

Series 0

Issue 14

# 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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# Letter From the Editor

...yeah, I got nothing.

I wanted to do these like a Rod Sterling-style Profound Statement™ to introduce the main story of the issue. You know, something timeless (last year's post-election thoughts not withstanding). But I got nothing this time.

I think it's because we got a new puppy in the house. He's house trained for the most part, but we're still learning each other's communication styles. Testing boundaries and figuring the relationship out. Like having to actually get up when the sun is up and not understanding that some people like to *sleep in*.

Maybe there is some kind of metaphor there. But I'm honestly too tired to find it right now.

—Ronyo



# Exile With Another Motive

"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.

The lighthouse was a fair distance away, and they were still walking.

Celeste rolled her eyes behind the Caretaker's back. "We can't just put all the portals in one place, of course," she mumbled.

"Yeah?" the Caretaker called over their shoulder. "When you learn sixth-dimensional geography and can cross that with twelve-dimensional geometry, you can talk."

Celeste sneered. "It was just a statement—"

The Caretaker rounded on her, livid. "Don't. Lie. To me," they snarled.

Celeste backed off, holding her hands up. "Hey, take it—"

"It's not 'just' a statement," they continued. "Nothing's ever 'just' something with you. You know you're not the smartest in the room, and I'll give you that, but you're sure you're the most clever. You're always looking for angles, sniffing for whatever leverage you can scrape off of people, and you think you're getting away with it. Well, not with *me*."

Celeste just raised an eyebrow. "Okay?"

The Caretaker seethed for a minute before stepping back. "These are good people," they said, their voice softer. "Good people doing good things in a cruel multiverse."

"I know," Celeste said, still holding her hands up, "which is *why* I'm helping them."

"Right," they said, eyes narrow. "And when they've outlived their usefulness to you, what then?"

Celeste put her hands down. "Probably the same thing that'll happen when I've outlived *my* usefulness to *them*?"

The Caretaker stared her down a moment. "If you cross them," they said, their voice low, "you will face me."

Celeste smirked. "No offense, but is that supposed to scare me?"

The Caretaker didn't smile. "You know you're not the smartest in the room," they said. "Consider what you don't know." They turned around and resumed the march.

Celeste rolled her eyes and pantomimed a mouth talking with her hand before she started walking.

"Or you can just keep making faces behind my back," the Caretaker called.

Celeste's steps didn't falter.

They came to a twenty-foot tall cliff of hard clay. "Right," the Caretaker said, "this is what I needed you for."

Celeste looked up. "You can't just climb up? Most of the species in Reptilia that I saw had claws."

"Putting aside the fact that I've never been there," the Caretaker grouched, "we don't need to get to the top."

Celeste looked at the cliff face and groaned. "You need me to dig?"

The Caretaker nodded. "Shouldn't be much trouble for an accomplished mage such as yourself," they said. They narrowed their eyes and added, "Unless you'd rather use those reptile claws you mentioned."

"Right," Celeste said with a roll of her eyes. "Let's walk *all* the way across Nowhere to the Reptilia portal, walk in, walk out, and then walk *all* the way back here."

The Caretaker stared at Celeste.

Celeste stared back.

"You keep the lies straight," the Caretaker finally muttered. "I'm impressed. No," they said at a more normal volume, "magic should be fine. The portal's about four feet in and six feet up."

Celeste got into position and started forming glyphs with her hands. "What was that about?" she said.

"Oh, nothing," they said, sounding much more jovial than normal. "Just the ramblings of a daft old fool."

Celeste glanced at them but let the matter drop. She held her hands up and activated the spell. A red glow cut into the cliffside in a perfect square. Celeste pulled back with her hands, and the affected clay fell out of the cliff. The resulting hole was half a foot deep.

Celeste sighed. "This might take a little while."

The Caretaker shrugged. "Still quicker than I could do it, so you have my thanks."

.....

