

imagine. Which means that when she looks at others, she wonders what she can learn—”

She leaned in and glared directly into Celeste’s eyes and snarled, “Not what she can *extort*.”

The queen cancelled the spell and stepped back. “When you are ready to learn,” she said at a more normal volume, “my door will be open. Until then, I am relieving you of your duties.”

“You’re putting me in *time out*?” Celeste said, incredulous. “I’m not a child!”

“Yet you insist on acting like one,” the queen said without missing a beat. “Use this time wisely, Celeste.”

And with that, she turned and left.

Celeste stood in the empty study for a moment, ignoring how many tears she wiped away, before storming out.

She was given a similar wide berth on the walk back to her office, though she would swear some of the fearful looks had turned to pity. She closed the door behind her and reflexively made a set of gestures with her right hand to trigger her security measures. The walls, ceiling, and floor pulsed a bright red glow that settled across the doorway in an intricate glyph.



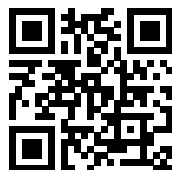
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Series 0

Issue 8

Nowhereverse Tales



wndfx.link/LNhY1

Celeste moved slowly. She undid the clasp on her robes—white with red trim, her badge of office as a Court Mage—and carefully set them on the hook by the door. Her hair tie was next, followed by her bracelets. Finally, she held a hand in front of her chest and pulled on an invisible strand of magic. The enchantment on her clothes untied, her blouse and pants loosened themselves and settled comfortably around her.

Her breathing started to pick up. She stared forward at the door as her breaths got heavier and shorter.

Until finally, she screamed. A wordless, careless, hopeless yell of frustration and rage.

And like so many screams of its kind, it ended with her on the ground, tears falling, breathing one step away from outright sobs.

Tenopolis didn't have "slums." Such a term wasn't befitting of the capital of Melodia. But every city has its shining jewels, its charming neighborhoods... and parts that, at least right now, seem to have been left behind.

In the case of the Tinhouse District, it was hardly the neighborhood's fault. One day a building was going up, the next the Crown had suddenly purchased it and the

She stood up to her full height and stretched. She still felt weak and sore, but she didn't get where she was by laying down. She pulled out her notebook and jotted down her observations so far before taking a breath and venturing onward.

Celeste will return.

There are parallel universes, other worlds, each with their own histories, their own cultures, their own biologies. We feel the walls grow weak, sometimes: when the world seems thinner, when the light is just right, when things seem just a little bit off, and we imagine we can reach out, just a little bit...

In the midst of all this, in a lost corner inside the lost space between spaces, a new place is forming. Born from hidden desires and deep longings. A place to rest, a stop along the way for so many. In the middle of everywhere, this is Nowhere.

Maybe you found yourself here by circumstance. Maybe you got lost and came to find shelter. Maybe you sought us out. Regardless, we have a place for you, no matter where you are in your journey.

The light is always lit, and the door is always open.

Special thanks to the patrons that supported series zero:

- Jacob
- Heddy2217

As well as everyone that left favorites and comments on the rough drafts.

Most importantly, **thank you for reading!**

So much pain.

She rolled onto her back and immediately felt a sharp pain from a new limb. She quickly rose to a kneel and held a hand—too big!—to her head—wrong shape! She brought her breathing under control and ignored the new smells as best she could. After a few moments to let the worst pass, she opened her eyes and took stock of herself.

The most obvious change was that she had grown fur, a cool grey pelt dotted with black rings. It was substantial, likely adapted for winter. Her hands felt larger, even accounting for the fur. She tensed her fingers and felt claws slide out of the tips. Feline, then. She patted herself down; her body was largely the same shape, though a little larger because of the fur.

She felt what could only be her tail brush the ground behind her. She looked back to see it gently sweeping the ground in agitation. She hissed; that was going to be a pain to keep a lid on. She finished her inspection by reaching up to her head and confirming her assumption of "feline." Small rounded ears and a blunt muzzle completed the picture.

surrounding block and walled it off with basic—but formidable—barriers. Speculation abounded, ranging from outlandish claims like a new palace or concert hall to more mundane concerns like administrative offices or a medical center. This speculation, naturally, led to further speculation by veteran and amateur investors alike.

Years passed, and the only further development on the property was beautification of the barriers, a clear indication that the property's true use was not for the public. Some speculators moved on, while others held on, whether out of stubbornness or necessity. Regardless, the district remained in its state of transience, impatient for what it would become but unsure of what it was.

Celeste, by virtue of her position, knew *exactly* what it was.

