

The alarm blared next to her, but Catherine was already awake. She reached over to find the large snooze button in the middle and struck it. Her apartment was silent again. The sheets were sticking to her legs. Her hair was glommed onto her face. The only movement was the slight up and down of her chest.

Pulling herself out of her bed was a feat these days, though she never slept in it. The small Christmas lights were dingy compared to the stars she was used to gazing upon at night. She felt uncomfortable in her clothes. The blue tank top was too tight and the elephants on her shorts were unnatural. But when her alarm blared again fifteen minutes later, Catherine turned it off and pulled back the covers. She cringed at the plush carpet under her feet. It should be dirt.

Titus brushed up against her legs, his black stripes reminding her of a grey tiger. He meowed with great demand. Catherine brushed a hand over his back and walked to the kitchen, getting ready to pour him food.

“You have a full bowl, Titus.”

He looked up and meowed again.

“Water and food.”

He tilted his head. And then meowed again.

She sighed and sat at the kitchen table. “You’re more trouble than you’re worth, you know that?”

Titus meowed again before leaping into her lap and curling up. It wasn’t long before he was purring. Catherine sighed and petted him, unable to start on her own breakfast while he was there.

Getting a cat had been her therapist's recommendation. Well, he'd suggested a pet, but Catherine didn't have the energy for a dog. Titus was supposed to help with her depressive symptoms, which he did. But that wasn't the only reason she'd agreed to get a pet. Pets let you talk to them about anything without judgment.

"I had another dream last night," she said as she scratched behind his ear. Titus practically vibrated.

"The fields were littered with bodies, swords and spears strewn about. And not a soul on it but me." Her hand paused over his fur. "I walked through the bodies. The grass was splattered with blood. Some bodies were unmarked, but most had yellow and purple crests on their armor, their shields." She swallowed. "They're going to die, and I'm not going to be there."

Something nudged her hand and startled her. Titus fell out of her lap with a screech, landing on his feet. His attempt to get her attention had done more than he anticipated, and he swiped angrily at her ankle, leaving three little marks.

"Sorry, Titus." She had her hand over her heart, willing it to slow to a manageable beat. "Have to do more than that to take down Dame Catherine." She took the opportunity to make her own breakfast, a bowl of oatmeal, bland.

"I bet they miss me. They have to. I was their best fighter, you know?" She took a bite and watched Titus sulk in the corner of the couch. He leaped onto the back of the couch and began pacing it, a wider arc each time. Catherine kept an eye on the precious things she had laid up against the side of the couch. "Titus, no."

But her cat was in an apparently vengeful mood, and Catherine barely had time to react before her sword and shield went clattering to the ground. Cursing, she picked them up carefully

and took them into her bedroom to assess the damage. Titus followed her in, meowing at her feet.

“Stupid cat. The only things I managed to bring back and you become hell bent on destroying them.”

The shield’s edge was slightly dented along the rim where it had struck the ground. Titus rubbed against her leg and Catherine pushed him away with her foot, not caring if it prompted him to scratch her again.

“These are the only things I don’t want you to touch. Scratch up the couch like a normal cat for all I care, but don’t touch these.”

The sword reflected light onto the walls as she held it aloft. Luckily, nothing seemed bent or out of place, and Catherine let out a sigh of relief. Yenis would have a conniption if she had let anything happen to the sword he’d spent days working on. Swallowing the past the lump in her throat at the thought of her friend, Catherine went in search for her sheath.

Passing through the kitchen, however, Catherine noticed the time on the clock and let out a curse for the second time that morning. Running around, she finally found the sheath under her couch and quickly placed the sword inside of it, putting it next to the shield on her bed.

“You.” She pointed at Titus. “I’m going to blame you for me being late to class.”

Stripping out of her tank and shorts, Catherine picked out a pair of jean shorts and plain tee without paying attention. Nothing fit her right in this world anyways.

