

Nowhereverse Tales



#20

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



Some things are constants. The eternal struggle (or balance) of life and death. The rising and setting of the sun. The insistence of governments on collecting their taxes.

And, as Justine learns today, some cultural touchstones have aggressively ordinary origins.

Content Note: Blue wishes to apologize for the language in their story this issue. In their defense, it's Mario Kart. <<https://xkcd.com/290/>>

—Ronyo

Universal Constants

Justine returns to the Lighthouse kitchen and learns some things are just universal.

Rated General

A Game Night

The three of you spend time with your siblings.

Rated Mature: foreign thoughts, Mario Kart, pervasive coarse language

Last we left off...

A while back, a joint space colony from a human world and their galactic neighbors **Guldor** was collapsing and escaped to **The Lighthouse**. To deal with the influx, up-and-coming chef **Justine** was brought on for the week to help feed the new arrivals. She was offered the full-time job then, but only accepted this past week. Now she's heading back to the kitchen she helped build...

Universal Constants

The mess hall kitchen hadn't changed much since Justine was here a year ago, and that wasn't a bad thing.

She walked along a couple of the prep areas. The makeshift tables had been replaced with real stainless steel, complete with indentations for holding containers for *mise en place*. And they looked to be well-cleaned. Good. She could see the old tables—rough but sturdy—pressed against the wall and suffering the fate of all nondescript flat surfaces: covered in things without their own place.

She turned around to inspect the burners and griddle. A little worse for the wear, but they seemed to have held up well enough. The ovens, however, were new. And upgraded! And... on?

The door slammed open. Justine spun and found herself eye-to-eye with a wide-eyed teenager with pale green skin and faintly glowing green eyes.

Right. Not on earth anymore. Here in the kitchen that was almost too easy to forget. Almost.

Justine motioned over her shoulder to the ovens. "Yours?"

The teenager nodded silently, mouth still hanging open.

Justine stepped out of the way and motioned to the ovens.

The teenager blinked. "Right," he said and dashed over to the oven. He flipped the oven light on, nodded in satisfaction, then turned the oven off. A moment later a tray with four biscuits landed on one of the prep tables with a clatter. He took a knife and cut into one of the biscuits.

He looked at it for a moment before dropping the knife and sighing. "Nope," he groaned. He looked up at Justine who was watching with a half-smile. "Don't suppose you know how to make 'biscuits'?"

Justine stepped closer and took one look at the biscuits on the tray. “Did you use cold butter?”

The teenager blinked. “No,” he said, unsure of himself. “No, I melted it so it would mix better.”

Justine grimaced and nodded. “Yeah, the butter’s gotta be cold. That way it heats up in the oven and creates the flakiness you’re looking for.”

The teenager looked at her for a moment before closing his eyes. “You’re the new chef, aren’t you?” he said, resigned.

Justine nodded. “What’s your name?”

“Matthias,” he said, then added with a weak smile, “Call me Matt.” He took a deep breath. “I was hoping to get a job here?”

Justine frowned. “I haven’t talked to the proprietor about hiring yet.”

Matt shook his head. “I asked him; he said it was up to you. Really, I just want to learn.” He picked up the failed biscuit. “And I’ve got a lot to learn.”

Justine gave him a once-over glance before holding out her hand. “The name’s Justine,” she said. Matt shook her hand firmly, and she answered with a solid grip of her own. “But *you* can call me Chef.”

Matt smiled. “Yes, Chef.”

They broke the handshake. “Okay, go wash up, and I’ll show you how to cut in the butter.”

“So let me make sure I remember correctly,” Justine said as she and Matt watched the latest batch of biscuits. “Y’all are called ‘Guldorians’?”

Matt nodded, but he made a face. “I guess? I’d prefer to say that we’re ‘earthlings,’ but...”

“But we *both* call our home planet ‘earth,’” Justine finished. “I knew there was some twist I was forgetting.”

“Anyway,” Matt said, “‘Guldorian’ is more of a nationality, except it isn’t—Guldor’s not a single country, and...” He threw his hands up. “It was just the easiest word to use back at the joint colony.”

“The joint colony with the humans?”

Matt rolled his head toward Justine. “You see, Chef,” he drawled, “the thing about *that* word...”

Justine met his gaze. “Y’all are called ‘humans’ too?”

“Yup.”

Justine sighed and went back to watching the biscuits rise. “This was not how I pictured meeting aliens,” she mumbled theatrically.

“Same, Chef,” Matt said.

