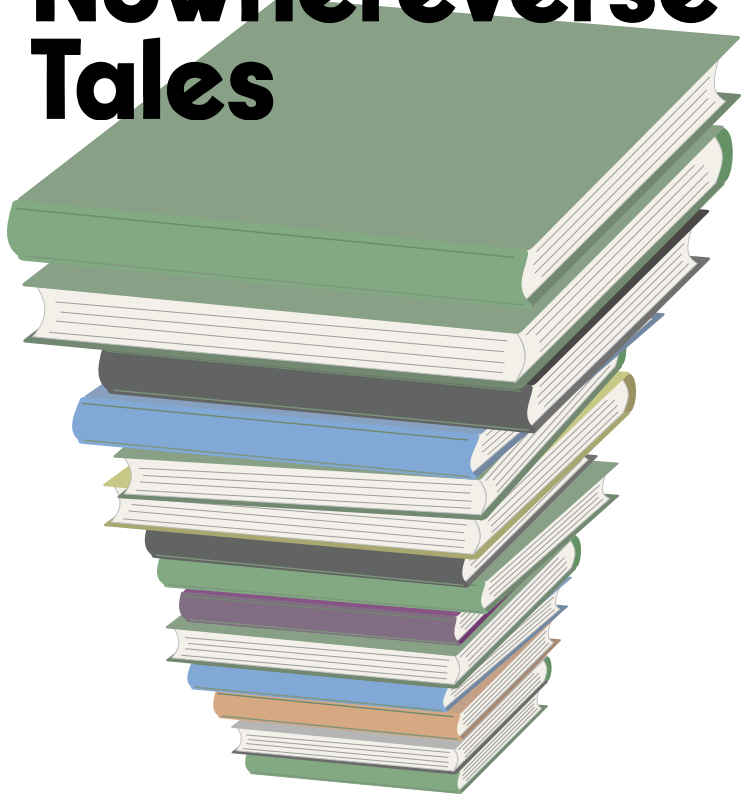


Series 0

Issue 10

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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Rated General

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You're still learning about each other, that's all.

Rated General: foreign thoughts

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Front cover: "Pile Of Books" by J_Alves (CC0) <<https://wndfx.link/0gncf>>

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Letter from the editor

An imagination is a powerful thing. It takes us places, helps us realize things different than ourselves. It transports us to other worlds, lets us meet fantastic characters... but only in our own heads.

In this issue, we meet an old friend of mine, someone who can take those images and make them real, or at least look real. But even powerful beings need a friend sometimes...

—Ronyo

Suspension of Disbelief

The rush of students packed the halls. Alphonse Morrison High School was small enough that the entire school took lunch at once, but just big enough that people complained about that very fact.

Jason walked briskly, attempting to keep pace with Kirk and make it to the front of the lunch line, or at least close to it. "You never said you were a writer," he said as he shoved open a door.

Kirk let out the kind of forced, single "Ha" one makes when one is simply trying to make a point. "I'm not," he said, descending the stairs in the kind of fluid motion that only comes with practice. Being a junior, he had plenty of practice.

"But I saw you working on something in history class."

Kirk shoved open another door and darted out into the main hallway. "Drafts of a character sketch for Creative Writing class."

Jason grinned. "So you are a writer."

Kirk wove across a group hanging out just outside a classroom. "Anyone can put words on a page; doesn't make me a writer."

"So there's no chance of me seeing anything you've written, then," Jason said as the two settled into the line. It would be about three minutes before they got their food; not bad for a Tuesday.

"Not at all," Kirk said. "I actually don't have any original stuff; everything I've written up to now has just been fan fiction, and bad fan fiction at that."

"Fan fiction?" Jason said, grinning, "What'd you write? Star Trek? Star Wars?"

"No..." Kirk said, deliberately focusing on obtaining his ultra-pasteurized cheeseburger.

Jason took his lunch and followed Kirk to a random seat in silence. Kirk noticed the sidelong glances he and Jason got from the other students, but he brushed it off. They were probably just stupid freshmen anyway.

