

Series 0

Issue 9

Nowhereverse Tales



There are parallel universes, other worlds, each with their own histories, their own cultures, their own biologies. We feel the walls grow weak, sometimes: when the world seems thinner, when the light is just right, when things seem just a little bit off, and we imagine we can reach out, just a little bit...

In the midst of all this, in a lost corner inside the lost space between spaces, a new place is forming. Born from hidden desires and deep longings. A place to rest, a stop along the way for so many. In the middle of everywhere, this is Nowhere.

Maybe you found yourself here by circumstance. Maybe you got lost and came to find shelter. Maybe you sought us out. Regardless, we have a place for you, no matter where you are in your journey.

The light is always lit, and the door is always open.

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Between the bad job and uneasy home life, Jasper's link to sanity is the fantastic mouse woman he dreams of and the group chat he shares her with.

Rated Teen: brief language, transphobia, nudity, body parts mentioned, controlling parents

3. A Clever Ruse

You've found a clever way to deflect your family's questions.

Rated General: foreign thoughts

4. Ask the Lighthouse

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Letter from the editor

Stories can be powerful.

Sometimes it's an escape. We can imagine a world where we don't have the problems we do in real life. We can forget about our crappy jobs, the things we can't afford, our bodies that are constantly breaking down. Escape our troubles and imagine fantastic adventures across the stars. Or the multiverse. 🤔

But sometimes, they let us imagine what could be... and they give us the strength to act.

—Ronyo

Jasper's Escape

The lights clicked on and lit the dense space. Pipes and conduits lined the walls and ceiling connecting tanks and consoles. And at the far end, a pool of dark amber liquid was set into the floor connecting to a large glass tank set into the wall.

Inside the tank, an anthropomorphic mouse was curled up, asleep, suspended in the middle. She stirred gently, her eyes not opening. She uncurled and swam out the bottom of the tank.

She stood up in the pool, the liquid coming just to her waist, leaving her voluptuous figure dry and exposed. She ran her hands through her hair and pulled a few stray strands behind her ears. She shook her head gently and let the rest of it fall into place, cascading down to the small of her back.

And her eyes opened, glowing orange irises matching a glowing tint to her hair, like strands of fiber optic cable.

She walked forward, taking the steps out of the pool. All of the liquid stayed behind.

She walked to her closet—in actuality a pipe with several garments hanging from it—and selected a navy blue jumpsuit. She pulled it on, taking care to thread her tail through the hole. She glanced toward a security camera on the ceiling and rotated around, checking herself all over.

With a smirk she walked forward, a happy bounce in her stride. "Let's find some trouble," she said to herself.

Jasper sat on his bed, sketchbook in hand, trying to capture the last bit of detail from his dream. He put his pencil down and pulled out his phone to take a picture: the image of the mouse stepping out of the opaque nanite pool was striking enough to share, at least to the group chat.

He had just gotten the picture when his mom yelled up the stairs. "Jasper! Time to go!"

Jasper frantically snapped his sketchbook shut and stuffed it under his pillow before grabbing his name tag from his bedside table. "Coming!"

In the passenger seat, Jasper did his best to send the picture to the chat without his mom seeing:

EarthStars: WIP of Terra

EarthStars: [image attachment]

BuckTheWorld: OMG tag your prOn homie

BuckTheWorld: 🙄

Desertian: 🙄💖

EternalSneptember: 💖💖💖

BuckTheWorld: 💖 someone's having
good dreams

"Chatting with your friends?" Jasper's mom said, trying very hard not to look like she was trying to see his phone.

Jasper locked his phone and slipped it in his pocket.

"Yeah," he said, turning to look out the side window.

When Jasper didn't elaborate, his mom kept going. "So Carol—you know, Jessica's mom?" she said. "She was telling me the other day about this news story she saw. Can you believe they're putting litter boxes in schools? Apparently there's kids out there that identify as cats."

Jasper hummed noncommittally.

His mom took it as a signal to keep going. "But I guess if you have boys pretending to be girls then you can have children pretending to be cats, and everything's 'woke' now so we have to coddle them." She huffed. "It's like it's a crime to be normal, now."

She pulled into the parking lot of Pullet Ford and brought the car to a stop. "Jasper," she said, turning to him fully, "I'm proud of you for keeping the job, you know."

Jasper glanced to her and nodded.

"Hard work's going to do a lot for you, right?" she said, patting his leg.

Jasper nodded. "I'm trying," he said before opening the door and stepping out.

His mom smiled at him. "I'll pick you up at 3:30. Love you!"

