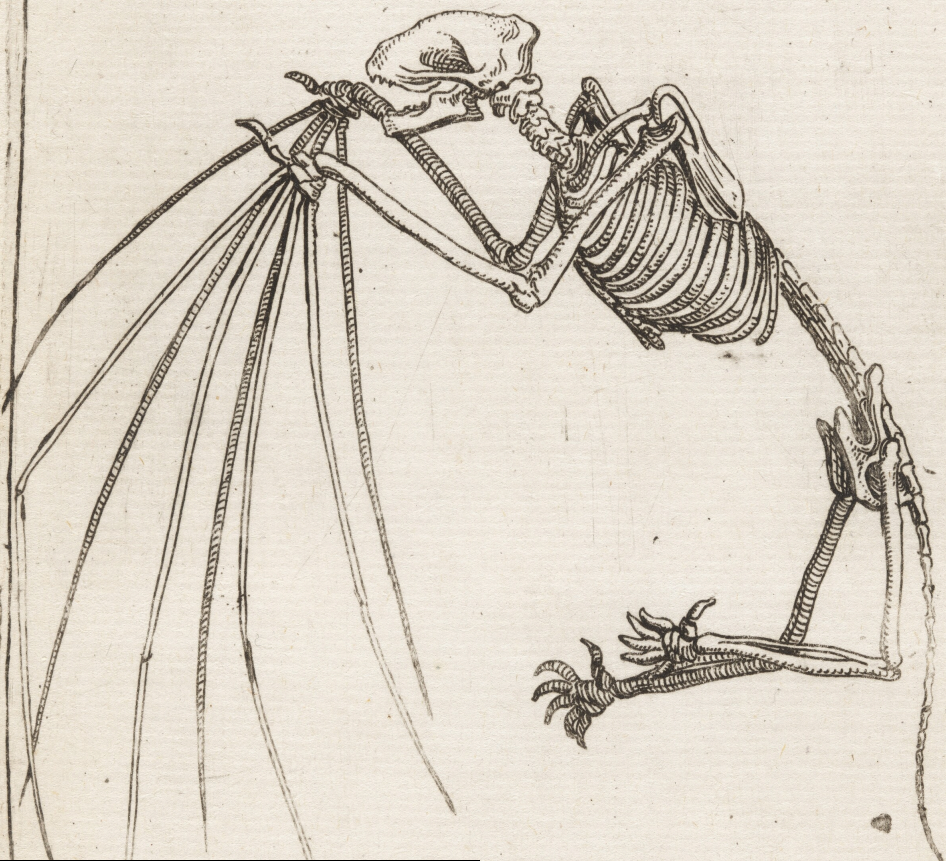


Sum...
Nom... da VESPER, dens mihi cauda mihi

Nowhereverse Tales



#18

AGES 13+

Pipistrello

We exist in our space and time... and we are not alone. Beyond our world lies numerous others with their own histories and biologies. And between them all, where the walls grow thin and possibility seems endless, there is a lighthouse, sitting in the space between spaces.

Welcome, travelers and castaways alike, to **Nowhere**.

In this issue



A multiverse where nothing is impossible because there's always a world where it is possible. Full of, as the show says, strange new worlds.

I've always been drawn to transformation, both for the act itself and for the existence afterwards. What is it like to be something else? To have different limbs, different senses, different perceptions.

And in all of this change, what about us stays the same?

—Ronyo

An Image In Mind

How do you describe sight to people without eyes?

Rated Teen

A Weird Introduction

Sometimes the best way to feel secure is to scare people off.

Rated General: foreign thoughts, religion

An Image In Mind

Shade pulled Fang a little closer. “Tell me again,” he said in his whisper, “what ‘sight’ is?”

Fang tucked his head under Shade’s muzzle. “It is...” He trailed off and took a breath, searching for the right words. “It’s like echo, but different. It’s like echo because it’s perceiving reflections to get a sense of what is around you in space. But instead of hearing our voices reflected, it’s sensing ‘light’ that is already there—like air.”

Shade purred. “You don’t make the light yourself?” he prompted.

“No,” Fang said. “No, it must come from somewhere. During the day, the sun provides light like it does heat. Unless it’s cloudy, because light is only straight, but even then—ugh, sorry.” He shook his head.

“You’re fine,” Shade said, giving him a squeeze. “It takes time to learn.”

“Pups can do this.”

