

“It’s midnight here,” Richard said, motioning to a clock on the wall. “Sorry I didn’t tell you about the jet-lag.”

Justine looked at the clock and nodded. “Yeah, nine works.” She turned back to Richard and smiled weakly. “I think I’m ready to go to bed, now.”

The apartment felt spacious, though Justine suspected that was only because it was one giant room with a kitchen in one corner, a queen-sized bed in another, and what she suspected was a bathroom in the third. There was a minimal desk against a wall, but nothing else. Richard had promised she could grab whatever she wanted from the “warehouse,” though she suspected it wasn’t nearly as impressive as the name implied.

The wall above the desk had a window, though it only had the strange sky to look at; she was on the other side of the building from The Lighthouse.

Slowly letting out a breath, she dropped her duffel on the floor and sat on the bed.

There wasn’t a sun.

She wasn’t in Georgia anymore.

She was a lot farther from home than she’d ever been.

room, that’s not the problem. What we don’t have is any idea how to feed these people.”

“And that’s where we come in?” Alex said.

Justine and Richard made eye contact, and in that moment Justine was sure she had never seen someone so tired and desperate. Except maybe Obama at the end of 2016.

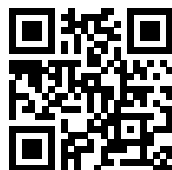
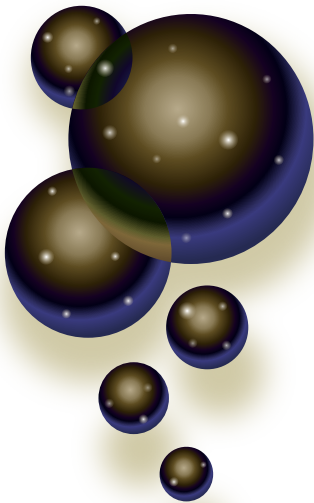
“We need help,” he said. “I barely know my way around a kitchen. My mechanic can follow instructions like nobody’s business—she’s got four arms, by the way—but I can’t direct her. I’ve got a few other people that either are too busy with their other jobs or can’t handle the kitchen. And then there’s the IT guy I hired straight out of college who acts like the height of cuisine is buying the moderately expensive microwave dinner instead of the ten-for-a-dollar ramen noodles.”

“You’re home cooks,” Justine said in an attempt to be charitable.

Richard nodded. “If that.”

Justine tried to smile. “I mean that the skills you need to run a service kitchen are different from the ones you need to cook for yourselves.”

“Okay,” Richard said. “Can you help?”

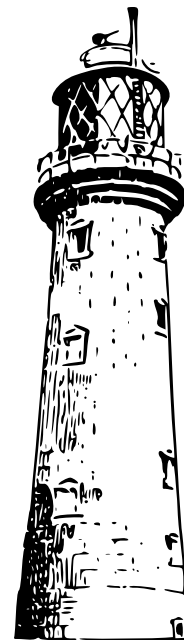


wdfx.link/SqSRa

Series 0

Issue 1

Nowhereverse Tales



Justine blinked. She looked to Alex who...
smiled encouragingly?

“Are you trying to poach me in front of my boss?” She said, taken aback.

Alex shook his head. “I’m not gonna stop him.”

Justine raised an eyebrow.

Alex shrugged. “He’s a good guy; I’d trust him with your life. And if Stanley is blocking you like this then it’s certainly not going to hurt your career.”

Justine stared at her plate, finally allowing herself to mull the situation over. A Dinner Impossible type situation, with her only help being a college boy, the not-old-but-definitely-not-young gentleman in front of her, and the mechanic with—

She glared at Richard. “A mechanic with four arms?”

Richard smiled a bit. “So you caught that? She’s a naga, a snake-person. Reptilian biology, four arms, snake tail instead of legs.” He grinned. “Don’t worry, she’s not venomous.”

Justine looked at Alex who was as confused as she was. “Richard,” Alex said gently but firmly, “I wasn’t kidding about trusting you.” He pursed his lips. “What’s going on.”

He raised a finger and took a breath, but let it out without saying anything. He took another breath, paused, and let it out again, lowering his finger. Finally, he hung his head and mumbled, “But I got the storage cabinets...”