"Love you too," Jasper mumbled before closing the door.

As she pulled away, he walked to the door. He checked his reflection in the windows: blue Oxford shirt, khaki pants, and a name tag that devoted a paltry quarter of itself to his actual name.

With a sigh, he walked in.

He saw the owner, Edwin Pullet the Third, and his nominal coworker Dwight immediately stop talking to look at him. He waved back weakly and went to the unmanned sales desk in the lobby next to the Mustang.

.....

Lunch was a cup of instant noodles prepared with water from the coffee maker. Jasper was letting it cool off while he checked his phone.

BuckTheWorld: Seriously, homie, looking good.

EternalSneptember: Remind me again why you're not making a killing doing commissions?

He rolled his eyes but replied with a smile:

EarthStars: Thanks, everyone. 🙏

EarthStars: Snep, it comes down to trying to fly under the radar IRL.

EarthStars: Mom picked up the "litter boxes in schools" story, BTW. 🙄

Edwin Pullet the Third walked into the break room. "Cup Noodles again?" he said with a chuckle. "I pay you better than that, right?"

Jasper did his best to smile politely back. "Just being frugal, sir."

Edwin Pullet the Third gave a satisfied nod. "Good boy."

Jasper did his best to continue smiling politely and not glare.

Jasper collapsed on his bed with a sigh. He checked his phone and confirmed that his parents had turned off the wifi again. He rolled his eyes and fished behind his bed for his burner phone and pulled up the chat:

EternalSneptember: Oof, yeah, i get that.

EternalSneptember: Hope someday they're able to appreciate all of you.

EarthStars: I hope so too, Snep. If I thought they actually cared about *me* I'd push back. But today she told me about how good my job is and how lucky i am to have it.

BuckTheWorld: And you've told her about the schedule shifts and wage theft, right?

EarthStars: all part of the job 🙄🙄🙄🙄
🙄🙄🙄🙄

EarthStars: g2g gonna finish the WIP and sleep.

He switched off the phone and put it back in its hiding spot. He finished getting under the covers before pulling his sketchbook back out and resuming work on Terra's ears.

Captain Jack went to take another bite of his burger and stopped. He set it down, sighed, and turned to face Terra.

She was perched on the back of the chair peering at him intently, eyes squinted.

"What," he said in his unplaceable accent.

She stared at him for a moment before finally saying, "Harkness or Sparrow?"

Jack rolled his eyes. "What's that supposed to mean?" He turned back and took the promised bite of burger.

"History in one world becomes fiction in another," Terra recited. "So, are you the omnisexual immortal flying about time and space, or are you the swashbuckler dealing with terrors beyond human comprehension?"

"Still not making any sense, darling," Jack said around a few fries.

"Then I have to question: this isn't the Caribbean. Magic is just sufficiently advanced science. Put either one in a crowded melting pot of a space port, and you'd be hard-pressed to tell them apart." She humphed. "So I'd have to rely on mannerisms, and that's tricky. Which brings me back to the question: Harkness or Sparrow?"

Jack swallowed the last of his fries. "Got an answer?"

Terra stared at him a moment longer before relaxing her stare. "Nope," she groaned. "Best guess is Harkness, but I think I'm over-indexing on you checking out my ass."

"You definitely are," Jack said before slurping up the last of his drink. "There's one thing I didn't hear you consider," he said.

Terra just raised an eyebrow.

Jack glanced at her with a knowing smirk. "Who says I'm not both, love?"

Terra's eyes grew wide and—literally—brighter. She smiled broadly. "Oh, Captain Jack," she said, "I think you and I are going to add up to a problem."

Jasper sat down in the break room with his instant noodles and checked the chat to see if his question from that morning had gotten any responses.

EarthStars: Question from Terra's world: if you put them in the same context, is there a functional difference between Captain Jack Harkness and Captain Jack Sparrow?

BuckTheWorld: 🍷

Desertian: Absent any direct quotes, probably not.

Desertian: And is it pre- or post-redemption for either of them?

EternalSneptember: Harkness has an American accent and sleeps with everyone; Sparrow has that vaguely British mumble and drinks all the rum. But Harkness did drink on screen a few times, and I have a hard time believing Sparrow didn't bang.

EternalSneptember: @Desertian Did Sparrow have a redemption? I didn't see the last PotC movie.

Desertian: @EternalSneptember Oh, right, his wasn't really a "redemption" arc, was it.

EternalSneptember: @EarthStars That's a "no" from me, dawg.