A moment passed before the penny dropped in Justine’s head. “Wait,” she said, “so what *did* you call the hu—the people that looked like me?”

“Pangeans?” Matt said.

Justine walked back into the kitchen, a lump of fabric draped over an arm, to see that the pile of green peppers was halfway down, Matt chopping away diligently at his station. She walked over to the other side of the table from him. "How's it going, Matt?"

Matt glanced up, not stopping his prep work. "Going well, Chef." He tossed another core in the trash and slid the cut pepper into a container. He reached for another before Justine motioned for him to stop.

"What's your shirt size?" she asked.

Matt shrugged. "I usually get large, why?"

Justine grimaced. "Well, I got you medium." She took another glance at his baggy shirt and lanky arms. "But I have a hunch it'll fit," she added.

Matt cocked his head in confusion, but walked around the table to see Justine holding out a plain white chef jacket.

His jaw dropped. "That's mine?"

Justine smiled. "It's been a week. You've been showing up on-time, keeping your station clean, and doing the work. So you get the uniform."

Matt beamed. "Thanks Chef," he said with a smile that couldn't seem to go down. He reached out but pulled his hands back at the last second before touching the jacket. "Wait, my hands are clean."

"Good eye," Justine said. "But I want you wearing this more than I want you to keep working. Just don't forget to wash your hands after."

Matt's smile turned a little sheepish but still didn't fade. "Yes, Chef," he said. He took the jacket carefully and walked briskly towards the back where the break room and staff restrooms were.

Justine plopped down in the seat across from Matt, a fresh red stain traveling down the left side of her jacket. "How's it going?"

Matt looked up from his dinner—a plate of the night's fried rice special—and spotted the stain. "Uh," he fumbled, "can't complain, I guess."

Justine followed his gaze. "Oh, this?" she said, lifting her arm up to get a better view of the stain. "Haven't you heard? I like to throw tomato sauce at myself every once in a while. Keeps me on my toes." She looked back with an easy smile. "Seriously, Matt; how are you?"

Matt shrugged. "I'm seriously okay, Chef." He took another bite.

Justine didn't move. "What are you doing here?" she asked, her voice quiet.

Matt's mouth was full, but he cocked his head. He looked pointedly down at his plate and back up.

Justine shook her head. “I mean *here*. You’re technically an adult but still a teenager. Why do you want to work in a mess hall kitchen in the middle of nowhere?”

Matt nodded. He swallowed his food and took a moment to compose himself. “You were here a year ago?”

“Yeah,” Justine said. “They brought me in to crash-course the kitchen because they were getting a bunch of displaced...” Her eyes widened for a moment. “But I’m guessing you know about that.”

Matt nodded, a wry smile on his face. “Not a great time for us,” he said. “My family knew what we were getting into, but having to get evacuated still sucks.” He closed his eyes and shook off the memories. “But this place—what do we even call this anyway?” He gestured broadly at their surroundings. “Is it a base? A hotel?”

Justine shrugged. “I’ve been calling it a hotel back home,” she said. “But in my head it’s a space station.”

Matt glanced around and nodded. “Space station works. Anyway!” He took a breath. “This whole place made evacuating suck less. A lot less. They gave us shelter, food—safety, really.” He sighed, still smiling. “So when we got the clearance to go back home, I didn’t take it. Wanted to...” He shrugged. “Wanted to help out here where I could, try to pay it forward—” He smirked. “And maybe learn to actually make some food for once.”

Justine chuckled. “You’re definitely learning.”

Matt heaved the plastic container onto the prep table. It was filled to the brim with small red-and-blue nuts. “Special delivery,” he said.

Justine’s jaw dropped. “That fu—what was it called?”

“Magic. Fruit,” Matt said, giving it his most teenager-y eye roll yet. “There’s another name, but that’s the literal translation.”

Justine didn’t take her eyes off the container. “Why do we have a box-full?”

“Because I went to the supply store when I went home last week.” He patted the box. “I, um...”

Justine finally tore her gaze off to see Matt looking down and shuffling his feet.

“Do you have the recipe you used?” he said quietly. “When you were here before?”

Justine patted her jacket reflexively before walking briskly back to the break room. She returned a moment later with a well-worn notebook.

“If I do,” she said, thumbing through the pages, “it’ll be in here—got it.”

Matt's face lit up. He craned his neck to look, but Justine pulled the notebook back against her chest.

"Hold on just a second," she said with a smirk. "I improvised this thing on the fly at the end of a very long week."

"I know, I just—" Matt shrugged, still smiling. "I really want that recipe, Chef."

