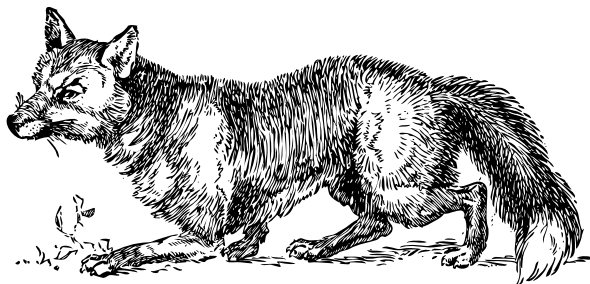


Series 0

Issue 2

Nowhereverse Tales



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.

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Letter from the editor

We're back, can you believe it? ...That feels much less impressive when I note that I'm posting the first three issues at once.

But that does bring me to a good point: this is all a work in progress. It's called Series Zero for a reason, mostly that I want—really, need—to be able to make mistakes here. I don't know if once-a-month is the right cadence. I still don't have a catchphrase. I don't know how well multi-part stories are going to work. I *especially* don't know how long I'll be able to get by with public domain and Creative Commons-licensed art.

I am working on that last point, by the way. Soon!

— Ronyo

Kitchen From Scratch, part 2

The next morning found Justine in the shell of a kitchen. For a moment, she did her best to visualize what the eventual kitchen could look like. There was enough space for fryers, a griddle, and a grill; and all generously sized. She imagined multiple prep areas centered around the storage area. Idly, she wondered if the IT-slash-procurement guy could find a dishwasher on the same level as the storage system.

As she was reminding herself to ask Richard what kind of ventilation systems they could expect, she heard movement in the dining room. She collected herself in time to see a snake-like woman walk—or, rather, slither—through the kitchen door.

“Morning, Chef,” she said with a smile.

Justine waved back weakly. The woman—Richard has said she was a naga—was covered in green scales, with the large, tan, plate-like scales normally found on a snake’s underbelly going from the bottom of her very reptilian jaw down her front. Justine idly noted the heavy denim

garment she wore, looking something like a cross between an apron and a pair of overalls. Her lower arms (lower arms!) were tucked into the apron's pockets, and she held out one of her upper arms, the other hanging limply by her side.

"I'm Dana," she said.

"Justine," Justine said, doing her best to maintain eye contact. Dana's eyes were unnaturally yellow.

Justine caught herself and blinked. "Sorry," she said, forcing a smile. "Still getting used to..."

Dana smiled gently. "I'm a lot to get used to. Even around here I'm pretty unusual." Her smile turned into a smirk. "So, go ahead and ask."

"Ask what?"

Dana held up both sets of arms. "I'm not offended by curiosity."

Justine hesitated for a moment before giving up. "Okay, how does having four arms work?"

"A lot easier than two from my perspective."

Justine shook her head. "Walked into that one," she muttered.

“I kind of forced you to,” Dana conceded. “But seriously, I don’t understand how you function. Last time I was in your world I kept trying to pick too many things up.”

That brought Justine up short. “What?”

Dana furrowed her brow. “Guess no one explained that part, yet,” she said. “Basically, when you go to a world, you take a form from that world. So when I went to your world, I got the body I would have gotten had I been born in your world.”

“That seems... weird,” Justine said.

Dana shrugged. “Well, I hear it makes exploring a lot easier, since you don’t have to worry about not being able to breathe the air or something stupid like that.”

Justine nodded while she wracked her brain for the last detail from yesterday’s conversation. “So, you’re the mechanic?”

Dana nodded. “Usually I’m just working on the cars and trucks here, but occasionally someone brings in something that needs fixing.”

Justine nodded. “Is this your normal wake-up time?”

“Usually,” Dana said, shrugging her upper arms. “I’m an early-to-bed, early-to-rise type. You?”

