

Dana, at the suggestion of everyone involved, had opted for the All-Star Special: a waffle, eggs, sausage, hash browns, and toast.

"God," Jordan said, eyeing Dana's plates with envy, "I used to put that away in college."

"What's stopping you now?" Dana said.

Jordan winced. "I've got a desk job, I don't exercise as much as I should, and my metabolism finally slowed down when I hit my 30s."

Dana shrugged as she took another bite. "I don't do *that* much heavy lifting," she mumbled.

Jordan pressed their hands together and pointed them at Dana. "Ma'am," they said, "with all due respect—and I do mean with *all* due respect, you are, as the kids would say, *jacked AF*."

Dana just raised an eyebrow and chewed her mouthful of food.

Richard bumped Jordan with his elbow. "It's not her fault she's the biggest and the strongest," he said theatrically. "She doesn't even exercise."

Jordan smiled broadly, though they blinked back some tears at the same time. "Oh," they said, "I like y'all."

Suddenly Dana's eyes got wide. "Oh, shoot, sorry!" she blurted. "What's your car called?"

Richard chuckled. "A *Jeep*."

Dana sighed. "Right, that." She looked back at Richard and thumbed over her shoulder. "Your Jeep's out back, just needs gas. Where're you headed?"

Richard smiled broadly. "Justine's taking the job."

"Ha!" Dana jumped back from the car and yelled joyously at the ceiling, all four arms lifted up. She let them down and looked back at Richard. "Why the Jeep, though? I can have the panel truck ready in an hour."

"We'll need that," he said, "but not yet. She wants to meet in person, probably just to hash out what her contract'll look like."

"Right," Dana said, and Richard saw her deflate just a little. "Right, yeah, she'll need some time. That's..." She sighed. "Yeah."

Richard peered at Dana who was idly picking at some grime on the side of the truck.

"If you wanted to come along," he ventured, "I don't see why you couldn't."



Series 0

Issue 16

Nowhereverse Tales



He saw her eyes go wide for a fraction of a second. "I... shouldn't." She tapped on the frame. "I got stuff to do." She flicked her tongue. "Plus it'd be weird, right?"

"Not necessarily," Richard said. "It's not unusual to have company on a road trip."

Dana didn't seem convinced. Richard racked his brain for some other reason for Dana to come along...

"Hey," he said with a broad smile, "We never actually got to Waffle House, right?"

Dana shook her head as Richard pulled onto the highway at the base of the mountain. "Sheesh," she breathed, "I don't know how y'all function like this."

"Like what?" Richard said with a grin, "only two arms?"

"No tail!" Dana yelled, her hair falling in front of her now-human face. "And yeah, only two arms. I can hold the door and the armrest, and that's it!" Richard heard her hit the base of the seat with her feet. "But I keep trying to wrap my tail around the seat."

Richard nodded. "I guess driving down a mountain isn't the first thing you want to do after switching bodies."

"You think?"

It was Dana's turn to smirk. "When the nearest city is hours away and hard to get to, you got to have someone like me around."

Jordan sighed. "I'd love a job like that. I'm a software engineer, myself; but just being able to see the people you're helping, *know* you're solving a real problem, that's the life."

Dana fished her phone out of her pocket. "It's a lot of fun, too." She pulled up some photos—Richard recognized it as the truck she was working on this afternoon. "Trying to retro-fit an electric engine into one of these."

Jordan watched as she flipped through. "That's some good work," they muttered.

Dana glanced at them, but their attention was fully on the phone. "You know cars? Thought you were a software kid."

Jordan shook their head. "I am, but my partner is all over this kind of stuff. Think they've got one of these, in fact."

The food took that moment to show up. Jordan's usual was apparently a waffle and two eggs. And Richard had a bacon, egg, and cheese sandwich.

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.

To be continued...

shuddering breath and let it out slowly. "I'd give anything just to g—" Their voice cracked, and they swallowed another sob. "Just to give them a hug."

They glanced at Richard and Dana and added, "We can't be together. Extraordinary circumstances. We accepted that five years ago."

"And yet you're still in a relationship?" Richard said.

Jordan nodded. "They're part of me, you know?" they said, hand to their heart. "Better to have half a heart than no heart at all."

Dana shook her head with a smile. "You got it bad, kid."

Jordan smirked back. "Don't I know it." They shrunk back. "There was a point in time we tried to move on. Really, honestly, tried. But..." They smiled. "No one else is them."

They took a sip of their decaf and shook their head. "Anyway," they said. "What do y'all do?"

