

I put the backpack in first, bidding it a fond farewell. I was less sure about giving it up than I was about giving up the Anyblade, but we'd had seven months to pull out everything we could want from it. Amaryllis had argued about it, but we hadn't had a proper fight. The thing that clinched it was that we might be able to get larger things from Earth; there had been quite a few times when I'd thought to myself, "oh, I'll just grab that from the backpack", only to realize that the thing I'd wanted couldn't possibly be pulled from the backpack, given its size. We were fortunate that most of the furniture we needed had been stolen from one place or another by Fenn (or in the case of things taken from Weik Handum or Caer Laga, rescued rather than stolen).

The closet wasn't terribly big, and it was about as unassuming as it had been described. The only thing that marked it as special was the fact that it wasn't very close to any other doors or rooms, which gave it a place of prominence in the hallway. I estimated the closet at about five feet to a side, which was a standard D&D unit of measure, and which I very much doubted was coincidence.

When I closed the door on the backpack, I glanced at Zona.

"Now what?" I asked.

"That's it," said Zona. "It's already done." A frown came across her face. "It's ... confusing."

"Confusing how?" asked Fenn. She stood beside me, close by, like she thought that I was going to vanish at any moment. I understood how she felt; we'd been apart for too long.

"When you described it ... " Zona trailed off. She held out her hand, and a note appeared. It was of a type very familiar to me, written on a piece of yellow legal paper, with handwriting that was identical to my own. "It says, 'no magic items, sorry,' and then a colon, followed by a left parentheses." She squinted at the note. "A frowning face?"

"Yeah," I said. "The entad has some underlying logic to what it will or won't give us."

"No," said Zona. "If it had that underlying logic, it would be exposed to me. I would know and understand it, even if it took some time to integrate. This is ... like speaking to someone."

"Huh," I said. "I'd guess the person you're speaking to is the Dungeon Master, for what it's worth. Can you ask questions?"

"No," said Zona. "I can only make requests for things from Earth."

"Wait, does that mean there are magic items on Earth?" asked Fenn.

"No," I said. "I've asked it for impossible things a few times, it just says no with the frowny face."

"But that function is somehow divorced from the entad itself," said Zona. "It's not a *part* of me, it's a tendril leading somewhere else." She shivered slightly. "The sensation is unlike anything I have ever experienced."

"Are you going to be ready for the sword?" I asked. "Or do you want to hold off a bit?"

"I'll have to learn more of Earth," said Zona, seeming to ignore me. Her focus returned to me. "Name something from Earth that would exceed the boundaries of the backpack."

"Surfboard," said Fenn, before I had a chance.

Zona held out a hand, and a surfboard appeared leaning against it.

"That's promising," I said.

"I'll need your help to prepare the room," said Zona with a frown, as she let the surfboard clatter to the ground. "I had hoped that I would have an understanding of what Earth had to offer, but it appears that's not the case."

"So, Anyblade too, or not?" I asked.

"Wait," said Fenn. She held out her hand, and a plastic box appeared in it. When I peered over, I saw that inside was sushi, covered in seaweed, sauces, and what I thought were probably fish eggs. "Ha!" she said. "This is great."

"No more," said Zona, with an edge of warning in her voice. "I can feel the strand of raw will when you do that. I'll need some time with the power in order to understand it and stop it from being used. It provides a channel to the -- the other end."

"Besides," I said, "It's trash that we don't have a good way to get rid of, not until we've got the glove on hand to put things into storage."

"I was planning on eating the sushi," said Fenn. She popped the container open and began picking out pieces with her fingers, plopping them into her mouth. "I fucking love sushi," she said with her mouth half full.

"Okay," said Zona. "Now the Anyblade."

The Anyblade was on my finger, as a ring, and I reshaped it into a sword, which I set just inside the closet. I did give it one last fond look before shutting the door; I was really going to have to find a new weapon, though I did have a backup sword until I could find a magical one with extra powers.

I was watching Zona carefully after I closed the door, so I caught it right away.

"She's stopped moving," I said.

"She wasn't moving," said Fenn, who was still eating her sushi.

"Incidental movements are part of the illusion," I said. "She's not breathing, she's not swaying, she's just totally static."

