

Territory, Voice, and Choice: A Case Study in Isolated Societies of Desert Biomes

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Territory, Voice, and Choice: A Case Study in Isolated Societies of Desert Biomes

by [callmearcturus](#)

Summary

The list of things in Night Vale worthy of study is long, and part of Carlos' work in this strange desert community is deciding what takes precedence. With the impossible seismology, apparently psychotropic sandstorms, fake clocks, and *whatever* those deer are, there's just not enough time to cover everything.

Also, call it an oversight, a budgetary limitation, or Carlos having seven degrees in natural sciences and none in social sciences, but studying the actual societal structure of Night Vale and its... peculiarities hasn't been a priority.

Six months in Night Vale to the day, he's going to wish he'd taken the time.

The AU in which A/B/O exists... but only in Night Vale. And after six months of residency, the scientists have just officially become citizens.

Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

Shout out to [wilder than lions, louder than sound](#) by ruthlesstlistener for excellent A/B/O worldbuilding. I'm leaning on that and going in my own direction.

Anti-shout out to Tree and Brinn who when I said "hey i got a night vale ABO idea" *didn't* do the right thing and say "no, arc." This is entirely their fault, and now here we are.

Six months to the day of entering Night Vale, Carlos' car went dead halfway down Broken Sound Boulevard. The power steering went with it, and he nearly hit a hydrant as he bounced up onto the sidewalk. Which, thank god, because his team had only recently discovered the possibility that the Night Vale emergency water supply system *might* belong to an ancient, living creature under the topsoil of the city. He didn't want to draw its ire.

Carlos rubbed his shoulder where the seatbelt caught him. "Ow."

Someone in a balaclava tapped on the window. "Citizen. Lower your window."

"They're power windows and I-- I think you just disabled my car with an EMP."

The Secret Police Officer tilted their head and looked accusingly at the car. "You don't got one of those handles you can spin around?"

"No."

"Fine." They moved to the side. "Please step out of the vehicle, Mr. Scientist."

Carlos sighed, but obligingly climbed out into the dry heat of the street. "It's Doctor, actually. What's the trouble, officer?"

"No trouble." They handed him a wrapped package with the Night Vale town seal stamped prominently in the center. "You've maintained residence in Night Vale for the required duration to be added to the list of citizens engraved in obsidian in City Hall. Congratulations. Here is your citizen welcome pack and mandatory orange poncho."

"Oh!" Carlos fumbled to hold both items in his arms. "Thank you? Thanks."

"You will be expected to update your tax information and file for a new driver's license. You have a one-week grace period to submit the proper paperwork."

That was half the grace period instituted for the new murder illegality statute passed last month. This town had completely unfathomable priorities. "Great, sure."

The Secret Police officer saluted. "Have a good day, Dr. Scientist." They turned on their heel and walked away, vanishing into a manhole.

Carlos tried to turn his car back on, but it clicked and remained dark. Sighing, he grabbed his bag from the backseat and started walking.

He arrived at the lab just as Nilanjana was at the door, looking unhappy and flushed in her pretty maroon hijab. She looked over at Carlos, then over his shoulder, and sighed loudly. "I can't believe this. You too?"

She had a familiar looking packet and poncho under her arm. Carlos held his up in return. "Welcome, new citizens, huh?"

"They got my car right off from the Ralphs. John Peters offered me a ride. Did you know John's truck doesn't have *air conditioning*?"

"You know what does have air conditioning? Our lab." He waved at the door entreatingly. "Come on, Nils, I had to walk."

Sighing loudly, she swiped her keycard and pushed her way in, holding the door behind. "Investigating the clocktower will have to wait. I think most of this '*welcome packet*' is mostly mandatory paperwork. Do you feel particularly welcomed, Carlos?"

He considered this. When he didn't have an answer right away, Nilanjana sighed again, clearly irritated, and disappeared into the Coat Room, where they kept all the lab coats, hanging pristine and ready. It wasn't uncommon for them to need a mid-day change because some strange disaster cropping up during their work.

She reappeared, hair loose, tying it up in a ponytail, her lab coat on.

"I think I do," Carlos answered. "Everyone's pretty nice. You just have to overlook the strangeness."

Nilanjana's arms fell heavy at her sides, and he was surprised to see her genuinely glare. She stalked over to him, and Carlos shrunk back a step at the sudden and weird ferocity of it. It was in her arms, he thought, how her shoulders were lifting slightly.

"Nice? Carlos!" She whipped some stray strands of hair out of her eyes. "Did the Secret Police just take out your car and leave you stranded to walk here, or didn't they? In the heat! What if you passed out? What if someone watched you all by yourself and decided to, you know, *do something*?"

"Do something?" Carlos echoed. "Do what?"

"There were feral dogs running around just a little while ago! The coffee shop across the street was hit with graffiti and rowdy behavior!" She lifted a finger and waved it at him. "Here's a hypothesis! What if they were out and about while you were all alone?"

"That's-- that's not a hypothesis, Nils."

"Don't call me Nils when I'm angry at you!"

"Why are you angry with me!" Carlos asked, voice lifting to match hers, fraying a little. "I walk around Night Vale all the time!"

"This place is dangerous and someone has to look--" she faltered suddenly, lowering her hand. "I'm... wait."

"Nils? I mean, Nilanjana? Dr. Sikdar?" He was unsure how to address her now, holding his hands together and rubbing his thumb over his skin.

"No, no, don't go formal, I don't." She put a hand on her head. "Shit. Carlos." Her face blanched, and she flung out a hand behind her.

"Do you need a chair?" Carlos asked, before Nilanjana threw up on the floor. He yelped, jumping back and away. "Containment! Someone grab a containment kit!"

"She looks bad," Mark said, leaning over Nilanjana.

From where she lay on the work table, she swung her arm out, trying weakly to hit him.

Carlos caught her hand, pulling her arm out. "Time to give blood. Did you cross into any possible contagion zones? The void sickness quarantine area?"

Her eyes were blurry as fogged glass as she watched Carlos set up a needle and begin filling vials. "No. None of those." She licked her lips, parched and dry. "Symptoms... nausea. Ele... elevated heartrate."

"Vomiting," Carlos added helpfully.

Nilanjana tried to narrow her eyes at him before giving up and closing them. "Weariness. Doubling vision. Uh. Skin itches. And..." She tapped her abdomen. "Itches... inside."

Luisa, another of the team, crossed her arms. "Centipedes are an issue in Night Vale, especially at the schools. Nilanjana talked to that boy with the two heads, so she's been there recently."

"I do not have centipedes," she protested, rolling onto her side and resting her head against the table. "Tell them I don't have centipedes."

"I'll run tests," Carlos said, and took her hand. It was clammy, and he held it tightly. "It's probably not centipedes. I heard Ce-- on the radio, they only live in teachers." He smiled for her. "When was the last time you taught a class, Dr. Sikdar?"

The puff of laughter from her was a gratifying relief. "Nice save."

"I have no idea what you mean. Mark, run these, please, thanks." Passing off the vials, he glanced at the radio. It hadn't turned itself on yet. It would later, when the show started.

He could ask Cecil. He wasn't a doctor by *any* means. But he was an expert in the oddities of Night Vale. And very eager to be of assistance.

Carlos rubbed his forehead with the sleeve of the lab coat. "Who messed with the thermostat? Can we lower it again, please, thank you."

Luisa patted Nilanjana's shoulder, then stepped away to examine the little panel on the wall. "Doctor, it's still at 78, which is of course the most efficient temperature for an air conditioner."

"What? That can't be right. It's much hotter than that in here."

Luisa gestured with both hands to the thermostat, like a game show host displaying a prize. Carlos walked over to see.

At the wall, he braced himself on his arm, taking a deep breath as everything tilted around him. "Oh no," he said, and leaned his whole body on the wall. "Oh, no no no."

His pulse pounded in his ears, and Carlos decided he needed to sit down immediately, and if all else failed the floor would do fine. "Masks and gloves," he said, sitting on the cold tile. "Contagion procedures, you and Mark, *now*."

Four days later, Nilanjana asked Carlos, "Still feel welcomed to town?"

"I'm going to write down '*being really snippy*' on your medical chart," he replied. This was a mostly empty threat, as he was sitting at a work table, bent heavy against it. It was the only thing keeping him upright as his whole body ached like a fresh bruise, cramps and dull pains lancing along his lower back and shoulders.

Mark and Luisa had arrived in Night Vale a few days behind Carlos and Nilanjana, back months ago when their research group was settling in to this strange new place. So, it was only today that the others received their citizen welcome packs.

Both of them, Mark and Luisa, were laying on cots in the Coat Room, having fallen ill shortly after.

As time progressed, the worst of it passed. Carlos felt functional, so long as he was sitting down and didn't let himself get too anxious about the tingly achey sensations running through his body.

Nilanjana seemed somewhat worse off; while Carlos tried to get through the paperwork in his welcome packet, she ran blood tests. This mostly meant she did ten minutes of work setting up the machine, then put her head back in her arms while it ran.

The good news was so far, their affliction didn't seem to be worsening. The bad news was outside that, they had no idea what was going on.

There was a knock at the door, and Carlos looked up sharply.

From where she sat with her head on the desk, Nilanjana groaned. "Go away."

"We don't know who it is, Nils. They might need help."

"*We* need help," she grouched. But when Carlos started to gingerly stand, she apparently rediscovered a wellspring of energy and forced herself to her feet. "No. Stay there. You're not-- you stay."

In his private copy of the medical notes for Nilanjana, Carlos had long since written '*protective urges*.' The pattern was unmistakable and completely new behavior from her.

At the door was Dana, the current community radio intern. Her hair was tied back into a barely-contained bun of thick curls, and there was a paper face mask on her face, the string hooked over her ears. "Hello! Official radio business, may I come in?"

"That's very unwise," Nilanjana said, resting her weight wearily on the door. Her hand reached back to press against her lower back; she was having the aches too. "The entire team is sick, and we don't know if its contagious."

"Oh, I know! That's why I'm here, and you don't need to worry. Cecil had me go see Old Woman Josie before I came over, and her tall friends gave me a blessing. I'm immune to all ailments for the next 48 hours." The skin around her eyes crinkled, showing over her smile even with the mask on. "I have soup, if that sweetens the offer."

Carlos sat up. "Let her in."

"Soup," Nilanjana said with delirious intent, and stepped aside to let Dana in.

"What kind of soup?" Carlos asked, staring at the object in her hands. It was a crockpot, the cord looped through one handle. The glass cover was opaque from condensation.

"Matzo ball."

Both scientists gasped. "How?" Carlos managed. "Wheat and its by-products."

"Cecil gets religious exception to the regulation. He made it! He doesn't do it very often, it's apparently a lot of work and you have to make the matzo balls beforehand so they can sit and he explained it to me, but I don't remember all the details," Dana said very quickly, cadence brisk as a riverdancer. She set the crockpot on an empty bit of counter space and plugged it in, setting the dial to low.

They found bowls and sat at the work table, Dana watching them immediately dig into the food. After days subsisting on delivery and whatever was edible in the shared fridge, real homemade food felt like a panacea.

For the most part. A cramp hit Carlos so hard he dropped his spoon, leaning on the table. "Nnnnghfl. Feels like someone has grabbed my obliques with needlenose pliers and is just going to town."

"Wow, that sounds scientifically awful," Dana chirped. "Any idea what it is?"

"Beyond painful and debilitating and putting all of us behind schedule on our experiments, no," Carlos said.

"It did coincide almost to the hour with receiving our citizen welcome packets, so that's our central hypothesis," Nilanjana said.

"Yours," Carlos corrected. "We tested the packets thoroughly, there was nothing of interest. Except a lot of forms we still need to finish and get to City Hall."

"You're citizens!" Dana gasped and let out a brief smatter of applause. "Congratulations. I'm going to text Cecil, he'll be happy to hear it. Not that you feel so terribly, of course, but that your names are being added to the great obsidian wall of names!"

Carlos cut a big, puffy matzo ball in half with his spoon and ate it. Amazing. Hot. Bit of dill and salty from the broth. He tried not to moan, as that was an inappropriate reaction to soup in mixed company.

"Oh, latest tests done," Nilanjana said, and turned in her chair to confront the lab results.

Carlos sighed, moving his spoon to his other hand. As he sipped broth, he picked up his (slightly illicit) pen and continued down his paperwork for his new driver's license.

All the simple things had been filled in. Carlos was lingering over a few things. For one, the organ donor checkbox; he'd heard some worrying press releases on the radio from the Night Vale Medical Community, enough to be concerned about what they considered the right time to accept donations.

Also, the three checkboxes next to the word *Endotype*. Each was marked with a Greek letter: α , β , ω .

"Dana," Carlos asked, forcing himself to sit up, out of his pained hunch, and turned his papers enough for her to see. "Do you know what this means?"

She leaned in to see. "Yes. That is asking what your endotype is."

Well. She wasn't wrong, he had to admit. "Could you be more specific?"

Dana's brow furrowed over her mask. "Oh, hm. Well, it's... where you fall on the spectrum? If you're a high or low beta, you can elect to identify as either beta or the other endotype, if you like."

"Other types," Carlos echoed. "Alpha, beta, and omega?"

"Yes." She sat back, apparently content with this explanation.

"I don't know what these terms are referring to," Carlos said. "I've seen them around the city, like the... the omega night at Tourniquet and the restaurants that offer different menu options for each... each endotype?"

"And the additional shots at the Spiky Hammer," Nilanjana offered, sounding distracted as she read through some print-outs.

"Sure, and the different vitamins sold at the pharmacy." Carlos paused to have more soup, because it was delicious and giving him a wonderful psychosomatic effect, lessening his aches. "Is that a... religious affiliation?"

Dana snickered and leaned back in surprise. "No, um, not at all. It's... endotypes. It's..." She trailed off, looking between the two of them. A distance grew in her eyes as she examined them. "I..."

Carlos watched her, waiting her out.

She met his eyes and then slowly pulled her phone off the table. "Oh, look, I have a phone call, excuse me!" The phone had not rung, but she sprung off her seat and to the far wall, next to the seismology equipment and its constant low din of noise. After a moment, she pressed the phone to her ear, turning away and covering her mouth.

Carlos really hoped he'd not just transgressed somehow and made an enemy. He was too achey to handle that right now.

"Carlos," Nilanjana said. "I... the results are in."

"Could you be more specific please," he asked.

"I... Right. Yes. So, I had a-- not even a hypothesis, more of a guess, so I ran my blood against the samples we took back when we first arrived in Night Vale. And when I saw the results of *that*, I decided I needed to be thorough, so I re-ran the tests, and then I ran yours as well, again comparing to six months ago."

"I follow your process, and it seems very thorough and considered. What were your findings?"

"They don't match. Not exactly."

Carlos raised his eyebrows at her.

She gingerly rolled her chair to his side and set out the print outs from her work. "See, they have... additional unknown compounds, as well as changes to the basic chemistry. However," she tapped two pages in particular, "the effect is not universal. Both of us are exhibiting different chemical variations that don't match."

"But we have the same symptoms, broadly speaking, and with the time of affliction, one would presume we have the same affliction."

"I'll run it again," Nilanjana said.

"And Luisa and Mark's," Carlos said. "See what their comparisons are."

Nilanjana nodded slowly. Then, spoken softly and conspiratorially, she said, "We might... want to consider some scans. Of the body." Her throat moved as she swallowed. "I'm worried what we'll find, but."

"I understand. Run these tests, and I'll... you can do an examination of me. X-rays at first, then. We'll go from there."

Nilanjana looked a little wild around the eyes, but she nodded and returned to her vials of blood and her machine.

With perfect timing, Dana returned, holding her phone against her chest as she rejoined Carlos. "Okay. All right. Hi again."

"Hello."

"I told Cecil you were enjoying the soup. You didn't say this outright, but I surmised as much from how quickly you were eating."

"It's amazing soup," Carlos said. "What else did you tell him, if you don't mind me asking?"

Dana was still for a moment, her nails tapping nervously at the glass of her phone screen. Eventually, she said, "We made assumptions. Everyone did."

"What assumptions?"

"Well, it's not totally uncommon for people to use heavy suppressants or to obfuscate their endotype. That's normal, though the fact that your entire group of outsiders was doing it seemed odd, but hey, you know, we don't want to be nosy!"

Carlos did not laugh at this statement, and immediately wished someone would acknowledge and compliment his incredible restraint.

"But you..." She sounded apprehensive as she whispered, "You don't know your endotypes. None of you?"

"I genuinely don't know what they mean," Carlos said. "Could you please explain?" He tapped his papers. "It's part of these forms, and I'm a citizen now, right? It seems important for me to know. Is it... a social feature of Night Vale? Or a matter of... lineage, perhaps?"

"No. Oh no, nothing like that. Or, it's... social, of course." She laughed, high and edgy. "How would anything work without them, the whole idea of sorties depends on them!" She breathed out hard. "I'm sorry, I think I should go. I'm not really equipped to handle this."

"Wait, Dana--" Carlos stood as she stood, unsure what to do.

"No, really, I'm sorry, I-- I need to ask Cecil what to do. Sorry!"

"Dana!" He stepped to the edge of the table, not wanting to chase her, but she was halfway to the door. "Dana, one question!"

She paused, spinning on her toes to face him.

"Which are you? Is that rude to ask?"

She blinked volumously. "Wow, no one's ever asked me that before. I'm an omega. I thought that was obvious, but-- I-- I have to go. I hope you all feel better soon!" Quickly scampering away, she reached the door. Then, turning back, she said, "Also, call City Hall to get an extension on those forms! Usually you need a doctor's note, but you're *all* sick, so I'll have Cecil say something on air and it'll be okay, okay? Okay."

She waved briskly, and left, the heavy door shutting behind her.

Sighing, Carlos sat back down, and dished out another helping of soup. "Tell me the second you have those results," he told Nilanjana, and stared down into his bowl.

By the end of the week, they knew a few things.

First was that the entire team was undergoing some kind of chemical change, but none in exactly the same way. Carlos and Nilanjana's bloodwork looked the most varied, as if they were hit by entirely different processes. However, Luisa and Mark looked fairly similar, and Carlos and Mark shared some of their new chemical markers.

There was a spectrum between them, Carlos noticed, between himself and Nilanjana. And he remembered very distinctly Dana saying that word. *Spectrum*.

Second, their ailment eventually started to taper off. The aches remained, and sometimes hit Carlos so hard and sudden he staggered. More than once, Mark laid flat on the concrete floor, proclaiming it was the only way to abate his own pains. But the nausea and the increased heartrate eventually stopped, and they one by one became functional scientists again.

Sending Luisa and Mark off to look into the forgettable man with the tan jacket, in case they can get some readings about him, felt strange. Carlos knew logically they were the same

people he'd arrived in Night Vale with, but as Nilanjana collated her findings more and more, Carlos knew they were changed. Or changing. And he was too.

But there was still science to be done, and just as too many chefs in the kitchen spoiled the meal, too many scientists on one project ruined the results.

Third, all the literature on endotypes lived in the Night Vale Public Library, and no. Nope. No.

Fourth, they all still had paperwork due. The team gave Carlos their old, out of state IDs: Illinois, Indiana, California, and Florida.

He went alone to City Hall for everyone. The team was his responsibility, and tearing Nilanjana away from her work was becoming impossible. After eight days of the investigation into their own bodies, Carlos was happy to have an errand to run out of the lab, on his own. He was just careful not to tell Nilanjana he was going alone. Why she thought his safety was suddenly her business, he didn't know, but the hovering was annoying.

Filling out the forms had involved some extrapolation, which was a fancy word for guesswork. For the endotype checkboxes, Carlos recalled what Dana said, and tried to reverse engineer the answers from there. If Luisa and Mark were the middle of the spectrum, then they would logically be betas. That left alpha and omega.

The term 'alpha' made Carlos think of incomplete game builds, which he hated. And as he was the one filling out the forms, he let himself call dibs on the term he wanted. So, he marked omega on his and alpha on Nilanjana, who he was fairly sure had played Minecraft since its alpha state, so it was probably acceptable to her.

Forms complete, Carlos queued all morning at City Hall until he reached a teller, handed over the old IDs, and was handed back a set of new licenses for the team.

There was a little omega symbol watermarked in the corner of his. He put it in his wallet, then decided he wanted lunch.

Trifecta was on the way back, and had been on his list of places to try for a while. It was a freestanding building with colorful striped awnings and relaxed jazzy music playing from the speakers. He'd never seen the place empty, so logically speaking it must've been a local favorite.

Inside, the restaurant was predominantly a large dining space, tables that matched the color scheme and extremely comfortable-looking armchairs.

So, the food could've been mediocre, and it would still be popular. Carlos made longing eyes at a cushy seat by the windows before reluctantly stepping up to the counter.

The menu was hanging on the wall behind the cashier. There were three, actually: on the left, written in blue chalk, was a menu with a bright ω. In the middle, purple chalk and a β. On the right, pinky-red chalk with a α above.

"Oh boy," Carlos murmured, hanging back to examine the items listed.

It wasn't that Carlos didn't know about the endotype thing when he came to Night Vale. But he had no idea. From the grant proposal's files, there were mentions of Night Vale's *wholly unique societal structure* and a suggestion that a social scientist would find plenty of topics to research. But Greek letters hadn't appeared anywhere in the documents, nor 'endotype' or 'spectrum.'

So, fine, Carlos had no idea what he was looking at, and for the past few months he'd been too busy trying to adjust to the strange pace of life in this place, the hurry up and wait nature of its cycles of disaster and downtime between disasters.

Now that he was looking for it, the presence of this underlying social (?) structure was everywhere. Glancing around, he noticed the tables were all colored blue, purple, or pink as well, a few a gradient of all three.

He examined the occupants of the tables, trying to find a pattern. But Carlos wasn't good at quantifying people, and nothing obvious caught his attention.

Someone entered Trifecta, the silver bell over the door ringing. Carlos paid them no mind until they walked up to him, passing the implicit boundary reserved for strangers.

He looked up, and Cecil stood there, mouth open as he looked over Carlos. "Carlos, hi, I... are you feeling better? I don't want to be rude, but you look a little rough."

"Oh. Hello." Carlos reached up to touch his own face, wondering what illness looked like clinging to him. "Getting better, if not quite nominal yet. Uh, Dana brought us that soup, thank you, it was great."

Cecil smiled wanly, face still drawn into a vague expression of concern. "I'm happy to help. Nothing is more a labor than trying to feed yourself during a period of infirm. It's... great you're out of the lab again."

"Yep. Had to brave City Hall. Got my team our new Night Vale licenses."

Cecil nodded, and stared for a moment before slapping a hand over his eyes. "Sorry, I'm totally being a bother. Dana mentioned something to me and I was curious."

"Yeah, she tried to explain some peculiarities to me, but didn't seem equipped to elucidate something apparently so ingrained and paramount to her life." Carlos shifted his weight from foot to foot. "Is it... weird to you?"

He pursed his lips, giving Carlos a full once-over. "I could tell you it wasn't, if you like. But it's not bad weird! Just... weird. Nothing wrong or anything." Cecil looked up at the counter

and the menu beyond. "This is an unusual choice for you. Unless you were doing research on endotype things. Then it's a great choice. The food is excellent."

"I have no idea what to order," Carlos admitted, looking up at the chalkboard. "Will I... get in trouble if I don't pick the right thing?"

"Oh, no, it's all just suggestions. I usually mix it up, have my usual but with a Thai iced tea from the beta menu. You could order anything you like, no trouble at all."

Carlos suddenly, desperately wanted to know what Cecil's *usual* was. Both he and Dana were loquacious and amicable. Was Cecil an omega as well?

"Can you stay for lunch?" Carlos asked.

"I... I can!" Cecil said. His face darkened with a flush. "You have questions! I could try to help. If you want company."

Nodding, Carlos approached the counter. The cashier looked up attentively to take his order.

Even as long as he'd loitered around, he hadn't decided what he wanted. But his license had that little curly W symbol on it, and something on the blue menu caught his eye.

When he was done and paid, Cecil stepped up. "Afternoon, Amiele."

The cashier smiled. "Alpha four with thai tea?"

"Yes, thank you." He paid her, dropping his change into the tip jar.

So, Carlos had no idea what endotypes meant. Fair enough.

Eager to grab the seat he'd been eyeing, Carlos beelined for the table by the window, hissing as he lowered himself down to sit. The chair was as comfy as he'd hoped, and for a moment Carlos just laid his head back, pressing his knuckles into the soft skin above his hip.

The chair across from him slid out, and Cecil sat. "Carlos? Are you feeling all right?"

"Better, not back to normal," he said through grit teeth, waiting through another wave of aches. They stopped eventually and he sagged in their wake. "My whole team has the same symptoms. Soreness and waves of discomfort localized to the abdomen, lower back, and shoulders. The severity lessens with each day, but." He shrugged. "I, uh, had wondered if you'd know something."

"I'm sorry, Carlos, I would absolutely love to be of help, but nothing comes to mind. I hope it passes soon." He unrolled a napkin and pulled it over his lap. "I could provide more soup if you wanted?"

"I need to return your crockpot," Carlos noted. "No, I think with the continued diminishing effect, I'll be fine in a few days. But thank you. You helped a lot of hungry, sick scientists."

Cecil grinned, crescent bright. "Oh, I'm glad. And whenever you're ready, no rush, you can get the crockpot back to me. You could drop it off if you want?"

"I'll try," Carlos said, and paused as a waiter came to leave drinks. Cecil had a tall glass of dark tea with pale coconut milk on top, adorned with a perfect star anise. He picked up his straw and tapped it into the glass, agitating and integrating the tea and milk.

Carlos' drink was in a shorter glass, clouded pastel orange. He tentatively took a sip and let out a surprised sound. "Oh, wow."

Cecil nodded. "It's excellent. Rosewater orangeade with cactus fruit juice. There's some supplements in it, but..." He let out a hard little exhale. "Well, if you're... not presented or endotyped, I guess you won't notice."

Yes. This was what Carlos wanted to know. Taking another sip of his drink, he hummed happily. It was floral and citrusy with the almost-watermelon of the prickly pear. There *was* a tang of something else, like a powder additive maybe, but Cecil was right. So, he said, "I already asked Dana this and I'm curious what you'll say. How would you explain endotype? Is that the correct form of the word?"

"Ah, 'endotyping' probably, or '*an* endotype,'" Cecil explained. "Dana was right, it's a very difficult question. Something so commonplace and integral to identity. Everyone has their own relationship to their own endotype, but it's like... how you feel about your mortal form or your gender of choice. It's part of a wider tapestry of the self. Not the end all-be all of the self, but, you know, important."

Carlos turned abruptly to look at the chalkboard menus, taking note of the colors, and felt a proverbial light bulb come on in his mind. "Wait, is it alternative terminology for sexual orientation? Beta standing in for bisexuality with the others--"

He was cut off when Cecil laughed, and quickly covered his mouth. "Sorry, that was really rude. But no, no, anyone at any point on the spectrum can be straight or queer, there's no correlation there."

Carlos sighed. "Right. And there's presumably chemical differences anyway, what was I thinking."

Food arrived, briskly delivered by a teenager in a blue apron. Carlos watched them as they left, wondering if they were omega, because the blue? Then what made them so?

"Can I take a sample of your blood?" Carlos asked.

Cecil, fork halfway to his mouth, froze.

"That was really inappropriate to ask over lunch, I realize this now, like five seconds too late." Sighing, Carlos looked up at the ceiling, hoping an anvil might inexplicably fall from the sky and destroy him. "Nevermind."

"You can," Cecil said after a strained moment. "I just didn't expect such a forward request, but I assume its for science."

"I want to make a comparative analysis of your sample to mine and Nilanjana's," Carlos said, then finally looked down at his food. A cup of sweet tamarind sauce with seared chicken, coconut cream rice, and heirloom carrot sticks surrounding it. It was colorful and fragrant with lemongrass. Scooping some up on his fork, Carlos started dipping things into the sauce, citrusy almost-smoky tamarind colliding with the coconut cream and the spices on everything.

After accidentally stumbling on a perfect bite of carrot-rice-sauce, Carlos stilled to say, "I think this might be the best thing I've ever tasted in my life. Am I hallucinating?"

Cecil laughed into his tea, shaking his head. "That's excellent, you should put that in a Yelp review for them. Trifecta's known for mixing up flavors in such a way it does something with your endotype and makes everything particularly good. The head chef, Avery, went through a rigorous degree course in... the food science one."

"Gastronomy," Carlos said, deliberately putting his fork down to slow his eating. "That's incredible work. Science really does improve everything." He looked curiously at Cecil's bowl.

Lifting his eyebrows, Cecil scoops up a bite and holds it out. "Go ahead. Cracked barley with lamb. It has a wonderful cilantro sauce."

Carlos held Cecil's hand to keep the fork steady, trying not to notice the way it made him grin with a simple happiness. He took the bite quickly, and sat back.

And immediately made a face.

"Oh," Cecil said, setting his fork down and folding his hands in front of him. "Maybe not wonderful?"

"It's... fine." Carlos swallowed and grabbed his roserangeade to sip. "That's really tart."

His fingertips tapped together as he peered across the table at Carlos. "Hm. Maybe."

Carlos didn't like the contemplation that Cecil was aiming at him, because if he hazarded a guess, he might assume they were thinking about the same thing. Instead, he tucked into his food again, but his enjoyment was dampened. Now, irrationally and very unscientifically speaking, his delicious lunch seemed in some way malicious. Perhaps even condescending.

Tucking his folded hands under his chin, Cecil let out a low considering noise. "It's funny, I was just thinking. Endotyping presents... around, oh, thirteen to twenty, usually, depending on a whole bunch of factors. But if I'm remembering my history correctly, and admittedly Night Vale isn't *great* about record-keeping, so this may be be anecdotal, but the latest presentation was... Valerie Sandero, who's Michael Sandero's great aunt, I think."

"Uh huh," Carlos said, applying the necessary grease to the wheels of Cecil's speech, worried about where this was going.

"Yes, well, to my knowledge, her endotype didn't present until... her mid fifties, I believe. Very, very much an outlying case, but from what Flora Sandero told me at the PTA meeting afterparty last September, Valerie had a lot of fun with it, changing up her own personal presentation from month to month."

"Interesting," Carlos said, meaning *'terrifying and confusing.'* Another day, another *hour* when his mind wasn't whirling through progressively worse possibilities, it would have been a story to press Cecil on for more details.

How did someone change up their endotype presentation? What was endotype presentation? Was Cecil doing that right now, and Carlos just lacked the context to understand it? What the hell, honestly? *Honestly?*

The tense silence hung over the table, snuffing out the conversation like a candlelight. It was uncomfortable, and Carlos had no idea how to fix it. He needed to ask more questions about this endotype thing. But his chest felt tight as he thought about what else he might learn, and what parallels might be drawn too close to home.

As he was silently mourning ruining a really decent lunch, Cecil rolled up his sleeve and laid his arm across the table, his fingers lightly curled, the vulnerable skin of his inner arm facing up.

Did he want to hold Carlos' hand? That was... very confident but not terrible. Carlos was on the verge of wanting a hug, which was a rare feat for him, limited to about seven times in his life. The lurking fear of what was going on in his own body was rearing its head, like the monster in dark water finally showing itself at the midpoint of the scary movie. By now, his *life* was much like a scary movie in some ways.

"You wanted some blood, right?" Cecil said gently.

"Oh. Oh, right. Yes." Eager for the distraction, Carlos reached into his bag. "But, is-- is it okay to just do this here? In a restaurant?"

"I wouldn't say no to some more privacy if you wanted," Cecil said, "but some contained bloodletting isn't going to turn an eye, don't you worry."

Night Vale and its lopsided perspective of what was socially acceptable worked in his favor for once. With a rubber cord and needle, Carlos set everything up, shooting Cecil an apologetic glance as he pierced his skin, and took a few vials.

After Cecil had a little cotton ball bandaided to his arm and everything was put away, Carlos was remarkably calmer. His food was delicious again, and he hummed as he ate. His looming fear wasn't gone, but the panic had, and he could handle it for now.

Across from him, Cecil was smiling, seeming very pleased with himself. He finished his drink and signaled for another one.

And for a moment, Carlos thought he could hear something, nearly subsonic, a low thrumming sound, sonorous and bellows deep. But it was probably nothing. A lot of things were going to remain *probably nothing* until Carlos had the time and ability to apply science and figure out otherwise.

Chapter 2

Carlos was taking apart his sixteenth clock when Nilanjana poked her head into his office.

This was clearly serious; he'd had the door closed, and his team knew to leave him alone when his door was closed. Immediately, he put down his screwdriver and asked, "What's wrong?"

Grimacing, she slid into the room and shut the door behind her. Carlos felt his spine go tense. Private discussion in his office behind closed doors? This was nearly unprecedented. The only other time to his memory was four months ago, when Mark came in to tell him that the other scientists had left, abandoning the Night Vale investigation. Mark had wanted to break it to him gently, which was appreciated, even though Carlos had taken the news, put it into a little box in his head, and not touched it for another two weeks.

He excelled at doing that.

Nilanjana sat across from him, and looked so distinctly uncomfortable, the feeling in Carlos' spine began to feel like his bone structure was trying to eject from his body. "Nils, what happened?"

"I want to forewarn you that this discussion will be of a highly personal nature, and we both will likely hate having it, but the topic is too important to ignore."

That, oddly, helped, and Carlos nodded. "I'm braced for impact. What's up?"

"I've missed my period by, at this point, over a week. For me, this is a serious aberration." She laced her fingers together on the desk, looking down at them and not at Carlos. "I have not had sex since arriving in Night Vale. Regardless, I attempted an over the counter pregnancy test. It came back... it didn't work."

"It didn't work," Carlos repeated dully. "What do you mean?"

With a terse sigh, Nilanjana reached into one of her lab coat's many pockets and set out an empty box, collapsed neatly down. "The tests in Night Vale seem incompatible with my physiology. They are marketed to omegas and low-betas."

Taking the box, Carlos looked it over. It looked like the normal packaging for such a test like anyone would see in a pharmacy, but there were the symbols for omega and beta displayed prominently.

"We should run lab tests here then," Carlos said.

"Barring a particularly invasive bit of Night Vale weirdness, like psychic conception or something equally ludicrous, I'm certain I'm not pregnant. My concern is the coincidence with the other... changes." She leaned in, lowering her voice. "I've not mentioned it before because, again, I prefer not to bring up personal matters, but did you notice that Night Vale

lacks normal menstrual products? They have similar analogues, but again, marketed to specific endotypes. Before, I assumed it was just a weird thing about this place, but now? I'm not sure what they're actually intended for."

This made sense to him. He tapped his fingers on the desk for a moment, thinking. "There may be more differences between us and the average Night Vale resident than we yet understand. This could be a serious alteration from our bodies." He gave her a concerned look. "We... should maybe inform the rest of the team."

"I was worried you'd say that." Nilanjana stood, tossing the test box into the trash can. "But you're right."

Carlos called a meeting in his office, trusting the location to add to the gravity of the atmosphere. He sat on the edge of his desk at Nilanjana's side as she explained everything again to Luisa and Mark. Curt, to the facts, and impersonal.

Luisa raised her hand when Nilanjana finished. "I'm late too. Only by a few days, but I'm usually very regular. I haven't tried a test yet, but."

In the chair next to her, Mark cleared his throat. "I, uh, I am too." His eyes darted across their faces as he spoke. "I'm late on mine."

Carlos blinked as that bit of information slotted into place. "Oh. Well, if we are three for three, that seems worthy of immediate investigation."

Mark subtly relaxed, and nodded. "That does seem like a very strange statistical outlier, especially given what Nilanjana noticed about avail products. That's super weird."

Carlos rubbed his chin, lining up what he knew and what he needed to know next.

He knew since their six month anniversary in Night Vale a few weeks ago, the team had underwent some kind of changes, some they understood and quantified, and some they had not. The blood samples from Cecil had tracked with Nilanjana's changes, which was reassuring.

This was verging on a sociological study. He needed to know more about how these biological aspects of the populace affected their lives. Just how much did Night Vale differ from the outside world, not in the sense of its earthquakes and strange sandstorms and the presence of angels, but the small mundanities that Carlos had overlooked.

Deciding, he said: "Spend the rest of today getting to a stopping point on your current experiments. Tomorrow, we're focusing on this. New rounds of bloodwork and comparisons. I'll ask around to see if we can get more samples from Night Vale citizens."

"Dana's really eager to help," Luisa noticed. "Really, it seems like the people around here either want to chase us out of town or tie themselves to our coat tails."

"Dana's an omega," Carlos said. "I still don't know the etiquette for asking other people about their endotype."

"Just text the radio host, boss," Luisa said. "He'll probably send a dozen people over for us to get samples from. And bigger sample sizes will give us a better idea anyway."

Always leaning on Cecil's eagerness to help with Carlos' work seemed unfair. He never knew how to repay Cecil, and it made him anxious when they crossed paths. What if Cecil eventually decided that Carlos was just using him and they weren't... friendly anymore?

"Maybe," Carlos said. "I'll think about it. But we'll do scans with the x-ray and CT, try to nail down what's... what's happening. With us." He looked to Nilanjana. "I'll go first, if you can operate the machines for me."

She held his gaze for a moment, then looked sharply away. "I would like to float an idea out there. Not necessarily as an advocacy of the idea, but because I feel it should be stated for the record."

"Go ahead."

Nilanjana took a deep breath. "Should we as a group consider leaving Night Vale, to seek normal medical attention and wider scientific inquiry, and to stop these changes if they can in fact be stopped?"

No one spoke. Carlos' team all glanced at him, but their expressions were difficult to read. He was never great at knowing what people were thinking until they said, and his team knew that. None of them were offering up any concrete thoughts.

He wished someone would, and stared back at them.

"I don't think I should answer that for everyone," Carlos eventually said.

Nods of agreement from everyone.

Mark said quietly, "I'm okay with waiting through this latest line of investigation to see what we can find. If you asked me while I felt viciously sick back when this started, maybe I'd hop on route 800 and speed away. But right now, I feel fine?" He shrugged.

"I'm not quite that content with the situation," Luisa said, "but I can wait for now."

Nilanjana just met Carlos' eyes and nodded.

"Okay then." He was glad he wasn't going to wake up tomorrow to an empty lab. "For my part, I have no intention to leave. There is too much here I still want to investigate. But consider this carte blanche to... to do what you have to." Clearing his throat, he went on: "Tomorrow, let's go around town and try to collect as many endotype-specific products as we can for analysis. And someone should visit the hospital to see if they're willing to share any texts."

"Anything to avoid the library," Luisa said. "I'll go."

"Good. Thanks, everyone." He waved his hands at them. "Now, back to work. Tomorrow, we'll be busy."

Come morning, Carlos left the lab early. He'd woken up to a text from Nilanjana, that she was going to help Luisa at the hospital, and would be back to do the scans and examination on Carlos after lunch.

Belatedly, he wondered why he'd essentially offered up his body in the name of science. Subconsciously, maybe he wanted to do something to offset her discomfort at having to come to him about her personal troubles. Now, a day later, that seemed much less compelling. But he was stuck with the decision.

Later, he'd have to submit to a medical gown and scans. Until then he went out in search of things to study.

When he wasn't looking for endotype-targeted products, they'd slid into the background of his perception. After all, he was a scientist in *Night Vale*, why would he concern himself with weird labels on vitamins? It was background radiation when there was a nuclear containment breach of Weird to see to first.

Now that he was looking for them, though, they were everywhere, and his initial plan of '*see endotype-related thing, buy it and take to the lab*' wasn't going to work. In just the corner pharmacy alone there was enough to fill three satchels.

So he turned boxes over and took pictures of the active ingredients with his phone, and anything that looked particularly intriguing, he bought and stashed to be examined back at the lab.

He got some strange looks from the people working register, but "It's for science," solved a lot of problems in this town.

Before long, his bag seemed to be getting heavy, and he took a break on the bus stop bench outside the Ralph's. Like every day, it was hot and dry in a way that made Carlos' skin feel like it was being desaturated. The whole city smelt like aerated dust, and the exhaust from passing cars almost had a texture, granulated and sticking in his throat until he coughed.