“Pups have had years to learn it, and their heads are empty, waiting to be filled. You came to us mere months ago with a head already full.”

Fang sighed. “It’s just talking,” he grouched. “I’ve been *talking* my whole life.”

“You have,” Shade said patiently, “but this is talking with purpose, to take the image in your head and place it in mine. Once more?”

Fang took a breath and nodded, his muzzle brushing against Shade’s chest fur. “Sight is like echo,” he began. “It shows the world around us, what is close and what is distant. But instead of chirps reflected back, it is light beaming out and reflecting. And our ears are smaller, to make room for our eyes which capture just a piece of that light.”

He nodded, but quickly remembered the earlier prompt. “But we can’t chirp light; it has to come from somewhere. It...” He twitched an ear, racking his brain. “What you use for heat, we use for heat and light,” he said finally, smiling at the connection he was able to make. “The heat of day is also the light of day, and the fires at night give their own light.”

Shade purred again. It reverberated through Fang’s head, drowning out any images he may have had, and he pressed closer against Shade in response.

“That is good, Fang,” Shade said. “You’ve helped me understand a bit more.” He chirped reflexively—no change. “Is light also like heat, where there must be nothing between you and its source?”

“Yes!” Fang said, smiling broadly. “Yes, that’s it.”

Shade hummed and smiled. “Then you should add that to your image.”

Fang nodded, but any further reply was cut off by a giant yawn. He slumped against Shade. “Rest well,” he murmured.

“Rest well,” Shade answered. He gave one final chirp: no disturbances. With a yawn of his own, he rested his muzzle on Fang’s head and pulled his wings tighter around them both as he drifted off.

Fang gripped the branch with his feet—claws, really—and let himself fall so he was hanging upside down. A quick chirp told him he was well above the ground: plenty of room to spread his wings should he fall. Safety assured, he turned his attention to the fruit hanging next to him.

When the other chirpers had told him about fruit, his first thought was an apple as big as he was. But either he was a giant bat, or fruit here was much smaller. Either way, it was basically a melon-sized pear.

He took a breath and let it out, trying to clear his mind. Eating was... weird. He had the muscle memory for it, or maybe just the instincts, but either way it worked so long as he didn’t think too hard about it. Another breath, and a chirp. The echo reverberated through the fruit: it was solid and healthy.

Fang leaned in and broke the skin with his teeth. The sweet aroma of the fruit sent a jolt through his nose straight to his brain, and he instinctively shot his tongue out and started eating.

Just don’t think about it too hard... He chuckled in his head as he quickly chirped again. The branch was sound, the ground was far, and the fruit was good.

“Tell me again what ‘sight’ is.”

Fang sighed and mentally went down about half his checklist. “Sight is like echo,” he said. “When we chirp, the sound bounces off a thing. Humans can’t chirp, and they can’t make their own light, but there’s enough from the sun during the day and the fires at night. That light bounces off things, and that’s how they see.”

Shade hummed. “Light comes from heat?”

Fang winced. “Kind of?”

“But humans don’t make their own light. Do they make their own heat?”

“Yes, but...” Fang groaned. “I think this is a dead end.”

“Is it?” Shade said, pressing closer to Fang in what he hoped was an encouraging manner. “It sounds like it takes a lot of heat to make light.”

“It does,” Fang admitted. “Except they also found ways to make light with very little heat. Enough that nearly everyone carried a small light with themselves.”

“Ah,” Shade admitted. “Perhaps you’re right, and there are better words to find.”

Velvet led Fang through a tunnel, the two chirpers crawling on their clawed feet and wings. “We’ve lived in this mountain for a dozen generations,” she explained, “because it provides everything we need. We have fruit, water, firewood, all that. But we also have this.”

They emerged into a large cavern. They reflexively chirped, sensing they were in a new space. Fang still wasn’t sure how big he *actually* was, but this easily felt like the size of a basketball gym. Maybe even bigger!

His chirp died off, but he kept his sense of the space much easier than he usually did. “What is this?” he mused. “How am I still getting an echo?”

“This is the Bright Cavern,” Velvet said as she led him towards the center. “There’s a waterfall at the far end. Not too loud, just loud enough to provide its own chirps. Enough for us to know the room and what’s happening.”

Fang turned in a slow circle, listening to the room and its stalactites and nooks and crannies and the water gently running through the center. “It’s beautiful,” he breathed.

