

Alright, my dear, I'm here. What are we working on today?

(violin plucking)

Reality 87.28 B, huh? And who's gone missing from there?

(violin plucking)

You still can't access the subject's datalog? I thought someone was supposed to come down here and fix that... Well, no matter. I can just read it out to you let me just- Oh! It seems we have an audience. And who might you be? It's been so long since we've had a guest here. Are you here to fix Minerva's datalog reader? No? Hmm... that's very odd then. People don't usually find their way here without me getting notice from Alexandria or Guillermo. Are you lost, friend? Well, you're in luck today, we're great at dealing with those who are lost. Wanna tell me where you're from? ...Feeling shy, huh? That's alright, I'm prone to bits of shyness myself. We'll get you back to where you're meant to be as soon as I'm done with work for the day. You can call me the Keeper, little wanderer. Welcome to the fringes!

(violin plucking)

Yes, yes, Minerva, I know you don't like that we call this the fringes since it *is* an oversimplification of what we do. But don't you want an oversimplification sometimes?

(violin plucking)

Alright, fine, I guess that's fair. But in my defense, the Council refers to this as the fringes as well, so it's only fair that you let me call it the fringes without sassing me every time. Sorry about that, wanderer! Anyway, do you have a name? ...Well, if you're not up for talking, wanderer, are you up for listening? You're in a unique situation, you see, and it's not often that I get to monologue to an audience.

(violin plucking)

An audience besides Minerva here, of course. Why are you staring at me like that? Oh! I bet you're wondering about Minerva. She's the finest piece of AI this side of the plane of magic! She's stored here in my console here and helps me keep balance. Are you sure you're not up for talking, wanderer? Because if you're not I'm just going to talk at you (murmured, disgruntled) it's not like you're going to remember anyway...

We call this the fringes, but it's better thought of as the origin point of reality, at least that's what Minerva and Alexandria call it. Think of it as a jumping off point for the almost infinite number of realities out there. Whatever place you call home is just one of millions of other worlds just like it and I, along with Minerva, keep these realities in balance. Well, Guillermo helps too, he kind of *is* reality itself. Of course Alexandria created it all and... I'm confusing you aren't I? If I had more time maybe I could explain... But you'll have to leave soon, that I'm sure of, so we'll do a TL;DR version of it all instead, okay?

Reality is soft, malleable. It stretches and contracts constantly, in ways that are imperceptible to most people unless they're looking at it from the outside. *This* is the outside. I watch over all of reality, every single one, and see where it softens. It's my job to harden those soft spots so that nothing falls through the cracks. And when something does fall through the cracks, it's my job to put it back. Sometimes this is easy, especially if I'm watching closely. But other times...

(violin plucking)

Sometimes it's bigger jobs like this! Minerva used to be able to access them directly and show me the important bits but her scanner has been on the fritz lately which means I've gotta hunt down the jobs and read them to her. It's nice though, I love story time!

Moving folks back to their realities is easy enough when you know a bit about their past, that's why we have story time, wanderer. We've got access to every person's memories here on the fringes and we use them to figure out how to get those who get lost back to their homes. Usually we pull up the moment they notice they're not where they belong and then try to use their surroundings to figure out where to grab them from to get them back home. It's fun! Well, not for them. It's tough to lose your place in reality... But that's why I'm here. I put them back in place. And I'll put you back in place, too, don't worry. Who knows, this might be your story we're working with! Just say the word if this starts sounding familiar, yeah? Or give me a little wave if you're not feeling up to talking still.

(violin plucking)

Yes, Minerva, I'm going to get my job done today. She likes to stick to a pretty rigid schedule, wanderer, but she's incredibly kind, I promise. Alright, Min, let me get everything pulled up and we'll get ready to go!

Here we go! Subject is Jonathan Alvarez, he/him, from reality 87.28 B. Let's see where he fell between worlds, shall we?

He was driving to work when he started to notice that things were a bit wrong. He passed by the exact same houses every day, a sea of white and off white buildings that were boring but something he was accustomed to. So when he saw a splash of green out of the corner of his eye, it took everything within Jonathan's power to keep himself from stopping his car just to stare at the building. The house looked almost identical to the one he usually passed, except this one was green. And the one next to it was blue. And the next was red, and the next was yellow, and on and on and on. Colorful buildings where white once sat, greeting Jon warmly as he drove onward towards the office.

The office looked different, too. The dull yellow of the building was replaced with a soft, welcoming pink.

Alice wasn't at the front desk that morning as he made his way into the building. In her place was a younger person with straight, pink hair not dissimilar from the color of the office building. They looked slightly puzzled upon seeing Jonathan, but waved him through anyway and addressed him by name. When he asked where Alice was, they let out a little laugh.