Her hair was pulled fully back into a bun, and she had changed into dark brown robes with strands of pale red running from top to bottom. She glanced to the sides from underneath the hood, but the streets were deserted, as they should be this early in the morning.

The barriers were well-lit, but Celeste kept to the darkness across the street until she came to the doorway. To most passer-by, it was indistinguishable from the rest of the

Ask the Lighthouse

Coda asks Tom: So what happened after... 'falling' through that crack? Did your stuff come with you or did you end up appearing in a stranger's apartment, that sort of thing.

Just my underwear. I wish more of my stuff *had* come with me. I was wearing my good headset, but I took it off when the lights started. If I had kept it on, maybe it would have come with me?

...yeah, I was gaming in my boxers, so what?

Dangit, now I miss my Playstation. I need to find out what Call of Duty is called here. Wait—no, I'm having a kid. I need to get, like... Mario Kart or something.

Anyway, no stuff. And I was just kinda lying in some garden in the middle of the night with an achy body that wasn't mine.

Ask at wndfx.link/ask

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Front cover: "A handbook to the carnivora : part 1 : cats, civets, and mongooses " by Richard Lydekker, Public Domain <<https://wndfx.link/afxhL>>

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barriers. Most mages would only notice the difference once it was pointed out. Celeste was not most mages. A wave of her hand revealed the underlying structure to her, along with its author.

She briefly felt a sting of regret at breaking the queen's spell, knowing it would—rightly—be seen as a betrayal. She quickly drowned that out: it was justified after *her* betrayal earlier. A more practical concern was how much time she would have after breaking the spell before someone came to investigate.

Unless... Celeste smiled. She couldn't resist the poetry of it. It would take three spells, though; all in very quick succession. And she only had two hands.

She reached into her shirt and pulled out the small crystal she kept around her neck. It had been a gift from the queen when she finally became a Court Mage—the youngest in a century! It was one of her most prized possessions, not only because of what it represented but what it could do: store a simple spell to be activated later. She quickly formed the lynchpin of her plan and stored it.

And Celeste put her plan into action. She traced the lockout spell with her eyes, mapping all of its points and vertices, her hands making opposite motions in front of her.

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Letter from the editor

There's an interesting dynamic when someone does the right thing for the wrong reasons.

All too often, there are problems that are so big that we don't have the privilege of quibbling over ideological purity. Help is help, and we take what we can get. Adversity makes for strange bedfellows after all.

But there's always that small itch in the back of your mind, that pit in your stomach that won't go away: how much can they be trusted? What happens when your goals no longer align?

—Ronyo

castle office but slightly different.

Now she was home.

Celeste stood in front of a portal. She double-checked her map and confirmed: this was the portal for Mammalia, called such because the residents were all anthropomorphic mammals. It felt like a good place to start exploring: different, but not radically so, especially considering she was likely to physically *become* one of the residents.

Most of her effects were back in her room, including her mage's robes. She wanted to travel light: just a bracelet that doubled as a magical focus and a pocket notebook.

She took a deep breath and stepped through the portal. She felt the energies pull at her, stronger than they had when she had arrived in Nowhere. Stronger... and more painful! She tried to resist, but this was a process driven by a deep natural phenomenon, and it was already in motion.

The energy pulled at her face, her ears, her tailbone. She felt her hands and feet warp while pinpricks attacked her skin all over.

She fell out of the portal on the other side. She didn't know whether it spat her out or if she stumbled as soon as she exited, but either way, she was on the ground. In pain.

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She says with full certainty that you will fight. That you will wonder if your love is worth the pain it is causing. And the only way to come out of those fights is through honesty. Not brutal words: those will hurt when they do not need to. And not falsely light words: the pain they delay will return stronger.

She looks Red straight in the eyes, and you could swear she was looking straight at you.

Do not play games with my child's heart; if you do, no power will keep you safe from me.

"Yes, ma'am," you say out loud.

Red giggles and tells her that you and Green know.

Red, Green, and Blue will return.

A red glow surrounded her hand as she pointed at the eight corners of the room. Four on the floor, four on the ceiling, and four in—She immediately dismissed the spell and let it fizzle out.

One more thorough exploration of the space later to determine the *actual* eight corners of the space, and she prepared her spell again. Eight corners to anchor, twelve corners to reinforce, six sides to block, one door to secure, and one key to bind.

The key was the fun part: a set of ideas translated into a magical signal. Easy to implement, difficult to break. Celeste formed the ideas firmly in her mind: a hairpin, relaxation, posture, her tongue, and...