“It is,” Velvet agreed. “But it’s not why we’re here.” She tapped Fang on the chest with her wing. “Get in the air, I want to make sure your flying is good.”

The colony was gathered around the fire at the end of the day. Shade had just finished telling the latest chapter of a sprawling story about one chirper flying across the world and the misadventures he has along the way.

“I have an image,” one of the pups called.

The others chirped—Fang along with them—as the pup made her way to the other side of the fire. The echo he got back was one of a small chirper pup, maybe seven years old: old enough to be clever, but young enough to have no shame.

She cleared her throat and recited:

“There once was a chirper named Dew
Who found a fruit somebody threw.
The feeling was mushy,
The echo was gushy,
And she ate it up. EWWWWWWW!”

Most of her cohort joined her with the last word. Fang couldn't help but laugh and wonder if he had just heard the chirper version of Great Green Gobs of Greasy, Grimy Gopher Guts.

Fang looked up. Except he couldn't. Because he had no eyes.

He assumed it was night. It was cold enough. He chirped towards the sky.

Nothing.

He chirped louder. Still nothing.

He filled his lungs and screamed a wordless howl into the Great Emptiness. Another breath, and another scream.

"Are you out there?" he yelled. "Can you see me?"

He took a moment to catch his breath. "My name is Brian Wilde," he said at a normal volume, barely speaking to himself. "I lived in New Brunswick, New Jersey. I was a janitor." He looked back up, symbolic as it was.

"Does anyone else remember?" he whimpered.

"Tell me again what 'sight' is."

Fang curled up tighter on himself. "It's nothing like echo," he spat before covering his head with his wings.

Fang landed in the small alcove, the sounds from the other chirpers more muffled. "You wanted to see me, Elder?"

The elder hummed. "Now that is a curious word," she said in her tiny voice. "I suspect, even if I wished to, I could not 'see' you."

Fang sighed. "No," he said. "You wanted to speak with me?"

"Yes, yes," she said. "Keep your voice down, Fang; this pocket is quiet for the two of us, but voices carry to wandering ears."

"Of course." Fang lowered his voice to just above a whisper.

"Yes," the elder trailed off for a moment before chirping. "Sit, pup; you are not here to be reprimanded."

"R-right," Fang stammered before lowering himself to the ground awkwardly.

The elder hummed. "The seasons will change soon," she said. "You came to us at the last change, such a short time ago."

Fang chuckled. "It doesn't feel that way."

"No, I suspect it does not," the elder mused. "Tell me, young Fang, how many cycles you had seen before you came to us?"

Fang cocked his head. "A cycle is all four seasons?" At the elder's affirmative chirp, he continued. "Twenty-nine."

The elder hummed again. "And how many did you expect to see in your other life?"

“Wow, uh... eighty? Maybe a hundred if I took care of myself.” He chirped and shook his head. “Feels so distant right now.”

“That,” the elder said pointedly, “is your head accepting what your heart has not. You are here, not there.”

“If there ever was a ‘there.’”

“Was there? Be truthful.”

Fang took a breath and steeled himself. “Yes,” he said, letting the word fill the small, quiet space. “Yes, I *was* a human.” He deflated. “Not that it does me any good.”

“It is your story,” the elder said with just as much conviction as Fang had a moment before. “It is an image your heart holds because it is part of who you are.” She took a breath. “The heart holds many images, and it does not always speak them clearly, but they are important.”

“That is why I have called you here, young Fang. I sense your heart has given you another image, but you hesitate.”

Fang hid his head under a wing. “Is it that obvious?”

“Is what obvious?” the elder said with a chuckle. “That you long for your perchmate to be your home?”

Fang ducked his head lower and squeaked.

“No, that is not obvious. That is an inference, and I thank you for confirming it.”

Fang went to cover his head with his other wing before the elder stopped him.

“What is obvious,” she continued, “is that there is something keeping you from knowing your heart’s image. If it is something you are unsure of, speak it now. There is very little I have not wondered myself.”

Fang slowly lifted his wing and raised his head. “Okay, um...” He took a breath to steady himself. “Is it—does it matter... is it a problem if I’m with—if I’m *home* with another male?”

The elder froze. “What?” she whispered.

Fang’s heart dropped, and his nervousness turned to panic. He turned to fly off, but the elder gripped his wing with hers.

“Fang,” she said firmly, and Fang stopped. She pulled him towards her and put her ear against his chest. Softly, she trilled, a series of chirps to get a more continuous picture. After a moment she pulled back. “You are terrified,” she said simply.

