

This time was different when I opened my eyes. Unlike previous times, there was no momentary confusion, no readjusting to my new body, no reorganizing my memories to figure out who I was in this incarnation. Instead, this time it felt like I was waking up after a very restful sleep. Rather than a fight for dominance between my memories, my personality of the previous incarnation, there was the simple sensation of existence. I was just *me*.

Another oddity was that I wasn't waking up when I opened my eyes. In all my previous incarnations, each new ascension started with me waking up in my new body, but this time it was like I had blinked and then my consciousness was in a different body.

My immediate surroundings were lackluster, to say the least. I was in a small room with white walls, perfectly square, with no furniture, wall adornments, or anything interesting, really. However, there was also a door on each of the walls.

Directly behind me was a door that almost looked more like a vault. It also had a screen on it which was counting down, apparently from a maximum of 7 days. When I first saw it, it was at "6 days, 23 hours, 58 minutes, 43 seconds." Below that was a button, itself labelled "Press to immediately initiate Ascension."

To my left was an unassuming wooden door labelled "Pangaea." To my right was an equally unassuming wooden door labelled "Grazing Lands." And on the wall directly in front of me was a door labelled "Warehouse." A closer look revealed that all of the doors, besides the one behind me, were all functionally identical.

"Weird place. Do you think the 'Pangaea' door has dinosaurs behind it?"

I spun to face the female voice which was suddenly next to me. The woman was short and lithe, she couldn't have been much taller than 150 cm, with long blonde hair, blue eyes, and a fair complexion. Her nose was rather large, but that didn't detract from the fact that she was quite attractive. The part that threw me for a loop was that I had seen her before, not in real life, but in a dream.

I must have been staring at her, because she gave me a quizzical look.

"Why're you looking at me like I have three heads?"

I gesticulated around the room as I spoke.

"How did you get here? I just looked around the entire room and it was empty! Where did you come from?"

The woman raised her arms in a stereotypical shrug and smirked at me.

"I guess you're just really unobservant."

“No, no way that’s true. One moment I was alone, the next you were here. How did you do that?” And then, after I paused a second to let my brain catch up with my mouth. “Also, do I know you?”

She clapped a hand to her chest, right over her heart, holding her mouth open.

“You wound me! How do you not remember me? Did you hit your head one too many times while flying around?”

That gave me pause. She must have noticed, because the jovial mood dried up quickly.

“...How do you know about that?”

“Damn, I played my hand too quick. Ah well.” She reached her hand out towards me. “The name’s Valerie. And I live in your head.”

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I stood across from the woman I had just met, Valerie, staring hard, my arms crossed. She was leaned up against one of the plain white walls, but I stayed upright, at attention. I wanted to not believe her, but my gut told me she was telling the truth, and she knew things she shouldn’t have. Things about me, and the dinosaurs, and Eve.

“Let me go over this once more. You’re my imaginary friend.”

“Yep.”

“You’ve been in my head since my incarnation as a detective.”

“Correct.”

“And you’ve experienced everything I have, from my perspective, but couldn’t communicate with me.”

“Yes.”

“Even the time I spent as a dinosaur?”

“For the last time, *yes*. Is this really that hard to believe, after everything else you’ve experienced?”

“Frankly, yes. Everything I’ve experienced since my first incarnation has been new and unbelievable, but I had past memories of the person I incarnated as to help acclimate me. This is totally new, all me, and even weirder. I mean, how do you even know you’re an imaginary friend? I don’t remember making you up.”

Valerie ran her hand through her hair, avoiding my gaze for a moment while she took a deep breath.

“I just do. I know that I’m your imaginary friend, and I shouldn’t even be able to interact with anything, because I’m just in your head, but somehow here I’m physical. But, I’m also still in your head, which is how I can disappear and reappear, because that makes sense. Don’t ask me how I know, it’s somehow inherent in my mind.”

“But why can I only see you now? What’s special about this place?”