Richard and Dana glanced at each other before Richard spoke. "I'm manager of a hotel in the middle of nowhere," he said. "Dana here's the on-site mechanic."

Jordan raised their eyebrows and looked at Dana. "On-site mechanic?"

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The Sudden Realization a Moment Too Late

Well, they just made a bad day a little bit better. You lean back in the booth with a sigh.

The waitress passes you the check. "They seem all right," she says.

You nod. "Yeah," you say. "Glad they were here." And you mean it.

You especially were happy to meet that mechanic. After all, you haven't see that many people working on a Padori outside of Red's—

Wait...

You feel the blood drain from your face as the realization hits the three of you at once: *She knows about other worlds.*

Your head snaps to the window where you see their Jeep pulling out of the parking lot.

Fuck.

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The two of them rode along in an easy silence, enjoying the comparatively open highway after spending so long on a winding two-lane road. After a moment Dana let herself relax her death grip on the car's handles and settled back in her seat. "So," she said, "you talk to [REDACTED] lately?"

"I have," Richard said evenly.

Dana turned her head to see Richard staring resolutely out the windshield.

"Be straight with me," she said. "Is he okay?"

Richard didn't react for a second. He took a breath and let it out slowly. "What do you mean?"

"What do you mean 'what do I—wait.'" She narrowed her eyes and shifted in her seat to turn more towards him. "Is this one of those therapy things where you don't want to tell me something I don't already know?"

"Eh," Richard said, "I'm not his therapist but..." He shrugged. "Basically."

Dana sighed. "He just seems more... muted now," she said. "I remember when he was first here and he just straight up said he'd do the tech stuff. Even when we weren't sure there was *going* to be tech stuff. And now it's like I can barely get three words out of the guy, and that's when I even see him."

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2. The Naga and the Waffle House

The Lighthouse crew gets a welcome text, and Richard takes the opportunity to show Dana a southern institution.

Rated General: food, relationship woes

3. The Sudden Realization a Moment Too Late

Rated Teen: brief coarse language

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Richard let the words hang in the air for a moment. "You're not wrong," he said finally. "Though it feels like he's been better the last month or so."

"Yeah, right up until Celeste came back," Dana grouched.

"You're not wrong there either," Richard affirmed quietly.

Dana shifted back in her seat to face more forward. "Are we doing anything about her?"

Richard tilted his head slightly. "Caretaker's working on her, but..." He trailed off.

"But she's not the type to listen to advice," Dana finished. "Remind me why you haven't done your banishment thing on her yet?"

Richard rolled his eyes—only slightly, since he was still driving. "It's not a 'banishment thing,' it's exercising dominion over the environment. And it's not something I can—or should—do lightly!"

"Uh huh," Dana said, deadpan. "So why haven't you done it? You know she's taking advantage of us."

"She is giving us something in return," Richard started.

"She's scouting out the portals. ██████████ was doing that too for a while."

"Whatever's going on with him was getting in the way of it."

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Richard and Dana placed their orders, and they were left alone.

Dana glanced between Richard and Jordan before tentatively starting the conversation. "So, do you want to talk about it?"

Jordan sighed. "It's..." They shook their head. "Hope is... hard. We can talk about being 'certain of things not seen' all day, but..." They took a shuddering breath and blinked back a few tears.

"It wears on you," they continued. "It's just an ache that sits there. Sometimes it's small, sometimes you can ignore it, sometimes you can even find joy in it. But it's there. And it h—" They stopped, fist on their mouth, choking down another sob. "It hurts," they said.

The three of them sat in silence for a moment, the clacks and clangs and sizzles of the kitchen behind them filling in the background.

"You've got a heavy load," Dana said finally. "Do you have anyone to help you carry it?"

Jordan nodded and blinked back a few tears. "Yeah, but that's also the problem," they said. At Dana's questioning look, they continued. "I'm in a long-distance relationship. They're amazing and incredible and..." They took a

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Letter From the Editor

If you haven't heard of a "beach episode," it's where characters in a story (usually an anime) take a break from the plot and go visit the beach. Usually it's derided as useless filler, a way to boost the episode count without having to make the plot more complex.

Y'all know that's BS, right?

Storytelling isn't just about what happens. It's about letting us get to know the characters, learn about the places and the world they live in. Without these "filler" episodes, we don't understand the stakes when the big moments hit.

I want to be able to strike that balance, and maybe some day I'll be able to. But in the meantime, have a **beach** Waffle House episode.

