

truth. "This is the safest place to put me."

Margo growled. "Fine. By my authority as a Princess of Melodia, I sentence you to house arrest." She banged her fist against the glyph on the wall to deactivate the magic suppression field.

Celeste raised her arm and sent a quick spell to re-activate the field.

Margo blocked it. "Celeste, please," she said, her voice softer.

Celeste sat up slowly and turned to sit on the side of the cot, staring at a spot on the floor. "I live in the castle—or at least I did," she said after a moment. "So house arrest would be the entire grounds."

Margo sighed and walked into the cell to sit next to Celeste. "That's the point," she said. "You seem so determined to punish yourself; I was trying to help you feel a little more... free?"

"Well, you didn't stab a princess while openly trying to usurp the queen," Celeste grouched.

"No," Margo answered, "I just mind-controlled half a small town because I was freaking out about an ethics report I was writing."

They survived the first round of layoffs with a toxic mix of survivor's guilt, paranoia, and knowing they only survived because they were cheap. They jumped to a lower-level position with a larger organization, hoping it would be more stable and open doors to where they wanted to be. It didn't. They were thankful to be caught in the layoffs that time.

That was two years ago. What happened since then was one entry-level job after another, each one draining in one way or another. But rent and groceries aren't free. So when the supervisor at their current job cut their hours, something broke.

They walked in their front door, roosted on the floor, and just stared at the wall, unable to keep their brain from running away.

They shouldn't be alone right now. How long could they keep this apartment? They should call some friends. They shouldn't spend money on going out. They shouldn't spend money at all! They shouldn't be alone right now. They could call their parents. That would involve unpacking the last ten years of low contact. They need to hit the skies, find a new job. They need to rest before their next shift. *They shouldn't be alone right now!*



Series 0

Issue 17

Nowhereverse Tales



wndfx.link/qgIXS

You and Red both have food and shelter to spare, but you're worlds away.

All Green had was the untenable situation they were bound in.

"Oooooo, what do we have here?" a high-pitched voice said. I knew I had heard it somewhere, but the exact point escaped me.

"Hello?" I said, my voice small.

"Oh! You're awake!" the voice said. "Are you? Your eyes are shut like you're sleeping."

"It's too bright," I said.

"It is?" I felt a weight on my arm for a moment, then it disappeared. "It looks fine to me. Do you have really good eyes or something?"

I relaxed my eyes a bit to try to see, but my eyes immediately burned. With a cry I threw an arm over my eyes for good measure. "Nope, too bright," I said.

"Huh," the voice said. I felt a pair of small hands—paws?—on my arm. "Well, when you open your eyes, what are you looking for?"

"Uh..." I fumbled for an answer. "Everything, I guess."

Two faceless drones on the roof of a rail yard building watching a sunset.

Every vision had more than one person in it. Every vision was people coming together, sharing life, helping each other, each in their own way.

And in all my life, I had never wanted anything more than to be part of it. To watch it happen; to *make* it happen. To help these connections form and grow and flourish and spread and *shine*! It drove me further into the light—

And then everything went dark.

Princess Margo strode down the dungeon hall, her face set in an uncharacteristic frown. She turned down the first corridor to the high-security holding cells. These were the most hardened, with the highest levels of magic suppression and isolation. As such, they were strictly for temporary use; no one wanted to stay there or keep anyone there longer than necessary.

She marched up to the last cell and put her hands on her hips. "Really? *This* is where you've been the last two days?"

Celeste turned her head to the doorway but remained lying down on the cot. "I'm a danger to society," she said with the bare intonation of someone speaking a simple

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.

Thanks again to Heddy2217, Jacob, Coda, Bullseye, A Random Fox, and everyone who's supported, whether through comments, questions, likes, favorites, and the occasional dollar.

And **thank you so much for reading.**
See you next month!

I gasped for breath, the flashes of visions overwhelming me—

A woman with sea monster heads and tentacles sitting in a bathtub while I sat on the counter.

I looked down at my hand, expecting to see the grey paws I had just seen. That grey fox hadn't looked anything like me, but—

Me resting on a rose bush as a green plant-woman tells me her story.

I flew further into the miasma. The visions were overlapping each other and my own vision now. Was that my future? A different life? I felt the wind brushing my fur and couldn't tell if that was a vision or if I was truly changing. I had to see more. I had to go further.

An anthropomorphic orange cat playing with a black-and-tan husky child while a grey husky woman is passed out on the couch.

I willed myself to go faster, and I did.

A grey hydra with three heads being comforted by a pure white hydra with twelve.

The visions grew brighter, faster, but I also saw the common thread...

"Oh, that's what it is," the voice said. "You're trying to look at too much."

"How does that work?" I blurted. "That's not how seeing works; you open your eyes and you see what you see."

"That's how *seeing* works," the voice said in a sing-songy tone, "but you're not seeing; you're *looking*."

"I—" I caught myself. I was already so far past the threshold; why wouldn't I be in some weird metaphor space? "Okay then; so how do I stop looking for too much?"

"I don't know," the voice said. "Do you know what you're looking for?"

"I think," I said. And hoping for a little levity, I added, "I still haven't found it, though."

"Of course not," the voice responded. "If you found it, you wouldn't be looking for it."

I couldn't help it, I burst out laughing at the absurdity of the answer.

"There it is," I heard the voice say. It was quieter, but satisfied.

"Hey," I said, "what do I call you?"

"Oh! I need to introduce myself. Ahem," it—literally—said before reciting, "Hi, my name is Lalaith Mairo, and I use she/her pronouns."

Ask the Lighthouse

Ronyo asks the author: Hey, you know the line about time, the boy, and the man; you said I was the boy, right?

You mean the bridge from "City of Blinding Lights"?
<<https://wndfx.link/mtswy>>

...

Dammit, Ronyo, you're going to make me cry.

I'm about to turn forty. And while the world feels like it's falling apart, inside I feel like I'm finally able to be who I've always wanted to be. I can look back at what brought me here and see the moments that could have been different, but it's not too late.

I'm about to turn forty. Four. Zero. Middle aged. Time, indeed, has not left me the same.

But you're right: you're still here. You're still part of me! And while I can't get back the years I ignored you, there's still time for adventure now.

...Thanks, Ronyo. I really needed that.

Ask at wndfx.link/ask

In this issue

1. The Fight

I'm looking for meaning. You're looking for answers. And Celeste is looking for vindication.