Justine tilted her head. “Okay, you win that round. But do you actually cook anything in here?”

He shook his head. “I use the microwaves over there, that’s about it. Someone occasionally whips up something, but it’s few and far between.”

“And there’s no ‘sufficiently advanced technology’ to help with that?”

He actually smiled at that. “If there is one, we haven’t seen it yet.” He pointed at her. “Nothing beats a real chef with real fire.”

“Well,” Justine said, allowing herself a smile, “I can work with this for now, but if we want any sort of volume from this kitchen, we’re going to need a lot more ‘fire.’”

Richard cleared his throat. “I was hoping you could take Justine out to get some equipment tomorrow morning.”

██████████ nodded and looked to Justine. “Want to meet up at nine?”

Justine narrowed her eyes. “It’s three o’clock in the morning now.”

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!**

Richard smiled. "Let's just say 'sufficiently advanced science' and leave it at that."

Justine shrugged, not sure how to respond to that. She browsed the cabinets a little, taking note of the eclectic mix of recognizable ingredients, exotic fruits she assumed were from some other world, and microwave-and-eat meals.

"Okay," she said, walking back into the kitchen proper, "you've got storage covered."

Another person was waiting there with Richard, a man in his early twenties wearing jeans and a red t-shirt. Richard introduced him as ██████████, head of 'procurement and IT.'

"Justine," she answered with a handshake. "So..."

He smiled weakly, glancing at Richard. "Yeah..."

"This is the whole kitchen," Justine said, still incredulous.

"Eeyup," he said with a grimace.

"And you're in charge of procurement?"

"And I.T." He scratched the back of his head.

"Mostly I.T."

"I can tell," she said with a sigh. "In what universe is this a functioning kitchen?"

Richard leaned forward. "If I had more time to prepare," he said, "I'd leave out some details. 'I need a chef for a full-service hotel in a really remote location in the middle of nowhere. We've got multiple types of vehicles for the staff to use and an onsite medical facility; room and board is included in your compensation package.' And I would leave the last little detail for when we actually got there."

He folded his hands. "Are you familiar with the idea of parallel universes?"

"Like the evil universe from Star Trek?" Alex said.

Richard shrugged. "Kind of. In a general sense, they're separate universes from ours, each with their own histories, their own biologies, their own cultures." He motioned to each of their plates as he said that.

"And in the middle?" He put his coffee cup in the center of the table where it barely touched each of the plates.

"There's an in-between world. A bridge between many of the different universes." He leaned back.

"We call it Nowhere."

Justine took a sip of her own coffee. "Do you call it that just so you can play 'Who's on First' with anyone who asks?"

Ask the Lighthouse

Ronyo asks Justine: How're you settling in?

Okay, that's not creepy at all. Does everyone get messages on this computer built into the wall?

I'm okay, I guess. Not entirely sure what "okay" means here, but... I guess apart from the weird sky it doesn't *feel* that different, you know?

Still wondering about the mechanic with four arms, though...

Ask at wndfx.link/ask

In this issue

1. Letter from the editor

2. Kitchen From Scratch, part 1

When Justine's job turns out to be a dead end, she takes a risky gig in the middle of Nowhere.

Rated General: implied misogyny

3. The First Puzzle

You've had strange feelings pop up from time to time, but this is something different.

Rated General: foreign thoughts

4. Ask the Lighthouse

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Back cover: "Orbis" by Klaro, CCO (Public Domain) <<https://wndfx.link/KFAC8>>

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“No,” Richard said with a smile, “but I’ll admit it’s a lot of fun.” He picked his coffee back up. “No, it’s because, as far as we can tell, it doesn’t really follow the rules of any of the other worlds. The conditions are...” He grimaced. “Well, it’s not toxic for any creature we’ve come across. I can breathe oxygen, a hypothetical person across from me can breathe sulphuric acid, and yet we can carry on a completely normal conversation. Same with gravity, same with language... It’s an in-between world in every sense of the word.”

They sat in silence for a moment before Alex spoke up. “And you’re completely serious right now?”

