

In his medical jumpsuit, Jasper sat quietly on the reception chamber's wall-bench. The room was sterile, sleek, and with the window to the gardens outside, frankly quite beautiful. Which was why it annoyed him that he had to share its presence with a custodial bot.

Granted, it was not precisely the thing itself that was discomfiting, but rather what it implied. Someone had seen it fit to guard the door to his transfiguration with a hunk of metal about as sacred as sewage. The plantoid withdrew his eyes from the bipedal robot's unflinching gaze, turning back toward the trimmed hedges of the window. One would figure the capitol of Paradise had the cash for a living butler.

“Medbay diagnostics routine running, sir. Estimated completion in 1 minute.” the bot's audio unit sounded.

Jasper turned back toward the door. His head began to rest in arms, hands absentmindedly plucking at his head's leaves for distraction. It really wouldn't serve him well to have such thoughts. He was a guest, after all. An honored guest, but a guest nonetheless. At least for now. The man sighed, looking up toward the operating room's entrance. He squinted at the synth's sheen.

Jasper had already dreamed about it, of course. But he never quite got the fact that he might actually qualify to join the Illuminated. When you were a sprout it was all about the cool abilities you received, nevermind the fact that you were apparently out of commission for a good three decades. It was with age that the feverish wondering came, how an elect dwelling on Paradise could manage all interstellar civilization in a 100 parsec radius. Even in all those years working in intelligence, he could never quite figure out what they were hiding, or at least get his suspicions confirmed. Now he knew. If not all then at least enough.

Jasper steadied his breathing after remembering Orientation. It would be worth it.

“Medbay diagnostics complete. 0 system errors. You are free to enter.” the custodian bot spoke.

Jasper stood up. The plantoid made his way to the embossed door. The bot moved aside for him.

“We would once again like to congratulate you for your performance. Good luck in your next life.” the bot said.

Jasper stepped past the thing and waited for the door. It slowly unsealed, hints of a harsher light coming in through the crack. Jasper idled there, the world behind him and a robot in his periphery. He really wished they didn't give the machines canned lines. Or at the very least gave them to people.

The door slid away into the wall after a few more seconds. Beyond was the operating room, shining and spotless and filled with fluorescent glare. The bed-pod whose nature his counselors had previously elucidated stood in the center, with his doctor for the evening coming into clearer view as he walked inside. The medical robot was affixed to a small pillar that was adjoined to what would become his resting place, equipped with an assortment of sensors and tubular limbs and things Jasper didn't really want to think about. At any length, he was sure he'd be receiving instruction soon.

“Welcome. Please disrobe and lay down in the chamber.” a foreign audio unit tuned, likely from the walls. The voice was not mechanical, but it was emotionless. Jasper heeded it regardless, edging toward the bed and gradually undressing. He tossed the dignity jumpsuit aside and eventually pulled

himself into the confines of the operating chamber proper. It was about as mentally unwelcoming as he had expected, like a cross between a flotation tank and a vivisection table. He could feel a few smartwires worming their way underneath him, each one gradually finding their way into his flesh through tender ports still fresh from preliminary surgery.

“Do you confirm your selection of the PARAGNOST augmentations?” the room-robot asked. A few of its surgical arms were beginning to hover over Jasper.

“Yes. You will find my specifications for the procedure in the admittee's database.” Jasper responded.

The thing paused for a moment, even the writhing of its limbs briefly ceasing.

“Confirmed. The operation will commence.” the robot responded crisply a half-second later. That was what Jasper disliked the most.

The plantoid's membrane-ears could pick up the sound of a freezer unit suddenly opening. That and the sound of various devices revving up made him quite glad when he saw the surgeon swivel over the mask to him. As soon as it was wrapped around his maw, the man inhaled once. He was out right after.

Jasper was only unconscious for a little while before he found himself walking in the forest. Despite the shade of the trees, he had to admit that the sunlight was quite tasty today, and the weather quite agreeable. His tasker had told him of the target's nature as the spot of buried treasure some poet was rumored to have made a few centuries ago. After analyzing his session, they determined that this stretch of wood most matched his findings, so now it was just a matter of finding the little stump that he had viewed. And if his aim was off today, well, it would make for a fun walk regardless. Jasper kept up the walk for a bit, before his eyes stumbled on something brown and green.

It was a tree.

Jasper kept looking at it, a difficult feat given the blurriness and pain this caused. It all seemed fuzzy, but the leaves of it looked so green and vibrant, like those of a person. Not like the wispy fronds of the sessile “trees” on Altin, capturing a sliver of the tremendous radiance that the system's primary put out every day. Jasper had no pressure suit for this excursion because it was in the cradle of his race, a planet he had not set foot on until a week ago.

