

The Last ShadowKnight

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The Last ShadowKnight

by [SLWalker](#)

Summary

(All Time, No Time) - When the multiverse collapses because of the Chilo, what happens to a man that Time can't see? And what is he willing to do, in order to make it back home?

Notes

This is kind of the explanation and perhaps eventually an ending to the Multiverse II round robin on Ad Astra's forum. Both Arnie and Nance were in the first one and were major players in that one; in the second one, Nance would get caught in the collapse, but Arnie -- a living paradox -- notably *wouldn't* be. The Kolshek, knowing what he does to destiny lines, manage to pull him out of their universe in the nick of time.

There're a ton of references in this to Red Dwarf, a variant on Marvel's X-Men 616 timeline, MST3K, Knight Rider, past RP universes, the Round Robins, etc. etc. T'Vel belongs to MirandaFave and is written here with Kev's blessing. Nance belongs to Teddog (Rach) in every way that matters. Many other characters are mentioned; they belong to their respective owners.

Mostly, though, this is a story I started and hope to finish so I can give closure to Arnie J on his original timeline, then his first team; I've been writing him for almost thirty years in some universe or another and after living over three hundred years, he and Nance deserve a happy not-ending. <3 I don't know when it'll be finished. It'll probably be awhile. But here's a bit of the beginning of it, anyway.

Prologue: Gravity and

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Guess we both know we're in over our heads,
We got nowhere to go and no home that's left;
The water is rising on a river turning red,
It all might be okay or we might be dead.
If everything we've got is slipping away,
I meant what I said when I said '*til my dying day*;
I'm holding on to you, holding onto me,
And maybe it's all gone black but you're all I see,
You're all I see.

-Mat Kearney; All I Need

275 (relative) years ago...

He had never been more of a ghost, or more aware of it.

The waiting time between proposition and action hadn't done much to dull the shock of everything. For Rimmer, everyone on the ship died mere hours ago; in real time, it had been over three million more years. He couldn't slot that together in his head. He knew what he had been *told* -- that he and Kryten had been knocked offline, that Holly had set course for the time warp that had started this entire damned mess, that she had been all three million and some odd years working out a solution to the problem -- but much like the last time he'd heard the words, "Everyone's dead," it just didn't make any *sense*.

(The last time, Holly brought him back because Lister was going insane. Rimmer's briefing of the situation was initially Holly saying, "You flubbed up the drive plate repair, everyone's dead but Lister, and he's been drinking himself catatonic on the regular since I let him out of stasis. Been about three million years since then, y'know, radiation and all. Need you to keep him sane, right?" Needless to say, Rimmer hadn't reacted particularly well. Holly had to break it down for him a little more slowly after that.)

Problem. *Problem*. Everyone was dead and she said she had a solution to the smegging *problem*. She'd tried to revive Kryten first, which had led to the mechanoid spouting some kind of stickily gibberish before half of his head melted like a badly sculpted block of cheese left sitting on a dashboard in the sun. Then, probably because there hadn't been another option, she had brought Rimmer back online and told him about it all, and that she had a solution to the *problem*.

He'd gotten a bit hysterical over that particular characterization of things. As if this was something for which there was a solution. It took some time after that, between him pleading with her to take him back offline and her trying to explain causality and how he could change it, for the message to get through the blind desperation.

It was only when she told him that he could *save them* that he finally calmed down enough to latch onto it.

Tell me how, Holly.

It wasn't that Rimmer disbelieved any of it. He just couldn't honestly get his head around it, not in whole. He could only bounce between *everyone's dead* and *you can save them*. The rest couldn't seem to get a look in.

What was the process for mourning when it was all now ancient history, anyway? Was there even a *point* to grief, when he was going to be undoing it all?

Somehow, though, telling himself that there wasn't really any point to going through the whole messy process didn't do anything to keep it at bay. Except, he wasn't sure which step he was on. Weren't there supposed to be five of them? And how much *time* were you supposed to spend on each, really? He wasn't sure he had enough of it left to get a proper start.

Half-heartedly, he sat on his bunk and tried to remember what they were, chewing on a thumbnail until it was a ragged, sore mess. One of the steps was bargaining, he knew. Uhm-- denial? Acceptance, which he definitely wasn't anywhere close to. But he could try that one.