“Stop asking me questions! I have no idea! Everything here is just as new for me as it is for you, alright?”

I closed my eyes and let my exasperation wash over me. It wasn’t helping anything.

“Okay. I believe you. But, what now? Are you tied to me?”

“Well, yeah, I’m in your head. Pretty sure I don’t exist anywhere else, except maybe here.”

“And are you okay with that? I mean, I spent two decades as a dinosaur, but I was still able to spend time with the humans I found. You were just... stuck. That sounds unbearable.”

“It wasn’t that bad. I don’t experience time the same as you do, at least not when I’m in your head. Don’t get me wrong, this is far preferable to being just a thought, but it’s not unpleasant to be bodiless.”

“Then I guess we’re just going to continue on? I don’t really know what to think about the fact that I’ve had an unknown passenger this whole time.”

“If it makes you feel better, I’m not experiencing things from your perspective while I have this body.”

“That really just raises even more questions, but I’m going to leave it for now, because I don’t feel like taxing my brain anymore than I already have.”

I turned back to the rest of the room and glanced at each of the doors.

“I suppose we should start investigating what’s behind the doors, huh?”

Valerie pushed herself off the wall and stepped to my side.

“Read my mind.”

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We spent the next few hours exploring behind the various doors, getting more confused with each one.

The door labelled 'Pangaea' did indeed have dinosaurs behind it, but it was far more than that. It opened up into an open area that looked suspiciously similar to the world I had spent the past two decades in. It was full of the same types of plants and animals, namely a bunch of dinosaurs, and it appeared to be a full continent, at least from what we were able to explore.

Of course, that wasn't the weirdest part. The door we had exited seemed to be built into the side of a large boulder, but there were no other doors on said boulder. Plus, it didn't look like the room could have fit inside said boulder, since we could easily walk around it. And, when we opened the door labelled 'Grazing Lands,' we found another landmass, this one populated by dinosaurs, but also by contemporary animals. It was also a completely different landmass than the one behind the Pangaea door.

And then the door labeled 'Warehouse' opened up into a, well, warehouse. Industrial style, complete with metallic shelves, fluorescent lights, and a large amount of space. But, the shelves were covered with stuff, and not just any stuff. It was all my stuff, a catalog of everything I had ever owned in my first incarnation. Nearly thirty years worth of objects.

We spent quite a bit of time in the warehouse, me spending most of the time reminiscing, Valerie admiring the various things I had. I mean, there were books, televisions, computers, radios, furniture, both of the Hondas I had owned, several air conditioners, loads and loads of clothing... literally everything I had ever owned, at any point in my life, for any amount of time.

And I'm fairly certain that it was truly literal, because my memory was apparently perfect. As I looked at all of my stuff, from an entire lifetime, I could experience the memories like I was there. It was a perfect recollection, like photographic memory, except I could recall every sensation, even the thoughts I was having during the experience.

There were only a few things in the warehouse that weren't from my first incarnation. The biggest one was a couch, like one of those stereotypical couches used by psychiatrists. It was pretty cozy, but I have no idea why it was there. The other items were all fairly small.

One was a bowl full of candies. They were individually wrapped and each labelled "Jump-chan Brand Energy Mints." I had never seen said brand before, but the mints were nice tasting, and they gave me a boost in energy. I took the time to read the fine print, and apparently that's what these mints were intended for. Strange, but not any stranger than the rest of this place. The part that confused me was that, no matter what I tried, I seemed unable to slip a handful of the mints into my pocket. They kept sliding through my fingers, like they were greased. I gave up after a few tries.

Another was a golden ring. It was a simple band, no engravings or gemstones set in it. It fit perfectly on my finger when I tried it on, and there was a small, but noticeable, increase to my senses when I did so. I decided to leave it on.

There was also a pistol, complete with a box of 100 rounds. I could remember all of my experiences with firearms in some of my later incarnations (I had had no interest in firearms in my original incarnation),

and this pistol appeared to be a high quality model, definitely one of the more expensive ones. I gave the weapon a quick look over, and like everything else it was in impeccable condition.