“Yes,” Fang whispered, barely moving.

“What strange world are you from, that you are terrified to find a home?”

Fang let out the breath he didn’t know he was holding. “You don’t need me to sire pups?”

“There are enough sires,” the elder said flatly. “You will look after the pups, same as the others in the colony, yes?”

“O—of course!”

“Then nothing has changed.” She poked Fang in the chest. “You are Fang of the Mountain. We have spoken it; it is so.” She chirped. “And we will repeat it until you are as sure of it as you are sure you were once ‘Brian.’”

“I have an image,” Fang spoke into the silence.

A murmur rippled through the colony. As he made his way to the other side of the fire, Fang could tell every ear was pointed at him. He chirped reflexively, and got a few back. Including one from Shade.

He smiled to himself. It was definitely time.

“My image is from my old home,” Fang said, projecting his voice out. “A place not too different from our Mountain. There are rivers and lakes; there are trees with fruit. There are hot days and cold nights with fires to keep us warm.

“And there are creatures called ‘humans.’ Humans do not fly, but they have hands to grasp and feet to walk. They have no fur, except on the tops of their heads. But most importantly, they do not have echo.”

Another murmur, this one mostly gasps by the young pups. “How do they know where they are?” one shouted. “Do they bump into each other all the time?”

“No,” Fang said. “No, they cannot echo, but they do have something else.” He paused a moment to fully grasp the colony’s attention. “They have *sight*.

“Now, we have heat. We have the sun during the day, we have our fires at night, and we have torches for ourselves. Humans need these too: remember, they don’t have fur!” The pups giggled, and it sent a pang through Fang’s heart: how ridiculous it was to imagine a creature without fur... He sniffed and pressed on. “But those things that have heat—the sun, the fire, the torch—also have *light*. And that light bounces off the world like a chirp, though it goes much faster and farther.

“Humans do have ears, but they are smaller than ours. What they have instead are *eyes*: small places on their faces that let in a little bit of light. And they *see* the light’s echo through their eyes, and that is how they know where they are.

“When we chirp,” Fang continued with a sniff, “and that chirp reflects off of a thing, the thing changes the chirp so we know what it is. When light reflects, it is changed by the thing too, and humans call that change *color*.”

“Now, imagine a good fruit. Echo will tell us that it is smooth on the outside and firm on the inside. Sight will tell a human that it has a good *color* and that color does not change over the surface; but they don’t know if it’s firm on the inside until they take a bite.

“But what about a bad fruit? Echo will tell us it is soft, that there are places beneath the surface that are decaying. A human could not see beneath the surface, but they could see that it has the *color* of mold and decay. And then?”

Fang chuckled theatrically. “Well, they do the same thing as Dew: they ask, ‘is that fruit bad?’ and take a bite anyway.”

The pups all yelled, “Eew!” in unison, and a few of the adults chuckled as well.

“Now,” Fang said, bringing attention back to himself, “I mentioned light goes farther and faster than a chirp. There is also such a thing as too much light, just as there can be so much noise that we cannot echo. And the sun can be like that for humans. But sometimes, during the day, they will look up at the Great Emptiness and see rain coming. Or they will see a bird and imagine what it must be like to fly. And at night, when the sun is no longer in the Great Emptiness, a human will look up and—”

Fang took a shuddering breath and tried to control his sniffles. He had to say it. He had to! To share an image is to have it remembered by the colony, not just him. And if he was all that was left...

“And they will see the night sky,” Fang said, his voice cracking. “They will see countless suns so far away that they give no heat, so far away that the light has taken years—lifetimes!—to get to them only to be a small dot, a tiny fire in the Great Emptiness no bigger than a speck of dust. *Stars*, they call them. And they give them names and imagine stories about them...”

Fang took one last breath. “And then?” he said, voice quiet. “They sit around the fire and tell those stories... so that the pups laugh and the others smile and so the colony remembers.”

He started to go back to his seat when one of the younger pups—Melody, who was just learning to talk to others—called out, “What happened to them?”

Fang froze. The pang in his heart burst wide open, and it was all he could do to hold it closed for a moment longer. “I hope,” he said, not bothering to hide the hitch in his voice, “I hope they’re out there, finding new colonies and making new friends.”

The elder stood up with a subtle chirp towards Fang. Fang answered with a weak one of his own to show gratitude before scurrying away.

