

## INFRARED AND ULTRAVIOLET

The first time it happened, it was reflex, pure and simple. I didn't even know I could do it. I remember it like it happened five minutes ago, it's that vivid. It was a dark and stormy night. No, really. It happened during a summer shower in the middle of the night on a Friday. I had walked to the skeezy gas station down the street from my apartment building. It was about eleven-thirty p.m. and I was all out of cigarettes. I figured I could either go to bed, or go to the store, but I sure as hell wasn't gonna sit around with that nicotine bug crawling over my skin.

I passed this couple outside the store as I entered. I remember them specifically because the chick got all up in my face for nodding at them.

"The hell are you looking at?" she snapped, throwing her arms out in the traditional "you wanna go?" gesture.

I swear, it took all I had not to get right up in her business too. I took karate for eight years. Come at me, bitch. But anyways. Not the point. So I get to the store, I buy my cigarettes, Pyramids. (They're cheap. Fight me.) I start looking around for something to eat. All I'd had that day was a pack of instant ramen that my roommate would never notice had gone missing. I really needed to hit up the grocery store. Still do.

So, I'm looking for a quick carb fix and find it in a party-sized bag of spicy Doritos. For good measure, I grab a Mountain Dew too. Pitch Black had just made a comeback, and I was all about it. I go up to the register to pay the bored looking dude behind the counter.

"Hey man," I said, and tossed my stuff down. He wasn't looking at me though. Annoyed, I turned to see what was so much more interesting than my midnight munchies, and found myself staring down the barrel of a thirty-eight special revolver. "Whoa," I said. I'm nothing if not eloquent.

"Hands up, asswipe," said the man in the black ski mask. It was such a cliché: man in ski mask robs convenience store in sketchy part of city, yet my heart was pounding like the bass in the EDM songs I prayed I'd get to listen to again.

I raised my hands, never taking my eyes off the gun. "All I wanted was cigarettes," I found myself saying.

"Shut up!" said the guy. "Empty your pockets, come on."

I remember thinking, can I reason with this dude? It couldn't hurt to try. Then again, yeah it could. "I'm getting out my wallet, okay?" I said as calmly as I could, holding up a hand to show I meant no harm. I pulled out my ratty Legend of Zelda wallet and handed it over. The guy rifled through it and pulled out all fourteen dollars I had in cash, then threw it aside. I breathed a silent sigh of relief. At least he wasn't interested in my debit card, which had about eighty bucks in its account.

"Look," I said, "I don't care that-"

"I told you to shut up!" screamed the guy, and a second man appeared over his shoulder.

"I got the safe in the back," he said. "Get the register and let's go!"

"Right. Get on your knees." The gun was in my face. Karate lessons came back to me, and I lunged for the weapon, but the second guy saw me coming, and unfortunately for me, he had his own gun. A big one.

“Are you fucking kidding me?” he yelled, and shoved me down. “You wanna die, bitch? You wanna die?”

It was in that moment that I was sure my life was over. I heard the blast of the gun. My ears were ringing from the sound, but everything else was silent. I had squeezed my eyes shut and I was sure that the moment I opened them, I'd be dead.

I guess curiosity is one of my vices, because I had to look. And what I saw wasn't possible. Inches from my face was a bullet, suspended in midair. Scrambling to my feet, I backed the hell up. The two goons with guns were still standing there, apparently stunned in disbelief. That's when I realized that they weren't moving either. Nothing was. Even the shitty rap the dude behind the counter was listening to had stopped.

There was an old-school analogue clock on the wall behind the dude, and the second hand was frozen in between the ten and eleven. I put it together then. Somehow, in some way, I stopped time.

Yeah. I thought the same thing you're thinking. That it's insane, I was dreaming, or high, or something. But I definitely wasn't asleep, and I'd been sober for like three months. Go me. So this was all very, very real. I had no idea how I'd done it though. Or, for that matter, how long it would last. Priority number one was getting as far away from this place as I could.

I stepped out of the path of the bullet that should have hit me right between the eyes, and grabbed my wallet. I was almost out the door when I had the thought. What the hell were these guys' deals, anyway? They would've killed me in cold blood. I stomped back over to the guy who would have shot me and looked him over. My fourteen bucks was crammed in the pocket of his jacket. I took the liberty of retrieving that. Then, for good measure, I checked to see if *he* had a wallet. Score.

I extracted it from his back pocket, careful not to touch his skin. I don't know, maybe I'd seen too many sci-fi movies, but I didn't think it was a good idea to touch him. What if he woke up? But nothing happened. The guy was solidly in stasis.

Going through his wallet, which held no cash at all, I discovered something that brought a smile to my face. The dude had brought his driver's license. Idiot. I swiped it and placed it on the counter, wrapping it in receipt tape. In perky letters, I wrote “For police. This is the guy who robbed the store.” I added a cheeky little heart for style. Why not?

Now to get out of here. I grabbed my cigarettes and food and booked it out the door. Under the awning of the store was the couple from before, frozen in the middle of an argument. The girl who had bitched at me stood with her arms outstretched. In one hand, she held an iced coffee.

The temptation was too much for me. I pried it from her cold fingers and opened the lid. Then, I placed it upside down on her head. I didn't linger long, but as I walked away, I couldn't help my laughter. It echoed down the empty street. I was alive!

Rain, like fat, round diamonds, floated in midair. I left a trail of empty space as I walked through it. By the time I got home, I was soaked, but I didn't care. I was alive, I had food, and a brand new superpower. Speaking of which, I needed to figure out how to unfreeze time. A harrowing thought struck me. What if time *never* unfroze?

