

Nowhereverse Tales



#24

AGES **13+**



wndfx.link/oz0JH

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

People can change. I think that's been made pretty obvious here, actually! Between having to navigate new bodies and new worlds, change is constant. It happens, and we adapt.

Sometimes the question isn't whether we can change. It's whether we even want to.

—Ronyo

Conflict Resolution

Celeste needs a ride to Human Earth, and Dana is only too happy to provide it. This will be the perfect chance for them to get to know each other better.

Rated Teen :

An Evening Walk

Sometimes you just need a quiet moment alone with each other.

Rated General :

Ask the Lighthouse

The Lighthouse Crew—

So Nowhere handles form when travelling between worlds, but how well does it handle language? Has anyone travelled to a world only to find they now speak a language from the other side of the planet than where the portal exit is at?

—Coda

That happened to me, once. I took a day trip to Reptilia—Dana's home world—and apparently my persona there doesn't travel much. Thankfully I've picked up enough Spanish to get by, and whatever language they *do* speak at the portal got mapped to Spanish in my (literal) lizard-brain.

Maybe I am getting the hange of this after all...

—Justine

Ask your question at wndfx.link/ask

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You throw yourself into an aileron roll as you exit the shadow and pass fully into the sunset. After half a moment to re-orient yourself you shoot back up and do a loop-de-loop before coming to roost on the edge of a public platform. You grip the bar a little too tightly as you catch your breath.

And you are so incredibly thankful to have a moment you can just be yourself.

As one, you open Blue's eyes.

You stand up. You crack your knuckles and revel in the feeling of something that doesn't hurt but feels like it should. You brush your hands through your hair and flick the tops of your ears. You stretch your torso and arms like you did with Red, then stand up and do some quick leg stretches.

You pick up an insulated travel mug Blue had prepared beforehand, and you set out. You take care with your steps: heel to toe, heel to toe. The streets here have no sidewalks, but there's also no traffic this time of day. You let your right arm sway; your left has a steady grip on the mug.

You take a deep breath of the cool evening air. There's a heady earthy scent; someone did yard work today. You hear a couple of dogs barking a few streets over, and a train plodding along even further away. A slight breeze blows above you; you see the trees sway, hear the leaves rustling.

You grip the mug just a little tighter. Not yet.

You walk past one of your neighbors sitting on her porch. You wave, she waves back. You keep walking, heel-to-toe, heel-to-toe. You walk for another block and get to a house with a white picket fence. There's an old park bench on the public side of the fence, and you take a seat.

You take a moment to take in the sunset. You can't see it directly because of the trees and houses, but you can see it light up the tops of the trees, wash the clouds in its warm colors. You smile to yourself. Okay, now.

You pop open the top of the travel mug and bring it to your lips. The coffee—decaf, owing to the late hour—is strong with chocolate and caramel notes. It's a little hot, but not hot enough to burn you. In other words, it's perfect.

You sigh in contentment, happy to be able to enjoy a small moment with yourself.



The Lightbringers will return...

Last we left off...

Celeste, a talented elf from the kingdom of **Melodia**, has traveled to a lot of worlds, and she's kept **Richard** and the rest of the **Lighthouse Crew** apprised of what she's found. Despite this, **Dana**, the Lighthouse's resident mechanic, has had her suspicions of her, especially as she seemed to be bullying the IT technician **Ronyo** when no one was looking...

Conflict Resolution

Dana leaned against the service counter that separated the kitchen from the dining patio, the naga watching Justine having a conversation with her young cook.

"Do you actually not want to?" she said, "Or are you not *supposed* to want to?"

The cook, a red Guldorian, looked at the ground and nodded.

Justine held out a pizza peel. "Pizza oven is yours, Matt."

Matt looked up and smiled slightly as he took the peel. "Yes, Chef," he barked before running to one out of sight.

Justine sighed and walked over to the counter and leaned across from Dana. "Kids," she said.

"What was that all about?" Dana asked, leaning forward on three elbows while she held an apple in her upper left hand.