Step one-eighth, he thought, *everyone's dead and--*

There was a cracked little noise of pain, and he realized with some surprise that he'd made it himself. He didn't *need* to breathe, but it was curiously hard to do it anyway. And for a dead man who was made of light and who couldn't actually process too many outside environmental factors, he felt cold down to the bone.

Denial would normally be his first go-to, unless it was particularly inconvenient. Arnold Rimmer was a masterclass champion at denial, he could fit it into almost any situation and hold onto it for any length of time necessary. Except, he was failing pretty badly right now at being in denial. He remembered the threat warning being broadcast, that was a fair piece of evidence that things had gone down exactly as Holly had said they had.

And the bunk above his head was empty and silent, too.

All right, he thought, *everyone's dead and--*

He tried to drag in a handful of slow, careful breaths and then got to work ruining the other thumbnail.

--Holly said I can fix this.

That didn't actually do much to calm him down any. And it had nothing to do with the whole stages-of-grief smeg. Shouldn't there be some kind of-- of funeral? Or-- or a memorial service, at least. Some kind of acknowledgment of the loss?

You were supposed to live to a hundred and seventy-one, he thought, somewhere between plaintive and bewildered, to another dead man, the one who was supposed to snore like a congested baboon above his head.

"Oi! I think I got it!" Holly's voice crashed through his thoughts like a runaway train; when Rimmer jumped half out of his simulated skin, her face on the monitor fell into something that looked dangerously like sympathy. "Sorry, Arn," she went on, more quietly, "Forgot that it's been a few more million years on the clock for me, but only a few hours for you. But I think I got it compressed enough that it won't short out your lightbee."

Holly had been doing something with a program she had written -- he only remembered disconnected pieces of her explanation, something about gravity and nanites and gravity being the key -- and he supposed the reason she hadn't compressed it before now was that she was angling for Kryten to be the one to deploy it. Which, he supposed, made sense; Rimmer tended to willfully forget the fact he was only really software, ultimately, and preferred to live in the denial that was failing him now. And he had always hated -- really, deeply, bitterly *hated* -- when circumstances added up such to remind him that he was nothing more than a really technologically advanced ghost.

It made sense Holly wouldn't want to remind him. At least, he thought it did.

"Okay?" he ventured, once he was able to pry his hand off of his chest, over his heart.

Holly glanced around uncomfortably, but then sighed out and looked back at him. "It's a one way trip. If it works, there's no coming back. We both stop existing, and so does this entire timeline. The one that gets restored in its place will have alternate versions of us, and we'll cease to be." A beat. "I figured I'd walk you through it once you make a choice."

There was a long moment there where they stared at one another. *Didn't I already?* Rimmer wondered, baffled. He didn't *have* any--

Except, he did have choices. He could just *not* go through with it, of course. Or he could insist on holding a memorial service, buying time to talk himself out of what was, for all intents and purposes, a suicide mission. Or he could suggest getting the skutters on trying to fix Kryten; maybe the mechanoid could come up with ideas beyond what a senile computer and a second technician could. He could--

He could--

On the wall of Lister's bunk, there was a picture of the man himself, holding the twins and beaming at the camera while Jim and Bexley bawled their lungs out, only days before he would lose them to their father's universe.

The man Rimmer had been told to keep sane, even if that had often meant them driving each other crazy. The man who thought curry was a food group unto itself. The man who could wreck any room within five minutes and render it a biohazard area.

The man who had gotten Rimmer completely smashed after he came back from the *Enlightenment*, smashed enough to talk about it, and had then looked him dead in the eye and told him that he was a better man than he thought he was.

The last human.

Rimmer looked at that ridiculous, gerbil-faced grin, then closed his eyes and tried to remember that he didn't actually need to breathe.

He had choices, but there was only one choice he could have ever made.

"Kryten probably *would* have been a better pick for this," he said, ruefully, waiting in the hallway outside of the airlock. "I'm not sure I'll remember these internal command prompts right, when the time comes."

"You'll remember them. And I've already disabled the audio-feedback for your footfalls, so that's one less thing you have to worry about." Holly paused a few seconds, then said, "It was always going to be you. I just wanted to wake him up first so you wouldn't wake up all alone."

