

The compromise is you're singing along at the top of your lungs, windows down, volume up. The images it sends are... well, you're not entirely sure, but Red loves it.

You pass by a major city. You briefly bemoan your timetable and the fact you can't stop at Ikea. You keep driving.

Until Green suddenly gets agitated. Their thoughts are chaotic: deforestation, a hurricane, mixed-race people, grounded airplanes, and a lone warrior riding into battle?

You imagine a green Don Quixote and suddenly hope Green isn't literally heading into battle. No, but they're angry enough.

You wonder if anyone else knows. If there's anyone Green can tell. Do they have a platform they can use?

Green's anger immediately shifts to despair, and you struggle to keep your attention on the road. There's a rest area in a mile. Green has told people. They've told everyone for months that this was going to happen. Lots of people cared. Just not anyone with any power to do anything about it.

You swerve into a parking spot in the rest area and wrench the car off. You lean your head against the steering wheel, close your eyes, and cover your ears.

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The woman at the counter—a tall borzoi with a pair of perfectly round glasses perched on her muzzle—slid Tom's rejected application towards him. The "Emigrating From" field was circled in red ink, like the wrong answer on a test.

"Ya need to put something else here, hun," she said in a thick New Jersey accent (except not New Jersey because New Jersey didn't exist here???). "They won't take your application like this."

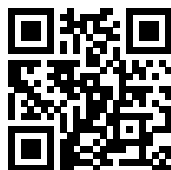
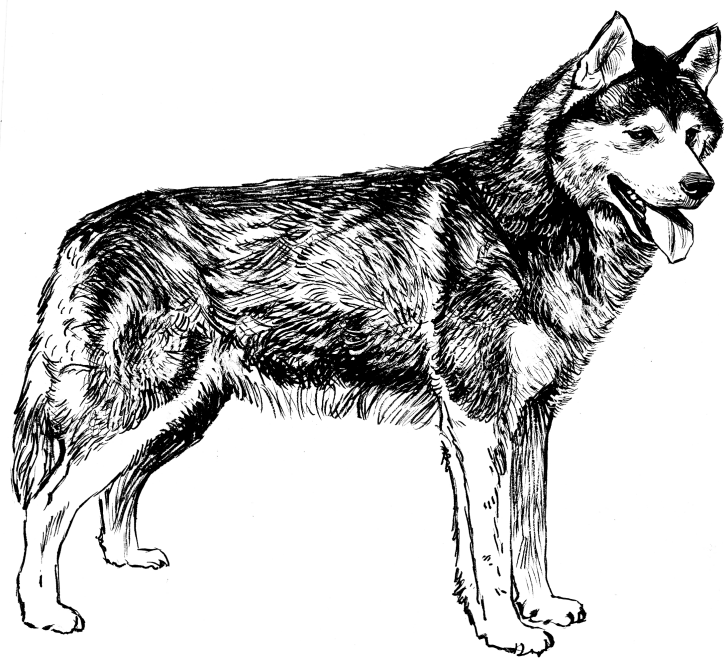
"Yeah," Tom said, doing his best not to get frustrated. "But then what should I put there?"

The woman rolled her eyes. "Listen, sir," she said, sitting a little straighter. "As a clerk of the State, I am unable to provide guidance on your specific situation. I can only remind you to provide truthful answers to the best of your ability." She smiled slightly. "As far as that field goes, I can say that you should use the name of the country as it is known to the State."

Tom suppressed a dramatic sigh. "So what name should I use?"

"Sir," she repeated, "As a clerk of the State, I am unable to provide guidance on your specific situation." She looked down at the rejected application. "You're from the... 'United States of America'? Hmmm..." She rummaged behind the

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wndfx.link/zs3J

Series 0

Issue 6

Nowhereverse Tales



counter and pulled out a laminated map. "Can you point to it? Even just the general area?"

The map was completely unrecognizable. There was something that looked like Antarctica, but only one large continent otherwise. The Americas weren't there, what should have been Africa was upside down, and if the large island to the west was supposed to be Australia, it was a poor substitute.

