| Rating: | Teen And Up Audiences |
| Archive Warning: | No Archive Warnings Apply |
| Category: | Gen |
| Fandom: | Welcome to Night Vale, The Dresden Files - Jim Butcher, Carlos' Team of Scientists (Welcome to Night Vale) Carlos Ramirez, The Man in the Tan Jacket, And The Rest |
| Character: | Original Character(s), Time Travel, Welcome to Night Vale: The Novel Science Bros, Grief/Mourning, Asexual Character, Explosions, Gratuitous Star Trek References, Lawn Ornaments |
| Additional Tags: | |
| Series: | Part 4 of Love is All You Need to Destroy Your Enemies |
| Stats: | Published: 2016-10-20 Completed: 2018-10-20 Chapters: 7/7 Words: 99282 |

Waiting for the Bus in the Rain
by shadydave

Summary

Julie hates the month of October. She hates waiting for the bus. She hates the rain. She hates the heat.

But most of all, she hates knowing that problems she is capable of solving are being delayed by problems she is incapable of solving.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Chapter 1

The bus is late.

Julie shifts her bag of groceries (mostly coffee, partially oranges) to her other arm and irritably pushes the hair that’s escaped her ponytail out of her face. It sticks to her sweaty forehead and she scowls.

Normally, she never has to take the bus, but the Prius is in the shop broken beyond even her capabilities after she used it to demonstrate some simple examples of mass times acceleration to a pushy rhododendron clearly interested in science, or at least in unarmed scientists, during last week's chlorofiend infestation. And normally she wouldn't run her errands during work hours in the heat of the day, but their research has come to a screeching halt and she's found herself with far too much free time after Cecil accidentally announced the chlorofiend infestation was due to "dark science", and City Council placed an immediate ban on the scientific method.

It's hard enough arranging distractions to misdirect their *regular* surveillance crews long enough to get some work done, much less the extra helping of Big Brother that's turned up to keep an eye on the protesters from all the other parts of the Science District. (Given the mortality rate of the average Night Vale protest and their staunch determination to protest anyway, even she can't bring herself to ask them to stop.)

There's a tinny rumble above her, like someone shaking a sheet of aluminum foil. She looks up: there's a very small thunderhead about three meters off the ground directly above her head. She steps sideways; it follows.

There's a small spark of lightning and another crackle of thunder. The cloud darkens.

"Don't you dare," says Julie.

The extremely localized storm system begins to dump rain on her.

There’s a dark sedan parked across the street and, back at the lab, at least one officer hiding in the bushes. Yes, she *could* shout “NRA!” and fire her flare gun into the trash can down the block, distracting them long enough to get some water samples, then go back to the lab and override the Sheriff’s Secret Police officers’ earpieces with a broadcast of Gary’s Spotify playlists until she can cycle through the standard battery of tests. She can repeat that pattern of events with slight variations of mayhem until she has an answer for why she’s being personally victimized by the weather.

She doesn’t want to. Well, she wants to know why there’s a tiny fucking thunderstorm sticking to her like a balloon on a cat, but she doesn’t want to spend most of the process increasing entropy instead of knowledge and stewing in frustration at the obstructive ignorance surrounding her.

Julie hates the month of October. She hates waiting for the bus. She hates the rain. She hates the heat. She hates the caffeine headache that necessitated the grocery run. (She could have stopped at the Java Trout and bought a latte, but she also hates baristas.) But most of all, she hates knowing that problems she is capable of solving are being delayed by problems she is incapable of solving.

She gives up and starts walking. After two or three blocks, another dark sedan pulls up beside her. She recognizes the driver when he rolls down the window.

Fortunately, the rain cloud does not try to follow her inside.
A few minutes later, she climbs out of the front passenger seat. The driver hands her the grocery bag. "Thanks," says Julie.

The rain cloud catches up with her as she's unlocking the door to the labs. With the flood of cold water comes the sudden realization that she can't remember the past five minutes.

She swears and asks the bushes, "Hey, did you see that?"

"Of course," says a disembodied voice.

"Who dropped me off?"

There's a sound of riffling pages. "A man in a tan jacket," says the officer.

"Ugh," says Julie. "That's the fourth time this month he's shown up."

More riffling pages. "I thought it was the third," says the officer, sounding hurt.

"Did you get the one on the first?" asks Julie.

"Uh," says the officer.

The man in the tan jacket had knocked on their door and talked to Carlos for at least fifteen minutes; Carlos' technological distortion field had, as usual, fucked up all her attempts at electronic surveillance. It seems his double secret probation stealth measures (putting his hood up) had fucked up all the Sheriff Secret Police's attempts at personal surveillance, also as usual.

"It started around 12:30 PM," says Julie. The lack of accurate timekeeping still annoys her. "He was here for about fifteen minutes talking to a hooded figure, then left."

After that, she had to go get Carlos a paper bag to breathe into while he insisted he wasn't having a panic attack, because it turns out spending a year recovering from the brain damage of having your memories swiss cheesed by a Smiling God makes you a little sensitive if you start forgetting whole conversations.

Julie hears the sound of scribbling. She wonders if they're using a real pen. "Thank you, Doctor Renegade," says the officer. "That's very helpful."

"Anything for our friendly neighborhood surveillance officers," says Julie, with only a minimum of sarcasm. "You know we love doing what we can to make other people's jobs easier. If only more people acted with such civic responsibility."

The officer sighs and says, "I've brought it up with my supervisor, Doctor Renegade, but there's nothing they can do about the ban."

Whoops, maybe she hadn't used the minimum of sarcasm. Or maybe she's passed the event horizon of sarcasm and all her comments are doomed to be crushed into it, escaping only into some theoretical dimension not of sight or sound, but of cynicism and biting commentary.

"Thanks anyway," says Julie. A gust of rain catches her in the ear. She unlocks the door and goes inside before the water can start pooling at the bottom of her grocery bag, where it's sure to get up to mischief she is legally unable to investigate.

The back of her neck starts to tingle.

Julie doesn’t really believe in the supernatural. Oh, she’s seen plenty of weird shit. Like the ghost
who haunts the baseball field, or the angels who haunt Old Woman Josie’s house, or a certain wizard who haunts the coffee maker as soon as a fresh pot is done. But it all comes down to semantics: “supernatural” implies something beyond the laws of nature. As far as Julie is concerned, if the laws of nature don’t adequately describe a phenomenon, then clearly the experimental observations that went into them didn’t go far enough.

Julie doesn’t really believe in the supernatural. She does believe in the weird shit. She also believes in being prepared, so she puts down her soggy groceries, borrows one of Andre’s steel-plated canes from the umbrella stand in the entryway, and pulls out her flare gun.

She slammed the door coming inside, so stealth is out. “Hello?” she calls.

Someone peers around the door of the lounge, and Julie relaxes. It’s Simone Rigadeau, who has had a key to the labs ever since she helped hide their equipment in the Earth Sciences building during the Strex Corp occupation. She tends to wipe out any leftovers left in the fridge, and Julie still occasionally discovers her pet soda cans nestled inside instrument control panels, but it was worth keeping the lab’s proprietary technology (and a few gadgets designed by Nikola Tesla) out of Strex’s bloodstained clutches. Plus she sometimes leaves helpful notes about their geomagnetic research on fast-food wrappers, and Julie never turns down volunteered peer review.

Julie straight up would have hired her, but Simone declined on the basis that none of the scientists really existed.

"Hi, Simone," says Julie. "Anything horrible in the lab?"

"I was right," says Simone. "He's seen it."

"Who?" asks Julie, but Simone trudges past her and out the door, snagging one of the oranges on the way.

Carlos isn’t due back until tomorrow, and it’s a Tuesday, so Andre and Kate are at the monitoring station (monitoring is still allowed). Wei and Gary were supposed to be here collating the apiological data, but this morning, when Julie discovered they had used up the rest of the coffee beans, they had completely voluntarily offered to stay late and do it after dinner so they could spend the day out of the lab in the tedious yet life-threatening task of replacing the batteries in all the electric field probes planted around town.

Julie quickly checks Lab Two – empty, with the computers safely humming away in their Faraday cage – then takes a deep breath and edges into Lab One.

There's a man at one of the tables. He appears to be grading a large stack of papers, which would be reassuring to anyone who has never experienced the desperation of grading an entire intro class before. Julie points her flare gun at the finished exams in case she needs hostages.

The man looks up. He looks extremely familiar, but he’s got more crinkles at the corners of his eyes and a wide streak of silver hair sweeping back from his right temple and what is either an extremely ill-advised neck tattoo or an extremely large Lichtenberg scar creeping up from his collar to scale his square jaw and spread halfway across his obnoxiously attractive face.

Then he smiles. Julie would recognize that blindingly white shit-eating grin anywhere.

“Julie!” says an older and (potentially) wiser Carlos. “Hasta la vista, baby. Did you know you’re out of coffee?”

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"So you're here," says Julie, "Because the stability of time and space is being threatened by lawn ornaments."

There's a plastic flamingo sitting on the lab table in front of them. It's the kind popular in Night Vale, which means it's got several extra legs and probably comes alive and stares at its owners while they sleep.

"Sort of," says Carlos.

"It's sort of threatened, or they're sort of lawn ornaments?"

"Definitely threatened," says Carlos. "Definitely lawn ornaments, definitely dangerous lawn ornaments. But there's something else, too."

"A sinister conspiracy of bird baths?" She pulls up the Geiger counter app on her phone.

"I wish," says Carlos.

The app beeps. She takes a step back, pulling Carlos with her by the cloak. The grey fabric is rough yet curiously slippery under her fingers, and she makes a note to grope the one he wears currently — err, contemporaneously — for comparison the first chance she gets.

Both versions look identical. He's dressed pretty much the same underneath, too: button-down shirt, cargo pants, combat boots, bulletproof vest, lab coat. She thinks the cuts are a little different — the angle of his collar sharper, his boots higher, his vest slimmer — but she doesn't know enough about fashion (combat or otherwise) to extrapolate a possible date of origin.

He’s also wearing fingerless motorcycle gloves and a leg brace that make him look one can of dog food away from roaming the Outback in a V8 Interceptor. The metal from his brace reflects light oddly, but is equally unhelpful at providing context. She reluctantly concludes it would be ableist as hell to steal part of it to run tests on.

"You know," she says, "I seem to recall you specifically telling me that messing with wibbly-wobbly timey-wimey stuff was super illegal."

"Swimming against the Currents of Time is," says Carlos. "I'm swimming with them. Hopefully."

Julie squints at him. "You have a technicality based on semantics when the penalty is getting your head chopped off?" She thinks about it a second, then adds, “And destroying the space-time continuum?"

Carlos shrugs. "Words are important."

"Okay, it's not that I won't take your word for it—"

Carlos snorts. "Julie, when have you ever taken my word for anything that you thought you could prove empirically?"

Julie narrows her eyes at him and continues, "—But you have to admit this is a pretty big change in attitude from contemporary you, who is only willing to concede that under very limited circumstances time travel could be positive as long as you promise to ignore the panic attack he has right afterward."

"Man, I don't miss those," says Carlos reflectively. "So what you want is some proof that I'm still the same person you know, and not some corrupted future version of me joyriding around time and
space asking you to unwittingly aid him in fucking things up."

"I mean, that would be nice," says Julie.

"I can't give it to you," he says. He's still smiling a little, but his voice is serious. "I'm not the same person I was, Julie. No one is. Experience makes us what we are, and though I've shared my past with you—"

Satisfied that he’s well into one of his big metaphorical speeches that will inevitably segue into his moral obligation to do his job, Julie checks her phone. The thumbprint scan from where he leaned against the lab table finally finishes uploading; a few seconds later, it assigns him a 99% match. The voice and cadence analysis is identical. She crosses her arms and waits for the inevitable verbal confirmation.

“—It’s my duty. But I would never force you to help, and I’ll leave if you—"

"Fine, I believe you," says Julie. "You don't have to give me the seven articles of the Constitution. Jesus."

He blinks at her, temporarily wrong-footed, then gives her another blinding smile. "Thanks, Julie. I —"

He stops in the middle of his sentence. Then he grabs her by the arm and yanks her behind him, just as something crashes through the window and lands on the lab table.

It’s a brick with a note tied to it.

“You miserable fuckers!” shouts Julie. “I'm not using the scientific method!”

Carlos hands her the note, which says, Just checking.

Julie makes an incoherent sound of rage and shouts, “I’ll have your badges for this!” She would have lunged out the window and shown the Sheriff’s Secret Police how much she wasn’t using the scientific method with their own brick, except Carlos grabs her by the lab coat and won’t let go.

She settles for screaming out every insult she can think of until she runs out of breath halfway through telling them their grandmothers can eat yeot.

“Rough day, huh?” asks Carlos as she stands there panting.

“I’m fine,” she grits out. Her hands are still shaking with anger. With some effort, she curls them into fists and jams them into her pockets, then starts her breathing exercises.

Carlos lets go of her lab coat and wisely does not comment on her self-assessment. Instead, he goes to the window and peers out, then gingerly touches one of the remaining shards of glass.

“Lum,” he says. It shivers, and with a noise like a sigh all the pieces – in the frame and on the floor – dissolve into white sand.

Then he gets the broom and dustpan from the closet, sweeps it up, and dumps it in the trash.

“Thanks,” mutters Julie.

“De nada,” says Carlos. He checks his watch. Well, one of his watches; he’s wearing three of them, one of which has no hands, and another of which is running backwards.
“I don’t think I’ve missed it,” he says. “Want to come with?”

“Come with what,” says Julie.

“Me, Old Woman Josie, Erika, and a whole sack full of these alimañas,” he says.

“The lawn ornaments that are threatening the stability of space and time,” she says. “That I’m to touch under no circumstances.”

“Yep.”

She looks around the lab with its gaping window and stalled experiments.

“It’s not like I’ve got anything better to do,” says Julie.

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Old Woman Josie does not seem surprised to see them, even though Carlos must look like he’s aged a couple decades since last week and Julie is getting rained on very specifically again. However, she still makes them ride in the bed of her pickup, because Erika called shotgun. They fortunately outpace Julie’s stalker stormcloud before she starts fantasizing too hard about using her brick on anybody else.

Carlos watches it until it’s out of sight, then turns back to Julie and begins, “You know—”

“Unless you can do something about it, I don’t want to hear it,” she says.

He mimes zipping his lips. Julie scowls at him on general principle and puts her brick in her messenger bag, just to be safe. She trades it for the dishtowel she swiped from the kitchenette so she can dry off her face and wring out her ponytail.

They’re on the edge of town, curving around that liminal space between empty housing lots and empty desert. There’s a canvas sack securely fastened to the tailgate. Julie can see a large pink plastic talon curving out near the top.

She looks at Carlos, who has gone back to his exams. There’s a fancy seal at the top of each first page, but all Julie can make out is the vague shape of a tree and the part of the inscription that reads *QUID ID EST*. Natural light is no more helpful in deciphering Carlos’ age than the fluorescent bulbs in the lab; he has one of those tanned and attractively weatherbeaten faces that means he could be anywhere from Julie’s age to eighty, assuming that wizards age at the same rate as regular humans. They probably don’t, just to make life difficult for everyone.

"How old are you, anyway?” she asks.

Carlos looks up from his grading. "Older than I was."

She rolls her eyes. “When are you coming from?”

“The year 2040,” says Carlos. “Our president is a plant.”

“Really,” says Julie flatly.

Carlos waggles his mighty eyebrows. “Hypothetically speaking, if I wanted to keep you from figuring out too much of what happens in the future, I’d tell you a bunch of nonsense so you wouldn’t know what was true and what wasn’t.”
“Everything you say is a bunch of nonsense,” she replies. “What can you tell me about time?”

“Time’s not real,” he says.

She gives him an unimpressed look. He grins.

“You’re here for the lawn ornaments, but you don’t have any problems interacting with me,” she says. “How come that’s not going to mess up the future?”

“You already know about time travel, so there’s a bigger margin of acceptable variance.”

“Which is?”

“Wiggle room,” he says.

“Oh, if there’s wiggle room,” says Julie.

“You’re already making informed decisions, so it matters less how you get that information,” says Carlos.

“And what I do with that information has no impact on anyone else ever?” says Julie. “Gosh, do I feel special.”


“Differently,” says Julie.

“It’s like…” He tilts his head contemplatively. “You’re with another person, and something happens. Something notable, I mean – the kind of thing you'd bring up as an anecdote. Specifically, the kind of thing the other person would bring up as an anecdote, too. Have you ever known someone that, every time they retell the story, the details change? Not just to make them look better to their audience, or whatever. They genuinely believe that whatever they're exaggerating or downplaying really happened, even though their whole account is wildly different from the way you remember it.”

He basically just described Julie's entire relationship with her mother. "Yes," she says.

Carlos leans forward and says, "What if you were both right?"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, that you remember the event one way," says Carlos. "And your friend remembers the event much differently. And you're both remembering it correctly."

"Because we're remembering two different timelines?" says Julie skeptically. "But human memory is naturally shitty. Eyewitnesses suck. I mean, yes, I'm going to think my account of events is the accurate one, but there's no objective guarantee I'm right. People believe the stories they tell themselves."

"Kind of a weird survival trait, don't you think?"

"If this gets anywhere near evo psych, I'm jumping out the back of this truck," she replies.

Carlos wrinkles his nose at her. "It's not currently testable, I know," he says. "But will you at least concede that reconciling constantly shifting timelines is a workable hypothesis for the human
tendency to play fast and loose with their recollections of reality?”

“I might,” says Julie.

“That’s how we flow with the Currents of Time,” says Carlos. “As long as we’re moving in the same general direction, we can change our positions – wiggle room. And then our memories ease the transition.”

“But wouldn’t we have heard something about it by now?” says Julie. “I mean, we’ve had objective records of events with audio and visual recording for over a century. Surely someone would have noticed a discrepancy that can’t be explained away by a PEBKAC error.”

“‘Objective records’,” repeats Carlos. “Tell me, how did JFK get shot?”

Julie opens her mouth, then closes it again.

“Our records are only as good at remembering as we are,” says Carlos.

“How did JFK get shot?” asks Julie. “And if you say ‘magic bullet’, I’m pushing you out the back of the truck.”

“The second gunman was JFK himself,” says Carlos. “He came here from an alternate history to set right what once went wrong.”

“Okay, now I know you’re fucking with me, because that’s the plot of a Red Dwarf episode,” says Julie.

“Is that the show with the telephone box?” he asks innocently.

She narrows her eyes at him and leans back against the side of the truck. “So if everyone’s wiggling around in different timelines, how do we interact at all?”

“Do you know how prophecy works?”

“Yeah, I had a whole course on it in undergrad,” says Julie. “Of course I don’t know how prophecy works, you haven’t bothered to tell me yet.”

“Consciousness doesn’t exist in a single point of time,” says Carlos. “Some beings, their consciousness stretches across their entire existence. They can give you snippets from likely futures because they’re already there. Humans aren’t as good at it – our memories are encoded by our perceptions. Since we haven’t perceived the future, even though our consciousnesses will exist there too, most people can’t decipher whatever signals trickle back.”

“And this relates to the many worlds interpretation how?”

“The reach of our minds may not be long, but it is wide,” says Carlos. “We pick up on multiple timelines all the time. Ours, and other people’s. The thing is, most of the deviations within them cancel each other out, so each person only really perceives one. But that doesn’t mean our perceptions match someone else’s exactly, even if they broadly agree.”

“Are you telling me,” demands Julie, “That the human perception of our timeline is basically Feynman’s sum over histories?”

Carlos taps the side of his nose.

A thought occurs. “So the history Simone remembers – where Night Vale was destroyed in 1983 –
she’s experiencing it because it actually happened?”

Carlos’ smile fades, but all he says is, “It didn’t happen to us.”

Julie shakes her head, pulls a legal pad and clipboard from her messenger bag, and starts taking notes.

When they pull into the parking lot of the pawn shop, Carlos puts his grading away and looks around carefully before climbing out the back of the truck. “Stay close and turn off your phone,” he says. “We’re going in under the radar. Jackie’s got a pretty solid stasis loop, and I don’t want to disturb it.”


“What? Oh, no, it’s just really rude,” says Carlos. “Gives you a huge migraine.”

They follow Old Woman Josie into the store, far enough behind that Carlos can hide them with his weird psychic cloaking device shit. Erika is no longer visible, but someone holds the door open for them and there are scintillating scotoma sparkling in the corner of Julie’s eye that she’s fairly certain are not the result of a misfiring occipital cortex.

Jackie’s leaning against counter, looking bored. She’s one of those kids who seems like she should be constantly snapping her gum, regardless of the actual presence of gum in her mouth.

“Hey, dude,” she says when they come inside.

Josie dumps the flamingos on the counter, and for a second, Julie thinks she sees...movement, maybe. Something.

Carlos tenses beside her, but nothing happens.

Josie looks at him. “It is not for myself that I give up these little ones,” she says, gesturing towards the flamingos, “but for the future.”

Carlos gives her a thumbs up, then nudges Julie with his elbow. As Josie haggles for her lawn ornaments of doom, Julie follows him into the furthest reaches of the pawn shop.

“Can you check the shelves on the right?” he asks softly. “I’m looking for a black rectangular prism, about four inches high.” He drops to one knee with a grunt and peers at one of the shelves close to the floor. “It might be wrapped in burlap that says ‘The Museum of Forbidden Technologies’.”

“Where’d that come from?”

“The Museum of Forbidden Technologies,” says Carlos. Julie smacks him in the arm, but inspects the shelves next to her.

It’s covered in a jumble of crap, painstakingly priced at $11 each. There are at least twenty such shelves in the store.

“You’d think forbidden technology would be worth lojacking,” says Julie.

Carlos winces. “Turns out that’s not a good idea,” he says, and goes back to carefully rummaging through the junk. Somewhere towards the front of the store, there’s a thump as Josie follows the traditional pawning ceremony and ritually dies.
Julie turns back to the nearest set of shelves. The ones on the bottom hold an assortment of dusty bloodstones, dream journals, knives, tears, tracking devices, and shotguns. The top shelf, which she has to stand on her tiptoes to see, holds horse figurines, pens, pencils, a bag of flour, a book with the cover torn off...

“Hey,” she asks. “How forbidden is this technology?”

“Legal decapitation,” says Carlos. Julie stops peering at the tops of nearby shelves and instead looks further up.

In a back corner, hanging from a net tacked to the ceiling, there’s a burlap sack. She nudges Carlos and points.

“You’re fantastic,” he says. He reaches into one of his pockets. Then he reaches into another pocket. Then he methodically checks all the pockets in his lab coat and cargo pants and comes up empty. “Uh. Can I borrow eleven bucks?”

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Josie drops them off towards the edge of town, a safe distance from the used car lot. Carlos took the black box but left the sack (and the eleven dollars); he’s been inspecting the former closely since they left the pawn shop, gently turning it over in his hands when he’s not staring blankly into space. Julie surreptitiously scans the both of them for EMF fluctuations until her phone dies with a sad bloop.

Oh, well. Assuming it actually transmitted, all her data should be safely in the cloud by now.

Satisfied, Carlos drops the box in his walletless pocket.

“What is that, anyway?” she asks out of habit. She’s not really expecting an answer.

“Time machine,” says Carlos.

“That’s a time machine?” says Julie. “I could fit like twenty of those in my bag.”

Carlos mutters something that sounds like I know, then says, “Fifty years ago it took whole rooms of computers to send man to the moon, and now you can fit the same amount of computing power on a smartphone.”

“Twenty-nine years ago, actually.”

“What?”

“Joking!” says Julie hastily, because Carlos looks like he might have a heart attack and he’s probably old enough to do that now. “It’s 2015 now and Apollo 11 landed on the moon in 1969, manned by Neil Armstrong and Buzz Aldrin and programmed by Margaret Hamilton.”

Carlos pulls out a pocket watch and looks at it suspiciously. “Don’t do that,” he says.

“Sorry,” says Julie, then, “Man, I wish I had taken a picture, your face was hilarious.”

“It’s not funny,” says Carlos sternly.

“It was pretty funny,” says Julie.

Carlos gives the aggrieved sigh that means she’s right but he doesn’t want to admit it. He takes one
last glance at the pocket watch, then puts it away.

“What do we do now?” asks Julie.

This time Carlos checks one of his wristwatches. “It should be close,” he says. “Just another—hah!”

He extends both his hands palm outward and moves them along the same plane of vertical space, chanting softly to himself. His brow is creased in concentration; a few beads of sweat run down from his carefully tousled hair. There’s a deep chime that starts somewhere in Julie’s bones and is pulled out of her, building to an almost physical presence as though it’s coalescing beneath Carlos’ hands, and it would all be very impressive if he didn’t look like a fucking mime.

The sound of the chime fades and Carlos steps back, looking very pleased with himself.

“Climb an invisible rope next,” says Julie.

“Sometimes I ask myself how we even became friends,” he says.

“I blackmailed you, remember?” asks Julie. “So you can’t say you weren’t warned.”

Carlos rolls his eyes at her. Then he reaches out and raps his knuckles against thin air.

_Shave and a Haircut_ booms hollowly. Then a one by two-and-a-half meter section of what Julie thought was thin air swings forward, revealing the back of a heavy iron door and a shadowy room filled with—well, weird shit, probably.

“Damn, son,” says Julie, impressed.

“You’re not keyed to the wards yet, so you’ll have to stay out here,” says Carlos. “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” says Julie, peering around him as he ducks inside. Rooms inside invisible walls are all well and good, but they’re just the sort of thing to make you lose your head and miss important details.

Carlos flicks his fingers and tiny stars spring out, drifting up to float above his head. They leave behind a little blue puddle of light as he disappears up a spiral metal staircase to the right, but it seems to grow fainter much faster than his speed would suggest.

Julie gingerly reaches for the air beside the door until her fingers touch something that feels a little like brick and nothing like getting zapped by defensive wards. Keeping her hand on the wall, she paces around the whole structure. It’s square or close enough, about twelve meters a side, and the walls aren’t exactly plumb, sloping inwards a few degrees. The interior of the door is visible until it’s cut off when turning the first corner; she doesn’t see it again until she’s made a nearly-complete circuit and walked all the way around its invisible exterior.

The door’s black inner surface is absolutely _covered_ in fractals of {5/2} regular star polygons, incised deep into the metal. It messes with her depth perception if she looks at it too long, the shadows deepening until it seems like she’s staring down an endless corridor made of dark stars, slowly moving as though orbiting the black hole at the center of a galaxy...

Julie shakes her head and steps back. Weird or not, that door looks _heavy_, and the last thing she needs is for it to swing shut and take off an arm or smack her over the threshold. Well, _into_ the threshold; every time she’s seen something try to break into the labs, there’s not really enough left to make it over. She has the sneaking suspicion the defenses on this are even stronger.
Carlos still isn’t back, so she roots around in her messenger bag until she finds a penlight and shines it into the gloom inside. There’s a noticeable delay as it crosses the threshold.

The floor is covered in symbols; they look like the kinds Carlos uses, but she wouldn't swear to that. She’d say that they’re entirely stationary, except when she double-checks on a patch by the door, all of them have changed.

The room isn’t empty, but the shadows cling to its contents in a way that suggests ‘shrouded in darkness’ is not a metaphor or simile or whatever.

She hears a *fwoosh* and feels a touch of air on her forehead. She trains her light upwards and stares into nothing; the beam isn’t strong enough to reach the other side of the room, assuming there is an other side to the room. But she waits patiently until she’s rewarded by the sight of an enormous metal circle swinging into the light field with ponderous grace: the bob of a massive pendulum. It looks like it’s made of polished bronze and its surface is crawling with more symbols, flashing like imperfections in the metal catching the light.

There are no razor blades attached to its outer edges, which is comforting on one level but kind of disappointing on another.

*Fwoosh*

Julie follows it with her light for the few seconds it’s in range. The next time it reappears, she starts the timer on her watch to measure the period. Using that alone to estimate the length of the pendulum requires a lot of (over)simplifying assumptions about massless unstretchable strings and tiny amplitudes, but still: there should be no way for a pendulum this big to fit in a twelve-meter-wide building.

Although tiny amplitudes could mean…

She steps as close to the threshold as she dares and strains her ears; after a long moment, she hears a single *tick*.

She waits again.

*Fwoosh*
“I’ll be damned,” she says.

“What did you do now?” Carlos calls from somewhere high above.

“It’s the clock tower!” she says. “You live in the invisible fucking clock tower!”

“I don’t live here,” says Carlos. “I just—”

There’s a noise so loud it seems to pick Julie up and shake her, a massive vibration she feels clear to her bones – the tolling of an unimaginably large bell. She claps her hand to her ears; it doesn’t help, which is when she realizes it’s not being caused by sound waves.

“What is that?” she shouts.

“The warning bell!” She hears footsteps pounding down a set of metal stairs. “Julie, what do you see?”

She forces herself to step away from the invisible wall and peer around the door.

“A rotational vortex,” she calls up to him. “About three meters in diameter and five meters away. It’s kind of a yellowy green.”

“Fuck!” says Carlos, which answers her question as to whether this is an expected occurrence or not. “Do you have a weapon?”

“I was with you,” says Julie. She desperately rummages through her messenger bag without taking her eyes off the vortex. “I’ve got a brick. The rotational velocity is increasing.”

“Just stay calm, Julie. It’ll be fine. In ninety seconds, the bus should get here. I need you to get on it, okay? Get on the bus.”

“I hate the bus,” says Julie.

“Julie—”

“Also, something’s coming through.”

“Just hang on, Julie! I’m almost there!”

The footsteps break off with a rattle of metal railings; a few seconds later, there’s a loud thud and the swearing of someone who has forgotten their knees are no longer thirty years old.

The vortex flares, and several things happen in close succession:

1) A dark figure reaches the surface of the vortex.
2) Julie throws her brick.
3) The brick misses the figure flying out of the vortex.
4) Carlos reaches the door of the clock tower.
5) The brick disappears into the vortex.
6) The figure crashes into the door of the clock tower.
7) The door of the clock tower crashes into Carlos.
8) Carlos disappears back inside the clock tower.
9) The door of the clock tower slams shut.
10) The vortex disappears back whenever it came from.
There are dual groans, one from inside the clocktower and one from the figure now sprawled in front of her.

“Carlos?” she asks.

“Are you ogay?” Carlos calls from inside the clock tower. “Whad’s habbedig?”

“Julie?” Carlos wheezes dazedly from the ground at her feet.

“It’s you!” shouts Julie. “What the fuck!”

There’s a clanking noise from inside, followed by the metallic *rat-tat-tat* of a chain unwinding.

“The defedses haf reset. I cad ged oud yet—”

The bell starts to toll again.

The Carlos on the ground struggles to his knees; something in his leg brace making an unpleasant grinding noise. “Julie,” he gasps. “Run.”

He looks horrible. There’s a red rash spreading around his scar; his eyes are surrounded by bruises and half-swollen shut. His hands shake as he pulls out a large metal ball labelled SNAIL POISON from one of his pockets.

“I’m not leaving—”

“Lissed to be, Julie!” shouts Carlos from inside. “Ged od the bus!”

The vortex reappears.

“Run!”

Julie runs.

The bus stop is only a few hundred feet away; it feels like a few hundred miles. Julie runs, propelled by fear and rage, both directed at Carlos and his stupid determination to get everyone else to safety. She doesn’t have breath to spare, but each time her heels hit the pavement she thinks, viciously, *Fuck you!*

There’s a bad moment where she can hear the bus but not see it, followed by a good moment of pure relief when it pulls into view. Then she realizes the marquee on the front of the bus says KING CITY, one of the non-stop lines, and she skids to a halt and shouts, viciously, “Fuck you!”

The bus stops.

Julie blinks. The marquee reads NIGHT VALE.

The door folds opens, releasing a blast of cold air. “You’d better hurry,” says the driver.

Despite her entreaty, Julie does not immediately leap on board, because the narrow viewing slots on a typical Night Vale bus plunge the interior into a gray dusk that can conceal any number of things that will ruin her day by ending it. If Night Vale has taught her anything, besides the necessity of checking *everything* for EM fields, it’s that the town has a more than adequate supply of both frying pans and fires.

Behind her and in the distance, but sounding more at a distance than he should, Carlos shouts something. Behind her and in the distance, but sounding a lot *less* at a distance than it should,
there’s a noise so weird Julie does not actually have a frame of reference for it.

Julie gets on the bus. The driver closes the door.

The world explodes.

~*~*~*~

23-January-2003

The College of Science Semesterly Interdepartmental Symposium – which, as far as Julie can tell, is indistinguishable from a regular department meeting apart from accomplishing even less with more people – is running over, as usual. Julie focuses on the perpetual motion machine she’s constructed out of the materials in her messenger bag. Smith will deanfully give her hell for it – also as usual – but if she doesn’t do something productive to channel her rage, like they told her in anger management class, then she’s just going to focus on the rejection letter in her messenger bag.

Andre is taking the minutes on his laptop. He is also instant messaging Felicia and everyone has to step over his ethernet cable to get to the coffee. Smith won’t yell at him. Andre probably doesn’t get this many rejection letters, either. People love giving geologists money, just because important parts of California might one day fall over or slide into the sea or get wiped out by a giant mudflow.

“Here,” says the guy sitting next to her, as he hands her a pen. He’s new.

“Thanks,” she says, and uses it to reinforce the cantilever.

It’s not just the rejection letter. It’s the acceptance letter, too, to a position she did not actually apply for. There’s only one national agency she would consider working for and it ends in Aeronautics and Space Administration. It definitely does not contain the words Intelligence, Investigation, or Security. Just because she can think of creative and efficient ways to wreak havoc doesn’t mean she wants to.

An interminable amount of time later, after the meeting has finally ended and Smith has finally stopped deanfully sneering, she turns to pen guy and says, “Who are you, then?”


Julie recoils.

“I get that a lot,” he sighs.

~*~*~*~

The world stops.

Julie looks around – no, that’s not quite right. She can’t move. But she can still, somehow, observe.

The bus is metaphorically frozen nearly sideways, tipped on its driver’s side wheels. Julie’s messenger bag floats in front of her, caught mid-flight en route to her face. She wishes that was the worst of her problems.

The bus is also literally frozen nearly sideways, frost coating the interior and a thick rime of ice covering the viewing slots, holding back the distorted bloom of flames pressing against metal and
glass. The bus driver has one hand extended, fingers spread wide. Her eyes blaze, but she’s not moving either.

Julie thinks of the universe – caught, maybe, between heat death and the Big Freeze. Neither option has the irregularities in entropy needed for life.

Nothing is moving.

Then the world unexplodes.

~*~*~*~

There’s an impression of fire and vertigo and deep, deep cold.

Then there’s not. The bus levels out on its seven wheels but does not bounce, because it was never thrown sideways. The bus driver is in the same position – hand extended, eyes intent – but she’s waiting for something to happen.

The clouds of debris retreat and a ball of flame implodes in on itself like a bad special effect, almost too fast to register. It disappears into a swirling vortex of brilliant violet, and then that’s shrinking down too, brightening until it’s like a single point of white-hot starlight.

Then it’s gone.

The bus driver lets out a gust of breath. “This town,” she says, “Is weird.”

“You must be new,” says Julie.

“I’m filling in for someone else for a few days,” the driver admits. She lowers her arm and cracks her neck. “If you could buy a ticket and have a seat, ma’am? I’m sorry, but you’ll have to pay full price.”

“What?” says Julie, still staring at the place where the vortex had been. She doesn’t see Carlos, and there’s no sign of the clock tower. Then again, there wouldn’t be.

“Ticket, please,” says the bus driver patiently.

“Right, sorry,” says Julie. “How much?”

“Eleven dollars or a bowl of whole milk. Exact change only.”

Julie is digging around for her wallet when she realizes she gave Carlos the last of her cash. The anxiety gnawing her diaphragm ignites in a welcome blaze of anger, because really, it’s just typical that he’d insist on inconveniencing her before blowing up—

She pulls out a purple embroidered clamshell change purse that looks like it belongs to a fashion-unconscious sesquicentennarian but, more importantly, does not belong to her.

“Uh,” says Julie, as the anger detours into fear. “I’d like to report a suspicious package—”

“It’s over,” says the bus driver, her eyes toward the change purse but focused on something far beyond it.

“Like hell it is,” says Julie, fear turning back into anger. She looks around for somewhere to throw the change purse away from them. The narrow window slots are useless. She wishes she still had her brick – the windshield is wide and inviting – but barring that, she starts for the door.
“No, I mean there’s too much in there,” says the driver. “Please stand behind the white line.”

Julie looks at her suspiciously. Then, as she moves back behind the white line, she looks at the change purse suspiciously.

She pulls on a pair of latex gloves from her messenger bag and opens it – slowly, with no sudden movements.

Inside is a good deal of lint, a small, folded-up piece of paper, a subway token for the SOUTHEASTERN PENNSYLVANIA TRANSPORTATION AUTHORITY, a piece of string, an old five dollar bill with Lincoln front and center, four crumpled ones, and just over two bucks in change that includes a fifty cent piece, a bicentennial quarter, and three wheat pennies.

She keeps the paper, token, string, and two of the wheat pennies. Everything else goes to the bus driver, who carefully fills out a ticket and clips it with a hole punch. The grid of stops is unreadable except for the big central cavity that says, simply, VOID.

“If you don’t want that, I’ll take it,” says the bus driver, as Julie goes to throw away the change purse.

Julie looks at it. It’s the change purse equivalent of a fanny pack.

“Knock yourself out,” she says, and hands it over.

Julie sits down as the bus finally pulls away and unfolds the piece of paper. There’s a short message in green Sharpie:

Made it!

XOXO Carlos

“You asshole,” Julie says loudly, to drown out the flood of relief washing through her.

“Organization policy,” says the bus driver. “The bargain is for full price tickets only.”

“No, my friend is an asshole,” says Julie. “You’re all right. I mean, I assume.”

Julie looks at the driver in the large rearview mirror above her head. Her blonde hair is pulled into a neat ponytail and her button-down uniform shirt fits perfectly, which given that she’s a strongly built amazon with an impressive chest stretches sartorial probability. In contrast to the sensible hair and uniform, she does have an extremely ill-adviced neck tattoo peeking out from her collar.

Her name tag says YJJOM.

Molly’s eyes flick up to meet hers in the mirror. Julie gets a sudden sense of vertigo and looks away.

There’s something off here. The smart thing in the short term would be to leave it alone.

“This is a non-stop line,” says Julie, who’s always believed in long-term planning. “Why’d you stop?”

Molly hesitates before answering, “If you follow the rules for too long, you stop remembering how to break them.”

“I didn’t realize that was a skill you could lose,” says Julie. Of course, it’s not like she’s ever come
close.

“In my line of work? Free will’s in limited supply,” says Molly. “You stop remembering how to break the rules. Then you forget all the reasons you’d need to.”

She sounds… sad.

“Was today worth it?” asks Julie.

Molly glances back over her shoulder and says, “The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few, or the one.”

“There’s only one of me,” says Julie.

The corner of Molly’s mouth quirks. “Humans never really work alone.”

Before Julie can question her further, Molly stops the bus and opens the door. A cloud of condensation bursts into the warm evening air. “Thank you for riding with us today,” she says, looking expectantly at Julie.

Molly doesn’t look threatening in the same way an iceberg doesn’t look threatening if you’re not steering toward it. Julie remembers fire and ice in a timeline whose deviations have been canceled out and wonders, for the first time, what kind of power you’d need to have such functional and effective air conditioning on a public transport.

She stands.

“Live long and prosper,” she says, and gets off the bus.

She looks at Carlos’ note again. Did he know what was going to happen and plant it in advance? Or did he go through everything and then travel back before it started? Why would he—

She startles as the bus pulls away, wheels hissing. Her hands start to shake.

"Really," she says to them. “Future versions of coworkers, fine. Killer lawn ornaments, fine. Holes in time and space plus big explosions, fine. But getting off the bus is where you draw the line?”

They keep shaking. Her sympathetic nervous system helpfully floods her with more adrenaline and screams You’re going to die!! at the top of its neurotransmitters.

It takes twice as long to fix her phone because it’s hard to hold the instruments steady. But finally, it blinks to life and she’s able to text Andre.

I’m at the bus depot. Come get me.

As expected, her phone starts ringing a moment later. She ignores it.

Andre finally gets the hint and texts her back. On my way.

She sits on the curb and tries to keep her breathing slow and even.

Directly above her, it starts to rain.

~*~*~*~

10-May-2003
“You know,” says Felicia. “Every year I hope the champagne will be better, and every year it somehow gets worse.”

“I hope you brought the backup refreshments,” says Julie.

“Do I look like an amateur?” drawls Felicia. She adjusts her expensive yet expansive designer handbag. It clinks. “You just finish that glass of bubbly first, sugar. We haven’t been here but five minutes. Now where’s that husband of mine?”

Julie spots Andre and Smith over by the canapes. “Talking to the Dean,” she says. “Maybe you can introduce yourself again.”

“Three years,” says Felicia, shaking her head. “Three years, and he can’t be bothered to learn my damn name.” She drains her plastic flute and hands it to Julie. A moment later she’s standing by Andre’s side and – yep, shaking Smith’s hand and smiling extra politely. Julie can almost hear the Bless your heart from here.

She catches movement in the corner of her eye. The suit who’d been talking to Johnson is heading right toward her, government-issued pleasant expression on his face.

He pulls up, startled, when she hands him Felicia’s champagne flute. “We’re out of veggie dip,” she says, then insinuates herself among the Department of Chemistry before he can recover. Julie hasn’t gotten any more recruitment letters – or phone calls, or emails – recently, and she’d like to keep it that way.

Johnson returns with reinforcements, ready to network the hell out of her government contact on behalf of paleontology cronies everywhere, so Julie sidles over to the dessert table.

Diaz is standing by himself, giving his drink a slightly dubious look.

“How’s the sparkling fermented grape beverage?” Julie asks, neatly sliding a dozen chocolate chip cookies onto a nearby tray of brownies and liberating the remaining plate of snickerdoodles for herself.

He holds it up to the light. “It’s got about as much leg as illacme plenipes,” he says, staring in fascination.

“They save the good stuff for the donor parties,” says Julie. “They know we won’t make a fuss during grant application season.” Diaz raises his eyebrows. “What.”

“You’re a glass-is-half-empty kind of person, aren’t you,” says Diaz.

“Well, yeah,” says Julie. “There’s always someone who will steal your damn drink when you aren’t looking.”

“Isn’t that a pretty depressing way to live?”

Julie doesn’t spill her champagne down his front and say Now my glass is all the way empty only because he made it sound like a genuine question and not like a poorly-disguised judgment, and also because some might get on her snickerdoodles.

“Depressed people usually have the most realistic view of the world,” she says. “Life is random and horrible, and if you haven’t found it like that then your experience is only a statistical outlier.”

“Wow,” says Diaz. “You sound like my old advisor.”
“And how are they doing?"

Diaz hesitates, then says, “He had to leave his last field site after accidentally eating a blister beetle.”

Julie looks at him askance. “All right, I know that proves my point, but there is a lot to unpack in that sentence.”

Whatever pitiful rebuttal he can come up with has to wait as Andre and Felicia finally escape Smith’s orbit and stroll rather desperately to their spot by the dessert table.

“He forgot Felicia again,” Andre says sadly to Julie. Felicia looks pointedly at him, then at Romero, then back at him, but Andre just says, “I’m sorry Smith thought you taught kindergarten, I know I’ve told him you’re a social worker—”

“Diaz, this is Felicia Timmons,” says Julie, taking pity on Andre’s cluelessness. “Felicia, this is Dr. Romero Diaz. He’s an entomologist, but we try not to hold it against him.”

“He’s in the Biology Department,” explains Andre, his face solemn.

Since she knows Felicia would rather die than be rude to someone by excluding them, Julie valiantly adds, “He can have one of my beers.”

“One of your—” Diaz blinks when Felicia removes the six pack from her purse and hands him a bottle. “Oh! Thank you.”

Julie takes the plastic flute from his other hand and gives both of theirs to the suit trying to sneak up on her with a determined look in his eye.

“Can you bring out some more cheese? Thanks,” she says, before turning her back on him and subtly herding everyone away from the table. A crowd of lecturers swoops in, seeking solace from their lack of long-term job security in corn syrup and preservatives, and he’s lost in the crowd. She eats another snickerdoodle in triumph and graciously accepts her bottle from Felicia.

“You know,” says Diaz, “You say that life is random and horrible—”

“Again, Julie?” asks Andre.

“—and yet—” He holds his bottle out for a toast; she grudgingly obliges. “—I just got free beer.”

“Which you didn’t even check for blister beetles,” says Julie. Diaz chokes on his beer but does not spit it out. Good man. “My point is that it’s random. You gotta be prepared for anything, good or bad.”

“If you think you’re prepared to contaminate my beer and make me go back to that champagne, you’ve got another think coming, sugar,” says Felicia darkly.

Diaz laughs. He also surreptitiously looks into his bottle. “I bet you don’t get caught off-guard very often,” he says. “You’d do well out in the field.”

“I’m a theoretical physicist,” says Julie.

Diaz smiles. “That just means they’d never see you coming.”
Julie stalks up to the labs in a fury. There are no cars in the front lot this morning; for some reason, everyone had the urge to work remotely today. Insofar as they can work at all. She doesn’t want to talk to anyone, but it pisses her off anyway.

Her rage is only slightly abated when she realizes the LAB sign out front has been turned on, glowing with the weird shit that means Carlos – contemporary Carlos – is back.

She pounds on the door. “Carlos! Get your perfect ass out here!”

“Just so you know, I will cite you on tha—” The door opens, and Carlos’ face slides from smug to startled as he sees her standing on the stoop under her own mini-thunderstorm.

It starts to hail.

“Huh,” he says.

“Do something,” she snarls.

Carlos reaches for the umbrella stand and pulls out, from among the spare canes, portable EM monitors, and pikestaffs, the lone umbrella. He opens it and offers it to her, but Julie just crosses her arms and glares, so he holds it above her head himself.

He drops it with a yelp a few seconds later, when it’s zapped by a tiny lightning strike.

“Do something useful,” she says, still glaring.

Carlos opens his mouth to respond, but shuts it without saying anything. He squints at her a few seconds.

“Never mind,” says Carlos. He transfers his gaze to the stormcloud. His eyes go unfocused for a moment, and then he’s drawing back with a shudder. “Stay out here. I’ll be right back.”

A half hour later, Julie’s feeling a little better. She’s still standing outside in the center of her own personal storm system, but it’s stopped hailing and Carlos got her two rain gauges and a barometer while talking down the Sheriff’s Secret Police officer in the bushes from arresting them on suspicion of using the scientific method by arguing that meteorology is an artform.

“They’ve gone to get Michelle Nguyen to confirm,” says Carlos, and Julie glances up from the rain gauges by her feet to find him looking more pleased with himself than usual. Nearby, a balaclava’d figure scuttles from the bushes to a lamp post to a Sheriff’s Secret Police car cunningly disguised as a Sheriff’s Secret Police car covered in a tarp. They drive off, tarp still on. “We’ve got forty-five minutes at least.”

“Fan-fucking-tastic,” says Julie.

She’s been pondering whether or not to tell Carlos about Carlos’ visit yesterday. On the one hand, he didn’t tell her not to tell him about himself, and this is definitely the kind of of thing he’d want
to know. On the other hand, by leaving the decision up to her, he’s trusting her to make the best
decision about telling him about himself herself for themselves – for them? – for everyone.

Julie decides that she needs more information and that she hates pronouns.

The wind gusts and blows rain up her nose. She sneezes and swears.

Carlos gives her a sympathetic grimace. “How long has this been going on?”

“Since yesterday,” says Julie.

“You could have called me.”

“It’s not that big a deal,” mutters Julie, crossing her arms defensively. “It’s just – bothering me.”

Carlos is watching her instead of her thunderstorm, so she flicks water at his face. When he dodges
that, she says, “I figured you were busy firing two guns while jumping through the air and yelling
‘Aaaaah!’”

“I wish,” says Carlos, finally dropping the subject and going back to studying the storm. “I was
investigating King City.”

“What’s wrong with it?”

“I don’t know,” he says sourly. “I can’t find it.”

“How do you lose a whole city,” says Julie.

“If I knew, it wouldn’t be lost,” says Carlos. “But the only place I’ve found anything is here in
Night Vale. People have been picking up pieces of paper with ‘King City’ written on them for
weeks. I’ve spent the last five days driving in circles around the 101 – nothing. I tried a homing
spell and ended up in the Tassajara Hot Springs. My finding spell exploded. Opening a Way—”

“Magic door, right?” asks Julie, just to fuck with him.

He rolls his eyes at her. “Yes, person with two doctorates, opening a magic door was unhelpful. I
ended up in a very unpleasant neighborhood in Winter that only took me right back where I
started.”

“How is this different from people not being able to find Night Vale?”

“Night Vale is hard to find because it has enough power being pumped into it to wipe out
everything in a 700-mile radius,” says Carlos. “King City does not. Hell, King City isn’t even near
a ley line. And before you ask, no one’s made a giant double of Night Vale’s wards and siphoned
off the power again, that was the first thing I checked.”

“Have you ever had problems in King City before?”

“When I was a rookie, I had to subdue a tengu there,” says Carlos. “The angry ghost kind, not the
kami kind.” At Julie’s expression, he adds, “Creepy bird-dog thing. They’re scared of plants.”

“Plants,” says Julie.

Carlos shrugs.

“So not up to stealing a whole city,” says Julie.
“Not normally, no.”

Julie tucks the barometer under her arm and pulls out her phone, leaning forward so it’s sheltered from the rain. She pulls up the GPS and searches for King City.

It comes up on the map, but the screen goes blank when she switches to satellite view, and when she tries to get directions it says NO ROUTES FOUND.

An error message pops up: the words FORBIDDEN QUERY below a photograph of her face transmogrifying into something akin to the Crypt Keeper, like she became a Nazi, traveled to Petra, avoided millennia-old booby traps, and flubbed the dismount by picking the wrong MacGuffin. It’s a sight she is depressingly familiar with, though she hasn’t seen it in about five months since Carlos came back from the desert otherworld.

“Huh,” says Julie. “You have to cut through Fairyland to get somewhere else on earth in our dimension, right? And vice versa?”

“Technically, ‘Fairyland’ is only one part of the Nevernever, but yes,” says Carlos.

“What if King City wasn’t in our dimension anymore?” She holds up her phone. “We chose… poorly.”

Carlos gives a heartfelt “Fuck.”

“Hold on,” he says as he pulls out his own phone. “I need to make a call.”

While Carlos repeats *Ita, Urbs Regis perdita est* and *Numquam* and *Capitanam conquire, eh?* to at least three different people, Julie takes more air pressure readings and watches the rain gauge by her left foot with some interest.

Finally, Carlos signs off with *Vaya con Dios* and hangs up. “What do you have so far?” he asks, standing on his tiptoes as if he has a chance of seeing over the top of the thunderstorm. She doesn’t know who he’s kidding, he’s at most only 20 centimeters taller than her.

“The air pressure is consistent with local readings,” says Julie. “But I think I’ve got a tiny urban heat island effect going on.”

“I actually meant more in terms of ‘hypotheses for why I have my own thunderstorm,’” says Carlos, but he pauses. “Urban heat island effect? Really?”

“My left foot’s downwind and it’s got significantly more rainfall,” she says.

“Huh,” says Carlos, intrigued. “Well, move onto the sidewalk. I’m pretty sure the storm doesn’t have an external source, but I’ll need to raise a circle around you to confirm.”

Julie hands him the barometer and picks up the rain gauges, careful to hold them in the same position relative to her body and the wind as she moves away from Lab 2’s windows (the hydrangeas needed watering). Carlos, meanwhile, has somehow procured a hula hoop.

It has *SCIENCE!* written on the side.

“Really,” she says.

“A circle’s a circle,” he says. “I can’t use chalk, it’d wash away.” Before she can duck or move out of the way, he throws it over her head like she’s a fucking ring toss.
He grins.

“You disgust me,” says Julie.

He’s still grinning as he crouches by her side. He nudges the hula hoop into place – perfectly centered around her – then touches it with one finger.

Julie doesn’t exactly feel any **mystic cessation of energies** or similar bullshit that is, annoyingly, testable and reproducible. But she knows the exact moment it starts to work. All the pressures and anxieties and grating misfit details that come from living in Night Vale cut out, leaving behind only the pressures and anxieties and grating misfit details of being her, stopped from working, getting rained on, in October.

It still feels like a weight off her mind. Like calling someone late at night and knowing they’d pick up. Like coming home after a long day and knowing someone was waiting for you.

She blinks rapidly, suddenly glad the rain hasn’t stopped.

“Feel anything?”

*Unfortunately*, Julie thinks. Out loud, she says, “Just the usual.”

Carlos pulls out a notebook and starts writing things down. “Has anyone stolen any of your blood recently?”

“Not that I know of.”

“What about hair?”

“No idea,” says Julie. “I burn all the stuff from my brush, but I shed like a motherfucker.”

“Nail clippings?”

“No. Also, gross.”

“Teeth?”

“Oh, yeah, I forgot to mention the Great Tooth Bandit,” says Julie. “He lassoed a bicuspid and tied it to a doorknob. I barely escaped with my life.” Though she does give her molars a prod with her tongue, suddenly paranoid. They all seem to be there.

“Right,” says Carlos, putting the notebook away. Then he cracks his knuckles. “What do you want to test first?”

The storm has a top speed of 2.24 meters per second, a reaction lag time of 1.77 seconds, and a consistent altitude of 1.58 meters above Julie’s head. They eventually determine that the rain within it is naturally occurring, but whatever’s condensing it is not. When Carlos reduces the relative humidity (by stealing all the water to make a giant floating water orb) the stormcloud calms, though he’s not strong enough to make it stop entirely. Adjusting the air pressure, meanwhile, has no effect on the storm at all.

“So, definitely not a natural process,” says Carlos, voice slightly strained. He relaxes when he taps the hula hoop with his foot, jarring it slightly; Julie feels her ears pop as the air pressure returns to its normal levels. “Someone’s forcing the water into formation by sheer force of will. Pretty impressive, really. You’re lucky it’s not worse.”
Julie flinches at a particularly close lightning bolt. “How would it get worse? A tiny tornado filled with tiny sharks?”

“That’s listed as a Ken Burns documentary on Netflix,” says Carlos, shaking his head. “Cecil didn’t believe it was fictional until I pointed out how there’s no way you’d be able to travel that quickly by car during a state of emergency.”

“People got chomped in half in the middle of LA, but you thought the traffic was unrealistic?”

“I almost got chomped in half in the middle of LA,” says Carlos darkly.

“Instead of letting live sharks rain down on people, you should have gotten in that chopper and thrown bombs into those tornados,” says Julie.

They look at each other. Then they look at the thunderstorm.

“I mean, we’ve got plenty of propane in the lab,” says Carlos.

~*~*~*~

10-July-2003

At this time of night, the only people left in the labs are Julie and Lucky, the janitor. This is how Julie prefers it, honestly. People are distracting – even the grad students, despite the way they diligently collate data and conscientiously maintain the scanners and generally do her bidding. She thinks it’s probably their dramatic personal lives, or maybe all the drinking.

“I’m locking the rest of the building up, Dr. Kwan,” says Lucky, stopping her cart right outside the lab door. “You should go home.”

“In a few,” says Julie vaguely, one eye on the slowly progressing screen. “Have a good night.”

“You too.” Lucky bobs her head and pushes the cart away.

Watching the program run doesn’t seem to be making it go faster, so Julie logs on to the internet and checks her email. Smith has forwarded everyone a reminder about the summer departmental retreat; there will be trust exercises. Julie deletes it immediately.

An email from Romero entitled see? pops into her inbox, and it takes Julie a moment to remember that her last email had the subject heading no it’s not, in response to his original field work is great! If he wants to haul his ass out of the wilderness to an Internet cafe and continue to feed the Sunk Cost Fallacy in his attempts to convince her that standing around in a lot of mud is fun, she’s not going to stop him. But she’s not just going to sit back and let him wallow in his wrongness, either. Someone has to save him from his delusions. It’s what friends are for.

Julie’s not sure how that happened and she doesn’t want to ask. She’s never really known how to make friends; she’s just looked up after several months and realized she knows a million useless facts about someone who doesn’t tell her to stop being angry and who actually cares when they ask invasive personal questions like “How are you?”

There’s a link to a video called p160375_serious_science; Julie clicks on it and goes to make herself some more coffee while it loads.

The video begins as she’s taking her first sip. She is completely unprepared for the image of a beetle the size of her fist crawling across Romero’s glasses, his face twisted in faux-terror while he
yells “Oh god, it’s sucking my brain out!”

After she’s stopped laugh-coughing, wiped the coffee off her monitor, and swapped her keyboard with Sarah’s so it can fully drain, she restarts the video. It’s a full minute of Romero lying sprawled on the ground shouting increasingly ridiculous Starship Troopers quotes while everyone else cackles, until he gasps out a final “Never… surrender. Never… retreat… Never… give…” and flops over with a gurgle. Whoever’s holding the camera laughs so hard they drop it in the mud. Then there’s a few seconds of blackness and swearing, and the video ends.

**Well, this has certainly convinced me to pack up my minions and explore the wilds of Geneva next year,** she writes back, still smiling. **They can scavenge for chocolate in the LHC tunnel.**

An hour later, when she’s abandoned generating ingroup bonding oxytocin in favor of cursing out her new data, debugging the program (again), and finally packing up her stuff for the night, the computer blips.

**At least you’d remember to bring spare parts when you’re hundreds of miles away from the nearest Radio Shack, says Romero.**

Julie sets her bag down and begins her response. **Some things are more important than sleep, and explaining how to cannibalize your grad student’s laptop for more useful purposes is definitely one of them.**

~*~*~*~

The micro-bomb arcs lazily through the air. Julie ducks. There’s a loud pop overhead, even through the earplugs, and the shockwave hits her like a firm slap, even through Carlos’ lab coat.

The rain stops.

She straightens, lab coat still draped over her head. She’s removing her safety goggles to wipe off some of the condensation when movement catches her eye. A man running, arms flailing, briefcase flapping, fleeing… well, Julie doesn't know what; there’s nothing else on the street but some parked cars and a bus trundling slowly past. Whatever it is, he's fleeing it pretty damn hard.

Carlos says something.

“What?” she says, pulling out an earplug.

“How are you doing?” he repeats.

“Just peachy,” she says. “Hey, did you see…”

She looks back to an empty stretch of road, where there had just been… Someone? There’s no one there now.

“We can stop,” says Carlos.

“One more,” says Julie, replacing the earplug. “We need—”

Exactly 21.49 seconds after the explosion, rain and hail splat down on her head like an even more annoying ice bucket challenge.

“—as big a sample size as we can get,” she finishes with a sigh.
Carlos gives her a thumbs up and picks up the last two propane micro-bombs. While she resets her safety equipment, he starts juggling them with one hand.

Julie takes a moment to despair that she’s letting this man participate in her scientific experiments. *She’s* never juggled explosives *recently.* Disgruntled, she adjusts her goggles and pulls the lab coat more securely over her head.

Carlos stops making a mockery of the noblest of disciplines in order to hold out his hand in what Julie can’t help but think of as the “Stop! In the Name of Love” sign, but which she has been assured means “Are you ready?” She repeats it back to him like they’re a very well-prepared Argonath, presiding over a river of runoff annoyance, and prepares to be blown up in the name of science.

This time when she straightens up in the artificial calm during the storm a blue and white police cruiser has pulled up by the curb. Julie feels her eyes narrow with instinctive loathing of The Man, which is not helped by the officer climbing out in the biggest and most mirrored aviator shades she’s ever seen.

“Good morning, folks,” he says, with all the respectable authortaaah of Barney Fife. He’s not even wearing his balaclava or a cape, just a uniform (although *certain people* would argue that a cape *is* a uniform). “Officer Walsh.”

“Are you lost,” says Julie.

He chuckles. “No, but thanks for asking. I received a call that the scientific method was in progress. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?”

“No, we haven’t written down anything,” says Julie. “That means we’re just screwing around.”

She looks over to Carlos, expecting to share an exasperated glance over the continued nonsense of Night Vale’s Finest. But instead of rolling his eyes or attempting to shampoo commercial his way out of trouble, he’s just... standing there. Propane micro-bombs on the ground out of reach, eyes lowered, hands visible, stance so deliberately relaxed and unthreatening that Julie feels fury boiling up at the knowledge that ‘how not to freak out the police’ is something he’s had to put so much thought into.

Then the subtly wrong details click.

In addition to Walsh’s uniform, he – and Julie is pretty certain it’s ‘he’, unlike (now that she thinks of it) the Sheriff’s Secret Police and their strict commitment to gender-neutral presentations – is also driving a Crown Vic. No one in the Sheriff’s Secret Police drives a Crown Vic. No one in the non-Night Vale, non-secret police drives a Crown Vic, not any more. The last person she saw driving a Crown Vic was Carlos, because he needed something that was good for ramming blockades for reasons she really doesn’t want to know.

In conclusion, there is some kind of imposter police officer and Julie just mouthed off to him.

On the plus side, Carlos has stopped looking unnervingly unassuming because he’s too busy shooting her exasperated looks. Whatever, this is why she hired him in the first place.

When Walsh looks over to him, Carlos finally unleashes his blinding grin and says, “This is *art.*”

He gestures at Julie, who barely has time to check her stopwatch app – 00:18.00, 00:19.00,
00:20.00 – and pull the lab coat back over her head.

At 00:21.49, it starts raining again.

“Ta-daaaa,” she says, throwing in some jazz hands for good measure.

Walsh claps politely.

“Is that all?” asks Carlos – still alert and wearing his Beloved Town Fixture smile like a face shield, but sounding a lot less like he’s three seconds away from firing two guns while jumping through the air and yelling Aaaaah! and more like his usual thirty.

“It looks all right,” says Walsh. “But do you mind if I get some independent verification?”

“Of course not,” says Carlos.

Walsh returns to the car and opens the back door. Michelle Nguyen climbs out.

“Michelle?” asks Carlos, rather taken aback. She’s clutching a dented shovel, and both she and it are covered in rusty splatters of what Julie really hopes is drying mud.

She looks at him and says, flatly, “Rock is dead.”

“Well!” says Walsh, the verbal equivalent of sweeping a pile of dust under the rug, or maybe burying a corpse in a shallow grave. “What do you think of this?” He points at the stormcloud.

Michelle walks closer until she’s about a meter away and stares at it. She doesn’t move. She doesn’t blink. Julie briefly considers throwing something at her to see if she’ll react, but given that they’re depending on her analysis that would probably be a little counterproductive.

