everything in him not to pivot and look down at the other man, but he can feel his gaze as he climbs higher.

He gets about three-fourths of the way up the tower before he finally gets a ping on the scanner, and he hooks himself securely to one of the tower beams before he reads it carefully. Not wanting to risk dropping anything trying to write it all down, he quickly memorizes the numbers before stuffing the scanner in one pocket and pulling the measuring tape out of another. He does the best that he can to measure the available space, the light breeze picking up this high off the ground
making it a little more difficult, but he gets what he needs. Unhooking, he begins his descent, glad that he didn't have an attack of vertigo or something. There aren't many things that is scared of, and now is not the time to discover he has acrophobia.

As he nears the bottom, he is dismayed to discover that Abbey and Cecil are having a lively discussion that promptly ends as soon as he is within earshot. That can't be good.

“You got a good ways up!” Abbey says, all smiles and enthusiasm. Carlos is immediately suspicious. “I told Cecil he could drop by the lab when we get some progress made on our transmitter and receiver. He seems really interested in what we're doing. You don't mind, do you?”

Carlos' words stall in his throat, just enough that Cecil's smile dims slightly, but he rallies quickly. “Of course! We'd be happy to have you. Have you come. Have you visit the laboratory! Just, uh, we can, we can let you know when it's a, uh, a good time.” His face turns scarlet and his eyes drop to the straps of his harness, so he misses Cecil's delighted grin.

“Do you mind if I take a look at the equipment?” Abbey asks, pointing at the enclosure that houses some of the machinery that helps run the station. She doesn't really wait for an answer, slipping inside the small room and leaving the two men relatively alone on the roof.

“Thank you for letting me visit the lab! Oh, it is very exciting to think I'll get a look inside! I've just been so curious, since no one really gets a look and it's all so very mysterious! Everyone has wondered, but I'll be the only one to really know, and...” he trails off, realizing he's babbling. “It will be nice to have something scientific to share with the listeners, that you approve of, of course.” Just like everything else Cecil says, it somehow manages to throw Carlos off balance. He's never really considered what they do mysterious, but he supposes they have been kind of secretive about what they've been doing.

“Well, some things we'll have to ask you not to, um, share. But there's plenty you can see. It will, uh, probably be next week?”

“That's perfect. Thank you, Carlos, sincerely.”

“Thank you for letting us do this. It will be a huge help in finding Joanna.” Their eyes turn toward the Sand Wastes, where they know Telly the barber, and now perhaps Joanna the biochemist, roam and terrorize the local flora and fauna.
“Yes, I had heard about it yesterday,” Cecil says, his tone dropping a bit lower with the sad topic. Not quite his radio voice, but not the usual bubbly notes that he usually speaks to Carlos with. “Nasty business, all of that. I would have reported on it, but Officer Wenzel strongly encouraged me not to do so.”

“Officer Wenzel?”

“The Sheriff’s Secret Police officer assigned to the station. Usually during my broadcasts, so I actually get to talk to her quite a bit. She’s always bringing me missives from the Sheriff’s Secret Police Department, or interrupting my segments to tell me I can no longer report on certain things. She’s almost an honorary member of the station.”

“Why did she not want you to report on Joanna’s disappearance?”

Cecil laughs. “They certainly didn't tell me. Don't misunderstand; I asked. I am a reporter, it is my job to ask. But they never answer, and I really didn't expect them to.”

“I see,” Carlos says. Abbey wonders back over and Cecil ushers them back down the stairs to the main part of the building. He really can't spend any more time talking to them, as he has a show to plan for, but he does show them out through the back entrance. “Thanks again for the help. Is there a time next week that would be good for you to come over?”

“Anytime, anytime at all. You just say the word, Carlos,” he replies. His lanky form leans in the space of the doorway, watching the two scientists make for the truck. “You do have my number?”

“Yes, you've given it to me. Twice, I think.” Internally, Carlos debates whether or not to ask, but his curiosity wins out. “Cecil, I was wondering. Yesterday, at the start of your show, you said something about rabbits.”

“Rabbits are not what they seem to be.” Cecil says immediately, dropping fully into his radio voice.

“Yes, that. I was wondering, who, er, why did—where did you hear that from, exactly?”

“Oh, that?” Cecil glances off to the right, rubbing his forehead absently. “Oh, I don't know. It sounded good at the time. And they really rarely are what they seem to be, don't you think?
Always, pretending to be something...they're not.” He drops his hand and turns his head to look behind him, then addresses Carlos again. “I really must get back to work. I hope you understand.”

“Of course,” Carlos says, backing away. “I’m sorry. I don't want to get you in trouble.”

“No trouble, everything's fine. I look forward to hearing from you.” He gives an awkward little wave before ducking behind the closing door.

When Carlos climbs in the drivers seat, Abbey give him the most over-exaggerated grin he thinks he's ever seen on a fellow scientist. He's immensely pleased that she's in a good mood, considering the events of the past two weeks, but he really wishes her playfulness wasn't at his expense. “Was that really necessary?”

“To have your crush see you in your natural habitat? Absolutely.”

“Please don't call him that.”

“What should I call him? Ceec?”

“Oh shut up.”

A few days later, the team manages to all be in the lab at the same time, so they go out for lunch at a new cafe they heard opened a few blocks over—Cafe Limburger. It is surprisingly good for being named after such a horrible cheese. Even Harris likes it, which is quite a feat, as he is notoriously hard to please when it comes to the culinary arts. They walk there and back, enjoying the relatively good weather under a bright yellow and bubblegum pink sky. When they get within sight of the laboratory parking lot they see a sight wholly unexpected, and they all stop in their tracks.

“Hey guys! Did we miss lunch?” Shouts Billy, climbing out of his car.

Gwen rounds the passenger's side. “Must have been hungry! You guys couldn't wait half an hour?”
“What.” Lei says, the question falling flat and sounding more like a statement than anything. The group seems to be completely useless in their confusion. Luckily Carlos manages to recover.

“What—um, what are you two doing here?” he asks.

They both look at him quizzically. “Is there somewhere else we should be?” Gwen asks in return.

“I...um,” he looks back at the others for help.

“You left,” Matt says bluntly. “Went back to Arkham.”

Billy cocks his head in confusion. “Why would we do that? Our work is here.”

“You guys are just trying to play some sort of trick on us,” Gwen says, nudging Billy in the side with her elbow. “Nice try, but you aren't getting out of leaving us without lunch.”

“You've been gone for three days,” Matt presses. “Do you not remember any of that? Joanna?”

They both make equally sad faces at the mention of Joanna. “So unfortunate that she ran off with that Telly,” Gwen says. “Someone should really do something about him.”

“Billy,” Carlos says, stepping forward. “What about Claudette?”

“Who's Claudette?”
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

This chapter is dedicated to tumblr user radiofedora, because sometimes good things do happen on birthdays. Happy Birthday, Radio, from one of the members of your harem.

Special thanks to tumblr user lepetitaquali for help with all things medical related, as well as being the most kick ass double ever. I hope you like your little surprise.

The magenta and white hairline stripe cotton with the mint green paisley bow tie? It goes well with his complexion. The periwinkle and navy with the mustard yellow? It contrasts well, but it seems awfully plain, and kind of squared. Not like his more fitted shirts. The lime green and yellow pinstripe with the cerulean gradient? There is definitely a summer feel to it, so it is appropriate for the weather. But is it professional enough? The black and plum candy stripe silk with the coral straight tie? It has a certain softness to it that invites touching; maybe save that for a date? The lavender and cream Bengal striped silk with goldenrod floral motif wide tie? The silk of this one shimmers so nicely in the light. How well lit is a laboratory, anyway? The cyan and scarlet awning stripe with turquoise and tomato dots? That one always looks so nice on the hanger but he just isn't sure it looks right once it's on his body. The shadow striped persimmon with peach and gold, and fuchsia twill patterned tie? The linen wrinkles so quickly though; he'll look like he just rolled out of bed before he gets there. Or maybe the alternating stripes of salmon, teal, burgundy, azure and orchid with the honeydew and olive striped suspenders? Why did he even buy this? It's hideous!

Each shirt and tie has been meticulously steamed and pressed, free of all traces of lint and stray hairs, and now they all lay across the bed in a kaleidoscope of colors and textures. It is barely a fraction of the ones still in his closet.

It is quite possible that he owns too many striped shirts.

Cecil surveys the mess while standing in plain dark gray boxers and a thin white undershirt with the look of a man at his wit's end. Ever since the phone call he received yesterday at the station—from Lei, not Carlos, as Carlos had been dealing with a particularly temperamental something that Lei had rattled off like it was nothing, but it sounded very scientific—he has been on pins and needles with excitement and anticipation. Normally an invitation by a newsworthy source is met with a mildly pleased feeling and just wearing whatever clothes he had already planned on wearing that day, but this isn't just any old restaurant opening or interview with a high ranking government official. This is the Night Vale Laboratories! A real lab filled with real scientists, not like the group a few years back that set up in a rented garage out near the car lot. That shifty group had wanted to study the viability and profitability of the human liver, and hadn't been real picky about test subjects. Actually, they had been pretty pushy about it.
No, these scientists are the real deal, even funded by a real university! Cecil doesn't really know much about Miskatonic University, but he vaguely remembers some literature on it in the public library. Oddly enough, he thinks he remembers it being in the Horror section, not Reference, but he can't recall if it was in the Horror Fiction or Horror Non-fiction section. He will have to remember to take a look the next time he finds himself transported there.

He glances at the clock in dismay; he has no more time to be indecisive about his outfit. He's been rearranging the selections on the bed for close to an hour now, and he has to be at the lab shortly. Reaching for the magenta and white shirt, then the goldenrod tie, he holds them up together and scrutinizes the combination one last time. Yes, he supposes that will have to do. It figures that he would pick his first choice in the end, but he had just kept second-guessing himself. Huffing out a self-deprecating laugh, Cecil slips into the clothes as well as a pair of charcoal black dress slacks.

There is an old oaken jewelry armoire situated in the corner of his bedroom that Cecil picked up at an odd little antique sale some years back. He clearly remembers when he saw it, nestled as it was behind a stack of bed frames leaning against a wrought iron yard statue of a rearing bull. He could tell that the grain of the wood had been gorgeous, even in the dim lighting and under a decade's worth of dust, and the nicks and dings to the corners had only added to its charm. It had taken some time to wrestle his way through the various furniture pieces in the way, upsetting a nest of mice that scattered in every direction when he moved an end table just enough to squeeze through, but he finally reached it to get a closer look.

Seven neat little drawers, each larger than the one above it, lined the front of the piece. The pull knobs were a tarnished metal that Cecil couldn't identify at first glance, but they looked to be in good condition otherwise. The design on each one was just a series of concentric circles, but he kind of thought they looked like eyeballs. He had eased each side door open, the hinges catching a little from lack of use, and was pleased to see all the little hooks were still inside. There had been a hesitation at opening the top lid, the place where earrings and rings might be kept. These types of jewelry boxes usually had a small mirror mounted in the top lid. Holding his breath, his fingers had gripped the wood gently and slowly eased the lid open, just enough to peek under, before pushing it all the way open with a grin on his face. Where the mirror should have been was nothing but an empty space, the reflective surface long ago broken and removed, leaving nothing but a little indentation in the wooden surface. Perfect, he had thought.

Now, he slides open one of the top drawers and looks through his collection of tie clips, which he doesn't usually bother with, but now seems like a good occasion. He so rarely has a reason to wear them other than just feeling a little more dressy that day. One catches his eye, a lovely gold and silver clip with the motif of two harbor seals playing in the surf engraved onto the bar, a memento that he picked up when he visited Svitz. Well, he doesn't actually remember picking it up, it just appeared in his bag one day, but it is one of his favorites. Attaching it to his tie, he lifts up the top lid to take a look at his rings. He slips a plain silver band onto his left thumb, and glances again at the empty space where a mirror should be. For the first time in a long time, he yearns for the chance to get a good look at his reflection.
A pair of bubblegum pink socks go on under his sensible black shoes, and he fiddles with his hair again, but really, he's styled it twice already this morning. There are a few tense minutes where he can't find a clean tape for his recorder—he really needs to invest in a digital one—but luckily he finds one in the odds and ends drawer next to the dishwasher in the kitchen. A flip notepad and a lump of wax are stowed in his bag, and he makes his way down to the little parking lot in the back of his apartment building.

Cecil's parking space is in the back corner of the lot. While most of the other residents beg and plead for spots close to the back doors, Cecil had been adamant about having the spot furthest from any other cars, much to his landlord's delight. The reason now sits under a nondescript gray car cover, a thin layer of desert dust coating it. He can't help but smile as he pulls the cover off to reveal his gleaming baby.


His car had been a labor of love for many years, since the day he and Earl Harlan had stumbled upon it's rusted and broken form abandoned on the outskirts of town, the engine still running but coughing out plumes of heavy black smoke. Earl, sensible and responsible Earl even at age fifteen, had called the Sheriff's Secret Police and the car had been towed to the impound lot. No owner was ever found, and Cecil had saved up every penny to make a bid on it at the Sheriff's Secret Police auction that year. Old Woman Josie had even slipped him a little more money when he was outbid—which he made up for by helping her can her homemade jellies every year. Most of the car he fixed by hand, piece by piece, putting in a little money here, a little money there, until it became the gorgeous vehicle it is today. He knows it is foolish to sink so much money into something like a car, especially in Night Vale where it could be destroyed so very easily, but it was his first real possession of any worth that he could remember, and what a possession it is. There have been a few close calls over the years, but this car has seen him through it all, and so far luck has been on his side.

Climbing behind the wheel, he gives the requisite turquoise fuzzy dice hanging from the rear view mirror a gentle tap, sending them careening around each other, before starting the engine. The drive to the laboratory is fairly short from his apartment, and he spends the ride trying to get himself to calm down. After all, this is just a simple visit for work. Nothing to be worried about, no reason to be nervous. There's going to be many people there, all very serious scientists that are doing very serious work. They probably won't even notice he's there. It's not like its a date or anything.

Carlos will just be there. No big deal at all.
He pulls into the lot and parks. In all these years, the big gray building next to Big Rico's has never looked quite so intimidating before. He goes to the front entrance and notices a small metal box next to the door. It has a standard keypad on it as well as a large button with a label stating, “Press For Assistance,” in small block letters. Pushing the button, he tries to arrange himself like he's not supremely nervous. Glancing around, he catches sight of a little black dome attached to the wall over his head. Wow, he thinks, they've really beefed up the security here.

Through the little vertical window in the door, he sees a secondary door open and Lei’s smiling face look out at him. There's a small buzzing sound before he pushes the door open. “Cecil! So glad you could make—oh. My. God. Is that your car?”

Rather than let Cecil in, he moves past the bewildered reporter and lets the door slam shut behind him, stepping over to the unfamiliar car in the parking lot and walking back and forth beside it. “Yes,” Cecil says belatedly, not that he really needs to. He wanders back over and watches Lei ogle his vehicle, trying to tamp down on the little surge of pride that comes with it.

“This thing is awesome! So vintage. Where did you get it?” Here, the shorter man squats down and looks at the rear wheel, admiring the line of the car from a lower angle.

“At auction. I was barely old enough to drive it when it went up, but I had to have it. It looked a lot different back then.”

“You fixed it up yourself? That's so cool.” He stands back up and walks around the back, looking at the chrome around the tail lights. “I love old cars, but I can barely change the oil in one; city boy. Public transportation all the way. And I'm still not as bad as Carlos.”

“Oh?” Cecil asks.

“Yeah, you'd think a guy that smart could handle a combustion engine, but car maintenance seems to be a field he neglected to study.” Lei makes his way back to the front. “Can I take a look?” he asks, gesturing to the hood. Cecil joins Lei by the front of the car and unlatches the hood, raising it so the scientist can get a good look. Metal gleams up in at them in the bright sunlight. “A V-8?”

Cecil nods. “Yeah, a hundred seventy-five horsepower. It actually—

The door to the lab bangs open behind them, making both men jump. Abbey leans around the door, her mouth opened to speak but Cecil can see her eyes widen and her face light up with joy. “Holy
shit, look at that! Cecil, tell me that gorgeous piece of machinery is yours!” The next ten minutes are spent talking cars with Abbey, Lei commenting here and there but mostly listening to Abbey rattle on about engines and transmissions and Cecil talking about salvaging the muffler from the junk yard and getting chased by the feral dogs that roam the lot. It occurs to him that given the chance, Abbey would gladly stick to this subject for the duration, and if he doesn't get the subject off suspension and brakes, he won't even make it into the lab today.

“So, I think Carlos might be expecting me?” he says, his voice creeping up at the end like a question though it really isn't. Maybe he had been wrong about the time or the day?

“Oh! Right, sorry! You can't expect to ride up in something like that and not let the engineer get a good look it!” Abbey steps reluctantly away from the vehicle, Lei giving her a light push, and they lead Cecil back to the lab doors. “Carlos isn't here yet, but he said to tell you he'd be back as soon as he can. There was some sort of weird seismographic activity—well, weirder than normal, he doesn't really explain it much—but something odd out near the service road on Route 88. He needed to go out there anyway to collect some sort of rock sample he saw out there last time. Shouldn't be long, but we can keep you entertained until then, I think.” Cecil watches as Lei keys in a ten digit code into the keypad and a green light flashes above the door handle.

“That's quite an impressive security system you have,” Cecil intones.

Abbey nods as Lei opens the door and gestures the other two ahead. “After everything, Carlos thought it best to take some precautions. There is a lot of expensive equipment—”

“And people,” Lei adds.

“And people in this lab, and we really don't need anything getting in. Or out. Ready to see the some science?” Abbey asks. Cecil nods, but she hesitates. “Carlos would want me to assure you, we're usually much more productive on any given day.” The comment doesn't make much sense, but he just nods again, sucking in a deep breath and holding it a little in anticipation. Abbey opens the secondary door.

Instead of a respectful quiet, maybe even the gentle hum of that expensive scientific equipment Abbey mentioned, Cecil only hears the sound or riotous laughter. Instead of a scattering of men and women bent over microscopes or test tubes, he sees the collected scientists in their lab coats standing or sitting on stools around Billy. The man himself is posed like an actor on a stage, his lab coat is slung around his shoulders like a cape, and he's gesturing theatrically at some imagined costar. “So the guy said there was no way I can eat that many oysters in twelve minutes. So I said, why don't you put your money where your mouth is? You know I couldn't let him call me out like that! Easiest hundred bucks I've ever made, let me tell you. And this other time...”
Cecil looks at Lei and Abbey, a little bewildered as they lead him into the main room. Lei leans close so only the three of them can hear. “Apparently Billy and Gwen were re-educated last week. Whatever they did made Billy a little more open and uninhibited about the oddest things. We’ve heard a lot of stories over the past few days. I don’t know why he has his lab coat on like that; we must have missed that one while we were outside. See Harris?” Up in the front of the group, Harris is sitting on one of the stools with a notepad open on the table next to him. “He’s taking notes on changes to Billy’s behavior. Gwen has been observed as well, but she isn’t nearly as entertaining.” The words make Cecil realize that Gwen isn’t amongst the other scientists, and Lei must accurately guess his concern because he gestures to the corner of the lab over Cecil’s shoulder.

The woman in question has her light brown hair pulled back into a tight bun, a single curl falling down her cheek. Her eyes are covered by goggles, and she’s wearing bright blue gloves under the cuffs of her lab coat. On the table in front of her are more than a dozen test tubes standing in a row in individual holders, spaced a good distance apart on the table from each other. She’s handling a pipette, dripping a clear liquid into another clear liquid in each tube. There is an intense look of concentration on her face.

“Gwen is extremely focused, now,” Lei says, even more quiet than before. “Doesn’t concern herself much with things other than her work. Doesn’t get as upset as much either.”

“Do you know what they did to them?” Abbey asks.

“I’m not entirely sure.” Cecil tilts his head slightly. “Were there any marks on her?”

They both shake their head, but Lei says, “Billy had these circular burns just below the clavicle. But Gwen didn’t look harmed at all.”

“From what I understand, it’s different for each person. Some people come back with burn marks, bleeding wounds, bruises, sometimes even missing parts altogether. Others are manic, or dazed, or don’t speak for a few weeks, that sort of thing. And then some people act completely normal, as far as you know.”

Lei’s face looks a little paler when he raises his hand to his mouth. “Have you ever been re-educated?”

The question startles a laugh out of Cecil. “Well, it’s possible I suppose. But I wouldn’t really know, would I?” This answer seems to make the two scientists look even more ill-at-ease, so he
changes the subject. “What is she working on?”

“Something Carlos cooked up for her to do. He doesn't want either of them working on some of the more sensitive projects in the lab right now, but they have to be doing something or they get confused. They can't do anything that might invalidate any results of our projects. I'm actually not sure what she's working on at the moment; he said he'd show us when he got back.” Behind them Billy seems to have run out of things to say for the moment and ducks through a darkened door at the back of the lab. Harris follows, and the others, sensing that the show is over, meander back to their respective lab spaces. Lei waves Abbey off. “Head back to work if you'd like, I can show Cecil around. I don't have that interview until seven tonight.”

“Sure, thanks. You can bring him back when you're done up here, I can show him the coolest toys.” She waggles her eyebrows at them, grinning and leaving through the same door Billy and Harris did.

“I hate to say it, but she is right; she has all the best equipment back there, and what she doesn't have she makes.” He turns back to Cecil and grins. “Well, I suppose I should have said it earlier, but welcome to the lab!” Arms thrown wide, he gestures to the room as a whole. “This is the main lab space, where we do most of the experiments. We each have our own space, and then a shared area for some of the group projects.”

Turning in a slow circle, Cecil takes the whole scene in. “You've certainly filled it to the brim,” he says, taking in the packed shelves and ordered stacks of boxes and plastic containers that seem to fill every space not used for working.

“Well, we had to make do with what space we have,” Lei replies. “We have two other storage rooms that are pretty packed, actually. It helps that Abbey has her own work space, and I don't really use the lab so much as just compile information on the computer. The only thing I need to keep up with is paperwork. Plus, Carlos has his own lab space, and it's probably crammed with more science than the rest of the building.”

“Oh? Where does he work?” he asks.

The other man gestures to a nondescript door along the side wall. “We don't have access to his workroom when he's not here, so we'll have to wait for that.”

“Is it alright if I...?” he asks, pulling out his notepad from his pocket.
“Sure, that's fine. I'll try to give you something interesting to write about! Here, let me show you what some of us are working on.”

On one of the middle tables sits a machine that at first glance Cecil things is a microwave, but there are clearly far too many dials and buttons on it for that, and the door is too small. In neat little stacks next to it are clear-topped round plastic containers. Cecil hesitates but Lei nods. “Don't worry, as long as the containers stay sealed you're good.” Inside, he can see what looks to be nothing more than dirt, maybe a few twigs.

“What is it?”

“Soil samples, from the lot of the house that doesn't exist in Desert Creek. We've been taking collections every three days.”

The machine makes a sound like it's winding down, then whatever it is doing speeds up faster, the hum louder and higher pitched. “What is it doing?” Cecil asks, leaning down and watching the little container inside. It seems to be almost vibrating, but it could just be the weird lighting inside.

Lei looks a little sheepish at his question. “To tell you the truth, I'm not sure what this thing does. I'm more of a social scientist than anything. Carlos just told me to set this one going while he was gone and that he would take the readings when he got back. If you want I can get someone else to talk to you about it.”

Cecil laughs, looking a little embarrassed himself. “No, that's alright. To tell you the truth I probably wouldn't understand half the stuff they try to explain anyway. I don't know much about science.”

“No problem, then. The only way to know is to learn, after all.” Lei lets out a little snicker. “I've got to warn you, though: Carlos doesn't really speak in layman's terms very well. He doesn't know how to dumb things down. So don't be afraid to ask him to clarify things, because he really doesn't get that some people just don't know about this stuff. The other day he was trying to talk to me about some sort of quantum time shift...I don't even know. I just smiled and nodded. I might have lost twenty minutes of my life, but hey, it made Carlos happy, so no skin off my nose, right? Anyway, let's see if I can show you some things I know a little more about.”

Cecil could tell he was really going to get along with Lei.
He's led over to a section of the lab that looks a little like the pet store downtown. There are cages and terrariums arranged like puzzle pieces four and five high, some of them filled with a thin layer of sand, others wood shavings, and still others damp with humidity and a shallow pool of water. Little lights glow down on the creatures inside in varying degrees of brightness. One is filled with little bumpy-skinned lizards in a variety of shades of brown. Another is filled with skittering spiders that crawl up the sides and hang from the top. On the floor in a long terrarium, a large black python raises its head to look at him with pure white eyes.

“This is where we keep most of the live specimens. We've only removed one or two of some species from the wild, a handful of the more abundant ones; we don't want to make a big impact on their ecosystem. But some of them have already reproduced, as you can see.” Lei lightly moves his finger back and forth along the bottom edge of one of the cages, and Cecil watches a little kangaroo rat follow the appendage with little hops.

“He's so cute!” Cecil coos at an armadillo with unusual iridescent coloring curled in one of the other cages before he's distracted by one of the containers near the top. “What's up there?”

Lei follows his gaze. It is the only one with no light illuminating the specimens inside. In fact, it looks unnaturally dark inside considering all the ambient light. “Oh! That's the one with the Emberflies. Becky, can I show him?”

Becky, who has been pulling mice from a large cage and putting them in a smaller holding container, shrugs. “Sure, but don't agitate the hissing mantis next to them. He's still upset at the loss of his harem. None of us want to get him going.”

Lei reaches for a stick that hangs by a hook on the side of one of the cabinets. For some reason it has a container duct taped to one end. “They like confectioner's sugar,” Lei explains, and hefts the stick over the top of the partially screen-topped container. Giving the stick a good shake sends a dusting of white powder down into the cage, and all of a sudden the inside is lit up by little flashing red lights. “They're some sort of distant offshoot from fireflies, and they're almost double the size, but they're mostly harmless.”

“Wow,” Cecil says. “I haven't seen Emberflies since I was a kid. They were said to be a sign of fertility.”

“Let's hope that's just for the animals and not the scientists,” Becky jokes. She carries the little box of mice over to the men. “I'm about to feed Mrs. Lovett, if you want to watch.”

Lei makes a disgusted face. “Oh, gross. Are you squeamish, Cecil?”
“I...I think I'll be alright. Who's Mrs. Lovett?” Becky hands the box over to Cecil to hold and eases a little door open on the side of one of the terrariums. She picks up two of the mice in the box and quickly puts them in the cage, then does the same with the remaining two before shutting the door. He looks confused. He doesn't see anything in the cage at all other than a little sand at the bottom. “I don't understand, what's—”

Both he and Lei let out a yelp of surprise as a large brown tarantula drops down from the top of the cage directly on top of one of the mice. Her two front legs rear up and Cecil can clearly see a lime green underbelly. Instead of normal fuzzy legs, these are sharp on the undersides, not unlike a butcher's knife. The spider swiftly chops the mouse into pieces, the others skittering to the corners and trying to climb the sides. Lei looks away from the scene as the spider makes quick work of the rest of the mice, then gathers all the pieces into one corner and begins to dissolve and consume her meal.

“Oh, God, tell me when it's done,” Lei says, sounding strangled.

“Mrs. Lovett...Sweeney Todd?” Cecil asks, grinning.

Becky laughs with delight, leaning closer to look with him. “Very good! Movie or theater?”

“I did enjoy the stage production when they put it on in town. But the movie was good, too.”

“We thought it was appropriate. This little girl was our first specimen, and first new species! *Theraphosa Nightvalei*. Carlos actually found her in his shower the first day here.”

Cecil valiantly pushes aside the thought of Carlos in the shower. He can give that thought some consideration later. “I'm guessing that didn't go over so well.”

“Yeah, not so much. She's actually quite friendly, as long as she's well fed. After she's has a good meal, she can be handled. I wouldn't recommended it if she hasn't been fed in a week or so, though.” Cecil takes a few more notes about the creatures they're keeping and those that have been tagged and released back into the desert, as well as plans to extract venom from the venomous species with the hopes of developing an antidote, then they walk passed several workstations with various amounts of notes and samples being analyzed to Matt's space. His is one of the cleaner areas in the lab, everything very pristine even by laboratory standards. All of his equipment is a cool white, the only color the deep red of blood within vials in a rack.
Oddly enough, there is a strong odor in the area around his station, stronger than the smell of animals in Becky's. Cecil can't quite place it, but it is unhealthy, like something festering. Nothing in the area points to a source, though.

Matt himself is bent over a microscope, a collection of slides on one side and a notepad on the other.

“Hey Matt,” Lei says, and his shoulders jump. He glances at Lei before turning back to the microscope.

“What?” he asks.

“Just showing Cecil around the lab. What are you working on?” Matt turns and gives Lei a look that Cecil thinks is irritation. Cecil suddenly feels uncomfortable, and wonders if it is his presence or something else entirely.

The weird look fades, and Matt slides back slightly from the microscope, but he keeps his hands on the table on either side of the machine. His eyes look a little red-rimmed. “I've been taking blood samples from volunteers in town, doing a genetics analysis on the populace. Looking for anomalies.” There's a beat where none of them speak, and Cecil realizes that Matt isn't going to elaborate.

“Right,” he says, trying to call upon his reporter skills. “That sounds like quite a task. Have you had a lot of luck finding volunteers?”

Matt shifts a bit on his stool. “More or less. I've been able to get a good number of the samples I need.”

“What kind of anomalies have you—”

“You know, I'm kind of busy here,” he interrupts. His voice jumps in volume, and there's a sharp edge to it now. Lei takes Cecil’s arm and leads him back from Matt’s station.

“No problem. We'll just move on. Oh, don't forget, Carlos said he wanted an update by this
evening. Come on, Cecil.” Matt huffs and turns back to his equipment while Lei leads Cecil out of the main laboratory space and down a dark hallway. “Don't mind him, he's just been in a mood lately,” he whispers. Lei points out the storage rooms he mentioned earlier, one of which contains a series of freezers that glow aqua blue in the darkness. Inside, Cecil can see containers, vials, and bottles, all neatly labeled. There is a lock on both the doors to the rooms and on each freezer and every cabinet. Everything is labeled with biohazard signs and other coded numbers that Cecil doesn't understand. It all looks very dangerous, and he says as much while Lei is re-locking the second storage room. “We take every precaution we can for safety. You can see why a security system is so important.”

They pass by the break room and enter Abby's workroom. It's filled the monotone sound of humming machines, a few of which Cecil is actually familiar with, but just as many are completely foreign or look like they are straight out of a science fiction movie. Like the spider-like mechanical arm that arches over the table with a claw clamp on the end. Or the panel of dials and knobs protruding from a machine that has electrical coils on top. But specifically, it is the very large laser sitting innocently on the main work bench. “Wow,” he mumbles, hovering in the doorway.

“Come on in!” shouts a voice from beyond the door frame. Around the corner, Abbey sits in a computer chair, tilted back and snacking on a bag of candy. She's sitting in a monitor bay, a good dozen or more screens mounted on both walls and on the desk in front of her. Most of the screens are subdivided into different views. She beckons them closer. “Don't be shy. Just taking a snack break and watching current events. Looks like we've got a couple of love birds on number fourteen, and a scout troop on numbers twenty-nine and thirty.”

Sure enough, on one of the higher screens there is a beat up car and two people making out on a large boulder. On a lower monitor, several of the views show a little over twenty young boys walking in single file through the shot. They all stop and gather around a taller man, thin and redheaded, clearly the scoutmaster, who takes a knee so they can all see whatever bit of nature he wants to draw to their attention. Cecil feels a brief flash of shame and knows that he's blushing slightly, no matter how irrational the reaction is. They don't know about his past with Earl, and they're certainly not here to judge. Still, he feels he should probably draw their attention away from the scene. “So you set all these up to look for Joanna?”

He's pleased that after flipping a switch on the panel, Abbey swivels her chair around to address him directly. “Originally, yes. Once we got started we found we had a little more money to work with, so we invested in some equipment at a few other locations we're keeping an eye on as well. The house that doesn't exist, Radon Canyon, a few others. We have one on the radio tower, too.” She taps one of the screens near the middle, and he can see an aerial panoramic view of Night Vale.

“You can get the signal all the way out to Radon Canyon?” he asks. The radio tower reaches that far, but he knows from experience that there is more than a little static out there.
“It was a hassle, and sometimes we have to go out there and readjust, but it works well enough. No sightings of Joanna or Telly yet, but it is a big area. We have this system we can arm, when no one is actively monitoring, and if something enters the viewing zone that’s roughly human size it automatically starts recording and flags it for our attention. It might take a while, but hopefully we catch sight of something soon. If not, at least we're getting a lot of other data.” She swivels back and forth lazily as she munches her snack, throwing what looks like Chex Mix up in the air with her mechanical hand and catching them in her mouth. She’s obviously gotten much better control over it. “I also picked up some strange signals coming off your tower. Not the normal radio waves that you'd expect. I'm not sure what it is, yet, but I just discovered it yesterday. I have to run a few tests, make sure it isn't some sort of interference between the two devices.” She turns back around to the screens and laughs. “Hey, look! There's Carlos!”

In one of the lower monitors, near the bottom corner, they see Carlos leaning over the camera from its lower position. He looks oddly distorted this close up, and the view moves erratically for a few moments before stabilizing. “Oh! I forgot he was going to swing by and adjust that! It was catching an awful glare off the sun in the late afternoon.” Carlos steps back from the screen, looking at it critically, then pulls an object out of his pocket and scrutinizes it. Seconds later, Abbey's cell phone buzzes in her pocket. “That's him! Hold on...Hey....yeah step back for a second.”

On the screen, Carlos moves back a few steps and moves to the left, looking back over his shoulder at the desert. When he looks back, his lips begin to move and a corresponding sound comes from Abbey's phone. “Yeah, it looks good. Hurry back, you have a guest you've left hanging.” The Carlos on the monitor moves back into close range of the camera, obviously surprised and bashful. He says something else, and Abbey replies, “Yes, we're looking at you right now, hold on.” She sets the phone down flat on the counter and hits another button. “Alright, you're on speaker.”

“Cecil, I am so sorry!” There is a slight delay in the video in conjunction with his voice on the phone, so his mouth doesn't sync up with his words properly. “I lost track of time running all these errands. I swear, I'm coming back right now. Do you have time to wait? I know you have to go to work yourself.”

Cecil speaks a little louder than necessary, but he wants to make sure Carlos can hear him over the static that is so heavy on the line. “It's quite alright, Carlos, they're keeping me very entertained. I'm learning a lot about what you do here. And I have time, tonight's a late show and I made sure to have enough prepared ahead of time.”

There's a bit of a longer delay as Carlos swats at a bee that's repeatedly swooping down at his head, and the three of them hold back their laughter, Lei physically using his hands to do so. “Stupid bee. Sorry. Okay, I'm heading back right now. Have you guys showed him the greenhouse yet?”

“Not yet,” Lei says.
“Oh, hi Lei. Yeah, show him that for me, please. But don't let him touch the *Ageratina morsusaspidisa*, it's highly poisonous. It's the one near the back with the big yellow clustering blooms.”

“Okay, be safe,” Abbey says, picking up her phone.

On the monitor, Carlos checks his watch and nods. “See you in twenty minutes or so,” then he hangs up and waves at them cheerfully before walking out of view.

They are delayed in their trip out to the greenhouse by Billy and Harris on the back porch. Specifically, Billy launching into a story about a girl in his high school sophomore biology class that he had a major crush on, and how he can't imagine why he never asked her out. Lei encourages him to look her up after finding out her name was Candice, and for some reason the comment receives a glare from Harris. Then Billy is darting back inside and with Harris hot on his heels.

“What did Billy work on, before his re-education?” Cecil asks as they make their way into the back of the lot where the greenhouse was constructed.

“Well, he's primarily a meteorologist and climatologist, but most days the weather here is surprisingly normal.” He stops and looks vaguely in the direction of the sun shining down on them. “It's hot, it's dry; typical stuff. He takes readings on it all the same, because if something changes we want to have some good baseline data. But since it isn't exactly abnormal, he's had two main projects: working with Becky trying to decipher the Glow Cloud thing, and figuring out the odd sky coloration you guys have around here.”

“It's odd?”

“Well...yeah,” Lei says, then considers Cecil. “You really don't know that it's not normal?”

The question makes Cecil feel oddly defensive, though he's not sure if it's of himself or his town. “It's been this way my whole life, so I don't see what's so odd about it.” Lei must pick up on his discomfort, and immediately backpedals.

“No offense meant, really. It's just, the sky here is colored greens and grays and taupe of all things, and sometimes it's actually striped with colors that are not found in any natural skyline. It's not like this anywhere else in the world. You have to realize,” Lei says with a laugh, “when we scientists
He unlocks the door to the greenhouse and lets Cecil walk in ahead of him. The air in here is just as hot as it is outside, but it is heavy with humidity. There are a lot of plants in various sized containers either on shelves and tables or hanging from the ceiling in baskets. Most of them seem fairly young, though there are some transplants here and there that are clearly older than the greenhouse itself. Lei admits he doesn't know much about plants, and Cecil can identify a fair number of them just because he had learned their names in scouts. He knows more than half of the ones along the back wall, all of which are in separate enclosures. These, Lei says, are either the poisonous or the rare plants of which they haven't been able to find multiple samples. “And this little guy,” Lei says, tapping the container that holds a small but healthy example of a Hecatomb Lily, the same flowers he and Dana brought Abbey in the hospital.

Cecil looks over at Lei, who is running his thin fingers over the blooms of a Creeping Marisilver. “Lei, you've talked about everyone else and their work; what is it that you study, here in Night Vale?”

The other man pushes his blue-dyed bangs out of his eyes where they've flopped down with sweat. “Oh! I'm a cultural anthropologist! So I'm studying the people themselves. I try to find out as much as I can about their culture and customs, religious practices, world views, anything and everything. I spend a lot of time observing people, or doing interviews and surveys. And...um...correct me if I'm wrong, but I hear you have a custom called History Week coming up?”

“Yes!” Cecil exclaims. “It's our little way of remembering our past and embracing where we've come from! Yes, that's just next week!”

“You wouldn't happen to know some sources I could go to beyond the normal channels for access to historical information about Night Vale, would you? I have to say, a lot of the information I've collected is pretty conflicting.”

Cecil's face twists in irritation. “Yes, well, if the City Council or the Sheriff's Secret Police decides to alter historical documents, it does sometimes tend to get a bit confusing. But, I'm a bit of a history buff. I guess I could give you a hand. I'll be doing some segments on the show all next week in celebration of it, I can share with you more than I can get into a five minute segment.”

“You wouldn't mind?” Lei asks.

“Of course not. Carlos was nice enough to offer to help with the Children's Fun Fact Science Corner, after all.”
“Thank you!” he says, excited. “I can call you this weekend to work out a good time.”

“A good time for what?”

They both turn to see Carlos standing in the doorway, looking between the two men standing in the sun streaming through the greenhouse windows, Lei's hand touching Cecil's arm from where he pat it encouragingly. It suddenly occurs to Cecil that Lei is standing much closer than he thought.

Crap.

“Nothing!” Cecil blurts, though that isn't a very truthful answer in the least. He takes a hasty step back, making one of the heavy pots rattle loudly in the quiet space. “I mean, Lei is just going to—I am just going to help Lei out with some of his research. For History Week.”

Lei nods encouragingly, and Cecil witnesses some sort of weird silent communication between the two men involving increasingly intense looks that he doesn't even pretend to understand. But, whatever information is conveyed, apparently Carlos is pleased with the final answer, because the slightly pained and suspicious look slides off his face and is replaced by a welcoming little smile. “Right, History Week. Of course. That's great, Lei really needed all the help he could get with that.”

“Hey! Play nice!” Lei says, ambling over to Carlos. “Did you find the rocks you were looking for?”

“Naturally occurring potassium permanganate, and yes, I found a whole vein of it. Which makes no sense, as it is usually produced in a more powdered form, or small pieces and shards like salt, but this is more like solid rock and, well, there are some other abnormalities when comparing it to what is synthesized. But my readings were correct, and it is indeed potassium permanganate. If Gwen is finished readying the experiment, we can get started shortly.” Carlos steps back to allow Lei and Cecil out of the greenhouse, and Carlos takes the opportunity to shake the reporter's hand. “Sorry again for being late. I didn't forget, I swear, just...time seems to get away from me more in this town for some reason.”

“It's okay, you don't have to apologize. Everyone said you had remembered, so I know you didn't do it on purpose. Your work is important; I get that.”
A delightfully pleased smile blooms on Carlos' face at that. “Thank you, you...that means a lot, actually.” He looks at Cecil for a long moment before he seems to remember what they're supposed to be doing. “Right! Well, I have an experiment I had Gwen start setting up before I left, if you're interested in seeing it. It shouldn't take long at all. And after, I can show you some of what I've been working on.”

“That would be ne—“

“Carlos!” Harris appears from within the main building. “Carlos, I need you to talk some sense into Matt. His arm is obviously infected, and he's still refusing to let me do the job you hired me to do. I have to stop it from spreading, and honestly, it might be too late, but I can't tell if he won't give me access to the wound!”

“How obvious is obviously infected,” he asks.

“As in, I'm pretty sure his veins are actually changing color and he smells like something dying,” Harris replies. Carlos groans and runs a hand roughly through his hair, looking at Cecil apologetically.

“I can wait, or I can come back tomorrow, whatever you'd like,” Cecil says patiently. It's not like he doesn't know what it's like to try and get a handle on employees. At least he only has to keep track of three at the most; Carlos has so many more to deal with!

“This won't take long. Hopefully. He can be so...headstrong.”

“You mean he's a jackass,” Harris intones. “Can you go talk to him? I'll...I need to cool off before I say something even more derogatory than I already have to his face.”

“I can keep you company, if that's alright?” Cecil offers.

“Sure, thanks. We'll be out here when he's ready.” Carlos disappears into the lab and Cecil and Harris take a seat on the porch chairs. “Sorry you keep getting passed around like this, we're normally a little more organized. No, that's a lie, we're always this undone.”

Cecil tries to remember what he already knows about Harris. “You're the medical doctor, I'm guessing? You were back in the operating room with Abbey?”
Harris smirks. “That's me. Here to keep our little group patched up as best I can and offer my medical opinion on things. Not that I get much chance to do the latter, as I'm always doing the former.”

“No projects of your own?”

“Oh, a few. Mostly I just work with the others, evaluate things from a health perspective, make sure they don't do anything that makes them sick. They aren't very good at listening, but I can only do so much. But, I've been extracting some things from the plants in the greenhouse, testing them for medicinal properties. Most of them aren't suitable, though. At least not the ways I'm trying.” He rubs hard at his eyes and lets out a large yawn. “To tell you the truth, I just want a nap.”

“Are you alright?” Cecil asks.

“Yeah. This place just takes a lot out of you, when you're trying to keep people alive and well. I've gone over to Night Vale General a couple of times since Abbey lost her arm. I want to get a better idea of how healthcare works here. But a lot of it involves rituals and chanting, which a few weeks ago I would have told you was ridiculous but now I've seen it. They also use a lot of methods that you don't find outside of Night Vale, and they've agreed to show me some of them. This place will run you ragged, though.” He chuckles to himself. “You know, for all of that, this is still the most needed I've ever felt with a team, and even though I get so irritated with them all half the time, I haven't had this much fun in years. I'm not sure what that says about me, but there is a reason I didn't go into psychiatry.” He smiles at Cecil. “I never thought a place like this would give me satisfaction with my work.”

“I'm glad that our little community could present a challenge worthy of your skills,” Cecil says winningly.

“Now you're just trying to flatter me,” Harris says, but he looks charmed.

The door opens gently and Carlos peeks his head out. “I think I've convinced him to let you treat it, but I'd tread carefully. I don't know how much of it is the toxin and how much is him being irritated. Let's just play it like a normal patient, and not berate him, okay?”

“I don't berate,” Harris says harshly. Carlos just raises an eyebrow at him. “I don't berate much.”
“Also, the wound is...a lot larger and more...vibrant than I expected.”

“Shit,” Harris stands, so Cecil stands as well but is clearly unsure if he should follow. “You can come, if you'd like. Who knows, maybe you'll recognize what it is.” They make their way back to the main lab where Matt sits at one of the stools in the shared area. He looks angry, but has already taken his gloves off. “Take the shirt off, please,” Harris says as politely and detached as possible.

“Why, it's just on my hand, there's nothing—”

“Matt,” comes Carlos’ stern warning. The man sighs and unbuttons and removes his shirt. He's wearing a thin sleeveless undershirt and it does nothing to mask the bright orange lines that branch up his arm and barely onto his neck, following the lines of his veins. His hand, which is swollen, sports a bright tangerine orange wound that is bubbling with pus. The moment his shirt comes off, an overwhelming stench floods the room, and everyone either starts to cough or covers their mouths. Even the animals become agitated.

“Oh my God, Matt, Jesus,” Becky says from behind one of her cages.

“Fuck, I'm sorry, alright, I'll try to stop rotting.” Matt says, temper flaring.

“This is a lot worse than a thought,” Harris says, moving to grab supplies. “Cecil, do you know what this is? Is it something common in Night Vale, or rare even here?”

Easing forward, Cecil holds a hand over his nose and mouth and takes a closer look at his hand, the point from which all of the orange lines grow like vines. It's difficult, as the smell is strong enough to make his eyes water. “Did you injure yourself? Did you have an open wound?”

“Yeah, I cut it on a piece of wood,” he answers.

“It looks like you've got Tangerine Death,” Cecil says, squinting as the hand releases a little gush of oozing pus when Matt tightens his muscles.

Matt himself looks gobsmacked, and his words jump an octave. “Tangerine Death? What's that? Am I going to die?”
Cecil scoffs. “No, of course not. I mean, you could, but it probably won’t be from this. Unless you don’t get it treated in time. We had an intern get it a few years back so I’m a little familiar with it.”

“Did the intern live?”

“No, he died on the operating table.”

“Let’s not make it worse.” Harris cuts in, bringing a large collection of medical supplies over to the table. “Cecil, what is this thing like? It looks like a strand of *Peptostreptococcus*.”

Cecil isn’t sure what that is, but answers the question anyway. “Usually people get it from a deep cut that isn’t treated regularly. We’re very careful with our wounds here, since you just don’t know what sort of flesh-eating bacteria or microscopic parasites are in the air or water. He looks pretty far along. Does your arm feel like you’ve gotten lemon juice in a cut, except all over?”

Matt looks at Carlos, then back at Cecil. “No?”

“Oh, well I’m sure that won’t happen. Anyway, once it’s in the bloodstream of the victim it spreads to the heart.”

“Victim?” Matt jerks when Harris ties a tourniquet tight around his upper arm to try and slow down the spread of the bacteria.

“Let’s stick with patient,” Carlos says. “Cecil, would the hospital here have antibiotics to treat it?”

“I’m not sure,” Cecil replies. “It’s not all that common, even for Night Vale.”

“I’m going to have to do an antibiotic susceptibility test, to see what, if anything, we have that might take care of this thing. Until I get the results of that, I’ll give you a broad spectrum antibiotic. And...” Harris glances back at Carlos before looking Matt in his scared eyes. “I’m going to have to drain the pus and ease the swelling up the arm.”

“Fuck,” Matt moans, bringing his good hand up to his face. “You’re going to say you have to, aren’t you?”
“Afraid so. I'll probably have to make several incisions up the arm and around the hand. We'll numb you up so you won't feel it.” Harris looks back at Carlos. “I'll need to prepare for the procedure, look up a few things and figure out what sort of sedatives I'll need. Two hours, maybe three, and we can get started. I wouldn't want to wait any longer. For now, Matt, let's get you laid down and hydrated.”

“We'll get this fixed, Matt, just hang in there,” Carlos says, helping the man down from the table. He just nods absently and heads up the stairs to his room.

“I'm starting to see that being a scientist is fairly dangerous,” Cecil remarks. Carlos glances over to see that he has been taking copious amounts of notes in a little flip book, using a little golden lump.

“What are you using?” Carlos asks, gesturing to the little thing, about the size of a pecan. “I'm always looking for better ways to, uh, make marks.”

Cecil smiles at Carlos' question. “Just a little lump of wax.”

“But how do you see it? There's no pigment.”

“Aha!” Cecil says, pulling a little bottle out of his pocket. He holds it up for Carlos to see the light reflecting off the emerald green liquid inside. “The marks may not have pigment, but the paper can. Watch.” He rips one of the pages out of the back of the pad and draws something on one side. Then, he takes a little dab of the green dye and drips it on the corner of the paper before smearing it across the rest of the paper with a fingertip. The paper itself turns bright and vibrant, but the doodle of a little heart stays white.

“Oh! That's...actually quite clever. I've been using this,” he says, unwrapping a charcoal stub from his lab coat pocket.

Cecil looks at it dubiously. “I guess that's effective, but pretty messy. If you don't use the ink until you're at home, you can usually avoid making a mess of your hands.”

“I'll have to keep that in mind,” Carlos replies, then claps his hands together. “So! I hope you don't feel too neglected, but now we can get to an actual experiment. Here.” He walks Cecil over to a cabinet from which he pulls a spare lab coat and a pair of goggles. “This might be a little hazardous, so slip this on. You can wait on the goggles until we start. I'll go get Gwen and see if
Cecil slides the white material over the clothes he picked out that day, securing each of the large white buttons through their holes and straightening it neatly with his tie once he's done. He pulls his glasses out of his pocket, wondering briefly if he can wear them under the goggles since he doesn't want to risk missing anything of the experiment, but figures surely one of these scientists wears theirs underneath goggles from time to time. The glasses are slipped onto his face and he slides the goggles over his head and down to his neck. In his mind's eye, he thinks he probably looks pretty good in this outfit, though the coat is a tiny bit short in the arms.

Abbey, Lei and Gwen return without Carlos a few moments later, putting on their own gear. “Looking good, Cecil,” Abbey says, handing him a pair of gloves. Cecil thinks he can't look much different than the rest of them, but just thanks her and pulls the gloves on with a snap. It's just about then that Carlos comes back into the room wearing a more professional looking lab coat and carrying a plastic container in both hands. He stumbles a little when he looks up at the group, eyes going wide and mouth falling open just a little with surprise. Cecil can't help but look at his bottom lip, even from across the lab.

Cecil holds his arms wide. “How do I look?” he asks, grinning.

“Good, um, very nice, very, uh, efficient,” Carlos says as he comes closer, then grimaces. “No, that's, I-I mean, it suits you.”

“Thank you,” Cecil replies, taking the compliment even though he's unsure what that means. He's efficient? Scientists must compliment each other more...scientifically.

“What exactly do you have us down here watching, Carlos?” Abbey asks, propping her good arm on her hip.

“We are going to do a slight variation on thunder in a test tube,” he replies, looking excited.

“That's all?” Abby looks unimpressed. “We did that in first year chemistry. Why are we wasting time with this?”

“Because,” Carlos says, shaking the little container in his hands, “I have something that I think will create a little stronger result than what we're used to.” He turns his attention to Cecil and Lei, who are the two that look the most lost. Cecil is messing with something in his pocket. “Something wrong?”
Cecil pulls his voice recorder from within his pocket. “Do you mind if I use this instead of writing? I don't want to miss anything.”

“Certainly, that's fine. In fact, it might be even better, since this has sound involved.” He waits for Cecil to get the tape set up and press the record button before continuing. “In the test tubes that Gwen prepared for me earlier, we have a layer of concentrated sulfuric acid under a layer of acetone. You can't tell because they are both clear and colorless, but they have been layered in such a way that they have not mixed. Now, all we need to add is a catalyst to get a reaction. In the normal experiment, a small amount of potassium permanganate would be added and a small reaction would occur. The liquids would cloud, and sounds and lights would be emitted from the tube, similar to those in a thunderstorm. Normally, potassium permanganate is a manufactured compound, and comes in powdered form. But this,” he says, holding opening the container, “is the first time naturally occurring potassium permanganate has been found, and in solid rock form. There is also some interesting coloration in it that implies it might have more to it, but it's in trace amounts. I brought back plenty for testing, and there is much more of it if we need it. So, any questions before we begin?”

“Are you sure this is safe?” Lei asks, looking nervous.

“We'll all have our protective gear on. You all stand on that side of the table in case you feel the need to flee,” Carlos responds, moving his goggles to his own spectacles. The rest follow suit, and Lei pulls Cecil back slightly from the table. Carlos removes the a small shard of the potassium permanganate from the container about the size of a bead, shifting the rest out of the way and approaching the first tube. “I measured a few beforehand so we'd have an idea as to the amount used. This is a fourth of an ounce shard. Everyone ready?” They all nod, and Carlos grins a little manically before dropping the rock into the tube.

The liquid level in the tube shoots up a few inches and it turns immediately a dark stormy gray color, but for a few long, agonizing moments, nothing else happens. It's just long enough for Cecil to feel disappointed. That wasn't very exciting at all. But, when his eyes look to Carlos, he sees a look of pure anticipation on his face, so he quickly trains his eyes back on the tube.

The reaction after that is violent. The surface of the liquid starts to bubble like water in a heated tea kettle, the tube itself jumping in its holder. Then, like a book dropping to the floor from a great height, there is a deep cracking pop and a bright flash of light the exact purple shade of lightning on a summer evening. Once the first crack of thunder sounds, it's like it can't stop, the booms tripping over each other and the lights flashing erratically in the little tube.

Once the reaction dulls to a gentle rumbling noise and only the occasional spark of light, Cecil allows himself to gush. “That was amazing! It really was like a little thunderstorm in there!”
“You guys want to do a bigger piece?” Carlos asks, eyes crinkled in amusement behind his glasses and goggles. They all wholeheartedly agree, and Carlos skips ahead in his planned experiment to a one ounce shard. “Here we go,” he says, dropping the piece in and taking several steps back. The others follow his lead.

The reaction is the same this time as the first time, for about fifteen seconds.

Then the tube explodes.

It sounds like a bolt of lightning struck right outside the building, it's so loud, and the force of the reaction causes not only the tube to explode in a dazzling flash, but all the other tubes on the table are knocked over in their holders, liquid pouring over the tabletop. Carlos quickly grabs the container with the rest of the potassium permanganate and moves it out of the way. A glance around reveals that no one was hurt, and Cecil watches Carlos face light up, ecstatic.

“Holy shit, Carlos!” Lei shouts, laughing. They all break out into laughter at that, as the four scientists move to clean up the mess and Cecil makes sure his recorder wasn't damaged. “I think one ounce was a bit much.”

“That was an excellent test,” Carlos says, and Cecil thinks that the tube exploding probably shouldn't count as a success, but maybe any reaction at all counts as a test well done. “It requires so little to get an impressive reaction. We might be able to find a way to utilize it. I'll do some thinking on it tonight and come up with some possible applications to explore.” He grins up at Cecil. “Was that more along the lines of what you were looking for?”

Cecil lets loose a slightly unprofessional giggle. “I hope you didn't put this together on my account.”

“That was a bonus,” he replies. They all pull off their goggles and gloves, Cecil handing over these and his lab coat to Carlos. There is an adorable reddened line across his forehead and on his cheeks from the goggles pressing into his face, and Cecil wonders if he's sporting a similar indentation. The others go back to what they were working on before, and Carlos leads Cecil to his personal laboratory.

“It's not much, so I hope you're not too disappointed.” The door is unlocked and Carlos leads the way into this smaller space, and it's not anything like what Cecil expects.
There are three sturdy work tables in the center of the room, two of them set up with experiments that look to have been stopped mid-step. Or, perhaps they are simply incubating, or simmering, or whatever experiments do when they're waiting for something to be ready. There are beakers and tubes of all sorts, all connected together with piping. Some have little tubes inside the other tubes that corkscrew around the insides, others are shaped funny or curve from one to the next, or have little chambers at the tops. Cecil hasn't taken a chemistry class since high school, and even then it was never this complicated. The only things he can really identify by name are the Bunsen burners and the Erlenmeyer flasks. Anything beyond that is a complete mystery.

The third table is completely bare, wiped clean and the metal shining, ready to be covered in equipment and notes. Just like in the lab, there are cabinets and shelves along two of the walls. These are packed full of boxes and containers, cases and jars, all full of collected specimens. There are several filing cabinets and a shelf crammed with books—books that do not look to be municipally approved, but Cecil does not comment—and an abnormally large number of clocks and watches scattered about the room. The white board mounted to one side is covered in scrawling marks that he realizes are formulas, or maybe just one big formula. There's a desk against the back wall, overflowing with scraps of paper and notes, all sharing space with a computer and at least four different coffee cups.

His eyes, however, skip over everything and settle on the area behind the desk, directly in his line of sight. Taking up a good six feet of wall space is a map of Night Vale.

“Elder gods,” Cecil murmurs to himself. Carlos does not move to stop him when he walks forward, so he winds his way back to the wall and takes a closer look. Every little street and every curving road has been meticulously drawn onto the surface of the paper, which looks to be of good quality and is a light sepia color. Not all the streets are labeled, but Cecil wouldn't be surprised if there was a list of them somewhere and a key for finding them on the map. The larger landmarks are labeled, and Cecil's eyes seek out City Hall, the Night Vale Public Library, even the Night Vale Laboratories. And there, right where it should be, is the radio station, a little facsimile of the radio tower drawn into the space.

There are little magnets in a variety of colors dotting the map; it must be mounted on a piece of metal. The magnets are clustered in certain places while in others there's just a single magnet seemingly placed at random. There's also a good number off in the less detailed parts identified by their labels as the Sand Wastes and the Scrublands. Cecil can't help but notice that a good number of magnets are surrounding Night Vale Community Radio.

“What do all the magnets mean?” he asks, face now less than a foot from the map so he can look closely at the little details.
“Each color represents a different phenomenon we're tracking or equipment we've placed. For example, the green ones are all the cameras we placed out in the Sand Wastes to try and catch sight of Telly or Joanna. The red ones are a reminder of phenomenon that still need to be investigated when we find the time.”

Cecil fingers one of the magnets over the radio station. He notices that one color is far less represented than the rest, showing up in maybe six or seven places total. “What do the purple ones mean?”

“Oh, that. Those are...those are phenomenon that I want to investigate personally, that I don't plan on working with the others on.” He doesn't elaborate that point. Cecil has long learned to listen to his instincts in an interview, and all his instincts tell him not to pursue that particular vein at this time. All the same, it makes him insanely curious, and he makes a mental note to bring it up again sometime.

He steps back to take in the whole map again. “Did you make this yourself?” he asks.

“Yes. I found it was rather difficult to find an accurate map of Night Vale,” he says ruefully. It makes Cecil chuckle. “Yes, the City Council keeps changing roads or denying certain areas of town exist at all. I guess cartographers just gave up, here. I don't think I've seen a map this good in years. It's beautiful.” He can tell that the scientist doesn't really know how to take the compliment, as he moves on to other areas of the room.

Carlos shows Cecil the other charts he has made, including a set of seemingly random lines and dots that he used to map the stars' movements, and explains that he's stayed awake several nights in order to track the stars from the roof. He mounted a telescope up there shortly after arriving in Night Vale. Apparently there were two other scientists that left that first night, and one of them was an astronomist. Carlos saw no need to let his equipment go to waste. “None of the constellations in the sky match up with where they should be at this time of year. I haven't been able to find a reason to explain it, but it was enough to make me buy a compass for when I'm out in the desert; finding your direction by the stars doesn't work if all the stars are different, or switch places seemingly at random.”

“Can I see the telescope?”

“Ah, um,” Carlos ducks his head, and Cecil wonders what he's said to suddenly make the man tongue-tied. He starts to gather the charts together in neat little piles while he fumbles for words. “I-I would, it's just, just, um...it's on the roof, and we'd have to go through my rooms to get...”
there...um...maybe some other time, it's a mess and...yeah, maybe some other time.”

“Oh,” Cecil replies. Then he gets it. “Oh. Yes, I understand. That's fine. So, what else are you working on?”

Carlos launches into the seismic activity that he has been tracking all across Night Vale, really getting into the subject, going on and on about tectonic shifts and fault lines and earthquakes and tremors, and Lei was right. Once you get him started on a subject he's passionate about, you won't understand a word he says. Cecil lost him long before he starts talking about magnetotellurics. Cecil still has his recorder playing, though, so he smiles and nods as Lei suggested and takes in the details that aren't scientifically pertinent. The way Carlos starts to talk with his hands when he's excited about something, how he can't help but make his hands mimic the way a seismic wave would move through the ground or how tectonic plates would shift together. He notices how Carlos keeps running his hands through his glorious hair, even though it is shorter and not actually in his eyes, but the habit is so ingrained in him he does it anyway. The way he shifts and takes a step to the right or the left, and Cecil can tell he wants to pace while he explains, but he doesn't want to drift too far away from his audience. Most beguiling is the way his lips quirk in little smiles and smirks when he brings up certain subjects, the way he slips the name of a fellow scientist into the conversation he obviously doesn't agree with, or when he's had some little breakthrough that isn't an answer but an opening door to more questions.

Carlos' eyes look the best when he talks about that. Cecil would almost swear the very color of his eyes shifts from dark amber to honey gold. But that would be silly.

When Cecil brings up the clocks, though, Carlos becomes surprisingly reticent. He picks up one of the pocket watches tossed haphazardly onto the counter and runs his fingers along the seams as he speaks. “I'm trying to figure out the apparent time fluctuations we've been experiencing ever since we arrived here. It's...most confusing. I...” he places the timepiece back on the table and stuffs his hands in his pockets. “I have some theories, but nothing concrete. Not yet. I want to be sure before I present it to anyone else. It's...a little out there. An idea that would probably get me laughed out of the scientific community completely if I didn't have proof. So...I don't think I can elaborate on it right now. You understand? I don't mean to be difficult, I just...”

“No, I get it. Very mysterious, but I get it.” They share a laugh, and Carlos glances at his own watch. Cecil wonders why he didn't just get the time from the pocket watch when he had it.

“I feel like I've eaten up your whole day. Shouldn't you be over at the radio station by now?” Carlos asks, and Cecil feels a jolt of adrenaline.

“Shit,” he mumbles, and at louder volume, “What time is it?”
“Close to five thirty,” Carlos answers, and Cecil scrunches up his face in a grimace. “I guess that's your cue. Let me walk you out.”

Cecil waves goodbye to the scientists he sees in the main lab, and Carlos joins him in the parking lot. Carlos has a similar to reaction to Cecil's car as Lei and Abbey did, but a lot more subdued and with a lot less specifics. “Wow, that's a pretty nice car. It looks like it's right out of the fifties.”

“Fifty-five, actually,” Cecil says.

“It's pretty.”

That actually brings Cecil up short. “Pretty?” he asks. Because a lot of people have said a lot of things about his car—and not all of them nice, especially not in the beginning—but no one has ever called his car pretty. Carlos' cheeks turn a lovely hue at Cecil's question, almost the same as the Pansy Purple of his car.

“Sorry,” he sputters, “I don't really know anything about cars. Didn't own one until I was in grad school.”

“Really? Wow. Well, thank you all the same. It is rather pretty, I suppose. I'll take you for a ride sometime.” That last bit is already out of his mouth before he realizes what a horrible, awful, terrible innuendo that sounds like, and he really needs to think before he speaks. He's about to apologize for it, before Carlos calls him on something so obvious, but Carlos just smiles like he didn't notice at all.

“Sure, maybe. It would be good to learn more about them. I hope you enjoyed yourself today. Again, so sorry about being late.” He offers his hand to shake again, and Cecil gratefully takes it.

“It was very enlightening, and I'm sure I can get some good material for the show out of it. We should do this again sometime. You're really a good teacher, you should try it sometime.” For some reason this makes Carlos laugh a little louder than before, but he just shakes his head at Cecil's confused look. He bids the scientist farewell and heads off to the station, aware that he's very late, but can't find it in himself to care.
Chapter 9

The only people that typically worry about dog parks are dog owners, usually city dog owners at that, and people who don't like dogs so they have something to complain about. Carlos personally loves dogs, but has not owned a dog or any sort of pet at all since he left Mexico, and they were hardly his. Héctor, his abuelo, kept several dogs on their sprawling homestead for herding, protection and companionship. One in particular, some combination of herding and hound breeds that not even Matt could identify with the help of a DNA analyzer, used to follow Carlos around more than the others, even more than he followed around his abuelo. Lobo, a short-haired but fluffy brown mutt with eyes like almonds, was his side-kick in many outdoor adventures. When he left Mexico at age twelve, he was told Lobo had to stay behind. He never saw Lobo again, and never found out what happened to him.

Needless to say, he's never been in the position of owning a dog or needing the services of a dog park before. That does not mean he has never seen one. A small open fenced-in area with trees and grass, no litter for the dogs to get into, and neat little trashcans for taking care of the inevitable mess dogs tend to produce. There was at least one that Carlos knew of back in Arkham near the university that some of his fellow faculty members made use of some mornings and in between classes with their own pets.

The Night Vale Dog Park is unlike any that Carlos has ever seen, and most likely unlike any other dog park in the world. Based on Carlos' estimates, it should be a little over two acres in size. The walls are a deep obsidian, flawless, smooth with no discernible features. The only deviation in the entire perimeter is the entrance, located on the corner of Earl and Summerset. The gate is decorated with jagged metal images of dogs in silhouette. If he were to guess, the walls are only about fifteen feet high, but attempts to look over the edge or through the gate make the viewer's eyes strain and slide away.

Even now, from his position in a tree next to one of the walls, he can see nothing within the boundaries of the Dog Park.

One of the little purple magnets Cecil had noticed on Carlos' map of Night Vale was located over this spot. It had been the first thing he had heard Cecil talking about on the radio that first night, and it had struck him as singularly odd that the radio host would announce the opening of a new public area then immediately deny access to it. The next day he had driven by on a whim, curious, and the two hand-held detectors still in his pocket from the evening before had started beeping erratically. Since then, the Dog Park has been one of his pet projects.

Setting aside the fact that mentioning or even thinking about the Dog Park is not allowed and he didn't want to risk his team getting arrested, or worse re-educated for mentioning it, something about this particular mystery irks him like so few do. Maybe it is because he has so little usable data—make no mistake, he has reams of data, but none of it useful—or maybe it is just the overall
secrecy. Most likely it is simply the fact that he can't get inside the Dog Park itself, and nothing peaks his curiosity like a locked door. And for once his slightly questionable ability to pick locks is entirely unhelpful. Whatever the reasons, something about the Dog Park makes him want to figure this out for himself. There is something important here, he knows it in his bones, if he could just figure out what it is. It has almost become a sort of personal challenge. Luckily the others have not shown much interest in it for one reason or another, and have left Carlos to his own devices in his pursuit of this particular Night Vale phenomenon.

Shortly after the Dog Park opened and he began his secret and most likely highly illegal study, he found a fairly large tree along one of the sidewalks on Summerset that runs parallel to one of the walls. It was tall and sturdy with a lot of cover from dense leaves. The best part, though, was that the main branches could support his weight. Climbing it had given him a premium spot to take readings from, and he was well hidden from passers-by on the street. He was sure the Sheriff's Secret Police knew he was up there, but so far no one had said anything, and he was working under the assumption he was fine until otherwise threatened.

Today he has dragged an unwieldy amount of equipment up the tree, but with the help of some straps and clamps, he manages to secure most of it so his hands can be free. He is still mostly invisible from the ground level unless someone is right beneath him, even with the extra gear, which is a plus. People in Night Vale are mostly friendly toward him, but they do not always have the sense to not bother him while he is working. He once spent an hour listening to a long and meandering explanation about the importance of crop rotation in the invisible corn industry, and it really is not a conversation he wishes to repeat. He does not have to worry about that sort of thing in his perch above the street. Light filters down on him from above and he is noticeably comfortable in the shade as he records information from a little black plastic box propped in the corner of two diverging branches. The readings today have been fluctuating wildly, just like every day he has found the time to study the Dog Park.

It is not the most taxing work, just taking down numbers with his little bit of wax as Cecil suggested, and the lack of urgency allows for ample time to let his mind wander. Unfortunately, all he keeps thinking about is the fact that right now, while Carlos is up a tree, Lei is meeting Cecil for help with his history research.

Not that Carlos has any reason to feel the warm mixture of envy and jealousy burning low in his belly and making his concentration vanish like a mirage in the heat. And, if he had discreetly thumped his head down onto Abbey's workbench a couple dozen times in the safety of her lab after the other scientist had left for his meeting, well, that was between Carlos, Abbey, and the machines.

Abbey insists that Lei wouldn't try anything, not on Cecil, but Carlos can't help but squirm with the thought. It is not like Lei did nothing to earn his reputation as a man who flirts with anything possessing human intelligence, sometimes less. Carlos is pretty sure he once tried to flirt a vending machine out of a pack of cheddar crackers. And Cecil is so charming on his own, why wouldn't someone like Lei notice. They had seemed to be getting along pretty well when Carlos had shown
up at the greenhouse...

Carlos shakes his head. It's none of his business. There are plenty of good, valid reasons not to pursue anything with Cecil, reasons that are independent of Lei and his tendencies.

The lab coat, though. He had put on the lab coat. The generic white material had obscured the colorful mess that was Cecil’s clothing, leaving nothing but long, lean lines and broad shoulders. Carlos could only imagine what he would look like in one more suited to his form.

He had looked *amazing* in the lab coat.

Carlos gives his hair a good yank and focuses; he needs to cast these thoughts aside in favor of his research. He spends a quiet hour making observations, and he gets a few ideas about additional tests he might try, shifting occasionally when one body part or another gets numb. Still, his interest wanes, and he finds himself distracted by an interesting little creature climbing down from the higher branches. It is a dome shaped little blob, a solid aqua at the core but translucent at the edges and it jiggles a little like jello. It clings to some of the more delicate twigs with long sticky tentacles, and Carlos realizes it is a jellyfish. What a jellyfish is doing out of the water, much less up this tree, becomes an interesting little puzzle to consider. It does not seem to be distressed or struggling in any way, unless you count it's difficulty releasing its own stingers from leaves it accidentally touches. He watches in fascination as it fights with one leaf for a good ten minutes, swinging the little bit of greenery back and forth as it tries to shake itself free. The little invertebrate eventually settles into an upside down hug of the branch above his head, and Carlos enjoys his company for a while after snapping a few pictures with his phone. He is just considering bidding his new friend adieu, climbing down and getting a snack from his car down the street when he hears a bit of commotion on the sidewalk below.

From his vantage point he sees a group of boys, maybe ten or so, walking down the sidewalk towards his position. They are maybe eleven or twelve, a few older, and all instantly identifiable as members of the local scout troop by their khaki and violet outfits and decorated sashes. They are all carrying backpacks, and Carlos wonders briefly what they are doing out at this time on a weekday. Shouldn't they be in school? A brief glance at his watch has him wondering just when schools get out in Night Vale.

The boys are rough housing as they approach, laughing and joking about something that happened in school that day, and Carlos goes back to his readings. So far he has not actually interacted with any of the scouts, though he has heard about some of their exploits on the radio. He knows that the older ones can be a bit intense, the closer they get to higher ranks. The first few weeks in town he knows a few followed him and the other scientists around, but always from a good distance away and none of them were ever approached. Eventually this extra attention ebbed away, and Carlos forgot about it.
Carlos becomes aware of a sudden silence, and he quickly looks back to the ground level. The boys have all stopped around ten feet from the tree trunk, and are staring directly ahead on the sidewalk. Carlos twists from his perch and looks straight down.

At first, all he can see is feathers. Big white gaudy feathers, with red-orange tips, sticking up and cascading down the person's head and back. Well, he assumes there is a person under there, but the sheer amount of plumage makes him a little difficult to see from directly above. Carlos leans sideways just a bit, gripping the branch beneath him tight with both thighs, and can just make out the features of a man sporting a lot of turquoise—oh. It's him.

Cecil had mentioned this man, the Apache Tracker, his first night in Night Vale, and is always quick to bring him up on-air as a shining example of what racism in this town is like. Which Carlos cannot help but find hilarious, because as far as racism goes, there are a lot worse things someone can do. Carlos has experienced a good number himself, where someone actually wishes you harm, where someone might follow through with the threats they spew.

It was actually the sort of thing he feared when planning the project, not just for himself but for Billy, Lei and Araav, the four of them decidedly not white. Small towns can breed the most hateful of opinions sometimes simply because they don't have enough dissenting voices, and Night Vale was certainly more isolated than your typical small town. Carlos had been prepared for open hostility, and the possibility that even if something did happen, the local law enforcement would have been as like-minded as the populace. It was a surprise and a relief to find the worst offender was basically a man with too much time on his hands for playing dress-up at the local costume shop. This, this man who dresses like a caricature out of an old western, a white man's television version of what it is to be Native American, is most certainly racist, but more the kind you pity than fear.

Still, Carlos is well aware that the Native American population in Night Vale is higher than most American towns, and this is pretty blatant. He does have to wonder if the Apache Tracker—and really, it would be nice if this guy had a real name to use instead of perpetuating the stereotype and making it worse—even knows what he is doing is offensive, or is actually that ignorant.

The man squares off against the group of children, and much to Carlos' horror, he raises one hand and says in a dull monotone imitation of a Native American accent, “How.”

*How?!* Okay, yes, Cecil is right. This guy is just an asshole.

The boys move to circle into the street and avoid him, but the Apache Tracker sidesteps and they stumble, confused. “When the chief is weak, the tribe is weak. Your chief, he is not a warrior or a
shaman. He does not teach you the ways of our ancestors.”

There's a derisive snort from one of the kids in the back. Carlos hears another one mutter, “Whose ancestors is he talking about?”

The Apache Tracker raises his arms in what Carlos thinks is meant to be a mystifying way. “You should be learning the ways of my people. You should be learning the magicks of the land. You should be on the quest to find your spirit animal.” There's snickering among the group, and the Apache Tracker plows on, going on a diatribe about seeking your true self in the wilderness. Carlos knows for a fact that these children are often out in the desert with their scout leader, based on the surveillance they set up in the Scrublands. Judging by the frequency of these visits, he would guess they know a lot more about the wilderness than this man in store-bought leather fringe will ever know. He's starting to grow annoyed with the entire situation and wonders if he should intervene.