"You've always been so funny, Mr. Alvarez," they said, pointing to their little nameplate. *Alice Meyers, she/her, front desk*. Jonathan had known Alice for a decade now and she was not the pink hair person sitting in front of him. He tried his best to shake the thought off as he headed to his desk, a sea of color in the office unlike anything he had ever seen before.

Everyone had the same names he recognized, from his office mates CJ and Sam to his work rival Sarah. They all sat in their same seats, same nameplates proudly displaying the titles of those he knew but he didn't recognize them at all. Even his work seemed unrecognizable to him, though he had been assured that his joke about not knowing what to do was 'hilarious'. No one was taking him seriously and he didn't know how to make it stop.

The day passed by in a technicolored blur, with Jonathan barely able to grasp anything that was happening. The sky looked wrong when he stepped out of the office, like there were two suns instead of one setting in the distance.

And yet for everything that seemed wrong since he woke up, certain things were still exactly as he remembered it. The radio station still played his favorite song, though they insisted it was by a band he had never even heard of. Traffic was still an absolute nightmare and all of the street signs were entirely familiar except they were purple instead of white. His wife's car was still in the driveway when he got back to the brightly colored place bearing his home address, and yet his wife was nowhere to be found. Instead a man claiming to be his husband opened the door and asked if he was okay, saying something about how he seemed stressed. All the pictures on the wall were there, though this Cam was in all of the pictures instead of *his* Cam.

It was confusing, it was frightening, and yet it wasn't as though there was anything Jonathan could do about it.

He could make a fuss, like he did at work, only to have his newfound partner laugh at him as though he was joking or worse, treat him as though he were crazy. Instead of doing any of that, he told this new Cam that he had a headache and was going to sit outside to see if the air would help clear his head.

“Of course, love. Let me know if you need anything, alright?” the new Cam said, pressing a kiss to Jonathan's temple. He, like Jonathan's actual Cam, was incredibly sweet, it was clear to see. Jonathan hoped that wherever this Cam's Jonathan had gone, he was able to get him back. Just like he hoped he would be able to see his wife again.

The garden in Jonathan's actual home was sparse. He and Cam had never really been big on gardening, using the space instead to sit in each other's company underneath the large pine tree. The one here seemed to be a cherry tree of sorts, pink petals in full bloom and a stone bench beneath it where his usual wooden one was. There were rows upon rows of flowers, most of which he recognized easily. Tulips and roses and carnations, all in various shades of red and pink and orange. Closest to the bench, though, he saw a flower he didn't recognize. It was blue, seven petals that looked almost sharp to the touch. Part of him was tempted to pick it up, to see if it would cut in the way it looked like it could, but he decided against it. There had already been far too much excitement for one day, sharp flowers didn't need to be added to his growing list of worries.

He went back inside, helping the new Cam make a salad to go with their dinner and trying to fight the wrongness of it all. If he closed his eyes, he could almost pretend he was back home with his wife and her soft humming of his favorite song. But she was gone and the sky was the wrong color and the unfamiliar flowers looked like they could hurt him if he let them. This place wasn't right and he knew it, and yet he didn't know how to leave. As he laid down for bed, he wondered what tomorrow would bring.

Wondered if it would bring him home.

That's it? That's all we've got? But... There's just nothing to hold on to, it doesn't make any sense! Usually the realities might share names or even places, but nothing *this* intensely linked. It's almost like the reality itself has gone wrong but it didn't affect Jonathan Alvarez at all... But that can't be it because I would've gotten a report about it. Guillermo is very good at sending through stuff when worlds go weird, he got in the habit after Alasdair's magic experiments. So what is it then?

(Keeper sighs) There's just... There's gotta be a way to figure out where he went, Min. I just know there is. If I could just... I'm sorry, little wanderer, I'm sure this makes even less sense to you than before. Let me try to explain... We know that Jonathan Alvarez is from reality 87.28 B and we also know a lot about him— his spouse's name, the name of his coworkers, what his home looks like. And we know all of the things that looked wrong to him when he woke up that day— the colors of the houses, who was at work that day, the person who was his spouse. Our job is to take a look at what we know and use that to figure out which reality he fell into. The issue with this one is the fact that so much of the world stayed the same. Sure there are different colors and houses and his partner is he/him instead of she/her, but the names are the same. The things that we could usually do a search for to try and weed out options is the same. People are unique, for the most part. Sometimes people will share a name, but they themselves are unique individuals, even across the millions of realities. The trouble is that falling out of your reality removes you from your reality in our system. It's a serious oversight, I know, but basically what happens is the data logs get out of order and they're no longer listed on their original reality's data log. That doesn't make much sense, does it? Let me see... Picture a library. Libraries are sorted by different genres, yeah? So one shelf might have mystery fiction but another has cookbooks. That's a simplification, I know, but stick with me for a second. Each reality is its own shelf in the library. And each person is a book on the shelf. In a library, if you put a book on a different shelf, the library's catalog still holds the information for the book as if it's on the right shelf. Our system doesn't. If you put a mystery book on the cookbook shelf, our system goes "Well this doesn't belong there!" and sends us a little memo while listing the location of the book as the re-shelf cart. The book isn't on the cart for reshelving, though, it's still on the wrong shelf and we have to find the book while not having any information on where it's actually been found.