Jasper remembered and laughed there to himself amidst the aspens. There was a delay between the start-up of the REM inducer and whatever medical wizardry they used to induce lucidity. He had somehow forgotten that part of the procedure's explanation. Then again, it wasn't like he could be faulted for it. You don't remember such things in dreams, no matter the preparation. His mind was running on meat, Jasper now remembered. Like code in a computer. Jasper's forehead creased and he pushed aside the thought.

In any case he was in this dream now, for what reason he had yet to discern. Jasper of course knew what they had said about this stage. It still didn't make it any more sensible. He was supposed to reflect upon his life thus far while the operation was undergoing in reality. While they were adding all those new tissue grafts and gene-mods and reducing his current faculties to make way for future growth...ah, Heavens, he couldn't be thinking about that part of the procedure. Jasper looked back out toward the woods. He breathed a few times and walked around in a few comforting circles. It was worth it. Had to be.

Jasper kept in his motions for an indeterminate amount of time before he saw something new in the repetition. There was a figure approaching, a man. His leaves were decently-combed, fangs shining, and he was casually dressed. Not really the figure of a hiker. Jasper wished the dream-person away, which was why it confused him when the being did not disappear.

“Hello. I take it you are Jasper?” the man spoke plain as rain.

“I, yes?” Jasper's mouth responded for him but his mind was still thinking. “This, I am currently lucid.”

“Yes you are, the system came on when it was expected.” the man said, edges of his maw lightly curling. He seemed a little bit taller than Jasper, though the dreamer found that hard to believe when everything else about him felt like an understatement.

“Then...” Jasper stared blankly for a few moments. “...the orientation never said anything about a simmed universe during the operation. That pod didn't have a mind-machine interface, did it?”

“You should know that it did not, Jasper.” the man said in faint amusement. “We can't exactly have any hardtech hooked up to your brain while we're working on it, now can we?”

“No need to remind me.” Jasper blinked. “And by your other statements I take it the bot didn't malfunction and send me to the Great Beyond with a misplaced surgical laser.”

“No it did not, though I suppose you could consider me an angel of another sort.” the man responded in that strangely plain voice of his. Jasper couldn't exactly pin down why, but he liked it.

“And...? I don't know if you can tell, but I'm waiting on the explanation.”

“Oh, telepathic communication. We can quibble over whether or not that also entails psychokinetic perturbation of the brain, but it's essentially semantics at that point.” the visitor explained. Jasper's eyes widened.

“I, you can do that? We're not just talking about everyday ESP here...” Jasper's voice gave way.

“The Illuminated can do many things, friend. I am simply here to help you adjust, before you find the changes that have taken place in the flesh.” the man said.

“I, okay, I suppose I'll have to wake up for confirmation, but what's your name?” Jasper asked in oddly frenetic exasperation.

“My designation is Willow. You can call me Will.” the man bowed his head slightly.

“Okay, Will, I have something of a better question.” Jasper's eyes narrowed. “Why did the Illuminated not tell me about this aspect of the process? Especially given my chosen augments? God, please tell me I get telepathy...”

“The encounter must be natural. The initiate cannot be told all aspects of initiation. We did however consider what you would choose had you access to the information you currently possess. The Paragnost Process has hidden features.” Will said, mouth curving enigmatically again.

“YES!” Jasper shouted and a few birds flew off their branches. The man smiled widely, soaking in the sunlight as he euphorically spun around. He started to get dizzy before Will gently caught his arm and brought him to a stop. A sudden self-consciousness overtook Jasper, and he muttered a quiet apology before opening his mouth again.

“So, then. We're in my dream. What now?” Jasper asked.

“I'll guide you through the process. As the rejuvenation procedure proceeds, you'll find new modes of thought appearing. I will help you become acclimated to them.” Will responded.

“You, don't need to put it like that.” Jasper made out after a few seconds. His amber eyes weren't exactly meeting Will's.

“That is how it is. You surely know that the augmentation process involves regression to a juvenile state on the physiological level, to ensure that the modifications take? To say nothing of the neuroplasticity necessary to learn whole new instinc-”

“No...I remember.” Jasper sighed. He forced his gaze more towards Will. “It's just like the hesitation before jumping into a cool pool. I mean, I can barely believe that the technology even exists. I spent hours trying to decipher the mechanisms involved, and could still barely fathom it with the spreadsheets in front of me. Anagathics is one thing, this is something else.” he finished with his eyes caught on the trees.

Will looked on at the man. His behavior was quite understandable, but he felt the uneasy emotion all the same. Will's forehead creased and he looked toward the area that caught Jasper's attention.

“Come, let's take a walk.”

It wasn't much time at all before Jasper and Will were working through the woods together. Will easily guided the expedition, balancing the necessary telepathic adjustments to Jasper's dream environment as he began to start up conversation. It wasn't too hard when he had trained for it.