Richard nodded. “It’s a lot easier to believe if it’s staring you in the face; that’s why I usually wait until then to drop the bomb.”

“But you don’t have time?”

“No,” Richard said as he put his cup down. “Because usually the big speech is followed by me offering to take whoever I’m with straight home if they want out. But with the time pressure, I don’t think I have time to do that more than once if I have time to do it at all.” He leaned forward. “Accepting what I just told you, are either of you interested in working for me for a week?”

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Richard walked up to her and had the decency to look chastised. “I did tell you we were building the kitchen from scratch.”

Justine took a breath to steady herself. “Usually when people say that, they mean the staff.”

“I mean that too.”

She took another breath. And another. “Do you even have a freezer?” she finally said.

Richard smiled. “That and more.” He led her through a doorway into a room lined with various cabinets, each with a transparent door, a colored light (most of them green), and a time display.

“Each cabinet keeps the food item inside at ideal temperature and freshness up to the time indicated,” Richard explained. “Fruits, vegetables, raw meat, you name it. And it’s all automatic.”

Justine just raised an eyebrow. “Raw meat.”

“Yes.”

“Without freezing it.”

“Yes.”

She cocked her head. “Automatically?”

“For the vast majority of foods in the multiverse, yes.”

“How.” It wasn’t a question.

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Letter from the editor

Welcome to the first issue of *Nowhereverse Tales*! There’s been a lot of stories coming through, and I wanted to be able to share them with y’all.

There’s going to be some strange things happening, and I think all of us here at the lighthouse are trying to find our place in it. My hope is that, as we find our place, you’ll find yours.

Also! If you have any questions for anyone in these stories, ask them at wndfx.link/ask and I’ll try to get them answered! You’ll see them at the end of each issue, hopefully.

And with that, let’s begin! Justine’s story will take the first three issues, so let’s get started.

— Ronyo

Red starts with more images—paying a debt, cancelling plans—but Green is holding both ideas, looking for something adjacent to forgiveness.

You rotate the problem again, and you see the connections. You see all the images provided and how they all stem from the one idea. The idea that you recognize well. The idea you’ve been chasing since you first learned about it.

Freedom.

“What was that?”

You start in your seat and look around. Your hurriedly jiggle your mouse to turn the screen saver off and turn to your cubicle-mate. “What?”

He just sighs and shakes his head.

You look back at your computer and get back to work, putting aside your experience for later.

Red, Green, and Blue will return.

Richard glanced up at her. “It’s what we offer to full-time staff.” He hesitated. “We’ve actually got larger ones if you need it.”

Justine shook her head. “But I’m just here for the week?”

Richard smiled gently. “And you’re staff for this week, so you get a staff room.” He turned back to the computer. “Plus, I think we both know that if this goes well, it’ll be more than a week.”

Justine bit her lip. “I guess...”

Richard looked up, concerned. He seemed to cycle through several different responses before turning back to the computer. “You’re staff for a week,” he said with finality. “Whatever happens after that happens.” He handed her a key fob. “Want me to take you to your room, or do you want to see the kitchen?”

Richard grimaced. “I did try to warn you...”

Justine stood in a mostly empty room. There was a pair of gas ranges off to one side, and a countertop island in the middle of the room that barely looked big enough.

She blinked. “What?”

Alex shook his head. “I’ve got a family to look aft—”
“I’ll bite.”

Alex and Richard both looked at Justine who sipped her coffee casually. She glanced at Alex. “Like you said, it’s not going to hurt my career.”

Alex frowned. “I can cover for you, but only for so long. A week’s pushing it; Stanley might not let you come back after that.”

Justine took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Alex,” she said calmly, “I interviewed at a law office today. A. Law. Office. I would rather go back into that cesspit of Lawyer Culture than work for Stanley.” She turned to Richard. “I’m making eleven dollars an hour.”

“Bill me at twenty-five,” Richard said instantly.

Justine turned back to Alex. “He’s trustworthy?”

Alex looked at Richard. “He’s never lied to me before now,” he said slowly. “And if he was going to start now, it wouldn’t be like this.”

Justine turned back to Richard. “When and where?”