One that I spent a while looking through was a book. The spine just said “History of the World,” and when I took a glance through I discovered that it had sections for every world I had ever incarnated into. The descriptions were relatively brief, being more like a high school textbook than an in depth account, but it was still enlightening, as well as slightly unnerving. It was interesting to look at the entry denoting the time I spent as a dinosaur, specifically because there was a blurb describing my actions of elevating the human tribe, and it finally told me what type of dinosaur I had been: quetzalcoatlus.

Then there was what at first glance looked like a top-of-the-line gaming laptop. It started right up when I clicked the power button, and booted up faster than any rig I had ever personally owned. But, when I tried to find out where it was plugged into, I found no such attachment. There was no battery pack, no power supply, not even a power cord. Yet, the machine was on.

And when I glanced through the contents of the system, I found that it had thousands of video games on it, more than I had ever seen in one place. It must have taken hundreds of terabytes to hold all of the information, if not more, yet it was running like it was a fresh install on brand new hardware. It even had multiple controller attachments for every type of video game console I had ever played.

The one that made me pause the most, however, was a simple picture book. At first glance it seemed innocuous enough: it was a photo book filled with pictures from my first incarnation. Except, as I looked through them, I realized that there never seemed to be anyone taking the photos in my memories of said events. Some of the pictures were even of times I had been alone, yet here were photographs of those times. When combined with a warehouse full of copies of everything I had ever owned, it cast an eerie pale over the entire experience, like this was some kind of tribute room made by the ultimate stalker.

Of course, once we finally got done looking over all of my various stuff, we found more things in the warehouse. There was a stairway in the corner that led up, but located nearby was a small area that was different than the rest of the warehouse. It was set up like a fully autonomous medical bay, with a table to lay on, computer-driven tools, and a host of other impressive looking attachments that I could only guess as to their function. Next to it was a large, futuristic-looking, ovoid-shaped capsule that was labelled “Body Mod Pod” on the side. It looked like a cryogenic capsule from a science fiction movie, complete with a touchscreen interface set into the side and a transparent hatch.

We were going to investigate the Body Pod when I heard the sounds of footsteps coming from upstairs. We climbed up quietly, peaking over the side of the stairs and found another level above the warehouse. It looked like it was roughly the same size, but it was almost completely empty, save for two military-style bunks.

And every pet I had ever owned.

I froze. I should have been used to impossible things being done, but this shattered even the other things I had experienced. It was all my pets. Rizu, the Australian shepherd from my childhood. Faust, the pekingese from my college years. Morte, the rabbit I had rescued from the side of the road. Amara, Litchi, and Vira, the three cats I had owned when I incarnated for the first time.

Except, I had spent the past... 34 years in various incarnations. All of my pets should have been long dead, especially Rizu and Morte, who had died in my original incarnation. Yet, here they were, each of them in the peak of health, hanging out on the two bunks, along with a large, velociraptor-like dinosaur.

“What the fuck is that doing here?”

Valerie followed my gaze to the dinosaur sitting on one of the bunks, casually watching the other animals.

“You had a dinosaur as a pet?”

“No! Wait, shouldn’t you know that?”

“I mean, maybe you can hide things from me, I don’t know everything. Plus, it’s sitting here with all of your other pets, so I just figured it must be another one.”

“I’ve never had a dinosaur pet. I would have tried to teach the humans to raise animals if I had the chance, but... yeah. And I never tried to train any dinosaurs after that. So why is it here?”

“Maybe it’s a gift?”

“From who? Who the hell is doing this anyway? This whole experience is impossible!”

“I’d say we could discuss the possible metaphysical aspects of our current predicament, but we might want to wait for another time. It looks like the dinosaur has noticed us.”

Valerie was correct. The dinosaur had heard us, and now it was staring directly at us. The other animals had likewise noticed our presence. Not wanting to get anything angry, I stepped out of the stairwell, my hands raised in as non-threatening a manner as possible. I spoke softly as I did so, trying to quell any tensions.

