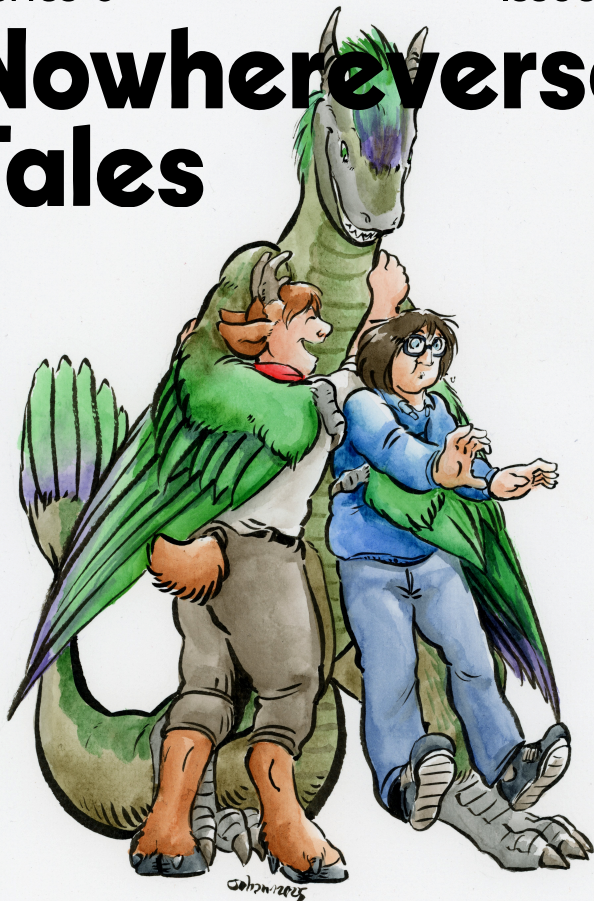


Series 0

Issue 13

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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Shaken from recent experiences, a fresh kitsune goes searching for answers.

Rated Teen: gender questioning, depression, bullying, internalized transphobia

3. The Dedication

You, Red, and Green realize what you mean to each other.

Rated Teen: foreign thoughts, brief language, brief sensual activity, sex mention

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Letter From the Editor

Sometimes we aren't sure.

Sometimes things are confusing. Things we thought were true aren't. (Or maybe they just aren't *as* true as we thought.) And we're left trying to make sense of a new world. We try to figure out our place, where to go, what to do.

Sometimes we find a new purpose, or a new direction. We take our inspiration, we determine what questions can wait, and we move forward. It can come gradually, or all at once. Or maybe both?

But while these are personal questions, we are social creatures. We can't exist in isolation; we need each other. We are capable of great things on our own. But together?

Together we bring light.

—Ronyo

Broken Connection

Jason pinched the bridge of his nose. "How did this happen, again?" he said.

[REDACTED] fidgeted nervously. "Just... woke up one morning—"

"Rule number one, kit," he said with a hint of a snarl, "you can't outfox a fox."

He felt the blood drain from his face and settle in the pit of his stomach. "I just..." He stammered. "It just happened..."

"And what did you do right *before* it happened?"

"Just... driving?"

Jason sighed. "This doesn't just 'happen.' People don't have some *kitsune* in their bloodline that suddenly manifests in their twenties, and I don't know of a single *kitsune* with more than one tail that didn't know how to illusion themselves. You've got three tails, and you're wearing a beanie and a trench coat in the middle of summer to hide them and your ears. So." He fixed [REDACTED] with a glare. "What. Happened."

He could barely think straight because of the fear, almost convinced the man sitting across from him—inhuman as he was—was going to claw his throat out if he answered wrong.

"I'm not from this world," he blurted.

"And there it is," Jason said. "Would it have been so difficult to lead with that?"

"Sorry," he said, still trying to get his heart rate back under control. "You just never know. 'A person is smart; people are dumb,' y'know?"

"Okay, I'll give you that," he muttered. "So your form in this world is a *kitsune*?"

"Apparently," [REDACTED] said with a wry smile. "So can you teach me about this?"