It's about that time that the little climbing jellyfish plops down in his lap, and Carlos gets a wonderfully awful idea. The sort of idea he knows he shouldn't follow through with, but only takes about five seconds to consider before following through anyway. Decision made, he props his notepad against a branch so his hands are free and gingerly picks up the jiggly creature by the body. Its little tendrils cling to his lab coat briefly before it hangs from his fingers like a limp rag. Carlos pivots in place on the branch and leans over, one hand wrapped bracingly around a higher branch, the other holding the jellyfish out over the scene below and waiting, poised for the perfect moment. The Apache Tracker says something low that he doesn't quite catch, but judging by the gasps from the scouts, they do.

One of the smaller boys boldly steps closer to him. “You can't talk about Scoutmaster Harlan that way!”

In a split second, the Apache Tracker has him by his thin arm, yanking him closer and spitting words into his upturned face. “Your chief is leading you astray! And you will meet with a fate worse than death if you continue to follow him blindly. Abandon him while you can!”

The boy's eyes widen in fear, but also in surprise at what he sees above the man squeezing his arm. A dark man with darker hair perched above, white coat tails hanging behind him like a cape, arm stretched out and dangling a squirming jellyfish in the air.

Carlos smirks, and drops it.

The jellyfish falls through the air and slaps the top of the Apache Tracker's head with a disgusting wet plop, jarring the man into letting go of the young boy. He backs away quickly, the older man
reaching through the feathers of his offensive headdress trying to feel what is now sliding into his hair and down his neck. When his fingers make contact with the slick gooey body, he makes an appalled face. “What the fuck?” he says, dropping his ridiculous accent and sounding much more like a mid-westerner. The kids titter at his curse, but they all gasp and jump back when he really starts screaming. Arms flailing, the Apache Tracker grasps and claws at his neck, the headdress impeding his reach as the jellyfish writhes against his skin.

The scientist in the tree gleefully notes that this land jellyfish is as toxic to humans as their sea counterparts. It would be handy if he could find some more. Below, most of the children scream and laugh as they watch the Apache Tracker run off down the sidewalk, still trying to pry the little critter off and shouting for help. Some of the kids give chase. Carlos watches their progress down the street, feeling an absurd sense of accomplishment in setting the racist jerk running. He is still smiling when he glances down and is surprised to see two of them still staring up at him from the ground.

“Thank you, Mister Scientist,” the smaller one says. It was the one the Apache Tracker had by the arm. He can't be older than ten years old, tops, with giant ears that stick out like satellite dishes from the sides of his head.

Carlos briefly considers correcting the name, but lets it go. “You're welcome. Are you alright? He didn't hurt you, did he?” The little boy shakes his head but says nothing more, the two going back to staring up at him in his tree. He stares back for long moments. They say nothing. “Okay, well...glad you're alright,” Carlos says, shifting back around on the branch and picking up his notepad again. The wax is retrieved from his pocket, and he goes back to recording his findings. The numbers are still as erratic as before, though trending lower than they were when he started. Perhaps there is some sort of pattern when all the data is looked at over time? It is something he'll need to look into when he compiles everything for comparison.

He is very aware that they have not left yet. Pointedly ignoring them, he goes about his business, twisting dials on some of the machines, adjusting the antenna on another. Nonchalantly, he glances beneath his arm, and is glad to see the children are gone.

Until a face peeks at him from around the trunk. Luckily for his health, Carlos doesn't jump in surprise and allow gravity to carry him to the ground. Instead he stills, noticing another face easing around the other side of the trunk. They duck back, giggling. “Can I help you?” he asks.

“You saved Seth,” says the boy leaning around the right, his stringy brown bangs hanging in his eyes. He tries to push them back with his free hand, but almost loses his balance and clings again to the tree, hair worse than before. The other boy, Seth, grips the tree harder as he leans just a little further around.
Carlos swallows, feeling distinctly uncomfortable with the statement. “I didn't save anyone. And besides, that guy shouldn't be harassing people, much less children.” He turns his eyes back down to his notebook, hoping if he doesn't speak to the boys that they will get bored and leave. His resolve only lasts a minute and a half, however. It is one thing to know you are being constantly monitored by the local law enforcement from safe but unknowing distances, and quite another to be watched from less than five feet away by two nosy kids. He raises his head and looks the two of them in the eye. Instead of recognizing his look for the irritation it is, though, they take this as a cue to speak.

“What are you doing?” asks the still unnamed child.

“What kind of science?”

“Lots of kinds.” Carlos writes a few more numbers before glancing up again. Seth is still staring at him with his wide dark eyes, but the other boy is looking not at himself but at the myriad of equipment around him. His eyes dart around to the different boxes and wires like he is not sure which unknown object requires the most attention. He knows he is going to regret what comes out of his mouth next. “Do you want me to show you?” he asks.

That seems to be all the prompting the two need, and they both scramble their way up and around through the branches of the tree. Seth ends up suspended from the branch above Carlos' head, curled around it like a Cheshire cat, head practically upside down. The other maneuvers his way around to the branch next to Carlos, his longer limbs making him resemble a spider balanced on too small a perch.

Carlos isn't sure where to start, so he asks, “Is there anything you want to know in particular? Do you know what any of these are?”

Seth shakes his head, still silent, but the other boy points to one of the smaller boxes. It has a digital interface showing numbers constantly rising and falling in dark green. Carlos picks it up and brings it closer so the two can look properly. “This is a Geiger counter. Usually it is a lot louder, but since the readings go off near-constantly now, I had to add a mute feature. Anyway, it's a particle detector that measures ionizing radiation. Do you know anything about radiation?”

By sunset, the two boys have learned far beyond their grade level about all manner of subjects, including radiation, nuclear fission, thermodynamics, seismology, the proper way to disassemble and reassemble a magnetic anomaly detector in the field, and that no question is too small or big.
that this scientist won't try his best to answer. Carlos has learned that the taller boy's name is Andrew, that they are members of Troop -667, that they have an unwavering loyalty to Scoutmaster Harlan, and that these two kids can think of more questions to ask than every student in his roster from last year combined. For a long time Andrew does most of the talking, but eventually Seth opens up and starts asking his own questions. It is growing dark by the time they help Carlos remove his equipment from the tree and carry it down the street to the parking space he snagged earlier that day.

If Carlos is honest, he has to admit that having a little company for the day certainly broke up the monotony, and the boys really were not any trouble to have around. With that in mind, he extends to them his hand to shake as he would a colleague, and tells them they can feel free to stop and say hello if they see him about town.

“Thank you, Mr. Carlos!” Andrew says. He waves and starts to pull Seth along, but the smaller child shakes his arm free and comes back. The little boy suddenly has both arms thrown around Carlos, hugging him around the waist and pressing his cheek into his hip. Carlos' own arms jump into the air, not knowing what exactly is going on.

“Thank you, Mr. Scientist!” Seth exclaimed, voice muffled by the material of the lab coat. Carlos has long given up trying to get him to use any other name than that. He awkwardly pats the boy on the top of his head before disengaging the child and breaking contact.

“Uh, no problem,” he says, feeling very inappropriate. He's never been good with handling affection from children. “No problem at all. You two head home, now. Stay safe.” The two wave again as they jog off down the street, and Carlos climbs behind the wheel. Maybe it wasn't his most productive day of science, but it could have been worse.

He idly wonders if Lei is back yet.

“Billy, I know it's not your specialty, but it really isn't any of our specialties, and Carlos asked you to look into it. You don't know it isn't caused by the weather.” Cecil patiently tries not to eavesdrop on Lei's phone conversation, but the man is not exactly being discreet. He picks up one of the books spread out on the table in front of him and pretends to look interested in chapter seventeen of Beings Above: Ancient Night Vale Cultures and Where To Find Their Thrones. “I don't know why he isn't answering his phone; you know how it is around here. No, I don't...no...no! Billy, I don't know what to tell you! Just take some equipment down there, take some readings, ask some questions! You might stumble upon something, you never know!” There's a long moment where Cecil can't hear the other voice through the phone. “Yeah, I know. No, don't...I know. I know, I won't...you know, you're all being dicks about this, I wouldn't do that to him. I'm not that much of a...you're such a dick. Yeah, okay. Bye.”
Lei hangs up the phone and gives Cecil an apologetic look from across the break room table at the radio station. “So sorry about that. The tourism board asked us to for help investigating who or what is...uh...telepathically assaulting tourists? So far we're a little stumped. Anyway, I didn't mean to interrupt.”

“That's fine,” Cecil says. “It is getting a bit late, anyway. I might be able to squeeze in another thirty minutes, but I have to get the script written for today's show.” They pick back up where they left off when Lei's phone rang, going into detail about Night Vale's 1943 decision to join the war effort and their contributions of chanting. Cecil, closet history buff that he is, actually owns an original chanting scroll from 1944 that he brought from home for Lei to view. He removes it from the leather and bronze scroll case with gloved hands, carefully spreading the papyrus open so that the letters written in blood don't flake off. The scientist asks several questions, and Cecil answers as best he can as well as gives a rough translation of the modified Sumerian sections. “I would perform the chant for you, but this particular one was outlawed in 1976. I can only own the paper itself because of my permit to handle antiquities.”

“Is it hard to get a permit for that?”

Cecil shakes his head. “Just three pints of blood and an eye exam once a year. Nothing out of the ordinary. Most people just don't have the inclination to keep it up to date.”

“Is it alright if I take a picture?” Lei asks. At Cecil's nod, he pulls a digital camera out of his bag and takes a few shots of the scroll, as well as a couple close-ups of some of the text and gold filigree edging. Time running out, Lei helps Cecil divide the books on the table into two stacks—those belonging to the Night Vale Public Library, and those of Cecil's own.

“I'll need to run these by the library sometime before Tuesday,” Cecil says as they secure the last book in a canvas tote.

“None of us have made it into the library yet. Don't you have to be...I don't know...teleported in or something?”

“I'm not sure if teleported is the right term, but you do fall asleep only to wake up among the stacks.” Cecil looks at Lei, surprised. “I would think that scientists would be more likely to be transported in than most, other than maybe students. Have you firmly stated that you are in need of a book out loud and then assumed a horizontal reclining position?”
Lei gapes at Cecil for a moment before answer. “No, that's...not how we do it back home.”

“Oh! Well, that's probably why, then. If you'd like, some of you could come with me when I take these back. As long as it's before Tuesday, of course. I can show you how it's done, and really, none of you sound remotely trained to deal with the librarians. I don't know how you dealt with them where you come from, but we have classes about this in school that I don't think any of you have taken. And I wouldn't want anything to happen to your group.” Cecil runs the strap of the tote bag back and forth between his fingers. “Even if all of you can't come, your leader should at least know the basics. So he can teach the rest of you.”

Cecil immediately knows he was too obvious, because Lei smirks. “Yes, I'm sure Carlos would love the chance to learn something new. He is an avid reader, after all.”

“Is he? Well, that's...good.” Cecil cringes and turns his face away on the pretense of putting their coffee cups in the sink.

There's a beat of silence. “I think he might be more of a fan of rare books, though. Maybe not what you'd find at a public library. Antiquities, that sort of thing. You did say you had a collection. I could ask him, if you'd like.”

Cecil shoots a narrow-eyed stare over his shoulder. The scientist cocks a jaunty eyebrow at him, and Cecil knows he's caught. Still, best to keep up the metaphor, for now. “I don't know if he would be interested. In my...antiquities. Besides, he's a scientist. I don't really have any scientific texts in my collection.”

Lei picks up his own bag and shoulders it. “Let's just say, it takes Carlos a long time to choose a book he wants to read. But when he does, he reads it very thoroughly. Cover to cover? I don't think he's even read another book in a couple of years...you know what? This analogy has gotten away from me.” This makes Cecil laugh, helplessly, and turn to face Lei when he keeps speaking. “He likes you, Cecil. I'm sure of it. He just...Carlos moves really slow. Like, glacially slow. I haven't even known him that long, and I know that. Abbey said he hasn't dated anyone for more than a month since he was in grad school, and no one at all in the past few years.”

“I'm not pressuring him or anything, am I?” Cecil asks.

“No, nothing like that. I mean, maybe a little pressure would do him some good. Maybe not. The point is, you're doing fine! I just wouldn't expect any big declarations anytime soon. If you're really interested, you'll be in for a long wait.”
Cecil sighs and nods, not entirely comfortable talking about this subject with one of Carlos' team members. At least he seems supportive. “I was serious, though, if you all want to go into the library. Just give me a call. I’ll probably head in on Monday.”

“Sure thing,” Lei says, shaking Cecil's hand and thanking him before heading down the hall to the front entrance. Cecil watches him disappear around the corner to the lobby before hefting the books back to his office. There is a thick stack of papers waiting for him on his desk, and he is pretty glad it is a busy news day. As much as he enjoys writing out editorials and expounding on some of his personal opinions while on air, he really does not feel up for it today. Most likely from lack of sleep.

He had the vision again. It's the fourth time since the day it started, when he blacked out at John Peter's farm. Some elements of the dream have changed, disappeared completely. He no longer sees the weary stranger driving a lonely road late at night. Now its someone sprinting through a thick forest. None of the man's features are ever clear except his mouth, opened for a silent scream, before the scene melts away into something darker. Rows and rows of dark shapes that make no sense in a barren landscape. The oddly floating lights, the blinking red of the radio tower, the hand on his knee and the clever smile, all remain. No matter the variation, the vision always ends in that beautiful golden place, the man back-lit by light, now accompanied by the ghost of a smell that Cecil can never quite place.

Last night's vision held a new element. The ever constant ticking of a clock.

Cecil had snapped out of it and found himself curled in a ball next to his washing machine, a basket of damp laundry upturned on the linoleum floor. It had led to a long and sleepless night.

What irritates him is that they really are the most vivid and detailed visions he has ever had outside of the radio station, and yet he is no closer to deciphering their meaning now as he was two months ago. If anything, they're growing more confusing as time goes on. Old Woman Josie keeps emailing him, insisting he come and discuss the runes he asked her to translate since he canceled on her that day, and he considers sharing the visions with her for the hundredth time. He knows that she would be understanding—she was there for some of the very first ones back when he was a teenager, after all. She had taken the whole thing in stride, actually. Sometimes he gets the feeling that she knows a lot more than she lets on, especially since she has a whole squadron of angels staying with her, no matter what the local government says.

If there is anyone he could trust this with, it would be Old Woman Josie, but he finds he is oddly reluctant. Perhaps its the feeling that of all the things he has seen when using the gift, this one seems the most personal. This isn't about random strangers or the focus of a news story, but about himself. He is not sure he is ready to share that, not yet. Maybe not ever.
Cecil gets a good way through the script before he notices a mistake. Not wanting to get confused later, he digs through his side drawer for the little bottle of liquid paper he keeps for times like this. He unscrews the cap and is hit with the familiar off-putting scent of—

He's running, running through a thick forest of grasping branches that cling and pull at his clothes, forcing him faster, forcing the air from his lungs with each lunge for freedom. Lost, so lost, where are his companions? How will he ever escape? He falls to the ground, the trees falling with him only to fade into the ground instead of impact it, like they were never there at all. Something is striking him, stinging him, jellyfish flying and falling and swarming him with their tentacles wrapping around his face and throat. They are trying to kill him. No, they are trying to hug him. He is going to die here either way. Then a hand, massive and dusky brown, blots out the sun. It's wearing a leather banded watch and it scoops him up, the jellyfish falling away like molting feathers, and he's cradled in warm soft skin. He looks up at his savior, but sees nothing but a golden light that blinds his third eye. When it dims, he looks back to see something more familiar, always the red and blinking light in a shifting sky, the only form that is not sliding through the void like melting butter. The car that's beneath his legs is still warm from the desert sun, the hand is on his knee, the voice is saying sweet words that never reach his ears, and always the ticking, ticking, ticking, overpowering every other noise. Then he is in the bed, the metal of the car becoming the soft fabric of plum sheets, the man is still sitting cross-legged and glowing before him, the light is still streaming in from behind. The smell is there, the taste just on the tip of his tongue, but his attention is stolen by this beautiful creature, and the dark curling movements right behind him, and the overwhelming sense of peace and calm that settles over him. The ticking has stopped.

Cecil gasps and clings to his chest, trying to get air in his lungs. In front of him is Dana, kneeling down on the floor. Through the haze of adrenaline making all his limbs feel like needles and his chest feel like an elephant sat on it, he becomes aware that he is sitting on the floor under his desk with one hand gripping the edge of the wood above him while the other presses hard on his heart. Its rhythm is distressingly high, and Dana is asking him if he needs a doctor. Her hand is reaching for the phone on his desk when he finally gains enough breath to speak.

“I'm fine, I'm fine. I don't need a doctor.” He closes his eyes and lets his head fall back against the little wooden divider at the back of the space. He can feel tremors starting to shake him to the core. “Can you get me some water, please?”

“Yes, yes of course. Stay there, okay? Don't move.”

She is gone and back in what seems like just seconds, pressing a cold bottle of water into his hands, the cap already removed. Cecil takes deep gulps, choking on the first stream of liquid in his haste. The soothing coolness eases his muscles somewhat, relaxing him out of the fight or flight response he seemed to be in.
“Can I touch you?” Dana asks. At his nod, she places a soothing hand on his arm and rubs in a soothing motion, the both of them listening as his breathing evens out. “Are you sure you're alright?”

“Yes, yes I'm fine. Just a little...well. It happens, sometimes. I see things, visions. I don't really want to get into it right now. Just don't call the hospital when it happens, okay? And don't tell anyone that it happened. Ever.” Cecil buries his face in his hands, embarrassment finally hitting him. He's never had a vision in front of an intern before, and of course it has to be in front of one of the most capable. What is he going to do if she decides to quit? Or if she can't keep this to herself? He really doesn't need this to be common knowledge, and he would hate to have to submit forms for re-education, but—

“No, of course! I won't tell anyone. I—you do know you have a third eye, right?” she asks.

Cecil slams his hand over his forehead. “Elder Gods!” Concentrating solely on relaxing, Cecil finally manages to close his third eye, and when he removes his hand there is nothing but pale skin. “I am so sorry you had to see that, Dana! I usually have much better control over this!”

“It's okay, Cecil! It's fine.” She looks at him with a little encouraging smile. “Um...I guess this is why you didn't want me in the booth while you were broadcasting?”

“One of them, yes,” he replies, finally calming down now that he can see humor in Dana's expression. “Though I suppose that rule is a bit useless now.”

“You said this doesn't happen often?”

He nods and presses on his eyes; he can feel a headache starting already. “It's the sort of thing that I can usually tap into voluntarily, but sometimes I see things a bit more randomly.”

“Oh. Um...is it usually that violent?” she asks, keeping a firm grip on his forearm.

Cecil peeks out at her from between his long fingers. “Violent?” It's then that he realizes that behind Dana is his desk chair, overturned, and that the floor is littered with today's news. Also, the cat calendar he had pinned to the wall. A new wave of panic hits him, and he scoots out from beneath the desk and stand only to gape at the state of his office. Anything that could have been ripped from the walls has been, leaving jagged corners still pinned by nails or tape. His bulletin board is cracked in half, as well as the frame for his college
degree. The monitor for his computer doesn't look to be broken, but it is wedged between the desk and the wall. The lamp is in pieces, glass and ceramic shards collected in a pile by the wall suggesting he probably threw it. The box of spare parts he had for fixing one of the faulty soundboards is now scattered down the hall from where he sent the container flying, and the stack of coffee cups he had been meaning to take back to the break room are definitely closer to their destination, but no longer in cup form. Every object that was on his desk is now on the floor.

On the bare wood, drawn in bright white, are the runes. Star. Man. God.

“Shit.”

Abbey finds Carlos out on the roof, nursing a can of soda and quite possibly sulking. She shoots off a quick text before pocketing her phone and tapping on the glass that leads out to the roof. Carlos waves her out, gesturing to a blue and white lawn chair leaning up against the low wall. His own is red and white, something he picked up in town so he wouldn't have to drag the chairs from his meager dining area out here.

“Do you need any alcohol in that?” she asks. At his noncommittal grunt, she hums. “No, you don't look like you're pouting at all,” she says once she's settled into the chair. He glowers at her, but otherwise doesn't comment. “Nothing happened. Nothing is going to happen. Even if he wanted to, which he doesn't. Lei has way too much respect for you as a person, not to mention his boss, to try anything like that.”

Carlos rotates the can in his hands, looking down at the different colors reflecting off the aluminum. “You don't know that. Besides, he doesn't know how I...he doesn't know that I have...feelings.”

Abbey snorts. “Uh, yeah, he does. Everyone knows, even if you don't say anything.” She stretches her foot out and nudges his leg. “Come on, Carlos, you know better than this. It was just work, nothing else. Hell, knowing Lei he either talked Cecil's poor ears off or he got bored and cut out early. And you know, if you'd just ask the boy out, you wouldn't be up here moping.”

“I am not going to ask...you know what? I don't want to talk about this.” He takes a long sip from his soda before promptly changing the subject. “How's Matt?”

She humphs. “Still bitching about being stuck in bed. I swear, that boy's temper gets worse by the
hour. You'd think he'd be a little more grateful considering the circumstances. I'm not going to check on him anymore.”

Carlos nods. “I don't blame you. Harris said he might keep him on bed rest another two days. Once he’s back on his feet he should be back to his old self again.”

“I don't know,” Abbey replies, kicking at the light gravel of the rooftop. “He was acting weird before. Oh, have you heard back from Billy?”

“No.”

“Are you sure that he's ready to be out on his own? I mean, the Tourism Board needed help, and I'd hate if we pissed off some group here by sending someone who isn't ready. We don't even know what we're dealing with.”

Abbey startles when he suddenly laughs. “Oh, the telepathy thing? Yeah, I already know what's going on there.”

“You do?” she asks, incredulous.

Carlos takes another sip before explaining. “Yeah, I figured it out a few days ago. One of their employees stopped me at Big Rico's the other day and asked if I could look into it. I did some digging and found out the problem, but I thought it would be a good starter problem for Billy. See if his reasoning skills weren't messed with. So I kept the findings to myself and sent him over.”

“Telepathy is a starter problem? You were able to figure out telepathy in a few days?”

He chuckles again. “Not quite. Seems that the good people of the Night Vale Tourism Board, including executive director Madeline LeFleur, are not exactly familiar with what the term 'telepathic' means.”

Any further explanation is delayed by the arrival Billy himself, who they see strolling down the street toward the building. He is walking with a swagger in his step, a sure sign that he solved whatever problem was going on and is in fine form. What is slightly worrisome is the leash hanging from his hand, which happens to be attached to a prancing little puppy.
“Oh my God, is that...? Please tell me he didn't bring home a pet.” Abbey laughs delightedly and rounds on Carlos. “Oh, Dad, can we keep him?”

Carlos groans into his empty hand. “Why? Why would he bring home a dog? This is the last thing we need right now...”

“Just let the boy have the dog. Maybe he's feeling some residual loneliness since he doesn't have you-know-who in his life anymore.” They share a look at that. It is true that every last scrap of Billy's memories of Claudette seem to have been wiped from his mind, but they dated for a very long time. That's a lot of years left unaccounted for. Whatever the Sheriff's Secret Police replaced that time with was not some fictional girlfriend, and in Billy's fragile mind, he had spent many years without companionship.

“You're right,” Carlos agrees, reluctantly. “It might be good for him. But it can't be in the main lab. I won't have dog hair messing up any of the more delicate experiments or contaminating samples. We're a professional lab, not some black market clinic.”

Carlos tells Billy as much when he knocks on Carlos' apartment door, bringing out the gangly little dog to meet them. It is more adolescent than puppy, taking huge steps like it isn't used to its big paws and longer legs. The feet are actually quite large, and Carlos inwardly groans. It's going to grow up into a monster of a dog, he's sure.

“Her name is Iris,” Billy says, and Carlos notices Abbey suck in a breath. “I picked her up while I was over at the Visitor's Center. Seems that the towns having some sort of puppy infestation? I don't know, exactly, but they were trying to get rid of this little girl and I just couldn't let her go!”

“What kind of dog is that?” Abbey asks. Carlos is curious himself—he can't say he's ever seen a dog with a coat quite like that.

Billy leans down and picks the pup up so she'll stop trying to chew on Carlos' shoes. “The woman said she's a Curly Coated Retriever. I love it! Her hair looks like mine when it's cut short. Aren't you just beautiful?” The dog tips its head back and licks at the skin under Billy's chin, and they all can't help but laugh at the little dog's antics. Maybe she'll be good for all of them, he thinks.

“How did it go down there?” Carlos asks.
Billy's smile turns wry. “Oh man, Carlos, those people didn't know what the hell they were talking about. Turns out the assault wasn't on their mind, just their ears. Both incidents happened near the community college; it was just a bunch of kids playing loud music, and the bass was so loud it vibrated some of the tourists' things. All they were trying to do was complain about the noise, but the tourism board jumped to a much different conclusion.”

Carlos manages to keep a straight face even as Abbey hides her curved lips behind her mechanical hand. “Well, sorry to hear it wasted your time.”

“Not at all, besides, I got this little girl!” he replies, holding Iris higher. “I'm going to head downstairs and set up somewhere for her to sleep. Oh! I almost forgot!” He manages to balance the dog in one hand and digs through his pants pocket, then has to switch Iris to his other arm to search the opposite pocket before pulling out a small business card. “I ran into a guy when I was on my way out. He said he wanted to talk to you about something important.”

Billy says goodnight after handing the card over, and the two settle back into their lawn chairs. “He seems to be doing better already,” she comments, then gestures to the card in Carlos' hand. “Who is it?” Abbey asks.

The light filtering out from his apartment is enough to see by. “Steve Carlsberg,” he answers.

“Carlsberg...Carlsberg...isn't that the guy Cecil's always going on about? The jerk?”

“Yeah, I think so. What do you think he wants?” Carlos asks, stowing the card in his pocket to deal with later. Abbey shrugs, stretching her legs out in front of her. “Oh, you reacted earlier. What's wrong with Iris?”

Abbey grimaces. “Claudette Iris Wells,” she says.

“Are you serious?”

“They must have not scraped his memories as much as they thought,” she replies. “And she called today while you were out. Again. It's only a matter of time before she gets ahold of him.”

“We're going to have to come up with a more permanent solution, but I don't know what that could be.” Claudette started calling the main laboratory the day after Billy and Gwen returned. It seems
the Sheriff's Secret Police removed all evidence that Claudette ever existed from his phone, his pictures, and his computer in addition to his mind. This included changing his phone number, and his number in anyone's cell phone in Night Vale. What they couldn't change was his number for anyone back in Arkham, and Claudette and Billy always spoke every night without fail. Carlos had attempted to talk to Claudette during that first worried phone call, when she was upset and thought something horrible had happened to him. Which was true, but he couldn't just say that. He tried to explain the situation as delicately as he knew how, which unfortunately was no where near satisfactory. She has since called multiple times a day, from multiple phone numbers, to either scream at or cry to whoever is hapless enough to pick up the phone, and their list of creative threats has been growing steadily each day. Any attempts at an explanation are met with denial and, eventually, a dial tone.

“Do you think she's contacted the school? Kendrick?” Abbey asks.

“I don't know,” Carlos replies. “I'll make sure to ask.” What he doesn't say is that he's sent all manner of communications back to Arkham. The phones have never answered, his mail has returned unopened. The only answers have been via email, and each one had the Sheriff's Secret Police seal watermarked into the top. Kendrick's replies have always been upbeat and positive, no matter what horrors Carlos has reported to him. Carlos is sure that whatever it is Kendrick is reading is not what Carlos is writing. At this point, he has no idea what the outside world knows about their time in Night Vale.

Below, Lei's car pulls in the lot. Abbey goes over to the edge and shouts down at him to come to the roof, and when she looks back at Carlos he is slumped even lower in his chair. “Oh my God, stop being such a baby! Do you want an update on his report or not?”

Carlos nods. He really is acting silly about the whole thing, he guesses. If it had been any other source he wouldn't be acting this way, he would just tell Lei to get as much information as he can and to act professional. It's the second part that worries him, but really, Lei has been nothing but serious when it comes to his work. Releasing a cleansing breath, Carlos sits up straighter in the chair as he listens to Lei making his way through his little apartment to the roof.

“Hey guys? How's it going?” Lei asks. He's carrying his backpack and a beer, and he drops to the ground, unmindful of the rough rocks. “I feel like my brain is going to explode.”

“Cecil knows his stuff?” Abbey asks.

“And more. It was like talking to Professor...what was her name? The one that teaches Ancient Egyptian History?”
“Bathani,” Carlos supplies.

“Yeah! You know how Bathani knows all those little details that you can't find in history books? It was like that. He knew about things that had been stricken from the town record decades ago, it was pretty crazy. I've got half a notebook full of ideas, and no idea what to investigate next.” Lei takes a long drag from his beer. “He also mentioned that he could show us how to get into the library, for anyone that wants to go. Turns out it's a lot simpler than we thought, but he wants to accompany us the first time. Apparently the librarian thing we heard about is no joke. He's free on Monday.”

Carlos starts to fiddle with the tab of his soda can with more focus than is entirely necessary. “Oh? That's great. We'll have to see who all might be free.”

“Uh huh,” Lei says. His smile widens and he leans back so his hands are stretched out to support him. “He wanted me to make sure I told you, personally. I think he is really looking forward to seeing you.” The little bit of metal holding the tab to the can snaps under his fingers, and Abbey and Lei laugh. “Are you still hung up on me flirting with him? Carlos, come on man.”

Carlos turns and hisses at Abbey. “You said you wouldn't tell!”

This just makes her laugh harder. “I didn't! I told you it was obvious!”

“It's okay if you don't want to ask him out,” Lei says. Carlos misses the dangerous look that Abbey shoots the other scientist, and Lei just winks back at her before continuing. “We all know how important your work is to you. We just want you to loosen up a little. You could at least try to be friends with him.”

“Am I not?” Carlos asks, genuinely perplexed.

“I'd say you're more business associates,” Abbey says, warming up to Lei's idea. “Business associates that get tongue-tied around each other. Maybe you could find something in common outside of work? Get more comfortable with each other?”

“I'm not...I'm not good at that stuff,” he grumbles, sliding down as far as he can in the chair without toppling out of it. “Can we please, please, please stop talking about this.”
“Alright. Oh, just one more thing,” Lei says, sitting up to dig through his backpack. He pulls out a bright yellow and black book and tosses it to Carlos. “Picked that up for you while I was in town. I thought, hey! No place better to start!”

Carlos looks down at the cover and his eyes narrow. *Car Maintenance for Dummies.*

Bastard.
Chapter 10

When Carlos lived in Los Angeles, he and his mother did not go to church every Sunday. Doing everything in her power to support the two of them simply took up too many hours in the day, leaving none for fancy clothes they could not afford and praying with people they did not know. The best she had been able to do was every other Sunday when things were going well, and maybe once a month when they were not. Their attendance was so infrequent and the church so large in their neighborhood that the priest did not remember his mother's name. At that age, the words he mumbled for the Nicene Creed were nonsense, and he was more interested in the pretty candles than the word of God. The dull colors of the stained glass windows had his young imagination swimming through colorful oceans of clownfish and coral, or in deep mines glittering with gemstones, each turn more fantastic than the next. It was only later in life that he realized his mother never attended church to hear the sermons. Attending Mass on the occasions she could was something she did to remember where she came from, to remember family. He remembers her coming home after and spending the rest of the day homesick and pasting on a happy face for her son. To her, God's only gift had been her precious Carlos, and from the looks of things there were no more gifts coming. For the last six months, she only saw the priest once, and it was at the end.

When Carlos lived in Mexico, he had accompanied his abuela to church every Sunday, plus every Wednesday Mass in winter. The only deviation to this rule was during the handful of Sundays out of the year when the duties to the farm could not wait, when the weather was just right for baling hay or during the weeks of harvest. Church was the domain of his Abuela Ileana, where she was involved with all the extracurricular activities, making food for those in need and gossiping with the other women while planting Zinnias in the churchyard. She had made him go through with confirmation, much to his dismay. He would have been in the choir or an altar boy or perhaps even shipped off to missionary school if it had been up to her, but his Abuelo Héctor had put an end to that, insisting they needed Carlos to help around the farm those days and not at choir practice. During those long Sundays spent listening to the priest switch between Spanish and Latin, Carlos’ mind was miles away, imagining wide open spaces under clear perfect sunlight. His abuelo only attended church once in six years—the day of Abuela Ileana's funeral. Once more if you count his own.

When Carlos lived in Haverhill, Massachusetts, his aunt and her husband expected him and his cousin Lucas to attend Mass every Sunday and Wednesday, and a few other days as well. In their eyes, Carlos was a problem child—too headstrong, too peculiar. Too opinionated. Apparently, too much like his mother. All qualities that an almost-daily helping of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit could cure, if Carlos would just stop being the way he was. The problem with their plan was that he had no intention of going to the massive cathedral every day; he had already begun to doubt so much, was angry and tired and lost and lonely. In the beginning, he spent his time staring at the wooden back of the pew ahead of him, dreaming of anywhere that was not this place where he did not belong, wondering if there would ever be a place like that. He would roam the cemetery, reading names and dates on the older tombstones and coming up with fantastical stories for the lives of long-dead strangers. Eventually he became adept at slipping into the background, disappearing into the city and coming home long after Sunday Mass was over, only to lock himself away in his room to avoid the screams.
Carlos hasn't been to Sunday Mass since he was sixteen, and the idea that Sunday is a day of rest is something for other people. It is just another day, another chance to get things done. So while the rest of his team is down on the back porch sharing an evening drink and listening to the random music streaming through the radio speakers, Carlos has mountains of paperwork spread out in front of him on his living room table. He has been letting it build up for the past two weeks, and it might not be his favorite part of the job, but it needs to be done. It does not help that he still is not sure any of his reports are actually reaching Kendrick.

After a few more notes written in the margins of Harris and Becky's joint analysis of the venomous species so far collected, Carlos makes a quick trip to the kitchen. A fresh cup of hot, fragrant tea later, he settles in to read Lei's preliminary outline of Night Vale history that he was working on the previous week. It's a lot longer than he thought it would be, which pleases Carlos to no end; it is a sign that Lei is thoroughly engrossed in his subject, something that Carlos had been concerned about when he selected Lei for the team. Once he begins reading, he is surprised with how comprehensive it is, even for an outline. It even has a recommendation for a future project investigating one of Night Vale's neighbors. Carlos makes a note there to speak with him about it in-depth, and finishes the written outline. All great work, as far as Carlos is concerned. It seems all Lei needed was for Cecil to point him in the right direction.

Attached to the back are a series of printed images. Some are of Night Vale historical sites, others are statues and monuments, or plaques attached to the corners of the government buildings downtown. There are a few photocopies of documents and backdated newspapers from the Night Vale Hall of Records. Near the end, though, is a series of photographs, blown up for clarity, of a scroll. Carlos can tell by the angle and the fingers on the edges of the image that this is the scroll Lei writes about briefly in his report, the one that Cecil owns. The calligraphy is beautiful, but Carlos imagines that the photograph doesn't do it justice. He reads over what he can from the shots, intrigued. He'll have to see how this part of the study goes.

Lei also mentioned that Cecil has a collection of such items. It makes Carlos itch to ask for a closer look.

There are a few suggestions Carlos writes at the end of the report, then he sets it aside with the others he has already completed. He will return the feedback to them first thing in the morning. If they actually get up at a decent time, they might even have the chance to review them before Cecil arrives. Leaving all the paperwork laid out for now, he refills his cup and grabs a small metal box from the kitchen island before he heads back to the bedroom where his supplies for the next day lay spread out on the bed.

The list that Cecil had rattled off over the phone had been short and specific regarding what they needed for their trip to the Night Vale Public Library. First and foremost had been a list of the books or sections he wanted to look for in order of importance. There was a good chance they would not be able to get to everything on the list in this visit, so they really needed to have their choices prioritized. Cecil had the forethought to supply them with a section list, because the Night Vale Public Library is organized far differently than the ones back home. Unfortunately, it really
didn't help their decision making process; with sections like 'Existential Quandaries' and 'Books with Between 135,000 and 138,000 Words' as choices, they would just have to trust Cecil's judgment on where things might be. He also mentioned that having a written list was essential because one might forget your purpose in the face of mind-numbing terror, but since Carlos was going to bring a written list anyway, he chooses not to think about that.

Carlos' rather long list is written in his journal and laid out on the bed next to two brand new cans of Librarian Repellent that he picked up at the Ralph's. Gwen has already opened and analyzed the liquid contained within an extra can, but there were no less than five unknown ingredients inside in addition to the strange and pungent smell of mold. The repellent was rather expensive, but Cecil assured him it was an absolute necessity, and to not skimp on the cheap brands—nothing less than Dewey's Decimation Librarian Repellent, Night Vale's most reliable librarian repellent and only mildly toxic to children!

Next to the repellent is Anduril, gleaming in the dull light from his bedside lamp. Cecil had specified a long slashing or bludgeoning weapon. He had been practically scandalized when Matt had asked if a firearm would be alright instead.

"Do you really want to attract every librarian in the building to our spot? We would be dead in minutes! Besides, bullets only make them more agitated."

So Anduril would have to do, and really, who could blame him for wanting to carry this thing around. He picks it up and swings it around, wishing he actually knew the proper way to wield it instead of like a light saber, which surely had to be wrong. Surely the rest of the scientists would have more sensible objects, and he briefly considers going down to Abbey and asking her to throw something together for him, or maybe even go out to the pawn shop he saw on the west side of town. He doesn't, though. The feel of the haft in his hands, the weight of the blade, it all feels right. Placing it back on the bed, he picks up the pocket knife.

Carlos has always owned pocket knives, ever since he got one for his eleventh birthday. This one is not nearly that old, just something he carried with him down in Peru. Flicking his wrist opens it with ease; he had always liked how this one required little effort to open. It has a gentle curving blade, fairly uninteresting as far as knives go, and a handle that started out with an almost black wood stain but has since faded to shiny pale wood grains everywhere but the edges. He knows that Matt has a fancy new knife that he bought yesterday, something large with unnecessary serrated notches made with Damascus steel—which Carlos personally finds ostentatious, but to each his own—and that he will probably be too afraid of scuffing the knife to properly defend himself. Not that Carlos is entirely sure what they will be defending themselves against, but when he had checked out at the Ralph's with over a dozen cans of Dewey's best, the checkout girl had grimaced and slit her finger right there at the counter, smearing her blood onto the back of his hand in a crude symbol that she said would help make his aim swift and true.
Not ominous at all.

In a duffel he stuffs some basic first aid supplies, a compass, fifty feet of nylon rope, and a week's worth of combat rations. Cecil assured him that they shouldn't really need a week's worth of MRE's, but it was better to be safe than sorry. The clothing choices were much easier to handle, and Carlos was glad he had everything necessary in his closet. A dull-colored shirt over a long-sleeved undershirt and a pair of cargo pants. No loose clothing, so the lab coat has to be left behind. A sturdy pair of shoes with good grips round out the outfit.

He grabs the small metal box again and flips open the lid. Inside are two neat rows of vials, four per row, each labeled and sporting a small symbol with 'CORROSIVE' written underneath. Lifting each one carefully out of their holders, he looks at the colorless clear liquid inside, checking for any traces of yellowing, and finds none. To be honest, Carlos isn't sure if Sulfuric Acid will work on a librarian, but he would rather have at least one weapon at his disposal that he is familiar with, something more powerful than a pocket knife.

The sounds of raucous laughter filter up through the building, and he smiles. It really is good to hear them cutting loose and enjoying themselves. He considers going down there and herding them to their beds, or their rooms at the least. Cecil will be by at seven sharp, and he does not want to waste the man's time just because his team can not get it together. Instead, he gets himself ready for bed and sets his alarm for five, which makes his stomach clench but he knows it has to be done. Grabbing the images from Lei's report, he props his pillows against the headboard and slides under the sheets.

He really will have to ask Cecil more about his collection of rare artifacts. Especially if there are more like this scroll. Of course, why they would be writing in scrolls in 1944, Carlos cannot fathom, but perhaps it is another Night Vale quirk they have yet to figure out. He keeps bringing the images closer to his face so he can see the grainy detail, and wishes that these were produced with a professional printer. When he begins to study the page with the close up of the bottom, Carlos wonders if maybe Cecil inherited this piece from a relative. Along the bottom edge in swooping dark red are the initials CGP.

Ten minutes till seven the next morning, Carlos and Harris are the only two scientists assembled and ready in the main laboratory.

“I told you they would be like this,” Harris says for the sixth time. Carlos takes a massive gulp from his coffee mug and fights an internal battle not to snap at the other man. Mainly because he is right, even if he is being annoying about it.
Harris is checking through his backpack again, obviously nervous. He has a considerable amount of medical supplies shoved in there, packed so tight Carlos doubts he would be able to retrieve anything quickly without dumping the contents on the floor. Strapped to his side is what has to be one of the most complicated hatchets Carlos has ever seen. “Did you buy that yesterday?” Carlos asks, intrigued.

Seeing where Carlos is pointing, Harris fumbles the tool off his belt and shows it to him. “Yeah, I picked it up at that camping store downtown. Look at this, it's got the hatchet part, obviously, but it's also got this hook thing, this...saw-like part, this little nob is supposed to be a screwdriver, and these holes are like wrenches!” Carlos nods along with this explanation, but just grows more worried with each descriptor. Harris is way out of his element.

“You know, you don't have to come with us,” Carlos says, trying to be tactful. From the look Harris shoots him, it is not appreciated.

“I'm the only one who knows what to do if one of you gets hurt. You are the next best, but you aren't a medical doctor, Carlos. I need to be there.”

“What are we going to do if you get hurt?” Carlos asks, helping him get his hatchet reattached to his belt holder.

Harris laughs. “If something happens to me, it might be time to head home. I'd hate to think of you guys here without me. You'd all fall apart without me.”

Carlos can't argue with that, but before he can agree, more of their rag-tag team comes traipsing down the stairs. Lei and Becky seem to be arguing about whose baseball bat is better, Becky's being wooden while Lei's is aluminum, followed by Matt carrying a machete of all things. He still looks a little rough around the edges, but he has been adamant about joining them and Harris assured Carlos that he should be fine. Matt is towing Gwen down the stairs, each holding one end of a tire iron as he tries to tell her that everything will be fine. Bringing up the rear, Billy looks far too pleased with himself, a sledgehammer propped neatly across his shoulders, grinning down at the rest of them from the top of the stairs. “Good morning, everyone!” he booms, causing most of them to flinch at the volume.

“A sledgehammer? Really?” Harris asks, zipping his bag closed.

“You're all just jealous you can't wield this mighty weapon,” he replies in a tone that suggests he isn't talking about the sledgehammer at all. He saunters down after the others, wrapping his wrists around the long handle over his shoulders. “I told you all to work on your arms and upper body
strength, but none of you listened.”

“We're all puny compared to you,” Lei says, looking a little mutinous. He is the smallest one out of the men, and barely bigger than Gwen, who is practically a pixie.

“Alright, Thor, either way, you need to pull those dreads back,” Carlos says, eying the long heavy hair hanging down Billy's back. “Anyone with long hair needs to get it up and tight.” There is a short scramble as Billy, Gwen and Becky get their hair dealt with, and Carlos is glad that he got a haircut when he did; if his hair had not been trimmed by now, he might be in the same boat.

Becky is struggling with her abundance of red curls when she mumbles out from behind a mouthful of hairpins, “Wer' ef A'ey?”

Before anyone can answer, a clear buzzing sound echoes through the building signaling someone at the front door. Carlos unlocks the inner door and glances out to see Cecil beyond the glass. Quickly opening the outer door, he motions in the other man. “Cecil! Thank you for coming, please, come in.”

All the scientists greet Cecil warmly as he steps in carrying a small backpack, a curved T-shaped black carrying case, and a soft looking cloth sack. He is dressed in black and navy, the fabric hugging his frame close, and a black knit cap covering the majority of his lighter hair. “Sorry, I hope I'm not running too late, I had to pick up some extra bloodstones on the way.”

“You're right on time,” Carlos assures him. He looks over the group assembled. “Everyone should be ready...wait. Where's Abbey?”

“I'll go check; she was back in her lab before,” Lei says, darting back through the back hallway.

“Where would you like me to set up?” Cecil asks, putting the other bags down and holding the sack up for Carlos to see. There's a dull clacking sound from within the bag, like rocks striking together. “I'll need a bit of room for eight people.”

“We'll clear a space,” Carlos replies. He and the others begin to move some of the tables and stools a little further into the laboratory, leaving an open empty space on the clean floor. Cecil begins to pull bloodstone after bloodstone from within the bag, arranging them in an almost perfect circle with a stone every foot or so. On the north end of the circle, he places an obsidian slab, about the size of a piece of paper. On the left side of the slab he places a violet candle, and on the right a
yellow candle, partially burned. He puts a wrapped package to the side along with a black candle, then comes back to the rest of the group who have all stopped what they are doing to watch his movements.

Carlos can hear Matt speaking low to Gwen, and catches the phrase, “...never going to work...” but Carlos ignores him. He has his own doubts about whatever is about to happen here, but Cecil knew more about this than any of them, and he would not be a good scientist if he was not willing to at least witness it firsthand. It would have been a lot easier on his nerves if Cecil would have explained the whole process in detail, but the broadcaster had explained that it is really something that needs to be learned through practice.

“Is this everyone?” Cecil asks Carlos quietly. “I haven't taken a group this big into the library before. Usually you try to go in small numbers or by yourself, unless it's during the Summer Reading Program as kids.”

“Is that a problem?” Carlos asks.

“No, it will just be more difficult to move as a group and stay quiet. We'll make do, though. And no splitting up.”

“Yes, I don't want anyone to get seperated, if it is as dangerous as you say,” Carlos replies.

Cecil nods and is about to say something when Lei and Abbey come back to the front and Cecil becomes distracted. “Wow, Abbey, that is a big wrench!”

Everyone turns and looks and indeed, Abbey is carrying a massive wrench, thrown over one shoulder like she's wielding a rifle, a massive grin on her face. “You like? Before I couldn't lift this thing without help, but now that I have this bad boy,” she says, wiggling her mechanical fingers on the handle, “I don't have any problem at all.” Carlos leans to the side so he can get a better look from around the others, and notices that there have been some modifications to her mechanical arm as well. He wonders what she might have added at the last minute for this little expedition. His attention is brought back to Cecil, who clears his throat to gain their attention.

“May I?” he asks Carlos, who nods. Cecil's voice drops into the lovely cadence of his radio persona, and Carlos feels a little shiver go through him hearing it in person. “It is an honor to be able to help a group of accomplished scientists such as yourselves in this endeavor. I'm not sure how the libraries are where you are from, but from what I've learned the librarians there are much less aggressive than those in Night Vale. To be honest, you should have taken Basic Library Survival in elementary school, but I'll do my best to cover the basics. Before we get started,
though, I'd like to go over your book lists. I want to be sure we get as much as we can this trip. After we get back, I'm sure you'll want to wait a while to return.” All of the scientists pull out their lists and place them on the table so Cecil can read them. Unfortunately, his face settles into a frown.

“What?” Billy asks.

“We won't be able to get half of these,” he says, motioning for a piece of charcoal from one of the scientists’ desks. Dark lines are drawn through many of the items in each list, and Cecil keeps a running commentary of each one. “No, no, this one is on the City Council's banned book list, as is this one, and all three of these. I doubt you'll find any of these medical journals, unless you don't mind anything from before 1998. They don't really keep books on modern technology in the library, but we might be able to find some in the Science Partially-Fiction section. You'd probably have better luck at the Museum of Forbidden Technologies. Can you be more specific with what you're looking for in the law section? It is one of the larger areas of the library, and the City Council adds to it monthly, from what I understand. There is a two year backlog, though. You don't mind looking through scrolls and stone tablets, do you? And the section on religion has been cordoned off for about six decades for repairs, so I wouldn't count on that. An Atlas? Like, a local one of Night Vale? You'd have better luck trying to copy Carlos' map than anything in the library. And there won't be any topography maps, either.”

By the time Cecil finishes crossing out lines on each sheet, there are barely a third of their requests left, and Becky only has two books left on her list. “Man, it's almost not worth going,” she says as Cecil hands back the lists.

When Matt leans over the table to take his list back, Cecil doesn't let go of the paper immediately. He leans over and inhales deeply. “Are you still sick?” he asks, eyes darting around to the exposed skin of Matt's face, neck, and hand.

Matt grabs for his long sleeves and tugs the cuffs of his shirt down self-consciously. “I'm fine.”

“No, you aren't,” Cecil says. He keeps his eyes on Matt but he addresses Carlos. “He still has symptoms of Tangerine Death. As long as it is in his bloodstream, he'll be putting off that scent. And if I can smell it, you can bet the librarians can, too. You'll be a liability if you come with us.”

“Are you serious?” Matt demands, agitated. “I've been trying to get in the library for, for...weeks! And you're telling me now I can't go?”

Cecil lets go of the list, looking contrite. “I'm sorry. It's really for the safety of all of us. That's why
I told you all to refrain from using scented shampoos or lotions over the last few days. In fact, any of you with open wounds need to stay behind. The scent of blood will attract a librarian within minutes.

“Oh!” Becky turns pink and leans toward Cecil. She beckons him close and leans in to whisper in his ear. Cecil flushes slightly himself and leans back, both amused and regretful.

“I'm afraid that counts, too,” he says, and Becky slams her paper down on the table.

“What?” Matt gruffly asks.

She gestures to her lower abdomen. “What do you think, smart ass? I swear, every time. Can't swim in the ocean 'cause you'll attract a shark, can't go in the library 'cause you'll attract a librarian. God damn it,” she hands her list over to Carlos. “If you have the time, there isn't much left on there anyway. I'm going to take a God damn nap.” With that, she stomps up the stairs, grumbling the whole way and swinging her baseball bat threateningly.

“Come on, Carlos,” Matt pleads, looking at his team lead. “I need to go in there, don't make me sit this out.”

Carlos shakes his head. “I'm going to trust Cecil's judgment on this one. He's the only one who has been—”

“Yeah, yeah, whatever,” he cuts off. Sighing, he hands over his own list to Billy. “Can you grab mine?” he asks. Billy nods and takes the other man's machete as well, looking pleased at gaining a second weapon. Instead of leaving, Matt pulls up a stool and watches the proceedings, interested in the process despite being told to sit the bench. Carlos hands him a notebook and a stick of wax so he can take notes, a stern look on his face.

Luckily Abbey's arm wound has healed closed by this point, even if the scars are still an ugly bright red, and Harris assures them all she is in good shape to go. What is more likely is that Abbey threatened to beat Harris with that massive wrench, but Carlos keeps that thought to himself.

“Okay, in order for the group trip to the library to work, you will all need to lie down in the circle while I preform the ritual. After I finish the last incantation, I will only have a few moments to get into position before we lose consciousness. When we awaken, we will all be in different areas of the library, so the first priority will be to regroup. Does everyone have their compasses and know
“Tell us about these librarians,” Lei says, leaning against one of the tables. “Is it true they're eighteen feet high, and have tongues like a frog?”

Cecil laughs, and everyone laughs along with him for just a moment. The creeping tension of the morning deflates as they all relax. Then, the Night Vale native ruins it all. “Oh, they're more like eight or nine feet tall. Their tongues are more pointed than rounded, though, and not nearly as long, but I wouldn't recommend letting them touch you with it. I haven't seen it personally since I was in school, but their saliva is pretty toxic.”

They all stare at him. “A-are you serious?” Lei asks, looking like he's waiting on the punch line.

“Of course. Have you never heard the rhyme?” At their perplexed look, Cecil recites, “*Turn the page with ease and care, lick your fingers, doom and despair. Crease the corners, broken bones, destroy the word, reap what you've sown.* No? Nobody? I'm pretty sure we repeated that every day of second grade.”

“I'm afraid we're not familiar with it, no,” Carlos says, hoping to get things back on track. “What do we need to be mindful of while we're in there? What do we need to keep in mind?”

Cecil looks up, like he's ticking through a mental list. “Do not make any marks or crease any pages in the books. Any damage at all, and the librarians will be able to sense it. Do not use your cell phones or any electronic devices in the library. Do not run in the library unless you are already being chased. Do not approach a librarian unless you know you can put it down and keep it down. If you encounter a librarian, don't make eye contact with it. Keep your head down and get out of its line of sight as quickly as possible without running. If you find yourself in close combat with a librarian, wound it, preferably in a way that will slow it down, and run for the checkout counter. Once you have agitated it, it will track you to the best of it's ability, so get out of there as fast as you can. And, most importantly, silence.”

They all look a little overwhelmed with the string of rules. Carlos shifts. “Are we not allowed to speak at all? That will make communicating pretty difficult.”

“You can whisper, in each others’ ears. But I wouldn't recommend any louder than that. They have very good hearing.”
Abbey twirls the nut on her wrench. "There aren't any doors in the library. How are we supposed to get back out?"

"Oh!" Cecil exclaims, reaching into his pants pocket and pulling out a stack of laminated cards. "I forgot! I picked up a library card for each of you. When you're ready to check out, or if we get separated, make your way to the counter and get the check out card in the back of each book stamped, then prick your finger on the needle provided. You won't be able to check out a book without a card, and you can't leave without checking out a book."

They each reach out to take a card from him. "What if you lose your card while you're in the library?" Lei asks.

Cecil chuckles humorlessly. "Don't."

Carlos looks down at the little laminated card in his hand. It is plain white with purple printing, the seal for the Night Vale Public Library—a circle enclosing a caged and enraged book, and how Carlos can tell it is enraged he isn't sure—as well as his own name on the bottom line, typed like from a typewriter. He pulls his wallet out of his back pocket and slips it in so that it will be easily accessible.

Cecil takes a look at his watch. "I don't mean to rush, but we should really get going." Carlos nods and they follow Cecil's direction, lying down within the confines of the bloodstone circle with their weapons and bags clutched tight to their chests. He leaves enough space so that Cecil will have room to lie down, and turns to watch the other man kneel before the obsidian slab. The package that was set aside earlier is unwrapped, revealing a chunk of raw purple muscle that Carlos thinks might be a tongue. It is placed in the center of the obsidian.

Picking up the black candle, Cecil squares his shoulders and takes a deep breath before lighting it with his silver lighter. He raises his arms and begins to recite an incantation in a language that Carlos does not recognize—perhaps it is the Modified Sumerian that Cecil has said he's fluent in, or some other ancient tongue that is only used in Night Vale. Whatever it is, the words spoken in Cecil's deep and reverent tone echo through the room like the ringing of a bell. Each candle is lit in turn, and he wedges the burning white candle into the raw meat as his words trail down to a low hum, then fall silent.

The man grabs his gear and tucks down next to Carlos, and turns his face to look him in the eye. Cecil gives Carlos a small, reassuring smile, and he has just enough time to wonder at the flecks of darker violet floating in Cecil's lilac eyes before his own suddenly get very heavy and everything goes dark.
The first thing Carlos becomes aware of is a sharp corner digging into his neck, and it takes about three seconds after this for his eyes to fly open and his heart rate to skyrocket. He is looking up at the underside of a book shelf, his body stretched along an empty space with books above his head and below his feet. Looking down his body, he is a little startled to see that he is holding Anduril like a king prepared for burial, but he is pleased to find the strap of his duffel clutched securely in one arm. Turning his head, he looks out and sees another shelf opposite him, crammed with hardcover books. Squinting, he can barely make out the authors Dumas, Hugo, and Voltaire in gold leaf. Great, he thinks, Classic French literature, never his forte in school.

It takes several minutes to calm himself enough to think clearly, and in that time he breathes deeply the scent of old paper and weathered leather, listening to the dull sound of the electricity running through the lights overhead. It is dark in this little corner of the library, and for a moment Carlos is reminded of the one his mother took him to in Los Angeles. It had been a huge building, easy to get lost in, and Carlos had spent hours sitting tucked into a bottom shelf and reading above his grade level.

Opening his eyes again, he refocuses on the here and now. Easing his head and shoulders out slightly from the shelf, he looks up and down the aisle. The shelves are a bit higher than that of a normal library, maybe twelve feet tall, but the shelves themselves look the same, lined with book spines facing outward, some leaning haphazardly against their neighbors. At each end Carlos can see another set of shelves beyond a small walkway separating the stacks, but past that is nothing but darkness. He looks up and sees no ceiling, just hanging round fluorescent lights every few rows that illuminate the area directly beneath in startling white light that fades to nothing at the edges.

No one else is in sight.

Deciding to make use of his cover while he can, Carlos pulls the compass out of his pocket and checks his orientation. Planning his immediate path, he takes a deep breath and eases himself down from the shelf, dropping onto the worn carpet with barely more than a thump. He crouches, though he is not sure if this helps or not, and makes his way to the end of the aisle. There is nothing moving in any direction, and nothing discernible to use as a landmark. He darts across the walkway, not running but certainly moving at a brisk pace.

A sudden motion out of the corner of his eye makes him drop down behind one of the shelves, back tucked against a series on Japanese warships. He listens intently as whatever it is comes to a stop a few aisles away, across another walkway. After a moment, Carlos recognizes it as gasping. Glancing out, he sees Lei huddled against his own shelf.
Carlos eases out so that Lei can see him, and when the other man catches sight of him he looks visibly relieved and begins to motion his boss over. After a quick look both ways, Carlos joins him, holding a finger pressed to his lips. Together, they head west.

They have just reached the wall, appearing from the obscurity with no warning, when Cecil joins them. He approaches swiftly along the wall coming from the south, and if Lei and Carlos had not stopped when they did the three of them would probably be in a heap on the floor. Carlos is not sure what shocks him more—what Cecil is wearing, or what he is carrying. He supposes that it could be called a ghillie suit, the camouflage clothing that soldiers wear that are covered in foliage and help them disappear into a forest. There is not one leaf on this cover, though. The pattern on it looks like book spines, random dull colors in thin geometric blocks broken up with horizontal lines every eight inches or so. There are hard edges built into the fabric, making it look more realistic, and one shoulder has an actual book attached. Cecil's face looks out at them from beneath an oddly angular hood.

Then, there is the crossbow. Notched and ready, Cecil holds it like he knows how to use it. That must have been what was in the curved case he was carrying. Carlos is not sure why he is surprised, but he is. Cecil just does not seem like the type to know how to operate something like that.

The broadcaster motions for them to fall in step behind him, and they make their way north along the wall. Cecil moves much faster than they were originally, accustomed to moving silently through the library as only a Night Vale native can, and in short order they find themselves at the designated meeting point where Billy is already waiting. The group huddles on the edge of the lobby so they can see anything approaching from multiple angles.

A million questions run through Carlos' head as they wait for the others to show themselves, and he curses that he must maintain this silence. He takes a moment to study the man that brought them here, through means that Carlos will question him about at his earliest convenience, and tries to combine the image of Cecil the radio host to this Cecil. His eyes are trained on the edges of the lobby, watching for the slighted movements, crossbow held in a steady grip, a ranger poised and ready. There is more to Cecil than meets the eye, that is for certain.

The other three make an appearance together, Harris out front and Abbey holding Gwen tucked close to her body as she clings to the taller girl. They are on the opposite side of the lobby, but Cecil must deem it safe because he stands and motions for everyone to gather close to the directory board in the middle. He gestures for them each to show him their lists again, and he scrutinizes them as well as the board before nodding. Carlos guesses he has memorized the route they are going to take.

Lei leans close and whispers without sound, “Should we split up?”
Both Carlos and Cecil shake their heads emphatically, and Carlos is glad they are in agreement on this point. Cecil motions them to follow, and they make their way swiftly and carefully to their first stop: Books Involving Rocks.

Carlos works quickly, searching through the titles on the shelf for anything that might be useful, not bothering to look through the pages unless it seems especially promising, and only then to make sure it is chocked full of information and not pages of full color pictures. He is aware of the others stationed at each end of the aisle he is on, keeping guard as best they can. A shadow passes overhead and for a brief moment he clenches at the book in his hands, barely stopping himself from wrinkling the pages, and looks up. Instead of the monster he has built up in his head, though, he just sees Cecil, perched atop the shelf like a bird of prey watching over its chicks. He smirks down at Carlos from his position, and he goes back to searching through the stacks, oddly comforted by the knowledge that Cecil is there to watch over him.

Things go smoothly for three more sections after that; they take a short and winding path from one section to the next, and one or more of them scour the shelves while the rest take defensive positions. It is not until they pause in the section labeled 'Controversial Political Subjects' that Cecil raises a hand and leans in close to speak.

“Up ahead is the 'Existential Quandaries' and 'Living Matter' sections.” Cecil whispers. “They're side by side, so I think we're safe to separate here.” He looks up at the shelves above them before addressing them again. “Stay in those two sections, and I'll keep watch from up top. No more than ten minutes.” They all nod and move down their current aisle.

Carlos hangs back, watching Cecil check one of the lower shelves with his feet before putting his weight on it. Something compels Carlos to stop him. “Cecil,” he whispers, and, seemingly without any input from his brain, he holds out a hand and grips the man's pant leg. Cecil looks down at him questioningly and Carlos nods toward the top shelf. “Be careful up there.”

Cecil shoots him a dazzling smile before hefting himself up the book shelves, scaling them as easily as a firefighter would scale a ladder. In Carlos' opinion, the view is comparable.

Well, minus the library book ghillie suit.

Snapping out of his reverie, Carlos hurries to catch up to his colleagues who have made it to their destinations and are scavenging the shelves quickly and quietly. The 'Existential Quandaries' section and the 'Living Matter' section are both three rows in size, so Carlos skirts the edges of the first few aisles and heads down the last row of 'Living Matter.' The books in this section are fairly diverse, considering a lot of things can be considered living matter, and he begins to methodically
skim book titles down the aisle. He occasionally pulls one out to flip through, but most of the works are out of date or unhelpful. Then, a few shelves up, Carlos sees a familiar title.

Scrambling in his pocket, Carlos pulls out Becky's greatly-reduced library wish list. Eight lines down and only one of two not marked through is the title *The Origin of Photic Behavior and the Evolution of Sexual Communication in Fireflies (Coleoptera Lampyridae)*, M.A. Branham and J.W. Wenzel. He looks back up at the dull brown leather spine.

Bingo.

Carlos tries to reach with one outstretched hand, but the book is two shelves higher than he can reach at ground level. Looking down the aisle, he spots a round foot stool near the end. He takes three steps toward the stool when Carlos hears an odd squeaking sound. For a moment he thinks it is something in his bag, but at that moment he spots a figure moving in the distance, much bigger than his companions. Without thought, he instinctively crouches down and tucks close to the shelf, watching from around the metal.

It is three aisles over from him, across two walkways, and obscured by darkness, but Carlos immediately knows this is a librarian. The features are hard to make out, but he can definitely see a creature over eight feet tall, even with its stooped over posture. He can tell it has a mountain of curling gray hair on top but other than that it is little more than a mottled silhouette. The squeaking noise gets louder as it moves up the aisles, and finally Carlos can tell that it is pushing a warped metal cart covered in books waiting to be shelved. He keeps a close eye on it until it has moved a few rows away before collecting his stool and returning to the task at hand.

With stool planted securely on the ground, Carlos stands with one arm clutching his equipment and Anduril, the other reaching up for a book that is still just out of reach. Looking both directions again, he puts his duffel bag down on the ground and leans the sword up against the books, putting one free hand on a relatively empty shelf and the other reaching hard for the book. The very tips of his fingers graze then grip the leather pulling it slowly back from its place on the shelf. If he can just get a little—

“Librarian!” a voice hisses.

It startles him, causing him to drop the book he had such a tenuous grasp on, and it slams to the ground with a sound like a lightning strike in the surrounding darkness. For one precious second, Carlos thinks his heart might stop beating in his chest right then and there.

He'll never know what instinct drove him to leap, climb and pull himself into the empty space
below the book he had been trying to reach for, but he slid into it just as a massive beast rounded the corner to his aisle. Despite the overwhelming need to gasp in breath, Carlos holds the air in his lungs as panic crawls up his spine and down his limbs, fingers gripping the shelf beneath him in a death grip.

From his position this high and the creature's position low to the ground, it passes too far underneath him to get a decent look. He can hear it below him, and a new wave of panic surges through him when he realizes it must be messing with his duffel bag, since he left it on the ground like a complete idiot. Easing a hand slowly down toward his cargo pants pocket, he tries to wiggle his fingers in enough to remove one of the vials of sulfuric acid inside, but the librarian moves on down the aisle and out of sight. Carlos' eyes fall shut for just a moment, and he breathes a sigh of relief.

When he opens them, he bites back a scream.

Two sets of skeletal claws grip the shelf above his head, the metal creaking under the force. To Carlos' growing horror, a head drops down from above on a backwards bending neck, head coming around to stare at Carlos like a flower on a delicate stem straining to look at the sun. Dull powdery gray hair curls down into a face that is contorted to contain the long tapered anglerfish teeth protruding from its gaping mouth. Beady cataract covered eyes stare out at him from behind ornate winged trifocals attached to the monstrous head by a bright pink cord. Its jaws open wider and it emits a shrill hiss at Carlos, and he wonders if the librarian will eat him whole or tear him to shreds, when a crossbow bolt embeds itself in the books behind its head.

The librarian's head jerks up, looking for the source of the attack, and darts away over the top of the shelf. Carlos immediately drops to the ground and gathers his gear, taking off down the aisle in search of his team. Rounding the first corner, he expects to see Harris cowering down along the base of the shelves, but the aisle is empty. The next is the same. In fact, both sections are entirely empty.

Shit.

Ducking around another corner, he blindly weaves his way through the aisles until he finds a darker area where he kneels down behind an overturned book cart. His eyes are wide open, trying to take in even the slightest change in the darkness, but everything is still and quiet. He reaches out and grips the shelf to his left, trying to get his bearings and think through the situation rationally. Cecil had said that if they got separated from the group to immediately head for the checkout counter. According to the directory Cecil showed them in the beginning, the checkout counter is a dozen or so aisles to the north of the directory. He reaches into his pocket to—

Wait.
Nothing in his left pocket. Just the pocket knife in the right. Vials in the pocket by his knees. Not in his shirt pocket either.

Where is his compass?

Squatting lower, he digs through his duffel twice and his pockets three more times, becoming for frantic with each passing second, but it is nowhere to be found. How could he have lost it? “Puto infierno,” he whispers. It must have fallen out of his pocket when he leaped up onto that shelf. Zipping the bag, Carlos checks his surroundings again. He cannot see any of the outer walls, the shadows obscuring anything beyond the rows of books. Picking up a book at random from the shelf next to him reveals Wings of the Weird and Wonderful by Eric Brown. A full color image of a military aircraft in flight adorns the cover. All it tells him is that he is not in a section they have already been in, to his dismay. Knowing that staying here will not get him any closer, he holds tight to the grip of his sword and begins a slow trek through the stacks, picking a direction and sticking with it.

He feels lost almost immediately, the stacks of books blurring together with no discernible features for him to use for orientation. Nothing looks familiar, he has not seen any of these sections before, and he has to double back when he hears the slow shuffle of a librarian shelving books on the neighboring aisle. As hard as he tries to keep a level head, he can feel the fight or flight response kicking in, and he has to fight everything in him not to run full-out down the rows.

At the end of his current aisle, Carlos decides to take a right and head up one of the walkways that runs perpendicular to the rows. Taking a fortifying breath, he rounds the corner and begins to walk, gaining speed with each successful aisle he passes. He is just thinking that he might be making progress when he hears a noise approaching from behind. He twirls and raises his sword to strike, only to be slammed into a tightly packed bookcase, one forearm pinning his arms above his head, a broad hand clamping over his mouth to muffle his surprised shout.

Carlos' eyes squeeze shut as he holds down his scream of surprise, but when he opens them Cecil's pale face is a mere inch from his own. The relief he feels at being found is short lived, however, as he follows the direction cut by those intense lilac eyes. Over Cecil's right shoulder, two librarians stalk into the open walkway. The bigger of the two is clutching a massive blood red tome in its withered hands. They tarry there, necks arched and bent toward each other, some sort of silent communication happening between them.

When it becomes clear that Carlos will not speak, Cecil slowly lowers his hand away from Carlos' mouth to his neck, two fingers pressed along his carotid artery. The pressure makes him aware of the erratic hammering of his own heart as well as the answering beat within the chest pressed to his. The two men stand frozen in place, pressed together from shoulder to knees, breaths ghosting
each other's faces and lightly stirring their hair. If Carlos was less petrified, he would have found it in himself to enjoy it.

It is long, agonizing minutes later when the pair of librarians move on, carrying the oddly large book deeper into the darkness beyond Carlos' vision. They remain with their limbs entangled for another minute after, just in case they return, before Cecil slowly eases his arm down and away from his hands still raising Anduril overhead. He drops his arms down and bites back a groan at the ache now in the joints.

Cecil takes a step back, but no more, body still practically trapping Carlos' against the bookshelf. “Are you alright?” he whispers.

The scientist nods, shaking his limbs to work the tension from his shoulders. “I lost my compass back in the Living Matter section. Do you know where the others are?”

“I led Lei, Billy, and Harris to the checkout counter. They should already be back in the lab by now. Abbey is waiting there for us.”

“What about Gwen?” Carlos asks.

The other man shakes his head. “Abbey said they lost track of each other over by Inter-Species Law. I'm going to go look for her as soon as I get you checked out.”

“No, I'm coming with you,” he says, slinging his duffel over one shoulder.

“Carlos, no, you need to get out of here. It isn't safe; I never should have brought outsiders to the library without the proper training. You're going to get killed—”

“Cecil. I'm going. Gwen is my responsibility, and I'm not leaving here without her. Now are we going to stand here and argue and possibly get eaten, or are we going to get moving?”

The broadcaster huffs out a breath of fond annoyance. “You are stubborn, aren't you?” Despite everything, suddenly they find themselves grinning at each other. Carlos helps Cecil shoulder his backpack from where he dropped it trying to stop Carlos from alerting the librarians, and they set off together down the aisles toward Inter-Species Law. The pair of them move much quicker than they did as a group, and Carlos is secretly pleased with how well he is keeping up. Before he came
to Night Vale, he has to admit that he was not in the best of shape. All the running around this town makes him do and occasional sleepless nights are doing wonders for his physique.

It ends up a bust, as there is no Gwen nor any sign she was there. This section is filled with normal looking books that smell oddly of fresh dirt and manure, cut grass and ozone. Cecil walks a little easier here, saying that the conflicting odors of the different manuscripts play havoc with the librarian's sense of smell. Carlos watches him climb to the top of a bookshelf again, this time offering a hand up when the bookcase wobbles dangerously, and Cecil scouts their current position. He waits until he descends to the floor before speaking again. “I think we need to head back. I can see Abbey at the checkout and I don't want to leave her alone any longer than necessary.”

“I told you, I'm not leaving Gwen.”

Cecil looks grim. “Carlos, I don't see any sign of her, anywhere. Let me get you back to the checkout, get you and Abbey out of here, and I'll go looking again by myself.”

“We can get Abbey checked out, but I'm not leaving, and that's all there is to it.” Carlos says again.

The other man puts a hand to his arm as they near the edge of the section. “Fine, but Carlos...I don't know if we're going to find her or not.”

“Do you think she...that she was...?” He isn't sure how to finish that sentence. Do librarians just kill their victims? Or do they eat them, too?

Cecil sighs. “Its possible. Likely, actually. I'm sorry, but it's true. She knew the risks when she came in here, just like the rest of you.”

“I know, I know, it's just...” He readjusts his duffel on his arm. “I'm not ready to give up on her, not yet. I'm a scientist, and scientists rely on facts and evidence. If something happened to her, there will be some sign of it, I'm sure. Give me that much.”

“Alright. But we aren't going to scour the whole library. When I say we're done, we're done. I'm not leaving you alone here.” Cecil waits for Carlos to nod in agreement before raising his crossbow once again, and moving to take point. “Let's take care of Abbey first, then we'll look for Gwen. Stay close.”
Five minutes later, Carlos and Cecil enter an open area of the library where an ancient checkout desk sits within a ring of bloodstones. Abbey is huddled behind the desk with a stack of library books opened and ready to be stamped on the counter in front of her. She lets out a squeak of joy when she sees Carlos.

“Oh, Jesus Fucking Christ, Carlos! I thought you were dead!” she loudly whispers. Carlos hurries over to her and they embrace, Abbey holding like a life line. When she pulls back she looks distraught. “I'm so sorry, Carlos! Gwen was with me, I had her by the hand, but when we took off running from the one that chased Cecil, we let go, and I didn't mean to, but—”

“It isn't your fault,” he soothes, hugging her again and turning eyes on Cecil. The other man flushes a rather attractive touch of lavender and busies himself with checking the mechanisms of his crossbow. He pushes her back to arms length. “I want you to checkout, now. Cecil and I are going to look for Gwen, but I don't want you here any longer than necessary.”

“But what about—”

“You're going,” Carlos says, tone brooking no argument. Abbey nods and turns to Cecil, surprising him with a hug of his own. The reporter looks startled by this turn of events but returns the hug warmly.

“You two be safe,” she says, picking up an ancient looking date stamp and taking a deep breath before slamming it down onto the checkout card at the back of the last book. Carlos isn't sure what happens after that, just that one moment Abbey is standing before him, and the next she and her books are gone, like time skipped forward over whatever happened. He looks back at Cecil to share his surprise, but it is obvious from Cecil's nonchalance that this is nothing new to him.

“Go ahead and set your books on the counter,” Cecil says, pulling his own out from his backpack. “We'll go ahead and stamp all but the last ones, so if we need to leave in a hurry we won't be even more rushed.” Carlos does as instructed, piling an impressive amount of books onto the counter next to Cecil's four. Cecil laughs as he begins to stamp. “Are you sure you got enough? We can go back for more,” he says sarcastically.

Carlos opens his mouth to reply in kind, but a piercing scream slices through the air. Dropping his bag, he grabs Anduril and removes one of his acid vials from his pocket before he takes off in the direction of the sound, Cecil's voice calling for him to come back but he barely notices. He jogs just slow enough to be able to look down each aisle as he passes, searching for the voice that he knows was Gwen. Another scream tears through him as he rounds a corner and stumbles to a stop.
A distant, detached part of Carlos' brain knows that he is already too late. The sheer amount of bright crimson pooled on the ground and splattered across the spines of the books on either side of the aisle is enough for inevitable death. That does not stop him from gaping at Gwen lying prone under the spread limbs of a massive librarian, this one bigger than all the others he's seen. Its riotous curling white hair is pulled into a ragged bun on top of its grotesque head, with bright aqua winged and bedazzled trifocals covering eyes almost completely white. A long tattered cardigan hangs from its skeletal frame, and even from here Carlos can see a stained name tag pinned to the remains of its shirt. In neat, orderly print he reads 'Head Librarian,' while underneath in jagged marks is the name, 'GRETCHEN.'