“It’s alright, it’s alright, I’m not gonna hurt any of you.”

My various pets all looked happy, recognition flitting to their faces. Rizu and Faust both jumped off the bunk and began to run over to me, but they were immediately outpaced by the dinosaur, which launched itself off the other bunk, barrelling at me far faster than any dog I’d ever seen. I braced myself for the impact, but was surprised when the dinosaur pulled back at the last second, stopping in front of me. It cocked its head at me, nostrils flaring, before something like recognition flashed across its face and it

trilled at me. I cautiously reached my hand out, wary of its sharp teeth, but it rubbed its head against me, continuing to make its trilling noises.

“Seems like he likes you.”

Valerie climbed up the steps behind me, crouching down to pet the other pets as they closed in. And, despite the absurdity of the entire situation, I couldn't help but smile.

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“Have you figured it out yet?”

Valerie was draped across my childhood bed, which she had dragged over to the Body Pod area once I started to investigate it. She had picked up a few books and read for a while, but she was getting bored.

“I have no idea how this thing works. I mean, the touchscreen is easy enough to use, and I can open the hatch, but I don't know how this works.”

“Don't you just get inside and select what you want?”

“Okay, yes, that is the process of using the machine, as far as I can tell. What I mean is, I have no idea how it's supposed to do what the selections say they're supposed to do. I mean, it says you can give yourself gills or wings, or make you into a hermaphrodite, amongst a variety of other crazy options. How could any of that work? Is it surgical? Does it use nanomachines? Are the changes instantaneous? I have so many questions, but there's no manual or guide or anything.”

“I guess we'll just have to try it out. You want me to go first?”

“...No, better let me. Everything else in this place seems engineered around me, so I doubt it will hurt me.”

“You sure? I'm still not sure anything can actually happen to me, since I'm technically a figment of your imagination.”

“That means that it might not work on you at all. Might as well be me that tests it.”

I popped open the hatch and began climbing into the Pod. There was a seat inside, as well as several handholds to help getting in and out, and another touchscreen. The hatch began to close as soon as I began interacting with the touchscreen.

I went through the various options, selecting the ones that seemed useful to me, and then clicked on the 'Initiate' button. A warning popped up which stated, 'Are you sure? The effects are permanent, and the

machine may only be used once per person.’ I confirmed the selection, but then an error message popped up. ‘Error: Body Mod already present on individual. The action could not be completed.’

“Problems?”

Valerie asked me as I stepped out of the machine.

“Looks like you will have to test it out. I’ve already used it, I guess.”

“More evidence that everything revolves around you, huh?”

“I guess so.”

“Oh well, I probably should have tested it anyway. Let’s see what I can do.”

Valerie climbed into the Pod and mimicked my actions. After fiddling around with the options for a few minutes she initiated the machine, and this time it began to work. The Pod began to fill with some kind of opaque gas, completely blocking Valerie from view, all the while it made a loud humming noise. When the noise finally stopped, the hatch popped open, the gas inside dissipating into the surrounding air. And as Valerie stepped out, it became obvious that it had worked. Mostly because she was now pale white with dark purple hair.

“You like it?”

“Is changing your hair color all you did? What options did you select?”

She placed her hands on her hips and raised an eyebrow at me.

“You didn’t even answer my question! Is figuring out how the thing works all you care about?”

“Sorry. I do like the hair color. I’ve always liked exotic hair colors... but you probably already knew that, didn’t you? I’m just really interested in the machine.”

“Yeah, yeah, it doesn’t have the same effect since I had to ask for it. Anyway, it didn’t feel surgical or anything. It filled with gas, then I felt warm, and when the hatch opened everything had apparently gone through.”

“Got it, it’s just magic.”

“Or hyper-advanced technology.”

I cocked my head at Valerie.

“...So magic.”

“Don’t you go pulling Clark’s Third Law on me.”