Jason pursed his lips. "I don't think I can." He looked down. "Even putting aside the fact that illusion-crafting is just... *innate* for me, being able to disguise yourself requires a certain confidence in yourself."

His face fell. "Yeah, that'd be a problem," he said quietly.

He nodded. "It's not innate, it's learned. And I'm not talking about 'swagger' or anything like that; it's just about knowing who *you* are."

██████████ wasn't sure it was possible to sink any lower. "That's what I was hoping to find here," he said with a sigh.

Jason took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I'm sorry, man," he said gently. "I'd have trouble helping you with that on a good day, and today's not that." He stood up. "Stay in touch," he said. "I do want to help when I can. What did you say your name was?"

"It's ██████████."

Jason went to enter the name in his phone and stopped, his thumbs hovering over the screen. "How..." He shook his head and brought his eyes back into focus. "How do you spell that?"


██████████ opened his mouth, but all that came out was a grunt. "Just..." He sighed. "Just put it down as 'I.T. Fox.'"

██████████ slammed the car door shut and dropped his head on the steering wheel. "Of *course* it's about knowing who I am," he yelled. "Of course the one thing I need is the one thing I don't have!"

He leaned back in his seat. The motion shifted his hips and pulled on one of his tails that had gotten pinched underneath his leg. With a vulpine yelp he jumped up, freeing his tail but hitting his head on the car ceiling.

He collapsed back in his seat and dropped his head back on the steering wheel. "What's wrong with me," he whimpered. "Can't even spell my own name..."

With a shake of his head he settled into his seat—carefully this time—and started the car. He had a long drive ahead...

 rolled to a stop and switched the car off. The parking lot lights glared off the windshield. He took a moment to center himself before yanking himself out of the car and trudged into the big-box store.

"Don't think about the security cameras," he muttered to himself as he walked in and saw himself on the very obvious security monitor at the front. "Don't think about everyone looking at you. No one here knows who you are, no one's ever going to see you again." He glanced at the occasional blue-vested worker. "Don't think about them talking about you in the break room."

He forced himself to look forward. "And don't be suspicious."

He idly walked through the clothing section, skirting the edge of the intimates before side-eying the dresses.

"No one here knows who you are," he reminded himself. He still couldn't help a furtive glance around before walking into the section.

He tried to browse aimlessly for a moment, but every other sound made his heart rate spike and ground his train of thought to a halt. After several false starts, he grabbed the first black dress he saw, quickly held it up to himself, and hurriedly replaced it with a larger size. With another furtive glance he folded it over itself to make it more indistinct.

He meandered around the store a little more, made a token glance over the printed t-shirts, before walking back to the front. He grabbed a can of Red Bull from a cooler, a pack of peanut M&Ms from a rack, and breathed a sigh of relief as he saw an empty self-checkout.

 walked up to Courtney's desk, taking a spot next to the red-haired elf. "Checking back in," he said.

Courtney and the elf both turned to look at him.
"██████████!" Courtney said with a smile. "How'd it go?
Any luck?"

██████████ winced. "Not much," he said. "Turns out it's one of those 'instinct' things."

"Ouch," Courtney said with sympathy before motioning to the elf. "By the way, have you met Celeste?"

Celeste flashed a winning smile and held out a hand that ██████████ shook. He flinched slightly: she had a firm handshake and a piercing stare that unnerved him slightly. "Nice to meet you," he said, trying to put a better foot forward.

"And you," Celeste said.

"Celeste is helping us scout out the newer portals," Courtney explained. "We were talking about where she should go next."

"Kinda tough when you've been through all of them," Celeste said with a smug smile.

"Wow," ██████████ breathed. "And you ended with Melodia?"

Celeste cocked her head. "What? No." She glanced to Courtney and back to him. "No, I just came from—what did you call it?"

"Deeandee," Courtney said. With a glance to [REDACTED] she added, "Vaguely medieval fantasy."

"Nice," he said. He gestured back to Celeste. "You're a Melodian Elf right now, so I assumed you just came from there. Guess you stopped by after you got back?"

Celeste nodded slightly.