Fenn peered at the image of Zona. "Huh," she said.

"That's probably a bad thing," I said.

"Well, she wasn't borked for long last time," said Fenn.

"I think last time she was devoting her full attention to research or thinking or something," I replied. "This time ... I'm less sure. I hope she's, uh, okay."

"No, I am," said Zona. She'd begun moving again as she said the word. "I was just adjusting."

"I hope that it wasn't too uncomfortable," I said. I rubbed my head. "You said the sensorium is one of the harder parts of getting a new entad, and whatever the impact is, you probably have new directions to stretch in."

Zona stared at me for a moment. "I did say that," she finally said.

"So ... what's up?" asked Fenn. "Are you the Anyhouse, or what?"

"Fenn," I said. "Give her some time."

"It's a fair question," said Zona. She was still staring at me. "Why were you worried about me?"

"Should I not be?" I asked. "I mean, you said that it was sometimes difficult or uncomfortable, and from what you said, it seems to have been a major source of trauma in the past. I know you're doing it voluntarily, but sometimes we voluntarily do things that still hurt us." I paused. "So I just wanted to make sure that you're okay."

Loyalty Increased: Zona lvl 1!

Quest Completed: A Room of One's Own - She is willing to take a chance on you, so long as you do your best not to remind her of him.

"I am," said Zona. "Thank you." The walls shuddered around us, shaking free dust. The hallway undulating, shrinking around us and then expanding again. "One moment."

I stared at the loyalty and quest messages, then blinked it away. There was a part of me that was disappointed to see it, not because it meant Zona was a companion, but because it meant that I was still on the rails in some way, operating within the confines of the game. Amaryllis probably would have told me that I was being stupid, and that I should take advantages when I could get them, but it wasn't that I preferred not to have the advantage, it was just that it felt like it sullied the relationship. It was like hanging out with someone, and being their friend, and then at the end of the evening, they gave you twenty dollars for having a good time with them.

The house moved around us, creaking and groaning. The hallway shortened, and the closet door disappeared. Fenn held onto me, still with her package of sushi in one hand, and the surfboard banged up against my leg as we began moving. We saw doors sliding past us and closing in on themselves, and rooms collapsing in on themselves.

We came to a stop in front of the time chamber, with a door to our left, a door to our right, and the doors to the chamber itself.

"What the fuck was that?" asked Fenn.

"Housekeeping," replied Zona, who came back into existence next to us. "I'm fairly certain that I can alter the chamber itself as well, but I don't want to try with people inside it, and not while the need for it is still urgent." She pointed to the door on the left. "That will be the operating room for you." She pointed to the other door. "And that's storage. I removed everything else."

"You're saying that this house is now three rooms?" I asked.

"Four," said Zona, "If you include the time chamber. It's already making things much more manageable. There's less pressing on my mind."

"What about the bodies?" asked Fenn.

Zona waved a hand, and the wall behind us split apart. I turned, swinging my flashlight, and saw that we were inside a large cave, that extended up above us. Beside us were a pile of decayed corpses, sitting next to a giant mound of furniture, broken pieces of the house, and general garbage.

"All the cleaning is done," said Zona with a sigh of satisfaction. "Centuries of refuse, gone in an instant." She laughed, and the laugh seemed to come from all three rooms. "This is what a new start feels like." She looked down at herself, then up at me. "And yes, I do think it's finally time for me to say goodbye to this form, and to this name, if I'm to be your house."

She shimmered, and Tiff was gone, replaced by a slender woman who was quite a bit taller than I was. She was momentarily naked, though sexlessly so, until clothes began flowing out from her skin, covering and wrapping her in shimmering, gossamer robes of a hundred layers. Her skin changed color, flickering through different hues, until she settled on a dark brown that gradually grew lighter as she looked at her hands and adjusted it, ending up about the same color as a piece of cedar. Her hair grew and twirled around her, at first a glowing white before finally settling into a dark brown, which twisted and braided itself, becoming almost reminiscent of a rope that then coiled its length around to sit on the top of her head.

"Pretty," said Fenn. "If you don't mind me saying so, it suits you better than being a teenage girl from Kansas."