Her bag was waiting for her by the door, and she grabbed it with a little too much force for the weight of it. “Bye, Titus. Don’t ruin things.” The door hadn’t finished closing before she was outside and unlocking her bike. The ride to campus wasn’t long, but she found she had

started to under estimate the time it took to get places on bike since in her mind she was still calculating with horses.

While she was passing by the Mulligan's house, their dog started barking at her. He was a large, ferocious thing, with long sandy hair and a bark that sounded more like a growl. The growl was what made her think of that hunting trip in the forest. It'd been one of her first trainings with the bow and arrow, and she'd missed the deer and rabbits nearly all day.

“Tell me, Saphros, when will you let me return to the sword?”

The young king smirked at her. “When you hit something with an arrow.”

Catherine sighed and let her shoulders sink. “Then I may as well bury my sword in the dirt for all the use it will get.”

Saphros laughed with mirth before something made his face snap shut. “Something moves.” The others in the party froze, but it was too late. The manticore leaped out from the bushes, its mane the trap for small branches and leaves. It landed in front of the pack, causing them to scatter. Catherine stuck close to her king. He handed her a small vial as they ran.

“What's this?”

“It is poison. Tip one of your arrows.” He pulled them to a stop and faced her towards the beast. “And then shoot it.”

The bow was shaking in her hand even as she plucked an arrow to dip in the poison.

“You can't be serious. It should be you who--”

“Catherine. You must shoot.”

She looked into the eyes of her king and nodded, notching the arrow before letting it fly and hitting the manticore on its back. She'd been aiming for the chest.

The car horn was her only warning before she was swerving and skidding across the asphalt. Pain flared up all along the left side of her body, but all she could manage to say was, “Ow.”

The car passed her by a few seconds later before a pair of feet entered her tilted field of vision.

“Catherine?”

Bushy curls brushed her face followed by the sight of Madeline’s face was in front of her. “Hey. You alright? I got the guy’s plates. You can press charges if you want. Do you want a Band-Aid? I have some in my bag. Can you move? Are you alright?”

“Fine. Just fine, Madeline.” She sat up with a wince and looked at her left elbow. It was bleeding pretty badly.

“Eesh. Let’s get you off the street and take care of that. I have rainbow Band-Aids if you want them. Or normal ones, but those are boring.” As she spoke, Madeline helped Catherine to stand and moved her to the other sidewalk, one hand on the handle bars of the fallen bike. “You sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine. I’ve had worse.” She’d once had an arrow to the shoulder and a quarter inch deep gash in her side. A scraped elbow and some road burn was nothing.

“If you say so. Mm, we should probably wash these out.” Madeline looked through her bag. “At least now we both have an excuse to be late to class. And I don’t have any disinfectant. Looks like we’ll have to make do with water. Here, we can use my water bottle. Hold out your arm.” Madeline poured some water over the area before dabbing it with a tissue she found in her bag. “Rainbow or plain?”

Catherine blinked. She'd been half expecting Madeline to pull out cloth bandages to wrap around the wound. But it wasn't a wound, it was a scrape, and Catherine barely saw the need for a Band-Aid at all. "Plain."

Madeline huffed as she pulled them out. "You sure you alright?"

"Yeah, I didn't hit the ground that hard."

"I didn't mean just from falling." Madeline put it on. "I mean, you've been quiet lately. You okay?"

"I'm fine." She yanked her arm away. "I'm going to a counselor. But it's fine. We're working through it."

Madeline shrugged. "If you say so." And then she continued to fill the silence with mindless blather while they practically jogged to class, the bike awkward and unbalanced between them.

Dr. Belling's only comment as they entered the lecture hall was to raise his eyebrows, continuing to drone on about economics. The only seats left were by the window.

"And when this occurs we find ourselves in a bull market. In your reading, you surely discovered that a bull market is desirable for..."