“If I may ask, could I hear of how you earned admittance? I suspect that it is related to your chosen upgrades, but I must admit that no one ever filled me in on that aspect.” Will spoke.

“Shouldn't you already know that? I mean, if you're the one they sent to be my mentor and all.” Jasper cocked his head.

“My relationship to the Illuminated is peculiar. I do not have access to all of their databases, though admittance reasons are not classified. I suppose they just thought it was not necessary for me to know.” Will nodded to himself slightly.

“Well, I suppose I can tell you then. I was conducting remote viewing sessions for a scout ship, pretty standard work that the agency sometimes loans you out for. On one expedition the boys thought they had found a pretty good candidate for colonization, or at least surveying. Scans from orbit indicated the planet held mild vegetative life, though of course they didn't frontload me any data when they gave me the task. I got a rough topographical impression of the world, but also a strange sense of minute organisms. I think some of my sketches are still in the archives. Anyway, my clairvoyance indicated

that virulent bacteria inhabited the planet, ones that would be deadly to our biology. If they had sent a surveying robot, the crew would have been dead once the thing was brought aboard the ship. Later they sent a lab ship with a detachable compartment and security measures out the whazoo to confirm my findings. They were accurate.” Jasper explained. The forest was bright and shining and strange to his eyes. He had seen deciduous trees in books and vids, of course, but it had still been not long at all since he first saw them in person.

“I sort of feel bad for the scouts. They knew I saved their lives, but their whole project turned out to be a waste of time. I think they grappled with that problem too.” Jasper commented quietly.

“I see.” Will said. He was still half-concentrating on extending the trees out for a longer walk, but his head turned toward Jasper regardless. The, young man's face was looking at the ground. In a daze.

“At the very least someone recognized your actions, if not them.” Will said.

“I guess. I mean, it'd be better to help someone than impress them. Still, I don't know.” Jasper looked back up, facing the path. “I honestly found it surprising that I was chosen over that scenario of all things. I've had far clearer days.” he said. A wry smile was coming over him.

“Given your records, it would seem so.” Will nodded.

“Sort of surprised you have access to those, of all things.” Jasper shook his head, grin widening.

“Indeed. In fact, your overall performance does have me wondering why all of your selected modifications are related to extrasensory perception. You already seem well set in that area. Most admittees choose at least a few adjustments outside of their expertise, some more strength in the arms or processing power in the hea-”

“It could be stronger.” Jasper interrupted.

“That is true, but I still thought it was curious. You can already survey a world's microbiome, after all.” Will spoke.

Jasper stopped walking briefly. Will braced for something, but the young plantoid just stared at him normally.

“It took me 10 minutes to identify the nature of the object. After that, I was able to tease out the topography over the course of a half-hour. It was another 30 minutes then to give them information their scanners had already picked up. Then I was able to scribble out a few microscopic beings and recognize them as such after 30 more minutes. Throughout all of this I had no idea I was right until afterwards. A week in the case of the bacterium.” Jasper spoke clearly.

The plantoid began to continue down the path with Will. He spoke again when the trees started to thin.

“When I was 10, one of the Illuminated came to visit my school. I assume he was on Altin for business, but he gave us a little visit regardless. During the part where he showed off his mods, calculatory ability and speed and whatnot, I asked him what was in my left pocket. He replied with the exact type of lined paper that I had, as well as the first few sentences of what I was going to turn in for literature class. I hushed him down and he laughed and moved on to impressing someone else.” Jasper

recollected. There was more emotion to his voice this time. Will could detect a slight quivering, and the initiate was a bit shorter. He drew closer to Jasper in his walk, lightly enough that the charge would not notice.

“He accomplished in a second what takes me a harrowing through Hell. I hope you understand my choices.” Jasper stated. His glare was intense.

Willow's seemingly permanent mouth-curve developed into a solid smile.

“I'm glad to see conviction. And you'll need it, considering what is to come.” Will spoke. By now the trees had fully parted, leaving a small clearing in the woods. A single tree flowering with alien fruits stood in the center of the small plain, with a deep-blue pool resting to the side. In hindsight such a formation would be rather unrealistic, Will thought, but such are the things that make dreams.

“I won't complain, but I figured that the whole dreamscape business would be more existential or something. Or at least not a day on the lark.” Jasper snorted, though not dismissively.

“Maybe those are more similar than you think.” Will said.

“Yeah, well, what can you say I suppose.” Jasper said. He stared vacantly onwards until he noticed the tree's contents. They, certainly looked edible. And he could taste the sunlight, something he would barely register in a normal dream. Could, he?

“Hey, uh...” Jasper reached over towards Will's arm, giving a poke that came out more like a tug. “Do you think we could, eat those? I mean, my senses don't seemed to have been dulled by the general surreality of dreams. Did your, interference, do something?”