"It's unfamiliar," said Zona, looking herself over (for our benefit, I guessed, since her eyes were only an illusion). "It won't be as perfect as the girl was, but in time I'll return to that level of fidelity. With less of me to manage, the acclimation should be easier. I have more room to think now."

"And you need a new name," I said, staring at her. To be honest, I was a little bit afraid, in much the same way that I'd been afraid of the changes the Valencia had undergone. I felt like I understood the house, at least a little bit, but I wasn't sure that I would go so far as to say that I trusted it.

"Names are important, powerful things," said not-Zona. "I will have to think on it."

"What do you want us to call you in the meantime, if not Zona?" asked Fenn.

"Bethel," replied not-Zona.

Companion Name Changed: "Zona" to "Bethel"!

I stared at the game message, not knowing what to make of it, or why it would be important, if it was. The names were just shorthands anyway, not actually mechanically relevant so far as I had seen.

"Like Bethlehem?" asked Fenn.

"Bethlehem?" asked Zona, eyes narrowing. "I'm not familiar."

"It's the place where Jesus was born," replied Fenn.

"And who is Jesus?" asked Zona.

"Oh, don't worry," replied Fenn. "We'll bring you into the Bible study group."

"What's a Bible?" asked Zona.

"Enough of this," I said. "Bethel it is. Beth?"

"Bethel," said Bethel, firmly.

"Nice to meet you, Beth," said Fenn with a smile. Blades began to rise from the flagstones, encircling Fenn and pointing in toward her. "Or Bethel," said Fenn. "I guess either is fine by me." The blades vanished, and Fenn kept on smiling.

"So what's the rule?" I asked. "You can reshape yourself, so long as you technically remain a house? Or is there a blade somewhere too?"

"The former," replied Bethel. "The edges of the power are hard to detect; it's versatile and permissive. Once the pregnancy is over, I think I'll try my hand at becoming a fairy house, which should make me small enough to be carried." She glanced at the time chamber. "Though perhaps that better wait, in case it interferes with the function of the time chamber. I'm not sure how much of the structure I'll need to keep in order to ensure that the stored time is maintained." She seemed vaguely annoyed. Her new face was a little more expressive than when she'd been wearing Tiff's skin, perhaps because she didn't have as fine a handle on conveying subtle emotional nuance yet.

"We'll save the more extreme experimentation for later," I said. I thought that radical changes to the makeup of the house should probably have waited until later too, but I didn't say that.

"They're almost finished, the chamber is spinning down," said Bethel. (I was trying to imprint her new name on my mind, so that I wouldn't annoy her by slipping up.)

"Quick question," said Fenn, hooking a thumb toward the closed door. "What's in storage?"

"Everything worth saving," replied Bethel. "Entads that I had no interest in adding to myself, valuables taken from the bodies of adventurers, and a few centuries worth of spirits made through the Everflask."

"There's loot?" asked Fenn, brightening considerably. "Because I have a *huge* debt to pay down, and if there's loot, I can get a start on that."

"I wasn't offering to share," said Bethel with a faint smirk. "But if you find something that you think you could use, I might allow you to borrow it. Narcissus died with a considerable quantity of entads on his person, and most of those I was able to hide away after I had cleaned up his body."

"Cursed treasures?" asked Fenn. "Count me in!"

The door to the time chamber opened up, and Grak stepped out, stretching slightly and then freezing as he realized that the room was different, and that Zona had changed shape.

"I take it things went well," said Amaryllis from behind him. I'd thought she'd more or less reached maximum size last time, but her belly was more swollen than it had been before, now veering into grotesque territory. It was hidden beneath a large dress, but even with that, still visible. She walked like she was trying not to let it show too much.

"Human pregnancy is insane," said Fenn, eyes wide.

"I don't want to hear it," said Amaryllis with a sigh. She looked at Bethel. "Change of form, I'm assuming?"

Bethel nodded. "I'll be going by a new name as well. Bethel."

Amaryllis nodded. "A name from legends. I definitely prefer it."

"I don't care what you prefer," said Bethel (Bethel, Bethel, new name, Bethel).