For a moment, Carlos considered retreating to the lab. He had plenty to look at already, but he intended to examine the grocery store's stock to see what else was available first. The desert had a way of dragging energy out, drying it up like so much moisture.

A neon yellow bike skidded to a stop near him, and Dana put her foot down. "Hello, Carlos! How's science?"

A friendly face bolstered his resolve instantly. Dana's smile was genuine in a reassuring way. Just knowing someone was happy to see him made him was restorative. "Hi, Dana. It's... science. Everything is a little hectic right now. I have my whole team trying to figure out this endotype thing, as its recently become a more pressing concern."

"Yeah?" She looked him over, and a little perturbed moue took over her smile. "Huh."

"Huh?"

"Mmm, nothing. Just thought--" She shook her head. "You look really peaky, though. You should get inside somewhere. It's a hot one, today."

"It's a hot one every day," Carlos pointed out. "What are you up to?"

"It's a slow news day, so I'm making rounds to find gossip." She smirked. "Cecil will make it sound all professional and newsy, but really, sometimes you just need to know who's doing what around town, and what listeners want the details on. Like did Sheriff Sam and Pamela get into another fight, or is this their normal antagonism at work? Sam's always picking fights, and it's pretty entertaining. Makes good news.

Carlos knuckled his hip, narrowing his gaze at her. "Uh huh. And you've stopped by me because...?"

Dana laughed, bright and loud, exuding happiness like sunlight through a glass of lemonade. "Well! You're a hot topic, Dr. Scientist! Any good gossip I can tell Cecil to make him happy?"

"No," Carlos said, snorting. "Very boring. I'm going into Ralph's to buy samples of endotype products so I can learn about the particular needs of each-- each type, I guess."

She lifted her eyebrows. "Do you even know what's a good product? What an omega would actually use?"

"Of course not. Hence the studying. I'll catalog all of them and then look for similarities in their chemical makeup and make some charts."

Her whole head moved as she rolled her eyes. "Wow, then let me put my bike in the rack. I'll come with. Your way sounds incredible boring, and there's way more bad omega products than good! You need an expert." She hopped her bike onto the sidewalk and started for the store. "Come on!"

Not following would be rude and Carlos didn't want to put Dana off, especially if she remained a good source of information. Pulling the strap of his bag over his shoulder, he heaved himself up, standing there for a moment as his head spun. It was so hot. Going inside was a good idea.

"You're not gonna lock your bike?" Carlos asked upon realizing she was leaving it loose on the rack.

"No point. If anyone takes it, the Secret Police will see and just take it back for me." Pivoting on her toe, she held out her arm, crooked. "Shall we?"

He hesitated, and she waggled her arm. "I'm not sure why you're helping me."

She waggled again. When Carlos finally took her arm, she brought him out of the heat and into the delightfully cool air of the grocery. "I might be looking for a story! Or maybe I just have a good feeling about you. It's that thing, when you get close to someone and just get a feeling and all your senses just tune in to them, like the static falling away as you find a radio station."

"I don't think I've ever felt that." It sounded nice, though. That sort of intuition would make life dramatically easier, he thought. Or any intuition.

As she carted Carlos through the store, he tried it out. Trying to get a sense from her.

Suddenly, and very viscerally, Carlos thought of peach fuzz. The soft suede texture. That, but ambient around her, like he could feel it in his mouth. But not the *taste* of peaches, just the taste of the idea of peach fuzz.

"You okay?" Dana asked.

Was he? He had no idea. Maybe. "Yeah. Just exploring abstruse mental rabbit holes."

"Right. Anyway." She snatched a zip-top bag off a shelf and held it to her chest. "These. They're the *best*."

There was a blue omega symbol on the bag under the curly cursive typeface proclaiming the bag contained a targeted snack mix geared for the omega on the go. Dana ripped open the top, claiming, "I'm going to buy it anyway, it's great," and reached in for a handful. The mix seemed to be dried cherries and roasted pumpkin seeds and tube-shaped candy that looked like a cousin to licorice.

She ate the handful, mouth suddenly full. Scooping out another handful, she mumbled something indistinctly at him and waved her cupped palm at him.

Carlos took half of the mix and tried each piece discretely. The cherries were incredible. The pumpkin seeds were well toasted. The candy part though was heavily spiced, not *hot* spicy but *spicy* spicy, in the way of masala more than peppers. Nothing like licorice, thankfully, and more like a marshmallow with an attitude problem.

Dana shot him a thumbs up and swallowed the rest of her palmful. "Good, right?" she asked when she'd finally finished.

"Very. Spicy sweet. My meal at Trifecta was like that. Are omegas partial to that flavor profile?"

"I guess. But also there's a bunch of stuff added. I like this one because it helps smooth over your senses when they're getting overstimulated. Sometimes, there's just too many alphas around and it's kind of a headache." She zipped the snack mix closed and tucked it into her free arm, then relinked arms with Carlos.

"Headache how?"

"Oh, I have the perfect example." Dana hurried along to another aisle, forcing Carlos to keep up. It was the toiletries section. She waved to a bunch of little colored glass bottles. "These, they're *meant* for betas, to give their pheromones an extra boost. But most betas don't care about that, just broadly speaking, so."

She picked up a maroon bottle and turned it over in her hands. "Yeah, this one is nice, and I actually like it? But alphas tend to buy this stuff and layer it over their own pheromones, and I have *never* met anyone who liked the result. It just makes my nose itch."

"What *is* it?" Carlos asked, taking the bottle and looking it over. There wasn't an ingredient guide on it. It looked like cologne. When he sniffed it, he gagged.

"Ooh, careful. Don't directly sniff it, it's way too concentrated like that." She patted his back briskly. "It's just scent enhancer. This one is based on alphas, but there's omega ones too." She made a face. "I just can't deal with the clashing smells, it's awful."

Carlos kept rubbing his nose, as if he could dislodge the-- it wasn't a *scent* exactly, it was again a textural feeling in his senses, tactility without touch. It was strange but interesting. "You have, do you have some sort of heightened sense of smell?"

Dana lifted her eyebrows at him. "Heightened compared to who? To the other endotypes, yeah, it's common for omegas to be much more sensitive than betas and alphas. But compared to *you*?" She tipped her head, watching him. "Hm. You all right?"

"I will be. You're right, smelling it was a bad idea." With effort, he stopped rubbing his face. It felt like he'd swallowed something astringent, it wouldn't go away. "Is that how people discern endotypes? Scent?"

"Usually." At long last, she let their arms unlink. Turning to face Carlos, she stepped into him, nearly toe to toe.

Stumbling away, his back hit the shelf opposite. "Um."

Dana was frowning severely, good humor traded for a sudden keenness. "Carlos, do you feel okay?"

"Why do you keep asking me that?" he snapped, too loud even to his own ears. "Wait, sorry. I didn't mean to sound harsh. Sorry."

Moving slowly, Dana set her bag of snacks on an empty bit of shelf. Hands free, she lifted them, palms towards Carlos as she took a careful step in. He inched back in turn. "What are you doing?" Carlos asked, a thread of nervosa strung from his words.

A sound other than words came in response. It was a low, quiet vibration in the air between them, a hum heard through the blades of a fan. It ran over him like fleece, his eyes sliding half-closed on a weary blink.

He snapped out of it with a full body shake. What was that and why did his body do that? The feeling of wrongness, of unfamiliarity with his self was vivid and technicolor. "Stop it,"

he said, unsure what *'it'* was.

"Carlos, calm down. I-- I think you might be... but you said you've not presented." She was mumbling, talking in part to herself. "I think... you should try very hard to stay calm."

"I think I should go back to the lab," Carlos said, and turned to fairly sprint away, a crawling sensation in his spine urging his legs to action.

He ran into a metal spinning rack of paperbacks, and the entire wire frame monstrosity tipped and fell onto the tiled floor with an earsplitting crash.

It was loud. It was so loud, Carlos clapped his hands over his ears to escape it. He could see the rack on its side, on the floor, but the sound was still in his ears, echoing and bouncing around his skull until his teeth ground together.

"Oh, shit," Dana said, low and intent. Her hands fisted in Carlos' sleeves. "No, don't do that, Carlos, it's okay, don't sit."

He didn't mean to sit. He didn't know he was slumping to the floor until he landed flat on his ass. Everything was loud, like he couldn't dislodge the ghost of the crash. It kept going in his head, and he tried to press on his ears harder, as if that would help.

The sound wasn't real anymore. Carlos huffed a breath, feeling his heart pounding in his head and against his palms and in his tongue. Everything was so much, and he'd had panic attacks before, plenty of them, but the sound reverberated and his mouth was full of weird not-tastes, and his body felt like an uprising, a coup against him.

A tenuous, long note came out of the back of his throat, a siren alarm, a keen of dismay. "Can't calm," he managed. "Can't."

Dana *let him go*, standing up and out of his reach. He didn't realize her nice peach fuzz ambience was surrounding him until it was gone, and she was running down the aisle away from him. Leaving him.

He was alone and everything was wrong, his body rebelling in ways he'd never felt before. Scrambling with his heels, he pushed himself down, finding a spot where the shelves met a big display. A corner against his back didn't fix anything but it made him feel marginally better. The angles were narrower and he was safer.

Maybe he could find somewhere even more confined. Small, he needed a small space, he needed to *be* small. Small and safe and not surrounded by sensory feedback like a lightning storm through his brain.

There was a pound of footsteps, and Carlos covered his head to keep the sound from joining the crashing orchestra in his skull.

"Oh no, what happened here?" The voice was new with broad vowels, a naturally deep register trying for softness.

"First heat, I think. Which-- which he said he wasn't an omega or endotyped or anything, the outsiders don't have endotypes!" Dana, high and worried.

"Don't have endotypes?" The voices were very close now. "I don't mean to doubt you, Dana, but I know a distressed omega."

"Stop talking around me!" Carlos said. Or shouted. Probably the latter. "What is wrong with me?"

Dana dropped to the tile next to him, and Carlos felt himself seized and dragged into her chest, both of her arms wrapping around his head and shoulders. "It's going to be okay. First heats are always terrible and really sudden, like you're just going about your day and suddenly the wind hits you too hard and you're a wreck."

When he tried to push away from her, she wouldn't let him. This close, the low sound in her chest was loud, the hum rich and pouring into his head. It washed over all the other sounds until he could suck in a shaking breath. The metal noises and clatter were there still, but like underwater.

She dragged nails over his scalp, the sound deep in her chest right by his ear, and Carlos squeezed his eyes shut, grabbing her back. Together, they rocked for a moment.

"Carlos," Dana said into his hair. "We need to go, okay? We need to get you somewhere quiet. You're kind of freaking out every alpha in the store." She rubbed behind his ear, then down his throat. "Steve's going to help, but we need to go."

The other person, presumably Steve, said, "We gotta scoot, right now."

"No," Carlos said, shaking and trying to press back into his little corner. "Can't, I, it's not safe."

"You are *not* in danger, Carlos, I *promise*." She shifted, almost letting him go, and Carlos clutched at her. "Oh boy. Steve, we're going to have to, you know."

You know turned out to be Steve and Dana bodily forcing Carlos to his feet. He fought, wanting to curl up, to be small again, but hands were gripping him tight and holding him upright despite all his attempts to collapse back down.

Steve was a big man built like a barrel. He picked up Carlos and heaved him over a shoulder. Dana stood behind and held one of Carlos' hands tightly, her other hand occupied with her phone.

"Please," Carlos said miserably. His skin was gooseflesh all over, his abdomen hurt where Steve's shoulder pressed into him, and everything was so loud and so much.

"We're taking you back to the lab," Dana said. "Hang in there."

Carlos was loaded into the backseat of the car by Steve with minimal effort, like he weighed no more than a duffle bag. Not that the treatment was as impersonal; Steve bent heavily on his knees to place Carlos on the seat, his feet never touching the floor.

This close, Carlos could look at him finally. He had dark hair and the skin tone of someone who was outdoorsy, and a wide soft face. He smiled as he nudged Carlos further into the car. "Watch your legs," he said before shutting the door.

This was better. Being in this kind of space helped. He wrapped his arms around his stomach and pulled his feet up, trying to corral his breathing into something calmer.

Dana climbed in next to him. "Hey, you're okay. We're going back to the lab."

Steve got in behind the wheel. "Where's this place?"

"Across from the Bean Mart in the Barista District, by Big Rico's." Dana put her hand on Carlos' shoulder. "I'm going to do something to help, okay?"

Carlos nodded, his throat tight.

Sliding in closer, Dana rested her hand on Carlos' clavicle. Her thumb pressed around, searching for a second, before she pushed into a spot above his collarbone, near his neck.

At first, it wasn't anything. Then tension began to leak out of Carlos, as if she were turning it into mush with her thumb massage. He sagged, head against her, a noise like a whine clawing out of his throat.

"Wha' is that?" he asked.

"I don't even know what its called," Dana told him quietly. "All of us have it, the little happy spot. You do too."

"I didn't before," he mumbled.

He lost track of time as Dana worked at him and the car trundled through Night Vale streets. Being in here, where the walls were closer and no one was walking idly around, it was dramatically better. But in the quiet, Carlos could feel his insides going tense, the cramps from before back with vengeance and baseball bats, apparently. His entire body felt sore, and throbs of pain ran through his lower back.

When they arrived, Carlos realized he'd have to get out of the car and whined. Dana ignored him, pulling away to slip out the other door.

His door opened, and he shied away from it.

"No, nope, you gotta come 'ere," Steve said, and made no argument about grabbing Carlos and half-dragging him out. Fists in the back of his lab coat kept him standing, even as he tried to drop himself down. "Stop that, stand up, let's get you inside."

Dana pulled Carlos' arm over her shoulders. "Don't make things harder than they need to be. We're already near the door."

Reluctant, Carlos let them walk him up the steps and to the entrance. His keycard was in his bag, and his bag was over Dana's shoulder, so he rang the buzzer.

Luisa opened it, and staggered back a step, covering her mouth. "Oh my god. Carlos! What happened?"

Dana and Steve brought Carlos over the threshold, forcing Luisa back. "Sudden first heat," Steve said. "Hey, can you back up a bit, he's kinda freaking out."

"All first heats are sudden and awful," Dana said. "I don't know a single person who had a decent one. Do you have a small, dark room in here?"

"What? No. This is a lab." Luisa was backing rapidly away, looking nervous. "Uh, Nils! Nilanjana!"

The altercation that followed did not make a lot of sense to Carlos in the moment. Later, he would rewind and figure out that, basically:

Nilanjana had walked in at Luisa's call, looked at what was happening, and then put herself into Steve's space so suddenly, so aggressively, he staggered back.

"I'm not encroaching!" Steve said loudly. "I'm not trying to threaten your sortie, I'm just returning Carlos!"

"Dr. Sikdar, he's helping!" Dana shouted, right at Carlos' ear, and Carlos crumpled to get away from the noise.

"I don't want him here," Nilanjana said. The mixture of brazenness and confusion was strange in her voice, like she didn't know what she was saying until it left her mouth. "He-- he's not supposed to be here. He's not yours."

"I know he's not-- okay, you know what, okay." Steve held up his hands and backed away. "Sorry, Dana, but I don't want to fight another alpha in their own space."

Dana let out a frustrated, angry hiss. "What are you *doing*? He's trying to help, grow up!"

"We don't need his help," Nilanjana said. "Is Carlos hurt? Who did this?"

"He's not *hurt*," Dana retorted. "You people don't know anything, do you?"

Everyone was upset and Carlos could taste it, like vinegar without the vinegar, all these senses without real scents, new stimulus that his brain was trying to keep up with. He wanted to be away from it all and for everyone to shut up.

Twisting loose from Dana, Carlos found what he wanted: the space under one of the empty desks. Down there was small and darker, and there were three walls around him. He put his back to a corner and cinched his legs under the desk.

Immediately, he felt better, and shut his eyes. Quiet. Small. Safe. Much better. Scientifically speaking, his angles were much better guarded down here, with only one point of entry.

Outside, four pairs of legs were walking around. The voices kept colliding, until Carlos could barely pick them out.

Eventually, Dana hissed again, and all three of the others stepped back. "This-- I can't believe this! You're not helping! None of you know what you're doing! I'm calling Cecil, I can't deal with you all and Carlos needs help." She stomped away from them, but closer to Carlos. Soon, she was sitting on the floor, by the entrance of his little hiding space. Her phone was pressed to her ear. "Hey, Carlos. Wanna hold my hand?"

He thought about it. That would require getting closer. Slowly, he shook his head.

Dana sighed. "This is such a mess." Her face brightened. "Hi, Cecil! Cecil, I need you right away! ... Down at the scientists' lab. ... Oh my gosh, have you heard? Yeah, right in the middle of Ralph's. ... I have no idea, but none of the outsiders know what to do and I-- I'm doing my best but... Thank you. Drive fast. Carefully but, you know, fast. See you soon, bye."

Something thumped against the top of the desk, and Carlos yelped. Dana stared up, over Carlos' head, over the desk. "You're scaring him."

"I just want to see him," Nilanjana said, her voice strange and piano wire-tight. "Carlos?"

He wasn't moving, and lowered his gaze to his knees.

Another thump overhead, and Dana snapped, "Stop that!"

Through the space around the legs of the desk, Carlos could see Nilanjana's sensible shoes hurrying away. It took effort to look at Dana again, still sitting vigil in front of him.

"What is happening," Carlos asked. "I feel like one enormous bruise."

She bit her lip, her eyes softening sympathetically. "Well... I know you said you don't do endotyping, but I'm really, really sure you're going through your first heat. Which, wow, that was terrible when I was a teenager, I can't *imagine* doing it at your age."

"Hey," Carlos said in offense.

"It's true! Gosh, you have no idea." She sighed. "Omegas and low betas have these cycles. Every few months, we go through a heat. They're usually not a huge deal, especially if you're prepared beforehand, but the first one is always dismal." Tentatively, Dana smiled. "Sometimes they can even be fun, depending on, um, stuff. But yeah. I'm sorry."

"What am I supposed to do?"

"Don't worry about that yet. We'll get you taken care of." She glanced around the room, then resettled on Carlos. "Do you not have... a quiet space, somewhere dark, like a private room or something?"

Carlos shook his head.

"Okay. Cecil will have a solution. That's what he does." She nodded and settled back on her heels, hands in her lap. Occasionally, she looked up to glare at someone, but otherwise just sat there, making no move towards Carlos, but also not leaving him alone.

Carlos rested his cheek against the inner wall of the desk and pressed his knees together. Everything ached and churned, and his face felt in turns clammy and overheated. A fever was probably involved, with his luck.

Eventually, the door buzzer rang. "Answer that!" Dana called.

"Don't, we-- we shouldn't open the door, not while Carlos is sick," Nilanjana said.

"Open that stupid door!" Dana slapped her hand against the cement floor.

Luisa and Mark seemed torn and unhappy, looking at the door and at Nilanjana, who stepped in close to them.

"This is so frustrating!" Dana pushed to her feet and sprinted to the door, ignoring the cry from Nilanjana.

Yanking the door open, Dana reached through and grabbed Cecil by his shirt, pulling. "Help, help, oh my god."

Nilanjana moved up to them both, her shoulders back and head lifted. Something was stern in her posture, but her hands were shaking. Carlos wanted very suddenly to go to her and do something to help calm her down.

But not more than he wanted to stay under the desk. So he just whined.

Cecil's head jerked to him, taking in the desk and probably Carlos' vague shape underneath. Then, he moved Dana bodily behind him and took a step towards Nilanjana. "Dr. Sikdar."

Nilanjana shut her eyes tightly, shaking her head. "I don't profess to know what is going on, but you-- you shouldn't be here. This isn't your place."

"Someone has to--" Dana started.

Cecil shushed her. "Dana. Go find soft things, anything that will help." Pushing her gently away, he turned and faced Nilanjana.

Nilanjana crossed her arms and leaned in against Cecil.

Carlos has observed Cecil plenty of times. Running into him around Night Vale, he was effervescent and perpetually enthusiastic about everything, so earnestly amicable that Carlos sometimes felt socially exhausted just looking at him, the apex of extroversion. Over lunch and coffee, he was attentive and soft-spoken and prone to verbal missteps Carlos chose to find charming. And in his booth, he was fluid and confident as a water moccasin.

But watching Cecil square his shoulders against Nilanjana was something else entirely, something wholly new. With just a shift of his feet, he suddenly loomed, head lowered, eyes fixed on Nilanjana like crosshairs.

"Nilanjana," he said, voice already low and coiled. "I'm not here to fight you. I'm here to help Carlos, and you need to step down and stop getting in the way."

She crossed her arms, chin tipped up, her nails digging into her arms. She reminded Carlos of a glass overbalancing, about to tip and fall. "I'm part of this team and you can't just shut me out. I have a right to know what's happening and to help him."

Cecil took another step towards her, and she matched it, backing away from him. "I imagine this is all very scary right now, and you can sense how distressed he is. I know. I *understand*." He leaned into her. "But frankly, you have no idea how to help, and I don't have time for you to figure it out. I've been doing this for longer than a few weeks, Doctor. So calm yourself and keep your dilapidated little sortie out of the way. That's how you can help."

His glare broke from her, and Nilanjana's shoulders slumped. She looked at Carlos, her hands twining in front of her anxiously. She moved through different types of fidgeting, like trying each one on for size. But she didn't do anything as Cecil walked over to the desk and gingerly lowered himself down.

Instinctively, Carlos pressed himself further back.

"I'm not coming in. It's okay." Cecil sat down, legs crossed lotus style, hands curled over his knees. "Hey there, Carlos. How are you feeling?"

"Awful," Carlos said. Squeezing his eyes shut, he tried to catalog the feeling better, to explain it better. "M-my body aches, and I think I'm running a fever."

Cautious and mindful of Carlos' jumpiness, Cecil extended his hand, backs of his fingers towards Carlos. "Let me see."

Resting his forehead against Cecil's fingers, Carlos realized how flushed he was. Cecil's skin felt almost cool in comparison, and Carlos let out a low noise, leaning further in.

Cecil turned his hand and ran his fingers through Carlos' hair. "Carlos. Do you have somewhere to go, a comfortable dark place?"

"No. Dana asked that too." He sighed. "Here's good."

"Mm, no, here is *not* good. You can't stay under a desk for five days." His hand slipped down and touched Carlos' own. Just two of his fingers hooking into Carlos' grip.

Dana returned, walking quietly. "Okay, this place has no nesting material at all. I actually feel sad looking around here. It's all so hard and grey and uninviting." She crouched down next to Cecil and waved. "Hi, Carlos."

"Hi," Carlos croaked.

"Should we take him to the hospital?" Dana asked Cecil.

"No. No, I don't want to risk that." His mouth twisted. "I don't want to find out if the Night Vale Medical Community would consider Carlos and his team a dangerous deviation or worthy of study. There's a reason I've not mentioned any of this on the radio."

She blew out a breath. "Then... you're going to ask me to take him."

"I would never presume--"

"Oh, stop." Dana imitated Cecil, hooking her fingers into Carlos' other hand. "I have the space already. And I have heat stimulants, so we can push him through this one in, like, two days, tops."

"At his weight?" Cecil asked with concern.

"What's wrong with my weight?" Carlos whined.

"You're supposed to carb up before a heat," Dana said. "Lots of bananas and municipally approved grains, all the pasta and rice. You're really not ready for it."

"Well, I'm sorry for not having foreseen being hit by a biological process that's not meant for my-- for me." He shuddered. "Five days or two? What're you talking about?"

"Normal heat's four to eight days. I got a prescription at home for stimulants, it'll force you through the heat in two days. It'll suck a *whole lot*."

"This already sucks," Carlos said. "I feel hot."

"We should move him before he gets delirious," Cecil said. "Carlos? I need you to come out from there now, okay? You're going to stay with Dana. It'll be much better, her apartment is full of comfortable places for you to nest in."

"So I'm turning into a bird now," Carlos muttered. "That explains all the pain."

"Okay, come here." Cecil reaffirmed his grip on Carlos' hand and pulled. "Out from there, now." When Carlos hesitated, Cecil shifted onto his knees and reached in. Carlos tried to tilt out of the way, but the downside of his hiding spot was it didn't have an excess of room.

It wasn't a grab, though. His hand found Carlos' shoulder, and his thumb started to stroke Carlos' collarbone.

The tension in Carlos' spine melted. He spilled down onto his elbows, humming as Cecil worked that weird spot under his neck. An arm wrapped around Carlos and pulled, sliding

him across the floor and against Cecil's chest.

Briefly, he tried to wiggle away, but Dana put her hands on him too, one pressing down against his head, and fine. It was fine. He could suffer through this. Dana's peach fuzz kindness was heavy, but not as much as Cecil. Cecil palmed the back of Carlos' neck with a strange nonchalance, as if he didn't have a grown man sick in his lap. His thumb stroked Carlos firmly, not trying to move him further yet.

Carlos breathed in against his teal tunic, and tasted something strong and resin-y, frankincense without the smoke. It filled his head like a hollow glass, laying heavy over all the turbulent panic and sourceless noises. Groaning, Carlos went unpinned, relaxing totally against Cecil.

"Oof," Cecil said.

"Have fun carrying him," Dana said cheerfully. "Let's go."

Seeing that they had everything well in hand, Carlos shut his eyes and checked the hell out.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

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

Time got intermittent. Another car ride and fingers in his hair. The feeling of being lifted and moved.

With his eyes shut, he thought about the novelty of sensory experiences that only come well over three decades into a life. There were synapses and internal circuitry to the body. Some cord in his physiology had never been plugged in, some drivers never installed properly, the hardware never fully coming online.

When the body's senses literally expanded in a concrete way rather than some psuedo-intellectual way, things were not overwritten or changed, per se. Additional information was suddenly available, an entire new stream of it that needed to be fed into the wider river of comprehension. New language was needed, but for the time being, what Carlos had was pre-established libraries to interpret the new stimulus.

Cecil had a scent, though that wasn't an accurate word. Carlos cast around for another one. New software needed a signature. That would do.

Cecil had a signature to him that filled his car and was unmistakable in Carlos' mouth as Cecil carried him. Resinous and smoke-sweet without the smoke, and something sharp that only became obvious when Carlos' head was against his chest. The slice of something illicit, like opium or the scent of a strange liquor before the first taste. It went right to Carlos' head, reminding him very suddenly and eidetically back to his geology degree, being younger and living in a house with a medical student and a chemistry major, and the smell of their ill-advised concoctions. Hours spent on the living room floor, floating and sensate.

That. That was the signature Cecil wore. Or, Carlos' best translation of it.

To be sure, Carlos clutched at Cecil's shoulders, bending up to put his nose against the bare skin above the neck of his tunic.

Cecil yelped and nearly dropped him. "Um, no, don't do that. Nope, down you go."

Carlos was set on a sofa, and finally opened his eyes. It was unfamiliar, a living room he'd never been in, and Carlos let out an anxious hum.

"This is Dana's home, don't be rude," Cecil told Carlos, voice stern. His fingers ran through Carlos' hair, though, and that was soothing.

His hostess appeared then, brandishing a cord and a plasticky flat rectangle. "Heating pad! This will help. Put this behind your back, Carlos."

He was studiously tucked into the corner of the sofa, heating pad against his cramps, a soft pillow shoved under his head, and a down comforter laid over his lap and up over one shoulder.

"Do you need me to pick anything up?" Cecil asked Dana.

"Don't think so, but I'll text you. You can send Maureen down."

Cecil frowned. "I don't have to-- Dana."

"Nope!" As Carlos watched them, his attention hazy through his pain, Dana reached up and patted Cecil's chest firmly. "You did great, swooping in like that to save the day. But now, you have to go!" Her grip shifted to his shoulders, and she bodily pushed him back down the hallway to the door.

"What?" Carlos asked, a curl of panic in his gut. "Wait, why does he have to go?"

Dana stopped pushing Cecil enough to turn and give Carlos a truly incredulous look. "Gracious goodness, it's sort of amazing how much you don't understand what's happening. We'll talk it out, if you're at all coherent these next few days. Personally, I doubt it."

Cecil inhaled deeply, his whole body moving with it. "I... can't stay, Carlos. And she's right, you probably won't be tuned in much for a while."

"But..." Carlos let out a breath, and it came out a whine. Over Dana's shoulder, Cecil crossed his arms tightly at the noise, looking at the ceiling. "That's not fair, I want him to stay."

Biting his lip, Cecil shook his head, still staring imploring upward.

"It's not fair to *him* to make him stay," Dana said. "Cecil. Leave."

"I know. I know." Sighing loudly, he shook himself. "Good luck, Dana. Carlos, I'll... I'll see you when you're feeling better. It'll be okay. Try to sleep through as much as you can."

Dana spun on him and reached out a hand. He backed away, nodding in silent agreement. He looked back at Carlos once.

Then he was gone, and Dana latched her door shut behind him. "Phew! Okay. Pain pills and heat stimulants, and then I think some TV. There's this documentary series that's great, *Riverdale*? Or I have a bunch of Ellery Queen on my DV-R if you like."

Lacking any strong opinions on TV, and frankly unsure if he had the attention span to even *watch* anything enough to follow along, Carlos let Dana pick what she wanted. Wedged into the corner of the sofa, Carlos took two acetaminophen and one dime-sized... not-quite-pill. The heat stimulant was almost tacky in texture and started dissolving the moment it hit his tongue, bitter and awful. He swallowed it with a tall glass of juice.

It took about an hour to take effect, and Carlos knew the precise moment it did. Doubling over, he slid down the sofa to lay on his side, curled up. The cramps got so bad, his back seized, and he was whimpering loudly, unable to *stop*.

Dana held his hand. She must've had infinite patience, since Carlos was sure he was squeezing down too tightly. Her voice was a senseless murmur over him as he rode the wave of pain.

He had things inside him, new things, organs or tissue or something that throbbed and radiated a white-hot heat to broadcast their existence. More than once, Carlos rolled onto his back, arching his spine, as if he could move away from the feeling somehow.

The wave passed eventually, and the lack of pain was such a relief, it felt almost euphoric.

His lips were dry as he looked dazedly at Dana. "You do this. It's a cycle. You do *this* every few months?"

Dana stroked his leg idly. "No, not *this*. This is your first heat. It's like... all the parts of you are finally getting warmed up and ready for, you know, stuff. The first one is always bad. The rest are..." Her face darkened with a blush. "They can be pretty okay! Again, you doing this at your age probably makes it much worse."

"Elaborate," Carlos said. "What parts. What *stuff*."

She found an errant curl of hair, slipped out from her headband and trying to escape her cloud of black hair. "Omega parts, Carlos, honestly! You're the scientist, not me. There's all these... It's like..." She hissed softly, and Carlos pressed away from her. "Oh, no, I'm not mad at you, I just don't know how to explain! You're clearly a fully grown man, but you're going through part of the change, and I don't know what parts are new to you!"

"Sorry," Carlos said. "I'm sorry. This is awful."

She took his hand again and squeezed it. "You're going to be okay. And then it'll be pretty good! Not to play favorites, but us omegas are pretty great."

Her grin was kind and her hand was cool in Carlos'. It settled him for the moment; *us omegas* she'd said, as if they were on the same side.

"Is that what I am," he mused, marble-mouthed, his eyes shutting.

When he woke, it was late, and Dana was curled up on the other side of the sofa, dozing.

Carlos was throbbing, like a full body headache. But worse, he felt dried sweat on him. He was still miraculously in his lab coat and flannel and jeans. It was too much.

When he stood up, Dana stirred. "Whassat," she slurred tiredly.

"Itches. Feel gross." He dragged his curls out of his face.

Dana lifted her head groggily. "Sure. Uh, that bag there, there's spare clothes for you. Sorry for going through your stuff. Well, Luisa did, not me, but you know." With a jaw-cracking yawn, she pointed across the room, to a door. "Bathroom's there. Take a lukewarm shower. Leave the door open a crack so if you fall I can hear it, mmkay?"

That seemed unlikely until he actually started walking, which really took the energy out of him in a disturbing way. Just bending to grab the bag made him have to go still and regain his equilibrium. He braced himself on the walls and the door as he shuffled along into the bathroom.

The cool tiles felt good on his feet, and he sighed. Bumping the door mostly shut, he started stripping, wondering if he should fold things up... but everything he wore needed a wash now. It wound up in a pile on the floor before Carlos turned on the shower.

First he set it to the lowest temperature he could stand. More than anything, he wanted the feeling of going swimming, cool water buffeting his body through the elevated core heat. Leaning on the wall, he lingered there for a long time.

Then, warm water finally felt good enough to indulge in, and Carlos looked at his options in the shower. Dana had a few shampoo options, seemingly dependant on how she was wearing her hair. None quite fit Carlos' hair texture, so he went for the closest one and kept the shampoo brief, and skipped the conditioner; he didn't have his, so his hair was going to turn into a terrible mess anyway, so who cared.

Dana's soap had an omega symbol on it. Carlos grabbed it and turned it over, squinting at the ingredients and labels. Without his glasses, reading was almost impossible. There was some cheerful blue text about removing common pheromone blockers and being specially formulated for omega skin.

It felt like soap, but maybe a little nicer. That was it. Like a bottle that came from a spa gift basket rather than a drug store. Using it almost felt like lotion, and the scent was powdery and pleasant enough.

When he was done, Carlos finally cranked the temperature all the way up and leaned on the wall, letting the water pound on his back. Tiredness strung through his body, as if he hadn't just been sleeping, and there was a chemical bite to everything he felt. The stimulant burning through whatever caused this cycle, not quite a scorched earth tactic but sure as hell not a gentle tactic.

He could have dozed off like that, propped on his elbows with hot water. It unknotted the tension, and every bit of relief made him hum in pleasure. He hadn't known how awful it was until he had a respite. If he stayed in the shower for the next 30-some hours, maybe none of this would be so bad.

Then... then something happened. Carlos didn't know what at first, just that something shifted. In the wake of all his coiled tension and pain, a loosening happened. All the vice pressure removed, there was something new, hot and distracting and demanding attention. At least it didn't hurt. It was similarly intense, but Carlos just let out a hard gasp and rose up on his toes, not trying to get away but trying to abate the feeling.

He cautiously pressed down on his stomach, his hips, the soft weight under his pelvic bone. That twinged, and something even hotter than the shower water ran down the inside of his thigh, making him yelp.

After he washed it away, because *what was that*, more slowly trickled down. Nervously, he touched it and brought it to his face to squint at.

Not blood. So... thank god? But it was slippery between his fingers as he rubbed them. Clenching involuntarily down made a *lot* more slip out, and everything was very warm and slick.

Rinsing off again, Carlos turned off the shower and dried off with a towel. But gradually he still felt it happening, what the fuck.

Opening the bag, Carlos found two sets of clothes, his soft sleep clothes and a full set of day clothes, minus the lab coat. He dressed in flannel pants and a soft tee, then looked at himself in the mirror as he tried very hard to take stock of his body.

Still... doing that thing. It didn't hurt. It just ached. Ached a lot, actually, with growing urgency. A fog was settling over his mind, less pain and more murky confusion. The feeling of body betrayal returned and Carlos had to breathe through another wave of anxiety.

As he did, though, he remembered something Nilanjana said, about the products Night Vale offered. Looking around, Carlos settled on the little cabinet over the toilet and checked in there.

Eureka. Familiar box. Carlos had bought them for friends in emergencies and, after a friend had suggested it, kept one in his apartment back home just in case a visitor needed them. Now, glasses on, he read through the information.

The box of pads was a perfect twin to ones back in the other world, the one beyond Night Vale's boundaries and its influence. But there were those Greek letters again, omega and beta interlinked in a fancy bit of marketing design.

These boxes never liked to outline precisely what they were, which Carlos always found strange. Human nervousness around the basic needs of bodies was as universal as the needs themselves. It was probably some sociology thing again he didn't really understand.

He read three sides of the box before finally '*For external use only, for use in heat cycles, no other applications tested*' appeared in tiny font on the bottom.

A gentle knock came at the door and Carlos jumped. "Carlos? You're not dead, are you?"

"No," Carlos said, strained. "Just figuring this heat thing out."

"Oh," Dana said, and didn't touch the door again, leaving it slightly ajar between them. "Uh, do you... need... help?"

"I have a question about physiology."

"Sure," Dana said, boisterous in that way that meant she was out of her depth.

"Do omega women, or I suppose most precisely cis omega women, do they have menstrual cycles?"

"I don't know what that is," Dana said through the door. "Um. Is that like a heat cycle?"

"I think it might be," Carlos muttered. "Do... all omegas have them? Heat cycles? Regardless of gender?"

"Yes? Are you okay?"

He sat down heavily on the toilet lid. "Trying to be." There was a pause, and Carlos relented. "I'm decent."

Dana pushed open the door enough to stand in the frame. "Oh, you look better. Showers are the best tool during a heat."

"Yeah, about that." Carlos swallowed thickly. He gestured with the box. "What are these for?"

Dana looked at the box and colored a little. Her voice was surprisingly steady as she explained, "For when your heat hits you when you're out and about, or just to keep things clean. From the slick, since it can, um, get messy. You can use some, obviously."

"Right." Carlos sighed. "Okay. I think I have it figured out now. Thank you."

Dana tipped her head at him. "Are you actually calm or is this like a really laconic freak out? Cecil does that sometimes."

"I think I'm too exhausted to freak out, so I'll shelve it for now. I'm pretty good at delaying emotional reactions when I need to." He gave her a wan smile. "I'll be out in a moment."

She smiled back and nodded, shutting the door.

Carlos finished up and settled back on the sofa, wrapping his arms around the pillow. He felt clean and warm and disconnected from his body in a strange way, like disassociation but less traumatic. His mind bounced from idea to idea, never remaining in place long enough to complete a thought, before he fell into a bone-deep slumber.

In his sleep, he dragged the comforter over himself and dreamt of solid weight and heat against him, breathing in his ear, his legs pressing together hard.

In the morning, Carlos took the second dose of his stimulants, and just lost *hours*.

He'd thought the first day of this ordeal was bad. It was a pleasant vacation compared to the tail end of his chemically-accelerated heat. The aches came back angry until Carlos thought he could catalog every change in his body just from the fanged sensation in his gut. He learned quickly to rub his neck to try and create another feeling, something to soothe him. It got tiring though, and eventually he just faded in and out of awareness.

He ate something at some point, and Dana tapped him periodically to remind him to drink.

Mostly, Carlos laid very still in hopes he didn't upset his body any more. All the existential fears fell away as he just wanted to get through this. He wanted to be okay again.

The next day, Carlos was okay again.

He felt like he was recovering from being trampled, but he could think and sit up and didn't spend all his time whimpering under blankets. Of which he'd somehow accumulated three in the past day.

Dana hugged him around the neck. "You did it! First heat, done, dusted, completely over!" She released him before he could catch up and hug her back, plopping down on the sofa next to him. "How do you feel? You look bright-eyed and bushy-tailed."

"If this endotyping thing leads to growing a tail, I quit," Carlos said. "I feel... good, or perhaps my experience these past few days was so dismal in comparison, I feel good now."

"You feel good," Dana said sunnily. "Getting through a heat always leaves you with a rush of endorphins, it's like a friendly little send-off."

"Thank you," Carlos said. Often he forgot the proper niceties of life, but not this time. "Thanks for doing this."

She smiled, more genuine and warm. "You're welcome. We all have to go through it. My cousin helped me with mine. Going through the first one alone isn't a fate I wish on anyone."

"Still, you volunteered your time and your home. Thank you."

"Oh, stop." She elbowed him. "You can buy me lunch sometime. Speaking of, do you want to know what you missed?"

Please say my scientists haven't left me, Carlos thought immediately. He didn't say it aloud though, just nodded.

"Well, I got through all of season two of *Riverdale*, that's pretty exciting. And the Glow Cloud possessed Diane Crayton and had her graffitti the high school principal's car, probably due to the new attendance policies that no one likes. And your team of scientists have been getting blood samples from people around town in return for lollipops. I wanted to go, but I

had to stay with you. Steve and Cecil had another fight, but I knew that was going to happen the moment I picked him to help us out. But Steve's a good guy! Ugh." She sighed. "Sorties, you know?"