"Anyway," Courtney said, "the Caretaker'll meet you at the bar over there."

Celeste thanked her and started walking over.

[REDACTED] followed close behind her, mentioning he needed to talk to Richard. The two of them sat on a pair of stools at the otherwise unoccupied bar.

"So, *every* world we have a portal for?" he said once they were seated.

"Every one on Courtney's map," Celeste said, not looking directly at [REDACTED].

He nodded. "Are you originally from Melodia, or is it just a favorite form?"

Celeste gave him a side-eyed glance. "From. Why?"

He shrugged. "Just curious, mostly." He shifted in his seat. "Do you tend to have similar forms across worlds?"

Celeste's side-eyed glance took longer this time. "Isn't the point that they're all different?" she said.

"Well, yeah, but..." He shifted again. "Like, I feel like I keep being a shapeshifter. It started with Monster Earth—" He motioned to his fox ears and wiggled them for emphasis. "But it just kept happening," he continued, unable to stop himself. "Pony world? Shapeshifter. Pokémon world? Shapeshifter. Reptilia? Chameleon—which isn't a shapeshifter, but—"

"I think we have those in Melodia," Celeste interrupted, turning to face [REDACTED]. "They're called faceless."

He felt his blood freeze. "That's what they're called?" he murmured.

"I read about them in a survival guide," Celeste continued without pausing. "You have to be careful, because they feed off of the personality and emotions around them. They can mimic someone perfectly, so you'd never know they were there until it's too late." She shook her head. "Kinda sad, really."

He was sure his face was completely pale now. "How so?" he said, his voice small.

"Well, they don't have any personality of their own. They've always got to find someone to mimic. And no one really knows how deep it goes: do they actually have their own looks, their own faces; are their memories theirs or are

those mimicked too? Can they ever be stable, or will they always be hopping between different faces—" She subtly glanced down at his shopping bag. "—and genders trying to find something that can never truly be theirs?"

██████████ was very still, staring at nothing. "So, I should avoid Melodia, then?" he said.

Celeste shrugged. "I mean, no one's completely sure they exist," she said, "so you might not be one of *those*." She made a show of looking him up and down. "Yeah, you seem pretty normal, so you're probably fine."

With that, she hopped off her stool and walked past him. He turned around to see Richard walking up next to the Caretaker—an older gentleman with a shock of salt-and-pepper hair and a fiercely angular face wearing a black pinstripe suit.

"Got another portal?" Celeste said cheerfully.

The Caretaker just stared at her for a moment. "Right," he said in an unplaceable accent, "this way then." And the two of them walked toward the exit.

Richard took his place behind the bar and immediately pulled out a mug. Without saying a word he pulled out a sachel of lemon tea and filled the mug with hot water before sliding it in front of ██████████.

"Am I that obvious?" [REDACTED] said.

"In general?" Richard said in his deep drawl. "No. But I know *you*. And I know that face."

The young *kitsune* sighed. "I thought," he said, "that being out here, that exploring and seeing everything..." He shook his head. "I thought I'd feel closer to whatever I'm supposed to be. But the..."

He took another furtive glance around the room before leaning over the bar. "The wakeup."

Richard didn't react. "That was a couple of months ago," he said. "It's still eating at you?"

[REDACTED] shook his hands and made several half-gestures before just nodding. "Yeah," he spat. "Yeah it is." He dropped his hands on the bar. "And I know there's nothing wrong with being a girl; it's not that. It's that..."

Richard checked his watch and pulled the tea bag out of the mug while [REDACTED] collected his thoughts.


"I thought I knew who I was," he said. "Maybe. I always did joke about not really understanding myself. A laugh and a shrug, and I move on." He sighed. "I'm not laughing now. This one... This feels deeper than just an idiosyncrasy. Like it's something foundational, something I should *know*, and I don't."

He looked up at Richard. "Really feeling the C.S. Lewis quote right now."

Richard nodded. "'The 'made for another world' one?'"

He nodded, his fox ears waving with the motion. "I know he was talking about Heaven," he said, "but I think part of me really hoped that *that* world was out there somewhere, that I'd finally find where I belonged. But all that got me was just feeling like I don't belong *anywhere*."

