

Tani rose up early on Solday.

Yawning a little bit, the bug glanced toward the window of the clay hut. By the feeble light outside, he figured that it was still early in the morning, and so he took some time physically. The mind, though, was already rolling.

*Today* was the day that he was supposed to go out to the westwoods with Ven, the bug recalled jitteringly. It had taken a good half-year of implorements, but finally the elder beetle had relented, if begrudgingly. Tani was of course ecstatic that he had been able to finagle a trip outside of the village. All the serious apprenticeships were limited to teenagers, and it was hard to build up expertise as an adventurer when you were stuck behind pallisades all day. But now he'd secured at least one trip outside. Heck, maybe he'd be good enough to get his foot in the door...imagine if he got to become a scout before his Molting rite...

Tani saw his leaf-pack and gear by the door. Beginning to fill with a vigor that was burning away early-morning sleepiness, the bug threw off his sheets to get out of bed.

That was when he noticed it.

Strapped around his waist, plainly but unmistakably, was a diaper.

Tani blinked twice. Tightly bundled cloth and twig-pins remained.

He still blinked once more for good measure.

It was after half a minute of pure paralysis that Tani's mind began to recover. Not that his emotions had, at all. The, *thing* was just like the garment of little grubs, except sized for an older child, one his own size. There, there was no way this could be happening, right? This had to be a...no, *no*, this was definitely real, Tani admitted to himself. The problem still remained though; how? Perhaps this was a sick prank, Tani considered. Yet he couldn't really think of any who would be mean-spirited and stealthy enough to pull it off, let alone able to procure a non-baby diaper. This was just...really weird.

Tani quickly glanced toward the window. It looked like nobody was nearby. Hesitantly, the bug got off the bed, taking pains to quickly run toward the wall. It was accomplished in an instant and he was able to get a better view. The village was still sleepy at this hour, but smoke was already trailing from some buildings, and he could tell that some of the more industrious were starting their day. Tani took the opportunity to breathe a little bit. Calm himself down. He. He could just-

Tani heard the curtain-door being slid. In an unthinking instant of something adjacent to terror, the bug snapped his attention back to the entrance. By the time he did so, it had already opened. Standing before him was the hunter, Talin. The cricket's gaze centered on him.

Tani could scarcely speak or think or breathe. For a single terrible instant, the only thing that registered was embarrassment like never before.

And then Talin leaned on the doorway.

"Hmm. I thought I heard a racket in there. Unusual for you to be up at this hour. I take it you still have that arrangement with Ven?" Talin spoke, and eventually Tani processed the words.

They were utterly unphased.

“Y-Yes.” Tani eked out.

“Right. Then I suppose we will see how you do. Funny to see that they're letting you do this early, I can still remember when you tried to run around the village naked all those years ago...ah, Unbound Three. Well in any case, good luck. You'll certainly need it if you want to make an impression.” Talin spoke in that usual distant air of his. As Tani stood in a diaper. And as the cricket looked upon him.

When Talin got off of the doorway and started to walk back outside like nothing had happened, Tani realized that he somehow had bigger things to worry about.

Before he could hyperventilate, the child measured his breaths and began to think.

There was no doubt that Talin had saw him in a *diaper* of all things. There was also no doubt that he acted as if that was completely unremarkable. It didn't phase him one bit. Tani didn't count himself the best at reading people, but it didn't even seem like it was an act. And why would Talin be the one trying to mess with him, anyhow? It just didn't fit his personality.

Something of equal disconcertment, though, was of something specific that Talin had said. Talin had mentioned that Tani had “tried” to go around the village without clothing years ago. And in a way, that was true. That was true because practically *everyone* went around naked. Tani was no exception to this. Only people in really cold climes truly needed clothes; usually they were just a weird fashion statement or limited to utility items, like straps. Yet Tani had mentioned his nakedness as though that was something unusual, even ridiculous. And as though it was something he didn't do...

No way.

Tani remained still in the hut for a while. There. There was really no way that it could be like this. He couldn't even *think* of going outside dressed like this. He had to just take it off and go out and-

Tani broke off his line of thought. He, he couldn't really lie to himself like that. It made no sense. Whatever...*this* was, he had to figure it out. There was no other path available. And if this was all really happening, then, well...at least the embarrassment would only be internal. If his interaction with Talin was anything to go by, none of the other villagers would bat an eye. Still, though, this was just...so weird.

Tani worked up his courage for a few seconds. Still half-disbelieving, the bug walked quickly and stepped outside.

At first it was rather anticlimactic, because there didn't seem to be any bugs around. Tani had half a mind to run back inside his hut, but he forced himself to stay firm. Gingerly, the bug-child began to walk down the dirt path to the village square.