"He wanted to take point on making pizzas," Justine said, "but he had it in his head that he should be doing more 'mature' stuff."

"Oh," Dana said with a knowing smile. "Nothing more childish than the fear of being childish?"

Justine nodded sagely. "Anyway, here to pick me up for the staff meeting?"

"Guess it is about that time." Dana took one last bite of her apple and slithered away from the counter. She tossed the core in a trash can and met Justine as she was walking out of the side door, still in her chef jacket.

"You're looking pretty snazzy for a staff meeting," Dana said as the two began their walk to the other side of the lighthouse.

Justine smirked back. "You're still in your uniform too," she said.

Dana looked down at her grease-stained overalls and shrugged with both sets of arms. "It's comfortable," she said.

Justine nodded, and her smile fell slightly. “Do you know what this is about?”

“Not a clue,” Dana answered.

“Great,” Justine groused. “Random staff meetings out of the blue aren’t usually a good sign.”

“No offense, girl, but you come from a world where you have to buy insurance for your *body*.”

“True.”

They passed one of the barely-used warehouses as Ronyo and Lalaith—both looking human, despite Lalaith’s pink frizzy hair—walked out. “Staff meeting?” Ronyo said.

Dana nodded. Justine looked at Ronyo’s head. “No fox ears?”

“Huh?” Ronyo touched the side of their head. “Oh, right; I just got back from Vanilla Earth, so... human!”

The four walked into the lighthouse atrium to see most of the others already gathered, along with an elf and a faun Dana didn’t recognize and another elf, Celeste, that she did.

Oh. *She* was here. Dana did her best to school her expression before making eye contact.

Celeste was looking around, almost frantically. She wasn’t moving her head or body very much, but Dana could see how tense she was, how her eyes were darting around. Celeste saw something in Dana’s direction, and some of the tension seemed to leave.

There was no time to analyze it, though. Both she and Celeste were immediately distracted by Lalaith darting across the room with a cry of “Margo!” She ran headlong into the other elf who, to her credit, apparently knew what to expect and had braced herself accordingly.

“Lalaith,” Margo said, her tone only slightly chiding, “we saw each other the other day.”

“Yeah, but that was *ages* ago,” Lalaith whined, releasing the hug and stepping to the side, still keeping contact.

Richard looked around and, seeing everyone, cleared his throat. “Okay, this shouldn’t take long,” he said. “New faces: we’ve got Pr—”

“Nope!” Margo interrupted. Seeing everyone turn to her she shrunk back, blushing. “Just ‘Margo,’” she said. “I’m here as a friend.”

Richard nodded. “Margo, then. And this is Kassandros—” He motioned towards the faun who waved at the group. “—who’s hoping to join us full-time. And I think most of you have met Celeste here.”

Celeste raised a hand but otherwise stayed withdrawn.

“So, for Kassandros: Ronyo?”

the earthiness of the barley mixing with the pungent fertilizer. It’s not exactly a pleasant smell, but one you’ve come to associate with home, family, safety, and an honest day’s work.

You find the path bordering the field and turn left.

You let your arms sway gently, the cool breeze finding ways around your flannel outer layer to pass through your linen shirt, cooling the smooth skin of your upper half. You’re in no hurry, but you can’t help but walk with purpose.

The breeze kicks up a bit as you get to a corner of the field. You see the crops wave with it, bending and swaying—

And a wild impulse bubbles up. It feels vaguely green, but you see no reason not to indulge. With a musical laugh you run headlong into the fields facing the wind, your arms spread out, catching the tips of the barley, your flannel shirt flowing behind you like a cape.

It is so, so good, you think to yourself, to be alive.

As one, you open Green’s eyes.

You don’t have as much time as you want, but you want to make it count. You’re already limber from a few hours of manual labor, but you still take a moment to take stock of your wings, flexing your claws and that barely-there-but-still-useful opposable thumb. You hop to your feet and get into a raptor-like stance, lifting one clawed leg and then the other.

You tuck your wings to your sides and start running towards the far end of the parking deck, past the personal flight augments and vehicles, to the edge of the deck.