I couldn't think that way. If I had stopped time, there *had* to be a way to put it right. I went up the three flights of stairs to my apartment and stuck the key in the lock. The door was sticky,

as usual, and I practically had to break it down to get in. Everything was dark, and instinctively, I flipped on the lightswitch, but nothing happened. I guess electricity isn't a thing while time is stopped. That sucked, since it was the middle of the night. I stepped forward and bashed my shin into the kitchen table. This apartment was so small.

I navigated my way through the kitchen and almost had a heart attack when I reached the hallway. A humanoid figure loomed out of the darkness before me. After getting a closer look, I realized it was just Duane, my roommate.

Duane was thirty-one, older than me by about eight years, and he was kind of creepy. Never to me though, he knew I was gay and was totally respectful of that, so it worked out. He was the kind of guy who wore a big black trenchcoat wherever he went. Long hair, tons of tattoos, death metal t-shirts... he even had a gold tooth. But he was nothing but nice to me, even when I took forever in the shower or stole his food.

I eased my way around him, which was not as simple as it sounds. It was a narrow hallway, and Duane isn't the skinniest dude. Luckily, I'm a living skeleton. I guess I got good genes, because I can inhale half a pizza and not gain a pound. I swear, Duane just looks at food and gets bigger. Poor guy. I mean, neither of us really work out, and honestly, I eat trash, so I'm just as likely as him to die of a heart attack when I'm forty.

My room was at the end of the hallway, and I shut the door behind me when I got in. I couldn't see anything, so I felt my way to the bed and climbed up the ladder to sit on the edge. I had a loft bed, which was over my desk. Like I said, this apartment was really, really small.

Now that I was situated on the bed, my legs dangling off the side, I could work on returning the world to normal. But how was I supposed to do that? I didn't even know how I managed to stop time in the first place. "Maybe I'm dead," I said to myself. In the silence, my voice sounded unnaturally loud.

I raised my hands and thrust them forward, willing time to start again. Nothing happened. Okay, so that was a bust. What about speaking aloud? "Time will start again!" Nope. The only thing that happened there was that I sounded like an idiot.

I tried everything I could think of over the next few hours, but nothing worked. Time remained stuck in place. My stomach rumbled, and I realized I hadn't eaten my Doritos yet. I also desperately needed a smoke.

After jumping down from the bed, I grabbed my chips and cigarettes and went out to the tiny porch that overlooked the back alley. The city was silent. It was so weird. I mean, it's not like this was Boston or something, with a bazillion people and constant traffic. This was Manchester, but still, it was strange. Usually at this time of night, you could hear bass thumping from cars driving by, or maybe a party dying down. But now, nothing.

I flicked my lighter and lit up my cigarette, taking a long drag. Sweet nicotine. Yeah I know, it'll kill me someday, it's bad for you, blah blah blah. Something's gonna kill me eventually. Might as well be this.

I kind of gave up on trying to start time again. I was hungry, tired, and despite the summer air, cold. I finished my Doritos and Mountain Dew, and went inside. If time was still frozen in the morning, well, I'd figure it out then. Right then, I needed sleep. After throwing away my trash and stubbing out my cigarette in the ashtray, I climbed into bed and tried to pass out.

Maybe it was the caffeine, or maybe it was the crap I'd been through at the gas station, but I couldn't sleep. I tossed and turned for a while in the quiet. Hell, maybe that was it. Without the sounds of the city, it was downright eerie.

I guess I must have fallen asleep eventually, because I woke up to a blast of light and sound. Groggy, I checked my phone. It was twelve forty-seven. In my not-quite-awake state, I wondered how that was possible. I had slept for at least a couple hours, right? Then I remembered that time had stopped. Of course it was still the same time.

Cupboards opening and closing reminded me that Duane was still up. Had he noticed anything? I went to find out.

"Hey dude," I said, coming up behind him in the kitchen.

Duane jumped about two feet off the ground. "Jaz!" he said, and I could tell he'd been smoking more than cigarettes. "How'd you get over there? I thought you went to the store."

Oh shit. "Uh, you must not've heard me come back in," I said, shrugging.

"Damn," he said, frowning. "I gotta cut back on the weed."

"Yeah you do. But you've been saying that for months."

He laughed. "You know it."

I eyed him as he rummaged through the cabinets, no doubt searching for a snack. "Hey, Duane," I said, trying to keep it casual. "Did anything weird happen tonight?"

His eyes got so wide, it was almost funny. "Yeah, man, did you see that lightning strike down the street? I'm surprised there ain't a fire." I must have visibly relaxed, because Duane frowned and looked me over. "Why? Something up?"

"Nah. I thought I heard a gunshot, that's all."

"Oh man, yeah, lightning can sound like that! You must've heard it from the store!"

"Yeah, that must be it." Little did he know... "Okay dude, just checking in. I'll see you 'round." I was still tired as hell and wanted nothing more than to go back to bed. I could figure stuff out in the morning.

It was a good thing I was off on Saturdays, because I slept for like ten hours. It was almost noon by the time I woke up. I knew what I was doing today: stopping time. Duane usually worked weekends, so I had the apartment to myself.

The living room couch creaked and groaned when I threw myself down on it. The thing was probably older than me. "Okay," I said out loud. "Time will stop... now!"

It didn't.

I shouldn't have been disappointed. Maybe I could only do it when I was about to die. That gave me an idea.

I threw on my Converse shoes that were pretty much falling apart and headed down the stairs. My car sat on the street, eyeing me sadly through dirty headlights. I only ever really drove to work anymore, and they did not pay me enough to drive for pleasure. I patted it on the hood as I walked by. Maybe next time.

It was a long walk from central to the river, but it's not like I couldn't use the exercise. When I reached the railroad trestle, I ducked under the 'no trespassing' sign and wandered out over the bridge.

Water rushed below me as I leaned over the edge, staring into the choppy blackness. One wrong move and I was toast. Worse than toast. I'd be-

“Hey!”