After about thirty seconds, Walsh yawns and leans back against his car. He takes off his aviator shades to rub his eyes. The sunglasses get stowed in his shirt pocket behind his ticket book; without them, he’s still got the blond, clean-cut look of an all-American douchebag, but he looks younger, more relaxed.

“It’s Troy, right?” says Carlos suddenly.

“Right,” says Walsh amiably. “Have we met?”

“I thought so,” says Carlos. “But you were working at the Ralph’s then.”

Walsh shrugs. “I’m sure I was,” he says. “I like to… move around. Go where I’m needed.” He smiles suddenly. “Like you folks, it sounds like. Can’t turn on the radio without hearing about Carlos and his team, saving the town with science.”

“Hmm,” says Carlos noncommittally.

“You’re a real help to Night Vale,” says Officer Walsh, voice earnest. He extends his hand to Carlos.

Carlos hesitates for just a second, then says, “Well – I try,” and shakes. They both have very firm grips. It’s like watching a masterclass on how to make a good impression.

Despite this, Walsh’s smile seems to radiate genuine sincerity. “We could use more people like you,” he says, and Julie has to stifle a snort, because he has no idea.
“Shh!” says Michelle, unfreezing long enough to unsnap a pocket on her bandolier.

“Sorry,” Walsh whispers.

Michelle pulls out an old Sony Walkman, holds it over her head, and hits the red RECORD button.

She stays like that, unmoving, for three minutes and five seconds. Walsh watches her. Carlos watches Walsh. Julie completely passes from paranoid to bored.

She’s in the middle of checking her email, sheltered under Carlos’ lab coat, when Michelle finally presses STOP and lowers the Walkman.

“Rewind this,” says Michelle, handing it to Walsh. While he obliges, she opens another pouch on her bandolier and removes a small package wrapped in what looks like bacon. She breaks it apart piece by piece, popping each one into her mouth and chewing grimly until she uncovers a pair of earbuds.

She takes the rewound tape player back from Walsh, plugs in her earphones, and pushes PLAY.

Walsh leans back against his car. “So, what do you thi—”

“Shh!” says Michelle again. Her eyes are closed. After a moment, her head starts to bob.

Walsh subsides. Julie goes back to her email. Carlos takes out a thick pack of papers and starts writing out equations on them with his Sharpie.

Walsh surreptitiously peers over his shoulder.

“Problem set,” says Carlos preemptively.

“Oh, that should be all right, then,” says Walsh.

Michelle bobs. The rain rains.

“Hey, what’s the relative atomic mass of lithium?” asks Carlos.

“The atomic weight is 6.94,” says Julie.

“Thanks,” says Carlos, plugging it into his calculations. His ability to do complex arithmetic and higher math without a calculator is one of his more endearing qualities, not that Julie plans on telling him this any time soon.

Another three minutes and five seconds have passed before Michelle opens her eyes.

“This is dirt,” she says. “I am covered in trillwave. Take your cloud rap and get out.”

“I think this is actually their lab, Michelle,” says Walsh.

“Ugh,” says Michelle. “Fine.” She turns and stalks away, dragging the shovel after her. Beneath the dirt, Julie can just about make out a THIS MACHINE KILLS FASCISTS sticker on the blade.

“Well,” says Walsh, “Everything checks out here.”

“Thanks, Officer,” says Carlos.

“Call me Troy,” says Walsh. “If you ever need anything, just let me know!” He gives them a
wave, then gets in his cruiser and cruises. He stops briefly by Michell – only halfway down the block – to ask if she needs a ride. Rebuffed, he drives on.

“That was weird, right?” says Julie.

“Madre de Dios, yes,” says Carlos. “Have you——”

He’s cut off by a car horn honking “Dixie”.

“Good God,” says Julie reflexively, as a dark red sedan with gold racing stripes and a black \( \frac{7}{2} \) heptagram on the side hops up onto the curb. An officer of the Sheriff’s Secret Police – a real one, bebaclavala’d, becaped, and befuddled – clambers out, out of breath.

“Sorry,” they gasp, clutching at a stitch in their side. “Couldn’t find Michelle. Got here as soon as I heard the report. Are you okay?”

Julie and Carlos exchange a glance.

“...Yes?” says Carlos. “Why wouldn’t we be?”

“Imposters,” says the officer dramatically. “Someone called in that he was responding to your evaluation, but it wasn’t one of us! We don’t know who he is or——”

“It’s Troy Walsh,” Carlos interrupts helpfully. “He worked at the Ralphs for a while.”

“Oh,” says the officer. “Right. I’ll call that in. Uh.” They look around. “You weren’t using the scientific method, were you?”

“Nope! Just ask Michelle,” says Carlos, pointing to where she’s shoveling the dirt in front of Big Rico’s Pizza. She tosses aside one final bladeful and drops her Walkman and earbuds into the hole.

“Oh, good,” says the officer, relieved. “That would have been your third violation today, and how would that look?”

“Thanks for your help, Offi— Wait, what do you mean, third?”

A thought blooms, like a newly-watered yet stress-inducing hydrangea.

“Carlos,” says Julie. “You haven’t seen my grad students, have you?”

~*~*~*~

“You can see how this is a very serious offense,” says the officer behind the desk. They started off sounding stern; by this point, they mainly sound apologetic, which probably has something to do with the way Carlos has been giving them his full attention while, under the florescent lights, his hair gleams with an albedo of at least 0.50.

Sitting off to the side of the holding area are Wei and Gary. In what is either the result of a clerical error or Night Vale’s general fuckery, their hands are bound together with giant twist-ties. Wei looks glum at the possibility of spending another year seeking sanctuary in the Ralph’s; Gary looks the same as he always does: slightly stoned and generally bemused by his environment.

“Of course, but – well, these are very new laws, you know?” says Carlos. “We’re sorry to make extra work for you, but it’s been hard for us to adjust. Science is so very exciting.”

“I understand,” says the officer.
Someone coughs at the door. By the time Julie has twisted around in her chair, she catches only the barest hint of cape and mitre sweeping past the door and out of sight.

What little is visible of the officer’s face has gone pale when Julie turns back.

“I mean, I don’t understand,” they say, words tripping over each other. “I don’t understand – I don’t understand anything. There’s your – your – your surveillance team! They say that all the six of you ever talk about is ordering pizza!”

“Excuse me?” says Carlos.

“You never actually order it, either,” says the officer, growing more upset. “You just talk about it! The anticipation is not good for our nerves.”

Carlos looks at Julie. Whooops, she mouths. Looks like it’s time to sweep for more bugs and update the looped recording jamming their frequencies.

“And who puts pineapple on pizza anyway?” the officer continues. Gary starts to raise his hands, but subsides when Wei kicks him in the ankle.

“We’ll try to be more considerate,” says Carlos.

“I wish that was the only complaint,” says the officer. “But just look at this observation log!” They hold it out; it appears to be a sketch of the inner regions of one of the hydrangea bushes. “Only one page of direct quotes, and most of them are unkind observations about our grandmothers. It’s nearly impossible to hear anything in the lab unless you’re standing by the windows or Doctor Renegade is shouting, and most of the time the hidden microphones don’t even work!”

“That sounds very frustrating,” says Carlos sympathetically.

“It is,” says the officer, heartbroken.

“It must be hard, having trouble doing your job,” says Carlos.

“I know, it’s – I mean – we aren’t – um,” says the officer. They dart a look at the office the Sheriff uses when they’re not in their secret moon base or wherever it is they go to fail at policing.

Carlos smiles at the officer again and runs his fingers through his hair for good measure.

There’s a long pause.

“I can let them off with a warning and an identity change,” says the officer. “That’s – that’s a thing we do.”

“Whatever you think best,” says Carlos soothingly.

The officer rummages through their desk and pull out two large plastic evidence bags containing nametags labelled STAN and NILANJANA. STAN is accompanied by a pair of Groucho Marx glasses; NILANJANA, a rainbow-striped John 3:16 wig.

The office slides the bags across the desk to Wei and Gary and stares at them expectantly.

“Nilanjana was my mom’s name,” Gary offers. After they’re un-twist-tied, he pulls the bag towards himself and puts on the wig. Wei grudgingly dons the Groucho Marx glasses, picks up the nametag, and hisses in pain when he pokes himself with the pin.
“Well. Stan, Nilanjana – your paperwork seems to be in order,” says the officer, tapping the form in front of them. It’s blank. “You’re free to go.”

“Thanks, Officer,” says Carlos with another blinding smile. Julie stands up, and even though she doesn’t say or do anything, Wei and Gary scramble to their feet and quickly exit the room without once meeting her eye.

Nobody tries to stop them as they walk through the lobby of the station, though the officer at the desk does sigh as they go past. Well, as Carlos goes past. Julie could be an angelic pen picking up the uncensored internet wrapped up in a flaky flour crust and the officer wouldn’t spare her a second glance.

She takes a moment to pull a survey out of her bag, write Return to Carlos at the top, and slide it towards the officer. The officer doesn’t notice. The four of them make it out of the station and into Carlos’ beat-up Honda Accord with nothing more than a dreamy “Goodbye, Carlos” floating after them.

“Gary, I need you to lean to the side,” says Carlos patiently. “You’re blocking my rearview mirror.”

There’s no response.

“Artist formerly known as Gary,” snaps Julie. “Scoot.”

“Oh, sorry,” says Gary, scooting and slouching.

Carlos finishes adjusting his mirror and starts the car. Then he starts it again when the engine sputters and dies.

“Would it help if I got out and pushed?” asks Julie.

“Be honest,” says Carlos. “Do you really think this car is cool enough to merit that comparison?”

“No,” admits Julie.

“No,” agrees Wei.

“No,” asserts Gary.

Julie shuts her eyes. Unfortunately, the world is still the same when she opens them again. “Gary. What are you talking about.”

“What do you think of Nils as a nickname?” he asks.

Julie sucks in a breath, then forces herself to exhale through her nose. “Did you at least get the data from the sensors?”

“Oh,” says Gary.

“It was confiscated as evidence,” says Wei glumly.

“The officer ate it,” confirms Gary.

Julie’s eye twitches. Carlos glances over at her, then says, “It’s not that we’re mad. We’re just disappointed.”
“No, I’m mad,” says Julie.

“Dr. Kwan is mad, and I’m disappointed,” emends Carlos. He pulls to a stop at the red light. “This is not one of your better days.”

“Sorry,” mutters Wei.

“Sorry, hon,” says Gary, but before Julie can deal with that, he adds: “If I changed my last name, would you call me Nils Bohr?”

There’s a high-pitched crack of thunder; they all jump. Julie swears and cranks the window closed as a small monsoon splats down on the roof above her.

“It shows up when you’re inside the car?” says Carlos, turning on the windshield wipers and ignoring the glare she sends at him. The wipers make one sweep before getting stuck. “That’s new. We should—”

Without breaking eye contact, Julie leans over and smashes her fist into the dashboard behind his steering column. The wipers jerk and resume wiping.

“—Deal with it later,” he finishes smoothly, as though that was always what he had been planning to say. “In the meantime, I need everyone to be quiet. Completely, totally silent.”

“Of course, hon,” says Gary.

“Are you doing magic?” asks Wei.

“...I very well could be,” says Carlos.

Julie grunts and watches the rain streak down her window like a bad metaphor. She absently wipes some off her face and arm. The drops are cold and freshwater, not warm and saline: nothing like tears.

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20-February-2004

One of the things she likes about Romero is his dedication to interdisciplinary studies, which means that he doesn’t mind when she barges into his office to rant about other people’s ridiculous papers.

“—And it will have no application in real life whatsoever!” she says, waving the journal in punctuation.

“I mean, you are theoretical physicists,” Romero points out.

“That just means it has no application in real life right this second,” says Julie. “You’ll change your tune when your RF resonant cavity thruster fails halfway to Mars because your magnetron overheated.”

“So you’re a practical theoretical physicist,” he replies, a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

“Says the man who looks at bugs all day.” Out of respect for a colleague who has proven himself not a total doorknob, Julie has tried to cut back on the biology cracks. It is very difficult.
“Insects are the most successful lifeforms on the planet,” says Romero mildly. “They’ve been here since before the dinosaurs and they outnumber us at least 200 million to one.”

“That just means—” Her cell starts to ring. She looks at the ID, snorts, and turns off the ringer.

“Feds trying to recruit you again?” he asks, sympathetically.

“My mom,” says Julie. “Oddly enough, I don’t really feel like listening to how I’m a disappointment for not providing her with grandchildren or personal yachts.”

“Yachts?”

“My parents wanted me to become a doctor,” she says.

“You are a doctor,” says Romero.

“The kind that makes money,” she clarifies.

“You were the youngest person ever to win the Franklin Fellowship!” he says indignantly.

“It’s cute the way you believe success in my chosen career would ever satisfy my parents,” Julie thinks, but does not say.

“I need a drink,” she says instead, paraphrasing.

“Not to mention all your publications and the work you’ve done building up the department – do they even keep up with your research?!”

“Now I need two drinks,” she says.

Romero sighs. “Sorry,” he says, leaning back to reveal the stack of papers he’s been using as an armrest. “I need to finish grading these.”

Julie leans over and inspects the exams. “Finish them while drinking,” she says. “They’re multiple choice.”

“I don’t suppose you want to help?”

She doesn’t, but an unfamiliar pang strikes her – her conscience, probably. “When do you need to have them done?”

“Monday,” he replies glumly.

She snorts. “Yeah, nice try. You’ve still got 48 perfectly good hours left if you don’t sleep.”

He looks at her, then the pile of exams. “Well…”

“Call me if you’re still panicking on Sunday night,” she says, scooping up his ungraded exams and dumping them in his backpack. “Let’s go.”

“Dr. Kwan, I do believe you are a bad influence,” he says, but he’s smiling and takes the backpack without protest.

“Work-life balance,” says Julie. “It’s a thing. You can – all right, you know what, Diaz, you can stop laughing. You also spent all of last Saturday in the lab.”
“I never said I didn’t,” said Romero. “I just never thought I’d hear you imply you had better things to do than research.”

“I don’t,” says Julie. “But the lab is closed tonight.”

She doesn’t bother to tell him to stop laughing this time. He probably knows she doesn’t mean it, anyway.

~*~*~*~

The road past the hospital has once again been flooded with marbles, so they detour around the north edge of town, comfortably outpacing Julie’s personal storm. With the water completely evaporated from her window, there’s nothing blocking her view of the enormous circular pit bored deep into the barren earth.

“What’s that?”

“Lenny’s Bargain House of Gardenwares and Machine Parts,” says Carlos. “They used to be that abandoned government warehouse—”

“I mean the giant hole in the ground,” says Julie.

He glances out her window. “Oh! I guess that’s where the Shakespeare in a Pit Festival is this year,” he says. “Jane said it was coming up soon.”

“I didn’t realize Shakespeare was into open-cut mining,” says Julie. “Are we sure Cactus June’s not selling diamonds to the Soviets?”

“She’s not,” says Carlos.

There’s a person running on the far side of the pit. She squints, but she can’t make out who it is. The dust kicks up and they disappear.

They’ve almost made it back to the lab when the radio turns on by itself. Initially, the only surprise is that Carlos is getting such good reception when she watched him snap the antenna off his car last month to fend off a hooded figure. She knows for a fact his local radio death curse will make it through in a variety of less-than-ideal conditions, up to and including Carlos wrapping himself in aluminum foil inside a lead-lined bunker, but that doesn’t mean the signal’s always the greatest.

She’s recording her observations (approx volume 70 dB; limited static; subject smiling like big goober) when an additional surprise makes a special guest appearance.

“—and joining me in my studio today is everyone’s favorite scientist: Carlos!”

Her clipboard and Sharpie go flying as everyone’s favorite scientist abruptly slams on the brakes. She lurches forward only to be stopped by her seatbelt and his outflung arm as indignant cries rise from the back seat.

“Ow!”

“What the—”

“Did you just soccer mom me?” she hisses. It’s a good thing he caught her across the collarbone instead of groping her, or else he would already be dead.

“Shh!” says Carlos, letting go of her to crank up the radio – which is pointless, because she’s pretty
sure the knob’s busted.

The volume increases anyway. So does her rage, because even as she pulls out her phone to monitor the incoming transmission, she knows it’s not like she’ll be able to do anything with the data without a big production—

She grits her teeth and focuses on the current problem, to wit: that’s definitely Carlos’ voice coming out loud and clear over the speaker, talking about clouds. That’s also definitely Carlos in the seat next to her, frowning hard at the stereo. Julie would not have picked atmospheric aerosols as a sign of incoming doom, but Night Vale has always had a weird relationship with the weather.

“Could your future self—” she begins.

Carlos cuts her off with a shake of her head. “I did this interview last week,” he says.

Well, that narrows it down. Slightly. “Rerun?”

“I don’t pick up reruns,” he says. “And it was live… I thought. But I just hung around the studio, so… I guess it might not have broadcast concurrently and I wouldn’t have known…” He trails off, still frowning.

“Wow, time isn’t working,” says Julie. “Must be Tuesday.”

“It’s Friday,” says Carlos.

“It is?” says Gary, leaning up between the seats. “Wait— is this October?”

“All month,” says Julie, ignoring Carlos’ muttered, “Hopefully.”

Gary actually looks worried. “Oh, geez.”

Carlos twists around in his seat to look at him more closely. “What is it? Did something happen?”

“No, nothing new,” says Gary. “I just forgot what month it is. This explains, like, a lot.”

“Never change, Gary,” says Julie.

There’s a conspicuous silence from the backseat.

“…Nilanjana,” she says, suppressing an eye roll.

“Thanks, Dr. K,” he says.

After a few false starts Carlos gets the car going again, and Julie checks her phone, still monitoring the radio transmission. Eyeballing the data, the purple noise levels don’t seem out of the ordinary. But they’ve only had a few months of data since Carlos came back from the desert otherworld; what if there are long-term trends they’ve been missing?

“Wei,” she says, turning around. “Do you remember—” Wei is hanging halfway out the window.

“What are you doing?”

He slides most of the way back in and says, “Excuse me. Did you say something?” His hand is still outside, holding his phone, and he keeps peering out the back windshield.

“First, put your seatbelt on,” she says. “Then—” She gestures emphatically at his phone.
“The storm is catching up to us,” he explains.

“Well, I need you to multitask,” says Julie. Carlos slows as they pull up in front of the lab. “Do you remember if any of the broadcasts from last week—”

“Nobody move!” shouts Gary, and leaps from the car. They stare after him in slightly stunned silence as he dashes to the lab.

“Did anything happen to him while you guys were in the station?” asks Carlos.

“No. They held us together the whole time,” says Wei. He leans back out the window to keep filming the storm. “You know, I think it’s gotten stronger?”

“We should go in after him,” says Carlos, but before Julie can agree with him, Gary reappears, wearing a set of electrical gloves and carrying an umbrella. He saunters over and unfurls it just outside Julie’s door.

“What? No,” she says, shoving the door open. “You’re not a fucking bellboy. Give me those.”

“Of course, hon,” says Gary. “Here you go.”

Wei whispers, “Oh my God, dude.” Julie elects to ignore the clusterfuck that is her graduate studies program in favor of not having to deal with this right now.

Carlos follows them in but, thankfully, does not say anything – apart from some chanting for the mumbo jumbo to ensure they can keep weird shit out without blowing up actual visitors (which they do occasionally get, even if it’s only to gawk at Carlos’ hair). It makes the LAB sign glow a cheerful yellow and black which Julie is almost certain is not radioactive.

“The storm’s gone,” says Wei, joining them in the entryway. “21.49 seconds after you crossed the threshold.” He puts his phone back in his pocket and, with a sigh of relief, pushes the Groucho Marx glasses back on his head.

“Write that down,” says Julie.

“Did you guys see any of our surveillance crew?” Carlos asks with a frown.

“No,” says Julie. Wei shrugs.

“I’ll check.” Gary says. He disappears back out the door; a few seconds later, there’s some rustling and a muffled “Gosh darn!”

There are leaves sticking out of his wig when he comes back inside and says, “Nope. Nobody home.”

“Maybe they’re still in a snit about the pineapple pizza,” says Julie, tucking the umbrella under one arm and beginning to pull off the electrical gloves. “Queue up your Spotify playlists, I need to swap out the jamming signal—”

Carlos makes a sharp motion for silence and draws his ridiculously large gun.

He edges down the hall. They creep after him, because given the choice between waiting for something sinister alone in ignorance and waiting for something sinister while watching Carlos charge it head-on, Julie will take the latter any day. Carlos gives them a sharp look but doesn’t order them back. So either he thinks it’s not a particularly serious threat, or he thinks it’s a very
serious threat and doesn’t want to lose track of them. Wonderful. She looks down at the umbrella clutched in her hands and wishes she’d thought to grab a pikestaff.

Carlos pauses before Lab One, his eyes going distant in a way that means he’s temporarily dislodged himself from the center of the universe in favor of thinking, listening, or doing weird shit really hard.

Julie listens, too; all she can hear, over the sound of her heartbeat, is the radio.

Carlos takes a deep breath and bursts through the door.

The sounds of chaos and gunfire fail to materialize. Julie waits a few more seconds before curiosity and the need to make sure Carlos hasn’t done something stupid like getting himself eaten by another building overwhelm her caution, and she peeks her head in.

Carlos stands a few feet away, gun pointed at Carlos – future Carlos – Carlos, who’s balanced on a stool, his back against the counter and his feet up on a lab table. Half a meter away sits a bundle of blankets, towels, rubber flooring, and bright pink beak. He’s reading a copy of the Night Vale Daily Journal from 1983 and eating a banana.

“Hasta la vista, baby,” he says, mouth full. Then he lets out a muffled swear as he ducks the electrical glove Julie heaves at his head and almost falls off his stool.

“You asshole,” she shouts. “You can’t tell me to run and then just—just—unexplode!”

“Julie—”

She hurls the other glove.

“I’m sorry! I had to clear the area before the Phoenicopteriform began the—”

Julie tries to throw the umbrella, but it catches when she swings it back. Carlos – initial Carlos – Carlos is holding on to the other end.

“Julie,” he says, “What’s going on?”

She shoves the umbrella at him. “Even in the future you’re an asshole, that’s what!”

Carlos stares hard at his future self. His future self gives him a little wave.

“Hey, Prime,” he says. “How were the cookies?”

Carlos hands her the umbrella.

~*~*~*~

“Lawn ornaments,” says Carlos0, after Carlos has gone through his whole spiel again. Carlos0 sounds suspicious, but Julie can’t tell if that’s because of the disruptive flamingos or because someone claiming to be his future self has shown up via time travel of dubious legality and dimensional safety.

Carlos shrugs. He looks basically the same as he did yesterday, though now he has two black eyes and a swollen nose that almost make Julie feel bad for him. She suspects it’s the result of getting smacked in the face by the clock tower door but is still waiting for more information to test her hypothesis. There’s no reason linear events for her would be linear events for him, and if she had a
nickel for every time Carlos looked like he’d been in a bar fight, she probably could have bought him an ice pack.

“I thought Josie pawned all the flamingos,” she says, poking the one Carlos brought with a pencil from her contraband writing utensil stash. Beside her, Gary is scribbling away on his clipboard. She assumes he’s taking notes, but since he keeps jerking it out of her view, for all she knows he’s doodling or writing poetry or even, unlikely as it may seem, working on his dissertation.

“She did,” says Carlos. “Which is why she tracked me down when they started reappearing. She’s been trying to gather up all the ones she finds around town, but they’re multiplying too quickly. Also, can you not do that? You’re making me nervous.”

Julie rolls her eyes at him, but stops poking the flamingo.

“Stops… poking… flamingo,” Gary mutters under his breath.

Julie puts the electrical gloves back on and drips some glue on the test subject. When that doesn’t disappear, she adds the electrodes, ignoring the agitated scrunchy faces Carlos keeps making. He hasn’t tackled her to the floor yet, so clearly it’s not that dangerous.

She twist-ties the electrode wires together in a bundle and lets them dangle over the side of the table, where Wei is sitting on the floor inside a chalk circle with his laptop and one of Carlos’ rubber duckies. He’s scowling to himself and occasionally directing comments in Mandarin to the duck, which Julie takes to mean the debugging is going well. She’d written a program last night to optimize flamingo analysis on the off-chance that Carlos would let them have some fun for once in his life, but she’s woman enough to admit that 4:00 AM is not her most coding-ly rigorous hour.

Their whole set-up – science; magic; blatant disregard for the laws of Night Vale, common decency, and physics – is the kind of thing that would be giving their surveillance team conniptions, had their surveillance team not been caught outside Carlos’ perimeter of mumbo jumbo that, apparently, imparts such strong FOMO that everyone in a 150-meter-radius has fled to go do something fun, or at least something that looks fun when posted on social media.

There is still a black sedan all the way down the block. However, they have yet to master the concept of rolling down their tinted windows before taking surveillance photos with the flash on, so Julie is not terribly worried about them.

“You talked with Josie – wait,” says Carlos, pointing an accusing finger at his future self. “How long have you been here?”

“I can’t tell you that,” says Carlos seriously. “The flamingos are already causing turbulence in this timeline. With so many progressive transient eddies impacting the stability, any information I tell you about our future in Night Vale – oh, you mean how long have I been here. Sorry. I got in yesterday.”

“Why?”

“Do you know what happens when a bunch of Night Valeans from 2015 suddenly show up and start wreaking havoc with the space-time continuum?”

“No,” says Carlos.

“Well, you will,” says Carlos.
“What did you do with them?”

Carlos f winces and says, “What I could.” Both of their mouths twist identically, in an expression Julie has come to associate with Night Valeans suffering some horrific consequence and Carlos’ failure to prevent it, no matter how impossible the task or how much they probably deserved it.

Then both their heads turn to watch the door, which was already kind of creepy when it was just one Carlos doing it.

Kate bounds in, carrying a box of seismograms. “Hi, Carlos – Wei – Dr. Kwan – Gar– Carlos?!”

“He’s from the future,” says Julie. “Don’t touch the flamingo.”

“Don’t... touch... flamingo,” says Gary.

“Wow, multi-chronological Carlos...es!” says Kate. “Carli?”

“Carloses,” say Carlos₀ and Carlos₇ simultaneously.

“Carloi if you’re using Greek,” says Julie, who looked this up last night. Kate leans over to inspect the flamingo, then takes out a marker and pokes it in the side.

“...Greek,” says Gary. “Also, Stan and I had to get new identities.”

“Stan?”

“Yo,” says Wei, waving absently.

“Yeah, don’t analyze sensor results while you’re still on 4th Street,” says Gary. “The police there are very strict.”

“Noted,” says Kate. She peers at Gary's name tag. “...Nilanjana. Hey, that’s—”

“My mom’s name!” says Gary. “I know, right?”

She examines at his clipboard. “Is that shorthand?”

“My mom was a secretary,” he explains in a way that explains absolutely nothing.

Andre stumps in and puts a plastic bag filled with small rocks and rolls of seismograph paper on the counter. “Good afternoon, everyone,” he says. “I’ve – is that one of those flamingos everyone’s been talking about? Oh, hello, Carlos, Carlos. Did you bring this in?”

“Hah!” says Wei triumphantly, as the connector port lights flash green. He hooks up the electrode wires and gives Julie a thumbs-up.

“All right, I hate to break up the pleasantries, but I need everyone to shut up and take about two steps back,” says Julie. “Tweedle Dum and Tweedle Dee, you’re in timeout.”

“I’m not leaving, Julie,” says Carlos₀, sounding personally affronted.

“Yeah, I want to check out your interference readings,” says Carlos₇.

Carlos₀ gives him a disgusted look. “I mean that we— that I need to be here in case something goes wrong.”
“Then you’ll make it worse by shorting out all our equipment,” says Julie.

“There are worse things than shorting out all our equipment,” says Carlos₀, and Julie wants to argue with him because there’s not many things that are worse than shorting out all their equipment, but having encountered all of them with distressing regularity, she’s forced to concede he may have a point about their current setup.

“What do you think?” she asks Carlosᵢ.

“Oh, there are worse things than shorting out all our equipment, for sure,” he says.

“I mean—”

He waggles a hand back and forth. “It’s hard to estimate the FUs,” he says.

“Excuse you, young man,” saysGary.

Carlos₀ clears his throat. “Fatality units,” he says.

“I thought those were a joke!” says Julie.

“Public safety is never a joke,” says Carlosᵢ in response, waggling his finger at her.

Julie throws her pencil at him. He catches it with a grin.

“It is useful,” says Carlos₀, with a glare at his counterpart, “to have a unit of measurement for how dangerous conditions are.”

“Right,” says Carlosᵢ, handing Julie’s pencil back. “But these conditions – here, in the lab – have a standard deviation that’s… a little high.”

“How high,” says Julie.

“Four to five people’s worth,” says Carlosᵢ.

“There’s seven of us,” says Julie, appalled.

“Does Carlos count twice?” Wei wonders.

“Yes,” says Carlos₀.

“But if you die, you wouldn’t be here, so you would think the math—”

“Like I said, it’s hard to estimate,” says Carlosᵢ loudly. “The flamingos won’t manifest the ritual working until someone provides a conduit for the dark spiritual energy by touching them.” At the expression on the faces of the non-Carloi in the room, he adds, “It’s like completing a circuit. But if they do…”

Julie hates that “ominous pause” is an effective rhetorical technique. It’s so… inexact.

“Can you at least stay in your magic hopscotch ring until something goes wrong?” she asks.

Carlos₀ looks at Carlosᵢ and lifts an eyebrow. “Well, old man?”

Carlosᵢ rubs his chin. “Hopscotch is squares,” he says contemplatively, but before Julie’s head can
explode, adds, “It should be fine if we have a quick out.”

“Water break?” suggests Carlos₀.

Carlos₀ brightens. “Right! I’d almost forgotten those.” He heads for the lounge, his leg brace clinking slightly with every other step.

“Are you just… really dehydrated in the future?” asks Kate.

“What?” asks Carlos₀. He’s watching the door where his future self exited with a small frown on his face. “Oh. No.” He rummages around in one pocket until he pulls out a piece of chalk, then drops to one knee. “If you use flowing water to break your circle, it absorbs some of the freeform energy,” he says as he sketches a wide circle around himself. “Which can keep it from unsettling anything that might be… highly reactive. Makes your release more precise, too. Excuse me, Andre.”

“Hmmm?” says Andre, still prodding the flamingo with his pen. “Oh, I beg your pardon.” He steps over the curve of chalk and retreats to Julie’s side. “…What’s going on, again?”

“Not much,” says Julie. “The flamingo is an evil time-traveling portkey, Carlos is from the future, Wei is legally named Stan, and Gary has turned into his mother.”

“Oh, all right,” says Andre. “When you get a chance, you should look at the numbers that have been coming in from the monitoring station! The ferromagnetic record is just fascinating.”

“Great,” says Julie. “I’ll just isolate the variables using the Think Method, then.”

“I’m sure the police will sort this out soon,” says Andre, but in the dubious tone that means he’s not actually sure but hopes that, by saying it out loud, it will actually happen, as though a positive attitude makes you the fucking Lathe of Heaven.

Carlos₀ finishes the circle and stands. “You were with him the whole time yesterday?” he asks Julie, nodding towards the lounge.

“No idea,” says Julie. “He was in the labs when I got back, and left when—” She thinks of how best to describe what happened by the invisible clock tower, and concludes, “—Some weird shit went down.”

“Did he talk to anyone?”

“While I was around? Josie,” she says. “Probably an Erika or two. Oh, and Simone, before I got here.”

“Right,” he says, writing on his own clipboard. “Did you notice anything strange about him?”

“Did I notice anything strange about the time-traveling wizard scientist who’s a future version of you investigating killer six-legged plastic pink flamingos,” says Julie flatly.

“You know what I mean!”

Julie rolls her eyes, but she considers the question carefully. Sure, he showed up out of nowhere, got himself into trouble, and disappeared on her, but at least she only had to wait a few minutes instead of six months to find out if he was okay. She didn’t even have to build a superweapon this time.
“I gotta say, you were well within the parameters of your normal obnoxious time travel behavior,” she says.

“I’m not obnoxious,” he says.

“Hah!” says Julie. Even Andre raises an eyebrow.

There’s a cough from the door. “She’s right, you know,” says Carlos, now holding a plastic cup of water.

Carlos scowls at him. “Look, let’s just get this over with,” he says. After some jostling of elbows, like a cockatoo fluffing its feathers at its reflection, they finally get situated inside the chalk circle along with the cup, placed close to the edge between them and the flamingo.

Bad wizard mojo safely contained, Julie drags in (well, makes Kate drag in) the scanner array and hooks it up.

“Wei, what’s our status?” she asks.

He finishes setting up the camera. Then he puts on his safety glasses for the express purpose of taking them off dramatically while saying, “We’re in.”

“Thank you, Leopard Boy,” she says. “All right, everyone, eye protection on.”

Everyone dons safety glasses except for Gary, who puts on a full face shield. She’s also about 90% sure both Carlois are wearing ballistics goggles, but it’s not like protection against high-velocity projectiles isn’t a good idea, so...

“All right,” says Julie. “First round of testing in three, two, o—”

Later, she will swear up and down that the explosion starts before she throws the switch.

~*~*~*~

5-November-2004

“It’s no good,” says Julie. She picks up Romero’s jacket, drops it over his arms, and slides onto the bar stool he’d been saving. “We’ve been ditched.”

“Hmm?” says Romero, still squinting at his Blackberry.

“Andre and Felicia can’t make it,” she says, then shamelessly peeks over his shoulder. Unfortunately, it’s just a Bio departmental email.

“Ohmm,” says Romero. He absently tugs at his jacket with one hand and drops it in the vague direction of his backpack.

Julie signals the bartender for a beer, which he provides without either of them having to utter a single word. There’s a reason she likes this bar.

Romero is still frowning at his phone. Unfazed, she writes up her notes on the day’s labs (“stress need to retain basic lab safety principles in case of limbs catching fire”), reads through a backlogged Advances in Theoretical and Mathematical Physics until she stalls out on the inanity of Harvard’s circle-jerk excuse of a research study, rescues Romero’s jacket from the floor and puts it into his backpack, and finally starts building a Rube Goldberg device out of coasters and
abandoned glasses.

She spins a quarter on top of the pint glass tower. It rolls down the left side into the martini glass, which wobbles and dominoes several coasters, which tip over an empty bottle, which lands on the bowl of a spoon and catapults a lemon wedge into Romero’s beer.

Romero jumps when it splashes and Julie snickers.

“C’mon,” she says, when he gives her a startled glance. “You like defiling your beer with fruit.”

“Not as a surprise,” he says, peering into his glass. “It could have been a beetle.”

Julie laughs as she retrieves one of the coasters. When she looks back at Romero, he’s staring at her with his beer hovering halfway to his mouth.

“What,” she says.

Romero blinks. “What?” he echoes, then “I— I was thinking I, uh— Sorry.” He flushes and puts his beer down. “I’ve just— I’ve never heard you laugh before.”

“Yeah, usually I’m too busy despising humanity,” says Julie. He’s staring again, but it’s a little spaced out, like her head is the gateway to the mysteries of the universe. “Do I have something on my face?”

“What? No! I was just… checking my email…”

“I noticed,” says Julie. “What’s got you all hot and bothered?”

“W-what?”

“Is anything from the Bio Department really that compelling?” she asks.

“Oh!” he says. “Oh. I’m covering the intro classes next week and I was trying to figure out… well, how much that’s going to suck, honestly.”

“How did you end up with the intro classes?” she asks.

“Blank has to cover for Johnson,” he says. “So Schrieber has to cover for Blank, and Telewoda is covering for Schrieber, but Dougherty didn’t want to cover for Telewoda, so… there I’ll be.”

Julie frowns at him. “Don’t you have seniority over Dougherty?”

“Only a month,” says Romero. “It’s not a big deal—”

“I thought you were preparing your case study for submission next week,” she says.

“It’s not a big deal,” he repeats.

She scowls at him, but he continues to fail to claim immunity from extraneous undergraduates as due his position as the least annoying person in his department. “So what happened to Johnson?”

“Nothing,” says Romero. “They requested her help reassembling Sue.”

“Come again?” says Julie.

“At the Field Museum,” says Romero, and when Julie remains unenlightened, adds, “The
“Tyrannosaurus rex?”

“Oh,” says Julie. “What happened to it?”

“She was stolen and dumped in a park outside of Chicago during a tornado,” says Romero, with the same tone of horror as though Sue had been a child. His child. “The fossils could be irreparably damaged. Who would even do something like that?”


“Creationists,” says Romero.

They both shudder.

“It breaks the heart,” Romero says, shaking his head. Julie tips her bottle at him and takes a long pull.

He’s making another weird face at her when she’s done, like she’s a particularly mystifying bug, or maybe has one in her hair.

“Seriously, what?” she says.

He glances around a little desperately. “Where’s Andre and Felicia?”

“Can’t make it,” says Julie, as he takes a big gulp from his glass. She surveys the now-crowded bar and wrinkles her nose in distaste. “Alone at last.”

Romero chokes on his beer and starts coughing.

“Good one, Diaz,” says Julie. She reaches over the bar and steals a napkin from the bartender’s stash. “Are you okay?”

He wipes his mouth and coughs again. “I’m, uh. Fine. I’m great. Uh. How are you?”

“Just peachy,” says Julie. “How do you steal a whole tyrannosaurus skeleton, anyway? It’d be like shoplifting a pile of rocks the size of a Slug Bug.”

“They have no idea,” says Romero, relaxing a little. “You’d think the security system at the museum would have caught something, but as far as I can tell they didn’t get a thing.”

“It’s not that hard to get past a museum security system,” says Julie, and finishes her bottle.

“Why do you know that,” says Romero helplessly. He drums his fingers against his glass, then asks, “Do you, uh. Want another beer?”

“Sure,” says Julie as she resets the fruit flinger. “I’ll get the next round.”

“Right, of course,” he says, but his voice sounds a little off.

Julie looks up from the spoon cascade. “Seriously, if it’s bothering you that much, email Dougherty and tell him something’s come up. He’s too inefficient at being an asshole to turn down a point-blank request, and he’ll have plenty of time to go over the lesson plans.”

“That’s…” He looks into his glass, then drains the rest of it. “That’s a good idea.”

“One of these days you’ll figure out how to ask for stuff,” says Julie. “It’s like applying for a
“grant, but with less bullshit.”

“Yeah,” says Romero. He sighs. “One of these days.”

~*~*~*~

She’s surrounded by bright white light and can hear voices beckoning her. A choir of angels sings in the background.

More prosaically, she’s standing in front of a parked bus, engine humming, headlights flooding the empty depot. The marquee reads KING CITY. Two impossibly tall beings disembark.

“Thanks for the ride, Molly!” says Erika. “Tell your dad we said hi.”

No, she’s standing in front of her apartment building under the floodlights, talking to… someone. He’s wearing a tan jacket. His leather briefcase hums.

“Please,” he pants. He sounds like he’s been running. “You’re a scientist, aren’t you? Please.”

No, she’s sitting in an uncomfortable chair under buzzing, uneven fluorescent lights. There are several people staring at her earnestly – government suits, all of them.

“We can go back and stop it,” says one of them. “Make sure he’s okay. We can save him. We just need your help.”

It’s not right, she realizes distantly. She’s not angry at all. The familiar spark of rage has been extinguished, leaving only a great and terrible void, and she’s plunging into the darkness, falling where she doesn’t want to go.

“Julie!”

Something inside her catches and pulls at the sound of her name. There’s a buzzing in her ears, and the light grows until it’s no longer white, but green, growing impossibly brighter—

Chapter End Notes

WOW the world got a lot more depressing since I posted last. To everyone for whom the world now sucks that much more, and to everyone who is trying to make it suck that much less: stay strong and rock on.

This chapter wouldn’t be nearly as good/readable without the close attention of the fabulous Ginipig, and I feel obligated to tell you all that while style guides prohibit starting sentences with numerals, I did it anyway and it’s not her fault.

ETA: "Why isn't this showing up anywhere?" she asks in frustration, repeatedly selecting the date 1/30/2016.

::facepalm::
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“—ooone?!!”

She’s standing in the lab, the sound of buzzing still rattling around her brain, her outstretched hand mere centimeters away from a dome of gelatinous green light. Within the viscous glow, she can just make out the flamingo.

“Julie?”

*Julie*

She starts at the echo.

There’s a hand on her shoulder, holding her back. She makes herself look away from the flamingo. Carlos stands beside her, his other hand gripping his drawn sword.

“Are you okay?” he asks.

She can still hear the buzzing. The flamingo catches her gaze again and tries to keep it, but she manages to turn her head – slowly, like something might slosh out if she moves too fast.

Andre, Kate, Gary, and Wei still stand where she last saw them, now sharing the stunned expression of someone who’s been slapped in the face by a fish. Carlos has moved, though: he’s only a few feet away and radiating the righteous indignation of someone who’s caught the fish-slapping bandit and is prepared for fish-slapping revenge. His hand is raised towards the dome, his fingers spread wide. The metal panels of his heavy glove rattle against each other: a harsh, persistent buzz.

*We can go back and stop it.*

Another echo. Her mouth shapes a question, a *what*, but she doesn’t have the strength to force it out.

Carlos answers anyway. “Are you okay?” he repeats.

Julie drags a gulp of air into her aching chest. This is her team, her lab. Whatever made her feel like this, whoever told her – they’re not – they’re not *here*. She is.

“Y-yes,” she says, reaching up with a shaking hand to wipe her cheeks. They’re wet. “You – you called me back.”

“We can’t have it getting *too* quiet around here,” says Carlos, his voice light but his grip on her shoulder firm and reassuring.

Her lab… her lab is a mess. All but the bare table at the epicenter of destruction, where the flamingo lies still. Waiting.

A lone panel of fluorescent lights stubbornly flickers overhead, reflected by the water spreading across the floor. A haze of smoke – thickest over the world’s worst Jello mold – hangs in the air.
from the fitfully sparking wires. The scanner array and the computer they were once attached to have gone dark and silent.

Unlike the radio.

“In other news, a woman wearing a bulky trench coat and aviator goggles, speaking on behalf of Lenny’s Bargain House of Gardenwares and Machine Parts, announced that there may have been some slight problems with a few of the things they sold,” says Cecil.

Carlos₀ makes a noise somewhere between a snort and a sigh.

“Why the sword?” he asks Carlos₁, without taking his eyes off his Jello dome.

“It dissolves magic,” says Carlos₁. “Why the shield?”

“It dissolves everything else,” says Carlos₀.

Neither of them lower their defenses, Julie notices. Nothing is happening, but the tension grates at her already-frazzled nerves, this watchfulness for a threat she doesn’t yet understand.

“What – what happened?” she asks, forcing her voice steady. She realizes with a sinking feeling that the water on the floor came from the overturned cup, instantly washing away the chalk circle to allow the Carloi to... do whatever they did to keep everyone safe, while also instantly destroying the functionality of every electronic device—

“You don’t have a chance,” says Cecil cheerfully.

—of every *useful* electronic device in the room.

“The more important question is whether it’s *still* happening,” says Carlos₀.

“I think we stopped it. I don’t feel anything else,” says Carlos₁. “You?”

Carlos₀ spares them a glance, then shakes his head. Still, he waits a moment after Carlos₁ sheathes his sword and nothing happens before dropping his hand. The metal panels on his glove stop vibrating and the Jello dome disappears.

Julie scrubs at her face one more time, then picks up her clipboard and slowly, carefully, writes down her observations until her hands stop shaking.

“Is everyone all right?” asks Carlos₀.

Kate gives a little shudder and says, “Okay, that's freaky.”

“What is?” asks Carlos₀ sharply.

“I saw... *this*,” she says, waving her hand at the room. “The lab, you making the shield go away, asking if everyone was all right...”

“Did anyone else see anything?” he asks.

“Me,” says Wei glumly. “Trying to fix my laptop.”

“I was making coffee and discovered we were out of soy milk,” says Andre, which Julie writes down, stares at for a second, then appends with an underlined *GOOD*. 
“How do you even do that with a piece of paper?” says Gary, sounding equal parts confused and disturbed. “I mean, she stuffed it up her nose first!”

There’s an interested silence, and then Carlos₀ asks, “Who?”

“That chick – uh, the nice young lady from the pawn shop,” says Gary. Carlosᵞ’s hand tightens on Julie’s shoulder; she’d completely forgotten it was there. “You mean Jackie Fierro?” he asks. “Where was she?”

“How do you even...”

“The flamingo used the wiring to tap into the power of your accumulators, creating a partial link for your consciousnesses to another point in your timeline – the near future, it sounds like. It collapsed when Prime shorted out the connections.”

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“She slaps herself mentally until she gets ahold of herself. “How did it tap my accumulators? First off, they’ve been empty for over a year. Secondly, they’re not even hooked up.”

“They’re not hooked up now,” says Carlosᵞ, carefully.

“If it can siphon the power from the accumulators at any point in time ever, then why doesn’t it just yank all of us into the future right this minute?” asks Julie, irritation filling her like a warm bath.

“She glances at Carlos₀, expecting him to object to Carlosᵞ’s slapdash security measures or unhelpful opinions or, failing that, to Carlosᵞ himself, on general principles. But he’s staring at the flamingo, his face troubled, not suspicious. He does catch her eye for the barest second before doing the thing where he lets his gaze drift off to the left, and his face is still troubled, but he gives her an encouraging smile, as if – as if it looks like she needs encouraging.
She musters up a glare for him, then turns it on Carlos₉.

“That is not a consolation,” she says. “That is the opposite of a consolation.”

“I’d tell you more if I could,” says Carlos₉, and – his voice is fine, but his expression is off. It’s not his usual cocky grin: it’s a smile, small and a little sad. It makes Julie feel like she’s lurched off a stoop with one more step than expected.

*Make sure he’s okay. We can save him.*

Her clipboard clatters the last inch to the lab table when she tries to put it down. She crosses her arms, hands clenched into fists, and tries to slow her breathing. It’s fine. Something weird is happening and she feels like shit but it’s fine—

“We need to make sure it’s fully contained,” Carlos₀ is saying. Had he said anything else? She doesn’t know. Her heart feels like it’s beating too hard and she’s starting to feel light-headed, but this is *not the time* for an anxiety attack, she has too much stuff to fix, still has to deal with the...

Carlos₀ is looking at her now with open concern. She wonders what exactly he saw during the light and the buzzing and the – the—

“Got any light bulbs?” Carlos₀ asks her.

“W-what?”

“Light bulbs,” he repeats lightly, like this is a normal thing to say in a normal conversation and Julie just misheard him, normally. “For the work lamps?”

“Yeah,” says Julie, a beat later. Her limbs feel stiff, heavy, but she forces them to move over to one of the storage cabinets. She crouches down and takes a moment to wipe her face on her shirt before retrieving a multipack from the back of the shelf.

“You’ve blown out all the circuits,” she says. Even the wires formerly attached to the flamingo have stopped sparking. Carlos₀ has come over and looks like he’s going to say something sympathetic and stupid, so she hands him the light bulbs to give him something useful to do.

“They’ll have to stay like that for a little, I’m afraid,” says Carlos₀. Then, to her surprise, he motions at Carlos₀ to keep the bulbs. “We need to tie up the wiring. Running a containment field in place of a current—”

“—Should keep it from tapping the accumulators,” finishes Carlos₀, sounding interested in spite of himself. More importantly, he’s finally stopped staring at Julie like she’s a small kicked kitten.

“What are the light bulbs for?” she asks.

“To disperse the excess energy from the containment field’s feedback loop,” says Carlos₀.

“So… you’re going to use them for light,” says Julie.

“Nope!” says Carlos₀. “Prime is. You don’t want interference from the... radiation from the vortex I came through—”

Carlos₀ shudders. “You’re right about that. Take the circle, then.” He tosses Carlos₀ a stick of chalk and pulls out a Sharpie.
Julie looks at her team. They’ve begun to stir, slowly drifting around the lab and righting things, but there’s still a certain fish-slapped hesitation to their movements. She makes her way over to Andre, who has slumped in a rolling desk chair and is staring off into the distance.

“Are you okay?” she asks.

“What? Oh, yes, of course.” He focuses on her, and Julie can tell the exact moment he decides not to ask her the same thing. “I was just thinking about the ferromagnetic samples. I’m worried they might have been compromised by whatever energy was released by the flamingo.”

“Oh,” says Julie, dismayed. “Well – we did scans on all the lab fixtures last month. We could use those as a baseline and do another round of scans now. If we compare them we should be able to determine contamination levels…”

“As long as it’s less exciting than this scan,” says Andre, and they both pause to look at the flamingo.

The Carloi are conferring around it, by which she means Carlos₀ is sticking his fingers in a work lamp’s light bulb socket while barraging Carlosᵋ with questions about it, and Carlosᵋ is producing a sidewalk chalk masterpiece on the lab table and shrugging quite a bit. Carlos₀ rolls his eyes and picks up a light bulb with his free hand. It lights up.

“Either way it should be fine. I can get more ferromagnetic samples, I think,” says Andre. He touches her elbow briefly, light but reassuring, then picks up his clipboard and flips to his sketches. “And maybe we’ll discover some new spectra interactions!”

“Maybe,” says Julie. She wouldn’t say his enthusiasm is catching, exactly, but in the light of his indefatigable ability to put aside any problem not actively preventing him from looking at rocks, it’s easier to shove her own useless feelings aside and focus on what needs to be done. “Wei!”

There’s a bang and a yelp, and then Wei’s head appears out from under a table. “Go run diagnostics on the equipment in Lab Two and then see if we managed to collect any remote data,” says Julie, and he deposits his collection of frayed cables and stands up. “Kate, can you check the offices upstairs to see if the secondary scanner array still works? Gary—”

“I’m on it,” he says smartly, then raises his voice. “Would anyone care for some coffee?”

When everyone stares at him, he says, “Of course you do,” and strides out of the room.

“Oh, yes, I forgot,” says Cecil’s voice. “Absolutely do not touch the flamingos.”

~*~*~*~

19-May-2005

“You know, that didn’t suck as much as I thought it would,” says Romero thoughtfully, after he takes a long draft of beer. He’s dressed like a Jedi.

“Really,” says Julie. She’s dressed like someone who has some dignity, though she did bring along her working replica of R2-D2. Her empties are currently sitting in his cupholder attachment. “Because I just watched someone who used to be fairly sensible spend the majority of the movie crying, never once go to an OB-GYN, then die of a broken heart in defiance of medical science. Despite the fact that she was supposed to live long enough to have her daughter remember her. And, you know. Start the rebellion.”
“Well, true,” says Romero. “But you have to admit – the rest of it wasn’t half bad. Much better than Attack of the Clones.”

“Watching code compile is better than Attack of the Clones,” says Julie. “Felicia started crying, it was so terrible.”

“And she liked Revenge of the Sith,” points out Romero. He had started crying during Revenge of the Sith, but Romero has been known to cry during Hallmark commercials, so it’s not much of an indicator of quality.

Julie squints at him, then says, “I’ll concede it was better than Attack of the Clones.”

“What about watching code compile?”

“Depends on the program,” says Julie, and finishes her bottle. She looks at the clock. The exact time is obscenely late, or maybe early, so she does the responsible thing and orders another beer.

She turns to Romero and catches him watching her. “Sorry, did you want anything?” she asks.

He jerks back guiltily and starts picking at the label on his bottle. “No,” he says. “I’m good, I…” He looks into her eyes, then down at the label, then back to her eyes. “Actually, I was thinking,” he says. “About things. And I want – uh, I mean, if it’s okay – I just wanted— Do you want to get dinner on Friday?”

“I’m cleaning out my office,” says Julie. “They’re moving me again. I’m going to start a pool on how long it takes before they stop pretending it’s for organizational reasons and just exile me to another boiler room on a satellite campus because they’re still upset about Sarah’s defense.”

Romero stops fidgeting with his label long enough to say, diplomatically, “You have to admit it was much more… eventful than most dissertation defenses.”

“The best dissertation defense is a dissertation offense,” says Julie.

“It might have been a good idea to let them know about the Tesla coils in advance,” says Romero.

“If they wanted to fool themselves into thinking they know all of the facts all of the time, they shouldn’t have become scientists,” says Julie. “Or they should have at least read my req when I reserved the conference room. Besides, the important part is that she passed. If they had a problem with that, they should have said so instead of pulling all this spineless backdoor bullshit. It’s just a waste of everyone’s time.”

“Yeah,” says Romero. “Wasting time, that’s… bad.” He takes a deep breath. “So… would you like some help moving, and maybe – um, then we could get dinner afterwards?”

“Sure,” says Julie. “Andre and Felicia coming?”

“Uh, no,” says Romero. “I was thinking it would be… just us.”

“Fine,” says Julie.

“You know, at dinner, together,” says Romero. He won’t meet her eyes, and the label from his bottle is falling to the bar in smaller and smaller shreds.

Julie raises an eyebrow. “…Yes, understood,” she says.
“On a date,” says Romero, all in a rush.

“A date,” says Julie blankly, then, without really thinking it through, “With you?”

Romero winces, but he says, “Well, it’s kind of – we’ve just, you know, been doing a lot of stuff together, and I thought that maybe we could… keep doing that, officially.”

“A lot of stuff,” repeats Julie. “We don’t do a lot of stuff.”

She maybe goes out every other weekend, because it’s easier for her to get shit done in the research lab when everyone else is spending their Saturdays and Sundays doing nonsense. So does Romero, because he’s usually going home at the same time she is when she calls him on her way back from the lab.

Yes, Romero did just give her a ride to the movie which would technically make it a double-date with Andre and Felicia, and she frequently meets him at the bar, and they hang out in each other’s offices when the labs are closed, and they go to coffee shops to do their grading together, and he invited her to his family’s Christmas party, and she dragged him to her cousin’s wedding so she wouldn’t have to talk to her family…

Julie has the sudden horrible realization that by certain standards, they’ve actually been dating for at least six months.

“Oh god,” she says. “We do do a lot of stuff.”

“Well… yeah,” says Romero. “So… what do you think? I mean, it’s…” He tears his last piece of label in half and blinks at it in surprise, as if he hadn’t even known what his own hands were doing. Then he looks at her and attempts a facial maneuver that might have been intended as a smile but comes out as a nervous squiggle.

She is making him nervous. Because he wants to date her, despite knowing her for over two years.

“…It’s worth finding out, right?” he asks.

“Is it?” asks Julie, feeling more bewildered than she cares to.

Romero opens his mouth. Then he shuts it. Then he opens it again and says, “It is to me.”

There are far too many feelings here. One of them has to do something. She considers the likelihood of Romero being that person and – well, that’s a little unfair, he has done something, he’s the one that’s gotten them into this mess, but Julie’s not interested in assigning blame, she’s interested in not having this be an issue, so she says, instead, “Fine.”

“Fine?”

“Yeah,” says Julie. “Sure.”

The anxious quirk of his lips solidifies into something more like a smile. “Right,” he says.

“But no promises,” says Julie. “Just one date. For preliminary testing.”

“Right,” says Romero.

“And if it goes horribly we’re pretending it never happened and never mentioning it again,” says Julie.
“Right,” says Romero, and – it doesn’t look like pretending it never happened is even a viable option for him. He’s beaming at her now, nervousness gone; his smile – his actual smile – is full of certainty. No, not certainty – hope. She’s never met someone so happy and excited to spend time in her company in her entire life.

To her horror, she finds herself wanting to tell him this.

Instead, she drains her beer, gives it to Artoo, and says, “Also, you still have to help me clean my office.”

~*~*~*~

The scanner array is, in the words of a past advisor, “totally fucked”. Julie gives it a few half-hearted thumps of percussive maintenance, but even jiggling the connectors that do not like being jiggled fails to yield any kind of reaction, positive or negative.

“Great,” she mutters, and gives it a shove to start it rolling so she can take it down to her workshop. It goes a foot and jolts to a stop. One of the wheels has started to stick.

“Here, I’ll help,” says Carlos, abandoning his dual observations of Carlos, who has been busily writing something on his clipboard, and the flamingo, which has been innocently sitting under the bright, too-blue glow of the work lamps.

“I’ve got it,” says Julie, as the discord of emotion inside her resolves enough to spit out a blare of annoyance. But then Carlos makes a series of dramatic eyebrow gestures that he presumably believes to be conveying some kind of useful information, and while Julie is staring at him in disgusted consternation, he shepherds both her and the scanner array into the hallway.

“I don’t need your—”

A shiver runs down her spine before she can say help, and everything goes eerily quiet. She looks down; the floor tiles have started to glow as small silver glyphs flow across them like a black and white neo-noir edition of The Matrix.

“He can’t hear or see us,” says Carlos. “Are you okay?”


“Can I check?”

“Why do you...” She doesn’t finish the sentence, because okay: maybe having your future self turn up without warning, hand over a mysterious object that blows up the lab/Attempts to yank all your friends’ consciousnesses into the future, and then show especial concern to your one friend who keeps crying when no one's looking might be slightly suspicious. Carlos is just doing his job – both jobs, since Julie did hire him to keep an eye on them. It’s not his fault Julie would prefer that no one look directly at her for the next few hours, or maybe days.

“What are you going to do?” she asks.

“Use the Sight,” says Carlos. “It shows the presence of magical energies, among other things.”

He says the last bit breezily, as if she’s not going to fucking notice.

“What other things,” she says.
He hesitates, then says, “Something’s... true nature. Its essence.”

“Ugh, don’t say ‘essence’,” says Julie. She rubs her forehead. “You’re going to stare into my soul.”

“More like your spirit,” he says, as if that’s any fucking better. Her skin is crawling with a mix of embarrassment and irritation and... other things, leaking out of the hole in her chest, and Julie desperately does not want to share that with anyone. Her self-control is fragile, brittle; she doesn't think it could handle the weight of pity.

But – this singularity within her feels familiar, even if she doesn't know why it's there, and yet she has no evidence that it’s truly hers and not some... feelings magic, or something equally horrifying, and... now she needs to know.

She looks away and mutters, “Fine. Go ahead.”

She half-expects some weird tingling or something, but she doesn’t feel a thing. Well, nothing from the outside; otherwise she still feels like shit. From Carlos she hears half an indrawn breath, like the beginning of a statement, or maybe a gasp. Her fists clench. But he doesn’t react any further, just stands steady in her peripheral vision until he exhales and gives his head a little shake.

“You’re fine,” he says.

“Told you,” she replies. She makes her fingers relax.

Carlos’ mouth twists unhappily. “We can’t trust him just because—”

“Look, I might not have much experience with weird shit, but I have a lot of experience with you being a pain in the ass,” she says. She tugs on his cloak: oddly slippery. Virtually indistinguishable from Carlos’. “And I’m pretty confident that’s all homegrown, control level obnoxiousness, right there. I doubt you’re more of a disaster than usual.”

Carlos sighs. “If you say so,” he says. He pushes a flange back into place on the scanner array, then asks, “Is there... is there anything I can do?”

“You can start by not waiting until you’re literally half-dead to ask for help while you’re popping through time and space,” she says.

“Is there anything I can do for you, right now, Julie.”

Unlikely. All the things she wants are either outside his ability or his moral code. She looks at him sidelong. “Why.”

“I... caught the edges of what it was doing,” says Carlos. “No details, but what I did feel... I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

Had to go through that, as if this feeling’s a one-time thing. It’s somehow inevitable that it’ll be waiting for her in the future, too.

“Yeah,” she says, adjusting another one of the flanges. “Me, too.”

He scratches the back of his neck and says, “Do you want a hug?”

“Absolutely not,” says Julie, alarmed.

He lets out a snort of laughter. “Fine, fine,” he says. “But – let me know if anything changes, okay? I’m heading to Lenny’s Gardenwares.”
“I’d just like to point out that the last time you attempted yardwork, gravity stopped working,” says Julie.

He rolls his eyes. “The old man won’t – or can’t – tell me much about the flamingos, and Lenny’s is where they’re coming from. Cecil was quoting one of their reps on the radio just now. Well, just now, from last week.”

“I’m mad that sentence makes sense to me,” says Julie. “What are you going to do?”

“Observe,” says Carlos. “Call me if anything seems off, okay?”

“Fine,” says Julie.

“Anything,” he stresses.

“Yes, understood,” says Julie.

He continues to stare at her pointedly.

“Yes, I will share my fucking feelings with you if the situation demands it,” says Julie. “Go away.”

He tips her a lazy salute and heads for the door. The floor stops with its edgy Y2K screensaver as soon as he leaves. Julie is too busy scowling at his back to realize until after he’s gone that she could have used his help getting the scanner array downstairs. She swears and kicks the cart, then swears some more.

Carlos sticks his head out the lab door. “Are you okay?” he asks. “What happened to Prime?”

“Went to do weird shit,” says Julie. “Look, make yourself useful and—”

“I left?” says Carlos.

“Like you’re so good at waiting around thinking about dangerous things instead of running off to poke them with a big stick,” Julie snorts. “If you could move the—”

“There’s a flamingo sitting in the middle of the lab unattended and we’re expecting someone in half an hour!”

“You’re here, aren’t you?” says Julie. “Look, make yourself useful and—”

“I left?” says Carlos.

“Like you’re so good at waiting around thinking about dangerous things instead of running off to poke them with a big stick,” Julie snorts. “If you could move the—”

“There’s a flamingo sitting in the middle of the lab unattended and we’re expecting someone in half an hour!”

“You’re here, aren’t you?” says Julie. “Now help me—”

“It’s not as simple as just taking my own place!”

“You can do it,” says Julie. “I believe in you. And if you could just take this down—”

“I can’t—”

“I swear to God, Carlos, if you don’t shut up and help me get this downstairs I’m dunking you in dioxygen difluoride!” snaps Julie.

Carlos blinks at her.

“Forget it,” Julie mutters, crossing her arms and shoving her shaking hands under her armpits. “Sorry.”

Instead of fussing about her distress, or the fact that she yelled about murdering him with far more sincerity than normal, he offers, “I mean, if you want me to really suffer, it should probably be in
something where I won't explode immediately. Like, sulfuric acid. Feet-first.”

“I’ll take that under advisement,” Julie manages.

He makes a leisurely circuit around the scanner array as she gets herself under control. Poking one of the flanges, he asks, “What about a freight elevator?”

“We don’t have freight elevators yet,” says Julie. “You suck at this.”

“No, I mean I want you to install a freight elevator,” says Carlos. “I know how many boxes you’ve got down there.” He crouches down with a grunt and touches one hand to the cart and one to the floor. “Hold on to the handle. Things with high centers of gravity tend to tip over.”

“Onto you, I assume,” says Julie as she takes the steering bar.

“There are many things I have not knocked onto myself,” he says, trying not to sound indignant and failing.