Tom stared at the map, hands still in his lap, clenching and unclenching his fists. "No," he said sullenly.

The woman nodded. "Well, as a clerk of the State, I am unab—"

"I know," Tom hissed, the hair on his neck standing up.

"Hey!" The woman snapped her fingers in his face.

"Don't get testy with me, big boy."

The snap startled Tom out of his mood. He lowered his head and slumped in his seat. "Sorry," he said meekly.

The woman sighed and shook her head. "I'm on your side here," she said quietly, "but there's only so much I can tell you."

Tom nodded but didn't look up.

A Perspective Check

You wave goodbye to the student, soon-to-be roommate, that you'd met at a coffee shop. They just got back from studying abroad and needed a place to stay for the spring semester. A place that, conveniently, you had. Hopefully, since you wouldn't be codependent on each other for a social life, you'd be more likely to tolerate each other.

Green reminds you not to self-deprecate. You swat the side of your head and get back to your car. You've got five hours of driving ahead of you, and you'd like to have a little bit of light when you get to your grandparents' house. You have your playlist ready, your car's oil checked, and the weather brought the crisp fall air you love so much. With a flourish, you put your car in gear and head out.

Green hangs back, knowing how travel can require a certain level of concentration. Red, on the other hand, seems to be trying to shove themselves into your head to hear your music. After getting a slight headache, you eventually convince them to back off a bit.

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!**

Luna couldn't help the smile. "Tom," she said, "I'm pregnant."

"Hi, Pregnant, I'm Dad!" Tom blurted before collapsing on her and embracing her, burying his face in her neck and hugging her tightly.

Luna returned the hug and arched her back to press tighter against him. "You!" she screamed with laughter as she shifted around and pulled him into a deep kiss.

Other survivors are finding their way...

"Hey," she said. "What I *can* tell you is that there is no country called the 'United States of America' that is *known* to the State."

Tom looked up as he took in what she had just said. After a moment, he closed his eyes and sighed. "I hate it when I have to be smart," he said, spitting the last word out like a sour grape.

"Oh, honey," the woman said with a suppressed laugh. "You can do it; come on."

Tom rolled his eyes but smiled anyway; he could tell she wasn't making fun of him. "Can you tell me one more time?"

She nodded. "Like I said, as a clerk of the State, I am unable to provide guidance on your specific situation. I know that you should use the name of the country as it is known to the State. And the 'United States of America' is *not known* to the state."

Tom processed it for a moment. "So should I wr—"

"Nope!" She interrupted. "I cannot tell you what you should and should not *write*." She slid the application closer to him. As she pulled her hand away she tapped the cup of pens to the side.

Tom reached for a pen as he made eye contact with her.

Ask the Lighthouse

Coda asks Dana: How difficult is it to be a mechanic working on machines from different worlds than your own? Do the different worlds tend to come up with similar designs?

Look, I'm an engineer, right? So yeah, it's challenging. Especially when you go from your standard internal combustion engine to one I'm pretty sure works on literal magic. But as much as we like to talk about how nothing's constant across worlds, the general principles work the same. Every universe has some variation on the simple machines, and we go from there.

Difficult? Yeah. But let's be clear: I *get* to work on these machines.

Ask at wndfx.link/ask

In this issue

1. Letter from the editor

2. Orange Stereotypes

Tom's immigration application keeps getting held up, but it's not his fault no one's heard of his country!

Rated Teen: nudity, implied sex

3. A Perspective Check

It'd be great if potential world-shattering events didn't happen while you were driving to a family reunion.

Rated General: depression, foreign thoughts, alcohol mention

4. Ask the Lighthouse

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She gave a very slight nod.

He took a pen, crossed out the old answer, and wrote "Not Known."

She immediately grabbed the application and slid a freshly printed copy over the counter to him, the new answer already in place. "Please read over this application to ensure I have correctly transcribed your answers," she said. "If so, please sign and date at the bottom of the last page."

Tom let out the breath he was holding, the fur on his neck standing down. "Yes, ma'am," he said.

"Mister Chalmers!" A lion in a well-tailored black suit waved him down in the atrium of the government building.