It's a flawed system. I think it used to work better than this? But everything's a bit rundown, and I haven't seen any of the Council in... I don't even know how long. Me and Min just try our best to do our job, even with the crumbling infrastructure around us. We're just lucky the readers still work well enough to actually give us the stories. If the readers stopped working...

Well, I don't know how anyone would get home at that stage.

But that's beside the point right now. Like I said, people are usually pretty unique, but Jonathan seemed to encounter only people with the same names he remembered. Which means... Well, I guess we can try running it. Minerva? Can you do a search for Cam Alvarez?

(violin plucking) Seven realities... That's... That's not bad, actually. What about those flowers? The blue ones, with the seven petals. (violin plucking) Glass sword blossoms? How many realities does this overlap with? Four of them. Right, so let's eliminate ones without them from the running... What else is there? We're so close, there's got to be enough to get him— Wait! Min,

how many of these remaining four have a Cam Alvarez using he/him pronouns? Just 9897? Pull up an image for me?

\What was it he said in his thing? “Colorful buildings where white once sat?” You almost got that picture, Min? There! I’d say that looks like a sea of color, wouldn’t you? I think... I think we’ve done it, Min! Let’s get him home.

(muttered) I’m just gonna open the file for 87.28 B and 9897 and... Min. Why are there two files for Jonathan Alvarez in 9897? Did... Did the one from 9897 not just get swapped? If this is the case then where has the other Jonathan been this whole time... It doesn’t make any sense, it’s not like 87.28 B could just magically insert himself into another man’s home and life. I mean, obviously one of them is in the wrong spot, there shouldn’t be two of them, but it just doesn’t make any sense. Are you sure this got sent to us like this Minerva? (violin plucking) No, I’m not questioning the accuracy of your machinery, I’m just... Never mind. Can you highlight which one got added to this file most recently? ...Alright, there we go. Let’s get this Jonathan home, shall we?

The one good thing about this whole system is that it’s very easy to put people back where they belong. Once we can actually locate where they’re actually meant to be placed, it’s as easy as opening up the file system and dragging them back to where they’re meant to be. I know I said before that it’s a flawed system, and it really is, but in that regard it’s helpful. All in all it’s easy to slot people back to their reality, just takes a couple clicks and then they get to go home. And that’s all we want at the end of the day, right? To go home? Or, in my case, to make sure people get home. There have been a couple in the past where I... Well, that hardly matters huh? ...I guess it does matter since I still have to get you home.

I hate to say it, wanderer, but it’s not that simple to get you home. The fringes... We don’t have a file for the fringes. There’s no need to, not really, since it’s just me and Minerva and the Council here. Plus it’s not actually reality, just the fringes, so people don’t really get lost here. People aren’t meant to exist on the fringes of reality, not unless they’re in the Council. (hesitant) Me? No, I’m not on the Council, I’m—

Huh. Why am I— (beeps) A story another day, wanderer, I promise. But like I was saying, it’s not really a place people get lost in often. Not a place people really get lost in *ever*, if I’m being honest. Other than the Council, I’m not used to having an audience present for my work, and even they haven’t been around for a while. But there’s definitely a way to get you home, I’m sure of it, I’ll just need to do a bit of digging. There are a lot of files, a lot of worlds, a lot of places to look to find where you belong. It might take me a little while, but you’re gonna get home, okay?

Until then, you're just gonna have to stay here. There's... Well, the space is pretty small, to be honest. I can give you a tour if you'd like but there's not much to it. Most of my time is spent working anyway, so it's not like it really needs to be much bigger than this. I... I won't have much to keep you entertained while I'm working and trying to figure out where to send you back to, though. Unless you liked watching me work! ...I'll also have to have Minerva do a quick scan, just to make sure you're not experiencing adverse effects from being on the fringes now. But that can all come later, for right now let's get you some food and get you settled, shall we?