And you leap off. You hold your wings for half a second before opening them with a snap and letting them catch the air. You feel the slight strain on your feathers, and out of the corner of your eye you see a few that you hadn’t groomed off fly away.

You feel an old stress bubble up, but you shove it away. This is a time for flight! You grip the air and *thrust* your wings down. A single beat brings you back level with the warehouse, a second sends you over it. You double-check the beacons around you to make sure you’re in a manual flight path, and you keep going.

The city has a scent all its own. A pungent mix of burnt fuel and vegetation layered over a foundation of sulfur that underpinned every city home to enough fire-breathers. Not everyone likes it; you’re used to it. You bank to the right and duck into the shadow of a nearby platform.

There’s no one else here, and you build up a little more speed. The wingbeats strain your core in just the *best* way and—

You shouldn’t. You really shouldn’t. But you just can’t help it.

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.

An Evening Walk

Red gets up from the dinner table and excuses themselves. They pull a flannel shirt off a hook near the door and pull it on as they step out into the cooler evening air. They take a seat on a bench on the porch and close their eyes.

Green taps the radio on their shoulder and informs their coworkers they're taking their break before turning it off. They rustle their feathers and press a few back into place as they exit the warehouse. They sit down off to the side and close their eyes.

You put down your phone and slip on your sneakers. You walk out onto your front porch, shut the door, and sit down to tie your shoes. When that's done, you sit up straight and close your eyes.

Across worlds, stretching impossible distances, but acting as one, the three of you take a deep breath, hold it, and let it out slowly...

As one, you open Red's eyes.

The light of the day is dimming. You get up from the bench and twist your torso to each side, then stretch your arms. You take a moment to feel your hands, right hand brushing over the hard, hoof-like nails of your left hand. You take both hands and run them through your hair to your horns, small nubs about as long as your hand is wide. You move to your soft ears, feel them twitch reflexively under your hands. The gentle touches deafen you for a moment. You pull up one leg then the other, feeling your short fur rub against your canvas pants, your cloven hooves thumping gently against the porch.

With a nod, you set out at a gentle pace. You're in no hurry to get anywhere in particular, just ambling along the path towards the fields.

You exit the shadow of the farmhouse and see the sunset over the barley fields. It's a beautiful sight, the orange of the sunset scattering among the plants, each one casting a tiny shadow. The smell is distinct,

"Yeah, boss?" Ronyo said. Dana noticed that they had shifted their position, putting her between them and Celeste. She glanced over toward Celeste to see her staring at the floor.

"Do you have room for Kassandros in I.T?"

Ronyo grinned. "I get an intern?"

Richard narrowed his eyes. "You get an *apprentice*."

"Works for me! Should we get started now?"

Richard made a shooing motion with his hands. Ronyo nearly bounced away, leading the faun towards the basement stairwell.

"As for the other part," Richard said, "Celeste has been doing a lot of exploring—she's helped Courtney solidify a lot of details on the different worlds we have—and she's learned something she wanted to share." He motioned to Celeste.

Celeste nodded to him and straightened up. "Okay, I hope this is useful to you," she said. Dana wasn't sure if she was imagining the tremor in her voice, or if it was an act, a way to gain sympathy. She kept her face carefully neutral as she listened.

"So when you go to a new world through a portal, you get a body from that world. And then you're stuck in that until you go back to a different portal, right?" Seeing some nods, or at least attention, she pressed on. "I may have figured out how to change without a portal."

Dana raised her eyebrows, and she saw similar reactions from the others. This was... actually something useful.

Celeste stepped forward and held out a hand in front of her. "The trick is to focus on the memories of that form," she said, her voice stronger now. "Not just what you did, but what it was like to *be* that. For me, I tend to focus on my hands: it's how I pick things up, how I interact with the world, and it's a body part I tend to look at a lot."

She took a deep breath and focused on her hand... and a wave of dull sparks started from the middle of her palm, raced back her arm, and swept over the rest of her body. Wherever it passed, what skin was visible grew grey fur with black spots. Her face pushed out into a muzzle and two feline ears poked out from her hair. It finished with a long tail appearing out of her rear.