"I'm not familiar with the legend," I said. "Is it ... important?"

"Not particularly, no," said Bethel. "As the legend goes, she sheltered the first of the humans from the eldritch storms that once crossed Aerb. She was the first home for humans, and the first god, before the five we know. The story is almost certainly apocryphal."

Almost. I'd done my fair share of reading on Aerb during my months in the chamber, and one of the things that had surprised me was how much people hedged their bets when talking about ancient history. The dwarves *probably* hadn't been cursed with child birth after millenia of carving their sons from stone, but no one seemed willing to just definitively say that it was hogwash. There was enough crazy random shit in Aerb's history that you couldn't always say for sure that something was totally false.

"Can you change the shape of the chamber?" asked Amaryllis.

"The chamber was installed in me in 132 FE," said Bethel. "It has little interaction with the essence of my being, though obviously they hoped otherwise when they paid the sand mage. The question isn't whether or not I can change the shape of the chamber, it's how it will interact with the sand magic used to power it, and the time stored within it. I am many things, but I am not a sand mage."

"Fuck," said Amaryllis. "I was hoping that we could all go in together for the last month." She looked back at the chamber and sighed. "If this rearrangement is the result of the Anyblade's powers, what was the outcome of adding the backpack?"

"Check this out." Fenn held out a hand to the side and struck a pose. "By the power of Grayskull! I have the power!" A sword appeared in her hand and she smiled at me, a smile that slowly slipped from her face.

"Er, what's that from?" I asked. "It sounds familiar."

“He-Man and the Masters of the Universe, you fucking ingrate,” said Fenn with a scowl. “Are you seriously telling me that you never watched He-Man?”

“It was a couple decades before my time,” I said.

“Oh fuck off,” said Fenn. She dropped the sword to the ground, and when it failed to clang, I realized that it was just a prop. “Let the power return,” Fenn muttered.

“Does He-man summon a sword?” I asked. “I thought he was like ... a Captain Marvel type thing.”

“Who the hell is Captain Marvel?” asked Fenn, frowning at me.

“He’s a superhero,” I said. “He’s a little kid who says ‘Shazam!’ and turns into a Superman type guy.”

“I have no doubt that this is fascinating for the two of you,” said Bethel. “However, the conversation is meaningless to me, except insofar as I can infer that you’re talking about Earth culture. Fenn, don’t use the backpack so frivolously again, I’m still getting used to it.”

“Fine, fine,” said Fenn. She turned to Amaryllis. “Point is, it works.”

“Good,” said Amaryllis. “We should start preparing the delivery room. I won’t go back in the chamber until it’s done, assuming that we can get everything set up in a reasonable time frame. Grak and I have worked on our plans somewhat, and assuming that everything looks good, we’ll pull you and Fenn in once I’m in the latent phase of labor, before the contractions start. That should give us all hands on deck for the crucial part, with minimal time wasted.”

“I won’t be able to participate,” said Bethel.

Amaryllis paused. “Would you want to?”

“I could be useful,” said Bethel. “I can see inside all of you. I effectively wield a scalpel sharper than any held by a surgeon, which I can use from the inside. I’ve only borne witness to nine births, all before I was the person I am today, but I might have some applicable knowledge.”

Amaryllis nodded. “I would accept that help,” she said. “We’d be trading, at most, a day of our time away during active labor, but it would also lower the time it would take to get me to the hospital in a real emergency.”

“Amaryllis anticipates fake emergencies,” said Grak.

“I anticipate that *someone* will say that we need to get to a hospital, and in the moment, it will seem like a good idea to everyone but me,” said Amaryllis.

“This is why we have the Council of Arches,” said Fenn. “Do you agree to abide by the Council’s recommendations?”

Amaryllis pursed her lips. “This is somewhat different from soul modification,” she said. “I will agree to the Council’s recommendations, so long as it’s a plurality of three, rather than a tie with veto, and so long as the Council first looks at my delivery plan and scenario cascade *first* and

says yes or no without the pressure of needing to decide in the moment. But that will take, at minimum, a full day, at least by my estimates.”

“And people call *me* difficult,” snorted Fenn.

“You are difficult,” said Amaryllis.

