

Nowhereverse Tales



#22

AGES 13+

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



We are who we are, retroactive cosmic interventions included. We're reactions and impulses and desires oscillating between vice and virtue day by day—sometimes minute-by-minute! And we're constantly evolving, small changes adding up to larger ones.

And then sometimes there's a big change all at once. It's me, hi.

—Ronyo

Best Laid Plans

Ronyo is assembling merchandise from all over the multiverse, but why? And will they get in their own way again?

Rated Teen

A Goodbye

Celeste, despite her best efforts, brings some changes to Red's farm.

Rated Teen: family drama

Last we left off...

Ronyo runs procurement and I.T. for **The Lighthouse**, at least in theory. They recently went through a literal journey of self-discovery where they met **Lalaith**, gained phenomenal cosmic powers, and were retroactively named “Ronyo,” their previous name being lost. Now they’re setting out to fulfill their mission: to “make this a multiverse worth reading.”

Best Laid Plans

Ronyo cut the electric engine and hopped out of the small pickup truck. “Handles like a dream, Dana,” they called as they carefully set the keys back on a nearby hook.

“Did it actually?” Dana answered from the other side of the truck. “Or did you use your new magic stuff on it?”

Ronyo turned around to face the naga, their fox ears flat against their otherwise-human skull. “Why would you think that?” they said.

Dana raised an eyebrow. “Look me in the eye and tell me you’re not using it every chance you get.”

Ronyo rolled their eyes before looking back at her. “I don’t use it every chance I—No touchy!”

In a flash, they appeared between Dana and the cardboard boxes in the truck bed, their mostly-human appearance traded for a three-foot-tall anthropomorphic fox hovering in place with their arms outstretched and their three tails curled around the nearest box protectively. “No touchy,” they said.

Dana backed away but sat back on her tail with a smug smile, both sets of arms crossed.

“You were about to touch something dangerous!” Ronyo protested.

Dana cocked her head and motioned to continue with one hand.

Ronyo sighed. “Yes, I use it every chance I get.” Their face lit up. “I mean, I get to be a literal flying fox, how cool is that? And don’t tell me you wouldn’t if you had powers like this.”

Dana smirked. “Never said I wouldn’t, kid,” she said. She held out a fist; Ronyo twisted themselves around and bumped it with a tail.

“Now,” she said, “what’s so dangerous that I shouldn’t even touch the box that it’s in?”

“Oh, you name it,” Ronyo said with a manic grin. “Cursed artifacts, magical reagents from three different worlds, mad science chemicals from a few others, and some IKEA shelves.”

Dana’s eyes narrowed. “And you brought this into my garage because...?”

Ronyo cocked their head. “So I could return the truck?”

“If it’s too dangerous to touch, how are you getting it out of here?”

“Oh that?” Ronyo relaxed into an easy smile. “I’ll teleport it in a second.”

Dana sighed dramatically. “Again with the magic?”

Ronyo shrugged. “That’s not even the best part.” At Dana’s quizzical look, they added, “It’s the shapeshifting.”

“For you, maybe,” Dana said, slithering back to her workbench. “I like myself just the way I am, thanks.”

“Really?” Ronyo said with a predatory grin. “Cause I’ve seen you as a human more lately.”

“I was helping Justine move in, thank you very much.” She made eye contact with them. “I know you do the fan-fiction thing; don’t get any ideas.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Ronyo said, crossing two of their tails behind their back. “I’m glad you two are friends, really.”

Dana held their gaze for a second before nodding. “How are you doing, kid?”

Ronyo sat down on the edge of the truck bed. “Fine, I think. Why?”

“You were having a rough go of it for a while, there,” she said. “Ever since...”

Ronyo nodded. “Since that first surprise shifting where I was suddenly a *kitsune*?” They sighed. “Yeah, I was excited at first but... yeah, it did throw me for a loop.”

Dana smiled gently. “But the shapeshifting is your favorite part?”