Desertian, BuckTheWorld

Jasper smiled, and he swore the noodles tasted a little better.

Jasper and his mom pulled up at the house. His mom shut the car off and made no move to unbuckle herself or open the door.

"Jasper," she said, her tone some kind of emotion that Jasper couldn't place.

He felt his heart start racing, felt the blood drain from his face as time seemed to slow down. This was not going to be good.

"You know I love how creative and artistic you are," she said, staring at the steering wheel. "You have a wonderful talent, and I love what you draw for me and the rest of the family every Christmas."

Jasper struggled to keep his outward appearance calm. "Is something wrong?" he asked evenly.

His mom kept not making eye contact. "I'm worried about you," she said. "I know that these chatrooms and the dark web are full of people trying to indoctrinate and radicalize you and drag you into their..." She visibly shuddered. "Perversions."

Jasper's stomach dropped. "Mom," he said, "what's wrong?"

She gulped. "I found a sketchbook in your room. It had a..." She cocked her head, still not looking at him. "A drawing of a naked woman with a penis."

Shit. She found *that* sketchbook.

"Now," she said, her voice getting firmer, "I don't know where you got ideas like that, but I can't have... *perversions* like that under my roof. So here's what's going to happen: You're going to give me your phone, you're going to throw away any of the perverted artwork I didn't find—and I'll be checking your room for it. And then we're going to have a *family* discussion after dinner about what it means to be living in an upstanding household. Okay?"

Jasper took a moment to gather his thoughts. "What..." He swallowed. "What do you have a problem with?"

She sighed. "It's not that I have a problem, Jasper; it's that it's not *right*! You drew a—a mouse-person with breasts and a penis! Things like that don't exist, and pretending that they do is how we got boys in the girl's room and litter boxes in schools!" she said with a shout.

"You know that's not true, right?" Jasper snapped. "The litter box thing?"

"Carol is an honest woman," she said, "and she wouldn't lie to me. And even if it wasn't true, it still doesn't change the fact that you are *drawing pornography*!" She shook her head and brought her volume back down. "I don't know those friends that you're always texting with, and it's clear

that I can't trust you to be on the internet without supervision—"

"I'm twenty-four, mom," Jasper cut in.

"And still living under my roof," his mom responded. "You've had that job for over a year and you still haven't moved out."

"Because it's not a *good job*!" Jasper blurted. "He doesn't pay me enough to get a car, much less an apartment. Plus *you* charge me rent!"

"I ask you to *contribute*, and what I ask isn't nearly as much as I should."

"And yet I *still* can't save enough to get *half* of one of the cars I sell!"

"Then get a better job, Ja—"

"How?"

His mother glared at him. "That's what being an adult *is*, Jasper," she said slowly. "It's taking responsibility for yourself and not yelling at your mother when she's trying to help you."

Jasper swallowed his response and broke eye contact.

His mom sighed. "Give me your phone, and get the pornography out of my house. We can discuss more after dinner."

Jasper didn't move.

"Jasper," she said, her voice hard, "give me your phone."

Jasper swallowed. He pulled his phone out of his pocket and passed it to his mom.

Jasper closed the door to his room behind him and took a moment to lean against it, solidifying his plan.

He strode over to his desk, grabbed the chair, and wedged it under the doorknob. It wouldn't stand up to much, but it would give him enough time to hide things if his mom checked on him.

The next thing he did was check behind his bed—his burner was still there. He powered it on and immediately hit the group chat:

EarthStars:   PRIMARY PHONE
CONFISCATED  

EarthStars: (mom found the sketchbook
with Terra's NSFW reference)

EternalSneptember: CHANGE CHAT
PASSWORD NOW NOW NOW

Jasper kicked himself. He dove into the chat app settings and did a quick password change. After waiting for that to finish he flipped back over to the chat.

EternalSneptember: (pw change logs out all other devices/browsers)

EternalSneptember: Ideally remote wipe but IDK if that's an option.

EarthStars: Thanks for the reminder, Snep. Remote wipe is an option but would cross a line.

BuckTheWorld: Ugh, this sucks. How bad, Earth?

EarthStars: The whole pornography under my roof speech combined with the litter box BS again.

EarthStars: With a hint of it's not rent it's "contributing" and if it sucks get a better job

EarthStars: I'm supposed to get rid of all the "pornography" by dinner when we'll have a "discussion"

Desertian: Do you want to cross that line, ES?

EarthStars: I "contribute" \$800mo. That wouldn't cover rent, plus the meals I'd have to have, plus not having a car.

EarthStars: I *can't* cross that line.