Richard made a point of glancing around. "You don't belong here?"

 groaned. "Not like that. Everyone here's great..." he said, mentally adding an 'almost.' "It's not that I don't belong here," he said, gesturing to the room. He brought his hand back to his chest. "It's like I don't belong *here*."

"I wasn't offended," Richard said with a smile. "But I wanted to hear *you* explain it."

The *kitsune* blew on the mug and took a tentative sip of the tea. "Got any advice?"

Richard shook his head. "Not really," he said. "This is all really personal, and I don't have any answers for you. But I can remind you of a couple of things, if you want."

"Please."

"First, regardless of how you feel, you're *welcome* here. I know that what we feel doesn't always line up with what's true, so I'm telling you: you're always welcome here."

He smiled slightly. "Thanks, boss," he said.

Richard nodded. "The other thing is: don't ignore the answer. I know these are some big feelings, some big questions, and you're not wrong to be asking them." He leaned onto the bar. "But big questions sometimes have small answers. And sometimes we already know the answer, we just need to accept it."

"Do you think that's what's happening here?"

Richard shrugged. "I can't say. We could dig into it some more, but I'm too invested in being your friend to be your therapist."

██████████ gave a wan smile and held out his fist.

Richard bumped it. "Get some sleep, kid."

██████████ shut the door to his studio apartment and looked down at the shopping bag. He was feeling a little better after his conversation with Richard, and he figured he should seize the opportunity while he had it.

Before he could lose his nerve he tossed the beanie and trench coat to the side and pulled off his shirt and pants. He pulled the dress out of the bag and threw it over his head. He wasn't sure if it actually felt weird, or if it was his imagination, but once it was in place, he turned to his mirror and opened his eyes.

It hugged his body in all the wrong places, tight around his shoulders and bunched up around his waist. It didn't fall well, like it was caught on something.

He looked... disgusting.

With an inhuman growl he yanked it over his head and flung it into some corner of the room. He threw himself onto his bed and curled into a fetal position, his mind screaming unwanted memories and scenarios at him.

Retail employees reviewing security footage and laughing. The pitying look from the older *kitsune*. The red-haired elf's glare. The judgement from strangers and friends alike.

Will they always be hopping between different faces and genders trying to find something that can never truly be theirs?

He squeezed his eyes shut and wished he could cry.

He wasn't sure how long he laid there. It could have been a few minutes; it could have been hours. But eventually he heard something shuffle in his room.

No one had come in, at least not that he heard. He held still, in case someone was still there... nothing. Slowly he opened his eyes and uncurled himself.

There was a plastic container on his small desk. He got up and walked over to it, wracking his brain to remember if he had brought that or not...

It was a single-serve pie—key lime, if the label was to be believed. And though it didn't specifically say so, the design was a dead-ringer for Publix. There was a pink sticky note attached to the container, and a plastic fork was on a napkin next to it. The note was obviously hand-written in a tastefully messy handwriting:

A good pie won't fix everything, but it will help. Enjoy!

It was perfectly chilled, perfectly tart, and the crust was perfectly crunchy. And by the end of it, he did feel a little better.

 will return

The Dedication

When it rains, it pours, as the saying goes.

The text stares at you from your phone screen:

Gabe: So, would you be open to getting dinner sometime?

On a normal day, it would spark some conversation in your head. But this isn't a normal day.

Red is at a gathering—a couple of families/friend groups having a cookout—and a not-unattractive minotaur is very openly flirting with them. And they are flirting back.

And Green is taking another dragon—this one a more Western dragon with four legs and two wings—back to their place.

It makes sense, you all realize. The spark is back. You're all brighter, shining in that way only someone in love does. It's attractive. And when you're not visibly attached...

Gabe is in the group you play trivia with. You shared similar interests, got along well, and generally meshed well. The text you got isn't a surprise, not really. You'd definitely gotten encouragement to send your own.

Green lands on their den balcony. Their tail brushes their date's neck.

The minotaur tosses a grape to Red. They eat it out of the air.