By the time he reached the center of the village, Tani noticed other bugs milling about. The first one to enter his sight was an apothecary who looked like he was heading out to the plains. For a moment Tani was gripped by that same terrible feeling he had felt earlier, but the bug gave no hint of a response and simply meandered on their way. Then it was the smith heading inside to set up shop, who gave a brief

wave as he would on any other day. The feeling returned, and Tani hoped that he had suppressed it enough to make his return wave seem normal. There still weren't too many bugs out, so the feeling wasn't quite as horrible as Tani presumed it could get. But still it was alien and acutely discomforting, like something he had never felt before. Perhaps this was how those clothed bugs up north would feel like if they ever went naked...

In any case, Tani had received confirmation of his suspicions, and they were only a cold comfort. No one seemed surprised at all that he was in a diaper, and it probably would have drawn more attention for him to be *without* a diaper. But that only meant that he had a true problem on his hands. If this wasn't a prank, then he had something far more supernatural on his hands. He had to get to the sorcerer, and figure out the specifics of whatever was going on. Perhaps he would be able to covertly get a little more information from the villagers about this..."situation," and whatever it was that was normalized to them. Tani already had his suspicions, but the wizard would likely be the one to be able to get him a true diagnosis, not to mention fix whatever was-

"Ah, Tani! You're up early!" a voice rose and Tani knew exactly from whom it had come.

Tani looked up and saw the unmistakable visage of his mentor, Ven. The beetle was approaching him from across the square.

Concurrently with this, Tani felt an alien spasm down below. Tani did not quite recognize the first sensations, but he certainly recognized the ones that came after. Without warning or a hint of control, Tani started to urinate, his diaper quickly absorbing the flow. Just as that happened, he also felt his bowels automatically give way, and he messed his diaper without warning. Tani was scarcely able to react to this consciously. His mind was gripped with shock to the point that the utter humiliation was practically playing second-fiddle. The only reaction that the bug was really able to finagle was a lack of one. As he recovered, he tried to play into this, as he remembered that that would probably be the exact reaction everyone else would expect...

"I suppose I can't exactly blame you for wanting to get started with the trip as early as possible. Still somewhat amazed that you were able to talk me into this, I can assure you that things will not be so simple going forward..." Ven mused in that way he always did, the beetle shaking his head a little good-naturedly. He looked down at Tani to get a better view of him. A second later though, he looked puzzled. Then, his expression returned to normal.

"Ah, we should probably get things settled first, though. Would you like a change, Tani?" Ven asked.

"Y-Yes..." Tani mumbled almost inaudibly.

Ven took Tani's hand without further ado and started to guide the bug down the street that led to his home. Tani was still shell-shocked, all things considered, but the more he recovered, the less he wanted anything to do with what had happened. He could feel a warm dampness up in front, and disgusting mushiness in the back. Not to mention the smell that was becoming apparent...

In the name of...*everything*! He had just pooped himself in front of his mentor in a garment for grubs, and now he was being taken to be changed like a baby! The only save that he had was that this was apparently normal for them, but it was most certainly not normal for Tani. Even once he fixed whatever was going on, this was going to leave a scar.

He, he was going to fix whatever was going on...

Tani did not stop to dwell on a certain line of thought.

All in all, the journey to the house was short, Tani was thankful for. There weren't any other bugs on the way, either, so Tani could at least be thankful for some blessings on this cursed day. Ven's house was more upscale than Tani's hut, consisting of fired, rectangular clay with interior wooden supports, not to mention proper rooms, but all in all it was a pretty low-key place. Ven guided Tani inside – with a firmer hand than usual, Tani noticed – and led him to a small room that Tani did not exactly recall. Inside, however, was a sight that Tani could still scarcely believe, even after all that had already happened.

Inside the small room was a wooden changing table. It was unadorned, but still of fine quality, matching the design of the changing tables they had in the Nursery almost to a T. Except this one was clearly larger than those, being sized for bugs far beyond babyhood. As Ven suddenly picked Tani up and placed him on the changing table, the bug even found that it was almost *too* big for him. A frightened thought passed through Tani's mind briefly, but he almost instantly dismissed it. It's not like they could be expecting him to grow into this, right?

Tani still didn't really know how to react to this situation, but Ven plainly did. The elder bug fetched some supplies from down below and started to work at unpinning Tani's used diaper. His graspers worked as though in fine artistry, and Tani was frankly rather unnerved by the skill. Tani looked away before he could see whatever mess he had made in his diaper, turning instead toward a side wall. It was then that Ven began to speak.

