

Nowhereverse Tales



#19

AGES 16+

We exist in our space and time... and we are not alone. Beyond our world lies numerous others with their own histories and biologies. And between them all, where the walls grow thin and possibility seems endless, there is a lighthouse, sitting in the space between spaces.

Welcome, travelers and castaways alike, to **Nowhere.**

In this issue



It's amazing the kind of life-changing experiences we can have. Where a moment passes, and we come out the other side with a new perspective. And we discover things about ourselves we may have never known—or maybe we've always known but couldn't admit.

These moments matter so much. But what matters almost as much is how the people we love react. How do the changes to ourselves change our relationships?

—Ronyo

Conversations In the Aftermath

It's been a busy few days at The Lighthouse, and Richard's just trying to make sense of it all, both to himself and others.

Rated Mature: attempted suicide

An Invitation

Sometimes being included is its own gift.

Rated Teen: child neglect, foreign thoughts

Last we left off...

In the middle of **Nowhere**, there's **The Lighthouse**: a place for multiversal travelers to find rest, supplies, and direction. The staff is led by the proprietor **Richard** and includes the mechanic **Dana**.

Nearly a year ago, the aspiring young chef **Justine** was contracted for a week but chose not to continue. Now, things have changed for her, which brings Richard and Dana into her world...

Conversations In the Aftermath

Richard and Dana walked down the Atlanta road towards Stanley's Grill and its unlit sign. A young woman in a chef's outfit was fiddling with a bike lock, seeming to have a hard time opening it.

Richard crouched down on the other side of the bike from her. "Need a hand?"

She jumped with a yelp before processing who he was. "Richard!" she said with a manic smile. "Hey! I just..." She took a breath and let it out loudly while shaking her hands out. "Lots of adrenaline, sorry," she said. "Quitting your job will do that."

Richard smiled gently. "I bet," he said. "Good to see you, Justine."

With a final tug Justine finally opened the lock. She stuffed the lock in her bag and gripped the handlebars with her still-shaking hands. With a glance to Richard she started walking her bike toward the sidewalk.

Dana stepped forward and laid a hand on the bike's top tube. "Want me to get this?"

"No it's—" Justine stopped herself when she saw her. She narrowed her eyes in confusion for a moment before asking, "Dana?"

Dana smiled, and Richard was almost sure there was a hint of a blush there. "Hey, girl."

Justine smiled back. "Hey." After a moment she let go of the bike. "Sure, if you want..."

With a single heave Dana lifted the bike up and threaded her arm through to rest it on her shoulder. "No problem," she said.

Justine just stared in awe. "That works," she said quietly.

"So," Richard said, "you needed to talk something through?"

“What?” Justine turned back to him in confusion for a moment. “Oh, right. Yeah, Alex said he wanted to check with you about something before I made anything official.” She motioned back towards the restaurant where a taller man—also in a chef’s uniform—was waiting at the back door, staring intently at Richard.

Richard felt his stomach tighten, dread settling in his abdomen. This did not look like a friendly conversation. He kept his smile up and turned back to the women. “You two go on ahead,” he said. “I’ll catch up.”

Justine looked a little hesitant, but Dana encouraged her on and the two left.

Richard walked slowly to the back door. “Alex,” he said, holding out a hand. “Doing well?”

Alex glanced at the hand but didn’t take it. “We need to talk.”

Richard sighed and pulled his hand back. “Okay,” he said. “Do you want to get a cup of—”

“Here’s fine,” Alex said, his voice clipped. He walked away from the door and led Richard to a corner of the parking lot.

Richard reminded himself—several times—that people dealt with their emotions in different ways, and patience was a virtue. “Have I hurt you in some way?” he said as they stopped under a street light.

Alex turned to face Richard, fists balled. “Who are you?” he said with a growl. “Really.”

Richard cocked his head. “Alex, we were at the mission together. I introduced you to—”

“Richard Glover is dead,” Alex interrupted.