“Extremely so,” added Grak.

Fenn looked at me.

“I love you so much,” I said. She hit me, and I pretended that it hurt.

“Are we going to set aside a day to review my plans?” asked Amaryllis. “Grak is already in agreement, and he’s the only one that’s read it, which means that either Juniper or Fenn would have to make a case that could sway him.” She had her arms folded across her chest. “I’m *not* saying that under no circumstances should we go to the hospital, only that women have been giving birth in their own homes quite successfully for literally millenia --”

“With high maternal and infant mortality rate,” I said.

-- and those women have had far less preparation, expertise, medical equipment, and magical healing.” She was speaking a bit faster than normal, but otherwise doing a good job of sounding calm and level. “I’m going to go lie down, decide whether or not you’re going to spend a day going through the manual. I don’t think it would be a bad idea for all of us to familiarize ourselves with it, but I certainly don’t think it will be necessary.”

She waddled back off into the time chamber, and sat down in the bottom bunk, using the supports for leverage.

“Well, I don’t want to,” said Fenn. “Sounds boring as all fuck, and I’m just going to end up trying to keep up as the two of you have endless discussions of risk factors and blah blah blah. Sorry, that’s just how I envision it going.”

“Me too, to be honest,” I said. “Grak, are the plans sufficiently cautious, in your opinion?”

“They are,” said Grak. “I am in partial agreement with Amaryllis though. It is hard to judge how we will feel at the time.”

“Sure,” I said. “But if something comes up that’s outside context, we’re agreed that professional medical help is paramount, right?”

“Correct,” nodded Grak.

“Well, okay then,” I said. “And you’re fine with taking point? You’re going to be in charge of directing me, if you need me for something to do with magic. I’ve practiced the circulatory bridge technique, and I think I’m pretty good at getting into the soul, but I’m really hoping that we don’t have to do something drastic like that. Worst case scenario, I can attempt to swap out my skills in accordance with one of Mary’s master plans, with Medicine in there somewhere, then sacrifice skills to boost it.”

"Yes," nodded Grak. "That's listed in her plan."

"Oh," I said. "I didn't realize." Amaryllis and I had briefly talked about the possibility, but apparently she had formalized it.

"Only if I'm literally dying!" called Amaryllis from the bed.

"Well ... fine," I said. "If she's thought things through, and you at least *mostly* agree, I guess we don't have to do the overview, so long as you're comfortable directing us, if we're needed."

Grak nodded, and Amaryllis, from the bed, sighed in relief. I walked over to her and sat down beside her, as Grak and Fenn began talking amongst themselves.

"Getting real tired of people second-guessing me," said Amaryllis.

"Yeah, I sort of got that," I said. "You still agree that the Council of Arches gets input on changes to your soul?"

"That?" asked Amaryllis. She waved a hand. "I don't intend to make any more." She hesitated. "Maybe, if my soul is under the mistaken impression that I'm a real mother. And ... only if she doesn't love me back."

"We'll talk about it," I said. I sat next to her in silence for a bit.

"I'm competent, you know that?" asked Amaryllis. "I know it's not what happened, but it feels like since getting pregnant the three of you have constantly been assuming that I'm actually a moron."

"It's a difference in how we judge risks, that's all," I said. "At least, that's all it's been on my end. You built a fucking VCR from scratch, I'm not doubting your competence."

"It wasn't from scratch, it was from parts, and you know for a fact that I don't have recording working yet." She sighed. "But thank you." Her hand went to her belly to rub it. "She's not kicking."

"Still?" I asked.

"If this is a stillbirth, I'm going to lose my fucking mind," said Amaryllis.

"No movement at all?" I asked.

"It doesn't necessarily mean anything," said Amaryllis. "I don't know if she's going to come out crantek, human, or hybrid, and maybe the crantek just don't move around as much as humans, but ... you know. It's nerve-wracking."

"Yeah," I said. "Are you going to be okay?"

"So long as we're in the top ninety-five percent of scenarios, then yes, I think so," replied Amaryllis. "I'm just ready for all of this to be over."

"I think we all are," I said. I patted her on the leg, then it felt awkward, and I stopped.