“Like?”

“Truck cabs, stacks of crates, overloaded forklifts, certain therapods, bookshelves from IKEA—”

“You could be like a million years old,” interrupts Julie, “And you’re still buying your furniture from IKEA?”

“I wasn’t buying furniture,” says Carlos. “I was fighting a duel. Tz’ap!”

The scanner array lurches about six inches into the air, wobbling slightly. Julie bends over: there’s nothing holding it up that she can see, and waving her hand underneath it encounters no resistance. She tentatively pushes the scanner array back and forth: it glides smoothly but… unevenly, almost, sort of like—

“You charged the floor and my scanner with EM fields of the same polarity,” says Julie.

“Sure did,” says Carlos, straightening with a wince and a click of his knee brace.

“You charged the floor and my scanner with EM fields of the same polarity,” says Julie, “When I don’t have any functional equipment to scan them.”

“The residual effects should last until dawn tomorrow,” says Carlos. “I’m sure you’ll have something running by then.”

Badgering Carlos about weird EMF shit is fruitless, but fun, and it almost lets her forget the hollow feeling in her chest. She doesn’t need his help pushing the scanner array down the hall, but she grudgingly admits it’s useful having him shoring up the forward end as they go down the stairs. She only briefly fantasizes about letting it go to run him over. It would be a pain to recalibrate if it fell, anyway.

However, when they return to Lab One she nearly runs into Gary as he lurks by the door. He’s twisting his hands together, face pale.

“Uh,” he says.

“Spit it out,” says Julie.

He flinches, then says, “…The coffee maker’s broken.”
Everyone is watching her very intently in the way that means they don’t want her to know they’re watching, except for Carlos, who’s checking his watch.

She turns around and leaves without another word.

She grabs some supplies from the lounge and stalks back down to her workshop. She dumps a can of coffee beans into a new trash bag, places it on her worktable, and then yells “Fuck!” and hits it with a wrench, again and again.

~*~*~*~

27-May-2005

“You know I’m never going to sleep with you, right?” asks Julie.

Romero chokes on a mouthful of complimentary bread, and, okay, maybe Julie could have waited longer than thirty seconds into the first date to bring this up.

But – if it’s going to be a dealbreaker, she wants to know now. She doesn’t want to – to get all invested, or whatever, just to find out that no, workaholism and misanthropy are fine to build relationships around, but not having sex is out of the question. Because that’s not something she’s going to compromise on, not now and probably not ever. She had her cliche period of experimentation in college, and even though it was a pain in the ass sorting out control groups, she came out of it quite sure she has near-zero attraction to any other human being.

Romero finally stops coughing and asks, “Is it – is it me?”

Julie gives him a flat stare. “Yes, you personally are responsible for my lifetime of asexuality. You’ve ruined all sex, retroactively and forever. Way to go.”


Julie narrows her eyes at him. He looks around a little desperately, makes an abortive poke at his Blackberry before remembering that table manners exist, and finally tries a smile. “What – uh – what do you think about the new trailer for The Island?”

She allows the subject change, because she doesn’t really want to talk about her sex life either. Besides, Michael Bay ripping off episodes of Mystery Science Theater 3000 is a new and exciting level of suckitude for her to complain about, and Romero quickly gets sidetracked by discussing the merits of the show. The man is a sucker for anything that features so many process shots of bugs.

“Peter Graves let giant grasshoppers eat Chicago,” says Julie.

“Geez, a guy accidentally feeds radioactive wheat to insects one time...” says Romero with his usual lopsided smile, and Julie hadn’t realized how weird its absence was until it returned. She also hadn’t realized she’s been keeping track of how often he smiles. Jesus.

“Stop trying to normalize giant bug attacks,” she says on autopilot. “I see right through your cunning plan. It’s all ‘It was an accident!’ and ‘Science requires risk!’ and then boom, your huge tarantulas are eating Arizona.”

He’s suspiciously silent.

“You’re thinking ‘Tarantulas aren’t bugs,’ aren’t you,” she says.
“...Maybe,” he says.

Julie snorts.

“But I’m also thinking I’m not really cut out for a career in mad science,” he says. “Most of it seems more like mad engineering, to be honest. Those death rays don’t build themselves.”

“There’s nothing wrong with engineering degrees,” says Julie, who has one as the result of a poorly calibrated youth.

“Or death rays?” he asks. He’s trying, without much success, to repress his smile.

Julie sniffs. “My interest in charged particle beams is purely academic.”

“Handy out in the field, though,” he says.

“Yeah,” says Julie, “Against giant bugs.”

World domination eventually segues into the latest installment of the ongoing saga of Romero Diaz vs. His Landlord, a rollicking roller coaster of a ride with intrigue, deceit, and unwanted houseguests. (When even the resident entomologist gets freaked out by a bug problem, something has gone very wrong.) It’s all engrossing enough that Julie is able to ignore the inherent awkwardness of dating Romero right up until he walks her to her door. He starts to stoop down, then pulls up so sharply she hears his neck vertebrae click.

“Sorry, I – uh,” he says.

She sighs and takes pity.

“Here,” she says, grudgingly pointing at her cheek.

He leans down and kisses it – more of a peck than anything, quick and dry. It’s... not terrible.

“Are you free on Wednesday?” he asks.

“You want to do this again?” says Julie.

He shoves his hands in his pockets. “...Yes?” he says.

“Go on a date,” Julie clarifies. “With me, who is never going to put out.”

His wonkus smile is back. “I had a really good time tonight.”

She stares at him. “Are you sure,” she says.

“I really am,” he says.

~*~*~*~

The door to the storage closet crashes into the wall when Julie flings it open, but she does manage to restrain herself from kicking any of the containers inside. Some of them are liable to kick back. She finds the box of new lab equipment and carries it upstairs, along with her wrench and the bag of coffee grounds.

There’s a noticeable drop in the conversation level when she reenters the lab.
“What,” she snaps.

“Uh, we thought—” Wei begins, but at her glare, stammers out, “That is, I – uh – I – Oh! I salvaged some of our data from the servers? It is translated into some kind of code, though, and I can’t tell if it is corrupted or not—”

“Fine,” says Julie. “You all work on that. I’ll be here.” She deposits her box of equipment on one of the lab tables and begins the process of restoring some small degree of order to the universe.

She sets up stands for a Florence flask and a Griffin beaker, then takes measurements and digs through the box for the glass tubing. It isn’t there. She’s resisting the urge to throw everything across the room when Carlos says, “Here,” and gently nudges her in the arm.

U-shaped tubing rests in his hands, its 90° bends at exactly the correct proportions for optimal brewing. She glares at him as she takes it, but the newly-rounded corners aren’t even warm, and she grudgingly concludes that manipulating the elements is *slightly* more convenient than sticking glassware over an open flame and hoping for the best.

“And this,” says Carlos, and hands her the rubber stopper for the Florence flask, perfectly bored through with a hole for the tubing. She adds a few drops of glycerin and slides it in place.

“You said we pick up on alternate timelines all the time,” she says, without preamble. “What does that mean, practically?”

“Deja vu’s the most common side effect,” says Carlos. This time he gives her a prepared thistle tube, but given that all he had to do for that was fit a filter cloth over the head, she’s not nearly as impressed. “You’re just not the you that’s had that experience before. Then there’s people who’ve got ‘one of those faces’ – that means at least one version of them is popular somewhere, and the recognition carries across the dimensions.”

“Social chaos butterfly,” mutters Julie, filling the flask with water. With the tubing clamped in place and the beaker filled with freshly-hammered coffee grounds, she *finally* lights the burner.

Then she moves to the next table and begins to repeat the whole process, because today is *definitely* going to require more than ~500 mL of coffee.

“What else?” she asks Carlos.

“Ever hear of...” He trails off, then says, “I forget what they call it now, but it’s a form of confabulation – a shared cultural memory of something that didn’t actually happen. At least, not that everyone remembers.”

“The Mandela Effect?”

Carlos snaps his fingers. “That’s the one.”

“What happened to Mandela?” asks Julie. “Did dimension-hopping JFK assassinate him too?”

“No, JFK was too busy writing those kids’ books about Anglo bears,” says Carlos.

Julie side-eyes him, then decides to drop it. For now. “Anything else?”

Carlos hums noncommittally. “A lot of the indicators can be hard to sort out from other extrasensory perceptions. Sometimes you get a bad feeling because something bad happened to another you; sometimes you get a bad feeling because you’re surrounded by badness. Most of the time it’s
too hard to eliminate the variables; if you can figure it out, it’s probably because it’s so trivial to you it sticks out.”

“Like what?” asks Julie.

“Baked Alaska,” says Carlos glumly. “It makes me cry.”

“Meringue? Mexican Ice Cream?”


Even at her most judgmental, Julie is hardpressed to imagine how some alternate version of Carlos could traumatize himself with dessert. Then again, she wouldn’t have called crying over a lawn ornament, either.

Hitting coffee beans with a wrench had helped for a while, but thinking about it just drags her back to that awful moment and the indignity of not even knowing why it’s awful.

—Save him—

“The flamingo…” she begins. “What was…” We just need your help— “What we saw…”

She stops, because while her mind is usually full of questions, now they’re jumbling up with emotions and memories, some of which technically don’t even exist yet. Might never exist. Bright lights. Buzzing. Buses. She doesn’t know what she’s asking.

She looks away and catches Andre watching her. She scowls. He just shrugs and gestures at his rocks, which either means he has a legitimate scientific excuse for observing the room, or that he’s pretending he does and is banking on her never wanting to discuss her feelings, ever, to escape retribution. Is it so much to ask that everyone ignores her emotional breakdowns so she can, too?

“It felt like a future part of the timeline, on my end,” says Carlos, quietly, but his voice is thankfully free of sympathy or pity or something equally horrifying. “It could still be an alternate timeline, though. Or maybe both.”

Even if it doesn’t happen to her, it’s going to happen to one of her. Great.

It’s not something she can prepare for. It’s not something she can prevent. Her fingers curl in frustration, so she adjusts the gas on the second burner to give them something to do. For much the same reason, she asks, “What’s this appointment that’s got you all het up? Is it dangerous?”

“What does it mean to know an answer?” Carlos says philosophically. “In order for a theory to remain valid, we have to constantly reevaluate what we think we know just to ensure the
“You’ve forgotten, haven’t you,” she says, and feels a grin creeping across her face – slowly, like it’s not sure if it’s wanted.

Carlos scowls. “I didn’t forget, I just don’t… remember all the details. Which is necessary for a healthy timeline, I might add.”

“More wiggle room?” asks Julie. Inside the Florence flask, the water vapor cools and the pressure decreases. Nature fires up its abhorrence and the air pressure in the lab shoves the contents of the beaker back through the filter and tubing, filling the vacuum with the world’s most popular psychoactive substance.

“Right,” says Carlos. “Which is great, until you run into something that doesn’t wiggle.”

“Like Jackie Fierro and her stasis loop,” she says, watching him carefully. When he doesn’t react, she adds, “Who is definitely showing up in…” She checks her watch; it’s stopped. “Ten minutes,” she finishes at random. It’s not like time really works anyway.

Carlos finally gives her an exasperated look, but doesn’t deny that she’s right. "I do remember Jackie's pawn shop."

"Well done," says Julie. She gets the flask tongs and unclamps the Florence flask.

"The problem is, I also remember Stan's pawn shop."

“How is that a prob—” Julie stops in the middle of pouring the coffee into her mug, because she knows that Jackie’s pawn shop is the only one in town, but she remembers Stan’s pawn shop, too. Not Stan (at least, not someone who wasn’t renamed Stan just this afternoon), or where the shop was, exactly, or even if she ever felt the need to pawn something there – just a stray moment of recognition, all contextual information gone.

“Huh,” she says.

“Exactly,” he says. “Jackie’s recirculating her own timeline, the rival pawn shop doesn’t exist, and meanwhile—” He waves his hand at the flamingo. “I remember lots of stuff about Jackie – or I think I do, anyway. But it’s like picking out puzzle pieces from every puzzle someone does in their whole lifetime to form a picture you saw once in a photo of a photo.”

“That’s a weirdly specific metaphor,” says Julie, and finally, blessedly, finishes pouring herself a cup.

“I think it’s a simile,” says Carlos. “Hey, can I have some?”

Julie pauses just before she takes the first sip and glares at him over the rim.

“It’s just a question,” he says mildly.

“Make your own,” she says. “I’m almost out.”

He looks pointedly at the second siphon, which has just begun to boil, then at her full mug. Her only response is to loudly slurp as she drains half the contents in one go.


Carlos makes a wounded noise.
“And make a cup for Andre, too,” Julie adds, as the man himself wheels his way across the room on his rolly chair. The second flask is just about finished boiling up and over, so she turns off the gas.

“I couldn’t help overhearing your conversation,” says Andre, who is full of lies because she knows he was listening in on purpose. “But I was thinking about it, and – isn’t this sort of dangerous? If Jackie’s in this stasis loop business you don’t want to disturb, that implies you – you-you, not your past self – shouldn’t interact with her too much. But at the same time, she’s coming here, and when I accidentally overheard Julie shouting about FOOF earlier, you seemed pretty concerned about Jackie getting the chance to talk to you – your past self, not you-you.”

“And why is she coming here, anyway?” asks Julie.

Carlos looks up from staring longingly at Julie’s mug as she tops it off from the second siphon. “Well, you know,” he says, and then, when faced with the unimpressed expressions of an audience who does not know, nor appreciates having their question dodged, continues, obviously stalling, with “When you consider all the various possibilities… probability, and whatnot…”

The radio gives a loud crackle, and Cecil’s voice says, “Need something explained in language that for all you know could be scientific? Feel free to drop by Carlos’ lab!”

“There, science,” says Carlos, and gives them a not-at-all reassuring grin. “Jackie has good investigative instincts. Definitely nothing for you to worry about.”

“So we should worry about any other alterations to the timeline?” asks Andre, who sounds like he’s jumped the gun and started worrying already anyway.

“Are you going to pull a Marty McFly and fade gradually, or just suddenly pop out of existence?” asks Julie.

“Julie,” says Andre reprovingly, as though he had not just started the most depressing line of questioning ever.

“What? I need to know what to expect!”

“Sometimes I get a rash,” says Carlos.

“That’s it?” Julie demands. Even Andre seems somewhat taken aback.

“I mean, there’s also the anxiety and nausea and blood pressure drop and insomnia,” says Carlos.

“Oh!” says Andre. “Like that time you didn’t sleep for three weeks and started hallucinating that all the clocks were singing to you and shot Gary’s car because you thought it was a unicorn?”

“I what?”

“Right before Cecil got mind-whammied and City Council put a hit out on you and you got throat spiders,” says Julie.

“I don’t remember that at all,” says Carlos, bewildered.

“Well, good, because you were pretty messed up about Cecil,” says Julie. “And it makes sense. You kept babbling that it had something to do with the man in the tan jacket, and we did hit you with a lot of tranquilizers.”
“No, I remember *that*, I just – before – I shot Gary’s car?”

“Very thoroughly,” says Julie.

“Huh,” says Carlos. He scratches his head. “Did I ever stop breathing?”

“You *stop* breathing?!”

“Oh, it hardly ever gets that bad,” says Carlos. “And by that point the timeline’s own defenses usually kicked in and it starts fixing itself – honestly, Julie, I’m *fine*.”

He spreads his arms as if to say *See?*, or maybe in preparation to catch the second Griffin beaker clutched tightly in her drawn-back fist.

Andre touches her shoulder, and she makes herself exhale slowly, fighting off the rage blackout. He has a point: killing Carlos for almost getting himself killed would be counter-productive. She puts the beaker back down, takes a fortifying sip of coffee, and makes herself ask “The timeline’s defenses?” instead.

“Free will,” answers Carlos. “Our choices mean something, even if someone else is manipulating the circumstances. The – shadow of a choice, I guess – still exerts an effect on the timelike curve, pulling it towards what it would have been before the interference.”

“Free will,” repeats Julie. “Somewhere Igor Novikov just felt a great disturbance in the Force.”

“How do you know you’re not interfering?” asks Andre.

“Once you’ve been that close to the K-R horizon—” Carlos hesitates almost imperceptibly. “It gets easier to tell significant changes from insignificant ones. You can... sense how it all fits, and if you’re careful, you can avoid having too much of an influence.”

Julie notes the hesitation, and also the term *K-R horizon*. So far, Carlos has stuck to purely descriptive explanations, emphasizing the weird shit and primarily working in metaphors, or maybe similes. Nothing quantifiable. He’s scrupulously avoided anything like scientific terminology with a dedication that is really quite suspicious.

She picks up her clipboard and writes it down on the basis that anything Carlos screws up is bound to be at least a little interesting, and also: fuck him.

“Hmm,” says Andre, nodding. “No, still sounds dangerous. What are you going to do about Jackie?”

“Talk to her,” says Carlos.

“That’s it?” says Julie.

He shrugs. “Words are important,” he says.

“Data is important,” she says, unimpressed. “Kate! What’s the status of the secondary scanner array?”

“Well, it’s missing a few parts,” says Kate. “But the ones that are there still seem to work?”

“What do you mean, missing—” The parts are down in her workshop, because the other night it seemed like a better idea to make them more efficient than to go back to her apartment and stare at the ceiling all night. She didn’t succeed in making them more efficient, but it was still a better idea.
“...Never mind,” she concludes. “Go bring it in. I want to have it running when Jackie Fierro gets here. Wei, are any of the computers going to rebel and try to kill everyone?”

“Probably not,” he says.

“I’ll monitor the ferromagnetic samples to make sure they won’t contaminate your new readings,” says Andre.

“Thanks,” says Julie. “Gary—”

Gary sighs gustily. “I’ll get the community outreach chalkboard,” he says, and trudges out of the room.

She looks back to Carlos, who’s reset the siphon and is now frowning at the Florence flask like that will make it boil faster. Well, maybe it could, she’ll give him that.

“Hey, Doctor Strange,” she says. “Is there anything we can do when Jackie gets here?”

He considers the question. “No, I don’t think so.” He flicks a fingernail against the flask; it goes plink and, abruptly, all the water inside erupts through the piping into the beaker. “We don’t want her to get distracted. Just act normal.”

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Carlos makes a face.

“What,” says Julie. No one’s doing anything particularly alarming: Andre is licking one of his samples to see if it’s fossilized, Kate and Wei are on either side of the chalkboard competing for the next turn with the Florence siphons by seeing who can reproduce the proof for Fermat’s last theorem the fastest, and Gary is next to Kate carefully updating the community outreach section. (Since it was designed to remind visitors of the reason they came to the lab when they get distracted by Carlos’ hair, it means he’s mostly just writing Science! a lot in weirdly perfect cursive. Their community rarely has very specific scientific needs.)

“Nothing,” Carlos sighs.

Julie looks at him sidelong, then pulls out her phone and texts Gary. He startles at the notification and drops his chalk. However, after reading the message, instead of following her directions he retrieves his clipboard, fishes a pen out of his wig, and begins to write furiously.

Julie scowls at him, but he doesn’t notice.

“Oh, look at that,” says Andre.

Julie and Carlos look at that, which turns out to be his bag of rocks.

“I don’t think I needed all these analyses after all. I’m pretty sure I left the actual ferromagnetic samples in my trunk,” he finishes, oddly cheerful for someone who has just wasted an hour of his life and willingly put his tongue all over Night Vale’s geologic record.

“Then where did you get those?” asks Julie.

“Oh, I just had them lying around in the car,” says Andre. “Easy mistake to make.”

Julie covers her face with one hand.
Gary continues to ignore her request, this time in favor of moving over to Wei’s side of the chalkboard and continuing his community outreach. “There,” he says with one final chalk flourish under his latest effort. “Now she’ll think we’re scientists.”

Kate pokes her head around the chalkboard and says, “Sometimes I cannot tell if you are joking or not, Nils.”

“Your mom has really nice handwriting,” says Wei.

“Thanks,” says Gary. He stares into space for thirty seconds, thoughtfully adds a small pink heart to the board, and finally says, as instructed, “Hey, Doctor.”

Andre and Kate turn to look at him. So does Carlos.

Gary shoots them finger guns and says, “Never mind.” Andre returns to his rocks, Wei and Kate to their coffee duel, Gary to his calligraphy.

Carlos gives Julie a long-suffering look.

“What,” she says.

“I changed my mind,” says Carlos. “I think I’m going to need you all to stand around a lab table, pretend to take notes, and try not to say anything.”

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18-June-2005

They’re walking along the pier, watching the sunset (orangey with weirdness from the June Gloom: Julie gives it a 3 out of 10; Romero, a 5) when Julie notices Romero’s hands. Specifically, his right one. The left one flaps when he’s talking and pushes up his glasses and disappears into his pockets, like normal, but the right is just kind of… dangling there, level with her own.

Julie looks around at all the other couples holding hands and purses her lips. By way of experiment, she edges just a little closer. His fingers twitch, but the whole limb remains resolutely within his personal bubble.

Romero would like holding hands, just like he likes sunsets and flowers. Julie hates holding hands. Julie is willing to bet Romero suspects this, and would rather let his hand flop around sad and pathetic and alone on the slim hope that she would take it herself rather than ask about something she almost certainly dislikes.

She scowls and takes his arm instead. It is, at least, not horrible. He looks ridiculously happy at such a small gesture.

Ugh, he’s probably touch-starved and needs more hugs in his life. Julie also hates hugs.

Maybe she can build him a wire monkey.

~*~*~*~

“Excuse me?”

Subject A: reportedly caught in a stasis loop (definition pending); identifies as nineteen years old, Julie writes. Walked in like she owns the place, but has stopped and is advancing slowly across the
room towards the weirdass artifact. It does not appear to be out of caution, which means that Subject A possesses the typical Night Vale immunity to danger signals and/or is surprisingly polite.

Pretend to take notes, hah. If you can learn something in as much time as it takes to fake it, you might as well just commit.

Based on prior interactions, Subject A considers herself a punk, but only acts that way when she remembers. Probably one of those kids who never hands in her assignments and won’t participate in class even though she understands the material.

“Careful now,” says Carlos.

Down with this sort of thing, writes Julie.

“We don’t know what this or anything else does,” says Carlos, nodding at the flamingo.

Julie nods back and notes, Subject B: allegedly from the future. Age ???? Claims not to know what the weirdass artifact he brought us is, nor its function which obviously falls under his jurisdiction. Is very clearly grading an exam on his clipboard instead of writing down his observations.

“We understand very little,” he continues.

Subject B understands very little, she writes.

“Excuse me, Carlos?”

Subject B has yet to acknowledge Subject A. Inconclusive as to whether this is a space-time safety issue or because he’s an asshole. The latter has some experimental merit, as pissing someone off reveals quite a bit about their personality.

However, Subject A continues to be polite in the face of frustration, suggesting she was well-taught by an authority figure. Definitely not raised by wolves. Unless they were polite wolves. Note: ask Simone about lupine courtesy levels in the Night Vale Zoo.

“Jackie, hello,” says Carlos, as though he just noticed her. “I’m sorry, I was doing science.” He gestures towards the flamingo, surrounded by work lamps Sharpied with esoteric symbols and glowing a bit too blue for a standard halogen bulb. “This is all very sciency stuff.”

Experimenter is embarrassed for Subject B.

He points at the community outreach chalkboard. “Just here is an equation.”

Barely. Experimenter’s grad student skipped a whole sub-section of the proof. Experimenter is also embarrassed for him.

“It’s important to have equations,” says Carlos, in a stunning conclusion destined to change science forever.

“I see that,” says Jackie.

How is Subject B so bad at lying. He literally does this for a living.

Jackie idly pokes at the grey heap of Carlos’ cloak, sitting on the counter in plain view, then asks, “How’s Cecil?”

Subject B initiates goofy dorkface, subtype II.
“Overenthusiastic,” says Carlos. “Consumed with his work, has very little understanding of science. I love him a lot. The usual.” Jackie is smiling back at him; then she catches herself and replaces her facial expression with a disaffected teenage scowl.

Subject B’s voice modulation and physical demeanor remains consistent with control conditions. Given his complete lack of chill re: boyfriend (Timmons 2014) this suggests the relationship is still ongoing.

Subject A has yet to make any indication of observing that Subject B looks noticeably older and weirder than usual. Unclear as to whether she is not paying attention or if that kind of thing happens all the time from her perspective. Note: add questions delineating potential limits of stasis loop to standard survey 227-A.

Julie peeks at Wei’s clipboard; he’s productively drawing the flamingo and less productively drawing his checkout clerk paramours at the Ralph’s like seven of his French girls. Gary, meanwhile, has written METAPHORS ARE A BIG PART OF SCIENCE and underneath that, It existed somewhere, like a moon that had escaped orbit and was no longer a moon but just a piece of something that once was, spinning off into nothing.

She writes, Experimenter wonders if there is any functional difference between a metaphor and a simile.

Jackie pokes his cloak again, rubs the back of her neck, then finally says, “I need your help, Carlos.”

Subject A clearly uncomfortable with asking for help. No – unused to it. Posture stiff, fists clenched, but voice still polite and nonconfrontational.

“Jackie, there's little I love more than helping people,” says Carlos. “Science and Cecil are about it.”

Goofy dorkface subtype IVa

“...But I’m in the middle of an important experiment, and I think if we push through we might figure out why the experiment is important.”

Subject A exhibits more signs of growing impatience: crossed arms, tapping foot, eyeroll. Same.

“Finding out why we are doing what we already were doing is an exciting moment—”

Subject A visibly stops self from interrupting. Another eyeroll.

“—and I believe we may be almost there.”

Subject A’s eyes will fall out at this rate

“All right, dude, but—”

Dude

“Besides,” Carlos says. “Josie asked us to look at this, and I owe her a few.”

Either Subject B has had more difficulty at League Night than the Experimenter has been led to believe, or Subject B₀ is in for a wild ride.

“More than a few,” Carlos says, wincing slightly.
How many mortifying bowling alley incidents can you even have.

Subject A growing more frustrated. Shifts from foot to foot, stops self from interjecting two more times.

“I owe her…” Carlos winces again. “I don't know, a high number.”

Was he attacked by demon bowling balls

“I would express it as an equation, but it’s all figurative—”

Subject A makes a face kind of like >:(

“—And figurative math is really tricky.”

For a five-year-old. Figurative counting actually occurs fairly early on in the stages of numeracy—

“Carlos, look,” says Jackie. She holds out her left hand and lets go of a piece of paper. It drops to the ground.

Then it is no longer on the ground. Instead, it’s pinched between her fingers. She tears it up and flings a fun-size hail of confetti into the air; after roughly three seconds, the paper has reconstituted and returned to its starting position, with no indication of how this occurred. The same thing happens when she folds it into a paper airplane and launches it out the broken window, stuffs it up her nose, drops it down Gary’s shirt, and sets it on fire.

Consistent reformation time of 3.27 s, writes Julie. Subject B looks intrigued, but not surprised. Subject A—

Julie jerks her head around, away from Jackie loudly chewing her piece of paper, to look back at the flamingo. It doesn’t appear to be doing anything.

Subject A looks

Julie can still see the flamingo in her periphery. It is not doing anything, and it’s not glowing. But…

looks resigned but

But it’s not glowing, and she can almost see the light anyway, feel it catch at her optic receptors, sense its sudden gravity and its immense pull—

Carlos drops his clipboard. The clatter jars her into alertness, like when you’re just drifting off at night and a noise bursts into your mind on a flood of adrenaline, and Julie gives herself a shake.

“You too?” Carlos says.

“Me too?” asks Jackie.

“Let me see that,” he says, and Jackie offers him the piece of paper.

Carlos unfolds it: it’s a receipt of some kind, with the words KING CITY written in blocky capitals. He glances at Jackie, the paper, and then the flamingo.

He takes a deliberate step closer to the lab table.
The flamingo doesn’t make a noise. It can’t. It’s made out of plastic and metal and fuckery.

Nevertheless, Julie knows that if it could make a noise, it would be growling.

Carlos lets go of the piece of paper. Julie doesn’t see what happens after that, because she can’t stop watching the flamingo.

_We can save him_, she hears under the not-noise. It’s growing louder.

Or.

…

Closer.

_We can save him_

_We can save him, we can save him, we can save_—

There’s a _snap_ off in the distance and the work lamps above the flamingo brighten. Julie, startled, stumbles backwards a step. When did she get so close to the table?

Another _snap_. The lights brighten even more, pinning the flamingo down in bleached colors and sharp shadows.

A third, and Julie is finally able to tear her eyes away and locate the source of the noise. Carlos, darting around like a toddler on a sugar high, throwing switches and babbling to – to Jackie, right. Here to ask about, about science. A piece of paper that made the flamingo – made it—

Her brain feels like it’s trudging through mud, so it takes her a minute to remember that all those switches shouldn’t be working. Dead. Magic, overwhelming the system – _her_ system, with all the failsafes she installed. But then Carlos did something else. Chalk equations, containment field, output in the visible spectrum.

Carlos throws another switch, and the not-growling fades into something more like a not-grumble, subdued by the light. No, not the light. Correlation, not causation. Subdued by weird shit.

Julie realizes she can breathe again and sucks in a deep gulp of air. The smell of coffee is nearly overwhelming; she looks down and finds Andre holding his mug directly under her face. Mechanically, she takes it and drinks a sip.

She spits it back out. “Is this _soy milk_?” she demands.

“Oh, you’re okay,” says Andre, sounding relieved.

“No, I’m not,” says Julie. “You put _soy milk_ in _coffee_.”

“I’ll fix it,” says Gary, and reaches for the mug. She recoils with it instinctively before remembering that it’s full of soy milk, so it’s not like he can make it worse.

He adds a generous pour of whatever’s in his flask, then hands it back. Julie takes a cautious sniff and almost starts coughing from the fumes. Well, it’s true she won’t be able to taste the soy milk. After a few of these, she probably won’t be able to taste _anything_.

Carlos is now scurrying between the work lamps and the Florence siphons. Jackie watches them all with bemusement, idly dropping the paper over and over. The flamingo not-growls again, but it
feels… far away. Like the flamingo has moved, not Julie, although technically the opposite is true.

Carlos finishes adjusting the last work lamp, lights a burner, and crawls underneath one of the lab tables. “We start immediately,” he shouts, slightly muffled.

“Oh, good,” shouts Jackie. “Why are we shouting?”

Carlos’ head pops back up. “Loud noises distract people!”

“What?” shouts Jackie, as a glob of minty green light leisurely arcs its way from the other side of the lab table to burst over the flamingo with the faint chiming of bells.

Julie takes a big gulp of coffee-flavored alcohol.

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10-July-2005

“So,” says Romero as they stroll along Julie’s favorite walking route, i.e. away from his apartment. He’s still a little twitchy about silences, Julie’s noticed. Before they started dating, lulls in the conversation didn’t bother him at all; immediately after, he started babbling through all of them as if convinced Julie would up and leave if he didn’t maintain a constant stream of engagement.

It doesn’t even matter if they’re her fault. Sometimes he smiles at her for no reason and it is. Very distracting.

“Yeah,” adds Romero, because while he is at least trying to return to pre-date silence levels, he hasn’t quite made it yet.

Julie takes his arm by way of encouragement. She’s finally gotten used to being in a relationship again and has zero desire to upset that equilibrium.

“Um. Have you…’ He surreptitiously peeks at his Blackberry. “...started re-reading Order of the Phoenix yet?”

“What do you have on there, a cheat sheet?” Julie snorts.

She meant it as a joke, but he stops cold in the middle of the sidewalk and gives her a stricken look.

“Oh my god,” she says. She holds her hand out and snaps her fingers. Reluctantly, he passes over the Blackberry.

“Is this,” she says. “Is this an itemized list of things I like to complain about?”

“Um,” says Romero. “...Yes?”

“Why?”

“I want you to have fun,” says Romero.

“I don’t have fun complaining about,” she checks the list and starts to say the cinematic oeuvre of Peter Jackson, but she doesn’t finish, because. When it’s not a matter of funding or not-funding, associate or tenured status, or life and death, complaining about shit is... kind of fun.
He gives her a tentative smile.

**Distracting.** She looks back at his Blackberry and scrolls down the list. “Enough about me,” she says. “I want to hear your opinions on... militant vegans.”

“I don’t have opinions on militant vegans,” says Romero, yielding to her tug and resuming their walk. She curls her arm around his so he leans in to the contact instead of stiffly holding on and wishing for conversational skills.

“Lies,” says Julie. “Everyone has opinions on militant vegans.”

He opens his mouth, then closes it again. Julie pokes him in the side.

“You with it,” she says.

“They give beekeepers a bad name,” says Romero in a rush. “Vegans don’t eat honey because of the alleged exploitation of the bees, but a hive typically produces more honey than it can make use of in a season, and—”

Julie has never been one for introspection. She’s always found the things she thinks about far more interesting than how she thinks or feels about them. But apparently, just because she wasn’t paying any attention to herself doesn’t mean Romero wasn’t.

Romero cares about stuff like that. It matters to him that beekeepers have a good reputation in general and not just for funding purposes. He probably lies awake in his shitty apartment at night, listening to the vermin trying to steal his stuff and worrying about the effects of quinoa monocropping on Chilean farmers. Currently, he is devoting all of his considerable eloquence and intelligence to pointing out how much of a ripoff almond milk is in comparison to actual almonds, and it’s not because he’s run out of other, more interesting things to talk about.

*It matters to him, quite a lot, that Julie understands why he thinks these things.*

When she acknowledges his concerns (while still commenting on the insipidity of those who prefer the weakass taste of homeopathic almond solutions), and he smiles his distracting smile, Julie thinks he might have a point.

~*~*~*~

Half an hour later:

- The flamingo has tried to – well, not escape, because it has yet to actually move, but it definitely has tried to pull *something* three more times;
- Julie has dismissed the idea of going somewhere where she can’t learn anything about the flamingo or what it’s doing in favor of remaining calm and quote *mentally opaque, but really it would be safer if you just let us take care of it* – ow, fine, you can stay unquote by way of two additional cups of Irish coffee;
- Her team has retreated what they think is a safe distance (but isn’t, because she can hear them) to brew more coffee, perform their assigned tasks, and make whispered observations about Julie instead of talking about something useful;
- Jackie has started expressing her frustration with her piece of paper in the style of Steve McQueen à la *The Great Escape*;
- Carlos has not shut up once.

“Science can help you—” He ducks a flying ball of paper as Jackie misses the cabinet she’s using
for target practice. “Science can help you discover almost anything. Like an object’s density, or its
elasticity, or—” He plucks the paper out of the air, slams it onto the counter, and stabs it with his
sword.

“—Tensile strength,” he finishes.

There’s a breathless moment as he bends down to inspect the pinned paper. Julie straightens in her
rolly chair (or tries to, at least). Jackie leans over to get a better look, and then—

Then they’re all looking at the sword jutting out of the counter. Jackie opens her hand; the paper
has returned.

“The important thing about science is not to get discouraged,” Carlos tells her. Jackie crumples it
into a ball and throws it at him. “Sometimes you have to repeat the same experiment over and over
until you get usable data.”

The paper is back in Jackie’s hand. “Over and over, huh,” she says.

“Yes, to make sure your results are consistent—”

It takes Jackie about 0.79 s to crumple her piece of paper; when she throws it at Carlos’ head, it
moves at an average of 7.3 m/s and disappears approximately 0.074 m from the side of his face.

His eye twitches. “You can learn a lot from—”

She throws it at his head again.

“Let’s try looking at it under a microscope,” says Carlos loudly, over the sound of assorted
snickering (but, to be honest, mostly Julie’s). “That’s very scientific.”

“I thought microscopes were illegal,” says Jackie, but holds on to the paper this time.

*Subject A looks excited to do illegal shit*, writes Julie, somewhat less legibly than usual. Her hand-
eye coordination is fine; she’s just covered her page in hypothetical equations and diagrams for a
stable time stasis loop, and she’s running out of space. *Or maybe she’s just excited to do something
besides watch Subject B run his mouth.*

Andre takes a break from his rock observation/gab fest to hand her a stack of graph paper. He gets
nothing but a grunt in return, but still delivers a cheerful “You’re welcome!” as though he has not
been openly and egregiously discussing her feelings in public like the traitor that he is.

“Laws, unlike science facts, are open to interpretation,” Carlos replies to Jackie, opening a
cupboard under the counter.

His sword blade has stabbed through the shelf below it.

“Is your microscope that glass thing?” Jackie asks. “Because I think you killed it, dude.”

Julie steals Jackie’s paper and throws it after him as he beats a hasty retreat towards the downstairs
storage closet to look for the spare. She *liked* that microscope. Good microscopes don’t grow on
trees, at least not during the fall. Also, the spare is two cabinets over and she doesn’t want to stand
up.

“You,” she says to Jackie. “Make yourself useful.”

She points to the cabinet; Jackie scowls. Julie scowls back. Jackie crosses her arms and redoubles
her efforts.

She’s good, Julie will give her that, but Julie has years of experience on her. Or at least, years of logged experience. Because when it comes right down to it, regardless of how many decades she’s repeated, Jackie still thinks of herself as nineteen years old, and Julie could crush the spirit of an undergrad in her sleep.

Jackie puts her hands on her hips, then crosses them again, then finally says, “Look, if you want —”

The flamingo lets out a dull not-rumble that grates across Julie’s mind, and she abruptly loses all taste for the competition. It’s not Jackie that’s causing the problems, after all.

“Never mind,” Julie says. “Forget it.” She presses her fingers against her eyelids, as if that can help block a stimulus that doesn’t even go near her optic nerves.

But over the not-sound of the flamingo, her tympanic membranes register the creak of cabinet doors opening and slamming shut, the susurrus of cardboard, and Jackie saying, “Is this another microscope? ‘Cause geez, you could have asked.”

Julie opens her eyes. The spare microscope, still in its box, is sitting on the counter. So is Jackie. “True,” Julie allows.

Jackie leans back against the cabinets, lounging aggressively in the way that only a teenager with someone to aggravate can. But her gaze keeps drifting back to the microscope.

“You have to take it out of the box to use it,” says Julie.

“Obviously,” says Jackie.

She looks at the box. She looks at the piece of paper in her hand. She looks back at the box. By the time Carlos returns, now holding – great, a hula hoop, Jackie has belligerently set up the microscope, belligerently learned the correct principles of light amplification in place of the balderdash she learned in school however long ago, and belligerently started making observations about what she sees.

“It’s just a big whiteish blur,” she says.

The flamingo lets out a not-grumble as if in response.

“Adjust the focus,” says Julie, doing her best to ignore it. “Yes, that knob.”

Something warm nudges into her hand and she jumps, but it’s just Gary with another mug of spiked coffee. She takes a long draft and rubs her forehead.

Unexpectedly, the pressure behind her eyes decreases. When she spins her chair around, she finds Carlos leaning against a lab table and the hula hoop now encircling the work lamps and the flamingo.

He winks at her. She gives him a look of pure disgust and turns back to Jackie.

“Still a – oh, now it’s got all sorts of craters in it,” says Jackie. She adjusts the paper slightly. “Whoa, it really moves. The pencil looks like – dammit!”

The paper is clutched between her hand and the microscope, where she’d reached up to readjust
“What did you see when it disappeared?” asks Carlos.

“Nothing!” snaps Jackie. “It doesn’t do anything!”

“Do it again,” says Julie.

Jackie lets out a frustrated sigh, but makes room for Julie and slides the paper under the microscope once more.

The flamingo makes another not-rumble of disapproval, but this time it’s easier to ignore. Julie sharpens the focus until the big off-white blur resolves into a vast pitted surface with a dark line of particles streaking across it, the ordinary made alien by proximity, like saying ‘button’ over and over until it no longer sounds like a real word.

And the paper is ordinary, nothing about it indicating that it’s anything other than a normal repurposed receipt with KING CITY scrawled across it in pencil.

The paper twitches as Jackie releases her grip; about three seconds later, it disappears. There’s no fanfare about it: no signs of heat of energy released (or chill of energy absorbed), no excess energy manifesting as sparkles of light, no rush of air filling a vacuum that had been a piece of paper.

“What did you see?” asks Carlos.

“Nothing,” says Julie. “Significantly.”

“Huh,” says Carlos. “One more time, Jackie?”

“I know that’s important, dude, but – isn’t there any different science you could do right now?” asks Jackie, a little desperately. “I’ve already had this thing for almost two days.”

“Sometimes science requires patience,” says Carlos, frowning down at the hula hoop and readjusting it ever-so-slightly. Jackie is crumpling her paper with a determined and slightly vengeful look in her eye, and for all that Carlos claims humans are bad at predicting the future, Julie doesn’t have to be a rocket surgeon to know that she really, really does not want to find out what would happen if that movable object met the flamingo’s stoppable force.

At least, not while she’s present in the same room.

She grabs a survey and waves it at Jackie. “Here, fill this out,” she says.

Jackie eyes it with suspicion, but she takes the packet. “I graduated, man. I don’t do tests any more.”

“They’re not those kinds of questions,” says Julie.

Jackie thumbs through a couple pages. “These—” she says, flipping the pages faster, scowling as she skims through. “These are just about – about life. Sleeping, going to work, showering and listening to the random thoughts appearing in your head – stuff everyone does!”

Julie remembers what it’s like to be nineteen and frustrated – with questions you can’t answer, things you can’t change, a world that makes no sense – until there’s no place for all that anger to go but sarcasm or a pack a day or a cast on your arm at commencement because you put your fist through the lab wall.
“Everyone does them, but it’s important how you do them,” says Julie. “And it’s important to know how you do them.”

“Me,” says Jackie, skeptically. But behind that is something else, something not averse to the idea of being taken seriously. Of having her opinions and frustrations matter. Of being treated like an adult, albeit briefly.

She takes out a pen and begins to answer the first question.

She writes KING CITY. They both stare at it.

“How about Nilanjana here takes dictation,” says Julie.

Jackie throws the survey onto the counter. “I don’t think it will do any good,” she says bitterly.

“Carlos, get over here,” says Julie. Jackie hadn’t written that on purpose. He’d be able to tell if she was mindwhammied, right?

“Just a minute—” His voice sounds strained.

“Dude, if your flamingo is bothering you that much, just put a blanket over its cage,” says Jackie, annoyed. Before anyone can stop her, she picks up Carlos’ cloak and tosses it over the flamingo, hula hoop, work lamps, and all.

Julie hadn’t realized it was making so much not-noise until it stops, a tapering off that counterpoints the near-breathless silence of the six people watching it intently and one person rolling her eyes and lighting her paper on fire underneath the Florence siphon. The flamingo has fallen completely silent except for a faint rumbling, coming in soft waves like—well, like snoring.

Exactly like snoring, actually.

“It… goes to sleep in the dark?” asks Carlos.

“Uh, it’s a lawn ornament, isn’t it?” says Jackie with weapons-grade sarcasm. She gestures at her paper, which disintegrates into ash and reappears in her outstretched hand. “Now can we please get back to this?”

“Do all lawn ornaments do that, or just flamingos?” asks Andre.

“Do you get many flamingos in the shop?” asks Kate.

“What are you doing next Friday?” asks Wei.

“Does it work on people,” says Julie.

There’s a thud as Jackie’s fist comes down on the table top.

“So you care?” she explodes. “That’s just more stuff to think about. I already can’t do anything without wondering about this stupid piece of paper. I can’t go back to work. I can’t go out to eat. I can’t go to bed and sleep. I want to know what’s going on!”

Carlos rubs his chin and says, “Me, too.”

The paper actually manages to bounce off his perfect hair this time.

“Then why do you just keep asking all these questions?” snaps Jackie, flapping the returned paper
back and forth like the semaphore signal for Jesus Christ, stop fucking around.

“That’s… kind of the whole point of science, kid,” says Julie.

Jackie’s hand freezes mid-shake. “You mean you – you feel like this all the time?”

“Of course,” says Carlos.

“Yep,” says Julie.

“Oh, certainly,” says Andre.

“Definitely!” says Kate.

“Yes,” says Wei.

“Sometimes I don’t when I’m really hungry,” says Gary. “But after that, yeah, all the time.”

Jackie stares at them for a long moment, then says, in tones of great profundity, “Dude.”

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12-September-2005

“The piano fell through your ceiling,” repeats Julie.

“There was water damage,” says Romero. He sounds all right, but he’s already on the second beer she got him, and underneath her hand she can feel the muscles of his forearm shivering with tension. “Or maybe it was the mold, Health and Safety was a little unclear.”

“Have you ever considered moving somewhere that’s not located on the Hellmouth?” asks Julie.

“It’s convenient to the lab,” says Romero. “And the rent is cheap.”

“Because you have musical instruments raining down from on high,” says Julie. “What’s next? Safes? Anvils? Acme five-ton weights?”

“Look, I just—” He stops and scrubs a hand over his face. “My lease isn’t up for a while. The building will cover all the repairs and my insurance will get the rest.”

His shoulders are beginning to hunch in on themselves, as if expecting a barrage from the rest of the string/percussion section. “Fine,” says Julie grudgingly, and changes the subject.

Multiple beers later, Romero’s regained some of his equilibrium, if not his usual observational skills.

“This is your place,” he says, blinking at Julie’s apartment door.

“Yes, I know,” says Julie, unlocking it and steering him inside. “Your place has a piano-shaped hole in the ceiling.”

“It’s actually more of a circle,” says Romero. “The piano took out a support beam.”

“My point exactly,” says Julie.

She manages to pour him into bed and is halfway through brushing her teeth when she hears a
“What are you doing,” she says.

“I should sleep on the couch,” he says, from the floor.

“No, you shouldn’t, because it’s terrible for your back and I don’t hate you,” says Julie.

“I don’t hate you either,” he says warmly.

“Thanks, babe,” says Julie, and spits out her mouthful of toothpaste foam before helping him back into bed.

“Are you sure it’s okay?” he asks. She catches herself wondering if she should tuck him in. Ridiculous.

“You can have the whole right side to yourself,” she says. “It’ll be fine.”

When hissed “Julie!” catches her just as she was drifting off, she briefly considers revising that opinion. She’s never been able to fall asleep very easily with the sound of someone else breathing.

“What?” she whispers back.

There’s a long silence, and then, “What if I try to cuddle you?”

Julie covers her face with one hand. “I’ll still respect you in the morning,” she says finally.

“But—”

She reaches over and squeezes his arm. “It’s okay, Romero. Just go to sleep.”

After the long drag back to consciousness the next morning, she finds that he has indeed started to cuddle her, but only because at some point during the night Julie migrated across the bed and latched onto his torso like a joint clamp.

She can tell when he wakes up, because he immediately tries to jerk his arms away, with only a fifty percent success rate since she’s using one of them as a pillow. “Sorry, I didn’t mean—”

“Shut up,” Julie mumbles into his chest. It is far too early to deal with this.

“Sorry,” he whispers. “But – I thought you don’t like cuddling. Or touching people. At all.”

Objectively, this is not strictly true; she’s just always rounded down out of convenience. It’s not the touching people that’s a problem so much as the people she’s had to touch, because she can count on two unheld hands the number of human beings she can deal with in close quarters.

It’s not her favorite activity, true, but on occasion it is tolerable. Like right now, though that doesn’t make very much sense since Romero is bony and puts off heat like a furnace and smells like stale beer.

This seems like the kind of existential question that requires getting up to answer.

“We’re not cuddling,” she says. There, problem solved.

“We’re… not?”
He’s right, that’s not a testable solution. “Primates require contact comfort,” she manages. Further analysis can wait until after a pot of coffee.

“Okay,” he says.

Julie grunts wordlessly. He strokes her hair a few times, but stops before it gets annoying.

“Maybe I could build you a wire monkey,” he says.

It’s a good thing she’s comfortable right where she is.

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By the time Julie has used up all her graph paper, Carlos’ questions and answers have grown increasingly longer and increasingly tangential until he’s more or less talking to himself, non-stop and largely full of nonsense. If this is part of his plan to avoid revealing anything useful about the future, he is very thorough.

Still, he does manage to take the question of Jackie’s piece of paper and King City’s disappearance and make it sound really tedious. It doesn’t make Jackie seem any less determined to get answers, but when he suggests talking to Mayor Cardinal, she does look relieved to have something concrete, excitingly dangerous, and not accompanied by the phrase “Scientifically speaking, wow,” to do. Carlos, on the other hand, looks relieved that she’s not going to charge off on her own and leave Night Vale for god-knows-where/when.

“Most people don’t leave here. Most people only come and then stay,” he’s saying, presumably to Jackie, looking – hmm, maybe it’s not relieved. Maybe he just has to sneeze. “...And stay and stay. Honestly, I have no idea how long I’ve been here.”

Julie stopped paying close attention on general principles after he busted out a slideshow, but that, she believes.

She goes back to her clipboard full of graphs and equations. It takes her a moment to figure out what she was calculating; she’s four-and-a-half spiked coffees in, and between the reduced coordination and the caffeine jitters, her Minkowski diagrams are barely legible.

Well, at least Polchinski is a punkass bitch is clear enough, even if she suspects her proof might need some work. Has the Queensland gang published anything recently? Or maybe Wilczek, unless he’s too busy cuddling his Nobel. She hates feeling out of the loop. Sure, it’s not her field, but why not? She’s got a brain and a good grasp of physics. So what if everyone has decades of a head start. Time’s not even real.

Christ, she wishes she had some pretzels. She’s starving.

“Oh, sorry, I have to go,” says Carlos. She jerks her head up in surprise. He’s lurking by the door and swathed in his cloak already, but he can’t go, they’ve got a lawn ornament problem and she’s not going to deal with it. Carlos scowls as if in response, but on second thought that might be in reference to something else, like the trails of smoke rising from the slightly charred edges of his cloak and lab coat.

Wait, no, that’s not Carlos, it’s Carlos. Carlos₀, Carlos₁ is chivvying Jackie to the door past his past self, who she doesn’t even notice thanks to his stealth mode (wizard hoodie).

“Oh you have to go,” Carlos₁ continues, cutting Jackie off before she can protest. “I’m going to stay here, this is my place of business. But it’s just that—”
Carlos₀ holds up a twisted, melted, and bullet-hole-ridden length of metal and pink plastic and waves it impatiently.

“—Cecil’s show is almost on and I never miss it,” Carlos₇ finishes with barely a pause.

Julie finally identifies the object in Carlos₀’s hand as the leg of a flamingo – former flamingo – and hell no, she is not doing this again. She stumbles into the hall as Carlos₇ pushes Jackie over the threshold and waves goodbye.

“No, I think I haven’t stayed long enough at all,” he says contemplatively, and shuts the door in her face.

“When did Jackie get here?” asks Carlos₀ from the doorway. “And what did you do?”

“Half an hour after you left,” says Carlos₇. Julie peeks out the window in time to see Jackie throw her piece of paper at the door in exasperation before stalking back to her car. “We just talked to her.”

“Mostly,” says Andre from the lab.

“I took notes!” calls Kate.

Julie hears the throaty roar of a Honda Civic as Jackie drives away, along with a grinding like a minor avalanche. Jackie should probably get her transmission checked out.

There’s a tug on her lab coat. “It should be safe to go back in the lab,” says Carlos₇. “Unless you want to go?”

“Nope,” says Julie. “Answers. I want them.”

“Don’t we all,” says Carlos₇ as she follows him back in the lab.

Carlos₀ has traded the flamingo leg (now sitting under his cloak) for Kate’s notes and Julie’s coffee mug, that bastard. He turns a page and lets out a frustrated sigh. “How do you know you’re not interfering with—”

“She’s got King City written on her piece of paper,” interrupts Carlos₇. “And it’s in a stable time loop.”

Carlos₀ chokes on his coffee, although that might be because he actually tasted it. Stable time loop. Sounds familiar, and not in a Carlos nonsense way. Julie frowns, blinks, frowns again, then leafs through the pages on her clipboard. Sure enough, there in one corner is Jackie’s paper=stasis loop=stable time loop? bounds of recursive light cone. needs shitload of energy but only once – recirculation. near perfect closed system minimal loss of energy c.f. unexplosion and then a column of equations she recognizes as a variation on Thorne’s solution to the Polchinski paradox.

Huh. Good job, drunk Julie. There’s even a diagram, a particularly twisted graph of Minkowski space that looks quite a bit like a pretzel and dammit, now she’s hungry again and wants a cigarette. She hasn’t seriously smoked in twenty-five years, unfair.

“Are you sure she’s not under a compulsion?” asks Carlos₀. “If someone’s making her… tap into her own stasis loop somehow—”

“She’s not, as far as I can tell,” says Carlos₇. “It’s a totally independent stable time loop. Although
some of the interactions—"

“Stable time loop,” says Julie, not slurring her words at all. “You keep saying that. What the fuck.”

Carlos0 looks into his mug, then wrinkles his brow. “Are you drunk?”

“You face is drunk,” says Julie. “And you said timey-wimey shit is illegal. But Jackie’s been nineteen years old indefinitely and you haven’t clenched once about it. Or the diner people.”

Carlos – both of them; staring at them side-by-side is making her feel a little queasy, like her brain thinks she’s seeing double and assumes she’s drunker than she is – looks offended.

“I do not cl– Never mind,” says Carlos0.

Carlos0 puts away his bitchface and asks, “Diner people?”

“In the Moonlite All-Nite Diner,” says Carlos0. “Booths twelve and fifteen.” He sighs, then says to Julie, “Do you remember anything about the roller coaster? In the – the desert otherworld?”

Julie squints at him. Carlos0 doesn’t talk about the desert otherworld very often. He did give her some of his notes, but they’re very incomplete – partially due to Ministry of Magic security bullshit, but mostly because he lost the majority of his observations to the chaos of the masked army right before he came home, thus proving right all of Julie’s warnings about civilians.

She doesn’t like to ask about his time there. She still does, because science, but – it’s sort of their fault he ended up there. It’s sort of her fault. He said “I’ll hold them off” when Strex Corp came after them in Desert Creek and she let him do it. She left him behind even though he looked like Gary post-anaphylactic shock and had fallen asleep in the middle of a sentence just that morning. She’d been grateful when she found out he’d somehow gotten stuck in the desert otherworld, because at least she hadn’t gotten him killed fighting angry corporate mercenaries.

Instead, he’d almost gotten killed fighting angry corporate smiling deities, and as thanks Night Vale kicked Carlos to the curb to deal with the resulting brain damage and post-traumatic stress, trapped in another dimension, alone.

He didn’t talk to her for two months, and that was bad enough, but it was worse when she figured out it was because he couldn’t remember her name and thinking about his co-morbid retrograde amnesia and prosopagnosia kept giving him flashbacks, and worst of all when she realized that even though it was sort of her fault, it wasn’t a problem she could fix over the phone, or at all. Just life, horrible and random.

He did figure out who she was eventually. He didn’t blame her for what happened. But the lab was too quiet and things kept going wrong – well, more wrong – in town and she didn’t say anything. She never said anything, because he might have been falling apart but at least he was doing it in relative safety. And when he wanted to stay, if Cecil stayed with him, she would have broken out the Teleforce to keep anyone from dragging him back.

Carlos doesn’t talk about the desert otherworld very often and Julie is glad, because she almost lost him there and made herself do it.

Liquor always makes her maudlin. She wishes she had a beer. And a smoke. And a sedative so she can just sleep through all this emotional fallout. And, since she’s going full rock star anyway, a hotel room to destroy.
“Yeah, I remember about the roller coaster,” she says. She steals back her coffee and takes a gulp. At least she has that. “Infinity symbol track. Sheets of flame. No safety bars. I thought everyone got stuck on it because they forgot to add brakes?”

“Not… quite,” says Carlos. “I mean, it didn’t have brakes, but – it was a stable time loop, too.” She can’t tell if he’s hesitating because he’s trying to think of the best way to explain it, or because he wishes he wasn’t talking about it. Knowing Carlos, probably both.

“The Currents of Time aren’t always straightforward, especially near… borders,” he continues. “They don’t always sync up between different dimensions, like our world and the Nevernever—”

“Or the desert otherworld,” says Julie, like she’s prodding a sore tooth with her tongue.

“—Or the desert otherworld, and in… highly irregular places like Night Vale, straightforward linear motion doesn’t even exist. If it seems that way, it’s because we all expect it to. But there’s still natural… whirlpools, and eddies, and—”

“Vortices,” Julie adds helpfully.

“Yes, thank you, Julie, vortices all around, and if you’re strong-willed enough you can pull yourself into one of those disruptions. I think someone on board that roller coaster – maybe more than one – didn’t want the ride to end, and, well.”

“So they caused their own time loop stasis thing, and so is Jackie,” says Julie. There’s a blank space in the middle of one of her diagrams, so she starts doodling a schematic of a kinetic energy converter to go with a perpetual motion roller coaster. You could probably generate a decent amount of power…

Wait, she wasn’t done talking yet. What were they talking about? Roller coasters. Time loops. Jackie Fierro, right. “But someone else probably caused one for her piece of paper,” she finishes. “The flamingo reacted to that but not to her.”

“Jackie said she got it from the man in the tan jacket,” says Andre, looking concerned. For Jackie? Night Vale? Who knows. Andre has a lot of feelings. “And what is its connection to King City?”

“Oh, that’s probably stuck in a time loop too,” says Julie. “So it can’t sync up with Fairyland, Night Vale, and/or the real world.” The Carloi both give her a startled glance. “What? These are obvious hypotheses. So are you going to chop his head off?”

“Whose?” asks Carlos.

“The man in the tan jacket’s. ‘Cause he might be kind of an asshole, but if he’s not creating these time loops, is he really violating ape law?”

“He wouldn’t be,” says Carlos, “If he’s not responsible for them.”

“Well, there’s your next step,” says Julie to Carlos, nodding several times. “See if it’s his fault. You’re welcome. Why are you smoking?”

“Snail poison,” says Carlos darkly.

“You also got some, you know,” says Julie, pointing at the sleeve of his allegedly indestructible lab coat. “Bullet holes.”

“Garden fountain,” says Carlos.
She squints at him, trying to figure out if those are code words or if he really does just suck that much at yardwork, then realizes that’s beside the point.

“Well, don’t,” she says.

“Don’t what?”


She expects him to shrug it off or say *I’m fine* or do something similarly moronic, but he doesn’t. He looks at her with a look that looks like he knows exactly what she means, and says, “I’ll try,” and it’s terrible because they both know he will try and they both know that doesn’t mean shit in the end, because you might just die stupidly anyway, where no one can do anything, and instead of a person there will be just be empty rooms and silence—

“What did you find out about the flamingos?” asks Carlos, and for once Julie is grateful for the reminder that he never shuts his stupid face hole.

“Attempts to collect another sample were…” Carlos looks down at his cloak-draped flamingo leg. “Inconclusive. From what I saw, the rest seemed stable. Well, as stable as that one.”

They all look at the lab table, with its heap of work lamps, grey cloth, and snoring.

“Get it out of here,” says Julie, which was not what she had intended to say, but which she finds she agrees with vehemently. Their equipment is currently useless, they’ve got plenty to do sorting through their recovered data, and she can just picture Wei untangling wires or Kate picking up bits of the scanner or Gary trying to walk in a straight line and... missing, and falling right into that void of awful potentiality.

“All right,” says Carlos.

He immediately strikes up a running discussion/argument with Carlos about whether to put the flamingo in the storage room downstairs or the storage locker just outside, but for once, Julie doesn’t mind the noise.

~*~*~*~

This is why Julie hates feelings: they’re distracting and useless. She’s spent the entire afternoon feeling like shit and all it’s done is interfere with her quest *not* to feel like shit, and now she isn’t even allowed to have any more coffee.

But she resists the urge to ignore her dumb feelings entirely and scrawls another note onto her clipboard. There were three distinct stages in the flamingo’s memory… vision… thing. The last one might have been the worst, but it’s also the one that gives her the least information.

The other two, though...

The mobile version of the Night Vale Area Transit Authority website isn’t the most useful font of knowledge, since it mainly comprises a link to the proposed subway system (a page that consists of the word NO in 300-pt font accompanied by a MIDI file of Mendelssohn’s Op. 61) and a detailed ranking of types of milk. But it does contain a complete bus schedule and also, rates both soy and almond milk dead last, where they belong.

Now she’s moved on to the lab’s visitor log. The man in the tan jacket gave Jackie her piece of paper yesterday; Julie talked to him (well, presumably; she could have just sat and glared, for all
she remembers) yesterday, too. Carlos mentioned that more people in town have pieces of paper with KING CITY on them: is the man in the tan jacket responsible for those, as well? Why didn’t he try to give one to Julie? Is there any correlation between his visits to other people and his visits to the lab?

Pain stabs through her head like a big stabby thing, and she shuts her eyes and rubs her temples. Weird psychic shit is the worst. The Carloi finally disposed of the flamingo in the storage locker before going off to do... something... but she can’t tell if she can still hear the flamingo’s snoring or if she just thinks she can hear it.

“Do you want to head home?” Andre asks.

“No,” says Julie. She’s supposed to call Carlos if anything quote feels wrong unquote, which: haha, buddy, everything feels wrong these days, and it’s wrongest in her apartment at night. “It’s too quiet.”

Andre doesn’t respond. Too late, she realizes what she’s done. She opens her eyes to find the grad/post-grad students avoiding her gaze and Andre giving her a sad, knowing look.

That tears it.

“I mean, yes,” she says. “I definitely want to not be here. Right now.”

“All right,” says Andre. “Just let me get my car—”

“Nope!” says Julie, grabbing her messenger bag. “Definitely not. That’s okay, I don’t want to sit in a small enclosed space with... anyone. Ever, preferably. I’ll just... take the bus.”

“The bus?” says Andre. Now he looks worried, not sad. Why do people insist on having feelings at her.

“It’s research,” she says. “I’ll be fine.”

“Oh, good,” says Kate. “Can I ride with you?”

Julie gives her a suspicious look. “Why.”

“I want to sit in the back and not talk to anyone, but I don’t want to go by myself,” says Kate. “The bus can be dangerous when you’re alone.”

“I know,” says Julie. Now she’s annoyed, because Kate is correct in both her estimations of the hazards of life in Night Vale and her insistence that someone with impaired reflexes not risk said hazards. It’s like. Rule number one. Except not rule number one, because rule number one is don’t promise to do something unless you know what it is, but the point remains that Kate has a... point, even if she’s staring at Julie’s shaking hands like Julie’s suffering a nervous breakdown instead of seven cups of doctored coffee.

Doctored coffee, heh.

“Fine,” Julie says. “You can come. But stop looking at me in that tone of voice.”

“Sorry,” says Kate contritely.