Gwen whimpers and holds up a weak hand as if to protect herself from the monster towering over her, but she is powerless to stop it. Carlos watches in horror as the beast grasps her body in its wide jaws and shakes her twice, Gwen's neck snapping with an audible pop so that she hangs limp and lifeless from its mouth. Its elongated neck bends so that Gwen is thrown up in the air like a heron eating a large fish, and the young woman disappears down its throat in a matter of moments.

The shock of the sight leaves Carlos standing with arms and legs numb, and when he finally manages to move backwards in fear, he stumbles, momentum carrying him blindly. He is unable to stop himself from careening into the card catalog. The large cabinet creaks ominously under his weight before toppling backwards, the wood slamming into the ground and splintering apart with an awful crack under the weight of the paper inside, and a confetti of catalog cards scatter around him. He has not yet hit the ground before he hears a series of earsplitting screeches, and he is on his feet and running before he is truly aware of it.

His feet pound into the carpet and he can hear the ripping threads of claws tearing through the carpet behind him, but he does risk glancing behind him, willing his legs to move faster. He can see Cecil in the distance, can now hear him shouting over the din to run faster, to hurry, and Carlos' lungs scream with the need for more air. Cecil is aiming his crossbow over Carlos' head, waiting for the right moment to fire, and screaming words that Carlos can no longer understand. The thing is too fast, he isn't going to be able to outrun it, and in his mind he weights the pros and cons of the sword in his right hand versus the vial of acid in his left, percentages and probabilities flashing through his mind in an instant. A claw slices neatly through his pants leg, just barely grazing his skin, and he makes a split decision, rotating his body and flinging the tube in his hand with all his might at the beast behind him.

There is a shattering of glass, and Carlos is dimly aware of the whirl of displaced air as a crossbow bolt cuts through the air inches from his head, then the head librarian is howling, reeling backwards from the dual assault, smoke rising from the skin on its face. Carlos does not wait to see the results, turning and sprinting toward Cecil who has now lifted the time stamp above their two remaining books. As Carlos crosses the line of the bloodstone circle, Cecil slams the stamp down twice, and all goes black.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Sorry for a slightly later chapter than normal, my lovely readers. This week was my birthday, Valentine's Day, and getting snowed in for a few days. I hope you enjoy!

“The water rises up, filling every last empty space around you. Its blackness sticks to your skin. No, wait, that isn't water. The tar rises up, filling every last empty space around you. Its blackness sticks to your skin. Take your last breath.

Welcome to Night Vale.

Listeners, it is exciting yet sad news I bring you at the top of our broadcast. Sad, and thorough, for I was not just a curious bystander, but an active participant in this story.

As many of you may know from last night's show, today I was to escort our very own intrepid outsiders, the scientists of the Night Vale Laboratories, into the Public Library. It was my duty, as an active and helpful member of our fair community, to assist them in any way I could. Especially after learning how ill-equipped—and uninformed—the scientists were with regards to library safety. It is a testament to the thoroughness of the Night Vale school system that our children are much better prepared for the hazards of reading improvement.

Garnering every last scrap of knowledge that I have amassed over my many years experience traversing that treacherous landscape, this morning I and six brave scientists entered the Night Vale Public Library.

Locating each scientist after awakening from my spot among the Questionable Cookbooks went surprisingly well, and though they moved through the aisles with the swiftness of third graders, the scientists at least did so on silent feet. Truthfully, it was going better than expected, when the clattering of a falling volume of Insect Pathogens: Molecular Approaches and Techniques alerted the denizens of the library to our presence.

The others scattered, and I believed all were safe, when I realized that Carlos, that most brave and beautiful of all outsiders, was trapped! Nimble as a goat climbing a fictional mountain, he had scaled the shelves and hid amongst the manuscripts, but as you all are aware, a librarian is a hard predator from which to hide. I let loose a crossbow bolt, drawing its attention and fleeing so that Carlos could escape.
The diversion worked, but I lost track of him as well as the rest of the scientists in the resulting chase. Rounding them up proved difficult, but those I could find were promptly checked out. As you all know, you should never dally in the library before checking out your books, as the risk of injury and death greatly increases once you have books in your possession. I found myself missing only two scientists, and began searching for them immediately.

I tracked Carlos to the Rhyming Titles section, moments from alerting a pair of librarians to his location. I acted on instinct, throwing myself at the other man and holding him bodily, hand fastened tightly over his mouth. And oh! Listeners! If only we had not been in mortal peril! In those long moments, my body pressing the length of his tightly to the bookcase behind him, I must confess that I let my mind wander. I took in the honey flecks swimming in his liquid whiskey eyes, the wide endless chasms of his pupils dilated due to petrification, and the way those dark eyes were framed by his even darker lashes, like a crow's wings in flight. The gentle sweep and arch of his nose, the plump dip of his lower lip that I wanted to—

Uh, excuse me, listeners. I am being informed that Station Management is requesting I move on with the story. And by requesting, I mean violently shaking the door to its office on its hinges.

Needless to say, it was a struggle to remove myself from Carlos' person once the librarians moved on, but I reminded myself that it was neither the time nor the place for such inclinations. We made our way to the checkout counter and were there but a minute before the final missing scientist, one Gwen Vogt, let out a terrible scream. My heart, which had been beating at a furious pace that would normally send me searching for medical attention, was metaphorically in my throat as I watched Carlos, brave and selfless Carlos, disregard his own safety within the checkout circle and rush to her aid.

Alas, he was far too late. I am unable to convey just what took place down that shadowy aisle as my line of sight was blocked by the stacks, but in the aftermath, after Carlos and I escaped back into the soul-warming fluorescent lights of their laboratory, the shaken man was able to describe to me his coworker's fate. It is but a small mercy that she was now slowly torn to pieces, as it is well known that librarians tend to bicker and fight over a kill.

To the family, friends, and co-workers of Gwen Vogt, we at Night Vale Community Radio offer our sincerest condolences. She will be missed.

Tomorrow the City Council will be...."
The rattling sound of glass striking glass is almost unbearable inside Cecil's car as he drives down the road toward Old Woman Josie's house. It sends his headache to new and ever more painful levels, and he is not sure he will be able to listen to the vibrations much longer. Part of him wonders if he could shove all the jars out of the moving car and claim they were sucked out by grasping tendrils of despair and self-loathing, but those are usually found on the other side of town, and he does not need a ticket for littering today. Or any other day, really.

Old Woman Josie's house is one of only two buildings down a short dirt road behind the car lot. The one on the left is a trailer, a rusted out abandoned metal home with broken windows and scrub grass growing more than three feet high around the cinder blocks holding it up. Cecil often wonders why no one hauls that thing to the junk yard, or at least dismantles it so it is not such an eyesore. It has been there for as long as Cecil can remember—which, if he is honest, does tend to fluctuate on occasion, so his memory might not be the most reliable source to consider.

A little further down on the right is Old Woman Josie's, a short one-story brown stucco house with a gentle sloping roof and wooden shutters painted a faded teal color with chipped areas revealing spots of bright yellow paint underneath. Her front lawn, if you can call it that, is more weeds than grass and more lawn ornaments than decorative flowers, but Josie has never seen a pink flamingo or garden gnome she did not like. Cecil thinks he sees a few tall figures disappearing into her home as he pulls up, but when he gets out of the car he only sees Josie's shock of pure white hair piled high on her head. She is rocking gently in her front porch swing, a book of crossword puzzles held aloft in one withered hand and a bright yellow highlighter in the other which she raises in greeting.

“I brought back your canning jars,” Cecil calls out, getting a good grip on the cardboard box in his passenger's seat and carrying it up the single porch step.

She gestures at her doorstep. “Oh, just sit them there. Erika will bring them in later.”

He nods, not questioning who Erika is or whether or not Erika is or is not an angel. There's no point in going down that road. Instead, he sets the box down and glances in through the closed screen door at her tiny living room and even tinier kitchen. He sees nothing. Standing back up, he turns to give her his most charming and enigmatic smile, but judging by the glare on her face it does not work.

“Humph. 'Bout time you showed up,” she says, head cocking up and to the side so that she is giving him a side-eyed contemptuous look as she pretends to consider her crossword puzzle. She says nothing more, so he knows that he has some grovelling to do.

“I'm sorry,” he says, looping his fingers together in front of him and trying for nonchalance. “It's been really busy down at the station lately. Lots of newsworthy stories that needed to be investigated. Station management has been on my back lately about training new interns, and,” he
stalls when her eyes narrow at the letters on the page, and he plows on, “and I really am. Sorry. I didn't—”

“You are just as busy as you've ever been, boy. Don't feed me your tall tales; I've been listening to you for too long not to know when to read between the lines.” She finally looks at him straight on, obviously annoyed. “You've been avoiding me.”

Cecil opens his mouth to refute this, but no one levels a glare like Old Woman Josie, so he snaps it back shut. They are quiet, she on her swing and he waiting patiently for a few long moments before she sighs and points to one of the two other wooden chairs on the porch. “Let me finish my puzzle before I deal with you.”

Knowing when to argue and when not to argue with Josie was something he learned a long time ago, so he wisely takes the chair closest to her. It has a cute yellow and white patterned pillow on it that he moves out of the way. She goes back to her crossword puzzle, mumbling to herself periodically as she talks out a particular spelling before writing in the little blocks.

It takes him five minutes of silently worrying about just what he is going to confess and just what she is going to say before he realizes she must have more than half her puzzle left, and she is going to make him sweat it out through the whole thing. It gives him time to admire the staggering amount of wind chimes hanging from the porch overhang. Collecting wind chimes has always been something of a hobby for the elderly woman. All of the ones hanging from her porch are made of natural materials, wood and rock and metals but an awful lot of copper, some professionally crafted and others cobbled together by neighborhood kids or Josie herself. There is a rather crudely made one hanging near the far corner of the porch, uneven stones and natural glass hanging by twisted copper wires from a wooden base. Cecil remembers making it for her when he was in elementary school. It hangs next to the one Cecil knows is her favorite, a long set of copper chimes that have a deep resonance that Josie once said reminded her of home, though she never specified if she meant here or some other home. He knows that Old Woman Josie was not originally from Night Vale, born on a reservation nearby that no longer exists, but she has lived here a very, very long time. Certainly longer than he can remember. Long enough that no one considers her an outsider, anymore, though Cecil cannot imagine a Night Vale without an Old Woman Josie.

From her swing, Josie emits a questioning hum. “What is a thirteen letter word meaning, 'to surround with a rampart or wall'?”

“Circumvallate,” he says after a moment's thought. She allows a small smile to grace her broad features before settling back into a serious look as she marks the squares. It must have had her stuck, because within moments she drops the book down on the swing next to her once she's done.

“So, you ready to tell me why you've been avoiding me?”
Cecil sighs, leaning forward and holding his hands together loosely between his spread knees. “I didn’t mean to,” he starts. At her unconvincing look, he continues, “The rune thing…it wasn’t just for work.”

“I figured,” she says. “You send an urgent request for rune translations and then nothing! Not a word about runes or Futhark on the radio, you cancel brunch on me, and I haven’t seen you outside town meetings in almost three months! So, spill! You know you’re going to tell me anyway, might as well get it all out at once.”

Taking a deep breath, he blurts out, “I’ve been having visions.” He drops his face into his hands before he can see her outraged face.

“Cecil Gershwin Palmer!” Josie picks up her book of crossword puzzles again and swats at his shoulder. “You've been having visions and didn't tell me?”

“Hey, it's not like I don't use the gift every day at work,” he argues before trying to unsuccessfully protect his face from Josie's wrath.

“You wouldn't be acting like this if they were voluntary visions!” She finally stops whacking him with the book and lets her scowl soften. “Work is work, and this is something else entirely. And it is visions? Plural?”

He nods. “Six in three months. Not always the same, but with recurring elements.”

“And you haven't been hallucinating or—”

“No.” It is a statement that brooks no argument, though he can tell Josie wants to question him about it. He softens his tone and looks away from her concerned face. “No, it's not—this isn't like that. I am not my mother.”

They sit in silence for a moment before Josie sighs. “How about you start at the beginning,” she says, settling back against the rails of her swing.

So Cecil begins at the beginning, describing the first blackout that led to the three symbols drawn
in the dirt in front of John Peter's farmhouse, to the first vision he had that night and every vision since, all the way up to the unfortunate incident in his office that led to replacing four picture frames, seven coffee cups, a stapler, and his computer monitor. Not to mention an entire bottle of liquid paper. He is extremely thorough in his descriptions of each dream, not leaving out a single detail. Years of dream interpretation instilled in him an understanding of just how important the details can be.

Just getting it all out in the open is a huge relief, in the end. For as much as he is used to keeping an incredibly large amount of information hidden from the rest of the community per request from the powers that be around town, Cecil has never much enjoyed keeping his own secrets. Only a handful of people are aware of his extra eye, even fewer what he uses it for, and approximately two people know about his tentacles, other than Station Management and the Sheriff's Secret Police.

Now that the words are pouring out of him, he cannot remember why he was so worried. After all, Josie was the one that first helped him cope when his second sight came in. Cecil had been lying curled in the fetal position for an untold amount of hours in Mission Grove Park before Josie found him. She never told him how she knew to look for him there, but the question did not occur to him until well after the event and by then it was not worth asking. It had been a special brand of hell laying there on Josie's worn-out sofa, debilitated with pain and unable to control the images streaming into his brain. He does not remember much from that time, luckily, and he had only missed a week of school which is not that uncommon in Night Vale. They had passed off the missing days as a case of Russian Carrion Fever, and no one was the wiser.

Once he has finished his voice is uncharacteristically hoarse, and she shuffles inside to make a cup of tea and give him a moment to compose himself. She comes back with an aromatic cup of murky water that she calls tila tea. His first instinct is to decline the beverage, but she pushes the bright red ceramic cup into his hands and insists, so he takes a tentative sip. It is strong, much stronger than he normally drinks any tea, and fills his senses with a heavy floral scent.

“Tila tilia mexicana,” she says, moving back to her swing with her own cup, a worn dark brown mug with an odd dash of cream speckles along one side. “And a touch of rosemary. Good for the nerves, good for the blood pressure. You've gotten yourself too wound up over this.”

Cecil swallows around the flowery liquid, trying to hold down a slight grimace. Why does she always have to make it so strong? “Can you blame me? This isn't normal.”

“Child, none of us are normal. It's what makes us interesting.” She takes a drink of her tea and settles back against the rails. “Whatever it is, normal or not, it sounds important. You're sure that it's you that you're experiencing? In the parts where you are a participant?”

“I think so?” he says but it raises at the end like a question. “It always feels like me. But, I'm not
Josie shakes her head. “I don't think so. One vision, maybe two, that could be just a coincidence. But six? No, this most definitely has to do with you. Especially since you've been writing in Futhark.”

“I'm guessing that has special significance?”

“It's the oldest form of runic alphabet known to man. Second to eighth century Germanic tribes developed the language.”

“How on Earth did you know how to read it?” he asks, surprised.

“How anyone knows how to read anything,” she replies. “By learning it. Anyway, it isn't something you would ever see in Night Vale, except maybe in some of the elder tablets and tomes in the library.

“But what does it mean? The runes and the dreams together?” Cecil asks.

“I don't know,” she replies, and she laughs at his disappointed frown. “Elder Futhark is not exactly a thorough language, so I can just tell you what each rune means, not what they mean together. And I am certainly not a dream interpreter; I never had the knack for it, really, though I did take the introductory course one semester at the community college. I've heard the pay is shitty and they have a horrible union.”

“Josie...”

She waves him off. “Tell me more about the man in the dream.”

He shakes his head. “There isn't much more to tell. He's never clear enough for me to get a good look at him, and whenever he speaks it's always distorted, like I'm floating miles under an endless ocean—”

“You've never even seen an ocean,” she counters. It makes Cecil scowl at her. She always
interrupts him when he tries to get eloquent.

“Be that as it may,” he continues, “I can never understand what he is saying or how he is saying it. And I can't even read his lips, at the end, because of all the light. And even in the beginning, it felt like...like he was a stranger, and yet he wasn't a stranger. I feel connected to him, somehow. Which doesn't make any sense at all.”

“Hmm,” is all she says, tapping her fingers on the arm rest of the swing. “If I was to guess, I'd say it sounds like visions of the future, or maybe a warped version of it. Between you and this mystery man of yours. Maybe not, though. It could be an alternate time line or another dimension. But most likely visions of the future.”

Cecil stands up and begins to pace on the miniscule porch, clearly uncomfortable. “You know how I feel about that. I don't want to know my future. Knowing your future skews every decision you make, changes everything, makes you do thinks you might regret.”

“You mean like that Harlan boy,” she says, not a question.

He doesn't look at her. “I should have never—”

“Oh, would you stop it?” The swing stops its gentle squeaking rock behind him. “You've been beating yourself up about that for over a decade. It doesn't matter what you saw or didn't see when you looked into your future with him; you were going to break up anyway. Sure, you might have stayed together a lot longer, but you two just weren't suited. It was never going to work.”

“You don't know that,” Cecil says, voice lacking the contempt he thought it would. He looks back at Josie, curious as to her explanation.

She resumes her swinging. “Earl Harlan is a sweet boy, but he walks around with his eyes half-closed to the world. He listens to your news reports and takes them as the gospel truth, hearing whatever it is the City Council wants us to believe and taking it as fact just because it comes from your honeyed voice. He likes to see the world as order and structure and doing things a certain way; he wouldn't have the job he has if he didn't. When he sees a house it is a house, when he sees a car it's a car, and when he looks into the void all he sees is dark emptiness.”

When she gestures, he comes and sits with her on the swing. “That isn't you, Cecil. Even when your eyes are firmly down where the authorities want them, they're always wide open and seeing.
You see so much more...potential, in the world. You let yourself see more than he could ever fathom, more than he would ever be comfortable with, and it would have driven you apart, eventually. You need someone that isn't afraid of that potential.”

Cecil lets her take his hand and offers a small smile. “I never said I wasn't afraid.”

“You're much braver than you give yourself credit for. I have always said this.”

“We've gotten off topic,” he says, not wanting to dwell on his past failed relationships any longer. “I still don't know what to do about the visions, or the runes.”

“There isn't much you can do, honestly. Either an ancient deity or your subconscious is trying to show you something, and you'll just have to do what you do best. See.” At his frustrated sigh, she pats his hand gently. “You look like hell. I'm guessing you haven't been sleeping lately. Is it just the visions?”

“No, I just didn't sleep well last night.” Cecil reaches up and scrubs at his eyes, which have felt heavy most of the day. “Yesterday was a hard day.” She tuts over him and takes his cup back into the house for a refill despite his protests. He takes a sip anyway, and good lord, did she make it even stronger this time? It makes him cough a little, and her hard slaps to the back are much harder than he would suspect from an old woman that size.

“I listened to your report yesterday,” she says once his airway is clear again. “That poor girl. Was it evisceration? Decapitation?”

Cecil shakes his head. “Carlos said it broke her neck before swallowing her, but that she was already dead from the blood loss. He doubts she was truly aware of what was happening, at the end.” He leans forward and buries his face in his hands, which sends the swing rocking back harder than expected but Josie holds on to the chain. “I never should have taken them in there.”

“Why not? Don't they have libraries where they come from?”

“Yes, but they aren't like the ones in Night Vale. From what I understand, their librarians actually help people. And aren't nine foot tall bloodthirsty predators. It was a little disconcerting.” He sighs. “They weren't prepared nearly enough. I thought I would be able to protect them.”
“I think you would have been fine if it hadn't been so many. Besides, you can't blame yourself. They were all of age.”

“I know, if any of them would have been under the minimum age requirement of twelve I would have insisted they stay behind, but they had the skills of an eight year old in there!” Josie puts a comforting hand on his back and rubs gently. “It's my fault that Gwen is dead, but I think Carlos blames himself. After we came back from the checkout circle, I wasn't able to convince him he wasn't to blame. They were all obviously upset, and one of the scientists that didn't go with us asked me to leave. I don't blame them; I wouldn't want to see me either,” he says miserably.

“Cecil, child, hush. It wasn't your fault. The library is a dangerous place even for the most prepared and experienced readers. You told them that beforehand, right?” At his nod, she gives his arm a squeeze. “It could have easily been you, if circumstances had turned out different. They knew what they were getting into. Like your interns, they know what they risk coming to work at the station. Some people make it and some people don't.”

“They're never going to trust me again,” he says gloomily.

“I doubt that. They just need time to mourn.” She pauses, looking at Cecil's dejected posture, then grins. “Give them a few days, then call up that one you have such a crush on. What is his name again? Carlos?”

Cecil just groans, covering his face again and slumping down on the swing further, his long legs bracing it from swinging. “What the hell is wrong with me? I can't seem to stop blurting things out on the air about him.”

“Tell me about him,” she suggests. It succeeds in bringing a light flush to his cheeks and an unstoppable smile.

“He's perfect, Josie. Just perfect! He is so smart, and so interesting. And, I mean, you were at their town meeting. You saw him, right?”

She laughs. “I did, he is a tasty little dish,” she says with an elbow to his side. “So when are you going to ask him out?”

“No! No, no, no, I could never! I can barely talk around him, I just fall apart! And he's so busy all the time, with science, and really, he's so smart and sophisticated, I'm sure he doesn't have time for
a lowly radio broadcaster, and—OW!” Cecil rubs at the back of his head where Josie smacked him. “What was that for?!?”

“Don't talk about yourself that way! You are a very intelligent and interesting young man!”

“Josie, I'm hardly young—”

“I said, you are a very intelligent and interesting young man. Are you going to argue with me more?”

He fluffs his hair out at the back where she messed it up and grumbles, “No, ma'am.” He gets to his feet. “I'm not asking him out, though. I barely know him.”

Josie smirks. “What better way to get to know someone?” Then she waggles her eyebrows at him.

“Josie!” Cecil exclaims, laughing. He checks his watch. “I have to get going. There's a press conference in an hour about the new voting procedures they plan on implementing this year. The mayor is supposed to make a statement, and I want Dana to get a feel for questioning an authority figure like that.”

“Alright,” she says, getting to her feet and pulling him down into a tight hug. He has to stoop and bend quite a ways to reach her. When she pulls back she takes his hands in hers and squeezes them tight. “You call me if you have any more visions, you hear? Don't keep it all inside. You and I both know how dangerous that is.”

Cecil nods. “I will, I promise.” He waves at her as he gets in his car and starts to back out of the drive. Glancing up, he sees her wave, and for a moment, he thinks he sees another hand waving from the living room window.

The note that had been taped to Carlos' bedroom window had been a shock, but he was slowly starting to realize that things like this just happen in Night Vale, and it might be in his best interest to just learn to roll with it. Keeping that in mind, he had collected the note—after giving the roof a thorough search to make sure nothing and no one else was waiting out there for him—and read it while eating a bowl of cereal that morning. It was from the Sheriff's Secret Police, informing him that there had been a designation error with the Night Vale Postal Service causing all of the
incoming mail for their address to be improperly sorted. Carlos was to come down to the Post Office at his earliest convenience to collect the backlog of mail.

That had been exciting news, perhaps the one thing that had gone right this week, and he had hurried to get dressed and head out the door. He had briefly considered telling the others, but those that weren’t locked in their rooms were busy, so he had left them be.

Carlos had been doing a lot of that over the past few days. Ever since the disastrous trip to the library, everyone had been wound pretty tight. Becky was near inconsolable, at least until yesterday when she finally allowed herself to join Abbey, Lei, and Harris for dinner. If it had not been for her responsibility toward the animals she had collected in the lab, he doubts they would ever have seen her. Any time not dedicated to them had been spent in her room with the door firmly locked. Harris had been wracked with the guilt of leaving the library before everyone else, certain that if he had stayed behind he might have been able to save her, despite the fact that Carlos insisted there would have been nothing they could have done. He is glad to see that Abbey and Lei have begun to lean on each other for support, though neither are as open to talking with the others as they were before. That reluctance will most likely fade when enough time passes, so he lets it be.

The other two members of his team worry him more than the rest.

First there was Matt, and his completely uncalled for attack on Cecil. When Carlos had woken up in the bloodstone circle, the first thing he had seen was Matt’s fingers wrapped around Cecil’s collar, hoisting him up in the air and demanding to know what had happened to Gwen. Carlos’ eyes had refused to focus as Becky and Harris had crowded around him, asking him if he was injured, and he had lost sight of exactly what had happened between the two men. Carlos had been too numbed at that point to vocalize much of anything, the image of that long neck extending around the mass of Gwen’s body still burned into his retinas. He was able to hear Cecil’s repeated apologies mixed in with everyone’s yelling, but they had done nothing to calm Matt down. The next thing any of them knew, Matt had been slammed into the edge of one of the lab tables and Cecil was standing on his own two feet again.

“Get out!” Matt had yelled then, picking up one of Cecil’s bloodstones and hurling it at the door. “Get your crazy voodoo shit and get out of here!”

Everyone was stunned for a few seconds by the outburst before arguing renewed, even louder than before. Cecil looked like he had been slapped. Ducking his head and gathering his things, he had moved faster than Carlos could track and was out the door. Finally getting to his feet, he had rushed to follow.

Cecil was throwing his things in the back seat and had one leg already in the car when Carlos
caught up to him. “Wait! Cecil, wait! I'm sorry, I—”

“No, I'm sorry,” he said, cutting Carlos off. His voice dropped into the cool mask of his radio persona. “This was a horrible accident, and I promise you it won't happen again. I hope that you'll forgive me for putting you all in such danger.”

“Cecil, please, you don’t have to leave like this,” he had said, not sure why he was arguing. If he had just been yelled at like that, he would have wanted to leave, too.

“I have to get to the station, it is much later in the day than I anticipated. The news must be told.” Carlos noticed that Cecil would not meet his eyes. “Again, I am terribly sorry for your loss.” And then he had slammed his car door and left.

There had been a shouting match after that between pretty much everyone other than Becky, who was sobbing into Abbey's arms. Matt had been oscillating between complete silence and vaguely hostile behavior ever since, with no one really talking to him other than Harris. The only reason Harris was dealing with Matt's attitude was because Matt was still trying to get rid of the Tangerine Death.

On the other end of the spectrum was Billy, who seemed to be showing no emotion toward the situation at all. Not that he had not been fully supportive of everyone, but based on his behavior, he was completely unaffected by Gwen's death. He had said all the right things that would be expected of him, but after conferring with Harris, they both had agreed that something was definitely wrong there. It was like Gwen was nothing more than a distant figure, a celebrity that he had only heard of, or an altogether hypothetical person. Harris thinks that whatever it is the Sheriff's Secret Police had done to him, they must have tweaked his ability to feel the sadness of loss. Only part of Carlos is sure this is a bad thing.

As for himself, Carlos does what he came to Night Vale to do. Any mourning he does happens within the confines of his apartment, and none of the others need to know about it.

They don't comment on the dark circles under his eyes.

So, the note about their missing mail is exciting, but he will not share the happy news until he is certain that nothing else will keep their mail from coming. Instead he makes the drive to the Post Office, only having to make a small detour as one of the main roads into town is inexplicably one-way in the opposite direction. On arrival at the plain red-bricked building, however, Carlos finds a sign taped to the glass door.
Carlos frowns at the sign before turning to the left and jumping at the appearance of a black-and-
navy-clad police officer in his customary balaclava standing less than four feet away. “Good
morning, sir. Are you here to inquire about your mail services?”

“Um, yes. I, uh, I got this note?” He pulls it out of his pocket and presents it to the officer, who
reads it over and nods.

“Ah, yes. Doctor Abaroa. May I see some I.D.?” he asks, handing the note back to him. Carlos
pulls out his wallet and shows his driver's license even though the man obviously knows who he is.
The man then has Carlos follow him around to the side of the building to what looks to be an old
abandoned dry cleaner's. Tacked over the sign is another that reads, “Night Vale Post Office:
Temporary Location.” Inside, a woman in a customary postal blue polo shirt greets him behind the
counter.

“This man is here to pick up his mail,” the officer tells the postal worker, handing over the note.
She nods and thanks the officer, who slips back out the door and into the shadows, presumably
back to his post hiding in the bushes. “If you can just sign here,” the woman says, holding out a
clipboard and a sewing needle. “You'll need to come pick up your mail here until the main office
opens again. We are sorry for the inconvenience. Did you bring a vehicle, sir?”

Carlos takes the needle and sighs. This is one aspect of Night Vale he does not think he'll ever be
able to find normal. He pricks his finger and presses it to the line, and by the time she takes the
form back, his name is written in glistening red along the bottom of the page in his crisp short
handwriting. “I have my car down the block. Why?”

It takes a bungee chord to hold his trunk closed, and he can not see out of his rear view mirror, but
he manages to get every single box and bag of mail back to the laboratory in one trip. Everyone
comes out to help unload the car and they spend the afternoon sitting at different tables in the lab
and separating the mail into categories. This includes who it was sent to—an individual scientist or
the lab itself—personal or business related, and a truly massive stack of junk mail. Billy is
delegated to keeping everyone's piles full of unchecked mail and disposing of trash, and also to
keep him from stumbling along any letters from Claudette, who is still calling daily.
A lot of the envelopes are already opened and either crudely taped back together or not closed at all, the flap slotted back into the envelope. Some of the text is also blacked out, and a few envelopes do not even have the original mail inside, but just a simple white sheet of paper with the word REDACTED typed in the center. This causes a fresh round of loud and opinionated complaining about the lack of privacy and freedom of speech that runs rampant in this town, but it is nothing they have not already said at length, and soon they are all working quietly together. Not completely silent, but calmly, which is certainly a nice change of pace.

Carlos is the only one seriously reading any of the mail immediately, all from the University. He has a thick stack of envelopes from Dr. Kendrick that the scientists add to faster than Carlos can read. It seems his boss has been getting his mail, heavily edited in the same way as theirs. From what Kendrick writes, it is no more than he expected—which would have been nice to know beforehand, but Carlos swallows that thought—and that thorough updates will not be needed in the future. He only need to send requests for needed supplies. That seems odd; surely he wants to get updates on what they are doing, what sort of progress they are making. And not one word about Tim, Aarav, or Joanna? He does not think he will have had time to hear about Gwen by this point, but surely he has heard about the others? He lets his focus fall to the margins of the page and notices some oddly placed marks on the ends of each line of text. What are these for? They look like...

His eyes widen in realization. Pulling two more letters from their envelopes, he holds them side by side. Yes, they all have the marks. It is a code.

He takes in a breath and almost blurts it out to the rest of them before remembering just what town he is in, and swallows the words. There will be no group collaboration on this project. Stuffing the letters back in the envelopes, he piles them together and resolves to crack this riddle tonight.

“Well, guys,” Lei says from his spot on the floor. “We are pre-approved for about seventy credit cards. I say we go on a shopping spree and skip town.” There’s a tittering of subdued laughter. Carlos makes his way over and kneels across from him.

“Wow,” he says, picking up straining handful of leaflet coupons for the Ralph's. “I've never seen so much useless mail in one spot.”

“Hey!” Abbey shouts from her table. “I got a check! Oh, big money, big money....two thousand bucks! Hot damn, drinks on me tonight!”

“What is that for?” Matt asks.

She laughs. “I helped a friend back home refurbish some old arcade machines for resale. Unlike
you geneticists, us engineers know how to make things people want to buy.”

“What do you want me to do with those,” Lei asks, pointing at a pile behind Carlos.

Turning, he sees a slightly tipping stack of square blue envelopes, and he bursts out laughing. “Holy shit, are you serious?” He rotates so he can pick up one of the top ones and takes a look at a white triangle with a swooping circle in the middle. It feels like he is looking at his childhood. “I thought they stopped sending these out years ago!”

“What is it?” Harris calls from across the room.

Carlos holds up the package. “America Online CDs!”

“Oh, man. Take me back to the 90's, if you please,” Billy says, snickering. He walks up to look over Carlos' shoulder. “There must be hundreds of them. I can't believe they still deliver these.”

“I don't think they do anywhere else,” Carlos says, opening the square and looking at the familiar logo. “Just in Night Vale.”

Becky walks over and takes a seat next to Carlos, pulling one of the envelopes into her lap and ripping it open with a sigh. It's the most any of them have seen her communicate all day. Once she has the CD out, she holds it between her palms by the edges. “You know, me and Gwen were roommates in undergrad,” she says, rolling the CD back and forth. “We still used to get these in the mail. Not often, but enough. It was always so silly for them to be sent to people living in a dorm room on campus with free internet. She would always do that thing, you know, where you microwave them?”

Everyone has stopped working and is listening to Becky speak, and they nod at her question. They do know. “Every time,” she says, a little laugh on her lips. “She would bring one in with the mail and say, 'We've got another one!' and we would have to stop what we were doing and fry it, right then and there. She said it was one of her favorite reactions.”

Carlos holds the CD in his hands up and watches the light refract into perfect rainbows of color. “Hey, you guys want to do a little experiment?”
The Night Vale Harbor and Waterfront Recreation Area might not exist as far as the town goes, but to the scientists it is the perfect staging grounds for this little experiment. Some of the buildings have already been demolished, and the sign has been spray-painted over to read “Nothing is here. Nothing was ever here,” but the docks are still standing over the dry cracked earth, and the sun is setting at an almost normal time today. It takes a couple of hours for Abbey to put together enough hand-held cavity magnetrons for each of them, but they busy themselves in the meantime by gathering together the other supplies for their impromptu outing.

Now, seven metal posts have been hammered into the ground out past the end of one of the piers. To the top of each are nailed and tied a series of AOL CD's, each post a little different in their arrangement.

They all had decided to dress the part, it seems, as most of them have fashioned tinfoil hats, shoulder pads and arm bands, all of pretty bad quality, and are wearing them proudly. Abbey is wearing her welding goggles, and Lei the ones he wears snowboarding, and why Lei decided to bring snowboarding goggles to the desert is beyond Carlos’ understanding. Carlos felt that the occasion called for a pristine white double-breasted lab coat and has his own dark goggles with green lenses pulled down over his eyes.

When the CD pyres are ready, they all line up a good distance away and ready their magnetrons. “Should someone say something?” Abbey asks. Becky has already started to get teary-eyed standing at her side.

Lei clears his throat. “Today, we gather here to say goodbye to our good friend, Gwen Vogt. Some of us knew her better than others, but she touched all our hearts, in some way.” He pauses, and Carlos is almost positive Lei’s eyes cut over to glare momentarily at Billy, but he doesn't look to check. “She was a good friend, and a good scientist. And she will be missed.”

It's short and to the point, which Carlos is glad for, because he doesn't think Becky can handle too much more of that. “Everyone good to go?” Carlos asks, looking down the line. They all nod and he holds his own magnetron aloft. They all follow suit. He raises his voice a bit theatrically, and says, “Gwen, this one's for you. Ready! Aim!” They all point the magnetrons out in front of them toward the staked CDs.

“Carlos, are you sure this is going to work?” Matt asks from the other end of the line.

“It wouldn't be an experiment if I knew that,” he replies, then shouts, “Fire!”
There is a sound of flipping switches, and a few seconds of silence, then a shower of sparks shoots out of each pole. They begin to smolder and crackle, bright lights arcing across the surface of each CD like lightning. Some of them are faster than others, but they all catch fire, popping and sizzling like a geek funeral pyre in the setting sun. It is beautiful.

They all begin to shout and cheer, turning off their magnetrons and watching the fire leap up from the melting CDs. Abbey throws an arm around Becky, who is grinning even through her tears.

After, Billy and Matt carry down four bags of junk mail which they dump in a huge pile over some real firewood they picked up when the stopped by the Ralph's. Around the bonfire they sit in a loose circle, everyone but Carlos downing Gwen's favorite beer which no one really cares for but drinks all the same. They sit and swap stories about Gwen, about home, and toast their friend when the last rays of the sun disappear below the horizon.

It takes Carlos just three hours that night to crack the cipher. The next morning he sends an eighteen page hand-written letter to Kendrick's home address in Arkham. This time, he expects answers.
Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

For those of you who do not follow me on tumblr, I greatly apologize for the delay in this chapter. I had a series of unfortunate medical emergencies to deal with, and writing was not physically possible. In fact, just thinking about writing was impossible. But I am back now, healthy and ready to bring you more Night Vale shenanigans.

If you have a tumblr account, you can either follow me or track 'Beakers and Bloodstones' for updates on upcoming chapters. I sometimes even ask random questions that in some vague and mysterious way relate to the section I am currently writing. Your answers to these questions might make an appearance in the next chapter!

Also, any writing on Chapter 13 will be on hold until I finish my cosplay for the live show on Wednesday in Durham! Expect pictures on tumblr of my silly self as Cecil, lepetitaquali as Kevin, and kyjexthu as an Intern!

Thanks for reading!

Carlos awakes with a start, choking slightly on his own saliva from where he fell asleep with his mouth open. His copy of Car Maintenance for Dummies begins to slide off to one side of his chest and he catches it instinctively. The room looks overly saturated with yellow from the glow of his bedside lamp, the shadows at the corners seeming darker than usual. He turns and squints at the clock underneath, dismayed that the first half of the numbers indicate that it is three in the morning, but the numbers after the colon are hieroglyphics. Leaning over, he puts the yellow and black patterned book on top of the stack next to the clock and reaches up to shut off the lamp, already letting his mind fuzz back over with sleep. The room is plunged into darkness, and he rolls so his back faces away from the window.

One eye creaks back open, though. Did he just see a flash of pink across his ceiling?

He stares out into the black nothingness for a moment. Huh. Must have been his imagina—

There! Another flash, this time green! And another, a yellow one across the door! Carlos sits up in bed and a rainbow of colors flash across his wall and all his other possessions at random intervals. He turns and looks out the window to see an odd glow in the distance. His first instinct is hope that this signals a sudden return of the Glow Cloud; the scientists still have not figured out that particular phenomenon, and the chance for more observations could only help. This does not seem to be the case, though, as Carlos can see not a cloud in the sky. The lights themselves seem to be flashing in a kaleidoscope of color in the distance.
Carlos eases out of bed in nothing but a pair of worn black boxers and his H.M.S. Beagle World Tour t-shirt. One of the things he likes about Night Vale, and the desert in general, is that the coming of October does not automatically mean long-sleeved shirts and digging out snow galoshes. Not that he has not already had his rubber boots out on several occasions in this town, but it was certainly not from any snow that he is used to. No, more along the lines of a glowing pale blue slime that the scientists worried would be deadly but actually did no more than leave a thin layer of goo on everything less than an inch off the ground, gathering in thick sticky puddles on the ground and possessing a faint but persistent odor of blue raspberry fruit punch. It took some creative application of bleach to get the bright aqua stains off his work boots—he does not mind a few stains, but it made his shoes look like they had track lighting.

Walking onto the roof, Carlos can clearly see flashing lights arcing across the sky, all emanating from Radon Canyon. It looks a little like a concert he went to in undergrad. And, now that he is outside without the walls of the building to muffle it, he can distinctly hear an accompanying noise. It is not anything specific—Radon Canyon is a good ways out from town, after all—but there is a definite cadence to it that changes every four to six minutes or so. He does not remember anything being said on the radio about something happening out there tonight. Maybe he should go check it out?

The softness of his mattress calls out to him, though. Thankfully not in the literal sense. He has not slept well since the library. Truth be told, he had not been sleeping all that well before the library either, but now his dreams are haunted by more specific specters. It seems every time he closes his eyes he watches Gwen's bloodied body disappearing into the gaping maw of that librarian. Sometimes he hears her screaming; other times it is deathly silent, like watching an old black and white movie, the images flickering on skipping film. He wakes up gasping for breath randomly in the night, feeling like he has been running for his life all over again.

Once it wasn't Gwen he saw being swallowed, but someone else, reaching out for him with grasping hands and calling for help that would not come, lilac eyes beseeching him to be rescued. It was the only time he woke up screaming himself hoarse, Abbey shaking him by the shoulders and Harris speaking soothingly from the foot of the bed. Lei had been hovering in the doorway, telling the others that everything was fine and to go back to bed.

Embarrassment and anger had welled up inside him then, but he had chosen his team well. Lei, Abbey, and Harris had not allowed him to push them away, and the four had shared a late night cup of tea and talked about inconsequential things until the tremors shaking Carlos' limbs subsided. There had been no questions asked about the contents of his nightmare; they all had them, after all. Becky's had been the worst so far, and she has been on a muscle relaxer ever since that first sleepless night, the sounds of her sobs echoing to all corners of the building. Harris tried to talk him into a mild sedative, just to get him through the harder nights, but Carlos declined.

He finds himself reluctant to allow anything to dull his senses lately, including alcohol. There have
been more than a few late nights since he arrived in Night Vale when he has yearned for a drink. Unfortunately, it seems the more he abstains, the less his team does. After Matt and Lei decided to start drinking at one in the afternoon one day, Carlos had to institute a new rule for the building, one that Abbey gleefully calls the Jimmy Buffett Rule. After all, with how inaccurate all the clocks are in Night Vale, it literally is five o'clock somewhere, at least on one timepiece or another. He also decreed that there would be no drinking at all in the main laboratory space, or Abbey's workshop, which was met with minimal grumbling.

Carlos watches the lights for a few more minutes before heading back inside and crawling back under the light blankets. He could set up a camera to try and record some of the lights, but he does not think any camera he can readily get to will pick up the colors at this distance. There is no point in waking up Abbey to help set up something more complicated, and driving out to Radon Canyon at three-something in the morning just seems cruel. Maybe it makes him a little bit less dedicated of a scientist, but he cannot find it in himself to feel too bad about it right now. He just wants to sleep.

Breathing out a deep, tired sigh, Carlos curls up facing the window. Tomorrow—no, today he will go to the radio station and ask Cecil about it. Maybe he knows something that he cannot say on the radio. Besides, he was already heading over there in the morning anyway. Since Matt screamed at the poor man and ran him out of the lab, Carlos has been trying to get in contact with him to properly apologize. Unfortunately, between keeping his own sanity and managing a team of scientists in mourning, he has not had the time to do more than call the station number. That has not done any good, either; all of his calls to the station have either gone straight to voice mail or to Dana, who claims she has been delivering the messages but he really doubts it. Carlos might not be the best at reading people, but even he can hear the sharp edge to her voice these days.

It is of no matter. Thanks to a slip in his conversation with Dana yesterday, Carlos knows for a fact that today Cecil will be at the station in the morning early to prepare for a meeting of some sort. Carlos will go, apologize properly on behalf of himself and the team, and hopefully the silent treatment—not to mention Cecil's role in his nightmares—will stop. If he can get a little information about whatever is going on in Radon Canyon while he is there, all the better.

Over the past week he has noticed that Cecil no longer refers to him by name on the air anymore. “One of the scientists called in to the station today,” he says instead, voice without inflection. Carlos' dreams have already started before he has a chance to question why that hurts as much as it does.

“Shit!” Cecil hisses, shoving his finger into his mouth. Damn, that hurt. He sucks on the skin for a moment before easing it out of his mouth and looking at the damage. There, along the crease of the first knuckle, is a thin red-violet slice into his skin just starting to ooze blood. He glares menacingly at the offending cardboard box full of printer paper sitting innocently on the break
room table. It does not give him the satisfaction of looking contrite. Giving his finger one more suck to try and ease the pain, he picks up the box and carries it to his office.

Refilling the office printers with paper is usually something he would leave for one of the interns to deal with, but this morning he finds himself without help. It is Dana's day off, and he sent Intern Stacey out to check on Intern Riley this morning. At least, he thinks it's Intern Riley. It definitely started with an 'R' anyway. Intern Might-Be-Riley did not show up to work yesterday, and while Cecil would normally just deal with whatever issues caused the unexplained absence when the intern comes in for their next shift if they come back at all, Stacey said Possibly-Riley owed her some money, and she was not about to let him skip out on twenty bucks. Cecil did not mention that he is pretty sure Intern Could-Be-Riley was about to become ex-Intern Probably-Riley, because he has already been warned twice about his attendance. When Cecil was an intern, he never missed a single day of work unless he was in the hospital, and usually his work at the radio station had been what put him there, so calling in was unnecessary. He has to admit, he has been pretty impressed with Stacey's performance so far as an intern. Though, if he is to be honest, she's still no Dana.

All of this leads to Cecil refilling his own printer paper, fetching his own coffee, and answering the station's main phone line, with his normal duties on top of everything else. Checking his watch, he figures he has maybe a half an hour before he must be at the school auditorium for the School Board meeting, something he refuses to be late for. He has just enough time to sort through the station mail for today.

The bell hanging on the lobby door jingles from down the hallway and Cecil groans, calling out, “I'll be right there!” Please, please, please, just let it be someone dropping off a package. He does not have time to listen to any more people's opinions about the sort of weather he has been playing lately. It is his show, he will play whatever he wants for the weather. So what if it has been nothing but mournful dirges and soul-wrenching instrumentals? Some people have no taste.

Grabbing his outgoing mail, he heads for the front lobby and starts talking just before he rounds the corner, voice falling into a welcoming version of his radio persona. “Sorry, we're a bit short staffed today! Welcome to Night Vale Community Radi—oh!”

Loitering in the front lobby is Carlos. Carlos the scientist. The scientist he has been avoiding. Successfully avoiding until now. So much for that plan. Carlos actually looks as surprised to see him as Cecil is to see Carlos. They stand there staring at each other for a few moments before Carlos speaks. “Hello, Cecil. I, uh, I'm sorry to bother you at work, but, d-do you have a moment? I really need to speak with you.”

Cecil can feel himself nodding, heedless of his plan to never put himself in the position to humiliate himself in front of perfect Carlos again. Instead, he says, “Sure! Let me just get this mail taken care of.” He somehow manages to get all the outgoing mail in the box for pickup, but when he grabs for the incoming mail he bobbles it in nervous hands, sending the letters scattering to the
“Oh, oh let me just, sorry,” he says, dropping to the ground and trying to gather it all as quickly as he can.

Across from the mess, Carlos' white lab coat brushes the ground as he kneels down and starts collecting letters. “Let me help,” he says, stacking them much more neatly in his hands than Cecil seems capable of at the moment. Where has all his composure gone? He usually does not fall apart like this!

“Sorry,” Cecil says again, standing and trying to straighten the envelopes in his hands. He ends up just dropping more of them, but Carlos quickly whisks them off the floor and places his neat stack on top of Cecil's own. Their hands collide and tangle as they try and get the stack in some semblance of order, which does nothing for his nerves. Thankfully, Carlos steps back and Cecil can take a breath. “Thank you.”

“Not a problem,” the scientist replies, adjusting the bag strap hanging from his shoulder and looking a little out of place. “If you're busy I can come back...”

“No, I—well, I am in a bit of a rush. I'm headed for the School Board meeting in just a few minutes. And after that, I'll have to get back here and get the show ready. I'll be cutting it close today.”

“Oh,” Carlos says, and Cecil thinks he might be picking up a bit of disappointment in his voice? “You're busy. I can come back some other time. Sorry to bother you.”

“No!” he blurts, then backtracks. “I mean, you're not a bother. I just have a really packed day.” He chuckles to himself, sorting through the mail as quickly as he can while talking. “There's never any interns around when you really need them. I've been all over the place already this morning, and I have to leave shortly. So unless you feel like accompanying me to a School Board meeting and trying to get an interview with the Glow Cloud, I'm really going to have to reschedule.”

“Okay. I'll drive.”

Cecil's eyes shoot up from the yellow envelope in his hand to Carlos' curious and interested face. A face which, now that he takes the time to look at it, is edged with fatigue. Still, what? “What?”

Carlos gives him a lopsided smile. “I said okay. As in, yes, I would like to go to the School Board meeting and try to get an interview with the Glow Cloud. Is it the same Glow Cloud as before? Not
that it matters; I would still want to try and interview it, or at least take some samples.” He pats at his sides, then in the pockets of his lab coat. “I always keep a spare test tube or two on me for just such an occasion. I'm not sure if it will be adequate in this situation, but it can't hurt to try. Well, I suppose it could hurt to try, actually. Since I have no evidence to suggest what kind of chemical composition sustains the Glow Cloud. It could consist of any number of harmful substances in new and interesting combinations. In fact, there is a distinct chance that it could hurt very badly, but I think it is a reasonable percentage of...oh, uh...that is, if you meant what you said. Ah, sorry, was that sarcasm?”

“You want to go with me?” Cecil asks tremulously. “That would be good! Great, even! Let me just get my things and we can head out, okay?” At Carlos' nod, Cecil bolts for his office, gripping the wooden desk hard for a moment to steady himself. He has gone from actively avoiding the man to eagerly accepting a few hours in his company, all because of that perfect smile. What is wrong with you, Cecil? Get a grip! It is not like this is a date or anything! This is work! This is not a date.

He gathers his things in his messenger bag and locks his office door before making a quick stop in the bathroom to feed Khoshekh, who rumbles at him quietly before devouring his food in large gulps. If Cecil takes a few moments to run his fingers through his hair and straighten his cornflower tie, maybe even checking that the underarms of his pale purple shirt smell fresh, no one needs to know but him and Khoshekh.

Back in the lobby, Cecil finds Carlos looking closely at the collection of framed photographs hanging over the visitor's seating area. It includes pictures of previous staff, special guests over the years, events around town, and even a few shots of Night Vale from the air. Carlos is looking at a black and white photo of a younger Cecil posing with Leonard Burton, the previous host of Welcome to Night Vale. “Ready?” Cecil asks, making Carlos jump a little.

“Ready when you are,” comes his reply. Cecil leads him out to the parking lot, and he tries to offer his own car instead, but Carlos insists. “You're allowing me to tag along, at least let me drive you.” Consenting, Cecil climbs into the passenger's seat of the little hybrid coupe.

The interior of Carlos' car is filled with debris. At first, Cecil assumes that it is trash, but glancing around he realizes that the only trash is the half-empty Arby's cup in the cup holder and a handful of wrapped mints and a half-melted Hershey's kiss tossed in one of the little dashboard pockets. Everything else seems to be of some other category entirely. There are sticky notes pressed all along the dashboard and on the edges of the sun visor, some with entire mathematical formulas, others with just a hastily scrawled handful of words and a series of question marks. All of the notes have the same quick, precise handwriting that he assumes is Carlos'. Notebooks are shoved in between a pile of boxes in the back seat, as well as leaning against the car's interior in the floorboard, and a few more in the pocket on Cecil's door itself. A metal cylinder-shaped object
with a series of dials on the side and a clear plastic tube sprouting from the top sits wedged between the back seat and the cushion at Carlos' back. Everywhere else, in every little nook and cranny in this ridiculously packed car, are rock samples. All sorts of different sizes, shapes, and colors, some that Cecil would think couldn't possibly be from Night Vale. They jitter and rattle as Carlos starts the car and they pull onto the road, the scent of settled dust heavy in air.

“So,” Cecil says once they are on the road and headed into town. “You said you needed to speak with me?”

“Yes, I did. I do.” He watches Carlos take a fortifying breath. “I wanted to apologize to you, Cecil, about what happened in the library and then after—”

“No! No, I'm the one who should apologize, Carlos! I said I was going to keep you all safe, and I couldn't—”

“But you did! You kept us as safe as you could! We should have never—”

“I should have never let you all go in there at all! I should have known better—”

“We were well aware of the dangers, Cecil. You told me repeatedly that it was too dangerous, but I kept pushing you, and—”

“You weren't pushy at all! I'm not that easily swayed, I'll have you know. I was—”

“The point is it wasn't your fault. I am the head scientist. I am the one in charge. The others are my responsibility—”

“Carlos! You can't possibly be blaming yourself for this! That's absurd, you can't—”

“Of course I blame myself! If you hadn't been so busy trying to find me, Gwen would have never —”

“You don't know that! That is hardly your fault! How can you—”
“I’m looking at the facts, Cecil. I should have made it clear from the beginning that the others’ safety took priority over my own—”

“You were the one that was in immediate danger! I couldn’t just leave you to be hunted like that! If I hadn’t shown up when I did, you would have ran out right in front of those two librarians! Then, not only would we have lost Gwen, but I would have lost you as well!”

“Cecil—”

“No, you can’t argue with me about this. I won’t hear it.”

“Cecil, you’re—”

“There was no way for either of us to know that Gwen would get separated from the group like that! It was just a fluke, an accident, the way of the library, eat or be eaten, survival of the fittest. There is no way you can place blame—”

“Cecil!”

The car comes to a sudden stop as Carlos reaches a four-way intersection, and the scientist turns and locks eyes with Cecil. It is quiet for a few moments, the only sounds the soft hum of the car and the duller hum of the transformer on the power line above their heads.

Carlos glances out the front window, his fingers tapping across the top steering wheel. “You’re right.”

“I am?” Cecil asks, confused. He might have lost track of his argument somewhere in there. What exactly is he right about?

“Yes.” Carlos looks back at him, and his voice is nothing but sincerity. “There is no way you can place blame. On either of us. It was...just an accident.”
Cecil nods, slowly. It was just something that happened, and you had to move on. Just an accident, like all the others that have gone into the library over the years and not come out. He never blamed himself for those deaths, even when he lost friends from school. Why was he doing it now?

That was an easy question to answer. It all had to do with the man sitting before him now.

He has not been forgiven, because there is nothing to forgive. It is oddly cathartic, and he feels lighter than he has all week. “Just an accident,” he repeats, watching the same burden fade from Carlos’ eyes at the words.

Carlos glances in his rear-view mirror and sees a Sheriff’s Secret Police officer's car behind him, so he wisely begins to drive again. Once he is certain that he will not be pulled over—at least not for something at the intersection—he addresses Cecil again. “I also want to apologize on behalf of everyone else for Matt's behavior after we got back.”

“Please, Carlos,” he says, waving his hand dismissively. “It isn't your fault. It was a very tense situation, and he was justifiably upset.”

“Still,” he replies, glancing at Cecil. “He said some pretty rude things. I wasn't even awake for part of it, but I can guess it wasn't good.”

Cecil can feel his jaw tighten at the memory. The scientists do not have the experience he has with waking up and reorienting yourself after a trip to the library, so while it took several minutes for Carlos' eyes and balance to adjust, Cecil had been on his feet in an instant. Unfortunately, he was swept back off his feet right after, Matt grabbing him by the ghillie suit collar and holding him off the ground. They had apparently been gone just long enough for Abbey to relay to the rest of them that Gwen was missing and possibly in danger. Seeing Carlos and Cecil return without the other scientist had sent Matt into an irrational frenzy.

Even now, Cecil cannot completely recall the exact words that were exchanged. With the adrenaline flooding his system and the lingering disorientation from reappearing in the lab, most of it is still very much a blur. What he can remember with complete clarity, other than the rancid smell of Tangerine Death that came with being that close to the other man, was Matt baring his teeth and snarling in his face, “You son of a bitch, your fairy ass got her killed! You saved him and not her?! You're ruining everything!”

It is obvious that no one told Carlos exactly what Matt had hissed in his face, and for that he is thankful. Cecil really didn't want to get into it with Carlos, though, so he was willing to put it all behind them and not bring it up. After all, Carlos has to actually work with the man—Cecil
doesn't.

“Don't worry about it,” Cecil says instead. “He was upset. People say a lot of things they don't necessarily mean when they're upset. After all, is it not human nature to let our emotions control us when confronted with a truth the mind is not ready to grasp?”

“I guess,” Carlos replies. “But I don't want you to think you aren't welcome at the labs. I was—everyone was worried that you might be upset.”

Cecil shakes his head. “I'm made of sterner stuff.”

Carlos slows at a crosswalk so a mother and her seven identical children can pass, each connected to the other via a tether of twine. The traffic is a bit congested and it takes longer than normal to pull into the parking lot of the Night Vale High School. The lot is filling fast with vehicles, and after finding a spot Cecil quickly herds Carlos inside to the auditorium and an unobtrusive seat on the side.

“Do you often go to School Board meetings?” Carlos asks.

Cecil nods. “All of them, if I can help it. So many of my listeners have children in school, it would seem amiss not to keep them informed. Some people simply can't take time off work or physically leave their homes to attend. It is my duty as a community radio host to let them know what they missed.”

“So, it's not because you have kids of your own then?”

That makes Cecil give Carlos a shocked look before cracking a grin. “Oh! No, not at all. No kids for me. Bit of a bachelor in that department. Do you have...?”

Carlos shakes his own head. “No. Not really in the cards for me, I think.”

Well that certainly is a loaded statement. Cecil wonders what exactly Carlos means by that. They are quiet as a rather large woman squeezes past them on their row and sits next to Carlos. She is wearing a horrendous hot pink blouse and dress jacket combination with sequins in the front, and an obnoxiously large hat with pheasant feathers on top. Cecil can't help but notice that Carlos moves a little closer to him when they settle, or the faint scent of lavender coming from him.
“So how long do these meetings usually last?” Carlos asks, pulling a notebook out of his satchel. Cecil is pleased to see that he has taken to using the wax writing method that he showed the scientist a while back.

“Cecil!” A waif of a woman in a plaid business suit calls him from across the aisle, and Cecil smiles.

“Hi Elda! Good to see you on your feet again,” Cecil says, waving at the blonde. Elda waves back with a little smile, gesturing that they should talk after before turning and speaking to a nondescript man in a black suit that sits down next to her. To Carlos, Cecil says, “Sorry, I haven't seen Elda in months. Her whole family came down with a bad case of trypophobia. They were—”

“Wait. Trypophobia? Fear of holes?” Carlos shakes his head. “How can the whole family ‘come down’ with a phobia? A phobia isn't something you can just catch like a virus or bacterium, it is something that develops from an aversive stimulus, usually an environmental factor.”

“Well, either way, they were quarantined to their home until it passed and had to use a soap gel instead of their showers for the duration. I even heard they had to throw away their colanders.” He hums in dismay. “Anyway, the meetings usually last around two hours, if we're lucky. If things get heated, they can debate a topic well into the evening. They rarely go over a day, though.” He glances at Carlos. “You don't have to stay the whole time, if you need to go.”

“I'm just surprised. And, I haven't really eaten much today. Do they really have that much to discuss?”

“Theyir children are important to them,” he replies. “And don't worry, there's a break at the one hour mark for refreshments. I brought cookies.”

Carlos looks around, stricken. “I didn't bring anything. I didn't know—”

“It's okay, no one will say anything.” That's when Cecil sets eyes on a face he could do without seeing for both the foreseeable and non-foreseeable future. He really can't help the low growl he emits. Unfortunately, with as close as they are, Carlos hears it.

“What's wrong?”
Eyes narrowing, Cecil grits out, “Steve Carlsberg.” The last syllable stretches into a rumbling thunder of irritation. At Carlos’ puzzled look, he tries to surreptitiously point him out. The man in question has moved to the seating opposite of theirs in the auditorium, sitting prominently on the front row. He is chatting with one of the mayor’s aides, though the woman does not look inclined to chat back. In his hands he holds his cell phone, flipped on its side with the sliding keyboard at the ready, much to Cecil’s dismay. “I cannot believe they let him be the meeting secretary again. His minutes are always so inaccurate. You’d think the man has never had a grammar class in his life.”

“That guy with the flipped up polo collar?” Carlos asks. Cecil looks back and indeed, the collar of Steve’s royal blue polo shirt is popped up. “Oh, he sent me his card a while back. Asked me to meet with him. I completely forgot about it after...well, I must have gotten busy.”

Cecil turns on Carlos, incredulous. “He sent you his card? Carlos, you're not going to call him, are you?”

“I don't even know what he wants,” Carlos replies.

“Oh, I know what he wants,” Cecil says with the confidence of a man who has dealt with something a few too many times. “He's going to try and warn you about everything he thinks is wrong with our lovely town, and then urge you to get out while you can.”

“Warn me about what?”

“Oh, anything and everything. You see, Steve Carlsberg is a bit of a conspiracy theorist. He has some very unorthodox opinions about the spying activities of the Sheriff's Secret Police, the City Council, the vague-yet-menacing government agencies that control the town, the list goes on,” Cecil says, waving his hand like it is of no importance.

Carlos looks around then leans in a touch closer and murmurs, “But, they are spying, aren't they?”

“Well, of course they are!” Honestly, Carlos asks some pretty obvious questions for a scientist. “But he seems to think it's for some nefarious plot! And, sure, there are a few bad eggs among them, I'm sure. I mean, every workplace has a few people you just can't stand. But most of them are trying to do what's best for us! They're just doing their jobs.”

His companion opens his mouth then closes it, opening it again after some thought. “I did catch
that you didn't really care much for him,” he says instead.

Cecil grumbles, “He's such a jerk, Carlos. I wouldn't even bother talking to him, if I were you. He is nothing but a nuisance.” When they both glance back at Steve, Cecil tenses. Steve is staring right at them. “Oh no, he saw us! Don't make eye contact!” They each look different directions for a moment before turning their attention to the cracked ceiling tiles overhead as if they were the most interesting things in the room.

After a moment, Carlos says, “Are we both looking at the ceiling?”

“Hopefully he'll think we're looking at a spectral beast only we can see,” he replies before sighing. “Great, now he's going to try and talk to us at break. He'll probably try to push whatever poor attempt at refreshments he made on us. I swear, last time—”

He stops speaking when there is a sudden hush of noise in the room, and he looks down to see the side doors next to the stage open and the School Board members file in. The School Board for Night Vale consists of the superintendent Nick Ford and six other board members. They all appear to be walking in synch, almost marching into the auditorium, standing erect and eyes obviously glazed over, even from this distance. Bringing up the rear and flowing into the room as only a creeping, noxious fog can is the Glow Cloud, rolling through the door frame then reforming into a cloud shape to hover six feet off the ground. It follows the others up the stairs and maintains its altitude over its designated chair.

“Cumulus congestus, moving independently of any air stream and not reliant on atmospheric temperatures. Amazing,” Carlos murmurs beside him, fumbling with his stick of wax. A glance to the side shows that the scientist is trying to write notes without taking his eyes off the cloud, which is currently alternating shades of pastel green and limoncello yellow, followed by a vibrant flash of safety cone orange. It then drops a fat and lifeless possum onto the floor in front of it’s chair.

Superintendent Ford stands behind the center podium, mouth fallen open and hands limp at his sides, and yells, “All hail the mighty Glow Cloud! All hail the glorious Glow Cloud! Bow before your malicious master! All hail the mighty Glow Cloud!” He then seems to trail off into a weak whine, his head drops forward, and when it raises again his eyes are no longer vacant. The School Board members beside him on the dais shake themselves as well, as if coming out of a long sleep, stretching their arms over their heads and yawning sleepily. The superintendent coughs a few times to clear a suddenly raw throat, then says, “Thank you all for coming to this meeting of the Night Vale School Board. Let us all come to order, we have a lot on the agenda for today.”

The first half of the meeting goes about as smooth as the first half of School Board meetings usually go. The good news is usually covered during the first half, after all. Things like scholarly awards, successes of the previous meeting, areas where the school has saved money. After the
initial introductions of the Glow Cloud as the newest member of the board, there is minimal fuss—mostly in part to the fact that most naysayers are quickly enthralled by the Glow Cloud, and when they return to their senses they are far more complacent.

Cecil dutifully takes notes with his own stick of wax on his notepad, marking down less of what is specifically said and more of the general subjects along with how people react. He does find his attention diverted, though. Beside him, Carlos is a flurry of activity. It seems for every one word that Cecil writes, Carlos jots down four more while simultaneously clipping a voice recorder onto the lapel of his lab coat, then pulling a small gray metal box from his pocket that Cecil recognizes as the Geiger counter from their initial visit. It is turned on before he has a chance to stop the motion, but much to Cecil’s relief it does not start the erratic beeping it did at the radio station. Instead, a small domed light on the top flickers in a steady beat. Carlos must have modified it since then to have a silent mode. He really is so clever. The unobtrusive light is nothing that would catch the attention of the rest of the crowd.

Well, most of the crowd, anyway. The woman on Carlos’ other side looks quite perturbed, and scoots a scant few inches further away from him. Cecil does not know what her problem is; Carlos is not the one distracting everyone with hideous fashion sense.

The first hour comes to a close with Cecil having nothing more interesting written than the initial reactions to the Glow Cloud’s appointment as a Board member. Meanwhile, Carlos seems to have marked down several pages of invisible notes, and for a good portion of the duration he was whispering into the recording device. He must have a lot of practice speaking quietly when observing scientific phenomenon, because Cecil can hardly hear him despite his good ears. Superintendent Ford calls for a break and the auditorium fills with the noise of a crowd shuffling for the lobby. Cecil leads Carlos out a side door to one of the hallways flanking the auditorium and they manage to miss the surge of people at the main entrance. Cecil places his Tupperware container of no-bake oatmeal cookies on the dessert table and the two men grab plastic plates and a handful of finger foods each.

“Here, hold this and I'll get us some drinks,” Cecil says, handing off his plate to Carlos. “What do you want?”

Carlos is eying the drink table warily. “What is that?” he asks, motioning toward a tall clear plastic drink stand that has a translucent green liquid inside and a vent on top to let out the smoke.

“Limeade, I think. Looks like they’ve been playing with the recipe again.”

“I'll just have something canned, thanks,” Carlos says, moving out of the way of the people trying to get at the beverages. Cecil grabs two cans of soda, saying hello to a few people as he shoulders his way through the crowd and finds Carlos leaning alone against a brick wall, looking a bit
overwhelmed by so many strangers. Opening both cans before trading one for a plate, they begin to eat. Most everything is what they would expect from refreshments at a School Board meeting—easy to eat and mediocre in taste. Cecil does notice that Carlos has two of his oatmeal cookies on his plate, and feels a little giddy at the thought.

Then there is an oddly loud crunch noise and Carlos’ face squints up in disgust. “¡Qué asco!” he exclaims, tongue working to coat his mouth before downing the rest of his drink in a series of gulps.

“What is it?” Cecil asks, looking concerned. He did not think anything on the table would be deadly to humans, but he could have missed something.

“That,” he replies, nodding at a partially eaten scone on his plate, tone of voice almost identical to Cecil’s the one time Big Rico attempted hazelnut and trout pizza. “It’s like eating corrugated cardboard lined with sandpaper.”

Cecil picks up the one on his plate and takes a tentative bite before spitting it back out again. “Ugh! That is awful!” He chucks his plate in a nearby trashcan after shoving one of his own cookies in his mouth. “Why would anyone make something so horribly dry and bland? I don't know who could possibly think that was an acceptable...oh.” He glances around and sure enough, Steve Carlsberg is hovering by the dessert table, intoning to each passer-by to try his delicious scones. “Steve Carlsberg.”

“I don't understand how he could have made them so poorly,” Carlos is saying at his elbow. Turning, Cecil is surprised to see him holding the bitten scone up to the light, looking at it from all sides. “After all, the ingredient listing for any simple scone recipe would only contain seven to nine ingredients, taking into account individual tastes and regional variations. Of those ingredients, at least two or three would be liquid agents used to both bind the dry ingredients as well as counteract the possibility of dryness inherent with most scones. None of these possible wet ingredients, specifically butter, milk, eggs, and in some recipes sour cream, would be hard to locate in Night Vale, and I see no indication that these were overcooked in any way, so I can only assume he purposefully made his scones this dry.” The scientist looks at Cecil and seems to realize he is contemplating a desert pastry and his gaze darts elsewhere. “As for why he would ruin a perfectly good scone recipe, I have no idea.”

“You sound like you know an awful lot about scones. Do you bake?” Cecil asks.

Great gods above and below, is that a blush? “Sometimes,” is all Carlos says, walking off to dispose of his own plate. By the time he returns, another one of Cecil’s cookies in hand, the light, delicate flush that had stained his cheeks is gone, and he’s talking on his cellphone. “—don't understand, you're saying the billboard is actually through the dog? With the pole? Then how is
it...yeah, but even if it could survive a pole of that diameter through the abdomen, the dog shouldn't have enough strength for it to hold up a roughly two hundred pound pole and a five hundred pound billboard sign, assuming it isn't digital...” He puts his hand over the receiver and whispers, “Sorry, I'll be right off.”

Cecil waves him off, but is curious. He listens as Carlos continues, “Wait, what? You have it at the lab? How did you...oh. Yeah, that's pretty clever, actually. It didn't cause any damage, did it? Because we still need to fix...no...no, tell Billy he absolutely cannot keep it. It's probably someone's pet, and we aren't keeping a dog with a billboard sign through it in the back lot...what does it say?” Carlos rolls his eyes at whatever is said on the other end of the line, a hand coming up to rub at his graying temples. “Of course it does. Why am I not surprised?”

In the end he hangs up after strict instructions to not operate on the animal unless it is in medical distress, and that Billy is not allowed to name it. “Sorry, I’ve been waiting on some very important mail and wanted to see if it had come. Becky says there have been all these billboard signs popping up in the oddest of places,” he says, pocketing his phone.

“What did the sign say?” Cecil asks. “The one through the dog?”

“Harlot,” he replies. “And it has a picture of a turkey sandwich on it.”

“A turkey sandwich?”

“Don't ask me, and I don't think the dog knows either. Hey, how much more time do we have? I'd like to try and get close to the Glow Cloud before the second half starts.”

“We have time. Come on, I want to try and get a quote from the superintendent while we're at it.” They make their way to the far end of the lobby where Superintendent Ford is standing slack-jawed, the Glow Cloud dropping gerbils and guinea pigs in an ever-increasing pile on the floor below. Carlos has pulled on a pair of latex gloves, his Geiger meter in one hand and a test tube in the other, and Cecil watches as he makes for the Glow Cloud before turning his own attention to the superintendent.

“Superintendent Ford, would you like to give a statement to the Night Vale community regarding the appointment of your newest School Board member, the Glow Cloud?” Cecil asks, wax at the ready.

The man's eyes, devoid of independent thought, turn to Cecil and he bellows out, “All hail! Kneel
for the Glow Cloud! Sacrifice! Pestilence! Sores! All hail the Glow Cloud!” He then turns in unison with the other board members and begins to file back into the auditorium, signaling the end of the break.

Looking around, Cecil catches sight of Carlos, people moving around him to go back inside. “Carlos, we need to get back to our seats,” Cecil says, but gets no response. He walks around the man and sighs. His eyes are clouded over slightly, staring blankly at where the Glow Cloud was floating, now just an empty space with a foot-high pile of dead rodents beneath. “Carlos. Carlos!” He waves his hand in front of his face. They're going to lose their seats at this rate. Reaching up, he gives the man a shake on the shoulder. “Carlos!”

That jars the man loose, shouting, “All hail!” before jumping and twirling around, looking around at the emptying lobby before his eyes focus on Cecil's face. “Cecil?” he asks. Oh, that confused little furrow between his eyebrows is just too adorable. Cecil opens his mouth to speak but Carlos' face shifts to one of glee first, his expression lighting up like he just found out he won the lottery and will not be ceremonially disemboweled and eaten by the wolves at the Night Vale Petting Zoo and Makeshift Carnival. “Cecil! The Glow Cloud spoke to me! In my mind! Or, I think it was my mind. Some form of telepathy, at least. It was amazing! Incredibly frightening and bound to alter my world view, but still amazing!”

“What did it say?” Cecil asks.

“Something about how if I ever have any concerns about the state of the Night Vale school system to not be afraid to speak up. And also, a good deal about hailing the Glow Cloud as my unequivocal overlord and to pray for mercy, as it would only bring woe and despair to do otherwise.” Carlos holds up a test tube stoppered at the end with a cork, a flashing colored gas swirling inside. “It let me take a sample! It said all I had to do was ask. The Glow Cloud is actually very polite, once you take the time to talk to it.”

“Wow,” Cecil says, looking into the tube. It turns a beautiful shade of rose pink before settling in a soft gold. “Come on, we're going to lose our seats.” The two of them somehow manage to find their original seats unoccupied. He almost chokes on the ghost sensation of dried out scone when they file into the row, however. The woman with the large hat must have decided to sit elsewhere, as her seat has been filled with none other than, “Steve Carlsberg.”

“Cecil,” Steve intones, lips twisting smugly. “So good to see you here. I hope you tried the scones; I made them myself. And you must be the scientist. Carlos is it?”

He offers his hand and Carlos takes it reluctantly. “Yes. Carlos Abaroa. Nice to meet you,” he says politely, shaking twice before taking his seat. Cecil slides in next to him and, much to his horror, watches Steve as he leans over well into Carlos' personal space to have a few words.
"I hope you don't mind, but I asked Mrs. deReyna to switch seats with me. I've tried to get in contact with you several times over the past month or so, but we seem to keep missing each other."

Carlos' body leans just a touch further toward Cecil's seat as he says, "Oh, yes, I do apologize about that, Mr. Carlsberg—"

"Please, call me Steve."

"...Steve. I am sorry about not getting back to you. Things have been very hectic around the lab these past few weeks. It must have, uh, slipped my mind."

"That's right, I heard about that. Lost one of your co-workers in the library, huh? You'd think a scientist would have been in a library before. She must not have been very good if she couldn't survive a trip to the library. You might want to think about getting yourself some better trained scientists, Carlos. If you plan on staying, that is. Which I don't recommend. This town is—ah, hold that thought. The meeting is starting."

Steve turns his attention to the front of the auditorium, pulling out his phone to take minutes, and Cecil can feel his blood boil in his veins. Somewhere about halfway through Steve's little chat, around the time Steve referred to Gwen as a not-very-good scientist, Carlos' back went rigid. One of his hands clenched hard on the armrest between their seats while the other crumpled the loose papers sticking out of his notebook. Now, Carlos turns his face forward, eyes focusing on some point in the middle distance as far as Cecil can tell. He is a bit hard to read when looking at him in profile. Cecil would think he was back in the Glow Cloud's thrall if not for the obvious tension around his eyes and mouth.

"Carlos," Cecil whispers, but the man gives a short shake of his head, and the meeting starts. It is incredibly difficult to pay attention after that, as the man beside him does not lose one iota of tension. Neither of them make a mark on their notes, and Carlos does not pull the Geiger counter from out of his pocket.

After twenty minutes of pure torture, superintendent Ford switches to a new subject. "As you all are aware, the school system has been working in conjunction with the Night Vale Public Library to coordinate after-school programs geared toward improving students' reading levels before summer. I'd like to open the floor to Sanjay Singh, one of our English teachers and the school's representative in negotiations with the library staff." Singh, a hardened man wearing a safari hat and an apple pin on his tie, stands and moves toward the stage.
In the small hum of conversation that follows, Carlos stands and whispers, “Excuse me,” shuffling past Cecil and the handful of people beyond, pushing out to the aisle and taking off at a brisk pace toward the exit. Cecil hastily follows, whispering his apologies as he goes. The doors have already swung shut behind Carlos by the time Cecil makes it into the walkway, people staring at him strangely. After all, Cecil never misses a School Board meeting, and would only leave in the middle of one if there was very important news happening.