She thought back to the moment she first stepped through the portal, seeing the terrain and sky of a brand new world. She imagined the new worlds she would see soon and let her heart race at the thought.

Adventure; specifically, the adventure she herself was on now. Making the feeling as personal as possible made the key that much harder to crack.

With a snap of her fingers, she released the spell. The walls, ceiling, and floor pulsed a bright red glow that settled across the doorway in an intricate glyph reminiscent of her

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And without a moment's hesitation, she acted.

She released the spell from her right hand. It sunk into the barrier and disconnected the lock, removing the queen's spell entirely. Immediately she activated her crystal, and as she did she released her replacement locking spell.

One blink of non-existence later, and Celeste was looking at the abandoned construction site inside the barrier. She looked behind her and felt the barrier still in place, but holding her lock spell instead of the queen's. With any luck, whoever might be monitoring the spells wouldn't be able to tell the difference and write it off as a false alarm.

Still... best not to take chances. Pride was a failing of most mages, and Celeste was no exception. But unlike many of her ilk, she wasn't too proud to run.

She dashed past half-finished walls and piles of rubble, noting that the path to her objective was well-defined and recently traveled. More evidence of the queen's hypocrisy in keeping her from something "too dangerous."

She rounded a corner and saw the alarm spell just in time to throw herself backwards onto the ground to avoid it. She looked it over just to confirm her guess: a simple spell

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You feel a smile creep onto your face without your control. You feel a purr-like rumble from Green's chest. And Red can't suppress a joyful twitch of their tail.

So Red describes you and Green to their mother. They describe your personalities, your jobs, and get into some of the episodes and events you've shared.

Red's mother smiles; she's genuinely happy for her child. And she can't wait to meet the others that have captured her heart.

Red tears up. They can't wait to meet them either. Before their mother can question the statement they get into it. That you can speak with each other, communicate over a long distance. But that distance means you don't know how to get to each other. They don't really give more detail than that, but it's enough for their mom.

Their mom takes their hand. There is a lot in her world she does not understand, but she understands love. She also understands people and how they can be cruel.

Red begins to protest, but their mom continues. Not everyone is cruel. She charges them—and you—not to play games with each other. To be honest with each other.

28

Exile By Another Name

Celeste stormed through the hallways of the castle. Her fiery red hair was threatening to break out of its ponytail, her fists were clenched so hard she nearly cut her palms, and she glared hard enough to set something on fire. Given her magical prowess, that wasn't out of the question.

She didn't notice the aides and pages give her a wide berth; that would require her to acknowledge them. She did notice the lords and dukes arch an eyebrow at her behavior, and any other day this would be enough to get her to stop. She had an image to maintain, after all.

But that *clearly* didn't matter anymore, if it ever did.

She strode into the royal suite and past the secretary, ignoring his calls of "Lady Celeste!"—she knew where she was going; she didn't need his help. Past the ostentatious doors to the conference room, down the nondescript hallway to the left, around the back, to the queen's private study.

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to alert the caster of anyone going in or out. And just past the spell was...

To the naked eye, it was a blurry haze suspended just above the ground. To her magical senses, it was a nexus point: a naturally-occurring spell. Normally extremely dangerous to even approach, as the naturally-grown magical construct was typically inscrutable without getting close enough to trigger its effects.

Thankfully, she already knew what it was: a portal to another world.

Celeste grunted to herself. The alarm spell made sense, but it also made things complicated. The chances of her getting even a few hours of a head start were low before; now they were nothing. Even now, the clock was ticking before someone figured out her stunt at the gate.

Putting her emotions aside, she knew it wasn't too late to turn back. Her work on the gate could be written off as immature vandalism; she'd done worse for sure. The alarm spell, on the other hand, was a metaphorical and physical line that couldn't be un-crossed. It would show her intent, her flagrant disregard for her queen's direct orders. And there was every chance the alarm would wake the queen herself.

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A flick of her wrist, a slight glow, and the doors opened. Forcefully. Celeste didn't even break her stride as she stormed into the office.

The empty office.

She heard the secretary quickly approaching behind her, so she turned around and snarled, "Where is she?"

The secretary immediately shrunk back. "Her Majesty is with Pr—" he stammered, not wanting to finish the word.

"Margo?" Celeste said, her voice dangerously low.

"P—Princess Margo," the secretary finished with a whimper.

Celeste glowered. "I'll wait."

"But you—" The secretary tried to stand up straighter. "You can't—"

"Can't tell your supervisor about your *activities*?" Celeste raised an eyebrow.

The secretary winced and trundled out, shutting the doors behind him.