“I don't see any reason why we couldn't.” Will looked down at Jasper. “Your greater awareness is probably due to the lucidity stabilizers; they mimic waking consciousness rather than the somewhat subdued nature of normal dream lucidity. That and just a few perceptual insertions of my own.” Will spoke. Jasper eyed him briefly.

“You should really think of people's reactions when you say stuff like that...but whatever, I'll take dreamfruit even if it's getting beamed into my brain.” Jasper shrugged, jogging over towards the tree. Will took some effort to catch up and maintain the clearing's coherency. He could see the young plantoid eagerly eyeing the suspended fruits. Most of the charge's head leaves had lost the deep green of maturity, holding onto the light green of young adulthood. And a rare few were even lighter. He'd probably have to tell him soon. Will came back out of his trance when Jasper started to talk.

“Uh, these things are pretty high up...can you like, I don't know, teleport them to me? I still sort of suck at the whole lucid dreaming thing.” Jasper's voice came out slightly guarded. He looked back and forth between the branches and Will, as if hesitant to speak.

“I'm pretty sure you can get them, Jasper. You just need to climb the tree a bit.” Will responded. He couldn't help but let a vague grin form. Until Jasper received the mod himself, he wouldn't be able to edit a telepathically-received environment.

“What're, you serious?” Jasper's tone edged toward a whine. Will figured that the furrowing of Jasper's youthful face probably didn't have the effect that the ward had intended. “Look, I know I'm no fossil

but my peak is past me.”

“That statement is incorrect, Jasper. You have not yet hit your peak.” Will said.

And waited.

The transformation from incomprehension, to presumed mishearing, to bodily examination, to disbelief, and finally astonishment was a wonder to Willow's eyes. Each set of physiological and behavioral responses was just as he had learned in the Warden program, but there was a little something else behind it that they had never taught him. At the current moment Will was watching Jasper mildly hyperventilate and ramble to himself along with occasional requests for help and bodily movements that implied a subtle excitement at adolescent vigor. Will took it all in stride, but he figured he should probably get to work comforting his charge.

“God, God, God, I'm actually turning into a teenager...is this happening in real-life too?!”

“Yes.” Will calmly nodded.

Jasper screamed a little and Will edged forward slightly more.

“This is, insane! Dude, do you realize how crazy this is! How is this even, ah damn, I don't know man...” Jasper's mouth kept moving but it stopped making sounds after a while. Will moved closer, resting a hand on the youth's shoulder. They made eye contact, and Jasper saw a certain deepness in Will's turquoise orbs.

“It really is not that big of a deal. You remember what you told me earlier?” Will asked.

“I, y-yes...” Jasper stuttered.

“You had that strength then. I don't think you lost it.” Will spoke firmly. His grip on Jasper tightened, in that pleasing way that he had spent so long practicing.

“Y-Yeah, it's just, when it actually happens it's scarier than in your imagination...” Jasper mumbled. Will could tell the teen's eyes were watery by the way he was rubbing them. The expression was clearing up though; the fearful giving way to the unsettled. It was a start.

“I'm, sorry for all this dude, it's unbecoming, I know. You...you're right though. I had the courage to sell my body for my soul and that hasn't gone anywhere.” Jasper nodded towards Will with a certain amount of confidence, however feigned.

“I'm glad to hear it.” Will said with a light smile, briefly patting Jasper's shoulder with the same hand that just rested on it. “Now then, I think you have a fruit to acquire?”

“Oh, right...” Jasper eked out. He scratched his head leaves a little before gazing back up towards the higher branches of the tree. He started to shimmy his way up the trunk, before transferring the bulk of his weight to one of the more sturdy branches. Unbeknownst to him, dream-pants couldn't snag.

“Hey, uh, can you catch this?” Jasper asked, but he had already plucked one of the crimson fruits and let it fall to the ground. Will caught it regardless.

“It would appear so.” Will raised a brow.

“Ah, thanks!” Jasper smiled for a moment, before letting himself slowly slide back down the main branch and jumped back down from the trunk. The now younger teenager rushed toward Will, unconsciously licking his fangs.

Will looked on at this in faint contentment, cradling the comestible in his hand. There was something to his expression that seemed a bit, different, to Jasper's eyes. The way he was handling – heck, the way he had caught the fruit. There was composure and shadows and a hundred other things he couldn't put a finger on. Jasper's voice tentatively came.

“Could I get the fruit, please?” Jasper took a while to say the words, but they seemed to come out right.

“Of course, sir.” Will replied swiftly, dropping the item into Jasper's outstretched hand. Jasper did like to hear that last word, even if it sounded different than usual.

Will wasn't sure what he was expecting when the boy bit into the deldi's flesh. It was difficult enough attempting to turn recorded knowledge of taste into a visceral experience, so he hadn't allocated much attention to his eyes. Still, he could hear signs of his handiwork. He could take comfort in that.