"What *is* a sortie?" Carlos asked. "Actually, I have a few questions, but that one's been bothering me a while."

Dana's brow furrowed. "Wait, you don't have sorties either? How do... things even work where you come from?"

"I have no idea," he answered honestly.

"Well, sortie-- that's *consortium*, I guess, but no one says that. Your sortie is everyone in your... your sortie, your group. Your parents, your siblings, your consort if you have one, the consorts of everyone else in your sortie. It's like your family unit."

"We just call that family and extended family, I think."

"Well, sometimes people aren't *in* your sortie even if they're family, like Cecil and--" Dana stopped hard. "Uh, anyway. Your group of scientists, that's like a sortie, though not a very stable one right now. Nilanjana seems to be really struggling, and if a sortie has only one alpha and that alpha doesn't know what's going on, everything goes lopsided."

"Go back," Carlos said. "What about Cecil?"

"No, uh, that's not my place to talk about. And it's fine! Night Vale is kind of his sortie now. He's okay. As long as Cecil has people to look after, he's okay."

That didn't sound like an accurate summary at all. Granted, Cecil was very inclined to help out however he could, but the idea that something was behind that never occurred to Carlos. Outside, to be honest, Cecil's apparent and clearly professed crush on him. But as a servant of his community, Cecil couldn't be beat, so *sortie* kept circling idly in Carlos' mind.

"Speaking of sorties, you should get back to yours before they climb the walls and attach to the ceiling and remain upside down forever like a bunch of really nervous spiders," Dana said. "Cecil'll be by soon to take you over."

That meant it was time to get dressed. Carlos slipped into the bathroom again for privacy.

When he returned, ready to go, Dana had one of those thick plastic shopping bags. She held it out to Carlos. "Here. It's really sad you don't have anywhere to nest, nor anything to nest with! So this'll get you started."

"Nesting," Carlos murmured, taking the bag. Inside was the comforter he'd been very cozy under these past few days, and another soft looking linen.

"It's comforting, you know. When you're scared or upset or in pain, you need a place to do that. It helps." She tapped one finger to her chin. "You know, your office? Slap some black out curtains in there and get a good cushy chair? I bet that'll help!"

"Right. Because I'm an omega now?"

She smiled. "Seems like! It's sure funny how just a few weeks ago you were saying you weren't *anything*."

"Yeah. Funny." He shook himself. "Thank you, for this, for everything."

"You're going to be great, Carlos, I just know it." She hugged him again. This time, he remembered to hug back.

This time, Carlos opened the passenger door and sat there, turning to toss his bags into the back. "Hello, Cecil."

Cecil was turned towards him with blatant concern. "Hi. How... how did..."

"Pretty awful, but Dana's sure that's a one-time ordeal of pure horrendous discomfort." He offered Cecil a small smile. "I'm wrung out and I think I just lost half my body weight but I'm good."

"I knew the stimulants were a bad idea," Cecil muttered, putting the car into drive and pulling away from Dana's house. "They're really only meant for emergencies."

"It was pretty much an emergency. I wouldn't have managed a week of that out of the blue."

Cecil kept glancing at him, eyes flicking between the road and Carlos' face. Eventually, he managed, "Can I take you to lunch?"

"Yes," Carlos said immediately. "That would be fantastic. I know I've eaten in the past two days, but I have no memory of it. Everything's pretty much a blur. Also, I assume I should *carb up* now since I neglected to before."

They went to Trifecta again, which Carlos didn't mind at all. He ordered a random number from the ω board. Same drink as before as well; he should have experimented with something else, but for once in his life scientific curiosity was trumped by hunger.

After he ordered, Cecil leaned in to do the same, and Carlos stood there, letting Cecil lean against his shoulder. Resin and that sharp illicit bite. Carlos' stomach clenched in a way that only partly had to do with food before he hurried to grab a seat for them.

He took a corner booth this time, out of the way. Now, it was the weekend, and the place was much busier than before. It was a smaller table, and Cecil sat on the corner next to him, their legs having to shift around to make room for each other.

"So," Cecil said at length, in that amusingly awkward way he had when he didn't have news copy to work from. "You're really all right? I can't imagine what it's like, to go from not

knowing what an endotype is to presenting as omega very suddenly."

"I wanted to ask that," Carlos said. "You can... tell?"

He nodded, lacing his fingers together and resting his chin on them. "Now I can, yes. Before a month ago or so, I couldn't. But sometimes people use suppressants, and I assumed it was a scientist thing."

"But no, I was essentially..." Carlos waved his hands in front of him, searching for the words. "Changing subspecies? I have no idea what the relationship to Night Vale human is to other humans." He considered what Cecil said a little more carefully. "Wait, you could tell when? A month ago, so, back the last time we were here?"

"I had an idea." His nostrils flared slightly, and Carlos sat up straighter.

"You knew. Wait, so... do I have an omega signature now? The pheromone thing?"

Cecil's cheeks darkened. "Ah, hm, that's... not usually something people speak about in public."

"This is a private conversation." And thus, they both fell into total silence as drinks arrived. When the waiter walked away, Carlos went on. "So if I do, you can tell now."

He looked nervy, saying any of it out loud, but agreed, "Yes. Uh, more so now, obviously."

"Now?"

"After your first heat," Cecil said, and started fiddling with his straw wrapper. "But that's common, for it to be more obvious after that."

"What is it like? Peach fuzz?"

Looking at him in surprise, Cecil frowned. "Peach fuzz?"

"That's what Dana's is like."

"Oh. Huh, yeah, you're right. I never thought of it that way."

"So what's mine," Carlos pressed. When Cecil hesitated, he said, "Hey, I'm a scientist. This is all completely new and unstudied."

"I don't-- I hadn't thought about it," Cecil said, and wow, Carlos *knew* he was lying. Just immediately knew from the way he was looking steadfastly at his glass of thai tea. His ears were reddening.

"You smell like something resinous, like frankincense without the smoke," Carlos said.

Cecil's entire face went red and he leaned in close. "You can't just *say that*, Carlos!"

"And something else I don't know what to call yet, but I always think of it like the sort of weird tactile rush you get from a first strong drink of alcohol, you know--"

Cecil reached out and physically covered Carlos' mouth with his hand. Which, that worked, and Carlos' lips stilled against his palm. He blinked guilelessly at Cecil, who seemed incredibly flustered. So describing Dana's signature was fine, but describing Cecil's apparently was enough to completely set him off. There was more etiquette that Carlos was obviously lacking here.

Which... good. He didn't want to know yet. Much preferred to figure it out from Cecil's reactions.

When it became clear Cecil could either keep his hand over Carlos' mouth or not, he elected for the latter, gradually lowering it. "Okay. Just-- not so loud."

Carlos nodded, and mimed zipping his lips. Much quieter, he whispered, "It's for science."

"Sure. Science." Cecil shot him an incomprehensible look. "Your way of describing it is... very interesting."

"I'm working from knowledge I already have, trying to describe something that's completely new to my life. I'm sure if I was born into this endotype system, I would have better language for it."

"That's sensible." He sat back as plates of food arrived. Cecil had his usual, and Carlos had plenty of rice with a spicy-smelling citrus sauce. Both were ignored as they stared at each other, Carlos unwilling to back down when he could tell Cecil was going to fold, specifically fold for him.

"Fine." He took Carlos' hand and pulled, turning his wrist upward. Bending, his nose just barely brushed Carlos' skin, light enough he shivered at the ticklish feeling.

For five seconds, Cecil breathed with his mouth open, eyes shut in concentration.

Then, he let Carlos go and picked up his fork, starting to eat.

"Well?" Carlos asked.

"I have to think about it," Cecil said. "You should eat."

It was a great idea. Carlos was ravenous, and the food was again excellent in a way that seemed too good to be true. There was seared salmon with crispy salty skin still on, edamame and sweet peppers. The sauce was a citrus butter thing that made everything taste ambrosial, until Carlos was swishing rice into it to mop up the last of it.

Cecil flagged down a waiter and ordered a side plate. When it was placed in front of Carlos, he protested weakly: "It's all right, I'm good."

"Eat," Cecil said, a little stern.

And that was enough rote protest from Carlos. It was a fruit plate, bright and colorful, and Carlos packed it all away as quickly as his main plate.

As he finished up and sat back, finally full and sated, Carlos shut his eyes. A low thrumming sound filled his ears, mellow and soothing. Vaguely familiar. He could absolutely put his head back and take a nap right now, it'd come to him so easily.

With enormous effort, Carlos lifted his head and looked at Cecil, finding him already looking back.

He was fairly sure Cecil was making that low rumble sound. Which was fascinating. "I really need to do a study," Carlos murmured, rubbing his face.

"Oh? On what?"

"Concrete physiological differences between us. There are obviously variations in our anatomy." He frowned mulishly. "I haven't thought about human anatomy since... degree two, when I was majoring in... seismology? I think. When did I take that course?"

"Do you need help with that?"

Carlos blinked. "Are you volunteering? Because a subject I'm already familiar with would be great, actually."

Cecil colored darkly. "Oh, I was going to mention it on the radio but... I-- I'm always up to help science. If you want. If it'd help."

"If you're comfortable with us pointing x-rays and CTs at you. Maybe a, hm, non-invasive physical."

"Sounds easier than my yearly check up with the Night Vale Medical Community," he mused. "Sure."

It sometimes floored Carlos, how sincere Cecil was. He was this strange font of kindness, was eager to help out everyone and listen to people to a degree Carlos could barely fathom. As someone who struggled with that, with the slow erosion of his ability to handle being around people like a fuse constantly burning down, Carlos didn't know where the compassion came from. And surely living in a place like Night Vale would make it that much harder.

Carlos remembered *sortie* and stared at Cecil until he was caught out, Cecil lifting his eyebrows at him. "Is something on my face?"

"No." He could just say it. But scientists didn't tend to communicate directly. It was nervewracking and he didn't have the right language for it.

Which, ha, wasn't that a recurring event? He could've made a chart tracking it.

With lunch finished, Cecil settled the check and they left. Back in the car, Carlos breathed in deeply, settling into the passenger seat with his legs tilted to the side, body curved in with his back to the side window.

When Cecil got in, Carlos asked, "Did you finish thinking yet?"

"Hm?" He was a picture of innocence. Carlos didn't buy it for a second. "It's not an easy question." He turned the engine over, looking at the wheel and not at Carlos.

He considered this, and the way Cecil wasn't meeting his eyes, and how Cecil was never at a loss of peculiar descriptors. He was a man with his pockets loaded down with ten dollar words and a mind for extemporisation. There was an answer lurking on his tongue; he just wasn't sharing.

Carlos put his hand on the gear shift before Cecil could, arresting his movement completely. Cecil stared sharply at him.

Saying nothing, Carlos waited.

"You're very demanding, you know," Cecil told him.

The honesty was so surprising, Carlos took his hand away, leaning back in his seat, unsure what to say. Was he? He'd categorize himself as *exacting* more than *demanding* but here he was.

"At least tell me why you won't say," Carlos managed in a small voice.

That seemed acceptable enough. Cecil nodded, and adjusted the A/C in the car. "It's not something spoken of. Sure, it's fine to let someone know they smell nice today, in the way it's good to compliment someone who's coordinated an outfit well or if their eyeshadow looks great."

"Or if they have perfect hair," Carlos added.

Oh, Carlos could *feel* the wave of embarrassment at that, the way Cecil's whole body reacted to the reminder. His lips parted for a moment before he managed to continue. "But, the... ah. The very specific remarks, they're less welcome and are considered too intense. Telling someone the very particular way their outfit makes their hips look or how it sits on their arms, the specifics drain the compliment of its virtues."

"Like if they have teeth like a military cemetery," Carlos said.

"Oh my god." Cecil squeezed his eyes shut and looked deeply in pain. "You want to hop out, I'm going to drive my car into Radon Canyon."

"No," Carlos said. "Because you and I aren't strangers, and I don't mind your lurid descriptions. I don't think in that manner, so hearing you say these things and trying to unpack them is always intriguing."

He seemed to think it over extensively before opening his eyes and letting his gaze fall on Carlos again. "If I tell you, then..." He trailed off, sighing and shaking his head. "Oh, nevermind. Hold still."

A hand braced on the back of his seat, and Cecil leaned all the way into him. Instinctively, Carlos stilled, only tipping his head back at the proximity. Which, he thought, was a weird instinct to have. But he could feel Cecil's hair against his cheek as he insinuated himself.

Then, stillness, as Carlos held himself firmly in place and felt Cecil breathing. He must've been close, close enough his warmth was obvious. If Carlos turned his head at all, they'd be touching.

Cecil sat back, and Carlos stopped holding his breath. "You called it a signature, right? A mixture of scent and texture?" His eyes were very dark, his pupils very wide despite the brightness of the day. "Yours is... I would say you are signed with unattainable things. There's an enigmatic taste around you, like you came from another world. Like I always imagined petrichor would be, if it rained often enough for me to know the scent well enough to remember." He paused. "And tobacco flower. Narcotic and almost peppery, without the impending sneeze."

"Oh." He didn't know what to say. He did, however, understand what Cecil meant now, about too much precision. It was the knowledge that Cecil knew something so meticulously about his person, something *he* himself didn't know.

Cecil nodded and put the car into drive.

"Is it good?" Carlos asked.

"Oh, Carlos," Cecil sighed, a fond smile curving his lips and flashing just a bit of teeth. "Of *course* it is, damn you."

Every word in the English language as well as most in Spanish vanished from Carlos' mind, and he sat quietly as Cecil drove him back to the lab, to the closest thing he had to home.

Chapter End Notes

me, going through all of my scent notes from quite some time being into weird indie perfumes: I was born for this.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

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

The last thing Carlos expected when he returned to his lab was a hug. He was not, generally speaking, okay with hugs. Or any touching he couldn't see coming beforehand.

He was just in his office, putting down the bag of... nesting supplies, he supposed, examining the room and considering Dana's advice. Black out curtains were an interesting idea. The sunlight tended to bounce off the white siding of Big Rico's and glare into his eyes. Having a darker room might be nice.

He was contemplating adding something to sleep on to the far wall, like a bucket chair or a really comfy sofa, when Mark slipped through the door and gasped. "You're back!"

Carlos turned, and caught an armful of fellow scientist. Mark put his nose against Carlos' lapel, his shorn black hair tickling Carlos' chin. Gasping, Carlos tasted something flat and green, like blackberry leaves, a scent through dry wax, pale and subtle.

Mark jerked away, his ears cherry red. "Sorry! I don't know-- that was inappropriate, I'm sorry. I was just glad to see you."

"Uh, hm, that's... fine." He cleared his throat. "Glad to be back. You've created a larger profile for the endotypes?"

"Yes. Everything's sitting consistent with our previous findings. Luisa and Nilanjana have been trying to get a better idea of *what* the appreciable differences are, what functions they serve." Mark moved his hands like he wanted a clipboard or something in them, an occupying force to keep him busy. Instead, he fidgeted. "I have a print out summarizing everything."

"We'll have more information coming," Carlos said. "Cecil volunteered for an examination later this week. I imagine I still owe Nils one myself."

Mark nodded rapidly. "She's been waiting for you to come back. Everyone has."

"Well, I'm back. Let's make headway on this. We never know when some strange disaster around town will arise and force us into crisis mode."

"Are you okay? What *happened*?" Mark blurted out, voice leaping up a distressed octave, like a cat run afoul of a rocking chair. "You were so upset, I-- I could *feel* how upset you were, then they took you away and you're fine now?"

Pushing up his glasses, Carlos examined the evidence writ into Mark's body. The tension in him, the dilation of his pupils, the fidgeting, and (this was new) the sharp spike of his signature.

"Sorry. Maybe it's not something you want to talk about. But we were worried and I, uh, I have some of the same chemical changes as you, though obviously not to the same degree, you have a 58 percent higher density, but."

"Mark, who are you talking to?" There was the loud click of shoes across the floors. "Holy shit, is that--" The door opened wider as Nilanjana stepped through. "Carlos!"

For the second time, Carlos was subjected to an embrace. "Why?" Carlos said aloud, patting Nilanjana's back awkwardly.

"Sorry. Oh, god, sorry." She hopped two steps back, tugging her lab coat straight. "I don't know what came over me. You're back."

"Consider me duly welcomed," Carlos said, and circled the desk to sit in his chair. With his luck, Luisa would show up and join in. "And ready to get back to work."

"They took care of you?" Nilanjana asked.

"Yes, very well too."

"Where did we meet?"

Both Mark and Carlos shot Nilanjana a surprised look. "What?" Carlos asked.

"Where did we meet?" She crossed her arms, looking stern.

"I don't think that's necessary," Mark told her.

"I know what I'm doing," she shot back, and Mark wilted.

"Don't talk back to him like that," Carlos said, standing again. "Nils, we met at a conference in Chicago. You wound up staying on the sofa in my hotel room when your own roommate hooked up with a statistician and locked you out. We watched the Showa Era Godzilla movies and fixed the microwave in the room so we could have popcorn. I'm *not* an imposter and I'm frankly displeased with the implication that you believe our closest allies in this city would do such a thing. Do I sound like the genuine article now?"

"I'm gonna go see what Luisa's doing." Mark announced, and retreated hastily from the room.

The quiet in his wake was loud, ringing in Carlos' ears. He sat down again, heavily, and pushed his glasses up into his hair to rub his face.

Nilanjana sat across the desk from him, looking deflated. "Sorry."

"You know, Dana mentioned as much, that you were struggling with this."

She laid her arms on the desk and flexed her fingers, open and shut, clawed and fisted. "I wanted to know you were safe, and..." She grimaced. "When Cecil got in my face about it, I felt this... chasm in my chest. I'd failed somehow, and I had no idea the parameters of my failure."

"I think it's an alpha thing."

Her nose wrinkled in distaste. "Alpha? Are we werewolves now?" The faint sardonic tone faded from her voice. "That's not what this is, right, we aren't werewolves, right?"

"I don't think so. We've already passed a full moon since our new citizenship began."

"Then... alpha thing. Explain further?"

"Not sure I can." He sat back in his chair, letting it rock behind him. "We've found ourselves in a unique sociological situation. It's like punishment for my oversights in team composition."

"Or," Nilanjana said slowly, "it's a heretofore unheard of phenomenon. I care much less about the sociological angle than the physical. Speaking of..."

"I owe you scans," Carlos conceded. "Let's get this over with."

It wasn't like they'd managed to build a full suite in the middle of the desert, but they had x-ray and CT facilities. That was honestly enough for them; they weren't going to get too much more information from extra equipment.

As it was, Carlos sat on the metal exam table in blue scrubs and stared at the transparencies Nilanjana put up on the backlit board. A composition of the body, built of gradiented blacks and greys, shone at them.

Nilanjana had *Gray's Anatomy* in her hands, flicking through pages, holding them up to the scans, flicking to another page, considering the differences. "Shame Dr. Taluth left. We could use medical expertise."

Carlos hummed in agreement.

She touched the scans with a fingertip. "There's differences here. In the lower abdomen." She compared the anatomy text to the scan. "Everything looks... rearranged, I suppose. And there are new growths."

Carlos pointed to the CT print out from his lower back. "There's the additions that probably caused all those cramps and pains. It looks like a thickening of muscle and new organs."

"There's also this," Nilanjana said, pointing to the chest scan. "Entirely new growths here, by the collarbone."

"Yeah, I know about that one." At her questioning glance, he went on. "Dana used that to calm me down during the heat. She didn't have a name for it, but it appears to be a complex erogenous zone geared towards relaxation."

"And you just have one now." She shook her head.

"You probably do too."

Nilanjana snorted. "I don't think so."

Lifting his eyebrows, Carlos fixed her with a look. "Why's that?"

"I don't... I would know that."

"That's very unscientific, Dr. Sikdar." He waved her over. "Allow me to prove hypothesis."

Lips pressed together, she walked over to the table, setting down the anatomy text a little heavily. "Should I disrobe?"

"No, I don't think that's necessary," Carlos said. Showing his hand, he moved cautiously to press his thumb and two forefingers against her shirt, near the collar. Finding the spot was not immediate, but he checked the scan illuminated on the wall as a reference. There was a soft valley of flesh just under the cliff of the collarbone, and tucked in there was a firm spot. He nodded as he located it and rubbed it in short circles.

Nilanjana smacked his hand away, stepping swiftly backward. "Sorry. Shit. Okay." Her breath heaved, and she tucked her hand under her shirt to touch the place Carlos had. "Okay, that was unexpected and disconcerting."

"I think it's interesting." He reached up to touch his own neck only to stop when Nilanjana gave him a haunted look. "Did you manage to find Night Valean texts on the endotype spectrum?"

"They are kept in the library, which is burned down this week," Nilanjana said. She consulted one of her coat pockets and produced several pamphlets, all tidily color coordinated. Blue, purple, and pale red. "There was free literature in some of the waiting rooms, though."

"Anything useful?" Carlos opened the first one, the alpha pamphlet.

"Yes." She paused, either for effect or out of reticence. "Several things."

There was some cheery headlines in the folded glossy paper. "*Consortium Dynamics: Do I Have To Be Head Of Household?*", "*Permission Before Forgiveness: Asking For Contact*", "*What Is A Sympathetic Heat?*", and "*Unpopped Collars: When Isn't It Okay To Wear Open Necked Shirts?*"

"Cute," Carlos remarked.

"You say that now." She leaned her hip on the exam table, crossing her arms. "Carlos. When they say 'heat' they mean heat, do you realize that?" Nilanjana pulled the blue pamphlet free and unfolded it. "According to these and what we could glean from the hospital, menstrual cycles don't exist here because Night Valeans operate under a completely different reproductive cycle in which omegas and low betas have fertility periods, those *heats*, like the one you went through, during which they can be impregnated, *regardless* of anatomy."

He didn't know what to say to that. "Huh," he managed at length.

"Yeah!" She waved a hand. "So do you feel so benign about these rapid changes to your body? Still find them 'interesting?'"

"Moreso than before. Does this mean Night Valeans are not always capable of conception?"

"Not that different than... than non-Night Valeans," Nilanjana pointed out. "God, we need to come up with terms for this. The odds of pregnancy fluctuate during the cycle we go through, but there are always points of high probability and low probability, fitting with ovulation."

"Went through," Carlos corrected.

Nilanjana scowled. "May I make a personal inquiry?"

"Sure."

"Why the hell are you so sanguine about this?"

"I haven't examined the feeling," Carlos demurred, looking away from her and back at his charts. For a long time, he'd been just putting off examination of his interiority, either from not wanting to deal with it or from other trains of thought taking priority. "But out of the many things that could be said to be wrong with Night Vale, I don't think this is one of them. We can assign concern and malicious motive to many happenings around town, but I don't think this is one of them."

"So being assimilated forcibly into this system is fine with you."

He frowned at her. "That creates the assumption this is against my will, and that assumes in turn I have a will on the matter. Beyond the initial discomfort, there has been mostly interesting effects to the situation. I'm finding the additional senses compelling, and the way this affects the wider community is certainly worthy of consideration and study."

"But we didn't sign up to join that community."

He tilted his head. "I'm not sure, but I don't think that's how community tends to work anyway. It's something that forms around you or something you find a place in."

Nilanjana seemed surprised and disquieted by that. "Do you feel you've found a place here?"

"I don't know," Carlos admit. "But I prefer that to the alternative. Do you?"

"I have no idea. I just don't know, Carlos," she said.

There was nothing more to be said about it. Not for now. But Carlos opened his arms towards her. The stare Nilanjana fixed him with was incredulous at first. "You don't like touching," she said.

"Not generally. But I don't like you being upset." He hummed. "Maybe that's another endotype thing. Dana said we're all kind of a sortie now."

"I've never been a fan of opt-out situations that assume participation," Nilanjana grumbled, but stepped in. Her arms folded around Carlos, her head resting against his shoulder. The initial contact was tense; Carlos wasn't an expert in embraces and Nilanjana wasn't entirely on board.

But, Carlos breathed in slowly, and tasted something like gunpowder, the textured mineral scent. He thought she'd be like Cecil, resinous and captivatingly boozy, but she smelled like hot baked sand and gunpowder oolong. The signature was a little green astringent and steady as a level.

He felt her nose poke where the scrub's scooped neckline exposed his skin. The tension unpinned from her, and she clasped her arms behind his back, strengthening the hug.

"This is weird," she mumbled against him.

"It's unusual," he agreed.

"I'm having a physiological response," she said clinically. "I finally know you're safe and there is a palpable sedation hitting me."

"Fascinating." He inhaled deeply. "You smell like something clean and mineral."

"Oh. Thanks. I've wondered, but didn't want to ask Luisa or Mark." Her chest moved with her own deep inhale. "You, hm."

"Cecil said petrichor and tobacco flower."

"I don't know about that. You don't smell like perfume, but." Moving with reluctance, she let Carlos go, taking a step back. There was a flush darkening her brown skin, but she didn't seem concerned with it, fixing him with her most scientific contemplative stare again. "I see what you mean. Like the idea of the scent without the scent. You don't smell like a flower, but you have something powdery and that organic velvety felt that petals have. But in my nose and mouth." Some of her frustration left her in degrees, until she managed a small smile. "I have to admit, that part is pretty fascinating."

"New senses are a pretty cool perk," Carlos said with a grin, relieved when Nilanjana laughed. She felt better, and he felt better in turn, like some imbalance was settling.

Thing derailed for a while when Night Vale citizens started to report crop circles in the invisible corn that needed immediate attention. Trying to discern a pattern in invisible corn was incredibly difficult.

In the end, the culprit wasn't aliens, but a suspended member of the Secret Police doing donuts out in John Peters' fields. Three days of investigation and time away from more important matters, all for naught.

Carlos sat on his new futon sofa and texted Cecil, asking if he was still up for volunteer work in pursuit of science.

It was frankly adorable; the radio was on, and Carlos could *hear* the pause in the broadcast as Cecil got his text, the little gasp he let out, and the flustered, "Sorry, listeners, just answering a very important text from a very important scientist. Haha, where was I?"

There was a chipper quality to the rest of the show. Carlos rested as he listened to Cecil impart the news over the airwaves. Today, the Weather was a soft crooning tune, some old Wainwright song, and Carlos shut his eyes for a while. The new curtains were a lifesaver, both making the office dark and much cooler without the desert sun pouring in.

He dozed off. He did that sometimes now; anytime Carlos was sufficiently comfortable, his attention kind of slipped and he dropped off into a nap. It was something of a bother and making his sleep schedule erratic. But he lived where he worked for the time being and staying up all night doing research and following up on projects was functional for the time being.

Still, he roused to someone saying not-quiet-enough "Oh, he's asleep again. This is getting a little absurd, if you ask me."

"Shh, lower your voice. We don't have permission to enter. Wow, he's made a nice little den."

"Prerogative of the team leader, I guess."

"And head of your sortie." There was a coolness to the voice. Cecil's voice.

Carlos whipped a hand up to press his palms into his brow. "M'up. Awake. Sec."

Luisa snorted and shook her head. "Late on-set narcolepsy, Carlos?"

They stood in the doorway, and Cecil did something. It was another bit of movement that didn't make complete sense to Carlos at first, not until he rewound it and unpacked the instance of physicality bit by bit. But Luisa made to enter the office, and Cecil stepped just barely into the room, one foot crossing the other, turning him until he faced her. So positioned, he blocked her way.

"I'm sure it's not that," Cecil said, tone still bright even as it lacked warmth. "Thanks for escorting me this far, Luisa."

"Hm. Sure." She glared up at him for a moment, then turned and left.

Sighing, Cecil leaned his back on the doorframe. "Sorry for disturbing you."

Dragging himself upright, Carlos slid his feet back into his shoes and walked over to Cecil. "No, please do, I should *not* be sleeping all day. Thanks for coming."

"Of course." Cecil smiled. "How're you feeling?"

"Curious," he answered truthfully. "You have this habit of implying your own knowledge of goings-on and not really explaining anything explicitly. Why are you certain it's not late on-set narcolepsy?"

His shoulders slumped, expression turning apologetic. "Sometimes it is so strange being here. All of your team, you're all very direct with your questions."

"Comprehension requires active pursuit. It's a rule of being a scientist." He covered a lingering yawn, then shook his head. "So?"

Cecil shrugged, looking at the floor between them. "Normal omega behavior, honestly. Retreating to a private place to get some shut eye when things are stressful. It's a nice start to a den, by the way."

"Thanks?" He looked around. "I can't do too much with it, given it's my office."

"I cannot imagine living with your work and fellow scientists like this. Is everything settled?"

He thought about it, and came up wanting. "I don't know. None of us really signed up for... consorting? Is that the word?"

Cecil flushed bright red. "I would hope not!"

"Not the word then," Carlos concluded, laughing.

"No, no that's for... something else."

Carlos gave him a *go on* gesture, twirling his hand. "Cecil, you are my best source of information about this. You don't need to trail off every time. I want to know."

"That doesn't mean it's easy to say!" He stepped away from Carlos, tilting his body away as Carlos propped up the other side of the doorframe. "Consorting is when you're pursuing a consort. More clandestinely a husband, wife, or spouse."

"Oh."

"Yes." His shirt was a linen, gauzy tunic. There was an ornate chord of twisted string hanging from either side of his open collar, presumably to cinch it shut. For now, Cecil twirled the chord around his finger tightly. "Soooo... You, ah, wanted my help?"

"Right. Yes. The medical room is private, lets go there."

On the way there, they passed Nilanjana looking over some print outs. She inhaled and stiffened, turning to look at them. "Afternoon," she said crisply.

"Dr. Sikdar, hi," Cecil said, coming to a halt by her.

"Mr. Palmer. Thanks for coming in to assist us."

He winced. "Right, yes. Um." He two-stepped in closer to Nilanjana, head bowing. "I just wanted to apologize about before. Intruding like I did and asserting myself."

She leaned back, and seemed to have trouble meeting his eyes. "I'm given to understand it was necessary."

"But ultimately still very disrespectful, and I'm sorry for doing it to you, in front of everyone." He gently took one of her hands in both of his, grip loose, thumbs pressing to the back of her hand.

Her eyes darted up to his, then away again. "Then... I guess apology accepted." She turned her hand to grip his and shake it once, firmly. Then she let go, and he backed up immediately, rejoining Carlos.

"What was that?" Carlos whispered when they were out of earshot.

"Normal *alpha* behavior," Cecil told him. "Don't worry much over it. I didn't want her worried I'd usurp her or anything."

Carlos opened the door to the medical exam room, gesturing Cecil in and following him through. Closing it behind them, he said, "These terms. They remind me of really reductive ideas we have about power dynamics. The concept of the Alpha Male, taken from wolf pack studies." He opened a cabinet and retrieved a folded set of scrubs. "In recent years, the concept of *Beta* Males has arisen, implying mostly substandard men who are sometimes said to literally lack testosterone and thus are inferior."

Cecil gaped at him, jaw dropped. "What? What are you *talking* about?"

"Exactly what I said. It's safe to assume no relation?"

"No. Wow." He blinked rapidly, shaking his head as if to dislodge something. "Your society is... well. I'm sure it's fine if it produced you."

"No, it can be pretty terrible at times. I have absolutely been called a beta male in this context."

"And it's derogatory?"

"Very." Carlos gestured to a screen that sectioned off part of the room, handing over the scrubs. "Do you mind?"

Cecil went to change, only the faint shadow of his movement visible. "We sometimes make assumptions about endotypes before someone presents, but it's all baseless stereotypes."

"Like what?" He worked as he talked, moving to the CT and preparing it.

"Uh, nothing very specific comes to mind. There are certain weights that a given endotype contributes to a sortie, but beyond that people do tend to be people, and endlessly varied. Strangely enough, what comes to mind is this old aphorism, that an alpha may start a fight but an omega will always end it."

"Alpha and omega. That's funny."

"But ultimately inaccurate to the extreme." He stepped out again, his clothes folded in his arms. He looked *strange* in the scrubs, wiped of his usually expressive presentation. "I don't know the full history of the endotypes. I think there used to be only two? Or, they thought there were only two?" He set his things down in an empty chair. "Alpha, then everyone else, which is, uh, wrong."

"You're going to lay on this table, and I'm going to scan you," Carlos explained. "It'll be fast. Why alpha in particular?"

"Um. I... think we're just more obvious." He sat himself on the long sliding table, situating his heels and boosting up to a decent position. "There's more... clear differences?"

"Okay. That's kind of what we're curious about, so." Carlos stood over him, hand on the appropriate button. "Lay back."

He lowered himself onto the table fully, and Carlos pressed the button to slide the table into the machine. Cecil made a sound, and with the way the scrubs cut off a few inches under the knee, the way his muscles tensed was clear.

Carlos reached down and touched his leg. "It's a fast scan. Sorry."

"I'm all right for the moment. But go and... start it."

Nodding to himself, Carlos hustled over around the reinforced wall and clicked the appropriate commands on the computer. "Starting. Try to remain still."

Thankfully, the first attempt came out well enough. Carlos checked the images as they came in, approving each one and sending them over to be printed on the appropriate sheets. Unwilling to wait, he also sent them to the medical tablet. Then, he powered everything off and retrieved Cecil from the CT machine, sliding him back out and offering his hand.

"Thank you." He pulled Cecil upright. "I know these things are unpleasant."

"But over with," Cecil said. As he sat there, he tapped his fingertips together idly. "Happy to help. Now... exam?"

"Oh! Yes." He'd already gone through his exam with Nilanjana, and it had been as embarrassing as anticipated. Now, looking at Cecil as he watched Carlos expectantly, made his face flush. "Right. Over here, on the table. You can, uh." Carlos picked up the tablet from where it hung in a plastic holder against the wall. "Disrobe to your comfort level, hm."

He powered on the tablet and checked the battery. Still over 60 percent, that was great. He pulled up the software for the camera as well as the application that displayed the scan results. Given the file sizes, they were transferring still, and Carlos watched the loading bar diligently until they arrived safely. Pulling out the stylus, he swiped up a notepad.

Was that everything? Hm. Yes, apparently. Tapping the stylus idly, Carlos set the tablet to night mode. Blue light was bad for the eyes.

When he finally looked over his shoulder, Cecil was sitting patiently on the table, scrubs folded up next to him, bare feet dangling off the ground. He was only in his boxer briefs, brightly patterned with colorful hibiscus flowers.

He had freckles absolutely everywhere, as if someone had dropped a can of paint in his vicinity and splattered him everywhere, leaving darker flecks across his skin.

Cecil was watching Carlos right back, he realized with a start as Cecil's eyebrows started to lift. "Sooo... science?"

"Yeah." Carlos' voice was a rasp, and he cleared it. "Yes. Sorry. I was getting the tablet ready." He approached the table, looking down at his screen. The scans were displayed, and Cecil bent to look at them with Carlos. "These are... which are these?" He pulled up the file information.

"Not me. I assume yours, unless you've had another omega scanned."

Carlos looked up at Cecil and narrowed his eyes.

Snorting softly, Cecil said, "Just... differences." Carlos flicked to another set of scans, and Cecil *oohed*. "There I am."

"Yes." Carlos squinted at the scans. They were full body, and there were organs and bones and muscle groups visible. Lots of them, all over. He rubbed his chin and hummed. "Hmm."

"Hmm?"

"I'm... not this kind of doctor. I am about seven and a half kinds of doctors, but not this kind."

"Should I put my clothes back on?" Cecil asked.

"No! I mean, no, I'm still going to, uh, catalog things, if that's okay. Obviously at any time you can stop, you're under no obligation--"

Cecil laughed and spread his arms a little. "Catalog away then. It's just a little chilly in here."

Oh, damn. Carlos put the tablet down and went to adjust the temperature. "Sorry, sorry." The cool air coming through the vents kicked off.

"Thank you."

Another apology was sitting on his tongue, but there wasn't anything yet to spend it on, so Carlos just got to work. He took a few photos of Cecil, blushing at the way Cecil beamed at him like he was smiling for a real camera. Surface level, he seemed like just a man, a little long limbed and with prominent bones at the wrists and ankles.

Pictures done, Carlos touched Cecil's collarbone, following its shape under his skin. Cecil's chest flushed a little, but Carlos magnanimously ignored that. "I'm going to push here," he warned, and dipped his fingers down to press on and confirm the same unnamed thing there.

"What is that?" He consulted the tablet, one hand lingering on Cecil's collar, fingers against the firm bit. "Is it a gland or a muscle?"

"No idea," Cecil said on a sigh.

"It's right under the bone, so I can't fully see it," Carlos complained. "I lost my only medical doctor after the Glow Cloud showed up and they left."

"That's a shame. The Glow Cloud's an exemplary member of our community." Abruptly, he took hold of Carlos' wrist and moved his hand away. "Excuse me. Little sensitive."

And here was the right place to use another "Sorry," murmured quietly. Switching to the notes app, Carlos jotted down a few things.

While he wrote, a faint noise tugged at his concentration, stylus slowing gradually as he listened. He'd heard it before; it was a low, almost subsonic rumble, more vibration in the air than true sound. Head snapping up, Carlos looked at Cecil.

Cecil, who quickly leaned back, away from Carlos, looking distinctly caught out.

"There's that noise again," Carlos said quietly. "That's *you*."

The flush over Cecil's skin darkened immediately and starkly. "No? No, I don't know what you mean. Nope, no noise."

Undeterred, Carlos grabbed the stethoscope and tucked the eartips into place. "Hold still."

Cecil resolutely did not, jolting away at the first touch. "Cold!"

Okay, fine. Carlos rubbed the diaphragm of the device with his fingers until it warmed, then replaced it. A look of concentration crossed Cecil's face, brow furrowed, mouth pulled into a deep frown. Maybe he was trying to stop the noise. It seemed autonomous.

Carlos leaned in, as if proximity would increase clarity. But he could hear it just fine. Something in Cecil's chest was thrumming, and with the help of the stethoscope he could tell it was a rapid vibrato, not precisely constant as it modulated subtly slower and deeper. Moving the diaphragm around, Carlos found what seemed like the source around the base of his neck.

"You are purring," Carlos said. "How the hell are you purring?"

"I'm not," Cecil said, sounding pained. "That'd be very presumptuous of me, I'm definitely not."

Eyes shut, breathing deeply, Carlos listened to the sound. The way it moved like a wave, the tone and tempo moving as if braided together, made for a really compelling sound. It wasn't like a cat's purr at all, in the way a flute wasn't a church organ. The complexity of sound was immense. In moments, it felt like all Carlos could hear, dominating the sense.

He thought he heard his name, but it was a ripple in the cavernous sound, following the modulation.

Belatedly, maybe *very* belatedly, Carlos recognized things in his head were feeling very fuzzy, like angora and suede and soft static. His breathing had grown deep and steady, and that rich, almost cream liqueur texture in his mouth. It melded very well with the rumbling noise, richness and richness layered over.

The eartips were plucked from his ears. Hands gripped his biceps tightly, rocking him back on his heels. "Carlos. *Carlos*."

Ooooh he did not want to open his eyes again. He could feel body warmth very close by and suddenly had a feeling he might've done something really stupid there. Almost, maybe extremely unprofessional. "Oh, no," Carlos mumbled, keeping his eyes shut.

Knuckles ran under his chin, a thumb against his face. "Carlos." His name was a sigh, and warmth against his face.

He was not going to open his eyes. Instead, he blindly leaned up and pushed in, his mouth finding Cecil's face, the corner of his mouth. He could feel the way Cecil's lips parted around a sharp inhale, and followed that path to kiss him properly.

The effect was instantaneous, stimulus and response almost overlapping. Cecil's hands clenched in Carlos' lapels, pulling. Drawn closer, Carlos stood between Cecil's knees, and moved to rest his hands on Cecil's legs.

He forgot his earnest, eager volunteer was nearly naked, his palms pressing against Cecil's thighs. His skin was a little chill from air exposure, and Carlos absently moved his hands up and down to hopefully warm him.