Celeste blinked and flicked her ears. She turned her focus away from her hand towards the others and smiled—a smile with too many sharp teeth. "Just like that," she said, her voice a little more gravelly but still recognizable as hers.

A couple of people started clapping, which seemed to remind Celeste to be embarrassed. Her ears flattened and she stepped back. "Anyway, that's it," she said, the waver back in her voice.

“Does it work with clothes?” someone—maybe Walter, the accountant?—asked.

“Maybe,” Celeste said with a tilt of her head. “It seems like it follows the same logic as the portals.”

“Do you have to be Melodian?” That was Selah, the healer, this time.

Celeste shook her head. “No,” she said. “Actually this all started because I’d put—” She stopped whatever she was saying and shook her head. “Because I needed to use magic but I was, well, *this*.” She motioned at her very furry snow leopard body.

“Does it work inside a world, or just in Nowhere?” That was Justine; Dana couldn’t help a glance to the side.

Celeste... grimaced and tapped her fingers together. “I don’t actually know,” she said. “Part of the portals is making sure you have a body adapted for a world; I didn’t want to change into an elf and suddenly find out that there was no breathable air, you know?”

A couple of uneasy chuckles made their way around the group.

Seeing no other questions, Richard stepped up. “Thanks, Celeste,” he said. To the rest of the group, he continued, “I’ve been able to do it, so if you can’t get it come see me.” He nodded. “Other than that, keep up the great work, everyone. That’s it.”

Justine tapped Dana on a shoulder. “I’ll see you around,” she said before walking off. Dana waved to her before slithering forward to get closer to Richard and Celeste.

“So, where are you off to next?” she heard Richard say.

Celeste shuffled her feet. “I’m trying to track down the three people with the telepathic link,” she said. “I met one in my home world, so now I need to get to—is it Vanilla Earth?”

Richard groaned. “Human. *Human* Earth. I don’t know who decided to call it ‘Vanilla.’”

“Probably someone who grew up as a human,” Dana said, announcing herself.

“Definitely not me,” Celeste said with a smile. “But yeah, I need a ride there.”

“I can drive you,” Dana said, doing her best not to give the predatory smile she wanted to.

Richard raised an eyebrow. Celeste’s smile got decidedly more uneasy.

“What?” Dana said. “As long as that little trick she showed us works, I can drive us.”

Richard held his stare for a moment. “Just make sure she gets where she needs to,” he said, making direct eye contact with her.

“I thought I knew how the world worked,” she said finally. “I had it all figured out, and I was navigating it well. And I was succeeding... for what I thought success looked like. I was growing in power, I was amassing knowledge and using it. I was taking on challenges and meeting them.

“And then I saw what it cost.”

Celeste inhaled, her breath shaky. “I saw my sword through Margo’s heart, felt her blood on my hands, heard the queen’s panic, and I...” She shook her head. “I didn’t want that. I realized, a second too late, that I didn’t want to kill someone to get ahead. But that’s exactly where I was going.”

She shifted in her seat and took a steady breath. “So *that’s* why I need to change. Because what Margo showed me next just gave me a direction; I already knew I couldn’t keep going the way I was.”

Dana nodded. “Okay then,” she said.

Celeste blinked. “That’s it?”

Dana shrugged slightly. “Those are some good words. The question is whether you can back it up.”

Celeste chuckled. “Well,” she said, “I don’t do things halfway.” She sighed. “But if you wanted to be there when I apologized to Ronyo, I’d like that.”

Dana narrowed her eyes. “Why?”

“So they have someone looking out for them. I...” She winced. “I don’t want to get away with a bad apology.”

Dana considered it. “If I can, I will,” she said after a moment. “But don’t wait on me.”

Celeste nodded. “Fair enough.”



The Lighthouse Crew will return.

"No, we can't," Dana snarled, any hints of humor gone. "Because if there's going to be any chance of me trusting you *at all*, I need to know why you—shit!" She slammed on the brakes as a car sped past them on her side.