Julie hands over her flare gun (Kate has better aim even when Julie’s hands are steady) and finally, finally, is able to escape the claustrophobic press of sympathy and concern.
Kate, true to her word, does not try to talk to her apart from a cursory “Looks okay,” when they get to the bus stop, so Julie pulls out her clipboard. Feelings and flamingos and Jackie Fierro’s piece of paper and the man in the tan jacket stare back at her, written and drawn out in numbers and equations, but there’s no conclusion. No answers. No reasons.

Well, not yet. They’re there somewhere. Like a moon that had escaped orbit and was no longer a moon but just a piece of something that once was, spinning off into nothing. Julie just needs a metaphorical – similil – similili – similililical – simile-y space probe to fire at it.

“Here comes the bus,” says Kate, pulling out the flare gun. She boards first to scope it out, then says, “Clear.”

Julie starts to follow, but pulls up short. Molly is sitting in the driver’s seat.

“The same driver does all the routes?” Julie says skeptically, but even as she’s saying it she realizes it’s not even the weirdest thing she’s come across in the past hour.

Molly shrugs. “I go where I’m needed.”

Julie waves Kate (hovering cautiously in the aisle with her flare gun) to continue and settles into her preferred seat right behind the driver. Aside from the air conditioning running full blast, the rest of the bus seems pretty standard, with forty to forty-three seats depending on whether you could catch the back bench out of the corner of your eye. The passengers seem the usual mix, too: a couple dozen commuters slumped in their seats, earbuds disappearing into their hoodies; Earl and Roger Harlan sitting stiffly besides one another with baseball gloves in their laps; a tentacle manspreading its way across three different seats. Julie keeps an eye on the locations of the first few stops, just in case, but the route proceeds as normal. She carefully notes it all down on her clipboard.

“Would you like to hear a story?” asks Molly suddenly.

Out of the corner of her eye, Julie sees Earl Harlan sit up straight and lean forward. He stares hard at Molly; his eyes widen and he places a protective arm around – well, around the back of Roger’s seat, but she guesses it’s the thought that counts.

“You’re not our normal driver,” he says.

“I’m filling in,” says Molly. She catches Julie’s eye, briefly. “What do you say?”

“What will it cost me?” Julie asks.

“Nothing but ignorance,” says Molly.

More movement: Kate settles into a new seat, across the aisle and two rows back. She seems intent on The Journal of Geophysical Research, but she’s got one hand hidden in her purse and Julie would bet her bus fare she’s holding the flare gun.

“What do you get out of this?” asks Julie.

“An audience,” says Molly.

Some people say a little knowledge never hurt anyone. That’s not true. A little knowledge could hurt a lot of people. Like adding ethylene to sulfur dichloride or assembling fissile material into a supercritical mass or projecting concentrated non-dispersive energy through the natural media.
But Julie has always been of the opinion that you should know it, anyway, because ignorance can never keep you safe for long.

“All right,” she says, deliberately ignoring Earl Harlan’s cut it out! hand flapping. “Let’s hear it.”

“Once upon a time,” says Molly, “someone was put in charge. It doesn’t matter how, exactly; only that they…” Her voice trails off. “They had a job,” she says finally. “And they chose to keep it.”

A wadded-up paper lands in Julie’s lap. When she unfolds it, she finds a receipt from Tourniquet for $43.75 worth of nutmeg and a hastily scribbled She’s not our normal driver!

“This person was given great power,” Molly continues. “And with it—”

“Great responsibility?” guesses Julie. She scrawls Yes, understood and throws the receipt back at Earl.

Molly’s mouth quirks. “Right. So now this person had duties. Important ones, even if others didn’t know about them. Especially if others didn’t know about them. But…”

Earl shakes his head as he reads her reply.

“It’s so easy to forget, that the power is there to serve,” says Molly. “That it’s a mean to the end, and the end isn’t about you, and you’re not the power. But it’s also easy to forget that you’re a person. That others are people.

“Because the thing is… that kind of power…”

Molly looks up, catches Julie’s eye.

“It makes you cold,” she says.

The back of Julie’s neck prickles even before Earl Harlan hisses “She’s not our normal driver” directly into her ear.

“Shut up, Earl!” says Julie, jerking away. He’s grimly hanging over the back of her seat.

Molly stops the bus, turns around in her seat, and raises an eyebrow.

“Shut up, Earl!” says Roger urgently.

“We’re getting off,” says Earl, face white but set. He ushers Roger off the bus, hissing “Don’t look back!” when Roger turns around to stare at Molly.

Kate’s hovering in the aisle, flare gun pointed at the ground. Molly’s raising an eyebrow at Julie now, and with a start, she realizes this is her stop too.

The temperature drops; time slows. Julie is uncomfortably reminded of the unexplosion. But this isn’t time failing to be real, it’s just the normal rush of adrenaline when Julie realizes her experiments are about to either make history or blow up in her face.

Now, if she could just remember what experiment she’s thinking of...

It makes you cold.

“Shit,” she says on autopilot. “Sorry. Thanks for the story.”
Molly smiles and time flows on. “Thanks for listening,” she says. “And for riding with us today.”

Julie disembarks. The leftover adrenaline takes advantage of her weakened state to start fretting about having ridden on a bus again, as if that’s the real problem here. Kate tries to herd her down the sidewalk, but Julie makes herself watch as the bus pulls away and proceeds with caution down to the light. If she clenches her fists, they don’t even shake.

“Psst!”

Kate almost clocks Earl Harlan in the side of the head with the flare gun: he’s right next to them, rendering the bus shelter more syntactically accurate by hiding behind it out of view of the retreating vehicle. Kate’s other arm is wrapped around Julie, who definitely failed the Leaping Away from Danger sobriety test.

She’s surprisingly strong. Julie would ask about her workout routine, but experience has taught her that inquiring into the personal habits of her underlings only leads to regret.

“Personal space, man!” Kate says to Earl, lowering the flare gun. Then she glances down at Julie guiltily, lets go of her, and carefully brushes off her lab coat.

“I’m sorry,” says Earl. “But you’re scientists, right?”

“I’ve got a doctorate and everything,” says Kate.

“Look, I owe Carlos one, so…” He casts an anxious glance down the block: Roger is walking away, slowly but steadily, moving in a rigidly straight line. He detours around a trash can with three perfectly executed ninety-degree turns and resumes his course. “There’s something strange going on with the bus. You need to be careful.”

Julie snorts; she can’t help herself. “Shouldn’t you be taking your own advice?”

“They can’t harm you unless you break the rules,” says Earl. “Or at least, they couldn’t. I’m not riding again until the regular driver is back. You should consider doing the same thing – you’ve already caught the attention of this one. That’s… never good.”

“Why not?” asks Julie – not because she doesn’t believe him, but because always knowing how much trouble she’s in is key to surviving Night Vale.

“Because,” says Earl. “She’s one of… them.”

“A giant radioactive ant,” says Julie.

He looks around again. “The Sidhe.”

“The she-what?” asks Kate. “Although honestly, gender-neutral language is probably more accurate. You don’t have to say ‘the she-creature,’ you can just say ‘the creature.’ I mean, you wouldn’t say ‘the he-creature’, would you?”

“No, not that,” says Earl. “The fair folk, the shining ones, the Seelie and Unseelie courts, the Tuatha Dé Danann, the Twyleth Teg.”

They stare at him.

“You know, fairies,” he says.

Kate starts to laugh, then trails off when Earl’s face only grows more grim.
Julie rubs her forehead. “What,” she says, “does that *mean*, exactly.” She’s guessing it doesn’t mean tiny sparkly people flitting about in flowers. Since they willingly chose to come to Night Vale, they probably steal children and mug people with box cutters.

“As part of an ancient bargain, the Queen of Winter rules over the bus routes and holds the fealty of the transportation unions,” says Earl. “But now there’s a new person. These things aren’t supposed to change, but they have.”

“Is there anything we can do?” asks Kate.

“I leave a bowl of milk outside the kitchen every night and never go unarmed,” says Earl. “Beyond that – I don’t know. I never got my Cold Iron badge.”

“Great,” says Julie. She covers her face with her hands and takes a deep breath.

“Uh,” says Kate. “Doctor Renegade—”

With unerring timing, a diminutive crack of thunder sounds above her.

“I know what you mean,” says Earl grimly, as the rain starts running down her collar. “I’ll do what I can, but – I don’t want them anywhere near Roger. I know I haven’t always been a good father. I haven’t always been a father at all. But if they took him away, out of Night Vale…”

“No, I understand,” Julie mutters. *Deep breath,* she thinks. *You can still get something out of this.*

She takes her hands off her face and digs a survey out of her bag. “Here,” she says. “This should be safe. Send it back to the lab – you know. For Carlos.” She adds, portentously, “He’ll know what to do with it.”

“I will,” says Earl as he takes the slightly damp packet. “And please – tell him I’m sorry about the Baked Alaska. I’ll get him a different dessert next time.”

“Will do,” says Julie.

He solemnly gives her a three-fingered salute, then produces a cast iron skillet from god-knows-where and jogs away. He catches up to Roger and says something to him; Roger doesn’t respond. They reach the end of the block and Roger makes another ninety-degree turn, eyes fixed straight ahead.

Earl stops, watching Roger go on without him. Then he shakes his head, hefts his skillet, and follows Roger out of sight.

“You know, this almost makes me change my mind about the importance of public transportation,” says Kate.

“I hate buses,” says Julie. “C’mon, I’m this way.”

They start down the street, Kate craning her neck as she scans their surroundings. “Do you think we should tell Carlos?” she asks.

“Oh, yes,” says Julie. “If I’ve been riding with Tinkerbell, Destroyer of Worlds, I’d like to know what exactly I’m getting into.”

“Uh, yes,” says Julie. “I feel bad, though. He’s already got a lot on his plate.”

“Don’t we all,” says Julie.
Kate doesn’t respond. When Julie looks over, she finds her eyeing the storm.

“We’re working on it,” says Julie.

“Right,” says Kate. “But let me know if you need a hand! If I could use it to model long-term erosion patterns, this could explain—”

The downpour stops – at least, it stops falling on Julie. There’s a man in a tan jacket next to her, holding an umbrella.

~*~*~*~

21-October-2005

Romero keeps jiggling his leg as he sits next to her on her couch, which annoys Julie on a level she doesn’t entirely want to examine. She knows what he’s like when he’s nervous: he’s twitchy, stutters, breathes a little too quickly. This is new, and speaks to some painful anxiety, and Julie has no idea what it’s about.

She reaches over and grabs his knee. He freezes, then forces himself to relax and says, “Sorry.”

“It’s fine,” says Julie, after waiting a moment to see if he’s going to say anything about what’s bothering him. He doesn’t, and now it feels awkward. Why does it feel awkward. She removes her hand, but that just makes it worse. This is terrible.

She goes back to grading.

His leg starts up again. She can’t take it any more.

“What,” she says.

“I love you,” he blurts.

She stares at him in genuine shock.

This feels like it’s come out of nowhere, but it hasn’t. It really hasn’t. They’ve been dating for 148 days and Julie doesn’t hate it. She doesn’t hate him, either. This is the only reasonable conclusion that explains his actions, and yet, she didn’t see it coming at all. She has no idea what to say.

She just has so many feelings. It’s awful. She wants to go back to work until she can figure out what they all mean, but she can’t, because Romero is staring at her in terror and that’s even worse than grading and she doesn’t want him to stay like that. His feelings are clear. He loves her. She needs to say something.

There are any number of appropriate responses she could use that would respect his feelings and convey her own.

Instead, she says, “I know.”

Romero gapes at her, anxiety fleeing before incredulity. Then he cracks up.

“Shut up,” says Julie. Her cheeks feel like they’re on fire. She can tell it wasn’t the wrong response, but it wasn’t the right one either.

Romero doesn’t sound like he cares, even though he’s lost the ability to stay upright and has slid off the couch. He’s not terrified anymore. Instead, he looks… happy. Really happy. He makes
honking noises when he laughs this hard but he still looks happy.

“Get up here,” she says, when he’s caught his breath. She catches his arm and tugs until he’s sitting next to her again where he belongs.


“I just want – it doesn’t have to change,” he says. “I just want it to be the two of us, like – what? What is it?”

“I – I don’t know if this is a good idea,” says Julie. “Your name is Romero.”

“...Yes?” says Romero.

“Mine’s Juliet,” she says.

“It is?”

She glares at him. Why didn’t she just legally change her name at eighteen like she threatened. This is going to ruin everything.

“I don’t get – oh,” he says. “Uh. Well. We could get nicknames,” he offers. “I could call you Jules?”

“That’s real neat, Romie,” she retorts. “I refuse to sound like an SI unit unless it’s named after something I discovered.”

He looks down at where she’s still clutching his arm, then squints at her for a moment and says, confidently, “Julodis.”

“Why,” she says suspiciously.

“It’s my favorite genus of beetle,” he says.

Julie does not have a response for that.

“Does it – does it really bother you that much?” he asks.

Romero and Juliet, ugh. “No,” she says grudgingly. “But I refuse to call you my boyfriend. We’re not twelve.”

“A nose by any other name would still smell,” says Romero.

“Get out,” says Julie. She doesn’t mean it. Romero smiles, because he knows she doesn’t mean it either.

She doesn’t let go.
paragraph more interesting like that?" – Ginipig, without whom this chapter would be a big, uninteresting mess
There’s a Sheriff’s Secret Police officer outside Julie’s window. Considering she’s in her office on the second floor, this is fairly impressive. But when they scream and scrabble against the glass after accidentally kicking over their ladder for the third time, Julie’s had enough.

“What do you want?” she demands, slamming the window open. They yelp and lose their grip with one hand, flailing over the hydrangeas below.

“Err, we… um… we just wanted to make sure you weren’t using the scientific method,” says the officer.

Julie stares at them directly in the eyes for a good thirty seconds as they grope for a handhold. “I’m not,” she says finally. “I’m reviewing old data.”

“You haven’t touched any of our cameras, have you? They’re not working.”

“No,” says Julie. She doesn’t need to touch them; that’s what EMPs are for.

“Oh, good,” says the officer. “I don’t suppose you’d like to give me a—”

Her phone buzzes, and she pointedly turns away from the still-dangling officer to check her text messages.

vulnerabilities include fire and cold iron

and according to the literature high velocity cheese wedges but i’ve never seen anyone test that

It’s Carlos, and tragically, she actually knows what he’s talking about. He’s been sending them all Weird Shit 201: Intro to Fairies via text message ever since he got called away to wizard cop duty before he could finish freaking out at them about Earl’s revelations. According to Carlos, the rules for dealing with fairies are complex and dangerous and basically boil down to: don’t.

“Who is it?” asks the officer.

“Carlos,” she said.

“What’s he texting about?”

“Cheese,” says Julie coldly.

“Oh,” says the officer. “You know, if we could troubleshoot the monitoring devices in your cellular network, that would make—”

Julie slams the window shut, narrowly missing their fingers.

What about hot iron, she writes back to Carlos. She waits a few moments, but he doesn’t respond.

That shouldn’t be unusual. She doesn’t really know what Carlos does on his missions – only that it requires a metric fuckton of firearms and the type of aggressive diplomacy that generally has to be authorized by Congress – but his continued existence implies that he’s pretty good at it. Most
likely, he is busy, out of service, or out of sync.

The same thing goes for Kate, who in the absence of anything useful to do has elected to brave the 4+ hour horror-filled drive back to civilization, no doubt to participate in various activities she will then overshare with everyone. Almost certainly, she will check in soon.

As for Carlos – the first time they parted ways he may have done a damn good impression of exploding, but the second time he patted her on the head and said he hoped she felt better before literally disappearing behind the flamingo storage locker, an offense for which Julie has been plotting revenge ever since she sobered up. Julie has no doubt he will continue to annoy her, and the lack of annoying her right now is probably not a matter of concern.

And yet.

She sits back down at her desk. Eyeballing raw data has never been her favorite – the stream of labels and numbers washes over her until she can pick up a pattern, but it’s not enough. Her mind insists on wandering off to non-scientific subjects like buses and flamingos and past Octobers and there’s nothing she can do to stop it, not when she can’t go research, not when she can’t run experiments, not when she can’t do science.

Rubbing her eyes, she stares at her computer screen. Then she decides to call Andre instead.

He picks up just before his phone goes to voicemail. “Julie?”

“I’ve been looking over our survey data and there’s a flaw in our population samples,” she says. “We need more people who don’t identify as human. Do you think we could get a survey to Hiram McDaniels in prison?”

Andre yawns on the other end of the line and asks, “What time is it?”

“Quit whining, it’s only—” Julie looks at the clock.

Shit.

“—3:00 AM,” she finishes defiantly, because she still has her pride. Embarrassment pricks at her like flying embers settling on bare skin, because now Andre knows she was so out of it she didn’t even bother to try keeping track of the time, and he’s going to think she couldn’t sleep because of feelings, which is both correct and incorrect, because she wasn’t even trying to sleep since distracting herself by going over the minutiae of their data while the Sheriff’s Secret Police scream and fall in the bushes is better than listening to her cats prowl around while lying in her quiet apartment by herself, and any moment now he’s going to feel bad and decide to humor her and answer her in a voice filled with cloying pity and say—

“Would Hiram McDaniels count as one respondent, or five?” He yawns again.

“Five,” says Julie, unaccountably relieved. “Or, well – I’d assume.”

Andre hums. “We should probably put a question about that in the demographics section,” he says. “We don’t want to make the wrong assumption for someone or something about how many distinct beings they comprise.”

“Good call,” says Julie, and they spend at least twenty minutes going back and forth on the wording of the new survey questions. It reminds her of the better parts of school (though with not quite as much stolen lab equipment): staying up late and then early with meandering discussions of paleomagnetism and isostasy and gamma… spectroscopy…
“It’s too quiet around here,” says Julie.

“I miss you too,” replies Romero.

“Yeah,” says Julie. She knows that fieldwork is important to his research. She knows that fieldwork is important to him. She still kind of hates it anyway.

She listens to the familiar sound of him breathing on the other end of the phone for a moment, then makes herself say, “I should let you go.”

Romero sighs. “Probably,” he says. “Give TV’s Frank a kiss for me.”

“I’m not kissing my cat for you,” says Julie.

“He gets lonely, Julie,” says Romero.

Julie tells him exactly what he can kiss and he laughs. God, Julie misses that sound.

“Fine, fine,” he says. “It’s all right. I’ll be back before you know it.”

“Pretty sure I’d know,” she replies.

She jerks awake and almost falls out of her chair. Andre’s still on the line; she can hear him snoring. The officer has either stopped spying on her or gotten stuck down in the hydrangeas. Also, there’s a tarantula sitting on her desk.

She stares at the tarantula. It stares back.

She picks up the phone. “Wake up and go to sleep,” she says to Andre, and hangs up. Tentatively, she puts her hand on the desk next to the tarantula. It crawls onto her palm and sits there.

“This isn’t contingent on what I’m about to do,” she tells it. “But if you ever happen to get zapped by a death ray and grow three hundred times your size while defeating the square-cube law, I’d appreciate it if you didn’t rampage over my lab.”

The tarantula doesn’t reply.

She carries it downstairs carefully. Not because tarantulas are particularly poisonous – she knows their venom is weak, nothing worse than a bee sting – but because she knows they’re too fragile to survive falls from much more than 0.3 meters. She takes it outside and sets it on the ground underneath the hydrangea (away from the Sheriff’s Secret Police’s stakeout). She knows they’re vulnerable to predators. Dawn isn’t far away, and she knows they don’t like direct sunlight. She also knows they can’t read, though that probably isn’t relevant right now.

She knows that females can live up to thirty years even in the wild, and that they can scrape barbed hair from their abdomens and throw it at potential attackers, and that they have retractable claws like a cat. She didn’t particularly want to know this information, but she does, and there’s nothing she can do about it but go down to her workshop and attempt to clean in furious forced idleness and pretend she’s not thinking about anything else.

~*~*~*~

When she opens the door of her workshop later that morning, she finds that someone has been by to leave her a breakfast tray. Well, “tray”, in that it’s a textbook, and “breakfast”, in that it’s a French press, a stale churro, and her blood pressure medication. But the French press is completely full
with still-warm coffee, so overall she’s going to count this as a win.

Her mug is eventually located on the floor under a work bench. She looks inside it and grimaces, so she heads upstairs, taking it and the French press with her.

Labs One and Two are empty – not surprising at this hour, even for them – but Simone Rigadeau is sitting on the floor of the lounge, carefully packing a box full of soda cans.

“Morning,” says Julie.

“Good morning,” says Simone.

“Not particularly,” says Julie. “Coffee?”

“Are you sure?” asks Simone skeptically. “I saw the weird one making it.”

Julie washes out her mug, then fills it and takes a sip.

“Tastes okay,” she says

Simone stares into space for a moment, then nods. Julie steals Gary’s remaining clean mug and pours her a cup, then tops it off with some of Andre’s soy milk.

“Want anything to eat?” she asks, handing the mug to Simone.

Simone shakes her head. They both drink in companionable silence.

Julie’s phone buzzes.

*temperature isn’t important, just high iron content. steel is ok too*

g2g battle starting

“Why are you like this,” Julie asks her phone.

“He should get better snacks,” says Simone, apparently at random.

“Can’t argue with that,” says Julie.

“Earl came by,” Simone continues, almost like she’s taking part in a different conversation. Well, maybe she is, what does Julie know. “He dropped this off.”

Simone starts digging through the pockets of her voluminous coat, then pulls out a slightly crumpled sheaf of papers – the survey Julie gave Earl the other night. “He wasn’t going to fill out the demographics section, but I made him do it.”

“Thanks,” says Julie, touched. “Hey, you wouldn’t want to fill this out, would you?”

Simone goes quiet, then shakes her head and says, “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I’m an outlier,” she says, simply. “The world ended, except for me. I don’t belong here.”

“Bullshit,” says Julie. “Besides, you’re not the only one with weird reality shenanigans. You can’t all be outliers.”
“Maybe some day,” Simone says. Her voice is too practical to be called wistful, and yet.

She goes back to packing her cans. Julie drains the rest of her coffee and rinses her mug out in the sink.

“Sometimes I see her,” Simone says.

“Who?”

“Simone,” says Simone. “And Simone. All the Simones, in their Night Vales.” She slurps her coffee. “It’s bad luck when there’s too many of us. It gets… heavy.”

“Heavy how?”

“I can feel the world changing,” says Simone. “The *worlds* changing.”

Julie grabs her clipboard and starts taking notes. “When you see the other Simones, are they actually here? Or do you just—just think of them?”

“Both, I believe. But I’m not entirely sure,” says Simone.

“Right,” says Julie. “Do the other Simones ever notice you?”

“I don’t know,” says Simone.

Carlos said *most* of the deviations within nearby timelines cancel each other out. What happens when they don’t? What happens when the wave function $\psi$ is the same as the physical system it describes, and what happens when that physical system collapses? How would the presence of multiple observers affect the system?

And they do have an effect, she’s sure of it. One of them is sitting right in front of her. Did you need the energy of the world ending to bring the timelines close enough together that you could peel off and fuse to another? Or was the end of the world the byproduct of fusion? Or is it something else entirely?

Something is tickling at the back of Julie’s mind. *It’s bad luck when there’s too many of us.* But it’s not something Simone told her. It was about—something about too many observers, warping the world around them—pulling it out of space and time, just like Night Vale—if she could just remember who—

Something else tickles the back of Julie’s mind. She frowns. “What’s that sound?”

“Probably the rioters,” says Simone. “They’ve got most of the science district involved.”

“They’re rioting now?”

Julie peers out the window, trying to get a glimpse of the would-be rioters. It’s not that she’s particularly close to the rest of Night Vale’s scientific community—the eleven straight months of them pointing fingers and screaming “Interloper!” whenever approached was one thing, but refusing to talk about the outdated studies and defunct textbooks they tried to pass off as foundational materials was *over the line*. Still... they’re scientists. Mostly.

“Just a little,” says Simone. “Knocked over some trash cans and recycling bins. Started a fire in one of them.”

“Isn’t that dangerous?” she asks.
“Only if their clothes are particularly flammable,” says Simone.

“No, I mean – with the police,” says Julie.

Simone shrugs. “They updated the arson laws again, so I don’t really know. Could be a fine, could be the abandoned mine shaft.”

Julie cranes her neck, but she still can’t see anything outside. She looks at the survey Simone gave her. She looks at the wall, behind which lurks Carlos’ storage locker and the imprisoned flamingo.

That is it.

Julie has always liked the phrase “I’m getting some answers if it’s the last thing I do”; it seems like a perfectly reasonable statement of priorities. She’s not suicidally reckless or anything, but honestly, what is the point of living if you don’t make something of it?

She slings her messenger bag over her shoulder and deactivates the lounge’s communications jammer.

“I’m going to the police station,” she enunciates clearly into the microphone not-very-cleverly hidden in a plant. “But I have to walk, so it’ll take me about twenty minutes—”

“Twenty-five,” interrupts Simone. “Earl Road is closed.”

“Oh,” says Julie. “Twenty-five minutes, then.” She turns the jammer back on. “Just lock up behind yourself,” she says to Simone, and marches off to get some answers.

The officer at the desk is waiting for her, hands folded and what’s visible of their face disapproving, but Julie can see that they’ve hastily shoved a comic book under the sign-in log.

“I’m sorry, Doctor Renegade,” they say, “But for the last time there’s nothing we can do about the scientific method ban. We don’t make the laws. We just selectively enforce them.”

Julie waves them off. “I need to check out your surveillance logs,” she says.

“For science?” says the officer suspiciously.

“No,” says Julie. “I just really want to violate the privacy of an interloper.”

“Oh!” says the officer. “That’s okay then. What can we do you for?”

~*~*~*~

14-April-2006

“—And then the water heater exploded through the roof,” says Julie.

“Did he tell his landlord?” asks Felicia.

“I’m pretty sure they noticed when it landed two blocks away,” says Julie. “Do you have any idea how many safety valves needed to be blocked for that to happen?”

“No, but why do you?” asks Felicia.

Julie wags a finger at her. “That’s not the point.”
“Tell Romero he should threaten to sue,” says Felicia. “He’s guaranteed a nuisance-free building in paragraphs 1941.1 and 1941.3 in the Civil Code.”

Julie squints at her. “Did you just happen to know that?”

“I’ve been reviewing housing codes after class,” Felicia says. “One of our caseworkers is concerned about a family’s living conditions.”

“Lucky for them you’re in law school now.”

“Yes,” says Felicia. “Lucky.”

She doesn’t say it bitterly in the same way she doesn’t look at the empty bar stool beside her. This is the fourth time in a row Felicia has wrested herself away from night classes long enough to socialize only to have Andre cancel on them.

But before it can get awkward, Felicia changes the subject. Unfortunately, it’s by giving Julie an uncomfortably evaluative look and then smiling a little to herself.

“What,” says Julie, immediately suspicious.

“You really like him, don’t you?”

“Yes, I like the person I’m dating who I was friends with for two years,” says Julie, deadpan. “Shocking. Wow. Romance conquers all.”

“Don’t you sass me,” says Felicia. “You haven’t made a crack about him being a biologist in months.”

Julie opens her mouth to respond, then closes it. Felicia is right. Romero told her a fun fact about cockroaches the other day and she didn’t even try to hit him with a shoe.

Julie looks into her beer and realizes she’s in love.

“Fuck,” she says.

~*~*~*~

The man in the tan jacket has three entire shelving units in the evidence locker to himself. They provide her copies of everything, ranging from an external drive with security camera footage, phone transcripts produced via dot matrix printer, the eight-track tapes and wax cylinders from the Night Vale Community Radio station, and twenty-seven eight-by-ten color glossy photographs with circles and arrows and a paragraph on the back of each one explaining what each one was. They even offer to call a car and drive it all over to the lab.

Troy Walsh pulls up in a beat-up Honda with an Uber sticker.

“In-house operation, huh,” she says.

She’s met with befuddlement.

“I work at the movie theater,” says Troy, then adds what he probably thinks is a charming smile, “But my shift doesn’t start for another few hours.”

“Troy is very helpful,” says the officer as they climb into the front seat, leaving Julie to wonder if they don’t know about or remember imposter Officer Troy from the other day, or if they just don’t
care anymore. Ignorance versus apathy, the ultimate Night Vale showdown.

“To be honest, we haven’t gotten very far on this case,” confesses the officer as they pull away from the station. “That’s why the Sheriff is willing to let you look into it. You can be like a – a consultant!”

“What are the rules for being a consultant?” asks Julie suspiciously.

“Well, after the ceremonial bloodletting—”

“I’m just going to stop you there,” says Julie. “No consulting.”

“Oh,” says the officer, disappointed.

“However, I will share anything relevant with the police,” says Julie. “You know, since I’m a good citizen who can be trusted with potentially dangerous procedures because I’m very responsible.”

The officer sighs. “We still can’t do anything about the ban, Doctor Renegade.”

Julie *hmmphs* and settles back in her seat to stare out the window. Her phone buzzes a moment later.

*they literally can’t give anything away for free. there’s a debt for every favor because they have to have a balance. if someone offers you a deal too good to be true IT IS*

*Did you win??* she writes back, because *honestly.*

*not yet*

His reply fills her with the standard mild irritation, but also unease. There’s nothing she can do about the majority of the dangerous parts of his job; she resigned herself to that long ago. But the fact that he considers telling them all this information when he’s in the middle of something important means that it, too, is important. This is information he’s willing to risk his life for, if only by distraction.

Is that what Carlos has been doing here? Because she’s been running it over in her mind and there’s no reason that she can see for him to have brought her along for the entire flamingo investigation. The part where he borrowed her lab, maybe (assuming he can’t access his own investigative methods in his relative past) but the rest of it?

The naturally suspicious part of her wonders if he deliberately provoked her reaction to the flamingo to gather more information about it. The naturally analytical part of her points out that Carlos is more likely to gnaw off his own hand than put someone in danger, especially when he could just put himself in danger instead.

*Stop texting and fighting*, she types.

Carlos0 doesn’t text back. Carlos† doesn’t reappear from… where- and whenever he’s gotten to. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, Julie’s going to assume those are good signs, and she’s going to keep telling herself that until she believes it.

They arrive at the lab, and she (well, Troy and the officer) puts all the boxes directly into the Faraday cage in Lab Two. Even though Carlos isn’t back yet she isn’t taking any chances. With the way things have been going, she wouldn’t put it past him to somehow accidentally destroy her data and equipment from halfway across the planet and/or ten years in the future.
After Troy and the officer depart with only a few minor zaps from touching the Faraday cage (she warned them), she methodically sorts through the material and disassembles all the cameras, bugs, and tracking devices. Some of them even work this time. Stepping over the inlaid circle on the lab floor, she grabs her repurposed insulin monitor and commits minor violence against her finger. Then she stoops down and touches the circle, leaving a single drop of blood. Nothing happens, as far as she can see. But the cage and all her equipment inside it are now (allegedly) weird-shit-proof.

It bugs the hell out of her. Not the invisible forces part – it’s not like she can see gravity or gamma radiation, after all. Nor is it the whole “blood sacrifice” thing; she lives in Night Vale. No, it’s that there’s obviously a connection between those two things, the mechanism that bridges the gap between science and magic, and she has no idea what it is or how to measure it.

She scowls at the floor. Then she goes looking for Gary, because there’s no way in hell she’s going to collate all that information. Wei should be off covering Kate’s shift at the monitoring station with Andre by now.

Gary’s not in Lab One or his office or the lounge. Eventually, she discovers him on the roof, lying down in classic sniper position and grimly clutching a paintball gun.

“What’s up?” she asks.

“Poachers,” he says. “The Ralphs had a sale on unfilled piñatas, and where’s the first place they come? That’s right, my research subjects.”

“Bastards,” says Julie.

“I mean, why would you fill a piñata with bees, anyway?” says Gary, still watching the hives through a scope. “They give you sugar without having to hit anything with a stick. Just get a wasp’s nest and spray paint it instead. There’s like… fifty different Pinterest pages for that.”

“Eleven o’clock,” says Julie. He fires and there’s a distant yelp.

He’s abandoned his shoes, as usual; she moves them out of the way and sits on an exhaust vent. The next few moments pass largely in silence, punctuated by the occasional scream as Gary tags would-be rustlers.

Julie briefly considers thanking him for leaving her breakfast, but then decides to spare them both the embarrassment. It does remind her of something she really can’t skip, though.

“So,” she says. “Nilanjana. Do you need new pronouns, or anything?”

“Does anyone need any pronouns?” asks Gary contemplatively, which Julie takes as a ‘No’.

“Should I drop ‘Gary’ entirely? Do you want me to change your name in our paperwork?”

He thinks about it for a moment. “I don’t know, man,” he concludes. “I don’t really believe in labels.”

Julie gives up after that. If Gary comes to any concrete conclusions about his identity, she’s sure he’ll tell her the usual way he relays important information: as an afterthought while doing something else entirely.

“Oh, I almost forgot,” he says, shifting the paintball gun to his right hand and digging through the pocket of his lab coat. “I found this in my mail cubby. It’s not very helpful but I thought you’d want
to take a look.”

He hands her a sheaf of papers. It’s one of their surveys, but when she opens it, all of the answers on the first page say KING CITY.

“I think it’s from that guy,” says Gary. “You know. With the Chrysops.”

“Chrysops?”

“You know, the guy with the jacket and stuff. He’s got a ton of Chrysops that follow him around, you can tell by the gold patterns on the eyes. Not sure what species. And I thought, that’s strange, you usually don’t see deer flies around here, and certainly not this late in the year…”

Julie skips ahead in the survey.

Q: Rate this statement on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being ‘strongly disagree’ and 5 being ‘strongly agree’: Science exists.
A: KING CITY.

“And it gets more interesting because Phoenicopterus ruber likes to eat their larvae, although despite individual birds showing up in the Everglades every now and then, flocks of them haven’t been breeding in America in the wild since the European conquest…”

She can’t recall her and Kate’s conversation with the man in the tan jacket the other day, only that one probably happened, but it doesn’t take a genius like her to reconstruct the pattern of events: a demand she couldn’t remember, growing frustration, the determination to get some information out of another failure of communication.

Q: On average, how many hours do you sleep/pretend to sleep each night?
A: KING CITY.

Useless. Typical.

“And then I thought: what would someone from Florida do? So, don’t do that. But maybe if we…”

Q: Pick the response that most closely matches your estimate of the distance between the earth and the moon:
a. 384,402 kilometers
b. 60 feet
c. endless void
d. All of the above
A: KING CITY.

Her anger fades. Well, it doesn’t fade, but it settles back into its usual spot and lets curiosity take the lead again, because what does it mean that both Jackie and the man in the tan jacket exhibit this behavior? She wanted information; now she has some. She’s not going to sit around and whine about how she doesn’t like the form it takes.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” asks Julie.

“I think so, Dr. K,” says Gary. “But how will we get three pink flamingos into one pair of capri pants?”
“...That would be a ‘No,’” says Julie. “The Sheriff’s Secret Police gave us all their surveillance info on the man in the tan jacket. It needs to go into our databases.” Converting that into usable and searchable data really is the kind of thing grad students are best for, but…

“You stay out here as long as you need to,” she says, standing up.

“Thanks,” says Gary.

“And let me know if you need back-up,” says Julie. “I’ll get the hose.”

~*~*~*~

22-April-2006

Romero pokes the quivering mass in what had once been a roasting pan.

“I don’t understand,” he says. “Cooking is just chemistry, and we’re both highly qualified scientists. How can we be so bad at this?”

“Why do you love me?” asks Julie.

Romero blinks at her. “It’s not any one thing,” he says finally.

“Name one,” says Julie.

He thinks about it, then says, “Well, I like that you’re so passionate.”

Julie can’t help it: she snorts. “Passionate? Me?”

“Well, yeah,” says Romero. “You really care about the things that interest you. You get really involved and angry and never quit or back down.”

“Oh,” says Julie, then blurts, “You like that I’m angry?”

“I... don’t like it when you’re unhappy?” says Romero. “But – it’s part of you, so... yeah, I guess I do, because it’s how you are. Why? Is – is everything okay?”

She’s spent a lifetime having people tell her to stop being angry. No one’s ever told her she’s fine the way she is.

“I love you too,” she says. “What kind of takeout do you want?”

He blinks at her, stunned, and then a smile breaks across his face.

“No, stop,” says Julie, waving the takeout menus at him. “Don’t you dare.”

“Stop what?”

“Having feelings,” says Julie, appalled at – well, everything, herself included.

“I can’t,” says Romero. “I hope that’s okay.”

“Ugh,” says Julie.

He takes the menus and leans against the counter next to her, his arm crossing behind her, almost but not quite around her waist. It’s... nice.
“Chinese?” he asks.

Julie sighs.

“It’s fine,” she mutters, and definitely does not smile, not even a little, when he kisses her forehead and goes to order.

~*~*~*~

It’s well into the afternoon before she gives up on uploading and transcribing the data from the police station for the day. (She’d tried to do some basic analyses of Earl’s survey results, but the Sheriff’s Secret Police officer kept coughing pointedly whenever she opened any program more complicated than a spreadsheet.)

She switches over to the transcripts for Cecil’s broadcast and queues up the corresponding audio as well. Their transcription software is pretty good, but it’s not quite up to handling chanting, musical interludes, or backwards Satanic messages urging everyone to shop at Costco.

“He was last seen early this morning on the unlit, gravel-paved stretch of Oak Trail, near Larry Leroy’s house out on the edge of town,” says Cecil. Julie makes note of the timestamp (such as it is). “The man in the tan jacket was reportedly seen in the moonless black, standing next to a refrigerator engulfed in flames.”

**Philly sports fan?** she writes.

“He was smoking a cigarette,” says Cecil. Well, great. Maybe he can lend her a smoke for all his trouble.

“Secret Police officials added that if you see a man in a tan jacket carrying a deerskin suitcase, write down what you see immediately,” Cecil continues. “The City Council has temporarily lifted their ban on pens and pencils, so that citizens can help law enforcement on this matter.”

“Oh, fuck you,” mutters Julie. After the ban on the scientific method had been set, she’d considered going to City Council directly to ask them to lift it. Considered, and then immediately discarded, because she likes having all her limbs and being alive.

She skips ahead in the broadcast to the next keyworded section. Cecil’s describing a tip he got.

“And the angel — if that is indeed who called,” says Cecil, “The angel said that the man in the tan jacket with the deerskin suitcase was from a place underneath the earth. Underneath our knowledge. A vast world, right below our feet. I asked for more, but the angel — if that is indeed who called — whispered only, a flower in the desert.”

Julie writes down Desert Flower Bowling Alley and Arcade Fun Complex? and stares at it in dissatisfaction. The bowling alley – more specifically, Lane 5 and its tiny murder city – is the obvious answer, but it doesn’t quite jive with the rest of the data. The man in the tan jacket is normal-sized, for one. And whatever his other faults, he has never once tried to shoot Carlos.

She makes note of her doubts, and also a reminder to ask Carlos what other horrible underworlds the man in the tan jacket could have crawled out of. Muttering to herself, she skips to the next keyword.

It’s fully dark before she blinks exhaustion out of her eyes and realizes that if she doesn’t move soon, she’s going to become one with her desk. The labs are empty, all but a few lights off; Andre and Wei have come and gone. She hopes someone checked to make sure Gary hadn’t locked
himself on the roof again before it got dark out this time.

The sensible thing would be to go home. Instead, she heads to the lounge, stomach grumbling. There’s half a pizza in the fridge, covered with bacon and numerous craters in the cheese that look suspiciously as though someone has recently divested the surface of any pineapple.

She eats two pieces and heads back upstairs. There’s a different Sheriff’s Secret Police officer perched on her windowsill, struggling with the window latches.

“Bad plan,” she says. “You won’t like the security system.”

“Oh, come on,” says the officer. “Can’t I just have a peek?”

“I’m not supposed to help you,” says Julie. “You’re supposed to be covert surveillance.” She adds, nastily, “I don’t make the rules, I just selectively enforce them.”

“That’s funny,” says the officer, shimmying a credit card under the latch. “Because that’s actually what we said to you earli—”

There’s a zap, a shriek, and crunching noise down below.

Julie mentally resolves to keep at least one sarcastic comment about Carlos to herself, because his wards are genuinely useful. She slides the window open and sticks her head out. “Told you,” she says. “Do you need me to call anyone?”

“I’m… good…”

“You have a great night,” says Julie, and shuts the window. She sits down at her desk, rubbing her temples.

Forms and theories whirl in her head, uselessly. When she was in elementary school, her third grade teacher had been fond of saying, “If you’re bored, it means you have no imagination,” at least until Julie had decided to deal with her boredom after finishing her science assignment, her homework, and the rest of the textbook by seeing what happened if you jammed a paperclip into the electric socket. (The answer was certainly not boring and, in fact, probably the most exciting and practical thing they learned that year.) It’s never been a problem of having nothing to think about; it’s not being able to act on it. She’d rather prove all her theories wrong than not be able to test them at all. This enforced inactivity is worse than every time she’s had to scrap her data and start over.

Unbidden, her mind skips to her memories from the flamingo. She doesn’t fight it, this time, but tries to concentrate on the rest of it instead: on the man in the tan jacket, out of breath, sweating running down his face; on the angels disembarking from the bus, its driver invisible behind the glare of the windshield. Why them? Why now? Why her?

We can save him…

She shuts her eyes and covers her face with her hands. “Save who,” she asks the back of her eyelids. They don’t answer.

Her phone buzzes.

they can’t lie but that doesn’t mean they’re telling the truth

actually they’re probably not telling the truth
if they’re telling the truth something has gone very wrong
dammit the parley’s wrapping up, i’ll tell you more later. stay out of trouble

She sighs and pulls up the files from the radio station.

She wakes to the sound of Cecil talking about the other week’s marathon, which may or may not have been mandatory, whoops. Carlos has texted her an emoji of various hadrosaurids gathered around a campfire singing “We Are the Champions”. Outside, it’s the tranquil time just past dawn, when the birds are singing and the police are whimpering softly in the bushes. Plenty of time to go back to her apartment, shower, and feed the cats.

~*~*~*~

Julie likes walking. It helps her think. Unfortunately, this is a drawback in a place where you shouldn’t go outside without the ability to remain alert, attentive, and combat-ready, so when someone says, “Need a lift?” out of nowhere she jumps about two meters.

Old Woman Josie’s truck is keeping pace with her, to the chagrin of the line of traffic behind it. Julie must be out of it; she hadn’t even noticed the honking and swearing. She really needs more sleep.

Also, more funding and more minions, but wish in one hand and collect coproliths in the other and see which one fills up first.

She pinches the bridge of her nose, then tells Josie, “Sure,” and opens the cab door.

“She likes riding in the back.”

Julie hesitates, but Josie waves her in.

“Pay them no mind,” says Josie, as Julie settles herself in the passenger seat. “They just like controlling the radio. I—”

There’s a distinct pop! from behind them.

“Ah, hell,” says Josie. “Erika, you know we shouldn’t do that! It just makes more of them!”

Julie twists around in her seat, looking for the source of the noise. “More of wha—”

There’s a flamingo in the truck bed, lying on a lumpy mass of blankets and towels.

“There’s a flamingo back there?” asks Julie, now plastered against the glove box.

“Actually, there’s twenty-four back there,” says Josie.

“Twenty-four flamingos?!?”

“Wait, no,” says Josie. “I forgot to count that one. Twenty-five flamingos.”

“What the fuck,” says Julie.

There’s a loud crack! Julie flinches, but it’s just her personal storm system turning up with its usual unerring timing.

“It’s all right, Doctor Renegade,” says Josie cheerily. Tiny pieces of hail bounce off the passenger
side window. “The flamingos can’t hurt you up here.”

“How do you know?”

Josie shrugs. “Got a feeling.”

“Oh, a feeling,” says Julie.

“If you want a ride, I’ll need you to put a seatbelt on,” says Josie. “But you’re welcome to borrow my saber if that would make you feel better. It’s under your seat.”

Julie looks at her, then under her seat, where there is, indeed, a sword.

“It might,” says Julie. She sits down and buckles her seatbelt, sword on her lap. She doesn’t draw it, but sits with the sheath tightly clenched in both fists. The back of her neck itches.

“So what’s with the mass migration?” she asks.

Josie doesn’t ask for an explanation; she just raises an eyebrow and waits patiently. Julie can respect that. “Of flamingos, in your truck,” she adds for clarification.

“Oh, they’re from the pawnshop,” says Josie. “Jackie’s a good kid, but she’s a little distracted right now. Also, there aren’t any doors, so I just walked in and took them back. She owes me four dollars in change.”

“And you’re taking them to…”

“Carlos’ lab, of course,” says Josie.

Julie sighs and slumps in her seat. “Of course,” she repeats.

There’s another pop! Julie twists in her seat just in time to see a flamingo drop out of thin air, landing on the blankets like a jumper from a burning building.

“Erika!” says Josie sharply. “Don’t make me come back there! I will turn this truck around!”

“How are the flamingos doing that?” Julie demands.

Josie sighs. “Oh, the flamingos aren’t doing that. Erika’s just being a little so-and-so.” At Julie’s expression, she says, “When Erika touches the flamingo, they go to a different time and place. Then they come back, and there’s another flamingo.” She shakes her head. “Erika may be having fun, but things are getting just a little too… too heavy, with them around.”

Julie looks at her sharply.

“So I called Carlos, and he said to take them to his storage locker at the lab,” Josie finishes. “The kid can’t pick up a seven-ten split worth a damn, but he is pretty clever with the science and whatnot. Although…” She looks at Julie. “Is it your lab?”

“What?”

“The lab,” says Josie. “I thought it belonged to Carlos, but does it actually belong to you?”

“Science belongs to everyone,” says Julie.

Josie nods. “So it is your lab,” she says. “I was wondering. Don’t worry, I’ll keep that to myself.”
“...Thanks,” says Julie. She doesn’t really know what else to say. Her anonymity in Night Vale started off as a self-defense mechanism but now has worn thin as – as the parallel realities of a social chaos butterfly. Night Vale doesn’t really know who she is, except when they do, just like she doesn’t really belong in Night Vale, except when she does.

She twists around to stare out the back window again. The flamingos stare back. Or would, if they had eyes or some other kind of sensory organ. These don’t, Julie observes, then emends that to, these don’t right now. But right now is the only now that matters. These flamingos aren’t staring at her and aren’t talking to her and aren’t pulling on her emotions. She’s as safe as anyone can be in Night Vale, as long as she avoids touching them.

Julie glares at them and continues to tell herself that.

They hit a bump and the sea of blankets shifts, as though some vast creature lurks beneath its surface. Julie sets her jaw and faces forward again.

“Have you ever met a man in a tan jacket?” she asks.

“I think so,” says Josie.

“What do you remember?”

“I liked him,” says Josie.

Julie blinks. “Liked him?”

“Sure,” says Josie. “He was trying to do… something, I forget what. I hope he figured it out.” At Julie’s incredulity, she says, “Some people, they’re rough around the edges, but they try. They hope for something better and keep going. That’s important.”

“What if you go where you’re not supposed to?”

“Then you come back and fix what you can,” says Josie.

“What if you can’t?”

“Then you find someone to help you,” Josie replies. “Oh! I love this song.”

She turns up the volume of the radio and treats everyone to the aria from Shastakovich’s *Paint Your Wagon*.

Julie’s phone buzzes in her bag. She has three new texts from Carlos, all quite lengthy, out of order, and missing some vital introductory information.

“What Accords, you asshole,” she mutters, trying to make sense of his info-dump. It sounds like he’s been punched in the face by Emily Post.

“There’s some nice ones in the used car lot,” puts in Josie. “I’ve got some raw meat if you want to distract the salesmen.”

“Not that kind,” says Julie. “I think.”

“Hmm,” says Josie. “The Unseelie Accords?”

“What are those?” asks Julie, not really expecting a useful answer.
“They’re the protocols for etiquette, hospitality, and neutral ground,” says Josie. “Ohh, and duelling. That was always my favorite part.”

That certainly sounds like Carlos. “Whose protocols?”

“Theyir signatories’,” says Josie. “You know, the two faerie courts, the White Council—”

Julie blinks.

“—the Archive, two dragons – although I don’t know how many heads they have – the svartalves, the remaining vampire courts, the Fomor, the Chy-Caygo mob—”

“How early and often did they have to vote to swing that?”

Josie shrugs.

Before Julie can comment further, there’s a strange noise like all of reality compressed into a MIDI file, looped and run backwards, that could with some effort be very inaccurately described as like the tinkling of bells.

“Erika wants me to tell you that Erika has also signed the Accords, but under no circumstances should you trust them to behave,” says Josie. “Slight problem with perdition and damnation and so on. I’m retired, so you’d have to call one of the new boys if you wanted help.”

“...Noted,” says Julie.

There’s another noise, like the universe being sucked into a straw to the tune of “Yakkity Sax”.

“Erika thinks you should read them,” says Josie.

“I’ll look into it,” says Julie. Protocol, great. She puts her elbows on the table when she eats purely out of spite. She doesn’t need another—

She hears another noise – no, not a noise; any audible pressure wave that loud would have ruptured her eardrums already – it’s a, a feeling that thrums through her entire body, vibrating like it’s hit her resonant frequency, making her face flush and her eyes water, lighting everything she can see with the dark electric phosphenes firing behind her eyelids, and it’s saying – saying—

“Oh! Good idea,” says Josie. “Erika says there’s a copy online at the library.”

“G-guess I’ll have to look it up,” Julie gasps.

The feeling cuts out. There’s an odd ringing in her ears. No, not a ringing, but a sudden burst of silence – the rain drumming against her side of the cab has stopped.

Julie takes a shaky breath and wipes her eyes, but – well, she feels pretty good, actually. Like she just had a nice nap, then an entire pot of coffee. It’s certainly one of the nicer ways she’s been brow-beaten into doing something.

“E-readers are such a blessing,” Josie continues. “Erika tears through fiction like you wouldn’t believe.”

“I probably wouldn’t,” Julie agrees. Though she suppresses it on general principles (she might be barely irritated by angelic peer pressure, but she’s irritated nevertheless) she still feels like laughing. She almost doesn’t even care about the three extra flamingos that appear during the rest of the ride.
The thing is, beneath Romero’s shy and mild-mannered exterior beats the heart of a raging romantic – not the kind who skywrites love messages above the boardwalk or proposes on a Jumbotron or anything, but the kind who would leave flowers on your kitchen table if you actually liked flowers and would passionately kiss you in the rain if you were dumb enough to want to stand outside without an umbrella.

Julie is still not entirely convinced he didn’t wander into her life because he somehow got lost. But it’s become increasingly clear that she’s going to have to do something about it.

She checks that the box of tissues besides the couch is full before she sits down next to him. She has feeling he’s going to need them.

She clears her throat. He looks up from his laptop and smiles at her. How dare he.

She thrusts out a sheaf of paperwork. “I have a proposal for you.”

“Is this your new grant?” he asks as he takes it from her.

“Uh,” she says. “No.”

She can tell the moment he stops skimming the text and actually realizes what it says. His eyes widen and he covers his mouth with one hand. The papers tremble as the other hand shakes, just a little.

Julie carefully puts his laptop on the coffee table, where it can’t get feelings all over it.

“It’s come to my attention,” she begins, then has to stop and clear her throat again. “It’s come to my attention that we have a pretty good thing going on. So I was just wondering if you’d like to keep doing this, you know. For the indefinite future. With me.”

When he doesn’t say anything, or look at her, or move at all for that matter, she removes her hand from under her thigh where she’s been sitting on it and points at the lease. “I highlighted where you have to sign,” she says, somewhat unnecessarily. “If you wanted to.”

His hand drops away from his mouth and falls to the couch like a stunned bird bouncing off a window. “My lease is up next month,” he says dazedly.

“Really,” says Julie, as though she has not been crossing off the days on her calendar.

“You – you already signed.”

“Well, yeah,” says Julie.

His eyes brim with tears and Julie almost cries herself, with relief that she hasn’t permanently broken him.

She hands him a tissue.

She hears voices when she lets herself in the main door, and enters Lab Two to find Wei sitting on the floor, surrounded by boxes and wearing his new identity.

“How are you doing,” she says.

Wei sneezes twice – the signal for the fuzz is listening – and says, “Uploading the rest of the information from the police into our comp— into our database.”

Julie looks at the remaining boxes of paper and magnetic tape and wax cylinders and, who knows, cuneiform, and asks, “Voluntarily?”

“Well, I didn’t think you’d want to deal with it,” says Wei.


He winces a little guiltily. “It was Gar— uh, Nilanjana’s idea, actually.”

“Thanks anyway,” says Julie. “Where is he?”

“Still guarding the hives,” says Wei.

“Right,” says Julie. “Because poaching is illegal,” she adds, projecting her voice and enunciating clearly for the microphones.

She finds Andre next door in Lab One, where he is clearly running tests on his rock samples.

“Andre!”

“Oh, hello, Julie,” he says. “You’re just in time for the interrogation.” He gives her an exaggerated wink. “When I will polygraph these rocks.”

“Of course,” she says flatly. “And those?” she asks, pointing at a separate group of samples.

“Under surveillance,” he says cheerfully, tapping the side of his nose. “Oh, I had a lot of leftovers from breakfast this morning, so I brought them in if you want anything.”

“You just happened to have leftovers,” she says.

“Indeed,” says Andre innocently.

She stares at him suspiciously. He meets her gaze, as impenetrable under interrogation as one of his rocks.

“I might have some,” she says. “If I feel like it.”

“Help yourself,” he says, then adds, loudly, “Where were you on the night of the eleventh?” as he runs a mineralogical analysis.

Julie heads to the lounge because she wants to, stewing all the way. The Sheriff’s Secret Police never believe her when she tells them her samples are under surveillance. She’s just as trustworthy as Andre, but refuse the pigs access to one workshop and suddenly they’re convinced you’re going to release scientific horror upon the whole town.

That’s why they’re not allowed anywhere near her workshop. There’s just way too much
dangerous stuff.

Andre’s leftovers turn out to be his slow-cooker oatmeal, which is less than ideal, but she finds some leftover kimchi from the hipster Korean place, so at least it won’t be completely tasteless. After she’s scarfed it down she goes back upstairs, puts on a pair of safety glasses, and pulls up the website of the Night Vale Public Library.

Half an hour later, she’s bleeding from a cut on her finger, her laptop is encircled in salt, and she had to burn a lock of her hair to complete her checkout, but there’s a pdf of *Being a Mofte Accurate Account of the Unfeolie Accords, Seventh Edition, as commisisoned by her Majesty the Queen of Air and Darknefs, Copyright MCMXCIV* downloaded on her computer. She’s pleasantly surprised the dark powers of the supernatural world, or at least whichever of their interns of the damned was in charge of scanning and uploading this, believe in DRM-free files.

There’s a rap at her window. “What are you doing?”

“Reading the fucking manual,” says Julie.

“Reading? Is that a good idea?” comes the slightly muffled reply.

“Try it sometime and find out,” snaps Julie.

“I read,” says the officer, hurt. “We’re supposed to review the Rules for Adequate Secret Policing on the Sheriff’s Secret Police’s Secret Website every week.”

“Really,” says Julie. “What do they say.”

“Oh,” says the officer, and falls silent.

Julie rolls her eyes and goes back to deciphering the text, which is technically in English but in a font that looks like it was last used by Johannes Gutenberg. Eventually she gives up and writes another transcription program, which is good in that she can consume the text at an almost-normal speed (the diction appears to have originated before modern English really got the hang of word order) but bad in that there’s no layer of obfuscation distancing her from the more… vivid of the scenarios described.

*I take back at least five mean things I’ve said to you,* she writes to Carlos. *This shit is messed up you found a copy? do i want to know how??*

Before she can respond, he adds, *you can tell me tomorrow, i’m on my way home*

She’s never really thought of Night Vale as home. Then again, she hasn’t really thought of anywhere as home in a while.

After she finishes her first read-through, she goes back to the radio transcriptions on the basis that she’s already ruined her evening. It’s amazing, how even spine-chilling horror starts to become dull… after a while…

“I finished proofreading your proposal,” says Romero.

“Thanks,” says Julie. “Do I need to change anything?”

“Well, the tone was a little…” He pauses.

“Dr. K?”
“Hesitant?” asks Julie.

“Combative,” says Romero.

“—the computers are acting weird and—”

“I don’t think it was that bad,” says Julie.

“The implied personal attacks are perhaps not helpful in making your case,” Romero says, diplomatically.

“—restarted the system but something’s still not right?”

“It’s not my fault they’re huge fucking nerds,” says Julie.

“You called me a huge fucking nerd just yesterday,” he points out.

“Dr. K?”

“That’s different,” says Julie. “You’re my huge fucking nerd.”

“Dr. K!”

Disoriented, she jerks upright, sleep sitting ponderously on her shoulders. What…? Curse Cecil and his soothing voice.

Someone’s calling her name. She yanks off her headphones.

“Dr. K!”

It’s Wei, voice frantic. She swears and bursts out of her office, grabbing her flare gun.

She finds him in Lab Two, typing frantically. “What is it?”

“Someone’s gotten into our files!” he wails.

“What? How?”

“It must have been when the flamingo knocked out our system,” he says wretchedly. “I thought the backup defenses would have kept everything out! But they must have used the downtime to establish a backdoor—”

“What are they doing?” Julie cuts in.

“Well, I’ve managed to redirect them to Gary’s server,” says Wei. “But—”

Right before her very eyes, she watches the directory listing for his dissertation (take 1) disappear. Deleted.

She makes an inarticulate gargle of rage and grabs one of the keyboards.

“Who is it? The feds?”

“It’s local,” says Wei, typing with one hand and re-sealing the circle behind her with the other. “Hold on, it’s… Fuck.”

“Who?”
“The Museum of Forbidden Technologies,” he replies, and they stare at each other in mute horror.

Yes, Julie has technically registered their equipment with City Hall, in that they’re listed as alternatively “electronic abaci” and “databases” and she’s claimed they only use the internet for checking email. Until now, they’ve coasted on general good will towards Carlos/her hair and the fact that all authority figures have been functionally electronically illiterate since the Incident in the community college’s Computer and Fire Sciences building.

But if you classify “forbidden technology” as anything dangerous and/or with the capability to destroy Night Vale’s infrastructure, well… even Julie has to admit pretty much every single piece of equipment they own would qualify, even the ones she’s built herself. Especially the ones she’s built herself.

Another directory disappears – Andre’s longitudinal study on vimbee.

Cold rage fills her.

She establishes a direct connection and sends a message.

* Shall we play a game?

~*~*~*~

Her call goes to voicemail. She swears and dials again, typing a reply to their would-be hacker with her other hand.

This time, someone picks up. There are a few seconds of sleepy fumbling, followed by “Hello?” in more vocal fry than voice.

“Cecil!” she says. “Is Carlos there?”

“Are you in fear for your life from the long arm of the law?” Cecil mumbles.

“What?” says Julie. “No, they broke an ankle falling off the ladder. Put Carlos on. It’s urgent.”

There’s a rustling noise, and then Cecil, sounding concerned and slightly more alert, says, “He’s asleep.”

“Fuck!” She sends their hacker another message; she can only stall him for so long.

“Is it an emergency?” Cecil asks. “I can try to wake him up…”

“Do it,” says Julie.

Cecil audibly lets out a breath that somehow conveys both disquiet and determination. “Of course,” he says. She can hear the sounds of him moving around. “It’ll take a moment.”

“Fine,” says Julie.

There’s a cracking noise, like an ice tray.

“Are you making a drink?” she demands.

“No, but that’s a good idea,” says Cecil. There’s a loud clattering, like he’s dropped the entire complement of cubes into something, followed by the sound of running water. “Is it the law man? Has he put an end to your running while you’re so far from your home?”
“What? No!”

“I thought it was better if I asked,” says Cecil. “Carlos told me one of the most important parts of science is interpreting your data.”

“He did?” asks Julie. She’s not so much impressed that Carlos said that as that Cecil actually remembered something both true and useful.

“Of course!” says Cecil. “Alright, hold on a moment. It’s almost ready…”

The water shuts off. There’s a strained grunt over heavy footsteps. Heavy, slow footsteps.

She grits her teeth. “What are you going to—”

She’s cut off by a simultaneous splash, yelp, thud, and vicious burst of static.

Garbled shouting. “Why—what’s—”

“Sorry—”

Julie thumps her phone against the heel of her palm. “Cecil?” she shouts. “What happened?”

“—Emergency—phone—”

“No—fine—give—”

There’s another burst of static, and then the noise resolves itself into a voice. “Julie?”

“Carlos,” she says, relieved despite herself. “How well can you simulate thermonuclear war?”

There’s a pause, then, “I’m sorry, what?”

“Thermonuclear war, you, the simulating thereof,” says Julie. “C’mon, we’re running out of time!”

“Why?”

“Because the Museum of Forbidden Technologies is trying to destroy my research,” Julie snarls.

“And you’re bluffing them with thermonuclear war?”

“I won’t be bluffing for long,” says Julie.

“Julie, do not start a thermonuclear war,” says Carlos.

Well, obviously. That would be distracting. She pulls up a much more useful program instead.

“Look, just hold on,” says Carlos. “We’re on our way.”

“Oh, I’ll hold on,” mutters Julie. She types in a command.

The ground rumbles beneath them.

“What was that?” asks Carlos sharply.

“Shriektronics’ oscillators coming online,” says Julie. “They want dark science? I will give them dark science.”
“Don’t – look, who’s doing this, specifically? Can you find out?” asks Carlos. She hears a car door slam in the background.

“Wei, what do you have?” she calls, holding out the phone.

“I’ve traced the relays to the Weeping Miner development,” says Wei. “But I can not pin it down any further or else they might get access to – shit!”

“Does that have a lot of civilians?” asks Julie. “Because I can have the rest of the oscillators synced in three minutes and if my research falls, so does Weeping Miner.”

“You’re not starting an earthquake in Weeping Miner,” says Carlos. “What else do you know?”

“They know basically nothing about nuclear command codes but they have watched War Games,” says Julie. “And they can’t spell for shit.”

“Oh, that’s probably Freddie Wilkinson,” says Cecil. Carlos must have her on speaker. The nerve.

“Won Employee of the Month at the Museum thirteen times last year. They moved to Weeping Miner thirty-two years ago and that movie had a very limited release.”

“Freddie Wilkinson?” asks Carlos. There’s a muffled conversation. They have her on speaker and Carlos has his hand over the mic instead of putting her on hold like a civilized human. Julie feels her eye twitch.

She initiates a self-diagnostic on the oscillators.

“Julie, I said hold on!”

“I am holding on,” she snarls as the rumbling stops. “It’s a diagnostic. 75% efficiency? Am I the only one who cares about proper maintenance in this town?”