He heard the beat of wings above him with a chirp—Shade! Shade landed next to Fang and matched his pace. “Alright, Fang?” he said.

“No,” Fang breathed. They had gone far enough that he could no longer feel the bonfire’s heat, far enough for a bit of privacy. He swiftly turned to the side, seized Shade’s sides with his wings, and buried his muzzle in Shade’s chest fur.

And he let go and sobbed. He didn’t even have the space to curse the fact that it was only a runny nose, that he had no eyes to make tears, no lids to squeeze shut. Just lung spasms and a runny nose and the mournful cry for a life, a family, a world that was lost to him—gone, for all he knew.

Shade wrapped his wings around Fang and held him close. He rested his head on top of Fang’s and kept his ears open.

Shade and Fang made their way back to their alcove after the bonfire. A few others had checked in, to make sure Fang was okay, to offer sympathies or ask questions. Melody—the pup that had asked the last question—came up with her dad chasing behind and asked if humans had mommies and daddies.

“They do,” Fang had said. “And brothers and sisters.”

She considered it for a moment. “Okay,” she said with the kind of confidence only a child of her age had. “That’s good.”

“I expected her to be scared,” Fang said, back in the alcove.

“You gave her nothing to be scared of,” Shade answered. “You told her of strange creatures, yes; but also how they will bite into fruit they know is bad.”

He leaned closer into Fang. “You told her—told all of us—how they are people, just like us.”

Fang smiled. “I’m glad that came through.”

Shade wrapped a wing around Fang and pulled him close. “It did, clearly. You’ve come such a long way with your words.”

“Well,” Fang said, “I had you to help.”

Fang shuffled a bit in Shade’s hold. The catharsis from earlier had cleaned out his emotional reserves which left one particular feeling burning brighter. “Hey, Shade?” he said, his voice even smaller in their small space. “Ask me to describe echo.”

Shade turned to Fang and cocked his head. “Okay,” he said after a moment. “Pretend I’m a human and tell me what echo is.”

Fang took a breath. “Echo is like color, but different,” he started with a smirk. “There’s no vibrancy, it’s slower, and may the deity of your choice help you if you step outside. Seriously, the chirpers’ word for ‘sky’ is ‘the Great Emptiness.’”

“But,” Fang continued, “you don’t have to worry about forgetting a flashlight because all you need to do is chirp.” He chirped quietly for effect, and Shade reflexively did the same. “And you have a picture of everything around you—even behind you if you’re skilled enough. You might even be able to perceive paint on a wall if the textures are different enough.”

Fang took a breath to steel himself. “But then how do they tell each other apart?” He smiled. “Well, if all you had to go off of was someone’s voice, you’d learn to tell the difference pretty quick, right? Plus faces have different shapes still. So while you can’t make eye contact with someone across the room, you can still chirp at him.”

Another breath, and Fang’s voice got quieter. “And you know his chirp,” he said. “You know it, know the sound it makes, know where it came from, and you know he knows where you are. You know his scent, the texture of his fur, the shape of his face and the feeling of his wings.”

Fang turned to face Shade, and Shade pulled his other wing around him, ears still with rapt attention.

“And you know what it’s like to be held by him,” Fang continued, wing-claws gently tracing down Shade’s sides. “To know that you’re safe, that nothing outside matters—not even the Great Emptiness—because he has you.” Fang turned his head so that one ear was fully against Shade’s chest. “And you can just let his heartbeat drown out everything else, so that it’s all you can hear. You can’t even hear your own chirps, can’t sense where you are, and it doesn’t matter. You find that it doesn’t matter because...”

Fang took one last breath and dove in. “Because you’re home.”

Fang heard Shade’s heart start racing. He felt Shade move his wings until suddenly he was out: he could perceive again and the warmth was gone but he still felt something... He chirped: Shade was holding him by the shoulders with his wings, muzzle and ears pointed straight at him.

And Shade was shaking. “Fang?” he said with a sniff. “Do...” A shaky breath. “Do you know what that means? To us?”

“Yes,” Fang said with a nod, one last human habit he couldn’t break. “If you’ll have me,” he added.

“If I’ll have you?” Shade said, his voice wet. “Fang, you incredible...” He took a moment to catch his breath and moved his wing claws to the sides of Fang’s face. Fang did the same to him after a moment.

“Welcome home, Fang,” Shade whispered.

Fang took one breath of his own. “Welcome home, Shade,” he answered.