I slipped and just barely caught myself before I went over. Time, I'd like to point out, kept right on rolling. I turned to see a cop on the other side of the bridge beckoning me to come over.

“Are you freakin' serious?” I yelled. “Who yells when someone's standing on the edge of a bridge?” As the words came out, I realized how it must have looked. “Look,” I said. “I'm not crazy or suicidal or anything, I was just-” Just what? Trying to stop time? Yeah, that didn't sound crazy at all.

“You're not supposed to be over here,” said the cop when he saw that I wasn't trying to throw myself over the edge. He glared at me, and I glared right back. I had almost died! That was twice in as many days. “Move along,” he said, sounding like a stormtrooper out of Star Wars.

“Whatever,” I muttered and began the long trek back home. As I trudged, I thought about what happened. Once my ragefire died down a little bit from the cop incident, I started to wonder if me stopping time was nothing more than a fluke. Maybe I really did hallucinate it or something. A weird side effect from nicotine withdrawal? Maybe I had never actually gotten sober, and this was all some bad trip I was stuck in.

I decided to put it behind me. There was no point in thinking about it anymore. What happened happened, and that was it. Whether it was a fluke, a miracle, or a bad trip, the point is it was over.

When I got home, I flopped on the couch and watched mindless hours of tv until Duane came home. He joined me, though he put on some random anime that I had never seen before. I could never get into anime, but I didn't care right now. I'd watch anything just for something to do.

The week dragged on. I went to work at the pizza place, then I came home and did nothing each day. By the time Friday came around again, I had almost forgotten about the gas station. Almost. I had dreams about it a couple times. Apparently having a gun shoved in your face is actually traumatizing. Who knew?

I had just come home from work on Friday and was ready to crash. I'd worked later than usual that day. The boss guilt-tripped me into it, citing the fact that I had weekends off. Joke's on him, I hit overtime hours.

So get this: I grab my cigarettes and go out to the porch to smoke, and I'm just relaxing, talking to Duane who was blazing it once again, when he suddenly stops talking. But it was more than that. All the sound in the world seemed to stop, and I was left with a deafening silence in my ears. The entire city went dark, at least from what I could see.

I jumped up. It was real. Or was it? I pressed the end of the lit cigarette to my arm. If that didn't wake me up, nothing would. Nope. It burned hot. I yelped and threw it aside. I looked at Duane. He was frozen with his mouth open, the smoke from his joint oddly solid. I took it from him and stubbed it out.

It struck me then that I was alone. More alone than I had ever been. Now, I'd always been a bit of a loner. Sure, I had friends, but no close ones. Most of them went off to college after high school, leaving me home with a shitty mom and no dad. I bailed as fast as I could, got a couple jobs, and started working. But working as much as I did didn't leave much time for making friends. Duane was really all I had.

That's what made me do what I did then. I extended my hand, then grasped his wrist. I was so sure he would pop into existence with me, but nothing happened. He just sat there. "Damn it," I muttered. This would have been a lot easier to deal with if I'd had company. And Duane would've been a hoot. He was as high as the moon, I can't even imagine what he would have said. He'd probably have some crazy, wacko theory. Or come up with wild suggestions for what we should do.

That got me thinking. Why shouldn't I make the most of this? I thought back to the two goons who'd almost done me in. If they could stop time, no one would get hurt while they robbed places. It would be the perfect crime.

I stood up. No harm in trying it out, right? But I had to be quick about it. There was no telling when time would start moving again. I hurried down the stairs and into the street. A car had been passing my apartment building when time stopped. Tiny pieces of gravel were suspended in midair behind the tires, which were just slightly oval-shaped. I touched one of the pieces, and it skittered to the ground. But there would be time to mess around later. Right now, I was headed to the gas station.

When I got there, I saw that the same bored, teenage clerk from last Friday was working tonight. He was caught in time staring down at his phone. I'll admit, I thought about messing with him. I mean, the guy couldn't even give me a warning that there was some goon with a gun right behind me. But that wasn't why I was here.

Truth be told, I was broke as hell. I'd been living off ramen noodles and the food Duane was nice enough to split with me. And I was sick to death of freakin' ramen. So yeah, I stole the money out of the register. There wasn't much, only about a hundred bucks, and most of it was in fives or singles. Then I remembered the second goon. "I got the safe," he had said. There was a safe.

I moseyed my way over to the back room, grabbing a few bags of chips and some candy in the process. I found the safe, sitting blatantly under the manager's desk. After a five-second search, I found a large ring of keys hanging on the wall. Only the finest gas station security. It didn't take long to find the right key and open the safe. Score.

Hell, it was better than a score. This was the real deal. There had to be like, ten thousand bucks in there! Too excited to walk, I went flying towards the register, grabbing a stack of plastic bags. I loaded up three with the little envelopes they used to store large chunks of cash, then put my chips and candy on top of them so nobody could see I had all that cash. Then, I remembered that time was stopped. Even knowing that, nothing could stop the frantic rush of my heartbeat, or the quickening of my breath. But there was something else I couldn't stop as I left the gas station and ran in the direction of home: my smile.

I counted it all when I was safe in my room, sitting cross-legged on the bed. Time had stopped earlier than the first time, and it was about midnight now. Anyways, you don't care about that. You wanna know how much I scored. Thirteen thousand, six-hundred and fifty-two.

Yeah. I was rich. I could go where I wanted, buy what I wanted, dress how I wanted... And that's when the reality of my situation *really* hit me. I could quit my job at Papa Giano's. A little pang shot through me. Did I really want to quit? As much as I complained about it, it was a halfway decent place to work, even if they didn't pay us enough.

No, no, I decided. I would still work. But maybe less hours. That wouldn't be suspicious, right? I couldn't stop staring at the money on the bed. It was mine now. Well, I mean, I could share with Duane. I could treat my coworkers to a night out. Maybe donate some of it to the homeless guy who hung out down at the end of the street. What? A little guilty? Me? Okay, yeah, a little. I mean, the gas station owner's gonna take a hit, and the poor kid who works there got robbed twice in one week. True, I wanted to kick his ass at the time, but this seemed a little extreme.