The phone rustles, and then Carlos says, “Okay, we’ve got it. Don’t do anything with the oscillators. Do you have some way to communicate with your hacker?”

“Yes,” says Julie.

“Don’t mention their name – you don’t want to give them any idea of how much you know – but tell them it would be a real shame if the news got out that employees let someone break into the Museum nine years ago and steal its entire collection of rocks with holes in them,” says Carlos. “A real shame.”

Blackmail. Fine. Julie’s always been a fan of blackmail. “The Museum of Forbidden Technologies has a collection of rocks with holes in them?” she asks as she types the message.

“Nope,” says Carlos smugly. “It has an empty room, a fake sign that says ‘exhibit closed for renovation,’ and employees with the bad habit of not taking inventory because then they’d have to look at the forbidden technology.”

“That used to be one of their most popular exhibits,” says Cecil, his voice reminiscent. “You’d stand in the room, covered in a burlap sack, imagining the barriers between dimensions slowly eroding…”

“You didn’t have to imagine it,” Carlos mutters.

“They’ve stopped!” says Wei, at the same time Freddie Wilkinson’s response comes back. It is
both creative and unprintable. Julie feels a surge of angry satisfaction.

“I think it’s working,” says Julie. “You can go home if you want.”

“No, I can’t,” says Carlos.

“Let me rephrase that,” says Julie. “Go home, because if you accidentally scramble any of my
equipment after the night I’ve had I’m lighting your damn cape on fire.”

“First of all, it’s fireproof,” says Carlos. “Second of all, you threatened to start a world war and
destroy an entire development, Julie!”

“They were deleting our research,” says Julie.

“It doesn’t matter,” says Carlos. “We need to talk. Stay there.”

He hangs up on her.

Julie’s phone shatters the window.

~*~*~*~

28-February-2007

They move in together. They have two cats and seventeen bookshelves. Romero is obsessive about
folding laundry, probably because he’s still used to having to pull it out of the dryer immediately
so it doesn’t get kleptoed by bedbugs, and Julie hates having to hunt for her half-finished gadgets
and dig them out of the junk drawer when inspiration strikes, but they manage not to fight about it
too much.

Julie isn’t too happy, but that’s because she called out Smith on the demographics of the grant
committee and mysteriously ended up banished to another one of the satellite campuses. She has to
stay late all the time in order to keep to her research schedule, and it’s horrible because now, she
actually likes being home.

They both still suck at cooking.

~*~*~*~

She’s still in the bushes, nominally looking for her phone, when Carlos and Cecil arrive. She
ignores them. She has better things to do, like sit with her head in her hands practicing her deep
breathing as it rains on her and the water undoubtedly ruins her phone, wherever it is.

Carlos comes out after about fifteen minutes. He doesn’t say anything, though; just stands in front
of the hydrangeas, waiting.

“What are you doing,” says Julie.

“Counting lightning bolts,” says Carlos. To her surprise, he drops to his knees and crawls in the
bushes with her. He’s wearing his lab coat, boots, a Night Vale Community Radio t-shirt, and
pajama pants.

She’s still angry, but guilt makes a half-hearted attempt to divert her attention. “You’re going to get
soaked,” she says.

“Too late,” says Carlos. “Cecil threw a bucket of ice water on me to wake me up.”
Julie snorts, then falls silent. They both sit quietly, the rain collecting on the leaves of the hydrangea and splatting onto them in bigger, more annoying drops than if they’d just stayed out in the open.

“I probably wouldn’t have destroyed Weeping Miner,” she says eventually.

“I know,” says Carlos.

“I could have, though,” she says.

“I know that too,” says Carlos.

When Julie had first read his report about what had happened/was going to happen on the day his evil twin and Dr. Raith decided to go time-loop-happy, and realized that if she didn’t help him he was going to die, it had been easy to make the decision to fight back. She knew there might be some collateral damage and had done what she could to prevent it, but that was never going to have stopped her from doing what needed to be done.

The problem is, it had felt nearly as easy tonight. It’s all very well saying the ends don’t justify the means, but how did that apply when not fighting back would cause just as much trouble? Destroyed houses can be rebuilt for their tenants, but destroyed research prevents discoveries that impact everyone. Worse still, every setback she and the other scientists encounter here is just another chance for ignorance to get a firmer foothold and drag all of Night Vale deeper into self-enforced fear and stupidity, erasing past progress and sabotaging its future.

She has the grim suspicion that the only real way to learn what to do is to deal with these situations over and over, and that knowledge makes her furious.

Carlos shifts. She looks over; he briefly catches her eye and says, “So could I.”

It’s not the same. Carlos would probably feel bad about it, for one. But she feels some of her anger dissipate anyway. At least she’s not the only one dealing with this bullshit.

More silence.

“Not that this isn’t fun,” says Carlos, “But why are we sitting out here in the rain?”

“I’m looking for my phone,” says Julie. “You’re just an idiot.”

Carlos starts crawling out of the bushes. “Wei’s getting ahold of the rest of the team,” he says. “Then we’re coming up with a plan to get rid of this stupid ban on the scientific method. This is ridiculous.”

He steps out of the rain and shakes out his hair. For a second, Julie thinks he’s going back inside, but then he raises a hand purposefully and she realizes he was just getting clear of the storm. Running water messes with magic – another testable, repeatable result that still lacks a proper explanation.

“Ek’,” he says, and a spray of tiny blue stars shoot out of his outstretched hand. The raindrops glimmer in their light; it’s almost pretty. Julie spots her phone sitting in a puddle and picks it up.

“Thanks,” she says.

“De nada,” says Carlos.
Andre got the car in the divorce; Felicia got the condo. Julie somehow got Andre in their guest bedroom and Felicia every Friday for a standing lunch date, and Don’t you dare try to hide, sugar, I will drag you out of the lab by your ear. Romero is not smug about ultimately winning the argument over which was more necessary, the second bedroom or another study, because he is a better person than she is.

Andre is unsurprisingly useless for three solid weeks, but then she comes in late one night and finds him sitting on the couch, grading lab reports and watching The A-Team reruns, instead of slumping over on the couch, halfheartedly eating leftovers and watching The A-Team reruns.

“Is this the log cannon episode?” Julie asks as she dumps her bag on the end table.

“Made out of a forklift,” Andre confirms.

“Olé,” says Julie. She rifles through his lab reports. “Why do you have these? What happened to your TA?”

“She’s sick,” says Andre.

“Tough break,” says Julie, and with an inward sigh asks, “Need any help?”

“No, thank you,” says Andre. “You’ve already done enough, Julie.”

Julie shrugs, but hands the reports back. She checks her email while he grades (yes, she wants them to renew her grant; no, she does not want to work for the government; no, she does not need a bigger penis), both pausing every now and then to watch things blow up in fight scenes where no one ever gets hurt.

Romero wanders in the front door, frowning down at his phone. He mumbles something that may be a greeting and heads towards the kitchen, successfully navigating the door on his second try.

Several minutes later, he emerges with an empty bowl and a box of Cheerios, which he promptly abandons on the coffee table when he sits down next to Julie. He hasn’t looked up from his phone yet; Julie peeks over his shoulder, but it’s just a question from one of his grad students.

They all sit in companionable silence until Romero puts his phone down with a sigh, blinks at the TV screen, and asks, “Are they shooting people with cabbages?”

“This is a family show,” says Julie.

“Huh,” says Romero.

Andre chuckles. “You know, this really takes me back. I don’t know what I would have done sophomore year if we hadn’t been able to take television breaks.”

“I knew you only befriended me because I built my own TV,” says Julie, and over his protests adds, “It’s all right, I only became friends with you because you kept stealing liquid nitrogen to make ice cream.”

Andre shuffles his stack of lab reports and tucks them into his bag. “I talked to a few people about apartments today,” he says. “Hopefully I’ll be out of your hair soon.”
“Take your time,” says Julie, glad that all the business cards of reputable realtors she’s been strategically caching all over the apartment have finally paid off.

“It’s not a problem,” adds Romero, not entirely truthfully, although Julie doesn’t plan on calling him out for it. He picks up the box of cereal and goes to pour it into his bowl. Four Cheerios fall out.

“We’re out of Hot Pockets, too,” says Julie.

Andre chuckles again and stands up. “I’m going to make myself something,” he says. “Do you want anything?”

“Sure,” says Julie. Romero hums, engrossed in his phone again.

A few moments later, she hears, “Julie? Romero?”

They find him staring at their pantry in confusion.

“How don’t you own any real food?” he asks.

~*~*~*~

The major strength of their plan (if you can call it that) is that it depends on the ingrained Night Vale habit of redefining reality by listening to whoever’s insisting on their version of events the hardest. Coincidentally, that is also the major flaw of their plan.

Julie finishes packing her messenger bag with the necessary equipment to join a protest (water bottle, snacks, clipboard, flare gun) and heads outside.

It’s a grey and miserable-looking day, although she doubts it’s going to rain on anyone except her. Wei is on the roof of the Sciencemobile, making last-minute adjustments to the massive set of speakers they installed last night. Andre dozes in the driver’s seat; Gary is writing on a piece of poster board propped up against the side.

Carlos stands nearby inside his hula hoop, texting someone. Judging by goofy dorkface subtype III, it’s Cecil. Hopefully he’s made it to the station by now.

“How’s it look?” asks Gary, holding up his poster. On one side is a large picture of Carrie Fisher giving everyone the finger; on the other is

WHAT DO WE WANT?
THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD!
WHEN DO WE WANT IT?
TIME’S NOT REAL!

“You’re a bad influence,” Julie says to Carlos.

“I’m the best influence,” he says, putting away his phone. As soon as Gary turns to put his poster in the van, he waves her over.

“I know the plan,” she says. “We went over it seven-and-a-half times.”

“I know,” says Carlos quietly, but it’s behind the kind of pleasant smile that Julie associates with ‘remain calm until the locals are distracted by my hair, then run’. “That’s why I need you to be the one to call it off if things go south.”
“Call it off? But—”

He gestures for her to keep her voice down, checking to make sure no one in the van has noticed them. Why is she the only one he wants to upset.

“I’m serious, Julie,” he says. “The team will follow you, and so will a good chunk of the protestors. If the rest of the science district gets violent, or the police get antsy, get out of there. It’s not worth it.”

“Then what is?”

“Blowing yourself up in your lab in the name of science is one thing,” Carlos says patiently. “But do you really want to get someone hurt by the police over plant monsters?”

“Depends on the person,” says Julie. “Also, they're chlorofiends.”

Carlos crosses his arms and waits.

Julie has pretty good endurance in outlasting people when it comes to matters of spite, but when it comes to matters of Night Vale’s public safety, no one can outlast Carlos. It’s one of the few reasons Night Vale even has public safety.


“Great,” he says, and this time his smile is more of the genuine ‘yay no one died and now I have coffee’ kind.

Julie wonders at what point Carlos decided she was the kind of person you trusted to keep people from dying, then realizes glumly it was probably when she hired him three years ago to keep people from dying. She represses the urge to correct him – that obviously she’ll look after her team, but because they’re her responsibility, not because she has any natural instinct for heroics – since it’s not relevant to the situation at hand. She’s just the logical choice to get shit done.

“Any more words of wisdom, Usidork?” she asks instead.

He thinks about it, then says, “If you do have to run, try to keep in front of the ornithologists.”

Julie squints at him. “Because they’re Canadian?”

“They’re from Alaska, and you should stay ahead of them because they’re much harder to kill than you are,” he says.

“And you were judging me about considering necessary losses?” says Julie. “I hope station management tries to eat you. With king crabs and salmon and shit.”

“Have fun storming the castle,” he replies cheerfully.

~*~*~

31-December-2007

Julie takes a drag off her cigarette, exhales. The smoke rises up into the night sky. There are actually stars tonight, which is a nice change.

Behind her, she can hear the noise of the party. Well, the terse, frigid disagreements, which in her family is more or less the same thing. She wonders if she still remembers how to blow smoke rings.
She does.

The door slides open behind her. She refuses to turn around.

“Here,” says Romero, settling something over her shoulders. Her coat. She huddles in it gratefully as he leans next to her against the balcony railing.

“You know they’re wrong, right? I’m really not lying just to make you feel better,” he says. “I mean, I’ve got nothing against kids, but… what are you supposed to do with them for eighteen years? Babies either lie there doing nothing, or they get everywhere. And what if you drop them? I mean, tarantulas rupture their abdomens if they only fall 0.3 meters.”

Julie snorts.

“I’m sorry it hurts. It’s none of their business,” says Romero.

Julie stubs the cigarette out violently. “No, it’s not,” she says. She wants to deny that it doesn’t hurt. She’s used to disappointing her parents, and she excised the part of her that cared about that long ago.

But sometimes that emptiness aches. Like a phantom limb, the brain still getting signals from something that doesn’t exist anymore.

She takes out another cigarette, perversely hoping that Romero will start disapproving of her, too. But he just asks, “Where did you find those?”

“Stole them from Doona,” says Julie. “One of the cousins. Smoking’s bad for you, you know.” She blows a double ring. “My parents hate it.”

Julie hates it too, actually. It pulls you away from your work and makes everything smell gross.

Romero shifts, moving closer and idly rubbing her back. She doesn’t move; it’s cold.

He waits until she’s stubbed out the second cigarette to hand her a tissue.

“Let’s go home,” he says.

Julie blows her nose and says, “Yeah, okay.”

~*_~*_~*_~

They pull up to the gates of the community college; the spindly bars look unequal to the task of containing its buildings, red brick monstrosities sort of like if M.C. Escher designed the Smithsonian. Already gathered out on the quad are their, for lack of a better term, colleagues.

Julie’s no stranger to interdepartmental rivalries, but usually they’re due to things like academic snobbery, not because the astronomers ate all the birdseed out of the ornithology department’s feeders.

“Are you sure we need them?” asks Wei, and Julie scowls, because she had just been about to say that, and now if Andre doesn’t say anything she’s going to have to argue in favor of it.

Andre doesn’t say anything.

“We have a greater chance of success if our strategy is employed by multiple sources,” says Julie. “Especially if they’re local. And we definitely don’t need anyone contradicting us without a
challenge.”

She waits for someone to offer a counter-argument; they don’t, because she – well, Carlos, it was his idea – is right, and dammit, now she definitely has to support the plan.

She eyes their potential allies. There’s a good turnout today: faculty, student body, and even some of the hooded figures from the janitorial department.

A little too good, now that she thinks about it. The crowd is turned inward, packed in a tight ring around… something. Even the ornithologists’ flock of cormorants is perched on the surrounding buildings and staring intently at the center of the gathering instead of circling creepily overhead like normal.

“Wei, grab your laptop and a lighter and come with me,” says Julie. “The rest of you, sit tight. Be alert.”

“The world needs more lerts,” says Gary as he tosses Wei his Zippo.

They make their way to the edge of the crowd, and Wei politely taps a likely-looking grad student on the shoulder. “Excuse us——”

The grad student turns; it’s Troy Walsh.

“What are you doing here, narc,” says Julie.

He blinks at her in polite incomprehension. “I don’t want to miss the Life Raft Debate,” he says. “It’s important to support your department.”


“We’re going to die, aren’t we?” says Wei glumly, but when Julie snaps “Go,” he edges past Troy and between two meteorologists.

They press through the crowd with renewed urgency. A jostled marine biologist rounds on them, but her protest dies on her lips when Wei flicks on the Zippo. The quantum physicists in front of them turn to see what the commotion is and shy away.

However, not even persisting trauma from the Incident in the Computer and Fire Science Building is enough to clear the tight press at the center of the crowd. It is therefore a good thing that Julie has very pointy elbows and zero fucks to give.

They emerge into the innermost ring of people, gathered around Dr. Barry Osborn (co-chair, Department of Astronomy, and director of the Haunted Observatory) and Dr. Nauja Romanoff (Assistant Professor of Ornithology and three-time bronze medalist of the Annual Night Vale Symposium of Excellence in Hair and Academics), who are doing their best to argue the vital importance of their respective disciplines to humanity as the justification of their place on a hypothetical life raft by whaling the tar out of each other.

“Seriously?” says Julie, but her protests are drowned out by the roars of “Space case!” and “Bird brain!” as the two departments compare and contrast their pedagogical strengths via their fists. Romanoff twists away from an uppercut designed to send her to the moon and beyond, leaps into the air, and flips Osborn to the ground using only her thighs.

Wei sighs. “What a way to go,” he says.
Back in the ring, Osborn breaks free of Romanoff’s chokehold with some difficulty and stumbles to the edge of the crowd, gasping. Romanoff cracks her knuckles and stalks towards him as the rest of the ornithologists jeer at his retreat.

Julie looks around for a relatively sane presence and finds Dr. Michael Galleti (Dean of Science, Technology, Technology With Finger Quotes, and Mathematics) waving a foam #1 finger around with one hand and Dr. Sarah Sultan (President of the college, river rock) with the other.

Osborn snarls and straightens, holding his ground. One of the astronomers whistles at him, and he half-turns and catches the crowbar thrown into the ring.

Without taking her eyes off her opponent, Romanoff thrusts out her hand. Dr. Aluki Robinson (Associate Professor of Ornithology) passes her a harpoon, its ivory barbs almost glowing in the dim light.

The two combatants heft their weapons and begin to circle each other.

“Fake science!” chants the crowd. “Fake science!”

Julie takes out her flare gun and fires it into the sky.

The flock of cormorants perched on the roof of the Earth Sciences building takes to the air, startled, then settles back on the roof and glares at her with beady little eyes. So does the crowd.

Julie takes a deep breath and says, “Are you fucking kidding me?”

“This is an internal matter, interloper,” sniffs Osborn, smacking the crowbar into his palm.

“Then do it internally, and not in broad daylight, when dueling is illegal and we’re trying to get them to rescind the ban on the scientific method!”

“It’s none of—”

“She has a point,” Robinson interrupts.

“Which you’d know if you practiced real science,” says Romanoff, gesturing with her harpoon for emphasis.

“Astronomy is the only science!” snaps Osborn. At the chorus of angry murmurs, he hastily adds, “Present company excluded. Except the ornitholog—”

Julie fires the flare gun again.

“You can settle your vendettas later,” she says. “We’ve got more important things to worry about.”

“Who died and put you in charge?” grumbles Dr. Alan Stein (False Biology).

“I haven’t decided yet,” snaps Julie.

Stein pales and takes a step back.

Robinson comes forward from the crowd of ornithologists; Romanoff takes her place at her shoulder, scowling. “We’ve been protesting against the ban on the scientific method for days,” says Robinson. “We haven’t seen you once. Why should we listen to you now?”

The crowd rumbles angrily.
Wei flips open his laptop. The crowd unrumbles, very quickly.

Julie gestures at him to lower it. “You seemed to have it under control,” she lies. “So we were trying to work with the SSP directly. Come at it from a different angle.” She tries to look penitent, but it probably comes out constipated. “It hasn’t worked, I’ll admit that. But Carlos has come up with a plan.”

The crowd breaks out into murmurs.

“Oh, Carlos,” says Osborn. “Why didn’t you say so?”

Julie valiantly resists rolling her eyes.

Robinson steps in closer. “You have a good point, interloper,” she says grudgingly. Her voice is low, barely audible over the growing excitement of the crowd. “But it’s too late. The Raft Debate was just a temporary pressure release. We were fractured already, and without science, or at least Warden Ramirez’s hair, to distract us…”

Julie almost asks Who?, then realizes that they’re talking about Carlos, then further realizes the implications of them knowing his real name. Or at least, the name Julie addresses his paychecks to.

On the other hand, maybe people who live in magical glass houses in the science district know not to throw stones. Julie certainly wishes the rest of this crowd did.

She adds it to the list of questions to ask him in between crises. They have to make sure this crisis ends first.

“Another hour, and we’re just going to be at each other’s throats again,” says Romanoff. She doesn’t seem too bothered by it. “Blood demands blood.”

“What’s more important,” says Julie, not bothering to keep her voice down. “Science, or vengeance?”

Robinson hesitates; the rest of the ornithologists mutter thoughtfully to themselves. An impressionable grad student cheers, and for a moment, Julie thinks she has them.

Then Dr. Galleti throws his foam finger to the ground, yanks off his lab coat, and screams, “Vengeance!”

Someone screams back, and like flipping a switch the mood turns ugly.

“I knew this would be how I die,” says Wei glumly, as they’re shoved into one another by the press of ornithologists rushing after Romanoff in the direction of the astronomers.

“First of all: this? Specifically?” says Julie. She takes his arm and looks around for possible escape routes, trying not to make any sudden movements. “Second of all, you can’t die yet, you’re almost finished your degree.” They both duck as a stone flies overhead.

A treble peal of thunder cuts through the baying of the crowd like a bandsaw. Everyone stills. Galleti blinks, wipes a single raindrop off his bald head, and stares up towards the sky.

The storm is much bigger now, but only by comparison: 20 meters, exactly the diameter of the crowd, is still ridiculously small.

“Ohhhh,” say several of the meteorologists in perfect unison. Wei sighs and stuffs his laptop inside
his lab coat.

There’s a high-pitched rumble like the cracking voice of a teenager, a camera flash of lightning, and then the low-hanging heavens open up.

“Hold the line!” shouts Romanoff without bothering to look behind her. The other ornithologists grumble, but pull their lab coats over their heads and stay in place.

“She makes a compelling argument,” says Galleti. Beyond him, the meteorologists have already begun to rig up a small lightning rod. The rest of the scientists huddle together, unwilling to be the only ones to leave, though a few grad students have opened their arms wide to stare up into the rain unblinking. Julie assumes they’re trying to dissolve away from their responsibilities.

She nods like she’s doing any of this on purpose. This is probably what Carlos feels like, all the time.

Galleti ceremoniously hands the river rock to Robinson. “Dr. Sultan is interested in what she has to say.”

Robinson sighs, but raises the president to everyone’s eye-level. “You still haven’t said why we should cooperate with you,” she says.

“Solidarity,” says Julie.

Romanoff snorts, casually leaning on her harpoon.

“I’m serious,” says Julie. “Got any computer issues? I’ll lend you my grad student for a day. He hardly ever sets anything on fire.”

“It’s true,” says Wei. “I have an excellent safety record.”

The ornithologists’ faces grow hungry, like post-docs circling a wounded grant floundering in the field. “You’ll give him to us freely?” asks Robinson.

Something cold trickles down Julie’s back. It’s the rain. But it’s also the memory of Carlos pausing in the middle of some fight to tell her if someone offers you a deal too good to be true IT IS.

“For eight hours – eight hours by UTC, I mean,” Julie says. “To do nothing he thinks is immoral. And I expect him to come back in the same shape and mental/physical health he left in.”

“And you have to provide lunch,” Wei puts in.

“And you have to provide lunch,” says Julie.

Romanoff snorts again and hefts her harpoon onto her shoulder; she won’t take the deal, Julie can tell. But Robinson watches her thoughtfully.

“What if your plan today does not work?” she asks.

“I’ll send him anyway,” Julie replies. “He’s a millennial, he can be a participation trophy.”

Robinson nods, sharply. “We will follow you today to rid ourselves of this troublesome law, in exchange for the aid of your ward,” she says, extending the hand not holding the president. “We have an accord.”

“Deal,” says Julie. They shake on it.
Things move fairly quickly after that, once Julie explains the plan (well, the parts of it that involve the other scientists and that they are unlikely to mess up) and Robinson convinces, browbeats, and guilt-trips enough of the rest of them to follow the ornithologists’ lead. The trick when dealing with scientists, Julie has found, isn’t to get everyone to come to a complete consensus, but to get enough of them to go along that the dissenters stay to keep on arguing and the indifferent stick around to see what happens. As long as they keep the ornithologists away from the astronomers (and the meteorologists away from the geologists, and the marine biologists away from the quantum physicists...), everyone is content, more or less, to march from the college to the science district shouting things about the scientific method and protesting the rights of human- and/or other- kind.

It does not actually stop raining, and whenever someone shouts “Show me what democracy looks like!” there’s just an awkward silence.

~*~*~*~

25-January-2008

“Julie! Hello. We’re almost done here,” says Romero, rising from his desk. There’s a spacier-than-normal-looking grad student perched on one of his chairs, legs folded into the lotus position. “This is Gary.”

“You,” says Julie, pointing at him. “You’re the one that doesn’t wear shoes.”

During his undergraduate career, Gary had elicited a considerable amount of interdepartmental discussion about his desire to be exempted from lab regulations for wearing appropriate – or any – footwear in the lab, which evolved into a considerable amount of interdepartmental discussion about whether wrapping your feet in duct tape immediately before said lab time constituted appropriate footwear.

“That’s me,” says Gary, flashing her a peace sign and showing an unusual amount of backbone, or possibly an entirely usual amount of obliviousness, by not cowering under her unamused stare.

“What are you studying, then?”

He thinks about it for a moment, then says, “Life.”

“He’s... interdisciplinary,” says Romero. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Gary?”

“Sure thing, Dr. D.” he says easily.

Julie watches him saunter out, then gives Romero a speaking look.

“He really is an excellent apiologist,” says Romero.

“He’d have to be,” says Julie.

~*~

5-March-2008

“You know, Gary’s really expanding his interdisciplinary research,” says Romero.

“Is that so,” says Julie.

“Ideally, he’d need an additional advisor.”
“Don’t we all.”

“He’s been using honeybees to look into EM field detection…”

“I know what you’re doing and it’s a good thing you’re cute,” says Julie. “The answer is no.”

“Just thought I’d mention it,” says Romero innocently.

~*~

16-April-2008

Julie swings by Romero’s lab, because they were supposed to meet each other for lunch two hours ago and she was the first one to remember. She sticks her head in the first room and finds Gary sitting next to a cooler, meticulously applying glue to a sluggish bee. He looks particularly seedy today, huge dark bags under bloodshot eyes, but his hands are steady enough.

“Dr. D is upstairs,” he says, placing a small antenna on the bee’s shaven thorax.

“Thanks,” says Julie, and starts walking down the hall.

Then she backtracks.

“Wait,” she says. “Weren’t you in the hospital yesterday?”


She stares at him. He carefully places the bee back in the cooler and comes back out with another one. He is wearing an ID bracelet clearly stating he is allergic to bees.

“You almost died,” says Julie.

He looks at her, then down at the bee held delicately in his clutches. “But we’ve still got two more rounds of testing to go,” he says.

~*~

17-April-2008

“Fine,” snaps Julie. “I’ll do it. What’s his thesis on?”

Romero sighs. “I think one day, even Gary may know.”

Julie regrets this already.

~*~*~*~

There’s not a terribly specific timeframe to their plan, which bothers Julie a great deal, but it involves several erratically moving parts and also, time isn’t real. She tries not to dwell on what might go wrong in favor of what will definitely go wrong, starting with getting a tarp for Wei so his numerous vital electronics don’t malfunction. He has it draped over his head classic Halloween ghost style, with a cormorant perched atop for camouflage.

Sadly, if unsurprisingly, this is completely effective. She’d suggest that Night Vale’s developmental psychologists investigate the reclassification of object permanence as a learned skill, except they get confused every time she leaves a room.
“So, what is the scientific method?” asks a bystander, after posing for a selfie with Gary. Between the chance to watch protesters get put down by The Man and the chance to livestream them getting zapped by tiny lightning, they’ve attracted quite a crowd.

“Well, it’s—”

“Zip-bp-bp!” interrupts one of the watching Sheriff’s Secret Police officers. Then the officer mimes zipping their lips, throwing away their key, picking the key back up, and melting the key down into slag.

“—Currently illegal, but very important for science,” Gary finishes.

The officer scowls. Gary extends his selfie stick and takes a picture with them too.

Another unexpected benefit of the rain is that none of the officers there for crowd control will get very close without using their riot shields as umbrellas. Their balaclavas, Julie has come to understand after an hour-long lecture, bleed when they get wet. She has decided not to ask if they mean the dye or the bodily fluid.

Gary’s phone chimes and he pokes it in front of her so she can read the screen.

*Josie’s here at the station, writes Carlos. We’re ready.*

She harvests the phone from its unholy limb. *What’s everyone’s status?* she sends to the group text.

*I’m ready!* comes Andre’s immediate reply. She waits for a moment, but Wei still doesn’t respond. *Did you suffocate under there?*

She gets back an eggplant emoji, *WRONG NUMBER SORRY*, and *Program complete, waiting to upload the changes.*

*All right*, she texts everyone. *Let’s go.*

She hands Gary his phone back, then tugs him away from his attempted police squad group shot before he can get charged with resisting arrest or something. As expected, several of the officers trail them back to the Sciencemobile, so intent on their prey that they walk right past Wei. The cormorant on his head gives them a stuttering cry.

They reach the van just as Andre leans out the window and says, loudly, “Well, look at that! We’re missing our favorite radio program!” and turns on the speakers.

They hiss and crackle a moment, the interview with Josie and Carlos cutting in and out, but the signal strengthens just in time to hear Cecil say, “—affected by their… what’s the scientific word for it… weird magic?”

“That’s not the scientific term for it, but it’s cute,” says Carlos, slightly strangled.

Julie sighs and covers her face with one hand.

“I thought Carlos was coming here,” says a Sheriff’s Secret Police officer accusingly.

“He is,” says Julie, “But first he and Josie have to update everyone on the status of a dangerous threat he’s been tirelessly working against. You know. Even though we can’t do science.”

A second officer throws up their hands. “Look, it’s not *my* fault plant monsters—”
“Chlorofiends,” corrects another officer.

“—chlorofiends attacked everyone because of the scientific method!”

“That isn’t why they attacked,” says Julie.

The second officer crosses their arms. “Prove it.”

“We can’t, you utter doorknob,” says Julie. “You banned our methodology!”

The second officer sniffs. “Seems to me like you’re not trying very hard to support your argument.”

Julie’s vision fuzzes over with a red mist, and things probably would have gone very poorly if a cormorant had not landed on her head, distracting her long enough for Gary to grab the back of her lab coat.

“We are scientists,” says Robinson, as Julie flails at the bird. It shoves off her head and glides over to Robinson’s shoulder. “We deal with the laws of physics, not the laws of men.”

The first officer frowns. “In Night Vale, everyone is subject to the laws of men.”

“And women,” says the second officer.

“And non-binary genders,” says the third.

“Laws have very little to do with gender, really, I don’t know why you brought that up,” says the first officer.

“And what is physics, exactly?” says the second officer. “Do you have a permit?”

“Should you even be bringing that within a thousand feet of school grounds?” asks the third.

“I think,” says the first officer. “That’d you better come with us until—”

“Science is remarkable!”

blares Cecil, loud enough to rattle the van’s windows. Everyone jumps.

“Whoops, wrong button,” says Andre cheerfully, adjusting the volume knob.

“So complex and mysterious,” continues Cecil, the broadcast still loud enough to drown out the officers’ protests. “I’m always in awe of what you and your team can do.”

“Thanks, but it’s pretty simple,” says Carlos. “We just follow the scientific method. No matter how advanced the scientific field gets, the foundation of scientific discovery is the scientific method we all learned in elementary school.”

The officers look at each other and shift uneasily.

“I’m not sure I ever learned that,” says Cecil.

“Us neither,” says the third officer.

“Definitely not,” says the first. “Now, if you could just—”
“Oh, it’s easy! Here, I’ll tell you and your listeners right now,” says Carlos.

“What?!” squawks the second officer.

“The scientific method is four steps,” says Carlos with a cheerful inevitability as the officers start shouting panicked instructions into their walkie talkies. “One, find an object you want to know more about; two, hook that object up to a machine using wires or tubes; three, write things on a clipboard; four, read the results that the machine prints.”

“Wait,” says the first officer. “What?”

“Oh, I totally remember this now,” says Cecil, with depressing sincerity.

“That’s not what we have written down at all,” says the second officer, producing a binder labelled FORBIDDEN and flipping through the pages. “I thought it was about making observations, thinking of questions, coming up with hypothesis—es—es—”

“Why would you think that,” says Julie. She looks around and finds Wei pulling off his tarp. He gives her a nod.

“Because that’s… what scientists do…” They trail off under the gazes of the scientists, and also some cormorants. “Is – isn’t it?”

“Doesn’t sound familiar,” says Julie.

“Have you checked your sources?” asks Andre.

“No, I’m sure we’ve heard it before,” says the third officer. “Step one is… is…”

“Step one, cut a hole in the box,” calls Wei.

“No, step one is collecting underpants,” says Gary.

“Step two, rinse,” says Andre. “Step three, repeat.”

“Step four: make a searching and fearless moral inventory,” says Julie.

“And then step five, acceptance,” Andre finishes. He gives the officers a helpful smile.

The third officer stares at him, then turns abruptly to Robinson. “That can’t be correct,” they say, voice pleading.

“Of course it is,” says Robinson. “You see, the first level is ennui, or boredom. In particular cases it may be the desire for somebody or something specific – nostalgia, love-sickness… At more morbid levels it is a dull ache of the soul, a longing with nothing to long for. A sick pining, a vague restlessness. Mental throes. Yearning. And at the scientific method’s deepest and most painful level, it is a sensation of great spiritual anguish, often without any specific cause.”

“…What?” says the third officer.

Robinson smiles toothily.

“It’s how you decide whether to fix the problem with duct tape or WD-40,” says Julie.

“I think,” says Osborn, “that it’s a divine machine for making flour, salt, and gold.”
“Don’t be absurd,” says Galleti. “The scientific method is two vast and trunkless legs of stone standing in the desert!”

“How?” demands the first officer.

“The scientific method is about the journey, not the destination,” Andre informs them.

“That’s not—” the first officer sputters.

“No, see, I’ve got it written down right here,” says the third officer, jabbing at a page in their notebook triumphantly. “Step 1, observe. Step 2, question. Step 3, formulate hypothesiseseses—”

Julie looks at Wei. He gives her a thumbs up.

“Step 4, um, predict? Step 5—”

“Wow, weird,” says Julie. “Because that sounds like the Rules for Adequate Secret Policing as detailed on the Sheriff’s Secret Police’s Secret Website.”

There’s a pause.

“It does?” asks the first officer as all the other ones pull out their phones. Julie does too, out of curiosity. She notes with some amusement that Wei has cleaned up the formatting, though he did leave OFICER’S HANDBOOK proudly typoing at the world above the, yes, steps of the scientific method.

“It does,” the third officer confirms in dismay.

“No, it’s fine, we must have just copied-and-pasted the wrong text by accident,” says the second officer. “We’ll just fill out an update for the regulations.” They pull out a form and hand it to the third officer.

“But what is the scientific method?” the third officer asks.

“Just write what Carlos said,” says the first officer. “He’d know, he’s a scientist.”

“But so are they,” says the third officer, waving the form at the protestors. “And they say the scientific method is—”

“—the quality of cosiness and comfortable conviviality associated with sitting around a fire in the winter with close friends,” puts in Dr. Chelsea Dubinski, Assistant Professor of Chemistry.

“It’s the sound of the tide and the laughter in the hearts of children,” says Troy Walsh, alleged grad student.

“Or is it the special look shared between two people, when both are wishing that the other would do something that they both want, but neither want to do?” asks Galleti.

Romanoff tests the edge of her harpoon and says, flatly, “I thought it was the friends we made along the way.”

“Maybe we’re missing the point,” says Julie. “Maybe the scientific method is all of these things.”

The second officer tears at their balaclava. “But we only have three lines on the form!”

“Let’s approach the problem from another direction,” says Andre. “What is this legislation
supposed to prevent?”

“Plant monsters,” says the first officer.

“Plant monsters,” the second agrees.

“They’re called chlorofiends, c’mon,” says the third.

“Well, just write that, then,” says Andre. “‘No chlorofiends (plant monsters)’. Nice and unambiguous!”

They consider this for a moment.

“I mean, I guess that would work,” says the first officer.

“This means the DARE program has been teaching the wrong rules for adequate secret policing for months,” says the second officer, depressed.

“Wait,” says the third officer. “We can’t tell City Council we’ve been enforcing the wrong thing. There will be… consequences.”

“Who says you have to tell them?” asks Julie.

There’s a thoughtful pause.

“But what about you?” asks the second officer. “You’ll just… go back to using the scientific method? Unregulated?”

“Any chlorofiend that dares show its miserable face will have to deal with me,” says Romanoff. She thrusts her harpoon into the air. “I swear this in the name of science and Ounalashka!”

The crowd cheers. “Science and Ounalashka!”

“And Night Vale, I guess!”

“And Night Vale, I guess!”

“Well, that checks out,” says the first officer.

“Let’s go, I’m beat,” says the second.

In less than thirty seconds, nearly all of the squad cars and riot team vans have disappeared.

A lone officer lingers, shifting their riot shield nervously from hand to hand.

“Yes?” asks Julie. “Is there something else?”

The officer scratches their balaclava awkwardly. “Do you have special flamingo removal science?” they ask. “Only I heard they were dangerous, and this morning my lawn was covered in them…”

Julie rolls her eyes. “We’ll send Carlos right over,” she says.

“Great!” says the officer. “Great. Uh – do you think he’ll let me—”

“No,” says Julie, “You can’t touch the hair.”

~*~*~*~
The team heads back to the lab in an atmosphere of subdued triumph and very small patches of variable condensation and temperature. Julie heads immediately for her workshop, and she doesn’t have to create a distraction or broadcast a fake conversation or hide every trace of her presence so the Sheriff’s Secret Police don’t get suspicious and try to knock the doors down. She just gets work done: fixing the scanners, analysing the latest batch of honey from Gary’s bees, running the data that has languished for weeks, creating some anti-fairy countermeasures, plotting out the next stage of their research…

She should be happy, or at least as happy as she ever gets. And it’s definitely relaxing. But there’s something, lurking at the back of her mind. A detail that doesn’t fit, waiting for her to mull it over until she slots it into her observations or drastically overhauls her theory to account for it. She tries to chase it down as she brushes at the iron(III) oxide clinging to her lab coat, but both prove obstinate.

She moves on instead to The Mote of the Unfeeling Accords. Thinking about Romanoff’s harpoon is a wonderful motivator for staying invested in the text.

Here, at least, her ideas are coming together, patterns of obstruction and interference pointing to some very interesting conclusions. Dangerous conclusions (thank you, Carlos). But… interesting.

Still squinting at her write-up, she picks up the phone on her desk and dials a number.

“Felicia, you’re good at legalese,” she says after the ringing has stopped.

“Why, hello, Julie. Yes, I’m fine, thank you for asking,” says Felicia. “I’m glad you returned my seventeen calls. We did get those new protocols cleared with CPS, I’m very proud.”

“Sorry,” says Julie. “I’ve been busy.”

“You’re always busy, sugar,” says Felicia. “You’re not always rude.”

Julie rubs her forehead. That’s the problem with having friends who don’t put up with bullshit: she can’t bullshit them either.

“I’m glad your thing got… thinged,” she says. “I read the article online. It’s…” She finally manages, “It’s been a real… month.”

“I’m sorry,” says Felicia sympathetically. “Do you want to talk about it?”

“No,” says Julie.

“It helps, you know. Talking.”

“Does it?” says Julie. All the tension relieved by finally having real work to do comes flooding back. “Fan-fucking-tastic.”

“You don't have to do this alone, Julie.”

“I don't feel alone,” snaps Julie. “I feel like shit, and I know why I feel like shit, and the thought of outlining that in excruciating detail is, oddly enough, not making me feel any better!”

She stops, realizes she’s yelling. “Sorry,” she mutters, after counting to ten and doing some deep breathing exercises.

“It’s all right,” says Felicia. “I didn’t mean to push.”
“I know,” says Julie. “You – you haven’t figured anything out recently, have you? Any great hypotheses about the human condition that might actually be useful?”

“I wish I did, sugar,” says Felicia, “But no.”

Julie knew she would say that. It still hurts. Not because Felicia’s letting her down, but because the universe is, making you ask questions that no one ever finds the answers to as you stare at the long slide into entropy. Life, random and horrible.

Felicia clears her throat, then asks, “Was there something you needed help with?”

“Yeah,” says Julie, knuckling her eyes. “I’m sending you an excerpt from a legal document. It’s old and weird. I know this isn’t your field, but I need you to tell me if my write-up is anywhere close to accurate.”

“Just let me get my laptop,” says Felicia. There’s the sound of rustling and clicking, and then, “Did you send me the Magna Carta?”

“I said it was weird,” says Julie. “I really need to know if I’m right about the municipal classifications and residency qualifications, alright? It’s… it’s important.”

“There’s some resources I can consult,” says Felicia absently. She makes the humming noise that means she’s bouncing words around her brain, looking for the puzzle. “When do you need this by? Because I can do it tonight, but sugar, you will owe me.”

“No, not tonight,” says Julie. “But soon.”

“Alright,” says Felicia. “But next time I call, you answer the phone, you hear?”

“Yeah,” says Julie.

“Take care,” says Felicia, and hangs up.

Julie places the receiver back in the cradle and rubs her temples. Then she stomps downstairs to work some more on her anti-fairy countermeasures: if anything’s going to blow up in her face, it might as well do it now when she could use the distraction.

~*~*~*~

17-March-2009

“She scowls at the spreadsheet on her laptop screen.

The corner of Romero’s mouth twitches, but he doesn’t change the subject as she’d hoped. “I was thinking about your rant about the university the other day,” he says. Julie almost replies Which one, but realizes in time that will only just encourage him. “And it’s just… What’s the point of it if you’re not happy?”

“Funding,” says Julie.

“You don’t have to get it from here,” says Romero.

Julie snorts. “Well, the private sector isn’t exactly clamoring for my expertise, and I’m certainly not gonna go work for the feds.”
“I know,” says Romero. “It’s just... if you wanted to try a different university, we could figure it out.”

We, he said. She stares at her laptop, but she’s not really looking at the spreadsheets.

She likes research. She just hates people, and sadly, they are an inescapable part of the field. At least her current job is a known quantity of terrible.

Still…

“What brought this on?” she asks.

“A lot of things,” says Romero. “But mostly because I don’t want you stroking out before you hit forty-five.”

“Yeah, think of the loss to the future scientific community,” says Julie.


“I’ll think about it,” says Julie. Surprisingly, she means it, and even though she’s concentrating on her work, she can tell Romero’s smiling, because he knows she means it too.

~*~*~*~

Eventually, she’s forced to temporarily abandon her work and sate the demands of her tyrannical stomach. Someone’s left a loaf of bread in the lounge, so she makes herself two peanut butter and sriracha sandwiches and takes them with her.

It’s late, but there’s still a light on in Lab One. She pokes her head in the door and finds Carlos, slumped at a lab table over an open textbook, head propped in one hand and highlighter drooping in the other. His eyes are open only on a technicality.

It gives her a weird sense of dislocation. During the year he was gone she’d wander into the labs still half-expecting to see him; now he’s actually here and her brain continues to act like it’s some big surprise.

“Go home, loser,” she says, and is gratified by the way he jerks and almost falls off his stool.

“Cecil’s working late, so I’m—” He cuts off in a yawn and points vaguely at his textbook instead. Julie wanders over and takes a look at it. “Orgo? Good luck.”

“Yeah,” agrees Carlos.

“Do you actually think you’re going to stay awake enough to study until he comes and gets you?”

“Well…”

He stares at his textbook in indecision, then closes it with a snap. His duffle bag is eventually located by his feet and he hauls it up to the lab table. It clanks.

Julie sits down and pulls a stack of flashcards towards her, poking through them as she finishes her second sandwich. It takes her back to her TA days, when she made a pretty damn thorough attempt to major in everything. She idly wonders if Carlos ever had to grade orgo exams. He probably deserves it.
The definitions and chemical structures are carefully drawn and labelled neatly, but several of the cards are stiff and wrinkly, like they’ve been doused and dried. Others are a bit singed around the edges, or pitted with tiny holes. She shuffles the flashcards together and secures them with a rubber band, then hands them to Carlos, who tucks them away in his bag next to what is almost certainly a grenade.

Julie rests her chin on her crossed arms; across from her, Carlos zips up his bag, leans against it, and does the same.

“Does it always feel like this?” she asks.

“Which part?” asks Carlos.

“We won,” says Julie. “Methods have lived to science another day. We can do our work without interference. All we did was lie about what the name meant, but…” She taps the lab table with a pencil. Another secret violation of the law. “It still feels like we… lost something.”

“We did lose something,” says Carlos. “It was just a name, but names are important.”

“Hmm,” says Julie.

She pulls out the bag of rice in her pocket and fishes her cell phone out. She unscrews the back, pops in a new power module, and reconnects the nanoadaptors.

It turns on with a soft chime when she hits the power button. She’s almost disappointed; she could’ve done with a challenge.

“Is this how you feel all the time?” she asks.

“You don’t notice it after a while,” says Carlos, which doesn’t exactly answer her question. “Sometimes it’s worth having what you can get.” He sighs. “But then the question is: is it worth staying that way?”

There’s a thoughtful silence.

“Christ,” says Julie. “No wonder you’re always so extra.”

“I’m not extra,” says Carlos.

“Carlos, you’re so extra you come in multiple editions,” says Julie.

His face scrunches up like a disgruntled kindergartner, which unfortunately for him does not actually constitute a rebuttal. After a moment, though, he stops pouting and asks pointedly, “Shouldn’t you be heading home?”

“Do you have any idea how many weeks of work I have to catch up on?” Julie replies.

“Yes,” he says. Then his eyes narrow. “No one’s been adding any extra ones, have they?”

“Not that I know of,” says Julie. She looks down and fidgets with the pencil. “I just…”

—Tend to work at an accelerated pace in October, is how she would have finished that sentence if she had, remotely, wanted to discuss why she felt the need to do so and how she accomplished it. Carlos understands about not sleeping. Hell, Carlos probably understands everything else, too.

She just wishes she didn’t have to be involved in the understanding process. If he could just know
everything already without her having to tell him, that would be ideal.

“Julie?”

“So,” she says instead, trading the pencil for her phone. She pulls up a file. “The Unfeelie Accordf.”

He groans and buries his face in his duffel bag.

“I have questions,” she informs him.

“Can’t we talk about orgo instead?” comes the muffled reply. But he answers her queries (albeit with slightly waning coherency) until Cecil comes to take him home and Julie heads back to her workshop to stave off another night of memories.

~*~*~*~

Julie finds herself at the Night Vale Community College campus for the second time in as many days, black plastic garbage bag over her head to protect herself from the rain. She’s not terribly thrilled about it, but the meteorologists were so excited about all their stormcloud observations that they invited her back for another round of testing, and Julie is not one to pass up on the chance to finagle some quality time with their pulse-Doppler radar/sound system.

Everyone makes it out of the experiments largely unscathed, Julie’s team gets scheduled for both their WSR-88D antenna and their 2.3 GHz S band receiver the following Tuesday, and she runs into Troy Walsh as she’s leaving the building.

“You,” she says, shifting the bag of equipment so she can jab a finger at him. “What is your deal?”

“I don’t understand,” he says. “Would you like me to carry your bag?”

“No,” snaps Julie, shifting the bag back. It’s heavy and slippery in the rain. “I’d like you to explain why you’re here, and at the movie theater, and with the police.”

“What?” says Troy, then, “Oh, no, that wasn’t me. That was Troy Walsh.”

“Troy Walsh,” Julie repeats.

“Yes?”

She adjust her bag so she can jab a finger at him again. “How many of you are there?”

“Uh,” says Troy, eyes darting away.

It hits her, a memory of a memory, a conversation with someone she can’t remember. Too many observers, warping the system. It’s bad luck when there’s too many of us.

“Have you ever been to King City?” she asks. A shadow flickers, some cormorants passing overhead.

“Oh, yeah, I used to work there,” says Troy. “Nice place. Are you sure you don’t want me to carry your bag? It looks pretty heavy.”

“What happened—”

“Doctor Renegade!”
Julie jumps and drops her bag; Troy catches it. Robinson is standing practically at her shoulder; Romanoff is straightening from a three-point crouch. Julie didn’t hear or see them coming. She immediately feels a prickle of misgiving. Or anger. Or anxiety and chest pain because they just about gave her a heart attack.

“Did you want to borrow Wei already?” she asks casually. She yanks at her bag, but Troy refuses to let go.

“No,” says Romanoff.

“It’s the bus driver,” says Robinson.

“She wants to talk to you,” says Romanoff grimly.

They both raise their hands and point: a bus is idling just beyond the campus gates. Julie’s storm rumbles above her like a growling puppy.

“Do I want to talk to her?” says Julie.

“Are you asking for our advice?” asks Robinson. “That is a favor we can grant—”

“No,” Julie interrupts.

She looks at the bus again. Common sense says she should avoid it; Carlos had been pretty clear on what a terrible idea getting involved with fairies is.

The problem is, Julie’s already involved, and it wasn’t her choice and she doesn’t know why. She feels the familiar swell of anger and curiosity.

She turns to Troy and says, “You can carry my bag and I’ll give you twenty bucks if you act as my human shield for the next five minutes.”

“Well…” he says, torn between the kind of chivalry that actually demands being properly helpful and the inherent grad student instinct for extra cash for groceries.

Julie unleashes her secret weapon. “And I’ll introduce you to some colleagues at a networking event.”

“Well… sure,” he says. She transfers one of her anti-fairy countermeasures from her bag to her pocket and makes sure the rest are easily accessible, then starts for the gates. There’s no sign of Robinson and Romanoff, only two cormorants winging their way towards the False Biology Building. Great. No witnesses. Encouraging.

The bus door opens as they approach; a fog of condensation rolls out. Molly is sitting in the driver’s seat, her face stern, remote.

She looks down at them and opens her mouth, as if to speak, or shout. Then she closes it again, scowling faintly. It’s the kind of expression that speaks of a delicate equilibrium you’d hesitate to unbalance.

“What do you want?” Julie demands.

Molly laughs, a sound devoid of joy. It’s not loud but it makes Julie’s ears ache.

“I want—” Her mouth opens and shuts again, wordlessly. Her scowl deepens.
Then she narrows her eyes and says, “Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra.”

“What,” says Julie.

“Darmok and Jalad at Tanagra,” Molly insists.

“Are you serious,” says Julie flatly.

“Kiteo, his eyes closed,” Molly admonishes.

It’s almost certainly a bad thing that one of the most powerful beings in at least one dimension is being forced to communicate in Trekkie in order to get her point across. Julie could just leave. She could walk away right now and not try to figure out what’s going on.

“Darmok and Jalad on the ocean,” she mutters.

Troy gives her a puzzled look, but Molly grins. She drums her fingers against the steering wheel a moment, then says, “Kira at Bashi.”

“You… want to tell a story,” says Julie, consulting one of the dustier closets of her nerd-based memory. “Or – like the other day? Why did you tell me that story?”

“The beast at Tanagra,” says Molly.

“So, you told me that story because there’s a problem,” says Julie. “A problem. You realize you can’t swing a stick without hitting problems here, right?”

Molly rolls her eyes. “The beast at Tanagra,” she repeats.

“The flamingoes,” says Julie, but when Molly doesn’t respond, she continues, “Time travel? City council? Angels? Rising bus fares?”

Molly shakes her head.

Julie racks her brain. After three years, her instincts have gotten pretty good, and she doesn’t think she’s missing anything—

Well. She wouldn’t, would she?

“The man in the tan jacket,” she says.

“The beast at Tanagra,” says Molly, nodding.


They both give him a look.

“What’s his deal?” asks Julie.

Troy shrugs.


“Is he causing problems because he can’t understand, or because he can’t communicate?”

Molly doesn’t answer.
“Ugh,” says Julie. “Why are you telling *me* this and not him?”

“Mirab, with sails unfurled.”

“He doesn’t have a ship – oh. He’s running. What’s he running from?”

“Kailash, when it rises.”

“What does he have to sacrifice?”

Molly grimaces, then reaches for the door handle.

“Wait!” says Julie.

Troy Walsh, bless his heart, grabs the edge of the door before it can close. Molly stares at him – not scowls, not glares, just… *stares* – as tiny frost ferns scroll across the outside of the glass.

He still doesn’t let go. It’s not the most desperate thing Julie’s ever seen a grad student do for twenty bucks, but nevertheless, she is grudgingly impressed.

“What does this have to do with me?” she asks Molly.

Molly frowns, and the frost thickens, growing into a sheet of black ice. “Temba, his arms wide.”

“A gift?” says Julie skeptically. “I thought you couldn’t give gifts.”

It hits her, then. “You helped me the other day and didn’t get anything out of it. You said – no, you *implied* you were breaking the rules.” Carlos said fairies couldn’t lie, but it seems an awful lot like the way that a scientist can’t lie when filling out a grant application, i.e. whatever they say mainly conveys what they need and only bears a coincidental resemblance to reality.

“You said it was because humans were never truly alone,” says Julie. “So… do you owe someone else?”

Molly is still frowning. Julie can see her own breath steaming in the air as the ice creeps over the bus windows, and wonders if this is what it feels like before a blizzard rolls in.

Then it she wonders if Molly is causing it, or holding it back.

“What do you owe them for?” she asks anyway.

“Shaka,” says Molly. “When the walls fell.”

The doors slam shut in a rattle of metal and falling ice, Troy leaping back just in time. He shakes out his fingers and asks, “What does that mean?” as the bus drives away.

Julie lets out a long exhale. It no longer steams, but she still feels cold.

“Failure,” she says.

~*~*~*~

24-September-2010

“What are you doing here?” asks Romero.

“Time,” says Julie.
He raises an eyebrow.

“The punishment for supporting interdisciplinary studies is listening to other disciplines,” say Julie, but offers him a snickerdoodle in the way of consolation. The entomologists have surprisingly nice refreshment tables at their conferences. Also way fewer obnoxious government headhunters. “The Bristol lot was talking about bees distinguishing floral electric fields. Sometimes even bugs can be mildly interesting.”

“And then you wanted to stick around afterwards for discussion?”

Julie rolls her eyes. “I’ll have you know I’ve talked to three different biologists and I was perfectly polite.”

He beams at her. Then something catches his eye and his smile quirks into a puzzle frown.

“Why is Dougherty crying?”

“He was the fourth person I talked to,” says Julie.

Romero half-sighs, half-chuckles, then takes a cookie.

“I’m surprised you stooped to having your name appear on the registration lists with such notorious practitioners of the—” He makes air quotes, just to be obnoxious. “‘Soft and squishy sciences’.”

“I didn’t have to register,” says Julie. “The security is terrible.”

Romero inhales part of his cookie on a laugh and starts coughing.

“I wanted to stay for your presentation, though, so I guess I would have,” says Julie.

Romero lights up like homemade thermite on a bomb range. Julie represses the urge to look around anxiously, like while sneaking somewhere to light up homemade thermite on a bomb range. Some people don’t mind having all these feelings in public where everyone can see.

“You know, if I had to,” she feels compelled to add. But Romero just keeps beaming at her with his crooked smile, and she realizes that at least right now she doesn’t care who looks.

~*~*~*~

Since she needs to talk to him, Carlos is naturally not in the lab. To add insult to injury, he’s out collecting more flamingos. Julie grumpily emails him a rough summary of her thoughts on Troy Walsh and her conversation with Molly and heads up to her office to pull up everything she has on both the bus garage and the man in the tan jacket. Despite the hours and hours of surveillance footage and recordings, there’s not much that’s actually useful.

Sitting down is a mistake. Listening to Cecil’s serene baritone is also a mistake. She should really just take a nap.

Instead, she grimly concentrates on her task and ignores her scratchy eyelids.

“—said the man approached his farm and asked about how much sunshine he had been getting.”

She squints at a piece of paper. At first she mistook it for a Julia set, but it’s actually a map of the NVATA’s bus routes in all their looping backtracking glory before they angle off in a straight shot.
“Somewhere, a man in a tan jacket is whispering into the ears of our mayor, and we do not know what agenda they pursue…”

The slightly lopsided corolla spiralling around the center of town makes slightly more sense once you realize it loops around the NO WINTER ZONEs scattered – plotted? – across the grid. Their lab is in the middle of one, she notices.

“He has seemed to pop up in relation to a lot of strange events…”

The routes are great for mathematicians, horrible for commuters. At least they make a pretty design….

“—place underneath the earth. Under…”

She blinks, slowly, her eyelids heavy.

“…world, right below…”

“Underworld,” Julie mumbles, the circular pattern of the local bus routes and the long stem of the King City line wavering before her eyes.

Then it hits her like a bucket of cold water thrown on you in the middle of the night by the host of a community radio show who is currently repeating the quote “a flower in the desert”.

King City is not in the correct dimension. The man in the tan jacket seems to know something about this, but up until a year ago he wasn’t drawing attention to it. He was busy poking his nose into everyone’s business, ingratiating himself with the powerful and the influential, dealing with them in secret…basically, the SOP of your typical Night Vale authority.

Like the Night Vale Area Transit Authority, with its bus route to… King City.

They had a job and they chose to keep it, Molly said.

“Fuck,” says Julie. “He was working for them!”

~*~*~*~

Her call goes to voicemail again.

“Carlos, you bastard, pick up,” she says, locking the lab door behind her. “Or get back here. I think the man in the tan jacket worked for Ice Station Zebra and there’s something weird going on.” She thinks about it, then adds, “Weirder” and hangs up.

“I don’t understand your reference,” grumbles the Sheriff’s Secret Police officer in the hydrangea. They’re still grumpy about being reduced to remote surveillance, as all their surveillance equipment has mysteriously degenerated into its component parts and somehow gotten upcycled into a lovely decorative high resolution EMC/EMI scanner with embedded spectrum analyzer.

“It’s not my fault you’re not hip to the jive,” says Julie. “Do you know where Carlos is?”

“Well, we did see him over in Sand Pit, but now there’s no one there but some hooded figures stealing people’s lawn ornaments.”

“Right,” says Julie, taking off in the general direction of the development. Andre’s phone goes to
voicemail, as does Wei’s, and no one has answered any of her texts yet.

She eyes the sun uneasily. She’ll get to Sand Pit in plenty of time, but if she doesn’t get ahold of someone to pick her up she might have to walk back after dark. She might as well wear a meat dress and walk through a rabid dog compound, or the used car lot.

She tries Gary’s phone again. A cheery voice tells her this customer has not set up their mailbox and ignores her strongly-worded response about the uselessness of grad students.

Ugh. Well, maybe she can request an Uber and see if she can get Troy Walsh. Two birds with one __

Something stings the side of her neck.

“Fuck!” she yelps, but resists the urge to clap a hand to her neck. If a bee isn’t frightened, it will twist its stinger out and fly on, instead of tearing itself free and dying while its stinger pumps poison into the aggressor. Gary showed her one time as they were en route to the hospital after the great Hive Domino Fiasco, because unlike some people she actually answers her phone during emergencies.

Then Julie realizes there’s nothing crawling around her neck.

Cold metal, beneath her fingers.

She pulls a tranq dart out of her collar. “Fuck,” she gasps, and hits the panic button on her phone.

Every car alarm on the block goes off, along with the fire alarms and the Angel Acknowledging sirens. Blooms of color burst across her vision, pulsing in sync with the noise. Hallucination or Night Vale? She starts to laugh, buoyed up by the wave of euphoria sweeping over her.

Ketamine-based. Definitely ketamine-based. She distantly observes that she’s dropped her phone, because someone’s grabbing her arm. She lets herself fall when they try to tug her away. It feels like flying, a fact they probably do not appreciate when they catch her dead weight and slowly begin hauling her away.

She forces herself to look around, to look for the reality behind the swirl of probable-hallucinations. All she sees are people in dark suits dragging her towards an unmarked dark sedan.

Her last thought before her mind slides into the dark abyss is, Haha, like that will narrow it down.

~*~*~*~

20-October-2010

She gets the call at 21:27. She goes to the hospital, although there’s not much point. The human mind is the most powerful thing on the planet and it’s housed in a fragile casing of meat and bone.

The bus driver is charged with gross-negligence vehicular manslaughter as a misdemeanor. He gets one year in prison and a $1000 fine. Julie gets to make funeral arrangements and hold on to Felicia’s arm during the ceremony. She doesn’t remember the eulogy she delivered; just that she had the horrible desire to laugh, the whole time, because splat, bug on a windshield.

Julie can’t tell if that’s the way he’d want to go, or the absolute last way he’d want to go. She never asked, and now she never can.
Content notes:
- warning for minor character death
- no spoilers for *It Devours!*, because I only just got it from the library

ME IN 2016: haha a science protest, what a hilarious notion
ME IN 2017:

So! It's been a year! Continued thanks to Ginipig for going above and beyond the duties of a beta and re-reading "Cold Case" so I didn't have to. You can brush up on your Tamarian [here](#). If you've been waiting to see the reverse Zeno's paradox for wordcount, then this is the story for you!
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Julie has been both awake and lucid for about five minutes and has determined several things.

First off, she has most likely been kidnapped. The tranquilizer dart and getting dragged into an unmarked car were a pretty big clue, to be sure, but this is Night Vale, and that’s the SOP for anything from becoming an elected official to calling a plumber. However, she woke up in a small room by herself on a hospital gurney, with an oxygen mask on, which is a level of comfort and foresight far beyond the capability of most Night Vale citizens.

At the same time, it’s not a violent kidnapping – at least not yet. There’s a pillow under her head and her arm restraints are well-padded. Whoever’s made off with her wants her alive.

It makes her feel sick to her stomach. Regaining consciousness hadn’t been a picnic either, what with the lingering hallucinations and all, and she focuses on taking deep breaths and achieving some measure of calm. Choking on her own vomit would probably inconvenience whoever kidnapped her, but she hasn’t reached cutting-off-her-own-nose levels of spite yet.

The hiss of the oxygen mask makes her feel a little like Darth Vader. Good. Let the hate flow through you. She could be doing actual work right now, re-scanning the lab or getting started on the next round of experiments or even dealing with the man in the tan jacket, but instead she’s cuffed to a gurney underneath flickering fluorescent lights. She glares at them, though fails to make them explode with her mind.

But it does remind her of Carlos, and that he is probably looking for her. Her panic button made it pretty damn hard to miss that something’s wrong, and even if he’s been called away for an emergency and can’t come himself, he’ll have done something. Her team is fully capable of fucking shit up under the proper direction, and even if that direction being ungrammatical text messages as he simultaneously fights fairy vampire tentacle monsters or whatever is not ideal, they could all manage. She just has to hold out long enough. Someone will come for her.

She tries to wipe her face and comes up against the restraints on her wrists again. She snarls.

For lack of anything better to do, she inspects the room. One door (shut), a box wired to the wall next to it that’s probably some sort of intercom, the gurney, the oxygen concentrator connected to her mask, a lone chair pushed against the walls, a security camera up by the ceiling, Julie Kwan, PhD. Someone’s left the water running somewhere nearby and, to make things even more pleasant, the fluorescent light directly above her flickers again and starts to buzz obnoxiously.