Cecil gasped against Carlos' mouth, and gripped the back of his neck, fingers tangling in Carlos' loose curls. Rising up on his toes, Carlos slipped his tongue into Cecil's mouth. He tasted like heat and coffee. Carlos curled his tongue around Cecil's, and felt the way the sound in his chest plummeted to a deep, gravelly rumble that reminded Carlos vividly of the first time he rode a motorcycle when he was eighteen. He'd thought there was nothing like that particular tectonic shake between his legs, but here he found it again. It made him feel youthful and reckless all at once.

Both Cecil's hands dug into Carlos' hair, cupping his skull and holding him still as their tongues pushed together. His knees pressed into Carlos' sides.

He couldn't stay on his toes any longer, and Carlos sank back down, the kiss breaking as they both made sounds of loss. His eyes opened slowly, Cecil's own eyes filling his vision, his pupils blown wide and dark. Something low in his belly twisted with dense heat, and he licked his lips, managing a strained, "*Cecil*."

Cecil exhaled slowly, fingers dragging through Carlos' hair, making him groan. It was loud in the room, and-- and Cecil leaned back, letting go sharply with a tight noise loosening from his throat.

"Oh, no," Cecil said, unconsciously echoing Carlos. "Ooooh, no, um, okay."

"No?" Carlos asked, confused and dazed from being thoroughly kissed. "Why no?"

Putting his hands firmly on Carlos' shoulders, Cecil pushed him a few steps back and slid off the exam table. He was much closer now, and Carlos touched him. "No, we-- we can't. Or, shouldn't, um, not here. Oh, stupid, impetuous Cecil, what are you *doing*?"

"What *are* you doing?" Carlos asked, watching Cecil scurry over to where his clothes lay folded. In a single fluid motion, he pulled his shirt on. "I... did I do something wrong?" He felt a pang in his chest. "Shit, what-- what, was I thinking, that was-- was inappropriate, Cecil, I'm so sorry."

Cecil pulled up his jeans, hopping in place until he could zip and button them. "What? No, Carlos, this is, uh." His open collar revealed a lot of flushed skin still. "More... alpha things? Gods and masters, I should *not* have done this here, *that's* inappropriate."

"What? Why?" Carlos took a step towards him, and in response Cecil stepped *around* him, keeping a few feet of distance. His chest was still thrumming, basso and deep.

"If, well, if we were consorting, that should be done on neutral ground and not in a shared sortie space, but you don't know that so I should have-- well, I did. I'm doing that. Yes." His back was against the wall, eyes trained on Carlos. "Being responsible."

"Okay," Carlos said, feeling lost. "I don't know what to say."

He whole expression softened as he looked at Carlos. "It is so hard to anticipate your delightful brand of temerity. You are so..." Cecil trailed off, and darted in, two strides to get close enough to cup Carlos' face. He kissed his brow, his eyes, his nose, and the corner of his mouth. "Carlos, dear Carlos," he murmured and kissed him once more on the mouth. Carlos tried to tilt his head back to deepen it, but Cecil drew away again. "I *need* to go."

A growl of pure frustration ground out of Carlos. His fingers ached to dig into Cecil's shirt and drag him back in again. "Then go," he managed, resisting the urge to reverse that, to make him *stay*.

Cecil smiled, his mouth kiss-bruised and eyes still rivetingly dark. "Yes. That seems wise." He still lingered for a long moment, staring at Carlos like he was every temptation rolled up into one person.

Eventually, he jerked his gaze away and exited the room on quick feet.

Carlos caught just a glimpse of Nilanjana looking up with confusion before the door swung itself shut.

Slumping against the exam table, Carlos pressed a hand against his abdomen, marveling at the pulsing hot feeling that had seized him. Like Cecil had slipped a burning coal into him along with his tongue, and it had only just hit bottom.

Later, when the simmering sensation finally quelled, Carlos took out his phone. He wanted to text Cecil something. An apology for his behavior, maybe. But more likely a demand for more information, on *where* it was okay to make out according to this society's inexplicable rules.

Carlos was an innately curious man with a thirst for knowledge. This knowledge in particular.

As he considered, he noticed the dancing ellipses bubble appeared several times in the chat window, indicating Cecil was typing. But it disappeared and reappeared sporadically, and no messages came.

When the text bubble finally stopped, Carlos' fingers jabbed at the keyboard.

'I have questions.'

A brief pause, then Cecil was typing back. Yet again, the bubble flickered in and out as Cecil apparently deleted and retyped his reply. Carlos counted seven times, seven different unsent iterations of the message before he finally settled on something and sent it.

'I may have answers, but only over drinks.'

Carlos' air whooshed out of his lungs in one loud exhale. He'd spent so long hearing Cecil on the radio, airing his desires like secrets between himself and a trusted friend, seeing tangible movement was incredible.

He took too long to reply, and another message appeared in a few moments.

'Or not. I'm always willing to help however I can.'

Then, *'That was a joke.'*

And, *'Nothing to worry about.'*

Carlos typed back, ignoring how Cecil's bubble was still bouncing erratically.

'I like drinks. We can do drinks.'

The bouncing bubble stopped completely. Carlos waited for a response.

After five minutes, he got back to work, looking over the new scans he had to refer to. His phone sat on his desk, display face up, waiting for it to illuminate with a message.

Finally, well after nightfall, after dinner in the lab with everyone, *finally* Carlos' phone lit up with a reply.

'Saturday @ 6pm?'

Licking his lower lip, Carlos typed back a simple 'Yes' and thumbed the screen off, his heart pounding.

Chapter End Notes

nuthin like posting fic at 1am eh

i'm gonna flip back and write a chapter or two of *all plans are golden in your hands* then return to this. i'm thoroughly enjoying both these stories, and I'm thrilled so many of y'all are having fun. the comments have been fantastic and reassuring, given how odd this venture is.

i love worldbuilding this AU. and i love writing carlos. he's so goddamn fun.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

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

Carlos shouldn't have been surprised when Friday rolled around, and Cecil mentioned their impending meet-up.

He was working in the main labspace with the other scientists. There had been yet another strange mystery to solve; Michelle Nguyen took in a shipment of record players from a shady dealer, all of which seemed discretely able to force the listener to dance to anything that was played.

This had quickly become a problem when citizens around town put on lengthy records and could not stop dancing long enough to turn the players off until the end. Depending on the genre and BPM of the music, this had lead to some injuries.

All the dismantled clocks were neatly packed away into the cabinets, and now all the work tables were covered in dismantled record players instead. It was turning into a reverse assembly line, as they took each of them apart, collecting the similar pieces into like piles. There was no clear sign of what was causing the compulsion, but a few of the players had strange extraneous parts from their fellows.

The radio was on as they worked. Carlos was holding such a part up to the magnifier as Cecil's voice moved out of an ad read and into something else.

"Oh, listeners. This epidemic of uncontrollable dancing has caused serious problems around Night Vale, and it deserves the most discerning and dedicated reporting. Unfortunately, I am not at my most discerning and dedicated. These past few days have gone by so slowly. Doesn't it seem like when you're looking forward to something that's juuuust right over the horizon, the universe draaaaaags, as if through thick molasses?"

He sighed, dreamy and soft over the airwaves. *"It's difficult to be an effective reporter when you have a date coming up."* Carlos continued to stare through the magnifier, but was no longer seeing any minute details of the plinth. *"Especially after a long dry spell, you know? I shouldn't go on about it, but I've been checking my phone between each segment to see what time it is, to see how many seconds still separate me from Saturday, and thus from my favorite scientist."*

"Don't say it," Carlos whispered, his entire face flushing.

"I have to say it," Cecil went on, oblivious and bubbly as tonic water. *"Carlos!"* Never had the two syllables of his name seemed so long, nor so musical. Across the table, Luisa lifted her head and gave Carlos an arch look. *"Have you noticed how lovely his skin looks lately? I think some recent events have him positively glowing."*

Silently, Carlos covered his face in his hands. Did he look better lately? Cecil was probably just inventing new things to enthuse about. It wouldn't be the first time.

"Anyway, Carlos and his team have been studying some, hm. Some aspects of life here in Night Vale, and I've been able to help out a little in my free time. Last time around, I laid in this large machine to be scanned, then endured the chilliness of a metal exam table so Carlos could take a... good look."

Carlos groaned, still hiding, shoving the heels of his hands into his delirious grin. It wasn't like that! Somehow, Cecil's significant pause and that honey bourbon voice of his just made everything sound so lascivious. It was ridiculous.

Though factually speaking, from the point of view of pure empirical reasoning, he *had* gotten a good look. And a feel.

"I only hope the information he managed to gather was... useful to Carlos. And I think it was, because we're going out for drinks tomorrow. Oh, it's like I swallowed a battery, there's just electricity all over! Obviously I adore him, but for months he didn't seem interested in return? And that was fine, you know. Sometimes, people aren't interested in you and it's okay."

"Still. When you luck out and someone looks back at you like you're something special and, honestly, is an astoundingly good kisser--"

"Carlos, really?" Nilanjana said. "Really?"

"--it just, well. It makes the days seem longer, the time keeping you apart spiraling out with decadent laziness." Cecil sighed again, even more dramatically. "While I contemplate clothing and shoe combinations, I leave you to the Weather."

"Wait," Nilanjana went on. "When? When did you even have the chance?"

"Please," Carlos said from behind his hands, "do not examine that too closely. Just let it go."

"It was during the exam, right?" Mark offered in a soft voice. "I mean, logically. Also, when Cecil bolted out of here..." He gestured vaguely. "It was pretty obvious."

"Obvious how?"

"Stop," Carlos said.

"Well, I mean, since my nose has come in, so to speak, I can sort of tell these things," Mark said. "Our notes say that omegas have the most sensitivity to these things, and I'm a low beta."

"And you could tell from, what?" Nilanjana asked.

Mark looked down at the table. "Oh, you know. Just... could tell."

Luisa frowned. "I was standing right there when he bowled by, I couldn't tell. I assumed he was just being weird again."

"Hey!" Carlos' voice grew in volume, and the effect was immediate and palpable, how the others all spun to give him their attention. "Drop it. Back to compulsive dancing machinations." He picked up his own project again. "And Cecil is not weird."

Someone scoffed, but Carlos wasn't certain who. He gave everyone a short glare before folding back into record player pieces.

After the Weather (a rather old Iron & Wine song today), Cecil's voice returned, relaying a story of how a rogue record player had turned the Community Center into a mob of undulating bodies and synthpop beats. He sounded utterly normal.

Still, Carlos bit his lip, thinking about Saturday. He was onto something, really. Time did seem to slow down in defiance to anticipation.

It was safe to assume that part of the alpha presentation thing was open-necked shirts.

Of course, Carlos didn't put this together until he found where Cecil was lurking outside of *Ingenue*, tapping his fingers anxiously together as he paced, balanced on the cement wheel stop at the head of an empty parking spot. From several yards way, the keyhole neckline of his gauzy shirt was clearly visible.

Carlos had just worn a slightly tighter than usual black tee under his flannel and his dark blue jeans. He wondered what he was *supposed* to wear, as an omega. Was there some sartorial signal he could be sending or avoiding? It was frustrating that he didn't know yet.

Still, it must've been good enough. Catching sight of him, Cecil beamed and stepped off the wheel stop to meet Carlos halfway. "Carlos, hi!"

"Hey, Cecil. Sorry if I'm late. We were finishing up some labwork."

"On a Saturday?"

"Science doesn't take days off," Carlos said. "I do, sometimes, but the science is always there, waiting for me."

"Well," Cecil said, and it was hard to tell with just the light of a streetlamp, but Carlos thought he was a little pink around the cheeks. "Maybe we can get you to take tonight off. Um. We can go in?"

Ingenue was for two minutes much louder than Carlos expected and then was much quieter than Carlos expected right after. It was solidly a club, with dark blue-toned lights and an open floor at center mass filled with people dancing too close. Not remotely a good place for a *talk*.

But Cecil requested a table at the front, and they were shown to a booth against the wall. Carlos didn't notice them at first because each booth seemed to be its own contained spot with a sliding door of smoky, thin glass. From the outside, the walls seemed to be shimmering fogged reflections.

Sliding into the booth, a round bench around a little table, Carlos understood much better. Once the door was slid shut on them, Carlos could see out from their seats, to the people outside dancing or chatting. But only from his side. It was privacy in public.

"What would you like?" Cecil asked, and he barely had to raise his voice to be heard.

Carlos could feel the bass as it moved through the floor and into his feet. "I have no idea. My palette's changed pretty drastically on me, and I'm still learning what I like." He picked up a drink menu placard, looking it over. "No endotype suggestions, huh?"

Taking the placard, Cecil looked it over. "Not explicitly, but... may I?" Carlos nodded, and Cecil smiled. "Beer or liquor?"

Wrinkling his nose, Carlos said, "Not beer."

"Preferred spirit?"

Carlos shrugged. "Something sweet."

That was all he needed, apparently. Cecil leaned over to slide the door open. A waitress appeared almost immediately, and bent to listen to Cecil place drink orders.

In moments, two drinks arrived. Cecil's was bright gemstone red and eye-catching, but Carlos was instantly drawn in by the tall glass set in front of him. There were broken blueberries in the middle of the glass, and when he dared a sip he tasted ginger beer and absinthe and a lot of syrup.

"That definitely works," Carlos said.

Cecil grinned, fiddling with the glass straw in his own drink. "I'm glad. So, how's science been?" He tucked his hair behind his ear and rested his chin in his palm, focus entirely on Carlos. It was so profoundly coquettish, Carlos ducked his head bashfully, unable to keep eye contact.

"It was decent. I learned a lot about the inner workings of record players. Not so much on how they can force people to dance, though. But the Secret Police collected all of them, I think, and we've taken them all apart." He sipped his drink, sweet and gingery and spicy on his tongue. "Interestingly enough, whatever caused the compulsion seemed to break upon dismantling. Even the players we put back together didn't have the compulsive effect anymore."

Cecil nodded and hummed softly.

Carlos thought maybe it wasn't very interesting and blushed. "What about you? How have you been since..." *Since I kissed you and you ran away*. "Since before."

"Distracted, mostly," Cecil said, his mouth still curved into a soft smile.

God, his face felt hot. Carlos hoped the sympathetic cool-tone lighting would help keep him from looking like he was about to pass out or something. "You're the one who left," he pointed out, then nearly slapped his hand over his own mouth. "Nevermind. Don't... mind that."

"I don't *mind*," Cecil said, sounding totally delighted. His grin was bright and gleaming in the colored light. "I'm sorry about that, but I had to."

"Can you explain why? Just so I understand?"

"Because it was in your lab," Cecil said. "Which is sortie space for everyone. Waltzing in there and getting, ah, close to the head of the sortie, it's very..." His hands flexed in the air, grasping for the thought. "It's disrespectful to someone else's space. And it wasn't really the time to go around and get permission from everyone."

"But here is different?" Carlos asked, chasing the question with a gulp of his drink, wincing.

"Well, it's a public space. Meeting up here is okay." He started to fidget; the condensation from his glass dripped onto the table. It let his glass glide smoothly as he pushed it from one open hand to the other, spinning slightly, like an ice skater. "It's completely strange to me, that these rules don't exist outside of Night Vale."

"They do, kind of. But not like this. It's probably a little rude to do-- that at work, but only because it's unprofessional and maybe annoying to my team, not because of some social dynamics I don't understand."

"Can *I* ask you a question?" Cecil ventured.

"Oh. Sure, if you want."

He lingered on that for a moment, lips against his straw to sip his drink. The lights shifted and spun in a way that dyed his skin dark blue, turned his drink purple, and back again.

Finally, Cecil asked, "What is it like, where you come from? I know that's a very broad question, but I don't really know how to narrow it down. Everything you say about it makes it sound unpleasant and a little anarchic."

"That's difficult. Let me think about it."

He nodded, and relaxed back against the curved seat. One arm stretched out, behind Carlos' head. It wasn't clear if Cecil was just getting comfortable or if this was a *move* of sorts, but regardless Carlos could breathe in and taste something that reminded him of melted gold, amber and heady. It made Carlos melt a little himself, heat in his chest and lower back.

He looked out through the glass, watching as something lighthearted and a little jaunty made the people dancing jump around in unison. Some laughter arched over the sound of the music.

"Why'd you pick this place?" Carlos asked as he watched. "That's not to imply I don't like it. I'm just curious. I've heard you mention Tourniquet before and thought you liked that place."

"Oh. Well, my friend Earl works there. It's nice, but very open. It's not really designed with territory stuff in mind."

"Territory stuff?" Carlos glanced over at Cecil.

He smiled faintly. "So many questions, and I don't get my own? Really, Carlos. No, hm." He rolled his head back against the seat, stretched and relaxed. "Omegas and low betas tend to be concerned with space. It's where the nesting instinct comes from, I'm told, and why it's very important to be careful navigating others' space."

"No one likes people invading their space," Carlos said.

"No, but... I care a great deal less than you would." He smiled faintly. "I'm more concerned with... taking care of people. The place that happens doesn't matter, as long as I can make it safe. Do you see?"

"Dana said something like that about you," he murmured.

Something flashed over Cecil's face, there and gone. "Dana," he sighed. "That's fine. It's nothing particularly mysterious or unknown. And I like it."

"Taking care of people?"

Cecil hummed, nodding. "As needed. The consortium system helps, but... not all sorties are good. Not all sorties are stable. I help where I can. People are often gracious enough to let me."

"We're not so different, then," Carlos said, settling on his answer after letting his mind work through it in the background for a while. "Night Vale is... dangerous and strange and sometimes completely opaque. But when something happens here, it seems..." He plucked a blueberry out of his glass and chewed it. "I'm doing this from the wrong direction. Back home, or outside Night Vale at least, terrible things happen. People are hurt, and pushed aside and made to feel small. Sometimes just eradicated. But it's all because who they are. I don't think Night Vale's like that."

"I don't understand," Cecil said quietly.

"Nils keeps bringing this up to me, and I keep dodging answering her because I never know what to say. Since we became citizens, we've changed. We've *been changed*, acted on by some outside force so we fit better into how Night Vale functions. All of that is true, and saying it out loud plainly is terrifying. I understand my team members who are upset by this."

Carlos ate another blueberry, and held up one finger demonstrably. "But."

He thought of home, what should have been 'home.' He thought of bathroom legislation and fast food companies who funded hate groups that wanted to ensure people like Carlos could never get married. He thought of how the word 'sanctity' sent off an alarm bell in his head. He

thought of chain letters he'd seen explaining how to treat tear gas, because there was a protest scheduled on the weekend. He thought of the times he'd wanted to go and march, but how crowds made him nervous and the prospect of being arrested made him even more so. Jokes about *you know what they do to guys like you in prison* that made his skin crawl.

Then, he thought of Night Vale, and the anxiousness dissipated like smoke.

Running a hand through his hair, Carlos tried to explain. "Night Vale doesn't care what people look like or who they love or how they define themselves. It's all fine. Maybe a sentient lightning storm will hit you or-- or a pyramid will beam strange riddles into your head or some record players will make you dance until your body collapses, or some mute children will drag you away to never be seen again, *but* ... never because who you are. And I guess after a life spent living in places where *who I am* meant a whole lot to people, many of whom had guns or government positions or money, Night Vale seems weirdly benign. Almost innocent."

Looking at Cecil, he asked, "Does that make sense?"

Cecil drew his arms close, fingers laced together, pressing them against his mouth as he looked at Carlos. His eyes were wide and such a pale shade of violet they seemed like nothing so much as lilac milk. "No," he said shortly. "No, that doesn't make much sense. That sounds... I don't know. Like you come from a horrible place. That can't be true."

Carlos tilted his head. "Why not?"

"You're so nice. How can you come from a place that sounds in passing so cruel?"

His cheeks flushed. "How are you so kind when your *literal job* is reporting on all the terrible things that happen here?"

"Because..." He frowned, seeming to think about it. "Because... I don't know. I have to be."

"Precisely."

"Oh," Cecil managed, voice stringing tight. "Oh, Carlos."

"Do you want to dance?" Carlos asked.

"What? Yes! With you? Yes." Cecil was flustered, and scooted out of the booth, sliding the door open.

Downing the remnants of his drink, Carlos followed, letting Cecil take his hand and help him to his feet.

Cecil was not a good dancer but he was a compelling dancer, which Carlos thought might've been the better option. At the start, he didn't touch Carlos at all, only stood in his space, conspicuous and distant simultaneously. His face was a mixture of hopeful and nervous and maybe a little fearful.

Carlos took off his flannel and tied it around his waist. He snagged one of Cecil's wrists and made him touch Carlos' shoulder. It made it easier to lead, and Cecil was quick to follow, moving into Carlos every time he stepped away. Once it was clear Cecil understood, Carlos let go of him, shaking out his arms, and moving.

There were few times when Carlos' mind stopped racing. His brain was Grand Central, tracks converging and branching out, different ideas and mental trains always moving through. Keeping a single thought in mind was never enough, left Carlos feeling empty and slow. The processes stacked and overlapped. It was how he worked.

Except now, when everything went dark inside and filled instead with percussion and bass. Now, he could let his many wandering thoughts go still. Just for a while.

Cecil never looked away, staring in wonder at Carlos as he danced. It was fuel on the fire, flames licking higher. He thought longingly of the ice in his drink, and said, "Another round?"

They ordered from the bar this time, because it was faster. Carlos ran his chilled glass over his forehead, sighing.

Bent over the bar like he was, it took a moment to realize Cecil was standing against his hip, his hands planted on each side of Carlos, against the glass top. His head was turned, looking around, seeming *extremely* keyed in to the environment.

"Problem?" Carlos asked.

"Hm? No," Cecil said, and seemed to recognize he was bracketing Carlos in. He sidestepped, his arm moving away, face flushed.

Carlos thought it was very interesting. As soon as he could, he left the bar, cognizant of how closely Cecil followed him. Calculating carefully, he stopped abruptly, stepped back against Cecil's chest, reaching one hand back to hook his fingers in Cecil's belt.

The reaction was exactly as Carlos predicted. Hands seized his hips and Cecil made a shocked noise almost directly into Carlos' ear. Stimulus and response, it was all very easy to project.

Until Cecil fucking bit his neck in retaliation. That one he didn't see coming at all, and jumped at the sharp application of teeth. "Cecil," he said, too loud and shocked.

There was a beat when Cecil didn't do anything, and Carlos had the chance to step away and make some distance.

Instead, he tipped his head back against Cecil and shut his eyes. It was a different type of dancing then, with fingers twisting tight in his shirt at his hips and lips against his neck. He was still leading somehow, since Cecil didn't seem to have the focus and just followed how Carlos moved against him.

All his concentration was barely enough to keep them on beat. Forget his voice, Cecil's *mouth* was unbelievable, brushing Carlos' skin under his neck, pressing his teeth gently down, a flashing heat of his tongue that made Carlos' eyes cross and his lips part around a gasp.

The hot feeling in his gut was going molten like warm syrup dripping down his spine. Letting out a winded sound, Carlos ducked his head, biting down a low noise. Meanwhile, Cecil nipped his ear instead, relentless.

Carlos turned, hands fisting in Cecil's shirt. They crashed together, and Carlos could feel the vibration deep in Cecil's chest, transferring into him by touch.

The biting thing was decidedly still happening; Carlos tried to slip his tongue into Cecil's mouth only to get nipped. Turning their heads more fully together, Cecil pushed against Carlos' tongue, over his teeth, demanding and suddenly confident in a way that Carlos didn't expect from him. It tipped everything dangerously, Carlos clutching Cecil's shoulder and winding a hand into his hair. In return, Cecil held his hip and fisted a hand in the back of Carlos' shirt.

He tasted like tart cherries and dark rum, and Carlos wanted to drink him right out of a glass.

He thought, maybe, this wasn't the place, and used the hand in Cecil's hair to pull him back. He went very reluctantly, licking his lips.

"We should go," Carlos said.

"Oh," Cecil said. Then, again, with dawning comprehension, "*Oh*. Alright."

"I assume we've fulfilled our need to meet in a public place," Carlos asked.

Cecil nodded vehemently. "Yes, yep, yeah, I think so. Come on."

Another time, Carlos would have been interested in what the inside of Cecil's home looked like.

Not tonight.

The lights were off, and Cecil turned on the hallway light long enough to take off his shoes and lock up behind them. Carlos managed to untie and toe off his own shoes and shove his socks inside before Cecil was on him again.

A hand carded deep into Carlos' hair, and Cecil bent to nose against his neck, all the while walking Carlos back, further into the apartment. Everything was too dark to make out details, but it felt like Cecil. It felt lived in, the air filled with him. It was the first time Carlos had felt completely immersed in someone else's space, and now he could tell the difference. It made his heart pound.

Through a door, Cecil stopped to kiss Carlos, lips closed, eyes lidded. "Is this okay?" he asked, voice shivering with the reverb in his throat. That low basso moving with the purr was honestly incredibly attractive, and Carlos let out a soft noise entirely against his will.

"Y--yeah, yeah it's okay," Carlos managed, leaning in to kiss the hollow of Cecil's throat, where the purr emanated from. "I really like that sound. It's a shame you're not supposed to talk about it."

"Well," Cecil murmured. "We're alone, so..." He guided Carlos backward.

Certain he was about to be nudged onto a bed, Carlos took the moment to prepare, pulling his black tee off. His flannel was missing; maybe it was in Cecil's car, or maybe he'd lost it somewhere. He had others.

With a little huffed sound, Cecil nodded along and undid his belt, pushing his pants down. His gauzy shirt hung low enough to remain modest. Luckily, Cecil pulled that off too, over his head, dropping it to the floor.

Carlos paused in his stripping with his button and zip undone. "What is that?"

Looking down, Cecil hummed inquisitively, his face flushing. "Um, be more specific?"

Given the exam before, Carlos had seen a lot of Cecil. The handsome span of his shoulders and the bones of his clavicle shouldn't have caught his attention again. Yet, Carlos reached out and touched a scattering of freckles over one of Cecil's pectoral muscles.

At his touch, the faint line he'd seen illuminated. A perfectly razor-straight line stretched over the span between two of Cecil's freckles. A few more similar lines appeared, delicate and faint, like they were glowing upward through his skin. They webbed out, linking the spots like... like constellations.

"Oh my god," Carlos breathed, lifting both hands to touch him. Arousal still simmered through him, but this, *this* was incredible. Lips parted, Carlos pressed his fingertips against Cecil's skin and watched the lines appear, kindling at his attention and connecting dots with pale gold light. "*Cecil.*"

"Ha, um, that tickles," Cecil said, shivering. "Do you... like them?"

"What are they?" He walked his fingers around, seeing what shapes illuminated. They *glowed*, the light catching on his fingertips faintly. "Cecil! What is this?"

"Just something I had done when I was younger. Back when I felt a little self-conscious of my freckles." He very patiently let Carlos explore all the little glowing lines and

constellations. After a moment, he leaned in to nose at Carlos' temple, the errant curls at his hairline.

"Right. Sorry." Very reluctantly, Carlos stepped back, his legs bumping into the bed. Bending, he shucked off his jeans and boxer-briefs, resisting the urge to cover up as he straightened. "I don't have any... anything like that. Just to be clear."

Smiling, Cecil bowed his head to kiss Carlos' shoulder, sweet and lingering. It made Carlos' knees shake, his legs pressing together. And, oh shit, there was that... hot feeling again. It was liquid and hot in his abdomen, and some of it seemed to spill a little, magma-hot against his thigh. Carlos twitched, shutting his eyes. "God, weird. That's weird."

Lifting his head, Cecil gave him a look of concern. "What's wrong?"

"Um, omega... thing. Didn't have that before. I really hope that's normal," he managed tightly, shivering as he stood there.

Carefully, Cecil urged Carlos back, onto the bed. Carlos sat and then propped himself up, pushing further up, towards the middle of the bed. "What do you mean?" Cecil asked, voice lowering to a warm whisper. With a knee up, he followed Carlos, sitting by his legs.

It was absorbing a little into the comforter. *God*, it had better be normal. What was even normal anymore? "The... slick, it's called, I guess?"

"Are you already...? I mean, yeah. Yes, obviously, that's..." Cecil inhaled deeply and touched Carlos' chest lightly. "That's new, I assume?"

"Yeah," Carlos said, voice jumping an octave. "It's definitely new." He arched his spine a little, balancing back on his hands. "Oh, that feels so weird. It's really hot."

A warm palm cupped his knee and slid gradually up. "I can, I mean, can I..." When Carlos nodded, that hand glided along sensitive skin, right over where there was some slick, like it *was* completely normal. It made their skin slide together more smoothly.

Cecil stilled, and let out a hum. Not a sexy hum this time, but a curious one. "Huh."

"Huh?" Carlos shifted anxiously.

"Can I turn on the lamp?"

Oh no, Carlos thought with dread. "Sure," he said with false brightness.

A low, orangey light clicked on from the bedside table. Carlos blinked against the new brightness.

In the new light, Cecil was touching him again, his brow furrowed slightly. "Huh," he said again. And stroked his thumb over Carlos' balls. Jerking, Carlos bit his lip. "Oh, I see. Yours are kind of outside."

"What? Wait, what?" Carlos sat up, forcing Cecil back again. "Are yours not? Is our anatomy different? Let me see."

Possibly he could've been more gentle about pushing Cecil over onto his back. The yelp Cecil let out was kind of adorable, though, and Carlos refused to feel bad.

Leaning over Cecil, Carlos nudged a knee out of the way so it stopped blocking the light and he could see. A strangled gasp of his name escaped Cecil, but Carlos was busy. He hadn't considered they would vary much here.

"Oh, dear," Cecil said, voice unsteady. "You have that *science* look on your face."

"Try to hold still," Carlos said, laying hands on. "Consider this an extension of your exam."

Resting his head back, Cecil muttered, "As long as I don't have to turn my head and cough."

Thing was: Cecil was a different. A little bit. Enough that Carlos *might* not have noticed if the lights stayed off, depending on the ensuring activities. But now, with perceptive eyes, Carlos took catalog. First, his cock was long, even when only half-hard as it was now. There was at the base a strange ring of thicker, darker flesh. Carlos stroked his thumb over it with a very scientific hum, and Cecil covered his eyes with a hand. "What's that?"

"Um, knot. It-- it's sensitive, so--"

"Did you just say *knot*? As in a part of the penis that engorges and expands? Like dogs have?"

Cecil, to his credit, whipped his hand away from his face and gave Carlos a deeply offended look. "Excuse you?"

"Sorry," Carlos blurted. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean-- I didn't know."

Nodding firmly, Cecil sighed and sank back, clearly trying to relax. "Is that new too?"

"Very much so." Carlos continued feeling around, taking a moment to tuck his fingers into the wiry curls down around Cecil's cock. That earned him a low, happier hum. "Another alpha thing?"

"An--anyone along the top of the spectrum," Cecil said.

Slipping his hands underneath, Carlos followed under the shaft and found... a rather conspicuous lack of testicles. Or, no. There was very, very soft skin there, and Carlos could feel Cecil's pulse against the tissue. Stroking there got a loud gasp, and Cecil's legs tensed. "Oh, *interesting!*"

"Is it?" Cecil asked, strained.

"Yours are internal?" He felt around, trying not to get his fingernails involved at all. It seemed *extremely* sensitive, more so than his own perineum. "The glands are internal and this is where fluid moves."

He was still exploring when Cecil grabbed his wrist and pulled his hand away. "Th--that's enough, please." His face was flushed deeply, eyes gone all pupil as he stared down at Carlos.

"Sorry," Carlos murmured.

"It's alright. Just... a bit much." Gingerly, he sat up. His dick was harder now, maybe from the science. "Do you, that is, do you still want?"

Carlos nodded rapidly. "Yes. Sorry. Got distracted." And he leaned in and kissed Cecil, hoping to silently convey his gratitude and also get them back on track.

It came easily, their tongue twining together, hands in hair, that low hum radiating from Cecil and into Carlos' core. Inside, Carlos felt hot and aching, and tugged Cecil in closer. As more weight pressed on him, he sank back against the bed, Cecil on top of him and doing his own thorough examination of Carlos' mouth.

Carlos had the distinct idea that he wouldn't need lube, which was... pretty convenient, he supposed. "Condom," he mumbled between dragging kisses.

Cecil made an inquisitive noise from Carlos' chin, nipping at him again.

"Condom, Cecil. I-- I want you to fuck me, if that's okay."

Eyes squeezing shut, Cecil moaned. "Mmhm, yes. yes, I can do that. But what?"

"What do you mean what? Do you have one?"

"One what?" He sounded dazed.

"A condom, Cecil!"

Cecil lifted his head to squint at Carlos. "What is a condom?"

"Are you kidding me?" Apparently not: Cecil just blinked guilelessly at him.

Fine. Carlos explained what a condom was, with some informative hand gestures.

After he was done, Cecil's face was twisted in baffled amusement. "What? That would never work. That sounds like a disaster. You're making it up."

"I'm not! How do you prevent pregnancy during intercourse?"

"Um," Cecil said, drawing out the sound like Carlos was clearly messing with him. "You don't have sex during heat, or you get heat suppressants?" The *duh* was silent, but heavily implied.

"Right!" Carlos slapped his forehead. "You have fertility cycles!"

"And you don't? You can get pregnant... like, whenever?" Cecil lifted a haughty eyebrow. "Like rabbits?"

Okay, he deserved that. Still, Carlos glared up at him. "Oh, hush up. No more comments of implied superiority, I get it." He was going to have to update the research document with these new revelations later.

Getting with the program, Cecil slid further over Carlos, rising up on his knees. That helped immensely, just the feeling of his legs parting around a warm body snuffed out Carlos' indignation. He let out a long, tremulous sigh.

Smiling warmly, Cecil stroked his calves, then tucked his fingers between Carlos' legs. He caught against Carlos' hole and started to coax him open. The glide was intense and blood hot. Carlos bit his lip.

Two fingers slipped in almost immediately. "Uh, oh," Carlos said, a little loud. Oh, god, his fingers moved so easily, felt so slick, and he just opened right up. A shaky exhale came out of Carlos' open mouth.

Cecil bent to kiss his forehead, fingers working and stroking him. "I've got you. Beautiful, perfect Carlos, I've got you."

Oh fuck, what the hell? His eyes didn't want to focus, his full attention narrow on the strumming pleasure starting in his gut. "I... ohgod. I've d--done this before, you know," he told Cecil.

Cecil looked up and down Carlos' body, gaze settling back on his face as he worked Carlos open further. "Have you now?"

He had a point, but Carlos was never going to admit that. The vividness of sensation was so intense, it did feel new. It didn't line up with what he knew already from being fingered. Which made him want to know more immediately, to detail the exact variances.

But also he wanted to stop shaking and making soft, overwhelmed noises. It was very loud in the quiet of the room, making him squeeze his eyes shut. "Ceec, Cecil, I--"

Cecil leaned over Carlos, resting a hand on his belly and adjusting his fingers, doing *something* remarkable that made Carlos break off into a groan. "I've never seen someone so..." He touched his tongue to his upper lip, concentrating and staring endlessly down at Carlos. "Why don't I get you off, just like this, sprawled and lovely."

"No," Carlos said between heavy breaths. Oh, fuck, Cecil's fingertips were rubbing just inside the rim and it felt so good, zipping up his spine like lightning. "I-- I wanted--"

"Carlos, I am willing to bet my soul to the dark masters who take wagers in the fire department basement that you can have two," Cecil said.

"I can't come twice," Carlos panted, knees bending and pressing into Cecil's sides. "Can I? Is that something?"

Grinning viciously, Cecil said, "Let me show you," and bent his fingers, knuckles rubbing against the rim, fingertip against Carlos' prostate. It made Carlos *quake*, hands tight in the

comforter, vision turning to indistinct colors instead of solid shapes as he gasped and gasped and started to chant a senseless litany of "Oh, oh, oh god, oh."

He came like being thrown off a cliff into warm water, impact and descent and dissolving into the feeling of drenching heat in his belly. He spilled over his stomach, legs twinging from the tension in them, moaning long and low.

Cecil looked tremendously smug as he watched over him. He held Carlos' cock in a loose grip, stroking his thigh with his other hand. "There. That's better, isn't it?"

"It's better," Carlos mumbled, sucking in a deep breath. "Why is it better? Makes no sense."

"Hm? What's that?"

Shaking his head, Carlos let his head loll to the side. He could feel his orgasm in his *hair*. It bordered on unreality. "That was... was intense. Cecil, can you?" He reached, and Cecil bent eagerly, hands planted around his head. His kisses were sweet, tipping into Carlos like spilling water.

This was familiar. No strange new discoveries, no reimagining of mechanics. Just kissing a man. It grounded Carlos.

Still, he ached, and anticipation was unfurling in him as Cecil lifted up, over him. He kissed Carlos' forehead and the corner of his eye. "Mhm. If I can make a suggestion," he said in a susurrus whisper, "this might be easier first time around on your front."

"Not my first time," Carlos reminded him dazedly. "But okay." He rose on an elbow and rolled, Cecil's hand stroking his spine slowly.

"Inexperience is nothing to be ashamed of." He thumb found a dimple in the small of Carlos' back and pressed down hard.

Pressure rolled up Carlos' spine and out of his mouth in a choked noise. It wasn't enough to keep him from looking over his shoulder at Cecil. "I've done this enough times!" Cecil ducked his head, grinning, and Carlos realized. "Oh, you're teasing me."

"A little," Cecil conceded, and dragged his slick fingers over his dick. Which, frankly, gave Carlos complicated feelings, knowing it'd come from him because Cecil had just gotten him off because *somehow* Cecil knew some of the nuances of his body more than he did.

"You need to teach me all this stuff," Carlos told him impetuously.

His grin was flinty in the dim light. "Okay. That may take some time, you know."

That was fine. Next time, Carlos would come prepared. With some charts. A voice recorder for notes. Maybe a small camera for observational purposes. Nothing he could put on the shared server space with the others, but nonetheless educational.

For now, in the moment, Carlos rested on his elbows and knees as Cecil lined up and urged him open with the slow press of his hips. The stretch was nothing after Cecil's fingers and the

way post-coital relaxation clung to his muscles. He simply opened his mouth around a long sigh, pressing his fists down against the bed.

Cecil's cock was heavy and blindingly hot inside him and slid easily against the slick to fill Carlos. His breath fanned over Carlos' shoulder as he shifted his knees, getting closer, rocking the last few inches in. Together, they groaned at the accomplishment.

Mouth against Carlos' shoulders and neck, Cecil went back to biting him very softly, just the pressure of his teeth and skin muffling the noises he made. His weight rolled forward, Carlos' braced arms keeping them both upright as he somehow managed to slide scarcely further in.

Eyes closing, Carlos sighed, "Cecil," faint and drawn out.

Hands wrapped around his forearms, Cecil pressing him into place. "Carlos... You feel so good." His hips rolled, and they both gasped. "You're like coming home." As soon as he said it, he let out a little shocked noise, something embarrassed and inhaled through the teeth. And he rolled his hips back to fuck into Carlos harder.

The drag was what drove Carlos out of his mind. The friction of being fucked had an entirely new intensity to it, making him shift and squirm as Cecil worked into him. The rhythm was steady and constant. Fingers twisting in the bed, Carlos shook, the sensation pouring over him like hot silk.

The fact he'd already come didn't mean anything. "Cecil," he moaned, head hanging. Another long thrust, and he moaned again, louder, his knees shifting outward. He wanted more. It felt like an impossible prospect, there was no way there *was* more. Still, he moaned again: "Ceec, Cecil. C'mon, come--"

Cecil slowed down, and Carlos was so angry for a moment that he stopped, even for a second. "What are you doing? Come on, I-- fuck, please, do it right already."

Hands curled tightly around Carlos' biceps, teeth scrapping the line of his jaw. "Bossy," Cecil said, either approving or chiding him, Carlos had no idea. His nose pressed against the soft skin under Carlos ear, and Cecil hummed intently.

Carlos twisted, turned until he could catch Cecil's lower lip between his teeth. He'd never been called *bossy* before, always took things as they came in bed. But the ache in him was just expanding, malicious and conquering until he could barely *think*.