Justine narrowed her eyes. She glanced down at her notebook and back to Matt. "Do you have a more authentic one?"

Matt quickly spun the box. Printed on the back label was a recipe with ingredients and measurements Justine had never seen before.

"I'll be happy to translate for you, Chef," he said, "but I literally asked my grandmother, and she pointed at this one."

Justine chortled which turned into a full-blown laugh. "Wow," she said, "some things really are universal." At Matt's confused look, she continued. "My grandmother makes the best chocolate chip cookies... using the recipe from the bag of chocolate chips."

Matt closed his eyes and chuckled.

Two chicken-and-rice dishes sat side by side, each with a purple sauce drizzled on top. One was more pale, the other slightly thicker.

"The thing is," Justine said, taking another bite with the thicker sauce, "even if it comes from a soulless corporation, it's still culture. It's still part of people's memories and experiences."

"Yeah," Matt said, putting his fork on a paper towel next to the pale sauced dish. "I just wish it wasn't so *much* of my culture, you know?"

Justine rolled her eyes. "You and me both." She pointed her fork at the thicker sauce. "But I do like this one better. The flavors are bolder, and I think it adds to the dish more."

"That's fair," Matt said. "I still like yours better, though."

Justine narrowed her eyes. "Kid," she growled, "I spent five years at my last job sucking up to my boss, and it *still* got me nowhere. I'm not about to pull the same crap here."

Matt held up his hands. "I do, honest!" He gave a weak smile. "It just speaks to me more."

Justine closed her eyes as she connected the dots. "Because that's the sauce I made a year ago," she said quietly.

"Like I said," Matt said with a nod, "we felt safe."

Justine nodded silently, her eyes still closed. She took a slow, shuddering breath and opened her eyes back up, a bit of moisture gathered on the sides.

Matt's eyes went wide in panic. "Are you okay, Chef?"

"Yeah," Justine whispered with a nod. She cleared her throat and said at a more normal volume, "Yeah, Matt. I'm good."

Matt nodded back. “Plus, I don’t always want to get kicked in the face by my food,” he added hastily.

Justine chuckled and shook her head. “Thanks, Matt,” she said quietly.

Matt smiled weakly and blushed. “So, uh...” He looked around. “What’re we making tonight?”



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**. While you may never be together physically, you're determined to bring light to your respective worlds.

A Game Night

You resist the urge to smash your controller on the ground; you don't have that kind of money. "Fucking blue shells," you growl.

"Why didn't you use your boombox?" your sister says.

"Blue shells fly," you shoot back.

"Yeah," she says, "but the boombox can block them if you time it right?"

"How the fuck does that work?"

"It's on YouTube, Captain," your brother says from your other side. He turns to you and smirks. "Git gud, scrub."

"Oh, fuck off," you grouse. You take a sip of your drink and calm yourself. "Language aside," you say, "thanks for stopping by."

"Thanks for dinner," your sister answers, and your brother hums in agreement.

"Of course," you say. "I'm just glad I was on your way."

"Eh, it's a bit of a detour," your brother says as the next race starts. "But *you* are worth it."

This one is much less contentious: your sister beats the two of you, and it's not even close. The three of you take a moment before starting the next one.

"So," your brother says, "have you told Mom and Dad about the multiverse?"

You shove down a spike of guilt. "No," you say. "The first conversation-slash-apology when I actually told them about Alec and Euty was tenuous enough. I feel like it's going to be easier to get if I can tell them *when* I'm leaving, or even just that I am."

"You don't know that yet?" your sister says. "I'm honestly surprised you haven't dropped everything already."

You shake your head. “From what the people I met told me, they *might* know where Euty is, but they definitely have no idea where Alec is. And it doesn’t feel right for two of us to be together without the third.”

Red and Green silently affirm the statement. It had been a conversation reminiscent of your very early discussions around hookups, but with an extra ten years of emotional maturity. All of you were willing for the other two to be together without you, but none of you actually wanted that to happen.

“We’re gonna see how long it takes to find Alec,” you finish. “Once things get real, then I’ll...” You sigh. “That conversation’s gonna suck no matter what.”

“You don’t know that,” your sister says. “Hey, I’m going to see my friends that I haven’t met in person yet’ feels like an easier sell than ‘Hey, I hear voices but they’re cool.’”

You glare at her. “Thank you for summing that up for me,” you say.

She smirks. “Anytime.” She shifts in her seat. “But seriously, what are you looking forward to when you do get together?”

You look at your controller. “I’m gonna introduce them to Mario Kart.”