That actually startled Rimmer out of his contemplation of what the Cat would call a 'shiny blue swirly thing'; he blinked a few times and looked over at Holly. "Really?"

"Yeah." She didn't elaborate, but there was an expression he might have labelled as 'fond' on her face. She pressed a thin smile, then. "We're as close as we can afford to get."

It wasn't as if they couldn't take more time on it. It was that neither of them *wanted* to.

He only nodded; as he passed his hand over the light-sensitive control for the first door, he asked one last question: "Do you think they'll be all right, in the future?"

"I don't know, Arnie," Holly answered, tilting her head in a shrug. "But at least they'll be together."

He carried that with him to the end of his world.

274 (relative) years later...

"I go where you go."

The *Shikra* was getting hammered.

"T'Vel! Release the panel, I'll take nav," Arnie said, sliding into the bridge seat and having to grab the top edge of said panel to stay in that seat when another volley of fire rocked the little ship and the artificial gravity and inertial dampers couldn't keep up with it.

T'Vel had been managing both functions from helm until the battle heated up; on Arnie's other side, Nance was rooted to the floor, gripping the top of the nav console, her teeth bared as she kept shoring up network connections against the Chilo onslaught and directing the Cobalt Crew as they did their best to engage the enemy.

"Are you qualified?"

Somehow, T'Vel managed to sound fairly cool even while the klaxon was wailing and they were being beaten to hell and back. Arnie barked a half a laugh at *that* one. "Failed my astronavs thirteen times, but since I don't have to calculate the coordinates and just input them, I'll manage fine, thank you very much."

The panel lit up as she transferred control back over and when Nance ground out a course-correction, he input it as fast his fingers could fly; the descending sequence keys reminded him of something almost familiar, making it easy for him to adapt.

Below, Scotty was calling out that their number one phaser array was going into the red. Somewhere out there, Hank Harrison was doing god only knew what, after he'd decided to go sacrifice himself. Someone named McGregor -- T'Vel's and Stan's captain -- was involved now. Hell if Arnie knew what was going on, beyond the *Shikra*.

Below on Sanctuary, the rest of this madcap crew was supposedly going to save the universe. Arnie had his doubts; admittedly, though, he was still a little bitter that only Berat had bothered to say goodbye to Nance. The rest of them should have at least *thanked* her for saving their lives multiple times since this mess started. Rudeness shouldn't be rewarded with universe-saving credit.

But they weren't going to be able to try to fix anything if the smegging fishbait broke through the blockade, so here the ShadowKnights had stayed, together, outgunned and outnumbered and not for the first time.

"Lost the first array, shield emitters are goin' offline faster'n I can reroute," Scotty was saying, voice tight and sharp. *"We're gonna lose 'em within the minute."*

No one really had time to answer, but Arnie did anyway, even as he was adjusting the *Shikra*'s trajectory on T'Vel's orders in an attempt to evade the worst of it: "Just do your best. We're at least making them work for it."

What else could he say? Their best was hopelessly outclassed. And when one of the Cobalt Crew went spinning across the screen in flames, Nance flinched.

All that was really left for any of them was holding the line until it dissolved out from under them.

And then, it did.

"Shields are down. Second array's goin' red." A beat. *"I'm divertin' everything we've got into impulse and maneuverin' and I'll keep her together as long as I can. We can dodge. Or not."*

Another hard slam made the lights flicker; even Nance, held in place by her hardlight tech, staggered against it. It wasn't a mortal wound *yet*, but *yet* was fast-approaching.

"Set course for 2851 point 2," T'Vel said, in the wake of it, sounding decidedly grim for a Vulcan.

Even having failed his astronavs thirteen times, Arnie knew what she was aiming at. He glanced over at her; took in the almost fierce look in her eyes as she looked back, and then he nodded and turned back to do that.

For a split second, he remembered why the descending sequence was familiar and what the Linotype's keys felt like under his fingers as he

plotted in the course, and even in the midst of all of this, he smiled to himself for it.

e-t-a-o-i-n s-h-

“Collision course?” Nance asked, voice still strained, hologram flickering sharply and passing her hand through the console before she yanked it out and managed to shore up her hardlight drive.

