Love is All You Need to Destroy Your Enemies

by shadydave

Summary

There are a few things that Carlos may have neglected to tell Cecil.

Like his last name.

Or how he hasn’t actually dated anyone since his junior year of high school.

Or that he’s a wizard of the White Council and the regional commander of Wardens in the western United States and not, in fact, a scientist.

You know. Minor details.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
Carlos decides he’s going to become a scientist when he’s six years old.

He’s in the first grade. Carlos is already partial to science class, since it’s the only subject that routinely includes dinosaurs in his homework. Then the mother of one of his classmates comes in to do a demonstration, and after he watches Professor Santiago create fog by putting dry ice in water and suck a hard-boiled egg into a soda bottle using only a match, he realizes that the universe is stranger than he ever imagined and all that knowledge is out there just waiting for him to discover it.

Fortunately, he has a similar revelation several months later when he falls off his sister’s bike and accidently dissolves part of the sidewalk, landing in a puddle of fine-grained dust instead of skinning his knees, and he finds out he’s going to become a wizard instead.

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Carlos learns about Night Vale when he’s twenty.

His family closed the restaurant early so they can throw him a combination promotion/yay-necromancers-didn’t-kill-you party, but since pretty much everyone in the immediate area has shown up it’s basically indistinguishable from a regular night. Not everyone can figure out exactly what he got promoted to, and most of them know better than to ask too many questions, but they’re willing to celebrate all the same.

His bisabuela, however, knows all about his promotion – she was a Warden herself, one of the few to make it to retirement – and since her former apprentice is now the youngest regional commander in history, he’s a little confused as to why she looks so grim.

(Most people would attribute it to the fact that Carlos almost died in Chicago, or that three-quarters of the Wardens have died since the Red Court's attack on Sicily. Most people have unrealistic expectations of what it takes for someone who happily endured over two centuries of active duty to make actual facial expressions.)

“Hello, grandmother,” he says in Ventureño Chumash, because one of the first things she had insisted on teaching him was a civilized language.

The only reply he gets is a grunt. But she finally deigns to look at him when he hands her a Coke, and she even lifts her glass so he can clink his bottle of beer against it.

“Has young Luccio given you your assignments yet?” she asks.

“You probably shouldn’t call her that anymore,” says Carlos. “It seems like a sensitive subject.”

His bisabuela snorts. “She’s always been young, boy. She’s Captain of the Wardens. She’ll adjust.”

She taps a finger against the side of her glass, still waiting for an answer to her question.

“I'm commanding, regionally, the western United States,” says Carlos with a grin. He receives a cool stare in response.

“You,” she says, “will also always be young.”

Carlos salutes her with his beer.
“Are you old enough to drink that here?” she asks. “I recall your mother worrying about her liquor license.”

“…I’m supposed to touch base with everyone who’s left on the coast,” says Carlos. “Keep things calm and organized. Keep our people calm and organized. We’re still scrambling to find more recruits.”

“What about the desert?” she asks.

Carlos narrows his eyes. “What do you know about the desert?”

Okay, all she’s said is “the desert”, which could mean the majority of the southwest and anywhere in the rain shadow of the Rockies (or, culturally speaking, most of the midwest). But Luccio has scheduled for the following week a personal debriefing with him and a Senior Council member (the Gatekeeper, of all people) on “the desert”, and Carlos’ predecessor left behind two cardboard boxes labeled “the desert!!!!!!” filled with notebooks Carlos has only begun to decipher. Some of them are written in crayon. All of them are disturbing.

“You don’t know the responsibility you’ve taken on yourself, boy,” says his bisabuela.

“So tell me,” says Carlos.

“Only the regional commander is supposed to know about it,” she says. Carlos raises an eyebrow.

“But I’ve outlived seven of them and I keep my ears open,” she continues. “Besides, when I was young, there were… stories. Of black-robed missionaries who came from the south, loading up their mules with wood and oil and disappearing for weeks. When they returned, they were always fewer in number. Sometimes they did not return at all.”

“So you think they trekked all the way out into the desert to burn whatever-this-is down?” asks Carlos.

“Well, they were Jesuits,” she says.

“I’m pretty sure that’s no longer standard operating procedure,” he says. “What about when you were an apprentice?”

“Warden Hirata did not share his thoughts on the desert with me,” she says primly. “Although given his methods, I have long suspected the missionaries had been acting under his suggestion.”

Hirata Munisai is one of the most famous regional commanders of what was then southwestern North America, where he had exiled himself in protest after Japan closed its borders; he’s almost single-handedly responsible for limiting the power of the Red Court in the area for close to two hundred years. Given that all the stories Carlos has heard about Hirata make him sound like Harry Dresden if Harry Dresden was also a disgruntled samurai sword-master, Carlos thinks his bisabuela is probably correct in her suspicions.

“So, your hypothetical advice for dealing with the place you don’t officially know about is ‘kill it with fire’,” says Carlos.

His bisabuela snorts. “I’ve seen your fire magic, boy. Better stick to grenades.”

Carlos ignores the slight to his skills, because he is an adult and a Warden and not a neurotic teenage apprentice, and also because nothing improves your fire magic like fighting for your life against hordes of vampires.
“What's this place called, anyway?” he asks.

“Night Vale,” says his bisabuela, and draws a protective ward in the puddle of condensation from her glass. “It’s called Night Vale. Now, get me another Coke – the real kind, with sugar – so I can tell you how to avoid dying horribly.”

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Carlos knows the exact moment he crosses Night Vale’s boundaries, though he’s still several miles away from the town and surrounded only by indeterminate desert. There’s a kind of psychic pressure that descends immediately, an unpleasant if not exactly painful weight jangling against his mind like an out-of-tune chord.

Also, there’s a sign posted that reads "CAUTION: ELDRITCH ABOMINATIONS. LEAVE IMMEDIATELY OR SUFFER THE CONSEQUENCES," in blackletter font (probably hand-painted, because the only thing the White Council mistrusts more than change is technology).

He pulls off Route 800 onto an unmarked dirt road and hikes a mile to the northwest, to a rough circle of worn-down sandstone pillars. In their center is an unremarkable lump of rusting metal and weathered stone – an old anvil sitting on top of a small marble hummock.

Carlos draws his sword and feeds power into it. When it’s humming with energy, he stabs down through the anvil into the marble, effortlessly parting iron and stone and dissolving the outermost layer of enchantments within them.

Everything goes white, and for a second Carlos thinks he’s fucked it up and there’s nothing left but the fireworks. Then there’s a gentle sound like thousands of bells chiming as the newly released spells begin to activate: the light disperses like a misty rain, trickling down to the face of the anvil and pooling around his sword blade.

Carlos looks up. Angry-looking storm clouds are racing towards him, stretching out from the direction of the unseen town. The first few spindly tendrils are already directly above, piling up against an invisible barrier in the sky – the boundaries of the wards.

Well, that’s working, anyway.

He kneels and takes out a chunk of smooth, rusty black rock, charmingly referred to by the locals as bloodstone. Very gently, he wraps his left hand around the six inches of silvered steel blade protruding from the puddle of light and squeezes it until he feels his skin part. He slides the bloodstone between his palm and his sword and starts chanting.

Carlos keeps an eye on the clouds as he goes through the ritual. The roiling greenish mass continues to grow above him, lit by flashes of purplish-white. He doesn't want to be there when the lightning strikes begin – much less the funnel clouds.

He finishes the last line of his chant just as a drop of his blood runs down the blade. The light splashes outwards in a flare of brilliant red, the chime builds to some impossibly huge chord—

They both cut out as the light hits the ground with a small splash, leaving Carlos to blink glowing afterimages from his eyes. The thunder has stopped; when he looks up, the clouds are dispersing.

There’s an elaborate pattern of silver light slowly rotating on the ground around him. The main form is a five-pointed star inside a circle, but when he looks closer he can see the pattern repeated within itself, fractaling beyond human sight.
It’s a representation of all the binding, containment, and warding spells around Night Vale, and just their projection is one of the most elaborate pieces of magic he’s ever seen.

(“What’s so terrible about this place, anyway?” Carlos asks.

“Boy, have you never wondered what happens to the Outsiders we fight?” says his bisabuela, taking another sip of soda.

“Wondered about what?” says Carlos. “They’re either destroyed or banished.”

That makes it sound so easy, like the servants and foot soldiers of forces antithetical to all existence in this universe will inevitably succumb to one of two possible destinies. Like he still doesn't have nightmares about Sicily.

His bisabuela leans forward. “Banished where?” she asks.

Ultimately, the Outsiders come from beyond the Outer Gates, the boundary of the universe itself. The ritual for banishing them is incredibly dangerous – Carlos thinks that only a few members of the Senior Council are probably capable of it – and logically, you’d think it would send them right back where they came from.

Except opening the Outer Gates is a violation of the Seventh Law of Magic, punishable by summary execution; and worse, even the crack required to shove the Outsiders back through might be enough to let something even more terrible in...

“What do they go?” asks Carlos, but he already knows the answer.)

At the debriefing, he asked Luccio when the wards were built. She said the only official record claimed they were based on an existing design from the fifth century, but also that they had been there forever. The Gatekeeper just smiled.

Now that Carlos has seen the wards, both their answers are starting to make sense.

The whole system draws its power from the ley line crossing the desert – a staggering amount of energy, and barely enough for its purpose. Three different sets of foci well within the boundaries actually create the spells; the interface before him is merely a visual echo, the translation of a system of magic that stretches for miles along and within the earth into a display comprehensible on a human level.

Any attempts to interfere with the ley line, ward foci, or interface will provoke an immediate response from the storm wards, designed to hunt down rogue magic with extreme prejudice. In theory, they only react to direct threats or to any magic done without a bloodstone connection. In practice, according to his predecessor, they're “kind of finicky”.

Should the storm wards prove insufficient, Night Vale will be completely immolated by cleansing fire, then swallowed by the sand. Carlos has to admit it has a certain direct charm.

Fortunately for him, Night Vale, and everyone in an estimated three-to-seven hundred mile radius, the wards can take quite a bit of punishment before self-destructing. They're designed to be self-sustaining: whenever one frays apart, the energy is cannibalized by the others, including charms that govern reduplication. Theoretically, given time, all but the most catastrophic damage to the system will eventually repair itself.

But even magic is subject to the laws of physics (well, some of them) and no system can perfectly conserve energy, which is where Carlos comes in.
He looks the circle over; there are no obvious breaks, so he walks to the edge and crouches down, inspecting the lines and whorls of silvery light as they flow past.

After a few moments, he's able to start picking out individual constructs: some of them familiar enough a first-year apprentice could identify them, some so archaic he can barely recognize their intended purpose. Those most prone to wear and tear are largely variations on standard protective sigils, if on a monumentally larger scale and facing inward instead of outward. The binding spells are the sturdiest, anchored deep within the ground. Emergency beacons and cloaking veils bubble up, in need of some repair but still ready for use. There's hundreds of suggestions in there, too, so strong they fall juuuust short of qualifying as highly illegal compulsions: most seem to be of the 'keep out' persuasion, although there's a repeated pattern he doesn't quite recognize - 'go back', maybe?

A delicately-balanced sequence of air, water, and fire magic zips by. Carlos frowns at the cascade of vapor condensation and pressure differentials and ion polarizations until he realizes he's looking at the storm wards, teeming with destructive potential and a little too much enthusiasm.

As regional commander, the monitoring, maintenance, and renewal of the spells is Carlos' personal responsibility. Should he fail in his duties, he risks the displeasure of the Senior Council, the retribution of the Captain of the Wardens, and anything from the minor disruption to the total destruction of up to twelve states in America and Mexico.

But the system is beautiful, in a completely terrifying kind of way, and it works almost as perfectly as it can. The whole thing is full to the brim with deadly beings antithetical to life itself, and it stays that way. There's just one tiny problem with Night Vale:

The people.

The town was established in 1745 by invasive settlers with more determination than self-preservation. Despite the best efforts of the Wardens, Jesuit arsonists, and the insidious nightmares of the sleeping Outsiders lurking deep beneath the surface, Night Vale has both survived and thrived, in its own paranoid isolationist kind of way.

As far as Carlos can tell, the White Council unofficially washed its hands of the inhabitants two centuries ago, after Hirata quite literally rode into the sunset, never to be seen or heard from again but always present in the hearts of those who loved and feared him. The following six regional commanders made only a token effort to drive people away, mainly by vigorously enforcing executions for warlocks who broke the Laws of Magic and by re-posting the CAUTION: ELDritch ABOMINATIONs signs, which in the finest tradition of safety signage are constantly being stolen by drunk students.

As a result, the White Council in general and Wardens in particular are not exactly welcomed into Night Vale with open arms and complimentary orange ponchos. This might have caused any number of problems to the few wizards authorized to enter the town, except most of the locals are incapable of distinguishing between the weird hooded figures that haunt their streets (and houses, and children's play areas) and Wardens wearing their cloaks, so remaining undetected is surprisingly easy.

Carlos heads for Mission Grove Park, the location of the first of the ward foci. With his hood up, everybody ignores him with an intensity that would be worrying, except that Carlos does not really want to interact with any of them (many of whom are not obviously human, and several of whom possibly don’t exist).

The other foci are by the used car lot and the pizza place; Carlos' stomach grumbles the whole time he repairs the last set of wards, even though the smell of Big Rico's cooking pizzas isn't so much
appetizing as... pungent.

His next objective seems to have been more inspired by the previous Warden’s beef with the local law enforcement than by any specific magical purpose. But Carlos doesn’t need to take chances, and besides, he respects a good beef with local law enforcement.

He sneaks into the abandoned mine shaft (although since it seems to have been renovated into a highish-security facility decorated like a cheap motel from the seventies, it is technically neither abandoned nor a mine shaft) and hexes the generators. Most of the prisoners only use the opportunity to stick their heads out their cell doors and complain that the Pay-Per-View is down. However, a few enterprising citizens make a break for freedom, or at least for the Ralph’s, where they can apparently seek asylum stocking the shelves and camping out in the storage area behind the dairy products.

(One of Carlos’ inherited notebooks contained a whole treatise on Night Vale’s many paradoxical laws, like a ban on pens and pencils – which at least explains why most of the notes are written in crayon – but not on murder. A loophole in the clauses regarding double jeopardy means that if a prisoner remains free for a year and a day, all charges are dropped and they are automatically entered into a raffle for a free toaster.)

At some point, Carlos is going to have to introduce himself to the City Council, who are bound by the terms of an ancient gentlemen’s agreement to parley with duly-appointed representatives of the White Council and monitor their town to make sure there are no flagrant violations of the Laws of Magic.

His predecessor referred to them as “a little temperamental.”

Carlos decides that the better part of valor is conducting his sweep of the town first, so he can plan some escape routes. He’s supposed to be on the lookout for anyone and/or -thing “out of the ordinary”, which is possibly the least helpful instruction he’s ever received. But he has to establish a baseline level of abnormality at some point. He doesn’t sense anyone and/or -thing blatantly evil as he roams through the streets – just a constant tingle of weirdness.

He does see a hooded figure steal a baby. He steals it back.

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Carlos’ inaugural visit to Night Vale ends somewhat less successfully.

The City Council member shrieks, “STAY TUNED!”, its finger or finger-like appendage pointed accusingly at him. Then it explodes in a tinkling shower of purple sparkles, fine gravel, and the smell of Windex.

Cold energy surges through Carlos before he can even raise his shield, and he has just enough time to think, I can’t believe I got hit by a death curse on my first day, before it stops abruptly.

And nothing happens.

Carlos blinks. When he continues to not drop dead, he straightens his cloak and asks, “Does anyone else have an objection?” His voice barely shakes at all.

The remainder of the City Council stares at him for twenty-seven seconds, then each one slides down out of their chair until only the tops of their heads are above the table.

“I’m glad we had this little chat,” says Carlos. "It was a pleasure to meet you." He tips his crown of soft meats to them and saunters out, making sure to whistle a jaunty tune.
Carlos first hears Cecil when he’s just about to die.

He’s almost made it out of town, only two exits away from freedom on Route 800, when the curse strikes.

The radio turns on with a burst of static; he shuts it off.

A minute later, it hisses back to life. Carlos twists the knob again, but the radio only goes silent for a few seconds before blasting a garbled mix of electronic noise and chanting.

He pulls over and turns off both the radio and the car, taking the keys out of the ignition for good measure. The back of his neck is prickling, and it’s like he can feel someone nearby gathering their power, waiting for some unknown purpose, unseen but lurking just out of the corner of his eye. He checks his back seat, just in case; it’s empty.

There’s a tinny echo of Stay tuned! and the radio switches on with a crackle loud enough to make him jump. This time he can hear a voice in the static: a voice that grows louder as the white noise fades, as though it’s consuming the static and gaining its energy; a high-pitched raspy monotone that makes the hair rise up on the back of Carlos’ neck.


“What the—” says Carlos.

“And now back to the news,” drones the voice. “We are pleased to announce that the Mighty Fightin’ Ophanim took home the trophy in the Night Vale Bowling League Championships. Captain Old Woman Josie attributes their success to the good will of the heavenly counselors of the first sphere and her perfect 300 game. She also nominated Night Vale Community Radio’s own Intern Cecil as the League’s MVP, citing his drastically improved play and the uncanny reality-warping nature of his forward roll, which really conquers those 7-10 splits. Well done, Cecil.”

Carlos concentrates and snaps, “K’as!” releasing a flash of energy that should fry the radio. Instead, the broadcast only switches to garbled Russian for a few seconds before resuming as before.

The prickles continue up his neck and onto his scalp.

“—but despite overwhelming cries of corruption and bribery, the Bowling Writers Association of Night Vale gave the award to Steve Carlsberg of the Double-Wolves. The subsequent riot was broken up by owner Teddy Williams, who sprayed everyone with a fire extinguisher before temporarily deafening the crowd with what has been described as a sub-sonic whine or yelp.”

Carlos stares at the radio with a kind of horrified fascination. It’s not that the announcer’s voice is particularly terrible, but something about its pitch and timbre grates against his mind, tiny resonances he can feel slowly building towards some destructive crescendo.

He gets out of the car and draws a circle in the dust, sealing it with a brief effort of will. For a moment, the sound cuts out and the weight against his mind lifts. He sags forward, hands on his knees, and lets out a sigh of relief.

“I have just received a message from City Council, via a carrier pigeon that crashed into the station window,” says the voice. Carlos jerks and almost falls over. “It says, ’Run, Warden. Run.’”
Pressure is building in Carlos’ chest. He knows, intellectually, that the circle should protect him from magic. But his heart and mind begin to race as the voice somehow triggers a physiological response, and a creeping anxiety sinks its claws into him.

The voice continues, “The last thing you hear will be our herald, slowly drawing out your soul with words, damnable words, unless…”

“Unless?” Carlos almost shrieks, trying to quash the escalating panic attack.

“The message stops there;” says the voice. Carlos grits his teeth. “I am turning the blood-stained parchment over. I am asking Intern Cecil if there is a second page. There is no second page. There is no end to the message. To whomever – whatever – the recipient may be: some questions may never be answered. Some answers may never questioned. Better start running now.”

“I’m leaving,” says Carlos, breaking the circle, “but because I want to.”

He pulls the hood of his cloak as far forward as it will go and starts walking away from the town, his staff clutched tightly in one hand and a bag containing his sword, an extra grenade, and a water bottle slung over the other shoulder. He passes an emergency call box, which emits a piercing squeal followed by, “—and close the suture with a generous amount of airplane glue. This has been Community Health Tips.”

He speeds up – he’s not running, this is a retreat, not a rout – but now there are cars passing him, and each one carries a dopplering snippet of the screechy monotone boring its way into Carlos’ soul.

—today—
—Deputy Director—
—Winchell—
—announced the—
—and establishment—
—no fly zones—
—under punishment—
—splenectomy—
—free balloons—

His heart is pounding and he feels light-headed, but the city limits are right ahead, and borders, borders are symbols, borders are important, he might not be able to escape the curse but he should be able to weaken it, if he can just make it beyond the wards—

One of the emergency sirens starts to wail and Carlos stumbles, catching himself on his staff. The siren winds down until it sounds like—

“And now, Traffic,” says the voice. “Today’s dialect: Mid-Atlantic. The eastern expressway is jammed from Boulevard to Belmont while NVDOT crews attempt to contain the unexplained fountains of marbles bursting from the storm drains.” Carlos’s hands are shaking uncontrollably now. “Pedestrians are advised to stay off the payment and avoid all wooder-ways. There’s a gaper delay on Route 800, where reports are coming in of a hooded figure who appears to be suffering cardiac
arrest, or who is perhaps in the middle of a raging bender.”

Carlos wobbles to a stop and flips off the general direction of the road. Then he gathers the ragged shreds of his concentration and gasps, “Yax!” A web of green light bursts from his fingers, forming a globe around him.

“‘Kay, listeners are reporting that the hooded figure dayown the highway is now surrounded by a glowing viridian cloud,” says the voice, distorted like he’s hearing it underwater. White sparks flicker against the green light of his shield: that voice definitely has some kind of power, though what kind of power is way beyond Carlos’ pay grade. For a moment, there’s blessed relief, even though Carlos can still feel his heart pounding too hard.

“However,” the voice continues, “I would like to remind our lis’ners to maintain their customary attyitudes of suspicion and harror. Under no circumstances should youse look at the hooded figures, no matter how comical it is to see ’em flailing around on the side of the shreet like a wobbly-legged colt wit’ inner ear problems and a refreshing mint flavor. This has been Traffic, yo.”

Carlos has to move. The shield helps, but he can feel his strength quickly draining. He takes a step forward, then another, focusing on a sign that reads “Thank you for visiting Night Vale! Abandon all hope, ye who exit here!” and hoping that’s not an omen.

He’s right under the siren, trying to ignore the voice, when it suddenly emits a high-pitched tone. That seems to trigger the klaxon, which spools up into a full-blown wail. The noise is so deafening it’s like a physical force; Carlos staggers, falls. His shield disintegrates when he hits the ground and his staff clatters out of his hand. All he can do is clap his hands over his ears and curl up into a little ball.

The noise stops abruptly.

“This has been a test of our emergency broadcast system,” drones the voice, barely audible over the ringing in Carlos’ ears. “Had this been a real emergency, we would probably all be dead by now. We go now to Financial N— No, wait, Cecil is handing me a dead pigeon, we have yet another message from City Council.”

Carlos tries to push himself up, but his arms give out and he sprawls in the dirt. His nose is bleeding, and his ears probably are as well. He manages to drag himself a few inches forward before he has to stop, panting.

“City Council says, ‘Good riddance.’ Well, I for one am so glad that they interrupted our carefully balanced schedule for that important announcement. You know, listeners, we should be grateful that our City Council respects our community so much that they feel comfortable hijacking this show to carry out their arcane vendettas via the power of community radio.”

The voice is still monotone, but louder. “Yes, listeners, this is sarcasm. I know it’s hard to tell because my vocal range is legally restricted to a fundamental frequency between 220 and 246.942 Hertz. But this is not in my contract. In fact, I am going to go get my contract now and deliver a copy to the City Council through the traditional method of tying it to a large rock and throwing it through their window.”

Something slams in the background – like a door, or a drawer.

“It appears the copy of my contract I keep on file has been replaced by a package of some kind of jerky,” shouts the voice, before chewing loudly. “It may or may not be beef. It is definitely teriyaki-flavored. I hate teriyaki. I am going to station management and demanding a copy of my contract. I
may be some time. See you, Night Vale.

“See.

“*You.*”

There’s loud thudding, and something crashes in the background. The speaker emits a short, sharp squeal. Then there is silence.

The quiet is worse. It feels like there’s a vice clamped around Carlos’ chest, his heart beating faster and faster as the silence stretches on, the tension winding higher and higher until he knows he’s almost at the breaking point—

There’s a series of thumps as someone rights the microphone.

“Uh… Hello, listeners,” says a new voice, and the pressure releases immediately, leaving Carlos gasping in the dirt. The new voice is low and sonorous, with an almost dreamy quality, and it resonates in his chest like someone has replaced his heart with a tuning fork. A deep, manly tuning fork. He feels a pang of regret, because as awesome as his own voice is, it will never sound as perfect as this one.

…Wow, he is really out of it.

“This is Intern Cecil. I know this is… rather irregular, but we can’t have dead air, now can we?” Cecil gives a nervous laugh. “I’m sure Leonard will be back in a moment. He’s currently pounding on station management’s door and screaming about his contract. Everyone else has barricaded themselves in the break room, so… it looks like you’re stuck with me! Temporarily, of course. Let’s go to the – oh, dear. It seems Leonard in his rage has smashed the tape with today’s weather forecast on it. He has also hurled several computers out of the window and put his fist through the control board, so I’m not sure if we can retrieve a copy.”

Carlos manages to sit up. He wipes the blood off his face as a weird, indescribable noise filters through the radio.

“Um,” says Cecil. “Station management’s door has opened, and Leonard has disappeared inside, but it seems that they are not happy about the missing weather report. They feel it shows both a lack of professionalism and a lack of commitment to keeping the sinister intelligences – greater than man’s, and yet as mortal as his own – sated and slumbering, and I agree, listeners.”

There’s some rustling as Cecil moves around, and glass breaks in the background.

Carlos grabs his staff and uses it to push himself up from the ground. His head spins and his knees feel shaky, but he’s standing on his own two feet. He leans against the staff, catching his breath.

“That’s why I have retrieved our Emergency Banjolele,” continues Cecil, returning to the mic. “Now, I know I’m not a trained meteorologist, but I think I remember most of the forecast, so if you’ll bear with me through these unusual circumstances, listeners, I’ll recreate it for you as best I can. So let us go to… the weather.”

Cecil clears his throat.

Then he starts singing a song about hedgehogs.

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When Carlos finally stumbles back to his car, there’s a parking ticket on his windshield. He carefully folds it into a paper airplane and launches it into the sky. Then he hits it with a blast of entropic force, and it disintegrates in a flash of green light.

As he slides inside the car, the radio flicks on again. He tenses, but it’s still Cecil, who is thankfully no longer playing the banjolele.

“—And to the family of Leonard Burton – if he has a family – we offer our sincerest condolences. On a related note, we’ve cast the promotion runes but are still trying to translate them, since one of the I-Ching sticks has rolled under the radiator. So... I don’t yet know if I’ll have the chance to speak to you again, listeners. But I did want to let you know that despite the chaos, the screaming, and the banjolele: it has been my honor serving you. See you – no. Good night, Night Vale. Good night.”

The radio snaps off.

Carlos drives back to East LA in a silence that’s more or less peaceful, although the weather report does get stuck in his head.

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His death curse is pretty handy, it turns out. Yes, it’s annoying when he’s not by a set of speakers and it tries to manifest by making the nearest semi-suitable material vibrate intensely, so the broadcast sounds like a swarm of angry bees (particularly the time it was coming from a swarm of angry bees). Yes, it’s embarrassing that the directional focus of the broadcast varies wildly and half the time it looks like he’s laughing at nothing.

But the information Carlos gets in return more than makes up for the inconvenience. He’s discovered the answers to several problems that perplexed his predecessors, averted a range of local crises, and even successfully waged an anonymous letter-writing campaign from “concerned citizens” to prevent a construction company from developing land too close to the ward lines. (The wards would have been fine. The northern quarter of the town: not so much.) Cecil’s reports give him a connection to Night Vale when he’s halfway across the world on Council business and a direct line into the meat-crowned heads of Night Vale’s citizenry, which is often unpleasant but usually illuminating. But most importantly, they give Carlos advance warning for all those times when he thinks something like, "Oh, Valentine's Day can't be that bad," and he turns out to be spectacularly wrong.

Things settle down into a nice rhythm – well, not a rhythm, because Carlos makes sure to vary his schedule and never follow any kind of noticeable pattern. But in between coordinating with the other regional commanders and the Wardens under his watch, Night Vale’s master wards get renewed and repaired at least once every three weeks, the approaches through the Nevernever checked once every few months (not that there’s any way to tell how much time actually passes there), and the town itself visited on an as-needed basis, i.e. when Carlos hears about the latest disaster over the radio.

Carlos’ death curse has saved his time, his sanity, and his life on multiple occasions. He figures he’s made out pretty well, all things considered.

Plus, sometimes he just likes listening to Cecil. What can he say? The guy has a nice voice, and Carlos appreciates anyone who can calmly give concise, informative reports on the locations of a renegade gaggle of zombies (“About three hundred meters behind me to the northwest, listeners!”) while running away from them at the same time. That’s just smart journalism.
Carlos is sautéing vegetables the first time Cecil says his name. He fumbles his toss and knocks over his crutch. This sets off a Rube Goldberg-esque chain of kitchen mishaps that only ends when he almost burns his eyebrows off transferring all the heat in the immediate area, and especially from the deep fryer, into a plume of fire spiralling upwards from his hand. It looks much more dangerous but, minus any fuel except the power of Carlos’ will, is far less likely to burn down the restaurant.

His mother puts down her tray and looks at the counter, now covered in rogue food and a thick layer of frost. "How much Vicodin did you take?"

"None," says Carlos. His hip (and his lower back, and his stomach – his whole torso, really) is killing him, but it's better than sitting around and doing nothing.

"Mijo, if you're too tired to help, you can just say so," she says with a sigh. "You don't have to destroy my kitchen."

"I barely singed the ceiling!" says Carlos.

"You're a walking OSHA complaint," she says, but without heat. Much like the deep fryer.

"Minus the walking," mutters Carlos. "I'll leave before the dinner rush, okay?" She pats him on his good arm and disappears with a loaded tray of food.

One of the new line cooks is gaping at him. Carlos musters up a grin from somewhere, then winks and says, “You should see my card tricks,” before beginning to clean up the mess he’s made.

“He grinned, and everything about him was perfect,” says Cecil, and Carlos gets a strange feeling in the pit of his stomach, like someone accidentally dropped their watch in there during his last surgery. “And I fell in love instantly.”

Carlos, thinks Carlos (chipping peppers off the counter with slightly more force than necessary), sounds like a real jerk.

~*~*~*~

Several months later, nothing Carlos (the scientist) has done has managed to disabuse Carlos (the wizard) of that opinion. Part of the problem isn’t technically the scientist’s fault, since presumably one of his parents or guardians was responsible for giving him the same name and thus causing the distraction of his more awesome peers whenever Cecil mentions him.

Which is often.

(Too often.)

That, however, is not a distinction Carlos (original flavor) is willing to make while delirious from fever, pain, and medication, which means his recovery from the next round of surgery, the next round of MRSA, and the next round of emergency surgery is filled with a lot of disjointed raving at a
radio broadcast only he can hear and a lot of alarmed concern from his caretakers.

(Sometimes he gets confused and thinks that Cecil's talking to him. It's probably a coincidence that he sleeps better afterwards.)

By the middle of November, New Coke Carlos has received a terrible haircut which totally serves him right, and Carlos Optimus Maximus is finally allowed to get out of bed and wander around the house unsupervised, as if he hasn't been doing PT for almost two weeks already under his sister's watchful eye. It's not like he's going to blow out any more joints or lose any more internal organs while making himself a sandwich.

Carlos is exercising his newfound freedom by sitting in a recliner and doing paperwork, instead of sitting in bed propped up by pillows and doing paperwork. He will never tell Dani in a million years that between taking his first shower without help in what feels like months, walking downstairs to get lunch, and walking back upstairs to sit down, he's already tired.

The doctors think this last operation really is the last, and Carlos desperately hopes they're right. He tries not to think about how long it's been since he was fit for active duty. It's not like he hasn't been pulling some weight; he volunteered for a desk job as soon as he could put enough thoughts together to mimic reading comprehension and hold a Sharpie. (He had gotten out of the habit of using pens and pencils after a couple memorable incidents his first year monitoring Night Vale. He never dreamed that would turn out to be a perfectly justified precautionary measure. The last few years have really sucked.) Coordinating their remaining forces and maintaining a clear line of communication from Edinburgh is critical, and rushing his recovery is both stupid and dangerous for everyone. But reading all the reports of Warden activity – and Warden injuries, and Warden casualties – makes him keenly aware how thinly stretched they still are; how helpless he is on his own turf.

On the West Coast alone they've lost Seattle and San Francisco to the Fomor. LA is technically under their control as well, but the White Court objected strongly to losing their favorite playground and responded by turning everything west of the Los Angeles River into the most subtle and best-dressed war zone the world has never seen.

Carlos also tries not to think about how the only reason he still has a home is because the evil shape-shifting sea monster hybrids were so busy fighting the sexy vampires for Hollywood that his two-hundred-and-fifty-year-old bisabuela was able to reclaim East LA by herself while he was still in his first medically-induced coma.

The radio plays softly in the background. Apparently, Night Vale is under siege by malevolent gluten. That does sort of help put things in perspective: Carlos may have gotten himself knocked out of commission somewhat less gloriously than usual, but at least it wasn't during a fight with wheat. Or its by-products.

Two of the reports on the end table next to him are from Luccio herself, and they both say the same thing: the master wards around the town are holding stable. But Carlos can't shake the feeling that while they haven't required more repairs than usual, they've required them more frequently. Some of the stuff on Cecil's show has been unusually worrying, too: underground cities beneath the bowling alley are one thing, but rifts in the space/time continuum appearing in the rec center and spitting out pterosaurs are an entirely different kettle of fish, one that violates the Laws of Magic if it's an intentional result and not just more of the town's random fuckery. (He's still annoyed that he was undergoing reconstructive hip surgery while that happened, and not because he missed a chance to scope out some real live pterodactyls.) (Well, not only.)

In the meantime... there's nothing he can do about it. He's already compiling data from the last couple
months, looking for trends, but nothing's conclusive yet. If anything goes seriously wrong, Luccio will handle it herself and tell him about it later. He's not going to worry that the Captain of the Wardens isn’t doing as good a job as he could.

…Cecil’s saying his name again.

Cecil is sounding a lot more animated on the radio, Carlos has noticed. For years, he used the same soft, almost affectless tone – not as bad as Leonard Burton’s, of course, but still deliberately neutral. He tries to ignore how Cecil’s growing emotionality seems to have coincided with the arrival of the other Carlos, because he may not have some fancy science degree but even he knows that correlation does not equal causation. The two are most likely unrelated.

Almost certainly.

Probably.

“I asked him where he got his shirt. It fit him so well,” says Cecil. “He said he would look at his notes and computer models and see if he could figure out what was going on.”

He feels the house's wards part briefly, and a door slams downstairs: Dani’s back from her shift at the clinic.

“I don't know if he listens to me, sometimes,” says Cecil sadly.

“You can do so much better,” says Carlos, rubbing his forehead.

“What?” shouts Dani. “Are you still alive?”

“I’m fine!” Carlos shouts back. He winces and puts a hand to his barely-healed scars.

“Don’t shout!” shouts Dani. Carlos doesn’t respond, because he is a mature adult and not at all because his stomach muscles are twinging.

He finishes double-checking the duty lists for the Pacific Northwest and (carefully) stretches his arms out above his head before picking up his favorite form.

(It’s a sign of the times that Carlos now has a favorite form.)

He grins to see Yoshimo’s name at the top of the Return to Active Service roster. It may have been inconvenient that she was off-duty with a sprained ankle, but the fact that she had sprained it by tripping over a cat and falling down the stairs was pretty hilarious.

He skims the rest of the list and almost misses it: the last name, just an innocuous note right at the end, impossible and inexplicable and infuriating.

He reads it again. It’s still there.

Carlos doesn’t even realize he’s started swearing until Dani bursts into the room. “Carlito! Are you okay? What’s wrong?”

“That fucking asshole!” shouts Carlos. “Ow!” He waves the paper at Dani.

“Stop shouting,” says Dani, snatching the paper from him. “If you tear anything open, I’m pulling out your remaining intestines with my hands.” She reads the list. Carlos sees her blink as she gets to the last name.
“Harry Dresden?” she says. “I thought he was dead!”

“So did I,” grits Carlos.

“Calm down,” says Dani. "He’s your… friend, right? Isn't this a good thing?"

“It’s a wonderful, beautiful miracle,” says Carlos, “That I discovered while filling out week-old paperwork!”

“Calm down, or I am going to sedate you,” says Dani in her scary big sister tone.

Carlos snaps his mouth shut and glares at her. She crosses her arms and raises an eyebrow.

“I’m not four years old anymore,” he says.

“Then you should be capable of acting like a responsible adult and listening to your nurse’s advice.”

“Fine,” snarls Carlos. He holds his hand out, and Dani returns the roster. He smoothes it out and places it back in its folder. They both stare at it for a moment, like it too is going to start spouting off sarcastic remarks and rise from the dead.

“What are you going to do?” Dani asks finally.

Carlos slumps back in the recliner. “It’s already been approved by Captain Luccio and the Senior Council, so it’s probably legit. Somehow. I can call the BFS in Chicago to double-check; they would definitely know.” He thinks of something and brightens. “Maybe I’ll ask Karrin Murphy to punch him in the face for me.”

Dani rolls her eyes. “Very mature,” she says. “You were doing so well, too.”

“I’m mature as hell,” says Carlos. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have a call to make, and then I’m going to take my nap.”

Dani snorts, but she helps him out of the chair.

Later, as he lies in his bed, trying to ignore the sun peeking around the edges of the blinds, his ancient clock radio turns on with a gentle click. Cecil’s show is wrapping up for the night, and that’s another thing – Night Vale has never exactly run on military time, but the discrepancies have never been this bad before.

It’s the middle of the afternoon and his mind feels like a hive of bees, but he’s exhausted and sore, and when Cecil ends the broadcast with, “Good night, Night Vale. Good night,” Carlos falls asleep almost immediately.

~*~*~*~

The radio snaps on as soon as Carlos takes the exit for Route 800, just in time for Cecil to announce that a sandstorm is on its way.

"Crud," mutters Carlos. He hasn't been back to Night Vale since Valentine's Day (which was as horrifying and unromantic as ever). In the past, that wouldn't have been a problem, but the condition of the wards has been slowly but steadily declining. Luccio was here only two weeks ago and said they were as bad as she's ever seen them. Carlos will have to take her word for it: he was gone so long the sequences have evolved almost beyond recognition, and it takes him as much time just to recognize which spells are in danger as it does to actually fix them. Today is the first chance he's had
since his recovery to actually crack down and find out what the hell is going on, and that's not going to be made any easier by the universe literally kicking sand in his face.

He briefly considers waiting the storm out, renewing the wards and conducting his investigation tomorrow. But his most comfortable bolt-hole was by the pizza place, and someone with stupid hair has selfishly repossessed it from perfectly honest squatters.

Also, he's kind of concerned about the town spontaneously combusting and sinking beneath the earth, never to be seen again. He really does not want to push the wards more than he has to.

Carlos pulls off the highway. There's a dark smudge on the horizon; it grows larger as he hikes out to the ward stones. Carlos can feel a strange tension to the air, which isn't helped by the sound of the wind moaning through crevasses in the standing stones and echoing warnings about baby raccoons. He stabs his sword into the anvil and summons the ward interface.

A thin circle appears, with only the sketchy outlines of a few dozen five-pointed stars and a scattering of loops and cross-hatchings. For a second Carlos thinks it's just taking longer to manifest than usual.

As he watches, one of the lines blinks out, then another, and to his horror he realizes that this is all that's left of the wards.

They're being destroyed.

For one terrible second he's tempted to let it happen: when the last ward falls, so will Night Vale, and Carlos would be quit of its burden forever, free to devote all his efforts to fighting the Fomor, the White Court, the Black Council...

But there are also thousands of innocent people and things down there with the not-so-innocent people and things, even if they do all ignore the KEEP OUT signs. Carlos is better than that, and he's put way too much effort into keeping this stupid place in its equilibrium of chaos, and he is not going to let whatever frighteningly powerful crazy asshole is doing this destroy everything.

Carlos has a duty: if he's going to run, it's going to be directly towards danger.

He draws a circle around him in the dirt and sits down cross-legged. He digs around in one of his belt-pouches and pulls out a bloodstone, then unsheathes the knife strapped to his left arm.

Touching the bloodstone makes his blood crawl. He makes a shallow cut across his left palm and places the bloodstone on top of it, closing his fingers and squeezing. He shuts his eyes and begins to chant.

The stone starts to vibrate, not unpleasantly. It lets out a creaky groan in counterpoint to Carlos' chant; its light pulses through his eyelids. Carlos finishes the chant, opens his eyes, and leans forward to break the circle.

A stray gust of wind does it for him and he almost loses control of the spell, the power tightly wound within him threatening to burst out in one glorious and deadly rush. But he grits his teeth and braces his mind against the magic's roiling surge until he can sense the channels waiting to receive it. He lets go, and the power floods through him like the tide. It funnels through the bloodstone he's holding, drawn on to its siblings in the thousands of circles all over town.

The interface shines a sullen red as the emergency wards begin to appear in unpleasant and twisted patterns of rusty light. The bloodstone in his hand has gone dark.
Carlos gets to his feet slowly. The emergency wards won't last for long: he needs to find whatever is overwhelming the town's primary defenses and destroy it. He bandages his hand and pulls on his *pakal* glove; he's got the feeling he's going to need his shield before the day is out.

He tries not to think about how much the wind has picked up.

~*_*_~

It's barely afternoon, but the sky is almost dark when he pulls into town. The car's engine sputters and dies before he can turn it off, and he has to lean most of his weight against his door to get it shut in the wind.

He digs a spare shirt and ballistics goggles out of his trunk, and nearly jumps out of his skin when someone says behind him, “The time is out of joint.”

He spins around. There's a woman and a well-wrapped baby carrier sitting on a wooden platform jammed between the massive limbs of an ancient cactus. He hasn't pulled his hood up yet, damn.

“Excuse me?”

“O curséd spite, that ever I was born to set it right!” she continues. *Hamlet*, Act 1, Scene 5.

“Uh, thanks,” says Carlos. Her name is Cactus June, he thinks. Or maybe Cactus Judy. All he knows about her is that she's the third-most beautiful woman in Night Vale, sits on a cactus, and, apparently, likes Shakespeare. “You should probably get inside,” he says, slamming the trunk shut. “The storm is supposed to be pretty bad.”

She nods and says, “Beware the Ides of March.”

*Julius Caesar*, right?” says Carlos. She winks at him.

He walks casually down the block and pulls up his hood as soon as he turns the corner. There's a handful of people hurrying toward him – toward their homes, hopefully – but they give his hood a wide berth. He steps off the sidewalk, centers himself, and reaches out his senses.

The storm wards feel quiet – whoever's attacking the master wards, they must have a bloodstone connection. Or maybe the sandstorm rumbling ever closer is causing too much interference. He keeps sensing an odd echo and catching glimpses of *something* out of the corner of his eye, though he doesn't think it's got the magical juice to wipe out a construct as powerful as the master wards.

A woman darts past him with her head down; her cell phone lets out a harsh squeal. She fumbles it with a curse and nearly drops it. Cecil says, over the speaker, “They come in twos. *You* come in twos. You and you. *Kill your double.*”

There's a huge gust of wind, laden with dark sand. Carlos throws a hand in front of his face. When he lowers it, there's two people standing in front of him, the woman and an identical copy, facing each other. They stare at one another, puzzled; they both look down at their identical phones. Each device fizzes and sparks.

One woman puts the phone in her pocket. The other throws it at her double's face and dives for her throat.

"No, wait!” shouts Carlos, running forward. The women are rolling in the street, clawing at each other, drawing blood—
There's another gust of wind. Carlos feels sand sting his face for just a second, but then the sensation is gone, leaving only a faint tingling, like he's been freshly shaved.

He blinks sand out of his eyes and sees himself.

Carlos' first thought is that he really needs to put some weight back on: his face looks gaunt and all his gear looks several sizes too big. His second thought is that something looks subtly off, until he realizes that he's used to seeing himself reversed in the mirror.

His third thought is, *Damn, I'm still a handsome devil.*

He feels the pull of an incipient soulgaze, and wait, how does *that* work?

His double jerks his eyes away. On instinct, Carlos shouts "*Yax!*", focusing power into his glove. Its armored plates rattle harshly as his shield springs up – just in time to intercept a splatter of green entropic fire.

There's a moment where they're both staring at each other again, this time in shock.

"What the hell, man?" says Carlos.

His double shakes himself, lowers his still-upraised hand, and says, "*Dios.* You don't understand, do you?"

"Understand what?" says Carlos.

"This is it," says his double. He sounds almost desperate. "*Dios,* this is *it.* How can you live like this?"

Carlos has no idea what the hell he's talking about. "Look, this doesn't have to end badly—"

"I'm sorry," says his double, and then he's shouting "*Koj lum!*" and ramming his staff into the ground.

Carlos dives out of the way, dropping his shield and cursing. The ground erupts where he was standing and showers him in flying dirt. He rolls to his feet just in time to see his double disappear around the corner.

Carlos takes off after him.

~*~*~*~*~

There's something very wrong with Night Vale.

Well, there's always something very wrong with Night Vale, but now there's something much more very wrong. Obviously it's not enough that something is attacking the wards, it has to happen in the middle of a sandstorm full of killer doppelgangers.

Carlos has been sensing flares of magic all over town. By the time he tracks them down, there's only a few faint traces muddled by the unnatural wind, but he can still feel the cold discordant taint of dark magic.

Carlos adjusts the shirt he has wound around his head as sand stings his cheek. He suppresses a coughing fit and squints into the gloom through scratched goggles. His double is still out there somewhere. They've found and lost each other in the storm several times now, but all Carlos has learned is that the other guy appears to be having an existential crisis that can only be solved by
murdering the hell out of Carlos. He’s not sure how that's supposed to help (especially since his
double also appears to know that the town they are running around in is about two dozen wobbly
sigils away from self-destruction, which you’d think would kick off the biggest existential crisis of
them all), but then again, Carlos is not an unnatural disaster-spawned clone permanently stuck in
Most Dangerous Game Night mode.

At first he thinks the strange hum is the wind picking up, but then he feels a massive rush of energy:
an impossibly huge spell building to the west, its greasy touch dissonant in his mind. The smart thing
would be to get the hell out of there, find Luccio, and return with back-up. Or not at all – the last
bloodstone circle he came across pulsed fitfully, barely hanging onto its connection with its brethren.
He's running out of time.

Carlos heads towards the source of the magic.

He passes a row of shops. Static blasts from the fake rocks that normally spew elevator music, and he
can only catch a few words of Cecil, still reporting from the safety of the radio station.

—vortex—

—beautiful—

—beyond—

Carlos stops in front of the Play Ball. The surge of magic has levelled off, and he thinks the wind
might be dying down. He's suddenly not sure if that's a good thing.

There's a noise behind him. He turns, raising his shield, which is when someone jumps on his
unprotected back and tries to strangle him.

His attacker is screaming in his ear; Carlos is cursing himself for falling for such an obvious trick and
trying to pry off the arm around his throat. He lunges like he's about to dive into a somersault and the
momentum carries the person on his back forward over his head. Gasping, he flings a handful of
green light as his attacker rolls to their feet.

The entropic force disintegrates against a familiar shield.

Carlos stares at his double, who glares back at him. He looks awful. His cloak is gone and he's
dropped his staff; his face is twisted into an anguished rictus, the distortion from his shield making it
look even more monstrous.

"How could you just give up?" his double screams.

There's another blast of wind, and Carlos hisses as sand stings the back of his neck. He's lost his
cloak, too; it's lying at his double's feet. He raises his staff.

There's a loud, metallic noise. They both turn.

A solid stream of water slams into his double's shield, knocking him to the ground. He drops the
shield as another wave crashes over him, and just… disintegrates.

Carlos instinctively throws up his own shield and braces for impact. But it's the earth beneath his feet
that betrays him, heaving upwards and hurling him back: right into a swirling, grasping maelstrom of
dark magic that blooms directly behind him.

~*~*~*~
He's moving quickly and not at all; everything is dark, but golden light flashes all around him; nothing is touching him but something is tearing out of him, unraveling, disappearing into the vortex as he is inexorably pulled away.

~*~*~*~

A flare of midnight blue surrounds him, and all at once he’s flying free. He catches a glimpse of sun – sky – sand – and crashes into something large and white. He hits back first and upside down, but does at least manage to roll forward off his shoulder instead of falling on his head.

He sprawls on the ground, stunned. He thinks he heard a scream, but now there's only a faint buzzing.

With a great deal of effort, Carlos pushes his goggles up and lifts his head. There’s no immediate threat that he can see. He’s lying on the shoulder of the road next to a white van with a dented side panel. The town is gone, replaced by empty desert. The sandstorm is gone. The vortex is gone, and there's no sign of his double.

He puts his head back down and groans. All of him hurts, and even through multiple layers the road is too hot to lie on. He gropes for his staff, on the ground by his left hand.

He hears footsteps.

Carlos leaps to his feet. Miraculously, he actually makes it more or less upright, staff thrust forward, although he staggers sideways and ends up propped against the dented panel.

“Whoa,” says the woman who just walked around the front of the van. She instinctively puts her hands in the air.

“Where am I?” demands Carlos, as he pushes himself fully vertical.

“Route – what the hell did you do to my van?” she says.

Carlos squints at her, and she points indignantly at said van.

The dent is Carlos-shaped, more or less.

“Sorry,” says Carlos. “That was me.”

“That was—” The woman puts her hands on her hips. “We were stopped. Where did you even come from? And what was that light?”

Carlos tries to think of a plausible explanation, but his head is spinning and he kind of wants to puke.

“I think I was violently ejected from a rift in the fabric of reality,” he says.

The woman looks at the empty desert surrounding them, then says, “Really. Would you describe it as more of a Schwarzchild or Morris-Thorne wormhole?”

Carlos blinks at her.

“Never mind,” says the woman.

Carlos jerks away as someone inside the van raps urgently on the window next to his head and calls, "Gary's bees are getting angry!"

"The refrigerant has its own power source, Wei. Shut down the rest of the equipment down before it
overheats and get out here – you, too, Andre," says the woman. She turns back to Carlos. “All right, mouthbreather, I hope you have insurance.”

“Hey, I’m a pedestrian,” says Carlos.

A man pokes his head around the front of the van. The sun gleams off the top of his shaved head and he’s leaning on a cane. “We hit someone?”

“We were stopped!” says the woman in exasperation. “He hit us!”

“Wait, why are you stopped?” says Carlos. “Where are we?”

“We’re at the fifty-mile-marker on Route 800,” says the man. “There’s something wrong with the engine.”

“The fifty-mile-marker – are we in Night Vale?” says Carlos.

The man looks at his phone. He frowns, shakes it a few times, and taps the screen. “Yep. Looks like we’re officially inside the city limits.”

“You need to leave,” says Carlos. “Right now.”

“Hold up there, Donatello,” says the woman. “You can’t just run into our van, cause several hundred dollars worth of damage—”

“I think the dent should actually pop out,” says the man.

“—And start threatening us.”

“You don’t understand,” says Carlos. “I’m not trying to threaten you. This place is dangerous.”

“Uh huh,” says the woman. “Well, we’ll just have to deal, because I’m not about to just pick up our equipment and our team and our bees and move. Do you have any idea how much of a pain it was to get out here in the first place?”

“You wanted to come here?” asks Carlos.

“Turns out field research takes place in the field, who knew,” she says. “So either pony up for the van or move along, buddy. I’m calling the police in about three seconds.”

“Dr. Kwan!” someone calls. Both Carlos and the woman turn. There are two more people coming towards them, a guy and a girl. They look a couple years younger than Carlos.

They’re walking directly across the Scrublands, and the ground behind them is moving.

“Get back on the road!” he shouts, running towards them.

“Get away from them!” shouts Dr. Kwan, close behind him.

The kids freeze, then bolt. Away from the road.

Carlos curses, but at least they’re not in the way anymore. He stops abruptly, screams “Koj lum!” and swings his staff down.

Its glyphs light up as it hits the ground and releases a pulse of energy. The equal and opposite reaction sends Carlos skidding backwards; it would have knocked him off his feet if he wasn’t braced
for it. A wave of earth races forward, cracking the dry ground.

Jagged points of rock erupt in a cloud of dust not quite large enough to obscure the enormous sand worm he just rudely unearthed.

Dr. Kwan lurches to a halt besides him and gasps, “What the—”

The sand worm rears its head back. “Get down!” bellows Carlos, and this time she listens, dropping to the ground as he thrusts his gloved hand out and shouts “Yax!”

His *pakal* glove buzzes and throws up a cloud of viscous emerald light just as the sand worm spits a stream of acid directly towards them. Carlos yanks his goggles down and tries to angle the shield as much as he can. That's the problem with semi-permeable shields: they're great for disintegrating projectiles but terrible at containing hazardous substances.

He flinches as a few drops of burning liquid hit his cheek, but most of the acid vaporizes into a puff of orange smoke that’s immediately carried away by the wind.

As soon as the sand worm has exhausted its reserves, Carlos drops his shield and hits it with all the entropic force he can muster. Which isn't much, but the worm’s head disintegrates in a blast of green light.

What's left flops to the ground. Its skin shrivels in the direct sunlight, and after a moment, there’s nothing left but a mound of dark, shimmering dust in a pile of rocks.

Carlos turns around. The kids are huddling together about twenty feet to his left; the person in the van has his wide-eyed face pressed against the window, and the man with shaved head is staring at him, jaw dropped. Dr. Kwan is climbing to her feet, pale and shaky.

She looks at the mound of dust, then back at Carlos, and asks, "What – what was that?"

“Sand worm,” says Carlos, pushing his goggles up his forehead.

"Sand worm," she repeats, her voice wobbling slightly. "Where did it come from?"

“No idea,” says Carlos. “Normally they only migrate every seven years, and we had them at the end of last spring.”

A tumbleweed bounces past as the wind kicks up; the shimmering dust scatters across the desert.

“You – you – how did you do that?” demands Dr. Kwan.

“Magic,” says Carlos.

“You're joking,” she says.

Carlos shrugs. “Okay,” he says, and starts to walk away.

“Wait!” she says, grabbing his sleeve. She is either very brave or very stupid. “What if there are more of those things out there?”

“Then don’t wander across the Scrublands,” says Carlos. He tugs his arm away from her, but changes his course towards the kids, still crouching on the ground and clutching each other.

“Our monitoring station is less than a mile away,” says Dr. Kwan, pointing southward to a series of low hills. “Is it safe from those thi– the sand worms?”
“Probably, although the acid is hell on adobe,” says Carlos. “Go in a group of five or more, and the lone worms will avoid you.”

“What if they’re not alone?”

“Then I recommend you avoid them,” says Carlos. They’ve reached the kids. “Alright, guys, you had your fun. Back to the van.”

They both shy away from his proffered hand, scrambling to their feet and clustering around Dr. Kwan instead.

“What was that?” asks the girl, her dark eyes almost impossibly wide

“Sand worm, Kate,” says Dr. Kwan. She shoots Carlos an indecipherable glance. “It must be the very end of their migration period.”

“…Oh,” says Kate.

"But giant worms can't – I don't – they shouldn't even exist!” says the guy.

"Sand worms," Carlos corrects helpfully. "Giant worms are bigger and more devious. Now back to the road." He makes a shooing motion. “Stay on the shoulder and you should be fine. They don’t like the vibrations from traffic.”

“What traffic?” mutters Dr. Kwan.

“Are you a magician?” blurts the guy.

“Hell no,” says Carlos. “Did those look like tricks to you?”

The guy blanches. Dr. Kwan slaps him on the back. "Fear is the mind-killer, Gary," she says. "Walk without rhythm, double-time."

Kate's holding her arm close to her body; when they get back to the van, the man with the shaved head frowns and asks, “Kate, are you alright?"

“I think it’s just a twist, Dr. Timmons,” she says. “Gary tripped me.”

“Sorry,” mutters Gary.

Someone else climbs out of the van – Wei, Carlos guesses – and offers her a first aid kit, but it doesn’t have much in it beyond a few bandages.

“There’s a clinic in town,” says Carlos. “I wouldn't recommend the ER.”

“How well do you know this place?” asks Dr. Kwan.

Carlos looks up. The sun is almost directly overhead, and now there’s barely a breeze. It’s like the sandstorm lasted only five minutes and then never existed.

“Less every day,” he sighs.

Dr. Kwan frowns. “Do you—”

Something flickers in the corner of his eye. He flings his left arm out, sweeping Dr. Kwan back, and with his right he draws his sword and slices it upward in one smooth movement.
The second sand worm’s head crashes at Dr. Kwan’s feet.

There’s dead silence. Then one of the kids starts crying – Gary, Carlos thinks – and Dr. Timmons says, “Where did that even come from?”

Dr. Kwan looks up slowly. “…Thanks,” she says.

“De nada,” says Carlos. “Oh, hell.”

A blue helicopter is approaching. It circles over them once and starts to touch down just up the road.

“Who are they?” says Dr. Kwan sharply.

“Sheriff’s Secret Police,” says Carlos.

"Come again?"

"The Sheriff’s Secret Police," repeats Carlos, and dammit, they’ve got to have a headcount by now. He barely has the energy to stand up, much less run or create a decent veil to hide behind. He’ll have to bluff them out.

He drops his staff and nudges it under the van with his foot. Two figures in balaclavas climb out of the chopper, their capes whipping in the downdraft. As the rotors slow, Carlos can hear music. Apparently this patrol unit really digs today’s Top 40 hits.

Dr. Kwan lifts her chin and says, “Hello, officers,” when they get within speaking distance.

“Car trouble?” asks one of them. The other has taken out their phone and is tapping at it intently.

“Yes, our engine stalled,” says Dr. Kwan.

"Sand worm trouble?"

"Nothing a little decapitation couldn't solve," says Carlos, gesturing with his sword.

"Well, sure," begins the officer. Carlos's goggles are starting to slide down; he pulls them off his head and sticks them in his back pocket. He suppresses a grimace as sand falls out his hair and down his shirt. "But we use machetes 'round... here..."

The officer stares at him intently. Carlos offers a bland smile and tightens his grip on the hilt of his sword.

"Of course, uh. That's just what we recommend in our self-defense classes. Old Woman Josie swears by her sabre," says the officer. With an obvious effort, they tear their eyes away from Carlos to look at Dr. Kwan and Dr. Timmons. “Don’t think I’ve seen you folks before.” It’s more of a statement than a question, but not quite as ominous as it could be.

“We’re from the university,” says Dr. Kwan. When the officer doesn't do anything besides give Carlos another surreptitious once-over, she continues, “We’re the research team here to investigate the irregularities in local seismic and electromagnetic activity?"

The officer’s balaclava furrows.

“Scientists,” says Carlos, and oh shit.

He takes stock of the situation:
1) There is no sandstorm.

2) The sun is considerably higher in the sky than it should be.

3) The sand worm migration is either six years early or one year late.

4) Today, scientists have arrived in Night Vale.

5) “Somebody That I Used to Know” just finished blaring from the chopper, only to be followed by “Call Me Maybe”.

…Fuck.

“Fuck!” says the other officer, still staring at their phone. “I can only connect to a G or an H, and all I’ve got is a U, an S, three Ys, and a Z.”

It’s that Scrabble game, the one Nita likes. “Syzygy,” says Carlos absently. He runs his hand through his hair, dislodging more sand, and tries to quash the panic welling up inside him, because he’s been shoved into a vortex through the Currents of Time themselves and he has no idea who’s behind it and he’s a wanted man talking to the police and he doesn’t even have his cloak to hide under because it got left behind in next March.

“Thanks,” says the officer with the phone, and does a double-take. “I mean – thank **you**. So… you’re a scientist, too?”

Carlos looks around. The scientists are wearing business casual, button-downs, wrinkled khakis, college t-shirts; they have pens and styluses sticking out of their pockets, behind their ears, through their hair.

He’s wearing slightly charred fatigues and still holding a grime-spattered sword.

He gives the officers his best cocky grin.

“Yes, I definitely am,” he says.

Chapter End Notes

For your viewing pleasure: DEEP HURTING, DEEEEEEEP HUUURTINNNNG!

Thanks for all the lovely comments!

I've updated the warnings/content notes, so please double-check them if that's how you roll.
Carlos leaves the officers discussing permits with Dr. Kwan and approaches Dr. Timmons.

“Hey,” he asks quietly. “Can I borrow a lab coat?” The officers keep stealing glances at him. He tries a smile and a nod, and they look away hurriedly.

“Uh,” says Dr. Timmons. “Sure? I believe I just threw mine in here—”

They casually walk around to the side of the van Carlos didn’t dent. He stoops and retrieves his staff. Dr. Timmons leans his cane against the side of the van and opens the front passenger-side door.

While he’s rummaging around, Carlos inspects his sword. The last of the worm blood is finally evaporating away; he’ll have to polish it later, but it’s clean enough for now. He sheathes it, then takes off his pakal glove and tucks it through his belt. The bandages around his left hand don't look very scientific, but it's not like the rest of him does, either.

“Aha!” says Dr. Timmons. He shakes out a white coat.

“Let’s trade,” says Carlos, holding out his staff. Dr. Timmons eyes it warily.

“It won’t do anything without me,” says Carlos.

"Then why can't you hold it?" asks Dr. Timmons.

"I'm already a little well-armed for a scientist," says Carlos. He decides to leave out the part where it's featured on his Wanted poster in the Post Office. "Nobody will notice if you carry it, and I don't want to lose track of it."

"It's not very scientific," says Dr. Timmons.

"If anyone asks, you can say it's Mesoamerican folk art," says Carlos.

Dr. Timmons sighs. "I guess we do owe you one for the sand worms," he says. "You have to take it back when we arrive at the lab, though."

"Deal," says Carlos. They shake on it. Dr. Timmons reluctantly takes the staff and Carlos pulls on the lab coat. It’s a little tight in the arms and kind of long, but otherwise it fits all right.

There’s a pair of reading glasses in the pocket. Carlos puts them on.

“What—”

Carlos holds a finger up to his lips. He saunters back to Dr. Kwan, who has already started arguing with the police.

“There’s not a problem, is there?” says Carlos. “I’m sure the doctor filed all the appropriate forms.”

“Oh, no, of course not!” says the officer without the phone, flustered. “It’s just… we’ll need to collect all your writing implements before you can enter the town. They’re a public safety hazard.”
“But—”

“Of course,” says Carlos, plucking the pen from behind Dr. Kwan’s ear.

“Hey!”

“I know, they get everywhere,” he says. The officer with the phone holds out an evidence bag and he drops it in. He turns back to the group.

“All right, everyone, double-check to make sure that no unwanted pens or pencils have hitched a ride with us.”

Wei asks Kate a question in a low voice. She says something back to him in Mandarin and digs through her purse, pulling out two ballpoints as he takes a mechanical pencil from his pocket. Dr. Timmons unclips a very nice pen from his pocket protector, unscrews it, and removes the ink cartridge. He holds it up inquisitively. The two officers consult each other, and then one scans it with their phone. The screen flashes green, and they nod. Dr. Timmons drops the ink in the bag and puts the empty pen back in his pocket.

“What is **going on**?” Dr. Kwan hisses in Carlos’ ear.

“**Their laws are idiosyncratic and sometimes just plain idiotic, but they take them very seriously,**” whispers Carlos. “Do you really want to piss off a group that calls themselves ‘The Sheriff’s Secret Police’?”

"Yes, but pens? What could you possibly do with a pen?"

"Poison the ink and make the user more susceptible to mind control," Carlos hisses back.

“Well, that seems to be in order,” says one of the officers, before Dr. Kwan can reply.

“Yep,” says the other.

One scratches the back of their balaclava.

The other rubs their foot along the back of their calf.

“Soooo… we were wondering…” says the first officer.

“**Would you maybe like a ride into town?**” says the other hopefully. They’re both looking at Carlos.

“**That’s very kind of you—**” he begins.

“We can’t leave the van,” says Dr. Kwan, alarmed. "It's got all our equipment."

"And all our bees!” says Gary.

“**Oh! That’s not a problem,**” says one of the officers. “**We’ll just call for back-up, and the tow-truck can stop by once they get that semi out of the tar pit.**”

“What do you think?” Carlos asks Dr. Kwan. She shrugs.

“That sounds great,” he says, smiling at the officers. He swears that one of them starts to blush.

“Thanks.”

Half an hour later, three more helicopters have landed, the tow-truck has arrived, and the police are
having a quiet but vicious fight over which one of them gets to take Carlos. He is politely pretending not to listen. He is also politely pretending he doesn't want to start grabbing people by the collar and demanding to know what the hell is going on.

“What’s today’s date?” he asks Dr. Kwan.

“June 15,” she says.

“Right,” says Carlos. “Gracias. What year?”


“Ha ha,” says Carlos. "Do you know anyone named Carlos?"

"My dentist," she says. "Why?"

"Just checking on something," he says. Dr. Kwan gives him an annoyed look. He suppresses the urge to start giggling hysterically, because he'd been hoping that maybe this was all a mistake, that he really hadn't gone back in time and that a real scientist named Carlos was going to show up at any minute, but it's not, and he totally missed the opportunity to say, "Come with me if you want to live."

Two of the officers break off from the huddle, triumphantly, and gesture for Carlos to get on their helicopter. He thinks it’s the original two officers, but he’s not quite sure.

The ride into town is laughably short. Dr. Kwan speaks briefly with the pilots, then watches him suspiciously the whole way, tightly clutching a box of equipment. Carlos doesn't think that seems very fair; it's not like she even knows about wizards and their bad track record with technology, especially the fancy components that stabilize flight and spin rotors and generally keep helicopters from succumbing to gravity.

They touch down by the pizza place, and of course.

Carlos had a safe-house in Night Vale for years. Well, it wasn't really a house, more like a basement, but it was safe. He checked the town records and picked the building closest to one of the ward foci with the fewest violent incidents. Did a couple exorcisms, raised some wards of his own – it wasn't fancy, but it was his. It had all the amenities of home, like a metric ton of canned food and bottled water, basic magical supplies, and extra grenades.

So he had been pretty pissed off when he'd heard reports of people moving into the building. But now he's here with the people and helping them move in and... his head is starting to spin again.

Carlos pinches the bridge of his nose and does a headcount; all five scientists/scientists-in-training are present and accounted for. The tow truck pulls up with the van behind it, and Dr. Kwan dashes over to supervise its unloading. He sees Dr. Timmons surreptitiously swap the staff for his cane.

He turns to their pilots. “Thanks, guys,” he says.

“Oh, anytime,” says one of them.

“Let us know if you need us to show you around town,” says the other.

“Don’t be a stranger,” says the first. “Really – strangers aren’t welcome here.”

“Keep in touch,” says the second. “I mean, we’ll be monitoring you anyway, but it’s nice when someone makes an effort, you know?”
Carlos smiles at them and makes non-committal noises until they finally leave. The rest of the helicopters take off as well, though one circles the building forlornly a few times before following suit.

There’s a small crowd of people gathering – customers from Big Rico's next store and a growing number of curious pedestrians. They glance now and then at the grad students (Kate has a crate marked ‘DANGER!’ under one arm, and Gary and Wei are shuffling around the back of the building with a giant buzzing refrigerator box) but mainly they’re staring at Carlos.

He gives them a weak wave.

Someone points a tentative finger at him and says, "I-interloper?" but is shushed almost immediately. The crowd's eyes follow him as he walks over to the van, where Dr. Kwan is unloading clinking crates and cardboard boxes.

“Can we give you a hand with anything?” someone calls out.

Carlos looks at Dr. Kwan.

“Nothing in the lab,” she says. “Safety regulations. But I should probably feed the grad students. If anyone knows a good place to eat—”

“Oh, you should go to Big Ricos’s!” says someone. “Get your weekly slices in!”

“We’ll pick you up a couple pies!” someone else shouts, and there’s a minor stampede to the door.

Dr. Kwan frowns. “What did you do to them?”

“Do to who?”

She nods towards the mass of interested bystanders huddled around the entrance of the restaurant. “The police. The crowd. They’re watching you like you’re a fully-funded research position with a personal lab and assistants to teach all your classes.”

“I didn’t do anything,” says Carlos.

Dr. Kwan snorts. “Sure, okay.”


“The Laws of Magic,” says Dr. Kwan. She sounds skeptical, but curious. “Are those like the laws of physics, or more along the lines of the Ten Commandments?”

“More like Texan legislature,” says Carlos.

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that breaking them is punishable by death.”

“Punishable by whom?” she asks.


She raises an eyebrow.
"I'm technically not supposed to tell you any more than that," he says.

“So, no mind-whammy, or else the Wizards’ Secret Police sends you to the chair.”

“The sword,” says Carlos, despite himself. “You get beheaded.”

Dr. Kwan eyes his own sword. “Peachy,” she says. “What are the other Laws of Magic? You can tell me that, right? Because it would be pretty stupid if no one knew any of the laws subject to capital punishment.”


“No avada kedavra,” says Dr. Kwan. “No frog prince, no mind-melds, no mind-whammies, no zombies, no wibbley-wobbley timey-wimey stuff, and no, what, Cthulhu?”

"You and your fancy science words,” says Carlos.

"So if you’re not doing anything, what’s going with the whole—” She waves her hand at the crowd.

“No idea,” says Carlos.

Carlos is not unaware that he is a devastatingly attractive individual, even after the past year. He has at times even used this to his advantage – mainly to get bigger tips whenever Nita needs him to wait tables, because Carlos otherwise believes in maintaining an air of professionalism. (And because panic is a perfectly acceptable response when random people slip you their phone number, because you don’t know who they are or where they’ll want to meet you or why they would want to try to consume your life essence). (That only happened once, but once was enough.) He's used to lingering glances and the occasional suggestive comment. But the closest he's ever come to the manic intensity of the Night Valeans' appreciation is the time an undead tyrannosaurus with burning orange eyes saved him from a world-threatening necromantic ritual just so it could tell him he had nice hair, and Carlos is pretty sure that was a hallucination.

It’s starting to freak him out. A lot of things are starting to freak him out, actually. There are certain beings, and occasionally mortals, whose consciousnesses exist over more than one point in the Currents of Time; their gifts of prophecy come from remembering probable futures in addition to the past. But Carlos has never even heard of someone occupying the same point twice. Sure, he sort of remembers what happens over the next nine months, but what if he misses a minor detail and screws up the future? It's bad enough imagining what might happen to him, but if he's in Night Vale, everything is guaranteed to be exponentially worse.

And that's not even getting into the fact that the amount of power needed to divert – or loop, repel, go back through, whatever – the Currents of Time in order to send him here is practically unimaginable. At some unknown point in history, some totally unknown quantity not only has access to that kind of power, but has also used it in direct defiance of the Laws of Magic.

He has to call the Wardens. He just hopes it’s not going to be his head on the ground.

“Hmm,” says Dr. Kwan. “Could you come inside a sec?”

“Sure, I guess,” says Carlos.

He picks up his staff and a cardboard box full of glassware and and carries them inside. They pass a
large room filled with humming breakers; Carlos swings wide to the other side of the hallway to avoid antagonizing the equipment. They finally end up in a slightly smaller room oddly reminiscent of a high school science lab.

“I’d like to offer you a job,” says Dr. Kwan.

Carlos almost drops his box. “Excuse me?”

“To be honest, it’s more like a stipend,” she says. “We lost a post-doc and I have a discretionary fund, but it’s still not that —”

“Hold on,” says Carlos. The box clinks as he shoves it on the counter, and Dr. Kwan gives him a disapproving stare. “What are you talking about?”

“I’m no sociologist, but even I can tell that this town is majorly fucked up,” says Dr. Kwan. “You, meanwhile, have hypnotic hair, know the ins and outs, and have got the whole Gandalf thing to fall back on. Do you have any idea how long it took us to get funding for this post? I want us all to get out of here with as much data as possible, and I want us all to get out of here alive.”

“What makes you think you can afford me?” says Carlos.

“Because I had a little chat with the nice officers in the helicopter, and they said illegal time travel is punishable by thirty-seven years in an abandoned mine shaft,” says Dr. Kwan. She leans back against a desk and crosses her arms. “Of course, that wouldn’t bother you for long, because then one of these Wardens will pop by and off with your head. The only reason you’re still here is because you have nowhere else to go.”

Carlos stares at her, then says, “No, I’m not!”

It’s not one of his finer rebuttals.

Dr. Kwan rolls her eyes. “Please. You know the town, but no one knows you. Then you lied to the police and said you were one of us. You’re like a spy, or something, and your cover’s been blown so bad you don’t know what year it is, but instead of bugging out you’re still here. I TA’d both organic chemistry and multivariable calculus. I know desperation when I see it.”

“I have access to forces you didn’t even know existed before today,” says Carlos. “The power of life and creation itself. And you’re seriously trying to blackmail me?”

“I don’t see it as blackmail so much as an exchange of needed services,” says Dr. Kwan reflectively. “We need a guide, a protector. You need a safe haven. We can help each other.”

“And if I don’t want to help you, you’ll turn narc;” says Carlos.

“All I want is my team to be safe,” she says. “And then tenure. Is that so much to ask?”

Carlos is kind of impressed. Annoyed, but impressed. Dr. Kwan discovered the existence of both magic and Night Vale’s particular brand of chaos this morning. Instead of freaking out, she has in less than two hours deduced his role in the mess and formulated a workable plan for her and her colleagues’ continued survival, by simultaneously strong-arming him and appealing to his protective instincts.

She must really want tenure.

“I have to make a call first,” says Carlos.
She raises her eyebrows.

“You’re smart, I’ll give you that,” says Carlos. “Of course, if you’re really smart, you’d get everyone out of here. I wasn’t the one messing around with the Currents of Time – I just got caught in the crossfire. That means there’s someone else out there working serious dark magic, and not even I know who. Trust me, that’s not an investigation you want to get caught up in.”

Her eyes widen with sudden realization. “You’re going to call the Wardens? But what if they come after you?”

“This is much bigger than me,” says Carlos. “One paradox, and suddenly we’re looking at alternate timelines, parallel dimensions, the whole nine yards. That’s bad enough wherever you are, but here? In Night Vale?” Carlos shakes his head. “So you might want to think about that while I’m considering my ‘job offer’. If you’ll excuse me?” He picks up the phone.

“Go ahead,” she says. He thinks she might sound slightly less sure of herself, her walk out into the hallway a little nervous. Wizard, 1, Scientists… well, maybe they have a tie.

He goes to punch in a phone number.

A moment later, he sticks his head out the door and yells down to her, “Hey, how do I dial an outside line?”

~*~*~*~

After a couple tries, Carlos finally gets through on the Warden hotline and asks for Luccio. The girl on the other end, who is so new Carlos can practically feel it through the phone lines, demands his security phrase again, makes him spell his name, and generally hems and haws until he’s ready to pull his hair out, but finally she patches him through.

There’s a curt, “Yes.”

“Hola, mon capitaine,” he says.

“Bonjour, Warden Ramirez,” she says dryly, but Carlos thinks he can hear the smile in her voice. Good. He’s gonna need all the smiles he can get. "I seem to recall giving you specific orders to rest."

"Yeah. So, funny story," says Carlos.

Luccio’s voice sharpens. “What’s wrong?”

“Hypothetically speaking, if I didn’t swim against the Currents of Time so much as get hauled out of them and thrown bodily upstream, am I obligated to cut my own head off?”

There’s a long moment of silence.

“Where are you?” she demands finally.

“The desert,” he says. “Hypothetically speaking. No one knows I’m here.” Which is both valuable information – the sixth Law of Magic is supposed to prevent complications, so the fewer people he contaminates with the future, the better – and also a very ominous thing to say to someone who might be duty-bound to come remove you from the Currents of Time permanently.

He’s pretty sure getting executed would cause a paradox, since his hair apparently makes a pretty big impression on the town for the next nine months. He’s not at all sure that paradox would be worse
than the paradox where there's two of him at the same time.

“Explain,” says Luccio. “Carefully.”

Carlos does, insofar as you can explain things that don’t really make sense to someone who shouldn’t know that much about the future, your past.

He leaves out the part where his now-deceased double was doing most of the attacking, though. No sense in muddying a nice simple case of breaking the sixth law with the possibility that he’s his own evil twin.

“Something’s wrong here, Captain,” he concludes. “Besides me, that is. Those reports on the radio – I’ve heard – there will be – ugh.” He rubs his forehead.

“But you don’t know who or what sent you back?” says Luccio.

“No,” he says. "I got a pretty good read on my one attacker—" Carlos has to tamp down hysterical giggles again. "—And there's no way he could have created the time vortex by himself. I'm almost certain whoever did make it had to have started the process before he... showed up. But if it was them who shoved me through... Captain, I don’t—” He coughs to cover the crack in his voice. “I don’t know what’s going on.”

“Dio,” says Luccio. “Carlos…”

Carlos swallows. “Yes?”

There’s a pause, and then she says, firmly, “You will remain in... the desert... until you can safely rejoin the Currents of Time. The wards are designed for circumstances like these and should be able to contain any untoward effects so long as you maintain them to their highest efficiency.”

Carlos lets himself breathe again. "Do I want to know why we know that?"

"No," says Luccio.

“You’re sure there won’t be… ripples? Paradoxes?”

“History is surprisingly robust,” she says. "It tends to flow around obstructions. But I will monitor the situation myself.”

Carlos snorts and says bitterly, “So if there are, I guess I won’t find out until it’s too late.”

“Warden Ramirez,” Luccio snaps. “By all rights I should bring this to the Senior Council. Altering the Currents of Time can cause any number of dangerous complications, and I do not think they would take the risk of allowing your continued presence. It is only my faith in you and your abilities that makes me think the alternative is less dangerous.

“Someone has broken the Sixth Law of Magic. Find them. You can’t do anything to disrupt your… current predicament… but you must stop them from further interference. Stay inconspicuous and do not under any circumstance allow yourself to become involved with any situation that will run counter to the future. If so – you are a Warden. I expect you to do your duty and maintain order no matter what the cost. Che cosa?”

“Yes, ma’am,” he says.

She sighs. “Be careful, Carlos. I’ve lost too many good Wardens already.”
“I’ll do my best, Captain,” he says. “Vaya con Dios.”

“Anche voi,” she says, and hangs up.

Carlos stares at the phone for a moment. Then he puts the receiver back in the cradle, looks at the ceiling, and counts to ten, in four different languages, until the urge to start screaming and never stop has faded away.

He finds the scientists in the second laboratory. The grad students are clustered around one copy of the New Citizen Welcome Packet and whispering frantically, Dr. Timmons is reading the garment tag on a mandatory orange poncho with a frown, and Dr. Kwan has a pizza crust sticking out of the corner of her mouth as she methodically picks through a pile of small electronic surveillance devices and strips them of their parts.

“So,” says Carlos. “What exactly did you have in mind for me?”

The grad students jump. Dr. Timmons looks up inquiringly.

“Protection from threats, supernatural and otherwise, if you can manage it,” says Dr. Kwan with a slight lisp, talking around the pizza crust like it's a cigar clamped between her teeth. “Advice for how to deal with everything else.” She removes the crust and points it at him. "And we want you to be our official liaison to the city. They seem to like you, and I get the feeling maintaining a low profile is a good idea.” She shoves the rest of the crust in her mouth and uses both hands to pry apart the casing of a pill-shaped bug.

“You want me to be your magical advisor and PR guy?” says Carlos.

“Unless you think you can do more, yes,” says Dr. Kwan, mouth still full. "Hah!” She dumps a tangle of wires onto the table.

“One thing,” says Dr. Timmons. “How much science do you actually know?”

“I’m fully up-to-date on all geocentric theories and can accurately diagnose most imbalances of the humors,” says Carlos.

They all stare at him in horror.

“That was a joke,” says Carlos. “Apart from a few random facts, high school science.”

They continue to stare at him in horror.

“I was in AP Bio!” says Carlos, feeling slighted. “I just had to drop out before I took the exams.”

“You dropped out?” says Dr. Timmons. Now he looks almost offended. “Why?”

“To join the war effort,” says Carlos.

“Which war?”

“The one against the vampires,” says Carlos.

They stare at him in horror some more.

“Don’t worry, we won,” he says. “More or less.”

“Is that a joke, too?” asks Gary tentatively.
Carlos gives him a wolfish grin, and he gulps.

“...Anyway,” says Dr. Timmons, “If you’re going to be our liaison, you’ll have to have a decent grounding in what we’re researching, so I hope you don’t mind a little homework.”

“Makes sense,” says Carlos. “Don’t want to blow my cover. Anything else?”

“Those are the basics,” says Dr. Kwan. “If we think of anything else, we’ll let you know.”

“Okay,” says Carlos. “After careful consideration, I’ve decided to accept your generous offer.”

“Good,” says Dr. Kwan. “You—”

“I’ve got some conditions of my own, though,” says Carlos.

“Go ahead,” says Dr. Timmons encouragingly.

“One: I have my own responsibilities. I won’t be available all the time, and I definitely won’t be here permanently.” I hope, he adds silently. “I can make this lab and wherever you’re living pretty safe, and I can give you advice, but you’re going to have to watch out for yourselves too.”

“How long will you be here?” asks Dr. Timmons.

“A couple months or so,” says Carlos, deliberately vague. Then he realizes he’s fulfilling one of the worst stereotypes of wizards by being secretive solely for the purpose of being secretive. There’s no reason he can’t tell them Nine months; withholding the information just makes him feel more in control.

The thought that the rest of the White Council is so tight-lipped because they feel this overwhelmed is actually pretty terrifying. It’s a good thing he’s so brilliant and adaptable.

“Possibly until the spring,” he adds. “I’ll try to let you know before I... leave.”

“We’ll need you to write all this down, in case we have a problem when you’re not here,” says Dr. Kwan.

Carlos gives her an exasperated look, but he supposes it’s not that unreasonable a request. Besides, there’s an entire room devoted to safety pamphlets at the offices of the Tourism Board. “Fine,” he says.

“All right,” says Dr. Kwan. “What else?”

“Two,” says Carlos, “You’re hiring me to keep you safe. You can do whatever you like with my suggestions, but if I give you an order, you obey it.”

“But—” says Dr. Kwan.

“This is not negotiable,” says Carlos. “I’m not going to risk my life, or anyone else’s, if you guys deliberately put yourselves in danger.” He looks each of them in the eye, though not long enough to start a soulgaze. Most of them look appropriately apprehensive. Dr. Kwan mainly looks irritated, but she nods stiffly.

“Those are the basics,” says Carlos. “If anything else comes up, I reserve the right to abruptly change all the rules with no warning.”

“What?”
“You’re the one with the protection racket,” he tells Dr. Kwan.

“Julie, you said he agreed to this willingly,” says Dr. Timmons in exasperation.

She waves him off. “Look here, Mr. Wizard, you—”

“We agree,” says Dr. Timmons.

Dr. Kwan glares at him, then grits out, “Fine.”

“Fantastic,” says Carlos. “Any questions before we get started?”

Kate the grad student raises the hand not in a sling. “Uh… are we supposed to call you Mr. Wizard?”

“You can call me Carlos,” says Carlos.


“I think a round of introductions are in order,” says Dr. Timmons. “There’s Kate, Zhang Wei, and Gary. This is Dr. Julie Kwan, and I’m Andre.”

“Dr. Andre Timmons,” corrects Dr. Kwan.

“Oh, that’s another thing,” says Carlos. “Never tell anyone your true name.”

“As opposed to…?” asks Dr. Kwan.

“You’re fine, Kate. I didn’t get anything,” Dr. Kwan.

“You have to do it personally,” says Carlos, then adds, “You’re fine, Kate. I didn’t get anything,” when she looks alarmed.

“That’s it,” says Dr. Kwan. “We’re getting code names.”

“You don’t need—”

“Renegade,” she says, jerking a thumb towards herself. “Renaissance, Reliant, Rawhide.” She points at Dr. Timmons, Wei, and Gary. “And—”

“Rochelle,” says Kate.

Dr. Kwan blinks. “Rochelle?”

Kate shrugs.

“Charmed,” says Carlos, offering them a courtly bow. They’re all staring at him again.

Tough crowd.

“First order of business,” says Dr. Kwan. ”Is our lab safe?”

“Did you get rid of all the bugs?” asks Carlos. “The electronic kind, I mean.” He gestures at the piles on her desk.
“Of course,” she says. “Whose are they?”

“Sheriff’s Secret Police,” says Carlos. “You should do regular sweeps, but try to short them out if you can, and then have loud conversations by the windows about your electrical issues and any juicy personal problems. They get touchy if they think you’re deliberately avoiding surveillance.”

“Poor Big Brother,” says Dr. Kwan. “What else?”

“In terms of physical safety, make sure you keep the door locked and shut at all times, and don’t let in anyone you don’t know.”

“If this turns into a shelter-in-place drill, I’m leaving,” says Dr. Kwan. “What about magical shit?”

“That’s going to require you to make some hard decisions,” says Carlos. “First of all, this is a place of business—”

“Science,” interrupts Dr. Timmons.

He gives Dr. Timmons a cool stare. “My point is, it’s too public, there’s no threshold, so I can’t do a proper set of wards,” says Carlos. “Now—”

“Why not?” asks Dr. Kwan. “And there is a threshold, you walked right through it.”

Carlos represses a groan. This is what he gets for working with scientists. Well, it wasn't like they gave him a whole lot of choice in the matter, but the point remains. “A threshold is more than just an entryway,” he says. “You know how vampires can’t enter a home without permission?”

“Yes,” says Dr. Timmons, “Although I didn’t realize it was a tested theory…”

“It’s because of the threshold,” says Carlos. “Any place that offers you physical shelter offers a little bit of psychic shelter, too. Usually the effect is negligible, but when you have a place where you stay day-in, day-out, that you put a lot of sweat and blood into and call your own, that you care about, that energy accumulates. Even if it can’t physically stop an intruder, the threshold can knock out a huge chunk of its power. Most wards are based on a threshold because it gives them a solid anchor and they can amplify its protective capabilities.”

“A man’s home really is his fortress,” says Dr. Timmons.

“Exactly,” says Carlos. “But this is a public building. People come and go, and it’s supposed to have visitors. Anyone who had to live here wouldn’t be too happy about it. So there’s no threshold to anchor the wards.”

“What can you do instead?” asks Dr. Kwan.

“Oh, there are a bunch of alternatives,” says Carlos. “Used cumulatively, they’re almost as effective as threshold wards. There’s just one problem…”

“What’s that?” says Dr. Kwan skeptically.

“This,” says Carlos. He holds up a hand. “Nabaj.” A tiny speck appears, surrounded by a faint cloud of mist. The mist starts to swirl slowly and the speck expands as all the ambient moisture in the room is drawn to one point. Soon, he has a small globe of water rotating lazily about a foot above the palm of his hand, held together by his will.

Dr. Kwan pales, but says, “Okay, pretty, but I don’t see—”
“Wait for it,” murmurs Carlos. The spell looks simple, but the amount of energy needed to attract, shape, and suspend the water in defiance of gravity is fairly considerable and should start having an effect—

A laptop monitor flashes blue, Dr. Kwan's phone makes sizzling noises and start to smoke, and then all the lights go out.

“Yeah,” says Carlos, dismissing the spell. The water splats on the floor. “So, magic and technology don’t really mix. I can raise a hardcore barrier of fancy protective spells, but it’ll be hell on your electronic equipment. Also, you can’t have wireless internet.”

As predicted, everyone starts shouting at once.

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“I thought you wanted to keep a low profile, Doctor Renegade,” says Carlos, watching even more people file into the community hall.

“We do,” says Dr. Kwan.

“But we don’t want our research to,” says Dr. Timmons. “Community involvement will make things much easier.”

“Especially if you dazzle them with your hair,” says Dr. Kwan.

“I told you, I’m not doing that on purpose,” says Carlos. This hadn't stopped him from taking a little extra time with it when he was cleaning up, but still. “Uh, guys? None of you are on the run from the feds, right?”

There are men in dark suits and dark glasses and large, ostentatious ID badges lurking by the back wall. Every so often they’ll lift a wrist and speak into their shirt cuffs. Even though Carlos hasn’t gone on stage yet, their sunglasses are aimed right at him.

“I don’t even have a speeding ticket,” says Dr. Timmons.

Dr. Kwan mutters something under her breath, then says, “Ignore them. They can’t prove anything.”

“Wow, that was the exact opposite of a comforting response,” says Carlos. “I’d stay far away from the black helicopters if I were you.”

People have started settling in, passing around a tray of corn muffins and sitting down in the folding chairs. There’s quite a crowd.

A few of them are wearing PRESS badges, and Carlos is hit with a jolt of realization: Cecil might be there, waiting to report on this. On Carlos. He’s no longer listening to the news thousands of miles away – he is the news. He’s a part of Night Vale, and at some point will be the focus of Cecil’s attention, described in loving detail in a deep, smooth voice.

A lot, if what he remembers from the past really happens—

The doors in the back of the hall shut with *clang!* which isn’t ominous at all. Dr. Kwan pokes him, and this isn’t the time to think about radio announcers and their – their radio announcing, even if the low hum of feedback from one of the speakers has taken on a familiar cadence. He walks out to the podium and the crowd goes silent.
“Hi, everyone,” he says, flashing a quick, friendly grin. “I’m Carlos.”

“Hi, Carlos,” they all repeat in unison. He feels like he’s accidentally stumbled into an AA meeting. He definitely has a problem, although he doesn’t think there’s a support group for unwilling time travelers even in Night Vale.

“I’m sure most of you have probably noticed us around town by now,” says Carlos, “So we wanted to introduce ourselves properly. We’re the research team from the university and we’re going to be collecting data from Night Vale and its environs. Our team consists of some of the country’s leading experts in geology and theoretical physics—”

“What’s your degree in, Carlos?” someone calls out.

“Sufficiently advanced technology,” he says. He hears a muffled snort from off-stage.

“As I was saying, we’re all highly qualified scientists,” he continues, and somehow manages to keep a straight face. “And we’ll of course try not to disrupt your day-to-day lives. But no one knows the town better than all of you, so we would definitely appreciate any help you can give us. In return, we hope to share our research with you, Night Vale. Knowledge is our future.”

There’s a deafening round of applause. Carlos smiles benignly, and when the noise peters out he asks, “Does anyone have any questions?”

One reporter stands on his chair and lets out a series of basso oms. The rest of the reporters wait expectantly.

Carlos blinks, then says, “Could you repeat the question, please?”

“He says that he likes your hair and wants to know why you’ve chosen to study Night Vale,” says another reporter.

There’s a certain electricity in the air; right now, everyone is still distracted by him, God knows why (well, besides the obvious reasons of the Ramirez charm and fabulous good looks), but it’s the fascination of a mob, where their adoration can turn just as quickly into wrath. Carlos has seen it before, and has the scars to prove it.

But Carlos has seen a lot of stuff here before, and he knows Night Vale’s weakness—

“I don’t know if you know this,” he says confidentially, “but you’re by far the most scientifically interesting community in the U.S.”

—Civic pride.

Well, and fire, but that’s probably not appropriate right now.

A pleased murmur goes around the room, and the Q&A dissolves into queries about what kind of shampoo he uses.

The scientists sneak out the back and leave him to mingle, which is strategically sound but still really annoying. He’s almost made it to the door when he’s intercepted by a gangly young man wearing a red NIGHT VALE COMMUNITY RADIO t-shirt and a name tag that says, “Hello, my name is Intern Chad!” Several of the dark-suited men are not far behind.

Carlos quashes a frankly ridiculous pang of regret, because if the station sent an intern, that probably means Cecil isn’t here. That wouldn't have made sense, anyway; he should be in the middle of his
show by now.

“Excuse me, Mr. the Scientist,” stammers Intern Chad!, his gaze creeping up Carlos’ forehead.

“Just Carlos,” says Carlos, and Intern Chad! yanks his eyes back down (not literally, thank God).

“I, um, I have a question,” says Intern Chad! He fishes out a crumpled piece of paper from his pocket. “Um… who are you, and what do you want from us?”

Out of the corner of his eye, Carlos sees the men in dark suits surround them in a half-circle. They raise their hands in unison and hold their wrists expectantly to their mouths.

“You can address me as Warden Ramirez. I'm a wizard of the White Council and the regional commander of Wardens in the western United States, lost in time and desperately trying to figure out why, how, who, and, yes, when,” Carlos does not say.

Instead, he says, “Well, I'm Carlos, and I’ve come to study just what’s going on around here,” and with a grin releases just a tiny bit of energy. The men in dark suits all jerk as their cufflinks let out a series of sparks, Intern Chad! frantically scribbles into a notebook, and Carlos hears a voice: smooth, sonorous, and familiar, except now it’s warm and rich and unfiltered by electronic equipment and radio waves and death curses. It says, “Why, thank you, Josie, I think I will,” and Carlos looks over and sees Cecil.

Cecil has half a corn muffin in his mouth and is looking at Carlos.

Their eyes meet across the crowded room.

The soulgaze starts just as Carlos thinks, a little too late, that he should probably stop staring.

Soulgaze really isn’t the most accurate term for when a wizard and someone else lock eyes – it’s not just looking, insofar as anything involving the Sight can be just looking. It’s a whole multi-sensory experience, where the considerable resources of a wizard’s power filter the entire core of someone’s being into an elegantly compact summary open to review. Luccio once told him (most likely because they were both high on painkillers in the infirmary after the time they dealt with Kemmler’s disciples) that she experienced soulgazes as a series of fragrances that triggered her own memories, creating the other person from a collage of her experiences. Harry Dresden gets – got – gets whole little fantastical tableaux, rich in symbolism and imaginative imagery, probably because he watched way too much television as a kid.

Carlos hears music.

Cecil sounds like white noise that builds into a chord, like a snare drum and high-hat cymbal, like an old, beautiful piano and a distant chorus. He sounds unearthly, melancholy, almost solitary in an echoing unfriendly universe, a lonely song heard in the middle of the night in the middle of the desert: strangely comforting and very familiar.

The music washes over Carlos, pulls him under, drops him back into himself in the crowded community hall. Lights are brighter, sounds sharper, the air a steady pressure against his skin; it’s too much, and he elbows his way the last few feet until he can escape into the harsh clarity of the desert sun and the burning purity of the desert heat.

The thing about soulgazes, like anything experienced with the Sight, is that they're permanent: a whole memory, forever incorruptible, embedded in your mind with perfect accuracy and precision.

He leans against the wall outside and breathes, learning how to think around the music that's wormed
its way into his soul, never to leave again.

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When he's able to move and think at the same time again, he finds Dr. Kwan waiting around the corner in a bright green Prius. The license plate holder proclaims it recently liberated from the used car lot.

"Get in the car, loser," she says. "We’re going researching."

Carlos refuses to dignify that with a response. "Where are we headed?" he asks instead, trying to drown out the melody still echoing through his head.

"The Desert Creek housing development," says Dr. Kwan. "Kate just called: there's something weird about the house down the street from theirs. As long as you think it's not going to rip open a dimensional portal and eat us all, we're setting up sensors."

"Maybe you should poke it with a stick while you’re at it,” says Carlos.

"We’re not ruling that out,” she says. “So. Time travel."

"What about it?" says Carlos.

"How does it work?" she asks, then adds as Carlos opens his mouth to protest, “I don’t want to know how to do it, I want to know what it does. I’m a practical theoretical physicist. I like practical theories."

"Theoretically," says Carlos, "It's unlikely that I'll be able to alter the future to any great extent. Everything I thought might have changed was actually due to differences in perception. I think history has its own sort of... momentum."

"So it sounds like the Novikov self-consistency principle is in effect, at least partially,” says Dr. Kwan. “That’s good. I’d hate for you to step on a butterfly and have us all turn into fascists.”

"Butterflies – like that Bradbury story?" says Carlos. "Trust me, you couldn’t pay me to hunt a T-Rex in the first place. What's this Novikov principle?"

Dr. Kwan looks at him sidelong, but answers his question. "The Novikov self-consistency principle asserts that if an event exists that would give rise to a paradox in a closed timelike curve, the probability of that event is zero."

"So paradoxes can't happen because... he said so...?" says Carlos.

"Novikov found that the only solutions to the laws of physics that can occur locally in the real Universe are those which are globally self-consistent," she says.

Carlos stares at her, then says, "I've got nothing."

She lets out a frustrated sigh. "Okay. Have you heard of Polchinski?"

"I'm guessing you don't mean the guy in East LA who sells awesome pierogies from his food truck," says Carlos.

She rolls her eyes. "Okay, we'll start with the basics. There are a couple solutions to the general theory of relativity that would allow for closed timelike curves, where the path an object follows leads back to its starting point – in other words, theoretically you should be able to travel backwards
in time."

"Thank God someone confirmed that," mutters Carlos.

Dr. Kwan ignores him. "Polchinski, however, calculated a situation where a billiard ball was shot into a wormhole at such an angle that when it arrived in the past it would run into itself, knocking its past self off course and preventing it from entering the wormhole in the first place, thus causing a paradox."

"Because the ball that knocked it off course couldn't appear because it never entered the wormhole... okay, I think that makes sense. But who finds a wormhole and immediately thinks, 'Ohh, let me get my pool cue?"' asks Carlos.

"The billiard ball is just to illustrate the calculations," says Dr. Kwan. "In any case, the students of Novikov's co-authors looked at Polchinski's calculations and found that there were any number of solutions where the ball would exit the wormhole and deliver its past self a glancing blow, which would send it into the wormhole anyway. Do you follow?"

"I think so," says Carlos. "So you couldn't change the past event, but you could effect how it came about?"

"No, but close enough," says Dr. Kwan. "All right, the Titanic example. You can't travel back in time and save everyone on the Titanic, because then you wouldn't have any reason to travel back in time and save everyone."

"Uh..." says Carlos.

"But you could travel back in time, replace everyone with realistic fake corpses, and drop the rescuees off somewhere with assumed identities," says Dr. Kwan. "Thus preserving the original reason for your time travel."

"Oh," says Carlos. "Like in Harry Potter."

"Really? It's come to that?" says Dr. Kwan. "Fine, yes. Like in Harry Potter."

"There’s just one problem with those calculations," says Carlos.

“What?"

“You said the closed time loops—""

“Closed timelike curves,” corrects Dr. Kwan.

“Right, those – you said they only went backwards in time,” says Carlos.

“Yes?”

“The Laws of Magic forbid travelling to the future, too.”

She stares at him for a moment, then says, “Son of a bitch. God, I wish this was my field.”

After that they both fall silent: Dr. Kwan concentrating on avoiding a marble spill on Earl Road and muttering equations to herself, Carlos staring out the window and listening to Cecil’s voice, now emanating from environmentally-responsible speakers. It triggers a flashback – if you could call an exactly perfect re-creation of an experience a flashback – to their soulgaze, and Carlos shakes his head, trying to settle the memory until it isn't quite so distracting.
Cecil is far from one of the worst things Carlos has experienced with his Sight. He just hopes the reverse is true, because the thing with soulgazes is that they’re two-way streets. While Carlos got the Cecil Symphonic Orchestra, Cecil was stuck peeking under the curtain of Carlos’ good looks and wonderful personality at a whole lifetime’s worth of, well, him. Carlos is under no illusions as to the state of his soul. He tries to be the good guy, but he’s a Warden: their job is to make the tough calls, and Carlos is the guy who wanted that (even with all the complications that come with it) since he was seven years old.

“Hey, they’re talking about us,” says Dr. Kwan. She turns up the volume. “Your speech was pretty good, by the way – interesting-sounding but completely vague! You should write grant proposals.”

It's weird, because he's starting to remember this – hearing the report before, that is. Over a hundred miles away, his past self is irritably cleaning a stove and muttering about that Carlos jerk, and—

“He grinned,” says Cecil, “and everything about him was perfect. And I fell in love instantly.”

"Madre de Dios," says Carlos. "I'm the jerk."

"I'm not even going to touch that one," says Dr. Kwan.

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The scientists are subdued by the end of the day; even Dr. Kwan seems overwhelmed by the combination of the non-extant house in Desert Creek, the imperceptible yet devastating earthquakes, the sun stubbornly refusing to set on time, and the vicious, inexplicable argument that erupts when Gary suggests tracking down the airplane that appeared in the elementary school gym and putting it on a treadmill. However, none of them are upset enough to do the smart thing and leave.

Carlos would like to leave, but even if he could he's got the grim suspicion that Night Vale is trying its best to emulate a time-traveling cue ball. A celluloid time-traveling cue ball, just waiting to explode on impact and scratch history into a paradoxical mess. Not only have the storm wards developed an alarming tendency to boil into existence, do nothing, and then disappear, but he can feel the master wards deteriorating, even after he's already renewed them once. They're not as bad as they were on the day of the sandstorm, but they're far worse than anything he dealt with before.

It doesn't make sense. He noticed irregularities with the master wards in Luccio's reports last summer – this summer – dammit, he hates time travel – but they couldn't have been this bad, or else Night Vale would have vanished in a fiery conflagration and sunk beneath the sands by Midsummer, much less the weeks-long stretches between Luccio's visits. If things were really this dire the first time, the only way Night Vale could still be standing would be if someone was there to boost the wards every day—

Oh.

Carlos swears, pulls out his notebook, and starts adding as many details as he can recall on the state of the wards in Luccio's reports. He wishes he could remember their statuses better to make sure they match up, but then he realizes with a shock that it doesn't matter: Luccio already knew there were two Carloses running around by the time things started really behaving erratically. No wonder she'd handled it so calmly – she already had a Warden on the job.

She hadn't even let the tiniest clue slip that she'd known that, either. Meanwhile, Carlos was busted by someone who hadn't even known him for two hours, much less two decades. You don't get to be Captain of the Wardens by collecting bottle-caps, that's for sure.
After an hour, he has: 1) designated his past self Carlos Prime, because otherwise it's way too confusing and also, it sounds cooler; 2) drawn up a nice timeline summarizing all of Carlos Prime's movements from now until March 15, 2013 (although it's really more like from January 9, 2013 to March 15, 2013, since his movements before then during his recovery were pretty damn limited); 3) supplemented those observations with a table incorporating everything he can remember about his readings from the wards; 4) developed a raging headache.

He puts his Sharpie down, stretches, and starts gathering supplies. He has a few ideas how to supplement the master wards with a back-up system, one more permanent (and less creepy) than the bloodstones. Although he's not sure what he's going to do when Carlos Prime recovers and starts his beat again – he'd definitely notice if someone added an entire set of secondary defenses – but since he didn't notice anything, that means he must have figured something out, and – he's got until January to work on that problem. He's got more than enough problems to deal with right now.

Assuming that Luccio's reports were all accurate minus any mention of time-related shenanigans (which seems likely) he can eliminate several possible causes for what's damaging the wards. His best hypothesis is blowback from the disruption to the Currents of Time, but it could also be another assault from his unknown attacker(s), or something else entirely. Before he can fix anything now, he needs to know what and how much damage has been done.

Carlos has his hand on the doorknob of Lab One when he hears a familiar voice. He pauses to let the rush of his soulgaze pass, then carefully eases the door open in case Cecil’s still interviewing Dr. Kwan and the grad students about the sunset. Carlos had given a statement to an intern about the house in Desert Creek; he let Dr. Timmons take questions from Cecil at the monitoring station, because Carlos had suddenly remembered that he needed to climb on top of the roof and lay there very quietly as he made a survey of the surrounding landscape. But it's not like Carlos is avoiding Cecil or anything, he's just... trying to be professional. Because they're both working and don't need to be distracted by Carlos' hair, or by things said in the heat of the moment while – while previously distracted by Carlos' hair. Carlos' hair is extremely distracting right now, he's not going to take anything personally.

Cecil isn't in Lab One, at least physically; just the merest whisper of his voice coming from a heap of junk covered in duct tape. Carlos quashes a pang of what is definitely not disappointment.

"Gary, have you tagged the bees with – oh, it's you," says Dr. Kwan.

"Carlos!" says Dr. Timmons. "How can we help—"

"Do you hear that?" interrupts Dr. Kwan.

Carlos freezes, sorting through the ambient noise for any sign of danger, but there's just the scuffling of the grad students moving furniture in the offices upstairs – the erratic hum of the breakers in Lab Two down the hall, or maybe the bees outside the window – a tinny replica of Cecil's voice, now coming from underneath a table—

"Oh," says Carlos. "I think you dropped a bug." He fishes it out from beneath the table and tosses it to Dr. Kwan.

"And it picks up local radio? Okay, why not." She pokes it apart and asks, in an appalled sort of tone, "Does this even have an AM receiver?"

Carlos shrugs.

The lab has way more floor space than his workroom, and even with his radio on – well, with his
radio broadcasting; he doesn't bother to plug it in – Carlos has reached his limit on sitting alone underground in the dim light of emergency candles while contemplating how much work he's responsible for. "Hey," he asks. "Do you mind if I do some stuff in here?"

"No, go right ahead," says Dr. Timmons. Dr. Kwan sighs loudly, abandons the bug to shut down her laptop, and stalks out of the room with it.

After settling crosslegged on the floor, Carlos draws an almost-complete chalk circle around himself and starts taking out his equipment.

“What are you doing?” asks Dr. Timmons. He comes over and leans against a counter to watch; Dr. Kwan has returned and is sitting back at her desk, but Carlos does notice that she angles her chair so she can see what's happening.

“I’m making a specialized proximity detector,” says Carlos. “It’ll go off in the presence of disruptions in the Currents of Time. Like a canary in a coal mine.”

“I’m not much of a zoologist,” says Dr. Kwan, “but your canary looks an awful lot like a rubber duckie.”

“Do you see me commenting on the fact that your—” He waves a hand at the machine by the door. “—Thingamajig is clearly held together by duct tape? No? Then shush.”

He picks up the chalk and connects the ends of the curve, muttering “Chikin.” The circle springs up around him, and Carlos is faintly shocked at how many mental pressures suddenly cut out. He's also a little unnerved how much he'd acclimated to them without noticing.

It kind of explains a lot about the people who live here.

Carlos winds up a wristwatch and slips it over the duck’s head. He shuts his eyes and concentrates, cradling the duck in the palms of his hands.

It takes longer than usual to focus his thoughts: the cut on his hand throbs, anxiety stirs fitfully in his chest, and a bone-deep weariness claws at the back of his mind. He lets them drain away one by one, until there's nothing left but the high clear song of the power of creation.

He calls it forth with a sharp “K’ay!”; feels it echo through his focus; releases it into the world as he breaks the circle.

The lights flicker overhead as the bug on Dr. Kwan's desk hisses and sparks. She hits it with a textbook and Cecil's voice resumes.

The duck lets out a series of low chirps. Carlos waves one hand in front of it; it tweets even louder.

He stands up and walks towards the door with it balanced on his hand.

“Wait,” says Dr. Kwan. “Where are you going?”

“To map out the town,” says Carlos. “I need to find out if there’ve been more disruptions to the Currents of Time.”

“You’re going to wander around all of Night Vale using a rubber duckie as a tricorder,” she says flatly.

“Yes, I am,” says Carlos.
She mutters something under her breath. “Just hold on for a hot second,” she says, and disappears down the hallway.

She comes back with someone’s bento lunch box, a cracked graduated cylinder, and some kind of blinking device.

“Is that an EMF detector made out of a Walkman?” asks Dr. Timmons, obviously impressed. Carlos is pretty impressed, too; he didn’t know they even sold Walkmen anymore.

“I used to get bored during department meetings,” says Dr. Kwan. She disassembles the bento box and waves one of the smaller sections at Carlos. “Will your bath time friend still work from in here?”

“Probably, but I don’t usually pack a lunch when I’m off investigating violations of the Laws of Magic. Is this really necessary?”

“Yes,” says Dr. Kwan. “We have a reputation to maintain, PR Guy. We can’t just have you wandering around looking like you escaped from Sesame Street.” She pops the lid off and dumps out a salad into the trash can. Then she holds the box out to Carlos and raises her eyebrows.

Carlos places the duck inside without comment, figuring he can always cast the spell again if he needs to, but even when Dr. Kwan replaces the lid he can still hear it whistling away.

She puts the cylinder and EMF detector on top of the box and fastens them in place with, yes, duct tape.


“You’re a regular Edison,” says Carlos.

As he heads out the door, he hears her say, “Hah. If I was Edison, I would have stolen my work from someone else.”

“As opposed to just the lunch box?” says Dr. Timmons.

“We appreciate Gary’s sacrifices for the team,” says Dr. Kwan.

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Carlos has discovered a slight problem with his detection methods. It’s not that they’re inaccurate; the duck has picked up any number of disturbances as he’s made his way across town. If anything, it has the opposite problem.

He’s across the street from the radio station, his last known location nine months from now. The duck is going crazy, and… there’s nothing there.

This has happened several times already. At roughly half of the hotspots, in fact. The other ones have obvious traces of serious magic: cold spots, lingering darkness, imprints visible with the Sight.

As he stares at the sidewalk where he met and will yet meet defeat, he glumly concludes that his best hypothesis is looking more and more likely: if someone is screwing around with time then there’s no reason the effects shouldn’t show up before the cause. The hotspots without obvious markers are places where the disruptions haven’t happened yet. Time’s exit wounds, like a bullet hole in a wall where the discarded shells and gunshot residue are in another room and the bullet itself is God knows where.
Except, you know, backwards.

Carlos has another headache.

He steps off the curb. The duck quiets for a few seconds, but the warbling picks up again halfway across the street – right in front of the Night Vale Community Radio Station.

It would be stupid to get nervous now when he’s already openly wandered across half the town, including past City Hall, without incident. Apart from its somewhat rocky start, Carlos’ relationship with Night Vale Community Radio has always been benign: station management stays safely confined in their offices, the staff members refrain from practicing dark magic, and the interns only ever show up as innocent bystanders. Their interactions today have done nothing to break that pattern, even after the part where Carlos accidentally let Cecil gaze into the abyss of his soul while it gazed back.

Cecil, apparently, didn’t notice or didn’t care. Carlos isn't sure if this says something alarming about his soul, the degree that Night Vale terrorizes its residents, or both.

Carlos takes a deep breath and puts his left hand against the station's enormous bloodstone door. The cut on his palm immediately starts to sting. He gives the door a mental prod and it swings open by itself.

Intern Chad! does a double-take and drops a large cardboard box.

“Hey, is it okay if I run a few tests?” asks Carlos, vaguely waving his duck-in-a-box. It’s begun to twitter in short, sharp bursts. “Also – your, uh, bugs are escaping.” He carefully steps over the stream of flightless insects making their way to the door.

“That would be great!” says Intern Chad! breathlessly. “We just went to the weather, help yourself! Can you hand me that broom?” Carlos passes the broom over and heads down the hall, leaving Intern Chad! carefully rounding up his quarry.

An odd hissing comes out of the lunch box as Carlos passes the frosted glass doors of station management. He pauses a moment, searching for movement, but the darkness remains still. He continues through the station.

The duck hushes as he turns down the next hall and passes the bathroom, but it begins to vibrate at the door marked STAFF BREAK ROOM and covered in crime scene tape.

The whistling starts up again as Carlos gets closer to the studio. He smoothes his hair, steels himself, and knocks on the door.

There’s a cheerful “Come in!”

Inside, a guy in headphones leans over the soundboard, in front of the giant pane of glass walling off the recording booth. On the other side of the glass is Cecil, who is staring dreamily at the ceiling and spinning around in his swivel chair.

The duck lets out a loud squeal. Headphones Guy turns his head and blurts, “Oh my God, he’s here!”

Inside the booth, Cecil spins around so he’s facing the right direction and leaps to his feet. His chair hits the ground in a silent thump.

“Uh, hi,” says Carlos. He gives Cecil a little wave, which is returned enthusiastically.
“Hi, I’m Jerry!” says Headphones Guy. “I’m so sorry, I thought you were Chad! Can I touch your hair?”

“No,” says Carlos.

Jerry sighs longingly. Fortunately, he’s distracted when Cecil opens the door of the booth.

“Carlos! Hello!” says Cecil. “Oh, please excuse me. I don’t think I’ve formally introduced myself—”

“You’re Cecil,” says Carlos, sticking his hand out. He belatedly realizes his palms are cold and sweaty, but it’s too late: he’s shaking hands with Cecil, whose grip is warm and firm, just like his voice. “I’ve, uh. Heard your show?”

“That’s wonderful!” says Cecil, beaming at him.

They’re still shaking hands. Carlos lets got abruptly.

“How can I help you, Carlos?” asks Cecil.

“I’m testing for...” Carlos blanks. “…Materials? With my, uh. Danger... Meter.” He holds up his duck-in-a-box as evidence.


“You live here?” asks Carlos.

“Only spiritually,” says Cecil, with a quick, crooked grin.

“No, of course not,” says Carlos, resisting the urge to smack his forehead. “Uh. Right.” He stares down at the duck-in-a-box and hopes Cecil doesn’t notice his ears are turning red. He frowns and gestures at the booth door. “Can I—?”

“After you,” says Cecil, holding the door open and making a little bowing motion.

Inside the booth, the whistling grows in pitch and intensity – bad, though not as bad as the readings across the street, or by the Rec Center. But the box begins vibrating so wildly Carlos stops when he’s level with Cecil’s desk, afraid he’ll lose his grip. He turns to face the studio wall, and the lights on the EMF detector abruptly flare and burn out.

“Oh, dear,” says Cecil, almost in his ear. Carlos jerks, because Cecil is standing right next to him. He looks faintly perturbed – no, concerned. “That sounds like an awful lot of materials. What does the Danger Meter say?”

“It, uh,” says Carlos, scrubbing his free palm on his borrowed lab coat. Cecil is looking at him, and Carlos thinks that maybe the soulgaze earlier was a good thing, because he can meet Cecil’s eyes with no problems now, like a fine, upstanding scientist, and maybe he’ll be able to determine what color they actually are, because it’s kind of hard to tell—

The microphone on Cecil’s desk is old; so is much of the equipment in the studio. It helps protect them from disruptive magical influences, like the presence of a wizard who is not freaking out, he’s just – distracted—

Jerry’s headphones, sadly, are not so lucky. Carlos can see them spark out of the corner of his eye, and Jerry rips them off with a yelp.

“Sorry,” says Carlos. “I – it says – these are really anomalous readings and I don’t know when
Jerry douses his headphones with a fire extinguisher, just in time for one of the computers to start smoking.

“I have to go,” says Carlos, and absolutely does not run from the room in a minor panic.

"Stupid," mutters Carlos, passing the row of beehives behind the labs. "Stupid, stupid, stupid."

This side of the building used to be a shop front before it was converted into apartments (and then into a temporary ghost sanitorium). Carlos unlocks the door next to the giant glass window so dusty it completely blocks the light from the streetlamps.

"'I'm testing for materials' – "Ek!" A tiny blue star winks into existence, illuminating the empty room. "This is my Danger Meter!"

He descends the narrow staircase and enters his former safe room – now, unfortunately, his actual room – just in time for his radio to crackle on and say, "...Pretty evening here in Night Vale. I hope all of you out there have someone to sleep through it with, or at least good memories of when you did."

"Oh, thanks a lot," says Carlos, because he's had a long day – an extra-long day – and sometimes people don't have the time or opportunity or luck to find someone trustworthy and convince them that you'd, you know, and then the years pass and it becomes increasingly awkward because if you did find someone you'd probably have to explain everything, including the fact that you maybe have exaggerated your experience slightly – slightly – and have thus created what are probably some unreasonable expectations that can only lead to disappointment, and sleeping alone isn't that bad, and you know what, Cecil doesn't have to rub it in. Although Carlos did just sort of accidentally sabotage his studio, so maybe he deserves it. He drops into a rickety folding chair and covers his face with his hands. "Argh," he says.

"Goodnight, listeners," is all Cecil says in response. "Good night."

Carlos sighs and starts drawing up plans for tomorrow.

It's simple, when you get right down to it: all he has to do is keep his head down and keep an eye out. Calm things down. Stay put.

For the next nine months.

In Night Vale.

Yeah, he's probably doomed.

Chapter End Notes

"I do not envy you your decision to make time travel such an integral part of the story."
— Libraflyter
By Midsummer’s Eve, Carlos has raised a combination of wards and protections around the lab capable of fending off a small mob of librarians, a large mob of angry citizens, and the noxious energies of the Valentine’s Day thing. In addition, he’s annotated every single public safety brochure available with corrections and helpful tips, and even submitted forms to City Hall registering all of the scientists’ computers, laptops, and tablets as electronic abaci and certainly not any kind of computing device that might gain sentience and seize control of the town (even though he’s not so sure about Dr. Kwan’s).

He is now the proud owner of a pair of fake glasses, more khakis than he has ever possessed in the entire rest of his life combined, and his very own lab coat.

He has also successfully prevented Night Vale from vanishing in a fiery conflagration and sinking beneath the sands, if only just. It's a work in progress.

~*~*~*~

Carlos is standing in line at the hardware store when the soft rock wafting over the intercom cuts out abruptly. “For sale: horseshoes, never worn,” says Cecil. "Welcome to Night Vale.”

Carlos looks around furtively, but no one has noticed the interruption. Then he sees one of the employees stepping away from a control panel and realizes they must usually listen to the show here. He's still not really used to other people doing that.

No one has noticed that for the fourth time this week he's buying things like concrete mix, fuel and oxygen cylinders for an acetylene torch, and three pallets of scrap metal, either. He guesses that's a side effect of everyone thinking he's a scientist, which is an unexpected bonus.

He still has no idea who or what caused the time vortex in the sandstorm, but he has figured out what’s putting so much strain on the master wards: it’s the misfiring storm wards, generating so much magical feedback they’re interfering with the other spells. He still doesn’t know why they’re misfiring – if anyone’s been doing enough magic to set them off, it’s the kind that makes no psychic noise and has no noticeable effects – but he thinks he’s come up with a way to ground out the excess energy. Hence all the trips to the hardware store.

Despite trying to distract himself by going over his plans, he still catches the last tinkling strains of the opening music. It triggers another flashback to his soulgaze with Cecil, which is why he misses the first rustle of fake plastic feathers.

When he realizes what he's hearing, he bites back a groan and immediately looks for an escape route. But he's blocked by the old lady in the next checkout line buying an entire cartful of rope, and then it's too late.

The Indian Tracker sidles up to him. “Warden Ramirez?” he asks, hesitantly.

Carlos looks around; no one is paying attention, on account of actively ignoring them. “Yes?” he says.

The Indian Tracker blinks, like he hadn't been expecting a response. “Why are you out in public?
Isn’t that dangerous?”

Carlos is not about to admit he’s being blackmailed by an unscrupulous researcher on a very
determined quest for tenure to a guy wearing a plastic feathered headdress that even hipster racists

“Oh,” says the Indian Tracker. “It’s a good disguise. I almost didn’t recognize you without your
hood. Your hair is so… shiny.”

“Gracias,” says Carlos, trying to edge away from his slightly unnerving stare.

"Some exciting local news!" Cecil’s voice echoes across the store. Several people smile reflexively.
"John Peters – you know, the farmer – is organizing a barn-raising! He hopes that this will provide a
valuable source of community togetherness, give us all a chance to build character as well as
agricultural storage structures, and at last repay him for all the work he’s put into improving our little
town over the years. All interested participants should submit a resume and a sample of their work.
Experience operating construction equipment is a plus!”

“I wanted to let you know I’ve changed my name,” says the Indian Tracker. “I’ve been doing some
research, and I realize now that some people may have considered it offensive.”

“That’s great, man,” says Carlos, relaxing a little. Maybe now they can have a civilized—

“From now on, you can call me the Apache Tracker,” says the Apache Tracker.

Carlos opens his mouth, closes it again, and finally manages to say, “Get out.”

The Apache Tracker says, like he didn't hear Carlos at all, “One must always be open to change
from the forces surrounding us.”

“Yeah, especially when one is *still acting like an asshole,*” says Carlos.

“I must leave you now to continue my quest,” says the Apache Tracker, nodding sagely, and you
know what, as far as Carlos is concerned this guy has forfeited all rights to any adjectives. Although
there's a couple nouns Carlos would definitely be willing to share, especially after the Tracker adds,
“Yonder dwells the great Pearl-Feather: Megalodon, the Magician, Manitoba's wealth and wampum
guarded by his fiery serpents.”

“Now you're just quoting 'The Song of Hiawatha',” says Carlos. "Sadly. That's not – I don't even –
ugh." He covers his face with his hand and takes a deep breath.

"What are you doing at midnight tonight?" he asks, instead of what he actually wants to say (which
perfect hair or not would probably get him banned from the store). Being a Warden means he has to
do a lot of distasteful things, and even though classifying the Tracker's skills as "ancient" or "Indian"
is complete and total *bullshit*, classifying them as "magic" is, unfortunately, not.


"I am so sure," says Carlos. "You can do it in that empty lot behind the library. I'm going to need
some help."

"May Coyote guide my steps and smile on our endeavors," says the Tracker, and vanishes as
mysteriously as he came – which is to say through the automatic doors at the front of the store,
followed by frowns and eye-rolls.
Carlos' next step is to summon aid from someone who does not make him want to hit things.

Night Vale's local chapter of the Paranet is surprisingly small, given the number of people with minor talents in the community. Or maybe it's not so surprising – Night Valeans are notoriously independent and notoriously weird. Also, Carlos has heard the words "blood feud" tossed around, and sometimes he just does not want to know.

The Paranet isn't really a hierarchical organization, but if it was, Shakeena Flynn would be the head of it in Night Vale. Carlos has established a wary trust with her over the past several years, but outside of emergencies they largely avoid each other, so he hopes she's not going to take it amiss when he knocks on her front door.

The peephole darkens momentarily. "Can I help you?" comes a voice from the other side of the door.

"I'd like to speak to Ms. Flynn, please," says Carlos. "Code Indigo."

The door is yanked open, revealing Flynn herself. "You're a scientist," she says. "How do you know about Code—" She stops. Then she squints at him and holds up her thumb. After a second Carlos realizes she's lining it up with his head to crudely mimic the effect of a hooded cloak.

"Warden Ramirez?" she says in disbelief.

"I'm undercover," he says.

Flynn snorts. "You better be. Four different vigilante squads are still after you. There's even a new picture of your hood up in the Post Office – not that anyone can see it now, but…"

"Can I come in?" Carlos asks.

Flynn's lived in this house for as long as Carlos has known her. She's raised a family there and the threshold is nice and strong. Carlos could break through – probably – but it would neutralize enough of his power to make things pretty dicey if anything or anyone attacked, and also it's really rude.

Flynn takes her time thinking about, inspecting his face closely, but at last says, "Fine," and holds the door open for him. "You are welcome as a guest in this house."

Carlos isn't sure if Flynn is being nice or just adding an additional layer of protection. Probably both. The code of hospitality is an old one, and one that most supernatural creatures will hold to religiously. Humans aren't subject to actually being bound by it, but most wizards tread very, very carefully about breaking it; it's not nearly as devastating when it comes to leeching your power as breaking your word, but it's close enough that you never know.

He sits on the couch. Her radio is on; Cecil is once again reporting on the barn-raising, which for some reason is taking place on the median near Exit 15 on Route 800.

Flynn brings him a glass of lemonade.

"Is this about the clouds?" she demands.

"Among other things," he says. She opens her mouth to protest, and he cuts in with, "Some of it's Council business, but I'll try to tell you as much as I can – if you help me."

According to Flynn, three months ago everything was fine. Two and a half months ago she had a
feeling something was wrong, but dismissed it as a nasty spring cold. Two months ago, she began a detailed log about the storm wards, which have apparently been freaking out on the average of once a day ever since.

She gives him a copy of her notes. Unsurprisingly, the storm wards were at their most erratic just before June 15, the date of his arrival. But Carlos also notices that there are definite spikes in activity corresponding with visits from Luccio, and wonders how the hell fixing the wards somehow leads to them becoming more broken.

"Thanks," he says, concealing his dismay. "If something like this happens again, could you try to let me know immediately?"

She gives him a flat look. "I did try," she says. "The number you gave me got disconnected. I even checked with other members of the Paranet, but most of their contacts had been pulled to deal with the Fomor, and I didn't trust the rest. Honestly, I thought you were dead."

"They tried," says Carlos. "It didn't take."

The problems started right after the raid in LA. If he hadn't been injured, maybe he could have caught this at the start. Maybe he could have stopped LA from falling. Maybe – he cuts off that line of thought. "One more thing," he says. "Are you available tonight?"

She looks at him warily, but says, "I should be as long as my sister can stay with the kids. I'm not leaving them alone at night."

"Great," says Carlos. "Meet us at the abandoned lot by the library at midnight."

She makes a face. "I hate that place. Who else is going to be there?"


She makes a different, more disgusted face.

"If you can't make it, send a message to the lab," says Carlos. "We're by Big Rico's."

"Carlos and the scientists," says Flynn, shaking her head. "You sound like an alt-rock group. Maybe you should enter the Battle of the Bands next month."

"I'm better with a sword than an axe," says Carlos. He's not making a pun; the Dark Owl Records Battle of the Bands uses real weaponry.

She shrugs. "Still. You guys are making quite an impression on the town. Cecil's been talking about you all week."

"Has he?" says Carlos, as if he hasn't heard every single show.

"We tried reaching out to Carlos, the intrepid leader of the small but brave band of seekers for scientific truths," says Cecil, as if on cue. "...But he was unavailable for comment. Listeners report that he was last seen standing in line at the Ace Hardware next to the Apache Tracker. He looked intensely uncomfortable and yet as dashing as always."

"Just don't get anyone's hopes up," says Flynn. She opens the front door. "Me and Cecil go back. You might want to keep that in mind."

"I will," says Carlos. He looks back as he leaves. Her smile is pleasant, charming. Unnerving.
Carlos is driving the Sciencemobile past the community radio station when the engine sputters and shuts off. He just sighs, because if he got upset every time a car died on him he'd never get anything done. At least this time he's not stranded on the Mojave Freeway in the middle of nowhere.

The radio lets out a burst of static, then subsides. "The Greater Night Vale Medical Community would like to remind you that trepanning is considered cosmetic surgery and will not be covered by most insurance plans," says Cecil. "Remember: you need trepanning like you need a hole in the head!"

Carlos is not disappointed the show is on and Cecil will therefore be busy, because that would be ridiculous. He's perfectly okay with asking an intern or a producer if they can recommend a garage, and can he borrow a phone, he apologizes in advance if there are any side effects from his scientific aura but this is very important.

He sighs again and climbs out of the van.

This time when he enters the station the front room is empty. "Hello?" he calls. There's no answer.

He frowns and briefly considers retrieving his staff from the van, but enough people are capable of recognizing a wizard's staff that they might start getting a little too curious about Carlos the Scientist. He does pull on his *pakal* glove, though; if he tucks the cuff in, the sleeve of his lab coat hides most of the Mayan logograms etched in the metal plating. He still feels exposed. It's times like these when he really misses his cloak and all the protective spells he's worked into it over the years.

Somebody has left a monitor turned up loud enough that Carlos can listen to the show without his curse co-opting nearby electronics. "We now return to the barn-raising for John Peters – you know, the farmer – bustling away on the median strip near Exit 15. Listeners are calling in and telling us that instead of a barn, volunteers have begun constructing enormous golden idols; one is nearly complete and appears to be in the shape of a wizened peach, shriveling in the white-hot scorch of the summer sun. I'm not sure how this will fit in with the finished structure, but we must applaud the talent and creativity of our local craftspersons!"

Carlos pokes his head into a few rooms and finds nothing. He gives the entrance to the realm of station management a long, hard look, but it seems quiet.

The door to the staff break room is ajar.

He pushes the door open the rest of the way. The room is clear, but a coffee pot has been overturned, and lying on the floor by one of the many commemorative plaques is a small plastic badge. Carlos picks it up.

It says "Hello, my name is Intern Chad!"

There's a strange noise from outside, a short, sharp shriek. Most people would probably assume it was some kind of animal.

The windows to the break room are jammed shut. Carlos disintegrates one of them and climbs outside. He heads towards the noise, skirting the edge of the building.

The perimeter is clear. There's nothing around the back but the employee parking lot and the station's bloodstone circle – which looks suspiciously damp. But by the time Carlos crouches down next to it, senses tentatively extended, the hungry stones have absorbed whatever moisture coated them only minutes before. The only other sign that anyone's been back here is an abandoned tennis racket lying
nearby.

Clouds from the storm wards are churning restlessly in the sky, though they’ve been doing that all afternoon. Carlos touches one of the bloodstones and feels a light but unmistakable trace of dark magic. Human, probably. It's too faint to give him much information. It may have once been able to wrap around the building and spill out into the street to the site of the vortex, or it may not have. He can't even tell when it's from – it might be recent and weak, or old and, once, extraordinarily powerful. He would almost certainly be able to find out more if he used his Sight, but Carlos would honestly rather overdose on bath salts and eat his own face than permanently imprint a bloodstone circle's entire magical history on his soul. It would be far less painful and traumatic.

Carlos circles the building again. He finds nothing. He can't shake the feeling that there's something wrong, but right now he’s done all he can, and he really needs to get back to the lab with the scrap metal. Cecil is tranquilly reporting on the construction of two giant marble plinths at the barn-raising, so at least inside the station everything still seems quiet.

Too quiet, his mind adds automatically.

There's a loose brick in the pathway from the parking lot to the station. Carlos tears a piece of paper out of his notebook and scribbles LOOK OUT on it, then duct-tapes it to the brick and throws them through the studio window.

"It looks like Intern Brad has returned, and he’s received a message!" says Cecil. "Are you all right, Brad? Oh, you might want to put some ice on that. The messages says..." There's a crackle of paper. "'Look out! Well, I'm not sure if this was intended as a very brief warning from a polite window-smashing vandal, or as a reminder that you can never be too vigilant in guarding yourself from the unknown malevolent forces that could be anywhere or anyone. But either way, thank you to our anonymous contributor! We go now to financial news..."

When Carlos gets back to the Sciencemobile, another unmarked white van has pulled up next to it. Several balaclava'd police officers are poking the tires suspiciously.

"Hi," he says. "Can I help you?"

They all cry "Carlos!" in happy unison.

"Oh, is this your van?" says one of the officers breathlessly. "We're sorry. Normally there's no parking here, but we can certainly make an exception for science."

"That won't be necessary," says Carlos. "I actually just broke down. As soon as I can get a tow, I'll be out of your hair."

They all sigh and repeat, "Hair." Then another officer says, shyly, "I'm pretty good with cars. Do you want me to take a look?"

"Sure," says Carlos, because he really needs the van in working order, even if it will be a pain to remove all the bugs and tracking devices.

Fifteen minutes later (after a purple, squishy thing has been removed from the engine, his spark plugs have been replaced, and he gets a brief lecture about the importance of regular inspections) he finally pulls away from the radio station. He peers at it in the rear-view mirror; it looks quiet, peaceful. Like any other normal community radio station run by extradimensional beings malevolent to all earthly life, whose show host is whistling “Camptown Races” as a paid advertisement for Dell computers.

Carlos clenches his fingers around the steering wheel and suppresses an unexpected surge of anger.
Not at Cecil; he’s about as magical as the brick Carlos just threw though his window and almost certainly not responsible for any supernatural disturbances.

No, Carlos is angry that his first possible lead on whatever’s fucked up the storm wards, or maybe even caused the time vortex in the sandstorm, was even in close proximity to Cecil, tainting what is possibly the only good thing to come out of Carlos’ tenure as Night Vale's regional commander: his death curse.

Carlos re-runs that sentence through his head.


"Perfect Carlos, with his perfect command of scientific principles and hair-care products," Cecil continues.

Carlos takes a deep breath and tries to clear his mind. Obsessing over this now isn’t going to get him anywhere, not until he can investigate; first he has to take care of the storm wards. He's got until dawn of Midsummer's Day tomorrow to get everything in place, or else he'll be perfect, all right: perfectly screwed.

~*~*~*~

While Carlos had a fairly stellar academic career overall – at least, during the years he actually got to attend high school – shop class was never his forte. Which means that welding together the branches of the **pararrayos** (because "weird metal trees" sounds stupid) without disrupting the glyphs etched on their surfaces is hard enough without the added complication of imbuing them with a stabilizing resonance for some of the most complicated and temperamental magical wards he's ever encountered.

So he’s not really appreciating all the shouting coming from upstairs, is his point. Aren’t scientists supposed to be dry and dispassionate?

"And now, traffic. The Sheriff's Secret Police have shut down all north- and southbound lanes of Route 800 near Exit 15 and have begun constructing barricades," says Cecil. At least, that's what Carlos thinks he says. He doesn't have a radio in here, so the broadcast is coming from a small razor blade vibrating in a crystal glass. Carlos normally uses it to determine ambient magical fluctuations, and it is just not up to competing with the sound of vigorous scientific debate.

There's a noise upstairs like a small explosion. Carlos swears and shuts off the welding torch.

He shuts the door to his workroom, strides past his bunk and emergency supply room, and climbs the stairs to the ground floor two at a time.

He listens for a moment at the door that leads to the science quarters: he still hears angry voices, but at least they're slightly quieter. Nothing has triggered the magical defenses around the lab, and he can’t sense any other disturbances, so he unlocks the door and scopes out the hallway. There’s a faint haze of some kind of (non-magical) smoke, but it’s otherwise empty.

Everyone seems to have gathered in Lab One – well, not everyone, as it turns out.

“Kate, stop shouting. Gary,” says Dr. Kwan calmly, a tone somewhat at odds with the still-smoking flare gun clutched in her fist. “Please explain in one hundred forty characters or less where Wei is.”

Gary’s face wrinkles in concentration, and then he says, “We were at the Dog Park and he got arrested by the Sheriff’s Secret Police and they took him to an abandoned mine shaft on the edge of
"You were at the Dog Park?" says Carlos. Kate and Gary jump when he speaks, and they both take a step back from him.

"Well, yeah," says Gary.

"You mean the Dog Park I told you under no circumstances to go near, and that I marked on the map with a big red X above the words 'STAY AWAY' in three different languages?"

"You know you're not supposed hang around there," says Dr. Kwan in exasperation. "It fucks with the equipment!"

"But the bees love it, and the readings it gives off are amazing!" protests Gary.

"Because they're leaking through a hole in reality," says Carlos.

Dr. Timmons, who has been watching this whole exchange silently, lifts his cane and points it at Carlos. "Can you help Wei?" he asks.

"I've got just over fourteen hours to finish a construct preventing the entire town from being destroyed," says Carlos. "And you want me to rescue one grad student who can't follow simple instructions?"

"Yes," says Dr. Timmons.

"Okay, fine," says Carlos.

"The doctors are very disappointed in you," says Carlos.

Wei slouches sullenly in the front seat of Dr. Kwan's Prius. Carlos keeps having flashbacks to Milagro's junior year, although when he picked her up at the police station he never had to hex the power supply to the whole complex and break her out in the subsequent confusion.

On the plus side, at least this time he doesn't have to explain what happened to his mother.

"I know it's tempting to keep up with the other grad students," says Carlos, "But you have to be responsible."

Wei mutters something in Mandarin that nevertheless conveys an essential quality of, "You're not the boss of me."

"This is all for your own safety," says Carlos. They pull up in front of the Ralph's. "Now get in there and ask for Kasha Sczimanski. Tell her you're officially requesting sanctuary and give her this." Carlos hands him a head of broccoli.

Wei gives him an incredulous look.

"The doctors will be around later with the rest of your stuff," says Carlos. "I hope by then you'll think of a suitable apology."

Wei climbs out of the car with a mumbled reply that is, possibly, a thank-you.

Carlos turns the radio up and settles in to wait a few moments, just so he's sure Wei isn't kicked out.
The volunteers have placed the idols on the plinths and have formed circles around them, chanting and holding hands," says Cecil. "The Sheriff's Secret Police report that the idols have begun to sparkle erratically – the golden peach emitting bursts of burnt sienna, and the golden ear of imaginary corn pulsing with a bright fuchsia Officer Cady Takagawa insists is an exact match for the shade of OPI nail polish known as Pompeii Purple."

Carlos sticks his head out the window and squints at the sky: whatever they’re doing instead of raising a barn, it isn’t big enough to attract the attention of storm wards, so he can probably let them sort it out themselves.

Several minutes pass; Wei fails to be thrown out on his ear. Carlos heads back to the lab.

The scientists are back in Lab One. There are more soot-stains in the fume hood, so it looks like Dr. Kwan had to break up another argument with her flare gun. She’s much more alarming with a weapon in her hand, but Carlos definitely isn’t going to be the one to try to take it away.

"Did you get him?" she asks as he walks inside.

Carlos tosses her the keys. "He's at the Ralph's," he says. "If he stays there a year and a day, all charges against him should be dropped. He should probably be able to make shift manager in about a month. I told him you’d bring his stuff."

"Thank you, Carlos," says Dr. Timmons. "We really appreciate it. Is there anything we can help you with?"

"Now, just wait a minute—" says Dr. Kwan.

"As a matter of fact, there is," says Carlos. "What are your feelings on post-holing?"

~*~*~*~

By the end of the afternoon, the scientists have very strong feelings on post-holing. Dr. Kwan, Kate, and Gary end up doing most of the work while Carlos drags the pararrayos into place. Dr. Timmons, meanwhile, shows up with a long grey cloak he got from the mall at Carlos' request, then helpfully sits in the van and gets them refills from the cooler.

"Aren't you worried that someone's going to see us?" he asks, as Carlos takes a short break.

"I planted suggestions all around the perimeter," says Carlos, sipping his water slowly. "Anyone who comes too close is going to have the sudden conviction they've lost their car keys. Most people try to avoid the library, anyway."

"That's a shame," says Dr. Timmons. "I mean, not that they'd want to avoid getting attacked – I know a little something about braving bad neighborhoods to get to the library. But they shouldn't have to deal with that, too. Knowledge should be open to everyone."

"Unfortunately, this is an improvement over the old system," says Carlos. He'd gotten nightmares the first time he'd read his predecessor's account of the Interlibrary Loan Wars.

"I wonder what it would take to get a Bookmobile?"

"Ten thousand signatures, thirteen pounds of gold, and a black rooster," says Carlos.
"Well, we could certainly start the petition," says Dr. Timmons. He leans over and fiddles with the tuner. "Huh. I keep trying to put some music on, but the radio's stuck on the local station."

"Wow, weird," says Carlos.

"The idols are gone," says Cecil, "melted down for more worthy purposes. The plinths have been smashed and eaten by City Council members. The barn itself blazes merrily as the sun sinks towards the horizon. But while we have all failed to raise John Peters – you know, the farmer – a barn suitable for housing livestock or equipment or non-soul-consuming ancient deities, we have still succeeded: we have succeeded in coming together for a common purpose and helping one of our own. May the fire of community effort always burn in our hearts, just as it is currently burning on the median near Exit 15 on Route 800, and may its warm glow shine clear in the night, visible through the thin desert air to anyone and anything for miles around, calling them as though moths to its civic-minded flames.

"Stay tuned for the Night Vale Symphony Orchestra performing Bach's *Echo Sonata for Two Unfriendly Groups of Instruments*… backwards! Good night, Night Vale. Good night."

Dr. Timmons shakes his head. "You know, this place is pretty strange."

"You wanted to study it," says Carlos.

"Oh, I'm aware," says Dr. Timmons. "It's not an entirely unpleasant experience, sometimes. Just... strange."

Carlos watches as in the distance one scientist and two grad students argue over the most efficient way to dig a hole for a magical tree behind a building filled with deadly inhuman librarians and thirty-three copies of *The Official Biography of Helen Hunt*, and then says, "Well, you're not wrong. I'd try the radio again, if I were you. It should be working now."

"Sounds like we're just in time for the replay of the Mandatory Earworm Registry's program!" says Dr. Timmons, after he changes the station.

Carlos hands him his cup and heads back to work to the dulcet tones of "Call Me Maybe".