Unfortunately, 'Steve Carlsberg is still a dick,' is not exactly newsworthy. Though he will be damn sure to point out something on air, because he really is a dick.

The lobby is empty, and Cecil breaks out into a jog to get to the parking lot, just in time to see Carlos fumbling with the keys to his coupe. “Hey!” Cecil calls, and Carlos looks up, startled. The broadcaster is glad to see that he stops trying to flee and instead throws his notebook onto the hood of the car, his lump of wax skittering over the shiny metal. Cecil slows to a walk a few yards from the car. “Going somewhere?”

Carlos looks everywhere except at Cecil, running a shaky hand through his perfect, if slightly short, hair. “I-I'm sorry,” he stutters, voice thready. “I j-just had to get out of there. I didn't mean to make you think I was going to-to leave you here. I'm sorry.”

“It's alright. Steve makes pretty much everyone want to flee in fear and disgust,” he says, a wry smile on his face when Carlos glances at him. The scientist can't help but crack a small smile of his own.

“He really is...something, isn't he.”

“No need to be gentle about it with me,” Cecil assures.

Carlos sighs and pulls the recorder from his lapel, turning off the device. “Don't let me keep you. I can sit out here and go over my notes until you're done. You'll still have a ride back to the station.”

Cecil looks down at his notes thoughtfully, then shoves them in his satchel. “No, I'm done here. Really, nothing will be more interesting or important than the Glow Cloud's appointment to the School Board. It is a huge step in Night Vale's quest for diversity and the acceptance of all manner of life forms, after all. Anything else of importance will be covered in Steve's horrible meeting minutes.”
“They can't be as bad as those scones,” Carlos says, and they share a laugh. Those really were horrible scones. He manages to unlock the doors on the first try this time and they settle inside, the fairly warm afternoon air causing the automatic air conditioning to kick on sending little dust motes flying around the interior of the car. Out on the road, they slip into a comfortable silence for most of the ride. It is not until they turn onto the road for the radio station that Carlos asks, “Cecil, do you know anything about the lights that were flashing out over Radon Canyon last night?”

“Flashing lights? What kind of lights? Orbs? Rays? You'll have to be more specific.”

“They were bright, brief flickers of light, with random colors and random timing. No flash lasted longer than one point two five seconds. I can't tell you if there was any light beyond my visual spectrum, but it is possible. I didn't have any imaging equipment with me at the time to measure for it. And they were accompanied by unintelligible noises. It might be some form of coded communication or signal-jamming technique, but honestly, some of it sounded oddly familiar. I couldn't figure out from where, though.” This brings a confused frown to Carlos' face.

“Flashing lights in the sky isn't all that uncommon around here. Most people have started to just tune it out.”

“You mean no one else called in to say anything?”

“It seems like the sort of thing someone would have reported.” Cecil tries to think back over his incoming reports, but comes up empty. “I can't say that I know anything about them.”

“You can't say because you don't know, or you can't say because you just can't say?” Carlos asks.

“In this case, the first one,” he replies, pleased. “You're starting to pick up on some things, I see.”

“I'm not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing,” Carlos says, pulling one of his sticky notes from the sun visor and crumpling it in his hand seemingly out of nowhere. He chuckles it down into the floorboard. “As a human being, it is important to adjust one's behaviors to survive, and ideally thrive, in any environment. However, as a scientist, it is important to keep myself distant from the subject I am studying. It keeps your data from becoming skewed due to bias. Staying removed from the subject can be difficult when your subject is everything around you.” He looks over at Cecil for a moment before his eyes go back to the road. “Sometimes the duties of being a scientist directly conflict with the needs of being human.”
Cecil ponders that for a moment. “You make it sound like you've made your entire life here in Night Vale into one big experiment.”

“No! Well, not...not really?” Carlos shrugs. “Not intentionally, and certainly not formally. But it isn't an awful idea, I suppose.”

“That's ridiculous. There has to be more to your life than work. Interests, hobbies...things you do on your time off, maybe?” Cecil asks, hoping to lead the conversation to weekend plans.

Carlos scoffs at that and avoids the question. “Is there for you? Every time I see you, you're either heading to or from work. You seem just as dedicated to your job as I am.”

“I still have things I do in my time off,” he insists. He is not about to admit that none come to mind at the moment. The car pulls into the station parking lot and Cecil tries desperately to think of something else. Inspiration! “You could stay! I mean, stay, and be interviewed about the lights. You could describe them on air! Listeners would be more likely to call in if they could hear it from you directly. And it has been so long since we've had a special guest—”

“Not a chance,” Carlos says. “I don't—no. I told you, I don't want to be on air. But, if you could ask anyone to call in if they have any information, I would really appreciate it. There could be some very sinister forces at work here, but I won't know unless I have more data.”

“Sure! Of course. I'll slot it in right after the piece about the lottery.”

“Lottery?”

Cecil unbuckles his seat belt and gathers his things. “The yearly lottery. Oh, you haven't been here for that before. Well, in case you don't catch it later: the City Council holds a lottery every year. If you pull a blank white paper, you win!”

Carlos glances at the pad of sticky notes in his center console, and asks, “What, uh...what do you win?”

“A white piece of paper means you get to continue on your merry path of existence to whatever fate is in store for you. Now, if you get a purple piece of paper, you lose, and are promptly disemboweled in a dark and grisly ceremony. Your body is then used to feed the wolves at the
Night Vale Petting Zoo and Makeshift Carnival.” At Carlos' horrified look, Cecil continues, “I'll be going over some tips on how to play the lottery effectively tonight on the show. Actually, I'm not sure you have to participate at all, being an outsider. You might want to check with your Sheriff's Secret Police officer. Better safe than sorry, after all.”

“D-do you play every year?”

Cecil climbs out of the car and shuts the door, leaning in through the now rolled-down passenger's side window. “It's mandatory, but I think I've gotten pretty good at sensing the auras of colors. Don't worry about me.”

“But I do,” Carlos blurts, which brings Cecil up short.

He...he worries about him? About Cecil? “You do?”

Carlos turns in his seat, one arm slung across the back of the one Cecil just vacated. He looks at Cecil earnestly. “Yes, Cecil. I'm scared for you. I'm scared for all of the citizens here in this strange town.”

Cecil feels his mouth fall open. To think that a man like Carlos, who is so smart, so knowledgeable about so many things, would worry about someone like him! That means that Carlos thinks about him, at least from time to time! And the rest of the town as well, of course, but...Carlos isn't talking to the rest of the town. He's talking to Cecil Palmer!

The bell on the station door jangles irritatingly behind him as Intern Stacey flings the door open and hurries out, brimming with excitement. “Cecil, sir, we need you in here. We're getting reports that the City Council tried to use the School Board meeting as a trap to catch the angels! The, uh, angels that don't exist, I mean.”

“What?!” Cecil exclaims, his previous thoughts completely derailed. “I was just there! They didn't say anything about angels!”

“Yeah, it sounds like the School Board was going to make a decision about whether or not pleas to angels during football games constitutes game tampering, and the Council saw its chance.”

“Did they catch any?” Cecil asks, fumbling for his notes from in his satchel and flipping through
the pages. No, not one word about angels anywhere in the entire first half of the meeting. Drat!

“No, they used their awesome angel powers to escape! Uh, allegedly. I've got a ton of people calling in about it, but I don't know if you can get through all these notes before showtime!”

Cecil turns back to the car. “Breaking news! I'm sorry, I have to—”

“It's okay. Thanks for letting me tag along. Sorry again for taking you away from the story.” Carlos says, He waves off Cecil's attempts to talk. “Go on! You're needed.” Cecil waves for just a moment before darting into the station, Carlos' coupe already pulling away.
Hi! After more than a year, I am so happy to be able to bring this unexpected hiatus to an end.

For those who do not follow me on tumblr, shortly after Chapter 12 was written I was hospitalized for two weeks. I won't go into details here, as I've covered most in previous tumblr posts. Regardless, I was in the hospital on heavy medication because of a condition that was apparently life-threatening, but no one felt the need to tell me that at the time. (Bastards.)

Backstory time--both sides of my family have an extensive history of Alzheimer's and dementia. I watched my mother's parents deteriorate first-hand, sometimes things leaving them slowly then suddenly skipping ahead as whole reams of information just disappeared. Keeping control of my mind has always been important to me, and memory loss a real fear.

I was on morphine for eight days, near-constantly for the first five. Everything I remember from then is snippets of time and staring at the clock, feeling like time wasn't real. I know, I am my own Carlos at this point. Joy of joys. (Can you feel my sarcasm? It was in fact NOT a joy of joys.)

Fast forward to coming home; I had a lot of recovery to do, and at first writing seemed far away. But eventually I had the strength to feel up to pumping out this chapter. I had five pages written from before I went to the emergency room, so at least I had a jumpstart! But re-reading those five pages was like reading someone else's words. And it was the end of the scene. I couldn't remember what came after that. I had a few bullet points that were supposed to be reminders of what I had in my mind but the information was just gone.

I thought going back through some of the previous chapters would jump-start things. After all, I had been writing constantly for weeks, maybe I just needed a reminder. But things were different. It wasn't just the next scene, either. Large chunks of the story I just could not remember anymore.

Rest assured, a bulk of the story is written down much more thoroughly. I haven't lost the important parts that come later--some of which is actually already written, because I'm a weirdo that wrote the story out of order like Quentin Tarrentino, but I'm not cruel enough to present the chapters out of order. You're welcome.

And it wasn't just the story I had trouble remembering, so obviously, I was spooked. This is the thing I was more worried about than anything else when I went under for surgery. I tried very hard to remember where I was going, then to just write something new, but it all seemed like shit. As much as I wanted to give you anything at all, I also didn't want to give you something less than I was capable of, than what I expected of myself.

The more time passed the more I felt guilty and inadequate about that chapter, because this isn't how things were supposed to be. I felt I had let you down, and I was letting myself down. I had always promised myself that I wouldn't let the story feel like an
obligation, but now I felt like it was some impossible thing.

Throughout it all, I never once thought about NOT finishing the story. People told me I could. That it wouldn't matter. But it did matter, to me! A great deal! I could have lost every reader and just writing to the empty internet, I still had to finish. Because I have a story that I want to tell and I'm going to tell it!

Which brings me to two days ago. I had managed to write another four pages out over the last YEAR, more if you count what I deleted in anger. I'll never know what changed, but I opened the file and the words flowed and the thing that keeping me stalled for so long was written in less than an hour. Yesterday I wrote sixteen pages in one day. And I have never been more happy and more relieved to send a chapter off to the beta reader.

To those of you who stuck with me all this time, I want to thank you with every fiber of my being. Every time I saw my follower count on tumblr drop, I was reminded of my ill-fated story, but that sweet handful of you that sent me encouraging words every now and then are precious and wonderful and I love you to pieces. And a special thank you to Hubris_And_Crafts (arachnecurse) for keeping me in a writing state of mind, caariosamu for reminding me to push through and create, and lepetitselkie (carryonmywaywardjotun) for being the best friend I could ask for, for all the inspiration when I needed it, the distractions when I was too far down to be creative, and the encouragement to keep my promises.

To those of you who bailed along the way, it's okay! I understand. For all accounts everything seemed abandoned, so I don't blame you. Hopefully you come back and join us sometime.

And to those of you new to the story, to those of you who are clicking on this link for the first time--welcome to my world. Strap in. This ride is a long way from over.

Cecil finds himself driving much faster down the gravel and dirt road to Old Woman Josie's house than the last time he made the journey. He is struggling to keep his car just barely under forty-nine in a forty-five, the acceptable speed for speeding without getting a ticket on a dead-end road, according to the Night Vale Division of Motor Vehicles. If he sneaks over the edge to fifty, the cloud of dense red and brown dirt he is kicking up under his tires is apparently thick enough to obscure whatever sensors the Sheriff's Secret Police use to monitor traffic violators, because he does not see the tell-tale blue and red lights in his rear-view mirror.

The first thing he realizes when her house is visible is that all the curtains in the windows are drawn. The second thing he realizes is that it is a good thing they are, because otherwise her house would be shining like a beacon in the night, more-so than it usually does as the only light source this far from town. Clear radiant light pours through the weave of her cotton curtains and shoots out the edges where they do not quite meet the window frame. The very ground around her home seems to be aglow with the light coming from the house.

His car skids to a stop on the uneven drive, and he's out of the car before he thinks to let the dust
settle. The particles billow around him, filling his lungs and coating his clothes and hair with a fine layer of earth. Eyes watering, Cecil struggles not to cough.

He strides across the front lawn, stumbling over a wrought iron crocodile lawn ornament with a pot of begonias growing inside, overturning the whole thing and spilling potting soil on the ground. Any other day he would stop, right the plants, apologize profusely to the older woman for his clumsiness. But not tonight. There is no time to worry about that now. He has to see. He has to know.

The sound of his knock would seem oddly loud to him if he wasn't breathing so heavily, but the rush of his own blood pumping through his veins fills his ears and muffles everything else. He did rush straight from the station after his broadcast, after all.

There is the sound of people moving beyond the wooden door, clearly more than one, and then the light streaming from the windows dims considerably, closer to the glow one might see from a single table lamp. The change is abrupt enough that he has to blink a few times to clear the black and red spots from his eyes. The sound of the slow shuffling of an elderly woman's footsteps coming toward the door is next. When the cracked wood opens, Josie has the audacity to feign a sleepy blink.

“Cecil? What are you doing here so late?” She asks, affecting a yawn.

He looks at her seriously. “Where are they?” he asks, but it comes out more like a demand.

She tilts her head innocently. “Where are who, dear?”

Cecil cannot help but narrow his eyes at her. “Your non-existent house guests,” he specifies. “The ones that aren't real. The ones that escaped from their cages at the School Board meeting in a blaze of Heavenly light!”

She gives him a significant look in return. “I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about. But since you're here, you may as well come in for a cup of tea. You want black or green?” Josie holds the door open so he can enter her home.

Walking in the tiny front hall, Cecil says earnestly, “Josie, please. I need to know what's going on. It was one thing when you were calling in with stories about celestial beings changing your porch lights, it's entirely another to think you're involved with some sort of...I don't even know what!
Something that has gotten the attention of the City Council and the Sheriff's Secret Police, and those are two groups whose radar you do not want to be on, I can assure you!"

As he talks, Josie pays his rants no mind. Instead, she shuts the door tightly and locks all seven different locks along the wooden door's edge, including the one shaped like a hendecagram, and the dead-bolt. Cecil always thought she had an overabundance of locks on her doors—after all, the Sheriff's Secret Police need to have easy access to their homes, and it seems awfully rude to make them come in through the window. Though, now that he thinks about it, Josie has always had locks on her windows as well. Some people just prefer the illusion of security, he supposes.

Once the door is shut tight, Josie shuffles around the corner into the living room. Cecil makes to follow. “I'm not trying to scare you, Josie, but I don't think you understand. This is serious business. Whatever you're up to, whoever you're hiding, it can't...be...”

Cecil grinds to a halt, mouth falling open and staring in awe at the strange and radiant figures gathered anxiously in the living room.

“Right you are. This is serious business,” Josie says. She smiles, amused, as Cecil's car keys slip from his lax fingers and fall to the floor with a metallic clack. “Have a seat, Cecil, child. We have much to discuss.”

The letter from Kendrick arrives that Wednesday in a manilla envelope, already torn open and resealed by the Sheriff's Secret Police. Carlos doesn't get to check his mail until late afternoon though, as he has been out at Radon Canyon drilling deep into the bedrock at the base of the canyon walls and placing seismographic sensors since four in the morning. What would be a long, arduous task normally was made even harder by the fact that some of the sensors he'd already placed would randomly shoot up into the sky from their buried spots like potatoes from a potato cannon, landing with a thud randomly—well not randomly, their landing spots are based on acceleration, wind speed direction, and air resistance—on the desert floor around their holes. From what he understands, it's the result of rather perturbed ground squirrels of some sort, based on the odd chittering noise so reminiscent of the squirrels back in Boston. At least that's what Becky assures him over the radio, but he isn't quite sure he can trust her judgment just yet.

Exhausted and feeling like he'll be at this for a year, the thought of decoding the letter waiting on his tiny kitchen counter just makes Carlos groan as he stumbles toward the shower. He's already waited this long, after all, so a task that tedious can wait one more day. Instead he opts for a long
shower that creeps from nice and cool to near scalding as he works the kinks from his back, then a cup of herbal tea that Lei insists will relax his sore arms, and an early night.

Unfortunately, his Thursday morning is interrupted loudly and abruptly as Harris wakes up with horns.

“Fucking fuck! What the—what the fuck?! I mean, what the actual fuck?! Are you seeing this? Tell me, are you seeing this? Please, tell me I am hallucinating—tell me I have gone off my fucking rocker and need to be shipped off to an asylum, thank you and goodbye, because this here? This right here?” Harris points at his head. “This is bullshit! This is such bullshit! I can't fucking do this, alright? Do you see? This is fucking—I can't even—I can't believe this fucking town! Fuck!”

Carlos wisely keeps his mouth shut. Harris has been ranting in this vein for a good twenty minutes now, ever since he woke up to a headache reminiscent of a hangover, pressed a hand to his forehead, and discovered the bony protrusions jutting from his hairline. After assuring their coworkers that they would handle the situation and encouraging them to perhaps work outside the lab that day, Carlos and Abbey finally managed to coax Harris away from the bathroom mirror and down to his workstation. Not that Carlos can blame him. If he spontaneously generated four horns from his skull, he would want to get a good look, too.

The horns themselves are between fifteen and twenty inches long, depending on the horn, and are smooth and dark brown fading to black at the tips. Two jut up and out from the crown of his head while two more branch out from his temples, curling down along the sides of his face and point forward, coming to a stop an inch or so beyond his cheekbones. Becky had been quick to point out that he now resembled a Jacob sheep, one of the oldest breeds of sheep in the world and nearly untouched by human influence, and how he was lucky to only have four as they can sometimes have up to six horns! Isn't that amazing?

Then Harris had thrown a bar of soap at her and she quickly retreated.

“Harris, if you don't stop flailing, I'm going to strap you down!” Abbey says, trying to wrap the measuring tape around the base of one of his horns. She grabs one of his arms around the bicep and forces him back onto the examining table and gives him a good shake. This finally seems to get his attention. She glares at him. “Sit. Down.”

There's a huff as Harris crosses his arms but otherwise stops moving. “Such fucking bullshit,” he grumbles, leaning his head sideways a bit so she can reach. He watches as Carlos readies their portable X-ray machine. “No—no, you're doing that wrong, you need to flip the—“
Carlos glares back at him. “I have used this before, you know.”

“You have it on the wrong setting for—OW!” Harris jerks as Abbey yanks his hair. “What the hell?!”

“You almost poked me in the eye, you ass! I don't need to lose any more limbs! Seriously, Carlos, let me get the restraints.” She sighs when Carlos shakes his head.

“He has every right to be upset. Irritable. Even pissy,” Carlos comments, tone heavy with implication, and Abbey smirks at Harris' affronted look. “That being said, I'm going to need you to sit still for this. You know the drill.” Harris nods—or at least tries an approximation of a nod, it is rather hard to do so without headbutting forward—and lays back on the table as Carlos covers him with a lead apron, Abbey handing him one to don once it's secure.

“Get more than one front and side view. I want to make sure it's well documented,” Harris says, resting his head on the hard table after a little rotating to accommodate the horns.

“That's the spirit,” Carlos smirks. He and Abbey retreat behind the little radiation shield and once Harris is in position the x-ray machine gives a loud clicking echo in the empty lab. “Turn your head to a three-quarter view.”

“I don't know if I can, really,” Harris says. He tries to rotate his head so that it can rest in some way on the table at that angle, but the jut of his horns makes it near impossible and his head rolls back to the side or forward again.

Abbey comes over and reaches out to grip the horns, turning his head slightly. “Can you hold that position?”

“Yeah, yeah,” he mutters, and Abbey retreats again behind the shielding. Once the machine clicks again, his head falls back into a more comfortable position. “Someone make a note of this. If we're going to be documenting people with non-standard anatomy, we should make some effort to meet their comfort. This is unacceptable. I have absolutely no neck support.”

“Turn your head all the way to the side,” Carlos says. “And what are you talking about? You've never given any thought to our comfort when checking us. Your bedside manner is horrible.”
“That is different.”

Carlos hides his chuckles behind the machine and the pretense of adjusting some settings. They take over a dozen images from multiple angles before they have Harris sit back up. He removes the data card from the machine and uploads the images onto Harris' computer. “Abbey, I'm so glad I let you talk me into springing for the digital machine.”

“I told you it would be a lot less hassle,” she says. She's got a steadying hand around Harris' elbow as he climbs down from the table. After an almost disastrous trip down the stairs, they've learned his center of gravity has shifted quite a bit. Harris teeters forward, top-heavy, and Abbey goes with the motion to steer him onto the stool next to Carlos' chair. He braces himself on Carlos' shoulder with one hand and the desk with the other and the three of them analyze the images on screen.

“Holy hell,” Abbey breathes.

It is clear from the x-rays that the four horns are solid bone, and fused near seamlessly into his skull almost like they have been there from birth, the very shape of his head altered slightly to accommodate their placement.

“Oh God,” Harris says, bringing a hand up as if to touch his face or horns but the fingers hanging in the air. “Oh God. Oh, God, I-I can't fix that. Oh fuck--”

Carlos rotates his stool quickly to grab the extended arm as Harris starts to reel backwards, and between himself and Abbey they keep him upright. “Easy, easy,” Carlos says, trying to remain calm. “You're alright.”

Alright?” Harris asks, voice tripping up into something hysterical. “What could possibly be alright with this? That's solid bone! It isn't keratin! I can't just—just—there's no sawing this off! Look at my fucking skull!”

“You're not in any pain, are you?”

“No, but--”

“You've still got all your mental facilities. You still know medicine. Right?”
The other man tries to nod but stops when one of his horns nearly conks Abbey in the head. “Yeah?”

“Then we're not going to panic. As long as we have the ability, we're going to work this problem and get it fixed. We're scientists, it's what we do. We'll think of something, okay?”

Harris takes a deep breath, and Carlos thinks it must be cleansing because Harris' voice is more certain now when he speaks. “Right. Yeah. Yeah, fuck, okay, yeah, we can do this.”

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Turns out, they can't do this.

After spending the day pouring over every medical book in their possession (municipally approved or otherwise), a short but heated debate about the merits of returning to the Night Vale Public Library, and an even longer and more caustic debate regarding returning to the world beyond the city's borders, it is decided that Harris and Carlos will brave Night Vale General first thing in the morning.

In the meantime, Harris is making liberal use of one of the neck braces he brought for emergencies. His neck and shoulder muscles simply aren't used to supporting so much extra weight, and after about two hours of trying to read over his books Harris had a raging headache and couldn't turn his head to the left without an awful twinge shooting down that side of his body. In the early evening, Carlos sends him to lay down in his room and rest, as the next day would probably be even more trying on his body.

Matt and Billy try to coax Carlos out to the back porch for a few beers to relax, but he refrains citing the need to be wide awake and aware the next morning if he's going to be Harris' escort to the hospital. Even if he was inclined to indulge, Harris was adamant about it based on his own experiences with observing at the hospital.

“Carlos, I swear, you have to make sure they don't do anything drastic to me,” Harris had said when it became clear that was their only option available. “Or weird or bizarre or...unseemly.”
After throwing together a simple dinner of leftover chili from the crock pot, Carlos settles down on his sagging couch and finally opens the envelope from Kendrick. He does a quick skim of the letter as-is, but most of it is nonsensical. Kendrick had to have something to write about in order to work in a coded message of that length, so a lot of the content is simply scientific jargon thrown into sentence format. Anyone with an ounce of scientific knowledge would be able to understand that Through cognitive disequilibrium, the multidimensional infrastructures generate developmentally appropriate classifications within the Zone of Proximity using global inter-segmented terminal and enabling objectives and the eighteen pages that follow is complete bullshit. There is nothing of merit to any of the information here. What did he even use, a word generator?

But it did the job, because the letter made it through the gauntlet. Obviously the Sheriff’s Secret Police, or whoever handles the reading of the mail since Carlos is not sure if it is them or the Post Office, knows little to nothing about science. It is worth noting, Carlos thinks.

The code that Kendrick developed is also not terribly complicated, at least for Carlos. Though, he always did have a healthy appreciation for puzzles, so maybe it is harder than it seems. A clean page from his journal laid next to the sheets and Carlos sets about translating. There are no breaks to indicate changes of words or sentences, so he will have to figure that out, but that is better than nothing. An hour later, Carlos has translated eighteen pages of scientific nonsense into the short concise letter written in charcoal in front of him.

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_Glad to hear you are alive. Trying to reach you for weeks. Only contact from NV by City Council. All mail came back black-out or blank. All phone calls say number temporarily disconnected. Satellite image of area is corrupted._

_Dhawan and Kaplan showed up three weeks after you left. Kaplan showed signs of severe dehydration and malnutrition. Burns on wrists. Dhawan unharmed. Complete memory loss of NV including you. Thought they had been on a six month camping trip to Ozarks._

_School requests Novak return to Arkham due to injury. How bad is it? Complete amputation? Is she getting adequate care?_

_Any word from Joanna?_
School Board unhappy with lack of response and safety of team. Sent a representative to Night Vale to meet with City Council about team. No contact with representative since they left. Have you heard from anyone?

Rep from company called Strexcorp Synergists Inc. sniffing around campus. Have paid me visit twice. Vague threats on job and reputation. Trying to get in ear of School Board members. Let me handle it.

People trying to get you replaced. NV City Council blocking it. Stay in their good light. They chose you. As long as you are there no one will replace you.

Do you need evac? Are you safe? Will try to send replacements from your list. People reluctant to come after Dhawan and Kaplan came back.

Will contact again when I find out more info. Keep record of everything. Stay safe.

Condolences for Vogt.

-Kendrick

Carlos stares at his own neatly printed handwriting for a long time in silence. A distant part of his mind ponders how much repeated stimuli it would take to render someone immune to fear, and how much psychological damage such an experience would inflict on a subject. Could it be accomplished through periodic sessions or would it need to be a constant factor the subject would have to endure? Because the uncomfortable prickle of terror that is tripping up his spine and causing the hair on his arms to stand on end is frankly getting really old and downright annoying at this point.

Perhaps he should have gotten a better night’s sleep.

Has it really been four months? Carlos cannot figure out if it should seem shorter or longer.
Sometimes it feels like the hours stretch on into infinity, while others it seems like just days ago that Tim and Aarav fled that first night. And what does it say about Carlos that he only ever had a vague concern about their well-being after they abandoned the team? Sure, he had made mention of it in the letters he sent, the ill-fated ones that Kendrick never read, and he had been fearful that first day after discovering their rooms empty and the truck gone. But the sense of betrayal had overridden his concern for their health and whereabouts, and the others had been like-minded. Had the two scientists really retreated on their own, or had someone helped them along?

Was it even really worth wondering, since the two people most qualified to answer that question have have no recollection of any of them at all?

For some reason the thought of Tim and Aarav having their memories altered—*reeducated*, his mind supplies unhelpfully—sends a roil of disgust and nausea through him more prominent than when it happened to Gwen and Billy. If he was being rational he would be equally perturbed by both situations. After all, the very thought of having his own mind or the mind of anyone else manipulated so thoroughly that entire subjects, entire years are missing, makes him feel uneasy in his own skin. There is a reason why talk of Alzheimer's and dementia has always left him feeling shaky and desperate.

Maybe it is because Tim and Aarav had been in town less than a day. They were exposed to Night Vale for less than twenty-four hours...well. That they know of. Carlos is still working on the time anomalies. So if just *knowing* about Night Vale spurred such a drastic reaction from the Sheriff's Secret Police, then what does that say for Carlos and his team who have spent months learning as much as possible about the town? Are they in that much more danger because of it? And when they decide to leave, what does that spell for their own well-being, their own memories?

And why did the Sheriff's Secret Police take away Tim and Aarav's memories of Carlos specifically?

As for the School Board and this corporation that keeps hounding Kendrick, Carlos can do little more than speculate. There is nothing here in Night Vale that he can do to help other than keep his team alive and producing results that can one day be sent out of this town in some manner. He will have to trust that his pink slip will not be arriving one of these days in the mail, three months late. He is not even really sure what he would do if it did. Best not to think of it for now, anyway.

Carlos' eyes skip over the last line without reading it again.

Plucking the letter from the table, he goes to his doorway and calls down, “Abbey?”
“YEAH?!" comes her voice from one floor down.

“Can you come up for a minute?"

Carlos turns the letter over in his hands, then creases it in half with a slightly uneven fold. He leans against the door frame with his shoulder as he listens to her moving around her room then the creak of her footsteps on the stairs coming up to his apartment. She's dressed down for the night in a white tank top and a pair of Carlos' own cargo shorts that she absconded with from laundry one day. How do you expect me to be an effective scientist when women's pants don't even have real pockets? Look, Carlos, look at all the tools I can fit in here! All I need is a belt...

“What's up?” she asks at the top of the stairs.

“I got a letter from Kendrick, finally,” he says, holding it top face out for her to scan. Not ready to share the rest of it with anybody. There is the thought that she might get caught up about their wayward scientists, but Carlos thinks that her eyes skip right to her own last name, and then she looks thunderous.

“They can't order me back home! I'm not some child, I'm the one that decides where I can and can't be! How dare they--?!”

“I know,” Carlos says soothingly, putting his hands up in a placating manner. Her fists, both flesh and mechanical, clench at her sides. “I know, and I'm not making you leave. Like it says, it's the School Board. They don't have much actual sway on people in the field. And I doubt they'll sever your pay, they wouldn't want the sort of lawsuit that would follow.”

Her lips twist a little, amused. “Sever, huh?”

“It was a bad choice of words.”

Abbey sighs. “So, what then?”

“I just wanted to let you know Miskatonic's position on the matter, in case it comes up. You have a right to know.”
“But you won't send me back?”

“I think we already covered that. Unless you want to leave?” Carlos asks, and they share a knowing smirk. And this is just another reason that Carlos made a horrible professor in his own opinion, because a good man does not play favorites but if he could have ten Abbey's on his team he would in a heartbeat. They just get each other, as scientists and as people, and there are so few that Carlos has known to which he can apply that trait.

“You won't get rid of me that easily,” she replies. After a glance over her shoulder at the silent stairway behind her, she leans in. “You going to tell everyone about Kaplan and Dhawan?”

He taps the corner of the letter against the opposite palm as he thinks. “They...should know, I suppose.”

“Let them know they might not have been all that shitty of human beings after all?” she asks flippantly.

That gets her a cocked eyebrow. “The jury is still out on that.” Then a little less flatly, “No, they've all moved past it for now. Or, if not moved past it at least it united them for a while. It will just stir things up again.”

Abbey tilts her head at him. “It could happen to any of us, you know,” she says softly.

Carlos' reply is just as careful. “I know.”

Her eyes flick from his to the letter in his hand, then around the hallway like they're searching. “I'd burn that,” she says under her breath. Then, louder, “You've got a long day tomorrow, boss. Get some sleep.”
Harris is loaded into Carlos' coupe before the sun is up the next morning, the two headed to Night Vale General before all but Becky are awake. Bless her, she was up making two thermos' of strong coffee and ushering them out of bed to make sure they got going at a decent hour. And even though Harris turned down the beverage, not wanting to skew any results when the hospital took blood and vitals, he appreciated the thought.

Carlos keeps a steadying hand on Harris' elbow as they make their way through the Emergency Room entrance, but they're brought up short when they see another person waiting at the glass window of check-in. A short woman with straight black hair, cradling a toddler against her shoulder.

The child has four little horns protruding from her head.

Looking to the side, Carlos looks into the waiting room. He can see two other people with similar sets of horns on their heads. The first a man in his early twenties, construction worker or electrician Carlos guesses. He can't read the logo on the front of his work shirt from this distance. The other is a man that might be going through a midlife crisis, or maybe is just a prick. He's in a business suit and has a briefcase but also a very nice bicycle propped along the chairs next to him like he couldn't stand to leave the expensive piece of equipment outside locked to the rack with the other less impressive bikes. His skin is over-orange, the kind of tint you only get if you go to spray-tan salons or use self-tanning bronzer way too often. It looks even more prominent thanks to the white ovals around his eye sockets, a clear sign he wears the type of sunglasses Carlos could never afford.

"Is it bad that I feel a little better about this already?" Harris whispers, still looking at the kid in front of them.

"Isn't that human psychology? The feeling of belonging, even if it is for unknown illnesses?" Carlos replies.

"No one likes to be alone," he agrees. "I guess that means we won't be rushed to the front of triage."

Not hardly. After initial check-in—and the nurse handling registration does not even bat an eyelash—Harris and Carlos are forced to wait their turn along with everyone else that filters in through the sliding mechanical doors. They get seats in the corner that have the dual benefits of supplying a wall for Harris to lean his heavy head against and also a great angle to people-watch, which is a scientist's go-to activity in boring social situations they have no chance of escaping from. It also helps keep Harris' mind off of his own condition by trying to distance-diagnose patients as they stand in line or take their seats.
Of the young man and woman sitting on the far side of the room, the man squirming uncomfortably in his seat while the woman holds his hand yet keeps a good two inches space between their bodies everywhere else, looking off to the side: “STD. Pubic lice or genital warts, maybe. Early stages of gonorrhea or trichomoniasis. But he told her he doesn't know what it could be, that maybe it was an allergic reaction to their condoms.”

“That's an awfully pessimistic outlook on it,” Carlos whispers back.

“Look at her body language. She's hoping her intuition is wrong, but she doesn't want to touch anything more than what she can cover with anti-bacterial soap. Bad day in paradise.”

The three men next to the hallway that leads into the rest of the hospital, one of which is cradling his arm against his chest, secured with a dirty t-shirt to his body, the other two listing into each other as they wince under the harsh fluorescent lights: “Broken arm. Drunken shenanigans the night before and he fell, putting all of his weight on it. Or something else equally stupid. His friends insisted he was being a pussy and that it was just sprained, but he hasn't been able to bend or move it.”

The woman with graying roots and no less than five rather gaudy rings on her fingers, clutching her Gucci purse in one hand and a ragged tissue in the other, trying her best to violently sneeze into it as daintily as possible: “Upper respiratory infection, maybe. More likely just the flu, but she isn't shaking it as quickly as she used to, and she got on WebMD and now thinks she has pneumonia. Wasting the doctor's time when she could have just went to Urgent Care or her regular doctor. I mean, unless it's some weird Night Vale-specific flu, in which case...” Harris pulls a bottle of sanitizer from his pocket and gives both of them a pump to ward off whatever she might be carrying.

The man about their age sitting down the row from them that came in breathing heavily, trying to keep his voice down but unable to do so as he told the nurse about burning in his chest, who keeps shifting restlessly in his chair and darting to the restroom to try and throw up even though his stomach is empty, who meets Carlos' eyes at one point and he sees nothing but sharp pain and dull fear in them in equal amounts: “Gall bladder. Poor bastard,” is all Harris says to that. He even nods to the man when he walks to the front as his name is called when every other person before him got a sarcastic comment said to Carlos from under his breath.

One thing that strikes Carlos as odd is that most of the patients in the Emergency Room look relatively normal, for the most part. Aside from the girl with a hole in her hand, and it looks like she is there because she is close to going into labor and not because of said hole in her hand, and the handful of people sporting the same horns as Harris, this could be an ER in any town in America. In his mind he had built up the thought of Night Vale General as a place that would be
filled with abnormalities and unheard of diseases and archaic practices. Other than the sigils that they saw carved into the doorway in a neat way that reminded Carlos of Times New Roman, things are almost too ordinary.

Though he still thinks he can hear some ritualistic chanting through the walls.

Things go a lot quicker for a bit after Harris Lattimore is called over by the nurse. A lot of medical history is asked—more than the form he filled out upon his arrival—a lot of measurements taken and vitals scanned and the expected blood drawn. Harris himself proves himself to be a tolerable patient for the nurses, sharing with Carlos in a moment between one step of this process and the next that he does not have a problem with nursing staff as individuals, just the less-than-stellar education system that shunts them out as fast as possible without what he feels is adequate testing. It's the doctors Harris is more likely to argue with at every turn, simply because he expects the doctor to have a rudimentary knowledge of body systems and how they function.

And Harris just has to question every single test that they want to take, wants to know every step of the procedure ahead of time and why they are doing it. And if any of it is unsatisfactory he has to have a discussion about it immediately, with not just the nurse but the radiologist, the hematologist, Carlos is certain that if he had his way Harris would drag the janitor into this.

To make matters that much worse, there's this guy.

"You have to understand, Mr. Lattimore—"

"Doctor Lattimore."

"Er, right. Doctor Lattimore, this is a great opportunity for us at Night Vale General. It would just be a few extra tests."

"No."

"But we have so few opportunities to do any medical testing—I-I mean, take, uh, take readings from outsiders from our community! As you can imagine, the sample pool runs rather small in Night Vale, and we get the same volunteers—"

"Not a chance."
“We are all doctors here. Scientists! I think it’s reasonable for us to come to a compromise, in the name of science?”

Harris levels this young hot shot doctor with a withering look, then throws an arm out to pat Carlos in the arm. “This is the only doctor allowed to try and pull that line on me. Dr. Abaroa, your opinion?”

“Only tests to do with his horns. Nothing more,” Carlos replies, voice short. He can admit that this whole process has reduced the threshold for his temper by leaps and bounds.

“Thank you, Dr. Abaroa,” Harris says snidely toward the interloper.

The other doctor smooths a hand down the front of his white lab coat, and nods. “Someone will be by later with your results. Excuse me,” he says with as much dignity as he can muster before escaping the room.

“Fucking prick,” Harris mutters, adjusting himself on the hospital bed and tugging irritatedly on the thin cloth gown on his shoulders. At least they had been moved from the curtained off area to an actual room, but the hospital is still the same sterile cold as all other hospitals and Carlos offers him the thin blanket folded at the end of the bed. “Thanks.”

“No problem. How's your neck?”

Harris rubs at the base of his skull. “Sore. Better settle in. If it's anything like hospitals back home, we'll be in for another long wait. Hand me my phone.”

They both exhaust their interest and their phone batteries quicker than they would like. Carlos swears that the clock on the wall is only going half-speed, and while there is a high probability that he is right about that based on his studies of time in Night Vale, it is also possible that it is just sheer boredom taking up residence in his brain like a fungus. Idle chit-chat rises and falls between them about their work, the town, something they heard on the radio, nothing in particular, interspersed with long periods of the sort of non-silence you only hear surrounded by beeping equipment and the muffled sounds of the medical community.

“What if it's serious?” Harris says out of the blue after about twenty minutes of staring at the
metallic shine of the hazard disposal container mounted on the wall.

Carlos blinks several times to try and break from the fugue state he had been in. “Then we'll deal with it,” he replies. Harris tilts his head over slightly so he can see Carlos and glares. “You are hardly one to talk to me about bedside manner. Would you rather I sugar-coat it.”

“...no,” he sighs, head rolling back along the horns' curves against the flat pillows. The back of the bed is propped up so he can sit up more easily, but his neck and back is just too tired now. “This could be permanent, you know.”

“Or it could disappear just as quickly,” Carlos says.

“In this town? Unlikely. But thanks for the show of sunshiny optimism.”

“We will deal with it,” Carlos insists more emphatically. “Whatever the outcome.”

“They'll ship me back to Arkham and I'll become some lab experiment—”

“No.”

Harris tries to turn his head again, shocked by the strength and sincerity of that one word spoken by his employer, but the movement is too sudden and he hisses at the bolt of pain it sends from ear to elbow. A movement in his peripherals and then Carlos is sitting at the end of the bed, pulling one knee up onto the mattress and trying to make himself comfortable. “You're one of us,” Carlos says simply. “I'm not going to send away a perfectly good researcher because people back home will want to get a good look at your hairline. Besides, do you really think they would be more qualified to fix this in Arkham than here?”

That makes Harris snort. “Please. I'd be locked away and half my blood drained. For science.” He looks up to see Carlos considering him. “What?”

“Why are you here?” Carlos asks.

“News flash, boss. I've got horns growing from my head.”
“Not here, the hospital. Here, in Night Vale.”

“I don't understand.”

Carlos tilts his head slightly, eyes sharp and focused. “It's something I've been thinking more and more of, lately. Why each of you decided to take this position. I know that there's the obvious draw of scientific curiosity, a unique experience in your field, that's the same for all of us.”

“I sense a 'but' coming,” Harris says.

“But, I now know that Billy needed to have something to call his own, for as much as Claudette had a hand in every other aspect of his life. I now know that Lei had a pregnancy scare with his last girlfriend and the thought of being a father terrified him so much that he applied for every social-anthropological opening available on every expedition he could find. I now know Becky's first pet was put to sleep because it had a sickness the vets couldn't figure out that it got from a species of insect they couldn't identify and it was easier to put it to sleep than work out the answers for themselves, and that she has a living specimen of every insect she has found since coming to Night Vale. But I don't know why you're here.”

“Why are you here?” Harris counters.

His lips twist. “Because no where else would take me,” he replies. Which is a gross generalization, and he has suspicions that the Night Vale City Council has their own reasons he is both eager and dreading finding out. And he knows his companion can see it for the blanket statement that it is, so he elaborates. “I'm well aware of the reputation that follows me. My research is problematic. I don't play the university game. I'm not afraid of unexpected results. And a slew of other things that make other scientists want to avoid collaborating with me or benefactors throw their money at other, more acceptable sciences.”

It still isn't near enough, but Harris nods and looks into the middle distance ahead of him, somewhere between Carlos and himself. He is quiet long enough that Carlos regrets bringing the subject up. After all, Harris has a lot on his mind right now, pun totally intended, he really does not need his boss dredging up hypotheticals about his past or his motives. Carlos is about to apologize for his ill-timed words when Harris speaks. “When I was in medical school, I did a few months humanitarian work overseas.”

“It was in your resume,” Carlos nods slowly, remembering. “The Congo region. You were there to help with HIV/AIDS education and treatment.”
“And malaria and yellow fever,” Harris tacks on. “Births sometimes, too. But mostly vaccines and treatment.” He looks down at the loose band on his wrist, listing his name and date of birth. No allergies. “I didn't want to go in the first place, but my adviser told me it would look good on a resume, and my mother would go on and on about what noble work it was. She had met Dad doing missionary work.” That sparks another derisive snort from Harris, shaking his head. “I thought...I'll go, it will only be a few months, and they'll all be happy enough to shut up about my life choices, and I could get a job doing something I liked.”

That thousand yard stare is back, and Carlos knows this is a box he should have never opened. Too late now.

“There was this little clinic we set up, and you know, those places are ramshackle and hardly adequate, but it was getting the job done. I'd been there maybe two months. This youngish guy had been brought in, maybe fourteen or fifteen, but he had a gun slung over his shoulder—which, to be fair, was hardly uncommon and by that point I'd gotten used to it. But he had this burn on his leg and I guessed it was from some sort of mine but it was all—” Harris makes a wiggling motion with his fingers. “Mangled. Charred. There wasn't much I could do other than amputate up to the knee.”

“He had been awake after the surgery for about two hours, and the interpreter was explaining to him what he was going to need to do to make sure it didn't get infected, when these soldiers came in. They told the doctors they had to take the man, that he was a criminal. They just grabbed him by the arms and hauled him out of the bed, and he was fighting it but what could he do? He was still weak from the anesthesia. But he still tried to grab me and I...I shrugged his arm off.”

Harris twists the band on his arm, making the hard paper crumple but it does not break. “He needed my help and I let him go, after cutting his leg off. I didn't know what he did or didn't do, I didn't know if the soldiers had any right to take him, I just let him go. And they drug him outside the tent and shot him in the head.”

This is a precipice, Carlos thinks, and one misstep will send everything crashing down. “That isn't your fault,” he says carefully. “If you had stepped in, they could have killed you just as easily.”

“I know,” he replies. “You think I haven't told myself that a thousand times? I know I couldn't have done anything. But he still shouldn't have died with me pushing him away like that.” Harris looks at Carlos and his eyes are a potent mixture of exhaustion and regret. So much regret. “I was a coward. The whole reason I was there in the first place was because I was too much a coward to just tell everyone to fuck off, because I'm not a nice guy that should be doing fucking humanitarian work, I'm a researcher! I don't have some sort of savior complex like half the assholes that go over there! I just wanted to do my work and go home! But I was there, I was right there, and I don't care how much it wasn't my job or how ineffective I would have been, I still took an oath and I let that man die because I was too much of a fucking coward to say one god damn word!”
The machine at Carlos’ right makes an alarming beeping noise, cutting through the fog of tension, and Harris reaches over and slaps a button to make it stop. A beat of silence, and he puffs out an angry breath. “That's why I'm here. I'm so...so fucking tired of being afraid. I don't have a death wish but the thought of wasting everything in some sterile little hospital lab like this makes me want to choke and the thought of going back to the jungle was even worse. So if I have to go to Nowhere New Mexico to find a place to stop being a fucking pansy and stepping up, then here I am.” He gives a helpless laugh. “I just...I never learned how to be brave. It would be nice if I had the chance.”

“No one here thinks you're a coward,” Carlos says finally. “Least of all me.”

“...thanks, Carlos,” Harris replies, sounding both younger and older than Carlos has ever heard him as he gives a small smile. He crosses his ankles under the blanket. “You named everyone else but Matt. Why do you think he's here?”

Carlos looks down at his watch. “Still forming a hypothesis.”

“Carlos. Look at me.”

“I am looking at you.”

“No. Really look at me. Do I look amused?”

A tired sigh. “Harris—“

“Do I look like I would find any of this amusing?”

“Stop being dramatic.”
“I am going to spit in your petri dishes and I don't even care if it fucks up four months of work.”

Carlos buries his face in his hands and lets the laughter he had been holding in for the past twenty minutes out now that the last nurse has gone to get Harris a wheelchair.

“Stop. What are you doing? Carlos! Carlos Abaroa, stop! Stop! Stop laughing, God damn it!” His anger is lessened by the fact that Harris is starting to laugh along with him. The stress of the day might have finally gotten to them.

“I can't help it!” he squeaks out, eyes squeezing shut, near-silent laughs shaking his shoulders because he simply cannot contain it any more. It's a struggle to get air in because every time he tries to breathe in he just laughs more. “You—you—your—!” and then Carlos' head falls back against the wall to laugh even harder.

“Yes, yes, let's all laugh at the Irish guy and his delicate skin,” Harris chuckles affably. “Laugh it up.”

“I'm sorry! I-I can't—” Carlos has to concentrate on not losing it again, taking deep breaths and forcefully stopping his body from shaking. Once he has it under control he grins. “You have spiral horns. From sun exposure.” That just renews his giggles all the more.

Harris, who has been redoing the buttons of his shirt, smirks. “Mom always told me to wear sunscreen.”

Carlos wipes the tears from his eyes and heaves a sigh. “We'll do the treatment they suggested, I guess. Unless you have a better idea?”

“We can try.” Harris finishes the shirt tries for serious. “It might not work. It probably won't work. If I could remove solid bone with drawing a chalk pentagram and using a sterilized razor blade, I wouldn't have needed medical school.”

“Right, sorry.” Carlos replies, a little abashed. He should not be laughing so freely about his subordinate's medical issues.

“No, it is funny,” Harris says, rubbing at his neck. “But if it doesn't work, I don't know what else to
do. They said treatment is ineffective in five percent of patients.”

“We'll think of something. We figured out Abbey's arm, we can figure out your...head.”

“You think she could make me some sort of brace or something? Until I get used to it?” Harris asks, perking up a little.

“I don't see why not.”

Harris rolls his shoulders a little. “Imagine how buff I'd be once I got used to it.”

Talking is cut short while the nurse has him sit in a wheelchair and pushes him to the front exit, Carlos fetching the car for them. Harris is agreeable enough, thanking the nurse for her help and maneuvering his head into the car and only whacking a horn into the frame once this time. Harris has to lean a little towards the center of the car so his farthest right horn does not shatter the window.

“You know the drill. The person put in peril gets to choose dinner,” Carlos says, thumbs moving across his phone to send a text letting the others know he will be picking up their meal for the night.

That earns him a genuine smile. “Turn left at the light.”

“Okay, what do we got here, we got...Kentucky Bourbon and Parmesan Peppercorn for Becky...Mango Habanero and Teri-Ginger Garlic for Lei...Aspen and Mardi Gras for the resident goat-boy—”

“Someone hand goat boy his wings.”
“You wish you looked as hot as me, don't lie.”

“Hey Mon Honey and Monterey for Abbey—”

“Did you get extra celery and carrots?”

“They're in that bag over there. Cuban Mojo and Kamikaze with extra heat for the bossman...damn, Carlos, these things smell like they're going to tear your stomach lining out.”

“We don't all have the digestive tracts of philistines.”

“There's culture and then there's basic health warnings...”

“Buffalo and Golden Barbecue and Cheddar Jalapeno for Matt; man, your inner frat-boy is showing.”

“Screw you, hot wings are an American tradition and if you all weren't wasting your time on the greenery you would have the stomach room to enjoy—”

“And Martinique and Lemon Pepper for me,” Billy concludes, setting the Styrofoam box in front of his chair. “What's with the extra box?”

“A few boneless unflavored ones for your mutt,” Harris supplies.

“You guys got Iris some goodies?! Aw, you do love her!” Billy exclaims.

“I wouldn't go that far...”

Across from Abbey, Becky is pulling on a pair of surgical gloves, folding her fingers together and making the plastic squeak before picking up a wing. “What?” she asks at Abbey's incredulous look.
“Really?”

“When you deal with the wildlife of Night Vale every day, including their droppings, you can talk. Until then, no judgments,” Becky replies before taking big bite of chicken from the wing in hand.

“Please tell me we don’t have to have a hand-washing meeting,” Harris groans from the recliner they hauled down from Carlos' apartment to the lab so he could be more comfortable. He has a beer in one hand while Lei hands him wings to eat with the other. “I will lose what little respect I hold for all of you if I find out you’re not washing hands before eating. What are you all, five?”

Carlos sits curled on his stool at the other end of the lab table they all gathered around for dinner, watching his team eat and enjoy each others' company, feeling inexplicably happy for once. His muscles feel fatigued in the way they only can after sitting doing nothing all day, and although he should feel anxious that he accomplished exactly zero with regards to his own projects, he has hardly given it a thought for hours. There are just as many members of his team now as there were this morning when he left the lab, and no one has lost (or gained) any limbs or diseases. There is better-than-average chicken wings being eaten and he allowed his team to push a beer into his hands for once. The weight of the letter from Kendrick he burned the night before feels like it really has blown away into the wind just as the ashes and smoke did through his open bathroom window.

Lei tilts his stool to the side to lean up and flick the knob on the old radio by the counter, and on the other side of a static crackle, Cecil's voice drifts through the speakers.

“...were no survivors. The Sheriff's Secret Police would like to thank you for your cooperation, and in the future, please abide by all road and pedestrian laws. It is for your protection.

Listeners, a woman entered the city limits not ten minutes ago. A strange woman. Not strange like the fact bats always turn left when exiting a cave, or strange like Steve Carlsberg's insistence that liking raw cauliflower is normal, I mean, I think we can all agree that there isn't much stranger than that! No, this woman is a strang-er, a stranger to our little town, an outsider coming out of the encroaching night like a streaking ball of burning extraterrestrial iron and nickle—”

“Hey, that's what Carlos was telling him about the other day on the phone—”

“Shh!”
“—cutting a path down Morrissey Lane and taking a right at the intersection across from the Chili's. It appears to be a white two-door with baby blue and pink hibiscus decals on the back window, and the stranger is breaking several motor vehicle laws if I am getting an accurate guess of her speed. Looks like someone doesn’t have their radio tuned in to Night Vale Community Radio, or she would definitely have slowed down after our last story, ladies and gentlemen and other-gendered listeners!

I'm not being handed a note that says Night Vale's finest are now in pursuit! Oh, listeners, it has been a long time since we've had a high-speed chase when I was actually on air to report it! The car of the woman, now suspect, has veered through the gas station parking lot on 4th and jumped the median headed south toward Sommerset.”

Matt lowers his sticky sauce-covered hand from his face. “That's headed this way.”

There's a moment of hesitation before they all scramble to their feet, grabbing paper towels and running headlong up the staircase to Carlos' apartment and the roof. Cecil's voice fades into the distance as they go, but they don't need the commentary when they can hear the sound of police sirens just a few streets down. They can spot flashing lights bouncing off the faces of buildings further downtown, the wailing of alarms getting louder.

“I see it!” Lei shouts, putting a foot up on the edge of the roof and pushing upward a little more.

The white car comes flying down their street and Becky lets out a loud gasp, slapping a glove hand covered in Parmesan Peppercorn against her lips. “Oh no!”

“What?” Carlos asks.

Lei realizes it next, eyes going wide at the scene unfurling below.

Careening into their parking lot and slamming on the brakes hard enough to sling dirt and gravel in a wide arc, the white car comes to a stop a foot from their front door. The woman that falls out of the car is dressed impeccably for someone who has the police screeching in behind them. From her bright yellow shirt and navy and white polka-dotted skirt and matching suit jacket with white pumps, she looks remarkably put-together. If you discount the manic look on her face.

The entire Night Vale Laboratories team stares down in shock as the woman slams her door behind her and looks up at them, shouting out, “Billy! I found you!” She takes two steps toward the door
before getting tackled to the ground by an officer.

The decal along the top of her windshield reads *Claudette* in curving brush script.
Chapter 14

“I really am sorry about all this.”

“There's no need for apologies, Dr. Abaroa.” Officer Erwin curses under his breath when his self-inking stamp leaves only half a mark on the form he is filling out, and he unsnaps one of the pouches on his belt to retrieve a new ink pad. “Damned things, always running out when you need them.”

Carlos gives a soft laugh at that, the kind of laugh that is only laughed for the need to fill the space in a conversation, not because anything is actually funny. His weight shifts from one foot to the other making the gravel beneath his old boots crunch, and he rubs at his bare forearms to try to keep his goosebumps at bay. It is nearly November, and while the days in Night Vale are still as hot and unforgiving as ever, the nights have tempered considerably over the past two weeks. If he is going to be out in the evening, he is going to have to start wearing layers.

The parking lot behind the Night Vale Laboratories – Miskatonic University sign is alight with flashing red and blue lights that dance across his face as well as the faces of the balaclava-clad Sheriff's Secret Police officers milling about outside their patrol cars. Only two sets of officers appear to be actually working; the two that are keeping tabs on the patrol car now holding Claudette in the back, and two more that are currently interviewing Billy on the other side of the parking lot. Most of the half dozen others are just talking low to each other, looking up at the laboratory building or out across the street that is flashing between brightly lit and total darkness. He thinks he overheard two of them arguing the merits of going ahead and getting their weekly slice of Big Rico's now or waiting until dinner the next day. Officer Erwin told him that some of them are new trainees doing tag-a-longs with the veterans. It makes Carlos ponder the recruitment process of Sheriff's Secret Police officers, where their training facility might be, what sort of benefits someone like Officer Erwin might get, and a myriad of other questions that Carlos will probably look into on another day.

A glance to the side and Carlos shifts again, turning his back a little more toward the crowd that has gathered in the doorway and at the windows of the pizza parlor next door. Most of the adults loitering there have the grace to try and look uninterested, but the teenagers are outright staring and one precocious kid had to be pulled back by his mother. He thinks he can even see Big Rico himself, his massive frame blocking the fluorescent light behind him in the main dining room window. Of course Claudette had to come crashing into town right in the middle of the dinner rush. The sound of screeching tires had brought the clientele of Big Rico's running to take a look at the ruckus. A friendly yet menacing warning from one of the officers-in-training that was assigned crowd control had sent the initial flood of onlookers back into the restaurant and most had been content to return to their meals; after all, the scene is hardly novel in a place like Night Vale. But rubberneckers are apparently just as common here as anywhere else, and people had slowly began to creep out again for the free show. It just adds to Carlos' feelings of nervousness and irritation, defensive even though he has no reason to be, memories of his own misspent youth resurfacing.
Officer Erwin's eyes flick up to Carlos' face, a calculating look, and Carlos has the wild notion that the Sheriff's Secret Police could possibly be telepathic. If he actually believed something like that existed. Which, given the state of a few of his projects recently, Carlos is not about to rule out even if it makes his skin crawl.

Whether or not he has telepathic abilities or any other form of mind reading, his monitoring officer does not mention. Uncomfortable with the silence, Carlos asks, “What are you filling out? If you don't mind me asking.”

“Standard paperwork for incidents that occur at the location assigned to any given officer,” he replies. Officer Erwin frowns slightly through the eye holes of his mask, considering a series of check boxes before marking one, then a second. His expectantly vague response raises more questions than it answers, and the tilt of the clipboard in his hand is at just the right angle so that the scientist can see the layout of the questions and boxes not unlike the forms used to fill out taxes, but not the actual text of the questionnaire. Carlos has to dig his fingers harshly into the biceps of the opposite arm to keep from standing on his tip-toes to try and see better, or letting a barrage of questions come tumbling out up to and including if he could get a copy of the form for his records. He has learned over the past months that there is only so much leeway the Sheriff's Secret Police are willing to give before their patience runs out and to choose his questions wisely.

After Claudette was unceremoniously dropped under the weight of a Sheriff's Secret Police officer, the scientists had surged forward to the edge of the roof en mass. Carlos recalls Matt shouting, “Oh shit!” and Becky letting out a shocked gasp forceful enough to make her choke on the rush of air. Down on the ground, Claudette had let out a wild yell and attempted a clumsy slash at the tackling officer with one well-manicured hand but he easily snagged it and yanked both her arms behind her back, securing them with handcuffs. This hardly stopped her from thrashing violently in his hold as the other officers approached, reading her a version of the Miranda Rights that Carlos had never heard, but her shrieks had made it too loud for him to catch them clearly. It was when one of them reached for the little bottle of pepper spray at their hip that Carlos spurned into action, the rest of the team following suit. Worries over Claudette's safety were shouted at his back as they descended the stairs to the entrance, Billy following behind confused by and concerned for this stranger that somehow knew his name. Claudette was still being held secure on the ground while she wailed and kicked, one firm hand keeping her steady as she ground dirt and dust into her pristine clothes. Officer Erwin had explained to Carlos that most people that run from the police in Night Vale are a lot more dangerous than a distraught ex-lover. Thinking back on some of the news reports from the outside he has seen over the years that really is saying something.

Carlos glances up over his shoulder at the closed and locked laboratory doors, then his gaze pans up to the roof. He normally does not let all the scientists mill about in his apartment or out on the terrace without his presence—honestly, they can be a bit like teenagers under the right circumstances, and he would rather not find a random hole in his wall thank you very much—but after the initial commotion he sent them all back up there to watch from afar. It seemed like the wisest solution at the time; between shocked shouts about the sudden appearance of Claudette and the possibility of police brutality, he would rather his team stay safe and as far out of earshot as
possible. And it seemed there was no immediate need to worry about Claudette's safety; the Sheriff's Secret Police might be many things that Carlos dislikes, but mindless violence-seekers they are not. That one aspect is surprisingly refreshing.

Looking up from his position next to Officer Erwin he can only see Billy's dog Iris with her large paws hooked over the short wall, snout sniffing the air as she watches the pretty lights and all the new people below, and the edge of Lei's profile from his position sitting along the ledge. The other man glances over the side at him, making a vague questioning gesture with hands and shoulders and face, and Carlos gives a small shrug in response before turning his attention back to the parking lot.

Claudette's voice is still detectible even through the metal and glass of the patrol car doors across from them. Carlos is glad for the muffled effect, because her voice is sharp and shrill even when she is not shouting incoherent curses and insults at the top of her lungs. “What are they charging her with?” Carlos asks.

The man at his side rattles off the offenses with an air of detachment. “Entering town without the proper authorization, speeding, failure to stop at a stop sign, failure to stop at a stop light, failure to stop at a glowing stop light sign, reckless driving, evading police, reckless endangerment, destruction of property—”


Officer Erwin gestures back up the road. “Taking the short cut through the Shop-n-Go parking lot at about sixty and nearly hitting not just the customers there but the gas pumps. There's a pretty shaken-up hooded figure that is being interviewed now. Not sure what good its testimony would be, but it pays to be thorough. And she took out a line of mail boxes on 4th Street. She'll have to take that up with the federal government. Never mess with the Postal Service.”

Carlos winces. That sounds like a lot. “What will happen to her?”

“It isn't as bad as it seems,” he replies, which surprises Carlos. It must show on his face, because Officer Erwin elaborates. “It isn't all that uncommon for people to react drastically when they figure out their significant other has been reeducated that extensively. We take that into account during sentencing. There's the possibility of jail time for the reckless endangerment, but my guess is fines and community service since she's a first-timer. If she's smart she'll take Route 800 right back to where she came from when she's done.”

“You won't...you know?” Carlos points at his own head. “Reeducate?”
Carlos cannot actually see Officer Erwin's eyebrows, but he has a feeling they just raised and lowered along with his shoulders. “Not sure. It depends on—oh, hold that thought.”

One of the officers that had been speaking in low tones to Billy is approaching, and Carlos is alarmed to see the other one helping Billy into the back seat of a squad car even if Billy looks to be going agreeably enough. This new one, a taller and thinner version of Officer Erwin with an accent that reminds Carlos strikingly of Boston, gives Carlos a half a glance before addressing his fellow officer. “He's a little spotty. Shouldn't take more than the night.”

Officer Erwin nods and the other man heads back to take the driver's seat of the patrol car. “Wait,” Carlos blurs, taking a step forward then turning to his monitoring officer. “Wait, they're taking him, too?”

“He should be back before the morning. It's for his own protection,” he replies, using his stamp to add one more mark firmly at the bottom of his paperwork.

“Is that really necessary?” he asks.

“She was a big part of his life. It is hard to wipe it all clean without leaving a few traces. He has seemed better off because of it, hasn't he?”

Carlos' mouth presses into a thin line. He wants to argue that it is beside the point, that it should be Billy's decision, that Billy's mind along with the mind of everyone else in this town should be sacred. That this whole practice is disturbing and wrong.

Still. Carlos cannot argue that Billy has seemed far happier since his reeducation than he was in the entire time they have known him. Sure, occasionally he has bouts of loneliness, and sometimes he gets a far-off look on his face like he is trying to reach for a memory just out of range, but it is happening less and less often. In fact, just yesterday Billy mentioned if some of the others wanted to hit up one of the bars in town that was having a singles mixer later in the week. They had all taken it as a good sign for his mental health. And that hardly touches on the fact that none of the scientists looked favorably on Claudette.

That sends a rush of shame and guilt through Carlos and he looks away. “So what happens now?”

“Now, she'll be taken to the station for processing, bond will be set, and you can get back to your
science, Dr. Abaroa,” Officer Erwin says while pocketing his stamp, now finished with his work.

“Bond?”

“If she or someone else has the money to pay it, she could be out in a few hours. Provided they
don’t consider her a flight risk.”

Carlos considers him for a moment then holds out a hand. “Thank you, officer.”

Officer Erwin shakes it and gives a friendly tip of the hat. “Just doing my job. You have a good
evening now.” The patrol cars are all pulling away now, leaving ashen gray clouds of dust in their
wake, and Officer Erwin disappears into the night just as quickly as he appeared, leaving Carlos
standing chilly and alone in front of his laboratory. By the time he enters the code and slips through
both front doors, his team has descended to the main lab space.

“What is happening? Where did they take Billy?”

“Reeducation,” Carlos replies.

“What?!” Harris takes a wobbly step forward, bracing himself with a hand on the lab table next to
him, trying his best to keep the horns on his head straight. “But why? He didn't remember
anything!”

“They seem to think otherwise,” Carlos replies, using the fingers of one hand to press hard on his
closed eyes. The scientists around him explode with questions and accusations, little arguments
breaking out, but it all seems to blend into loud white-noise that reverberates against his eardrum
uncomfortably, a dull throb making itself known behind Carlos' eyes. He is just too tired to deal
with this right now. “Alright, enough,” he says tiredly, though his voice is loud enough to cut
through all conversation by the way they all fall silent. “I don't agree with it any more than you do,
but we can't do anything about it now. Whatever damage they've done there, it's already been done.
Billy will be back by morning, and we'll just have to carry on from there. You all may as well clean
up and get some rest.”

As he says his peace, Carlos makes sure he has his keys and his wallet and heads for the door.

“Where are you going?” Abbey asks, moving to stop him.
“The police station. Claudette should have bail set soon enough.”

“You're bailing her out?” Matt asks, incredulous. For some reason his voice echoes far louder than the other scientist's, and it is like a sharp jab to Carlos’ blooming headache. “Why?”

At Matt's elbow, Becky nods in agreement. “Yeah, that isn't your job! You told her not to come. And some of the stuff she's been spouting on the phone is like, borderline stalker stuff.”

“You don't owe her anything, Carlos,” Harris adds.

Carlos remembers back to their first night in Night Vale, standing on the rough laboratory rooftop in his pajamas, staring down at dark cloaked figures swarming in the black shadows. The shrieking drag of static across the thick night air, like the sound was clawing its way forcibly out of an inhuman throat. The pool of blood that spread wet and black as obsidian across the sidewalk and into the street. How the next day he saw one of those same hooded figures carrying a newspaper and an umbrella with unseen hands and how the other people on the sidewalk simply veered out of its way and continued about their business like death was not walking mere yards away. Because they knew better.

“Yeah, I do,” Carlos says simply. He does not elaborate. He is not sure he can put to voice the thought that he is doing this as much for his own sanity as he is for her safety. He does not even want to try.

For a moment it looks like Matt is going to press the point, opening his mouth and sucking in a breath to respond, but from his other side Lei steps forward. “I'll go with you.”

“I'm not sure how long I'll be,” he tries.

Lei just gives an easy shrug and a smile. “It will be a good learning experience. Besides, buddy system at night, right?”

“Right,” Carlos agrees, relieved that he does not have to do this alone.

“Just don't bring her back here,” Matt says shortly, stalking off toward the back porch. The others scatter after that, either back to their abandoned meals or after Matt, talking to themselves. Carlos waits for Lei to run up to his room to grab his tablet, and, remembering that he had been chilly
earlier, grabs one of the lab coats from the hooks by the door to take as a coat. He really needs to remember to get his winter clothes out of storage.

“Don't wait up, kids, Mom and Dad will be out for the evening,” Lei jokes to Harris and Abbey as he passes them on the stairs, Abbey offering a steady support as Harris tries not to tip backwards.

“I always knew I was adopted,” Harris calls over his shoulder.

Lei and Carlos do not speak again until they are well on their way down the road, the streetlights flashing over their faces as Carlos points the car in the direction of the police station. It is still relatively early in the night, only an hour or so after sunset, but the streets seem markedly bare. Lei has made mention to Carlos on more than one occasion that it seems the people of Night Vale are either all out and about town or all hidden away in their homes on any given night with hardly any in-between. A curious trait that Lei thinks is indicative of many small towns where social gatherings such as high school football games or holiday parades are more likely to motivate townsfolk than individual interests. Even more so in a town where the individual is placed under so much scrutiny.

“So, cash? Blood? Plasma?” Lei asks, flipping on the radio to see if Cecil is still on. The weirdly jumbled voice that warbles out of the speakers singing *Heartbreak Hotel* sounds like Elvis Presley if Elvis Presley coated the inside of his mouth with peanut butter, and Lei wonders briefly if the King really is dead or just hiding out in Old Town. Cecil must have went off-air some time ago, but just in case this is the Weather for today Lei leaves the station on with the volume turned down low.

Carlos wrinkles his nose at both the question and the disturbing melody. “They didn't say.”

“Don't be like that!”

“I don't much like the idea of giving a pound of flesh as payment for anything, much less for bailing someone out of jail.”

“Nah, they outlawed that in the seventies, apparently,” Lei replies. When Carlos shoots him an unamused glare, he laughs. “Seriously! That was deemed an inefficient practice!”

“I hate that isn't a joke,” Carlos replies flatly, checking left and right before heading through a four-way stop.
Lei turns a little in his seat, gesturing with his hands as he speaks. “If you think about it, it’s a pretty ingenious system. Think about how many people in the world are in car accidents that need blood. I don't have the exact statistics, but it must be considerable. And how many of those car accidents involve people speeding or driving recklessly? Or people who fall asleep at the wheel, or drunk drivers. They don't have any regard for the safety of others, just focused on where they're going or what's going on in their own lives. And if they get pulled over, what? They get fined? Pay a ticked, something they might just get out of anyway? Just an inconvenience. And then they go right back to the same behavior, because no one is going to change because of a slap on the wrist.

“If people aren't going to change, they may as well pay it forward. Your traffic ticket today might save the life of someone next week, with blood they wouldn't have normally in the blood bank. Carlos, you know damn well that they probably go through blood like water in this town, what with all the dangerous stuff going on here every day. And, I don't know if you've noticed, but I haven't exactly seen the Red Cross around. They have their own organization here that handles that sort of thing that keeps everything in town where they need it. They make sure the people who are in the most need get the attention they deserve.”

“What about disease? Blood-born pathogens?”

“Everything is tested; they won't contaminate others just because of a law. Anyone with those issues has to pay their fines the old fashioned way, or do more community service to compensate. Anyway, the rest of the world might take a page from Night Vale's book on this one. Just imagine some place that has a dense population implementing something like this! You could eliminate blood and plasma shortages in hospitals!”

Carlos mulls that over in his head. There are a lot of logistical questions that would need to be answered, but the idea does have some merits. “That's disregarding the idea of body integrity and the individual being autonomous.”

“News flash: I don't think they know what that concept even means here in Night Vale.” Lei picks up one of the rock samples rattling loudly on Carlos' dashboard, bringing it close to his face to see the flecks of gold in the rock. “There is also the added benefit that for some people the experience of their first ticket will be enough to dissuade them from future offenses. If people here haven't been completely desensitized to the fear of needles or pain.”

“You would know, lead foot,” Carlos replies with a smirk of his own.

“Hey!” Lei leans over and gives his shoulder a shove, laughing. “I have done a lot better!” Not three weeks after arriving in Night Vale, Lei had the opportunity to find out the town's policies on
moving violations first-hand. He had only been going ten over and the fine had only been half a pint, so in the end he was not even upset. The Sheriff's Secret Police officer who pulled him over had been more than happy to explain the process to him, and Lei took the nurse who drew his blood out for lunch so he could get even more questions answered. There is already a rough draft for a paper based on the practice to be sent back to Miskatonic once they figure out a method of getting that much information out practically.

Conversation fades as Carlos navigates downtown and drives cautiously to the Sheriff’s Secret Police station. The parking lot is filled with police cruisers, and the last thing Carlos wants is to accidentally ding one of them while parking. The building itself is a rather normal minimalistic two-story concrete structure, a washed-out gray-white with square columns supporting the awning at the entrance, Night Vale Police Headquarters written in simple black letters over the bullet-proof glass double doors. There is a circular drive out front of the entrance with a statue at its center that Carlos and Lei walk past on their way into the building. Carlos pauses to look up at it more closely: Lady Justice, her eyes obscured by a blindfold, resplendent in robes and her arm stretched out before her. But where Carlos has normally seen Justice holding scales, here the chains balance a battleaxe on one side and a scythe on the other. Her other arm supports a set of tombs with words inscribed into the bronze.

“Justitia est caeca, ultio in obscuritate videat?” Lei reads, voice lilting upward at the end in question. “You know Latin, right?”

Carlos nods. “Justice is blind, vengeance may see in the darkness,” he translates.

Lei looks at Carlos a moment, taking that in, before looking back up at Lady Justice's blindfolded face. The bronze has patinated in a way that caused turquoise green streaks down her cheeks and across where her eyes would be, giving the illusion of tears. Or something else. “Well. That's not creepy or anything.”

Since Lei has already gone through this once before, Carlos lets him handle talking to the officer behind the enclosed front desk who then directs them down a hallway to the left, fifth door on the right. Carlos tries not to walk too closely to Lei, but police stations have always made him uneasy. Their footsteps seem abnormally loud on the tile floor of the hallway, and the piercing gazes peering through the eye-holes of the masked officers they pass make him wish he had something scientific to hide behind. All he has is Lei and his newsboy bag, so his grip on the canvas strap tightens as he returns the friendly nods two of the officers send their way. He gratefully ducks through the door that Lei holds open for him, the placard next to it labeled Fines and Fees.

Then he grinds to a halt as he looks up and sees Cecil Palmer in the waiting room, sitting bored in the chair directly across from the door. The other man looks up at their sudden entrance, a magazine in his hands and a surprised look on his face.
“Oh!” Cecil’s finger slides between the pages to mark his place as the magazine closes in one hand, and he sits up straighter. “Carlos! And Lei, what a surprise!”

“Hi, Cecil,” Lei greets with a little wave.

“Uh, yes, hello,” Carlos adds, jumping slightly when the door bumps into his back as it automatically closes behind him.

Lei nods toward the receptionist behind a sliding glass window. “I'll see what we need to do to get her out.” He does not wait for Carlos to answer, and it leaves the scientist with no choice but to have a seat in the tiny waiting room. There are not that many chairs, and it would be awfully rude to sit across the room from the radio host, so Carlos sits in the chair facing Cecil, their knees only a few feet apart.

“What brings you here so late in the evening?” Cecil asks, all smiles like they've just ran into each other at the market rather than in a police station. The radio host is still dressed for work, a lovely cerulean blue button-down and a magenta and black paisley tie over charcoal dress slacks. However the tie is loose like Cecil tugged at it as soon as his show was over, and his sleeves are rolled up to the elbow exposing a previously unknown set of geometric tattoos along the muscles of his forearms. It is distracting, and Carlos has to tear his eyes away from them and back to Cecil's face.

“One of our colleagues'...uh...old friends came to town,” Carlos tries, not sure how to explain.

“An old friend or an old lover?” Cecil asks with a knowing look, mouth tipping up into a slightly wicked smirk. Then he blinks and gasps as the pieces come together. “No! It wasn't the car chase from earlier, was it?”

Carlos' shoulders slump a little. “I guess everyone knows.”