The dig took a couple of hours, with a few stops to transmute the walls of the tunnel to be more sturdy. But Celeste finally pulled the last mass of clay out of the tunnel to reveal the portal at the end.

"Finally," she said with a smile. She waved her arms and shaped most of the dug-out clay into a set of steps.

The Caretaker nodded from their seat on a nearby rock. "How long will that transmutation hold?"

"The transmutation is permanent," Celeste said. "The *structure*, on the other hand..." She shrugged. "I'm pretty sure it won't come down in the next few hours."

"Right. I'll get something for that."

Celeste glanced at the Caretaker. "You know I'm going straight in, right?"

"I expected nothing less." They held up their hand and motioned for Celeste to wait.

Celeste put a hand on her hip and cocked her head.

"You're going to outlive your usefulness to them," they said, leaning forward from their seat. "And when you do, nothing will change. You'll still have a place to stay, meals to eat, and friends to see."

Celeste shook her head. "Everyone wants something."

"Aye, and you're giving them what they want now. But their kindness doesn't end there."

"I'll remember that," Celeste said. She started to move towards the portal but stopped and turned to face the Caretaker.

"Actually, no," she snapped. "I've been to every world we have a portal for. You've *watched* me go to every world we have a portal for. And there's not a single world where people are just like that. Everyone wants something, and everyone plays everyone else to get it." She smirked. "Some people are just more honest about it."

The Caretaker just stared at her. "Bartering, leverage, trade," they said. "That still happens. I'm not saying everyone has pure motivations—that *anyone* has pure motivations. But if you think that's all there is?"

They stood up. "One day," they said quietly, "you'll see that you're wrong. I just hope when you do, it's not too late." They walked back towards the Lighthouse.

Celeste tossed up her arms. "Again, is that supposed to scare me?"

"No, Celeste," the Caretaker called over their shoulder, not slowing down. "I happen to like you. And if you weren't so cynical, we'd be friends."

Celeste turned away and started forming a spell construct in front of her. Nothing large, just a long, narrow crystal shape. Before it could finish forming, she grabbed it with one hand and snapped it in half with a growl. "Stupid bastard," she whispered, barely audible to herself. "Who does he think he is?"

Before she could get lectured again she strode toward the steps and the portal. She pulled her notebook and pen out of a pocket as she walked up to the portal—no guarantees her robes would be accessible. And without missing a step, she walked through.

She felt the portal's energy pull and shape her. It wasn't as painful as the first time she went through another portal, though her first time in a new form always brought more aches and pains than subsequent trips. But the changes this time felt minimal.

She stumbled out of the portal and stayed on two feet. She was in a field with short grasses at night. It was well-lit by the nearly-full moon over her head, though there was a red glow coming from something nearby.

She pulled her notebook in front of her and nearly dropped it in surprise: the red glow was her. Her skin was glowing a faint red, the same hue as her magic. That

couldn't be a coincidence.

Quickly she checked the rest of her. Her body seemed to be roughly the same shape; maybe trending more "lanky" than "elegant," but still elvish. Her face and hair were unchanged, but her ears were blunted and human-like.

She couldn't help the giggle. Human ears!

Her musings were interrupted by a sound coming from one of her pockets, specifically the magically-enlarged bigger-on-the-inside pocket. She flung her hand into the pocket and fished around for the device, racking her brain for what it could—wait.

She pulled out a communications device. It was small but sturdy, folded closed and with a military crest on it. And it was sounding a three-note chime every second.

She remembered who had given this to her. A human, in the same military uniform. When he had heard she was going to different worlds, he had asked her to carry it just in case it got a signal.

Well, apparently it got one. She flipped it open.

The ringing stopped. A green light blinked on the open face. "Captain Baker?" a young voice—deeper, probably male—said.



Celeste just stood there, not sure what her best move was.

"Captain Baker," the voice said again, "this is Ensign Malcom at central communications; do you copy?"

Celeste went to close the device before she remembered the most important detail the human—Captain Baker?—had mentioned: they were trying to find their home. If his communicator was getting a signal...