“Duuude...this thing is juicy! Never ev-” Jasper paused his gibbering to take a bite. “-en had it before! What's, whatsit called?”

“It's a deldi. Native to Paradise, so you should be seeing plenty more.” Will said. The plantoid was munching on the thing and leaving stains on his shirt. It was more entrancing to see in the flesh, Will realized.

“Oh, uhuh...” Jasper said. Will had his view ruined by a downcast face. Before he could say anything, the boy had already looked down and noticed his new pre-pubescence. Jasper was giving one of those faces that Will could instinctively recognize now, the bad-feeling one.

“How about we take a look at the lake? I don't wager that you've really seen one before.” Will said. His eyes were still concentrated on Jasper, though he tried not to make it too obvious.

“I guess...” Jasper mumbled.

Will took Jasper's arm and began to walk towards the body of water. There was surprisingly less resistance than he had anticipated, though that may have been due to the fact that Jasper was taking the opportunity to polish off the rest of his deldi. He threw away the core once they reached the shore.

“Hey, wait...” Jasper spoke, his eyes resting on the pebbled edge of the lake. He bent down and picked up one of the smooth stones, eyeing it curiously.

“Do, does skipping stones actually work?” Jasper turned toward Will with a tilted head. He, he was asking a question.

“You tell me. You have both a rock and water.” Will said. He'd answered.

Jasper shot him one of the wider grins of this whole dream. The little plantoid coiled up one of his lithe arms before swinging it forward, the saucer-shaped stone bouncing off the water's edge once before plopping into the deeps. The boy jumped up and down as much as he shouted.

“Did you see that! You weren't like changing it or anything right? 'Cause it just did it like in the vids!” Jasper excitedly spoke.

“Physical laws for this dream are currently in 100% operation. That was a genuine skipped stone.” Will gently set an arm on Jasper, the boy's excited hops almost immediately lessening. The smile wasn't going away, though.

“That's so cool! It's like, well I dunno how it works but it's cool!” Jasper said, staring at the lake with wide eyes. All so blue and deep and watery, not like ammonia pools...

“Just one of the many sights you'll be seeing soon. Sort of surprised you didn't get to see one over the past week, really. At least considering the places they usually let admittees sample.” Will said automatically. His mind was still more focused on his, his own charge.

“It was mostly just city stuff...” Jasper sighed a little.

“You don't sound too enthusiastic.” Will cocked his head. “I hope the open air was at least better than sealed habitats?”

“Well, yeah...but it was all pretty empty. I mean, I get it, 'cause you don't always need people around to run stuff, but that just means more robots behind the scenes...” Jasper mumbled. He had turned away from the lake in favor of the woods.

Will stared at Jasper for a little while. His head leaves were finer than before, lime-green and young. His whole face was so much more vibrant, less haggard than before, but still these words were coming out of his mouth. Will eventually responded.

“How is that an issue?” Will asked.

“Because you don't get to talk to people?” Jasper gave Will a quizzical look, and the man realized in an instant the gaps that telepathy can't always breach. “We had 'em on Altin too, just 'cause they can do lots of normal things better than people. Moving and computing and all that. But they're not like people. I'm sort of lucky that my powers are one of the things they can't do, at least not yet.” Jasper looked off dejectedly. “But I'm pretty sure only people can be psychic.” he looked back at Will, strangely reserved for a sprout of few years.

“I thought you'd want your powers everywhere, Jasper.” Will spoke after a few seconds. It was flat but forceful. Jasper looked closely at Will and found a far-away quality. The, grown-up wasn't quite looking at him properly. Something primordial awakened within Jasper, and despite not knowing how, he knew regret.

“I...dunno what I was saying, I, psi should be everywhere, you're right...” Jasper was talking but his heart still felt heavy and his breathing weird. There was a dizziness, which was why his face was now so intent on Will. He was a bit scared to think about why, but he thought he might find answers there.

“You're right too, Jasper. You're the one who said it in the first place.” Will spoke again. It was as serious as before, but in a different way. Jasper felt his heart ease ever so slightly.

“I, thank you mister...I didn't mean to betray, me, there.” Jasper spoke even though the words came out awkwardly. He still knew they were right.

“Sorry, I shoulda thought if you liked robots or something. You, probably feel the same way as me about psi powers if we're talking like this anyway...” Jasper rambled on.

“I tend to think of others' souls.” Will said. “Come along, now.”

Jasper didn't really know how to react, but he took Will's hand regardless when he extended it. The bigger plantoid definitely felt like the adult now, and it wasn't just because of his height. Jasper tried to sort out all the thoughts in his head, he really did. It was just that it was all getting so confusing. He remembered, loosely, that it must be related to the, doctor's work, so he could finally be free. But he had also been talking with someone in a way he hadn't done in a long time. The trees were coming into view again, along with a soft dirt path this time. Jasper took one last look back to see the clearing recede into the distance. Before him now was a woodland trail as idyllic as any storybook. Jasper smiled. He'd only seen them in storybooks.