Rated Teen: strong language, violence, guns, swords, blood, existential questioning, mild sensuality, gender questioning, foreign thoughts, reckless driving

2. Ask the Lighthouse

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"Nice to meet you," I said. "I'm..."

I trailed off, a bitter mess in my head where my name used to be. "I don't have a name," I said.

"Oh," Lalaith said, and she sounded sad. "That's..." I felt that same weight, this time on my chest. "That's a lot," she said. "No wonder you're looking for so much."

"Yeah," I said.

You asked your phone for a route to Atlanta, and it looks like Richard and Dana are on the same route. Hopefully this means you can catch up to them, because you're stopped at another light.

You're feeling antsy, and you know Red is too. Green probably is too, but they've got a lid on it. They've learned how to stay focused in a tense situation, and it's coming in handy now.

The light changes—it's the left turn lane, not you. You want to beat your head against the wheel, but you instead idly watch the turning cars roll past. Sedan, lifted truck, another lifted truck, a Jeep—Shit! They're turning! You hadn't seen them!

Red keeps you focused. Green asks for options.

Gravity shifted for me, and my jump became a head-first free fall into the light. Each point was connected to at least one other, a graph undulating and re-forming before my eyes. The closer I got, the more I could pick out different colors, different details from each point.

I hit the outer limits. I wasn't sure what was up or down at this point; I felt like I was falling, and yet I felt nothing but exhilaration. I stretched out an arm and let my fingers brush between a couple of points—

A blue tentacle creature with four arms and uncountable eyes slept in the cradle of a much larger creature.

I blinked, not sure what I had just seen, but my hand was already moving towards another pair—

A faun, a wyvern, and a human standing in a circle, hand to claw to hand.

Was this real? Did these already happen? I had to see more, and I dove towards a cluster of points—

A pair of lilac-colored women standing in a pale blue flower, resting against each other in the waist-deep nectar.

Two women looking out the window of a space station.

An anthropomorphic mouse with glowing orange eyes being hugged by a woman in a lab coat in the rain.



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<<https://wndfx.link/bxwz0>>

Richard smiles gently at you. "We've got time," he says. "Why don't you start at the beginning? How'd this all start, anyway?"

Memories float to the surface, of a time so long ago and yet so fresh in your minds. You can't help the smile as you lean forward and clasp your hands together.

"Well," you say, "it starts with a contrarian thought..."

Many more tales are yet to be told...

I looked at her with a sad smile. “Do I actually have a choice?”

“You have a choice,” she said, mirroring my smile, “but we both know what you’ll choose.”

I looked back up. I felt lighter, standing taller... like the miasma was pulling me towards it. One jump. One jump and I’d be in. I was standing on my tip-toes, ready to leave the ground.

“It looks musical,” I mused, “like there’s a song I can’t hear...”

“I can help with that!” Lalaith yelled cheerfully. Less loud, I heard her mutter, “but how... oh!” She darted forward and landed on my shoulder as she whispered in my ear, “You look so beautiful tonight.”

I swore I could hear The Edge’s overlapping guitar picking synchronizing with the shapes in the center. I idly felt Lalaith float away. Small points of light shone out, catching my attention, drawing me closer...

With a smile so broad I was sure my face would break, I dropped the rest of my inhibitions...

And I jumped.

You check your mirrors; the turn lane is still full. You look ahead: the turn lane has a red light, but now you’ve got the green. You start forward.

There’s no cars coming the other way.

With a quick prayer for safety, you yank the wheel to the side and make an illegal left turn. The road ahead is relatively clear and much wider. You’ve never actually pushed the accelerator all the way to the floor; by the time this is over you just might.

“So...” I asked my new friend, “how do I look for less?”

“Hmmm,” Lalaith said, and I felt her weight shift. “Well, when I have too much to do, I figure out what I need first. Like... you can’t have a cake without flour.”

“Okay,” I breathed. “So I need to find a foundation?”

“Sounds like a start.”

So what did I need? I needed someplace safe, someplace where I didn’t have to worry about what was around me.

I felt the world around me shift, and on instinct I opened my eyes—

I was in my room, my studio apartment. It was cleaner than I remembered, but I wasn’t about to complain about that. I was standing in the middle of it, a slight weight on

Margo pointed at Jordan’s entry. “We’ve made contact with one,” she explained. She pointed to Eutychia. “And this one is in our world somewhere.” She tapped on Alec. “But this one, we have no idea.”

Celeste looked at Margo. “You want me to find them?”

Margo nodded. “I think you’re their best chance of finding each other.”

Celeste narrowed her eyes. “And you’re just going to let me go?”

Margo smiled. “Consider it parole if you have to.”

Celeste let that sit for a moment before she nodded and closed the file with an audible snap.

Richard and Dana are sitting on your couch. You put a can of sparkling water in front of Richard and a can of Coke in front of Dana.

“Is there anything off-limits?” their passenger—Justine—yells from your kitchen.

“Just the spaghetti,” you call back. “That’s for Thursday.”

“Copy that!”

You turn your attention back to the people on your couch. “So, uh...” you say with a sheepish grin.

The Fight

You slam your credit card on the table and bodily shove yourself out of the door. You think you yell something about leaving a tip. You hope you did.

You jump over the railing and frantically start your car. A glance behind, a flick of the wheel, and you’re out of your parking spot and on the road. You’re scanning the cars as you drive along, looking for Richard and Dana’s Jeep.

Red is in their room, door shut. Green is alone in their apartment. You’re locked in.

The road you’re on is an old suburban throughfare: four lanes, no median, very few street lights. You’re starting to question whether you’re even on the right road when you spot them go through the next intersection, a couple of cars in front of you.

The light turns red. The cars in front of you stop. You try not to panic.

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my shoulder. It left, and I saw a pink... critter? Some small mustelid floated into view.

"Oh," the critter said, and I recognized her voice as Lalaith's. "This is your room?"

"It is," I said. "But what *are* you?"

She looked down at herself. "You know," she said with a cheeky grin, "I'm not quite sure." She flew over to my mirror and looked herself over.

"Oooh, look at how *fluffy* I am," she mused, twisting around to see her backside. She brought her tail up to curl around one wrist and wagged her ears. "I think I'm an ermine."

"You would be," I said without thinking. The thought felt strange, and I narrowed my eyes. "Have we met?"

"We have," she said, turning towards me and upside down. "Just not yet."

I groaned. "Time travel?"

"Maybe; the timelines are all fucked u—gasp!"

She flipped upright and looked at me with an absolutely predatory grin. "I can say 'fuck' now!"