Celeste wasn't sure how long she waited before the doors opened again—gently this time. The Queen glided in, somehow moving effortlessly even in her full regalia. She looked at Celeste, and her face fell.

"I'd hoped you would take this better," she said quietly.

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Celeste waved it off. "That's fine," she said, inwardly cheering. "Knowledge is its own reward."

And having favors owed was even better.

The room was sparse. Celeste didn't care one bit.

The bed linens needed a quick transmutation to be serviceable. The desk would need to be expanded if she ever planned on using it. The kitchen was no more than a wet bar with some mechanical cooling device. And there were a few shelves that looked to be sturdy enough.

Celeste began emptying her pockets onto the desk. A small collection of foci, scrolls, and quills. She reached her arm into one of the inner pockets of her robe and pulled out a small drawstring leather bag covered in runes and sigils. She opened the top, reached her arm in, and started pulling out textbooks and magical tomes one by one.

As much as she would like to dump the entire contents out on the bed, these books demanded more respect than that.

She hung her mage robe up in the closet and turned to survey her new dwelling. She couldn't help but feel like something was missing...

She snapped her fingers. Of course...

19

You are both thrilled and scared at the implications. Green too, but they quickly wonder if it's not more true than not. You make a mental note to explore this later.

You're walking back to the "Heart-healthy parking" when Red gets a sudden spike of fear: their mother is demanding to meet you. Not asking about you or even if there is an interest; when can she meet you.

Red is off-balance. Green snarks that there is no better investigator than a parent but also wants to know what she knows. Red stammers out a question trying to find out more but knowing the game is up.

You don't even know what the game is!

Red's mother smiles, and you see a large amount of kindness in it. She knows the look that Red has had these past few weeks. Of finding someone they're in love with, even if they don't realize it yet.

The smile gets a little firmer. She knows there's someone, and she knows who that person is, at least to her child. And she is going to meet them.

You do your best to keep your fear suppressed; you don't want to ruin Red's relationship with their family.

Red mentally flicks your and Green's ears: don't be like that. They pose the question: are the three of you in love?

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Celeste suppressed a flinch: in the midst of her euphoria over meeting a mythical creature, she had given her real name. If she was trying to stay out of sight, she was off to a pretty bad start. "You too, Courtney," she said.

Courtney put a piece of paper on the counter. "Here's the portals we know about. People end up here through all sorts of ways, but if you want to actually know where you're going, you need to use a portal." She pointed to a spot, and Celeste recognized it with the buildings she'd passed. "Here's the portal to Melodia; that should get you home pretty quick."

Celeste took the map and looked it over. Besides Melodia, there were two labeled variations on "Earth," one "Reptilia," and another had some name with a "Z" that had been crossed out several times and replaced with "Mammalia."

A plan started to form.

She looked back at Courtney. "You said you were still exploring? I could help with that."

Courtney's eyes lit up. "Could you? That'd be great!" Her face fell a little. "We can't offer much in the way of 'money' right now. I can get you a room, but honestly I'd get that for you anyway."

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product: it's not layered like baklava but it does have similar ingredients.

Right now their mom—a very matronly faun—is making the dough. The spice combination doesn't look familiar, and you can't really tell one ground spice from another. You're really curious how it tastes, though.

Green suggests making it yourself.

You go to dismiss it before stopping yourself. Why not? As long as Red can help with it.

Red smiles and says something to their mother asking about the recipe. She smiles a knowing smile—how much does she know?—and responds.

You roll your eyes. Apparently some variation of "if you want to know, why don't you help me?" is a multiversal constant.

Red, to both their own and their mother's surprise, agrees.

Their mother's smile somehow grows even *more* knowing. Red suddenly supplies a little bit of cultural context: preparing food for each other is a common step in the courtship process.

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Celeste got up and looked back toward the center of the city, toward the towering castle with its light that shone into the night. Toward the queen that had been an idol, a mentor, and a maternal figure.

Toward the usurper wearing the title that was rightfully *hers*.

Celeste felt her anger rise, and she harnessed it. She cast a quickening spell on herself, set her feet, and sprinted toward the portal.

She felt the alarm spell wash over her. Her stride didn't break.

She felt the energy of the portal reach for her. She let it pull her in and didn't break her stride, not even to look for any potential pursuers.

The portal felt like walking through a sheet of water, the energies clinging to her in strange ways that she would have to look into. Later. Celeste looked around in the strange twilight world and the small dais she found herself on. There was a path in front of her leading toward a lighthouse she saw in the distance, but the land was otherwise barren.