Cecil waves the magazine dismissively. “Nothing to be embarrassed about. Things like this happen, and you could hardly control where she ended up.” His eyes then make a few quick cuts between Carlos and the man at the receptionist counter. “It's not...” Cecil trails off as he points at Lei then at Carlos, raising an eyebrow meaningfully.

“Oh, no, no it was Billy's ex-girlfriend. Claudette. She found out about Billy's reeducation.”
For some reason it seems that Cecil lets out a relieved little sigh at that, though Carlos is not sure why. Then Cecil's face morphs into something softer and perhaps a touch amused. “And you're bailing her out? That is so sweet! You're such a good friend, Carlos!”

“I don't know about all that,” he replies, not sure how the compliment could possibly apply to him. “It's kind of our fault she got arrested in the first place. We could have handled things a little better.”

The reporter makes a disapproving noise. “It is not your job to handle the fallout from reeducation. There are paid professionals that can be brought in for this sort of thing, but they don't get a lot of work considering most people from around here are used to it. Do they really not reeducate people where you come from?”

“No, not at all. I think it would be considered illegal,” Carlos says, sarcastic and a little incredulous that he is even hearing Cecil say these things.

His tone seems to fly over Cecil's head, though, because the other man just shakes his head wonderingly. “How curious.”

Lei comes over then with a stack of papers to fill out, flopping into the chair next to Carlos and handing him a clip board and pen of his own. “More paperwork than the IRS in this town, I swear. We have to fill this out first. And three pints of blood, one from Claudette and one from each of us.”

“Mierda,” Carlos groans, rubbing his eyes again before settling in to fill out his paperwork.

“Only three!” Cecil exclaims. “Sounds like they're taking it easy on her, at least! Probably because she's an outsider. First offenses are shown some leniency. Plus she has to get over someone like Billy! He seems like a nice enough fellow.”

Carlos' eyes glance up at Cecil before going back to filling out his address. “Yeah, he's nice.” He tries to ignore the way Lei smirks out of the corner of his eye as well as the tension growing in his shoulders as he fights not to duck behind the clipboard and hide.

Things go quiet after that, Cecil picking up his magazine and keeping his thoughts to himself so they can concentrate on answering everything accurately and neatly. Cecil may be able to
multitask while completing complex government forms, but not everyone has the ability. Besides, Cecil practically has this particular set of papers memorized; the scientists most decidedly do not.

There are seven pages for each of them, forms that back in Arkham Carlos would have signed without bothering to read past the first few lines but here in Night Vale he reads meticulously. There is no telling what you would be agreeing to otherwise, and Lei ends up asking Cecil to clarify a few questions and even goes back to the front to ask about some of the fine print on page four. Carlos glances up a few times when he feels the tell-tale prickle of goosebumps along his arms and the back of his neck like he is being watched, and he thinks he catches Cecil looking at him once or twice, but nothing obvious enough to be sure.

“So why are you here?” Carlos asks once Lei stands to take his and Carlos' clipboards back to the front. “Weren't you just on air?”

“I got off about an hour ago,” Cecil replies. His eyes linger on Lei and the receptionist for a long moment before he looks back at Carlos, leaning an inch or two closer, dropping the volume of his voice. “Intern Brad was arrested for trespassing at the Flaky-O's underground headquarters. I can't imagine what he could have been doing there. Not anything work related, and certainly not because I told him to. That would be a horrible example to set for young, impressionable interns.”

Carlos' eyebrows jump in surprise, and a little smile grows on his face. “Yes, that would be horribly unprofessional, I'm sure,” he agrees. He tilts his head a little, appraising the man across form him with new eyes. “A man such as yourself wouldn't commit such behavior?”

Cecil clears his throat theatrically. “Well...people do a lot in the name of journalism.”

“I could say the same for science,” Carlos replies.

“You sound like a man with experience.” Carlos shrugs, and it makes the radio host lean forward again, this time a touch eagerly. “No! You?”

“People do silly things when they're young,” Carlos hedges.

It is obvious Cecil wants to press the point, and Carlos can see the questions burning behind Cecil's eyes, but Lei comes back then to flop in the chair next to Carlos and he lets out a gusty sigh. “It will be just a little bit. She said they're a little short-staffed.”
“I've already waited around plenty today, what's a little more?” Carlos says, leaning on one arm propped on the armrest. Cecil must read something in his face that broadcasts that their previous discussion is not one he wants to have in front of a subordinate, and Cecil obligingly changes the subject by asking what exactly he spent his day waiting on.

The next ten minutes are occupied by Carlos relating the story of Harris and his horns, their sudden appearance and the hurry-up-and-wait trip to the emergency room that mirrors so many other emergency room trips. Cecil asks a lot of questions and even jots down a few notes once Carlos tells him that there was more than one case of the spiral horns in the waiting room, and adds that he will probably give Night Vale General a call in the morning to see if they would like to make a statement about the problem before he reports to the town.

Carlos has just started explaining a particularly nasty test the doctors had wanted to perform on Harris that involved needle nosed pliers and a generous amount of hydrogen peroxide when the wooden door creaks open and a tired nurse addresses the room. “Cecil Palmer. Carlos Abaroa. Lei Yang.”

They stand in unison in the otherwise empty room and file one after the other down the narrow hallway so reminiscent of a doctor's office. She gives Carlos a hard look. “You two in here with me. Mr. Yang, you'll be down there with Nurse Carolynn, she'll take good care of you.” A woman with warm brown eyes waves to him from down the hall and Lei gives Carlos and Cecil a wink over his shoulder before heading that direction. Cecil and Carlos glance at each other and Carlos gives a helpless little shrug—what can he say? Lei is a flirt in any situation.

Their nurse, an older woman with graying curls and scrubs in a harsh neon paint-splatter design that looks right out of the eighties has them enter the same room that is set up with mirrored drawing stations, one on either side. Two identical chairs sit about two feet apart with carts on the far side of each containing needles, IV tubing, swabs and antiseptic wipes, and a variety of test tubes with different colored tops. “Have a seat, Mr. Palmer here, please,” the nurse says, gesturing for Cecil to sit on the left. Carlos takes his place in the right chair, feeling nervous as the woman goes about setting up Cecil's equipment.

Cecil, for his part, looks completely at ease as he swings his legs in place and the nurse reclines his chair back. “How are you today, Phyllis?” he asks, adjusting his rolled-up shirt sleeve so the delicate skin in the crook of his inner arm is exposed. It prompts Carlos to remove his own lab coat and start rolling up the sleeves of his plaid cotton shirt.

Phyllis' face morphs from severe to doting in less than a second. “I'm doing pretty well, thank you for asking. It was pretty busy earlier, so I didn't get my break till just now. Sorry to make you wait.”
“No need to apologize! You work so hard,” Cecil says, charming and generous. Carlos can see why he has rarely heard an unkind thing said about the radio host. He just seems to ooze social grace when he is talking to Night Vale citizens. “What happened to Mejs? I thought you two were on the same schedule.”

“Sick. Some fool tried to get around paying his fee by bringing in blood, saying he'd drawn it himself at home,” Phyllis says with disgust. While she talks she strings up an IV connected to a blood bag to hang from the metal stand over Cecil's shoulder. “Came in with about three pints in a bucket!”

Cecil hums. “That sounds unsanitary.”

“Don't you know it! And you know we can't accept anything like that, we wouldn't know where it came from or anything, it isn't sterile. Could have just been any old bucket from the hardware store! So when Mejs told him we'd have to take the blood ourselves, he threw it at her.”

“No!” Cecil gasps.

“Yes! Threw it right in her face and ran. Didn't make it far, what with the wards and being in the middle of the police station, but she got some in her mouth and eyes and got all sick.”

“Do you know what she caught?” Carlos asks from his chair, unable to keep his questions in any longer. The nurse's smile is wiped off her face almost instantly, and Carlos has a moment to regret opening his mouth despite his concern, but Cecil nods right along with his question.

“Yes! Carlos is a scientist, I'm sure he would find it most interesting!” he interjects.

Phyllis looks as if she is reluctant to have any sort of small-talk with the outsider in the other chair, but Cecil's eager face is enough for her to relent. She pulls tight on the rubber tourniquet around Cecil's upper arm. “You heard of toxoplasmosis?”

It takes a moment for Carlos to place the name with the illness. “A parasitic disease. Isn't it normally transmitted through cats?”

She allows a surprised nod at that, impressed. “The guy drained his house cats for blood and used the bucket he disposed litter with to bring it here. Turns out they were carriers.”
“I’m sorry to hear that,” Carlos says sincerely. “But there is a low mortality rate, I believe? Mostly people with a weakened immune system or people who are pregnant?”

“Yes, and thank the gods she had her baby last year,” Phyllis says, turning her attention back to Cecil. Maybe this outsider is not so bad after all. “Right now she’s just showing flu-like symptoms, but Aggie got sucked into the swirling maelstrom last month and they haven't gotten around to hiring a replacement. Make a fist for me.”

Cecil does as he's told, the nurse tapping at the veins of his arm to bring them to the surface and readjusting the tourniquet. “I'm afraid I have no idea what you two are talking about,” he admits. The violet lines press up from beneath his pale skin.

“You don't want to know, Mr. Palmer, you just don't want to know,” Phyllis replies. “There's one! You've always had such good veins.”

“Thank you, I do try to take care of them,” Cecil grins.

Phyllis swabs the skin clean and readies the needle, and Carlos politely looks away so as not to watch it pierce Cecil's arm. There is the sound of medical tape being ripped as she secures it in place and Phyllis checking the tubing up to the blood bag before she comes over to repeat the process on Carlos. Things go normally until Phyllis tries to find a vein in Carlos' arm, and he finds himself getting tapped harder and harder in the crook of his elbow.

“Gracious, you have the smallest veins. Small and deep.” There's a loud snap as she yanks the band free from the top of one bicep and switches to the other arm. The process is repeated and she makes a disapproving tisk noise. “We'll have to use the back of your hand. It will take a little longer and sting more, but I just don't think I can get anything from these veins without using a butterfly needle, and then you'll be here forever.”

“That's fine, really,” Carlos says, turning the original arm over for her to feel the thin skin on the back of his hand where the veins are much more pronounced. “It's always been hit-or-miss with me. It's okay.”

“There's a good one,” she agrees. Carlos keeps his eyes on the back of his hand as she cleans the site and the needle is pressed home, thinking that Harris would probably compliment her on her steady hands. But the moment is gone and she tapes the IV in place. “Alright, I'll come back and check on you, holler if you need anything, okay?”
“Thank you, Phyllis, I’m sure we’ll be fine,” Cecil says as Carlos nods his thanks. Then they are left alone in the small exam room, reclined back in their respective chairs for the next ten to twenty minutes or so. It feels awkward as they both turn their heads to look at each other, nothing but the distant sounds in the building and their own breathing to fill the silence. And Cecil has never been one to handle silence well. “So...” he drawls, searching for a topic. “Toxi...toxa...it was something with an osis at the end? What was that all about?”

“Toxoplasmosis. It's a parasite that can be found in most warm blooded species but is most prevalent in the feline family. Humans are most likely to get it from cats they come in contact with because the parasite is transmitted through fecal matter, but if I recall you can also get it from ingesting infected meat. In healthy individuals it can cause flu-like symptoms but for people with weakened immune systems they can develop encephalitis, damage to organs such as the heart, liver, inner ears and eyes, neurological disorders including schizophrenia, and even death if left untreated. If she did not already have major health problems then they're probably just treating the symptoms, but there are fairly strong medications they could prescribe and...and you're probably not that interested,” Carlos concludes, realizing that was probably a lot more information than Cecil really wanted to know. “It isn't exactly the most glamorous subject.”

“No! It's really interesting! And you just knew that off the top of your head?” Cecil asks.

“I don't normally know that much about medical science,” Carlos admits. “But I had a friend in college whose roommate got it. They had six or seven cats in that apartment.”

Cecil's eyes go wider. “You don't think Khoshekh has it, do you?”

“Probably not. He is probably pretty safe from parasites, what with floating off the ground and all. Unless there are flying airborne parasites in Night Vale that I don't know about?”

“Not anymore,” Cecil says. “There was a scare a few years back with twitchfly larvae, but they released a chemical into the air that wiped them out for the most part. Every now and then you'll hear about some construction workers finding some when they're renovating some old home, but that's just one of the hazards of the job, right?”

“Right,” Carlos replies a little less enthusiastically. He wonders how often the government releases random chemicals into the air in Night Vale, and if he and his team should consider wearing respirators more often. “Twitchflies?”
“They’re a little like wasps only a lot longer-lived and with little pincers along their...uh...” Cecil makes a vague motion in the air with his free hand. “The part at the back, that hangs down? That the stinger is attached to?”

“The abdomen,” Carlos answers.

“Right! That! You’re so smart!” Cecil immediately looks chagrined with that energetic statement, a delicate flush staining his cheeks as he suddenly looks far more interested in the blood pressure and diabetes info-chart on the wall. “Uh, did you get any good science done lately?”

Carlos, unsure how to even respond to the first statement, replies, “Everything with Harris and now Claudette has been a bit of a distraction. Hopefully things get back to normal soon—er, well, what passes as normal.”

There is another lull in the conversation, and Carlos tries to think of something, anything to make a valid contribution rather than let the room slip into uncomfortable silence. But his brain keeps stalling out, jumping back to subjects that no one but fellow scientists would be remotely interested in, safe subjects where he can hide his nerves behind technical language and theory.

Somewhere from the back of his memory, his abuela's voice echoes like a rusted bell.

*If you meet a pretty girl, mi Carlitos, do not just talk about you. You are not her world, even if you want to be.*

She might have had a different target in mind, a wife to provide great-grandchildren and not a male radio host, but Carlos supposes the advice is still valid. But that does not immediately present a topic. His eyes settle once again on Cecil's forearms, and his mouth takes over. “I like your tattoos.”

Cecil glances back at him, then down at his own arms. There is a brief flash of worry, almost panic, that crosses Cecil's face. Then it is gone and he is back to his pleasant smile. “Thank you!”

“What are they?” Carlos asks, leaning up in his chair a little so he can see better.

Obligingly, Cecil holds his free arm out across the space between them to offer a closer inspection. Carlos can now see it is a repeating pattern that circles both forearms, a series of intricate lines that
branch out symmetrically from wrist to just before the elbow, with large gazing eyes at the center of the design. “The All-Seeing Eye, and the radio tower,” Cecil explains. “Well, not really the radio tower, but inspired by it. Got them the day I turned eighteen.”

“You already worked in radio?” Carlos asks, taking in the crisp black and violet lines. Upon closer inspection he can now see little touches of orange and gold here and there, especially in the details of the iris. The small strokes of color really pop forward in contrast and seem even more vibrant against Cecil's pale skin.

“Oh. No, not yet. I was just an intern still.”

“You committed the radio tower permanently to your epidermis and you weren't even a full-time employee yet?” The thought makes the scientist laugh. Cecil does not strike him as overly confident, but maybe eighteen-year-old Cecil was a bit more cocky. “Seems like quite a risk for an internship.”

“I always knew this is where I needed to be,” Cecil replies, and the sentence seems heavier that it should. He rotates his arm so Carlos can see the way the design goes around the wrist. “But I knew I wanted the All-Seeing Eye as soon as I decided to get some, and a friend of mine went with me to the parlor. They used ink to put the design in place and I just didn't like it anywhere! Not my shoulder, or my bicep, or my back or hip or thigh or...uh...” Cecil stammers slightly, realizing what he is talking about. He does not need to tell Carlos what Earl thought of putting the tattoo on his lower back. “So my friend said maybe I should get something else so it wasn't just floating on my skin like an awkward half-inflated balloon. And then I just thought of the tower and the tattoo artist took a few hours to design it, and here it is!”

“They're really cool,” Carlos says, daring to reach out with a finger and trace one line near Cecil's pulse point before retreating it back to the safety of gripping the arm rest. “I always wanted a tattoo, but I could never find anything to settle on.”

Cecil shivers imperceptibly at the touch, fingers of his free hand rubbing together. “Did you ever have any ideas? What did you think about getting?”

The scientist shrugs. “I don't know...something related to one of my fields of study, maybe. A chemical compound or an equation, or...you can see why I never got one. Too indecisive. Besides, what if I got a tattoo related to a scientific theory only to find out that it has been disproved.” Carlos chuckles at the thought. “Scientific fact doesn't seem to be as solid as it is everywhere else.”

“Maybe a symbol, then,” Cecil suggests. “Something that is more representative of what you've
studied rather than something specific. You said you knew a lot about radiation and you had all those clocks, and if your car is anything to go by you know a lot about rocks.” Carlos actually lets out a huffy little laugh at that, almost a snort, and it makes Cecil grin. “The only thing I know to symbolize radiation are the signs for it. The trefoil hazard one.”

“And that is so overdone,” Carlos agrees. “It would be worth thinking about, I suppose. Having them wouldn't really keep me from getting a job anymore.” In light of everything that has happened since becoming the head of this research team, Carlos supposes that a little ink is the least of his problems with keeping a job.

“If you decide you want one, I’d be happy to take you by the shop where I had mine done. They still have the same artist. I think she took over when the owner started phasing in and out of existence during working hours. You can imagine how hard that made it to finish a tattoo!”

Carlos imagines how that would work and cringes at the thought. “I'll keep that in mind, thank you. Who knows, maybe I'll find something unique to Night Vale for a tattoo. Something I haven't seen in my studies.”

“You must have spent a long time studying, to become a doctor. Several times. I know you said it wasn't medical degrees but that must still take time.”

“Uh, yeah, yes. It wasn't easy,” Carlos agrees. “I was always just more into learning than anything else. It seemed more beneficial to just double and triple up on classes where I could.”

“Triple classes?” Cecil asks, an eyebrow creeping upward. “Just how many degrees do you have?”

Carlos glances at Cecil then down at the tattooed forearms again. “I have doctorates in geology and chemistry, and masters degrees in mathematics, ecology, history, and linguistics.”

Cecil considers himself a man of poise under pressure. He has seen a lot in his tenure as the Voice of Night Vale. Awe inspiring, terrifying things, things that would make many people shriek and cower with fear or run screaming with madness into the Sandwastes. So even he is surprised when that statement makes him choke slightly in shock. “Gods above and below!” he exclaims. “That's...wow! I can't even imagine! You must be a genius!”

The scientist squirms a little and looks down at his taped hand, uncomfortably trapped by the needle buried in his vein. He is not used to praise being pointed his way. Not like this. “I have a
keen interest in certain subjects,” he allows. “What about you? I remember seeing diplomas on your wall. More than one.”

A restless hand flits to mess with the creases of his trousers as Cecil presses a pleat more tightly against his thigh, right hand is hindered by his own needle so it cannot fidget. “Oh, it’s nothing nearly as impressive as all that. Just the community college, here in town. Journalism and public relations, Associate's degrees. Hardly worth mentioning, in light of—”

“I think that's pretty amazing,” Carlos states, and Cecil's head flies up to look at Carlos with wide eyes.

“You...you do?”

“Sure I do.” And Carlos smiles open and honest at him, and maybe a little self-deprecating. “Certainly you remember that town meeting I did. It was absolutely awful! I’m a horrible public speaker; I kept rambling on about science and going off on tangents and I knew everyone was either bored or confused, but I couldn't help it. I've never been able to handle strangers like that. I couldn't imagine speaking with the sort of weight and presence that you have, and you do it every day to the whole town! And you said you write all your own content, and track down leads...I think that's all pretty impressive.”

The fact that Cecil really does not remember the town meeting all that well other than staring at Carlos' dark curls and watching his mouth move without really hearing the words coming out does not seem like a prudent point. And besides, Cecil is more fixated on what Carlos is saying in the here and now than whatever failings as a public speaker he had a few months ago. “You really think that?” he asks, touched.

Carlos nods, smiling even wider. “I really do. Don't sell yourself short.”

“Thank you,” Cecil replies sincerely, returning the smile with a warm one of his own.

“Alright! Looks like you're both about full!”

Cecil and Carlos both startle at the voice, Phyllis bustling into the room and between them to check their blood bags. “Yes, yes, Mr. Abaroa, you've got a few more minutes. Let me get Mr. Palmer squared away and then we can take yours out.”
“It’s Doctor Abaroa, actually,” Cecil corrects her, warm and polite.

“Oh, that isn't necess—”

“Pardon me, Doctor Abaroa,” Phyllis says, a little smirk playing along her lips like she is more amused by Cecil than anything.

While she is tending to the radio host, Carlos bends around to look below his chair at the blood bag hanging from the short IV stand. It is filled with his dark red blood, slowly working its way fuller with each pump of his heart. Under the armrest as it is and obscured by shadow, the writing looks upside down. A series of symbols on the bag catches his attention, and he tries to focus his eyes in a way that he can decipher them but the angle makes his vision blur.

There is the snipping sound of scissors and Carlos looks back to see Cecil has had his arm bandaged with gauze and bright pink self-adhering wrap. She opens a small refrigerator under one of the counters and pulls out two boxes of juice, handing one to Cecil. “I'll grab you both some cookies once I get Doctor Abaroa squared away.”

“Thank you, Phyllis,” Cecil replies, plucking the straw stuck to the side of his juice box and removing the plastic wrap.

Carlos obediently holds his hand out for her to remove the IV. The tape is removed easily enough, and the needle begins to slide out of his hand—

“Ouch!” Carlos gasps, hand jerking involuntarily as pain shoots through the back of his hand and up his arm.

“I am so sorry, dear!” Phyllis says, disposing of the needle in the biohazard box on the wall before checking the site. The back of Carlos' hand looks red and blood oozes quickly to the surface of the wound, but there is otherwise no bruising or swelling. “I am so so sorry about that,” she says again, cleaning his hand once more before putting gauze tightly against the spot and taping it down with a lime green bandage. “Looks like you wanted that needle out as quick as you could!”

“It's fine, sorry,” Carlos replies, rubbing at his injured hand as soon as she releases it. The skin feels hot to the touch, and he can already tell it will be sore for the rest of the night if not tomorrow. Maybe he was hasty in thinking Harris would approve of her technique.
“Here,” she says, handing him his own juice box. It takes her but a minute to fetch them each prepackaged single serving cookies, handing one to each of them. “We want to make sure your blood sugar comes back up before we send you on your way. No passing out driving, you hear me? Both of you rest, I need to go check on Carolynn. As soon as you feel up to it, you're both free to head out.”

Once gone, Carlos struggles to get his packages open with fingers that ache, the pain on the back of his hand radiating outward. It is annoying more than anything, and Carlos knows that it should not hurt nearly as bad as it does.

“Let me.” Cecil takes the items from his hands, poking the straw into his juice box and handing it back then opening the cookie wrapper. “I always heard that the back of the hand hurts a lot worse.”

“Thank you. And it's alright, just surprised me,” Carlos replies, feeling a little embarrassed but trying his best to swallow that down along with the taste of concentrated apple. “Anytime Harris has had to take my blood or given me an injection, he's had to use a near-infrared device.”

Cecil has to swallow a bite of cookie before asking, “A what?”

“Near-infrared device. It's quite interesting, really! It's a hand held machine that scans for veins and then uses light to paint them on the surface of the skin so they're easily visible.” Carlos takes a sip of his juice. “I told him initially that we didn't have room in the budget for that, but he fought me on it. Good thing I listened. Between this and carpal tunnel, I'd be useless in the field if it hurt like this every time.”

Cecil finishes his food and drink quickly, tossing the trash in the bin across the room. Then he sits sideways in his chair so he can face Carlos. The scientist is trying to balance his cookie and juice in one hand so his other can open and close, trying to work the soreness from his fingers. “May I?” he asks, holding his open palm out to the Carlos’ injured hand.

All movement stops as Carlos stares openly at Cecil, taking a moment to process the question and he suddenly feels hot not just in his hand but in his cheeks. After the briefest of hesitations, Carlos holds his hand out.

The skin of Cecil's hand is cool and smooth against his own, an immediate relief to the slight inflammation he can feel under the surface. Carlos watches as Cecil runs his long fingers over Carlos' own before holding the palm in one hand and using the other to massage the soft skin around the bandage with sure pressure. “This should help,” Cecil murmurs to him, voice lower and softer that before. His fingers trace the lines of Carlos' knuckles, the faint scar along the meaty
outer side below his smallest finger, the faint callous on his ring finger from where he grips the handle of his bicycle. The circle of his wrist where surely Cecil can feel the surging of his heartbeat in double-time. When the hand holding him from below squeezes, Cecil's thumb rotating into the fleshy pads of Carlos' hand, the scientist's fingers tighten in his hold.

“Did that hurt?” he asks.

“No. It feels good,” Carlos replies, breathless. He feels a light-headed, and he does not think he can blame the blood loss. Not with Cecil pressing his thumb to the same spot that sends pleasant tingles up his arm. Nor when Cecil turns his eyes from their clasped hands to look Carlos in the eye, his gut twisting over hot inside.

And Carlos is so incredibly grateful for the lab coat folded in his lap, because he is suddenly, achingly hard.

Swallowing, Carlos does what he normally does when he is nervous—he babbles.

“You know, Lei told me you collected historical artifacts,” he blurts, voice higher and louder than he intended but he presses on heedless of anything other than dispelling the energy in the air that he cannot process. “I-In fact, he, uh, he showed me pictures, of the scroll you showed him—I mean obviously he showed me, I'm his boss and I have to review all the projects that the team is working on, and he was very eager to show me what you showed him—and-and he said you showed him a few other things that you had in-in your office, and he s-said you had a lot more things like that, I mean, historical artifacts, not necessarily scrolls or chants, actually he wasn't very clear what you had just that you had a lot of things you had collected over the years, and that a lot of it might be beneficial to our research and—”

“Yes,” Cecil says, cutting off the verbal flood with the warm word and an even warmer smile.

It leaves Carlos derailed. “Yes?” he asks, worried that he had somehow asked a question in there he had not intended. What had even left his mouth?

“Yes, I do have a lot of interesting things from the town's past,” Cecil clarifies. “And I would be happy to show you. Anytime. Well, not when I have to broadcast, but I do have most mornings and some days off.”

“That would be great, uh...I mean...very beneficial, thank you.” Carlos' hand is still clasped
between both of Cecil's, he realizes.

And then much to his absolute horror, Lei pokes his head around the corner of the door, having already finished and been given the okay to leave his exam room. Lei takes one look at the two of them and both eyebrows shoot toward his hairline in surprise, but he does not immediately say anything. Instead he gives a wide smirk to Carlos and two thumbs up.

If there really is such a thing as a benevolent god or gods in Night Vale, now would be a great time to listen to his prayers and strike him dead from embarrassment.

No such gods are listening, it seems, but Lei does take pity and clears his throat just enough that Cecil pulls his hands away. Not before a parting squeeze, though. “They said Claudette should be ready to go in about twenty minutes. You okay?”

“Fine,” Carlos squeaks, bundling his lab coat in front of him and getting to his feet as Cecil does the same, rolling his shirt sleeves back down over his tattoos. “Where do we go to pick her up?”

“Other side of the building,” Cecil explains. “I can show you. Intern Brad should be about ready, too.”

Thankful that getting to his feet suddenly did not result in a fainting spell, Carlos gestures for Cecil to follow Lei first while he slips his lab coat back on, his injured hand tucking into the side pocket. It gives him a precious moment to calm himself and get his mind focused; they are here on serious business, after all, not...whatever that was that just transpired that Carlos will have to think about later.

Lei waits until they are in the hallway again before triumphantly presenting Carolynn's number displayed in the contacts list of his phone, regaling them with how he charmed her into meeting for Pinkberry the next day.

“If you're not careful you're going to go through all the singles in this town and be out of luck,” Cecil teases as they approach the waiting room for prisoner releases.

“The town isn't *that* small,” Lei argues.

The waiting area for the release of prisoners is more of a common area and it is not empty, instead
filled with random citizens waiting for one thing or another. Lei comments that it is oddly busy for so late at night, and Cecil mentions that the Sheriff's Secret Police believe in making the most out of all the hours in a day, no matter how many there may be. The conversation makes Carlos itch as he keeps his thoughts on the state of time in Night Vale to himself.

Still not enough data. He has to get more data.

Cecil only has to wait about ten minutes before a sheepish looking young man is led through the double doors to the sign-out desk, a Night Vale Community Radio t-shirt on under an opened black hooded jacket and gray camouflage cargo pants. The kid cannot be more than eighteen but he is tall, all long skinny limbs and hands and feet too big for his frame, like a pup that is not used to the paws he has been given. It is no wonder he got caught trespassing; he looks like he would trip on his own feet.

“Intern Bradley,” Cecil greets, getting to his feet and walking over to the desk to sign him out. His tone is even and expectant, and the intern cringes.

“H-hi Mr. Palm—Cecil. Uh, thanks for coming?”

Cecil just hums as he pricks his finger in order to press his blood along the form the receptionist slides across the counter towards him.

“I know you said—”

“Not here, Bradley,” Cecil cuts off, calm and congenial but the warning is there under the surface.

The intern nods quickly, shutting up, and looks out to the crowd to spot Carlos and Lei. He raises a hand in greeting. “Hi Mr. Scientists.”

“Hey Brad,” Lei greets as Carlos nods politely. “Fightin' the good fight?”

That makes Brad laugh, though he tries to keep it to a minimum as Cecil shoots both he and Lei a glare over his shoulder. There is not any heat to it though. “Don't encourage him.” Everything is squared away and Cecil turns back to the scientists. “Does Miss Claudette have anywhere to stay once she is released?”
“We haven’t really gotten that far,” Carlos admits. “I’m not even sure if she will speak with us once she’s released. She might leave immediately.”

Cecil nods, pulling out his wallet and ticking through the business cards stuffed into one side until he finds the one he is looking for and tugging it free to hand over. “Monmouth Motel. It’s just off the exit from Route 800, and they have good rates. Tell Charlie at the front desk that I sent you; he’s the owner’s nephew, and should give you a discount. She at least needs to get a good night’s rest before heading out. The road out of town is a long one.”

Making an effort not to think about the tingle of Cecil’s fingers as they brush, Carlos takes the little white square of card stock and thanks him. “It will be good if she isn’t so close to the labs, anyway.”

It is then that the receptionist calls Carlos up to the front, and he ducks out of the conversation to speak with her. “Alright, Bradley, let’s get you out of here,” Cecil says with bravado, putting a hand on his intern’s shoulder and beginning to lead him toward the exit.

“Hey, Cecil,” Lei says before he takes four steps. When the radio host looks back at him, Lei smirks. “Nice moves.”

Cecil takes approximately three seconds to realize what Lei is talking about, and his eyes widen as his cheeks flush. “Don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Uh huh. Sure thing,” Lei replies, grin like a shark.
Chapter 15

It is another ten minutes after Cecil and Intern Brad leave before Claudette is led out to the reception area in the same fashion, though where Brad had been put-together, friendly and free, Claudette looks anything but. An officer has her by the elbow and her hands are handcuffed, though the last time Carlos saw her they had been linked behind her back rather than shackled in the front as they are now. Her clothes are in shambles, great smears of brown and gray dirt from the parking lot ground into the fabric so thoroughly that it will probably never wash out completely. The sporty jacket she had been wearing is missing three buttons and the hem of her skirt has a three or four inch strip dangling from the front. Her hose is torn clean through with big rips all along her shins and calves. She is not even wearing her heels as they now dangle from her fingers, one of them completely missing the large point of a heel. If he had to guess, Carlos would say it broke when she had been kicking violently at the inside of the police vehicle.

The look on her face is hard to read, but Carlos knows that there is a lot of anger and hostility boiling under the surface. And it is all directed at him.

They do not speak while he finishes checking her out with reception. The Sheriff's Secret Police officer reminds her that her car is in impound, and to keep out of trouble as he finally unlocks the cuffs around her wrists. When he hands her purse over, Carlos half expects her to turn and strike at the officer since his hands are occupied. But she simply gives a stiff nod to the man and rubs at where the metal had pressed into her skin, the bangles around her wrists having been shoved up her arms a little uncomfortably. She has a bandage around the crook of her elbow just as Lei does, a bright happy yellow adhesive holding it in place. The trio maintains their silence all the way out to the parking lot before Claudette decides to speak.

“Thank you for the bail,” she says, the words coming out slower than expected. Lei and Carlos share a look. “They told me they had to have three pints, and that you can't give that much at once. I would have to stay until I could produce that much.”

Carlos opens the door to the back seat for her, and Claudette stumbles slightly as she sits down. Instead of closing it immediately, he kneels down next to the car, handing the keys to Lei so he can get it started. Once the engine turns over Lei flicks on the interior lights and Carlos leans in to get a good look at her face. There is some faint bruising to her chin from where she hit the ground, a little abrasion from the gravel. Her eyes are glassy and dilated, reaction times dull, and there is a slight droop to her facial expression. “They drugged you?” Carlos asks rhetorically. She nods anyway, a rolling of her head on her neck. “We're going to take you to a motel. Do you have any money?”

She nods again, gesturing to the trendy little purse hanging from a skinny leather strap over her shoulder, the one thing she had on her when they had arrested her. Lei reaches for it and she gives a vague noise of protest. “We're just getting the money for the hotel,” he assures her, making sure
she can see him removing just enough to get a room for the night and nothing else.

“Where's Billy?” she slurs, fingers trying to grip the purse once it is handed back to her. It slides off her lap to the car seat, her fingers refusing to hold it. Her once finely manicured nails are a mess of chipped paint and grit.

“Away from you, crazy-pants,” Lei mutters under his breath.

“He's at home,” Carlos answers instead. No use telling her the truth. She looks confused, and Carlos realizes maybe using the word *home* was not the best choice. It is not like the lab is home, anyway. “Claudette, you shouldn't have come. We told you that he didn't want—”

“Liar,” she murmurs, giving an ineffective push to his shoulder. It makes her list to the side as her balance fails her, shoulders sliding along the back seat until she is slumped over a box of monitoring equipment. Whatever drugs the Sheriff's Secret Police gave her are becoming more effective. He is guessing they gave her another dose before sending her on her way, to keep her in line for release.

Carlos sighs and shuts the door, moving to the driver's seat. “So, what, we take her to a hotel and leave her to sleep it off?” Lei asks.

“I don't know what else to do,” Carlos says digging his fingers through his hair in frustration. He drops his voice low so Claudette cannot hear them, though he thinks it hardly matters. “We can make sure she is safe in her room and leave a note to call us—me. I'll handle it. She'll need someone to take her to get her car, anyway. But we can't let her get to Billy. I'm afraid the police will just take him in for reeducation over and over again, and we have no data on what repeated reeducation will do to a person.”

“Shit, they could send us back a vegetable,” Lei hisses, realizing Carlos is right. He sighs and flops back against his seat as Carlos heads for the edge of town. “This is so much more trouble that it is worth.”

The motel is just like every other motel that Carlos has seen in his life along a hundred other highways, one story with a handful of rooms facing a dusty parking lot, the Monmouth Hotel written in exaggerated cursive above a neon vacancy sign out front. This one is faded white with freshly painted red doors and shutters, though the carpets in the front office have little holes in them from wear and tear. The kind of place that cannot afford to renovate the whole place at once and has to do it in stages. Cecil was right about getting that discount, Charlie downright enthusiastic that Mr. Palmer sent him a customer and hopeful that he might mention their services
on the radio. Carlos figures they probably do not get many guests considering how few tourists—outsiders—come through the town, and he vaguely considers that the motel probably gets more use from cheating spouses and randy teenagers than actual tourists. If Carlos had driven past it on the road, he would say it was just the right side of seedy.

By the time Carlos has her checked in Claudette is more unconscious than not, her head lulling on the back seat. Between himself and Lei they are able to half-carry her to room four and help her onto the full sized bed that dominates the little room. The television is an old CRT that even has an antenna perched on top. It might even be a black-and-white. After checking that the room is free of anything harmful by Night Vale standards, Lei makes sure that her purse is where she can see it when she wakes up and that she is more or less comfortable while Carlos writes a note on the stationary provided in the bedside table with a stick of lipstick he found in her purse.

“Lipstick,” Lei comments. “Never thought of that. Might be a good thing to write with.”

“Doesn't last long,” Carlos mutters, his letters getting increasingly fat as he goes. It is simple and to the point, explaining what happened and where her car is and Carlos’ number, promising that he would take her to retrieve her car when she woke up. Leaving the letter next to her purse, Carlos leans over to check her pulse just in case they overdosed her but he doubts it. The Sheriff's Secret Police probably know sedation better than most of the anesthesiologists in the world. “You need anything, Claudette?” Carlos asks, loud enough to get her eyes to flick open.

She makes a hum noise like she is fighting with sleep to open her mouth, and when she does the only words that come out are, “Fuck you,” before she slips off again.

“So not worth it,” Lei sighs from the door.

The last remnants of his dream linger as Carlos slowly comes to consciousness, though he fights it with everything he has. It was a good dream, an amazing dream of a man with a voice dark and sweet and a touch dangerous whispering filthy words in his ear as his hands traveled Carlos’ body. It does not matter that he no longer remembers what the words were, just that the intent behind them was anything but innocent. But the morning tugs him out of his slumber as the first light of day filters through the gap in his curtains, desert sun making the room brighter than his sleep can tolerate. He groans and shifts his legs about in the tangled sheets, luxuriating in the feel of them
against his skin, aware of a heavy weight between his thighs.

He has been careful since he came to Night Vale to keep his more carnal urges in check, even in the recesses of his own mind. Whenever he has taken care of arousal it has been quick and efficient and pointedly not about anyone in particular, relying on old fantasies and just getting done what needed to be done in order to find some relief. And always exclusively in the shower, where he is not completely certain but he thinks the Sheriff's Secret Police grant a touch more privacy while bathing. Carlos has not felt nearly as on display behind the flimsy shower curtain in the tiny room as he has laying in his more spacious bedroom with floor-to-ceiling windows obscured only by the curtains.

But today, in these early morning hours before his mind has constructed the barriers and fortifications that keep such thoughts at bay, Carlos’ imagination strays past the strict boundaries he always places on himself. Muzzy with sleep, the man in his dreams resolves himself with a face and a voice he recognizes. This time he is too relaxed to care, and his eyes stay closed as he licks his lips, a hand petting the dark skin of his lower chest and down along his front, pausing below his navel to run fingers up and down the trail of fine hair there.

Cecil's hands, holding his own, working the muscles beneath the skin like a sculptor forming clay with sure movements so perfectly placed to hit all the nerves along his palm. The tendons flexing with each press and squeeze, up from hand to delicate wrist to tattooed forearm and hell, of course he had one of Carlos' weaknesses. He had never personally been with a man who had tattoos, but that did not mean he did not find them exceedingly attractive on the right person. And Cecil's tattoos draw perfect attention to those deliciously formed forearms. Especially the way the design filled with straight rigid lines curved so perfectly around the muscles there.

In his mind's eye, Carlos imagines one of those arms wrapping around his torso, the gentle pressure of his own hand morphing into Cecil's on his lower belly beneath the sheet. With a slow push his fingers drag under his boxers and along skin into his pubic hair, pulling just a touch before settling his palm against his hard length. His other hand steals up to his own throat, the low moan that pushes out vibrating against his fingers, a reminder that he needs to keep quiet.

Taking himself in hand he gives slow lazy strokes, indulging in teasing himself in a way he has not since he arrived in Night Vale. He is not sure what sort of lover Cecil might be, tender or rough, timid or sure, but the one in his mind works him steadily. After all, there is no rush. And he knows just where to touch Carlos, knows that a hand tugging at the hair at the base of his skull will make his neck arch. Knows that a press of his thumb along the underside of the head right along the ridge will make the tip wet with moisture. Knows that when Carlos' hips start moving of their own accord he is getting close to riding the wave of orgasm.

The thought of one of those lovely arms wrapped around his body, one of those hands working him towards release, makes another low moan slip from his throat that he cannot quite contain. The
other hand would wrap around his rib cage and tug him back into Cecil's body. Would he be hard, pressing his own cock against Carlos' backside? Carlos decides that is exactly what he would do, legs spreading slightly even though there is nothing beneath him but the mattress. It makes his breath catch, air stuttering as his hand speeds up at the thought of it. Cecil just as aroused and undone as Carlos.

While everything else seems but fantasy, Carlos is certain that Cecil would press those sinful lips close and whisper hotly into the skin below his ear, voice so low and dark and promising pleasure, his own name pouring like wine from those lips and across Carlos' body in torrents. That is what tips Carlos over the edge, cock pulsing in his clenched fist as he comes with one last moan that tips an octave or two higher than normal. It leaves him shaking, out of breath, sticky with sweat and semen, but he lets the tremors rock through him to their natural end and his heart calm in his chest before kicking the sheets free and heading for the bathroom.

The shower feels amazing, body loose and oversensitive. He indulges in soaping up thoroughly, washing and conditioning his hair, but as the shower brings him completely to the here and now so comes the increasing tension between his shoulder blades. Stepping out of the tub to dry he feels a creeping anxiety in his gut. By the time he has his towel secured around his waist and he steps up to the mirror over the sink to look himself in the eye, shame has settled over him like a blanket.

*You jerked off thinking about Cecil Palmer.*

Even in the privacy of his own bathroom he cannot stop the dark blush that spreads across his cheeks, eyes dropping to the sink basin. Logically, he knows people fantasize about people they know. People they are attracted to. Obviously. And Carlos can admit that he finds Cecil attractive. Hell, the first thing he noticed about him was his ass in those ridiculous-for-this-heat slacks. He can even admit between himself and his reflection that he is attracted to Cecil in other ways, not just his good looks and radio voice. And there is nothing wrong about indulging in those fantasies from time to time. Nothing wrong at all. He looks back up at himself, at the way his skin is still flushed from his arousal.

*You have to look him in the eye.*

“*Mierda,*” Carlos curses, yanking his medicine cabinet open to get his toothbrush and paste. He makes a point not to look at himself in the mirror while he goes about the business of brushing his teeth and combing his damp hair, though he does have to pay attention while he shaves. His reflection does not look nearly as judgmental while he's rolling his lips in to get at his stubble with the razor. Once he is neat and trim, he addresses his reflection. “*You're a scientist. There is nothing wrong with natural biological functions.*” When his mirror self does not look so sure of that assessment, he adds, “*He doesn't know. There's no point in freaking out, because he doesn't know, and no one is going to tell him.*”
That sits better in his gut than anything else, and with new resolve he goes to get dressed. He is not sure how long the sedative that the Sheriff's Secret Police gave to Claudette will last, but surely she will be calling in the next couple hours. Enough time for him to put together breakfast for himself and do a little work.

A bowl of sausage mixed with scrambled eggs later, Carlos stands at the kitchen bar glaring in confusion around his rooms, hand on the empty counter. He knows for a fact that the day before yesterday he left a stack of readings and notes on the end of the bar, a phonolite sample serving as a paperweight. A quick check of his coffee and bedside tables comes up empty, and they have not slipped onto the floor anywhere. He brought them up here so he could go over them with some of his non-municipally approved books. Did he take them back downstairs by accident?

At the base of the stairs he spots Billy having his blood pressure taken by Harris on the other side of the room, and the relief at seeing his meteorologist safe in the lab once again sets something inside him at ease. “Everything alright over there?” Carlos asks as he rounds to his personal lab and unlocks the door.

“Just doing some routine checkups,” Harris replies carefully, monitoring the numbers on the dial next to the blood pressure cuff. “Told Billy he has to stop skipping out on my tests.”

“I must have fallen asleep reading my notes on the star charts. I don't even remember going to bed last night!” Billy laughs.

So Billy has no memory of anything that happened last night. Probably for the best. “Right. Make sure you're getting enough sleep,” Carlos replies, eyes meeting Harris' before he opens the door and slips inside.

Carlos most decidedly does not tear his office apart trying to find the papers, but he does have to put a pause on looking when he accidentally knocks a whole stack of other findings to the floor and has to put them in order again. His search ends up revealing he has got to clean out some of the coffee cups scattered among the papers and experiments because they are starting to grow mold—on second thought, maybe that mold should be checked, but either way it cannot be allowed to grow without supervision—but not his notes. “Hey, guys?” he calls from his office doorway, leaning out into the main lab. “Has anyone seen my findings from Radon Canyon?”

“Which ones?” Becky asks from her station where she is lifting a large bag of feed up onto her worktable. From the severe looking label, he thinks it might be for the carnivorous chinchilla.
I had a whole month's worth of readings from the river bed down there. All my radiation charts, and all my notes. But they aren't where I left them up in my rooms. Did any of you see them while you were up there last night?"

Those scattered about the lab shake their heads, Matt not even bothering to turn and look from his microscope. Carlos does another sweep of his offices, the main lab and the break room before retreating to his rooms to look again, but the notes seem to have up and vanished. “What the hell?” Carlos mutters, re-stacking a pile of books for the third time just in case he accidentally missed them the first two times. Any further searching is put on hold as his cell buzzes along the counter. He knows who it is before he even picks up.

“Hello?”

“...I got your note,” comes a much more tightly controlled voice than the last time Carlos heard Claudette speak.

“Yes. Uh, I...thought you would...appreciate the ride to the impound lot.”

“Could you bring something to eat.” It is more of a demand than a question, and there is a pause as if the next word is being forced out of her. "Please."

“Of course. I'll head right over. Do you want anything—” The line cuts to the dial tone as Claudette hangs up.

Carlos arrives with a bag of croissants and two cups of coffee from the bakery on Pine Street as well as a grocery bag containing two t-shirts and a pair of sweatpants that Becky donated. The clothes end up being a good idea, because when Claudette opens the door of her motel room her own clothes are barely any better than the night before. She obviously tried to salvage her blouse as best she could by rinsing it in the sink, but instead of a joyful sunny yellow it is now more a dingy goldenrod with one large smudge near the bottom like mud. The white dots on her skirt are similarly brown now, and she appears to have forgone her hose. She takes the bag of clothes and gives them one disdainful look before slamming the door in his face with a terse, “Wait here,” leaving him to sit leaning against the hood of his car as he sips from his own cup.
She comes out a few minutes later looking composed if a bit uneasy in a stranger's clothes. Carlos is guessing she normally eats a little more daintily, but she must truly be hungry from the way she practically swallows one croissant in a handful of bites before settling in on the second one at a slower pace. “Where's Billy?”

“Back at the lab,” Carlos says, trying to get a gauge on her mental state.

She gives an irritated grunt at that, eyes hard as she looks Carlos over. “That officer last night told me Billy's got a restraining order out on me.” That is news to Carlos, and it must read clear across his face because her thin eyebrow ticks upward. “You didn't know?”

“Billy doesn't really talk about his personal life,” he says, which is true, now. He did not really talk about his personal life with Claudette all that much before his reeducation, either, but certainly not since. But Carlos thinks he can put the pieces together now. That was how the Sheriff's Secret Police so easily got Billy to get into the police cruiser last night. Perhaps they told him she was a local that had started following him around, or someone from back in Arkham that tracked him down all the way in Night Vale. It would be easy for him to agree to go in and sign a restraining order to keep a stalker at bay. And while they were at it, they would make sure he never remembered having the need to sign it in the first place.

“That's bullshit,” she practically spits, throwing the wrapper from her food haphazardly into the open window of Carlos' car to the floorboards. “Billy wouldn't do that. Not to me. He said he was coming home, that he was going to stop all this silly field work and settle down and finally get married, and then you and your scientists keep him from the phone, filling his head with lies! You all have brainwashed him or something! What, is he one of your test subjects?” she demands, advancing on Carlos so quickly that he nearly trips trying to step back along the front of the car.

“No!” Carlos insists. “No, we aren't like that! I tried to explain on the phone—”

“Oh, you had plenty of excuses, don't try and feed me any more!” she shrieks, slamming her hand down on the hood of his car hard enough to leave a slight dent. “Tell me what is going on, and you tell me right now!”

Carlos' hands go up defensively in surrender. “Alright! Alright!” He takes a breath and looks around. “At least get in the car, we can talk while we drive.”

It is only a ten minute drive to the impound lot from the motel, but Carlos drives slowly so he has
time to try and explain things to an increasingly more upset and annoyed Claudette. His explanation wobbles between too simple and too scientific, but he really is not sure what words he can say that she will not just believe but comprehend. She certainly does not trust him at first, calling him a liar, a kidnapper, evil, but something eventually gets through. That is almost worse, because before she could blame just Carlos' boss and colleagues—now her enemy is the whole town that took her lover away.

Carlos' hearing might have suffered permanent damage from this car ride, based on how loud she screams. When he pulls the car to a stop along the street it just seems to make her even louder. Out Claudette's window he can see an old tin sign hanging on the brick wall next to the gates, *Night Vale Police Auto Compound*. The security guard peers out at them, concerned, because the woman in the passenger's seat is loud enough to be heard from his post.

Claudette is in the midst of a tirade about the corrupt police in this backwater town when he throws the car into park and turns to face her. “Listen!” he finally cuts in, loud and sharp. She sucks in a breath to argue but he keeps talking. “I know, okay?! I know that it's not right! I know that it's dangerous! You think we don't know that?”

Claudette blinks at him with wide brown eyes, and at least she is listening to his words now. “We're all scared, here. All the time. But we couldn't do anything! By the time we found out it was too late, and we can't figure out a way to reverse it. Believe me, Harris has tried, we all have! And we tried for Gwen—” and his throat catches on the name like a rusty nail, and maybe one day he can say it without having to take a breath. “And we're still trying for Billy. We haven't given up. But for whatever reason, these people decided he couldn't know about you, and they're going to keep wiping him clean as long as he remembers anything. Don't you realize what psychological damage that could cause, repeatedly putting someone through that? You trying to contact him is putting him in danger, and whether or not you agree, you have to stop trying to talk to him. It could kill him—”

One of her hands snags him by the shirt collar and hauls him close so she can hiss right in his face. “You listen to me! Billy is mine, and no fucking nerd like you is going to tell me different! And no piece of paper is going to keep me from what's mine! I don't care what you say; the cops can't be everywhere, and you can't keep my baby locked in there forever!” She shoves him hard back against the opposite side of the car and throws the door open, grabbing her purse. “Tell Billy I'll see him soon!” she shouts, slinging the door shut behind her before stomping barefoot towards the gates. She even goes as far as giving him the finger as she pushes past the guard and heads out of sight.
It is not even mid-day yet and Carlos already feels like crawling back under the covers when he trudges back up the stairs to his third floor apartment. He shuts the door behind him, leaning his head against the wood and tipping back to close his eyes and breathe a deep sigh of relief. He and his colleagues had an impromptu meeting on the back porch while Billy was engrossed with sorting a container of seeds by type that the team had collected over the past few weeks. A lot of the local flora have been shedding seed pods with the coming of winter, and as long as they were sure the seeds posed no threat to the team they decided to just chuck the all in one large zip lock bag and divide them up in the comfort of the lab.

Billy seemed content to sit at his work station moving each little seed pod into their corresponding pile, marking down notches on a spare sheet of paper to keep count while the radio played in the background, his dog Lady curled up near his feet. It had not escaped their notice that Billy had spontaneously stopped calling her Iris, and a quick check of the little silver dog bone name tag hanging from her navy blue collar had Lady freshly printed on the metal, Billy's cell phone number underneath. When exactly the Sheriff's Secret Police changed it, none of them knew.

But Billy was preoccupied enough that it gave Carlos time to fill everyone in on the situation with Claudette, which left them all more uneasy than ever. From the sound of things she had no intention of leaving town, quietly or otherwise. Abbey had voiced what many of them were thinking: why had the Sheriff's Secret Police not just escorted her to the city limits? Or dumped her in the desert? They had no problems turning away the other scientists that had tried to find the town. It made no sense why they had let her into Night Vale at all, much less hang around unchecked.

Nothing made any sense, and they were not going to get any answers from their monitoring officer, he was willing to wager. They still had a lot to figure out as far as how they were going to handle Claudette if she showed up again, and what they were going to do when Billy needed to leave the lab. That was one thing Claudette was right about; keeping him locked up like some prisoner in the lab was out of the question. In the meantime they agreed to come up with some indoor research he could do on-site, and Carlos and Abbey thought they could get him started monitoring the ever-changing state of the atmosphere from Carlos' terrace for a few days. Monitor duty looking for Joanna would be good for him, too.

A buzz from his pocket knocks Carlos out of his daze. Pulling his phone free he is surprised to find Cecil's name on the caller ID. Heat spreads through him, the memory of what occurred in this very apartment this morning flooding him, but he quickly opens the phone to find a text from the radio host.

*Look at this cutie!*
There is a file attached, and he frowns down at the phone as the message downloads, then accepts the prompt to allow the video player access. The image is grainy and he has to turn the volume up, but he can clearly see Khoshekh floating in his spot in the mens’ bathroom at the station. He's got a cat toy clutched between his front paws and his back ones are kicking at it frantically, sharp white teeth digging into the soft fabric. The noise he makes is like the engine of a lawnmower running over something metal, which Carlos thinks means he is excited.

Eyes straining to get the details clear, Carlos can see Cecil in the background of the shot leaning against the doorframe of the bathroom. Dana must be the one recording the video. The radio host blurs in and out of focus, but Carlos can tell that he is grinning.

Carlos smiles down at the video, playing it one more time before replying.

*Yeah, what a cutie.*

He sets his phone and keys down on the counter and starts to walk toward his bedroom before slowing to a stop. Turning slowly, he looks back to the counter. Next to the key ring and the phone is a stack of paper, neat and tidy, with a chunk of phonolite on top.
Chapter 16

“ABBEEY?!”

“YEAH?”

“YOU BUSY?”

“WHY?”

“MY CAR WON'T START! WILL YOU COME LOOK AT IT?”

There are murmurs from the break room and then Carlos can clearly hear Abbey, Becky, Billy and Harris all laugh, presumably at his expense. Several times. With increasing volume. Carlos can feel himself starting to blush even though no one is there to see his embarrassment. But then he hears the scraping of a chair and Abbey comes out, half a sandwich in her mechanical hand and dusting crumbs from the other. “What can I do you for?” she asks. Her expression is schooled into polite concern, but he can see the way her eyes crinkle at the corners where she wants to laugh at his face. Crossing his arms in irritation, he has a feeling that will not be long in coming.

“Will you take a look at it, please?” he asks, tacking on the please because maybe being polite will help her not tease.

She gives him a once-over. “I thought you'd been studying.”

That makes Carlos let out the sigh of the long-suffering. “You're going to make this difficult, aren't you?”

Confirming his suspicions she lets out a giggle and pats him on the back, luckily with the flesh-and-bones arm. Striking pressure is still something she has trouble gauging with her prosthetic, and there have been some incidents. Matt still has a purple bruise on his side where she poked him in the ribs with one metal finger. “It will be a learning experience! Consider me the professor for the day.”
“Difficult and painful...” he complains as she pushes him out the door.

Carlos had just been headed into town to check on some of the readings coming from the Desert Creek housing development. After talking to the Home Owners Association for the area, they had agreed to allow the scientists access to the property where the The House That Doesn't Exist is located. It was no trouble, they had said, because they had been having such a hard time finding a buyer. Maybe having been the site of scientific testing would help the property values!

As a result some of their monitoring equipment was set up around the plot, taking a wide range of readings since they really were not sure what to even look for. And sometimes those readings made little to no sense when the information was sent back to the lab. First thing they always check is if the equipment is malfunctioning, just so they are sure of the results.

His gear was tossed into the back of his coupe and he was thinking of grabbing a coffee and a doughnut on the way over, but when he stuck the key in the ignition and turned it the engine had made a worrying noise as it tried and failed to turn over. Another two tries resulted in the same sound, then the final attempt ended with no noise at all from under the hood of the car. Just a click. The indicators in the dash had not even tried to light up.

Carlos explains all this to Abbey as they move out to the parking lot and she lifts the hood on his car to take a look. He is expecting a quick fix and maybe a little ribbing, something about how easy a fix it would be if he just learned some simple car repair. Instead Abbey's eyebrows pinch together and he instantly knows something is wrong, though he cannot see anything out of place himself when he looks down at the collection of dirty parts in front of him. Wait. No, even he can see something is off. “Is that supposed to be like that?” he asks, pointing at what to him is just a random hose leading from one box-like thing to another cylinder thing. Or it would be if it was not curled oddly on top of the cylinder with viscous fluid dripping from the loose end.

“No, it's not,” Abbey says, reaching out and testing to make sure it is not hot before grabbing the hose. Handing her half-eaten sandwich to Carlos to hold, she fiddles with a few more things with both hands, frown growing. “Neither is this,” she adds, and Carlos has to lean over to see what she is talking about: a set of wires all pulled free from where they should be connected. The sandwich is snatched back and she shoves the majority of it into her mouth, chewing and swallowing before pointing to the side of the car. “Look underneath, tell me what you see.”

Not sure what he is supposed to be looking for but knowing when to follow orders, Carlos gets to his knees and tilts his head to look on the ground beneath the low undercarriage. “Uh...there's a lot of fluid under here,” he replies, worried. The dirt and gravel has soaked up a lot of it, but everything under the car is still wet so it must have been a lot. There are still drops falling every few seconds from somewhere between all those metal bits and tubes. He can hear Abbey curse from above and watches her shoes stride away from underneath the car. Raising his head he looks over the open hood. “What do you think—hey! Abbey?”
The engineer is stalking down the line of vehicles in the lot and flipping each hood up in turn: Matt's SUV, the beat-up old truck Billy bought about a month after coming to town, the car that Lei, Abbey and Becky pooled their money to buy a week later when they could no longer stand Billy bragging about it. "God damn it!" she shouts, kicking out ineffectively at the bumper of the last car in line.

“What? What is happening?” Carlos asks, dusting his hands on the fabric of his jeans as he stands.

Abbey gives him a hard look. “Sabotage.”

He looks at her, uncomprehending. “Excuse me?”

“Someone's tampered with them,” she hisses, gesturing wildly at the line of vehicles. “All of them! Someone that didn't know what they were doing, granted, but they just started yanking and unscrewing and jabbing at things randomly.”

Carlos gapes down at the assorted car parts under his hood now that he has this new information. One hand steals out as if to touch, to grab something and try to fix, but it is more for the want to be useful rather than actually having the knowledge to accomplish anything so his fingers curl back as his hand drops to his side. “Are you serious?”

Surveying the damage in front of her, Abbey nods. “I think they just wanted to make things more difficult on us. Though, yours is a lot worse than the others. There is a lot of damage here.” Reaching into the mess of parts, Abbey pulls out a...thing. Carlos is not sure what it is, but it should probably actually be connected to something under there instead of just laying useless between two other parts. It is also covered in gouges like angry stab wounds all along the metal surface. “Someone is really pissed at you.”

As soon as the words leave her mouth their eyes fly to each other in comprehension. “You should call the police,” Abbey says firmly.

“I have no proof it was her,” Carlos argues.

Abbey takes a step closer so they can speak low. “I thought we had someone monitoring us all the time?”
“Almost all the time. You know I don't know the rules for this stuff.”

“Even if it wasn’t her, someone did this! This,” and she waves the part under his nose, “Is not some Night Vale thing! This was a human doing something intentional!”

“Oh for the love of—” Carlos cuts himself off, pressing his hands to his face and making an annoyed noise into his palms. “I do not need this today, I do not.” Dropping his hands, he looks along the open hoods. “Will you be able to fix them?”

“I'll have to check, but probably. Unless she tampered with the computer in you or Matt's car, but I doubt it. I won't want to mess with anything until the police have a look, though. If they even bother.”

The next thirty minutes involve Carlos calmly and quietly informing his team that their vehicles were vandalized in the night, dealing with the blow-out, and calling the Sheriff's Secret Police. It is clear as day that everyone other than Billy knows exactly who the culprit most likely was judging by their strained looks and stiff postures. Still, his team readily jumps on the suggestion that it was probably some local teens out to make trouble. If their words ring hollow, Billy does not notice.

Officer Erwin apologizes profusely for the lapse in monitoring when he shows up mere moments after Carlos calls the station. Apparently the previous evening had been one of his monthly designated nights off but his replacement had called in sick with the strand of flu that has been going around, and the need for another monitoring officer had simply gone unnoticed. A simple oversight on the department's part that will not happen again, and could they please not mention any of this to the townsfolk, especially Mr. Palmer?

“It’s fine, really, no one got hurt or anything,” Carlos says, following him around as Officer Erwin investigates the crime scene. He assumed that the Sheriff's Secret Police did not really have to worry about bad press, but maybe small town politics are more intricate than he thought. “Just inconvenient.”

“Is there anyone other than Miss Wells that might have wanted to cause you some inconvenience?” he asks, pulling a small camera from one of the many pouches along his person and lining up a shot of the damage inside Matt's SUV.

Carlos takes the time to consider the question, which Officer Erwin appreciates. People so often immediately assume that no one would wish them harm. No one more than the normal psychopaths
or malevolent forces usually do. But the scientist wants to be accurate; it is something a scientist is. “Not that I know of,” he finally assesses. “That man, I’m not sure his real name, he goes by the Apache Tracker? We had a bit of a run-in but it was nothing serious. And it was a good while back. Most everyone in town has been nice.”

“That's good to hear. We are a town of simple people, and I'd hate to hear you had trouble just because you're an outsider.”

Simple people is not the term Carlos would have used, but he nods anyway. “What can you do?”

“We'll question Miss Wells, but I can't really go any more into the investigation than that. I'll leave you a form that you'll need to fill out and send in to your insurance company, and a copy you can leave by the window that I can pick up for our records. And don't worry, there won't be any more slip-ups in your monitoring.”

“...Great,” Carlos mumbles, less than enthusiastic. If only he had known they were not being watched last night, who knows what they might have been able to accomplish. Damn hindsight.

A loud string of curses interrupts the two and they look over at Abbey who is hunched over the open hood of Carlos' car elbow-deep in dusty car parts. Her hair has fallen in her face and she blows upward hard to try and clear her vision, a worrying scrape noise echoing from whatever she is doing with a set of well-used tools. “Shame how much damage was done to your car. It's a nice little vehicle. Was thinking of getting one for my wife.”

“Uh, yeah, shame,” Carlos replies, crossing his arms again to hide his discomfort and annoyance. Is he really the only one who cannot tell what the hell is wrong with a car by sight?

“I'll leave a copy of these pictures with the form, and let us know if the insurance company gives you any trouble. I hate to see good people not get compensated when something clearly wasn't their fault.” He walks over to Abbey and asks her a few questions about the state of the car, and he takes a few more pictures before he bids them both a good day and walks off talking into his radio.

“Bad?” Carlos asks once Officer Erwin is out of sight.

“It's not good,” Abbey replies, shaking her head in dismay. “You won't be driving anywhere today.”
“Shit.” Despite being nearly winter it is still hot enough out at mid-morning for him to sweat, and he pushes at the hair sticking uncomfortably to his forehead. “Are any of them drivable?”

Abbey walks over to Matt's SUV and takes another look under the hood. “The only thing wrong with this one is a missing spark plug, unless there is something else wrong with it I can't see...” She turns in a circle looking at the ground around them.

“Spark plug?” Carlos asks. The engineer looks up at him and he sheepishly rubs at the back of his neck, causing Abbey to roll her eyes.

Holding two fingers out in front of her, she says, “About this long, a hooked screw on one in and a terminal on the other. A metal bit. And you're pathetic.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Seriously, how a man as smart as you, who can put together a Geiger counter with his eyes closed, not know what—”

“Shut up.”

They scour the ground for a few minutes before Carlos finds the missing part at the edge of the fence where their vandal tossed it along with a couple other pieces of metal and tubing and straps that just make Abbey tut and complain about how hard it is going to be to order new parts all the way out here. Luckily there does not appear to be any damage to the spark plug itself, just a layer of dust that Abbey blows out with a few hard puffs of air. It is replaced in a matter of minutes and the SUV rumbles to life. “At least we have one working car,” Abbey says. “But I'll have to put in some work with the others.”

Carlos looks around them, at the street out front of the laboratory and the parking lot next door, people streaming in and out as they get their weekly slice from Big Rico's. “I don't want you working on them out here.”

Abbey frowns at him, confused. “You don't?”

“You're too exposed,” he replies, looking at the secure lab doors. “And I don't want you out here at night by yourself, since I know you won't stop when the sun goes down. Can we move them to the
back of the building? At least you'll be inside the fence.”

She seems to get what he is not saying then, and nods. “I can throw them in neutral, but we'll need some help pushing them back there.”

A helping hand from Billy is more than enough to get the vehicles pushed around the side of the building and through the chain link gate, lined up in the center of the space like medical patients waiting their turn in triage. When they had moved the other car, a steady trickle of black oil had trailed from underneath marking their progress and it sent Abbey into a new wave of creative curses. Billy fussed a bit over his own truck, muttering about money wasted and how they 'just don't make them like they used to.'

“You know about fixing cars?” Abbey asks, tilting her head. He had never really showed interest before.

“Sure! We can't all rely on our engineer buddies like some people,” he said, sending a knowing smirk Carlos' way.

“So many jokes today,” Carlos sighs. Then, he gets an idea. “Maybe you can help Abbey out with this? We really need them fixed as soon as possible, if we want to get any field work done.”

Billy gives him an exaggerated salute. “Whatever you need, bossman.”

He nods and turns to head inside. “Thanks. I can just go take Matt's—”

“Ah ah ah!” Abbey calls, wagging a finger at him from where she is kneeling over a box of assorted parts. “Where do you think you're going?”

“I have science to get done,” Carlos says like that is obvious.

“You need to learn a thing or two about cars,” she counters. “Seriously, you drive this thing out to the desert every other day, what are you going to do if it breaks down out there? Where there isn't any reception, and the police don't follow? You want to risk dehydration and heat stroke?”
He gestures wildly back at the lab. “But I have to get out there and check the equipment at The House That Doesn't Exist!”

“That can wait, man. Abbey's right, it's too dangerous out there to not be prepared,” Billy says. “We don't need to lose any more of us, especially you.” And damn if he does not look so sincere and worried about Carlos' well being. He wants to argue; he has wasted enough hours over the past week on things not science-related. But they're right.

Carlos makes a strained whining noise, head tipping back in frustration, and Billy shoots Abbey a grin knowing they have won.

“...and then you use the two open wrenches to tighten it back up,” Abbey explains, holding a tool in each hand and cranking the hex fittings into place. “Think you can handle that?”

“I think so,” Carlos nods, wiping sweat from his forehead. He is down to his Star Wars t-shirt and jeans, the ends of his hair damp and curling, his discarded lab coat on the ground beneath his back. Dirt and grime is smeared along the side of his neck where he keeps trying to push the strands off his overheated skin, and even though he is wearing a spare pair of work gloves he can tell the insides are not exactly clean.

“Even though the second brake line wasn't cut, it's always good to change them at the same time. That way they're always similarly worn. We'll go ahead and have you change the other one, see if you learned anything.” She hands the two wrenches over to Carlos with an encouraging smile. “Just follow the steps.”

“Follow the steps,” he echoes and nods again, accepting the tools. This should not be too hard, he thinks, talking himself through the simple explanation Abbey had gone over. Loosen the connection using the two wrenches. Be ready for excess brake fluid to leak out. Remove the old brake line and replace it with the new one. Hand-thread the connection together. Use the two wrenches to tighten the hex fastenings.

Abbey tries not to smile too widely when she can hear Carlos repeating the steps under his breath as he moves around the car and underneath the opposite side, mindful of the jacks holding the vehicle off the ground. It is amusing that his little habits from the lab are spilling over into their
pseudo-garage. Not wanting to work directly under the sun's rays all day, Carlos and Billy had thrown up the excavation tent they had in the storage room, big enough for two cars to fit under. While Abbey and Carlos work on his hybrid, Billy is working on the few repairs his truck needs before moving on to the car. She tries not to watch too closely as Carlos works, pretending to check on other things while watching from the corner of her eye. Her boss can get a little defensive when he feels like he is not grasping a concept quick enough, she has found.

“How's it going over there?” Abbey calls over to the other vehicle.

There is a scraping noise out of sight, and Billy's upbeat voice replies, “Not too bad! I think I can get this one fixed by the end of the day, if we have another fan belt. Most of the damage is easily fixable, just tedious. Also, I apparently had a bird trying to build a nest under here.” He tosses a little bundle of twigs cobbled together into a crude spherical shape onto the dirt out in the sun. “No eggs, though. Sorry birds! Have to find a new home!”

“You better hope it was just a bird's nest, and not some sort of poison-spitting lizard or winged snake or something.”

Billy snorts at that, giving Abbey a look. “If so, I'm not telling Becky. She'll want me to try and catch it.”

“Don't feel like breaking out the butterfly nets?”

“Or the metal cages.”

“There,” Carlos states, giving a final crank with the wrench. “Is that right?”

Abbey scoots across the dirt on her back to check the connections and smiles. “Very good, Dr. Abaroa! You get a gold star!” There is straight out laughter coming from the other car at that. Carlos glares upside down at the man partially blocked by the raised hood until it dies down to the occasional chuckle. His temporary instructor ignores this, continuing, “Now all we have to do is add the brake fluid then bleed the brakes.”

He recoils a touch, looking up at the tubing he just replaced. “Uh... bleed the brakes? Do you really think that's the best way of putting it here?”
Billy leans over the side of the truck. “If actual blood comes out of your brake lines, I'm throwing in the towel.”

“Don't be dramatic. We'll have rags at the ready no matter what fluids decide to leak out.”

Things go well in that the connections hold, Carlos earning his fictional gold star after all, and the fact that no blood makes itself known is a definite plus. Abbey explains that it is a relatively easy thing to fix on a car, routine maintenance especially in hot dry climates where the plastic can crack in the heat. Still, Carlos feels oddly proud of this small accomplishment and the few things he has learned so far, the feeling warming him from the inside.

Abbey is going over the issues they are going to have getting some replacement wiring since hybrids have more electrical components, several of which were damaged in the attack, when there is a sudden loud pop from the other car like a hose bursting. It is quickly followed by the high-pressured splash of liquid spraying against metal and human alike, then Billy's loud shout of “Shit!” Looking over, they find Billy standing back from the hood with a black slash of oil from left shoulder to right knee and dripping in rivulets down over the rest of him. “God damn it!”

“Oh my God,” Abbey giggles, Carlos laughing right along with her as they scramble to find rags for him to mop up most of the excess. “What happened?”

“I don't fucking know,” he replies, chuckling at his own predicament. “Damn, these clothes are trash.”

“Don't walk through the lab like this. Let me run get you something to change into,” Carlos says, pulling his dirty gloves off his hands. “What do you want me to bring?”

“I've got shorts in the dresser, and I think I got a blue t-shirt on the floor by the bed. It's got the solar system on the front. No use putting on clean clothes if they're going to get dirty again. Oh, for God's sake, it's in my dreads, man!”

Carlos grins and heads back to the main building with the sounds of Billy's fussing behind him. Wonderfully chilled air hits his skin as he comes inside, and he groans slightly at how good it feels to lift his black hair off his neck. He wonders if they are even going to need the heater for the winter, or if the air conditioner will end up running the whole year through.

The second floor is empty of people, the building feeling oddly silent for the middle of the day.
Sun filters out from Billy and Matt's shared room and into the hallway from the ajar door, little motes of dust dancing in the light. Carlos pushes his way in and takes a moment to survey the space; it is abundantly clear that at least one of the two men that share the room is reliving his glory days in the dorm rooms. There is laundry thrown about all over, the basket overflowing with clothes caked in dirt or random stains from fast food or the lab. Only one of the beds is made, the blankets of the other tangled and twisted from sleep. Not that Carlos makes his bed every day, but he does wonder if he even cleans his sheets. “Note to self, make sure to buy some Febreze at the Ralph's,” he mutters, nose wrinkling at the stale odor of sweat and feet that hangs in the air. Then he spots a bottle of it on Matt's desk and he grabs it, giving the room a sweeping spray.

Matt is either really patient or suppressing a lot of irritation over the state of Billy's side of the room. Carlos would guess the latter.

A pair of shorts is easily located in the dresser, but the t-shirt ends up nowhere to be found. Carlos tosses clothes left and right, thinking Billy must have been wrong but unwilling to dig through their nasty laundry basket to find a stupid shirt. The man even has clothes stuffed under his bed. Dropping down to the floor, Carlos starts shoving things to the side trying to spot this mysterious shirt.

“Aha!” Carlos catches sight of it dangling oddly from where it snagged one of the springs on the underside of the bed. The graphic printed curve of the outer planets' orbits and Neptune are visible from how it is folded. He reaches out and gives it a hard yank, pulling the fabric free. But as he does an object falls down onto the floor with a solid thump. Frowning, Carlos puts a hand over it and pulls it and the shirt out into the light.

It is a book. Carlos rolls to sit with his back against the bed frame so he can get a better look. Small but thick, bound in dark brown leather that has faded from a rich mahogany to light tan in the parts where hands have opened and closed it over time. There are even cracks along the edges, a little fraying on the corners that suggests the book has fallen or scraped against other things on multiple occasions. On the cover a star chart reminiscent of those found in old science texts has been embossed into the surface, the texture smooth and rough and smooth in turns under his fingertips. There is no text on the front or the spine; it must be a journal of some sort. A double-sewn flap of leather wraps around the open side with a worn silver snap holding the book closed. And as if that security was not enough, a braided cord of leather and two other fabrics that Carlos does not recognize, one black and one green, wraps around the book over and over again. Looped into the ends of the cord is a ring.

A diamond ring.

Carlos stares down at the book, thoughts racing. The purpose of the ring is obvious, from the delicately designed gold filigree to the prominent clear stone in the center flanked on either side by three smaller diamonds. A woman's ring that Carlos imagines was purchased to perfectly fit a well-
The fact that Billy was going to propose to Claudette comes as no surprise. He had mentioned the possibility, of course, and for the two it seemed inevitable even if it was ill-advised. No, what is surprising is what this ring is doing here. There is no way given how thoroughly they wiped every trace of Claudette from Billy's life that the Sheriff's Secret Police would allow him to keep such an obvious reminder of the love he had with this woman.

Which means they missed this. And whatever is written in this book.

A loud banging from downstairs startles Carlos, eyes flying to the open doorway at the fear of being caught. He can hear Lei downstairs, the shuffling of equipment, the slamming of another door as someone passes through. He has lingered here too long. Without really thinking about it, Carlos shoves the journal into the waistband at the back of his jeans and pulls his shirt down to cover it. Clothes in hand he returns to the back porch where Billy is still lamenting how much oil he is going to have to clean out of his hair.

“—it's terrible, just terrible! God damn, and I hate the smell of vinegar, but it can't be helped! Ugh, man, this sucks!”