“The timeship,” Arnie and T’Vel answered in unintentional unison; the former hoping she wouldn’t order him to belay that. And also hoping she would. Either way, he’d do whatever she said.

If the motley crew below managed not to cock it up, they would see the other side of this eventually. It might just mean sacrificing their lives first.

Nance didn’t countermand the order, though; instead, she said, “I’m ordering Elaine and the Cobalt Crew to back off.”

Arnie wouldn’t remember much of what happened next; wouldn’t remember what actually got them, the enemy’s weapons or a collision. Whether they took the timeship out with them. Wouldn’t remember the process of actually *dying* again, though he was entirely aware that he did. That *they* did. And that it was, appropriately, explosive.

But he wouldn’t ever forget reaching out and grabbing Nance’s hand, and her holding on back.

Part I

Part 1:

Chara II, present day

In the hazy moments between dreaming and waking, not quite one or the other yet, he thought she'd left. So, he did what had rapidly become automatic and cast a clumsy hand out to her side of the bed, expecting cold sheets, and was therefore pleasantly surprised to knock against warm skin.

Nance didn't need the same amount of sleep Arnie did; even now, with her hardlight hologram and a very detailed frame of reference for what it was to live in human skin thanks to her foray into the past, she still only averaged about five hours a night to his eight or nine. Sometimes more, though rarely. Sometimes less. Her staying in bed until he woke up wasn't a guarantee, nor would he ask her to. Combined with his tendency to turn limpet in bed -- something he hadn't learned about himself until over *three centuries* had passed -- and they were still working out the fine points of being in a committed romantic relationship.

It probably didn't help anything that they kept getting yanked apart; that every time they managed to get some traction, some other crisis popped up. It put an uneasy edge on everything they did, even as they tried hard to achieve some kind of stability.

At least it was an edge they navigated together, instead of a wedge to drive them apart.

"I have a barnacle for a boyfriend," Nance commented, her smile in her voice, as she took his hand and picked his arm up so she could wiggle under it and back up against him.

Arnie not only wrapped that arm around her once she was settled, he threw a leg over her, too. Though that might have been to avoid retaliation as he asked, grinning into the hair on the back of her head, "Don't those usually attach to whales?"

"Better to be the whale than the parasite." She freed a hand from the tangle of limbs and gave his hair a quick and painless tug, not quite payback.

"Oh, I don't know, Nance. It doesn't sound too bad." He smirked, squeezing on her. "Attaching myself to your skin and getting a free ride?"

He hadn't even opened his eyes yet, but since he could all but *hear* her eye roll back, he figured he might have won that round.

That was, until she shifted enough in his arms to look at him; when he did pry his eyes open, she was smiling that pleasant sort of smile that always -- *always* -- meant she was about to verbally obliterate him. "You're long past due for a new callsign. How's Barnie-cle sound?"

It took him a few seconds gaping incredulously before he could reply, with some awe, "Like absolute unholy hell."

She quirked her eyebrows, entirely smug; he waved the metaphorical white flag by stuffing his face into the pillow and laughing hard enough that it made his chest ache.

Still, while he had already learned that he couldn't leave any sucker-bites on her hardlight skin, once he was done laughing he made a valiant attempt to, in decidedly nonverbal retaliation.

It had turned out that weekends didn't come naturally to either of them. The simple act of *not* working left them both at a loss. The renewal -- or building -- of their romantic relationship had largely taken place in the spaces between their respective duties, and if that wasn't a recipe for hardship, a *lot* had happened in the past year and a half or so. Ever since they had been kidnapped out of their universe and turned into labrats for the Chilo, they had been trying to tread in unknown waters.

Complicating matters, the shift in their relationship had taken place *during* that god awful time. And when they were dropped back into the same moment they'd been taken from, Arnie remembered everything, but Nance *hadn't*.

That had ranked up there, in terms of awful and bitter moments he'd faced; he had snatched for her hand across the briefing room table, disoriented and -- according to Nance -- paler than the ghost he often acted, and his fingers had gone right through hers.

He had been following the impulse he'd had as the *Shikra* had gone up like the antimatter bomb it was, expecting her hardlight hand to hold on back. When it clicked that she couldn't, his stomach had hit the floor.