Guilty or not, I couldn't just return the money now that time- well, it hadn't unstopped yet, but I hardly had time to make it all the way down to the gas station, put the money back in the safe, and then... the point is, the money is mine.

And not gonna lie, the little thrill I felt walking out of that gas station? It was worth every second of doubt. I was going to like this. Of course, then the paranoia set in. What if this was some kind of prank tv show and people were gonna burst out and interrogate me? What if time returned to normal while I was in the middle of a robbery? What if time never stopped again? I still couldn't figure out how to turn it on or off. Well, no matter what happened, I was now thirteen thousand dollars richer.

I could do anything. I could get my car fixed. Hell, I could buy a new car! "Whoa," I said aloud. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves." First things first, I needed somewhere to hide the money. Under the mattress was out, as it was a lofted bed. I looked at the closet. Nah, that was too obvious, plus there was so much crap in there already. I jumped down from the bed and the floor squeaked under my feet. Now, that was an idea.

I knew for a fact there was a loose floorboard in my room because I tripped over the damn thing every other day. It was inconveniently in the middle of the room, but at least when I went to tug on it, it came right up. I checked out the creepy area beneath. There was at least a foot of space down there. Using my phone light, I shone it in and started to laugh. There was a porno magazine hidden down there, in addition to some comic books and toys. Some kid must have lived in the room before me.

It was the perfect hiding spot, and I dumped most of the money into the hole. I saved a couple thousand to use right away. The air conditioning was busted in my car. I'd be making an appointment to get that fixed. After that, I could pay August rent. That was coming up in a few days. Hell, maybe I'd even pay early, surprise the landlord.

Time suddenly started moving again and I jumped as all the lights came back on. I heard an echoing yelp from the porch. Crap! I forgot I had been sitting with Duane when time stopped! It must be like I just vanished from thin air. I ran to the bathroom and quick flushed the toilet, then strolled back out to the porch like nothing had happened.

Duane spun around wildly as I approached. "Dude... how did you get over there?"

I pretended to laugh. "What do you mean? I just told you I had to pee."

"You... you did?"

"Yeah... man, you gotta lay off the weed."

Duane looked at the blunt in the ashtray, inspecting it carefully. "Might be that this is laced with other stuff," he said. "I didn't get it from my usual guy."

"Why don't you just go to the dispensary in Mass?" I asked. I was trying to get the conversation off my mysterious disappearance.

“Aww man, that’s a long drive and I don’t have the money for that. My guy gets me a discount.”

“So why’d you go to a different guy this time?”

“Dunno, man. He was there, he offered... no time like the present, right?”

It was always fun talking to Duane when he was stoned, and as I had nothing better to do, I settled in for a couple more hours of chilling.

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The next time everything froze, a week had gone by. It seemed to happen on Friday nights. I wondered if that was significant somehow. I couldn’t think of why it would be. I was starting to wonder if it really was me stopping time. Maybe it was a fluke of nature, or a sign the world was ending, or something. Of course, that didn’t explain why I was able to resist it.

Anyways, I was ready for the sudden silence this time. I jumped right into action. I hadn’t just sat around while I waited for the next time stop. Nope, I’d been preparing. First, I’d made a list of all the convenience stores and gas stations near me. There were four in the surrounding area, and I could walk to them all easily enough. This time, I’d brought a backpack, flashlight, gloves, a hat, and a couple extra plastic bags. I also dressed in dark clothing, just in case. Pretty sure I looked like a stereotypical bad guy.

I figured I could also hit up a few of the nicer houses around. Don’t ask me why, but I learned to pick locks when I was a kid. It’s a handy skill to have. I had my bobby pins and my metal nail file with me.

The first three gas stations were easy. Their safes were blatantly obvious, just like the first one, and the keys were always nearby. By the time I came away from them, I was twenty-three thousand dollars richer. Plus the ten thousand I had hidden away. I had spent about four thousand during the week. I fixed my car, paid the rent, and bought myself a couple nice things I’d been missing out on, like a TV for my room and a new gaming laptop. Not only that, but food! I think I actually gained something, I ate so much. You could see my stomach poking through my shirt. I went out to eat almost every night that week, even bought breakfast a couple times. I still ate lunch at work though. I’m a creature of habit, and Papa Giano’s is pretty delicious.

The fourth gas station was a bust. Their safe was some electronic thing with a pinpad. I looked everywhere, but I couldn’t find a combination. I got the stuff out of the register, though that felt like pocket change in comparison. On to the houses.

I picked houses a couple streets over from me so no suspicion came back to me. The further north you go in Manchester, the nicer the houses. They were well-maintained, with real lawns, none of the dirt and weeds combination you see in the inner city. The first house I chose was a white one with an American flag out front. I’ve never been much of a patriot, so that didn’t exactly deter me.

I jimmed the lock, and bam! I was in. I found myself in a dark foyer. It was close to midnight and I was hoping everyone was asleep. Not that it really mattered, but it made me feel better not to have some weirdo staring off into space while I did my thing. I hurried upstairs into what I figured would be the master bedroom. Yep, I was right. It looked like no one was home, the bed was made and untouched. Who bothers making their bed these days? Rich people, I guess.



There was a dresser near the bed that had some jewelry boxes and perfumes on top of it, so I started there, digging through the boxes. Most of it was pretty uninteresting, just costume jewelry and whatnot, but I did find a ring that might be a real diamond. It looked old. I pocketed it before turning my attention to the dresser itself.