—Ronyo



"Waffle House during Georgia Snow Storm" by Northwalker, CCO <<https://wndfx.link/6bRAF>>

The driver sighed and deflated more than they already were. "Had a bad day," they said. "Got worse. But yeah, I'm alright."

Richard motioned to the restaurant. "Would you like to join us?"

He could see the driver start to demure before catching themselves. "Actually," they said, "yeah, I'd love that. Let me, uh..." They fumbled around for a moment before turning their car back on so they could roll their window back up.

Their name was Jordan, and they took the inside seat before Richard had a chance to offer otherwise. They were breathing steadily now, but the fluorescent lighting was doing their complexion absolutely no favors. Their hair was still harried, their eyes still red, their nose still running slightly. Richard slid in next to them, and Dana took the opposite bench.

"You alright, Jordan?" the waitress said.

Jordan shrugged slightly. "Same as it ever was," they said. "Maybe a little worse, but I'm here."

"Okay, kid. Usual?"

"That'd be great."

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Richard shook his head. "We can't know for sure, but..." He shrugged. "We were there, we listened. And sometimes that can make a bad day a little bit better."

The Lighthouse Crew will return.

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"So get Courtney. Or Walker. Hell, you know I'm up for a little exploring every once in a while! Is what we're getting from her *specifically* worth what she's doing to everyone else?"

Richard narrowed his eyes. "What *is* she doing to everyone else?"

"You think I don't know bullying when I see it?"

"And what have you seen?"

"I see the way [REDACTED] looks after they cross paths."

"Dana," Richard said firmly, "what have *you* seen?"

Dana leaned back in her seat with a huff. "Nothing," she groused.

"And that's the problem," Richard said, a note of bitterness entering his side of the conversation. "I know whatever she's saying to [REDACTED] isn't helping him. I also know he gets in his head sometimes. So without him telling me what's going on or anyone else seeing it, I don't know if it's malicious or not."

"How can it *not* be malicious?"

"People have sore spots, sometimes ones they don't even know about. The wrong comment at the wrong time can hurt, even if the person saying it doesn't mean anything

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The Naga and the Waffle House

Courtney's desk had an array of phones, each connected to a different world's network. She didn't want a "command center" like [REDACTED] had; even this setup was a little complicated for her tastes. But they had different contacts in different worlds, and someone had to keep in touch.

Because sometimes good news came through, in this case from Vanilla Earth:

Justine Fox: Hey, I know it's been a bit. Is the offer still on the table?

Courtney couldn't keep the smile off her face. She yelled across the atrium, "Hey, Richard!"

Richard looked up from his spot behind the bar.

"Is the job offer for Justine still good?"

"Hell yes it is!" Richard called back. He put down the glass he was holding and started making his way across to the desk.

Courtney pulled up the phone and typed out a reply:

The Lighthouse: It sure is! Are you in?

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by it."

Dana narrowed her eyes. "Why're you making excuses for her?"

"I'm not," Richard said, giving Dana a side-eyed glare. "I'm telling *you* why I haven't done my 'banishment thing' on her, as you put it."

They drove on, the silence hot and tense, lingering in the car longer than either of them really wanted.

"I've seen what you've seen," Richard said after a moment. "I don't like it, but I also don't like to jump straight to the..." He sighed and shook his head. "'The banishment thing.'"

"Catchy, right?" Dana said with a grin, though it fell back quickly. "Okay, so that's the extreme option. What's something we can do that gets the point across? A warning shot?"

"Been trying to figure that out," Richard admitted. "[REDACTED] had mentioned something about the lock on her apartment, but he clammed up when I asked for details. And she hasn't asked about new portals or other work yet."

He glanced to Dana. "I don't have any intentions of letting her join the staff, but she hasn't expressed any interest either, so I don't think we can use that." He shook

"Yeah, well," Richard said, "this could be rough."

"Oh, I'm letting you take the lead, for sure," she said. "Just not by yourself."

The screams from the car had died off; the person was just collapsed against the steering wheel. Richard and Dana walked up, not making any attempt to be quiet. The driver didn't acknowledge them.

Richard leaned forward and lightly tapped on the window.

The driver jumped slightly. They turned their head to the side and opened one blue eye that was very bloodshot. They raised a hand and wiggled a few fingers.

"Doing alright there?" Richard said.

The driver went to roll down the window, and when the switch didn't do anything they turned the key in their ignition. The car's headlights turned on, and the window finally rolled down before they turned it back off.