"Uh... congratulations?"

We walked for what could have been miles, or just a moment. But we made it around one of the hills and found a small valley. There was a glowing miasma in the sky above it, continually pulsing, moving, shifting; a blue-white star made of countless smaller stars.

"It's beautiful," I whispered. "What is it?"

I saw her close her eyes and float forward. "The source of everything. The core of the multiverse. The middle of Nowhere."

I took a step forward, just trying to get closer. "Have..." I could barely collect my thoughts; the miasma commanded so much of my attention. "Have you been inside it?"

"I have," Lalaith said. "It killed me."

Before that could fully sink in she turned around and fixed me with a fierce, desperate stare. "You don't have to do this," she said quickly. "I can go find you a name, take you back to the normal lighthouse, give you a place in the narrative where you can be safe."

I looked back to the miasma. "What do you mean by 'killed'?"

"You'll never be the same," she said, and I could feel the gravity of the moment. "You'll be someone different, and you can never go back to how you were before."

In the whole Lighthouse, there was one door I hadn't walked through. At the top of the spiral staircase to get to the balcony, next to the door to go outside, was one other. And it was always locked.

The Caretaker said it was dangerous and did not elaborate; I didn't ask. I had plenty of reasons not to, plenty of other things to do. Until now.

I tried the door first, in case it wasn't actually locked. It was. With no visible lock.

"Come on," I mumbled, tails twitching behind me, "do I need a lockpick set now?"

"You could just ask," a vaguely accented voice said behind me.

I looked over to see the Caretaker leaning against the wall at the other end of the landing. "Awfully rude," they said, "talking about breaking in before even asking."

"You made it pretty clear it was off-limits," I said.

They shrugged. "Doesn't seem to be stopping you." They motioned outward. "There's plenty of worlds out there, each with a lifetime of experiences. Why are you so keen on what you can't have?"

We laid there for a moment before she shifted and started hovering above me. "So," she said, reaching a hand down, "what's next?"

I took her hand and joined her in the air. "Well," I said with a grin, "there's a whole multiverse out there. Want to find some trouble?"

"So," Celeste said, "what do I do next?"

"I think I might have something for that," Margo said. She reached into her robes and pulled out a folder.

Celeste took it and opened it to find three sheets of paper, each with a name and detailed information: Eutychia of Mesone. Alec Squallchaser. Jordan Hendrick.

"We got word from the Lighthouse," Margo explained. "They made contact with someone that claims to have a mental bond with two other people across the multiverse."

"A telepathic bond?" Celeste skimmed over the dossier. "Should be straightforward enough to detangle."

"Except they don't want it detangled."

Celeste looked at Margo, confused, then turned back to re-read the dossier. Each sheet had detailed place descriptions and identifying information. "They want to be found," Celeste said.

You bend over, hands on your thighs, as you try to catch your breath. It comes out in fits and spurts, barking convulsions...

And you've never really understood how laughing and crying are so similar. It was always more one than the other.

Until now. When you finally give in and collapse on your back on the dirty, oil-and-rubber-stained blacktop, arms spread wide, laughing and sobbing into the air. Red runs and grabs their nephew and spins them around in the air, hollering with joy. Green almost breaks down their door before leaping off the landing and dive bombing into the valley only to swoop back up and go for another dive.

"Hey, are you okay?" a voice yells from behind you.

You sit up and look behind you. One of the employees is a safe distance away, phone in hand, looking concerned.

You raise an arm and give a "thumbs up" gesture. "Yeah, sorry," you breathe. "Just..." You shake your head with a chuckle. "Just got some really good news," you say. You pick yourself up, crack your back, and pat yourself down to make sure you have everything before you head back to your car.

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And at the bottom of the crater I dug my muzzle into the fur where her neck met her shoulders and squeezed her tighter. "You made it!" I yelled, making sure my mouth was away from her ears.

"Me? I made it?" she shrieked back at me. "Two! Years! You said you had the scene written and you didn't publish it for two whole years!"

I pulled back to look her in the eye; we were on our sides at the bottom of a comically large crater, holding each other in a loose hug. I was now a small fox about the same size as her. The same grey fur and three tails, just all over now. "I had to get here first," I said. "How's the new name?"

She raised an eyebrow but smiled. "Feels a little on the nose, doesn't it? 'Laughter horse?'" She leaned forward and tucked her head under mine. "It's odd, but it fits me. *This* me." She pulled back and looked me in the eye. "But I haven't gotten yours, buster!"

"Oh, right." I scratched the back of my neck and gave an embarrassed smile. With a breath I centered myself and looked back at her. "Hi," I said, "my name is Ronyo Gwaeron, and I prefer they/them pronouns."

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She grinned and started repeating "fuck" in a sing-songy voice for about two seconds before she stopped, grimaced, and stuck her tongue out like she had just tasted something awful. "I don't like it," she said. "It's not me."

I couldn't help a giggle.

That seemed to perk her back up. She floated lazily on her back towards me. "So, this is your room?" she said. "It's very clean."

"Yeah, that's how I *know* it's not real," I snarked.

"Or maybe it's *more* real," Lalaith said.

That brought me up short. "Wait—so it's like the ideal room? The thing itself untainted by me?"

Lalaith flipped over and flew into my face, her face stern. "Don't do that," she said, her voice low.

I blinked. "Do what?" I said quietly.

"Act like you ruin things just by existing."

My face fell. "But I do, though," I said. "I had a system, I had a plan, and then one busy day later it all goes to shit." I motioned around me. "If I weren't here, there wouldn't be a mess."

"There wouldn't be *anything*," Lalaith countered. "It would just be some blank space in a building somewhere. Besides," she said, floating over to a corner where something

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I tried to come up with a good response, but I came up empty. "I keep thinking that if I find the *right* world, I'll finally..." I scoffed and shook my head. "Never mind."

"No, keep going," the Caretaker said, and he sounded *offended*. "What's going through your head?"

I already didn't want to get into it. Now I was done. "It's the depression," I said with a wave of my hand. "I'll get over it." I held my arms around my chest and stared at the ground.

"Maybe," the Caretaker said. "But this isn't normal. You need to go through the door."

My head shot up, and I glared at them. "So you're going to berate me for wanting to do something and then tell me to do it?"

His face got fiercer, and I took a step back into the closed door. He bent down just slightly to look me in the eye.

"I'm not angry," he said quietly.

My heart refused to slow down. "What's going on?"

"How do you spell your name?"