Richard closed his mouth, his face falling. “Oh,” he said quietly.

Alex peered at him. “You don’t seem surprised to hear that.”

Richard closed his eyes and sighed. “Well,” he said, “I’ve been gone for a few years and...” He shook his head, eyes still closed. “And they probably found the note.”

Alex hummed, keeping his poker face. “The note?”

Richard opened his eyes but didn’t meet Alex’s gaze. “The world was moving on,” he said. “The mission was closing. Not just lack of funding or interest. No... no, the neighborhood was growing. Blooming. Beginning to prosper, people were saying. And with every new person that moved in, every house that got renovated, more neighbors stopped seeing the people here and just saw...” He glanced up to Alex with a sad smirk.

Alex nodded. “Gentrification?”

Richard nodded back. “Yeah. The writing was on the wall: there was no place for the mission in this new world.” He looked away. “There was no place for *me* in this new world.

“I didn’t want to talk to the people I’d helped—” He gestured toward Alex. “—because I had some misguided idea of not wanting to burden them. I didn’t want to talk to the mission’s old supporters because...” He winced. “Because I felt abandoned by them. The closest place I could have gone for a new job was in a completely different part of town, and they didn’t have any openings anyway. So I finished up, closed the doors one last time...”

Richard closed his eyes. “And I gave up.”

He couldn’t bring himself to look at Alex, but he didn’t hear any inflection in his voice. “You killed yourself?” Alex said.

“I tried at least,” Richard said. “Wrote the note, got the rope, got on the chair, and...”

He opened his eyes. “Things got hazy. I started seeing afterimages of the room, seeing through next door, through the floor, and streaks of light were shooting through from one side to the other. Something shifted, or maybe I just lost my balance, but either way I fell backwards. Away from the rope, through the floor, through the ground...”

He finally looked to Alex. “Landed on my back in Nowhere. Knocked the wind out of me something fierce, but it hurt. It ached.” He rubbed his lower back. “Still aches, to be honest. So I’m pretty sure I’m not a ghost.”

Alex just blinked. “So why didn’t you come back?”

“Well,” Richard said with a shrug, “it took a while to even *find* the portal back. First world I went to was actually Dana’s.” He motioned in the direction the women had walked off. “And by the time I did, I was busy trying to set up what we have now. Didn’t see the reason to leave the place I had for someplace that didn’t want me.”

Alex took a deep breath that could have been a sigh. “You were mourned,” he said, voice still flat. “Missed. People would have wanted to know you’re okay, even if you weren’t around.”

Richard nodded. “I know that now,” he said. “And I’m not proud of myself for this. For not reaching out in the first place, and for letting it sit afterwards.” He smiled sadly. “But I imagine everyone’s moved on by now.”

“Yeah, well, you left a suicide note and disappeared. You bet they’ve moved on.” Alex took another deep breath. “I wish you had said something earlier,” he said after a moment. “To me, now. About this.”

Richard closed his eyes and nodded. “I should have. You trust me, and I should have honored it more.” He looked at Alex. “I’m sorry.”

Alex held his gaze for a moment before reaching out his hand.

Richard smiled and took it in a fierce handshake.

Alex cracked a small smile and pulled Richard in for a hug. "I'm glad you're okay," he whispered.

Richard chuckled. "I'm proud of you," he said. "You've done well for yourself."

"You gave me the chance," Alex answered. He broke the hug and stepped back. "Take care of Justine, okay?"

Richard smiled broadly. "I promise."

Richard, Dana, and Justine were piled into Justine's cramped apartment the next day.

"So," Justine said, steeling her features, "what's included in the offer?"

"Salary," Richard said, "room and board, healthcare, paid time off, anything else you might need."

Justine glanced around herself. "Relocation assistance?"

"Absolutely," Dana said. "I can be back here with the panel truck tomorrow."

"And we still have the room you stayed in last time," Richard added.