Cecil nipped him. Carlos decided two could play this weird interpersonal game and *bit* him back, making Cecil suck in a breath.

"That's enough," Cecil said, his voice going deep and wide like some obscene wind instrument. It hit Carlos right in the gut with a sharp punch of heat.

Cecil's hands moved to his shoulders, and he pushed, and they tipped, Carlos falling forward onto the bed with Cecil's full weight baring him down. He felt immediately pinned, and dug his fingers into the linens to hold on.

"This what you want?" Cecil asked, not sweet at all now. Certain and steely, and making Carlos' entire body tighten; he toes curled, hands fisted, and he clenched down on Cecil's cock. "Oh, *yes*," Cecil groaned, and thrust against the clench. "Wh--whatever you want, I'll give it to you. Is this what you wanted? Do you want it hard and fast?"

Burying his face into an arm, Carlos groaned. Yes, yes, yes, he wanted this, Cecil heavy pinning him flat and fucking him. It was so smooth, it was fast, Carlos held on as Cecil fucked into him deeply, sometimes shoving in and grinding his hips in until Carlos felt like he was going to fly apart.

He tried to grab the headboard, but it was a flat, padded arch. He pressed his palms against it, pushing back, pushing himself back just a bit as Cecil fucked him, trying to get him impossibly deeper. He couldn't, they couldn't, there was nothing left to give, and Carlos' eyes teared at the corners. It's *never* felt this good, what even happened to him? Thank god it did. He was going to die from the crashing pressure and pleasure sharp as a shock, and thank god.

His legs bent up, muscles tight. Cecil kept at him, holding him down, his cock thrusting in, "Carlos," and in, "*Carlos*," and in, "Fuck, Carlos, that's it."

"Oh, *fuck*," Carlos sobbed, and shook apart, the razor-tipped pleasure too much, breaking him open until he was crying out into the bed, he felt so good, *so good*, like his whole body was a tuning fork struck on metal, atoms vibrating as he came and came to pieces.

He was useless and shaking as Cecil wrapped his arm around Carlos' chest, under an arm and up to clutch the opposite shoulder. He thrust his hips, moving them up off the bed and then heavily back down, then again, Cecil's voice utterly wrecked against his skin as he pitched up into Carlos.

He could have been a part of Carlos, he was so deep, their bodies stretched together, his deep rich taste entirely filling Carlos' mouth and lungs. An equitable collision of their bodies into something new and starlight brilliant. That seemed perfectly acceptable. Entwined so tightly, Carlos felt it like his own body when Cecil came, how he snapped taut and held on. He came, torrid hot and heavy inside Carlos, pouring molten as he panted open-mouthed against Carlos' shoulder.

A viscous sweet feeling rolled up Carlos' body, a spinal tap injection of velvet and wet gold that caught up at the base of his skull and undid him. He sagged against the bed, a thin moan leaving him as his eyelashes fluttered. That felt so good. He felt so good, what was that? Didn't matter. Rationality was dashed like glass into a thousand useless glittering pieces, and he lay there moaning with every exhale.

It just kept going, even as moment dripped languidly by. Cecil lifted his head slowly from Carlos' shoulder.

Carlos whined, unable to articulate anything further.

"Here, move arm," Cecil slurred drowsily, guiding Carlos' arm to fold in. Then he tipped them both over onto their sides, still cinched close together. His hips rolled slightly, and his cock pulled at Carlos, letting out another warm pulse.

Carlos sprawled, unwilling to work up the conscious thought required to move. He was wrung out and relearning his body by degrees. There were a lot of disparate parts to reassemble in his mind.

He started with the back of his own neck, letting himself learn the feeling of Cecil breathing open-mouthed against his skin.

With audible effort, Cecil asked, "Carlos?" It encapsulated a lot more words, requests for reassurance and sated concern and a constant vibrato of affection that spread through his skin and into Carlos' body.

"Mm hm," Carlos hummed. Anything more was beyond him for the moment.

"Carlos," Cecil sighed, and nuzzled in against Carlos, giving into the quicksand demand for rest.

Chapter End Notes

nilanjana: wow this is a ton of really in-depth fascinating information on endotypes, where did it come from

carlos: oh. you know. the library.

i should probably admit: "alpha condoms" always baffled me in fic because, like, how? wouldn't it.... like..... turn into a balloon and wind up injuring someone? for real? so no, not doing that. esp in this AU, when heat cycles are the *only* time anyone can get knocked up, and heat suppressants are OTC.

also i am very pleased with myself for the "rabbits" joke. because i'm a predictable sap, and carlos' nickname being canonically "bunny" makes me want to fucking dissolve into pure starshine.

whatever, not to sound vain but i'm p jazzed with this chapter. i hope it's as whimsical and sweet and sexy as i aimed for.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

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

At some point in the night, Cecil got up to double check the door. Which was an impulse he hadn't felt in... well, in quite some time.

His apartment was sealed with a bloodstone lock, and thus he often felt fine just letting the door swing shut behind him as he entered. It would most likely settle on the bloodstone lock properly and it would probably seal tightly and everything would almost assuredly be alright.

Now, the urge to make *sure* his home was shut and safe was overwhelming. It was a pretty predictable reaction to having someone snoring softly away in his bed. Of course, it wasn't for his own sake. Cecil knew with the taste of old wisdom that if someone in his city wanted him, they would get him. No locked doors or windows would dissuade the most persistent agents of Night Vale, and only such people would dare intrude on him when he was off-air.

But listening to Carlos' breathing had kept Cecil awake as he pondered keeping such a tired, gently resting guest safe. And that mattered a good deal more than Cecil's wise resignation to his own fate.

The deadbolt stuck a little before he was able to turn it properly. Once it slid home, he walked over to the window in the living room.

Picking up his watering can, he opened the window and tended to the flowerbox hanging outside. "If there happens to be any urgent news I need to hear or summons to attend to," he said to the poppies, "I would really prefer to deal with it after my guest has left. If at all possible."

From a shrub a few feet under the window rose an arm. A gloved hand twisted into an 'OK' sign before lowering back into position.

"Thank you," Cecil said. It was important to speak to your plants and to show appreciation to your civil servants. He shut the window and locked it.

Finally, he returned to his bedroom. In here, it was dark, the air heavy with contented slumber. It gave Cecil a silent thrill, immature and ridiculous.

The dopamine rush was intense, and Cecil bit his knuckle as he stood at one of the posts of his bed. Something in his hindbrain crowed: *Sleepy omega! In my bed! I must've done something worthwhile! Whoo hoo!*

In the spare minutes Cecil had been away, Carlos had rearranged himself in the bedding, arms secure around the pillows Cecil had *just* been sleeping on. Which, again, inspired some good feelings and was very cute besides, but now he had to sidle in and disturb Carlos.

Climbing in on the other side, he considered his options and picked out one that seemed easy to retrieve. As he tugged at it, Carlos' brow furrowed, his fingers clenching down. "Carlos. I need a pillow. I need *one* pillow, Carlos, can you let this one go?" Cecil said quietly, cajoling as he tried to open Carlos' hand with his own and take the pillow.

Carlos tried to bury his face in the pillow and ignore Cecil. Which made silver bells ring in Cecil's chest. *Sleepy omega! Nesting! Good job, Cecil!* But even more than that, he needed to get some sleep.

"Nooo," Carlos mumbled as Cecil relinquished the pillow from his arms.

"You have the other three," Cecil whispered, taking his prize and finally laying down.

His arm was outstretched, as if he expected the pillow to be handed back to him. Instead, Cecil took his wrist and directed him, placing Carlos' arm around him. This seemed like an acceptable alternative, as Carlos tucked his head down against Cecil's neck and went calm and still again.

It was strange to think someone who enjoyed bedding down in such a tactile way would live and sleep in a room with three other people. There was an almost hedonistic measure to how quickly Carlos bent towards comfort, piling it up around himself in slumber. He really deserved his own space, if he was given an inch and indulged in it so jealously.

Carlos breathed in deeply, and let out a low sigh, utterly unmade of all tension.

"My god, what have I done," Cecil said in a voice dry as vermouth and desperately fond. His hand curled around Carlos' skull, thumb stroking his hairline.

Fumbling a hand in the dark, Carlos found the curve of Cecil's jaw first, then followed it to his mouth, resting his fingers over lips. "Quiet. Sleep."

"Oh, alright."

Just so, they slept.

In late morning, Carlos walked barefoot around Cecil's apartment, his flannel draped around his shoulders, just-washed hair dampening the collar, his legs dark where they stretched from his boxers.

Cecil had to make a conscious effort not to lean his cheek in his hand and sigh dreamily after him. He seemed much like a diamond unearthed from dull stone. Or like a hot desert wind off Route 800 bringing a lattice of woven gold instead of a tumbleweed.

One careful fingertip touched the antlers over Cecil's altar, situated on a stone table in the corner. "This is a strange amalgamation of items," he said softly.

"Hm? Not really. Basic altar construction. I know other people who do incredibly intricate ones. Janice Rio, from down the street, uses antler horn to carve little insects and strings them around like garland. It's very pretty." The process seemed a little tedious, woodcarving at that tiny scale, but he admired the craft greatly.

"These altars are common?" Carlos asked.

"I would surmise they are almost universal. I don't know anyone who doesn't have a bloodstone altar. Do you want tea or coffee?"

"Black tea?"

"Sure." Cecil set out mugs.

"What are they for, the altars?" Carlos picked up a smooth stone between his fingers. "More Heliotrope. This isn't common to the area."

"The City Council operates the local bloodstone factory. They have a source somehow." He plated breakfast and brought it to his coffee table before returning to the kitchen for tea and coffee. Taking a guess from what he knew about Carlos so far, he added sugar and vanilla creamer to the tea, bringing it over. "Here."

Meandering to the sofa, Carlos sank down with a heavy sigh. It was easy to imagine he was feeling a little worn out after last night. "Oh, thank you. Cecil, I didn't realize you were cooking, I'm sorry." He picked up his plate and leaned back against the corner of the sofa. "I've just been... really out of it." His ears flushed red, eyes cutting to Cecil and then down at his food as he ate.

"Mmhm," Cecil hummed, unable to contain his pleasure.

"That's normal, huh?" Carlos asked in a low mutter.

"Yes, I should think so." He speared some eggs and watched Carlos levelly. "Any more... questions?"

The flush spread over Carlos' neck and cheeks. "I, uh, I mean. Everything was... very demonstrative. What I remember is-- it was all very, hm, enlightening." He shoved a ricecake with blackberry jam into his mouth, crunching loudly. "Mmph."

Taking a long sip of his coffee, Cecil smiled. "I'm always happy to help out the scientific community."

Carlos *glared* at him, radiating nervous interest like a thurible. Lording over him like this was terrible and unfair, and Cecil was going to stop the second it ceased making Carlos react with keen intent. Just as soon as that happened.

Plates set aside on the table, Carlos drank his tea quietly. The nervousness around him was palpable. Which was understandable. There was always something heavy about Carlos, the weight of his regard for the universe curving space around him. It drew people in. Or, well, it drew Cecil in.

When Cecil idly rubbed his neck, Carlos let out a tiny noise. "God, I really, uh, really got you. I'm sorry."

Cecil pressed his thumb over the sore point on his neck. He imagined it was bold and dark against his skin. "I don't mind. I probably shouldn't have started that."

"It feels so intense," Carlos said, still flushed. "Is there something there for endotyped humans?"

It was Cecil's turn to go red. "Oh. Well. You know."

Carlos pointedly picked up his mug and took a drink, eyes never leaving Cecil's face.

"Ohmygod, stop," Cecil complained. "It's... like the thing under the collarbone."

"It's really not," Carlos pointed out.

Sighing, Cecil agreed. "It's not. Oh, how to explain. Outright, it sounds very... There's multiple purposes, see, depending on... The way you go about it, it changes what it's for, so it's not *necessarily* the one thing."

Brazen, foolish Cecil, just barreling in and getting bitey with Carlos' neck. He deserved this, floundering while Carlos looked at him over his glasses, beautiful and professorial. He gave Cecil nothing to go off, just watching expectantly.

"You know how," Cecil started faltering, trying to line up his metaphor as he was already speaking, cart before the horse, "when you're at the hospital and they give you a little button to press that will give you a dose of painkiller but prevent you from going overboard? It's that."

Carlos took another long drink, still watching Cecil over the rim.

"It's a, well, a small bit of a larger thing that's there around the neck. No one would presume to do the big bite without *thoroughly* discussing it beforehand, but little, um, nips and such, that's pretty common."

"What's the big bite?" Carlos asked, because of course he did.

"Oh. You know." He tucked his legs up in front of him, resting his hands on his knees. "I've never done it, actually."

"Is this like the purring? Is it taboo to talk about?"

"No," Cecil said miserably. "It's not. Look, it's a bonding thing. You-- you do it with a long-term consort. The way I understand it, which is very much *not* from personal experience, it lets out a rush of endorphins or something to promote... togetherness."

Carlos cocked his head to the side, thankfully looking more inquisitive than scared off. More and more, it seemed less like Carlos had a healthy sense of curiosity and more like he was phenomenally reckless in his desire for more. More everything, honestly.

Something deep in Cecil's chest thrummed protectively. He ignored it, a well-learned habit by now.

"Is that a euphemism for sex or for emotional intimacy?"

"The latter," Cecil said. "Though they tend to go hand in hand."

"So when you bit me back at *Ingenue*, what did that mean?"

"That I was being presumptuous and-- and you'd just grabbed me!"

He nodded in agreement to that, at least. "I did, yep. I wasn't sure you'd make a move like that if I didn't first. More unspoken rules?"

"No," Cecil murmured, staring down at his nearly-finished coffee. "I mean, a bit, but mostly just me being apocalyptically nervous around you almost all the time."

"Can you show me?" When Cecil just blinked at him, Carlos took Cecil's mug and set it aside on the table with his own. "You know how hard a... what's it? A bond bite is? Can you show me up to that point?"

"What?" What was he asking?

Taking Cecil's hand, Carlos pulled, until Cecil rose up on his knees and braced a hand over Carlos' side of the sofa. "It's something I don't understand. And I need to. For science."

That sounded like a load of bullshit. But Carlos tipped his chin up, looking at Cecil with dark eyes. He was still plainly sated, warm and comforting like a dose of melatonin under Cecil's tongue.

But he'd sooner learn how to fly than to say no to this.

If this is what Carlos wanted, Cecil would give it to him. Inflict it as needed until Carlos understood what it did to him. And until he understood what *he* did to Cecil.

Taking firm hold of Carlos' chin, Cecil turned his head to the side and up, feeling the shocked exhale out of Carlos' mouth. One hand curled around Cecil's bicep, not pushing him. Just holding on.

"Science?" Cecil murmured.

"Y-yeah," Carlos rasped.

Very well. Laying against Carlos, Cecil fit his mouth against Carlos' neck. His pulse sped up, starting to race against Cecil's lips as he dragged his mouth against skin. Any spot would probably do fine, but he took a little time finding a comfortable position.

Under him, Carlos squirmed a little.

He couldn't help but be fond of how much this man played with fire.

Starting slow, Cecil dragged his tongue against Carlos' neck, first wet swipes of his tongue, tasting his heartbeat, then adding slow sucking kisses. Carlos gasped, letting out a wavering sigh, his jaw moving in Cecil's grasp.

After letting him languish in that feeling for a moment, Cecil ran his teeth over the same point, firm pressure against darkening skin.

He paused long enough to ask, "Making good observations?"

"Shut up," Carlos said, whining.

Cecil bit him. Not hard, but swiftly enough Carlos jerked and tensed all over. Heavy strokes of tongue over the spot soothed him down again, as well as the low purr starting in Cecil's chest. Fingers touched the hollow of his throat, over the drape of his robe. "Cecil," Carlos breathed softly.

Now, he was careful. Around him, Carlos' taste like sweet watery air was thick, and a curl in his gut wanted to just press down and hold and keep Carlos forever. Forever sounded excellent.

It was nothing. *L'appel du vide*, nothing more. Cecil pressed his teeth against Carlos' neck and *pushed*, a hand braced on the sofa arm for control.

The effect was stunning. He could feel Carlos react as he asserted more and more pressure.

His breath catching in his chest.

His back arching up against the wall of Cecil's body.

His fingers finding Cecil's back, nails biting too hard.

His body rocking and pushing up against Cecil, a sharp cry breaking free, then an utterly ruined, "Fuck, fuck, oh fuck, Ceec, *Cecil*, fuck," his hands clutching and searching for purchase against the swelling sensation in his body.

There, that was the threshold, and Cecil rose, licking his mouth and drawing back. He was just pondering some sexy quip about science and experimentation or something when Carlos jerked out of Cecil's grip and bit him *back*. It was insensible and hard, making Cecil's entire body jolt like electroshock therapy. A low, winded sound was keening out of Carlos, and Cecil-- Cecil was an absolute idiot for doing this with someone who, yes, was a grown man who knew his mind, but was also newly presented and impetuous and completely madcap.

Between Carlos' insatiable desire to know *everything* and Cecil's inability to deny him anything, it was all sure to misspell disaster for them.

Grabbing Carlos by his soft flannel, Cecil shoved him back, down into the cushion. His glasses were askew and his mouth was open around tense gasps. He touched Cecil's neck, where he'd bitten him, then swept down to grab the edge of his robe, pulling. "Cecil, I-- I-- please." He pushed it down.

That was, comparatively speaking, safer, a good clean way to burn the absolute deluge of oil Carlos had spilled in his blood. He was shaking, the whiplash still resonating like a bell, silver bells, his body confused but fairly cheering for how good he must've been to earn that attention.

Poor beautiful, lovely, catastrophically *reckless* Carlos.

The sofa was not the place to do this. There was no room to spread out or adjust. That was, honestly, fine for once. Carlos sank further against the cushion and Cecil crowded him down as they pushed clothes out of the way. He didn't even have to check, he knew Carlos was ready, and pushing into him was vicious and hot like a fresh slap across the face. Carlos pulled at Cecil's hips, his back, gasping and keening in an endless cascade of noise.

There were no words, only Carlos breathing his name a few times as they fucked. It helped immensely, the vague delirious tumult of emotion burning out of Cecil until he calmed, sinking into the reality of rocking hard into Carlos. Hands framed his face, and he rested his mouth against Carlos', not a kiss but shared air until they came.

Okay. That was something, and frankly not how Cecil expected his morning to go. He anticipated breakfast and some flirtatious conversation and maybe more of Carlos' really pointed queries about whichever of Cecil's ingrained habits struck him as worth over-examination.

His back twinged a little, and he took hold of Carlos' hips. "Come here," he said, voice low and lazy. Coaxing Carlos along, Cecil sat back, helping Carlos sit up against his hips.

Then Cecil laid back, because he needed the rest.

Carlos sat over his hips, looking deliciously dazed, his hands on the sofa back and on Cecil's chest. "God," he said, voice thick. His hair was an absolute wreck from being mashed against the sofa. He pushed his glasses into his hair and rubbed his face.

"Uh huh," Cecil drawled, exhausted. He breathed out a long, heavy lungful of air. "That's why... we talk before biting. Okay?"

"Sorry," Carlos said. "Fuck, I'm really sorry. Though..." His legs flexed as he moved, eyes sliding shut. It pulled at the knot, making Cecil groan and scramble to hold Carlos' hips down.

"Easy, easy," he panted. "Carlos, you are going to kill me."

"Sorry," Carlos said again, sounding a little marble-mouthed. He swallowed and reopened his eyes with visible effort. His palms settled on Cecil, balancing against his shoulders. "I-- I can't get over how it feels. I feel almost *drugged*, is that..."

"Normal?" A choked laugh made its way from his chest.

Bracing himself carefully, Carlos rolled his hips in a slow circle, eyes unfocusing as it drew another slow pulse of come out of Cecil. "Yeah," he said belatedly.

"I have no idea," Cecil said with an almost manic laugh. "Sit still, you-- Carlos, have a little mercy on me here, *please*."

"Oh. Sorry." He shifted, sitting back on his heels. "Are you, um, are you okay?"

"If I haven't pulled something, then yes." He caught Carlos' hand, tangled their fingers until he could kiss the knuckles. "Are you?"

"Uh, more than? Outside the inkling of guilt, I feel incredible." He blushed deeply. "I really shouldn't have bit you that hard."

"No," Cecil confirmed. "Given the circumstances, I'm definitely not blameless. I certainly forgive you, but..."

"Don't do it again," Carlos finished, with a firm nod, looking a little more coherent. "I understand. Though, I have to tell you, this has been a serious case of... unintended positive reinforcement."

He could see that. Maybe it was something he could work on, finding a way to *not* immediately roll over for Carlos' every whim.

Or not. He knew which was more likely. He just needed to be more careful until Carlos knew what the hell he was doing. Which, honestly, if that continued to result in Cecil knotted in Carlos and staring at the soft look of post-coital wonder in his face, he'd survive. He'd find a way.

Perched over him, Carlos stretched, arching his back a bit and raising his arms out and back. It did interesting subtle things to his body that Cecil could feel. "Mm. Hm!" He relaxed, hands resting lightly on Cecil's belly. "Hm."

"Hm," Cecil parroted up at him.

"How... long does this process last? I'm just curious. It's a shocking pleasant feeling, but I sort of slept through the tail end of it last night."

"I don't time myself," Cecil said sardonically. "But ten to twenty minutes, maximum, I'd guess."

"Okay, that's fine," Carlos said agreeably, as if he had some say in the matter at this point in *the process*. "Would you say that's an average time frame or an outlier somehow?"

"Carlos. I really do adore you. Do you know that?"

Carlos stilled. "I... yes. Um, I know that. You never left that a mystery. I-- I'm not very eloquent, not like you. I'll *never* be able to talk like you do, making everything sound so... like you do. But I do like you. I hope that's clear."

Smiling, Cecil tucked an arm lazily under his head. "I thought so. Either you reciprocated somewhat or I was an *extremely* appealing test subject."

"You are. And I do! Both those things are accurate." He cleared his throat. "Yes. Um. Why?"

"I just wanted to make sure you knew that before I told you I have few hard lines, but one of them is conjecture on the knotting performance of other alphas. That's a firm no."

Laughter burst out of Carlos like a soap bubble popping. He was rosy-cheeked and bright eyed, and Cecil *loved* him.

Late Sunday, Cecil returned Carlos to his lab.

There was a long moment as Cecil's car idled in the parking lot, and Carlos looked at the door with a contemplative set to his face. his hair moved in soft waves from the A/C; it was a blisteringly hot day, and the temperature hadn't dropped yet, even as night loomed on the horizon.

The pause was significant enough that Cecil considered quietly putting the car in reverse and just sort of keeping Carlos for another night. Maybe no one would notice. With sufficient distraction, Carlos himself might not notice.

"I'm starting to see what you and Dana mean," Carlos demurred. "About space. I never considered it before. I was always the type of student who could curl up and sleep anywhere, and often did during finals."

Cecil propped his elbow against the window and leaned his cheek on his fist. "Hm. But you're not a student anymore."

"No. And I have a fairly incontestable reluctance to return to the shared quarters now that I've experienced a period of domestic privacy. Even if it was borrowed from you."

"I'm always happy to share," Cecil told him. "But it's true that cohabiting is maybe..." He trailed off until Carlos gave him an inquisitive look. "Putting some strain on your sortie."

"It's really not a sortie," Carlos said.

"No, it is."

"I thought sorties were, uh, family groups?"

Cecil waved his hand. "A close-knit unit that feels instinctual pull towards each other, who often live in close quarters or share a common area, and who take care of each other. Sortie."

"The amount of notes I have to write up after this weekend honestly doesn't bear thinking about," Carlos muttered. "How I'm going to phrase anything, I have no idea. They didn't cover this in scientific writing classes. Do I use passive or active voice? Are we consorting now?"

Cecil choked mid-breath, on nothing but air and his own surprise. Coughing, he managed, "You do that constantly! Just a-- a left turn in the middle of a conversation! No signal, nothing, just we're going over here now!"

He did that *other* thing he did, watching Cecil with steady eyes, waiting him out.

God. Point that gaze at Cecil for too long and he would dissolve. "I... don't know," Cecil said, quieter though not more calmly. "I think it's best for you to... continue to learn how life works here before committing to anything."

"That's very sensible. Are we *dating*? Do Night Valeans date?"

"Yes," Cecil said.

Carlos smirked, his teeth perfect in the dim light. "Mathematician's answer?"

"You like math," Cecil said.

"I love math. I'll see you soon, Cecil." He leaned over the console and kissed Cecil once, softly, before opening his door and slipping out of the car at last, winding his way up to the lab.

Cecil waited until Carlos was safely inside, then pumped his fist, beaming. *Dating!* They were dating!

He accidentally hit the roof of the car, and shook out his hand, wincing. Still. Dating! He must've done something right!

Chapter End Notes

cecil is surprisingly fun to write. i think anyone having to deal with carlos is probably fun to write. someone teach carlos to calm the hell down a bit. take your foot off the accelerator, man.

[i'm on tumblr btw, come join me in WTNV shitposting and complaining about music and video games.](#)

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

this might have some hypnosis? i'm actually on the fence whether it's really hypnosis, but figured i should mention it up front.

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

When it comes down to it, Carlos' cut of the research funding affords him enough to make the first payment on a flat *or* to furnish it from scratch. Not that the first payment was all that unreasonable; Carlos was given the option of first two month's rent down or first month and the use of his heart for two weeks. He didn't know if that was a sort of metaphysical offer or something a good deal more literal, but he didn't want to take his chances.

"I'll just go antique hunting, find something I can use," Carlos had told Cecil over the phone.

Cecil had simply gasped in fear, and suggested maybe IKEA instead.

Late in the afternoon, Nilanjana read a sheet of instructions, held carefully between her fingertips, as if it might bite her. "The metal bars are attached next."

"Not the feet? I need feet to stand it up on," Carlos said suspiciously. Picking up one of the metal bars, he turned it over in his palms.

"You're thinking of it upside down. The holes are on the bottom, and the wide bit of the bars will be the feet."

"Right." Armed with a little metal key instead of a proper screwdriver, he got to work putting things together.

Nilanjana watched him critically. It had been her default expression looking at him since he'd told the team he was securing his own place. He wasn't sure what it meant.

Putting the instructions aside on the floor, she asked, "Why are you building a Fjällbo before you have anything to fill it?"

"TVs go on sale all of the time," Carlos answered. "I'd like to pick up a console too, I think. I had a PS3 back before I took this assignment. It's good for unwinding after a long day."

"Do you think we should get our own places?" she asked coolly.

Carlos liked Nilanjana. He did not want to play favorites with his team, but Nilanjana had always been the most competent and headstrong and dedicated to science. Long ago he'd

typed up a *To whom it may concern* document on his computer, and it named Nilanjana the new scientific lead in his absence should anything happen to him.

But she was sometimes very hard to read. Getting better at detecting someone's emotions was slow work for Carlos; he found it very amusing, that he wasn't good at it before, with visual and verbal stimulus, and now that he'd acquired a whole new sense to use, the same uncertainty still dogged him.

He wished he knew what she was asking.

"If you want," he said evenly, using a heavy relativity textbook to hammer one of the bars into place before flipping the whole thing over.

Her face pinched in that way he knew meant he'd not answered properly. Which was kind of annoying. She hadn't questioned properly.

"It just seems very permanent," she said, likely continuing on her own conversational trajectory. "Renting a place, building furniture for it."

"Nothing is permanent," Carlos reminded her.

She rolled her eyes. "Carlos. That's not what I'm asking."

"You're being really obtuse about what you're asking," he told her. "Just ask me. I don't deal well with inference."

"Do you intend to remain in Night Vale? Our funding will last us through the year--"

"We'll get more," Carlos said with simple certainty. "Once I send back the reports and samples, there is minimal chances that we won't secure more funding. I've seen truly spurious projects get grants, and that's one problem we don't have."

"I'm not worried about funding. I'm worried about you extending the project. I'm worried about you signing for this postage stamp of an apartment."

He looked around, examining the place. "It's small, sure, but I like the layout. I don't need a lot of space." Just space. He needed space.

"Do you intend to go home, Carlos?" Nilanjana asked, voice warring between testiness and layered on patience.

"Sure," Carlos said. "Nothing is permanent."

Nilanjana didn't look as certain, but picked up the instructions to guide him through. He appreciated her dependability. Even when she transparently was displeased with him.

Cecil brought groceries. Brown paper bags covered the counter as he started filling the cabinets and the fridge with staples and a few quick meals that Carlos could heat up if he needed.

Dana brought a truly impressive variety of textiles, and proliferated them around the flat with a judicious, heavy hand. Carlos was immediately fond of the loopy knit of the blanket she put over his loveseat. Running his fingers over it, he caught in the complex pattern of yarn.

He looked at Cecil in the kitchen area, how he fussed and organized things according to some internal logic about how everything was supposed to be situation. It was Carlos' space, so maybe he should have intervened and imposed his own order? But also he didn't care.

"You're staring at him," Dana pointed out. "It's very sweet, but wait until I leave, okay? Here." She handed him a purple drawstring bag, the same kind they used to sell whiskey. Carlos had used a similar bag to collect interesting geological samples when he was a kid.

And fittingly enough, when he opened the bag, it had rocks inside. More heliotrope, bloodstones.

"What are these for?" he asked.

"To get your altar started, of course."

"Is that a requirement? What are the altars for?"

Dana tilted her head to the side and hummed. "Required, huh, I don't know. Cecil!"

He looked up from unwrapping forks and spoons to place into the drawer divider. "Hm?"

"Is there an ordinance requiring altars?"

"No," Cecil answered promptly. "Not technically. It's never needed to be *enforced*, per se." He straightened a little, seeming confused. "Does Carlos not want one?"

"Just asking for clarification," Carlos told him, waving him off. Reluctantly, Cecil shrugged and went back to his unpacking. To Dana, Carlos asked, "What are the altars *for* though?"

"Oh, the Creator," Dana said blaisely. "The Destroyer, the Savior, the Deer-Headed Watcher With Chitin Wings."

"Who are they?"

"She. It's all one person. I forget the name." She bit her lip, fingers to her chin as she considered. "Well, anyway. You don't have to make a bloodstone circle if you don't want to. The stones are still pretty, I think. You could put them in a jar and add one of those plants that does well in rocks. I think they tend to need a lot of watering though."

"Thanks. They're beautiful specimens."

She grinned and bumped her shoulder into his, briefly taking his hand with both of hers and squeezing. "You'll need a radio too. You don't have one yet, and *that* is definitely against city ordinance."

"Oh, how convenient for you both," Carlos said, shooting a glance at Cecil.

The look Cecil gives him is arch and vaguely superior. "Would you want to go without one in a crisis? To sit in the dark during midday, not knowing if the sun were ever going to return, or perhaps if the dark blanket were a malevolent creature itself to hide from? How would you hear the Weather?"

"Fine. Radio, I'll pick one up tomorrow. I don't think I need one tonight..." He trailed off inquisitively.

Quietly, Cecil smiled and ducked his head.

"That sounds like my cue," Dana said. "I have to get over to the Last Bank of Night Vale anyway, I'm taking notes on the potluck down there."

"Be careful what you sample," Cecil told her. "Some people attending are just awful at baking."

Facing Carlos, Dana rolled her eyes a little, shaking her head. "Will do. Have a nice night."

"Thanks for the housewarming," Carlos said, squeezing her hand before letting her go. It made her grin brightly in response.

She rose up on her toes, and for a split second, Carlos thought she was going to kiss his cheek. Leaning in close, her chest bumped into his, and she touched her cheek lightly to his, breathing deeply before easing back and away. "Thanks for inviting me. Bye!"

She left, and Carlos stared in mild confusion after her. "What was that?"

Cecil folded down one of the paper bags as he finished it. "What?"

"Dana, she leaned into me, by my face."

"Oh." His lips curled upward. "Just an omega greeting. Makes signature linger for a little bit." He leaned an elbow on the counter and met Carlos' eyes. "It means she likes you and considers you a friend."

"Oh. I do too. Consider her a friend, that is."

"If you didn't, you wouldn't have reacted well to her gesture. It's one of the most awkward communication errors to make, going in for that kind of greeting and it not being reciprocated. You pretty much know immediately if it'll go well."

"Most communication is awkward with me," Carlos pointed out mildly. Sitting heavily on his sofa, he looked around at the place. His place. He tested the idea a few times. His flat. His home? Maybe not yet, but the windows were situated in such a way that the sunset was

visible on the horizon and he didn't have to deal with the glare of the sunrise. That was perfect.

He heard a sigh and turned his head to see Cecil leaning on the counter, staring at him. His eyes were soft, expression softer, though when Carlos caught him, he straightened suddenly. "Hm?"

"Don't *hm* me," Carlos said. "What are you looking at?"

"You. *Of course.*" Cecil rolled his eyes. "Is it my fault you look lovely silhouetted by the rising hues of night? No. I'm merely subjected to the sight."

"Testy," Carlos noted, because he had no idea how to handle a compliment like that. If he was dating Cecil, though, he'd likely have to get used to it.

He spread his hands, showy and plaintive all at once. "Guilty." He took down two stemmed glasses that Carlos hadn't owned an hour ago, then a bottle from the fridge that Carlos *also* hadn't been aware of before.

The sofa seemed much larger when he was sitting alone on it. With Cecil and his long legs settling in with him, the space vanished, Cecil's ankle against Carlos'.

This place had rugs. They were cheap rugs, just something easy to cover the hard concrete floors. The smooth slate-colored stone reminded Carlos far too much of the lab, and he'd wanted to create a delineation. This place was different from where he worked. If he let it emulate the lab too much, he'd just take his projects home and never stop plugging away at them, and that direction lay exhaustion.

He wasn't on PhD track anymore, he didn't have to do that shit anymore.

Carlos stared dully at Cecil's feet against the rug. Barefoot, his shoes left by the door. It was all very domestic. He was trying to make it into something, a *space*.

Nilanjana's concerns struck through him like metal, and Carlos jerked, shaking his head sharply, sucking in a breath.

Cecil's mouth opened, surprised. "Are... you alright, Carlos?"

"Am I moving too fast?" Carlos asked. "I've only been here for a few months and now I have an flat?" Since Cecil was still patiently holding two wine glasses, Carlos relieved him of one and drank some. It was sweet. Beyond that, Carlos had no idea what it was, but he liked the initial mouthful and that first hot rush that it gave him, a prelude to later tipsiness, like his body was bracing itself.

"Colloquially, a few is three. You've been here over seven months, nearly eight." The sip of wine he took was almost haughty, with a bit of eyeroll. "How did you survive dorming with your coworkers so long, *that* is a much better question."

"Used to be, I could sleep anywhere. There was a beanbag in the campus library, stolen from one of the child development classrooms, and I used to sleep whole nights in it during finals.

It was fine."

Cecil clucked his tongue. "Bad for your back."

"Nilanjana keeps asking me things, and it's all things I don't want to think about. Which I think," he paused to drink another mouthful of wine and then finished it off because Cecil had only half-filled the glasses. "I think I'm being a bad project lead."

"What did she ask you?" Cecil took the glass from him and set it on the table. "Also, do you drink when you're nervous?"

"Kind of. I'm not often nervous like this. More like anxious." He rested his head back on the sofa. "I don't know precisely why I'm upset, which makes it hard to examine the feeling and determine what I should do about it. Similar to displaying symptoms, but being unaware of the underlying cause."

Long fingers curled around his wrist. Cecil's thumb pressed firmly into Carlos' palm. His pulse thrummed against Cecil's skin, and Carlos shut his eyes. "Okay. Alright. Relax."

Carlos snorted.

"You're fine. Keep your eyes closed. Just listen to me for a moment, Carlos." His hand tightened around Carlos' wrist, then released. Tightened again, and released. Carlos' brow furrowed at the sensation, like a very slow, drowsy drumbeat. "Don't do that," Cecil chided. "Relax."

"Why?"

"Just trust me for a moment." His grip continued that strange tighten-release beat. "I'm somewhat accomplished at this, given its part of my career. Just keep your eyes closed and listen to me."

Okay. Shifting his shoulders, Carlos found a passably comfortable spot on his new sofa and held his eyes shut.

"That's much better," Cecil said, voice lower. It felt like suede running against his mind, that particular basso he carried around like a Stradivarius hidden in the violin case of his ribs. "If you are clutching too much to your fear and upset, then you can't examine it. You have to set it aside first to look at it. You don't have to put it away, just put it aside."

That made sense. Equipment too close to a specimen wouldn't garner any clear information. Taking a step back, then zooming in, was the correct procedure. His hand twitched, involuntary clench and release along with Cecil's rhythm. "Okay. That's logical."

He could hear Cecil take a sip of his wine and set the glass aside. His other hand was drawn into Cecil's grip. "It is," he agreed amicably. He took a deep breath, and let it out slow. "Much better. Do you feel that?"

"Hm?"

"Your heart was racing before. Now you've settled down considerably. Nice and slow and heavy, a viscous bead of honey dragging its way along and leaving pieces of itself behind. It's all old weight, unneeded, unheeded once its discarded."

"What," Carlos said through lips that felt almost numb. If something could feel pleasantly numb, that was the sensation. "What are you doing?"

"I have some experience in keeping people calm. Would you like me to stop?"

"Mmno. It's not hypnosis, right?"

"I don't think so. I don't have any orders for you. I only wanted to ask you things. Is that alright?"

"Ask me and lets see," Carlos told him.

He moved then, keeping a hold of Carlos' wrists, turning his palms face up. Whatever calm spell was settled over him nearly broke as Carlos tried to reorient things around his mental map of the flat. Cecil was sitting on the low table in front of the sofa, Carlos assumed, given position and height. Once he figured that out, he could relax again.

"Easy does it," Cecil said, the words useless but the way they sounded in his mouth distracting and nice. He squeezed Carlos' wrists, and released, the same rhythm. "How do you feel?"

"Like I'm maybe being hypnotized, but otherwise pretty okay." He curled his fingers, touching Cecil's thumbs, then going lax again.

"Well, when I count to three, you'll...." Cecil trailed off and chuckled, low and deep and catching Carlos right in his gut. "I don't actually have a decent end to that sentence."

Carlos could think of a few things Cecil could try. "Maybe later."

He couldn't see Cecil, but by god he could hear the breath he took. "Noted. But for now, Carlos. Lovely gentle kind-hearted Carlos." His hands squeezed. "Why do you think you're not a good project lead?"

It was strange. He *wanted* to pick up the anxiety again, the tension around that question, but... he couldn't lift it. His hands were held, and that was a physical thing that should have had no effect on his mental state. But he felt very heavy and immobile, unable to move to the emotion and claw it close to his chest.

"I..." Carlos gasped softly, fingers twitching. "I should be more concerned about my team being changed, but I'm not. Until someone directly tells me they want to do something about our changes, I'm happy to leave them alone. That's bad."

"Bad in what way?" Another squeeze and release.

"I should send them all away, maybe, out of Night Vale. I-- I should return to Chicago, and probably submit my body to science to see what happened. But instead I'm continuing all the

other work and now I have a flat."

"And why aren't you more concerned?"

"There's other things worth being concerned about here. Actual danger and phenomena." His breath hitched slightly, and Cecil's thumbs pressed on his palms. Grounding him. "The endotype thing doesn't scare me. It makes me feel--" He stopped, shaking his head.

His hands were drawn up and together, and Cecil's lips brushed over his fingers. "Can you tell me? You don't have to."

Carlos licked his lips, brow creasing. "I like it, so far," he whispered. "It doesn't feel like anything malevolent. And I've never..." It was hard, holding steady. His eyes wanted to open; he squeezed them shut. "Never felt part of something like this. I study things, I write them down, I put the universe into lines and charts, and so the universe is contained in those frames, see? Sometimes I feel like I'm standing outside everything, just the observer. I can't *just* be an observer with this, though, it's-- it's..." He inhaled sharply and shook his head. "God, this is all insensible false tautologies. Saying these things does not make them true."