“I think we might have to move you up a size in another year or so, this one was a bit too tight.” Ven spoke almost absentmindedly, wiping Tani down. “It won't be too long before you're a teenager, in fact, so we might have to get the tailor to prepare some bigger ones in reserve. And maybe we can finally get this thing moved into your hut and you can start changing your own diapers, y'hear?” the beetle spoke, and Tani crossed eyes with him. Even despite this situation, his voice had...remained the same. It was quietly kind and even that last little riff had seemed to be partially in jest. Tani couldn't help but smile at that fact alone; that he still had his Ven with him. But before he could really think about the significance of the statements Ven had made, the beetle began to speak again.

“...well, I suppose we can wait a few more years for that. After all this time, a little more couldn't hurt.” the elder bug shook his head, lightly smiling to himself. By this point he had tossed the used diaper into a wicker basket, and had started to crush talcum crystals over Tani's...privates. The child looked away again, and Ven's voice returned.

“I realize that I may have brought the mention of sizes out of nowhere – that one wasn't exactly tight, I know – but I brought up the matter as it came to the mind in a rather peculiar way.” Ven said. He had unfurled a bolt of specialized cloth and was beginning to fold it over Tani's unmentionables.

“The other day, I was looking in the old storage closet, and found some of your old diapers. Your really old diapers, from when you had just hatched. Back when you were in the Nursery all those years ago, I can't say that I had expected I would still be changing you all these years later. But I can't say I mind it, not one bit. I know you give a more stoic face nowadays, but I still remember when we took you to the apothecary and discovered that you were incontinent. You were teary for weeks afterward, knowing that you would never be able to potty train. I know you've practically forgotten how much it broke you

at first by now, and have gotten over it emotionally, in any case. But it still took strength, and you've developed remarkably over the years. I can't think of many who would still earnestly pursue the adventuring life after that revelation, but you never lost that drive." Ven spoke quietly, and didn't seem to stare at anything in particular. The bug had long since folded the diaper and was now finishing up the pinwork. Tani looked up at him, and found a face he hadn't seen in a long time. He...he wasn't quite sure how to feel. And in any case, the beetle began to speak up again soon after.

"Well, I suppose this was a roundabout way of telling you one of the reasons why I acquiesced to your request to visit the westwoods with me. Now that we've gotten sentiments out of the way, I trust you won't botch things and make me regret letting you come, correct?" the beetle spoke, looking down with his usual approachable firmness. Tani realized that he had just had his diaper changed, but he spoke regardless.

"Correct, sir." Tani nodded.

"That's what I like to hear." the beetle grinned. "Now, let's set off!"

Tani had not expected the gear-up to turn out quite like this, for obvious reasons, but still he was fairly satisfied. He was equipped with a leaf-pack, a fine belt, and a diaper. Not exactly an intimidating look, he had to admit. But Ven had stuffed the backpack with a ton of *real* exploration gear, and the belt was made of real (and mysterious) leather. Tani figured that such coolness balanced things out.

Ven's equipment was distributed more broadly in web of straps that encircled his form. In comparison to Tani, the beetle was far more plainly naked. Or normal, rather, Tani remembered. Whatever the case, the two were now ready and had begun to set out towards the village's gates. It was still early enough that they avoided a lot of other bugs. Tani still felt the residual embarrassment, of course, but now, with the knowledge he had, it seemed less incapacitating.

Tani's world had been changed through magic. This he plainly knew. No matter how it had happened, somehow his past had been exchanged for another, his presence within reality changed. It couldn't have just been the minds of others that had been affected, for his sudden diaper usage in the village square told him that he was truly, physically incontinent. According to Ven, this had been the case since his hatching in whatever world he now occupied, and that seemed as reasonable a lead as any. He would do well to actually visit the town sorcerer, Tani thought to himself, but he was kind of roped into this out of the village excursion thing at the moment. Tani felt some frustration as the pair walked to the gates, and then caught his emotions right after. It was really quite sad that the thing he had been so excited for was now causing him some annoyance. Granted, it mattered little, Tani thought to himself. He could always make the visit after they got back. Hopefully he would be able to turn things back to normal before he pooped himself again...

Tani's awareness returned to the world once he noticed that they were approaching the front gate. The, the town guard was standing there, that hornet garbed in glittering metal, whose face was hidden behind a helmet. Tani felt his embarrassment return, and spike when Ven hailed the guard to open the gate. At first the faceless visage looked on at Ven, before it turned to the child at his side. Tani was half-expecting some reaction, some awareness that would break through this sorcery. He had always been so intimidated by the guard growing up, the one who wore "armor," from the time before his people came to dwell in this pure land. It always seemed like they were silently laying judgment over every last thing. When he was a *little* little kid, Tani had even thought that he had actually hailed from the time when the Three walked the Earth. With a spear, he was practically an alien within the village

itself.

As emotionlessly as it had meandered onto Tani, the guard's gaze turned toward the gate. He fiddled with the mechanism, and pulleys raised the gate. Without a single word or second more of staring, he resumed his position.

Huh.

That was good at least.