Will picked Jasper up as soon as he could hear the little plantoid's feet dragging. He was rather sleepy and little at this point; the operation easily had only a quarter left to go. Thus, there was little resistance when Will swung Jasper's tiny legs over each of his broad shoulders. The sprout was placing his hands on Will's head, for support. They interlaced with his head leaves. It was a sensation. Good and unanalyzable. For once, Will was happy about the latter.

“Mister, Will? Where, where are we going?” Jasper said. Will could tell he was dragging himself out of fatigue.

“Someplace that should be easier to handle than a forest. With four walls and roof. I wouldn't worry about it.” Will said. He was smiling now that Jasper couldn't see.

“Mmm...kay.” Jasper spoke and then let his head drift closer down towards Will's.

The cabin came up on the horizon as planned. Will had spent the better half of a month designing its final layout in his mind; even more if you counted all of the practice sessions in Warden training. At this rate it felt more like home to him than his quarters. He lamented the fact that they'd probably only be here for a half-hour, tops. Not that it mattered.

“Hey, issat, house!” Jasper shouted in that newly-squeaky voice of his. Will could feel the sapling's head lift up, and then his legs eagerly bounce around. Will tightened his grip and began to speak.

“Uhuh. That's where we'll be staying for now.” Will said softly. Jasper remained a bit bouncy, but the tone was reaching him.

“Is cool! Like a cabin...”

The pair reached the cabin in short order. It was in a small clearing and made of finely-smoothed wood, the kind that the nouveau riche might commission in imitation of ancient nobles. But in a dream, a little

fantasy wasn't indulgent. Will listened to Jasper gasp in excitement at the patio pillars and intricately carved designs of supernatural significance. He carefully walked up the steps and opened the door to the interior. He was greeted by the warmth of the hearth to his right, already "set" to burn. He could hear Jasper gibber now, no doubt seeing a cobblestone fireplace for the first time in his life. Will passed by the woven rug, tasteful living room, and homely orange glow in favor of the hallway to the left. He entered into a small corridor and stopped at a painted blue door.

"Are...we?" Jasper started to speak, audibly more lucid.

"You'll see." Will grinned.

Will opened the door to the nursery and quickly stepped inside. He didn't give Jasper much time to react to the riot of color inside; carved wood tiles of wild animals and natural scenes on the walls, elaborate toy chests and a multitude of stuffed animals. He instead took the distinctly *baby* boy and placed him on the cushion of the simple lacquered changing table in the corner, undressing him in tandem. Will saw Jasper's eyes widen, but he wasn't prepared for what was to come next.

Jasper giggled.

"Really?" Will said, giving a laugh of his own. "You get scared of being a teenager but don't bat an eye at getting diapered? Silly boy..."

Jasper just laughed harder at the response, kicking his legs a little.

"Nuh, am just more happy am magic!"

"I'd say the same, kiddo..." Will chuckled and started to work.

In all of his preparations, Will had assumed that the greatest challenge would be getting the charge on the changing table. Now he realized his true leviathan; the squirming legs of a giggly little sprout. He initially tried to pin them down completely, before giving up and instead preparing the diaper. He reached down and acquired a small plastic undergarment; vaguely incompatible with the surroundings but far more appropriate to the waking reality he'd be dealing with. After that, he was finally able to wedge it under the little rascal's bum, thanking his lucky stars that Jasper had decided to pay more attention to the wall carvings for once. His attention came back to after he felt his privates getting powdered by Will, but his attempts at resistance proved futile once the first wing was taped on. It no time at all, Will had successfully left the sprout in much poofier attire.

"This, is wei-rd." Jasper spoke, poking his new underwear a little. Doing so gave him a nice lavender smell though, so his attention quickly turned toward the toy chest.

"Ooh! Can I play?" Jasper asked, looking at Will with the most innocent face he could muster. It wasn't that hard.

"Hmm, I think so." Will said, feigning resistance for a moment. It worked, if Jasper's subsequent squeals of delight were anything to go by. Such behavior was more than fascinating.

"Yay! Down down down please..." Jasper gibbered as Will's hands took him to the floor, the sprout managing to stand up on wobbly legs. He toddled over to the unlatched chest. As soon as he had

opened it, he pulled out the first green thing he saw.

“Is that a liz-urd?” Jasper gasped, rotating the plush around with his admittedly inarticulate hands.

“Yes indeed, glad to see you know so much of otherworldly wildlife.” Will just smiled. His eyes were doing most of the work.