He sends everyone home at quarter of twelve, right before Flynn appears. The Tracker shows up at 11:59 and makes a big production of bowing repeatedly to the void. Flynn doesn't bother to hide her exasperated sigh; Carlos just rubs his forehead and wishes he could introduce the Tracker to Wizard Listens-to-Wind, or better yet, his bisabuela and the business end of her naginata.

Cultural appropriation out of the way, they get to work. The sky is already lightening by the time they manage to pull the last of the *pararrayos* upright. They have only minutes to spare, but if Carlos has done this right, everything should be ready.

Belief is a critical part of successfully completing a spell, so now would probably be a really bad time to alarm the others by bursting into gales of hysterical laughter.

"You're sure we can do this?" asks Flynn.

"I've already done all the heavy lifting – uh, not literally – with the *pararrayos*," says Carlos, ruthlessly suppressing frantic giggles. "They just need to be linked and activated."

"Wakan Tanka looks upon us, and he will guide our hands," says the Tracker unhelpfully.

Flynn's own hands fly up into the air. "That's Sioux, you idiot! They don't even go here!"
"We need to get into position," says Carlos. He pulls on the new cloak. It's slightly too long and the fabric feels strange and there's no comforting buzz of protective spells, but it'll have to do.

Flynn mutters something under her breath, but takes her place in the circle behind him, facing southwest. The Tracker faces southeast, and Carlos takes the cardinal point to the north. His companions aren't nearly as strong as any wizard on the White Council, but right now that doesn't matter: Carlos can't manage this on his own. Fortunately, Midsummer is an excellent time for magic and the three-person link should help negate the power disparity, even if "Maiden, Mother, and Asshole" isn't exactly a legitimate tripartite combination.

Flynn starts chanting; the Tracker starts yodeling atonally and shuffling around in what he calls a Medicine Dance and what everyone else calls the Texas Two-Step, because they are not hugely racist. Carlos carefully draws two columns of glyphs in the sand, the shadows of their indentations darker than their actual depth would suggest.

Thunder rumbles above them and the wind picks up as the storm wards respond to their summons. Carlos' ears pop at the sudden change in air pressure.

As the sun breaks over the horizon, he shouts "Muyal k'al!" and breaks the circle.

Magic floods out, surging up the forest of metal trees and into the sky. The clouds gathered above disperse.

"Wow, it worked," says the Tracker.

"Of course it worked," says Carlos breezily. "You all right, Flynn?"

She's sitting on the ground, head between her knees. "Give me a minute," she says. "Your weird metal trees better last, Warden. I don't think I have the juice to do that again any time soon."

"If it needs any adjustments, I can tweak it myself," says Carlos.

"Is it supposed to do that?" asks the Tracker, staring at the sky.

"Do what?" asks Carlos.

The charred husk of what was probably once a surveillance drone crashes to the ground right in front of them.

Carlos squints upwards. Then he picks up a rock and hurls it into the air.

It goes up about thirty feet and then bursts into flames.

"Hmm," says Carlos.

"Fiercely the red stone descending," intones the Tracker. "Burned his way along the heavens, set the sky on fire behind – ow, son of a bitch!"

He flails at the pigeon that just collided with his head, its tail on fire. Once free of the plastic feathers it zig-zags off without even trying to attack them.

"Okay, you've ruined our town, but that was kind of funny," says Flynn.

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Despite the minor – minor! – side-effects, the pararrayos stabilize things long enough for the master
containment wards to fully regenerate, and things eventually quiet down. Which is, of course, the moment the scientists decide to strike.

They're getting along pretty well now, largely by avoiding each other except when necessary. A combination of a giant circle set in the floor of Lab Two and the installation of an enormous Faraday cage is apparently enough to shield their most sensitive equipment from his anti-technology field, and Dr. Kwan re-does most of the electrical wiring on the south side of the building herself, which helps with the rest. The grad students downgrade his suspicion level from "serial killer" to "member of the Flat Earth Society" after he rescues Wei. When he raises wards around the monitoring station, the doctors' apartments, and the grad students' house in Desert Creek, everyone begins looking the other way whenever he steals some of the coffee in Lab One (usually after he finishes brewing it, because the lab is filled with barbarians who never refill the pot).

Apparently, it's too good to last.

It starts innocently enough. He's listening to Cecil on the radio and welding another branch to the scale model of the *pararrayos* on the desk in front of him when someone knocks on his office door.

(The office is another unexpected courtesy. Carlos has his workroom down in the basement for more seriously magical endeavors, but this has a window and a desk and bookshelves. The bookshelves came pre-stocked with some textbooks and lab equipment, and someone taped some science cartoons on his door; if Carlos didn't know any better, he'd think he looked like a real scientist, too.)

He shuts the torch off and says, "Come in."

"Be alert," says Cecil. "Night Vale needs more lerts! Please report to your nearest Lert Recruitment Office as soon as you have reached the legal age and keep the draft from being reinstated."

Dr. Timmons enters. "Hello, Carlos," he says, leaning his cane against the door. "Oh, is that supposed to be one of the weird metal trees behind the library?"

"Yes," says Carlos, then, "They're not weird metal trees."

"They're still setting all airborne objects on fire," says Dr. Timmons. "Are you going to get rid of them?"

"No, they're supposed to do that," says Carlos. "Well, they're supposed to be there; they're not supposed to set everything on fire, I still need to make some... minor adjustments. Can I help you with anything?" he adds, pointedly.

"Indeed," says Dr. Timmons. "These are for you." He hands him a stack of paper almost half an inch thick.

Carlos pushes his welding goggles up on his forehead. The first page is covered in chemical equations. "What is this?" he asks.

"It's your assessment," says Dr. Timmons.

"My what?"

"Dr. Kwan and I decided we could best tailor your curriculum if we could evaluate your proficiency across all fields," he says.

Carlos translates that in his head and says, "Wait. I have to take a test?"
"It seemed like the most efficient solution," says Dr. Timmons. "It's due tomorrow. Good luck!"

Carlos stares at the sixty-page assessment in dismay. He’s been out of high school for over ten years and he still somehow feels guilty for not studying.

He shoves the test in a desk drawer with all his useless computations and psychic readings and energy diagrams of the radio station and turns back to his model. He carefully sets it in the middle of the circle drawn on the floor. Maybe the addition of more aluminum leaves should dissipate some of the stray energy...

He channels power into the tree. The leaves rustle faintly, but otherwise there's no noticeable difference.

He flicks a spitball into the air above it.

It catches on fire.

Carlos sighs, severs the connection, and breaks the circle. The tree gets dumped with the other failed models. He pulls out a Sharpie and his test, and looks at the first question.

1) Write a nuclear equation for the indicated decay of each of the following nuclides:  
   a. Po-210 (alpha)  
   b. Ac-227 (beta)  
   c. Tl-207 (beta)  
   d. O-15 (positron emission)  
   e. Pd-103 (electron capture)

"Madre de Dios," he mutters. He stares at the question. Then he stares at his recycling bin full of miniature pyromaniacal trees.

Times like these call for test-taking strategies. He rips off the first few pages, sets them aside, and skips around until he finds the section on entropy, which makes him feel much more competent.

When he hands his test back to Dr. Timmons the next morning, it's considerably lighter.

"Sorry if there are some missing pages," says Carlos. "I was testing the model of the pararrayos in my office and things got kind of... flammable."

"Unexpected exothermic reactions happen to the best of us," says Dr. Timmons sagely. "We'll just make sure all those sections are covered in your lesson plans. Unless you want to retake the test?"

"No, I'm good," says Carlos.

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He pounds on the door to Lab Two.

"Who is it?" Dr. Kwan shouts.

"I need to use the emergency shower!" shouts Carlos.

She yanks the door open and says, “The emergency shower is for emergencies—” She pales as she gets a good whiff of him. “Never mind, go ahead.”

He practically runs over and yanks the chain. Tepid, stale, yet blessedly clean water cascades down around him, washing away the noxious mix of the ectoplasm and carrion. The last lingering touches
of dark enchantment dissolve and slide away too, unable to withstand the running water.

Dr. Kwan disappears into the Faraday cage (across the room and well away from the water), but returns in a few minutes. "I shut everything down," she says. "Since you're here, I thought we'd discuss your test results."

"Seriously?" says Carlos, and immediately regrets his decision to open his mouth.

She opens a window and says loudly, "It's a good thing there's no one close to our building, or else these noxious fumes from our scientific experiments would certainly ruin someone's day! They are much less interesting than our latest report from the monitoring station, anyway. Thank goodness Carlos will be reading that at 10:15 PM, after the lab airs out!"

There's an odd rustling outside, like someone hidden in the bushes rapidly crawling away while trying not to gag.

"There, that should give us some privacy," she says to Carlos, opening more windows. "Don't worry, your results aren't nearly as awful as I'd thought they'd be."

Carlos gives her a sarcastic thumbs-up.

"Your biology scores were terrible, but you seem to have a decent grounding in chemistry and physics, and you're not unknowledgeable in geology," she continues. "Andre and Kate will work on bringing you up to speed in geophysics; their side of our project is more layperson-friendly, anyway, so you should cover that first. We'll work you up to apian-assisted energy mapping. As for the rest of your assessment – well, you're going to need to do some serious brushing-up on the nuclear sciences, but I was pleasantly surprised with your essays on thermodynamics. Is there any reason you know so much about the role of entropy and the second law in fluid systems?"

Carlos sticks his head out of the stream of water and says, "I have a practical interest in understanding exactly how my shield is keeping people and/or things from shooting me in the head."

She snorts. "Yeah, you definitely wouldn't want anyone to mess up your hair."

She lets him stand there for about fifteen minutes before asking, "Are you good?"

"About as good as I'm gonna get," sighs Carlos, who is going to have to burn all his clothes. He just hopes his staff is going to be okay.

"Thank God," she says. "Please leave." Carlos gives her an ironic salute as she pulls down the shut-off valve.

"So, can I ask why you smell like dead animals and—" She sniffs. "—Vanilla?"

"I don't want to talk about it," says Carlos.

~*_~*_~*_~

Dr. Kwan executes Operation My Fair Lady (Carlos did not get a say in the name) with a ruthless efficiency that explains both how she secured funding for their research and why her superiors were perfectly happy having her disappear into the desert for an indeterminate length of time. (That was definitely a mistake on their part, Carlos thinks. He understands barely a quarter of her research, but he's pretty sure if they had given her a fully-staffed lab like she had requested – or so he assumes from the frequent diatribes she mutters under her breath while repairing their equipment – she would have figured out how to take over the world in about two years, tops. She's like a one-woman
Manhattan Project.)

Dr. Timmons is much less terrifying, though he is more likely to go off on tangents about their research for hours on end. He focuses on "anomalous geologic formations" (which Carlos translates to "weird rocks" with no loss of clarity) and actually looks happy when Carlos suggests things like their seismographic readings being off because they've accidentally stuck the sensors in another dimension.

Kate is Dr. Timmons' assistant. She's working on her doctorate in geophysics, enjoys hiking (even while wearing a full hazmat suit in Radon Canyon), and proves to be the best shot when Carlos makes everyone go to the firing range to learn the basics of gun safety. She also founded her campus' Sex Positivity Club, is in a committed long-distance relationship, and is alarmingly open about about her surprisingly active sex life, and somewhere out there all of Carlos' friends are laughing and they don't know why. Carlos spends a depressing and frustrating week comparing their relative prowess at both dating and engineering geodesy until he finally gets over himself.

Wei handles the bulk of his tutoring, since he's temporarily confined to the Ralph's. He's from Shanghai and is here on a student visa while he pursues degrees in both environmental chemistry and something involving computers. He's not pleased about his grocery store exile but still calculates the most efficient way to stock the shelves, and Carlos spends another depressing and frustrating week comparing himself to life in the science fast lane when he overhears some stock girls discussing exactly why Wei's nametag reads 'Ladykiller'. However, he's very gracious about explaining concepts that would be laughably simple to the non-technologically intolerant (like the difference between iMacs, iPods, iPads, and iPhones, and why they are great for some programs but terrible for others, and what an operating system is) and he keeps a surprisingly cool head in difficult situations (like getting attacked by an inorganic chemistry textbook trying to bite his leg off).

Gary is... Gary.

~*~*~*~

Carlos is not having the best day. His new haircut looks awful. He's having a hard time grasping nuclear physics. Play Ball, which is normally quite good about stocking small arms and light weapons, is out of grenades. The Scienemobile broke down for the third time. He's tired, on account of waking up in a panic when he dreamed a faceless old woman crept into his room and leaned over his bed and demanded to know why they didn't have wifi, and he's irritated, because now he has to spackle over the bullet holes in the basement ceiling and living room wall caused by immediately going for his gun after waking up in a panic when he dreamed a faceless old woman crept into his room and leaned over his bed and demanded to know why they didn't have wifi. His only lead on the time vortex issue has gone cold. The storm wards are acting up again. He spent most of last night on fire.

Cecil just ran out of the radio station, took one look at him, and fainted.

Carlos ends up dragging him over to the defunct Scienemobile and sticking him in the back. He props Cecil's feet up on a box of seismograph paper and loosens his tie. After a moment's thought, he covers him with his lab coat. The temperature has dipped since the sun went down, and judging by Cecil's exit velocity and what Carlos knows of station management, he probably needs the defensive spells Carlos has been slowly working into the lining more than Carlos does right now.

Carlos sits down on the bumper by Cecil's head and wonders what to do next. He tried asking for help. The first person he found ran away screaming as soon as they saw his hair, or possibly the barrage of purple lightning from the storm wards actually doing their job and keeping station
management from leaving the building. He's since stolen one of Gary's baseball caps from the back of the Sciencemobile (and set up a portable array of scrap metal and aluminum over on the sidewalk) just in case; however, everyone else appears to have evacuated the area, and Carlos knows better than to leave anyone alone and unconscious in Night Vale. But even if he could find someone, or get the van running, he's not really sure where to go: the walk-in clinic is closed at this time of night, and the emergency room has a rather reckless attitude towards limb- and organ-removal.

Cecil stirs and groans.

Carlos breathes a sigh of relief and gently taps his shoulder. "Cecil?"

Cecil's eyes blink open. Then they go wide.

"Are you all right?" asks Carlos. "You fainted when—"

"Am I dead?" whispers Cecil.

"No?" says Carlos, taken aback.

"Are you sure?"

"You're awake and breathing," says Carlos. Cecil still looks alarmed, so Carlos adds a little desperately, "I could take your pulse again?"

Cecil sort of flails one arm out from beneath the lab coat, and Carlos wraps his fingers around his wrist. He can feel blood pounding beneath the warm, delicate skin. He thinks about telling Cecil that zombies are never particularly concerned with their metaphysical status, but then he thinks that's not a particularly scientific thing to say.

Cecil's heartbeat speeds up and his eyes are beginning to widen again, which is when Carlos realizes he should probably let go.

"Perfectly – uh. Perfectly normal," he says. He stands up to give Cecil more room. "You should probably sit up slowly."

Cecil does, Carlos' hand hovering awkwardly a few inches away in case he needs to catch him again. Cecil scootches around and unfolds his legs from the back of the van. He pulls the lab coat tighter around his shoulders.

Carlos jams his hands in his pockets and takes a step back, so he's not looming creepily.

"Thank you, Carlos," says Cecil.

"De nada," says Carlos. "Are you – how are you feeling?"

"Much better," says Cecil. "I should probably go..."

"No, don't – I mean, you can wait for as long as you need," says Carlos.

"Thank you," says Cecil again. They both fall silent.

Carlos stares at the ground in front of him, then looks over at Cecil. His fingers are curled around his wrist, cradling it to his chest; as Carlos watches, his ears begin to flush bright red. Carlos goes back to staring at his feet. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Cecil glance over at him and wince at the hat.
"I wanted—" he begins at the same moment Cecil says, "So, I—"

They both stop.

"You first," says Cecil.

"I, uh, wanted to ask you about the creeping fear you were talking about earlier," says Carlos. "On your show."

"Oh, of course," says Cecil. "Anything to help Night Vale's scientific community. Intern Brad got a call from Larry Leroy, out on the edge of town, at 3:07 this afternoon. It was gone around four, but I'm not actually sure when because all the clocks stopped in the studio when station management began, ah, voicing their disapproval." He looks nervously at the station. An eerie blue glow illuminates the windows, but the lurking presences within have fallen into sullen silence.

"Great," says Carlos. "Thanks. You'll be okay, right? With station management?"

"Oh, probably," says Cecil. "Once dawn comes and sweeps away the night, they might not even remember. And I've got a copy of my contract tied to a brick all ready to go if need be."

"Good," says Carlos.

There's another long silence.

"Did you want to ask me something?" says Carlos.

"Oh!" says Cecil. "Yes, – I..." He flushes. "...I forget."

"Oh," says Carlos.

Cecil rubs the back of his neck and says, "I think I'm going to try standing now." He carefully gets to his feet.

"Can I – are you okay to drive?" asks Carlos.

"Yes," says Cecil. He hands back the lab coat. "Carlos, I don't know how to thank you—"

"It's fine," says Carlos. "I'd do the same for anybody."

"Of course," says Cecil. His wilt slightly, and Carlos takes half a step forward, in case he faints again. "Have a good evening, Carlos," he says instead.

"You, too," says Carlos, watching him walk back to his car with steady, measured steps.

It's only after he drives away that Carlos realizes he still doesn't have a ride, which means he's going to have to walk home and tell Dr. Kwan he KO'd the van yet again. It's the perfect end to a crappy twenty-four hours, so it almost definitely explains why his heart is racing and his palms are sweating and his mind is whirling. This kind of day would make anyone feel full of emotions.

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If Carlos had to pick an adjective to describe scientists, he probably would not have gone with 'sneaky'. And yet, despite the fact that he has been trained in both tactics and evasion, and has put those skills to use in any number of life and death situations, they have still managed to corner him in Lab One while he is innocently stealing their coffee.
“Can I help you?” he asks, pouring the last of this morning’s dregs into a mug that says WORLD’S BEST SCIENTIST. He’s pretty sure it was meant sarcastically, since it appeared shortly after Wei and Dr. Kwan spent an hour standing in the cold storage stock room at the Ralph’s trying to explain how the internet works, but hey, free mug.

Dr. Timmons frowns at the empty carafe. “You’re not going to just leave that, are you?”

“Of course not,” says Carlos, affronted. “I always start a new pot. What do I look like, a grad student?”

Dr. Kwan mutters, “I knew it,” under her breath, then says, “Do you listen to the community radio broadcast?”

“Oh, you know,” says Carlos, with smooth nonchalance. “Sometimes.”

“So you know that Cecil, the host, has an enormous crush on you, right?”

Carlos does not like the direction this is going, and decides to bluff them out. “Can you blame him?” he says. “I mean, look at me.”

Dr. Kwan rolls her eyes. “Well, don’t let him down too harshly. He’s instrumental in maintaining the good will of the community, and as our public front, you’re——”

“I don’t really think it’s fair to drag my personal life into this,” says Carlos, a little more hotly than he intended.

Dr. Timmons holds his hands out apologetically. “I know, I know. But every time he mentions you, there’s at least a ten percent spike in community interest in our projects, even though no one’s bothered to learn any of our names yet. We’re not asking you to – to go on dates for the good of our research——”

“Yet,” says Dr. Kwan. “I, personally, am totally willing to blackmail you into pimping yourself out if it means avoiding an angry mob of Luddites.”

“Your candor is appreciated,” says Carlos. “Just keep in mind that now I know how to knock out your internet connection at any time.”

“As I was saying,” says Dr. Timmons over Dr. Kwan’s indignant hiss. “We all appreciate the work you’ve done to protect us so far, and we don’t want to force you to do anything you don’t want, Julie, but we just want you to be aware that your actions can have… far-reaching consequences.”

“I know that,” says Carlos, annoyed. “For God’s sake, I almost caused a car accident when I went outside without a hat on yesterday.”

“Yes, about that,” says Dr. Timmons. “We don’t mean to pry into your personal grooming habits, but – what’s with the hair, man?”

“There were some unexpected exothermic reactions at the monitoring station,” says Carlos. “I needed a trim afterwards.”

Dr. Timmons’ jaw drops.

Dr. Kwan blinks. “You mean that was you?”

“You don’t pay me to stand around looking good,” says Carlos. “That’s just a valuable bonus.”
“There’s a clear ten-meter radius around our station,” says Dr. Kwan in disbelief. Dr. Timmons is speechless, his arms flapping with some unknown emotion. “And then the rest of that area is littered with fulgarites. Do you have any idea what kind of temperatures are needed for that kind of vitrification?”

“Sadly, yes,” says Carlos. “Look, did you need anything else?”

“No, it’s just – our equipment could have been completely destroyed,” she says.

“Those fulgarites are amazing!” Dr. Timmons bursts out. “One’s over four meters long!”

“De nada,” says Carlos. He salutes them both with his mug and strolls out.

He later finds a gnarled, sandy piece of glass sitting on his desk along with a mineralogy textbook with Dr. Timmons’ name on the cover and a note from Dr. Kwan reading, “Andre says he’s never seen this particular shade of white outside the samples from Pensacola,” and, scrawled down at the very bottom and squashed in a corner, “Thanks.”

After that, the scientists stop treating him with quite so much suspicion, even if he is still forbidden from borrowing the Sciencemobile ever again on pain of dioxygen difluoride. Carlos finally wins them all over when the Sheriff’s Secret Police raid their expedition to Red Mesa and make off with their TI-84s and he’s the only one who remembers how to do higher math using only a slide rule. Saving their lives got him grudging thanks, but saving their research apparently earns him eternal gratitude.

The grad students still keep forgetting to put a fresh pot of coffee on whenever they finish one off, though.

Chapter End Notes

Bach’s *Echo Sonata for Two Unfriendly Groups of Instruments... forwards!*

1) Sorry about the formatting:

   a. $^{210}_{84}\text{Po} \rightarrow ^{20}_{82}\text{Pb} + ^{4}_{2}\text{He}$

   b. $^{227}_{89}\text{Ac} \rightarrow ^{227}_{90}\text{Th} + ^{0}_{-1}\text{e}$

   c. $^{207}_{81}\text{Tl} \rightarrow ^{207}_{82}\text{Pb} + ^{0}_{-1}\text{e}$

   d. $^{15}_{8}\text{O} \rightarrow ^{15}_{7}\text{N} + ^{0}_{+1}\text{e}$

   e. $^{103}_{46}\text{Pd} + ^{0}_{1}\text{e} \rightarrow ^{103}_{45}\text{Rh}$
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"—And then Kelly pulled her hamstring while they were doing the Fixing of a Nail position. I'm trying to convince her that she and Joe should do yoga together, I think it would really cut back on minor injuries and also they both look great in yoga pants. Anything new with you, Carlos?"

"Nothing that compares to... hamstring injuries," says Carlos, from his position on top of the Sciencemobile.

"All right," says Kate, adjusting an enormous pair of mirrored aviator shades. "Then describe the Barstow formation."

"Now?" says Carlos. He's running on only three hours of sleep and has been holding the same veil in place for twenty minutes, unaided, which is hard enough without a pop quiz. On top of that, Cecil's on, and he's reporting on the City Council meeting Carlos missed, and Carlos would just like this one nice thing. And a nap, but he'll happily settle for Cecil.

"Just because you're using me as pteranodon bait doesn't mean you can slack off on your homework," says Kate.

"They're not pteranodons," says Carlos around a yawn, as Cecil talks about angels. "Pteranodons have a big crest sticking out of the back of their heads, no teeth, and a much bigger wingspan."

"Old Woman Josie agreed with the measure," says Cecil, "Adding that 'lead is a health hazard,' and that the old door was 'nothing but a ticking time-bomb'."

"Noted," says Kate. "Barstow formation: go!"

"Ugh," says Carlos. "The Barstow formation was formed around the early, um, Miocene. It consists of sandstones, limestones, siltstones, conglomerates, and—"

"Carlos – beautiful Carlos, tragically shorn of his locks – reportedly was the only dissenting voice—"

"What?" says Carlos.

"Shales," prompts Kate.

"—The minutes only report him stating, 'There is no time! No more time!' into a black rectangle in his hand, and then running, winded, from the community hall," concludes Cecil, inexplicably.

"What the hell," says Carlos.

"They're sedimentary rocks composed of mud, mostly clay and quartz particles," says Kate.

"That's not what – I'm not supposed to be at the City Council meeting!"

"No," Kate agrees. "You're supposed to be in the Mojave, near Barstow."

"I – never mind," says Carlos, adding investigate appearance of yet another double to his to-do list. "Sandstones, limestones, siltstones, conglomerates, and shales, right. Most of the sediment was deposited by lakes and rivers, except for nine layers of – pterodactyl!"
Kate rips off the sunglasses and runs for cover as Carlos drops his veil and barks "Way!" The sleep spell isn't meant for long distances, and even channelled through his staff it loses most of its potency by the time the hissing flicker of energy intercepts the pterodactyl. Its wings falter; then it abruptly pulls up out of its dive and circles over the shiny new obsidian walls of the Dog Park.

Carlos slides down the hood of the Sciencomobile, but before he can go more than ten feet there's an unearthly screech and the pterodactyl disappears.

"Dammit!"

"What happened?" asks Kate, face barely visible under the bumper of a tan Corolla.

"The pterodactyl's gone," says Carlos.

She crawls out from beneath the car. "Dog Park?"

"Dog Park," says Carlos glumly.

She grins. "Aww, did you want a dinosaur of your very own?"

"Technically speaking they're winged reptiles," says Carlos.

"Well, true," says Kate. "I'd ask what you could possibly need a prehistoric winged reptile for, but: prehistoric winged reptile."

"Not any more," says Carlos mournfully.

Kate drops him off at the lab on her way to the monitoring station. Julie opens the door to Lab Two before he can even knock. "Did you catch it?" she asks.

"Disappeared into the Dog Park," says Carlos.

"Oh," she says, disappointed.

"Listen, were you at the City Council meeting the other day?" asks Carlos.

"I was, and it was the usual glorious triumph over common sense," says Julie. "Until you ran through the middle of it like a streaker with stage fright, anyway."

"So it definitely looked like me?" asks Carlos.

"It was you," says Julie – then, at his expression, "It wasn't you?"

"Madre de Dios," says Carlos. He rubs a hand over his face.

"Maybe it was future you," asks Julie, who does not sound appropriately concerned for the potentially diverted course of the Currents of Time. Or for the potentially diverted course of the already unlinear life of Carlos.

His stomach roils at the thought of more time travel. "Some kind of illusion is more likely," he says: some person or creature temporarily assuming his form, probably for sinister purposes. He reluctantly adds those weird doubles from the sandstorm to his list of possible suspects, though his dissolved right in front of him in the middle of next March and there haven't been any sandstorms recently.

"How are you going to tell?" asks Julie.
"I have to get over to the rec center. And Town Hall. Can I borrow—"

"Let me get my stuff and I'll drive you," she says, disappearing back through the door.

"But—"

"There is at least one active and/or recent wormhole out there right now," says Julie. "With dinosaurs. I'm definitely coming with you."

"They're winged reptiles," says Carlos. "And it's probably not safe."

"Walking next door to get pizza isn't safe," says Julie. "At least this isn't safe with cool research."

Both Carlos and Julie go over the auditorium and Town Hall with a fine-toothed comb (metaphorically, though several bystanders did offer to donate their own hair-care products to science if it would’ve helped); results are, as they say, inconclusive.

It kicks off what is possibly the most frustrating two and half months of Carlos' life that do not involve recovering from almost getting bitten in half in an LA sewer.

Several weeks after the pterodactyls, Flynn calls him.

"What did you do to him?"

"Do to who?" says Carlos, rubbing his eyes; he had just been about to drop off during Financial News. He doesn't remember the last time he got a good night's sleep. So far he's been subsisting on stolen coffee and siestas on the trash-picked couch in his living room.

"Look, I know he's an asshole, but we have a gentlemen's agreement," snarls Flynn. "You promised to notify me of all local infractions of the Laws of Magic so I can stand as witness, and if you didn't want him investigating the Post Office you should have—"

"Did something happen to the – ugh – Apache Tracker?" asks Carlos, finally catching up.

Flynn pauses. "You didn't?" she asks.

"No," says Carlos. "Where is he?"

"I don't know," says Flynn. "He's disappeared."

"He can't disappear," says Carlos. "He's supposed to lend me his car!"

Carlos drags himself off the couch and ends up scouring the Post Office and the meadow that used to be the Tracker's house for clues.

Apart from a newly-discovered ragweed allergy, results are inconclusive.

"Did you see this?" asks Andre. Carlos jerks and nearly faceplants on a stack of flyers for his guerilla war against wheat and wheat by-products. He’s sitting at his desk and his arm has gone numb from propping up his head for so long; he must have fallen asleep again.

Andre hands him a copy of the Night Vale Daily Journal. “Look your best to face the void. Smooth-chinned souls are most enjoyed,” reads Carlos. “‘Burma-Shave.’”
"No, below the ads," says Andre.

"'Marcus Vansten Purchases New Socks'?" asks Carlos.

"Over a little—"

"'City Council Approves New Strip Mall Behind Library' – *dammit*," says Carlos.

Despite his well-reasoned points and sensationalist scare tactics regarding the likelihood of librarian attacks if they move the weird metal trees, his anonymous letters are ignored in favor of the possibility of a Pinkberry.

With Flynn's help he's able to transplant some of the *pararrayos* to strategic areas around town, but he's been forced to deactivate the majority of them. At least the few remaining ones are unobtrusive enough that Carlos Prime shouldn't notice them, and either the storm wards have chilled out or he was able to successfully downsize, because Night Vale is not torn apart by electricity and funnel clouds.

Unfortunately, Flynn nearly passes out when they attempt to discover which it is, and barring the discovery of another suitably talented asshole the results remain, once again, inconclusive.

Things Carlos *has* been able to conclude:

- Someone tried to invade the minds of visitors on bus tours using dark magic;
- These attempts were almost certainly connected with the disappearance of a further two Night Vale Community Radio Station interns, also the result of dark magic;
- The aforementioned events were *not* related to the manifestation of mysterious lights in Radon Canyon, and the Pink Floyd Multimedia Laser Spectacular is not, will not, and never has been the result of dark magic;
- Nobody is ever going to let him forget that;
- He will have to deal with Julie repeatedly informing him that he can't have any pudding if he doesn't finish his meat for approximately forever.

Carlos retaliates with *lots* of dark sarcasm in the classroom, but it's a hollow victory at best.

~*~*~*~

Night Vale is, at least spiritually, a small town. (Carlos has never been able to find an accurate count of the population; all previous attempts by census takers induced unexpected changes in momentum and a resulting 700% increase in traffic accidents, and were abandoned in short order.) As a result, Night Vale is prone to small-town happenings, like quilting bees (not the kind with insects, though Gary seems to be trying), people giving him casseroles or fruitcakes at least once a week, eruptions of violence from decades-old blood feuds, and running into people he knows at the grocery store when he would much rather slip in and out unnoticed.

Admittedly, that last one is probably more avoidable if he doesn't stumble out of meetings with Wei and fall asleep on his feet while staring at a display of pre-cooked bacon, but unfortunately that's what he's doing when he's greeted with an enthusiastic "Carlos! Hello!"

In a way it's a *good* thing, because Carlos recognizes Cecil's voice even in his sleep and thus twitches awake with a minimum of disruption to nearby bystanders, which is not always the case when his reflexes take over.

Cecil pushes his shopping cart beside him. "You have frost in your hair," he blurts, and his look of confusion is immediately replaced by one of chagrin.

"I was consulting with a colleague in the cold storage stockroom," says Carlos.

"Oh!" says Cecil. "What were you studying?"

"Bioremediation for contaminated pit lakes via sulfur-reducing bacteria," says Carlos truthfully.

"Who knew?" says Cecil. "Well. Besides you, of course."

"Of course," echoes Carlos. "So you're... shopping."

"I am," says Cecil. "And you're... napping with your eyes open? That's a handy talent."

Carlos winces. "Not on purpose," he says. "I haven't been sleeping very well."

Cecil looks concerned. "Oh, dear," he says. "I'm very sorry to hear that."

Carlos shrugs, like it's a normal bout of insomnia and not, as he fears, the eventual backlash from dark magic forcibly rewinding his internal clock nine months in nine seconds.

"My mother had just the remedy for that sort of thing," says Cecil. Then he frowns. "At least, I think she did. Or she would have, if she existed. Which I'm pretty sure happened at some point..."

"You exist," says Carlos, because Cecil is starting to look like maybe he's not so sure.

"Thank you, Carlos, that's very kind," says Cecil. He continues, in a hopeful tone, "I could bring it by the lab tomorrow morning? Stop by on my way to work? I've been meaning to thank you for helping me when, uh. You know. That one time..."

"If you want," says Carlos, who can't quite remember what he's agreeing to. But it's Cecil, so he's probably safe from most things except, maybe, extreme awkwardness.

"Great! I'll see you then!" says Cecil, beaming at him.

"Bye," says Carlos. He watches as Cecil pushes his cart away, whistling a song about hedgehogs. Then he goes to buy the biggest sack of coffee available and discreetly litter the bread aisle with anti-gluten propaganda.

~*~*~*~

Carlos is startled awake from a restless sleep by a loud ding-CHUNK. After a few breathless seconds where he automatically evaluates his bedroom for imminent threats – clear, except for the increasingly hazardous pile of laundry in the corner – he realizes that it must be the doorbell. Nobody's ever used it; the scientists usually call his landline or pound on the interior door or scream until he saves them from renegade textbooks.

He keeps ahold of his gun, grabs the first relatively clean item of clothing that comes to hand, shambles upstairs, and looks through the peephole.

It's Cecil. He's holding a white cardboard box carefully with both hands. He doesn't let go even when one of the bees lands on his face; all he does is wrinkle and un wrinkle his nose rapidly, then try to blow the bee off. His eyes cross more and more as it crawls up the bridge of his nose.

Carlos vaguely remembers that they were supposed to meet about... something... so he sticks the
gun in his pocket and yawns "Pat chan" as he opens the door.

Cecil twitches and the bee flies away as they're hit by the small gust of wind.

“Carlos! Um…”

“Hi, Cecil,” says Carlos, around another yawn. He meets Cecil’s eyes. There’s no familiar pull of a soulgaze, so it’s either Cecil or something with no soul that has decided to disguise itself as a furiously blushing community radio announcer wearing a sweater vest and bright purple fuzzy trousers.

It’s almost definitely Cecil. No one but a human could come up with quite that unnatural a shade of electric violet.

“Good… morn… urgh…” says Cecil in a rather strangled voice.

Carlos realizes that he’s been staring at Cecil’s pants instead of acting like a proper host/normal human being. “Do you want to come in?” he asks.

Cecil stares at him, then says, faintly, “...Could you pinch me?”

“Okay?” says Carlos. Cecil shuffles his box and sticks out an arm. Carlos obediently pinches him just below the elbow, wondering if this is a traditional greeting he’s somehow missed over the past several years.

“Ow,” says Cecil. “Thank you.” He rubs the back of his neck, still flushed bright red.

“De nada,” says Carlos, scrubbing a hand across his face like he can just wipe away his lingering desire to sleep. Then he abruptly realizes that he’s answered the door wearing only a lab coat and a pair of boxers, and the past minute now makes horrible, horrible sense.

“Argh,” he says, pulling the door open wider and trying to hide behind it. Cecil jerks his eyes up from where he’s been staring at the line of pale scars marching across Carlos’ abdomen like the marks of a set of giant teeth (which was, in fact, what caused them). “I mean, come in, make yourself at home, there’s bad coffee in Lab One, through that door and down the hall. I’ll be right back, I have to slip into something more, uh, clothed. Sorry. I was asleep, I don’t actually work like this, that would violate several laboratory regulations and distract my colleagues.”

“Yes, I can see that,” says Cecil. Carlos shuts the door behind him and flees downstairs to his room, where he spends several seconds banging his head against the wall before frantically searching for clothes.

When he returns, he finds Cecil standing by the record player with his back against the wall, staring fixedly at Carlos’ vinyl copy of Ixnay on the Hombre.

“Sorry,” says Carlos again. Cecil jerks at the sound of his voice, but gives him a quick smile even though he still looks kind of nervous.

“No, I should be the one apologizing,” says Cecil, replacing the record carefully on the shelf. “I didn’t mean to wake you. I stopped by the main lab first, but one of the doctors extensively quoted the scene with the doorman from The Wizard of Oz and then told me to go around back, so I assumed…”

“It’s fine,” says Carlos, silently cursing Julie. "Did you need help with some scientific question, or...?"
"Oh!" says Cecil. "No, actually – this is for you!" He picks up the box and hands it to Carlos.

Carlos opens it. It appears to contain only an empty pie plate.

"Homemade invisible pie!" says Cecil. "It's an ancient Tibetan recipe."

"The ancient Tibetans had pie?" asks Carlos.

Cecil waggles his hand back and forth. "Well, it originally started as more of a porridge, but it's been refined over the years. Mostly by non-Tibetans, now that I think of it, so maybe that's not an appropriate description. Still got plenty of delicious yak butter, though! It's just the thing for insomnia." He frowns. "Or maybe it's for scrofula, I don't actually remember..."

"Thanks, Cecil," says Carlos. Out of curiosity, he takes a quick glimpse of the pie with his Sight. He almost drops the box.

"Oh, and I, uh. I also wanted to give you this," says Cecil. He holds out a small purple rectangle and Carlos takes it automatically, still trying to process the metaphysical record of dessert.

It's a business card, identical to the one Carlos has taped to the side of the phone cradle.

"I know you already have the station number," says Cecil, "But I wrote my home and cell numbers on the back, just in case you wanted to contact me during non-work hours... Or for non-work purposes..."

"Great," says Carlos. Cecil is still looking at him with a mixture of hope and trepidation on his face, so Carlos adds, "I'll be sure to update you on the latest scientific developments."

"Right," says Cecil, his shoulders drooping. "Of course. Well, I better get over to the station..."

"Oh," says Carlos. "Okay." He thought maybe Cecil would have liked to stay for a piece of pie, and maybe some coffee. But it's probably for the best, since Carlos would feel a little guilty about essentially using Cecil as a taste-tester for his own gifted baked goods.

He shows Cecil to the door, and watches him until he gets in his car and drives away.

He takes the pie into the kitchenette and probes it tentatively. Nothing seems too out of the ordinary, despite its formidable psychic imprint, so he cuts a slice and tries a tiny bite.

He wakes up on the couch. His plate and fork are balanced on his chest, Cecil is wrapping up the Children's Fun Fact Science Corner with a warning about the upcoming Science Fair, and someone is pounding on the doorway that leads to the labs.

"Coming," he mumbles.

Julie's on the other side. "Whoa," she says, eyebrows shooting up. "Did you finally get some sleep?"

"What?" says Carlos.

"Keep in mind that I say this with all awareness of the irony of belonging to the most caffeinated profession – at least, the most caffeinated profession according to the 2011 study conducted by Dunkin’ Donuts¹, which for obvious reasons may be subject to some serious methodological flaws – but you were starting to look a little... zombie-esque."

"I march to the beat of my own drums," says Carlos.
She stares at him.

"It's a joke," says Carlos. "I took a nap. Did you need something?"

"We're heading out to Desert Creek," says Julie. "We have to move the long-range sensors and I'd like you on point. Oh, and Cecil stopped by earlier. Did he find you?"

"He gave me a pie," says Carlos.

"I hope you invited him in for some damn fine coffee," says Julie.

"I was going to, but he said he should get over to the station," says Carlos.

"And you let him leave," says Julie.

"Well, yeah," says Carlos.

She raises her eyebrows again.

"What?" Carlos says defensively.

"Nothing," says Julie.

~*~*~*~

Carlos sprints down 4th Street holding his hood up with one hand. He takes a sharp left onto Old Musk Drive and pulverizes the sidewalk behind him with a quick flash of entropic force. He risks a glance over his shoulder as the first members of the vigilante squad round the corner. They immediately plunge into a deep pit of nearly frictionless dust, cursing and flailing as their less speedy comrades follow them around the turn and trip over their heads. Carlos grins and cuts across the street, sliding across the hood of a car stopped at the light before ducking into an alley between the narrow buildings on the far side.

There he takes a moment to try to catch his breath and clutch at the stitch in his side. Harry used to mock him for being out of shape, but Harry has – had – has the legs of a freaking giraffe and has never considered how much more effort it takes to cover the same amount of distance when you are a normal-sized person.

A police car goes past one end of the alley, and then he hears the squeal of tires, probably as it pulls a U-turn.

He curses and heads for the far end of the alley. It opens onto a not-quite-vacant lot: Cactus Jane is there, sitting on her eponymous plant. But now Carlos can hear a helicopter approaching, so he pulls up a veil and emerges into the early-morning sunlight.

He slowly makes his way across the lot, trying not to kick up any dust. She's only twenty feet away, and even though her eyes are closed he still doesn't—

"I'll show thee the best springs," she says.

Carlos freezes.

"All torment, trouble, wonder, and amazement inhabits here: some heavenly power guide us out of this fearful country!" She opens her eyes and looks right at him. "Sit down, for thou must now know farther," she says. She swings her legs over the side of the platform and gestures at the ground beneath.
Carlos looks around. From here, he can see the police car circling the block. If she starts making a fuss, they’d definitely notice.

“I will guard your person while you take your rest, and watch your safety,” she says.

He approaches cautiously; she waves her hand toward the base of her cactus again, so he sits. There’s not much shade from a cactus, but it’s better than nothing, and at least it’s easier to maintain his veil.

One of the helicopters starts to land. Carlos tenses and starts to get up.

“Faith, sir, you need not fear,” says Cactus June, quietly. She raises her voice as the helicopter disgorges its pilots. “Howdy, officers.”

“Howdy, June,” says the first officer, rolling up the bottom edge of their balaclava so they can fan their face.

“How are things?” asks the first. They pat the back of their neck with a handkerchief.

“Can’t complain,” says Cactus Judy. “I’m practicing for my new show.”

“Oooh, what are you doing?”

“The Tempest,” she says.

The officer frowns. “I don’t think I know that one.”

“It’s about a wizard stranded in a strange, uncharted desert territory,” she says serenely. Carlos twitches.

The officers look at each other sidelong. “Well, best of luck, Judy,” says the officer with the rolled balaclava. “On a completely and totally unrelated note, there’s a dangerous fugitive loose in the area.”

“He’s armed and dangerous,” says the one with the crumpled cape. “Use extreme caution when approaching him.”

“Oh?” says Cactus Jody. “Who is it?”

“We can’t tell you that for your own protection,” says the first officer. “We recommend you mistrust and avoid all strangers, some friends, and a few family members, just in case.”

“He’s wanted dead or alive,” says the second officer. “If you find anything, we can stamp your Alert Citizen Card!”

“Will do,” she says. “Anything else?”

“Dinner?” asks the second officer hopefully.

“’Fraid not,” says Cactus Joan. “Y’all have a nice day now, you hear?”

The second officer is dragged off, sighing, by the first.
“Thanks,” says Carlos. “Can I go?”

“I will have none on’t: we shall lose our time,” she says.

“What?”

“Hear a little further and then I’ll bring thee to the present business which now’s upon us,” she says. She drops a bottle of water over the side of the platform; he catches it.

They sit there in silence for several minutes. Carlos polishes off half the bottle and reluctantly screws the cap back on, in case he's stuck here for a while.

"So," he says. "Have you ever considered a gluten-free lifestyle?"

"Ugh," she says. "I mean – by Providence divine, some food we had," she says, like she's rebuking him. Then she adds, in a significant tone, "And some fresh water."

He offers the water bottle back, but she waves him off.

He hears a rustling up above; he cranes his neck and sees that she’s setting up a small, battery-powered radio. There’s a brief fuzz of static, and then a familiar voice is saying, “—God Almighty, weird at last. Welcome to Night Vale.”

It’s not the strangest place he’s listened to the show (a storage container filled with talking bobble-head dolls on a cargo ship off the coast of Australia), and Cactus Jen is not the strangest company he’s had while listening (an unconscious Buffalo Bill Meyers, two half-vampire members of the Fellowship of St. Giles, and the Guatemalan Border Police). But it’s still pretty damn strange. Especially because Cecil is talking about him again – or, rather, his hair. Carlos wishes it would grow out faster; he knows it's not his fault, but being the direct cause of Telly's ongoing vilification (though not his tendency to wander around the Sand Wastes, howling – he's been doing that for years) and the indirect cause of so many minor accidents is making Carlos feel bad. He can't shake the feeling that he's letting everyone down.

He wonders if this is what Stockholm Syndrome feels like.

"Telly gave my cactus a trim," says Cactus Jemma.

"Looks nice," says Carlos.

She nods. "I think he'll be able to rejoin society soon," she says. "He'll have to change his name and undergo extensive plastic surgery, of course."

"Telly, or the cactus?" he asks. She taps the side of her nose.

Carlos stretches out his legs and settles back on his hands. It's been a while since he sat down and just listened to a broadcast, without working or napping or doing anything else. Not since he made it back to active duty, probably.

It reminds him, a little uncomfortably, of the long months he spent recovering from his last doomed mission in L.A. On the other hand, he had spent the majority of that bored out of his skull (well, the parts he was conscious for, anyway) and most of the time listening to Cecil had been the highlight of his day.

Listening to Cecil is still the highlight of his day, to be honest. There's something comforting about knowing no matter where he goes or what he's doing, a transmission will beam out and pin him
down almost every afternoon (Night Vale time), reliable when nothing else is.

And it's just nice to know that if Carlos sent in a bulletin that evil shape-shifting sea monster hybrids from ancient mythology were taking over the country one city and sewer system at a time, or even that a shadowy conspiracy of disparate foes with unknown and unimaginable power was plotting to overturn the world order/whole universe, Cecil would report it with the same grave concern with which he reports the imminent threat of the day or Steve Carlsberg's latest poor life choice — not because it's not important, but because it is important, all of it. Cecil would commiserate equally with the Wardens' massive casualties, uncompensated overtime, and drafty barracks in Edinburgh instead of judging them for losing fights against unbeatable odds. If life is a contest between good and evil, Cecil would be one of the people handing out stickers just for participating.

People expect a lot from Carlos. They expect him to take charge, look nice, solve problems, sweep them off their feet, save the day. Carlos is awesome, don’t get him wrong, but that can get… exhausting. Cecil is the first person he’s ever met who doesn’t expect anything from him aside from his mere existence. Cecil’s just happy he’s there, terrible haircut and all.

Carlos is grinning doofily at absolutely nothing.

He straightens hastily and puts on a more serious expression, even though no one can actually see him. He’s just... doing his job. Sure, Cecil is talking about the floating cat in the radio station’s bathroom and it mostly just sounds adorable, but Carlos has to treat every word that comes out of his mouth as a potentially valuable piece of intelligence. You never know when an offhand reference might get him a lead, however faint, on one of Night Vale's many, many issues.

“And, thanks to our new intern, Brad, we finally solved the litter problem!” says Cecil. “Brad is very excellent at both carpentry and dark magic.”

Carlos blinks, then says, “Son of a bitch.”

“Be free, and fare thou well!” Cactus Jamie calls after him as he takes off for the radio station.

~*~*~*~

"Look, Brad, just give yourself up!" Flynn shouts into the megaphone. "Don't make this any harder than it is!"

"Never," Brad shouts back from the roof of the Pinkberry. "You're too small-minded to see what I'm doing, Shakeena Flynn, age 37!"

"What you're doing is murdering interns, assaulting tourists, and cheating at the Lottery! You had a purple piece of paper and you know it!"

Brad laughs unpleasantly. "Insignificant casualties. I'm destined for greater things than wolves."

"The Sheriff's Secret Police will be here any moment, Brad. If you surrender to the Wardens, I can make sure they give you a fair hearing. They'll make it quick. Do you really want to be tried before City Council?"

"I should have known you were a tool of the Wardens, Shakeena Flynn," says Brad scornfully. "Let them come. I'll show them what it means to face the wrath of Brad."

"Oh, for the love of – they're already here, Brad!"

"What?" Brad squawks.
"A Warden has been standing next to me literally the entire time! Don't tell me you still haven't learned to tell a hooded figure and a Warden apart – good God, that's just sad."

Carlos mutters "Che' nah," then says, "It's over, Brad." His voice rumbles over the empty streets and up into the cloudless void of night sky. If the police weren't already on their way, they would definitely be showing up now for the noise complaint. "You stand accused of invading the minds of thirty-six people and murdering three by the use of dark magic. Do you have anything to say for yourself?"

There's a long pause, and then there's a strangled, "Suck my dick!"

Carlos doesn't even bother to respond. He just releases the valve on the fire hydrant next to him and shouts, "Nabaj!" The water spirals in tighter and tighter circles around him, and when he points his staff it shoots out in a jet over the roof of the Pinkberry, stronger than a firehose.

There's a startled gurgle as a dark figure flails over the edge. It takes off down the street, limping.

Carlos sighs and sweeps his staff down and back. Brad hydroplanes on his next step and crashes to the ground.

"Stay back," says Carlos to Flynn, then "Ha' bak!"

Water flows up Brad's arms and legs as he tries to scuttle backwards, crab-like. It yanks him back to the ground, and he struggles uselessly against the concentrated force of surface tension holding him down.

Carlos loves the southwest, don't get him wrong, but he gets so few opportunities to cut loose when there’s always some kind of water restriction in effect.

He walks toward Brad, switching his staff to his other hand and drawing his sword. "By my authority as a Warden of the White Council, invested as a lawful proxy of the Senior Council, I charge you with thirty-nine violations of the Laws of Magic. The sentence is immediate execution. This is your last—"

With absolutely no warning a massive burst of energy tears through the air between them. The explosion collapses in on itself, swirls of deep red light rotating around its center, and something small and pale rockets out and slams right into Carlos' solar plexus.

He collapses in a clatter of weaponry, gasping for breath.

A cue ball rolls away from him into the gutter, tainted scarlet from the swirling light of the vortex.

"Warden Ramirez!" he hears Flynn shout.

"Yax!" wheezes Carlos, raising his gloved hand as Brad screams something in Sumerian. His shield intercepts a curtain of fire.

Dull yellow flames pile up against Carlos' shield; the heat is unpleasant, but not enough to seriously hurt him. Something’s not quite right with all this. Maybe Brad's not strong enough to maintain the vortex and launch an attack. Or maybe—

Thunder rumbles overhead. The storm wards have noticed their little showdown.

Carlos grabs his staff and his sword with his free hand and climbs to his feet, wincing. "You have to stop, Brad!" he shouts as soon as the flames subside. He keeps the shield up while he awkwardly
sheathes his sword. "You can't create something this powerful – the storm will tear you and everything around you apart!"

Brad only laughs maniacally.

Carlos feels all his hair stand on end. He drops his shield and takes off running. Purple lightning streaks down from the sky, shattering the wet pavement.

The wind is picking up. Another bolt of lightning hits, and Brad's laughter cuts off in an indignant screech.

"You have to shut it down!" screams Carlos.

"You can try to pin this on me, but this is nothing compared to my true goals!" Carlos can barely hear Brad over the droning of the vortex and the sound of the rising wind. Lightning hits the vortex directly: the humming only intensifies.

"You expect me to believe that you're not doing this?" shouts Carlos. Water is still jetting from the fire hydrant, flooding the street. He grits his teeth and starts drawing in energy. He's not the greatest at fire magic, but with the storm wards active he can't risk one of his stronger attacks.

"No, Council scum, I expect you to die – ow!"

Carlos snaps a line of fire at him; Brad dodges it easily, but wipes out on the sheet of ice that now coats the street, all the water's heat energy channeled into Carlos' flames. Carlos hits him with a blast of wind, keeping him off-balance and sending Carlos sliding backwards across the ice. Purple lightning completely obliterates the place he stood only seconds before.

"You make a crappy Bond villain, Brad!" shouts Carlos. The wind is strong enough he can barely keep his balance. He takes cover behind the base of a streetlight. From this angle, the vortex is a thin sliver of angry red, now surrounded by a purple nimbus from the lightning. The humming deepens; he thinks the vortex's rotation may be slowing, but he can't be sure. "This is between you and me. You've already killed three people; what are you going to gain from hurting anyone else?"

"They were – just – interns!" Brad howls.

"You are a disgrace to that t-shirt!" bellows Carlos.

"I've had enough of your tricks! Conjure all the magic whirlpool things you want, you can't stop me! I will win the love of station management, and I will become the Voice of Night Vale! My plan is fool-proof! It's sheer elegance in its simplicity! I'll show them. I'll show them a—"

The cue ball moves through a displacement of about 3.5 m and leaves Flynn's hand with an acceleration of approximately 240 m/s², traveling with the wind. It smashes square into Brad's left temple, ricocheting towards the vortex; he staggers and falls sideways just as the vortex disappears. It takes with it the cue ball, part of the parking lot, and, unfortunately, not nearly enough of Brad.

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"Remember, folks: always supervise your children at the Science Fair!" says Cecil. Carlos brought the radio from his office and stuck it on the counter in Lab One, because he was up all night avoiding the secret police and searching in vain for who the hell is behind the vortices if it wasn't Brad, and his stomach still hurts from that stupid cue ball, and how does a town with this approximate population size even produce that many warlocks, and he's got a million papercuts from folding brochures about
the scientific method for Julie for the aforementioned Science Fair, and right now he just really needs some soothing background noise. And for Julie to finish making the next pot of coffee after traitorously taking the last cup, and to stop eyeballing him.

"The plate glass centrifuge may look like jolly fun," continues Cecil, "but it’s the third leading cause of decapitations in Night Vale, just behind machine threshers and wizards!"

Julie chokes on her coffee. "Wizards? How many people have you beheaded?"

"More than have tangled with a machine thresher," says Carlos, because he doesn’t really want to think about that answer. Maybe it’s time for another anonymous letter campaign to reinstate teaching the Laws of Magic in school.

"On a related note," says Cecil, "We would like to take a moment to remember Intern Brad, whose meteoric rise through the ranks of the Night Vale Community Radio Station is eclipsed only by his spectacular and sudden descent. We hope that Brad's family may find some measure of peace, or at the very least, the rest of Brad himself."

Julie looks at him askance.

"He was trying to free station management from their interdimensional prison by murdering other interns!" says Carlos. "And then he fell in the vortex while it was closing, and trust me, decapitation was his best option at that point."

"Fine, whatever," says Julie. "Just keep folding those pamphlets, pamphlet-folder."

"And now, traffic," says Cecil. "There's a back-up on Oxford Road by the McDonald's. Eyewitnesses report that customers have been plunged into metaphysical terror-induced fugue states after receiving their hamburgers, or possibly after observing the sudden influx of clowns to the area. All drivers are encouraged to detour onto Ouroboros Road..."

The Science Fair is Julie's idea, another way to maintain good community relations or, as she put it, "Buy their loyalty with carnival rides and fried food". She put herself in charge of demonstrating the uses of their less esoteric/illegal equipment (specially fitted with blinking lights for the occasion) while delegating the task of actually judging the kids' projects to Andre, since he is far less likely to crush their spirits. He's very good at remaining calm when sixth-graders proudly show off the strains of flesh-eating bacteria they've been growing on a piece of bread. Kate operates the Tilt-a-Whirl and Gary provides the entertainment: between the bribes she collects to extend the ride's length and the ones he collects to put down that guitar, for the love of God, they actually come out in the black. Even Wei makes an appearance, sort of, remotely operating the robot he's trying to program to ring the doorbell on the house in Desert Creek.

Carlos is in charge of schmoozing: he answers people's questions, stays far away from the plate-glass centrifuge (which is good, because no one's told him what it does or even who it belongs to), and covertly eats as many breaded food products as possible, because he has seen the future and it is gluten-free.

He keeps hearing Cecil's coverage but doesn't think he's here in person. The station must have scrounged up another intern from somewhere to send; Carlos thought he saw someone in a red t-shirt fleeing from the zoology projects.

Carlos isn't disappointed. But if he was, it would only be because he wanted to thank Cecil again for the pie and maybe ask for the recipe.
When night falls, he disperses his entourage of eager fair-goers by the simple expedient of leading them to the parking area and hiding behind the food truck of Dave Polchinski (no relation to either the physicist or the pierogie guy). Eventually, they get distracted from looking for him and start heading home. Carlos grabs Dave's last serving of onion rings and sneaks back into the fairgrounds/elementary school parking lot.

"Dr. Kwan!" calls Kate. "I'm shutting everything down. Do you want a ride?"

"I'll pass," says Julie. She eyes Carlos' onion rings and says, "I thought you were on a gluten-free kick."

"I'm eating these so others don't have to," he says piously.

She snorts and steals one. "Do I want to know why there are so many hooded figures roaming around?"

"They're janitors from the school," says Carlos. "Mostly harmless, unless you're an overflowing garbage can. You can get on their good side by donating cleaning equipment. They like mops."

"I'll consider that if I ever develop an interest in pursuing a career in the custodial arts," says Julie. "I dropped by the strip mall earlier and took some readings. The results are... unusual. Are you sure it wasn't this Brad guy creating those vortices?"

"As far as I can tell, no," says Carlos. "I found his... stuff, back at his apartment. He didn't have the discipline to pull off a working of that magnitude, much less the strength."

"Could you do it?"

"Oh, for sure," says Carlos. "All I'd need would be a couple years to do nothing but work on a highly illegal spell and figure out a way to steal an entire ley-line's worth of power and excise my sense of morality and self-preservation. Then I'd be all set to fail, since I haven't really worked with anything except combat magic for the past eight years and I'd have no place to start."

Julie raises an eyebrow.

"That would be 'No'," says Carlos.

"Hmm," she says, chewing on her lip. "You might want to look at these, then."

She hands him a clipboard. The top sheet contains three separate graphs, tangled messes of colored lines and blocks of text labeling the $x$- and $y$-axes.

"Does this remind you of anything?" she asks.

"The hair I pull out of my shower drain?"

She rolls her eyes but says, patiently, "They're the readings from potential vortex sites at the Pinkberry, the rec center, and Town Hall. Notice that I controlled for size: the one with the pterodactyls was much bigger but proportionally similar. I arranged them in descending order of interference."

Carlos squints at the graphs. Now that he thinks about it, it does seem like they get less erratic as they go on. "What kind of interference?"

"Varying types of energy waves, mostly; I listed the significant ones on the side. I still don't know
how your magic tricks manifest, but I can tell you that they leave behind somewhat similar profiles, if
on a much smaller scale."

"Okay..." says Carlos. "Wait. This goes cue ball, the pterodactyls, and Doppel-Me – why didn't you
put them in chronological order?"

"The thing is," says Julie, "I think I did. It just doesn't match our chronology. I think the interference
decreases because the vortices are getting more efficient, which means—"

"—Whoever is making them is getting better at it," says Carlos. "Dios."

"That's why I asked if you could do it, since you – or something that looked like you – showed up
by the vortex least likely to splinch you between time periods," says Julie.

Carlos remembers Brad, and Brad's lack of normally vital body parts, and shudders.

"But if it couldn't be you, and it wasn't Brad, that means there's still someone else out there, and
they're on the verge of a major breakthrough." She thinks about that a second and adds, "Or they
haven't had it yet, or already had it a while ago. We just get to see the results. Time travel, man."

"Great," says Carlos. He shakes his head. "And I'm not any closer to finding out who they are."

"Well, you do know something about them," says Julie.

"I do?"

"Sure," says Julie. "On their first successful attempt – probably – they launched a cue ball through a
wormhole. That implies whoever is doing this has a passing familiarity with the Polchinski Paradox,
and they're assholes."

"So they're scientists," says Carlos.

"Hey," says Julie. "They could just have a life-long love of learning, such as we are trying to instill in
the Youth of Today without them realizing it."

"Or they could have opened the vortex in a pool hall," says Carlos. "So basically, we still know
almost nothing useful."

"All knowledge is useful in the correct context," says Julie. She steals another onion ring. "So,
Andre told me Cecil wasn't here today."

"Yeah," says Carlos glumly. "Wait. Why do you care?"

"Oh, we just like gathering data," says Julie.

Before he can ask her what that's supposed to mean, they're summoned by the distant screams of
Gary, who has not been very successful at cleaning the centrifuge. Carlos doesn't remember it again
until the middle of the night, when he's staring at his ceiling in the dark, wide awake and wishing the
radio station re-ran its programs.

~*~*~*~

"Hey, Sparrowhawk, you've got a phone ca— What are you doing?" says Julie, halting at the
entrance to Lab One.

"My gluten intolerance is causing me to lash out," says Carlos, reading the ingredients on a box of
cereal. He empties it into the trash, then puts the cardboard in the recycling container. Both are nearly full with the former contents of everyone's snack drawers. "Who's on the phone?"

It's Flynn, who returns his greeting with an irritated, "The Apache Tracker is back, and now he's more of an asshole."

But for the first and possibly only time Carlos is pleased: assuming it is the Tracker and not an imposter (though Carlos has no idea why you would want to impersonate him) now there's someone else to help with exorcisms when wheat and wheat by-products turn against them in T minus three hours. And also because the Tracker is usually good for a ride when certain people become unreasonable that their Prius no longer has functioning electronic locks, air conditioning, or satellite radio stations that don't play 24-hour bluegrass. He has yet to be un-banned from using the Sciencemobile.

Flynn promises to come get him and hangs up, still muttering angrily.

"So are you going to explain your war on junk food yet?" asks Julie.

"This is more of an opening skirmish," says Carlos. People yell at him when he doesn't let them collect data, so he locks a small bag of pretzels in a spare terrarium. Then he dumps the rest of the trash in a circle and incinerates it. He compacts all the smoke and ash until it looks like a small, dense brick of charcoal, which he hands to Julie.

"...Gosh, thanks," she says. "Is this for anything?"

"No," says Carlos. "I just feel bad adding particulates to the atmosphere."

"Great," says Julie. "Should I start running stats about how wizards contribute to climate change?"

"I'd be more concerned about the fey, to be honest," says Carlos. "Keep an eye on the pretzels. And you remember how to make a circle, right?"

"A magic one?" says Julie. "I guess. Why?"

"Because you'll probably need it later. Unless you can figure out another way to—" Someone beeps the horn of their car outside the lab. "That's my ride. Gotta go."

"Wait!" shouts Julie. "You can't just leave before you explain—"

"Sure I can," says Carlos. "I'll be back soon, try not to miss me too much." He grins at her as she sputters in anger, then dodges the brick she hurls in his general direction.

Flynn's back seat is filled with plastic containers, burlap sacks, and long, forked sticks. "Are you sure you can't tell me what's going on?" she asks. "Or at least why I had to bring all my snake-catching equipment?"

"Sorry," says Carlos. "If it's any consolation, you'll find out soon enough."

She mutters something under her breath that sounds like, "Tight-lipped Council bastards," but Carlos politely pretends not to notice.

Carlos puts on his sad excuse for a cloak as they pull into the parking lot of the Desert Flower Bowling Alley and Arcade Fun Complex. The Tracker is leaning against the hood of his car, staring off into the distance, but he raises a hand as they approach and says, "Как."
"Are you serious," responds Carlos flatly.

"Where have you been?" asks Flynn.

The Tracker shrugs. "Недалеко."

"Who did this to you?" asks Carlos.

The Tracker remains silent.

"Human transformation is a violation of the Second Law of Magic," says Carlos. "If there's someone out there doing this to other people—"

"Hem!" says the Tracker, shaking his head vigorously.

Further conversation is fruitless, only partially because Carlos doesn't speak much Russian. However, the Tracker does agree to assist them for the afternoon, so Carlos gives them both a brief overview of what they're up against: the rapid and total transformation of wheat and wheat by-products into venomous serpents and then malevolent spirits. He’s skating the line to exploit his knowledge of the future like this, but Carlos didn't join the Wardens to stand idly by and let everyone get bitten and/or possessed by the former contents of their pantry. (He didn't join the Wardens to specifically combat that, it's true, but the point remains.)

"Wait, is this why someone's been posting signs that say, 'Repent your gluten, the end is nigh' all over town?" asks Flynn.

"Did that happen?" says Carlos innocently.

"Змеи," says the Tracker, looking miserable. "Почему змеи?"

"I feel just awful for you," says Carlos.

---

Flynn drops him off at the back of the lab before she leaves to cover Old Town Night Vale, which is why Carlos doesn't realize they have a visitor until he passes Julie's office and hears her say, "Oh, you'll want to consult with Carlos about that," before she grabs his arm and hauls him inside.

"Here he is!" she says brightly. "And here are our latest readings," she says to Carlos. She shoves a clipboard into his arms and ducks out the door, leaving him blinking at Cecil.


Cecil has leapt up from where he'd been leaning against Julie's desk. "Oh! Hello, Carlos," he says. He smiles nervously.

Carlos looks down at the clipboard Julie gave him. They're seismograms, annotated in Andre's neat print with things like, "1.584 times bigger than Valdivia!!" and "NV = shadow zone??"

"You wanted to know about Night Vale's inability to experience tectonic shifts?" Carlos guesses.

"I was hoping you could provide a few comments," says Cecil. "The listeners love hearing about your latest scientific discoveries. You make them sound so... so grand. Almost romantic."

"Um," says Carlos, avoiding Cecil's gaze. He resists the urge to squirm, which is his normal response whenever Cecil compliments him. It makes Carlos feel... awkward, because Cecil says nice (if
somewhat ridiculous and/or embarrassing) things about him all the time, whereas Carlos has never even managed to tell Cecil he actually likes his show.

Then Carlos realizes, to his shock, that he can tell Cecil how he feels. There’s no reason that he couldn’t say, right this minute, “Our latest research indicates that something underneath Night Vale is refracting or blocking both primary and secondary seismic waves radiating out from the posited hypocenters, and by the way, I listen to your show every day and I really enjoy it.”

Enjoy doesn’t even begin to describe the way Carlos thinks about Cecil – Cecil’s show. He’s become one of Carlos’ few constants in an inconstant world: the friendly voice interrupting the dark spiral of his thoughts, the soothing lullaby chasing away his insomnia—

Wait, no – that’s a bad idea, because Cecil might take it the wrong way. It's not that Carlos doesn't like him. It just wouldn't be fair to lead him on when Carlos wouldn't actually—

Well, Carlos wouldn’t mind asking but he doesn’t normally go for—

Okay, Carlos could definitely make an exception for Cecil and—

And—

"Did the earth move for you, too?" says Cecil.

"Bwuh?" replies Carlos.

"At the monitoring station," says Cecil, because right, they're talking about science and not about how Carlos may or may not have accidentally developed a tiny, tiny crush on Cecil, who is standing right in front of him and looking extremely interested in what he's saying and will commit his words to memory and lovingly repeat them for all the world, or at least all of Night Vale and anyone else who received the same odd death curse as Carlos, to hear.

"Oh. Hmm – unh," replies Carlos, then shakes his head. Not talking, that's the way to go. That way he won't accidentally say something he doesn't mean, or worse, something he does mean but probably shouldn't say. Cecil can ask him science questions and he can shake his head yes or no, and maybe refer him wordlessly to supplementary materials, and it will all be very professional and—

"Where did you get your shirt?" asks Cecil. "It fits you so well."

"I'll look at my notes and computer models and see if I can figure out what's going on," Carlos blurts out, and practically runs from the room.

He locks himself in his office and collapses against the door and puts his head between his knees. It's not like he hadn't suspected once or twice that maybe he wasn’t, you know, 100% straight. He just hadn't really planned to do anything about it, or tell anyone about it, or actually think about it, because Wardens are supposed to avoid emotional entanglements and people already pre-judge him for enough stupid reasons and he doesn't need a whole other gender to reject him when he totally fails at basic social interaction and he really could do without that little voice in the back of his mind calling him a coward, thanks.

He stays in his office until the muted voices down the hall – Julie's raspy alto and the strident baritone that Carlos can recognize anywhere, under a variety of alarming test conditions – invoke the traditional cadences of a farewell. Carlos kind of wants to crawl under his desk, but you know what, he isn't a coward, so he forces himself to pick up his notebook, unlock his door, and wander down the hall as though deep in thought and not deep in the middle of a minor sexual awakening/panic attack.
"Carlos!" says Cecil.

Carlos twitches at the sound of his voice, even though he was expecting it. "Cecil," he says; it's almost more than he can manage. "Sorry I ran out. I had to take care of some... science..." He jerks a thumb vaguely in the direction of his office.

"Oh! I... understand," says Cecil, while Julie gives him a look like he suggested a letter-writing campaign to teach intelligent design in the Night Vale Area School District. "I was just leaving. Thank you for your help today. I really appreciated it."

"No, uh," says Carlos. "No problem."

“You too, Doctor Renegade,” says Cecil, as she shows him to the door.

He glances back once on his way to the street. Carlos gives him an awkward wave.

Julie looks at Carlos, then at Cecil’s retreating form, then back at Carlos.

“Oh, my God,” she says.

“What?” says Carlos.

“You talk a big game, but you have no idea how to interact with someone you’re actually attracted to, do you,” she says.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” says Carlos, feeling increasingly alarmed.

Andre wanders over with a clipboard. “What are we talking about?”

“Carlos and his potential crush on Cecil,” says Julie.

“Aww,” says Andre. He leans over and peers into Carlos’ face.

“No, we’re not,” says Carlos. “Andre, what are you doing?”

Andre is holding Carlos’ wrist and staring at his watch. “Your pupils are dilated and your heart rate is elevated,” he says after a moment, letting Carlos go. “Typical physiological signs of attraction. You sure you don’t want to reconsider a potential crush in light of the evidence?”

“You are a geologist,” says Carlos. ”And why is everyone suddenly so interested in my love life?”

"We just want you to be happy," says Andre.

“Plus it's hilarious,” says Julie. “You should ask him out. You know he’d say yes.”

"What," says Carlos.

“Unless you’re having a sexual identity crisis,” says Andre.

"What," says Carlos.

“I mean, you could still ask Cecil on a date, you’re good under pressure," Andre continues, "But I would also reassure you that this lab is a free and non-judgmental refuge to people of all colors,
creeds, and orientations. I think Kate has some pamphlets—"

“I can’t date Cecil!” says Carlos, collapsing onto a stool. “Or anyone from Night Vale!”

“Is this about your job?” says Julie. “If you’re worried about going native, I’ve got bad news for you, buddy, because you do more chanting than anyone I’ve met.”

“Yes, this is about my job,” says Carlos. “Tell me, about how long is Cecil’s show?”

“Thirty minutes,” says Julie, the same time as Andre says, “A couple hours.”

They look at each other.

“That’s… weird,” says Julie. “But… that’s probably a perceptual issue, right? And we already knew that time is fucked up in Night Vale.”

“Yeah, we did. That’s why I’m here,” says Carlos. “If anyone has broken, is breaking, or will break any of the Laws of Magic – like, for example, Thou shalt not swim against the Currents of Time – I, personally, will have to execute them. I’ve had to hunt down people I know before, and trust me, it’s not a fun date night!”

“Oh, come on,” says Julie. “You’ve met Cecil. There’s no way he’s responsible for any time shenanigans.”

Carlos thinks she’s right. He definitely wants to believe she’s right. But he has no proof, and—

“That’s not a chance I can take, unless I wants both our heads to roll,” he says. “Literally. Plus, there’s the whole issue where I am trapped in hostile territory and if my actual identity is discovered, anyone who is close to me could be put into danger. So no, I do not want to date anyone from Night Vale.” He bangs his forehead against the countertop a few times and then mutters, “And yes, I might be having a sexual identity crisis.”


“We can still give you those pamphlets if you want,” says Julie. “Sexual identity crises suck.”

“Fine,” says Carlos into the counter. “You’re not – you won’t tell anyone?”

“Certainly not,” says Andre.

“No way,” says Julie indignantly. “How else would we use this personal information to tighten our psychological hold on you and increase your protective instincts towards our group?”

But she’s smiling sympathetically when she says it, at least until Carlos tells her about the snakes.

~*~*~*~*~

Carlos meant every word he said to Julie and Andre. He can't date Cecil. It will only end in tears and/or decapitation.

But the alternative is almost as bad, because now Carlos gets to listen to the voice of the one person he – he likes, who... likes... him back, on the radio, every day, possibly forever. And he can't do anything about it. Not even when—

"His eyes were distant," says Cecil, his voice coming from the speakers of a TV shattered on the floor. "Distracted, yet beautiful."
—Not even when he needs to concentrate on other things, like (for example) exorcising the last of the evil wheat/wheat by-product spirits. But Carlos finds himself wondering again what color Cecil's eyes are before ducking the DVD player being thrown at his head.

The spirit hurls a chair, a bookshelf, and finally the Tracker himself towards Carlos. They both go down in a rattle of plastic feathers, but Carlos manages to crawl forward and close off the circle on the floor, trapping the spirit inside.

"Exorcizamo te, spiritus tritici!" he shouts. It lets out a high-pitched wail that tapers off, as though the spirit is falling some impossibly great distance, until at last it fades completely.

The Tracker groans. Carlos shoves at his foot until it is no longer digging into Carlos' ribs.

There's a brief hiss from the TV's speakers, and then Cecil says, in a small, forlorn voice, “I don't know if he listens to me, sometimes.”

Carlos puts his head down and laughs bitterly.

Chapter End Notes


I am sorry to note that in the following year, scientists were bumped down to second place by food preparation/service workers. Now, I'm not saying this is a conspiracy to promote food preparation/service workers – like, say, the ones who work at Dunkin' Donuts – but I do find it interesting that as soon as they achieved first place the study was discontinued.

I find it very interesting.

ETA: You are not trapped in some alternate timeline, I changed Kate's BF's name to concur with the One-Steve Limit.

ETA²: You are still not trapped in an alternate timeline, the lovely Morcabre helped me with my Russian. All remaining mistakes are mine! MINE I SAY.

ETA³: I mean, maybe you ARE trapped in an alternate timeline, I don't know your lives. Double-check with non-fic-related incongruities, though.
Carlos stares at the clock on his kitchen counter and wishes he could tell whether or not he’s hallucinating.

Instead of gears or cogs, the casing is filled with a slimy grayish mass with teeth and hair poking out of it, like the clock consumed someone’s parasitic twin during gestation, and now Carlos has to put his hands on his knees and take deep breaths because he was already feeling pretty nauseous.

Two out of the last three clocks he’s dissected are filled with goop, too, as is the calculator wrist-watch and the sundial. Carlos picks up his chisel and pokes one of the lumps. It quivers slightly. He wishes he could ask Andre or Kate or even Gary if they’re seeing the same thing, but he can’t, because Julie threw him out of the lab.

This might have something to do with the fact that he’s gotten about four hours of sleep in as many days, and none in the last 36 hours.

Julie doesn’t understand. Well, that’s not strictly true – Julie told him about the drastic increase in time discrepancies between Night Vale and the rest of the world in the first place. And later on, she promised to share more data if he, quote, "turned the crazy eyes down to at least a 7," unquote. But after that – he’s not sure how long after, the last week has been kind of a blur – she stole all his coffee and locked him out of the labs and threatened to sedate him if she saw him again. The only contact he’s had with her since then is a note shoved under his door that reads "Physics says: GO TO SLEEP."

And, okay, he understands her point: he’s not in the best shape. He’s swamped with vertigo every time he shuts his eyes, and he may or may not have imagined an entire phone conversation with Cecil. (Unless he was tired enough that he thought calling him was a good idea, which is even worse.)

But time might be slowing down, which either means that Night Vale is bobbing free from the Currents of Time, or…

He doesn’t know what the “or” is. And now the clocks aren’t even clocks, or were clocks but are now clock-shaped containers for teratomatous masses, which is also not correct, and there has to be a connection there somehow. Because otherwise Carlos has nothing but a pile of unknown variables, and they scare him worse than 1,703 extra minutes per week.

He has the phone receiver cradled against his ear. It’s ringing. He doesn’t actually remember picking it up or dialing the phone or even who he’s calling.

“Hello!” says Cecil.

Carlos feels a wave of relief sweep over him. “Cecil, it’s me, I—”

“You have reached the voicemail of Cecil Gershwin Palmer,” Cecil continues, and Carlos growls in frustration. He looks at the clock on the wall. It’s no longer on the wall, because it’s lying in pieces on his coffee table. He looks out the window instead, and realizes it’s late afternoon and that Cecil is probably at work.
Cecil is definitely at work, because the speakers crackle on Carlos’ radio, like it knows Carlos hasn’t been paying attention, and now Carlos can hear him, talking about… talking about Carlos, dammit, he did call Cecil yesterday. He feels deeply betrayed by his sleep-deprived decision-making skills, cheating on him with Cecil behind his back, and great, now he doesn’t even make sense to himself any more.

He tries to order his thoughts as Cecil-on-the-phone says, “Please leave your name, number, soul-strength, and reason for call at the sound of the gleep, and I’ll get back to you as soon as I can. Thanks!”

There’s an indescribable yet horrible noise, then expectant silence.

This is something he should handle on his own. He should hang up.

“Cecil, sorry to bother you,” says Carlos. “I need you to get the word out that clocks in Night Vale are not real—”

...Or he could ramble on about errant timepieces. In for a penny, in for a pound of gelatinous gray lumps with teeth and hair.

“I need to know if all clocks are this way, Cecil. This is ver—” Carlos cuts off: there’s a sudden mental pressure, a quick rap against his mind.

Something is testing the defenses around the lab.

“There’s something at my door, Cecil,” he says. “I need to go, okay? I’ll call you back in…well, I don’t know.”

He carefully puts the receiver back in the cradle. His staff is leaning against his wall, so he picks it up. After a moment, he picks up the whole phone, too, the cord uncoiling after him as he sneaks down the hall.

Once again, he hears the phone ringing against his ear without actually remembering how it got there.

“There’s a man in a jacket holding a leather suitcase outside my door, Cecil,” he hisses after Cecil’s voicemail picks up. “He’s not knocking, he’s just standing in front of my door. I can’t make out his face. I’m peering through a crack in the living room blinds— oh no. He saw me!”

He drops to the floor underneath the window.

There’s a knock on the door, and Carlos wants to scream, because time is moving wrong and all of the clocks are fake and there’s something at his door so powerful he can feel it from here and he’s so tired he wants to throw up.

Instead, he closes his eyes, grits his teeth against the wave of vertigo, and reaches his senses. His defensive magic is still intact; whatever’s out there hadn’t done more than lightly brush against them, like they just wanted him to know they were there, like a—

Knock, knock.

His threshold isn’t great, but it’s still enough to take a chunk out of anyone’s power if they force their way inside. Then the wards would kick in, further ruining the intruder’s day, leaving only a half-hysterical but still fully trained combat wizard who is suddenly very, very angry at the whole world for making him feel like a coward. He stands up and pulls on his pakal glove.
Then he opens the door.

~*~*~*~

Carlos jerks awake when the phone rings right in his lap.

He flails and catches it before it falls. He’s sitting on the couch. Right – he had left Cecil a message, and then he answered the door, and then he must have called Cecil back, sat down, and fallen asleep.

He tries to look at the clock on the bookshelf before remembering that it’s currently disassembled on the coffee table. Or maybe in the kitchen. Or down in his workroom. There are a lot of clocks in here. He hopes he wrote down where he got them all, because he should try to give them back, and also because Julie will yell at him about selection biases.

The phone rings again, startling him, and he picks up the receiver. “This is Carlos,” he says, then yawns. “Sorry.”

“You never have to apologize for your existence to me, Carlos!” says Cecil, sounding shocked. “Oh – this is Cecil, by the way. I’m returning your call?”

“No one can see the Clock Tower, Carlos,” says Cecil patiently. “It’s invisible.”

Carlos rubs his forehead. “Right, right. Does anyone know where it is?”

“No for long,” says Cecil. "Since it, you know. Teleports constantly...”

There’s a short silence, and then Cecil says in a strange tone of voice, “I’m free tomorrow afternoon. I have those contact numbers for you, and—”

"Contact numbers?"

"For the mayor's office?" says Cecil. "And the spokesbeing for the Sheriff's Secret Police?"

Carlos blinks at the phone. City officials range from mostly to completely uncooperative when dealing with Wardens, but if Carlos the Scientist showed up, with an appointment and everything…

"Cecil, you're a genius," he breathes.

"Well, it was your idea, but, um. Thank you! You're a genius, too," says Cecil. "Sooooo… I could give you the numbers, and then I was thinking we could grab some coffee...?"

“Coffee,” says Carlos. "Yes, coffee." He pictures himself holding a cup of coffee (real coffee, not the swill abandoned by the grad students; coffee perfectly brewed and delivered by baristas who don’t need to be beaten off with sticks to make them go away), sitting next to Cecil in a place that is not covered by not dismembered clocks, and is overcome with a sudden, great longing.
“Great!” says Cecil. “The Java Trout Espresso Internet Bar and Gift Shoppe at 1:00?”

“I’ll see you there,” says Carlos. He hangs up.

He takes the phone back to the kitchen. He catches the end of the weather report, and then Cecil, in his warm, resonant voice, says, “Well, I just got off the phone with Carlos, listeners, and we have a date!”

Carlos drops the phone.

He reviews the conversation he just had in his head and yes, he did in fact agree to what basically amounts to a date.

He kneels to pick up the phone. He should call Cecil and explain that no, this is not personal business, it’s strictly for science (magic) and public safety. He hasn’t had a lot of sleep and he’s sorry for the mistake.

He’s not sorry for the mistake. He’s already called Cecil four times, and it wasn’t for science (magic) and public safety. It was because he felt alone and frightened and wanted to hear a friendly voice while he tried to figure out what to do, and the numbers he dialed, in the middle of several different exhaustion-induced blackouts, were ones he’s never called yet has memorized anyway.

All the reasons he gave to Julie and Andre for not dating anyone in Night Vale are still perfectly valid. It’s unprofessional, hazardous, and probably very stupid.

Carlos doesn’t care.

He’s been here for eight months, and he’s very, very tired, and he’s going on a date tomorrow before grilling semi-elected officials about why, exactly, time seems to be slowing down.

He puts the phone on the counter and leaves it there.

~*~*~*~

When he finally does get to sleep, he has a very strange dream.

He’s standing at the front door, facing a man in a tan jacket. The bees seem to be buzzing much louder than usual.

“Hi,” says the man in the tan jacket. “I’m Edgar.”

(At least, that’s what Carlos thinks he called himself. It might have Egbert. Or Evan. Something like that.)

“Can I help you?” asks Carlos pointedly. He has his arm half-raised like he’s resting his hand on the door frame, but it’s actually clenched around his staff, just out of sight of the man in the tan jacket.

“What list?” asks Carlos.

The man in the tan jacket rattles off a list of words – meaningless, though something about their rhythm and meter sounds familiar, the echo of something powerful—

“Stop,” says Carlos.

The man in the tan jacket smiles. Or maybe it's a frown. “I'm afraid City Council will issue a recall,” he says. “But it's always cute when they try to protect and serve.”

“The police?” asks Carlos.

The man in the tan jacket does not clarify. “You’ve seen the clocks,” he says instead.

“Yes, I have,” says Carlos.

The man nods. “Thank you for your time,” he says. “We returned the unused portion. You should get some sleep, son.”

“What?” says Carlos.

“You have a big day tomorrow,” says the man in the tan jacket, as he walks away from the door. His deerskin suitcase swings slightly, and Carlos thinks he might be whistling something.

~*~*~*~

“Do you have the time?” Carlos asks the man at the table next to him.

His eyes widen. “I didn’t take it!”

“No, I mean – what time is it?”

“Oh,” says the man. He pulls out a pocket watch. “1:45,” he says.

“Thanks,” says Carlos. He looks across the table at the empty seat on the other side. He takes a sip of his coffee. It’s delicious, and getting cold.

The bear bells hanging on the door of the coffee shop jingle, and he looks up automatically.

“Oh, good, you’re still here!” says a girl with short natural hair and a red NIGHT VALE COMMUNITY RADIO t-shirt. One of the interns – Stacy? He thinks it’s Stacy. She’s been around for a few months and once said complimentary things about the pararrayos, and Carlos hopes that she continues to have the fortitude and reflexes necessary for remaining a completely alive radio station intern. “Cecil’s really out of it today and I didn’t think to check his planner until fifteen minutes ago. These are for you,” she says, sliding a piece of paper across the table.

“Is Cecil all right?” asks Carlos. He picks up the paper. It’s a list of names and a phone numbers, the ones Cecil promised to bring him.

He suddenly feels cold.

Intern Stacy holds out a hand and waggles it back and forth. “Not as bad as some of the others, but usually he handles it a lot better than this. He thought I’d been dead for months! I had to tell him my name was Dana and that I switched over from the morning show. His aura is completely mangled.”

“Handles what a lot better?” says Carlos.

Stacy looks around the coffee shop as she pulls out a crayon from her purse. “Oh, nothing,” she says casually, as she writes re-education on a napkin.

“Oh, yeah, you see that all the time, with science,” says Carlos numbly. “Nothing. Like… dark
“Wow,” says Stacy. She takes a lighter out of her pocket and sets the napkin on fire. “Maybe you could come by the station later, and Cecil could interview you about it? It might help him feel better.”


“Dana,” she corrects, as she sweeps the ashes from the napkin into the trash. “I'm going to try it out for a while. I think it might be lucky.”

Stac – Dana bounces out of the coffee shop, leaving Carlos watching his coffee valiantly battling the first law of thermodynamics, like if it can only stay warm, it will somehow melt the metaphorical ball of ice sitting in the pit of his stomach.

It loses.

~*~*~*~

Carlos doesn't go to the station for an interview, because as soon as Cecil's show starts he literally recoils in horror at the sound of his voice. There's something wrong, in some way Carlos can't describe but recognizes with a bone-deep certainty.

The worst part is that it's familiar. Cecil has sounded like this before, if never as bad, and Carlos just assumed it was normal – that Cecil was tired, or his Lyme disease was giving him a hard time, or Steve Carlsberg had pissed in his Flaky-Os. Carlos Prime heard this exact broadcast and Carlos can't remember doing anything more than sympathetically shaking his head.

He hadn't thought to double-check on the re-education facilities in City Hall, even though he was hexing them to oblivion every couple weeks. He never made sure there was nothing even more sinister going on beneath the bright rooms with their big-screen TVs and endless recordings of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. Carlos had done nothing.

"Remember," says Cecil, "If you see something, say nothing, and drink to... uh..."

There's a long pause.

"Forget!" says Cecil. "Thanks, Dana. We go now to Traffic."

The weather report starts playing. Jazzy, with a chance of hip-hop.

Carlos stares at the radio and refrains, barely, from putting his fist through it. Instead, he picks the lock on the entrance to the labs next door.

They're empty. Carlos is both grateful he doesn't have to explain what's going on and irrationally angry that he doesn't have back-up.

He rummages through Gary's desk until he finds a pair of enormous headphones. After a few seconds, they start hissing and the weather comes back on.

He hangs them around his neck and writes Gary a note of apology.

Carlos can't do anything for Cecil right now, either, because he has a meeting with the mayor, the Sheriff, and representatives from Captain Digglesby's Airship Emporium for Ladies and Gentlemen of Quality in fifteen minutes about the time fluctuations. As much as he wants to storm down to the radio station and disintegrate things until someone tells him what's going on, he has to make sure
Night Vale is still going to be around for him to demand answers in. And besides, Cecil would probably get upset if Carlos destroyed his work place. He loves his job.

Carlos' fingers hurts. He forces himself to relax his white-knuckled grip on his Sharpie.

His appointment in City Hall will get him past security, so he better take advantage of it once the meeting is over. He can't risk bringing his staff, but he's got his cloak and pakal glove in a messenger bag along with a clipboard and a specimen bag containing a wristwatch.

His footsteps synch to the forecast's final refrain of *too late / too late / too late* as he jogs away from the labs.

~*~*~*~

By the time Carlos escapes from City Hall, just ahead of the search dogs and dog-like beings, he's left with more questions than ever, Cecil's show is over, and the metaphorical ball of ice in his stomach has metaphorically grown large enough to threaten *Olympic*-class ocean liners.

He goes to the radio station, but a producer tells him that the intern formerly known as Stacy gave Cecil a ride home. So Carlos steals a car and pulls up to Cecil's apartment complex just as he's waving goodbye to someone in a beat-up Volvo and totally failing to notice Carlos hopping the curb and narrowly missing a fire hydrant.

"Cecil!"

Cecil turns, and the brightness of his smile is enough to almost light up the shadows under his eyes. "Carlos!" he says.

"Cecil," says Carlos again, then, "Uh... hi," because he suddenly realizes his plan stops at *Find Cecil and make sure he's okay*, without providing any details on how to do that. "How are you?" he asks, in lieu of *Does your mind hurt?* or *Tell me where the bad men mentally probed you.*

Cecil frowns. "That's right, you – you... called me, right?"

"Yes!" says Carlos. "Yes, I did, do you – Can you remember?"

Cecil snaps his fingers. "The clocks, right? You said the clocks weren’t real."

Carlos feels like he's been hit by another time-traveling cue ball. "Yeah," he hears himself saying. "Yes, the clocks weren’t real. *Aren’t* real. Well, the casings are real, but there’s nothing inside them."

"Oh, dear," says Cecil. "Did you find out what happened?"

"Sort of," says Carlos. "Most of the gears were stolen by rogue steampunk enthusiasts, and the empty casings were colonized by—* Magical constructs,* he suddenly realizes, is probably not something a scientist would say. “Some kind of... interdimensional artificially-grown lifeform... with a... native source of energy,” he finishes. “They moved in like hermit crabs. I don’t know why, though, I still need to do more research...”

"Well, I’ll have our listeners keep – oh, great. What is *he* doing here?"
Carlos follows the line of Cecil's indignantly pointing finger to the tan Corolla he's temporarily borrowed.

"Who?" he asks.

"Steve Carlsberg," says Cecil. "And would you look at that? His parking is a menace to society." He adds in a dark mutter, "Like the rest of him."

"Oh," says Carlos. "Maybe he had someone – something really important to take care of and was... in a hurry?"

"You can never be in enough of a hurry to fail at basic parking etiquette," says Cecil, shaking his head.

"Leaving the engine running might have been a little much," admits Carlos.

"I ought to go over there and—" Cecil cuts himself off, then continues sheepishly, "I'm sorry, I can take care of that later. Uh... what were we talking about? Sometimes I get distracted and I can't, uh..."

"Remember?"

"That's the one!" says Cecil cheerfully.

"It's okay," says Carlos. "I don't mind."

"You don't?" says Cecil. "No, of course you don't, you're a scientist. Oh, right – science! And clocks! I'll have our listeners keep a weather eye open for any clock-related developments."

He smiles at Carlos, who tries to smile back. He must not do a very good job, because Cecil says in a worried tone, “Was that it? Is everything okay?”

“I don't know,” says Carlos, because Cecil looks a little rough, but now he sounds mostly fine. “The important thing is that you're all right.”

Cecil's eyes widen, and Carlos stammers, "I mean – thanks, Cecil. Take – take care of yourself.”

"Carlos, I..." Cecil is frowning again now. “You’re... sure? I could have sworn – ow,” he says, rubbing his forehead.

“Cecil?”

“I can’t help but think I’m – ow – forgetting... But I don’t want – ow!”

Cecil clutches his head, looking increasingly confused and upset, like his mind is rejecting what his brain tells him, and the metaphorical ice sweeps back through Carlos' stomach like the dawning of the Quaternary glaciation, because he knows what this looks like and it’s not supposed to happen to people he – people he’s supposed to be watching out for.

“Cecil, calm down,” he says, and grabs Cecil's shoulder. Cecil freezes.

"It's okay," says Carlos. He slowly reaches up and, when Cecil makes no protest, gently pries Cecil's hands away from his head. “Do you mind if I check something?”

“1, uh—” Cecil is momentarily distracted by staring down at Carlos’ hands encircling his wrists. “Of course, I – are you sure? I – ow!”
“It’s okay,” Carlos repeats, and opens his Sight.

He only needs a second before he flinches back, shutting down his senses, because a hatchet job like that on someone’s psyche is really fucking obvious.

"Carlos, is something wrong? Ow! Something's wrong, I knew it—"

"Cecil, it's—"

Cecil wrenches his arms back. His long fingers dig into his skull. "I knew it but now I don't, because – ow – because I was supposed to – supposed to—"

"Cecil!"

Carlos is shit at mental magic, and if there's anything he could do, it might do more harm than good anyway. He knows that, but that's not helping Cecil, who is freaking out right in front of him, so Carlos panics and snaps out, “Way!”

Cecil blinks twice. Then he collapses into Carlos’ arms, sound asleep.

Sleep – Carlos can work with sleep. A night of deep, dreamless rest will give Cecil’s mind a chance to heal over – maybe enough that it won’t try to tear itself apart, fighting against the manipulation inflicted upon it.

Carlos realizes that he’s standing in the middle of the sidewalk barely holding up Cecil's unconscious body.

He grunts and manages to haul Cecil up on his shoulders in a fireman’s carry. Fortunately, Cecil’s apartment building appears to be unlocked. Unfortunately, Cecil lives on the third floor, and judging by the way the foyer lights are flickering Carlos is probably not in the correct frame of mind to risk the elevator.

He has to stop on the second floor landing for a break, and thinks rather hysterically it’s really a good thing he got sent back in time. He’d caught a glimpse of Carlos Prime the other week, on his first mission in Night Vale after he made it back to active duty: he looked like a stiff breeze could knock him over, and he was so wiped from repairing the ward foci in Mission Grove Park that he didn't even notice Carlos almost getting mowed down by a herd of cyclists doing a better job than normal of ignoring his hood. His past self would have collapsed halfway up the first flight of steps, whereas he is probably going to collapse at a much higher altitude and then roll all the way back down.

Cecil stirs and mumbles "Hazelnut," before dropping back off.

Carlos starts back up the staircase.

He edges carefully through the fire door, making sure he doesn’t accidentally whack Cecil’s head, then staggers to Cecil’s apartment. He awkwardly gropes for Cecil’s keys – literally, since they’re in Cecil’s pants pocket; Carlos feels faintly sick. They hum quietly in his grasp, a match for the modest yet effective patchwork of wards around Cecil's apartment. It's the style preferred by members of the Paranet. Apparently Shakeena Flynn wasn't exaggerating when she said she and Cecil went way back.

Carlos unlocks the door and feels the wards part to let them through. He tightens his hold on Cecil, takes a deep breath, and steps over the threshold.

He isn’t prepared for the way Cecil shifts and then relaxes over his shoulders. He isn't prepared for
the firm pressure of the threshold to dissipate. He isn't prepared for *nothing to happen*, because Cecil had honestly meant all those *Come over whenever you like* and *Stop by at any times*; because it doesn't matter that Cecil is in no shape to invite Carlos in since Carlos failed him; because Carlos is a welcome guest in Cecil's home.

His knees wobble and almost give out, but he lurches past the kitchen, down the hall, to the bedroom at the very end.

Carlos carefully deposits Cecil on the bed, then collapses on the floor, wheezing.

The room is shadowy from the faint glow of the streetlights but it smells like Cecil, and the combination is almost comforting. He just needs a moment—

Carlos jerks awake when someone says his name. For a moment he’s completely disoriented, until he hears slow, steady breathing above him and everything comes rushing back in a flood.

He squeezes his eyes shut.

Then Carlos climbs to his feet and leans over to check on Cecil. His face is slack and peaceful, his breathing deep and even. Carlos smoothes the hair back from his forehead so it's not hanging in his eyes and turns to go.

“Carlos,” Cecil mumbles.

“Cecil?” Carlos whispers, but Cecil doesn’t respond. He’s just talking in his sleep. Carlos slips out of the bedroom and back down the hall.

Cecil will recover faster if there's no blatant holes or discrepancies in whatever he can remember. Carlos pulls out his notebook and scribbles a brief message:

*Cecil –*

*Thank you for helping me with those science experiments.*

*Call me if you suffer ANY negative side effects.*

– *Carlos*

He tears it out and folds it neatly.

The keys go back on the counter next to the note after he locks the door. He listens: the apartment is completely silent.

He pulls the door shut behind him. The lock clicks and the wards spring up, a solid barrier between Cecil and the rest of the world.

He walks away.

~*_~*_~*_~*

Julie discovers him drinking directly from the coffee pot in Lab One when she flicks on the lights at 6:00 in the morning. Carlos winces at both the sudden brightness and her angry shriek.

“Get *out* – oh, it’s you,” she says. “Wait, no, I told you to get out, too. What are you doing here?” She stares in confusion at the jumble of papers all over the counters, the desks, the floor.

“Research,” says Carlos. “Some of those are public records. If I’m not back later, can somebody take
them back to City Hall? All the rest can be burned.”

“Burned? Won’t you need them?”

Carlos finishes the pot and doesn’t answer her.

“What do you mean by, ‘If I’m not back later’?” asks Julie.

“Here,” says Carlos.

She takes a business card from his hand. “What’s this?”

“Contact information for Elaine Mallory,” says Carlos. “She lives in LA and I’ve worked with her before. She’ll do phone consultations if you have a problem that can’t be handled locally, and she’ll know who to call if it’s an emergency. Otherwise talk to Shakeena Flynn over on Ouroboros Road. Or the Apache Tracker, but that guy’s an asshole and I try not to encourage him.”

He puts on his belt and clips on his holster, his sword, and two grenades.

“Carlos, where are you going?” says Julie.

“To do my job,” he says. “Valentine’s Day is in a couple weeks. Everyone should get in the bunker the night before and stay there until at least noon the day after. Don’t let anyone fool you: they hope every year that it won’t be as bad, and they’re always wrong. You have to watch out for March 15, too – there’s going to be a sandstorm and you can’t go out in it, no matter what. After that... you should use your best judgment. Make sure you’ve got batteries for the radio; Cecil will keep you updated.” He swallows a lump in his throat, because maybe Cecil won’t be able to keep them updated. Maybe Cecil’s mind has already begun a long, painful dissolution, and after the sandstorm there’ll be someone else sitting in his chair, trying to bring some order to a state of emergency.

That would probably mean there will be no one keeping Carlos’ death curse from finally fulfilling the purpose it was meant for. Of course, Carlos might not even make it that long, because Cecil – and Steve Carlsberg, and Becky Canterbury, and Janice Rio from down the street, and Officer Cady Takagawa, and even the Sheriff; countless others, strewn across the counters, the desks, the floors – is proof that there’s another City Council member with the mojo for some serious dark magic, and if Carlos gets tagged by another death curse he has no illusions about dodging that particular bullet twice.

_Hazelnut_, he thinks. _Mystify. Cuttlefish. Lark._ It’s not a list worth so many minds.

Julie has started shouting at him, but he’s not really paying attention. He wades through the reams of paper over to the refrigerator and opens the freezer. There’s a stack of frozen dinners; he takes them out and, ignoring the Sharpied warning of ‘Do not touch! Property of Gary!’, methodically begins peeling back the wrappers to reveal frozen chunks of Salisbury steak. He pries them out and arranges them on the counter, lays a circle of paper clips overtrop them. Carlos gathers up his will and says, “_K’ak’!_”

Several of the fluorescent light flicker and die as fire flashes around the circle. It fuses the paper clips and meat chunks together before floating in a tiny ball of plasma over Carlos’ hand for a few seconds, sucking in the local heat energy until the metal has cooled and frost coats the counter. Carlos breaks the connection and it disappears. The skin on his hand stings like a sunburn, but he ignores it.

Julie stops shouting. “That’s a meat crown,” she says.
“Yes, it is,” says Carlos.

“It’s not very soft,” she says.

“I’m pressed for time,” says Carlos. "It'll defrost eventually."

“You’re going up against the whole City Council?”

“Technically, just one of them,” says Carlos. “I only found traces of a single person’s handiwork in everyone’s minds.”

“They’ve been messing with people’s heads?” says Julie.

“In direct violation of the Third Law of Magic,” says Carlos. “There’s a report in my desk if any Wardens come looking. Play dumb if they question you about anything I’ve told you.”

Julie gives him a look.

"Okay, fine, play the skeptic. Just say I was hired muscle with some weird tricks.”

Julie nods. “Do you need a driver?”

“No,” he says. “It’s better if I go alone.”

He heads to the door.

“Carlos,” says Julie. He turns.

“You’re not just hired muscle,” she says. "But even if you were, you better come back. I’ve paid you for the whole month.”

~*~*~*~

Julie’s still there when he returns – hunched over a desk, face illuminated only by the glow of her laptop monitor, fingers stabbing angrily at the keyboard. It's not unusual for her or Andre to stay late, and he's been gone for almost an entire day, so she must have moved at some point. Probably.

She glances up at him, then does a double-take. “Holy shit, Carlos. Did you and Carrie enjoy the prom?” She opens a drawer and pulls out a First Aid kit.

“I never went to prom,” says Carlos.

“Yes, that’s the relevant traumatic issue here,” she says. “Are you—”

“The blood’s not mine,” says Carlos.

“I hope not,” says Julie. “Or else I’d have to donate your body to science as a medical miracle and it would get way too quiet around here.”

There’s a joke in there somewhere about Carlos’ miraculous body, but he’s too tired to make it.

Julie frowns, so she probably noticed that too.

“You look awful,” she says. "Besides the whole Evil Dead theme you have going on. Have you slept yet?"

“I spent the last eighteen hours in the Beatrix Loman Memorial Meditation Zone hiding from
vigilante squads,” says Carlos, instead of answering her question.

He sits down on a stool and pulls off his *pakal* glove. His left hand is probably the last clean body part he has left; the rest are covered in blood.

Something nudges into his field of vision. Julie's holding out a packet of baby wipes. He takes them and mechanically begins to clean off his gear.

“I read your report,” she says quietly. “I’m sorry.”

“I’m not the one to feel sorry for,” says Carlos. He unsheathes his sword, scrubbing dark patches of grime off the blade.

“Right,” she says. “You finally own up to months of pining just in time for your boyfriend to get mind-whammied, but I’m only capable of feeling bad for one person at a time, so clearly it’s not at all sad for you.”

Carlos stops scrubbing. “He’s not my boyfriend,” he says dully.

"You could still—"

Carlos makes a gesture that vaguely encompasses his appearance, the lab, and all of Night Vale. "I don't think the initial results warrant further testing, Julie."

Julie lets out a sigh, but doesn’t push. They sit in silence for a few moments: Julie rifling through a folder, Carlos staring at his reflection in the polished silver of his sword blade.

“A couple years ago...”

Julie's writing something on a notepad, but she glances up to give him her encouraging scowl.

Carlos sheathes his sword. “A couple years ago, there was a traitor in – in our ranks,” he says. “He manipulated a lot of people, violated a lot of minds. My—” He swallows. “He got a lot of people I knew.”

“What about you?” asks Julie.

Carlos laughs bitterly. “Not me,” he says. He picks up one of Julie's Sharpies and twirls it between his fingers. “He was a paper-pusher. A real bureaucromancer. He poisoned his ink to make everyone more susceptible to his control—”

“—But you never use pens,” finishes Julie. “I guess it's not paranoia if they really are out to get you.”

“A lot of good it did me,” says Carlos. “My friends were the worst hit. People I worked with. People who trained me. People *I* trained. And I didn’t notice a thing until it was too late.” He looks at the stack of records, now piled neatly on his desk. “I was too late again.”

Julie looks at him steadily for a minute, then says, “That sucks.”

Carlos snorts.

“What?” she says. “Even if I could prove it quantifiably – which I can’t, since I can’t really measure your psychic shit yet and basically your whole job is classified – you still wouldn’t believe me if I told you it wasn’t your fault. But we can both agree that not being able to help your friends when they need it sucks.” She slams her notebook shut. “It sucks a lot.”
"Yeah," says Carlos.

The screen of Julie's laptop flickers and dies. She swears.

"Sorry," says Carlos. "I should have—"

"It's fine," says Julie. After a few seconds of fumbling in the dark, she clicks on a lighter, then fishes out an emergency candle. "I was just checking the vulnerability of Shriek-Tronic's networks on the off chance I could co-opt their oscillators to cause a distraction."

Carlos rubs his forehead, then grimaces at his hand. "Julie, that's… not a good idea."

"I'll say. Their equipment's unbelievably shitty," she says. "The only way they're generating 'earthquakes' for the 'government' is by the placebo effect. Now please go take a shower. I can smell you getting all sorts of weird diseases from here."

"Thanks, Julie," says Carlos.

"De nada," she says.

~*~*~*~

The next few days are difficult, and not just because of the City Hall-sponsored mob roaming the streets, or the dozens of voice messages from Flynn and the Tracker, all variations of "What did you do?" and "Какого черта?!" Carlos unplugs his phone and shoves it in a closet.

He spends most of his time staring at the ceiling of his bedroom. He still can't sleep. Even Cecil can't help, his voice a harsh buzz from the ruined speakers of Carlos' radio, lying in pieces in the corner.

Carlos hangs on every word anyway. Did Cecil hesitate during the traffic report when he mentioned Big Rico's just next store? Is the slight hitch in his voice from a tickle in his throat, or because his mind keeps trying to remember things that have been taken from him? Is his dedication to his work the only thing keeping him from succumbing to the madness and pain of having his spirit mauled?

Or maybe he's fine. Barring a sudden divergence with history – slightly less likely now that the time fluctuations have suddenly abated – Cecil makes it to the middle of March at least. Carlos checked on all the other victims he could find, and they seemed... all right. By Night Vale's standards, at least. Cecil's probably used to having forbidden knowledge excised by now. And maybe he only had a, a minor crush on Carlos. Maybe forgetting one date as a side effect of his ordeal isn't that big a problem. That would be for the best, probably: Cecil will heal quickly and things will go back to the way they were and they'll both stay out of trouble. The human mind and spirit are resilient; they'll live.

"Good night, Night Vale," says Cecil. "Good night."

He didn't mention Carlos at all. Carlos tries to convince himself that's a good sign.

Someone is knocking at one of the doors upstairs.

Carlos considers just laying there until they go away, but his conscience gets the better of him. If it's one of the scientists, they might need help, and they can't call him. Or they might want to ask him a stupid question, in which case they'll keep knocking until he answers, because they're all way too persistent for their own good.

He drags himself upstairs and answers the door.
"Hi!" says Kate brightly. "We brought you food."

Gary holds up a bottle of mead in illustration, and Kate, taking advantage of Carlos' distraction, shoves a pizza box into his hands and slips past him.

"Dr. Kwan sent us to discuss the time fluctuations. Or, well, the lack of time fluctuations. They're holding steady at their pre-January levels," she says from his kitchen. He hears the clink of plates as she collects them from the cabinet while Gary wanders into the living room and flops down on the easy chair.

He drops the pizza box on the end table. "I don't think—"

Gary's phone rings. "Hi, Dr. Kwan. Yes, he's up. No, they're at least an 11. Have you slept yet?" he asks Carlos.

Carlos glares at him.

"I think that's a No," says Gary.

"Do you have any medical allergies?" calls Kate.

"No," says Carlos.

"She wants me to tell you that long-term total sleep deprivation has caused death in lab animals," says Gary.

"I know," says Carlos.

"Just checking. Kate? Dr. Kwan says it's a go. The eagle has left the nest."

"Wait, what?" says Kate, still in the other room.

"Um, The eagle is soaring? The eagle has, uh..."

"Do you mean The eagle has landed?" says Carlos.

"Oh, yeah, that's the one!"

There's a sharp hiss, and then something stings the side of Carlos' neck. "Ow!"

"Bullseye!" says Kate.

Carlos gingerly touches his neck and comes away with a tranquilizer dart.

"Oh, come on," says Carlos woozily. He somehow manages to collapse on the couch, and the last thing he hears for several restless but REM-filled hours is Kate yelling at Gary to stop eating all the pizza.

Unfortunately, the scientists rule the results of Operation Seda-Give inconclusive and demand several retrials.

~*~*~*~

Carlos hates Valentine’s Day. Loathes it. Not only does it mark – nay, celebrate – each passing year that he totally fails to go on a successful date, get laid, or develop a deep and meaningful emotional connection with someone who is neither related to nor paid to deal with him, but it’s also so tacky
and overcommercialized, cheapening what should be one of the purest pursuits in someone’s life.

There’s also the fact that he has to spend it wading through blood, futilely trying to save the lives of people who are too stupid not to live next-door to eldritch abominations demanding yearly sacrifice.

He takes another pull of tequila. He’s drinking it straight out of the bottle. The bottle is made of plastic.

Carlos is perfectly willing to admit that he’s probably made some recent poor life choices, but right now he doesn’t really care.

He thought that maybe this year he could make a difference. That Carlos Prime would take the front line while he followed behind, dealing with the collateral damage while his past self was busy fighting the thing. That he had a second chance to make everything – well, not right, but at least less terrible.

Instead, he can still taste the chalky sweetness of candy hearts in the back of his throat, and his hands are covered in glitter.

He hears someone coming down the hall. Nothing’s tripped the wards, so he’s probably safe. Safe to face another year of loneliness, capped off by mass bloodshed. Hurrah.

He swallows another mouthful, screws the lid back on, and slumps even further against the side of the desk. The bottle somehow starts rolling away, which might have something to do with how Carlos can’t really feel his hands.

That’s pretty good, actually. His left arm is covered in cuts and bruises and he’s jammed a bunch of fingers.

At least Cecil is safe this time. Carlos had been dreading his broadcasts these past couple weeks, because listening to his voice made Carlos feel... things... but today it was good because he knew Cecil was okay and also it kept him from blacking out and getting eaten that one time.

Someone stops the rolling bottle with their foot. “I’ve found him, Julie,” says Andre.

Her voice comes over a speakerphone, slightly distorted. “Where is he?”

Andre picks up the bottle and winces. “Seven tequila, floor,” he says.

“What do I look like, an amateur?” slurs Carlos. “I’ve had way more than seven.”

“Right, of course,” says Andre soothingly. “But I think that’s probably enough.”

“Nooooo,” says Carlos. “It’s really not, because I can still remember.”

“Remember what?” asks phone Julie.

“It’s one of the town mottoes, you know,” says Carlos. "If you say something, see nothing, and drink to regret.”

“I think you’re doing a great job,” says Andre. “Can you stand up?”

"Remember what, Carlos?" says Julie again, as he crawls to his feet.

"Everything," says Carlos. “Mostly the screaming. So much screaming. This is a terrible holiday. Worst time of the year.”
“You’ve done this before?” Julie’s voice crackles in disbelief. Or maybe that’s just him, slowly destroying his friend’s phone with his very presence. Although Andre is making him stand and now the room is spinning, so possibly he deserves it.

“Every year,” says Carlos. “And I got to do this year twice. Lucky me.” They’re walking out of the lab now. Well, Andre is walking; Carlos is kind of perpetually slumping forward against the wall. He flails at the bottle in Andre’s hand and almost falls over trying not to trip up his cane. “Gimme,” he says. “I’m remembering again.”

“You can have some when you get to your apartment,” says Andre.

“Okay,” says Carlos. “...Andre, I’m remembering a lot.” He stops.

“Carlos?” asks Andre.

“I need to sit,” says Carlos. He slides down the wall and covers his face with his hands.

“Carlos?” says Andre again. He puts a hand on Carlos’ shoulder. He sounds worried. Julie sounds like static.

“Don’t worry, they can’t get past the wards,” Carlos mumbles. “Did that on purpose. It’s not fair. I know what it can do, and I still can’t stop it. Every year. Even this year. Especially this year. Even two of me wasn’t enough.”

“Carlos, you helped a lot of people,” says Andre.

“Not enough,” says Carlos. “That’s the problem with this town. You think you can do something, but it’s not enough, because the whole thing is built on doom. And earthquakes. And explosions. I don’t know why people are here – no, that’s a lie. I just wish I didn’t. I wish I didn’t care.” He drops his hands. “I want to go home,” he says wearily.

“Let’s get you back to your apartment,” says Andre.

That’s not what Carlos meant, but it’s not like he has much of a choice.

~*~*~*~

Carlos wakes up on his living room couch. He’s stripped down to his shorts and his arm is thoroughly but inexpertly bandaged. A pile of clean clothes is on the floor next to him, along with all his weapons, a bottle of Tums, a larger bottle of aspirin, a giant bottle of water, and a trash can.

The immediate threat level determined and dismissed, Carlos grabs the trash can and pukes up everything he’s eaten for the last month. It makes his head hurt even more. He chokes down the aspirin and some water and collapses back on the couch.

One of the kitchen cabinets is buzzing.

He groans, which seems to make his teeth vibrate and set off the pounding in his head again.

Walking is sort of beyond him right now, so he ends up crawling across the room, only to find out that the cabinet has those deviously clever child-safety latches. By the time he wrestles it open, he is seriously regretting leaving his trash can a whole ten feet away.

Instead of a rogue hive of Gary’s bees, the buzzing proves to be a small radio, bundled up under a space blanket and shoved in with the other emergency supplies. Carlos can’t remember putting it
there. He briefly considers throwing it through the window, but then the broadcast will start coming from the actual bees, or, like, his toaster, or all muffled through the speakers on his record player (which has been wrapped up in blankets and duct tape for the past two weeks in case he gets the brilliant idea to throw *that* out the window) and he would probably have to stand up to deal with it.

Carlos frees the radio and puts it on the floor next to him.

“This Valentine’s Day, as all Valentine’s Days, will not succeed in bringing our city down,” says Cecil. “This Valentine’s Day, as all Valentine’s Days, will soon recede into painful memory, fading with time, until another foul Valentine’s Day is upon us again.”

“Don’t remind me,” croaks Carlos.

He wakes up several hours later still propped up against the fridge. The radio has gone silent.

So has the refrigerator, and at some point someone snuck in and draped the space blanket over him. Carlos tries to muster up the energy to feel annoyed, or embarrassed, but all he feels is a vague sense of relief that he managed to get some sleep without hitting the bottle (...some more) or being stunned like a captive wildebeest. Maybe there’s a correlation between his insomnia and the time fluctuations. Or maybe his hangover is bad enough to distract the rest of him from its time-travel allergy, and all he needs to do to get a good night's sleep is just feel really fucking terrible.

It’s nice to have achievable goals again.

~*~*~*~

The good news is that his hypothesis, proposing that extreme physiological stress counteracts the effects of a tangled personal timeline, holds up under several testing trials.

The bad news is throat spiders.

~*~*~*~

Technically speaking, Carlos probably doesn’t need his science classes any more. He mastered user-friendly abstracts of the scientists’ research months ago, and they’ve kept him up-to-date on new developments, only sometimes by trapping him in the lab and talking his ear off or forcing him to physically drag them away from experiments gone wrong. He’s only got a few weeks left before he leaves Night Vale, one way or another.

But it’s nice to have a routine, and even nicer to spend a couple hours focusing on things that have nothing to do with Night Vale. He just has to sit there and learn things upon which the fate of the world does *not* depend (at least, not from him) and bask in the glow of scientific enthusiasm. Carlos' life has been pretty lacking in enthusiasm lately.

He skirts the edge of the vacant lot out back of the Ralph’s and heads to the loading dock, where an employee wearing a store polo and a bandana tied over the bottom half of her face escorts him to Wei’s corner of the refugee camp. She exchanges an elaborate series of code signs with Wei, then leaves, looking back with a sigh and touching the part of the bandana over her lips before shaking her head.

Instead of breaking out the textbooks, Wei ushers Carlos over to a table covered in a mish-mash of electronic equipment.

"I told you, I think Mat Lab’s pretty much a lost cause—"
"Just sit," says Wei. "Don't touch anything."

He leans over and types on the keyboard. After a few seconds, a window pops up on the screen and makes a chiming noise, and the blur inside it quickly resolves into a face.

"Carlos!"

"Milagro?" he says in amazement, because that's definitely his younger sister staring at him from the screen, still wearing her desert fatigues and a patrol cap over her curly hair.

"Wow, your friend is lucky he came through," she says. "I was about to report a security breach. Look at you, finally entering the twenty-first century!"

"I'm not allowed to touch anything," admits Carlos. Wei gives him a thumbs up and disappears with a stack of shopping baskets.

His sister laughs. "How's everything at home?"

He swallows a lump in his throat. "Good," he says, because it's technically true. "I'm not there right now, though. Kinda stuck. It's good to talk to you, manita." Milagro called home at Christmas, and sent Carlos Prime a few postcards and a letter, but the Carlos sitting here right now hasn't heard his sister's voice in almost a year.

She looks at him silently for long enough that he's afraid they've lost the connection, or however this thing works, but then she says, "Yeah, I know what you mean. Oh, so I told you about the goat, right?"

"I'm trying to think of a time when any story starting with 'So I told you about the goat' ended well," says Carlos. "I'm coming up a little short."

"That's because you're just an officer," says Milagro, and launches into a long and complicated story about her squad that indeed does not end well for the goat but does end well (according to her, anyway) for peace in the Middle East, freedom, and America, and at one point Carlos laughs so hard the screen shuts off for thirty seconds and then flips orientation so everything gets stuck upside down.

"I'm due back at my station in five," she says finally. "But I've got some leave in a couple months, and we're going down to the shooting range and you're going hand that gun of yours over to someone who appreciates her."

"I appreciate my Desert Eagle just fine, thanks," says Carlos. "But I'll consider it if you stay out of trouble."

"You stay out of trouble," she says.

"Trouble is my middle name," he replies.

She snorts and says, "You wish."

They say goodbye, and then Milagro does something to make the screen go dark, unless that was Carlos again. He gets up and goes into the stockroom, where Wei is reading something and chewing on the end of a highlighter.

"Hey, uh. Thanks," says Carlos.
Wei shrugs and says, "Sometimes it helps me to talk to someone from home. I thought it might work for you, too."

"Yeah," says Carlos. "It did." He scratches the back of his head. "Do I want to know how you contacted a secure army installation?"

"No," says Wei cheerfully. "But you do want to know the specific conductivity of these water samples."

~*~*~*~

The next day another vortex appears: in the Coyote Corners housing development, on Nasreen Smithwick’s living room wall. This one ejects cue balls at supersonic speeds every 7.39 seconds for about fifteen minutes and then disappears, and the only reason Julie found it was because Gary got lost driving the Sciencemobile and a cue ball crashed through the rear window.

“We need a better way of locating these things,” says Julie. Carlos nods; this vortex was small enough that the storm wards had barely managed cloud cover before it vanished. “Look at these readings!”

She waves a sheet of brightly-colored squiggles in Carlos’ face.

“I mean, yes, I was able to get data from an active wormhole, but I barely had time to set up our instruments, so who knows if we even had the correct calibrations? We could be missing out on whole spectra! This is so sloppy I could barely determine the temporal distortion if I hadn’t suspected it was there already!”

“Temporal distortion?” says Carlos.

She blinks at him, like she hadn't expected him to say anything, but recovers a moment later. “Right, these lines here,” she says, jabbing a finger at the graph. “I think the spatial compression affected the synchronization of the timelike curve with the world line, but I can’t actually confirm that without more data, and——”

“The vortex was smaller, so… time moved faster?” Carlos hazards.

She pauses again and gives him a speculative look, and, okay, so maybe Carlos hasn't been getting top marks in participation for the past couple days – weeks – but he can't have been that bad, and also some of it was not his fault, because throat spiders.

“If you want to simplify it so far it's almost useless, sure,” she says, and that at least is a pretty standard reaction. “I doubt it was intended effect, though the regular ejection of the cue balls may indicate that whoever is doing this was aware of the possibility and controlled their entry into the wormhole to test other variables. That, or they really hate the modular housing in Coyote Corners. Can't say that I blame them..."

"It looked a lot better before Valentine's Day," says Carlos. "And there are a lot more efficient ways to destroy a neighborhood than cue balls traveling at Mach 2."

"I'm sure," says Julie. "But the point remains that we nearly missed this one. For all we know, mini-wormholes have been popping up all over the place! There has to be some way—"

Julie shut her tablet off before she started talking to Carlos, but now it emits a piercing electronic squeal, like the death cry of a robot pig, before modulating into, "Spacious skies. Amber waves of grain. An army of caterpillars marching towards Mexico. Welcome to Night Vale."
"Can we talk about this?" says Julie.

"I'm fine," lies Carlos.

"I actually meant, 'Can we talk about the way perfectly innocent electronics get co-opted to broadcast your boy – your friend's show every afternoon,' but we can pretend your feelings are doing okay at the same time, I guess."

"Gracias," says Carlos dryly.

Julie nudges him with her elbow. "Well? What's with the EVP?"

"I got cursed," says Carlos. "City Council used to use the Voice of Night Vale to take down their enemies."

"Today's top story," says Cecil, "Anti-shampoo extremists have chained themselves to the front doors of the Curl Up and Dye salon as part of their campaign to spread awareness about the hazards of hair-care products."

"Truly terrifying," says Julie, deadpan. "Why didn't it work on you?"

Carlos looks down. "Cecil's different," he says.

"You poor bastard," says Julie sympathetically. "Anyway, wormhole detection. Thoughts?"

"The protesters claim that even ordinary shampoos contain harmful sulfates, carcinogens, and deadly tree frog venom used to—"

"We could call him," says Carlos, resolutely staring at his feet.

"What?"

"We could call Cecil," says Carlos. "About the vortices. We could ask him to have his listeners contact us if they notice anything."

Julie shrugs. "It's worth a shot. I'll give him a ring this evening, I guess."

"I can do it," says Carlos.

"That would require your phone actually being connected," says Julie.

"I plugged it back in the other day."

Julie eyes him a moment, then says, "You don't have to."

"No, but – I should, right? I can't just... avoid him forever. We have to talk sometime. And I'll be gone in a couple weeks, so—"

"Could you not phrase that so – so finally?" Julie bursts out.

"Sorry," says Carlos. They stand in silence for a few moments, then he continues, "I'll be ditching you losers in a couple weeks, so—"

Julie elbows him again, hard.

Later that night, Carlos stares at his phone for a good five minutes before picking it up and staring at
it some more, until the dial tone turns into an angry beep. He hits the switchhook and dials Cecil's number before he can think the better of it.

It's been almost a month. He just has to make it clear he's calling Cecil for science, not – not anything else, and Cecil will be fine. They'll both be fine.

"Hello?" says Cecil.

"Hi," says Carlos. He swallows, then says, "I'm not calling for personal reasons."

Chapter End Notes

Since I am probably not the real Joseph Fink, some of the lines are from the show and not my own fevered imaginings.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

"Me paenitet, Custos Ramirez."

"Gratias tibi," says Carlos. "Vale."

He hangs up the phone and tries to think positively. Like, how comforting it is that the Captain of the Wardens is so stealthy that even Carlos couldn't find her when she was checking the wards yesterday, and how heartening for the rest of the regional commanders that she's back in the field and could get called in for an emergency strike before she could hit Carlos' message drop-off point, and how great that the Wardens have done such a thorough job training their operators in secrecy that they won't tell Carlos when Luccio will be back, and how it will be such an amazing opportunity for Carlos to demonstrate his own value as a Warden if he gets to deal with the time vortices all by himself in two weeks because nobody else is allowed within the city limits.

"Good news, everyone!" says Julie, bursting into his office.

Carlos eyes her warily. "I'm the only one in here," he says, after double-checking.

"It's from – never mind," says Julie. "Are you embroidering your lab coat?"

"They're defensive spells," says Carlos, tying off a thread and snapping it with his teeth, and okay, yes, he is sewing them into the lining of his lab coat with split stitches, but there is nothing unmanly about protecting yourself, and anyways his bisabuela taught him how to sew and she's the most badass person he knows. "Did you need something?"

"Here, check this out," says Julie, and throws a copy of the Night Vale Daily Journal at him.

"Cactus Jane got married?" says Carlos. "Crud, I didn't get her anything."

"Not that," says Julie. "City Council voted to decriminalize time travel! Now you just have to worry about all those murder charges."

"I'm not wanted for murder," says Carlos. "Murder's not illegal."

"Then why is there a picture of your hood hanging up in the Post Office?"

"Unpaid parking tickets," says Carlos.

Julie snorts, but before she can say anything, the Carlos' desk phone rings.

"Salve, Carolus est," he answers. Maybe they've received a dispatch from Luccio—

"Hello, Carlos!" says Andre. Carlos sighs and gently bangs his head against his desk. "Have you experienced any seismic activity in the past three minutes?"

"That depends," says Carlos. "What time do you have?"


He looks at Julie. "9:45," she says, "And I just re-set it off the universal clock, in case you were
wondering."

Carlos shakes his head. He's started discovering more and more time discrepancies, now within the town itself; the only good thing is that they have a consistently low statistical deviation. It looks like Night Vale is also preparing to deal with the coming time vortices.

" Noticed any earthquakes in the last eleven minutes?" he asks Julie.

"Negative."

"No, everything's been quiet here," he tells Andre. "How bad was it?"

"A 9.4 on the moment magnitude scale," says Andre happily. "That's 1.995 times stronger than Alaska! And we disabled all the local government oscillators, so there are no confounding variables this time. It's funny, because the intensity would indicate a reverse fault, but the duration is more typical of the strike-slip faults in this area—"

"Wow, you'll have to tell me about it later," says Carlos, because if he doesn't interrupt Andre now there'll be no stopping him. "Did you need anything else?"

"Oh, that's right," says Andre. "Tell me, have you been digging holes out by the monitoring station?"

"Uh, no," says Carlos.

"Hmm," says Andre. "What do giant worm holes look like again?"

"Did he say wormholes?" asks Julie, perking up.

"Holes from giant worms," clarifies Carlos.

"Boring," says Julie. "Call me if any of them break the curvature of space-time."

Fortunately, the holes are not from giant worms. Unfortunately, they look like someone has been digging around the circumference of the monitoring station's protective wards, which is far too suspicious for Carlos' comfort.

"And you didn't notice anything when you left last night?" he asks, climbing out of one of the holes. He hands Andre a shattered piece of a fulgarite he found at the bottom.

"Ohh, thank you," says Andre. "No, everything seemed normal. Normal for here, at least."

"I'll stay here tonight and keep an eye on things," says Carlos.

"That won't throw off your sleep cycle, will it?" says Andre.

"I'm sleeping much better now," says Carlos, which is mostly true. The only time he's been sedated this week was when Gary accidentally shot him after sitting on the tranquilizer gun. "I've mostly been napping during the afternoons, anyway."

"Research does suggest that polyphasic sleep was the ancestral sleep state for all mammals," says Andre. "And some humans have adapted successful variations on it."

"See, there we go," says Carlos. "I'll be fine."

"There haven't been any long-term studies on its effects, though," says Andre worriedly.
"I can be a case study," says Carlos.

But naturally, the one time insomnia would actually be useful, all Carlos wants to do is sleep. He grimly sips his thermos of coffee as he sits in the darkened monitoring station, listening to the gentle humming of machines on the far side of the room and staring out the window at the night sky.

*An impeccable backdrop of stars and void*, his mind supplies traitorously.

When he hears something around 2:30 AM, it's almost a welcome relief from his thoughts. He loosens his sword in its sheath, veils himself, and slips out the door. A quick circle of the monitoring station yields nothing.

There's another noise. Carlos takes a deep breath and opens his Sight.

It takes him a moment to filter out the imprint of the wards encircling the station, a humming wall of sparkling energy. Beyond its protective barrier the dim traces of failed worm incursions shimmer faintly. Pale streaks snap down from the sky – the remnants of last summer's storm ward malfunctions.

There's also a weird blur about twenty meters away, rumbling indistinctly.

It begins to retreat as soon as Carlos focuses on it. When he closes his Sight there's only the taillights of a large pick-up truck disappearing down the access road.

~*~*~*~

Tracking down the truck's owner is much easier than anticipated, since when Carlos mentions it to Wei the next afternoon he says, "Did it look like the one parked across three spaces out front?"

It's the same truck. The owner is equally easy to identify, since he's followed by a small crowd of people watching him pick up kumquats and say, "How quaint!"

Also, Cecil keeps talking about him on the radio.

The so-called Traveller has his arm around Cactus June, who regards him with fond tolerance and puts the kumquats in their shopping cart when his attention is caught by someone's puffy vest. He doesn't seem dangerous; then again, some things never do. And while Cactus Judy's helped Carlos out before, Carlos has no idea why, or what her ultimate agenda may be, or how she spends so much time with only a cactus and The Complete Works of William Shakespeare for company anyway.

Plus, Cecil's right: the Traveller's outfit does look uncannily like the uniforms of the Desert Bluffs Cacti marching band, and Carlos remembers the Incident as well as everyone else.

The crowd melts away with impressive alacrity when Carlos and his hood manage to corner the two suspects by the feminine hygiene products.

The Traveller's eyes widen. "Warden Ramirez!" he says, seizing Carlos' hand and shaking it vigorously.

"I don't think we've met," says Carlos, finally managing to free himself. The Traveller's no practitioner, as far as Carlos can tell, but something about his touch makes Carlos want to go wash his hands.

"Not yet," says the Traveller. His gaze sweeps over Carlos appreciatively.
"My eyes are down here," snaps Carlos.

"Sorry if I'm staring," says the Traveller. Now he gives Carlos a wink that makes Carlos want to lightly punch him in the face. "You just look so different without the scar."

"Come, come, you answer with an idle tongue," says Cactus Jade, gently poking him.

"Ever so sorry – my bad, as citizens of this era would say. This is my wife, Jade," he says.

"Howdy," she says.

"She's showing me the town. I need to learn know where I'm going, since it looks like I'll be here a while!" He laughs uproariously; Cactus Jan's smile is small, almost secretive.

"Doing what, exactly?" says Carlos.

"Oh, this and that," says the Traveler. He looks to his left and to his right, then leans in and touches Carlos' arm. "The storm is coming," he says in a low and not particularly appropriate voice. "Or should I say... sandstorm?"

"I don't know," says Carlos, shrugging off his hand. "Should you?"

"There are dark forces gathering against you, Warden Ramirez. Forces from without... and forces from within." He taps the side of his nose.

"Great," says Carlos. "So you'll be telling me everything you know about them?"

The Traveller shakes his head. "My knowledge is a heavy burden," he says. "But if you wish to know more, meet me in the parking lot in half an hour."

"What happens in half an hour?" asks Carlos.

"Come and see," says the Traveller. Then he holds up a finger. "Ah-ah! My ears are burning."

"The Traveller has been spotted in the vicinity of Jerry's Tacos," says Cecil, just barely audible over the bustle of the store. "If I were you – and I do not believe I am – I would be very careful about ordering anything off the Secret Menu at Jerry's. Definitely do not order anything off the Forsaken Menu."

"That Cecil," says the Traveller, chuckling to himself. "What a card! I can't begrudge a satisfied customer, though. He sure did enjoy my enchiladas. Right where everyone could hear them, too!" He waggles his eyebrows.

Carlos' eyes narrow.

"Radio," says the Traveller, shaking his head. He nudges his cart towards Carlos. "I'll be seeing you, Warden Ramirez."

Carlos thinks about refusing to get out of the way, but that would be a pointless piece of posturing, and who the hell would be proud enough to make suggestive comments about enchiladas that cramped, anyway? Carlos has made better enchiladas while hopped up on pain meds and with only two and a half fully functional limbs.

"Maybe you will," he says, stepping back.

"I'll be seeing you," the Traveler repeats.
"Farewell, honest soldier," says Cactus Jeanine, and they disappear around the corner of the aisle.

~*~*~*~

Carlos goes to the stockroom so he can borrow the phone of exile.

"Julie, have your scanners picked up anything?"

She lets out an aggrieved sigh. "I don't know, Carlos. That would depend on what I'm looking for, and where. For example, my Geiger counter is telling me the hazmat suits are not optimally decontaminated, and my olfactory sensors are telling me Gary made popcorn in the lounge and isn't sharing. Tragically, I left my starship back at the university and can't just push a button to scan the whole town."

"Right, I know that," says Carlos, who pretty much didn't. Isn't that what the scientists use the internet for? "I need to know if there's been another vortex."

Julie mutters something under her breath, but says, "I'll see what I can find." Then she hangs up on him.

Carlos replaces the phone in its cradle. He leans against the wall and wishes that if the Traveller was going to cause trouble, he'd do it when it wasn't interfering with Carlos' nap.

Two weeks. He only has to make it two weeks, and he'll be free. Well, first he has to battle his way through the sandstorm and deal with whoever is creating the time vortices. And Night Vale will still be in his territory (barring some hugely bizarre disaster) (which Carlos won't rule out entirely) and thus his responsibility, even if he doesn't have to live there anymore. And then there's his death curse...

"I'm still not completely sold on there being more than one mountain," says Cecil. "It's possible that the mountain apologists built a single mountain in order to prove their skewed world view.

Not certain listeners, not certain… but possible."

Carlos rubs his forehead: on the one hand, only Night Vale would deny the existence of mountains that lurk just below the horizon, visible with only a half hour's drive in pretty much any direction; on the other, Cecil isn't just blindly leaping to conclusions about the existence of scientific phenomena, but evaluating a theory step by step, and Carlos actually feels a little... proud.

He needs to get out of here.

~*~*~*~

"Well, Warden Ramirez? What did you think?" The Traveller leans against the side of his large and expensive truck, crossing his arms over his chest in a way that just happens to flex his arm muscles. His handsome yet terrible beard gleams healthily in the sunlight.

The crowd that had gathered to hear his speech is dispersing: silently, and casting wary glances over their shoulders.

"I think you shouldn't wade through the Currents of Time like they're a freaking kiddie pool," says Carlos. Julie hadn't found anything, but there's something off about this whole situation, and Carlos hasn't survived being the youngest regional commander by ignoring his instincts. His hand closes around the hilt of his sword, and the Traveller hastily takes a step away, though his smile never dims.
"Dare me to the desert with thy sword," says Cactus Jeri, stepping between them. "If trembling I inhabit then, protest me the baby of a girl!"

"Now, now, dear, it's quite all right," says the Traveller. "Warden Ramirez is just doing his job. Don't worry," he says to Carlos, "I bravely saved Night Vale from certain destruction without breaking any of the Laws of Magic. Isn't technology wonderful?"

Carlos ignores that little jibe. "What do you know about the sandstorm?"

"Wellllllllllll..."

"Fine," says Carlos. "We're done here." He turns, even though putting his back to the two of them makes his skin crawl.

"Wait!"

Carlos keeps walking.

"Now, God help thee, poor monkey!" says Cactus Jackie. She sounds exasperated.

There are hurried footsteps, and then the Traveller cuts in front of him, panting slightly. 

"I'm sorry," he says. "I should have realized you'd be like this at such a young age."

"Still done," says Carlos, pushing past him.

"I can't tell you much about the sandstorm," says the Traveller, walking backwards so he can keep facing Carlos. "Causality, and all that. But I can tell you it's a diversion."

Carlos stops. "Whose diversion?"

The Traveller's face screws up as he thinks about it. "It's just like the old song," he says, finally. "You know, the... the old song!"

Carlos gives him an unimpressed look.

The Traveller sighs, and his shoulders droop. "Watch yourself," he says, and starts back to the truck.

"A word of advice," says Carlos.

The Traveller looks up hopefully.

"Keep your head down," says Carlos. "This isn't a great place to draw attention to yourself."

"Oh, pshaw," says the Traveller. "My destiny will see me through!"

"In the words of the philosopher James Cameron: the future is not set," says Carlos, and walks away.

~*~*~*~

Either the Traveller didn't want to listen to him or had never seen The Terminator, because he disappears not a few hours later. Well, "disappears". Carlos loses almost an entire day of preparations for the sandstorm investigating the vacant lot out back of the Ralph's, trying to figure out what really happened to him.

Results are inconclusive.
Carlos shows up at Cactus Jaida's with an economy-size package of diapers and is greeted with a blinding smile. "Thanks," she says, as Champ squirms around in her arms. "Sweets to the sweet?" she says, trying to put something in the baby's mouth. He twists away. "I would have gotten something from your registry, but it was online and then all the store clerks kept running away from me," says Carlos. Well, technically they'd run away from his hood; if they'd been helping Carlos the Scientist, the whole store would have pitched in, customers included. "What happened to the Traveller?"

She shakes her head sadly. "In delivering my son from me, I bury a second husband."

"Could I have that in modern English?"

She frowns. "That is Modern English."

"Right," says Carlos. He looks at Champ. He appears healthy, and there's nothing too strange when Carlos peeks at him with the Sight.

Carlos has heard people claim that small infants look like old men, but the beard is pretty ridiculous. It takes off at least twenty years.

Well, he tried. "You'll let me know if you hear anything, right?" he asks.

"Double, double," says Cactus Jo. "Toil and trouble."

"That one I know," says Carlos.

She holds up a washcloth. "Come, let me wipe thy face," she says to Champ, and then to Carlos, "Good fortune, worthy soldier, and farewell."

"Adios," says Carlos. He spends the rest of the evening wondering if the look on Champ's face was somehow desperate, despairing, or merely colicky.

~*~*~*~

On March 14, the scientists throw what they insist is a Pi Day party, although there are balloons that say "Good luck!" and "We'll miss you!" and they all shout "Surprise!" when he walks in the room. (Someone had helpfully left a Post-It on the door that also said "Surprise!", so that didn't end as poorly as it might have.)

But there are four different kinds of pie and an atomic plum pudding from Wei and an alarming amount of hard liquor from Kate and Gary, and nobody makes any reference to the next day or even the immediate future, so Carlos lets them call it what they like. The music's even loud enough that all Carlos can hear of Cecil's broadcast is the indistinct but reassuring murmur of his voice, as long as Carlos doesn't concentrate too hard.

It's definitely the best farewell party Carlos has ever attended, even when Kate shakes his hand and Andre gives him a hug and Gary slings an arm over his shoulder and says, "You know, man? I love you, man. It's like, you're the best, man. The best," before apologizing tearfully for shooting him with the tranq gun by mistake, again.

Julie just punches his arm and tells him to stop hogging the bacon apple pie.

He doesn't even mind when Intern Dana shows up for an interview. She talks to Andre about the cultural folkways of scientists and lets Julie tinker with her phone in the name of science, and leaves
them an invisible pie that she says is from "all of us down at the station!" but that Carlos can tell was made by Cecil after one bite.

He eats two pieces and sleeps like a rock.

~*~*~*~

Some people claim that the wait before the battle is the worst part. Carlos privately thinks they're full of it.

He spends the morning of the sandstorm watching the master ward interface and eating leftover honey pecan pie, and he's pretty sure this is about as good as his day's going to get. Besides, the worst part of battle is that breathless moment between pulses of adrenaline when you not only realize that you might die, but that you might lose. That your weak human body will fail and the magic singing in your veins will drain out with your blood and all your strategies will come to nothing. That you're going to let everyone down and you'll never be able to fix it, because you'll be dead.

The matching sets of scars across his stomach and back ache with the imprint of phantom teeth.

With grim determination, Carlos shoves another forkful of pie into his mouth and concentrates on the interface.

The wards have been weak but steady for the past two weeks; whatever caused them to deteriorate so critically hasn't occurred yet, which means Carlos still has a chance to see it take place and hopefully figure out what the hell is going on. Using the interface, he should be able pinpoint which of the ward foci has been targeted first and track down the perpetrator from there. It's possibly his worst plan for finding a lead ever, but if he can determine who's doing this without breaking causality he'll suck it up and deal with the collateral damage.

(All his instincts are telling him he needs to just stop the attack from happening, but he has no idea if he should listen to them or not. Or if he even can stop the attack from happening. He really hates time travel and time travel-adjacent problems.)

The end, when it comes, is pretty anti-climactic.

There's a hiss from Gary's headphones (kindly pressed upon Carlos as repayment for the tranq gun incidents, and also because they no longer transmit sounds from normal devices) and Cecil says, "Blinking red light in the night sky. The future is changing, but it's hard to tell. Welcome to——"

The interface blurs out of focus, like Carlos' vision has doubled, and orange light ripples across its surface – the whole surface, and everything beneath, each concentric pentacle infected with a burning glow. There's a stutter of power from the standing stones, then nothing but the faintest of hums.