With a sigh and a shake of her head, she started toward the lighthouse. At a magically-enhanced jog, this time.

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Celeste glared. "How long have I been in your service?" "Celeste—"

"How much have I done for you? How much of my life have I given to you?"

"That's never been in question."

"Then what is?!" Celeste screamed. "What does *she* have that I don't?"

The queen just pursed her lips and looked at Celeste. Celeste growled. "Don't say it."

"Celeste..."

"I'm smarter than her. I'm more skilled than her. I've done more for this kingdom than her. I've done more for *you* than her!"

"Yet I chose her," the queen said firmly. "Why do you think that is?"

"Don't pull that 'enigmatic teacher' castoff on me. You owe me a straight answer."

"Do I?" The queen stood straighter, her eyes narrowed. She took a step forward.

Celeste couldn't help but step back, hating herself for it.

"Who is to blame," the queen said quietly, "when the student does not learn the lesson? Is it the student for refusing to listen?" She closed her eyes and shook her head.

7

"Hello there, traveler," a young woman said as Celeste entered the building.

Celeste glanced around the lobby—a few spaces to congregate and a tastefully-stocked bar on the back wall—before settling on the counter with the woman sitting behind it on a stool. She strode up to it, doing her level best to project confidence. "Hi," she said, putting on a patient smile. "Can you tell me where I am?"

The woman smiled back. "Well, this building is just the Lighthouse," she said, "but if you mean in general..." She motioned around her. "This is Nowhere."

Celeste glanced around and smirked. "Clever," she said. "Is this a hub world?"

"Probably," the woman said with a smile. "We're still exploring around. Do you know how you got here?"

Celeste caught her answer before it could leave her mouth. "Not really," she said, and gave an embarrassed shrug.

"No worries," the woman said. "I can point you to the portal back to Melodia." She started rummaging behind the desk.

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"Or is it the teacher for failing to understand how to teach the student?"

She looked at Celeste with a smile that didn't reach her eyes. "I watched you grow into an incredible young woman. I saw your potential, and I thought I could help you reach it. I'm sorry I failed you in this way."

"I bet you a—"

A sharp gesture from the queen's right hand, and Celeste's voice cut off, a subtle white glow around her throat.

"You do not suffer fools," the queen said, her voice slicing into the silence, "and that is not a bad trait. But these past years you are only too eager to find them. And it has brought you dangerously close to making enemies I cannot protect you from."

She closed her eyes and took a slow breath, her hand still in place holding the silencing spell.

Celeste froze in place, seething.

"Here is your answer," the queen said, staring intently down at Celeste. "She is your equal in intelligence, and her skills in magic surpass yours for one reason: she knows when to rely on her friends. Most importantly, she understands bonds of love on a level that I can only

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Celeste's blood froze; had she been recognized already? Maybe not; other worlds obviously existed, and this person knew about Melodia, at least enough to get the name. "You know about Melodia?" she said as evenly as she could.

"We do!" the person said with a broad smile. "We've got a couple of doctors from there opening a clinic here. And not a moment too soon," she added with a chuckle.

"Wow," Celeste said. Inwardly, she breathed a huge sigh of relief. She made a note to figure out how this stranger had identified her as a Melodian so quickly—

The person turned to the side, and Celeste caught sight of her rounded ears. The analytical side of her was happy to have found the answer; her inner child was beyond thrilled. "Wait," she said with genuine excitement, "are you a *human*?"

"Yes?" the person said, confused. "Wait, sorry; yes, yes I am," she corrected. "Sorry, where I come from, literally everyone's a human." She held out her hand. "Name's Courtney."

"Celeste," Celeste said immediately, shaking her hand. Courtney smiled back. "Nice to meet you, Celeste."

17

An Unexpected Interrogation

It's a mid-December weekend. You've got about a week left of work before you burn the rest of your time off and head home until the new year. And for lack of anything better to do, you decided to brave the traffic and crowds (but mostly the traffic) and do some shopping.

Red and Green caught on to the idea of Christmas pretty quickly, or at least the "holiday celebrated with an exchanging of gifts" part. And they both felt your desire to make this Christmas a little more special, seeing as how it's your first Christmas with a real paycheck.

You're finally out of the overly tiny GameStop with half the things you were hoping to get there. You did want to make one last stop at the Apple store just to drool over things you couldn't afford and didn't need, and then you wanted to get out.

Red, meanwhile, has gone into the kitchen where their mother is making a pastry of some kind. It looks vaguely Greek, but not like baklava (not that you're *super* familiar with baklava). Red supplies an image of the finished

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