The door opens.

A woman in a trench coat comes in. She’s wearing a flying cap and goggles and smoking a cigarette in a cigarette holder, like fucking Cruella DeVille. She also has one hell of a shiner: almost the whole right side of her face a painful purple-blue. Julie feels a twist of vindictive pleasure.

“You’re awake,” says the woman.

It would probably be a good idea to get on the good side of her captors, at least until Julie can figure out what it is they want.
“No shit,” she says instead.

The woman rolls her eyes. “For the record,” she says, “I thought this was more trouble than it’s worth.”

“Me too,” says Julie. “Why don’t you let me go and we’ll call it even.”

The woman snorts and leaves the room.

Julie thumps her head into the pillow and glares at the ceiling. The lights overhead continue to flicker. There’s a hitch in the hum from the oxygen concentrator.

Hurried footsteps, out in the hallway. She tenses.

“Dr. Kwan!” calls a jovial voice, and two new people come into her room. A man and a woman, both in cheap government-issue black suits and sensible footwear. The man has his left arm in a sling; the woman’s hair is singed at the ends, but otherwise she looks unhurt.

“Who the fuck are you?” asks Julie.

“Who we are doesn’t matter,” says the woman soothingly as she unlocks Julie’s arm restraints and helps her sit up. “We’re sorry about all—”

“Doesn’t matter?” says Julie. “You kidnapped me, so yes it fucking does.” She jams her hands inside her pockets; they haven’t been emptied, so now she’s armed with… a pencil, a roll of duct tape, and one of Gary’s Epi-Pens. Wonderful.

“We are sorry for that,” says the man. “Very sorry! But it is important that we talk to you. Vitally.”

“Here’s a thought,” says Julie. “It’s called ‘making an appointment’. Or ‘writing an email’. Or maybe ‘picking up the goddamn phone’.” She pulls the oxygen mask off her head.

“Trust me, that would have been our preference,” says the woman.

“I should have been more specific,” says the man. “Juliet – can I call you Juliet?”

“No,” says Julie.

”—It is of the utmost importance that we speak with you… without interference.”

Julie snorts. “Buddy, you picked the wrong town. You’d be better off trying to listen to the radio in a lead-lined bunker.”

“That’s not what we mean,” says the woman. Julie knows what they mean; she just has no desire to make this any easier for them whatsoever.

“Let me guess,” says the man. “Wizard Ramirez has never told you about the Laws of Magic, has he?”

“First day we met, actually,” says Julie. “No avada kedavra, no frog prince, no mind-melds, no mind-whammies, no zombies, no wibbley-wobbley timey-wimey stuff, and no Cthulhu.”

They stare at her blankly.

“We’re talking about the Sixth Law of Magic,” says the woman. “No—”
“No time travel, yes, I know,” says Julie. It’s actually ‘thou shalt not swim against the Currents of Time,’ pretentious diction and all, but they don’t bother to correct her.

“Has he ever bothered to explain why?” says the man.

“It might make you evil, it definitely messes with your head, you could fuck up history, and Night Vale would probably explode,” says Julie.

The suits hesitate; Julie’s messed up their script. It seems like they weren’t expecting her to know any of this, which: what the hell. Even if Carlos hadn’t just told her when she asked, she’s been here for over three years. That’s plenty of time to figure it out. It’s only been three minutes and she can already tell they want to drive some sort of wedge between her and Carlos. She wonders with grim amusement whether they’re going to try to discredit him or gaslight her next.

“That’s not… quite the whole story,” says the man. “You see, when Wizard Ramirez told you—”

“We won’t lie to you,” the woman interrupts. “We and Wizard Ramirez have… had our differences.” The man starts to cut in, but she coolly stares him down. “That doesn’t mean we can’t respect his accomplishments, however. And… I hope that with some investigation, you might respect ours, as well.”

“Yes!” says the man. “Come, see the rest of our facilities.”

They’re smarter than she thought – at least, some of the time. Attacking Carlos was a no-go, so they abandoned that and went for Julie’s weak spot: unanswered questions. Julie can tell exactly what it is they’re doing and, damn them, it’s a very effective strategy.

The woman opens the door and gestures for Julie to go through.

“No, after you,” says Julie, glaring at the man until he gets the message and goes first. After waiting to make sure nothing happens to him, then sticking her head through the door and pointedly inspecting the hallway to make sure there’s no more tranquilizer dart teams lying in wait, she finally deigns to follow them.

The building is not elaborate: painted cinder block walls, drop ceilings, cheap tile, beige paint. She can still hear running water. This looks like the only hallway; the rest of the doors are locked (the government cheese gives her uncomfortable looks when she jiggles the handles, but don’t try to stop her) though one set of double doors boasts a pair of small windows. She looks through and sees a large warehouse, metal shelves stacked with everything from bags of fertilizer to bear traps to bazookas.

“What’s with the Home Despot?” she asks. She cranes her neck and catches a flash of pink: a rack of flamingos on display.

“Ah, Lenny’s,” says the man. “I must say that for our front, it’s been surprisingly profitable! We were hoping it would serve a practical purpose, and it’s returned usefulness in spades. Night Vale is in great need of our services, as you can see.”

“There’s no one in there,” Julie points out.

“Well, yes – we had to close a little early,” says the man. He rubs his arm, the one in the sling. “But we’d be happy to let you poke around the inventory later!”

“There’s nothing quite up to your level of technical expertise, but we would be able to supply you with anything to secure and customize a workspace,” says the woman. “Even to exacting
specifications. You’re welcome to whatever you may need.” She shoots Julie covert looks, as though gauging her reactions, as the man starts blabbering on about the construction of the warehouse.

Something’s off here – besides the obvious, anyway. Kidnapping is new, but this isn’t Julie’s first ride at the recruiting evil genius rodeo. The suits, however, aren’t reacting at all like she’d expect, in a way she can’t quite pin down.

“—Which funded the plumbing installation,” the man continues. “We designed it ourselves, you know! And it’s fully compatible with contemporary—”

“—With modern plumbing systems,” the woman interrupts.

“I mean, as you’d expect,” says the man. “If you were conversant with twenty-first-century plumbing. Which we are.”

“Hmm,” says Julie noncommittally. He looks thrilled.

Thrilled about Julie not hating their plumbing. It’s ridiculous, but – that’s part of what’s wrong. They’re too eager. Not in a predatory way, in a hyped-up kindergartner with a stick figure drawing kind of way.

At the end of the hallway is a heavy set of security doors. Julie waits impatiently for palm print identification of each suit – then the retina scans – then the proprietary tonsil ID mapping – before the doors swing open and she is ushered through into a lab.

There’s a distinct impression of impermanence. Coils of wire and power cords run across the floor to the line of servers and banks of computers on her left – bog-standard PCs, though with some custom modifications (sloppily) wired in. There’s an inert gas fire suppression system, but the old water sprinkler heads still poke out of the ceiling. The right wall is lined with a variety of machinery she doesn’t immediately recognize, but which looks familiar nonetheless; a box of spare parts blocks the other security door, which must go outside. Some sections of the room are too crowded, but others have gaps of space large enough to be annoying but too small for extra work stations. The woman in the trench coat from earlier is sitting on two stacked milk crates (also full of stuff) and scowling at a visual display.

Along the back wall, however, is what for all the world looks like some kind of modern art sculpture, a melding of carved rusty-black rock and smooth metal interspersed with vacuum tubes, blinking lights, and wall-mounted keyboards. A black rectangular prism about four inches high nestles in the middle, in a small alcove, hooked into the rest of the… thing… with red and blue wires. The whole thing glows with the faintest red light.

She points to the right. “What kind of accumulators are those?”

“Ah, I thought you would recognize these,” says the man with a broad smile. “They’re taking in Night Vale’s ambient free energy. From there, the energy is transferred to our transient eddy generator—” He points towards the woman in a trench coat— “Which is currently displacing our spatio-temporal position by half a second.”

He beams at her.

Julie takes in the accumulators, the equipment, the mystic red glow. “That’s not all you’ve displaced, is it,” she says.

The woman in the suit stiffens. The man begins, “I don’t know what you m—” but he’s cut off by
the woman in the trench coat barking out a laugh.

“I told you she’d figure it out,” says trench coat. “God, you’re such idiots.”

“Steiner, please,” says the man.

Steiner. Julie snorts. It figures.

“Dr. Kwan,” says the woman. Since she doesn’t want to name herself, she’s just going to have to deal with Julie thinking of her as Agent White. “You must understand—”

“That you time traveled here from the future?” says Julie. “Yeah, I’ve got that. What I don’t get is how you have a room full of tech like this and thought that kidnapping was the best way to make me come look at it.”

“Well,” says Agent White slowly. “When our previous attempts to contact you failed, we—”

“Previous attempts,” says Julie.

She puts it together. Cheap, government-issue suits. Overly enthusiastic. Zero ability to take a hint and leave her alone.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

“You’re with the feds,” she says. She can’t say they’re definitely all the headhunters she used to run into back at the university, but, well, it’s not like she’s ever bothered to tell them apart.

“It’s more that the feds are… with us,” says Agent White.

“We’ve asked you to work for us multiple times,” says the man, a little petulantly. Agent McKee—no, Connors, Julie decides. “One time you dumped a tray of pigs-in-a-blanket down my shirt and hit me with a champagne cork right in the eye!”

“I’m not good at networking,” says Julie.

But her skin is starting to crawl, because the feds—these losers—whichever, have been after her since grad school. It’s bad enough when she thought the regular government was keeping an eye on her, but some future government, where she might not even have a chance of rights and representation?

Agent Connors sighs. “Juliet,” he says. “Do you know what the most important rule of magic is?”

“Don’t disintegrate the support beams of the building you’re standing in,” says Julie. She eyes a nearby modem, balanced on a desk and less than firmly secured.

Agent White lets out a brief chuckle. “No,” she says. “It’s that you must believe in what you are doing.”

“...Nah, I’m gonna go with the first one,” says Julie. She’s pretty sure she damaged her rotator cuff digging Carlos out that one time.

“It applies to us, too, but what we believe in is scientific advancement,” says Agent Connors. “What kind of small-minded person would want to stand in the way of that?”

“Pissed off your ethics committee, huh,” says Julie.
“Whose ethics?” retorts Agent White. “Those of the uneducated masses, who can’t even begin to understand what we’ve accomplished? Those of a hidebound and defunct cabal of superstitious cowards, clutching at the arbitrary rules of centuries past? No. Until we have a jury of our true peers, we must keep expanding our associations.”

Julie snorts again. “You’ve come to the past because you feel *misunderstood*.”

“Not *only*,” says Agent Connors, looking pretty sulky for someone who probably has time-traveling government funding.

“The past has other resources,” says White. “Ones we can’t get anywhere else.”

“Like what?”

Steiner turns towards them, leans against a control panel, and says, lazily, “You.”

“What,” says Julie, which is when Agent White reaches into her suit jacket and pulls out a flamingo.

~*~*~*~

The following seventeen seconds are *extremely* eventful.

~*~*~*~

“I’m sorry we startled you,” says Agent Connors, holding a handkerchief to his forehead. He’s bleeding but good from where Julie clipped him with the modem; she’d feel triumphant, except she’d been aiming for Agent White so she could make a break for the security door and has now lost the element of surprise for nothing. “But we can assure you, the flamingos are perfectly safe.”

“Tell that to Sheila from the Moonlite All-Nite Diner,” hisses Julie, plastered against the wall.

“I don’t think we’ve met,” says Agent White. “Yes, there are some… side effects when unauthorized entities activate the flamingos. Any technology has its flaws.”

“Technology,” says Julie.

“Of course!” says Agent Connors. “This is a *completely* different field of study from so-called—” He telegraphs the scare quotes from a mile away—“‘Magic’. You see, potential energy is stored in the flamingo’s matrix by running an accumulating program activated by our biosignatures and the sound waves from our specific vocal folds. When it encounters the designated DNA key, it completes the flamingo’s algorithm and activates its own internal programming, and the potential energy is converted into a connection to a specific point on the worldline.”

Translation: we chanted a lot and filled the flamingo with power so when you touch it, it zaps you somewhere.

“Right,” says Julie. “*Completely* different from magic. I see.”

“Experience it for yourself, then,” says Steiner. “Touch it.”

Julie stares at her askance.

“I dare you,” says Steiner.

Julie snorts at that. But, keeping her fists jammed in the pockets of her lab coat, she leans forward a little to inspect the flamingo – resting in Agent White’s bare hands, as she’s apparently unaffected by its weird shit, even though Julie can – can feel it, just like at her lab and in Josie’s truck. This one’s not growling or watching, though; just… sitting there, placidly. Like a trained animal in the arms of its handler.

“What will it do?” Julie asks.

“Well, the transportation matrix would be a little redundant,” says Agent Connors. “You should be able to experience some of the worldline telescoping, though! I think you’ll find it quite fascinating.”

Agent White continues to hold the flamingo out; not forcing it on her, just leaving it there, within reach, ready for investigation. “There will be no untoward side effects,” she says. “I swear by my research. We tested it on ourselves.”

Julie can feel her resolve waver, because… she’s afraid of the flamingo. She’s afraid because it hurt her, and she doesn’t know why or how. It’s an unknown quantity, and now it’s right there, with the chance to figure it out and dissect its workings and pit herself against them, transforming it from an inexplicable terror to an understandable challenge.

They’ve gone through all this effort to bring her here; would they sacrifice that to send her careening off through time and space? They could have done that while she was unconscious. On the other hand, curiosity killed the cat.

Her mother always used to say that. But she always left out the other half of the truism: satisfaction brought it back.

Julie touches the flamingo.

The area behind her navel lurches, like she’s going down a roller coaster and plunging into—

Memories

She’s halfway through her senior violin recital and hating every moment of it – she’s detonating the birdseed canister at Andre and Felicia’s wedding – she’s watching Romero consumed by the agony of having to choose just one of the kittens crawling all over him to take home – she and Wei are throwing the levers on an unfamiliar machine and running for their lives right before it’s eaten by a giant centipede—

Another jolt and she’s back where she started, in this shitty lab, swaying on her feet.

“Where—” Julie swallows. “Where did that take me?”

“Where you’re supposed to be,” says Connors.

“Throughout time, to here,” says White.

“Everybody who touched one of these came here?”

“No,” says Steiner. “The calibrations wouldn’t be correct. They would have defaulted to whatever the path of least resistance through space-time would be – which in this town, who knows. These are programmed just for you.”
Just for her. Julie stares at the flamingo. How many hundreds of these are in Night Vale? How many people have touched them, by accident or design? How many were circulated, all in the hope that she’d touch just one?

The suits stare at her expectantly. They kidnapped her off the street, what the fuck, what was even the point.

Those are the questions she should be asking.

Instead, she says, “How does it work?”

~*~*~*~

“So it comes down to the manipulation of the sparticles?” Julie asks, flipping through another page of equations.

“Superpartners,” corrects Agent Connors for the seventeenth time. Julie rolls her eyes.

“Essentially, yes,” says Agent White, pointing at a section of the proof. “You’ll need to familiarize yourself with the differences between your old theory of supersymmetry and modern research, of course, but I’m certain you’ll catch on eventually.”

Julie resists the urge to roll her eyes again. They’ve adjourned to the employee break room in the basement, which is stuffy and poorly ventilated and, despite the hot water heater ticking over in the corner, chilly. In the interest of employee morale, instead of beige it’s been painted a charming olive drab/pea green/baby diarrhea chartreuse and there’s a poster of a cat clinging to a screen door that says Hang In There! in Papyrus.

She moves an empty mug out of the way to pick up another handout. They look like printed copies of a scanned textbook – or at least, random sections of a scanned textbook. There should be nothing suspicious about that, really – the government cheese wants her to catch up on some “modern science” as quickly as possible, and at least half of any survey textbook is decades-old research with the sentences reworded and some flashy new graphics so they can justify putting out a new edition and charging everyone for the pleasure.

At the same time, Julie is absolutely sure they’re restricting what information she has access to on purpose, and she’s betting it’s not just for the sake of her timeline.

“That takes care of the initial transfer from your accumulators, but how do you fix it to your flamingo portkeys?” she asks. When Agent Connors opens his mouth to correct her again, she adds, “Sflamingo sportkeys.”

The three suits exchange glances. “We’ll cover that later,” Agent White concludes smoothly, sweeping everything Julie’s not holding into a stack and tucking them into a folder. Yep, they don’t trust her with the goods at all.

“Why flamingos?” asks Julie as she pulls her remaining printouts a little closer.

“Flamingos have always been viewed as liminal beings,” says Agent White. Disappointingly, she doesn’t get distracted enough to miss plucking the papers out of Julie’s hands. “Creatures of both air and water. Well, time itself is a stream, and those are what skim the surface.”

Julie pictures running into a flock of those and suppresses a shudder. Carlos should get a raise.

“This is natural,” says Agent Connors. “The free range of an organic process.”
“Gluten-free, too,” drawls Steiner from the corner, where she’s been leaning against the wall and poking at what could pass as a Fitbit on her wrist.

Agent Connors gives her a slightly puzzled look, but continues to Julie, “It’s symbolic. How could imitating their example be anything but beneficial?”

“Plus we got the lawn ornaments wholesale,” says Steiner. Agents White and Agent Connors shoot her exasperated glances. “What? Our funding isn’t unlimited, you know. Practical theoretical physics.”

Agent White doesn’t miss the way Julie starts. “Yes, we’re aware it was you who named the field,” she says. She stands and walks over to the pneumatic tube in the corner. One blink of an eye later, their research is whisked out of sight. “Why choose to call yourself that?” She fills a mug from the coffee maker and carries it back to the table.

“Theoretical physics can be applied to everyday life, that’s why,” says Julie. Maybe not everyone’s everyday life, sure, but as soon as they want to build their own charged particle beam it would certainly come in handy. “Names are important.”

She accepts the offered mug and takes a sip of coffee. It’s awful.

“Exactly, Juliet!” says Agent Connors. “We cannot be limited by the mundane definitions that divide us. We must be free to blaze a trail ahead, into the unknown reaches of knowledge, unburdened by the limits of artificial morality, ignorant public concern – even the constraints of technology!”

“Yeah, I’ve been meaning to ask about that,” says Julie. “This whole setup – it’s your research and your tech. Why do you think I can help you?”

They all look at each other, and then Agent White says, “Well, that’s where the… theoretical part of practical theoretical physics comes in. We already know what we can – and can’t – do with our technology.”

“We know that very well,” mutters Steiner.

“But who knows what sort of insight you’ll be able to give us?” asks Agent Connors. “You – well, to be frank, we’re very impressed with your work.”

“My work has nothing to do with this,” says Julie slowly.

“Not yet, of course!” says Agent White, and laughs.

Before Julie can get into that, a new guy comes bursting into the room. Oh, look: there’s Agent McKee. (They had finally done a round of proper introductions, but Julie didn’t bother to pay attention.)

“Ma’am! Ma’am! Sir!”

“What is it?” says Agent White irritably.

Agent McKee shoots Julie an anxious look, then says, “There’s been an… incident… at the perimeter.”

“The perimeter?” says Agent Connors, frowning. “But we’re running the displacement. No one should be able to——”
“It’s a very… persistent… incident,” says Agent McKee. “We’re beginning to depart from the zonal mean—”

Agent White grumbles, but she and Agent Connors stand and follow him out, the very picture of government-issued dignified calm. However, before the door shuts all the way, Julie gets a glimpse of them all bolting down the hall.

Steiner snorts. “Idiots,” she says.

Julie doesn’t say anything. If she can get Steiner to leave, too, maybe she’ll be able to find a way out of this breakroom hellhole. Those ceilings upstairs don’t look too sturdy, and if she can follow that pneumatic tube she might be able to discover where they keep their primary sources—

Steiner comes away from the wall she’s been holding up and plops down in the chair next to Julie. She raises an eyebrow, as if she knows what Julie’s been thinking.

“So what’s that displacement supposed to prevent?” asks Julie, since snooping around on her own doesn’t seem to be on the table.

“Interruptions,” says Steiner, putting a carton of cigarettes on the table and digging through her messenger bag.

“Like?”

Steiner looks at her, then rubs her bruised face and groans. “I should have known you’d be one of those. God forbid you don’t have a project to work on for more than thirty seconds.” She pulls a cigarette holder and a clipboard out of her messenger bag. “Here. You dropped this when we tagged you.”

The clipboard is Julie’s, with all her notes about the man in the tan jacket, King City, and their potential connection to the fairy-owned and -operated bus system.

“Thanks,” she says.

Steiner sticks a cigarette in her holder and digs into the pockets of her trench coat with her other hand. “What’s that got to do with you, anyway?”

“What?”

“The King City affair,” says Steiner, waving the cigarette holder at Julie’s notes. “Why’d you bother getting involved? You’ve got to have better things to do.”

“Tragically, I did not,” says Julie. Not before – god, was the protest only two days ago? It feels like it’s been years, and Julie can’t even rule that out as a metaphor. Or a simile, whatever. “You can’t tell me a whole town disappearing into a dimensional disruption isn’t at least sort of interesting.”

“Well, yeah,” says Steiner. She pulls out an acetylene torch from her pocket. “That part is. But – some guy you can’t even remember? And faeries? You’re fucking with me if you think I’d believe you actually care about what they’re up to, besides distracting everyone from more important work.”

“I don’t,” says Julie slowly. “But the man in the tan jacket’s a pain in my ass, and fairies steal babies and shit. I wouldn’t exactly mind if they fucked off and left Night Vale alone.”

“Yeah, but… that’s not really your problem, is it?” asks Steiner. She lights her cigarette with the
acetylene torch. “Let them bother each other and your problem’s gone.”

Julie shrugs. Steiner’s putting up a good front, but something’s off again. She’s just too... weirdly vehement about this.

Steiner snorts and takes a drag from her cigarette. “A distraction, if you ask me,” she says, exhaling and watching the smoke rise to the ceiling. “Leave that shit to civvies. It’s not like they could ever pay you back for the time away from your work.”

“Time away isn’t exactly a problem for you, though,” says Julie.

“Time travel only gets you so far,” says Steiner. “There’s still limitations. Trust me, fuck everyone else and concentrate on what really matters.” She watches Julie sidelong for a moment. “I know you’re not buying it.”

“What,” says Julie.

“The sales pitch,” says Steiner. She taps out another cigarette from the carton and holds it out to Julie. “‘Come with us and we’ll give you more science than even you can imagine, blah blah blah.’ You don’t like us and you don’t trust us. Why would you go along with us?”

Julie stares at the offered cigarette and doesn’t answer.

“Double-crossing us, though…”

Julie looks at her sharply.

“You’d do it, wouldn’t you,” says Steiner, pausing to blow a smoke ring. “You’ve got the guts. Even though the rest of these chuckleheads should know it doesn’t mean you’re less intelligent than they are, they still underestimate you because you don’t have their training. Once you’ve caught up, though? You’ll blow them out of the water.” Steiner smirks. “Or project concentrated non-dispersive energy through their natural media.”

Slowly, Julie takes the cigarette.

“They try to leave that out of the history texts, you know,” says Steiner. She fires up the torch; Julie leans forward and lights up. “But that’s what I always liked the best about you. Validating your idol by blowing shit up the way he would have wanted? Incredible. You could split the earth like an apple and they want you to rewire the equipment.” She shakes her head.

“You think you know an awful lot about me,” says Julie.

“Psychology,” says Steiner. “History. You see, I’ve always been a big fan of interdisciplinary studies. And, well… I know Night Vale. I know what you need to do to survive here, and you? You’re good at surviving.”

“What about you?” Julie asks. “What are you doing here?”

Steiner takes a long drag from her cigarette, then lets it out. “PR,” she says.

Julie snorts out a laugh in spite of herself.

“Why are you telling me this,” she says. “If you’re so sure I’ll double-cross you.”

“Because I want you to know I won’t get in your way,” says Steiner. “I want to see what you’ll do and how you do it. I’m here to learn from the best, after all.”
Footsteps, in the hallway. The door opens and Agents White and Connors come back in.

Agent White raises an eyebrow at them sitting at the table together. “Making friends?” she asks, her voice a very pointed pleasant.

Steiner smiles; there’s teeth in it.

Agent Connors frowns. “You’re not supposed to smoke in here.”

“Rules were made to be broken, Steve,” says Steiner, stubbing out her cigarette in his coffee mug. She looks at Julie. “Shall we?”

~*~*~*~

They spend the next few hours in the lab, and either by very careful planning or very dumb luck they manage to show Julie just enough to keep her in anticipatory fascination without actually being able to figure out any more of their research’s major underlying principles. The interesting parts of their computers are all password-protected, and they won’t even let her near the weird shit in the back. If she’s going to double-cross anyone like Steiner thinks, she’d pretty much have to play the long con.

Assuming she doesn’t die of frustration before then, that is.

“These connections to your energy converters are garbage,” says Julie, poking through the section they’ve allowed her to take a closer look at. She’d be offended by the four mother hens hovering (well, three hovering and Steiner taking another smoke break) over her shoulder, except that she knows they’re there to keep her from poking into things she shouldn’t, rather than from any real concern about her safety. They won’t even let her near the accumulators, and she’s pretty sure they’re just copies of ones she’s built herself.

Agents White and Connors exchange a glance. “They’re… fairly standard, for our purposes,” says White slowly.

“Then I guess all your conversions are this inefficient,” says Julie. “This cycle, here? You can reduce the attrition by half.”

Agent Connors leans in. “Really? How?”

“Well, instead of redirecting the current from the—”

“Perhaps you can show us later,” Agent White cuts in.

“Look, do you want help or not?” snaps Julie.

“Of course we do!” says White. “But we want to – to make the best use of your time. And right now, that means familiarizing you with the—”

The security door beeps and Agent McKee staggers into the room, trailing wisps of smoke.

“Danny!” says Agent Connors, startled.

“Need… help…” he gasps.

Agent White catches him as he stumbles, then turns him around and shoves him towards the door. “Return to your post,” she snaps. “We’ll be there in a minute.”
“But—”

“We’ll be there,” says Agent White. “We must take care of our guest first.”

“Don’t mind me,” says Julie. “I can leave if it’s a problem.”

Agent White rolls her eyes heavenward, then shuts the security door behind the unfortunate Agent McKee.

Steiner consults her Fitbit.

“He’s not wrong,” she says. “Too much positive feedback has been introduced into the displacement. It’s almost reached the flutter point.”

“Keep an eye on it,” says Agent White, then gestures for Julie to follow her.

They take her back to her room – her room, Jesus, Stockholm syndrome is all she needs. The bed’s been removed, but they’ve added a large potted plant. She takes the one chair, leaving everyone else to hover awkwardly except for Steiner, who’s resumed her seemingly permanent slouch against the wall. The lights overhead are still buzzing (one panel has burnt out entirely) and the security camera is still fixed in the same position.

Agent White opens her mouth say something, but Julie cuts her off. “What’s in it for me?”

Steiner snorts. “You mean the chance to make unheard-of scientific breakthroughs isn’t enough?”

“I can make those on my own,” says Julie.

“Of course you can,” says Agent White. “We have complete faith in you. But you’re funded by the university, aren’t you? Every year, you submit your budget and apply for grants and hope to get enough to accomplish barely a fraction of what you can do. With us, though – your only limit is your imagination.”

“Science beyond my wildest dreams, huh,” says Julie.

“You might want to look at those wildest dreams again,” says Agent White. “You’re a practical theoretical physicist. Once you apply the theory, think of all the practical uses.”

“Abusing the interest in my bank account,” says Julie. “Winning the powerball. Planting archeological dig sites. Faking wine vintages.”

Agent Connors leans forward and says, eagerly, “We could save your boyfriend.”

Time stops.

The sounds around her are gone, except for the buzz of the lights, which fills her entire head and thrums beneath her skin. Ice water runs through her veins, drawn up her spine by the great vacuum inside her, paralyzing her and freezing her heart in her chest.

Julie stares in his direction, but she can’t really see him, visual input no longer recognized during this massive paradigm shift. She opens her mouth; she doesn’t know what will come out, a question or a scream. She hears, distantly, “How?”

“We can go back and stop it,” says Agent White. “Make sure he’s okay. We can save him. We just need your help.”
The words would send her toppling if she could move. This can’t be – she can’t – not again.

But it’s not again, is it. This is it, this is what the flamingo showed her because here she is—

Julie forces herself to focus on White. It’s hard to breathe when her lungs feel covered in frost, and the buzzing is even louder, now, but this time she can feel her thoughts roiling beneath the surface.

“How,” she says again.

The suits exchange a glance, slightly uneasy. Julie can’t even imagine what the expression on her face looks like.

“We—”

All of their Fitbits go off at once. Steiner swears under her breath.

“—We’ll explain the exact process later,” White finishes, keying open the door. “When we have more time. We apologize for leaving you like this, but… perhaps you’d want a moment, anyway.”

“I know grief is a powerful emotion,” says Agent Connors. “You can have the space to think it over!”

“It’s your future, after all,” says Steiner. “Both of yours.”

“You can reach us by intercom if you need anything,” says Agent White. “We’ll return in – well, we’ll return.”

Connors pats her on the shoulder on the way out, but Julie barely feels it through the buzzing.

Steiner is the last one out. “Don’t be stupid. You know what you’ve got here,” she says, and locks the door behind her.

Another odd noise through the buzzing. Ragged breathing. It sounds like hers.

Julie’s shaking, forcing herself to stay seated but wanting so badly to leap up and run to the intercom and say Yes. To pretend to help the suits long enough for her to learn the technology and strike out on her own, preferably striking them out in the process.

Instead, she jams her hands desperately into her pockets, searching for… something. Anything.


Pencil. She can work with that. Her clipboard – but no, she doesn’t have unused paper – there are these nice blank walls, though. Except – she went into the field to control her own research, and she can’t stand the thought of showing any of her work to anyone who – who—

Grief is a powerful emotion. We want you to have time to think it over.

—But the joke’s on them, because the field is Night Vale, and now Julie has plenty of experience thinking about things that, under normal circumstance, she wouldn’t give a flying fuck about. They want her to think? They’re welcome to it. She will tell them every goddamn thought she’s ever had about fairies, without a single speck of scientific speculation.

She clutches her clipboard tightly to her chest and stands up. THE MAN IN THE TAN JACKET, she writes on the wall. It’s wobbly and she has to physically prevent herself from pressing too hard, or else her pencil will break and then she’ll have nothing to do but actually sit down and consider—
works for the NVATA, she writes instead. She circles it, and connects to another bubble floating off to the left. Main heading: fairies suck. Sub-bubbles: dangerous and steal babies and shit and debt for every favor and weaknesses: ferrous compounds, cheese???, and, as a favor to Carlos, dangerous again.

multiple contacts with lab, she adds to the man in the tan jacket’s cluster. She frowns, and adds, mostly with experimenter, not resident weird shit specialist. That splits off a new cluster for Carlos and his lack of involvement: missing for a year? But no; the man in the tan jacket’s been around longer than that, and his recent activity has been since Carlos returned. More sub-bubbles for Carlos: still has panic attacks. crowded schedule. monogamous.

A new branch off crowded schedule.

credit overload. routine Night Vale maintenance. secret agent nonsense.

Julie stares at that last part. The Man, she branches off, and decapitation-happy.

She goes back to experimenter and gives herself her own cluster.

no decapitations. 3 degrees. previous to recent breakthrough too much free time. actual common sense.

Back to the man in the tan jacket.

recent focus on King City. (Below that: King City displaced, weird shit.) no apparent name. MO: talking to people. visits cause memory loss. terrified.

She underlines it – terrified – nodding to herself.

Then she says, out loud, “What the fuck.”

She doesn’t remember the man in the tan jacket being terrified. She doesn’t remember the man in the tan jacket being anything. But here she is, organizing her thoughts, and that came out. I hope you’re right about this, subconscious Julie.

She looks back at what she wrote before that.

visits cause memory loss

Carlos doesn’t remember him, either. Neither does Old Woman Josie, or Cecil, or anyone he’s interviewed. Which suggests…

fairies suck. dangerous. debt for every favor.

“Well, fuck me,” she says, drawing one line connecting debt for every favor to terrified, then another from decapitation-happy to a new sub-cluster, no mind whammy. Why come to Julie for weird shit? Because she’s better than the alternative when the alternative might be legally bound to chop off your head for the way you’ve been messing with other people’s heads left and right, including those of your dangerous – very dangerous – employers.

on the run gets added to the man in the tan jacket’s orbit. She lingers there, frowning. If he’s got such pressing job problems, why this urgency for King City instead? And why now?

Does he have people waiting for him somewhere? Are they in danger?

What would he do to save them?
We can save him

The pencil snaps in her hand.

Julie would do anything. She knows this. If it was a question of capability and technology, Julie would tear the universe apart and then methodically put it back together until she found Romero again.

But the thing is—

The thing is—

The thing is, Romero’s dead. She’s very sure of that point, because she was at the hospital and at the mortuary and at the funeral where she watched his ethically composted remains get planted underneath a tree, because it was the most environmentally friendly option. It’s not just a memory that could fade or change or get canceled out; it’s a part of her now, a fundamental absence around which she’s reconstructed her life, a gap in the system permanently wired into the emotional centers of her brain. The black hole at the center of the galaxy.

What are they planning to do, whisk him away to the future for a little while and then drop him back in the middle of that road before he ages too unrecognizably? Is she supposed to buy a few years of supposed happiness with the knowledge that she’ll have to help kill him?

Or maybe they were just planning to sidestep paradoxes entirely, reach farther afield. Her Romero is gone, so who’s going to be there in his place? Who’s going to get yanked out of a timeline too far away to be canceled out and plopped in this one, like Simone, always knowing that something’s wrong?

The thing is, he won’t be the same Romero, and she won’t be the same Julie, and they will both categorically note every mismatched detail and altered memory because that’s what they do, because they’re scientists. The thing is, all their notes and hypotheses and conclusions will never add up to the happiness they lost five years ago.

The thing is, you can’t do magic you don’t believe in, and Julie can’t believe that she can just get Romero back.

She slumps against the wall. The bits of her pencil hitting the floor sound very far away.

She slides down bonelessly and stares at the fluorescent lights until her eyes hurt, blurring with the same buzzing in her head.

How dare they, she thinks.

How dare they use him against her. How dare they offer her what they can’t give. How dare they use such laughable methodology and shaky logic to make her reason out all the ways she’ll never see Romero again.

Something changes. A stillness, like the bob of a pendulum at the height of its swing.

Despite the buzzing she’s suddenly aware that her hands hurt from clenching so tightly, that three of the bulbs in the ceiling are burnt out, that the security camera waits motionlessly. That somewhere nearby, there’s the rush of running water, and now a new sound, the quiet crackle of static, building from the faintest whisper to a dull roar to—

“...The stages of grief,” says Cecil Palmer from her intercom. “Denial, sadness, despair, and the
final step: vengeance. Welcome… to Night Vale.”

The pieces come together, and the buzzing pours out her like an ion cascade, leaving nothing but an electric anger.

She scrambles to her feet and snarls, “I’ll show you grief, you miserable pieces of shit.”

Julie usually works alone, but sometimes, your best results come from having a partner.

~*~*~*~

She kicks her chair into the corner of the room closest to the direction of the running water. It wobbles alarmingly when she climbs on top of the seat and then the arms, but does not collapse. She pushes the ceiling tiles upwards, out of their frames and then off to the side.

Like she thought, the cinderblock walls don’t extend all the way up to the structural ceiling; there’s a half-meter of clearance, when there’s not pipes or wiring in the way. She grabs the top of the wall and, pushing herself off the back of the chair, lunges upward.

The chair crashes to the floor below her as her noodle arms protest the indignity of being used for things other than typing and lifting coffee pots, but propelled by sheer rage and some deeply undignified wriggling, she manages to drape herself over the top of the wall like a sack of laundry. She pries up a ceiling tile on the other side, desperately trying not to lose her balance and hoping that she isn’t going to discover her hypothesis is wrong by finding government cheese chatting below about how to further ruin her life.

The good news: her hypothesis is correct. The occupant of the room next to her is none other than Carlos.

The bad news: he’s unconscious, dangling from the ceiling like a side of beef that’s been thoroughly tenderized by Sylvester Stallone, underneath a vigorous stream of water running down to the drain in the floor.

“Carlos!” she hisses.

He doesn’t respond. Her anger takes on an uncomfortable prickling of fear.

She sticks her head back above the tiles and traces the path of the water pipe. It passes not too far from her on its way to Carlos and – yes, there’s an emergency shut-off valve. She stretches for it.

It’s just out of reach.

She growls and strains her arm, leaning precariously away from the wall. Her fingers graze the lever; just a few more centimeters and she can—

Her grip on the wall slips and she topples forward. She flails and catches the pipe, but it’s too late: gravity asserts its dominance of local physics with a vengeance. She falls off the wall entirely, yanking the pipe first from its moorings and then from its fittings, and they all smash through the tile ceiling.

She hits the ground with an hollow thud and a lot of swearing, at both the pain and the water from the broken pipe jetting directly into her face.

There’s a groan in response.
“Carlos!” she says again. Fuck, she should be quieter. Then again, it’s a little late to not make a ruckus.

She scrambles across the room, slipping on the wet linoleum and wrenching her already-bruised knee. Carlos doesn’t look much better up close. His hair is plastered to his scalp, rivulets of water dripping from it to his lab coat. Some of them are tinged pink with blood. Besides the collection of bruises speckling his face, he’s pale underneath his tan and his lips have gone blue. He’s suspended from a hook in the ceiling by a pair of handcuffs, and even from here she can see how they’re cutting into his wrists. Julie feels another surge of rage and hopes that he was responsible for each and every injury to the feds. She hopes they hurt.

He twitches feebly.

“Hey, hey,” she says, slapping his less-bruised cheek a few times. “It’s all right. Rise and shine, sleeping beauty.”

His eyes flutter open. “Julie?”

“Who else would it be?”

“Julie,” he says again, voice cracking. “You’re alive?”

Her stomach lurches. “I – yeah,” she says. “I’m fine.” She tries to smile reassuringly, then realizes that might just freak him out more. “The feds can’t kill me. I’m too full of spite.”

He blinks at her slowly. “The… feds?” he asks.

“Shit, how hard did you hit your head?” She scowls and stands on her tiptoes to poke at his scalp, looking for the head wound.

“Ow!” He gives himself a little shake. And then another, and starts to shiver. “It’s fine, it’s… It’s just a cut. You – you’re okay?”

“Just peachy,” says Julie.

“Right, good. The feds, okay. Are we…”

“In their headquarters attached to Lenny’s. It’s October 19, 2015,” says Julie. She puts her hand on his forehead. It’s clammy (unsurprising) and cold. “Christ, only you could get hypothermia in the desert. What happened?”

“Your panic button,” he says. “Knew they’d… try something. But they got the jump on me.”

“Idiot,” she says. “You couldn’t figure out it was a trap?”

“I knew it was a trap,” says Carlos. “I just didn’t think it would, you know. Work.” His arms shift and he grimaces. “I’m stuck.”

“You’re hanging from a meat hook,” she says.

He cranes his neck upwards. “Lift me up,” he says.

“I have spaghetti arms, hello,” says Julie. “We can’t all bench-press our boyfriend.”

“We can’t stay. It’s too dangerous.” He grimaces and twists his hands until he’s holding on to the chain connecting the cuffs. “You lift, I’ll pull.”
“Ugh,” says Julie, but grabs his legs – his brace poking her in the shoulder, ow – and heaves upwards with all her might, which is not much. It’s easy to tell the exact moment he stops pulling and frees his cuffs from the hook, because that’s the moment Julie drops him and they both crash to the ground.

After they each stop whimpering, Julie says, “I can’t believe you got captured by people who put us next door to each other.”

Carlos lets out a feeble snort. “It’s not that big a building. And I don’t think they thought you’d want to escape.”

“How—” She cuts herself off.

You can save him. Julie concentrates on rubbing her elbow and trying to control her breathing. After a moment, she says, “They’ve got a time machine and shit, I assume you’re not onboard with that.”

“Right. I need to stop them,” says Carlos, and doesn’t try to change the subject back. Thank god.

She climbs to her feet and offers him a hand. “We need to get you out of those cuffs. Let’s go.”

After much struggling and swearing, they both manage to climb over the wall into the room beyond Carlos’. Not only is it a supply closet, filled with useful things like coils of wire and wrenches and acetylene torches, but its door is unlocked.

“What next?” Julie asks, shoving a face shield at Carlos. She puts on one as well and picks up a torch; the hoses and flashback arrestors appear to be sound. It shouldn’t take long to melt through the chain of Carlos’ handcuffs.

She maybe could have used one of the smaller screwdrivers to pick the lock, but her hands are still shaking and also, she’s not exactly in a subtle mood.

“We’re finding an exit and getting you out of here,” says Carlos, holding out his arms and pulling the chain taut.

She snorts and fires up the torch. “Try again.”

“Julie—”

“Don’t ‘Julie’ me,” she snaps. “One – you look like shit. Two – all those feds, all those flamingos – they were meant for me. Countless people have gotten into trouble, or gotten hurt, or gotten killed, because these assholes want my brain. Well, if they want it, they’ve got it, and they’re going to pay for it.”

“Julie—”

“I’m not going to leave, Carlos.” The chain separates, links still glowing red-hot. “I’m going to destroy them.”

“Julie.”

She looks up; he’s refusing to meet her eyes, as usual, but he’s staring at her left ear, which is about as close as he ever gets.
“Will you follow my lead?” he asks.

“What for?”

“Anything,” he says. “Will you follow my lead?”

The torch is still burning, a tiny jet of bright blue. So destructive, yet so useful. She shuts it off.

“Yeah,” she says.

“Alright,” says Carlos. “Then we’ll do this together.”

“Great,” she snaps, shoving past him.

She starts pocketing a toolset, a spool of wire, the torch and its fun-size gas tanks – anything that looks useful. Carlos hovers by the door, listening intently. Wait, no – not listening. Or if he is listening, it’s to weird shit. Her life, honestly.

“Where are they?” she asks.

Carlos stares off, eyes unfocused, for a moment more. Then he gives his head a little shake and snorts softly. “They’re dealing with the perimeter. We’ve got a little time.”

“Good,” she says. She ties a rope to a small stepladder, picks it up, and stomps into the hallway.

As she suspected, they’re able to use it to climb through the drop ceiling and over the security door into the lab, because no matter how matter how fancy and futuristic your technology is, people are still idiots.

“Madre de Dios,” Carlos mutters when he sees the lab, running a hand over his face.

“Is it… bad?” Julie asks. He’s a little steadier now that he’s up and moving, but he still looks awful.

“It’s ugly,” he says. He turns and helps her haul the stepladder over the door with the rope. “This punches holes through time instead of connecting them through the K— instead of connecting them.”

Julie catches the backtracking, but only asks, “Is that dangerous?”

He puts the ladder down, then raises a shoulder in a half-shrug. “They both have their drawbacks.”

“Can you stop it?”

“No, but we can,” he says. Then he ruins the effect by adding, “I hope. Can you wipe their mainframe?”

“Wipe their mainframe,” repeats Julie. “You know, despite everything, I still held out hope that one day you would actually learn something about computers.”

“I know stuff about computers,” says Carlos, hurt. “...Some computers. Anyway, you know what I mean.”

Julie grunts.

“Great!” he says. “You’re the Thorne to my Novikov, Julie.”
She stares at him incredulously. “Carlos, I have seen a lot of weird shit,” she says. “But I refuse to believe there’s any universe where you get to be the Novikov in this relationship.”

He opens his mouth, closes it, then finally says, “All I'm saying is you better get wiping on that mainframe.”

“No you're doing it on purpose,” she grumbles, but she’s already considering her task. She can probably compromise the actual machines, but if the cheese has anything stored remotely…

Most of the computers are on, just locked into sleep mode. Interestingly, none of them seem to be reacting to Carlos and his technology death field. She frowns, then starts searching desk drawers.

She finds a password scrawled on a post-it note in desk number three. She’d bet fifty bucks it belongs to Agent Connors. She increases her wager to a hundred after it proves to be the same password for his computer, his email, eleven databases, and the custom software programs.

Out of curiosity, she launches FLAMINGO.exe.

It should be pure chaos: equations with unfamiliar symbolic notation, a half-dozen rotating four-dimensional sets, model after model of the spontaneous breakdown of topological supersymmetry. These are the tools of the suits’ trade, she realizes; not a time machine, but its operating system.

It’s… beautiful.

She looks over at Carlos. He’s muttering, or possibly chanting, to himself while he carefully removes vacuum tubes.

When she looks back, all the equations have changed. Of course they have, they would have to be four-dimensional too – the Lorentz transformations should – yes, and the information from that light cone should transmit to this function and—

There’s a loud crack! and Julie jumps.

“Sorry,” says Carlos cheerfully, tossing one of the wall-mounted keyboards to the floor. A second soon joins it, and he starts humming along with an advertising jingle on the radio.

Julie looks back at the computer, gnawing at her lip. She doesn’t trust the suits out of her sight, much less out of her time; they can’t continue to have access to this, obviously.

But… does that mean no one can?

Julie has no issues with stealing the intellectual property she was kidnapped to work on. The question is should she. Yes, it’s been awkwardly and probably dangerously grafted on to this point of history, by people with only a passing familiarity with the words professional ethics.

But…

The advances to particle physics – quantum mechanics – chaos theory – hell, even biophysics – alone could make her career. She’d have funding for life.

And even more than that – this would open up the avenues to so much research. Her and hundreds of others, blazing into new fields, racing ahead with leaps and bounds. With just a fraction of this information, she could revolutionize science as they know it.

The thought of destroying all of this information twists her stomach.
It might be assembled together again in the future. *Might be.* But right now? It’s like the scientific method all over again, except an order of magnitude worse: at least there, the information wasn’t lost. Just… relabeled.

All this would be gone.

*I won’t get in your way,* said Steiner. *I want to see what you’ll do and how you do it. I’m here to learn from the best, after all.*

The best. Is that what she is, in the future? When and how did she become the best?

How much more does she have to lose? Why is it up to her to take make this decision?

Why does she have to take care of it?

“Hey,” says Carlos.

With a jolt, she realizes his humming has stopped. “What,” she says, keeping her eyes on the screen.

“I’m sorry they did this to you.”

She shuts her eyes. She can still see the fractals from the program, twisting in on themselves, evolving with each passing moment.

Julie opens her eyes and looks over at him. “Not as sorry as they’re going to be,” she says.

She takes care of it.

After all, time isn't real.

Chapter End Notes

It's here: your latest installment of *I'm Bad At Estimating Story Length!* The good news is there's definitely only two chapters left, which I know because I wrote them. They will be posted according to my usual strict schedule (erratically, without warning).

As always, thanks to my intrepid beta Ginipig! And extra thanks for dealing with chapter 6, because uuuuuuuuuuuugh chapter 6 uuuuuuuuuuuugh.

ETA: leaving this here for reasons completely unrelated to me forgetting to delete my own editing notes from the final draft haha who would do that not me
THE VOICE OF NIGHT VALE

CECIL: …and a highlight of my childhood was certainly the fairy tales my mother used to tell me: charming bedtime stories like “The Boy Who Wanted to Know Everything,” or “The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage,” or “The City on the Edge of Forever”. All children know that monsters are real, but fairy tales teach you that monsters can be defeated – though probably not until after they’ve eaten someone important, like a roommate, a grandmother, or you yourself.

[cell phone chimes]

Oh! Breaking news, listeners. Intern Sheila was following up on the environmental cleanup efforts after Cactus Jane’s annual Shakespeare in the Pit Festival, and apparently something very strange is going on at Lenny’s Hardware right next door. She says— Hmm. Sorry, listeners, Sheila’s texts have started arriving all out of order. Some of them are pretty scrambled, too, like when you're typing too quickly for your lagging device and an errant brush against your touchscreen dooms the second half of your sentence – already tapped out by your flying fingers, but yet to manifest in reality, caught in the limbo between action and consequence – to transpose itself into the first half, and though you grind your teeth in frustration at the prospect of having to type it all out again, slowly and painstakingly, you've yet to realize that even this unpleasant choice has been taken away from you because you accidentally hit ‘Send’ already.

Okay, I think I've got it. Sheila’s... first?... text says, “Lenny’s has turned on all their garden fountains,” followed by “The door opened and nothing came out.”

Then she says, “Something is wrong with the dust. It should not be moving like that, but it is,” and, “I can't see. I can't see anything. The landscape has been smeared across the horizon.”

Then we have, “It shouldn't be that big. Nothing should be that big,” and… oh dear.

This one says, “Oh, god, I can feel it. It's happening again. There's something wrong with time.” Then she repeats, in all caps, “THERE'S SOMETHING WRONG WITH TIME,” followed by, “What have they done. What have they done.”

And what must be her final text says… uh… “Lenny’s is closed today.” Bummer. We’re almost out of bear traps, and I was hoping to pick up some of their cute lawn ornaments.

More on this story as it develops. Before we return to our segment on fairy tales, let's have a word from our— [static] My apologies, lis— [static] having some technical difficulties— [static] a word from our sponsors:

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

[static]

~*-~*-~*-~

The Scientist, the Fairy Queen, and the Man in the Tan Jacket
Once upon a time, there was a brilliant scientist. In the wee hours of the morning of the twentieth of October, she got up from her desk (for she had not slept) and thought, “Today is a good day to die.”

This was not because she truly believed it was a good day to die, but because if she did perish, then at least her final thought could be I told you so.

The scientist had before her that day a very difficult quest. She lived in a place called Night Vale, and though she wished for nothing more than to practice her science, person after person and creature after creature had come to her town and stirred up trouble until there was hardly any room for her to think. The latest of these was a quarrel between the man in the tan jacket – a person with no name, known only by briefcase full of flies and the confused void of memory he left in his wake – and the rulers of Winter – fairy queens of awesome and terrible power. Though she was loathe to get involved, the scientist had spared some thought to discovering how to end their feud, for it was very distracting.

Nothing might have come of it, but for the chance that Night Vale now seemed to her unnaturally silent, recovering as well as it could from a perilous battle in the very currents of time: one that she herself had taken part in. She could not – or rather, would not – change the past, but it vexed her greatly to do nothing when she had already devised a solution for a problem, even if it was about that good-for-nothing man in a tan jacket. And thus it was that she resolved to undertake the quest.

She wished she did not have to go alone, for the road before her was full of peril and toil alike. But she would not endanger those who followed her leadership, and her friend the wizard had gone to his rest, so she knew there was no one to trust but herself.

The scientist gathered about her all that she would need for the journey: a gallon of milk, white as snow; a potted plant with a crooked ribbon; several surveys, just in case; and a number of cunning devices wrought of science, quite inimical to fairies (and anyone standing in their immediate vicinity). However, the most powerful thing she brought with her were not objects, but words: from a dread lawyer, a brave wizard, and mightiest of all, herself.

And so the scientist donned her lab coat (which had no special power, but which did have many useful pockets), picked up her bag, and set forth on her quest alone.

~~*~~*~~*~~

19-October-2015

Julie starts hooking the sprinklers back into the water supply when she’s finished with everything on the computers. It’s too late to change her mind about the fate of the feds’ research, even if she wanted to, but whatever else happens they definitely don’t get to keep their hardware.

“How’s it going?” asks Carlos. He’s delicately disconnecting wires from the small rectangular prism set in the wall.

“They’ll have a fun surprise the next time they try to run their programs,” says Julie. “…Assuming there’s anything left to run them on. The sprinklers are online, I figured we could flood the lab on our way out.” She thinks of something else. “Do you think we’ll have time to get back down to the basement?”

Carlos stares off into the distance, then blinks with a shudder. “Maybe,” he says. “Why?”

“Grand finale,” says Julie.
Carlos grins. “Can you drain the accumulators, too? I don’t want to be caught off guard if they manage to keep something for backup.”

“Sure,” says Julie. “I’ll splice them into the general power supply; that should empty them pretty quick.” She gets off the stepladder and heads over to the accumulators. Carlos turns his attention to the vacuum tubes after detaching one last lead from the prism, leaving only a single blue wire running from it into the rusty-black rock. The red glow has nearly faded.

Julie pulls open a control panel on one of the accumulators and is hit by an almost-physical wave of irritation. “I knew it!” she splutters. “This is my design!”

“Is it?” says Carlos, very unconvincingly.

Julie glares at him. “Barely. Did they glue this together?”

“It certainly lacks the quiet elegance of duct tape,” says Carlos.

She throws a screwdriver at him. It misses by several feet and he chuckles.

It’s short work to reconfigure the accumulators; plagiarism has its benefits. Carlos gets her into the basement by the simple expedient of dissolving a hole in the floor and dropping the ladder down for her, meaning she gets ten whole minutes of quality time with the hot water heater.

He’s helping her back up the stepladder when his head swivels towards the front of the building.

“We’re out of time,” he says, and yanks her out of the hole and onto the floor.

She shrieks as her ass hits the tiles with a thud, but it’s drowned out by shouting from the basement. Carlos slams one hand on the ground and shouts, “K’ak’is ch’en!”

For a second, it seems like nothing happens except for the air growing heavy around her.

Then the weight disappears and ice explodes across the floor with a crack like a gunshot, sealing the hole. Through it, she sees a bloom of fiery light.

More shouting, this time from the hallway. But when she looks over at the door, its indicators have gone dark behind the thick layer of ice coating it, too, stretching up and across the ceiling for several feet.

Carlos straightens up and grins at her. The air has gone thin and dry: even Julie’s labcoat isn’t damp anymore, the water sucked away and frozen to the floor. Her hair is trying to escape her ponytail and stand on end from all the static building up.

“I hope you didn’t freeze the water pipes,” says Julie.

“They should be fine; they come in over by the wall,” he says, giving her a hand up and zapping her in the process. More static, she assumes, unless Carlos wants to die painfully.

“You better have an exit strategy,” she says as she follows him across the room. Gunfire echoes hollowly from the ice-encrusted metal of the security door, making her flinch. “I devoted all of my time to sabotage.”

“I always have an exit strategy,” he says airily.

“A good exit strategy,” says Julie.
“One could argue that any strategy that gets you a successful exit is by definition a good exit strategy,” he replies.

“One could argue that next time you’re in charge of digging your own damn self out of the rubble,” says Julie.

He tilts his head. “Oh, yeah,” he says after a second, then, “Heh, I forgot about that.”

“I didn’t,” grumbles Julie. “You jacked up my shoulder, asshole.”

“Sorry,” he says. He actually sounds sincere. “We’re going out that door,” he says, gesturing at the security door in the back of the room. “Things might get a little… weird, when I disconnect the time machine, but don’t worry, you’ll be safe. Set off the sprinklers at my mark. We’ll make a break for it as soon as I get the door open. They’ll probably have their garden fountains operational, so make sure you stay behind me.”

“Garden fountains,” says Julie flatly.

“Machine gun turrets,” says Carlos.

“Right, of course,” says Julie. “Exactly what you need from a home improvement and pseudoscience emporium.”

“We don’t want to stay out in the open long, so we’ll head around the back of the lab, then cut through the warehouse,” Carlos continues. “After that, we’ll… strategize from there.”

“So our plan is to dodge multiple machine gun turrets, invade the place we’re trying to leave, and then make it up as we go along,” says Julie. “Sounds great, aside from the part where I’m not fucking Rambo.”

“Don’t worry. I got it,” he says, flashing her a confident grin. It would be more reassuring if he had about twelve fewer bruises on his face. “Ready?”

“What would you do if I said no,” says Julie, but she gets out her acetylene torch and takes her place under one of the sprinklers. Carlos takes up position by the back wall, hand hovering over the black rectangular prism in the center. It looks, she realizes, exactly like the time machine they rescued from Jackie’s pawn shop the other week. Same model? Or same device? Would you even need to make more than one time machine, or just distribute the same one at multiple points in a timestream?

“Here we go,” says Carlos, then... starts to hum one of the commercial jingle from the radio.

Julie shoots him an incredulous look, but he just motions for her to get started and keeps humming. She positions the torch under the sprinkler head and, in lieu of a thumbs up, gives him the finger.

He shouts “K’as pa’!” and yanks the prism out of the wall.

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THE VOICE OF NIGHT VALE

CECIL: … whereas fairy tales are typically classified under a motif-index, which assigns them a kingdom, phylum, class, order, family, genus, and species based on their plot, character archetypes, and social norms to which they pressure their audiences to conform.
Fairy tales were traditionally meant for all audiences. However, their whimsical portrayal of rural life, feudalism, and shocking violence naturally associated them with children, and a highlight of my childhood was certainly the fairy tales my mother used to tell me: charming bedtime stories like “The Boy Who Wanted to Know Everything,” or “The Mouse, the Bird, and the Sausage,” or “The City on the Edge of Forever.” All children know that monsters are real, but fairy tales… teach you that monsters…

Sorry, listeners, I’m a little… distracted right now. As you know, we’ve been experiencing some temporal difficulties. I’ve tried calling Carlos, but I haven’t been able to reach his cell phone, and there’s no answer at the lab…

[forced chuckle] Well, I’m sure everything’s fine, and that even as we speak, Night Vale’s finest scientists are working to resolve these issues.

[cell phone chimes] Oh! Breaking news, listeners. Intern Sheila was following up on the environmental cleanup efforts after Cactus Jane’s annual Shakespeare in the Pit Festival, and apparently something very strange is going on at Lenny’s Hardware right next door. She says—

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The Scientist, the Fairy Queen, and the Man in the Tan Jacket

As the scientist left her laboratory and traveled along the public sidewalk, she grew more and more troubled. One part of this was because she traveled alone, but a greater part was because she knew she faced three trials: the journey to King City, which would test her bravery; her audience with the man in the tan jacket, which would test her scholarship; and their journey back to Night Vale, which would test every part of her wits, wisdom, and will.

However, the greatest part of her trouble in this moment was the storm, small in stature, that dogged her every step. She did not like the rain.

At the street corner the scientist came across three men, all alike. They were dressed all in black but for their green aprons and carried trays of miniature sample cups in their arms. Each bore upon the chest a carefully decorated name tag that said TROY WALSH.

“What are you supposed to be?” asked the scientist. She partook of a fancy latte sample and grimaced at the non-coffee ingredients interfering with her caffeine intake.

“I’m a barista,” said Troy Walsh.

“Say, you wouldn’t need to hire one for the day, would you?” asked another Troy, his voice full of hope and longing.

The scientist looked around. More Troy Walshes loitered on the corner of each block, stretching as far as the eye could see. A sea of free coffee-like beverages, though at what cost, she could not say.

However, the scientist decided this sounded like someone else’s problem.

“I don’t need a barista,” she said, drinking again from the samples of fancy lattes. She stretched forth her hand and timed how long it took the tiny cup to fill with rainwater. “I do have a job for you, though. And by job, I mean unfinished business.”

At this, the Troys seemed greatly disturbed.
“I don’t follow,” said Troy Walsh.

“I had an interesting discussion with Diane Crayton last night,” said the scientist. “You know, your ex.”

Troy Walsh looked down at his feet.

“And then I had an interesting discussion with Josh Crayton and Jackie Fierro,” the scientist continued. “You know, your ex-children.”

Troy Walsh hung his head in shame.

“I’m going to King City,” said the scientist. “And I think you should come with me.”

At this, Troy Walsh and Troy Walsh and Troy Walsh were greatly amazed and tried to raise their voices in astonishment.

“Not all of you,” said the scientist, cutting off their interruption. “Just two.”

“They didn’t really want my help in King City,” said Troy Walsh.

“They didn’t want an infinite number of you from infinite timelines warping local space time and dimensional stability in King City,” said the scientist. “Which – how did you even do that?”

Troy Walsh shrugged, for he had not a clue.

“Typical,” muttered the scientist. “Well? Are you coming?”

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19-October-2015

Time goes… weird.

Like she’s watching light waves distorting underwater, but she’s not watching it, she’s experiencing it: consecutive events warping and bending in frequency and wavelength. Pulling the trigger to the acetylene torch seems to take less than a heartbeat, but she feels like she can count each individual drop of water as they’re expelled from the sprinkler heads. Carlos is dropping the black rectangular prism in his lab coat pocket even as the refrain from his song is still echoing in her ears. She’s across the room and right behind him as he raises his bad leg to kick down the door, and she watches brilliant green light seep out of the metal of his brace, glowing brighter and brighter.

Carlos’ foot impacts the door just as time zips back in like a temperamental Venetian blind.

The door flies outwards in a burst of light, not so much kicked down as forcibly expelled from the doorframe at dozens of meters per second. There’s a moment of shocked silence, or maybe one last gasp of the timeless universe, as the metal slams into the closest water feature.

Carlos whoops, grabs Julie by the elbow, and hauls her out of the building at a dead run right as the gunfire starts.

She flinches and stumbles, but nothing hits them – the bullets explode into dust against the dome of glassy green light that surrounds them, the metallic fragments rippling out in shimmering concentric circles like a fireworks display. The sound is muted a little, but it still sounds like being inside a drumhead while someone drops dried beans on the membrane.
They round the back of the lab; she can see the side of the warehouse in front of them. Unfortunately, she can also see two more water features rotating to train their guns on them.

“’T’s okay!” shouts Carlos, steadying her with one hand as they haul ass towards the warehouse. The other is held before him, bits of metal gleaming in his leather gloves, the same color as the glow still emanating from his leg brace. “You’re doing great!”

“Fuck you!” shrieks Julie, a little unjustly. She doesn’t want to yell at Carlos, it’s just so… so loud.

She’s almost sobbing with exertion and rage by the time they reach the building, so naturally, the doors are locked.

“Can you get it?” calls Carlos.

“Not all of us can kick down doors!” she grits out. They’re back-to-back, except they’re not doing equal shares of fighting, Carlos is facing all their enemies and holding off all their fire and shielding Julie with his assortment of bulletproof garments and his own body, and Julie is standing there, useless. She plunges her hands into her pockets and comes out with the acetylene torch. “Y-yeah, I think—”

There’s a particularly loud boom and she flinches.

“Don’t worry, it’s just a small RPG,” says Carlos – voice a little strained, but cheerful.

“I – I’m more into MMORPGs, myself,” she manages, fumbling with her safety glasses. Her hands are still shaking as she slices through the deadbolt, but they don’t need to be that steady, do they.

“I got it,” she says, after what seems like a thousand years but is barely a few moments.

“Great,” he says. “Stay close.”

With that, his shield contracts abruptly, growing more prolate as it pulls in around them. He holds it even as they shuffle through the door and doesn’t drop it until they’re several feet off to the side. He waves a hand and the door slams shut.

Julie starts giggling uncontrollably.

“What,” says Carlos.