Justine leaned against one of the ranges. “Well, I was an early riser in college, but with the dinner shifts I’ve been up pretty late. So I have no idea these days.” She motioned to the storage room. “Coffee?”

Dana shook her head. “Caffeine doesn’t agree with me, actually.”

That brought her up short. “Oh, right,” she sputtered. “Sorry, I...”

Dana laughed out loud. “No, it’s just me!” she said. “My brother actually works as a barista; loves the stuff.”

“Wow,” Justine said, studying a random cubby in the storage room to hide her blush. “Well,” she offered, “do you want breakfast?”

“You don’t have to,” Dana said, slithering into the storage room. “I know it’s your first day and all.”

“Not a problem,” Justine said with a wave of her hand, glad to be back in familiar territory. “What do you usually eat?”

“Anything really. I like a lot of meat, but I’m an omnivore. Usually I get one of these breakfast sandwiches and head down to the shop.” She motioned at one of the cubbies.

Justine checked it: it was a standard microwavable sausage-egg-and-cheese sandwich, apparently purchased in bulk.

“The tech-head tends to find pallets of frozen food,” Dana explained. “He joined us straight out of college, and it kinda shows.”

Justine nodded. “Well, if you want, I can make you an omelette?”

“So,” Dana said, setting her fork down, “how did Richard convince you to come out here?”

Justine took a deep breath. Then let it out slowly. “I guess,” she said, “I’m just not sure I’m in the right place.”

“How do you mean?”

Justine bit her lower lip. “You know, I was going to be a lawyer? I was on the pre-law track and everything, and I wasn’t doing too bad, except...” She looked at Dana and smiled weakly. “I just didn’t care. I mean, I got into the track to try to help people, make sure the law actually did what it was supposed to, and then...”

She gestured to the omelettes. “I found out just how much good food can do for people. Good food, made with love, is... so powerful. And it was so much more personal

than anything I had imagined doing as a lawyer.”

Dana nodded. “So what happened?”

Justine’s smile faded. “Well, student loans happened.” She stared towards the ground, one hand idly tugging on her hair. “Student loans means I need a reliable income, and reliable income means a normal job. And at this normal job, at least, it means that love I want to put in the food gets put through a filter named Stanley.”

“And you and Stanley don’t get along?”

Justine shrugged. “No, we’re fine, it’s just...” She took a bite of her nearly-cold omelette and considered her words. “Stanley is the kind of guy with a solid vision of how he wants his restaurant to be, and he doesn’t see any reason to change it.”

Dana frowned. “He doesn’t listen to y’all in the kitchen?”

Justine shook her head. “He does, but just enough to keep the food good. He’s smart enough to know that if the food goes, his restaurant goes; so he makes sure we have what we need to execute the menu well. Anything beyond that...” She rolled her eyes and took another bite. “The head chef, Alex, has been there longer than I have, and in

order for him to have any say at all over the menu, he has to convince Stanley to do it.”

Dana nodded in understanding. “He has to make Stanley think it was his idea to begin with, right?”

“Exactly. And when it comes to some things—like, say, maybe letting your senior line cook that’s been training for a more active role in the business call herself the sous chef—he just won’t bite at all.”

Dana frowned. “He doesn’t think you’re ready?”

Justine shook her head. “He ‘doesn’t see the need.’”

“Where are we headed, again?” Justine said, sliding into the passenger seat of the jeep.

“Earth-17,” ██████████ said. “Courtney, our usual front desk person, is from a different world than yours. We’re calling it Earth-17 for now until we can get a better classification system. Anyway, she mentioned that the portal’s not too far from here, and the other side is near a commercial district with a restaurant supply.”

“And that’s better than the portal to our world?”

He smiled uneasily. “Yeah, that portal’s at least an hour from anything we’d need.”

Justine just grimaced and nodded. “Wait, different world? Are we going to be able to buy anything there?”

“Definitely,” he said. With a smile, he fished a black credit card out of his pocket.

Justine just gaped. “I thought those were a myth!”