I closed my eyes and turned my head away.

"Or how many letters is it? Maybe a nickname? Know what it means?"

7

was crumpled on the ground, "maybe it's not about the mess."

She reached down and pulled up the black fabric. "What's this?" she asked, her voice back in its higher register.

My heart skipped a beat. It was the dress I bought and tried once. "A failed experiment," I grumbled.

Lalaith glanced down at it and back to me. "Maybe you just needed a friend to help you," she said. "Want to try again?"

I... I did and I didn't. I'm not sure what face I was making, but I'm sure she could read my indecision.

She smirked at me. "Would it help if there was pie afterwards?"

"Probably—Wait, *you* left the pie in my room? How..." A jumble of questions fought to get out of my mouth, but all I could do was just repeat, "How?"

Lalaith shrugged. "You needed a pick-me-up," she said, "so I got you some pie." She flew over to me with a strange glint in her eye. "But now I think you need a bit of a push."

And she shoved the dress over my head.

.....

"NO!" I finally yelled, turning to glare at them, ears flat against my skull. "No, I don't know what it means, or what the first letter is. All I know is that it's [REDACTED]."

"That!" They leaned back and pointed at me. "That right there, what did you just say?"

"Fuck if I know!" I shouted back.

And my breath left me as I realized what I had just said, what I'd been dancing around for months: I had no idea what my own name was.

My legs gave out and I managed to slide down the door until I was sitting. "What's wrong with me?" I said, my voice trembling. I focused back on the Caretaker who had crouched down my level. "How?"

"How'd it happen? No idea," they said. "How have we not noticed? Narrative conceit. We—you included—all know who we're talking about. But eventually that breaks down." They smiled sadly. "Hard to put your name that doesn't exist in a phone."

I felt my chest tightening, tears falling out the corners of my eyes. "What do I do?" I managed to say.

"The Lighthouse is a nexus point in the multiverse. It's tied into the fabric of reality. And the farther you go past that door, the closer you get to..." They waved their

whole story."

You focus back on the present, all three of you holding everything at bay so you can finish the conversation. "I'll tell you anything—everything, I mean. Everything. I..." you stammer. "I've got a guest room if y'all need that, I work from home—fuck it, say the word and I'll clear my schedule..."

You take a breath. "You've been to other worlds?" you say, trying to clarify. You turn to Dana. "You're from another world?"

Dana nods with a smile.

Another crack. Green pulls you back—they're in a hurry. You pull your phone out. "What's your number? I'll text you and..."

"Breathe, kid," Richard says before the two of you exchange numbers. "Can't promise anything, now."

"I don't care," you say, a giddiness bubbling up. "You've given us the first lead we've ever had. Anything—*anything* you tell us is more than we had."

Richard smiles. "Then we'll see you tomorrow."

He and Dana leave in their Jeep and head back toward the interstate, leaving you alone in the truck stop parking lot.

size in there. You consider just lining the floor with futon cushions.

Maybe Red's world would be the best: you and Red don't have wings for Green's, and Green might be too big for yours. Maybe. You giggle at the thought of one of your worlds being a tiny world compared to the others.

Green finally collapses around two in the morning. Their last thoughts are of the three of you together, resting, you and Red against Green, their wings surrounding you.

Red takes the image and gives you a passionate kiss before laying their head against Green and following them into sleep.

You wash your hands and climb back into bed, imagining your smooth legs brushing against Red's furred ones, your hand idly scratching Green's scales.

I shot out of the center with a joyful yell. I felt the wind through my fur, catching my ears and tails, my new muzzle wonderfully aerodynamic. I pressed my arms to my sides and did a loop in midair before flying straight towards Lalaith. She barely had a moment to see me before I grabbed her by her midsection and threw us both into the ground.

into crisis mode with laser focus, giving you words when you need them.

"But they're not human," you say finally, shoulders slumping. "One's a faun in a world straight out of Greek mythology. The other's a wyvern in a world of flyers." You turn back to Dana. "So if you can tell me where you got that truck, I can find out where *they* got it from, and maybe, *maybe* I can trace that back to Euty."

Dana glances at Richard. He nods. She turns back to you and gives a smile—weak, but friendly. "I got it from one of our coworkers," she says. "She had a friend that was selling it for scrap and I was interested. I didn't know it was so unusual here." She motions to the car behind her. "They don't make Padoris or Jeeps where I'm from."

It takes a second, but the full meaning dawns on you, all of you: she's not from your world. Or Red's.

But you're talking to her. Face-to-face.

And, for the first time, the insurmountable barrier cracks.

Your jaw drops, head fully turning from Dana to Richard and back. "You...?"

"I'm not," Richard says with a smile. "Born and raised in Atlanta—which we do need to get to. But we're coming back through Greenville, and I want to hear the

Celeste had to admit—only to herself, and begrudgingly at that—that Margo clearly knew how to fight. Every strike was expertly blocked or redirected with almost academic precision. They were in a stalemate, and Celeste was fine with that for the moment.

Margo's face didn't change, but she twisted one block into a counterstrike. Before Celeste knew it the sword in her dominant hand was sliding across the marble floor.

In one fluid motion Celeste jumped back, pulled the stunner from her thigh holster, and shot Margo directly in the chest.

Margo went down fast and hard. After a moment she rolled over onto her back, her arms and legs still twitching feebly. "You..." she wheezed, "must have learned quite a bit."

Celeste had run over to grab her sword, keeping her other sword up. "I did," she said, slowly approaching Margo. "But no matter where I went, people were the same. Everyone wants something, and everyone does what they can and uses who they can to get it."

"Oh," Margo said, the disappointment clear.

Another step. "Which means you're only as free as the power you can wield," Celeste said, taking another step and closing the distance to see Margo still twitching on the

hope, my wonder, my curiosity. You're the me in this world, the boy with shapeshifting powers exploring a multiverse where anything is possible. And that's going to make you different from me in some big ways.

The dress?

And the pronouns. And a lot more to come.

So I'm you, but I'm not?

Basically.

Alright... I think I can work with that.

In that case... Go, Ronyo, and make this a multiverse worth reading.

You—all three of you—barely sleep that night, each taking turns imagining and planning your future or trying to reign in your imaginations. On the one hand, the road ahead has only moved from "impossible" to "extremely difficult."

On the other hand, the road ahead is no longer impossible.

Red is making a list of places they want to show you. Green wants to know more about the mechanics of travels. You're sitting on your twin-size bed and looking around your bedroom trying to figure out how you'll get a king-

hand. "Everything."