“I read about animals a lot but never got to see 'em...” Jasper's voice went down. “...but now I do!” his tone quickly shot back up.

“That's right. I know plenty of zoos in the area.” Will offered.

“Uhuh, we should go there, an' see stuff, and go to parks, an' play, an'...” Jasper's excited speech was interrupted by a set of hands picking him up.

“Hehe, we'll be able to do all of that and more once you're up. Now, I think the living room would give you the most space to play?” Will spoke.

“Uhuh!”

Will took a lively sapling and his plush friend out of the nursery and into the cabin proper. As soon as he had set Jasper down on the rug, the sprout eagerly began to crawl on the floor with his friend “lizurd,” the position being most amenable to play and less taxing than standing. Jasper could feel heat over him, ambient like a heating unit but different given the presence of flame, or dream-flame. He let it tickle his body, not just for him of course but for his cold-blooded friend too. It was kind of weird, because he was naked apart from a moon-patterned diaper, but it was just him and Will and this kind of situation was normal now.

“H-Hey. Wiiiill?” Jasper said. It was a little bit higher than how he normally talked but that was okay.

“Yes, Jasper?” Will responded swiftly from his position in a leather-bound armchair by the hearth.

“Umm, when am up, who's gonna, y'know...be with me...” Jasper asked lowly.

“I trust that you know we already have a candidate for guardianship lined up for you, Jasper. I thought the answer would be a little obvious, frankly...”

“Wai...really?!” Jasper's little maw widened a little.

“Yes Jasper...the dream-entrance is when you meet with your guardian, it's part of why this stage was hidden from you during orientation.”

“Thank you Wiiiill!” Jasper screeched and smiled and peed himself a little. The sprout clutched his lizurd tightly and jumped up onto Will, who surprised himself when he actually caught the toddler. While Will was still struggling to process the sudden influx of emotion, the boy started to nest on the man's lap, the exhaustion from earlier obviously returning harder than before. Will's mind steadied as he looked closer. A mint-green little one was on *his* lap, breathing gently and exuding warmth. He was so small and delicate and in need of care, if the faded moons of his diaper were only one indication. And Will didn't *want* to say that Jasper was his, to betray the very ideal that the Person he cared for had

delivered to him. But it felt like that and Will was speechless. He cradled him there, in the last few minutes before Metempsychosis was complete, and for the first time felt weakness.

Jasper woke up in a bed. It would be most accurate to call it a bed, for it had covers and cushions and was soft and warm, unlike the cold-darkness of the pod-bed he was so sure he had fallen asleep in. He looked up gingerly into one of the clean, white rooms he had grown accustomed to. This time, though, it all seemed so much different. That was probably because the door at the end seemed really large, though, along with the people standing by it. It was all very different from what he had seen before, he thought, but it didn't *feel* very unusual. He smiled lazily, licking fangs that were notably tinier than usual. He knew in the back of his mind, of course, all that had transpired. It was just that it didn't particularly bother him anymore.

“E-lloooo.” Jasper enunciated. The people by the door; a younger grown-up in a shiny suit and a bigger one in a robe, both suddenly shot their faces toward him. He knew them both as his counselors, the ones who taught him about the procedure and science and stuff. He still liked them but he was looking for someone else.

“Ah, Jasper. It is good to see that you are awake.” the robed one spoke first. “Are you feeling alright?”

“Mmm, good.” Jasper lazily smiled, still blinking his eyes a little. “Where, where's-”

“We'll be bringing you to them soon, don't you worry.” the younger one spoke. Jasper could've sworn something was off but he didn't have time to think about that when the suited person started to pick him up out of the bed and place him standing onto the floor. Jasper realized then that he was wearing an indigo-blue sleeper with stars on it, and that there was a curious warmth down below.

“I would like to officially welcome you into the ranks of the Illuminated, initiate.” the younger plantoid said, and both of them bowed in tandem. Jasper giggled a little in excitement.

“That means am fully one of you now?!” Jasper hopped up and down.

“Well, yes.” the older one spoke.

“Though there'll be further...training, in the future. In any case, come along now.” the suited man said.

The younger counselor took Jasper by the hand and started to walk him out of the room, past the sliding door, while the older one went ahead. Jasper followed along with some vigor, though it was tinged with impatience. The halls were made of bright synth like everything else was around here, and the layout was all very confusing. After a while, though, the trio reached a larger pair of sliding doors; doors that Jasper recognized as the ones that led to the complex's entrance hall.

“I still don't see 'em. Where's Wiiiill?” Jasper whined a little.

“Your guardian will be right in the center; just a few more seconds, grasshopper.” the older counselor stated in faint amusement, his presence already beginning to part the automatic doors.

When they had finally opened, Jasper suddenly found himself in a world of light. Tingly sunlight crept onto Jasper's face through the glass roof above, the whole room a circular conclave currently ringed with a multitude of plantoids, various Illuminated that Jasper recognized from his time as an admittee.