They were a couple of minutes into their meal before Jason asked again, "What'd you write?"

Kirk took another bite. "The cheeseburgers aren't as crappy as usual," he said.

"I'm not going to stop asking until—"

"It was Sonic the Hedgehog, okay?" Kirk said slightly louder than he intended. Certain that people were staring, he took an even larger bite of his mushy cheeseburger.

Jason shrugged. "Not a bad place to start," he muttered, trailing off in thought as they finished their meals.

After they threw away their trays, Jason picked the conversation back up. "Hey, fan fiction is all on the internet, right?"

Kirk nodded. "Yeah, since they're using other people's characters, they can't publish it. So they just put it up on websites and let people read it."

"So let's go get one!"

Kirk stopped. "What?"

Jason turned to face him. "I'm itching for a good story, and you know where I can get one."

"Why not just get one of the books out of the library?"

"Read 'em all."

Kirk squinted at Jason. The casual, flippant way he had said that threw him off. "Seriously?"

Jason's rolled his eyes impatiently. "Yes, I'm serious. So come on, let's go."

Kirk considered backing out and going outside with his usual crowd, but something about Jason intrigued him. He shrugged it off; he hung out with those people every day, and he needed a change of company.

For a school exclusively for academically gifted students, the school media center was painfully small. There were only ten computers students could use, and they were usually taken by freshmen checking their e-mail. The book selection was just as lacking, consisting mostly of popular novels the students requested. By some miracle, however, there was an open computer today. Kirk pulled up a website almost instantly, having been to this particular site several times before. After a minute of navigating, he sat back and motioned towards the screen.

"This is a good one," he said.

Jason glanced at the screen. "Did you write it?"

"I told you, all my stuff is crap," Kirk said. "This, on the other hand, is one of the better ones out there."

Jason glanced over the first few paragraphs. Seeming to find what he wanted, he nodded quickly and said, "Print it."

Kirk looked at Jason uneasily. "It's close to fifty pages. Our limit's ten per day."

Jason grinned widely. "Do it and watch me work," he said.

Kirk gave a sidelong glance to Jason and pressed the button.

Jason nodded and got up, motioning for Kirk to follow. On the way to the circulation desk, he talked to three other people. Kirk hadn't known Jason long, but given his character, it was very likely he had never spoken to these people before. The group of five, three of which looked extremely awkward compared to Jason's confident manner, crowded around the circulation desk.

"Well, how are you today, Jason?" the librarian asked.

"Doin' fine," Jason said. He motioned toward the printer. "That's mine."

The librarian looked at the printer, which was still spitting out pages. "All of this?"

Jason grinned. "Yes—well, you see, ten are mine, ten are Kirk's right here, ten belong to this guy, ten belong to that guy, and ten belong to this very fine young woman right here." He motioned to the different people as he mentioned them, flashing a grin at the girl as he mentioned her. She allowed herself to smile back.

The librarian looked over her glasses. "I really shouldn't do this," she said quietly as she handed the stack of papers to Jason. "And don't try to use the stapler," she said.

"Thank you very much," Jason whispered. He turned to his crowd. "Thanks a lot."

The group dispersed in silence. The girl gave Jason a small wave goodbye as she returned to her seat. Jason waved back and bowed slightly before walking out of the library, Kirk in tow.

"Do you know her?" Kirk asked once they were out of earshot.

"Nope," Jason said, still grinning.

Kirk looked back at the library. "You gonna ask her out?"

Jason's grin vanished. "No..." he said softly. He opened his mouth to say more but decided not to. "Nevermind about that," he said, holding up the freshly printed story. "We've got work to do."

Jason led Kirk outside to an unused corner of the campus. Being juniors, they couldn't get within reach of the senior area, so they settled for a spot near the softball field, ignoring the yells from the ultimate frisbee game going on behind them.

"How much time 'til class?" Jason said.

Kirk checked his watch, perfectly synchronized to the school bell. "Twenty-six minutes... now."

Jason nodded and smiled broadly. "Start reading."