“I mean, I’m not really. It could be magic. Remember when I incarnated as a dwarf? I could cast spells during that incarnation. Or what about when I was a superhero? What else can you call that but magic?”

“I guess. But, does that really change anything? Either way you don’t understand it.”

“That’s true, but that doesn’t mean it’s not potentially explainable. It’s like... if this is magic, could I learn how it works and replicate it? Could I learn how it was made? If it’s technology then it should be possible, but I have very little basis to determine if magic can be done by anyone. It might be beyond me. But I still want to know.”

“I guess we need to learn more about magic then, huh?”

She said it so casually, but it wasn’t dismissive. Rather, it seemed like she really meant it. Simple, but not easy.

“Alright, I’ll hold you to it. You’ve got to help me out.”

“Deal.”

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After messing with the Body Mod Pod, the next obvious object was the medical area. A quick look over the area revealed a similar lack of a guide, so I was forced to investigate using my own body, again.

The operating table didn’t appear to have any interface to it, so I laid down on it. The various robotic tools immediately began to move, reaching down all around me like a many-limbed monster. Nothing touched me, but I could see a strange-colored light shining out of one of the implements, apparently some form of scanning device. I could also feel the light on my skin, although it was faint. It felt similar to direct sunlight, and so was not unpleasant. After a few moments of scanning, an electronic voice echoed out of the machine.

“NO INJURIES DETECTED.”

The voice was obviously robotic, sounding like something out of a sci-fi show. It was so stereotypical, I had to assume it was an intentional design choice, not a deficiency in the device’s voice processing technology. Still, it was useful. Less than 30 seconds and it had deduced that I was uninjured? That left me intrigued. I bit my forearm lightly, just enough to draw blood, and then laid back down on the table.

Once again, the device swarmed into motion, the various robotic limbs swirling around me. This time, however, when the scanner reached my wound, it changed in intensity. The light focused, feeling almost like it was pushing slightly on my skin, making it tickle. When I looked down, I realized that the tickling sensation was my skin actively knitting back together, in real time. I motioned Valerie towards my arm.

“Are you seeing this?”

“I can see. You think this one’s magic, too?”

“I think this one is more clearly technological. Very advanced, but still technology.”

I flexed my arm, and it felt good as new. Not that the wound had been particularly deep, but there was no sign of damage at all: no scar, no slightly red mark, nothing. The scanner finished going over my body, and then all the limbs retracted once more.

“MINOR LACERATION DETECTED AND REPAIRED. NO FURTHER INJURIES DETECTED.”

As I slid off the table, I motioned for Valerie to sit down.

“You want to take a shot?”

She shook her head.

“No, I think I’m alright. I’ll test it out if I get hurt.”

“Fair enough.”

I continued to look at the various robotic tools, until a familiar gurgle broke the silence. I glanced back at Valerie, who was smiling.

“I guess I’m hungry.”

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It didn’t take long for use to realize that there didn’t appear to be any food in the warehouse, despite there being three refrigerators. For that night, I gathered food in the Grazing Lands, since I still had a wealth of knowledge about how to survive off the land. Luckily, it seemed as though the entire area was highly populated with berries, roots, and other edibles. I snagged a few rabbits and caught some fish for protein, and we had a nice dinner.

Sleeping that night was interesting. All of the animals wanted to crowd into my bed, but eventually a hierarchy was established, with Litchi sleeping on me, Vira and Amara curling up next to me, and the bottom of the bed taken up by Rizu and Faust. Morte had his cage, so he stayed there.

The dinosaur had stayed with us most of the day, stalking the shelves while we fiddled with the Body Pod and the medical area, and hunting for its own dinner while we collected for ourselves. It had followed us back in afterwards, and like the rest of my animals, it curled up next to the bed when I slept. I still wasn't sure where it had come from, but apparently it was some kind of pet.