Richard smiled. “If you’re willing to ride back with me, now. We can stop at your place to get whatever you’d need for yourself, and I can send you out with the quartermaster tomorrow for kitchen supplies.”

you want to risk having your phone out when you feel the sudden need for a *particular* word.

You love a puzzle, and you’re not busy, so you give the feeling your full attention. What kind of word? What is it describing?

The feeling stays frustratingly abstract.

You try to imagine the problem from another angle: whenever you’ve had trouble with a word for a thing, it can point to not knowing what the thing is.

You feel a sense of agreement off to another side.
A third?

The feeling starts to blossom. It conjures images in your head of driving with the windows down and the music up. You imagine standing on a mountaintop vista under a blue sky and seeing for miles. Of graduating.

The sense of agreement morphs into other memories: standing in front of a finished building, holding the thing you saved up so much to buy, a warm red sunset.

The first, the one with the problem, adds their own images. A clear sky at morning over a green forest. Pursuing the thing you long for. Of not being held back...

You think of an idea attached to the last example: being forgiven. You add that idea to the first.

Kitchen From Scratch, part 1

“You’re sure I can handle this?” Justine said into her phone as she fumbled with her bike lock.

“I’m positive,” Alex said. “Double-check our stock of zucchini; we might need to do a special on that soon. Other than that, I think today’s going to be pretty straightforward.” He coughed a few times. “I’m sorry I can’t be there myself, but I told Stanley you’d be running the kitchen for me.”

“It’s okay, Chef!” Justine said, maybe a little too forcefully. She hefted her bag and squeezed through the back door to Stanley’s Grille. “We’ll take care of it; you just get better.”

They wrapped up the conversation as Justine threw on her jacket. She paused outside the door to the kitchen.

“I can do this,” she muttered. “I can do this; I can do this; I can do this.” With a deep breath, she pushed open the double-doors and strode into the kitchen.

“Alright, everyone!” she yelled to the two line cooks. “Where are we with prep?”

Justine reached her hand across the table. Richard grasped it firmly and shook.

Another truck stop faded into the distance, and Justine's eyes slowly adjusted back to the darkness. "I'm surprised there's this much traffic at two in the morning," she muttered.

"New York isn't the only city that never sleeps," Richard answered. "And if Atlanta and Charlotte are awake, so is Eighty-five."

Justine hummed in assent, thankful the Jeep they were in had all of its lights working.

Another truck passed them on the left, both too fast and not fast enough for Justine's comfort. She shifted and stared out her window. "What's our exit, again?"

"Forty-two," Richard answered. "Normally I'd take exit one and go up Ceaser's Head, but since it's so late I wanted to stick to some wider roads." He motioned ahead. "We'll go around Greenville, head up into the mountains, then double back west once we cross into North Carolina."

"And this portal's in North Carolina?"

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"Doing well, Justine!" one of the cooks answered. The other held up his knife in a mock salute before returning to his tomato.

"Great," Justine said at a more conversational volume. "Listen, Chef Alex is out tonight. I'll spare you the details since we're in a kitchen, but suffice it to say he doesn't want to be here and we don't want him here."

The other cook smiled. "Are you Chef tonight, then?"

Justine smiled despite herself. "That's the pl—"

The doors to the kitchen slammed open and a middle-aged man walked in, pulling on a chef jacket with "Stanley" embroidered on the lapel. "Good evening, cooks," he said with a showman's grin.

Justine's smile fell. "Boss," she said.

"Chef Alex is out tonight," Stanley continued, "so I'll be running the kitchen tonight. Where are we with prep?"

Justine bit her lip. She glanced at the other line cooks. One was staring at his tomato, the other was looking at her, silently questioning.

With an internal sigh, she angled her head toward Stanley.

He nodded back and turned to Stanley. "Meatloaf went in the oven ten minutes ago."

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Justine followed Richard into the Lighthouse. The inside seemed fairly normal: exposed brick walls and normal-looking light switches. It reminded Justine of one of the larger hotels she'd seen. There was a simple social area in the middle with a couple of couches quietly occupied, a double-wide hallway coming off of one of the walls.