The orange light disappears like flame consuming a piece of paper. It takes with it over half of Night Vale's defenses.

Carlos feels the fork slip out of his fingers.

He stares at the interface, stunned. Distantly, his mind is shouting at him that all that power just can't disappear – there's enough magical energy in those wards to level a quarter of the continent.

Or divert the Currents of Time?

A gust of wind tugs at his cloak. Right, the sandstorm; Carlos Prime will be here soon.
Carlos stumbles to his feet and yanks his sword from the anvil. The interface dissolves with an only partly metaphorical whimper, and his shock is slowly replaced by a cold anger.

The master wards are badly damaged – drained – whatever, but whoever's doing this couldn't destroy them entirely. There should be enough to hold out until Carlos Prime activates the emergency wards; hopefully enough to regenerate after the sandstorm has passed and Carlos has found whoever's stolen the power of his wards and made them pay.

Carlos has questioned. Carlos has conjectured. And now somebody else is going to be tested.

~*~*~*~

As soon as the sky darkens, Carlos activates his new shield. The crystal lets out a single, pure tone and falls silent, though Carlos can still feel it humming with a faint energy. It's not as strong as his pakal glove, but it's not supposed to be. It's more of an electro-static filter than an actual physical barrier – sand particles should lose their forward momentum and crash into each other instead of him. The screen doesn't do much to keep the wind out, but it does bend ambient light across its surface, creating something like an automated veil. Most importantly, it takes only a little energy and less concentration to maintain.

Carlos is pretty pleased by the design, actually. Normally he doesn't have the time to create foci for such specific problems, and if he has to, he rarely has the opportunity to refine them to their maximum simplicity and efficacy. But until today, free time is definitely the one thing he had in Night Vale.

Carlos hangs the leather cord around his neck, and the crystal settles next to his father's dog tags and the miraculous medal his mother gave him. He's gonna need all the help he can get.

Plan A was to track the damage to the master wards back to its source. That's a wash, but Plan B is still viable.

He's spent hours going over Carlos Prime's movements during the sandstorm. He (Carlos Prime) will arrive in Night Vale down by Fourth Street, get in a fight with his double, range all over town trying in vain to track down manifestations of dark magic, and end up outside of the radio station. That means he (Carlos) can't do anything to disrupt either the dark magic or the vortex until he (Carlos Prime) discovers them and gets blasted into the past.

But in the meantime, he (Carlos again) already knows that the enemy is out there. He knows where they'll be working magic. And he knows that there are two more versions of himself to use as decoys if they think they know he knows.

The leading edge of the sandstorm hits when Carlos is outside City Hall: a wall of sand hundreds of feet high, surging relentlessly down the street. He braces for impact.

Darkness envelops him, and he staggers from the force of the wind, but the sand screen holds. The air clears a little after a few minutes, enough to give him limited visibility.

There's a prickle of sensation on the back of his neck, a chilly hiss creeping through his mind, and he turns just in time to see a glowing crack split through the air itself. Something begins to rotate around it, moving against (or unaffected by) the wind, throwing up sparks of static electricity. He watches in horrified fascination as the crack bleeds more and more light; it spirals around the central axis with a low hum—

A blast of sand sweeps by, and the mini-vortex vanishes as abruptly as it appeared.
The same thing happens on Bandera Street, outside the Applebees, and even by the Dog Park. He almost has a heart attack in front of the Post Office when one of the vortices doesn't dissolve: it's nearly a meter wide when a web of rusty light erupts around it, hissing and sparking as it clings to the outer currents of the vortex and drags them to a halt.

But potential cardiac arrest pales in comparison to what he just learned – the emergency bloodstone wards aren't just effective against the dark magic, they target the vortical flow to counteract it. The vortices disintegrate entirely as soon as their rotation stops, and that is the hallmark of a specialized class of entropy spells not many people have the knack for. In the White Council, it's mainly Carlos and a decent percentage of the more research-minded wizards. Minor hex specialists make their living off it in Night Vale. And whoever built the master wards loved it so much they scrawled it across the sky in bright purple flashes of lightning and roiling green supercells.

Now, if he could just find out who's using it to swim against the Currents of Time...

He isn't picking up any traces of the spells' creation, and that doesn't seem to make sense. There's no obvious pattern to the distribution of the vortices, which almost certainly rules out a set ritual, and it's practically impossible to manipulate that kind of magic freehand with any kind of accuracy at a distance. (Carlos would have said definitely impossible, but he already thought the incapacitation of Night Vale's master wards and the widespread manipulation of the Currents of Time were impossible, and look how that turned out.) It's also ridiculously inefficient: whoever's doing this is probably wasting at least half their energy just corralling their spells from afar.

Then again, scientists don't stand at Ground Zero to observe the effects of their nuclear tests...

Carlos doesn't catch the sound of running footsteps over the wind until it’s practically on top of him. His double skids around the corner and dives behind the statue of Lee Marvin. Where Carlos is taking cover.

He stumbles backwards and drops his staff as his double hits the edge of his sand screen and bounces off it with an electric buzz. Carlos rolls to the side and comes up with his gun drawn. So does his double.

There's a brief Mexican-American standoff.

"What do you want?" says Carlos.

His double is favoring his left arm, keeping it wrapped in his cloak. His right hand is steady: a Desert Eagle isn't exactly a one-handed point-and-shoot, and Carlos' lab coat and Kevlar could probably stand up to it at any reasonable distance, but they're close enough that it might not matter. It definitely won't matter if Carlos gets shot in the head. Right now Carlos has the advantage, but just barely.

His double swallows. "You can't live like this. Neither can I."

"Wow, that explains everything," says Carlos.

His double looks pale, and his eyes are wide with something almost akin to panic. His goggles are pushed up on his head and he's not even blinking – the sand doesn't bother him. "There can only be..." He stops.

Carlos sighs. "'There can only be one'? Really?"

His double flushes. "I'm sorry, I've had a long day fighting for my own existence. Like you could do better!"
"Okay, fair point," says Carlos. "Doppel-Carlos."

"What?"

"I'm calling you Doppel-Carlos," says Carlos.

"I'm just as much Carlos as you are!"

"Right, because the first thing I did was try to disintegrate your skull," says Carlos. "Oh, wait. You have to earn this name."

"You think just because you were lucky enough to keep my body means that you get to decide?" says Doppel-Carlos with a slightly hysterical laugh. "But sure, why not. You've stolen everything else of mine. Take the name, too. At least you can't stand by and let that drain away into the sewer because you're too much of a coward to do what needs to be done."

"What the actual fuck are you talking about?" says Carlos.

His double doesn't answer at first. He's staring at Carlos – no, at his sand screen. He frowns. "Your shield is protecting you from the sand," he says finally. "Why bother?"

"Better late than never," says Carlos.

"What is it, electro-static?" asks his double. "Based on a crystalline matrix, too. It's nice. Delicate work."

Carlos has never really understood the phrase 'train of thought' until now, because while the thoughts aren't his, he's familiar enough with the mental rail lines that now he's staring down the tracks at the inescapable destination, and Doppel-Carlos just figured out he can't use his pakal glove without disrupting his sand screen.

They fire at the same time.

A lone bullet glances off Carlos' left bicep, deflected by the spells in his lab coat. He doesn't wait to see if his shots connected before diving for cover behind Lee Marvin. Normally he'd return fire immediately, but Doppel-Carlos will be expecting that, and his double doesn't have anything stopping him from raising his shield.

Carlos pulls the pin from one of his grenades and throws it past the corner of the Post Office.

For a second he thinks the wind must have caught it, because a grenade is tumbling past his position, but no, the wind's in the wrong direction and he's fighting someone who thinks almost exactly like him—

"Yax!" he screams, scrambling away. His shield materializes. His crystal shatters. The grenade explodes.

He hits the ground hard. It takes a few seconds that feel like forever to suck in a new lungful of air, and between the explosion and the magical backlash from the disintegration of his sand screen that's the only thing he can manage.

He's not dead, so his shield must have absorbed the shock wave. But he can feel sand stinging his exposed face, so... all his protections are gone. He should open his eyes, but it's hard enough just to breathe, and he's so tired...
The thought echoes back and forth in the darkness. He can't hear anything else but a high-pitched ringing—

—Except there's this persistent thrumming in his chest, weaving around the staccato rhythm of his heartbeat, a loose syncopation unlike any music he knows but so familiar, its cadences rising and falling like – a human voice—

Carlos wrenches his eyes open, raises his shaky left hand, and croaks "Yax." Probably. He still can't hear.

Six sets of concentric circles ripple across the gelatinous light of his shield. He’s showered in a spray of metallic granules – the fragmented remains of bullets. He rolls onto his side and uses his right hand to lever himself to one knee, still holding his shield with the left. His strength is draining rapidly; he makes it to his feet and nearly falls from the wave of dizziness. Six shots – he's shooting .50 cals, so that should have emptied the magazine, but is he carrying more ammo? He should reload before his double drops his shield – no, his double has dropped his shield, he’s standing right there unprotected —

His vision is blurring from the sand, but the sand is his. The one fate he can control. How easy it would be, to just ride the wind into oblivion—

Carlos shakes his head abruptly. Doppel-Carlos, who had been dreamily lowering his gun, jerks back and raises it again.

"Get out of my head!" shouts Carlos. "It's mine!"

His double shouts something back. Carlos still can’t hear.

The wind shifts and whips back Doppel-Carlos’ cloak, and Carlos realizes why he’s been shooting one-handed.

Half his arm is gone.

Not chopped off below the elbow; split vertically, bloodless, somehow fuzzing into the air.

It's the sand, Carlos realizes. The doubles are human – Doppel-Carlos is bleeding from a cut on his forehead, blood sheeting down the side of his face – but they're also sand, because Doppel-Carlos hit the sand screen with his left side and almost lost his arm. And if the sandstorm passes—

There’s a surge of power to the northwest, a great rumbling chord with a dissonant edge, washing across his senses with the cloying stickiness of dark magic.

Doppel-Carlos takes advantage of his distraction and hits him with everything he’s got.

Carlos’ shield is still up, but the force sends him flying backwards through the plate glass windows of the Radio Shack. He's helpfully stopped by a shelf of merchandise that collapses around him. Light flashes from outside, and there's a strange noise that might possibly be an explosion.

Carlos struggles out of the pile of appliances to his feet, shield wobbling back to life.

The expected follow-through never comes.

Several breathless moments pass as he waits, tensed for action. His whole arm is shaking from the effort of maintaining his shield and his ears are still ringing from the grenade explosion. And now his face hurts from windburn, a distracting sting that—
Windburn. His sand screen is gone. Does he have another double? But he was lying defenceless for a few critical moments, more than enough time for any halfway decent copy of him to attack. Doppel-Carlos hasn’t even let the imminent chance of mass destruction stop him from trying to kill Carlos.

He’s not trying to kill Carlos now. No one’s trying to kill Carlos now. There was that light and strange noise right after he was thrown through the window – did someone attack his double? Did someone attack his double, thinking it was Carlos?

Did whoever’s creating the time vortices finally decide to eliminate their competition?

Carlos tenses at a sudden movement, but it’s just the charred remains of some white fabric, caught by the wind. It flaps against the broken glass before being carried away in a whirl of sand.

There’s still no sign of anyone. Carlos takes cover behind a shelf that’s still standing and drops his shield with a sigh of relief. His staff and gun are out there somewhere in the street. His headphones are dangling by a few wires; he pulls them off and drops them on the floor.

The tiny speakers let out a choked hiss.

A half-crushed radio by his left foot snaps on, followed by another, and another, and then a plasma TV and a laptop computer and a home speaker system and a dozen other things Carlos doesn't have names for, until it seems like every electronic device in the shop is blasting static at him, loud enough that he can actually hear it.

They all fall silent.

“Hello?” says a voice. “Hello, Desert Bluffs?”

It’s not Cecil.

That dark magic had come from the direction of the radio station.

Carlos climbs back through the window, grabs his staff from a storm drain, and takes off down the empty street as fast as his battered body will allow.

~*~*~*~

He makes the turn onto Oxford and almost runs straight into the past.

Although metaphorically speaking he’s been running straight into the past for the better part of a year, but whatever.

His double is engaged in a deadly fight with, well, himself. Carlos Prime, the Carlos he was nine months ago. He’s treated to the bizarre spectacle of watching himself clinging monkey-like to his own back, throttling his own neck and screaming, “You coward! You didn’t do anything and now he’s gone! You could have lost him forever and you’re not even looking for him!”

There’s an odd reverberation to the words; they arrive in Carlos' brain like they’ve always been there, clear and impassioned, unaided by the muffled contributions of his abused eardrums.

Carlos Prime jerks forward, and his double goes catapulting over his head, ripping off his cloak in the process. Carlos watches his past self hurl a fistful of green light at his double, which splashes harmlessly off his double’s shield, and – he remembers this, this is when—
There’s a fire hydrant ten feet away. Carlos blows the cap off, and as his double turns, shield raised, Carlos redirects the gush of water directly at him, helped along by a nice dose of percussive force.

His double goes flying, the shield flickers down, and Carlos hammers him with another stream of water as a lone ray of sun breaks through the storm.

Water is a purifying force, capable of dissolving almost any magic. It's one of nature's strongest forces, too – leveling cities, carving the landscape, bringing life to the desert. With enough water, you can wear down mountains.

Carlos' double doesn't stand a chance.

There’s the faintest echo of rage and regret, and he’s gone.

Another surge of magic hits, so close Carlos has to drop to one knee. A swirling vortex of midnight blue opens up right behind his past self just as the street ripples like it's been hit with one of his earth-breaker spells. It catches Carlos Prime off balance, and he's thrown backwards straight into the vortex with a blinding burst of gold light.

When Carlos’ vision clears, the only sign of his past self is the abandoned Warden’s cloak lying forlornly in the gutter, there’s nothing left of his double besides a puddle of water on the wet pavement, the vortex is gone, and a cloaked figure is standing at the other end of the street.

One hand is upraised. There’s something small and black sitting on it, but Carlos can’t make out what; their whole figure is blurred and indistinct, some kind of veil camouflaging them even as the cover from the sandstorm begins to subside.

They lower their arm. Carlos slowly gets to his feet. They watch each other, warily.

Then the cloaked figure bolts towards the one remaining source of dark magic – the Night Vale Community Radio Station.

Carlos races for the building, but the cloaked figure is closer and disappears through the open bloodstone door.

Carlos raises a wide slice of his shield before darting in. The front room is empty. So is the hall.

He stumbles and has to lower his shield before carefully setting off into the labyrinth of corridors. The door to station management’s lair is dark. Intern Dana is furiously digging a hole in the floor of the break room as he passes and doesn’t notice him. Intern Dana is also lying on the floor of the studio. He drops to one knee and feels for a pulse as he scans the recording booth through the glass: it looks like it’s filled with black light but is otherwise empty, and Dana, or her double, is dead.

He draws his sword and pushes the recording booth door open with his staff. The back wall is completely covered by a deep indigo vortex, almost black, rotating much more slowly than the one that had swallowed his past self. Cecil’s chair has been shoved back, like it was pushed aside hastily, and there’s nothing on his desk but the microphone and a toppled picture frame. Carlos can hear the weather playing over one of the monitors.

Bloody footprints track across the floor.

“Cecil?” he calls.

There’s the barest hint of movement in the corner of his eye.
Acting on instinct, Carlos pours power into his sword as he slashes downwards, intercepting a spell that unravels with a small thunderclap. Somebody curses, and he catches the thrust from another sword on his blade.

His opponent surges forward and bowls him backward onto Cecil’s desk. Carlos drops his staff. His attacker’s face is barely a foot away, but Carlos can’t make out their features. Shadows pool under the dark hood where a face should be, even though the backlash from Carlos dissolving that spell should have made almost anyone mortal drop their veil...

He grabs the blade of his sword with his gloved left hand and shoves. His attacker stumbles back: they may be the same size, but Carlos is stronger.

"Who are you?" says Carlos.

His attacker hesitates, then leaps into the vortex in a blaze of pinkish light.

Carlos almost follows them. They're the last lead – the only lead – he's got in this mess. The vortex's hum is soft, inviting; its magic genuinely beautiful, a complex spiral of strands that Carlos is so close to understanding—

His outstretched arm is only inches away before he catches himself.

He jerks backwards and swears. The subtle compulsion woven into the vortex is a nice touch, almost guaranteed to lure someone through before they can investigate more closely. He has to destroy it.

He has to destroy it, even though Cecil might be somewhere on the other side, and Carlos is about to leave him stranded with someone who is almost certainly an enemy...

The pitch of the vortex's hum increases. Carlos swallows. He steps closer and channels more power into his sword.

The vortex flares again and Cecil stumbles out.

Carlos catches him by reflex. He yanks Cecil backwards and stabs his sword into the heart of the vortex before anyone else can come out. The blade tears through magic and will; power sprays free from the disrupted currents, bursts from the remains of the spell, blankets the whole room in darkness.

Cecil's arm is trembling in his grasp. Carlos drops it abruptly.

The shadows are fading, draining away like inky water running off a mirror.

“H-hello?”

Somehow, Carlos still has the presence of mind to throw up a veil, even if the effort makes his knees wobble. He can see Cecil now, covered in bruises and soaked in blood, and for a second, Carlos can barely resist the urge to drop the veil and damn the consequences.

But even though Carlos has destroyed this vortex, he’s no closer to figuring out who made it than he was the last time he ventured out into the sandstorm. They’re still out there, free to move against the Currents of Time themselves. Carlos still has a job to do.

He stands perfectly still, holding his breath and willing his heart to beat less painfully loud.

“Is anyone there? Hello?" says Cecil. He rubs his eyes, then blinks at the studio.
"Oh, Night Vale," he cries.

“Cecil!”

Both Cecil and Carlos jump.

“Dana!” says Cecil. “Or Dana’s double! What happened? Was anyone in here?”

“I don’t know, I had to get rid of my imposter,” says Dana. “But somebody has put on the weather report – oh! The weather! Cecil, you’re on in five!”

Cecil scrambles for his chair. He reaches down to retrieve his headset, which must have fallen off the desk at some point. It’s lying next to Carlos’ staff, and for a breathless moment Carlos thinks he’s going to grab that instead and – well, Carlos doesn’t actually know. Take another look around the recording booth and see through Carlos’ faltering veil. Run screaming from the studio. Collect a nice bounty from City Council.

But Cecil’s fingers unerringly zero in on the headset, his attention already locked into his broadcast.

“Hello? Night Vale?” he says into the mic. “I told you I would be back.”

Carlos sinks to the floor in the corner of the studio and waits out the rest of the broadcast, Cecil a mere yard away, as untouchable as if he were still in whatever terrible place lurks on the far side of the vortex.

~*~*~*~

It’s Carlos’ favorite time of night when he gets back to East LA: late enough that traffic’s not bad, but early enough that the streets are still full of people out for fun on a Friday night, safe in their numbers from threats both supernatural and mundane.

When he gets to his mother’s house, no one’s home. He showers and changes and lasts for about five minutes before walking the five blocks to their restaurant.

Nita’s at the hostess station. She looks up when he walks in and smiles.

"Carlito! You’re back early," she says, and ruffles his hair furiously. "I thought you’d be gone the whole weekend. You’ve got sand in your hair. Did you play hooky and go surfing without me?"

Carlos throws his arms around her.

"Oh, Carlito," she says softly, hugging him back. "Are you okay?"

"I’m fine," he says, pulling away and trying to wipe his eyes surreptitiously.

"Is everything all right? I just talked to Mami, she’s at the new place with Tia Sarah and Alex and Rob and Consuela. Dani is working the night shift again. You’re not hurt, are you?"

"No, I’m fine," he repeats. "Everything’s fine."

She inspects his face for a moment before finally saying, "Great, then you can go cover table five."

"What?"

"I let Ana go home early because she had a babysitting emergency," says Nita.
Carlos looks at table five. "They're college students," he says. "They're just going to order nachos and margarita pitchers."

"Even you should be able to handle that," says Nita, and dumps twelve menus in his arms.

He walks Nita back to her car after they gently usher the students home (six pitchers later) and close the restaurant. She gives him another hug before driving away.

He watches her go, then walks to his bisabuela’s house.

He lets himself in, but his bisabuela is still awake, reading by the cheerful glow of an oil lamp. She watches him carefully but doesn't say anything as he collapses on her couch, staring at the photograph of his Tia Daniella (died subduing Kemmler and his zombies in 1961) and the engraving of his Tia Isabella (died subduing Kemmler and his zombies in 1820). He wonders if one day his picture is going to be up on the wall, and whether their future relatives will look at it with pride or just wish he had kicked the bucket eight years ago fighting Kemmlerites, scoring a Warden hat trick and preventing himself from bringing shame upon the family.

His bisabuela stands up and walks over to him, blocking his view of the portraits. He looks up and she takes his face in her hands. She's frowning, but her hands are gentle. Like they were on that day over twenty years ago, after he learned to recite the Laws of Magic in a voice that didn't shake; when a protective web of blue light burst from her fingers as she pointed at a word in her old Mayan codex and said, "Yax."

"How long?" she asks.

"I shouldn't," he says dully.

"How long?" she repeats.

"Nine months," he says.

She nods. "I'll keep watch."

Carlos stares at the gentle gleam of light reflecting from the blade of her naginata and listens to the sound of turning pages until he falls asleep.

He doesn't wake up until dinnertime the next day, or remember any of his dreams. He eats an entire loaf of bread on his own and writes out his official report as Cecil's show plays softly on the Victrola and agrees to meet Bill Meyers in Austin to investigate potential Fomor safe houses and probably set them on fire, and thinks for the first time that maybe things will go back to normal.

Chapter End Notes

Since I haven't said it enough: THANK YOU to Libraflyter, my wonderful beta, without whom this chapter would make no sense whatsoever. And thank you, gentle readers! Your comments and kudos and general positive thoughts make my day.

Yes, even yours. Especially yours.

That's so true! Haha, you're the best.
Note on updates: I know this is a ~drastic departure~ from the military precision of my previous posts, but I'll probably be updating a little more slowly in November, thanks to previous commitments and NaNo and travel and so on. But updates there will be! I look forward to returning to my normal erratic posting schedule in December.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

There's no direct Way to Night Vale.

It can be accessed through the Nevernever, but Carlos has to cut from East LA (behind an old maintenance shed at Garfield High School) through the barren marches of Winter to a lonely mountaintop in Nepal (something he finds amusingly ironic on a good day, when it's not snowing) and then jog the entire last leg of the journey in case the river (which is not made of water) drowns the bone-covered floodplain that exists on the other side of reality from Night Vale.

This time he's running, flat out. He knows it doesn't really mean anything – time in the Nevernever rarely matches up to the most stable places in the mortal world. He could get there five minutes after he left East LA, or five days. Either way, he's probably already too late.

He keeps running.

There's an ominous rumble behind him. He doesn't look back, because the last thing he needs to do is trip over a giant femur and sprain an ankle. The liquid in the puddles around him trembles as if the ground shivers in anticipation from the imminent deluge.

The air in front of him ripples and shimmers like a mirage, and he skids to a halt. He raises his staff as he catches a glimpse of empty desert. But there's no one there, no one on the other side trying to open a gate into the Ways: the desert isn't Night Vale.

It's briefly illuminated by a red light, a flash bright enough to light up the floodplain, too. The air feels thin, stretched, like he could just reach out and tear a hole through the membrane between the Nevernever and... wherever this is...

There's another burst of red light and the desert disappears.

Carlos is left staring at the normal vista of dark mud and bleached bone. The distant thunder of a flash flood jars him from his absorption and he starts running again.

He gives the former location of the mirage – the vision – the local anomaly a wide berth. It's not an immediate threat; if it's more than the general weirdness of the Nevernever, he can figure it out later. But he looks back, just once, before he returns to the mortal world, and thinks he catches the dim reflection of a blinking red light.

~*~*~*~

Carlos circles the entire Dog Park twice. He can feel a faint tension in the air, but it's just a formless afterimage of power already spent. The stand of pararrayos nearby rustles faintly in the wind; otherwise, both they and the storm wards are quiet. The gates to the Dog Park are shut, and there's no break in the smooth onyx walls, silent and solid and impassible as ever.

If there's anyone trapped inside, Carlos can't sense them.

He tries not to feel guilty. He had to go to Athens: the Wardens have suffered so many losses that any victory is valuable, much less successfully concluding a major campaign in a key city. Poetry Week was normally peaceful, as long as everyone stayed away from the librarian cages during the
closing ceremonies; he thought Night Vale could manage on its own.

Even if he'd been here, there's no guarantee he could have saved anyone. When it first appeared, both he and Luccio agreed that the Dog Park was too dangerous for a lone Warden to handle and that it should be left to the master containment wards to deal with; nothing it's done since has convinced him otherwise. The hooded figures are an unknown quantity at the best of times. And Carlos has learned (through trial and painful error) that even the most average citizen of Night Vale can be dangerously unstoppable when in the grips of terminal curiosity.

*But you don't know for sure,* whispers a treacherous voice at the back of his mind.

He sighs and walks back down towards Somerset Street.

The street lights are notoriously spotty in this part of town – unsurprising, given the presence of the Dog Park – so at first he almost misses the figure in the shadows ahead. As he approaches cautiously, it resolves into a familiar silhouette; its shoulders are slumped as it regards the spontaneous memorial that's sprung up in front of an apartment building across and down the road, a safe five hundred feet from the onyx walls.

Carlos hesitates. Then, before he can think too closely about what he's doing, he unbuckles his sword belt, pulls off his cloak, and wraps it around both staff and sword (though he makes sure his hilt is clear). He tucks the bundle under his left arm and walks forward.

"Cecil?" he asks.

"Carlos!" says Cecil. There's a hint of enraptured enthusiasm in his voice, though it quickly fades. "You're committing science?"

"Yes, I'm... taking measurements," says Carlos. "But I didn't – I couldn't find anything."

"Oh," says Cecil, softly.

"I'm sorry to hear about Dana," says Carlos.

Cecil nods. "She – or her double – was one of our best board operators. Good at filing, too. She even managed to text me a picture of the monolith, before... well." Cecil takes out his phone and wipes blood off the screen with his sleeve. "Do you want to see?"

"Of course," says Carlos.

He gets a brief glimpse of a dark, looming mass and words engraved in bronze before the phone bursts into flames.

"Sorry!" he says, as Cecil drops it hastily.

"Oh, it's not your fault," says Cecil. He picks up a votive candle from the memorial and lights it from the green-tinged flames before pulling out a personal fire extinguisher and dousing his phone. "It's been doing that all evening. I was told it's a pretty common flaw with this model."

All Carlos can really say to that is, "I see."

"Did you know Dana once looked up something for me in the reference section of the library?" says Cecil, with a wistful tone. "And during Most Dangerous Game Night she constructed a hand cannon using only local vegetation and homemade black powder. I really thought..." He sighs.
"She went out doing her job," says Carlos neutrally. Apparently some people find that comforting; he's certainly written enough letters, showed up on enough doorsteps with the sentiment, and watched it shore up a tiny amount of the despair in the eyes of grieving loved ones.

Cecil rubs the back of his head. "I've never found that to be much of a relief," he says. "Since our job consists largely of terror and uncertainty."

"Then at least she knew what to expect," says Carlos.

"That's a good point," says Cecil, looking a little less melancholy. "We all know journalism is a harsh mistress. Worthwhile, but harsh. Sometimes I just wish it... wasn't."

"I understand," says Carlos.

He looks down at the candles. Cecil's still staring at him, but it's not demanding or uncomfortable: just an acknowledgment that Carlos is there and pleasant to look upon, an appreciation of the way he's sharing his presence.

Cecil shifts, and Carlos looks back at him. "Do you lose many scientists?" asks Cecil.

"Something like that," Carlos says. Most of the Wardens his bisabuela introduced him to when he was younger are gone. So are many of the people he trained with. And even though he hasn't lost a lot of his own trainees, he'll always wonder if he had told them more – taught them differently – prepared them better – they would still be here.

He asks, "Do you ever worry you'll forget their names?"

"I almost never remember anything anyone tells me," says Cecil sadly.

They both stand in silence for a while, watching the lights flicker.

Finally, Cecil sighs and says, "Well, I better let you get back to science. Thank you for staying with me."

"I don't mind," says Carlos, and Cecil smiles, a quick small thing nearly gone before it even started, but as warm as the candle flames dancing in the wind.

"Good night, Carlos," he says.

"Good night, Cecil." Carlos watches him walk back to his car and drive away.

He looks down at the memorial.

"Sorry, Dana," he says. "Or Dana's double. I wish the new name had worked out."

He lights the remaining votives with a wave of his hand and leaves to circle the Dog Park one more time.

~*~*~*~

Carlos leans against the door to Lab One. Julie is sitting on one of the counters next to a whole ream's worth of print-outs scattered along its length; at the other end, Andre's kneeling against someone's desk chair on his good leg and poking Julie's clipboard with his cane.

"But if you compare the bees' distribution with that of the ferrimagnetic materials containing the record of the poles' geomagnetic reversal—" says Andre.
"You!"

"I haven't been here for two weeks, the coffee is not my fault," says Carlos.

"Carlos!" says Andre. "How have you been?"

"You left without talking to us!" says Julie, still pointing accusingly at Carlos.

"I wrote you a note," says Carlos. "And I've been fine, thank you for asking."

"So have we, there have been four different undetectable seismic events," says Andre happily, as Julie shouts, "All it said was Not dead, leave Night Vale if things start spontaneously combusting, results inconclusive re: time vortices!"

"Well, yeah, I thought that covered the important stuff," says Carlos.

"You left before we could correlate data points!" says Julie, sounding thoroughly and utterly betrayed.

"Oh," says Carlos. "Sorry."

"Sorry," mimics Julie. "You could have at least sent me a copy of your observations!"

"Was I supposed to take notes?" asks Carlos innocently.

Julie lets out a strangled shriek, like dry ice on a warm metal pan. Carlos grins and pulls a logbook out of his backpack.

She fixes Carlos with a stony glare. "The radio station," she says. "Spill."

"Right, so the first vortex appeared—"

"First vortex?" says Julie, scrambling for her own notes.

"Yeah, there were two of them," says Carlos. Julie swears. "You couldn't tell?"

"I thought there was something strange about those readings!" says Julie. "But we were getting a lot of interference from inside the station. That whole area was a mess." She looks very happy about it.

"The vortex inside the station appeared first, and—" says Carlos.

"The one to Desert Bluffs?" says Andre.

Carlos blinks. "How did you know that?"

"Cecil and their guy switched places," says Julie. "We all heard it. Did you check it out?"

"I did," says Carlos. "Everything seemed fine. So, at the height of the sandstorm, the first—"

"If you were out in the sandstorm, wouldn't that mean you would have gotten a double?" asks Andre. His eyes widen. "Are you a double?"

"No," says Carlos.

"Are you sure?" asks Julie.

"Yes!" says Carlos.
"I mean, we won't judge, but I do want to get some scans of—"

"I'm not a double!" says Carlos. "And that only happened once, anyway."

"What only happened once?" says Andre.

Carlos puts his hands over his face and groans. "Look, just let me finish talking, then ask questions," he says.

"Of course," says Andre. Julie sighs dramatically, but gestures for him to go on.

Carlos takes a deep breath and says, "All right. The sandstorm was the day I went back in time and met you – the origin of that closed timelike curve. The first time I was here – me, nine months earlier – I didn't know about the doubles, and spawned Doppel-Carlos right after I got into town. The second time – me, two weeks ago – I rigged up a screen to prevent the sand from touching me. There were some, uh, system failures, but I think it worked for long enough, because no other Doppel-Mes showed up to murder original me. Or any new doubles were destroyed from an attack from what I think was the vortexes' creator. Or I already had an immunity from the first time, like chicken pox. But that still meant there were three versions of me running around town: Carlos Prime – my earliest timeline self; Doppel-Carlos; and me."

"Well, that was nice and full of conjecture and uncontrolled variables," says Julie. "What was with the doubles, anyway? I couldn't find any traces of them when we went out after the storm. I was starting to think they were just another mass hallucination."

Carlos laughs hollowly. "I wish. I think the sandstorm might have been the – the magical equivalent of a freak natural disaster. There was a lot of raw power, but very little focus, and I think that when it came across a particularly strong psychic presence – like a person – it mimicked that form."

"If the doubles were just copies, why did they try to kill their progenitors?" asks Andre. "It doesn't seem like there's that many people willing to murder themselves, even in Night Vale."

"Self-preservation," says Carlos. "I don't think the doubles could hold their form without the sand, and the storm was passing. Blood isn't just a powerful magical focus, it's a powerful magical weakness – get ahold of someone's blood, and you can do almost anything to them. I think that the doubles needed the blood of their original copy in order to finish what the storm started and become... real, I guess." He remembers Doppel-Carlos' bitter laughter. "To them, it'd be like stealing their bodies back."

"That's creepy and unnerving," says Julie. "But let's get back to the vortexes."

"You asked," says Carlos. "The first vortex appeared in the radio station. That one had a particularly strong psychic profile of dark magic, and—"

"Say that in Muggle talk," interrupts Julie.

"It was really loud," translates Carlos. "Loud enough that all three of me heard it and went after it. When Doppel-Carlos was distracted by fighting Carlos Prime, I doused him with a whole fire hydrant. It disrupted the magic and destroyed him. That's when the second vortex outside the station appeared. And one of its creators. I think."

"You think?" says Julie.

"They were concealing themself with magic and I was too close to the vortex to use the Sight safely," says Carlos. "I couldn't get a good look at them. They ambushed Carlos Prime and knocked
him into the second vortex. I followed the attacker into the station, but they disappeared into the first vortex."

"To Desert Bluffs," says Andre.

"I don't know," says Carlos. "It all seemed fine when I looked. After Cecil came back, I destroyed the vortex, and—"

"You saw Cecil?" says Andre.

"You destroyed the vortex?" cries Julie.

"Julie, I can't just leave a portal made of dark magic wide open," says Carlos. "Who knows what could have come through?"

"Well, thanks to you no one will—"

"Julie, there will be other vortices," says Andre soothingly. He doesn't sound as alarmed about this as he probably should.

She mutters something under her breath, then spends an hour making Carlos describe both vortices in minute detail, down to how how badly he wanted to puke on a scale of one to ten when he fell through the second vortex his first time in the sandstorm.

He finally escapes and heads to his office. There's nothing on his desk except his typewriter; he'd cleaned up the town as best he could before he left. He's got notebooks locked away he should bring back with him. Maybe some distance will shed some light on the problem of the time vortices. Easy access to non-municipally-approved information or people who don't scream and run away when he asks them questions would probably help, too.

Carlos isn’t staying for long. He didn’t have a plan when arrived, just the duty to do all he can (which is nothing) for the citizens lost in the Dog Park. The master wards are regenerating nicely; the storm wards are... not as terrible as they could be. Julie and Andre didn’t mention any other crises, so he should probably be heading out soon. Like he used to. It just feels wrong – strange – because he hasn’t done a one-day tour in a while, that’s all.

He hasn’t missed the place, that would be ridiculous.

The red light on his office phone is blinking. He has thirteen new messages.

Beep!

“Carlos! Thank you, Carlos! Thank you!”

Beep!

“¡Muchísimas gracias, Carlos! Me has ayudado mucho. Me hacias sonreír cuando pensaba que no volvería a sonreír jamás. Lo que estoy diciendo, Carlos... es que te quiero. ¿Quieres... quieres casarte conmigo?”

Beep!

“Carlos, how can we ever repay you for saving us from that terrible place? Terrible. Terrible. Terrible…”

Beep!
"Carlos... Thank you... It was so... orange..."

Beep!

“...DIA YLEMIT TSOM RUOY ROF ECNEPMOCER NI NROBTSRIF YM FO EDUTIVRES DERUTNEDNI EHT TPECCA ESAELP...”

Beep!

“I don’t have the words to thank you, Carlos, so I stole someone else’s. Didi madloba.”

Beep!

“Terrible. Terrible. Terrible…”

Beep!

“Um. Thanks.”

Beep!

"...Triangles."

Beep!

“DID YOU EVER KNOOOOW THAT YOU’RE MY HEEEEEROOOOO? YOU’RE EVERYTHING I WISH I COULD BEEEEEEE. I CAN FLY HIIGHER THAN AN EEEEEEAGLE, YOU ARE THE WIIIIND BENEATH MY WIIIIIINGS—”

Beep!

“Terrible. Terrible. Terr— What was I saying? Oh, right. Thank you, Carlos. Wait, whose phone is this?”

Beep!

"Sir, you have my eternal gratitude. The doctor of the cold eyes may haunt my nightmares, but my dreams shall ever be devoted to you. Please be assured that I am naming my next pet horned lizard Carlos, in your honor. Your grateful servant, always."

Beep!

"—doesn’t matter, Kate, I’m sure no one will need any coffee before we get back—"

Carlos frowns. Apart from the last one (the latest in the series of Gary’s pocket-dials) he hadn’t recognized a single voice.

"Good night, Carlos!" says Andre as Carlos exits the stairwell. "Julie needs to talk to you. If she wants anything that involves a consent form, tell her you have to sleep on it. Sometimes her small print can only be read in daylight."

"Thanks, Andre," says Carlos. "I'll see you later."

Julie is fiddling with a boxy piece of electronics in Lab One; he knocks on the door before entering, just in case it doesn't like surprises.
"Did I do anything while I was gone?" asks Carlos.

"I don't know whether to be happy or sad that I understood that," she says. "No, not that I've heard. Why?"

"I have twelve messages from random people thanking me profusely," says Carlos. "One of them was a marriage proposal."

"Just one? Your hair must be losing its touch – oh my God, it's fine," says Julie, when he instinctively raises his hand to his head. "I'll see if the grad students heard anything and let you know. Speaking of which..." She tosses him the device she's been working on.

"What's this?" he asks.

"A cell phone," says Julie.

Carlos stares at it. "Are you sure?" he asks, because while he might not be on the cutting edge of electronics, he didn't think they made cell phones that were quite so... brick-like... any more.

"Don't be a whiner," says Julie. "You said wizards don't play well with modern technology."

"I meant modern as in 'post-World War II'," says Carlos.


Her computer beeps.

"See?" she says. "It's working already. Give it back."

She pries off the back of the phone and starts poking at the wiring.

"Why are you giving me a cell phone?" asks Carlos.

"So I can beg lives off you in Candy Crush. Why do you think I'm giving you a cell phone, Carlos? We're still in Night Vale. Weird shit will happen while you're gone, and when it does, I still want to be able to talk to an expert." She snaps the back panel on and hands him the phone.

"I don't think it's going to work, Julie," he says.

"I will make it work," she says. There's a steely glint in her eye. Carlos decides it's probably better not to argue.

~*~*~*~

It turns out that cell phones are not completely inconvenient (when they work). But Carlos now understands why so many of the older Wardens have such an aversion to firearms: it's hard to trust technology that used to be completely unreliable, even if it's mostly functional now, and Carlos has never even had to piss down the barrel of his phone to keep it from jamming during battle.

It also turns out there's a steep learning curve about remembering to turn it off during family dinners, church, meetings with the Senior Council, and secret midnight raids.

~*~*~*~
"Hi, Gary, what do you need – Gary? Hello? Are you there? Ugh, not again." Carlos flips the phone shut and drops it in his pocket. He dodges a woman with horns growing out of her knees and a two kids pushing a watermelon in a baby stroller and speeds up as he makes his way down Main Street.

A little old man with a smiling face steps in front of him and hugs him firmly.

Carlos stays frozen on the spot as the old man continues down the sidewalk. It's not the first time random strangers have attempted to touch him, but usually they try to cop a feel of his hair—

He bolts after the old man. "Sir! Excuse me, sir, I need you to take a scientific survey!"

"Why, of course!" says the old man, and one of Carlos' hunches has finally paid off for the first time in two weeks, because that voice sounds an awful lot like the one on his answering machine that thanked him in Georgian. "Anything to help Night Vale's scientific community."

He gives Carlos an exaggerated wink.

"Yes, thank you," says Carlos. They move to the mouth of an alley, Carlos peering down it to make sure it's empty first. He flips through the notepad on his clipboard until he finds a blank page, then hands it and a Sharpie to the old man. "Uh... name?"

The old man hesitates. "I'd prefer to remain anonymous," he says.

"Oh," says Carlos. "Um, all right. Age?"

"Sixty-seven."

"Place of residence?"

"Night Vale, endless white hallways, and Night Vale again."

"Job?"

"Hex specialist," says the old man.

Carlos blinks.

"And until four weeks ago, meaningless cog, of course."

"Meaningless cog?"

"You know," says the old man. "In the system."

"The system of what?" asks Carlos.

Worry creases the old man's brow. "Last month you said I shouldn't talk about it... any of it... so she won't hear. You asked me to swear by my power!"

"Right, of course," says Carlos. "Now that we've finished the demographics information..."

Carlos rattles off a few questions about basic scientific principles, thinking furiously as the old man scribbles down some answers with his tongue between his teeth.

The sandstorm was last month. At this point there's an absurdly long list of suspected Carlos-like entities that the old man could have met, though the timing suggests it might have been Carlos' double he ran into. But why would Doppel-Carlos stop in the middle of an insatiable blood quest to
save someone he doesn't even know, trapped God-knows-where?

Julie couldn't differentiate between the two vortices at the station; when the second one appeared, if Carlos hadn't already been there he's not sure he could have separated it from the first, either. Was there another vortex somewhere, out in the storm? How many Caroloses were out there?

Carlos rubs his forehead. That's just not a question a guy should have to ask himself.

"Finished!" says the old man.

"Great," says Carlos. He digs into his pocket, pulls out a modified blood glucose testing kit, and inserts a new sterilized needle. One of his duties as a Warden is measuring the magical talent of practitioners; mostly it's used for evaluation of potential candidates for the White Council, but he'd be lying if he thought every result wasn't scrupulously recorded in case it needed to be... reviewed. It's probably stuff like this that gives the Wardens their (not inaccurate) reputation as ruthless paranoid bastards. Especially since Carlos could just shake the old man's hand and find out that way, provided he didn't mind broadcasting his own talent potential, and, well. "Could I have a blood sample?"

"Welllllll," hedges the old man. Carlos doubts he's lying about being a hex specialist; every practitioner, even in Night Vale, knows how dangerous blood magic can be.

"You can have it back when I'm done," says Carlos.

"Oh! In that case..." The old man submits to sticking his finger into the tester.

"You might feel a slight pinch—"

"Probably not," says the old man. There's a snap! as the spring releases the needle; he doesn't even flinch. "I haven't felt pain since puberty. Is that it?"

"Just have to check your results," says Carlos. He pulls out the test strip: around the tiny blot of blood, it slowly flushes a pale phenolphthalein pink. A minor practitioner, definitely not someone capable of creating the vortices – even if he could theoretically understand them, if Carlos' hypothesis about their entropic components is correct.

At least, not someone capable of creating the vortices by himself...

"One last question for – for the metadata. Can you recommend anyone else for this study?"

The old man frowns. "Recommend anyone else?"

"People like yourself," says Carlos. He taps the side of his nose.

"Oh!" says the man. "You should try the Ralph's. I bet there are people there who would be happy to help you." He taps the side of his nose, too.

"Thank you, sir," says Carlos. He pops a plastic cap on the needle and ejects it into a biohazard bag, followed by the indicator strip, then hands the whole thing to the old man. "I—"

His phone rings. It's Gary again.

Carlos sighs. "Excuse me," he says. "Gary, if you're not calling me on purpose, I swear to God—"

"Janitors!" Gary squeaks.

"You're at the school? Did you remember the sawdust? The – no, calm down, Gary, just take a deep
breath. Do you have the sawdust? What about the new dustpan set? Yes, sawdust, you need the whole bag – look, can you put Dr. Timmons on?"

The old man makes an inquiring gesture. Carlos gives him a wave, and he starts back down the street, whistling happily.

Carlos briefly considers skipping the elementary school's Career Day to go interview people in the refugee camp at the Ralph's. But his presence was heavily advertised, and the last thing he needs is to draw attention to what exactly was so important that he neglected instilling a life-long love of learning in the Youth of Today.

It takes him an embarrassingly long time to realize he has the solution – or a temporary one, anyway – literally at hand. Brow furrowed in concentration, he writes, *Can you find the employees who joined after the sandstorm?* and sends it to Wei.

He gets a response almost immediately.

?????

After a second, he realizes his original text actually says *Abo you dime the employees win joined after the same storm?*

He re-types it out. He's not really sure where this T9 stuff came from, but predictive text is definitely as much of a crapshoot as everything else that predicts the future.

~*~*~*~

“Carlos?”

Carlos suavely and debonairly comes to an abrupt halt and spins around on the sidewalk. “Cecil!” he says. “Um, hi.”

“Hi,” Cecil parrots back.

They both stare at each other.

“You’re, uh. Done at the station?” asks Carlos, then mentally slaps himself on the forehead.

“Yes,” says Cecil. “Yes, I am. You were shopping at the Play Ball?” He nods at Carlos’ paper bag.

“Baseballs?” guesses Cecil.

“Uh, grenades, actually,” says Carlos.

Cecil blinks. “Are they for science?”

“Sort of,” says Carlos. “I mean, yes. We used up the rest of ours doing the live ammo demonstration at the elementary school for Career Day.”

Cecil smiles. “That was always my favorite day of school when I was younger. How did it go?”

“Pretty well,” says Carlos. “We blew up a model of a street cleaner on the shooting range, and then I made a volcano out of baking soda and vinegar.”
“Neat!” says Cecil.

Awkward silence, temporarily held at bay by small talk, descends once more like a swooping hawk.

“I liked your show about Europe,” blurts Carlos.

“Really?” says Cecil.

“Yes,” says Carlos. “It was very…”

He searches for a word that conveys ‘Madre de Dios, how did you even get into those sections of the Nevernever, and more importantly, how did you get out?’

“—Educational,” he finishes.

“Wow,” says Cecil. “Thanks, Carlos. I didn’t even know you listened to m— to our little program.”

Carlos feels almost hurt. “I listen to your show,” he says.

“Oh!” says Cecil, then, “Oh.”

Awkward silence snatches them both up like helpless rodents.

“Well, I better get back with these grenades,” says Carlos.

“Right,” says Cecil. “Good luck with your science!”

“Thanks,” says Carlos. He unlocks his car and puts the grenades on the floor of the passenger’s side. When he looks up, Cecil is gone. Carlos climbs inside, buckles his seatbelt, and bangs his head against the steering wheel a few times. Then he turns the key in the ignition.

It doesn’t start.

He's banging his head against the steering wheel a few more times for good measure when someone taps on his window. He jumps in his seat and the car roars to life.

He rolls down his window. "Cecil?"

"I was going to ask if you needed a ride," says Cecil, rubbing the back of his neck. "But I guess you don't now. So I'll just... be on my way..."

"Thanks, Cecil," says Carlos gratefully. He smiles much more warmly than is probably appropriate when someone doesn't realize they helped fix your car.

After a few dazed seconds, Cecil smiles back. Making himself shift into gear and drive away is probably the most difficult thing Carlos has done all day.

~*~*~*~

Carlos is still stinging from a defeat in Seattle when he finally finishes interviewing the refugees at the Ralph’s. What he finds does not noticeably improve his temper.

He immediately calls a meeting with Flynn and the Tracker. The sensible thing would be to wait a little bit and cool down, but the matter is time-sensitive – well, it was/is/will be time-sensitive – and Carlos is extremely uninterested in fostering positive community interactions at the moment.
They meet in the parking lot of the Desert Flower Bowling Alley and Arcade Fun Complex. The Tracker has been spending most of his time there keeping watch, and while normally Carlos would be reluctantly concerned about the correlation between this and the fact that the Tracker's house is still a bucolic meadow lacking anything that remotely qualifies as "shelter", he is also extremely uninterested in fostering positive personal interactions at this moment.

"Were you ever planning on telling me well over a dozen different practitioners just instantaneously disappeared from Night Vale last year?" he shouts as soon as Flynn climbs out of her car.

"Люди исчезли?"

"You didn't even notice?" he says, in a commanding, authoritative tone that is definitely not screechy with anger.

"It didn't seem statistically significant," says Flynn carefully.

"What?"

"I checked!" says Flynn. "But the numbers were well below our weekly mysterious disappearance rates, so I didn't think it was an issue."

"You didn't think nearly a quarter of Night Vale's active practitioners disappearing at the same time while the Fomor are specifically preying on practitioners was an issue?"

"They wouldn't join the Paranet," says Flynn sulkily. "Who knows why people like that would feel like disappearing?"

Carlos grips his hood in both hands, digging his fingers into his skull in the hopes that that will prevent his head from exploding with rage. He shuts his eyes and counts to ten. Then he counts to ten in every other language he knows.

Over a minute later, he opens his eyes and says, very quietly, "Your blood feud ends now."

"You can't—"

"You're right, I can't," says Carlos. "But you know what I can do? I can report that you deliberately concealed information relating to potential enemies of the White Council. I know you recognize me, Shakeena Flynn, but do you think you can pick out every Warden in a hooded cloak wandering through town?"

Flynn turns grey. "You wouldn't."

Carlos stares at her.

She finally looks away. "Fine," she mutters. "I'll... talk to the others. We've got some extra olive branches anyway."

"I'm supposed to protect mortals, Flynn," says Carlos. His voice sounds tired even to him. He found another eight people who claimed he'd "saved" them after the sandstorm. None of them were quite sure how many of them had originally been taken... wherever they were, but everyone agreed it was many more than the nine who came back. "I can't do that if you're working against me, too."

Flynn nods and returns to her car. Her back is stiff and she doesn't look at them.

"Брат Орел одобряет," says the Tracker. Carlos rounds on him, finger upraised.
"You!" he snarls. "Do you even know what that stupid thing you're wearing on your head is supposed to symbolize? Eagle feathers are sacred and you're supposed to earn them with bravery and good deeds, and even then you need permission to wear them in a war bonnet! But noooo, you go right ahead and wear that cheap-ass abomination as a sign of "respect". Just don't talk to me, I am done."

He stalks over to his car and slams the door when he gets in.

His car won't start.

He gets back out.

“Right, I’m glad we got that cleared up,” says Carlos. “Can you give me a ride back to the lab?”

There's a dreamcatcher hanging from the Tracker's rearview mirror, because of course there is.

The Tracker spends most of the drive with his eyes forward, avoiding Carlos' gaze when he's forced to look down to fiddle with the radio after it turns on by itself.

"The Council noted that from now on, death would be earned through hard work and productivity, not just as a handout for every resource-sucking freeloader on the street,” says Cecil. "If you want to die,' the Council said, 'you will have to achieve death yourself. Not everyone gets to die, and that’s just how it will be.'"

The Tracker gives up and returns to staring stonily out the windshield.

It’s not the most uncomfortable yet righteously indignant five minutes of Carlos' life, but that's only because he's not in prison this time.

~*~*~*~

Despite repeated interviews and the strategic use of hair-flips, Carlos fails to get any more information out of the rescued sandstorm cohort. They're all very grateful, very polite, and very close-mouthed, because he, apparently, asked them not to reveal anything. Even to him. If this is the work of some future Carlos, he is going to encounter some issues when he ceases to exist after annoying his past self to death.

If it's not the work of some future Carlos... Carlos has no idea what happened. In his experience the kinds of people/creatures who want to impersonate you generally do so for sinister purposes and don't go out of their way to break innocent bystanders out of mysterious bondage.

He doesn't want to push the rescuees into breaking their oaths if he can help it, not when they've been so cooperative and trusting. But gleaning circumstantial information from them is just so slow, and he's got fewer and fewer opportunities to do it. The Wardens have gathered steam fighting the Fomor in the Mediterranean; it's great for the world but terrible for his task management.

In the old days, he'd just throw Harry at the problem (detective work or warfare; he was pretty good at both), but Harry's been officially alive for months now and Carlos hasn't heard a goddamn thing from the guy, so... screw him. They don't need Harry and his stupid observational skills and his stupid fire magic and his stupid bad/good luck that always exposes his enemies when they inevitably try and fail to kill him. So what if they're severely undermanned? They'll figure something out.

It would just make things a lot easier if Carlos' one solid lead led anywhere beyond the stockrooms at the Ralph's, is all.
It's a Saturday when he returns to Night Vale, and the labs are empty. However, there's half a fresh pot of coffee left, so Carlos goes upstairs to Julie's office.

"Carlos!" says Andre, looking up from his laptop. "Don't move, I need to save this."

"Ditch the shades, loser," says Julie. "You're inside."

Carlos pushes his sunglasses up and she whistles.

"Hey, Carlos," she says. "Does your face hurt?"

"Yes," says Carlos in a monotone.

"Because it's killing me," finishes Julie gleefully. "Here." She throws him a bottle of Advil – not, thankfully, aimed anywhere near his head.

“Ohh, that’s quite the shiner,” says Andre. "What happened?"

"Tentacle to the face," says Carlos, swallowing two capsules dry.

"Some people have to pay extra for that," says Julie.

“I’m sorry,” says Andre. “Is it anything we should worry about?"

“Not unless you were planning your next vacation in Santorini,” says Carlos. “Listen, can you guys do me a favor?"

“Of cour – ow!” says Andre.

“C’mon, Andre, No rash boons is like rule number one,” says Julie, and Carlos feels a rush of pride that she’s so magically paranoid. “First tell us what the favor is.”

“I need you to find out everything you can about Strex Corp," says Carlos. “They’re based in Desert Bluffs. I’ve done some poking around, but I think there’s a lot more stuff online.”

Carlos has checked out Desert Bluffs a few times now; it seemed fine, except there was so much static on the radio he could barely hear Cecil. The lead on Strex Corp is just a hunch – there are lots of places with endless white hallways, metaphorically and literally if you’re in Night Vale – but they’ve got an awful lot of good security, and they do practically own the town.

“We’ll look into it,” says Andre. "Julie, stop making that face, he can't even use Google. It's the least we can do."

"Ugh, fine," says Julie. "But if this ends me up on another government watchlist I'm holding you responsible, Carlos. Oh, that reminds me." She opens a drawer, pulls out a lead-lined box, and removes Carlos' phone with a pair of forceps. "I'm done your upgrades!"

"What part of your previous sentence reminded you of my phone," says Carlos, mildly horrified, but he takes it anyway.

It beeps. A second later, the phone on Julie's desk rings.

"Huh, I didn't expect it to assimilate the transfer software that quickly," says Julie. "Cool!" She picks up the landline and says, "Integrated Science Center."

She listens to the person on the other end for a few moments, then says, “You want to talk to Carlos!"
Carlos is definitely the person to whom to address any questions, concerns, death threats, or mob violence."

"Wait, what?" says Carlos.

"Just a moment, I'll see if he's available," she says, and covers the receiver. "It's John Peters. You know—"

"The farmer?" says Carlos. "What does he need?"

"Something about a door," she says. She hands him the phone.

"Hello, this is Carlos." He pulls out a notebook and his Sharpie. "Hmm. Yes. I see," he says, taking notes. "Right. Go on. Yes, you are correct, that's very scientifically interesting. We'll be out there shortly." He hangs up the phone.

"We will?" says Julie. She sounds unimpressed.

"I can't," says Andre. "I have to go to the monitoring station."

Carlos shrugs. "I mean, if you don't want to investigate a probable interdimensional rift..."

"I never said that," says Julie quickly. Andre heaves a wistful sigh.

Carlos arrives first to clear the area. This part of the Scrublands is particularly barren, although he can't tell if that's from the freestanding old oak door covered in chains and padlocks or from the fact that they're, you know, in the middle of the desert.

The only thing that's changed since the last time Carlos checked it out is the rudimentary lean-to built nearby. Inside is a weathered middle-aged man, clutching a shotgun and sitting on a lawn chair. He stands when he sees Carlos.

"John Peters," he says, extending a hand. "You know, the farmer."

Carlos shakes his hand and says, "I'm Carlos," barely resisting the urge to follow his name with an interjection and his profession. "My colleagues will be here shortly. What scientific matter can we help you with today, Mr. Peters?"

"Oh, call me John," says John. "Mr. Peters is my cousin. This door is acting up again. The knocking was bad enough, but now—"

A doorbell rings, echoing oddly.

"See?" says John. "Day and night. Always during dinner, too. Call me old-fashioned, but just because someone is trying to force their way into our world by means unknowable to mortal man is no reason to be rude."

"...Of course not," says Carlos. "Would you mind standing back? I'm going to take some readings. With science."

"Sure," says John. He retreats to the lean-to, but, thankfully, leaves the shotgun propped up against the side of his chair.

Carlos pulls out the Danger Meter, specially calibrated with two Lego minifigs and a kazoo. It honks quietly as he circles the door.
"It seems we haven't been seeing much of you around town lately, Carlos," says John.

"Well, you know," says Carlos. "I've been pretty busy. Being a scientist."

"True, true," says John. "I can see you love science as much as I love farming. Overseeing my peaches, planting the imaginary corn – every minute is a joy and a pleasure. Even watching this door – well, it's not fun, not with the ominous dreams that come whenever I close my eyes, but you do get a lot of satisfaction from an unending vigil."

"How would you describe the ominous dreams?" asks Carlos. The Danger Meter hums and drones.

"Impressionistic, not sequential," says John. "Like quick peeks into the sleeping mind of an approaching stranger."

"Thank you," says Carlos, writing that down.

"Anyways, my point is that you can have too much of a good thing. Professional burn-out, we call it. That's why it's important for a man to have a variety of interests. Like... hobbies. Or, you know. Relationships."

John stares at him intently. Carlos lets out what he hopes is a non-committal, or at least scientific-sounding, grunt; John shakes his head, but he doesn't look displeased.

"Me, I like some things that don't relate to my job at all," says John, and Carlos relaxes a little. "Like Scrabble, and snipe-hunting. But even related activities can be relaxing, too. I'm quite the Farmville maven, if I do say so myself."

"Hmmm," says Carlos, wondering what the hell Farmville is. He sets the Danger Meter on the ground and places his hand against the door. It's vibrating slightly – a little stronger than the last time he was here, but not by much.

Curious, he presses his ear against the thick oak. There's the faint whistle of wind and the rasp of sand – footsteps? The doorbell rings.

The Danger Meter lets out a buzzing shriek. Carlos yanks his hand away from the doorknob; he doesn't remember grasping it.

"So rude," says John, shaking his head.

"For sure," says Carlos, a little unsteadily. He puts his hand back against the door and mutters "K'al."

Energy flows into the wood and it swells up, tightly filling the frame; the sound of the wind and sand cuts off completely.

The binding won't stop a determined invader, but it should slow them down. He'll seal the whole thing inside a circle later to keep it from broadcasting quite so loudly. If anything can get through, then... well, Night Vale will probably be screwed, but at least they'll hear it coming.

"You know what's a lot like science?" says John.

"What," says Carlos, after he realizes it's not a rhetorical question.

"Bowling," says John. "It's got physics, psychology, biology, chemistry..."

"Chemistry?" says Carlos.

"On some teams," says John darkly. "Some teams ruin it for everyone."
"I see," says Carlos. He picks up the Danger Meter and walks around to the other side of the door.

John stands up and follows him at a safe distance. "I used to be quite the bowler, you know. Before the Accident."

"Oh?" says Carlos.

"Yep," says John. 'Bowed for the Fightin' Ophies. We weren't the flashiest team around, but we had spirit! And gumption! And good ol' fashioned stick-to-it-iveness! We were going places, me and Josie and Shakeena." He pins Carlos with a laser-focused gaze. "And Cecil, of course."

"I – oh," says Carlos, and sensing weakness, John strikes.

"Yes, Cecil is quite the bowler," John continues. Carlos feels a sudden, overwhelming sympathy for the local snipes. "Josie and I had our eyes on him for quite some time, ever since—"

What follows is a meandering yet relentless account of Cecil's contributions to the bowling team, the community radio station, and Night Vale in general, as well as several off-hand descriptions of the many qualities desirable in a mate that Cecil just happens to possess. Carlos barely manages to avoid promising to go on a double-date with Cecil, John, and Frances Donaldson from the Antiques Mall and is reduced to sending Julie increasingly frantic text messages under the guise of recording scientific data.

ive secured the perimeter where r u

wait what did u do 2 the txting

thats not nice

pls hurry i need ur help

its john peters

u kno the farmer

hes trying 2 set me up w cecil

its not funny!!

he keeps talking abt his ball handling technique julie i want to die

dios

'FINGERTIP GRIPS WILL GIVE U THE BEST CHANCE AT THE MOST EFFECTIVE RELEASE'

At last the cloud of dust on the horizon resolves into an unmarked white van. "Excuse me, John, I have to consult with my colleagues," says Carlos.

"Sure thing," says John, and Carlos bolts for the van before it's even stopped braking.

"Save me," he hisses to Julie.

She leans out the driver-side window and pats his arm. "It's okay, Carlos. If you succumb to the matchmaking we have every confidence you'll bring honor to us all."
"I think Mr. Peters might have a point about the fingertip grips!" says Kate. "I'll report back after I consult with Kelly and Joe."

"You are terrible, terrible people," says Carlos. "Please help me change the subject."

"Luckily for you, I brought extra blinky lights to pacify the locals," says Julie. She climbs out of the van. "Kate, are you sure you know how to set up the equipment?"

"I read the manual on the ride over," says Kate cheerfully, unloading the usual array of duct-taped devices.

"Where's Gary?" asks Carlos.

"At the clinic," says Julie. "The bees were cranky and he went into anaphylaxis again. How close can we get to the door?"

"Ten feet," says Carlos. "You can't leave any monitoring equipment behind, though. I need to seal it into a circle before we go."

"Is something going to come through?" says Julie.

"Why risk it?" says Carlos. "Better safe than – wait, if Gary's allergic to bees, why did he volunteer to be head beekeeper?"

"Because that man loves his bees," says Julie.

"But that doesn't – shit, John's coming over, distract him with science talk!"

"Science talk?" says Julie, with an extremely judgmental eyebrow, but when John approaches she says loudly, "Mr. Peters! Can I collect your observational data, please?"

"I know we laughed – a lot – but I know how you feel," says Kate sympathetically. "One of my exes tried to set Joe and me up with another one of my exes once. It was a nightmare. Can you not come any closer? The indicator lights are blinking."

"Sorry," says Carlos. "How are Joe and Kelly, anyway?"

"They're great," says Kate. "They just adopted a puppy. And they sent me an awesome video!"

"Of the puppy?"

"Well, it was sort of inspired by dogs..." says Kate, and Carlos has to excuse himself from the description after about fifteen seconds.

"Science talk," says Julie witheringly, as soon as he comes within range.

"I panicked," he says. "It's been a stressful afternoon."

She shakes her head, but doesn't comment on it further. "I got an email from Andre about Strex Corp," she says instead.

"And?" asks Carlos.

"And so far, nothing," says Julie. "Although anyone who willingly uses the word 'Synernists' in their name is pretty suspect in my book. And I'm interested in what we didn't find."
"What do you mean?"

"No complaints," says Julie. "No negative customer feedback. Nobody grousing about the menial, soul-sucking labor, or their bosses, or the hours, or even the coffee. Hell, not even anyone whining about not getting a job."

"Huh," says Carlos. "That's not normal?"

"Hell no," says Julie. "At least half the internet is devoted to complaining about stuff. Granted, Strex seems like the kind of place that asks their employees for their Facebook logins, so maybe everyone's just more circumspect about it. We'll see what we can find. What about you?"

"What?"

"What have you turned up? You've checked them out, right?"

"Yeah," says Carlos. "They seemed fine, but..." He shrugs.

"Oh, well if they're fine—" Something beeps. "Shit, go away, I need to recalibrate the scanners before they go all... Scanners on us."

He retreats to the lean-to, collapses into the lawn chair, and rubs his hands over his face. The doorbell on the old oak door rings again, but it's much quieter, and if Carlos listens closely now he can pick out the exposed echo of the suggestion spell urging the listener to open the door. He feels nothing but the vaguest desire to get up, so his binding magic must be doing its job.

A hand comes down on his shoulder and he almost leaps out of the chair. It's John, which does nothing to dispel his desire to run away. Carlos desperately looks around for Julie; she and Kate are putting on hazmat suits.

"Here," says John. He hands Carlos what looks like an empty sandwich bag, but it feels full of cold, pebble-sized lumps. "Some frozen corn for your face. Figured you might be one of those pain-feelin' folks."

"Thanks," says Carlos warily.

"I'm sorry if I came on a little strong earlier, son," says John.

"What?" says Carlos.

John crouches down next to the chair and stares moodily into the distance. "I've been doing a lot of thinking out here. A lot of remembering. A lot of regretting. Sometimes I get carried away. Cecil's a good man, and an old friend. I just want him to be happy."

"Me, too," says Carlos without thinking.

"You're also a good man," says John, "Or a good scientist."

Carlos makes a noise that could probably be interpreted as an agreement. He holds the bag of invisible niblets to his eye; the entire side of his face goes numb, but in a nice way.

"You deserve the same," says John. "So... just give me a call if you reconsider on that double-date, you hear? That way you can... collect all your facts. And think about things."

"Thanks, John," says Carlos.
"Clear!" shouts Julie. The machine emits a bright beam, goes *ping!*, and then explodes slightly. Carlos leaps up, but Julie waves him back, a huge grin on her face.

"It's fine!" she shouts. "Just slightly radioactive. These readings are amazing!"


"Me, I'm just a simple man of the earth," says John, as Julie scribbles notes furiously and Kate runs around, picking up pieces. "But I can certainly see the glamorous appeal."

~*~*~*~

Carlos finishes reassembling his gun as Cecil signs off. He's in the process of packing away his gear when music erupts from his phone and the Sugarhill Gang urges Tonto to jump on it, jump on it, jump on it.

"Stop it," he says, horrified. "You're just encouraging him!"

The phone shuts off in response. Carlos has yet to figure out if the questionable ringtones are a side-effect of his anti-technology field, the deliberate result of Julie's last upgrade, or his phone's opening salvo in the inevitable rise of the machine.

Several minutes later someone rings his doorbell. Well, so he assumes. There's a series of clangs, like a melodic metal tube tearing free of its moorings and falling down somewhere inside of a wall. Then there's a long pause, followed by a knock at the door.

Carlos opens it on the Tracker, standing with his arms folded across his chest. Carlos will give him this: it's possible that this time he's not imitating crappy Westerns but is, judging by his glare, merely still mad at Carlos about their discussion last month.

"Здравствуйте, кемосабе," says the Tracker.

"Now you're just being a dick," says Carlos.

The landline in his kitchenette starts ringing.

"Hold on, I have to get that," he says. "I'll be right out."

The Tracker spins and stalks back to his car, plastic feathers swirling around him.

"Dick," Carlos mutters.

The landline stops ringing before he can pick up, but his cell phone's display lights up with the words REDIRECTING... REDIRECTING... He stares at it in confusion until it bursts into song and nostalgically recounts listening to the wireless back in '52.

"What is wrong with you," he says. He takes a deep breath and flips it open. "Hello?"

"Carlos!" says Cecil, and Carlos' stupid heart leaps, even though Cecil says his name like that an average of three times a week. "Hello! It's me, Cecil."

"Hi, Cecil," says Carlos.

"I know this is a little sudden, but I have to ask: what are you doing tomorrow afternoon?"
"I—" says Carlos, and stops, because he's remembering five months ago, and no one wants a repeat of five months ago. Unless it can maybe end differently – no, it's still a bad idea.

But... he can't help but remember John Peters' conversation – well, it was more a soliloquy – especially the end. *Cecil's a good man, and an old friend.*

They could... be friends, right? It's not what Carlos wants, and it's probably not what Cecil wants, but it's better than nothing. Maybe, in the long run, it will be enough.

"Carlos?"

"Sorry," says Carlos. He's gripping the phone in both hands. He removes one and presses the heel of his palm to his forehead. "I have some experiments to wrap up in the morning, but I don't have anything else planned, I guess. Did you have a question about science?"

"Wellllllll..." says Cecil. "It is a question, and it's *sort of* about science..."

He pauses.

"Yes?" says Carlos, whose heart has now begun to thud heavily for no reason at all. *Just friends,* he thinks loudly.

"Did you know that tomorrow, it will be exactly one year since you came to Night Vale?"

Carlos blinks. "It will?"

"I know, right?" says Cecil. "It seems like just yesterday when I first saw you in the community center, your hair shining under the blue-tinged fluorescent lights—" He coughs, then says, "Uh – as you talked about science, of course. Studying Night Vale."

"Oh, for sure," says Carlos, then, "You mean that metaphorically, right? About it seeming just like yesterday?"

"What? Oh, yes, of course!" says Cecil, a little rushed. "Sorry, I forgot that scientists value accuracy and precision in conversation as well as in data sets. It metaphorically feels like yesterday, but literally feels like 364 days ago. *Anyways* – we here at the radio station pulled together a little ceremony to honor the occasion, and if it's not too much trouble, well, we were wondering if you'd like to attend?"

Carlos hasn't been here for one year. He isn't a scientist. He is no longer trapped in Night Vale, so there's no reason for him to stick around any longer than he has to for his investigations. There's only one logical response to Cecil's invitation.

"I'd love to come," he says instead. "A scientist should never pass up a chance to celebrate his or her field."

"*Molto bene!*" says Cecil. "Oh, Carlos, you won't be sorry!"

After he hangs up, Carlos thinks that probably isn't true.

A whole year has passed, and while he's eliminated a lot of possibilities, he's still no closer to discovering who or what has been manipulating time in Night Vale, or even how and why they're doing it. He doesn't know why future/alternate/fake versions of himself keep turning up, or why there's one old man and eight Ralph's employees who owe him a life debt, or why Desert Bluffs keeps coming up in his investigations when it obviously seems fine. He can't explain why the sun...
won't rise or set when it's supposed to or what dangers this will inevitably cause. Hell, he still hasn't even gotten over – over his stupid crush.

But he has to spend all of tonight staking out the Sand Wastes with the Tracker, and dammit, he deserves some kind of reward if only for that, even if it's just an awkward presentation, free food, and a chance to listen to Cecil in person.

It will be a nice, relaxing afternoon. Maybe even fun.

Totally harmless.

~*~*~*~

Cecil sounds really upset.

Carlos has heard him sound unhappy before. Like the day of his sister's wedding. Or the time they dissolved the bowling league amid charges of steroid abuse, and Old Woman Josie and John Peters – you know, the farmer – got arrested during one of the protests: Cecil was disappointed and worried for weeks.

A thought niggles at the back of his mind, but it's gone before Carlos can grasp it.

Over the course of almost a decade, Carlos thought that he'd heard Cecil cover pretty much every emotion on-air. But this – this is so much worse – Cecil can barely speak, like he's overwhelmed with sadness, and then there's a pre-recorded ad and he never has to go to those unscheduled unless there's technical difficulties, Cecil is a professional, but he was really upset and now he's gone and something is wrong, and all Carlos is doing is lying on the floor, useless.

The thought is back, but he doesn't have time for that now, Cecil needs his help.

"What's wrong with Cecil?" he asks. Well, tries to ask; it mostly comes out, "Wwwurrgh."

Carlos realizes his eyes are shut. With great effort, he opens them.

Teddy Williams is peering down at him. He starts hooting, and is answered by a thunderous round of applause.

Carlos briefly considers shutting his eyes and dealing with this later, but no, Cecil. He attempts to get his bearings.

He's lying on a linoleum floor in front of a rack of bowling balls. Everything hurts and his torso has been wrapped in so much gauze he looks like a mummy, and crud, he's going to have to check to make sure he has the same number of internal organs he started out with. Bastards can't take his spleen, though, he already lost it. Hah, that'll show them.

Wait, no, he's getting off track. Cecil's at... the radio station? And Carlos is by some bowling balls, which would put him at... the bowling alley...

The thought returns with memory for back-up. Carlos is in the Desert Flower Bowling Alley and Arcade Fun Complex and was just almost murdered by very tiny people with very impressive surface-to-air projectiles and he sort of wants to die, except not really, because the only thing more embarrassing than almost being killed by a race of tiny people in front of a large crowd is actually being killed by a race of tiny people in front of a large crowd.

Carlos sits up with a groan. There's an answering groan, not from him, and shit, the thought has just
handed him an entire appendix of supplementary material.

Teddy Williams trills warningly at him as he crawls/sprawls over to the side of the Tracker, who is lying in a large puddle of blood that is growing ever wider despite several tourniquets and Shakeena Flynn applying pressure to his wounds.

Her face is grim as she says, "He saved your life."

"You bastard," hisses Carlos. Teddy Williams gently moves Flynn out of the way, inspects the Tracker's injuries, and shakes his head.

"Can you hear me?" asks Flynn. The Tracker doesn't respond, even when Teddy Williams chirps at him.

"Is there anything you can do?" asks Flynn, looking at Carlos.

"Вы быть сильным, вы выжить," says Carlos, because even though he's now dying on the inside, he's not dying on the outside because of this man. "Вы останетесь в живых, независимо от того, что происходит!"

The Tracker's increasingly glassy gaze focuses on Carlos' face and his hand twitches. Carlos takes it in his own. No one should have to die alone on the battlefield, even if they are a racist asshole.

"Ладно, ладно. Я знал, это случится. Ты можешь взять мою машину," says the Tracker, and he dies as he lived: being helpful while making everyone feel angry and uncomfortable.

Carlos pulls into the Arby's parking lot when he gets too dizzy to drive any further. He rests his forehead against the steering wheel, taking slow, deep breaths until the worst of it passes.

The remains of his shirt are sitting in a bloody pile on the seat next to him. He fishes his cell phone out of the pocket. Then he fishes the rest of his cell phone out of the pocket.

It warbles through a few bars of "You Give Love a Bad Name" before fading into silence. He makes note to tell Julie that the shielding is only moderately effective against tiny ammunition and drops the pieces in the cupholder.

Carlos' go bag is still in the back seat. He pulls on his cloak and picks it up, then sneaks inside to the Arby's bathroom.

He re-emerges mostly blood-free and in moderately clean clothes. He makes his way to the counter, swaying only a little.

"Hi," he says, giving them his best smile. "I've lost a lot of blood and I need fluids. Also, can I borrow your phone? I have a very important call to make."

Carlos gives up trying to poke the straw into his complimentary Capri Sun and leans against the back windshield of his car, instead. Cecil's voice rumbles over the speakers, making the whole car vibrate.

"Oh! Message on my phone," says Cecil. "...Carlos wants to see me."

Carlos stares up at the sky and feels a smile tug at the corners of his mouth.
The sun approaches the horizon and scatters its rays in the atmosphere, leaving behind only the longest wavelengths of red and orange and the green glow of the lights above the Arby's.

"Um… I am not sure what scientific exploration now needs the services of my radio audience, but I will dutifully go, dutifully meet him," says Cecil. "And as I go, let us all go – go now, to the weather."

Carlos checks his watch. The face has cracked and he hasn't dared to look inside it, but it's still functioning. He's pretty sure there's some kind of relevant metaphor there. The sunset is about fifteen minutes late today.

For once, Carlos doesn't mind. He’s just killing time until Cecil gets here.

*Killing time* is pretty violent phrase, now that he thinks about it. *Wasting time*, too; it could even be a synonym. Losing time, hard time, rough time, a stitch in time, the nick of time, borrowed time, out of time…

Mortals also make time, gain time, keep time; take time, but give it too. It’s actually a pretty confusing relationship at the best of times (hah), and Carlos is finding it hard to blame time for not keeping up in Night Vale, which is even more confusing.

He blinks, and wonders if it’s really that simple.

He’s seen the graphs – a whole year’s worth of data, now. Sunrise and sunset appear to come whenever they please, but the days grew shorter and then longer; winter reigned, and soon summer will have its supremacy. The long slow dance of the seasons is still there, and so is the quicker rhythm of night and day. It's not like perception and reality matched before – the sun he's looking at now has already disappeared under the horizon, even if atmospheric refraction tries to convince him otherwise. Yes, normal human methods of quantifying time have lost their precision, but everyone knows the observer effect can cause irregularities, and isn’t that the point of data analysis? You follow the major trend and discount the statistically insignificant outliers.

All that time he's spent staring at the master wards – he knows what they're for now. The Currents of Time roll on and Night Vale bobs along the surface. Reality-warping prisoners weigh it down, and it catches and spins unsteadily in the eddies of the vortices, but the wards are their equal and opposite. In the end it doesn't matter what Night Vale floats in, only that it keeps floating.

Time is just another dimension. A structure to use to describe any single point. A way to make the most of the limits of the human mind, the limits that the laws of physics expand and the Laws of Magic protect. It's the universe that's real: Carlos, the lights above the Arby's, the stars emerging one by one to glitter in the void – no, not emerging. Merely blocked by sunlight scattering in the upper atmosphere. Starlight was there all along. The stars may be long dead, but their radiation still streaks across the millennia. There's a record of everything that fills the universe to its bounds.

Human perception makes it difficult to read that record, but right now Carlos is pretty sure that he's in Night Vale around 8:15 PM on about Saturday, June 15, 2013, and Cecil's car just pulled up beside him.

Carlos pushes himself painfully upright. Cecil tumbles out of his driver's seat and narrowly avoids shutting his tie in the door. "What is it?" he says. "Wh – what danger are we in? What mystery needs to be explored?"

Carlos shakes his head. “Nothing,” he says. “After everything that happened…"
He almost died, and the last thing he heard before he passed out was Cecil, and the first thing he heard when he woke up was Cecil, and it was both all he ever wanted and not enough.

"I just wanted to see you," says Carlos.

"Oh?" says Cecil unsteadily. He's looking at Carlos, really looking; not just staring at his hair, or his teeth, or the fit of his shirt. It's somehow even more intimate than a soulgaze, because this is Cecil looking at him now, all his focus directed to this moment in time (such as it is), this one point in the universe given entirely over to Carlos as he presently exists, foolish and disheveled and wounded.

Right now it's more than Carlos can handle. He stares at the sun instead, which is also so bright it hurts. “I used to think it was setting at the wrong time,” he says. “But then I realized that time doesn’t work in Night Vale, and that none of the clocks are real. Sometimes things seem so strange, or malevolent, and then you find that, underneath, it was something else altogether. Something pure, and innocent.”

Carlos speaks four languages fluently. He can make his meaning known in four more, shout "Look out!" and "Run!" in a further half-dozen, bend the universe to his will in yet another, and describe almost exactly what he's done in numbers and mathematical symbols. He knows all that, but he has no idea if what he's saying is what he wants Cecil to hear. Or if Cecil even wants to hear it.

Carlos finally meets his eyes, desperately wondering how to translate so many thoughts and so many feelings into understanding, and Cecil smiles and says, "I know what you mean."

Carlos smiles too.

Cecil climbs up beside him. He wants to hold Cecil's hand, but his fingers aren't working very well, so he puts his hand on Cecil's knee instead and feels warmth seep up through wide-whale corduroy. Cecil lays his head on Carlos' shoulder. It's probably uncomfortable, but Carlos likes the tickle of Cecil's hair against his face and Cecil doesn't seem to mind.

The lights above the Arby's dance joyfully. At some point they'll probably turn dangerous, or signal something dangerous, or try to distract everyone from something dangerous, but right now... Right now they're just beautiful, and Carlos is happy that he and Cecil are both in this one point together, watching them in a fragile but perfect moment.

The ancient and ageless tide of magic sweeps across the land as the image of the sun disappears below the horizon, more or less around the right time. The night is silent, except for the muffled sound of music playing inside the car.

"That’s the weather," says Carlos.

"What?" says Cecil. “Oh, yes – you’re right.” He sighs. “I probably need to get back.”

“Right,” says Carlos. He feels the perfect moment crumbling, and tries to steel himself against its loss. He knew it couldn’t last, after all. “Okay,” Cecil slides off the back of the car and offers Carlos his hand. Carlos takes it and attempts to follow him, and wow, is that a mistake.

“Carlos!” says Cecil, catching him before he crumples to the ground. “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” says Carlos. “Just a little light-headed. Don’t worry, it’s probably just from all the blood loss.” Cecil is clutching him to his chest. This is their first hug. Carlos wishes he didn’t feel like he was about to faint so he could hug Cecil back.

“Here, why don’t we sit down,” says Cecil, gently lowering the two of them to the ground. “What
did Teddy Williams say?” He’s starting to sound worried again, which makes Carlos feel anxious, too. Or maybe that’s just the hypovolemic shock speaking.

“He mainly made kind of a hooting noise,” says Carlos. “And then I left. I had to see you.”

“Oh, Carlos,” says Cecil. Now he sounds a little exasperated, and it sounds amazing, because it’s so much more real than hearing his admiration from afar over the radio. And also because – to be honest – nearly all the people who care about Carlos sound exasperated with him frequently, and now Cecil is one of them, and it makes Carlos feel all warm inside, which is nice because the rest of him feels kind of cold.

“You should lay down.” Cecil takes off his sweater vest and puts it under Carlos’ head, then pulls Carlos’ feet into his lap so his legs are elevated. “Do you have someone to come pick you up? I won’t leave you here alone.”

That last part makes Carlos smile doofily at the stars again. Then the rest of the statement catches up with him. “I need to tell the scientists I’m not dead,” says Carlos, struggling to sit up, because unlike some people he is not just going to leave his friends in agony wondering whether or not he’s alive before eventually notifying them via carbon copy.

Cecil stops him with a hand to his chest. “It’s okay,” he says. “I’ll call them.”

Carlos lies back as Cecil pulls out his cell phone. After he's done talking he finds the abandoned juice pack and pierces its nigh-impenetrable packaging with ease. He makes Carlos sip it slowly, rubbing soothing circles on Carlos’ left ankle the whole time, and Carlos feels clammy and faintly nauseous but mainly content.

“Carlos, do you know anyone in an unmarked white van?” asks Cecil.

“Oh, that’s the Sciencemobile,” says Carlos. “Can you help me up?”

"Is that a good idea?" says Cecil.

"I doubt it," says Carlos, trying to sit up anyway. Cecil helps him to his feet and keeps him there with a strong arm around his waist.

The Sciencemobile screeches to a halt in front of them, and an unexpected number of people climb out of the back.

"Julie, did you kidnap an EMT?" says Carlos, as said EMT wheels a stretcher over.

"Don't be ridiculous," says Julie. "I'm bribing her. They're running a special for non-bulletproof morons—"

"Thank you, Cecil, we'll take it from here," says Andre, gently prodding Carlos with his cane until he sits on the stretcher. It's freezing without Cecil beside him. But he doesn't want to say that, because Cecil should leave so he can return to the station and sign off.

"I'm fine," says Carlos. "I'm not cold at all."

"Well, you're a terrible representative sample," says Julie, flinging an emergency blanket at him. Cecil catches the other end and helps wrap it around Carlos' shoulders.

"If there's anything I can do, doctors...” Cecil says, but the weather report hits the bridge and he grimaces.
"You can go," says Carlos. "I know you have to finish the show."

"Oh, Carlos," says Cecil gratefully. Carlos feels a flash of pressure as Cecil squeezes his hand, and then Cecil is gone.

Julie snaps her fingers in front of the EMT's face. The EMT gives herself a shake and stops staring at Carlos' hair; with Kate's help, she slides the stretcher into the back of the van. Gary climbs in and manages to almost yank out Carlos' IV line only once.

"Wait, just a minute—"

"Cecil?" says Carlos, lurching upright and almost disconnecting the IV line himself.

"I will sit on you, you easily perforated idiot!" shouts Julie.

"Sorry," says Cecil, slightly out of breath. "I almost forgot!" He passes a small gold trophy into the back of the van.

"'Scientific Champion of Night Vale, 2012-2013'," reads Andre. "Wow, that's... something!"

"Something I am going to beat you both with—"

"Doctor, is that a wormhole?" says Kate loudly, pointing out the front windshield, and Julie scrambles into the front seat, swearing.

Andre makes him lie back before handing over the trophy. Carlos clutches it to his chest with trembling hands, feels its reassuring weight settle over his heart, and the chaotic clouds of shock and fear and affection and hope finally collapse towards its steady mass, subsumed into a tiny but brightly burning embryo of happiness.

"I hope you like it," says Cecil. "I really have to go, but—"

"I like it," says Carlos. "I'm not alone outside anymore."

"You're safe with us, for now," shouts Julie, which is technically incorrect because no one is safe and figuratively incorrect because Julie and the others won't abandon him no matter how mad she gets.

But Cecil climbs in the back of the van and over the EMT and settles awkwardly in Gary's lap, so he can hold Carlos' hand.

"Excuse me, Master Rawhide," he says to Gary, and then to Carlos, "Outside what?"

"Outside the radio," says Carlos. "Now you can hear me when I talk to you."

"I can," says Cecil. "Oh, I am listening, Carlos."

"I'll call you," says Carlos. "I promise. Later. A little later. You have to finish the show."

"You're right," says Cecil. "Good night, Carlos. Good night."

Carlos shuts his eyes. The words beat in time to the echo of soft music in his soul, and other voices argue comfortingly around him as he cradles his trophy close and drifts into peaceful unconsciousness.
Carlos gets benched for the next couple weeks, which is *totally unnecessary* considering the rate at which the human body regenerates blood cells. In retrospect, he probably should not have included quite so many of his speculations about the nature of time in his official report to Luccio, or at least should have edited them for context *after* he stopped taking painkillers.

The backlog of work nearly kills him, if not in quite as literal a manner as the tiny civilization under Lane Five, but he's finally able to overcome his paperwork, his nerves, and a sleeper cell of demon-ridden practitioners in Portland in order to call Cecil.

They go out to dinner.

Like all of Carlos' attempts at dating in the past decade, it's interrupted halfway through by malevolent forces seeking to wreak havoc on largely-innocent mortals.

*Unlike* all of Carlos' attempts at dating in the past decade, Cecil doesn't actually mind.

At least, Carlos thought he didn't mind. But it's been three days and Cecil hasn't called him back yet, and now Carlos is caught in an agonizing spiral of tactical indecision. Does he break and call Cecil first, upsetting the equilibrium they've maintained so far, maybe trampling all over Cecil's personal boundaries, maybe violating some unspoken code, maybe making himself look needy and insecure? Or does he tough it out? What if it's a test? What's the right answer? What's even the question?

"Drink!"

All three grad students take a shot. Again.

"Aren’t you guys going a little fast?” asks Carlos.

"You just need to calm down,” says Gary, trying to pat him on the shoulder and actually patting him on the bicep. “Have more mead!”

Carlos grabs the bottle before his lap gets topped off, too.

"It's my party,” says Wei, picking up his own glass of mead. “So I get to pick the games.”

"Games?” says Carlos, suddenly filled with misgivings.

"We’re drinking every time your eye twitches,” says Kate.

"Hey!"

"It’s nothing personal,” she says. “But Dr. Kwan’s already left, so—”

"I remember when you used to be afraid of me,” he says. He gives them his best judgmental glare, then pulls his sunglasses out of the pocket of his lab coat and puts them on. The grad students may be the hardest-drinking people he's ever met, out of a pool of acquaintances that includes Wardens with decades of horror stories, semi-immortal Norse warriors, and an actual maenad, but Wei's only been out of the Ralph's for a couple weeks and Carlos refuses to be the cause of any alcohol poisoning.
Even if Gary's somehow already managed to steal one of the CAUTION: ELDRITCH ABOMINATIONS signs.

"You need to get laid," says Wei sagely. "Wow, that was a really big one. Drink!"

"Don't be rude," says Kate. "You shouldn't make comments about people's sexual relationships without their express permission. Although if you're out of supplies, Carlos, feel free to stock up!" She pulls a basket from underneath her desk and holds it out. It's filled with condoms and lube and individually-wrapped things that Carlos did not even know could be individually wrapped. "Can't go wrong if you shield your—"

"Thanks," says Carlos, in lieu of asking "Why do you keep those in the lab," (which will probably result in an enthusiastic lecture no level of intoxication could ever make up for) or crawling under a desk (which will probably result in the grad students chugging the rest of their drinks).

He grabs a handful just to be polite.

"How's Cecil?" Kate asks.

"He's fine," says Carlos. "...I think. I haven't talked to him in a couple days."

The grad students lower their glasses and stare at him. Gary grabs Wei's arm and hisses, "Write this down!"

"It's fine," says Carlos shortly. "I'm fine. Everything's fine."

"He hasn't called? Or texted?" asks Wei, who is indeed writing this down.

"He hasn't called my landline," says Carlos. "I don't know if he has my cell number."

"Well, there's your problem," says Gary. "Who uses landlines?"

"Besides us, when the electrostatic buildup from the bees interferes with the network?" asks Kate. "Or when the broadband goes down and we have to resort to... dial-up..."

She and Wei turn to stare at Gary.

"Did you disconnect all the phone lines from the router after the experiment?" asks Wei.

Gary takes another pull of mead. "Define ‘all’," he says. He gets to his feet and meanders out of the lab, remarkably steady for someone who's drunk enough honey-based alcohol that he probably has his own cell in the beehives. Or his own seat in Valhalla.

"I don't get Gary," says Carlos.

"Nobody gets Gary," says Wei. "He's the wind."

They all start as something raps at the window. Carlos isn't exactly at the top of his game, but his coordination's all right and he's got his Glock in a shoulder holster. He slides the window open.

"Special delivery," says their resident eavesdropper from the Sheriff's Secret Police. They hand Carlos a box. "Say, is everything all right with you and Cecil? I can patch you through to his surveillance team—"

"Everything is fine," says Carlos, who clearly needs to sweep the lab for more bugs. "I was just about to... text him. But thank you."
"No problemo," says the officer. "Have fun at your science party!"

Carlos shuts the window and scans the box for anything untoward.

"It's clean," he says, handing it to Wei.

As soon as he sits down, Kate leans forward and asks, "So what are you going to text Cecil?"

There's a crash outside, towards the back of the labs; all the lights flicker. A few moments later Gary stumbles back into the room. For some reason he is covered in small pieces of honeycomb. "There, that'll do ya," he says to Carlos. "Did you know you have fourteen new messages?"

"Look!" says Wei. He holds up his present. "I won a toaster!"

Carlos finishes his drink.

~*~*~*~

Later that evening, after an ambiguous number of mead bottles and a quarter of a loaf of homemade gluten-free artisan cinnamon toast and one heavily-heckled viewing of The Core, he takes out his phone and writes, *Sorry if you couldn't reach me. We were using the phone lines for science.*

He hits Send before he can panic and erase it.

Then he panics and sends *I'm texting for personal reasons,* because the sentences look stark and emotionless, not laid-back yet approachable.

Then he panics again and writes *This is Carlos,* and dammit, he should have led with that.

It still doesn't look friendly. He adds :) and throws the phone across the room into the laundry pile before he can do any more damage.

He flops backwards onto his bed and flings an arm over his face. Then he rolls over and pulls out his latest round of calculations for hypothetical time vortices, because they haven't made any sense while he's sober and shaking up the testing conditions is worth a shot.

After half an hour, he's half-convinced that if he somehow added another ley line to Night Vale, changed all of the spells in the storm wards into a transportation matrix, and used a particle accelerator to make a tiny black hole, he could probably make a cue ball explode five minutes in the past. He's also half-convinced that he's reconciled the theories of special and general relativity, though, so he's not too optimistic about his formulae holding up in the morning.

His phone beeps.

He's halfway across the room before his balance leaves him for someone more confident and less drunk. Fortunately, his room isn't actually that big, so he ends up pitching face-first into his laundry, which is more or less where he wants to be. He scrambles for his phone.

All it says is *Carlos!*, but unlike Carlos' attempts at communicating, Cecil's meaning is perfectly clear. Carlos rolls onto his back and beams at his phone, which lets off a few sparks but keeps the screen lit, and he takes back every unkind thought he's ever had at it.

It beeps again, and *I didn't know you had a cell phone* appears. Carlos bites his lip, but *I would have called that instead!* pops up a few seconds later, and he relaxes.

A little. Because there are a few things that Carlos may have neglected to tell Cecil.
Like his last name.

Or how he hasn’t actually dated anyone since his junior year of high school.

Or that he’s a wizard of the White Council and the regional commander of Wardens in the western United States and not, in fact, a scientist.

You know. Minor details.

It's not like Carlos has deliberately lied to Cecil about any of those things. He's just let Cecil assume that he doesn't have a last name or his virginity or magical powers. The whole scientist thing is a little trickier, but you know what? Carlos has been taught about science, written papers for science, and even conducted experiments with science, thanks to his helpful nature and Gary's tendency to try and fail to work with a Benadryl hangover. Carlos isn't an expert, but functionally, he pretty much is a scientist now, even if no one is ever going to read his research on the effects of entropic accelerant on dark magic levels in cursed objects apart from maybe three other members of the White Council and Andre (who gave him an A-). He's even got an honorary doctorate from Night Vale Community College, and though it's printed on unnerving dark leather with ink rendered from municipal food pastes, it's still a degree, dammit.

It's true that all these facts, when added up, don't remotely come close to describing his actual life, in a way that some might describe as "extremely deceitful". But it's somewhere to start. Carlos can correct any minor misconceptions that are unlikely to disrupt Night Vale's delicate equilibrium and drop some hints that suggest there's more to the story, and if things get serious, he can sort of... usher Cecil gently towards the truth.

Carlos wonders how you can tell when things get serious when one person has been in – has pined from afar for a whole year, and the other has kind of maybe sort of done something similar for the better part of a decade.

You probably need more than one date, at the very least.

*I can call you at this number, right?* blinks onto his screen.

*Yes, any time,* he writes back, and in less than three seconds, Freddie Mercury is crooning on his phone about sitting alone and watching the lights, his only friend on teenage nights, and Carlos is smiling too hard to judge.

~*~*~*~

For their second date, Cecil volunteers to teach him “the noble art of swordplay”.

Carlos is pretty sure he’s talking about fencing.

He’s not 100% sure, which is why he compulsively took a second shower and bought another box of condoms and ended up circling the block three times in Julie's Prius (because his car is still undergoing the tender ministrations of his cousin Manny back in East LA, and while the Tracker's car has been bequeathed to him not even Julie wanted to make him bring it on a date) before forcing himself to park, because while Carlos knows his way around the sword literally, metaphorically he’s a, you know. Complete novice.

But they’re at a studio, wearing protective gear, and Carlos is holding an actual blunted foil, so fencing is looking more and more likely.

At some point, he needs to tell Cecil his actual experience re: swordplay with and without suggestive
quotation marks. However, at this moment Cecil is standing right behind him, adjusting his grip on the foil and correcting his stance, and Carlos can't quite bring himself to enlighten Cecil just yet.

During the years he actually attended high school, he used to roll his eyes at his classmates who would pretend not to know things just so they could flirt, but he has to admit it is pretty effective.

“Now step forward and extend your arm,” says Cecil, gently urging him with one hand on his waist. Carlos thrusts obediently. His internal narration apparently took the memo about suggestive quotation marks and ran with it.

“Excellent!” says Cecil.

They go through the basic footwork, attacks, and defenses, and these at least are stylized enough that Carlos genuinely isn’t that familiar with them; they’d be almost useless in battle, but for exercise and discipline they’re not that bad. Taijijian forms aren’t that practical, either.

Cecil moves in front of him and says, “Okay, now we’ll try that in an actual engagement. Êtes-vous prêts?” Fencing whites are a good look on him.

“Yes?” asks Carlos absently, and Cecil lunges towards him.

His instincts take over, and a second later he’s kneeling above Cecil on the floor, his blunt foil at his throat.

He freezes, but then Cecil says, in a slightly aggrieved tone, “Carlos, that move was cheating.”

Carlos pushes his facemask up. “Oops,” he says, and tries a grin. “I’m sorry. Are you hurt?”

“Only because I’ve been babbling on about the basics this whole time,” Cecil pulls his mask off and drops it by his sword, “When we could have been doing something more productive. Why didn’t you tell me you’ve studied the noble art of swordplay?”

Cecil’s hair is mussed. Carlos resists the urge to smooth it down.

“I like listening to you tell me things,” says Carlos. “And then I got… distracted…” It suddenly occurs to him that he’s practically sitting on top of his boyfriend – his date – is Cecil his boyfriend? He’s pretty sure they’re exclusive, but they’ve really only been on a date and a half. And even though Cecil doesn’t actually look unhappy, Carlos probably just disqualified himself as boyfriend material by disarming him with extreme prejudice, great—

“Distracted, eh?” says Cecil, and suddenly his elbow sweeps into Carlos’ leg and they’re both rolling and then Cecil is sitting on him. “I’ll show you distracted, mister,” he says, and then he leans down and kisses Carlos.

Carlos kissed Cecil last week, but the last time someone kissed Carlos was… a pathetically long time ago, on a blind date with one of Nita’s former classmates, which had ended at the very beginning of a potential makeout session when Carlos threw her in a dumpster to protect her from the vampire that just had to choose right then to try to take him out. (She was very grateful he had saved her from the ‘mugger’, but not grateful enough to return his calls. He can’t really blame her.) That was awkward, polite, and fun. This – this is everything else from that date, the adrenaline rush, the thrill of competition, the frisson of fear that makes him feel alive—

Cecil pulls back abruptly. "I'm sorry, was that okay?"

Carlos blinks at him. "It was amazing," he manages eventually. "Victoire."
"No, I meant – I should have asked first," says Cecil, then, "Amazing? Really?"

"Yes," says Carlos. "I am okay with this. I am more than okay with this, you should kiss me all the time. Can I kiss you?"

"Yes, you may," says Cecil, but then kisses Carlos first anyway. Carlos is more than okay with that, too.

Some indeterminate amount of time later, Cecil’s watch starts to beep. Starts to, then stops, then starts again at a lower frequency that warbles into a downward spiral. He makes an inarticulate noise of protest before pulling back out of range.

"Sorry," gasps Carlos.

"Hmm? Oh, it's not you, Carlos! We should just... start getting ready to go,” says Cecil.

“I think we should collect more data before drawing any radical conclusions,” says Carlos.

Cecil smiles. “Oh, Carlos,” he says, and this close Carlos can feel his voice rumbling through him. He shivers; Cecil's eyes glaze over and he has to clear his throat before continuing. “Normally, uh. Normally I would agree, but there’s a class scheduled for this studio in about five minutes, and I didn’t fill out any Permission for Exhibitionism and Public Indecency forms.”

“Oh,” says Carlos. “Yes, I think we should probably leave then.”

“Right,” says Cecil.

“Okay,” says Carlos.

Cecil sighs and rests his forehead against Carlos’. It’s strange to meet someone’s eyes for so long, especially when Carlos still can’t tell what color Cecil’s are, but weirdly nice, too. One of Cecil's hands is still tangled in Carlos' hair; Carlos' is wrapped around the back of Cecil's neck, thumb stroking the patch of skin between his ear and his hairline for no reason other than it’s there.

Neither of them moves.

“That means you have to get off me,” says Carlos, not very enthusiastically. Cecil groans and climbs to his feet. Carlos takes his outstretched hand, which pulls him up with surprising strength. His grip lingers for just a moment. Then Cecil stoops to pick up their masks.

Carlos lofts the foils up into the air with his foot and catches them, one after another.

“Your sword, sir,” he says, presenting one of the hilts to Cecil. Cecil beams at him, an expression which turns rueful a moment later.

“You could have said something,” he says.

“Technically I haven’t studied Western fencing,” says Carlos. “I really did learn a lot. You’re a good teacher.”

Cecil flushes pink with pleasure and says, “Well, I learned from the best. Josie was quite the sabreuse in her day. What did you study?”

“Taijijian,” says Carlos.

“Do all scientists learn the martial arts?” asks Cecil.
“You’d be surprised,” says Carlos, because Kate has a brown belt in kung fu and Andre used to box. “I wouldn’t ask Doctor Renegade if she does, though. She hates that.”

“They banned dueling at the community college years ago, so I can’t imagine it would be very useful nowadays,” says Cecil.

Carlos reviews the sword fights he’s been in recently and discards all of them from use in a non-classified conversation. “Not often,” he says. “I guess – wait, sand worms! It was pretty useful then.”

“They usually recommend a machete for sand worms,” says Cecil. “But – do you mean last year’s migration? I thought they had all gone by the time you came.”

Carlos gives a slightly abridged account of the first day of his stay in Night Vale as they return their rented equipment and stroll down the block to the strip mall. Cecil holds the door to the Pinkberry open and ushers him through with a hand on his lower back, which makes Carlos trip over a few sentences and the carpet, but he manages to recover soon enough.

“It’s a shame they disintegrate so quickly,” says Cecil, as the server buries his frozen yogurt with raspberries and a healthy shake of red pepper flakes. “You could have nailed its head above your front door, like they did for conquered foes in the good old days.”

“It could serve as a warning to all about insufficient sample sizes,” says Carlos. “In scientific experiments, not yogurt,” he adds, seeing the cashier’s worried expression.

“Oh, of course!” she says. She gives them a fifty-percent discount for Carlos’ hair.

“You make science sound so exciting,” says Cecil. His knee knocks against Carlos’ under the table; it’s enough to make Carlos risk deliberately leaning them together, a maneuver which immediately pays off when Cecil smiles at him.

“Not, uh. Not as exciting as you make it sound when you’re talking about us,” says Carlos.

“Oh, pfft,” says Cecil, but he looks pleased, like he does whenever Carlos mentions that he listens to his show. “You have all that daring and danger and data archiving and deductive reasoning...”

Carlos shrugs. “It seems that way with a lot of jobs when you’re outside the field. Not that there haven’t been occasional moments of...” He thinks about it for a second.

“Terror?” suggests Cecil.

“Well... yes, actually,” says Carlos. “But a lot of it's waiting around for the experiments to finish running.” Like monitoring the house in Desert Creek, which when they’re not actively being attacked usually consists of Carlos sealing himself in a circle and getting increasingly bored while the scientists huddle around some expensive, heavily modified equipment and mutter to themselves. Sometimes, when things get really wild, Julie points something that looks like a radar gun at the house and frowns.

“And then the terror,” says Cecil. “Born of knowledge and post-lapsarian regret.”

“Only sometimes,” says Carlos. “The rest of it involves a lot of pretty dull paperwork. Well, so does the terror, but... you know...”

“I do indeed,” says Cecil. His gaze goes distant for a moment. Carlos catches himself thinking that a thousand-yard stare's a good look on him, which is really just taking things too far, so he's grateful when Cecil gives himself a tiny shake and directs his attention back to Carlos. “When did you
“Know?” he asks. "That you were going to be a scientist, I mean."

Carlos intends to say something banal, vague enough that it's not a lie and uninteresting enough that they can move on to something else, but instead he finds himself telling Cecil about Professor Santiago and his first grade science class.

“—And I thought, any subject that has dinosaurs and cool sublimation effects has to be pretty great,” finishes Carlos. He feels a pang of nostalgia for his younger self, mind afire with the mysteries of the universe, who was months away from finding out that his bisabuela was more than a grumpy old lady and that monsters were real and that he had powers that could land him on the wrong end of a sharp sword if he wasn’t careful. “Sometimes I miss that.”

“You always seem so enthusiastic about science to me,” says Cecil.

“Oh, I am,” says Carlos. “I love my job. I guess it’s more like…” He thinks about it for a moment. “It’s the responsibility,” he concludes. “Now I know that all knowledge has a price. When I first came to Night Vale, I wanted to make a difference, but I didn’t realize what I’d have to give up to make that happen. Most of the time, it doesn’t matter, but…”

Cecil nods. “I know what you mean,” he says, contemplatively poking a raspberry. He smiles suddenly. “Of course, if you hadn’t come to Night Vale, you wouldn’t have gotten to see the pterodactyls. I know those aren’t real dinosaurs, but…”

“That’s true,” says Carlos. He’s never seen a real dinosaur. But a pterosaur and a zombie tyrannosaurus rex are more than most people get, and Cecil is radiant with pride across the table because he actually remembered a genuine scientific fact, so Carlos is definitely not going to complain.

“How did you get into radio?” he asks.

“Oh, you know. The usual way,” says Cecil.

In Night Vale, it turns out the usual way involves birth prophecies, the ability to quickly fashion crude weapons and do light filing, and drawing the short straw when the previous Voice of Night Vale disappears into station management’s offices, never to return.

Somehow, Carlos is not very surprised.

Cecil takes his hand as they wander back to Carlos’ car, causing Carlos to have a minor freakout over whether his grip is too tight or too loose, or if he needs to angle his arm up to account for Cecil’s height, or what if he missed some chocolate syrup on his fingers and they end up stuck together? Well, that wouldn’t be so bad, but—

“Penny for your thoughts,” says Cecil, flipping him an actual penny. Carlos catches it one-handed.

“Do they sell chocolate-flavored superglue?” he asks.

“Not anymore,” says Cecil, shaking his head sadly. “It wasn’t approved by the FDA. The Ralph’s had a big recall about two years ago.”

“Oh,” says Carlos, and now they’ve reached his car.

“Soooo… any exciting plans for the evening?” asks Cecil casually.

“I have to get to bed early,” says Carlos. “We have a big research trip tomorrow.”
“Oh, of course,” says Cecil, and his shoulders don’t slump, and he doesn’t sound disappointed, and Carlos is infinitely grateful because he’s pretty sure Cecil would like to be doing both of those things. “Well, you’ll certainly want to be well-rested for that.”

“Yes,” says Carlos, because the last time they’d done long-range recon on the Fomor in LA he’d ended up almost bitten in half. Now is really not the time to get distracted.

But he also really does not want to let go of Cecil.

Cecil ends up solving that problem; he drops Carlos’ left hand to wrap both of his around Carlos’ right, gently curving their fingers over the penny balanced on Carlos’ palm.

“Maybe you could bring this with you,” he says. “It’s a triple-headed penny.”

“Triple-headed?” says Carlos, trying not to sound too skeptical and probably failing.

But Cecil just smiles and says, “That’s three times as lucky,” and Carlos is not at all equipped to handle the way the tiny wrinkles at the corner of his eyes make Carlos’ stomach flutter.

He grabs the front of Cecil’s tunic and pulls him down for a kiss.

Cecil makes a happy, surprised noise and puts his hands on Carlos’ hips, kissing him back enthusiastically, and by the time they stop to breathe Carlos is almost a little sad they still don’t have any Exhibitionism and Public Indecency forms.

“I’m three times as lucky,” he says, and “Wait, that makes no sense,” and “Because you’re my boyfriend,” and that sounded much smoother in his head and why did he just say that. “I mean – if you wanted – you’re—”

“My boyfriend,” Cecil repeats, and they should probably have an actual conversation about it, but right now Carlos is going to make use of his considerable deductive skills to conclude that Cecil is fine with this relationship development and has better things to do with his lips and tongue and teeth.

Carlos hits the car with a small thump and ends up sandwiched between Cecil and the driver's side door. It’s exactly where he wants to be as the streetlights brighten overhead and the neon signs stutter across the parking lot and the Prius makes an odd CHUNK as the transmission slips and it starts to roll away.

Carlos flails and almost falls, but Cecil catches him, and helps him chase after the car.

~*~*~*~

By the time they pull up to Cecil’s apartment, Carlos has almost managed to convince himself that current data suggests his adult dating life is not automatically doomed to catastrophic failure, or at least not to a statistically higher degree than his normal life.

“Well, this is me,” says Cecil. “You’re welcome to come up and have some coffee and help me submit the standard End-of-Date Report, if you want.”

“I wish I could,” says Carlos. It’s both true and not true, because he took an extra shower and obtained a frankly ludicrous number of condoms, but he also has enough trouble just dealing with hand-holding. “I had a really nice time, Cecil.”

“I’m glad,” says Cecil. He gives Carlos a smile that makes Carlos’ fingers involuntarily tighten around the steering wheel for support and says, “Good night, Carlos.”
"Buenas noches," says Carlos.

He watches Cecil walk up to his apartment building. Just as he opens the door, Carlos says, “Wait!”, gets out of the car, leans back in the car and engages the emergency brake, and runs up to Cecil.

“What is it? Is everything all right?” asks Cecil.

“Yes,” says Carlos. “I just remembered something I wanted to say.” Cecil’s eyes are warm and dark under the streetlights. Maybe they don’t have a color; maybe they only reflect his feelings and the weather, like a mood ring crossed with a barometer.

“Yes?” says Cecil after a moment.

“Oh,” says Carlos. “I – if I hadn’t come to Night Vale, I’d never have seen you either.”

“Oh,” says Cecil. “Oh! Like the pterodactyls!”

“Yes, like the pterodactyls,” says Carlos. “Good night, Cecil.”

“Good night,” says Cecil, and leans down to kiss him, short and sweet.

Carlos sits in his car, grinning at nothing, until the lights come on in Cecil’s apartment. Then he drives halfway home and walks the last mile whistling when the engine gives out.

~*~*~*~

“You sure are cheerful today,” says Meyers.

“I had a great night,” says Carlos, disintegrating the squid head of whatever kind of thing just rounded the corner with insufficient caution. His blood is on fire with magic and adrenaline and happiness, but it's not distracting at all: all his senses are sharpened while the lingering fear of his last mission to LA huddles dull and listless at the back of his mind. He wants to shout about his date as a battle cry, but since they are supposed to be hiding he will settle for mentioning it to Meyers.

Meyers groans and says, “I'm real happy for you, 'Los. Please don’t give me any details.”

"Where's Chaudhary?" asks Carlos, ignoring that last bit. Okay, yes, he may have on occasion regaled his fellow Wardens with lurid tales that weren't so much based on his personal life as based on Fermi estimates of what his personal life should be, but that was only before meetings or during stakeouts or whenever Carlos was bored and thought everyone else might be bored, too. It kept them sharp and boosted morale and had absolutely nothing to do with overcompensating.

"She said she'd meet us at the rendezvous," says Meyers. "...You're smiling again."

"I'm allowed to smile, Bill," says Carlos. There's movement by the back wall. "Down!" He rolls a grenade across the warehouse, holding a veil over it. The Fomor literally and metaphorically never see it coming.

"We've been made," says Meyers. "We'll have to pull out and we still haven't found out anything about their southern supply lines."

"We knew that was the likeliest possibility going in. We can't retake LA in a day, Buffalo," says Carlos. "This is our most successful mission since Athens and we haven't had to escape through the sewers yet. It's a great day to be alive."

"It's all... pleasant, and – on your six!" says Meyers. Carlos dodges a stream of acid and takes down
the spitter with a quick headshot; Meyers sets them on fire for good measure. "Downright unsettling."

They crouch behind a stack of pallets while Meyers reloads. “Did you ever just meet someone and know you've been waiting for them? Maybe for your whole life?” asks Carlos, scanning the room. The rendezvous point looks clear, but he thinks a patrol should be heading this way within two minutes.

Meyers blinks at him. “You met a girl you wanna settle down with?”

“Something like that,” says Carlos.

Meyers frowns. "And you've actually talked to her? And done... normal stuff?"

“We went fencing and had frozen yogurt,” says Carlos. He holsters his Glock and switches his staff to his right hand.

“Is that one of them double-entendres?"

“No,” says Carlos. “Get your mind out of the gutter, Bill. A gentlemen never kisses and tells.”

Meyers looks bewildered. “You once told me the size of one of your girls’—"

He's interrupted by the arrival of Warden Nila Chaudhary, through the warehouse wall, in a Mack truck. The ceiling collapsing is not terribly convenient, but it covers their retreat and saves Carlos from having to make some very awkward explanations about his previous, mostly fictional dating life, so he's going to count it as a win.

~*~*~*~

Carlos shoves the subway grate upwards. It pops out of the ground; he pushes it to the side. He hauls himself up onto the sidewalk and rolls onto his back with a groan.

For a moment, he’s tempted to stay there. He made it back into town late last night just in time to find a giant creature composed of the twisted, melded forms of librarians busting through the back wall of the library, by the biography section. (The subsequent inferno was not entirely his fault, since he wasn’t the one shooting fire from his sensilla, but he maybe could have been slightly more careful with the grenades.) He barely had time to shower off the ashes and eat before Andre knocked on his door, asking about the new subway. Apart from a power nap during lunch, he’s spent the rest of the day sabotaging “construction”, fighting off swarms of cockroaches, and having his (admittedly scanty) knowledge of DNA heckled by ungrateful nitpickers. He hasn't felt this exhausted in months.

But he's not going to stay there, because he and Cecil have been dating for approximately thirty-two days, one hour, and seventeen minutes (local time), and tonight they are celebrating their one-month anniversary. Cecil insists that this is not inaccurate, since they cancelled another Wednesday, and Carlos is not going to argue with him when all his supporting data points should probably be classified as outliers.

Most of the other people on the sidewalk are walking around him without even seeming to notice, but then he hears someone say, “Are you okay, mister?”

He turns his head and immediately calls up a fistful of entropic force, because a horrible grinning mummified bug-like corpse of a face is staring at him.

A few seconds too late, he realizes it’s only the head of a successfully neutralized librarian, being
carried by twelve-year-old Tamika Flynn. He dismisses the green light pooling in his hand.

She stares down at him, then says, hesitantly, “Mr. Carlos?”

Carlos sighs and sits the rest of the way up. “Hi,” he says. “It’s Tamika, right? I work with your mom sometimes.”

She nods. She looks over at the displaced grate and says, “Victor Hugo said the sewer is the conscience of the city. It’s where everything bears its true form.”

Carlos has seen the true forms of things in sewers. He's felt their teeth, too.

He suppresses a shudder and says, "I was actually down in the maintenance tunnels."

"For the subway?" she asks.

He nods.

"The trains came back," she says. "Most of them."

"Most of them," Carlos agrees. He rubs his face. The old litany kicks up in the back of his mind: what if I was faster, what if I was better, what if I had more time, what if, what if, what if...

Tamika is frowning down at her feet. "I couldn't help everyone in the Summer Reading Program, either."

"Sometimes I feel like you'd have to be crazy to stand up against terrible things when you know you can never stop them completely," says Carlos. "But you'd have to be crazy to stand by and let them happen."

"That's a bad paraphrase, but I know what you mean," she says. Now she stares at the horizon. "I've seen the true form of the city."

Carlos looks at her closely. Almost everyone in Night Vale has eyes wizened before their time; Tamika’s are older than most. He wonders if the written word ever trembles beneath them.

"I believe you," he says. "I'm sorry."

"There's a war coming," she says. "We'll be ready. I'll make sure everyone's ready this time."

The rational part of his mind tells him that she is a child who has seen more than anyone should have to. The rest of his mind points out that 1) that doesn't mean she's wrong and 2) he's been fighting a long, slow siege against time itself; the war, or part of it, has already come to Night Vale.

"Just remember," he says. "Even in war, there are some laws you should never break."

Tamika transfers her ancient gaze to him. She looks away just before a soulgaze starts and nods.

She holds up her free hand and grimaces in concentration. A little jet of butter-yellow flame flickers briefly to life before disappearing.

“Is that science?” asks Tamika. "I haven't read much non-fiction yet."

“It all depends on how you look at it,” says Carlos. "I like to think so, but a lot of people would disagree."
Tamika stares at him some more, until suddenly she blinks and looks like a normal preteen again, albeit one carrying the mummified head of a librarian. “Don’t worry,” she says. “I won’t tell them.”

“Gracias, Tamika,” says Carlos. He climbs to his feet and holds out his hand.

Tamika shakes it, saying "De nada." Her grip has a nice healthy buzz of magic, a moderate talent with a lot of potential. Carlos isn't sure what his own handshake feels like, but judging by the way Tamika is still staring askance at her fingers even after he's let go, she probably registers it as slightly more than a buzz.

She looks up at him and says, "Cecil was talking about you on the radio."

"He does that," says Carlos.

"My mom says he's a nice boy and if you hurt him..." She trails off ominously. She's only twelve years old and about six inches shorter than him, but she pulls it off pretty well.

The severed head helps.

"What will she do?" asks Carlos, morbidly curious.

Tamika sighs and says, "She won't tell me. She just trails off ominously."

Carlos grins. "Tell her I'll be good. And speaking of which, I've got a date, so I should be going."

"Are the cockroaches a gift?"

"What?" asks Carlos, alarmed.

Tamika graciously helps him pick bugs out of his hair. She's a good kid, Carlos thinks.

~*~*~*~

Carlos has the whole evening planned out. Sort of. He’s picking Cecil up from work as soon as his show is done, they’re going out for a nice dinner at the new seafood place on Dagon Street, Cecil is getting a present Carlos definitely has not spent the last week agonizing over, and then… then he has no idea how to tastefully suggest they have hot one-month-anniversary sex, preferably with explicit instructions since he’s never actually done this, sorry, maybe he should have mentioned that before.

Carlos ruthlessly shoves any feelings of nervousness and hesitation aside, because this is a time for action. Well, romance first, then action. Hopefully. The point is, he has a rendezvous at twenty hundred Juliet and he needs to move out.

Carlos wonders if other people plan their dates like they do their ops.

The first inkling that something is wrong is when he pulls up to the station and Cecil, who is normally very punctual, is not waiting outside. Carlos drums his fingers against the steering wheel. When he turns the radio back on to see if Cecil’s still somehow broadcasting, there’s only the buzzing of a swarm of flies.

Carlos parks and walks to the door. The only person in the front room is an intern hiding under her desk, but there are people coming down the hall. He hears Cecil’s voice and relaxes.

“—and now, now we are in a state of grace! It is a time of illumination and fevers, when the doors of perception have been cleansed, a high moment where we can plumb the fathoms of unseen mystery and remember that Dylan was a hard worker and pleasant company, and shall be greatly missed—"
The two women following Cecil nod tearfully. One of them is carrying a cardboard box full of someone’s, presumably Intern Dylan’s, office supplies; the other is clutching a station flyer on yellow paper.

“—and should he ever return from his journey into infinite space, infinite meaning, and infinite dimension, we will be happy to offer him his previous position and comp his subway ticket.”

The women thank him and leave. The intern crawls out from under her desk and follows them, still crouching low. She somersaults through the open bloodstone door and disappears into the night.

“Hi, Cecil,” says Carlos.

“Carlos!” says Cecil. “You’re here! Have you ever considered the inherent perfection of the human nose? Not just yours, of course; everyone’s.”

“I can’t say that I have,” says Carlos.

“Our eyes cannot see the tiniest organisms or the furthest stars, and our ears turn the silent agitation of nature into metamorphosed song, but our noses – our noses remember even when we do not!”

It's not the strangest speech Cecil has made, and yet... He's flushed, and there’s a feverish gleam in his eyes. “Cecil, are you okay?” asks Carlos.

“I’m fine,” says Cecil. “I’m better than fine! For one brief moment, I knew all, Carlos. I knew all. Of course, such transcendence is fleeting, but recall is in my grasp. Do you know how, Carlos? Do you know how?”

“You're going to go around smelling subways,” Carlos guesses.

“Yes!” Cecil practically shouts. He gently places his hands on either side of Carlos’ head and pulls it towards him until their foreheads are touching. “The subway has been closed for construction, but all I need is the one perfect mixture of compressed air, hot steel, and the faint scent of stale urine, and the mysteries of the universe will be mine once more.”

"I think your altered mental state is impairing your executive functions," says Carlos.

"Oh?" says Cecil. He sounds politely interested, but is stroking the lapel of Carlos' lab coat with a somewhat worrying fascination.

"Cecil,“ says Carlos.

"Yes, Carlos?"

"You sound really high,” says Carlos. “I think you’re the first person in recorded history who wants to smell a subway station.”

“You raise a valid point,” says Cecil. He kisses Carlos once, lightly. Then he kisses him again, with more intent. Carlos kisses him back and wow, Cecil’s hands are creeping places they don’t normally go in their respective workplaces, and then Cecil says, “It can wait until after our date. It is a date, right? I don’t want to presume. Any time with you is precious to me, Carlos.”

“I can confirm it is a date,” says Carlos. Their faces are barely an inch apart. Cecil is nuzzling Carlos’ nose with his own, which Carlos should probably think is hilarious but mainly finds horrifyingly adorable. “If you take your hands out of my pants we can go get dinner.”
“Dinner sounds amazing,” says Cecil, then, “Oh! I’m sorry, Carlos.”

Carlos’ ass is un-groped. “Your nose is amazing, too,” says Cecil, very sincerely. “I should write it a sonnet. After dinner. My innards ache with the cavernous emptiness that haunts the deep places of the earth, doomed to sunless exile since the days when life took its first faltering steps from the primordial seas.”

"Have you been reading up on evolutionary theory?" asks Carlos, impressed.

"No, but I ate an entire box of popsicles when I got back from the subway and that was the punchline to one of the jokes written on the sticks," says Cecil, and now he hauls Carlos into a hug and buries his face in his hair.

"Uh, Cecil?"

"Sooooo hungry," mutters Cecil, but otherwise does not move.

"Cecil...

"I don't even like poisonberry popsicles." He sighs. "Carlos?"

"Yes?"

"I think that maybe we should get takeout instead."

“That's probably a good idea,” says Carlos.

"Can we stop by the subway station?"

"Maybe later," says Carlos.

~*~*~*~

For once, Carlos’ return to consciousness is peaceful. Relaxing. His head is pillowed on something warm and nice-smelling, there’s no sound but the steady thump of a heartbeat, and someone is gently stroking his hair.

Carlos runs all that through his head again and bolts upright.

“Carlos!” says Cecil. “I didn’t wake you, did I?”

“No, it’s fine,” says Carlos automatically. “I, uh—”

He’s on Cecil’s couch, partially sprawled on top of Cecil. The room is clear, and early morning sun spills through the windows.

“…Did I fall asleep on you?” he asks. The previous night is coming back to him: listening to Cecil talk in the car, listening to Cecil talk during dinner, listening to Cecil talk as they answered the End-of-Date report together, listening to Cecil talk as Carlos sat down and almost immediately passed out…

Cecil sighs and slumps deeper into the couch. “I don’t blame you,” he says. “I spent our date babbling for six straight hours. Six! On a date! That was a personal record I never wanted to break. Cosmic illumination is all well and good, but there’s a time and a place. Oh, Cecil, you’ve done it again—”
“I like hearing you talk,” says Carlos, because it’s true: the thought of lying with his head on Cecil’s chest and listen to the rumble of his voice all day sounds wonderful, and that’s only partially because he could use some more sleep. “I had a nice time. And I’m not going to blame you for anything when I spent our date drooling on your shirt.”

“Oh, I didn’t mind,” says Cecil. “It’s just – it was supposed to be a special evening. I had it all planned out.” He sighs again. “It was going to be perfect.”

“Well, no battle plan survives contact with the enemy,” says Carlos without thinking, and crap, you’re probably not supposed to compare your relationship to a clash of hostile forces.

But Cecil brightens and says, “Strategy is a system of expedients. How do you like your eggs?”

Carlos watches him bustle around the kitchen, pulling out ingredients, and it makes something inside of him relax even though it's pretty clear Cecil approaches cooking with much more enthusiasm than actual skill.

Carlos manages to last twenty seconds watching Cecil chop vegetables for their omelettes. "Can I help?" he asks, as Cecil dices a tomato very slowly, his tongue sticking out in concentration. "I know you have to get to work."

"If you don't mind—" begins Cecil, but Carlos has already taken the knife away and made quick work of the tomato. And half an onion. And a bell pepper and a clove of garlic and one of the jalapeños sitting by the cutting board which may or may not have been intended for the omelette but is definitely going in it now.

"Oh, my," says Cecil faintly. Carlos grins and gives the knife a little twirl before setting it back down.

"My family owns a restaurant," he says. "I sort of grew up in the kitchen." He also started learning the basics of knife-fighting when he was nine, but that's a conversation for another day.

"You can cook, too?" says Cecil.

Carlos shrugs. "I'm not the best in our family, but I'm pretty good," he says. "It's basically applied chemistry."

Cecil sighs longingly. "That's so brave of you," he says.

"I know you can bake, Cecil," Carlos points out. "You made me a pie."

"Oh, that?" says Cecil. "Once you've subdued the cornmeal it's barely any trouble at all."

Cecil's omelettes are runny in the middle and burned on the bottom, but Carlos doesn't really mind. Cecil is uncharacteristically quiet as Carlos picks out the last of the peppers. When he lays down his fork, Cecil says, "So..." but then pauses.

"Yes?" says Carlos.

"Well, yesterday was our one-month anniversary, and even though I can't in good conscience count last night as a date—"

"That was my fault, too," interjects Carlos.

"I, uh. Well, I got you something," says Cecil, and now he's vibrating with what looks like a mixture
of nervousness and glee.

"You did?"

"Here," says Cecil, handing him a gift bag.

It's much heavier than it looks and Carlos almost drops it. Carefully setting it on the table, he reaches in and pulls out—

—A bronze-covered brick.

"I didn't know if you remembered, but—"

"It's from our first date," says Carlos happily. Carlos had spent the entire time either panicking that he was doing something wrong or panicking that he wasn't going to be able to fend off the shadow beings; he would be the first to admit that it was a disaster no one would ever want to commemorate. But not only had Cecil spent a whole show rhapsodizing about it afterwards, he also must have thought things were going well enough at the time that he'd kept the complimentary brick from Gino's.

"I hope you like it," says Cecil. He's beaming at Carlos when he looks up, and Carlos' pulse thunders in his ears like his heart is laying down suppressive fire.

"I do like it," says Carlos. "I like it a lot. Thank you, Cecil." He carefully places the brick on the table. "Hold on," he says, as Cecil begins reaching for his dishes. "I have something for you, too."

"You do?" says Cecil. He sounds surprised, and a brief pang of uneasiness shoots through Carlos as he gets up to find his lab coat, because he's not so terrible a boyfriend that Cecil would think he'd forget, right? Sure, they've had a few problems going on actual dates, between Cecil's schedule and Carlos' tendency to get called away to international debriefings and/or supernatural warfare and/or leads on the time vortices that mean nothing and go nowhere at inconvenient moments, but Carlos has tried to make it up to Cecil by spending time together in other ways. As a Warden, he's developed a firm list of priorities when it comes to his duties versus his people, and Cecil is right up there next to his immediate family and closest friends, just under saving the world.

Carlos rummages through the pockets of his lab coat and thinks that, maybe if he told Cecil that's how important he was...

...Cecil would probably want to know exactly what Carlos was doing that was so integral to the future of humankind, and Carlos would either have to lie to his face or tell him the truth.

The thought of the latter makes him take a moment to hide his face in his lab coat and run through his breathing exercises. Because even though he knows – he knows – Cecil would never stop – never stop caring for him, Cecil might think it's dangerous enough, or seditious enough, that they shouldn't risk it.

At the same time, Carlos doesn't want to lie about anything else. Cecil deserves better than that.

Things are good now. Things are great now. They can just... go on as they started, and Carlos will figure out how to break the actual facts of the situation to Cecil gently, at the right moment, so when Cecil makes his decision he understands both sides of the matter unclouded by fear and misinformation, or at least equally clouded by fear and misinformation.

Carlos finally locates the small, slightly battered box and brings it back to the table, ignoring the tiny voice whispering that all closed systems decay towards entropy.
"Here," he says, handing the box to Cecil.

Cecil carefully opens it and pulls out a wristwatch. It's a nice one, with no pesky batteries or electronics or anything else that will malfunction in the presence of magic; just beautifully-crafted gears (Carlos checked) and simple human ingenuity.

"Oh, Carlos, it's beautiful!" says Cecil. He turns it over and reads the engraving. "To CGP, from CMOR. Cecil Gershwin Palmer – that's me! – and—"

"Carlos Ramirez," says Carlos. It's more of his true name than he's told anyone in Night Vale. It's probably more than is wise, both in terms of potentially granting them magical control over his very being and of giving them something to look up and fail to associate with any scientific institution whatsoever, but... it's Cecil.

Cecil blinks. "You have a last name?"

Carlos suppresses a grin, because that's not fair. "Yes, I have a last name," he says.

Cecil flushes and says, "Oh, obviously. I just assumed you didn't use it for professional reasons. Like Selina. Or Charlemagne."

"I've always pictured myself as more of a Cher," says Carlos, and Cecil smiles at him.

"Carlos Ramirez," he repeats. Repeats exactly, and Carlos shivers at the echoes in his soul, and barely resists the urge to tell Cecil the whole thing just so he can hear his true name pronounced with that voice, consequences and embarrassing middle names be damned.

"This is wonderful, Mr. Ramirez," says Cecil, and now there's just the normal heady overtone of wonder and fondness and mostly unresolved sexual tension.

"I'm glad you like it, Mr. Palmer," says Carlos. "I set it off Coordinated Universal Time, and it's purely analog, so nothing can interfere with it."

Cecil fastens the watch on his wrist and says, "Oh, look, it's 10:37!"

They both look to the clock on the kitchen wall, which reads 7:25.

"The one true timepiece in all of Night Vale," says Carlos, with a sigh.

"They say the clock tower keeps impeccable time," says Cecil. "But this is much more convenient, since it's fully visible and will stay on my wrist."

Carlos wants to tell him that now Cecil will always know what the human measure of time is, regardless of the vast indifference of the universe or whatever Night Vale has done to it; that no matter where in the world Carlos goes, Cecil will always be able to tell what time it is there, too. But then Cecil says, "Thank you, Carlos," in a soft voice and looks at him, and the words stick in Carlos' throat, because it turns out that's not what Carlos wants to tell him at all.

Carlos wants to tell him "I love you," and he has no idea how to make sure he's not lying about that, too.

Chapter End Notes
Cecil's ~cosmic illumination~ borrowed from Anaïs Nin, William Blake, and Guy de Maupassant, via the 'Inspiration' quote page on Goodreads. A+ research right here, folks.

Happy Thanksgiving to those who celebrate it! Happy random week in November to everyone else! May we all be thankful for what we have, and mindful of what we and others do not.

Also, I hope your groveling pleases the BROWN STONE SPIRE, or, well...
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The vengeance squad is almost past Carlos’ hiding place when his phone rings. It’s on silent, but somehow the vibrations manage to amplify themselves on every possible material in his pocket and it’s almost louder than his actual ringtone.

Carlos swears and throws up his shield. The vengeance squad opens fire.

He’s only able to escape when their machine gun finally succumbs to the Ramirez charm and jams. He wraps himself in a veil and retreats to Cactus Judy’s – it’s a risk, but it’s close and he doesn’t have the strength to hold off another attack. Hopefully they won’t think to look for him there; it’s not like Cactus Jane encourages visitors when she’s not performing—

There’s a man in a tan jacket standing in front of her cactus. He’s holding a briefcase and doesn’t seem bothered by the flies swarming the almost-vacant lot. There’s something familiar about him, though Carlos can’t quite place his features.

“—wish you’d come back,” he’s saying. “We could use your help.”

“O, call back yesterday, bid time return!” says Cactus June scornfully. She’s standing at the edge of her platform; her fists are clenched at her sides. Champ is crying somewhere out of sight.

“Think of the kind of example you’re setting as a mother,” says the man in the tan jacket mildly.

“Villain, I have done thy mother,” she says. “Avaunt and quit my sight!”

The man in the tan jacket sighs. He tips his hat to Cactus Jean. Then he nods to Carlos. Carlos nods back and tightens his grip on his staff, because anyone who can see him while he’s veiled and wearing his cloak is worthy of some caution. But the man in the tan jacket strolls past him and disappears without further incident.

Cactus Jewel scowls after him. “These tedious old fools!”

“Is everything all right?” asks Carlos.

She sighs. “The strong necessity of time commands our services awhile.”

“There’s not something else wrong with it, is there?” says Carlos, alarmed, all thought of the man in the tan jacket fleeing from his mind.

“I doubt it is no other but the main,” she says, waving her hand dismissively.

“If you’re sure,” says Carlos. His phone starts vibrating again. “Wait – what time is it? Uh, on the clock—”

“I think it lacks of twelve,” she says.

“Crap,” he says. He has three missed calls from Cecil. “Do you mind?”

“A lover’s ear will hear the lowest sound,” says Cactus Jill indulgently.
“Carlos!” says Cecil, when he answers the phone. “Sorry about all the calls. I was running late, and now I’m not, but… you’re not here… We are still on for lunch, right?”

“Yes!” says Carlos. “We are definitely still on for lunch. I just have to finish some science first and I’ll be right there.”

“Oh! Okay,” says Cecil. “That’s all right, I guess… I’ll see you soon?”

“You will,” says Carlos. “Goodbye, Cecil.”

“Love you!” says Cecil, and hangs up.

Carlos stares at his phone until it lets out a pathetic beep and starts to smoke a little, and he’s being ridiculous, because Cecil says he loves him all the time. On public radio. It doesn’t mean anything – well, no, it does mean something, Carlos would never deny that – but now they’re actually dating and what if it doesn’t mean the same thing anymore? What does it mean now?

“Here if thou stay, thou canst not see thy love,” says Cactus Jolene, and Carlos can’t help it – he twitches. She frowns and says, “That’s an ill phrase.”

“It’s – it’s fine,” says Carlos. “Everything is fine. I just… have to go.”

Cecil, thank God, is acting completely normal when Carlos meets him at the deli, which at least makes one of them.

"That looks like a nasty windburn," he observes, after greeting Carlos with a very enthusiastic kiss.

"What?" says Carlos, before remembering that he had in fact taken 700 disintegrated rounds of a FN Minimi to the face. "Oh. That."

"What's it like, not having a sense of pain?" asks Cecil. "I've always wondered."

"Me, too," says Carlos.

Cecil's eyes widen. "You mean you can feel it?" he asks. His hand comes up to cup Carlos' cheek, but hovers millimeters away. "Do you want to go to the drugstore, or a walk-in howling audience at City Hall, or—"

"I'm fine," says Carlos. "A scientist is always fine." Cecil still looks concerned. Concerned that Carlos might be in a truly minor amount of pain. And Carlos wants to make Cecil feel better, in gratitude for slavishly devoting such empathy towards him, and for... so many things, but now the only thing he can think to say would – would just confuse the issue and confusing Cecil is the last thing he wants to do.

"Um," he says, then manages, "So what are you getting to eat?" He takes Cecil's hand and gives it a squeeze, which seems to convey the gist of his message, since Cecil's concern fades into a smile and he starts explaining his complicated feelings about mayonnaise.

They keep holding hands as they wait in line, and by the time they've ordered Carlos has calmed down, because this he can do. He's got eating lunch with his boyfriend locked down, and in the future he can just avoid thinking about feelings while coming off an adrenaline rush. Everything is fine. There are no surprises here.

He's picking out sodas from the freezer case when Shakeena Flynn walks in.
They haven't spoken since that day at the bowling alley, though she did send him a note when one of the local mediums went missing (they were stuck down a well, though no one was quite sure where the well came from or, after they were rescued, where it went) and Carlos gave her a copy of his survey of the library after the Summer Reading incident as a professional courtesy.

Flynn doesn't see him at first, which is for the best. Almost getting murdered by tiny invaders from an underground city was pathetic enough that watching him agonize between Cel-Ray and about fifteen brands of off-shelf Dr. Pepper would probably put the nail in the coffin of whatever dignity Carlos has left. Instead, she heads right for Cecil, who's waiting for his and Carlos' sandwiches. The two greet each other with a bizarre ritual handshake before hugging.

"So how are things with you and that—" Flynn pauses almost imperceptibly. "Scientist? Carlos?"

"Mr. Ramirez and I are on a last-name basis," says Cecil smugly.

Flynn frowns a little. "You're moving pretty fast," she says, and Carlos feels a small pang of irritation, because while he knows he's charging into this mostly blindfolded, she doesn't have to assume.

"We just had our one-month anniversary," says Cecil. "And Carlos is an absolute gentleman. Here, let me introduce you. Carlos!"

Flynn looks taken aback when Carlos appears at her shoulder, though that might be directed towards the Cel-Ray.

"Yes, Cecil?" asks Carlos.

"Carlos, this is my friend Shakeena Flynn, age—"

Flynn punches him lightly in the arm.

"—Uh, 29," says Cecil. "She and I were on the bowling team together. Shakeena, this is Carlos, my scientist boyfriend!"

"Pleased to meet you," says Carlos, sticking his hand out. Flynn takes it after a moment's hesitation and lets go as soon as possible, surreptitiously shaking her fingers afterward.

"Ohh, our order's up," says Cecil, and darts forward to pay, leaving Carlos and Flynn in a slightly awkward stand-off.

"So," she says, "What do the Wardens want with Cecil?"

"The Wardens don't want anything with Cecil," says Carlos.

She looks at him with some skepticism. "So your interest in him is—"

"Purely romantic," says Carlos firmly.

"Does he know about...?" she asks. She gestures vaguely to her head. For a second Carlos thinks she's referring to his hair (which, yes, obviously Cecil knows he has hair; Cecil is quite fond of his hair) but then he realizes she means his hood.

"No," he says, and he discovers that he honestly does want her opinion on the matter – Flynn's a practitioner and has known Cecil for years. She's probably going to call Carlos a tight-lipped Council bastard and scowl at him for keeping secrets for no reason and—
"Good," says Flynn. "Maybe that way he can stay out of trouble." She studies him for a moment, then says, "We've been through some hard times together in the past year."

"You could say that," says Carlos.

"So I'm going to give you a friendly warning," says Flynn. "I don't care if you're White Council. If you hurt him..." and really, it's pretty impressive how much quiet menace she can pack into an ellipsis.

Cecil returns with the sandwiches and says, "Sorry to run, Shakeena, but my lunch break is over in half an hour. Are you ready, Carlos?"

"Absolutely," says Carlos. Cecil and Flynn exchange air kisses, but as he and Carlos are leaving the store, she points to her eyes, then at Carlos, and mouths *I'll be watching you.*

Carlos can feel her accusing stare follow them all the way to the station.

"You're pretty quiet," says Cecil as they're sitting in the break room.

"Sorry," says Carlos. He tears his eyes away from Cecil's watch. "I was just thinking about science."

"Oh, of course," says Cecil, but there's a smidgen, a hint of anxiety – no, concern – no, uncertainty – no, not any of those, but something still foreign and unwelcome in his voice that makes Carlos’ stomach twist. It's like the end of their first date, when Carlos realized he would say or do almost anything to make that go away, and screwed up his courage to kiss Cecil good night. But now...

"Cecil, I think – I—"

"Yes, Carlos?"

*I think I have no idea what I'm doing,* he thinks, loudly, trying to drown out the other words clamoring for attention even though it's *not their time yet, dammit,* he has to be sure.

"I think it's great you have such good friends," he says.

There's a tiny frown line between Cecil's eyebrows, an inch a below his ajna chakra, but it slowly smoothes away as he starts explaining how he and Shakeena first met, back when she preferred to be called Leverne and he was the newest intern who hadn't yet learned the importance of ritual purification. It's gone completely by the time he moves on to the glory days of the Fightin' Ophies. His gestures are grand, his voice strident, and Carlos takes it all in like a plant absorbing sunlight. The moment passes, and they're fine. Everything is fine.

Carlos tries to ignore the reliable *tick-tick-ticking* of the second hand on Cecil’s watch and how much it sounds like a countdown.

\~*~*\~*~

Carlos hates vampires.

The Red Court was bad enough, but at least they had the courtesy to be obviously evil and then spontaneously combust *en masse.*

Outside of Chicago, Carlos hasn’t even *seen* a member of the White Court, but that hasn’t stopped them from sticking their pale, lovely fingers everywhere. He has a feeling it’s going to take a lot more than a covert war with the Fomor to halt the little games permeating every level of California’s
tech and entertainment industries. Now that he knows what he’s looking for, Carlos can see their influence all over the place – their circumstantial influence that never technically falls under his jurisdiction.