Kirk took a deep breath. "It was a dark and stormy night," he read. Although he didn't care to admit it, he was slightly dramatic by nature, and he allowed himself to get into the story a little more than usual. When he read a line about a "gentle breeze," he thought he felt a breeze blow by. Glancing up, he was surprised to see not the chain-link fence of the softball field but the lush, vibrant landscape he had just read about.

"Jason?" he asked.

Jason turned around. "Why'd you quit reading?"

Kirk glanced from side to side, not sure if he was seeing things. "What..."

Jason held up a hand. "I'll explain later. Keep reading."

Kirk, still very confused, turned back to the paper and read a line introducing the "island's guardian." He thought he saw a familiar red echidna walk by, but he did his best to ignore it.

Tuesday's lunch was a gourmet dish Kirk affectionately called a "rubber chicken sandwich."

The school operated on an alternating day schedule: one day students would go to one set of four classes, the next day they would attend four different classes. Because of this, Kirk and Jason had different classes right before lunch, leaving Kirk alone in the lunch line that day. Falling into his old habits, he took his lunch outside and parked at his usual group's picnic table.

"Yay, it's a Kirk!" Adrienne, a slightly shorter girl with dark brown hair, said playfully from across the table.

Kirk smiled back as he unwrapped his sandwich. "Good to see you too."

Adrienne leaned closer. "So where were you yesterday?"

Kirk started to explain what had happened, but decided against mentioning Jason at this point. "Ah, just hanging," he said dismissively.

That was apparently enough for Adrienne who quickly inserted herself into another conversation with two other people over the merits of Nietzschean philosophy. Kirk just laughed to himself and started on his sandwich. It's a school for the gifted, he thought, so what else did you expect for lunchtime conversation?

Kirk felt a strong pat on his shoulder and turned around to find Jason standing behind him, flashing his trademark grin. "So I guess we're not on for today?" he asked.

Kirk opened his mouth, turned to glance at the group, then turned back to Jason. "No, sorry," he said.

Jason shrugged. "Tomorrow, then?"

Kirk nodded, and Jason walked off. Kirk turned around to find about half the group watching Jason go, the conversation stalled. When he was out of earshot, Adrianne said, "Okay, he's gone; where were we?"

Kirk narrowed his eyes and bit into his sandwich.

The next day's lunch wasn't any better.

"I hate skim milk," Kirk said, "even if it's chocolate. Why'd they have to run out of normal milk?"

Jason grunted and poked at his rice.

Kirk furrowed his brow. "You don't like rice?"

Jason looked up at Kirk. "You ever had a good rice ball?" Kirk shook his head, and Jason continued. "That, my friend, is the way to eat rice. This?" He poked unenthusiastically at his rice again. "This is not rice."

They threw away their trays and most of their lunches with it and made their way back to their spot.

"Now, where were we?" Jason said, cracking his knuckles.

Kirk flipped through the pages. "Well, they just had the big argument..."

"I mean where. Place, setting, that sort of thing."

"Oh." Kirk flipped back a few pages. "The Floating Island."

"And what does it look like?"

Kirk raised an eyebrow. "Um..." He flipped back a few pages, glanced over the text, and started to read. "'The island's aroma'—"

"No," Jason interrupted. "I want you to describe it. Yourself. Where are we?"

Kirk bit his lip. So, Jason wanted to play, did he? "Well, for starters, we're a couple thousand feet in the air, so the air's cool and a little thin... no, wait, it's in the tropics, so the air's a little muggy, like here in Charleston during the summer but a little hotter."

Jason nodded. "What about the place?"

Kirk tried to think, but he kept getting distracted by what felt by a sudden change in temperature. "Did it just get hotter?"

Jason smirked. "Did it?"

Kirk looked at Jason, and in that moment this person—Kirk couldn't call him a friend yet—had a look in his eyes so unfamiliar it threw Kirk off balance. He just stood there, mouth half open, trying to pin down exactly what about Jason was so abnormal.