“Totally! There’s a difference between choosing to be in a different body and *finding yourself* in a different body. Case in point—”

Ronyo hovered into the air for a moment before twisting around themselves in mid-air. In a flash of light they went from a three-foot-tall fox to a twelve-foot-long naga like Dana, though with blue scales and grey scutes.

They flexed their four arms slightly, looking at each one in turn. “Okay, yeah,” they mused, “I see why you like this so much.”

Dana slithered over to them and brought the end of her tail over the end of Ronyo’s. “Nice dye job,” she said.

Ronyo scratched the back of their head. “Yeah, the colors tend to be the same no matter what,” they said.

Dana shook her head and whistled. After a moment, she took Ronyo's lower hands in hers. "Seriously, though, you're okay?"

Ronyo smiled softly. "Yeah, I am," they said. "That first shift made me question a lot about who I was—"

"Bet Celeste didn't help you there," Dana grouched.

Ronyo swallowed thickly. "Not really, no," they said quietly, almost too quietly for Dana to hear. They shook their head. "But I got some answers," they continued. "Answers a lot of people don't get."

"Good answers?"

Ronyo grinned. "Very good."

"Good." Dana nodded. "Then get this shit out of my garage."

"Yes, ma'am," Ronyo said. In a flash they were a flying fox again. They hovered over the boxes and concentrated for a moment before they and the boxes disappeared in another flash.

Ronyo appeared in a small warehouse with the newly-acquired goods and immediately set to work sorting them into place alongside the existing merchandise.

"Now, Chat," they said as they pulled out a glass tube with glowing green goo inside, "you might be wondering why I took a truck to several different worlds." They carefully set the tube on some egg crate foam and went back for more. "After all," they said, "if I've got to come back through Nowhere to get to another world, why not drop stuff off each time? And the answer is actually quite simple."

They looked up with a flat-lidded stare. "Don't think too hard about it."

They finished with one box and opened another to see a pink ermine lying on top of the contents. "Hi, Ronyo!" she said in a high-pitched voice.

Ronyo couldn't help but smile. "Hey, Lalaith," they said. "Was wondering when you'd show up."

"You know me," she said as she flew out of the box and started hovering across from Ronyo. "So, you're going with the 'mysterious shopkeeper' trope?"

"It is one of my favorites," Ronyo said as they resumed unpacking. "Especially the part where you don't necessarily get what you want, but you always get what you need." They shrugged and grinned. "That and I'm a fox; I figure I should at least try to be a trickster god."

Lalaith grimaced. "Are you sure about that?"

Ronyo's face fell. "You don't think I can do it?"

Lalaith flew over, took Ronyo's head in her hands, and stared into their eyes. "If it's really what you want—I mean *really* really really what you want to do, then I'll help..."

“But?”

“You’re too nice.”

Ronyo’s brow furrowed. “Tricksters can be nice.”

“Tricksters can be *good*. The best ones are. But they’re also unpredictable, they do things to you without asking, they make fun of you...”

Ronyo sighed. “They’re mean.”

“They kinda are.” She leaned forward and rested her forehead against Ronyo’s. “I’m sorry, friend.”

“It’s okay,” they said. They took a breath and let it out slowly. “Okay, so putting ‘trickster’ on a shelf for later.”

They pulled back from Lalaith. “Well, while we’re at it,” they said with a weak smile, “any chance you can teach me about hammerspace?”

Lalaith lit up. “Abso-tutely-lutely!” she said, beaming. “You got a golf ball in here?”

Ronyo’s tails drooped. “A golf ball?”

“A spool of thread? A thumb drive?” She held her paws in front of her. “You know, something small.”

Ronyo glanced around the room. “Yeah, probably...” they said weakly.

Lalaith’s smile fell. “You... you weren’t counting on putting all of this in your hammerspace, right?”

Ronyo deliberately didn’t make eye contact.

Lalaith sighed and pulled Ronyo into a full hug. “I’m sorry,” she said, “I feel like I’m pooping on all your ideas like a Poopy McPoopypants.”