I checked all six drawers, but all I found were ladies' underwear, some really big bras, and a handgun. I was careful to leave that exactly where I found it. I checked a couple other obvious spots for a safe, but saw nothing of note until I found the door to the basement. It was unfinished and dingy, with plenty of cobwebs to get stuck in, but I found what I was looking for. There was a huge safe against the wall. It had to be a gun safe. That made me nervous, even though I literally couldn't be caught.

These people were smarter than the gas station owners. The combination lock looked complicated, and there were no sticky notes with numbers hanging around. I went back upstairs to look for a password. I got lucky in the computer room. I guess the woman who lived there had a hard time remembering her passwords, because I found a whole book of them. One of them was a three digit series of numbers. That had to be it.

Back in the basement, I tried the combination, and I almost couldn't believe it when the door opened. I was right when I said the safe had to have guns. There were eight of them in there. I left those alone, focusing on the rest of the contents. There was a yellow bar of metal in there, and it took me a few seconds to get through my head that that was actual gold. That was coming with me. There was a few thousand dollars, and some important-looking files. The gold and the money was more than enough for me.

Time to get out of there. I left, and hit a couple of their neighbors next. No big finds like the first house, but I still came away with a few pieces of fancy jewelry and of course, more money.

Time came back just as I stepped out of the last house. An earsplitting alarm wailed into the night and I must've jumped a mile. I booked it out of there, cutting across a few lawns and driveways until I found my way back to my street. It was past midnight, so luckily I was more or less alone.

Duane was in the kitchen when I came in. "Hey man, where've you been? I was just about to head out to the porch, wanna come?"

"Yeah," I said, shifting my bag behind me. "Lemme just put my stuff down." I hurried to my room and threw the bags inside.

We hung out for a couple hours, but my heart wasn't really in it. I was too excited about that block of solid gold sitting in my room right now. When I was finally able to escape, I sat down on the floor and took out the gold, turning it over and over in my hand. I'd never seen anything like it before. There was no way I could sell it without attracting crazy attention, though I did know a couple sketchy pawn shops that might take it, no questions asked. I wouldn't even get half a fair price on it though.

I fell asleep holding the gold brick. It was comfortingly heavy. My dreams that night were full of treasure and piles of money. I guess all this was going to my head. The next morning, I went on my new computer. My news widget blinked, and I clicked on it. It was set up for my area, and the first story that popped up was "Crime spree strikes Manchester!"

My throat went dry and I clicked on the story. It went on to describe the area I had been working in: the gas stations, the houses, and weirdly, two banks on the other side of the city. Apparently, most people called in the crimes around midnight. The statement from the police said they had no leads at the time. My breathing started again. I was safe.

Maybe I'd take a break from my life of crime this week. I could just walk around the silent city, checking out the areas I couldn't or shouldn't go at night. Throughout the week, I tried to make time stop at will, but of course, nothing worked. Still, I waited anxiously for Friday, when I knew time would stop again.

When it finally happened, I made sure I was in my room so Duane didn't get suspicious. Not that he ever was, but it never hurt to be cautious. I found myself hitting up my usual gas station, despite telling myself I would stay away.

I strolled through the aisles, dodging a customer who was stuck in place perusing the condoms, and helped myself to whatever I pleased. I was halfway through an extra-large purple slushy when I heard the door open. At first, I thought it was time coming back before I was ready. But when I turned around, I dropped my drink. Purple slushy splattered all over the floor and my legs, but I didn't care. Standing in front of me was some girl in a dress!

I know: what?

The only reason I wasn't running, aside from the fact that she was blocking the door, was that she looked as shocked as I was. "Uh..." I said. Like I said, I'm wicked eloquent.

She stared me down. Her eyes were this mesmerizing shade of violet I couldn't look away from. She was beautiful too, with brown skin that shone, even in the dark, and smooth black hair that was tied in a braid that went down past her waist. "So you're the one who started a crime spree in Timeless. Nice."

"Timeless?" I said with a bit of a tone. "You named it?"

She frowned. "I had to call it something."

"I don't call it anything," I said, then shook my head. "Wait a sec, how are you even here?" The answer hit me right when I asked. "It's you, isn't it?" I said. "You've been making time stop."

She smiled, and I swear I got goosebumps. "Isn't it perfect?" she said, and I found myself nodding along in agreement. "A world of my own. No one to mess it up or tell me what to do." Her smile faded, and honestly, it felt like the world got a little darker. "Until now." She fixed me with that purple stare again.

"Hey, look," I said, raising my hands up. "I'm not here to start anything. I'm just here to—"

"Get some money, right?"

"Well..." I was more than a little embarrassed at being so obviously caught out. She stepped closer, and I had to force myself not to back away. "What are you, some kind of superhero or something?" I asked, ready for a fight.

She smirked. "Me? Hardly. Did you see the news? Your crime spree has been making waves, but mine was barely even mentioned. I hit two banks on the west side."

"That was you?" I grinned. Maybe this chick and I had more in common than I thought. "Nice. I never even thought that there might be someone else out there stopping time." I remembered how I first found out I could move through time. "Wait a sec," I said. "It was you this

whole time? What about the first time? During the storm? You stopped time right before my head got blown off. How did you know?"

Her face changed and she looked horrified. "What do you mean? Your head almost got blown off?"

"Yeah, I got caught in a robbery. These two assholes with guns right here in this store." I glanced at the spot where I'd been forced to kneel. There was a bullet hole in the floor there. I pointed it out. "I almost died, but you stopped time. You saved my life."

"If I did, it was unintentional," she said. "But I'm glad I did. I'm Tanvi." She held out a perfectly manicured hand with purple polish and gold accents.

I shook it, feeling a little self-conscious about my own fingernails, which were ragged and plain. "Jaz," I said. It was short for Jasmine, but no one called me that unless they had a death wish.

"Jaz," she repeated. "I like it. Hey, are you a Scorpio?"

How did she know that? "Uh... yeah," I admitted.