"Sorry about that," Dana said, bringing the car back up to speed. "Merging lanes is not a good time for a serious conversation." She glanced over to Celeste and saw her hugging the seat belt.

"This thing has airbags, right?" she squeaked.

Dana smirked. "I'm not sure," she said. "I think I blew them out already." She glanced back again and saw Celeste's eyes wide, staring out into nothing. With a sigh, Dana decided to take a little pity on her. "I know the crumple zones are intact, though."

Celeste nodded. She closed her eyes and forced a few calming breaths through. "Sorry," she said after a moment. "Growing up in Tenopolis, there's not a lot of..."

"Cars?"

"Internal combustion engines." She took another breath. "The, uh... explosive fuel is not something I'm used to."

Dana sighed to herself. "Look," she said, "people can change. I believe that you can change, that you don't have to be the same person that... stabbed someone?"

"Stabbed Margo, specifically," Celeste said. "While trying to usurp the Queen."

Celeste felt the car noticeably slow down. Dana just stared ahead for a moment before catching herself and putting her foot back on the accelerator. "That's..."

"Stupid, right?"

"Queen Artemis? Isn't she supposed to be immortal? Did you have a fucking death wish?"

Celeste sighed. "Honestly, yeah. On some level... I needed her to stop me. And then Margo stepped out in front of her and..." She chuckled. "She's a really good fighter. Wouldn't mind sparring with her sometime."

Dana nodded. She noted a couple of the landmarks and realized they were getting closer to town. "Richard's giving you a chance," she said, "so I'm giving you a chance. You're right, I don't like you; I don't trust you. You are, in the best sense I can think of, a bitch. I know people can change, but they never do unless they feel like they need to."

Dana risked taking her eyes off the road longer than usual to make full eye contact with Celeste. "Why do you need to change?"

Celeste made a grunt of acknowledgment, but the car was otherwise silent for a solid minute.

Dana nodded, an unspoken acknowledgment that she wouldn't go too hard on her.

It took Dana a moment to get the hang of transforming into a human, and another to re-familiarize herself with the pedals on Richard's Jeep. But quick enough she and Celeste were through the portal and on their way.

Not long after they passed the portal, Celeste spoke up. "Is there a particular reason you don't like me, or is it just vibes?"

Dana glanced at Celeste before turning her attention back to the road. "What makes you think I don't like you?"

A moment. "Well, you're not a naga anymore, and you *still* look like you want to unhinge your jaw around me."

Dana grunted. "To be fair," she said, "there's a lot of switchbacks on the road coming up and I'm really not looking forward to it."

"But you don't like me."

"Not particularly, no." She hit the brakes and gingerly pulled the car around a sharp curve. "I don't think any amount of information you bring us justifies how you treat Ronyo."

Dana couldn't see Celeste's reaction, but she heard a soft, "That's a good reason not to like me."

Dana let the silence linger for the next stretch, opting to navigate one thing at a time: first the switchbacks, then the conversation. When she finally got to the bottom of the mountain and turned onto the highway, she glanced at Celeste to see her staring off into space.

Dana wasn't entirely sure what she was expecting out of this conversation, but it wasn't this. "That's it?" she said.

Celeste blinked. "What's it?"

"You're just going to take that? You're not going to question how I know anything, or whether I can believe what Ronyo said, or tell me that I'm a jerk for letting other people dictate my opinions?"

"What do you want me to say?" Celeste said, and she didn't sound angry or indignant, just tired. "That he was an easy target? That it was never about leverage, just about how good it felt to knock him around?"

"Them."

That brought her up short. "What?"

Dana kept her eyes on the road. "Ronyo's non-binary."

"Oh." Celeste shifted in her seat. "Is that... new?"

Dana glanced over. "Since you were here last... yeah, I think so."

"Okay then." Celeste took a breath and let it out slowly. "Good for h—them. Good for them," she repeated, mostly to herself.

Dana let the moment sit, concentrating on driving.

“Are they happy?” Celeste said, her voice smaller than Dana had ever heard it.

Dana bit back what she wanted to say. “They’re better,” she ground out.