“That bad?” Carlos asks, setting the shirt and shorts to the side while Billy starts to strip. Billy has never been shy about his body, dropping everything but his boxers right there in the open sun and getting the last of the excess oil off his skin. Politely turning his head so as not to stare, Carlos sees that Abbey has no qualms about looking her fill. “Abbey,” he chastises.

“What, see something you like, girl?” Billy asks with a roguish smirk, flexing a little.

It makes Abbey laugh out, humming, “We're allowed to take in the scenery. This is a research lab, after all.”

“Anything to help a fellow scientist,” he teases back. “Don't worry about the bossman, I know I'm not his type. Maybe someone a little shorter, a little slimmer. Maybe a little more vocal—”

“ANYWAY,” Carlos interrupts, feeling his face flush but unable to stop it. “You said something about vinegar?”
Yeah, to treat my dreads. After I shampoo I'll do a baking soda and apple cider vinegar rinse, make sure there isn't any damage.”

Carlos frowns. “Wouldn't that cause an acid base reaction followed by a decomposition reaction? Combining sodium bicarbonate with hydrogen and acetate ions—”

“Carlos, man, I know the science. Everyone who's seen one of them papier-mâché volcanoes has seen the reaction. You don't do it at the same time, man.”

“Oh.”

“Do we even have apple cider vinegar? Does it have to be apple cider?” Abbey asks.

“It's cool, I can run out and get some—”

“No!” Abbey and Carlos blurt simultaneously. It earns a confused look from Billy, so Carlos rushes ahead. “No, I need to head out anyway, and you'll be more help to Abbey with the cars that I will. Just let me know what you need and I'll grab it.”

Thirty minutes and a fresh lab coat later Carlos is cranking up the air conditioning in Billy's truck and pulling out of the lot, finally headed to his original destination. Some days he feels like he simply cannot get anything substantial accomplished, and while that is not an uncommon feeling in the science community, getting waylaid by ordinary mundane things is always irritating. Reaching over the larger dash Carlos flips on the radio then immediately lunges for the volume as loud thumping rock blares over the speakers. He gets it normalized, realizing that the beat is not drums but actual rocks striking against something stretched and wet that Carlos does not really want to think about.

He swings by the Ralph's and grabs a bottle of apple cider vinegar and a soda and beef jerky for himself. Well, jerky. It does not specifically say beef jerky on the package, but then again, none of the packages in that section are explicit about just what meat is going into their products. But Carlos reasons that he hardly knew what was going into the things he ate outside of Night Vale, and if he analyzed everything they sold at the Ralph's he would probably starve.
Just as Carlos gets back in the truck and cranks it on the intro music to Cecil's show plays over the radio. He turns up the volume just as Cecil starts to speak.

“Our top story today: A roving pack of feral dogs has been terrorizing Night Vale for the past several hours. The dogs have been described as mostly mutts, possibly pit bull mixes. Witnesses say their apparent leader is the three-headed one wearing dozens of decorative service medals and chevrons.”

He rips open the bag of jerky and pops a piece in his mouth, stuffing the open bag in the pocket of his lab coat. Chevrons?

“Sheriff's Secret Police confirmed that the dog pack has already attacked a group of elementary school children this morning, around eight, as they were getting on the bus. Injuries were minor, as the children protected themselves ably with their school-issued nerve gas canisters and automatic pistols. The dogs' motives are not yet known, although authorities believe it could be meth and/or gang related. More on this story as it develops.”

Carlos shakes his head. Nope. Not his problem, not today. After the dog with the billboard through its abdomen (which incidentally ended up escaping through a gap in the fence and running off into the desert, an image of a turkey sandwich taunting them with Harlot as they watched it fade into the distance) he wants nothing to do with weird dogs. At least for a little while more.

“This Friday afternoon, the Parks Department will be spraying pesticide in all public park areas, and in neighborhoods with dense foliage and predominantly Irish heritage. Night Vale is making a strong effort to reduce the mosquito population and the dangerous diseases that they carry. Last year, mosquitoes were responsible for outbreaks of West Nile, influenza, panache, elephantitis, and Fanny Brice Approximation Syndrome.”

“Wait, what—?”

“Please stay indoors from 1:00 PM Friday until 10:00 PM Saturday to avoid dermal contact with the pesticide, which has been known to cause skin abrasions, epilepsy, super epilepsy, and organ inversion. The Parks Department also notes that the pesticide has a half-life of two-thousand one hundred years, which means we'll be safe from those annoying mosquitoes for a long time.”

Carlos loses focus on the radio program thinking about that. A pesticide that powerful would be highly dangerous to any living matter that comes in contact with it. Is it possible that Cecil is
exaggerating for the sake of drama?

Wait, who are we even talking about here?

At a stop sign, Carlos pulls out his phone and shoots a quick text off to Harris to look into the situation. Maybe they can speak to the Parks Department about getting a sample of this pesticide. It does not sound like something that is under a lot of regulations, even though it should be. It also makes him wonder just how bad the mosquitoes must be in Night Vale to warrant such extreme measures.

He pulls into the driveway in front of The House That Doesn't Exist and puts the truck in park, raising his hand to turn off the engine but pausing. Maybe just a few more minutes. He has such a nice voice, and he will probably miss most of the show, he reasons.

“Let's go now to Community Health Tips. Listeners: Are you suffering from carpal tunnel syndrome? Are you enjoying carpal tunnel syndrome?”

Carlos' eyes zero in on the radio, staring with increased nerves with every word that pours out of the speakers.

“Are you surprised by carpal tunnel syndrome? Are you enraged by carpal tunnel syndrome? Do you feel a throbbing sadness that you almost cannot stand from carpal tunnel syndrome? Do you feel a bounty of love and appreciation for your fellow human beings traveling through this confusing and finite lifetime with you from carpal tunnel syndrome?” The voice dips low and suggestive. “Do you get sexually aroused by carpal tunnel syndrome? That—”

He slams his hand into the knob on the dash, Cecil's sultry voice cutting off into complete silence save for the beating of Carlos' heart in his chest and the sound of the air conditioner ticking from being shut off. A wave of panic surges through him for a moment before solid thoughts take hold.

No. No, no, no. It's just a coincidence. Just a coincidence. Just because Cecil was touching him—massaging his hand—when it was hurt does not mean anything. Maybe it just reminded Cecil of carpal tunnel. That is not that far-fetched. Lots of people have carpal tunnel. Maybe Cecil has it himself! Maybe it has nothing to do with him! Yes. Yes, it has nothing to do with Carlos in any way. It was just a coincidence. He does not know about anything that may or may not have happened in his bed the other morning.
Or the next night.

He takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. It really is a silly thing to get worked up over, anyway. And he has science to do.

The House That Doesn't Exist being one of the first projects they started after arriving in Night Vale, it was important that they establish a system of protocols for studying it. Different monitoring equipment was set up to measure a variety of readings, some of which have since been removed after it was determined things like ultraviolet rays and subatomic particle emissions were not applicable in this situation. But temperature, vibrations, radiation, and many more quantifiable variables that alter from day to day are all diligently measured and recorded, and Carlos wants to make sure they do not miss a single one.

Unfortunately, The House That Doesn't Exist happens to be located in the middle of the suburban Night Vale community of Desert Creek, which incidentally seems to be completely devoid of anything resembling a creek. All around the neighborhood are cookie-cutter houses in happy shades of cream, yellow, tan, and light blue, identical mail boxes in front of driveways filled with middle-income sports utility vehicles that have probably never left the asphalt unless driven off the road when the asphalt opens up and tries to eat the car. It all feels very Stepford Wives to Carlos, creepy and cloying, and reminds him of a few years of his childhood he would rather bury in a shallow grave out by Route 800. The people are nice enough, most giving him a friendly wave when he passes on the street. Though he does get some distrusting looks from some of the soccer moms and the occasional power-walking dad out taking the family dog for some exercise.

The real problem is the kids. There is no question that children are constantly trying to traipse through the cordoned off property. Some incidents are innocent enough; the house directly to the left of The House That Doesn't Exist is a family of five with three middle- and elementary-school children, two boys and a girl. The boys are both little sports stars in their daddy's eye and a basketball hoop is mounted near the top of the garage. It was politely explained to the parents that the children—and their toys—needed to stay off the property to keep the data from being corrupted, but there is not a week that goes by when a basketball does not go careening through the site. On one occasion the two young boys had to apologize to Carlos and Becky, a broken video camera in pieces on the ground between them, heads hung in embarrassment as their mother stood behind them with arms crossed.

Those cases may be irritating and occasionally costly but Carlos can hardly be mad at them. They are just kids playing in their yard, accidents happen. It is the teenagers that grate on his nerves. Once they found the generator they use to keep the equipment running spray-painted with a crude drawing of a dick in bright neon yellow. Another time they jammed a stick into one of the sensors on the light emission monitor, shattering the lens inside. Someone outright stole one of the temperature gauges. They later found it tossed on the side of the road, the housing cracked and mercury leaking onto the dirt.
As Carlos walks around the property checking each piece of equipment in turn, he has to admit that he might not be the fatherly type. Nothing new there. In small doses he does well but he would much rather at the end of the day send the children home with their parents. He has too many lives to worry about as it is without adding someone to the mix that cannot even drive yet.

Everything appears to be in working order today. Nothing noticeably out of place, no new footprints in the dirt to indicate someone messing around. He cleans out a thick layer of dust coating the time-lapse camera casing, glad to see that their efforts to keep the lens dirt-free are paying off. Interesting that there seems to be new growth on the rose bushes in front of The House That Doesn't Exist considering the time of year, and he takes a few clippings for analysis back at the lab. He does a check of the locks and chains they use to secure the equipment in place and a walk of the perimeter before heading back to the truck.

As he leaves Desert Creek, it occurs to Carlos that there are not a lot of people out today. He did not see the usual number of kids riding their bikes in the street or running around in a cul-de-sac. There are hardly any cars on the roads, either. He does not think much of it, though. Maybe it is one of their scheduled days to cower in fear in their homes or something of the sort.

Just a few blocks from the lab, Carlos’ curiosity finally gets the better of him. Pulling off the road proper, he parks in an empty lot behind some generic looking businesses, the backs of the brick buildings tall enough to cast the truck in shadow from the bright sun. He turns the car off and looks over at the glove compartment, closed and innocent. But he has to know.

Inside is the journal, hastily stashed there when he had gone out to give Billy his clothes. Picking it up he turns it over a few times in his hands, checking it for any more clues but it is just as he saw it on the floor of the bedroom. Carefully he unwinds the braided cord mindful not to sling the diamond ring around and sets both aside. The snap falls open easily; that explains the extra protection. The paper inside is thin and most of the book is positively filled with Billy’s handwriting. Carlos flips through the book randomly for something to catch his eye.

We had an argument about Alexis today. She found out that she was my first kiss. I don’t know what to do...Alexis has been my best friend since preschool! And that first kiss was in 7th grade, it's not like it meant anything! We were kids! The next day I'm pretty sure she shoved me into a locker! And what's more, Alexis is dating John! So no, we aren't seeing each other behind your back! Why would you even think that? What am I supposed to do, just stop hanging out with her? It's just so stupid...
Found out Claudette is allergic to dogs. Which doesn’t make any sense, cause she had pictures at her house of her and this little terrier with bows around its neck. She says it’s a recent allergy or something. But it means she won’t be coming by the house as long as we have Biscuit. She asked what breed he was. Ha! Like I even know! I think he’s more of a boxer mix, but the shelter sure didn’t know.

I was hoping we’d be able to hang out at home more often...taking Claudette out every few days is starting to hurt my wallet. But I can't tell her that! She’s classy, I can't let her think I'm some broke dude. It would be nice if she ever wanted to go out with our friends, but she said Franklin is irritating, and she still isn’t talking to Alexis. And now Alexis hasn’t talked to me in like a week.

I decided not to try out for drum major. I know, I know, I said it was important, but Claudette sat down with me and talked about if I just worked a few more hours a week we could go to Florida this summer. She really wants me to see Disney World—she said she's been four times, and that there is nothing like it. She said that's way better than waving my arms around every day after school for a few months, getting all sweaty in those uniforms.

Really, what is wrong with meteorology? How can you not like the awesome power of nature at its best and its worst? I can't think of anything I'd rather study! I guess not everyone understands...
I took Claudette by work today to meet everyone. She said she was really interested in seeing the new facility! But...I don't know. Things didn't really go as planned. She seemed really distracted, and kept checking the messages on her phone. Nobody seemed to get along with her. Maybe it was just a bad day to bring her by, I mean, we do have that review coming up at the end of the month. Everyone's on edge. Next time, I'll bring her by when everyone is gone for the day.

Alexis left town without saying bye. Claudette was right, she is just a bitch.

Momma said I've been acting different lately. When I asked what she meant, she said I seemed awful tired, and more quiet than usual. Have I been? I'm not sure. When I asked Claudette, she just shrugged, so I'm not sure if that's a yes or a no?

Mom said she was worried, but I guess that's what mom's do.

Stupid stupid stupid stupid stupid! Why does anyone even bother with me! FUCK!

This is nothing less than I deserve.
I signed up for a few business classes this semester. Twenty-one credit hours is going to be no joke, but I need to start thinking about my future if meteorology doesn't pan out. Something that will be more lucrative, you know? Looking at the business opportunities for people with this degree isn't all fun and games...and yeah, my adviser says I'm doing great and should be able to find work easy, but I...I don't know. Does he even know what he's talking about? Can I even trust his judgment? If things don't work out, I need something to fall back on, and Claudette’s uncle has a manufacturing business up in Vermont. As long as I'm not a salesman. Claudette said I'm horrible speaking in front of a crowd.

The presentation went okay, I guess. All the professors were there, or the important ones anyway. I messed up the opening, just like Claudette said I would! God, I was so mad at myself. Why couldn't I just get the words out right?

Dr. Kendrick congratulated me personally. I'm not sure why, I mean, it's not like it means that much except to us nerds... I could have sworn that I saw Claudette come in during the last ten minutes or so, but she swears she was there for the whole thing. I must have been imagining things. There was a couple of visiting scientists I wanted to talk to afterward, but Claudette said we had to get going. There was some sort of party she said we had to get to. It ended up being a bunch of her friends. I don’t remember her mentioning it before, but we must have just got our schedules mixed up.

She finally stopped crying when I promised to come back a day early from the convention. I'm going to take her out for ice cream now. Maybe she'll be calmer by the time we get back. It's my fault she's upset.
It's my fault.

Never would have guessed I'd run into Alexis Hargrave! I saw her at the gas station. She was in town to visit a friend who's getting married. (Also, Franklin is getting married??? Why didn't he tell me???) Apparently she works up in New York with some theater company now! Sounds like a small production, nothing I had ever heard of but I don't keep up with that stuff like I used to. She has a little apartment up there with a roommate and a pet ferret!

She asked how I was doing and I told her about school and Claudette. And I told her I was sorry we didn't talk after graduation. She got this funny look on her face, like she was kind of sad? Maybe it was from being so close to home again. I know I get nostalgic every time I go visit Mom and Pop. But she gave me a long hard hug and told me that if I ever needed anything, that she would be there. I really wish we had kept in touch, she's such a good person. People do stupid things in high school, after all.

I'm sorry....I can't do anything right. I'm sorry.

God, I feel like I either can't sleep at all or need to sleep for a week straight...I just want to crawl into bed and never get up again.
I applied for that position today for the New Mexico trip. The one we had that fight about. I haven't told Claudette yet...I know she won't be happy, and she is going to be really upset with me, but this is one thing I really want. I already turned down the Greenland expedition and going to South Africa, I can't turn down a third one! And there's no way I'll be able to research abroad once I ask her to marry me. This is my last chance to do this! Just once, and I'll be happy. I will never ask for another thing, ever. We can move to Vermont, closer to her parents just like she wanted. I can get a job somewhere up there...I'm not sure what. And she can have her two kids, a boy and a girl. She wants to name them Cordell after her grandfather, and Lacey after her friend from school. That's fine. Anything she wants, she can have. Then maybe she'll be happy.

Carlos does not read the entire journal, because it is not necessary. He has read plenty, more than he ever wanted to know. It actually makes him a touch nauseous, this peek into their relationship. If it could even be called that.

While it is true that Carlos was never one for the social sciences, even he can see the signs of emotional abuse written plain as day in Billy's handwriting. Hell, he can even get a glimpse of the man's mental state as he flips through the pages, certain entries written in a hasty erratic scrawl while others nearly rip through the thin pages with the force of his emotional marks. There are even a few ragged edges here and there throughout the book, the remnants of sheets torn out and Carlos can hardly imagine what Billy deemed too much to keep in his private journal. And Carlos remembers a seminar he sat in on once regarding gaslighting as a way of manipulating friends and loved ones and how to avoid it. Every few pages it seems like Billy is doubting his own memory of events and berating himself for it.

These are just the events Billy committed to paper. What else has happened that did not even make it into the journal?

Carlos slings the book across the dashboard in anger, the cord with its connected ring ricocheting off the windshield. “Meirda,” he mutters, rubbing both thumbs into his eye sockets and pushing against the mounting pressure there. This is a disaster. He should have left her in that jail cell for however long it would take for her to produce her own damn three pints of blood. Now she is roaming Night Vale doing who-knows-what and every moment she is in town is a moment that puts Billy at risk. And no matter how much Carlos wants to protect him, Claudette was right: he cannot keep Billy locked up in the lab forever. It would make him no better than her.
As Carlos lowers his hands from his eyes he happens to glance to his left and catches sight of movement. Rounding the building from the main street is a young teen, he would guess maybe thirteen or so, headed for the alleys behind the parking lot. He's dressed as a boy scout with the same tan shirt and purple shorts and sash as the two scouts he spent a day showing science to outside the Dog Park. A striking difference is that this boy scout's run is hampered by a severe limp as he mostly drags his right leg behind him, and there is dark red blood smeared down that entire side of his body from his neck to his shoes.

For a moment Carlos is too shocked to react. Then he flings the truck door open and shouts, “Hey!” The boy does not even spare him a glance, rounding the corner into the alley. “Hey, wait!”

Carlos leaves the truck and jogs after the boy, his trail easy enough to follow what with the drips of blood on the asphalt. The area between these buildings is narrow, though, with dumpsters and empty wooden palettes stacked beside the back doors and service entrances of businesses. When he finds the kid he is gripping the brick corner three buildings over in the alley trying to stay upright while he catches his breath. As Carlos slows to a stop in front of him, he can now take in the ring of teeth marks on the boy's shoulder and the mangled state of his leg, flesh missing from the calf muscle. Chest heaving, hyperventilating, skin near white as a sheet, eyes so wide they are mostly whites, pupils blown: shock has surely set in. He must be running on pure instinct at this point.

Another step closer is too much, and the boy swings wildly with his injured arm. The hunting knife that was clenched in his hand was so soaked in blood that Carlos did not even see it. The blade just misses Carlos' shirt centimeters from gutting him bilaterally and he jerks backward, hands up in defense. “Whoa!”

He is panicking, Carlos thinks. Fight or flight response. Whatever did this put up a hell of a fight. “Calm down! Calm down, I'm here to help you!” When that gets him nothing but the knife pointed at him by a trembling arm, he tries again. “My name is Carlos. I'm a scientist. I'm not here to hurt you. I want to help you, please. Please let me help you.”

Something registers in his eyes, and the scout takes another heaving breath. “C-Carlos the-the-the sci—sci—”

“Yes, that's me,” Carlos replies, nodding emphatically. “You're hurt really badly, and I want to help. That's all.”

The knife is lowered slowly though Carlos is not sure if it is more from trust or from lack of strength at this point. Either way, he takes two tentative steps forward to make sure he is not about to get stabbed, then takes the boy by the arms. Still in the grip of fear the scout tries to fight free,
but Carlos holds him steady. “Calm down, calm down, you're alright,” Carlos says, trying to keep his voice gentle but firm. “Easy, you're alright. Can you tell me your name?”

“D-D-D-Devin,” he stutters out. His left hand grips back at Carlos' shoulder like a lifeline. “D-Devin Bilb-b-bey.”

“Devin Bilbey,” Carlos confirms, nodding. He puts a hand to his pocket to pull out his phone and call emergency services and curses when he realizes it is back in the truck. “Okay, Devin. I'm going to lift this arm and help take your weight, okay? And we're going to get back to the truck, and I'll call the hospital. We're going to do this together, and it's going to hurt, but I will not leave you, okay?” The boy nods, bracing himself as best he can. The arm is lifted over Carlos' head to settle on his shoulder as efficiently as he can and the boy tries his best not to scream but he cannot keep down the gurgling noise that rattles in the back of his throat. Carlos is not really sure where he can safely place the arm he wraps around Devin's waist, so much blood slicked along that side of his body that there are probably more injuries the scientist cannot even see.

They take one step and the boy scout cries out in pain, all the adrenaline he had been running on wiped out in a wave as he sags into Carlos' side. The sudden added weight nearly brings Carlos down. A look into his face shows he is losing consciousness. “Hey! Devin, Devin, stay with me! Come on, Devin, we can do this, I'm here with you but you have to stay awake!”

“It hurts!” Devin sobs, voice slurring worryingly.

Carlos has to get him moving now. Crouching lower and wishing he had bothered to go to the gym a little more often in his life, Carlos shoves his upper body under Devin's torso and lifts the boy upward over his shoulder. Maybe his own adrenaline has spiked because it is not as hard as he expected, though he still grunts under the weight. Especially when the head and body above him goes limp. “Shit! No no no, stay with me Devin!”

With no response coming, Carlos pushes himself off the wall and half-stumbles as fast as he can down the narrow alleyway. His mind is racing with possibilities and scenarios. He has to get the boy to the hospital. Will an ambulance make it to his location and back to the hospital in time? Or should he drive the boy himself? Where are the Sheriff's Secret Police? Are they even allowed to interfere if they are not called? The part of Carlos' brain beyond panic recalls Lei mentioning that there are strict guidelines on what does and does not constitute reasonable interference on the part of the Sheriff's Secret Police. Does Carlos need to commit a crime to get them to show up and save this boy? And the amount of blood is staggering. He is not sure if it is more than a person can lose and live. Carlos is not even sure if all this blood even is his, for that matter. What even caused this?

No sooner does the thought cross his mind than Carlos hears a truly alarming noise from his left
that grinds his steps to a halt. A rumbling growl that hitches and rolls like pebbles falling down a hill in the path of a much larger boulder that will surely destroy anything it collides with if given just the right little push. And also oddly synthetic? As if played through a tape recorder.

He barely turns his head to the side and for a moment he fears his heart may well stop in his chest. Or he would, if rational thought was something he was capable of at the moment.

The creatures are bigger than German Shepherds, and certainly dog-shaped. But these are no dogs. Where one would expect flesh and fur there is nothing but folds of thin grocery store plastic, the labels for the Ralph's and Dark Owl Records and the local Target and a dozen other stores in Night Vale printed where chest and ribs and spine would be. The plastic is a stark and shiny white where clean but along their fronts is the bright red crimson of fresh blood, smeared across their chests and muzzles, dripping off teeth and gums too slick to absorb liquid. Nearly translucent in some places, the animals—if you could call them that—appear hollow apart from the flesh sitting inside their gullets where stomachs would be, rent from their victims and swallowed to somehow be digested.

Processing the visual of just one of these bizarre and terrifying animals is enough to take Carlos' breath. Four of them, one sporting three heads, is a bit overkill.

Carlos does not remember the path his feet took to get him and his cargo through the winding alleyways and out into the parking lot where Billy's truck is waiting. Several trash cans were overturned and he clipped his knee on a pipe protruding out of the back of one of the buildings, but he will not feel that pain until later. All he remembers is the gnashing of plastic teeth sounding louder and harsher than anything made out of bags has any right to sound, as well as gaining ground when a stiff breeze around one of the corners pushed the dogs back. He bursts out of the alley toward the truck, eyes focusing on the cab and safety.

From inside the open passenger's side door, a dark hand with bright yellow manicured nails reaches out and slams the door shut.

“No!” Carlos shouts, feet pounding on the asphalt as flies toward the truck. From through the window he sees Claudette put her fingers over the manual lock and press it in place, looking up at him with satisfaction.

Carlos skids to a stop at the door and grabs the handle, yanking desperately but it is a futile effort. “Open the door! Open the door!” Panicking for real now and sending a silent apology to Devin, Carlos tosses him over the truck walls into the bed and scrambles over himself, pulling his feet back just as plastic teeth snag in the hem of his jeans. He kicks wildly and manages to dislodge the feral dog with a few good shakes, though the plastic clings to him briefly before falling back.
The monsters snarl and lunge upward at the sides of the truck, circling the back and other side trying to find a way up but they just are not tall enough. Wild thoughts flit through Carlos' head, what the mass and bite force of a feral-dog-plastic-bag monster would be, how much lift they would need to be able to fly right over the edge of the truck and eat the two of them. The smaller one leaps and manages to get its shining paws hooked on the lip of the tailgate, back legs scraping to try and gain purchase on the rear bumper and hoist itself over the side. Carlos' fingers slip on the slick knife but pulls it from Devin's still-clenched fingers and slices at the animal, the blade cutting smoothly through the crinkled plastic around the mouth. It lets go to fall backwards to the ground, another one surging up to try and take its place.

Carlos holds the blade between himself and the dogs defensively but glances over his shoulder. Claudette has her face pressed close to the back sliding window that even from here Carlos can tell she has locked. “Let us in!”

“No!” she shouts, voice muffled.

“Let us in now!”

“Where's Billy?!”

“Are you crazy?!” Carlos screams. “Now isn't the time—”

“You probably made these things in your lab!” she shouts back, pointing at him like he is actually paying any attention to her movements. She even has the nerve to sound self-righteous. “You took my Billy from me, you deserve what you get!”

“We're going to die!” He looks down and sees blood starting to pool under Devin's unconscious form and realizes they do not have time for discussion. Kneeling at the back window and knowing this is about to hurt really bad, Carlos clenches his arm and swings his bent elbow backward into the window. It doesn't so much as crack and Claudette screams right along with Carlos as pain shoots up his arm, but he rears back and does it again, and again, the fabric of his lab coat doing nothing to lessen the force up his bones.

Another dog leaps up the side of the truck and he has to slice at it again, waving the hunting knife frantically. “Claudette, this boy is going to die, you have to get him out of here right now! Do you hear me? NOW!”
Inside the cab Claudette is starting to shake, realizing that this is not a good situation for her either. And how much will these crazy police officers take from her if they think she is responsible for some kid getting eaten by these things? She scoots across the seat behind the wheel and starts to turn the key just as one of the animals rips the side mirror off and she screeches.

“Now! Start the car! Hurry!”

Then the blessed sound of the engine starting reaches Carlos’ ears and the truck vibrates beneath his feet. “Go go go go go!” he screams. “Drive!”

Carlos nearly falls face-first into the truck bed as the vehicle lunges forward and down the road but the monsters give chase, keeping time with the truck. “Faster, to the hospital!” he calls over his shoulder, not sure if Claudette is going to listen but they need help now. They need to somehow lose them, or at least put more distance between them. Striking out with the hunting knife seems mostly ineffective, only keeping them at bay for a few seconds before they regroup. He pats down his sides, feeling for anything that he could use—

From inside his lab coat pocket he pulls the bag of half-eaten jerky. Maybe it will work?

Carlos pulls a few pieces out and waves it at the dogs before chucking it between them. One of them slows and investigates the dry jerky but quickly discards the pieces to try and catch up. It is not good enough, not enough like the fresh meat they have already had a taste of.

He picks up a handful of the jerky, knowing he only has about enough for two more throws. Then he looks down at his knee and the blood soaking through the denim and collecting around it in the grooves of the truck bed. Swallowing, Carlos rubs the jerky bites in the blood so they're saturated. “C'mere! C'mere, you want a treat?” he shouts, waving his bloodied hand. The beasts perk up and snarl even harder, so he throws the handful into the street.

This gets their attention better than anything and they stop to gobble up what he threw, the three-headed dog and the larger of the others snapping at each other as they bicker over the morsels. “Yes! Yes, one more...” He repeats the process, throwing the pieces this time off the road as they drive. He watches as the four feral dogs chase the food behind a sign and their truck takes a hard right in the opposite direction. Carlos slumps against the tailgate, momentary relief flooding him before he crawls back to hold Devin, checking vitals. His pulse is weak, too weak, but there.

Nurses and attendants stream out of the Emergency Room entrance as they slam to a stop in the ambulance bay and questions are thrown at Carlos—what is the boy's name? What happened? What did Carlos see? He answers as best he can and then they are gone, whisking Devin Bilbey up
to surgery. Words about locating his family and alerting the authorities fly around Carlos but he barely takes it in. The nurse at the front desk says she is surprised to hear of another feral dog attack, even skeptical. After all, Mayor Pamela Winchell just held a press conference announcing that there were no feral dogs, just some plastic bags caught in the breeze.

Once the chaos dies out it leaves Carlos standing between the two sets of automated doors at the entrance to the Emergency Room waiting area, cold blasts of air conditioning cooling the tacky blood on his skin and clothes making him shiver. He turns toward Billy's truck still parked haphazardly on the other side of the glass and sees the cab doors wide open, keys still in the ignition. The frustrated scream he lets loose when he finds the journal and ring missing echoes back to the triage nurse, and she just turns her radio up louder.
Chapter 17

The old pipes rattle as the water shuts off, the heavy stream of periwinkle-colored water dying to a steady drip that falls from the shower head down onto Carlos’ bowed head. Still bent over he takes a moment to gather himself, breathing a little heavy in the humid air of the shower stall. He has to use the arm he turned off the water with to push himself back upright, all of his weight held by his right leg or the wall he is leaning against.

A gentle knock raps against the wooden door to the bathroom. “Are you okay in there?”

“I'm alright,” Carlos calls back to Becky. He pushes the stall door open and reaches around to snag a towel one-handed, the other gripping the inset ledge where he keeps his soap and shampoo for support. It almost makes him teeter over but he manages.

“If you need help, just call, I'll be right out here.”

Carlos does a quick but frankly mediocre job patting his body dry, not even bothering to lean back down for the skin below his knees. He's afraid if he bends over that far he will not be able to stand back up again, or worse, fall over. And he is not about to call Becky in here for help while lying naked and prone on the bathroom floor. She has seen him in enough of a dressed-down state as it is. Thankful for once that the apartment came with a stall and not a tub to step out of, Carlos finally takes a few tentative shuffling hops from the shower to the tiled floor, careful not to trip or slide on the bath mat beneath his bare foot. He turns and sits heavily on the closed toilet lid, hissing a little at how cold it is on his skin but so very happy to finally take the weight off his tired muscles.

His left knee is a mess. An angry red ring surrounding a terrifying amount of black and blue and violet, all swollen and inflamed. Carlos cannot remember ever seeing a bruise quite so dark on his
skin before, not even the time he accidentally slammed three of his fingers in the door to the chemistry lab in undergrad and two of the fingernails actually fell off. The skin is tight in some places where the pressure is greatest, and in others feels squishy like a water balloon. Next to his undamaged right knee, the left looks like it belongs to someone else.

And fucking hell, it hurts.

Carlos had not even realized he was hurt until he arrived back at the labs in Billy’s ransacked truck and tried to step out of the cab. His left leg had crumpled beneath his weight sending him sprawling across the dirt and gravel, because what was this day without adding one more insult as well as injury? Luckily Matt heard his arrival and with some help from Becky they were able to get Carlos inside and onto an exam table where Harris took x-rays of the knee to rule out any breaks, assuring Carlos it was just a very nasty bruise. Then they helped him up the two flights of stairs to his apartment and into the bathroom so he could wash all the dried blood off himself, and while he appreciated the awkward offer of assistance from several of his team members he insisted he could shower just fine on his own.

Getting his clothes off had been painful but easy enough. Replacing them with fresh clean ones is another matter entirely. At least the selections Becky picked out from his dresser are loose and have elastic waists. He manages to get the boxers up over his knees and pulled on completely, but even that much movement is hell on his leg. Putting on his shirt is a short reprieve before attempting the pajama bottoms—one of his favorite pairs, a blue and green plaid print in soft cotton flannel that used to be a staple of his wardrobe back in Arkham where cold winters meant his pajama collection saw a lot more action. Since living in Night Vale he has mostly limited himself to boxers in bed, but he does not think he will ever be comfortable enough to sit around in so little around his teammates. Dressing takes way longer than he would like, the clothes twisting oddly around his body in certain places where he yanks at the fabric and the bottom few inches of his pajama pants cling to his damp skin irritatingly. Still, he finally manages to sit dressed in the bathroom.

And his energy for the day has ran out. “Becky?” he calls through the door, hating himself a little for how pathetic the question comes out.

“Can I come in?”

“Please.”

She is there in an instant, the door cracking open immediately so she can peek to see if he is decent before she slips inside. Becky gives a strained smile at the state of his clothes and it is only because she can tell he is not in the mood that she does not comment on them. “Let’s get you on the couch and you’ll feel a lot better. Come on.”
With Becky helpfully taking some of his weight from under one arm Carlos is able to hobble his way through the narrow doorway and only slightly messy bedroom out to the living room where someone has straightened the contents of his coffee table and rearranged the pillows on his couch. Everything is set up so that he can lay along the length of the cushions with his back propped up. And, once Carlos flops back onto the couch with a gusty sigh, Becky is there to help him lift his injured knee enough to shove a pillow underneath.

“You need to keep that elevated,” comes Harris' voice from behind the couch, and it is only then that Carlos realizes both Harris and Abbey are puttering around his kitchen.

“Make yourselves at home,” he calls back absently, frowning as Becky starts to roll up his pants' leg on the left side.

“Thanks, we already have. Do you want turkey or ham?” Abbey asks.

When Carlos tries to sit up to see what they are doing, Becky gently but firmly pushes him back down with a hand to the shoulder. “They're making sandwiches and soup. I think they can handle that much without your direct supervision.”

“Turkey,” he replies, relaxing back. “You guys don't have to—”

“Don't worry, we're eating from your stash tonight so consider us repaid,” she laughs. “You are going to be a horrible patient, we can already tell.”

“The best doctors make the worst patients,” Harris comments. From over the edge of the couch Carlos first sees the graceful arch of horns before Harris' auburn red hair. He barely registers the sympathetic smile that looks down at him before a flash of icy cold hell blots out all thought, a bag of ice plopped onto his injured knee.

“¡Ah cabrón!” Carlos gasps, jerking under the sudden painful stimulus. Becky obligingly holds the bag steady while Harris secures it in place with some medical tape.

“We'll leave this on there for twenty minutes or so. I want to get some of this swelling down.” Once he is sure the bag will not be going anywhere, Harris tilts his head to get a look at Carlos' face. Carlos is glad to see he is getting better at handling that extra weight on top of his head after such a short amount of time to adapt. “How bad is the pain? Scale of one to ten.”
“Manageable,” he replies around a grimace, shifting his hips so he is more comfortable. “Six or seven.”

“You still have feeling around it? No numbness or tingling below the knee, no loss of sensation in your feet and toes?”

“I would prefer loss of sensation at the moment,” Carlos gripes.

Harris’ lips tick up on one side, amused, but it fades quickly. “And how are you feeling otherwise?” he asks carefully, meeting and holding Carlos’ gaze. “Mentally.”

“I’m fine.”

Harris tries again. “You experienced a fairly traumatic event. If you need to talk about it—”

“I'm fine,” Carlos repeats, harder, more final, eyes full of warning not to push. Becky and Harris exchange a look over his prone form that makes hot irritation twist under his skin. He knows that they are thinking of him down on the exam table, of the silence he slipped into about halfway through his explanation of how exactly he came to be near-crippled and covered in blood that was obviously not his own. Harris repeated a question three times and Carlos had shown no response, staring with wide eyes at the opposite wall. Then Becky carefully saying his name had triggered full-bodied tremors that made it impossible to get a decent picture with the imaging equipment, not until the two of them talked him down from wherever his mind had taken him, Matt watching from over their shoulders with an intense expression on his face.

Abbey appears before things get too awkward with a bowl of tomato soup and a plate topped with a turkey and cheese sandwich, pushing her way between the other two and setting the tray across Carlos’ lap. “You’ll be better than fine after you get some food in you. Hope you like your sandwiches toasted, because that’s the best way to have them! What do you want to drink?”

“Just a soda, thanks,” he replies, a touch startled by the rumble his stomach lets loose when the smell of cooked tomato and spices hits his nose.

“You sure you don't want something a little harder?”
“I’d rather not.”

Harris glares halfheartedly at Abbey and says pointedly, “Besides, if I can convince him to take something for the pain I’d rather it not be on top of alcohol.”

“Such a good little doctor,” she coos, patting one of Harris’ horns affectionately. “All the same, I always keep a bottle of whiskey stashed in the workroom behind the stress strain analyzer if you change your mind.”

“Soda now and you can walk us through how you like your tea after you eat,” Becky says, fussing with the blankets tucked around his feet. “Is your knee comfy?”

“Yeah, it's good.”

“Do you need another pillow? I can go get another one downstairs—”

“I'm alright, really. I'm not a child you know,” Carlos insists. “Go on, get something to eat.”

She huffs but smiles, the other three going into the little kitchen to get plates of their own. Tucking into his meal, Carlos takes a moment to reflect how much a harrowing experience makes you really appreciate smaller things, like how good a simple sandwich and a can of soup can taste. Still, one of these days he should really make something from scratch for everybody. It has been a while since he has spent any time in the kitchen other than throwing together cheap meals. Maybe it would be good for morale.

“Did you guys find out anything about that pesticide while I was gone?” he asks once the three of them have situated themselves around his coffee table, Becky in his one chair and the other two on the floor.

“We did!” Harris leans over to grab a stack of papers and a few books he brought up from the little reference shelf he keeps at his lab station. “I called over to the Parks Department for information and they were more than happy to talk to me about it after I found the right official. They even emailed me what they have on it.”

“My people aren't particularly fond of mosquitoes, so I'll let it slide” Harris says around a mouthful of sandwich.

“No people are particularly fond of mosquitoes, regardless of ethnicity,” Carlos retorts before taking a bite of his sandwich.

Harris has to concede that point with a tip of his head. “It's also not a product actually found on Raid's website. Nor did the company know what I was talking about when I gave one of the distributors a call. It is either a super-secret government-grade formula, you know, the type that gets slipped under regulations, or it is being made by some other company on the down-low.”

“I don't understand any of this, but it doesn't look healthy,” Abbey sighs, handing the sheet of chemical information up to Carlos on the couch. “You're the chemist of the group since Joanna is gone; what do you make of it?”

Carlos turns the paper around to look at the list of ingredients and the wrinkle between his brow deepens. “Dinitrobutyl phenol, nitrofen, sodium arsenite, vinyl chloride, tetramethrin, pyrethroid, bifenox...half of these are banned pesticides, ruled to be known carcinogens or suspected toxicants...”

“Banned?” Harris repeats, frowning up at Carlos.

“Yeah...hell, this has arsenic oxide in it. And there's a few I'm not even familiar with. I've never even heard of chlordimeform-DBv4.”

“How can they use a bunch of banned chemicals without getting in trouble?” Abbey asks.

“Same reason they get away with reeducating people, I'd imagine,” Harris replies sarcastically.

Becky makes an unhappy noise as she swallows the spoonful of soup she had been eating, shushing him. “Careful,” she warns with a pointed look. The other two check themselves quickly; they are still not sure how much they can actually get away with talking about reeducation without getting reeducated themselves.
"How are they administering the pesticide?" Carlos asks, getting them back on topic.

Harris points to Abbey, who chimes in, "They said I could run over and look at the spreading equipment, but from what the guy I talked to said it's going to be a pretty major operation. We're not talking guys in coveralls with hand-sprayers. They use crop dusters."

Carlos blinks a moment at her, uncomprehending. "Crop dusters? You mean...like the airplanes?"

"Yep," she replies, nodding at how ridiculous that seems. "Wherever they spray that stuff, it's going to cover every single thing in the drop zone."

"That sounds like an incredible amount of overkill," Harris comments.

Becky points at him knowingly. "Hey, you don't know how big or dangerous the mosquitoes might be in Night Vale."

"Fair point."

"That's still going to make testing a lot more complicated," Carlos says. "What about a sample?"

"The Parks Department's monitoring officer let us know that there was some paperwork we would need to fill out. If we get it filed in the morning they can try to rush the processing for us. We won't have a sample until tomorrow afternoon at the earliest, though." From somewhere in the stack of papers Harris pulls the required forms, setting them on the table for Carlos to look at. He has already taken the time to fill in some of the information. "I wasn't sure about a few things, and figured you would want to look over it as the head of the project."

"So we'll only have that evening to study it in a laboratory setting."

Harris nods, putting another sheet of paper on top of the others. "And I spoke with Officer Erwin. We went ahead and started the paperwork for having permission to be out during the quarantine hours for testing. As long as the forms are approved and we are wearing the proper safety gear, there should be no problems. All it needs is your signature."
“What time did they say they were starting spraying?”

“One, the next afternoon.”

Carlos blows out a long slow breath, setting his tray aside and trying to hoist himself up a little higher from his reclined position. It sends a new twinge of discomfort through his leg but he ignores it. “One day,” he mutters to himself, mind racing over what all they would need to accomplish in that time if they have any hope of being ready for field tests by Friday. “Alright. Alright, this...we can do this. It's going to be cutting it close, but we can be ready. Becky, you're going to be working with me devising experiments on local flora and fauna that can be carried out while the pesticide application is happening. Anything we can do during the quarantine period, anything that does not require a lot of prep work. I'll also come up with some tests we can run on the inorganic materials that the pesticide will come in contact with. Harris, I'll need you to work with Matt on possible human health risks, anything you can think of for experiments regarding that. This many chemicals mixed together, I'm sure he'd love to see how this might have an effect on his current genetic projects. Also, you'll need to make sure all our Hazmat equipment is in order and that we aren't exposing ourselves to toxins. Safety is top priority. Abbey, you can help with that and any other equipment; make sure things are in working order, extra parts out of storage, and everything readily available in case anything breaks. And get the SUV and the other car fixed, we need as many as we can ready to move. Any grunt work will be delegated to Billy and Lei, unless they can come up with anything in their fields that would warrant something small, which I doubt. We can also set them to taking samples that we will keep here in the lab to compare with the specimens that stay in the parks. We're going to have less than twenty-four hours for real-time testing before residents are allowed out, so we're going to have to make every minute count.”

The others are all writing notes—Abbey on her laptop and the others using the wax method Carlos shared with them after Cecil walked him through it the day of his visit—and nodding, slipping easily into work-mode. “Are you going to want live samples from fauna exposed to the pesticide?” Becky asks.

“How hard will that be to get hold of?”

She shrugs. “Not too difficult, depending on where they spray and how agitated it makes the wildlife in the parks. But I will need to keep them separated from my other experiments. We don't know if the pesticide residue can be washed off easily, and I can't risk cross-contamination. I'd need more lab space.”

“We don't have more lab space,” Harris points out. And it is true, even with four of their team missing or dead the scientists have quickly encroached on the open space, filling every inch of it with experiments.
“What if we converted space in one of the storage areas?” Abbey asks.

“Then what will we do with the stuff in there? We can't possibly stack it any higher,” Harris argues.

Becky taps her wax stick against her chin. "I could put some cages and terrariums in storage room B."

"That's the refrigeration room, we can't risk animals getting loose in there with all the chemicals and delicate specimens. We could use room A," Harris counters.

"What? No!" Becky waves the stick at him. "That room is like a furnace! They'd swelter in there, and it isn't properly ventilated! Do you want them all to die?"

"They're desert animals, how could they not be used to those conditions?"

"There's a difference between living in that environment for survival and animal cruelty--"

"Alright, alright," Carlos cuts in, shaking his head as he fills out the sheet in front of him. It's unfortunate that he has to use dipped ink from a tiny stirring straw to fill out the more official files. Even though he is getting used to the method it is quite tedious and Carlos has a tendency to forget that the ink is still wet and smear his letters. "Becky, what animals do you have that could be moved to the greenhouse? Surely some of them would be suited for that environment. As long as you keep them properly caged?"

She bites her lip as she considers that. "I might could move a few. The frogs and toads, most definitely, and some of the insects. Maybe the python. But I could still use a little wiggle room."

"We'll figure out how much more space you need after you get those animals moved," he replies. "Now, what about safety?"

“I'll need to look over the information the Parks Department sent in more detail. Judging by what you said about those chemicals I'm guessing we're going to need some heavy protection. Do you think we'll need to set up an entrance to the lab for decontamination?” Harris asks.
He hums, thoughtful. “It's possible. Try to find that out as soon as you can, I know it takes a little
time to get that set up. We'll need to sterilize any equipment and sample containers as they come
into the building, as well.”

“That might be a good job for Billy,” Abbey comments, looking up at the rest of them. “Keep him
in the lab, you know?”

“What are you going to do about that?” Harris asks, the three of them turning in unison to Carlos.

The lead scientist sighs, rubbing at the bridge of his nose. “I don't know, I really really don't. After
finding that book and everything— ” His voice cuts off, not wanting to expound on what happened
today. Not just yet. “She's dangerous.”

“What does she think she's going to do? Force him to leave? Kidnap him? Strong-arm him into
marriage?” Harris asks, incredulous.

Becky shakes her head at him. “It's easy for you to say it so flippantly, but you don't have to be
physically bigger or stronger than a person to force them into something. She treats him like a
possession, and he's been with her so long he couldn't even see how toxic it all was. That's what
happens when it's the only person you've ever really loved treating you that way.”

"She's right," Abbey says, pointing at Becky for emphasis. "All it would take is Billy's memories
to resurface and he could be skipping his way back up to Arkham or Connecitcut or Vermont or
wherever the hell it was she wanted to live, and he'd do it with a smile on his face, thinking that
what she says is best. People in that situation don't always make choices that make sense to us, the
people on the outside. And when you've been told over and over again that you're wrong and your
own thoughts are invalid compared to theirs, then it is only a matter of time before you start
believing it."

"I know...it's just weird hearing it from this side, I guess," Harris admits. "You usually see this as
women having to deal with abusive men, not the other way around. I volunteered at a rape crisis
center in undergrad for a little while and we never once had a man come in."

"You did?" Abbey asks, surprised. "Color me shocked."

"Hey!" He throws a bit of crust at her. "Yeah, it's not my normal thing but it seemed a little more
meaningful than some of the other volunteer opportunities they had. But it was really eye-opening,
even if it does make you see a really horrible side to people. To tell you the truth I kind of hated myself for a while and I didn't even do anything."

Abbey laughs and reaches over, giving his head a playful shake by one horn. "You're a good guy, Harris. Even if you do channel Bones from Star Trek."

"Bones and I are kindred spirits linked by our decisions to boldly go where no sane person has gone before and bosses who get themselves hurt in stupid self-sacrificing ways," he replies, grinning up at Carlos.

Carlos glares at him but it lacks any heat. "Thanks. Next time I get hurt I'll make sure it's in a way you approve of." Then he pauses, a thought just now occurring to him. "Wait. Where is Billy?" He does not remember seeing the other man when he came back to the lab.

“Don't worry, he's with Lei,” Abbey assures him, leaning back on her mechanical arm like a support strut. “Billy was feeling anxious from being cooped up inside, and Lei had some interviews he was doing with the Night Vale Fire Department so Billy tagged along.”

“Yeah,” Becky laughs, “We figure if Claudette wants to try anything then being surrounded by a bunch of first-responders would be a good deterrent.”

“Why's he interviewing the Fire Department?” Carlos asks.

“Apparently there is some sort of 'Fire Person Appreciation Parade' on Sunday? On the radio Cecil said it was bi-weekly, but this is the first any of us has heard of it. Anyway, Cecil started talking about some dust fire a few decades back and how most of the population was lost. Cecil hadn't even finished the segment before Lei was on the phone trying to find out if any of the firefighters from back then were still on the payroll at the station. He was saying something about the impact a catastrophic fire would have on the culture of an isolated community when he went out the door.”

Harris drops his own wax stick on the table, sighing. “The point being, Billy is distracted for now but that will not last. He was chosen on the team to work and that fact wasn't reeducated out of him. He's going to want to get back to his job.”

“I know, I know,” Carlos replies, signing his name on the bottom line and laying it down to dry. “And unfortunately I don't have the time right now to figure out a solution. Let's just...he'll be busy for the next three days helping with this big project. Maybe since we're all involved he won't feel
isolated. His mind will be engaged. Get us through the next two or three days and we can tackle that problem properly. And no matter what, don't let Billy go off on his own while we're in the parks.”

Two knocks sound from the doorway to the stairwell and Matt ducks his head in. “Hey, you've got a visitor down here. Do you want to come down or have him come up?”

“Who is it?” Carlos asks.

“Tall skinny guy in a uniform. I think he's with the scout troop that boy was with? He said he just came from the hospital.”

Harris gets to his feet. “You really need to stay off that leg,” he advises Carlos, picking up Abbey's plates as well as his own.

“Alright...you can send him up,” Carlos sighs, trying to straighten his clothes to be a little more presentable while the others take the empty plates to the kitchen. He feels like such a slob, dressed down to pajamas and laid up on the couch, but he supposes it just cannot be helped.

Abbey helps Harris gather up the paperwork while Becky goes off to his kitchen, disposing of the remains of their dinner and washing the few plates they have while Matt fetches his visitor. All but Becky are filing out of his living room just as the other man arrives, nodding a greeting to the two scientists as they pass each other in the narrow entryway.

At first Carlos thinks this must be one of the older scouts in the troop. Tall as he may be he screams skinny teenager, baby-faced and covered in freckles. It probably takes him a month before he needs a proper shave. He is wearing an official scouts uniform just as Devin had, but even Carlos can recognize the ridiculously large-brimmed hat he holds in his hands as one that troop leaders wear. Scoutmaster is embroidered in royal purple on the left breast of his tan uniform shirt. His bright red hair looks like it is normally kept in a neat side-part but the fingers he runs nervously though it make a mess of the straight line.

“Dr. Abaroa?” he greets, direct but obviously thrown off by the man laid up on the couch.

“Call me Carlos. Please, come in, I would stand but...” he waves at his iced knee.
The young man takes a few strides forward on long legs and holds out a hand to shake, his grip firm and confident. “Earl Harlan. I'm the Scoutmaster for the local Boy Scout chapter? Sorry to drop by without calling first, I didn't realize you had been injured, earlier.”

“I had a bit of an accident, yes,” Carlos replies, trying to downplay his part. Instead he gestures to Becky who is hovering just by the kitchen bar. “This is Rebecca Higginbotham, one of our scientists.”

“You can call me Becky,” she adds, shaking Harlan's hand as well. “Nice to meet you. I was just about to fix Carlos some tea, can I interest you in anything?”

“I wouldn't want to impose...”

“It's no trouble, I'm already making a pot,” she assures him. Carlos nods along with her so the Scoutmaster agrees, even going so far as to offer assistance but Becky shoos him back to the living room to sit across from Carlos in the open chair.

“They're making a fuss over nothing,” Carlos sighs, smiling a little at how half his team have turned into mother hens. “Not that I don't appreciate it, but they do have better things to do than worry about me.”

“That's debatable, boss!” Becky calls from the kitchen.

It takes just a few minutes for Becky to carry two steaming mugs of dark tea out to the two in the living room—sugar and cream for Earl, half as much of each for Carlos. Earl makes small talk mentioning the interesting sample of selenite that Carlos has in a little container on his side table. Just the fact that Earl correctly identified the crystal from sight is enough to put him in Carlos' good graces, and they talk rocks until Becky politely excuses herself, reminding Carlos that Harris will be up in a little while to check the swelling of his knee.

Once they are alone a more somber mood settles over the room, and Carlos was correct in reading that Harlan wanted to speak in private. “I just came from Night Vale General,” he says.

Carlos nods, cutting to the heart of the matter. “How is he?”

“Devin's going to live,” Harlan replies, taking note of how Carlos' fingers loosen from the white-
knuckled grip he had on the handle of his mug before taking a fortifying sip of his tea. “He needed a blood transfusion and he lost a bit of muscle mass from the leg. And he's got a good number of stitches that he'll brag about once he's well. But he'll live.”

Carlos lets out a slow breath, the anxious knot that he had been carrying around the past few hours easing inside him. “Good, that's...that's excellent news. I take it they got hold of his family then?”

“Yes, they're there with him now. They called me as soon as they found out.” At Carlos' curious look, he explains, “Scouts is rather important in Night Vale. If you're chosen it is considered a great honor. We're like family.”

That is a curious way of putting it, and Carlos wonders what exactly Harlan means by *chosen.* “Even better that he has a support system, then.”

“He told me what you did,” Harlan says, gaze sharp and assessing, an intense blue that Carlos finds hard to look at directly. “Left a secure vehicle to run down an alley that could be easily cut off? Nearly getting yourself trapped with no way of escape? That you didn't even have a weapon of your own?”

“What would you have had me do, leave him to die?” he asks, his own eyes narrowing at the Scoutmaster in confusion.

“Most people would. Most people did; he ran four blocks and no one so much as cracked a door to help him. You were not the first person that crossed his path.”

“That's...horrible,” Carlos says, aghast though the feeling quickly fades to one of disgust. To think that so many people would just let a boy get hurt and possibly killed without even lifting a finger of aid.

“People around here don't really interfere with boy scouts in survival situations. They think that they should be able to handle it, and up to a point they should. My boys are better equipped than a lot of other people around here, I mean, it's one of the reasons they join after all. But they are still boys, and they are still training,” he insists, and there is guilt in those words. Even Carlos can tell, bad as he is at reading people sometimes. “It's just the way things are in Night Vale.”

Carlos gives a puff of a laugh, more out of exasperation than amusement. “Not helping people in trouble isn't all that uncommon outside of Night Vale, either,” is his reply. “And I really don't see
how letting some kid bleed to death is helping his training.”

Harlan leans forward, his arms braced on his knees and his hands rotating the mug in his hands between them. “And I heard you stopped the Apache Tracker from harassing some of my boys a while back.”

“Seth and Andrew,” Carlos supplies. It is not sure who is more surprised that he remembers their names, Harlan or himself. “They're good kids, even if they don't take a hint.”

“They said you told them all about science. Seth was talking about radiocarbon dating for weeks, wanting to know if we had any badges about it.” That makes Harlan give a soft laugh but he quickly turns serious again. Cautions. “Why did you do that?”

“Do what?”

“Help them. Help my scouts.”

Carlos frowns. “I...shouldn't I? It seemed like the right thing to do.”

Harlan blinks at him, head tilting slightly as the silence drags out from that statement, and Carlos feels like he is being sized up. “You know,” Harlan says finally, “You're not at all what I expected.”

“Should I take that as a compliment?”

Harlan's face breaks out into a real grin. “From the way Cecil talks about you, I imagined you were ten feet tall and moved mountains, if they existed.”

If his face was not currently turning bright red Carlos would probably have something to say about the mountain comment. As it is he flounders an eloquent, “Uh,” then drops into his own embarrassed laugh, looking down at his tea. “Please tell me you just mean what he's said on the radio and nothing else?”

“Just the radio.” Harlan takes a drink from his own mug before continuing. “It's been a while since
we've hung out, to be honest. He gets so wrapped up at the station.”

“You're friends?”

“Yeah...friends,” he replies, a wistful note leaking out of the corners of that statement. Harlan recovers quickly, adding, “We went to school together, and we used to be on a bowling team. But, work, life, you know how it goes.”

That gives Carlos pause. He opens his mouth, closes it, looking Harlan over again more closely. “Are we talking...taking some college courses together?” At the Scoutmaster's perplexed look, he clarifies, “You don't look a day over twenty.”

Harlan looks confused for just a moment before it visibly dawns on him. “Oh! Oh, that! Sorry, I guess I'm just used to everyone knowing. No, I stopped aging at nineteen.”

“You...what?” Carlos asks, pushing himself up even more, his curiosity piqued.

“I didn't notice at first, of course, but it got pretty obvious when everyone else started having a receding hairline and I was still having acne,” Harlan says, wrinkling his nose. “But it does have some perks. I'm still in the prime of my youth, so I've been told. I can keep up with the kids and all their energy. And it helps the scouts be able to relate to me better, even if my outer age is just an illusion.”

“And you don't age at all? It isn't just slow, but actually stopped?”

“Uh, I think so? I mean, I haven't changed in decades at this point.”

Carlos' mind is racing with ideas about that, his mouth following suit. “Because it would be a fascinating phenomenon to investigate! It's possible that it would be caused by a genetic abnormality or outside variables effecting your metabolism, or something causing cell growth to remain constant and stable, of which any scientific findings would have far reaching implications on the studies of human health and longevity, or even something specific to time and space that has caused an anomaly for only you, which would be completely unheard of except in science fiction but science fiction is becoming more and more observable the more time spent—and—and, oh, I—I don't mean to make you sound like a science experiment, I apologize, so sorry, I—” Carlos' mouth snaps shut to keep more words from spilling forth.
The Scoutmaster looks a little shell-shocked by the suddenly bubbly scientist, but luckily is not offended. More amused than anything, which just makes Carlos feel more embarrassed. “No trouble. I guess it would be interesting to someone else? I don't mind questions about it.”

“Yes, do you have any idea why you stopped aging?”

“I haven’t a clue. Steve thinks I was the subject of some sort of secret government chemical testing, but he said that about the woman down the street who will only eat if she hears a doorbell ring, and we're both doing just fine.” He shakes his head and laughs at that, leaning back in the chair and sipping the tea. “This is really good, by the way.”

“Thanks, it’s *poléo,*” he says. He is surprised Becky chose it, actually, but then he remembers most of his tea bags he keeps on the counter are in Spanish and she probably just picked one at random.

“Ah! You drink your tea like Old Woman Josie,” Harlan says, laughing again.

“I wouldn’t know...and would that Steve be Steve Carlsberg?” Carlos asks. There must certainly be more than one Steve in Night Vale, but knowing his luck it would be the man he has successfully avoided since their one horrible encounter at the PTA meeting.

Sure enough, Harlan nods in affirmation. The look Carlos gives him must communicate what he thinks about Steve because he quickly says, “I know, he can be a bit hard to deal with sometimes, but his heart is in the right place. He's just really not good with tact. Did he say something?” Carlos hums in acknowledgment, and Earl suddenly turns earnest. “I'm sure he didn't mean it! Seriously, he is a really nice guy, once you look past his perpetual foot-in-mouth disease.”

Carlos gives a polite laugh but offers nothing further on the subject. He does not think that he and Earl are going to see eye to eye about Steve Carlsberg, but it hardly matters. He does not plan on being in Steve Carlsberg's company anytime soon. Speaking with the man once was enough.

Instead Carlos tries to bring the conversation back around to the beginning. “Did they ever catch those...feral dogs or whatever they were?” he asks.

“From what I understand the bags dispersed when the wind picked up,” Earl replies, looking around at the room idly. “A shame, I would have liked to hunt them down and send them to recycling, especially after hurting one of my boys.”
“Slashing damage seemed to not do anything but irritate them.”

“With something like that, you have to rip them to shreds so they can no longer maintain their shape.” The Scoutmaster takes another sip of his tea. “Do you not have anything like that where you come from?”

“No, nothing. Just normal dogs,” Carlos says, perpetually shocked at the things the people of Night Vale consider normal. “You know a lot about animals like that?” And he hates that he is even referring to something made entirely of plastic and hatred as an animal.

“Quite a bit. Why?”

“Becky is our zoologist. She’s been collecting live specimens from the area as well as studying others from afar, gathering data on unusual species and analyzing behavior. I’m sure she would love to get your perspective.”

Harlan's brows raise slightly in surprise, and he looks flattered. “Really? You scientists would really want to know what I think?”

“Of course. We prefer to have as many sources of information we can get, and that would include local experts.” He can see that statement makes Harlan flush a little with pride. Perhaps the Scoutmaster is not used to being seen as such. Though, Carlos imagines his perceived age might have something to do with it. How often do the people of Night Vale remember that he is not as young as he seems?

“I don’t see why I couldn't help out a little,” Harlan agrees. “I could show her some hot spots on the outskirts of town where I know some animals tend to haunt. Do you need help with plants, too? Really, anything to do with the wilderness I would be willing to lend a hand with, baring my commitments.”

“Right, of course! We don't want to keep you.”

Harlan finishes the last of the tea in his cup before drawing out a, “Well....” At Carlos' curious look, he says, “Seth did get me thinking, about the lack of badges that we have with regards to science. And it would be a shame for the boys to have gaps in their education and training, just because it might be something I don't know about.”
“What are you suggesting?” Carlos asks, wary.

“Would you be willing to come by and talk to them about science? It doesn't have to be anything fancy, but from what I understand they've changed the science curriculum at the school pretty much every year and their knowledge is all over the place. And I'm always trying to get them to keep sharp on all subjects; you never know what will help you in a survival situation.”

It is on the tip of Carlos’ tongue to decline. Getting away from teaching students that do not really care about science is one of the reasons he took this job in the first place. And at least his previous students were college-level. This would be a bunch of kids! How young do the Boy Scouts even start, anyway? It was awkward enough talking to Seth and Andrew.

But then Carlos thinks about how the endless stream of questions Seth asked that day did not seem nearly as tedious as even an hour lecturing in a classroom back in Arkham. Unstructured, relaxed, just sharing knowledge about anything they were interested in, no set information to cover and no tests to administer. It had been surprisingly refreshing, come to think of it. Especially having pupils that seemed genuinely interested and present not just because of a class credit.

“I wouldn't want it to be something required,” Carlos allows, thinking it through. “I don't want them to feel forced to learn something they aren't interested in. It will just make them not like it.”

Harlan's lips twist, considering. “I would have the first talk mandatory as one of our weekly meetings. And if you and any of the boys are still interested, we could set up more for them specifically? The ones that would want to use science as a means of earning badges. How does that sound?”

“That could work,” Carlos agrees, not even realizing that he is essentially committing himself to not just one lecture but several.

“Great! I can leave you my email and we can set things up, when you're on your feet again that is.” Harlan sets his cup down and sits up, frowning over at Carlos’ leg. “Now, how bad is that knee?”

Carlos looks down at the state of his knee. What once was a bag of ice is now no more than a bag of quickly-warming water, sagging around the bindings of tape holding it in place. His knee throbs painfully underneath now that the numbness brought on by the ice has faded. “Not great,” he admits.
“Let's see it?” Harlan asks, slipping around the table. “I can get you some more ice, if you need.”

He makes a noise of protest. “You don't have to—”

“It's no trouble. I've seen a lot of contusions, you know. Scouts tend to play rough.” With Carlos' assent the two of them carefully unwrap the tape from his leg. Or more accurately, Earl unwraps the tape while Carlos tries to hold still and not hiss when the tape pulls some of his leg hair out. Then Harlan gingerly removes the ice pack before letting out a low impressed whistle. “Wow. That is not messing around. Are you sure there's nothing broken?”

A gusty sigh blows out of Carlos' nose. “Harris took x-rays. Shit, the swelling has barely gone down at all.”

“What got you?”

“Metal pipe.” While the Scoutmaster goes to the kitchen to fetch more ice from his freezer, Carlos continues, “I have a major project in two days, something the whole team is involved in! I absolutely have to be able to walk...or run! Running would be better, but I can barely put weight on it at all! Oh, this is a disaster....”

“I'm sure you'll figure something out,” Harlan replies, returning with a fresh bag. The pack is reattached and Harlan looks down at Carlos who now leans back a little more into the couch, wincing at the sting of cold again. “You really should take something for the pain, though. It will heal better if you can actually rest.”

“I can't,” Carlos mutters. “I have too much work to do, and we're on a time limit. And I'd rather not have my senses dulled.” Not in Night Vale, he thinks. Not here where a bit of trash on the street might sprout legs and hunt you down.

“I'll see if I can put something together that's a little more localized, then. Something more natural.” Carlos wants to question that but Harlan holds out his hand. “I want to thank you, for what you did for Devin. And helping Andrew and Seth back then, too, but you saved Devin's life.”

Carlos takes the hand again, shaking more sincerely this time even though he feels called-out. “Please, don't, uh, don't mention it. Really. It's, it's fine, glad to help.”
A nod and Harlan replaces the hat on his head, heading out. “I'll let them know your ice has been changed. Harris, right? The one with the horns.” He stops and turns back, a sharp and altogether dangerous smile on his face. “Oh. And keep in mind, the desert here is endless. If you hurt Cecil, no one will ever find your body.” The Scoutmaster tips his hat cordially and ducks out the door.

As far as their schedule goes, things progress far better than expected. In an amazing act of consideration on the part of the local government, all the forms and payments—in this case an offering of a slab of beef or the equivalent amount in ground chuck which Lei happily went to the Ralph's to procure—are processed in record time. Night Vale Laboratories receives a sizable sample of the pesticide by three the next afternoon in the form of six large metal canisters. Those that needed it to start testing get to work immediately while the rest do what they can to prepare the experiments for the next day, everything else being sanitized and secured for travel. The lab is a flurry of activity as everyone has something to do and somewhere to be.

Everyone except for Carlos.

His injury has grounded him, as it were. He can barely put enough weight on the limb to make it from point A to point B, and not without considerable agony on his part. Intellectually he knows that it is not that bad; just a very ugly large bruise, as Harris keeps assuring him. That does not make it any less painful or his movements any less clumsy. Maneuvering around the lab was quickly vetoed with Harris ushering him out, claiming that he was more likely to knock something over or be in the way with how Carlos keeps teetering around and grabbing things to keep from falling over. Also, if he has to tell Carlos one more time to keep off that leg he will lock the other man up in his rooms, and Carlos knows that is not an idle threat.

So Carlos' contributions to the project are mainly theoretical or administrative, or small things that do not require constant movement around the labs. Not only that but he is banished to his personal labs so he cannot even watch over the proceedings of the others. He spends a good half an hour sulking and determinedly not asking for help, no matter how hard it is to move around the tiny space. At least until he drops a container of ion exchange resin and it rolls under one of the lab tables with a foot shelf, the round cylinder loudly rotating again and again against the floor before settling defiantly against the wall well out of reach. A pathetic attempt at trying to retrieve it leaves Carlos sitting on his ass, tears heavy behind his lids and gripping his knee as his leg protests the treatment. It is only then that he admits that maybe he really should be sitting today out.

All that aside, once a sympathetic Lei helps him back behind his small desk he does get a considerable amount of planning done including who will be doing what and when the next day. They have to coordinate their efforts to get the most they can out of their limited time frame, and
that includes planning experiments, travel, and breaks so that there is as little downtime as possible.

Unfortunately that leaves him at a loss as to what to do once all that is accomplished; his own experiments will have to be carried out by the others with his supervision the following day, and once his equipment is boxed up Billy comes in and whisks them away. In the absence of anything better to do, Carlos turns his attention to his other notes. He has been negligent in keeping things in order, and filing and rearranging his findings is an important enough activity to keep his mind occupied and out of his team's hair for a few hours. He does not want to think about any of the other problems brewing in the background, such as Claudette's meddling or Mr. Harlan's completely uncalled for ultimatum. It is not like he is going to do anything with Cecil in the first place, so there is no reason to assume he is going to hurt the radio host in any way, that would be ludicrous and the implication that he would even do such a thing if they were to get involved is just rude and unnecessary and honestly maybe Harlan is acting all the more like the teenager he so resembles and—


Carlos is sitting in his rolling desk chair straddling the floor-level drawer of his filing cabinet and injured leg propped up by a lab stool rotated down as low as possible when the door behind him is rapped on firmly. “Permission to enter?” Matt calls.

“Yeah, come in,” he replies, not bothering to look up from his files. Should he put his notes on Khoshekh under space temporal anomalies, or under local mammals? Or, alternately, under the file he reserves for phenomenon specific to the radio station. Is Khoshekh's state unique to just the location?

Matt comes up behind him, takes one look at Carlos, and sighs. “Carlos, man, it's late. We have to get some rest if we're pulling an all-nighter tomorrow.”

Turning his wrist Carlos checks his watch. It is nearly two in the morning. “Shit. I didn't realize it was so late.”

“Most everyone already headed up to bed, but I needed to finish up a few things. And Harris was hoping I could convince you to take some of these.” Matt holds up a little white pill bottle and shakes them meaningfully at his boss.

Stretching his arms over his head until his spine makes a satisfying pop, Carlos laughs. “He is persistent, I'll give him that. But it really doesn't hurt as much as it did earlier.”
Matt crosses his arms. “Oh yeah? Then you won't need my help getting up the stairs and I can just head on up to bed?” he asks dubiously.

There's an exaggerated moment of silence then Carlos huffs. “Fine. The stairs are still a bit of an obstacle. What kind of pills are they?”

“You got me.” The little bottle is tossed to Carlos who catches it at his chest. The chemical name is not one that he recognizes, but Harris' name is printed neatly on the bottle as the prescribing physician and it says they reduce inflammation. May cause drowsiness. “I'm just a mild mannered delivery boy.”

“Ha.” Carlos has no intention of taking any medication that he does not need, thank you very much, but he also knows Matt will report back to Harris regardless. He makes a show of pocketing the bottle in hopes that Matt will assume he takes them up in his room, then pushes the remaining files into the front of the drawer for sorting later. It makes a loud clanging noise as he pushes it shut. “Give me a hand up?”

“Are you going to be able to come out with us tomorrow?” Matt asks, offering an arm to the lead scientist and hoisting him up. He hovers next to Carlos and keeps a steadying arm at the ready in case he needs it.

“Harris says he's got a crutch with my name on it,” he replies. “If worst comes to worst I'll take a few more breaks in the truck, and I can keep in contact with everyone on the radios.”

“Don't worry so much. We've got a good solid plan for tomorrow, and everyone knows what is expected of them. You've made sure of it. Maybe put one of us in charge and you stay back off your feet? You can trust us!”

“Yes, well, I can't trust much to go right in this town,” Carlos says sarcastically. They get to the second floor landing with Matt practically supporting half of Carlos' weight before the lead scientist grinds to a halt, putting a hand out to the rail to stop their forward momentum. “Wait. Wait, I forgot to lock my lab door.” He moves to turn and go back but Matt prevents it.

“Hey, Carlos, I can get it. No worries. If you go back down now I'll never get you up the stairs,” Matt says.
Carlos seems to consider this and nods. “Alright. But come right back down and lock it once I'm upstairs, alright?”

“Sure, boss. No problem.”

If Carlos had driven into the town of Night Vale today instead of four months ago, he would have thought the town abandoned. No cars in the oncoming lanes, no neighbors greeting each other on the sidewalks. No shoppers tarrying in front of the grocers looking at the fresh fruit display. No hooded figures standing dark and ominous outside Jerry's Tacos. Not a soul to be seen in Mission Grove Park.

Not even a deep welcoming voice on the radio.

The sky was a clear blue leaning towards teal that morning, clouds as absent in the sky as people on the ground, an observation that Billy made while triple-checking his gas mask. This was before the team divided into three groups, each scattering to a different area of town under the blanket of the quarantine. Abbey and Matt were off in one of the smaller parks near the Barista District, with Harris and Lei set up in Old Town.

Becky, Billy, and Carlos grabbed their remaining gear and headed out in the SUV to set up the primary testing location near the back side of Mission Grove Park. Located along the edge of both a small lake and a cluster of trees, and within a short walk of the playground, Becky insisted it was the perfect spot for knocking out a good chunk of their tests without moving the whole set-up elsewhere. Despite how much they had to do, erecting the quarantine tent and their mobile lab takes less time than expected and leaves the three waiting for things to start, anxious and mostly silent.

“I feel like I'm waiting for an air raid,” Billy says, barely above a whisper.

Becky wrings her gloved hands together, worried. “Don't say it like that!”

“I'm just saying...”
They talk quietly among themselves as Carlos checks that all his sample-gathering tools are secured to his belt or in the pockets of his protective bag. He has to admit, even if just to himself, that he is a bit nervous too. The odd calm feels like energy collecting before a storm, which makes no sense considering this is a man-made event that should have no effect on the weather or air pressure. Still, the energy in the air feels electric all the same, and when it gets too quiet in the lull of conversation the hair on the backs of his arms stand on end.

The first sign that the spraying has begun is the sound of incoming engines. The aircraft pass overhead, four separate motors in a line as far as they can tell, the shadow of one passing over the lake though none of them catch sight of the planes themselves. Then all falls silent again and the three scientists gather at the closed entrance to the tent, watching out the translucent plastic window for anything in the scenery to change.

“Look, there!” Becky exclaims, pointing upward.

From above the treeline a heavy cloud drifts downward. It reminds Carlos of creamer being poured into coffee, how it drops down then billows outward in an ever-growing mass. It is even colored an off-white creamy color, more yellow than white, though the air is so dense with it that the sun is blocked out and everything becomes dark and muted. The fog curls down around the tree branches, snaking down the trunks, insidious and everywhere. So thick that by the time the pesticide cloud reaches the ground they can hardly see the SUV not twenty yards away. Vision beyond that is meaningless, everything obscured like the team is suddenly in another world.

“Holy shit,” Billy says slowly. “This is freaky.”

“This is going to make things a little more difficult,” Carlos comments. “We might have to break out the flashlights a little earlier than expected.”

Billy laughs. “No kidding. Maybe it will lighten up before the sun sets.”

They startle when a loud screeching noise sounds from outside the tent, painful and choking, then a thump hits the roof making them all jerk their heads toward the noise. Whatever it was hits and slides down the incline to fall off onto the ground outside the tent with a thump.

“Oh my God, I think that is a bird...” Becky whines, hands fluttering uselessly.
Was a bird,” Billy points out, and it makes Becky whine once more and Carlos glare at him. “Er, sorry. Masks on?”

“Full gear on,” Carlos corrects. “Nobody goes out without full gear.”

Harris assured them all that the hard plastic tents would be safe, but just to be completely sure he is requiring they keep their safety masks on at all times. This is a rule everyone enthusiastically endorsed after he explained just what would happen to the human lungs if the pesticide was inhaled. And after hearing the death-wails of that poor animal, Carlos is going to take no chances even with skin exposure. They help each other step into their Hazmat suits and don their respirators, making sure buckles are tight and the edges sealed with protective tape, and soon they find themselves gathered at the exit again.

“Stay within range of the tent and let each other know where you are at all times,” Carlos says. “If you start to feel any symptoms, get back to the tent immediately, understand?”

His companions nod in agreement, but Billy gestures to the crutch under Carlos’ arm. “Are you sure you want to go out like that? You can hardly see the ground.”