Nevertheless, Carlos has noticed a distinct uptick in their interest in him, personally, since Chicago. He can tell because there’s absolutely no way to trace any of those coincidental encounters (as opposed to purposeful encounters prompted by Carlos existing in the wrong place while being the wrong color) with the police, immigration services, and in one particularly memorable incident Homeland Security back to them.

He has the morbid suspicion it may be a form of flirting.

Not even the fun kind of flirting, but the kind of flirting that ends with someone sneaking a body out of a hotel room, and the body is him.

Carlos gets by with a charming, helpful smile and by always carrying at least two forms of identification, copies of his car and gun registration, and a variety of magical weaponry not identifiable as such to the fine members of whichever law enforcement agency that has decided to detain him. He makes it look easy, but being precociously competent and devastatingly handsome and – okay, fine – enticingly virginal does have its drawbacks.

He’s uncomfortably aware that he now has a simple solution to that last problem. He’s pretty sure that if he said, “Cecil, I need you to deflower me immediately so I am no longer the manly, virile equivalent of shark chum to vampire sex fiends,” Cecil would not even blink. Cecil probably has a copy of the required paperwork already, just in case.

But, right now, that solution feels somehow… cheap. They haven’t even made it to their official third date yet.

Tonight is, in fact, the third time since their anniversary they haven’t made it to their official third date. One of those is Carlos’ fault, and one of those is Cecil’s, and this last one is almost certainly the White Court’s (since Carlos is not in the habit of missing dates because he enjoys getting kidnapped in Palo Alto by purposefully amateur masked gunmen in an unmarked white van, escaping, and subsequently leaving his attackers bound and gagged in front of the nearest precinct) but is officially going on the record as Carlos’ fault since Cecil thinks he got waylaid at the monitoring station.

Carlos drops his bag on the couch and heads into his kitchenette. There’s not much to eat; he was supposed to go grocery shopping today. Before dinner with Cecil. He pulls a casserole out of the fridge and slams the door with perhaps more force than necessary.

He’s only halfway through a bowl of Strange But True Casserole when his kitchen phone rings. "Mmflo?" he says, mouth still full.

"...Carlos?"

He swallows. "Cecil! Look, I’m so sorry about today—"

"I haven't heard from you in hours," says Cecil. "Didn't you get my message?"

"My phone must have died," says Carlos.

Cecil sighs, a noise halfway between relief and irritation. Objectively speaking his concern is not actually unreasonable, since the last time Carlos texted him he was still handcuffed in the back of a random van, but as far as Cecil knows he was only held up in the normal sense by malfunctioning
equipment.

And, okay, maybe he shouldn't have implied that there was a radiation leak, but he didn't think Cecil would worry that much. It's Night Vale. They eat radiation for breakfast. Sometimes literally, depending on what flavor of Flaky-Os you like.

"I'll make sure it's charged next time," says Carlos.

"Next time?" says Cecil, sounding very unimpressed.

"I didn't want to cancel, Cecil," says Carlos. He shovels another bite of ground turkey, marinara, and mushroom soup in his mouth. Are those poblanos instead of bell peppers? Interesting choice. "I told you, I got tied up. That happens with science sometimes."

"I just really feel like – are you eating?"


"You're eating a casserole from Frances Donaldson?" says Cecil.

"It's good!" says Carlos, around another mouthful.

"Evidently," says Cecil.

Carlos gulps down the rest. "Sorry," he says. "I missed lunch and I just got back. What did you end up doing for dinner?"

"I had to eat by myself at Jerry's Tacos," says Cecil.

"I'm sorry," says Carlos, wincing.

"They're not that bad, Carlos!" says Cecil in exasperation, and Carlos was apologizing for the "by myself" part, but if he's going to bring it up—

"Their enchiladas crunch," says Carlos.

"So?" says Cecil defensively. "They can crunch if they want to."

There's a short, uncomfortable silence.

"I really am sorry I missed our date," says Carlos. "I'll make it up to you."

"Well... I suppose if we – Carlos, could you not?"

"Showwy," says Carlos, swallowing.

Cecil sighs. "I'll call you tomorrow, okay? We'll... figure something out."

"Right," says Carlos. "I – good night, Cecil."

"Good night," he replies.

Carlos hangs up the phone and frowns at it through two more bowls. ~*~*~*~
Carlos hates vampires. Currently, he also hates cell phones, semi-long distance relationships, and houses that don't exist but stubbornly insist on disgorging incorporeal former Night Vale Community Radio Station Interns anyway.

He's using the second to report the fourth to Cecil, but given recent tensions in the third thanks to the first, they have instead been side-tracked into their inaugural fight as a couple.

It's allegedly about Carlos’ intolerable chewing volume and Cecil’s abominable taste in “Mexican” “food”, which wouldn't be too bad, except Carlos thinks that's not what they're fighting about at all. It's like there's another argument going on in the spaces between their words, and that one's about Cecil feeling like Carlos ditches him for science because he cares more about it than him and about Carlos feeling like Cecil could try a little harder to appreciate the demands of his job and, okay, he hasn't seen Cecil in four days and maybe he's feeling kind of guilty, too.

But it’s his job. It’s important. He fends off the forces of darkness and tries to keep order in a chaotic universe. He’s been doing it since before he was legally able to drink, and if all goes well, he’ll be doing it long after all humans and almost everyone else currently in Night Vale are dead. Including Cecil.

The thought doesn't make him feel better, unless 'unbearably sad' is somehow better than 'frustrated and touchy'. All it does is remind him of how much he does not want to lose Cecil any sooner than he has to.

So far, he really sucks at it.

The phone lets out an electronic wail as Cecil says, “I don’t suppose you can come by the station this afternoon,” because as terribly as wizards and technology get along in the first place, things are a thousand times worse when strong emotions are involved. Carlos is trying not to have them. It's not working.

He winces. “No, we’re supposed to be in Desert Creek until after sunset, and I have to leave for a, um, another shift at the monitoring station after that.”

The scientists can usually be trusted to take care of themselves now; Carlos would gladly ditch them in almost any other part of town. But in the Desert Creek housing development there's a house that doesn't exist. It seems like it exists, like it's just right there when you look at it, and it's between two other identical houses, so it would make more sense for it to be there than not... but it does not exist. Whenever he risks a brief glimpse of the house with his Sight it shimmers with a deeply unsettling energy, and so far they've been attacked by horned toads, clouds of sentient gas, a helicopter painted with swooping birds of prey, and a giant worm disguised as an ice cream truck while they were trying to study it.

Plus, you know, there's the whole part where Intern Dana, or her double, or her psychic imprint, or the psychic imprint of her double, or none of the above, emerged from the house and ran right through them.

“Couldn't you just ring the doorbell and call it a day?” asks Cecil. “You’ll even make some money.”

“I’m not ringing the doorbell for five dollars,” says Carlos. His connection briefly dissolves as a chagrin-fuelled crackle swells into indignant bursts of static. “I have standards. Scientific integrity. A healthy estimate of my own value to the scientific community.” A stubborn if possibly petty urge to dissuade Julie and Andre from poking around, because there’s something that seriously weirds him out about this place starting with how he sort of wants to ring the doorbell, and also, five bucks, really?
“Five dollars is a taco lunch at Jerry’s Tacos,” says Cecil.

“I wouldn’t eat at Jerry’s Tacos even if you paid me an additional five dollars,” says Carlos.

Carlos can practically hear Cecil's eye-roll over the phone. “Whatever, rich guy.”

“It’s not – ugh,” says Carlos. “What about Friday?”

“I can’t do Friday,” says Cecil. “That’s when I rescheduled my interview. You know, the one I moved from last night, so we could—”

“I said I was sorry!” says Carlos. His phone sparks alarmingly, and he has to hold it away from his head and count to ten before he can hear Cecil again. The little screen on the front has gone black.

“—sorry to science, huh?” says Cecil. “Look, we can discuss it whenever you're finally done with... whatever you're doing. Is there anything else to report about the person who came out of the house who may or may not be Dana, or her double?”

"She had a phone. I think she was talking to you," says Carlos. His irritation slides away; he checks again, but there's still no sign of anyone or anything remotely Dana-like. "She sounded panicked – no, concerned."

"Wait. Who was she talking to?"

"You," says Carlos. “It sounded like the person she was talking to was you, Cecil.”

There's a long silence.

"Cecil?" says Carlos, afraid that he's shorted out the phone again, and of many other things as well.

"There aren't any messages on my phone," says Cecil, in a quiet voice. "I just checked."

"Cecil," says Carlos again, because he doesn't know what else to say.

"I need to get back to the show," says Cecil. "I'll talk to you later."

"Right," says Carlos.

He doesn't say anything else. A moment later, Cecil hangs up.

Carlos throws the phone out of his circle and flops back onto the dirt. The sky above looks faded by the harsh sun, almost brittle. Like a quick burst of energy could shatter it into pieces and reveal more desert on the far side. He rubs a hand over his face and squeezes his eyes shut, just for a moment.

Then he sits up and brushes himself off. He re-seals the circle and briefly scans the area with his Sight – more a squint than anything. Still no sign of danger. Or Dana. The scientists are clustered around a heap of equipment that's either a highly sophisticated and revolutionary method of measuring things previously unmeasurable or a pile of scraps or, if Julie made it herself, both.

"Wei, did you finish building that pneumameter?" she shouts.

"Yes," says Wei, climbing out of the back of the Sciencemobile. "It just needs to be calibrated."

"I was helping him assemble it back at the labs," says Kate. "Can I assist?"

"You might as well try," says Julie. Kate does a fist-pump. "I need to see if I can train newbies on it
anyway. All right, everyone, five minutes. Gary, smoke if you got ’em.”


"Don't go out of sight!" Carlos shouts after him.

Kate carefully skirts his circle and starts unloading things from the Sciencemobile. He watches her for a little, does another scan of the area, and then realizes that Andre has picked up his phone and is frowning gently at him.

"What?" he snaps.

Andre raises an eyebrow.

"Sorry," mutters Carlos.

As if summoned by the mere hint of trouble, Julie appears by Andre's side. She plucks Carlos' phone from his hands and brushes it off. Then she pries the back off, starts poking it with some kind of long, thin needle, and says, "Spill."

"What?"

"You've got Byronic hero face," she says. "I've already dealt with enough mopey wizard for a lifetime, so tell us what's bothering you so we can determine how you deal with it or how long to avoid you."

"You've helped us immeasurably, Carlos," says Andre. "We're good at crowdsourcing solutions."

Carlos stares at him blankly.

"Brainstorming in a group," Andre translates. "We have seven and a half degrees between the five of us. I'm sure we can figure out something."

"Right," says Carlos. "Well..."

Julie looks at her watch. "You have four minutes," she says, and Carlos is halfway through his rant about vampires before he figures out that was an obvious goad. But it feels nice to get it off his chest, even though his chest also tightens with anxiety as he remembers everything that's gone wrong so far. His thorax is feeling very ambivalent.

He can almost hear Cecil’s sarcastic “Whatever, rich guy,” grating against his nerves. Then he realizes he is hearing it, repeated over the speakers of his own phone.

Andre whistles. Julie says, with her normal tact and sensitivity, “You done fucked up, son.”

“Argh,” says Carlos. “I know. I just – I don’t know how to fix it.”

Julie checks her watch again. "Okay. Andre, analysis."

"Carlos, you can't give up hope yet," says Andre. "He might be annoyed, but he obviously thinks the world of you. I suspect he became even more upset because you gave him the bad news about Dana on top of everything else. But my wife also left me because I spent too much time at work, so... you should probably take care of that."

"How?" says Carlos.
"I never did figure that out," says Andre sadly.

Carlos turns to Julie.

"Don't look at me," she says. "All I've got is make sure he looks both ways before crossing the street."

"What?"

"My partner and I got along great," she says. "We called each other on late nights and went to the labs together on the weekends. But then he got hit by a bus, so..."

Carlos slumps back to the ground. "I'm sorry," he mutters.

"Yeah, it sucked," says Julie. She starts reassembling his phone and asks, "Wei, what's your status?"

“Single and looking for a good time,” says Wei.

“With the pneumameter, you reprobate.”

"It’s still loading," he says. "We should reach optimal scattercast range in another seven minutes."

"Great," says Julie. "I'm gonna go initialize the worldline buffers. Kate, get over here, you have functional relationships."

“My relationships are functional!” says Wei. “I make sure all parties know they’re supposed to end that quickly.”

“Are you sure about that?” asks Kate. “Because the checkout clerk in Lane 13 keeps muttering about science and shortchanges me every time.”

“Sadie?” says Wei, looking suddenly guilty.

“Hmm, she does the same thing to me,” says Andre.

“One time she threw a rotten tomato at me and shouted ‘Clean-up in Aisle Three,’” says Gary, dropping his cigarette and grinding it out in the dirt.

“I always count all my change,” says Julie. “Gary, write a strongly-worded letter to the store and pick that up, litterer. Wei, apologize to the minimum-wage fugitive and go fire up the countdown sequencer. Kate, interpersonal problem set. Andre, do you want a beer? It’s gonna be a while before the data collection's done and I need a drink.”

“Yes, thank you,” says Andre, as Kate plops down in the dirt just outside the circle and asks, "So what seems to be the problem, Carlos?"

In the interest of avoiding a half-hour tangent on the sexual behaviors of the White Court, Carlos is careful to skim over their exact MO and get right to the point where they are contributing to the ruin of his relationship.

His irritation at Cecil is gone, replaced by a cold apprehension, because Carlos hates losing and he’s not just failing in general at this whole boyfriend thing, he might literally lose Cecil.

“Hmm,” says Kate. Her brow is furrowed in concentration as she doodles in the dirt, like a polyamorous Filipino geophysicist Jesus. “You know, you get to listen to Cecil every day for hours – or minutes, I’m a little unclear – but he doesn’t get to listen to you.”
Carlos opens his mouth. He closes his mouth.

He pictures not hearing from Cecil for days except for the occasional text or phone call.

“Oh,” he says.

"It’s not your fault, it just is. But it means that you're always going to have something of an advantage when it comes to indirect communication, and if someone in the relationship feels out of the loop, that kind of thing can get out of control pretty quickly, and then you might try to make up for it with elaborate sex toy parties, but no one will enjoy them for their own sake because they're supposed to shoring up your relationship so you kind of have to force yourself to have fun and they become kind of a chore and sex toy parties should never be a chore, Carlos. Never.”

Carlos decides the most productive response is to just nod his head in agreement.

“So it’s easier if whoever’s got the advantage – you, in this case – keeps that in mind and tries to even things out whenever they can – you know, lots of small things. That way you don’t tire yourself out and feel like you’re doing all the work in the relationship, but you can also hopefully avoid ending up with a drawer full of the dildos of bitterness.”

“Thank you for that colorful mental image,” says Carlos.

“The other thing is that the key to any good relationship is honest communication," says Kate. "But—"

She holds up a hand. "I know you can't tell him everything because of your job. But you can make it clear how you feel. How you honestly feel – don't worry about how things are ‘supposed’ to go. Just stick to the pace you're comfortable with, because it’s only the two of you in your relationship. Unless you add someone else, of course."

There’s a sharp whistle, which is the only warning Julie gives them before she pitches Carlos’ phone in their general direction. Kate lunges and catches it before it hits the ground.

She dusts it off and hands it to him. “Trust me, I know you can’t just give up your career for someone,” she says. “I bet you Cecil knows that, too. But you can’t let it seem like it’s more important than them, either. The trick is to make sure they never feel second-best. If you’re trying, and they're trying, you'll find some way to work it out.”

"But – what do I do?" asks Carlos.

"You could ring the doorbell!" shouts Julie.

"I'm not ringing the doorbell," Carlos shouts back.

"I think that you should go talk to Cecil," says Kate. "Who’d know better than him, right?"

"Right," says Carlos. He takes a deep breath. "Okay. I can do that."

"Great!" says Kate. "Although maybe if you tried the knocker first—"

"No," says Carlos. Feelings are hard enough without having to worry about interdimensional contamination.

~*~*~*~
The sun has set by the time the scientists leave Desert Creek. On a hunch, Carlos drives by the radio station. The lights in Cecil’s office are still on.

He makes a brief detour, then heads back to the station. The heavy bloodstone door is warm to the touch; it swings open with a ponderous grace when he channels energy into it. He goes upstairs and knocks on Cecil's office door.

"Who is it?" calls Cecil. He sounds tired.

"It's me," says Carlos. "Uh, Carlos. Your boyf—"

The door flies open. “Carlos!” says Cecil. He's holding a two-by-four with a nail in the end, but he’s smiling. “I thought you had to leave.”

“I do,” says Carlos. “But I decided to delay for a couple hours so we could search Desert Creek—”

“Oh,” says Cecil, smile dimming.

“For Dana,” Carlos finishes.

“Oh,” says Cecil again, softer.

“We couldn’t find anything,” says Carlos. “I’m sorry.”

Cecil shakes his head. “I couldn’t find anything either,” he says. “I asked the Sheriff’s Secret Police if they could triangulate her signal, but they said their equipment wouldn’t stop bleeding.”

Carlos winces.

“Well, at least she’s out there somewhere, free,” says Cecil. “It was good to hear from her. And – thank you, for letting me know.”

“De nada,” says Carlos.

The silence accelerates right into ‘awkward’, completely bypassing ‘comfortable’, and Carlos hates this, hates that he’s trying to make things better and has no idea what to say, hates that everything they’ve worked out together is slipping away even when they’re not doing anything.

“So,” he says. “Uh.” He gestures at the two-by-four and asks, “Is that for me?” and on a scale of one to why did I just say that he’s pretty sure he’s just set this week’s record.

“What? Oh!” says Cecil, and hastily shoves the two-by-four back in the umbrella stand. “No, of course not. Standard safety precaution. Speaking of which, you probably shouldn’t stand out in the hall for too long – although… I guess you have to get on the road?"


Cecil’s smile returns, briefly. He ushers Carlos inside and shuts the door. Carlos immediately feels better, although whether that’s because he has proof Cecil doesn’t want to throw him out or because he can no longer hear the uncanny wailing from station management’s office, he doesn’t know.

“I wanted to say goodbye to you first,” Carlos says in a rush. “And apologize. For being such a jerk today, and… I know I haven’t been around much lately, and – I'm sorry I missed our date.”

"Oh, Carlos," says Cecil. "I wasn't mad you missed our date – well, I wasn't very mad you missed our date – I wasn't mad just that you missed our date. I know science is important to you, but you
have to learn to put other things first sometimes. I mean, who wants to play second fiddle to an Amontillado flask?"

"Erlenmeyer flask," says Carlos.

Cecil gives him a look.

"Uh – never mind, that's not important," says Carlos. "Sorry. I meant to say that no one wants that."

Cecil sighs. "Well, it's a start."

“I want to make it up to you,” says Carlos. “I mean. If you want me – if you want me to.”

“Of course I want you to!” says Cecil, and Carlos feels the knot of tension in his chest relax. “I'll have to think about it for a little, but—” Cecil cuts off and sniffs the air. "Do you smell that?"

"You mean this?" says Carlos. He holds up a greasy paper bag.

"Is that—" Cecil says, practically snatching it from Carlos’ hands.

“A number five combo meal from Jerry’s Tacos,” says Carlos.

“You brought me food!” says Cecil happily.

“Well, let’s not exaggerate,” says Carlos before he can stop himself, but Cecil actually chuckles.

"You still owe me a date, but I suppose this will do for now," he says, and leans over and kisses Carlos like they haven't been fighting. Or like they have been fighting and Cecil forgives him. Like Carlos hasn't ruined everything and they're going to be okay. "How did you know I'd be hungry?"

“You always skip dinner when you stay late,” says Carlos, a little dazedly. His fingers have somehow ended up tangled in the fringe on Cecil's shirt, holding fast to him without conscious thought.

"See, I don't mind when you use your amazing deductive powers for good," says Cecil. He kisses Carlos again, a quick peck. "Oh, Carlos. You know me too well."

Carlos doesn’t, but he’s trying. He sits on Cecil’s desk and waits for him to finish eating, asking him about his weekend and occasionally stealing one of his chips. They’re stale and oddly flavorless, but they’re also somehow the best thing he’s tasted all day.

~*~*~*~*

Carlos is roasting green chiles and contemplating windows. In the Nevernever, some kind of crack or fault line in the realm of the spirit has opened up above the floodplain, showing a different landscape altogether. It's happened before, if on a smaller scale; Night Vale's wards warp the forces of magic around it like a lead weight on a rubber sheet. Carlos doesn't know if the distortion is another section of the Nevernever folded in on itself or the reflection of some other dimension entirely. Nothing can move in or out, but the low and menacing overgrown foothills above the alluvial plain have been obscured by the image of a solitary mountain, topped with a blinking red light.

Carlos can tell, because something similar has happened between the boundary of the Nevernever and the mortal world. If he squints he can stare through the window in Cecil’s kitchen into the Nevernever into some distant otherworld plastered against the horizon and watch the light wink scarlet fire. It's been there all afternoon. Given that it’s the feature of Cecil’s broadcast, it’s probably
safe to say that even the mortals have noticed it.

“The mud ripples under the footsteps of the approaching masked army, and this warps the reflections in interesting ways,” says Cecil over the radio.

Carlos blinks, then grabs the phone.

Intern Vithya answers with a cheerful, “Hi, Carlos!”

“What masked army?” asks Carlos.

“Oh, you know, the one only a few hours’ march from here, on the bone-covered floodplain,” says Vithya. “Are you going to study them?”

Carlos looks through the windows; now that he knows it’s there, he thinks he can see a low blur on the horizon, just underneath the mountain.

...They can totally finish dinner by the time the army gets there.

“No,” says Carlos. “Normally I would like to, but I promised to make dinner and put other things besides science first.”

“Oh!” says Vithya, and he hangs up.

The clock on the kitchen wall has stopped. He raps on it a few times until it starts again.

He does start calling some of his contacts as he finishes the salsa, because multitasking doesn’t count and sudden, massive extinction would make them both miss dinner. By the time he starts making the enchilada sauce, he’s got several answers but even more questions.

The apartment door slams open. He spins, instinctively gathering his power, but instead of fairies or Fomor or tentacled eldritch abominations bearing down on him, it’s Cecil.

“What—” he manages before Cecil launches himself into his arms and kisses him desperately.

Carlos kisses him back, and they stumble backwards until Carlos bumps into the counter next to the stove. He’s still holding the spatula in one hand. The other is clutching the back of Cecil’s shirt.

Something is making an ominous sizzling noise. It’s not him, so Carlos briefly considers letting it go. But even though Cecil is kissing him like it’s the end of the world, Carlos promised he would cook dinner, and dammit, he is going to make these enchiladas even if it is the end of the world.

“Mmph,” says Carlos, and Cecil pulls back far enough for Carlos to flail at the stove until he can turn it off, still slightly hampered by the spatula. Then Cecil pulls him into a tight hug, one hand stroking his hair.

“Umm... Hi, Cecil,” says Carlos, still slightly out of breath. “Not that I’m not happy to see you, but aren’t you supposed to be at the station?”

Cecil mutters something under his breath in a language that raises prickles on the back of Carlos’ neck, but he finally lets Carlos go.

“We're into the weather,” says Cecil. “I can’t stay long, but I had to make sure you’re all right.”

“Cecil, I know how to cook,” says Carlos, a little exasperated. "It's not that arcane an art."
“It’s not that,” he says. “It’s the blinking light up on the mountain.”

“Oh, that? That’s a… mirage,” says Carlos, which is fairly close to the truth. Atmospheric and dimensional refraction aren’t that different. “I’ve seen that one before. When you get the… clouds… a certain way, and the temperature is… where it’s at, you can sometimes get this… blinking-light-mountain-floodplain-masked-army mirage.”

They both look out the window.

“It’s been here since lunchtime,” says Cecil.

“Wow, this is a pretty strong one,” says Carlos weakly. “It should disappear in an hour or two.”

“So the invading masked army isn’t real?” asks Cecil.

“Well…” says Carlos, then staggers into the counter again as Cecil flings his arms around him like a frightened octopus.

“I mean, there are some tests I could run, if you want me to check,” says Carlos, slightly muffled, into Cecil’s shoulder. “But I was going to do those later. Or not at all. Because of my dinner plans that I’m definitely not going to miss.”

“I think you’ve had enough encounters with invading armies, mister,” says Cecil.

Oh.

“You were worried about me?” asks Carlos.

“Of course I was worried about you!” says Cecil. “This kitchen is not rated for combat!”

“I could wear Kevlar,” says Carlos.

Cecil’s grip loosens until it is merely crushing. “You have Kevlar?”

“A scientist should be prepared for anything,” says Carlos.

“Oh,” says Cecil. He steps back and looks down at his feet. “I guess it would be selfish of me to keep you from conducting tests that might save our fair city from invasion.”

“I could wear Kevlar to that, too,” says Carlos. “And put the oven on a timer.”

“I suppose,” says Cecil reluctantly.

They stand there for a few more seconds. The weather plays faintly in the background.

“I should go,” says Cecil.

“We’re still on for tonight?” asks Carlos.

“Of course. Be careful,” says Cecil. He kisses him on the cheek and leaves, head bowed.

Carlos swears at the kitchen, covers up all the ingredients, and grabs his gear.

~*~*~*~

Carlos wears the Kevlar (custom-made and backed with chain mail, because he’s learned the hard way that it’s great at stopping bullets and terrible at stopping blades). He also wears his grey cloak,
his sword, his gun, and an assortment of grenades. In deference to the fact that he would like this to
be a peaceful meeting, he has tied his lab coat to his staff to make a white flag.

He drives to the edge of town and beyond – towards the shimmer of touching worlds, right on the
boundaries of the wards. The confluences nesting within one another are hell on perspective, with
mountain and floodplain and approaching army tiny in the distance while nearly on top of them.
Carlos leaves his car on the side of the road. When he reaches the window, he gathers his will and
says “Pas jol!” jabbing the be-coated staff forward.

The air ripples and parts – a little more easily than usual, thanks to the window effect, but not by
much. A humid breeze touches his face, leaving a faint spray of ectoplasm. He grimaces.

There’s a flash of movement and the gate floods with a dull maroon light. Before he can shut it,
Pamela Winchell shimmies through, carrying a glowing bloodstone.

"As you were," she says, and marches back towards town, weaving slightly.

"You are not authorized to be there!" he shouts after her. "We have a gentlemen's agree—"

"Pedicabo ego te et irrumabo," she says airily.

"What—" he sputters. "That is sexual harassment!"

"Poesis est, conluvio Concilii," she says.

"Hic indignus potestatis maioris est!"

She spins around and stares in his general direction for a solid minute. Then she crosses her eyes,
swings her arms in circles, and concludes her routine with rapidly fluttering jazz hands.

"Ille indignus potestatis maioris est," she says, and disappears in a puff of green smoke.

"Iactatrix," he mutters. He turns sideways and edges through the gate.

Depth perception reluctantly reasserts itself on the other side: bone and mud and dark liquid now
stretch back to the horizon, except where they're cut through by the image of the mountain and the
blinking light thereupon. He finds the highest ground he can and plants his makeshift flag in the mud.
It leaves him exposed, visible for leagues around, but just because he can no longer see the source of
the river doesn’t mean it won’t send a flash flood down to surprise him, and just because he can't see
the masked army’s advance scouts doesn't mean he wants to surprise them. Springing parleys on
unsuspecting combatants is not the path to success.

Through the window to… somewhere, the blinking light up on the mountain continues to blink. Like
an aircraft warning light in an area where no aircraft will ever go. Or...

Carlos squints at the mountain and is gratified when he catches the faintest hints of red reflecting off
its crags slightly before and after the blink. Not a warning light, then – more like the sweep of a
lighthouse lamp.

He looks behind him. The window to Night Vale shimmers, like – okay, like a mirage. For a second,
the town disappears completely and all he can see is the vast, empty desert. But there’s something off
about it – like the sand’s the wrong color, the rocks the wrong shape, like it's just the... wrong desert
—

He feels a prickle on the back of his neck. He's being watched.
Three figures are approaching, hugely mismatched. The first wears a robe and a mask and looms menacingly over the second figure, who like Carlos sports body armor and a sword.

The third is a Bichon Frisé the size of Julie’s Prius, though thankfully not the same color.

Carlos resists sighing with relief. This could still be a trap. But the dog is adorable, the giant robed figure looks like they're marching more towards a funeral than a fight, and the second person looks human – and very familiar. He's not quite close enough for Carlos to get a good look at the saber hanging from his hip, but it doesn't matter: even from here, Carlos can feel it humming with power. No, not power – or at least, not any earthly power.

He relaxes his guard just a little. "Богатырь Саня," he says politely, because Carlos is more than enough of a Catholic that the guilt of being rude to a Knight of the Church would be way too much to handle. Besides, they’ve fought together before, and Sanya’s a good guy.

“Warden,” says Sanya. He peers at Carlos’ face beneath his hood, then brightens. “Karyusha! My small friend!”

“There are literally thousands of ways to describe me that are not that,” says Carlos, but he stretches out his arm. Sanya clasps it manfully and Carlos braces himself for the inevitable shoulder thump so he doesn’t fall over. “It’s good to see you, Sanya. It’s been a while.”

“Almost two years since Chicago,” says Sanya. “I fought alongside your captain last year and she said you were out of the field. You are back now, yes?”

“For sure,” says Carlos. He nods to Esperacchius. “And you’re still on the side of the angels, I see.”

“I am on the side of right,” says Sanya placidly. “Whoever I stand with may call themselves whatever they wish.”

"Even when they're heavenly creatures with supernatural powers urging you down the path of righteousness?" asks Carlos.

"Da, exactly," says Sanya. "They could be aliens, I do not know their lives. I am but a simple man with a big sword."

Carlos wonders at what point it starts being weird that so many of his acquaintances are agnostics who work with angels they don’t believe in.

The masked figure stirs and bends down a little. Their face is completely hidden behind their mask, but Carlos senses a hint of interest. “Sir Sanya knows this wizard?” they ask. Their voice is unexpectedly soft and sad. Up close, the loom looks more like a slump.

“Da,” says Sanya. “This is Warden Ramirez. Karyusha, this is Doug.”

Carlos blinks, then says, "It's a pleasure to meet you... Doug..."

"The pleasure is all Doug's," says Doug. He sounds like he hasn't experienced pleasure in a long, long time, but he carefully shakes Carlos' hand with a thumb and one of five fingers.

The Bichon extends a paw. Carlos looks at Sanya, who shrugs, and Doug, who says, "This is the dog of Alicia. The dog of Alicia is a good girl."

The Bichon wags a tail as Carlos takes her paw in both hands, then scratches her behind one giant ear.
"Warden, Doug comes to parley in peace," says Doug. "Sir Sanya has requested the aid of the masked army, but the way forward is blocked by wizard magic. The masked army requests passage through the city."

Carlos looks at Sanya, who says formally, "I will stand for their good conduct, Warden."

Carlos raises his eyebrows. He wouldn't ever want to take responsibility for the actions an entire army. Then again, Sanya and his fellow Knights have a history of eerily accurate instincts and luck that makes *deus ex machina* into an artform, though in Sanya's case it's more like making *higher-power-that-can-neither-be-proven-nor-disproven ex machina* into an artform.

But more importantly, Carlos trusts him.

"All right," he says. "I can't vouch for the actions of the town's inhabitants, but I can lead you through and offer you whatever guidance is possible."

The Bichon barks. "Doug agrees to this accord," says Doug. "Doug will tell the masked army of this peaceful march. Come, dog of Alicia."

Sanya raises his hand in farewell, and Doug and the dog lope down the hill. Doug takes off towards the distant army with surprising speed; the Bichon pries up a femur from the sucking mud and bounds happily through the puddles.

"Sanya," says Carlos. "Where did you get a masked army?"

Sanya shrugs. "I found them."

Carlos isn't even going to go there. "For what?" he asks.

"Trouble in the east," says Sanya. "I decided it was best to take the Ways when they were opened to me, and Doug and his companions agreed to stand as my allies in this matter."

"Do you want me to call the Council for back-up?" he asks.

Sanya rubs his chin. "Not yet," he says finally. "I hope to resolve it myself first. I do not know what the temptation would do to your companions."

"Wonderful," says Carlos. "If you need help, though..."

Sanya slaps him on the back with bruising force. "You are a good man, Karyusha."

"I'm all right," says Carlos modestly.

"A good man," Sanya repeats. He looks over his shoulder, then back towards the army, which is quickly drawing closer.

He repeats this gesture several times as they wait – not nervously, just... with curiosity, maybe.

Carlos finally cracks and looks behind them. Night Vale glitters on another horizon, under another sun. Nothing too terrible appears to be happening.

"What's up?" he asks.

"That place," says Sanya. "What is it?"

"It's called Night Vale," says Carlos. "We'll be heading through there shortly."
"Night Vale," repeats Sanya in a thoughtful tone, but he doesn't say anything else.

"Have you been through Chicago recently?" Carlos asks, casually. Like he doesn't care about the total radio silence he's been getting from the Second City.

"Da," says Sanya. "Cannot miss Michael's movie night."

"Movie night?"

"Last time we watched The Avengers," says Sanya. "Russian saves day while everyone has big flashy fights, very accurate. Black Widow best."

Carlos snorts.

"I went around the city, too," Sanya continues. "There are good people fighting. Have you been back?"

"I was just looking after it until—" Carlos stops. "It's not my responsibility anymore. I know things aren't great, but at least they're quiet." They're too quiet, but he's not the Warden who's supposed to be there doing his job and asking for help and fighting for the good guys.

"I have been listening also," says Sanya. "I did not see Harry Dresden, though I know he has returned."

"Yeah, well," says Carlos. "He works for Winter now."

"Winter is not so bad," says Sanya, and Carlos wants to protest, because even when the Winter Sidhe aren't outright inimical to mortals they're still dangerous, and also that season in Chicago sucks. But Sanya should know all that, and he's not the kind of person who gives false hope, so...

Sanya claps him on the back again, almost knocking him over, and says, "Here comes Doug!"

Getting the masked army out of the Nevernever is surprisingly painless; herding them through Night Vale even more so, at least once Carlos explains the idiosyncratic WALK signals. The masked army is very conscientious about traffic safety.

"This place," says Sanya, as they stand in the shade of masked giants and wait for the light. At Carlos' suggestion he's put on his white cloak emblazoned with scarlet crosses and pulled up the hood. "It is familiar."

"It is?" says Carlos.

"Ha!" Sanya snaps his fingers. "Night Vale – a friend of Michael lives here."

"The knight or the archangel?" asks Carlos.

"Da," says Sanya. "But it is more than that..." He stares at the statue of Lee Marvin contemplatively, but does not continue.

The masked army continues to trot peacefully through the town. There's some initial confusion on the part of the citizenry as to whether the masks and robes officially qualify them as hooded figures, but when the giants fail to vibrate threateningly at anyone before stealing their babies, the lure of tourism revenue overcomes their qualms. Squadrons of the army break off to investigate the strip mall by the library and Frances Donaldson's antiques and, more alarmingly, a spontaneous farmer's market.
The sun hangs high above the horizon, unmoving. Carlos can tell already that trying to figure out today's timeline is going to give him an enormous headache, but at least it's working in his favor for once. He's got enough time before dinner. More than enough time, when he can think about all the stupid things he might say and all the stupid mistakes he might make...

"I remember now," says Sanya.

"What?"

"Why it is so familiar." Sanya gestures at the town around them. "Is reminding me of my childhood home, when I was very small. Before we moved to Moscow."

"Where's that?" asks Carlos.

"Нулегорск," says Sanya. "By the sea."

He shades his eyes from the bright sun. A gust of dry dusty wind blows past, along with a hissing and snarling tumbleweed.

"...Huh," says Carlos.

"Is gone now, I hear," says Sanya. "Like my childhood."

"I think that's the most Russian thing I've ever heard you say," says Carlos. "And I've had to listen to you talk about Trotskyism."

"I talked about Marx, too," says Sanya. "Is this all?" They've reached the outskirts of town. A straight march down the eastern expressway will take them past the boundaries of the wards and once again allow them access to the Nevernever. Only the most determined masked figures are with them; the rest have been waylaid by the forces of capitalism, probably to Sanya's disappointment. They're going to be waiting for a while.

“That's it,” says Carlos. “I mean, unless you want the grand tour—”

Sanya’s eyes light up.

And that’s how Carlos ends up on a bus heading out to Radon Canyon jammed between two giant masked figures as a Knight of the Opiate of the Masses reminisces about clam digging.

~*~*~*~

Carlos hears Cecil’s car pull up. He switches off the lights, raises a hand, and says, “K’ak!” All the candles light at once. He scrubs his hands against Cecil’s apron, then realizes he’s still wearing an apron. He pulls it off and hangs it on the pantry door where he found it. Then he realizes he’s still wearing Kevlar.

Cecil walks in as he’s trying to pull on another shirt, one that does not smell like sweat and iron. It probably would have worked better if Carlos had unbuttoned and turned it right-side-out first.

“Carlos?” he hears Cecil say.

“Uh, hi, Cecil,” says Carlos. “Just a second—” His arm is somehow stuck on top of his head. He’s like the world’s least competent stripper in reverse.

“How about we get you into some comfortable clothes?” asks Cecil.
“No,” says Carlos. “Wait, I mean – if you want to, but I’m trying to put this one on…”

“Oh,” says Cecil. “Would you like some help?”

Carlos sags in defeat. “Yes, please,” he says.

Cecil frees the shirt from his head with two quick tugs. His brow wrinkles.

“Do you want it inside out?” he asks.

“No,” Carlos sighs. “Have you ever tried to take a shortcut and it ends up taking even longer and then you get laundry stuck around your head?”

“Oh, haven’t we all,” says Cecil, smiling a little. “On a related note, don’t try to use trick quarters to scam the machines at the laundromat.” He pulls the shirt sleeves through the armholes, shakes the shirt out, then hands it back to Carlos.

“Thanks,” says Carlos. He pulls it over his head and starts doing up the rest of the buttons.

“Can I?” says Cecil hesitantly.

“Uh,” says Carlos. “I mean – yes.” Cecil steps close, buttoning up his shirt with quick, deft fingers. Carlos can feel their warmth through his shirt. He stares at Cecil’s hands and swallows.

Cecil leaves the top button undone and fixes his collar for him. He smooths the fabric over Carlos’ shoulders.

“Thank you,” says Carlos.

“You look so different without your lab coat and glasses,” says Cecil. “Like you’re someone else entirely.” He’s still stroking Carlos’ shoulders.

“Oh, hold on,” says Carlos. He fishes around in his pants pocket and pulls out his glasses. “See? It’s just me, Cecil. It’s—” He swallows what he wishes he could say. “It’s always just me.”

Cecil smiles wistfully. “Carlos—"

The oven timer buzzes, interrupting whatever Cecil was going to tell him, and Carlos is intensely ashamedly grateful. "That’s dinner,” he says, taking Cecil by the hand and towing him towards the dining room. Cecil’s eyes light up when he sees the candles and table settings, which eases some of the anxieties once again holding Carlos’ heart in a vice-like grip. Carlos pulls out Cecil’s chair for him and leaves him delightedly examining the napkins folded like swans. Carlos brings back the wine, and Cecil actually sighs.

"You’re so… professional," he says.

Carlos grins. "You don’t wait as many tables as I have without picking up a few tricks." He retrieves the food and smacks Cecil’s hand with a spoon when he tries to serve himself.

Finally, they’re both seated. The food is steaming on their plates and Cecil is smiling at him in the candlelight. He takes one bite and says, "Carlos, this is perfect."

"I haven’t dated anyone else since I was seventeen," blurs Carlos.
Cecil blinks at him. A heap of refried beans slides off his spoon and lands on his plate with a small *plop!*

"I mean, that's mostly my fault, I spent most of my time focusing on science, but I thought that eventually I would solve everything and it would all just magically – uh, scientifically – work out," Carlos babbles.

"Carlos—"

"I know you think I'm some kind of genius, but ever since I came to Night Vale I've literally been making everything up as I go along, and I know you said this relationship wasn't the one you'd envisioned—"

"That wasn't—"

"But I've never really done this before, and I know I'm not getting it right, and I am so sorry. But I'm trying, Cecil, I really am. I'd try almost anything for you."

“*Oh, Carlos,*” says Cecil, and his voice is so full of warmth Carlos almost has to look away. “I had no idea! You were just *so cool,* I just assumed it was typical scientific nonchalance, and here all this time you were—” He waves his hand expressively. “And—” He gestures again. “And then you wore body armor while you made dinner! It’s true, this relationship isn’t what I’d pictured. But that just means it wasn’t the right picture, because, well. *You’re* what makes it so perfect, even when it’s not… as perfect as it could be, just because you’re here with me."

“But sometimes I’m not, Cecil,” says Carlos. “You’re right, you know. I do get distracted by science. And… science-related things.”

“But you’re here *now,*” says Cecil. “You keep coming back. To me! Carlos, I can’t think of anything more perfect than that.”

Carlos has to look down at the dishes and the wine and the candelabra before he can speak, but for once his heart and his mind manage to agree on the appropriate response. “Neither can I,” he says. He looks up tentatively. Cecil is beaming at him from across the table, and Carlos smiles back, because they’ve managed to stumble their way back from mistakes and misunderstandings to this perfect moment together, and that’s all they do for a good minute.

Then the moment ends naturally, and Cecil says, “This smells really good,” and Carlos says, “You should eat your enchiladas before they lose their thermal energy.”

“Okay,” says Cecil happily. He takes a bite and freezes.

“Cecil?” says Carlos. Cecil doesn’t answer; he just sits there, completely still, his eyes wide. “Cecil?” asks Carlos again, feeling a curl of panic that maybe Cecil is allergic to peppers or beans or cheese, or maybe they’re forbidden, or—

Cecil finally starts chewing again, slowly. He swallows and says in a hoarse voice, “*That was the most delicious thing I have ever tasted.*”

“Flattery will get you everywhere,” says Carlos, as Cecil shoves another forkful of enchilada into his mouth.

“Mmm – everywhere except Old Town Night Vale, there’s a city ordinance,” says Cecil. He takes another bite and moans, and Carlos is suddenly feeling overheated for reasons that have nothing to
do with the amount of peppers and everything to do with his dick.

“I mean, they’re no number five combo at Jerry’s Tacos...” says Carlos, and speaking of dicks, he’s being one, but he really needs something to distract him from the way Cecil is licking his fork and also, all the food at that place should be on the Forsaken Menu.

“Omm,” says Cecil. “I concede your point about their enchiladas. These are the one true enchiladas; never again shall I sully their name with an association to lesser beings.”

"Maybe next time I should start working through their whole menu,” says Carlos.

Cecil stops chewing; his eyes grow distant.

“Cecil,” says Carlos. “Cecil!!”

Cecil gives himself a shake. “Sorry,” he says, after he’s finished chewing. “I was lost in contemplation.” He pushes some beans around on his plate. “So... next time?”

“Yes,” says Carlos, with more confidence than he feels. “I mean, I can’t have my boyfriend eating subpar Mexican food.” Cecil is looking at him with such happiness that he relents and adds, “Not all the time, anyway,” because who is he to give someone a hard time about their God-given right to splurge on shitty fast food? Cecil understands his feelings about onion rings, after all.

Something touches his ankle and he almost leaps out of his seat until he realizes it’s Cecil’s foot. “You really haven’t done this very much, have you?” says Cecil, waiting until Carlos subsides to tangle their feet together. “I always thought you were ticklish.”

Carlos covers his face with his hands and sinks down in his chair. “I don’t want to talk about it,” he groans.

“Okeydokey,” says Cecil, rubbing his foot comfortably on Carlos’ calf.

He peeks over his fingers. Cecil is eating another enchilada and looking perfectly content. Carlos sighs and says, “My first and only girlfriend’s name was Gabby. We met junior year because we both sat at the same table in the cafeteria alone. She was really nice and didn’t mind that I had to disappear a lot to… go to science… camp… or that I had really terrible skin as a teenager and all my sisters called me ‘Pizza Face’. Unfortunately, her family moved to San Francisco right before prom and we lost touch. After that I really committed to science. I mean, I tried to keep dating, but, you know, the hours and workload and the travel...Also, whenever I’m actually attracted to someone I panic and laugh it off or freeze up or accidentally throw them in dumpsters. So that’s how I ended up as the 29-year-old virgin.”

“It’s nothing to be ashamed of,” says Cecil. “It means you’re eligible for all sorts of fun sacrifices!”

“I’ll pass, thanks,” says Carlos with a shudder, because he’s already got one group of uncanny dangerous beings over-invested in his virginity, and that’s definitely one group too many. “It doesn’t… bother you, right?”

“Not at all,” says Cecil. “But Carlos – my dear Carlos – tell me if you feel uncomfortable, please? I’m not going to make any more assumptions. You know what happens when you make those.”

“I have a feeling I don’t,” says Carlos.

“Why, giant predatory insects swoop down and consume both you and -mptions, obviously.”
“Obviously,” echoes Carlos. “Tell me, are those the same giant predatory insects that swoop down and consume children who won’t help their parents with chores?”

“No, those don’t really exist,” says Cecil with a chuckle. “They’re more like a metaphor to prepare youngsters for the day when the Sheriff’s Secret Police takes them in for questioning.” Cecil’s voice turns introspective. “I remember it like it was yesterday: the smell of the burlap sack thrust over my head, the thrill of being hoisted in the air by the helicopters, the tension in the courtroom—"

"Courtroom?"

"Oh, sorry, it was a jaywalking trial," says Cecil. "I had to testify, you see. Jan Novak just couldn't use those crosswalks. Oh, the shame he brought on his family."

"How old were you?" asked Carlos.

"Seven," says Cecil. "It left quite an impression, let me tell you." He shakes his head.

"I know what you mean," says Carlos, because when he was seven, he had to sit in at the trial of a sixteen-year-old potential warlock. All the apprentices had. Someone higher up clearly thought they needed an example for what happens when you broke the Laws of Magic, although now that he thinks about it—

"Uh – what’s the sentence for a jaywalking conviction, again?"

"Public flogging and twenty to thirty years of community service," says Cecil. "Jan managed to get it commuted to ten years and a light paddling after he checked into rehab, though, and he really did a lovely job cleaning up Mission Grove Park."

"I see," says Carlos. Harry got off with the Doom of Damocles, so if he wanted to avoid summary execution all he had to do was refrain from breaking any more of the Laws of Magic. Or appearing to break, or being a suspect of breaking – having Morgan as a Warden PO was kind of a raw deal, now that Carlos thinks about it— Harry's age he'd stopped having so many nightmares about getting decapitated, so really, things pretty much worked out fine and he shouldn't be alarmed by any comparisons between Night Vale and the White Council's respective penal codes.

Heh, penal codes.

Carlos gets distracted by the way Cecil's throat works as he swallows his wine, and has to recite next month's duty rosters in his head until the excitement passes, but the rest of dinner proceeds quite pleasantly.

“So,” says Cecil, playing with the tines of his fork. “I suppose you have to go back to the lab pretty soon. Unless you have other plans?"

“You,” says Carlos. “I mean – I took the whole night off. So I can spend time with you.”

"Oh," says Cecil. "Oh. Carlos, I have a very important question to ask you."

"Yes?" says Carlos, swallowing compulsively.

Cecil leans forward. "What are your feelings on The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance?"

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Carlos has never seen *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* before. Technically speaking, he still hasn't seen it, because even though it's been playing for quite some time they both got pretty distracted about five minutes in. Carlos is totally fine with this, and is perfectly willing to watch *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* as many times as Cecil deems necessary.

Maybe Cecil’s right and time really *is* slowing down whenever they’re together, because Cecil is kissing him and it feels like he can sense every fluctuation in the output of the streetlight outside and hear the voices on the TV get more and more distorted and see the lamps flicker and shit, no, that’s just Carlos.

He pulls back and gasps, “Sunspots!”

Cecil blinks down at him and says, “What?”

“There was a lot of, uh, sunspot activity. Today. It might have aggravated the, uh, mirage.” Carlos tries to gesture vaguely, but his hands are still under Cecil’s shirt and then he gets distracted.

“Neat,” says Cecil, eyes glazing over slightly.

“Yeah,” says Carlos. “Wait, no – I mean, there’s probably going to be solar flares and – electronic disruption and – you should probably unplug all your appliances. Because of the electromagnetic radiation.”

“Electromagnetic radiation,” repeats Cecil, and Carlos simultaneously 1) remembers that Cecil definitely has a thing for scientific vocabulary and 2) realizes that *he,* apparently, has a thing for Cecil’s thing for scientific vocabulary.

They startle apart several minutes later when the TV goes black with a loud *pop!*

“Electronic disruption, huh,” says Cecil.

“Yeah,” sighs Carlos. “Lots of it.”

Cecil groans and climbs off the couch. He pulls Carlos up with him, which is fine, because Carlos doesn’t really want to let go. But Carlos *does* want to be a responsible boyfriend, and even though none of the dating advice people have ever specifically mentioned it he is pretty sure that you shouldn’t accidentally destroy all of your significant other’s electronic equipment, especially when you haven't even finished watching *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* yet.

He has to release Cecil when he crawls under his desk to unplug a power strip, so Carlos tries to keep the mood going. “Technically speaking, it’s not the solar flares that cause the problems,” he says, leaning sideways so he can sneak in some proper ogling. "I mean, they do, they can disrupt… radio… communication…”

Cecil makes a disapproving noise, which snaps Carlos out of his contemplation of the view. “But, uh, more of the issues are caused by the coronal mass ejections—”

Cecil bangs his head on the underside of the desk.

“Are you okay?” asks Carlos, helping Cecil to his feet. They end up standing just inches apart. Cecil is still holding his hand.

“I’ve never really liked the rest of my appliances,” says Cecil, breathlessly.

“Okay, great, me either,” says Carlos, and Cecil pulls him down the hallway.
Carlos blows out every light fixture in Cecil’s apartment.

Even mostly asleep, Carlos can feel someone’s gaze boring into the back of his skull.

“That’s creepy, Cecil,” he mumbles into the pillow.

“Sorry, Carlos,” says Cecil, who doesn’t sound sorry at all.

Carlos’ brain finally catches up about a minute later, and his eyes snap open. He rolls over and, yes, there’s Cecil, who is still staring at him intently. It’s not the searing, slightly blank gaze Carlos used to get back when they first met. This is gentler, but warmer, like standing in the first rays of the morning sun. The morning sun that is pouring through Cecil’s windows into Cecil’s bedroom and onto Cecil’s bed, which currently contains Cecil, sunlight, and Carlos.

“Uh. Good morning,” says Carlos, and dammit, he’s youngest regional commander of the Wardens in the history of the White Council, his voice definitely did not squeak and he is not going to start blushing like teenage girl.

“Good morning, Carlos,” says Cecil, and goes back to staring at Carlos with… yes, that’s definitely fondness, Carlos can’t have screwed up too badly.

“Um,” says Carlos. “So... How was—”

“It was perfect,” says Cecil.

“Even when I almost kicked you in the—”

“Perfect,” repeats Cecil firmly.

“I mean, that’s what I thought,” says Carlos. “I just wanted to... confirm the results. You know. For science.” He gives Cecil a lopsided grin. Cecil smiles back at him, and Carlos’ heart flops around in his chest like a trout during the very short-lived attempt to restock the Night Vale Harbor and Waterfront Recreation Area.

Then—

“Are you laughing at me?” says Carlos.

“No,” says Cecil, who is definitely laughing. “I’m observing you. You know. For science.”

“Science this,” says Carlos, and hits him with a pillow.

Carlos blows out every light fixture on the third floor.

“We heard an interesting report on the radio today,” says Julie, as Carlos studiously records his follow-up observations about the subway and absolutely does not keep getting distracted and doodling in the margins.
“Oh?” he says, sketching out a representation of the Aurora Borealis above a cloud of cockroaches.

“Apparently Night Vale suffered a localized geomagnetic storm,” she says.


“All night long,” says Julie.

"Um," says Carlos, who is not blushing, dammit.

“It seems to have made a positive impression on Cecil,” says Andre. “He talked about it for quite some time and even got most of the terminology correct!”

"I hear there were, and I quote, ‘Solar energetic particles. Really energetic, listeners, you have no idea,’” says Julie.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about and also, shut up,” says Carlos.

“Maybe you should check on the ‘sensitivity of your instruments’, Carlos,” says Julie.

“Maybe you should check on the sensitivity of your face,” says Carlos, and flees.

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It’s one of the rare evenings where Dani doesn’t have a shift and Nita finds someone to close both restaurants and babysit the kids and Carlos is in town and not battling dark creatures of the night like a younger, sexier Van Helsing, so they’re all expected to show up at home, eat whatever their mother has been experimenting with, and fill her in on any life-changing events she hasn’t already heard about from the rest of the family.

Carlos doesn’t have any aunts or cousins in Night Vale – that he knows of; they’ve turned up in some pretty weird places – which means he’s going to have to inform his nearest and dearest of his change in relationship status himself. His family is pretty open-minded; it shouldn’t cause any problems. Probably. He’s, like, 80% sure. Maybe 75%. It can’t be as bad as the time Milagro informed them all she had enlisted, anyway. And their mother finally started talking to her again as soon as she (unlike their father) came home from Iraq, and if all Carlos needs to do is return from something dangerous and life-threatening he’ll be un-disowned in about a week.

That thought’s not as comforting as he hoped it would be.

He might as well get this over with.

"I'm seeing someone," he announces, after eating a bite of burrito sushi.

"Oh, mijo, I'm so proud!" says his mother, and what kind of response is that?

Carlos shoves aside his confusion for later. "His name is Cecil," he says quickly, and braces for impact.

Everyone stares at him.

"What, not that tall guy?" says Nita.

"What?" says Carlos blankly.

"Your Harry," says his mother.
"My—" he sputters. "You thought I was dating Harry Dresden?!!"

"You're not?" says Dani. She sounds disappointed. Carlos is confused until Nita taps her on the shoulder and holds out her hand, and Dani digs into her purse, pulls out a twenty, and slaps it in Nita's palm.

"No!" he says. "Why in the name of all that is holy did you think I was dating him?"

"Well, you used to run off to meet him all the time—" says Dani.

"We're both regional commanders!" says Carlo. "We had to work together!"

"And you talked about him constantly—" she continues.

"He's one of the most infamous wizards on the council!"

"You did bring him home to meet us," says Nita.

"He saved my life multiple times," says Carlos. "The least I could do was invite him to dinner!"

"And you were so upset when you thought he was dead," says his mother.

"He's my friend!" says Carlos. "Was. Was my friend." He honestly doesn't know which is worse: that his whole family figured out his sexuality long before he told them, or that they thought he had terrible taste in men.

Not that Harry is a terrible guy – well, he wasn't a terrible guy, before he joined Team Violent and Morally Ambiguous – but the thought of trying to date even old Harry makes Carlos want to hide under a blanket. A large, fireproof blanket. Carlos is awesome, but even he knows they'd be a walking disaster.

The point is—

"You are so wrong you're a hazard to yourselves and others, and I am never asking any of you for dating advice," says Carlos.

Nita rolls her eyes. "Whatever," she says. "So who's Cecil?"

"He works at a radio station," says Carlos. He folds his arms across his chest and he doesn't care what his mother is thinking as she hides a laugh behind one hand, he is not sulking.

"Wait," says Dani. "Is that the guy you always listen to?"

"No – yes – wait, you can hear him?"

"It'd be hard to miss," says Dani. "Since you do it all the time."

"Oh, Carlito, that's so sweet!" says his mother.

"It's for work," says Carlos. "...But yeah, that's him."

"His voice is sexy," Dani tells their mother. "What do you think's wrong with him?"

"There is nothing wrong with Cecil!" says Carlos hotly.

"Aww, you're so cute," says Nita. "Pass the soy sauce?"
The conversation devolves from there.

By the time Carlos escapes, Cecil has been invited to any and all holidays, Milagro was somehow informed and sent him an email via Nita that says only *Aw yeah bro get it ::high five::*, and Carlos’ ears have probably turned permanently red from embarrassment. He walks to his bisabuela’s house, because why ruin more than one evening laying his heart bare and being asked horrible, invasive questions about his life choices in return?

“You know how you always said Wardens should stay aloof from emotional entanglements?” he asks when she opens the door.

She sighs. “Well, boy, what have you done now?”

“I’m dating a guy who lives in the desert,” says Carlos. “I’m almost certain he’s not involved with dark magic, and even though he works for the people who once tagged me with a death curse he hasn’t once tried to take advantage of it and murder me. On the plus side, I am no longer White Court catnip.”

She stares at him levelly.

For a full minute.

“Well,” she says finally, “At least it’s not Warden Dresden.”

“Madre de Dios,” says Carlos. “What is wrong with you people?”

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"...the fuck?” asks Yoshimo, peering curiously at the Danger Meter. Two of the lights blow when she leans too close, though the faint trio of whistles inside remains unchanged. The camouflage isn't strictly necessary; almost everyone else on Mt. Fuji suddenly got the urge to spend today in quiet reflection at home and come back tomorrow as soon as they got within range of the fifth station trailheads (and Yoshimo's suggestion spells). But Carlos has the dignity of his position to maintain and he is carrying three too many Hello Kitty dolls to do so effectively.

It definitely has nothing to do with their lifeless black shark eyes and disquieting lack of mouth.

"Proximity detector," says Carlos. "This half of the perimeter is clear, by the way." He suppresses a shiver. The air up here is cold, clear, and very thin.

"Good," she says. "Now we wait." She glances towards the summit, then gives him an appraising glance. "You look like shit. You should wait inside the hut."

"I'm fine," says Carlos, suppressing a wince as he shifts his weight more equally on both ankles.

She gives him a look that somehow manages to convey both *Your endurance is impressive and I respect that* and *You are dumber than a sack of hammers*. Carlos remembers when she used to be a polite rookie with a G-rated vocabulary, though to be fair he's pretty sure the latter's only because she hadn't learned the right English and Latin curse words yet.

Something beeps inside his pocket. He swears and pulls out his phone.

Yoshimo takes a step back. "Is that a fucking portable?"

"Sorry, forgot to silence it," says Carlos. He does a double-take; Yoshimo is staring at his phone like
it's about to say some very unkind things about the White Council and throw her down the mountainside too. (Their parley with the delegation from Aokigahara has not been going particularly well.) "What?" he asks.

"No one with human magic can use a portable telephone," she says. "They're too fucking delicate! What kind of deep shit are you in?"

"It's a phone, not a bomb," says Carlos in exasperation.

She pales, like the thought hadn't occurred to her until now.

"A friend made it for me!" says Carlos. "And it malfunctions all the time, I swear."

"You... didn't do anything?" she asks doubtfully.

"No!"

His phone beeps again. Her hand flies to the hilt of her silver katana.

"Oh, for the love of – it's a text message, from my boyfriend, asking when I'll get back!" He holds up his phone. "See?"

She eyes it doubtfully.

There's another beep.

"'Miss you, less than three, Cecil,'" she reads. "'XOXO'. And there's a little cartoon of a man with cat ears and a very large axe."

"Aww, hey, there is," says Carlos, smiling at the screen.

"I guess it can't be that bad," she says. "Although why the fuck—" She stops. "Wait. You have a boyfriend?"

"Uh," says Carlos. He swallows, then straightens his shoulders and says, "Yes. Yes, I do."

"Thank fuck," says Yoshimo. "Maybe now you'll shut up about your horrifying sex life."

"It's not horrifying," says Carlos, irrationally offended on behalf of his imaginary exploits.

"I had to listen to that story about the dancer in the cake three fucking times," says Yoshimo.

"...You know what? On second thought, I am going to go wait inside," says Carlos. "Signal me when you see our honored guests. I'll meet you at the perimeter."

"Hai," she says, muttering, "Fucking cake," as she starts climbing up to the lookout point.

"Yuki-san," he calls after her. She looks back.

"I haven't really told anyone," he says. "The people I – the people I care about... I don't want them to be in any danger. Because of me."

Carlos can put up with awkwardness and occasional mockery. Unfriendly ears listening to friendly gossip and using it against him: less so.

Not even the ranks of the Wardens are safe anymore.
Yoshimo's mouth twists. "Shit," she says. "Do you – do you think it's that bad?"

"I don't know," says Carlos.

"Fuck," she says. "I hoped you were going to tell me I was wrong." Her left hand clenches around the hilt of her katana and she stares up at the grey sky for a moment. Then she says, "I understand. I won't tell anyone."

"I know," says Carlos, and hopes that's true. The Black Council has spread its influence almost everywhere, it seems. But he's known Yoshimo almost as long as he's been a Warden, and while mistrusting all his friends might keep him alive longer, he doesn't think that kind of life would be worth the cost.

She tosses him a salute and resumes climbing.

Carlos enters the empty waystation and stretches out his leg on one of the padded benches. He starts texting Cecil back, but hesitates before hitting Send. He dials Cecil's number instead.

"Carlos! Is everything okay?"

"Hi, Cecil," says Carlos. "Everything's fine, I'm just calling for personal reasons."

"Oh," says Cecil. "Oh! Well, I'm... glad? Yes, I am glad. I am very glad, Carlos. I've missed the sound of your mellifluous voice."

"Mellifluous?"

"You know, like honey," says Cecil. "Composed of pollen and transformed by the ritual dances of bees. Delicious on biscuits. Mellifluous!"

"Thanks, Cecil," says Carlos. "I've missed you too." He can rope Gary into explaining how honey works later.

"How's your conference going?" asks Cecil.

"It's... going," says Carlos, flexing his ankle beneath its brace. It's stiff and sore from the climb, but it could have been much worse, and Yoshimo has a lot of practice dealing with leg injuries.

Cecil makes a sympathetic noise.

"How about you?" asks Carlos. "How was work yesterday?"

Carlos is treated to a lively description of the mayoral candidates, who by complete coincidence both spontaneously decided to stop by the radio station and record some sound bites. Well, Cecil assumed they both stopped by – no one actually saw or interviewed the Faceless Old Woman, but they have an audio file from her nevertheless, and all the books on the shelf of free paperbacks in the break room have had their covers switched around and are subtly different in some other, indefinable way. Hiram McDaniels, meanwhile, was engaging and charismatic and only set the studio on fire a little.

"His green head seems rather excitable," concludes Cecil.

Carlos agrees with him, because unless there's another five-headed, 1.8-ton dragon with a minor case of dissociative identity disorder running (or flying) around the Southwest, he has the sneaking suspicion that Hiram McDaniels is yet another alias for Briganos, the dragon who was subdued in a legendary fight in San Francisco in 1906 by a group of Wardens led, coincidentally, by his
bisabuela. He is extremely glad Hiram seems to have mellowed out over the past century, and that Night Vale is largely fire- and earthquake-proof.

“He autographed one of his pamphlets, too,” says Cecil. “Such penmanship! I'm looking at it right now.” There's a pause, and then Cecil says, a little wistfully, "What are you looking at?"

“Guess,” says Carlos. He shifts so he can see out the window.

“The void,” says Cecil, wistfulness fleeing from the spirit of healthy competition.

Carlos grins. “No. Try again.”

“A scientific journal?”

“No. Last chance.”

“The Danger Meter,” says Cecil.

“Close, but no cigar,” says Carlos.

“Phooey,” says Cecil. “What is it?”

“A mountain,” says Carlos.

There’s silence on the other end, then: “Are you sure?”

“Within one standard deviation. I had to climb up it,” says Carlos. There are perfectly good roads running up Mt. Fuji to the fifth stations, but Yoshimo insisted that they needed to go on foot from Aokigahara to the summit to show proper respect. She didn't swear the whole time, so he knows she was being serious.

"Is that safe?"

"Of course," says Carlos. "My colleague is an expert." Walking down could be pretty interesting, given his ankle, and the actual negotiations even more so, given the fireworks (literal and metaphorical) they’ve had to dodge so far. But they've definitely made progress, and Yoshimo and Carlos are a pretty badass team, and maybe he'll be able to convince her to let them hitch a ride on one of the tour buses from the closest fifth station once they wrap things up and release the spells encouraging everyone to stay away.

"Good!" says Cecil. "So..." He sounds nervous.

"What's wrong?" says Carlos.

"Nothing!" says Cecil quickly. "Nothing. I was just wondering if you knew when you'll come ho— err, back to Night Vale."

"Not yet," says Carlos.

"Oh," says Cecil, and it's back, that note of some emotion Carlos can't quite identify. But it sounds too much like sadness, and he wants it to have no part of Cecil, and – and if he has to sit here and hyperventilate about his feelings to make Cecil feel better, he'll do it.

"I can call you as soon as I know," says Carlos. "Is something wrong?"

"What? No," says Cecil. "Everything is... perfect."
"You can tell me anything, you know," says Carlos. "You don't have to, but... you could. Scientists like collecting data. I like collecting data. Especially about you, Cecil."

"Well, it's just..." says Cecil. "Sometimes I worry – irrationally! – that one day you'll... you know... goononeofthesesciencetripsandforgetaboutme."

"Cecil," says Carlos, then stops, because he's bursting with denials and reassurances and confessions, but he doesn't know which Cecil needs to hear right now. He doesn't know what's the truth and what he wants to be the truth, or what truth even is when there's no objective measure.

But facts... facts he can do.

"I could never forget you, Cecil," he says. "Your image has been burned into my soul since the first time we met."


"Cecil, I – I can't promise I'll always come back," says Carlos. "Science is dangerous. Life is dangerous. And I'm always going to be the one who charges straight into danger, because it's my duty, and because that's – that's who I am."

"I know," says Cecil quietly.

"But that's how I found Night Vale. That's how I found you. And—" He takes a deep breath. "As big as the universe is, as infinite and vast and terrifying, I promise you there is nothing in it that can stop me from trying to come back to you."

"You promise?"

"I promise," says Carlos, and Cecil sighs again, a sigh of resignation, but also of relief and, maybe, of acceptance.

The sun is rising out of a sea of clouds, quietly. It's beautiful, and Carlos suddenly, desperately wishes Cecil was here to see it. They'd be together and Cecil would know that even though there are many dangerous things in the world, mountains are not one of them. Well, except for the treacherous footing and avalanches and volcanic activity and altitude sickness and exposure and charismatic megafauna and spiritual presences that will be judging them very closely—

The point is, sometimes the view is worth it.

Chapter End Notes

...And we're back! Sorry about the delay. I finished my first draft months ago, which means that in addition to a lot of editing sometimes I have to go back and tweak stuff so it's not quite so unintentionally soul-crushing in light of recent episodes. Also, my copy of War Cry finally came in at the library and I was super busy laughing at Carlos' facial hair.

Thanks for your patience!
"Here," says his bisabuela. She hands Carlos a spiral-bound notebook. "Read that. I'll keep watch."

"Thanks," says Carlos. He stretches as much as the cab of his car allows while his bisabuela puts down her sudoku and picks up the binoculars. He wishes he could check his phone, but he knows from sad experience that texting and stakeouts just don't go well together. "There's a sentry making the rounds every seven minutes, but I haven't seen anyone else."

His bisabuela grunts.

"What cipher did you use?" he asks.

"Caesar," she says. "Left rotation, three places."

He flips open the notebook. It's filled with a nearly incomprehensible series of looping characters.

"Minimum security, huh?" he asks. The Voynich script was discontinued as a secure code hundreds of years ago after one of the White Council's alchemical texts leaked to the public. But most of the older members of the White Council had to learn it anyway, since no one bothered to translate the declassified codices into Latin until the late nineteenth century, and most of them had adopted the philosophy that the younger generations should suffer as they had suffered.

"It's still in S.hamala," she says. "And I know all the translators."

"Then why bother with the script and the cipher?"

"So whoever steals my field notes won't realize it's too easy until it's too late," she says calmly. Carlos gave up arguing what constituted 'reasonable paranoia' with her years ago; he's not going to start again now. He just thinks it's much easier to enchant your books to spontaneously combust if they're taken by the wrong people, is all.

"The sentry – what did it look like?" she asks.

"Turtleneck, MP7," says Carlos.

His bisabuela grunts again. Carlos goes back to the notebook.

"You're out of practice," she notes, when he has to use a blank page to decode several different words.

"You spelled these completely—"

She raises an eyebrow from behind the binoculars.

"—Differently," finishes Carlos.

The notebook turns out to be her observation log for most of the past year. He frowns at it for a while, then writes down the most relevant information in a table.

"What am I focusing on?" he asks. "The dips in activity from the White Court?"
"And the Fomor," says his bisabuela. She's right – they correspond with unnatural frequency.

Carlos double-checks the dates with a sinking feeling in his stomach.

"Are you trying to kick me out of town?" he asks, because a marked decline in aggressive action against mortals occurs every time he leaves East LA.

She snorts. "Boy, if I wanted you out, you'd be gone already."

"What are you thinking?" he asks, slightly reassured.

"That the vampires and the fish-men are too busy harrying each other to bother us whenever they think you're away," she says. "I'll show you my log for the western part of the city. They fall back whenever you return because they don't want to overreach on one flank and provoke attack on the other. They can't afford pitched battles on two fronts."

"Huh," says Carlos. "I didn't think they'd still consider me much of a threat..."

Without taking her eyes off the building across the river, she reaches over and flicks his ear.

"Ow!"

"Stop thinking about it," she says. "It does you no good."

"We lost LA," Carlos points out. "And I couldn't do a thing."

"No one thinks less of you for getting wounded in the line of duty," she says. "Not I, not young Luccio. Not even, it seems, the Fomor."

"Fine," says Carlos. "I'll put 'one-man army' on my resume." But secretly, he feels a little relieved, like he does whenever she yells at him for feeling guilty about things that aren't his fault. Probably aren't his fault. If he hadn't let the Fomor catch him—

"Ow!"

"That spring is long past," she says. "Focus on what might yet still be changed and look to the future."

"Yes, grandmother," he mutters, rubbing his ear. He pulls out the pages he's written on and crumples them into a ball, which he drops in the cupholder.

Somehow, his bisabuela manages to give him a look without actually looking at him.

"I'm not burning them in the car," he says. "And I'm not going to swallow them, either. I'll destroy them later."

She shakes her head disapprovingly.

Carlos stares out the windshield at the dark building just visible across the river. "I can't disappear completely, or they'd think we're vulnerable," he says.

"The Fomor would certainly attack," says his bisabuela. "What about the White Court?"

"Worse," says Carlos morosely. "Since we're technically on the same side, they'd probably offer to help."
She puts the binoculars down and actually meets his eyes for a few seconds. "Don't let vampires take over the city," she says.

It's Carlos' turn to give her an unimpressed look.

"Still," she says, resuming her vigil, "I think you should keep some distance. It will be worth learning how they react, and we may be able to make use of their inattention."

"Yeah," says Carlos – a little reluctantly, because East LA is his home. But...

"I assume you'll find a way to stay occupied in the desert," she says, voice drier than the Sand Wastes, and Carlos leans back in his seat so the shadows cover his furiously blushing face.

Then he leans forward. "Do you hear that?" he asks, peering out the windshield at the sky.

"Two helicopters, coming north," she says. "Our veil is in place?"

"Of course," says Carlos. "It should help disguise our heat signatures, too."

"Good work," she says, and Carlos feels a glow of pride even though he hasn't been her apprentice in over a decade.

More figures appear as one of the dark helicopters lands on the roof; the other hovers warily above. His bisabuela hands him the binoculars, and he focuses in on two turtlenecked guards who help unload the chopper's cargo. They disappear back into the building and both helicopters leave.

The entire operation has taken place in less than two minutes.

"You were right," he says, watching the sentry make one more sweep of the roof and go below. "Supply drop."

She makes a pleased noise. "They like to put their backs to the river when they regroup. The White Court destroyed one of their bases last week," she says.

"Destroyed?"

"Magnesium fire," she says. "It did not react well when the Fomor tried to quench the flames in water."

Carlos winces.

"And now the city is investigating their improper storage and use of the metal," she finishes. "Their building permits were not in order."

"Remind me not to piss off the White Court," he says. "Although it's interesting..."

"What is?"

Carlos taps her notebook. "Funny how neither of them seem to take you into account when they plan their ops."

His bisabuela shrugs. "I'm retired," she says. She absently shifts the sheathed blade of her naginata in her lap; the haft is jammed behind Carlos' ankles. Then she picks up her sudoku and triumphantly fills out the last square.

~*~*~*~
“What about this one?” says Cecil, running his fingers along Carlos’ ribs. Carlos represses a shiver.

“Ran into some broken glass,” says Carlos.

Cecil makes a concerned noise and flattens his hand over the scar. Part of Carlos wants to tell him it’s all right, that the vampires of the Red Court are gone, that he’ll never get thrown through a window (or into a wall, or off a fire escape) by bloodsucking fiends ever again. Of course, that’s because now they’d have to stand in line behind other, worse things that want to do even more terrible things to him, so he should probably just... not say anything at all.

"That one?" asks Cecil, following the neat diagonal under his ribs.

"Splenectomy."

"How about this?" asks Cecil, poking him gently in the shoulder.

"Bowling alley," says Carlos. "So is this one, this one, this one, thi—"

Cecil is starting to look actively upset instead of mildly concerned, so Carlos concludes, "—And a few others that are barely scratches and look much worse than they felt."

It's times like this he's glad his scars fade so quickly and that his multiple stab wounds are no longer identifiable as such.

Cecil’s fingers trail over the ugly dashed line stretching across his abdomen. Carlos does shiver this time, and for a moment, he’s back in the sewers of LA, watching his blood slowly but surely drain from his body, shivering in the warmth of spring...

“I don’t want to talk about those,” he says.

"All right," says Cecil. "Carlos..."

"Yes?"

"You need to be more careful," he says.

"I'll try," says Carlos. "You, too."

Cecil makes a scoffing sound. "Oh, these days I'm barely in peril."

"You have chainsaw scars on your back," says Carlos.

"No one's tried to chase me with a chainsaw in years," says Cecil. "Well, two years. Eighteen months. How did you find out about that, anyway?"

"Scientists are very resourceful," says Carlos. (He'd fallen out of his hospital bed when the transmission abruptly cut out and went to the weather.)

"All right," sighs Cecil. "I promise."

Carlos tugs on his arm until Cecil scootches up so Carlos can kiss him. He slides a hand across Cecil's spine, over the chainsaw scars, and for a moment it seems like Carlos' morning is going to get a lot better.

Then Cecil looks at his watch, does a double-take, and groans.
"I'm sorry," he says. "I've got a meeting with the new station management in half an hour."

Carlos stares at him in disbelief. Then he squints at the alarm clock. "Local time is 6:15," he says flatly.

"I knoooow," says Cecil. He sags, dropping his head so he's talking into Carlos' shoulder. "But they insist on syncing with their sister station in Desert Bluffs, ugh. I tried to explain that according to science measures of time, like pants, are an illusion, but they were all 'Blah blah efficiency this' and 'blah blah productivity that'..."

"Will you be free for lunch?" asks Carlos.

"On my agenda, I'm blocked out for 'motivational trust exercises' right up until the show starts," says Cecil glumly.

Carlos suppresses a sigh, because this isn’t Cecil’s fault. "I'll see you for dinner, then," he says. "What are your feelings on babaganoush?"

"The fluttering excitement of a clandestine affair," says Cecil, immediately propping himself back up on his elbows.

"Don't worry, I won't tell the enchiladas," says Carlos, deadpan.

Cecil smiles down at him and sneaks in another kiss before climbing off Carlos and out of bed.

Confirmation biases are deadly to both scientific inquiries and intelligence gathering; you have to keep an open mind about a given subject or risk dismissing critical information when it doesn't fit your preconceptions.

Still, as Carlos runs through his breathing exercises and tries to think unsexy thoughts, right now he really hates Strex Corp Synemists, Inc.

~*~*~*~

"Thanks for coming," says Julie. “We need someone who can say ‘maximize core competencies’ with a straight face.”

“What happened?” asks Carlos, pulling on his lab coat.

“We received a summons from the Secret Police and a brick from City Council through the window,” says Andre, raising his voice over the sound of the approaching helicopter. “I think they might want us to make friends with Strex Corp’s Scientific Liaison Officer.”

The yellow chopper touches down.

“How do you want to play this?” shouts Julie. “I’ve been hearing some weird stuff about Desert Bluffs, but according to the info Andre dug up their people at Strex Corp might actually be qualified. You’ve gotten a lot better, but if there’s any real discussion you’ll need to leave the science talk to the grownups, Carlos.”

“Let’s play it by ear,” says Carlos, as the rotors begin to slow. “We’ll see how the introductions go, and you can let me know if you need me to run interfer—”

He stops talking, because someone’s getting out of the chopper. A pale, shapely leg in stylish yet sensible pumps emerges, followed by a clinging dark pencil skirt, a crisp button-down, a tailored lab
coat, a cool, beautiful face, light eyes perfectly framed by thick-rimmed glasses, and a glorious mass of dark hair. The woman in charge of these disparate parts begins walking towards them, a businesslike stride that is somehow also a sultry prowl. Her hair ripples through the downdraft like it’s her own personal wind machine.

“Yowza,” mutters Julie.

“Wow,” breathes Andre.

“Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck,” says Carlos. “Level ten. Level ten!”

He snaps his fingers in front of their faces.

“Wait, what?” says Andre, blinking.

Julie gives herself a small shake. “Level ten?” she repeats. “Are you sure?”

“Stay back,” says Carlos. “She preys on weakness, so try to look confident. Don’t touch her and try not to talk to her. She’s got serious mind mojo.”

“I thought that was illegal,” says Julie.

“It is,” says Carlos. "For humans." He squares his shoulders and plasters on a cocky grin, then turns around.

She stops about fifteen feet away, regarding them with an amused smile, like a researcher watching rats run in circles through their maze.


“Call me Carlos,” he says. “I don’t think we’ve been formally introduced, Ms…?”

“Doctor, actually,” she says. Her lips curl into a predatory grin. “Dr. Caroline Raith.”

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"You have no idea how excruciatingly disappointed I am that sexy vampires are a real thing," says Julie. Her fingers jab at her keyboard like it's offended her personally, though she's doing better than Andre, who keeps stopping in the middle of sentences to stare into space and maybe drool a little. Carlos can't make his leg stop jiggling up and down. Their complimentary tour of Strex Corp's shiny new monitoring station in Night Vale had been a study in fear and frustration. "I want to file a complaint."

"You're not the only one," mutters Carlos, flipping through pages of his notes on the White Court. His resources in Night Vale aren't strictly backup copies – there's plenty of information back in East LA he wouldn't trust within a hundred miles of here – but he should have something.

He does. It says Raith, Caroline. b. ???? Daughter of the White King. Chicago, IL; Berkeley, CA; Bloomington, IN; St. Louis, MO. Badass with kris, looks hot covered in blood, totally ripped a ghoul's face off. NB: WILL KILL YOU WITH BONERS.

Man, he really needs to revise and update all the stuff he writes down on pain meds.

"Did you find anything?" asks Julie.

"Results inconclusive," says Carlos. "What about you?"
"Okay, it's weird," says Julie. She angles the monitor towards them and the Strex Corp website appears, all tasteful fonts and orange logos and a picture of Caroline Raith, MD, PhD, leering sedately at the camera. Carlos instinctively leans away from the computer; Andre scoots closer. "She doesn't have much of an online presence, and her bio is pretty basic: degrees, bullshitty corporate title, 'I have always held the strongest desire to give more women and minorities a firm foundation in STEM subjects,' yada yada," says Julie.

"She does have firm stems," says Andre, his eyes glazing over as he continues to stare at her picture.

"You're being part of the gender inequality problem, Andre," says Julie.

"I'm sorry," he says. "Could we go to a less distracting page?"

Julie clicks a link and a picture of the monitoring station comes up.

"Oh, it's her accelerator mass spectrometer," sighs Andre.

"Just look at that linac," says Julie covetously.

"Focus, guys," says Carlos. He leans over and pokes a random button. The screen goes black, probably not on purpose. "What's the weird part, Julie?"

Julie blinks, then rubs a hand over her face. "I searched as many databases as I could, and I've got co-authorship for a C. Raith on hundreds of papers," she says. "Hundreds, going all the way back to the 30s. Even filtering out unrelated fields and, like, people named Chad, the numbers are way higher than the expected distribution for that name. And they follow a logical interdisciplinary evolution..."

"It was probably her," says Carlos. "The White Court is long-lived."

"Figures," says Julie. "For a woman to have kept credit for her work during the whole twentieth century, the supernatural pretty much had to be involved."

"What's she supposed to be doing now?" asks Carlos.

"Green energy projects, mostly," says Julie. "Wind and solar power. She just published a paper on the prototype for a more efficient converter array, but I can't get access to the details."

"What, are they classified?" asks Carlos.

"No," says Julie. "They're behind a paywall." She frowns at the computer, then smacks the side of the monitor. The screen flickers back on.

"Andre, you did some work on monitoring the environmental impact at a solar station, right?" asks Carlos. "Do you have any contacts who might know something?"

"Hmm?" says Andre. His eyes are once again glued to a picture of Dr. Raith.

Carlos waves his hand in front of Andre's face. Andre blinks, then says, "My apologies. I'll call some of my colleagues at the university and ask if they've seen her research."

"Thanks," says Carlos.


"Members of the White Court have a symbiotic relationship with a demonic entity they call the Hunger," says Carlos. "It gives them incredible strength, agility, healing abilities – functional
immortality. They feed on strong emotions, and given the chance, they'll suck out all your life force."

"Don't says 'suck'," says Julie. "Let me guess: Dr. Carmilla here feeds on lust?"

"All the Raiths do," says Carlos. "They mentally manipulate their victims and drain them when they're weakened."

"That does make her less attractive," says Andre sadly. "Just not... physiologically. I thought you said we won the war against vampires, Carlos."

"We did," says Carlos. "We're technically not at war with the White Court."

"So they peacefully swallow our souls," says Julie.

"Life force," corrects Carlos.

"Wonderful. Is there any way to stop them?"

"They can die like any human if their Hunger is weakened, but they can take a hell of a lot of punishment before that even becomes an issue," says Carlos. "And..."

"And what?"

Carlos sighs. "And they're repelled by true love," he says.

He's met with silence.

"They can't feed on you and have a much harder time manipulating you," says Carlos. "It can even hurt them if they're not careful. Stop looking at me like that, I don't make the rules."

"I'm trapped in a shitty YA novel," says Julie. "This is hell."

"I find it very meaningful," says Andre. "True love is, after all, the result of conscious devotion. In some ways, it can be considered the ultimate expression of the mind over flesh."

"Don't say 'flesh'," says Julie. "So, is it only true romantic love that repels vampires, then? Or would familial love work, too?"

"Uh," says Carlos, surreptitiously writing down Andre's quote.

"What about friendship? Unconditional love?"

"I... don't know," says Carlos. "No one's ever said."

Julie gives him an unimpressed look. "Given that we're talking about the weaknesses of one of mankind's mortal enemies, this area seems remarkably understudied."

“Well, yes," says Carlos. “But even if you are protected spiritually, vampires are still fast, strong, and violent. Those aren't really the optimal conditions for conducting research."

“I guess you're right," says Julie. “Soliciting volunteers for a control group probably wouldn't pass an ethics board."

"Probably?" says Andre.

"And that's not even the worst part," says Carlos.
"They can non-con you into ladyboners and slurp up your life force," says Julie flatly, "And there's a worse part."

"They're a rich old family of pretty people who love double-secret probation cloak-and-dagger dealings," says Carlos. "Take a wild guess how they purchase legitimacy."

"Private donors?" says Andre in horror.

"Private donors," says Carlos. "Do you guys know where all your grant money comes from?"

"I'll find out," says Andre, grabbing his cane and limping over to a filing cabinet. "The awards from the endowment should be fine, but..."

"Um," says Julie, "So. Just to clarify: sexy vampires are overwhelmingly seductive and intensely dangerous to both us and our funding, right?"

"Yep," says Carlos.

"...I may have made a tactical error," says Julie.

"What?" says Carlos.

Andre frowns and looks around the lab. "Julie," he asks, "Where are the grad students?"

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"I can't believe you sent them to interview at Strex Corp," says Carlos. He’s plastered against the door in the back seat of Julie's Prius, trying to stay as far away from Andre and his smartphone as possible.

"Still no answer from Wei or Kate," says Andre. "Gary's just goes straight to voicemail."

"They own half the town now, I was just trying to ingratiate ourselves!" says Julie. "God knows you don't want me doing it. Plus I had to check to make sure Strex Corp wasn’t attempting scientific espionage."

"So you made your graduate assistants do it?" says Carlos.

"Well, yeah," says Julie. "No one expects it on the first day."

"I don't expect it ever," says Andre severely.

"We need more data!" says Julie. "I thought it would be an acceptable risk! Admittedly, that was before I found out about the sexy vampires, but I think that just proves my point. Now, maybe when they’re postdocs—"

Carlos' phone loudly informs the car that them and it, baby, ain't nothin' but mammals.

"Kate?" he answers. "Is that you?"

"Hi, Carlos!" says Kate. "Is Dr. Timmons there?" There's a certain dream-like quality to her voice, a sated happiness in her languorous drawl. Carlos breathes a sigh of relief that she sounds perfectly normal.

"Hold on, I'm putting you on speaker," he says. He squints at his phone until the little speaker button lights up.
"Where are you?" asks Andre. "Are Gary and Wei with you?"

"Hi, Dr. Timmons!" says Kate. "We're at the clinic."

"Why are you at the clinic?" demands Julie.

"Hi, Dr. Kwan!" says Kate. "So, I've got good news and bad news."

"What's the bad news?" asks Carlos.

"Well, Strex Corp is super-Stepford, for one," says Kate. "And then while we were filling out forms in HR afterwards, one of their scientists dropped by, and — there was something weird about her. I mean, she was pretty hot, if it weren't for Joe and Kelly I'd hit that like the fist of God, but you'd think by the way the guys reacted to her she'd written 'Yes, please' across her cleavage, which I'm not judging but seemed pretty inappropriate for the workplace. But Wei and Gary were also kind of freaked out at the same time. Do you think it might have been aerosolized roofies? Or some kind of pheromone?"

"It's worse than you know," says Julie darkly. "How did you get out?"

"Well, Gary started talking a mile a minute about his research, so Wei made a break for it and locked himself in the van. I didn't want to leave Gary behind, but I couldn't get him to stop talking to her. So I finally invited her back to the van to see our equipment."

"Your—"

"The portable seismograph," says Kate. "But when we got there, I told Gary to start explaining the initializing sequence of our transmogrifier."

"We don't have a transmogrifier," says Andre.

"Yeah, but I didn't want to actually tell her about our research, and Gary's a champion bullshitter when he wants to get laid. I said I would go set it up, but instead I let Wei out of the van. He caused a distraction by throwing up in a trash can, and then I shot Gary with a tranq dart."

"What?"

"The whole front office came out to see what happened and make sure everyone was okay, and I convinced them that I had to drive the guys to the hospital in Night Vale for insurance reasons. And thus we made good our escape!" she finishes triumphantly. "Except Wei had kept all the windows sealed when he locked himself inside and I think he has heatstroke, and Gary hasn't woken up yet, so we really did need medical attention. That's why we're at the clinic."

"You mentioned good news?" asks Andre.

"I got a callback!" says Kate. "They want me to come in for another interview."

"They employ evil, life force-sucking vampires, Kate," says Carlos.

"Huh. Did not see that one coming," says Kate. "That's okay, I don't want the job. It's just gratifying that my skills will be in demand when I finish my degree, you know? The job market sucks for recent graduates."

"What did you find out about Strex Corp?" asks Julie.

"Nothing concrete," says Kate. "But the office listings for their deep science division have way more
personnel than the company directory indicates, and half of them were just numbers, not names. Wei says their security encryption is pretty ridiculous for their corporate persona, too. I snuck a look at some of the other job postings – they're looking for psychiatrists, physicists, MechE's, and history-English double-majors."

Julie snorts. "Why?"

"English majors are very flexible," says Andre.

"What about the building itself?" asks Carlos. "Did you notice anything out of place?"

"The whole place smells like hot metal, and there were weird noises echoing in the stairwell," says Kate. "Also, it's only a seven-story building, but they've got at least thirteen floor buttons in their elevators. And Gary said the men's room was out of soap and paper towels but did have motivational posters hung up in front of each urinal and in all the stalls."

All three of them exchange horrified looks.

"Get back to the lab as soon as you can," says Carlos. "And stay together."

"Will do!" says Kate. "Bye, Carlos. Bye, Dr. Timmons. Bye, Doct—"

"Good night, Jon-boy," says Julie, reaching back and poking Carlos' phone.

"That's certainly a load off my mind," says Andre. "I'm glad they're all right. Well, mostly all right."

"And now we know that Gary and Wei are compromised, too," says Julie. "But not Kate. I guess you can add a section on committed polyamory to your wizard Kinsey report, Carlos."

"What about you?" asks Carlos. "You seemed... okay."

"Okay?" says Julie. "You're lucky I wasn't lying under her linac in a puddle of my own drool."

"She slowly caressed your arm and you didn't even flinch," says Andre. "And I apologize for how creepy that sounds, but I was watching her very intently and now all her actions are burned into my brain."

"Well, yeah, I didn't flinch," says Julie. "It's not her, isn't it?"

Carlos blinks. "It's not?"

"Well, obviously it's her, but it's not her, herself," says Julie. "I was trying to analyze her mind-whammy when Andre was draping himself seductively over her lab equipment. There's definitely a psychic pull there, don't get me wrong, but the majority of the effect seemed to be her triggering all the happy neurotransmitters and providing a convenient target. Why expend the extra energy chasing your prey when you can lure it in, right?"

"Right," says Carlos. "And that didn't work with you, because..."

"Because I'm asexual and heteroromantic, so I was never going to find her sexually attractive in the first place," says Julie, the duh implied. "It made it pretty to easy to sort out what was going on – well, when I thought about it later, anyway. At the time it was pretty distracting. She walloped us with a mental lap dance during our introductions, but after that she dropped the psychic shit and relied on typical social signals to manipulate our primed physiological responses. Andre's used to following the social script of 'Yay, I'm getting laid,' so his autonomic nervous system kept dancing to
her tune – no offense, Andre—"

"None taken."

"—But mine defaulted back to disinterest as soon as it got the chance. She can molest my sleeve all she wants, but even when I'm revved up I'm not gonna associate her with sexy times unless she's directly interfering and providing the connection herself."

She peers into the rear-view mirror at Carlos, who is gaping.

"You haven't figured this stuff out? Seriously?" she says. "That's it, I want co-authorship on your report. And somewhere to send an angry letter. I have serious concerns about the state of wizard sex ed."

"What about you, Carlos?" asks Andre. "You seemed pretty functional."

"I've dealt with the White Court before," says Carlos. The first time they met, he'd soulgazed Lara Raith, the power behind the throne; it was sort of like shooting yourself in the foot to keep from walking off a cliff, but the awful chorus of the Hunger entwining the remains of her soul was ultimately a lot less distracting than, you know, dying.

"Uh-huh," says Julie.

"What," says Carlos defensively. "I have!"

"Chill out, Anita Blake, I believe you," says Julie. "Any solutions you'd care to share with the class?"

"Not unless you've developed the ability to stare into someone's soul," says Carlos.

"Contrary to my reviews on Rate My Professor, I have not," says Julie. "Damn."

Carlos rubs his forehead. He needs more information. He's completely behind on the politics of the White Court, so he has no idea if Caroline Raith's working alone or with the support of her family or with the support of some of her family to take down the rest of her family or if she's not working for anything at all, because even creatures of the night need hobbies and this is hers. Underhanded corporate mergers and hostile takeovers do sound like something a Raith would do for fun.

But since the detente, any official contact with the White Court has been bumped up the command chain way beyond his pay grade. The White Court lives and breathes formality and intrigue (when they're not busy feeding on humans), so this is good in that actual diplomats are handling the diplomacy, but bad in that asking the diplomats to dish automatically involves you in their subtle machinations. In the old days, he used to just ask Harry, who somehow had multiple contacts within the White Court itself despite usually being as subtle as a brick to the head.

It's not the old days anymore. Carlos is just gonna have to figure it out himself.

"I'm reporting this to the Council," he says to Julie. "Can you write down what you told us before?"

"Sure," she says. "We'll be a regular Masters and Johnson."

"Don't say 'Johnson'," groans Andre.

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“People were calling in about that new scientist from Strex Corp again, even though she’s from
Desert Bluffs,” says Cecil. “Ugh.”

Carlos scowls down at his slice of gluten-free pizza. It's been a week, and Caroline Raith, MD, PhD, has yet to seduce, murder, or reveal her evil plans to any of the scientists. She's even been keeping clear of the town for the most part. He's almost starting to believe she really *is* just a regular Scientific Liaison Officer, except his orders from Luccio told him to under no circumstances let her snoop around too closely, all the dark-suited men from vague yet menacing government agencies have disappeared from their normal spyholes around the lab, and she seems overly interested in trying to get into Julie's private workshop.

Literally, not metaphorically.

“Dr. Raith,” he says, “is not from Desert Bluffs.” The flashback of her sister's Hunger rears up and leers at him. He shudders.

“Oh,” says Cecil. The temperature drops several degrees (also literally; it’s Pathetic Fallacy Week). “You’re on a last-name basis already?”

“I’ve met her before,” says Carlos, if 'dueling her cousin to the death' and 'fighting on the same side of a temporary alliance' counted as ‘meeting’. He spears a stray mushroom on his fork with more force than necessary – well, maybe not, it might have been making a break for it.

“Oh,” says Cecil again. “Is she nice?”

“That woman,” says Carlos flatly, “is evil.”

“Oh!” says Cecil, and warmth returns as the sun comes out from behind some clouds. “What happened?”

“Dozens of innocent bystanders died,” says Carlos. “Also, I got stabbed twice and then the whole place exploded.”

“Oh, dear,” says Cecil. “...Are you sure she’s not from Desert Bluffs?”

That makes Carlos smile. “Maybe I'm wrong,” he says. “But – you should probably stay out her way, Cecil. Everyone should. I’m sure she’s very busy and we don’t want to disrupt the valuable experiments she’s conducting for Strex Corp. It’s probably best if she finishes her research as soon as possible.” He taps the napkin dispenser. “Did you guys get that?”

They're sitting by the front windows of Big Rico's; one of the bushes just on the other side of the glass rustles as a leather-clad hand ascends from the foliage and gives him the thumbs up.

“Good,” says Carlos. He releases a dribble of power. The hand jerks out of sight, and a second later a sparking bluetooth earpiece arcs out of the bushes and lands on the sidewalk. “Sorry I’m in such a bad mood,” he says to Cecil. “How was your day?”

Now it’s Cecil’s turn to look aggrieved. “Steve Carlsberg,” he says, “called in today.” Carlos makes a sympathetic noise around a mouthful of pizza. He missed a good chunk of Cecil’s show after an unexpected exothermic reaction from one of Julie’s machines left his ears ringing for most of the afternoon.

“He started spouting off about the City Council’s initiative to collect Nielsen ratings for internet pornography viewership and how that entire industry is actually a front for a shadowy organization secretly shaping mankind’s baser urges for their own sinister purposes. And I said, ‘Of *course* that entire industry is actually a front for a shadowy organization secretly shaping mankind’s baser urges
for their own sinister purposes, *everyone knows* that our sexual preferences have, via pornography, long been manipulated to lower our self esteem and make us more emotionally and spiritually vulnerable to be preyed upon by a conspiracy of inhuman yet sexually ravenous succubi and incubi!'”

Carlos chokes on his pizza.

“—And then he said that the new scientist's hair is nicer than yours. Can you believe the nerve? Now, I'll allow that she has *more* hair than you, but nicer? No. Way.”

Cecil's voice thunders with outrage; Cecil's voice thunders with passion; Cecil's voice thunders with righteous indignation, all because someone, somewhere, does not think Carlos has the best hair in Night Vale. Carlos reaches across the table and twines his fingers around Cecil’s. “I don’t care what Steve Carlsberg thinks about my hair,” he says. "Just you.”

"Oh, Carlos," sighs Cecil, like a warm breeze in a lingering summer. He chews a bite of pizza contemplatively, then says, "You don't have to, you know – care about what I think, I mean. It's a free country, insofar as none of us can ever be truly free of inflexible fate. You can style or—" His eye twitches. "Cut... your hair... any way you want."

"I probably should get a trim," says Carlos.

Cecil gulps, but says, "If that's what you want."

"I don't have an opinion either way, but Doctor Renegade has been making noises about lab regulations," says Carlos. "She claims that if I can't pull it back I should be wearing a hairnet."

"Hair should be *free*, Carlos," Cecil hisses, thumping the table with his fist. The wind howls. "I refuse to let you submit yourself to such indignity! I will accompany you to the barber myself if that's what you need."

"Thank you, Cecil," says Carlos, oddly touched.

They walk arm in arm back to the lab. Cecil loves the lab, which probably has a lot to do with Carlos, but even he's not self-centered enough to take *all* the credit. Cecil remembers all the scientists' code names and ages and hobbies, can draw a floor-plan of the building, can repeat verbatim anything anyone says – as long as it's not about science. Fields of study and equipment names and uses escape him; scientific facts flow through him like water through a gradation sieve. But he keeps asking questions anyway, and hoards the gleanings of the answers that manage to stay with him until he can painfully but painstakingly bring them out into the light.

Wei is repairing one of the machines with a roll of duct tape in Lab Two. In Lab One, Andre and Kate are pointing what look like barcode scanners at various rocks, and Gary appears to be taking his bees out of a cooler one by one and shaving them. Carlos isn't sure where Julie is, but he hears her shout "Clear!", followed by the noise of a much more contained exothermic reaction, so everything is probably fine.

"Does shaving the bees make them qualified to fly without breaking the laws of physics?" asks Cecil.

"I'm pretty sure that's an urban legend," says Carlos. "Bees don't fly the same way as airplanes, so you can't use a standard fixed-wing model when calculating lift."

Cecil is still staring at him inquiringly, so he says, "They're more like helicopters."
"What—"

"Blue ones," says Carlos.

"Ohhh," says Cecil. "So... why do you shave them?"

"That's how you attach tracking devices," says Carlos. "See, bees can detect electromagnetic fields with their antennae, and Doctor Renegade uses them to identify likely hotspots for, uh—" He trails off as Cecil's hand insinuates itself in his back pocket.

"Electromagnetic fields?" asks Cecil huskily.

Carlos swallows and says, ever so casually, "You know, I think I left the readouts in my apartment. We should go double-check my calculations."

They're just getting into the more complicated parts of the proof when Carlos' subconscious, which has spent far too much of the week suffering from the effects of Dr. Raith's wiles, panics at the lack of sexual frustration and shoves his soulgaze with Lara Raith front and center.

Carlos flinches back as the discordant thrum of a horrible gaping maw and empty eyes grates across his mind. His knee slips off the edge of his mattress, and with the ingrained reflexes and natural grace of a life's worth of combat training, he falls off the bed.

"Carlos!"

"Sorry," he gasps.

Cecil's head appears over the side of the mattress. He looks delightfully mussed, and maybe Carlos can just – nope, there it goes again, his mental defences are still set at maximum cockblock.

"Are you all right?" Cecil asks.

"If I crawl under the bed, will you forget I'm here?"

"No," says Cecil seriously. "I work very hard to keep my object permanence issues at bay."

"Argh," says Carlos. He covers his face with his arm and wonders if it's possible to die of embarrassment.

"Do you think it's possible to die of embarrassment?" he asks.

"I'm pretty sure it's possible to die of anything," says Cecil. He starts climbing off the bed, and Carlos sits up as he asks, "Are you hurt?"


"Oh," says Cecil. "It's okay, Carlos, that happens to everyone."

"Argh," says Carlos again. He pulls his knees up and smushes his face against them.

Cecil starts rubbing soothing circles on his back. It would be very comforting, except for the part where Carlos needs comforting because he's sitting on the floor in his underwear after dramatically proving that he's a giant loser who gave himself supernatural ED. He'll have to stick to all those romantic and non-sexual activities from those pamphlets that Kate gave him, like holding hands and brushing each other's hair, and – actually, that sounds pretty nice, he could probably sell Cecil on
that.

He turns his head to look at Cecil. "Sorry," he says again.

"It's not your fault," says Cecil. "Is something bothering you?"

There's the standard concern for their safety, Carlos' ongoing anxiety about concealing his true identity, and his secret fears that he's actually a terrible boyfriend (definitely not helped by this most recent episode). And now Carlos has the exciting new dread that he'll end up deducing his own level of commitment to their relationship based on its comparison to true love by the reactions of a sexually ravenous succubus who may or may not be trying to make off with his friends' intellectual property and/or life forces. Because... he does love Cecil, he's almost certain. But he's terrified that what he'll find won't be enough; that he's leaving Cecil vulnerable when he should be the best-protected of them all; that he doesn't love Cecil anywhere near as much as he deserves.

"I don't want to bother you," he says.

"You won't," says Cecil.

"It's my job," says Carlos, bracing himself. One of the last things he wants to do is tell Cecil that the source of most of their relationship difficulties is now managing to interfere with their sex life, but... Cecil asked. "I don't like interacting with Dr. Raith and I'm worried about my team of scientists. This week has been very stressful."

"Ugh, I know what you mean," says Cecil. He slumps sideways against Carlos. "We still haven't replaced Vithya, and the new management is so... yeuchh. I try to keep a positive outlook, but I just don't think that a soulless corporate takeover of the majority of our town is really the best fit for Night Vale! And I haven't heard anything about Old Woman Josie in a couple days. I know she's a tough old bird, but there are all those wolves that come out at night in the used car lot, and sometimes she can get... carried away by the excitement." He sighs and buries his face in the back of Carlos' shoulder.

They sit in silence for a few moments. It's almost peaceful.

"I was thinking about tabouli for dinner tomorrow night," says Carlos at random.

"Really?" says Cecil. He kisses the back of Carlos' neck and sits up. Carlos leans back as well; Cecil puts an arm around his shoulders. "That sounds good. Can you make extra so I'll have leftovers when you're camping out at the monitoring station?"

"For sure," says Carlos. He's actually going to Texas to keep an eye on Meyers. He's worried that Buffalo Bill's pushing himself too hard, and he doesn't have anyone else to send for backup.

"Carlos?"

"Yes?"

"I don't mean to criticize," says Cecil. "But your room is pretty depressing."

"Let me guess," says Carlos. "It's the paint job."

"Oh, sure," says Cecil. "The paint job on the cinderblock walls."

"The concrete floor."
"The exposed pipes in the ceiling."

"My inadequately-proportioned bed."

"I actually don't mind that," says Cecil. "It's cozy." He gives Carlos a tiny smile, and Carlos can't help but return it.

"Can you stay?" he blurts. "I mean – I know we haven't... in a while, and I'm not really up for anything right now, but..." He meets Cecil's eyes, dark in the light of the one stubborn lamp. "I don't want you to leave."

Cecil reaches up and gently strokes a thumb down the bridge of Carlos' nose. "Of course I'll stay," he says.

Regardless of what Cecil claims, Carlos' bed really is way too small, so when he jolts awake in the middle of the night Cecil is draped over his back like a warm, breathing, multi-limbed blanket. He mumbles something into Carlos' hair.

"I'm fine," Carlos whispers. "Go back to sleep."

Cecil mumbles something else. Carlos squirms around and curls up against his chest, and Cecil relaxes. Carlos counts the slow, steady beats of his heart until he falls back asleep.

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"There you are," says Julie, before Carlos can even knock on her office door. "All your signal activity cut out four days ago, I was getting worried."

"Wait, are you tracking me?" says Carlos.

"Of course not!" says Julie, affronted. "I mean, not unless I activate the GPS and turn off the scrambling algorithm. Which I hardly ever do, unless I get bored. There's no way I'm paying for that data plan. So what happened to you?"

“I had some phone trouble,” says Carlos. He takes it out and puts it on her desk. It's in a plastic bag so he didn't lose any of the pieces.

"Seriously?" says Julie, pulling out a deformed lump of metal.

"This model is much better at stopping bullets, if that helps," says Carlos.

"You know, I don't remember Harry Potter getting into so many shootouts," she says.

"Harry Potter never had to go to Texas," says Carlos. “How are things here?"

“Meh, the librarians have escaped or something," says Julie.

Carlos heard; he's waiting for his tracking spells to pick something up. Going after a full-grown librarian is not a task to be undertaken lightly.

”—But more importantly, I’m pretty sure our systems were hacked by Lisa," continues Julie.

“Who?” asks Carlos.

“Lisa! From Weird Science!” says Julie. “’Mon, that was hilarious.”
“Never saw it,” says Carlos. “What did she get?”

“Well, unless she’s really into a half-written thesis on the impact of seismic fluctuations on the pollinator health of *Apis Mellifera* or five thousand links to Rick Astley videos, nothing. I un-networked all our sensitive research ages ago.”

“She hasn’t tried to get in the labs again, has she?”

“She dropped by to tempt us with private grants a few times,” says Julie. Then she sighs.

“It’s a trap, Julie,” says Carlos.

The screen on one of Julie’s computer flickers; over its speakers, Cecil announces his decision to call his boyfriend, which is a lost cause unless they put all the pieces of Carlos' phone in a metal can with a really long string attached to the other end.

“I know, I know,” says Julie. “It’s just – have you *seen* the size of her budget?”

"She—"

Carlos stops, because even though his phone is scattered all over Julie's desk, completely silent, not only has Cecil succeeded in calling it, someone has picked up on the other end.

Someone who sounds exactly like Carlos.

"What,” says Carlos – the real Carlos, not some, some phone-hacking imposter who is sounding a little too familiar for his own good, and if Carlos ever finds out who—

"Whoa,” breathes Julie, then, "Get out!"

"What?"

"I need to trace the call! Go be jealous downstairs or something."

"I'm not jealous," says Carlos, backing out of the office. "I'm concerned that someone has stolen my phone. And my voice. And my boyf— wait, do I really sound like that?"

"Out!"

He grabs the Danger Meter and another magazine for his gun and goes out to look for librarian victims the hands-on way. He bets his identity thief doesn't do anything this awesome. He's probably relaxing somewhere with a cold drink, chuckling at Carlos' confusion and revelling in his fully functional sex drive, but that just means he'll never see Carlos coming... as soon as Carlos finds out who and where he is.

~*~*~*~*~

Carlos does not find out who and where he is.

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"We don't have to be enemies, you know."

This is not the first time someone's said that to Carlos. However, it is the first time that someone's said it to him in the toiletries aisle at the Ralph's.
Dr. Raith pulls up beside him. Her shopping cart is mostly full of coffee, though there are a few containers of perfectly ripened strawberries and an incongruous bag of lime-flavored corn chips, which, why.

"You're right," says Carlos. "Stay away from the mortals under my watch, and I'll have no quarrel with you."

She waves a hand dismissively. "Your mortals are fine," she says. "It's not them I'm interested in."

"What do you want?" he asks. He doesn't think she'll actually tell him, but hey, it's worth a shot.

"Knowledge, naturally," she says. "After all, this is the most scientifically interesting community in the United States."

Carlos looks at her sharply, but she sounds nothing but genuine.

"Unless it's not in the United States, of course," she says. "I'll admit I've received conflicting results from my data. It's really quite fascinating."

"And what does Strex Corp want?" he asks.

"To share their mission statement with Night Vale," she says. "And then..."

"The world?"

"I was going to say Red Mesa," she says. "But as a shareholder, I am quite pleased at our ambitious plans for expansion." At the expression on his face, she says, "Oh, come now. You must have been to Desert Bluffs. Was it truly so horrible?"

"It was fine," says Carlos grudgingly.

She leans in suddenly, which since Carlos has been resolutely staring at her nose means he almost goes cross-eyed. "And don't you want some of that order for your town?" she asks. "There's no shame in submitting to those who have your best interests at heart and the means to show you your true desire."

Dr. Raith smells like flowers and musk and olive trees; her skin is as flawless up close as from a distance, and her lips are the exact color of blood. Carlos is having difficulty breathing.

"Disappointing," he says.

"I beg your pardon?"

"I bet myself a sundae we could have an entire conversation without resorting to weird sexual metaphors," he says. "Looks like I'm going to bed without dessert."

"Yes, I think you've been doing that a lot, lately," she says with thoughtful tone, and Carlos feels himself flush a hot, angry red.

She smiles at him kindly. "I'm sorry," she says. "I didn't mean to offend."

That, too, sounds nothing but genuine. Carlos knows she's playing some kind of game, but he suddenly feels way out of his depth.

"Apology accepted," he says, in lieu of a better strategy.
She inclines her head, then just... watches him. It's like being stared down by the wolves in the zoo – no, it's like being stared down by the wolves in the zoo if Simone Rigadeaux never snuck in to feed them subs under the mistaken impression they're a lost litter of puppies. Carlos gathers in his will.

"What kind of conditioner do you use?" asks Dr. Raith abruptly.

"What?"

"It's drier out here than I'm used to," she says. "I don't want split ends and my useless brother won't give me a straight answer."

With an almost titanic effort of self-control, Carlos manages not to gape at her. "The stuff with the coconuts," he says finally.

"Hmm," she says, plucking a bottle off the shelf and inspecting the label. Carlos leaves her reading the list of ingredients, her forehead wrinkled in a symmetrical and aesthetically-pleasing frown, while he beats a strategic retreat.

For the rest of the day, he feels unsettled, off-balance; like there's been a shift in the great, glowing coils of the universe.

~*~*~*~

"Carlos!" says Andre delightedly, when Carlos slinks into Lab One and collapses on a stool. "What can we do for you?"

"Can you figure out how to magically generate closed timelike curves without leaving behind a single trace?" he asks glumly.

"Do you have a particle accelerator we can borrow?" asks Julie.

"No," says Carlos.

"Then sorry," says Julie. "Tragically, I think this question is a little too theoretical even for me."

"Julie, why would you need a particle accelerator?" asks Andre with a frown.

"I always need a particle accelerator, Andre," says Julie, pointing her wrench at him for emphasis.

"Where would we even keep it?"

"I'd make room," says Julie, with an unsettling gleam in her eyes.

Carlos decides to change the subject before he has to veto any dangerous renovations. There are some places in Night Vale you really shouldn't dig. "How do you tell if someone's a robot?" he asks.

"Hex them and see what happens," says Julie. "Oh! That reminds me." She starts rummaging through a drawer.

"Unless it's Cecil," says Andre. "Or someone who might have a pacemaker. Or – Julie, did you finish the prototype? Already?"

"It's Cecil's new supervisor," says Carlos. Then he catches the strange metal cylinder Julie throws at his head. It's squat, like a hockey puck. "What's this?"

"We're working on new ambient energy dispersal units for our equipment," says Julie. "Do us a
favor and zap it."

"Just let me back up my files first," says Andre. He types some commands, then shuts down his computer. "You're all clear."

"If you're sure," says Carlos. He climbs off the stool and draws a circle, just in case, then concentrates on the puck and says, "K’as!"

It emits a single spark and stops humming.

"Okay, now press the button on the side," says Julie.

Carlos does. The puck erupts in smoke and a sudden flash of heat and a noise like firecrackers going off, and Carlos drops it with a yelp.

Julie hurls her wrench aside. "It worked!" she says, pulling on thick gloves.

"It’s supposed to do that?" says Carlos.

"Well, no," says Andre. He limps over and opens the window to let the smoke out. "But it did something!"

"That means the shielding is working!" says Julie, cradling the puck in her hands. "Now, if we've adjusted the scatter sensitivity on the input feeds correctly..." She starts wiring the puck into another machine.

"Thank you, Carlos," says Andre. "Your help is invaluable. Now, when you say that Cecil's supervisor is a robot, do you mean that he's clearly an electro-mechanical device? Or is he more of an android?"

"Please, he's Strex Corp," scoffs Julie. "He's probably a cyborg. Barely. Oh! Speaking of advanced and possibly dubious technology, I ran the trace on your phone."

"My phone?" says Carlos. "You were supposed to track down whoever it was that Cecil called!"

"Um, yeah," says Julie. "I did." She stares at him significantly.

"You have got to be kidding me," moans Carlos. He covers his face with his hands.

"Sorry, buddy," says Julie. "It was definitely yours. I'd like to see someone try to duplicate that."

"Plus your voice prints were a complete match," says Andre. "You have very nice diction, by the way."

"Don't say diction," mutters Carlos. He's starting to see the appeal of walking around with his eyes shut all the time: if he ignores the time vortices for long enough, maybe they'll go away. He's almost willing to try anything at this point.

"There was no sandstorm and no one else got cloned and murdery, so according to Occam's Razor, future you dropped into town and took some calls," says Julie.

Carlos drops his hands. "I'm pretty sure that's not how Occam's Razor works," he says.

"Do you have a simpler solution? No? Then shush," says Julie. "Besides, remember that City Council meeting that not-you crashed last year? We knew this was a possibility."
"I guess," says Carlos, still irritated.

"It's not confirmed, I'll give you that... Hey," she says, and kicks him in the ankle.

"Ow! What?"

"If that is future you, and you don't stop by the labs at least once on your way back to the future, I'm gonna kick your ass," says Julie. "I've got questions, bub."

"Oh, yes," says Andre. "Please do, Carlos!"

"Fine," says Carlos. "I promise that if I get some free time while being tossed around the Currents of Time like a beach ball, I'll come fill out a survey."

"You think I'm joking, but I'm not," says Julie, brandishing a piece of paper at him. "I've got seventeen questions written already."

"I'm going home," says Carlos. "Cecil's waiting for me."

Andre shoots him a beaming smile, which is normal enough, but he's somewhat alarmed when Julie suddenly grins at him, wide and sly.

"What?" he asks.

"Just thinking about your phone repairs," she says. When he continues to squint at her with suspicion, she adds, brightly, "How do you feel about titanium plating?"

~*~*~*~

Later that night, Carlos is glaring at his calculations, which are supposed to tell him how you turn the incredible power of the delicately-balanced booby-trapped containment field that is Night Vale into something that punches holes in both said containment field and time itself.

They don't. Only the fact that all his walls are made of cinder blocks prevents Carlos from punching a few holes in things.

Well, that and the fact that he'd have to stand up, depriving Cecil of his pillow. Cecil's head is in Carlos' lap and his legs are hooked over the side of Carlos' couch. They're having a quiet evening in, which is probably more quiet than most because Carlos still doesn't have anything more sophisticated than a record player in his apartment, but Cecil seems perfectly content to lie on Carlos and stare at a blank newspaper while he imagines the news.

At least, he seemed perfectly content; now the newspaper's tented over his face. Carlos lifts it with the end of his Sharpie. Cecil's asleep.

Carlos feels his irritation drain away. He carefully slides the newspaper from Cecil's limp fingers and drops it and his notebook on the end table. Cecil gives a small sigh but doesn't wake up when Carlos smoothes his hair back from his face.

"So, you talked to my – my future self, or whatever," says Carlos, quietly. "Any insights on the situation?"

"Carlos," Cecil mumbles.

"That's us," says Carlos. "I wish I could tell you how."
He runs his fingers through Cecil's hair. Cecil doesn't stir. His face is relaxed and open in sleep, vulnerable, and Carlos is nearly overwhelmed by how much trust Cecil is placing in him: not just by taking a nap on him now, but also by loving him in the first place while Carlos muddles around panicking at feelings.

But for once that doesn't make him panic, because, well. If Cecil's put up with him for this long, then he also trusts Carlos to figure it out, and of all the things Carlos doesn't know, the one he will never learn is how to give up.

"I wish I could tell you – well, there's a lot of things I wish I could tell you, Cecil," he says. "I will one day. I promise."

Carlos' newly-repaired phone beeps.

"Porkchop sandwiches!" yelps Cecil, flailing upright.

Carlos grabs him before he falls off the couch. "Porkchop sandwiches?" he repeats with a grin.

"I am awake, right?" says Cecil, clutching at Carlos' arm. "This isn't just another level of a recursive delicatessen-based dreamworld?"

Carlos pinches him by his elbow.


"My phone," says Carlos. "Sorry, I haven't fixed the volume since I got it back."

"It's fine, there was far too much mustard. And it's only—" Cecil squints at his watch. "9:45. AM. Hmm..."

Carlos leans forward and picks up his phone from the coffee table. He has a text message from Julie. "Hey, Cecil."

"Yes, Carlos?"

"Would you mind helping one of my colleagues with a scientific inquiry?" he asks, and Cecil lights up.

"Me? Wow!" he says. "Of course, anything to further scientific advancement in Night Vale."

"She'd like to know if your supervisor has ever injured a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm," says Carlos.

Cecil's brow furrows. "You mean Daniel? Hmm," he says. "You know, he did just stand there when the flightless insects tripped Intern Maureen down the stairs..."

Cecil hooks his chin over Carlos’ shoulder to watch as Carlos dutifully texts this back, then slides an arm around his back. "So," he says nonchalantly. "Do you have any other avenues of research that need exploring?"

"I'm not – I can't—" Carlos sighs. "I'm still really... stressed," he mutters.

"It’s all right," says Cecil, kissing the edge of Carlos’ jaw. He reclaims his paper and settles back next to Carlos, though he keeps an arm around him. “Do you want to talk about it?”

Carlos groans and hides his face in his notebook.
Cecil chuckles a little. “Well, if you change your mind, you can tell me about it whenever you want.”

“Thanks,” says Carlos, into his ciphered equations.

“Carlos,” says Cecil, and Carlos turns his head to meet Cecil’s gaze. His eyes look lovely in the light of the oil lamps. “You can tell me anything whenever you want.”

“Whenever?” asks Carlos.

“Whenever,” Cecil repeats firmly.

“I will,” says Carlos, half-impulsively but half-not, because it didn’t matter if Cecil was asleep, he promised. He promised and he meant it.

~*~*~*~

"In my defense," says Julie, "this was a very small fire."

"It was a very small fire on me," says Carlos. He coughs and tries to find a clean piece of his clothing to wipe his streaming eyes. His lab coat took the brunt of the explosion; the residue from the fire extinguisher is much more uncomfortable.

"Yeah, it looked totally cool, dude!" says Gary.

"Can I put this on YouTube?" asks Wei, phone in one hand, fire extinguisher in the other.

"That's probably not a good idea," says Andre, though he loses all his helpfulness points for sounding kind of sad about it.

"Here you go!" says Kate, handing Carlos a towel.

"If we all get attacked, I'm saving you first," he tells her. "What did you do?" he asks Julie.

"I eliminated a method of opening the door on the house in the Desert Creek development that doesn't exist, is what I did," says Julie. "You know, you don't have to look so judgmental. Alfred Nobel invented dynamite."

"Did he accidentally test it on his friends?" asks Carlos sourly, carefully trying to wipe Purple-K off his face.

"Is everything all right?"

With an almost choreographed precision, they all turn towards the new voice.

Caroline Raith, MD, PhD, is peering in the open lab window. "I was just passing by and I noticed the smoke and chemical cloud," she says.

"Unexpected exothermic reaction," says Julie shortly.

Dr. Raith smiles. "I'm sorry to hear that, my dear Juliet."

Julie's eyes narrow. "Sweet Caroline," she says, "Suck my—"

"We're a little busy," interrupts Carlos.

"Surely there must be something I can do to help," says Dr. Raith. It comes out more a purr than
anything. A vein throbs on Julie's forehead, Andre's eyes fog over, and Wei accidentally squeezes off the fire extinguisher onto his feet.

"You can't help," says Gary. "You're too hot to put out fires." Then he shoots Dr. Raith double finger guns.

A faint look of consternation passes over her face, like she bit into an apple and accidentally ate a worm.

"I just remembered!" says Kate. "I left all my geology in the lounge, you guys should come help me find it." She links arms with Gary and Wei and forcibly pulls them from the room.

"I'll... be in my office," says Andre. He wobbles until he remembers to grab his cane, then walks stiffly from the room.

Dr. Raith leans against the window sill – casual enough, though Carlos notices she's careful to avoid touching the screen and and triggering the lab's wards. Her gaze sweeps over him, lingering on his hair, which is still recovering from its encounter with bright purple potassium bicarbonate. She raises an eyebrow.

Carlos narrows his still-watering eyes at her. Despite the midmorning heat, she seems perfectly cool and collected, as though the bright sun had no effect on her other than to pick out the gleaming blue highlights in her hair. Carlos feels his heartbeat accelerating. He hopes she's getting thousands of split ends from the sun damage.

"Well," says Julie. "You're certainly still here."

"You haven't told me whether or not you are in need of assistance," she says calmly. "And I never pass up an opportunity to network – though usually not through a window."

"We're taking inspiration from the McDonald's and testing out Cuil Theory," says Julie. "I'll send you a consent form. Or a hamburger."

"Excuse me, ma'am." A person in a balaclava and leather cape comes into view. "If you wouldn't mind moving, I need to... start... my surveillance..."

"Of course, Officer," says Dr. Raith with a smile. The officer's mouth falls open in silent adoration. "Perhaps we could share?"

The officer nods vigorously, then drops down out of view. Dr. Raith uses them as a step-stool to alight on the window sill, crossing her legs primly. "I think you'll find a 2% vinegar solution in hot water should neutralize most of your chemical suppressant," she says.

Julie crosses her arms. "Do I tell you how to run the Small Hardon Collider?"

"I'm not your enemy, Juliet," says Dr. Raith, a little sadly.

Julie snorts.

"I know what it's like to have to fight twice as hard to gain the same respect as everyone else," says Dr. Raith. "To have that respect so easily rescinded, because you're different from the others. To have your work questioned by small-minded men. To have your will subsumed to someone else's whims. You deserve more."

"Well, obviously," says Julie. "I don't see what that has to do with you, though."
"Strex Corp is always looking for project leaders and will judge you only by your efforts," says Dr. Raith. "I've made sure of that. And I find myself in need of someone who excels in calculating energy dispersal in systems that do not yet exist – a practical theoretical physicist, if you will."

"I won't," says Julie.

"I can offer you opportunities you never dreamed of," says Dr. Raith. "You're wasted in Night Vale."

"Knowledge is never wasted," says Julie. "I chose to come here. And no, it's not the work I've dreamed of doing, but it's still worthwhile."

Dr. Raith puts one hand on the screen, carefully; white sparks crawl around her fingers. "Juliet," she says, her voice low, intimate. "It is our work that will shape the course of history. People like us should never have to settle for worthwhile."

"You—" Julie takes a deep breath. "I'm committed to my own research right now, thank you," she says. "Exothermic reactions and all. So please go away."

"Juliet," says Raith, and it's an admonishment and an invitation and a promise all at once. Her eyes gleam with the barest hint of silver.

"She said no," says Carlos.

She removes her hand from the screen; Carlos feels the wards subside. "Ah, Warden Ramirez," she says. "I rather think you'll find she did not."

She uncrosses her legs and daintily steps down from her perch; somewhere below her, the Sheriff's Secret police officer lets out a groan. They don't sound like they're in pain.

"You'll think about my offer," she says, no hint of a question in her voice, and she walks away from the lab without a backwards glance.

Julie goes to the window.

"Wait," says Carlos, starting after her a second late.

"She's gone," says Julie. "Hey, watch it down there, this is a No Exhibitionism and Public Indecency Zone."

There's a mumbled reply, then the sound of bushes rustling as the officer retreats.

Julie opens the screen and reaches over the sill, feeling around the outer wall. She comes up with something that looks like a tiny brass button.

"Thank God," she says. "I was actually starting to think she really liked me."

"Do you want me to take care of it?" asks Carlos.

Julie frowns at the bug for a moment before saying, "No." She places it gently on a lab table.

"Network this," she says, and hits it with her wrench. Several times. Then she drops it in the remainders of Andre's coffee.

"Feel better?"
"Yeah, sure. It's awesome being reminded that I've been shuffled around from campus to campus because I'm too obnoxious to make anyone feel self-righteous about their diversity stats," says Julie bitterly. "It's all well and good to talk about leadership and innovation and pushing the boundaries of the discipline, but as soon as it comes from someone like me it's all, 'We recognize that you're gifted, but what we really need someone who's a team player, Kwan. We need someone who understands how everyone fits.' I know how they want us all to fit; it's the same damn way they've always wanted us to fit, and it's bullshit."

"And let me guess," says Carlos. "The best person for the job usually turns out to be some old white guy."

"Of course," says Julie. "Don't tell me the secret wizard illuminati have to deal with this, too."

"We award our positions by seniority," says Carlos. "All you have to do is stay alive long enough and you're eligible. So when fifty-five percent of the most recent members are white and seventy-seven percent are male... what happened to everyone else?"

Julie scowls. "Damn the Man."

Carlos sighs. Then he pokes Andre's mug with a frown. "It's making noises."

Julie picks it up and dumps its contents out the window. There's a faint protest.

"Sorry," she says to the officer. "Go back to sleep."

She leans back in and shuts the window. "Stupid sexy vampire," she mutters. Then she pulls out a cleaning cloth and starts wiping down the machine that caused all the excitement in the first place.

"Stupid sexy vampire and her stupid multiple PhDs and her stupid publishing history in well-respected journals and her stupid state-of-the-art equipment and her stupid, stupid funding." A flange flops down; she shoves it back into place. "I can't believe she's one of the few people to respect me for my mind."

The flange falls off, followed by half the machine. Julie's eye twitches.

"I have to go recalibrate my ion accelerators," she snarls, and stalks out of the room.

"I'm filling the emergency shower tank with ice cubes," says Carlos.

"We're legally obligated to keep it between sixty and a hundred degrees Fahrenheit!" comes the shouted reply. "But I get first dibs!"

~*~*~*~

It's a beautiful evening for November: the air warm, the sun lingering long after the projected time for sunset.

Carlos stalks up to the elementary school, wearing his cloak, carrying a mop, and trying, with limited success, to quash the rage boiling up inside him. The parking lot is littered with toppled barricades and smoldering debris. He grabs a fleeing parent and snarls, "Desktop or laptop?"

The man blinks at him, overcome by the apparent disparity of a hooded figure existing right in front of him and communicating via normal human speech and transporting cleaning supplies. "Wh-what?"
“The computer. Meghan Wallaby’s computer. Is it a desktop or a laptop?”

“Um,” said the man. “D-desktop?”

“Thank you,” says Carlos, and lets go of his shirt.

He goes to a side door. It’s locked. He resists the urge to disintegrate it and instead bangs on it with the mop handle, in a pattern of three sets of three that echo and grow louder without any interference on his part.

The door opens, and a hooded figure stands before him. He hands it the mop.

The janitor inspects the mop for a second, then nods and stands back. Carlos walks past it. The classrooms are dark, but the hallway is lit by a strobing series of fluorescent lights blinking on and off in a complex pattern.

At least, until he gets through with them.

He strides down the hall, and the lights explode in showers of sparks above him. The computer’s stilted inhuman voice cuts in and out as the speakers for the PA system blow one by one. The electronic locks on the classroom doors disengage in puffs of smoke; parents and teachers begin creeping out, hugging the wall and staying far, far away from him and the storm of malfunctioning technology and the shades of the janitors floating after, gathering in a great custodial mass.

The last of the lights goes out. He hisses “Ek’!” and a tiny globe of burning blue winks into existence. He kicks in the door to the gym.

The computer lurks across the basketball court, glowing golden in the darkness, ignoring the lone adult man’s hand typing frantically at the keyboard. Carlos can just make out the table where Cecil’s microphone sits, abandoned. His chair has tipped over.

A floor polisher turns on him with a small roar, but he hexes it with barely a second thought and it fizzles to a halt.

He snarls, "Aj chan," and whirls his staff around his head once.

His ears pop and the emergency exits of the gym fly open at the change in air pressure. Hooded figures pour inside. They spiral around the computer, blocking it from view, and its golden light begins flickering wildly.

Carlos walks past the hooded figures, reaches down, and yanks the plug out of the wall.

The golden glow dies.

The emergency lights begin to flick on one at a time, except the ones nearest Carlos, who is yanking at the handle to the custodial closet. It’s locked.

He gathers up his will, but then a mop handle appears in front of him and gently but inexorably pushes him to the side. A vague hand reaches forward. The lock on the door clicks, and the hooded figure steps back as it opens.

Cecil is inside, alive and well and struggling to get untangled from the hose of a shop-vac. “Oh, hello —” he begins, and trips over a power cord.

Carlos catches him, wrapping his arms around him and pulling him close.
Cecil freezes, then says, “Um, thank you for saving me?” and pats Carlos stiffly on the back.

Several seconds later, Cecil says, “I’m very grateful, but I need to get back to my broadcast, and also I’m in a committed relationship with my boyfriend, so if you could just—”

Carlos lets him go. He watches Cecil fix his shirt, ask the hooded figure next to him a few questions, and swagger back to the microphone. Carlos lets his miniature star extinguish and sinks down to the floor as Cecil says, calmly, “Ladies and gentlemen, I am back.”

He huddles by the closet and listens to the rest of the show live, surrounded by janitors humming in monotone and mopping up spilled floor polish.

~*~*~*~

Carlos waits until he sees a lamp turn on in Cecil’s apartment before getting out of his car and letting himself into the building. The lights in the stairwell stutter as he takes the steps two at a time. He forces himself to calm down and walk to Cecil’s door.

Play it cool, he thinks. He knocks and shoves his hands in his pockets. Play it cool.

“Carlos!” says Cecil as he opens the door. “...Carlos?”

Carlos realizes he’s just standing there, staring at Cecil.

“Oof,” says Cecil, because now Carlos is hugging him, squeezing tight, his ear tucked next to the thunder of Cecil’s pulse.

“Sorry,” says Carlos, but he doesn’t let go. “Today’s broadcast was very stressful.”

“Oh, Carlos,” says Cecil, and now he hugs Carlos back, because this is his rightful boyfriend and not a handsy eldritch apparition. “I do apologize. I try to be careful, but, well, sometimes the truth requires a blood-price. Journalism is a demanding mistress.”

"Are you all right?” Carlos asks, still slightly muffled by Cecil’s shoulder.

Cecil sighs and leans into the hug. Carlos can feel the muscles of his back relaxing under his arms.

"I feel better now that you’re here,” he admits. "I want Megan to have her own computer, but I can’t say I was looking forward to an evening of mistrustfully watching my appliances for any signs of aggression."

"I'll keep them in line," says Carlos. "You're safe with me."

"As safe as anyone can be," says Cecil, but with a happy kind of existential dread.

Cecil gives great hugs. One hand is stroking Carlos’ back and the other is petting his hair. “I love your hugs,” says Carlos, as the last shreds of play it cool give up the ghost and dissolve into metaphorical ectoplasm.

“I’ve won awards,” says Cecil modestly.

Carlos snorts into Cecil’s shoulder. “How many people are you hugging?”

“Regularly? Just Janis and you, pretty much,” says Cecil, and Carlos feels like his heart has been hugged, too: painfully tight but comfortingly warm. “I was embraced by a hooded figure today, though.”

"Regularly? Just Janis and you, pretty much,” says Cecil, and Carlos feels like his heart has been hugged, too: painfully tight but comfortingly warm. “I was embraced by a hooded figure today, though.”
“Oh?” says Carlos casually.

“I politely declined, of course,” says Cecil. “I think it was just lonely.”

Carlos straightens, though he keeps his arms around Cecil’s waist. “Cecil...” he says.

“Yes, Carlos?”

Carlos opens his mouth, closes it, then says, “Sometimes my job is dangerous too.”

Cecil sighs. “We’re like two ships, passing in the night, briefly sharing the tiniest of lights as we signal each other in the darkness.”

“With our candles burning at both ends,” says Carlos.

Cecil smiles. “Briefly illuminating a warm room as a bird flies in from the night and leaves through the opposite window.”

“Live fast, die young, leave a good-looking corpse?” says Carlos.

“You can’t just leave a corpse, Carlos,” says Cecil. “There are corpse disposal units for a reason.”

For some reason, this strikes Carlos as the funniest thing he’s heard in days. He lets out an embarrassing honk of laughter, and that sets Cecil off, too. It's not his normal baritone chuckle, but a high breathless burble, bursting out on the last surges of adrenaline.

“Carlos,” says Cecil, one hand covering his mouth in an unsuccessful attempt to stifle his sniggering. The other is still tangled in Carlos' hair, clinging to it like a lifeline. "Carlos, are we having hysterics?”

“Results—” gasps Carlos. He ruthlessly quashes his giggles and manages to finish, “Results seem pretty conclusive.”

"Usually I don't laugh in the face of danger," says Cecil. "Or, well, at its b-b-b-backside..." and Carlos loses it again at Cecil's total and utter failure to keep a straight face at the pinnacle of elementary school humor.

Cecil drops his head onto Carlos' shoulder; Carlos can feel him shaking. He hopes it's with laughter. He pulls Cecil closer, just in case.

"Cecil, I..." He hiccups and continues, "I – I would really miss you if you were gone.”

Cecil straightens and presses their foreheads together. “I’d miss you, too,” he says, and maybe he understands what Carlos is trying to tell him, despite the secrets and deceptions and inappropriate laughter. Maybe one day Carlos will just be able to say it outright.

Right now, all he’s got left are some high-pitched snorts and a bad case of hiccups and wow, even disregarding his other issues, he is the least cool boyfriend ever. But the corners of Cecil’s eyes are crinkled with genuine amusement, and when Carlos smoothes a thumb across the delicate skin under his eyelashes, wiping away a few clinging drops of saltwater, he lets them flutter shut.

They open, filled with determination, even though he's biting his lip against pent-up mirth. “The Victorians invented a cure for hysterics, you know,” he says unsteadily.

“Oh?” says Carlos, and great, that was a titter, he actually tittered.
“You’ll like it. It’s science,” says Cecil, and it turns out you have to stop laughing when you’re kissing each other breathless.

~*~*~*~

Carlos sets off the sprinkler system on the top three floors.

They ignore it.

~*~*~*~

"I hate this thing inside me," Dr. Raith says conversationally. She reaches up, pulls the last box of persimmon chipotle Flaky-Os off the back of the highest shelf, and hands it to Carlos before he's forced to decide between climbing, jumping, or using magic to get them.

Returning home without Cecil's favorite cereal is not an option, so he accepts the box and says, "I'm... sorry?" Dr. Raith's shopping cart is now evenly split between more lime-flavored corn chips, coffee, and bottles of red wine.

"I was born into privilege," she says. "I knew there would be obstacles ahead of me when I chose the path of natural philosophy, but I was confident that between my intellect and my family's connections I would overcome them. The latter came with a price I should have discovered. I did not learn until too late that my birthright—" She sneers genteelly at the word. "—Would be the greatest obstacle of them all. On that day, I vowed I would never be caught unknowing again.

"You kine are lucky," she continues. "Your passion inspires you, gives you purpose, drives you to greater heights. You may know the agony of dreams deferred, but you are more than that. There's always more of you." She whips her head up with a clearly inhuman speed and grace; her eyes are bright silver, and they pin Carlos in place with their intensity. “You can never know true Hunger. Emptiness. Void.” Her gaze shifts over his shoulder, and she bares her teeth in a jungle cat grin.

There's a noise behind him, like something falling off the shelf – or someone dropping something.

There's a pull to her more primal than gravity. She's close enough to touch, close enough to be drawn in, close enough to cross the event horizon where escape becomes impossible. All his instincts are begging him to give in and give up.

Carlos breaks free of her enthrallment and gathers his will. She focuses back on him; her eyes have started to fade back to grey before she looks away.

“My family thinks there’s only one path to power," she says, gently touching a box of cereal. “But creating new technology, changing the way the world operates, deciphering how the universe itself works – isn’t that the greatest power of all?”

“So spying on and manipulating Night Vale is just for fun?” asks Carlos. He has to work to keep his posture relaxed, confident and untroubled. He wishes he could check on whoever's behind him, but though Dr. Raith looks fine – normal – now, he doesn’t dare turn his back on or take his eyes off her.

She smiles – a real smile this time, beautiful and a little sad. “It is my duty, after all." At Carlos' no-doubt skeptical expression, she says, "Scientific Liaison Officer. I chose my title. Strex Corp often finds itself... uncomfortable with the creativity and license needed for any true innovation – a common failing for those who entrenched themselves in power. Under my supervision, however, our scientists – and yours – are allowed the latitude needed to work to their utmost capabilities. I determine the developments my fellow board members would find most interesting and monitor the rest personally, so they... need not trouble themselves."
"You've been covering for us," says Carlos in disbelief.

"I told you, Warden Ramirez," she says. "We don't have to be enemies. And one only needs a common purpose in order to be an ally."

She pushes her cart past him. "My apologies, dear," she says to Sadie the checkout clerk, transfixed in the midst of a sale sticker rampage. Dr. Raith picks up a box of instant oatmeal from the floor and returns it to Sadie's hands, then pats her on the cheek. Sadie shivers and shakes her head dazedly, like she's coming out of a dream. Her eyes follow Dr. Raith as she heads to the checkout lines, but the rest of Sadie does not; after a moment, she's even able to look away. She re-shelves the oatmeal and puts a sticker on its label with trembling fingers.

Carlos leans against his shopping cart and tries to take deep, calming breaths. His first impression from that encounter was that while Dr. Raith might be more unstable than Francium-215, she could control herself around potential victims; that she didn't buy into either the White Court's or Strex Corp's mission statements; that she was dangerous, but not, right now, to him or the mortals around him.

But a first impression isn't good enough, because Carlos has no doubt that everything he saw was exactly what Dr. Raith wanted him to see. The White Court thrives on back-room back-stabbings; there’s no way she’s lasted this long without mastering the shadiest of politics, learning to seize whatever advantage she can, engineering the downfall of her rivals with soft words and sharp smiles and discarding her allies when they outlive their usefulness. If she wants them to help each other, it's so he can advance her cause.

Dr. Raith is playing on his sympathy so she can subtly strong-arm him into doing what she wants. Carlos knows this. Carlos knows that she most likely knows Carlos knows this.

He just wishes she didn't sound like she was telling the truth at the same time.

~*~*~*~

Carlos rolls into town at 5:30 in the morning after losing over a day in the Nevernever. That hasn't happened in a while, oddly enough; Night Vale seems much more closely synced with there than the mortal world. It should probably bother him, but honestly he's grateful for any stability that comes from a known source. Better the devil you know from the underworld you know, and all that.

It's a little weird when Carlos realizes that he didn't have to really think about coming to Night Vale. He was just in East LA a few days ago, so it's not like it's a problem; he went to his cousin Angie's quinceañera, waited tables for Nita, and followed up on a tip from Elaine Mallory just in time to watch a warehouse go up in a pure-white blaze of burning magnesium. But when he left Edinburgh last night (subjective time) he detoured through Nepal and ran across the floodplain without doing anything more than noting that the desert and the mountain and the blinking light were back, though they looked much farther away. He can remember all the details of his journey, so it's not as if he wasn't paying attention. He just... assumed Night Vale was his destination.

The streets are nearly empty; so is the lab, with only Julie asleep at her desk. Carlos lets himself into his apartment and tries not to think how empty that feels, too. Cecil had stayed with him while they fixed the water damage in his place; he was only here a few days, but now all the rooms feel like they're both too small and too large without him. The threshold quivers with tension like a pet waiting for their owner to come home. He drops his gear in the workroom and is about to head to bed when he notices something out of place.
There's a note on the table in his handwriting. After he transliterates it and decrypts the cipher, it lists this month's passcode and ¡¡You're moving in with Cecil!! :) :) :)

Carlos sits down rather abruptly.

He checks just in case the paper has been enchanted somehow. It hasn't.

He stares at the message for a few moments, then stumbles to his feet and goes in search of a phone.

"Carlos?" asks Cecil. His voice is tinged with sleep and concern. "Is everything all right?"