A more full kiss pressed into his fingers. "Relax again." Squeeze, release. "Perception is reality, often. If you feel like that's how your life works, then it is. At least for you, and that's all that matters."

"Ugh. That sounds like philosophy," Carlos complained. "Soft sciences."

"Excuse you, Carlos," Cecil said with warm, false offense. "I went to school for those soft studies, thank you very much. Journalism and philosophy and eschatology."

Carlos stuck out his tongue in mock distaste. Cecil laughed again, that low rumbling sound. It was morphing as the hum started up again, the low purr. Carlos' toes curled in selfish delight at having somehow inspired the noise again.

"What do you think?" Carlos asked.

"What do I think? Hm." Cecil's hands felt like warm manacles around his wrists. It was easy to imagine them tied to a heavy anchor, keeping him steady and present. Though if he was imagining metaphors like that, was he present? He wasn't sure. Was Cecil holding him in this moment or in something out of lockstep of his usual self?

He did not have the correct language to figure it out, so he let it go, just floating there.

Cecil kissed his fingers again as he seemed to contemplate the question. Eventually, he said, "I think... Night Vale wouldn't have made such a claim on you if you weren't receptive to the idea. And I think it loves you, in so much as a city can love."

"And how much is that?"

"I have no idea. I'm its Voice, not its Heart."

Carlos didn't know if that was true at all, but said nothing.

"Does that help?"

Carlos pursed his lips. "Eh. Maybe."

"How about this." Cecil moved, and leaned over to kiss Carlos, chaste but lingering, a long press of their mouths. When he eased back, Carlos tried to follow, wearily lifting his head. "You're allowed to enjoy it. Being here. Your team are all adults and if they want to leave, then... that is their choice. But that doesn't mean you have to follow them. You can choose to stay somewhere you're loved."

"Am I," Carlos murmured.

"Ardently." Cecil squeezed, sitting back down on the table.

"Someone should tell Night Vale that I have a boyfriend already."

The thunderclap of a laugh out of Cecil nearly startled Carlos into opening his eyes. It was loud and sudden, drenched in obvious surprise.

Curling his fingers, Carlos felt how his muscles moved under Cecil's hands. "How do you feel?"

"Floaty. I *think* this is something like hypnosis, Cecil."

"Is it? I only meant to help."

"You did. Until the next time I think about this or the next time Nils says something about it."

"Well, don't court disaster. Let it be for now."

Carlos grinned. "If I didn't court disaster, would I be here?"

"That's very sweet. Am I a disaster, by implication?"

"In a good way. Like a lightning storm. You remind me of..." Carlos licked his lips. "Oh, you grew up in a desert. You won't understand."

Squeeze, release. "Tell me anyway." He sounded just a little desperate, a little demanding.

So, Carlos told him about thundersnow up in Illinois. Looking out his window and seeing the the weather weaving a blanket of white over the city, covering it and softening its edges under the accumulating flakes. There was a particular way lightning looked through snow, flashes of forked energy through layers of cloth. Everything looked strangely peaceful, from the safety of indoors, but it was dangerous. One year, the power had gone out when lightning managed to strike a transformer, and Carlos had sat up all night with his comforter wrapped around himself, at the window and watched the world envelop in snow and muffled flashes of light.

"You're like that, I think," Carlos said.

Finally, Cecil let his wrists go, and the trance broke. Carlos could finally open his eyes, and did so in time to watch Cecil lean in, hands cupping Carlos' head, and then he shut his eyes again because they were kissing. Cecil kissed him like he could taste the words in the corners of Carlos' mouth, like he wanted to devour them.

In a way, it felt like the next time Carlos opened his eyes, they were relaxing in bed, after. He'd apparently put the frame together correctly, as the bed functioned well.

Turning his head, Carlos watched Cecil as he stretched and lay sprawled out. His neck was dotted with red marks, thought Carlos knew now not to bite.

Cecil rubbed the heel of his hand against his eyes, and he looked gorgeous.

"You're staring," Cecil pointed out softly, purring away, filling the room with that ambient rumble.

"Are you essentially Night Vale's therapist?" Carlos asked.

"Huh." He lowered his hand and propped his head up, rolling onto his side. "I never considered it that way. I don't *think* so? Nothing so thorough. I just talk, I voice things, I try to take... to help people. When I can."

"Thank you," Carlos said softly.

It drew Cecil in. He rolled further, until his arm went around Carlos' waist, and he rested his head on Carlos' shoulder, his mussed hair against Carlos' cheek. Lips pressed against Carlos' neck, and though Cecil didn't say anything, Carlos felt his lips move. Three words brushed into his skin and sank, heavy as a ballast, into his core.

Chapter End Notes

this is what happens when i write without prior outline, the fic just Goes Places
sometimes, IDEFK

hey so

i really enjoy podcasts and i wanted to make a space to chill and talk about them and share fanworks about them with other chill people. so i made a discord server. not only WTNV and NVP stuff but any podcast, because I listen to a bunch. if you would like to join, please hit me up [on my tumblr](#).

/jazz hands weakly

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

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

Having his own place was great. Also, potentially treacherous. He wasn't sure yet.

He woke much earlier in his own flat. Not under his own volition, but Cecil stayed once or twice a week, and he tended to wake Carlos in the morning as he slipped out of the bed to go home and then go to the station.

Well, sometimes Cecil tried (and failed) to delicately slip out of bed without waking Carlos. Other times, he woke Carlos up very deliberately, with slow dragging kisses against his stubbled jaw up to his ear, or with hands pushing down on Carlos' stomach until his breathing hitched.

This morning, Carlos woke to his leg being lifted and braced over Cecil's shoulder. His muscles were still sore from the night before, and he mumbled low and drowsy. "Hm, mmhm, Ceec--" Until Cecil bent his body down like a bowing tree and pulled the flat of his tongue up Carlos' cock. "Fffu-- *Cecil!*"

Cecil gave him a smile that would make the devil blush and stroked Carlos with his tongue, firm wet pressure that turned some idle morning hardness into fullness in ten seconds flat. His lips pressed on the head of his dick, and with Cecil's eyes peacably shut, his eyelashes dark over his face, he looked impossible. Just unfeasible. There was new math in the curve of his mouth around Carlos' skin, and it put the Golden Ratio to fucking shame. A universal constant of beauty ready for inked equations.

Carlos was barely awake, except in all the ways he was. He fisted a hand in his own hair and the other under his head, in the pillow, clutching tightly and watching down the length of his body as Cecil sucked him.

His heart was pounding in his ears and he was already on the verge of firing off, startled and hauled along to the point of orgasm, when Cecil stroked his fingers against Carlos' ass. His fingertips skipped and slid through the accumulating slick.

By now, fine, Carlos was acclimatized to the new upgrades to his body. And they were *absolutely and solidly* upgrades. He gasped and gasped and came onto Cecil's tongue as his fingers slipped in, and pulled against the sensitive rim.

"Ooh, *god*," Carlos moaned, panting. "Cecil, *te lo juro por dios*, are you trying to kill me?"

"Not exactly," Cecil rumbled at him like a menace. Rather than politely withdrawing and leaving Carlos to catch up with that proverbial bus that just hit him, he curled his fingers and pushed further into Carlos before the edges of orgasm even finished fizzling out. It was that trick again, Cecil had done it before, catching Carlos while he was still coming down and essentially just pushing him right back up to the same peak.

There was a look on his face, reminding Carlos of nothing so much as him peering through his cheaters at a concerning press release. Attentive, focused as he worked through a problem. Which, in this moment, seemed to be making Carlos come again.

He was relentless, and Carlos didn't even know what to do in the moment but lay back and be a good test subject to whatever Cecil had gotten into his head. And, shit, it was working. Carlos' eyes unfocused as the muscles in his abdomen tightened, soreness ringing through him. Three times in, what, a twelve hour period? Could he? Could he do it and not pass out?

Apparently. Cecil worked his prostate with his fingertips, his own breathing coming fast and labored like he was the one getting fucked. It filled Carlos' ears, and he let out a blue streak in his mother tongue as he got there again, the muscles in his legs spasming, his eyes tight shut, breath locked like a vice in his chest.

"Fuck..." He gasped deeply, his whole body moving. "I... I can't..."

The bed shifted as Cecil moved, lowering Carlos' leg. "No more?"

He tried briefly to focus on Cecil. He was too dazed. "As... opposed to?"

"One more." His fingers were wet and blood hot as he stroked Carlos stomach. "Just like this, you don't have to do anything." He moved close, and Carlos' thighs slung around his hips. "I know you could do it thrice. Thrice is such a good word, I think. Thrice, laid out and letting me fuck you and taking a nice knot to start the day. Does that sound like an interesting experiment, bunny? Do you want to try?"

"Dios mio, estás tratando de matarme," Carlos whined, his heart racing.

"That doesn't sound like yes, per se," Cecil noted quietly. His hands started to slid away, off Carlos' legs.

"No, don't!" Carlos tucked his legs more closely around Cecil, worried he'd somehow get away. "Do it, come on. I may die, but it seems a good way to go out."

"You won't die," Cecil replied, a coy twist to his voice. "I have the utmost faith in you."

"Fuck," Carlos said eloquently. Then Cecil fit his dick against Carlos and rocked in, and he threw his head back. "Oh, ha, *fuck!*"

Cecil laughed, jubilant and maybe a little mad, and started to just take Carlos apart. His hips moved in quick, rough circle, driving him in and in and in until Carlos was incoherent and just babbling. Not English or Spanish, just nonsense as he opened up and did his best to take everything Cecil gave him. Which, he told the truth; all he had to do was lie back and hold on.

After the vague disappointment of Cecil's headboard, Carlos had gotten himself one with the little bars. He hadn't envisioned his boyfriend trying to fuck him to absolute pieces when he'd set it up, but it was fortunate nonetheless, and Carlos grabbed two bars and held on.

He came with the knot, not for the first time. It started to pull and drag at him while Cecil continued to thrust into him, and with the increased sensitivity it just set him off without warning. He didn't black out or anything, but for a solid minute the only thing he could comprehend was an exhaustive symphonic climax that rattled every atom in his body. It was too much, but also he didn't have to *do* anything but weather it. And there wasn't anything to do but weather it.

An incredulous thought about how it was still morning and that he had neighbors above and below him and how was he going to meet *anyone's* eyes after this bouncing around his skull like a shot marble. His earthquake gasps turned into incredulous snickers as he lay there and stared at the ceiling, toes curling tightly as Cecil came, hot pulses filling him up.

"Thrice," Carlos giggled, rubbing his face.

Cecil put his forehead on Carlos' chest, panting. "Ha... told you."

He tucked his fingers into Cecil's slightly sweaty hair, thumb rubbing his skull. "Could you... resist being smug for one minute?"

"Oh, never," Cecil answered brightly, laughing. With effort, he lifted his head, face flushed and mouth pulled into a fantastic smile. "Good morning."

"Pfft." Carlos rolled his eyes. "Is it?"

"'Good' may be... inadequate." He rested his head on Carlos' chest again, nuzzling in and wrapping his arms around Carlos. His shoulders moved with every deep inhale he took. "Wanted to see if you could."

"Ta da," Carlos singsonged, relaxing as the wave of potent molten pleasure rolled through him.

God, he felt sore. He needed to figure out a way to resist Cecil's wiles at some point.

But not right now. Now, he felt sleepy and full and weighed down by Cecil's body. He tucked his pillow under his head and dozed, buzzing with so much pleasure it left him even more tired.

Getting his day actually started and going would be... difficult.

Cecil, it seemed, did *not* have this problem. Within forty minutes, Carlos was still completely wiped out, but watched Cecil sit on the edge of the bed to put on his shoes. He looked less like he'd just had sex and more like he'd gotten a vitamin shot.

"How," Carlos said slowly, "are you up and moving?" He could see Cecil's mouth split into a grin. "If someone offered me a five year grant on the condition I had to remove myself from this bed, I would fail. Just, completely."

There was a shiver of humor in his voice as he replied, "Well. Here is your lesson for the day, dear Carlos. It's a well-known piece of wisdom that orgasms knock anyone low on the spectrum out on their ass." He turned, hand on the bed, aiming his easy, still-pretty-smug

smile down at Carlos. And damn him, he drew one of the blankets up over Carlos, which was too much for Carlos to manage himself. "This is why I'm not willing to tease you at work too much. It'd ruin your day! And you'd be upset with me."

Carlos waved a hand. "But you'll do it here, now, before I have to go into the lab?"

"You make your own hours, don't you?" He seemed unapologetic.

"Yes, and they are always conspicuously later any morning after you stay the night. I get looks when I show up. Mark just stares at me."

"Oh?" Cecil got that arch look again, leaning back and lifting his chin a little. "Does he now?"

"Yes? What's that mean?"

Shaking his head, Cecil's grin faded into something more reasonable, his gloating lowering to a socially acceptable level. "Hm. This is going to sound crass, but there are few things as *distracting* as an omega who's recent gotten some."

That did not compute. "Wait. Mark?" Carlos frowned. "But... Mark is low spectrum too? Does that happen?"

"Oh, Carlos, of course. You think that's a barrier?" Cecil snorted, and pushed himself off the bed, standing. "Omegas with omegas, betas together, alphas and alphas, and then any combination of polyamorous coupling. It's all been done *before*, my dear Carlos. It might be fun to try to deduce a combination that *hasn't* occurred."

Carlos had made assumptions, he realized now. "Wow. I hadn't... considered."

Cecil's smile was kinder now, lacking its previous bite. "I wanted you before I knew what your endotype was. Attraction is a beautiful hypercube of vertices and overlapping layers and vivacious desire."

"Aw, that sounds nice," Carlos said. "I love hypercubes."

"I figured." He put a hand down, leaning over to kiss Carlos, a quick peck. "Anyway, I'll see you Saturday! Have fun with science."

"Bye," Carlos managed, and then lifted his head to watch Cecil leave, the way he carefully locked the door behind him.

Resting his head back on the pillow, he let out a deep sigh, and closed his eyes. Just for a bit.

Carlos did not make it into the lab until nearly one in the afternoon, which was a record, even for him. It took entirely too long for his legs to function again, to drag himself out of bed, and to get ready. He'd washed and dressed in fresh clothes and a brand new labcoat. Still, he thought Cecil's signature was sort of lingering around him. That or he was imagining the lingering boozy taste in his mouth as he breathed.

"Oh, are you here now?" Nilanjana asked.

"Yes," Carlos answered curtly. "What'd I miss?"

"There is a hole in the middle of Oxford Street that seems to drop into infinite darkness." She floated her hand over his shoulder, fingers picking at a thread or piece of lint, something. "And the Apache Tracker guy reappeared, but he might actual be indigenous now, but he only speaks Russian."

"Okay, I think I'm more equipped to handle the hole into infinite darkness." He swatted her hand away as she tugged at the pointed corner of his collar. "Stop that."

Huffing, she walked briskly away. "Come on. I'm driving."

They piled into her car, Carlos passenger side and looking through his bag of equipment. In the back, Mark sat, on his phone going through Night Vale resident's social media accounts for more information on the hole.

The radio was on. *"The Mawing Abyss on Oxford Street has garnered a considerable crowd. Curious citizens have taken to throwing small items into the enormous hole, feeding the perilous chasm of darkness with chapsticks, balled up receipts, and all those items you let accumulate in your purse over time, certain you'll clean them out eventually only to get home every night too tired to take the time. It's been somewhat liberating for bystanders, who are really getting into it, discarding unwanted things with incredible abandon."*

"Wish they wouldn't do that," Carlos muttered. Nilanjana nodded gravely.

"Intern Dana is on location as well, helping interview witnesses, and confessed a deep desire to return to her home and unearth these old muffin tins she's sick of. They're apparently awful, they cook too hot and make everything she tries to use them for burn. But they were expensive, so she just can't justify throwing them out. Well. We've all been there, haven't we? There's this set of jadeite bowls that belonged to my mother..."

"Dammit, Cecil." Sighing, Carlos took out his phone and texted Cecil.

"And I-- oh. Hm. Mmhm. Listeners, my boyfriend, the team of the science team, Carlos? Maybe you've heard of him? He just texted to say we should not be throwing things into the Mawing Abyss on Oxford Street. At least not until his team can take a look. Ooh, they are en route. That should be interesting. While we wait for science to arrive and vainly try to pin the great unknowns of the universe down for our meager comprehension, lets go to the Weather."

"Vainly?" Mark complained.

Carlos shut his eyes against the window, wanting a nap.

When they arrived, the crowd almost completely obscured the hole. More and more people were holding broken household items and small pieces of furniture and lamps, apparently eager to sacrifice them to...

What was a truly enormous hole. Looking at it was compelling. Looking at it also made Carlos' brain hurt a little. It was pitch black and about 30 yards in diameter, centered in the middle of the street and starting to swallow up the sidewalks framing it. Walking fast, Carlos went to one side and peered at how the hole cut harshly into pavement.

Mark, following on Carlos' heels, leaned in to look. Immediately, Carlos elbowed him backward. "Do not lean over the perimeter."

"Oh, right, sorry." Swallowing, Mark knelt and looked at the edge. "It's..."

"Not a hole, yeah," Carlos supplied, pressing his palm against his cheek, staring.

"It's like a field. Everything beyond it is just dark."

"I know."

A weight rested against his shoulder. Nilanjana looked over his shoulder. "Huh. It's not a hole."

"We know," Mark said. "Anyone got a coin?"

Carlos did and handed him a quarter. Moving carefully, Mark lined it up and rolled the coin along the street and into the darkness. There was a moment where it crossed the threshold and then fell, and then was gone. Not in the sense of falling into an abyss, but in the sense it vanished entirely as soon as it crossed the blackness.

"Creepy," he reported.

"Can you get the remote camera from the car for me," Carlos asked. "We can lower it in on a rope and see if there's--"

Nilanjana tossed Mark her keys, who immediately fumbled them and lost them into the abyss.

All three of them froze.

Putting her hands on her knees, Nilanjana bent over, taking a deep, steadying breath. Carlos rubbed her back. Mark stared at the abyss in horror.

"Why did you throw them?" Mark asked softly.

"Why didn't you catch them, Mark?!"

Carlos shut his eyes and rubbed his face. He maybe should have stayed in bed, just skipped the day. "Okay. Anyway. I'm going to.... investigate."

Leaving them for a moment, Carlos started to walk around the edge of the hole. A few times, he interrupted someone about to throw in a toaster or a water hose or a sewing machine. But there were a lot of people, more than he could catch in time.

Including Dana, who he saw a few feet along the circle, flinging a pair of non-stick muffin pans into the hole. She grinned, hands on her hips as they vanished.

Carlos looked at his feet, at the dramatic boundary between the abyss and the asphalt. "Huh." He looked up again. "Dana!"

Her curls bounced animated as she turned her head. "Oh! Hello, Carlos! Come over here!" She waved both arms, as if he hadn't already spotted her. Still, he weaved between people until she could reach out and catch his hand, pulling him away.

There was a little break in the crowd, a small circle where people were keeping distance. There was a familiar car parked there, its trunk open, and a tall antennae pointed skyward.

Sitting on the bumper with one leg crossed over his knee was Cecil, a pair of industry-grade headphones around his neck.

He looked up and smiled. It was unfairly sly. "Well, hello there stranger."

"Remote broadcasting?" Carlos asked.

"Mhmm. If a giant mawing abyss is going to eat our town, I thought I should be on scene to report on it."

"I don't think that'll happen," Carlos said, and spun around, squinting back through the crowd, looking for his team. Luckily for him, scientists followed him like ducklings and were easy to spot amid Night Valeans, with their bright lab coats. "Nils, Mark!"

"Oh, Mark? How's he doing?" Cecil asked solicitously.

"He's fine, stop it," Carlos chided him, putting a finger to his lips. "He maybe threw Nilanjana's keys into the hole."

"Oh, she must be thrilled," Dana murmured.

"Yeah, not really," Carlos said quietly.

Predictably enough, Mark had his head ducked, ears red as he followed on Nilanjana's heels into the little circle of radio, separating from the crowd.

"It's not growing," Nilanjana said.

"Hello, Dr. Sikdar," Dana said brightly, practically colliding with her report.

It startled Nilanjana out of her stern posture, enough she took a step back in surprise. "Oh, um, hi. Dana, Cecil."

Cecil waved two fingers, pulling his headphones back on and looking down at his equipment as he listened.

"I noticed too," Carlos said. "Sort of the opposite of the expected effect."

"Did you also notice that the vast majority of things being thrown in are household items?" She waved around them, and Carlos took stock. "That's very peculiar. I have this urge to go back to the lab and get the mini-oven out of the break room and hurl it in." She cut a glance Mark-ward. "If I could."

"Sorry," he muttered, and sheepishly went to sit on the curb.

"Well, it seems just about half of the city has turned out to observe the Mawing Abyss on Oxford Street," Cecil said, his voice unfolding like wings into the grandeur of this radio voice. All around, heads turned as people listened, like a compulsion.

Hm. A compulsion. Carlos crossed his arms and furrowed his brow, settling into his deep thinking pose.

"Misbehaving televisions, dulled mandoline slicers, and even a minifridge have been offered up to the infinite pitch of the hole. The atmosphere here is bordering on festive. It's hard not to be caught up in the spirit of the season."

"It's May," Nilanjana said. Dana shushed her.

"The exuberance has not gotten its claws into everyone, it seems." Carlos noticed Cecil look right at him, and didn't put together what that meant until his boyfriend unfolded himself from the car bumper and crossed the distance between them, still holding a microphone on a long, sturdy cord. He shifted one of his headphones off his ear and said. "Carlos is standing near my mobile set-up, looking impervious to the mood around him. But it has to be said for the benefit of the community, it's a sunny day, and the light catching in his hair is like gold gilt."

A few people in the crowd nodded in a very thoughtful way. Carlos' cheeks flushed. *What are you doing*, Carlos mouthed at Cecil.

Cecil winked. "Carlos, you've been contemplating and observing the Mawing Abyss since you arrived. Have you reached any conclusions? Are we as doomed as we fear?"

"Uh," Carlos said, leaning back on his heels. "I, uh, Ceec. Ce-- *Cecil*, sorry."

His grin was like a guillotine. "We could use petnames if you prefer, I don't think listeners would mind."

Oh god no. "Don't you dare," Carlos managed in a strangled voice. "Uh, sorry, you should have warned me you were going to do this." He ran a hand through his hair, looking at the

microphone with fear, then up at Cecil with slightly less fear. "I don't think we're doomed, beyond the longterm existential sense. I assumed that the hole-- which isn't really a hole, it's more of a plane settled adjacent to ours that our human perception cannot penetrate, or at least that's my preliminary hypothesis. It's not a hole or abyss at all, that's sort of leaping to conclusions." He looked away, and caught Dana's eyes. She gave him two thumbs up. "What was I saying?"

"A somewhat didactic aside about the nature of the abyss.

"Right. Oh, but it's not growing. Actually, I think it's shrinking, though if Nilanjana and Mark could confirm that for me, that's be great." He shot them each a look.

Nilanjana turned on a neat heel and went over to the hole. Mark nodded and followed, head hung. "I'm going to have to do something about that," Carlos muttered.

"What's that?" Cecil asked.

"Uh, nothing! Sorry. Anyway, I was thinking about Night Vale and it's particular way of doing things. And then I was thinking about how often they, or you, or all of us I suppose, how often we encounter situations that cause us to act outside normal parameters. And it's very curious that everyone in Night Vale wants to get rid of household things. I would think someone would want to clean out a closet of old clothes they're tired of looking at, you know?" He took a deep breath. "And I have no drive to throw anything in, but I just got a new apartment last month. All of my things are fairly new."

"That is a very intriguing set of facts."

"Right. Also." Carlos stepped aside and pointed down Oxford Street. All the way at the end, on the bend where the road turned to Old Musk Road, was a building under construction.

"The only major business on Oxford is the new Menards."

A gasp rippled through the crowd at this revelation. Which struck Carlos as rather overdramatic; someone had to notice the building before him, it was huge.

Then a siren rang out from somewhere. Someone with a fedora and sunglasses and a full suit pulled a walkie-talkie from their jacket, muttering tersely into it.

There was a sound like a zipper being pulled, but louder, and in the fabric of reality. Carlos felt it like all the molecules of air suddenly snapped towards the street, where the hole was. Or, had been; someone called out, "The abyss is gone!"

The crowd surged around them (though no one broke the strange invisible barrier around the radio set-up, which Carlos found odd, but no odder than anything else today). Cecil gave Carlos a brilliant smile, and said, "One moment, listeners. An update is on its way."

Pressing a button on the microphone, he seemed to disable it, and clipped it onto his belt. Then, he stepped on the tire of his car, then climbed up onto the roof. Stepping carefully, he stood on top, looking over the crowd.

Picking up his microphone again, he pressed the same button. "Listeners, I've ascended to the top of my car for a better vantage point. It does seem like the Mawing Abyss on Oxford Street has been closed. Or, perhaps, removed by the shrewd marketing team that placed it there? Of course, Carlos' conclusions are circumstantial, and a journalist could not report them as fact." He smirked and gave Carlos another wink from high above. "But we'll seek comment from the new Menards and report back to you, Night Vale.

"Normal traffic should resume in South Night Vale soon, though I would advise caution on Oxford for a while, at least until the crowds disperse."

Then, he hopped down, to the front hood and then to the ground, strolling back over to Carlos. "This has been a special report from your faithful servants at Night Vale Community Radio. We'll return you to your normally scheduled programming, as I take the opportunity to thank my boyfriend for his exemplary work protecting our little town."

"I didn't do anything really!" Carlos protested, ducking his head.

"As always, the facts hardly matter, and we may never know for sure if this was a publicity stunt by our local hardware and appliance superstore to drum up product demand. However, my favorite scientist managed to use his gorgeous mind and his unceasing charisma to keep Night Vale from divesting more of their possessions into the abyss."

"I *will* unplug your microphone," Carlos told him.

"I believe that's my signal to sign off. Goodnight, Night Vale. Goodnight."

"It's midday!" Carlos laughed, before Cecil could thumb the microphone off. "Cecil, you're ridiculous."

He set the microphone on a little metal stand, on the equipment in the trunk. Turning back, his eyes were lit with a fey look as he met Carlos' gaze. "I simply report the truth, Carlos. It's my role in this city."

"The truth," Carlos granted him, "and some extravagant additions."

Cecil slammed the trunk shut and did this somehow showy turn back to Carlos. It was posture; Carlos was starting to think *everything* with alphas might've been posture, because with just a turn on his heel, he seemed different, keyed in, and it made Carlos stand up straighter like a call and response.

"Extravagant," Cecil repeated, making the word sound even longer and almost musical with his specific, measured cadence.

All other words vanished as Cecil stepped up to him, nearly *into* him, their feet together. Carlos sucked in a breath and leaned back, afraid of being knocked over. But a long arm wound around his waist, under the drape of his lab coat. It kept him close, kept him in place as Cecil kissed him.

He didn't expect this, and the fear of tumbling over grew, so it felt correct to seize Cecil's shoulders. Eyes instinctively sliding shut, he inhaled against Cecil's lips. To his mild surprise, against mountains of prior evidence, Cecil didn't deepen the kiss. His lips pressed warm and firm against Carlos', and he held him there, in the middle of the sidewalk, under the sunshine, with the ambient murmur of people going about their lives around them.

Carlos hummed softly, fingers twisting in Cecil's shirt. This seemed to be ample encouragement, as Cecil pressed another hand flat to Carlos' spine, between his shoulder blades, and tipped him back. Holding on, Carlos went, essentially letting Cecil dip him. Keeping both feet flat on the ground was difficult.

They were in the *middle of a very full street*. People were looking at the recently removed phenomenon, but a chemical rush in Carlos' blood was still near and very present. He was being dipped and kissed in public! A little noise loosened from his throat. People didn't do this.

Or, he hadn't. Carlos thought that people did probably kiss in broad daylight sometimes. But... he had not. He couldn't imagine having someone willing. Couldn't imagine doing this anywhere. Except Night Vale.

After an eon that probably was closer to about five to seven seconds, they straightened, Cecil's hand steady as he guided Carlos upright again. Breaking the kiss, he leaned in to run his nose against Carlos' jaw, breathing in deeply. Then, he let go, and stepped back to a polite distance, as if he hadn't just *done that!*

His knees were distressingly weak. "Wow," Carlos murmured, blinking like coming out of a dream. He glanced around, but most people weren't paying attention.

Dana was, and shot him a grin and a fond eye-roll. Also the woman who ran the pawn shop, Jackie Fierro, gave him a slow clap.

Carlos looked quickly away against, flustered. Looking at Cecil was easier. "I. Ah, wow."

The smirk he wore was unfairly attractive. Carlos was fairly sure Cecil hadn't been this self-satisfied in all the time he'd known him. Not until the past week or so. He wore it far too well, confident in a way that felt more settled and bone-deep than the facade he put on for the radio.

Turning at the hips, he tucked his hands into his pockets and nodded out at the crowd. "Dr. Sikdar! Did you recover your keys?"

Carlos startled, realizing his teammates were *just there*, god. Here he was gawking at his boyfriend, thinking of soft-focused thoughts, and his team was right there! He tugged at his lab coat in case it'd fallen out of position or something.

"No," Nilanjana said. "It seems like everything thrown into the hole is gone."

When he managed to glance over at them, Carlos found Mark was looking at him again. It wasn't the usual long curious stare he'd gotten used to, but a faint frown. Was that better? He

had no idea.

Meanwhile, Nilanjana was squaring up for staring match number seventeen with Cecil, who looked utterly content to narrow his eyes right back at her, his smile genuine and implacable.

Suddenly deeply suspicious, Carlos glared at Cecil.

"Let me drive you back to the lab," Cecil offered, a consummate neighbor.

"That's very generous of you," Nilanjana said.

"I am trying to be," Cecil said. "If you wouldn't mind."

"I don't mind. You think I mind?"

"I have no idea. Do you?"

Dana appeared at Carlos' side and nudged his side. "Hey, good job."

With effort, he tore his eyes away from the others to look at her. "Thanks. What the hell is going on?" Carlos tried to be subtle, gesturing to *whatever was going on* in front of them.

"Repairwork, I think. He's been trying to do that since, you know, your heat when he did that thing to Dr. Sikdar. Don't think she's very receptive." Very slowly, Dana tucked her arm through Carlos'. She moved in such a way, it would have been very easy to move out of the way, to make her stop.

Carlos... didn't. It was okay. And she bumped into him companionably. "It's kind of funny to watch him. Day to day, he doesn't mess with this stuff, but when he *does* go into alpha mode?" Dana puffed up her chest a bit, then slumped, laughing. "It's just funny."

In the sanctuary of his own mind, Carlos thought it was a good look. But most of Cecil's looks were good. Flushed and happy from a few glasses of wine, tired and ready to capsize after a long day, bright-eyed and brilliantly *awake* in the morning.

Still, the fact remained: "Why is he doing it? I don't *get* this."

Dana blew out a raspberry. "Goodness, Carlos."

"It's all... sociology! I don't do that! I keep telling people this."

She looked skyward, shaking her head, like God or the void or the sun would take pity on her. "It's you. It's consorting stuff."

Eyebrows lifted, Carlos looked at Cecil as he continued to talk to Nilanjana and Mark. "He said we weren't consorting. Just dating."

"Oh. Hm." She shrugged. "Sure, I guess. I'm sure he's telling himself that, but... he did just pull out a pretty dramatic gesture, in front of everyone. In front of your sortie."

"Oh," Carlos echoed. "I. Hm."

"I wouldn't mind if you were consorting, personally," she told him, a little more quietly. "Before you, he worked all this absurd hours, just throwing himself into the job. Which, I thought at first that's just *how* you become the Voice. But then I learned he was prophesied, so no, he was just sort of *like that*. But lately, he's eager to leave at the end of the day, and it's such a relief, because I feel bad if I leave the station before he does, you know? It's good to have a life outside work, I think." She trailed off and leaned her head for just a second on Carlos' arm. "I think you're good for him. I really shouldn't, but I see him like a brother sometimes, but I'm not allowed to worry about him that way, really. But I can be relieved he has you. It's been a long time."

Carlos' throat felt very tight. He cleared it, and did so again when the first time didn't work. "I don't, uh. I've never..." Deep breath. "I've never been important like that before."

"It's like you came from a whole other world sometimes. You don't even know when someone is consorting."

"It kind of is," he sighed. "Here, I'm constantly playing catch-up."

"You are. It's fun though, isn't it? Maybe it's just fun for us." She smiled sunnily at him. "Oh no, here goes Carlos, what will he need gently explained to him next?"

He unlinked their arms and tried to fix her with a stern look. It was difficult with the aura of peach fuzz around him, suede wrapped around his ire. "I'm trying, you know!"

"We know. We *all* know. That's why it's okay that you're terminally clueless, see?"

They were interrupted as Cecil approached.

"Did you know," he said, voice pitched low, "how unnerving it is to watch the two of you talking? Especially when you keep glancing at me. It could put the fear of god into a man. Or at the very least the fear of omega collusion."

"We were absolutely talking about you," Dana told him in a chipper tone. "Carlos had more questions."

"Ah," Cecil said. "As always."

"I'm a scientist. This is my job." He crossed his arms and looked between them both. "What have I missed now?"

"Nilanjana has elected to stay until AAA shows up. She'll let me take you and Mark back to the lab."

"Let you?" No, you know what?" Carlos lifted his hands quellingly. "Explain another day. I already have a lot of things to sift through and fit into place in this... enormous tapestry of my understanding of what my life is now."

"Sounds like a lot of work," Dana said. "Can we go? We missed lunch and I'm hungry."

"Sure." Cecil beckoned them along to the car, and his hand somehow found a path to the small of Carlos' back again, under his coat.

Carlos looked up at him as they walked, but Cecil was busy chattering enthusiastically to Mark and Dana, and didn't seem to notice.

He thought suddenly of how far away Saturday was, how weirdly grateful he was for a fairly safe unnatural event that let him run into Cecil, and the way his heart just seemed to beat harder any time he lay eyes on him.

Chapter End Notes

in which the scientists of night vale are a collective disaster, and cecil is so happy and smug you kind of wanna shake him. but its fine.

/checks fic timeline. well would you look at that, almost time for a..... heat wave.

do you ever just go back to WTNV episodes with dana just to her her particular cadence and manner of speech? or is that just me.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

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

Dana cut things very close.

Cecil was already in the booth, his copy printed and stacked in neat rows on his desk, the soundboard soothed and ready to work. His fingers drummed a sauntering tune against the desk, seven-four time, his eyes on the window to the control room. The show was set to start soon, and Dana hadn't returned from lunch yet.

It wasn't that Cecil was worried; she was with a scientist, and thus was as safe as possible.

He looked at his phone, sitting in silent mode next to his papers. As his gaze fell on it, the screen illuminated to show him the time. Only two minutes since the last time he looked.

Cecil chewed his lip.

The light came on in the control room, and he could see Dana dropping her bag on the floor. She glanced at him through the window, nodded, and then went to the door. Poking her head through, she said, "I'm not late, am I?"

"No, no, not at all," Cecil assured her. He cleared his throat. "How was, ah, was lunch good? Enjoyable? Newsworthy in any way?"

Dana opened the door enough to let her lean on the door frame and stare at him. "It was good. You know Trifecta's always great."

He did. "Mmhm." Cecil nodded.

Slowly, Dana's eyebrows rose. "Mmhm. So, need anything before the show? Coffee refill? Shot of olive oil?"

"Dana." There was a touch of whine in his tone.

She knuckled her hip, shoulders squaring. "Yes, Cecil?"

He just looked at her, trying to amplify his pitifulness with a cow-eyed look. See how sad he was? Who could resist this?

Strong-willed interns apparently. "I'm going to check sound on my side." She stepped back and let the door swing shut.

"Dana. Dana!" He rolled his chair out from the desk to center on the window. There was an intercom to facilitate discussion with his producer. He picked up the phone and rang.

Dana stood before the window and gave him a dryly amused look. Taking her time, she adjusted her hair, taming it back into a very poofy ponytail, and picked up the receiver. "Yes, Cecil?"

"You know that I know that you had lunch with him, do we have to pretend? Cactus June sent me a text and Joel Eisenberg snapchatted me. Okay?"

"Okay," Dana agreed. "Your sources are impeccable as always. Good job."

"Daaaaana," Cecil sighed. "How... is he, is he..."

All around them, lights came on. The ON AIR lamp illuminated itself, and the door (which seemed to not have settled on the jam) shut itself.

In unison, Cecil and Dana replaced the phones in their respective cradles. Cecil slid back to his desk while Dana settled herself in before the switchboard and monitors.

Looking at her, Cecil mouthed *First ad break* .

Dana rolled her eyes but nodded, and held up her fingers to count him down. Which wasn't strictly necessary; Cecil could feel his Voice rising in his throat, and it would come out regardless. There was little he could do to stop it for the duration of the show.

But it was a ritual. And Cecil was very fond of little rituals.

Speaking of, music kindled in his headphones, and something placed words on his tongue.

"Safety is here, behind the delicate curtain of your eyelids. Keep them closed. I'll tell you when danger has passed. Welcome to Night Vale."

As soon as Dana engaged the first ad read, Cecil pushed his microphone away and grabbed the phone again.

"Thirty seconds," Dana told him from the other receiver. "What would you like to discuss?"

"Ugh, can't you just... tell me?" He leaned his face in his hand. "You know I can't... *You know.*"

She blinked owlishly at him, which frankly was so rude. It wasn't like he could just put the words out there and request information like that. It wasn't right, wasn't *proper* .

Cecil was *thrilled* that Carlos and Dana were friends. Absolutely ecstatic about it. Privately and maybe a little vindictively, he was relieved with every connection Carlos made. He wanted Night Vale to be a welcoming home, and this was good! Great.

But the relationship between two omegas was completely different from a relationship between an alpha and an omega. So he couldn't *just ask*.

Dana gave him a cruel eyebrow, because she knew this just as well, and she was really mean to him sometimes.

"Lunch was nice," Dana said after a lengthy pause that ate up a good seven seconds of their limited time.

"Yeah? That's good."

"Carlos had questions." Her carefully stone-faced expression cracked a little, a smile stealing over her face. "It's a good thing City Council removed that weekly question limit, because otherwise he'd be in a lot of trouble, you know?"

"Scientific prerogative, or so I hear," Cecil said. "Anything specific?"

"Nothing I couldn't handle. Sort of my area of expertise." She tapped a nail against the phone; he could hear the dull noise down the line. "He's trying to wrap up his current projects and write-ups. Get everything ready. He asked if he'd be able to work on some papers. I told him probably not."

"So he is preparing? He's not, uh, forgotten?"

Dana hung the phone back up and held up five fingers, then four.

Damn it. Cecil pulled the microphone back over. "Sheriff Sam called a press conference this past weekend. With the end of the month coming, they said the Sheriff's Secret Police would be setting up speed traps across town. They handed out a small leaflet to all reporters present, printed on cardstock that smelled pleasantly of woodsmoke and pine needles. It was a list of all the streets selected to have speed traps.

"The list included: Oxford Street, Ouroboros Road, Desert Elm Drive, Somerset (with an 'o' and one 'm'), 7th Street, Summerset (with a 'u' and two 'm's), as well as Exits 7, 13, and 19 from Route 800.

"The Sheriff noted that given the sheer number of locations and that residents were being advised to their locations beforehand, it would be *very unlikely* anyone would manage to avoid every single one through the end of the month. In fact, such a mysterious and fortunate avoidance would probably result in the driver's household being investigated. Probably sometime in the middle of the night, in the midst of a treacle-deep REM cycle.

"The Sheriff then reminded people to keep quotas in mind. 'Not that ticket quotas are a thing,' Sheriff Sam said as they folded some foil paper into an origami crane. 'Ticket quotas are very illegal. But everyone should still keep them in mind, especially during the last week of the month, obviously. They are the most illegal then, and the Secret Police has them in mind the most then.'