Jason snapped him back to reality. "What about the place?" he repeated.

Kirk blinked and tried to bring back his train of thought. "Um... palm trees. Really tropical plants, like... short water oaks, not more than twenty feet tall since they've been beaten by the wind so much. And then there's..." He trailed off, searching for more description.

"I got the idea," Jason said, picking up Kirk's slack. "Look around and tell me what else it needs."

Kirk looked around, surprised to see the trees he had just described surrounding them, the air distinctly muggy. "How..." he whispered, then turned to face Jason. "You did this!"

Jason raised an eyebrow and smirked again. "Did I? It was your description, and it needs work."

Kirk winced at the criticism but was determined not to derail his train of thought. "Is it real?"

Jason rolled his eyes. "It's as real as you can make it. So what's it need?"

Kirk bit his lip again and filed the question away for later. At least now he knew he wasn't seeing things the other day; he could play along for now. "Well, for one thing, you can't smell the trees. They've got that thick smell—I think it's chlorophyll. And then there's the ground. I think we're close to the beach, so it's mostly really, really fine sand." As he spoke, the respective changes were made to the world around them.

Jason looked around and nodded in approval. "So," he said, rubbing his hands in anticipation, "there was a massive argument; what happens next?"

Kirk didn't move. "How do you do it?"

Jason feigned confusion. "Do what?"

Kirk motioned with his hands. "This! I'm standing in the middle of a freaking video game! This isn't even supposed to exist. I'm supposed to be behind the softball field wasting time before lunch is..." He trailed off as he saw the softball field and his high school once again.

Jason, meanwhile, had sat down and was now pinching the bridge of his nose, his eyes tightly closed as if he was experiencing a massive headache.

Kirk knelt down in front of him. "You okay?"

Jason took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "You had wonderful suspension of disbelief for a second, and then you lost it on me," he said quietly.

Kirk felt his conscience wince; Jason sounded hurt. "Sorry," he said, "but honestly, what did you expect? I mean..." Kirk tried to find the right words, but Jason spared him the effort.

"It's okay," he said, still breathing heavily. "You did what any human would have done in your position."

Kirk nodded—then caught himself. "Any human? So what does that make you?"

Jason's eyes shot open, and for a brief moment Kirk saw a flash of panic behind them. Only for a moment, though. "Isn't it time for class yet?" he said, calmly attempting to steer the conversation.

Kirk checked his watch. "We have time," he said with a bit more edge than he intended.

Jason sighed and looked up. "How long have we known each other?"

Kirk sat down. "Let's see... We met freshmen year in Dowsley's biology class and again last year in Meany's geometry class, and this year we have history, literature,

study hall, philosophy, and precalculus. Who'da thunkit?"

Jason nodded. "You don't believe in coincidence, do you?"

Kirk shook his head.

"Me neither," Jason said. "And—"

The five-minute warning bell rang. Across the yard the groups of students disbanded and shuffled into two masses slowly oozing into the building.

Jason got up first. "We'll continue this tomorrow; I promise," he said quickly and walked off towards the building, leaving Kirk alone with his thoughts.

The end of the day couldn't come quick enough for Kirk. He and Jason avoided each other the rest of the day, and when the final bell came Kirk took his time getting out of the building. Being Wednesday, his parents had loaned him the car, and he was able to avoid the initial rush to the buses for seats.

"And where have you been?" a loud female voice said at the edge of the parking lot.

Kirk looked towards the voice and sighed. He waved, smiled weakly, and walked over. "Hey, Adrienne," he said, giving her a slight hug.

"So where were you at lunch today?" she said with more than a hint of playful annoyance.

"Oh, I was..." Kirk fumbled over his response. "You know Jason Young?"

Adrianne laughed. "You were hanging out with that weird guy?"

Kirk was surprised. "The self-proclaimed non-conformist is calling someone weird?"

"Duh?" she said, not sure whether or not to take Kirk serious. "He hangs out in the library all the time, no one sees him outside of school, he always looks like he's about to do something crazy, and..."