My breathing started to steady now that I had a goal. "Dangerous?"

"Incredibly. You're probably going to die." They reached past me and turned the handle. The door swung open away from me, and I fell onto my back, pinching my tails beneath me.

I scrambled onto my feet and looked into the dimly-lit space beyond the threshold. "What happens if I stay?"

"How long do you think you can survive without a name?" they answered.

It never crossed my mind that they could be lying. That I had more choices than I was being presented with. Because in my heart, in my soul, I knew it was true. I had to go.

And I looked back, gave a Vulcan salute, and shut the door.

A hush fell over the court, the usual din of side conversations falling away. The crowd parted to make way for a lone elf with vibrant red hair dressed in a black catsuit that covered her body from the neck down, fingerless gloves, and heavy combat boots. Her outfit was accessorized with grey armor plates covering what they could and

ground—except that last movement looked deliberate.

"And I learned to wield a lot," Celeste finished as she jumped forward and brought her two swords point down onto Margo—

Who flicked her wrist and disappeared in a purple flash.

Celeste's strike cracked the floor and embedded her swords into the ground. With a grunt she pulled them back and turned around to see Margo getting up.

"Short-range teleport," Celeste said with a faint smile. "Well played."

Margo cracked her neck. "Pin your opponent by their robes," she answered. "If I were done, I would've taken it."

Celeste smirked and raised her swords. Margo answered with a smirk of her own and brought up her hands.

I tried to duck out of the way, but Lalaith had timed it perfectly so that I ended up pushing my arms out of the sleeves and putting the dress on properly. "Hold still," she said, and I could feel her tug at different parts of the dress. "I'm not usually the fashion one either, but I know a few things, like how to account for your tails." And with one more sharp tug I felt the dress fall into place around my hips. "Take a look."

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various weapons and gear strapped to her hips, thighs, arms, and back.

The queen closed her eyes and sighed. She stood up and addressed the court, "I'm afraid we will need to adjourn until tomorrow. The court scribes will make sure everyone's attendance is noted." She nodded to the guards on either side who began to escort everyone out of the throne room.

The elf in black kept her stare on the queen, letting the chaos around her dissipate.

Finally, the room was empty save for the queen, the figure, and a smaller elf in white robes with purple trim. The queen nodded her head. "Court Mage Celeste," she said, her voice even, "it is good to see you well."

"Is it really?" Celeste asked with a quirk of her eyebrow.

The queen stood still for a moment. "I see," she said quietly. "What is your business before the court today?" she asked at a more normal volume.

Celeste straightened her posture and spoke out. "For years, I studied under you. I performed every task, learned every lesson. I gave you my loyalty, my devotion, and I excelled at my role far beyond anyone's expectations.

"It's a Padori 722, a light truck most often used by trades and contractors. My partner has one, they love it. But they don't make them here."

Richard doesn't react. "And you want to import one?"

You groan in frustration, close your eyes, and take a breath. Green points out the key detail you're leaving out. "They don't make them *on this planet*," you say.

Dana bites her lip. Richard raises an eyebrow. "But your partner has one."

You smile in relief and anticipation. "Yes," you say.

Richard nods slowly. "Start talking," he says.

"We're connected," you blurt out immediately, ready to spill your whole story. "Three of us, actually. We can read each others' minds, share thoughts and ideas, see what the others see, feel what they feel, smell, taste, touch. They're always with me, all the time." It's coming out in a rush, words tripping over themselves to get out.

You blink back some tears but don't bother to hold back the sob, the heartache from earlier mixing with the anticipation and frustration. Inside, you're overwhelmed and nearly drowning in feelings. Red's used to operating at this emotional level, and they hold you up. Green's kicked

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This story, this series? This is what I've been trying to build most of my life. A shared universe where nothing's impossible because for every thing that's not possible, there's always a world where it *is* possible. And I was just going to take a back seat, be the guy in the background giving the characters what they need.

I.T. and procurement?

Exactly. But part of that was because I was trying to back off some of the... weirder stuff. When it actually came time to make this world real, I wasn't content to sit on the sidelines anymore.

But why the whole name thing?

For the story to be believable, there has to be something to overcome. I haven't gone through exactly what you did, but I've had those thoughts, struggled with my identity, and I wouldn't be who I am if I hadn't. You did have a name in the first few drafts, but once I realized it wasn't going to last, I decided to start playing with the format. Poking some holes in the fourth wall and all that.

Because I'm not just the I.T. guy anymore?

Nope. You are my avatar. You know the nature of your world and the story it's in. And you are the means by which I experience it: my eyes, my ears, my hands, but also my

They pull off at the next exit. There's a truck stop there, an overly large gas station with lots of lighted parking spots. They pull into one spot, and you take one two over, leaving an empty spot between you.

You each get out of your cars. Richard and Dana look tense, and you can't blame them. You're fidgeting, rubbing your fingers together and alternating between hyperventilating and holding your breath.

"Sorry, I—thank you, sorry," you stammer, your thoughts completely disjointed. "I didn't have your number or anything and I just..."

Richard frowns. "What's going on?"

You start to stammer some more, but Green's calm and focus cuts through. This is an investigation, what they're good at. You let their thoughts flow through you, as if they're talking with your mouth. You look intently at Dana. "That truck that you're modding an electric into? Where'd you get it?"

You see her flinch, either from confusion or fear. "From a dealer, I think?"

"Why do you need to know?" Richard cuts in.

I resisted. "But..." I was still looking down as I struggled to put the fear into words. "What if I don't like how I look?"

"Then you try something else," she said. She tilted her head to the side. "Why did you get the dress in the first place?"

I wanted to shrink down, hide, forget this whole thing ever happened. But more than that, I wanted to be done with all of this. And I knew—I *knew*—the only way out was through.

"I woke up as a girl a while ago," I said. "And when Jason—that older *kitsune*—told me to have more self-confidence, I..." I shrugged. "I couldn't get that moment out of my head. What did it mean for all..." I motioned at myself.

Lalaith floated back a foot or two. "Okay," she said, "concentrate on how that felt."

I closed my eyes and did my best to remember. The longer hair, the smoother skin... the curves... I knew I was blushing fiercely, but I forced myself to remember the boobs. *My* boobs. The weight, the way they hung, the way they felt in my palms as I was covering myself up—

Lalaith spun me around. I took a breath and opened my eyes.

A blink, and one idea jumped to the front: three people, deeply in love, connected across different worlds. Somehow, this time, the words flowed.