“They basically are. You have to have a ridiculous amount of money to even be asked to join...” He grinned. “Or give your information at an office in two different worlds.”

“So it works across worlds?”

He handed her the card. “It was the original purpose. Then the big shots with more money than brains wondered why, if they were so important, there was a card out there they didn’t have. Eventually there was—pardon the expression—a black market for these cards until they finally cashed in on that market themselves.”

Justine turned the card over in her hands, running her fingers over the embossed numbers. It was metal, that much was obvious, but a more lightweight metal than she expected.

“Hang on,” ██████████ said after a while, “we’re coming up on the portal.”

The portal itself wasn't bad; Justine was ready for it, though not as much as transitioning to the broad daylight of the new world after so long in the twilight of Nowhere.

The worst part was [REDACTED] slamming on the brakes as soon as they were through the portal.

"What was that?" Justine yelled, bracing herself against the car frame.

He just moaned in pain at her right. "Not good," he managed to get out.

Justine looked at him. Granted, seeing a four-armed naga earlier had prepared her for unusual biologies. That being said, seeing someone who, up until this point, had been human suddenly have grey fox ears and more than one tail was a little disconcerting.

He held his chest with one arm and clutched his head with the other hand. "I think I'm going to be sick."

Justine shook away her unease. "How can I help?"

"Can you help me get out?"

Justine scrambled out of the jeep and ran around to the driver's-side door. He had unbuckled in the meantime, and she eased him out until he was on all fours on the ground.

“Anything else you need?” Justine said, crouching down near him and doing her best to ignore the three fox tails somehow connected to him.

He shook his head. “Just wasn’t expecting to shift. First one’s always rough.”


“Shift? What do... wait, is this what Dana was talking about this morning?”

He nodded. “You take a form native to the world, yeah.”

“But I didn’t change...”

“Yeah,” he said, catching his breath. “Courtney’s human, she only ever knew humans, so we figured her world was just like ours. And for you, we were right: if you’d been born here, you’d be exactly what you are now. So you didn’t change.”

“And you?”

 pushed himself into a sitting position. “How do I look?”

Justine grinned awkwardly. “Well, mostly the same. A lot more clean shaven.” She pointed at his head. “And you’ve got fox ears.”

His face lit up. Slowly, he twisted himself around to see his tails. With a grin he turned back to Justine.

“Well,” he said, “if I had been born here, I would have been a *kitsune*.” He smiled broadly. “Worth it.” He started to get up, winced (which included his ears flattening against his skull), and sat back down.

“Are you okay?” Justine asked.

He shrugged tiredly. “I’m going to need a minute, actually,” he said. He blinked, felt his ears with his hand, and smiled. “Yeah, still worth it.”

Justine stood awkwardly at the sales counter. “My boss said they would call.”

The salesman—a lanky, balding gentleman—looked down at the Black Card with an unimpressed stare. “I really need to—”

The phone rang. The salesman barely turned his head to look at it. It rang again. He kept staring. On the third ring, he started moving his hand, and he finally picked it up during the fourth ring.

“Blue Ridge Restaurant Supply,” he said in a monotone. He listened for a moment, then turned slightly toward Justine.

“Are you [REDACTED]?” he said in the same monotone.

Justine forced herself to nod. “Basically,” she mumbled.

The salesman just stared at her skeptically as he handed her the cordless phone.

“This is Justine,” Justine said, holding up a finger to the salesman. “██████████ is in the car, he’s not feeling well.”

“That’s alright,” the woman on the other end said. “My name’s Carol with cardmember services. As long as you can provide his security passphrase, we can get you started.”

Justine rolled her eyes. “All your base are never gonna give you what’s going on?”

“That’s it. You said your name was Justine?”

“I did.”

“Okay, I’ll make a note of this on the account statement.” There was a pause while the woman typed. “And I’ve activated your account for local services! Is there anything else I can help you with today, Justine?”

“Do I have a credit limit?”