“S-suddenly I have a refreshing mint flavor,” she gasps out.

“Keep it together, Kwan,” he says, not unkindly. Then his head jerks around as a door slams shut somewhere else in the warehouse.

He puts a finger to his lips and takes her by the elbow. Julie gulps, then nods, and they set off, staying low and moving as quietly as possible. A faint glow still emanates from Carlos’ leg brace; she hopes it’s because he’s doing some kind of magic to amp up their cover, and not because he can’t turn it off. Regardless, he doesn’t let go of her elbow and she’s glad.

Julie strains her ears, but she can’t hear anything over the sound of her harsh breathing and her blood thundering through her veins. Hopefully Carlos is having better luck. Or maybe he can use his sixth eye mumbo jumbo. Although he did once tell her (very cheerfully, what is wrong with him) that staring at the true nature of things permanently imprints them on your psyche, so you had to be careful what you looked at, and Julie thinks that whatever surplus is being sold by these chucklefucks is probably not remotely safe, and what if he looks at the wrong thing and—
“Steiner, have you found them yet?”

Julie jumps and bumps into a display of snail poison. The voice was heavily distorted and crackly with static – a walkie talkie – and it was close, nearly level with them, only two or three aisles away.

To her horror, she realizes that one of the round globes of snail poison has rolled off its display. She watches, frozen, as it tips off the edge of the shelf.

Carlos lunges past her and catches it. He wobbles on his bad leg and Julie grabs him. They balance there like they’re playing the world’s worst game of Twister.

“—and nothing yet,” Steiner is saying, sounding bored. “Are you sure they came in here?”

Carlos straightens and relaxes with an inaudible sigh. He places the snail poison in one of the pockets of his lab coat (not the one with the prism). Julie covers her face with both hands and wishes, briefly but intensely, that he had just let her get eaten by whatever came out of the vortex and unexploded the other week, because at least then this would all be over with.

“They entered through the north entrance two minutes ago,” comes the terse reply. “Shouldn’t you be able to use your—”

“In here? Hell no,” says Steiner. “Do you want me to file a mental safety violation report?”

The walkie crackles with an annoyed sigh. “We know he can create optical and auditory hallucinations—”

“No shit,” says Steiner. “But I’ve got nothing on the infrared, either.”

Carlos nudges her with his elbow, but when she looks up at him, he just gives her a smug grin. She rolls her eyes.

He jerks his head towards the entrance and they set off again, leaving the imperfect cover of the metal shelves for the nonexistent cover of the front of the warehouse. The beam from Steiner’s flashlight sweeps over them.

“What about the other one? How much longer will the displacement last?” Steiner asks, sounding bored. The light desultorily moves on and she turns away, peering under some shelves.

“Minutes. The interference at the perimeter…”

Their conversation fades into unintelligibility as Steiner stalks down the aisle. Carlos pauses at the door, listening intently. Then he looks down at her.

Ready? he mouths.

This spike of adrenaline is cold, uncomfortable. Julie clenches her fists and nods.

Instead of kicking this door down, or blasting a hole through it, or ripping it off its hinges and hitting someone with it, Carlos gently depresses the crash bar and eases it open. He peeks out, then pushes it open a little wider and shimmies through.

Julie follows him outside, and they emerge in front of Lenny’s. There’s no cover out here, either: just wide open desert and four garden fountains. She can see the barrels of machine guns sticking out of slits in the head-high armored walls, in the shadow of the tacky Italianate (well, Italianish)
water features floating above.

The ground is dry, hard-packed dirt with a few rocks to make things interesting, stretching from the warehouse past the garden fountains, between the mining pit and the roped-off area that serves as a parking lot. A few desperate tumbleweeds cling here and there. Julie keeps a paranoid eye on her feet, willing them not to kick up too much dust and give away their position once it hits the edge of Carlos’ Jedi mind trick. A gust of wind sprays her with debris and she glares at him.

But as they draw closer to one of the garden fountains, an unpleasant roiling starts in her stomach. What is Carlos planning on doing when he gets there? It’s probably something violent, she concludes with a distinct lack of enthusiasm. Julie’s not exactly a pacifist, and the feds deserve everything they have coming to them, but – it’s not like she goes around vaporizing everyone she meets. Yes, these people kidnapped her, broke the laws of magic and common sense, have proven to be incredibly dangerous, and tried to use Romero against her. But she knows their faces and names (well, fake names) and is going to have to watch them get hurt, possibly die, right in front of her.

She can already picture it, because she knows exactly what it looks like when someone’s life, everything they were and one day might be, disappears in front of you in an irrevocable flash of light. She was the one who disappeared it. She would shoot Dr. Raith again in a heartbeat, but she still remembers that flash of light.

They creep around the outside of the garden fountain; at least now they’re hidden from the other three. She can hear Agent Connors inside.

“Yes, there’s no sign of them out here, either!” he’s saying into the radio, voice laden with frustration. His back is to the entryway. “Are you sure he didn’t open a dimensional rift into the Neverne—”

By the time she remembers what the tiny downdraft sweeping down her neck means, it’s already too late.

“Way!” barks Carlos, a split second before her startled “Fuck!”, but Agent Connors had hit the deck at the first crack of minuscule lightning from her stormcloud. Carlos’ spell passes over his head and crackles against the fountain’s control panels.

Agent Connors comes up holding some sort of gun that looks like a dustbuster and fires.

It splatters against Carlos’ shield. But instead of leaving bullet fragments swirling harmlessly apart, it’s like thousands of tiny sparks sticking to green glass, eating it away.

Agent Connors fires again.

“What the fuck!” shrieks Julie, as a spray of something flies past her, stinging her face.

“Sorry, Juliet!” calls Agent Connors, letting off two more blasts. They go wide, pulled off by the recoil; the dustbuster clearly isn’t made for people with one arm still in a sling. Carlos grabs her with his free hand and pulls her inside, behind him. They circle around the turret, staying in perfect symmetry: Agent Connors, Carlos, Julie. “It will just neutralize the entropic interference, I promise —”

Carlos drops the shield and charges. Julie ducks on general principles, which is good, because a dustbuster blast splatters against the turret wall right above her.

“Sorry!” Agent Connors calls, and then grunts as he and Carlos hit the ground.
His dustbuster skids off and bounces against the wall. Julie scrambles for it as Agent Connors follows suit.

“Stop!”

She has the dustbuster pointed at him, but he’s holding something out in his hand: his own ball of snail poison.

“Hah!” he says, flicking the cap back with his thumb and revealing the trigger. “I think this means you better put that down and come with me.”

Carlos stares at it from where he’s still sprawled on the ground, then collapses back on his elbows in all apparent exhaustion. “Madre de Dios, what is wrong with you?” he says.

“You better not risk it, Wizard Ramirez,” says Agent Connors as he climbs to his feet. “Juliet?”

She looks at Carlos, then slowly puts the dustbuster back on the ground.

“Now get up,” says Agent Connors to Carlos. His thumb wiggles warningly against the trigger. “If you give yourselves up and—”

“Perimeter breach!” Agent White shouts over the radio.

As if that's some kind of signal, there’s a flash and everything around them blurs into a throbbing haze, like the entire world has turned into an inside-out eyelid. Someone grabs her arm and pulls her into a run.

“C-carlos?” she gasps, trying to find whatever it was that breached the perimeter, but – hell, she'd settle for just finding something solid to look at. There’s no horizon line, no consistent light source, just a nauseating blurred and swirling ruin of the landscape.

“Still me,” he gasps back. “Hasta la vista, baby.” They’re not running as fast as they were before.

She hears a spray of machine gun fire, and Carlos tackles her to the ground.

There’s dust up her nose and blood in her mouth; her stomach churns. This close, at least, she can make out most of Carlos and the ground below her without it fully blurring into incomprehensibility. Carlos is half-crushing her into the dirt, with… his arm raised? Raised, and probably holding up this optical fuckery. Of course he had to go and make things more dramatically complicated.

“Get off me,” she hisses.

“Shh!”

Another burst of the guns, followed by a yelp.

“Stop firing!” she hears Agent White scream – out loud, not just over a radio. “Does anyone have clear visuals?”

“Um… I’ve been hit…” The voice isn’t familiar. McKee, probably. “I’m returning to my fountain now—”

“Idiot! This is my fountain!”

“Steiner? Steiner, we need you to use your Si—”
“Fuck, no! Visual input in this town is bad enough. I’m not going to permanently imprint—”

Carlos’ arm is starting to shake, his expression strained. But the haze holds steady, or rather swirls disconcertingly but at a steady rate; if Julie hadn’t been squished into one place by a very heavy wizard, she’d wouldn't be able to tell up from down. The suits must have it worse.

Still – while the haze is keeping them from firing, Carlos doesn’t seem like he’s in any condition to start sprinting again. They might be hidden, but they’re still trapped, and he hasn't told her what they’re running from or where they’re running to or anything useful.

“We can’t stay here,” she whispers. All it takes is one stray bullet and—

“Just wait,” says Carlos. She can tell his teeth are gritted.

“For what?”

He doesn’t answer. A bead of sweat rolls off his face; Julie sees it plop in the dust in front of her nose.

Then something explodes.

“Hah!” shouts Carlos, and yanks Julie to her feet. The haze disappears. Under cover of his glassy green dome, they both stumble towards the nearest garden fountain – the one McKee abandoned, Julie hopes.

There’s a shout. Agent Connors starts towards them, only about 30 meters away.

Something small drops out of the sky, bounces off the ground between them, and explodes.

Julie flinches and nearly trips. Minuscule cracks run over the dome of Carlos’ shield as it catches shrapnel and absorbs the shock wave, but they’re gone in a few seconds, the glassy surface smoothing out. It catches a few more bullets from a scattering of fire, but now the suits are shouting frantically at one another as Agent Connors picks himself up and staggers towards the cover of the nearest garden fountain.

One of its walls explodes. A few pieces of shrapnel disintegrate in Carlos’ shield.

“What is that?” shouts Julie.

“Grenades!” says Carlos happily as they reach their fountain. He shoves her inside – it’s empty, fortunately – and they both collapse, panting.

“Whose—”

She cuts off in a shriek as someone leaps over the turret wall and lands beside her.

“Hasta la vista, baby,” says Carlos. “I really wish you’d let me change the code phrase.”

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THE VOICE OF NIGHT VALE

CECIL: …previously reported that today was Monday, October 19. However, recent investigations have revealed that we may be up almost a whole week off, and that in all likelihood today is actually last Tuesday, or possibly a Thursday several months from now, and also tomorrow. In the meantime, we will refrain from making assumptions about any potential correlation with the
calendar and prepare ourselves for an existence free of linear progression.

This has be en C o r r e c t i o n

~*~*~*~

**The Scientist, the Fairy Queen, and the Man in the Tan Jacket**

The scientist was pleased, for now she did not have to make all of her journey alone – though still she wished that she might have a faithful companion at her side and not either Troy Walsh, who were basically useless.

After journeying for many minutes, the scientist at last reached the site of her first trial. She was surrounded by bright white light and could hear voices beckoning her. A choir of angels sang in the background.

More prosaically, she stood in front of a parked bus, engine humming, headlights flooding the empty depot. The marquee read KING CITY. Two impossibly tall beings disembarked.

One stretched forth their hand and said, “Thanks for the ride, Molly! Tell your dad we said hi.”

The two angels were majestic of figure and surrounded by a bright black light, though one of them was completely nude. Their name was Erika, as were the names of all angels. Suddenly, in a flash, both angels had disappeared leaving nothing behind but muttered words on the wind: “I used to own my own bus.”

With cautious steps, the scientist came closer to the bus door. Inside she beheld the fair young Lady of Winter, in the dread uniform of the Night Vale Area Transport Authority: the Lady of Winter, whose reputation was one of power and cunning, who like all her kind spoke in riddles and puzzles. This trial, the scientist knew, would test her bravery, for if she could not find the courage to proceed safely at this early stage, she would surely never survive the long road before her.

“Why me?” asked the scientist.

“I know who you’re supposed to go to when you have questions in this town,” said the Lady of Winter. “I’ve listened to the radio.”

“Fine,” said the scientist, and climbed onboard, out of the rain.

The Lady of Winter held out a hand, stopping the scientist where she stood.

“I should probably tell you this is my last leg of the bus route,” said the Lady of Winter. “I won’t be covering the return trip.”

“Who will be?” the scientist asked.

“My… supervisor,” the Lady of Winter replied.

“Do they… supervise… all the employees?” asked the scientist.

The Lady of Winter replied, “You could say that.”

The scientist already grew tired of these riddling words, and that made her even more frightened. She knew full well that to avert the ill will of the fairies, one had to be both clever and courteous.
Cleverness she had in spades, but courtesy… well.

She did not look back, but thought longingly of the door behind her. This was her last chance to depart the bus, to trade the unknown dangers of her journey for the known dangers of the town of Night Vale, to leave the mystery that hounded her behind, all its questions unanswered.

Ignoring the pounding of her heart and the rudeness of Troy Walsh, who crowded behind her on the steps, the scientist instead gave the Lady of Winter her first talisman: the gallon of milk, white as snow.

“Three round trip tickets to King City,” said the scientist.

The Lady of Winter passed her hand over the milk and it disappeared. The scientist and Troy Walsh (both of him) took their seats.

The small storm cloud waited just outside the window, where like a sullen child it pounded its raindrops and threw small hailstones violently to the ground. The scientist turned her gaze from it and surveyed the bus. There was but one other passenger, besides the scientist, Troy Walsh, Troy Walsh, and the Lady of Winter: a man with a tattoo of a cabbage on one arm. He had not roused through any of her conversation with the Lady of Winter, and slumbered still in his seat against the window. The scientist thought to herself that she liked him already.

At their scheduled departure time (such as it was) the Lady of Winter drew forth her powers and in all her might and majesty carefully signalled her turn and exited the depot of buses. They passed through the town and onto the open road, through *impenetrable hellscape* into *southwestern wilderness*, and again, the fear began to curdle in the scientist’s heart.

She turned her thoughts then to the Lady of Winter, in the hopes that this puzzle might calm her.

The Lady of Winter kept her eyes on the road and her hands at ten and two, but the scientist thought she recognized the expression on the Lady of Winter’s face.

Though the Lady of Winter was some ageless immortal of unimaginable power and all-too-imaginable terror, the scientist did know one secret, told to her by the wizard of admirable wisdom and perfect hair: this fairy queen was (or had once been) human, one the same age as the scientist’s own students. And as she thought on it, the scientist was put in mind of those very students, for she had more than enough experience with young adults with burning questions too stubbornly dumb to put aside their petty concerns and just come out and ask them.

And so she took pity on the Lady of Winter and all the questions she had not yet asked and said:

“Have you ever had something you didn’t want to do because it’s not really your job, but you know you have to do it because in some ways it is your job?” asked the scientist. “I don’t want this to be an exchange or anything. I’m just… wondering. Hypothetically.”

The silence stretched out like the road beneath their wheels, and the scientist almost felt as if she should apologize. However, she had never apologized for asking questions before and thought it cowardly she should do so now, just because might get zapped with a fairy freeze ray. And so she held her peace.

At last, the Lady of Winter began to laugh – not happily, with a touch of bitterness and weariness, but it was laughter nonetheless.

The scientist knew exactly what she meant.
“The worst part is,” said the Lady of Winter, “I don’t even know why. Others provide the tribute; I’m just supposed to provide the transportation. But this time, I knew I wanted to help— to help out without even learning the reasons. Like an instinct, but not one that comes with… my job. It’s like… like recognizing a face in the crowd even though it’s someone you’ve never seen before.”

“Do you get a lot of déjà vu?” asked the scientist.

“How do you know that?” asked the Lady of Winter, astonished.

“I’m a practical theoretical physicist,” said the scientist, trying not to shiver in the cold air. “And I’ve gotten a crash course on the multiverse. Maybe you’re hearing the you who knows your reasons.”

“A parallel universe, huh?” said the Lady of Winter. “And me without the sexy gold lamé version of my uniform.”

“You could always grow a beard instead,” said the scientist.

The Lady of Winter laughed again, and the scientist felt her heart lift at the sound. She grabbed it and stuffed it back down where it belonged.

“Well,” said the Lady of Winter, “I hope this version ends better.”

_Shaka when the walls fell_, the scientist thought to herself, but she only replied, “Me, too.”

The Lady of Winter caught her eye for the barest second, but the scientist knew she had discerned something of her thoughts.

“It’s okay to be afraid,” said the Lady of Winter. Before the scientist could reply unwise with sarcasm or untruths like _I’m not afraid_, the Lady of Winter went on, “I mean, that’s probably the smartest response.”

“Figures,” said the scientist.

“But you always have a choice in how you respond,” said the Lady of Winter.

“What, _violate your ethics or die horribly_?” replied the scientist.


“Great,” muttered the scientist, and yet her heart was lightened. For though she might be charging headlong into danger, she at least knew her instincts were working correctly. Her poor life choices were hers and hers alone.

“What about yours?” asked the scientist.

“Mine?” said the Lady of Winter, startled.

“Your choices,” said the scientist.

“I think,” said the Lady of Winter, “that I’ve done all I can.”

“What if you didn’t do it, though,” said the scientist. “What if you refused? Just… stopped the bus, or whatever.”
“If it was just me…” The Lady of Winter shook her head. “I’m not going to let the system fall apart just because I get screwed over. I’ve seen it get close and it was… bad. I can handle it.”

“I’ve never seen a system that settled for screwing over just one person,” said the scientist. “Everything decays to entropy eventually.”

The Lady of Winter fell silent, discontent stirring in her heart. “So, what, I should just burn it all down?”

“Frankly, that seems like it would be really satisfying,” said the scientist. “But if you want to be slightly less dramatic, you could figure out a better way first.”

The bus drew to a stop, their destination achieved. The look the Lady of Winter turned on the scientist was something like fear, and something like yearning.

“The Sidhe don’t change like that,” said the Lady of Winter.

“Humans do,” said the scientist, departing the bus. “Fuck the system.”

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19-October-2015

Julie is caught somewhere between the lingering flood of adrenaline and crying with relief, so what comes out is another involuntary “Fuck you!” and a punch to Carlos₀’s arm.

“Good to see you, too,” he says. He immediately goes for the fountain’s machine gun, even though he’s already armed to the teeth with sword and staff and a frankly ridiculous number of grenades clipped to his belt. She claps her hands over her ears as he returns fire – not just from the sound of the gun, but also from the sudden renewal of a radio broadcast where Cecil is apparently seeing how long he can drag out a voiced alveolar fricative. Had Carlosᵦ somehow been muting it this whole time? It is just like him to introduce potential anomalies into their purple noise research when she doesn’t have any of her equipment.

“Where have you been?” she shouts.

“I tracked you here, but I couldn’t breach the perimeter,” Carlos₀ shouts back. The machine gun jams – the cheese didn’t make it wizard-proof, and she doesn’t know if that’s because they deliberately chose not to or because they can’t. Their gunfire has dropped off, but he still crouches back down next to her to reload one of his ridiculously large handguns. “I’m sorry I couldn’t help sooner. The perimeter displacement didn’t drop until a few minutes ago. When did you learn to do an obscurement on that scale?” That last, directed at Carlosᵦ.

Carlosᵦ squints at him, concerned. “You don’t already know how to do it?” he asks. He makes a gimme motion with one hand. “I thought Luccio taught us in Malta. Wait – you do remember Malta, right?”

“Yes, I remember Malta!” says Carlos₀. He reaches into his lab coat, pulls out another gun from his shoulder holster, and slaps it in Carlosᵦ’s open hand. He follows up the gun with two grenades. “It’s Crete I still have issues with! And I know the theory behind her obscurement, it’s just the practical that’s impossible!”

“It’s not impossible,” says Carlosᵦ. He stands and takes a couple shots over the turret wall before ducking back down. “Eat your Wheaties and maybe one day you’ll grow up to be as awesome as
“You—” splutters Carlos₀, as he empties his clip at the suits. They return fire as he ducks back down. “I’ll have you know I can—”

“Oh, my god, Carlos,” snaps Julie. “He’s like the one person you don’t need to have a dick-measuring contest with! Drop it and get us out of here!”

Carlos₀ scowls, but swaps his gun for his staff. “Do you think you can loft a grenade all the way over there, or is that not awesome enough for you, old man?”

“As long as you can keep up with the veil,” says Carlosᵢ, taking out one of his two grenades as he ushers them towards the turret’s entryway. “Break for the next fountain – on your mark?”

Carlos₀ grins fiercely. “Shut up and dance.”

Cecil’s weird humming pauses as the fountain’s receiver immediately erupts in a flood of pop alt rock.

Julie punches him in the arm again. “Goddammit, Carlos, you know that song’s in the Earworm Registry!”

“On my mark,” he says, ignoring her. “Three, two, one—”

Carlosᵢ pulls the key and hurls the grenade over the fountain. Julie thinks it leaves his hand much faster than humanly possible, but it disappears almost immediately as Carlos₀ raises his staff, so she can’t take measurements.

“Get ready to follow me,” says Carlos₀. “Shield?”

“Got it,” says Carlosᵢ.

Something explodes.

“Go!” shouts Carlos₀, and they take off for Connors’ abandoned fountain. Julie is really sick of running.

On the plus side, they escape the music before she has to murder anyone for calling her discotheque Juliet.

They’re almost halfway to the garden fountain when—

“Wait!”

Carlos₀ skids to a halt, almost colliding with Carlosᵢ’s glassy green shield as it stops moving with them. “What?”

“We can’t go this way!” says Carlosᵢ.

“Why not?”

Carlosᵢ hesitates.

“What,” says Julie.
“Um,” says Carlos\textsubscript{\text{f}}. “...I don’t remember.”

“What do you mean, I don’t remember?” snaps Carlos\textsubscript{0}. A lone bullet disintegrates in the shield; at least one of the suits has recovered from the latest grenade.

“It means I don’t remember!” says Carlos\textsubscript{f}, waving with the hand that’s not generating his shield. “It’s dangerous, or we’ll get pinned down, or – any number of reasons! Okay, look: in order to maintain an optimal timeline, you have to allow for a certain amount of wiggle room—”

Connors’ fountain – vaporizes.

There’s really no other way to describe it. One moment it’s there and the next Julie’s flat on her back in the dirt, blinking away at the violent purple after-images seared into her vision as debris hits Carlos\textsubscript{f}’ shield like a hailstorm. She turns her head and realizes, once the dust clears a little, that they’re on a small bubble of level dirt in the rim of a giant crater. Carlos\textsubscript{0} has hit the deck in front of her, but Carlos\textsubscript{f} has only dropped to one knee to brace himself.

“Oh, right,” he says. “He dropped the snail poison! That’s why.”

“How,” shouts Carlos\textsubscript{0}, angrily unfolding his arms from over his head, “Did you forget a two-ton explosion?”

“No idea,” says Carlos\textsubscript{f} cheerfully. His knee brace squeals as he stands up. “But it’s your problem now, buddy.”

Julie sits up cautiously, rubbing her skull, and looks back. The fountain they’d been sheltering behind is gone, scattered in pieces across the desert. She swallows, picturing what would have happened if they hadn’t left, if they’d been closer to Connors’ fountain, if Carlos\textsubscript{f} hadn’t had his shield up—

“Hey,” says Carlos\textsubscript{0}, crouching down beside her. “You okay?”

“Y-yeah,” she says. She touches the back of her head again. She doesn’t think it’s hurt, but— “My ears are ringing.”

Carlos\textsubscript{0} checks her head, too; he’s closer than she normally likes people to be, but he keeps his touch light and doesn’t try to crowd her.

“Nope, still as hard as ever,” he says, rapping her on the skull. She scowls and swats his hand away. “It’s probably just from the sound of the explosion,” he says as he helps her to her feet. “The incredibly loud and memorable explosion.”

“Be the change you want to see in the multiverse, Prime,” says Carlos\textsubscript{f}. “Now we just have to—”

He stops, staggers. Clouds of dust pour in around them as his shield flickers and disappears.

“Carlos?” says Julie. At her side, Carlos\textsubscript{0} gasps and doubles over, clutching his head. The background hum of Cecil’s broadcast stutters. “Carlos!”

There’s something wrong with the dust – swirling back and forth like a reversing film loop, particle speed inversely proportional to the distance from the axis but the direction an exact mirror. No, something’s not wrong with the dust – the dust is – is a symptom.
Something’s wrong with time.

There’s a sound so weird Julie does not actually have a frame of reference for it, and a translucent figure appears, like a bad special effect photoshopped onto reality. At first it’s a long scaly leg – the foot at the end over a meter wide, webbing spreading between the three toes capped with half-meter-long claws. Bright pink.

Another leg follows, then another and another and another and another. The thing’s neck unfolds and its head lowers to inspect them: double-beaked and many-eyed, with not a single drop of warmth in any of them. It still doesn’t seem entirely solid, and yet there’s still way too much of it present for Julie’s screaming instincts.

The flamingo rears up on four of its six legs and not-roars again. Poisonously green liquid drips from its beaks.

“What,” says Julie, “the fuck.”

~*~*~*~

THE VOICE OF NIGHT VALE

CECIL:

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The Scientist, the Fairy Queen, and the Man in the Tan Jacket

The scientist was cautious as she set off through King City, for only a single sunrise had passed since Jackie Fierro and Diane Crayton had warned her of its dangers. She had no sooner left Troy Walsh and Troy Walsh in the depot of buses when she encountered a strange figure: neither a bird nor a dog but something in between, lurking in the shadows. She brandished her potted plant with the crooked ribbon at it and the creature fled before her in fear.

But as she traveled into the heart of the town, she found nothing else in it that seemed out of place. The streets she walked through seemed ordinary enough, as did the people on them, and the buildings beside them. When she consulted the wisdom of her GPS for guidance, she did not have difficulty getting directions; even the storm cloud that had plagued her steps for many days failed to appear.

At last the scientist reached the site of her second trial: City Hall. It was filled with a joyful bustle, people hurrying towards and fromwards with important tasks at hand. The scientist straightened the ribbon on her potted plant and donned a name tag bearing the sigil of The Garden House Florists, and by means of these talismans she made her way through reception unhindered.

She searched up and down the hallways until she found the door bearing the blazon MAYOR’S OFFICE. Though it was shut against her, she barged through anyway.

Inside the office sat the man in the tan jacket at a great oak desk, covered in framed pictures, paperwork, and many a fancy pen. But he ignored them all with his head in his hands, for his heart was full of shame and despair.

When he saw the scientist he began to say, “You’re not supposed—”

“Look,” the scientist replied. “Yesterday I got kidnapped, was exploded *multiple* times, and ended up in a boss fight with a lawn ornament, so don’t even start with me.” She carelessly set the plant upon his desk and sat down upon an office chair without asking his leave. “I’m going to tell you a story. About real estate.”

“What?” said the man in the tan jacket in astonishment.

This was the scientist’s second trial, the test of scholarship – the measure of not only all that the scientist had learned, but also of how she spread that learning, and how she would convince those who heard it of the wisdom of her methods.

And so she drew forth all her fearsome volumes of learning – the Unseelie Accords, the analysis of the dread lawyer Felicia, and her own clever judgments – and began to read.

“Our story begins in 454 CE, when someone named…” She peered at her notes, for the ink of one
curious name had all blurred together, until she got annoyed and gave up. “—Named H-something-something begins to sublet a small settlement near the Mojave to some guy named Myrddin Emrys, in perpetuity, in return for 127 tons of sweetbreads, head cheese, and black pudding. Emrys, in turn, designates an organization known as the Concilium Album as his legal representatives and turns the care and maintenance of his lease over to them. At the same, this…”

Once more, she attempted to read the hidden name. “—Hrmbl… blar… person affirms the rights of the pre-existing residents to have their own ruling body and everything a settlement needs: ‘secrets, dread, omnipresent government, forbidden areas, and crowns of soft meats’.”

“Are you talking about Night Vale?” asked the man in the tan jacket, bewildered.

“Ding ding ding,” the scientist replied. “Give the man a prize.”

“But – I don’t understand,” said the man in the tan jacket. “What does this have to do with me?”

“Wow, Elmer,” said the scientist. “Not everything is about you.”

The man in the tan jacket scowled, greatly wroth.

“My point,” the scientist continued, “is that this being relevant to the previously mentioned entities also signing a charming agreement known as the Unseelie Accords, Night Vale has an interesting legal standing. Technically speaking, anyone’s allowed to go there, but they’re not allowed to interfere with the will of…”

For the third time, she attempted to speak the forbidden name of HUNTOKHAR, and once again she failed. “—Hundledore, her representatives in the local government, or any of her lessees – including the White Album.”

“Where did you find all this?” asked the man in the tan jacket. “It’s not in the Unseelie Accords.”

“It is in the copy I got from the library,” said the scientist. “This is why you’ve got to read the footnotes, Ernestino. I think you’ll recognize this part, though: if any of the signatories have been wronged by another signatory, the aggrieved party has the right to challenge their enemy to single combat.”

At this, the man in the tan jacket looked very uncomfortable.

“Which brings us up to the present day,” said the scientist. “…Ish. Now, this next part is conjecture. But since it is about you, feel free to throw in.” She paused, awaiting a contribution from the peanut gallery, but he remained silent as a stone.

“You’re the mayor of this charming little burg;” the scientist said. “Then, one day, Troy Walsh arrives from Night Vale. Unfortunately, Troy Walsh keeps arriving. I doubt you’re up on your practical theoretical physics, but I’ll try to keep it simple: preliminary investigations indicate that the compounding of too many individual timelines negates their inability to cancel each other out, resulting in a loss of acceptable variance. This strongly correlates with spatio-temporal instability and leads to conditions known in scientific parlance as ‘super fucked up’.

“As conditions in King City became untenable, you – as the mayor, but also presumably as a normal person – became desperate to find a solution. The spatio-temporal abnormalities let all sorts of weird shit into your town – but it gave you access to all sorts of weird shit, too. At some point, you made contact with, or were contacted by, an organization known as the Night Vale Area Transit Authority.”

“Wonderful,” said the scientist, who did not actually think it was wonderful but was being very sarcastic. “Fun fact about the NVATA: they’re in charge of various transit routes in this area, but they’re not actually from Night Vale. However, they are signatories of those accords I mentioned before. Which means if they got caught interfering with the non-transit areas in Night Vale, there’d be hell to pay. Possibly literally; I saw something about a tithe in there.

“But you needed help, and by that point, I’m guessing you didn’t care how you got it. You had one thing going for you: absolutely no one remembers you. You’re the perfect infiltrator. So you struck a deal with a boss lady: in return for interfering in Night Vale for her, she was going to help you with King City. Am I right?”

The man in the tan jacket mumbled something.

“What was that?”

“I said I’ve told you this before,” he snapped, angry and anguished. “I’ve been trying to tell you for weeks! You never remembered and nothing ever worked! And now—”

“And now, you’re in deep shit,” the scientist said. “You need my help because you didn’t keep up your end of the bargain.”

“I did keep my end of the bargain,” said the man in the tan jacket, his voice bitter. “But now I owe her for everything else I took, because even… she couldn’t remember me. Not enough.”

“You owe her memories,” said the scientist.

The man in the tan jacket nodded. “I realized – eventually – she wouldn’t be able to fix King City,” he said. “At least, not in any way we would want. But I was never able to settle up, because every time I saw her, I took another memory. And when I stayed away, without doing anything, I just owed her another job. Service for service. Memories for memories. And I… I’ve already given up so much.”

He smote his fist upon the desk.

“Why should I have to give up any more?” he cried. “It’s not right!”

“I feel bad for you, Egon, I really do—”

“That’s not my name,” the man in the tan jacket hissed.

“I know,” said the scientist, for it was engraved upon a metal plate on his desk, right in front of her. “I don’t actually care. Because yeah, you got a raw deal, and you asked for my help, but then you decided to fix it yourself by stealing one of Troy’s kids and sending them in your place.”

The man in the tan jacket recoiled in astonishment.

“When in Rome, huh,” said the scientist.

“How—”

“I talked to Diane and Jackie and Josh,” the scientist said, greatly vexed. “And you’ve been working for the fucking fairies. It’s not hard.”

The man in the tan jacket hung his head in shame. “I didn’t – I didn’t actually take the children,”
he said. “They wouldn’t – I let them leave.”

“Congratulations, you’re not as despicable as you could be,” said the scientist.

The man in the tan jacket slumped upon his desk in despair. He picked up one of the framed pictures. “The only thing I have left is my family,” he said in misery. “I can’t let her hurt them, but I have nothing else to give. I don’t know what to do.”

The scientist took the framed picture from him. It was a portrait of the man in the tan jacket and his family. His expression was joyful and almost unrecognizable, and he stood next to a smiling woman, cradling a baby in his arms.

It was a picture of the final step of her plan.

“Come with me,” said the scientist. “I do.”

~*~*~*~

19-October-2015

It takes Julie a moment to notice, on account of being somewhat distracted by the giant mutant transparent time flamingo, but it’s not actually that aggressive. Stalking around the warehouse, yes. Dripping see-through green drool all over the desert, yes. Attacking, no.

This is probably for the best, since the expert she’s hired for this sort of thing – both of him – is busy looking like his brain is trying to explode out his ears. Carlos₀ has dropped to his knees; Carlos₁ is on his feet, but looks like he regrets it.

Julie frantically runs through their hardware options. Carlos₁ has some weird shit of unknown quality and the snail poison from the warehouse, which would come in handy if she wanted to kill everyone within a hundred-meter radius and particularly themselves. Carlos₀ has his sword and staff, which she definitely can’t do any weird shit with but in a pinch could be used for their original bludgeoning and stabbing purposes… for all the good it will do her against something that big. The grenades are more promising – localized damage, and even she should be able to hit something twenty meters tall, right? Right?

Although – the flamingo raises dust when it moves (and settles dust when it drools) but the closer she examines it, the less real it appears. The parts in her peripheral vision keep a solidity that fades in the center of her visual field, like the personification of a poorly-understood interpretation of the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle. Would a physical attack even work?

She checks her pockets as she scans the rubble from the garden fountains lying strewn all around them. Epi-Pen, acetylene torch, wire spool, duct tape… Maybe she could cobble something together—

The flamingo lets out one final not-roar, then shakes out its head. Drool flies everywhere; some of the dust starts to smoke. One by one, the flamingo retracts five of its legs to curl up against its body. Then it tucks its face under one wing.

A few seconds later, Julie hears the familiar grating rumble of its not-snores.

Carlos₀ gasps, then sags in relief. Carlos₁ straightens with a grimace, rubbing at his neck and chin. Blotchy patches of red are spreading across it, breaking out all around his scar.
“What – what is that?” she asks, helping Carlos₀ to his feet. He sways and clings to her shoulder with one hand and his staff with the other, but manages to stay upright.

Carlosᵣ looks at her, then the… thing, and says, “It’s a flamingo.”

“Oh, fuck you,” says Julie.

A voice rings out. “Wizard Ramirez!”

“What?” both of them respond in unison.

The wind picks up, clearing away some of the dust and smoke. Agent White is standing in front of the last garden fountain, the only one still – well, not standing, since it’s sideways and missing half its armored plating, but it is at least still vaguely recognizable as a garden fountain/machine gun turret. She’s torn the sleeve off her cheap suit and wrapped it around her arm; the shirt is stained with a considerable amount of blood. Her other hand clutches a silver machete.

She walks up to the flamingo, her mouth twisted in a satisfied smirk. “It seems we are at an impasse,” she calls out.

“If that’s what you want to call this mess,” says Carlosᵣ in a measured voice. Raspy, but strong enough, unless you knew that what some might mistake for deliberateness is due solely to exhaustion.

Steiner crawls out of the overturned garden fountain. She looks at the flamingo, Agent White, the crater, and back at the flamingo, and Julie can clearly hear her say, “Well, fuck me.”

She stands up, wobbling a little, then kicks at a pile of twisted metal. It groans. “Up and at ‘em,” she says.

Agent Connors emerges from beneath the rubble. “Wha?” he asks, dazed.

Julie looks around, wondering what happened to McKee, before it occurs to her that maybe she’s better off not knowing.

“I believe it’s in your best interest to give us what we want,” says Agent White, as Steiner and Agent Connors join her beneath the flamingo.

Carlosᵣ smiles tightly. “I don’t negotiate with idiots.”

Agent White narrows her eyes, then stabs a finger at her Fitbit.

Both Carloi stiffen and look towards the direction of the mining pit. It’s where the flamingo had come through, but Julie can’t see a damn thing.

Carlos₀ asks, grimly, “Is that—”

“—Yeah,” answers Carlosᵣ.

“What,” says Julie.

“Do you think—”

“—Almost certainly.”
“What,” says Julie.

“What about—”

“Nope.”

“Please keep doing that, it’s not annoying at all,” snaps Julie.

“You see why we should negotiate,” Agent White cuts in.

The Carloi look at the flamingo, then exchange a glance.

But before they can answer, Julie calls out, “Actually, no. What the hell is going on?”

Part of it is because she hates not knowing what’s going on. But the other part is that Carlos — well, it’s not that she doesn’t trust him. She’d trust him with her life.

She just doesn’t always trust him with his life, and if she lets him make decisions concerning her without a chance for any input along the lines of “That’s stupid, you will die,” then – well, she’ll just regret every day for forever, that’s what.

In response to her question, Agent White points at the flamingo with her machete.

“You’re going to make a sacrifice to the great god David Attenborough,” says Julie.

“As of right now, the flamingo is not fully manifested – split between two points in the timeline, you might say. If Wizard Ramirez deigns to open his mind to the possibilities—"

“This matter isn’t open to compromise,” Carlos cuts in. “You’re still endangering the lives of everyone in this town. You’re swimming against the Currents of Time.”

“You’ve unlawfully transported yourselves and an invasive species to a protected area of historical progression, disrupted local space time, and knowingly developed and proliferated anachronistic spatiotemporal-altering information and technology,” adds Carlos. It has the sound of a practiced speech.

“Time itself is an anachronism,” says Steiner, and Julie has to stop paying attention for a moment to give that the eyeroll it deserves.

“Tired old customs blind you to the truth,” says Agent White. “You’re a relic of a bygone age, Wizard Ramirez.”

“What, the Eighties?” snorts Julie.

“You’re not going to be able to keep it stable,” says Carlos. “The rift will collapse.”

Steiner scoffs. “Please, Ramirez,” she says. “You can try to pull the stick out of the Council’s ass and jam it in our spokes, but whatever pathetic attempts at sabotage you’ve made, it’s not going to stop us.”

“Urgh,” says Agent Connors.

“Let us simply talk to Dr. Kwan and we’ll… be on our way,” says Agent White.

“We—”
“Give me a moment to confer with my colleagues,” Julie interrupts, cutting Carlos₀ off.

“You’re not seriously considering this!” he hisses as she drags him around. They circle up, by which she means both Carloi use the fact that she’s blocking the suits’ lines of sight to pull out their weapons.

“Of course not,” says Carlos₉ tiredly. “We have to get Julie out of here.”

“Julie can get herself out of here,” says Julie, annoyed. “But this is obviously a trap, right? They’re just going to grab me and unleash flamingo hell.”

Carlos₀ looks at Carlos₉.

“Yeah,” Carlos₀ admits. “The flamingo came through that rift, and that rift is still growing. They’re definitely planning something.”

“Rift?” asks Julie. “How is that different from a vortex?”

“Different connection to the worldline,” says Carlos₉. “The timelike curve associated with your standard vortex is hypertoroidal, right? A rift, though – I know you’re familiar with Minkowski spacetime, so this is like—”

“Stop trying to distract me!” Julie hisses indignantly, when the shock of actually getting a scientifically viable explanation wears off and she realizes why.

“It was worth a shot,” says Carlos₉, looking completely unrepentant. “They’re after you, Julie.”

“Then we need to keep them from grabbing me,” says Julie. “Give me a grenade.”

“What? No!” says Carlos₀.

“Look, I can be a hostage for the two minutes it takes you to figure something out,” says Julie, tugging a grenade away from Carlos₉. It’s rounder and smoother than she was expecting, bigger than anything she’s made. “I’ll keep my distance, and if they try anything… uh, how do I work this?”

“Just pull the pin and throw it,” says Carlos₉, resigned.

“You’ve seen her throw,” Carlos₀ hisses. “Julie, it’s too dangerous—”

“You can dissolve the connection to the rift with your sword, Prime.” says Carlos₉. “Without its connection to its mirrored counterpart, the flamingo will dechronolate. All we’ll need is a distraction—”

“Time’s up!”

Trying to ignore how much her hands are shaking, Julie clutches the grenade and stalks over to the feds.

Agent White’s eyes widen when she sees it. “Dr. Kwan, I assure you that’s not necessary—”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t have kidnapped me off the street,” says Julie. “That’s the kind of thing that really damages my faith in humanity, you know.” She glances at the Carloi. Carlos₀ has his hand clenched around his sword hilt while Carlos₉ grips his shoulder, like he’s holding him back.
“Those two chuckleheads are all paranoid and shit, but I’m willing to listen if you keep it short,” she says to the suits. “Just... call off your rift, or shut it down, or whatever.”

Agent White gestures at Steiner.

Steiner raises an eyebrow.

Agent White grits out, “If you please, Steiner.”

“Meh,” says Steiner. She starts poking at her Fitbit. “There, I stopped its expansion. That’s the best I can do until we banish the flamingo.”

Julie catches Carlos’s eye – well, close enough – and jerks a head in the alleged direction of the rift; Carlos nods.

She turns back to the feds. “This is your last chance for your sales pitch,” she says. “I know it could make me famous. I know it can revolutionize science as we know it. I know—” She has to stop and swallow. “I know I could save Romero. What – what else is there?” She has to keep herself from again looking back at the Carlois, even now trying to think of some way to save her.

“Why would it be worth it?”

“You,” slurs Agent Connors. “You can’t help it.”

“What?” says Julie.

“Be honest, Dr. Kwan,” says Agent White kindly. “It’s your very nature. What could you possibly care about more than finding out the answers to your questions?”

Slowly, Julie lowers the grenade.

Which is when, with a sound like a jet simultaneously taking off and popping like a balloon, the water heater explodes through the roof of the Chuck E. Government Cheese’s.

“No!” shrieks Agent White, and Steiner swears at the burst of sparks from her Fitbit. “Steiner, open a vortex and get the rest of that flamingo here now!”

“We’re losing the K-R horizon,” mumbles Agent Connors, squinting at his own Fitbit. “Levels at 500 millikwans and dropping—”

“Steiner!” shouts Agent White.

“The vortex generator’s offline,” says Steiner, poking furiously. “At all local timeline points. No power for the reset. I’m not getting any readings from the accumulators—”

“What? How—” They’re cut off by the water heater crashing to earth in the parking lot, neatly crushing someone’s car. Julie hopes it’s Agent White’s.

Agent White grits her teeth. “What about the backup units?”
“They keep shorting out,” shouts Steiner. “I’m pulling up the security cam for a visual assess—you said you disconnected the sprinklers in the lab!”

“413 millikwans—”

“I did!” roars Agent White. “Just – try the satellite stations, one day and two weeks back.”

“I’m trying,” Steiner shouts back. “Your damn program isn’t responding!”

“It can’t not respond,” snaps Agent White. “It’s mirrored in two other server sites! It’s practically indestructible!”

“287—”

“Someone’s already corrupted the source code and deleted five directories – no, six!” says Steiner frantically. “It’s disappearing right now!”

As one, they turn to stare at Julie.

“Sorry,” says Julie innocently. “Should I not have sent your login info to the Museum of Forbidden Technologies?”

They gape at her.

“But how,” mumbles Connors.

Julie smiles, very slowly. “Oops,” she says.

“Oh, fuck you,” says Steiner, throwing her hands in the air.

“You – you threw it all away! How could you?” screeches Agent White, her face turning bright red. She starts towards Julie—

—and stops, as Carlos₁ appears out of thin air.

“Nice try,” he says, stepping in front of Julie. Agent White retreats into the shadow of the flamingo. “But you’re going to be here a long time, awaiting charges.”

Steiner turns to Agent White. “It’s no use. If we cut our losses—”

With a wordless snarl, Agent White plunges her machete into the flamingo’s leg.

The flamingo lets out a horrible not-screech that actually blackens Julie’s vision. She trips and falls to her knees, head swimming as everything goes in and out of focus.

“Or we could that,” gasps Steiner, hands clapped over her ears. “The horrible, dangerous thing we’re not supposed to do.”

“Are you insane?” shouts Carlos₂. “You have no control!”

The flamingo flickers, patches of it solidifying into real time, phasing out and then back. A hand closes around her arm – Carlos₀.

“Time to go,” he says as he half-helps, half-drag her to her feet. “We need to get out of here before —”
Agent White yanks out the machete out in an entirely gratuitous spray of blood. Carlos takes the brunt of it, but—

“Oh, gross,” says Julie, trying to shake off the purplish liquid still clinging to her hand and—
—hanging in the air, suspended in an arc, the lumps of matter in a young universe before they become a galaxy.

They start to rotate.

“Oh, fuck,” says Carlos.

Julie gasps as the blood on her hand burns, a rush of heat flooding up her arm, yanking her off her feet, tearing her from his grasp.

She barely has time to cry “Carlos!” as she’s dragged into the newly-formed vortex.

She thought it would be like a tunnel, but it’s not: it’s a pit, an abyss, the void, and she’s plummeting into it.

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The Scientist, the Fairy Queen, and the Man in the Tan Jacket

When the scientist and the man in the tan jacket approached the depot of buses, they beheld an unfamiliar woman leaning against the bus and smoking. She wore the same garments as the Lady of Winter, but her eyes were hidden by a pair of dark sunglasses.

The man in the tan jacket cowered in terror and said, “That’s her.”

“Great,” said the scientist. “Let’s get this over with.”

“I – I can’t,” said the man in the tan jacket. His voice shook with fear, as did the rest of him. The scientist thought she had passed her second trial, but now it threatened to run away and undo all her hard work. “It – it can’t work! She’ll never let me go.”

“Then what do you propose to do?” said the scientist, filled with a mighty exasperation.

“Running’s not going to cut it, either.”

The man in the tan jacket made no reply.

The scientist threw up her arms. “Fine,” she said. “Don’t take my advice. Good luck.” She stalked away, relieved that she did not have to undergo this third and most dangerous trial, but annoyed as well.

“Wait!” said the man in the tan jacket, dashing after her. “Are – are you sure this will work?”

“No,” said the scientist shortly. “But I’m the best you know, and it’s the best I can come up with.”
The man in the tan jacket gulped, but he said, “I’ll do it. Just – give me a moment.” He put his head between his knees, taking several deep breaths.

The scientist looked to the bus, but the woman leaning against it had gone while they argued – boarded or disappeared, the scientist did not know.

The man in the tan jacket stood up. He straightened his shoulders and reached into the pocket of his tan jacket. He brought forth eleven dollars and, with his head held high, walked to the bus.

As they climbed aboard they beheld the smoking woman sitting in the driver’s seat – no longer smoking, though surrounded by the smell of burnt cloves. Her mirrored sunglasses reflected back the man in the tan jacket’s terrified face. Her name tag said MAB.

The man in the tan jacket had frozen in place, so the scientist prodded him in the back.

“One – one ticket to Night Vale,” he said, thrusting out the eleven dollars.

The Queen of Winter took it from his hand and said, “You have business to conclude.”

“Y-yes. That’s… that’s why I’m here,” said the man in the tan jacket.

The Queen of Winter nodded and let him pass. He took his seat far from Troy Walsh and Troy Walsh.

The scientist drew forth her return ticket and offered it to the Queen of Winter.

“You and I have no business,” said the Queen of Winter.

The scientist knew then that the third trial was upon her, and this was her last chance to turn back. Her path was fraught with dangers and she owed the man in the tan jacket nothing. All he had done was request her aid; she was not obligated to give it. She was just a scientist.

“As a resident of Night Vale, actually, I do,” said the scientist.

“You are of Night Vale,” said the Queen of Winter.

“Got a copy of my water bill and everything to prove it,” said the scientist, patting her bag. In it she felt the cunning devices she had wrought of science, but now that she might be forced to use them they brought her little reassurance.

The Queen of Winter accepted her ticket and tore it in half. “What claim do you have on me?” she asked the scientist.

“Egbert here,” said the scientist, point at the man in the tan jacket, “Has been hanging around my town because he found himself… unable to contact you. It’s in my interest to mediate your dispute and resolve it without any… appeal to authority.”

The Queen of Winter put the bus into gear. It rumbled like some great beast.

“We will discuss this when we reach Night Vale,” said the Queen of Winter.

The scientist was relieved that she would not immediately be turned into something horrible for impertinence, though she was also wary, for “when we reach Night Vale” could mean anything in the fairies’ crooked flow of hours, and also because time wasn’t real. She took her seat behind the Queen of Winter and set her bag upon the ground.
The scientist did not mean to fall asleep.

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She's moving quickly and not at all; everything is dark, but sickly greenish-yellow flashes all around her; nothing is touching her but something is tearing at her, trying to unravel as she—

—Jerks to a halt.

Below her, it looks like someone threw Zuul in the spin cycle. But above her, emerging through a crackling veil of violent purple light, an arm has reached out and clamped its hand around her wrist, holding her up even as a force more pervasive than gravity grasps at her, trying to pull her away and through.

The rush of – God, she doesn’t even know – time? matter? space? – whatever it is, it’s loud, a torrent of sound, not quite matched up to the harsh twists of light. Like the rolls of thunder after the lightning has struck. She cringes back as it bulges near her.

Then she hears shouting. Julie can’t understand the words, but she feels them in her bones, a rising crescendo quickly passing out of the range of mere human output. The noise builds and builds until for one torturous and exquisite second, it’s not noise but infinitely complex music, and—

—the vortex twists, and shifts, and flows.

Gone is the cacophony and savage clashing of purple and yellow-green light and utter darkness, replaced by the rush of liquid and the gentle silver glow streaming past. She twists around, trying to observe as much as she can, and in it she sees memories – no, not memories, moments. Fourteen years old, smoking behind the high school gym. Twenty-eight years old, ducking as her Teleforce prototype undergoes sudden spontaneous disassembly. Forty-two years old, watching Romero pill the cat. Her eyes flashing past her life. The flow of time all around her.

Soothingly luminous facets of the vortex reflect all of them back into infinity, Julie after Julie after Julie dangling by one arm, her whole life swirling around her, but they’re not all the same: minor changes expanding into bigger ones the further out she gets. Not one vortex; all of them. She doesn’t see it all, she feels it all, thousands of actions and reactions branching off into paths taken and not taken. Lichtenberg figures. Root systems. Time crystals. The secret underpinnings of experience, the structure of the universe, laid bare around her.

Oh, she thinks. This is why time isn’t real.

She looks up, and now she can see Carlos through the mouth of a vortex, like staring through a bioluminescent whirlpool. The orientation is wrong, Julie dangling by one arm, her whole life swirling around her, but it’s his hand firmly wrapped around her arm. Belatedly she realizes she should hold on, too, but it takes a moment for her fingers to respond and clutch his wrist, like the command had to go out through all the Julies and back again.

His other hand is stretched out and holding the small black rectangular prism from the lab – no, from Jackie’s pawn shop – no, from both; Julie can hear its song in the roar of time flowing past her. Silver light spills out of it, twining around him before flowing into the mouth of the vortex, spreading out and streaming past her. Past everything.

His lips are moving, but she can’t tell what he’s saying, if he’s talking to her or chanting to himself
or, hell, singing along.

Then the flamingo’s head descends into view, looming behind him, beaks wide open.

“Carlos!”

His hand tightens on her arm as he shouts something.

“Jel!” echoes through the vortex as he gives an almighty heave. Julie shoots up like gravity has reversed, out of the vortex as Carlos —

-- as Carlos falls past her.

~*~*~*~

Julie hits the dirt just in time for the flamingo to smash its beak against the ground right next to her. It rears back with a roar that has her curling into the fetal position, even though she knows she has to move, she is not going to die like this, get up Julie get up get up GET UP—

The flamingo splats its face directly into a dome of Jello-y green light that forms right above her.

“Julie!”

Carlos steps over her, his hand stretched up. The metal plates on his glove buzz defiantly. “Are you all right?”

“Carlos – he—”

“He can take care of the flamingo from the other side,” says Carlos. “It’s trying to reach itself through the vortex – we can’t let it consolidate.”

“Right,” says Julie. “We can’t let it consolidate. Because I definitely have a lot to contribute to fighting the giant magic flamingo!”

“Oh, good,” says Carlos, over the weird reverberation of the flamingo scraping its beaks over his shield. “You're okay!”

She looks over at the vortex – well, where it was. It had definitely closed when she popped back through. But if it closed, then why are the dust patterns disrupted and the— “Is the vortex still there?”

“Yes and no,” says Carlos. “It’s closed off, but still connected to the worldline. If the flamingo—”

He cuts off when said flamingo bashes his shield again, its translucent beak fuzzing out against the barrier. His glove rattles like a loose muffler.

“If the flamingo can’t reopen it, each half only has a limited amount of potential energy to maintain their forms,” he continues, strain obvious in his voice. “Once that’s gone, so are they. We just have to wait it out.”

There’s a loud crack! from Julie’s left just as they’re hit by a spray of — sand? No, Carlos’ shield pulverizes anything that gets through, which means—

“They’re shooting at us!” she says indignantly.

“Technically, I think they’re shooting at me,” says Carlos.
“It’s not a contest!” snaps Julie. “But I’m the one who destroyed all their equipment and time travel capability and evil plans, so—"

The flamingo bashes against the barrier again, followed by two more bullets. Carlos grits his teeth and braces his gloved hand with the other.

“All right, your plan sucks,” says Julie. “If we wait, we’re gonna got smushed and/or shot.”


“That’s not a—"

“Run!”

“Fuck you!” shouts Julie as she takes off running from a track start, which has nothing to do with her athletic ability and everything to do with getting away from yet another horrible not-roar.

She skids to a halt by the edge of the snail poison crater and climbs down. It’s not much in the way of cover, but she’s not going anywhere until she knows what’s happened to—

Carlos is gone. All she can see is the edge of the mining pit, the vortex that isn’t there yet, and the flamingo. It’s doing an elaborate shuffle with all six of its legs as it pivots around, darting its heads in various directions, as if it’s – looking for something? Okay, so Carlos probably didn’t get eaten, but what if he fell in the mining pit or—

The flamingo’s head jerks back in a splatter of green light, seemingly emanating from thin air. Partially dissolved pink feathers fly everywhere. One of its beaks opens and lets loose with a piercing unsound of tearing concrete, and she almost misses the rapid staccato of gunfire coming from somewhere underneath the flamingo.

Its other beak strikes at the empty ground and comes up with nothing, and then it stumbles forward with a surprisingly dorky not-squawk as a grenade explodes behind it. Julie catches a glimpse of Carlos behind his shield before he drops it and disappears again.

More green light washes over another of the flamingo’s beaks, darkening it from pink to black. It lets out another horrific not-screech.

Then, moving faster than Julie thought possible, it pivots on two of its legs and sweeps out with three more.

Carlos hits the ground and skids backwards until he comes to a halt, dust rising around him. He doesn’t get up again.

“Carlos!”

She slides to a stop beside him, completely exposed to the feds and the flamingo, but Julie can’t think about that right now because Carlos still isn’t moving.

“Fuck,” she says desperately, feeling for his pulse. “Wake up, c’mon—” She cringes as the flamingo looms overhead.

It ignores them. Six legs daintily step over them like the multiverse’s ugliest kick line, before it crouches and extends its head. Its beaks sway back and forth, as though following the bouncing
ball, and then—

It strikes. Its head shoots out and the beaks clamp shut – around what, she can’t tell. The flamingo gives a vicious twist, and Julie is reminded that birds are the direct descendants of dinosaurs, even if this one is by way of the Elder Gods.

“Look, you were right, they’re not shooting at me,” says Julie. Carlos’ pulse is strong, his skin warm, but he still hasn’t woken up. With a final, violent yank, the flamingo tears open a vortex – or, not a vortex – the vortex, the one Julie had almost fallen through, and great, now she’s making definitive statements with nothing more than half-remembered rotational data points and a gut feeling. “C’mon, Carlos, I need you – that vortex ends up two weeks ago and I don’t know how you – future you – dealt with it—”

He stirs slightly.

“Carlos?” she says hopefully.

His head flops over to the other side and he lets out a snore.

“You asshole!” she shouts, punching him in the arm. The flamingo crouches on all six of its legs and, unhurriedly, extends its head into the vortex. “You unbelievable asshole! Now is not the time for a fucking power nap!”

“Astrapē!”

Julie topples forward as all her muscles lock up in waves of endless pain.

It stops, and a hand yanks her to her feet – Agent Connors. “Fuck,” she gasps, knees trying to buckle. Every muscle in her body hurts. Her mouth tastes like metal.

“Told you you should have taken the deal,” says Steiner. “Hell’s bells, what a mess.” She doesn’t sound smug so much as tired, and when Julie looks over, she’s got her hands braced on her knees like she’s just run a race – or tasered Julie with the power of her mind, what the fuck.

“What the fuck,” says Julie, trying to pull away from Agent Connors, but even with only one arm he’s stronger than her.

“Please, Juliet,” he says over her shoulder. Julie snarls but cuts off in a gasp of pain as he twists her arm behind her back.

“I think we’ve fought enough,” says Agent White, striding into view.

“I sure have,” mutters Steiner. She straightens and picks up Carlos’ staff. After inspecting it for a moment, she pitches it over the edge of the mining pit.

“I haven’t even started,” snaps Julie.

Steiner nudges Carlos with the toe of her sensible government-issued shoe. “Are you sure we can’t just kill him?” she asks. “Save us a lot of trouble. And me, specifically. Cannot stress that enough.”

“It’s too early,” says Agent White, over Julie’s hissed expletives. “The timeline’s already severely compromised with the presences of the Phoenicopteriform, and the calculations for the safety zone alone will take—” She cuts off and glares at Julie, still struggling feebly against Agent Connors’ grip. “The calculations would have taken days. And now, no one knows how long. We’ll barely be able to manage our own existence here until we can restore our systems.”
“If we can restore them,” says Agent Connors. “You can’t just build your own computer.”

Julie stops her sad escape attempt long enough to twist around and stare at him incredulously. “Yes, you can,” she says.

“Fucking faeries,” mutters Steiner nonsensically. “Just had to mess with the fucking faeries.” She turns to Julie. “Why couldn’t you just stay in the lab?”

“Why couldn't you?” shouts Julie.

Agent White ignores Steiner and says to Julie, “I wish you could have chosen this yourself, but now it’s too important that we make use of your abilities,” she says. She looks around – at Julie; at her injured colleagues; at Carlos, still asleep and helpless; at the flamingo with its head disappearing into the vortex, probing it for god-knows-what – and shakes her head. “This… this is madness.”

The vortex flares, and several things happen in close succession:

1) The world explodes.

~*~*~*~

THE VOICE OF NIGHT VALE

[static]

~*~*~*~

The world stops.

Julie looks around – no, that’s not quite right. She can’t move. But she can still, somehow, observe.

The shock of the pressure wave, the blaze of the flames, the tear of the shrapnel – Julie feels it all, but then she hasn’t felt it all. She’s on her knees on the ground but it isn’t because she felt herself die, even though she remembers it. Carlos is still happily snoring, unhurt. The suits are lying around her, mid-groan, weapons and equipment scattered across the ground, but they’re not hurt either, because the explosion/un-explosion is a timeline branching off, events flowing around her and away—

~*~*~*~

The vortex flares, and several things happen in close succession:

1) The flamingo is violently ejected from the vortex with all the force of a ball of snail poison.

2) The dust swirls back and forth like a reversing film loop, particle speed inversely proportional to the distance from the axis but the direction an exact mirror.

3) Something’s not wrong with the dust – the dust a symptom, because something’s wrong with time—

~*~*~*~

The vortex flares, and several things happen in close succession:
1) Julie pulls out her acetylene torch, jams the valves open, and throws it at Agent White.

2) The torch misses Agent White and hits Steiner.

3) Steiner’s coat catches on fire.

4) The flamingo scrabbles to its feet with a strangled not-screech.

~*~*~*~

The vortex flares, and several things happen in close succession:

1) Julie takes off for the nearest piece of cover.

2) Agent White follows in close pursuit.

3) The flamingo lurches towards the vortex, several legs dragging.

4) Agent Connors screams “Stop, drop, and roll!” and tackles Steiner to the ground.

5) Agent White crashes into something invisible with a satisfying booooon.

6) Carlos steps over her from behind the door of the invisible clock tower.

7) The flamingo reaches the surface of the vortex.

8) A brick breaches the surface of the vortex and crashes into the flamingo’s eye.

9) The flamingo staggers backwards, misses its footing, and topples into the mining pit.

10) Carlos shouts “K’al!” and the vortex disappears back whenever it came from.

There’s a series of immense crunches and increasingly feeble not-screeches from inside the pit as the flamingo crashes off each level of the roads spiralling downwards. Apparently, it can’t fly, but it can definitely bounce.

There’s one final, distant crunch, then silence.

“This,” says Julie, “is sparticle sphysics.”

There’s a nasty grating noise. Julie is unpleasantly surprised to realize that it’s Carlos, hunched over with his hands braced on his knees and laughing.

“What’s wrong with you?” she asks.

“I’m fine,” he says. He straightens up, takes a deep breath, and barks out, “Way!”

His leg brace glows as a flash of white light streaks through the air. Julie hadn’t noticed the suits, but Steiner and Agent Connors both slump back to the ground, asleep. Agent White is still out cold, to her intense satisfaction.

Carlos starts to cough, deeply alarming wheezing hacks.

He staggers sideways and catches himself against the side of the invisible clock tower. Julie frowns
at him.

“Hey, are you o—"

He collapses.

~*~*~*~

THE VOICE OF NIGHT VALE

[static]

~*~*~*~

The Scientist, the Fairy Queen, and the Man in the Tan Jacket

The scientist awoke as the bus returned to Night Vale and found the man in the tan jacket beholding her with terrified respect. (She had not intended to fall asleep, but though it was still morning, it had been a very long day.) The scientist glared at him and tried to wipe the cobwebs of sleep from her mind.

The Queen of Winter stopped the bus. All was silent and still; frost seemed to hang in the air.

The Queen of Winter looked at the scientist and said, “Continue.”

The scientist summoned Troy Walsh and Troy Walsh by saying, “Oy, Doublemints,” and they obediently came to her side.

"This is Troy," said the scientist to the Queen of Winter. "He and a multiplicity of himself are the ones that started causing problems in King City in the first place."

"Not on purpose," said Troy Walsh.

"But I am pretty sorry," said the other Troy Walsh.