And the dam broke.

A blink, and I was looking at a laptop in a dark room, lit by a few electronics and pre-dawn light filtering through the blinds. The man was sitting cross-legged on a couch, a dog next to him chewing on something plastic.

I could hear the tapping of the keys as he typed on his laptop. It was a description of everything I had just seen, everything going through my mind at that moment.

I wasn't sure whether to be scared, angry, or joyful; my entire being was taken up by a growing realization:

I'm not real.

No, not in the same way I am. You're a character, and this is a story.

Not the first story you've written, by the looks of things.

And not the first story you've been in.

No kidding—wait, am I your *self-insert*?

Afraid so.

Okay... but why? Why bring me here, show me all this?

"Yet when the time came to announce a new princess, I was overlooked." She glanced at the other elf before looking back to the queen. "When asked, you cited old lessons you failed to sufficiently clarify or defend. You clearly felt I lacked the power and skill to ascend to your side.

"So I have traveled. I have studied in my own way, ventured far beyond where any other elves have been, and learned from every corner of worlds far beyond ours. And I have grown in power and skill."

Celeste stepped forward. Her glare was focused, harsh, and she held the queen's gaze. "I'm ready to stand by your side now."

Today was not a good day.

Another kid in Red's family got engaged! They just wish it wasn't their *nephew*. A kid they've watched grow up. Help raise. Seen with yams all over his face along with the rest of his cohort. And now grown and in love with a minotaur.

The two of them were at dinner tonight. They were in love, obviously and joyously. The brief glimpses of eye contact, the blushes, the hesitant hand-holding... Even now, they were on the couch leaning against each other.

I saw a *kitsune* girl about my height wearing a simple black dress, brown hair framing her soft face, blue-grey fox ears perked up, three fox tails swaying gently behind her.

"That's me?" I breathed, reaching out to touch the mirror. The girl in the mirror reached back.

"That's you," Lalaith confirmed.

My breath hitched. "I..." I took a shaky breath and sat down on the ground, still touching the mirror. "I'm really cute."

"Yeah," Lalaith said, "a real cutie patootie."

I looked down, unable to look at the mirror any longer. I *was* cute. And that scared me. "What does this mean now?"

Lalaith floated around and looked me in the eyes. "Whatever. You. Want," she said emphatically. "Do you like it?"

I nodded. I did like it. Quite a bit, actually.

"Do you want to be a girl?"

"I..." I swallowed. "I don't know. Maybe..." A wild idea hit me. "Can I be both?" I said.

Lalaith wrapped her arms around my neck. "Of course you can."

I took a deep breath and nodded. "Then I'm both."

"Both is good," Lalaith said.

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It was adorable. Red was absolutely happy for him—for both of them. And maybe later they'll be able to say so.

But right now, all they want is to sit across from him between you and Green. To be able to make eye contact with you across the room. To know your faces, your presence, your *scents*! To bury their face in your hair, run their hands through Green's plumage, right before the two of you pin them against the wall. Or vice versa.

Yes, they're horny. But they don't want sex. They want you. The three of you together. And they want it in a way that hurts. And their nephew's fiancé picking him up and carrying him out to the bonfire just twists the knife a little bit more.

Red shuts themselves in their room, unable to do anything but be alone with their pain.

I was at the bottom of a chasm. There were ducts and pipes and wires everywhere, towering up higher than I could see rising unforgivably into the light at the top.

I reached up, found a handhold, and started climbing. When I got to about sixteen feet up—easily three times higher than I stood—I couldn't find another way up.

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distance or some impossible angle. Power flowed freely, effortlessly along it.

Celeste looked to the queen, and saw even more of those bonds, too many. She turned away; it was too bright to look at for long.

Finally, Celeste looked at herself. She expected to find nothing, but there were a few faint connections. The brightest—though still extremely dim—curled off into another impossible angle. She touched it, tugged on it slightly—

And remembered how Courtney lit up every time she brought back stories from a new world.

There was another bond, still faint, but in the same direction. She touched it...

"One day," the Caretaker said quietly, "you'll see that you're wrong. I just hope when you do, it's not too late."

Celeste dropped her sword, the blood leaving spots on the throne room floor. She dropped to her knees and put her hands on the back of her head.

"I surrender."

.....

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A blink and I was browsing through an elvish dictionary I found online. It says the word for fox is *ronyo*.

A blink, and I was in a field letting the power inside me out as my red fur hardened into pure white scales and my wings sprung from my back. I had to protect my friends!

A blink, and I was a *kitsune* again, but with the red fur from before.

A blink, and I was looking at a grey fox, seeing myself more than I ever had.

A blink. Years had gone by. The teenager was in his twenties now, looking through old notebooks of half-imagined worlds. With a sigh, he put the box back on the shelf.

A blink. Various worlds and ideas flew past, adventures half lived but never fully realized, everything tinged by a growing frustration. Why couldn't I write how I wanted? Why couldn't I finish what I started? Why did all my ideas have to be so huge? *Why didn't I have more time?*

A blink. A sprawling multiverse slowly formed, chipped away from pockets of time stolen across a decade, longer. Characters stolen, adapted, changed, scrapped and repurposed. A familiar pink pony with a very unfamiliar horn and wings sticks in my head more than the others.

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Celeste just blinked and shook her head. "How?" She couldn't stop her mouth. "The power to run a healing spell that throughly would be..."

Margo laughed: it was an uneasy laugh, a release of tension. "It's..." She motioned toward the balconies. "My friends, really."

Celeste glanced at the balconies, seeing a few faces peering over the edges at them. But her attention was most drawn back to the throne, seeing the utter relief on the queen's face.

"I don't understand..." Celeste said, her voice small. And she didn't; there was something else happening here, something just beneath the surface...

Margo held up her hand and began forming a glyph. Celeste felt the instinct to counter, but she couldn't summon the will to do it. All she could do was lean away.

Margo noticed and just held the glyph out. "Let me show you," she said gently.

The calm cut through Celeste's storm. Slowly, Celeste reached out and touched the glyph. And she saw.

It was a magical bond unlike any she'd seen before. The strongest was between Margo and the queen, but others branched out to the balconies, and others curled off into the

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Celeste blinked. "What? I..." She looked down. "You didn't deserve me yelling at you," she said. "I wasn't trying to make you feel bad, I just..." She shrugged. "Had a lot of feelings, I guess."

"But you tried to spare mine," Margo said, insistent. "Right?"