Tom approached warily. "Can I help you?"

The lion held out a business card. "Agent Holden, State Investigations," he said.

Tom froze before he could take the card. "Am I in trouble, sir?"

"Not at all," Holden said with a smile. "In fact, we think we might be able to help you." He held out his card again.

Tom took it but kept eying Holden suspiciously.

Luna took a breath and bit down most of her words. "Tom," she said evenly, "who else would I have been seeing?"

Tom's brow furrowed, and he glanced to the side and back. "But..." he mumbled, "but I'm a cat and you're a dog..."

Luna sighed and pulled Tom down so his full weight was on her. "That doesn't mean anything here," she said, stroking the side of his face as understanding started to dawn on him. "My grandma's a fox, my aunt's a raccoon, and my other grandpa's a cat too."

Tom's eyes grew wide. "So we..."

She nodded.

He looked at her, almost panicked. "I didn't—" He stopped himself. "Do you want this?"

"Yes," she said without hesitation. "Do you?"

Tom nodded and started to answer, but he suddenly froze and fixed her with an earnest grin. "Say it again," he said, running a tongue over one of his fangs.

"Say what?"

"Say what you said earlier. Tell me the news again." He was vibrating with excitement, tail twitching erratically. He pushed up, moving his head and torso away from her.

Letter from the editor

What do we do when everything falls apart?

I don't think there's a "right" answer here. There's something to be said for moving forward, for finding where we are and going from there. Find out what we can control and accept what we can't.

But we also have emotions, feelings. And sometimes we just need to take a moment and properly mourn what we've lost. That isn't wrong.

Our first story this issue is someone that's already mourned and trying to move forward, but he's not finding that particularly easy. Hope you enjoy!

—Ronyo



"French Country Study: Two Boys Climbing a Tree" by Auguste Giraudon, Public Domain
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"I know I'm not stupid," Tom grinned, "but I'm not smart. I tried being smart. I hated it." He sighed. "I like being with you, Luna."

Luna took a breath, and her smile fell a bit. "Did you mean what you said earlier?" she said. "You want to stay with me?"

"Of course!" Tom said before his smile fell slightly. "If that's okay?"

"Of course it's okay, Tom!" Luna said, tears falling down the sides of her face as she smiled up at him. "I want you to—" She shifted. "I *need* you to stay, okay?"

Tom smiled down at her, though his face cocked in confusion. "Babe, are you okay?"

"Never better, babe," Luna said, steeling her resolve for the second time that night. "I'm pregnant."

Tom's smile split his face. "That's awesome, babe!" he said. "Who's the dad?"

Luna blinked, her thought processes coming to a screeching halt. "What?" she whispered.

Tom didn't stop smiling. "You're gonna be a great mom. Do I get to be 'Uncle Tom'? Wait, is 'Uncle Tommy' better?"

Holden just kept his good-natured smile and pulled a notebook out of his jacket pocket. "You're not the only person to put 'United States of America' on your immigration application." He clicked a pen. "Can you, if you're able, tell me what you experienced before you ended up here?"

Tom shivered, the memories coming up on their own. "I was up late," he said, "playing CoD with some friends—*Call of Duty*?"

Holden shook his head.

"A video game," Tom explained. Holden nodded, and Tom continued. "Anyway, game started lagging like hell, and the chat started glitching." He shivered again. "Then there were ghosts or something in the room, and then..."

He took a shuddering breath and hugged himself, staring at the floor.

"Take all the time you need," Holden said gently.

Tom nodded. "A crack. It was like one of the northern lights just came out of one wall and ran through the floor, all glowing and pink and—" He shook himself. "Then another one, and then it felt like I was falling even though nothing was moving and..." He took another shaky breath.

Red commiserates. There's places, there's moments, and when the two are separated, it feels wrong.

They turn the memory in your mind. Of being a kid and climbing the tree that seemed so gigantic. The moment is a part of you. It can't be re-experienced, but it can be remembered.

You smile despite yourself. The memories are there, and you can make more.

"You alright?"