I slept extremely well, feeling well-rested and ready to go when I woke up in the morning. Valerie, the dinosaur, and I spent the day exploring more of the Grazing Land and Pangaea. I couldn't find any obvious walls or barriers, so I concluded that they were entire landmasses, or close enough to be considered as such. There were also dangerous creatures in both areas, but we were able to stay away without too much trouble.

As the second night came to a close, I found myself standing in front of the last remaining door, the one that looked like a vault. It was still ticking down, now below the 5 day mark.

“What do you think it'll do?”

Valerie asked. She was looking the door over herself, but was careful not to touch the button.

“I mean, it seems pretty straightforward. The button will cause me to ascend right now, and I'm willing to bet I'll ascend whether I want to or not once that timer finishes counting down.”

“Are you going to press it?”

“I don't know. This place seems interesting, but I'm intrigued as to where I'll incarnate into next. What kind of person, or creature, will I be?”

“Then why don't you press it?”

“Then there's the other side. What happens to all of this when I ascend? Was this just a momentary reprieve? Can I come back here, or is this it? I don't want to cut it short if it won't happen again. I mean, it has my pets here, and you. It seems hasty to just throw that away because I'm intrigued by what comes next.”

“In that case, what are we going to do tomorrow?”

Valerie smiled at me as she asked, and that solidified decision in an instant.

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On the third day, Valerie and I went to the Grazing Lands to wash off. It was then that I discovered that I had gills. They had remained closed while I was in the air, but they opened up once I was in the water.

This discovery led me to spend the rest of the day trying to figure out what I had gained from the Body Mod Pod, and what I learned was astounding.

Not only did I have gills, I also had many of the other options available in the selection. I could release an electric charge through a touch, I secreted poison from some glands in the back of my throat, I could change the color of my skin and hair like Valerie, but I could also produce light like a jellyfish. And, once we looked through the options on the Body Pod again, we figured out that I had the ability to shift into another form, what the machine referred to as an ‘alt-form.’

That in and of itself was interesting, but I was able to change what my other form was, giving it a tail, wings, pincers, a shell, almost anything I could think of. There were limits to how much I could change at any given time, but once I got used to changing between the two forms, I was able to do it incredibly quickly, taking seconds to shift from one to the other. It seemed as though I had two forms I could switch between, but if I wanted to do it quickly, I had to decide beforehand what my two forms were going to look like. Altering either form took a few minutes of concentration, so I ended up leaving one of the forms being essentially a normal version of myself with some non-obvious adaptations, like the electric charge touch and the poison, and leaving the other as a monstrous, combat-oriented form, complete with wings, a stinger, and a much larger body than normal.

However, I discovered something else while transforming: I was not limited to just these two forms. I could also transform back into my quetzalcoatlus form, and even back into my dwarf body from many incarnations previous. With a bit of time and concentration I could make myself look like any of my previous incarnations, but that was by transforming what my two base forms looked like. The quetzalcoatlus form and the dwarf form were separate forms, even though I was also capable of morphing them to some extent.

I went to bed that night absolutely fascinated with my newfound abilities.

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“You sure you’re alright?”

“For the last time, yes. I’ll be fine, and even if something went wrong, I’m pretty sure you can just imagine me on the ground, so I won’t even fall the intervening distance.”

“Shouldn’t we test that before we go for a ride?”

“No, that’s boring.”

“It’s also safer.”

“Just shut up and fly.”

With that sounding like the last word, I stretched out my wings and took off into the sky. We had decided to spend our fourth day exploring the Pangaea continent, and the quickest way to do that was for me to fly in my quetzalcoatlus form. Of course, that meant we had to rig a way for Valerie to accompany me, but after a bit of finangling with the stuff in the warehouse, we had come up with a basic harness for her to ride in while strapped to my chest.

Another thing we found out was that I seemed capable of merging my various forms together. I could speak in my quetzalcoatlus form now, despite the actual creature lacking the vocal cords and mouth shape to make those kinds of sounds. Likewise, it seemed like I could cause vast wings to erupt from any of my humanoid forms, although it made me look like an anatomical horror. Still, a useful discovery nonetheless.