Celeste took another deep breath. “I owe them a pretty big apology,” she said, words stumbling out of her mouth. “More than that, probably. I’m just glad they’re still alive for me to give it to him—THEM!” She spat out a curse word in some language Dana didn’t recognize.

“Hey, now,” she chided, “you just learned about the pronouns. Go easy on yourself.”

“Seriously?” Celeste spat. “I just admitted to bullying them bad enough that I was afraid h—they’d kill themselves, and you’re telling me to go easy on myself?”

“Oh, we’re not done with that,” Dana shot back. “Not by a long shot. Which is why we don’t need to waste time on stupid stuff like tripping up on someone’s pronouns two minutes after learning them.”

Celeste huffed and sat back in her seat. “It wasn’t even for anything good,” she groused. “Just putting someone pathetic in their place.”

“Beneath you.”

“The only power worth having is power over someone,” Celeste recited. “Except...” She sighed. “Except that’s not true.”

Dana glanced over and couldn’t help a smirk. “Explain.”

Celeste thought for a moment. “We have magic in Melodia,” she said. “It’s quantifiable, measurable. You can measure magical power and know whether something is more or less powerful.” She started making idle motions with her hands. “Power freely given,” she said, “offered in love and shared in kind, is an order of magnitude more powerful than anything I learned.”

Dana nodded. “So where does power over others fit into that?”

Celeste hummed. “It started as a way to keep from getting screwed over. Leverage against one person to protect against someone else having leverage against me. Had to be scrappy in ways I wasn’t proud of, but it got me where I was.”

“Let me guess,” Dana said, “once you got a taste for it, you couldn’t stop?”

“Couldn’t stop. Still *can’t* stop.”

Dana narrowed her eyes and looked over. “Really.”

Celeste sighed. “No, that’s unfair. I still have a lot of those reflexes, yes; I’m just trying to redirect them.”

“That difficult?”

“It sure as hell isn’t easy!” Celeste huffed. “I am getting help, though.”

“Professional help?”

“Definitely. And Margo’s been a lot more relatable than I expected.” She took a long breath. “And Eutychia helped a lot.”

“Margo’s the other person you were with earlier?”

“Yeah, she...” Celeste smiled. “She’s a good friend.” She cleared her throat. “Makes sense, she’s the one that discovered the whole ‘order of magnitude’ thing.”

Dana’s face darkened. “Right, that,” she said. “So you gave up social manipulation for more power?”

“What, no, I—” Celeste started to protest but cut herself off. She stared into space for a moment before groaning. “Well, it *does* sound bad when you put it that way.”

When she didn’t elaborate, Dana prompted her. “So how should I put it?”

Celeste leaned against the door and let herself think for a moment. “So I can’t say that I don’t care about the power,” she said. “And you’d probably think I was full of shit if I did. It’s just not *all* I care about.”

She shifted in her seat to turn more towards Dana. “I only saw the world in terms of power: who has leverage over who, everyone wants something from someone, eat or be eaten; you get the picture, right?”

Dana nodded.

“So I’m flexing every bit of power at my disposal doing...” She shook her head. “Something *really* stupid, and then Margo comes along and makes what I’m doing look like grade school? It upended... everything!”

Dana nodded appreciatively. “What did Margo do, anyway?”

“That’s the thing,” Celeste gushed, “it was just a healing spell. Like the kind of thing we *actually* learned in grade school, but she made it look effortless while using it at a level I’ve never seen, and there was no scarring—it was like it never even happened!”

“What was she healing?”

“A st—” Celeste froze. She gingerly turned forward and sat back in her seat. “A stab wound,” she said, almost too quietly to hear.

Dana smirked. She might have a mammalian nose now, but she could sure taste the blood in the air. “It wasn’t from that ‘really stupid’ thing you were doing, was it?”

Celeste muttered something.

“Sorry,” Dana said, forcing herself to keep her eyes on the road, “I couldn’t hear that.”

“Look, you don’t like me, I get it,” Celeste snapped. “So can we just leave it at me doing the absolute most stupid thing that I should honestly be rotting in jail for?”