“Yes. Give me just a moment to look up that information.”

“Okay,” Justine said, doing her best to ignore the salesman’s stare.

“Alright, Justine: it looks like you have a spending limit of ten thousand dollars in local currency, but based on current balance and your usual transactions, I’d limit yourself to two thousand today.”

“Two thousand should be plenty,” Justine answered, making sure to stare the salesman right back.

“That’s great; anything else I can help you with today?”

“There isn’t.”

“Well, then, we want to thank you once again for being a cardmember, and we hope you have a great day.”

“You too, thanks!” Justine hung up and handed the phone back to the salesman.

“The card’s activated,” she said, motioning to the card he was still holding.

The salesman looked down at the total that was a lot less than two thousand dollars. “Are you going to need anything else?” he said.

“Not from here,” Justine said with a glare.

Justine pulled the jeep up to the door of the dining hall. Before she could finish cutting the engine the newly foxified [REDACTED] had stumbled out and was limping towards the door.

Dana slithered in, Richard close behind her. “How’d the trip—What?” She darted over to [REDACTED] and helped support him up. “Are you okay, kid?”

“Never better,” he groaned with a wry smile, his fox ears flattening. “Just a little sore in my everywhere.” He turned to Richard. “We need to update the file on Earth—17. Maybe do some recon.”

Richard looked him over. “Urban fantasy?”

He shrugged. “Don’t know,” he said with a wince. “If Courtney went her entire life thinking it was a mundane world, chances are they’re in hiding.”

Dana tugged at Sam. “Come on, you,” she said, “I’ll get you to the docs.” She turned back to Richard and Justine. “I’ll help y’all unload in a bit.”

Justine waved her off as she climbed out. “It’s a lot of small stuff; we’ll manage.”

She met Richard around the back where he was beginning to sort through the dozens of boxes of utensils. “That could have been much worse,” he muttered.

Justine bit her lip. “I’m going to regret asking, but how?”

Richard looked at her. “He became something relatively human, so he was able to adapt relatively quickly. If he’d become a naga, there’s a good chance he would have been

paralyzed from the waist down until his brain caught up with the rest of him.” He frowned. “Which is weird, since your brain is part of your body, so it changes along with the rest of you...”

He shrugged. “We’re still learning the rules of how this works, but one thing we’ve learned is that your first time in a new body is always rough, and if it’s your first time ever then it’s twice as rough.” He jerked his thumb over his shoulder. “That’s his first time, so right now his body’s dealing with the effects of every cell getting rewritten and every muscle twitching and every nerve firing for a solid few seconds.”

Justine gaped. “But he’ll be okay?”

Richard nodded and picked up a box. “I’m sure he will, probably after a good night’s rest.”

“That’s a relief.” She picked up a stack of catering bins. “I’ll make sure to make him a plate.”

Richard smiled broadly. “Speaking of, what do you have planned for dinner tonight?”

Justine set the bins on top of a bright red cooler and picked them both up. “Assembly line tacos.”



Tuesday morning, Justine followed Richard to the atrium in front of the front desk. About half a dozen people were standing around the desk. [REDACTED] was there, leaning against Dana but decidedly more stable than yesterday.

Richard and Justine walked up and completed the circle. Richard looked around the group and nodded. “Thanks for being here, everyone,” he said before motioning to Justine. “This is Justine; she’s going to be interviewing to be our head chef. Do what you can to help her feel welcome, but answer any questions she has honestly, folks. We want a good fit, and we’re not going to get that by sugar-coating where we are.”

Justine waved slightly. Everyone in the group either waved or gave some approximation of a greeting.

“Right,” Richard said, mostly to himself. “As for us, you’ve met IT and our mechanic. Next is Courtney behind the front desk; she’s good at finding information and mapping out the worlds we have access to.” He motioned to the others on the outside of the desk.

“This is Walker; he’s finance.” Walker wore a black suit, had black hair, was deathly pale, and glared at everyone.