Nance was clearly worried at that moment; she just as clearly didn't remember any of it. In a panic, he'd managed to excuse himself long enough to go and piece together what he could. He dodged her concern for a few days, enlisting a very reluctant Phil to cover for him, and once he'd confirmed that Scott didn't remember either, he'd gone back to his cabin and paced and argued with his most-talkative poltergeist about whether or not to tell Nance about what had happened to them.

And what had happened *between* them.

Then, before he had time to try to tell her, the journal had been found that detailed that they had a rogue ShadowKnight who had used Nance's knowledge of the Guardian of Eternity to go back into the past, in order to kill Nance's parents and ShadowKnight's future. Nance, naturally, had enlisted Andy and Scott and had gone back in time herself to keep her parents alive, leaving Arnie behind to guard the homefront.

At some point, the timeline had destabilized, and once again, Arnie was the only one left who remembered how things were supposed to be. And the only one who carried the memories of that defunct timeline when returned to their own, as Nance's mission succeeded.

Still, after passing back through the Guardian, Nance's memory of the pocket universe had returned. And then he'd had no choice but to come clean about remembering himself.

There was nothing that *wasn't* harrowing about all of that.

Arnie had spent most of the last century in neutral. He worked, he handled a majority of ShadowKnight's covert operations planning for the field, he trained new recruits so that they would live to come back home. He had long-since been given the informal title of Field Commander, which was a legacy he was proud of, even if he was the only one who knew why. He acted as Nance's hands and occasionally as her weapon, be it to cut regular rebellion leaders down to size or to carry out missions that no one else was able to, the delicate stuff that some two-and-three-quarters centuries training was required to do.

It wasn't that he was miserable or anything, because he wasn't; he just wasn't too emotionally engaged with any of it. The days -- and months, and eventually years -- blurred together, undifferentiated from each other except by the occasional stand-out moment. Work was his purpose and his hobby; he didn't draw, or paint, or pick up his sax, or any of the things he used to occasionally do to pretend he had a life outside of whatever the day's duties were.

The Chilo kidnapping had kicked him into gear with all of the smoothness of a clapped out Morris Marina.

It was the memories that the whole bloody affair had dredged out of the depths; a sharp renewal of the emotional engagement he'd managed to avoid. And it was impossible to be disengaged when Nance looked at him like he was worth wrecking an entire multiverse for.

That wasn't the first time they had saved one another, but it had been a long, long time since those dark days.

Once they both had their memories back, they had started making a go of it; of shifting lifetimes worth of friendship into something more romantic. And in that arena, neither of them were experts; Arnie had precisely two love affairs behind him (and put together, their duration was less than an Earth solar day!), and Nance had none and was only just getting used to having a physical form. Sex had been awkward, though heartfelt, and there was always a sort of quiet desperation that lingered over them no matter how slowly they went, that something would come along and obliterate this thing they were trying to build together.

Then, fairly recently, Nance went missing again. Vanished entirely. Arnie had been beside himself. Somehow, between him and Phil, they managed to keep ShadowKnight afloat and working, but the stress of it had left him so shaken that once she reappeared several weeks later -- alive, unharmed, but emotionally wrecked -- Phil had ordered them both to get the hell away from headquarters and rest.

Thus, the weekends.

What had started as an order by their CMO had recently turned into a tentative attempt to be *normal*. Or, as close to normal as they could get. Arnie's cabin on his mountain had gotten more use the past month than it usually got in a half-year's time, since he often slept in his old room or Nance's new one at the base. He now actually bothered to stock some groceries and build up his firewood pile for the rapidly approaching winter. They talked more shop than was probably healthy, but they slept in the same bed and wove around each other in the kitchen and cuddled on the couch sometimes.

Just like real people did.

He drifted back from his brief, post-coital siesta to Nance tracing the band of scars left around his wrist from the Chilo stringing him up; she did that, sometimes, especially when she was feeling pensive. It wasn't the first time he'd felt her fingers mapping out old wounds, as if she could erase them or at least apologize for them; she knew where and when he had gotten the majority of them, after all. Even if Arnie didn't pay much mind to them himself.

"They'll fade," he said, offhandedly, freeing his hand just so he could reach over and tuck her hair behind her ear. Outside, the low gray light of dawn was starting to show through the window, which meant the weekend was over and it was back to headquarters in an hour or so.