You turn to your aunt who sat next to you on the couch. "Yeah," you say, "just feeling nostalgic."

"Word," she says. She leans in conspiratorially. "There's vodka in the freezer," she whispers.

You hesitate. You've avoided alcohol lately, largely to avoid drinking alone.

Red and Green both point out that you are the opposite of alone right now.

You smirk at your aunt, and you both leave the couch.

Red, Green, and Blue will return.

Orange Stereotypes

Tom felt the telltale tickle in the back of his throat. With a grunt he pulled away from the kitchen table and ran back to the apartment bathroom.

"Don't cough another hairball in my drains!" Luna yelled after him.

"I wo—" Tom started to yell back, but said hairball immediately got in the way. He stumbled into the bathroom and started retching. He gripped the corners of the vanity and fought to keep the convulsions reasonable until, finally, a wad of orange hair fell into the sink. With no hesitation, Tom grabbed the wad and flung it into the trash can.

He washed his hands off—taking care to avoid the claws—and splashed some water on his face to wash off the last of the bile. He dried his hands off and looked at himself in the mirror, still not used to his new face.

An orange-furred anthropomorphic cat stared back with pale-green eyes. A white splash of fur spilled from Tom's chin down his chest and contrasted with the striped orange

"That's what I needed to hear," Holden said with a nod. "Thank you, Mr. Chalmers."

Tom looked up and blinked back a couple of tears. "Do you know what happened?"

Holden shook his head. "We're still piecing together the story, but what you're telling me meshes with the other people I've talked to. I'd love to get your email if you're willing; we'll keep you up to date with what we know."

"Oh, uh..." Tom scratched the back of his head with one hand and held out his other hand. "It'll be easier if I write it," he said.

Holden pulled a scrap out of the back of the notebook and handed it and his pen to Tom. Tom scribbled and passed it back.

Holden chuckled. "Bike 4 Lyfe?"

"I couldn't think of anything," Tom mumbled, blushing.

"Hey," Holden said with a grin, "at least it's not something like 'baculum69,' right?"

Tom couldn't help a little giggle.

Luna picked up her phone with a smile. "Hey, Tom," she said, looking up to make sure her door was closed. "How was the immigration office?"

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around his eyes and down his arms.

Luna—a grey-and-white husky with attentive ears and piercing blue eyes—walked in and nudged him to the side as she loaded her toothbrush. Her head came to the middle of his bicep which she brushed her nose against. Tom gazed at her through the mirror, unable to keep a dopey smile off of his face.

Luna stopped before her toothbrush got to her mouth. "You okay, babe?" she said.

"Yeah," Tom said absently.

Luna narrowed her eyes and smirked. "Is it just 'cause you can see my boobs?"

"Yeah," Tom said before catching himself. "I mean, no?"

Luna just chuckled and started brushing her teeth.

Tom broke his gaze away and went back into the kitchen to finish his breakfast. He sat down to the last couple of bites of his egg-and-cheese sandwich and browsed his phone. An email came in that caught his attention, and he tapped over to read it:

**Re: Your application for legal
immigrant status**

Mr. Chalmers—

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Tom pushed himself up so he was looking down at her, his hands just to the sides of her shoulders. "I'm sorry—" he started.

"Tom," she said, looking him in the eyes and smiling. "I love you."

Tom smiled, then his eyes grew wide as her words sunk in. "Babe, I..." His face was split by a goofy grin, a smile that Luna swore produced its own light. "I love you too, Luna," he said, earnestly.

Luna's smile widened. She brought her arms in and put her hands on his chest. "I spend all day with fake people," she said. "I'm always on guard, always watching how I look or what I say or whether my tail's wagging and... It's exhausting, Babe." She tapped his chest. "And then I come home to you and I can just... be me."

"I like you," Tom said.

"That's a relief," Luna said with a good-natured eye roll.

"No, Babe, I..." He bit his lip. "I like you! You're pretty and cool and smart..." He shook his head. "You're so much smarter than me."

"Hey," Luna said, "you're not stupid."

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It doesn't help when your aunt asks what's new with you.