The window had a perfect view of the quad. The trees stood in formidable patterns, and Catherine idly mused about what the best strategy would be for sneaking through them. The large shade tree in the middle was probably sufficiently large enough to hide a horse. And if they settled their archers high enough in the branches, they could shoot anywhere on the field.

Lindell's remembered laugh floated through her mind. "You have put much thought into this."

Catherine grinned up at her. “Of course, my queen. I don’t take the protection of you and Saphros lightly.”

“I know you do not. We are very grateful for you, Catherine. Catherine. Catherine!”

Her heart thudded hard as her whole body tensed at the loud voice. The stone walls of the council room disappeared. In their place were tan tinged walls, a beat up whiteboard, and an angry Dr. Belling.

“Catherine. Would you please answer the question?”

“I…” She wracked her brain trying to remember what they had been discussing. Surely they had moved off of bull markets by that point. “I don’t know.”

He nodded curtly. “James.” He walked to the other side of the room. Catherine sighed and let her head fall into her hands.

Much of the day passed in the same way. She went to class. She sat through it. Nothing held her interest. She got lost in memories. And then class was over, and she was scrambling to write down the notes and the homework before the professor erased it all from the board.

Madeline texted her later that day about doing homework on the quad. She was unnaturally quiet as they sat under one of the trees, actually doing her homework for once instead of yammering on and on about the various new hairstyles she’d seen online. Catherine was staring at her economics book, attempting to make the letters become words and the words sentences with coherent thoughts. But she kept feeling like someone was watching her.

The hairs on the back of her neck stood on end. Every dog on a leash seemed to be growling at her. Catherine tried to take deep breaths like her counselor had said, but the feeling

persisted. Turning around, she saw no one behind her. She did a lap around the tree they were under and still saw nothing. She glanced up in the branches.

Madeline sat up. “What are you doing? You’re making me nervous.”

“Sorry.” Catherine blinked up at the sun. “Just needed to take a breather before getting back to work.”

“If you say so.” Madeline turned back to her book.

Catherine continued to stand, glancing around every now and then. A stray Frisbee landed at her feet. Bending over to pick it up, she felt a hand close over her shoulder. Turning and using her squatted position to her advantage, Catherine soon had her assailant pinned to the ground. Her knee was digging into his middle while her left hand was constricting his neck, her right holding the Frisbee like a sword poised to strike.

“Catherine!”

The boy under her arm was scratching at her hand, his eyes wide and his lips turning a pale blue. His t-shirt had three Greek letters made of Star Wars fabric. Catherine jerked back, Madeline pulling her farther away from him once she was standing.

“What is *wrong* with you?” Madeline rushed over to the boy’s side.

Catherine stared down at him, her heart still beating fast as if in battle. The boy was still choking on the new air.

“S-sorry. Sorry. I didn’t-- You startled me.” Catherine grabbed her backpack and started walking across the quad, heading in any direction that was away. Her breath was coming in short breaths to match the kid she left behind. Madeline would take care of him.



Her feet carried her to the library bathroom and inside one of the old stalls. She pressed her hands against the back of the door as she tried to collect herself. Something had to give. Her hands balled into fists as she punched the wood once, twice. And then her head was in her bruising hands, and she sunk to the floor of the bathroom, leaning back against the toilet.

Her counselor said she had to let go of the made up world. That if she didn't, she'd never be able to live a normal life.

“It's not healthy to hold onto these fantasies.”

“They aren't fantasies.” Catherine rolled up her sleeve and put it under her counselor's square glasses. The woman's pointed nose crinkled. “I got this scar when practicing the mace for the first time.”

The counselor sniffed. “Your mother said you were chopping vegetables.”

“She's lying! You're my counselor, you're supposed to believe me.”

The woman sighed. “Look, we can talk through the steps of depression and PTSD, if you like. But these symptoms won't go away until you realize they aren't real.”