Despite his mixed feelings, Kirk felt the need to defend Jason. "He seems alright to me," he said, wishing he could have sounded more convicting.

Adrianne gave Kirk a look that could almost be described as horrified. "Just be careful around him," she said, any playfulness gone from her voice.

Kirk was taken aback slightly. "What?"

"I don't trust him," she said. "I don't want anything to happen to my Kirk."

Kirk glanced at his watch more for show than to actually check the time. “Hey, I need to get going...” he said as he backed away.

Adrianne pouted as she waved goodbye.

Kirk did his best to concentrate on the drive home, but his thoughts kept wandering. Not only did he have to work out how he felt about Jason being... something, but he had Adrianne and his entire lunchtime crowd to worry about. He didn't know for sure how everyone else would react, but if Adrianne was any indication he could lose some standing in that group. As much as he wanted to believe that their opinions didn't matter, they did. Those people had been his friends for some time, and he didn't want to do anything they would see as a betrayal.

It didn't help that Adrianne's fears weren't completely unfounded. Kirk couldn't deny that Jason did have a certain aura around him. It had certainly intrigued Kirk at first, but now that he was face-to-face with whatever it was, he wasn't sure how to react. But then again, he had never found anything malicious about Jason, just different. Kirk white-knuckled the steering wheel as he realized what was going on: it wasn't anything specific he—or Adrianne for

that matter—was afraid of; it was just the unknown. Neither of them was sure what Jason was like, or even what he was, Kirk reminded himself.

“It’s not a coincidence,” Kirk said out loud to himself as found his exit. “Me meeting Jason wasn’t a coincidence. So let’s see what happens.”

Kirk could barely pay attention during his morning classes. His sense of anticipation had grown overnight, and the resulting adrenaline made it hard for his mind to stay focused on mundane details of the Civil War. When he and Jason did have the same class, they glanced at each other but didn’t greet each other. When lunch finally came, Jason motioned toward the softball field, away from the cafeteria. Kirk nodded; this was more important than food.

“So what are you?” Kirk said when they reached their spot.

Jason looked around “Are we alone?”

Kirk shrugged. “As alone as we ever were.”

Jason sighed in resignation. “Have you heard of a *kitsune* before?”

Kirk racked his brains. “Somewhere...”

"Probably on those Sonic messageboards. You know his sidekick, that two-tailed fox?"

"Tails?" Kirk said.

Jason nodded. "Yeah. I can't fly, myself, but I can do the whole illusion thing."

Kirk furrowed his brow. "Wait... you're what?"

Jason sighed in frustration. He ran his hands through his hair, and when he pulled them out there were two oversized scarlet fox ears in place of his human ears. Next, he made a face and fidgeted with his pants slightly. He glanced behind himself to make sure no one was looking as seven bushy tails materialized behind him, presumably out of his tail bone.

"I'm a *kitsune*," he said. "But if you call me 'Tails,' I'll claw your eyes out." He flexed his hands, whose fingernails had grown into claws, for dramatic effect.

Kirk looked at Jason. Even with all his mental preparation, he still wasn't prepared for this. His friend wasn't human, and part fox at that. "The scenes, they're illusions?"

Jason nodded. "It usually requires suspension of disbelief, and I can't make them up myself. I have to have experienced it myself or get it from someone

else's imagination."

"Thus, the stories," Kirk said, more to himself than to Jason.

Jason nodded, eying Kirk worriedly.

Kirk bit his lip and looked off to the side, letting everything sink in. His head was swimming with unanswered questions, most of which had just popped up just then. "How many people know?" he asked.

Jason glanced up as he silently counted off names on his claw-like hands. "Apart from the other paranormals downtown, you."

Kirk kept his face blank, but the meaning of that statement was not lost on him. His next question, though, was a little more difficult. "Did I hurt you yesterday?"

Jason smiled genuinely. "It takes someone with a lot of trust and faith to break down an illusion as spectacularly as you did. Yeah, it hurt, but that means I was right about you."

Kirk cocked his head. "Right about what?"