Celeste blinked. And blinked again. "That's it?" she said, eyebrow raised.

"No," Margo said. "But it is a start to treating other people like people." Margo's smirk turned a little sadder. "It's something I'm still learning."

Celeste nodded, and they sat in an easy silence.

A blink, and I could see again. It was a dark room, lit only by a small desk lamp. The wind blew ominously through the trees outside as I hunched over a desk—no, the body I was in hunched. I was still a passenger in this memory, coloring in red fur on a fox in a gray shirt and blue jeans.

And I was looking up at the teenager holding the pencil.

A blink, and I was in a forest meeting an orange fox with two tails—Tails?! My fourth or fifth cousin by some convoluted logic.

We looked at each other, then back at the mirror. "Both," we said in unison with a nod.

Today was not a good day.

You can't be there for Red. You can't provide for Green. Hell, the way things are going, you might not be able to provide for Green even *if* they were here.

Your workplace had its own round of layoffs recently, and things are still tense. And one of the higher-ups is taking the opportunity to push their idea of a productive workplace... and browbeating anyone that pushes back.

It looks suspiciously like what you see in your country: the wrong people getting too much power. It's been sitting in the back of your mind for too long, and now it's becoming impossible to ignore. You want to fight back, to stand up, to inspire people not to give in to despair, to have hope...

But today is one of those days where you just can't seem to dig it up.

You feel responsible, that you're letting Red and Green down. Hope is your *thing*! It's what you bring to the table, what you stand for between the three of you.

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So I went sideways. I shimmied along the pipe I was standing on until I felt something change. And I continued on.

Upwards until I couldn't, then sideways until I could. Thirty feet. Fifty feet. Further up and further in.

Maybe eighty feet? It was hard to see the bottom, just a vague shadowy area.

The light was brighter, and I was squinting more, navigating by touch.

Was I past a hundred now? My arms were tired, my legs ached. I reached up, higher, into the blinding light.

My hand caught something. I grabbed, held on, and pulled. I dug into reserves I didn't even know I had and willed myself to get just a little bit farther.

I couldn't see—it was too bright. I fumbled blindly for another handhold and found it. My feet dangled and caught on some edge. I dug in and pushed.

The next thing I gripped was thin; it dug into my palm painfully.

I reached and found a ledge, or at least it felt enough like one. I summoned every bit of leverage from my legs, every drop of strength left in my aching arms, and drug myself higher.

They, of course, remind you that it's not your responsibility. That your self-described mission is a *collective* mission. And right now...

With Red feeling the pain of your separation...

With Green feeling trapped by their circumstances...

With you in the depths of despair...

There isn't much light to be brought.

Margo caught a sword strike between a pair of arcane shields. "You said the queen brought up a lesson; what was it?"

Celeste sneered. "Some dungheap about bonds of love or something."

Margo brightened up. "Oh, that's my speciality!" Her eyes lit up and a bright smile cut across her face. "What do you need help with?"

Celeste's jaw dropped. She just stared at Margo for a moment before her hands began to glow red, arcane glyphs forming around her swords. "I'm not here for a fucking *study session*!" she screamed as she lunged forward and struck with her swords.

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I got my hips over the corner and yanked myself the rest of the way onto the ledge. I lay there, back on whatever rough surface there was, arms splayed out, eyes squeezed shut and yet still letting in enough light to know I couldn't open them.

The queen just stared back at Celeste. Others would say it was the saddest they had ever seen her.

But Celeste only saw condescending pity. "You won't have me by your side?" she said with a glower. "Then I'll have *your* throne instead."

"Are you serious?"

Celeste and the queen both turned to the other elf who strode out between them, looking at Celeste with a mix of horror and confusion. "You're challenging her?"

Celeste turned her full glare on her. "I am, Margo—sorry," she said with the air of someone absolutely not sorry. "*Princess* Margo," she added with a sneer.

Margo gave a vague shrug. "I don't know what your problem with me is—"

"I don't *have* a problem with you!" Celeste yelled, pulling a sword from her back and holding it to the side. "I have a problem with *her* giving *you* what was rightfully *mine*!"

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She hadn't meant to kill her!

But what was the point of sharp swords and quick strikes if not to kill?

"Don't be afraid, Mage," Margo said calmly. "I'm okay," She placed one hand on her chest next to the wound and took the sword with her other.

Was this really what she wanted?

"Celeste!" Margo said a little more forcefully.

Celeste forced herself out of her panic and saw Margo slowly pulling the sword out of her, a purple aura moving from her other hand over the wound.

"Can you finish pulling this out?" Margo said with the hint of a laugh. "My arm's not quite long enough."

In a daze, Celeste gently took the sword and pulled it the rest of the way. It was still covered in blood, as was Margo's robes, but the wound was quickly closing up. A moment passed, and the wound was gone, as if it had never been there.

"Not even a scar?" Celeste said in a small voice.

"No," Margo said, "I was able to get to it quick enough to heal it well. And it was a clean wound. Really, this was the ideal conditions for it."

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Margo smiled. "As for your other question... I had to do community service. I had to go up to every person I'd wronged and make it right." She shook her head. "I did so many odd jobs that month."

"Odd jobs?" Celeste said with a raised eyebrow. "I guess you couldn't just cut a check, though."

"That would have defeated the purpose," Margo agreed, as if she was stating a simple fact. "It was about showing that I understood what I'd done wrong, how I'd harmed that particular person."

Celeste nodded glumly. "*That's* what makes you better than me."

"Wrong," Margo countered. "Celeste, I'm not *better* than you. I'm anxious, I have screwed up priorities, and I can be mean—like, 'sarcastic misanthrope' mean." She put a hand on top of Celeste's. "My journey might not be as dramatic as yours has been, but that doesn't make me less flawed."

"Yeah," Celeste said, "but you actually care about other people."

"And you don't? What made you stop earlier? When you were—and I'm using your word here—'bitching' at me?"

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"I—" You take one hand off the wheel and point to yourself. "—need to talk—" You make a talking gesture with your hand. "—to you!" You point at her.

You see her turn to Richard before she looks back at you and gives a "thumbs up" gesture.

"Thank you!" you say, putting your hand to your chin and bringing it down. You point to your eyes and then to her, a more colloquial "I'm watching you."

She holds up her thumb again.

You sign "thank you" again and ease off the gas, letting them pull ahead. You start to pull back into the lane behind them, fully expecting them to go all the way to Atlanta with you following. But as soon as they're clear of you, they pull into the center lane in front of you.