Ronyo stayed still for a moment before they returned the hug. “Shit, I forgot how good you are at hugging.” They sighed. “It’s not your fault; I *know* it’s not your fault. My brain’s just getting ahead of me in fifteen different ways.”

Lalaith tapped the top of Ronyo’s head. “Your brain’s different now, foxie,” she said gently. “Your *everything* is different now. You ascended, evolved, apotheosi-whatevered.”

Ronyo chuckled and ducked their head under Lalaith’s chin. “I thought it was supposed to make me better.”

“It made you more *you*,” she said. “And that includes your enthusiasm. You just need to pace yourself.”

Ronyo hugged her tighter. “I just feel like I can *do* things for the first time since... ever! And if I slow down I’ll just... stop like I always do.”

Lalaith pulled back and tapped Ronyo on the nose. “That’s what friends are for, foxie.”

Ronyo smiled slightly. “How’d you get so wise?”

Lalaith rolled her eyes and smiled. “That ‘happily ever after’ you wrote had me living for a couple thousand years, remember? Plus I had some great friends.”

“Your very best friends?”

“The best-est, most special-est friends ever. And now I get to make new ones! Like you.”

“And Justine?”

“And Justine! Garlic and ginger, she’s amazing! She had this weird fruit she’d found and she was like ‘what do I do with this one’ and I said ‘cupcake’ because I love cupcakes and then she did some stuff with a blender and a whipped cream thingie and we made a *stuffed cupcake!*” Lalaith sighed dreamily. “She’s so cool.”

Ronyo chuckled and tapped her on the nose. “You’re cool, noodle.”

“I know.” She blinked. “Where were we?”

“Hammerspace?”

“Right!” She pulled out of the hug and reached behind her back. She felt around for a moment, her frown getting more and more pronounced as she did.

“Everything alright?” Ronyo said.

“Well,” she said, “turns out *my* everything is different too. I’m used to reaching into my hair, but I don’t have hair now, just fur.”

Ronyo nodded. “So it’s anchored to a particular place?”

“No, it just has to be off-camera. But going to the same place makes it easier to—got it!” She pulled her paw back to the front and handed a wrapped lollipop to Ronyo.

Ronyo unwrapped it and took a lick of the bright orange lollipop. “I don’t know what’s scarier,” they said. “That you made a macaroni and cheese lollipop, or that it *works.*”

“Why not both?” She pulled a red lollipop out and stuck it in her mouth. “Cherry pepper,” she explained. “But that’s the basics; we can work on the details later. For now...” She looked around at the warehouse. “What about a pocket dimension?”

Ronyo’s jaw dropped. “Shit, that’s it,” they said absently. “Wouldn’t have to set up and tear down, just open a door in whatever world I’m in and let people walk in.” They looked back at Lalaith. “Brilliant. How do I do that?”

“No idea!” she said with a smile. “I can’t do it. But I’m preeeeetty sure it’s a *kitsune* power. Maybe ask Jason?”

Ronyo snapped. “Right, the *kitsune* down in Charleston that told me to find some self-confidence.” They chuckled. “I should text them anyway, let them know what my actual name is now.”

They flew over to a table and picked up their phone. “Oh, sweet,” they yelled, “I’ve got a sale!”

Lalaith looked around. “You’re open? What about the hammerspace? The pocket dimension? Literally any kind of storefront?”

Ronyo held up their phone. “Online sales?”

Lalaith slapped her forehead and grumbled to herself. “Right,” she said, “forgot about that.”

“To be fair,” Ronyo said, floating back over, “it’s only in Monster Earth for now. There’s enough of a magic subculture that there’s a market for this kind of stuff. But eventually I’ll get the website in more universes. Which reminds me!”

They flew back to the table and dove into a leather satchel on the ground next to it. They returned holding a small black card and handed it to Lalaith. “Figured you’ll need this.”

Lalaith took it gingerly. “A black card?”

Ronyo nodded. “I opened a business account.” Their smile fell slightly. “If you don’t want to—”

“I do!” Lalaith said, maybe a little too loudly. She looked at the credit card, then back at Ronyo with a mischievous grin. “Cue the stinger.”