The driver put a pair of thick-rimmed glasses on and looked at them with a weak smile. "If I said 'yes', would you believe me?"

Richard returned the smile and just inclined their head.

Justine Fox: The owner told me to my face I'm not chef material. So yeah, I'm in.

Justine Fox: Going to quit after service tonight.

Richard leaned over the front desk to see the screen. "That's wonderful," he said. "No offense to anyone here, but..." He grimaced.

Courtney nodded. "She was good to have around. And also the food was good."

Richard chuckled and started to reply, but another blip on the screen distracted him:

Justine Fox: Any chance you can make it out here tonight? Want to hash out a couple of details in person before it's official.

Courtney glanced at Richard. "I assume she means you?" Richard nodded and did some mental arithmetic. "Yeah, if it's after things close, we can do that."

Courtney nodded and replied while Richard turned to leave.

The Lighthouse: Assuming you mean Richard, yes. (This is Courtney, BTW)

"Please," Jordan said with a sad smile. "Y'all were here exactly when I needed you." They shrugged. "And I can't buy my partner dinner. It's the least I can do for you."

Richard appraised them for a moment before saying, sincerely, "Thanks."

Jordan sat back as they got up to go. "Good luck with the hotel!" they said as they left.

Richard smiled back. "Hope you find what you need."

As they got back into the jeep, Richard asked Dana, "So, that was Waffle House. What do you think?"

"It was greasy, floppy, and overdone," she said bluntly. "When can we go back?"

Richard laughed out loud as he put the jeep in gear. "Let's go get our girl."

"Hell yeah!" Dana whooped, as she clicked her seat belt into place.

As Richard pulled out of the parking spot, Dana turned to him. "We helped, right?"

Richard glanced at her before turning back to his driving. "Jordan, back there?"

"Yeah. We didn't make things worse, did we?"

Richard nodded to the brightly lit building. "A Waffle House has a particular ambiance: the light's always on, the door's always open, and the food's always hot." He smirked. "I tend to think we have a lot in common."

Dana rolled her eyes. "Of course that's your angle." She popped her door open. "Okay, let's eat some butter."

"That's the spirit!" Richard said as he hopped out. He walked around the Jeep to see Dana standing with her hand still on the open door, peering at the other car in the lot.

He turned to see the driver of the car still in their seat, forehead against the steering wheel, pounding a fist against it. He could barely hear their screams muffled as they were.

"Hey, Richard?" she said, her voice low, "does that 'ambiance' include people having a breakdown in their car?"

"Honestly?" he said, matching her volume, "yeah."

Dana bit her lip. "Is there anything we can do?"

Richard took a closer look. "We don't know them, so not much." He shook his head. "If you want to get us a booth I can check on them."

Dana glanced inside: there was one person at the counter and no other customers. "I don't think we're in danger of losing a seat," she said.

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Jordan fixed them with a fierce stare. "Tell me God isn't cruel," they said. "Tell me that hope isn't in vain. Tell me—" Their voice cracked.

Richard put a hand on Jordan's shoulder. "God isn't cruel," he said. "But what we hope for might not be what we get."

Jordan nodded grimly. "It's frustrating," they said. "I've got a spare room and more money than I need and—and my partner..." They closed their eyes and took a shuddering breath. A few tears made it onto their face. "I have what they need," they said finally, "and I can't get it to them."

They sighed. "I want us to be together more than anything," they said. "But it might not happen in the way I'm expecting; is that what you're saying?"

Richard nodded. "Faith is a conversation," he said. "We hope, but we listen."

Jordan nodded grimly. "Yeah," they muttered.

Richard glanced at his watch and looked to Dana. "We need to head out if we're going to make it to Atlanta in time."

"You two get going," Jordan said, pulling out their wallet. "I got this."

Richard frowned. "We can—"

his head. "Shame, really."

"What, that a conniving bitch doesn't want to join us?"

"She's dedicated, talented, resourceful, and dangerously clever," Richard countered. "She could be amazing if it weren't for..." He smirked. "For what you said."

Dana smirked back. "It's just us here," she said. "You can't say it?"

Richard scoffed. "I can say it."

"Then say it."

"What, that she's a b—" He couldn't get the word out. "A b—" He started to form the "b" sound, but his cheeks puffed out and he started to heave.

"Okay, okay!" Dana said with a laugh. "Don't crash the car!"

"Yeah," Richard said. "That'd be a real bitch."

"Oh, screw you," Dana said with no heat.