Out loud, you talk about the job, your new roommate, the tv show you watched a few episodes of to maintain conversation at the office. In your head you're sarcastically describing how space aliens are clearly trying to assimilate you into their hive mind. You all laugh, but also start turning over the problem of how to tell your families.

Not now though. Now is for food.

It's when you're sitting on the couch, barely paying attention to the football game, that the melancholy of these family visits hits you. The in-laws that you grew up seeing that... aren't in-laws anymore. The trees you would climb now seeming so small. The memories of spending all day watching Nickelodeon now diminished by being too old for Nickelodeon.

You know now that there has always been family drama. But you think back to the summer you and your cousins first realized what it was, what it meant. How the uncle you had once been so excited to get wasn't your uncle anymore. How the grownups didn't necessarily feel about each other the way you felt about each other.

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Tom nodded. "I really do," he said. "Are you okay, babe? You've been off today."

"Yeah, I'm okay," she said as she pulled her phone out of the apron pocket. "Usual order?"

"You bet."

She tapped a few times. "Okay, should be here in about forty-five." She put her phone on the counter and gave Tom a coy look. "And I *guess* we'll have to do *something* to pass the time..."

Tom's eyes grew wide, and his grin grew wider. "Plan D?"

Luna jumped up with her arms on his shoulders and wrapped her legs around his hips. He immediately brought his hands to her rear and held her up.

She took Tom's face in her hands. "Plan D," she affirmed before pulling him into a passionate kiss.

Luna sighed as she let herself sink into the bed, Tom lying next to her. The endorphins flooding her system steeled her resolve, and she turned her head to the side, her mouth against Tom's ear. "I love you," she said.

"I love you too," Tom said into her neck before giving her a playful nip.

"Hey," Luna said, pushing him away a bit. "I'm serious."

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The concept of Thanksgiving's surprisingly hard to communicate. Red and Green understood a holiday spent with family, but the actual occasion was a bit muddled. It didn't help that the pilgrim mythos had been thoroughly shattered for you a few years back.

But Red did point out that, as something not readily understood by them, Thanksgiving was obviously something unique to your culture. Your snark about colonialism and genocide was also noted.

Thanksgiving dinner isn't the uproarious event you envisioned. But for the first time, you feel like you belong at the grownup table. As in you're actually following the conversation and contributing a joke or two.

Red knows better than to try jumping into your skull again, but they do want to know all your favorite dishes. Green too, but to a lesser extent.

You were afraid the mental Bluetooth would make you more distracted. You had trouble staying in the moment normally, despite your best efforts. But instead the opposite happens: you have two guests along for the ride whose only way to experience this is through you. So you do your best, like with the singing in the car, to portray the ideas and experience.

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"I think it's working this time," Tom said, and she could *hear* his goofy smile. "Also there was a guy from State Investigations that wanted to talk to me."

Luna's blood ran cold. "Did you tell him anything?"

"He said I wasn't in trouble," Tom said. "He just wanted to know what... coming over was like."

"Okay," Luna said. "You know you shouldn't—"

"Shouldn't talk to them without a bad-ass lawyer like you, I know," Tom said. "If it had gone any further I would have called; I didn't tell him anything I did after I landed." A beat. "I think he's just asking everyone that put 'USA' on their forms."

Luna sighed. "Yeah, that would—wait, there are others?"

"That's what he said. He didn't give any names, but we exchanged emails; he said he'd let me know if they found out anything."

Luna's heart refused to stop hammering. "Anything like?"

"I dunno, what happened? If there's a way back?"

Luna took a breath. "Do you think," she said quietly, "you'd go back to America if they found a way?"

"Totally," Tom said, obviously smiling.

Luna's heart started to fall, but Tom's next words caught it.

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There is an issue with your immigration application. Please contact our office at your earliest convenience; we are unable to process your application until this is resolved.

Thank you,

**Dorothy Brown
Special Immigration**

He groaned and dropped his phone face-down onto the table. He angrily stuffed the last of his sandwich in his mouth and glowered at nothing.