You feel... extremely conflicted. You're happy for them both, really! And it's not like you're lacking in "game" right now yourself. Not to mention that you're physical creatures with physical needs, needs none of you can satisfy for the other.

You'd all suspected this would happen eventually. So naturally you ignored it.

The minotaur finally makes his proposition to Red. You pull back, wanting this to be their choice.

You feel Red hesitate. They shake their head slightly, demurring but with a friendly promise. "It was fun," they say. "I hope you're at the next cookout."

The minotaur turns away for a moment before looking back with a forced smile. But he agrees and promises to look out for them.

And you're both immediately distracted by Green. They're inside the den. And making out heavily.

Green gently bites their date's neck. He moans and scrapes his forepaws on Green's chest. Their tails are rubbing and coiling around each other.

You and Red are in perfect agreement: Green can *get it*. You can feel yourself heat up, and Red is doing their best to excuse themselves.

The other dragon snakes his neck over Green's shoulder and nibbles on the nape of their neck. Green looks down at them, wrapped in their wings...

They pull back.

The other dragon is confused. "Is everything okay?"

Green shakes their head. "It's not you," they say.

The dragon gives them a knowing look. "I'm just not who you want," he says.

Green just nods. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have..."

The dragon picks himself up. "No, you shouldn't have." He pads over to the door, but stops at the threshold. "At least tell me I'm not a revenge fuck," he growls.

"What? No!" Green shakes their head and hold up their wing-claws. "It's a distance thing."

The dragon rolls his eyes, but smiles slightly. "Then do us both a favor, hatchling, and have some phone sex like a normal person."

The door closing doesn't echo dramatically like you were afraid it would.

You look back down at your phone. The message comes naturally.

Me: Full disclosure, I'm not looking to date. But if you're up for it, I'd love to hang out as friends. You're a lot of fun, and I'd love to get to know you more.

Okay, Green says, but that minotaur was *hott*. Red giggles in their head. He was honestly average. Seriously?

Yeah... for a minotaur, they add with a smirk.

You start fanning yourself. Lawd, help me, you think in your best Southern Dame accent. Mentally, you pantomime claws across a chest.

Red gives a growl of their own.

Green tries to stuff down the pang of regret. Laugh it up, they say, we've all turned down solid hookups in the last hour.

You had solid hookups, you say. Mine was just an offer of a date.

Seriously, Blue? Red says. Did you *see* the way Gabe was looking at you at trivia? That "just a date" would have gone as far as you wanted.

You don't believe that. Something about this situation isn't adding up for you. I didn't make either of you miss out, did I? you ask.

Green feels genuinely confused. I didn't send him away because you're jealous, they say. With a mental blush they add, Of course, if you asked I would have.

But these were choices we made, Red continued. Because it doesn't feel fair to screw someone else when we just want to screw each other.

You come up short. "Why?" you blurt out loud.

Red starts to reiterate, but you interrupt them. "No, why *me*? Euty, you're a fire, you light up every single room you go into, you make everyone around you smile, you're jacked as hell, and you just have so much love. You're amazing is what you are.

"And Alec," you continue, "you are just incredibly brave, you stand up and shout things I'm too afraid to think, and you never stop trying to be better and make everything around you better, and I know everyone around you can fly but you make it look so effortless and beautiful.

“So why?” you finish with a sniff. “Why would you throw all that away for me? All I bring is... sadness.” You wipe your nose on your sleeve. “When we were falling out, I’m the one that got suicidal. When we were evolving, I didn’t join in with joy, or with happiness; it was when I got sad and drug you down with me. And when we became permanent, it was when I had that huge fight with my roommate.” Another sniff. “I don’t doubt the strength of your convictions, I just... you shouldn’t.”

Your chest feels lighter. You’ve named the feelings.

And Red is *furious*. More furious than you’ve ever felt them. And it comes through as this raw emotion: don’t talk about my friend/family/partner/spouse like that.

Do you think I’m just naturally bright? they say. That I’m out here living life and you’re dragging me down?

You can barely form the affirming thought before they continue.