"So, how did you build this place?" Justine said. "I imagine it's hard to get deliveries out here."

"We didn't," Richard answered. "A lot of the buildings and such just end up here. And the Lighthouse itself..." He looked up toward the ceiling. "You'll meet the Caretaker eventually."

Justine decided not to deal with that. Yet. "But I saw you fixed up some of the other buildings. How'd that happen?"

Richard winced. "Lots of small deliveries. About the biggest thing we've gotten through the portal is a panel truck, so we just made a lot of small trips to the lumber yard. And when you're building this many things, that's a lot of small trips."

Richard took his place at the computer behind the front desk. "Is a studio apartment okay with you?" he said, tapping a few keys.

Justine blanched. "I... guess?"

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The First Puzzle

It starts with a contrarian thought, a strangely nihilistic idea you quickly brush off.

Weeks, maybe months later, a simple mistake leads to you berating yourself. But just as you get started, it disappears. Mistakes happen.

At another point, you find yourself suddenly restless. And just as suddenly breathing deeply and slowing down.

There may be other instances, you can't be sure. Your brain has had so many shakeups over the last year, between graduating, getting a job, moving, establishing your life for what feels like the first time. It's hard to tell when one of these episodes occurs when your thoughts already feel more erratic than usual. You're not even sure that there *is* something going on.

Until one day when an episode gives you more than an emotion: it gives you a *puzzle*.

You're staring at your computer screen waiting for your code to compile. You're idly tapping the mouse to keep your screen saver from kicking in while trying to decide whether

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Passing through the portal—even in the jeep—felt like walking through a sheet of water. When the glow faded, the jeep was driving down a different dirt road (though the quality was similar). The light level was slightly higher, like twilight instead of the pitch black they had just come from, with the eerie glow that comes from a late-night thunderstorm near a city. The color came in waves of intensity, and Justine wondered if there was some kind of aurora hiding behind a layer of cloud.

“And here,” Richard said as the jeep crested a hill, “is the Lighthouse.”

It was, at first glance, a junkyard. Buildings in various states of disrepair, dirt roads carved out of the rubble, with a town square in the middle, the eponymous Lighthouse rising from the middle.

“It’s not very big,” Justine mumbled.

“The inside is bigger than the outside,” Richard said. “That, and we’ve got other buildings for other stuff.” He pointed out a slightly more well-built building on the square. “That’s the mess hall, if that helps.”

“It certainly helps,” Justine said, wondering once again what she had gotten herself into.

“In a corner of the Dupont State Forest.” He chuckled. “It’s a wonder we still have access to it, yet we do.” He glanced at her. “I’ll be all right if you need to sleep.”

“Nope,” Justine groaned, “I can’t sleep sitting up. Not unless I slouch really low, and I can’t do that in a car.”

They drove on in companionable silence for a while.

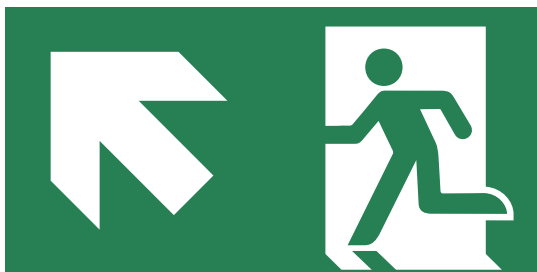
“What do you have against lawyers?” Richard said.

“Hmm?”

“In the diner, you mentioned that... ‘cesspool of lawyer culture’?”

“Oh, that.” She snorted. “I was pre-law in college. I didn’t really care about what I did, and my parents really wanted me to get a ‘profitable’ career, so I tried pre-law.” She shrugged. “I was okay at it, nothing too spectacular. But the people...” She rolled her head and glared at no one in particular. “What I didn’t realize was that pre-law would attract every single social-climbing type-A win-at-all-costs screw-you-I-got-mine smile-to-your-face-stab-you-in-the-back student at the school.”

She sighed. “I know I’m being super judgmental. I know I’m misjudging an entire group of people. I know there’s good, upstanding lawyers out there fighting the good fight, but I can’t deal with the stuff they deal with.”