She steeled herself and spoke. "This is Mage Celeste of Tenopolis," she said, hoping her title would smooth over any faux pas she was committing. "Captain Baker gave me this device for safe-keeping."

She heard someone scrambling on the other end. "Uh..." A shuffle of papers. "Greetings, Mage Celeste of Tenopolis. This is Ensign Malcom of the UNGP. Are you in contact with Captain James Baker?"

"I am," Celeste said. "You probably want to talk to him?"

"Talk to him?" Ensign Malcom nearly yelled, incredulous. "Do—are you aware he and his entire colony have been missing for nearly a year? Presumed dead?"

Celeste breathed a sigh of relief as the rest of the pieces fell into place. "Well, Ensign Malcom," she said with a smile, "I've got good news."

"They're alive?"

"They're alive."

She heard something between a laugh and a sob from the other end before Ensign Malcom yelled away from the microphone, "Lieutenant! Europa-22! They're alive!"

Celeste couldn't help but smile broadly.

"Mage Celeste?" Malcom said, his voice clearer.

"I'm here," she said.

"How soon until we can talk to Captain Baker?"

Celeste bit her lip. "I'd say it's an hour round trip from the portal back to—wait, do you know about the multiverse?"

"We know a little bit. Captain Baker's last message mentioned a portal and a pocket universe, but we couldn't make sense of it. You're..." A pause. "They're in another dimension?"

"Basically," Celeste said. "There's portals going out to other worlds and their location is fixed. The portal I just walked through is about a half hour from the main compound, so it'll be at least an hour before he can be here."

"I'll inform the—oh, sorry!" There was a shuffling on the other end, and a new voice—this one much older—joined in.

"Mage Celeste, this is Lieutenant Sawyer," the newcomer said. "First, I should inform you that these lines are recorded. Is that an issue?"

"Thanks for letting me know," Celeste said, inwardly reminding herself to be more guarded. "It's not a problem."

"We appreciate that. Second, we are triangulating your current position. Are you at the portal now?"

Celeste nearly dropped the device as she scanned the horizon for anything approaching, but she didn't see anything. "I am," she said. "If that's the case I'll go get the captain no—"

"If you could wait a moment, Mage Celeste," the lieutenant interrupted. "We don't have a precise location yet, and it will take us at least as long to get there as it will take you to return with Captain Baker. I will assume you are a civilian? Not military?"

Celeste kept her eyes peeled. "That's correct," she said, her voice much more wary.

"Then I am not in a position to give you orders. I would ask, though, that you remain on the line for another moment so we can finish the trace."

Celeste relaxed, but only a little. "I can do that," she said. "Any way you want to pass the time?"

The lieutenant chuckled. "In truth, I was hoping you could answer a quick question for me."

"Go ahead."

"You have knowledge of other dimensions in the multiverse, correct?"

Celeste smirked to herself. "Some knowledge, yes."

"Do you know of any that have a Pangean—or human—earth around the early twenty-first century?"

Celeste knew the answer, and it was non-specific enough that she felt she could give it. "There's a few, yes."

A sigh. "Thank you, Mage Celeste," the lieutenant said with an audible smile. "You just helped explain about a dozen open investigations."

Celeste knelt down and put the communicator on the ground as she thumbed through her notebook. "Out of curiosity," she said, "can you tell me about them? The investigations?"

"I can't be too specific—"

"That's fine."

"But it involves some mysterious appearances we've had. Have you seen anything similar, or perhaps some corresponding disappearances?"

Celeste finally stopped on a nearly-full page:

- Mammalia x4
  - Tom Chalmers: human, USA?
  - Evie Parker: human, Australia
- Reptilia x2
  - Roy and Ann James, US UK??
- Diandee x1?
- Monster Earth x3

She added one more line:

- [tbd] x12?
  - See Lieutenant Sawyer, UNGP

"Not really," she said to the communicator, "but I'll get in touch if I see anything of interest."