But mostly, Jasper found himself staring at the center.

In the middle of the room stood a robot. Not a type of robot that Jasper had ever seen but a robot nonetheless. The being had a pristine synth frame, whiteness gently formed into the rough shape of a plantoid. There was some machinery tucked into the corners unadorned by plasteel plates, gleaming hints of coolant tubes and other mechanical arcana. Their face was a black globe holding a simple graphic face sculpted from turquoise light. The face was smiling.

In an instant Jasper felt something click in his brain. Multiple things, in fact. For if it wasn't the presentation that told him, or the common visual tones, then it would have to be the dialogue that was beginning to form in his mind, something new and wondrous which he had previously experienced.

Only this time there was no barrier, no adornments of the unconscious or linguistic caltrops to prevent understanding.

The very second their minds touched, Jasper could already tell that they were Will. This was just one understanding.

velvet light
I'm sorry

yes, but no
minds of all kinds glorious

should have

already did
((Warmth))
infinity-1= infinity

thank
bubbling heart
but ((currently))
streaming pool

When Jasper asked Will for a change, they thought it would ruin the numinosity of the thought-stream exchange. It did not.

fear invalid
new feelings
<Shelter>
^until we^
warm pool

Jasper giggled and remembered the room around him. Will gently drew out of the telepathic exchange, though there was now a new channel formed in their mind, one they doubted would disappear.

“I take it the exchange has gone well.” Jasper's senior counselor had started to step forward. “It would appear as though our selections were proper.”

“Indeed, my Illuminated.” Will bowed their synthetic head forward a little, though it came out more towards Jasper than the elder.

“For a self-aware, psychical machine, Willow, you seem rather humble.” the man looked toward the robot, as did the appraising gazes of the other gathered Illuminated. “Given what your design heralds for robotics, I must say that you understate your own capabilities.” the man continued, nodding to himself. “I suppose that's a virtue.”

“I simply know what I desire, sir.” Will stated, screen-face lighting up.

“Very well.” the man backed off a bit, the rest of the Illuminated beginning to engage in hushed chat.

“Your villa is already prepared. I trust you already have the schedule for the education and rearing of an Illuminated, though I must admit that our little brother here will not be seeing that for quite a while.” the man's eyes looked toward Jasper. He smiled back.

“Indeed, sir. I am prepared.” Will nodded firmly, servos clinking.

“Then, you two may depa-” the man's speech was interrupted. Some of the Illuminated looked back up from their discussions.

“Wai! Will, there's a, thingy in your, metal pocket thing!” Jasper shouted excitedly, pointing at a hatch on Will's right leg.

“I was wondering when you'd mention that.” a smiling light-face formed on Will's screen. Their hand was entering the compartment.

“Uhuh! It's a crystal, pyramid! From Jono!”

“One of the only!” Will opened their grasper to reveal a tiny, zircon pyramid, etched with the seal of Jonoian artisans. A few of the Illuminated eagerly pointed and smirked among themselves.

Jasper squealed and moved to hug Will. The robot eagerly scooped the sprout up. Tears were forming, but Will recognized these as the happy kind.

“Tele-path-ee...and E. S. P. I got it all, Will...” an age beyond both of his years tinged Jasper's voice.

“Very few people can say that, kiddo. You do.” Will spoke for themselves as much as him.

Will took a pair of keys out of the elder's outstretched hand and began to walk toward the doors of the glass entrance. Jasper was in their arms and waving back at all the other Illuminated. They gave their own waves and veiled gestures before returning to their occulted discussions. Soon the pair stepped from smooth synth to a cobbled entranceway. The carefully-designed path led up to the small roundabout that encircled the gardens. There on the road was the groundcar.

Will walked with their child down the road. Jasper was still resting in the robot's surprisingly comfortable grasp, though his actions were more bubbly now that the full force of natural sunlight was hitting him. Soon enough they had reached the angled groundcar and Will began to open the doors.

They quickly brought Jasper into the luxurious interior, plopping him onto his autolocking carseat in the back. The sapling did make grabbing hands at them for a bit, but those settled once the bot sat in the driver's seat and the boy realized he could still see his Will. Through the dashboard's camera-monitor, Will could see their boy beaming.

“Will? Where we going? Ooh, can we go to the zoo? I wanna talk with the animals!” Jasper said.

“Heh, we're just heading home for the moment, kiddo. It'd be best to have you dressed for the day-time. And cleaner.” Will's audio unit tuned in amusement.

“Oh, forgot about that...” Jasper mumbled, but Will could see him smile.

Will started up the engine and began the long drive out of the complex, towards their new life. They began to think.

Will was glad that Jasper had grown up so much.

And that there was still so much growing to do.