ISO Exit - Up Left by The Navigators, CC0
<<https://wndfx.link/wYaCU>>

“I still can’t believe he did that,” Alex said.

Justine fumed, feeling the bad mood returning despite the incident being several days ago. “He told you I could run the kitchen?”

Alex groaned. “He told me ‘We’ll be fine; you just get better.’ He never actually acknowledged what I was saying about you.”

“Par for the course, there,” Justine muttered.

They walked along in companionable misery for a few moments, the Waffle House still a few blocks away.

“So did you have an interview earlier?” Alex said.

Justine started. She felt the blood drain from her face. “What makes you say that?”

Alex shrugged. “Noticed you had the nice clothes in your bag,” he said.

Justine made a noncommittal noise.

“I don’t think Stanley notices stuff like that,” Alex added. “Did it go well?”

Justine laughed bitterly. “Nope.”

Alex sighed. “Well, if you ever need to be late for a shift to make one, let me know and I’ll cover for you.” He added his own bitter laugh. “Since you’re the one without a

Richard waited to make sure she was finished. “And you interviewed with an office today?”

Justine laughed bitterly. “They said they’d call me. They’re not going to call me.” She sighed. “It’s just that...” She hit her palm against her leg. “After the stuff Stanley pulled I had to do something. Even if only to reassure myself that I’m not stuck here.” Another sigh. “Or that I can do a lot worse than Stanley.”

She blinked. “Sorry to dump on you like this,” she mumbled.

“Don’t apologize,” Richard said quickly. “I asked.” He nodded towards her. “And I’m sure you’re tired.”

“Exhausted.” She shook her head. “Maybe I should try and sleep some...”

Justine didn’t get to sleep, but she did nod off a couple of times. Maybe a little more than that, she mused, since she’d jolt awake and see that they had left the interstate, jolt awake and see them climbing the mountain, and finally one final jolt as the jeep turned onto a dirt road.

“Does this mean we’re almost there?”

Richard stopped the jeep and pulled the parking brake. “We’re there.”

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criminal record you’ve actually got a chance of getting a better job.”

Justine winced. “Alex, I—”

“I mean that,” he interrupted. “Don’t stay in a dead-end job on my account.”

Justine bit her lip. “Well, it’s a moot point right now anyway,” she said. “But thanks.” She looked up towards the Waffle House. “You said we were meeting someone?”

Alex nodded. “Richard. He was running the rescue mission when I hit rock bottom. Helped me get back on my feet and all that. The mission closed a few years back; I think he left town then. But he’s back for the night and wanted to meet up.”

“Do you know what he’s doing now?”

Alex shrugged. “Something about the middle of nowhere...”

“We’ve got a boatload of refugees coming in soon,” Richard explained. “I’m working on the eventual resettlement opportunities, but we’ll need to house them around the Lighthouse in the meantime. It’ll be about a week.” He took another pull from his coffee. “We’ve got

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Richard led her out of the car to the middle of the clearing and a faint shimmer that, for some reason, made Justine feel uneasy.

“We’ve already got dew on a spiderweb?” Justine said.

“Look a little closer,” Richard said.

She did, and the unease inched toward fear.

It looked like a round plane of frosted glass floating in the air, the surface rippling gently. The edges were blurry, like a vignettted picture. Justine walked a little closer, trying to ignore the feeling of the air getting thicker around it. She could barely see a road on the other side... barely. She walked around to look at it from the other side but stopped when she saw it nearly disappear when looked at from the side. She glanced at the back—it looked much the same as the front—then turned back to Richard.

“The portal?”

Richard nodded. “It’s not too late to turn around.”

She bit her lip again. “How much farther to the Lighthouse?”

“A few minutes.”

Justine took a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Okay,” she said quietly, “let’s go.”

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“Stop,” she muttered. She took a deep breath and let it out slowly.

And another breath.

She looked up. “I’ve got four walls here,” she said to herself. “There’s a kitchen right over there.” She shifted her weight. “And this isn’t that bad of a bed.”

She took another breath, steeled herself, then reached down to her duffel. She’d brush her teeth and try to get some sleep.

One thing at a time, she reminded herself.

To be continued...

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