Carlos sighs, looking down at the tight grip his arm has on the handle of the crutch and the way he is leaning heavily against it. “I’ll do my best. Don’t worry about me. Anyway, everybody got their radios on? Good. Okay. Let’s do this.” Reaching out, he unlatches the tent door and steps out into the mist.

They are instantly aware of an acrid chemical smell even through the filters of their masks. “Damn,” Billy says, voice muffled from behind Carlos. “I feel like I just fell in the pool at the YMCA back home.”

“For some reason I didn't expect the chlorine scent,” Becky agrees, getting the door closed behind them. “Yuck.”

Carlos looks around, feeling like he is on the surface of some distant planet rather than somewhere in the southwest United States. Holding his hand up in front of him, the cloud is thick enough that their suits are already coated in a wet film of yellow. “Becky, I’d grab that bird before you get started.”

“Sure thing, boss.” Becky slips around the side of the tent and comes back a minute later with the
tiny corpse of a starling sealed in a plastic bag. She deposits it in a large container next to the door of the tent—they'll take in samples in bulk rather than one at a time. “I hope I brought enough bags.”

After acclimating to the odd environment, work goes quickly and methodically. Hours pass as Becky carefully removes plant samples from the area at regular intervals, noting the amount of time that has passed since exposure. Or, perceived time as Carlos is quick to point out. He still has not nailed down the source of time disruption in the area. Becky also monitors the fate of several test animals that she has exposed to the pesticide, though that takes less time than she anticipated. Within the first few hours nearly all of them have succumbed to toxins and she dutifully seals each in a bag with a sigh.

Billy mostly sticks with Carlos to help with manual labor since the head scientist is incapacitated. To be fair, Carlos hobbles around the site as best he can but spends a majority of the time down on the ground. Soil and water samples are easier for him to collect with Billy manning the shovel and auger probes while Carlos gathers everything in metal cylinders. They make a good team, working efficiently, and Carlos cannot help but note how focused Billy is, how happy he seems to be working, how quick he is to make a joke. Despite the seriousness of the situation, his good attitude makes even the oppressing feeling of being surrounded by a deadly fog a lot more bearable. So enjoyable is it that they lose track of time, missing their first scheduled break by an hour—though not knowing the exact time might have also contributed to that.

The fog still has not dissipated as the sun begins to set, or at least when they think the sun is setting based on the relative time and the way the golden hue to the mist grows more orange and violet as the light fades. It is around then that the surface of the lake begins to bubble violently, the chemicals in the pesticide mixing with the water and causing an unknown reaction that produces even more oddly colored gas vapors—this time a light misty red. It hangs just above the surface of the water, a cloud below a cloud.

“Do you think it's safe?” Billy asks, adjusting the air flow calibrator on his sampling pump.

“Not a chance,” Carlos replies, adding a layer of duct tape to the joiner of the calibration tube. “Be ready to drop that thing if it starts to dissolve or something. Your hands are more important than some piece of equipment.”

“How much did it cost?”

Carlos takes a moment to consider that particular item. “Something like nine hundred?”
“Dollars?” Billy’s eyes widen and he looks down at the pump again. “A grand? Damn, man, couldn’t get it at discount?”

“That was at discount. You're lucky, you're a meteorologist. Most of your equipment isn't nearly as expensive.”

“Meteorologist and climatologist; don't be holding me back, now,” Billy laughs, snapping the casing shut. “Ready when you are.”

The sudden sound of the pump motor seems incredibly loud in the otherwise quiet park. The machine itself looks more like a glorified vacuum cleaner, but luckily the collection instrument is light-weight enough that Carlos can wield it one-handed while Billy holds the heavier motor. The thick pink vapor is sucked into the collection vessel easily enough, but Carlos wants to get plenty. Taking a careful step forward with his good leg, he moves his crutch another few inches. And things get irritating.

Carlos’ shoulder drops suddenly, his weight sinking, and he looks down. “Oh, fuck,” he curses once he sees the trouble. Raising his voice over the sound of the motor, he shouts, “Billy! Help?”

The motor dies and Billy is already laughing. “I swear, boss-man, only you! Only you have this luck!” He reaches down and yanks upward on Carlos’ crutch, which has sunk down into the muddy silt at the edge of the lake. It makes a disgusting sucking noise as Billy pulls it free, now covered in sticky mud and wet grass. “You're lucky you didn't fall in.”

“This thing isn't made for uneven ground,” Carlos complains. He shakes the end of the crutch, sending debris flinging out into the lake to plop into the water causing eerie pink and yellow ripples. As they are looking out at the surface, a flash of light brings their gaze upward. A trio of bright flashes arc overhead, branching out through the cloud in long fractals. They are quickly followed by a low rumbling noise.

“What is that?!” Becky calls from the direction of the woods, out of view.

“Anvil crawlers,” Billy shouts back, head tipped toward the sky.

Even Carlos is caught off-guard by the answer. “What?”
“Anvil crawlers. Horizontal in-cloud lightning discharges. But these aren't right, they're supposed to be high-altitude events. These are right over the park and the thunder sounds like it's miles away.” Another set of the oddly slow lightning streaks over the park, slow enough that Carlos can track the path of the lightning with the naked eye. “The pesticide cloud might be acting as a localized low pressure system. We should be alright to keep working.”

“You're sure?”

“Yeah,” Billy assures him, hefting the collection pump back up off the ground. “Nothing to worry about. Just adding to the atmosphere, you know?”

Carlos shakes his head. “I think Night Vale might be getting to you.” From behind the protective plastic mask, Billy's smile falters and he looks down at the pump, adjusting his grip. “You okay?”

The taller man is quiet for a moment before raising his eyes back to Carlos. “Carlos...do you think that the police are monitoring us, right now?”

That gives Carlos pause, and he looks around. The mist is lessening to be more like a normal heavy fog, but they have a long way to go before the quarantine is lifted. “Probably not, all things considered. Why?”

He opens his mouth, grasping for words like they are just out of reach. “I...things have just felt...weird, lately,” he says. “Do you think I've been different since coming here?”

Shit. “What do you mean?” Carlos asks, trying for nonchalance.

“I don't know,” he says on a huff, obviously frustrated. “Something has just seemed off. I mean, the laboratory, working with you guys, that's been great! I haven't been happier with my job in forever, I-I don't think...but it seems like something isn't quite right and I can't put my finger on it. Something is just...missing.”

“Maybe you're just homesick.” Becky wandering over would be really welcome about now, but she is nowhere to be seen. “We haven't been able to call out, and you said you were close to your mother. That might be it?”

But Billy is already shaking his head. “Things aren't lining up right, here,” he says, tapping the
side of his head covering where his temple would be. “There's this...ache. You know how Abbey talks about phantom limbs? It's like that, only it's in my head. Carlos.” He steps closer to Carlos. He's never seen the other man more serious and it is a struggle to meet his gaze. “Carlos, I need you to be honest with me. Did they—”

His voice cuts off, afraid to finish the question, but he does not need to. Carlos knows well enough what he is asking, and the unsaid words hang more heavy and poisonous than the air around them. Billy's eyes beg, plead, for Carlos to tell him that his worries are unfounded. That whatever blank spaces he finds are illusions, that the dark areas of his mind are from his mind alone.

And as much as Carlos wants to do as Billy wishes, he cannot find the words to lie to him. They stall in his throat and he remains silent, eyes dropping in shame.

“Fuck,” Billy hisses, face crumpling. He drops the air pump to the ground and brings his hands up as if to grasp his head, but the gloves and mask keep him from it. “They did, oh my God, they did! Carlos!”

“I'm sorry,” Carlos says, dropping his own tools and taking a staggered step forward, guilt flooding him. “I'm so sorry, Billy, we didn't even know until afterward, we couldn't stop them—”

“That's where the scars came from? On my chest?” he asks, referring to the burns that were already healing by the time Billy was returned to them. He begins to pace away from Carlos faster than the other man can keep up with his crutch. “I knew it wasn't from some accident as a kid, I knew it! I've never ridden a go-kart in my life, what were they, false memories? Jesus Christ! Why didn't you tell me?!”

“If you found out, they would take you back! We don't know what will happen if you get reeducated too many times! It could damage you permanently! We couldn't risk that, Billy, we just couldn't!”

Billy turns back on him and shouts, “So you just let me be ignorant? Is that supposed to be better?”

“No! No, we were just trying to keep you safe—”

“What did they take from me?” Billy demands, striding right into Carlos' space and looming over him. “Don't jerk me around, Carlos. Tell me!”
Carlos nearly falls over when he tries to take a step back but Billy grabs his arm, pulling him upright and keeping him steady despite how furious he looks. “Billy, please—”

“Just tell me!”

“Not what,” Carlos blurts. There's no use holding it back now. “Who.” At Billy's confused look, he clarifies. “A woman. Claudette Wells. You were high school sweethearts, you were still dating her when you took this job.”

From behind the protective covering, Carlos can see Billy's mouth working but no words coming out, trying to grasp the concept that he was in a long term relationship with someone he has no recollection of. “I had a girlfriend?”

Carlos nods. At least Billy doesn't look like he's going to pop Carlos in the jaw. For now. “You were going back to Arkham when the Sheriff's Secret Police took you and Gwen. We don't know what they did, but when you came back you didn't remember her. I'm sorry.”

“I don't understand,” Billy says, growing more confused by the moment. “That doesn't make any sense. Why? Did something happen to her?”

“No, she's...” He looks around them. Of all the places this conversation has to take place, this is not at all where he imagined it going down. “Billy. I don't know how to put this, and I'm sorry if this comes out harsh, but Claudette...she isn't a nice person.”

“What do you mean?”

Carlos swallows. How do you tell someone they have been emotionally abused for years by a person you have never seen and will never know about it first-hand? “There were things...that she did to you. She kept you away from your friends, isolated you, telling you that they didn't like you or were using you. Told you that your family didn't want what was best.” He feels sick to his stomach just saying that much, but he forces himself to continue. “She told you your work wasn't valid, and that your opinions were wrong. That everything you did was wrong. And you loved her enough to believe her.”

“I—that—I wouldn't—” Billy stutters, eyes no longer focused as he tries, tries with all his mental prowess to just remember. “That doesn't sound like me. That doesn't sound like something I'd let happen.”
“But it did,” Carlos says, not sure how else he can put it.

Billy shakes his head in disbelief. “Who told you that?”

Carlos swallows and says gently, “You did.”

Billy’s gloved hand comes up as if to cover his mouth that falls open, doubt fading into fear. His grip on Carlos’ arm tightens and Carlos realizes he might have to keep them both upright before long, the shock of realization leaving Billy weak-kneed. “I’m sorry,” Carlos says again. “I’m so sorry that this happened. If I could have stopped it I would have.”

“But why did this happen?” he asks, voice uneven. He looks up at Carlos again. “I don’t understand why they would do this to me? Why?”

It is not until that exact moment, standing in a poisoned bog under rolling waves of lightning and staring up into a face torn by anguish, that Carlos gets it. Plain as day, the reason hits him like a freight train. The same reason anyone would want to spare another soul pain. “I think because they wanted you to be happy,” he says simply. It does not make either of them feel better, and it is nowhere near good enough, but that is the answer he has for Billy. Judging by the look on his face, Billy finds the answer just as unacceptable as Carlos.

Billy looks out over the water next to them. “What do I do now?” he asks, voice quiet and filled with loss.

“I don’t know,” Carlos admits. “But we’re here for you, whatever you need. If you can forgive us.”

“You want me to trust you? After you lied to me?” he asks sharply, but the anger drains from him almost immediately after, his posture slumping. “It could have been any of you, couldn’t it?”

Carlos does not comment that he thinks it was directly tied to the fact Billy and Gwen were trying to leave Night Vale, nodding slightly. “We’re not entirely certain it hasn’t happened to anyone else, but we’re pretty sure it was just you two. You were gone for a few days.”

That makes Billy give a harsh laugh, shaking his head as he releases Carlos and puts his hands on
his hips, looking out at the water again. “What a fucking mess.” His breathing is not the steadiest, and the laugh sounds a bit manic. “So I just...I just work in the lab and go to bed each night and dream happy little dreams? See an officer on the street and smile like everything is just peachy?”

“I don’t know,” Carlos says. “But if they find out you know, they’re going to take you in and reeducate you again.”

“How do you know that?” Carlos realizes his mistake but before he can backtrack Billy pounces. “This has already happened?!”

Carlos bites his lip, feeling like he’s going to be apologizing until next year. “I’m sorry, things got out of hand—”

“Hey guys!” Becky calls through the fog. “I heard shouting! Are you okay?” They can tell by the direction of her voice that she’s near the tent, just barely visible in the dying light.

“Yeah!” Carlos responds, looking at Billy. “We are going to be alright, right?”

Billy shakes his head. “I don’t have any choice,” he says quietly.

Their companion is coming closer based on the volume of her voice. “It’s about time for a break. Did you get those vapor samples?”

“We got enough.” Carlos leans down and pulls the sample cartridge out of the machine, securing it in his bag for safe-keeping. “How are things on your end?”

“I managed to find a few live animals to monitor throughout the night. A few of them might actually make it!” she replies, voice bubbly optimism in light of the rest of their day. “Oh, what’s that?”

They still cannot see Becky, so the question makes no sense until the men see a pair of headlights cutting through the fog in the distance. They swing around and tilt downward before leveling out, a car turning down the small hill then headed their direction across the open field next to the lake. The only reason Carlos knows it is a car is because of the low set of the headlights. It rolls slowly up toward the tent before coming to a stop next to it, the beams of light revealing Becky’s location as they shine around her body.
The driver's door opens and Becky exclaims, “You shouldn't be out here! Not without a suit!” But whoever it is ignores her. A woman's silhouette joins Becky's, round hips and a knee-length skirt under an opened umbrella, high heels walking slowly out into the fog towards the two men. Carlos recognizes her before her face is even visible, tensing when she raises the umbrella. Claudette is wearing a surgical mask to protect her nose and mouth and a light jacket but she seems to shrug off the lingering vapors like it is nothing more than a light drizzle. Even from beneath her mask Carlos can tell she is smiling. “Hi baby,” she says softly, coming to a halt a few yards in front of them. “I've been looking for you.” When Billy does not respond, she tilts her head. “Don't you recognize me, sweetie?”

Next to Carlos, Billy stiffens. He has never seen this woman before, does not know her, but the voice is one that pulls at something buried deep. He glances at Carlos before taking a breath. “You're Claudette?”

“Yes!” she laughs, pulling her mask down so he can see her face. She looks positively radiant, the picture of innocence. “Carlos here told me that you've had a hard time of it lately, and I've come to take you back home. I've missed you.”

Billy swallows. “I don't know you anymore.”

Her face falls sad, Claudette's hands wringing around the handle of her umbrella. “I know,” she breathes out. “This place, these mean people, took you from me.” Then she brightens and holds out her left hand, the engagement ring perched proudly on her fourth finger. “But I love you too much to let them hurt you like this. Come with me and we can get back where we belong.”

There's a long expectant silence after her words, Billy watching her and everyone watching Billy, but he does not move an inch. When it becomes obvious that he is not going to respond, she drops her arm and steps forward. “Billy. You love me. You've always loved me. I wouldn't lie to you.”

“My friends here seem to think otherwise,” he finally replies, wary.

“They are not your friends! They do not know the first thing about us,” she argues, eyes cutting a sharp look over at Carlos despite maintaining a blinding smile. “Whatever he told you is lies.”

“You don't even know what they told me.”
Claudette laughs, like the tinkling of a bell. “I can guess,” she says knowingly. “They were filling your head with nonsense before you even left Arkham! That's why you stopped calling me. They let me think that you had left me! They lied to both of us, baby, tried to turn us against each other!”

Carlos tries to interject in defense of his team, “We didn't know—”

“This doesn't concern you!” Claudette practically snarls, breaking her happy facade for a brief second. It looks like it is becoming more difficult for her to keep her composure. “Billy, you don't need to stay here with these people. Don't you remember, we were going to buy a house, and raise a family together. You and me! We're all each other need!

Billy takes in her sincere words, her imploring face, but behind her stands Becky who looks like she might cry watching the exchange. Becky, who stayed up all night just last week working beads into his dreadlocks on a whim. Becky, who begged and pleaded for him to join them for sushi, insisting he needed to broaden his horizons when he claimed he had never had it. She and the rest of their unorthodox crew of scientists, all of which welcomed him with open arms, like he had been friends with them all along. He looks back at Carlos, the only boss who has ever treated him as an equal as far as he can remember, the man who believed in his research and his drive even when he himself did not. The Sheriff’s Secret Police did not take those memories from him, and he knows, knows they are true. Carlos meets his gaze open and calm, nodding slightly in support. That is all he really needs.

Turning back to Claudette, he shakes his head. “I don't believe you.”

The sweet smile drops. Suddenly it feels ten degrees cooler. Claudette is clearly done playing around. “Excuse me?”

“Whatever we had, it's...I can't go back,” Billy says. “Even if I did love you, I don't now. We don't know each other. I'm sorry if that hurts you—”

“You're sorry?” she interrupts harshly, a hand propping on her cocked hip. “You're always sorry. If you were sorry you wouldn't be putting me through this. You know, I've come a long way to pick you up. This has cost me time off work. I had plans. But you just have to be the center of attention. I had plans, Billy, and this little spectacle is putting everything on hold.” She presses her lips together in a thin line, the deep pink of her lipstick smearing a little at the edges as she reigns in her irritation. “I forgive you, of course I do. But you need to realize I am just looking out for you. So, come on. Stop being difficult. We can talk back at the hotel.”

“I said no,” Billy replies, his shoulders squaring in defiance. “I think it's best if you leave.”
“I am *not* leaving without you!” she cries, pitching her umbrella down at the ground in anger. It bounces and rolls to the side, dented inward, and the mist settles on her dark curls like a dusting of yellow confectioner's sugar. “You're always like this! Why won't you just do as I tell you!”

Claudette strides forward and grabs Billy by the arm, trying to jerk him in the direction of the car by sheer force alone. He is pulled a few feet before he digs in his heels, trying to get his arm free. “Stop!”

“Get in the car!” she shouts.

Carlos sees her grab for Billy's headgear and leaps to help him; even though Claudette is fine in the exposed air now that does not mean she will be for long, and he is not about to let her hurt Billy in her anger. Hands from three different people wrap around the canisters covering Billy's mouth, Claudette's trying to pry the mask off and Billy and Carlos' trying to pry her fingers free, all while she pulls violently on Billy's frame. Carlos finally manages to wrap his fingers fully around her hand and in a desperate move flings her back away from Billy. It sends the two men falling forward into a pile on the hard ground, and Claudette stumbling backwards into the thickest of the mud. Her skinny heels dig deep, pulling right off her feet. The sudden drop makes her fall straight back with a loud splash right into the shallows of the lake, completely submerging under the water mid-shout.

The taller scientist is shoved roughly as Carlos yelps in pain, gripping his knee tightly. “Shit,” Billy says, kneeling next to him. He landed right on Carlos' bad leg. “Shit, sorry!”

“It's fine,” Carlos says tightly through clenched teeth.

Claudette surfaces with a coughing gasp, spitting out mouthfuls of water. “You son of a bitch!” she screeches. “What the fuck!” Just barely able to get her feet under her, Claudette struggles to move through the heavy silt of the lake bed toward shore. “Fuck him!” she shouts, coughing. “Get over here—and—and help—help—” Her words stop completely as every breath becomes devoted to coughing, harder and harder, making her curl over even as she tries to keep her head above the water.

“Claudette? Claudette!” Billy scrambles to try and get to his feet, Becky running up to them.

The woman in the water sucks in another lung-full of air but on the next cough blood sputters from her lips, staining them bright red. “Bil—Billy—” she cries out, eyes widening in panic. Then she
starts to scream.

“Claudette!” Billy shouts, making a break for the water, but Carlos grabs his leg and Becky grabs his arm, bringing him crashing down to the ground again.

“No! Your suit isn't waterproof!” Becky cries, the two of them holding him down.

Carlos' brain readily supplies a flash of memory, the radio broadcast he listened to just two days ago, the Voice of Night Vale's sonorous tones describing the upcoming quarantine and the possible side effects of exposure. Before he really process what it all means, his mind has connected the dots and knows the logical outcome. With desperate hands Carlos grabs Billy by the shoulders and twists him around, forcing the other man to look at Carlos and not the woman in the water. “Don't look!” he orders, gripping Billy by the back of the neck and holding his gaze. “Don't look, Billy, keep your eyes on me! Do not look!”

The other man fights to turn his head but Becky is there to assist, pressing her face low and holding onto Billy's shoulders, the two of them acting as anchor. The screams behind him turn frantic, violent, wordlessly pleading not for help but for things to end. Tears stream down Billy's cheeks and he squeezes his eyes shut, breaking the gaze Carlos held on him and burying his head against the other two. It gives Carlos an unobstructed view of a scene he could have gone his whole life without witnessing.

Organ inversion is a nasty business.

The screaming chokes off when Claudette's esophagus begins to reverse, cutting off air flow and clogging her throat. After that, the noises are mostly wet and ripping, her skin unable to contain the force of the chemical reaction occurring in her bloodstream. Becky's sobs block out most of the noise, but Carlos is so shocked and horrified by the sight of someone turning inside out before his very eyes that he does not even think to close his own. It overwhelms his senses completely, not growing nauseous even though he surely should be turning his head and vomiting at what is the most disgusting thing he has ever witnessed.

The human form falls apart soon enough, spreading red and pink in the water before the mass of bones and flesh sinks below the surface leaving nothing but a dark stain. Billy cries out when the sounds cease completely, shaking in Carlos' numb arms, clinging helplessly. No matter what has happened before this point, a human being and a woman he once loved is now gone.

Carlos is not sure how long the three of them huddle there in the mud by the bloody bank of the lake but eventually the sounds of Billy's sobbing are overshadowed from above. Rotor blades
thump against the thick air making the fog dissipate in all directions and a search light cuts through the encroaching darkness. It passes over their testing site and the scientists before bobbing downward like a lazy bumblebee to alight in the open field. Four officers in black Hazmat suits leap from the open doors behind the cockpit, two sweeping over to the abandoned car and the other two approaching cautiously. “Doctors Abaroa, Odell, and Higginbotham? Are you injured?”

Carlos shakes his head negative, trying to get his wits about him but finding it difficult. The officer helps Carlos to his feet and even hands him the discarded crutch.

“Where is Miss Wells?”

The questions causes a new round of wailing from Billy, and Becky holds him tight. Carlos clears his throat and points toward the water. “She—I—the chemicals, she didn't—”

The officer nods as if this is exactly what he expected, though it is hard to tell anything more. Where the scientists have clear plastic face masks, the Sheriff's Secret Police have nearly opaque black masks that must allow them to see out but no one to see in. His partner is over at the water with a long stick, but Carlos does not want to see what he is doing with it. “We got word that she was in the area. I'm sorry for your loss.”

“Everything's secure over here,” calls one of the ones near the car as they slam the still-open door closed, one of the officers driving her white sports car out of sight. The quick and precise nature of their movements are hard for Carlos to follow and he tries to shake himself out of the haze of shock.

“Did Miss Wells speak to you, Dr. Odell?” asks the officer by their side.

“What?” Billy asks, looking up at them. His voice is a wreck and his eyes are swollen from crying to the point that he has to squint to see.

“Did you and Miss Wells have a conversation, sir?” the officer repeats, slow and clear. Billy looks lost and nods before thinking better of it. “I'm sorry to hear that, Dr. Odell. But I'm going to have to ask you to come with me.”

The implications of that dawn quickly. “Now, wait a minute,” Carlos says, stepping between them. “I don't think that's necessary. You see what happened to her, he's not in any danger. There's no need to—”
The officer does not move backwards even a centimeter. “I'm just doing my job, sir,” he says. Leaning down he hooks an arm around Billy's elbow and hauls him up off the ground, the second officer coming from behind to grab him by the other elbow before he can even react. “I have orders to take him in for reeducation.”

“Hey! What are you doing! Stop! Let go of me!” Billy shouts, flailing. The men, despite having a smaller stature than Billy, have no trouble controlling him as he fights. The shock of the last hour has left him drained of energy.

“No!” Carlos hobbles around in front of them, holding up his hands. “No, you can't do this! We aren't going to let you just take him!”

“Step aside, sir,” says the one on the right.

“He doesn't need someone telling him what to think anymore! He can think for himself!” Carlos screams, throwing his arms wide. He is not going to let them just fly Billy off and fry his brain, not this time.

“I'm going to ask you one more time, sir. Please step aside.”

“This isn't right! People should be able to choose what they want to remember, not have some strangers decide for them! You're going to—”

From behind the officers Carlos sees Becky's mouth open as she lunges forward, screaming, “Carlos!”

Then there is a sharp strike to the side of his head and a flash of pain. He is unconscious before he hits the ground.
There have been numerous occasions throughout Cecil's memory where someone has noticed that he has an above-average appreciation for old things, especially for someone his age. That is not to say that his possessions are simply old, of course. Cecil has always had a good eye for quality products, barring his unfortunate habit of picking up cat figurines or anything he considers too cute to pass up despite how cheap the plastic may be. Little antique shops, flea markets, yard sales, all of these are places someone could easily find Cecil Palmer on his day off work, browsing the knick-knacks and dinged-up furniture. A good portion of his wardrobe is consignment shop finds or clothes from the few vintage stores in the downtown strip, the ones that fit neatly between the boutiques and cafés that have popped up in recent years in an attempt to revitalize the area.

The point being, Cecil Palmer rarely sees an object without discerning some worth from it, no matter how inconsequential it may be. Where he got this trait from is painfully obvious from his position in one of the metal chairs in Old Woman Josie's kitchen. She has more things crammed into the small space than he could ever get up the stairs to his apartment, and at least double the square footage. And everything looks like it was bought by someone with a time machine, because Josie cannot limit herself to just one decade of style. Despite lace and gingham curtains hanging from a post-modern metallic curtain rod, despite a giant rooster cookie jar tucked in next to the fine china, despite the brand new refrigerator standing across from the practically ancient dish washer, it all looks great and works for her, somehow managing to look properly lived-in without seeming like a hoarder lives there.

A fine example being the retro-style dining set that could be straight out of the Moonlite All-Night Diner circa 1950 complete with bright pink and glitter vinyl cushions. Well, except for the fourth chair. She could never find a matching chair in the same style, the original charred in a fire at whatever establishment had pink glitter chairs in the first place. The fourth one is instead teal and white with large studs along the edges.

And apparently favored by one of the Eriks. Not that Cecil is acknowledging their existence in the universe, much less in the chair across from him.

“Are you sure the card is in here?” Cecil asks over his shoulder, focusing on the collection of index cards contained in their wooden recipe box. Made of poplar, he thinks, though deciduous trees were never something he could easily identify by sight. It was rather hard to get that particular badge in boy scouts, what with a lack of naturally occurring trees in the area to practice the skill on. The parks only helped so much considering half the trees planted in them were unnatural for the desert, and another half of the ones left over were man-made and used as information-gathering data towers by the Sheriff’s Secret Police. At least that is what he had been told at the time by his scoutmaster. That number seems a little conservative, now that he thinks about it. Besides, if it is made of poplar it must have been aged in the sun at some point because it
is darker than he would expect. Maybe Josie stained it.

From the other room, Josie calls back, “I'm sure, dear. It's in there.”

Cecil frowns as his long fingers tick through each recipe in turn, scanning the titles. *Chitimacha Macque Choux, Miss Maulpin's Gumbo, Missiiagan Pakwejigan, Besugo a la Espalda, Ogwissimanabo, Cheese Tortellini with Cherry Tomatoes, Ojawashkwawegad... “Josie! Most of these aren't even in English!” he cries out. “How am I supposed to find it if I can't read it?”

The huffing sigh she gives would be audible through the wall even if the door had been shut. He knows what she is going to say before she even says it. “It is in there, in English! This is what you get for taking modified Sumerian in school instead of a language you'll actually use! I told you that when you were twelve! Lord child, you'd think a boy as smart as you would know better...”

Cecil grumbles to himself as he mouths along with the familiar argument, slowing down to actually read the text on each card that is in English. It is not his fault that Josie decides to write her notes in languages he cannot read. Spotting a card written completely in hieroglyphics is nearly enough to make him slam the box shut and forget the whole thing, but he promised he would help and he is a man of his word. “Aha!” he exclaims when he locates a card labeled with the correct recipe. *Chicken and Biscuit Cobbler.* “Found it!”

Josie shuffles into the room with an Erika following closely behind carrying a large cardboard box. “Just set it on the table, dear,” she says to them, gesturing to the space next to Cecil. The contents of the box clink loudly against each other as the tall being sets it down, turning luminescent eyes toward her for more instructions and casting Josie's upturned face in a soft apricot glow. “Thank you, Cecil and I can take it from here. I think Erika could use some help out back with the muscadines, though.”

Erika does not acknowledge this verbally or non-verbally, simply turning and gliding through the hall to the back door.

Getting to his feet, Cecil pulls open the flaps of the cardboard box and starts pulling out casserole dishes in a variety of colors and patterns. “What am I looking for?”

“There's a pretty light blue ceramic one in there with orange and white flowers on the side that should be big enough,” Josie says, picking up the recipe card Cecil pulled and scanning the ingredients. Satisfied, she flips the recipe box shut and props the card on the slanted lid for easy reading. “And there should be a little yellow one; grab it too. You can take one home for yourself.”
“Josie,” Cecil admonishes, “You don't have to do that!”

“Don't pretend you won't be trying to sneak some otherwise,” she chuckles, taking the yellow one when Cecil hands it to her. Josie tuts at the dust on it and heads to the sink to give it a quick wash. “Besides, you're helping.”

“Well...thank you,” Cecil says. He is not about to argue with free food if it is from one of Josie’s recipes. He remembers having it on occasion when he was younger, how homey it felt, which was an odd enough sensation. But Josie has a large range of dishes she likes to make and loves to try new things so nothing was ever really a staple in her home. “I haven’t had this one in years.”

“It is an old favorite,” she agrees. “And if all goes well, we can run it over there just in time for supper. There’s nothing that soothes the soul quite like fresh baked bread.” The Erika sitting in the teal chair flutters a few of their many wings, feathers fluffing up and twitching before easing slowly back into position. The single oblong eye in their face turns all-seeing toward Josie in an ominous stare. Nodding after a long moment of silence, Josie sighs sadly. “That's a shame. We'll enjoy it while it lasts. Remind me to make some pancakes in the morning.”

Cecil looks between the old woman and the more reddish-hued Erika for a moment, but neither clarifies that statement. One more tick of annoyance. Irritation rising, he turns his attention back to the box. “I think it’s on the bottom, of course,” he comments. The blue casserole dish, easily the biggest one in the box, is pulled carefully out from under the other heavy dishes with a loud clatter but nothing breaks. Putting all the others back and placing the box on the floor to be packed back up later, he brings it to Josie to be rinsed. “Planning on making a lot?”

“There are a lot of scientists, and I want them to have enough for leftovers. Though, they'll probably polish it all off in one sitting. I've seen them at the Arby's; they eat a lot.” Josie dunks the blue dish into the water and soaps it up thoroughly. “And I'm sure they don't eat many home-cooked meals.”

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Cecil asks, worry coloring his words. He cannot help but remember the aftermath of Gwen's death: the near-violent reaction from Matt, the tears in Becky's eyes, the weary caution the incident seemed to instill in Carlos at the time. Things got better eventually, and he knows Carlos was sincere when they spoke after-the-fact, but they are all still outsiders. Maybe things like this are not proper where they are from. “They didn't really seem all that receptive to being friendly after the last time something like this happened.”

She shakes her head like he is the one being unreasonable. “That was completely different. You were there at the crux of the matter with that young woman in the library. They didn't have time to
mourn. Here, it's been a week. There is nothing wrong with extending a warm hand to someone when they have fallen on hard times. This is neighborly, and I'll be doing it with or without your help. It's the Night Vale thing to do.”

“The Night Vale thing to do would be handing over a brown bag with vodka and telling them to drink to forget,” Cecil points out cynically.

Josie turns and slings a damp washcloth at his arm, smacking him with it before heading for the refrigerator. “Hush! Don't start spouting that nonsense in my house. We help people in need, and that's that.”

“Alright, alright! I just don't want them to be upset with us!”

“Everyone needs to eat. Now,” Josie pauses to push a pile of ingredients into Cecil's arms. “You're handy with a knife; get to chopping while I start on that dough.”

“Yes ma'am,” he laughs, tension easing somewhat. More than familiar with where Josie keeps everything, Cecil moves about the kitchen collecting a knife, cutting board, and measuring cups, setting up a little station to one side so Josie has plenty of room on the counter for mixing dough.

“Go ahead and triple everything in the recipe,” Josie says, digging under the counter for a mixing bowl she prefers for making baked goods with as well as her sauté pan. “May as well make a batch for here while we're at it.”

There is the sound of metal scraping against the linoleum floor as the teal chair is pushed back and Erika moves to the cardboard box of dishes. It takes all of Cecil's effort not to turn and stare as they sift through the cookware and pick out a white dish with three cheery little red roses painted on each side, then move to the sink to wash it for the old woman. “So helpful,” Josie praises when they finish and set it to the side to dry. “You don't have to hang around if you don't want to, Erika.”

Erika makes a cooing noise that resonates from somewhere in their chest, like a dove if a dove were a being of near-limitless power. It reverberates through Cecil's bones in a way that leaves him feeling tingly along his scalp and knees. The feathers of two of their wings fluff again and their eye blinks with four lids before they return to their perch. Hoping to keep Erika occupied, Josie pulls one of her word search books from a drawer and sets it in front of them with a doting little smile.

“You shouldn't encourage this,” Cecil chastises quietly, chopping carrots quick and efficient as
Josie comes up next to him.

“Encourage what?”

He side-eyes her as Josie measures out some self-rising flour from a sack. “You know what.”

“Keep your eyes on your fingers,” she counters, ignoring him. “And wouldn't that go a bit faster if you used more than one knife?”

Cecil actually lets out a gasp at that and turns to face her fully. “Josie!” he protests with a hiss. The very suggestion makes his tattoos squirm restless in his skin. His eyes cut to the Erika. They seem to be making marks around words in their word search without the use of a pen, pencil, or any other writing utensil, but with just their mind. Cecil whispers quickly, “Not in front of...of...them!”

“Like they don't know.” But Josie sighs and shrugs, acknowledging her overstep. Cecil knows that she knows damn well how private he is about his tentacles; at least she can see that little comment was out of line. She waves vaguely at him. “Don't forget the mushrooms.”

“Any particular kind?” he asks, putting the knife down a little firmer than necessary and heading for the pantry.

“There are some button mushrooms—Oh! I've got some twilight stars growing in the cellar! Be a dear and gather some, those two would be perfect. You know, twilight stars are excellent for fighting depression.”

Cecil nods and changes direction, grabbing a brown paper bag from the cabinet before heading out the back door. There are three steep steps down to the dry little path behind Josie's house, steps that he fell down on at least four separate occasions that he can remember from childhood, one of which resulted in a busted-open chin. It took that incident to finally get him to walk carefully down the stairs which he does while keeping a hand on the thin wrought-iron rail, looking out at her back yard. Her garden is in full bloom still, despite the lateness of year. Josie is a staunch believer in always having something growing in her garden. As far as he can remember, there has never been a time when it stood empty. Through every arid drought, unnatural flood, and locust swarm, this plot of land has always been fertile. Josie tells him it is the nitrogen-rich soil and her special plant food she makes by hand, the recipe for which she refuses to share with anyone but Cecil knows at least contains decomposing bird carcasses.
Early November and her garden is lush with various root vegetables and gourds, and her grape vines are producing plump healthy fruit. The Erika from before and another one that has a round arch of bone protruding from the top of their head and a smattering of pale blue eyes along both arms raise their heads from behind a row of muscadines to stare warmly at him. At least he thinks that is their intention. He feels warm under their gaze, warm and light which is the exact opposite of how he should feel when beings that the City Council adamantly claim are not real stare at you. Realizing his thoughts are venturing where he would rather not tread, Cecil turns his back to them and leans down to slide the latch then lift the heavy cellar door up and open.

The familiar musty smell of age and decay and dirt wafts up in a cool breeze as the wood door is settled to the side. Cecil kneels down on the top step and draws a quick set of symbols into the dirt that has gathered there, then spits into the rune to make it glow a soft teal before carefully stepping down the wooden stairs. They creak under his weight, the wood unused to someone weighing more than a little old lady stepping on it. He wishes they had been built longer; he has to step sideways to even put his foot down on the step properly. The afternoon sun casts a golden shaft down onto the floating dust and the lone moth that flutters randomly in the air, shocked and disoriented by the sudden burst of light. The glow does not spread well, though, so Cecil's hand grasps a bit blindly for the dangling chain he knows is there. When he grasps it he gives a quick yank and the bulb above flickers to life.

Josie's cellar is a treasure trove of interesting items piled up in corners like the antique stores he loves to frequent. What Cecil would give to own half of it himself. A lot of them are pieces from the old opera house Josie used to be the Chairwoman for; candelabras and wall sconces, letters from the old marquee sign, the cash register that was in the ticket booth at the front, countless other odds and ends. The frame for the large chandelier that used to hang in the foyer of the opera house is turned and leaned on its side against one wall, partially held upright by a stack of canning jar boxes. Cecil knows all the little crystals for the chandelier are packed safely away somewhere they would not be damaged. The opposite wall is floor-to-ceiling shelves of canned jams, jellies, mustards, pickled vegetables, sauce, and butters. Anything Josie can grow and preserve is lined up neat if not a bit dusty on the wooden shelves.

In the middle of all this is a ring of bloodstones embedded into the earthen floor, an obsidian alter at the northern-most point of the circle. The candles around it are mostly stubs at this point, the wicks burned down to almost nothing and wax piled high in circles like long-cooled lava. A splash of dried blood still clings to the edges of the slab.

Cecil leans down to get a closer look at the alter, humming. "Not good." Making a mental note to come down here before the week is out and tend to the circle so Josie will not have to trek down those stairs, Cecil gingerly steps over the stones to the crawlspace door in the back corner. Harvestmen skitter along the surface and a few have tried to make webs connected to the latch so he has to bat a few of them away so he can open the seal. "Sorry guys. You need to make your home somewhere else. Try the ceiling corners, I hear that's prefereable." The fetid odor inside this secondary hole is thick and heavy in the air, and Cecil has to cough to clear his throat. He is not sure what decomposing material is scattered in the concrete and dirt space but from it grows what he came for.
Twilight stars are one of Night Vale's rarer native species. Long and thin with five-pointed caps at the top like ornate bells, they are black at the base and fade in a near-perfect gradient to pure white at the tips. Filaments of violet run vertically up the stems and tiny dots of the same color freckle the caps. The displacement of pressure from Cecil opening the door causes the mushrooms to tremor back and forth.

Cecil hums the weather from the night before to himself as he examines the selection in front of him, then plucks the ones he deems ready. Each pull and snap results in a twilight star making a soft shrill noise not unlike the distant sound of a wailing fox only more ethereal, and the other mushrooms tremble more violently in response. Logically he knows they are not sentient, that it is a response to the spores that are released when one is picked, but Cecil cannot deny it is a bit disconcerting to hear. He is quick and precise and soon enough the remaining mushrooms fall silent, his paper bag filled with three casseroles-worth of twilight stars.

Rolling up the top of the bag so they are not exposed to direct sunlight, Cecil closes the door tight and latches the lock back. Two stubborn harvestmen creep back onto the door as soon as it is shut, intent on remaking their web. Cecil shakes his head at their persistence and turns, then lets out a surprised shriek.

Silhouetted in the light pouring down from the open cellar door is one of the Erikas, their form dark and imposing.

“Gods,” Cecil huffs, putting a hand to his chest. He can feel his heart fluttering rapid beneath his breastbone. “You scared me! Don't do that!”

Erika says nothing in response. This one is thin for the most part save for their broad shoulders made more so by the bulk of their wings folded at their back. Arms longer than that of a human hang down low, massive hands dangle to the knees, and small useless feet hover about half a foot off the ground. That explains why he did not hear Erika coming down the stairs behind him. While the two in the garden have intricate hairstyles of woven braids and bony protrusions, this one is completely smooth on top. The light behind them highlights the edges of their form but the face is a dark smear that Cecil cannot read. A wave of unease falls over them as Cecil realizes the only thing he can hear is his own breaths flooding in and out of his lungs.

“Um. I was...just getting the twilight stars...” he tries, gesturing back at the crawlspace door. The harvestmen have already started covering the latch in thin gray strands.

Silence. Cecil just knows he is being stared at.
Well, he does not have to just stand there feeling like a spectacle. He clears his throat and takes a step to the right as if to go around. “I should get back to—“

The moment Erika starts to move Cecil wants to make a break for the steps and away from this being that by all accounts should not be here. There is no telling what the Sheriff’s Secret Police would do if they found out. Honestly, they know, they have to know that Josie is harboring them all here, that their claims that angels are not real is about as believable at this point as Steve Carlsberg being an upstanding man of moral character. Why they have not acted, why they have not come in and rounded them up to take them out of town or at least away from view escapes Cecil completely. There must be a reason and if only he had a lead to follow and figure out why.

As it is, Cecil ends up backing over one of the bloodstones on the floor and tripping into a tower of precariously stacked boxes that threatens to topple over. Scrambling with flailing arms he manages to keep the pile from tipping, and when he looks again Erika is floating not three feet from him. “Uh, I, um, what do you—I'm just getting the mushrooms, I'm not doing anything—listen, you don't need to get so close—oh.”

Cecil stutters to a halt as one of Erika's lengthy arms reaches out past Cecil to the wooden shelf he knocked into when he fell. Alabaster fingers like bare bones wrap around a small jar of garlic in oil, labeled with Josie's swirling cursive. They pluck it from the shelf and hold it in front of them, giving it a slight shake before turning slowly toward the stairs.

Oh.

Feeling foolish, Cecil runs a hand up through his short hair before following Erika. But there has been something itching in his mind since the night he saw these beings for the first time in Josie's living room, and he has not had the opportunity to voice his worry without Josie hearing until now, and the Sheriff's Secret Police probably do not have a monitoring device down here. So Cecil clears his throat. “Um.”

Erika pauses above the first step upward, rotating in place with a little bobbing motion not unlike a cork in water. Now Cecil can see the five solid white eyes on this one's face, their orientation shaped like a flower in bloom. He wishes they had a mouth, because the combination of random eye placement and the missing orifice makes it very hard to read their expression. But from the slight tilt of the head, Cecil can guess that they are listening.

Pulling himself to his full height, Cecil states, “Josie is very important to me.”
The eyes all blink, one after the other, in a counter-clockwise wave.

“Can you promise me that your intentions with her are genuine?” Cecil asks. His fingers feel numb as they grip the brown paper bag at his side. “That you all will keep her safe?”

He is not sure how the eyes all manage to look pleased, anatomically speaking, since they do not all have a cheek underneath to simulate smiling. But they do, and Erika tips their head in agreement. It makes Cecil feel warm all over again, and he knows instinctively that Erika is being truthful. Holding up their large free hand they curl it into a fist, extending a thumbs-up sign to Cecil.

Well then. “Uh,” Cecil holds up his own thumbs up. “Great. That's...that's great. No problem, then.”

When the Erika turns and glides up the stairs, Cecil's own eyes widen and he shakes his head. That was surreal. He thinks he will still try to limit how much he talks to the Erikas. Angels are weird.

The interaction makes him feel less tense that he would have been when he returns to the kitchen to find three Erikas where there had previously been one. They are all gathered around Josie and watching attentively as her small arthritic hands knead the dough she made in Cecil's absence. The lack of normal human facial expressions does not make them one lick harder to read in this case; their body language clearly shows how curious and fascinating they find the whole process. Josie has pinched off several round balls of dough and rounded them before setting them aside. The one with skin like rusted iron reaches out tentatively and pokes one of them with a curved talon, watching with three eyes as it gives slightly. Some of the batter sticks to the rounded curve and Erika issues a little tremor from their throat.

“No sneaking, you'll have some of your own when it's done,” Josie chastises, shuffling to the side to push the Erika out of the way. While she is not looking, the one on her other side reaches out and snags the mixing bowl that had been teetering close to the edge. They silently place the bowl safely in the center of the counter, returning to their calm and serene stance as Josie looks back at her work.

They really are good for her, Cecil thinks, watching from the doorway. It is good to know she is not alone.
The smell of bread and spices permeates the inside of Cecil's car so thoroughly that his stomach rumbles in protest. Gods, it smells so good. He knows what he will be eating for dinner and lunch the next day. Maybe even breakfast between. But the waiting is driving him slowly mad. He has secured the casserole dish in the back floorboards and rolled down his window to get fresh air flowing through the car. Even for November it is still a bit stuffy in the afternoons. His fingers tap restlessly along the bottom of the steering wheel. What is taking Josie so long?

An Erika that Cecil has not seen before is sweeping Josie's front porch with her cheap broom. This one has feathery green fringe growing along their jawline and shoulders and some sort of midnight blue cloth draped around their body. It is also the first one he has seen with a tail, which he is trying to get a look at without it being noticeable. Considering the number of eyes that are looking Cecil's way, he does not think he is doing a good job at hiding his curiosity.

“Finally,” Cecil mutters when he sees the front door open, but he has to do a double-take when he sees Josie step out. The old woman has changed into what could only be described as her Sunday best: an olive green dress that stops halfway down her calves, a little white jacket and matching purse, and a white large-brimmed hat with blue and yellow flowers on one side. She pauses to say something to Erika before stepping down the stairs and over to the car, taking care not to scuff her little white flats. Her gold and white jewelry gleams bright in the afternoon sun.

Cecil stares incredulously. “Are you wearing perfume?” he finally blurs.

“Gardenia,” she replies primly, settling her purse on her lap. Then she looks at him challengingly. “What?”

“Why?”

Josie puts her nose in the air and looks out the front window. “There's nothing wrong with looking nice. Some of us would like to make a good impression.” Her nostrils flair as she inhales. “Besides, you put on that little stash of cologne I know you keep in your dash, so I don't want to hear it.”

“I don't know what you're talking about,” he replies, starting the car. Maybe they can get through this drive without discussing it.

“So, have you talked to him recently?”
Okay, maybe not. “Him?” Josie turns toward him, unimpressed by his attempt at ignorance. “No. Not recently. And after the news last week I wasn't sure when would be appropriate to send my condolences.”

She hums in agreement. “Did you find out if they'll be bringing that one back? What was it, Billy?”

“I asked the monitoring officer on duty at the station but she said it wasn't something she was at liberty to discuss. When I tried to track down the monitoring officer at the lab, I was...uh...gently rebuffed.” Cecil has been threatened with reeducation so many times by the Sheriff's Secret Police that it is hardly worth mentioning, and the thought of it always upsets Josie so he tries to limit how often he brings it up.

The old woman can read between the lines well enough and chooses not to comment on what Cecil does not say. “It can be tricky. Them being outsiders complicates things. They have their own customs that we should try and accomodate. Where did you say he was from, again?”

“Miskatonic is in Arkham, Massachusetts,” Cecil explains. He is pretty sure he has gone over this with her already.

“Yes, but what about him?” she asks, waving that off. “Is he from there? Or somewhere else? The world's a big place, you know.”

Cecil blinks. “I...I don't know, actually,” he replies. “I never really thought about it.” Now that Cecil is thinking about it, Carlos' accent isn't much like those of his colleagues. They all sound a bit different from each other in one way or another, and Lei mentioned that he was originally from the San Francisco area which is nowhere near Massachusetts. But Carlos' is something else entirely, like nothing he has heard before. Light and crisp one minute then a word will cause a slightly accented vowel or a rolling 'r' and...now really is not the time to be imagining Carlos' rolling r's.

“I doubt they're all from there,” Josie says. “Maybe none of them. Big university like that, they're probably from all over. Ugh, Massachusetts. So cold in the winter.”

“You've been? Did you see Arkham?” Cecil hazards a glance over at her but there is a bit of traffic out today so he keeps his eyes mostly on the road.
“Of course. Many years ago.” Josie is digging in her purse and pulls out a little compact, flipping it open and checking her teeth.

“What was it like there?”

“A lot greener, that's for sure,” she says wryly. There's a moment where one of her short nails messes with something along her gum line before she gives the mirror another wide smile. “I was just passing through and stopped for a night. Had a few drinks, met a few fellas. Pressed on in the morning.”

“You didn't see any of the sights?” Not that Cecil would know what sights a city like that might have. He feels a little bad that he has not even done a little digging about this place other than looking up the college, and unsurprisingly most of that information was blocked. Some reporter he has been lately.

Josie laughs lightly. “Not much there other than Miskatonic, or at least there wasn't then. Most tourists head over to Boston if they want sights, but it's a charming city and there's a lot of history there, if you know where to look. A gorgeous campus, from what I remember. So many huge trees, bigger than anything here, and everything is old red brick and stone. Anyway, back to your scientist—”

“He isn't my scientist,” he protests, but Josie ignores this like she ignores most things she does not care for.

“He could be, if you stepped up your game.”

Cecil's mouth opens wide to retort, but he cannot decide if he is amused or aghast. “I cannot believe—my game?! What do you know about my game? Why are you even saying that, oh my Gods, Josie I don't want to hear these words coming out of your mouth—”

“I'm just saying, maybe you should be a little more direct with him! He sounds like a shy thing. Or a little dense.”

“He is not dense!” Honestly, he cannot believe what he is hearing. “He's a scientist! That is like, the opposite of dense! Smart! Intelligent! Uncompressed!”
“I don't think uncompressed is what you're going for—”

“I know what I mean!” Cecil considers those last few sentences and shakes his head. “I mean, you know what I mean. Shy, I can agree with, sort of. I think he's just thinking too much all the time.” Then he frowns a little. “Or maybe he just isn't interested.”

Josie, who had been pressing her gray curls upward with the palm of her hand to try and give them a little more bounce, snaps her compact shut with an audible click and sighs loudly. “Cecil.”

“What?! You don't know!”

“Until the day comes when one of you grows a metaphorical spine and gets around to actually asking, then there is no use in worrying about that possibility. And please don't go around growing a literal extra spine; you remember what happened to Gerald Weis.”

Cecil shudders. “Don't remind me. I don't want to get queasy.”

Josie fills the rest of the ride with chatter about maybe going bowling sometime soon. The Eriks have been wanting to learn, but her arthritis has been acting up in her hands and she just has not felt up to it. Attempts to get Cecil to commit some time helping to teach them are met with half answers, so she drops it when they pull in the laboratory parking lot. Then Josie flips down her vanity mirror to check her appearance one last time.

“What has gotten into you?” Cecil asks, retrieving the casserole dish from the back seat.

“Nothing!” she snips, looping her purse into the crook of her arm and leading the way to the door, letting Cecil handle the heavy lifting. She presses the button next to the door that rings the inner bell, each shifting their weight a bit as they wait.

After a minute or two comes the sound of locks clicking open from the inner door and Lei's face becomes visible from around the door jam, a blandly curious expression on his face. He brightens considerably when he sees them and unlocks the outer door, throwing it open with a grin. “Hi Cecil! And hello there, Ms. Josie! You are looking quite lovely this afternoon!”

Josie giggles like a schoolgirl, and Cecil suddenly feels like he has fallen down the proverbial burrowing muskrat hole. “Why thank you, young man! You look charming yourself!” she replies.
with a little hand gesture toward Lei, like she wants to touch. Taking in Lei's attire, which consists of two layered T-shirts and what Cecil would guess are his laundry-day jeans, he is pretty sure Josie is not referring to his outfit.

“You're too kind to me, Ms. Josie, too kind. What brings you by today? Just couldn't wait to see me again on Saturday? Ms. Josie, if you missed me that much you just had to call and I'd come running.”

“I bet you say that to all the girls.”

“And some guys, besides.” Lei follows up this with a little wink for her benefit and it sends Josie off into another fit of giggles.

Behind her Cecil could not look more confused. Saturday? Again? What in the void is going on? Cecil's discomfort must be plainly visible on his face because when Lei looks up at him the other man's laugh turns from doting to more genuine. “I ran into Ms. Josie in the park, literally, and we got to talking. So far I haven't found a better well of information about Night Vale than her. She's always sending me off in some random direction with a new bit of history to investigate. Ms. Josie, have you been keeping me your dirty little secret?” he teases to the old woman.

“A girl has to have some secrets, young man,” she says coyly.

He stands corrected. He can feel more uncomfortable.

Luckily Lei's eyes are drawn to the blue dish Cecil is clutching tightly and he changes the subject. “What do we have here?”

“Chicken and biscuit cobbler,” Cecil says, adjusting his grip. This thing is heavier than he thought it would be, and still hot on the bottom.

“Cecil and I were baking up a storm today, and we had a little extra,” Josie adds. “Thought you all might like a little home cooking.”

Of all the scientists that Cecil has had the chance to speak with for more than two minutes, Lei is probably the one he would consider the most dialed into human interactions. Makes sense, considering his background is more in what Lei explained to him were the social sciences. Judging
by the sharp look Lei shoots Cecil, he knows exactly why they have suddenly popped up with a neighborly gift of food. His smile turns understanding, and he plays along beautifully. “Must have been baking a lot,” he comments, eying the size of the dish. “Thank you, that is awfully kind of you. Please, come on in.”

Lei holds open each door for them, Josie pausing to take in the lab just as Cecil had the first time he came to visit. She looks mildly impressed, but then it does take a lot to impress her nowadays. The room looks a bit different now, some equipment moved to different spots than he remembers. It is also empty of scientists, though several machines are running loud enough so the room is not completely silent.

“Everyone is off doing their own thing today,” Lei says, walking around them after making sure the front is secure. He also picks up a cardboard box that was sitting by the door, tucking it under one arm and gesturing for them to follow. “It's been a bit quiet around here.”

“It's not what I was expecting,” Josie admits. Her shoes sound loud as she clips across the floor.

“I still owe you that tour, don't I? Maybe we can arrange that some day when there are more of us about.” Lei leads them into the break room, setting the box by the door. There is a round table that takes up half the space of the room with folding chairs set up around it or collapsed in a stack against the back wall. In one of them is Matt, two stacks of papers laid out in front of him. He's bent over them and marking different lines of information with a bright neon yellow highlighter. When they come in Matt looks up at them with a vaguely hostile glance, glaring at Lei.

“Here, let me take that from you,” Lei says, relieving Cecil of the casserole dish. “Check it out, man, we've got dinner for tonight.”

At the table, Matt's face hardens. With quick jerky movements he slaps the left stack on top of the right, collecting the papers and pushing away from the table. Without a word he pushes his way past Lei and Cecil and out the door, not even sparing Josie a glance.

Lei puts the dish prominently in the center of the table and turns back to them. “I am so sorry. I can't...he's been acting that way since...anyway. We really do appreciate this. It smells delicious.”

“You don't need to apologize, sweetie,” Josie replies. Then she gets a good look around, immediately fretting for a different reason. “Don't tell me this is your kitchen.”
“Carlos has a real kitchen up in his apartment, and if we need to do any serious cooking he lets us go up there. But for the most part us scientists survive off stuff you can microwave or toast anyway,” he chuckles. “I might eat better here than I did back home, actually. At least your fast food options are more limited. We used to have a Starbucks on the corner of my street; it was hell on my nerves but so very tasty.”

Josie tuts at that, shaking her head with dismay both for his beverage choices and the state of their kitchen. “I’m going to have to make sure you lot eat better. How are you supposed to do the kind of hard work Cecil tells me you all do here if you're all wasting away?”

“You don't need to worry about us, Ms. Josie, we'll get by. But I can't say we would say no to anything that smells this good,” Lei says. This seems to placate Josie, as she nods even though Cecil can tell she wants to desperately say something about the pile of coffee cups in the sink. From the looks of it they have been surviving on nothing but caffeine for the past who knows how long. In fact, the only thing that looks recently used is the coffee maker which is still turned on with a half-full pot waiting for drinking. The whole set-up looks more suited for a college dorm than a group of self-sufficient adults.

Even worse is the pile of bloodstones in the back corner, arranged in an uneven circle save for two that have been shoved out of alignment most likely when someone shoved their chair away from the table too quickly. The stones are covered in a layer of dust from lack of use, and there is no alter at all. “Have you not been using your bloodstone circle?” Cecil asks, surprised to the point of being beyond social graces.

“The others haven't really taken to it,” Lei admits. “It isn't a practice where we come from. But they know the basics. I keep a set up in my room, though. I think I'm getting the hang of it.”

“Improper bloodstone maintenance can lead to a number of ill effects and portents,” Cecil warns. First Josie and now the scientists, he feels like he needs to take a scrubbing to the lot of them and do a midnight group chant and a blood sacrifice just to be sure none of them get sucked into the endless void for their transgression. “Also, there's a seventy-five dollar fine.”

“Oh, that's good to know. Thanks, Cecil.” A quick check of the time and Lei heads for the door. “Let me just see if anyone's around.”

“We don't mean to keep you from your work,” he tries, feeling awkward. It seems weird to be here uninvited when they are all surely busy doing important science.

“It's practically quitting time anyway,” Lei assures him, sticking his head out the door. “And most
“Yeah, Cecil and Ms. Josie brought us dinner,” Lei says, reaching out to lift up the lid of the casserole dish.

There is a moment of surprise happiness, then the three scientists surge forward into the room spouting thanks and appreciation. Becky's eyes actually well up a little as she takes the time to greet Josie and give her a light hug, then turn to give Cecil a long one of his own. “You didn't have to do that,” she says gently, voice more subdued than he is used to hearing from her.

“Well, we had plenty,” he tries. The other two have no qualms about collecting the necessary plates and forks, Abbey coming back with a large spoon to divvy out helpings to each scientist.

“Sorry if we're rude, but oh my God is that rosemary? It smells like rosemary, and real chicken not compacted into nugget form, and also, hello, I'm Harris, nice to meet you, ma'am.” The horned man shoves his fork into his mouth and holds out the bowl in one hand for his serving and his other to shake Josie's hand.

“Goodness, you're like locusts. Eat up while it's hot,” she chuckles, shaking his hand.

“Oh we will. It's nice to finally meet you, Lei has told us so much about you,” Abbey adds, plopping a helping onto a plate for Becky while the other woman washes her hands. Her own serving is twice as big and some of it nearly drips off the edge of the plate.

Lei grabs the roll of paper towels on the counter and tosses it over to Harris. “All good things, I swear! What do you guys want to drink?”

“Coffee,” the girls chorus, but Harris shakes his head and waves Lei away from the machine.

“Don't you dare, water for everybody. Someone needs to sleep at some point this week. There's a pitcher of filtered in the fridge.” The medical doctor gets an approving nod from Josie, who looks like she desperately wants to get those coffee mugs in a bin of soapy water and is only holding out
because it would be incredibly rude to do, at least on her first visit. If she plans on dropping by more often all bets are off.

Abbey is the first one that gets a bite of food in her mouth, and she makes an excited and pleased noise not unlike a squeal. “Oh my God this is amazing!” she exclaims as soon as she swallows. The others follow suit and noises of praise are the only thing that comes from the scientists for a good minute straight. If Josie were a bird she would be preening at the attention.

Suddenly Becky raises her head and looks around the room guiltily. “Shouldn't we have gotten Carlos?” she asks.

Lei shakes his head. “Light's red.”

“Again?”

“Still.”

“But it's been hours.”

Lei raises and lowers one shoulder. “What do you want me to do? Light's red.”

“What does that mean?” Cecil asks. The not-knowing is killing him, and damn it, he came to see Carlos. He made certain not to get a single speck of food on his clothes the whole time he was chopping, mixing, and baking just so he would still look good, and it is all going to waste. The other scientists getting to eat is just a nice bonus.

Abbey lets out a tired sigh and sits back in her chair, propping one edge of the plate against her chest and using her fork to cut one of the biscuits into pieces over her meal. “Carlos had me install a red light outside his lab. When the red light is on, it means we aren't supposed to disturb him because he is doing an oh-so-important experiment. Unless someone is dying, the door stays locked.” Becky makes a little whimper noise at the word dying, turning her eyes back down to her food and focusing completely on getting each forkful from plate to mouth. The other woman looks contrite. “Sorry, Becks.”

“I told you that light was a bad idea,” Harris points out.
“If I didn't do it, he would have just done it himself. At least this way no one gets electrocuted,” she counters.

“How long has it been since he came out?” Cecil asks, growing concerned. He is sure Carlos is doing important science that needs to be watched and controlled carefully, but if he has gone through a traumatic event—several traumatic events, his brain unhelpfully supplies—then being holed up in a room by himself for hours on end is the last thing he needs.

The scientists glance around the room at each other. “I haven't seen him since yesterday,” Becky says.

“This morning, around six,” Lei adds. “But just for a minute, he was getting a refill. You think he smuggled his own coffeemaker in there?”

Cecil shakes his head, not wanting to get off track. “Isn't that dangerous? Aren't there, like, chemicals and fumes and stuff in there? What if he gets hurt and no one knows about it?”

Across the table Abbey shakes her head. “The ventilation is top-notch. We can hear the exhaust fan running, and Carlos wouldn't risk something that could kill him without someone watching his back. I think. Anyway, he's probably working on his seismic readings. There was a spike yesterday that registered over an eight on the Richter scale at three of the sensors on the outskirts of town, but not at the two that are between them. So that will have his attention for a while.”

“That man and his rocks,” Harris murmurs, rolling his eyes. “He'll probably wander out in a little while. Even he has to eat sometime.”

Conversation flows around Cecil after that, and while he does his best to follow the others his thoughts keep circling back to the man hiding somewhere within this very building. Normally Cecil would not worry about someone who buries himself in his job after someone dies or gets reeducated, or in this case what might be one in the same. That happens to be one of Cecil’s preferred methods of dealing with grief, after all. But isolating himself like this, surrounded by all these fun and creative things that could cause serious damage if a darker mood stuck Carlos and no way of anyone knowing about it until it is far too late to make a difference? None of that sits well in Cecil’s gut. It does not help that the others seem only vaguely concerned about him. They are not nearly as lively as they have been on his previous visits, but they seem to be in good spirits. And true to Josie's word, the casserole dish becomes less and less full as they go back for seconds and even thirds.
“Hey, hey, save some for Carlos and Matt,” Becky finally says, whacking Harris when he reaches for the serving spoon again.

He gives her a long-suffering look but relents, dropping his fork onto the table with a pleased sigh. “Fine, fine. But I'll have to get a snack later.”

Cecil gives him an incredulous look, eying his thin frame with something akin to wonder. “After eating all that?”

“This is a new development,” he explains. “The horns require a lot of energy to heft around, and I've been putting on muscle mass at an accelerated rate in my shoulders and neck. Believe me, I could never eat half of that otherwise. It's something we've been keeping track of but we've come to the agreement that my metabolism will slow down to a more natural level once I can support them without considerable strain.”

Now that Cecil takes the time to really look at him, he can see the changes more clearly. The cords of muscle in Harris' neck are more pronounced on the sides, the slope down to his shoulders less abrupt, the breadth of his upper chest broadening to accommodate the extra mass. Maybe he did not notice before because Harris is usually wearing two shirts and a lab coat when Cecil sees him. Now, dressed down in a simple collared shirt that is looking to be a size too small for him, it all seems a lot more obvious. “What sort of problems are you still having?”

“Headaches mostly. Pain around the T1 and T2 vertebrae, you know, and just general stiffness all over.” Harris rotates his head on his neck a bit just mentioning it. The tilt of his head is stopped by the curve of horn meeting shoulder, and Cecil thinks he can see the problem. Human shoulders are not built to accommodate a ram's horns; Harris can only move his head to the side so many degrees.

There is a click noise from down the hall, something powering down, then another like a lock being turned. The scientists all glance at each other then the door, Josie and Cecil following suit, and then Carlos appears.

And he does not look good.

Okay, that is not true. He looks good, at least to Cecil; it would take an awful lot for Carlos to not look good to Cecil. Actually, Cecil is not sure there is anything that could happen that would make Carlos seem unappealing in his eye. But there is a difference in looking good and looking well, between looking healthy and looking like this.
Dark smudges are visible under downcast eyes that Cecil realizes are actually bruises, and his first reaction is to think that Carlos has been in a fight. Hot on the heels of that is the realization that it is more likely from lack of sleep and digging gouges into his own eye sockets to try and stave off pain or stray thoughts or a combination of both. His skin is sallow from being cooped up inside for days on end, hair unkempt and shaving disregarded completely. Those last two points would normally be enough to make Cecil swoon but not under these circumstances. There is also a still-healing bruise, muted and violet, creeping out from under the silver hairs at one temple that Cecil heard was from a Sheriff’s Secret Police take down. He is also gripping a metal cane in one hand for support.

The head scientist barely glances up, his eyes zeroing in on the coffeemaker that he takes a direct line towards with the two empty mugs dangling from his other hand. Without a word he pours out the remainder of what is left in the pot into one of the cups and drains it down with deep thirsty gulps.

“Carlos?” Becky asks gently, worry coloring her voice.

Swallowing the last of the black dregs he sucks in a breath and sets the mug down, reaching for the container of grounds to start a new pot. “Yes?”

Becky glances at the other scientists. Lei gives her an encouraging nod. “Uh, we've got some dinner here for you, if you want to have some while it's still hot.”

“Busy,” is his curt answer, filling the reservoir in the top of the coffeemaker with filtered water from one of the many pitchers in the refrigerator.

“Josie and Cecil brought it by,” Harris says, voice turning sharp and leading. “Maybe you should say hello?”

Carlos’ hands keep moving another few seconds before the words seem to penetrate whatever haze he has been operating in because he stills suddenly, then twists to look at the group gathered behind him with wide eyes. Bloodshot eyes, Cecil is dismayed to note. But at least he is acknowledging their presence in the room. “Oh. Hello,” he greets. His attention darts between the newcomers and the coffee pot, though he does have to wait for it to percolate. “Uh. Sorry to not...come out and say hello sooner.”

“That's alright,” Josie says magnanimously. “It looks like you've been keeping busy, Doctor...?”
“Abaroa. Call me Carlos, and yes. Busy, yes.” The answer is thin and sort of trails off, Carlos’ mind already back somewhere else before his attention refocuses again. “I’m sorry, we haven't properly met, I think?”

“When you first came to town,” Josie nods, shaking Carlos’ hand when he offers after checking that his hands aren't filthy. She holds it a long moment, longer than a handshake should be held, looking at him critically. Assessing. Cecil is about to interrupt because he is not sure what Josie is doing but it can only end in pain or embarrassment on his part but she releases him. “You should drop by sometime for a cup of tea and a chat.”

“That would be...good,” Carlos says, a touch confused. He glances at Cecil again. “How long have you been...?”

“Long enough for us to have this delicious meal,” Lei replies. He reaches out past Abbey and grabs one of the chairs against the wall and neatly unfolds it right next to Cecil's seat. “It really is amazing, you should have some.”

“I-I need to get back, I'm in the middle of something,” Carlos says. One of his hands fidgets with a button below the lapel of his lab coat.

“When was the last time you ate?” Harris asks, cutting through the pleasantries in his no-nonsense medical tone that Carlos and the rest of the scientists are coming to despise and which immediately sends Carlos on the defensive.

“I have snacks in my lab.”

“It doesn't matter if they are in your lab if you don't eat them.”

“I'll eat if I get hungry.”

“You'll eat now because you'll forget you're hungry.”

“I can take care of myself.”
“Just sit and eat.”

“There's work I really need to get through.”

“It can wait until after you've eaten properly.”

“I can't just set things aside whenever, just because you want—”

“You're both being awfully rude to our guests,” Becky interjects at volume, her chair making a grating screech noise when she shoves back from the table and stands. There are mumbled apologies from both the bickering men as she fetches eating utensils for her boss, and by the time she turns around her face is back to that subdued smile from earlier. “Seems Cecil here is a bit of a cook, or at least a good helper for Josie.”

Cecil jumps at the chance to try and disperse the awkward and tense atmosphere in the room. “Oh, not me, certainly! Josie is the chef, I just do as I'm told. Cut this, mix that, you know. She's the one who knows how to put it all together.”

“He can hold his own,” Josie adds, smiling dotingly at Cecil before turning her attention back to the group. Her eyes trace over Carlos again, thoughtful, before she smiles sweetly at Lei. “You'll have to let me know what you all like, because I simply can't let you eat any more of those little microwave cups. Eating that much ramen just isn't healthy...”

Josie prattles on after that, clearly smitten with Lei. As soon as they get back in the car Cecil is going to grill her about that little situation and how she can just keep her opinions about him and his crush to herself if she is going to be just as ridiculous about it. But that is for later, because Carlos is standing right there and he really wants the chance to talk. “How's your head?” Cecil asks, and immediately wants to smack himself for that choice of topic.

One hand reaches up to graze the discoloring on the side of his head. Carlos will not meet his gaze. “It's getting better. Just a little sore.”

“That's good. That it's getting better I mean. And your leg?”
“Nothing permanent.”

“Good. That's good.” Gods above and below, could you be any more awkward, Cecil? “So...you've been working on earthquakes, they said?” he asks, looking up at Carlos who has stepped over to the chair next to him and wrapped his fingers around the top of the back for added support. He really wishes the other man would sit down; that cannot be comfortable with a leg injury. Or a head injury.

“Yes. There has been an uptick in seismic activity over the last two days that points to a possible tectonic shift, but only on the northern side of town, which hardly makes any sense considering the strength of the readings and how it should be leveling half the state, much less Night Vale. And then the primary monitoring station on Gorgon Avenue barely registered at all, but the one on Heathcliffe was in catastrophic ranges and the points are less than a mile apart…” He trails off mumbling something about displacement of mass and tremors and possible groundwater and something called aquifers, frowning down into the middle distance between himself and the table, lost in thought.

“You brought those up the last time I was here,” Cecil points out. He remembers Carlos can go on about it at length, if he chooses to. “That you had recorded earthquakes we couldn't feel. Have you figured out why that is?”

A few half-words make it past Carlos' lips as he struggles for a suitable answer but in the end he just sighs and shakes his head. “No. I've got more questions than I have answers at this point. Every time I'm close some extra element comes into play that renders all the previous findings moot.” He shakes his head again, taking a plate full of Josie's casserole when it is pressed into his hand but not moving to eat.

Okay, so maybe talking about work is not the best tactic at the moment. He casts about for something else to bring up and his eyes land on the tight-fitting plum t-shirt under Carlos' lab coat. Across the chest is a graphic design of some sort of bird repeated in different boxes and overlaid with plants and seed diagrams. He thinks the birds might be finches? “I like your shirt,” Cecil blurts. “Where did you get it?”

The steady stream of coffee pouring down into the pot on the counter catches the scientist's attention immediately and he turns away like he did not even hear Cecil, setting the plate down to fill his cup. “I've been working on a computer model to cross-reference with my notes. Hopefully I will be able to piece together what's been going on and get some real results.”

“You've been working on that for days. We need to regroup with our other projects,” Abbey says, reaching out to try and snag Carlos' cup from her seated position but he neatly sidesteps her despite leaning on the cane, adding a splash of creamer. “I'm serious. We need to reorganize and figure out
who is going to take over Billy's work, Carlos.”}

Becky jerks her eyes toward Abbey in shock, then looks at Carlos' suddenly stiff back. He sets the container down on the counter with a firm clack, picks up his coffee mug and departs for the door without so much as a backwards glance.

“Carlos?” Abbey calls after him, but it does no good. “Carlos!” The door down the hall slams shut, and Cecil can imagine that the red light Abbey installed for him has just flicked back on as the tumblers for the lock click closed. On the counter sits his meal, untouched.

Chapter End Notes

Important Update:

This upcoming Wednesday (August 26th) my brother will be having open heart surgery. He was born with heart defects, and while he had some repaired when he was two years old there were others that were not detected until very recently. To counter this, surgeons are going to attempt to repair the mitral heart valve and replace the aortic heart valve with one made of titanium. There is a chance that the mitral valve won't be repairable, in which case they will then replace that one as well. I will be traveling home to be with my family during this time, and after will be staying with him to help in the recovery process for a few weeks.

What does this mean for you guys? Well, I'm not entirely sure, to be honest. I will have a lot of free time on my hands while I'm at the hospital, and once he is home a good portion of time will just be me sitting with him and making sure he doesn't need anything. If things go well, I will hopefully have plenty of time to write while I have nothing else to do. But as you can imagine, my mind will be elsewhere and I will be under considerable stress. My brother is a relatively healthy man in his mid-thirties, so we are hopeful everything will go well. Still, we are all very worried and nervous about the whole thing.

I'm not certain when the next chapter will be up for Beakers and Bloodstones, but I want to assure everyone that it will be up eventually and I hope you can all bear with me during this trying time. If you want updates on the situation, I will most likely make posts about what is happening on tumblr. Thanks to all my readers who have stuck with me so far, and to any new readers rest assured the story will go on. <3 <3
Hello my lovely readers! I have returned!

First things first: a million and one thank you's to everyone that messaged me wishing my brother good health! He had open heart surgery and ended up having his mitral valve replaced and his aortic valve repaired. He was in the hospital for a little over a week, and then home-bound for several months recovering. It has been four months since the surgery and he is back to light work, but still limited in how much he can lift. (No, bro, you can't even lift. And yes, I have teased him about this a hundred times. He is not amused.) He wishes to let all of you know he really appreciates the good thoughts!

As you can imagine, helping out with him took a nice chunk of time (he is also a farmer, and animals don't just stop needing to eat because he's sick!). Between that, my own health issues (you really don't want to know on this one, trust me), making all my holiday presents and getting sucked into Drawlloween 2015 (which I completed despite all odds, woo hoo!) I have been a busy little bee. Writing has also occurred in this time, just not necessarily in the right order. But the more I couldn't write, the more the ideas percolated and I'm pretty sure the story has grown substantially in note-form.

The point is, it is a new year, I am rejuvenated, and we're back in action. Again, thank you to everyone who sent messages in my absence; knowing there are people out there that actually like this thing is a great motivation to get back! I hope you enjoy, and stay tuned!

An update on our previous message about wheat and wheat by-products. You should not eat wheat or wheat by-products, say several frantic scientists waving clipboards in our studio.

As it turns out, all wheat and wheat by-products, for unknown reasons, have turned into venomous snakes, which are crawling all over our small city, causing even more chaos than is normal. These snakes have been described as terrifying, loathsome, and 'probably from the bowels of hell itself!' – also, green and three feet long.