Catherine leaned her head back against the toilet rim. She thought of Saphros and Lindell smiling down at her. “They aren't... They aren't real.” Saying it aloud made her feel crazier than ever before.

The bike ride home was less thrilling than the one she'd had on her way to school. “Titus!” She heard the cat answer with a meow, but couldn't see him. His food and water were barely touched. When she sat on the couch, however, Titus sauntered over from his hiding place and curled up in her lap.

“Hey, buddy. Have a good day at home?” He purred as she petted him. “Well, I’m glad one of us did.” She licked her lips and looked down at him. “They weren’t real. Right? Nothing was real. The shield and sword are replicas. My scars are normal ones. The battles are all my imagination. Right?”

Titus looked up and meowed at her. She sighed. “Not real. It wasn’t real. I didn’t run through a forest, didn’t eat dinner with knights and nobles, didn’t find my home with a king and queen to serve and protect. It wasn’t real.” She swallowed the lump in her throat.

“But it was,” a voice whispered behind her.

Startled, Catherine dropped Titus for the second time that day. Turning her head, she saw a shimmery circle floating in the middle of her living room. A dark skinned man with greasy smudges on his face was smiling at her through it. She thought her heart would leap out of her chest.

“Yenis?”

“Ah, so you haven’t forgotten us.” The man grinned cheekily.

“I can’t... Are you here? For real?”

He nodded. “We need you.”

Catherine stood and crossed her arms. “Oh. Oh, so it’s okay to disrupt my life when you need me, but it’s an inconvenience for you all when I need you.”

“Dame Catherine--”

“No. I don’t want to hear your bull. Just forget it.”

“It’s not that easy. You know that.”

She huffed a laugh. “I don’t, actually. No one tells me.”

Yenis looked down before glancing over his shoulder. “We need to hurry.”

“Just tell me... Are the queen and king in trouble?”

“Would we be calling you otherwise?”

Catherine sighed. “No. You wouldn’t.” Hurrying into her bedroom, she grabbed her sword and shield and walked back towards the portal. “Well. Here goes nothing.”

BECCA: I’m just gonna write this up the way I’d write up workshop notes for someone HOORAH.

I like this take on the ‘person gets stuck in a magic world’ - usually we end with them returning/being forced home without so much as a by-your-leave, and I like how it picks up completely after the fact. I also really like that Catherine has friends in the “normal world” outside of the cat, and that there are people (like Madeline and the mother) who notice her struggling.

There are a few places where the flashbacks are working really well and a few where they interrupted the story a bit for me. This might just be me, but I found I was more into the little snippets versus the longer flashbacks with the dialogue, etc. It was during the longer flashbacks I started having worldbuildy questions, whereas with the shorter snippets my brain just sorta shrugged and went with it. I just found I was much more ‘in the world’ so to speak when Catherine was more or less reflecting versus when we’re shown a scene, if that makes sense. I’m still working on waking up and the drinking of the coffee so it’s possible his is all nonsense. XD

I don’t know if this is what you were wanting to happen, but this feels a lot like a story about moving from childhood to adulthood, a bit. She’s spent a lot of time in this magic world (which, up until that last scene, could be real, might be imagined completely) and now is going to college. It’s literally moving from an imaginary world to the real world, so to speak. It’s an interesting set up.

That being said, I’m undecided about the ending. Again, the above paragraph is very much how I’m reading this, and so when Yenis comes for her through the portal it didn’t quite sit right in my head. She’s almost at a point of acceptance when he shows up, and so the fact that she ends up going back fet...I don’t know. A little anti-climatic? Especially since someone else had to come and get her. I guess that Catherine struck me as someone who would somewhat try and save herself, especially if she’s leading armies, instead of waiting for someone to help her get back. I’m also a sucker for happyish endings, so. There might be a way to get that same

feeling you're going for, but maybe not flat out telling the readers that she made it back? Idk man idk.

ANYWAY. Overall I think this is a very strong draft and you should be proud of it. :D