“Call me ‘Walk’ and I’ll bite you,” he grumbled with the barest hint of a smile.

The last two were a tall man and woman with angular features. “And last we have Harper and Selah, on loan from the Melodia Academy of Medicine.” He started to move on, but quickly added. “They’re elves.”

“Darn straight,” Harper said with a gentle smile.

“So,” Richard said with a clap, “We’ve got the planned evac from Europa-22 coming in at around noon local time. This is a spacefaring universe, and the evacuees in question are coming from a joint colony between humans from Earth and their neighbors from the next galaxy over.”

Richard motioned to Courtney who put a picture up on the monitor behind her. It showed two figures wearing the same navy uniform. The one on the left was human: a kind-looking man with a touch of grey in his hair. The one on the right was definitely human-shaped but with faintly glowing light-blue skin, and his eyes were black with light-blue pupils.

Courtney pointed to the man on the left. “This is Captain Baker of the ESCC...” Then to the right. “And Captain Nalya of the GSCO. His people are called

Guldorians, and their planet is Earth.” She paused with a smirk. “Yes, they’re just as unoriginal as we are.”

She tapped a button on her phone, and the screen changed to show a small city underneath an environmental dome. “This colony was an experiment in creating a habitable biome on an otherwise uninhabitable planet, and for the most part it’s worked.”

“Except...?” Walker snarked.

Courtney rolled her eyes and flipped to the next slide, showing a diagram of the planet. “Except the mining they’ve performed to get geothermal heat also weakened the surrounding geography. The whole place is in danger of collapsing in on itself sometime in the next, oh, five years or so.” She turned to stare right at Walker.

Walker met her gaze. The stare down lasted about two seconds longer than everyone was comfortable before Walker finally said, “Fine, what’s the urgency?”

Courtney tapped her phone. The diagram zoomed out to show an object on a collision course with the planet. “There’s a major asteroid going to hit near the colony. Nothing really out-of-the-ordinary for this planet, but with the weakened geography, the odds of this becoming an extinction-level event for the colony are... too high.”

“Fortunately,” Richard picked up, “the mining also turned up a portal. We’ve made contact, and they’re moving as many people as they can here. Our hope is to find a portal to Earth-22—either of their Earths—and get them home that way, but if that’s not possible we have options.”

Justine raised a hand. “How many people are we talking?”

“About five hundred,” Courtney said. “Give or take.”

“Any known dietary restrictions?”

“None that we’ve been made aware of.”

“Can I get some help with the prep?”

Richard looked around the group, all of whom nodded to some extent.

“Alright then,” he said, “everyone take some time in the kitchen when you can spare it. Harper and Selah, I’m expecting you to be the most busy. Everyone else, let’s make this happen.”

As the group broke up, Justine pulled Dana aside. “Are you any good at welding?” she said with a grin.

Dana shrugged. “I’m okay at it; why?”

“We need more counter space.”



Wednesday night found Justine and [REDACTED] climbing to the observation deck of the lighthouse.

“Don’t get me wrong, or anything,” Justine said, her impressively cold drink almost causing her hand to cramp. “It’s very cool.”

“But why do we have a lighthouse?” he replied with a smile.

“Why do we have a lighthouse?” Justine said as they crested the staircase to the deck.

He immediately crashed against the lighthouse wall and slid to the ground. Justine walked to the railing and looked out.

The strange half-light of Nowhere barely illuminated the surrounding area. There were plenty of shifting shadows, scrubby trees swaying in the wind.

“We have a lighthouse so people can find us,” he said after a moment. “Between the low light and the tendency for the geometry to twist back onto itself out there, it’s almost comically easy to get lost.” He stuck his thumb up toward the rotating light. “So we have a lighthouse.”

Justine gripped the handrails tightly. “It feels strange, here,” she murmured, “but I can’t quite put my finger on it.”