If you have any wheat or wheat by-products in your home, you are almost certainly already dead.

Sorry about that.

Cecil moves on to a short segment about an increase in Night Vale property taxes and then a story
about the possibility of powering the high school football stadium with energy produced from the first man-made neutron star. The school board has come under a lot of flak since their refusal to update to basic electrical lighting rather than whale oil lamps, which, while beautiful and maintaining the long Spiderwolves tradition, is still quite expensive. Plus environmental activists are very keen on protecting the rare whale pods that sometimes travel through the Night Vale area; every year there are at least a few protesters outside the football games with placards against their exploitation.

The story is one that he is particularly proud of, since he scooped Leann Hart by wining and dining a few members of the board who, up until recently, have kept any developments hushed. But a fine bottle of pinot noir, a little charm, and the promise of good press was enough to loosen their tongues on the matter, and Leann was left out in the cold.

Concentrating on his notes proves to be difficult though, since there are a pair of scientists still trying to get his attention through the plate of glass that separates his booth from the hallway. Unfortunately Harris and Lei are either horrible at charades or never bothered to learn the town's official language of interpretive dance, because he cannot make heads nor tails of whatever it is they are trying to tell him. He wonders briefly where Dana might be; she should be handling the situation and slipping him a discreet note if they have anything to add to the story. Who even let them this far into the building? All employees and interns know better than to let someone unaffiliated with Night Vale Community Radio just roam the halls. That sort of behavior really riles up Station Management, which can only end in bloodshed and cleaning bills.

Thankfully his points about both John Peters and Marcus Vansten are fresh in his mind so Cecil can devote some of his attention to trying to decipher Harris' movements. The horns impede the message a bit, what with the way his head movements keep almost jabbing Lei in the eye. There's a brief dispute between them before Harris shoos Lei to the side to give him more room to gesture. For his part, Lei presses his clipboard to the window and points at the graph on the sheet. He thinks there are numbers, and some sort of plotted points with an exponential line. It is all really just too small to read from this distance. But Cecil thinks he has the gist of it.

*Further updates on wheat and wheat byproducts:*

*The good news is that they are no longer poisonous serpents. The bad news is that they have transformed into a particularly evil and destructive form of spirit.*

*Please, be aware that wheat and wheat by-products are now malevolent and violent supernatural forces, capable of physically moving objects up to two hundred pounds and entering human souls of up to Soul Strength Four.*

*The frantic scientists, who are now hopping up and down just outside my recording booth,*
indicating various charts and figures, recommend creating a simple lean-to out of animal bones and mud, such as you might have made and played in as a child, and hiding there until the spiritual forces of wheat and wheat by-products have passed.

Judging by the way Lei and Harris react, Cecil thinks he might have gotten a few of the finer details wrong there. Lei actually bonks his head gently and repeatedly against the glass, then stops Harris from doing the same. Which is good, considering Cecil does not have the exact figures but those glass panes are not cheap by any means.

As much as Cecil wants to talk to his guests—and figure out where his wayward interns got off to, because this is ridiculous—he really needs to concentrate on the show. Yesterday he fell completely off-script when a caller got him talking about the cat show they had in town recently, and before he had realized it he had missed three sponsor reads. The only reason Station Management had not reprimanded him was because it was feeding day, and being well-fed and content will have a positive effect on anyone's attitude. Two days in a row is not something he is willing to risk.

Still, when he gets to his story about undetectable earthquakes and the shifting of tectonic plates, Cecil can't help but get off-topic.

_We asked Carlos about our inability to experience tectonic shifts. Carlos, lovely Carlos, had previously recorded other massive tremor activity under our city. His response was a few seconds of stammering followed by a sigh and slow head shake. His eyes were distant—distracted, yet beautiful._

_I asked him where he got his shirt. It fit him so well. He said he would look at his notes and computer models and see if he could figure out what was going on._

_I don't know if he listens to me sometimes._

Cecil cringes as the words tumble out. Could he sound more desperate? And he is more than aware that Harris and Lei have both stopped their attempts to communicate with him and are instead looking pointedly at anything that is not him.

A slip of paper drifts suddenly into his view, landing gently on top of the stack of notes before him. He looks up at the venting above his head but sees nothing but darkness and dust clinging to a long string of cobweb bouncing erratically in the stream of air conditioning. The paper itself sports the City Council seal, so he knows not to dawdle.
Ladies and gentlemen, I take you from an unreal disaster to an un-unreal one.

It is my sad duty now to announce that the City Council is officially putting Night Vale under an emergency state, due to the ongoing and life-threatening wheat and wheat by-products stipulation. The Council states that anyone who has come into contact with wheat and wheat by-products, and has by some happy miracle survived, should consider themselves infected and proceed to the usual quarantine area, just behind the playground in Mission Grove Park—they're to spend the rest of their days in quiet contemplation and weaving.

Everyone else should head immediately to the Wheat and Wheat By-Products Shelter that has been sitting unused for decades under the public library.

When asked why a Wheat and Wheat By-Products Shelter already existed, the City Council answered, simply, 'Prophecy.'

May you all be safe. May you all be well. May you be strong and flexible with ruddy cheeks and legs like tree trunks.

And now, the weather.

As Cecil flips the switch from his microphone to the appropriate track, he pushes his unfinished strawberry and sprinkles doughnut and its incriminating crumbs into the waste paper basket by his desk and then covers it quickly with his crumpled newspaper. Just in time it seems, because when he turns to finally address the scientists beyond the glass he finds not just Harris and Lei, but the missing Intern Dana as well as Officer Wenzel, the assigned Sheriff's Secret Police officer for the station. Dana is holding a large empty container of what he knows used to be pretzels that he bought in bulk for the break room. Now Cecil can see the distinct dark coils of a snake through the plastic, its head striking at the bright orange lid that has been duct taped shut. Always resourceful, that Intern Dana. By her side, Officer Wenzel knocks carefully yet firmly on the studio door, and Cecil is quick to comply.

“Officer,” Cecil greets as he opens the door, friendly as possible. “What can I do for you?”

Harris opens his mouth indignantly. “Hey, we've been waiting—”

“Shut. Up.” Lei squeezes Harris' arm and tugs him forcefully back down the hall and behind Dana,
his warning enough to make Harris rethink the wisdom of interrupting the balaclava-clad woman with the large baton.

Officer Wenzel gives a polite nod. “Cecil. I'm going to have to ask you to discontinue the rest of your reporting on the wheat and wheat by-products situation.”

“What?” he asks, frowning. “But the City Council just issued that information, I was only doing what I was told—”

“And now you're going to report this.” Officer Wenzel pulls a thin piece of folded rice paper from an inner pocket of her uniform and hands it over with a fully-gloved hand.

Cecil takes the note and scans the information listed, frown deepening on his forehead. They can see his eyes clearly look from the small square piece of paper to the jug full of former wheat and wheat by-products and back again. “This doesn't make any sense. It's obviously not true.”

“Cecil,” she sighs with the resignation of someone who has had to deal with the unending questions of the reporter for some time.

“I'm serious! How can they expect me to report this? No one is going to believe that the wheat and wheat by-products have just disappeared, not when they have evidence right here. You know that there are probably a whole lot more snakes and spirits around town than just this!” As if to punctuate his statement, the former-pretzels-now-snake gives a helpful hiss from its prison of plastic.

“Actually, that wasn't what we were trying to say earlier,” Harris mutters but looks suddenly interested in whatever diagram is on page two of his clipboard when Officer Wenzel levels him a look through her eye-holes.

“Either way, it's too much. It's not even a slight changing of events, this is full-on erasing something that is happening right now, something people can see with their eyes,” Cecil argues.

“It's not up to you to decide what is and isn't true, you just report the news as is municipally appropriate. Don't make this more difficult than it needs to be, Mr. Palmer.” She punctuates this by tapping her baton in a patient little rhythm along her thigh that gets the point across more clearly than words.
Cecil presses his lips together into a thin line like he has to physically restrain himself from blurting out his real opinion. Irritation still leaks out when he responds, “Fine. Anything else, Officer Wenzel?”

“That will be all. Thank you for your time.” She tips her head obligingly and turns to head down the hallway, pausing in front of Harris and Lei. “We're under a state of emergency. You should be headed to the Wheat and Wheat By-Products Shelter.”

A flash of pure panic crosses both Lei and Harris' faces, but Lei rallies quickly enough. “Er, right, of course officer. We'll head right over once we're done here.”

“See that you do. And Cecil, don't forget to dispose of that note in the proper manner.”

The reporter smiles through his gritted teeth. “Consumption, yes ma'am, I'll remember.”

Officer Wenzel nods again and disappears around the corner toward the closet where they keep the cleaning supplies and shovels.

“We are not going anywhere near one of their 'shelters,' I don't care what they say,” Harris snaps as soon as she's gone.

“No duh, Sherlock. You've really got to get a hold of yourself, that mouth is going to get you thrown down a hole somewhere,” Lei replies, elbowing the taller man hard in the arm. It makes Harris grunt and rub hard on the suddenly aching muscle. Turning his attention to Cecil, Lei says, “Sorry we couldn't get our point across; did you know the edges of your door glow kind of weird when you try to open it during a broadcast?”

“Safety measures, it's nothing personal,” Cecil assures. “Now what is it that you were trying to tell me?”

“I don't think it really matters at this point,” Harris sighs, dropping the arm with the clipboard down to his side. “There were never any spirits, just snakes as far as we know. Not all wheat mixtures seem to be changing to reptiles, but we haven't nailed down any specifics. It seems to have something to do with added sugars and exposure to certain temperatures. None of which makes sense because cereal grains shouldn't turn into snakes under any circumstances, regardless of factors--”
“We were mainly hoping to warn people to cordon off and avoid their kitchens until we could come up with a solution,” Lei adds. “But I’m not sure if there is a solution to find other than just calling Animal Control. What are they making you say?”

Cecil growls a little, waving the little paper in agitation. “That the spirits, or snakes, whatever, they’ve all vanished mysteriously, so everything is just fine and dandy! Despite the fact they clearly haven’t!” He gestures to the animal inside the pretzel jug. “And wheat and wheat by-products are still banned, but I’m supposed to downplay that. We’re going to get so many angry phone calls...”

“You already are,” Dana finally says, shifting the container full of snake to one hip. “The phones have been lit up ever since the first announcement. And Big Rico wants you to come by the restaurant personally after you get off. He’s called six times already.”

“Better and better,” Cecil groans. He leans back to look in the booth and check how much time he has. “I’m almost back on. Where have you been, anyway? Where’s intern Brad?”

Dana gives a humorless smile and pats the container. Now that the snake has twisted around they can see it is a cobra. The markings on the back of its hood look a little like a pretzel. “He was having a snack. I moved a few tiles aside in the break room so we can start digging the grave.”

“Mi sono rovinato! Rovinato! Ruined! Kaput! Bankrupt! No more customers, no more business! I will have to close doors, lock up! Will have to pack up and leave! Maria will leave, she’ll want divorce—no woman will stay with man who cannot run business! I will have to go back to the old country, beg family for a job! I am disgraced!”

Cecil’s head falls back on his shoulders to stare up at the clear turquoise sky above. “So you’ve said, about eighty times,” he mumbles flatly, but Rico is on a tear that shows no end. At least he has mostly moved back into the realm of English rather than Italian; no longer having his ruined inventory in direct sight helps. They’re still inching their way back to proper grammar, and Cecil hopes Rico stops sounding like a cave man at some point.

After he and Dana had dutifully disposed of the already swelling and discolored body of Intern
Brad—it turns out that the pretzel-cobra was not the only snake to get their fangs into him while Dana had been busy catching the first offender—Cecil rode his bike over to Big Rico's as requested, giving any stray serpents along the sidewalk a wide berth. The trip takes longer than expected given his decision to detour to avoid Daphne's Bakery. The sirens can be heard several blocks away, and he can only imagine how much work they have in store for them clearing out a literal stores' worth of snakes. He'll make a note to check in with Daphne and her daughter Florence once things calm down. The bakery has been a part of the community for over two decades, after all. Hopefully they will be able to bounce back.

The situation is not much better at Big Rico's. When he arrived, a few customers were loitering on the sidewalk in a semi-circle around the restaurant entrance, peering through the propped-open door and windows at the piles of snakes where their thin crusts used to be. One guy was even taking video of the scene on his cellphone. Inside, other customers barely seemed to give the sudden snakes a second glance, going back to their conversations and their food—those that had non-wheat based meals, anyway. Cecil could hear several voices screaming loudly at each other but Big Rico's voice is booming and unavoidable, especially when using his native tongue. Cecil did not really get a good look because he was immediately dragged around to the back of the building by Maria.

Maria, Rico's amazingly resilient and unfazed wife, took charge of the situation when it became apparent Rico was far too overwhelmed and on the verge of hysterics. She and all available waitstaff as well as a few of the scientists from next door took to getting a handle on the sheer amount of snakes taking up the space where Rico's pizza dough used to be. They have been at it for over an hour, and every now and then someone shoves a bundle of snakes out the back door, either in a container of some sort or just with a broom.

For his part, Cecil was given his very own broom for protection and delegated to Rico-watch. The back lot of the restaurant with its empty crates and cardboard boxes with soggy corners seems to be the best place to let him pace and release steam. And Rico has been doing a magnificent job of impersonating a steam locomotive with the way he keeps bellowing.

“I had seventy-five pounds of dough settling in my pantry!” Rico continues, flailing his heavy arms around angrily and showing no signs of stopping. “And it is all gone! All turned to animals! I cannot make pizza out of snakes! Pizza is bread, it is the most important ingredient, how am I to make pizza without pizza crust?”

“That isn't all that's on your menu,” Cecil tries from his position sitting on a stack of boxes and wood slats against the brick wall of the restaurant. He flicks a baby asp from the side of his perch.

That makes Rico wail out, “Stromboli! Calzone! Sub sandwich! Bread, bread, bread, wheat, wheat, **wheat**!” He kicks out with a foot and a stack of boxes filled with snakes topples over, sending them slithering in all directions from the top box. Cecil pulls his legs up off the ground and uses the
broom to steer away the ones that make for the screened back door of the restaurant. “Cannot even make my pasta. My pasta, my mama taught me, recipes have been in my family for generations, and no more! Disgraceful!”

And isn’t that a shame, Cecil thinks sarcastically. Rico is well known for his pizza, but his pasta? Not so much. As much as Rico claims his family's pasta recipes are stellar and he makes them all from scratch, Cecil cannot tell the difference between his and a box of dried pasta from the store. Sometimes the store is better. Also, he is not sure if it is the family recipes as much as it is Big Rico that fails there. He feels bad about the uncharitable thought immediately. “Maybe you can branch out into something new?” he suggests. “Just because you are Italian doesn't mean you have to limit yourself.”

“Something new! Something new, he says!” Rico swings his arm around to point right through the back door to the kitchen proper. “The restaurant is Big Rico's Pizza! Pizza! It is what keeps us in business! Without the dough, without the pizza, it is nothing!”

Rico follows this up with a sweeping collapse onto the crates adjacent to Cecil which creak ominously under his weight. Head hung between hands that grip his thin dark hair, he looks to be the epitome of hopelessness. “What am I going to do?” he asks. No, beseeches. “We just put in the last payment for the new brick oven, and I have nothing to cook in it!”

Cecil waits until a viper slithers away from Rico's leg before reaching out and rubbing a flat palm up and down the bigger man's back. “You've gone through hard times before, and you've always gotten through it! Remember when that competing chain opened up across from you on the corner? You outlasted them, and not just because your pizza is city mandated. And when the help went on strike because they were against your use of vegetables as pizza toppings? You and Maria handled the dinner rush for three weeks straight, and didn't lose a customer. Even when you came down with that case of Shade Confusion you still came to work every day and pushed through it! No one even cared that some of the pizzas were inverted!”

“It is not the same,” he laments. “Pizza, it is all I know. It is all I have ever wanted to make. It is in my blood. In my bones.”

“The ban might not last forever,” Cecil says assuredly. “Just a few weeks, months at most! You wouldn't be the only business hurting over a wheat ban. They can't keep it that way forever.”

“Oh, yes they can. You know how this town can be.”

“Maybe they'll make an exception! They let you use writing utensils when no one else can.” A
point that Cecil finds incredibly annoying. How unfair that Rico is allowed pencils and pens for
taking down pizza orders, but Cecil, a fine and upstanding reporter dedicated to delivering factual
and relevant news to the masses, is stuck with wax and charcoal and dabs of food coloring.

Rico snorts, unconvinced, and drags a dish rag from his pocket to mop at the sweat gathered on his
brow. “I'll be out of business before the month is out,” he states bleakly.

Cecil’s insides twist with worry. He has never seen Rico so despondent, and a simple solution is not
presenting itself. Big Rico's is a staple of the community; what are they going to do if he has to
close? Setting aside the fact that the very laws would have to change, Rico does make a mean
pizza. And Big Rico's is one of the show's primary sponsors, so Cecil has a vested interest. “We
can appeal to the City Council,” Cecil says. “Having a slice of Big Rico's Pizza is a requirement; if
you can't make pizza then everyone in town would be breaking the law, right?” When Rico doesn't
respond, he adds, “I'm sure you'll figure out something; everyone in town uses wheat for
something. We aren't entering some sort of...of wheat prohibition.”

“...Prohibition?” Rico's head raises and his gaze goes wide and far off for a few long seconds, lips
move without forming words as thoughts race through his head. Then he startles Cecil by making a
loud triumphant noise, slapping his thigh as he jumps to his feet. “Hot damn! Genius, my boy, pure
genius!”

“Wha—eep!” Cecil gasps as Rico grabs him by the shoulders and hauls him up into a bear hug,
squeezing the breath out of him. “Rico! Breathing!”

“Grazie! Grazie, Cecil, my smart, smart boy, grazie!”

“You're...welcome?” The radio host actually trips and falls back against the crate when Rico lets
him go, his hair now sticking up oddly and his tie shoved to one side. He sets about trying to
straighten himself out. “Why am I a genius?”

“Better you don't know for now. Plausible deniability,” Rico replies, pulling out his trusty pad of
ticket paper and a stub of a pencil to take down some notes. At least he politely pretends not to
notice Cecil's covetous looks.

The screen door bounces open then as a young woman uses her wide hips to push through, her
arms around one of the large containers that Rico usually stores sacks of wheat in. Instead there are
close to a hundred baby snakes writhing inside fighting for space. Faye, Cecil remembers; one of
Rico's more competent waitresses. She carries the metal holder over to the fence and flings the
snakes over causing them to rain down onto the packed dirt of the laboratory beyond. A few cling
to the sides and she gives it a shake until they slide free. “I think we've cleared most of them out,” she says with a huff, shaking her arms out from carrying all that weight. “A few hiding in the corners, but Maria says we can leave the oven on and it will lure them out. Hey, you're looking better, sir.”

“Are you implying I am not always dashing and handsome, young lady?” Rico asks, running a hand up to push the fly-away hairs back into place along his scalp. “And of course, I am fantastic! As they say, when life hands you lemons, slit them so the acidic juices run free and throw them at your enemies' vulnerable points!”

Faye gives a soft laugh, heading back for the door. “Good to hear. Oh!” She turns back, leaning half-way out the door. “Maria wants to know how we should modify the Scientist Special? Since we can't offer the deal as-is anymore?”

Rico hums, flipping back through his pad a few sheets until he comes to the check he is looking for. “They already know what happened. Offer them a free basket of fries, let them know we'll come up with something else by tomorrow.”

“Yes, sir,” she says, the door clattering loudly against the door frame as she moves back into the store.

“Scientist Special?” Cecil asks, curious.

Rico makes an affirmative noise. “Two dollar slices all day and free drink refills. They're here so much, it only made sense to honor my most frequent customers.”

“I didn't realize they came by so often.”

“They're in there right now. Even the one you've got your eye on.”

Cecil blinks up at Rico, brain catching up with that statement, before he scrambles to his feet. “What?!” Heedless of protocol—Cecil's been in the back of Big Rico's Pizza plenty of times, it is nothing new—Cecil pushes through the door and winds through the kitchen to peek out into the restaurant proper. The first he sees is Becky, her riot of muted red curls pulled into a pompom at the back of her head. Across the booth from her is Abby, a set of tools laid out to one side and a big bowl in front of her, happily munching on the remains of a chicken Caesar salad, hold the croutons. Becky seems to be holding up the conversation while Abby stuffs her cheeks, and neither notice
the radio host craning his neck to look at them from beyond the front counter. “He's not—”

“In the back,” Rico replies, having followed Cecil with an amused expression.

Sure enough, around the corner and three booths down the side leading toward the unisex bathroom, Cecil spots a familiar figure. Carlos' back is to him, shoulders hunched as he curls over whatever he is working on. But a dark hand reaches out occasionally to grip his Styrofoam cup and bring it close, taking a sip from the straw.

Rico leans his frame against the assembly counter. “He's been in every day for the past week with his notebooks and these recordings he's been listening to. Not sure what's on them, but they make him upset occasionally. I've been making sure to always sit him near the back so the other customers don't stare if he starts crying.”

“He's been crying?” Cecil asks, heart clenching in his chest along with his hand on his chest, wrinkling his shirt even more.

“Only twice that I've noticed. Don't you go making him uncomfortable, now, he's a paying customer.”

“I'm not going to bother him!” Cecil states, offended, holding onto the wall so he can lean out and sneak another look.

“And I'm just saying, when you go over there, behave yourself.”

“He looks busy, I think it would be better if I just left him alone. He's probably got a lot of work to do...” When Cecil turns back, however, a fresh basket of curly fries are pressed into his hands along with a bottle of ketchup by Faye, picks up one of her own and heads out to the table of three. “Wait, what?”

“Since you're already headed that way, you can make yourself useful.”

There is a flash of panic that crosses Cecil's features, and he tries to hand the food back but Rico holds his hands up and away. “No, no, I can't! Rico, I can't, he got so mad at me the other week! He isn't ready to talk to me or anybody else, he's just going to walk out. Don't make me do this!”
“Josie told me, and we're in agreement. He wasn't mad at you, he was mad at himself,” Rico replies, taking Cecil by the shoulders and turning him around to face the dining room. “Just go out there, be yourself, and offer the man some fries. He might share them with you. Now, go.” He gives Cecil a shove, and the radio host manages to maintain coordination enough to not trip. The glare he sends back over his shoulder is missed because Rico is already heading into his kitchen to work on the secret plan already cooking in his head.

Faye is explaining the current wheat-ban predicament to the two scientists, Becky happily taking the basket of fries. They both catch sight of Cecil and gives him a little wave, and, after accurately guessing where he's headed, Abby gives him a thumbs-up, Becky mouthing, 'Good luck!'

This is not how he planned for his day to go.

But he can do this. It's just delivering some food. He can say a polite hello, something cordial, or not! If Carlos is listening to something important, maybe he should not even speak. He can just give a friendly nod and place the basket in front of him, a smile, not too big or too small, then make his retreat. No need to make a big deal out of it! In and out, and Cecil can head home and do one of the many things he had planned for today! Maybe a load of laundry. The kitchen needs cleaning. Have a glass of Armagnac and forget this whole mess of a day even took place. Yes, that sounds lovely right about now.

With that in mind, Cecil squares his shoulders and walks the short distance from the front counter to Carlos' booth, his steps on the checkered tile floor barely perceptible over the muted sounds of Dean Martin crooning through the speakers.

Everything goes according to plan, up to a point. Cecil successfully arrives at the table and places the basket of fries in a clear spot—most of the table has been covered with various opened journals or loose papers. It is probably a good thing it takes him a moment to find a bare spot on the tabletop, because otherwise he might have chucked the fries down in an effort to get rid of them. The scientist does not even notice that Cecil is not one of the waitstaff until the bottle of ketchup joins the basket, and by then Cecil's nerves have gotten the better of him and his smile is more weak and shaky than he would like. For that matter, his body has decided that time is not going fast enough and abandons the plan completely, turning to retreat before letting Carlos acknowledge he is even there.

“Cecil?” Carlos asks doing a double take, gentle hand darting out to wrap around Cecil's wrist as he starts to walk away. The touch is cold and unexpected and Cecil grinds to a halt, looking back down at the other man who tugs ear buds from under his hair. “Hey.”
“Hey,” Cecil parrots. This was not in the plan. “Um. Sorry to bother you, uh. Rico asked me to drop those off for you.”

Carlos glances at the fries briefly but returns his focus to Cecil. “You work here?”

“Oh! No, uh, just visiting. Rico was talking my ear off. You know how he is.” Or maybe not, Cecil does not know if Carlos and Rico are on friendly terms more than customer-restauranteur. “I'll leave you to your work.”

He makes to pull his hand free and Carlos lets him, his cool touch leaving Cecil's skin hyper-aware and tingling. Two steps and Carlos' voice stops him a second time. “Cecil? Wait.” Turning, Carlos has twisted around in the booth so he can see Cecil without hurting his neck. “Would you like to join me?”

“Are you sure?” Cecil asks, hesitating.

Carlos' face twists into a sheepish smile. “It's the least I could do after making an ass of myself, don't you think?” His brows raise and Cecil can read those honest eyes, that hopeful slant to his mouth that says without words that maybe he did not muck things up too badly between them.

How can Cecil refuse? “You weren't that bad,” he answers, coming back to slide into the booth opposite Carlos. He can already feel the underlying tension of the day begin to recede. If it leads to being on speaking terms with Carlos again, then he will gladly suffer through Rico having a tirade anytime.

“I really was,” Carlos insists, running a hand back through his curls and scratching the base of his neck. He forces himself to look Cecil in the eye, though it is obvious he would rather duck his head in shame at his actions. “You were trying to do something nice and I just wasn't ready for it. I'm sorry?”

“It's alright,” Cecil assures, smiling with sympathy. “You are—were—you're in mourning, and people have different ways of reacting to grief.”

Carlos stares at him for a long moment, taking in that statement. “Mourning,” he murmurs. “Yes, I guess that's what it would be called.” He looks down at the notes in front of him and nods, like Cecil has confirmed something for him in some way. Cecil wishes he knew what.
Following his gaze, Cecil takes in the spread of papers before them. Directly in front of Carlos is a nearly-filled notebook of his own handwriting, and next to it a similar book with a bright green cover rather than Carlos' dull brown. The marks in this one are in someone else's hand, larger letters, bolder print, perhaps a touch neater than Carlos' own. There is also a pile of micro-cassette tapes, thin and numerous, and an odd setup of an old-style voice recorder rigged to Carlos' cell phone, the plug for his ear buds hiding somewhere amidst all the exposed wiring. That second handwriting is featured on all the tapes filling in the labels with vague titles, like Event 32: Evening and Violet Condensation – Second Appearance.

“I take it you haven't gotten any word about him?” Cecil asks softly, carefully picking up one of the tapes and turning it over in his fingers. Barometer Readings 8-5-5 Part 2.

Carlos shakes his head, his own voice falling into the same gentle cadence as Cecil's own, as if out of respect for those not present. “No. Nothing. I asked Officer Erwin and he told me as soon as he had more information he'd let me know but not to...not to get my hopes up.” His jaw tightens, and Carlos clears his throat, dismissing those thoughts. “Anyway, uh, as my colleagues so helpfully kept pointing out, someone has to keep things running around here, even for Billy's work. He'll be pissed as hell if he comes back and he finds out nobody has been keeping up with his experiments. So.” Carlos waves his hand at the mess in front of him.

“What is all this?” Cecil asks, picking up another tape. Unknown Precipitant: WTF? This one has a smear of red on the corner of the label. Billy's fingerprint. Some things simply cannot be erased.

“For some reason none of his recording equipment ever worked except this old thing he found at the thrift shop. You know, the one down on Fourth?” At Cecil's nod, he continues, “He had a pile of stuff for keeping track of his readings but every one of them malfunctioned when he took them out to the field. All but this guy.” Carlos taps the object in question, careful to hit the casing and not the delicate innards. “I need to understand what he was working on, so I've been transcribing the tapes and crosschecking with his notes. It takes a while.”

“You've written out all of these?” Cecil asks incredulously. There must be at least three dozen tapes here.

“He had another box and a half of them,” Carlos groans, rubbing his hands together, fingers over knuckles from one hand to the other. “Never had to buy any, they just kept showing up. I'm getting to the end, though, just a handful more.”

Cecil's eyes flick over Carlos' shoulder and he catches Abby and Becky looking over at them only to duck their heads back together half a second later. Now he can understand why Rico said he had caught Carlos crying back here. Sitting by himself listening to the unassuming voice of his colleague and friend for hours on end, unaware of his fate and fearing the worst? Cecil would need
He wants to ask, to demand why Carlos does this to himself. Why he did not ask the other scientists for help? Why he is torturing himself? But Cecil is starting to understand a bit about Carlos the scientist, and that maybe taking on the burden so that others do not have to is one of the only way he knows how to cope. That and throwing himself bodily into his work until that is all there is in his life.

With a clench of his stomach, Cecil realizes it is something he can relate to.

Carlos seems to finally register that there is new food at his table that is rapidly cooling, and he drags the basket between them. “So why did I get fries? I think I missed that part of the conversation.”

Shaking his maudlin thoughts, Cecil replies, “Ah, Rico said free fries since he can't offer that special he was giving to you guys. What with the pizzas turning into snakes and all.”

“The pizza—Oh yeah!” Carlos exclaims like he just remembered that wheat has been turning into snakes right in front of him. Shoving a handful of fries in his mouth he twists to look back at the other booth. “Becky? You got anything about the snakes yet?”

Becky has rotated so her legs are stretched out along the length of the booth, back propped against the wall. Looking at Carlos she raises her drink and wiggles the cup at him. “I'm on break, boss!”

He swallows his mouthful before giving a warning look. “Becky.”

“Alright, alright,” she grumbles, rocking her way out of the booth. “You need anything?”

“Get Cecil a drink. Cecil? What can I get you?”

“Oh, I don't need anything—”

“Please, it's my treat,” Carlos insists.
One delivered cup of cherry cola and a paid tab later, Becky and Abby give friendly waves and head out, leaving Cecil and Carlos with the dining room to themselves save for a group of boy scouts waiting on an order up front. If not for the lack of delicious cooking cheese and marinara in the air, Cecil would think this was just a particularly slow day for Big Rico's Pizza.

“You don’t seem all that concerned about the snakes,” Cecil observes, taking a fry at Carlos’ urging.

“I’m not,” Carlos replies, taking a sip of his own drink.

“You aren’t?”

“Nah.” The scientist leans forward across the table and Cecil finds himself mirroring the gesture. “See,” Carlos whispers, “it’s nearly winter. Even in Night Vale, the snakes are just going to go into hibernation at this time of year. Too cold for them to function properly. So all these snakes are a nuisance right now, but by tonight they’ll have found someplace safe to sleep until Spring. Now that’s when you need to worry.”

“And since Becky is the animal expert...”

“. . .it’s Becky’s job to worry,” Carlos concludes, finally breaking into a smile. “A shame about the wheat, though. She says it isn’t all wheat that’s changed, so maybe there’s some ingredient factor that makes a difference. If she figures it out maybe we can get the ban changed. Too early to tell. I guess we’ll all just have to suffer through it. Hey, at least Steve can’t make those awful scones anymore, right?”

“Silver linings,” Cecil laughs, tipping his cup in a toast of that and taking a drink. Then something occurs to Cecil and he looks around the booth. “Hey, no more cane?”

Carlos makes a face. “Don’t let Harris hear you. If I have to hear one more time about how I should still be using that thing, I’m going to shove it down his throat. It’s not like it’s a long walk from the labs to here and back.”

“He’s just trying to help,” Cecil tuts. Now that he looks, it is assuring to see that the bruise that had still taken up residence at Carlos’ temple is all but gone, maybe a slight discoloration but with his darker skin it is hardly visible. Mind and body both on the mend.
“I will use it if I need it, but it’s a hindrance more than anything,” he says saucily, taking another fry and popping it in his mouth. After chewing it thoroughly and considering Cecil from across the table, he swallows and says, “I heard the show. Quite the turn around on the story, before and after the weather.”

Cecil stills, eyes darting around the room. Big Rico’s Pizza is covered in surveillance devices, just like everywhere in town, but in most places it is not quite so obvious. That is mostly because Rico is not a fan of police confrontation in his restaurant; it is bad for business and makes people avoid coming more than their mandated once-a-week. So he keeps the cameras in plain sight and the listening devices poorly hidden despite warnings from the Sheriff’s Secret Police to improve his practices. Rico would just rather people remember that there are always eyes and ears at every table rather than risk running their mouths about something they should not be speaking of in public.

At their table the napkin holder sits off-kilter, the case not fitting on well thanks to the microphone jammed into it. Rico could easily put the napkins inside in such a way that would sufficiently hide it, but who has time for that? Rico has a business to run. “Yes,” Cecil says at length, choosing his words carefully. “That’s the news for you. Changes in a blink.”

“Hmm.” They both turn their heads to look at the booth opposite theirs, a ruddy orange cornsnake curled in a happy knot around the salt and pepper shakers. It flicks its tongue out at them like a taunt. “Crazy how all the snakes and, what was it? Spirits? How they all just vanished.”

“Yeah. Crazy.”

The knowledge is there in Carlos’ eyes as they meet Cecil’s. “That happen often?”

“More often than I would prefer,” he says regretfully. He takes another curly fry and chews it with the force of his irritation over the matter. A matter he cannot even talk about freely because talking freely is the problem. He does nudge the napkin holder with his elbow so the microphone is at a weird angle, tilting the inner workings up to make contact with the shiny metal edges. It may or may not be true, but he has heard that it has a fifty-fifty shot of rendering the microphone useless. Or maybe the chances are better than that, but what does he know about underground surveillance-dodging techniques? He is just a radio host. “It’s a blow to my journalistic integrity.”

“Did you just…?” Carlos trails off, looking up from the microphone to Cecil, raising his eyebrows. A quiet sort of approval passes over his face, pleased and intrigued. “But people must know what is being asked of you.”
“It doesn't matter if they know or not. A reporter's reputation follows them forever. If people think I'm a liar, then...”

Carlos shakes his head. “No one thinks that. Not even close.”

“A stooge, then,” Cecil says, barely above a whisper. “A pawn?”

“Anyone with half a brain would know otherwise,” Carlos replies, voice full of conviction. Then, he laughs. “No, not half a brain. You wouldn't function, or you would be severely limited. And, depending on how you lost the other half of your brain, you'd probably die. Especially if it involved the brain stem. Unless you underwent a hemispherectomy, in which case one hemisphere of your brain would be removed or disabled, but that is only for rare types of seizure disorders or epilepsy, and most commonly used to treat children because their brains demonstrate more neuroplasticity than adults. Someone with half a brain from a hemispherectomy would have almost full cognitive range, barring some possible damage to vision and hemiparesis, and...and I have lost you.”

Cecil grins. “Somewhere around neuroplastic-something-or-other. But I get the idea. And thank you for the sentiment.”

“I'm serious,” Carlos says, rubbing at his hands again.

“Is something wrong?” Cecil asks, watching the movement. “You keep doing that. Hurt your hands?”

“Just cold. I don't know why; I've never had trouble with circulation or temperature pain before, and I'm used to a lot colder than this. But for some reason my joints just keep aching. Like it hurts in the bones...” He trails off, holding both hands in front of him and flexing the fingers open and closed rapidly, then shaking them. It's not hard to imagine how much wear and tear those poor hands go through, as often as Carlos seems to be sticking them into danger. And if he has been doing all this writing—with food coloring in a thin coffee straw, Cecil notes—on top of his normal work, then no wonder his hands ache. “You don't happen to know anywhere I could get warm gloves around here, do you? Everywhere I've looked it's either thick work gloves or so thin they won't be worth it.”

“Most places around here don't really cater to winter wardrobes. But I can ask around.”
“Don't trouble yourself,” Carlos says, but Cecil's already thinking of eight different places to check, maybe calling a few lesser-known stores in the area. Some of his favorite consignment haunts have more out-of-the-ordinary clothing than places like the mall or downtown. Surely he can find something that would suit his needs.

Carlos' phone and thus all the things attached to it begin to pulse, vibrating an inch or so across the table and making a few of the tapes rattle along with it. “Shit, is it that late already?” Carlos asks, quickly jamming the button for it to stop and checking the reminder. “I have ten minutes to get back to the lab.”

As Carlos grabs his bag and starts raking the micro-cassettes into the large inner pocket, Cecil does his best to help by gathering the loose papers into a neat stack. Hopefully he did not get anything out of place, but they seemed haphazardly scattered in the first place. “Important experiment?”

“I need to remove DNA samples from the electrophoresis box for Matt,” he replies, taking the papers from Cecil and shoving them in his notebook where he left off. “Harris started them running in the gel but I need to turn them off. Matt made it clear that it shouldn't run more than two and a half hours at that voltage. Not sure what exactly he’s looking for with this one, but he left clearly written instructions so I'm not going to complain. At least I don't have to do the staining, Harris said that stuff gets everywhere.”

“Why isn't Matt doing it if it's his work?” Cecil asks. Come to think of it, Matt is the only scientist he hasn't caught a glimpse of today.

“Apparently things have just been 'too much' for him lately,” Carlos replies, voice going a touch derisive, the implied air quotes obvious. “So he asked for a week off, to go 'clear his head.' Which, alright, sure, who am I to disagree, what do I know about coping mechanisms, right?” He shoves the rest of his things into his bag with more force than necessary, then gives Cecil a rueful smile. “Sorry. Working in such close proximity may finally be starting to effect some of us more than others.”

“Is that a fancy way of saying that he's driving you crazy?” Cecil asks knowingly, smirking.

“More than,” Carlos whispers, leaning forward again. “I couldn't wait to see him get out of here! Which is bad, I shouldn't feel that way, but I need him to stay on point with his work. My understanding of genetics only goes so far, and that is a big part of what we're working with here.” He sits up again, pushing himself up out of the booth and onto his feet. “But maybe Matt taking a little time off will be good for all of us. Clear the air. He said his head and heart just wasn't in it
The way he says it, Carlos does not sound like he can fathom what it would be like to not be fully invested in scientific endeavors. Which is endearing, really. He just loves his work so much! Cecil does his best not to turn to mush over it.

“And he was serious about it, too,” Carlos adds. “I thought he was just going to hole up in his room or go rent a hotel room for a few days, but he went filled out a temporary travel permit, somehow got it approved and everything. No one else seems to be capable of it, but he managed to get one and didn’t even have to hand over any body parts...”

Cecil follows Carlos' slow pace, a slight limp making the scientist favor one side. “He actually left town? Wow, he really did need a breather. Where did he head?”

“Down Route 800. He said he was stopping at the first city he found and taking it all in.”
Approximately eighteen days and sixteen hours after disappearing into a black helicopter, William Thaddeus Odell walks through the front doors of Night Vale Laboratories.

This would have been much more dramatic if anyone other than Carlos was awake and present to see it.

As it is, Carlos is the only one who happens to be up and about, having had yet another nightmare about hands and arms and faces disappearing into lakes and helicopters and gaping maws and the void. Faces he sometimes recognizes but sometimes does not, the voices harmonizing together in their agony, sometimes dipping too deep in tone and always bringing him to a startled wakefulness.

As it is, there is only so much lying awake and staring at the uneven coloration of his ceiling that Carlos can take. There are experiments to be run, after all, and a scientist is not a time-waster. It is perhaps the fifteenth or sixteenth thing a scientist is.

As it is, there is no sudden exclamation and rushing of hugs to greet Billy. Rather it is the soft clink of a pipette rattling against the edges of a beaker and Carlos' sudden intake of breath. The door closes behind him with a metallic thud of finality as it shuts out the early morning sunlight. They stare at each other for a pregnant moment, the shock and disbelief slotting into place on Carlos' face before he shoves back from the lab table. His chair makes an abrupt squeak as the rubber feet skip along the tile floor, friction in action. It echoes uncomfortable in the large room.

Carlos rushes forward four steps then catches himself, hesitating, uncertain. After all, there is no telling what Billy has gone through or how he might react. No telling what the Sheriff's Secret Police filled his head with this time. Is he even here on friendly terms? Why is he here at all? How is he here at all? “Billy?” he asks, finding his voice too loud, too abrupt, and gentling it. “Billy, are you—”

“It's alright,” Billy replies, holding up his hands with palms down, as if Carlos is the one in need of calming which is just absurd. His words are more of a croak, the gravel-on-asphalt of someone who has not spoken in days. Or, alternatively, someone who has spoken a great deal. Or screamed a great deal. Carlos is not sure which and is afraid of the answer to that line of thought, so he does not ask the question. The other man clears his throat, the gravel grating under a the big wheels of a truck. “I'm alright, but could I get some water?”
“Yes! Of course, come here, let's get you sat down!” Carlos wants to reach out and help guide the other man to a chair, but initiating contact is probably not the wisest course of action. Instead he flits to the sink and grabs a beaker and after checking for contaminants he fills it with filtered water. Turning back he is glad to see Billy did as asked and is seated at the closest stool to where Carlos had been working, his weight propped against the table and breathing steadily as he looks around the lab.

At first assessment, Carlos would have thought Billy appeared quite well for someone who had been absconded away by a shadowy government agency for nearly three weeks. He can even trick himself into believing Billy had not been gone at all; the disheveled clothing and the pungent stench of dried sweat is not all that different than some of the scientists themselves after a long binge of inspiration if left to their own devices. Frankly, the only reason half of them remember to bathe some days is because they have to interact with the public and each other. That and the lab safety and cleanliness rules they agreed to when they moved in. When you are the dirtiest thing in the lab, it makes you a lot more aware of your own filth.

Billy is still wearing the same clothing he was in when the Sheriff's Secret Police took him, sans the hazmat suit. It's possible he has been wearing them this entire time, hopelessly wrinkled and possessing that stiffness that comes with stale laundry left too long in one place. The state of his clothing aside, though, Billy looks surprisingly good. Tired, certainly. But he is physically in one piece with nothing obvious that needs immediate medical treatment, no stains on his skin, no caked drying blood. Carlos returns and presses the beaker into Billy's hands—dry skin cracked around uneven nails, traces of dirt or skin or something else gritty beneath but not blood, not blood—and watches as he raises it greedily to his mouth. Billy chokes momentarily at the first gulp and Carlos jerks as if to assist somehow, but after the initial trouble Billy downs the entire beaker in one go, heedless of the rivulets of water that sneak out the corners of his mouth and down his chin to drip on the tabletop. “Thank you,” he gasps once there are nothing but drops left.

“Drink as much as you need,” Carlos says, fetching him another glassful without prompting.

Once Billy's gotten down another half a beaker and slowed to small sips, Carlos sits down next to him while carefully making sure their knees do not touch. There is a stillness to Billy that reminds him of a frightened rabbit in a cage, left too long without stimulus, nothing but its own thoughts and silence. This time when Billy speaks his voice sounds less abused. “Hey.”

“Hey,” Carlos parrots, because he is wholly unprepared for this. How does one prepare for a conversation like this? He wishes Lei was awake. “You gave us quite a scare.”

“I bet,” he replies, looking down at the crystal clear beaker and it's equally translucent contents. “Everybody asleep?”
“Yeah, it's early yet.” Carlos licks his lips, struggling for how to proceed. So many questions all clamoring to the forefront. But first things first. “You know who you are?”

The other man nods, but Carlos looks at him pointedly. A nod is not going to be a good enough answer, not after everything that has happened. “William Thaddeus Odell,” he supplies.

Carlos presses, “And do you know who I am?”

“Carlos Abaroa. Don't expect me to remember all those middle names you've got,” Billy says, the smallest of smiles splintering at the edges of his mouth at Carlos' slight flush.

“A Mexican heritage and Catholicism tack on a lot of extra baggage to a name, I'll give you that,” Carlos says in response, his own smile forming. But it fades just as quickly. “How do you feel?”


“Do you...do you remember—?”

“I remember everything,” Billy says plainly, and it takes Carlos a moment to understand the magnitude of such a statement and what it all entails. For a moment, he thinks he may be ill.

“E-everything?” he reiterates, very aware that their voices are barely above a whisper. The air around them feels incredibly still, as if all the specimens in their terrariums have come to a halt to listen intently. As if the very equipment humming around them has geared down in deference to Billy's solemn words.

Billy gives another slight nod, meeting Carlos' eyes. “They, ah, didn't feel that the traditional methods were effective, with me,” he states. There's a faint line on his bottom lip, obvious now that he has gotten them wet with water. A pale pink healing fissure in the soft tissue. “I'm not sure how long that took. Time was...some of it seemed to go by so fast, and then the rest dragged on and on for eons. But none of it worked, this time, and they couldn't take the...the knowledge away. I heard one of them say it was because our kind were more resilient, whatever that means...for whatever reason, they decided to try a different approach.”

“I'm sorry,” Carlos blurts, unable to stand it. All the horrific scenarios his mind had concocted over the past few weeks—of which there were no shortage, because Carlos might not be the most
creative man when it comes to art or literature but worst-case scenarios he can supply in abundance—seem all but confirmed. Guilt comes pouring forth. “I'm sorry we lied to you, but we didn't know what they'd do if we told you and you seemed so much happier after everything—”

“Nah, man, don't,” Billy says, leaning forward. “Don't. I know. I get it. I didn't at first but they helped me get through it.”

“What does that mean?” Carlos asks warily.

“Not what you think it means,” he says, giving a tired huff of a laugh. There's a bit of silence while Billy gathers his thoughts. “I think that…that they have the right intentions, even if it's the wrong methods.”

Carlos looks incredulous. “What? Billy, that's—that's exactly what someone brainwashing you would want you to think—”

“I am well aware of what brainwashing feels like,” Billy snaps, and Carlos recoils a little at the sharp sting of violence in his voice. It is there and gone again just as quickly, and Billy looks abashed. “Sorry, I didn't mean—sorry.”

“You're alright,” Carlos says softly, ignoring the prickling fear creeping up his spine. He is not sure who he is reassuring more, Billy or himself. “You've been through an ordeal,” and Billy gives a little snort at that, but Carlos continues, “and I'm not in any position to tell you what you should feel. We don't have to talk about this right now. We can wait, or, or never go there, if that's what you want.”

Billy is already shaking his head, dreadlocks limply following the movement. For some reason Carlos picks up on the motion and a corner of his brain still engaged in absorbing all the visual facts realizes Billy's hair is hardly mused, despite the rest of his appearance. Either he was allowed to fix himself up or his captors were respectful of at least that much of Billy's identity and autonomy, which is a thought so completely ironic given the situation that Carlos nearly misses Billy speaking again.

“They told me everything that...that she had done,” Billy says slowly, working through the words one by one. He makes a point not to use her name. “They spent so much time trying to take those memories away, because it would be so much easier to just forget. But you can't forget, you can't, no matter how deep you go some things can't be smudged out—”
His voice swells and he has to stop, catch his quickening breath and settle back to the stillness from before. There is something barely restrained there that Carlos does not want to agitate. “When they couldn't make me forget, they laid it all out on the table. Said maybe the evidence would make it easier, since I was a scientist.”

“The evidence?”

“Every backhanded, manipulative thing she said. All the people, all the opportunities that she took from me, all the ways she tricked me into loving her, and I was too dumb to realize—”

“You are not dumb,” Carlos insists, hand finally breaching the distance between them and gripping Billy's forearm. Because he cannot stand to hear this and have Billy feel he is anything less than he is.

“Blind, then,” he counters. “There were so many signs I didn't read because I didn't want to read them. It was all in that book, in my own handwriting, and I didn't even see.”

Carlos' eyes widen, mind racing up two flights of stairs and through his apartment to his bedroom where in a fit of guilt-ridden rage he had wrenched Billy's diary from its place of prominence on his nightstand and flung it as hard as he could against the brick wall. The action had felt just as unsatisfying as this, just as helpless. Pages splayed open against the floor, Carlos had left it lying there before one of his transcription sessions at Big Rico's. When he had returned and the book was no longer there, a twist of angry pleasure had curled in his gut. *Good riddance,* he had thought.

Two weeks later and Billy is before him pulling the same leather bound book from his side, and how had he not noticed it stuffed crookedly in the pocket of his cargo pants? The book has seen better days, that is for certain. Ripped and slashed and even burned on the lower corner. He wonders why it was not destroyed completely.

“They helped me understand,” Billy says, setting the book before them on the cool metal and framing it with his large hands. “Their methods may be unorthodox but I understand now.”

“Understand what?” Carlos asks, but any answer that might have been forthcoming is interrupted by creaking on the stairs. A pair of socked feet comes into view followed by the rest of Becky, her red hair in a knotted tangle and falling in her face. Fresh out of bed, she makes it all the way to the second-to-last step before looking up, her yawn interrupted by an ecstatic screech once she lays eyes on Billy.
That brings the rest of them clamoring downstairs and there is a flurry of activity. Harris of course wants to give him a full physical examination right then and there, and Lei falls straight back on his trauma survivor training and tries to keep everyone from overcrowding while simultaneously attempting to get Billy to move to a quiet room. Bickering ensues almost immediately, the two of them trying to work around each other and all the while Becky clings to Billy's neck like a very heavy necklace, alternating between sobbing into his shoulder and patting his face like she cannot believe he is there.

For his part, Carlos steps back and lets them fawn over their lost team member. After all, they lost him twice; the odds of recovering him twice in this town are abysmally low. Abbey, who was always much more level-headed when it comes to these things, gives Billy a once-over and a hard hug before promising to help him catch up on what he missed, then slots in next to Carlos. She has the look of someone who is in desperate need of sleep or caffeine. “When did this happen?” she murmurs, their outer arms pressed together.

“Just now,” he replies, watching for signs of Billy's discomfort. He seems to be taking the attention remarkably well, letting it all roll over him while he pets comforting at Becky's hair. There's still the uncharacteristic stiffness to his posture and movements, but he certainly looks more amused by their antics than annoyed. Basking in it all might be the right way to put it.

They watch together for a few minutes. When Harris starts suggesting brain scans and MRI's, Abbey glances up at Carlos. “Coffee?”

“Coffee.”

“Here.”

A large cup of coffee is set in front of Carlos' face, breaking the dazed lock his eyes had on the far end of the linoleum table top. Little wisps of steam curl out of the mouth opening, beckoning him with promises of delicious piping hot Americano. He reaches out and pulls the drink close, inhaling the scent. It is like a balm to the senses. “Thanks.”

“No problem,” Abbey replies, sliding into the booth opposite him. They do not typically make it to Starbucks; there are half a dozen closer coffee shops to the labs, all either cheaper or more cozy
than the hustle and rush of the popular chain. Plus the Night Vale Starbucks franchise has a frankly terrifying staff, all with perfect posture and hair pulled tight beneath their hunter green visors. Carlos once witnessed a barrista make a woman cry her own tears into her Caramel Espresso Granita because the salt would accent the caramel perfectly. A lover of caffeine and sugar he may be, but there is only so much he is willing to give to the craving. Literal tears is a bit much.

But Carlos had said it would be a nice day to splurge, given the circumstances, and Abbey had even offered to get the tab. Now she is sucking a sugary beige concoction through a straw, looking at him with a mixture of concern and sympathy. At least the coffee looks tasty.


“Yeah.”

“I take it you talked to him before everyone descended?”

Carlos nods, finally taking a drink. It is still too hot, biting angrily at the tip of his tongue, and he sets it back down after a careful swallow. “Yep.”

She looks at him for a pregnant pause, then glares expectantly. “And?”

“It wasn't pleasant,” he says, shaking his head, letting his gaze fall back into the middle distance. Carlos really has no desire to go into details, but Abbey can be like a dog with a bone. “More of whatever they did last time, and then some pretty intense counseling, if you want to call it that. I would avoid using the word 'brainwashing,' unless you want a possible violent reaction.”

“But he remembers everything now?”

“That's what he said. I don't know how true that statement is. It might be, you know,” Carlos makes a vague hand motion toward his own temple. “His own interpretation of the truth, or their interpretation of the truth. Hell, do we even know that what we know is the truth, anymore?”

“Don't talk like that,” she frowns, taking another sip of her drink. “I haven't had any sudden periods of time unaccounted for and no head wounds to speak of, so I'd like to think I have a firm grasp on reality. And we've all been careful to keep track of each other.”
“I shouldn't have let Matt leave,” Carlos groans, leaning down and thumping his head on the table, arm curling around as if to hide from view.

Abbey smiles, reaching over and patting his dark curls a touch too sharply to be empathetic. “Matt is a big boy who can make his own decisions. If you hadn't let him get out of our hair for a little while one of us was going to have more than words with him. Hell, I think Harris was done with him after the first month or so. It was for the best.”

“What if something happens to him?” his muffled voice asks from under his arm.

“Then we can start playing some good music on the radio instead of his garbage—”

“Abbey,” Carlos chastises, raising his head to give her a sharp look.

She raises a placating hand, taking the chastisement in stride. “I'm sorry, I'm sorry! That was in bad taste, I apologize.” Looking down at her drink she gives it a little shake to knock loose some whip cream that is clinging to the side, then stirs it again with her straw. “Hopefully with Billy back and Matt in a better frame of mind things can just get back to normal.”

“Fat chance of that around here,” he mumbles, finally picking up his drink and taking a healthy gulp. The burn down his throat feels just right, leaving a trail of warmth to his center that he desperately needs today. “I've been thinking.”

“Good, it's your job,” Abbey counters immediately, then looks up with a cheeky grin.

“Why do I even hang out with you, anyway?” Carlos asks, finally laughing properly.

“Because I'm a riot, ask anyone. You were thinking…?”

“I've been thinking, I need to come up with some sort of contingency to get us out of here, if necessary.”
Abbey glances up at him, then around the busy coffee shop. There is a group of giggly teenagers ordering pumpkin spice lattes at the register. The bell on the side entrance clangs against the reinforced glass of the door as a new customer comes in. The clack-clack-clack of keys on a Macbook Pro, for some unknown reason sounding like an antique typewriter rather than modern technology. The harsh whir and bubble of whip cream being applied to the top of a beverage. A man loudly complaining that he thinks the barrista put whole milk rather than soy in his machiatto. The barrista in question perched on the counter like a stalking predator, eyes focused on the man and growling a low rumble in her throat. And the shout of the latest order rings out over the rest of the sounds, the cup finished and sliding across the tiny serving counter.

Suddenly Carlos' insistence on Starbucks makes a lot more sense.

“Do you have any ideas?” she asks, leaning closer to the table to rest her own elbow on it, trying to look uninterested to anyone who might be watching them.

“A few,” Carlos admits. “Was wondering your thoughts on it.”

Abbey makes a little noise in the back of her throat and looks around again, this time for answers Carlos is pretty sure are not there. “Well, obviously we can't discuss anything substantial in city limits,” she starts. Carlos nods in agreement, so she continues. “Did you ever notice how our facilities are kind of...centered? In town?”

Carlos had noticed. When he was making his hand-drawn map of Night Vale, the first order of business had been establishing just where Night Vale Laboratories was located in relation to the town as a whole. Just to the east and south, not too far from the center of town, not too far north from the radio station. Not that it has any bearing on the conversation. “Yeah, but the town isn't that big, so that isn't saying much.”

“It's still a little disconcerting. I can't help but think it was deliberate.”

“They couldn't just up and move an old research facility to any old part of town just because—wait, what am I saying, of course they would,” Carlos says, rubbing his forehead. He has felt a headache coming on ever since he went out into the sun today. “No, just...something tells me that even if it is convenient it wasn't intentional. Big Rico said that the abandoned lab has been there since he opened the restaurant.”

“Either way, we're kind of sitting ducks where we are, you know?” Abbey taps her straw back and forth against the inner walls of the clear plastic dome over her cup. “Maybe the first step is establishing some sort of place on the outskirts of town.”
“A research station,” Carlos supplies, and Abbey nods, sucking at the dredges of coffee through her straw and making an overly-loud noise. “Not a bad idea, for multiple reasons. We could build one or find a building already out there, somewhere. Have it have a legitimate purpose; we've got plenty of projects that could use more space. And it would be nice and quiet. You know, for thinking and talking about science.”

“And if things seem to be going more to hell than normal,” she suggests, “we could slowly get our things out there and—”

“Right.” He takes a sip of his own drink, holding her gaze over the lid. Eyes telling her silently to tread carefully. Once he puts his cup down he considers her a long moment. “Do you remember the route we took into town?”

Abbey nods. “Of course. We came in Route 800.”

“None of the others remember.”

That gives her pause, and Abbey blinks back at him, uncomprehending. “What do you mean, they don't remember?”

“Just as I said. When I brought it up, none of them remember exactly how we got here. They remember the drive, they remember the heat, but from which way? It's a blur. Some of them claim that they must have dozed off in the car or something, but...”

She shakes her head. “No. No, I remember, in the car I was in, I was the only one who wasn't feeling good. Remember? I got overheated; Harris was worried about heat stroke. Everyone else was alert, because they were wanting to find town and get me somewhere cool.” Abbey looks up at him worriedly. “Do you remember?”

Carlos nods, looking troubled down at the lid of his cup and tapping his thumbs along the sides. “I might have been on the verge of falling asleep that morning, but I remember the way.” As much as he had poured over the directions in preparation for their journey, the route is practically seared into his memory. “I just wanted to make sure. If something happens to me, I need someone who can get the others out.”

“Nothing is going to happen to you,” Abbey says forcefully, catching his attention. She glares at
him for a long moment, then takes his hand in her mechanical one. “Everyone else around here might be bat-shit insane or falling apart, you absolutely cannot leave me alone with these people, you hear me? We are going to be fine, and that's that.”

He squeezes the metal back. It makes not a squeak or creak; Abbey has gotten her prosthetic down to a smooth and seamless work of cyberpunk art. “I didn't think you believed in the power of positive thinking,” Carlos teases gently, silently thanking her.

Abbey laughs. “If that sort of nonsense works anywhere, it would be here, wouldn't it?” she counters.

They finish their drinks and dispose of their trash just as the barrista launches herself off the counter and attacks the complainer. The pair crash into the Mac user and he starts screaming as his Venti, half and half, ten pumps vanilla, extra whip splashes across his screen and drips down between the edges of his keys. Very quickly a dash of type AB blood joins the mixture. Time to go.

The commotion goes mute once they step outside into the warm sun, and Abbey checks her phone as they walk to the car. “I'll give what we talked about some thought. Maybe we can—oh!”

“Oh, what?” Carlos asks, opening the driver-side door and leaning on the roof with one hand, bracing for whatever disaster might accompany whatever is on her phone.

She turns the screen towards him. “Looks like we're having Thanksgiving dinner tomorrow! Did you even remember it was coming up?”

Carlos squints down at the little picture. Looks like Becky is taking a selfie at the Ralph’s with Matt—and he feels a weight lifted off his shoulders knowing Matt made it back into town—standing in front of a bin filled with live turkeys. They're both smiling broadly with the man at the butcher counter who is holding a large bird up for the picture. Neither he nor the bird is smiling.

“Well, that's gross,” Carlos comments, shaking his head and getting in the car, Abbey following suit. “And no, I never give it much thought.”

Their conversation turns to how they're going to properly cook anything in the labs, Abbey happily sending text after text in their group chat about what sort of side dishes they should make while Carlos drives. He has very little to add, mind on things he feels are more important than some large meal. Abbey must sense that he wants the quiet because she does not ask for much input, leaving
him to his thoughts. When they get back to the laboratory Abbey hops out, reminding Carlos to clean up his kitchen since he has the only working oven before disappearing to her own devices.

He waits until the heavy door to the lab has slammed shut before he rolls down his car window. Taking a few moments to gather his thoughts as well as his courage, he finally takes a breath. “Officer Erwin?”

From around the back side of the vehicle, the Night Vale Laboratories monitoring officer strolls around to the driver-side window like a normal traffic stop. Carlos knows he was not there before. The only part of his face not obscured is his mouth and the circle of skin around it, balaclava and aviator glasses obscuring the rest. He leans an arm on the roof of the car and peers down curiously. “Dr. Abaroa?”

“I have a few questions,” Carlos says hesitantly, squinting up at him.

“We're here to protect and serve. What can I help you with?”

“I cannot believe you've never had a proper Thanksgiving dinner,” Becky states for maybe the fourth time in as many hours.

“I don't know if I would call this a proper Thanksgiving dinner, either,” Harris argues from his position in the living room. Due to the size and radius of his horns he has been delegated to ensuring any experiments-in-progress are still running smoothly for the day and answering the door if anyone drops by. Seeing as everything has been just fine in the labs and they rarely get visitors as is, Harris has been alternating between the random channels covered in a haze of static on the television and keeping up a steady stream of commentary toward the kitchen. They have dubbed him the peanut gallery.

Without Harris' presence there is just enough room in Carlos' kitchen for himself and Becky to work comfortably. After an impromptu meeting yesterday wherein their dishes of choice were discussed—complete with whiteboard charts—Carlos had decided it best if he and Becky took on the bulk of the cooking, seeing as everyone else has skills in the kitchen ranging somewhere between teenager-with-a-microwave and baboon-discovering-fire. The others are downstairs using the break room or their lab spaces to work on the dishes that the upstairs crew simply does not
have the time or space to make themselves, which still leaves quite a bit for the two of them.

They approached it like they would any other complex science experiment, sectioning the kitchen off into research (printed-out recipes arranged in the chronological order each dish needed to be cooked), preparations (with the cutting board and knives laid out as pristine as any surgeon's tray), assembly (complete with conversion charts), and the oven. While Carlos tends to normally be a little less stringent in the kitchen, these are recipes he has never tried before, so he erred on the side of caution. Neat and orderly and room to see all the variables.

Carlos double-checks the time on the oven then moves over to stir the large fragrant pot of fruits and juices he has simmering on the back burner. “It's not like I've never had Thanksgiving, but I've certainly never cooked it. It wasn't a big deal for most of my life.”

“How could it not be be a big deal?” Becky asks, incredulous.

“Seriously, Becks?” Harris says, twisting his body so he can better watch them work. “He's Mexican. Why do you think?”

Becky gasps, nearly putting a hand to her mouth before realizing that it has a smear of butter on it and reaching for a paper towel. “Oh my God! I am so sorry, that was very rude of me! I didn't mean to offend—”

“Stop, stop,” Carlos snickers, shaking his head and glancing over his shoulder. “He's just trying to rile you up. I don't care.”

“Still,” she says, sending Harris a look that clearly says he should keep an eye out for spit in his food. Becky thoroughly cleans the grease from between her fingers and leans a hip against the counter. “Well, why didn't you do Thanksgiving, then?”

“Various reasons,” he says evasively, dipping a clean spoon into the pot and tasting the mixture carefully. “Needs more cinnamon. I think I had another stick in that bag?”

Becky goes to fetch it, handing the small but expensive package over to Carlos. This pot, whatever it is, was Carlos' only requested dish for the whole meal. When they had been discussing what they wanted to eat for the holiday Carlos had been decidedly indifferent towards nearly everything, and had only requested this one item, something he had rattled off in Spanish that none of them had ever heard of. When he had added that he could make an alcoholic version, everyone was on
board. He had even offered to go buy the ingredients himself seeing as he would need to go to one of the little markets in town where everything was in other languages and half of the ingredients were unrecognizable to the rest of the scientists. The two bags that Carlos had brought back were full of bright fruits and weird shaped compounds with red and white wrappings, a bottle of soda loose in Carlos' fingers.

Now, he takes out the remaining cinnamon sticks and drops the spice into the pot, stirring thoroughly. The scent is a little tropical and does not quite mesh with the other, more traditional smells associated with Thanksgiving dinner. Becky leans forward to peek inside but Carlos is already replacing the lid. “So you never had, like, the big turkey dinner with all the trimmings?”

“When I was a teenager,” he says. “Circumstances were...different. And teenagers aren't really interested in those kinds of things, anyway. It was just another day most of the time. Christmas was a much bigger deal.” He adjusts the timer on the oven for another twenty minutes.

“Well, of course. Thanksgiving would be ideal if everyone got presents after we stuffed ourselves,” Harris quips.

“My family would have a huge dinner,” Becky sighs, tearing another few sheets from the paper towel roll to wipe the counter clean. “People would come from all over. My aunt and her family would sleep on air mattresses in the living room, and Dad's family would stay with my grandmother down the street. We'd all walk with our dishes down to her house around lunch time and set everything out on her long dining table; it was the only time of the year she used both the leaf inserts for it. And then everyone would say grace and get plates and sit around everywhere, since there wasn't enough room to all sit together. Half the time I had to sit on the floor.”

Harris chuckles warmly, folding his arms on the back of the couch and resting his head on them, horns digging softly into the cushion fabric. “Sounds a lot like our dinners. We had to have two, though. One with Mom's side and one with Dad's. Lunch we'd be at my grandparent's house, then we'd drive across town and do it all again for dinner at my uncle's place. God, I would be so sick by then!”

“Why couldn't they just all eat together?” Becky asks.

“Oh, you know how it is,” he replies with an eye roll. “Everyone has their traditions that they just can't break, no matter how outdated or inconvenient they are. Grandpa only wanted 'real Lattimore's' in attendance, so the in-laws would get offended because isn't it convenient to be all-inclusive when he wants free food come canning season, but when he has to share a holiday dinner he gets all stingy. Then Uncle Marty would say something offensive—and he always says something offensive, it's just a matter of what topic he last heard on Fox News this year. And then Aunt Robin ends up locked in the bathroom trying to raid the medicine cabinet and possibly ending
up in the emergency room. Again. So yeah, two Thanksgiving dinners is just easier for everyone.”

Becky winces. “Yikes. And here I was glad I didn't have to listen to one more 'Oh! Becky, did you hear? Your cousin Elizabeth is having another baby! When are you having a baby? Time's ticking!'” Her impression is startlingly on-point in pitch and tone, complete with over-embellished hand gestures, obviously taken from a specific family member.

“Don't think I don't get the same treatment! When am I going to settle down, marry a nice young woman, start a family. 'Grow up.' Like those are the only ways to be grown up.”

“Tell me about it! Because everything else I've accomplished is just child's play!” Beck exclaims enthusiastically.

Carlos smiles, back turned to them as he scans down his to-do list to make sure he has not forgotten anything. All that is left is the gravy and to open the cranberry sauce. “Where are those cans of cranberry sauce?” he asks.

“Right here!” Becky plucks the two cans from the other end of the counter and brings them over, Carlos ready with the hand-operated can opener. “I cannot believe we have to eat this gelatine goop.”

“It's what half of us grew up with, and they didn't have any real cranberries!” Harris stands and stretches his arms over his head, nearly brushing the low ceiling. “We're lucky we got what we did, shopping the day before Thanksgiving. It doesn't seem like it's nearly as big a deal down here.”

“I'm not surprised. The further toward the east coast the more fanatic people seem to be about the holiday,” Carlos says, cranking the blade around the top of the can with smooth turns. “So this is just...what? A can of cranberry jelly?”

Harris nods, he and Becky watching as Carlos shakes the can over a bowl and the cranberry sauce wiggles its way out of its metal confines. Breaking free, it makes a wet slurp noise before plopping into the bowl, the excess dripping down Carlos' fingers. It has retained the shape of the can, including the wavy ridges along its sides. “Yep. Pretty much.”

“Gross,” Becky complains, wrinkling her nose. She had been so adamant about real cranberry sauce. “This is an affront to good cranberries.”
“Suck it up, enjoy the jiggly deliciousness,” Harris grins, edging in and picking up the knife to cut the wobbly cylinder into slices. Carlos opens the second can and it gets the same treatment. The end result is a rather industrial yet appealing plate of cranberry patties, for lack of a better term. “Perfect!”

“I feel like I'm looking at overgrown petri dish agar,” Carlos says. “And I don't know how I feel about it.”

The front door to Carlos' apartment creaks and Billy uses his back to open it completely, an aluminum disposable tray balanced precariously in his hands. The sides of it are a dark and discolored. “Where do you want this?” he asks, carrying it over.

Carlos takes one of the used bowls and puts it in the sink to make room. “Just on the counter here,” he says, and Billy puts the pan in its place. Inside is a semi-translucent golden liquid with butter and spices and bits of turkey floating in it.

“One pan of turkey and ham leavings, as requested,” he says, brushing his hands together once it is secure. “Matt's got the meat resting under a heat lamp until we're ready to carve. Man, it looks good, too.”

“No one got hurt using the deep fryer?” Carlos asks, getting out a small pot for the gravy and setting it on one of the closest burners.

“Please, Carlos, we are professionals,” Billy replies, putting a hand to his heart in mock indignation. “Not even a flair-up.

“Alright, I'll finish up the gravy and if everyone else is ready they can start carrying stuff down to the lab.” Carlos gets to work at the stove, whisking flour and butter together in a pan before working in the ham and turkey leavings. It has been a long time since he made gravy, but the simple recipe comes back to him easily. He also separates out his ponche navideño, the fruity drink he had requested. Into the biggest portion goes a healthy amount of rum. Maybe more than a healthy amount, after a second thought. The rest he leaves alone; someone has to be responsible and it is not going to be that lot down there.

It takes a few trips but all the dishes get down the stairs. They have cleared the largest work table completely and spread a roll of brown paper out like a table runner. A little arrangement of the lab's bloodstones and the orange-shaded beakers Harris uses for some of his medical specimens serves as the centerpiece, the little tea lights inside flickering happily and making the table look more holiday-appropriate.
And then there is the food. The honey baked ham and the turkey sit prominently and ready for carving, the turkey deep-fried and Cajun-spiced as per Billy's family tradition. The cornbread stuffing is gluten-free, which they had anticipated having a problem with because of the wheat ban but the Ralph's in Night Vale is always quick to adapt to dietary restrictions. Somehow through all the bickering and insistence of the group they ended up with four different potato dishes: a hashbrown casserole, a sweet potato casserole (half covered in marshmallows and pecans), a large pot of hand-mashed potatoes, and something called Hasselback potatoes that Abbey grilled on a grate down in her workshop. Even though none of them had ever heard of it, they all agree that the gooey cheddar cheese of it looks appetizing. Then for some reason everyone except Carlos was adamant about having green bean casserole, and Becky had done something fancy with the deviled eggs that makes them look like something out of a food magazine. There had been a debate about what sort of corn to have, canned or fresh or creamed, but in the end it had all come down to curiosity. There is a bowl of grilled invisible corn-on-the-cob at one end of the table, butter and black pepper already dripped and shaken all over them so they will be easier to see. The ponche navideño is on another table because there's no room left for the two large pitchers, and Carlos is on drink duty for the others. At the other end of the table and farthest from the hot foods sits the cranberry sauce, as well as the two dishes Lei brought to the table.

“What is that?” Harris asks, fighting to keep his face polite and neutral. It is a losing battle.

Lei gives a wide smile, gesturing at the first dish, a pile of lumpy green goop. “Pistachio salad! It's got pistachios, obviously—I mean, it's pistachio pudding, but still, the flavor is there—crushed pineapple, marshmallows, and whipped cream. And a little actual pistachio on top; I've got more cracked if anyone wants more.”

Now everyone is listening, with growing horror. “Uh huh,” Harris replies. “And that one?”

If possible this one looks even more gross than the first, despite the happy bright pink coloration. At least there is no visible marshmallows in it. But Lei looks particularly proud of it. “It's called Ambrosia,” he says with a little theatrics. “Mom used to make it every Thanksgiving! It's got cottage cheese, mixed fruit, whip cream and just a touch of pink food coloring. Well, to be honest it isn't exactly like Mom's. I couldn't remember what kind of canned fruit she used so I just got a random assortment. But it looks spot on!”

“Are these supposed to be...desserts?” Harris asks.

Lei blinks at him, confused. “No?”

“Because we've got a pumpkin and a pecan pie waiting for dessert.”
“They're side dishes.”

“Uh huh,” Harris says again, giving the two dishes a concerned look. Down the table Carlos and the rest of the scientists are trying to curb their snickers with various amounts of success.

It finally occurs to Lei that they might be making fun of him. “Hey!” he shouts, flinging a pistachio randomly down at them. “They're good! Don't knock it till you try it!”

Everyone begins filling their plates, passing dishes back and forth and commenting on how good the food looks. Carlos waits until everyone is mostly back in their seats before he clears his throat. “Hey, guys? I'd like to say something.”

The group quiets and turns their attention to Carlos, curious.

“Um...well,” he laughs. “I'm not great at this, but, um. I know it's customary to give grace or whatever at Thanksgiving dinner, right? But, uh, I'm an atheist and we're probably the least religious bunch around here, so maybe not that, yeah?” The others laugh, nodding, so he continues, “That being said, I can't think of a better word for it, but it is a blessing that Billy is back with us in one piece.”

There are murmurs of agreement to that. Down the table Billy flushes and ducks his head, Matt grinning and throwing his arm around his shoulders to give him a happy little shake.

Carlos looks at each of his team members, his friends, and feels his throat clench a little in unexpected emotion. “It's been rough this year. Rougher than any of us expected. But I couldn't think of a group of people I'd rather have with me sharing a meal. So, thank you. For that.”

“And to you, our fearless leader,” Billy counters, lifting his glass and the others following suit.

“To us!” Becky cheers, everyone clinking glasses and toasting.

Harris swallows his drink and smirks, pointing at the Ambrosia. “I'm all for sharing a meal but I'm not eating that,” he teases. Lei gasps and starts to argue, sending a ripple of laughter down the table as they all dig in.
Carlos stays quiet for a little longer, watching, wanting to memorize every detail of this moment. He has been thinking a lot about memory, lately, and how much the human mind loses in so many various ways, whether it be purposefully or by outside forces or just through the process of time. How it is a lot easier to hold onto the bad memories and lose the good. This, this moment, is one he does not want to lose, no matter what happens.

Finally picking up his fork, Carlos thinks maybe things will finally start to get better.

In an apartment across town, Cecil kneels in the center of his kitchen. The linoleum floor around him is littered with shards of broken glass, some of it splattered and stained bright red-violet with his own blood. His palms sting so badly but he is heedless to it as he tries to grip the phone in his hands. It keeps slipping away, his wet fingers smearing the plastic and his face.

“Josie?” he sobs to the woman on the other end of the line. “Can you come over? Please? I need your help.”

Across from Cecil is a crude series of runes, carved jagged and bloody into the wood of his cabinets. Star. Man. God.

Chapter End Notes

Hi guys! Later than expected, but typical for me, am I right? Keep on keeping on, love your faces, you're all amazing! <3 <3

End Notes

If you like what you see and want more, or just want to chat, you can find wyntera on tumblr. Please, be gentle on this new writer, as she bruises easily.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!