Shade dropped his grip and wrapped Fang with such force that they both fell to the ground, holding each other, hearts soaring, their laughter echoing off the walls, reminding them where they were.

Other survivors are finding their way...



Last we left off...

About eight years ago, you found two other people in your head. Their names are **Eutychia** and **Alec**, but to the three of you, you are **Red**, **Green**, and **Blue**. While you may never be together physically, you're determined to bring light to your respective worlds.

A Weird Introduction

"Why do you call him Miss Jordan?"

You can't help but tense up as you overhear the conversation between the two kids that think they're out of earshot.

"Because she's a girl?" the other kid responds.

"Guys," a third whisper-shouts, "he's *right there!*"

You expect that to be the end of it, but instead you see one of the kids—a girl—walk toward you with purpose, the two boys trailing timidly behind her. "Excuse me," she says.

You hold your coffee to the side. "What's up, Caroline?"

"Are you a boy or a girl?" she asks.

Green's honestly impressed with how forcefully she's asking, given that they can tell how nervous she actually is. You briefly consider flipping a coin and picking one or the other, but Red is having none of it.

Lying is a sin, right? they say. You blow a raspberry in response.

"Neither one," you say. You try to smile, but it gets harder as you see Caroline's forehead wrinkle in confusion.

You brace for the worst. God help you—literally—but you were not relishing explaining gender identity to church kids.

"Then what do we call you?" she says finally.

It's your turn to be confused. "Jordan?" you say with a head tilt.

"Yeah," one of the boys—Landon—pipes up. "But if you're not 'Miss' Jordan or 'Mister' Jordan, what do we say?"

Green is mentally perusing their list of alternative honorifics. Red shouts out their own ideas. And one of them resonates with you just right.

You look back at Landon. "Captain," you say with a smirk.

That was apparently the right answer as all three of their faces light up. Landon gives you a childish salute and nearly yells, “Aye aye, Captain!” before running off, the other two close behind.

You breathe a sigh of relief. “And that’s not even the weirdest thing about me,” you mutter as you revisit your coffee.

“Well, now I have to ask.”

You freeze. You look to your left to see the pastor—Todd Williams—looking at you over his own styrofoam cup of coffee. When you make eye contact, he continues: “What is the weirdest thing about you?”

You’re not sure what it is. Maybe it’s some sense of desperation born from going over seven years hiding part of yourself. Maybe it’s wanting to get to the inevitable rejection as soon as you can. Or maybe you were just feeling cocky.

Either way, Red and Green give their approval.

You look Pastor Todd in the eye. “I’m in a hive mind with a faun and a wyvern in another dimension.”

He raises his eyebrows. “Okay,” he says, “how does that work?”

You search his face for any sign that this is a joke, that he’s humoring you. If he is, Green says, it doesn’t look malicious, just curious.

You take another moment to compose an answer. “I can see and hear everything they do,” you say. “Alec is working on a listicle, and Eutychia is sitting on the roof of their house basking in the sun.”

You see him process it. It takes a moment, and then another. Finally he re-establishes eye contact. “So Eutychia is the wyvern, I’m assuming.”

His comment brings you all up short. “No,” you say quietly, “but how’d you get there?”

Todd smiles slightly. “Well,” he says, “wyverns are dragons, right?” You nod. “So I figured the reptile was sunning him—sorry, himself?”

Your head is silent. “Well played,” you say eventually. “You’re quick.”

Todd’s smile turns a little embarrassed. “Have to be in this business.”

You chuckle. “No,” you continue, “Eutychia’s the faun, and Alec’s the wyvern.” With a smirk, you add, “And they’re both impressed with you.”

Todd chuckles. “Well, tell them ‘thanks’ for me. You’ll have to tell me about them sometime.”

A lightness bubbles up from your chest, and you can’t help but smile. “I’d love to.”



The Lightbringers will return

Ask the Lighthouse

Green—

Is everyone you know a feathered dragon/wyvern like yourself? Do you know any other kinds of people in your world?

—Bullseye

No, my world is about as diverse as Euty's when it comes to shapes. I'm actually an outlier in the city here; most of the traditional inhabitants are dragons (four legs, two wings). And not all wyverns have feathers either, but I think I've got more griffon (bird with a furry back half) in my immediate family tree. That or winged serpent (two wings on a wyrm).

Someday I'll do some research. You'll forgive me for not going to the primary source, though.

Ask your question at wndfx.link/ask

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