Echo Cares

By C. Jade Wyton

Echo the tabaxi, despite not wanting to, has found herself growing to care for her classmates. She hates this feeling, and takes a moment to contemplate it.

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Echo the tabaxi, despite what many people who knew her might have said, was not *entirely* stupid.

Stubborn, sure.

Annoying? Perhaps.

Definitely some kind of bitch.

But she wasn't as stupid as she let people think.

There was a cunning brain in that head of hers. The cogs always turning. Thinking about her next move. The next person she could manipulate into giving her what she wanted with just the smallest bit of acting….

Oh, boy, could she *act!*

Like the sweetest little kitten who had just so happened to have forgotten her wallet at home…. Completely by accident, of course! She'd pay you back, when she saw you again!

If she saw you again.

It was no wonder that she always got in so much trouble back home.

She had always lived her life with no regard for others. Not a care for anything that didn't directly benefit her and her lavish lifestyle.

Even her sexuality, she used to joke, was "whoever can afford the best restaurant."

She'd never cared about anyone but herself.

Never!

So why —*WHY?!*— did she keep willingly putting herself at risk for her classmates?

It had all started when that stupid weird creepy hand-creature-corpse-ball-thing had attacked Cayenne. Well— Echo *thought* that was where it started. It was when she'd become aware that her motives weren't entirely, completely, and unarguably self-centred, at least.

And then there was WIP. That strange changeling who, despite their many unsettling oddities, Echo found herself genuinely calling her "friend."

And enjoying spending time with Rumpus was just plain *embarrassing!* She could barely admit that she had fun in the man's company; even to herself.

Just the thought of it made her feel stupider than… than….

Well how was *she* supposed to know who she felt stupider than!

Echo gave a huff, rolling over in the cramped inn bed. Then, she sat up and looked over to her sleeping friends— *Classmates.*

Her sleeping *classmates.*

She gave a haughty sniff before standing up and silently stepping over to Cayenne.
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‘Hey… hey!’ she tapped the centaur on the shoulder. ‘Hey, I can’t sleep. Can you sleep?’

‘I… well I *was* asleep,’ Cayenne sighed, a long huff of a breath, and shifted into a different position so she could look up at Echo. ‘What’s going on? Is everything alright?’

‘I’m going for a walk, want to come?’

Cayenne gave Echo a quizzical look. ‘Why?’

‘Cos you’re… I dunno,’ Echo gave a shrug. ‘You’re my *fr… fru*…. Eugh. You’re my *frah*….’

‘You’ve said the word *friend* before,’ Cayenne raised a brow.

‘Yeah but I’ve never *meant* it.’

Another long, long sigh escaped Cayenne and she rose to her feet. ‘Alright. I guess I’m awake now, anyway. I might as well make sure you don’t get yourself killed.’

‘Hah. Thanks,’ Echo offered a smile —a real one, not a fake one— and headed for the door. ‘I appreciate that.’

‘Oh you’re *actually* walking?’ Cayenne asked as she caught up to Echo (easily, it should be noted; a single stride of her long equine legs was equal to about five of Echo’s little munchkin steps). ‘I was expecting you to climb on my back. You know. As you always do.’

Echo shrugged. ‘I gotta stretch my legs *sometime*.’

‘Well… if you get tired you let me know.’

The offer was appreciated. Genuinely. But something about accepting it didn’t feel right, tonight.

Something, something, David told me I’d grow as a person or whatever, Echo thought to herself mockingly. *Eugh. I hope that’s not what this is. I don’t want David to be right!*

As they made their way out of the inn and into the city Cayenne cast Echo a look that told her she was making a face, and Echo cleared her throat and sheepishly rubbed the back of her head.

‘I’m thinking about David,’ she clarified.

Cayenne pulled the same face Echo had made and stomped a hoof in displeasure. ‘I don’t know how that man keeps his job.’

‘I know, right?!’ Echo exclaimed, throwing up her hands and hurrying ahead so she could turn to Cayenne and walk backwards. ‘I mean, after the screw-up with the paperwork and stuff? Woof—‘

Echo tripped, falling flat on her back, and Cayenne effortlessly stepped over her and kept going as Echo threw up her hands and continued rambling;

‘I mean he’s not a *bad guy* or anything, he’s just kinda incompetent!’

‘Mhm,’ Cayenne agreed.

Echo rolled to her feet and hurried after Cayenne, catching up as they reached the corner of the street.

They paused for a moment, looking ahead through the crowded streets, and Echo realised that they could see the bright lights of the casino in the distance.

That sure had been a hell of a job, Echo recalled, thinking back on the heist they had stopped. *I’m glad nobody got hurt—*

She bit back the thought.

Why should she be bothered if someone, besides herself, got hurt?

'You *know,*' Echo finally broke the silence with a long, slow drawl. 'I don't know what "needs" the headmistress thinks she's fulfilling for me, but she's sure as hell made life a lot more complicated.'

'Oh, yeah,' Cayenne agreed.

'Like I don't *get* what she thinks she's doing, pairing me up with you guys,' Echo continued, scratching at the concrete under her feet with her claws. 'Making me care about you….'

'You care about us?' Cayenne asked, an almost-cheeky smile finding its way to her lips. 'I thought you didn't care about anyone but yourself.'

'*Ugh,*' Echo gave a grumble and started walking again. 'I thought so too. But you and WIP? Yeah. I think I care. At least a little. And I kind of like Rumpus, too. But like. I also kinda wanna make him cry? But also if someone *else* made him cry I'd punch them in the dick or whatever? I dunno. Ugh! I wish I knew *why* the headmistress was subjecting me to this shit!'

'Connecting to people is good for you,' Cayenne pointed out.

'Maybe, but it's still *annoying!*'

Cayenne gave a huff, though Echo couldn't tell if it was meant to convey that she was humoured or annoyed.

'You're not annoying,' Echo admitted; hoping that wasn't what Cayenne thought. 'Neither's WIP. Rumpus? *Eeeeeh*…. He's growing on me. He's kinda like algae, actually.'

'*Um?*'

'You know? When you start a fish tank and when the algae starts growing it looks and thin and brown and gross and *bleh!*' Echo stuck out her tongue for emphasis. 'But then, like…. You let it grow for a while. And it becomes a nice thick carpet of green that softens the whole tank. That's Rumpus.'

'Hm,' Cayenne didn't sound like she *completely* understood the concept, though she didn't ask Echo to clarify. 'It's good you're opening up to people, Echo.'

'Yeah, well…. Even still, I'm not changing or having any kind of quote-unquote "*personal growth*"!' Echo said with a huff. 'I'm a bitch. That's who I am in my *soul!* And if you want me to be anything else then that's just too bad!'

Cayenne just shrugged at that and, for a long moment, the pair walked in silence.

Then Echo slowed down; doubling over and letting out an exhausted groan.

'*Eugh,*' Echo panted, feeling suddenly out of breath. 'I think I *will* take you up on that offer of a lift.'

'Alright,' Cayenne gave a nod and circled back to Echo. 'But if I hear one more "giddy up!" from you I'm bucking you off for good.'

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