"You still have that one on your side from two hundred years ago," Nance pointed out, sliding her hand under the blanket just to trace it.

"If you think that was bad, you should have seen the teeth marks I left in my belt when Daanish stitched it up. Much more impressive." It had been a parted guy wire that had whipped across his side while he was disabling a trap, back in the days when he measured his life by his missions south of the Canadian border. It was also the first time he'd bled as a rebel, and the first time he'd ever gotten stitches without so much as a local. Memorable, yes. Pleasant? Absolutely *not*. "It's pretty faded now, though. And I don't regret it."

"I know." She propped her head on her hand, resting on her elbow, and just because he could, Arnie mirrored her. Then she reached up and brushed the backs of her knuckles lightly against the line of his jaw. "I don't know where this one's from. Or the one on your back."

Those two were almost as old as he was, and unlike the ones he'd picked up since his return to flesh and blood, those left from his first life hadn't really faded over the years. He didn't know why they were the exception. "Nothing so exciting as rebellion," he said, grinning a little, sliding his fingers up and down her forearm and marvelling even now that he could feel the fine hairs projected there. "I got attacked with a VHS case. A childhood squabble about which movie to watch with an old acquaintance."

Nance raised an eyebrow, looking amused despite her pensiveness; she didn't ask about the anachronism of a man born in 2149 still using VHS tapes. "And here I thought it was going to be something daring," she teased, deadpan. "What about the other one?"

My brothers stuck a live land-mine in my sandpit when I was six; give it a couple inches and I probably would have been paralyzed, wasn't the kind of answer Arnie wanted to give her. That opened doors to places he wouldn't wish anyone through, let alone Nance. Hell, let alone himself.

So, instead of answering, he leaned over and pressed a kiss to her brow before divesting himself of the warm blankets. "I have to go shower and shave."

"Yeah," Nance answered, but he still felt the look -- maybe sad, maybe knowing, probably both -- all the way out the door.

Okay. Leave one thing at home, he thought, staring at the array of survival gear sitting neatly on the kitchen counter, down from where Nance was making tea.

This *shouldn't* have been a problem, since he was standing in his own kitchen, on Chara II, a half-hour drive from their base and as safe as anyone could possibly be in this universe. But after that whole business where the Chilo snatched them from said base in the middle of a morning briefing, Arnie had taken to carrying all of his emergency survival gear on him, making use of all those jumpsuit pockets.

Just in case they were kidnapped from their lives without warning again. It wasn't like there wasn't precedent now.

Admittedly, most of it wouldn't have made much difference on that particular kidnapping, because they were in space, or floating around in subs on an ocean moon, or being held captive and tortured, but having it still made him feel better now. There were some things he carried before while in uniform (handlight, fireflash, bo) and there were a few common-sense things he added after that which he wouldn't stop carrying (boot-knife, paracord), but some of it *was* probably just a teensy-tiny bit extreme.

He looked over the array and chewed on his lip, then switched to chewing on his thumbnail and tried to figure out what to leave behind.

It was taking a lot more willpower than it should have to keep from pacing back and forth.

"Still getting to you?" Nance asked, as she finished pouring the tea into the thermos so they could sip on it on the way to work.

The tone was sympathetic; when Arnie looked up from his rather hopeless attempt to whittle his survival gear down from 'highly paranoid' to 'within the realm of sensible', she had a mild wince written on her features. Phil had taken them both to task -- separately, thank everything -- and while Arnie didn't know what Phil had said to Nance, if it was anywhere near as hard to swallow as what Phil had said to *him*, she was probably still struggling with it herself. "Yes," he answered, after a moment, looking back over the gear on the counter and wrestling with half a dozen nervous ticks. Then he blew a frustrated breath out. "I think he's made me more paranoid, not less."

Nance, probably wisely, didn't make a comment on that; she just capped the thermos, then came over and leaned next to him, back to the counter.