"Please don't," Richard said.

Dana sat back in her seat with less force this time.

"Okay," she said, "so we just keep watching Celeste?"

"Think of it this way," Richard said. "If she always behaves when we're looking, the more we look, the more she behaves."

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Justine Fox: 🙌

Justine Fox: And yes, was hoping to meet with him tonight.

The Lighthouse: I think he's going to talk to Dana now.

The Lighthouse: I'm so excited! Can't wait until you're here!

Justine Fox: Please tell me y'all have been eating real food in the meantime.

The Lighthouse: 100

Richard strode into the garage and froze: the vehicle currently on the lift was missing tires, doors, and several body parts. He couldn't help the icy fear that struck through his core.

Dana slithered out from behind the open hood. "Boss," she said, wiping her upper hands off with a rag, "what brings you here?"

Richard pointed at the frame. "Please tell me we have a working car."

The naga gave him an easy smile. "What, worried? Your jalopy's parked out back, don't worry." She tapped the lifted vehicle. "This is that Padori truck I got from Melodia."

"Yeah," Dana said with a groan. "I get it, but if I see her so much as look at [REDACTED] wrong, she's gonna catch these hands."

Richard smirked. "Just those? You've normally got more."

Dana didn't laugh. "Richard," she said, "I will find a world where I'm some kind of bug just so I can slap her with more than four hands."

Richard laughed, and Dana let herself smile.

"You really care for him," he mused.

"Hey, now," Dana said quietly, "I care for all y'all." She gripped the side handle and nodded to herself. "But yeah. He reminds me of my little brother so much. So how can I help him?"

Richard shrugged. "Be there, listen to him. Be his friend." He sighed and adjusted his grip on the wheel. "Sometimes that's all any of us can do, but sometimes it's enough."

Richard made one lap around the very full parking lot and turned back towards the highway. "Nope," he said.

Dana raised an eyebrow. "Nope?"

"Way too many people there," he explained. "Probably a freshman hall, or a fraternity party." He paused, then added, "After-party. But there's two colleges not far from

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Richard rolled his eyes and smirked. "Hey now," he said, "I take good care of my car."

"Course you do," Dana said, turning back to her workbench. "You bring it to me, don't you?"

Richard blinked for a moment before following her from the other side of the car. She was already pouring over something in the engine block, all four hands either holding something in place or threading a set of wires.

He leaned on the car frame. "You know what a 'jalopy' is?"

Dana glanced up at him. "Apparently not?" She turned back to her work.

"It's a word from the Great Depression; means an old dilapidated car." He shrugged, mostly to himself. "So if you're just playing, that's cool; I just want to make sure I'm understanding you."

Dana didn't respond, except for a slightly exasperated hiss.

Richard just waited patiently.

After a few moments, she snapped a part into place and breathed a sigh of relief. "Okay, that's done." She looked up at Richard fully. "Give me a second."

Richard just waited.

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here, so for all I know it's both."

He glanced at Dana. "How hungry are you?"

Dana winced. "No offense, boss, but I need to eat pretty soon."

"Understood." He pulled out his phone and did a quick search. He looked back at the highway, then at his phone.

"Left or right?" he said finally as he turned back onto the highway.

"What's the difference?"

"At the fork up ahead, there's another Waffle House ten minutes to the left and ten minutes to the right."

"Ha!" Dana barked. "Well, I'm always right, so let's go left."

"Left it is."

There was one other car in the parking lot: a small, red Honda. Richard pulled into a space on the far side of it and cut the engine. He turned to Dana before he got out. "I want to set some expectations," he said.

Dana narrowed her eyes but couldn't help a smile.

"This isn't high cuisine," he said. "This is comfort food with lots of butter."

"Okay," she said. "Why are we here, then?"

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Dana shook her head but smiled fondly. "This is nothing," she mused. "You should see my family around the holidays."

"Big eaters?" Jordan asked.

"Oh yeah," she said. "Only thing bigger than the meal was the nap afterwards." She made eye contact with Richard.

Richard nodded back with a smile. What Dana left out was the name of the holiday in question: the Hibernation Feast. A day for naga to gather with family, unhinge their jaws for a decidedly oversized meal, and sleep off said meal for the next couple of days.

The conversation meandered some more over food. As they finished their respective dishes, Richard turned to Jordan. "So," he said, "is there anything we can do for you before we go?"

Again, Richard saw them start to demure before stopping themselves. "You're a man of faith, right?" they said quietly.

Richard nodded.

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