He nodded. “That’s Nowhere for you.” He licked his lip reflexively. “Have you ever been to an abandoned theme park?”

Justine blinked in surprise. “Can’t say I have, but I bet it’d be creepy.”

“Why would you think that?”

She shrugged. “Can’t say, really; just seems... creepy?”

He nodded. “But you know the idea. A place that’s supposed to be lively that isn’t.” He considered his next words. “There’s also schools during breaks. Playgrounds at night. They’re all places that are slightly out of context. Then there’s liminal spaces—they’re just thoroughfares; you don’t spend time in them: hallways, stairwells, rest stops on the highway...”

“Your point?” Justine said, folding her arms.

“This is one of those places!” His hands fidgeted nervously. “All those other places... They feel weird on one level because our brains don’t understand them, but there’s other places where they just seem weird for no reason.” He held his arms open. “There’s all sorts of parallel worlds, and sometimes the walls between them get a little weak. We can sense something’s different, but we don’t quite have the understanding.”

██████████ brought his arms in. “We’re in the middle of all those parallel worlds. When we feel something weird through the walls, we’re feeling this.” He motioned down. “Where we are now.”

Justine was slack jawed. “So we’re in a giant liminal space,” she said quietly.

He nodded, his face a mixture of elation and fear. “This is a giant thoroughfare. Stuff doesn’t stay here.”

“But we do?”

He smiled weakly. “We describe this place as a hotel, but that’s for simplicity’s sake.” He motioned out into the wilds. “This is the frontier; we’re the explorers, and this is our outpost.”

Justine smiled at that, but her face fell as she followed ██████████’s gesture. “So if this is the frontier,” she said slowly, her dread returning, “what’s out there?”

To be continued...

A Laugh of Recognition

It's a few weeks later when you're staring down another puzzle at work. You've read and re-read the chapter in the book they gave you at work about the single-responsibility principle, but there's some block keeping you from putting it into practice. You stare at the screen, willing it to make sense.

You feel your thoughts shift. Green wonders what you're trying to do.

You close your eyes and turn the problem over in your head. You imagine your code as a piece of machinery.

Green immediately starts picking apart the work. They break the main piece into several smaller pieces.

You aren't sure when Red first showed up, but they try to move the pieces farther away from each other and can't. They're too tangled in each other.

You've tried to keep your frustration away from them, but you can't help it. Of course they're tangled; they're supposed to work together!

Immediately you brace for a reprimand. You know you're being immature. You should be able to get this, and if you stopped being stupid you'd—

Red stops that train of thought; it feels suspiciously like they flicked your ear.

Green shifts the machine into an assembly line. Each part is a worker doing their small part, trusting their coworkers for the whole.

Red tweaks the image and removes the conveyer belt, having the workers pass the widget among each other. Each one does their small part, and no one of them needs to worry about the whole.

You're on the catwalk of the factory, looking down at the big picture. And that's your job; it's so simple you wonder why you haven't gotten it yet.

The image shifts, but instead of several workers each doing one thing, there's just one worker in a blue jumpsuit doing several things.

There's just *you* in a blue jumpsuit doing several things.

You can't help it, you laugh. Something something I didn't come here to be read like this. Red and Green laugh with you, now that you can see how ridiculous the idea is.

It's a laugh of recognition: this is a lesson they've both learned the hard way.

You blink, and you're back at your desk. The screen saver hasn't cut on this time, thankfully.

Red, Green, and Blue will return.

Ask the Lighthouse

Ronyo asks Richard: So who's the Caretaker?

Do I know you?

The Caretaker is... someone. They've been through a lot, more than I can understand right now. But they're also responsible for Nowhere itself, in a way. I hope they come down from the top of the Lighthouse while Justine's here, but I doubt it'll happen.

Seriously, do I know you?

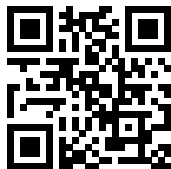
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Most importantly, **thank you for reading!**



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