"...Yes?" says Carlos, still staring at the note. "I mean – yes. Yes, I am all right."

"Good!" says Cecil. He yawns. "How are you feeling this morning?"

"Uh," says Carlos. "Confused. Did... something happen yesterday?"

There's a loaded silence from the other end of the line.

"Cecil?"

"You don't remember?" he asks, neutrally.

"Scientifically speaking... no," says Carlos.

There's another pause, fraught with a meaning Carlos wasn't here to learn, and then Cecil says, "Well, I won't hold you to anything you don't remember, of course—"

"I wrote myself a note," says Carlos. "Did we agree to live together?"

"Yes," says Cecil miserably. "There was that whole business with the condos, and then you suggested that we get our own place – not a condo – and said some very romantic things and then left to take care of some science. But it wouldn't be right to push you into something you—"

"The note has two sets of exclamation points and three smiley faces," says Carlos, "Which suggests that I was really happy and excited. I'm, uh, still happy and excited. If you still want to."

"I do!" says Cecil, and Carlos has to sit down again, because he was not expecting those words to be quite so full of connotation and denotation and general... wordiness.

But not, he notes through a numb haze, in a bad way.

"Can I come over?" he asks faintly.

"Of course!" says Cecil.

"I love you," says Carlos, shoving the words out before he tries to second-guess himself. He holds his breath.

"I love you, too," says Cecil warmly, and hangs up the phone.

Carlos blinks at the receiver. It starts beeping at him, so he reaches up and puts it back on the cradle.

The inside of his head is very loud right now; he starts going through his breathing exercises and tries to deal with the thoughts one by one. Item: he's in love with his boyfriend and they're moving in together. Item: he'll have to go through all his field notes and documentation and see if his
impersonator had access to anything classified. Item: because they've already stolen the yesterday Carlos didn't have and tricked Cecil into thinking they were Carlos. Item: how dare they. Item: he'll have to alert Luccio of a potential security breach and get the passcodes changed. Item: where the hell do they get off asking Carlos' boyfriend to move in with them??? Item: a condo doesn't seem like that terrible an idea. Item: random imposters are better at Carlos' relationship than he is. Item: who knows how long it would take Carlos to get his act together, so... maybe that was a favor? Item: Cecil loves him – the real him, so there. Item: Carlos told Cecil he loves him and... and...

Carlos hates his likely future self but possibly his double/clone/unrelated but identical entity/other. But he also hates himself (his actual self) a little, because he's been holding onto saying 'I love you' for months and yet had the gall to expect Cecil... he doesn't even know. Have some big, dramatic reaction that would make Carlos feel good, and Carlos may be so bad at this the universe has arbitrarily assigned him a stunt double, but even he can tell that's... that's... that's the opposite of what love means. Love is waking up at the ass-crack of dawn and filling your boyfriend in when he can't even remember all the romantic things he said and did and shit.

"You asked me on a date in February," blurs out Carlos as soon as Cecil opens the door.

Cecil blinks. "I did? What—"

"I said yes," says Carlos. He shoves a piece of paper into Cecil's hands. "And then you got re-educated because of this list. I wrote it down in case it's important. Well, it is important, it's all important because it was yours to remember, and sorry, I probably should have told you this before but I didn't want to upset you, but actually it was sort of because I didn't want to upset me either, since everything was pretty horrible after you forgot—"

Cecil is looking at him with concern, so he quickly adds, "Because throat spiders. But the point is this should be about both of us not being upset and I should have reminded you sooner."

Cecil takes the list. "Hazelnut—"

"Shh!" says Carlos wildly. He lunges inside, sandwiching Cecil safely between him and the wall as he claps his hand over Cecil's mouth.

Cecil meets his gaze steadily. He reaches out to shut the door, then gently pries Carlos' hand off his mouth. He kisses Carlos' palm and laces their fingers together.

"Your eye is twitching," he says.

"I might have to sit down," says Carlos. But he manages to stay upright as Cecil slides a hand up his neck into his hair and tips their heads together.

"I can't get re-educated this week," says Cecil. "They're still trying to contain a puppy infestation at the re-education center."

"Good," says Carlos.

"If we file a Do Not Remember form, you can request access to my list of thought crimes and ask for recommended recovery times. It's in a data table, you like those."

"I do enjoy data tables," says Carlos.

The edges of Cecil's eyes crinkle in a smile. "I'm not upset," he says. "Well, I'm a little upset we could have started dating four months before we did, but... we got there in the end, right? I wouldn't change our relationship for anything."
"I wouldn't either," says Carlos. "I love you. I don't know if I said that yesterday, but if I didn't, I should have."

"You did," says Cecil. He adds, shyly, "I, uh. Made a recording? If you wanted to hear it."

"Only if I can take notes so I can say it all again," says Carlos.

In addition to a variety of meaningful poetic science metaphors, the other Carlos told Cecil he loved him in three languages and $9x-7i > 3(3x-7u)$, solve for $i$. It's going to be pretty tough to beat, but Carlos is up to the challenge.

~*~*~*~

Cecil ends up being half an hour late to work when Carlos drops him off. He doesn't get in trouble, because it turns out that android supervisors, like vampires, are also vulnerable to the power of love.

Or a well-placed hex, whatever. Carlos knows what he means.

Chapter End Notes

100% GENUINE BEE FACTS

Thanks again for reading and commenting and kudos-ing! And don't worry about those noises – that was just me expressing my feelings at the newest Google Docs app update.

I had a lot of feelings. A lot.

It's time for another round of cheers for my amazing beta, Libraflyter. She is both an excellent editor and somehow still friends with me despite me giving her a story 150K longer than either of us agreed to. Go to your local library and whisper "Hip-hip, huzzah!" three times to show your gratitude and appreciation.
Chapter 12

Chapter Summary

Please double-check the warnings in the ultimate end notes if that's a thing you do!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Carlos waits for the helicopter to pass. Then he sprints forward and scales the side of the building using the window ledges. He tosses his go bag over the side, and when nothing attacks it, he vaults onto the roof of the radio station.

It’s riddled with antennae and exhaust vents and metal structures twisting Escher-like into deep pools of darkness. The moon is nearly full dark, but starlight fights with the ambient tungsten/sodium/neon glow of the town and the powerful sweep of helicopter search beams, and Carlos doesn’t think any of the shadows quite line up.

“Cecil?” he says softly.

“Carlos!” Cecil whispers, right in his ear. Carlos manages to turn his instinctive turn-and-grab into something more like a hug than a judo flip. Cecil waits to hug him back until after he’s pulled Carlos under one of the towers, into the unnatural umbra. “I thought you weren’t coming back until tomorrow!”

“Well, I thought that I didn’t have to worry about my boyfriend *starting the revolution,*” Carlos hisses back. “But then all of the sudden I’m listening to Radio Free Night Vale!”

“I didn’t start the revolution, Carlos,” says Cecil. “I’m just reporting it.” There's a pause, and then he continues in a softer but sterner voice, “I’m sorry if I made you mad, but it’s not just my job. It’s my duty, no matter what certain corporate entities may or may not imply.”

Carlos sighs. “I’m not mad,” he says. “I was just worried. The show ended three hours ago and there are helicopters circling our apartments and I didn’t know where you were.”

Cecil squeezes his hand. "I was going to go back down, but the search started sounding a bit... heated... so I decided to stay here for a little longer. I would have climbed down the fire trap but I think there might be foot patrols."

"There are," says Carlos. He means to describe the pattern and distribution of Strex Corp’s security forces, but somehow, "Do you really think we don't need heroes?” comes out instead.

"What?"

"Something you said earlier, during the show," says Carlos. He aims for casual, like the words hadn't been echoing through his head as he ran across mud- and bone-strewn floodplains, mocking him for worrying when it already could have been too late and there was nothing he could do.

He falls a little short of the mark.
"You asked Night Vale if we needed heroes," he continues. "And then you said we didn’t. Why?"

"Oh, it was just something I was thinking," says Cecil. "Heroes are treacherous."

"What?"

"Not like that!" says Cecil. "Probably. Tamika is certainly the hero of her story. We're all the heroes of our own stories. But there’s so little we can accomplish by ourselves. Our real stories are built on the blood and sweat of others: the parents who didn’t sacrifice us to capricious fate, the teachers who first set weapons in our hands, the friends who stayed by our sides, even though if we fell first, they could have used the distraction to make good their escape. Alone, we search selfishly for the few events where we can be a heroic fulcrum, the point around which destiny pivots. But together – together we can rise up, sweeping all stories before us like the break of the tide: defy fate and change history!" He pauses, then adds, "Or descend into mob rule. Hopefully, the first one."

"What else would you call Tamika, then? Instead of – well, besides a hero?"

"A leader," says Cecil. "There's always people looking ahead to the beach we're about to storm together. Some people see further than most."

"Standing on the shoulders of giants," says Carlos.

"Well, I won't lie," says Cecil, "An army of giants could be quite useful under the circumstances."

Carlos lets out a huff of laughter. "No, it's a quote Sir Isaac Newton used. 'If I have seen further it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.' He couldn't have made any of his discoveries without the work of others before him. I lied on our first date."

"What?"

Carlos meets his eyes, the only part of him distinct in the shadows. "Scientists aren't self-reliant. Not at all."

"Oh," says Cecil.

A helicopter flies overhead, its searchlight cutting a blinding path across the roof that nevertheless fails to pierce their cover.

"They're watching our apartments?" asks Cecil.

"Yes," says Carlos, although Julie was still at the lab and he's willing to bet she's made them very sorry for it by now. She’s been in a terrible mood lately. It's something he's going to worry about as soon as he figures out whether or not Strex Corp is going to maximize its core competencies by crushing the town beneath its feet.

"How did you find me?" asks Cecil.

He doesn't sound like a Boy Scout survivor, or a revolutionary, or a disruptive team influence. He just sounds like Cecil.

"Where else would you be?" says Carlos, and he can feel Cecil’s smile before he’s thoroughly kissed.

They sit against an exhaust vent, Cecil’s head on Carlos' shoulder. It's almost peaceful, apart from the hum of helicopters and the barking of dogs and the glaring sweep of the searchlights crossing the
sky.

Cecil shivers.

"Are you cold?" asks Carlos, wrapping an arm around him.

"Not very," says Cecil.

Carlos hesitates a moment, then thinks *screw it* and pulls his cloak out of his bag. He spreads it over them, upside down. It's dark; Cecil probably won't recognize it, but he can totally pass it off as a science snuggie if he has to.

"Oh, this is nice," says Cecil, rubbing the fabric between two fingers. "Is this bloodproof?"

"Yeah, up to three meters," says Carlos.

Cecil sniffs. "Do you smell cordite?"

"That's me, sorry," says Carlos. "I kind of left in a hurry."

"Ah," says Cecil. His stomach growls. "So you probably didn't hit a drive-through on your way."

"It wasn't one of my top priorities, no," says Carlos. "Wait, hold on." He leans forward and rummages through the pockets of his bag. "There. A canteen of stale water, a half-eaten MRE, and thou."

"Are you sure you weren't a Boy Scout, too?" says Cecil teasingly. "You're very prepared."

"Too much camping," says Carlos. "I'll stick with science." Cecil kisses him on the cheek and takes the ration bar. After he takes a bite, he offers it to Carlos.

"No, I'm okay," says Carlos. "Eat the whole thing; you don't want your blood-sugar to get too low."

"Thank you, Carlos," says Cecil softly. He kisses Carlos on the cheek again. "I'll be fine, you know." He spoils it by adding, "Probably."

Carlos scowls at a passing helicopter, and is gratified when one of its searchlights goes out. Cecil cuddles up to him with a contented sigh when Carlos puts his arm back around his shoulders.

"We should do this more often," says Cecil.

"Hide on the roof from corporate justice?" asks Carlos. "Because I can think of better dates."

"No, just... sitting. We can't see the lights above the Arby's, but – there's always the stars. They twinkle in vain amidst the vast tenebrous emptiness of space, but they are pretty."

Carlos looks up at the sky. Even without the average Night Valian's oppressive instinct of the void, the sheer number of stars is almost overwhelming.

"They are," Carlos agrees. "You know, I never even saw the Milky Way until I was seventeen. The light pollution at home was too bad – all you could see was a big orange glow and few bright dots. I spent years studying star charts without really understanding what I was learning."

"What happened when you were seventeen?" asks Cecil.

"Science camp, out in the middle of Utah," says Carlos. Now that he thinks about it, the locations of
all the Warden bootcamps have been places with incredibly clear skies. That's probably intentional on Luccio's part: sending baby Wardens home with a healthy respect for the infinite and a more humble sense of their place in the universe as well as newly-improved pyrokinesis.

"I bet this Utah place doesn't have as many constellations as we do," says Cecil smugly.

"No, they don't," says Carlos. It's one of those things that should probably concern him more than it does. But apart from a few judgmental looks as he stares into the void and it stares back, the stars have never bothered him.

"I've always wondered about the moon," says Cecil.

"What about it?"

"Oh, just the whole thing, in general. Where has it gone now, what does it think about... I wanted to ask you one time, but it was before we were dating, so I... didn't."

"Oh," says Carlos. "Well, I'm a scientist, not a selenologist, but you can ask me now. If you want. I'm all yours."

"Carlos!" says Cecil, so flustered it comes out at his normal volume. Carlos startles, clutching Cecil closer and looking around frantically in case they've been detected; Cecil claps a hand over his mouth as the shadows swallow the resonant echoes of Carlos' name.

"What is it?" Carlos whispers, when he's mostly satisfied no one has discovered them. He continues to scan the darkness, just in case.

Cecil lowers his hand. "You shouldn't say things like that," he whispers back. "You can't just will possession of yourself to another person. What if they lose track of you?"

"You wouldn't," says Carlos.

"Everyone always thinks that," says Cecil. "But let me tell you, some people can shirk even the most precious of responsibilities."

"You wouldn't," Carlos repeats. He squints at a patch of near-solid black, braces himself, and opens his Sight.

He Sees nothing. Pure nothing, trying to drag him in past the point where not even light can escape. But there's a song, melancholy and haunting and familiar, and Carlos follows it, away from the sinister but stationary emptiness, until he closes his Sight and finds himself back on the roof of the radio station, Cecil at his side.

Cecil puts a gentle hand to Carlos' jaw and turns his head. Carlos remembers to relax his arm, though he doesn't let go of Cecil entirely. Cecil stares into Carlos' eyes; whatever he finds there makes him smile, small and exhausted, but genuine. He drops his hand and puts his head back on Carlos' shoulder, and it's like this small section of night belongs only to them.

"Carlos," he asks a few improbably peaceful minutes later, "Where has the moon gone?"

"It's still there," says Carlos. "It's just... hiding in the shadows."

"Hmm," says Cecil. "Sensible." He snuggles closer, and they wait for the chaos to pass.
In retaliation for the Flynn Incident, Strex Corp Synergists, Inc. Presents Welcome to Night Vale schedules Cecil straight through the three weeks surrounding Christmas. It's fairly mild, as far as despotic punishments go, but Carlos has the grim suspicion it's merely the opening gambit of a comprehensive strategy carefully designed to crush the soul. Cecil told him that they only ordered round-the-clock programming for "holiday carols" when Intern Maureen dumped her coffee on Daniel's head and shorted out his logic processors.

"I mean, yes, I don't personally celebrate the holiday, because I'm anti-materialism and anti-bear," says Cecil. He moodily pries apart a pistachio and tosses the shell into one of the many tumbleweeds that would litter the Night Vale Harbor and Waterfront Recreation Area, had it ever existed. "But you do, and..." He sighs. "I was really looking forward to meeting your family."

"I know," says Carlos. He had been more conflicted about it: besides the dismal odds of his family making it through the entire holiday without referencing his actual job to Cecil, they can be... overwhelming. But now that they definitely can't meet Cecil, he's filled with righteous anger and the familiar desire to shoot things until justice returns to the universe. "They're already disappointed. I think they’re planning on trapping me in the kitchen to make tamales while they steal my phone and drunk-dial you."

"Really?" says Cecil. "That sounds lovely. I haven't talked to anyone else, but I do like your sisters."

“You’ve talked to my sisters?” says Carlos, trying not to sound horrified.

“Of course!” says Cecil. “Unless they were imposters with nice hair who friended me on Facebook, I suppose. Do they go by Juanita Reyes—"

“Nita.”

“Daniella Agnese—”

“Dani, I don’t know why she uses her middle name.”

“And Specialist Max Fightmaster Ramirez?”

Carlos sighs. “Milagro.”

"They're really something," says Cecil.

Carlos eyes him suspiciously. "How many pictures have they sent you?"

"Just a few," says Cecil. "…Dozen."

Carlos groans.

"I think they're adorable," says Cecil. "Especially the one of you in the first grade, with your little beaker and lab coat and plastic allosaurus…"

"They may seem friendly now, but they're just trying to lull you into a false sense of security before they start asking embarrassing questions," says Carlos. "There will be threats. Lots of them. Some subtle, some from Milagro."

Cecil lets out another sigh and flops down on the picnic blanket so he's lying next to Carlos. "They can threaten me as long as they like," he says. "I'm going to have to eat at least one holiday dinner with Steve Carlsberg."
He looks so mournful Carlos abandons his post to sneak in a couple quick kisses. Then the tranq
gun's dubiously legal pneumatic augmentation system makes several unsettling noises, and he pulls
back to double-check all the gauges before re-settling into position and peering down the sights.

"See anything?" asks Cecil.

"Not yet," says Carlos. "Wait— No, never mind. It's one of those 28-point bucks with two heads."

"I don't think that's what we're looking for," says Cecil. He rolls over and squints into the distance.
"What about over there?" he asks, pointing.

"Good eye," says Carlos, impressed. He exhales and then squeezes off a shot.

They tramp out into the Scrublands and find a deer, collapsed on the ground. Its feet are twitching in
its sleep. Cecil leans down and taps on its rib cage.

There's something that looks like a kangaroo pouch on the deer's underbelly. A few seconds later, a
human face worms its way out.

"Hi!" says Cecil to the realtor. "We're looking for an apartment? Or maybe a duplex, we haven't
decided yet."

They actually manage to view a few places that afternoon, although Cecil doesn't like the first two
and Carlos vetoes the third on account of being obviously cursed. When he gets back, only the grad
students are manning the lab. Well, "grad students", in that Kate is now a postdoc in possession of
both a diploma and an alarming amount of debt, and "manning" in that she and Wei are having a
quiet argument in the lounge while Gary sleeps off an allergy attack on the couch.

"—And it will read 'Kathreena "Rochelle" Ancatan, 1986-2013: Where do you see yourself in five
years?!'"

"Hey, it will read 'Doctor Kathreena "Rochelle" Ancatan, 1986-2013'!" protests Kate. "Oh, hi,
Carlos. How was apartment hunting?"

"No luck yet," says Carlos.

"No... luck... yet," Wei repeats under his breath as he writes in a logbook. Carlos decides he does not
want to know; in the words of Cactus Jane, the better part of valor is discretion.

"Do you know anything about cell phones?" he asks instead.

"I can look at it," says Wei, putting his notes down. "Dr. Kwan has me learning all her new designs
so we can retrofit everything for the energy converters."

Carlos hands the phone over. Wei opens the back and blanches.

"...I'll be back," he says, and exits the lounge.

"...I'll be back," he says, and exits the lounge.

"So," says Carlos to Kate. "What's this about your imminent demise?"

"My next round of interviews at Strex Corp is coming up," she says. "Wei and Dr. Timmons don't
think I should go, but I think I need to. Even Dr. Kwan agrees that we should try to stay on Strex’s
good side, right? I'm afraid if I blow them off, they'll start interfering with our work."

"But what if they actually offer you a job?" asks Carlos. "If you don’t take it – which you shouldn't –
than that might just piss them off and put everyone in danger."
"I've been thinking about that," says Kate. "What if I self-sabotage? I mean, nothing too overt, or else they'd notice. But if they think we're all inadequate, they'll be more inclined to write us off. See us as less of a threat."

"It's tactically sound," says Carlos. "Except for the part where you'll be going into enemy territory."

"Well, yeah," says Kate. "I mean, I made it out last time okay…"

"You were lucky," says Carlos. He sighs. "When’s your interview?"

"Tomorrow morning," she says.

He rubs his chin. "I think I can go with you," he says.

"Really?" says Kate. "Thanks, Carlos!"

"De nada," he says.

"I still think it's a bad idea," says Wei, re-entering the room. He's wearing lab goggles and heavy gloves.

Gary wakes with a snort. "What?" he says.

"Carlos is taking me to my interview tomorrow," says Kate.

Gary scratches his still-blotchy face. "Isn't Strex Corp kind of evil?"

"Go shave your bees," says Kate.

"Can't," says Gary. "I need a new Epi-Pen. Oh, I was going to leave another care package for the book club. Do you have anything to donate?"

"Yeah, hold on," says Kate. She pulls a copy of *The Worst-Case Scenario Survival Handbook* out of her purse and hands it to him.

"Good one," says Gary. He gets up and shambles over to the coffee maker. He dumps the dregs into his mug and disappears from the room without a backwards glance.

Carlos looks at the other two; neither of them look remotely perturbed. Well, Wei looks plenty perturbed, but it's directed at Carlos' phone and not the blatant breach of coffee etiquette.

"You guys are shameless," he sighs, and puts a new pot on. Somebody has duct-taped over the brand name and written *That's DOCTOR Coffee!* in its place.

The phone bursts into flames. Wei yelps and dives for the fire extinguisher, but Carlos hastily redirects the fire before they all get a faceful of Purple-K.

“This might take longer than I thought,” says Wei.

~*~*~*~

There's something extremely off-putting about the Human Resources office at Strex Corp's Night Vale campus. Maybe it's the fixed, plastic smiles on the faces of the administrative assistants, their fingernails scrabbling over their keyboards with a noise like the skitter of clawed feet. Maybe it's the way the walls are made entirely of reinforced glass, giving the impression that you're trapped in some kind of vast terrarium. Maybe it's the constant background hum that sounds like a drawn-out scream,
or the metallic tang in the air.

When Carlos excused himself to the bathroom to cast some basic scrying spells, his rubber duck melted.

His arrival seems to have thrown Strex Corp for a loop; there's a lot of hurried telephone conversations and furtive glances in his direction. Carlos weathered it with seeming unconcern and a secret vindictive pleasure as he listened to the sound of desperate typists and pretended to read a back issue of Night Vale's one and only science journal (which gets tossed through a lab window tied to a brick every month). He can feel the beginnings of a migraine creeping out from behind his sinuses, but he makes himself smile and nod whenever he catches someone's eye. It just seems to confuse them further.

Kate's been gone for fifteen minutes. He made sure she understood there's always a risk when confronting antagonists: no plan is fool-proof, no outcome totally predictable. Opting out is not a sign of cowardice when it's done out of caution. She nodded and concurred and pointed out that they still need more information, and her interview would be the perfect time to get it.

With some reluctance, she agreed to wear his labcoat. With much less reluctance, she agreed to arrive half an hour early so she could have very loud cell phone conversations with three different people about how excited she was to interview at Strex Corp, she told everyone that's where she was going, yes, the Night Vale campus, isn’t it funny how it’s on the wrong side of Radon Canyon, no, the address is 16 Business Park Way, right off of Exit 3 on Route 800, yes, she’ll definitely be home to call them after dinner and tell them all about it, haha, no, Kelly, she won’t get lost and they won’t have to ring up Joe’s charming state trooper ex Manuel to come find her, she’ll definitely remember to check in this time.

If that doesn’t prove enough of a deterrent, Carlos has her keychain and a lock of her hair in his pocket he's going to use to track her down if she's not back in another two hours. One of the benefits of the world's creepiest waiting room is that there’s a whole line of alarms behind the receptionist’s desk – fire, hazardous materials, radiation, unidentifiable symbols… They seem very thorough and very elaborately technological. It would be a real shame if they malfunctioned and went off and caused a diversion.

A real shame.

"Excuse me, uh... Carlos?"

"Hmm," he says absently, pretending to focus on the journal. The man in front of him is wearing a black double-breasted suit under his labcoat and a Strex Corp ID that says 'NAME HERE'; he doesn’t appear to be armed. His clasped hands are clean except for some unknown dark grime under his fingernails, which is both creepy and unhygienic.

Name Here clears his throat. Carlos waits another ten seconds before he looks up and says, “Oh, hi. Are you here to give me the complimentary tour?”

“I’m here to – what?” flounders Name Here.

Carlos stands up and heads for the door; after a startled second, Name Here follows him. “Dr. Raith’s monitoring station in Night Vale is pretty nice, but she mentioned her home facilities were quite advanced. I’d love to see her labs.” He picks a hallway at random and strides down it.

“Unfortunately, that area’s under construction,” says Name Here, running a few steps to catch up. “Tell me, Carlos: do you have any questions about the Smiling God? I understand that our initiative
in Night Vale is generating some confusion— Uh, Carlos, we’d prefer if you waited – there are classified areas – wait, don’t—”

Unfortunately for Strex Corp, the electronic locks on most of their doors are also very elaborately technological.

Carlos opens the newly-disabled door onto a room full of deer. They have clipboards around their necks. They all turn to look at him and tilt their heads in unison.

Carlos gapes at them for half a second, then recovers with, “Hey, is that calculus?”

The deer all blink twice.

“Neat,” he says. "Oh – you should check your differential equations on that board over there. It's a great effort, though. Keep up the good work!"

He shuts the door and turns back to his sputtering would-be handler.

“Where to next?” he asks brightly.

Name Here slumps in defeat and motions him down the hall.

He tries to keep Carlos’ “tour” confined to the extremely clean-looking labs working on green energy projects, but Carlos somehow manages to wander into a few more esoteric experiments. He watches Name Here's reactions carefully, noting which rooms make him nervous and which cause panic. He doesn’t necessarily want to enter the latter, though he’s grimly curious; this is a recon mission. What he's really interested in right now is the layout of the whole building.

He is, however, not above using his newfound knowledge for extortion.

Name Here is desperately grateful to answer questions about the basement, sub-basement, and floors one through six as he herds Carlos away from some tall black doors, vaguely alludes to the seventh floor and the sub-sub-basement as being for 'research purposes' when he physically redirects Carlos away from a sticky-floored hallway full of plastic sheeting by slinging an arm around his shoulders, and quickly changes the subject every time Carlos asks about the rest of the underground levels, even when Carlos goes through three consecutive doors marked 'Do Not Enter'. Then Name Here calls his bluff by fainting, which: well played, sir.

Carlos generously allows him to recuperate in the cafeteria amidst the tiny bags of pretzels, overly shiny apples, and carefully shrink-wrapped sandwiches in refrigerator cases that are labelled things like "Genuine vegan protein!" and "Post-consumer chicken with organic spread!" but all look like a white slab and green smudge between two pieces of whole-wheat styrofoam. Name Here clutches a cup of grey coffee closely, occasionally mumbling “Smiling God” under his breath. Carlos pokes at his slice of Black Forest cake and wonders if he can sneak away a sample for Julie to analyze.

He looks up as the cafeteria doors open and about fifteen people enter.

It’s a long line of younger men and women in lab coats. They’re accompanied by a security guard, though they’re not particularly fractious – the opposite, in fact. They seemed dazed, languid, their movements slow and unsteady as the guard shepherds them into lines. Their hair is mussed and their clothing is disheveled. Several of them have lipstick on their collars. Bruises on their throats. Fingernail scratches on their necks.

“What’s this?” asks Carlos. Under the table, his hand slowly clenches into a fist.
“Oh, it’s the interns’ feeding time,” says Name Here.

“Dr. Raith’s interns?”

“I can’t – we prefer to think of our employees as belonging to the whole of Strex Corp,” says Name Here uncomfortably.

“So you’re all responsible for them,” says Carlos.

“Well, they’re volunteers, all of them, you know. And their numbers increase productivity and decrease the risk of personal harm…” Carlos is sure he didn’t react outwardly, but Name Here trails off as he stares at Carlos anyway. His shoulders hunch inwards and he looks down into his dishwater coffee like it will provide him with justification. He doesn’t move from that position.

Carlos slips away from the table and joins the end of the line, next to a young man who’s holding up his pants, seemingly unaware that he could just reach down and pull his fly back up. His pupils are blown wide and he keeps shivering.

“Hi,” says Carlos. “I’m Carlos. What’s your name?”

He has to repeat the question twice before the young man turns and stares in his general direction.

“Hi, Carlos,” he slurs. “Her teeth are so white. So gleaming and white. I looked… perfect…”

“Who?” asks Carlos, though he’s pretty sure he knows the answer.

“And her eyes are so cold…” The young man sighs. “Do you think I’ll see her again today?”

Carlos takes a deep breath and opens his Sight.

He shuts it barely a second later, feeling sick: the young man’s spirit is dull and huddled in on itself. It looks like it’s had bites taken out of it, just like his neck.

“Look, do you want to get out of here?” he asks in a low voice.

The young man frowns slowly, like it takes too much effort just to process his unhappiness. “No,” he says. “No, I have to get back to work. Shouldn’t you be working, too?”

“Excuse me, sir,” says the security guard, one hand on their radio. “But the interns are on a tight schedule—”

“Just checking out the genuine vegan protein,” says Carlos with a grin that makes the security guard step back.

“Bye, Carlos,” says the young man. He’s smiling dreamily to himself. The apple in his hand is very red.

Name Here is only just looking up from his coffee with a frown. Carlos gives him a wave and edges past the security guard to sit back down at the table. “You know, you’re right,” he says.

“I am?” asks Name Here, startled.

“I would love to visit your offices!” he says. “The highest concentration of Employees of the Month, you say?”

He obediently follows Name Here into the elevator and takes out the science journal again. Carlos’
cooperation, or maybe the piped-in music doing its best to melt their eardrums with cheerful banality, clearly lulls Name Here into a false sense of security; he’s back to staring into his coffee when the doors open on two workers in hard hats and coveralls splattered with rusty stains.

They startle when they see Carlos. He smiles at them and casually runs his fingers through his hair.

The workers rush onto the elevator. Name Here looks up sharply, but it’s too late. "Hi, Carlos!" says the first worker. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, you know," says Carlos. "Just having a look around."

"I wish we could bring you down to our floor," says the second worker. She frowns at Name Here, who is making violent Shut Up gestures in Carlos' peripheral vision. "But the tunnel renovations aren't quite finished yet..."

"How are they going?" asks Carlos, and receives a detailed step-by-step update with almost no additional prompting as Name Here turns as grey as his coffee.

After the workers exit on the first floor Carlos tries a casual hairflip to calm him down, but Name Here apparently has more of a tolerance for Carlos' coiffure than his two very helpful colleagues. He practically drags Carlos from the elevator into the beige-colored hallways of the sub-basement, but pulls up short at the sight of another man in a black double-breasted suit and lab coat. His ID only has a string of numbers.

"Here!" bellows the man, shoving an enormous folder into Name Here's arms. "File these TTP project reports!"

"Uh – I – Carlos, this is my supervisor. Sir, did you get the memo about the Night Vale—"

"Memos?" shouts Name Here's supervisor. "We're on a deadline!"

"But—"

"I'm just gonna run to the bathroom," says Carlos, patting Name Here on the shoulder and ducking out before he can protest. Carlos can still hear his supervisor shouting all the way to the elevator bank.

He hexes the security cameras, pries open one set of doors, and slides down the cables to the lower levels, because if he belonged to a morally dubious corporation that gave him interns to snack on and had a secret laboratory in which to practice dangerous illegal magic, the far end of a set of underground tunnels would be an excellent place to hide it: connected to the main facility and its resources, but far enough away to avoid disrupting any delicate technology and to contain any... unwanted results.

The last floor is warded.

Carlos hesitates, one ear cocked for the sound of a descending elevator. The wards are impressive, a full range of the standard defenses and several more he's unfamiliar with but can take a good, unpleasant guess at. Breaking through would be tantamount to laying siege to Strex Corp, which despite what the cold rage coiling in his gut tells him should definitely not be done publicly and without back-up, especially when he has no idea what's waiting on the other side. Reluctantly, he pulls himself up to the next floor.

The sub-sub-sub-sub basement is dead silent when he listens at the door. It is also only protected by electronic security. It's a very fancy system and Carlos is sure they spared no expense, and it takes
him about fifteen seconds to hex it (and the one on the floor above, just to make life interesting for the inevitable security team) into oblivion.

Carlos hauls open the doors to find a large but empty guard station and endless white hallways stretching off in all directions.

There's a subtle curve to the halls, winding them into a confusing labyrinth. Carlos marks his way by hexing a single fluorescent light tube in every third panel above him. There's nothing so crass as dust on the floor, but the air is stale and unmoving. The level appears to be completely empty.

It takes him less than five minutes to find a line of doors with heavy manual locks and bolts in some metal that makes Carlos' fingers sting when he touches it. The cells are white, too, except for the neat tallies marked in crayon and food paste-based ink. Some of them add up to well over a year's worth of hash marks. Some of them don't make it that far.

Carlos retraces his route just in time to hitch a ride on the bottom of the security team's elevator. He goes back to the sub-basement and is using the slightly too-low sink in the bathroom when Name Here bursts in, looking terrified.

"Where did you go?!"

"Looking for toilet paper," says Carlos innocently, as another security team jogs past the open door.

Name Here leads Carlos back to HR and washes his hands of him (not literally; the bathroom didn't even have soap) a broken man. Carlos would feel a little bad if not for the fact that he averted his eyes as they passed another line of torpid interns, smiling glassily to themselves and staring at nothing.

Carlos pulls out his journal and starts making notes. Despite the anger still simmering inside him, he feels the corner of his mouth twitch when the painfully inoffensive light jazz lurking in the background cuts off mid-lick. “Only 90s kids will get this,” says Cecil.

But his voice fades in and out; another one keeps breaking in. “Only 90s kids—”

“—Who do not learn from history are doomed to—”

“—Save us all. Welcome to—”

“—Desert Bluffs!”

Both transmissions dissolve in a brief burst of static that only makes his headache worse. This had happened the whole time he was in Desert Bluffs, too. It made an otherwise fine trip pretty annoying.

_Tunnel entrances: below detention level?_ he writes in the margins of the journal, right over the floor plan he's worked out. It's very different from the one on the directories hanging by the elevators.

Carlos makes a few minor adjustments and leans back in his chair, rubbing his forehead. No sign of Kate, but they're still within the safety margin. He flips to the next article in the journal and scans the abstract. He reads the same sentence over and over again – “Incorporation of the buttocks with realistic properties diminished the first vertical natural frequency from ~12 to 5.5 Hz, in agreement with the literature” – but his mind keeps returning how some of the tallies in the detention cells cut off before others, and how the interns were herded around like cattle.

“Millions of peaches,” says the unfamiliar voice on the radio. “Peaches for—”
“—No one,” says Cecil.

Carlos feels someone’s gaze on him. He waits for just a moment, then casually looks up from the journal.


"I'm fine, thank you," he says. He tries smiling at her; her eyes widen even further, and her fingers fly across her keyboard.

The radio crackles again.

“—Officials warn that two feet of fast-moving marbles can carry away most vehicles, including SUVs and pick-ups,” says Cecil.

The receptionist stands up abruptly. All the other admins stop typing and stare at her.

"I'm sorry," she says pleasantly, though Carlos can see the whites of her eyes ringing her irides. She pulls a crowbar out of her desk, then walks over to a maintenance closet and drags out a step-stool. She climbs up and levers the speaker out of the ceiling. Then she carefully sets it on the ground and begins whaling at it with the crowbar. Carlos ducks a flying piece of plastic.

A loud dial tone fills the room; the receptionist's head swivels towards her desk, where her speakerphone has just activated by itself.

“All traffic has been re-directed through—”

“—The heart of a dark star, where annihilation reactions generate life-giving heat.”

"Excuse me," she says, then unplugs the phone and deposits it into the hazardous materials disposal chute.

Hanging on the wall is a large flatscreen tv, currently showing a muted broadcast of Desert Bluffs' local news; the picture flickers, distorts, then explodes into snow.

“Earl Road is closed as thousands run screaming from—”

“—Meteor outbursts!” says the other voice. “The streams of cosmic debris disintegrate in our atmosphere in beautiful blooms of destruction. I hope it’s a clear night so we can all experience nature’s fireworks.”

The receptionist goes back to the maintenance closet and pulls out a high-powered rifle.

An electronic doorbell chimes and dies. Carlos can see Kate and a woman in a severe black pantsuit coming down the hallway that leads to, presumably, the offices. Kate appears to be chatting happily, although there's a subtle tenseness in the set of her shoulders and her shoes are covered in a dark liquid. The woman in the black pantsuit looks grim.

The other admins throw themselves back into their typing. The receptionist freezes, then bows her head as “This has been Tra—” “—gic for all ages!” stubbornly sizzles over the TV’s speakers.

“Thank you again for this opportunity!” says Kate as they emerge through the heavy glass doors. "It
was a pleasure to meet you."

“We will let you know about potential developments, Ms. Ancatan,” says the woman in the black pantsuit.

“Dr. Ancatan,” corrects Kate.

The woman’s eye twitches, but she shakes Kate’s hand. Her gaze travels from the receptionist to the TV and back, and she shakes her head the merest fraction.

The receptionist wilts. She slowly leans the rifle against her desk and sits down. She does not start typing.

The woman in the pantsuit surveys the room with pursed lips. She blinks when she sees Carlos, then gives him a solemn nod.

“Good afternoon,” she says, and leaves.

“Just a minute,” Carlos says to Kate. He walks over to the receptionist’s desk; she sits stiffly, staring at her hands. “Thank you for all your help,” he says, and scribbles his phone number on her notepad. She doesn’t look up. He adds a couple question marks, then slides the notepad so it’s in her line of sight.

“Have a pleasant and productive day,” says the receptionist woodenly.

Carlos grimaces inwardly, but turns and leaves with Kate. When they pass by the front windows of the office, the receptionist is gone.

“How did your interview go?” asks Carlos as they walk towards the front doors. Heads jerk up behind thick windows to watch them pass.

“Oh, I think it went really well!” says Kate, her voice just a bit louder than usual. “I’m a little under-qualified, but they seemed interested in on-the-job training. It’s really such a fascinating opportunity —”

They emerge into the afternoon sunlight, and Kate lets out a deep breath.

“That place is so creepy,” she hisses. “I hope Dr. Kwan’s transmitter was receiving, because I’m sure not coming back to try again. I don’t even want to know what I stepped in. Thanks for coming with me.”

“Dr. Raith didn’t show up, did she?”

“No, thank goodness,” says Kate. "That lady isn't safe, sane, or consensual."

“You’re telling me,” Carlos mutters. He rubs at his pounding temples.

That’s the problem with the White Court vampires: they seem so human. Perfect, beautiful, smiling humans, who make you forget about the monster inside until it’s too late.

He watches a security guard proceed past, giving them a regulation curving of lips and baring of teeth, circling the building like a hyena guarding a carcass rotting in the sun, and thinks that maybe it’s not the Hunger that makes the vampires so terrible. Maybe it just makes it even easier for them not to care, to let the darkness of human nature rise up and press like a tongue behind their gleaming teeth.
Strex Corp practically glows in the sun, the light stabbing directly into his brain. He takes a deep breath, then another, and deliberately looks away until the temptation to do something violent and inflammatory passes.

“Do you think they’ll call you back?” he asks Kate as they climb into the Sciencemobile.

“Heck no,” says Kate, adjusting the mirrors. “I started talking about my work organizing grad student unions and my interviewer looked like she wanted to throw up.”

She pulls out of the Strex Corp parking lot and onto Route 800. Carlos can see Night Vale far across Radon Canyon, a soothing shimmer in the distance, and feels his headache start to fade.

“Good thinking,” says Carlos. “Nice job, Kate.”

“That’s Doctor Kate,” she replies.

~*~*~*~

Doctor Kate leaves to catalogue rock samples when they get back to the lab. Carlos attempts to retrieve his cell phone, but Wei looks pretty busy swearing at it in Mandarin, so he uses his office phone to call in to Edinburgh instead. It’s just as well, since that makes it much easier for him to bang his head against his desk as soon as he hangs up.

After he’s done giving himself another headache, Carlos returns to Lab One and settles in with the rest of the Night Vale Science Journal, one eye on Wei as he attempts a battery-ectomy with grim determination.

Carlos is halfway through an article from the Night Vale Psychological Association entitled “Sex Differences in Human Neonatal Transdimensional Monster Perception” when Julie sticks her head in the door.

“Did you disable the secondary defenses yet?” she asks.

Wei yelps as the phone erupts in another shower of sparks.

“Guess not,” says Julie.

“Can I talk to you for a second?” asks Carlos.

She hesitates for a moment, then says, “Fine. Wei, start screaming if you need help.”

When they get to her office, she takes an envelope out of her pocket and locks it in a lead-lined box. She scowls at Carlos when she catches him looking.

“What do you want?” she asks.

“Is everything okay?” he asks.

“Why wouldn’t everything be okay,” she says, her voice short, her arms crossed defensively.

“We live in Night Vale,” say Carlos.

She stares at him for a long moment, then says, “Okay, point.”

"Dr. Raith hasn't been bothering you, has she?"
Julie lets out a slightly hysterical laugh. "No, Dr. Feelgood is not the problem."

"Then what is?"

Julie pinches the bridge of her nose. "Ugh, why are you so helpful," she says. "Look, I know I’ve been a lot more murdery than usual. I’ve got a new project and the deadline is pissing me off. As are a lot of other things."

“I don’t know how helpful I’d be,” says Carlos. “But if there’s something I can do—”

She snorts. “You’ve done enough already, but we’ll see,” she says. “Thanks for backing up Kate, PhD, though. I got a ton of unsecured data. What did you find?”

"Strex Corp’s detention level,” he says. “I’m almost certain they were holding all those minor practitioners from Night Vale."

Julie whistles. “That side of the canyon is still Desert Bluffs’ jurisdiction, right? I don’t suppose their cops are any better than ours...”

“They’re fine,” says Carlos. “But Raith’s on the shareholders’ board, and she’s got more than enough influence to make the problem go away – assuming anyone’s willing to press charges.” He thuds a fist against Julie’s desk. “I couldn’t even get people in imminent danger to leave.”

Julie grimaces. “And meanwhile, the Feds are too busy harassing people over perfectly innocent scientific breakthroughs,” she says. “So Strex Corp is behind the vortices?”

"Not that I can prove," says Carlos, frustrated. "I think they've got an underground lab or two, which is probably where I'd find any evidence. But the whole bottom floor is warded and I wouldn't want to break through without back-up. Operations in Night Vale require a special clearance, especially with the White Court involved, so if I want help I need proof—"

"—Which you can't get without help," finishes Julie. "Sorry, Yossarian."

"I’ve reported it," says Carlos. "But it'll take weeks unless I can come up with something else."

"What about the sandstorm cohort? Can’t they vouch for anything?"

"All they’ll tell me is that I saved them and swore them to secrecy," says Carlos glumly. "They won't, and I quote, 'violate the sanctity of your hair'."

"Hoist on your own petard," says Julie, shaking her head. "Whatever that means."

"According to Cactus June, it's a mining explosive," says Carlos. "'Hoist on your own petard' means you've been blown up by your own sappers."

"I'll give you this, Carlos: you know your exothermic reactions," says Julie. "You'll figure this out, too."

He scrubs a hand through his hair in lieu of yanking it out. "Things just don't add up. To create something like the time vortices requires a lot of skill and a lot of power. The combined efforts of all those practitioners could have maybe – maybe – gotten them to my level, strength-wise, but you would still need a hell of a ritual to augment that into something able to manipulate the Currents of Time. And that's just on a small scale. With the magnitude we've experienced... they’d need an entirely separate power source to draw from, and none of them have the training to handle that much energy without leveling the whole desert by accident, much less to successfully punch holes through
time and space. Hell, I doubt even I could do it without months and months of hard study – years, even."

"Maybe Dr. Raith – no, she has a million gadgets that wouldn't last five seconds in your presence," says Julie. "They've still got wards even without the sandstorm cohort there. Sounds like they've got a wizard on payroll, too."

"I bumped that up the chain of command as well and they've got everyone looking," says Carlos. That at least was worth an immediate response: a warlock with that much power and control… "Nobody's got anything. Yet."

He's depressingly aware that most of them could continue to not get anything right up until the moment the anything sucker-punches them and runs away laughing. Poor communication is just one of the many problems with evil secret conspiracies infiltrating your ranks.

Still, an undertaking this big should generate enough magical resonance that rumors of it should spread beyond even the reach of the likes of the Black Council. There's got to be something.

"Hmm," says Julie. "Well, I think your best bet is to figure out how they did it, and use that to determine who they are."

"Right," says Carlos. "I'll just reverse-engineer the illegal magic I've been trying to figure out for months. Piece of cake."

"I didn't say it would be easy," says Julie. "Just the most likely to correctly succeed. I mean, your biggest suspects are cartoonishly evil and you don't have much of a solid lead, which means there are way too many possibilities for false correlations. You could be missing the real culprit while trying to pin it on Dr. Scientific-Progress-Goes-Boink and/or Stifle-Joy Co. At least this way you'd have some hard data. And can start planning how to defend yourself."

"If I can find out how they did it," says Carlos. "I might as well just——" He stops before the whining gets out of control. "Sorry, Julie. It's good advice. I… There's just so much wrong out there, and I hate not being able to do anything."

“Yeah,” says Julie. "I know what you mean." She hesitates, then says, "Look—"

"Dr. Kwan!" shouts Wei, in what may or may not be panic. There's the sound of the fire extinguisher going off.

When they find Wei, he's holding up the phone's screen at arm's length; it's now only connected to the rest of the phone by several trailing wires. Julie plucks it carelessly from his fingers and presses a button.

Her eyebrows shoot up.

"Oh, no," she says. "I was afraid this would happen."

"What?" asks Carlos.

"You have internet access," says Wei.

He looks from Julie to Wei and back again. "Uh, how?"

"Dr. Kwan incorporated some more sophisticated technology during your last upgrade, solely for processing speed," says Wei. "But the dormant functions were reactivated."
"Some of the subroutines I installed for minor repair may have been a... little overenthusiastic," says Julie.

"So it repaired itself, and then gave itself a makeover," says Carlos. "Shouldn’t I be worried that my phone is evolving on its own? What happens if it gains sentience and tries to kill me?"

"We will be sure not to add that functionality," says Wei seriously.

"You'll be fine," says Julie. She wipes off the pieces and reassembles them. "Probably. Keep an eye on it, I want to know what happens."

Carlos accepts the phone somewhat gingerly and turns it back on. "It says I have 1,937 unread emails," he says. "I don't even have email."

"Oh," says Wei. "Oops."

"This one’s on you, Padawan," says Julie, slapping him on the back.

"We set up an account for you when we first got here, since we thought people would try to contact you," says Wei. "Gary and Kate and I monitored it. When they had questions about science, we would give them to you for homework. But... we lost the password."

Carlos stares at the screen in dismay. "Do I have to answer them all?" he asks.

"Nah," says Julie. She sounds much more cheerful now. "Delete 'em. If it's important they'll write again."

"Most of them were about your hair," offers Wei.

"Oh, that reminds me," says Julie. "You're not allowed on Twitter or Instagram."

"What?" says Carlos. "Why not?"

"You're a narcissist foodie, Carlos," says Julie. "I don't want to stare at pictures of every single thing you ever eat again – to say nothing of the selfies."

Carlos turns the phone over in his hands, inspecting the casing. "I have a camera?"

"What hath God wrought?" mutters Julie.

~*~*~*~

Sadie the checkout girl is halfway through scanning Carlos’ groceries when her eyes widen at something over his shoulder. She drops to the floor out of sight.

Carlos whips his head around, gathering in his will. The automatic doors slide open and reveal Dr. Raith, a shopping basket on one arm and her casually glamorous lab coat slung over the other shoulder. She’s raising an eyebrow at something on her cell phone.

Carlos pulls out his own phone and leans back against Lane 13’s conveyor belt, relaxing as if he’s waiting for his checkout clerk to return from some urgent errand. Dr. Raith looks up and gives him a small, private smile.

“Excellent work, Carlos,” she says, then sashays past him before he can answer. She stops at the produce, well within sight-line of the register – trapping Sadie, and thus Carlos, in a stalemate.
“One may smile, and smile, and be a villain,” says another voice darkly. Carlos looks back to find Cactus June depositing a sleeping Champ in his car seat at his feet. “Be a dear and pass him to Sadie?”

“What?” says Carlos, but Cactus Joanne is already gone. She pushes her cart past the produce, and Dr. Raith’s head comes up to watch the third- (though now potentially fourth-) most beautiful woman in Night Vale walk past. Dr. Raith sets off after her, weaving through the crowd with sinuous grace, following her around the end of the aisle and out of sight.

“She’s gone for now,” Carlos says to Sadie. “I can go to another line, if you need to get out—”

“No,” says Sadie. “Here.” She stands up and Carlos passes Champ over. She puts him in the bagging area and starts scanning the rest of Carlos’ groceries, her hands trembling.

“I found the cells,” says Carlos quietly. “In the endless white hallways.”

Sadie freezes.

She’s rescinded her blood feud with Wei, but she’s still one of the least cooperative of the sandstorm cohort. And she’s afraid of Dr. Raith. Not overcome with lust or uneasy with an unexpected attraction. Afraid.

“She put you there, didn’t she?”


Carlos sighs and rubs his forehead. “I don’t blame you,” he says. “She hasn’t given you any trouble here, has she?”

“No,” says Sadie.

“Good,” says Carlos. He scribbles his number on the back of his receipt and hands it to her. “Call me if you think she will.”

Sadie stares down at the receipt.

Champ makes an unhappy noise; Carlos gingerly rocks his car seat back and forth. Champ yawns, blows a spit bubble into his beard, and goes back to sleep.

Sadie folds the receipt up and puts it in her pocket.

“Okay,” she says.

One day, justice will be served. He doesn’t know how or when, but he has to believe it, or else he won’t have anything else left to believe.

Carlos can’t stop the time vortices. He can’t invade Strex Corp. He can’t follow Dr. Raith around and drag away anyone who thinks they wouldn’t mind giving up some of their life force. But he can answer his phone and he can file paperwork and he can annoy all the right people, and if that’s all he can do for now, then so be it.

Cactus Jenny casually strolls out of the freezer aisle, cart laden with diapers and formula, and gives them a wave before disappearing around the other side. Dr. Raith emerges a moment later, her stride now the determined prowl of a hunter; she turns the wrong way and vanishes into the toiletries.
“I thought she didn’t leave her cactus,” says Carlos.

Sadie gives him a disparaging look, which seems to lighten her mood.

Carlos’ phone beeps. It’s Cecil, back from the Auction House. His inquiries into the buyer of Lot 37 – Cecil Palmer have yielded nothing, but the Sheriff’s Secret Police did give him a free cymbal-banging monkey toy which isn’t creepy at all as long as you’re not looking at it out of the corner of your eyes. Carlos resolves to exorcise and/or burn the damn thing as soon as he goes over to Cecil’s and texts him back a comforting picture of a Gorgosaurus and a Daspletosaurus playing basketball against the Harlem Globetrotters. He’s really getting the hang of these emoji things.

“That’s a pretty fancy phone,” says Sadie as she bags the last of his groceries.

Carlos blinks in surprise; those are the most words she’s ever said to him in a row. Her interviews normally consist of muttered monosyllabic responses and the occasional, “Because I promised.” He’s not sure if it’s because she hates scientists, Wardens (assuming she’s figured that out), or just talking in general.

“It just upgraded itself,” he says. “I’m still trying to figure out what everything does.”

Sadie grunts. Then she takes it from his hand, leans across the bagging area until her head is between Champ’s car seat and Carlos’ shoulder, and pushes a button.

There’s a little click. She hands the phone back.

“Selfie,” she says.

He smiles a little. Then he remembers a half-understood piece of information.

“So,” he says. “I can send photos to people directly, right? Like texting?”

~*~*~*~

Julie does not appreciate his market-to-table photo essay of dinner in the slightest. Her revenge takes him a few days to discover.

"Why," demands Carlos as he marches into her workshop, "Is there a countdown to when I'll accidentally send everyone dick pics?"

"Because we've met you?" replies Julie. "Hey, I have to quench this. I don't suppose you can lend a hand?" She thrusts a tiny piece of brightly glowing metal gripped by comically large tongs in front of his face. He scowls, but strips it of its heat energy. Even with the resulting plasma ball, he has to slowly release the excess into the air. By the time he's done, the temperature of Julie's workshop and the hallway outside has risen by about ten degrees. On the plus side, he was able to reheat his terrible grad student/postdoc coffee.

"Huh," says Julie, inspecting the now-dark metal. "That might have actually worked."

"Stop trying to change the subject," says Carlos, one eye on his dwindling plasma ball. "Somebody started a Twitter feed about me called 'Shit Carlos Says!'"

"That was forever ago," says Julie. "Back when you vetoed all our suggestions while we were trying to name the lab."

"You wanted to name it Wardenclyffe!"
"I know, buzzkill," says Julie. "It was perfect. Tesla would back me up on this. I mean, after he ran out of town screaming, sure, but I'm comfortable enough in my genius to admit that he was probably smarter than me."

"Stealth," says Carlos. "I'm sure you've heard of it, yes?"

"Your idea of stealth is to put on the hood of your ridiculously large cape," says Julie. "It's about two steps up from hiding under a blanket. I have literally known stealthier three-year-olds."

"That's not the point!"

"Ah, but it is," says Julie. "Despite our best efforts, no one in Night Vale thinks there's anything wrong with your observations, and everyone outside of Night Vale assumes you're someone's 90-year-old grandpa with his first smartphone."

Carlos narrows his eyes. "How's your project going?" he asks. "You know, the one where you stopped talking to me and kept glaring like I destroyed all your computers and set your notes on fire, for no reason at all."

"Don't get any ideas," says Julie. "It's..." She glances at him sidelong. "I think I've got a shot at it now. There are a couple of variables that are still a pain in my ass, but, well, they're worth working around."

Then she gives him her standard evil grin and continues, "Why, did you miss me?"

"I will text you a selfie of me and a baby," he warns, because it will take more than embarrassing (if painfully accurate) Twitter feeds to make him admit that he really did.

~*~*~*~

*a wizard did it #overlyhonestmethods*

"Dammit, Julie!"

~*~*~*~

FROM: Me <carlosthescientist@isc.uc.edu>

TO: Julie <renegade@isc.uc.edu>

SUBJECT: WHAT THE HELL?????

Sent from my [device]

~*~*~*~

FROM: Julie <renegade@isc.uc.edu>

TO: Me <carlosthescientist@isc.uc.edu>

SUBJECT: RE: WHAT THE HELL?????

I told you that if you ever forwarded me another chain email, I was filling your office with bubblegum air fresheners.
Why is your location data tracking to the Amundsen–Scott Station?
-- J

FROM: Me <carlosthescientist@isc.uc.edu>
TO: Julie <renegade@isc.uc.edu>
CC: Andre <renaissance@isc.uc.edu>, Wei <reliant@isc.uc.edu>, Gary <rawhide@isc.uc.edu>, DOCTOR Kate <rochelle@isc.uc.edu>
SUBJECT: RE: RE: WHAT THE HELL?????
TURN ON THE RADIO

Sent from my iPhone

FROM: Andre <renaissance@isc.uc.edu>
TO: Me <carlosthescientist@isc.uc.edu>
SUBJECT: RE: RE: RE: WHAT THE HELL?????
Remember to turn your caps lock off, Carlos! It’s poor ‘Netiquette’ and makes it look like you’re shouting. :)
Sincerely,
Andre

FROM: Julie <renegade@isc.uc.edu>
TO: Me <carlosthescientist@isc.uc.edu>
SUBJECT: VORTEX SIGHTING
Good news: while we were trapped in the van, I was able to recalibrate some of the chronometer settings based on the short-range travels of local Cervidae. Bad news: didn’t get to the radio station before the vortex closed.
However, preliminary results seem to indicate spatial distortions only, nearly identical to
the first vortex from last March, so no wibbly-wobbly timey-wimey stuff.

Scanned your boy, he's no more radioactive than normal. He says hi.

How's the South Pole treating you?

-- J

-----Original Message-----

Stuck in traffic outside monitoring station; Rt 800 closed. We'll get to the radio station as soon as we can.

-- J

~*~*~*~

FROM: Me <carlosthescientist@isc.uc.edu>
TO: Julie <renegade@isc.uc.edu>
SUBJECT: RE: VORTEX SIGHTING

THanks.

If anyone asks, we never had a Jötnar problem and the West Antarctic ice sheet was always like that.

Sent from my [ ]

~*~*~*~

FROM: Julie <renegade@isc.uc.edu>
TO: Me <carlosthescientist@isc.uc.edu>
SUBJECT: RE: RE: VORTEX SIGHTING

1) I had to look that up, you pretentious umlauter. Why can't you write 'frost giants' like a normal person?

2) Did you type the rest of that with your face?

3) Look on the bright side: it'll take a couple centuries for the sea levels to rise from the collapsing polar glaciers, so by the time it's an issue we'll probably all be dead.

-- J

~*~*~*~

FROM: Me <carlosthescientist@isc.uc.edu>
TO: Julie <renegade@isc.uc.edu>
SUBJECT: RE: RE: RE: VORTEX SIGHTING

1) Why can't you write 'time-traveling deer' like a normal person?
2) No byt i can’t feel my fingers.

3) Speak for yourself.

Sent from my \( \text{PHQO}^{\text{O}} \text{N}_{\text{E}} \text{O} \text{N} \)!

~*~*~*~

FROM: Julie <renegade@isc.uc.edu>
TO: Me <carlosthescientist@isc.uc.edu>

1) Obviously I am better than normal. You however are just weird.

2) ...You still have fingers, right?

3) I’ll send you elevation maps of the coast. Start investing in future oceanfront property now!

-- J

~*~*~*~

FROM: Cecil <3 <3 <3 <palmercg@nvcr.org>
TO: Me <carlosthescientist@isc.uc.edu>
SUBJECT: RE: how did the mayorL DEBATES GO?

Oh, Carlos, it is good to read your words and imagine that it's your voice saying them to me instead of my eyes – my tired, but human? probably? eyes – Carlos, I have just realized you can never really look at your own eyes; the side of your nose, the curve of your brow, the tops of your cheekbones, the edges of your lips, the rest of your body if you’re pretty bendy, yes, but eyes? No! The windows to our souls remain hidden from our very selves, for mirrors are untrustworthy, and so how can we really be sure that our eyes are truly our own? – anyway, it is good to read your words and imagine that it's your voice saying them to me instead of whomever's untrustworthy orbs these are looking at the tiny aloof letters forced into congress with one another to convey the entirely arbitrary meanings assigned to them regardless of form.

Instead of seeing their stark blackness staring out of an uncaring, soulless screen.

Not that I don't appreciate the effort of your dear fingers selecting each letter individually just so you can say, "Hi, Cecil," and "I heard teh debate, ti sounded very intwense," and "Aer yiu oK?" even if you did include a few more typos than usual. No, not 'even' – I appreciate your efforts even more, because of those typos, since they remind me of your perfect imperfection shining through the bland impersonal conformity of technological precision. But you should probably adjust your autocorrect settings.

In response to your message: the debate was very intense. Did you know some moderators do this every time there's an election? I can't imagine always knowing your candidates' positions on current policy and hot-button issues – what's government
without a little spontaneity? But I must admit it was pretty fun. Oh, the heady power of controlling public discourse!

But then... Carlos, if I suddenly became a blood-stained, rictus-grinned, suspiciously cheerful shadow of my former self, you'd tell me, right? I do not like this Kevin fellow, but worse than the way he derailed the debate and tracked blood all over the carpet and went on and on and on about Vanessa, like he's never even heard of accidentally unsettling the spirits of dead interns, is the way that he seemed... familiar. I mean, besides the fact that I've seen him and tried to choke him to death before. They said we looked alike, and though I couldn't see the resemblance myself, I'm still haunted by the faint echo of what could be, if someone else was looking out through my eyes.

He's gone now, back to Desert Bluffs like he deserves. And I think I am okay. But I will be more okay when you are here.

Also, do you remember if I have any orange milk left? I’m heading to the store if you need anything.

Love,

Cecil

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~*~*~*~

sry abt teh typs, fingers covered in bandages. spent a little too long in the science freezer.

macdougall (1907) puts average soul weight at 21g \(^3\), so any suspiscious growths can be quantified. but more importantly, i've had you under personal observation

i can name every single person whos eyes i've stred into since i was six, adn tht includes you, cecil gershwin palmer

not kevni

i'd recognize you anywehre

you have half a carton of orange milk on door of fridge and i'm out og butter. i'll be home soon. XOXO

~*~*~*~

"I believe this belongs to you," says Dr. Raith. She's waiting outside his door and holding out some sort of deed. If that wasn't alarming enough, it has Cecil's name written on it.

"He's a person," says Carlos. "He doesn't belong to anyone." Snatching the deed from her hand probably isn't going to win him any White Court style points, but his visit to Strex Corp is still fresh
in his mind, he's spent the past week investigating dead deer and typing up statements from victims of dead deer-induced time travel with still-healing frostbite, and he doesn't want anything involving Cecil remotely near her.

She smoothly whips it out of reach of his clumsy fingers.

Carlos gathers in his will.

There's a charged silence that lasts several seconds.

"Where did you get that?" Carlos asks, after firmly reminding himself that the fate of the world probably depends on someone not starting another vampire war, and that Dr. Raith almost certainly accounted for him freaking out and trying to disintegrate her into her evil plans anyway.

"At an auction," she says. "I'm willing to give it to you for some information."

"No," says Carlos immediately.

She lets out an impatient sigh. "He's your lover. I redeemed him from contraband and seized property. Will you really let your pride stop you from ensuring his liberty?"

"It's not my pride that's stopping me," says Carlos. "I'm not in the habit of divulging sensitive information."

She leans forward. "Fascinating," she murmurs. "The circles in which you twist your minds..."

She stops and looks down, where Carlos is holding a knife just millimeters from her lab coat. The blade isn't exactly his normal style: pearl-handled, ornate, a little too long for throwing. It's part of a matched set; the other one is tucked into his boot. He usually doesn't wear them, but they were commissioned by the White Court, so it seems appropriate.

They were a gift. A gift delivered at very high speeds, point first. But Carlos walked away (well, got dragged away) from that fight; Raith's cousins did not.

She tilts her head. "You would challenge me to... one-on-one... combat?"

"You're invading my personal space," he says.

"Ah," she says, but doesn't retreat. Instead, she runs a finger along the blade. Pale blood springs up in a neat line. Since Carlos refuses to look in her eyes but won't look away from her face, he unfortunately has a front-row seat as her tongue curls around her fingertip before she slides the whole thing between her lips. "Our arrangement would be to your benefit as well," she says, after removing her finger. The cut is gone, the skin perfect.

"We don't have an arrangement," says Carlos. He's probably sprained something in his cheeks from not making any facial expressions.

"A pity," she says. "One would think a Warden would be interested in potential violations of the Laws of Magic."

Carlos waits a moment, then reverses his grip on his knife, so it's no longer pointed towards her. "What," he asks steadily, "Do you want?"

"The anomaly at the radio station," she says. "What caused it?"

Carlos blinks. "You don't know?"
"The shareholders' board had a meeting with your City Council, which I naturally attended," she says. "It's a matter of public record. As I was otherwise occupied, I was unfortunately unable to intervene when implementation of our _Cervidae_ outreach program... went awry. Our corporate agents distributed exit surveys before the program was terminated, of course, but I'm afraid the data from our former interns was less than illuminating." She takes a step back and looks up at him through her thick eyelashes, which is a neat trick when she's taller than him in heels. "If Strex Corp has broken any of the Laws of Magic, I take full responsibility."

"What," says Carlos.

"All I want," she says, "Is for those who have pledged their service to me – bound their wills to my purpose – to be able to push the boundaries of knowledge in safety. Is that so much to ask?"

Carlos' jaw is hanging open. He snaps it shut.

He knows the White Court is fond of misdirection and operating by proxy, but offering up justice on themselves while asking the opposition for details on what they did wrong is a new one to him.


You're supposed to negotiate from a position of strength. Potential threats to his boyfriend and a total and utter lack of knowing _what the hell is going on_ is not particularly strong. Avoiding outright antagonism is probably wise, and it’s possible that cooperation could make her underestimate him.

Not likely, but possible.

"I would strongly suggest that Strex Corp avoid any investigation into time travel – unless you want the White Council involved, of course," he says. He smiles pleasantly. "Any misapplication of your... research... could have serious consequences for everyone's continued well-being."

"Of course," she says. "And the radio station?"

He watches her very carefully as he says, "A spatial instability only."

A single furrowed line appears between the graceful arches of her eyebrows. "Hmm," she says. "Thank you, Warden Ramirez." She hands him the deed to Cecil. "Your analyses are invaluable."

She glides off as a yellow helicopter lands across the street, and Carlos looks away from her in relief. He feels suddenly tired, the deed in his hand a heavy weight. He needs a shower – cold, hot, it doesn't matter. He just hopes it's enough to make him feel clean again.

~*~*~*~

"Carlos?" asks Cecil sleepily. "Is something wrong?"

Carlos found himself launched directly into consciousness sitting upright in bed with a gun in his hand, so he's going to go with _yes_. He scans Cecil's apartment, desperately trying to determine what woke him up.

There’s a violent crash so loud it almost ceases to register as sound, and now _Cecil_ is fully awake and clutching his two-by-four with a rusty nail in it.

"What _is_ that?" he asks.

"Thunder," says Carlos. He rolls out of bed and starts pulling on the nearest clothes at hand,
swearing under his breath.

“Should the clouds be that color?” asks Cecil. Carlos turns and finds him peering through the shades.

“Get away from the window!” Carlos practically screams. He tackles Cecil to the floor as a bright purple light envelops the building, followed three seconds later by a clap of thunder that shakes the room.

“...Maybe I should stay away from the windows,” Cecil says a moment later. Carlos can feel his heartbeat hammering in his chest and has to shake the urge to stay curled protectively around him.

Instead, he grabs his go bag and cautiously pulls Cecil down the hall. They take shelter under the dining room table.

“I think the storm should pass soon,” says Carlos. Most people messing around with magic don’t last very long against the storm wards.

“I don’t know, Carlos,” says Cecil. “Clouds can be very temperamental.”

Thunder rolls, as if in agreement. The lightning strikes are getting closer.

Something prickles across Carlos’ senses.

“I need to – I need to get to the lab,” he says.

"Carlos—"

"We’ve got – lightning rods. I can help. Cecil, something’s wrong."

Cecil rubs at the circles under his eyes and sighs. “I thought you might say something like that,” he mutters. "What if the storm gets worse?"

Carlos gathers in his will and reaches for his bag. “Here,” he says, pulling out his sword. He lets some of his power trickle in, partially waking the blade.

He gives it to Cecil.

“Uh—"

“Hold it by the sheath. Metal’s an electrical conductor,” says Carlos. “You should be safe in here, but if—” The apartment wards fail, he does not say. “—If you have to go, stick the blade in the ground and run. It should buy you some time.”

“If you say so,” says Cecil. He pokes at the string of teeth dangling from the hilt in place of a tassel. “Huh, these look like vampire fangs.”

“That… doesn’t sound very scientific…” says Carlos.

“Well, this one time I was talking to a reporter from the Midwest Arcane when we were both attacked by—”

Cecil’s cut off by another clap of thunder. He gulps.

"What about you?” he asks, voice lowered like he doesn’t want to attract attention. Maybe he’s right; it's not like the storm’s wards have ever behaved exactly according to spec.
“What about me?”

Cecil curls his fingers around Carlos’ wrist – not hard, but with the sort of determination that suggests he would prefer not to let go. “What’s going to keep you safe, Carlos?”

"I'll be fine," says Carlos. “...Probably. I'll go right to the lab and put up the lightning rods. That’s all.”

Cecil relaxes his grip reluctantly and nods; his face is drawn. "Be careful," he says.

"Of course," says Carlos.

~*~*~*~

Three hours later, Carlos carefully pulls the last of the pararrayos into place, on the highest point of City Hall, right in the eye of the storm.

The situation isn't as bad as he imagined, but only because he has the apocalypse on his list of worst-case scenarios (sadly, not without reason). No, all that's happening is that Strex Corp is demolishing every bloodstone circle they can get their hands on, crippling one of Night Vale's admittedly creepy defenses and destroying the delicate equilibrium of an already unbalanced system. But hey: the town might be doomed if he can't get it stabilized, but he's pretty sure most of the Southwest would survive this time.

A light flashes out of the corner of his eye; he ignores it in favor of securing another cable to the pararrayos. If he did this right, they should counterbalance each other physically and magically.

If he didn't do this right, he and Shakeena Flynn are going to get struck by lightning, plummet five stories, and probably get crushed by hundreds of pounds' worth of pointy metal bars.

Another light flashes.

"Tamika says that they've disabled three more construction vehicles on the east side of town," says Flynn. “The rest were hit by lightning.” She has a humming black crystal around her neck, a death grip on Carlos' belt with one hand, and a semaphore lamp in the other. Carlos would never wish it on anyone, but he has never been more grateful that his primary paranormal contact has spawned a revolutionary saboteur with whom she has shared her hatred of Strex Corp and her love of archaic long-distance communication techniques.

"Good," grunts Carlos. He flicks on the blowtorch. "Tell her and the kids to get to shelter."

Flynn chants quietly for a moment, and her crystal falls silent; a faint ripple in the air is the only indication that she's parted the veil around them. He hears the clank of the semaphore lamp, and turns his attention back to the pararrayos.

"They're withdrawing," says Flynn a few minutes later. Her voice sounds strained; Carlos can't tell if it's from concern for Tamika and her friends or from chanting their camouflage back into place. Even with the crystal to help, a veil this large is pushing the limits of her strength.

Ball lightning rolls across the storm's eyewall, and a rogue burst of magic courses through the metal trunk of the pararrayos. Carlos curses and lunges forward, catching it before it slides down the roof; Flynn yelps and hauls back on his belt. They balance precariously as he tries to re-secure the pararrayos without dropping the blowtorch.

His phone vibrates and promises to light the fire if Carlos places the flowers in the vase that he
bought today.

"Uh," says Carlos.

"You cannot be serious," hisses Flynn.

"Can you get that? Please?"

"Is now really the time?"

"Now is exactly the time if someone is calling me back with a way to keep the wards from destroying Night Vale that's better than holding them together with bubble gum and paper clips!" He's called all the people he can think of – well, nearly all the people he can think of – he's called some people. The list of practitioners of magic with both trustworthy opinions *and* allegiances who are capable of giving advice without knowing any of the details about the wards is not very long.

"You want me to talk to another member of the *White Council*?" asks Flynn, horrified.

"Night Vale! Destroyed!"

"Fine," she says. There's a clatter as she settles the semaphore, and then a hand rummaging in the pocket of his lab coat. "Hello, you have reached the phone of, um – Cecil! Sweetheart, how are you? Oh, Ward – uh, Carlos needed an extra pair of hands for… one of his experiments. Yes… mm-hmm… oh, you know, he’s… hanging in there…"

Carlos rolls his eyes.

"Honey, you would not believe the mess out here. Strex Corp is taking all the bloodstones – I know! Ours has been in my family for four generations! I swear, one of these days I'm going to march up to —"

Sparks roll along the branches of the *pararrayos* and break along the edges of the aluminum leaves.

"Flynn?"

"—and shove my foot right up—"

"Flynn!"

"Hold on, sweetie," she says. "Yes, Ward – uh, Carlos?"

He jerks his chin upward. She looks up at the clouds collapsing inwards through the eye of the storm.

"Cecil?" she says. "Carlos will call you back in juuuuuust a minute."

She hangs up and drops the phone back in his pocket. "What do we do?" she asks.

"Start chanting," says Carlos. He shuts off the blowtorch. "I'll try to finish linking them by the time you're done."

"Try?" says Flynn, but she closes her eyes; her next words are indecipherable and oddly rhythmic.

Dust and grit sting Carlos' face as he loops another cable around the last of the *pararrayos*. There's a faint surge of energy through it as Flynn finishes with the first one.
"I can't veil us and do this at the same time," she gasps.

"Drop the veil," says Carlos. The clouds have begun rotating above them. "The concealment charms should activate as soon as everything's connected." \textit{Should} being the operative word, but they'll burn that bridge when they come to it.

Flynn lets go of his belt and yanks the crystal off her neck; it makes an odd whine as the cord snaps, and the fuzz in the air around them disappears. The first two \textit{pararrayos} unite just as a ball of lightning whizzes around them. Flynn's chant falters.

"Keep going!" shouts Carlos. A bolt of lightning terminates about twenty feet above their heads; the next one, ten feet. There's enough resonance from the \textit{pararrayos} to delay the storm wards temporarily, but if they can't stabilize them soon...

He releases the last of the \textit{pararrayos}; the cables pull taut, but it stays in place. He grabs the still-chanting Flynn by the elbow, takes hold of the guide rope, and leads her through the tangle of black metal roots and limbs. They carefully climb beyond the bounds of the circle of aluminum, sitting on top of City Hall's cupola like the world's largest game of ring toss. Sweat runs down Flynn's temples; her words come slower and slower. But she plows determinedly towards the end of the chant, and Carlos braces himself against the slant of the roof and reaches up to lay a hand on one of the black branches.

The long, dark finger of a funnel cloud points accusingly at them from the sky above.

Carlos gathers in his will and shouts, "\textit{Muyal k'al}!" just as lightning erupts around them.

He hits the roof hard and tumbles for a few terrifying seconds. Then he's in open air for a terrifying eternity.

The earth looms.

He flings a panicked blast of entropic force and plummets into a pool of almost impossibly fine powder.

Even with the nearly-frictionless pulverized grass and dirt and bedrock breaking his fall, he hits the bottom hard. He gets his feet under him and tries to push off the solid ground, to swim through the dust, but he has no buoyancy and no traction against the tiny, slippery particles and no idea how deep the pit is. His lungs are aching for air; he doesn't dare open his eyes. He doesn't think he's moving and he's not even sure he would know if he did—

Something hits his arm. A hand, closing around his wrist. It slowly hauls him upwards.

He gasps for breath as soon as he breaks the surface, which is a mistake; the air is filled with powder. He can barely crawl onto solid ground from coughing so hard, and he still can't \textit{breathe}—

Whoever's got his arm drags him about fifteen feet and dumps water all over his head. "Here," says Flynn. She presses a water bottle into his hand and he takes a long, grateful draught, trying to suppress the coughing. He wipes his streaming eyes; this stuff is even worse than Purple-K.

Flynn has a scarf tied over the lower half of her face. She hands him a damp handkerchief, and he does the same. They're out of the worst of the dust, and a gust of wind helps clear the air a little more.

"Thanks," he croaks, after he's finally able to get a few lungfuls of particulate-free oxygen.
"I would never want to tell a Warden what to do," says Flynn, which is a blatant, blatant lie. "But you might want to consider changing the ground into Jello or something next time."

"I'll keep that in mind," says Carlos, after another coughing fit. "How did you get down?"

"I caught the gutter," says Flynn, pointing at City Hall. Something is dangling from the eaves. "That's why I always carry fifty feet of coiled rope in my purse."

"Are all the clouds gone?" he asks.

"They disappeared while I was still abseiling," she says. "I haven't looked at the weird metal trees, though."

Carlos climbs to his feet. He futilely tries to brush his clothes off, but he still looks like he's been dredged in flour. He starts hobbling away from the building until he's back far enough that he can see the peak of the cupola.

The sky above it is completely clear. The weathervane is pointing straight up, like normal, but the original lightning rod appears to be gone. He can’t see anything else.

He opens his Sight, and there they are: four tree-like shapes glowing brightly, roots twining down the sides of City Hall and disappearing into the ground, limbs branching off into thinner and thinner tendrils that stretch impossibly long over the whole town.

"It worked," he says, and starts coughing again.

"I'll be damned," says Flynn. When Carlos gives her a look – she doesn't have to sound quite so incredulous – she says, "Hey now, don't get your undies in a bundle. I only assumed that we were going to die."

"Thanks, Flynn," he says. He pulls out his phone.

Dust pours from the speakers.

"Here," she sighs, turning on her own phone and handing it to him. "Cecil should be towards the top, I was just texting him."

A tiny keyboard pops up on the phone's screen; with some difficulty (if it's such a smart phone, how come it doesn't have punctuation?), Carlos writes, Storm over I'm ok should be safe to come out now please leave sword in closet love you carols

Carols

What the duck

CARLOS

He gives Flynn her phone back before something dire happens to it, like getting hurled into the side of City Hall.

"C'mon," she says. "You can come clean up at my place."

"Thanks," he says again, though with much less sarcasm, and a little surprise.

They're halfway to her house when she snaps, "Pull over!"
He obeys. Flynn shoves her door open and scrambles on top of the car. Carlos gets out, too, but the street is clear.

Balancing upright on the roof, Flynn signals something with her semaphore lantern. There's an answering sequence of flashes.

"What's up?" asks Carlos.

"Tamika says Strex Corp has resumed destruction in the Barista District, but there's no sign of the clouds," says Flynn, and Carlos relaxes a little. She sends back a brief reply, then starts to climb down.

"Wait," says Carlos. There's another series of flashes.

Flynn lifts the lamp, hesitates, then lowers it again. She slides to the ground, jaw set.

"What is it?" asks Carlos. She doesn't answer at first, avoiding his eyes as they get back in the car.

Carlos starts the engine. "Do I need to know?"

"She – she told me to have a good day at work," says Flynn. She doesn't look up from her hands the rest of the ride back to her home.

Carlos emerges from her bathroom, mostly de-dusted and more or less able to breathe, to find Flynn staring at a framed picture. She starts when a floorboard creaks under him, then puts it back on an end table. It's a photo of the Flynns from some Christmas past; her two youngest are sitting on the back of a bear wearing a Santa hat, while she and Tamika are standing on either side. Tamika has a book under her arm, and all four of them are beaming.

"How old were you when you became a Warden?" she asks. "No – I'm sorry, that's personal." She hands him a glass of water.

"It's all right," says Carlos, after he takes a long draught. "I was seventeen."

"Seventeen," says Flynn. "That's... young."

"We'd just gone to war with the Red Court," says Carlos. "And I'd already been an apprentice for ten years."

"Ten?"

"I was a precocious child," says Carlos.

Her lips twist. "Do you have family?"

"Back in East LA," he says.

She frowns. "I thought the Fomor held Los Angeles."

"They do," says Carlos. "You can't go west of the river at night."

"You couldn't put them somewhere safe?" Flynn asks.

"I tried, but they wouldn't leave," says Carlos. "It's our home."

"Can't you... do anything?"
Carlos' hip aches; he thinks he can feel the scars on his stomach twinge. He leans against the back of her couch, taking the weight off his bad side. "We have been," he says. "Trust me, I won't give up without a fight. Anywhere."

"Of course not," she says. She clears her throat. "I beat most of the dust from your cloak," she says, and hands it to him.

"Gracias," says Carlos.

"You're not bad, for a Warden," she says grudgingly. "Let me know when you move. I'll have the gang 'round to put up your wards so Cecil doesn't get suspicious why you're the only ones who don't have a spectral moaning problem."

"Thanks, Shakeena," says Carlos, touched.

"Tell him I say hi," she says. "And if you don't treat that boy good..."

Her ellipsis is as menacing as always, but in kind of a nice way.

~*~*~*~

Carlos surfaces from a nightmare of flashing lights and sickening falls and clinging dust to the awareness that someone's watching him. Someone close, their breath stirring the air by his face.

"Creepy," Carlos mumbles, and opens his eyes. Cecil's there, kneeling in front of Carlos' couch. His face is barely six inches away, resting on top of his folded arms.

"I like watching you sleep," he says. "You're so cute when you drool."

"Ugh," says Carlos. He yawns. "How was work?"

"Wonderful," says Cecil. "Persons unknown sabotaged five Strex Corp construction vehicles and a security truck, and seven more were destroyed by lightning!"

"Gosh, what a shame," says Carlos, though he is a little sad he missed Cecil's coverage. It's been forever since he slept through a whole show. He lifts his head; one of his papers is sticking to his cheek. He pulls it off with a grimace.


"I'll take your word for it," says Carlos, although he's probably smiling kind of stupidly. He sits up and stifles another yawn. "I didn't miss dinner, did I?"

"No, I just wanted to see how you were doing," says Cecil, and Carlos' stupid smile grows wider. "I ran into Shakeena and she mentioned that you two had quite the morning."

"Is she all right?"

"She scowled so hard she accidentally destroyed the engine of a Strex Corp security truck," says Cecil. "So I assumed so. Also, don't tell anyone about the truck. But look what she gave us!"

He thrusts a lime-green piece of paper covered in even more eye-watering swirls of color in front of Carlos' face.

Carlos takes it gingerly and squints at it. "What am I looking at?"
"It's an invitation to her birthday celebration!" says Cecil. "You have to sort of... unfocus your eyes and stare off into the middle distance in order to read it—"

Carlos yelps and drops the paper as an unnerving-looking sigil leaps out at him.

"There you go!" says Cecil. He retrieves it from the floor and stands up, walking towards the kitchenette. "Oh, Carlos, I'm so glad she wants you to come, too. I was hoping you'd get along, and—oh."

Cecil stops talking.

Carlos frowns. "Haven't you been talking about her party for weeks?"

"Well..."

"What's wrong?"

"It's—oh, it's nothing," says Cecil. He folds the invitation into smaller and smaller squares. "You know, we don't have to go, I can catch up with Shakeena over coffee, or we can have her over for dinner—"

Carlos makes notes. "We can go," he says. "I don't mind."

"But—"

"We'll stay out of Lane Five," says Carlos. "I can wear Kevlar."

Fortunately, Cecil is too busy pacing and gesticulating wildly to notice. "I can't ask you to go back there, but I won't leave you behind, either. I'll just tell Shakeena—"

"Of course I'm sure," says Carlos. "Cecil, I don't want you to—"

"I am happy, Carlos," he says huskily, then grabs Carlos by the lapels and kisses him thoroughly.

Carlos is beginning to feel extremely charitable towards Shakeena Flynn, bowling alleys, and the
world in general when Cecil abruptly breaks off the kiss, pats him on the cheek, and stands up. "I'll let you get back to your science," he says.

"Hey – wait," says Carlos, snagging Cecil's wrist. Cecil sprawls happily on the couch next to him without any additional urging and takes the papers Carlos hands him.

"It's data analysis, but for apartment hunting," says Carlos. "I thought I'd organize all the features you were interested in. Then we can evaluate each place we look at and narrow them down to the ones that are most compatible." There are columns and columns of notes, because Cecil has strong and occasionally conflicting feelings about everything from the location of the morning sun (when it bothers to rise) to marble countertops vs. ritual altars to the number and distribution of bathrooms.

"This is wonderful, Carlos!" says Cecil. "But – didn't you have any preferences? These are all things I've asked about."

"The only thing I need in our new place is you – mmph," says Carlos.

When they break for air, he manages to gasp out, "And a defensible position and multiple exits and a full-size kitchen. But mostly you."

"I think we can manage that," says Cecil. He’s sitting on Carlos’ lap now, arms wrapped around Carlos’ shoulders and one hand inevitably in his hair, and he’s beaming so hard that Carlos aches with reciprocal happiness. "This will be your home, too."

Carlos reaches up and touches his cheek, just because he can. "Our home," he says. It’s important to use the correct terminology.

Chapter End Notes

Look, if Carlos doesn’t get to stand on SOMEONE'S shoulders, I'm going to be very upset.

~*~*~*~


"—Council reminds you that, if you are not already dead, you should seek shelter immediately—"

Cecil's voice blares from a megaphone lying abandoned in the street. The emergency worker who dropped it is long gone; Carlos hopes it's because they retreated with the last of the crowds, but he wouldn't bet on it.

The carapace of the Valentine's Day thing splits down the middle, revealing its true form. It's somehow bigger than its outer candy shell, which is just unfair. It's uglier, too, and getting worse every year.

It catches his scent and starts to lumber towards him.

Carlos waits until it's barely twenty feet away and fires Julie's flare gun right in its face. It rears back, its mouth gaping wide in a shriek undetectable by the human ear but far too detectable by the human psyche.

Carlos pulls the pin from a grenade and hurls it into the thing's mouth. It swallows reflexively.

Carlos starts running.

He hears the detonation a few seconds later, and feels the creature's cry of pain right after. It starts pursuing him in earnest.

Right on schedule, thinks Carlos. He speeds up and rounds the corner onto Earl Road. As long as he can stay ahead of the thing, he'll—

Tires squeal. He catches a flash of tan but he can't stop—

“—and remember that the paper hearts are highly contagious,” says Cecil.

Carlos blinks granules of safety glass from his eyelashes. He's sprawled across the passenger seat of a mid-size sedan, which no longer has a windshield. Steve Carlsberg is clutching the wheel and staring at him in terror.

"Dammit, Steve," slurs Carlos. "That was clearly a pedestrian crossing."

Steve's face contorts, like most people's do when Carlos tries to talk with his hood up.

There's another parasonic roar.

"Get out of here," says Carlos. He fumbles for the door handle and spills out onto the pavement. The tires squeal as Steve throws the Corolla into reverse and floors it.

Carlos pushes himself off in an alarmingly wobbly four-point start. A heart-shaped box hits his shoulder and bursts, scattering chocolates everywhere. They slide off his cloak and start to eat away at the sidewalk as soon as they hit the ground.

His head is spinning and his right knee is screaming at him, but he focuses on the end of the street. Miraculously, the sun is setting early. If he can just—
A thorny vine grabs at his ankle and sends him flying. He hits the ground and rolls. He manages to disintegrate the first wave of rose tentacles, but the thing itself rises up from behind them. Its articulated tail lashes forward.

A thin line of white-hot fire intercepts it, severing the last few joints. Carlos' mind goes blank from the force of the thing's scream; he rolls out of the way by instinct as the stinger crashes to the ground right next to him. The fire snaps like a whip, burning through several legs, and the thing pitches forward just as the sun disappears below the horizon.

It explodes into a shower of rose petals.

Footsteps approach; someone kneels beside him. "I must confess I've never seen the romantic attraction of the holiday."

"Well, if this doesn't convince you..." says Carlos.

"Are you hurt?" asks Luccio. She helps him sit up.

"I just need a minute," says Carlos. He rests his head against his knees. "Psychic feedback. And a Corolla."

She draws a circle around them and the pressure in Carlos' head immediately lessens.

"Thanks," he says.

"I'm sorry I did not arrive sooner," says Luccio. "One of its hives had spawned by the hospital; I thought it best to eliminate the second threat." She nods at the pile of disintegrating rose petals as they liquefy and run down into the sewers in putrid, glittery streams. "It's grown since I last came here."

"I think that's why it molts," says Carlos. He tentatively lifts his head from his knees, and when it doesn't fall off, he starts brushing the remains of the petals off his shoulders. "I appreciate the help. What brings you to this friendly desert community, Captain?"

She gives him an indecipherable glance and picks off a petal he missed. "You're needed in Edinburgh."

"Edinburgh?" says Carlos. "What—" He's interrupted by sirens in the distance; the remaining emergency crews should be coming out now. "We should get to cover," he says instead.

"Can you walk?"

"Only one way to find out," he says.

He can, sort of. With help. Luccio takes a moment to inspect the wards around the lab as she waits for him to muster the energy to let her through them, and politely studies the set-up in Lab Two as Carlos leans against a wall and tries to force his head to stop pounding through sheer force of will.

There's an odd... tingling in his mind. Carlos assumes it's just a fun new Valentine's Day side effect, but now Luccio is frowning and looking past him down the hall.

The tingling stops; nothing happens.

"What was that?" asks Luccio quietly.

"No idea," says Carlos. He flinches at a particularly determined mental echo of the thing, and adds,
"Although I'm not much of a reliable witness at the moment."

Luccio's eyes go distant and unfocused for a moment, then she shakes her head. "Everything appears to be in order," she says.

"Another unexplained phenomenon," says Carlos. "Yay."

A few seconds later, there's footsteps on the stairs that lead down to Julie's private workshop. "Finally," she says, emerging from the depths. "I thought we'd have to pull you out of another bottle —" She stops when she sees Luccio.

Carlos rubs his face. "Julie, this is..." He looks at Luccio.

"Warden Luccio," she finishes.

"And this is..."

"Doctor Renegade," says Julie.

"This is her building," says Carlos, and hopes he's struck the correct balance between etiquette and security.

"...Hi," says Julie.

"Hello," says Luccio. "Is this laboratory yours?"

"Yes," says Julie cautiously.

"What operating system do you use for your machines?"

Julie blinks. "What?"

"I noticed you've gutted several different computers and linked them together," says Luccio, gesturing back to Lab Two. "...With quite a lot of duct tape. It would be Linux-based, I assume."

"It would be," says Julie, and gives Carlos a pointed look. "Finally, someone civilized."

"I'm sure you'll have a lot to talk about," he says. He gestures vaguely towards the bathroom. "Do you mind if I—"

Luccio sends him off with a small wave. As he staggers down the hallway, he hears Julie say "Ubuntu? Ubuntu? Let me explain you a thing about that unstable piece of—"

Carlos locks himself in the bathroom and sticks his head under the tap. He leaves it there until he stops shaking and the memory of the thing's scream mutes into a tinny echo.

Water runs down his collar when he straightens up, but it's a minor discomfort compared to his twisted knee and the giant bruise that is his back. He sits down on the closed toilet and takes a moment to feel sorry for himself. He wants to go home and lick his wounds – curled up with Cecil safe in their new apartment, secure behind his and Shakeena's wards – not back out into an unfriendly night filled with unactivated Valentines, or to the other side of the world for what is undoubtedly bad news.

He sighs and takes out his phone. Definitely not going to make it home tonight, he texts. Even more work to catch up on than we anticipated.
The radio has gone into commercial, so he's not surprised when he gets an almost immediate response. *Don't worry about it. We're all staying in the broadcasting bunker tonight anyway. We can't get the door open.*

Cecil continues, *Don't worry about that either, we've got enough canned food and bottled water to last for ninety days.*

*I'm sure the air supply is perfectly adequate.*

...*If I'm not back by Monday, can you come try to get us out with science?*

Carlos smiles and writes back, *I'd like to see the door that can keep me out.*

*Don't go to Desert Creek, it's filled with conversation hearts!!*

That startles a laugh out of him. He texts a reassuring picture of a mosasaur leaping from the waves to snatch an airplane in its jaws and stands up, carefully stretching. At least nothing's broken this year.

He finds Luccio in Lab Two, safely beyond the border of the circle as she watches Julie demonstrate the intricacies of the energy converters with all apparent fascination.

"—Ambient energy charges the accumulators, allow us to convert it into electrical energy," says Julie. "Or whatever. Oh, great! You look a lot less like you've been hit by a car now."

"Funny story," says Carlos.

"Thank you, Doctor," says Luccio.

"Pleasure's all mine," says Julie. "I'll be in the workshop if you need anything. The others are in the bunker."

"Good, tell them to stay there," says Carlos. "And don't go out until tomorrow, it's still not safe."

Julie gives him a sarcastic salute and herds them out of the lab.

"Just a minute," says Carlos when he and Luccio reach his office. "K'as!"

Sparks rain down from the ceiling vent as the newest set of bugs from the Sheriff's Secret Police short out. He offers Luccio the chair, but she leans against his desk instead and stares at him calmly until he sits down.

"Why do they need me in Edinburgh?" he asks.

"The Merlin wants to see you," says Luccio.

"What?"

"He's been following your reports with interest," she says. "He wishes to speak to you personally about... recent developments."

Carlos stares at her and tries to think of a reason why the leader of the White Council would send the Captain of the Wardens to deliver his summons. And why the Captain would agree to deliver them, much less on a day when she knows Carlos will be almost useless. Unless—

"Did you come to warn me?"
"The Council finds no fault with your actions," says Luccio. "Neither do I."

Carlos relaxes slightly.

"Thanks to your diligence, this... place... is the quietest it's been in decades," she says.

"This is quiet?" says Carlos.

"Yes," says Luccio. "It is." Her eyes go distant with some memory; she shakes her head and meets his eyes. "Past commanders have dealt worse with less. You do good work here, Carlos. And given the current state of affairs, this has been no small weight off my mind."

Carlos leans forward, propping his arms on his knees. "Things must be pretty bad if you came all the way out here to give me a pep talk," he says.

"My support is the least I can give," she says. Her mouth twists. "And, at the moment, the most I can give, too."

"Great," says Carlos. "Is the bad news about the violations of the Sixth Law, or the White Court? Wait, no – it's got to be the latter. The Merlin wouldn't make a big deal about seeing me unless he wanted it to be political." He looks at her. "Of course, the same could be said for the Captain of the Wardens."

"The Merlin is responsible for the entire White Council, and must consider certain sacrifices for the common good," says Luccio. "I am responsible for the Wardens, and unless you have failed in your duties, you will always have my full support, regardless of whether or not the Senior Council finds it... politically expedient."

She sounds a little bitter; Carlos guesses she still feels guilty about Morgan. Her former field commander (and apprentice) ended up uncovering both a murder and a massive conspiracy dedicated to dragging the world into chaos (Carlos doesn't know if that's their ultimate goal, but it's certainly what they're doing). They'd even corrupted the White Council from the inside with bribery, violence, and dark magic-imbued writing implements.

For his troubles, Morgan took the fall himself when it became obvious the real killers couldn't be exposed without making the White Council even more vulnerable.

Morgan was a lethal, paranoid asshole who would sooner cut off his (or anyone else’s) head rather than commit treason. Carlos had once shot him in the leg in the line of duty and Morgan had thanked him for it, because he would have done exactly the same thing in that situation. He'd been the only other Warden authorized to enter Night Vale. And even though Luccio hated that his reputation had been destroyed, sacrificing himself for the greater good was exactly the way he wanted to go.

The Merlin didn't really need to throw Wardens under the bus; most of them would hurl themselves right out into the street if they thought that's what was needed.

Which is why Carlos is going to Edinburgh anyway.

"I shouldn't leave until the rest of the hives have been cleared," he says.

Luccio nods. "I'll help."

"You don't have to stay," he says.

"Warden Ramirez," she says drily, "You seem to be under the mistaken impression that you are in
any condition to go about your duties unaccompanied. I will assist you in securing the town and escort you to Edinburgh."

"Yes, ma'am," he says, secretly relieved. No one can think he's being disrespectful if he shows up late with the Captain of the Wardens. Making the Merlin wait is unthinkable, but so is leaving all the caches of Valentines where anyone might come across them. Nobody deserves that. He already hates that there’s always so many casualties after the fact because he can’t find and destroy them fast enough.

The radio on Carlos' desk hiccup with a volume increase. "Valentine's Day has passed, though its claws sink into our skin in a final death-spasm," says Cecil. "Will it return again to haunt our nightmares? Yes. But for now we are free: free to count our blessings and our dead; free to dream of a slightly less terrible tomorrow; free to love and be loved without our sacrifices summoning ancient dark powers bent on devouring our still-beating hearts…"

“There was always a certain poetry to the power of the Voice of Night Vale,” observes Luccio.

“That there is,” says Carlos.

“You haven’t run into any more problems?” she asks. The expression on her face when Carlos had delivered his very first report on Night Vale had been… memorable.

He tries to imagine the expression on her face if he told her he’d spent all of last weekend picking out curtains with the Voice of Night Vale because they moved in together.

"We get along pretty well," says Carlos.

~*~*~*~

Thanks to time-zone changes, the vagaries of chronology in the Nevernever, and delays from a dangerous glitter storm, they arrive in Edinburgh at dawn. Luccio stays behind at the gate to catch up on recent intelligence from Chandler. Carlos stops by the barracks to compose himself and try in vain to de-sparkle his hair.

In the ready room, someone’s wheeled out a giant map of North America, only a hundred and fifty years out of date. It’s covered in push-pins and annotated with meteorological data, tracking the movements of the polar vortex. Carlos stares at the low-pressure system that should be over the Arctic pulled unnaturally south over the Midwest; there’s a little flag over Chicago that says -26°C, coldest day in twenty years. He quickly shuffles through the stack of blurry photocopies by the map: more weather reports. The Wardens may be keeping watch, but it doesn’t look like anyone’s planning to take action.

Yet.

There's a small packet of carbon paper at the bottom of the pile – somebody’s pulled the copy of the Return to Active Service form for one Dresden, Harry: regional commander of Wardens in the midwestern United States. It's not in Harry’s handwriting, which is confusing on one level but explains why it even got filed in the first place; Harry mastered the art of record-keeping chicken long before he ever became a Warden and never met paperwork he couldn't ignore until someone else gave up and filled it out instead.

Under Reason for Absence the report says "medical leave"; under Additional Comments, there's a note that states "Discharging personal obligation to the Queen of Winter." They make it sound so... uncomplicated.
Carlos shuffles the form back into the pile. He takes a steadying breath, straightens his cloak, and shoves aside any thoughts about winter, Winter, and Knights thereof. Then he heads towards the Merlin's study.

He's expected, of course.

The meeting goes exactly the way Carlos thought it might, which is to say that the Merlin simultaneously forbids him from interfering with the White Court and implies that Carlos needs to find out exactly what it is he isn't interfering with, fast.

"I've looked into your reports," says the Merlin. "There is no direct link between the flouting of the Sixth Law of Magic and this Dr. Raith's activities in the desert."

Translation: there is absolutely a link between the flouting of the Sixth Law of Magic and Dr. Raith's activities in the desert; she's just hiding it too well.

"Now is not the time to meddle with the private operations of our allies, Warden Ramirez," says the Merlin. "Not when they support us in good faith."

Translation: stop it cold. They can't demand public compensation if it will expose them to awkward questions.

"The... curious properties of the desert have little to do with their ultimate goals, I expect. We will continue our monitoring of the area as we have in centuries past."

Translation: they absolutely cannot find out how dangerous Night Vale is.

"The White Council must continue to present itself as a unified front," says the Merlin.

Translation: you're on your own. Don't let them catch you.

"With respect, Merlin, I must protest," says Carlos, because he has to read his side of the script, too. "The local practitioners—"

"—Have not filed any complaints with the Wardens," interrupts the Merlin, almost gently. "And we have no other recent reports of warlock activity in your area. Should additional information come to light, we will of course reconsider our position – though I hope the situation can be resolved diplomatically, as we have striven for in the past."

Translation: you need to give us actual evidence so we can look the other way while you throw down.

"Your objections have all been noted, Warden," says the Merlin. "But I expect you to carry out your duty."

Translation: I'm telling everyone we had this conversation, so make it look good.

I expect you to carry out your duty.

"Yes, Merlin," says Carlos.

He nods. "The Gatekeeper and I have been looking into the matter of the degradation of the containment wards."

Carlos blinks at the sudden turn off-script. "Sir?"
"Your predecessors often spoke of the wards’ shortcomings, as has Captain Luccio. Given recent developments, you have the permission of the Senior Council to augment the defenses," says the Merlin.

"I can do that?"

"You have spent enough time tending the containment wards that they should accept your adaptations," he replies. He hands Carlos an old, leather-bound book entitled *De Principiis Munimentorum*. Carlos flips it open; it was written in 1820 by... Arthur Langtry. Huh. Carlos knew the Merlin used to be considered something of a scholar, but he's never actually read his work before.

"There are several sections in there that might be of interest," says the Merlin, gesturing towards the ribbon bookmarks. "We have included our recommendations, but you and Captain Luccio must evaluate their usefulness. Yours is the most accurate and up-to-date knowledge of the wards and their workings."

The Merlin, who Carlos once saw whip up a temporary ward that kept back an entire army of Outsiders and Red Court vampires, just told him that he's one of their most reliable authorities on Night Vale's containment wards.

Translation: we're trusting you on this. Don't fuck it up.

"Thank you, sir," says Carlos.

"That will be all, Warden Ramirez. Please convey my regards to Wizard Solares."

"I will," he says. His bisabuela and the Merlin have disliked each other for centuries, but they are nothing if not excruciatingly polite. He guesses you can't watch someone be competent at their job for decade after decade without affording them some respect, even if you hate their guts.

The sad thing is, Carlos is pretty sure the Merlin actually likes him. Oh, he always treats Carlos with politeness and respect as well – it would not be politically expedient to disparage the youngest regional commander in the history of the White Council, with his sterling record and the loyalty of most of the newest generation of Wardens and his largely unproblematic attitude towards respecting authority. There’s a reason they're having this meeting in person, after all. But underneath the layers of power and politics, he gets the impression that Arthur Langtry thinks Carlos Ramirez is a good kid. Carlos can tell by the helpful way he censures Carlos' friends and throws Carlos in prison and hands Carlos a metaphorical transit schedule. There’s a bus barreling right towards them that needs a Warden under the wheels.

~*~*~*~

Someone clears their throat in the doorway of his office.

"I put a new pot on, it should be finished in a couple minutes," says Carlos absently. The Merlin's book is fascinating. Carlos considers himself pretty decent at raising wards: brute strength isn't his strong suit (as it were), but he knows how to play different types of spells off each other, each one weak on its own but guarding against a different kind of assault until almost all of the bases are covered.

That, apparently, is just the beginning. Those spells can be woven together, layered, doubled in multiple foci and amplified; even the shape in which they're laid out can work to make them stronger. Carlos is willing to bet that the master containment wards just don't happen to form pentacles within pentacles.
Someone clears their throat again.

Carlos blinks and says, "Cecil?"

"Carlos," Cecil replies patiently.

Cecil's show just ended, didn't it? Well, not just ended, but Carlos was only going to finish this chapter – whoops, that last chapter – before he left to... meet Cecil at Gino's...

"Um," says Carlos. "...Did I miss dinner?"

"'Miss' would imply that I ate without you, instead of awkwardly nursing my complimentary water at the restaurant for half an hour before going to the bathroom and sneaking out through the window," says Cecil.

Carlos groans. "I'm so sorry. I lost track of time, and—" He frowns at his desk clock, then picks it up and bangs it a couple times until the second hand starts ticking in the correct direction. "And... that's a lousy excuse. Sorry."

Cecil sighs. "Well, I guess three weeks without a missed engagement is your best record so far." Cecil doesn't sound angry today; just resigned. It still makes something twist in Carlos' chest, but it's not as bad as anger or – God forbid – disappointment.

"I'll make it four," says Carlos, locking his papers in his desk. "Wait, no – I mean I'll make it never."

"Oh, Carlos," says Cecil. "Don't make promises you can't keep."

Carlos stops cold in the middle of locking his office. "I keep all my other promises, right?" he asks. "You – you trust me?"

"What?" says Cecil. "Oh, yes, of course! I've found you nothing but scrupulously trustworthy when it comes to everything except science." He gives Carlos a smile; Carlos can never keep himself from smiling back. "I just wish your results were similarly consistent."

"Me, too," says Carlos with a sigh. "'Similarly consistent'. I like that."

"I've been practicing," says Cecil modestly. Carlos takes his arm; Cecil automatically puts his other hand over Carlos' and leans in a little closer.

Carlos checks his mail cubby (mostly fliers and – oh, hey, another fruitcake) before they head for the door.

Something twinges against the lab's wards. Carlos freezes.

"Carlos?" says Cecil. He moves to step forward, but Carlos stops him with a hand to his chest.

Wei and Gary are pulling shifts at the monitoring station, and Andre and Kate are still out at Radon Canyon. The only one in the building is Julie, asleep at her desk again.

Carlos quietly puts his mail on a nearby table. He has his gun, but if whatever out there that's leaning on the wards needs something more...

Cecil's watching him with concern – no, the concern isn't about Carlos. It's for Carlos, and a little for himself, because this is Night Vale and nothing particularly bad has happened to them recently. Cecil trusts him.
Carlos smiles at Cecil reassuringly and flexes his hand, visualizing its potential to hold and release entropic force, to keep Cecil safe regardless of the consequences. Then he steps in front of Cecil and opens the door just as someone knocks.

"Dr. Raith," he says.

"Hello," she says, with a small, private smile. "...Carlos. " She peers around him. "And you must be Cecil."

"Uh, hello," says Cecil. He sounds a little flustered. "Doctor – Doctor Raith? I don't believe we've met."

"We have not, more's the pity," she says. Carlos hears Cecil shift behind him but doesn't move out of the way, in case Cecil tries to shake her hand.

Instead, Cecil steps a little closer to Carlos, his fingers curling around the back of Carlos' lab coat. Carlos is unexpectedly heartened.

"I'm sorry, we were just leaving. Is there something you needed?" Carlos asks.

"You know, some of my colleagues were quite upset with you after that little incident with the oranges," says Dr. Raith, dropping Cecil's gaze. His grip tightens on Carlos' lab coat, like he wants to pull Carlos back out of range.

"What a shame," says Carlos.

She waves a hand dismissively. "They’re fools," she says. "You’d hardly need to be a scientist to realize that those crops weren’t natural.” She smiles at him.

Well, her lips are pulled back, baring her teeth. You could technically call it a smile.

Carlos smiles back. Casually, he picks up an envelope, pulls a pearl-handled knife out of the inner pocket of his lab coat, and starts opening his mail.

He slits open a letter and glances at its contents, then replies to Dr. Raith, "Well, honing your powers of observation is the first step to becoming a scientist. It's amazing what humans can do, when they have the training."

"Quite," says Dr. Raith, smile widening. "I set my colleagues straight, of course."

Carlos blinks. "Oh?" he says.

"Their feelings were making them quite irrational," says Dr. Raith. "You know what they say: scientists are subtle and quick to anger."

"...Right," says Carlos. He glances out the window, down the block. A yellow van with an enormous orange triangular logo and tinted windows is idling at the end of the street.

Dammit.

"I hope you weren't too hard on them," says Carlos. "They're only human."

Dr. Raith sighs. "Really, Carlos," she says. "Do you think I would jeopardize my working relationships in such a way?"

Carlos doesn't answer. "Tell me, Caroline," he asks instead. "Do you like fruitcake?"
She's too well-trained to do anything so crass as blink in surprise, but she still hesitates for a fraction of a second. "What?"

"You should try it," says Carlos, offering her the package. "I've already gotten three this week, and I can't stand to see it go to waste. I'd hate to see the hospitality of Night Vale's citizens abused."

There's another miniscule hesitation, and then she accepts the fruitcake graciously. "Thank you, Carlos. How considerate."

"De nada," says Carlos. "Now, if you'll excuse me, we're going to be late for dinner..."

"Ah, young love," she says. "It truly has a taste like no other."

"You know how the old song goes," says Carlos. "‘Love is all you need to destroy your enemies’." 

"I never was very interested in music," says Dr. Raith. "Good night, gentlemen." She turns and walks away. Carlos stares fixedly off to the left, keeping her in his peripheral vision just in case, until the opportunity to ogle has passed. Dr. Raith may not have quite the magnetic pull of her sisters, but Carlos absolutely refuses to indulge his basic instincts even a little bit. Especially not when Cecil is right there, staring at... staring at Carlos, hah.

"Wow," says Cecil, letting out a shaky breath. "Dr. Raith is very... intense."

"That's one way to put it," says Carlos.

"I'm glad you gave her the fruitcake," says Cecil.

"You are?"

"It was very nice of her to speak to her colleagues on your behalf," he says. "I know you two... don't get along... but I'm glad you didn't reject her overture of – of friendship. In the spirit of scientific cooperation. Or whatever."

"That's what I thought," says Carlos. Cecil's not wrong, really. Carlos has no idea what Dr. Raith has to gain from warning him about the Strex Corp security team lying in wait, though he's sure she's gained something. But it's still not a good idea to be beholden to her – or anyone – like that, and while regifted fruitcake may scrape the bottom of the gift-giving barrel, she accepted it and now they are technically even.

"Also, we still have the last one you got," Cecil says. He rubs a thumb against the back of Carlos' hand. Carlos' breath stutters; he realizes he's still holding his dagger, knuckles white around the hilt. He slides it back into its sheath and Cecil lets out an odd sigh.

He looks up in alarm, but Cecil is still watching him. They're standing very close together. Cecil's pupils are dilated; his fingers wrap loosely around Carlos' hand and he licks his lips. Carlos stares at them in fascination. Lab One is right there, Kate probably wouldn't mind if they borrowed her desk...

"Let's go home," says Cecil.

Carlos lets out an explosive breath and says, "Good idea."

The van's headlights turn on as they start walking away from the lab. Carlos comes to an abrupt stop on the sidewalk and suppresses a groan of frustration.
He's filled with the sudden reckless urge to cut loose, to beat the security team into submission and vaporize their van into its component particles, to show Cecil that he's the perfect storm of talent and power and vengeance. That he's worthy of the trust Cecil puts in him.

But... Cecil wants to go home. To their home. They were supposed to have a nice evening, and Cecil doesn't care that he's not really perfect, and the only way Carlos can ruin that is if he blows his cover and drags Cecil after him. He's not going to leave Cecil behind, but... he wants Cecil standing beside him of his own free will, not out of necessity. He doesn't want to take Cecil's choice away from him.

"I forgot to borrow a science textbook from Doctor Renegade," Carlos says instead.

"Are you sure you need it?" asks Cecil, a little desperately. His fingers caress the thin skin over the veins of Carlos' wrist.

"I need… I need you… " says Carlos. He gulps and tries again. "I need you to get it for me. Would you go inside and ask her about it? I'm not allowed to wake her up under pain of pain. Although – I’m not sure where she is, so you might have to do some exploring…"

"Oh, of course!" says Cecil, brightening at the chance to peek around the lab even as his hand slides up Carlos' sleeve. "Although – she won't be angry, will she? I mean, I'll still ask, but—"

"No, she likes you," says Carlos. "Tell her I need... level ten."

"Will do," says Cecil. "Do I have to include the dramatic pause?"

"Yes, please."

"Back in a jiffy," says Cecil. He leans in for a quick kiss, which accidentally turns into a slightly longer kiss than is really appropriate for the situation, then disappears into the labs. Carlos shuts his eyes and takes a deep breath. Then he wanders a little further down the sidewalk, well clear of the lab's wards, staring down at his (dead) cell phone as though completely oblivious.

The yellow van pulls up. Two men get out.

"Are you the scientist Carlos?" one asks. The other circles behind him.

"Can I help you?" asks Carlos, dropping his phone back in his pocket.

The man in front draws a taser.

Carlos darts forward and grabs his arm. The taser discharges right into the chest of the second man sneaking up behind them. Carlos stomps on the bridge of the first man's foot and elbows him in the face, then barks, "Way!" The first man drops and the second, already on the ground, stops writhing in electrified pain. Both are sound asleep.

Carlos steals the keys out of the ignition. Something beeps; a cell phone is sitting in the cupholder. Carlos reads Any sign of the scientist? and texts back, No. I'm getting really tired. He shuts both men in the back of the van, engages the child safety locks, and wipes down his prints. He's just locked all the doors and dropped the keys down the storm drain when Cecil dashes out of the lab.

"Hi," he says, slightly out of breath. "Is this the textbook you wanted?"

Cecil is flushed. Carlos can feel his own heart pounding.
"For sure," says Carlos, looking into Cecil's eyes instead of at the book. "Let's go."

Later, Carlos stares at the ceiling in the dark. Cecil is sprawled across his chest; Carlos doesn’t think he’s asleep, either. It’s a little too hot in their room to be so close, and Carlos is kind of hungry since they skipped dinner, but he doesn’t move.

He's thinking of earlier, when the adrenaline burned through his veins and he was prepared to do anything to keep Cecil safe. He's thinking of how little his cover meant to him.

He's thinking of how to tell Cecil the truth.

Out of the heat of the moment, he forces himself to consider all the ramifications. Security is a concern, but the past several months have proved that Cecil can keep plenty of secrets, for both the good of Night Vale and the good of those he cares about. If Shakeena and Tamika Flynn can trust him, Carlos certainly can.

Trust – that's the sticking point, really. Cecil might understand intellectually why Carlos kept this a secret, but no matter when Carlos tells him, Cecil's always going to wonder why Carlos didn't tell him sooner.

...Carlos wonders why he didn't tell Cecil sooner. But whenever he thinks about it, his chest constricts into a knot of terror, and this whole self-reflection thing is pretty damn difficult when you're trying to stave off a panic attack.

"Carlos?" asks Cecil, and Carlos flinches, which is ridiculous. Cecil's not telepathic, he would have told Carlos about any... magical mental powers...

Cecil props himself up on one elbow and frowns down at him. "Are you okay?" He flattens his hand over Carlos' racing heart.

"I'm fine," says Carlos. "I was just... thinking," and that's a mistake, because what if Cecil asks what he was thinking about?

And that's it, that's the answer. Carlos doesn't need to tell Cecil, he needs to let Cecil find out. This is Night Vale: disseminated information is naturally suspicious, but anything gleaned from investigative journalism and/or poking your nose into others' business might as well be the Word of God. If Cecil figures out Carlos' actual purpose here, Carlos can tell him the truth immediately when he asks about it. He won't have to lie to him ever again.

"I love you," he says, feeling his heart now thud with happiness and excitement.

"Love is pretty terrifying," says Cecil, as if in agreement.

"That's not what I – come here," says Carlos, and pulls him down for a kiss. He breaks off with a laugh when Cecil's stomach rumbles against his.

Cecil smiles at him, his eyes crinkling at the corners. "I'm a little hungry. What about you?"

"Starving," says Carlos, and follows him out of bed.

They've lost power again, because while their apartment is perfect in most other respects, the wiring is not the greatest and Cecil had pinned Carlos to the door when they got home and said things and Carlos is not made of stone. But Cecil just lights some candles and hands Carlos a carton of ice cream to finish as they tangle together on the couch.
"That's the third time this month the power's gone out," says Cecil.

"Yeah," says Carlos, a little proudly. He's getting much better at this, though clearly he still needs practice. Lots of practice.

...He's getting distracted. He has a plan now. "What could have caused that, do you think?"

"The capricious whims of the power company," says Cecil immediately. He licks ice cream off his spoon, temporarily preventing Carlos from asking follow-up questions.

"What else?" asks Carlos when he's recovered. He grabs Cecil's hand and redirects the next spoonful into his own mouth to prevent a reoccurrence.

"Uh... the bloodstones," says Cecil, who is now staring at the spoon in Carlos' mouth. Carlos stares back. It's possible he didn't think this through.

He definitely didn't think this through: brain freeze hits a second later. He scrunches his nose in agony and Cecil laughs at him.

"Chanting isn't nearly as effective and there's a lot of rogue energy flying around, ever since Strex Corp started tearing them up," Cecil continues. He scoops the tiniest spoonful of ice cream possible and holds it out to Carlos, who narrows his eyes at him but eats it anyway. "Say what you will about their dark and horrifying nature, but a good bloodstone circle does a lot to calm a turbulent psychic atmosphere. I mean, unless you're trapped in one, of course."

"Mm-hmm," says Carlos, as Cecil feeds him another spoonful. "A rogue energy overload – that sounds pretty likely."

Cecil tenses and goes completely still. Carlos looks at him, his heart thundering in his ears.

"Rogue energy overload," Cecil repeats hoarsely.

"Um," says Carlos. Cecil stopped with his spoon halfway out of the carton; a drop of melting ice cream rolls down the outside of the bowl until it releases to splatter in ecstasy against Cecil's bare chest.

They've made a good start for tonight, Carlos thinks as he shoves away his ice cream and Cecil drops his spoon and they both simultaneously try to crawl into each other's laps. A really memorable start is just what they need.

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“Okay, start the engine,” says Cecil.

“You grounded the black cable again, right?” asks Carlos.

“Yes, Carlos.”

“On metal?”

“Yes, Carlos,” says Cecil, rolling his eyes.

Carlos starts the engine on Cecil’s car. Cecil comes over and leans against the passenger side window. “I’m still not quite clear how you ended up with an old Honda Accord last used by the Apache Tracker, ugh,” he says.
Carlos shrugs. “They told me dying words count as a last will and testament, and Teddy Williams is a notary public.”

“Oh, I know *that,*” says Cecil. “But… how did you know the Apache Tracker? Besides the part where he saved your life.”

“We used to work together,” says Carlos.

“I didn’t know he was into science,” says Cecil.

“He wasn’t,” says Carlos, after a pause. He forces his hands to relax on the steering wheel. Cecil asking questions is *good.* He can do this.

“Huh,” Cecil muses. “Rev the engine a little?”

Carlos depresses the gas pedal for about a minute. Cecil chews on his lip, his eyes distant.

“Okay, I’m going to start it,” he says, and heads back to the Honda. The engine turns over once and goes dead.

“Дерьмо,” mutters Carlos. Cecil gets out of the Tracker’s car and frowns at the engine. Then he blinks and reaches down into it.

“Cecil, *don’t*—”

“Ak!” says Cecil, pulling out – a rock? “Hold on…” He leans in the Honda’s driver’s side door.

A second later, the engine roars to life.

“There’s your problem,” says Cecil, handing Carlos the rock. It’s clearly been carved, with a shape almost like an irregular raindrop, the thinner end rounded and the thicker terminating in a small knob; it hums with its own energy. “I mean, I’m not a mechanic, really, so I don’t know what it *is,* but it was definitely draining the battery.”

Carlos fingers curl around it. You could pack quite a wallop with the power stored inside. “It’s a charmstone,” he says, meeting Cecil’s eyes.

“Neat!” says Cecil, with a proud grin. “You should give it to your—” He looks around, then leans through the window and whispers, “*Geologist friends.*” He gives Carlos a quick peck on his ear. “I’ll drive to the garage. You’ll follow me?”

“Uh,” says Carlos, then “Yes?” to Cecil’s retreating back. He puts the charmstone in the cupholder and drums his fingers against the steering wheel, a little uneasy, because… Well, because Cecil used to be totally comfortable redefining the word *perfect* to apply to anything Carlos said or did, and now Carlos has the sneaking suspicion he’s doing it with the word *normal.* His boyfriend accepts him just the way he is, and that’s certainly not a bad thing, but—

“Wait – Cecil, *black cable first*—”

Cecil escapes with only a few minor burns, but between the trip to the clinic, the trip to the garage, and the trip to the salvage yard to argue with the tow-truck driver that *yes,* they want to drive the Apache Tracker’s car *on purpose,* they both forget all about his line of questioning.

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Carlos can’t really hear Cecil open the door over the sound of croaking, but he does feel the wards
part to let him in.


“What?” asks Carlos. He does another two crunches and sits up.

“No, don’t stop on my account,” says Cecil. “Where did the frogs come from?”

“Doorknockers,” says Carlos, dropping into another set of push-ups. “Everyone in a 0.78-mile radius around Stan’s Pawn Shop has had their doorknockers turned into frogs. Except us.”

“Oh, that’s right. Shakeena was telling me down at the Java Trout – her youngest tried to eat theirs,” says Cecil with a chuckle. "I'll talk about it tomorrow on the show, I suppose." He sits down on the couch with a glass of scotch and puts his sock feet up. On Carlos.

Carlos gives him a look. Cecil says, innocently, “What number were you on? Sixteen?”

“Forty-six, you cheater,” says Carlos, but he doesn’t even bother to hide his grin. “So… Shakeena lost a doorknocker, and we didn’t? Forty-nine, fifty, hah.”

“Yep!” says Cecil.

“Don’t you think that seems a little weird?” asks Carlos, settling down on his elbows.

“Well, I guess it depends why we have frogs,” says Cecil. “Eyewitnesses reported Stan perched atop the roof of his pawn shop blowing into a conch shell that emitted a magical green glow and no sound, but honestly, that could mean anything.”

“And then all the frogs just happened to congregate around our apartment.”

“It is a very nice apartment,” says Cecil. “Although…” He gnaws on his lip. “There are scientists who study frogs and salamanders and other lizards, right?”

“No,” says Carlos, trying not to sound scandalized, and they get side-tracked into a biology lesson that for once actually stays about biology, because lizards, honestly.

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Cecil squints at Carlos’ sword: at the string of vampire teeth in place of its tassel, the strange silver metal of the blade, the almost-perceptible aura of sharpness extending from its edges. Carlos stops polishing. He holds his breath and meets Cecil’s eyes.

“You missed a spot,” says Cecil cheerfully. He taps the zhongren and drops a kiss on the top of Carlos’ head before heading into the kitchen. He rummages around the fridge, then asks, “Do you want take-out?”

Carlos sighs.

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"He's not moving," calls Kate. Her hands are cupped around the upper half of her face, which is pressed against the window at the house in Desert Creek. Carlos gives the house a quick prod with his senses, but it doesn't seem to be in danger of eating her head, so he goes back to De Principiis Munimentorum.

It might be nice to have the Senior Council's trust that Carlos can dick around with the wards and
probably not destroy a major part of North America, but it is also a royal pain in the ass. After a long conversation with Luccio which included a highly confusing tangent into C programming languages until he figured out her point, they deactivated anything in the ward foci rendered defunct by the greatly reduced number of bloodstones. Then they set up an entirely new focus by Bandera Street, one that mirrored the functioning of the pararrayos but did it much more smoothly and elegantly since they didn’t have to cobble it together at the last minute. In theory, the modifications should have calmed the whole system down as it ran with greatly increased efficiency.

In practice, the modifications still haven’t fully synced with the regenerative and multiplicative spells, so half the time they don’t work, and during the other half the storm wards can't make up their minds about whether they’re a legitimate addition to the defenses or rogue magic that must be terminated with extreme atmospheric prejudice.

The supercells churning in and out of existence every few hours would be alarming enough on their own. But more disturbingly, they've seen this behavior before: two years ago, bookending Carlos' untimely arrival from the sandstorm. Both he and Luccio comb through the foci looking for any past evidence of tampering; the only magical signatures present are theirs.

He flips to the chapter on weather wards. Maybe it's a known secondary effect from certain entropy spells...?

"Okay, Gary, try again," calls Andre.

Gary obediently raps "Shave and a Haircut" on the front door.

"Still nothing – wait – he's moving! He's moving! He's – oh, he just turned his head to look at another picture of a lighthouse," says Kate, disappointed.

"Wei, write that down," says Julie absently. She hasn't really been paying attention to the latest round of tests for "Analysis of Methods for Attracting the Attention of John Peters – You Know, the Farmer", but has instead spent most of the afternoon squinting at a well-worn sheaf of papers and scribbling things onto her tablet.

"Did he look to the left or the right?" asks Wei.

"The right," says Kate. "Away from the window."

Wei shakes his head. "It's probably just statistical noise," he says, "But we'll run it anyway."

Carlos feels someone's gaze drilling into the side of his head. He looks up; Julie is watching him intently.

"What," he says, warily.

"The laws of conservation of energy apply to your whole bibbidi-bobbidi-boom thing, right?" she asks.

Carlos briefly considers preserving the dignity of his profession by not answering, but then Julie will probably start singing. "Yes," he says.

"So where do you get the power for it? Does it have to be a local energy transfer?"

"It depends," he says. "Doing it that way can save your strength, especially when you're throwing around a lot of thermal energy. Other constructs are powered by the secondary stored reserves, or by outside energy currents. Otherwise, it's basically sheer force of will."
“Outside energy currents?” she says. “Hmm…” She picks up her stylus again. Carlos goes back to reading about Hecateian rites.

Julie’s moved on to assembling one of her machines and Gary’s got his hand stuck in the mail slot when a pack of yellow helicopters shows up. They hover above Desert Creek for about five minutes; finally, one peels off to circle lazily around the neighborhood while the rest leave.

Carlos watches it out of the corner of his eye. His book’s back in the van now, safe from prying eyes, but Julie apparently doesn’t care that they’re being observed: she just keeps hooking up cables and duct-taping things in place.

“All right, everyone,” she calls. “Assume battlestations!”

Carlos looks at her machine. Most of it is a match for her built-in-a-cave-with-a-box-of-scraps aesthetic, but the flanges gleam with the memory of flames. “I’m going to end up on fire again, aren’t I,” he says morosely.

“Ehhh, probably not,” says Julie. “But definitely don’t come any closer.”

The helicopter ignores her advice, hovering nearly directly above them. It’s out of range for a subtle hex, though he could probably will a rock to bounce off the chopper’s blind spot—

“Clear!” shouts Julie. Everyone ducks.

After about ten seconds, when nothing blows up or sets Carlos alight, the scientists burst into a flurry of energy level monitoring and core sampling and data recording. Gary, now clad in a hazmat suit, knocks on the door again.

“You forgot the two bits,” says Andre helpfully, from behind the Sciencemobile. Gary raps twice more.

Carlos frowns. There’s a strange tingling and the smell of ozone in the air. Something feels… unsettled, though when he opens his Sight there’s nothing but a lazy swirling of past enchantments, drifting around the house in a sluggish unseen current.

He checks on the helicopter and swears at the sky beyond it. The storm wards are at it again, when there’s nothing more exciting than the unchanged house that doesn’t even exist and a solitary circle keeping his aura to himself. The supercell hasn’t quite formed, but if he expects to get the scientists out of there without leaving time to break down their equipment, he might as well—

Julie’s machine makes a loud whomp noise and lets out a burst of blue-white light. As Carlos blinks rapidly against the glowing afterimages crowding his vision, he realizes the regular chugging of the helicopter rotors has changed into an erratic sputtering.

A second later, there’s a deafening screech of protesting metal and a lot of cursing.

“Wei, write that down!” shouts Julie.

Carlos breaks his circle; the machine lets out a few sparks at the sudden rush of released magical feedback. He wades through the dust cloud kicked up by the helicopter crash and helps the pilot out. She shrugs off his arm and stumbles away.

“You’ll be hearing from my supervisor!” she coughs. Then she thumps the side of her helmet. “Sugarfoot Leader, is this is Sugarfoot Five. Bear down – repeat, Bear down. Requesting back-up, over.” She winces at the hiss of static and the next round of helmet-thumps, but slaps a first aid kit
out of Gary’s hand when he offers it to her. “Searchlight Actual, this is Sugarfoot Five, requesting a disposal team at Undisclosed Location Six, over.” She frowns. “Does anyone copy?”

“I don’t think they copy,” says Andre kindly. “Can we give you a ride somewhere?”

“No,” spits the pilot. She yanks the black box (which is orange) out of the cockpit and stomps off unsteadily down the street.

“Man, you crash one helicopter and everyone gets touchy,” says Julie. She picks up a piece of her machine, frowns, and tosses it to Gary.

“Uh,” says Kate. “Strex Corp’s running a little short on helicopters. I don’t think they’re going to be too happy with us…”

“I weep for them,” says Julie. “But since all my work permits extend upwards for nineteen stories—”

“Did that come standard, or did you make a special request?” asks Carlos.

“—They can take their complaints and—”

“Are you using this?” They all jump at the new voice. Tamika Flynn is crouched on top of the chopper; half a dozen more faces topped in little brown beanies peer out from around it. “According to international salvage laws —” She gestures with her copy of *The Wide Sargasso Sea*. “—The helicopter’s yours, but we were wondering…”

Julie blinks at her, then says innocently, “Helicopter? What helicopter?”

The scientists cluster around Julie’s machine, steadfastly ignoring the swarm of activity behind them – although when one of the Brownies coughs, shifting nervously from one foot to the other, Carlos sees Julie discreetly pass her a swing wrench.

Carlos goes back to reading, though he keeps half an eye fixed on the sky above. By the time the rest of the Strex Corp helicopter pack arrives, Tamika, the Girl Scouts, and the downed chopper are long gone. He listens to an upbeat weather report and can’t see a single cloud on the horizon, but he can’t shake the feeling that a storm’s coming anyway.

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Carlos tries to enter quietly, but Cecil still turns from where he’s curled up on the couch and gives him a sad little smile.

“Any change today?” asks Carlos.

“None,” says Cecil. He twists back to watch his Crystodyne radio as the next cycle of numbers starts. Not with hope – just resignation and sorrow. Carlos sits next to him.

“It’s been almost a week,” says Cecil. “I wish I could think of some other way to help Fay, but… I don’t suppose you…?”

“I couldn’t – I’m not good with sensitive electronics,” says Carlos.

Cecil doesn’t pursue it, and there’s no curiosity in his voice. Carlos feels a sting of frustration, followed almost immediately by a sting of shame. Fay might just be a voice on the radio, but for years so was Cecil, at least to Carlos. She had escaped her numbers station programming and become, however briefly, something very much like a person, and she deserves a better memorial than Carlos’ interior whining about how communication is hard.


“Maybe Doctor Renegade?” offers Carlos.

“Maybe,” repeats Cecil. He doesn’t sound very optimistic. “But… sometimes freedom’s just another word for nothing.” He puts his head on Carlos’ chest and wraps his arms around Carlos’ waist. Carlos rests a hand on his hair. They sit. They listen.


~*~*~*~

“Do you know anything about clouds?” asks Sadie the checkout girl. Her hand is extended, holding Carlos’ change, but she hasn’t let go yet.

“Some,” says Carlos warily. She and the rest of the sandstorm cohort haven’t said anything new in months, apart from a few requests to smell his hair (that were not from Sadie).

“Good,” she says, and drops twenty-six cents in his hand.

Dr. Raith waves at him languorously from the parking lot as he’s leaving, but he’s past her before he can decide whether or not to respond. He pulls over and texts Sadie a warning.

K, she says.

Carlos drops off his groceries and trudges out to the main ward interface for the fifth time that week. The light spills over the ground around him; he gives it a poke and it obediently grows upward, expanding into the third dimension. It’s easy to pick out his and Luccio’s additions: they seem to float above the others, like a child’s crayon scribbles on an oil painting. It looks like there are some improvement, at least. After almost a month, the metaphorical youthful artist has at least learned how to color inside the lines, and it corresponds to a small but statistically significant decrease in activity from the storm wards. Maybe in a year, they’ll look like they’ve been there all along.

His phone chimes.

Initiating tests on the new energy converter, reads the text from Andre.

We’re in the Sand Wastes. If we haven’t checked in in two hours please come find us!

Copies of our wills in our desks.

Carlos sighs. He’s come to the conclusion that most scientists are secretly adrenaline junkies, only their risk-taking behavior manifests itself as "What's this do?” instead of (or in addition to) "Yay, this could kill me!"

He’s about to respond when a faint blue-white light to the east – the direction of the Sand Wastes – catches his eye.
The wind stops.

Silence falls.

The interface disappears.

Carlos realizes his mistake a second later: the interface hasn’t vanished, it just doesn’t have anything to display because the magic isn’t there anymore. The constant background hum of Night Vale’s containment wards is just gone – not malfunctioning, not reduced, gone – and Carlos feels exposed and naked and terrified out of his mind.

There’s a distant rumbling in the earth, the echoes of uncanny screams.

He almost drops his phone before he can dial it.

"Carlos, this is sort of a bad—"

"Turn it off!" he shouts. "Andre, whatever you just did, reverse it!"

"Did we do something wro—"

Something enormous and black and chitinous bursts from the ground.

"Turn it off!" he shrieks again. He drops his phone when the thing swats at him, bending oddly with one end still planted in the earth. He ducks under it, splattering it with green light, but as it recoils he realizes it’s only a leg, the appendage of some massive insect-like creature.

A wave of despair hits him, forcibly dragging his mind towards darkness. He grits his teeth and shoves it away, but he can feel it clinging to him, draining away his will...

The earth shakes hard enough that he stumbles. The leg braces itself against the ground, and the earth bulges upwards, rocks and dirt avalanching off – off the creature’s back, looming higher and higher.

Carlos drops to his knees and gapes at it in helpless awe. It’s useless to resist. He’d never be able to even make a dent in its armor before it crushes him and moves on to—

A sudden sense of pressure crushes him to the ground, and all he can see is blinding purple lightning —

~*~*~*~*~

He wakes himself up by sneezing, which sets off a cascade of pain in his head so awful he curls into a ball and doesn’t even think of whimpering.

After a few moments, he’s recovered enough to focus his thoughts. He’s lying outside somewhere. Horrible red light stabs at him through his eyelids, but when he opens one eye in a squint, it just seems to be coming from the sun in normal, if regrettable, amounts. There’s a throbbing and painful pressure in his head, but when he recognizes it as the healthy hum of the containment wards, he almost wants to cry. The desert around him is empty and everything is quiet. Well, mostly quiet.

"Hello, listeners!" Cecil warbles from the speakers of his phone. The rest of it is smoking. "It appears that the end times have come and gone. The servants of the elder gods, awakened from their centuries of slumber, have apparently reconsidered their desire to crush our puny mortal lives after death rained down from the sky, and have thus returned to rest in their prison of the ages. Of course,
this has caused some serious delays in the evening commute—"

Carlos groans – mistake – and rolls over. Everything hurts. His nose is bleeding. So are his ears, and possibly even his eyeballs. But there's no sign of the giant Outsider bug-thing, apart from the jumbled heap of displaced boulders and disturbed sand that collapsed back over its resting place.

He slowly climbs to his feet. His sword still juts from the anvil, and the interface is back, glowing even more brightly than before. Squinting, he reaches for the hilt.

He stops and stares at the runes and sigils flowing past.

For a moment, he can’t find his and Luccio’s additions to the wards, and he has the sudden dread that their weeks of hard work have been erased. But then he catches a flash of a familiar pattern.

Their magic’s still there, it’s just indistinguishable from the rest of the defenses. Fully incorporated. Working smoothly together.

He blinks at it, then resolves to figure it out at such a time when he can look straight at it without wanting to throw up.

~*~*~*~

"So, on a scale of one to ten, how badly did we fuck – wow, you look terrible," says Julie when he shambles into Lab One and collapses into the first available chair.

"Ugh," says Carlos.

Gary pokes his head in the door. "Uh, Carlos?" he says nervously. "Your office phone has been ringing for five minutes straight, and Cecil is kind of freaking out on the radio—"

Carlos glares at him.

"Right, I'll... go tell him you're okay," squeaks Gary, and disappears.

The lights in the lab are too bright, even with his sunglasses on. He pulls his lab coat over his head.

"What did you do," he says finally.

"We were just testing the prototype for the new energy converter," says Julie defensively. "There's a massive influx flowing westward into town. You can't pick it up on the scanners, just detect it from the secondary effects. But it dissipates right inside the city limits – weird, right?"

That’s the path of the leyline. The one that fuels Night Vale's containment wards. "It's not weird," says Carlos. "It's supposed to do that."

"...Oh," says Julie. "That energy was being used for something?"

"Yes."

"So it was probably a bad idea to divert it completely into the accumulators."

"Yes," says Carlos. "Yes, it was."

"Ah," says Julie. "So the advisability of repeating our experiments is..."

"Negative six point zero two two times ten to the twenty-third percent," says Carlos.
"Right," says Julie. "Right, of course."

Carlos watches aurae crawl across the back of his eyelids and waits for the inevitable.

"Only it's just – we hit maximum capacity in five seconds," says Julie in a rush. "And we're still getting all kinds of incredible readings. Even if we only siphon off a little of the available energy—"

"That's what they said at Chernobyl."

"I could run the whole lab for an hour! If we could just—"

She stops when Carlos lifts up the corner of his lab coat and pulls down his sunglasses to glare at her.

"That was magic, Julie," he says. "Your energy converters stole and converted magic."

Julie blinks at him for a moment, then says, "Cool."

"Julie, you know how Cecil was talking about the servants of the elder gods bringing about the end times after escaping their prison of the ages?"

"Yes?" says Julie.

"He wasn't being metaphorical," says Carlos.

"Oh," says Julie. "So... not cool."

"Not cool," agrees Carlos.

Julie sighs.

Carlos retreats back under his coat. Julie Kwan, PhD is many things – brash, easily irritable, moderately misanthropic – but she's neither unreasonable nor irresponsible.

She's also not easily deterred.

"Give me a copy of your blueprints," says Carlos. "I need to make sure you can't break any of the Laws of Magic. There's a place in the mountains above Porterville that might work, but you didn't hear it from me. That leyline is smaller than Night Vale's, at least."

"Thanks, Carlos," she says gratefully.

"Don't blow up California," he says.

"I won't."

"Someone may show up and try to chop your head off," he warns.

"That's a risk I'm willing to take," she says.

He startles awake when a hand settles firmly but gently on his shoulder.

"Cecil?"

"Let's get you home," says Cecil. "Unless you just want to go to your old place?"

There are way too many stairs between Carlos and a bed that way. "Ugh," he says, and Cecil pulls Carlos' arm over his shoulder to help him out to the car.
By the time they get back to their apartment, Carlos is unfortunately wide awake and hating every minute of it.

"I'll try to be quiet," Cecil whispers as he digs his keys out of his pocket. "But—"

"Noooo," Carlos moans into his shoulder. "Quiet hurts."

"Oh!" says Cecil, and then, in a normal tone. "Is – is this okay?"

"Don't stop talking," says Carlos, because Cecil's voice might be too loud, but there's something soothing about the way its orderly frequencies bounce around Carlos' skull.

Cecil carefully deposits him on the couch, draws all the curtains shut, and makes some kind of circuit of their apartment, rambling about his sister and niece and definitely not Steve Carlsberg the whole time. "Oh, Abbie just got a new shipment of depleted uranium, and she wanted me to tell you that you're welcome to borrow some whenever you like," he says, his voice getting closer. "And Janis said all those tips about angular momentum you gave her are really helpful. She should be getting her knife-throwing merit badge any day now!"

Carlos opens his eyes to find Cecil kneeling in front of him, holding a wet washcloth. "There you are," says Cecil with a soft smile, and he starts to wipe the rest of the blood off Carlos' face. He finishes with a kiss to Carlos' forehead, then stands up and disappears into the kitchen.

"—And I'm all for new flavors at the Pinkberry, but everyone knows you need a special license to prepare and serve nutmeg, and is a fifty-dollar serving of frozen yogurt really worth it?" he says as he comes back. He's holding a bowl of something steaming. "I mean, I guess some people enjoy the numb lips and feeling of intoxication. Haute cuisine, eh? Speaking of which – I know you don't like canned soup, but Chicken Noodle Surprise is just the thing when you're feeling poorly. I think my mom used to make it for me. Maybe? Probably. Anyway, here you go!"

"Thanks," croaks Carlos. He doesn't ask about the sodium content or the surprise.

Amazingly, after eating three-quarters of it he does feel marginally more human, though that might also be due to Cecil gently rubbing the back of his neck the whole time.

"So what happened today?" asks Cecil. "Off the record, of course. I talked to one of your colleagues, but he was a little hysterical and then claimed your brain was exploding out of your ears, so I... got a little distracted."

"Oh, you know," says Carlos. "My team of scientists was meddling in forces we didn't understand. But the, uh, negative side effects stopped when we shut down the experiment. They've promised not to do it again."

"That's very thoughtful of you," says Cecil. He scrubs his fingernails through Carlos' hair; Carlos' eyelids flutter shut for a moment. "Nobody blames any of you, of course – well, except for Steve Carlsberg, but you shouldn't listen to him. I mean, who hasn't almost doomed Night Vale to unimaginable, apocalyptic terror? Everybody knows it's all the wizards' fault, anyway."

Carlos snorts soup up his nose.

"I mean, the periodic decapitations are one thing," says Cecil, handing him a napkin. "But was it really necessary to encase Night Vale in a web of self-destruction on the slim possibility that the lethal and unearthly forces trapped beneath us might try to escape and destroy life as we know it? I mean, that just seems a little selfish. And yes, we don't have many clouds out here in the desert, but – are you all right?"
"Wizards?" says Carlos weakly.

"Of course wizards!" says Cecil, surprised. "They're everywhere. I mean, sometimes you can even buy them on eBay!"

Carlos does not have a response for that.