I’m happy, they say. I’m happier than I’ve been in a long time. I haven’t had that much fun at the spring festival in years. I’m trying new things that I just wouldn’t have bothered with. And it’s because I’m sharing it *with you!* You’re so curious and open and just in awe of everything. I burn brighter because I have you to burn for.

Their words pierce you. You're speechless, dumbfounded. You never expected to be that valuable to anyone else.

You're included, Green, Red says, poking them.

Green is silent.

A pang of worry cuts through you. "Alec, I'm so—"

You're pulled into a vision. Your senses blank out. You're no longer on your bedroom floor.

You see Red, a fiery titan with glowing fists piercing the darkness. You see Green, bedecked in armor, claws at the ready, screeching into the black. You see a blazing connection between the two, a sympathetic feedback loop strengthening them.

And you're between them, kneeling on the ground, arms outstretched towards them both. A blue connection flows from each arm deep into Red and Green. It's holding them there, tethering them to you.

Like I said, you say, I'm just holding you back.

Green forces your perspective closer. It's a desperate, urgent feeling. You *need* to see this.

And you see that the blue glow isn't just coming from the tethers. It's beneath the three of you, solidifying the ground.

Winds come in. Waves and gusts come from the darkness. But Red and Green don't lose their footing. Because you're there.

You aren't weighing them down; *you're holding them up.*

Do you see? Green yells, desperate and passionate and frantically *loving*. Do you see who you are? You believe in a better world so strongly that it hurts! I can only fight for it because you know it's there.

You were the one to get help when we were falling out. You're the one that pulls me up on my worst days. And don't forget—don't you *ever* forget—that when we first discovered we were in different worlds, *you dared to hope!*

And what did that get us? you say in despair.

Everything!

And the vision changes. Instead of the oppressive darkness, it's the gentle light of an evening. Outside your circle is still formless and vague, but peaceful. And the three of you are there together. Holding and being held. Leaning and supporting.

It got us each other, Green says. And that is no small thing.

You're facing Red and Green, hand-to-hand-to-hand. You feel an inkling of touch, but you know it's imaginary. You look at each other, sensing your love echoed and reinforced.

Red, Green, and Blue, Green says. The three parts of visible light.

Red giggles. Did you realize that when you came up with it? they ask.

You shake your head. No, it just fit.

It really does, Green says, face serious. You can feel the gravity of what they're about to say, the atmosphere in this strange place growing heavy.

Three is a pattern across our worlds, they say. Two strands are twisted; three are a rope. Two times is a coincidence, three is a pattern. Two anchor points will fall; three is a structure. I'd continue, but...

You and Red chuckle.

We have power, Green says. We may not know what brought us together, what created this bond, but we decided to keep it. There is real power in a trinity, in what we are. How will we use it?

The answer comes across your bond. It resonates deep within you, within each of you. There's no hesitation, this is only putting in words what each of you already knows in your hearts.

Where there is pain, Red says, we bring healing.

Where there is captivity, Green says, we bring freedom.

Where there is despair, you say, we bring hope.

Together, we bring light.

You feel this new conviction settle inside you. It fuses to your bones, surges through your veins, fills you with purpose.

You blink. You're back on your bedroom floor. Green is in their den. Red is around a corner from the main party.

Red jumps to their hooves and trots back to the party. Green shakes their head and ruffles their feathers. You get up, but you feel different. Red and Green have been with you constantly for a while now, but now it feels like a physical presence inside you, a weight in your chest that wasn't there before.

And even as the sun goes down, your room feels just a little brighter.

The Lightbringers will return.



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Ask the Lighthouse

Coda asks Blue: You did remember to tell Red and Green your name, right?

Yeah, we did all make sure we knew each other's names properly. We'd heard them over the couple of months we'd had full senses, of course. But there's a difference between hearing a group of sounds and knowing it means *someone*.

Anyway, ever since The Breakdown, we're making a point to refer to each other by name when we're talking to other people. How can we expect others to see us as real people if *we* don't treat each other that way?

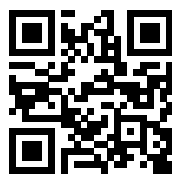
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Most importantly, **thank you for reading!**



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