“How would that work?” she blurts out. “Do they even have video games?”

You laugh. “Have I not told you?” You look to either side to see your siblings shaking their heads. “Well, amazingly enough, everyone’s having a game night. Red’s got one old TV in the house—CRT, rabbit ears, all that—and they’re taking turns on a platformer.”

“Like *Mario 64*?”

“Like *Mario Brothers*.”

“That’s where all the good Sonic games are, anyway,” your brother mumbles.

“Debatable but beside the point,” you say. “Anyway, Green’s playing *Fortnite* with their brother.”

“Actually *Fortnite*?”

“Free-to-play third-person shooter with lots of cosmetics and predatory currency pricing?”

He blinks. “Shit, that’s *Fortnite*.”

“Of course, the gameplay is more like *Star Fox* since, you know, they fly.”

“And you want to play *Mario Kart* with them?” your sister says, incredulous.

You motion at the screen. “It’s a fun game!”

“You complain when I look at your screen,” she shoots back.

“Yeah, so?”

“So how are you going to play with them when they can see your *actual brain*?”

“What, because they know everything I’m going to do?” You smirk. “But that’s not going to help them, since I know everything they’re going to do.”

You turn to your brother and add, “Strange, isn’t it?”

“Fuck you,” he says with a smile of his own.

“So,” Green’s brother says into their headset, “you gonna tell the progenitors about the multiverse?”

Green fiddles with their controller. “Dropped a sniper for you,” they say. “And no, I’m not.”

“Any particular reason?”

“You think I should?”

“I don’t, actually, but I want to know why you’re not.”

Green snorts. It’s a very dragon-like snort. “I don’t need another reason for them to be disappointed in me.”

“They shouldn’t be,” their brother says. “Doesn’t mean they won’t, though. I’ve got wingbeats.”

Green gingerly looks around. “Two of them,” they say, “and they’ve already passed us. Yeah, they’d probably just key in on me leaving my life behind ‘for love.’” They sigh. “Not that they care about this life anyway.”

There’s a tense silence in the chat. “I’m sorry about the job stuff,” their brother says quietly. “I’d refer you to my boss, but—”

“But I’m too honest for your line of work,” Green finishes.

“Hey, now; sales isn’t all fluff and lies,” he says with a rehearsed mock offense. “Just mostly.”

The two of them chuckle at the well-worn joke. “I appreciate the thought, though,” Green says.

They play the game for a bit before their brother says, “How much have you told them so far?”

Green sighs. “Just the bit ten years ago about being in a long-distance relationship. They didn’t seem to care then, and they haven’t asked since.”

“Oh,” their brother says. “So you never told them about the... the mind thing?”

“No.” Green’s statement is flat and final.

“Yeah, probably smart,” he says. “Best case, they humor you.”

“That’s basically how they reacted to what I *did* tell them.”

“Yeah... that’s how I reacted too.”

“Yeah,” Green says, “but you actually followed up, asked questions.” They sigh. “You actually cared, and that means a lot to me.”

“Of course,” their brother says, and you can hear the sincerity in it.

Green sees something on their screen and drops a pin the arena map. “Storm’s closing,” they say. “Wanna go here?”

“Okay,” Red’s sister says, “are you as tired of Mom’s fussing over you as I am?”

“Hey, go easy on her,” Red says. “She’s just afraid I’m going to move out tomorrow.”

“Are you?”

“No!”

“Haven’t we already beat this game?” their youngest brother says from the floor.

“No one’s making you play, bleater,” their sister snarks.

“He’s got a point, though,” Red says. “Why *are* we playing this one?”

“I thought you said you found a new level?”

“What? No—” They fished into their bag next to the couch and pulled out a game cartridge with a handwritten sticker on it. “No, I found a hacked version at the market this week.”

“Sweet!” their brother yelled, the current game forgotten. “Is it going to devour our souls and send us to an infinite digital purgatory with no escape?”

“One, no, that only happens in books,” their sister says, holding up a finger. “And two, what is *wrong* with you?”

“I crave the sweet release of death,” he says quietly and entirely unseriously.

Their sister throws a pillow at him

With a sigh, Red gets up and switches the game out.

“Hey, that isn’t going to dud the console, is it?” their brother says, actually serious. “Cause I don’t think they make parts for it anymore.”

“Relax,” Red says, picking up the controller and sitting on the floor, their back against the couch. “People on Jordan’s world do this all the time.”

“Yeah? So they can get us a new one if this one breaks?”