"I knew it," she said, looking satisfied. "You totally have Scorpio energy."

I wasn't sure what that meant, but I nodded anyways. "Thanks," I said. "What about you?" I didn't know the first thing about astrology, but it felt polite to ask.

"Oh, I'm a Cancer," she said cheerfully. "Also a water sign, like you!"

"Cool." I had so many questions for her! "So, how did you get your power? Like, were you born with it? And your eyes... what's up with the purple? Is that from the power?"

Tanvi laughed. "Contacts," she said. "Brown is just so boring. Everyone I know has brown eyes. I wanted something different."

"Oh." I felt a little silly for not guessing that in the first place.

"As for making Timeless appear," she said, pulling up her hoodie and shirt to show me her back. Across the flawless skin there was a bright red scar.

"It looks like lightning," I said, resisting the urge to touch it.

"Right! I got struck a few weeks ago. It was awful. But time stopped when it happened, and I've been able to do it at will for a while now."

I thought back to the night at the gas station. Hadn't Duane mentioned a lightning strike? "So you got struck by lightning at the exact moment I almost got shot?"

"I guess so. Sounds like it was meant to be." She smiled at me again, and my heart melted a little.

Should I trust her? I wanted to. How cool would it be to have a partner in crime? We could work together and get rich! But we were strangers. Normally I had more sense than this, but there was something about Tanvi that made me want to be near her. "So," I said. "Wanna rob a bank?"

She giggled. It sounded like music. "I would love to!" she said. "I know just the place. She held open the door for me and I walked out. "So, what do you want the money for?"

"What do you mean? I'm broke as hell and my job doesn't pay me enough. With this power, I've got everything I need to live comfortably."

Tanvi nodded. "Fair enough," she said.

"What about you?" I asked, curious about her motivations.

Her smile faded. "It's complicated," she said. "And kind of a long story."

I shrugged. "We have all the time in the world."

She looked at me for a moment, and it felt like she was staring into my soul. Those contacts were something else. "Alright," she said. "I'll tell you."

I wondered if she really was some kind of ethereal being, and contacts were a lie she told to pass as human. I shook my head a little, suppressing a laugh. It sounded like something Duane would say.

"It began back in India," she said, and my focus returned to her. "I come from a wealthy family, and that has certain stipulations attached to it. Namely, an arranged marriage."

"You serious?" I said. "I didn't know stuff like that still happened."

"It does," she said. "Many women are forced into marriages without love, often to much older men. It happens all over the world. Even here."

"I had no idea."

"My parents had three girls. I was the youngest. I had to watch my oldest sister go into an arranged marriage to a man she loathed. He was a cruel man, abusive in every sense. When it came time for my other sister to marry, she refused. She would marry for love, or not at all, she told them. They-" She paused and I watched her with wide eyes. "They killed her."

She didn't elaborate, and I didn't try to make her. That was horrific. "So you were next? What did you do?"

Her face hardened. "I wasn't going to be forced into a life of misery, and I certainly didn't want to die. So when I turned eighteen, I ran. I told my older sister of my plan and thankfully, she helped me. She gave me the money I needed for a flight to America. I started in Boston, but eventually made my way up to Manchester, and I've been here for about six months. I thought I would die when that lightning bolt hit me, but it turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to me."

Tanvi told me more about her life in India as we walked down the empty street. She had lived in a huge manor with servants and gardeners and all sorts of fancy stuff. I was jealous until I remembered the conditions. Arranged marriage? No thanks.

I was so enthralled by her stories, I didn't even notice we were at the bank until the building loomed over us, shrouding us in even more shadow. "Okay," said Tanvi. "It took me a while to get the door open at the last bank, but I'll try again."

"Here," I said, showing her my lockpicking setup. "I got this." I was pretty proud when I managed to unlock the outer door in less than five minutes. "Some security."

Tanvi just pointed up. I looked, and there were four cameras pointed in all directions. "I'll bet these doors are alarmed too," she added. "Lucky for us, we don't need to worry about that. Come on, this way!" She led the way into the bank, winding past signs and queue lines until she reached the counter. "Give me a boost!" I cupped my hands and crouched down. Tanvi placed a delicate foot on my palms, and I pushed upwards. Her weight left my hands as she crawled across the counter top. "I'll be right back," she said, her black braid snapping behind her like a whip.

This was exciting. It's like I thought, having a partner in crime was awesome. It felt more like a heist and less like stealing. There's a difference. Kind of. I kept thinking about how I asked if Tanvi was a superhero. She wasn't, was she? She was just like me: a lonely loner who

needed a leg up in this world. Did that make us villains? Well... so what if it did? Sometimes the villain has a good point.

A door nearby opened and Tanvi waved her hand at me from the inside. I ran in after her. "This way," she said with confidence, and she led the way through a few rooms and a hallway until I found myself behind the counter.

"Cool. Let's grab the registers!"

Tanvi smiled and shook her head. She slipped her hand into mine and a chill stole across my skin. I could look at her smile for days and never get- wait, what am I, a damn poet? She was my type, okay? I was totally into her.

Anyways. She brought me past the counters and into the room with a massive metal door. The vault. This is where I got serious. Was I really gonna rob a bank? I looked at Tanvi's wide-eyed expression. She seemed as awestruck as I was. That was enough to convince me. "Let's open it up!" I said, my voice too loud in this silent place. In more of a whisper, I said, "How do we do that?"

Tanvi laughed. "I don't actually know! I never got this far!"

"Wait, what? I thought you robbed two other banks?"

"I did, but only the front registers." She bowed her head a little, and muttered "And the coin counter machine."

Now I was the one laughing. "That's commitment," I said.

She squeezed my hand. Her fingers were soft and gentle, but freezing cold for some reason. I squeezed back all the same. I wondered what this meant. We had only just met, but Tanvi and I had an instant connection.