"Sam finished three cranes during the press conference, adding them to a large glass jar almost full of the papercraft birds. Listeners may not be aware, but legend has it that folding a thousand paper cranes will grant a person the abilities and powers of a real, living crane, including flight, a sharp beak, and short range teleportation.

"And now, a word from our sponsor."

Dana looked up sharply, mouth forming a clear *wait, what?* before she dove for a tape and shoved it into one of the players, flipping a switch to start the ad.

Cecil picked up the phone. On the other side of the glass, Dana did the same.

"Cecil! Another one? Already?"

He gestured at her helplessly. "Dana. Please."

She pulled the phone away from her mouth to let out a loud sigh, then returned it. "I don't know what information I can give you that you currently lack! Of course he's preparing, you *know* that. That was what he was asking me about. We went through a checklist of everything he'd need beforehand. What are you fretting your head about?"

"He hasn't asked," Cecil moaned. "And I'm like, is he going to do a stimulant again and just try to skip it? Or maybe is he going to weather it alone? But he knows that's a bad idea, right? You told him? Because he doesn't know these things, Dana."

"He picked up normal suppressants, not a stimulant. Cecil." She sighed again, softer. "You just said it yourself: he doesn't *know* these things. He doesn't know he's supposed to ask you! So." She tapped a finger pointedly against the glass to punctuate her words. "You. Need. To. Ask. Him."

He blanched. "I couldn't!"

"You have to! I'm not..." She squeezed her eyes shut tightly, and took a breath. "Cecil. You're my friend."

He slumped, nodding. "I know. You don't have to say it. You're not in my sortie, I am... I am being an ass, I'm sorry."

"No, Cecil--"

"Yes, Cecil," he replied swiftly. "I'm overstepping, and I'm sorry. My anxiety is not for you to handle. I'll... talk to him."

Dana nodded, looking stricken. "It'll be okay. You know how he is. Either he hasn't thought ahead that far or... or honestly, maybe he's just assuming you'll join him. He's kind of clueless."

"He is," Cecil agreed. "Thank you. I'm sorry to pry."

"You're fine. I know how *you* are too." She gave him a smile, genuine if a little wan. "Seven seconds."

"Thank you, Dana, ever oracular and wise," he told her, and hung up. He had a show to do.

Cecil knew when it was meant to happen. He'd marked it on his calendar. Subtly, of course, just a little blue sticker at the corner of the date.

It had him nearly vibrating with anticipation. Because Cecil wanted to help. He didn't think he'd ever wanted something more in his life.

But... having to *ask*? It was unheard of. Or, an alpha asking an omega to share their heat was a great way to get slapped and probably thrown out of any polite establishment. That wasn't how things were done. It was impolitic to just intrude on the period of time when an omega was most vulnerable. And Cecil tried very hard to be a consummate alpha.

Carlos made this difficult sometimes, because he didn't seem to know what that meant.

After the show, about six days out from the date with the little blue sticker, Cecil's phone rang. Carlos' name flashed on the screen.

Picking up, Cecil smiled into the mouthpiece. "Hellooo there?"

"Cecil, hi. I'm calling for... uh, actually I don't know how where this falls on the scale of personal to non-personal reasons, hm." Carlos sounded beautiful, as ever, but also a little frazzled. "It's not too late, is it? What time is it?"

"It's never too late for you," Cecil reassured him.

"Oh, but I'm calling to ask a favor. A big favor. With almost no notice. Sorry."

Cecil's heart leapt, and then flipped, and did several impressive aerial stunts. "Oh? How can I help? I'm already up for anything you need."

Carlos groaned, the stress in his voice palpable. "You say that, but this is like-- I will owe you, okay?"

"Just ask me, Carlos," Cecil soothed. "I might be more amenable than you assume."

"Okay. Um. I-- I am currently swamped, I have to get this crap done before-- well, soon, anyway." He cleared his throat. "Can you... come over and bring dinner please I'm sorry."

Oh, that wasn't what he expected. "Oh," Cecil said.

"No, nevermind! God, I'm-- I'm just a little stressed, I should just order--"

"Carlos!" Cecil held up a hand, as if he could quell Carlos' anxiety from so far away. "Breathe. Tell me what you'd like."

"I feel like such an ass," Carlos muttered. "Anything. But, uh, something heavy, I guess. I'm supposed to be... eating more. Goddammit."

"I'll see you soon," Cecil told him. Carlos made a distracted noise and ended the call.

This was fine. He kept an overnight bag packed lately, since he spent so many weekends at Carlos' flat. He'd pick up some dinner, figure out what was winding his Carlos up so much, and then they could talk about the heat thing. It was totally fine.

Between getting dressed and getting out the door and picking up food, it took an hour to reach Carlos' place. He used his key to open the door to let himself in, and locked up right after, flipping the deadbolt. He probably wouldn't be leaving again tonight, and there were work clothes in his bag.

Carlos' place had been struck by a tornado of paperwork. He sat on the floor, his sofa covered in papers. His laptop sat on the coffee table, connected by a cord to a bulky printer that took up most of the space. It was comically oversized for such a small apartment; Cecil immediately assumed it was migrated from the lab.

Carlos looked up from reading a print-out. "Ceec, *god*. Hi. Thank you, hi." He put the paper down on the keyboard, and made to stand, accidentally knocking over a short stack of papers as he did. "Aah, shit!"

"What," Cecil said patiently, setting down the white paper bag of food he'd brought on the kitchen counter, "are you *doing*?"

"Panicking, mostly." He bent to restack his papers, then stepped carefully over them to meet Cecil at the counter. "Hi."

"Hello," Cecil greeted, and leaned over the counter to kiss him briskly. "What are you doing besides panicking?"

"Grant correspondence. I have to ship back reports on what we've been working on out here in Night Vale. The deadline is actually two weeks off, but Dana said I'm going to be completely insensate for half of that time, so now I'm-- I'm trying to get it all done before that." He breathed in and out, very hard. "This is... important, it's necessary to keep our funding, and I just didn't think ahead, so now it's out of hand."

"It sounds like," Cecil said, and unpacked the covered platters from the bag. "Take a break, eat something."

"I'm so sorry for bothering you." He sat on the stool on the other side of the counter, sinking on it so hard it creaked under him. His hair was held back in a little claw clip, flyaway curls sneaking loose to bounce around his face. He looked exhausted.

"I'm happy to help. And you're supposed to be preparing anyway." Which was delicate acknowledgement of Carlos' impending heat, Cecil thought. Very subtle, not pushy, not likely to earn him a slap at all.

"I know. It's hard, I eat like a bird usually." He took the platter Cecil handed him, and cracked the lid. An overloaded baked potato sat in a shell of aluminum foil, alongside garlicky vegetables and a steak. "Oh, Ceec, thank you. God, I owe you. This is too much."

Cecil unpacked his own platter, salmon and cilantro rice. "Eat. It sounds like we have a lot to do tonight."

"We? You don't have to--" His words trailed off as Cecil shot him a look. "Ha, okay. Thank you. I-- I really need the help."

"That's what I'm here for. Now, eat."

Sitting across from Carlos, it was impossible to avoid the fond, candid little smiles he shot Cecil between bites of food. And sure, it was an inconvenience to have to bring his boyfriend food at eight at night, but the degree to which Carlos was grateful still seemed a bit much.

Cecil felt guilty, soaking up Carlos' attention like a flower to the sun. The desire to know what the Plan was itched at him.

He should have just asked.

But it was so improper, to ask! So they ate together, threw out the disposal platters after, and adjourned to the living area. Carlos settled on a pillow on the floor, and cleared a spot on the sofa, "Please, I really insist."

He then used Cecil's lap like a shelf, setting a binder clipped set of papers on his thighs as he sorted through things. "This is such a mess."

Cecil reached out and carded his fingers in Carlos' hair, clenching and pulling his head back until he rested against Cecil's legs. Carlos inhaled sharply and went still. "Relax. Tell me what you're doing."

"Um," Carlos said, cheeks flushing. "I-- I have most of the reports written, but they're all roughs. So I need to read them over and check for, uh, errors and readability. I'm just stressed because our funding depends on this, and even if I'm sending twelve reports, if the *first* one they pick up is bad, that could be it, you know?"

Cecil nodded, picked up the clipped pages in his lap, and stood, going to his overnight bag.

"Wait," Carlos said, then seemed to bite his tongue.

"Just a second." He pulled out his makeup bag and retrieved the eyeliner pen. He sat down again, resettling Carlos against his legs, and uncapped the pen. "Right."

Carlos turned to watch him, his eyes wide and dark. "Cecil..."

Pausing for just a moment, Cecil leaned forward, taking hold of Carlos' chin, and kissed his temple.

That seemed to be reassurance enough. Resting his cheek on Cecil's thigh, Carlos inhaled deeply once, then straightened, turning back to his laptop.

Copy editing was among the skills of a journalist. Cecil worked his way through the first report, a summary of Night Vale's incredible seismic activity and the incongruous lack of effects on the landscape and city. A few sentences read poorly, and there were swapped words and repeated ideas littered around, as well as a few grammatical errors. All the usual signs of a rushed job. Cecil marked each one, and then handed it to Carlos.

He accepted it like a gift, and turned to work on the revisions.

Cecil tapped his shoulder. "Give me another."

Carlos handed him the next, and Cecil continued his work. This time, the report was on temporal anomalies observed around town. Cecil recognized most of them, and wasn't sure why they were worthy of scientific briefs, but he was less motivated by curiosity and more motivated by maybe getting to sleep before three in the morning.

When he finished with that one, Carlos was busy printing out the first and slipping it into a nice navy folder. Cecil leaned past him, snagging another.

It was quiet, just the sound of paper sliding over paper and Carlos' brisk typing speed. In the distance were the whirring blades of passing helicopters, and the faded din of a city at night.

Crossing one leg over the other, Cecil tucked himself into the corner of the sofa, eyeliner pen in one hand, his other drifting to Carlos' hair, pulling his clip free and stroking through the silky waves. Some tension spilled out of Carlos' shoulders, a soft sigh escaping his lips.

The mess of papers consolidated; Cecil threw out the rough drafts as they became unnecessary. Marked drafts piled in two neat stacks. A smaller stack of navy-sheafed final reports began to grow.

When Cecil finished marking the last report, he dropped it into the appropriate pile and tossed his now-depleted pen into the corner somewhere. "Done."

"Done?" Carlos rubbed his eyes and turned on his pillow to look up at Cecil. "You're kidding."

Cecil waggled his black-smudged fingers at him in a weary show of jazz hands. "Done. Tedious copy-editing isn't exclusive to science, bunny. I'm much more than a pretty face, you know."

Carlos' face creased into a tired smile. "God, I love you," he said on a long exhale.

Cecil froze, like a deer that just heard a lightning strike nearby and didn't know if they were still alive. The sound was so sudden and so profound, reality seemed to pivot on that point. "What?" Cecil breathed out.

Blinking slowly, Carlos seemed to come more awake. "Um. Wow, that... was just awful timing. I'm sorry. It-- it's true, though. If that's alright with you." His throat clicked wetly as he swallowed. "An--and not just because all this, dinner and helping and me being exhausted and stuff. It's an all-the-time sort of situation, not dispositional or limited to specific parameters."

"Say that again," Cecil managed.

"Which part?" Carlos grinned, and snickered when Cecil smacked his shoulder. "Heh, sorry. I'll tell you as often as you like. It's just a recitation of fact. I love you."

It was worth the papercuts and the dark smears caught in his nail beds. Bending, Cecil draped his arms around Carlos' shoulders, burying his face in soft, perfect curls. He breathed in, the heavy taste of rain and satiny scent of hair oil in his lungs. He held it in for a long moment, like he could absorb some part of Carlos and keep him as a piece of himself.

"Hey," Carlos murmured. "Don't fall asleep on me."

Oh, was that what he was doing? Cecil forced himself to sit up. "Sorry."

Taking Cecil's hand, Carlos pressed it to his own cheek, looking up at Cecil with a tired smile. "Let's turn in. It's late, and this will go really fast tomorrow."

There was a toothbrush here for Cecil already, and Carlos was quick to cover the bathroom mirror for him. They got ready and stripped down together, falling into Carlos' bed. It was becoming Cecil's favorite place to be; more pillows kept turning up there, and it smelled like Carlos, but sleepy and content and dreaming. Those silver bells that hung in the back of Cecil's mind rang out as he settled in: *Sleepy omega, nice soft little haven, home home home.*

Cecil rested his hand on Carlos neck, enjoying the way Carlos lolled his head to smile at him. He looked like butterfly wings felt, something delicate to take care of.

"You're staring," Carlos murmured, eyes sinking to half-lidded.

"I'll stop staring as soon as you stop being the loveliest thing I've ever seen."

"Thank you for coming." His sleepy expression felt like an open door, a welcome place. It made Cecil's heart beat slow and hard. Gently curled fingers ran over Cecil's chest. "Hey. Um."

Cecil ducked his head, kissing Carlos' hand. "Sleep, bunny."

"No, no, I will. Just, uh." He blinked a few times, clearly fighting off the lead anchor of unconsciousness. "I don't know if you can take time off or-- god, all I'm doing today is asking you favors. I'm sorry."

Oh, *finally*. "Carlos, I have been *waiting* for you to ask," Cecil said, pained. "Worried about your plan, whether you were ready, whether you wanted me."

"Oh. Oh, sorry, I've just... been swamped with getting ready. It snuck up on me. Or, it didn't, that's not what time does, but I was caught off guard nonetheless." He licked his lip and bit it anxiously. "Can you be here for my heat? It's coming soon, and, um... I'd really like it, if you were there too. I don't know what I'm doing, but I often don't know what I'm doing, and it's always fun to figure it out with you."

"Of course I'll be here," Cecil whispered, rolling in closer. He rested his head on Carlos' shoulder, arm around his chest. He could feel the long, relieved breath Carlos released.

Gods and desiccated masters, Cecil knew the feeling. It was an inexorable swelling thing in his chest that pushed at his ribs. It sometimes hurt, striking him with needles of relief at random times of the day, so precise and painful his eyes stung. He'd held onto loneliness for such a long time, his fingers ached as he unclenched his fists, letting it go.

Carlos turned his head to rest against Cecil's hair, breathing him in. "Cecil."

"Mmhm?"

"I... have another report," Carlos told him, very quietly. Like someone attempting (in vain) to avoid surveillance. "A summary on Night Valean society and the-- the endotype thing. I, um." His hand against Cecil's back curled.

"Mmhm," Cecil hummed encouragingly.

He took a deep breath, his chest moving under Cecil. "I haven't printed it out. I don't... know if I want to send it along." He licked his lips. "The other side of the coin, I guess. I'm a part of that report, of what's happening here. I don't. Hm."

It took some effort to dredge himself back from the river of sleep, but he managed, lifting his head. "Then don't tell them."

"But its scientifically relevant. And it's fascinating. And I'm a scientist. Science is built on collaboration. Withholding information--"

"It's not withholding information," Cecil told him. "It's... keeping something for yourself."

Carlos laid his head back, eyes shut. "I want to believe that."

"Then do it," Cecil said, a little sternly. "Belief is nine-tenths of existence. If they want to know about Night Vale and about *you* so much, let them come and see for themselves."

Carlos' eyes flickered open, and the dim light from the streetlamps outside reflected over the wet gleam. "Cecil. Do you think... No. Ngh, I mean... Do you think Night Vale..." He shut his eyes again, breathing out. "Nevermind. That's not scientific at all."

"Neither am I," Cecil said.

"Do you think Night Vale... decides who gets to stay here?"

Sometimes, Cecil lied. Just a little bit. So he huffed a laugh out and said, "I hope not. Or else it's decided to include the Apache Tracker, and he's such an asshole. Did you know he told Pamela Winchell her beta inclinations are keeping her from true mayoral greatness? What a jackass."

Carlos laughed and pressed his face into Cecil's hair again, inhaling again, deeply. "Yeah, okay. I'd hope Night Vale would have better taste than that."

"It picked you," Cecil reminded him.

"Like I said." And he twitched as Cecil pinched him. "Okay, okay. M'tired."

Holding him close, Cecil said, "Go to sleep."

It took some time, Carlos laying there and gently touching Cecil's freckles, illuminating the narrow constellation lines between. But eventually, his hand slipped, his breathing evening out. Only then did Cecil let himself slide into sleep.

Chapter End Notes

in case you are asking "arc how the fuck are you writing 4K to 6K every two days"

well, i work night shifts and have a subsequently Very Fucked sleep schedule. listen, it's fine. I'm working a lot more hours this week, so the big heat chapter might take a bit longer.

thank you everyone who keeps commenting on this fuckin fic even with its absurd update schedule, i appreciate it immensely.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

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

Carlos' phone rang, and he answered it with a harried, "Not yet, sorry."

"You don't have to keep apologizing," Cecil told him gently. There was noise like metallic keystrokes ambient around his voice. A typewriter, maybe. Did Cecil use a typewriter? That would be... strangely attractive for reasons Carlos didn't fully understand, but it brought to mind his resin, tipsy signature, and chiaroscuro, and old movies Carlos saw when he was young and his mother assumed black and white American movies would be relatively safer for a teenager to watch. Little did she know they taught Carlos brand new English words and an appreciation for steely-eyed journalists and investigators. Maybe he owed her some thanks in hindsight. Though Cecil had more charisma than even Nick Charles, even if they shared some of the same quick wit.

"Carlos?" Cecil asked.

Carlos sighed and pressed his thumb against his brow. "Uh, sorry. Did you say something? I-- I keep getting distracted thinking about honestly *very* random things."

"That's normal, I think," Cecil said reassuringly as the dull *tnhk-tnhk-tnhk* of the supposed typewriter surrounded his voice. It was a nice repetitive sound. What was Cecil's words-per-minute? Was he fast? He'd have to be in radio if he was typing up his own news copy before each show. "Carlos."

"What's your WPM?"

"Hm? Oh, high eighties, I think? Depends. Is that what you were thinking about?" There's a definite curl of amusement in his voice.

"This is really just untenable. A scientist is never *this* absentminded. It's like herding mental cats."

"Again, that's perfectly normal. It's a pre-heat symptom. Which is good, since you're two days late."

"I'm sorry," Carlos apologized again. "I don't want to get you in trouble with your terrifying station management."

"The systems in place account for this," Cecil explained patiently. He was still typing. That was some truly admirable multitasking. If Carlos tried to type while speaking, he just wound up writing what he was saying. It never worked. "There is a grace period around my time off, because sometimes cycles can be capricious, like yours. My time off starts from the day we get started."

"Okay," Carlos said, calmer. "Still, I hope that's soon. I'm sitting here daydreaming, I finished all my projects so there isn't anything to do, after all this preparation, it's a whole bunch of hurry up and wait."

"Mh. Don't agitate yourself further. Just go home and relax." His voice softened to almost a whisper. "I'm willing to bet a month's pay you're being a complete infliction on your team."

"What? No. They're fine. Mark went out to check seismic equipment and Luisa is hitting Staples to restock things. And Nils is busy with something."

"How curious that most of your team is out of the building while their leader is in pre-heat," Cecil demurred.

"Oh, come on. Half is not most, that's mathematically incorrect." Though now Carlos thought about it. Luisa had left *hours* ago, just after Carlos arrived at the lab. How long did a Staples trip take? And Mark had been out all day. "Are they avoiding me?" he asked, less certain now.

"It's nothing personal. You're just stressing your sortie out a bit."

"Fine," Carlos conceded. "I don't think you're right but *just in case*, I'll head home. I'm not getting anything done anyway."

Whatever Cecil was going to say next was predicated by a low chuckle over the line, and Carlos's eyes slid shut at the sound. He felt hot to his core. For the past few days he'd been, hm, excitable, especially when Cecil called to check on him. Or when he listened to the radio and heard Cecil's voice. Or when he thought about Cecil for too long. He pressed his legs together and exhaled slowly through the interested pulse in his body.

Cecil went quiet, even his typing coming to a halt. "Oh?" It was lilting and too-curious.

"Stop it, stop noticing things," Carlos growled back at him. "I'm not Bacall, you don't have to be all observant and looming."

The silence was genuine for a moment. "Okay, I have *no idea* what you are talking about."

"I'll talk to you later," Carlos said. He nearly hung up the phone in a fit of pique, but that'd be mean, and Cecil was just checking on him, just caring. He put it back to his ear and said, "Um, good luck with the show. Bye."

Ten minutes passed and his phone buzzed. It was Dana.

*can you hurry up with your heat
he's climbing the walls
not literally, he remains bound to gravity for the time being
but much longer and who knows honestly?*

Carlos sighed and thumbed back, *Sorry, working on it I guess???*

Then packed his bag up and left his office.

Nilanjana looked up from her lab station, her head on her cheek as she watched over some petri dishes. "Hey."

"Hi," Carlos said, and wandered over to her. The only scientist he hadn't scared away, apparently. "I'm heading home early, unless you need me."

She shook her head, but sat up straighter and looked him over. "Do you need help? Is everything alright?"

"Too alright, I guess," Carlos muttered, shaking his head. "I'm fine. I did, ah, I wanted to... speak to you, if that was agreeable."

"Sure." She turned on her stool to face him, all her attention focused in. Which wasn't necessary, but that was how people showed they were listening, he guessed. Fidgeting, he glanced down at the floor, thinking. "Are you sure you're fine?"

"I am. But I'm trying to be a better leader of this sortie or team." He cleared his throat and forced himself to meet her eyes. "Nilanjana. We've past discussed our citizenship in Night Vale. I want to reopen that topic for the moment."

She swallowed and nodded. "What would you like to add?"

"That I... care about you, and think you're my best asset out here on this project. But I worry you're not happy here, and I don't want you to stay if you're not happy," Carlos said quickly. He'd written this down in a notepad file before saying it, wanting to be sure he did it right.

"It wasn't a matter of unhappiness," Nilanjana said, her expression very serious. "That was never the problem."

"No, but." He verbally stumbled, and had to remember what his notes said. "But, uh. You return to the question of our residency in Night Vale frequently, and I have not been equipped to answer you. Sometimes I simply decide not to, and that's not fair."

She leaned back as if he'd done something beyond a verbal admission. "I... I thought you might be. You can be avoidant."

"Yes, I can be. Sorry." He took a deep breath and tried to relax. It felt like there was a knot in his shoulder blades, tying him in awkward, painful position. Drawn and quartered by his anxiousness. "I didn't want to admit that I love it here, because it felt cruel given your discomfort with everything happening. But I do, I love this place."

"Why are you telling me this," Nilanjana asked in a small voice.

"Because I think you should know. If you're waiting for me to wiser up and decide to end this project, that chances of that happening are slim. I want your decisions to be informed and comprehensive. Which I think means needing to know you can't depend on me in this sense."

"Carlos, shit." She covered her mouth, staring at him. With her face partly covered, he had trouble reading her expression. Disgust? Irritation? Shock?

"I'm going to be gone for a few days, and you're in charge. You're *always* in charge of yourself, though, Nils, and I just wanted you to take the time and think about what you want." Here, in his notes, he'd added a specific instruction, and followed it now; he stepped in and hugged her. She stiffened for a moment, and he feared she'd push him away.

Instead, her arms went around his shoulders and linked tightly.

"Whatever you decide is okay with me," Carlos told her, breathing in deep her signature, green and dry sand. Wasn't it strange, that she'd remind him so much of the perilous desert.

He felt her nod. "Thank you. I'll think it over." She let him go first, which saved him from having to guess how long the embrace should last. "Have a nice, um. Vacation."

He laughed. "Sure, we can call it that."

"Yeah, shoo." She waved him off, and turned with finality back to her project.

The day continued into evening, and Carlos let it, unsure what else to do with himself. There was simmering anticipation that didn't really have an outlet. He heated up leftover stirfry in a pan, sat on the sofa and watched Jeopardy, which in Night Vale involved a more literal sense of the word, as each contestant with the lowest score vanished without remark after each round, leaving one perspiring contestant by the end. Also, most clues were in Russian.

When he was done, he took a shower, flossed, and pulled a dark pillowcase out of his linen cabinet to cover the mirror.

He stood in his kitchen for a moment, frowning at nothing. Then, he made a mug of tea. It was too late for coffee, and he had a box of something herbal with a ω stamped on the side. As the tea steeped, he read the ingredients on the box, curious what made it suitable for his endotype. Passiflora and eleuthero and lemon balm.

Eeh. He was a scientist, not a botanist. It tasted nice and helped him sleep. That was all that mattered.

This was tedious. He was antsy and felt guilty that everything was taking so long to kick off. His body was prepared and raring to go for the heat thing, and the production of slick was actually super annoying.

He could play a game to take his mind off it. That was a great idea, but when he turned on his PS4, it told him it needed to update.

His phone buzzed. He had a text from Cecil, just a rabbit emoji and a question mark.

No one was around to see him pout, so Carlos did so with gusto as he tapped back, *Still nothing. This is very boring.*

The little dots danced as Cecil replied. *It'll happen. I'll check on you in a few hours. xoxo*

That at least gave him something to smile at. Putting his phone aside, he scooted further down on the sofa, his head on the arm. Taking a moment, he set his glasses aside and just watched the blurry image of loading bar shiver with light as it progressed.

At a loss of what else to do, Carlos let his mind off the metaphorical leash and let it wander in that persistent aimless way that his pre-heat had granted him.

Where it wandered to was the thought he'd been avoiding considering too closely. He just really wanted to get on with this.

There was the matter of a new experience, which he could add to his personal research, that was important. There was also the fact it was a sort of bodily maintenance for omegas, a basic requirement, no shame and nothing to worry about.

But also, god, he really wanted to have sex. Which was too prosaic; he wanted someone to fuck him and come inside, like an undying nagging itch that wouldn't leave him alone. It was a yawning hunger that he couldn't sate with food, just gnawing at him.

And obviously he tried jerking off. It just didn't do the trick, left him aching and feeling empty. Or, something more distressing than that. He was unfulfilled. It was awful.

Sad as it was, he couldn't get the right angle to finger himself without potentially overextending a muscle. Nothing would be more embarrassing than self-injury during masturbation.

Sighing, Carlos pulled his blanket off the back of the sofa and wrapped his arms around a pillow. It was the pillow Cecil tended to use and that comforting dark amber scent lingered. That helped, as well as the weight of the blanket on his shoulders. Before he'd questioned the wisdom of Dana giving him rather heavy knit things when he lived in a desert. Now, he understood the benefits. Pressure was good.

His laptop was sitting on the table. He could peck at some of his personal notes. A theory was forming in his head, specifically about the omega reaction to ejaculate. A fascinating subject, but built on the sort of findings he would never show anyone. Was the effect anatomical, or was it chemical? He suspected the latter, given the absolute headrush the process gave him felt like some sort of chemical reaction. It probably promoted affection, like a hit of oxycontin, and also kept the omega pliant and still for the knotting process.

Or he had it reversed and it was the pressure of a knot that caused the intense wave of pleasure. Everything was extra sensitive down there now, scientifically speaking. And it was fair to say Carlos had more sex with Cecil than he'd had with all his previous partners combined-- not a tall task by any means. The new preference for penetration was interesting, if predictable; a knot felt *incredible*.

There would be ways to test Carlos' ideas. If there was, perhaps, a sort of sexual aid that including a knotting function. Did Night Vale have adult stores? He could ask Dana.

Or, no, he *absolutely* couldn't ask Dana that! He tucked his head down, embarrassed at the very notion. There were *limits*, even to Carlos' curiosity.

Fine. Option two: He could *make* one, perhaps. Carlos was not an engineer, but he knew his way around these things. It'd be a fun private project.

Not as good as Cecil, though. Carlos sighed and curled up on his side, thinking about his boyfriend in rigorous detail. The multitudes in one man; the somber basso that talked the city through its crises, the bubbly excitement that ate into that low calm when Cecil got excited, the rumbling register he carried in private moments, which Carlos suspected he alone got to hear. It made him covetous.

Cecil was a little showy (okay, a *lot* showy and pretty dramatic) with his affection for Carlos. In return, Carlos felt jealous and hoarding, keeping the private parts of Cecil to himself and out of sight. Only he got to listen to the chuckle like a gravel road when they were alone and Cecil laughed, only he got to see how Cecil forgot to be timid and let that strange dark confidence out to play, only Carlos got close enough to see who he was under radio bravado and when he forgot to be shy. That was for *him*.

Every part of Cecil was for him. Which was good, because there was this intruding thought that kept nudging against the back of his skull, the knowledge that he was all for Cecil too. All of the new parameters of his body, the space in his bed, the spare moments he could share, the place inside him that Cecil fit so well, lock and key, enzyme and substrate, catalytic and brimming with potentiality.

The thought under *that* thought was too sharp to touch, that something about his body *needed* Cecil. It was very romantic and sweet that Cecil loved him before he knew Carlos' endotype, and really Carlos appreciated that. But there was a serendipitous covalence to how the dice had fallen, wasn't there?

Except for the fact Cecil wasn't *here now*, that was bad. Carlos looked around to check for him because he could taste him on the air, but his vision was blurry and there was no sign of him. That didn't make a lot of sense.

A tight sensation formed like a winding cord in his gut, and Carlos curled around it. It was uncomfortable and tugged insistently at him. He let out a low whine, hoping Cecil would hear if he was nearby and come... rub Carlos' back or stroke his hair or press him down or fuck him until the tension unwound.

None of that happened, because Cecil didn't seem to be around. To be sure, Carlos dragged his body upright, letting out another low whine when the pressure made the slick more obvious between his legs. He was ready, he *needed* attention, and he couldn't see anyone around. The flat was dark, but for the bright blue light that shone out of the TV.

Stumbling around, Carlos checked his small closet and the bathroom and stood on the cold kitchen floor, breathing deep through his mouth and exhaling faint, upset noises. Everything felt heightened, and it almost reminded him of the overstimulation he felt after a solid panic attack.

His home felt very open all of a sudden. His vision was still blurry for some reason and everything seemed so far away, cavernous and dangerous. The shadows were too deep.

His blanket wrapped around himself, he darted out of the kitchen, looking around. Small and safe. He wanted somewhere he could be small and safe.

Under the bed was enough room for someone as short and kind of reedy as him. He slid under, tucking up his legs so they didn't cross into the blue light that spilled out over the floor and several inches under the bed. The mattress frame brushed his shoulder as he laid there, catching his breath; it was very small under here. Good.

The tight feeling in his gut strung tighter, like a fisherman's line. Whimpering, he tried to roll himself tighter, bending his body with the ache as it bloomed into pinpoints of pain in his abdomen.

He couldn't see and his body was starting to hurt and no one was here. A cold despair hit him, and Carlos pressed his temple to the concrete floor, eyes stinging. Something was wrong. It felt like a capital offense that he wasn't currently warm and held tight and somewhere soft. Had he done something wrong?

The blanket was tight around him, which helped, but his skin felt hot, so hot. He pressed against the cold floor, trying to alleviate the feeling.

He drifted for a while, trying to hold so still, the hurt would remain constant and not increase any further. It was possible he could find a more comfortable position. Or he could stumble into a less comfortable position. So, he stayed still.

Everything was silent beyond his breathing, until it wasn't. A dull metallic noise came, cutting through the darkness, and the door opened. Someone was here, and Carlos' spine suddenly wanted to eject from his body.

He put a hand over his mouth, trying to be silent.

The door shut, and locked. The musical click-thunk of the deadbolt flipping was obvious. "Alright," his intruder said in a low, dark drawl. "This could have gone better. Where did you go, bunny?"

Bunny. Carlos blinked at the term, the warm flush it spilled in his ribcage.

There was a loud sigh, and the tall lamp in the living area flicked on. "There are only so many hiding spots in this small of an apartment." Footsteps across the room, then the closet door opened. "Nope."

They walked to the living room table and picked up his phone. "Well, you didn't see my seven texts. Carlos." The voice pitched to something teasing and sing-song. "*Caaaaarlos*. Don't make me drag you out."

The whimper was involuntary and too-loud to be completely muffled. Carlos couldn't see much clearly, but could tell the feet walking around pivoted, realigning on the bed. "I heard

that, bunny." They approached, and Carlos inched back from the edge of the bed.

His intruder knelt, then dropped back on his heels, head tilted to peer under the bed, his hair loose and soft-looking, his eyes even softer beyond the mischievous gleam. Cecil. *Cecil*. Cecil, warm and tasting like moonshine or moon shine or *it didn't matter*.

"Hi, there," Cecil said, voice fragmenting slightly as a rich purr filled the air around him. "Are you hiding?"

Step one was taking his hand off his mouth. He did so with some effort, taking a deep breath. Oh, he could taste that familiar signature, it was so good. "Cecil," Carlos said quietly, his own voice rough.

"Carlos," he replied, smiling beautifully.

"I..." He shuddered, legs curling tighter to his chest. "I don't know what I'm doing. Can't see."

"Oh, beloved dear Carlos. You left your glasses over by the sofa." He reached out an arm. "Come on. You're only going to get worse if you huddle under there."

"It's dark under here," Carlos said, because it felt important.

"It's pretty dark out here too. Here, hold on." Cecil pushed himself to standing and left, and Carlos gasped. "One sec! Just a second! I'll be back."

The TV screen flicked off, and the lamp followed a second later. The only light was from outside, ethereal and moon-white.

"Carlos," Cecil said, unyielding and demanding. "Come out. You're safe. I will *keep* you safe. Do you believe me?"

Carlos braced himself and rolled himself out from under the bed, though being out in the open immediately felt like someone was filling his bones with anxious static.

"Shh, easy." Cecil bent and gripped him, the cocoon he'd made for himself, and drew him up. It wasn't far to the bed, and Carlos curled up there instead, his breathing quickening. Hands dug into his hair and stroked along his skull. "No, you're fine. It's all okay, you're okay." Cecil put a knee on the bed and pressed his mouth against Carlos' temple, bent to kiss his ear. "Easy, let me see."

The blanket was slowly tugged loose around his shoulders and pushed down. The air in the flat was cold, and Carlos pressed into Cecil. "Ceec, I-- I feel weird."

Cecil kissed his forehead and finished extricating him from his knit shield, pushing it onto the floor. "Mhm. I know. Your heat finally decided to show up to the party. Terribly late, unconscionably tardy. You should report it to the Heat Regulation Board."

His shirt was pulled off over his head. "Is that a thing?" Carlos asked as Cecil pushed him onto his back, untying his drawstring pajama pants.

"Nope," Cecil said, singlemindedly getting Carlos from point A to point naked. When Carlos was just bare and trembling slightly, Cecil nudged his legs apart and put his cheek against the soft skin of Carlos' inner thigh. His eyes were lidded, his lips parted as he breathed. "Oh, Carlos. You're ready, god, you're so fucking ready."

His tone was low and intense, and it hit Carlos like a physical touch. He shuddered. "Ceec, please."

With effort, Cecil's eyes blinked back open, and he leaned back to take off his clothes, discarding them quickly. Then, he was climbing up, his hand cupping Carlos' neck, his teeth on Carlos' lower lip.

He was right; Carlos was so completely ready. He brought up his knees against Cecil's hips, head lolling back, neck exposed. "Please, please, I-- I can't think, I need you."

Cecil groaned and situated himself closer, fingers finding Carlos' hole and pushing in against the hot slick. "You'll have me, sweet, I got you. I'll take care of you, you going to let me in?"

"Yes," Carlos moaned, his breath hitching. "Yes, yes, fuck," he shook as Cecil pushed his dick inside, somehow even hotter than his fever. "Fuck, I need you, I need, uh."

Hands curled around Carlos hips, pressing against the small of his back. Lifting, Cecil leaned down into him, tipping Carlos up just a little. His whole body seemed to sink into Carlos, so deep with one long devastating stroke, Carlos clutched at him, head thrown back, crying out.

It was deep, so deep, he wasn't empty, wasn't alone, he was going to take Cecil inside and keep him forever, it was so hot, he was going to be so good for Cecil and keep him, fuck, *fuck*.

Cecil thrust into Carlos like a man on a mission-- which, true enough-- until he came, voice flaying around a tight yell. His come was a drenching flood inside Carlos, key to lock, catalyst and ignition, and Carlos whined loudly as the sensation set him off. He came, body tight around Cecil's knot. He was pinned and couldn't move, and didn't *want* to move ever again.

Sucking in gasps of air, Carlos lay there, content. Cecil bent and kissed his temple, his ear, the hinge of his jaw. His kisses were as soft as his body was heavy, weight resting on Carlos.

The confused fever broke. Carlos shuddered down to his toes as he took another long, hot pulse of come, heels skipping against the sheets. "Mmm. *Fuck*."

"Uh huh," Cecil murmured, levering himself up on his arms with visible effort. His hips rotated in a slow circle, knot caught and pulling at Carlos, making him gasp. "That's... that's how it works." He pecked Carlos brow, and grinned down at him, a little smug, brilliantly pleased.

"*No me digas eso*. Seriously? I-- I lose my mind and then we--" he faltered.

"Then I knot you and take very, *very* good care of you," he kissed Carlos' nose quickly, "and you're fine until we have to do it all over again."

A hot flush swept over Carlos' cheeks. The dizzying sense of helplessness hit him, staring up at Cecil's rich velvet gaze. "Cecil, I..."

"Hey. It's okay." Finally, Cecil really kissed him, his tongue a familiar guest as he stroked it into Carlos' mouth, tilting their mouths together. His cock rocked into Carlos a little more in time with the leisurely thrusts of his tongue, and it was so much, so good. Carlos fisted a hand in Cecil's hair, keeping him there as their tongues twined and Cecil rocked harder and harder into him.

Gasping, Cecil drew back, looking pretty dazed himself for the moment. The same torn open, desperate light Carlos felt was reflected in Cecil's eyes. "Carlos. Oh, Carlos, I am... I'm going to take care of you, I'll be so good to you, baby, I promise." He held Carlos' jaw and kept working his hips.

Coherence fled the conversation. They communicated with nails digging into soft skin and rising volumes, more desperate noises as they worked together, absolutely gorgeous *perfect* covalence until Carlos came again. His fingers gripped hard as he egged Cecil on too, goading him into spilling again inside him.

It felt so good, like a sacrifice to hedonism gone out of control.

Cecil slumped, head tucked against Carlos' shoulder, catching his breath.

Days of this, Carlos remembered, and turned his head to lay against the bed, settling in. Days of Cecil and the unwavering desire to keep him, to have him.

Dragging his tongue over the flat edge of his teeth, Carlos closed his eyes, and rested. He'd need it.

Chapter End Notes

okay i didn't expect to split this chapter but when i broke 4K and was barely in it, i figured the heat was gonna be two chapters instead. gotta be flexible with your ABO fic.

~~also i think maybe cecil's POV would be fun for the heat. pity him, for he must take care of a whiny horny scientist who feels very bitey for a week. such is his lot in life now.~~

remember in The Investigators where Carlos got so excited about a melodramatic murder mystery that he could barely contain himself? Carlos is cute. that's all.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

heat chapter, so expect some altered mental states and some bilateral intensity, but also some hopefully amusing stuff

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

It was the first day, and the heat hit Carlos with the swiftness of an arrow taking out a trespassing deer. They were talking about something, still thick-tongued and slow from sleep, when Carlos grabbed Cecil's hand and shivered all over, so sudden he would have buckled to the hard, cold concrete floor if Cecil hadn't caught him.

Cecil was in fact very proud of having caught Carlos. It was effective, if awkward, and Cecil simply turned Carlos around and leaned him on the countertop.

When they'd woke, Carlos had put on a pair of cute stripey boxers that were mostly swallowed under an oversized U of C hoodie. Cecil didn't know what the U or the C were, but the rich blood red color looked incredible against Carlos' dark skin.

The boxers, though, he pushed down Carlos' hips.

Carlos whined and bowed his head in a way that-- well. Cecil wasn't particularly proud of how a little show of deference went straight to his dick. But for the moment, it was acceptable; his dick was fairly integral to the process right now.

Tipping Carlos' hips up, Cecil rocked the head of his cock against Carlos' hole. Slick was already running in a thick bead down his inner thigh, making his legs twitch. When he pushed, he started carefully, making sure Carlos was ready.