"Troy," said the scientist, "Has agreed to finish out Elrond’s contract. They’re very helpful.”

"I am," said Troy Walsh.

“So if there’s anything I can do—” began Troy Walsh.

"—That’s permissible by the laws and statutes of King City, where this all started," the scientist interrupted, despairing in her mind at his total and utter lack of negotiating skills with immortal loophole finders.

“—I’ll do it,” Troy Walsh finished.

The Queen of Winter watched them from her rearview mirror, then says, “Go on.”

The scientist turned to the man in the tan jacket. “Ezekiel?”

"I – I'm sorry you were offended by my actions," said the man in the tan jacket to the Queen of Winter.

The scientist covered her face in her hands and hoped that the Queen of Winter slowly froze his eyeballs.
"B-b-but—" The man in the jacket took a deep breath. "My… condition… has been known to take away the memories of others, and while I would never dare do it on purpose, I apologize for unwittingly putting you in that position. I hope you will accept my apology and – and a year of my own memories, in recompense for what I unintentionally – very unintentionally – took from you."

“A year of your memories,” said the Queen of Winter musingly.

“As is traditional,” said the man in the tan jacket, a little too quickly, and the scientist thought in her heart, *Have some chill or she’ll eat you alive.*

“January 23, 1968 through January 23, 1969,” said the man in the tan jacket. “I – I hope between this and Troy’s service in my place, our association will be at an end.”

“January 23,” said the Queen of Winter.

“They’re… they’re my birthdays,” squeaked the man in the tan jacket.

Indeed, they were his first birthdays; days one through three-hundred sixty-six (the scientist hoped the leap year provided an added bonus) on the path that sent him walking to this day, although of course at the time he couldn’t walk for any of them.


“Memories for memories,” said the Queen of Winter. “Service for service.”

The man in the tan jacket nodded, though he quaked with fear.

"Very well," said the Queen of Winter. "Let this matter be done between us." An unspoken *finally* hung in the air around them. The man in the tan jacket knelt before her and she placed her hands upon his head.

He flinched at her touch, and when she withdrew her hands, he remained on his knees, unmoving. A cold fear struck the scientist’s heart. She thought of her cunning devices of science – half in her pocket and half in her bag behind the Queen of Winter’s seat – but stayed her hand until she saw how fortune might fall.

At last, the man in the tan jacket opened his eyes. He could not gaze upon the Queen of Winter, but he did catch the scientist’s eye.

"Th-thank you," he said. "Your majesty. Doctor Renegade."

Then he bolted off the bus and ran, arms flailing, across the desert. There was a moment of silence as they all watched him go.

“Th-thank you," he said. "Your majesty. Doctor Renegade."

Then he bolted off the bus and ran, arms flailing, across the desert. There was a moment of silence as they all watched him go.

“That is one strange little man,” said the scientist.

“He has given me the recollections of an infant,” said the Queen of Winter. “The purest bond between parent and child. Do you think he’ll ever know what he has sacrificed?”

“No,” said the scientist. “Because he’ll never ask.”

“Service for service,” said the Queen of Winter. The scientist could feel the weight of her gaze, even through the dark sunglasses. “Memories for memories. A fair bargain, and yet in my favor.”

The scientist almost said *You’re welcome*, but caught herself at the last moment.
“Doctor Renegade,” said the Queen of Winter, almost to herself.

“That’s not my name,” said the scientist.

“Isn’t it?” said the Queen of Winter. “What could I offer you to enter my service?”

~*~*~*~

19-October-2015

“No,” says Julie, running to Carlos’s side. “No, no, no, no – what’s wrong? We fixed all this weird time shit, you shouldn’t— What’s still wrong—”

Carlos makes a horrible wheezing noise that Julie realizes after a second is supposed to be another laugh. “No – you got it – just need a minute—”

“You’re turning blue,” says Julie. She hauls him upright and clutches him against her, his back to her chest. “You don’t have a minute!”

Carlos gurgles something that shouldn’t be intelligible, and yet—

“You are not fine!”

Carlos chokes and clenches his fingers around her forearm, and Julie realizes that if she doesn’t do something, he’s going to die right in front of her. Also himself. He’s going to invent a new complex about mortality deadlines and give it to her and his past self and Julie will never be able to yell at him about it and she doesn’t know what to do.

She frantically runs through first aid procedures. CPR is useless and he won’t have time to go into shock if he can’t breathe. A trach tube? But that won’t help if his bronchial passageways are swelling shut. She learned that the hard way with Gary back in 2011—

She blinks. Then she grabs a small tube from the pocket of her lab coat and pops it open.

She removes the contents; the safety cap goes next. “I’m sorry if this kills you,” says Julie, and jams Gary’s Epi-Pen into his thigh.

Carlos jerks – and a few seconds later, makes a deep wheezing noise that nevertheless signals the presence of enough air entering his lungs to make a sound.

“What was that?” he gasps.

She pulls out the injector after ten seconds. “Massage the injection area,” she says, grabbing his hand and slapping it on his thigh. “‘Do I ever stop breathing? Oh, it hardly ever gets that bad.’ You stupid fucker. Are you allergic to time travel?”

“What?” wheezes Carlos. “No, doesn’t make—”

He stops.

“Not... consistent,” he says, a moment later. “Hardly ever been this bad. Only the last couple times—”

“Wow, really?” says Julie. “Almost like prolonged exposure makes it worse?”
“Um,” says Carlos.

“I have had it up to here with your complete and utter lack of self preservation skills,” yells Julie, probably undercutting her message with the way she's started to shake. “This – this crypto-fascist – toxic masculinity – military industrial complex nonsense, from, from your stupid opiate of the masses and your stupid town and your stupid wizard illuminati and – and all your other stupid bullshit institutions!”

“Aww,” says Carlos hazily. “That’s just like the toast you gave at my wedding.”

“I will leave you to die,” snarls Julie.

“Okay,” says Carlos, vaguely patting her on the forearm. He stirs a moment later, half-heartedly trying to straighten up. “Hey. You’re giving me a hug.”

“I’ll give you a beatdown you won’t forget,” says Julie, but she hitches him more upright. He pats her arm again, chuckles, chokes down another cough, and subsides. She checks his pulse; it beats steadily under her fingers.

Julie waits until his breathing has evened out before asking, “So… how are we getting out of here?”

He doesn’t answer.

“Carlos?”

She receives a snore in response.

“You are the actual fucking worst,” she says.

~*~*~*~

THE VOICE OF NIGHT VALE

—naht rehgih yaw og nac uoY .nam ,haN’ ,dias eikcaJ hcihw oT :LICEC

‘—That.’ Oh! Listeners, I think we may be back to our regular broadcast timeline! While we reset and then throw out all the station timekeeping devices, I take you now to… the weather.

~*~*~*~

19-October-2015

Julie’s almost done disassembling Steiner’s Fitbit when she sees the cars approaching – not from town, but from the distant desert, shimmering in a mirage that makes it look like there’s not even a road. (Unless it’s not a mirage, and there is no road.) She pockets the usable tech and chucks everything too advanced into the pit, then waves her hands over her head.

Miraculously, the cars – a Mercedes convertible, only a few years old, and a burgundy Ford hatchback with a crumpled fender – slow to a halt. Inside are Jackie Fierro, Diane and Josh Crayton, and a plastic pink flamingo in each front passenger seat.

“Did you carjack a pair of lawn gnomes?” asks Julie.

“It’s… a long story,” says Diane. The flamingo in her car has its seatbelt on. “Can we help you?”
Julie eyes the flamingos, but they’re neither moving, growling, nor giving her the heebie-jeebies. There’s still an instinctual discomfort, but since she’s experienced the life-size version, they’re just not that upsetting anymore.

“We need a ride back to town,” she says. “Important science stuff.”

“We?” asks Diane.

“Me and my… hooded figures,” says Julie.

They all look at the Carloi slumped on the ground and snoring gently.

“I thought touching them was illegal,” says Jackie, who doesn’t sound very bothered by the idea. “Why do you need them?”

“I can return them for a five-cent deposit,” says Julie.

“Cool,” says Josh.

“I guess that’s fiscally responsible,” says Diane. She looks at Jackie; Jackie shrugs.

Diane says, slowly, “Though I don’t know if I want one up front…”

“Oh,” says Julie, “They can definitely go in the trunk.”

~*~*~*~

THE VOICE OF NIGHT VALE

CECIL: Sorry, let’s try that again. And now: the weather!

~*~*~*~

The Scientist, the Fairy Queen, and the Man in the Tan Jacket

What could I offer you to enter my service?

The air grew cold and light seemed to flee before the Queen of Winter’s majesty. The scientist took a deep breath.

“A linear accelerator,” she said, and began to tick a list off her fingers. “A fully equipped lab and the ability to choose my own paid assistants. Funding appropriate to our size and ambition with parity to that of top research institutions. At least eight consecutive hours of research and development per twenty-four hour period, local time. Protection from all reasonable and predictable threats, access to room and board equivalent to my current circumstances, and the ability to sleep for optimal levels of functioning.” She came to the end of her list, then added, “Deferral from being compelled to injure any human being or, through inaction, allowing any human being to come to harm.”

The Queen of Winter was silent, her mirrored gaze heavy upon the scientist.

“There’s a few other details, too. Duration of service and so on,” the scientist continued, as though this did not interest her very much. “I’ve got a copy of a contract in my bag. If you’re interested.”

“You,” said the Queen of Winter, “think very highly of yourself.”
“I know my value,” said the scientist.

They stared at each other.

“I regret,” said the Queen of Winter, “That I am not in a position to guarantee the terms of your employment at this time.”

“Thank you for inquiring,” said the scientist. She stood up.

The Queen of Winter made no move to open the doors.

The scientist swallowed.

She clutched at the cunning device of science hidden in her pocket. But she restrained herself from action just a moment longer, until she knew what had passed, for truly, whatever she exploded she would never be able to unexplode.

“Was there something else?” she asked, voice barely quavering at all.

“I am indebted to you for your part in the negotiations,” said the Queen of Winter, coldly. It took the scientist a moment to realize she was being literal, not polite and old-fashioned.

*there’s a debt for every favor because they have to have a balance*, the wizard had said.

"Oh," said the scientist, who found herself in the unenviable position of, having priced herself out of the reach of the powerful and dangerous Queen of Winter, now having to send her a reasonable invoice. Ask too little and risk an insult; ask too much and get punished for arrogance.

*Fan-fucking-tastic*, thought the scientist.

The thing she most wanted most in the entire world and in all the dimensions beyond, no one could give – except maybe in some distant other timeline where the random sweep of chance had been less cruel. She hoped that her other self was enjoying it.

Aside from her lost love, there was never much that she wanted for herself. She had no desire for power, for then she would have to talk to the people she commanded: a task for which she had less than no patience. She did not care about money as long she had enough to eat, which she did, or if she had enough funding, which she did not; in either case, unreliable fairy gold seemed like a poor substitute. Almost everything else, the scientist could either buy, build, or steal.

The only thing of worth left to the scientist was her research, and truly, she wanted to be remembered for what she discovered. But therein lay the crux of the matter: *she* had to be the one to discover it. Her struggles with the government servants of the flamingos had taught her that. Fame and fortune meant nothing if they were empty honors with weak conclusions and poorly-constructed theories.

The scientist knew her fate: she would spend her life chasing after knowledge, knowledge which would only lead to more questions. Always risking danger to test one more hypothesis, formulate one more theory, answer one more question.

When she thought about it like that, the answer to this riddle was quite simple.

She reached into her bag and handed a packet of papers to the Queen of Winter.

“I’ve always considered knowledge to be the greatest treasure of all,” said the scientist. “So it
would be great if you could fill out this survey.”

~*~*~*~

THE VOICE OF NIGHT VALE

CECIL: …Happily ever after is not, in fact, the only way to end a story. For example, you might say, “Тут и сказке конец, а кто слушал - молодае!” Or “και ζήσαν αυτοί καλά κι εμέις καλότερα.” Perhaps “at dito nagwawakas ang kanilang kwento,” or even “sen pituinen se”? “Ja kui nad surnud pole, elavad nad siiani önnelikult,” is nice spin on what is typically considered traditional, but my personal favorite is, “Eta hala izan bazan, sartu dadila kalabazan eta atera dadila Haran Gauko plazan!” Get in the gourd, indeed.

Before we wrap things up this evening, listeners, we have time for one more round of my popular advice segment, Hey There, Cecil!

“Hey there, Cecil. My friend is a total fuckhead and—”

[chuckles] Wow, it’s a good thing we have Intern Sheila on the dump button, because technically speaking I’m not supposed to say ‘fuckhead’ on air, so that piercing squeal of feedback you just heard again is the censor—

Sorry, what was that, Cate?

...Oh. Listeners, Intern Sheila has left again, wandering insensibly through Night Vale in a haze of time-looping grief, which means there was no one on the dump button and you did not hear a piercing squeal of feedback, but instead me, referring to someone as an indelicate term for capital copulation on air, violating both social norms and our station policy. Twice.

…Sorry about that, Night Vale.

Oh, look. Intern Cate has brought me a bar of soap so I can complete the FCC purification rituals right here on air. Wow. How thoughtful. Thanks.

[gagging, spitting, someone going “Eeeeeeeurgh” around a mouthful of soap]

Right, that should be ritually clean enough. [burps] Excuse me.

So! Back to our email. “Hey there, Cecil. My friend is a—” Okay, you’re on the dump button now, right, Cate? Good.

“Hey there, Cecil! My friend is a total [CENSORED] and he owes me big time. Actually, fun [CENSORED] story, he’s two total [CENSORED]. He helped me out, but then I had to save his [CENSORED] and now this [CENSORED] self-sacrificing [CENSORED] is [CENSORED] lying there [CENSORED] useless when he should be getting his dumb [CENSORED] to somewhere [CENSORED] useful for some [CENSORED] medical attention.

Also, his [CENSORED] boyfriend won’t answer his [CENSORED] piece of [CENSORED] phone so I’m sending this stupid [CENSORED] email in the hopes that he will get his [CENSORED] together and realize this is [CENSORED] meant for him, because he owes me for that [CENSORED] ‘dark science’ [CENSORED]. Yes, I [CENSORED] mean you, you [CENSORED] [CENSORED] son of a [CENSORED] [CENSORED]. Get your [CENSORED] [CENSORED] over here before I [CENSORED] [CENSORED] up and burn this entire [CENSORED] [CENSORED] [CENSORED] to the [CENSORED] ground.

Hey there, [CENSORED] Furious! It sounds like you’ve had a rough day and I can tell you’re very upset. It’s wonderful that you’ve taken such good care of your friend, but make sure you take care of yourself, too! Also, it sounds like you and your friend’s boyfriend have some unfinished business over that “dark science [CENSORED]” that you need to discuss – although [chuckles] who doesn’t? I mean, just a few weeks ago I myself accidentally… said… uh…

[paper rustling]


Um. [clears throat] You know what, [CENSORED] Furious? Don’t move. Stay right there and your friend’s boyfriend will be there shortly to help you and I’m sure you won’t have to set anything on fire.

[chair scraping] This has been “Hey There, Cecil!” That’s all the time we have for today! [distant, off-mic] Good night, Night Vale! Good night!

[door slams]

Chapter End Notes

"Marriage is a bullshit institution. But both of you are pretty good at bullshit, so I guess that works out."
— Julie, "Toast"

The struggle of writing this chapter was second only to the struggle of formatting it, which is why I am extra grateful for Ginipig and her continuing support as I tried increasingly bizarre methods of fixing the narrative, and then kept all of them.

Some links!

Video by Niki Paprika

they lived happily ever after (the end of a fairy tale)
Julie very calmly exits the bus, clutching the packet of papers sublimating slightly in the hot air, and watches as the Transportation Manager of the Night Vale Area Transit Authority/Queen of Winter rolls off.

Once the bus is a whole block away, she can’t hold back anymore.

“Have an ice day,” she says. She plops down on the ground underneath a cactus – because she wants to, not because it feels like her legs might give out.

“I see Queen Mab hath been with you,” says a voice.

Julie looks up. Cactus Judy, wearing a sun bonnet and a #yayhamilton t-shirt, is staring at her with some interest from her perch amidst the cactus arms.


She only gets hit by one tiny bolt of lightning, but that is more than enough.

“Why, how now, kinswoman,” says Cactus Jane, amused. “Wherefore storm you so?”

“You’re hilarious,” grumbles Julie. She shoves her bag out of range of the water and pulls her lab coat over her head to protect her phone. “When are we?”

“The grey-ey’d morn smiles on the frowning night, check’ring the eastern clouds with streaks of light,” says Cactus June. “And fleckled darkness like a drunkard reels from forth day’s path and Titan’s fiery wheels.”

“I mean the date, thumb-biter,” says Julie. No one’s responded to her mass text yet.

“The twentieth of this month of October,” says Cactus Judy, smirking a little. “The year of their Lord, two thousand and fifteen.”

Julie lets out a gusty sigh and rubs her face. It’s earlier in the morning than it should be – she probably only missed the tranquil sunrise screaming by a few hours – but that’s basically punctual, for Night Vale. She might actually have pulled this off. Of course, given who she’s been dealing with, she probably won’t know if it didn’t work until horrible freeze-dried retribution is already upon her. Revenge is a dish best served cold, indeed.

Well, looks like her constant paranoia will have to stick around for the next forty-nine years, too.

Though… if she’s thinking of things that may or may not prompt vengeance, there’s a slightly more immediate problem right above her.

“So,” says Julie, “You know your enormous open mining pit that’s not at all suspicious? Would you describe yourself as being particularly attached to it?”

“Why, may one ask?”

“It’s got a giant dead flamingo in it,” says Julie.
“O, a pit of clay for to be made for such a guest is meet,” says Cactus June.

“It’s not clay,” says Julie. “We’re on shale and sandstone here.”

Cactus Jane snorts. “Take my good meaning,” she says. “You may salve so, not what is dangerous present, but the loss of what is past. How camest thou hither, tell me, and wherefore?”


“Indeed, I should have ask’d you that before,” says Cactus Judy, rolling her eyes. “Tell me without asking.”

Julie looks back over her shoulder – down the block, where the bus had gone. “The man in the tan jacket had an… employment problem,” she says. “I took a round trip to King City to get it cleared up.”

“And why, my lady wisdom?”

“Because field research takes place in the field,” says Julie, gesturing towards town, “and I’m sick and tired of these clowns waltzing in and fucking with it just because they can. I’ve got research to do.”

Then she frowns.

While all that is true, it doesn’t seem… complete, when she says it out loud. Doesn’t adequately describe the testing conditions. Talking to Molly, forcing Eugene to get his shit together, standing up to the Queen of Winter… the promise of getting to go back to her research undisturbed didn’t power her through that.

It wasn’t all from sheer contrariness or the grim satisfaction of testing her hypotheses, consequences be damned, either. It was like… it was like when she had finished her latest prototype for the Teleforce, right in the middle of all that vampire and evil twin shit going down, and the satisfaction of completing the project had been subsumed by something else entirely.

Outliers, in her experience. She could discard them. Or, maybe, try to find a hypothesis that accommodates them as well…

“How now, Juliet?” asks Cactus June.

Julie scowls. “Don’t call me that.” Andre’s phone goes to voicemail again. One more person she could try. It’s stupid to hesitate, but she does anyway.

Get ahold of yourself, Kwan. He’s going to find out anyway. She might as well be the one to tell him.

She dials Carlos’ number.

“What’s in a name?” asks Cactus Jane philosophically, as the line rings and rings.

“Names are—”

Over the rumble of an approaching engine, she can just about make out an obnoxiously cheerful voice singing, “—That doesn’t mean my eyes will soon be turning red / crying’s not for me, ‘cause—”

She turns and glares – at Carlos₀, at the douchey Honda Accord he is driving with the top down,
and most especially at his phone.

He waggles it at her with one hand. “This one’s all on you,” he says, over its insipid chorus of *Because I’m freeeee, nothing’s worrying meeeeee.*

“And I regret it immensely,” she says. Evolving obnoxious ringtones are what you get when you don’t set strict parameters on your subroutines. “What are you doing here?”

“Got a call at the lab,” he says. “Your car’s ready for pick up and nobody had seen you. Which, by the way, isn’t unnerving at all when the last thing I remember yesterday was trying to get you unkidnapped.”

“Didn’t Cecil or Dr. Dan Streetmentioner clue you in?” asks Julie.

“The old man told me before he left, but still,” says Carlos. “So. What are *you* doing here?”

“Hydrating,” says Julie.

Carlos raises an eyebrow, but doesn’t challenge her. Her stomach sinks. Dammit, not good.

“Want a ride?” he asks instead.

Yes, she does want a ride, but no, she does not want to talk about any of the things Carlos is likely to ask her. “You’re sure?” she asks. “It’s raining on me and you’re in a convertible.” She’s being pathetic, but maybe he’ll get one of the others and they can—

“It’s seen worse,” he says airily.

*Suck it up.* “This is your idea,” says Julie. She doesn’t slam the door, but she does take a grim delight in the way the storm follows her into the car. Then she realizes something.

“Wait,” she says. “Didn’t your car used to have a roof?”

“I told you it’s seen worse.”

“What happened?”

“Angry chupacabra,” he says.

There are so many things she could say to that. “Are there non-angry chupacabras?”

“Not really,” says Carlos. He waves to Cactus Judy and peels off, leaving the storm cloud behind.

Julie can feel the silence growing, so she’s not really surprised when Carlos says, “Hey.”

“What,” she says, steeling herself for the inevitable questioning.

“Do you want to come over for dinner?”

She looks at him incredulously. “With you and Firesign Chat?”

“Yes, Julie. Shocking as it may seem, my boyfriend will be present for dinner in his own home,” says Carlos, deadpan.

It hits her, then. She narrows her eyes. “Did Andre put you up to this?”

“No,” says Carlos. “He just mentioned he’d be unavailable tonight, since he’s covering the
And knowing Andre, he had probably looked worried about it. Worried about her. Ugh ugh ugh. The only thing she wants to talk about less than her field excursion to King City is her fucking feelings.

But… she actually considers it for a moment. She’s going to be miserable all evening either way; at least this way she’ll be miserable and then have leftovers.

The problem is, there will be people talking at her. And eventually she will crack, and start responding, because she cares about Carlos and his dumb hair and his dumb boyfriend and his dumb life too much to be actively mean, and it will be terrible.

“Nah, I’m good,” she lies.

“Do you have food?”

“Of course I do,” says Julie. She has a six-pack and a whole can of Pringles with her name on it. “…What’s that look for?”

“Because I’ve seen you eat,” says Carlos,

“Fuck you, salsa and pudding is delicious,” says Julie.

Carlos snorts, but lets it go.

He doesn’t say anything else for five whole minutes. Julie is so impressed that when he does finally break and ask, “What’s wrong?” as they wait at the light on Old Musk Drive she barely feels the urge to smack him.

“Why do you think something’s wrong,” she says. They’ve been stationary too long and she feels a cold wind down her neck, promptly followed by more rain.

“It’s the little things,” says Carlos. “Extra yelling. Shorter sentences. The literal storm cloud of emotion following you around like a puppy.”

Julie looks at him sharply.

“I think I figured it out,” he says. “This started the day before I got back, right?”

She nods.

“Pathetic Fallacy Day,” says Carlos. “And that is a mood if ever I’ve seen one. What I couldn’t figure out was how it could keep going after the holiday, until I realized – stasis loop.”

Julie frowns. “Like Jackie.”

“Your lightning strikes repeat if you watch long enough,” says Carlos. “Wind speed, hail patterns – it all loops eventually. Those clowns with the flamingos disturbed the Currents of Time so badly there are eddies all over the place. You don’t even need magic to attract one – just a strong enough will.”

Julie opens her mouth to snap Why would I want to attract this nonsense, but at the last second holds back. It’s not like Carlos knows the answer to that, and there’s a high probability of him just turning the question back on her.
“We stopped them,” says Julie. “Which implies – wait, we did stop them, right?”

“Well, they’ve got no power or equipment left, the Museum of Forbidden Technologies is trying to repossess their offices, the old man’s initiating proceedings against them, and Diane Crayton filed a littering complaint,” says Carlos. “So I’d say they have their hands full for the moment. The jurisdiction is… complicated… but I’m keeping an eye on them.”

“Right,” says Julie. “As I was saying: we stopped them, which implies this—” she waves at the storm— “should stop, too.”

Carlos shrugs. “Maybe. I think at this point it’s mainly up to you.” At Julie’s glare, he continues, dryly, “I don’t know if you noticed, but time doesn’t really work here.”

“Ugh,” says Julie, slumping back into her seat.

“Besides,” says Carlos, “When it comes down to you versus physics, I’d bet on you any day.”

Julie snorts. The light changes and they outpace the storm.

He glances at her, then focuses back on the road. He’s not fooling anyone; she can tell he’s still waiting for an answer to his first question. What’s wrong? Hah.

She briefly entertains the notion that maybe he’ll drop it if she continues not to answer, but not only does he have the patience to go on a 48-hour stakeout by himself, he’s a scientist. The probability that he’ll stop asking questions is basically zero.

“I don’t… like October,” she manages.

He doesn’t stare at her and make any bizarre faces with emotions and shit, but she can still feel him allowing her space to explain, and… she can’t. It’s been too long a day. It’s been too long a week. It’s been too long a month, just like it is every year.

But weirdly, it feels like – like now she has room to breathe. Because… she could tell him, if she wanted. She knows he would listen. And she knows that he’s still around, being obnoxious, at some point in the future. There’s at least a little bit of time that she can make use of, and instead of feeling trapped by her stupid emotions, she feels… free.

Or maybe that’s just the wind blowing through her hair because the roof got ripped off of his car, what the hell.

“So what happened to the barista deluge?” she asks, changing the subject with all the subtlety of Night Vale’s own Carlos the Scientist driving a homemade convertible in a populated area. Despite the adoring crowds congregating on the corners, she hasn’t seen a single Troy in their journey so far, whereas early this morning you couldn’t swing a stick without hitting one (as she had tested herself on the way to the bus depot, with some satisfaction). “It couldn’t have been good having that many Troy Walshes here.”

Carlos doesn’t react to her conversational diversion except to grin. “Remember all those flamingos lying around that can transport anyone anywhere in time, space, and dimension?”

“You didn’t,” says Julie, half appalled, half impressed.

“We reprogrammed them,” says Carlos. “Me and the old man. Night Vale’s wards could handle the dimensional warping better than King City, but it still wasn’t safe with that many versions of Troy. He volunteered to help out and we managed to send about 90% of him to other timelines.”
“The right timelines?”

“Well, probably,” says Carlos. “Though the margin of error isn’t as small as I’d like.” He makes a face that everyone but him would describe as a pout and adds, “I asked the old man how much trouble landing Troy in the wrong dimension permanently could cause and he just laughed for five minutes straight. But look at it this way: it’s easier to fix one guy at a time than to fix all of Night Vale after it’s been wiped off the face of the earth by cleansing fire and entombed beneath the sand.”

“Hmm,” says Julie. “Just for reference, how much hysterical laughter would that generate?”

“Ten minutes,” says Carlos firmly. “Minimum.”

Well, her sending a couple Troys popping off to fairyland might have been slightly more hazardous than she intended, but as long as the Dairy Queen doesn't try to keep them too long, her dimension will probably be fine. After that she'll only have herself to blame.

“So our mayor isn’t going to get stuck in a perception bubble and start harassing people with memes? And yes, I mean that in the Dawkins sense, not in the ‘Hotline Bling’ dance loops sense.”

“At our current Troy Walsh quotient, the dimensional warping is down to manageable levels. And if he doesn’t try to leave Night Vale en masse again, the rest of the world should be safe too,” says Carlos. “A pretty neat solution, if I do say so myself.”

“It’s not attractive when you’re this smug,” says Julie.

Carlos smirks. “Wanna send out a survey about it?”

Julie rolls her eyes, but that reminds her. “I’ve got extra grenades,” she says, pulling the remote detonator out of her pocket, then digging through her messenger bag. “Want some?”

“Sure,” says Carlos. “What kind?”

“Thermite.”

“Nasty,” says Carlos. Then his eyes narrow. “Why do you have so many thermite grenades?”

“You never know when you’ll have to set something on unquenchable fire while dousing it in pure molten iron,” says Julie.

“You—” The car screeches to a halt and she bounces off Carlos’ outflung arm. “Julie, I told you the fey were dangerous!” he sputters.

“Uh, yeah,” she says, pushing his arm away. “Hence thermite grenades.”

“What were you thinking?”

“Well, the Teleforce seemed like overkill,” she says.

“Iron weaponry is the nuclear option to the fey!”

“If we’re talking about stuff I can theoretically build, I’m pretty sure nuclear weaponry is the nuclear option,” says Julie.

“They could have killed you!”
“They didn’t,” says Julie. “And yes, I know there’s an implied *yet* in there, but there’s a shit-ton of things here that haven’t killed me *yet*. This is *my* research area, and I’m not just going to sit back while – while the police, or the feds, or the fucking Snow Queen come in and fuck everything up. I’m a scientist, and in Night Vale—”

It finally clicks.

This whole time, she’s been wondering why the suits had acted like there was a deadline for recruiting her when they had Julie’s entire lifespan and, you know, time travel.

But she’d ignored them at the university and then she came to Night Vale, where time wasn’t real. Kidnapping and strong-arming her had been their desperate, last-ditch attempt, because they were afraid. Not *for* her; there couldn’t have been personal danger to near-future Julie (or at least, no more than the normal amount of personal danger) because there’s no way Carlos would be that chill about her imminent demise.

No, they were afraid *of* near-future Julie. The Julie who was about to follow up going toe-to-toe with the police with going toe-to-toe with the fucking Queen of Winter. The Julie who could not just reject their plan, but destroy it utterly, if they didn’t approach her just right.

They hadn’t been running out of time. They’d been running out of *her*.

Because that’s how it works here, isn’t it. You come to Night Vale, and it gets into your head. Feds become a vague yet menacing government agency. A fairy shill starts cursing people with pieces of paper and plotting to steal children. And a scientist…

Words are important. *Names* are important.

“‘In Night Vale’ what?” asks Carlos, concerned. “Are you all right?”

In Night Vale, *scientist* means *hero*.

“*Fuck,*” says Julie. “I’m turning into *you*!”

If geomagnetic reversal was capable of sentience and had emotions and needed coffee, it might feel like this. Like the world lies before her just as it had a moment ago, only now her perspective is completely different and she is once again made aware of the vast power she is capable of wielding and—

“Good,” says Carlos, completely unconcerned by this massive, life-altering paradigm shift. “At least you won’t accidentally set anyone important on fire.”

She’s abruptly pulled out of her inner turmoil. “You’re extrapolating from too little data,” she says. “Name one important person I’ve accidentally set on fire.”

“*Me!*”

So the pneumameter is a little temperamental, big deal. “*Look,*” she says, “Do you want the grenades or not?”

He stops scowling and just… looks at her.

“What,” she says, and when he still doesn’t answer, “*What.*”

“Do *you* think you’ll need them?” he asks.
Now it’s her turn to stare. But Carlos – even though he still won’t meet her gaze, he’s watching her with a seriousness and a weight she doesn’t see very often. Or hardly ever. In fact, the last time she felt like this, she was promising to risk running her energy converters in the Sand Wastes so Carlos had the once chance to reboot – well, all of Night Vale’s weird shit, pretty much. All of Night Vale’s weird shit, depending on her.

“I’ll hold on to one, just in case,” she says slowly. “But… no. In my admittedly limited experience, I think I managed to arrange everything without pissing anyone off.”

“Well, there’s a first time for everything,” says Carlos. He smirks briefly, but it resolves into something decisive, and he focuses back on the road with a firm nod. “Okay. Tell me about it later, though.”

“Sure,” she says, feeling unmoored again, because instead of treating her like she’s one of the people in Night Vale who needs help, he’s treating her like she’s one of the people who helps Night Vale. Even a year and a half ago, powering up the energy converters in defiance of any escaped Elder Gods, this level of trust sat uneasily. Five years ago she couldn’t even have imagined it.

But five years ago, she wasn’t responsible for the Teleforce. Five years ago, she didn’t know Carlos. Hell, five years ago she wouldn’t have even come here. That person from five years ago is gone – even though she’s still here, all the best and worst parts plus the accumulated experience and the hard-won knowledge, everything that makes her Julie.

Names are important. Christ.

They pull up to the car dealership. “Where do you want these?” asks Julie, taking out a thermite grenade. It suddenly seems a lot heavier. Probably all that responsibility.

“Glovebox is fine,” says Carlos.

~*~*~*~

Though presumably all this would mean Carlos trusts her not to pick a fight with any more motor vehicle-based supernatural groups, he still hangs around for the arduous process of freeing her car from the dealership’s clutches. He does at least prove to be moderately useful by distracting the mechanics with his hair, leaving Julie free to search her car for any unauthorized additions. The Sheriff’s Secret Police have left behind a variety of new surveillance devices, but it only takes a few minutes to “accidentally” smash the video feeds, splice the audio pickups with the 24-hour bluegrass station on satellite radio, and reassign the lojack signal to the tan Corolla sitting nearby.

It’s possible that arguing with the service department over her bill isn’t the smartest course of action, but first of all, it would probably look more suspicious if she didn’t argue with them, and secondly, chlorofiends attack before she even gets to complain about the bullshit extraneous labor charges.

In the ensuing fight, Carlos barely sets himself on fire, and she’s pleased to note that his field test of her grenades is extremely effective.

~*~*~*~

“Oh, hello, Julie!” says Andre as he enters the lounge. “Did you get your car?”

“Sure did,” says Julie, jangling her keys at him.
“Excellent,” says Andre happily. “Oh, and Carlos, we’ve been getting several calls this past hour thanking you for your scientific action at the car dealership and inquiring about the health of your hair.”

Carlos grunts, staring fixedly at the coffeemaker. The red ON light shorts out with a pop, but everything keeps percolating, so Julie can probably fix it later.

“Minor smoke damage,” she translates for him, magnanimously.

“Wonderful! They’ll be so relieved,” says Andre. The coffeemaker clicks off and Carlos darts forward, filling his mug and gulping it down as though he had not spent the rest of the morning trying not to burn himself.

Julie tugs the carafe from his hand and fills her and Andre’s respective mugs.

“We figured out my whole personal weather thing,” she says – reluctantly, but not only is this of scientific interest, it’s also the kind of emotional bullshit he’d want to know. “It’s a leftover from Pathetic Fallacy Day, stuck in a stasis loop.”

“Ah, I see,” says Andre. “That makes sense, given the – well, given the givens.”

“Yeah,” says Julie. She is intensely grateful he doesn’t elaborate; attempts to get people to babysit her for the evening aside, Andre is a good friend. “You know – sorry I’ve been such a menace.”

“It’s all right,” says Andre. “It’s certainly not your worst. You’ve really mellowed out since undergrad, after all.”

Carlos spits out his coffee.

“Go home, Extra Crispy,” Julie says, glaring at him.

Andre helpfully thumps him on the back until he stops coughing. “You’ll be all right?” he asks.

Carlos waves his hand, still coughing.

“Sure,” says Julie. It’s another translation, but Andre doesn’t need to know that.

~*~*~*~

“Wei, how are the new security subroutines coming?” asks Julie as she duct-tapes the casing of one of the computers back together. The Faraday cage hums soothingly around them. Feelings? Who needs feelings. She has problem-solving.

Wei absently waggles the rubber duck at her.

“Great,” she says. She moves to the scanner array. Christ, what a mess. She sticks out a hand and says, “Nilanjana, get me my—”

Gary hands her another mug of coffee.

“I was going to say ‘wrench,’” she says. He shrugs.

She takes a sip anyway and pokes through the scanner’s problem areas as Gary digs through the toolbox.

“Steele’s Pots and Pans: please sterilize thoroughly before use,” says Cecil over the radio. “An
important update about today’s kerfuffle at the car dealership, listeners: I have just spoken with Carlos and he assures me that with a few rounds of deep conditioning, everything should be fine. He has texted me a picture of his grocery bag, and I can confirm that he has purchased the conditioner, along with the ingredients for what looks like an exceptionally delicious dinner. I am sure we can all rest easy, knowing that with the use of deductive reasoning and small arms and light weapons, science has once again prevailed against dark sci— err, I mean, chlorofiends – and everything is on track to return to our normal state of affairs.”

“Does this mean we all get to use thermite grenades?” Gary asks.

“Make your own,” says Julie.

Cecil moves on to reading excerpts from the Online Entomology Dictionary and she moves on to recalibrating the EM inputs. Everything is going well, or at least as well as can be expected.

“Julodis turbulenta,” reads Cecil.

Too close. Everything is too close. The cavity of the scanner array is suddenly not big enough, like the circuits and wires and relays have started to tighten, cutting off her air. Which is ridiculous. The scanner array isn’t going to go all Skynet when it’s not even plugged into a power s—

“—and the concept evolves through Julodis peregrina,” says Cecil.

She flinches at the sound of the wrench hitting the floor. She must have dropped it. She pulls her head out of the scanner array, carefully, focusing on her breathing.

Wei is still poking at his laptop and mumbling to the rubber duck; Kate has come in, but is cheerfully cleaning the ersatz rock polygraph. They don’t seem to have noticed her. Good.

She looks across the lab and finds Gary watching the radio pensively.

“Dr. D once told me Julodis was his favorite genus of beetle,” he says.

Julie stares at the radio, too. She suddenly feels very tired.

“Yeah,” she says. “It was.”

Eventually she realizes she hasn’t retrieved her wrench. She fishes it out from under the scanner array. It’s reassuringly solid in her hand.

Wrench. Now that’s a nice evocative word for Cecil’s linguistic segment. All sorts of fun yet horrible associations. A hand tool that’s also a violent twist, or the injuries therefrom. Pipe wrench fight. Professor Plum, in the study, with the wrench.

“Dr. Kwan?” asks Kate.

More similes and/or metaphors. She feels like a moon that had escaped orbit and was no longer a moon but just a piece of something that once was, spinning off into nothing.

“Darmok on the ocean,” Julie says.

“What?”

Julie realizes she’s just crouching there, staring at her wrench like an idiot. She clears her throat. “I’m heading out,” she says. She stands and drops her wrench in the toolbox. “Email me a status report before you leave.”
“But it’s not even five o’clo—” says Wei before Gary, with great presence of mind, kicks him in the leg.

She grabs her messenger bag and flees.

She pulls up short at the sight of her car. There’s a large white container sitting on the front seat that wasn’t there before. She almost marches straight back into the lab to get – she doesn’t know; Kate, the Sheriff’s Secret Police, the Teleforce – but then she realizes it appears to be a styrofoam cooler, clearly labeled in Carlos’ neat handwriting *BEER IS NOT A FOOD*.

She still checks the undercarriage of her car and gets out a pair of radiation gloves from her trunk before she opens it; that’s just common sense. But the only thing inside the cooler is dry ice and a casserole, cooking directions Sharpied onto its foil lid. When she peels back a corner, she can see tomatoes and smell something spicy. Her stomach growls.

She sits in the driver’s seat and takes a deep breath. She can do this.

She turns on the car and realizes too late she left the radio on.

“Of course, the feeling remains constant in *Julodis desertica,*” says Cecil, “and especially in *Julodis fidelissima.*”

“Fuck,” says Julie. She has to close her eyes and rest her head against the steering wheel until he moves on to the financial report. She keeps the radio on for the ride home, because while his imitation of pteranodon battle cries will probably not illuminate the state of the economy, it certainly makes a considerable effort to keep her from thinking about anything else.

~*~*~*~

Professor Bobo headbutts her in the shins as soon as she walks through the door. Observer deliberately slinks into the room and then out again, ignoring her completely, to register his displeasure at the indignity of being forced to eat from the same bowl of food for two days in a row.

She puts the casserole in the oven, grabs a beer, and manages to distract herself checking her email (*no*, she does not want to work for the Department of Energy, *yes*, she wants the committee to read her application for the Wu Memorial Grant, *no*, she does not need a bigger penis) until it’s done cooking. Concentrating on not searing off her taste buds while shoveling casserole into her mouth gets her another ten minutes, but as she slows down, all she can hear is the faint sound of traffic, the tick of a clock, and the silence of rooms with no one else in them.

*Tick*

*Tock*

*Tick*

She stands up and gets a flashlight. She searches under furniture and in the top corners of her cabinets until she finds the old-fashioned alarm clock wired to a detonator under the sink in her bathroom.

She half-heartedly pokes around the payload after she disarms it. Aside from a small black powder charge, there are no explosives: just a lot of confetti and small slips of paper that say *Cheer up, Doctor Renegade!*
Resisting the urge to subject all of it to thermal energetic disassembly, she reconnects the wiretap on her phone and asks, “Was that propaganda bomb yours?”

“Sure was!” says the Sheriff’s Secret Police officer. “We noticed you’ve been angrier than normal lately. How do you feel now?”

Julie shuts her eyes and counts to ten. *It could be worse,* she reminds herself. *They could have told you to smile.*

She counts to ten again. “Just peachy,” she grits out. She disables their wiretap again and hangs up.

They must have found a hole in her defenses; she hasn’t been in her apartment enough to stay on top of security. Normally, she’d be furious about it and channel everything into inventing new and creative ways to make the police regret invading her privacy.

But her anger is slipping away, the thought of upgrading everything exhausting. She gets another beer and goes back to the couch.

Without the mysterious ticking noises, the silence is oppressive. She still doesn’t want to talk to anyone, but regrets not taking Carlos up on his invitation anyway.

There are two busted radios in her front closet. After a few minutes of cannibalization and some light soldering, there’s one functional radio sitting on her coffee table. She tunes it to the local station, hoping for some reruns of Cecil’s show, but there’s only the sound of a book spine creaking and pages turning rapidly.

She sighs and tries the TV. It’s all reruns of *The Big Bang Theory.* The remote makes a satisfying *crack!* when she throws it against the wall.

Professor Bobo crawls on her lap. She pets him mechanically.

She hates this. She hates the way distractions have stopped working, giving her only a few minutes of peace before she remembers everything. She hates the way her mind won’t settle. She hates the burning behind her eyes. She hates the ache in her chest.

She hates the feeling that she could have *tried* to make it go away. She hates the knowledge that it wouldn’t have worked; would have only made her feel worse.

She hates knowing that this awful silence will always be there, no matter where she goes or who she’s with, because the person who filled it is gone.

~*~*~*~

Condensation creeps down the lower third of her beer bottle, slowly saturating the coaster. She should put away her dirty dishes, stick the rest of the casserole in the fridge, but she doesn’t. Emptiness presses around her.

Someone knocks at her door, *Shave and a Haircut.*

She startles and Professor Bobo jumps off her lap.

She cautiously approaches the door and looks through the peephole (moved off to the side of the decoy peephole). It’s Carlos, the older one, still sporting two black eyes and the remnants of his hives, though they’ve lost their angry coloring. He’s wearing full battle gear while juggling a significant stack of papers and paper grocery bag on one hip.
He reaches forward and adds, *Two bits.*

Julie swears under her breath and scrubs at her eyes. “What’s the password?” she calls.

“New England Clam Chowder.”

“Is that the red or the white?”

He rolls his eyes, which is how she knows it’s actually him. She undoes the row of locks and security chains and opens the door.

“What,” she says.

“Hi,” he says. “Can I borrow your kitchen? It’s important.”

“Important for saving the world, or important because you forgot to make your hubby a snack?” she asks suspiciously.

“…Yes,” says Carlos.

Julie sighs. “Fine,” she mutters. “Come in, but you have to leave me alone. I’m busy.”

“Of course.” He steps over the threshold and looks around. “You should have Prime check your wards,” he says. “They’re not as strong as they should be.”

“Yeah, I know,” says Julie, re-locking the door. “Big Brother got in and left a prop bomb in the bathroom.”

“Try not to make them suffer too much,” says Carlos as he divests himself of cloak and lab coat. “You should be fine for now, though.” He plops his stack of papers on the coffee table next to his sword and, thankfully, disappears into the kitchen with his bag of groceries.

She pulls one of the papers over. More exams. Julie would make fun of him for literally having all the time in the world to do his grading and still getting stuck with a pile of it at the last moment, but honestly: it’s probably inevitable. If time isn’t real, it certainly can’t stand up to the drudgery of recording data on the incremental progression of your students’ journey to something approximating understanding.

She puts the exam back and slumps into the couch cushions. Observer deigns to come over and knead her legs, claws extended. She scratches his head and stares at the back of her eyelids, listening to Carlos fight with the mixer.

After a while, the distinct smell of cinnamon permeates the air.

“What are you making?” she demands, peering through the kitchen door just as Carlos removes a tray of cookies from the oven. “Are those *snickerdoodles*?”

“Hopefully,” he says, ignoring her accusing glare. “Your leftovers were still on the counter, so I stuck them in the fridge. What did you have? It smells good.”

“You broke into my car and left me a casserole,” says Julie.

“How was it?”

“You are unbelievable,” she says. It was delicious. “Stop trying to change the subject.”
“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he says, and holds out a snickerdoodle. “How’s this?”

She vindictively stuffs the whole thing in her mouth.

“Terrible,” she says, mouth full, then steals another one off the tray. “Why are you making these?”

“Would you believe me if I said I need them for a picnic?”

“You are so full of it,” she says, taking a handful and retreating back to the couch. She flops down and picks up her laptop. Since it’s too late to throw Carlos out, she should probably figure out how the Sheriff’s Secret Police got into her bathroom so he doesn’t get into trouble with them while he’s here. The man already lives dangerously; that was real wheat flour she saw on the kitchen counter.

Her home surveillance (her personal home surveillance, not the public home surveillance gamefully attempted by the Sheriff’s Secret Police) malfunctioned in the north quadrant yesterday; something happened with the weird shit there, she assumes. She heads to the bathroom and inspects the outer wall.

“Oh, gosh, a mouse hole,” she says flatly, before setting off a small EMP and duct-taping a metal plate over the SSP’s perimeter breach.

She replaces a circuit board and reboots her surveillance system; better safe than sorry, even if she’ll just have to do the same tomorrow, or whenever Carlos0 comes to fix her wards and break all her electronics in the process.

Tomorrow. It’s so easy to say that, as thought this day isn’t stretching into eternity. She squeezes her eyes shut.

After a few minutes, she makes herself get up. Her ass has fallen asleep on the cold bathroom floor, and since she’s going to suffer anyway she might as well do it in comfort.

She pulls up short at the entrance to her living room: Carlos has relocated to her arm chair. She hesitates, but grits her teeth and makes her way back to the couch.

However, aside from an absent-minded hum as she sits down, he seems absorbed in his grading. Will wonders never cease. He might essentially still be the same dumbass she knows now, but at least at some point he learned how to shut up. Julie goes back to her extremely important business – petting Observer and trying not to think about how shitty she feels – in peace.

She’s losing the latter part of the battle when Carlos puts down his red pen; she startles at the movement, even though it wasn’t particularly sudden. He turns to her and asks, “Hey, do you have the recipe for those smoothies you used to give me?”

“Smoothies.” Julie stares at him blankly for a moment, then wrenches her thoughts into working order. “You mean the ones from that time I thought you were going to die and only had six months to come up with a way for us to save your ass ourselves.”

He snaps his fingers. “That’s the one.”

“Recipe’s in the kitchen somewhere,” says Julie. “Where’d you get it, anyway?”

He blinks. “What do you mean? It’s your recipe.”

“I found it in your time-traveling dossier envelope thing,” says Julie. “What, you didn’t put it
Carlos’ face does something complicated, then he sighs. “Not yet, apparently,” he says grudgingly.

“I feel a lot better about the future, knowing you’re still there to bother yourself,” says Julie. She levers herself off the couch.

“I can get it,” Carlos says, a little too quickly. “I think I brought most of the ingredients, but I just wanted to check—”

Julie glares at him until he sits back down. “You, keep grading. If you think I’m going to let you destroy my blender, you have another think coming.” With the way this month has gone, beer slushies are going to be a priority.

She digs through her junk drawer until she finds the recipe under a disassembled drone prototype, then gets the ingredients from his grocery bag and chucks them in the blender. Loading dose of potassium iodide, right. Watercress, pea sprouts, ginger, thyme, chamomile, peppermint, onion, pomegranate juice… She snorts.

“What?” Carlos calls from the other room.

“Nothing important,” says Julie, dropping the lid into place. “Only that all these foods are, you know, high in antihistamines, but I’m sure that wouldn’t imply anything about their effectiveness in relieving your symptoms when you’ve been yoyoing through the time vortex—”

“All right, I admit it, I should have figured that out sooner,” says Carlos. “You don’t have to—”

Julie takes great pleasure in cutting him off by turning on the blender.

The resulting purple mess goes into one of her ten thousand Night Vale Community Radio promotional thermoses, which she tosses at his head.

“Thanks,” he says, catching it without looking.

“Jjan,” she says, and flops back down on the couch.

The silence is worse, after that burst of activity. Her knee starts jiggling; with a disgruntled sigh, Observer leaves off trying to crawl onto her lap and jumps off the couch with a thud. She clenches her fists, then forces them to relax.

She picks up an exam and flips through it. General Science. Typical. “Your periodic table is missing the actinide series,” she says.

“It’s not missing, as such,” he says. “Just a little… irrelevant. Currently.”

“I bet it goes great as a carbon copy handout with your unit on old quantum theory,” she says.

“The periodic table? I make them memorize it by then,” he says.

“That’s mean,” she says approvingly.

She drops the exam back on the coffee table and observes him, calculating.

“Speaking of quantum theories – the hundredth anniversary of Einstein’s Theory of General Relativity’s next month,” she says.
Carlos checks one of his watches. “Huh,” he says. “That’s right.”

Julie waits. He goes back to grading.

“What do you get someone for a hundredth anniversary, anyway?” she asks.

“Ten carat diamond,” he says absently.

She watches as his pen slows on the page and his mighty eyebrows come together in a tiny frown. When he looks up at her, she smirks.

“That proves nothing,” he says.

“What?” says Julie innocently. “Never said it did.”

“You’re a menace,” he says, making a show of going back to his grading.

“So are you,” says Julie. “Running around at the ripe old age of – what, 138? 139?”

He puts his pen down. “All right,” he says. “Assuming you were correct – which you’re not – how do you figure?”

“Five years,” she says. “That’s the outer estimate of how long it will take you to get married, because you’re both big saps like that. It’ll probably be more like three, unless you or Cecil have a dramatic enough near-death experience, in which case it’ll be sooner. Plus a hundred, plus another few years – let’s go with another milestone, at five. Your present was close to mind, but you weren’t vomiting happiness everywhere, so it’s not that recent. So, around 139.”

He stares at her a moment. “It’s a good guess,” he says finally, then smirks. “But you’re nowhere close.”

“Seriously though,” says Julie after another minute. “A ten-carat diamond seems expensive.”

Carlos finishes writing with an elaborate loop and a definitive poke of a period. “Not,” he says triumphantly, “if you make it yourself.”

She watches him, contemplating. He was pretty smug about her estimate, which means… too low, definitely.

“151,” she guesses.

He sighs loudly.

She smirks again. But her triumph is short-lived when he points his pen at her and says, “Your turn.”


“You don’t even know what I’m going to ask,” says Carlos.

She glares at him.

He taps his pen against an exam. “Why didn’t you do it?”

“Do what?” asks Julie, before she can think better of it.
“Keep the feds’ research,” says Carlos.

That… was not the question she was expecting. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” she says.

Carlos raises an eyebrow.

She could just not tell him. She can handle a pouty wizard, no matter how old he is. He’s her friend, and he helped save her, but she doesn’t owe him anything.

Dammit, that’s probably why she should tell him.

“Because…” She looks away and mutters, “It wouldn’t have been my problem.”

“What?”

“It wouldn’t have been my problem,” she snaps, louder. “It would have been yours.”

As he blinks at her in surprise, she continues, “Best case scenario, I make dozens of brilliant discoveries. And the future feds are all over me trying to recover their data and steal my IP, fucking up timelines left and right, and you – current you – have to deal with the consequences. With enemies you know nothing about but who already know how to fight you, and have been doing it for god knows how long. Or the worst case scenario… Worst case scenario, I make dozens of brilliant discoveries and I seriously fuck something up. And you have to deal with the consequences. With me.”

She picks at a loose thread on the couch. “I wouldn’t do that, Carlos,” she says. “At least, not for someone else’s research.”

She looks up, startled, when he starts to laugh.

“You’re something else, you know that?” he says.

“Obviously,” she says. She throws a cookie at him as he keeps chuckling. “Shut up.”

He catches it easily. “Hey.”

“What.”

He smiles his dumb perfect smile at her. “Thanks,” he says.

She rolls her eyes. “So what’s your deal, then?” she asks. “You just bop around like Time Cop and take the occasional break to bake cookies for everyone?”

“Not everyone,” he says.

“Time can’t handle it?”

“No,” says Carlos. His smile fades. “I can’t.”

She looks away.

151, or thereabouts. Christ. Assuming she makes it somewhere near the average life expectancy instead of stroking out early, that still means Carlos hasn’t seen her – well, shared a timeline with her – for over eighty years. He obviously still has Cecil – if Cecil’s managed to survive this long, he’s probably going to outlive everyone and then stick around to give live color commentary about
the end of the world – but everyone else? Carlos’ family, his other friends? Her team? All the mostly humans he looks after here in Night Vale? Even his fellow long-lived wizards aren’t a sure bet, because she knows that despite his best efforts the world is still dangerous, and probably getting worse, and they’re the ones on the front lines.

The fun thing about tragedy, though, is that it’s not quantitative. The human mind is open to potentially infinite expansion, but it still gets hung up on the fellow primate that used to be in your tree. Ten, a hundred, a thousand people is terrible, but sometimes one person’s all it takes.

Each moment, there’s the chance you’ll look over and remember they’re not there. Each moment, you’re either dealing with it or… you’re not.

She looks back. He picks up his next exam and starts grading.

“Does it – does it ever go away?” she asks.

“No,” says Carlos. “But it gets easier to carry.”

Julie swallows. She doesn’t want it to go away, for memories to fade like a canceled-out timeline, a statistical anomaly. If that’s the price she pays for keeping them, she’ll pay it.

“Good,” she says.

To her relief, he keeps grading instead of looking at her. At least she can pretend he’s not paying attention and having feelings about all this. Julie doesn’t want to pay attention and have feelings about all this, but life is random and horrible and here she is.

“It’s been five years,” she says. Carlos doesn’t look up, but she knows he’s listening. “That’s how long we were together. In another three, it – it will be longer than I even knew him.”

At that, Carlos does look up. “Some people, it doesn’t matter how long you know them,” he says. “They stay important even when they’re gone.”

“That’s...”

Terrible. Comforting.

“Stupid,” she concludes.

“Time’s not real,” he says. “People are.”

Julie wants to argue, but – it’s been twelve years, eight months, and twenty-seven days since their first meeting, and she still remembers that Romero used cheap blue Bics, which were a pain in the ass to pop the ends off even though she preferred the barrels for construction purposes. Twelve years, eight months, and twenty-seven days. Approximately 14.34% of the average lifespan of an Asian-American woman, and all devoted to one small fact that would be completely insignificant if it weren’t about Romero.

Julie doesn’t know what insignificant facts the feds know about her – what future they expect from her. Is she famous for her discoveries? Or is she the lost expert, known only by the most obsessive students of practical theoretical physics, because she spent more time trying to keep this eldritch murder town from getting more eldritch and murdery than she did trying to publish?

She doesn’t know what she’d prefer, honestly. She just knows what she wants now, and that’s to observe the world, formulate questions, construct hypotheses, make predictions, test the results,
and analyze her findings for as long as she can. She’d say she doesn’t care what other people think about her, but that’s not precisely true.

In the future, there’s one person who remembers her as the kind of friend who, over a century later, you recalled felt like shit one week, so you tried to share an interesting intellectual problem (with explosions) with her to occupy her time and, when that went south, made her favorite cookies.

That’s a legacy worth living up to.

Also:

“You’re a ridiculous person,” she says.

“You love me anyway,” says Carlos.

“Obviously,” she snaps. She points at his exams. “When are those due?”

“Tomorrow.”

“Which tomorrow?”

“All of them,” he says glumly.

She sighs and steals one of his red pens. “Here,” she says, holding out a hand. “Give me your rubric.”

Outside, the sunset yells and time, which isn’t real, does a reasonable approximation of lurching on. Inside, Carlos slouches in her armchair and Julie sits on the couch and they grade papers. The silence can never be filled, but with the smell of cinnamon and the scritch of a pen and the sound of someone else breathing steadily, it doesn’t seem as empty.

Julie wakes up the next morning on her couch covered in a blanket, a full plate of cookies on the table, one quiet night closer to the future.

~*~*~*~

21-October-2011

The bus is late.

To make matters worse, Julie is on the bus. Her car’s in the shop after a run-in with some trash cans, so instead of being productive and only coming home when she’s done in the lab – even if, perhaps, her reaction time is not the best at four in the morning – she’s trapped in a three-lane parking lot in rush hour.

It’s not that Julie has thrown herself into her work to cope; she’s always thrown herself into her work regardless. Very little of her life has changed, even as a huge part of her life has changed. She hates October with every fiber of her being and has two papers ready for publication and is still in limbo on the waitlist that Smith swears up and down doesn’t exist for more lab space and assistants. She thinks that, maybe, if she can suck it up and stomach chairing a committee or volunteering for things that have the word “donor” in them, she can bump herself up a few slots.

Or she could write back to the very nice and very persistent officials from her elected government and accept their offer to take her off all those pesky watch lists and give her lots of money in return for all her intellectual property.
Instead, she is catching up on the last six months of potentially relevant interdisciplinary publications. The 3G here is terrible, but watching a slowly loading browser window is moderately more gratifying than staring out the bus window. Or into the future.

She clicks on a footnote and discovers, to her disgust, that the university does not have a subscription to the archive. She stabs repeatedly at the next link, which not only does not make it load faster, but takes her to the wrong footnote entirely.

The footnote makes no sense.

The bus advances approximately three meters, then stops again. They are less than a mile from her apartment.

Julie skims the attached article. It is coherent but boring; the footnote that made no sense is the only interesting part, framed by the researchers in what essentially amounts to a verbal shrug.

There are, however, references.

After following the trail of a dozen other baffling footnotes, a terse and inconclusive study alternately credited as Kayali (1961) and Kayali (1691), and an amusing detour to a well-written if very unlikely article in the deeply yellow archives of *The Midwestern Arcane*, Julie realizes she’s found something utterly fascinating and completely unmarketable.

It would require fieldwork, almost definitely. She’s a theoretical physicist. That’s not what she’s supposed to be here for.

“Fuck this,” she says, and stands up.

The bus driver yells a lot and it’s raining outside when she kicks the bus doors open, but she doesn’t care.

"I need you to write a grant proposal for me," she says on the phone to Andre in lieu of hello. "I'll pay."

"A grant proposal for what?" asks Andre. She hears the ding as her email arrives in his inbox. "Oh, there it is." He goes all distant as she's put on speaker. "I see, it – hmm…" He stops and stays silent for several moments.

"Andre?"

"Ferromagnetic records?" asks Andre.

"Yep," says Julie.

"Wow. And... Did you see this note on the anomalous rock formations?"

"Of course," said Julie, who had in fact skimmed over the majority of it on her way to the description of the EM fluctuations.

"You'll definitely need a geologist along," says Andre, and Julie stops walking, because... She was prepared to do this alone, like she’s been doing everything else alone, but... she doesn't have to. Other people can help for their own sakes, not just hers. Other people can get something valuable out of being with her. "Actually, two. You'll definitely need two geologists. And of course we'd need tech support..."
"Think we can swing a fellowship for apian energy mapping?" says Julie.

"Yes?" says Andre. "I mean, yes. Because – Julie, did you see these tables? This ferromagnetic data alone—"

As Andre talks about magnetic north, Julie thinks about that, and how to transport bees, and where to lease a van, and the best way to measure energy fluctuations, and all the questions inherent in the application of practical theoretical physics – so many mysteries that it wouldn’t seem like she should be able to solve even one of them, not if she had all the time in the world. She doesn’t have all the time in the world, but that’s certainly not going to stop her from trying.

_Night Vale, she thinks._

_They’ll never see her coming._

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Chapter End Notes


~*~*~*~

ME, FINISHING _LOVE IS ALL YOU NEED_: well i have definitely learned my lesson about writing ridiculously long stories just because two characters have the same name

WTNV THE NOVEL:

"Is this Night Vale?" Diane

“It is,” said the driver. Her n

ME: gdi

As always, I could not have done this without my fabulous beta *Ginipig* and her many wise sayings, like "If you're changing this to setting her on fire, this is a reminder" and "Ah, yes. I knew this [fact about thermite's ignition temperature] from my work at summer camp."

Thank you to everyone who stuck with me while I flung chapters at random upon the internet! You who read WIPs are a credit to your species’ bravery. And thank you to everyone who read this in its entirety! I am writing to you from the past, to what is simultaneously your present and my future, which is pretty conveniently thematic when you think about it. Throughout history, my readers have been/are/will be the best.
Since it's stuck in your head anyway

This fic would not be here without 1) my complete inability to learn my lesson, B) a slight sense of ????? at the conclusion of Welcome to Night Vale: The Novel, and most importantly π) the AMAZINGLY ENTHUSIASTIC RESPONSE of everyone who's read my stuff. Comments! Kudos! Bookmarks! Genuine Grade-A Fan Fiction! You are just the best, dear readers. THE BEST.

And speaking of the best: please put your hands together for Ginipig! Now take them apart. Now put them back together again and repeat with increasing speed. There! She is the greatest and selflessly agreed to be my beta despite knowing that I am the kind of person who asks people to be their beta four days before posting, and then hurled herself into the breach known as "making sure time travel makes sense" and "explaining physics in the middle of the night to someone who hasn't used it in twelve years" with spirit bent to her full height. Admire the noble lustre in her eye!

You can stop clapping now. Please. Please stop clapping, it – wow, one hand? Really? That's totally zen, dude.

Updates will be posted in my usual timely fashion, i.e. erratically and without warning!

A note on the tags: this is not a particularly depressing fic, but I wanted to make sure it was properly labelled so no one, to use a totally random example, is caught off guard by a ~surprise plot twist~ that actually the whole thing is about a horrible tragedy that closely mirrors a horrible tragedy they've had to deal with in real life and it's right at the end of the story so even though the plot has wrapped itself up in a neat bow they're still really upset and then they end up trying not to cry on the DC Metro about something other than the DC Metro itself. If anyone needs any more detailed content warnings, let me know!

ETA: added some dates! Time isn't real but copy edits are.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!