Richard didn't miss the glance between Justine and Dana at that, but Justine moved on quickly. "Cool, cool. What's the job description?"

Richard shrugged. "Run the kitchen?"

Justine rolled her eyes. "I got *that*. I mean, to what end? I did the one-week emergency camp thing, but I imagine you've settled into a routine now. What kind of kitchen do you want me to run?"

Richard leaned back and considered his answer. "Most of what we have right now is a volunteer system," he said. "Different people take turns making something everyone can eat off of. Any extras go into storage for people with off schedules."

"Has anyone been owning that process? Coordinating things, setting menus, that sort of thing?"

"Lieutenant Gibbons from the colony has. He was running the mess hall there, so he took over for us."

Justine grimaced. "Is it going to be a problem, me taking over his kitchen?"

Richard shook his head with a smile. "Nope. He went home a couple of weeks ago. We finally found a portal back to their world."

"How about the volunteers; do you think any of them are going to get territorial?" She opened her mouth to continue but let it fall into a smirk. "You worked at a charity; you know what I'm talking about."

Richard laughed at that. "Thankfully, no. Most of them left with the rest of the colony. I expect the ones among the staff to be excited at you coming back." He leaned forward a bit. "You will, of course, have

my full support if there is any trouble.”

Justine nodded. “That’s the important part.” She tapped the table in thought. “You’ve been getting good supplies? Produce, staples, all that?”

“I haven’t had any complaints.”

“Ronyo hasn’t bought a pallet of frozen dinners, if that’s what you’re asking,” Dana cut in with a tongue-in-cheek grin.

Something about that sentence seemed off to Richard, but he couldn’t quite put his finger on it. It took him a moment to realize Justine had asked another question. “I’m sorry,” he said, recovering. “What was that again?”

“What’s the rules on PTO?” Justine said.

Richard nodded. “Week-to-week, just get done what needs to get done. I don’t care about time worked as much as work done, you know? If you need to take a vacation, just check with me. For you specifically, I’d say just making sure there’s something in place for your time off. Train a sous chef, maybe.”

“Oh, *hell* yes I’m going to train a sous chef,” Justine said. At Richard’s quizzical look she added, “When we first met, it was right after Alex had called out sick. Alex wanted me to run the kitchen instead, but the owner stepped in himself.”

Richard nodded, remembering the situation. “Yeah, definitely want to avoid that,” he said. “Because I definitely wouldn’t know what I was doing.” He shifted in his seat. “Anything else? I know the salary isn’t as much as that first week—”

Justine waved him off. “Salary’s never as much as contracting. Plus the money I’m going to save from not paying for housing makes—wait, you said healthcare’s included?”

Richard grinned. “Onsite clinic, as you know; if something happens outside Nowhere, we can probably reimburse you for care.”

Justine’s grin turned feral. “I don’t have to buy health insurance?”

Richard nodded. “You don’t have to buy health insurance.”

Justine threw herself back from the table and started dancing around the apartment singing various variations on “I don’t have to buy health insurance.”

Dana leaned over to Richard. “Isn’t insurance for catastrophically expensive things?”

“It is.”

Dana watched Justine for another moment. “And you have ‘health’ insurance here?”

“We do.”

Dana blinked. “That’s bullshit.”

“I know, right?” Justine yelled from across the room.

Richard and Justine walked through the front doors of The Lighthouse, Justine with her duffel and Richard with a well-used legal pad.

Courtney peeked up from her spot behind the front desk and spotted them. “Justine!” she yelled as she ran around the desk to hug Justine.

Justine wrapped one arm around her. “Good to see you too,” she said. “Glad things haven’t burned down while I’ve been gone.”

“Eh, it’s been close,” Courtney said. She turned to Richard. “Ronyo’s at the bar; he wants to talk to you.”

Richard blinked away the unease that hit him and looked to see the *kitsune* at the bar with a curvy woman with pink hair. “Thanks,” he said, turning back to Courtney. “Can you do me a couple of favors?”