He sat on his bed and stared at nothing. Putting it in words drove it home: he was trapped. He tried to regulate his breathing, to stay calm, but all he wanted to do was scream and sob and—

His phone buzzed. He looked back to the chat:

Desertian: We have a couch. If you can walk to the highway Buck can pick you up on his way home.

👉 *BuckTheWorld*

Desertian: We might ask for help with food, but no rent.

Desertian: Literally. Our lease doesn't allow subletting. 😏

Desertian: Transportation might be iffy, but if it's a morning shift Buck can drop you off.

He just read and re-read the chat. Part of him couldn't believe it. Part of him wondered if it would be trading one prison for another.

Part of him really wanted to say yes.

The chat buzzed again:

Desertian: No pressure, no expectations.
We just want to give you an option if
we can.

EternalSneptember: If money's a factor I
can venmo you some. If you can get out of
town I have a couch and eventually a room.

EternalSneptember: Don't suffer because
you can't play Capitalism as well as others.

Jasper put the phone down, trying to gather his thoughts. He saw the open sketchbook on his bed and sighed: it was open to Terra's reference drawing, complete with everything his mom described. It just wasn't her without it. Unless it was a more G-rated picture, of course.

He sighed. His mom was right about one part: Terra wasn't real, no matter how real she felt to him. Was he really going to throw away a stable, happy home because of this?

He felt the lack of a phone in his pocket. He remembered the wifi restrictions, the browbeating about the job, feeling blamed for the life he was promised never materializing.

He felt the weight of adult expectations while being treated like a child.

Jasper picked the phone back up:

EarthStars: @Desertian Promise me this won't be a burden for you.

Desertian: Promise.

Desertian: I'm not saying we won't have to make sacrifices, but it's nothing we wouldn't gladly do for a friend. It's not going to break us.

EarthStars: Then fuck this shit. I'm out.



Desertian, BuckTheWorld
EternalSneptember

Jasper was sitting on a bench at a gas station drinking a fountain drink when a well-aged red sedan pulled up. The driver didn't bother to switch off the car, just got out and ran around to meet Jasper with a hug.

"Thanks, Carl," Jasper said.

"What are friends for, homie?" Carl said. They loaded his duffel into the trunk and got back on the road.

"So," Carl said once they were back on the highway, "did Terra ever get an answer about the Captain Jack thing?"

"Wha—oh." Jasper sighed with a laugh. "That was today, crap."

"Been a bit of a day?"

"Been a bit of a couple of hours." He shook his head. "Dream ended before she could get an answer..." He thought back and laughed. "Oh, right; the guy in question said 'what if I'm both?'"

Carl, to his credit, kept his eyes on the road; but he took one hand off the wheel long enough to make a "mind blown" gesture.

Carl and his domestic partner Lisa sat on the couch, Jasper having voluntarily taken the floor so they could see each other as they ate their fast-food dinner.

"I understand wanting a clean break," Lisa said, "but you also don't want her to call the cops or something."

Jasper nodded. "Yeah, I just *don't* want her to have this number." He held up his burner—now only—phone.

"Dave probably has something for that," Carl said.

Jasper froze, then rolled his eyes and sighed. "Of course." He opened the chat:

EarthStars: @EternalSneptember got a way to send a text to my mom that won't give her my number?

EternalSneptember: She's on an iPhone, right?

EarthStars: Yeah.

EternalSneptember: I'll make an iMessage burner, nbd. What do you want it to say?

Jasper looked up at Carl and Lisa. They nodded; Lisa moved her foot farther forward to touch Jasper's.

EarthStars: Not us drafting this text for the last half hour, but here goes.

EternalSneptember: Burner ready and waiting.

EarthStars: Hi, mom; it's Jasper. This is going through one of my friends, so I might not get a response. Letting you know I'm safe with a place to sleep and a ride to work. This isn't just about the artwork. I know you think you're helping me, and I'm grateful for the love you've given me. This is me getting space to be the grownup we both want me to be. The pornography is out of your house, and you have my phone and contribution. I'll be in touch when I'm

ready to talk.



EternalSneptember

EternalSneptember: Sent. I'll let you know if I get a reply.

EternalSneptember: *polite reply lol

EarthStars: tysm

EternalSneptember: Don't forget to remote wipe!

EarthStars: Already done.

Jasper put his phone down and stuffed the rest of his burrito in his mouth.

"Hey, slow down," Lisa said with a smile, "it's not going anywhere."

Jasper shook his head. He started to explain himself, but his mouth was too full.