Red winces, but they’ve already turned the console on. The title screen is identical to the previous game, except the colors on the game title are inverted.

“Creepy,” their sister says.

The game proceeds to the opening cinematic, exactly the same as the original... except for the massive amounts of enemies and traps now barely missing the player character.

“Oh, boy...” Red’s brother says.

.....

A world away, you're cackling on your couch.

"What is it now?" your sister asks. She and your brother are gathering their stuff and getting ready to head out.

"Red bought a hacked cartridge at a flea market," you say. You make eye contact with each of your siblings. "I think it's a Kaizo hack."

Your sister whistles. Your brother furrows his brow. "What, like it's a hard one?"

"Try 'impossible,'" your sister says as you nod. "Like professionals have a hard time with it."

An hour passes. And another. And another.

Red's sister has long since gone to bed. They and their brother have been taking turns trying to beat the first level. By unspoken agreement, they aren't giving up. Not yet.

You're on your couch idly scrolling your phone. Green is solving and re-solving a Rubik's Cube-like puzzle. You know better than to try to sleep when one of you is this locked-in.

Red's brother sits back after another failed attempt but doesn't hand over the controller. He's staring at nothing, his head still pointed at the small television but not seeing it.

Red notices this. "You okay?" they say.

Their brother blinks. "Can you take me with you?" they say, their voice quiet, barely audible over the game's background music.

"What?" Red breathes, but you quickly connect the dots. "You mean if we find a way to each other?"

He turns his stare on you. Technically just Red, but you can tell it's meant for all of you. "No if. When. Don't *fuckin*g pretend that it's not going to happen."

It's not the first time you've heard English words out of a faun's mouth, but it's enough to surprise you. "How do you know that word?" Red says.

And how does he know how to use it *correctly*? Green adds.

"I've listened to you work on your truck," he says. "But yeah, I wanna go with you. Not like I'm needed here."

Red doesn't bite. "You went to university, Kassandros."

"So did Simon," he retorts, "except he actually studied something that's useful here."

Red takes a breath. "It's too late and my words aren't working," they say. "Can I ask something blunt?"

Their brother turns back to the TV. "I think I know, so yeah."

"Why'd you come back? Why didn't you get a job in Philippi? Hell, why didn't you try for something in Melodia?"

He doesn't look at them. "There weren't any Melodians recruiting at my school, amazingly enough," he snarks. "And I..."

He closes his eyes and takes a breath. "I didn't want to move away from you."

You feel the punch to Red's gut. They're close to their brother, but this was a genuine surprise. "Why not?"

He turns back to Red. "Come on, Euty," he says. "You've been there for me my whole life. I can't imagine a good life without you in it." He shakes his head. "I said I didn't want to move away from the family, and I meant it."

Red smiles sadly. "But you really mean me." They shift in their seat. "I don't know what things are going to look like. I won't know for a while."

He nods. "I get that. I'm not saying I want to move in with you—I'm assuming you're going to be honeymooning for a while—"

"Or fighting," Red says quietly. At their brother's concerned face, they add, "It's gonna be the first time we're in the same physical space; we'd be fools not to think there's going to be some rough spots."

"Oh," he says. He shakes his head. "But even so, there's got to be other places nearby wherever you'll be, right?"

Red shrugs. "I really don't know, Kass." They sigh. "But if you can tell me what you want, we can try to make it happen."

He nods. "I don't want to just see you around the holidays; I want to have the three of you over for dinner on a Tuesday. I want to be able to go to a show or see a movie with you on a random weekend. And if we're lucky, I want to stay up late with you trying to beat a video game from hell!"

He sighs. "I want to have a life with the people I love." He opens his mouth to say more, but he stops, his eyes wide. "And I mean in like a sibling way, so we're clear."

There's a flash of disappointment from Red that they can't tell the joke they're thinking of. "We're clear," they say out loud. In your head, they add, But if we were drinking stale coffee during a sunrise, I'd have questions.



The Lightbringers will return

Ask the Lighthouse

Celeste—

Did you figure out that trick to return to your original form yourself? Does anyone else know about it?

—Coda

I did! I kind of stumbled into it by accident. Since I had keyed the lock to the feeling—the memory, really—of that first moment, I was already trying to recapture that feeling, but this time as a snow leopard. It was only a step or two away from what it took to do it for real. And it's not just your original form; it works for anything you've become through the portals, so long as there are strong enough memories to support it.

But no, no one else knows.

...I need to fix that. Maybe once I get the nerve to show my face back at The Lighthouse.

Ask your question at wndfx.link/ask

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