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've been living in different worlds since you met, but now **Celeste**, an elf from Red's world, hopes to bring you three together for the first time...

A Goodbye

It doesn't surprise you that Red's youngest brother, Kassandros, sees things differently. They'd gone to college and gotten a taste of the wider world, and everyone knew they weren't going to be a farmer.

You were a little surprised they were butting heads with Red's oldest brother, though. You would have thought it would have been their dad. But here he was, the older faun sitting patiently at the table while his oldest and youngest got into it.

Next to him was Celeste, the visiting elf who had been there a few days. Red sat on her other side. They leaned over to whisper something to her, but she held up a hand.

"Don't apologize," she whispered. "I'm learning a lot."

"Learning what?" Red said. "Dysfunctional family dynamics?"

"This is a *farm*, Kass!" the older brother bellowed. "We do things the way we do them for a reason!"

"All I did was talk to him," Kass shot back. "What's so wrong about that that you're treating me like I sold off my inheritance?"

"You might as well have!"

With a wordless grunt of frustration, Kass shoved his seat back and stormed away from the table.

To your—and Red's—surprise, Celeste follows him out and stops him before he gets too far. You don't hear much of what she says to him, but you can just make out the words "don't want to leave like this."

With a sigh Kass walks back to the table. He doesn't sit down, though Celeste slides back into her seat. Red searches her face for any clue of what might be going on; she doesn't make eye contact.

"Attikos," he says, leaning on the back of his chair, "what did I do wrong?"

Attikos stares down Kass. "You talked to a liar and a cheat. We don't do that."

“Why not?” Kass shakes his head. “All you know about him is he’s from Melodia. How do you know anything else about him if you won’t even talk to him?”

Attikos looks away. “I don’t expect you to understand,” he says.

“But you *want* to understand, right?” Red’s dad—Irenaeus—cuts in.

Kass holds up his hands. “Please,” he says.

Irenaeus nods. “Well, I can’t speak for your brother, but as the one whose name is on the deed to the farm—” He glances significantly at Attikos who shrinks back slightly. “—I have a few thoughts. But first, let me ask: did you promise the man anything?”

“No! I even told him I couldn’t.”

Attikos scoffs. When everyone looks at him, he motions to the brochure and contract on the table. “Why would he have given you that if you couldn’t sign it?”

“So I’d give it to someone that could,” Kass said, incredulous. “That’s what salespeople *do*.”

“But you didn’t misrepresent yourself or us, correct?” Red’s dad says, cutting off the argument.

Kass just nods quietly.

Irenaeus dips his head. “Then you haven’t *done* anything wrong.” A beat. “Though I see why Attikos is concerned.”

He settles into his seat and leans forward. “This is an offer for new equipment and a loan to pay for it, correct?” Nods from both sons. “We got a similar offer while you were away at school, Kass. We gave it due consideration but ultimately decided against it. We felt that the risks outweighed the potential benefits, both for the equipment itself and for the loan.

“Now, the equipment risks, I’m sure Euty could speak until dawn tomorrow about those, so I trust you understand those?”

Kass glances at Red, and they share a smile. “Yeah,” Kass says, “We can only do so much if it breaks, and when it does we have to order parts and service from them.”

“Really?” Their dad looks back at the brochure in surprise before turning to Attikos who is equally surprised. “That’s new.”

“Yeah, planned obsolescence,” Kass says. “Sacrifice margins on the equipment and make it up in service contracts. As soon as he mentioned ‘quality service’ I figured that was his angle. Even if I *could* sign this, I wouldn’t.” He glances at Attikos as he says that.

Irenaeus either doesn’t see it or chooses to ignore it. “So that’s the equipment. Do you know why we would have turned down the loan?”

Kass shrugs. “If the equipment isn’t worth it, why go into debt for it?”

Their dad shakes his head. “Even if it was for good equipment, we’d still be very hesitant to take a loan. Do you know why?”

“Other than not liking debt? No.”