You give them a comfortable distance. But not too comfortable; the last thing you need is someone getting between the two of you.

Celeste's vision was dark; all she could see was the red liquid quickly soaking into Margo's robes. She vaguely heard the queen yell something, heard shouts from the balconies, but everything was muffled. She dropped her other sword and stepped back.

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"Don't call me that," Margo hissed, head pointed down, eyes closed. "I don't deserve it," she said. "I'm not special. I've screwed up so much of my life. I shouldn't be where I am just because I..."

Celeste sighed. "Princess," she said, "the queen is one of the wisest people I know, and the fact that I was too stupid to—no..." She shook her head. "I didn't *want* to see it. But that doesn't make it any less true." She swallowed and looked ahead. "She said you understood bonds of love better than she did; that you wanted to learn from people. That's why she picked you and not me."

Celeste hung her head. "That's why she was *never* going to pick me. I didn't get it. I *still* don't get it, or I wouldn't be bitching at you like a spoiled brat. So what do I do, Princess?" she finished, turning back to Margo.

Margo sighed, but smiled slightly. She looked back to Celeste. "First," she said, "don't call me 'Princess.' I want us to be friends. And that means you call me 'Margo,' okay?" She held her hand out to Celeste.

Celeste looked down at it, then back to Margo. "As you wish, Margo," she said as she grasped it in a firm handshake.

Margo ducked back and moved to block again, but this time the sword cut straight through her shield. "Then what are you here for?" she said, her voice steady despite everything. "And is it really worth... all this?"

"You don't understand, *Princess*," Celeste spat. She charged forward. "Everything I have, I had to claw and scrape for!" A parry, blocked. "I had nothing! I was no one!" A swing and a jab, dodged. "And I won't—" Strike. "let anyone—" Strike. "control me again!" A jab—

Celeste found a gap in Margo's shield and cleanly impaled her through the heart.

I walked along a dirt path in my bare feet, Lalaith floating by my side, my dress and tails catching the breeze. The countryside was well-lit, despite the lack of any visible light source. "This isn't real, is it," I said.

Lalaith sighed. "If I give you an honest answer," she said finally, "you have to promise me to keep walking."

I stopped. "What?"

She turned around, and when she saw I had stopped her eyes grew wide. "I'm serious!" she said, motioning. "Keep walking!"

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"Princess Margo," the queen cut in, "you do not need to defend me."

Margo turned back to the queen. "But I do!" she said, the ghost of a smile on her face. "I swore I would, and I will." Before the queen could object she turned back to Celeste.

Celeste narrowed her eyes at the princess. "Why *are* you defending her?" she said.

Margo cocked her head. "Because she's the queen?" she said as if it was obvious.

Celeste smirked. "So she's always right?"

"No," Margo said, though her voice was weak. "No, she's the leader."

"If she sends soldiers into an ambush, who dies?"

Margo's jaw dropped in horror. "What?"

Celeste pressed her advantage. "Because *she* isn't on the battlefield—" She pointed her sword at the queen. "She's back here, in her palace, probably with a glass of wine."

Margo shook her head. "It's not like that," she said quietly.

"If a professor doesn't teach her class, who fails?" Celeste yelled. "If a chef serves bad food, who gets sick?"

I took a breath and a step forward. And then another. "What's going on?" I said.

Lalaith took her place beside me as we kept moving. "Do you remember the story of the Velveteen Rabbit?"

"Wow, it's been a while," I said. "That's the stuffed animal that wanted to be real, and they said that the more the kid loved it, the more real it..." I trailed off, the implications starting to sink in.

"Keep walking," Lalaith said.

And I did. Only because she said. "I'm not real, am I?" I said.

"We are and we aren't," Lalaith said. "And I can tell you there's nothing to be afraid of, and you can believe me. But you won't stop being scared until you actually see it for yourself."

"Which is why I need to keep walking?"

"Which is why *we* need to keep walking."

I raised an eyebrow. "You too?"

Lalaith darted to me and nuzzled my cheek. "What're friends for? Besides," she added with a giggle, "I'm just as real as you are."

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She took a step forward. "Every decision *she* makes has consequences for *us*," she said. "And I'm done pretending that's okay."

Margo shook her head. "It's not like that!" she said, louder.

Celeste sighed and pointed her sword at Margo. "Get out of my way."

Margo just stared at Celeste, her face an odd mixture of confusion and hurt.

"Princess," Celeste growled, pulling the other sword from her back, "get out of my way."

Margo's eyes narrowed, and she spread her arms, purple glyphs appearing around her hands. "No," she said.

Celeste stared at Margo for a moment before she lunged forward with a yell.

Today was not a good day.

Green has had trouble holding down a job. They found some success a few years after you first connected: enough to stabilize their career, and just in time for journalism to stop being a viable career.

You get within sight of them in time to see them turn onto the interstate. You manage to shed enough momentum to follow them onto the on-ramp.

There's more traffic here. You do your best to keep pace with the Jeep while staying sharp for merging cars from other exists and lanes. They're in the left-most lane, and it takes you way too long to get to the middle lane.

The car behind them jumps into your lane. You quickly take their place in the left lane and speed up. You know you're following too closely, but you also don't think you can get their attention from behind.

Farther out of town, the traffic spreads out a bit, and you have your chance. You pull into the lane to their right and add a little more gas, enough to pull you even with them. You look to the side: you can see Dana, and you might be able to make eye contact.

You honk your horn twice. You see her glance around, but she misses you.

You lean on the horn, its discordant yell blaring into the night.

You see Dana and Richard both look around, and Dana finally makes eye contact with you.

Celeste turned to Margo in shock, mouth agape. "I heard about one of the scholars having a breakdown; that was *you*?"

Margo blushed and nodded.

Celeste gripped the cot harder and looked down at the ground. "Why did *you* get to be a princess?" she spat.

Margo started to shrink into herself.

"I mean, I thought it was that you were better politically since you weren't as manipulative as I am, that you were better at following the rules, but you cast a *mind-control spell*?" She scoffed. "How is that not worse than blackmailing a few pages? Or—or breaking into a restricted area?"

"I did that too," Margo said in a small voice.

"See?" Celeste yelled and turned to Margo, livid. "What makes you so much better—"

Celeste stopped herself when she saw Margo. She was hunched over, eyes closed, arms pressed close to herself and legs pressed close together, trying to take up as little space as possible.

Celeste deflated. She closed her eyes and sighed. "I'm sorry, Princess—"