Captain Baker, of the United Navy of Guldor and Pangea, sat in the dining area. He was wearing his uniform unbuttoned over a casual shirt and snacking on a banana while pouring over a tablet computer.

"Captain Baker?"

He looked up to see someone looking very anachronistic as a red Guldorian in Melodian mage robes. Wait, Melodian...

"I'm sorry," he said, stumbling over his words, "was it Celeborn?"

"Celeste," Celeste said. "I'm impressed; I don't know if *I'd* recognize me with this face."

Baker nodded but pressed his mouth shut. "Well," he said after a moment, "given you look like a Guldorian right now, did you...?"

Celeste smiled and held out his communicator. "They're expecting you in half an hour, Captain."

Captain Baker nodded. He stood up slowly and walked around his table to stand in front of Celeste.

Celeste handed him the communicator.

He didn't take it. In one swift motion he grabbed her in a bear hug and leaned on her shoulder.

Celeste stood there in shock for a moment before bringing her arms around him in turn.

He didn't cry, but he did take a few shaky breaths.

Celeste patted him on the back after a moment. "Alright there, Captain?"

Captain Baker cleared his throat. "Yes, thank you."

The two separated, and Baker took the communicator. "So we're clear," he said, "you found our home world?"

"The latest portal goes there, yes," Celeste said.

He nodded. "Great. That's..." He nodded again and blinked. "Really great." Another blink. "I should get my counterpart," he said. "I think he's at the Lighthouse."

He started walking that way. Celeste quickly caught up to him and handed him the tablet he'd left on the table.

"Right," he said, taking it. "I, uh..." He cleared his throat again. "I'm in your debt, Celeste."

Celeste shook her head. "Anyone would be a little scattered in your position."

"What?" He went to gesture but felt the tablet in his hand. "Oh, no, I meant..." He sighed. "For doing the work, for finding the right portal..." He shook his head. "If there's anything I can do for you, now or in the future..."

Celeste gave herself a moment to think. "I come from a peaceful world, Captain," she said. "And I'm thankful for that. But..." She sighed. "I know there's a lot out there that isn't peaceful."

Baker hummed in agreement.

"I'm assuming there's an academy on your world," she said, looking carefully out the corner of her eye. "Is there a self-defense course I can take?"

"Yes," Baker said without hesitation. "We can absolutely make that happen."

"Wonderful," Celeste said with a smile.

Celeste, still a Guldorian, wearing a svelte bodysuit underneath her robes, climbed the stairs to her apartment's floor and froze: someone was at her door. She quickly threw herself against the wall and felt for her new personal stunner strapped to her thigh. Carefully, she tried to get a better look at the assailant...

It was the IT guy, whatever his name was.

Celeste rolled her eyes but smiled confidently. This would be easy. She resumed her stride toward her door and schooled her face into a fierce glare.

"Are you trying to break in?" she demanded once she was a few steps away.

"Wha—" The IT guy stumbled backwards, nearly dropping his phone. "No, I—Celeste! You're back."

"Yeah," Celeste said, hands on her hips. "Couple months of military training and back just in time to catch you trying to break into my apartment. Why? Trying to get my underwear?" She gave him a quick up-and-down glance, savoring the way he wouldn't make eye contact or stand at his full height. "What, did you run out of yours? Thought you'd steal mine? Pervert."



"No!" he yelled. "No, it—the lock!"

"Yeah, I caught you trying to pick it!"

"I wasn't picking it—I couldn't even touch it!"

"Why were you even trying to touch it? Thought you could get my fingerprints?"

"No, I was—why would I even—look, just—"

"A pervert and an identity thief! What would Richard think about that?"

"UPGRADES!" he finally yelled, glaring at her. "I was trying to upgrade the locks and yours wasn't showing up so I came over here to see if something was wrong and obviously nothing's wrong so..." He stood there, lips pressed together, hands balled into fists shaking at his sides.