“We don’t like debt, no,” Irenaeus says, “because it takes away our reasoned choice.”

He leans back in his seat. “We have a duty, not just to ourselves but to the land, to our neighbors; and the decisions we make reflect that. We rotate our crops to keep the land healthy. We hire more hands than we have to at harvest so that we don’t overwork anyone. We take less for ourselves so our relationships remain beneficial. That is the overarching reason we do things the way we do them.

“If we take this debt on, and we have a bad harvest, the best outcome is we lose the equipment.” He sighs. “But I do not think it would stop there.” He takes the contract and skims over it until he finds what he’s looking for.

He turns to Celeste. “Court Mage, if I may?” Celeste nods, and Irenaeus points to a particular line. “Does this mean what I think it means?”

Red looks over Celeste’s shoulder as she reads the section. The first line says, “This contract is signed, ratified, and agreed to outside of the Kingdom of Melodia, all citizenships of all parties not withstanding.”

Celeste hands the contract back. “It means they’re trying to sidestep Melodian law while still operating as a Melodian company. I don’t know that it actually does what they think it does, but their objective is usually to tie things up in the courts long enough for you to give up.”

Irenaeus nods and looks back to Kassandros. “I’m sure you can guess what would happen if we ran into trouble with them. They would tell us to only plant barley because that’s the most profitable. They would tell us to hire fewer hands at harvest to increase our profits. They would tell us to charge more for our goods and pay less for our costs, because they would only see money. Not the land, not the people.

“Do you understand now?” he finishes.

Kass takes a breath and nods slowly. “You can’t start a business relationship that risks losing the ability to run the farm the way you—the way it *needs* to be run.”

Irenaeus smiles. “Well put.” He turns to Celeste. “Unless I’m mistaken, we have a reputation here for taking care of ourselves, correct?”

Celeste nods. “That’s one way to put it, yes.”

The older faun chuckles. “What most outside of our borders don’t realize is that we take care of ourselves so that we can take care of each other. We teach our children this, instill it in everything we do.

And if all that fails, and someone decides to be selfish and enrich themselves at the expense of their neighbors?" His gentle smile grows firmer. "They will not be welcome here for long."

Kassandros pulls Red outside later that evening. He's nervous in all the subtle ways you and Red are used to. They get far enough away from the house, and Kass turns to Red.

He stops and starts a few times before finally saying, "I'm leaving with Celeste."

You're surprised. Red isn't, at least not as much as you. Green's curious what his angle is.

"Okay," Red says. "Any particular reason?"

"I'm sorry, were you not just there for that argument?" He gestures back to the house.

"One fight isn't a good reason to leave," Red counters.

He sighs and runs a hand through his hair, stopping to grab one of his horns. "It's not just the one fight," he says. "I snapped at Ma the other day. Pa's being patient but I can tell that's wearing a little thin. And Attikos straight up *does not trust me.*"

"Attikos isn't in charge."

"He's gonna be, and he won't let me forget it." He scoffs and shakes his head. "I mean, you heard him: he was so sure I'd said *something* to the salesman I shouldn't have. If I float an idea, he's immediately picking it apart. Anything I do he goes back and checks." He sighs. "I don't know what I did to piss him off."

Green thinks they know, and Red concurs. "He knows you aren't staying," they say. "You went to school for something other than farming; then you came back, but not to stay. He doesn't understand it, so..." They shrug. "Either way, it's not right."

"Yeah," Kass says. "So this way I have someone to travel with at least—unless you think I shouldn't?"

Red starts to answer but stops. The three of you consider: can you trust Celeste with Red's brother?

You've gotten a good vibe from her, but you also know you're a sucker for a good redemption story. Your vote is yes, but you want to hear from Green.

Green is definitely uneasy, given her history. Regardless of the outcome, she did fatally stab a princess. But she doesn't seem the type to murder someone on the highway. Exploit and blackmail, sure; but not murder. They vote yes, contingent on Red trusting Kass to take care of himself.

“You can take care of yourself,” Red says, answering Green’s question indirectly. “And having a traveling partner is good. You headed to Melodia?”