Carl chuckled and shook his head. "Hey, I'm proud of you, homie," he said.

Jasper tapped a fist to his chest. He swallowed the last of his food and said, "Yeah, I just wanted to make sure to eat that before everything hits."

"It's okay when it does," Carl said.

"Oh, I'm going to cry," Jasper said with a weak smile. "No question about that."

The space was familiar to Jasper, and yet not. It was Terra's nanite pool chamber, but with lower, more amber-colored lighting. And no Terra. Jasper looked around from his position waist-deep in the dark amber liquid, seeing if there was some detail he could spot to make the scene less liminal.

The pool rippled, and a figure started to form from the nanite fluid itself. Jasper took a step back as best he could; the fluid was unnaturally thick and resisted him. The shape started to resolve, forming a body, arms, a head, muzzle, and a distinctive set of ears.

The liquid fully formed into an anthropomorphic mouse with dark fur and a feminine figure, slightly shorter than Jasper with the liquid coming up to her navel.

Her eyes opened, glowing a deep orange.

Jasper gasped in shock. "Terra?" he whispered.

Terra glided forward, seemingly unhampered by the liquid, and stopped just in front of Jasper. She held her hands—five fingers, blunt claws, with leathery pads on the

palms—up to Jasper's bare chest, staring at him with a growing smile.

"You're real?" Jasper said, still not believing what he was seeing.

Terra's gaze shot up to look Jasper in the eye, and her face lit up in a broad smile. "I'm here," she said, as if she couldn't believe it herself. She looked back at his chest and reached forward the rest of the way, her hands touching him near the base of his ribcage. "I'm here," she repeated.

Jasper shot awake, heart racing. He sat up, momentarily disoriented before remembering he was on Carl and Lisa's couch. He pulled his phone out from between the cushions to check the time: 3:30 in the morning.

He rested his head in his hands and stared at nothing in the darkness. "Well," he said to himself, trying to catch his breath, "that's new."

Terra Astra will return.

A Clever Ruse

The pastry is a hit at Christmas dinner. You catch up with the other side of your extended family, gifts are exchanged, hugs are given.

And in that space between Christmas and New Years, your immediate family goes out to dinner to decompress. To that restaurant you used to go to as a kid with the paper tablecloths that you could color on.

Your younger brother asks about Red and Green. Kind of. Your family knows there's someone you're talking to online. And that's the story you're sticking to.

You don't know what aspect you're more afraid to confess: that your "online chat" is actually a telepathic link with someone in a parallel universe, or that there's *two* of them. For the record: it's unusual but not unheard of in Red's culture. Green's parents just asked if they were happy and left it at that.

You almost envy Green, except they wish their parents *wouldn't* leave it at that.

But, with Red and Green's assistance, you craft a persona that's a believable amalgamation of the two. Freelance journalist that works construction. Enjoys concerts. Has a bird's-eye-view of the world. Gets lots of exercise.

Your dad asks if you're being careful. You again reiterate that you do not—and for the foreseeable future *cannot*—meet in person.

That's not what he's talking about. He doesn't want you getting hurt.

Your parents awkwardly glance at each other then back at you. You realize you're the oldest sibling, the first child they've gotten to watch fall in love. They're as lost as you are.

Your dad reiterates that he doesn't want you to get hurt. Does this other person feel about you the way you feel about them? Are you both in this for the long haul? What happens when talking online isn't good enough? Will you go meet them? Will they come here?

You want to reiterate that you *can't*, but with how connected your world is, anyone that would have internet access could have access to travel or be traveled to. You can't say more without bursting the illusion.

You say you're figuring that out. Finding out how deep your relationship could go. Finding out what it would take to be together. You aren't lying.

You say you're being careful with your feelings. You are lying.

Red, Green, and Blue will return.

Ask the Lighthouse

Sam asks Tom: How did you and Luna first meet?

So there I was, lying in the middle of someone's backyard garden. I must have made some kind of noise because I heard her yelling, then I heard more cars and stuff, and then I was being loaded onto a stretcher with this very good looking woman trying to talk to me about what was happening.

That wasn't Luna; that was her BFF Alyssa. She's a martin. And a paramedic. And when she heard that the person whose backyard I crashed wanted to press charges, she called Luna.

And when Luna walked in she saw an officer waiting by my hospital bed and stormed up in her power suit and icy blue stare and... *sigh* Chat, I was in love.

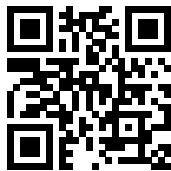
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