Celeste just sneered. "Stars, you're pathetic," she said.

He opened his mouth but nothing came out. With a sigh he walked past her towards the exit.

As he sank out of sight down the stairwell Celeste's sneer turned to a sadistic grin. She waited a moment longer until she was sure she was completely alone, then focused back on her door.

It was a magical lock. It required a certain set of ideas in a certain order. And it required magic. Magic that didn't exist in her Guldorian body.

She closed her eyes and focused on what it felt like to be an elf. The feelings, the sounds, the sights as she learned about magic, crafted her first spell, went through that first portal. Focused on it, and commanded her body to *be* it.

Quickly, a wave of dull sparks, like sand or dust, spread over her body. Her ears pointed out, her skin went from red back to the pale color she was born with, and her curves became a little more pronounced.

She opened her eyes and held out her hand. Now that she had magic, the door opened easily. Quickly she walked in and shut the door, reapplying the seal.

She walked over to one wall and transmuted a pair of hooks out of it. Gently, she laid her new personal stunner on them, then stepped back to take in the entire wall and all the weapons hung on it. Blunt instruments like batons and staves gave way to tasers and sonic cannons surrounding her lethal options: a pair of pistols and a pair of swords.

Celeste mentally catalogued her options and her training with each of them. Slowly, a smile began to form.

"It's time," she said.

Celeste will return.

# A Bad Night

It's been seven years.

Seven years since you first saw Red and Green through their own eyes. Seven years since you learned you lived in separate worlds. Seven years since you quoted C. S. Lewis and promised you would be together anyway.

Seven years of waiting. Of navigating falling deeper in love with people you could only interact with from a distance. Of seeing and experiencing lives you thought only existed in people's imaginations. Of loving and being loved by two of the most incredible people you've ever had the privilege of knowing.

Seven years of having two-thirds of your heart somewhere else.

Green is alone in their apartment. Red has escaped to a barn on their family's farm. You're alone in your living room. And the three of you are allowing yourselves time to mourn.

You're consciously trying not to turn the problem over for the thousandth time. Green, likewise, is trying not to figure out next steps for you three, whatever those steps might be. There will be plenty of time for that later. And as for turning the problem over, well...

It's been seven years, and none of you have any idea where to begin. At this point, you wonder if you just need to accept the obvious conclusion:

It's never going to happen.

You take a sip from your tea. It's a strong herbal tea with nothing—no sugar, milk, nothing—added. Your compromise with yourself since you really, *really* don't think drinking is a good idea right now.

Red, true to form, doesn't want to accept defeat. You try to re-frame it, change the meaning, but it's a trick that doesn't work, not now at least.

There's movement out the corner of Red's eye: the minotaur is back. You remember him from years ago, when you, Red, and Green were still figuring out your relationship. And from what you see now, the years have been good to him. *Very* good.

Red invites him over. He sits next to them in the hay, and they slip under his arm to lean their back against his chest. They talk: he has a girl somewhere else and Red wants to know how he handles it. He asks about you... kind of. He knows Red is in a long-distance relationship, but nothing else.

Red tells him a little more. That there's two of you, that you're impossibly separated, and they need to accept it.

"I'm never going to hold them," they say in their language. They list off different parts of their life that you can only ever see from a distance, and each one breaks your heart—all of your hearts—a little more. Everything they say is nothing you don't already know, but hearing them say it makes it real in a way it wasn't before. "I'll never give them a hug," they say, "hold them close, tell them how much I love—"

They break down fully, turning against the minotaur's chest and sobbing loudly and uncontrollably.

You put your head in your hands and just sit. Your breathing gets a little ragged, but you're not crying. Red's doing enough for all of you.

The minotaur puts his hand on Red's back, pulls them closer to him. Red clings to him like someone drowning. You and Green cling to the feeling, the touch both comforting you and reminding you of the separation.

After a moment, Green huffs—a very dragon-like snort—and picks up their phone. A half thought floats among you, and you do the same.