“Only by necessity,” Kass says, and he looks even more nervous now. “I’m thinking of going to Nowhere.”

You feel Red’s heart fill with pride and joy. “Is that what you want to do?”

Kass nods, and you see the smile tease at his face. “Yeah, yeah it is.” He looks back to Red. “Celeste says they’re always willing to take people in, especially if they can help. So I can start...” He shrugs. “Start getting things ready for you.”

His smile turns to a smirk. “And I imagine there’s a lot of creative uses for magitech that they have. Might actually put my degree to some use.”

Red can’t hold it in anymore. They jump forward and grab Kass in a tight hug, one he eagerly returns. “My little brother, setting out on his own,” they say. They tap him on the back, and the two separate. “Just let me know you got there okay.”

He nods. “Definitely. Not sure how, but I’ll figure something out.”

“And have you told Ma and Pa?”

Kass gets very still. “No...”

Red fixes him with A Look.

“...t yet?”

Red nods. “Good answer.” They shrug. “At least give Ma the chance to give you a going-away dinner.”

He smiles despite himself. “Yeah, you’re right. Wish there was a way I could tell them without tipping off Attikos...”

Red walks into their room and shuts the door. Celeste is sitting on the floor reading something obscure. Red sits across from them and just stares.

Celeste glances up but doesn’t make any other motion.

Red keeps staring.

Celeste turns a page.

Red keeps staring.

Celeste doesn’t look up. “So is this intimidation, barely concealed rage, or a secret third thing?”

Red shrugs. “Intimidation, I guess. Not that I’m expecting to actually intimidate you.”

Celeste nods but still doesn’t look up.

Red huffs. “I’m trusting you with one of the people I love most in this world. He’s an adult, he can handle himself, but he’s going with you. So I’m trusting you.”

Celeste nods and puts down her book. She meets Red's stare. "He approached me," she says.

"And I'm glad he did," Red says. "Seriously. And thank you for taking him."

Celeste smiles. "Of course," she says. "I could tell he was looking to get out. Is there..." She leans closer and lowers her voice. "Is there a reason he didn't just go somewhere else after he finished college?"

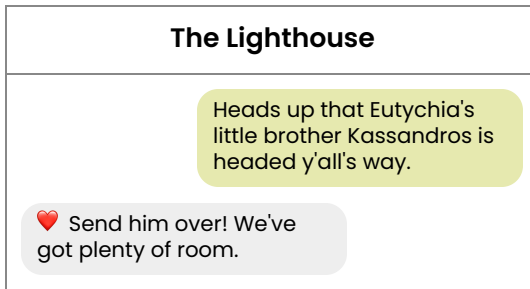
Red nods. "I think he needed one more push."

Celeste frowns. "It's not your brother, is it?"

Red shakes their head. "It's you." They lean forward. "You're here because someone at a Waffle House showed Jordan a picture of my truck." They shake their head. "I've been waiting for so long for the smallest spark of hope that I could see Alec and Jordan with my own eyes. You being here means it's happening. And you're going where I'll be going, so that's where Kass is going."

Celeste takes a deep breath and lets it out slowly. "Then I'll get him there safely."

Meanwhile, you get your phone out:



Ask the Lighthouse

The Lighthouse Crew—

What's everyone's first impressions of Lalaith?

—Coda

Justine here. She popped up in the kitchen already in an apron and a hair net, pulled out a mixing bowl half as big as she was, and proceeded to make a baker's dozen baker's dozen of cupcakes. One hundred sixty-nine cupcakes, fully frosted and everything. I have no idea how she fit them all in the *two* ovens we have, or where half her ingredients came from, but they were some damn good cupcakes.

But after I found her passed out in a pile of flower and nutmeg, I had to set some strict hours on her.

We now have a regular rotation of cupcakes on the menu, though.

Ask your question at wndfx.link/ask

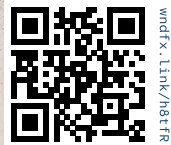
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