"Oh, I'm no magic-hater," says Cecil quickly. "One of my best friends is a practitioner! But wizards are just – yeuchh. Can you really trust someone who willingly lives in a society governed by a council of inscrutable leaders in ancient ceremonial costumes and policed by a deadly and highly-trained secretive cabal of cloaked operatives who keep us under constant surveillance?"

"I don't know," says Carlos, starting to feel more than a little desperate. "Can you?"

"What?"

"Are we still talking about wizards?" asks Carlos.


"Nobody," repeats Carlos. His voice cracks.

"Nope!" says Cecil. "They're worse than interlopers. You should go down to the Post Office and look at the Wanted posters. It's very difficult to pick them out from the hooded figures, especially when you're not supposed to be looking at them, but I bet with your scientific eye for detail you'd have better luck than – are you sure you're all right?"

"My entire life is a lie," says Carlos with a sort of numb horror.

"Here, let me get that," says Cecil, taking the bowl from his shaking hands. "It's all right, Carlos. You told me yourself there are always new scientific discoveries to be made; there's no need to bother with wizards. Who'd want to discover them?"

Carlos pulls his lab coat over his head again.

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The numb feeling doesn't go away. Neither does the pain in his head or the tingling on the side of his face, but Carlos is pretty sure those are side effects from his lingering migraine and not because he's... he's... He doesn't know what he is.

Cecil doesn't notice – or, well, he does notice; he just doesn't notice the underlying problem. He's the very picture of a nurturing boyfriend: bringing Carlos cereal in bed; offering him back rubs and scalp massages; letting him pick whatever half a program they can watch before their TV, cable, or streaming internet service inevitably goes down. It would be perfect if the only thing wrong with Carlos was the backlash from an experiment gone wrong, but Cecil looked at the evidence and drew all the wrong conclusions and Carlos... Carlos can't correct him.

Carlos finally can't take any more of it. As soon as he can drive safely, he tells Cecil he's visiting his family for a few days. Cecil makes him promise to give them his love and packs Carlos a bag of mostly-edible snacks for the road.

"What's wrong, mijo?" his mother asks as he helps her close the restaurant around the one remaining table. The new place is a little more upscale, so instead of students lingering over nachos and pitchers
of margaritas, there's business people lingering over guacamole de molcajete and tiny glasses of margaritas. (The students tip better, percentage-wise.)

It feels strange discussing his relationship with his mom, since Carlos spent so long glossing over the horrible failure that was his dating life. But she spent an hour talking to Cecil at Christmas while he was hiding in the coat closet at his sister's house, and has declared him a 'nice boy', so Carlos guesses it's worth a shot.

"I don't know if I can tell Cecil about my job," he says.

She sighs. "Oh, Carlos. You never did like lying," she says.

"What?" says Carlos, and, "Yes, I do," before he really thinks that through.

His mother gives him a pitying look. "Didn't you ever notice that I always asked you and not your sisters what had happened whenever you got in trouble? Two seconds and you'd crack like an egg."

Carlos had noticed that; he'd just assumed his mother inherited a minor talent for truth-seeking magic.

"But I've been lying about stuff for years," he says. "Including my job!"

"Nothing so important, and never to anyone you care about, mijo," she says.

She has a point. Basically his whole family knows what he does. He has a few friends from high school who don't know, but at this point they're barely more than glorified acquaintances; they've just lived in the same place and interacted casually for so long that no one wants to look any deeper than what they expect to see. His closest friends are either related to him or wizards like him or drawn by their jobs to Night Vale and sucked in by its weird dangerous charms, like him.

Cecil's pretty much the only one who doesn't know.

"Oh," says Carlos. "I should've—" He stops, because he doesn't know what he should have done, either. He loves Cecil, and Cecil loves all of him except for the one thing that brought them together in the first place, and no matter how far back he goes, he can't think of a single decision he could have changed without one of them getting hurt.

"My poor Carlito," says his mother, and gives him a hug before sending him to help his cousins lock up the kitchen.

He's back in Night Vale and his headache is gone before he figures it out. They're in the waiting room at the veterinary hospital while Khoshekh undergoes surgery; just sitting, silent, in the uncomfortable plastic chairs underneath the posters of unsettlingly photorealistic geese huddled on a watercolor frozen baseball field. Cecil is sniffling into his handkerchief and clutching Carlos' hand like it's a lifeline. Like he'd be lost without it. Like this small point of contact represents their whole relationship so far, where Cecil loves him and is just happy that Carlos is there even though he's not doing anything, and Carlos looks down at their joined hands and realizes that Cecil isn't there for him. Not truly. Not for all of him.

It's not Cecil's fault. It's Carlos', for not realizing it sooner. There's a line in the sand and Carlos fooled himself into thinking he was standing on the right side. But the illusion is gone and its absence is a great, sucking hole in his chest, because Cecil may love him but he'll never truly know him.

Carlos may have been putting it off, but he'd always thought he'd be able to tell Cecil the truth some day. He'd promised Cecil, even if Cecil didn't know it. He'd thought he'd figure it out – they'd figure it out.
He didn't think he'd have that choice taken away from him. That he'd break his word instead.

He grips Cecil's hand just a little tighter, for all the good that will do, as the grief fogging his mind takes up residence in his heart instead.

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Sadie stops ringing up his groceries and stares at him.

"What," says Carlos warily.

"You okay?" she asks.

"I'm fine," says Carlos. He plasters on a smile. Sadie doesn't seem very impressed, but she starts scanning barcodes again.

*Fine*, thinks Carlos. Maybe if he repeats it enough, it will be true.

He focuses back on Sadie. "Your year and a day is up, isn't it?" he asks. It's several days past that, actually, assuming she started working at the Ralph's on the day of the sandstorm.

"Sure, but..." Sadie looks around, waits for a Strex Corp security guard to push her empty grocery cart past, then continues in an impressive display of verbosity, "I do my belomancy part-time out of the loading dock. There's no legal limit on how long you can claim sanctuary."

"You think there's still a problem?"

She frowns unhappily. "I promised."

Carlos isn't going to push for her to break her oath, not now. He feels terrible not following through on his promise to Cecil, and it's not just emotional. If he went back on a vow sworn on his power... Well, to start, that's a good way to lose your power altogether. He won't ask that of the sandstorm cohort. Not without an urgent need. "You'll let me know if you think of something?"

"Sure," says Sadie, but she sounds doubtful.

He's putting his groceries in his car when there's a cough behind him. He spins around, silently cursing that he'd let himself get so distracted someone could sneak up on him—

"Hi there, Carlos!" says the little old man from the sandstorm cohort. Carlos has barely registered him as *not a threat* stand down STAND DOWN when the old man steps forward, deliberately wraps his arms around Carlos' torso, and squeezes.

"There," he says in satisfaction, stepping away.

"What?" says Carlos, arms still half-raised, caught between potential attack and embrace. It was a pretty good hug – not nearly as technically precise as Cecil's, but still: pretty good. Also, *what.*

"Sadie says you needed a hug," says the old man. "And I agree, son. You have the look of a man groaning under his burthen, as Jane would say."

Carlos blinks down at him, then says, "...Thanks?"

"It's the least I could do," says the old man.

"For...?"
The old man taps the side of his nose.

Carlos sighs. "Right," he says. "If you say so." He turns to load the rest of his groceries.

The old man coughs again. Carlos looks back over his shoulder.

"I don't rightly know if I should share this with you, Carlos," says the old man. "But seeing as you're so burthened..."

"Yes?" says Carlos, when the man hesitates.

"Well... the first time we met, I thought to myself, 'I don't necessarily agree that this young man is right, but I appreciate that he's trying to do some good in this world'," says the old man. "I didn't tell you that at the time, so I hope that means it's all right I let you know now."

Carlos opens his mouth, closes it, and says, "Yes, that's all right. I – thank you."

"You're welcome," says the old man. "I think you have a lot of answers coming at you, son. I'm truly sorry for that. But you do seem to like asking questions, so I hope for your sake they're worth it."

Carlos stares down at his groceries. "Me, too," he says softly. The old man pats him on the arm and walks away.

He does feel a little better, oddly enough. It's like it doesn't matter what the old man knows about his secrets; merely offering a hug and some compassion put them back into a human scale. Carlos' heart is still heavy, but other people have hearts, too, and all sorts of ways to bear their burdens.

Carlos is halfway home before he realizes he's never figured out the old man's name.

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"This better be good," says Julie when she answers the phone. "I'm in the middle of live-tweeting Cosmos."

"Can you come pick us up at the—" Carlos sniffs and wipes his streaming eyes. "Hospital?"

"At the what?"

"The veter—" Carlos sniffs again.

"Are you crying? Is everything okay?"

"I'm not crying!" says Carlos. "I'm just—"

He sneezes.

"I might be slightly allergic to—" The spine dander of demonic cat things, he does not say, because Cecil is standing five feet away, cooing at the sullen figure inside the pet carrier as he fills out release forms. "...Khoshekh," he finishes.

"Why can't you drive? How did you even get there?"

"I can't drive back because we're taking him home and—" He sneezes three times in rapid succession; the lights in the waiting room flicker.
"Carlos, don't you live in your home?"

"Yes. So?" he says defiantly.

She sighs loudly. "All right, I'll come—"

Carlos sneezes again, and his phone dies.

"Doctor Renegade's giving us a ride," he croaks.

"Great!" says Cecil. "Thanks, Carlos." He gives Carlos an absent-minded peck on the cheek and goes back to signing forms.

Carlos likes animals. He’s never going to be one of those fanatical enthusiasts, but he enjoys playing with friendly pets and bribing any unfriendly ones with treats until they like him, too. And Khoshekh for all his deadly primary defenses is pretty easy to get along with, even if Carlos did have to hold his breath every time he went into the men’s room at the station.

Khoshekh watches him unhappily, probably wondering why Carlos hasn’t produced a floating bag of catnip in tribute yet. Carlos sneezes. Khoshekh makes a noise like a disgruntled garbage disposal.

"Shhh," says Cecil, abandoning his paperwork to tempt fate by sticking his finger through the carrier door. He strokes Khoshekh just behind the venom sac and says, "Who's my baby boy? You are! Don't mind Carlos, I'm sure he doesn't mean to upset you."

Khoshekh makes another noise, like a slightly less disgruntled garbage disposal.

Carlos is not jealous of a cat – well, of something vaguely cat-like. Even if Khoshekh was a foul-tempered and deadly predator that paralyzed people on purpose, instead of a good-natured omnivore who paralyzes people mostly unintentionally, he’s in pain and far from his home. He didn’t ask for Cecil to talk to him and visit him and lavish attention on him and love him until it was too late, until he loved Cecil, too, and now he can't deny his affections without feeling trapped in this depressed and lonely existence while Cecil doesn't notice, because for Cecil love is so easy. It's a word he says, and then it's the truth, and sometimes Cecil lets Night Vale sink its claws into his chest and close around his heart so he won't look at the truth too closely, won't look for a better definition when the one he has doesn't quite fit, won't question when he's afraid he might find different answers than the ones he already knows. Won't take the chance that the unknown might hold joys as well as terrors.

But Cecil does love Khoshekh, and even though he doesn't pay attention to all the details, he'll always eventually notice when Khoshekh hurts, and he'll hurt too. Carlos doesn't want anything to hurt Cecil.

He's not jealous. Jealousy is a hot angry thing; Carlos just feels cold and tired and itchy. The cheek where Cecil kissed him burns.

He goes outside to wait for Julie, partially because he doubts she knows her way around the veterinary hospital, but mostly because he’s starting to wheeze a little.

She pulls into the patient pick-up lane and rolls down the window.

“'You have hives,” she says. Carlos stops itching his cheek.

“It’s not that bad,” he says.

She pegs him with a packet of Benadryl. “For someone who is not unsmart, sometimes you are really
dumb,” she says.

Khoshekh starts hissing as soon as they carry him outside, but he falls silent, appeased, when Julie hisses back at him.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” she asks.

“Of course!” says Cecil. “You’re okay with this, right, Carlos?”

“I’d fide,” says Carlos, and opens the door for Cecil so he can buckle Khoshekh’s carrier in the back seat.

“We appreciate your help, Doctor Renegade,” says Cecil, climbing in next to Khoshekh. When Carlos gets in, Cecil reaches up between the front seats and gives him a handkerchief.

Julie gives Carlos an extremely dubious look as he blows his nose and sort of collapses sideways against the door, but she says “Noooooo problem,” and rolls down all the windows for the drive home.

“Have you decided where you’re going to put him?” she asks as Carlos fumbles his keys into the apartment locks. He’s not really sure why she’s still here, although it was nice of her to grab him by the sleeve and drag him in the correct direction whenever his eyes would water over.

“That’s a good question,” says Cecil. “I was thinking about putting him in our room to keep an eye on him, but…”

"Cub id,” says Carlos, holding the door open. He heaves a sigh of relief as Cecil carries Khoshekh over the threshold with no obvious problems.

"Do you need an inhaler?” asks Julie, alarmed.

"I ked breathe," says Carlos. She side-eyes him, then reaches for the light switch.

She flips it right as Carlos sneezes again. The lights flare and explode.

“Drat,” comes Cecil’s voice in the sudden darkness, broken only by the orange glow of Khoshekh’s eyeshine. “There they go again. That’s been happening a lot these past couple weeks…”

When Carlos turns on one of the emergency flashlights, he finds Julie frowning at him, but she just snaps her fingers and holds out her hand. He gives her the flashlight.

“How about putting Khoshekh in your office?” she suggests.

Cecil frowns. “I could sleep in the desk chair, I guess—”

“He’ll be okay by himself,” says Julie firmly. “No need to get covered in cat hair. Just look in on him every couple hours. If he needs anything, I have a feeling his… vocal emanations… are more than capable of attracting your attention. Or the attention of anyone on the block.”

“I don't know…”

“Cats adjust more quickly to new places if they have a nice, quiet room to themselves,” says Julie. “I mean, my cats were attacked by a robot right before I came to Night Vale, and they had a 100% recovery rate.”

“Oh!” says Cecil. “Well, if it’s science, then, of course!” He sets off for the study. He doesn’t have a
flashlight, but Cecil’s night vision has always been preternaturally good.

“Thags, Julie,” says Carlos. “What actually had to your cats?”

“They hated the cones of shame, but they got over it in the end,” says Julie. “The first law of robotics seriously needs an animal corollary, though. It’s just not right.”

Carlos stares at her, then says, “I'b goig to bed.”

He wakes up the next morning feeling groggy and hungover, though with considerably improved oxygen intake. It’s mid-morning, judging by the sun. Cecil left him a bowl of soggy Flaky-Drink, a mug of lukewarm coffee, and an almost-empty box of Claritin on his nightstand. He’s halfway through the coffee when he hears voices.

The door of the office has been fitted with a chemical shower and copious amounts of plastic quarantine sheeting. He can just barely make out Andre standing on the other side. He’s wearing Gary’s beekeeper gloves and gingerly petting Khoshekh, who is making a noise like a rusty chainsaw. Carlos can't remember if that's his version of purring or the noise he makes before he coughs up a toxic hairball, but hopefully Andre will be able to figure it out.

Julie is standing on a ladder in the middle of the den, sorting through the waterfall of wires hanging out of the ceiling.

“Good morning, sunshine!” she says, pulling out a defunct listening device and dropping it on the floor. There’s already quite a pile.

“What are you doing?” he asks.

“Well, we were just going to decontaminate your home, but then I decided that it wouldn’t help very much if you kicked the bucket in an electrical fire first,” she says.

He squints at her. “Why?”

"Because you'd be dead?"

"No, why are you doing... whatever it is you're doing."

“It has been brought to my attention that I never actually apologized for almost destroying the town on your watch,” says Julie.

Carlos waits. Julie pulls a handful of wires out of the ceiling completely, raises an eyebrow, and tosses them over her shoulder.

"Well?" he says.

"Hello, I've rewired forty percent of your apartment so far," says Julie. "If that doesn't indicate an apology, I don't know what does."

"Saying 'I'm sorry'" suggests Carlos.

"Fine, I'm sorry for nearly making one of the biggest scientific breakthroughs of the decade," says Julie.

"Apology accepted," says Carlos. He drags himself into the kitchen.

The pantry is full of Girl Scout Cookies. So are all the cupboards.
He sighs and heads to the fridge, wondering if anything is salvageable after having lost power. But when he opens it up, misty vapor rolls out and onto the floor from containers of dry ice.

"We dumped the stuff from your freezer," Julie calls. "Except for the box of Thin Mints. We ate those. But your fridge was still within the accepted temperature range, so most of it should be fine."

"Thanks," he croaks. He blinks rapidly, then pulls out some leftover noodles.

He can feel her watching him as he slowly makes his way through the carton.

"So," says Julie. "We're not going to find you curled up on the floor weeping into a bottle of tequila again, are we?"

"Come on, that was barely tequila," says Carlos. "And I wasn't weeping. You can ask Andre."

He picks at the noodles.

"Ugh, that was clearly your cue to tell me what's wrong," says Julie. "C'mon, Carlos, my tolerance for feelings is fading rapidly."

"Nothing's wrong," says Carlos, then adds, after Julie makes a very disrespectful face, "Nothing new, I mean. It's just... the weather, and work, and, well. Cecil. It... gets me down."

"The... weather," asks Julie.

"Yes," says Carlos.

"Like, the actual weather? Not here, it's been nice. So... the long winters and polar vortices and all that?"

"Let's just say it's not all down to climate change," says Carlos, stabbing a water chestnut.

"Wow, you're not bitter at all," says Julie. "Were you supposed to have an Oscar-winning duet with Queen Elsa or something?"

Carlos doesn't answer, but Julie blinks and says, "Holy shit, what?"

"Leave it, Julie."

"Are there any other Disney movie protagonists that personally offended you? Did Belle booby-trap the library? Did Rapunzel steal your frying pans?"

"Let it – just stop," says Carlos, standing and picking up his food.

"Fine, fine. Sit back down," says Julie. "I'm going to take a wild guess and assume work is bothering you because this town is a giant ball of crazy and your job description is essentially Sisyphus crossed with the first five minutes of Raiders of the Lost Ark."

Carlos snorts.

"And on top of that," she continues, "You're always popping off for exciting firefights in exotic locales."

"Julie, that's another one of those things you really shouldn't know," says Carlos in exasperation.

"I can't help it if I'm observant," says Julie. "It's not like I'm spreading it around. I keep a lot of
secrets, Carlos." She says that last part like it's supposed to be comforting. "What I don't get is why you don't get back-up. Your boss told me her first name was Stacey’); DROP TABLE Wardens;-- when I confirmed my name was Doctor Renegade, and I hate to think that someone like that is a shitty manager."

"I used to have back-up," says Carlos. "The Cap— Warden Luccio, and her second. But he's dead and she's got more than enough on her plate."

"She can't send someone else?"

"It's too dangerous," says Carlos, and adds before Julie can comment, "It's not about personal safety. If the wrong people found out about what's in Night Vale, and used it for the wrong reasons..."

"Let me guess: servants of the elder gods bring about the end times after escaping their prison of the ages," says Julie. "You know, even I used to think the paranoia around here was a little excessive. I miss those days."

"Me, too," says Carlos.

Julie's silent for a moment, her head disappearing into the hole in the ceiling. She re-emerges with an uncomfortable look on her face.

"I don't suppose you have any vacation time coming up?"

Carlos laughs hollowly.

"Then are you sure you don't want to weep into a bottle of bathtub tequila?" she asks. "Because... look, I've seen people burn out before, Carlos. It's bad enough losing a promising young academic, and they don't have to worry about literally burning out. Well, except for some of the chemists. And a few electrical engineers. And the nuclear physicists—"

Carlos rubs a hand across his face. "I'll be fine," he says. "I have to be."

Julie lets out an irritated sigh. "I can't even tell you that you can't just say things and make them come true. It's factually inaccurate."

Carlos manages a half-hearted smirk.

"So... what's going on with you and Cecil?" she asks, coiling some of the wires into neat loops.

Carlos stares at his noodles. "I keep a lot of secrets, too," he says finally.

"You'll figure something out," says Julie, and she sounds so confident that for a second Carlos almost believes her. "And for what it's worth, you've always got us. Just... take care of yourself, okay?"

"Thanks, Julie," he says.

He finishes his noodles and throws out the carton.

"I didn't fuck it up too badly, did I?" asks Julie.

"What?"

"Night Vale," she clarifies.
"It'll recover," says Carlos. "And it sort of helped, in a weird way. There were some wards I was having trouble with. When they reactivated, most of the problems fixed themselves."

Julie starts laughing.

"What?" says Carlos. "What is it?"

"Did you try turning them off and on again?" she says mockingly.

"You're really lucky you pay me to put up with you," says Carlos.

"Don't front, you secretly love us," says Julie. "There's no way we actually pay you enough for that."

Carlos doesn't dignify that with a response. Julie has a really obnoxious habit of being right most of the time.

~*~*~*~

Carlos slides into their booth at the Moonlite All-Nite Diner two hours late for dinner. The other bench is empty and there's a half-full mug of coffee sitting on the table. Carlos remembered to call this time, and Cecil hadn't sounded upset on the phone, so hopefully he's not trying to sneak out through the bathroom windows again.

Carlos presses the heels of his palms against his eyes and tries to settle his thoughts. He'd been running security for a warlock trial in Biloxi, and they're not any easier even when he's not the one pronouncing the sentence or holding the sword.

The last vestiges of adrenaline still pumping through his system don't help, either. After the trial, he and Chaudhary uncovered a cell of Fomor less than a mile from their position. Their attack didn't even come close to touching the Senior Council, but Carlos can't shake the feeling that it wasn't a random coincidence, an unplanned opportunity. Maybe he just can't believe in easy victories anymore, but even though only a few turtlenecked goons escaped, he didn't think they'd run like they'd been routed.

He looks up just as Cecil slides into their booth.

"Hi," says Carlos.

"Hi!" says Cecil, with a warm smile that makes the corner of Carlos' lips involuntarily lift in response.

"Sorry I'm late," he says.

"Since time isn't real, I just figure I'm lucky you turn up at all," says Cecil, but his voice is light and he's still smiling. "Any exciting scientific developments?"

"Science is always exciting," says Carlos, and it doesn't hurt as much as it might have, but he changes the subject anyway. "How's Khoshekh doing?"

"Oh, much better!" says Cecil. "He only stunned two assistants at his PT session today! I moved him from the study to the den as a reward, so he could float in the afternoon sun."

"You moved him into the den?" asks Carlos, trying not very successfully to keep the dismay out of his voice.
“I’ll vacuum,” says Cecil carelessly. “And I got you this!” He hands Carlos a surgical mask.

“...Thanks,” says Carlos.

"That – that is okay, right?" asks Cecil, sounding hesitant for the first time. "You said you didn't mind, and you haven't complained, but..."

Cecil is harboring a demonic cat thing in their home. Carlos was two hours late for dinner because of a pitched battle in Mississippi he'll have to lie about. Cecil doesn't always notice when something's wrong; Carlos notices but avoids talking about problems in the hopes that they'll resolve themselves. Cecil's passive-aggressive and Carlos is just passive. Cecil has an abominable palate and Carlos chews too loudly. They both have a list of defects as long as their arms.

It might be the beginning of the adrenaline withdrawal, or repressed trauma from the fight, but right now Carlos finds it hard to care. Despite everything, he's still happy to see Cecil, and Cecil is happy to see him, and he just wants a few hours of that simple, uncomplicated happiness.

"It's fine," says Carlos, and manages to mostly mean it. "Surgical masks remind me of my childhood. Just... don't forget to vacuum, please?"

"I'll do it as soon as we get home," Cecil promises.

He does, and Carlos takes more Claritin, and things are fine. He settles on the couch with a draft of Gary's dissertation and Cecil sits down in the middle of the carpet and starts disassembling the blender.

It's almost an evening ritual at this point: Carlos casually points out whichever mechanical device has succumbed to the Ramirez charm and ceased functioning; Cecil curses the destruction of the bloodstones, busts out his toolbox and his Small Appliance Repair merit badge know-how, and coaxes it back to life.

Cecil doesn't even use the blender, because he finds the noise alarming. But he always drinks the smoothies Carlos makes him, and now he's fixing it without Carlos even asking.

Earlier today, Carlos had gambled on cover that was much less bullet-proof than he had hoped. He was pinned down by a gunman – gunperson – gun-Fomor? – for a few seconds and his life passed before his eyes, and – okay, Carlos is pretty used to that by now, since it happens several times a year. But this was the first time his regrets flashed through his mind and they were all for things he couldn't change, not for things he hadn't done. The biggest one (apart from his imminent demise) was that he didn't get enough time with Cecil.

Then Chaudhary ran the gunfish over with a bus, and Carlos owes her a beer, because that commercial driver's license is one of the best investments she's ever made.

But the point is that even though Carlos may be living a lie, he would rather live it with Cecil than without him. He doesn't know if that's right or fair, but it's the truth.

Carlos isn't the kind to despair. He still hopes that one day he'll be able to trust that Cecil trusts him. But it's the kind of hope that needs to be wrapped up and put away so the rough world won't shatter it.

In the meantime, he will take every day down to each imprecisely-calculated second and hoard them up, and he may never have enough, or Cecil may never have enough, but by God, that time will be theirs, and when everything comes crashing down, no one will be able to take it from them.
"You know I love you, right?" he says, because Cecil deserves to know this, too. "No matter what."

Cecil actually puts down the blender to think about it, but a moment later he says, "Yes," his voice strong and confident. "Yes, I do." He flashes Carlos a quick smile. "Me, too."

Then he picks the blender up again, turns it upside down, and goes "Ah-ha!" He pulls out a small piece of paper from its innards. "'You are fragile, and blind, and wanting, and stepping alone into the great darkness of the future.' Neat!"

He begins collecting the scattered pieces and reattaching them. His sleeves are rolled up; he's holding a screwdriver in his deft fingers. He raises the blender like he's presenting it to the animal kingdom and says, "There!"

"Cecil," says Carlos.

Cecil does a double-take; Carlos isn't sure what the expression on his face looks like, but it's probably kind of... intense.

"Well, that's sorted," says Cecil, a trifle unsteadily. He puts down the blender and shuffles over to the couch on his knees. "Can I fix anything else?"

"No," says Carlos, but he grips the front of Cecil's tunic and pulls him in, because it doesn't matter. He's not letting go.

~*~*~*~

"The king of snacks wears nine crowns," says Cecil. Carlos flicks the speakers of his desk radio absently a few times until the volume turns down. "Welcome to Night Vale."

Carlos flips through the folder Andre dropped off. It's the proposal for Dr. Raith's converter array, sent to him by one of his environmental science colleagues at the university. Carlos is impressed in spite of himself; if her calculations are accurate, it could increase the efficiency of most wind- and solar power stations threefold. He tries to think of ways in which it could be used for evil but comes up short; he guesses it's not totally unreasonable for a nigh-immortal to want to invest in sustainable energy and combat climate change.

"Today's top story: there are reports of strange lights and noises emanating from inside the Dog Park," says Cecil.

He squints at the blueprints: they seem innocuous, yes, but somehow... familiar.

"In response to the allegations that the sound bears a remarkable resemblance to the barking of a large dog, the Mayor's office has released a statement reiterating that dogs are not allowed in the Dog Park, and that the noise is clearly due to the rustling of plastic bags blowing in the wind. They offered no comment to the source of the strange lights, choosing to instead glare judgmentally at the press corp. Meanwhile, some eyewitnesses also claim that they can detect the smell of meat and fennel, and that frost is forming on the obsidian walls – a particularly strange occurrence, given this week's record temperatures.

"However, the statement continues, there is no need to be upset because it is forbidden to even look at the Dog Park. The phrase 'What you don't know can't hurt you' has been proven wrong many, many times, but who knows? There's a first time for everything – unless we are trapped in a never-ending cycle of misery, doomed to repeat every failure of our past lives while the universe spins and spins in the illusion of progress."
Eternal inflation is all well and good, but Carlos makes a note to update Cecil on all the other theories of universal expansion. Its potential heat-death is probably news-worthy.

“In other news, Night Vale Airport officials have come under fire for misplacing an entire airplane en route to Bermuda. ‘I mean, it’s only fair,’ says one air traffic controller. ‘We redirect planes from other cities all the time, so why should we worry that a 747 just happened to disappear on our watch? I’m sure whoever took it needed it.’”

“It’s the code of the skies,’ said another air traffic controller. ‘The cooooooooode.’ All airport employees present then linked arms and began an elaborate danse macabre to the accompaniment of several beatboxing TSA agents.”

Carlos frowns at the neatly-printed diagrams, then hurriedly shuffles through his desk drawers. He pulls out his copy of Julie’s blueprints for her energy converters.

He stares at the two schematics side-by-side. They're not quite the same, but...

A bizarre figure enshrouded in white appears in the door to Carlos' office. It's carrying copies of Guns, Germs, and Steel and A Brief History of Time in one bulky hand.

"Hi, Gary," says Carlos. "Did you need something?"

"Did you have anything for the book club?" asks Gary.

Carlos looks away from the blueprints, an idea still brewing in the back of his mind. "Yeah, hold on," he says, and opens another desk drawer. He pulls out two bread loaf bags, now filled with sandwiches. One contains delicious ciabatta rolls stuffed with grated fontina, prosciutto, sliced figs, and arugula; the other, passed on by Shakeena, contains peanut butter and jelly on potato bread, because she is much less optimistic about juvenile eating habits.

"No books?" says Gary. "We're trying to get them some more non-fiction to expand their horizons."

"I must've left Magic for Dummies in my other lab coat," says Carlos, passing him the sandwiches. A rogue bee buzzes around his head twice, then goes back and lands on Gary.

"Well, thanks anyway," says Gary. "Oh, Wei wants to know if you got his message."

"What message?"

Gary shrugs.

"Thanks, I guess," says Carlos to Gary's retreating back.

He fishes his phone out of his pocket. It's been shut off since he checked the ward focus in Mission Grove Park that morning, whoops. He turns it on and scrolls through his texts. The latest set is from Cecil, recording for posterity the totally fictional saga of a producer – let's call him Nathaniel – who somehow got a magnet stuck to his forehead completely by accident and spent a team brainstorming session walking repeatedly into a wall, and I know we just had enchiladas on Saturday but today just seems like an enchilada kind of day, don't you think?

Carlos smiles. He's in the middle of sending Cecil a coy emoji of an archeopteryx soaring over the Scrublands when a whole string of messages from Wei arrives all at once.

Just heard from a friend at the Ralph's
The sandstorm cohort was in here last week, stocking up on emergency supplies

They refused to speak and just tapped their noses significantly

Sadie's holed up in the loading dock with five hundred arrows and a hwacha

I checked the community calendar and we don't have any emergencies scheduled

Do you know what's going on?

“Listeners, we have just received an important update,” says Cecil urgently. “Something has escaped from the Dog Park. The northern wall has exploded outwards, covering Earl Road with deadly volcanic glass shards and ectoplasmic goo. Eyewitnesses report a man with a carved wooden staff fighting his way through a tear in reality and climbing out over the wreckage, accompanied by a large plastic bag growling viciously at the hooded figures. They describe the man as being about six and a half feet tall, with dark hair and a wild-eyed demeanor. He is wearing a long black leather coat and a single dark glove like a confused Michael Jackson impersonator. He is definitely not wearing a hat.”

Carlos puts his phone down, slowly. He stares at the radio.

“Several hooded figures radiating malevolent intent tried to follow the man out of the Dog Park,” continues Cecil. “But he rebuffed their advances by conjuring a wave of icy blue flame – further destroying that section of the wall – and screaming, ‘YOU SHALL NOT PASS!’”

“Oh, fuck,” says Carlos.

Chapter End Notes

We ended up with five full months of winter AND I got a migraine while editing this chapter! ~Method~

Cecil's intro courtesy of Auntie Anne's off-putting advertising for their pepperoni pretzels.
Earl Road is a mess. They've blocked off the street, trapping dozens of cars while the Sheriff's Secret Police attempt to redirect traffic, and the sidewalks are packed with bystanders filming the chaos at the Dog Park with their cell phones. Carlos takes the most direct route and climbs up the trunk of a tan Corolla, making his way down the right lane by leaping from car to car.

"Get back!" he shouts. The wind is picking up; he clamps one hand to his head to keep his hood in place. "Go home!"

The bystanders look around in confusion. Only a few of them start leaving.

The storm clouds above have begun spiralling together, illuminated by flashes of purple-white. The old stand of *pararrayos* on Somerset glows faintly; black metal branches whip back and forth in a high wind that hasn't quite made it out to the rest of town. Carlos is still a block and a half away.

He loses precious time when he changes lanes to avoid a delivery truck and almost falls into a convertible. The first bolt of lightning discharges *above* the Dog Park, illuminating a dome of weird energy over it that glows like the aurora. The strange nature of the Dog Park itself might buy him some time, but Carlos doesn't want to know what the cost is.

There's a jagged break in its obsidian walls packed with hooded figures, each one trying to push past the other. They recoil from another wave of blue and white flames released by the man in front of the Dog Park. A gigantic grey dog has the back of his coat in its jaws and is trying to pull him away, slipping on the frost sparkling the length of the street.

Lightning strikes again and again. The air above the Dog Park begins to glow, and even over the wind Carlos can hear its strange hum.

The tip of a funnel cloud pokes its way through the bottom of the supercell.

Carlos jumps from the last car and shouts, "Stop! Harry, you have to stop!"

Harry's only response is an enormous blast of force, hurling the first ranks of the hooded figures back into the Dog Park.

The dome of energy above the Dog Park shatters. Lightning rains down, striking at random on the black walls, the sidewalk, across the street—

Carlos runs faster, lungs aching, but he's not going to make, and there's nothing he can do—

"Get down!" Carlos screams. Harry's dog lets go of his coat and, as he stumbles forward, leaps onto his back. Carlos draws his sword, flooding it with power until both he and it are vibrating with leashed force of will, and skids to a halt.

He thinks *This is the stupidest thing I've done all year* and thrusts it towards the sky.

Everything goes white.

~*~*~*~
Someone is licking his face.

"Ugh, Cecil, stop," he says, painfully flailing. His hand connects with something warm and fuzzy.

"Yo sprechen no Spanisho, Carlos."

"What?" he says in English, opening his eyes.

Carlos is immediately greeted by hot doggy breath and a wide doggy grin and, ew, a slobbery doggy tongue, this is not at all how he wanted to wake up.

"Mouse, no," he says, pushing him away. Mouse dances back and sits down, his tail wagging furiously. If he wasn't a dog, Carlos would swear he was laughing at him.

Carlos squints at the sky. The storm clouds are gone. He sits up slowly, wiping his face. He's on the ground behind the Fuel 'n Go's dumpsters. In the distance he can hear sirens and the roar of a crowd, but right here it's just him, Mouse, and Harry Dresden.

Knight of Winter.

Former Warden.

Giant asshole.

"You're a giant asshole," he says, glaring at Harry.

"Hello to you too, Carlos," says Harry. Even crouching down surrounded by the faint stench of garbage he exudes an aura of menace.

That's new.

The sensible thing would be to act like nothing's happened. Like their friendship hasn't changed in the time that Harry died, got better, and then defected to become Mab's yes-man without bothering to tell anyone. Like Carlos isn't subtly going to scope out Harry's abilities and intentions and prepare accordingly.

“So,” says Carlos. “How’s the whole amoral fairy hitman thing treating you?”

Harry grimaces. “You don’t wanna know.”

“No, I do,” says Carlos. “Because I’m real interested in what could possibly be so great that you’d sell out to what's basically the Dark Side and stay there. Is it the benefits? Vacation packages?”

"I'm not staying because I want to, trust me," says Harry.

"I would," says Carlos, "Except I trusted you not to be stupid enough to take a deal like that in the first place, and yet, here we are."

“I made a bad call, Carlos,” says Harry. “Do you think I don’t know that? But I needed what Ma—what the Queen of Air and Darkness was selling, and now I’m paying for it.”

“She’s a Queen of the Sidhe, Harry,” says Carlos. “She's the Queen of Winter. You’re always going to be paying for it. And while you’re doing that, we’re fighting another war. Do you know how many Wardens we’ve lost in the last couple years?”

“I know,” says Harry. “But I needed help in Mexico, and I sure as hell wasn’t going to get it from—”
He halts, nostrils flaring with poorly suppressed emotion, and pauses just long enough that Carlos is pretty sure he had to stop and count to ten. “I couldn't count on the White Council. It's different for you, so I don't know if you'd understand, but—”

“Right,” says Carlos. “I guess I ended up cooling my heels in the brig through complete coincidence and not because I tried to have your back. And the whole Mexico issue is a total mystery. I mean, the only way I could understand it myself would be if a Senior Council member busted me out of prison, called in the Grey Council reserves, and then found some way to transport us thousands of miles to back up some moron who decided to go up against the entire Red Court practically by himself. But you had no one to count on, so clearly that didn't happen.”

They stare at each other combatively for a long moment, which since they're both trying to avoid a soulgaze means that Carlos glares at Harry's chin while Harry squints at Carlos' left ear.

"Oh," says Harry.

"Yeah, oh," says Carlos.

There's an awkward silence.

Carlos looks away. "Would you do it again?" he asks.

"Yes," says Harry almost immediately. "I'd try to be less of a moron, but it was important."


"Doing as well as she can, under the circumstances." He pauses, then adds, "We both are. Winter's cruel, but... sometimes it's necessary."


It's like punching a brick wall. Harry doesn't even move except to smirk, because asshole, seriously, but something in his posture shifts and he's no longer looming quite so much. “You said that already,” he says.

“Some things bear repeating,” says Carlos. “What are you doing here?”

Harry eyes him for a minute, then says, blandly, "I'm on a mission from God."

He’s probably being a smartass. Then again, if there's one thing Carlos has learned from long experience, it's that the rumors that swirl around Harry Dresden aren't half as weird as the actual truth. And Carlos knows for a fact that he used to keep two swords of the Knights of the Cross in his umbrella stand, though Carlos politely pretended not to notice at the time.

"Bad news," says Carlos. "It's more than 106 miles to Chicago, my car is out of gas, smoking is bad for you, it's the middle of the day, and you never wear sunglasses because you're weird."

"Heh," says Harry, and the corner of his mouth twitches. It's not much, but it transforms his expression from resting murder face to the genial hobo look Carlos remembers.

"How you doin', Mouse? Still hanging around with this loser?" he says, sticking out a hand. Mouse obediently lifts a paw to shake.

Harry rolls his eyes. "See if I bust my ass rescuing you again, Ramirez."

"I'm sorry, rescuing who?" says Carlos. "Because I seem to remember some moron tossing around
tons of magic like they weren't clearly standing directly under the automatic defenses of some extremely violent suppression wards."

"I had it under control!" Harry protests.

Carlos snorts.

"And what the hell are wards that strong doing some place like here, anyway?" Harry continues. "I had a hell of a time opening a gate. Getting out of the Nevernever was like pushing a watermelon through a garden hose."

Carlos blinks. "You mean you don't know?"

"Don't know what?"

"We're in Night Vale," says Carlos, watching for a reaction.

"Sounds... charming?" says Harry.

"What the hell were you doing in the Dog Park if you don't know about—" Carlos stops. "Dios. Did you get lost?"

"I don't get lost," says Harry. "I was just... temporarily misplaced. It's perfectly – okay, haha, yes, it's hilarious I just needed a moment to get my bearings, you can stop laughing now, Ramirez."

Carlos laughs until he wheezes, because of course – of course – Harry Dresden would end up in the Dog Park, with a dog, looking at hooded figures while setting them on fire, by accident.

"So. Uh. Where are we, again?" asks Harry, when Carlos finally gasps to a stop and tries breathing again instead.

"We need to get to cover first," he says, wiping his eyes and suppressing a slightly hysterical giggle. "Where's my sword?"

"Mouse," says Harry. Mouse bounds away to the end of the alley and burrows under a plastic garbage bag. He returns with Carlos' sword clamped between his teeth.

Carlos gives Harry a look.

"What?" says Harry. "You appeared out of nowhere, went all *By the Power of Greyskull!* and passed out. I just wanted to make sure you weren't too excitable when you woke up, He-man."

"Maybe you should use *your* stuff to play fetch," says Carlos, taking his sword. Mouse's ears perk up and he looks at Harry pleadingly.

“It’s a staff, not a big stick,” says Harry. Mouse sighs. He’s only drooled all over the sheath a little and managed to avoid burying it in anything gross, so Carlos scratches behind his ears.

Then he prepares himself for the worst and draws his sword.

A Lichtenberg figure stretches the length of the blade, the discoloration branching down from the point all the way to the jiàngen, where the silver is so thick with fractalled lines it's nearly black. He hefts it; the lightning hasn't affected the balance, at least. But when he tentatively feeds some power into his sword, there's a distinct sour note in the hum of magical energy. The dissonance makes it hard to focus; activating the dissolution spells in the blade requires nearly all of his concentration, and maintaining them for just a few seconds takes the rest. He releases the magic with a gasp.
"That didn’t sound good," says Harry.

"It'll work," says Carlos, trying to keep the dismay off his face. His is one of the few blades still in service; Luccio can’t make them anymore. He doesn’t know if she can reforge a broken one.

He stares at the tarnished silver. He’s carried this sword since the day he earned the right to put on the gray cloak of the Wardens.

He pushes the thought to the back of his mind and sheathes the blade with a businesslike snap. They both stand; Carlos fastens the sheath to his belt and pulls off his cloak. “Here, put this on,” he says.

Harry gives him a skeptical look, but fastens the cloak around his neck. He looks down.

It barely falls to his knees.

“Shut up,” says Carlos.

“What?” says Harry. “I didn’t say a word.”

“Good,” says Carlos. He’s still wearing his lab coat, fortunately; he pulls his glasses out of the inner pocket and smoothes down his hair.

“What’s with the Clark Kent specs?” asks Harry, as he peers around the dumpster.

“I'm undercover,” says Carlos. "What do you see?"

“Both roads are blocked by some unsavory-looking types.”

“You’re going to have to be more specific," says Carlos.

“It’s practically ninety and they’re wearing leather balaclavas,” says Harry.

“Oh,” says Carlos, leaning past him. The Sheriff's Secret Police are still directing traffic; a blue helicopter circles overhead, but that’s the only one. “They're cops,” he says.

"Cops," says Harry skeptically.

"More or less," says Carlos. "But they shouldn't bother us. Let's go."

They stroll casually down the street. The Sheriff's Secret Police (all of them, in unison) give him a wave when they hit the end of Somerset; he waves back, and that's that.

The break in the walls of the Dog Park is already gone.

Mouse trots beside him and Harry follows after. All of Carlos' instincts are screaming at him for leaving his back unprotected; he tries to figure out how to subtly get Harry where he can see him, until he realizes Harry would immediately figure out what he was doing anyway.

"Will you get up here?" Carlos hisses. "You're making the back of my neck itch."

"Maybe you should look into regular showers," says Harry. He lengthens his stride until he's beside Carlos. "Can you hear that?"

"Hear what?" asks Carlos, scanning the road. Traffic's still bad and there are more pedestrians than usual, though they seem unperturbed by the storm just minutes before. They call out cheerful greetings to him and Mouse; Harry gets ignored completely, much to Carlos' relief.
"The radio broadcast," says Harry. "The source keeps changing. It's like it's... following us."

"It happens," says Carlos.

"Now it's talking about you and Mouse," says Harry. He cranes his neck to peer down the street. "But we're not being tailed. Do they have cameras?"

"It happens," Carlos repeats. "It shouldn't be a problem." He smiles at a group of people at a bus stop.

"Did you beef up the concealment charms in your cloak or something?"

"What?"

"The last five people we passed didn't even look at me," says Harry.

"You're standing next to me while I'm walking a dog," says Carlos. "Well, walking with a dog. I'm a ten, you're a seven, and Mouse is the ultimate wingman. It's basic math."

"Funny," says Harry. "But people just don't... not notice me anymore. For better or worse."

"It's the hood," says Carlos. "You saw those things in the Dog Park, right? They don't like being looked at. The locals train themselves not to notice hooded figures, or else bad things happen. It's like aversion therapy."

"Well, that's freakin' creepy," mutters Harry, as a man pushing a stroller full of bananas stops, swerves around him, and continues on without ever looking up from the sidewalk.

"Yeah, but it makes my job easier," says Carlos. "I can count on one hand the number of times someone's figured out it's a wizard under there."

"Hi, Carlos!" says a passing jogger. "Hi, Starborn! Oh, you look radiant!"

Harry walks straight into a telephone pole.

They've made it to the community college when Harry yanks him off the sidewalk and behind the ornamental brick wall. Mouse lets out a low growl.

"What is it?" whispers Carlos, gathering in his will and peering over the wall.

"A giant glowing cloud just appeared out of nowhere and started raining dead woodchucks!"

Carlos relaxes. "Don't worry," he says. "We have an understanding."

"Carlos."

"Yes?"

"What the hell is wrong with this place?"

"Don't ask me, man," says Carlos. "I'm just covering my beat."

~*~*~*~

By the time they reach the labs, four different people have stopped them to ask if they could pet Mouse (or Carlos), they've had to detour around Third Street to avoid a tarantula gang fight, and
Harry has narrowly averted breaking the First Law of Magic twice: once when he mistook a group of housewives with surgically applied gills for the Fomor, and once when he was surprised by the officer snoring in the bushes outside the labs. His terrible joke delivery has increased by 400% in the last five minutes, which means that he’s weirded out enough that he probably is telling the truth about ending up here by accident.

Harry stops to peer curiously in Lab Two; Carlos has to pull him away before anything important shorts out. Technology doesn’t play well with any wizard, but in Harry’s case it straight up takes its toys and goes home.

Carlos grabs the coffee pot and a bowl of water for Mouse, then ushers everyone into his office. He turns the radio as far down as it will go without the signal defaulting to another, more audible speaker, and shuts the door.

"Should I check under the desk for more cops?" Harry asks.

"No, they usually just bug the place," says Carlos. "I shorted them out this morning."

Harry stares at him, then says, "Freaking. Creepy."

“What are you doing here?” says Carlos, crossing his arms.

Harry sighs. “I sort of owe some… people… a favor.”

“Ookay,” says Carlos. “Speaking of ‘freaking creepy’—”

“I just have to help one of their friends," says Harry. "In an actually helpful way, not in a thinly-veiled-euphemism-for-violence way. I was in the Nevernever trying to find my – my client, I guess, and the next thing I know, I’m getting attacked by bargain-counter Ringwraiths.”

“You were trying to find your client in the Nevernever?” asks Carlos skeptically.

“I was following up on a lead,” says Harry. “But something went wrong when I tried to open a gate. After I almost ended up in the middle of a giant army, I decided to cut my losses and bug out, which… could have gone better.”

"A giant army?"

"They couldn't follow me," says Harry. "Even so, I barely made it out and ended up in the—" He makes finger quotes. "'Dog' 'Park'."

"Of course you did," says Carlos. He rubs his forehead. “Are you here to harm or bring to harm any mortals, non-mortals, or the town itself?"

“No,” says Harry. His voice turns serious. “I intend no harm to any mortals, non-mortals, or the town itself. I'll defend myself if I’m attacked, but I'll try to be as careful as possible. I swear it by my power.”

“You didn’t have to do that,” says Carlos quietly. Swearing by your power – that was the most serious oath a wizard could make.

Harry smiles crookedly. “The Sidhe are about as straightforward as a bendy straw," he says. "Gotta practice remaining blunt and tactless somehow.”

“Thanks,” says Carlos. He comes to a decision and pulls one of his few remaining bloodstones out of
the pocket of his lab coat. He tosses it to Harry. "Here, bleed on this," he says. "No one wants a repeat of the Dog Park."

"What's it do?"

"Connects you to the storm wards," says Carlos. "You'll need it if you want to do anything more exciting than lighting a few candles. Although you should really stick to the subtler kinds of magic, because it's a little... sensitive."


"Yep," says Carlos, popping the P.

"Carlos," says Harry, staring moodily at the bloodstone. "Have you ever seen Twister?"

Carlos claps him on the shoulder. "Just think of all the people out there, depending on you to keep a lid on it just like you promised."

"Gee, thanks," says Harry.

Carlos hands him his ritual silver dagger, then digs out his first aid kit and sets it on his desk. Harry holds the bloodstone up; his eyes go unfocused for a moment, then he comes back to himself with a shudder. But whatever he Saw wasn't enough to dissuade him from using it, since he pulls a piece of chalk out of his leather coat and drags it across the floor as he spins around in the desk chair.

"This isn't going to give me gills or anything, is it?" he asks.

"No," says Carlos. "You can keep that bloodstone if you're worried about anyone getting their hands on it. You will pick up a faint signature that the wards can track, but there's too much interference from all the locals and their bloodstones for anyone else to use it. I've tried." It was the first thing he attempted back when he started looking for whoever created the time vortices over – over a year ago, Dios.

"If you're sure," says Harry. He pokes the tip of his pinky with the knife, then touches it to the bloodstone. "Heh, that tickles. Is that it?"

Carlos looks out the window; the sky's clear. "Should be," he says. "Try something small."

Harry breaks the circle, picks up the coffee pot, and mutters something under his breath. Carlos feels a faint trickle of magic as the temperature drops almost imperceptibly and the formerly lukewarm coffee starts to steam.

"Still clear," says Carlos, with no little relief. He suspects it will take more than a lightning storm to bring down Harry Dresden, but that means it will probably take several lightning storms to bring down Harry Dresden. Combined with his usual penchant for mayhem, that spells extreme danger and considerable property damage for everyone in – well, just everyone, pretty much.

Harry raises his mug to him, then takes a sip of the coffee. He makes a face.

"Blame the grad students," says Carlos.

"Grad students?" asks Harry. "What, are you teaching courses on how to be a cocky little shit now?"

"People would pay to be as cool as me," replies Carlos. "But I got stuck here about a year and a half ago and signed on with some scientists as their security consultant. The labs are theirs."
"That explains all the circles in the floor," says Harry. "Do the Faraday cages actually work?"

"Yeah, they help a lot," says Carlos. "When—" The phone on his desk starts to ring. "Hold on, I should probably take this."

Harry gestures graciously with his mug. Carlos rolls his eyes and picks up the phone. "This is Carlos."

"Oh, Carlos, how I’ve missed the sound of your voice," sighs Cecil. "This is Cecil, by the way."

Carlos smiles. "I could tell. Everyone else just says ‘hello’."

"Sometimes a simple greeting cannot adequately convey the depths of my feelings," says Cecil. "Also, I tried texting and calling your cell phone, but you weren't answering."

Carlos fishes his phone out of his pocket. It's a little... melty. "Sorry," he says. "I forgot to turn it off during an experiment, and there was a lot of interference." Several hundred million volts of magically-generated electricity counts as interference, right? "Is everything all right?"

"Oh, of course!" says Cecil. "I mean, an alleged wizard and his large plastic bag have escaped from the Dog Park, their intentions unknown though probably violent—"

Harry is poking at Carlos' typewriter; when he hits the return key, something twangs and he lets out a startled curse as the carriage is violently ejected. Mouse lunges through the air and catches it, but skids into Carlos' bookcase. It knocks the model of a caffeine molecule onto his head, where it sits like a jaunty methylxanthine alkaloid crown.

"—But that's pretty normal for a Tuesday. I just... heard some rumors... and wanted to ask, uh. You... didn't get a dog, did you?" Cecil's voice is a mixture of longing and trepidation. "Because that’s fine if you did. I love dogs. I've always loved dogs! Not that I have to approve all your pet choices, of course, we’re both adult men, but—"

"I didn’t get a dog," says Carlos.

"Are you sure?" says Cecil. "People have been calling in for quite some time. I mean, it was pretty windy today, so I guess they could have seen a plastic bag instead—"

"There is a dog, but I’m just… watching him for a friend," says Carlos.

"Oh!" says Cecil. "That’s kind of you, Carlos. But, uh… are you planning to bring him home? Because I don't know if Khoshekh will... react well..."

"We’re at the labs right now," says Carlos. "But I’m sure if I had to go home he wouldn’t cause any problems. He’s very well-behaved. Say hello, Mouse." He holds the phone out. Mouse barks once, then starts wagging his tail vigorously.

Carlos puts the phone back to his ear just in time to hear, "—A good boy? Yes you are!"

"Thanks," says Carlos dryly.

"I stand by those words, Carlos," says Cecil, unfazed. "I’ve only got another minute before the commercial finishes, but have I got a scoop for you – I haven't received official word, but I saw a press release on the desk of Lauren, our program director, that Strex Corp is beginning testing today for a historic science initiative! They have approval from City Council and everything."
Carlos frowns. “Did they say what they were going to test?”

“No. Should they have?”

“Well, it would make my job easier,” says Carlos, flipping open his notebook and scribbling *Testing at Strex Corp – Dr. Raith involved??*

Cecil sighs. “So inconsiderate,” he says.

Carlos pulls off his glasses so he can rub the bridge of his nose. “Thanks for the tip, *cariño,*” he says.

"Carlos!” says Cecil. He sounds flustered. "You can't – that's not apro— I'm at work!"

Carlos grins. “*Cariño,*” he repeats. “*Mi tesoro, mi cielo, mi corazón, mi—*”

Cecil makes an odd, muffled noise, then hisses, "There are *other people in the room, Carlos.*"

"Sorry," says Carlos unrepentantly. "*Mi amor.*"

Cecil lets out a small whimper, then says, "I'll – I'll talk to you later, okay? And then maybe we can... finish our conversation."

"I can't wait, sweetie," says Carlos. "Love you."

"I love you too," says Cecil, and they both hang up.

He realizes he's twirling his glasses and grinning stupidly at the phone at the same time he realizes that Harry is smirking at him. "Yes?” says Carlos, putting the glasses back on. “Can I help you?”

“So who’s the lucky Lois Lane?” asks Harry.

Carlos does some rapid calculations in his head, and yes, it seems unlikely that Harry’s going to let this pass without comment, for more than five minutes, forever. Going on the offensive is the only worthwhile tactical response.

So Carlos waits until Harry’s taking a sip of coffee before saying, “Cecil.”

The results are gratifying.

“He actually is a journalist, good guess. You should become a detective or something,” says Carlos. “Napkin?”

Harry, still coughing, grabs the napkin out of Carlos' hand and starts wiping himself off.

“I thought you were – were—”

“Married to my job?” says Carlos. “A drifter, born to walk alone? Too much man for any one person?”

“—Straight,” finishes Harry.

“Yeah, well,” says Carlos. "It turns out you miss a lot when you disappear for a year and everyone thinks you’re dead and they only find out otherwise from *reading paperwork,* which, by the way, you never even bothered to fill out for them when you were *alive,* and all this despite the fact that you *promised* to share important information like, 'Actually we do have backup,' or, 'Oh hey, I think our ranks have been infiltrated by an evil conspiracy!' or, 'PS, I'm *not actually dead.*'"
...That might have come out slightly more bitter than he intended.

Harry winces and says, “If it makes you feel any better, the Gatekeeper filled out my paperwork for me.”

“Since that meant your original plan was to not even bother telling anyone you were alive, it really doesn’t,” says Carlos.

There’s a long silence.

“Although getting a member of the Senior Council to do your homework for you is pretty ballsy, I’ll give you that,” says Carlos finally, because he’s lost too many friends to ignore a chance to get one back.

“One day, when you’re older, you’ll learn the value of delegating unimportant jobs,” says Harry. “Next time I’ll put you at the top of the phone chain. Does that make you happy?”

Carlos snorts. “Don’t bother. If you pull this Tom Sawyer shit again I’m tracking you down myself. I only need to sign off on one page for the friendly fire casualty report, and no one will blame me because you’re an annoying asshole.”

“Ohh,” deadpans Harry. “I’m shaking in my boots. Thanks, Ramirez, it’s definitely your terrifying threats of violence that have made me reconsider faking my own death again, because it was so fun the first time.”

“It’s sad when you see this kind of attention-seeking among the elderly,” says Carlos, shaking his head.

Harry kicks him in the shin, but not very hard. “Don’t think I haven’t noticed you changed the subject,” he says. “From how you are apparently into getting boned by guys now.”

“And chicks,” corrects Carlos. “I mean, who am I to deny my considerable charms to half the population? That’s practically a human rights violation.”

Harry snorts. “Half the population? Please,” he says. “I’m shocked you managed to get one person to go on dates with you.”

“I’m honor-bound to only use my devastating attractiveness for good,” says Carlos. Sadly, he’s not actually joking, although every now and then he is also pretty shocked he managed to get Cecil to go on dates with him.

“You’re a regular Peter Parker. So,” says Harry. “You and… Cecil.”

“Yep,” says Carlos. He crosses his arms. "Me and Cecil. You're going to be cool about this, right?"

"I'm always cool," says Harry, "Hey, don't look at me like that, you walked right into that one."

"I'm serious, man," says Carlos. "I haven't really told that many people, so if you're going to be an ass about it I will—"

Harry puts his hands up. "Hey, man, I've told everyone from cops to Fairy Queens that what a guy does with his personal time is none of my business – what's that face for?"

"I'm trying to figure out if what you just said was insanely insulting or just... insane," says Carlos. Harry squints at him, then shrugs. "So you, uh." He scratches the back of his head. “You tell your
“Yes?” says Carlos, wondering where this is going.

“They take it okay?” asks Harry, and Carlos realizes that Harry is worried for him. Awkwardly so, but he guesses it’s the thought that counts.

“Yeah, man, they’re fine,” he says. “I’ve been told by four different people that the pope won’t judge me. They’d already figured it out, anyway.”

Harry snorts. “Let me guess,” he says. “All those stories about your improbably-proportioned ‘lady friends’ tipped them off that you were overcompensating.”

Carlos throws a Sharpie at him. “Actually, they thought I was dating you,” he says.

Harry lets out a sputter of dismay that would actually be kind of offensive if the expression on his face wasn’t so hilarious.

“I know, right?” says Carlos. “I am way too hot for you.”

"That's not – I don't—" Harry glares at him, then says, "I hope you're happy," in a tone more appropriate for, "Go ahead; make my day."

"Watching you squirm during awkward conversations always makes me happy," says Carlos. "Every time you have to talk about feelings, an angel gets its wings."

It's hard to say which one of them is more surprised and horrified when Harry bursts into sudden, violent sobbing.

"Dios!" says Carlos, leaping backwards so quickly he almost trips over Mouse. "Are you okay? Are you dying? I'm so sorry!"

"W-what the fuck did you d-d-d-do to me?" sobs Harry. Mouse whines and thrusts his head under his hand.

"Me? I didn't do anything!" shrieks Carlos. He shoves a box of tissues in Harry's direction. Harry grabs a handful and then throws the box at Carlos' head, and Carlos is so shaken he doesn't even dodge out of the way. "Ow!"

"Th-th-the hell you didn't!" says Harry, still weeping copiously.

Carlos desperately reviews the situation in his mind, and – wait, what?

"Dios," he says. "Were you bad-touched by an angel?!"

Harry starts crying harder.

"Sorry! Sorry!" says Carlos. "It's okay, you'll be okay!"

"What are you t-t-talking about?" demands Harry through his veil of tears.

"It's a local anomaly," babbles Carlos, "Lots of citizens reported seeing angels – shit, sorry! – and those who were sensitive to their Presence would kind of, you know, start crying a little if you happened to mention it. It's totally normal, it happens to a lot of people! Madre de Dios, I'm so sorry, I wouldn't have mentioned it if I had known, just – try to calm down, okay?"
Harry buries his head in his arms, and in between his sobs Carlos hears something like, "—Change his own fucking lightbulbs, the next time I see Mr. Sunshine I'm going to shove my fucking calm up his fucking—" before it devolves into incoherence.

"Look, I'll be right back, you just – stay here where it's safe and think peaceful thoughts," says Carlos, backing out of the room.

He is absolutely not hiding in Lab One when Julie darts in and shuts the door behind her.

"Carlos!" she hisses. "What the hell is going on?"

"Where to start," he says. "What's wrong with you?"

"We've almost lost power twice and the lights are going crazy," she says. "I sent Gary up to tell you to quit sexting Cecil or whatever, but he said your office was full of a giant junkie and his pet bear!"

"That's Harry and Mouse," says Carlos. "'Giant Junkie and his Pet Bear' is their band name."

"You mean the guy from the Dog Park is upstaa— Wait, you actually know a wizard named Harry?" says Julie.

"Yes," says Carlos. "For my sins."

Julie grins. "Don't tell me – he joined the wizard cops after defeating an evil wizard as a teenage – are you serious?"

"I need to get back upstairs," says Carlos. The lights are still flickering, but not nearly as much. "You should go check on the circle in Lab Two and back up all your files. We might be here for a while and the technology situation could get a little dicey."

He starts for the door. Something goes skittering across the floor after he kicks it – an envelope, inexpertly stuffed with several handwritten pages. Carlos picks it up.

"Here, you dropped... this..."

The untidy scrawl looks sort of like his handwriting when he's drunk or tired, but it's not even ciphered. He gets a glimpse of a set of coordinates and Strex Corp underground facility before Julie yanks it out of his hand.

"No! Bad!" she says, hitting him with it.

"What is that?"

"I'll explain when you're older," she says.

"But that looks like—"

She puts a hand on his shoulder. "Carlos, I need you to trust me," she says. Her tone is deadly serious. "It's from you. It's important. And I can't give you details."

He stares at her, then says, "If I ever run into my future self, I'm gonna punch him so hard he feels it years from now."

She grins at him. "Can you get video?" she asks. "Not for science. It just sounds hilarious."

There's a loud bang! from next door, like the sound of a breaker blowing.
"Shit!" says Julie, and runs out of the room before Carlos can question her further.

Carlos' office is mercifully free of emotional breakdowns when he returns. Harry's eyes are still red, and he's letting Mouse rest his head on his lap and drool all over his leg, but he sounds mostly normal (if slightly congested) as he talks to someone on Carlos' office phone. "Justine emailed you back? That was quick." He wedges the phone between his shoulder and his ear and grabs Carlos' notepad. After a few minutes of scribbling, he says, "Great, that's – yes, I told you, I'm fine. It's just a cold, I— No, your face, and that doesn't even make any sense. Look, thanks. I'll let you know what happens," and hangs up.

"Are you... okay?" asks Carlos.

"Just peachy," says Harry, and yep, it appears he's adapted his normal coping mechanism for expressing emotions neither sarcasm nor rage, i.e. pretending they never happened.

"Here," he says, tossing Carlos' notepad back. "Sorry to bogart your phone. But I felt bad about blowing up the Dog Park and busting your sword and sending you fleeing from your office in panic —"

"I wasn't panicking, I was just... incredibly unnerved," says Carlos. "You were the one crying."

"Anyway," says Harry. "I used my amazing detective skills to determine that you were investigating our old buddies of the White Court." He gestures at the notepad. Underneath Testing at Strex Corp – Dr. Raith involved?? is PROBABLY and a long list of notes. A very long list of notes. Whatever Julie's doing, it's going to have to wait until he's done with the current crisis. "I've never tangled with Caroline Raith, but I called one of my contacts and that's what he came up with. Apparently the rest of her family is also trying to find out what she's up to."

"Thanks," says Carlos. "That's... really useful, actually. The Council's been stonewalling me on account of 'diplomacy', and I haven't been able to get much on my own."

"You know what they say about walls," says Harry. "If you can't go around 'em, go through 'em."

"That explains so much about your life," says Carlos, turning to the next page of notes. "Whampires? Really?"

"Hey, you knew exactly what I was talking about, ergo it is a perfectly legitimate abbreviation," says Harry.

Carlos scans the rest of the information. It confirms that Caroline Raith, MD, PhD is a majority shareholder and board member of Strex Corp, and lists a much more extensive record of her activities over the past centuries than Carlos had been able to dig up: patronages for or positions in the Royal Society, the American Institute of Electrical Engineers, the—

"—The Department of Agriculture?" he says incredulously.

"Soil Conservation Service," says Harry. "Gotta say that when I dig up dirt on people, it's usually not that literal."

"Wait," says Carlos, grabbing one of Andre's geology textbooks. He flips to the section on erosion and starts to swear.

"What is it?"

"The Soil Conservation Service was in charge of combating the effects of the Dust Bowl in the
"Thirties," says Carlos.

"And...?"

"And that means that Dr. Raith has a lot of experience with dust- and sandstorms," says Carlos.

"...Which means absolutely nothing to you. But if I'm right..."

He pulls the blueprints free from the mess on his desk and lays them side-by-side again. Now that he knows what he's looking for, he can see it: he barely grasps the science behind it, but the wind power adaptors of Dr. Raith's energy conversion array seem to feature a cruder but analogous system to Julie's.

Under normal conditions, the power collected from ambient magic would be negligible. But if something filled with the raw energy of the sandstorm rolled through—

"...That makes her the prime suspect for repeated violations of the Sixth Law of Magic," he finishes.

Harry's eyebrows shoot up. "The Sixth Law?"

"You know the White Court better than me," says Carlos. "If someone who's potentially responsible for messing with the Currents of Time announces they're starting testing for a historic science initiative—"

Harry starts swearing.

"Yeah, that's what I thought," says Carlos grimly. "I need to talk to the City Council. She went to the effort of going through the local government, so her company must be trying to keep things aboveboard; if I can persuade the City Council to revoke her permits, it could slow things down long enough for the White Council to stop her."

"Do you need backup?" asks Harry.

Carlos pauses in the middle of fastening his cloak. "Don't you have a crusade to go on? Snowballs in hell to throw?"

"My last lead went cold," says Harry. "I need to do some local recon, and I'm not going to stomp all over your territory in the middle of a crisis without offering to lend a hand. How many people will be trying to kill you this time?"

"At the very least? One White Court vampire, the evil corporation that's in the process of taking over the town, whichever warlock or warlocks who started messing with the Currents of Time in the first place, the Sheriff's Secret Police, and anyone who's been down to the Post Office and wants to collect the bounty on my hood," says Carlos.

"Just another Tuesday, huh," says Harry. "What do you think?"

Carlos snorts. "It could get messy."

"Wow, I can't imagine what that's like," says Harry in a monotone.

There are a whole host of reasons why getting Harry involved is a bad idea. Carlos doesn't think he's lying about his reasons for being here, but he's definitely leaving out a lot of information. Important information, knowing Harry. Information that would dramatically impact Carlos' strategy if he knew about it, which he doesn't, because there are spoiled pre-schoolers better at sharing than Harry Dresden.
And Harry’s been working for the Sidhe. A Queen of the Sidhe, even. They never lie, but they’re masters of stretching and contorting and manipulating the truth until what you think you know is far more unhelpful than any actual lies they might have told. Even Harry’s sworn promises might mean something else entirely, if Carlos missed some verbal loophole.

Finally, there’s the simple fact that chaos and confusion follow Harry around like plastic bags come to heel. The best thing he could do for a place that’s supposed to remain low-key and calm is leave.

But while Harry has misled Carlos, told him the truth but too late, straight-up lied to him, almost gotten him killed, definitely gotten him hurt, occasionally destroyed everything around him, and made fun of him a lot, he’s always done it while watching Carlos’ back. There’s only one way to find out if the person he’s become still believes the same.

"Then suit up," says Carlos. "We're going to City Hall."

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"Seriously, Ramirez, this joke has gone on for long enough," says Harry.

"Stop poking at it, you’ll mess it up," says Carlos. “I told you, it’s part of the dress code.”

“How the hell kind of dress code requires me to wear a cheap-ass cape and a lunch meat tiara?” demands Harry.

“The kind formulated by beings who keep getting busted for practicing dark magic every few years even though the Wardens have executed—” Carlos does the calculations in his head as he sticks the final toothpicks in his chorizo circlet. “—A full third of their council members for it?”

“You should have executed them for crimes against fashion,” says Harry.

"That's pretty rich coming from a guy who willingly wears cowboy boots during situations that do not involve emergency line dancing," says Carlos.


"Bill lives in Texas," says Carlos. "He also wears a bolo tie and a belt buckle the size of a plate."

“That still doesn’t explain why I get the crown of cold cuts. My hair is going to smell like processed meat food forever.”

“Quit whining,” says Carlos ruthlessly, putting on his chorizos. “Do you think I like being covered in sausages?”

Harry looks at him, then starts to snicker.

“Shut up,” says Carlos.

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Carlos fully admits his relationship with City Council is not the best; there's too much blood and/or ichor spilt on both sides for any significant establishment of trust. But he has a concise and impassioned argument for why they should temporarily revoke Dr. Raith’s testing permits until further investigation could be made into potential side effects, all for the good of Night Vale — and more importantly, all for the good of the City Council. Any halfway rational being would at least think about it.
Unfortunately, Carlos only makes it through a few sentences before the City Council cuts him off by hissing in unison “Believe in a Smiling God,” and waving Strex Corp-branded rally towels, so he doesn’t feel too guilty about the subsequent breakdown of discussion and civic order.

Besides, Harry only set City Hall on fire a little.

If there’s one thing City Council has done correctly, though, it’s improving the quality of their vengeance squads.

“Pick up the pace, Ramirez,” says Harry. Carlos is running flat-out; Harry is moving at the same pace but looks like he’s just going for a jog in the park. He’s barely broken a sweat, that bastard. Carlos doesn’t have the breath to respond, so he just flips him off.

The baying of hounds gets closer. Carlos yanks his chorizos off his head and tosses them over his shoulder, then ducks under the hail of flying lunchmeat as Harry does the same. They break right down an alley.

A large and expensive truck roars towards them. Harry shouts ”Parkour!” and leaps off the bumper over the cab, what the actual fuck. Carlos hits the ground and feels the heat of the diesel engine pass over him.

Several seconds later, an enormous grey blur follows it. The truck screeches to a halt at the end of the alley, and Cactus Judy sticks her head out the window as Mouse wriggles under it and charges down the street.

"Havoc!” she cries cheerfully.

Harry grabs him by the arm and pulls him to his feet. As they run, there are several loud barks behind them from Mouse that make Carlos' ears ring loudly, then a series of yelps disappearing into the distance as the attack dogs scatter.

The remaining human members of the vengeance squad have fallen behind, but they're still too close for comfort. "Left!” Carlos wheezes. He grabs Harry before he passes the back of the apartment building entirely and pulls him into a recessed doorway, gasping out "Mak!"

The vengeance squad runs past the illusion of uninterrupted stucco and disappears out onto the street.

A few minutes after the sound of pursuit has faded, Mouse comes trotting down the alley. He stops right in front of them and sits there, panting.

"I guess that's the all-clear," says Carlos, dropping the veil.

"Ow," says Harry, pulling a spiny needle out of his shirt and another from his cheek. "Who the hell keeps a cactus in the back of their truck?"

"I'm sorry, I would have warned if you if I'd known you'd be leaping tall vehicles in a single bound," says Carlos. "When did you learn that?"

"When you get iced in all winter on an island in the middle of Lake Michigan with a lot of excess athletic ability, you learn to make your own fun," says Harry. "Where to now?"

"Fire escape," says Carlos. He can grab the bottom rung if he jumps; Harry doesn't even have to stand on his tip-toes to reach up and pull it down. "Mouse should probably wait outside, though – sorry, man. The... cat... might react badly."
"Keep an eye on the exits," says Harry. Mouse wags his tail in acknowledgment and trots back towards the street. "And stay away from the dumpsters!"

At the top of the fire escape, Carlos jimmys open the window and climbs in first, lowering the wards.

Harry pauses with one hand on the sill. "You don't have to invite me in," he says.

Carlos is tempted. During the fight at City Hall, there were a few times where he found himself calculating weak spots and sight lines for the guy that was supposed to be on his side. Harry never crossed the line, but... while he acts and looks the same 99% of the time, the remaining 1% – when something cold and predatory peers out from behind his eyes – is that much disturbing.

"Please, like you need a handicap for me to take you down," he says instead.

Since the Winter Knight doesn't snap and murder him while he's busy laughing at Harry maneuvering his ridiculously long limbs through the tiny window frame, he's probably good for now.

He makes Harry wait by the window until he determines that Khoshekh is definitely in the study, floating over the corner of Cecil's desk and napping.

"What do you have in there, E.T.?’ demands Harry, squinting through the plastic sheeting.

"It's Cecil's cat. Sort of. I'm allergic," says Carlos.

"But he's staying in your apartment?"

"He's recovering from surgery," says Carlos. "It's a long story."

"Uh-huh," says Harry, and he imitates cracking a whip. Carlos doesn't bother to dignify that with a response. It's not like it's totally true.

"Those were some nice wards you've got up," says Harry. "Patchwork pattern's familiar. You have help?"

"Cecil's friends with the local Paranetters," says Carlos, leading him towards the den. "They've worked out the best defenses for local problems, and I filled in the rest. It should keep out just about everythi—"

Tamika Flynn is sitting on his couch: leaning forward, elbows on knees, hands clasped gravely. She’s flanked by two Girl Scouts, slingshots loaded but pointed at the ground. More children crouch on tables and countertops, similarly armed, and either they just happened to choose the most strategic positions or they've picked up a healthy understanding of tactics from the copy of Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God sitting on his coffee table, right next to Tamika’s mummified librarian head.

"Everything but a rogue band of chimney sweeps, apparently," says Harry.

"No, they worked for Marcus Vansten," says a Girl Scout Cadette.

"Uh, hi," says Carlos. "Is there something I can help you with?"

"You're a traitor, Mr. Carlos," says Tamika.

Carlos blinks and opens his mouth. A dozen slingshots come up, ready to fire. He closes his mouth.
He can't tell what they're using for ammo; he has a feeling he doesn't want to know.

He's gotten out of worse stand-offs. The problem is that during those, he didn't have to worry about explaining what happened to his opponents' parents.

Carlos raises his hands in surrender and kicks Harry in the ankle until he does, too.

"What's wrong, Tamika?" he asks.

"You're White Council," says Tamika, pronouncing the words like month-old lunchmeat crown. "You've decapitated at least seventeen people—"

"Warlocks," corrects Carlos.

"—and two members of City Council—"

"Also practitioners of dark magic."

"—Planted those metal trees that made everything higher than thirty feet catch on fire—"

"To protect you from the clouds."

"—Repeatedly sabotaged government buildings—"

"To protect you from the government."

"—Blasted a hole in the vacant lot out back of the Ralph's—"

"That was eight years ago! How do you even remember that?"

"—Consorted, in a No Winter Zone, with the Winter Knight —"

"No, we're just friends," says Harry.

"—and got $7,564 in unpaid parking fines," finishes Tamika. "But the worst part is that you lied to us, Mr. Carlos. We thought you were here for Night Vale. But when the yellow helicopters came, you did nothing."

"Tamika—" he starts. Then he has to take a deep breath, because her accusations hit so close to home they're basically in the living room with them. "If Night Vale has a problem with magic or monsters, then I'm your guy. But it's my job to help everyone, not just the people I like. I can't be the one to decide who's worthy of my protection. And if I don't remain neutral, no one else will, and that means Night Vale's going to end up a war zone.

"We've got a lot of power, Tamika. I know you're learning what that's like. And I think you know, even if you're not sure you believe it, that it's up to us to always make sure – always – that the power's not making us the monsters people need protection from."

"I'm familiar with Nietzsche's Theme from 2001: A Space Odyssey, Mr. Carlos," says Tamika. "But why are you working with Strex Corp?"

"We're not working with them," says Carlos. "We just smile when they show up and try to leave as soon as possible."

Tamika stares at him, her eyes unfathomably deep; Carlos looks away before a soulgaze starts.
“So you weren’t spotted climbing out an access hatch above Strex Corp’s underground facilities near Radon Canyon?” she asks, just as he hears, “—third time a meeting of the local chapter of the NRA has been interrupted by a potentially deadly invasion. Evacuations have been ordered—”

“What?” says Carlos.

Tamika begins “We have reports of you—” before Carlos shushes her. A Brownie narrows her eyes and raises her slingshot.

“Turn that up!” he says, pointing at the enormous Crystodyne radio in the corner.

She looks at Tamika, who nods. The Brownie twists a knob and almost falls over when the speakers let out a blood-curdling scream.

“—was the only comment issued by members of the Mayor’s office, fleeing the scene,” says Cecil. “However, initial estimates put their numbers well over twenty-seven. Experts debate whether their current incorporeal form discounts them from the record books, but should they regain solidity, this would certainly be the largest ghoul incursion in Night Vale’s history, surpassing even—”

He and Harry stare at each other with identical expressions of horror.

“In the words of legendary sports writer Holden Caulfield,” says Tamika, “Fudgesicles.”

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The operator on the Warden hotline puts him on hold.

On hold.

"That's not a happy face," says Harry.

"They're playing 'The Girl from Ipanema,'" hisses Carlos. The phone receiver crackles as he jams it between his ear and his shoulder. He flings open his bedroom closet and pulls out his weapons locker.

The music cuts off mid-sax noodle. “Sorry,” says the operator nervously. “Um. Captain Luccio isn’t in, Warden Ramirez.”

Carlos lets out a frustrated sigh. “I know that,” he says. “I need to get a message to her. Region Code LI, Hirata Protocol, sitrep: over twenty-seven ghouls in a civilian area where the White Court is trying to interfere with the Laws of Magic.”

“Um,” says the operator. “The Senior Council ordered a communications blackout for the Captain's mission.”

“What,” says Carlos flatly.

“I can take your message!” says the operator desperately. “But I can't send it until—”

“Fine,” says Carlos. “Put down that I recommend Warden William Meyers as a suitable candidate for regional commander of the western United States.”

“But – that’s your job, Warden Ramirez!”

“I know,” snarls Carlos, and hangs up the phone.
“No backup?” asks Harry.

“No backup,” says Carlos grimly. “Luccio’s the only other person authorized to be here, and she’s somewhere in the Mediterranean under a communications blackout.”

“You know, just once I wish we could get too many people for a job,” says Harry. Carlos puts on his reinforced kevlar and sorts through his arsenal. “Everyone standing around awkwardly, jostling each other’s elbows as the front lines mow down the opposition…”

"Good news!” says Cecil, on the clock radio. "Many of the ghouls have disappeared as suddenly as they appeared. A spokeswoman from the NRA claims this was clearly a result of citizens exercising their Second Amendment rights and had nothing to do with the brief manifestation of a giant, dark green vortex, humming seductively and beckoning all into its swirling embrace."

Carlos swears.

"I take it that means the problem hasn't solved itself," says Harry. "Do you thi— Holy crap, Carlos. How many grenades does one guy need?”

“Twenty-seven ghouls,” Carlos reminds him, though he does take off the last two. He was running out of room on his belt anyway. “And they were on sale.”

He holds out the extra grenades. “I’ll pass,” says Harry. “Carrying around mechanical devices that are designed to explode makes me a little nervous for some reason. Have you got anything else to spare? A rocket launcher? Tank? Patriot missile?”

"There's a Glock in the nightstand," says Carlos. He pulls out an extra magazine for his Desert Eagle.

There's a yelp and the sound of a drawer slamming shut.

"...The other nightstand," says Carlos.

"Yeah, but where do you keep the brain bleach?" grumbles Harry.

"I could punch you in the head a couple times," Carlos offers, tossing him a spare magazine for the Glock. “Maybe it will improve your aim.”

“Sounds great,” says Harry. He pockets both gun and ammo. “Let me know if you want me to sit down or wait for you to get a step-stool.”

Carlos ignores that, because he is a mature adult who is above average height. For Mexican-American males aged 20-39, anyway. “Can you make sure Tamika and the others don’t leave before I talk to them? I have to call her mother.”

When Carlos enters the living room yet another futile phone call later, he finds himself in the middle of a pitched argument.

“It’s empowering non-fiction,” says Tamika. “Janie does the right thing, no matter what the law or society says.”

“I agree with that,” says Harry. “Although I didn’t know it was based on a true story. I just think it’s a horrible plot twist to die after trying to save a dog. I mean, what kind of message does that send?”

“Excuse me,” Carlos interrupts. “Tamika, the situation’s changed. Did you hear the radio?”
She nods. “What are we going to do?”

“We?” says Harry.

Carlos elbows him. “Right now, I’d appreciate it if you could wait out in the hallway. I need to get some more information, and then we’ll talk.”

Tamika gives him a level stare, then nods. She makes a few hand signals, and several seconds later the room is empty of children. She even considerately locks the door after them with her mother’s keys, which at least explains how she made it past the wards.

That should keep the kids close for the meantime. Long term, though...

"I need you to keep them safe," he says to Harry.

Harry frowns. "Look, Ramirez, you're good, but we've done the ghoul army thing before, and even working together we barely made it out alive. You don't stand a chance alone."

"If I knew I'd be alone, I wouldn't need you to look after them," says Carlos resignedly.

Harry gapes at him. "Are you insane? We can't drag kids into this!"

"Harry," says Carlos. "They've been on the run from Strex Corp’s security forces for almost five months. They've commandeered at least half a dozen helicopters and brought down twice that. Some of them are better knife-fighters than I am. There’s terrible things in this town and they’re used to adults not doing anything to help. They'll drag themselves into this, and we don't have time to stop them – assuming we can stop over a hundred very determined kids."

Harry's mouth opens and closes, but no words come out.

"I've already tried calling Tamika's mother," says Carlos. “She told me that every growing child needs to set her own boundaries and enforce them with blood and steel." Then Shakeena had started crying and hung up on him, and while that makes him feel better about the attitude of the average Night Vale parent, if not their actual practice, it's not helping the situation at hand. "That's the kind of people we're dealing with here."

“This isn’t their fight!”

“It wasn’t our fight, either,” says Carlos. “We fought anyway. At least this way they've got you.”

Harry looks away. “They’re going to get hurt,” he says quietly.

“I can’t stop them from getting hurt,” says Carlos. “But if you help me, I might be able to stop them from getting killed. Please, Harry.”

“Dammit, Carlos,” says Harry. His fists are clenched; with what looks like deliberate effort, he relaxes them. “Fine. I’ll do it. ”

“Thanks, man,” says Carlos.

Harry lets out a short, bitter laugh. “Nice job, by the way.”

“What?”

“Guilting me into keeping a bunch of kids safe – that’s smooth. I can’t turn you down, and you don’t have to worry about what I get up to when you’re busy,” says Harry. “It’s pretty sweet, I guess. At
least you still trust me with children.”

“Of all the—” Carlos stops, counts to ten, then says, “Go sit down.”

“Why?”

“Because I need to punch you in the head!” he shouts. “It’s not all about you, dammit.”

“So you’re not trying to get me out of the way?” says Harry skeptically.

“Of course I’m trying to get you out of the way,” says Carlos.

“But—”

"You're right," says Carlos. "I don't trust you. That's because trust is earned, and I haven't seen or
heard from you in two years and you've made a lot of questionable life choices I don't understand.
But I want to trust you. I want you to earn it back. What I don't want is to explain to hundreds of
parents why their kids aren't coming home, or explain to the Council why the first thing you did
when you left your territory after a year and a half of silence is show up here just as things start to
fall apart. So if it's not too much trouble, I'd appreciate it if you could trust me to do my job, and
believe me when I say that you should help the cute kids survive their first encounter with ghouls and
pick up a solid alibi while you're at it!"

Harry blinks at him for a couple seconds, then says, “You know, technically that is all about me.”

"I take back every single toast I ever made in your memory," says Carlos. "And all the votive
candles my family lit and all the Mass cards we bought."

"How many Mass cards—"

"A lot," says Carlos. "I've met you, okay? I wasn't taking any chances. You had a lot of Masses said
for your soul."

"Oh," says Harry. "Thanks. Uh." He looks intensely uncomfortable for a minute, and then, in a
completely unexpected turn of events, says, "I know I've made a lot of mistakes. Especially with my
friends, so... sorry."

He holds out his fist.

"You are the actual worst friend I've ever had," says Carlos, but he fist-bumps Harry back.

"And now you're stuck with me," says Harry. "I let you ride on my T-rex. There's no take-backs for
zombie dino rides."

"No take-backs," repeats Carlos. "At least I know I'm putting you with the right age group."

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Harry lights some candles with a muttered phrase while Carlos hauls the kitchen table to the center of
the room. He makes sure it’s clean, then unfolds a giant map of Night Vale. It’s marked with dozens
of notes and diagrams in Sharpie. Checking against the compass he keeps in his go bag, he rotates
both map and table a quarter turn so they’re oriented due north.

“Do you need a circle?” asks Harry, watching him curiously. “Nope,” says Carlos. Circles are
designed to screen out magical interference, which is exactly the opposite of what he needs right
now.
The candles go at the cardinal points of the round table. He takes five small chunks of marble and sets them on the map, marking the five points of a pentagram; a flat piece of rusty iron goes in the center. He can feel them humming once they’re in position, and the map beneath them ripples slightly, like liquid.

“Okay, stand back,” he says to Harry, and draws his sword. Harry prudently retreats behind one of the counters.

Carlos takes a deep breath and centers himself. Then, gathering his will, he forces power into his sword and stabs it into the center of the map.

He lets go of the hilt, but his sword won’t maintain the connection and the magic begins to slip away. Pain grinds in his temples as he wraps both hands around rayskin rawhide and concentrates.

Silvery light floods outward from the iron plate at the center of the map. When it reaches the marble boundary markers, it splashes back with a noise like tinkling bells and drains away to reveal the familiar shapes of the ward sigils.

They're all still there, which is a relief. Carlos was dreading a repeat of the day of the sandstorm.

For a second, the lines of the interface blur, leaving a ghostly double mirroring the spells scrolling above the tabletop. Carlos grits his teeth; the interface snaps back into focus.

“Sparkly,” says Harry.

"They're illusions," says Carlos. "Or reflections, maybe. The reflection of the reflection of the combined efforts of the ward foci."

“Wards with... containment spells. Protection, binding... what's that suggestion? 'Go in'?"

"Something like that. Whatever it is, it's popular," says Carlos. He shuts his eyes for a second, steadying the interface as much as he could. There's a buzzing behind his sinuses – interference from his sword. It's slowly getting worse.

"These are some serious wards," says Harry. "Seriously... familiar. Sort of like – wait, is this place a prison?"

Carlos' eyes snap open. "How did you know that?"

Harry stares at him like a realtor caught in the headlights, then says, "...Intuition?"

"Are there more places like Night Vale?" asks Carlos incredulously, because the one area where Harry is consistently intuitive is following leads that get him into trouble, and the only thing Carlos can think of that's more troublesome than accidentally finding out about one ancient magical prison is finding out about two of them.

“...There might be,” says Harry. “Not that I would know anything about it, because that’s the kind of terrifyingly powerful knowledge that might freak people out if they knew I was involved.”

“Of course it is,” says Carlos. He keeps one hand on his sword and gestures at the interface with the other. “Well, hypothetically speaking, how does this look to you?"

"A lot... simpler,” says Harry. “On a more human level, I mean. Hypothetically speaking, some other places the enchantments are so deep it requires an independent manifestation just to keep everything straight.”
“Like a homunculus?” asks Carlos. “Or a genius loci?”

“...Hypothetically speaking,” says Harry, and it makes sense. Night Vale’s wards, while considerable, are uncomfortably underpowered compared to the combined might of the Outsiders housed within; Carlos had assumed it was because everything is terrible in Night Vale, but it seems to have been a deliberate decision. If they were any more complicated, people wouldn’t be able to look after them. Outsiders can only be summoned by humans, even if they’re just summoning them to the same place over and over for all eternity. A magical manifestation monitoring the system would be next to useless when they couldn't respond to a problem.

Plus...

“That means you’d have to bond with the place just to find out what’s going on,” says Carlos. He pictures trying to mind-meld with the spiritual manifestation of Night Vale itself, and shudders. “Man, I'd hate to be the sucker with that job.”

"Haha," says Harry. "Yeah."

Carlos stares at him.

“What?” asks Harry.

“Hypothetically speaking, you are a disaster,” says Carlos. He shakes his head and immediately regrets it. "I can't hold this for much longer. We need to find out how the ghouls got in – you saw how difficult that was to pull off. Something with that much energy would definitely leave a mark. Can you tell me if anything seems... off?"

'I'll assume you mean something more specific than the whole freaking town," says Harry. He accepts Carlos' notebook and flips it open to a new page.

Carlos concentrates on the interface. The silver lines expand, welling up into more and more complicated patterns until almost the whole map is covered.

Harry leans in closer. “There are gaps,” he says. “No – more like... snarls.”

“I knew it,” says Carlos. “Read me the cross streets?”

“Second and Earl,” says Harry as he writes it down. That's by the Ralph's. "Some alley about halfway down Bandera. The middle of Mission Grove Park. Fourth and Old Musk. Uhh, these two unmarked roads in the Cactus Bloom development. Earl and Somerset—""

“That's the Dog Park,” interjects Carlos.

“This big blob to the west—”

“Elementary school.”

“Hollows and Great Hill, a vacant lot at First and Earl, No and – No? Is that supposed to be North?”

"No," says Carlos, then, "I mean – it's just No Street. It's not by Oxford, is it?"

"Sorry to say," says Harry. Great, now there might be something wrong at the library. "Flint and Main – aren't those your labs?"

"Yes," says Carlos grimly.
"And... just west of First and Oxford," says Harry. "What?"

"That’s by the radio station," says Carlos. "That’s – nothing. Anywhere else?"

"What's that other shape?"

"What?"

"Can you, I don’t know, zoom in a little?" asks Harry. "Something’s a little… off."

Carlos shuts his eyes and focuses his will. He can almost see the light brightening through his eyelids.

"Uh-oh," says Harry. "Is it supposed to look like that?"

"What?" says Carlos, his eyes snapping open.

Dozens of tangles appear at the hotspots, like new runes and sigils are welling up as others circle around a drain and disappear, trapped in a...

"Fuck," says Carlos. He lets go of the connection. The sudden cessation of painful feedback makes his knees wobble.

"I’m guessing that’s a No," says Harry, grabbing his arm to keep him upright. "Like the street."

"They’re time vortices," says Carlos. He braces himself against the table and takes a deep breath, then straightens up. Harry lets go of his arm. "For at least a year, someone's been trying to use them to manipulate the Currents of Time." He yanks his sword from the table.

"Someone?" says Harry. "That's not – Carlos, these places were built across the Currents of Time."

"What?"

"They’re prisons, simultaneously constructed in multiple eras, so that they’ve always existed," says Harry. "Always. It took two Fairy Queens and their strongest minions to even make a dent in the defenses of Demonreach in real time. There’s no way one person could—"

Mouse barks outside.

The hallway outside Carlos’ apartment is empty, of children or anyone else. Carlos swears and bolts for the stairwell. Harry races past him, vaults over the safety railing, and is out the door with a dim cry of "Parkour!" before Carlos has even made it to the next floor.

When he finally gets outside, the street in front of the apartment complex is crawling with ghouls. Well, bits of ghoul, mainly: half-frozen chunks dripping black ichor, weakly wriggling towards each other and trying to reconnect. A nearly whole ghoul lies twitching on the ground, stabbed through with icicles as thick as Carlos’ arm.

The remaining ghoul is oddly pale and almost transparent, except for a flush of blue light around its leg, clamped between Mouse's jaws as he tries to drag it away from Harry. But it tears itself free and takes a swipe at Harry even as flames bursts from his hand—

And its claws pass right through him.

Both Harry and the ghoul stagger, overbalanced from the lack of impact. The stray blast of fire lights ignites a telephone pole. The ghoul falls against a mailbox and passes right through it, completely
incorporeal. Carlos half-expects it to sink into the ground and disappear, but as it rolls to its feet there's the faintest trace of silver light around it, like the light from the wards...

"Back!" shouts Carlos, and hurls a globe of entropic force. It passes through the ghoul harmlessly, but disintegrates a perfect circle into the asphalt. Harry's hand comes down a second later, and Carlos can tell the moment he raises the circle, because the ghoul is suddenly solid and angry and unable to be contained by a purely spiritual barrier—

A slingshot snaps as it charges out of the circle. The ghoul screams and clutches at its eyes, then collapses to the ground after Carlos disintegrates its knees.

"Ha' bak!" he shouts, and the water from all the frost coating the street flows up the ghoul's arms and yanks them away from its ruined face, pinning it to the ground.

It keeps screaming. Carlos grimaces.

"Gross," says Tamika, appearing at his side. She's reloaded her slingshot and has it drawn and ready.

"I thought I told you to wait in the hall," he says.

"We did," she replies. "And then we decided to wait outside."

"Where's everyone else?"

"Hidden," she says. "I posted sentries."

"What should we—" Harry begins, and the ghoul stops screaming at the sound of his voice. "Well, hey. Thanks."

Whistles echo up and down the street.

"Chopper," says Tamika urgently.

"Hood up," says Carlos to Harry. "Tamika—"

But Tamika is already kneeling and burying her face in Mouse's fur. She pets him enthusiastically, and for a moment is indistinguishable from any other teenage girl taking her dog for a walk in the middle of an ichor-strewn war zone, which in Night Vale is admittedly pretty good camouflage.

The blue helicopter passes directly overhead without stopping.

Mouse waits until it's out of sight, then turns and licks Tamika's face. She falls back on her heels with a startled laugh, and for a moment she looks like the happy girl in Shakeena's photo instead of the face of the revolution.

Then the ghoul groans something, and she leaves off petting Mouse to stand by its head, slingshot at the ready. Harry's mouth twists and he shifts a little closer.

“Any idea what he just said?” asks Carlos.

Harry grimaces. “Sorry, I've lost my knack for ancient Sumerian.”

“He says that he'll never surrender,” says Tamika.

Harry stares down at her. “What?”
“The ghoul,” says Tamika. “He says he’ll never surrender.”

“You speak ancient Sumerian?”

“I’ve been learning it since the third grade,” says Tamika. “Do you want me to say something back?”

“See if they’ll tell us their evil plan,” says Carlos. Harry raises an eyebrow. "What? It's worth a shot."

Tamika says something scornful, and the ghoul replies with a long string of spitting and hissing.

“I said, uh, something rude,” says Tamika. Carlos would swear that she’s almost blushing. “Then it swore to eat all of us very slowly, especially the two of you, because the Great One promised them revenge for the Cave of Fire. The Great One promised that there would be a balancing of the scales. Uh. And then it quoted legendary sports writer Holden Caulfield a whole lot.”

Carlos looks at Harry. They both look down at the ghoul.

It’s huge, much larger than the standard breed. The only reason they were able to neutralize it without killing it is because of the still-healing burns covering most of its body; it had them even before their fight.

Carlos has only seen ghouls like this once before: his and Harry’s duel with the White Court seven years ago in the Raith Deeps. Dozens of innocent bystanders died, Carlos got stabbed twice, and then Harry exploded everything. There’s no way even super-ghouls could have survived that.

Well, they thought there was no way even super-ghouls could have survived that...

"Did it say how it got here?" asks Carlos.

"'The Great One opened the way'," says Tamika.

"The Nevernever?" guesses Harry.

Carlos shakes his head. "Not in the middle of town. One of the vortices is my guess," he says. He chews his lip, then says, "We need—"

The ghoul rips itself (literally, gross) from the ground, but before it can do anything, Tamika's shot catches it right in the mouth. It gags, clutches at its throat, then falls down writhing; in less than a minute, it starts shriveling from the inside, almost imploding until there's nothing left but a wizened husk.

"What the fudgesicles," says Harry blankly.

"Librarian venom," says Tamika. "I don't think we have enough if all of them come back, though."

"Librarian venom?" says Carlos. He looks up and down the street, empty except for still-twitching ghoul bits. He has a terrible idea.

"I have a terrible idea," he announces.

~*~*~*~

"You're right," says Tamika, when Carlos finishes explaining his plan. "That is a terrible idea."

“But will it work?” he asks her. “You’re the expert.”
She makes a face. “In theory,” she says.

He looks at Harry.

"Well, you said words," says Harry. "Individually they all made sense, but then I try to think about them all together and – nothing doing."

"What else is new?" says Carlos, and staggers sideways when Harry tries and fails to give him a gentle Winter Knight shove.

"It's like the old saying," says Tamika. "'Set a bloodthirsty pseudo-reptilian keeper of literature to catch a bloodthirsty pseudo-reptilian keeper of literature'."

"Okay, I still have no idea what's going on, but I'm also going with 'terrible idea' on general principles," says Harry.

"Do either of you have a better plan?" asks Carlos.

Tamika rubs her chin. "Could we stage a series of protests that detail the abuses of the ghouls' power over Night Vale?"

"You mean beyond killing and eating people?" asks Carlos.

"That might be hard to sell in some of the more conservative areas," admits Tamika. "They're really into barbecue."

"Do you have a six double charges of C4 and a large enclosed space?" asks Harry. "Or a *Tyrannosaurus rex*? Because those are the only surefire anti-ghoul solutions I know."

Carlos gives him a look and says, "I thought you were bringing those."

"I brought them last time," says Harry.

"You guys are weird," says Tamika. She looks up at both of them. "We're doing the terrible idea, aren't we."

"Looks like," says Carlos.

Sighing, she pulls out her copy of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. "Tea Cake, you will not have died in vain," she says, and tears off the cover.

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They leave one of the bodies of the ghouls in front of the library, clutching pieces of the book in each hand. (They let Harry, and shortly after that the storm wards, deal with the rest of the remains.)

They take cover behind the Pinkberry. Carlos drops the veil hiding the ghoul from sight.

"How long do we wait?" he asks in a low voice.

"They're in the middle of re-shelving, so they'll be distracted," whispers Tamika. "But they can sense books in need of repair, so it shouldn't take them long to—"

Mouse lets out a low rumble. There's a dark blur and a gust of wind, and the ghoul disappears.

"Holy shi—" says Harry, cutting himself off when he looks at Tamika. "—ugar. Holy sugar. Did
you see that thing?"

"Most people can't track their movement directly," says Tamika, giving Harry a speculative look.

There's restless movement in the librarian cages. A Cadette lets out a muffled yelp. Tamika shushes her, but she yanks her earbuds out of her ears and holds them out so they can all hear the tinny but loud broadcast.

"—Listeners, the following areas have been upgraded from a Ghoul Watch to a Ghoul Warning, following multiple sightings of fully corporeal monsters: Second Street and Earl Road, Hollows Road and Great Hills Drive, and that unmarked intersection in Cactus Bloom by Becky Canterbury's house. We are also getting reports that the dark portal spotted at the NRA meeting has reappeared, approximately three blocks from, uh. Approximately three blocks from the radio station—"

Carlos finds himself on his feet without having consciously decided to stand up. "I have to go," he says.

Harry grabs his arm. "You can't take them on by yourself!"

"We can't leave the librarians unsupervised!" says Tamika.

"I won't," says Carlos. "You guys stay on the librarians. If I can find the vortices, I can shut them down and cut off the rest of the invasion. I won't engage directly. If I haven't found you before then, we'll rendezvous at the Book Club supply drop in an hour. Got it?"

Tamika nods. "Good luck, Mr. Carlos."

Harry lets go of his arm and offers him a fist-bump instead. "Give 'em he— heck," he says.

Mouse slobbers all over his other hand.

It's not the most dignified heroic farewell, but at this point he'll take what he can get.

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Strex Corp's yellow helicopters have begun circling the area, but the only thing moving on the streets are four more ghouls. He manages to avoid both.

"Listeners, I have grave news," says Cecil; Carlos borrowed the Girl Scout's earbuds. "Over a dozen witnesses have called in to say that there has been yet another librarian outbreak. The librarians appear to be systematically sweeping through the town and targeting the ghoulish outbreak. Whether or not this deadly hunt has been prompted by some ancient grudge between the species, we do not know; nor do we know whether the librarians will be content in eliminating these foul and apparently non-book-loving invaders, or will turn on our fair city in a bloodlust-fuelled rampage.

"However, there have been unconfirmed reports that a roving band of preteens led by Tamika Flynn have been spotted in the vicinity of these librarian attacks. We can only hope that—" Cecil pauses. There are faint voices in the background; paper rustles near the microphone.

"We can only hope that these juvenile delinquents repent their criminal past and turn themselves into the police, or their nearest Strex Corp security officer," Cecil continues flatly. "And on that note, let us go to this unscheduled special announcement, just handed to me by Lauren Mallard, our new program director. 'Remain calm, Night Vale!', it says. 'Remain calm and stay inside. Everything is fine. In fact, everything is better than fine, because today we all have the amazing opportunity to work from home! Explore this once-in-a-lifetime chance to combine comfort and productivity, and
soon history itself will forget today's minor difficulties. Remain calm, Night Vale. *Remain. Calm.*”

Cecil sighs, and with an obvious note of sullenness, says, "And now, a word from our sponsors."

Carlos reaches the radio station with no further incidents. The massive bloodstone door is sealed tight and they've closed all the blast shutters, which is a relief.

Storm clouds are gathering overhead, and he can feel the hum of dark magic nearby; Cecil's three-block estimate for the vortex is probably correct. But he takes a minute to circle the station anyway. Multiple vortices appeared there last time, and he can't afford to be preoccupied with concerns for Cecil's safety, so if he sets his mind at ease now—

There’s a muffled noise.

Carlos makes sure his shield surrounds him completely, because he isn't about to get sucker-punched into a time vortex *again.*

It's probably the only thing that saves his life when the world erupts in fire and heat and pressure.

His shield absorbs most of the shockwave even as he's hurled violently backwards. He loses control as he crashes *through* something, then skids along some kind of flat surface and drops several feet.

There’s silence, apart from the ringing in his ears. He opens his eyes.

He’s lying on the floor. His foot is stuck under an overturned chair from the table he just slid off of. Eighteen inches away from his face, the dust-covered carpet parts around a small metal plaque that says *In Loving Memory of Intern Leland.*

He groans and kicks feebly at the chair. He frees his ankle, which begins to throb. He manages to get on his hands and knees, then grabs the edge of the table and hauls himself up partially upright.

Cecil is standing, frozen, on the other side of the room. He’s covered in white dust and holding a coffee pot. He is also staring right at Carlos.

Carlos’ cloak hangs askew from the blast. He’s not wearing the hood.

Carlos can almost see the thoughts running through Cecil’s head. It’s a familiar pattern in Night Vale: first there’s shocked recognition, then rapid denial, followed by nigglng doubt, reluctant reassessment, horrified conclusion, and, finally, fear.

Carlos pushes himself up, wobbling a little, but managing to stay on his feet.

“Carlos?” says Cecil, barely louder than a whisper.

Carlos flinches.

“But that’s a – those are—”

“Cecil, this – this isn’t what it looks like,” says Carlos.

“It looks like you just came crashing through the wall to the break room, by magic, wearing a wizard’s cloak and carrying a wizard’s staff,” says Cecil.

“...Maybe it is what it looks like,” says Carlos.

Cecil stares at him.
Carlos stares back.

"Wait, you saw my staff?" he asks. "Where did it go?"

Cecil wordlessly points to the corner of the room. Carlos limps over and picks up his staff, which fortunately seems to have made it through the blast unscathed.

"Carlos," says Cecil, when he turns back around. "What’s going on?"

"Cecil, I – I’ll explain later, I promise," says Carlos. "I just need you to stay here. Be safe. Uh – I think I just took out your blast shutters, so you should probably move to the broadcasting bunker."

He scans the street outside, then climbs over the remains of the windowsill.

"Wait!" says Cecil, dropping the coffee pot. He scrambles out the window after Carlos. "You can’t just leave—"

"Cecil, don’t—" A harsh inhuman voice is shouting in ancient Sumerian – out of sight, but close. "This is dangerous!"

"Life is dangerous, Carlos," says Cecil, grabbing his arm. "You’re not going anywhere until you explain what is happening."

"Don’t you have to get back to the show?" says Carlos desperately.

Cecil pales, but snaps out, "Fuck the show! We’re doing paid advertisements, they can always run one more. Is this – some kind of science gone horribly wrong, or—"

"I’m not a scientist," says Carlos.

"But—"

"I’m a Warden of the White Council of wizards," says Carlos. "For the last year – over a year – fuck. Since the first time you first saw me in Night Vale, someone has been manipulating the Currents of Time in direct violation of the Sixth Law of Magic, and I’ve been trying to find them and stop them. Today, they’re trying to stop me. I’m not going to let them."

"The first time I saw you…?" whispers Cecil. "You’re only here to – you mean you never… all this time?" His grip loosens on Carlos’ arm. He looks sick.

"I’m sorry, Cecil," says Carlos. "I—"

Cecil shoves him, hard. Carlos stumbles back just a green blast of energy whizzes past his face and hits a ghoul loping towards them. They all fall as the ground cracks and heaves beneath their feet.

Three more ghouls round the corner of the station and charge.

Carlos flings a handful of entropic force at the ghoul nearest Cecil, then empties his magazine into the one coming after him. That slows it down enough for the librarian stalking it to pounce.

"Cecil!"

Cecil scrambles to his feet, clutching a brick in one hand, but the first ghoul has risen and the third ghoul is closing in—

Carlos screams, "Chahuk!" Lightning leaps from his staff. The third ghoul falls. Carlos reaches Cecil
just as the first recovers and leaps for both of them.

It hits Carlos' shield.

Four hundred pounds of ghoul near the peak of its arc has a lot of potential energy for Carlos' shield to turn against itself.

The ghoul continues towards them, just no longer in a state where it's capable of harming them on anything but a microbial level. It hits with a massive splatter.

The librarian lets out a triumphant bugle and disappears with the second ghoul's corpse. Then silence falls. The whole fight took maybe thirty seconds.

Carlos still has his left arm outstretched, even though he's dropped his shield. The other is clutching Cecil tightly to his chest. One of them is shaking. Carlos doesn't know who.

Cecil straightens, wiping gore off his face with an unsteady hand. Carlos drops both arms. "Sorry," he says; it comes out as a whisper.

"Carlos," says Cecil. He opens his mouth, but for maybe the first time ever, words fails him.

"Cecil," say Carlos, his voice cracking.

Cecil takes a step back, then another.

"Carlos," he tries again. "The whole time we've been together, you've been – you've been lying to me?"

"Cecil, I – I—" Movement catches the corner of his eye. A cloaked figure is standing at the end of the block, watching them. It turns and disappears.

Carlos stares at Cecil helplessly. “I have to go,” he says, and runs.

~*~*~*~

He hears the humming before he sees it: a vortex so deep green it’s almost black. It pulses, and he barely has time to duck around a corner before it disgorges two more ghouls. They start muttering to each other in low, hissing voices. He gathers in his will, but they turn and head away from him.

The radio is still playing pre-recorded ads. He desperately hopes Cecil has moved to the bunker.

As soon as the ghouls are out of sight, Carlos draws his sword and walks towards the vortex. He can feel it beckoning him, but he grits his teeth and ignores it.

Instead, he focuses on the fear and pain churning in his chest, the emotions threatening to overwhelm and strip him of control, and channels them into the flare of energy inside him. Power floods through his veins like liquid lightning. His sword tries to resist, but it's no match for the force of his anguish, and he pours himself out until they're both humming with magic. He whips the blade in a circle and thrusts it into the vortex—

—where it’s parried by another sword, emerging out of the dark light.

The other blade shears in half. Carlos stumbles forward, off-balance, his sword's magic tearing away from him with a screech and dissipating into nothing.

A pale hand reaches from the depths and yanks him into the vortex.
Unlike his last trip, he doesn’t experience the same terrible sense of vertigo and wrongness; instead, he's being dragged along an almost tangible distance by the grip on his collar. He struggles, tries to get to his feet; the hand shakes him violently back and forth, like cat with its prey. He slumps back to the ground, dazed. The walls of the vortex pulsate with sick swirl of colors, and it's all he can do to look away before they overwhelm his mind. He's yanked up and hurled forward through a burst of green light.

Exactly like his last trip, he flies free of the vortex and crashes into something hard. Someone kicks his hand and his sword goes flying.

He’s in a brightly-lit, sterile room, slumped against a white wall leading to more white walls. The only spot of color is the orange Strex Corp logo. Even the other end of the vortex is white with a faint orange hue.

The floor is covered in sand.

Caroline Raith stands above him, still holding the hilt of what used to be a *kris*. The wavy blade now extends only a few inches from the base.

“Warden Ramirez,” she purrs. "So nice of you to join us."

A cloaked figure steps forward. He’s dropped the veil concealing his features, except it's not really a veil, it's a screen of sand, parting and flowing gracefully down to disappear beneath his cloak.

“Welcome to Desert Bluffs,” says his double.

Chapter End Notes

Speaking of unleashed librarians: my most excellent beta Libraflyter just graduated from her program! She is now a master of Secret Librarian Arts and also Information Science and you should congratulate and bow down before her. She also said she wanted to apologize for taking so long on her beta duties on account of having to look up all the science terminology, but since she is now far more efficient at that than any of us could ever hope to be I'm forced to conclude that time is probably just being weird.

Three cheers for Libraflyter! No, three, I said *three*, that's – well, okay, that's fine too I guess.

ETA: Haha whoops Tuesday is the new Thursday.
Carlos' double looks almost unchanged since the last time Carlos saw him a year ago, though he seems much healthier. He’s wearing a grey cloak and black fatigues. His belt is hung with a holstered Desert Eagle, a long straight sword, and three fragmentation grenades. His face is handsome and his hair is great, if a little short. He does, in fact, look like Carlos in every way, except for—

“Madre de Dios. You have got to be fucking kidding me,” says Carlos.

—a giant black mustache and matching tufted goatee.

"I’m afraid Carlos is being a little overdramatic," says Dr. Raith. “We may be on the outskirts of Desert Bluffs, but this is our Night Vale campus, after all. It's a pity you won't be staying long. You see—"

"Yeah, yeah, evil plan, whatever," says Carlos. "What the hell did you do to my face, man?"

"It's not your face," snaps Doppel-Carlos. "You gave that up when you stole my body and tried to kill me last spring!"

"One, I didn’t steal your body, this one’s mine," says Carlos. “Two, you tried to kill me first. Three, I didn't try to kill you. I did kill you."

Doppel-Carlos snorts. "You wish," he says. "I'm a little disappointed with your performance, Carlos. I've spent a whole year hearing about your perfect and beautiful brain, and yet you can't even manage basic math. You were out in the sandstorm twice, asshole."

“I know that,” says Carlos. “But—"

—But he’d assumed he didn’t spawn a second double; he never had proof. He’d been dazed and deafened by an exploding grenade when he dropped his sand screen; he could have spawned an entire chorus line of sand clones performing the can-can and not noticed them.

Hysterical laughter bubbles up inside him. He thought it was odd that a second double hadn’t appeared to try to kill him. He thought Doppel-Carlos hadn’t come to finish him off inside the Radio Shack because someone had attacked him by mistake, thinking he was Carlos. Well, he wasn’t wrong; he just needed to combine those two observations together.

“I had another double. He attacked you,” says Carlos. “He’s the one I fought at the station.”

“He was pretty insistent on getting there,” says Doppel-Carlos. “Or on killing me – the data was ambiguous. I had to go all the way to Desert Bluffs to shake him.”

Desert Bluffs – the spatial vortex in Cecil’s studio. But Carlos had chased him through there – but no, that was after Doppel-Carlos 2 attacked him—

No. He can think this through.

Say Doppel-Carlos is telling the truth: he disappeared through the vortex to Desert Bluffs, leaving
behind Doppel-Carlos 2. Doppel-Carlos 2 attacked Carlos Prime before being picked off by Carlos and a handy fire hydrant. One double down. But then Carlos Prime was attacked by someone else – someone with a sword and a hood and a veil that didn’t really work like a veil…

“You came back,” says Carlos. His eyes widen. “And you opened the time vortex and shoved me through.”

“You must admit that circumstances made Carlos uniquely suited to act as a control,” Dr. Raith interjects. “You were the perfect test subject.”

“And you had near instantaneous results, because there I was, still standing,” says Carlos. “You knew I had survived.”

“So efficient,” murmurs Dr. Raith.

Carlos shuts his eyes for a moment and takes a deep breath. Then he looks back up at his double.

"All the other doubles disappeared at the end of the storm," he says. "Why not you?"

"I am a wizard," says Doppel-Carlos. "Give me some cred—"

Carlos hurls a fistful of entropic force and makes a break for the vortex.

The green light splatters harmlessly against Doppel-Carlos’ shield. Carlos hears him shout "K’al!" as Dr. Raith's arm blurs and something catches between Carlos’ legs, sending him sprawling.

The vortex disappears. Carlos slides head-first into the opposite wall.

Footsteps approach. He rolls over, dazed.

Doppel-Carlos picks up the pool cue tangled between Carlos' ankles and pokes him with it. "Yeah, I saw that one coming,” he says.

Carlos grabs the pool cue and pulls. His double stumbles forward – right into the arc of the slashing knife in Carlos’ other hand.

Doppel-Carlos hisses and catches himself against the wall, but a line of fire burns down Carlos’ forearm. He drops the knife and clutches his arm to his chest; he’s bleeding from a gash stretching from his wrist to his elbow.

"Saw that one coming, too," says Doppel-Carlos. He straightens up, adjusts his cloak one-handed. "Don't feel too bad, though. It's what I would have done."

He holds out his own arm; the wound matches Carlos’ perfectly. His double furrows his brow in concentration.

Sand stirs at his feet and flows upwards, disappearing under his clothes. The skin ripples like a beach in a strong wind: blood slows, stops, recedes; the edges of the wound close and seal together.

"Bet this isn't what you would do, though."

"Your beard is still stupid," says Carlos, through gritted teeth.

He puts his back to the wall – for safety, and also because it’s covered in a giant mirror and seeing so many versions of himself is giving him a headache. He raises his arm until it's above his heart.
"Fascinating as this conversation is, gentlemen," says Dr. Raith drily. "There are some pressing matters to which we must attend."

She pulls down a lever on the wall. There’s a buzzing noise, and a few seconds later someone laboriously slides a heavy metal door open.

The intern Carlos talked to during his visit to Strex Corp wanders in, clutching what looks like a heavily-used first aid kit. He stares at Dr. Raith imploringly.

She snaps her fingers and points at Carlos.

The intern's face falls, but he stumbles over to the wall and sits down.

"Please, Warden Ramirez," says Dr. Raith. "Accept this gesture of our hospitality. You're of no use if you bleed to death."

"You're too kind," mutters Carlos.

The intern pulls out a pack of alcohol wipes and slowly – very slowly – starts cleaning the blood and ichor off Carlos’ arm. Carlos tries not to wince at the sting, or at the thought of how many horrible diseases he might be catching right now.

"How did you do this?" Carlos asks.

The intern has been awkwardly maneuvering around Carlos’ other hand where he’s keeping pressure on his wound, but Carlos has to let go so he can clean and bandage the actual cut. Blood wells up, enough that it drips to the floor.

Carlos looks up and finds his double staring hungrily at it.

He has to repeat the question before Doppel-Carlos gives himself a small shake and looks away from his arm.

"It's amazing what you can do with someone's blood," he says. "Especially when it's the same as your own."

Carlos goes cold.

“Thank you, that will be all,” says Dr. Raith, when the intern secures the last of Carlos' bandages and shows no sign of doing anything else except gazing at her in adoration. He lets out a heart-wrenching sigh and starts cleaning up after himself, but Carlos grabs his wrist before he can make off with any blood samples. The intern simply abandons the whole mess and trudges for the door.

“It was simple, once I figured out the basic mechanics,” says Doppel-Carlos. “You see, using the connection between—”

There’s an ear-rending squeal. Doppel-Carlos waits impatiently as the intern shoves at the door until it starts sliding again.

“What I mean to say is that the echo of—”

The door gets stuck again.

“Oh, for the love of the Smiling God,” says Dr. Raith. She strides over and slams the door shut with one hand. There’s a heavy clanking as the locks on the other side fall into place.
His double lets out a short, mirthless laugh. "It's the *I'm Rubber and You're Glue* principle," he says. "Anything you do to me happens to you."

Carlos takes a moment as he gathers all the used medical supplies inside a circle and sets them on fire. Then he stands up as straight as he can and smiles defiantly at his double.

“What’s keeping me from casting the same spell and falling on my sword?” he says, with way more confidence than he feels.

"You mean the sword in the corner behind me?” says Doppel-Carlos, but with what Carlos realizes is also more confidence than he feels.

"Ah, I see we’ve entered the pointless posturing section of negotiations," says Dr. Raith. She glances at her wrist, then frowns and taps her watch.

"Yeah," says Carlos. He takes a step forward; his double doesn't retreat, but he shifts his weight on his feet like he’s preparing for a fight. “That one. I’m dead, you’re dead, it wipes out any enchantments connected to either of us. Boom, I win.”

Doppel-Carlos grimaces. “I’ve thought of that, actually. And maybe that’s how this will end. We’re pretty brave when we’re desperate, aren’t we?”

Now his double steps closer. They're less than a foot apart, and it's getting hard for Carlos to glare at him while trying to avoid his gaze.

"But we don’t have a death wish,” says Doppel-Carlos. “No, as long as you think there’s a chance, you’re going to keep fighting, and so am I. Where there’s hope, there’s life.” His fingers curl and uncurl, but he doesn’t move otherwise. Neither does Carlos. The tension thickens.

There's a flash of light and a shutter-click. They both look over to where Dr. Raith is holding up her cell phone.

"Now kiss," she says.

"Caroline..." says Doppel-Carlos threateningly.

"I begin to feel peckish, Carlos," she says. "Warden Ramirez, I would advise that you refrain from making any undoubtedly brave but ultimately futile last stands for the time being. We have matters of some importance to discuss with you. However, if you do not wish to cooperate..."

She flips a switch, dimming the lights and revealing one of Carlos' worst nightmares. Literally.

The wall that had been behind the vortex is made of mirrored glass. Or something stronger than glass, Carlos hopes, because on the other side are dozens of ghouls. They're a little extra crispy and missing minor pieces, like arms and legs and large circular chunks of their torso, but they're regenerating much faster than Carlos would like.

"Those are—" says Carlos. “You *did* get them from the duel in Raith Deeps.”

"Opened up a portal in the floor beneath them, right as the fireworks started," confirms Doppel-Carlos.

"And then you unleashed them on a town full of defenseless people?"
A muscle in his double's jaw twitches, but he doesn't say anything. "We found ourselves in need of a credible threat to draw you out," says Dr. Raith. "If you did not wish us to accelerate our plans, you should not have involved Dresden in this affair."

"I didn't involve him," says Carlos.

Dr. Raith shrugs. "It makes no difference. There was no point in letting them go to waste, once we determined their retrieval was largely successful. Sustainability is important to practice in any field."

Carlos isn't going to touch that statement with a ten-foot pool cue. "How did you open the vortices, anyway?" he asks. It's worth a shot.

Dr. Raith smiles, slowly. Her teeth gleam. "I was hoping you'd ask," she says.

~*~*~*~

The vortex room is massive, perfectly round and nearly fifty meters in diameter. The walls are lined with a tangle of thick black cables and there's an almost tangible crackle of energy in the air. It reminds him a little of something Julie would build, except there's not nearly enough duct tape.

It's also beautiful, which Carlos was not expecting.

There are six sets of concentric circles laid into the floor, the five smaller ones marking the points of a pentacle around the massive inner rings. All of them are composed of rusty black stone, with glimmering silver glyphs and sigils racing around each circumference before breaking off to trace the degrees of the diameter in some complex pattern.

Carlos has been searched and disarmed, but since it's apparently Take Your Nemesis to Work Day at Strex Corp, nobody complains when he breaks away from his double and Dr. Raith to inspect the closest set of rings. He frowns, and moves to the next set. They look unnervingly familiar, and not just because Doppel-Carlos still uses the same pictoglyphs he does.

"You copied some of Night Vale's wards?"

His double smirks.

"Initial tests of the vortex last March were disappointing," says Dr. Raith. "The conversion array generated adequate power, but even with added guidance from radio waves and optimal interference to Night Vale's containment wards from the sandstorm, the initial pool of subjects was only able to achieve spatial alignment."

Carlos barely refrains from pointing out that using only passingly-talented kidnapped practitioners and some genuine mad science to connect two points of space without going through the Nevernever is the opposite of disappointing. He moves to the next circle.

He crouches down to inspect it more closely; as he does, he slips his hand into his pocket. Dr. Raith had taken one look at his phone and started laughing. And then she gave it back to him.

Sure, it hadn’t even turned on, but if he can get it working now—

His phone beeps, faintly, and he withdraws his hand.

He stands up and paces around the small circle; at first glance, it seems to match the ward focus in
Mission Grove Park.

"They were not a complete waste, however, as they did gain us Carlos,” Dr. Raith continues. Carlos has a moment of disorientation until he remembers she’s talking about his double. “The mastery of water and entropic magic translate well into manipulating the Currents of Time, it seems. Even hampered by his need to maintain his particulate field—"

His double looks at her sharply.

"—The addition of his efforts allowed us to generate a time-negative stasis in which to run our tests, negating the deadline imposed by the sandstorm's end. We were finally able to create one single closed timelike curve. He suggested early 2012."

A horrible, horrible thought is blooming in the back of Carlos' mind.

Night Vale originally had three ward foci. Carlos and Luccio added a fourth.

This one has five.

He looks at the largest set of rings in the center of the room and recognizes the pattern of the streaming glyphs and sigils: pentacles within pentacles, the same display from the interface, writ large.

They’re not a copy of Night Vale's wards.

Night Vale's wards are a copy of them.

"You added another set of foci. You changed the wards," he says, horrified. "Early 2012 – you went back to when I was out of commission after getting wounded in LA. You wouldn’t have had to add much, because the regenerative and multiplicative spells would expand them as much as you liked. Lu – the other Wardens hadn't examined the interface closely in years, so it would be almost impossible for them to notice any alterations – even if they did, it'd be with my magical signature. And by the time I was back on duty, I thought it was part of the wards' natural evolution."

Carlos looks up: his double is leaning against the doorway, face impassive; Dr. Raith is staring at him with an expression that suggests she’s both undressing him with her mind and deducting points from his final grade.

“That's where you're getting all the power to fuel the vortices,” Carlos finishes. “You link these to the original wards, siphon the energy, then bounce it back and – you're using the whole town as a power source and an amplifier."

He stares at the fifth of the foci, the one Doppel-Carlos added in Night Vale… somewhere.

It’s not even complicated. There’s some delicate work, sure, but when he looks at the component parts he recognizes almost all of them: the focus of power, the manipulation of liquids, the harnessing of entropy…

If Night Vale’s wards were built across time, like Harry said, then no wonder his double could adapt them to create time vortices; the connections were all there already. No wonder the sun doesn’t set on time. No wonder they lose or gain minutes every week. No wonder clockwork disappears and grey lumps with teeth and hair take its pl— wait, no, that still makes no sense.

“Not bad,” says Doppel-Carlos. "I told you he could figure it out.”
Dr. Raith makes a noncommittal noise, continuing to watch Carlos intently.

“As soon as I got back from 2012,” says his double, “We found that in the intervening year the new wards had grown nicely – perfect for testing out the new system. It didn’t take much to exhaust the wards' power potential, but we hammered out most of the details before we had to stop. Our final round of testing seemed to go perfectly, although you’d really be the judge of that.”

Carlos’ fists clench.

“But the most important thing is…” Now his double smiles at him, almost as creepily as Dr. Raith. “The wards have had a whole year to regenerate again.”

"You nearly destroyed the wards last year!” says Carlos. "If you think an underground bunker is enough to protect you when they self-destruct—"

"We don’t," says his double. "Because it doesn't have to. Didn't you look at the interface today?"

"Of course I did," says Carlos. "As soon as the ghouls showed up."

"Notice anything different?"

"Yeah," says Carlos. "The wards getting great big holes ripped in them by your vortices—"

"—And then repairing themselves, like they're supposed to," says his double. "And to have holes ripped in them, they had to still be present in the first place. We've made improvements, Carlos. With the added power from Caroline’s converter array, the vortices don't drain the master wards anymore. And as soon as their power potential is exhausted, they shut down and start regenerating. They’re no more dangerous than anything else in—"

A lab technician bursts into the room. "Dr. Raith!" he gasps, out of breath. "There’s a seismic resonance disrupting the integrity of our containment area. The test subjects are still incorporeal and they’re trying to escape!"

"Doctor," she says pleasantly, "What have I told you about interrupting me?"

"I—"

She crooks a finger, and he staggers over to her as if pulled by an invisible line. She closes the last few feet herself. He starts to tremble.

Doppel-Carlos looks away.

So does Carlos, feeling a little sick. But he takes advantage of their distraction and pulls out his phone.

There’s no signal. Maybe it was too badly damaged by the storm wards. Maybe he’s too far underground. Or maybe Dr. Raith has developed some kind of jamming device that not even Julie’s technology can surpass. He scrolls through his phone’s menu, desperately trying to find some way to communicate, but the only thing it gives him is a set of 16 numbers.

Longitude and latitude. Great, he knows the exact location of the enemy base he’s trapped in. He puts his phone away.

Dr. Raith runs a finger along the edge of the lab technician's jaw. She breathes into his ear, "We'll discuss this later," and he collapses to the ground, moaning.
"We're still trying to work out the difficulties of synchronizing large quantities of matter with the world line when they're brought out of the closed timelike curve," she says, daintily stepping over the lab technician's twitching body.

"The incorporeal ghouls?" asks Carlos.

"We lost a plane somewhere in 2012, too," says Doppel-Carlos. "It kept phasing through different dimensions and made the curve loop back in on itself. Technically, the diameter of the vortex shouldn't matter, but once the volume of what we're trying to transport exceeds a certain amount, it reacts erratically after it goes through. We're not sure how long the effects last." He pauses, then adds casually, "Any ideas?"

"What?"

"We don't monologue our cunning plans to just anyone," says Doppel-Carlos. "We want you to join us."

Carlos snorts. "Give me one good reason," he says.

"Assuming your current percentage of casualties in the war against the Fomor remains constant, you'll have lost approximately half of your senior – and I use the term loosely – Wardens within a decade," says Dr. Raith. "Your recruitment efforts have been going well, but your attrition rates since Sicily have been unacceptably high, probably due to the lack of training time and resources combined with the frequency of combat. Each cohort of new recruits is slightly less well-prepared than the last, and more of them die more quickly as a result. Even barring an unusually catastrophic loss like Sicily, within twenty years you will no longer be able to sustain your current command structure. Within fifty, the Wardens will be all but wiped out."

"I'd like to check your sources," says Carlos, but it's a bluff: he's run the numbers himself. The exact time-frame changes, but the end result is always the same.

"That's another thing," says Dr. Raith, a small, private smile on her lovely face. "There is a great deal of information leaking from the White Council – minor, so far, but still much more than one would expect from such an august and secretive organization. There are even rumors of traitors in your ranks. How long until you are sacrificed for their gain?"

Carlos doesn't say anything.

"To the White Court, the war with the Fomor is an annoyance," she says. It's a lie, but compared to how the White Council's faring against the Fomor, not as untruthful as it might be. "It is, however, enough of a distraction that I am willing to promote this alliance. I trust you see how we all profit."

"I don't," says Carlos. "Please, explain how breaking the Sixth Law of Magic supposed to help."

"Remember LA?" asks Doppel-Carlos, which is a stupid question; Carlos has been trying to forget LA for two years. "We could have retaken the city if they hadn't pulled the reserves to cover the recon team’s retreat."

"We don't know that," says Carlos. It doesn't matter how many times he goes over the mission in his head and thinks of all the things he should have done differently. There were— "There were too many variables. And if they hadn't pulled the reserves, the entire recon team would be dead right now, including us."

His double shakes his head. "You're not getting it," he says. "What if they didn't have to choose?"
Carlos frowns.

"Pretend we're doing everything all over again," says Doppel-Carlos. He pushes away from the doorway and starts pacing. "The recon team’s been made. Our only chance is the sewers, but they’re filled with the enemy. We know that if the push falls through, we'll have to pull back to the river. And we know that unless someone covers our flank, our retreat from there through the Nevernever is going to become a death sentence.

"But this time, we have a vortex opened and go back. A day, a week, a century – it doesn't matter. We take a vacation in Tahiti and work out what exactly we need to kill those landshark heavies. We sneak into the city and plant an extra weapons cache full of the stuff we couldn’t transport right by our position. We hire a group of mercenaries to arrive just when we'll need them so they won't have to pull the reserves. We still don't know how the battle will go, but guess what? We've tripled our effectiveness, and our enemies have no idea."

Doppel-Carlos stops in front of him. "It's not about changing history," he says. "It's about creating options. It's knowing that we're never going to get backed into a corner, because there's always a hidden door. The future is what you make of it, Carlos."

Carlos looks down; his double is clutching imploringly at his arm, and he didn't even register it happening. It’s not a threatening gesture, which is more than Carlos can say for the way Dr. Raith is swaying towards him, coming up on his other side.

She extends one hand; a shiny black cube sits on her palm. The very air seems to hum with anticipation.

He takes the cube from her hand. Upon inspection, it doesn’t reflect light quite the right way.

"What's this?" he asks.

"A control module," she says, at the same time Doppel-Carlos says, "A focus."

"It allows for communication to the present, for lack of a better term, and grants a limited degree of control over the timelike curve’s destination in space-time. The initial conditions are set here, but circumstances can always change. As you might expect, creating the vortex requires… cooperation," says Dr. Raith. The pause might have been a repressed sigh, or a repressed sneer. "My converter array supplements and stabilizes the energy cascade from the wards—"

"—But I have to actually open the vortex," says Doppel-Carlos. "And it won’t fully close until I return to my starting point in the Currents of Time and shut it down myself."

"You just leave a vortex open?" says Carlos. He does not shudder. Shuddering would be a sign of weakness, and Dr. Raith’s eyes are just a little too bright to risk that.

“You misunderstand,” says Dr. Raith. “Once initiated, the timelike curve is stabilized outside our temporal laws. The vortex is simply the connection to our world line – a freestanding door, if you will. Regardless of where or when it is opened, the timelike curve is still there until its creator returns to his origin and collapses the system.”

“That can’t last long,” says Carlos. “The amount of power needed to maintain the wards—”

"It is the creation of the curve itself that requires the generous investment of energy. Without sufficient power, it simply will not form. Once the timelike curve is collapsed, its remaining potential energy reverts back to the wards, either to generate the next vortex or to help repair them until they are capable of doing so."
"But if you have leftover potential energy," says Carlos, "That implies you had a limited supply to begin with. Just because the vortices are outside our temporal laws doesn't mean they're outside the laws of thermodynamics; the curve can't stay open forever, in or out of time." Carlos narrows his eyes. "What happens to the vortices if something happens to my knockoff here before he can close them?"

There's a moment of silence.

"We don't know," says his double.

"You don't know," says Carlos.

"On the day of the sandstorm, I suggested leaving a timelike curve open – one with no vortex at either end, unconnected to the worldline. Safe, for all intents and purposes," says Dr. Raith. Her voice holds an edge of sultry disappointment and, less sexily, annoyance. "Carlos refused to test it. He was concerned that it could disrupt the Currents of Time beyond our intent, despite a complete lack of any verifiable data."

"It's one of the Laws of Magic," says Doppel-Carlos.

"Until the statement is backed by repeatable experimental observation, it's not a law of any sort," says Dr. Raith witheringly. "By my calculations, only simultaneous open vortices would cause unpredictable variations, if alterations to the past from different eras are allowed to interact with each other unchecked."

"Your calculations barely got you from one radio station to another," snaps Doppel-Carlos, and Dr. Raith's eyes blaze silver. He stiffens, like he wants to take a step back but doesn't dare. He still keeps talking. "We don't have enough hard data. If something goes wrong, we have to be able to replicate the original testing conditions in order to go back and correct any mistakes. That's not possible if we're using a purely theoretical framework."

They make it sound so delicate, time. Like it's a puzzle of cause and effect, where all the pieces can be neatly categorized, where all the initial conditions can be manipulated. Like it's a matter for logic and not chaos theory. Like it's something so real it can be controlled.

Dr. Raith's fingers flex. Then she shuts her eyes and exhales. When she opens them again, they've returned to a calm gray.

"The balance between passion and recklessness is a delicate one, and not easily learned," she says to Carlos. Her voice is low, and she leans towards him just a little. "We do not have the luxury of too many mistakes, and yet..." One graceful finger lightly strokes the cube in his hand before withdrawing. "We have so much to learn. You see why we need you."

Carlos swallows. His fingers close around the cube.

It's simple, really: he's alone, unarmed, and outmaneuvered in his enemies’ stronghold. He's discovered the source of the magic interfering with the Currents of Time, but he has no way to stop it on his own. It's a truly terrifying kind of power – unlike anything he's ever encountered before, its capabilities stretching the bounds of his imagination, a system so beautifully complex that it fills him with a dark fascination to just understand...

His double and Dr. Raith are waiting for his answer. He has no illusions as to what they'll do to him if he refuses to help.

His options are kind of limited.
He makes a decision.

“What’s the standard size of your vortex?” he asks.

“Just over ten feet,” says his double.

Carlos gives him an unimpressed look. “You maybe wanna throw me some SI units and a couple significant figures, buddy?”

“It has a diameter of 3.14 meters,” says Dr. Raith.

“We can change it, but if we’re not careful it fucks up the synchronization with local time,” says Doppel-Carlos.

“I noticed,” says Carlos. “You took out a quarter of Coyote Corners with your Mach 2 cue balls.”

“Mach 2?” says Dr. Raith. She pulls out a notebook and writes that down. “Interesting.”

Carlos asks, “When you were trying to steal the plane, did you have to make the vortex bigger?”

“No,” says Dr. Raith. "We've yet to encounter an object too massive to transport, actually. The vortex seems to respond to homogeneity."

Carlos walks around the perimeter of the room. His double trails after him. "The... timelike curve is toroidal, right?"

"...Hypertoroidal, technically," says Dr. Raith after a brief pause; there’s a faint – very faint – hint of grudging respect in her voice. "But as our perception is essentially limited to three dimensions, yes, it does closely resemble a torus. May I ask how you came to that conclusion?"

"Intuition," says Carlos, because A time vortex is still a vortex and vortices get vortex rings, you megalomaniacs is unlikely to win him any allies. "How many ghouls could you fit through before they went all incorporeal?"

"Eleven," says Dr. Raith.

"Well, there's your volume ratio," says Carlos. "Sounds like there's dimensional coefficient. Anything below that shouldn’t interfere with resynchronization."

"Yes, we know," says Dr. Raith, a touch irritably.

He picks his way across the master circle, the one in the center, and crouches down to inspect two thick double inner rings. The glyphs in the first are a simple formula to specify dates and times, carved in rusty black rock; the next ring out covers locations. They must be how Doppel-Carlos and Dr. Raith designate the vortex’s endpoints.

"Did you try moving anything that large outside here or Night Vale?" he asks. He reaches down and touches the location ring with his left hand. It hums slightly. It looks like he’s found what happened to some of Night Vale's bloodstone, at least. The rings show signs of significant modification and expansion, and when he looks closely he can still see the dark blotches of past experiments.

"No," says Doppel-Carlos. "Why?"

"The ghouls re-corporealized when I trapped them in a circle," says Carlos. "And some of them had managed it on their own. The incorporeality is probably a result of feedback from Night Vale's wards; there's enough of a – an echo, I guess, to maintain the vortex's hold on them."
"Hmm," says Dr. Raith.

"That makes sense," Doppel-Carlos says to her. "You said that when the loads were above the volume ratio, the rotation in the meridional and longitudinal directions—"

Carlos flattens his hand to the ground outside the rings. The floor is humming, too.

"Your hypothesis does seem plausible," says Dr. Raith, sounding reluctantly impressed.

The intern bursts in. "Dr. Raith!" he gasps, and falls at her feet.

Dr. Raith lets out a long-suffering sigh. "Did they not cover basic courtesy at your orientations?"

"He failed you," says the intern to the floor.

"Who?"

The intern gestures at the lab technician. "You were supposed to have been notified…"

"Of what?" she says sharply. When the intern doesn’t respond, she flips him onto his back with a sharp kick. "Of. What?"

The intern blinks at her dazedly, then scuttles to the side of the lab technician. He rifles through the fallen man’s pockets and pulls out a packet of paper.

Dr. Raith plucks it from his hand and glances at it. She does a double-take; her perfect forehead wrinkles in a frown.

"You’re good at this, you know," says Doppel-Carlos quietly. "Which isn’t a surprise, since I did it first." He pauses for a moment, then asks, "Before this, when was the last time you learned some new magic?"

"What?"

"The last time you learned something new," says his double. "A spell, a ritual, whatever."

"I picked up a new evocation from Yoshimo," says Carlos, warily. "Short-range cyclone."

"Huh," says Doppel-Carlos. "When was the last time you came up with something new?"

"Who wants to know?" says Carlos. If you didn’t count his and Luccio’s modifications to Night Vale’s wards, it was the sand screen, over a year ago.

"Don’t you miss it?" says Doppel-Carlos. "I mean, yeah, we’re awesome at combat magic. When we were an apprentice, we were awesome at a lot of other stuff, too. I know you’re tired of fighting all the time."

"It won’t be all the time," says Carlos, even though his double is… not wrong. "Once we take down the Fomor – the Black Council – maybe even the White Court – things will calm down."

Doppel-Carlos lets out a dismissive huff. "You can’t tell me you actually believe that."

Carlos smirks at him. It’s not particularly smug: he doesn’t have the energy. "Careful," he says. "That is why you’re to getting me to help. You don’t wanna make me think you’ve got some sinister ulterior motive."
His double copies his expression perfectly. "It’s not like you’ll trust me anyway."

Carlos looks down at his feet. He can feel the floor vibrating beneath them now, faintly. Like the hum of a distant generator.

“What is it?” asks Doppel-Carlos, frowning.

“I—"

Their heads snap up as one of the fluorescent lights in the ceiling blows out. A speaker nearby makes a gurgling noise.

"Flag on the moon. How did it get there?" says Cecil. The words practically vibrate with emotion.

Carlos flinches at the tone of his voice. The last time he heard Cecil sound like this – no, he doesn’t know if he’s ever heard Cecil sound like this.

"Dammit," mutters Doppel-Carlos. "I should have guessed both of us being here would overload the buffers."

"You've been blocking him?"

"No, I like listening to him go on about your perfect science and your perfect hair and your perfect life," says Doppel-Carlos bitterly.

"The mouth of a cave, a thousand feet up over jagged cliffs," says Cecil. "A man murdered. A woman's purse. These are a few of our favorite things. Yes, things; material objects, worthy of the affection we assign to them purposefully."

Carlos' fists clench so tightly he can feel his fingernails digging into his palms. There’s a sharp pain from his forearm where the cut has opened again.

"Nothing bothers some people, not even—" Cecil clears his throat. The speakers in Dr. Raith's labs are much nicer than the ones Carlos' curse normally bogarts; it practically sounds like Cecil is in the room with him. "Lights," he continues. "In the sky, above the Arby's, seeking restlessly for their former equilibrium. Touch a button, things happen. A scientist becomes—"

Something shatters in the background of the broadcast.

"...Ow," says Cecil. "I'm sorry to interrupt this paid advertisement for Febreze, listeners, but I seem to have crushed my coffee mug in my grip. Perhaps I was holding on too tightly and did not notice its imminent, inevitable destruction. Or perhaps I was wrong about its nature all along, and it was not the reliable container of all my hopes and joys and beverages that I thought it was."

“I guess he didn’t take the news well,” says Doppel-Carlos.

Carlos swallows. “No,” he says.

"You really are gone on him," says his double, shaking his head. "Pathetic."

"Right, I'm the pathetic one," says Carlos. "I bet you're picking up hot chicks left and right down here."

Doppel-Carlos' smirk turns ugly. "You might want to watch yourself," he says. "If something happens to you, I'm gonna be the only one left to look out for Cecil." He strokes his goatee contemplatively. "Do you think he'd even notice it wasn't you?"
"Shut up," says Carlos.