Sometimes it feels like you don't have many friends. But you do have some.

And maybe now is a good time to not be alone.

The porch door opens, and you saw a woman with blonde hair framing a soft, round face. "Wow," Gabe says, "you look rough." She steps to the side and motions you in.

You give a weary smile that doesn't reach your cheeks, much less your eyes. "Thanks for letting me come over," you say as you walk past her into the quiet house.

She closes the door behind you. You hand her the drink carrier and drop your winter coat onto the chair by the door. You follow her into the kitchen where she puts the drinks on the table, turns around, and catches you in a hug. It's gentle, but firm.

"What are friends for?" she says.

It's an interesting friendship you developed, especially after the gentle rejection you texted her back when you were all figuring yourselves out. But she ended up being someone you trusted, and that's someone you need now.

You take your seats at the table, you across from her. You have your peppermint mocha—decaf, since it's after eight—and she has her iced chai latte. A hot chocolate—labelled Juan—sits to the side.

"I still don't get how you can drink something cold this time of year," you say with a smile.

Gabe makes eye contact and takes a long pull from her drink. "I sleep with a space heater," she says.

Said space heater quietly walks into the room and takes the seat next to Gabe. "Yup, that's me," he says. To Gabe, he adds, "I think she's down, but I'm watching the monitor." He holds up his phone for emphasis.

Gabe nods, and they both turn to you. You can't help but think back to a similar conversation setup almost seven years ago. "Thanks for having me," you say again. "I don't have many friends that know about... about Euty and Alec."

Juan perks up. Gabe stiffens but keeps eye contact. "Is everything alright?" Juan says.

You nod, but it turns into a head tilt. "We don't remember when the bond first started," you say. "It was always very subtle until it wasn't. Just ideas, feelings, thoughts." You take a sip. "Seven years ago tonight is when we first got senses."

"So, seeing what they see?" Juan asks.

You nod. "And knowing how impossible it is to be together."

Juan's face falls, but Gabe cuts in. "Do you want to talk about them? Or about something else?"

You look at her and wince internally. "I know you don't exactly like—"

She holds up a hand. "This is about you, not me. What's going to help?"

You feel inside yourself, feel the ache of separation...

"Can I tell you about them?" you find yourself saying, because you realize you need to remember *why* it hurts.

Gabe reaches across the table and puts her hand on yours. Juan leans forward.

You take a breath. "Eutychia is a faun that works the land. They know when a field needs to rest, and when it's ready to grow. They know how to sow the seed and be light on their hooves as they do it.



"And they know how to *move*. How to let the music fill them and spin and leap and weave and dance with complete and total abandon. How to be unrestrained and full of *life*."

You take another breath and a sip of your drink. "Alec is a wyvern that sees the world as it is. They see people and events and connect them to others. They see actions and consequences and how people react.

"And they take what they see and put it into words that *show* what's happening, that take these far-off stories and make them real, make them tangible."

You look up to see Juan and Gabe looking back at you. "They sound incredible," Juan says.

You smile and feel your breath catch at the back of your throat. "They really are," you whisper.

You take another sip of your drink and clear your throat. "But how are y'all doing?"

The Lightbringers will return.

# Ask the Lighthouse

**Coda asks Blue's Friends:** You took Blue's revelation of a mental connection across worlds well. What are your thoughts about the things going on with them?

That was very kind of h—*them* to portray us that way. I'm guessing they glossed over the literal hour and a half of questioning we did. Why hadn't they gotten checked out? Were they sure they weren't just hallucinating? Seriously, have they gotten checked out? They couldn't *prove* anything to us, but... seeing the pain they were in, how frayed they were... *They* believed it was real, and we had to accept that. And after the weekend, we'll admit we believe them too.

Plus, what they're describing? It's not as outlandish as a man coming back from the dead. If we claim to believe that, then...

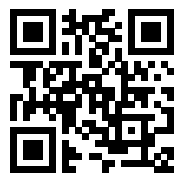
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