Jason grinned. "Faith the size of a mustard seed."

Kirk raised an eyebrow and suppressed a smile. "So is it hereditary, were you bitten, or what?"

Jason's face darkened. "No, we're not like werewolves; it's hereditary. But... let's not talk about my family right now, please? And before you ask, no, Jason Young is not my real name."

"Why the pseudonym?"

Jason looked to the side and scratched the back of his head. "It's not that I don't trust you. It's that... there's a lot of responsibility involved if you know my real name; I don't want to put you in that position yet."

Kirk nodded, filing away that question for another time; he had heard enough for now. "*Kitsune*. How do you spell that?"

Jason raised an eyebrow and spelled it. "Why?"

Kirk fished out the story they had been reading from his backpack. He scribbled the word on one of the sheets of paper and flipped a few more sheets ahead. "I'll look it up later. Now, where were we?"

Jason raised an eyebrow and smiled. "So you're okay?"

Kirk nodded. "Yes, I'm okay. Now come on, I want to get through this story."

Jason grinned. Kirk watched as the trees and brush he had described the day before grew out of nowhere.

Jason turned back to Kirk with a broad smile, his tails brushing side-to-side in unison. “How much time do we have?”

Kirk looked at his watch.

Kirk and Jason will return.



"Head, Cow, Cattle" by Christophe (via Pixabay)
<<https://wndfx.link/1dCvM>>

A Minor Annoyance

You're staring down a diagram at work, trying to plan out your next course of action. You're close to cracking it, but every time you think you're close, another whiff of a foul smell shoves itself forward and throws off your train of thought.

You can't even go somewhere else to escape it, because it's not *you* that's smelling it: Red's cleaning out the stables, humming a vaguely Mediterranean tune.

After yet another derailment, you wonder how much longer they're going to be cleaning.

You *feel* their eyes roll. It'll be done when it's done.

You understand, but it's also hard to concentrate with that smell.

Kind of hard to clean it out without disturbing it. Besides, Red doesn't notice it anymore.

Well, that block hasn't made its way to your brain yet, and it's making it hard to do your job.

Red angrily shoves their shovel into another patch of caked-on manure. They aren't exactly enjoying this either, but you're the only one making a fuss. Work's got to get done one way or another.

You're not disputing that. You're not even upset that it's happening, you just want to know *how much longer?*

When. It's. Done.

A spike of frustration from Green cuts into your discussion. You need to stop making a big deal out of something Red can't help.

You take a breath in real life and try to push back your frustration.

Red agrees that they can't do anything about the smell.

Green notes that they *can* do something about the singing.

Red thought Green liked it!

Green does! Just not *right now*.

You quickly ask what Green is doing before the conversation can devolve further.

You see them drop their claw-hands to their side and gesture at what is probably a computer. They're trying to pad their word count.

You can't help a bitter chuckle. It seems like all three of you are frustrated with something else right now, not each other.

There's a beat before the other two agree. There's a sense of apology, but the frustration is still there.

"Hey," you hear.

You look up and see a pair of your coworkers. "Afternoon walk?" the first says.

You immediately lock your computer screen and get up. A walk would do you—all of you—some good right now.

Red, Green, and Blue will return.

Ask the Lighthouse

Coda asks Celeste: Does this plan of yours involve a return to Melodia?

Yes.

The queen thinks she knows everything. She keeps pushing this ridiculous notion that love is the greatest source of magical power. Love brings weakness; any idiot child knows that, and yet we spend enormous amounts of energy pretending it doesn't.

If I can't learn true power from her, then I'll find it myself. And with a whole multiverse out there, I've got plenty to learn. And when I've learned enough...

The queen hasn't been challenged in hundreds of years. I intend to fix that.

Ask at wndfx.link/ask

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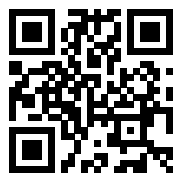
- Jacob
- Heddy2217

As well as everyone that left favorites and comments on the rough drafts.

Most importantly, **thank you for reading!**

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