"Seriously, though. If I got a shave, would he even be able to tell us apart?" asks his double. "I doubt it. It's been almost two years and he never figured you out. Makes you wonder if he was actually paying attention, doesn't it?"

"Shut up," says Carlos.

"You know, I'm gonna have some free time coming up," says Doppel-Carlos. "Maybe I'll stop by, pay him a vis—"

Carlos lunges for his throat. Doppel-Carlos sidesteps and throws Carlos over his hip. Carlos lands badly, his wounded arm leaves a smear of blood across the circles' neat rings.

He flips onto his back and aims a kick at his double's knee. He misses but connects with Doppel-Carlos' shin; they both let out identical yelps. His double grabs his leg and twists. Carlos rolls hastily to keep his knee from being dislocated and tries to scramble away, but his left arm slides out from under him in a slippery streak of blood.

Doppel-Carlos stumbles back a step at the sudden lack of resistance, and Carlos hooks their left ankles. His double goes down, but Carlos didn't anticipate the air rushing from his lungs, too.

"Gentlemen," says Dr. Raith absently. She's frowning up at the ceiling.

Carlos takes a moment to register that the hum coming from the floor is louder, now. Rougher.

When he pushes himself to his knees, his head spins. His arm is bleeding in earnest.

His double yanks him to his feet. Carlos breaks his hold and manages to land a glancing blow across his right cheek — ow — before Doppel-Carlos shoves him back.

And throws sand in his eyes.

Carlos staggers backwards, loses his balance, and falls. He can feel the warmth of the bloodstone circle beneath him as he paws at his face with his good hand.

"Seriously, man?" says his double. There's a loud noise — another light blowing overhead. "How's this fight working out for you?"

Carlos squints through watery eyes just in time to see Doppel-Carlos touch the cut on his cheek; his fingers come away bloody, but the cut itself disappears almost instantly.

"Just... great," Carlos grits out, wiping his own cheek and clutching his left arm. There's blood soaking the bandages, and a generous amount smeared across the floor. Even sitting, he still feels dizzy.

A whole string of lights go out, and dust rains down from between the foam ceiling tiles. The whole room is vibrating now.

"What's going on?" calls his double, not taking his eyes off Carlos.

"Some kind of seismic pulse," says Dr. Raith. "It's hitting the complex's resonant frequencies. We need to—"

An alarm goes off. "Attention," says an electronic female voice. "The emergency alert system has been activated. Please evacuate all personnel. Attention. The emergency alert system has been
activated. Please—"

"I did not authorize an evacuation," says Dr. Raith. Her voice is calm, but her eyes turn a flat silver. "You." She points at the intern, who is dragging the lab technician (now drooling slightly) towards the door. "Go to the technology center and tell them to find out who triggered—"

The fire alarms go off, deafeningly loud in the enclosed space.

Which is why no one hears when Carlos shouts "Pas!" with every available ounce of will poured into the command.

Nothing happens, and for one horrible moment Carlos thinks he’s miscalculated, that his double wasn’t really complacent enough to make the activation words “Open” and “Close”—

Then the power surges out of him in a rush, and if he hadn’t been on the ground already he’d definitely be there now. The cables on the walls begin to spark and his hair crackles with static. The rings light up, one by one, and the bloodstone around him moans. Dozens of dates and locations blaze in dark, rusty red as his blood disappears into the thirsty rock.

In the middle of the room, a tiny white spark appears. Then another, and another, until a whole constellation of miniature suns, too bright for Carlos to look at, floats above the center of the circle.

“You fool!” screams Dr. Raith, her voice cutting through the noise of the alarms like a silver stiletto.

Doppel-Carlos says, “Dios, what have you done?” He didn’t say it loudly, but Carlos heard it anyway. There’s a look of horror on his face as he stares into the blazing nebula.

The sparks contract into pinpoints of darkness. Then they explode, expanding into swirling vortices of orange-tinged white light, flickering and merging until there’s only one massive maelstrom of energy, roaring like the ocean during a hurricane.

“I’m creating options,” says Carlos, as he tackles his double into the vortex.

Chapter End Notes

DO I NEED TO DRAW A DIAGRAM

ETA: I NEED TO DRAW A DIAGRAM
I'm sorry it's huge here's a tiny unreadable one

ETA²: QOPHIA ALSO DREW A DIAGRAM IT IS HELPFUL AND BEAUTIFUL

Cecil is of course quoting The Beast of Yucca Flats, Coleman Francis' charming documentary about life in Night Vale in the 1960s.
They’re moving quickly and not at all; light surrounds them, punctuated by flashes of darkness; nothing touches them but something is tearing out of them, unraveling, disappearing into the vortex as they are inexorably pulled away.

~*~*~*~

And then they’re falling.

A lot.

They’re falling a lot.

They pass through something, and Carlos catches the briefest glimpse of silver metal and cramped seats and terrified flight attendants, all oddly transparent, before they’re back in open air. The jet disappears into the flash of dark green light above them, leaving only Carlos and his double, in free-fall, thousands of feet above the earth.

"Fuck," says Carlos, the wind tearing his words away from him.

"Fuck!" screams his double.

Something buzzes against Carlos’ leg. His double fumbles for his own pocket and pulls out a black cube, identical to the one Dr. Raith gave Carlos.

“Caroline, get us out of here!” he shouts.

“I’m trying,” comes the icy reply – echoed from the cube in Carlos’ pocket, too. “But the confluence of vortices makes it extremely difficult to match the correct coordinates, and we’re currently experiencing some… structural difficul—” Her voice cuts off with a hissed curse.

“Caroline?” says Doppel-Carlos. “Caroline!”

There’s no answer.

"You idiot!" he screams at Carlos. “You opened all the vortices right on top of each other! We’ll have almost no control until both of us can close all the timelike curves!”

"Good!" Carlos shouts back.

“Do you have any idea what this could do to the Currents of Time?”

Carlos grins, so wide it hurts. “Time’s not real!”

His double gapes at him.

Carlos’ pocket vibrates again. He pulls out the black cube and immediately almost drops it when Doppel-Carlos crashes into him.

His double grabs his cloak and snarls, "Oh, no you don’t. You're coming with me. Pas!"
Carlos doesn't bother to respond. He just elbows Doppel-Carlos in the face.

Pain blossoms from his own nose, but he’s able to kick off his double with a foot to the chest. They go flying apart as a pool of blinding orange-white light appears below.

Carlos falls through it alone—

—*~*~*~*~

—And immediately discovers a slight complication in his plan when he exits the vortex. Specifically, the fact that he’s now traveling at near-terminal velocity, horizontally, mere feet above the earth.

Before he even has time to scream, he's hit head on by a blast of icy wind and goes tumbling out of control in what feels like arctic gale. He hits a slurry of ice, water, and dirt and skids out of control until he's helpfully stopped by a tan Corolla.

"Carlos? Carlos!

Someone’s flicking his ear. "Ow, quit it," he says, opening his eyes – oh, he might have passed out a little there, whoops.

He squints. The figure looming over him resolves itself into one Harry Dresden. There’s frost on the shoulders of his leather coat, steaming in the warm air.

"Now that is what I call a dynamic entrance," says Harry. "Are you okay?"

Carlos is lying in an icy puddle, he probably just broke his own nose, and there’s a hollow ache in his chest that’s not a purely physical sensation, but his biggest problem has nothing to do with him.

"I have an evil twin," says Carlos.

"Uh," says Harry. "You didn't hit your head, did you?"

"No," says Carlos. "Well, not much. But that's not the point. The point is that my evil twin is using time travel and is probably going to show up and do... evil shit, I don't know. I think he stole a plane. Who steals a plane?"

"Terrorists?" says Harry.

"Madre de Dios," Carlos groans. “My evil twin is a terrorist.” He covers his face with his hand, but that just makes his nose hurt more.

"Yeah, about that," says Harry. "You just fell out of one of those time vortex things. How do I know you're the real, non-terrorist Carlos?"

"Because he has the douchiest facial hair in the entire world," says Carlos.

"Your evil twin... has an evil beard."

"Yes," says Carlos.

"Of course he does," says Harry. "Hey, no one happened to take incriminating photos, did they?"

“The whampire,” says Carlos. “Also evil.”

"I left you alone for an hour," says Harry.
“I can make you cry,” mumbles Carlos. He tries to wave his finger at Harry, but he only gets one pass before his arm succumbs to the pull of gravity and flops down across his chest.

“Whatever you say, big guy,” says Harry, patting him on the shoulder. “Can you sit up?”

Harry eventually gets him propped up against the side of the Corolla and makes him eat a peanut butter and jelly sandwich while he does his best to stop Carlos’ arm from bleeding. Carlos shivers, even though the air is warm. He’s soaking wet and some ice just slid down the back of his shirt, and all he wants to know is why Harry couldn’t have thrown in with the Queen of Cotton Balls and Memory Foam Mattresses or something way less uncomfortable.

“Here,” says Harry, as soon as Carlos chokes down the last crust of bread.

He hands Carlos a snowball. Carlos stares at it in consternation.

“Your nose is still bleeding,” says Harry.

“My elbow hurts, too,” Carlos offers. “Ow!”

Harry’s smushed the hand with the snowball against the bridge of his nose, which stings right up until it goes numb.

“Oh,” says Carlos. He wipes snow from his eyes and pinches his nostrils shut. “Thags.”

Harry rolls his eyes at him, then sticks two fingers in his mouth and lets out a sharp whistle. Carlos winces.

Three Girl Scouts come running up.

"Mr. Harry!” says the oldest, one of the Cadettes. “Tamika says everyone's in place and you should report to the staging area. The librarians are four blocks to the southeast and should be heading this way soon.”

“Great,” says Harry. He cracks his knuckles. "Let's do this Chicago style."

"I'b preddy sure we're subbosed to use ACS forbattig," mumbles Carlos.

"Uh-huh," says Harry. "Carlos, why don’t you stay put and cover the rear, I hear you're good at th— Uh." He looks down at the three girls waiting expectantly for him to continue. "—Guarding stuff," he finishes lamely. He covers his chagrin by letting out another piercing whistle. Mouse comes trotting down the block.

He gives Carlos an exploratory sniff and sneezes. "Sorry," says Carlos, then asks Harry, “Where are you goig?”

"This quarter of the town is clear,” says Harry. “We need to push the librarians eastwards before the ghouls can re-group.”

“Righd,” says Carlos. “Ogay. I badaged—” He tentatively withdrawals the snowball and lets go of his nostrils. Well, at least he can cross ‘bleeding out due to sort-of-self-inflicted nose injury’ off his list of problems. “I managed to mess up their control of the vortices, but I wasn’t able to shut them down.” He shuts his eyes, which helps him feel a little more steady. “If you see one or feel it forming, get out of there. Watch out for the compulsions – they’ll try to pull you in, but the vortices are unstable and I don’t know who – or what – will be on the other side.”
“Roger that,” says Harry. “Send up a red flare if anything comes this way. Meet us at the rendezvous in half an hour.” He hesitates, then says, “I’m leaving Mouse with you, but are you going to be—”

Carlos opens his eyes. “I’m fine,” he says. He climbs to his feet and doesn’t fall over. Most of that’s because he’s leaning against the Corolla and Mouse is leaning against him, but it’s the principle of the thing. “See?”

Harry gives him an intensely skeptical look, but just says, "You two: stay."

“Hilarious,” says Carlos. He waits until the Girl Scouts turn to leave before flipping Harry the finger, but adds, “Watch your backs.”

“Same to you,” says Harry. His coat flares out in a melodramatic swirl as he turns and strides after the Girl Scouts down the slushy street.

This block is mainly businesses; their doors are shut and their windows are boarded up. Carlos hopes the owners are all safely tucked away in their bunkers.

He settles on the hood of the Corolla and takes stock. Assets: his devastating charm, the ability to see straight as long as he doesn’t have to stand up for too long, a soaking wet cloak, a cell phone that – he pulls it out – won’t even turn on, magic with no sword or staff to direct it, his *pakal* glove and thus his shield (provided nobody shoots at him too hard), and a spare magazine for a gun that’s back in Strex Corp along with his knives and all his grenades.

Allies: Harry Dresden (who is now being followed by some tentative storm clouds just from *walking down the street*), Tamika Flynn, the Night Vale Young Adult Book Club/Militia, and the librarians, unless they realize who really defaced their books.

Obstacles: ghouls both corporeal and incorporeal (currently being handled by his allies), Dr. Caroline Raith (who may be incapacitated or even dead, but with Carlos’ luck is probably just really pissed off), his double, an unknown number of time vortices forming at unknown dates leading to unknown locations, and—

"This just in." Cecil's voice comes from inside the car, slightly muffled. "We're getting reports of a massive sinkhole forming on the other side of Radon Canyon, about half a mile southeast of Strex Corp headquarters. It seems like this day has not yet run out of unpleasant revelations causing us to question all of our recent life choices."

Something warm and furry butts his hand. Carlos blinks rapidly and looks down to find Mouse staring up at him mournfully.

"Sorry," says Carlos, scratching behind Mouse's ears. He wipes his cheeks with the back of his other hand.

Mouse stiffens; several seconds later, Carlos hears the engine of an approaching car.

"It's okay, boy," he says, as Shakeena Flynn's blue Grand Caravan rounds the corner. She pulls up in front of him and rolls down the window.

“What did you do to Cecil?” she demands.

“Now’s not really the time, Shakeena,” he says.

She narrows her eyes. “Well, if you don’t feel like sharing…”
“I told him about—” Carlos waves his hand vaguely, indicating himself, the street, and the entire town.

“So why is he – oh,” says Shakeena. “Oh.”

“Pretty much,” says Carlos dully.

She shakes her head. “Tough break.” She gives him a once-over and adds, "You look like hell."

“Thanks,” says Carlos.

“I can talk to him,” she says unexpectedly. “I mean, you’re a Warden, sure, but you’re not totally awful.”

Carlos lets out a hiccup somewhere between a laugh and a sob. “Thanks, Shakeena. But do it later. Right now you shouldn’t even be on the streets—”

“Tell me about it,” she says. “But I needed to see if… anybody… happened to need back-up. And then Doctor Renegade said you’d need these.” She reaches down between the seats and comes up with a travel mug and… his staff?

“Where did she – never mind,” says Carlos. Shakeena passes them out the window to him. “What is this?” he asks, hefting the mug.

"Some kind of science smoothie. She said it would help with the jet lag – what's so funny?"

With a great deal of effort, he manages to stop giggling. "What's in it?"

Shakeena shrugs. "I don't know. Science?"

He pulls off the lid. The contents are an opaque purple and it kind of smells like grass.

Carlos gives a mental shrug and chugs the whole thing.

"How is it?" she asks.

"Not bad. Kinda chalky," he says, then burps. "Excuse me."

"You're all class," she says. "I – is that the Winter Knight?"

Carlos turns. Several blocks away, he can just make out Tamika, half-kneeling on one of Harry’s shoulders and towering over a small crowd of middle-schoolers. She’s sending orders via a pair of blue and white semaphore flags, sweeping her arms with a calm implacability. Harry is supporting her foot with his left hand and – Carlos squints – eating a sandwich with the right.

“Yes,” he says.

“Is that the Winter Knight and my daughter?"

"He's pretty good with kids," offers Carlos. "He gets really upset when we lose any."

For some reason, this fails to keep Shakeena's face from growing more horrified. “What is she doing?”

“Standing on the shoulders of giants,” says Carlos, and has to suppress another bout of giggles.
Flynn looks at him askance.

“It’s a science thing,” Carlos explains.

“You aren’t a scientist!”

“We’ve all been scientists at one point or—” He stops, because that’s Cecil’s line.

He thinks he understands his double now – not Doppel-Carlos, the other one. The one who was born in the middle of a firefight, the one whom Carlos killed with barely a second thought, the one whose first thought (besides his immediate hatred of Carlos' existence) was to run for Cecil.

*You coward! You didn’t do anything and now he’s gone! You could have lost him forever and you’re not even—*

Carlos jerks his mind away from that train of thought. He doesn’t have the *time—*

Tamika waves her arm, and she, Harry, and the rest of the book club disappear. Literally. It’s definitely not Harry's doing; that guy can barely veil… barely veil… can barely veil something obvious in a really easy place.

"I heard on the radio they're – they're using the librarians," says Shakeena. Her knuckles are white around her steering wheel.

"Yeah," Carlos manages. Whatever was in Julie's smoothie is working, unfortunately. With his head beginning to clear, it’s much easier to see how thoroughly fucked they all are.

"Do you—" She swallows. "Do you trust him?"

"I trust him with the kids," says Carlos. "If there's any way to keep your daughter safe, he'll find it."

There's shouting in the distance, followed by the sound of an explosion. The first wisps of smoke rise above the rooftops.

Shakeena's jaw clenches. Then, finally, she says, "I believe you," and takes a deep breath. "Right. I can do this. We have to let them grow up sometime."

Her eyes go unfocused for a moment, and Carlos realizes she must be using her Sight.

"They’re moving," she says distractedly. “She’s directing them into the classic pincer movement. I taught her that.” There’s a hint of pride in her voice. “And – oh, I cannot believe it.” She shudders, then comes back to herself with a shake of her head. “It couldn’t have been, what, more than two months for him? And his spirit’s already fit and trim. Mine was soft and flabby for almost a *year* after I had Tamika."

“What?” says Carlos.

“Some people have all the luck,” sighs Shakeena. “Well, at least he knows what it’s like. But if *anything* happens to my little girl that’s not the result of horrible coincidence or cruel fate…”

Mouse growls. Carlos feels something like a prickling on the back of his neck, except... everywhere.

The cube starts to vibrate in his pocket.

"Shakeena, you have to get out of here," says Carlos.
"But—"

"Go!" he says, clutching his staff. She throws the car into reverse and retreats back down the block, not even bothering to turn around.

"Chak ek'!", says Carlos; he doesn't even have the energy to sound panicky. A stream of red stars burst from the end of his staff and shoot high into the air.

Mouse leans against his leg. "It's okay, boy," he says, and wonders who's supposed to be comforting who, here.

He starts down the street, following the trail of melting slush.

The first ghoul is through the vortex almost before it fully opens.

Carlos disintegrates most of its chest with a blast of entropic force, and manages a headshot for the next ghoul, dropping it entirely. "Nabaj!" he shouts, redirecting the meltwater from Harry's mini-nor'easter to cover the whole area in front of the vortex. The first ghoul is still stumbling towards him – until Mouse lunges for the back of its right leg and hamstrings it. As it crashes to the ground, Carlos casts a wave of eye-level fire at the next two ghouls emerging from the gate; only one clutches at its face, but they both lose their footing on the sudden layer of ice now coating the street.

He hurls a fistful of green light. The entropic force splatters across their skin like acid, but doesn't fully incapacitate either of them. Carlos is fading fast.

Mouse goes for the half-blind one, savaging its hand and retreating, luring it away so Carlos can deal with the other.

"Ha' bak!"

Ice shoots up the ghoul's legs in long, jagged spikes; it falls, and more ice pins it down. Temporarily – it slowly begins to tear its limb free, an inch at a time. Carlos takes a deep breath, shouts, "Em chan!", and whips his staff back.

The bodies of the three ghouls begin to swell rapidly as all the air around them disappears.

The one with a disintegrated head stiffens and stops twitching; the hamstrung ghoul thrashes wildly, then goes still. The ghoul imprisoned in the ice rips a leg free and lurches forward, trying to escape the vacuum. Or maybe just making its way towards Carlos, shaking with the effort of holding back that much air.

Carlos looks up, desperately: storm clouds are forming, but not quickly enough to help.

The third ghoul flails blindly at the ground with a stiff, swollen hand, then goes limp.

Carlos hears a heart-rending yelp. He drops the decompression spell and gasps, "Chahuk!"

There’s a double-clap of thunder as superheated air rushes into the vacuum, and the last ghoul hesitates as much from that as it does from the weak strike of lightning from Carlos’ staff, but it’s enough to let Mouse bolt away on three paws.

An engine revs.

All three of them look down the block, where for perhaps the first and only time a minivan waits ominously.
It lurches forward, tires squealing and horn blaring, and it turns out that six cylinders can get you plenty of acceleration for two tons of excellent consumer safety ratings if you're really determined.

"Mouse, back!" shouts Carlos, then "Koj lum!"

The wave of cracking pavement sends Carlos and the ghoul flying backwards in opposite directions: Carlos skidding into a pile of slush, the ghoul right into the path of the oncoming minivan. It leaps into the air.

Shakeena slams on the emergency brake and skews the wheel.

The van executes a perfect 180° spin, slamming the back end into the ghoul's mis-timed jump. It rockets straight back through the vortex, which disappears in a flash of green.

Shakeena rolls down the window. "All about the armswing," she says gleefully. Carlos grunts and sits down right in the middle of the slush puddle. "Hey, you want me to—"

Mouse lets out a confused whine, which is all the warning they have before four shots ring out.

The van's tires collapse as Doppel-Carlos drops his veil, keeping the gun trained on the driver’s seat. Shakeena’s ducked for cover, for all the good it will do her against a Desert Eagle.

"Sorry, Flynn," says Doppel-Carlos. "You: drop the staff."

"What do you want?" asks Carlos, carefully setting his staff on the ground and putting his hands in the air. Mouse lets out a growl, and Carlos tries to look like he's relaxing in a puddle on purpose. They're not really fooling anyone.

"You," says his double shortly. "Let's go."

"Aw, you say the sweetest things," says Carlos, fluttering his eyelashes.

He's been made, but he still needs to stall for time. The longer his vortices exist, the longer they burn through Doppel-Carlos' wards and the longer they prevent him and Dr. Raith from targeting whatever points of history they want.

Carlos adds, "...Baby," for good measure.

His double's eye twitches and he shoots off the minivan’s side mirror.

"Here's your choice," says Doppel-Carlos. "You summon the next vortex and come with me to close the timelike curves, and Flynn's free to go. Or we wait for these guys here—" He nudges one of the bloated ghouls with his foot. "—To regenerate."

"If you think we're just gonna go along with you..." says Shakeena.

His double shoots out her windshields.

Carlos feels the cube vibrating against his leg, filled with potential energy.

The clouds rumble sullenly overhead. Maybe Harry will show up. Or – shit, one of the kids, expecting ghouls or librarians but getting Carlos' double, losing valuable reaction time to surprise, presenting an even more tempting target for hostage-taking—

"Fine," says Carlos through gritted teeth. He climbs to his feet as slowly as he can, trying to think of another option. He wobbles and nearly falls over; it’s not entirely for show.
“If you’re thinking about claiming you’re too drained to open a vortex, save it,” says his double. Now he points the gun at Carlos.

Carlos could refuse. He could die, maybe without even getting a chance to release his death curse. He could leave his double free to steal his blood and assume the rest of his power. Doppel-Carlos might not be able to close the vortices by himself quickly enough to put his former evil plans into action, but without Carlos to worry about, he could use the remaining vortices to come up with a new strategy and do something so irrevocable that not even the momentum of history can stop it. He could permanently alter the flow of the Currents of Time.

If Harry survives, he’d probably warn the Council. But Carlos knows what their response will be: cleansing fire, burning Night Vale and who knows how many other places right off the map.

Carlos shuts his eyes. Then he takes out the cube, gathers his will, and says, "Pas."

This time the vortex is slow enough that Carlos can watch it unfold: the initial spark of white-hot light like someone (Carlos) burning a hole in time; filaments of plasma flaring out in graceful curves; the ignition of time itself, converted to energy and light.

Carlos would never admit it, but it’s beautiful.

Doppel-Carlos frowns, because they’ve both just realized Shakeena’s brake lights are flickering in a curiously regular pattern.

“Sswa!” bellows someone in the distance.

There’s a noise like dozens of fireworks launching, and two hundred fire arrows – suitable for repelling medieval pirate attacks or predicting the future, if you’re a suitably misanthropic belomancer – arc over the buildings at the end of the block and scream towards them.

But the hex hits them first. It’s just a tiny entropy curse, practically harmless – unless it catches you off guard.

Doppel-Carlos’s shot goes wide and he trips over the body of a ghoul. Carlos wipes out in the slush, but he manages to hurl himself onto his double right before he raises his shield. Gunpowder charges detonate around them as the first hail of arrows lands.

Carlos reaches for the Desert Eagle. His double tries to wriggle away from him, screaming, “Idiot!” as arrows explode against his flickering shield.

Carlos grits his teeth and slams his double’s hand into the pavement. Doppel-Carlos drops the gun and his shield, but he grabs Carlos’ cloak and snarls “Aj chan!”

They go skidding backwards, right into the vortex.

~*~*~*~

The vortex ejects them right into the side of a dumpster. His double breaks their impact, which helps Carlos absolutely not at all.


A single arrow hisses out of the vortex before it closes. It buries itself in a pile of garbage by Carlos’ head, and there’s a breathless moment as they both watch the fuse spark towards the black powder charges.
Then it goes out, and they each let out a sigh of relief. His double shoves at him half-heartedly, just enough so he can sit up. Carlos lets his head drop until it’s resting against the dirty ground in the alleyway. It’s still probably cleaner than he is right now.

His phone starts ringing.

“What the—” says his double.

Carlos flops over onto his side, almost on top of his staff – no, his double’s; his is still lying in a puddle of ice water in April 2014. Doppel-Carlos snatches it out of reach. One of Carlos' pockets is buzzing; he flails at them until he finds the right one. His phone is playing Coldplay, because why not make the day just a little bit worse?

“You have a cell phone?” his double squawks, actually scuttling backwards a few feet.

“What, your fancy science friend didn’t hook you up?” says Carlos. He squints at the screen, but it’s blank. The ringtone orders him to tell it his secrets and ask it his questions and is monumentally unhelpful.

“Wizards can’t use cell phones! Not unless—” Doppel-Carlos stops, pales. “Madre de Dios, what have you been doing?”

“What have I been doing?” says Carlos incredulously. “Look, do you mind if I get this or what?”

“You shouldn’t be able to get anything!”

Carlos rolls his eyes and hits the answer button. “Hello?”

“Hey, Carlos. Uh, it’s me,” says Cecil. It goes right to speaker, and his double flinches at the sound.

Carlos’ heart leaps in his chest. But Cecil continues, “I’m – I’m calling you from the show,” and Carlos’ heart thunders back to earth with enough force to unleash the equivalent of 100 teratons of TNT and form an oceanic basin in the depression of its impact crater, because he already knows what Cecil’s going to say. Cecil’s not calling to talk about what happened earlier today, or apologize, or let Carlos apologize. He can’t, because it’s not that Cecil at all. It’s a Cecil from months ago, completely unaware of Carlos’ true nature, calling to warn him about…

The hair prickles on the back of his neck, and Doppel-Carlos stiffens. They’re not alone.

“Oh, hey,” says Carlos on autopilot, looking around frantically. They both climb to their feet. “Yeah, I was listening earlier, um, but I got distracted with, um…”

A librarian slithers down the wall on the opposite side of the alley.

“With work…”

It heads towards Carlos. He catches its eye; it stops. Moving slowly, Carlos holds his phone out to his double.

"What are you doing?" Doppel-Carlos hisses.

"Just take it," Carlos whispers back. "If things go bad I doesn’t want Cecil to hear this." He shoves the phone into his double's hands.

Doppel-Carlos fumbles it but quickly recovers. "Yeah, I’m…I’m standing in front of a row of... beakers," he says.
Carlos stares down the librarian. There's no soulgaze, but he can see the distinct flicker of predatory intelligence in its eyes. His own eyes are drying out from not blinking.

"...Intermittently rubbing my chin," his double is saying. "And writing down… long, complex… equations."

"Stop that!" Carlos growls out of the corner of his mouth, because this is not an appropriate time for technical terminology.

His double stumbles over the next few word, but keeps going. "And there is a... giant computer next to me, too. With several blinking buttons."

Carlos’ fists clench.

"Well, you’re obviously… hard… at work," says Cecil huskily, and hot rage sweeps through Carlos. His phone gives off a loud static crackle and he can see his double recoil from the shower of sparks in his peripheral vision.

The librarian retreats back to the alley wall, bowing its head slightly.

Then its gaze focuses on Doppel-Carlos.

"Don't you dare blink," Carlos snarls to his double.

Doppel-Carlos stammers through an answer to one of Cecil's questions, and the librarian slips closer.

"Anyway, so I heard that you announced that there’s a new wing of the library opening!" says Doppel-Carlos, his voice a little high, his words a little quick. “That’s exciting!"

The librarian pauses.

"No!" says Cecil. "No! No, that is not exciting!"

The librarian lets out a low rumble.

"Well, actually, technically, yes it is exciting," Cecil continues. "But it’s like the horrible exciting. There are escaped librarians on the loose!"

There's an odd chuffing sound from the librarian, and Carlos realizes it's laughing. It's not a nice laugh.

Doppel-Carlos takes a deep breath and straightens his shoulders. Then he gives the librarian his best charming smile. "Why would we need to be afraid of librarians?" he says. "Librarians are helpful and kind. I mean, I don’t want to generalize about all librarians, you know – certainly there are some... mean librarians... just as there are some mean people! I mean, just as there are helpful and kind librarians and people. They’re no different than any of us—"

The librarian strikes.

So does Carlos.

He doesn’t bother to aim at something that eludes human perception; he just whips Doppel-Carlos’ staff into the path directly between his double and the librarian’s former position. There’s a loud crunch and more hissing, then a flash of movement.
“Aj chan!” snaps Carlos. The librarian flies backwards, but lands feet-first on the alley wall. It glares balefully down at them. Carlos glares back.

“...I’ve never actually had to read a book,” says Doppel-Carlos, a little weakly.

“Oh!” says Cecil.

“Yeah, and thus, um,” his double continues. “...Yeah. And... I’ve never actually been inside a library. Uh, but, but I had friends in – college, who were – literature or – journalism majors, and they told me that librarians did things like... help recommend good books, and find important information related to their interests, and—”

The librarian disappears.

Carlos takes a deliberate step to the side and bumps into his double. Without speaking (to him, at least), Doppel-Carlos turns until they're back-to-back.

His double's staff is almost twisting in Carlos' grip, like he caught if off-guard when he used it and now it's angry. He switches hands and summons a ball of plasma. The alley brightens further; his double is doing the same thing.

The temperature drops.

Carlos grits his teeth, channels as much thermal energy out of the air as he can. They both let the twin plasma balls rise higher, holding them at a safe distance; heat beats down on the top of his head, but his lower back is chilled with cold sweat. His rapid breaths puff out in small white clouds.

"Anyway, I don’t see what the panic is about!” says Doppel-Carlos, with a thin edge of desperation to his voice.

There's a crash: the librarian loses its grip on the alley wall and falls in the dumpster beside them. It climbs out gracelessly, sluggish in the cold.

"Wizardssss," it hisses. "Tell usss what we want and we will yield."

"What do you want?" asks Carlos.

"Have you sssssseen Randall?"

Carlos blinks at it. "Uh, no," he says.

"Fudgesiclesssss," it says, then skitters slowly out of the alleyway on clumsy tendrils and heavy feet.

Carlos waits a moment, then slowly releases his ball of plasma. Warmth floods the alley.

He turns to tell his double to do the same.

"—Carlos, even though there are no librarians where you are, I want you to be safe. I want you to come home," says Cecil.

Doppel-Carlos is staring at the phone in his hand. He looks like he's been gut-punched. He opens his mouth, then shuts it again without saying anything.

Carlos takes his phone back.
"I'll see you soon," he says. "I promise."

"Just... be careful. I – I don't know what I'd do without you," says Cecil softly. "I love you."

The alley darkens abruptly as his double's ball of plasma goes out.

Carlos feels like he's been punched, too. There's nothing but sincerity in Cecil's voice, because this Cecil loves him with no regrets.

"I love you, too," he says, even though it's not the right time. But that doesn't matter: elsewhere in Night Vale, Carlos Prime is already distracted from detonating the Danger Meter by accident after hearing Cecil say he loves someone else, however unintentionally. Carlos Prime doesn't know. He's still terrified of saying those words himself, of saying them and making everything real, because if it's not real then he can't ruin it.

He's going to ruin it anyway, but he doesn't know that, either. He hasn't figured out that it will never be the right time for them, that no matter how much they love each other there's always going to be something between them, and that something is Carlos.

But, right now, he can give Cecil this much. "Cecil, I'll be fine," he says. "I'm a scientist. A scientist is always fine."

He hangs up. The last thing he said to his boyfriend – maybe ever, with the way this day(?) is going – was a lie. Carlos leans heavily against the dumpster and slides to the ground.

His double sits down beside him.

"Cecil sounds good," he says. Carlos looks at him sharply, but there's no malice in his face.

"Yeah," says Carlos quietly.

"I didn't..."

Carlos watches with a dull suspicion as his double pulls out the black cube, but he doesn't do anything with it: he just stares at it for a moment, then puts it back in his pocket. Carlos' feels inert – no chance of a vortex soon, he'd guess.

"I didn't want – there was no point in sending so many ghouls into Night Vale," says Doppel-Carlos. "Not when we just needed your attention. When they started recorporealizing, I followed to keep them contained. Caroline wasn't happy, but – well."

"You're a real hero," says Carlos flatly.

"I did my job," says his double. "Night Vale was fine, mostly. But..."

He pulls his knees up in front of his chest.

"I didn't mean to out you like that. That trap wasn't meant for you."

"Oh," says Carlos. He knows his double has some angle here, but he's too tired to be angry. Besides, it's not his double's fault Carlos couldn't figure out how to make Cecil trust him. That's all on Carlos.

Doppel-Carlos sits in silence, staring down at his knees. Carlos deliberately straightens his legs so they're not sitting in exactly the same position, but he doesn't say anything either.

A whisper of movement above: librarians, leaping from roof to roof. None of them descend into the
After several more minutes, just when Carlos has recovered enough that he can't use his exhaustion to keep the worst of his thoughts at bay, his double reaches over and pulls the arrow out of the ground. He squints at the runes carved in the shaft.

"Ask again later," he reads.

Carlos snorts.

"One of Sadie's?"

"She's the only belomancer I know with a hwacha," says Carlos. Then he frowns.

He didn't meet Sadie until after the sandstorm.

Which means that if his double knows her, too—

"You saved them," he says. "The practitioners imprisoned at Strex Corp."

"Yeah," says Doppel-Carlos tiredly.

"Why?"

"Caroline didn't need them anymore," says his double. "And they knew too much. She would have just killed them."

"So you saved them," says Carlos in disbelief.

"Do you think I'd just stand there and let them die?"

Carlos doesn't say anything. His double's jaw tightens.

"Well, it's good to know you think so highly of our duty," he snaps.

"Our duty?" says Carlos. "You're trying to fuck up the Currents of Time, and you're telling me about duty?"

"At least I'm trying to help!" snarls Doppel-Carlos. "All you've done is made things worse! Instead of one controlled shortcut through history, there are dozens, appearing God-knows-where to God-knows-when, so... great job with that, Warden Ramirez." He shakes his head in disbelief. "Time isn't real. What were you thinking?"

Carlos was thinking that his double and Dr. Raith had it all wrong, that they believed time was some kind of strict progression of cause to effect, held to some linear subjective viewpoint. But history has its own momentum, and the probability of a paradox in a closed timelike curve is zero, and the rest of Night Vale's wards – the ones built across the Currents of Time – were still operating full strength.

He’s almost certain that the Currents of Time are safer with a dozen undirected vortices than with any one vortex controlled by his evil twin and a megalomaniacal vampire PhD. The pressure is distributed; history has more than enough opportunities to self-correct, and the wards could mediate the worst of any collateral damage. However, he's not very enthusiastic about the White Council agreeing with him.

He's even less enthusiastic about the other possibility: that he's just flat-out wrong.
The dark magics used to violate the Laws of Magic have a corrosive effect on your soul. It's the whole reason they've executed warlocks who aren't even old enough to drive: by the time the Wardens have caught up to them, too much damage has been done to the warlocks' own psyches that they couldn't stop even if they wanted to. Which most of them don't.

But Carlos really wishes someone had gone into detail about how, exactly, your soul gets corrupted: is it cumulative, with each act leading to more temptation to repeat it? Or does it only have to happen once, planting a tiny sliver of darkness that grows unchecked until it consumes you?

Does Carlos still have a chance, or is the damage already done, so comprehensively that he can't even tell it's there anymore?

"Why are you doing this?" he asks.

"I told you that already," says his double.

"No, you didn't," says Carlos. "You told me why I should do it. But there's no way that's the first thing you thought of when you ended up in Desert Bluffs during the sandstorm. We're not that noble."

Doppel-Carlos briefly meets his eyes. “We almost died two years ago,” he says.


“Then you remember how it felt, knowing that we were about to check out in some dirty fight that no one would even remember. And you remember waking up and finding out the Wardens lost LA while we were lying there useless,” says Doppel-Carlos. “It wasn’t a heroic last stand. It wasn’t a necessary sacrifice. It was stupid and pathetic.”

“I – we – didn’t become Wardens for the glory,” says Carlos.

Doppel-Carlos snorts. “Didn’t we? You didn’t think it would impress the chicks?”

“Of course I did,” says Carlos. “I’m very impressive. But I wanted to become a Warden to make sure that someone was doing it right. I wanted to help people. I wanted to make a difference. The world is wrong, and I wanted the chance to fight back.”

“And now we can,” says Doppel-Carlos. “There’s always someone stronger than us, Carlos. Always. We're punching way above our weight, and the only reason we haven't died already is sheer dumb luck. But now – now we finally have a chance, a real chance. We can take down anyone before they even know what’s happening.”

“Yeah, but for how long?” asks Carlos. “It’s not just the dark magic screwing up your mind. Humans aren't meant to mess around with time. We can’t handle it. Just going back nine months knocked me for a loop.”

"Every mission has its risks," says his double.

“The Laws of Magic—”

“The Laws of Magic are there to protect people,” says Doppel-Carlos. “Isn’t that what you’d be doing, Warden? Protecting people? You know how much we hate how the White Council has held back, covering its own ass and letting the Wardens get chewed up one by one while innocent people suffer. And that’s assuming they all haven’t been corrupted by the Black Council already. They
made Night Vale our responsibility. We should use it.”

“The wards weren't made to work against the Currents of Time,” says Carlos. "Eventually you'll miscalculate, and they won't be able to regenerate, and you'll burn the whole town off the face of the earth.”

“It's one town versus the whole world,” says Doppel-Carlos. “We could take out the Fomor single-handedly. Destabilize the White Court. Make anyone who tries to fill the power vacuum scared of their own shadow. Hunt down the traitors on the White Council and make them pay for what they've done. We'd be a conspiracy of one, and no one would ever see us coming. We'd be heroes.”

"To who?" says Carlos. "The entire town you just betrayed?"

His double makes a sudden movement, like shrugging off a fly, or suppressing a flinch. "The White Council already betrayed them," he says. "Two hundred years ago, the second they stopped trying to make people leave."

"What are you talking about?"

"You can't play dumb with me, Carlos," says his double. "I know you figured this out years ago."

Carlos looks away.

"You don't want to believe it," says Doppel-Carlos. "I don't blame you. But I know those wards, and I'm telling you that they're not strong enough to keep all those Outsiders quiet by themselves – maybe back when there weren't so many, but not anymore. But they are strong enough to influence people. A whole town’s worth, who’ve sunk their blood and sweat and tears into the earth below them. All those suggestions, saying stay put. Don't stray. Fear the unknown. Night Vale is the only place you should be.

"Outsiders can only be summoned by humans, and they're being summoned, all right. Summoned by the thoughts of thousands of people, who only want to do one thing: go—"

"—Go home,” Carlos finishes quietly.

“Why don’t you sit there and think about what would happen if you went before the Senior Council and told them you were evacuating Night Vale,” says Doppel-Carlos. “That you were willing to risk the lives of millions, when the Outsiders rise and trigger the failsafes, for the empty freedom of thousands.”

Carlos doesn’t respond.

“I’ve seen what happens after the failsafes go critical at full strength,” says his double. “I did my research – what I could find, anyway. There are parts of Russia that just don't exist anymore, wiped almost completely from history. You can't tell me that's not swimming against the Currents of Time.

“But my way – Carlos, we're shaping the future. How can that be against the Laws of Magic, when it's the greatest act of creation of them all? We can do so much before the wards start to fail. While our enemies fall around us, we’ll have all the time we need to study them. We can make sure the damage will be contained and get everyone out. They’ll finally be free, and they’ll be safe.”

His double laughs, a short, sharp sound. “I mean, you can't tell me you'd rather spend your life babysitting a whole town full of people who can't tell the difference between supernatural horrors and street cleaners when you could be doing so much more.”
“Yes, I can,” says Carlos.

“What?”

“That’s the whole point, man,” says Carlos. “The universe sucks. It’s always going to suck, and the best that we can hope for is to stand up to whatever shit’s going down and face it head on. Order’s never going to pull ahead, and the ends are never going to justify the means. It doesn’t matter what Night Vale, or the White Council, or Caroline Raith, or anyone is doing: it only matters what we do.”

“And what’s that?”

Carlos pulls himself painfully to his feet; his double follows. “You can’t do magic you don’t believe in. There’s no suggestion in the world that could make someone love Night Vale if they didn’t want to. If everyone wants to be here so much that they can keep Outsiders here, too, it means they chose to stay of their own free will. So I’m going to respect that choice. I’m going to do my job and protect the mortals under my watch the best that I can, and you – you are going to get out of my town.”

Doppel-Carlos’ knuckles go white around his staff. Carlos gathers in his will.

There’s a piercing squeal – not from Carlos’ phone, but from both black cubes. It’s followed by something like static, except there’s an almost organic tone to the distortion that makes Carlos’ hair stand on end.

“...spontaneous formation,” comes Dr. Raith’s voice, garbled and barely audible. “—tential energy depleting... close timelike curves as soon as —cilities compromised...”

A vortex blooms besides them, its dark green light like a whirlpool into the coolest depths of some primordial swamp.

"...I didn't summon it," says Doppel-Carlos. "Did you?"

Carlos shakes his head.

“Well, fuck,” says his double.

"Why did these last two vortices form so much more slowly than the others?” asks Carlos.

Surprise flickers over his double’s face, briefly displacing suspicion.

“That means they’re running on their stored potential energy,” he says. “They can’t draw power from the wards – probably because of whatever you've done to the labs.”

“Me?” says Carlos. “Those weren’t my seismic pulses. I was with you the whole time!”

“Yeah, because it’d be totally ridiculous for you to be in two places at once,” says his double. He holds a hand out, mere inches from the rippling light. "Spontaneous formation. I thought it was a possibility, but that implies a catastrophic systems fail—"

The vortex pounces.

~*~*~*~

Carlos lands in a puddle of blood, which is rarely an auspicious beginning.

There’s a bone-white (or maybe just bone) ergonomic desk chair inches from his nose, sunk halfway
up its wheels in offal. He looks up: a horrible face, propped up on a bloodstained hand, stares back at him with eyes like a window to the void.

"Well, hey there, silly!" it says in an incongruously pleasant voice. "You didn't say you'd be dropping by today!"

"Uh," says Carlos. His head throbs. He pushes himself upright, slowly, in case sudden movements upset or enrage this... person...?

"I love your outfit," says the owner of the voice and the... eyes. Carlos looks down; he's still wearing the gore-stained clothes he had on a minute ago, now with special bonus gore. "But – oh, you've shaved!"

The vortex hums and disgorges Doppel-Carlos. His double hits the sodden carpet and rolls to his feet, one knife drawn. The vortex disappears.

"Oh, my," says the creature in the chair. "Two of you? It is my lucky day."

"Kevin?" says Doppel-Carlos. "How—" He looks around the blood-spattered room and lowers the knife. "Hello," he says stiffly.

Kevin chuckles. "Hello, Carlos. Who's your handsome friend?"

A muscle twitches in his double's jaw. "This is... also Carlos," he says.

"Hi," says Carlos faintly. The pain in his head is building; he’s hit by a wave of nausea.

Kevin somehow snags one of his hands. "Charmed," he replies. Carlos tries to pull back, but it’s too late: he’s shaking hands with Kevin, whose grip is hot and painful, not like his voice at all. His depthless gaze is horribly, horribly sincere.

"Help me," says Kevin.

"W-what?"

"Help – I—" His smile starts to slip.

"Kevin?" Doppel-Carlos' voice is oddly gentle. He kneels next to Carlos and puts a hand on Kevin's shoulder.

Kevin reaches for it, then freezes. He blinks several times, and then his lips pull back further and further until he's baring his teeth.

"Excuse me! I don't know what came over me," he says, and Carlos almost falls jerking away from physical and spiritual contact. His double lets his hand drop from Kevin's shoulder. "What brings you two gentlemen to my humble studio?"

"A... productivity seminar," says Doppel-Carlos wearily. He stands and sheathes his knife. "We're... workshopping."

"Carlos, you are a marvel," says Kevin. "Hold on, I think I – yes!" He rummages around his desk and pulls out a— "Can I tempt you with a jar of sand?

Doppel-Carlos shifts uncomfortably. "I don't—"

Kevin waggles it enticingly and says, "You're starting to look a little ragged around the edge, baby,"
and even though Carlos can barely think over the pain in his head and is literally dripping with blood, that single baby is somehow the most horrifying thing that’s happened to him in the past… well, thirty seconds, but still.

"Madre de Dios," he says, blankly.

"Don't worry, there's plenty to go around!"

Doppel-Carlos glares at him, then plasters on his best charming grin as he turns to Kevin and says, “Nah, he just ate. But I could use a snack. Baby.”

And sits on his lap.

He also swallows about half the jar of sand in one go, but Carlos’ brain is now closed for trauma for the immediate future, thanks.

A white-hot burst of agony lances through his skull, and he finds himself curled up on the floor, whimpering. He barely registers a deer blipping into existence next to him and licking his cheek.

Yum, it thinks. I like your hair.

Then it disappears again.

“Uh,” says Doppel-Carlos, jar halfway-raised to his mouth. “Did you see that?”

“Oh, the deer?” says Kevin. “They’ve been popping in and out all morning. They really like that short-range time travel.”

Doppel-Carlos sprays a mouthful of sand across the room.

“They learned to time travel today?” he chokes.

“I’m afraid that little project is getting out of hand. I wouldn’t be surprised to see a recall notice come out during the show.”

“Oh, so that’s what happened to the interns,” says Doppel-Carlos, when he’s recovered.

“Did Caroline terminate them already?” says Kevin, surprised. “She’s so efficient!”

“Uh – right,” says Doppel-Carlos. “You know her. Sorry about the mess – I think they’re attracted to the vortex’s echo.”

“Oh, that’s all right, then,” says Kevin. “I don’t mind working through lunch, and it reminds me of the day we first met.”

“Exactly,” says Doppel-Carlos, with a horrible fake smile. “Listen, we have to go. Good luck with today’s show.” He pecks Kevin on the lips and slides off his lap.

“C’mon,” he says, nudging Carlos with his foot. “Carlos. Carlos?” He snaps his fingers in Carlos’ face, then hauls him up by the arm.

“Have a wonderful day!” Kevin calls after them.

Doppel-Carlos wipes his mouth with the back of his hand, then pulls out a stick of gum and shoves it in his mouth.
He drags Carlos to the station’s exit. As soon as they step outside, Carlos’ mind just goes… blank. His instincts are screaming at him to look for potential threats, but there’s just… shapes, and smells, and sounds, all meaningless. There’s too much… He can’t…

Carlos loses track of things after that: he’s being carried, and then he’s not. His double is there. He’s lying on the ground, staring up at what maybe is the sky through a haze of agony.

Then the world snaps back into focus, a painful clarity that’s still somehow better than his vanished headache.

He’s in the middle of a circle drawn on the sidewalk. Doppel-Carlos is crouched next to him, still holding a piece of chalk. They’re behind the Desert Bluffs radio station. Desert Bluffs is…

Desert Bluffs is…

Desert Bluffs is not fine.

Carlos pushes himself upright. He can remember his last visit here. But as his mind shakes off the last grip of whatever enchantment is being blocked by the circle, he realizes that while the layout of the streets and buildings is the same, the pleasant overlay of tidy liveliness has been stripped away.

There’s a burnt-out car sitting across the street. The sidewalk around them is crusted in dark stains; the gutters overflow with a rusty sludge. A pack of raccoons is clustered around what Carlos hopes to God is a heap of abandoned clothes.

“Sorry about that,” says his double.

“What did you…”

“Blood magic,” says Doppel-Carlos. “We didn’t want you to poke around town for too long, so I just made things… seem a little more palatable. You were supposed to take a quick look around and leave. It wasn’t meant to directly override your observations when you already knew something was wrong…”

Carlos stares at the blood on his hands and remembers Kevin’s depthless, soulless stare.

“Are you all right?”

"Baby?" blurs Carlos.

Doppel-Carlos flushes. "Thanks to you, I ended up stuck in this godforsaken town with a succubus as my only ally. I had a problem and Kevin... helped me take care of it."

Carlos doesn’t say anything, but Doppel-Carlos' face twists at his expression. "Like you're much better. At least I'm not dating a guy who doesn't believe in mountains."

"At least Cecil has a soul and doesn't call me baby!"

"Well we can't all have Cecil, can we!" screams Doppel-Carlos.

He shoves Carlos' shoulder, hard. But since Carlos couldn’t even stand up to a stiff breeze right now (or stand up at all), he topples sideways and hits the concrete with a dull thud.

“Ow,” he says several seconds later.

"Just... shut up," says Doppel-Carlos, barely above a whisper. He draws his knees up to his chest.
and wraps his arms around them.

"You don't even like him," says Carlos.

Doppel-Carlos looks away. "I do a lot of things I don't like to survive," he says.

"There's got to be a better way."

Doppel-Carlos laughs bitterly. "That’s easy for you to say. They didn't use to be like this, you know. Their Smiling God... All I've found out is that there was some kind of light in the desert. And now a whole town under my watch is like this." He gestures at the car, the gutters, the raccoons. "Kevin wakes up screaming sometimes. I think that's when he remembers, even though it doesn't last. He's not... but he's nice to me, at least. I owe him that much." He looks at Carlos. "Where are you going to get the time to deal with this, huh?"

"I don't know," says Carlos. He swallows. "But I'll – I'll figure something out."

His double lets out another tired snort of laughter. "What a pair." He spits out his gum, then pulls out the rest of the pack. "All that blood, and none of it's the right kind. I can never get the taste out of my mouth." He offers Carlos a piece. It tastes like lavender.

They sit on the sidewalk and chew too loudly.

Their cubes let out dual screeches. Doppel-Carlos pulls his out: it vibrates in a jerky, stuttering rhythm.

"Finally," says Doppel-Carlos. "Brace yourself, I'll have to break the circle." He shuts his eyes.

Carlos feels power gather around him, then surge outwards as his double smudges the chalk circle and shouts, "Pas!"

Nothing happens.

"What the—" says Doppel-Carlos. "That should have synchronized the cubes. Where's the vortex?"

Carlos pulls out his own cube. It's silent now, but with a sense of watchfulness. Intent. Beneath the spell clamoring for his attention, trying to distract him from the true nature of Desert Bluffs, a memory stirs.

"The studio," says Carlos.

Doppel-Carlos lets out an irritated sigh. "Kevin's probably going to wander through again," he says. "Great."

"Kevin— Deer," says Carlos, trying to crawl backwards.

"Oh, fuck you too, dear."

"Deer!" screams Carlos, yanking his double towards him as the deer flickers again and materializes almost on top of them. The cube almost jerks out of his grip, there's a flash of orange and white light, and the vortex—

—Hiccups.

~*~*~*~

They both land in a puddle of mud. It is by far the best landing Carlos has had all day, so he's not
going to complain.

He squints at their surroundings. "Why are we in a jungle?"

Doppel-Carlos groans and pulls his head out of the mud. “What?”


His double looks around, then starts to laugh. There’s a slightly hysterical edge to it. "Welcome to Jurassic Park, asshole," he says.

Carlos stares at him. "Are you serious," he says flatly.

"We were testing the vortex’s temporal range. Turns out it’s really damn far. Besides, if you had the ability to go check out some dinosaurs, wouldn’t you?" says Doppel-Carlos, which: point. "Pretty good, huh?"

"You opened that vortex in the middle of the Rec Center," says Carlos.

"That was an accident!" says Doppel-Carlos. "We were still adjusting the triangulation—"

"Thirty-eight people died from pterodactyl-related injuries! Seven more screwed up their heads when they stuck them through the vortex walls!"

"I said it was an—" His double stops, shakes his head. "It doesn’t matter."

"It mattered to them!"

"You don't understand," says Doppel-Carlos. He gestures perfunctorily at the sky. "Here, look at that pterodactyl. It's not hurting anyone."

“That’s not a pterodactyl,” says Carlos. “It only looks tiny because it’s got to be at least a mile away.”

Doppel-Carlos frowns. “That would put its wingspan at, what, ten meters? Quetzalcoatlus, maybe?”

Carlos stares at him in horror. “You brought us to the Late Cretaceous?"

“Tyrannosaurus rex."

It advances with a gliding ballet step, far too poised and balanced for its seven tons, its taloned feet delicately impressing footsteps six inches deep wherever it settles its weight. Its delicate watchmaker’s claws are folded close to its chest; its armored flesh gleams dully, like a thousand tarnished coins. Among the coins, tiny feathers sprout and spread, so that its entire body seems to twitch and undulate, even as it creeps forward.

The jungle around them falls silent, as if someone shut a door. Doppel-Carlos gulps.
Then he dives to the side just as the T. rex lunges forward, its jaws snapping shut with brutal force mere inches from Doppel-Carlos’ head.

“Ek’!” screams Carlos. Tiny blue stars flare into novae right in front of the beast’s eyes. It rears back and roars, teeth glittering with sun.

He drags his double out of the mud and runs.

“We can’t... outrun it…” Doppel-Carlos wheezes as they duck into a stand of magnolia trees.

“Give me your cube,” gasps Carlos.

“What? No!”

“Don’t be stupid,” says Carlos, grabbing for his double’s pocket. Doppel-Carlos shoves him off, and they both overbalance and fall, disturbing a cloud of green butterflies.

The ground shakes beneath them. They look at each other, then over their shoulders.

Doppel-Carlos shoves his cube into Carlos’ hand and they scream “Pas!” in unison.

A sound of thunder—

~*~*~*~

They land in the middle of someone's picnic.

The picnic-goers are gone, fortunately – or not: their food is half-eaten, there’s no condensation on the side of their wine glasses, and there are two large piles of ash in the shadow of a large, empty plinth. There’s an iPod hooked up to some speakers; no music plays, but Cecil's voice comes through loud and clear.

"Update on the Shape formerly in Grove Park that no one acknowledges or speaks about," he says. "It seems that the City Council, in their superhuman mercy and all-seeing glory, have chosen to move the Shape directly in front of our own radio station, where it is continuing to be what can only be described as… indescribable."

Doppel-Carlos frowns. "Grove Park?" he says. "Where the hell is Grove Park?"

…That's a good question.

They're in Mission Grove Park, not far from the ward foci. Carlos doesn't remember there being any sort of statue (or indescribable Shape) there. He looks at the ash-piles, then the empty plinth.

"Cecil," he says, scrambling to his feet.

Doppel-Carlos tackles him. Carlos goes down hard, dropping both cubes.

"You can't!" shouts his double. "We have to—"

Carlos reflexively kicks out and hears a yelp of pain; he’s too busy struggling to get his breath back to react to the sharp burst of agony.

"Listeners, do you ever think about the moon?" asks Cecil. Doppel-Carlos flails at the cubes, which have started to hum. Carlos lunges for them and tries to wrestle them away. "I was sitting outside last night, looking at the moon, and I thought: 'Does anyone actually know what that thing is? Have there
been any studies on this?"

His double goes stiff, then just… disappears. Carlos collapses on his face. But the ground is crawling beneath him, like the scraping of tiny grains of sand—

He’s thrown to the side as his double consolidates right underneath him and shoulders him off. Doppel-Carlos grabs the cubes.

“IT WENT TO ASK CARLOS, BUT HE HASN’T BEEN SEEN MUCH SINCE—"

"Pas!" shouts Doppel-Carlos desperately, and the ground explodes in orange and white light.

They land in the middle of someone's picnic, in the midst of a nightmare.

The sky boils crimson. The air smells of smoke. A loud buzz echoes from the crumbled walls and burnt-out shells of abandoned buildings.

Suddenly, the clouds part; sound and colors (mostly red and black) fade, and a voice from the void booms, "BEHOLD, THE SCION OF THE DARK ORDER DESCENDS."

"Warden Ramirez, welcome to… the future," says another voice, less eldritch and much closer.

“Could you pass the potato salad?”

A man in a uniform jacket with gold braid, silver epaulets, and indescribable buttons is sitting cross-legged on the red-and-white checked blanket. His beard is handsome, yet terrible.

“BOW BEFORE ME, MORTALS, AND KNOW THAT YE – I BEG YOUR PARDON?”

“He is not Warden Ramirez,” says Carlos.

Doppel-Carlos blinks at the Traveler, says, “Am so,” and rolls over with a groan. He hands the Traveler a slightly-squashed tupperware container.

The Traveler winks at him and says, “Now, now, boys. There’s no point in fighting over little ol’ me.”

Doppel-Carlos’ face looks exactly like Carlos feels.

“What Year?”

“What are you doing here?” asks Carlos.

“Oh, you know me – well, you will, anyway,” says the Traveler. “I just love a good show!”

“You think the apocalypse is a good show?” says Doppel-Carlos incredulously.

“This is barely an apocalypse,” sniffs the Traveler. “Oh, to see the things that I have seen!”

“OH, MY MISTAKE. PLEASE FORGIVE THE INTRUSION, I AM TERRIBLY SORRY.”

They all look back: the owner of the voice disappears and the clouds crash back together, and everything returns to its previous apocalyptic hellscape equilibrium.

“Honestly, it’s like he’s never calculated dates for the prophecies before;” says the Traveler, shaking
his head. “So embarrassing.”

“No,” says Doppel-Carlos. “Embarrassing is you sitting on your ass doing nothing except making smart remarks and eating potato salad with that much mayo!”

A bright flicker of movement catches the corner of Carlos’ eye.

“It’s essential to the flavor—”

“Sure, if you’re doing it wrong!”

Carlos climbs unsteadily to his feet and stumbles after a small flutter of green.

“Why would I substitute avocado? Avocados are an abomination!”

“Well, if you hate joy so much, why didn’t you just make a German potato salad?”

Carlos rounds the corner – the remains of Fourth Street and Old Musk Drive, he thinks – and nearly walks into an enormous cactus.

“You have done wrong to this my honest friend,” says Cactus June. She’s holding something clasped loosely in her hands. “—Who, but staying on your controversy, had hoisted sail and put to sea today.”

“Sea?” says Carlos.

“Well, air,” says Cactus Joni. "I didn't have time to do a thorough reading of the compendium results, sorry."

“What?”

There’s a startled shout back around the corner.

Rapid footsteps approach. Carlos turns and raises his hand defensively – to do what, he doesn’t know; he’d be hard-pressed to defeat a tub of potato salad right now – but it’s just his double, clutching at a stitch in his side.

"Don't... do that," he wheezes. "We can't... lose each other... now!"

The Traveler saunters into view a few seconds later, hands in his pockets and a smug expression on his face.

Cactus Jocelyn extends her arms. "We'll live, and pray, and sing, and tell old tales, and laugh at—" She unfolds her hands. Gently cupped between them, glistening green and gold and black, is a butterfly, very beautiful and very out of place in this world of ash and dust.

"A butterfly?" says Doppel-Carlos, the blood draining from his face.

“Did this come with us?” asks Carlos.

She smiles.

"It wouldn't... change things, would it?" asks Doppel-Carlos.

"History has its own momentum," says Carlos. "It shouldn't make a difference..."
"One butterfly couldn't be that important," says the Traveler dismissively.

Carlos and his double both look up at the fiery sky, then at each other. Carlos carefully puts his hand over Cactus Jessie’s before the butterfly can escape. Doppel-Carlos grabs the Traveler by his epaulets and shouts, "I need an applesauce jar with holes poked in the lid!"

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It turns out that the hard part about releasing a captured butterfly back into its native environment is not travelling 67 million years into the past.

No, the hard part is making the pissed-off T. rex stay there.

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"Quit whining," says Carlos. "It barely grazed you."

"It ate my entire arm," says his double.

“And you grew it back!” says Carlos, firmly wrapping a bandage around said arm just below the shoulder. The last vortex had deposited them in someone’s upstairs hallway right in front of the bathroom; the owner of the house is downstairs on the phone, shouting at both the person on the other end and the police officer monitoring their line. Unless they returned the butterfly too late and everyone is now living in a fascist surveillance state, they’re almost certainly in Night Vale. “Don’t be so ungrateful.”

“Do you have any idea how much effort it takes to reconstitute a limb?” grumbles Doppel-Carlos. He looks awful, drawn and pale. His arm is still bleeding sluggishly; he doesn’t seem to be able to heal it fully.

“I’m sure I didn’t complain this much last March," says Carlos. Despite his best efforts he can still hear Cecil on the radio, talking about the NRA’s newest slogans. He ties off the bandage a little too sharply; they both flinch. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” says his double.

Carlos starts to undo his own bandages, but his double grabs his wrist. Carlos freezes.

His double is staring at Carlos’ wounded arm, where blood has started seeping through the bandages again. His breath is coming faster; his grip is painfully tight. Then he swallows and looks away. “You should probably… wait,” he says raggedly. “I can go outsi—”

“How are y’all getting in?” says a new voice.

They both swing around. Becky Canterbury is standing in the doorway of the bathroom, one hand over her eyes so she can’t see. The other hand is holding up her towel, which is the only thing she’s wearing.

“Uh,” says Doppel-Carlos.

Carlos’ mind seizes on Cecil’s broadcast, brings up the related memories – Becky Canterbury, plane, interviews – and suggests a plausible deflection.

“…Journalism?” Carlos offers.

Becky lets out an aggrieved sigh. “I swear, one plane appears in your upstairs hallway and everyone
just loses their damn minds. I didn’t even see it! I don’t see anything! I will never see anything!”

“We’re very sorry—” Doppel-Carlos begins.

“We?” says Becky. “There’s more of you in here? If I have to give y’all another interview, I swear by my linen curtains—”

“No, it’s just me,” Carlos interrupts.

“I’ll just… go,” says his double.

“Your journalist friends tunnelled out of the rec room,” says Becky. “I’d appreciate it if you could avoid making any other exit wounds in my home.”

“Oh, for sure,” says Carlos. “Although – if you could just tell us – I mean, tell me when the plane appeared…?”

“Out!” shouts Becky, and her towel hits Carlos in the face. His double yelps and drags him from the bathroom. Becky slams the door shut behind them; a second later, her shower turns on.

Their cubes let out identical whines, and without fanfare the vortex at the end of the hall re-opens. The color of this one flickers wildly, green to blue to orange, until it settles on the last and swirls sinisterly like a giant… evil… creamsicle.

Carlos needs a nap.

Doppel-Carlos swears under his breath.

“What?”

“The rotation has slowed,” he says. “That means the potential energy’s running out.”

“After making a 134-million-year round trip twice?” says Carlos. “Who knew?”

“Millions aren’t that hard,” says Doppel-Carlos absently. He squints at the vortex. “It’s all that sentient life and recorded history that starts making things difficult.” He frowns. “There are ghouls on the far side.”

“Wonderful,” says Carlos. “Keep them there.”

His double must be using his Sight, which: go right ahead, Carlos sure as hell isn't going to imprint the true nature of dark magic on his soul.

Anymore than he already has, at least.

"No, I mean—" says Doppel-Carlos. "I don’t recognize the location. The ghouls didn't come from there, but there's three of them, charging away from the vortex."

“Did you see any people?”

"No, but…"

Carlos groans. "We have to go after them. Will we be able to get back?"

"Guess we’ll find out," says his double, and without hesitation he walks into the vortex.
They emerge on the summit of a mountain, littered with shrubs and stands of pine. It overlooks a wide valley; far to the south, Carlos can just about make out the glimmer of water. He’s sure there are plenty of clues to orient a competent outdoorsman, but fuck if he knows where they are.

“Is this… California?” his double asks uncertainly.

“Maybe?” says Carlos. “It kind of feels like it, but—”

“—We’re by the coast and I don’t see any roads or cities,” his double finishes.

A shot rings out behind them. It’s answered by an inhuman snarl.

They both take off into the trees. They’re drawing close to the sounds of a fight when Carlos trips over an old musket; further on, there’s an abandoned leather backpack, a quiver of arrows, a recurve bow, and the twitching headless body of a ghoul. His double puts a restraining hand on his arm, and they proceed forward cautiously, giving the ghoul a wide berth.

The stand of pines gives way to scrub, where they can see a Warden fighting for her life.

Her polearm is a blur as she fends off the two remaining ghouls; the head of the headless ghoul grimaces upside down in a nearby bush, its neck stump charred and smoking. But the Warden is slowly losing ground, forced backwards towards the cliffs. Her blade flashes and an ugly hand goes flying, but its owner doesn’t even slow down.

"That's not—" says Carlos.

"It can't be—" says his double.

They look at each other, then charge forward.

Carlos' fistful of entropic force catches one ghoul in the chest; a matching blast from his double hits the second in the side. Doppel-Carlos bellows something at it in Sumerian, but the ghoul only snarls and leaps towards him.

“K’ak’!” shouts the Warden. Blue fire bursts along the blade of her weapon and she beheads the ghoul mid-flight.

The last one howls and runs straight into Carlos’ splatter of entropic force so it can take a swing at her.

The Warden dodges, but the blow still clips her and sends her sprawling. The ghoul lunges towards her.

"No!"

Doppel-Carlos leaps on its back. Sand shimmers over the ghoul’s face; it claws blindly at its eyes while Doppel-Carlos stabs it in the neck.

The ghoul bellows in pain. It reaches back and grabs Doppel-Carlos by his cloak, then hurls him to the ground with brutal force.

“Koj lum!” shouts Carlos, stamping on the ground. The wave of earth isn’t big, but it’s enough to make the ghoul stumble – right into the fiery sweep of the Warden’s naginata. The ghoul collapses, its leg gone, and she thrusts her blade through its chest.

There’s a surge of power and its eyes burst into flame.
The smoking remains of the ghoul slump to the ground.

"Salvete, Custodes," says the Warden, wiping her forehead. "Gratias vobis." She pokes the ghoul with the butt of her naginata, then calls “Quid agis?” to Doppel-Carlos.

He groans.

She crouches at his side and gently but firmly rolls him over. He blinks up at her, then starts violently and tries to scrabble away. She freezes.

“Valeo,” rasps Doppel-Carlos.

The Warden stands up and takes several steps back, watching him warily.

Doppel-Carlos’ face twists, but he quickly composes himself and pushes himself up on his good arm. After a few false starts, he gets to his feet with Carlos’ help.

The Warden transfers her naginata to her other hand and adjusts her grey cloak. Jet black hair hangs in a thick braid over one shoulder, and sharp eyes inspect them from a very familiar face.

"Grandmo—" begins Doppel-Carlos. He stops and swallows. "Konoyo Solares?"

"Ita est," says his bisabuela warily.

There’s a strange swell of energy as Doppel-Carlos raises a hand.

Carlos grabs it. "You can't kill our great-grandmother!"

Doppel-Carlos flinches like he's just been slapped. "I'm not trying to kill her, Carlos – I just helped save her! Why would I try to kill her?"

He tries to twist away, but Carlos has his arm pinned to his side. "You're the crazy time-traveler, not me!"

Doppel-Carlos bursts into hysterical laughter.

“Desinite!”

Their bisabuela – well, no, not yet – Warden Solares has her naginata levelled at them. Carlos lets go of his double and takes a step back; they both put their hands in the air.

“Qui estis?” she demands. "Omnia Custodum scio. Vos nescio."

"I'm sorry, grandm – err, Luhui," says Carlos in Chumash. Her face remains impassive but her eyes widen, though whether that’s from Carlos speaking her language or Carlos addressing her by an honorific when she looks younger than both of them, he doesn't know. "It’s hard to explain and we don’t have much time. There's trouble out in the desert."

She stares at them for another moment, then puts up her naginata. "I should have known," she answers in the same language. “Those ghouls came from nowhere, and it’s nearly impossible to get through the Nevernever on this summit. Should I summon Warden Hirata?"

It’s an innocent enough question, but Carlos is pretty sure it’s a test. He doubts she’s let go of her suspicions entirely.

"I’d recommend it," says his double. “But it’s up to you.”
She only grunts in response, though her grip relaxes on her naginata.

“The vortex—” begins Doppel-Carlos, but as if summoned by name, there’s a rush of magic and an ugly whine coming from the direction of the summit. They all turn their heads towards it.

"The desert sounds much closer than I recall," says Warden Solares drily.

"It's a long story," says his double.

"We're trying to fix it," says Carlos.

"Do better," she says.

All three of them approach the vortex cautiously, though no travelers seem to be forthcoming. Yet.

"There are more ghouls on the other side," says Warden Solares. She shakes her head slightly, trying to dispel the aftereffects of the Sight. “I suppose you have to go through?”

“Yes,” says Doppel-Carlos.

She nods. “I’ll cover you.” She disappears back into the trees and returns with the quiver and recurve bow.

"Not the gun?" asks Carlos.

She snorts. "No. I enjoy being able to aim, boy." She strings the bow with a practiced movement and nocks an arrow. It’s tipped with iron and silver: expensive, but effective against most of the supernatural threats an arrow somewhere sensitive wouldn’t stop.

"The vortex should close behind us," says Doppel-Carlos. “We should be able to hold them off until then.”

"And if it doesn't?" asks Warden Solares.

"Uh – well, we’re probably dead," says Carlos. “Your blade should be able to dissolve the enchantment, but you’ll have to watch for further attacks if we can’t regain control.”

She mutters something under her breath and draws her bow. "Good luck, Wardens."

"Thank you," says Carlos. He looks at his double. "After you."

"We'll go together," says Doppel-Carlos. They both summon a handful of entropic force, then charge into the vortex.

There’s more resistance this time: Carlos feels like he’s running uphill, through syrup. The corridor seems to be closing in on them, the sickening swirl of colors collapsing towards them—

They burst through the far end. The nearest ghoul staggers back with an arrow in its throat; the next two go down in dual bursts of green light.

“Here!” shouts his double, and tosses Carlos his staff.

Carlos cracks the first ghoul over the head, then shouts, “Chahuk!”

He doesn’t summon a bolt of lightning so much as a dribble, but it’s enough to stun the ghoul so that Doppel-Carlos can behead it with his sword.
Carlos nearly misses the movement in the corner of his eye.

“Watch out!”

The last ghoul nearly lands on top of them. It swats Carlos away almost effortlessly; he bounces off a mailbox and drops to the sidewalk, stunned.

“Close the—” His double’s shout cuts off.

“K’al,” gasps Carlos, summoning the last reserves of his will. With almost glacial slowness, the swirl of the vortex begins to slow.

Then his double lands on top of him. The final ghoul, sandblasted and missing an arm, pulls itself to its feet.

Carlos croaks, “Wake up,” but his double is a dead weight pinning him down. “Wake up. Carlos!”

The ghoul charges.

Ten feet away, its head snaps back, an arrow through its right eye. It screams and staggers forward.

The vortex closes on the second arrow, shearing off the fletching, but it still flies straight and true. The ghoul drops to its knees, arrows through both eyes, and Carlos finally feels his double move. He flings up an arm, and the thin bar of entropic force severs the ghoul’s head from its body. It falls.

Doppel-Carlos slumps back down. Onto Carlos.

“Ow,” says Carlos.

“Sorry,” mumbles his double. “Vortex?”

“Closed,” says Carlos.

“Ghouls?”

“Headless.”

“Where?” asks Doppel-Carlos, and then with what sounds like a titanic effort of will, adds, “When?”

Carlos squints. It’s nearly sunset and there’s a campaign poster for Hiram McDaniels plastered on a telephone pole. “Night Vale,” he says. “Close enough.”

His double grunts.

They both continue to lie there.

“Get off,” says Carlos, after a few minutes.

There’s an odd whispering sound. Carlos squints: at first it seems like the road is moving, but then he realizes that a layer of sand is flowing across the asphalt and towards his double.

“Ew,” he says, as his double rolls off him.

“You’re just jealous,” says Doppel-Carlos.

He’s up and stretching by the time Carlos has mustered the energy to even sit, and then insists on pulling Carlos to his feet. Carlos looks enviously at the ground while his double collects his staff and
his sword and inspects the corpses of the ghouls with a disgusting amount of energy for someone who was squashing Carlos just moments before.

Doppel-Carlos stops by the last ghoul’s head and nudges one of the arrows with his foot. "She really is a good shot," he says admiringly.

"You saved her life," says Carlos.

His double snorts. “Please, she wouldn’t have stooped to miss even if she hated me.” He yanks out one of the arrows, then walks over to the rest of the ghoul’s body and cleans it on its tattered shirt.

“No, in the past, you – you saved her life."

Doppel-Carlos looks at him, puzzled. Then his incomprehension fades into a studied blankness.

"Well, yeah," he says, looking back down at the ghoul as he scrubs at the arrowhead. "She trained us, and you know how much she's done with the Wardens over the years. History would never have survived without her; there's no way we could have avoided an alternate timeline."

"No, but—"

"Just leave it," says Doppel-Carlos. He snaps the arrowhead from the shaft with a violent crack, and there’s that strange swell of energy again. But Doppel-Carlos isn’t doing anything, he’s just—

“You cared,” says Carlos. He blinks. "You miss her."

"Of course I miss her!" snaps his double, and now the swell of energy is boiling hot, a wave of anger washing over him. "I miss all of them! It's been two years since I saw my family, and I can't—" He scrubs a hand across his face. "I can't go home until I fix this."

"Fix what?"

"Everything!"

Every car alarm on the block goes off.

"K'as!" screams Doppel-Carlos.

His anguish hits Carlos with an almost physical force, even as his hex tears outwards in a shock wave of sparks and smoke.

The sudden silence is deafening. He drops his staff and sits heavily on the curb, his head in his hands, and Carlos can feel his misery almost as well as if it were his own.

Carlos sits next to him.

"They'll never let me live," says Doppel-Carlos, his voice breaking. "It doesn’t matter that they used to trust me. An inhuman clone of you? I'm too big a security risk. At least this way, I'll have enough power that they'll think twice about coming after me. That's why I need Caroline. I – I can live with a truce."

"Raith is gonna betray you the first chance she gets," says Carlos. "...Which was about twenty minutes ago. Do you really think it's a coincidence ghouls went after our bisabuela?" He feels another surge of anger from his double, but it's not directed at him. “That trip was a distraction. Who knows what else she's done.”
"I know," says Doppel-Carlos quietly. The anger fades, replaced by a tired resolve. "I'll deal with it. I've been expecting something like this."

"Then why are you still going through with it?" says Carlos.

"Because somebody has to do something, Carlos, and I'm not letting the world go without a fight." He looks at Carlos. "I can't do it again, man. I can't die knowing I didn't make a difference. I won't."

Carlos meets his eyes, briefly. "Then come with me," he says.

His double's eyes widen with a flare of surprise and incredulity.

"I'm serious," says Carlos. "You're right, we need to do something. But think of how much more we could do together."

Doppel-Carlos shakes his head. "The White Council—"

"—Thinks I'm pretty awesome," says Carlos. "But more importantly, they're terrified of losing more Wardens, so getting another copy of me? If you help us survive the war against the Fomor they'll learn not to care where you came from."

"You can't seriously believe that'll work."

"Harry's working for the Queen of Winter and we're still holding his back pay for him," says Carlos. "You're right, they did use to trust us. We can use that. Surrender yourself to the Doom of Damocles and we can buy time for you to prove yourself. If I vouch for you, Luccio will listen."

His double snorts, but Carlos can feel his denial start to waver. "Then what?" he asks. "I just show up at home and everyone welcomes me with open arms?"

Carlos shrugs. "Why not? Milagro always said she wanted more brothers."

There’s a rush of fondness and amusement, and the corner of his mouth actually twitches. "What—" He stops.

Carlos waves him on, and with equal parts anxiety and yearning, his double asks, "What – what about Cecil?"

Cold floods through Carlos. His double flinches.

What about Cecil, indeed. Cecil probably hates him by now, and having twice as many of him won’t change that for the better.

But – if Carlos can pull off this, maybe he can pull off anything. Maybe with enough time – and what is time, anyway? It’s been crumpled and abused and erratic as the rest of Night Vale, but in the end it’s just a unit of measurement, marking the thwarted attempts of his double and Dr. Raith, and maybe – it could mark the period until Cecil forgives him. Maybe there’s a second chance.

Carlos clings to that hope, shoves the grief back into the corner of his mind. "Weirdly masturbatory threesomes," he says. "Don't front, you've thought about it too."

His double lets out a huff of laughter, optimism creeping in despite himself. "You've got it all sorted out, haven't you."

"I think that covers the most important points," says Carlos. He stands up; his double follows. "We can make the rest up as we go. What do you say?"
He holds out his hand.

Doppel-Carlos' smile fades. "You've forgotten one thing," he says, and Carlos can feel his control returning, smothering the impression of his emotions until there’s just an eerie blank silence.

"What?"

"You," says his double. "Nobody really needs me as long as they have you."

His hand blurs. Carlos instinctively throws up his shield—

—which explodes into pure agonizing energy as Doppel-Carlos stabs and unravels it with his sword.

Carlos’ mind is on fire. Dimly, he registers his double kneeling next to him.

"Carlos," he gasps. "Don't—"

"I'm sorry," says his double. Carlos ineffectually grabs at his wrist. His double's control slips – or maybe he lets it go – and Carlos knows his regret is genuine.

But regret has never been enough to stop him from doing what needs to be done.

“I won’t make you help me,” Doppel-Carlos continues. “I know you’d rather die.”

He sets his sword at Carlos’ throat.

"Ventas servitas!"

The sword clatters to the ground as a blast of icy wind hurls his double backwards. He hits the sidewalk and rolls, coming up with a palmful of entropic force, and—

—He hesitates. “Harry?”

Carlos doesn’t know what he sees, but he can tell the second his shock turns to fear.

"Yax!" screams Doppel-Carlos. He blocks Harry's blast of pure kinetic energy. His shield shatters with a horrible grating screech and he crashes into the mailbox behind him.

Harry stalks past Carlos, the cold pouring off him in waves.

Carlos' cube starts to shake. "Harry—"

“You have to listen to me,” gasps his double. He tries to get up and collapses. “I can stop this, Harry. I can stop it all. I can—"

"He’s right, you know," says Harry. A ball of blue-white flame is forming above his left hand. "The lip caterpillar has got to go."

“Just listen to me!” his double begs, scuttling backwards. “Harry, please!”

The vortex forms almost lazily, dark green swirls of light unfurling from time.

In contrast, the cue ball that flies out is moving very quickly.

It slams into the back of Harry’s head.

"Pas," gasps Doppel-Carlos. The ground drops out beneath him in a blaze of orange and white, and
he’s gone.

Harry staggers forward, arms windmilling.

Through the haze of numbness, Carlos can still hear the echoes of his double’s pleas, feel his fear. It would be so easy to just lie here.

But even if the Winter Knight turns on Carlos as well, he’d rather face that head on and lose than know that he survived by letting whatever was left of his friend fall, too.

Carlos lunges and grabs Harry’s coat as he teeters over the edge of the second vortex. Harry stumbles back and trips over him; Carlos faceplants on concrete.

A ghoul rolls through the first vortex and leaps right towards him.

“Oh, come on,” gasps Carlos.

Someone grabs him by his cloak and hauls him back. The ghoul lands where he had been laying, its fist cracking the sidewalk.

"Fiat lux spatha!" shouts Harry, swinging his staff.

The entire top half ignites with a hum of power and sizzles as it bites deep into the ghoul’s side. The ghoul howls and twists away. The light from Harry’s staff disappears, but his next blow connects with a meaty thump.

The ghoul reels back clutching the side of its face and falls into the second vortex with a cut-off howl. Then there’s nothing but the hum of the vortices and the faint smell of woodsmoke from Harry’s staff.

“Are you all right?” asks Harry, after a counterstrike of ghouls fails to appear. The cold edge to his voice is gone.

"Let there be... light saber?" says Carlos. The entire world seems to be spinning gently above him, but the ground seems sturdy enough. He thinks he’ll just stay there for a while.

"I needed something with a closer range than my blasting rod. Got the idea from a friend," says Harry. He waves his hand majestically. "May the Force be with you."

"And with your spirit," mumbles Carlos. He shuts his eyes.

Someone gently shakes his shoulder. "Don’t pass out on me just yet," says Harry. “Do we need to do anything about these vortexes?"

Carlos tries to gather his will and comes up short. “Give me a minute,” he gasps.

His eyes snap open as the first vortex whines. Another ghoul leaps out, but before Carlos can even move Harry shouts "Infriga!"

The ghoul crashes to the ground, frozen solid.

"Take your time," says Harry. "I've got it covered."

Carlos stares blankly at the sky for several moments before what he’s seeing actually registers. Storm clouds are forming overhead, though slowly. He can probably wait a few minutes as long as Harry doesn’t do anything too dramatic.
There’s a sharp whistle from the roof of a nearby building. Harry scans the area, then whistles back.

A Cadette and a Junior shimmy down a drain pipe and trot over. The latter is carrying Carlos’ staff.

Carlos pushes himself into a sitting position. Then he has to put his head between his knees and take a couple deep breaths, but still: progress is progress.

“Tamika says the extraction was a success, Mr. Harry,” says the Cadette. “And you’re wrong: it’s Catch-22.”

“I’m just saying that if you’re judging by reach and relevance, the greatest satire of the twentieth century is obviously Terry Pratchett’s Discworld series,” says Harry. “You just can’t leave them out just because fantasy is an unfairly disrespected genre. Are there any librarians left?”

“They’ve converged on Old Town Night Vale,” says the Junior. “Tamika says to report there as soon as you can. There’s one small cell of ghouls left, but they haven’t repor– recorp—”


“Yeah,” says the Junior.

“Tell her we’ll be there soon,” says Harry. “Remind everyone that I won’t witness your Advanced Perimeter Scouting badge requirements unless you avoid engaging the enemy.”

The Cadette sighs and rolls her eyes, but she says, “Yes, Mr. Harry. We will.”

“Good,” he says. The Junior hands him Carlos’ staff. He salutes them both, and they disappear back up the side of the building.

“What extraction?” asks Carlos.

"Tamika's mom busted her leg and they had to airlift her out," says Harry.

"Is everyone okay?"

"Well, they've got some very wrong ideas about the merits of certain cinematic adaptations of The Hobbit, but otherwise they're fine. I sent Mouse to meet them at the Ralph’s – some of your local minor practitioners have it fortified against all comers. Pretty thoroughly, too: I almost lost to another frozen turkey when I accidentally triggered an entropy curse."

"Any sign of Caroline Raith?"

"No," says Harry. "There's – do you hear that?"

The black cube is buzzing feebly. Carlos pulls it out with a certain amount of dread, but instead of yet another vortex appearing, or a communique from Dr. Raith, he hears, "—Meanwhile, representatives from City Council, the Sheriff's Secret Police, and a vague yet menacing government agency all disavow knowledge of the event. The Night Vale Seismological Society advised that, contrary to popular belief, ‘earthquakes do in fact just “happen” sometimes, through, like, science or something, IDK’."

"What is that?" asks Harry.

Carlos swallows and says, "A focus for summoning the vortices. A communication link, too. It must be picking up radio signals."
“I sent Intern Jeremy to consult with some scientists – or at least, people who claim they are scientists,” says Cecil. "Since we only have their word for it, and who knows how much that’s worth? Who knows what they've actually been doing here in Night Vale, besides infiltrating the town and becoming an important part of everyone's lives only to reveal that it's all part of their elaborate cover—” He stops, coughs. “That aside – Intern Jeremy reports that the scientist he interviewed stated that earthquakes are caused by shifts in tectonic plates, aggravated by people who passive-aggressively broadcast their issues over public radio instead of waiting to discuss them with the person they’re mad at like an adult. The scientist then disintegrated an empty bee skip and made Jeremy fill out a ten-page survey before releasing him to return to the radio station."

Carlos drops the cube back in his pocket, where he can pretend he doesn’t hear it.

He was wrong, before. He should know better by now than to hope for a second chance. The universe is nothing but a long slow slide into chaos, and it’s better to shore up what’s left than scrabble for higher ground. His double made his own choices and Carlos made his.

And so did Cecil.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” asks Harry.

“Yeah,” says Carlos. He attempts to stand; Harry helps him up and hands him his staff to lean on. “It’s just – it’s been a long day.”

Harry snorts. “I’ll say. So, what was your deal at the library?”

“The library?” asks Carlos. "Well, I left to close the vortex, and that’s when Raith—"

"No, after that," says Harry. "When you met us back there later."

"When I met you back there later?" repeats Carlos, mystified.

“And then you just… disappeared. You know, after all the ghouls and the killer librarians and the jet —"

“What jet— Wait, stop. Don't tell me anything else."

Harry blinks at him. "You mean—"

"Come with me if you want to live," says Carlos.

“No,” says Harry. He shakes his finger at him.

“No?”

“No, I refuse to be the Sarah Connor in this situation. There’s no way I’m making any kid of mine—Infriga!"

Another ghoul topples to the ground as a solid mass of ice. This one’s arm breaks off.

Carlos’ phone rings. Harry rounds on him and summons a fireball.

"Madre de Dios, it's just my phone," says Carlos, searching through his pockets until he finds it. It's Julie. "Hi. Hello? Julie? Can you—" Harry is staring at him like he's mortally insulted the deep dish pizza. He still hasn't dismissed the fireball.

"Will you put that away?" Carlos hisses. "Julie, can you hear me? Julie?" There's another burst of
static; then the phone beeps, his call dropped.

Carlos glares at his phone. Then he glares at Harry when Harry says, "Carlos, what did you do?"

"I'm not the one whose fireball scrambled the signal," he says sourly.

Harry shakes his head a little wildly. "You're a wizard. There's no way you should be able to use one of those things. Do you know how many delicate electronics those things have?"

"Yes, actually," says Carlos, because he always makes a point of knowing the offensive capabilities of anything that might try to murder him if it ever gained sentience.

"Human magic users—"

"Dios," says Carlos, throwing up his hands. "It's a phone, not a—"

The phone's alarm goes off, a blaring klaxon that probably is loud enough to wake the dead by standing in for a necromancer's drumbeat.

The humming from the vortices changes.

Thunder rumbles overhead.

The black cube lets out a groan of static and Dr. Raith's voice breaks through, cutting off the Financial News. "—Almost total recursion. I repeat, the closed timelike curves are collapsing in on each other and initiating—"

Harry finally lets go of the fireball. "Are they supposed to do that?"

Wisps of light are streaming from each vortex, only to be sucked into the current of their partner. Their rotation slows and the humming becomes discordant.

Carlos doesn't answer. He gathers every shred of magical power he has left and shouts, "K'al!"

He feels the spell leave him. He feels it latch on to the vortices.

He feels it fail.

The orange vortex flickers briefly, then resumes its slow spiral; the green vortex crackles and spits noxious light.

Harry grabs him by the arm and yanks him back. "Defendarius!"

The radiation from the vortex splashes against Harry's shield. So does a stray bolt of purple lightning from above. He swears.

"I can't hold this for long," he says. "We have to get out of here."

Another bolt of lightning strikes the vortex. "If I don't close them, the failsafes on the master containment wards will trigger," says Carlos.

"Failsafes," says Harry. "You mean the ones designed to take out... whatever's held prisoner here?"

"Yeah," says Carlos.

"How bad?"
"Remember Iowa? Picture that with a twelve-state diameter. And then erase the picture from history."

"Then I definitely recommend you close them," says Harry. "Quickly."

Carlos represses a burst of manic laughter. He tried to close them. He failed.

"Drop the shield and get out of here," he says.

"What about you?"

"I'm going to have go through," says Carlos.

"Which one?" asks Harry.

"No idea," says Carlos.

"To where?"

"Not a clue," says Carlos. He starts forward.

Harry grabs him by the shoulder. "Carlos, not that I don't respect your decision to valiantly fling yourself in the toilet bowl of time, but can you at least try to come up with something that's not stupidly suicidal?"

Carlos stares at him helplessly, because – what's the point? He's failed at everything. His double may have changed the wards, but Carlos is the one that's going to destroy Night Vale. He took a gamble and now everyone will pay. At least this way he'll go down swinging. The only other plan he has is to lie down in the gutter and accept his fate, and the fate of everyone he's doomed.

But Harry would never leave him behind. And—

—And Doppel-Carlos' sword is in the way. It glitters in the light of Harry's shield.

Carlos kneels and picks it up.

The hilt jerks in his hand, like his double's staff had. But the grip is still familiar, even though it feels grainy against his skin. *Just your typical non-Newtonian solid,* he thinks rather hysterically.

He tries to feed his will into the blade, but nothing happens. The sand squirms restlessly, like it's losing cohesion so far from his double.

"What are you doing?" asks Harry.

"I've got another terrible idea," says Carlos, as he tears off his bandages.

He lays the flat of the blade against his arm, directly on top of his still-bleeding wound.

The sword turns red.

Sand crawls against his skin – sand crawls *in* his skin – the roaring of sand fills his ears until the pounding of his heartbeat drowns it, and all other sensation, out——

Power rushes out of him, more than he thought he had left. *So that's it,* he thinks regretfully, and waits for the void to claim him.
Instead of silence, he hears singing.

Sensation returns. The song fades to a strong hum.

Carlos is so weak that if you stole his staff he would probably fall over, but he can't stop grinning. The sword hilt is solid in his hand; the blade blazes with power and silver-white light.

"And you made fun of my lightsaber," says Harry, shaking his head.

"Yours looked more like... a staff-shaped flaming sword," says Carlos. He takes a few practice swings: the balance is identical, and so is the chorus of leashed magic. "You've been hanging out with way too many angels."

Harry doesn't answer. Carlos looks over at him: he's got a hand clapped over his mouth, and his eyes are full of tears.

"Oh, sorry," he says, belatedly.

Harry lets out a hiccuping sob. "Dammit, Ramirez!"

"Look on the bright side," says Carlos. "If this doesn't work, I definitely won't be able to tell anyone I made you cry twice."

Harry glares at him, the effect ruined by his sniffling. "Come over here and we'll talk about crying. I'll have to drop the shield and re-angle it above us. Are you ready?"

Carlos stops leaning against his staff and takes a few tentative steps. The sun lurks just above the horizon: it doesn't appear to have moved since the last time he saw it. There's a faint tension in the air, like the world holding its breath.

He draws in his own breath, counts to ten, and lets it out again. "Yeah. Look, if I don't... Just... tell everyone I'm sorry, okay?"

"Man, I hope you don't die," says Harry. "Those are horrible last words."

"So are those," says Carlos. "Fine. 'Tis a far, far better thing, blah blah, et cetera." He salutes him with his sword.

"Hold my beer and watch this," says Harry, and drops his hand.

His shield disappears.

Carlos charges towards the vortices.

Chapter End Notes

- I hope you enjoyed that large chunk of Bradbury I borrowed.

- I saw the live show of "The Librarian" in March 2014, which reported that Carlos was definitely in Night Vale and not in any desert otherworlds that might be lying around. The recorded version of the live show is obviously somewhat different. I can only conclude that someone altered the timeline and changed history.
- A list of locations and dates:

A time vortex; ????? ??, ??
16,825 ft above Night Vale; April 22, 2014 (morning)
Night Vale; April 22, 2014 (afternoon)
Night Vale; October ??, 2013 ("The Librarian")
Desert Bluffs; December ??, 2013 ("The Debate")
Meade County, SD; ????? ??, 67 Ma
Night Vale; August 15, 2012 ("The Shape in Grove Park")
Night Vale; ????? ??, 2052
Meade County, SD; ????? ??, 67 Ma (again)
Night Vale; June 15, 2013 ("One Year Later")
Ventura County, CA; ????? ??, 1795
Night Vale: April 22, 2014 (just before sunset)

References (Cont'd)


Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"And now, the weather!"

Chapter End Notes

>:D
Carlos wakes up reluctantly. The details of his dream are slipping away—something about another Carlos (except this one wasn't trying to kill anyone and had gotten a shave), and—

—And Cecil. Stroking his hair and talking about science, like he used to.

It was a very nice dream.

...He can feel someone staring at him. No, multiple someones.

He opens his eyes to a ring of strange, eager faces peering down at him, scrutinizing him as narrowly as someone with a microscope might scrutinize the transient creatures that swarm and multiply in a drop of water and then swear when their behavior invalidates months of research.

"Uh, hi," he says.

"Hi, Carlos!" they chorus. Roger Singh flaps a freshly-severed spine at him, but in a friendly way.

He's in Night Vale. By the abandoned gas station on Oxford Street, actually, except the station is no longer abandoned. It's filled with an ominous blackness and wrapped neatly by a long line of interesting bystanders.

There's an odd chalky taste in his mouth; his head doesn't hurt, precisely, but it buzzes like he's been using caffeine to replace sleep.

Despite just waking up, he could really use a nap.

Carlos sits up to take stock and blinks in surprise. Underneath his sparkling white lab coat, he's wearing an entirely different set of clothes, ones he's never seen before but which somehow fit perfectly. The rest of him is clean, too. His cloak has been folded up and put under his head for a pillow, and there's a duffel bag sitting next to him containing his sword, his staff, his phone, a few basic magical supplies, duct tape, a strange metal container that turns out to be a cookie tin (complete with two Snickerdoodles), a strip of battery-powered blinky lights, and a rubber duck.

For one wild second, he thinks that it's all been a dream, that his double (or he himself) isn't trying to tear time apart, that he hasn't ruined his... everything with Cecil.

Then his arm twinges. He pushes up the sleeve of his lab coat: someone's rebandaged the gash on his arm from his fight with Doppel-Carlos.

His tries to ignore the way his heart sinks as climbs unsteadily to his feet. "So... what brings you all here?" he asks, brushing off his lab coat. His hand catches on something; he reaches into his pocket and pulls out the black cube. It's completely inert.

Whenever he is, he's stuck here for a while.

"We're getting condos!" says Janice Rio, from down the street. "Are you getting one, too? It was pretty smart to camp out for a spot in line."

"Something like that," he sighs.
His brand-new Danger Meter keeps making upsetting squeaking noises whenever he scans the other people in line. That makes sense when they are, for example, the Glow Cloud ("Kneel in obeisance," whispers Leann Hart, fingers tightening around her hatchet) but is distressingly unhelpful when it comes to Samantha Guzman, or Janice Rio from down the street, or even Roger Singh and his spine.

It's worse because Carlos knows something happened to them — will happen to them. Something involving the condos. He feels like he's in a murder investigation, except the victims are still alive and chatting happily with him, and besides figuring out what the crime is he has to figure why he didn't — won't stop it.

He peers inside the windows of the gas station. It's filled with swirling darkness, but there are tiny spots of light, like—

"—like distant, dying stars," says Cecil from the cube in his lab coat pocket. Carlos flinches.

He wishes he couldn't hear Cecil's voice. He wishes he could never stop hearing Cecil's voice. But most of all, he wishes he could hear Cecil's voice in person, telling him that it's all right, that there's something Carlos can do to make up for it all, that Cecil forgives him.

Carlos doesn't want to think about how much he'd have to change the past for that to happen.

But... Cecil doesn't know any of that yet. Carlos can still talk to him and Cecil won't be anything but happy to hear from him. He has his phone right here, in his bag. Carlos Prime is stuck somewhere in the Nevernever between yesterday and tomorrow. Carlos can call Cecil and tell him — tell him—

He can tell him more half-truths and deceptions. His gut twists at lying to Cecil yet again, now that he knows how Cecil feels about it. But Carlos has made his choices already: he didn't tell Cecil who and what he was, and he opened all those vortices. The normal human perception of time may not exist in Night Vale anymore, but Carlos isn't going to swim against its currents and upset whatever parts of it do work just to make himself feel better.

"And... all right," says Cecil. "I know this is out of nowhere, but... at what point in a relationship is it normal to think about living together?"

There's one more thing: Cecil’s told him how he remembers this day going. Carlos can’t recall all the details, but he’s had his own words from Cecil’s recording memorized for months and knows the only thing he confessed was his love. And for a while, that was enough. He can’t — won’t — take those memories from Cecil.

His rubber duck squeals. He looks up and sees Roger Singh round the corner of the building.

"Is that a condo?!" says Roger, pointing at the Danger Meter. Carlos ducks away from the flailing spine.

"No," says Carlos. "And... I wouldn't stand so close to the gas station, Roger. It's—"

Screaming, from down the street. They both whip their heads around, but it's just (just) the potential condo owners fleeing a rain of rainbow trout from the Glow Cloud.

"ALL HAIL THE GLOW CONDOS," shouts Roger, running towards them.

A stray fish bounces off the gas station window. The darkness inside retreats a little, like it too has a sense of smell.
Carlos starts to laugh a little wildly. He doesn't know why he was ever surprised things would end this way; his entire relationship with Cecil has been marked by personal joy counterbalanced with the tragedy that is Night Vale. Because this is what he's been fighting to protect: a town that's ankle-deep in dead fish, full of people who regard severed spines as potential currency, congregating round something new and unknown that, extrapolating from all past performances, is probably going to try to kill them. But amazingly, they still want to find out what condos are. And even though all he wants to do is lay down regardless of the fish and and wait for unconsciousness to claim him, Carlos is instead going to do his best, today or whenever, to make sure they still have that chance.

"You know, I just wish he would communicate more directly sometimes," says Cecil. "But... scientists don't communicate directly. Everybody knows that."

Carlos pulls out his phone. He doesn't know what he'll say, but he has to say something. If this is the last time they talk before a vortex returns for him, well: there are worse conversations to have than a promise to build a future together.

~*~*~*~

Carlos knows what the condos are now.

The condos are perfect.

Carlos is so light he feels like he's floating. In front of him are endless rows of Erlenmeyer flasks. Each one holds a liquid, and all of the liquids are bubbling. Before each one is a notebook of numbers, and above is a dial with more numbers. Carlos can see all of this, and he understands.

It's science. Not the messy kind full of trial and error and wrangles over funding and skewed results from human prejudices and knowledge born of hard work that most people will never appreciate and wisdom that is always increasing, shifting, changing as minds stretch and poke and prod and never, ever stop.

No, this is perfect science. There are puzzles in those flasks and notebooks and dials, and Carlos knows – knows – that the answers are inside him, ready to be expressed. He won't even have to think about it. The answers will be perfect, too, solid and unchanging. It doesn't matter that he wasn't a scientist before – now he can be, and he'll be a perfect scientist. The kind Cecil thought he was. It won't be a lie anymore.

He reaches for a flask.

And stops.

Take it, says the condo. The time is perfect.

Time. It all comes back to time, in the end. Time is definitely not perfect in Night Vale, which both is and isn't Carlos' fault. Wizardry hasn't discovered all of time's mysteries. Neither has science.

If Carlos becomes the perfect scientist, who's going to make sure time works perfectly for Cecil? Or not even perfectly – who's going to make sure it works at all? Who's going to look at the chaotic mess of the past and make sure it continues into the chaotic mess of the future? Who's going to discover the secrets of time, piece by imperfect piece, a puzzle that will never fully be solved, so they can protect both it and humankind?

His hand hovers above the flask, the notebook, the dials. He can almost see them shrinking away from him, but he doesn't reach out.
Then he realizes they're not shrinking, they're receding. They're sitting in perfect parallels, lines that stretch into infinity and never meet. They're disappearing into the distance as he's pulled away.

He lets them go.

~*~*~*~

He's not floating anymore, but he's still moving. There's an arm across his back and another under his knees. His head is resting against someone's shoulder.

"Cecil?" he asks, and the arms around him tighten, cradling him closer.

"It's all right, Carlos, I think we're almost—"

He cuts off in a yelp, because there is a feeling of suction, and then freedom, and then free-fall. Carlos makes a desperate grab for him, and they crash to the ground in a flash of green light.

They crawl out of the cloud of white dust, coughing and heaving, back into the world.

"Carlos, are you all right?" Someone's patting his face and arms and chest, checking him for injuries, and it looks and sounds like Cecil, but that can't be right, because Carlos gave him up, Carlos let him slip away—

His fingers close around a familiar wrist, and the familiar voice is still calling his name, and the familiar eyes are still looking into his.

"Cecil," he says, his voice cracking. "You came to get me? Even after—"

He stops, because memory just returned, and with it heartache and regret. But then Cecil says, "Of course I came to get you," and even though it's not the right answer at the right time, Carlos pulls Cecil close, rests their foreheads together, listens as they wheeze the same disintegrated vacant lot dust.

Cecil pulls back after a few moments and futilely brushes at Carlos' hair.

"What happened?" asks Carlos.

"Uh," says Cecil, going a little red beneath the white powder. "I was carrying you out, and I tripped. Good thing this hole full of nearly-frictionless dust was here to break our fall..."

"But the condo—"

"It was perfect," says Cecil, his eyes going distant. "I saw great distances, and shrouded figures on the beach of a bottomless ocean, and a dark planet lit by no sun, and..." He sighs. "Mountains. And even they were perfect." He meets Carlos' eyes. "But I didn't want perfect. I wanted you, imperfections and all."

"Oh," says Carlos, in a small voice.

"So I got you and left," says Cecil, like it was nothing hard. "But, Carlos – I have to ask. What were you doing in there?"

Carlos belatedly remembers the purpose of his investigations. The results are conclusive: touching a condo was really stupid. "Well," he says.

"Oh, hold on," says Cecil. He pulls his microphone out of his pocket and knocks it against the heel
of his palm. A stream of dust falls out. "Yep, still working. You don't mind, do you?"

"No, I—"

"Into the mic, please!"

Cecil's voice sounds steady and upbeat, but the microphone is trembling ever so slightly in his grip. Carlos wraps Cecil's hand in his own, leans forward, and repeats, "No, I don't mind," into the mic.

And as he explains himself – part of himself – he smiles. It's not a happy smile, but it's still genuine, because when Carlos found the condo, he had been thinking about the series of ongoing actions that they perceive as the present, and the amassing of memories that they treat as the living record of the past, and the hopes and dreams and assumptions that they project as the future. He had been thinking about time. And he had been thinking about space. And now he's thinking about how lucky he was to be able to share them with Cecil, even for a little while. Cecil who pulled him out of a condo no one else could escape and then flubbed the dismount, Cecil who loves him despite the imperfections that will one day push them apart, Cecil who just agreed to move in with him with a flustered "That would be neat!" that is nevertheless meant with complete and total sincerity.

Because Carlos is trying to find his way home, and when he stumbled on the road, Cecil found him instead.

"But somewhere else, okay?" says Cecil. "A duplex, or an apartment... I don't think a condo."

"No, not a condo," Carlos agrees, rubbing the back of his neck.

He looks at the other condos; their featureless black surfaces are fading as they sink into the earth. The people inside are frozen, unchanging, perfect. For all that time doesn't work in Night Vale, probably because of Carlos, it's almost certainly too late for them.

But.

"Cecil, I need to—"

"Science, right," says Cecil with an indulgent head-shake. "I should get back, too, before the Faceless Old Woman rearranges the studio." He pats the back of Carlos' hand; Carlos hadn't even realized it was still wrapped around Cecil's. He can't bring himself to let go.

"Just... be careful this time, please?" asks Cecil, once they both climb to their feet.

"I will," says Carlos. "Look, I'm going to tell you something, and – and try to remember it, okay? No matter what I – no matter what happens."

"Of course," says Cecil.

With an almost painful effort, Carlos releases his hand. "Cecil—"

_I'm sorry_, he wants to say. _I don't want to go. I know you're not perfect either, but I wouldn't change that even if it meant that was the only way you'd forgive me._

He tells him he loves him a variety of poetic science metaphors, three different languages, and $9x - 7i > 3(3x - 7u)$, solve for $i$. Then he kisses him goodbye.

~*~*~*~

Julie’s door is closed, but Carlos can hear someone moving around inside. “Julie?”
“I’m sorry, I don’t have office hours for morons who poke dangerous things that are clearly not condos!” she shouts.

He leans against the door and slides down until he’s sitting on the ground. “Sorry,” he says.

Two floors below him is a note to his past self. It was one of the hardest things he’s ever written, even though he already knew what the words were supposed to be. It was leaving everything else out that was the problem.

Memories from the condo resurface, tinged with shame from his failure to rescue anyone. He’s too tired to fight them off. He redirects them instead, shutting his eyes and focusing on Julie as she angrily mutters equations to herself on the other side of the door. Something about electrostatic propulsion, he thinks.

It would be nice to actually be a scientist. If he was, he’d still be able to help people (at least as effectively – or ineffectively – as he does now). He’d still be able to deal with Night Vale. He’d still be someone Cecil trusted. And when his time came, he’d be able to look back on his life and mark it in facts learned and theories taught and discoveries made, not in sentences delivered and casualties suffered and matter destroyed.

Admittedly, the condo was trying to lure him in and absorb him in a kind of eternal, immutable embrace, but it had a point.

Julie yanks the door open and he topples backwards.

“What makes you think—” She frowns. “Your crazy eyes are back.”

"Sorry?" he offers.

"Your hair is longer, too," she says. Her eyes widen. "Wait. Is this really you?"

"It's really me," says Carlos. "Just... future me."

"Code word," she demands.

Carlos sighs. "Hasta la vista, baby."

She pulls him into a sitting position and says, "We need to get you to Lab One. I have so many tests to run!"

The laptop on her desk lets out an electronic whine, escalating in pitch.

“Listeners, I send you now back out into the night,” says Cecil. “And it’s dangerous out there, and it’s lonely, and—”

Her desk lamp explodes in a shower of sparks; the computer monitor goes black, garbling the rest of the broadcast.

Not enough to keep Carlos from hearing it, of course.

Julie is staring at him. "Are you all right?" she asks.

Carlos scrubs at his eyes. "I'm fine," he says shortly.

"Is Cecil all right?"
"He's fine, too." Carlos attempts to stand; Julie eventually takes pity on him and hauls his arm over her shoulder.

His head spins. He tries to focus.

"Did you find any vortices today?" he asks.

"No," she says. "Wait – how did you get here?"

"No idea," he says. "I need something to write on."

"Downstairs," she says.

"But—"

"Downstairs," she repeats. "You can get scanned and write at the same time. And you promised me a survey, McFly. It doesn't matter if you look like death warmed over."

She only has to grab the back of his cloak to keep him from falling down the stairs once.

Her survey is forty pages long; he picks five at random and fills them out as they wait for the coffee to brew.

"Don't tell me about any of this later," he says, answering 'Describe your current condition'. ('QUEASY AND FULL OF EMOTIONAL TURMOIL.') "I'll figure some stuff out, and that's okay, but – no details."

"Is this to protect causality?" asks Julie. "Or is this to protect your sorry ass from condo-related mockery?"

"I'm a multi-tasker," says Carlos. He finishes his rough sketch of the tyrannosaur.

"Then I hope you get a chance to multi-task your way back into Strex Corp," says Julie. "They're up to someth— Don't giggle, Carlos, it's undignified. You are horrible at this whole spoilers business, has anyone ever told you?"

"Sorry," says Carlos, after he gets himself under control. "What do you mean about Strex Corp?"

"I heard a lot of weird chatter today from sources that are definitely not unsecured Strex networks," says Julie. "And then Dr. Strangelove swung by to complain about how she was surrounded by incompetents. With a lot of leading rhetorical questions and significant eyebrow waggles. I figured it might have something to do with the condos, but..." Julie chews her lip. "There wasn't anything I could have done, was there?"

There's the barest hint of uncertainty in her voice, which from Julie is like an entire textbook on trying to determine a particle's position and momentum.

"It's not your fight, Julie," says Carlos.

She scowls at him. "That wasn't what I asked," she says. She picks up a toolbox and slams it on the lab table.

"She's trying to get to you," says Carlos. "She'll show you a problem, then try to convince you to help her solve it. But in the end it won't help anyone except her."

"Yeah," says Julie. "I know." She wrestles one of her machines into position. "On a scale of Not
Really to Extremely, how unethical would it be to weaponize grad students to keep her away?"

Carlos squints at her. "What?"

"Kate and her twu wuv," says Julie. "I mean, she's almost a postdoc..."

"Not unless there's no other way," says Carlos. "Kate would still be in— What?"

Julie is frowning at him. "I just suggested recklessly endangering one of the grad students and you didn't even yell at me," she says. "How bad are things?"

Carlos looks down at his survey and doesn't answer.

Julie swears under her breath and starts flipping switches with more violence than is probably necessary.

The coffee maker clicks off. She pushes Carlos back into his seat when he tries to stand up and fetches three different mugs. She fills them to the brim. "Breakfast of champions," she says, sliding them all over.

"It's night time," says Carlos. "I mean, probably."

She gives him a half-hearted smirk and returns to her machine. "All right, I'm firing this up. Let me know if you feel any tingling or burning sensations, okay?"

"If the burning sensation is actual fire, I'm leaving," says Carlos, but it's an empty threat. It's not like he has anywhere else to go.

The machine hums. Julie's eyebrows raise. "Did you know you're slightly radioactive?" she asks.

"Slightly?"

"You're not a hazard to others. And I don’t think you absorbed enough to cause Acute Radiation Syndrome," says Julie. "...Probably. Still, you should probably top up on potassium iodide and antibiotics and blood transfusions."

"You gave me a smoothie already," says Carlos.

"Did I?" asks Julie. "Great, that was probably the loading dose. Hold on a sec."

She rummages around in a cabinet and pulls out a small bottle with a stopper. She adds a few drops to one of the mugs.

"Drink that," she says. "It's probably too soon for more antibiotics, but what's your blood type?"

"You're not that kind of doctor, Julie," says Carlos wearily, though he does drink the coffee.

"Ugh, fine," she says. "But promise me you’ll go to one."

That assumes he’ll survive long enough to make it to the clinic, but Julie doesn’t need to know about that. "For sure," says Carlos.

There's a *pop*! and a small plume of smoke from one of Julie's machines. She swears and starts unscrewing the metal plates.

He methodically works his way through the rest of the mugs as he tries to summarize the events of
the past day – the past several hours – uh – the relevant actions of himself and his double and Harry and Dr. Raith and Strex Corp and the general Night Vale citizenry for whatever poor suckers have to deal with this mess if he doesn't make it back.

His timeline has an x- and y-axis.

When he's finished, he scans over the report, checking that the most relevant details are 1) present and 2) legible. He has no idea whether any of it actually makes sense, but it will have to do. He folds the report up and sticks it in an envelope.

"What's today's date?" he asks.

"My date or your date?" she replies.

"...Oh," says Carlos. "Uh."

He leaves the envelope blank and pushes it towards her. "Here," he says. "If anything happens to me, make sure the right people get this."

"Please, be more vague," says Julie. "When?"

"You'll know when," he says, and she glares at him. "I—"

The cube starts vibrating.

"—I have to go," he says.

Julie drops her roll of duct tape. "What?"

"I may be some time," says Carlos.

"Are you kidding me?"

"I have to, Julie," he says, standing up. He has to steady himself against the lab table. She shuts her gaping mouth and ducks out of sight to retrieve the duct tape. "Go where?" comes the slightly muffled question.

He smiles tiredly. "Back to the fu—"

He cuts off with a yelp as a tranquilizer dart ricochets off the reinforced sleeve of his lab coat and lands in the coffee pot. He drops behind the lab table as Julie swears and tries to reload the tranq gun. "What the hell?!"

"I can't let you go," she says, her voice hard.

"Look, if you hold off on sedating me for five minutes, you'll be able to see a vortex up close," he says. "I'm sorry I don't have the time for you to run more tests, but—"

"You. Are. An. Idiot," she snarls. He tries to pull himself upright with the help of the lab table and flops back down when another dart skitters past his hand. "You can't walk in a straight line. You can barely stand up. Your hands are shaking and your pupils are two different sizes. You got your ass handed to you by a building, Carlos! A building! Whatever you're going to do, you're going to do it stupidly and you're going to get yourself killed!"

"Julie—"
“No! And I don’t care about your stupid wizard illuminati, this is their fault for failing to properly allocate resources!”

“Julie, please—”

“Think of your family. Think of Cecil. We still have so much to learn, Carlos! I can’t let you—”

Carlos dives for his staff, rolls to his feet, and shouts “Bak!”

Julie yelps and topples to the floor as thin ropes of silvery-green light wrap themselves around her.

“I have to go, Julie,” says Carlos. He picks up the tranq gun and pockets the darts, then sticks his staff in his duffel and slings it over his shoulder. “I’m the only one that can.”

“You stupid fucker!” she shouts, red in the face. “If you don’t die I’m killing you myself!”

“I’m sorry,” he says.

“Carlos, get back here! Carlos!”

He can still hear her shouting outside. He stumbles and ends up on his hands and knees in the short, scratchy grass.

The cube is vibrating harder now, a rough, uneven rhythm that feels like it's trying to shake the cube apart instead of tune it to the incoming vortex. He takes a deep breath that's more like a sob, gathers in his will, and says, “Pas!”

The vortex forms sluggishly, its hum more a laborious groan.

Carlos opens his Sight.

The swirling currents of the vortex – folding in on themselves, folding through themselves – clutch at his mind, trying to drag it outwards into the flood of madness. He clenches his teeth and looks beyond.

Now that he's concentrating on it, Carlos can sense the thick, thumping cord of power anchored in his chest that disappears into the vortex – blood magic. He follows its journey across and between dimensions until it terminates in the heart of its caster.

His double is lying sprawled on the ground. Not dead; Carlos can still see the veins of living magic pulsing through him, though they're dim and unsteady. Drained from his fight with Harry, maybe, or from closing more timelike curves. As Carlos watches, he lifts his head.

Alarm flickers through him, and he starts struggling to his feet.

Carlos shuts down his Sight. His head is still spinning, but he doesn't have time for that now. He sways as he stands, then backs up for a running start.

A door slams. “Carlos!”

The last thing he hears over the hum of the vortex is Julie shouting, "You asshole, I will – fuck, it's beautiful!"

~*~*~*~

Carlos drops his double in a tackle and they skid across a polished wooden floor. They both freeze at
the sound of screams, but it's just some kids playing basketball at the far end of the gym.

Then they hear the roaring.

“Shit,” says Doppel-Carlos.

The vortex flickers and closes. The roaring grows louder, like it's getting closer.

"Shit!" His double shoves Carlos off and stumbles for the one of the side doors. But instead of escaping, he pulls the fire alarm.

Two of the adults start screaming and running in circles, but the children line up in neat, if disgruntled, rows. Their coach unlocks the metal grate over one of the windows, defenestrates the fire extinguisher with a tinkling crash – *in case of fire, break glass* – and then begins ushering the players out of the gym.

"We have to open the vortex!" his double shouts at Carlos; he's already holding his cube. He's sagging against the wall and his hands are trembling. "The timelike curves are too unstable to maintain incorporeality!"

When Carlos pulls out his cube, it's shaking wildly, like – like two interfering frequencies colliding with each other. The roar is almost deafening.

"Pas," he gasps. The cube jolts in his hand. "Pas!"

He sees Doppel-Carlos' mouth move, but still nothing happens.

Carlos screams the incantation one more time, unable to hear himself over the sound of rapidly approaching PW4000 high-bypass turbofan aircraft engines. His double half-dives, half-falls under the bleachers for cover.

The vortex appears on the wall in front of him just as the nearly corporeal jet phases through the opposite end of the gym. It passes over him and disappears again in a thunder of afterburners and a flash of green.

Tiny cracks snake across the surface of the cube.

Carlos hurls himself into the vortex. It's like running against a strong current, at the brink of a waterfall. He can feel the vortex disintegrating behind him, feel the connection to his own time stretching, straining, weakening—

A burst of orange light—

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He stumbles, hits the ground. He's lying on the empty street in front of the library. The world is unnaturally still around him, the silence nearly suffocating.

Then life rushes back in, just in time for him to hear Harry say, "—look, Margaret Atwood can call herself whatever she wants. I respect that. But she is *clearly* a sci fi writer and denying that connection only – *son of a biscuit!*"

The jet screams overhead.

When he's confident that nothing else is screaming, Carlos lifts his head from the pavement.
The street is no longer empty. To his right is Harry, with his hand outstretched and what appears to be an entire troop of Daisies clinging to his coat. Mouse crouches behind them, glowing with a faint blue light and looking impossibly huge. Tamika’s on his left, slingshot drawn and ready to fire. Her librarian head glares at him from eye-level. And beyond that—

The block in front of them is littered with the bodies of the ghouls. They’re still slightly out-of-phase. So is the 747 retreating into the sky, prudently leaving Night Vale behind. It shimmers into solidity the moment it passes beyond the boundary of the wards.

“Did you just take out an entire squad of ghouls with a jet?” demands Harry.

“I lost my gun,” says Carlos.

Harry rolls his eyes so hard Carlos can practically hear it.

He pushes himself onto his elbows; some of the ghouls have begun to twitch. There’s a flicker of movement in the corner of his eye and he lurches to his side, freeing his hand in case he needs to—well, cast a handful of spells and then collapse from exhaustion, but at least he’ll be prepared to do that.

The librarians descend.

Most of them go for the defenceless ghouls, but a few, maddened by bloodlust, leap for their small group. They bounce off of Harry’s shield.

"On my signal..." says Tamika.

The librarians begin circling them, hissing in displeasure. Mouse barks at them and they slither back a few feet.

"I'd prefer not to!" shouts Tamika. Harry drops his shield and she fires a copy of *Billy Budd and Other Stories* from her slingshot. The Daisies all scream in unison at the particularly grating frequency only kindergarteners can reach and let loose a volley of hardback Great Illustrated Classics.

The rogue librarians screech. In a blur of movement, they've disappeared with the books and retreated back to the library.

The rest of the librarians ululate in triumph and swarm down the street away from them, leaving only a trail of black ichor behind. Tamika takes out a flare gun and fires it; a moment later, there's an answering flare from Old Town Night Vale.

"What's that mean?" asks Harry.

"We're holding our positions," she says. "And our discussion topic is twentieth-century satire."

Crisis handled, Carlos decides that he doesn't really need to sit up.

Something warm and wet drags itself across his face.

"Ugh, Mouse, no," says Carlos. Mouse is sitting next to him, normal-sized – well, normal for him – once more. Carlos glares at him. Mouse licks his face until Carlos finally pushes himself up.

"Good boy," says Harry.

"What happened by the Ralph's?" asks Tamika, before he can think of a sufficiently cutting reply.
"That area was supposed to be secured."

"My evil twin," says Carlos. He wipes his face with his sleeve. Mouse wags his tail. "From the sandstorm. He's working for Strex Corp and he's got an evil beard."

Tamika shakes her head. "Where's he now?"


"Probably plotting to invade us with Morlocks next," says Harry.

"Morlocks are from the future," says Tamika patiently. "Here, you dropped this. I think it might be broken..."

She hands him the cube, now cracked and brittle.

"What is that?" asks Harry with a frown.

Carlos scrapes up some power and gently prods the cube. Nothing happens. "A... vortex detector, basically. But I think they've exhausted their energy supply. All that's left is – Harry?"

Silence rolls over him with an almost physical force. The street is empty again, no sign of Harry or Tamika or anyone else.

The world around him is frozen.

In the distance, colored smoke from the book club's flares hangs motionless in air. So does the Glow Cloud in mid-carrion-rain over the Shambling Orphan development. Even Night Vale's wards have stopped, the sky turned silver with arrows and lines and circles halted in the middle of their great pattern.

Carlos climbs to his feet, feeling oddly light. The cube glows a soft orange; he can tell because it's shining right through his now-translucent hands.

Sound returns, as suddenly as someone turning on a radio. His hands solidify and the cube goes dark.

His head snaps up at the rumble of thunder. Storm clouds are gathering over the center of town.

There's a faint whispering noise, too. After a few seconds, he realizes it's the cube. He raises it to his ear and hears Dr. Raith's voice say, "Total recursion... timelike curves... collapsing..."

Life cuts out again.

Carlos takes a deep breath and tries to quash the hysteria demanding to know why he's still conscious and which dimension he's in and what, exactly, he's breathing.

He checks the sun: there's an oddly opalescent sheen to it as it lurks just above the horizon in the silver sky. Though the sunset has never been the most reliable method of measuring time – or maybe vice versa – even in Night Vale it still signals the end of the day. Carlos can sense its leashed energy, the magical potential of night waiting to be released, even though it feels... distant. Muted.

He looks back to the center of town. Beneath the unmoving clouds, a vast bubble of light has bloomed, and Carlos finally understands where he is: Carlos Prime is unraveling time vortices, and he's trapped in the shock wave.
He hears a whisper and literally jumps, like his reflexes got a power boost. Or like gravity's next door in space-time instead of right underneath him.

The whispers are coming from the cube, which is glowing orange again. The shadows it throws out over the empty street quiver as Carlos' hands shake. It's too quiet to recognize the voice now, but he can just about make out the words.

*Established time-negative stasis*, he hears. *Rendezvous... adapt into converter array*...

There's at least one other person with access to a cube trapped in this shock wave dimension – stasis – *whatever* with him. The list of possible suspects is very short and very dangerous.

The list of locations for potential converter arrays is even shorter, because Dr. Raith's is/was/??? currently suffering seismic difficulties at the bottom of a giant sinkhole, and there's only one other person with the technical capabilities and cheerful disregard for the established laws of physics to create a similar device.

Carlos runs for the labs.

~*~*~*~

Someone's blasted a hole in his wards. He can actually see the power sweeping down to the breach to stop the intruders, a ripple of faint green light that's just as frozen as everything else.

Carlos pauses only to pull out his staff and summon a handful of entropic force. He stumbles more than steps over the threshold when he's hit by a sudden sense of heaviness and opacity: time, or something like it, is working inside. The front hall is clear.

There's a noise in Lab Two. He edges around the door and sees Julie, stumbling backwards, a look of terror on her face. Carlos charges in—

—and is immediately clotheslined by an arm as rigid as an iron bar.

Caroline Raith kicks his staff away. The illusion of Julie wavers and disappears. Carlos tries to gather his will, but it's smothered by some outside force.

"*Dios,*" says Doppel-Carlos, limping out of the shadows. "I can’t hold him forever. Just eat him already."

"No," says Dr. Raith. Her clothes are torn and stained with dust and pinkish blood. She's wavering a little on her bare feet, but it's the hypnotic sway of a cobra: her eyes blaze silver and power rolls off her like a supernova's last burst of glory. She casually stomps one perfect foot into Carlos' solar plexus.

He curls up into a ball, gasping for air, and Dr. Raith rips his duffel bag off his back and hurls it into the opposite corner. The Faraday cage crackles alarmingly. Three of the breakers lining the walls crackle and start to smoke.

She lifts Carlos off the floor with one hand and puts him in a headlock.

"This lab is locked into a time-negative stasis, but it is running out of power," she says. "Where are the rest of the accumulators?"

Her arm tightens around his throat, squeezing just enough to let him know that she could be squeezing *more* than enough.
“The what?” he gasps.

She leans down and murmurs sweetly into his ear, “The accumulators, Carlos.”

“Thanks,” he wheezes.

“What?”

“I always wondered what autoerotic asphyxiation felt like,” he says.

Dr. Raith lets out an irritated sigh. “Go find the scientist,” she says to Doppel-Carlos. "Bring her here. One of them will talk."

"No," Carlos chokes out.

"And do what with her, Caroline?” says his double wearily. "He's already dissolved the timelike curve. Even if we find the accumulators, all we'll have left is this stasis."

“Then we shall ensure that is all we will need," snarls Dr. Raith. "The shock waves from the dissolution of the timelike curves will be felt throughout history. We can travel with them – if we have the power."

Carlos' fingers scrabble ineffectually against the sleeve of her lab coat. “Don’t,” he says. "Carlos—"

He actually blacks out for a few seconds as Dr. Raith's grip tightens. He's on his knees when he comes to with a painful gasp. Dr. Raith is kneeling beside him; her arm around his neck is the only thing keeping him upright.

“You should have told her,” his double says quietly. He doesn’t look back as he leaves the room.

“Poor Carlos,” says Dr. Raith. “Sometimes he lacks the necessary dispassion. But he is learning. Our collaboration has been quite profitable, wouldn’t you say?”

Carlos wills oxygen to his brain, trying to come up with some kind of plan. Dr. Raith is a vampire: she preys on weakness, and Carlos is pretty much the textbook definition of weak right now.

But Dr. Raith is also a scientist, and if the past couple years have taught him nothing else, it’s how to deal with scientists:

“Why did he ever bother with you?” he rasps. “It's not like you really know anything about magic.”

—distract them by calling their entire field of research into question.

“You wizards are all alike,” she says. “Just because you can use something, you think you understand it. You’re like children using microchips for tiddly-winks.”

“Literally no one has played tiddly-winks for decades,” says Carlos. "They were banned after the Time of Knives."

“Magic, science, it’s all power,” Dr. Raith continues, ignoring him. “It’s not enough to just wield it blindly. True control comes from knowledge: where power comes from, where it will flow, what it can do with the proper application – and when to throw out that knowledge of the past and forge on to new discoveries.”

Vague, yet intriguing. Carlos has the feeling Dr. Raith has written a lot of grant proposals over the years.
“No one understands power like the White Court,” says Dr. Raith. “Your little double thinks he knows what he can accomplish, but he has barely begun to dream. I do not possess such... limited vision.”

“And what do you dream about?”

She pets his hair. He shudders. “A better world, of course,” she says. “For all their capability, my darling family wastes their mental exertions on your kind, enslaved by their Hunger, thinking only of out-maneuvering each other for the pleasure of chasing after prey. Imagine the discoveries we could make without such distractions.”

“You want the throne,” says Carlos.

“Don’t be foolish,” says Dr. Raith. “What need has a goddess for a throne?”

Carlos freezes. "Goddess?"

Her hand stills on the crown of his head. "I already know what it is to have a smiling god turn his gaze on you," she says. Her voice is distant. "To have your will burned away in the all-consuming light until you break and smile for it."

Her fingers knot in his hair until his eyes water.

"Desert Bluffs has been used rather inelegantly, has it not?" she continues. "I hardly think such wanton destruction should be allowed to continue. Or allowed to take place at all."

"You can’t—"

"Fear not, Warden," she says. She lets go of his hair, smooths it down. "When the world kneels before me in love, they shall know why they smile. You should be pleased. You have the chance to save all the wasted lives squandered by violent appetites."

“Me?”

“Some of you kine can be quite brilliant,” she says. “I will foster that cleverness personally and see that it is developed towards worthy goals under my protection. Starting with dearest Juliet, provided you cooperate.”

He hears footsteps in the hall.

"Yax!" he gasps, and Dr. Raith hisses as his shield attempts to form through her.

He scuttles backwards when she drops him, entropic force gathering in his right hand. But he underestimates her recovery time and only clips her in the shoulder. She gives an inhuman shriek and grabs him by the ankle, yanking him towards her. She picks him up with her good arm and slams him into the wall, her fingers tangled in the neck of his cloak.

"I told you to just eat him," says Doppel-Carlos. He's alone.

"Where is she?" snaps Dr. Raith.

"Gone," says Doppel-Carlos.

"The accumulators?"

"She must have taken them with her. I could—"
"No," she says. Her eyes go flat. "Very well," she says. "Warden, you have cost me years of planning. I will enjoy killing you slowly." Carlos feels the rough bite of sturdy fabric as her fingers dig into his throat. She leans in very close. "If I am feeling merciful, perhaps you will too. I—"

There’s a loud crackle from Carlos’ cube, lying abandoned on the floor.

It's followed by the soulful wailing of a folk singer who's realized she needs more than three chords for the truth.

"—I hate that show," snarls Dr. Raith.

“Let him go, or I'll shoot.”

Julie is standing in the doorway. She’s wearing safety goggles and some kind of metal contraption, all shiny panels and glowing tubes and blinking lights. She has one barrel strapped to each arm, pointed at his double and Dr. Raith.

The latter rolls her eyes. Doppel-Carlos snaps “K’as!” and a shower of sparks erupts from Julie’s machine.

She flinches. The lights flicker and die.

Carlos tries to choke out, "Run," but Dr. Raith almost lazily cracks his head against the wall.

"Juliet," she says pleasantly. "Thank you for coming. As you can see, we are having some technical difficulties."

Julie gulps. "I'll say. You've almost drained the accumulators powering the building."

"Indeed," says Dr. Raith. The bright silver of her eyes lightens even further, and Julie visibly shivers when they turn upon her. Doppel-Carlos looks away. "Please, lend us your expertise."

"I'll – I'll pass, thanks," Julie croaks.

"You remind me of some of my former colleagues," says Dr. Raith, her voice almost a purr. "Darling Nikola. Sweet Ada. They died in agony, forfeiting their legacies to others with more ambition. I would hate to see you come to the same fate – not when you could stand by my side."

Carlos goes limp while he gathers his will again, desperately trying to think of something his double won’t immediately squash, something that possibly has a chance of working against Doppel-Carlos or Dr. Raith.

His vision is starting to tunnel.

Julie has gone pale. "I—"

"My dearest Juliet," croons Dr. Raith. "If you had truly wished to defy me, you would never have come alone."

Julie closes her eyes.

Dr. Raith turns back to Carlos. Her face is the only thing he can see, her hand spasming around his throat, her eyes completely white, and her lips pulled back in a twisted snarl that is still, somehow, beautiful, and even as Carlos futilely tries to struggle he thinks, *Great, the last thing I’m going to hear is the weather.*
“Welcome back, listeners,” says Cecil, and Dr. Raith screams, dropping him as she claps her hands over her ears.

Carlos throws up his shield.

Julie fires.

There’s a confusion of light and noise and smoke but also, thankfully, air.

“I’m not alone,” says Julie. “I brought a little science with me.”

Carlos is slumped against the wall, coughing weakly. There’s a large pile of white ash in front of him. There’s no sign of Doppel-Carlos, though the opposite wall has a very big hole in it.

Someone’s coming towards him. It’s Julie, which is good. Probably.

“What the hell was that?” he wheezes.

“The Teleforce,” says Julie. She holsters one of the barrels and helps him sit up. “It’s a portable charged particle beam reflector. Neat, huh?”

“It vaporized a vampire,” says Carlos.

“Yes, it did,” says Julie. “The ionic focusing suffered a little when your double hexed my blinky lights, but hey: I aimed for center of mass.”

“Julie,” he says. “That’s a death ray.”

“Historically speaking… well, yes,” she says.

Carlos blinks at her for a moment. “I think you’ve gone native,” he says finally.

“Please,” she scoffs. "Tesla was an East Coast boy."

She steadies him as he stands up. There’s no pile of dust by the enormous hole across the room – well, not the same dust as the former Dr. Raith, anyway. “What happened to my evil twin?”

"I hit him with the backdraft," says Julie.

"You didn't vaporize him, too?"

"I – no," she says, suddenly sounding uncertain. "He – Carlos, I think he saved me."

"What?"

"I was still in my workshop finishing the Teleforce when Team Edward showed up," she says. "Your double came downstairs and walked right past my door."

"He told Dr. Raith you were gone," says Carlos blankly.

She shakes her head. "He didn't even try to look inside. There's no way he could have missed me unless he was purposefully ignoring me."

Carlos limps over to the hole in the wall.

A bloom of dust and debris hangs in the air, trapped by time beyond the lab’s wards. But there’s a disturbance cutting through it, like something person-sized had fallen through and hit the street and...
"Dios," he says.

"I wish I knew how he was traveling without a stasis field," says Julie.

"He is a stasis field," says Carlos. "Dr. Raith, too. They would have needed the blood of someone strong to regrow all the bloodstones they were using. The vortex was keyed to their – our – magic. I think that now we're keyed to the shock wave."

"So you've already destroyed the vortex?" asks Julie.

"I hope," says Carlos. "But..."

"But what?"

"I just destroyed what was left of the vortices," he says. "The... method of creating them is still out there. I need to destroy that, and... stop him from trying it again."

Julie looks at him for a long moment. "He's just like you, you know," she says quietly.

Carlos swallows. "I know."

They both stare out into the empty street.

"Where's everyone else?" asks Carlos eventually.

"Radon Canyon, San Dimas time," says Julie. "I didn't want them to get involved with—" She gestures with the Teleforce. "—All this."

"Why didn't you get stuck, too?"

She doesn't answer.

"Julie..."

She sighs.

"Julie, what—"

"I don't know, okay?" she bursts out. "I was running out of time and I thought – you said once that if something happened to you, and you couldn't renew your threshold thingies around the lab, that they'd fade out after a while. I took readings and wanted to see if I could replicate the effect."

"So the lab would still be protected if I bought it?" asks Carlos. "That was smart, but how did—"

She punches him in the arm, hard. "I wanted to make sure we would all have somewhere safe, you idiot," she says. "Because you sure as hell didn't look up to withstanding a siege the last time I saw you. But when I programmed the accumulators to mimic the energy frequencies I could pick up, nothing happened, and I thought it didn't work. Apparently it just hadn't worked yet, so now my power supply is almost depleted, I've somehow managed to generate a stasis field in a shock wave from the destruction of a timelike curve—"

"That was already collapsing," Carlos interjects.

"—The destruction of an unstable timelike curve, and I have absolutely no idea what I did apart from
When Carlos' laughter finally wheezes to a halt, he asks, "How much power is left in the accumulators?"

Julie shakes her head. "Less than five percent. Don't ask me how long that is when time's not real."

"Does your energy converter still work?"

Julie blinks. "You're going to let me re-charge them?"

"Not quite," says Carlos. "My double, he..."

He shouldn't be explaining any of this to Julie. If she wants to help, it should be by following orders from a Warden of the White Council, no questions asked. Night Vale's wards are a secret Carlos is supposed to guard with his life.

"Night Vale has wards, just like this lab," says Carlos. "My double integrated his own changes to create the time vortices. I need to wipe them out of the – the programming, basically, and reset the whole system."

"As soon as I leave the lab, I'll just drop out of the shock wave and synchronize with the worldline," says Julie. "I can't go with you."

"That's all right," says Carlos. "Because when you do rejoin the Currents of Time, I need you to go to the Sand Wastes."

A wide grin spreads slowly across her face. "Have you tried turning it off and on again?"

Carlos tries to smile back. "Can you get out there and be ready by sunset?"

Julie squints at the frozen sun through the hole in the wall. "Should be close, but – yeah, I can. Assuming I pop out at the same time I entered..."

"You will," he says. He doesn't tell her that his certainty is based entirely on some hideously unscientific intuition. But the good thing about being a wizard is that he knows the accuracy of his intuition hovers around 95%, though the precision is shit. "Start it up as soon as the sun disappears below the horizon."

Julie shakes her head. "The sun crosses the horizon whole minutes before we see it," she says. "The disk is only visible because the atmospheric refraction—"

"But it doesn't feel that way, does it?" says Carlos. "Mortals can sense when night really begins. You know it's not sunset until you see the sun go down. Why do you think even the astronomical definition of sunset is based on visual measurement?"

"I was going to say 'tradition', but your way is actually more scientific," says Julie. "Okay, I'll fire up the converter at sunset. Then what?"

"Shut it off after thirty seconds," says Carlos. "Or if something tries to crush you with despair, whichever comes first. That will be my window to get rid of – get rid of the alterations to the wards. But whatever happens to me, those wards have to come back up."

"Elder gods, end times," says Julie. "Yeah, I remember." She meets his eyes, briefly. "You have my
word."

Carlos swallows. "Julie..."

"What?"

"I don't know who – or what – might be waiting for you. Strex Corp might have sent out their
security teams... or if something goes wrong with the wards, I won't be able to... I'm sorry I can't
protect you."

"Carlos," she says. "Do you know why I hired you?"

"Why?"

"Because you ran out into the desert screaming like a maniac for us when we needed your help,"
says Julie. She unholsters the barrel of the Teleforce and spools it up. "Now it's my turn."

Carlos smiles for real this time. "Thanks, Julie."

"I'm really glad that turned on, or else this would've been considerably less badass," she says. "I still
haven't finished the stress-testing past one round of hexing, so you need to get moving before you
wreck my stuff. Do you know where to find your double?"

There's a loud puttering noise outside, shockingly loud in the otherwise silent world. Julie jerks
around towards the hole in the wall, the Teleforce at the ready. Her hands are only shaking a little.

Carlos steps up beside her and gently pushes the barrels until they're pointed safely at the ground.

They both watch the large and expensive truck pull up in front of the labs.

"No," answers Carlos. "But I think I know someone who does."

~*~*~*~

Carlos approaches the idling truck cautiously. Cactus June is sitting behind the wheel; Champ is
strapped into a carseat on the back bench. Her cactus is in the bed of the truck, wrapped in pieces of
blanket and held down by bungie cords.

She rolls down the window. "Need a lift?"

"That depends where I’m supposed to go," he says.

She smiles. "I have told your lordship already," she says. "And at first meeting."

"'The time is out of joint'," says Carlos. Her smile widens, and she leans across the cab to open the
door for him. He climbs inside.

The obvious answer is the clock tower. It's symbolic, and while no one’s ever seen it, Night Vale
believes in it. That kind of belief is a potent force. It’s the first place he would choose.

"Well?" asks Cactus Jules.

"Wait," says Carlos. "The first thing you said to me, or the first thing you said to me?"

"Yes," she says.
"'I'll show thee the best springs'," says Carlos.

"When thou camest first, thou wouldst teach me how to name the bigger light, and how the less, that burn by day and night," she recites. "And then I show'd thee all the qualities o' the isle, the fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place and fertile..."

"Water," says Carlos. "He created it by water." He's always been good at water magic.

Symbolism is power. Water is the source of life in the desert. It's one of the basic elements, a purifying force. It can disperse magic and wear down mountains.

All it needs is time.

Cactus Jasmine watches him patiently. He shuts his eyes and tries to think.

Desert Creek has no creek. There’s no river beneath the drawbridge and no bay beside the former Harbor and Waterfront Recreation Facility. There are plenty of places that should have water in Night Vale but don’t. Carlos doesn’t want to find out what happens if he makes her chauffeur him around to each one.

Water that’s not there is a dead end. The only water they have is the water they provide themselves, from the treatment plant and the aqueducts and the...

The...

His mind shies away from the thought even as his head throbs in pain, just like it did in Desert Bluffs.

He forces himself to follow it through, to push past his double's compulsions and remember—

"The water tower," says Carlos. "Where the hell is the water tower?"

"Buckle up," says Cactus Janie.

~*~*~*~

Carlos waits until after the taillights of the large and expensive truck have disappeared around the corner before walking the last block towards the edge of town.

He passes a small, shallow pyramid and stops. The water tower is the last structure between Night Vale and the open desert, looming over an overgrown parking lot.

The ground around it has been cleared and burns with the frozen silver light of his double's focus: sigils and glyphs to channel power. Manipulate liquids. Harness entropy.

Doppel-Carlos himself stands in the center, leaning against the water tower's main pipe, staring moodily at Night Vale. He glances over when Carlos steps into the focus, but otherwise makes no move.

Time rushes in with a flood of sound; Carlos can almost feel it tugging at his cloak as it swirls around him. He looks towards the center of town, where the storm clouds quiet and disperse. There's no other indication his past self just destroyed what was left of the vortices, although that's probably a good thing.