“That’s my job, right?” she said with a smile.

Richard motioned to Justine. “First, get Justine checked back in. Same room if we can.”

Courtney pulled a key fob out of her pocket and handed it to Justine without breaking eye contact with Richard. “Done.”

“Easy enough,” Richard said with a smile. He handed her the legal pad. “Can you get this typed up?”

Courtney took the pad and flipped through it. “What is this?”

“We ran into someone on the way to Atlanta. They’re claiming to be connected to two other people in other worlds, and we’re pretty sure one of them is in Melodia.”

“Connected how?”

“Telepathic, sensory, hive mind stuff?”

Courtney whistled. “Interesting. I’ll get on this.” She turned to Justine. “Let’s make sure that key actually works.”

Richard waved the two of them off and strode back to the bar. Ronyo was standing there, looking—to Richard’s eye—a lot healthier than the last time the two had talked here.

“Boss,” Ronyo said, tapping his eyebrow in a lazy salute. “This is Lalaith. Lalaith, Richard.”

“Hi!” Lalaith said in a high-pitched voice and thrusting a hand out.

Richard shook it—or rather, was shaken by it. What Lalaith lacked in grip she made up for in vigor. “Nice to meet you,” he said, shaking the numbness out of his hand.

Lalaith saw his reaction and winced. “Too much?” she said quietly towards Ronyo.

“A lot? Yes,” Ronyo answered. “Too much?” He looked toward Richard.

Richard shook his head. “Don’t apologize for enthusiasm,” he said. He took his place behind the bar and started some water on a boil. “What brings you out here?”

She smirked and pointed a thumb at Ronyo lol. “I followed them home. Can they keep me?”

Ronyo rolled their eyes. “She’s a friend,” they said. “We... ran into each other yesterday.” They smiled softly. “She helped remind me who I am.”

Lalaith shrugged. “You bring the frowns; I’ll turn ’em upside down!” She gave a thumbs up gesture before making a face and sticking her tongue out. “No, that didn’t work.”

“Well, everyone’s welcome here,” Richard said. “Friends especially.”

“Great!” Lalaith said. “Which way is the kitchen? I’ve got cupcakes to bake!”

Richard pointed to the doors. “Kitchens are around the back, but you’ll have to check with the new head chef first.”

Ronyo broke out into a broad smile. “Wait, Justine’s back?”

Lalaith stood straight with her heels together, gave a sharp salute, and held it as she fell backwards.

Richard leaned over the bar to get a better look; she wasn’t there. He looked up at a smirking Ronyo. “Do I want to know?”

“You do not.”

Richard got out two mugs and added the tea sachets. He still held some unease about the question he was about to ask, and pouring water from a hot kettle gave him somewhere else to send that attention. “So, Ronyo,” he began, focusing on the kettle in his hands and the steam coming from the mugs, “that wasn’t always your name, was it?”

He set the kettle down and looked back at Ronyo who had a nervous smile on their face. “No,” they said. They took a breath. “How much do you know about what’s inside the lighthouse?”

“The locked door at the top of the stairs?” Richard said. At Ronyo’s nod, he answered, “not much. Caretaker was cagey about it, and I never pressed.” A beat. “They did tell me about some of the creatures there, though.”

Ronyo licked his lips and got very still. “Did they, now?”

“Mhmm. The elementals that come from the bright center of the multiverse. They don’t look like much, just colorful critters that seem more like cartoons than flesh and blood.” He looked toward where Lalaith had been standing. “But they’re incredibly powerful. The elements that they’re made of tie into the fabric of reality itself. They

can fly, manipulate energy, and change their shape, all without breaking a sweat.”

Ronyo nodded slightly. “Interesting.”

“Indeed.” Richard kept looking at the empty seat. “The most important thing—to the Caretaker, at least—was how they acted. Something about them, whether it comes from being so powerful, from living in the center of everything, or just their culture; but all of them just seemed to treat everything like one big joke.”