The fourth day passed quite pleasantly. Somehow, probably from the Body Mod (it was annoying that it wouldn't tell me exactly what I had picked), my stamina had been vastly increased. I flew for hundreds of miles without even getting tired, and only stopped because Valerie was getting cold and stiff.

The landmass here was *huge*. It was definitely an entire continent, and a big one at that. After hours of flying at the highest altitudes I could muster, I still couldn't see the edge. Even based on rough estimates, I covered several hundred kilometers, meaning Pangaea had to be the size of Asia, if not larger.

And, the whole thing was populated with dinosaurs. The "History of the World" book had revealed that the world I lived in as a quetzalcoatlus had been roughly equivalent to the Cretaceous period, with a few anachronisms aside, and it appeared that all of the known species of dinosaurs from that period, as well as many more unknown to science, lived here. There were also some mammals, but they were mostly small and rodent-like, and they had nowhere near the variety as the dinosaurs.

Still, the day was quite extraordinary in just seeing how big this place was. Valerie and I were still stumped as to why there were these two giant land masses connected to my strange, stalker warehouse, but it was still very interesting.

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The fifth day passed much the same as the fourth, except involved us exploring the Grazing Lands. This area was obviously a different landmass, notable from the size, shape, and types of creatures present, but it was comparable in size. An entire day of travel spent as a quetzalcoatlus, and I was nowhere near the edge of the large area.

The differences between the two areas were fascinating. Whereas the landmass labelled Pangaea appeared to be some kind of facsimile of the land I had lived in as a quetzalcoatlus, itself some kind of alternate Cretaceous period, the landmass labelled Grazing Lands was like some kind of frankenstein-mixture. Modern mammalian animals mingled with dinosaurs, with plants and insects from both ecologies not only existing, but thriving.

As interesting as I found the experience of just exploring the two landmasses, Valerie had gotten more than her fill, and she wanted nothing more than to go back to the warehouse and relax. As such, I acquiesced, and we decided to spend the last two days primarily in the warehouse.

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The last two days passed just as quickly as the first five. We spent some time in the Grazing Lands gathering food, but even that time was short, since it seemed like I had a golden touch when it came to foraging and hunting. Other than that, I spent time playing with my animals, learning more about my new dinosaur pet (I decided to call him Noa), and just spending time relaxing. It was time well spent, and it was done far too quickly.

Which is how I found myself standing in front of the vault door, watching the timer ticking down. There was only a few minutes left, with “0 days, 00 hours, 03 minutes, 58 seconds” displayed. Valerie stood at my one side, and I had all my pets with me. Since I had no idea if they would remain here, or if this place, whatever it was, would still be accessible after this ascension, or if it would even exist after this, I was adamant that I would be with them when it happened.

“Are you going to press the button?”

Valerie asked, glancing towards me. I shook my head.

“No, I’d rather let it finish counting down. I’ll see this week through, all the way.”

After that we lapsed into silence. We had already discussed possibilities that might happen after this, and ultimately it was up for grabs. Valerie was convinced I’d be waking up in a new world, like every other ascension, but I wasn’t so sure. This week-long break had been completely unlike any previous incarnation, so it might mean that whatever came next would be different. There just wasn’t any way to know without it happening, so we had eventually let the topic drop.

But, I pushed the worry away. This had been nice. It was the first time I had truly been *me* in, what, thirty-some years? Wow, thirty years. I had been conscious for over sixty years, plus all the lifetimes of experiences I had inherited. I was an old man. I didn’t look it, or feel it, but that was the truth of the matter.

The timer had dropped under the minute mark. Noa had noticed something was up long before now, but even my other pets were aware of the strange air now. I sat down on the ground, cross legged, and pulled my pets in towards me. Valerie crouched down next to me, leaning on my shoulder. Even Noa came over, although he sat down in front of me, as if he thought something was going to burst through the vault door. And it was like that when the timer finally hit 0.

Then there was naught but darkness.