Carlos turns back towards the water tower. The light from the ward focus has disappeared, though now that he knows what he's looking for Carlos can sense the subdued whispers of its power. His
Carlos stops by one of the support struts and settles himself against it, hands in pockets. He follows Doppel-Carlos’ gaze: from here, he can just see the aerials of the Night Vale Community Radio station. He can pick out an echo of Cecil’s voice from the quiet sounds of water reverberating through the pipes.

“That was quick,” says his double finally. "I knew you’d figure it out in the end, but – I hid it for a whole two years. Pretty good, right?"

"Yeah," says Carlos. “And to be honest, I thought you’d go for the invisible clocktower.”

The corner of his double’s mouth lifts. “I tried,” he says. “I couldn’t find it.”

Carlos lets out a huff of laughter.

They both fall silent, listening to Cecil report on the day’s casualties. The leading edge of the sun kisses the horizon.

"It's not that I don't care," says Doppel-Carlos. "I was... I am afraid that I've changed something by accident that will make things worse. That history won't recover from. But I stopped thinking about what I was doing a long time ago, because all the answers were wrong anyway. And... if I did split history, at least that meant that somewhere there was a version of me where I hadn't made those choices, where I didn't have to make those choices. That used to make me angry.

"And then one night I dreamt that time wasn't real. Or – it was real, but not the way I thought, and I had figured out some small part of it. And when I woke up I wasn't angry anymore, because I knew that it wasn't time that I had changed. Somewhere out there, there’s a – a butterfly, dreaming of being a tyrannosaur, and when he wakes up he knows deep down all of life is a second chance. And when I wake up... Well, I wish I could keep dreaming," says Doppel-Carlos. "You were right about one thing."

Carlos looks at him inquiringly.

"I don't really want to tear the town apart," says his double. "I'll try not to, if that makes you feel better."

“This isn’t the only way,” says Carlos. “You can still come with me. I need all the help I can get, and so do you.”

"We'd never trust each other."

"I work with lots of people I don't trust," says Carlos.

"And you hate it," says his double. "I'm done with that. I'm done with all of it."

"So this is it?" says Carlos.

"Looks like," says his double. "You know I won't give up without a fight."

The sun slides gently downwards, the visible portion of its disk bathing everything in reddish light. With half of Doppel-Carlos’ face in shadow, they once again look nearly identical.

"And as this day draws to a close, listeners, we must think: how much do we truly want to know of the horrors of the world?" asks Cecil. "What will we do when that terrifying knowledge is dangled
before us, when we've lost the comforting illusion of safety that ignorance affords us?"

Doppel-Carlos meets his eyes. "I promise I'll take care of him. I'll take care of all of them."

"Me, too," says Carlos.

He side-steps the first attack.

Entropic force narrowly misses the strut behind him as he darts in under Doppel-Carlos' guard. His double breaks out of his armlock, but Carlos lands a punch to his stomach that leaves them both gasping.

The sun disappears below the horizon. Everything goes quiet – not the unnatural silence of the timeless world, but the hush before battle, the calm before the storm, the silence of the tyrant lizard's reign.

The sigils of the ward focus flare and then blink out like they never existed.

His double blanches. "What have you—"

Carlos strikes. Doppel-Carlos blocks his second blow and flips him to the ground, but Carlos can feel the sting in his own neck as his double reaches up and pulls out the tranq dart.

His double stares at it, then at him, in disbelief. "You can't—" He wobbles, then drops to one knee; Carlos can barely make it to his own. "You'll destroy everything!"

"Nabaj," gasps Carlos.

"No!" screams his double, lunging for him. The water tower moans and lurches as its contents strain downwards; the support struts start to buckle and main pipe bulges towards them. They crack the ground as their ends tear free, and Carlos feels the snap of residual magic against his mind as the components of the ward focus begin to unravel.

Carlos catches his double's wrists with both hands, a knife only inches from his throat. His arms begin to shake as he pours all his energy into this last spell. Doppel-Carlos forces the knife downwards; he feels the sting as it breaks the skin of his neck.

He looks into his double's eyes.

He doesn't know when the soulgaze starts, can't pick out the moment when he realizes that the music he's hearing has an echo, its melody doubled almost perfectly. The song is utterly familiar, like he's heard every day since his mother sung it to him in his cradle, and it winds in and out of the chaos of background noise – still persisting even as it's almost overwhelmed by the sounds of destruction. Mirrors breaking. The earth rumbling. The screams of tortured metal and tearing wood. The roar of falling water.

Cecil saying, "Good night, Night Vale. Good night."

Chapter End Notes

THE NEXT CHAPTER IS REAL I PROMISE
A list of dates:

November ??, 2013
June 15, 2012
n/a
April 22, 2014 (early evening)
n/a
April 22, 2014 (sunset)
Carlos’ first thought is that Cecil is kissing him, which is nice. It’s pretty sloppy and his nose is being pinched, but you know, he's not picky.

His second thought is that he can’t breathe, and that probably should have been his first thought, except he's already had this problem and it's been moved down the list of priorities.

Fortunately, Carlos’ body does not agree. He gasps, chokes, and then manages to roll over just in time to cough up approximately seven million liters of water.

Strong arms pull him up when he’s done, wrapping around him and holding him tightly against a warm, solid chest.

“Cecil?” he asks, craning his neck to try to see Cecil’s face.

“Hi, Carlos,” says Cecil, and Carlos can feel his voice rumbling through him. He shivers, only partially because he’s soaking wet.

“What happened?” he asks.

“You were underneath the water tower,” says Cecil. “You almost drowned.”

Something pokes him in the side. Carlos fumbles in the folds of his cloak and lab coat and finally dislodges an arrowhead, iron and silver, gleaming the color of blood in the dying glow of twilight.

"Was there anyone else?" he asks.

"No," says Cecil. "Just you." He pulls Carlos even closer.

Carlos slumps against his chest, trying not to think about how much longer he has the right to do so, how much time he has left to feel the thump-thump-thump of Cecil's heart slowing until it matches the painful beat of his own.

Thunder grumbles overhead. Carlos drags his eyes skyward, but the clouds of the storm wards are already dispersing. Reluctantly. He breathes a sigh of relief and starts coughing again. His chest hurts so much when he's finished that Cecil has to help him sit up, holding him steady with an arm around his shoulders.

Everything around them looks pretty much the way Carlos feels: splintered and soaking and spent. The water tower is barely recognizable as such, its twisted and fractured pieces scattered across the ground. It's in far worse shape than after anything Carlos could have done to it, and sure enough, when he turns his head, there’s Harry, sitting on the cracked asphalt and holding a wadded-up piece of cloth to his bleeding head.

“What happened to you?” asks Carlos.

“Your boyfriend hit me with a piece of rebar!” says Harry, the words slurred and uneven.

Carlos frowns. “Why? What did you do?”
“I was *trying* to save your life,” says Harry. He points at Carlos accusingly; it takes him a couple tries. “Next time you can blast your own damn water tower off.”

Carlos looks at Cecil, who says, “I thought he was attacking you! He’s a dangerous wizard!”

Carlos says, “I’m a dangerous wizard.”

Cecil’s arm drops off Carlos’ shoulder. “Oh,” he says. “Right.” Carlos swallows and looks down at his hands.

“I’m more dangerous, if that helps,” says Harry.

“You should probably go,” says Cecil. “Strex Corp’s security teams are still busy, but the police will be here soon, and wizards… aren’t very popular in Night Vale.”

“I know,” says Carlos. His voice is hoarse, weak. He tries to tell himself it’s from all the coughing, but there’s no point. As much as the rest of him hurts, there’s no comparison to this horrible drawn-out agony of heartbreak.

For a moment, neither of them move. Then Carlos stands up, very carefully. He wobbles a little when he makes it to his feet, but Cecil is there, steadying him with a warm hand on his arm.

“Thanks,” says Carlos. Their eyes meet. He still doesn’t know what color Cecil’s are.

“Goodbye, Carlos,” says Cecil softly. He turns and starts to walk away.

It sounded final. It *should* be final. Carlos has eliminated the threat to the Currents of Time and blown his cover. He should let things go back to the way they were before, with him slipping in and out of Night Vale unseen and unnoticed, watching from afar. It would be much safer for everyone.

Nobody stays in Night Vale because it’s safe.

“Cecil, wait,” says Carlos. He reaches out a hand to stop him, but Cecil is already turning back.

“Look, before you go,” says Carlos. “I won’t make excuses, but – I’m sorry I’m such a shitty boyfriend. I’m sorry I ran away after you were almost eaten by ghouls. I’m sorry that my double tried to swim against Currents of Time and I seriously fudged with Night Vale’s history to stop him.

"But most of all, I’m sorry I lied to you about who I am. Because I think I started loving you when – when I came to Night Vale for the first time, and heard your voice, and listened to you fudge all the words to the second verse of the weather while playing that stupid banjolele, and I know I'll never... I'll never stop. I should have trusted you to come to a similar conclusion."

He swallows, but manages to croak out, "I understand if... if this is... if this is it. I just wanted you to – have all the relevant information."

Carlos can’t read the expression on Cecil’s face. That’s because he’s staring at the ground. It’s completely silent; he doesn’t know if he can bear knowing how Cecil is looking at him right now.

Finally, Cecil speaks. “You heard me play the banjolele?” he asks, in a slightly strangled tone.

“Yeah,” says Carlos to his shoes.

“Oh my gosh,” says Cecil, and Carlos finally raises his head. Cecil has covered his face with his hands and his ears are bright red. “I can’t believe you listened to that. I was so nervous and it was terrible!”
“The banjolele was awful,” says Carlos. “But I liked listening to you.”

Cecil lowers his hands. “Just to be clear: you are, in fact, a wizard.”

“Yes.”

“A wizard who belongs to the deadly and highly-trained enforcing arm of a secretive cabal of potent magic users, who has covertly been guarding, policing, and occasionally attacking Night Vale for the past... however many years.”

“Yes.”

“And you love me?”

"Yes," says Carlos. His voice cracks in the middle, so he says it again. "Yes, I do."

Cecil lets out a shaky breath. "And... you weren’t just using our relationship as a cover for your secret cabalistic activities?"

“No!” says Carlos, horrified. “Cecil, I’ve never lied about how I feel about you. Or us, together. That – that was all real.”

“Oh,” says Cecil. “Um. Okay.”

Carlos blinks. “Okay?”

“I mean, I’m not happy you lied to me,” says Cecil. “But I certainly understand the urge to lie to, deceive, or otherwise mislead another about sensitive information regarding clandestine organizations who secretly manipulate the world for its own alleged good. I don’t want you to do it ever again, but I understand it. So... I guess it’s okay.”

“Okay,” says Carlos. Cecil tentatively touches his cheek, and Carlos leans forward, equally uncertain, and kisses him: just once, just... gently. Just like the end of their first date.

"Okay," he says again. Cecil's fingers stroke through his hair, and Carlos can feel his heart leaping up and breaking free of the buzzing shadows surrounding it, also just like the end of their first date.

“You guys are so cute, I’m gonna throw up,” says Harry.

“Nobody asked you,” says Carlos. Then he doesn’t say anything else, because Cecil is in his arms and Cecil's tears are warming his cheeks and Cecil's mouth is smiling against his own, and Carlos is right where he needs to be and everything really is okay.

They startle apart when someone honks at them.

The Sciencemobile rolls to a halt. Andre leans out the driver’s side window, takes in Carlos, Cecil, the former water tower, and Harry puking into a gutter, and says, "You know, I don't even want to ask."
"You guys are really wet," says Gary.

"Thanks," says Carlos. "Has anyone seen Julie?"

"Not since this afternoon," says Andre. "The original plan was for her to meet us at the rendezvous with medical assistance."

Carlos takes out his phone; water drips out of the speakers. He puts it back in his pocket, trying to tamp down the curl of anxiety in his gut. Cecil reaches over and squeezes his hand.

The grad and post-grad students are all squished into the bench seat, so they have the questionable luxury of the entire storage area to themselves, minus the space taken up by things in storage. Harry somehow manages to fold his legs in, then shuts the door and closes his eyes. Carlos wearily pokes him in the knee.

"Hey, you can't go to sleep yet," he says. "You have a head wound."

Harry grunts, but doesn't open his eyes. Mouse sticks his nose in his ear, and he bolts upright with a yelp.

"Good boy," says Carlos.

"Give me your cloak," says Harry.

"Why?"

"Because if you're going to make me stay awake, I'm going to need to use your hood as a barf bag," says Harry, although he looks much less green. Carlos doesn't think you can build up a resistance to traumatic brain injuries, but if anyone was going to do it...

"Oh, I've got one," says Cecil. He takes out his wallet and pulls a folded paper bag out from behind a Post-It note. "Here you go. I'm Cecil, by the way. Sorry I tried to kill you."

Harry peers inside the bag rather warily, but he does shake Cecil's hand. "Harry Dresden," he says. "And don't worry about it. Happens all the time."

Kate finishes conferring with her peers and twists around in her seat to speak to them. "Just hang tight," she says. "We'll reach the rendezvous in a couple minutes. Oh, I wouldn't lean on that, if I were you."

Harry shrinks back from the box propping him up. "Why?"

"It's full of bees," says Wei.

"Why," repeats Harry.

"They can't ride in front because of the airbags," says Gary.

Carlos frowns at Harry. "Didn't you hear the buzzing?"

"Well, yeah," says Harry. "But I thought it was a hallucination, like his shirt." He points at Cecil.

Cecil is wearing a relatively inoffensive short-sleeved button-down, though it is a particularly vivid shade of highlighter yellow and patterned with tiny purple squid.

"Hallucinatory? This old thing?" says Cecil, looking rather pleased.
Harry stares at him for a moment, then puts his head between his knees. “Do me a favor,” he says, slightly muffled. “Next time hit me hard enough that things start making sense.”

"Will do!” says Cecil. He turns to Carlos. “So what else is back here? I've never ridden in a science van before. Or is it a wizard van…?”

“Science van,” corrects Carlos hastily, although he’s moderately heartened by the thought that if Julie somehow heard that, she will almost certainly be turning up in short order to kick his ass. “Um, we have the bees, a beekeeping suit, boxes of seismograms, a pneumameter, some depleted accumulators, and—" He frowns at an oddly-shaped pile covered in a sheet.

Carlos twitches the cloth aside.

"—And some kind of electro-mechanical oscillator," he says. "That's new." He looks up at the grad and post-grad students, who have all suddenly decided they want to face forward and not meet his eyes. "Andre," he calls.

"Yes, Carlos?"

"Where did you get an electro-mechanical oscillator?"

"Julie built it," says Andre, confirming his suspicions.

"So," says Carlos. "What were you guys up to today?"

"Oh, not much," says Kate casually. "Just recording the seismic activity from the Radon Canyon event. It helped us map the entire northern edge of Night Vale's shadow zone!"

"I... practiced negotiating the restrictions of corporate security protocols," says Wei.

Gary jerks his gaze forward again as soon as Carlos looks at him. "Um, nothing," he says.

"Didn't Nikola Tesla design a really powerful electro-mechanical oscillator?" asks Carlos.

"Uh," says Gary.

Carlos stares at the back of his head. A bead of sweat rolls down from his hairline.

"You mean the Earthquake Machine?" Gary finally blurts, and Kate and Wei make noises of protest.

"You collapsed Strex Corp's underground facility?" asks Carlos, caught somewhere between appalled and impressed.


"Oh, for sure," says Carlos.

"It would be scientifically impossible according to the specifications that Tesla made public knowledge."

"Uh-huh," says Carlos.

"They proved it on Mythbusters!"

Cecil sighs. "I do enjoy that show, but I wish they would be more careful on their firing ranges."
We're always finding cannonballs and mannequin parts and exploded pieces of toilet bowls in our backyards. Or halfway through the windows of our cars. Or in our living rooms, surrounded by plaster dust and the ruins of the false sense of security we assign to the walls of our homes."

"Don't they test most of their explosives in Alameda?" asks Kate, after a significant pause.

"Yes?" says Cecil, clearly confused by the question's relevance.

Carlos reaches for his notebook, then realizes it's just as wet as the rest of him. "Somebody write that down," he says.

Andre stops the van. As soon as he shuts the engine off, Carlos can hear a familiar voice arguing with someone.

"You said medical treatment for my team was part of the deal!"

"That's only if you rent at least two lanes!"

Cecil helps him and Harry climb out of the back into the parking lot of the Desert Flower Bowling Alley and Arcade Fun Complex. Julie is standing toe-to-toe with Teddy Williams as they shout in each others' faces and gesticulate wildly, although Teddy keeps punctuating his arguments with rhythmic hoots and screeches, and Julie's gestures are greatly curtailed by the barrels of the Teleforce still strapped to her arms.

Carlos can't keep himself from smiling, but he hopes she has the safety on.

Then he really hopes she included a safety in the first place.

"Carlos," says Harry. "I don't mean to be picky, but: why would we be getting medical treatment at a bowling alley?"

"I would just like to point out that the last time you were in charge of finding a doctor, I woke up in an autopsy table," says Carlos.

"Butters is a licensed medical examiner," says Harry defensively.

"I woke up in a morgue, on an autopsy table," says Carlos.

"Oh, dear," says Cecil. "I hope they had a reasonable co-pay."

"This is your final offer!" Julie bellows. "If you don't treat my team, I won't join your militia!"

"Why should I let you join my militia?"

Julie points one arm at the water feature outside the Bowling Alley and Arcade Fun Complex's entrance. There's a high-pitched electronic whine, a flash of light, and suddenly, no more water feature.

Teddy closes his gaping jaw with a snap. "Just... let me see my other patient off," he says, edging away from her.

"Thank you, Mr. Williams," says Julie. "I'll have the university reimburse you for the fountain. We appreciate its sacrifice in the name of science."

Teddy disappears inside, only somewhat literally.
"Are you okay?" asks Carlos. "Who's hurt?"

Julie looks him up and down in disgust. "You are unbelievable," she says. "I literally do not believe that your continued existence is due to anything except random environmental errors. What's happened to you now?"

"He almost drowned," says Cecil, sounding just as disapproving.

Julie throws up her arms. Everyone ducks. "You are in a desert," she shouts.

"I'm glad you're okay, too," says Carlos. She scowls at him and stalks off towards the Sciencemobile.

"And I'm feeling much better," says Harry. "So I'll just be on my way—"

"Oh, no you don't," says Cecil, grabbing hold of the back of Harry's coat. "You need a doctor. I always received the very highest grades for concussions." He wraps his other arm around Carlos' waist. Carlos does not try very hard to get away.

Teddy Williams reappears, pushing Shakeena Flynn in a wheelchair. She has an enormous cast up to mid-thigh on her left leg and the glazed eyes of someone on the really good painkillers.

"Shakeena!" says Cecil. He hurries to her side, towing Carlos and Harry with him. "I heard about the accident. Are you all right?"

She magnanimously pats him on the head as Teddy sets the brakes on her wheelchair and then stomps back into the building. "I'm great," she says, switching to the ritual bowling handshake. "Put me in, coach. I've got a perfect game in me, I can feel it."

"What happened?" asks Carlos.

She squints at him. "Which one are you?"

"The one who didn't shoot your car," he says.

"Oh, okay." She thrusts her arm out and narrowly avoids punching him in the stomach. "Damn the man," she says happily.

"Damn the man," Carlos repeats, giving her a fist-bump. "How did you get in an accident?"

"It was the ghouls."

"You crashed trying to get away from them?" asks Harry.

She gives him a deeply unimpressed look. "I pinned them against the side of the bank with my van so I could get a clear headshot," she says.

"That's... logical," says Harry.

"Damn straight," says Shakeena. "Where are your popsicles?"

"What?"

"You're the Winter Knight," she says. "You've got to be good for something. Popsicles, chop chop."

"I must have left them in my other mantle," says Harry. He's glaring at Carlos, probably because
Carlos isn't even trying not to snicker.

Shakeena makes a shooing motion. She doesn't stop until Harry sighs and backs up about ten feet. Then her gaze falls on Cecil and she brightens. "Cecil! Hey! Wanna sign my cast?"

"Sure!" says Cecil. "Just let me get a non-pen..." He pulls out a cocktail straw and trims the end with a non-penknife.

"How's Tamika?" asks Carlos, as Cecil rummages through his fanny pack, muttering to himself.

Shakeena peers up at him, then shakes her head vigorously back and forth. "That's enough of that," she says when she's done. Her gaze is clear now; when she shifts in the wheelchair, she winces in pain. "Nice while it lasted. Are you asking as Warden Ramirez or Carlos the Scientist?"

Carlos opens his mouth, closes it, and finally says, "They're the same."

She nods. "I've taught her all I can," she says. "She'll walk her own path. I won't stand in her way. But I know that wherever she goes, she'll go there deliberately." A look of defiance comes over her face. "And if the White Council wants to tell her what to do..."

"There's only seven laws I care about, and she knows them already," says Carlos.

Shakeena thumps him on the arm. "You've got a pretty good head on your shoulders," she says. "I hope it stays there. Your hair isn't half-bad."

Carlos gives her a tired smile. "Thanks, Shakeena."

Cecil rocks back on his heels and sits down. "I'm sorry, Shakeena, I'm all out of food paste non-ink." Carlos fishes out a slightly water-logged Sharpie and hands it to him. "Oh! Thank you, Carlos," says Cecil warmly, and signs his name with a flourish, right above Shakeena's knee.

Harry wobbles back over, squinting up at the sky. "There's a chopper coming," he says. "Which colors are we supposed to look out for again?"

"You just need to remember the rhyme!" says Cecil. "Bird, blue, or black, usually no attack; orange and yellow, outwardly pleasant but perniciously wicked fellow."

A yellow helicopter comes into view. However, as it flies closer Carlos realizes it has 'The horror! The horror!' stenciled on the side, and Tamika Flynn jumps out while it's still hovering several feet above the ground.

She runs towards them. "Mom!"

"Tamika! Oh, baby, I'm so proud of you!"

"If liberty means anything at all, it means the right to read what people do not want to hear," says Tamika, throwing herself into Shakeena's arms.

"Are you crying?" Carlos asks Harry.

"No, I've just got some water tower on my face," says Harry, who is definitely looking a little teary-eyed.

Tamika releases her mother just long enough to signal the helicopter with her semaphore flags. As it lifts off, the little old man from the sandstorm cohort leans out the open side and gives them a wave. Carlos waves back, even though his arms feel like they're dragging around lead weights. Or bags of
sand.

Maybe the old man never realized it wasn't Carlos who saved him. Or maybe he did, and he doesn't think it matters.

Sadie leans out a second later, crossbow raised.

The bolt is intercepted by Tamika's copy of *Kindred* by Octavia Butler before anyone else can react. As Tamika trots over to retrieve her book, Sadie's next shot sticks in the side of the Sciencemobile, right beside Wei. Carlos hears a distant cry of "The lease is in *my name*, dammit!" from Julie.

Tamika returns, carefully brushing off the book's thick wooden cover. She pulls the bolt out and hands it to Cecil.

"Wow, a free reading!" he says.

"All reading should be free," says Shakeena.

"Mom, that's *my* line," sighs Tamika, but she consents to be hugged again.

"Reading?" asks Harry.

"Extremely aggressive belomancy," says Carlos.


"*Outlook good!"* says Cecil. "Now... does anyone know what the question was?"

Tamika shakes her head. "*Livet skal forståa baglæns, men må leve forlæns op på lakrids,*" she says.

"*Gesundheit,*" says Harry.

Teddy Williams reemerges from the building dressed in improvised riot gear. "I can see the patients now," he announces.

Tamika shakes Harry's hand, then Carlos'. "Thanks for helping me save Night Vale," she says. Then she winks, slowly and deliberately. "If I think of any good recommendations, I'll let you know."

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Carlos ends up in a small room behind the shoe-rental counter of the Desert Flower Bowling Alley and Arcade Fun Complex that contains a pair of exam tables, a ball polisher, and a poster of all the bones in the human hand. Teddy gave him an old-fashioned oxygen mask before shining a light in Harry's eyes and clucking irritably. He dragged Harry out of the room, leaving Carlos alone.

Carlos really wishes he hadn't.

He reaches into his pocket and takes out the arrowhead, the one from the water tower. It's much broader than the square head of Sadie's crossbow bolt. It was designed to punch through armor and magic; barbs extend from the back end to prevent it from being easily pulled out. Beautiful and deadly, the weapon of a Warden. It's nearly useless with no shaft or bow or archer.

His double had lived for more than a year, and apart from the ripples of his actions in the Currents of Time and his soul burned into Carlos', this was all he left behind. He hadn't accepted any new weapons or borrowed any clothes or received any gifts; everything he'd carried with him, he'd been
carrying since the sandstorm. Everything was the sandstorm. And now it was all gone. Doppel-
Carlos had been alone apart from a scavenged reminder of his bisabuela and the double who didn't
just kill him – he destroyed almost all evidence that he had ever existed.

Thanks to that last soulgaze, Carlos remembers his double's final thoughts – panic, fear, desperation,
and beneath everything, a deep, deep sadness – like they were his own. Maybe they were.

*You know I won't give up without a fight.*

That was their problem, wasn't it. They might go down fighting, but they were still giving up.

Carlos has had a list of enemies longer than his arm since he was eighteen. Now he realizes that his
name is on there, too: the very last, or maybe the very first. Because he knows the damage he can do,
and it wasn't because his double had the wrong information, or was forcibly subverted by the bad
guys. He just gave up.

And Carlos is so very, very tired.

The edges of the arrowhead bite into his fingers. He forces them to relax.

A faint draft touches his cheek; the oxygen pump clicks and stutters. Then there's nothing but silence.

"Hello, Captain," he says.

Luccio drops her veil. She's leaning against the other exam table, not two feet away.

"Warden Ramirez," she says evenly.

"How are the wards?"

"They've suffered some damage, though nothing they can't repair themselves," says Luccio.

Carlos' shoulders slump in relief. "Good," he says.

"I got your message," she says. "We were able to secure Crete more quickly than anticipated, and I
came here as soon as I could." She pauses, studying his face. "Not five minutes after I arrived, the
wards disappeared entirely."

Carlos winces. "Did anything—"

"No, nothing escaped," says Luccio. "They weren't down long enough, fortunately. I nevertheless
found the experience..." He can tell that she's carefully considering her choice of words.

He can also tell that her hand hasn't left the hilt of her sword once.

"...Deeply unsettling," she finishes.

"That's understandable," he says.

"Warden Ramirez," she says. "What happened?"

Carlos points at the other exam table. "You're going to want to sit down for this," he says.

She doesn't, because the Captain of the Wardens never sits down for bad news. But he does watch
her eyebrows creep higher and higher as he explains – well, everything. His double, Dr. Raith, his
double's changes to the wards, Carlos' very own collection of time vortices. By the time he's done,
his voice is almost gone and her eyebrows have practically taken up residence in her hairline.

"So the good news is that situation seems to be resolved," he concludes dully. He leans back against the wall and stares at the water-stained ceiling tiles.

He wonders if she'll let him say goodbye before she hauls him off to trial.

Luccio lets out a long sigh. "I've been a Warden for almost two centuries," she says, "And I have never seen a violation of the Sixth Law that even remotely approaches this scale."

He winces.

"Carlos," she says. He looks back to her.

She steps up to the exam table and firmly but gently takes his chin in her hand. Then she meets his eyes.

Nothing happens. He doesn't know what she was expecting; they soulgazed each other years ago, and it's a one-time deal.

Whatever she finds seems to satisfy her. She takes a step back and says, "Kneel, Warden."

Carlos thinks about protesting. But he doesn't want to have to fight. He's a Warden of the White Council, and this is his Captain, and he knows his duty. He doesn't know if he can make up for what he's done, but maybe he can do this. Maybe he can hang on to the end.

He slides off the table. With an extreme effort of will, he manages to drop stiffly to his knees instead of crumpling to the floor.

"By my authority as the Captain of Wardens of the White Council, invested as a lawful proxy of the Senior Council—"

Now that he's made his decision, the wait is almost peaceful. All he has to do is kneel.

"I hereby sentence you to—"

Carlos closes his eyes.

Darkness greets him like an old friend.

"Warden Ramirez," Luccio says, a little sharply. Like she's had to repeat herself.

"What?" he asks, disoriented. He lifts his head; his chin was resting against his chest. He blinks and his eyelids try to drag themselves shut again.

He thinks he might have snored.

Luccio stares down at him, the slightest hint of exasperation creeping into her expression. "I'm placing you under the Doom of Damocles," she says.

"What?" says Carlos again. Maybe he's dreaming. He pokes his arm: pain sears through him, and he doesn't wake up. "You can't—"

"I can," she says. "The Senior Council granted me the authority to pass judgment within these wards, just as they have done with you."
"That's for executions!"

"The ability to mete out death carries with it the converse obligation to determine who deserves life," says Luccio. "When I took on this responsibility, the Senior Council swore an oath to uphold my decisions as their own. They cannot countermand me without being forsworn. And if they rule that I am unfit to pass judgment, then I will break my sword, for I will not continue to command the Wardens if my reason is deemed unsound."

Carlos gapes at her. "But if I screw up, your life will be forfeit!"

"I am aware of how the Doom of Damocles works," she says.

He opens his mouth to argue, then closes it again. "Why?" he asks, a little plaintively.

"Because you're still the same person as the man who soulgazed me nine years ago to save my life and the lives of his fellow Wardens," she says. "You're still the same person as the youngest Regional Commander in history, and you're still the same person as the little boy who told me he wanted to be a Warden when he grew up because he was going to discover the best way to keep people safe. That person would have forfeited his own life to go against the White Council's judgment if he knew he could find a way to preserve the Currents of Time. And when he was done, that person would have destroyed the magic to manipulate them rather than let himself or anyone else succumb to temptation."

She pauses. "The White Council, and especially the Wardens, have always shunned knowledge that takes us too close to lines drawn by the Laws of Magic," she continues, her voice steady. "Where our enemies go, we dare not follow, and it is not because of nobility or righteousness. We do not trust ourselves with forbidden knowledge. And so we sometimes fail in our duty." She meets his eyes. "I trust you."

Carlos swallows. They're both silent for a moment.

"I'm pretty certain that when I was a kid, I also told you I wanted to be a Tyrannosaurus when I grew up," he says.

"I'm sure you would have made an excellent dinosaur, Warden Ramirez," says Luccio gravely.

"You're really going to tell the Senior Council this is your decision?"

"I shall notify the Gatekeeper, as this matter falls under his purview," says Luccio. "He may inform the rest of the Council as he sees fit."

But what if you're wrong about me, wails a little voice at the back of his mind. It sounds exactly like his own voice. But Carlos has taken an oath, and his captain has made a decision, so he just says, "Thank you," instead.

Luccio offers him a hand up, which turns more into both arms up. He barely makes it back on the exam table.

"What's our next move?" he asks, wheezing a little.

"Your next move is medical leave," she says.

"I'm fine," protests Carlos.

"Besides your physical injuries, your previous experience suggests a number of serious side effects
from transversing the Currents of Time," she says.

"I can handle sleeping disorders," says Carlos.

"Carlos, you just fell asleep during a hearing for your potential execution," she says, which: point. "And I think it would be best if we allowed matters to... settle with the Council."

Carlos sighs. She's not wrong. Maybe he can record more data on the effects of time travel on the human body and soul; the White Council's healers will be happy with him, at least.

"How long am I off-duty?" he asks.

"Until further notice," she says, and gives him a pointed look when he opens his mouth to protest.

"But what am I supposed to do with all that free time?" he asks, half-seriously, because he's never been good at stopping, and now... now it just seems a small step away from giving up.

"Find out," she says. She turns to the door.

"Captain," he asks. She looks over her shoulder. "What if—" I succumb to temptation and decide to bend history to my will, he does not say. "What if you're mistaken?"

"I'll monitor the situation myself," she says, and disappears.

~*~*~*~

Harry and Teddy Williams return a few minutes later. Harry is herded onto the other exam table and given a bag of ice to put on his head.

"I'll have your test results in a few minutes," says Teddy. He takes away Carlos' oxygen pump and waves something that looks like UV scanner over him.

"Did you know you're slightly radioactive?" asks Teddy.

"Yes," says Carlos.

Teddy writes out a prescription for more antibiotics and potassium iodide, then breaks three pairs of shears trying to cut the arm off Carlos' lab coat. Carlos finally shrugs out of it himself, despite the repeated hissing from his attending physician/alley manager. Teddy snips off the remainder of Carlos' shirt-sleeve and bandages with extreme prejudice. The scraps go into a hazardous waste bin, where after about fifteen seconds of intense chanting they burst into flames.

Harry's leaning against the wall with his eyes shut, so Carlos again has nothing to do but think as Teddy cleans and stitches up his arm. The fingers of his other hand curl around the edge of the table in a white-knuckled grip that has nothing to do with pain.

After Teddy puts a bandaid on the cut on his cheek, he lets out a rapid burst of chittering and leaves the room. Carlos stares down at his newly bandaged knuckles, but sees only the swirl of orange light, smells the rich earth of a prehistoric jungle, hears the roar of water...

He yelps when an ice cube bounces off the side of his neck.

“What’s eating you, Ramirez?” asks Harry. Then he smirks. “Besides—”

“If you say ‘Besides Cecil,’ I’m gonna go get another piece of rebar,” says Carlos.
"Well?" says Harry, when Carlos doesn't say anything else.

"My double," says Carlos reluctantly. "He was... me."

"Keep in mind that I have a concussion, so if you're going to have an existential crisis you're gonna have to explain it with short, simple concepts."

"He wasn't really my evil twin," says Carlos. "...Apart from the literal bloodlust. But everything he did – I understood it. I understood it, and I can't say I wouldn't have made the same choices if it had been me instead, and – I'm just one bad day away from it being me. When he got dealt a bad hand and lost everything, he blew through the Sixth Law of Magic like it didn't mean a thing. The guy who was a copy of me."

Harry squints at him. "Would you do the same thing now?"

"No!"

"Then you're not the same person," says Harry. "Everybody has the potential to go Dark Side in them, Carlos. Take it from someone who knows. But being able to make the wrong choices is pretty much the definition of free will. The part that matters is what you actually do with that choice."

"What if you just... give up? On what you're supposed to do?"

"That's still a choice," says Harry. "And I'm not saying you won't ever make bad calls, but as long as you're still trying to figure out what the right call is – that means something."

"Yeah, but how," says Carlos. It's largely a rhetorical question, addressed to the back of his hands, but Harry frowns and considers it for a few moments.

"Math problems," he says finally.

"What?"

"Sometimes I have to think about math problems until my head clears and I can feel the situation logically. It can take a while."

"I can see that," says Carlos. "I mean, your feet are huge; I bet it takes forever to unlace your shoes so you can count your toes."

"Well, you know what they say about guys with big feet."

"Yeah, I do," says Carlos, and smirks.

"Oh, gross," says Harry, with a horrified expression. "I can't know that! Why do you always have to imply things at me, Ramirez?"

"So I guess you don't want to know what Cecil and I were doing on that examination table during Flynn's birthday party—"

(They were wrapping Shakeena's birthday present.)

"I take back everything I said," says Harry. "I thought the love of a good man would keep you from sharing upsetting personal details, but I was wrong. You are definitely evil and a danger to yourself and others."

"Danger is my middle name," says Carlos.
Harry gives him a withering look. "Your middle name is Maria."

"That's the pot calling the kettle Blackstone," says Carlos.

"Carlos Maria," repeats Harry.

"It's traditional!"

Harry snorts at him, and Carlos lets the matter drop, because he is a good friend and doesn't want to tire Harry's poor, over-taxed brain.

"What about you?" he asks instead.

"I'm not comparing shoe sizes," says Harry. "It's juvenile and pointless and mine are way bigger anyway."

"Stop thinking about my boyfriend's shoes," says Carlos. "No, I meant—" He stops, half-wishes he'd never brought it up.

"What?"

"You are still trying, right?" he says. "To figure out what the right calls are?"

"Hell, I'm probably never going to figure it out," says Harry. "But I'm gonna keep on trying until there's nothing left of me to try."

"Good," says Carlos.

"I mean, someone has to hold it together to keep an eye on you," says Harry. "I take a couple years' leave, and suddenly the White Council's golden boy has a mirror-verse clone cannonballing the Currents of Time while he's busy attending bowling orgies."

"That's what you get for not filling out your paperwork," says Carlos.

Teddy bursts into the room, irritably flapping a stack of X-rays at Harry. "How long has it been since your parthenogenic section?" he demands.

"Uh," says Harry.

"What?" says Carlos.

"Don't make me get the HIPAA forms," says Teddy threateningly. "Your mind underwent parturition less than three months ago, correct?"

"What," says Carlos.

"In a manner of speaking... well, yeah," says Harry. Teddy picks up a reflex mallet and hits him in the middle of the forehead. "Ow!"

"That's still working, at least," says Teddy. "You shouldn't be exerting yourself in your condition, not until you're fully healed. You could seriously damage your chances for future successful gestations!"

"Uh," says Harry. "Sorry?"

"You need to schedule a follow-up visit with a specialist, or with City Council for therapeutic
"howling," says Teddy. "I'll write you a referral. Don't move until I'm done filing your discharges." He rounds on Carlos. "Especially you, Mr. I-Lost-Three-Pints-of-Blood-But-I'll-Just-Walk-It-Off the Scientist." Then he stalks out of the room, hooting derisively under his breath.

"Are you sure he's a licensed medical professional?" asks Harry.

"Did he seriously just say what I think he said?" says Carlos.

Harry sighs. Then he pulls his wallet out of his back pocket. He takes something out and passes it to Carlos.

It's a picture of a girl, old enough to join the Book Club. She has her dark hair in pigtails and is wearing a *Clone Wars* t-shirt. There's a carved wooden skull sitting in her lap with two points of green fire burning in the eye-sockets. The skull is wearing a tiara.

"They're cute," says Carlos. "Also, *what the hell.*"

"It's a long story," says Harry. "A long, complicated story, which I will explain when I'm not under the influence of brain damage."

"So never, then," says Carlos. He twists out of the way when Harry half-heartedly tries to kick his ankle. "No, it's fine, you can tell me whenever you want."

"Good," says Harry.

They sit in peace for a moment, until Carlos starts singing under his breath, "*Papa don't preach, I'm in trouble deep—*"

Carlos is saved from the Winter Knight's fearsome retribution (trying to dump ice cubes down Carlos' shirt) when Teddy comes back into the room and glares at them until they both sit down.

~*~*~*~

When they're finally discharged, Harry gets a copy of *What to Expect When You Weren't Expecting* and a pink balloon that says *It's a girl!*

Carlos gets a lollipop.

Teddy escorts them out past the racks of shoes, then disappears through a trapdoor.

"The van will be back in a few minutes, if you can wait," Julie is saying. "I can't fit everyone in the Prius."

"Thank you, Doctor Renegade – oh, they're out!" Cecil and Julie are waiting for them by the front desk; a second later, Mouse trots back from investigating Lane Five and sits, tail wagging vigorously.

"You're okay?" Cecil asks, looking between them.

"Just a couple stitches," says Carlos.

"Bag of ice and an alarming lecture on post-natal care," says Harry.

"Oh, good," says Cecil. "Teddy's one of the best. Congratulations on your new mindspawn!"

A slightly pained look comes over Harry's face, but all he says is, "Thank you."
After carefully inspecting him for any hidden injuries, Cecil pulls Carlos into a gentle hug. But Carlos buries his face in Cecil's shoulder and squeezes tight, despite the objections of various body parts, because he almost lost this, almost lost Cecil, and still isn’t quite sure how he managed to get him back.

He eases his grip, but doesn't go very far; Cecil keeps a firm hold on him. Carlos is just fine with that.

Harry is frowning at Julie, who still has the Teleforce strapped to her back.

"I'm not hugging you," she says.

"Oh, sorry," says Harry. "I was just calculating the odds that you've ever shouted the phrase 'I'll show them! I'll show them all!' while waving around your science gun."

"Low," says Julie. "I'm too busy pressing big red button while laughing maniacally. I'm Doctor Renegade."

He squints. "Is that a supervillain name, or..."

"Says the wizard named Harry," says Julie. "You can call me Julie. I'd shake, but I'm afraid if I come any closer you'll blow something up."

"I get that a lot," says Harry. "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise," says Julie. "Were you the one who Feynman-sprinklered the water tower?"

He jerks a thumb at Carlos. "He started it," says Harry.

"Figures," says Julie. "So which one of you encased the drawbridge in ice, knocked it over, and set the pieces on fire?"

"This is my dog, Mouse," says Harry loudly. "Mouse, say hello to the nice people."

Julie holds her hand out with a look of extreme misgiving, but Mouse just gently nudges it with his nose and wags his tail twice before padding over to Carlos and Cecil.

Instead of unwinding himself from Carlos to shake the proffered paw, Cecil shuffles them around until he can free just his right arm. "What a handsome Temple dog!" says Cecil. "You certainly have him well-trained."

Mouse barks once, over Harry trying to say, "Thanks, although—"

"They're certainly a handful, aren't they?" says Cecil. "I know mine is."

"Actually, he—"

Mouse barks again.

"Oh, I know what you mean," says Cecil with a chuckle. "It's a pleasure to meet you!" He scratches Mouse behind the ears. Then he straightens and manhandles Carlos until Cecil is once again, Carlos realizes, directly between him and Lane Five.

"You don't have to do that," says Carlos.

Cecil raises an eyebrow. "I don't think you need any more near-death experiences today, mister."
Carlos wants to protest that most of his near-death experiences didn't technically take place today, but then thinks the better of it.

"You almost died in a bowling alley?" asks Harry, poorly repressing a grin, because his middle name should really be hypocrite.

Carlos narrows his eyes. "There's an underground civilization beneath Lane Five," he says coolly. "Their hostilities took us by surprise."

"Welllll, not exactly 'by surprise'," says Cecil, with an apologetic pat to Carlos' shoulder. "I mean, I imagine you were pretty surprised when they ambushed you—"

Harry snickers.

"—But the beings who are definitely not angels had been watching them for – are you all right?"

One of the barrels of the Teleforce squeals, a disco ball pops out of the ceiling and begins to rotate in fits and starts, and Harry buries his face in his duster, sobbing noisily.

“What’s his deal?” asks Julie.

“Hormones,” says Carlos, and Cecil has to catch What to Expect When You're Not Expecting before it hits his face.

Julie backs up several steps and pulls something that looks like a silver hockey puck out of her lab coat. "Whoa," she says. "Hey, Mr. Freeze: whatever you're doing, keep it up! These readings are nearly off the charts!" She takes out her phone and dials a number. "Hi, Andre," she says, connecting the puck with long white cord. "You'll never guess—"

"How are you doing that?" wails Harry, pointing at her phone.

"Check it out, there's a spike in the scattercast! Just hold on a sec," she says to Andre, then lowers the phone. "Well, the phone converts my voice into an electrical signal," she says kindly. "That's transmitted via radio waves to the nearest base station, which—"

"Cell phones don't work around wizards!"

"Maybe yours doesn't," she says. "It's not my fault my smartphone is smarter than you." She pulls out several pages of slightly-crumpled paper and slides it down the registration counter to him. "Can you sign those?" she asks. "I'd like to use this data."

Harry wipes his nose on his sleeve and eyes the papers dubiously. "What am I giving my 'informed and enthusiastic consent' for?"

"Science," says Julie. "The experiment parameters are in paragraph two. The short version is that we will keep your data anonymous and confidential and will not accidentally read them in lieu of the Traffic Report, Cecil."

"Well, certainly not anymore," says Cecil cheerfully.

There's a loud mechanical screech; they all look up as the disco ball retreats into the ceiling.

Harry frowns back down at the consent form. "I want a copy of this," he says, flipping to page two.

"No problem," Julie replies, sliding down another stack of paper. Harry reads the final page, sets the two copies side by side to compare them, and then hands Cecil his balloon so he can root around his
pockets. He pulls out a pen and signs the bottom line.

"My card's there, too," says Julie, after he pushes the signed copy back to her. "Let me know if you suffer any negative side effects. Unless it's about your weird mobile-phobia – that's all on you."

"It's just not right!" protests Harry.

A sly grin creeps across her face. "I think you need to just—"

"Julie, no," says Carlos.

"—Let it go," she finishes gleefully.

The jukebox by the concession stand fires up a mournful piano intro.

"Doctor Renegade, you know that song has been listed on the Mandatory Earworm Registry!" says Cecil, his voice reproachful.

Harry stares moodily at the disco ball, which has begun to descend once again. "I was trapped on an island by myself for the whole winter and I still think this song is over-played," he says.

"Worth it," says Julie, at Carlos' extremely judgmental look. "Anyway, so back to the subject of near-death experiences——"

"Oof," says Carlos, as Cecil clutches him tightly to his chest.

"—When I was talking to Andre, he mentioned he's checked all the sensor readouts and there's no sign of any more vortices," she says. "Kate's been monitoring the GhoulsWatch hashtag on Twitter and says there have been no more verifiable sightings, Wei's pretty sure that Strex Corp's security teams have all been pulled to guard a sinkhole which definitely isn't over any secret facilities they didn't have, and Gary wants to know if anyone wants any green honey."

"Green honey?" asks Carlos.

"Apparently the bees got into his M&M stash," says Julie with a shrug.

"What about the White Court?" asks Harry. "Didn't you say there was a Raith running around?"

"We defeated her with the power of friendship," says Julie.

"Is Friendship the name of your science gun?" asks Harry.

The disco ball makes another alarming noise. Cecil jerks the It's a girl! balloon out of range and passes it back to Harry. "You know, you should really have a christening ceremony," he says. "Cut the ribbon, smash a bottle of wine against your creation..."

"I really hope you're talking to me and not him," says Julie.

Carlos rests his head against Cecil’s shoulder and lets his eyes shut, just for a moment. The adrenaline is long gone from his system; even his second – third – whatever wind he had left has started to flag.

But he has so much left to do. He might be on medical leave, but he just can’t let Night Vale’s wards go unmonitored, not when they’ve been put through so much abuse. And Dr. Raith might be gone,
but Strex Corp isn’t – and if they, or worse, the White Court, realize that Dr. Raith didn’t die from a
natural disaster, or figure out that the disaster wasn’t so natural after all, the fallout isn’t going to be
pretty. And maybe not even metaphorical.

And then there’s Desert Bluffs and its Smiling God. The town his double couldn’t save.

*Light in the desert...*

Something chimes close by. He opens his eyes.

"Would you look at the time," says Cecil. He shifts his left arm until the watch Carlos gave him for
their anniversary is at Carlos’ eye-level.

"Ten o'clock," says Carlos.

"And all's well," says Cecil with a smile.

And it’s not exactly true, but while things aren’t perfect, right now, in this very moment, they’re
doing...

They're doing okay.

He’s got Cecil, and his friends are safe, and Night Vale still exists. Carlos has a lot to do and no idea
how to do it, but that’s a problem for the future. At least he’s managed to make sure they have one.

He smiles back.

Mouse’s ears go up. Harry frowns. “Does anyone else hear a bunch of people shouting ‘For the glory
of Huntokhar’ very quietly?” he asks.

Carlos yelps as Cecil flings them both to the ground.

Julie rolls her eyes and spools up the Teleforce. “Don’t worry,” she says. “I’ll protect you from the
army of tiny people.”

Harry looks up in alarm from where he’s crouching behind the registration counter. “They wouldn’t
have nail guns, would they?”

“Why would they have nail guns,” says Julie.

“Because tiny people are bastards,” says Harry.

Carlos is very gently squashed to the ground as Cecil rolls on top of him. “I’d like to see them try,”
Cecil says hotly.

"You know, Carlos," says Julie. "I haven't conducted an exhaustive survey, but having met a certain
sample of the people you hang out with: it explains a *lot*."

When they make a break for the door, Harry hexes the jukebox and accidentally sets it on fire, Cecil
puts it out with his personal fire extinguisher and then insists on carrying Carlos the rest of the way
out, and Julie takes their six, just in case the civilization under Lane Five is eager to be introduced to
the thrill of scientific discovery in the form of concentrated non-dispersive energy, projected through
the natural media.

Carlos never bothers arguing with her. She’s right most of the time, anyway.
Any concerns Carlos had about time-travel-induced insomnia are quickly put to rest (hah) when he sleeps for almost two straight days. Harry is apparently staying in his apartment, as he discovers when he wakes up long enough to stumble off in search of food and finds him sitting at the table with Cecil.

"—And that's Zayn," Cecil is saying. Harry is frowning down at a brightly-colored magazine. "He's the sensitive one with surgically-implanted gills who will never, ever, ever leave the group."

"Huh," says Harry. "Okay, but who's this Larry Stylinson character Athena keeps talking about?"

Carlos wakes up some time later, except now he's on the couch with Cecil's tie-dyed orange business poncho draped over him and a half-eaten box of Flaky-Os in his lap and zero recollection of how he got there, which is when he reluctantly emends his concerns to include time-travel-induced narcolepsy.

He twists around and peers over the back of the couch. Mouse, who was probably lying in wait, darts up and licks his face.

Harry's in the kitchen, chatting on the landline. When he hears Carlos' sputtering, he turns around and gives him a wave.

"—you too, Maggie. I'll see you—" Harry stops and listens a moment. He takes out a notebook and flips through it until he finds what he's looking for, then says, "I agree with you, kiddo: Twilight Sparkle could definitely take him in a fight. But you're still not allowed to make fun of Athena – No. Not even then. Okay, I do make fun of people all the time, but they know I'm joking. Usually. We'll talk when I get back, sweetheart. Can you put Mrs. Carpenter on before I say goodbye?"

He covers the receiver with his hand. "How are you feeling?" he asks Carlos.

"What year is it?" asks Carlos.


"I'm—" Carlos cuts off in a yawn. "—'m fine," he finishes.

His head feels oddly heavy. He rests it on the back of the couch.

"If you say so, big guy," says Harry. He's probably being sarcastic and/or condescending, but lifting his head and confirming his facial expressions seems like way too much effort to Carlos. "I just wanted to let you know – I found my client."

"Client," Carlos repeats, into the couch cushions. His brain eventually discloses the relevant context re: Harry's arrival in Night Vale. "They're not in the Dog Park, are they?"

"They're definitely not in the Dog Park," says Harry, far too confidently for Carlos' peace of mind. "I'm going to try to track them down later today, so I'll probably be out of your hair soon. Or should I say I'll be out of your nearly perfect and still beautiful hair soon?"

"Yes," says Carlos. "My hair is great."

"So I've heard," says Harry. "Repeatedly. I can't believe you found someone worse at sharing personal information than you."
Then he winces and holds the phone a foot away from his ear.

"Hi, Charity," he says, over the sound of someone being loudly displeased on the other end. "Thank you for watching— No, I'm sorry I didn't get back by— Actually I'm— That's not—"

Carlos decides that exhaustion is the better part of valor and goes back to sleep.

He's back in bed when he finally shakes off the grip of unconsciousness for good. It's late afternoon, judging by the sun. Cecil is reporting on a fifty-car pile-up at the Pinewood Derby for Traffic.

Carlos yawns and rubs a hand over his face, which is when he discovers that someone's stuck a Post-It note on his forehead.

_Sleeping Beauty_ –

_Tell Cecil thanks for letting me crash on the couch._

– Harry

_P.S. Give me a shout if you ever need back-up. You know how dull Chicago gets._

_P.P.S. Sorry about all your appliances._

The refrigerator has stopped running, but there's a giant block of ice sitting on the top shelf and two more in the freezer. Carlos starts finishing the last carton of frozen yogurt, just in case.

"Listeners, we've just had a special report from a caller who wishes to remain anonymous, as she doesn't want to be distracted from her efforts to introduce a greater appreciation of the arts – opera, to use a totally random example – to Night Vale, or to free our fair city from the grips of its tyrannic—"

There's a pause and the faint sound of discussion in the background.

"Sorry," says Cecil. "I meant to say, ensure that our fair city stays safely in the hands of our benevolent new overlords. Ownership! Benevolent new ownership. She certainly doesn't want to be distracted from focusing on them, that's for sure.

"Old Woman Anonymous Caller reports that the mysterious wizard and his physically intimidating yet sweet-tempered plastic bag, who have brought so much excitement to our normally fire-free town, have finally left Night Vale. She just happened to be passing by a house near the used car lot, which has stood empty for several months, when the man approached her and offered to carry her surveying equipment and cleaning supplies. He then assisted her in giving the house a good scrubbing and even changed the bulb in the porch light for her. She said it was quite easy because he was so tall.

"It turned out that she and the stranger had friends in common, though he grew rather tearful while discussing them. However, she managed to change the subject, and even though the stranger reportedly did not watch television he still gave an insightful critique of ballroom dance techniques that our anonymous caller says, 'really opened my eyes about the last season of _Dancing With the Stars_'. The stranger and his plastic bag then bid her farewell and departed almost completely without incident, except for a minor brush fire and the shutdown of Route 800 near Exit 15, on account of the frozen carcass of a giant worm blocking the northbound lanes.

"I think there’s an important lesson to learn from all this, listeners. Yes, wizards are the leading cause of decapitation in Night Vale..."
"Yes, they refuse to adhere to chanting guidelines and employ a dangerously unregulated system of magic. Yes, two days ago they caused tens of thousands of dollars’ worth of property damage and clean-up costs from their skirmishing, explosions, and meat rains – not to mention the weeks of water restrictions due to the destruction of the water tower..."

Carlos winces.

Carlos sits down on the floor. It's not that he doesn't believe Cecil, when Cecil has said he's okay with what Carlos is; Cecil obviously didn't even mind keeping Harry out of trouble for the past couple days.

Carlos had just hoped – rather foolishly – that Cecil would have accepted him because of what he was, not in spite of it. That Cecil could overcome just one of the deeply-ingrained prejudices Night Vale breeds and—

"But wizards play an important part in our society, dear listeners," says Cecil. "They helpfully keep secrets from us about the hidden evils lurking just out of sight, so we can enjoy a tenuous peace of mind instead of screaming into the void every night for even longer. They make treaties with dangerous beings so that they must clandestinely prey on humankind instead of openly ruling the darkness. They even post those lovely signs reminding us that Night Vale is filled with unearthly abominations and we should leave immediately or suffer the consequences, in case we ever happen to forget.

"Now, I'm certainly not saying that it's a good thing that several wizards just happened to show up and join forces with our Children’s Militia to rid our town of deadly infestations of ghouls. That sort of behavior is highly irregular and not in keeping with a business-savvy team-oriented approach to community corporatization. But I think it's well worth considering, the next time you’re looking down the scope of your high-powered anti-wizard rifle, that wizards are after all people, just like us – with the same kindnesses, and hobbies, and general cluelessness about the entertainment media aimed at preteen girls – and let them who are without pyrokinesis cast the first stone, or hollow-pointed bullet."

Carlos peeks through his fingers and waits, breathlessly, for the other shoe to drop.

But Cecil only continues, in a cheerful tone, "And now it's time for the Community Calendar! Due to massive time fluctuations, next week has been canceled. It will be replaced by seven of eleven available days held over since 1752—" and Carlos is so overcome with relief he has to lie down on the kitchen floor and take a short nap.

~*~*~*~

Carlos manages to shower and change the dressings on his arm with only one short break to rest his eyes. He's rubbing ointment on the dozens of bruises and scrapes he's accumulated over the past 67 million years when he hears an irritated blip somewhere in the apartment.

His phone is sitting on the kitchen counter. Someone – most likely Harry – has surrounded it with a circle of salt. Carlos has no idea if he was trying to protect it or contain it.

There's a message from Julie, asking him to stop by the lab, and a text from Cecil: *Let me know when you wake up!*

He texts back, *I'm awake.*

Cecil replies with a smiley face. Carlos stares at it for a while, trying to decipher what it means.
Cecil's happy, obviously. But is he happy that Carlos is awake? That Carlos is honoring his requests for updates? That Carlos just is?

He decides he needs to deal with it later, when his head is a little more clear, and calls the lab instead.

Gary picks up the phone. "You're awake!" he says. Carlos can hear a loud buzzing in the background.

"For sure," says Carlos. "Look, Dr. Kwan asked me to come over, but I, uh, don't think I should be driving. So—"

"No problem," says Gary. "Kate and I will come get you!" Then he hangs up.

Carlos snorts and goes to look for his lab coat, because apparently he's going to the lab now.

Kate and Gary pull up in front of his apartment building not in the Scienctomobile, or Kate's Harley-and-sidecar combo, but in a backhoe. Kate is driving; Gary is partially dressed in his beekeeping suit and riding in the front loader.

"Hi, Carlos!" says Kate. "What's up?"

"Besides Gary?" he says.

"We're renovating the labs!" says Gary. "One of the hives swarmed and went in the walls, so we have to get them out before we fix the hole."

"With a backhoe?" asks Carlos as he climbs in next to Kate.

"You can rent them at City Hall," says Kate. "The backhoe lurches a little as she puts it in gear. "You don't even need a license! I offered to pick it up since I already know how to use one."

"Where did you learn that?"

"Well," says Kate, "Joe and Kelly and I were filming this video, and we decided to go on location —" and Carlos realizes that it is probably too late to join Gary in the front loader.

The lab isn't far, but the backhoe doesn't move very fast or corner very well. Their journey ends up being long, twisted, and full of delays, not unlike certain parts of Kate's story.

"Machine oil?" asks Carlos at one point.

"Yeah, I can't actually recommend that," she replies. "So, how are you and Cecil doing?"

Carlos takes out his phone and pulls up his last conversation. The smiley face is still there, as remote and mysterious as the copy of the Mona Lisa buried under the Beatrix Loman Memorial Meditation Zone.

Just yesterd– uh – just two days ago, Cecil found out that Carlos had been lying to him since the moment they met. Then he saved Carlos' life and forgave him. And now he's just... happy? That can't be it, right? And Carlos owes him an explanation. A lot of explanations.

"I think we're okay, but... so much has changed," says Carlos. "I need to – we need to talk."

He looks at Kate for confirmation, and she gives him an encouraging smile.

Carlos writes We need to talk. Then he immediately erases it, heart pounding, because that's – that's
not the message he wants to send at all.

Communication is hard, he says instead, because Cecil deserves a reminder that Carlos is terrible at this. He also includes an emoji of a pack of velociraptors riding motorcycles.

It's one of the most deadly forms of social interaction! Cecil replies.

Carlos chews on his lip and wonders how to segue from that to arranging a chance to have a serious conversation without implying anything unfortunate.

Do you want to get dinner? he asks.

Cecil replies with three smiley faces. Carlos smiles back at them.

"You'll do fine," says Kate sagely.

"Thanks," says Carlos. "Kate, I'm glad you lead such a fulfilling life. And that you remembered to wear a hard hat."

"Thank you, Carlos!" she says. "Oh, so speaking of hard hats – at that point Kelly and I were able to get Joe on the wrecking ball, and..."

When they finally reach the lab, Kate slows down so Carlos can hop out, then carefully circles the building with a cheerful "Bye, Carlos!" Gary salutes him and puts on his veil as the front loader lifts skyward.

The lab is a scene of organized chaos. Thick cables snake their way across the yard in all directions; Carlos picks his way through them carefully. Wei is hanging out the open doors of the Scienecmobile, affixing a satellite dish to the roof with duct tape. Andre sits at a card table underneath an open-sided tent crowded with mining equipment and piles of pale blue rocks. As Carlos watches, he turns on a microscope that's plugged directly into the ground.

With the exception of the gaping hole in the side of Lab Two, everything looks almost back to normal.

Carlos heads towards Andre. He doesn't see Julie anywhere, though he doubts she would—

“Don’t move!” shouts Wei. Now he's balancing a laptop on the roof of the van.

Carlos freezes. “What is it?”

“It’s your technological distortion field,” says Wei. “I’m picking up Big Rico’s wifi!”

Carlos sighs. At least he’s made it into the shade. "You've got ten minutes," he says. "But I hope you don't mind listening to the radio."

"What?" says Wei, then yelps and almost drops the laptop as Cecil's voice booms from all available speakers, "Here’s a modest proposal: take your children to Swift’s Daycare!"

Andre chuckles and says, "I guess you two have made up."

Carlos blinks. "What?"

"It's the signal-to-noise ratio of your spontaneous electromagnetic reception," says Andre. He taps the dial of a small device plugged into the ground next to his microscope. When Carlos stares at him blankly, he continues, "There's a 47% increase in purple noise when you two are happy with each
"Other."

"Purple noise?"

"That's what Julie calls it," says Andre. "I think I have the figures somewhere—" He rummages around his messenger bag. He pulls out a small binder and pushes it into Carlos' unresisting hands. "Look at the ratio of the power spectral frequency to the frequency of the signal! And you'll notice the correspondence with spikes in emotional state, though of course it's also been increasing at a steady rate—"

Specifically, it's been increasing at a steady rate since June 15, 2013.

"The charts could be more accurate, of course, since mood evaluation is only based on outside observation. But if you and Cecil wanted to fill out a psychological battery, we certainly wouldn't say no!"

Carlos flips through page after page of detailed notes in five different sets of handwriting, all about his radio-listening habits and radio-listening feelings. "...Why?" he manages, in a slightly strangled voice.

"We were just trying to figure out why we kept picking up Cecil's show," says Andre. "That's how we discovered there was a new type of electronic noise being transmitted. But when we realized that you were one of the variables, well..." He at least has the grace to look a little sheepish. "We don't have much in the way of entertainment in the labs, thanks to the protections you've laid down – which we deeply appreciate! I'm not complaining – but when we're waiting for the mineral analysis to complete or the code to compile or the bees to settle down, we have to... make our own fun. I mean, it's a fascinating phenomenon, and you listen with such consistency, and there were just so many intriguing correlations..." He trails off, then rallies with, "We just want you to be happy, Carlos. In an observationally quantifiable way."

"That's kind of creepy, Andre," says Carlos. "But also kind of... nice. I guess."

He flips through an appendix, which thankfully focuses on the purple noise and not on the human subject's quote unquote goofy dorkface. He wonders what kind of things have been hidden in the electronic noise of Night Vale's radio signals over the years. Subliminal messages? Ritual triggers? Death curses, almost certainly. But Dr. Raith had reacted to Cecil's voice when she had been trying to feed on Carlos, and—

His eyes go wide.

"We weren't planning on using the data for anything," says Andre, his voice earnest. "But I have a consent form you can sign if you want to—"

"Maybe later," says Carlos faintly. He tries to pull himself together, because – it's not like he didn't know Cecil loved him, he just didn't think he could – they could—

"You'll be fine," says Andre, patting him on the arm. "His enthusiasm index is in the top 2.1% of the Gaussian distribution. Just look at figure 54!"

"Yeah, he definitely... yeah," says Carlos, and gives himself a shake. "Look, Andre... thanks for the other day. I don't think I would have made— I couldn't have done it without you."

"I am neither confirming nor denying anything," says Andre. "But any time, Carlos. And I mean that quite literally."
Carlos feels himself smiling. "What about you guys?" he asks. "Is everything all right?"

"Once we get Gary's hive out of the walls, we should be back inside in under a week!" says Andre.

Carlos opens his mouth to say that he meant, "Is everything all right for each of you, personally," but changes his mind and asks, "Where's Julie?" Everyone seems physically and psychologically okay, but he'll check on them again after they no longer have the lab repairs as a distraction.

"Down in her workshop," says Andre. "She wanted to keep an eye on the wireless power transmitter."

A loud beeping makes them both look up. Kate shifts out of reverse, then carefully eases the backhoe forward to the hole in Lab Two. Gary leans out of the front loader, puts a stethoscope on the wall, and almost immediately loses his balance and topples over the side.

"I'm okay!" he shouts.

"A week, huh?" says Carlos.

"You can't rush good results," says Andre. "This hive is especially good at sensing ferrimagnetic materials and seismic vibrations. And their latest batch of honey is delicious." He pulls out a jar filled with a viscous green liquid and, as Carlos looks on in slightly horrified fascination, dips one of his rocks into it and eats it.

"Such a fascinating local deposit," says Andre, crunching happily. He does a double-take at Carlos' face, and holds up another piece of rock. "Vimbee?"

~*~*~*~

It tastes like Smarties.

~*~*~*~

It's dim inside the labs, lit only by the windows and a few emergency lights. Swaths of mosquito netting hang everywhere. As Carlos descends towards Julie's workshop accompanied by the constant droning of the bees, he wonders at what point it officially qualifies as a lair.

He knocks on the door and enters at her reply.

"Good morning, sunshine!" says Julie. "Nice of you to drop by."

"It's afternoon," says Carlos.

"Pfft," says Julie, waving a hand dismissively. Over her shoulder, Carlos can see the Earthquake Machine lurking in a corner. The Teleforce has been disassembled on her work table, and she's methodically picking up each piece and cleaning it before packing it neatly away in a box labelled FACULTY/STAFF SATISFACTION FORMS – PLEASE FILL OUT IN TRIPlicate.

"Stay on that side of the line," she says, pointing at the floor. "We're stuck with wireless power until I fix all the circuits, and the transmitter is pretty temperamental. Would you mind pulling that lever for me?"

There's a large, red lever a few feet from the door. Carlos hauls it downwards.

He yelps as it zaps him with a painful electric pulse.
"What the hell, Julie?!!"

"That," says Julie, "is for tying me up and running off to your certain doom last November."

"It wasn't certain doom," says Carlos, shaking out his hands.

"Really?" says Julie. "So you didn't need to be saved by me, Andre, the grad students, the post-grad student, your boyfriend—"

"Julie—"

"—Snow Miser, the Mockingjay, her badass soccer mom, Krypto the Superdog—"

"I get it, Julie," says Carlos. "I appreciated your help, but I would have figured something out."

"Or you could have asked us for help in the first place and saved everyone a lot of stress," she replies. "Me, for example. Do you know how hard it is to get everyone to brainstorm ways to save your sorry ass when you can't tell them why or when? I couldn't even take it out on you because you hadn't even done it — or not done it, you tool — yet. I almost had an aneurysm trying not to punch your stupid face."

"How did you even —" Carlos sighs heavily. "You read my letter. Julie, that wasn't for you."

"I know!" says Julie. She points her pliers at him accusingly. "It was for your replacement. You thought you were going to kick the bucket and you still wouldn't let us help. I had to commit mail fraud for you!"

"I didn't want you to—" He stops.

"Didn't want us to what?"

Carlos slumps against the wall. "You're scientists," he says. "You're supposed to save the world with science, not creative ways to commit murder and mayhem. That's my job. You shouldn't have had to do it while I was here."

Julie comes over and leans next to him. "It's not enough to just collect data, you know," she says. "You have to know what to do with it."

"I know that," he says.

She punches him in the arm. "Then you should know that we asked you to teach us how to protect ourselves."

"But—"

"We made the choice to deal with the consequences the moment we decided to stay in Night Vale," she says. "Do you think I wanted to make two of the greatest scientific re-discoveries of the century so I could undermine an evil corporation and blow up my vampire nemesis?"

Carlos stares at her.

"Okay, I don't know how to answer that question either," says Julie. "It was awesome, yet horrible. But we set off the evacuation alarms at Strex Corp and I told Raith I was gonna shoot. They made their choices and I made mine, and that was to help you and protect my research opportunities. So stop feeling guilty for stuff that's not your fault and start feeling guilty for stuff that is, because I swear to God, Carlos, if you pull a stunt like that again I'm using you for target practice."
"Thank, Julie," says Carlos.

"Target practice," she repeats. She returns to the table and starts popping LEDs out of the blinky light array.

"For what it's worth," says Carlos. "I don't think you made the wrong choice."

She shoots a glance at him, then goes back to sorting LEDs, but Carlos thinks the set of her shoulders relaxes just a little.

"What are you going to do with these?" he asks, nodding towards the Earthquake Machine and the Teleforce.

"I'm gonna do what I do best," she says.

"Shout at people until they're less stupid?"

She throws an LED at him. "I'm gonna think about it," she says. "Carrying around potential weapons of mass destruction in my brain is kind of a big responsibility, who knew. I don't think I should be the only one in charge of that kind of power, but – I want to make sure that knowledge isn't used for – for evil, either."

"Tesla took a sledgehammer to his Earthquake Machine," says Carlos.

"And yet, here we are," says Julie, gesturing at her workshop, or possibly at all of Night Vale. She finishes packing away the Teleforce and duct-tapes the box shut. "Here, come carry this."

Carlos follows her to one of the storage rooms. It's full of metal shelving stacked with identical boxes. He hefts the box onto a mostly-empty shelf with a grunt and asks, "Okay, which ones are actual paperwork, and which one is the Ark of the Covenant?"

"There's only one person with a bullwhip on this team, and it's not me," says Julie, uncapping a Sharpie. She sets the tip on the side of the box, but hesitates.

"You're pretty much a potential weapon of mass destruction," she says. "Would you... would you ever just... stop?"

A year ago, Carlos never would have even considered the question. But he's older now, and tired in a way that doesn't have anything to do with how much he slept, so he thinks about it.

He thinks about his double. He thinks about Harry and Captain Luccio. He thinks about his bisabuela teaching him his shield spell, the first magic he ever deliberately learned.

"I'd never stop doing magic," he says. "It's part of who I am. But – it matters how you use it. I'd stop fighting, if I cou– if I had to. It just wouldn't stop the rest of the world from using it the wrong way."

Julie looks up at him. "If the world isn't ready for this kind of knowledge, then maybe we need to change the world," she says, and writes FOR REVIEW on the side of the box in big, bold letters.

"You get the lever," says Carlos. "I'll find a place to stand."

"Now you're thinking like a scientist," she says approvingly. "There's hope for you yet."

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Carlos makes reservations at Gino's and spends the rest of the afternoon putting together a casserole,
dropping it off at the Flynns', and stopping halfway home at the ward focus in Mission Grove Park so he can take a power-nap somewhere relatively safe.

When he wakes up twenty minutes later, there’s a large and expensive truck parked next to him.

Cactus June is sitting in the bed in the shade of her namesake. Champ is on her lap, and she’s reading to him from a Little Golden Book.

“But that I am forbid to tell the secrets of my prison-house,” she says, “I could a tale unfold whose lightest word would harrow up thy soul, freeze thy young blood; make thy two eyes, like stars, start from their spheres, thy knotted and combined locks to part and each particular hair to stand on end, like quills upon the fretful porpentine!” She turns the page. “But this eternal blazon must not be to ears of flesh and blood.”

Champ giggles.

She looks up at Carlos and smiles. “Angels and ministers of grace defend us!” she says pleasantly.

“Hi,” says Carlos. “I'd like to thank you for your help, the other day.”

She inclines her head graciously.

“But I have a couple questions,” he continues.

“Speak,” she says. “I am bound to hear.”

“Who are you? And no Hamlet quotes, please.”

She looks at him steadily for a moment. Then she puts Champ in his car seat and stands up.

“I have bedimm'd the noontide sun,” she says, walking to the edge of the tailgate until she's looming over him. She looks up at the sky. "Call'd forth the mutinous winds, and 'twixt the green sea and the azured vault set roaring war."

She lifts her hands, palms up. The wind gusts, and prickles of power run up and down the back of Carlos’ neck.

"To the dread rattling thunder have I given fire, and rifted Jove's stout oak with his own bolt," she continues, her voice rising. Green thunderheads gather overhead, swirl together as the storm wards wake.

"The strong-based promontory have I made shake!" she shouts, and thrusts one hand at the sky. “By my—"

Purple lightning flashes.

“—Most potent—”

The ground shudders at the answering clap of thunder.

“—Art!"

She clenches her fist.

The wind dies and the clouds disappear, as though nothing had ever disturbed them. She looks back down at him.
"But this rough magic I here abjured," she finishes, in a normal tone.

She sits down.

Carlos lets go of the hilt of his sword.

"...If you could lay off The Tempest, too, that would be great," he says. "Why are you in Night Vale?"

"Time yet serves," she says, "Wherein I may redeem my banish’d honors and restore myself into the good thoughts of the world again."

Carlos rubs his forehead.

"This segment brought to you by Gino's Italian Dining Experience and Bar and Grill!" says Cecil from the truck's radio. Some resonance activates the subwoofer and makes the whole truck bed vibrate. Champ squeals and claps his hands. "Gino's: the perfect place to reconnect with your special someone. The perfect place to observe the groveling of your special someone. The perfect place to accept tribute delivered on hands and knees while begging for forgiveness from your special someone."

"Wait," says Carlos. "He's not talking about me, is he?" Cecil's not really the type to enjoy groveling. Carlos is not above begging for forgiveness on hands and knees, but— "Am I supposed to get him a gift?"

"O, a kiss long as my exile, sweet as my revenge!" she suggests.

Carlos gives her a look.

"I'm sorry, is that mushy?" she says. "Well, you know what they say. Ča ėdtän rũ sã, ļe's a marshmallow."

There's an odd pressure against his eardrums, but when he looks around for the source, nothing seems wrong.

He turns back to Cactus Judy. She's holding Champ's arms and gently waving them around. Champ burbles with laughter and spit-bubbles.

"Look, just... stay out of trouble, okay?" says Carlos.

"Will do," she says. "Try the eggplant at Gino's, it's to die for. Bring your sword."

"...Thanks," he says. "You – have a nice day."

"Fare thee well at once!" says Cactus Jane. As he climbs back in his car, she begins reading to Champ again. "The glow-worm shows the matin to be near, and 'gins to pale his uneffectual fire: Adieu, adieu!"

~*~*~*~

Carlos gets to Gino's first, so he can short out all the bugs the Sheriff's Secret Police planted in the private room he reserved. He goes a little overboard, but hey, candlelight is more romantic anyway.

Setting up protection against all other eavesdroppers only takes a few minutes, and then there's nothing to do but wait. His leg keeps jiggling nervously. He's concentrating so hard on keeping it still as Cecil signs off that he accidentally falls asleep.
The sound of footsteps startles him awake. He leaps to his feet.

"Hi," says Cecil, slipping inside. He shuts the door behind him and flips the three deadbolts. "Sorry I'm late!"

"Hi," says Carlos. He sticks his hand out. "I'm Carlos."

Cecil stares at it for a moment before a tiny smile pulls at the corner of his mouth. "Hi, Carlos," he says. "I'm Cecil." He takes Carlos' hand, but before they can shake, Carlos pulls Cecil's up to his lips and kisses the back. The tips of Cecil's ears turn pink.

Carlos pulls his chair out for him. Cecil waits until they're both seated before asking, "So... I'm in community radio. What do you do, Carlos?"

"I'm a wizard of the White Council and the regional commander of Wardens in the western United States," says Carlos.


"The imprisoned servants of the elder gods slumbering deep beneath the earth," says Carlos.

"Literally, or..."

"No," says Carlos, shaking his head before realizing how redundant that is. "To get here I usually take a shortcut through another dimension. Or, you know. Drive."

"That sounds like a lot of work," says Cecil. Carlos can't read his expression at all.

"It's... Night Vale is – it's by far the most magically interesting community in the U.S.," says Carlos. He tries smiling and feels it twist nervously on his face. "And the... the people here have kind of grown on me over the years."

“Oh?” says Cecil.

"Yeah," says Carlos. "Everyone makes me all these casseroles and fruitcakes and – and pies, even though I'm an interloper. And there's these scientists I know – I try to look out for them, since they're always getting into trouble. And..."

"And?” prompts Cecil.

"Well, I met this guy," says Carlos. He takes a deep breath. "He's – he's really neat, and I... I love him. But I messed up, and now I'm worried because our relationship isn't the one he thought it was. I don't want him to be stuck with something he didn't sign up for, or trapped in it when – when it's not good for him."

"I—" begins Cecil, but he stops when the waitress crawls out of a floor vent to take their order. Carlos stares at his silverware and has to sit on his hands to keep them from fidgeting.

The waitress finally leaves, with a bang! and a puff of smoke.

"I think he'd be a fool to let you go," says Cecil.

Carlos looks up. "Really?"

"Yes, your job is time-consuming and dangerous and morally ambiguous," says Cecil. "But let's be honest, most jobs are like that. As long as the two of you – no. I love you, Carlos, and as long as we
trust each other, we can figure something out. Together. That's – that's what you want, right?"

"That's what I've always wanted," says Carlos, staring into Cecil's eyes. "Ever since I came to Night Vale, and—"

They both startle when a basket of dinner rolls drops onto the table from the ceiling. The hatch starts to retract with a tortured groaning noise; it only closes halfway before it creaks to a halt, showers them in a burst of golden sparks, and catches on fire.

Carlos redirects the flames with a hasty wave of his hand, leaving a fine layer of frost over most of the floor, the table, and the two of them.

"And, um. Heard you," Carlos finishes.

Cecil wipes frost off his eyebrows and sighs. "Heard me playing the banjolele," he says gloomily.

A breathless stutter of laughter escapes Carlos. "If it makes you feel better, that was my first day too."

"Sometimes it feels like all of my days are my first day," says Cecil. "Let's see, that was when Leonard retired for the third— wait, or was it when he was torn apart by the— Oh, I remember! Another member of City Council spontaneously combusted and Leonard stormed out over a death curse—"

He stops. His eyes widen.

"Uh," says Carlos. "Yeah, that was me."

The blood drains from Cecil's face. He lunges across the table and grabs Carlos' wrist. "You're under the Doom of the Voice of Night Vale?" he says, somewhere between a hiss and a squeak.

"Is that what it's called?"

Cecil's fingers spasm around radius and ulna, like he's afraid Carlos is going to leave. Or disappear. "Carlos, if I hadn't seen Leonard – if I hadn't changed my contract – I could have killed you!"

Carlos shakes his head vigorously. "You saved my life," he says.

"You don't understand – that curse is permanent. I could kill you right now! Right here, in the middle of Gino's! It would be terribly rude, but I could do it!"

"You saved me," says Carlos. "You saved me nine years ago, and you saved me just the other day, and the only thing I've ever heard from you is – is love. Cecil, I can't think of anyone I'd trust my life to more than you."

Cecil swallows. His grip loosens, but he doesn't let go of Carlos' wrist. "It's just – if you trusted me with your life, why didn't you trust me with... with who you are?"

Carlos looks down at their hands. "I was... I was scared."

"Carlos, I give you my word. I would never hurt—"

"No!" says Carlos. "That's not— I wasn't scared of you, Cecil." He meets Cecil's eyes, covers Cecil's hand with his own.

"I love you," he says. "And I know you love me, but... you also love Night Vale. And if it came
down to me or Night Vale, I – I didn't want to find out which side you'd chose."

"Carlos," says Cecil. "How could I not chose you?"

There’s a strange feeling in Carlos’ chest, warm and soft and threatening to burst, like he’s a teacher at Night Vale Elementary and he’s filled with happy centipedes. It’s the same warmth in Cecil’s eyes, the same warmth that’s all around them as they bask in this nearly-perfect moment together.

The waitress has to cough multiple times to get their attention so the wait staff can challenge them to single combat.

~*~*~*~

"So," says Cecil, when the last groaning busboy has been dragged away. "My boyfriend is a secret wizard operative, huh?" He speaks the words like he's rolling them around in his mouth and seeing how they taste.

"Yes," says Carlos. "Is that... is that okay?"

"Okay?" Cecil looks surprised at the question. "It's... it's... it's pretty cool, that's what it is!" he says, and at his brave attempt at enthusiasm the last tendril of anxiety unwinds itself from Carlos' heart and slinks back to where it came from. "Tell me some of the secret wizard stuff you've done. I mean, not the really secret secret wizard stuff. Just the sort of secret stuff, like the Secret Underground Missile Testing Site and the Sheriff's Secret Police's Secret Garden."

"Um," says Carlos. "Well, when I was exorcising the ruins of Sammy's Ultimate Sliceria, I, uh. Sort of accidentally blasted a hole in the vacant lot out back of the Ralph's..."

"That's our most popular huddling spot!" says Cecil. "Wow. What else?"

"I made those weird metal trees that used to set everything on fire above thirty feet," says Carlos, with a little more confidence.

"You mean the lightning rods?" says Cecil. "What do they— Ohh, are you in the post office lineup?"

Carlos grins at him. "Top row, third from the left."

"That – that reward is for one hundred thousand yen!" He frowns, and Carlos feels the grin freeze on his face. “That is outrageous. Carlos, you can do so much better—"

Carlos only stops laughing when their dinner arrives, with backup.

Cecil keeps him talking as they work their way through their hard-won eggplant, and Carlos tells him almost everything. Nothing confidential – Carlos doesn’t want to put him in even more danger – but far more information than the White Council would be remotely comfortable with. His notable successes (and failures), his less notable successes (and failures), his pessimism about the war with the Fomor, his satisfaction with the weapons training courses he instituted, his hatred for the drafty barracks in Edinburgh – all the minutiae of his job, down to the most boring details.

By rights it should be of interest to no one except Carlos, but Cecil listens with all apparent fascination and keeps asking questions and goes back so Carlos can clarify his frustrations with the overtime (or lack thereof) forms. Cecil’s guarded excitement transforms into something brighter, more open, like it does when he’s interviewing guests and asking Carlos questions about the moon and forgetting, for a little while, that he’s supposed to be scared of the unknown.
Carlos feels much lighter when he’s done. It’s not just that’s he’s managed to work in, several times, the ways that wizards help keep Night Vale safe and really try not to make it more lethal to live there. It’s also that no one else has ever wanted to hear his thoughts on organizing duty rosters before.

They both go quiet as they wait for their dishes to be cleared: Cecil, gazing into the middle distance and occasionally tapping his bottom lip with his ceremonial eggplant trident; Carlos, accidentally nodding off into his fifth glass of water.

Cecil’s still preoccupied when dessert comes. Carlos tries not to take it personally – they both have a lot to think about, and their waitress knew some tricky judo flips that could really rattle you if you didn’t fall right. He attempts to excavate his crème brûlée as noiselessly as possible so he doesn’t interrupt Cecil’s reverie.

But after five solid minutes, the silence finally gets to him.

“Is everything okay?” he asks.

“What? Oh!” says Cecil. “Sorry, Carlos, I was just thinking. I was talking to Shakeena at lunch today, while you were asleep.”

"How is she?"

"Out for at least six games," says Cecil sadly. "But we were also discussing you, and, well... she mentioned that you're not really supposed to use your power to take sides. Not just in bowling -- all the time."

"She's right," says Carlos. "Night Vale is my responsibility, and I'll always try to protect people, no matter what, but... I'm supposed to protect all people, not just the ones I like. And..." He tries to think of a way to phrase his thoughts that will protect the confidences shared with him, but still give Cecil an honest answer. “And I wouldn’t want to draw the attention of -- of the kind of things that would come to Night Vale to see what’s so important that a representative of the White Council would reject his neutrality.”

"Right," says Cecil, nodding. "I understand. So on a totally unrelated note, I think you should probably avoid the parade next week."

"The parade?"

"You know, the one that's definitely not a secret call to rebellion, overthrowing Strex Corp while they're weakened by their losses," says Cecil.

"Oh," says Carlos.

"And I think you should do it somewhere publicly, in case you need an alibi," says Cecil.

"What about you?"

"Oh, I'll just be reporting community events like usual," says Cecil. "As safe in my booth as I ever am."

"Your desk is made of knives," says Carlos.

"I'll sit down carefully," says Cecil. "But... will you promise me that you'll stay out of it? You've already done your part."
"I can promise I'll try," says Carlos. "I'm supposed to be on medical leave anyway."

"Good," says Cecil, with a satisfied smile.

"I mean, it's not like anyone would be really happy to see me until it turned into a complete disaster," says Carlos. "Wizards aren't exactly popular in Night Vale." He's aiming for 'light and self-deprecating', but hits something more like 'lonely and slightly bitter'.

"Hey," says Cecil. Carlos looks up and is favored with a soft smile. "They'll come around. It's you, Carlos, not some faceless hooded terror drawing down lightning and decapitating dark magic practitioners left and right."

"Uh, that is me, Cecil," says Carlos. "That's a pretty big part of my job."

"Oh, I know," says Cecil. "But it's different when it's someone you know chopping off people's heads. Much better quality assurance. That's the key part to getting people to accept you."

"Quality decapitation?"

"No, getting to know you!" says Cecil excitedly. "You've already made a great start – I mean, lots of people like you, and you get along so well with Janis, and Abbie, and everyone at League Night – well, except Teddy Williams, but you don't have to listen to him. It didn't even matter that we all thought you were an outsider and a scientist! And since you end up saving the town all the time anyway, I think that if we just let people know that, they'll be so impressed and grateful that they'll be more willing to overlook any problematic secret identities."

Carlos looks at him a little skeptically. "You sound pretty sure about this," he says.

"We're great at overlooking things," says Cecil. "And… I know that people in Night Vale can be kind of standoff-ish. And suspicious. And prone to acts of random terrifying violence. But people notice when you give back to the community like that. They'll realize that you really belong here, Carlos. And then they won't mind so much that you're a wizard."

"Really?" asks Carlos. The surge of hope he feels is a little ridiculous, because, well, it's Night Vale. It doesn't need to like him for him to do his job – in some ways it would be easier if it didn't. And the only people he truly cares about accept him already.

But… it's hard to look after something for so long and not care a little. Night Vale might be a hot mess, but it's his hot mess, and it would be nice to know if the reverse were true. That a spot could be made for him. That it's where he belongs.

"Really," says Cecil. "But, uh, until then… you should probably just keep saying you're a scientist."

Carlos raises his eyebrows. "You want me to lie to, deceive, or otherwise mislead people about—"

"—sensitive information regarding clandestine organizations who secretly manipulate the world for its own alleged good, yes," Cecil finishes. "I mean, that's just common sense. Honesty is all well and good, but you have to stay safe, too."

"What about you?"

Cecil leans forward. "I figure we can use secret code words," he says. "So when we're in public, or I'm on air, or we're under surveillance – if you say something about science I'll know you're really talking about magic. Unless you are really talking about science. I haven't quite figured that part out yet."
"I'll explain whatever it is later," says Carlos. "But I mean—" He rubs his face. "You'll have to lie, too, Cecil. For me. To everyone, all the time."

Cecil puts down his spoon and miniature pickaxe. "I had to think about it for a while," he says seriously. "People depend on me for the truth, even when they shouldn't. But then I decided to take a page out of your book and do a little research."

"Research?"

"Did you know that wizard and scientist used to mean the same thing?" says Cecil.

Carlos blinks. "They did?"

"One who seeks out knowledge," says Cecil. "If it's in the Online Entomology Dictionary, it must be true. And... is that really that different from what you do?"

Question suspicious information. Hypothesize why the wards aren't working. Predict enemy movements. Test new evocations. Analyze the data for danger to practitioners and civilians.

Avoid unexpected exothermic reactions.

"I guess it's not," says Carlos.

"You have your magic, Carlos, but I have words," says Cecil. "And I think they'll back me up on this. One day... One day I'll report the details, but only when they matter the most."

Carlos feels happiness and relief and pride bubble up inside, expanding until they're equal to the environmental pressure. "Thank you, Cecil," he says.

Then he frowns. "Entomology dictionary?"

"It's amazing what kind of information insects can communicate with pheromones!" says Cecil. "Science – you know, science science – really is fascinating, isn't it?"

"It really is," says Carlos, and he leans across the table and kisses Cecil right there in Gino's, because knowledge is fascinating; knowledge is terrifying; knowledge is power. Knowledge is what he deals in, and Cecil, who knows its price better than most, trusts him so much that he willingly sought it out and carries it safely right by his heart.

Cecil trusts him with Night Vale.

Cecil trusts him.

Carlos sits back. Cecil beams at him; he doesn't say anything, but Carlos knows what he means.

A throwing star beheads the centerpiece between them and buries itself in the wall.

"Here comes the check," says Cecil. He hefts his complimentary brick. "Do you want to split it?"

"I'll get it," says Carlos, drawing his sword. "You can clear the exit."

Once pursuit has fallen off, they walk arm and arm until they reach their apartment building.

"Thanks for dinner," says Cecil. "I had a wonderful time getting to know you."

"Me, too," says Carlos. Cecil's eyes glow warm under the streetlights, and they crinkle at the edges.
when he smiles.

"Hey, Cecil," asks Carlos. "What color are your eyes?"

"Oh, I don't know," says Cecil. "Kind of... darkish... brownish, I guess. Why?"

"They're beautiful," says Carlos, and watches them widen as Cecil's breath hitches. Carlos steps in close and kisses him until all the streetlights around them flicker and die.

They both pull back a little at the same time. Cecil shifts his hand in Carlos' hair and gently tips their heads together until their foreheads touch. For a moment they stay balanced against each other, just breathing quietly in the darkness.

"I guess this kind of thing happens to you a lot," says Cecil.

"Mostly when I'm with you," says Carlos. Cecil chuckles, a deep rumbling sound that makes Carlos shiver in anticipation.

His hand disappears from Carlos' hair. There's the sound of rustling and a muttered curse. "I was going to say something witty about coming up to fill out the End-of-Date Report," says Cecil. "But it's too dark to find my keys."

"I've got it," says Carlos. He holds out his hand. "Ek!"

A tiny blue star blinks into existence right above them. Cecil stares at it with surprised pleasure before retrieving his keys from his fanny pack and unlocking the door. Carlos holds it open for him, but Cecil tentatively raises one hand instead.

Carlos lets the light settle in his palm and stay there until it dwindles away in the glow of the foyer's lamps. When Cecil looks back up at him, he's still wearing the same expression of delight.

"Well," says Carlos. "This is me."

Cecil smiles and takes his hand. "Carlos," he says, and, "Me, too."

Chapter End Notes

SEE

References


Carlos decides he’s going to become a scientist when he’s thirty-one years old.

(Ish. He missed his birthday while he was in the desert otherworld. Ignoring outlying data like time-loops and unintended sabbaticals in alternate dimensions seems to be the easiest solution, anyway. Given that the average lifespan of a wizard is 203, it's unlikely to be a significant deviation.)

It's not the most practical decision. He has over a year's worth of reunions and reconnections and repairs to make. There is a stack of paperwork waiting for him in Edinburgh that is literally taller than he is. LA is still under the control of the Fomor, the White Council is still under the influence of the Black Council, and Night Vale is still under the yoke of... well, Night Vale.

But the point is – he still has a chance to do all that. Carlos was gone for over a year, and the world didn't end without him, and he didn't end the world. When the worst happened – his magical strength stripped by the threshold of the old oak doors, his memories nearly unravelled by the light of the unravelling of all things, his claim on Night Vale rejected by the universe itself in favor of exile beneath the watchful gaze of the blinking red light up on the mountain – he kept going.

If there's one thing he learned in the desert otherworld (besides rock-based field medicine and how to repeatedly repair a Power Macintosh) it's that you can't just metaphorically live in the present. It's easier to survive there, focusing only on immediate problems or threats or mysteries. But to truly thrive, part of you has to metaphorically live in the future, planning for the hopes and dreams that don't exist now, but may exist, one day. The exact details aren't so important; what's important is that you're headed somewhere and you know who you want walking beside you.

He came home with a lot of questions he'd like to find answers for. Only some of them are immediately relevant, but that doesn't mean they're any less valuable. Life is always going to be full of covert wars and evil conspiracies and the deadly banality of bureaucracy, and you can't let that get in the way of a good education.

~*~*~*~

Cecil takes the news much better than Carlos expected, which is to say that he doesn't even try to tackle Carlos to the floor, drag him into the pantry, and hide him away from the baleful influences of higher learning. He just blinks and says, "Oh!"

"I haven't done anything yet," says Carlos. He hangs up his apron and pulls on his Kevlar. "I wanted to talk to you about it first."

Cecil gives himself a shake and finishes drying the last of the breakfast dishes. "Later tonight?" he asks. "I should try to get in early today..."

"Sure," says Carlos.

Cecil seems a little preoccupied as he helps Carlos into his lab coat, but he smiles when Carlos hands him his lunch and his can of bear spray.

"Have a good day at work, sweetie," says Carlos.
"You, too," says Cecil. He fastens Carlos' cloak around his neck and takes a moment to smooth it over his shoulders, his expression pensive. Carlos is about to ask if everything's all right when Cecil grips him by the collar and pulls him up for a goodbye kiss that leaves him breathless.

Carlos watches him go and doesn't even try to wipe the goofy smile from his face. Part of him is frankly appalled at the disgusting degree of domesticity they've achieved, but that part of him is insecure and unhappy and no longer allowed to make decisions.

He checks his watch. He's not due to meet Shakeena for another hour and a half, which means he probably has time to swing by the labs and ask Julie a couple questions about—

There's the sound of running feet. The front door slams open.

"Nope," says Cecil. He shuts the door and collapses against it. "Nope! I can't do it. I'm going. It'll mean a breach of contract, but I'm prepared to deal with the consequences. Can I borrow some grenades?"

"What?" says Carlos.

"No, you're right," says Cecil. He pushes off the door and starts pacing in a circle around the kitchen table. "That won't hold off station management for long. What do you have in the way of heavy explosives?"

"I think Play Ball is having a sale...?" says Carlos, a little bewildered. "Why are we fighting station management?"

"Because I just signed a new contract saying I wouldn't leave and you're taking me with you," says Cecil.

"I – okay," says Carlos. "Of course I'll take you with me, but... where are we going?"

"The University of What It Is!" says Cecil, gesturing wildly. Carlos reaches for him, but he peels off from his orbit and heads down the hallway.

Carlos follows him. "Cecil—"

"I know we said we'd talk about it later, but I couldn't help thinking about it already and I am terrible at long-distance relationships, Carlos. Terrible. I can't do it again, so I'll just go with you now." He goes to the closet in their bedroom and wrestles his suitcase down from the top shelf.

"Cecil—"

"You don't have to worry about me," says Cecil. He dumps the suitcase on the bed and starts throwing items into it at random. "I'm sure I'll be able to find a job doing... something..."

Cecil stops suddenly, a silvery muumuu in one hand and a machete in the other. His shoulders slump. "Do they... do they at least have a college radio station? I could be a faculty advisor. Or volunteer as a producer. Or sweep out the recording booth, I'm not picky—"

Carlos divests him of both muumuu and machete and firmly but gently takes his face in his hands. "Cecil, I'm not going to the University of What It Is," he says.

"But you want to be a scientist," says Cecil, bewildered. He clutches at Carlos' wrists like they're the only thing keeping him anchored.
"I do," says Carlos. "But the University of What It Is..."

The University of What It Is is hard to explain, largely because no one's explained it to him yet. His memory may still be a little fuzzy in some places, but he's fairly certain he wouldn't forget bullshitting his way through an entire academic career all the way to tenure; the university officials' (frankly half-assed) search is definitely for the wrong Carlos. However, he's sure about one particular detail:

"They're not a fully-accredited institution of higher learning," says Carlos. "I was just going to take classes online from somewhere else."

"Oh," says Cecil. "So... we don't have to leave Night Vale."

"No," says Carlos.

"I don't have to quit my job without notice and gain the eternal wrath of station management," says Cecil.

"No," says Carlos.

Cecil is scrutinizing him intensely; his eyes hold a question. Or maybe they hold many questions. Carlos can only guess at them, only guess what Cecil wants, and he hopes it's the one answer he can give.

"Cecil, it means – it means everything to me that you would come with me," says Carlos. "But I – I would never ask you to leave radio. Science is important to me, but that's just as important to you, and... we're in this together."

Then he says, "Oof," because Cecil is hugging him so tightly he can feel Cecil's heartbeat surrounding him, echoing from Cecil's chest to Cecil's arms to Cecil's fingertips where they are wrapped around Carlos.

He squeezes back and lets his head rest on Cecil's shoulder. Carlos doesn't need Cecil's permission; that doesn't mean he's not anxious about how Cecil feels about it. He wants Cecil to be happy, but he's allowed to be happy, too, and since those things have become inextricably linked he's just going to have to figure out a way to make it work for both of them.

Cecil unwinds his arms and Carlos straightens up so he can see his face. He sets his finger on the crease between Cecil's brows; it disappears, replaced by the crows' feet at the corner of his eyes as he smiles.

"You should tell me more about becoming a scientist," says Cecil.

"Yeah?"

A firm grip on Carlos' hips tugs him forward. There's nothing to do but drape his arms around Cecil's neck to keep his balance, because who is Carlos to argue with gravity, except when it's personally inconvenient?

"I am very," says Cecil, his voice abseiling down the octaves, "Into science."

Parts of Carlos' ensuing explanations are pretty technical, so according to Cecil it's definitely not his fault when the discussion gets a little heated and he accidentally knocks out the power to their building.

~*~*~*~
He’s standing underneath the water tower again. Just ahead of him, an old oak door opens onto a blank, featureless wasteland: a blinking red light up on a mountain flashes a warning, but the desert otherworld beckons him into its welcoming glare and muffling peace.

His double stands next to him.

Carlos is just waiting for his clothes to disappear and Luccio to show up with a trigonometry test he forgot to study for, because all his anxiety nightmares are apparently offered in one neat bundle now.

“Aw, you rank me up there with disappointing an authority figure?” says his double. "I'm honored."

"I'm not scared of you," says Carlos. "I'm scared of what you represent. What I could become."

"There's the door," says his double. "You wouldn't have to worry about it in the desert otherworld."

“I've already made my decision,” says Carlos. “I’m staying in Night Vale.”

"It won't work."

“What do you know?” says Carlos. "You're not even real."

“I’m just as real as you.”

Carlos snorts. “This is my dream. You are me.”

His double gives him a sharp smile. Carlos looks away.

“That’s why I know it won’t work,” says his double. “You'll just ignore the problems until you snap and let everyone down. Again. You know this is only a distraction.”

"Life is not a distraction," says Carlos.

“Yes, it is,” says his double. "It's literally written in the Wardens' Charter. Section six, paragraph one: Vivus avocatio est."

"If that works for them, fine," says Carlos. He looks at his double. "Did it work for you?"

"You mean ignoring centuries of wisdom because I think I have a better way?" says his double. "It could have. Just say the word, and I'll show you how."

The ground lights up around them with the runes and sigils and glyphs that created the time vortex. Carlos remembers them all. His double deliberately meets his gaze, and the music starts: a familiar melody with a perfect echo. But the doubling devolves, the pitches slipping, the frequencies clashing, and soon there's nothing but cacophony reverberating through his mind and heart.

But there's another song, too: unearthly, melancholy, a lonely song heard in the middle of the night in the middle of the desert. It swells louder and louder, overwhelming the twisted harmonies of promises and doubts, drowning out the discord, until all Carlos hears is its own warning and welcome—

Carlos opens his eyes. The radio on his desk is three inches from his nose, blaring the introduction to Cecil’s show.

A hand reaches over and turns the volume back down. "You are damn near impossible to wake up, did you know that?” says Julie.
Carlos grimaces as he sits up and stretches in his chair, because he does know that. "It's been like that since the time vortices," he says. "It's a problem. If I'm running low on sleep, I won't wake up until I'm fully rested."

"What's that I hear?" says Julie, theatrically cupping a hand to her ear. "An obvious solution?"

Carlos makes a face at her. "What if I sleep through an attack?"

"Well, if it's someone poking you with a stick, throwing letter openers at you, or shooting you with a dart filled with a mild stimulant, I wouldn't worry about it," says Julie. "You've got that covered."

"What?" he says, then notices that his sleeve is covered in a fine white powder.

So is the desk. And the floor.

"I was using entropic force in my sleep?" he asks, horrified.

"'Entropic force'?" says Julie. "Nerd."

"Julie, I could have hurt—"

"That's why we were behind the mobile lead barrier," she says. "But it didn't matter – you didn't target people, just the stick and the projectiles. We got ignored. You didn't even move when Gary drew on your face with a Sharpie."

"What?"

"Joking," says Julie. "...Mostly. There's some isopropyl alcohol down in the bathroom."

He stops anxiously rubbing his face and says, "Where is everyone?"

“Monitoring station,” says Julie. “I kicked them out after the first round of trials. You looked like you needed the sleep, which, score one for me.”

“Is everything okay?"

"Oh, yeah, we were just bored," says Julie. "You have no idea how quiet it gets when you're not making the instruments malfunction."

Carlos gives her a slightly exasperated look. "Why did you wake me up?" he says.

“I wanted to see how round two of testing turned out,” she says. “Plus your nap no longer looked restful, so..."

"Oh," he says. "Yeah, I – thanks." She doesn't ask him what's wrong, which somehow makes it easier to admit, "Old nightmares."

"Better than new ones," she says. "But since you're up..." She hands him several sheets of paper. "I finished the proposal for your lab requirements."

“You didn’t have to—"

“I said I was bored,” says Julie. “Most of your intro classes will have mandatory lab time, so I’m volunteering Andre to serve as your off-campus advisor. That way you can use this place.”

“Do you think that will work?”
“Probably,” says Julie. “Especially if I threaten to come back to Main Campus if they don’t approve it.”

Carlos scans the proposal. Since he got back from his latest mission yesterday, the most progress he’s made on his application is drooling all over the course catalogue. But this fills in things he might have missed and answers questions he didn’t even know he had and makes the whole thing seem... logical. Achievable. Worthwhile, not wasteful.

“This is – this is great," he says. "Thanks, Julie."

“I’m only doing this because I want to credit a fully-qualified research team when we win the Ig Nobel,” she tells him.

“Yes, I love you too," he says.

She makes a scoffing noise. She also doesn't deny anything. “Shove over,” she says instead, pulling up a chair. “I have opinions on your pre-reqs.”

~*~*~*~

"So I'm taking some online classes this fall," Carlos announces in the middle of dinner, when the conversation threatens to veer back to his year's absence. His sisters have long since moved on to mocking him instead of slapping, hugging, or crying on him whenever it comes up, but it still makes his mother (who had skipped the first and last options) smile sadly.

When he had finally worked up the courage, back in the desert otherworld, to call her and tell her that he was thinking of staying there, she hadn't blamed him for not being able to come home, or begged him to keep trying, or said that he was wrong for settling for what he had left. She told him he deserved to be happy.

He's happy he came back.

Even though Dani keeps asking awkward questions while Nita holds the injera hostage until he answers them.

"You can take online courses?" asks Dani, yielding to his deflection.

"Probably," says Carlos. "The university's made a big push to put everything on a mobile platform."

He stares pointedly at the flatbread until Nita tears off a piece for him.

"I did some of those for my BBA," she says. "Maybe you’ll be a good influence on Milagro and get her to take advantage of the G.I. Bill when her years are up! The last time I asked about her plans for the future she held up a copy of Skippy's List and told me records were made to be broken."

"The last time I talked to her, she asked me to look up our local zoning ordinances to see if we can keep goats," says Carlos.

"I thought she was out-of-touch in Poland for training exercises," says Dani. "When did you talk to her?"

"In Poland," says Carlos. "The training exercises are going well."

He decides now is not the time to mention that the training exercises went much better after an accidental if timely joint Polish-American-White Council strike against the Fomor. The important
thing is that everyone made it out all right and the Army attributed the reports of strange lights and
tentacle monsters to hallucinogenic mushrooms spores and she can't make any jokes about him
getting saved by the cavalry because the whole op ended up classified.

"She also told me to look up Polish goat-herding commands," he adds.

Nita rubs her chin speculatively. "We could start making our own cheese..."

"Don't encourage her," says Dani darkly.

"I'm just saying, the farm-to-table movement could be a worthwhile investment," says Nita.

"The operative word there is farm," Carlos points out. "We have one yard the size of a postage
stamp between us."

Nita concedes the point with a half shrug. "When do you start classes?" she asks Carlos.

"Next month," he says. "It's usually a four-year program, but I could probably do it in three. Two
and a half, if Dr. Kwan and Dr. Timmons can convince them to accept independent studies for my
electives – I did some work for them a couple years ago, which they say can count towards my
degree."

His mother has been unusually quiet this whole exchange. When he glances over, he's shocked to
find tears in her eyes.

"What is it? Is something wrong?"

She shakes her head. "Oh, mijo. You always were an overachiever."

"Hey!"

"But if that's what makes you happy, you should do it," she says, giving him a watery smile. "We'll
be proud of you no matter what."

"Thanks, Mama," he says softly.

On bad days, he's not sure if he made the right choice to come back. But that has everything to do
with his shortcomings and nothing to do with the people he loves, with the rush of affection and
comfort that feels like the opposite of homesickness. He looks down at his plate and focuses on
dinner until he can return her smile with the steadiness it deserves.

"So, you know how you can get married in all fifty states now?" says Nita, and Carlos chokes on his
duro wat.

It's the opening salvo in a dramatic but short-lived conflict: his sisters are absolutely ruthless when
they work together. It ends in Carlos promising to ask Cecil to come to Nita's birthday party so he
can finally meet everyone in return for Dani never saying, "Mami was just telling me the other day
that it would be nice to have more grandchildren," within earshot ever again. The mother in question
merely smiles benignly. Carlos suspects a conspiracy.

"Tell him to wear something cool!" Dani calls after him, as he tries to salvage his retreat. "I love his
Instagram!"

His bisabuela's house is dark, but when he tentatively brushes his senses against her wards, they part
to let him through. He finds her leaning against a windowsill, watching the night sky. She looks
unsurprised to see him. Then again, she always looks unsurprised to see him, even when he's turning up in her path as a sniffing child with a handful of white dust, or as an escaped patient on crutches with a torso full of scars, or as a slightly truant regional commander (still technically the youngest in history) with the Doom of Damocles and thirteen months unexpected leave in another dimension. He guesses that meeting your great-great-etc grandson two hundred years before he even exists might permanently adjust your expectations of what he's capable of.

There's something comforting in knowing she regards that with the same unimpressed equanimity with which she treats the rest of the world.

He leans next to her. The moon hangs fat and gold over the mountains, just visible through the crowd of the cityscape.

"The prophecies of the Blood Moon claim that the next eclipse will bring a great calamity," she says, like that's a normal way to greet someone.

Then again, Cecil once opened a conversation with "Last night I dreamed we had a Destroy the Moon Festival, and it really worked!", so Carlos can't really judge.

"What do you think?" he asks.

She snorts. "I think we have calamities enough without blaming the moon for them," she says. "But we should be cautious."

"Why?"

She raises an eyebrow at him. "When I was young, I learned that certain spells were suited to the new moon, and others to the full, and that some would wax and wane with its courses," she says. "I asked where the moon had come from. I was told how the great eagle who holds up the sky would slowly stretch his wings and cover it, then fold them back in when his strength was renewed. How the sun's brother had murdered the goddess of food and was exiled forever from his sister's presence. How two great lights were made, the lesser to bring order to the night."

"Did you believe them?"

"Of course," she says. "Just as I believed them when they measured its mountains and charted its seas, and when I watched man set foot upon the desert of its surface."

For years, Carlos has pored over his bisabuela's words, trying to decipher their hidden meanings. He'd always assumed it was her prerogative as a wizard to be obscure as possible, and also because she thought it was fun to make her apprentice scramble for the answers.

But the moon is a part of myth and religion and a satellite orbiting the Earth; magic depends on belief as well as the ability to harness natural forces.

Theories are made to be tested, confirmed through observation and experimentation, and sometimes, you need someone else to evaluate the data to make sure it actually fits.

"The Fomor," he says. "The next eclipse coincides with the full moon at perigee. They might try something with the tides so high."

"So they might," she says.

"Operation Super Blood Moon," says Carlos, and grins when she gives him a pointed look.
The satellite in question climbs higher, growing more silvery as the shorter wavelengths of its reflected solar radiation unfilter themselves from atmospheric scattering.

"The most popular hypothesis for the moon's formation is that a planet the size of Mars hit the Earth and ejected its material into orbit," says Carlos. "But that should have turned the Earth into an ocean of magma, and there's no sign that ever happened. And then you have the isotopic ratios of the moon's oxygen and titanium, which are too closely related to Earth's to have come from another planet. The volatile elements there exist in as-yet unexplainable proportions, and Venus, which suffered the same kind of impact, has nothing like it."

"And?" she asks, patiently.

"It means we're still asking where the moon came from," says Carlos.

His bisabuela looks back out the window, and the side of her mouth quirks. "As we should," she says.

~*~*~*~

"And that's Thanaskelos, the Doom Centipede!" says Cecil, pointing at a slightly unnerving cluster of stars a few degrees above the horizon. "She harries Scorpio across the void until she catches and eats him, then hibernates deep underground until he is painfully resurrected by the blood of Cetus the Sea Monster."

"So it's not visible all year round?" asks Carlos. He dashes off a few more righteously angry lines in his email (the accounts office at the university initially denied him in-state tuition on the basis that Night Vale didn't exist; now they've started pleading with him to move somewhere else) and hits Send.

"Only during every other leap year," says Cecil. "Are you finished now?"

"For sure," says Carlos absently, as he skims through the rest of his inbox. Nothing's really urgent, although there's an email from Shakeena about some whispering rocks in Radon Canyon that he should probably go check out, especially given the latest results from Julie and Gary's apian energy maps. It's probably not dangerous, but he's never seen a link before between electromagnetic variations and—

Cecil pointedly clears his throat.

"Sorry," says Carlos, sheepish. He hands his phone over to Cecil, who puts it in his pocket before tenderly grabbing Carlos by the lab coat and hauling him closer. Carlos endures being manhandled into position (which, okay, is not really that big a burden) until Cecil has him arranged to his satisfaction, with Carlos' head pillowed on his shoulder and Carlos' hair within stroking distance.

Carlos has a moment of disorientation when he stares at the stars and recognizes them. In the desert otherworld, they changed every night. Doug and Alicia and the other members of the masked army would spend hours patiently telling him what they knew of astrology, but no matter how carefully he mapped and plotted the stars, he could never find any patterns in position or magnitude.

But here, the void is filled with familiar shapes, the constellations he saw in books long before he found a suitable sky, picked out in light that's traveled through time to show them a thousand different pictures of the past.

There's a couple extra, because it's Night Vale. Maybe it's future starlight, given a rare chance to be simultaneously emitted and observed across the universe in a place where time doesn't work. Or
maybe they're not stars at all, like the lights above the Arby's, and they're waiting to be understood. Carlos doesn't know yet, but he'd like to.

"What happens when you look at Thanaskelos in a telescope?" he asks as he wriggles closer. Even though the night air is cool, Cecil radiates heat just like the roof beneath them.

"Nobody knows," says Cecil. "Everyone who's tried has been driven mad."

"Because they looked at Thanaskelos, or because they were all using the Haunted Observatory?"

"You know, that's a very good question," says Cecil. "Is that one of those, uh, confounded..."

"Confounding variables," says Carlos, impressed. He props himself up on one elbow so he can give Cecil a kiss, because he believes in supporting learning with positive reinforcement.

"Do I get a cookie?" Cecil asks, tugging on Carlos' arm until he sprawls across his chest. Carlos kisses him again and says, "We can get some later."

"What happened to the ones you brought?"

"Hmm?"

"You said you were packing some," says Cecil.

Carlos pulls back a little. "I did?"

"Right before you left for work," says Cecil. "You know, when my head got stuck in the pantry? You said 'I'm putting the cookie tin in the hamper, mi monosacárido hermoso,' I said, 'Mmm-mmm!' which was supposed to be 'Okay!,' and you said 'Cecil?' and I said 'Mmf?' and then you came into the kitchen and started swearing and disintegrated the counter under the microwave to get me out—"

Carlos dives for the picnic basket, swearing again, because while the pantry incident may have been slightly distracting he's pretty he's never owned a cookie tin or come up with a pet name that ridiculous.

On top of all the food he knows he packed, there's a strange metal container and an unfamiliar thermos.

"Stay back," he says, drawing a circle around himself before cautiously opening the thermos. It's full of a thick purple liquid that smells faintly of grass.

"What is it?" asks Cecil.

Carlos frowns. "I think it's one of Doctor Renegade's science smoothies." He screws the cap back on tightly before prying the lid off the strange metal container.

"Ohh," says Cecil. "Snickerdoodles!"

"Things that look like Snickerdoodles," says Carlos.

"Is that... is that real wheat?"

"It's probably a trap," says Carlos. "Why else would someone sneak into our apartment, impersonate me, and plant this in our stuff?"
"Maybe they say in the card," says Cecil, and before Carlos can stop him, he reaches over and picks up the lid, breaking the circle as he crosses it.

"Cecil!"

"If whoever sent this was going to attack me, they could have done it while I was trapped, buried in light red kidney beans and defenceless, in the pantry," says Cecil, peeling off an envelope duct-taped to the bottom of the lid. "Besides, it's addressed to you."

Carlos takes it gingerly and prods it with his senses. When nothing happens, he slits it open with one of his knives.

Inside is a small piece of silvery paper with a short but complicated cipher. The first part is this month's passcode, and then—

"No," says Carlos.

"What is it?"

"I – he— No!"

Cecil plucks the card out of his hand. "Hey, Prime," he reads. "Hope you enjoy the snack. Try not to be so hard on yourself. XOXO Carlos. P.S. Hasta la vista, baby."

"That asshole!" Carlos shouts.

"I think it's sweet," says Cecil.

"You don't understand," says Carlos, as despair creeps in. He thought that it was safe to come back to Night Vale instead of staying out of trouble in the desert otherworld, that he was stronger than the temptation to try to change history. That he wouldn't end up like his double. "He – I – some future me is swimming against the Currents of Time and putting everyone in danger and – and—"

"Dropping off some snacks?" suggests Cecil.

"Yes!"

"You used your code phrase to say that everything's okay, and I certainly don't see how any of this is very dangerous," says Cecil. "I mean, not if you left out the nutmeg, which—" He sniffs the cookies. "—I'm pretty sure you did."

"That's not the point," says Carlos.

"How do you even know you're swimming against the Currents of Time?" asks Cecil. "Currents are full of eddies and whirlpools and souse holes, swirling around and doubling back on themselves... You could be going the right way, going the wrong way."

"It's more of a metaphor—"

"Also, as a very handsome scientist once told me, time doesn't really work in Night Vale," says Cecil triumphantly. "I'm sure whatever you're doing is making it work better. Or worse. Whichever is more appropriate."

"But... how do you know?" asks Carlos.

Cecil looks at him like he's suggested that real coffee should be ground by some other method than
hitting it repeatedly with a hammer. "Why would you do something if it wasn't important?"

The problem is that Carlos wants to believe him. He wants to believe that his future self hasn't broken the Laws of Magic, that he hasn't forfeited his Doom and betrayed Luccio, that he hasn't made Night Vale even more dangerous.

But he's had that kind of power before, and he knows exactly how seductive it is. His double had thought saving the world was important, and instead he almost destroyed it. It had taken Carlos over a year to accept that he didn't deserve exile for using the same methods to stop him.

Yes, Carlos did a routine check of the wards just this afternoon and found no evidence of damage, so however his future self got here, it hasn't hurt anyone so far. Yes, supplementing their picnic is probably not on the same scale as trying to manipulate the outcome of a battle or strike down antagonists before their time. But where does he draw the line? Why was that his decision? How is Carlos supposed to trust that his future self didn't abuse his power and that the best course of action for everyone was for him to travel to the past long enough to deliver a thermos and a tinfoil of—

"Cecil!"

"Definitely no nutmeg," says Cecil, around a mouthful of Snickerdoodle. "It's all right, Carlos, I'm disposing of the evidence."

"Cecil—"

"We can't just leave time-travelling wheat products where anyone could eat them by accident," says Cecil sternly, as with great determination he eats another cookie on purpose.

Carlos covers his face with his hands and counts to ten. Then he picks up the card and flips it over, looking for any evidence that this isn't going to end horribly.

There's another cipher on the back.

P.P.S. Duck

Carlos hurls himself sideways into Cecil just as a flash of scarlet light floods the roof. Something whooshes over their heads. It passes so close Carlos feels it ruffling his hair before it ricochets off the fire door with a bang!

He grabs his staff and drags Cecil to relative safety behind an exhaust vent.

"Huh," says Cecil, as Carlos cautiously peers around the corner.

"What is it?" Carlos whispers. He doesn't see anything but the usual bottomless shadows and the cookie tin and thermos sitting innocently next to their red-checked blanket, but he isn't taking any chances: the faint echo of dark magic grates at the edge of his senses.

Cecil's hand appears in his field of vision, holding something round and white.

"Pool, snooker, and billiards have been banned in Night Vale since 1892," he says, "On account of all the celluloid explosions."

Carlos stares at the cue ball in horror. "Cecil, we need to—"

The world stops.

Silence wraps around them with an intensity that muffles even the sound of his own heartbeat. Cecil
"Time isn't real, right?" he whispers.

"Right," says Carlos.

"Are we real?"

"I think so," says Carlos, "Therefore we probably are."

Cecil swallows. Carlos squeezes his hand. "What's happening?" he asks.

"The cue ball was from Strex— was from my double's time vortex, one of the early attempts," says Carlos. He keeps his voice low, just in case. "This feels like a shockwave from when I unravelled his— my time vortex last year, though. It probably followed a weak point in the Currents of Time and—"

As abruptly as it came, the silence retreats, an implosion of nothingness sweeping back to circle around a single point in a flood of murky green light. Carlos feels the chilly groan of dark magic, rising in pitch as it grows stronger, the light brighter, the swirl of time itself faster and faster until—

The vortex screeches and spits out a jumbled heap of wood and metal and sad grey cloth, then pops back out of existence.

"Dios," breathes Carlos. "Did you see how the vortex looked like it was in reverse? The remains dissociated so completely from the worldline that—"

The heap groans.

"Carlos!"

"Cecil, wait—" Carlos grabs his arm before he can get too close.

The heap raises its head and says, dazedly, "Cecil?"

It's Carlos. Well, not Carlos, obviously, but some past or future self, or a double, or a clone, or— He can't believe he has to go through this again.

The other Carlos focuses on him with an almost visible effort. "You!"

"Carlos, wait!" shouts Cecil, darting in between them as the other Carlos lunges for his staff.

It feels like time's stopped again, but no, that's just terror dragging out every second Cecil is in danger. Carlos drops his staff and shouts, "Hasta la vista, baby!"

The other Carlos hesitates at the code phrase, his own staff wavering in his grip. He looks from Carlos to Cecil, then back again. "You're... me?"

"...Probably?" says Carlos. He takes a cautious step to the side, so Cecil is no longer in their line of fire. The other Carlos relaxes a little. He still clutches his staff, but more in the way that suggests it's the only thing keeping him upright.

Whenever he's from, Carlos is almost certain he did not have the wherewithal to go on a baking spree. A murder spree: possibly. His hair is sticking out in every direction, everything except his cloak is soaked or splattered with blood, and dammit, Julie's right: he does have crazy eyes. Carlos
doesn't recall any of this meeting, and yet...

There's something familiar here – a feeling, a smell, the concern radiating from Cecil like heat energy. The other Carlos stares dully at him in a way that suggests he's just as confused as Carlos, but has passed so far beyond the boundaries of tiredness that he's floundering in uncharted, infinite exhaustion.

And that feeling, Carlos remembers.

"Your double just tried to kill you," he says, and the other Carlos – his past self, Carlos Prime – is too weary to suppress his twitch of acknowledgment.

"Harry just tried to kill him," Carlos continues. "You just charged into the vortex and destroyed it, and it was the easiest decision you've ever made, because the only thing that scares you more than letting everyone down is that Cecil won't forgive you, and there's nothing you can do to fix that."

Carlos Prime flinches.

"It's all right, Carlos," says Cecil earnestly. "You're safe."

Carlos Prime's staff clatters to the ground as he falls to his hands and knees. Cecil rushes to his side. "We really need to change the code phrase," he mumbles.

"Yeah, good luck with that," says Carlos, carefully coming a little closer. "Julie think it's funny."

Cecil helps his past self get to his feet. Fresh blood is trickling from Carlos Prime's nose and ears; Cecil dabs it away with a handkerchief. "Are you okay?" he asks, his voice so full of concern that Carlos has to tamp down a ridiculous curl of jealousy, because it's still obviously him, and obviously him looking awful.

"I'm fine," says Carlos Prime. He stares at Cecil helplessly for a moment, then forces himself to look away. "You shouldn't – I need—" He stumbles back a few steps, out of Cecil's reach, and steadies himself on one of the antenna's guy wires. "I..."

He looks up and frowns.

"Why are you on the roof of the radio station?"

"We're having a picnic," says Carlos.

His past self blinks at him and says, "Oh. Right. Good idea."

"Would you like to join us?" asks Cecil.

Carlos Prime looks at him, then down at himself, and says, "I'm kind of a mess." His face twits, probably because, like Carlos, he just mentally awarded himself a trophy for Understatement of the Year.

"Oh!" says Cecil. "Well, we can take care of that."

~*~*~*~

Even with everything that's happened over the past couple years, 'standing guard in the women's bathroom while his boyfriend give his past self a sponge-bath' is not something Carlos ever thought he'd have to conceptualize.
Apart from some ominous rumbling from station management (pretty typical for this time of night) and some equally ominous, yet somehow soothing, rumbling from Khoshekh in the men's room, the radio station stays mercifully quiet.

Carlos Prime is slumping on the edge of the sink now, mostly-clean hair still dripping onto the mostly-clean clothes donated from Carlos' go bag. His lab coat is soaking in one of the basins; the rest of his clothes are smoldering in a trash can. Cecil stoops in front of him, slathering antiseptic on the gash on his arm as his tongue pokes between his teeth in concentration, and Carlos Prime is staring at the top of his head with such raw intensity that it doesn't matter Carlos can't remember what he’s thinking. Misery and longing and hopeless, hopeless love are written so clearly across his face that Carlos has to look away before one of them breaks down, because he doesn’t think they’ll survive all the first- and second-hand embarrassment.

“There you go!” says Cecil, taping off the generous wrapping of gauze. He smiles up at Carlos Prime, who has mostly managed to compose himself.

“Thanks,” says his past self hoarsely. Cecil is still gently cradling his arm. "If you don't want – I can go—"

"Carlos," he says. "I don't know if you'll remember this, but – there is nothing you can do that will ever make me stop loving you. I'm not saying that will always be enough, because our duties are cruel and fate capricious, but I think you should know anyway."

Carlos Prime's lower lip wobbles; he blinks rapidly and says, "Cecil – Cecil, I'm sorry."

"I know," says Cecil, giving his arm a final pat before releasing it. "It's all right."

They're back on the roof when Carlos Prime stops abruptly. "Wait," he says. "Am I in the future?"

In his defense, he's had a very long day.

"All of us are always at least one step in the future, Carlos," says Cecil.

"...But considerably more than one step, in your case," says Carlos.

"But – I can't know this. What if I—"

"I promise not to spoil you for the whole future during a picnic," says Carlos. "And if it helps, I doubt you'd remember enough to make a difference, anyway."

His past self sags in relief. "Good," he says. "Good." Then he frowns. "Wait – if you're me... Cecil, I need you to get a video camera. It's important."

"Oh! Well, all right—" Cecil fumbles out his phone. "I'm recording now. Is this okay?"

Carlos Prime hisses, "Stop fucking with the past!" and punches Carlos in the arm.

"Ow!"

"Okay, cut," says Carlos Prime.

Before Carlos can retaliate, there's an unearthly moan from downstairs, like the dying grind of oceanic crust as it's subsumed under a continental plate. The roof vibrates ever so slightly beneath them.
Cecil sighs. “Poor thing, I guess he heard all the excitement. Khoshekh has had FOMO something awful lately.”

“Khoshekh’s back in the station?” asks Carlos Prime, relaxing his white-knuckled grip on the hilt of his sword.

“He is!” says Cecil, then catches himself. "Or maybe he isn't. Maybe he's in his steel cat carrier with a flask of poison and a Geiger counter, or maybe he's radioactive. Who knows?" He eyes Carlos and his past self speculatively. "I know! If he is downstairs, I'll go show him this to calm him down." Cecil waves his phone. "He loves human videos. You two stay here."

Carlos Prime shifts his weight every so slightly away from Carlos. "But—"

"I'll be right back!" says Cecil airily.

Carlos waits until Cecil has disappeared down the stairs before rounding on Carlos Prime. "What was that for?" he demands, rubbing his arm.

"Quit trying to steal my boyfriend! I saw him first!"

"Get your own!" says Carlos indignantly.

"I did! But you keep – showing up in the past, and calling him, and inviting him to move in with you, and—"

Carlos gapes at the sheer unmitigated gall. "I'm sorry, who's at that point in the timeline? Oh, right! Not me!"

Carlos Prime actually claps his hands over his ears. "Don't tell me that!"

"I was just trying to protect causality," says Carlos. "But maybe if you would get your act together and actually tell Cecil what you—"

"Do you think I don't want to?"

"Not enough to do it before you literally have no other choice!"

Carlos Prime goes white, but he snaps, "I'm not going to fuck up our future by—"

"That just means you're fucking up the present!"

"I know!" shouts his past self, swaying on his feet. His fists are clenched and his breaths are coming too quickly. When Carlos reaches out a hand to steady him, he stumbles back and his knees buckle. Carlos grabs him before falls. His past self stiffens, and for a second Carlos thinks he’s going to try to twist away.

But then he sags against Carlos so heavily Carlos almost drops him. "You don't need – you don't need to make it seem worse," mumbles Carlos Prime. "I've got that covered."

“Yeah,” says Carlos, because they're not talking about just Cecil anymore. “I know.”

He tries not to say it cruelly, because it’s true. He – both versions – is far past the point where he can lie to himself about Cecil, and Night Vale, and the Currents of Time. He can’t hide what he felt or conceal what he did, and he knows exactly how much it weighs on him, and...
It's kind of freeing, not having to explain yourself. Carlos hasn't stopped making mistakes, will never stop making mistakes, but these – despite everything, he finds he's strong enough to bear the burden.

Although in the literal sense, not for long. His past self weighs a ton. Carlos has put a lot of muscle mass back on after coming home from the desert otherworld, but apparently not enough.

He waits until Carlos Prime has stopped shaking quite so much before awkwardly digging in his lab coat pocket with one hand. Instead of a tissue, he pulls out that stupid silver card, and stares at _Try not to be so hard on yourself;_ and _how is this an appropriate time for puns._

He rolls his eyes. He figured out the gist of the message on his own, anyway. If Future Carlos really wanted to help, he'd—

There's a whole pack of tissues in his other pocket, beneath the duct tape, that he's ninety percent sure was not there this morning. Carlos glares at them, but decides to rise above it.

Carlos Prime is mostly steady on his feet now. He wipes his face and blows his nose with the grudgingly offered Kleenex, though he refuses to look up until Carlos takes him by the shoulders.

"Yes, you fucked up." says Carlos. "And you're going to keep fucking things up. But then you deal with it, okay? You'll figure something out and you'll learn from your mistakes."

"W-what if—" Carlos Prime swallows. "What if I can't fix it?"

"There are people who love you, and you have to let them to help," says Carlos. "You have to trust them, because you can't do everything yourself no matter how hard you try, and that's when we make _really stupid_ decisions."

His past self lets out a shaky laugh.

"Just... don't give up," says Carlos.

Carlos Prime blows his nose again. "Why are you being so nice to me?"

"I'm not being _nice_," says Carlos. "I'm being honest."

"Yeah, okay," says Carlos Prime. If he had the energy, he would probably sound skeptical. Maybe even mistrustful.

Carlos opens his mouth to argue, to make him understand, but—

Carlos has always been his own worst enemy. In some ways, he needs to be, because unchecked he could be _everyone's_ worst enemy.

But he's fought long enough to know that the side you're on isn't automatically right. That enemies can become allies, and more than allies. He still has so much to learn, and so many decisions to make, and no one makes it to the future unchanged.

He might change for the worse. But he might change for the better, too. There's only one way to find out for sure, and it's not something that can be told.

He closes his mouth without saying anything.

"What," says Carlos Prime suspiciously, when he doesn't respond. "What is it?"

Carlos shrugs. "It's because nobody's perfect," he says.
His past self snorts. Carlos knows why: he never thought he was perfect. But he kept—keeps—
trying all the same, and keeps failing. Like now, as Carlos Prime smirks tiredly at him with no
comprehension. And... that's okay.

He'll figure it out.

They both turn at footsteps bounding up the stairs.

"What are the odds that he's covered in Schrödinger's cat hair?" asks Carlos Prime.

Carlos wordlessly digs out his emergency supply of Benadryl and hands him two caplets, and Carlos
Prime refuses to let Cecil come on the roof until he's depilated the worst of it with a ring of duct tape.

~*~*~*~

"There's another vortex coming," says Carlos Prime, staring at his black cube in dismay. He insisted
on patrolling the roof, patiently accompanied by Cecil, whose shoulder under his arm is the only
reason he's currently standing upright. "Somehow. I thought—" He rubs his face with the back of his
hand. "I thought I destroyed them."

To Carlos' surprise, he holds out the cube. Carlos takes it and gives it an exploratory probe. He feels
only the barest echo of power, but it is there.

"Vortices have two ends," he says. "Maybe you started with the terminal point."

His past self squints at him. "I don't think that makes any sense," he says.

Carlos shrugs.

"Is it coming soon?" Cecil asks.

"Not for a while," says Carlos, returning the cube. He wonders if it would be unethical to knock his
past self out; he's fairly certain the initial point of the incoming vortex leads to the abandoned gas
station on Oxford Street, and Carlos Prime is going to need all the sleep he can get if he wants to
survive looking at condos.

"A couple hours," says Carlos Prime.

"Then you need some rest, mister," says Cecil firmly, steering Carlos Prime over to their blanket. He
doesn't protest when Cecil makes him sit down, which probably means he was about two seconds
from falling over. Carlos sits down on Cecil's other side in case his past self needs a positive role
model for not dying of exhaustion.

"Can we get you anything?" asks Cecil.

Carlos Prime stares at him a few seconds too long before he looks away and says, "No, I'm—" He
clears his throat. "I'm fine."

"You're not hungry?" Cecil asks.

His past self grimaces in a way that's probably supposed to be a smile. "I,..." The expression slides off
his face and he stares fixedly at his boots. Carlos can't tell if he's too tired to finish speaking or too
tired to overcome his emotions.

"Carlos?" Cecil asks gently.
Carlos isn't good at accepting pity, but he is a big fan of distractions. "Here," he says, passing over the thermos. "I think this is for you."

It takes him a couple tries, but Carlos Prime finally manages to unscrew the lid and sniff it. "Is it from Julie?"

"It's her recipe, but..."

Carlos hands him the card.

"What an asshole," says Carlos Prime. He sniffs the thermos again, shrugs, and chugs the whole thing in about thirty seconds.

"Thanks," he says. "Cecil, I... thanks." He adds, only a little grudgingly, "To both of you. I guess."

"De nada," says Carlos benevolently.

Carlos Prime rolls his eyes. "I'm just gonna..." He leans back against the exhaust vent, carefully holding himself so he doesn't accidentally lean on Cecil, and shuts his eyes.

Almost immediately, he slumps sideways onto Cecil's shoulder, and then onto his lap, completely passed out.

"Wow," says Cecil, tentatively resting a hand on his head; he only gets a small snore in response. "You must have been pretty tired. Do you remember any of this?"

Carlos shakes his head. "The magical backlash from unravelling a construct as immense as a time vortex isn't great for long-term memories, and I was already pretty out of it." At the concern on Cecil's face, he quickly adds, "But it was probably the Benadryl. That stuff always messes me up."

Cecil smiles a little, but with a distinct tinge of concern. No, not concern – sadness. Regret.

"What is it?" asks Carlos.

"I didn't know you felt like this," says Cecil. Carlos doesn't know exactly which you or this he means – Cecil is looking at him while petting Carlos Prime's hair – but maybe that's the point. "I should have noticed. I should have asked."

The wind picks up a little, and Carlos Prime shivers in his sleep. His lab coat is hanging over a guy wire, still drying, so Carlos shrugs off his own and drapes it over him.

"I would have told you I was fine," he says.

Cecil lets out a small sigh – quiet, but so long-suffering that Carlos grins.

"We're quite the pair, huh?" he says.

"Give or take a few," says Cecil, and the regret doesn't go away, but it fades back to join all the other emotions comprising a smile just for Carlos.

He smoothes Carlos Prime's hair back from his face, then takes out his phone. "What did you want with this?" he asks as brings up the video of Carlos Prime's altercation with – well, himself.

Carlos sighs. "Send it to Julie," he says. "I promised."

"Okeydokey!" says Cecil. His phone makes a deep whooshing noise, like a nearby 747 taking off,
when his email sends.

Twenty seconds later, Cecil's pocket asks plaintively *From my heart and from my hand / why don't people understand / my intentions?* He fishes out Carlos' phone. "You have a message from Doctor Renegade," he says.

"Let me guess," says Carlos. "'Stop hitting yourself'."

"Got it in one," says Cecil cheerfully. The phone chimes in with more Oingo Boingo. "Oh, and she sent you a survey." He offers it to Carlos.

"I'll look at it later," says Carlos.

Cecil puts both phones away and picks up the cookie tin.

"Don't worry," he says in response to Carlos' expression. "We can save you some Snickerdoodles, too. There's plenty to go around."

He playfully nudges Carlos in the ribs and holds out a cookie. Carlos sighs and takes it, because as much as his future self's baked goods certainly bend if not outright break the Laws Of Magic, there's no way they'd be dangerous enough to risk hurting Cecil.

The Snickerdoodles aren't bad. Maybe he should do more baking.

He's packing away the thermos when he discovers a book inside the hamper. It's older, with an aggressively plain cover that screams university publication. He reads the title and his heart almost stops.

Куда течет река времени?

That can't be right, Carlos has read practically every magical text available about the Currents of Time—

"Is that a book?" asks Cecil, recoiling.

"It's—"

Carlos' eye catches on the author: Igor Dmitriyevich Novikov, PhD.

He starts to laugh.

"Carlos?"

"It's a science book," he says. "About time."

"Oh!" says Cecil. He cautiously leans back in. "Is it one of your... textbooks?"

Whether by design or by accident, time is weird in Night Vale. It's only bound to get weirder. Someone has to keep an eye on things and stop them from getting too out of control. Someone needs to discover which way history is really flowing and prevent people/beings/abstract concepts from swimming against it. Someone has to figure out why time isn't real but seems like it is.

Dark magic is dangerous. But much as it likes to pretend otherwise, the White Council does not have a monopoly on human knowledge, and it's Carlos' duty as the regional commander of Wardens in the western United States to use every resource at his disposal to safely find out just what's going on around here.
He's still not sure where the Snickerdoodles come into it, but maybe even they'll make sense eventually. Or maybe they're not supposed to make sense, because there's more to life than duty. There has to be, so you always remember what you're fighting for.

"I guess it is," says Carlos.

Cecil reaches out and tentatively pokes the book's spine. "Did you get everything sorted with the university?" he asks.

"I hope so," says Carlos. He holds the book out; after a brief hesitation, Cecil takes it. "I've already filled out more paperwork than three End-of-Date reports."

"That makes sense," says Cecil. He peeks inside the book, slams it shut, then peeks inside again. "Love and knowledge are both very dangerous things."

Carlos Prime stirs, fretfully mumbling something about calculating the volume of a torus. A small frown creeps across Cecil's face and he hands back the book as Carlos Prime's hand tightens into a death-grip on his fuschia seer-sucker capris. Cecil gently strokes his hair until he relaxes.

Carlos looks at the book, then his past self, then back at Cecil. "Dangerous things are what I'm here for," he says, and Cecil smiles, and leans in close, and kisses him deeply. And they both know what they mean, because time isn't real, and Night Vale is the people who live there, and their love is a theory: one that's been tested and will be tested again, but that they know will always prove true.

Some time later, when Thanaskelos the Doom Centipede has reached its zenith in defiance of all astronomy, Cecil says, "I learned something interesting the other day."

"What's that?"

"The void is full of radio waves," says Cecil. "From all corners of the universe, originating from unknown and unknowable sources – and from us." He sounds a little frightened, and a little excited, and a little full of awe. "To think – someone could be listening to the emptiness of space and hear me! Do you... do you think that's possible?"

"I don't know," says Carlos. "I haven't learned much about radio yet. But..." He takes Cecil's hand. "If they were listening very closely, I think they might."

"Will you learn about radio?" asks Cecil. "What will you be studying?"

Everything is not a sensible response, though that doesn't mean Carlos isn't going to try.

"Eventually, I want to be a practical theoretical physicist," he answers. "But there's so much to learn about the whole universe, and it's all connected anyway... Right now, I want something with a solid interdisciplinary background."

"What kind of degree would that be?"

"General Science," says Carlos proudly.

"That," says Cecil, "Sounds neat." One hand rests on Carlos Prime's head; the other is still entwined with Carlos'. He puts their joined hands on Carlos' knee and Carlos leans his head on his shoulder.

The night sky above them is filled with the void, and radio signals, and a scattering of stars (some living, some long dead, and some not entirely real). And beyond that, somewhere, all the secrets of the universe: stranger than they ever imagined and just waiting to be discovered.
They watch for them together.

Chapter End Notes

"Space-time continuity makes my head hurt." – *The Thrilling Adventure Hour/Welcome to Night Vale Crossover*

"WHY TIME TRAVEL WHY" – *[Libraflyter](https://libraflyter.tumblr.com)*

Approximately one year later, here it is: the final chapter! Of this fic!

Thank you to everyone who's been reading or who just started reading or who will eventually be reading. I had a blast writing this and knowing everyone else enjoyed it too just improved the experience immeasurably. Your patience has been deeply appreciated!

And thank you, thank you, THANK YOU to Libraflyter, my intrepid beta, who boldly waded through two hundred thousand plus words (!!) to make my writing so much better and bravely persevered through unedited time travel sequences so that others might not suffer from the same confused fate. Whenever you hear anguished howls from your local library, think fondly of her and the great work she's done while retreating to a safe distance.

I don't have any other stories planned (YET) but I will be cleaning up this fic and adding special bonus features! Well, special bonus feature. At least one. Anyway: watch this space!

End Notes

First of all, I would like to say that I did not write a ridiculously long fic just because I was consuming both series at the same time and went, "lol those guys have the same name."

I would *like* to say that, but...

All the thanks to Libraflyter, who in addition to being the best beta ever *never once* tried to use her librarian training for evil, even when given provocation like, "Can I have this by tomorrow?" or "Could you read all nineteen chapters before I flee the country?"

Updates will be posted erratically and without warning. In the interest of full disclosure, I should probably tell you that my office radio refused to shut off for three weeks straight while I was writing this and I have no idea if that's a good or bad omen.

Watch me reblog stuff you've already seen on *Tumblr*!

~*~*~*~
Warning! Contains warnings flippant in tone but serious in content; canon-typical violence (for both canons); minor character death; references to child endangerment; minor animal harm; description of panic attack; drinking, underage; drinking, irresponsibly; the inherent non-connishness of sexy vampires; repeated involuntary sedations for comedic and/or dramatic effect; ableist language; swearing; adverbs; [insert important warning/content note I forgot but will add if notified here]; the Apache Tracker; the Apache Tracker as written by a random white girl trying to be funny; the Apache Tracker written via poorly translated Russian; a regrettable over-reliance on Google Translate in general; canon compliance fatigue; spoilers for Skin Game; spoilers for A Sound of Thunder; wheat and wheat by-products.

Processed in a facility that contains peanuts. Do not taunt Happy Fun Ball. Do not read fic while operating heavy machinery. Do not enter the "Bighorn Crossing Zone" by vehicle or on foot when sheep are present. Allow the sheep ample space to cross the road. Stay by the roadside when sheep are on the hill or in the meadow at Sheep Lakes. Obey all signs and closures. Do not attempt to approach sheep or make loud noises in their presence.

Void where prohibited.

References


Hahaaaaa guess who hit the character limit. Please refer to individual chapters for further references!

**Works inspired by this one**:  
*Eager to Be What You Wanted* by michelel72, *Love is All You Need to Destroy Your Enemies [Podfic]* by BearHatter, *The Sleeveless Lab Coat* by Apples93

Please [drop by the archive and comment](http://example.com) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!