Ronyo grunted. “I can see how they’d think that.”

Richard looked back to Ronyo and took in their posture, the way they gripped their mug and wouldn’t meet their gaze.

A spike of fear shot through Richard. He lifted his mug and blew on his tea to give himself a moment.

He looked to Ronyo to see them looking back with their own level of fear.

“So I take it,” he said, “that I’m not just describing your new friend.”

Ronyo shook their head.

Richard nodded. “So, are you a particular element, or...?”

Ronyo smiled, and he could see them exhale in relief. “It depends,” they said. “In the classical system, it’s wind.” A sudden breeze tossed a lock of their hair as they smirked. “But the real answer?”

They stared into their mug. “Connection,” they said quietly, reverently. “The ties that bind, the bonds between family, between friends...” They took a breath. “The love that makes life worth living.”

They looked up at Richard. “That’s what I saw in the center,” they said. “Every thread linking every soul, every story intertwined with another, the songs of our lives sung in harmony...” They blinked back a couple of tears, their smile threatening to split their face in half.

“It’s not a joke,” they said. “At least not to me. No it’s...” They chuckled. “It’s beautiful.”

They took a breath and sighed. “Of course, my usual reaction to that is to find the humor in everything so... maybe the Caretaker actually is right on that one.”

Richard let himself chuckle, if only to acknowledge their attempt at cutting the tension. “So what are you going to do now that you’ve transcended physical existence?”

Ronyo rolled their eyes. “First of all, I haven’t. Second of all, I haven’t quit. I actually think I fell behind on my work the last few months, so...” They grinned. “Sorry, boss.”

“Yeah, get on that,” Richard said with a mock glare.

Ronyo nodded. “Other than that, probably...” They shrugged. “I don’t know, open a shop that sells cursed items that turn people into other things so they can learn important life lessons?” They glanced to the wall and winked.

Richard decided to ignore the last line; the less he knew the better. “As long as you do that on your own time.”

“You got it, boss,” Ronyo said. They gripped their mug and tapped a finger on it nervously. “But, uh...” They took another breath to steady themselves. “I know I mentioned the *incident* to you and how it was eating at me.”

Richard leaned on the bar and lowered his voice. “Where you woke up as a girl?” he said.

Ronyo nodded. “I, uh... had to make peace with that. And...” They took yet another breath.

Richard just waited, watching the steam rise from their mugs.

“I think I might be both?” Ronyo blurted. “It’s more ‘both’ than ‘neither.’ Maybe fluid? I don’t kn—”

Richard held up a hand. “You’re non-binary?” he said.

Ronyo gulped and nodded. “Some flavor of that, yeah,” they said quietly. “They/them, if that’s alright.”

“Of course it’s alright,” Richard said with a smile.

Ronyo smiled and tentatively took a sip of their tea. They closed their eyes and set their mug down gently. “That’s good stuff,” they breathed. They looked back to Richard. “Thanks for this,” they said.

Richard lifted his own mug to his mouth. “Of course.”

“Not just the tea,” Ronyo continued. “*This*. The whole Lighthouse, oasis, way station, place you’re building. It’s important.” They chuckled. “So thanks. And thanks for letting me help.”

“You’re very welcome,” Richard said. He glanced down behind the bar and smiled. “And you know what else will help?”

He put the empty tea box on the bar. “Those were the last two. Can you order some more?”

Ronyo picked up the box and got up. “Procurement and I.T. at your service,” they said with a chuckle.



The Lighthouse crew will return.

Last we left off...

Over a decade ago, you found two other people in your head: **Eutychia** and **Alec**; to the three of you, you are **Red**, **Green**, and **Blue**. You see and hear everything each other do, but you're each in separate worlds with no way to travel to them. Except you recently met someone from **The Lighthouse** that may be able to help with that...