Luna walked into the room—dressed in a sharp black tailored suit over a white blouse—as she put the backing on her last earring. "Immigration again?"

Tom just looked pitifully at her and nodded.

She sighed. "Did you put 'USA' on your form again?"

"No," he said. "I wrote out 'United States of America' this time."

"Babe," Luna said, a little chastising. "The abbreviation wasn't the problem."

"What was?"

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"I mean, I gotta take you to Cook Out, first off! And tailgating, we gotta go tailgating. Oh, and—"

Luna let out a tearful laugh. "Tom," she said, forcing the words out, "what if you couldn't come back here?"

"What?" Tom furrowed his brow. "No, I..." He shook his head. "No, I want to stay here," he said quietly.

"Aw, thanks," Luna said, putting as much cheer in her voice as she could. "What're you up to now?"

"Eh, probably hit the library," Tom said. "Anything you need me to pick up for dinner?"

"Nope, got it covered. Just be home by six, okay, babe?"

"You got it, babe."

Luna ended the call, dropped her phone on her desk, and leaned back in her chair with a loud exhale. "Stupid hormones," she growled. A couple breaths and wiped tears later, she shook herself off and got back to work.

Tom opened the door to the apartment fifteen minutes before six and ran into a wall of smell. It was steak, but any positive aspects were drowned out by the overpowering stench of burnt meat and carbonized spices. He quickly shut the door and walked into the kitchen to see Luna in nothing but her underwear and an apron staring at a pan on

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Luna shook her head with a tired smile. "The fact you put down that you're emigrating from a country that *doesn't exist!*"

Tom's face scrunched and he opened his mouth to protest... only to let his breath out and drop his head, his ears drooping to the sides.

"Oh, babe," Luna said. She walked over to him and crouched down so she was looking up at him. "Tom," she said gently, putting a hand on his leg.

Tom looked at her but didn't move his head.

"I believe you; you know I believe you," she said. "And whoever you talked to at Immigration probably believes you too. It's not about that." She tapped his leg. "It's about telling the government what they need to hear."

She glanced at her watch and hopped to her feet. "I'm sorry, I gotta go," she said. "I'm making dinner tonight, remember?"

Tom smiled brightly. "How could I forget?"

The inside of the building was just as beige as the outside. Tom was pretty sure this wasn't colorblindness, just a fact of government buildings everywhere.

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the stove, smoke wafting from the open oven and getting sucked into the hood vent.

"I set the timer wrong," she growled. "And by the time I realized..." She gestured fruitlessly at the attempted dinner with one hand and wiped an eye with her other.

Tom saw the tears and rushed over to her. "Babe, it's okay," he said, wrapping his arms around her.

He expected her to hold him at arms length, but she turned in and pulled him closer, her head resting against his chest. She sniffled a bit. "I really wanted tonight to be special," she said, "but now all I want to do is order Panda Express."

"Oooh, I like Panda Express!" Tom said.

Luna chuckled. "I know you do." She sighed. "I'm sorry, Tom."

Tom looked down at the top of her head. "What for?"

Luna stepped back and looked at him. "I just wanted tonight to be special, that's all."

Tom just gazed at her and shrugged with a broad smile. "Babe, *you're* special."

Luna blinked back a couple of tears. "From anyone else," she said, suddenly choked up, "that'd be an insult. But you really mean it."

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The concepts start to gel a bit more. There's a community that lives on a mountainside. It's dangerous, but it's also theirs. They've lived there for generations, and there's few if any other places these people could thrive. You know the actual reason isn't translating, but you see the strong connection.

There's other interests, some kind of natural resources? Your mind jumps to oil discovered on Native American land.

Green jumps to that metaphor and shifts it: oil on every side. And even though no one's touching the land, it's still dying. This was a chance to stop things, but the people in charge chose money over people. As usual.

You start to rotate the problem, wondering if there's some connection Green missed that could change things. As you do, Green sends more info.

They're talking to one of the people affected. This is not the end of their story, they say. Only another chapter. And because of Green, more people know the story.

You feel Green try to deflect. You flick their ear and tell them not to self-depreciate.

.....

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