He was. Oh, he was deliciously fucking tight, as could be expected this early in the day and this early in his heat. But he opened right up, and as Cecil sank into him, Carlos lifted his head to let out a loud, strangled cry. "Cecil, *Cecil*, yes, oh fuck!"

He obliged the best he could, braced on the countertop and fucking Carlos in a hard, steady rhythm. The counter was just a little tall, and Carlos' toes struggled to keep contact with the floor as he was nudged further up with each thrust.

When his feet left the floor, Carlos let out this noise like a *sob*, hands scrambling against the soapstone surface. His scent changed, a hairpin turn from enjoyment to desperation.

Leaning over him, bearing him down, Cecil fucked him until Carlos shook, and then continued to fuck him until his knot filled and caught inside.

Weakly, Carlos moaned.

"There we go," Cecil said, breathing labored but voice still cheerful. He kissed the back of Carlos' neck and straightened up. "That should keep you a while."

"God," Carlos managed. His head remained bowed, body still sprawled on the counter. "Going t' have to clean up later..."

Cecil hummed a happy affirmative. Then, because everything was in reach, he picked up the electric kettle from its stand, swapped it over to his other hand, and filled it in the sink. When it was full enough, he passed it over Carlos' back again, resettled it, and turned it on to heat.

Slowly, Carlos lifted his head, observing all this with a little annoyed frown. "Are you... putting on water? While you're-- you know, *inside me*."

"Well, we'll be stuck here for a few minutes. Should be plenty of time for the water to boil and finish up tea."

Putting his head back down, Carlos muttered, "This is so embarrassing."

"I think it's wonderful," Cecil told him, and tucked his fingers into dark curls. "Carlos. There's nothing to be embarrassed about here."

"Losing control is embarrassing, Cecil," Carlos protested, knocking his forehead lightly against the counter. Fixed deep inside him, another slow pulse of come spilled from Cecil and into Carlos. "Haa, aah, god, why-does-that-feel-so-good," he said in one quick breath.

Cecil didn't actually know the science behind it, had never questioned it in the same way Carlos obviously would have. There were always jokes about how omegas ran the table when it came to sex and how much enjoyment they got compared to everyone else. But the sociological angle wasn't Carlos' forte, as he so often reminded everyone.

The water boiled, and Cecil reached out to pour it into their mugs. Carlos, resting his head on a folded arm, watched and snorted.

"Well." Cecil replaced the kettle, then stroked down Carlos' spine. "It's a matter of how you look at it, and that's entirely up to you. Do you want to lose control or to relinquish it?"

"Semantics," Carlos groused.

"Not at all. Not with me. My lovely, trepidatious Carlos. I'll take utmost care of anything you deign to give me, including your heart, soul, and body." He wrapped his arms around Carlos' waist and pressed his weight down on him. "I'll do my best to keep them safe and return them in perfect condition."

"What about you, Ceec?" He turned a little, enough to meet Cecil's gaze over his shoulder.

"What do you mean?"

"You're asking me a big thing. I'm just wondering if you would do the same if you were dealing with this."

Cecil pushed himself upright and grunted as his dick slipped free, the knot still flushed but gone down enough for them to separate. "Mm. Are you alright?"

Gingerly, Carlos settled back on his feet and turned to face Cecil, bending to tug his boxers back up, a little sheepish. "Yeah, I-- I'm fine. Anyway, tea, right?"

"In a moment," Cecil said. "For clarity's sake." He leaned in and pressed his lips to the corner of Carlos' eye, enjoying the way Carlos tipped his head a little into the gesture, his eyes both closing. A silvery thing in Cecil chimed with excitement, with contentment and a bone-deep fulfillment at having a sated omega in his arms.

Carlos' hand slowly fisted in Cecil's robe, a grip that let him pull Cecil closer. "Ceec," he breathed softly.

Sliding his mouth back, Cecil said into Carlos' temple, "If you'd like, I'd remove my own heart and hand it to you. You already have it, in the metaphorical sense, so you can presume ownership of the physical organ too."

"Okay," Carlos said, inhaling sharply. "I... I presume to leave it in your chest so it can keep circulating your blood. That's an important function." His face pressed against Cecil's chest. "Your body temperature would be significantly lower otherwise, and would be much less suitable for this."

"That's delightfully pragmatic of you." He kissed the top of Carlos' head. "Come on. Let's put our feet up."

Next time, Carlos' shoulders were laid back, arched over the arm of the sofa, his head thrown back, his neck a long column. His lips were parted around Cecil's name, repeated it over and over, voice rising with each iteration, an apotheosis of desire.

His fingers were in Cecil's hair, and held Cecil down against his chest. Cecil rubbed his face into the soft red cotton of his hoodie, groaning and straining to fuck him. The couch was just not the best place for this, it was too narrow to get decent leverage.

It was worth it for the particular way his name sounded in Carlos' mouth. Breathy and sibilant and surprised every time, like he couldn't believe it.

After, Carlos wrapped an arm around Cecil's shoulders and cupped the back of his neck, an obvious command to stay put. This was amenable enough, and Cecil floated on his post-coital cloud right there, his head lifting and falling slightly as Carlos breathed under him.

"I'm going to unpause the movie," Carlos said, and reached out to grab the controls, enough to jab the applicable button. It was some black and white murder mystery Carlos had been dead set on watching. A former detective and a rich heiress spent the majority of the film being extravagantly self-absorbed and besotted with each others' brilliance. Cecil admired their marriage and their lack of regard for the banalities of life, like the aforementioned murder.

"Do you think Nick Charles would be an alpha?" Carlos asked after a while, his head tilted towards the TV.

"It's extremely strange to think that you've grown up with media that completely lacks endotypes," Cecil said, rubbing his cheek against Carlos' hoodie. "I don't know, honestly. The unflappability makes me think a sort of middle-spectrum beta."

Carlos didn't seem to like that answer, and pouted. "You know, I feel like this heat thing isn't that bad. The interruptions are a little annoying, but otherwise it's just a mild fever."

"It's the first day." Tucking his hand under Carlos, he kneaded the soft skin around his waist, then dug his fingers into the pressure point near the small of his back. "If you remember your name come day five, I'll be extremely impressed."

"That's ominous." Cecil could hear the way Carlos' breath caught, the noise lovely and intimate. "It feels good, whatever you're doing," Carlos said, voice rougher.

"For the next few days, that's all that matters." Cecil lifted himself finally, his need to unfold his legs overriding his want to continue laying on Carlos. Sitting up, he reached for his water bottle and drained half of it in a few gulps. At this rate, he'd need the hydration.

They fucked again for bed, and it was technically before Carlos' heat grabbed him again, but preempting the next wave gave them both a chance to sleep, wrapped up together in bed, bodies cinderblock heavy and entwined. There was a soft thrill to inhaling against Carlos' skin and finding his scent loosening like pulled thread, the particulars of it melding with Cecil's as they mixed so thoroughly.

With that thought warming him, Cecil slept hard and deep, strangely devoid of nightmares. How nice, for Carlos to ward off the haunting visions that tended to visit his unconscious mind.

In the morning, he managed to feed Carlos and get him to take his little blue octagonal suppressant pill before being Carlos grabbed him and used all his weight to pull Cecil onto the bed and shove him down on his back.

"Easy, bunny, I'm here," Cecil said, petting Carlos' shoulders.

Carlos didn't pause in untying his robe, shoving it open and letting out a *growl* when Cecil wasn't hard yet. The sound significantly helped the situation, though. Still, with a sudden streak of impatience, Carlos tried to climb onto him anyway, tried to coax Cecil's dick inside.

It just wouldn't work, everything a little too quick. Grabbing Carlos' hips, Cecil rolled him off.

Which... didn't go well. Carlos let out another low, angry sound as he tried to get Cecil on his back again. It dissolved rapidly into a very imprecise struggle, a seesaw of power.

But Cecil had earned all of his Close Quarters Combat boy scout badges and Carlos was, to put it kindly, not operating at maximum capacity. With a grunt, Cecil managed to flip Carlos and pin him down on him with his entire body. The air whooshed out of Carlos, his hips moving, pushing at the bed to try and heave himself up.

He couldn't lift their combined weights, though that didn't keep him from trying.

Taking a gasp of air, Cecil bent and pressed his teeth hard against Carlos' neck.

Only then Carlos stilled, panting and whining quietly as he lay there. The rebelliousness remained there, lurking, simmering just under the surface.

By now, Cecil was more than ready, his cock hard from a rousing bout of barely-clothed wrestling. Pushing Carlos' clothes just enough out of the way, he shoved inside, listening to the gratifying way Carlos yelled, legs kicking, body shaking.

The fight went out of him as soon as the knot went into him, and Cecil breathed a sigh of relief.

"Ohmygod," Carlos moaned. "Cecil. I..."

Resting heavy across Carlos' back, Cecil relaxed his bite and dragged his tongue along Carlos' skin. Words dissolved as Carlos went lax, shuddering down to his bones.

Some time later, when they could separate, Cecil sprawled on his back, rubbing his elbow where he nearly pulled a muscle.

Carlos sat next to him, his neck red, doe-eyed and dazed, hair a catastrophic mess that was immensely endearing. "Ceec," he mumbled, rubbing his face drowsily.

"Mmhm," Cecil acknowledged, stretched his arm carefully out. Still fine, thank goodness.

"I didn't mean to... I'm sorry."

"It's perfectly alright."

"I don't know what came over me," Carlos continued in a small voice.

Tsking softly, Cecil shook his head. "Your alpha, who is supposed to be at your beck and call right now, wasn't ready. In this situation, it's your prerogative to take action. You're *fine* ,

Carlos." He lifted his eyebrows and grinned up at his beloved. "I didn't anticipate getting jumped first thing in the morning, but that certainly woke me up."

"I waited for you to wake up." Carlos ducked his head and tilted his head, extending the skin where he'd gotten the admonishing bite. "Then you just kept sleeping and I... got annoyed."

"Uh huh." Sitting up, Cecil kissed Carlos' neck softly, right over the new bruise. "How about some breakfast?"

"That was really okay?" He sounded like he didn't dare to hope.

"Yes," Cecil told him firmly. "You're not more than I can handle, bunny, I promise."

That, finally, seemed to settle him down, and he gingerly followed Cecil through the flat. He stayed close enough to touch Cecil, trying to hold onto him, like he couldn't stop. Which, he probably couldn't.

=

On the cusp of day three, Carlos got... bitey.

They were in the bath, because nothing helped with an omega's aches like hot water. And frankly, Cecil was feeling the effects of keeping up with Carlos. He could really do with a sympathetic heat kicking in for him soon. Until then, he languished in the tub, Carlos curled around him, the water level of the tub high enough to be in danger of overflowing if they moved around too much.

Fortunately, they laid still. Cecil had a towel under his neck, letting him rest his head back, arms stretched around the rim of the bath.

Carlos pressed his fingertips from freckle to freckle, igniting the connecting lines in Cecil's skin, building new constellations. The bathroom light was off, and the starlight glow reflecting in his eyes was doing things to Cecil's heart. Whatever the opposite of breaking it was.

Part of him wanted to say something like *see? heats are great* or *let's stay this way until the water erodes our bodies to nothing but a collective Us*, but he didn't want to seem pushy and it might ruin the quiet moment between them. Instead, he tried to use his fingertips to press his meaning into Carlos' spine.

He was silently contemplating draining the tub a bit to refill it with more hot water when Carlos nuzzled his neck. The pressure against the tendons and sinew around his bonding node felt calming, and privately Cecil sort of appreciated being soothed after spending so much time tending to Carlos. It wasn't necessary, but it was nice.

Then, Carlos nipped him, humming deep and low in his throat, like he was trying to purr.

Lulled and heat-drowsy, Cecil didn't react but to hum right back at him.

Then, Carlos spent a little longer mouthing and running his tongue over Cecil's neck, which felt so *nice*, so relaxing, until Carlos turned his head and bit him, significantly harder.

"Hey! No!" Cecil fisted his hand in Carlos' damp hair and pulled him off.

Carlos went with a broken whine. "Sorry, sorry, ow, dammit!"

Keeping his hand on Carlos' head, Cecil pushed him under the water, watching the surface of bubble with a released yelp from him. After a second, he let him go, and Carlos rose up, sputtering. His face was covered with his soaked curls, and he pushed them all up and back over his head. "Cecil!"

Crossing his arms, Cecil settled in and stared at Carlos.

Who promptly wilted. "Oh. I... did it again."

"Yes," Cecil told him. "Carlos, dear sweet handsome inquisitive--"

"I knooooow, I know, stop adding appellations," Carlos moaned, covering his face.

"--beautiful Carlos, you are *very bitey*."

"I know, it just... feels good to do it! It's this sensation in my teeth and it just grows insistent until I..." His head hung, and he dripped water back into the tub. "I'm sorry."

"It's alright. You can be such a handful though," Cecil said, and demonstrated by groping Carlos under the water.

Some sloshed out, onto the floor, and they both froze.

"We should maybe dry off," Carlos admitted reluctantly, still a little shame-faced. Meeting Cecil's eyes, he leaned in, slowly at first, then bent to press his lips apologetically against Cecil's neck.

It was just impossible to stay upset with him.

They drained the tub and climbed out, drying off. The floor was entirely too cold, and Cecil let an impulse seize him. Bending, he scooped Carlos up in his arms and carried him over to the bed.

He intended it as something flirtatious to break the tension, but Carlos held onto his shoulders and just looked at Cecil, his eyes still touched with that lack of focus afflicted by his heat.

Cecil frowned in concern. "Carlos?"

Blinking in that slow, sweet way, Carlos said, "You're really good at this," in a faint, awed voice, like he'd just realized.

And such a tender thing hit Cecil right between the ribs. He inhaled sharply, unsure what to say. Only his chest bloomed with heat, and his heart pumped it through his body.

Resting Carlos down on the bed, Cecil climbed up with him.

Carlos' fingers brushed his cheek. Turning his head, Cecil kissed his palm and leaned in over him.

Warm hands framed Cecil's face, drawing him down. He could feel Carlos' lips move as he mouthed Cecil's name.

Cecil touched him. The skin along his thighs was soft, from the bath or from his heat or both. Soft, almost malleable, like Cecil could sink into him and dissolve the boundaries between them.

He tried it, falling into Carlos. His pulse was a steady, deep beat in his body, pumping more heat through his veins.

They'd fucked plenty of times, but this felt like something different. Carlos rested his fingertips against Cecil's cheeks, stroked his eyelids, whispered like a revelation, "You're so good, Cecil."

It stung. Cecil shook his head silently, rocking in Carlos with a halting, pendulum rhythm. Hands cupped his jaw and drew him into a kiss, and for one solid, too-real moment Cecil felt sloppy and completely lacking finesse, too out of control to do this right, to be what he promised to Carlos.

Carlos curled a hand around his neck and whispered again, "You're so good," and Cecil fell apart, clutching at too-soft skin, squeezing his eyes shut to avoid the placid, sweet shine in Carlos' gaze. It hurt, like the discovery of a wound by accident, a papercut forgotten before spilling lemon juice.

The sound from his throat was undignified and completely inappropriate for an alpha taking stewardship of someone's heat. Worse, it wasn't loud enough to drown out Carlos' tender murmurings.

He stuttered his hips and came, which *should not* have happened, not first, not with an omega in the throes of heat oversensitivity. Cecil bowed his head, pulling out of Carlos' hold, shaking. "Sorry. Sorry, I-- I'll, in a second."

"It-- it's okay, I'm gonna," Carlos replied, voice pitching up as he squirmed, his breath quickening. "It feels so good, you feel-- look at me, please."

There was nothing Cecil wouldn't do for Carlos like that, no command he could resist from that hopped octave and dreamy tone. He lifted his head.

Gently, Carlos cupped Cecil's face. His thumbs pressed on either side of his nose and very gradually moved outward. Cecil closed his eyes as the light touch ran over his eyelashes, to the canthus, then back to his ear.

Cecil let out a winded breath, biting his lip. He didn't see it coming when Carlos leaned up to tug his lip free, to kiss him, intent and shuddering and intoxicating as sweet cordial.

"Can we stay like this," Carlos asked quietly after a while, his heels tightening around Cecil minutely. "For a little longer."

We could stay like this forever, Cecil wanted to say, but his voice was too tight. Instead, he nodded, and rested himself in the cradle of Carlos' body.

Chapter End Notes

there is a hurricane breathing down my neck BUT I STILL COME BEARING FIC

cecil out here, doing his best. carlos out here, being a disaster but a cute one.

more heat to come, then maybe we'll try some Actual Plot. or, semi-plot. not a Full Plot but some Plot for flavor.

oh BTW i wrote up a fast and dirty summary of how endotypes work in this au. [for the curious.](#)

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

/face in hands

CWs in the end notes

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

Carlos is somewhere else for a while. It's the dead of night, with the moon distressingly large overhead, a point of perihelion perhaps making it so big, so milk-blue. Perception is a delicate thing, and from where he is perched, it seems within reach. Or, somehow, that he is within reach of it, a reversal that makes minimal sense.

It basks everything in that light, dyeing Carlos' skin blue, the deer antlers rising around his seat silver, and the sand surrounding him into crushed starlight, every granule of quartz glimmering.

He looks around. He doesn't know where he is, why he's suddenly in the middle of the desert. There is nothing around, nothing but smooth rippling dunes all the way to the horizon; when he stares out, the seem to roll like the ocean.

But this is Night Vale. He knows this with absolute certainty.

Pressing his palms down on his seat, he finds its covered in fur, the coarse strands of deerskin. Under him, he thinks there is warmth. Maybe even a pulse, which is unsettling.

The fear rushes over him, and then past, like it can't catch. It glides away, as if he were as perfect and smooth as a river stone.

His toes curl, and he sways, taking a deep breath. Everything is the dead of night and the blinding brightness.

Then, so suddenly it comes without motion, just a substantive alteration of reality (--reality?), there are hands on his shoulders, pulling him back and flat onto his back against the possibly-alive, potentially- *breathing* seat. His spine is flush to the fur, and the moon is *enormous* directly over him, like a dentist's lamp, its circumference only broken by a figure leaning over him from above. A person-shaped being with a deer mask and tall, elegant antlers.

"I am the Creator," she says, her hands still firm on Carlos' bare shoulders. "I am other things too, but right now I am the Creator."

"I'm Carlos," Carlos says, because it seems the thing to do. "That's... all I am, honestly."

"You are more. You will be more. You can make more." She presses a palm over his heart. "I see the world beyond, outside of my sentinel. I watch rising black smoke from my sandstone towers. I do not let it enter Night Vale. I protect them all."

Carlos thinks *Interloper* with terrible intensity, and shivers. "I don't want to hurt anyone. I wouldn't hurt anyone! Not with any purpose, anyway."

"This place is safety. This place is dangerous. It devours those with pitch in their hearts." She presses on his heart. "You came heavy and tired and looking for rest, smoke corroding your lungs. Not all who follow a mirage find an oasis. This was allowed."

"Thanks," Carlos says.

"I am the Creator. I planted the seed in wet sand. I tend to it. I keep them all safe." Another hand cups his neck, a hand thumb against the soft skin under his chin. Pressure, not enough to choke him but nothing he can ignore.

"Please don't kill me," Carlos says. His body is still and calm, thrumming from the heat under him, from the attention of the moonlight coating his skin like ink, from a smolder deep in his core.

The symmetry of antlers and moon is broken, as she tilts her head at him. "I am not going to kill you, Carlos. I am going to keep you. I keep them all, the ones who make that choice."

"Did you make Night Vale this way?" he asks. "The people, how different they are?"

"I protect them. I see them born and die, watch them find themselves and each other, give them wisdom and compassion. I give this to you." *Another* hand presses down on his belly, and Carlos jerks. His eyes want to slam shut, but he can't. Something about this place doesn't work like that. He cannot even blink, his observance of this is absolute.

The inability to shut his eyes even for a moment makes him shake, nervousness finally breaking through the spell draped over him. His heart pounds in his tongue and a familiar fever pumps through his body.

"I am Huntokar," she tells him. "I claim you as one of mine. My blood is your blood. Your triumphs are my triumphs. My gifts are moulded into your body. You are claimed."

All her hands vanish, again with such suddenness it's as if they were never there. She leans back, just visible above him. Her head tilts once more, somehow conveying a wryness. "This process is normally less distinct. A group of kind strangers with masked faces. I have someone more appropriate for you."

Huntokar is gone, there and then not.

New hands land on Carlos, on his legs. He cannot move to see, but he thinks he knows the size and shape of them against his skin. And he *certainly* knows by now the particular way they stroke him, the splay over his hips. His eyelashes flutter, though still won't close. His vision is the tips of the antlers curling around him, the ink black of the sky, and the moon.

His hand is taken, and warm lips press against his knuckles. The tender, firm grip moves him, resting his hands up around his head, then drag full-palmed down Carlos' chest.

"Cecil," Carlos breathes.

A kiss presses to his knee. Then he's dragged down the deerfur, his legs fully slipping loose. Cecil, because Carlos *knows* it's him from touch and signature alone, cups his ass and insinuates himself between Carlos' legs.

He feels like a doll for a moment, positioned and caressed and made to be exactly so. Then Cecil pushes into him, and he feels like some virgin sacrifice to an old god, but a nice one maybe. He gasps and accepts it as Cecil's thick cock works him open. Thus, he feels like a vessel of something wordless and passionate, made to lay still and just open up for a great metaphysical joining.

Cecil's breath hitches, still wordless but his voice nonetheless unmistakable. He pushes in harder, and Carlos can see his hands wrap around the antlers. The leverage helps him get deeper, like he could sink inside like a stone lost to the bottom of a deep well.

For the moment, Carlos just watches the white-knuckle clench of his hands and soaks in the kindling pleasure, their bodies coming together striking sparks and igniting.

Cecil seems to have to be silent for this... initiation, ritual, whatever mystic thing. Carlos does not, and fills the air with "Cecil, yes, Cecil," and "hurry up, let me feel it," and "fill me up, please, please, oh," and then just soft cries up at the moon.

Carlos woke, face flushed and body vibrating with tension.

It was night. Next to him was a gently snoring man, tired and sprawled in his bed.

Outside the window was the moon, full and bright.

Huntokar, Carlos thought with absolute lucidity.

The thought winked out like a candle snuffed.

Then, he started shaking, and moved across the bed until his back hit the wall. His heartbeat was deafening in his ears, it was thunderous.

Placing his hands over his ears didn't help; the pressure made the sound seem louder. Instead, he gripped his hair and curled up on his side, lips parted around a low keen.

He felt weird. More weird than the base level, regression to the mean of weird he'd grown accustomed too. His body tingled, heat rushing over him, but also a strangeness, like his soul had just been refitted into his body after an absence. He lay there on his side and scratched at his skin where the feeling was strongest, trying to settle back into himself.

"Mmph. C'rlos. Carlos," Cecil mumbled, half asleep. "Where're you at, baby?"

Carlos let out another low noise, and felt the bed shift as Cecil dragged himself across.

"Hey, bunny, shh." His hand cupped Carlos' skull, stroking his hair. "You're okay. It's alright."

He wanted to reach out and grab Cecil. His arms were too tense, wrapped around his own chest. Everything ached.

"Come here, please," Carlos managed, voice shaking like a leaf in a storm.

Gratifyingly, Cecil immediately tucked himself closer. He crowded Carlos back against the wall and folded around him, limbs draping over Carlos' body. This way, the feeling of small and safe finally soaked in, a barrier built from the solid wall and Cecil's body. Carlos shuddered, taking a deep breath.

"You're okay," Cecil murmured, still sleep-rough. "I've got you, you're safe. All tucked up and safe, shh."

He could touch Cecil, which was nice.

... When had he ever not been able to touch Cecil? He did little else these past few days.

Carlos pushed his nose against Cecil's neck and breathed until his panic released hold. Open mouth pressed to warm skin, he inhaled until Cecil had permeated his lungs, was logically becoming a part of Carlos, his cells oxidizing, molecule and fuel ignition.

Sighing, Carlos twined an arm under Cecil's, draping around him. "God. That was weird."

"Shh." Cecil kissed his head. "Totally normal. Are you good for now?"

"Mhm. Better," Carlos said.

"Go back to sleep," Cecil bade him. "Long day tomorrow. Need your rest."

Humming, Carlos shut his eyes.

By the fourth day, or what Carlos *thought* was the fourth day, even Cecil began looking a little worn out. Normally, he would bustle around the flat, tending to whatever he deemed important at the time.

This time, Carlos found him laying on his back, arm folded under his head. There is a fairly impressive prickle of stubble over his jaw, and Carlos wanted to feel it.

Insinuating against Cecil's side, he could taste the tiredness clinging to Cecil's frame, that tactile-scent signature clinging to him. It was a strong aura, like dulled cinnamon. It tickled something in the back of Carlos' skull, some urge to bed down with him.

He drew up some of the blankets, tugging the sheets out from where they were tucked under the foot of the bed, pulling them up over Cecil. Grabbing the pillows, he put one where he wanted to rest on Cecil's chest and another against his own back.

Sitting up, Carlos looked around, trying to find something else within reach.

Silently, Cecil reached off the bed and hooked his fingers in the robe that he'd taken to wearing, handing it over.

That worked, and Carlos laid it over Cecil's side, so he could get comfortable without too much skin touching. It was getting warm as the sun rose higher in the sky, and he didn't want to deal with too much skin-on-skin. It was in fact a very precise calculation, the layout of everything, to ensure optimal comfort.

When everything evened out to perfect zero, Carlos laid down, his nose against Cecil's neck, and privately congratulated himself on how comfortable everything was.

Fingers twined in his hair, twirling a curl slowly, pulling it from the rest to toy with. "You are adorable," Cecil murmured.

"Hm?" Carlos hummed.

"Nothing. How are you feeling?"

"Okay." His lips moved against the stubble, and it was imminently distracting. Carlos sighed and flicked his tongue, against the grain. The texture was rough, but pleasant, like that weird prickly sensation from getting licked by a cat. He did it again, where the stubble started down near his adam's apple, and could feel the steady pulse under the skin. His skin tasted faintly of salt.

"Don't you dare bite," Cecil said, voice slurring a little as he rolled his head back.

"M'not," Carlos said, though that gave him an excellent idea. He scraped his teeth against the prickle.

"You are going to bite," Cecil complained, but didn't move. When Carlos licked under the hinge of his jaw, Cecil shook.

"Not hard." Carlos' teeth pressed against his chin.

"God, I'm too tired to wrangle you." He kept a hand in Carlos' hair, ready to pull Carlos away if he did bite too hard. But otherwise, Carlos was left alone to explore Cecil's skin at his leisure.

Keeping his eyes closed, he experimented. The soft spot next to that apple was intriguing, and made Cecil restlessly shift his legs. A full drag of his tongue up his neck made Cecil melt, totally lax against the bed. He applied variables, tongue and teeth in sliding measure, and cataloged reactions.

Everything was so vivid and tactile. He could fill up books with the constancies and reactions that made up Cecil. His fingers itched to write something. His teeth tingled. He wanted Cecil so much it was rattling loud in his mind, an unfulfilled desire that kept shoving hooks into him, pulling and pulling.

And the way Cecil jolted into something more alive than life was so addictive. Everything about him illuminated like he'd swallowed neon and taken a spark. Carlos wanted him constantly. He'd never wanted anyone more than he wanted his solitude and his work, but. But.

He didn't realize what he was doing until he was forced onto his back, Cecil pinning him down. His neck was a *mess* of red and pink marks, and Carlos dragged his tongue over his teeth.

"You keep-- Carlos, *fuck*. " Cecil's eyes were blown wide like he'd taken a hit of something, dark and devouring as he pressed his forehead against Carlos', panting and desperate. "Carlos, this just isn't *fair*."

He was shaking, gaze darting over Carlos, face flushed.

Carlos rolled his head to the side, tilting.

"Not fair, I-- I can't keep--" Cecil bowed and set his teeth against Carlos' skin and pushed. And pushed. And let out a growl like a rusted tiger.

It felt like a delicate glass ampule was cracking, straining under the pressure. The morning drowsiness fled Carlos in a rush and he jerked, gasping, spine arching. "Ah-- oh, god!" His pulse flash-boiled, volcanic overflow, magma to lava, and it singed and burned him with a bloodflood of incandescent desire. He breathed in resin and his mouth watered.

He *wanted wanted wanted* , it was going to turn him to ash if he lay there and took it. He scratched at Cecil until he let Carlos' hands go and grabbed him, heaved up against him.

For a second, he just listened to the deep hollow metal growl Cecil was letting out, whining in his ear as the pressure just held and held and held, not enough. Cecil was so careful, he was so good and careful even when he was holding onto his control by his fingernails. Carlos wanted him, beyond the transient nature of how they circled each other like amorous satellites. He wanted the orbital drop and the finality of impact.

He could taste it in his teeth, and dug his hands in Cecil's hair to hold him steady as he turned his head and bit down hard as he dared.

Cecil's body snapped taut like a cord, still holding Carlos, a statue as he stilled everywhere.

After a moment that teetered dangerously before falling, Cecil took proprietary, rough hold of Carlos's chin, turned his head, and finally finally *finally* dug his teeth in.

The delicate glass cracked and broke, and Carlos' body filled with a cocktail of potent emotion, an injection of industrial grade ardor just taking him like an overdose. It caught in

his heat and spread fire.

Cecil held on with his teeth for a long moment before releasing and clutching Carlos close. "Mine," he growled in Carlos' ear. "Mine, mine, mine, get to keep you now, mine."

Keening, Carlos held on, nodding, his cheek rubbing against Cecil's rougher one. "Yes, yes. Ceec, keep you."

They fucked, cinched so close into each other it turned into a slow, desperate rocking together. The build was slow, and Carlos scarcely noticed, his heat drowned out by the rush of affection he felt as he held Cecil's face between his hands, keeping him close. The way Cecil's gaze unfocused as sensation took him, the air he breathed sharply, it belonged to Carlos now. All his.

"You're so good," Carlos mumbled, his face pressed to Cecil's. "Good to me."

Cecil's eyes fluttered closed, and they drowned in it together for a long time.

It was mid-afternoon by the time they got up again. The fog around Carlos' head was nearly impenetrable, his thoughts blurry and lost in the haze only to be randomly found again. He would have been content to sleep through the rest of the day, but Cecil was bossy and mean and cruel, dragging him upright and into the shower.

Not even a bath, which had Carlos whining through the entire ordeal.

"Oh, stop that," Cecil grouched, spraying Carlos with warm water until he subsided.

"Want a bath." Carlos pressed his nose against Cecil's collarbone.

"You're lucky I'm still standing, I don't have the energy, bunny."

"If we had a bath, you wouldn't have to stand," Carlos pointed out, because he was a scientist, even when his brain felt like it was operating at about 30 percent speed. "That's logic."

"You have lost all authority on reason and logic. I have to retroactively re-examine everything you've told me to check it for hidden madness."

Carlos whined again. "Too many syllables."

When they finished shower and dried, Carlos was installed on the sofa with some pillows and his suppressant pill. He swallowed it peacably and drained the glass of water in a few gulps. Cecil refilled it, and he drained the entire thing again, and felt much better.

When Cecil joined him, he hauled Carlos into his lap, laying back with his legs open, holding Carlos against his chest. His hand curled around Carlos' neck and his thumb pressed down on

the bite mark.

Carlos' eyes crossed, and he keened, squirming.

"I get to keep you now," Cecil promised against his curls. His other hand found its way under the blanket to just touch Carlos *everywhere*. He stroked Carlos' ribs, the ticklish side at his sides, the cut of his pelvic bone, his cock, the sensitive skin of his inner thighs. It was possessive and constantly moving, like Cecil was taking stock.

When he was satisfied, he sighed happily and rested his palm on Carlos' hip. "Soft," he murmured.

Carlos hummed back and dozed, feeling the pattern of Cecil's breathing under him. Sporadically, Cecil's thumb stroked his neck, sending a little rush of feeling through him.

Later, his heat picked and pushed at him, until he rolled over and kissed Cecil awake.

"Need you," Carlos said between their mouths.

"All yours," Cecil drawled, eyes just barely open. He moved Carlos, encouraging him onto his knees. "Go on. Take it."

Positioning took a moment, given the narrowness of the sofa, but Carlos sat back on Cecil's cock, the overwhelming slick of him making the glide and stretch easy. He felt made for this, the discrete moment where he got to possess Cecil in this intimate way.

There was a world outside this, where he'd have to let it go.

The thought struck Carlos like a blow and he jolted, reached down to clutch at Cecil's shoulders. Sensing and reacting to his distress, Cecil stroked his skin, humming low and sweet. He cupped Carlos' cheeks.

"You're okay," Cecil soothed. "I've got you. Take it, you're okay."

It was a hectic, anxious thing. Being knotted helped, the rush of endorphins and drenched heat thick in his head. Moreso, when Cecil drew a blanket around him and wrapped him up.

Either due to the bite or how deep in the heat he was, the coherence didn't fully return between waves anymore. Carlos shivered and hitched into Cecil, unsure what else to even do anymore. He was overwhelmed again as soon as the effects wore off.

"Bed?" Carlos asked in a small voice.

"Go on." Cecil kissed his cheek. "I need to heat up food." When Carlos shook his head, he added, "You need to eat, Carlos."

"Stay, please." His senses were so frayed, and the only thing that abated them was Cecil close, Cecil's signature, his warmth.

Sighing, Cecil pulled Carlos to the kitchen, settling him on the stool as he worked. More than once, Carlos reached out for him, silently requesting contact, and was relieved when Cecil stepped in, touching him.

"Almost through," Cecil reassured him. "I can tell, you're almost done."

Closing his eyes, Carlos whined again, wishing that was as much of a comfort as Cecil clearly intended.

The last day was just a blur.

They fucked, and Carlos swallowed something that was food-shaped, then they fucked again. Cecil kissed his forehead several times, letting out worried noises as Carlos just burned up.

The despondency he felt every time Cecil stopped touching him was intense and frightening. "Don't go, don't go," he moaned more than once, and Cecil pushed into his skin to soothe him.

At one point, Cecil went to fetch Carlos something to drink because his throat was so dry it felt like sandpaper. But the minute of separation made Carlos sit up in the nest of blankets and pillows, letting out pained sounds.

It hurt. It *hurt* to be alone, it was agony, like rapid erosion, like crumbling sand castles, he hurt in every joint as he clenched and shuddered.

Cecil fairly knocked Carlos back onto the bed in his haste to touch him. They collided and fell into each other, and Carlos held on tightly.

"Don't leave." And Cecil had to listen, they wore matching bruises on their necks and Carlos almost constantly felt the need to do what Cecil wanted; Cecil *had* to feel the same.

Cecil kissed his forehead and his temple and nodded. "I'm here. I brought you a water bottle, you need to drink, Carlos."

"You take good care of me," Carlos told him, kissing him back.

A winded noise knocked out of Cecil, and he hid his face against Carlos' hair, purring up a storm. Embarrassed and happy was a good look for him, and Carlos adored it.

They stayed in bed the rest of the night, and Carlos was so blindingly relieved. With the wall of pillows and Cecil over him, Carlos couldn't see anything beyond, and that suited him fine. The observable universe was small and warm and littered with tenderness. Cecil nursed his heat with kisses, diligent and kind.

"You know what Dana said," Carlos whispered into the dark burrow they'd built. "She said heats were fun. What a fucking liar."

Cecil laughed, too loud for the quiet lounging. "Did you not have fun?"

"It was..." His nose wrinkled as he thought, trying to pick through the haze to examine the details. "I don't know. It made me kind of..." He frowned deeply.

"Mm." Cecil licked at his jaw for a moment, then lifted his head to look down at Carlos. "An invitation."

"That's a very *you* way to phrase something," Carlos noted. "An invitation to what?"

"Home," Cecil admit softly. "I always got that sense from you, though." He didn't let the words sit there long enough to be examined, sighing and propping himself up on his elbows. "The next one will be easier for you. I think given the rather unusual circumstances around your presenting, you're doing fine." He paused for a beat, blinking. "Mostly."

"Mostly?" He tried not to sound offended.

Cecil looked down at him, and very deliberately arched and kissed Carlos' neck. The sensation shivered through him, and Cecil breathed out slowly. "It's partly my fault. I should have kept you from messing with it so much. You're like a teething kitten."

Oh. A chill crawled up Carlos' spine. "Are... you upset?"

"If I was half the alpha I pretend to be, I would have kept a tighter rein on myself. I knew what you were like already, and I just gave into how-- I didn't stop you like I should have. It was poor behavior."

Carlos squinted at him and nudged his side with his knee. "Are you *upset*?"

His eyes lowered to Carlos' neck, then dragged reluctantly back to his eyes. "I just... don't think you *know* what you've done."

"I bit you and it causes a physiological or maybe psychosomatic connection between us, probably reinforced by a chemical reaction caused by--"

Cecil bit him. Carlos yelped, and colored darkly as Cecil smirked down at him.

"You're *incredibly* ... Erm." He looked away.

Cecil's voice brought him back, lovely and velvet. "I'm what?"

"Very..." He searched for the word, the correct term for the way Cecil made Carlos want to roll over and show his neck. Which, come to think of it, he'd literally done a few times in the past week. "You excel at language. What's a word for 'domineering' but without the negative connotation?"

"Mmhmmm." He propped his head up on his hand. "I think it can have... contextual meaning." He smiled. "Hey. You're thinking in full sentences again."

"Oh. It seems I am. That's a relief. Does that mean it's over?"

"Or soon to be. Hmm. You sound..." He walked his fingertips over Carlos' skin. "Trepidatious."

"Confused, mostly." The soft fingertip feeling was nice, but Cecil's skin was far more interesting and it glowed in the dark given proper stimulus. "What day is it?"

Cecil's eyebrows lifted. "Oh. Well. Oh, dear."

There was such surprise in his voice, Carlos paused in his slow exploration of starry freckles. He curled his fingers, dragged his knuckles against Cecil's chest. "Wait. Do you not *know*?"

"Not... immediately, no," Cecil said, pressing the heel of his hand against his brow. "Well. This is unprecedented. Where's my phone?"

Carlos counted, mouthing the days as he considered. "Saturday? I think it's Saturday. Does that seem right?"

To be sure, Cecil checked his phone. "An excellent guess. It's Saturday for another few hours yet."

"Good. Then..." He touched a freckle, and watched the lines that flowed like gold shine from it. "You'll stay tomorrow? We can... recuperate together. Maybe have a full meal for the first time in six days."

"I'm not cooking again," Cecil said, and Carlos' heart skipped a nervous beat before he went on. "I didn't bring any suitable date wear. I wish I thought to bring my furry pants. How about we order something in?"

The smile on Carlos' face was involuntary and brilliant and an utterly welcome intrusion. "I think that's an excellent idea." Because real food sounded great. Because looking at Cecil without a heat fog obscuring him was exciting. Because Carlos had been thinking of the inevitable moment when Cecil had to walk out of this flat and found himself terrified of having to let him go.

Cecil replaced his phone on the bedside table and turned off the light. It was dark, but for the stream of moonlight.

Sleep loomed, and at last without the spectre of his heat waiting to rouse him and demand another round. He was tired and sore pretty much *everywhere* and satisfied down to his bones in a way he'd never felt before.

His life was turning into a long series of new experiences. He couldn't wait to find time to add this one to his personal research logs.

Before that, Carlos hummed as Cecil tucked his face into his neck, clearly getting cozy for sleep.

Into the dark, Carlos whispered, "Thanks for being here. You're good at this."

He could feel Cecil's breath hitch. But he didn't say anything, only held Carlos close, and went to sleep.

Chapter End Notes

CW for carlos being an impetuous lil shit and bond-biting cecil and then cecil doing the same back!!! god that was not in my plan. also Spooky Dream Sex overseen by a mostly benevolent old god. /SHRUGS

Carlos really is just a massive handful aaaaand now Cecil is stuck with him. However will he survive this ordeal.

Gonna probably flip back to *all plans are golden in your hands* for a chapter or two, I have been neglecting it and I miss my grumpy witchy Carlos.

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