The sight of sunlight through the window catching her hair, setting the color ablaze, made him smile despite everything. It was enough to knock the edge off his frustration, anyway, and after a moment he turned and leaned next to her, adding, "I'd leave the fishing gear, but we *were* on an ocean moon--"

"With a replicator," Nance answered dryly, crossing her arms and bumping her shoulder off of his affectionately. "I wonder if our tech in this universe will ever catch up to that. Scotty mentioned that it seemed to be related to transporter technology while we were building the frame to lift the *Shikra*. But he didn't know too much about it, either." There was a long moment there where she was no doubt thinking about the engineer and all of the pain that went with him, then she sighed out quietly. "Phil told me that recovery isn't a linear process."

Arnie would have been happy -- no, *thrilled* -- to have discussed replicator tech all morning, if he could have dodged the whole mental health thing. A lifetime of habit had him wanting to go *recovery from what?* But the fact he had an entire cache of survival gear laid out on the counter and couldn't seem to bring himself to leave even a single piece of it at home without getting anxious made that a willfully foolish question, and Nance deserved better than that. At least she was up front about the fact she had issues to work out, when she was able to recognize them. Which made one of them.

It felt like they were trying to pick their way through a mine-field, and even though Arnie knew very well that he'd dug the majority of those himself, he didn't always remember where or how to get through them.

Or how to disarm them, for that matter.

"The network connections?" he asked, because while that wasn't exactly a 'safe' topic, it was safer than anything he had to bring to the table; Nance had been talking about it since she'd been jerked into another temporal anomaly. It was a sore and painful subject for her, but one she had been willing to try to discuss.

She nodded, gaze on their shadows on the brightly polished floor. "Every time I open one, I half expect to get yanked away." A beat. "And-- maybe even hope, a little, that I will. And it's still hard to close down the connections knowing that I'm going to have to re-open them later."

"Even on safe networks."

"Yeah."

It hadn't seemed to sink in after the incident with the Chilo in the pocket universe, but then again, Nance hadn't remembered until months after

it happened. But the second snatching -- unintentional as it apparently was -- seemed to cement both events into a kind of anxiety, which in itself was rather unprecedented. It wasn't that Nance had never felt anxiety before, Arnie knew full well she had, but never the kind that couldn't be resolved by action. Before, she'd always been able to do something about her fears. Now, they kept looping back around, catching her off-guard each time and offering no resolution.

He wished he knew what to tell her about managing it, but most of the techniques he'd picked up over the years himself were proving--decidedly unreliable of late. Repression wasn't working. Emotional detachment only went so far these days; he'd loved Nance for centuries, but being *in love* with her opened doors he'd half forgotten existed and couldn't bring himself to close again.

And his ability to compartmentalize had gotten spotty, though it still worked enough for him to at least function in their day-to-day. Even if that required a whole array of wilderness survival gear laid out on the counter *just in case*.

"I'm supposed to be adaptable," Nance said; the note of weary bewilderment in her voice made his heart ache. "I'm *written* to be adaptable. To analyze variables, and make value judgments. But I just keep coming back to this over and over again, and no matter how many times I tell myself that it doesn't make any sense to keep assigning such a threat-level to something that's only happened twice, and that we both survived..."

She trailed off there, tightening her arms against her chest.

This kind of scene had played out enough times of late that Arnie at least had some idea of what to do, even if not as much of one as he wished. He reached out and took her shoulders and drew her in close; rested his cheek to her hair and breathed in the clean, thunderstorm scent of her before saying, honestly, "I'd fix it, if I knew how."

"I know," Nance answered, sliding her arms around him in turn and pressing her face into his shoulder. "This helps, though."

That was a truth for both of them. The simple act of just holding on. It didn't erase the anxiety, but at least in moments, it made it bearable. Breathing room, maybe; wrapped around each other, that meant nothing would really come between them, and if they had survived this long, then maybe nothing *could*.

"I think I'll leave the fishing gear," Arnie said, squeezing Nance a bit, after a long moment where the only sound was of them breathing.

"The trout of Chara II all heave a watery sigh of relief," Nance quipped back, right on cue, but she held on a little tighter herself.

They bantered back and forth some after that -- whales and barnacles came up again, of course -- as they got ready to head back to work for the day; as Arnie pushed the mint-tin sized fishing kit to the back of the counter and put the rest of his survival gear in the various pockets of his jumpsuit before grabbing his fall field coat, and as Nance grabbed the thermos, then took a deep breath and opened up her network connection to ShadowKnight's servers.

Only minutes before the end of everything.

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