An Invitation

Red takes another bite of their pita as they look out on the freshly planted field. Well... half-planted. They wipe a bit of spread off the side of their mouth and consider what's left to do. You idly wonder, not for the first time, the logistics of a faun eating *goat cheese*.

"Hey," Red growls playfully. "We're all made out of meat," they answer.

Meanwhile Green is stacking boxes and counting the minutes before their lunch break. They fluff their feathers and try to ignore the grumbling in their stomach.

As Red leans against the fence, their newly-engaged nephew trots up. "Zizi Euty?" he says.

"Hey, Marcus," Red says, balancing back onto their hooves. "What brings you here?"

Marcus tapped their hooves nervously. "So, you found a way to Green and Blue?"

Red humms. "Maybe. Jordan found someone in their world that's been to ours. So we actually have a way forward, but there's a ways to go still."

"Oh," he says, and his face falls a bit. "Do you know..." He shrugs. "I guess you can't know how long it'll take."

"Sorry, Marcus," Red says with a friendly grimace.

Green shoves a box into place with a little more force than necessary. One of their coworkers glances at them, but no one says anything.

You pull out your phone and pull up the text message thread:

The Lighthouse

Hi, Jordan! This is Courtney at the Lighthouse. We've heard back from our contact in Melodia, and they've got someone looking into your situation.

That's great news! Do you know when we'll hear from them?

Afraid not. But we did pass on everything you gave Richard, including the maps and code words.

Good to know. We'll be on the lookout. Let me know if we can do anything to help.

Red blinks as they also see the texts. "But it sounds like things are in motion," they say to Marcus. "So who knows?"

Marcus nods. "I guess... are we talking months or years?"

Red shrugs again. "Don't know. My guess is if we hear something in a week, then months. Otherwise..."

"Yeah," Marcus says. "It's just... Dio and I are trying to nail down a date."

Red smiles sadly. "Oh, Marcus," they say. "Don't put your day off on our account."

Marcus shakes his head and smiles slightly. "I mean, I want the whole family there."

The sentiment touches you, and you find yourself tearing up. Red too. Green—

Green has abandoned their workspace and is darting towards the bathroom. Someone says something to them, they yell back that they're about to be sick.

Red must be reacting, because Marcus starts explaining. "So if there's a chance Green and Blue can make it—"

Red shakes their head and blinks back some tears of their own. "They got it," they say.

Green folds themselves into the cramped bathroom, slam the door shut, lock it...

And they're sobbing. Crying with such intensity they're almost dry-heaving. Your head is flooded with images of distant parents, broken relationships, cold interactions where you kept hoping for a warm nest,

never sure if you were doing something wrong or if you were just never going to be enough...

It's an old wound, one that doesn't re-open often, but when it does, it's deep. You try to comfort Green as best you can from here.

Red winces and takes a shaky breath of their own.

Marcus looks concerned. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have—"

Green's emotions surge higher, and they spur Red into action. They lunge forward and hug Marcus. Fiercely.

He quickly returns the hug and gently holds Red as they cry into his hair. "Thank you," they say.

"Of course," Marcus says earnestly.

"Marcus," Red says as they pull back and look him in the eye, willing him to understand the significance of his offer. "Green—Alec—doesn't have much of a family. So you wanting them to be here means a lot."

You see Marcus blush and shy away with a smile. "I mean," he says, "they are, right? Family, I mean."

"Yeah," Red says. "They are."

The Lightbringers will return.



Ask the Lighthouse

The Lighthouse Crew—

*Who was responsible for deciding which Earth got to be
'Vanilla Earth'?*

—Coda

Richard, here. And I'd like to know who *exactly* called it that. Because I'd like to have words with them. Was it Ronyo? I bet it was Ronyo.

To actually answer your question, we don't really have a formal list of which world is called what. As things expand (and especially as we find more similarly-named worlds) that'll likely change. Probably sooner rather than later.

Seriously? *Vanilla* is what they came up with?

Ask your question at wndfx.link/ask

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