"Too bad our powers don't include invisibility," I grumbled. It would have been so easy to just sit there until someone opened the vault. "Well, I bet there's a manager's office around somewhere. Let's look for something like that. Maybe there will be some information there."

"Good plan!" Tanvi leapt forward, dragging me along behind her as we ran through the maze of hallways. We stopped and picked every lock looking for information. Finally, in the room at the very end of the hall, we saw it. A schedule for the transfer of vault items. It looked like all the pickups happened in the early hours of the morning. And one just so happened to be scheduled for that night.

"This is it!" I shouted.

"What? What is it?" Tanvi was practically bouncing up and down, she was so excited. "An armored truck is coming tonight! To this bank! They're gonna transfer items from their truck to the vault, and vice versa!"

Tanvi finally caught on and squealed with joy. "What time are they coming?"

I checked the schedule. "Twelve-fifteen. That give us..." I checked my watch. It had frozen at eleven fifty-eight. "Seventeen minutes!"

"Okay, let's plan this out first. We need to get everything right."

I nodded. That was wise. I sat down in the manager's chair and swivelled around while Tanvi laid out everything, doodling the layout of the bank and its grounds on some spare paper. We talked for hours, going over every possible scenario. It was a lot of fun, but tense too. This was the real deal. It went beyond petty theft to actual robbery.

“So long as we stick together, we’ll be fine,” I said when we had finally nailed everything down.

“Of course! We’re in this together now. It’s so nice to have a friend, especially one who understands what I’m going through.”

I didn’t know how to tell her I felt the same way. “Thanks.” Then, I changed the subject. “Okay, so we’ll lock ourselves in, and then you start time.”

Tanvi nodded. She closed her eyes and concentrated for a second, then a piercing wail cut through the nothingness. It was the bank alarm. The police would be coming, just as we planned.

We waited in silence, listening for any sound over the scream of the alarm. It was hard after being in the ringing silence of Timeless. Damn it, now she’s got me saying it. I looked down at our clasped hands and couldn’t help a smile. Was this moving too fast? Probably, but how often do you meet someone with the same superpower as you? It felt like fate. Up until then, I would have laughed at the idea, but here we are.

Voices broke through over the sound of the alarm. Tanvi squeezed my hand tighter. “Check the cameras,” said a woman. “I don’t see any signs of forced entry, but this door should not be open.”

Damn it! We should have locked the door behind us. Beside me, Tanvi shot me a wide-eyed look. “I know,” I whispered. That was a stupid mistake, and we couldn’t afford to mess up. We were looking at prison time if we got caught.

The alarm stopped shrieking just in time for us to hear footsteps approaching our little room. “Okay,” I said. “When the door opens, stop time. We can run out and hide somewhere else.”

Tanvi smiled and nodded. The footsteps came closer and closer, and finally, we heard a key in the lock. The door swung open and time stopped. A man and a woman stood there, frozen. The man looked like he worked for the bank. He was wearing a suit, though his clothes were disheveled and wrinkly. He must have just woken up to get here, I realized. The woman was obviously a cop of some kind, maybe a detective. I peered over her outstretched arm to read her name tag. Detective Jane Moreau. She looked to be in her late thirties, maybe early forties, with dark hair tied back in a bun.

“Perfect,” I said, sidestepping the detective. “We better pull this off, or we’re screwed.” Tanvi didn’t answer, just tugged me towards the vault. There was a small offshoot room beside the huge vault door, and we hid in there. Tanvi looked at me, and time started again.

“There’s no one here,” said a masculine voice.

“Damn.” That one had to be Detective Moreau. “I shouldn’t get my hopes up. The last two robberies were just like this. No suspects, no signs of breaking and entering, and they didn’t even attempt to open the vault. I’d say it was a fluke if it hadn’t happened three times now.”

I grinned at Tanvi. This time, we’d be getting the vault. Then the police would really be stumped.

“There’s an armored truck coming tonight,” said the man. “Care to stick around and make sure it gets in and out safely?”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” said Moreau.

My grin quickly turned to a frown. Hopefully these people wouldn't get in the way of our heist. We hid in the offshoot room for another five minutes before anything happened.

"Here's the truck now," said the bank man. My stomach did some sort of backflip. It was time. We waited a few more minutes until we heard the voices draw nearer.

"We've searched the entire building and the grounds. No one is here, I'm certain of it," said Moreau.

I held in a snicker. Boy, would she look like an idiot when this was all over. A twinge of pity went through me. I'm sure Detective Moreau was fine, but I didn't trust cops. Never have, never will. I also felt bad for the bank guy. He was about to lose everything. "Maybe we shouldn't do this," I whispered to Tanvi.

She looked surprised. "But we must," she said. "Don't you want to be rich?"

"Well, yeah," I said. It would be so easy to take all those people's money. But maybe I had more of a conscience than I cared to admit. "But what about all the people it belongs to?"

"Forget about them," she murmured, and leaned in.

My heart practically leapt out of my chest as those perfect lips crashed into mine. This was all so sudden, but it felt so right. I returned the kiss, winding my arm around her waist. "Okay," I breathed. "Let's do it."

Her relieved smile was breathtaking. She stared into my eyes, and I could see the outline of the contact lens around her iris. "Ultraviolet," I whispered, half to myself.

"What?" she asked.

"Uh, just a thought," I said, slightly embarrassed. "But if we have these superpowers, maybe we should have superhero names. You could be Ultraviolet. You know, because of all the purple." I gestured to her nails and eyes. "I dunno, maybe it's stupid."

"I love it," she said. She studied me and I felt a flush creep over my face. "Infrared!" she said excitedly. "For your hair! Then we match."

I should probably mention that I have fire-engine red hair. It's dark normally, but I bleached it and went red a few months ago and fell in love with the look. "Infrared and Ultraviolet," I said. "It's awesome."