"I'm okay with you touching me," said Amaryllis.

"Yeah, okay, I just, um," I said, stumbling through my words.

"A backrub would be nice," said Amaryllis. "If you wanted to make me feel better."

So I gave her a backrub, following her directions. From outside the open doors of the chamber, I saw Fenn look at me with a raised eyebrow, which I answered with a small shrug. It was, to my knowledge, the first real break that Amaryllis had taken while the clock was running. It was also an extremely rare example of her requesting physical contact. I kept wanting to ask whether she was keeping up with the modifications to her soul, and how that was going, but I didn't want to sound accusatory, or like I was second-guessing her, especially since that was exactly what I was doing.

"Okay," said Amaryllis after a while. "Let's get the delivery room ready, I have a wish list."

"You're good?" I asked.

"Yeah, I'm good," she sighed. "You're going to have to help me up though."

"Oh, you should know that we're scenario one," I said.

Amaryllis froze. "Before or after we handed things over?" she asked.

"After," I said. "It took a hell of a leap of faith."

Amaryllis relaxed and let out a breath. "Good," she said. "Then things are looking up."

For someone who still carried a candle for our narrative, Amaryllis hadn't chosen her words very carefully.

It took us about two hours to get the delivery room ready for Amaryllis. Most of the equipment that could be pulled from the backpack already had been, which included linens, plastic gloves, bags of saline, an enormous variety of medicines labeled in Amaryllis' careful hand, a small fridge stocked with snacks and more medicines that needed to be kept cool, and basically everything else that Amaryllis could think of. The biggest thing that Amaryllis wanted was a comfortable bed that reclined, which we were able to pull from Earth with a little bit of work as we tried out various different ones and put the rejects into the glove.

"I think this good," said Amaryllis, looking around the room at everything. She turned to Grak. "Ready?"

Grak nodded.

"When I see you next, I'll be in labor," Amaryllis said to Fenn and I. "Be prepared."

"We will be," I said. "We are."

"Prepared for what?" asked Fenn, frowning. "I thought we were just hanging out here."

"You ass," replied Amaryllis with a smile.

I swallowed back a word of caution, which I didn't think would be taken the right way, and watched Amaryllis wave goodbye as they closed the doors to the time chamber.

"Anxiety really is the appropriate reaction," I said as I let out a breath. "We've got forty-five minutes, at the most, and then ... blegh, I'm not looking forward to this."

"It seems like it was only four days ago that our little princess got pregnant," said Fenn with a wistful sigh.

"It's insane to think that the world stood still while we were doing this," I said. "Or at least, mostly so. I'm a bit worried about coming back to Valencia. It's going to take time to reacclimate and remember where we left things off."

"Your much-vaunted fifth member?" asked Bethel.

"Yeah," I said. "I guess you're going to see her at some point, and with a warder's sight you'd find out then, but ... she's non-anima."

Bethel raised an eyebrow. "You mean to tell me that you consort with devils?"

"Oh," I said. "No. You know what, I'm going to have to work on my pitch a little bit, because I wasn't explaining it right. She *was* a non-anima, and got transformed into sort of the opposite of that. Not an empty vessel for devils and demons, but, um, more a killer of them."

"Like Uther?" asked Bethel.

"Not really, no," I said. "It's hard to explain. She eats them from a distance, in sort of the opposite way that they possessed her from a distance." I hesitated. "I'm assuming that a non-anima won't be a problem for you?"

"Why should it?" asked Bethel.

"Just curious," I said. "It's one of the things that I've been worried about, when we bring other people in."

Bethel opened her mouth, then turned to the time chamber. "They're coming out," she said with a frown.

"That was fast," I replied. A wave of anxiety washed over me. "Way, way too fast."

It took some time for the chamber to spin back down, and we spent it waiting anxiously. As near as I could tell, they'd chosen to duck out of the chamber almost immediately after they'd gone in, which didn't bode well at all. Fenn tried to crack jokes, but they fell on deaf ears; I was worried.

When the doors finally opened back up, Amaryllis was standing there, leaning on Grak and holding her belly.

"Water broke, four weeks early," she said. "I'm not in labor. We're going to the hospital."