"You ready, Infrared?" Tanvi asked with an adorable little smirk.

"Always," I said.

A loud metallic clanking came from just outside, and I knew they were opening the vault. The sound suddenly stopped as Tanvi paused the world. Both of us froze for a fraction of a heartbeat before scrabbling for the door in excitement. It opened and we peered around it to get our first view of the inside of the vault.

I don't know what I had been expecting, piles of jewels and gold coins like a pirate's treasure trove? But it wasn't like that at all. There was a wall of safe deposit boxes, a few large bins, and... score. A huge stack of money, neatly organized and ready to go.

I started laughing, tossing piles of money everywhere, ignoring the crowd of people outside the vault who were trapped in place. "We did it! We're set for life!" I turned to look at Tanvi, but she was busy examining the safe deposit boxes.

"Let's open these," she said, setting to work on the first one.

I frowned. "Tanvi- I mean, UV, I think we should just grab the money and go. There's more than enough here for us both."

But she didn't answer. Sighing, I joined her despite my instincts to get going as quickly as we could. We opened box after box. Some contained only documents. Some had money or jewelry. Still others contained war medals and odds and ends. But nothing seemed good enough for Tanvi. She would get one box open, then toss it aside in frustration.

"Are you... looking for something?" I asked, unsure what was going on. "Was there a reason you wanted to come to this bank?"

Once again, Tanvi didn't answer, but this time, she held something in her hand. "I knew it," she whispered. "I knew it was real."

"What? What is it?" I tried to get a look at whatever she had, but her fist was clenched around it.

"You're right," she said. "We should go."

I figured she would tell me when we weren't surrounded by cops and security. "Okay, let me just fill my backpack."

"Good plan. I'll be right back," said Tanvi. She stepped out of the vault and I busied myself with stuffing money into my bag.

A loud metallic groaning sounded and I looked up just in time to see the vault door close. I dropped my backpack. Had time started up again? "Tanvi?" I said. "What's going on?"

From the other side of the door, came her muffled voice. She sounded wistful. "Oh, Red. I really did like you."

"What are you talking about?" I pushed on the vault door, but it wouldn't open. "Tanvi, it's not funny, let me out."

She sighed, and I could hear her pacing outside the door. "I really like the name you came up with for me," she said. "Ultraviolet. It's perfect. Perhaps I'll visit you in prison some day."

"Prison? What are you-" It hit me then. Bowled me over like a punch to the gut. "You- you can't leave me here! I'll tell the police everything!"

Tanvi laughed again. "You'll tell them what, Red? That you met a girl who can stop time? You'll definitely have to come up with something. And you'll have time. Now that I got what I wanted, all I need to do is leave."

"Are you serious? What- why?"

"I couldn't have you getting in the way. I don't know why you can walk through Timeless like I do, but when you told me you can't make it appear, I knew what I had to do."

"But..." I couldn't believe it. "So everything you told me was a lie? You only said all that to get me to help you?"

"Well..." She hesitated for a long while before speaking. "No. All of those things really did happen to me. But there's the part I didn't tell you too. That I came to Boston because I had a friend there. He taught me the ways of acquiring things that don't belong to me."

"Yeah, and what happened to him, you screw him over too?"

She laughed, but it sounded sad. "The police caught up with him eventually. He resisted, and was killed. But I am keeping his legacy alive."

"So let me help you!" I had no desire to help her anymore, I just wanted out of the damn vault. Although maybe there was a small part of me that wanted to stay with her. She was the most beautiful, ethereal woman I had ever met.



“I work alone. And I couldn’t have you botching my plans with your ill-planned crime spree. So good luck Red. You’ll need it to survive prison.”

I pounded my fists against the vault door, which only made them hurt. “No!” I cried. “Let me out! Let me *out!*”

But there was no answer. I was well and truly trapped, and with a crowd of people on the other side of this door who desperately wanted a scapegoat.

There was nothing for it. I sat down and pulled out my pack of cigarettes, lighting one. Inside, my anxiety roared to life, taking over every part of my body. I was antsy with nerves. At least the cigarette helped with that. What would prison be like, I wondered. Who would visit me? Duane, maybe. What if Tanvi came? I clenched my fists. It wasn’t fair. Someone had to stop her. And I figure that person could only be me.

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That’s where the exciting part ends, I’m afraid. Time eventually came back and they opened the vault to find me sitting there with an empty backpack and five cigarette stubs. Detective Moreau took me in for questioning, but ultimately, because nothing had actually been stolen by me, they had to let me go. Well, not let me go exactly. I was charged with criminal trespass, but that’s okay. In the state of New Hampshire, the first charge is only a misdemeanor.

I did tell the cops all about Tanvi, if that was even her real name, but it didn’t sound like they believed me. But it was the only explanation I had for why I was trapped in a bank vault with no evidence of my arriving there recorded in the cameras.

I guess no one had mentioned before that the three banks Tanvi hit were all the same branch. She had definitely been looking for something, and it sounded like she found it. Moreau wouldn’t tell me what she stole, so I’m guessing it was a big deal.

But I have a plan. Time has stopped a few times since then, and word has it that the art museum got hit a few days ago. Someone made off with some valuable pieces, so I know Tanvi is still around. I’ll find her. Maybe it’s time for me to step up and be a damn superhero after all. Because I’ve been noticing something weird. I still can’t stop time, but every time I lean against a wall, it feels like I’m sliding through it. I think I’m developing a power. I still don’t know how or why, but I think I learned my lesson. Doing good things will make me feel better inside. And let’s be honest, revenge is a powerful motivator. Trust me, if I have the chance to lock Tanvi in a vault, I’m taking it. But like I said before, not all villains are inherently bad, so that must mean no hero has to be inherently good, and I am definitely no exception.