Without further ado, the two made their way out past the gate.

Tani was greeted with plains before his eyes and Ven's grip on his hand. The plains were cut through by a cobblestone road that the two were now following. Admittedly, this wasn't quite the surprise to Tani, of course. He'd been out in the fields before and had even apprenticed under the apothecary collecting herbs, all for the chance to spy his true prize. For there at the end of the horizon was the thin treeline that marked the beginning of the westwoods. That was one place he had never visited.

Of course, it would have been easier for this to feel like a proper victory if Ven hadn't been holding his hand like a toddler.

The two continued on quietly for a while. Tani was beginning to realize one of the disadvantages of adventuring gear now; the weight. The pack itself was filled to capacity and it took a not insignificant amount of effort to hoist it up. It was difficult for Tani to really pay attention to that, though, when his attention was far more enraptured by another piece of equipment he was wearing.

This, this diaper was...something. Now that he was past the worst of the shock and the grossness of a used diaper, he was able to actually examine the feeling of the thing more clearly. The most obvious part was the softness; whatever cloth was on the interior was clearly finer than the type on the exterior. It was tight too; almost like being cradled or swaddled, except with only your bottom as the recipient. There was a faint sense of nostalgia that that invoked, one that didn't even really seem tied to diapers at all. Briefly, Tani recalled when he had lived in the commons of the Nursery, before he had grown up enough to get his own hut and a mentor. It, it was interesting to remember, he thought. Peculiar, but interesting.

It was after a moment's more thought that Tani realized he could apply that same thought process to the diaper, and so he quickly withdrew himself.

Anyway, he was going to be having this thing on now for the time being, so he figured he might as well get familiar with it. As he had observed before, it would just seem weirder to the village if he *didn't* seem accustomed to them, he thought.

Tani focused once more on the road ahead. It took a few minutes of walking to reach the edge of the forest proper. The stones grew rougher here, more scattered and overgrown with moss. Before them stood a veritable wall of trees, broken by the road. Tani gazed into the weave of leaf and wood intently.

He was finally here.

Tani took a deep breath.

Here, it almost seemed like an ocean.

“Are we moving?” Ven spoke and Tani looked back up. The elder bug was staring down at him. He had stopped moving, he realized.

“Y, Yes sir.” Tani quickly nodded. It hadn't sounded like Ven had asked a question.

Without another word Ven continued to walk, pulling Tani along with him into the forest itself. Tani supposed that he was excited, all things considered. It was just difficult to pay attention to that fact when another emotion was enveloping his mind. He had never been in the woods, before, and for some reason, it wasn't like what he had expected. Hell, if he had been expecting anything in particular at all. It was dark; far darker than a rainy day. Light made its way through branches that soared above, but still it was as though it leaked through a filter. It was tight and compact too. Apart from the road, it seemed like one couldn't walk more than five feet without walking into another tree. And the further they went in, the further it felt like they were surrounded on all sides. On the plains, you were free. And even in the village you at least had some space to yourself. But this was like venturing through a tunnel. It was practically claustrophobic.

Tani looked behind him and saw an oval of light behind them, an aperture that opened up onto the plains. It was fairly big, all things considered, but rapidly receding, as the pair walked further and further into the westwoods. Out past it he could see his home village, the only place that he had really known for so much of his life. Nestled there in the prairie that extended on and on, he never quite realized how much he had liked it until now.

When Tani looked forward once more, he hewed all the more closely to Ven. Before he had found Ven's iron grip annoying, but now he almost wished that it was tighter. The elder beetle seemed resolutely set upon his path, which Tani thought he would have found more comforting if he had actually known what path they were on. The road began to curve slightly, winding through trees and past slight hills. It remained a single path, but it was still hard to tell where they were going. In fact, Tani hadn't recalled there really being a destination apart from the westwoods. What, what were they doing here, really? Did Ven decide to take him for a walk here just because he asked? It...was basically what he had asked for, he supposed. But he hadn't imagined exploration would be like this...

“Alright, this should be good.” Ven stopped in his tracks and spoke matter-of-factly. The beetle pointed his gaze to the right, so...north, Tani guessed?

“Come along now, Tani. I hope you're ready for exploration.” the beetle spoke, beginning to look back down at the little bug. His face changed a little, Tani thought.

“E-Exploration?” the child made out.

“Indeed. That's why we came out here after all.” Ven raised a brow.

Tani languidly nodded, as if in a trance, before he turned towards the area that Ven had been inspecting. There was brush and trees and wild.

“There, where's the road?” Tani asked in a haze.

Ven suppressed his chuckle.

“We're *exploring*, not traveling, child.” the beetle shook his head. “Roads go to towns and claimed areas. We want to find something new, don't we?” he asked.

Tani nodded slowly, as he did before.

Ven's head tilted a bit in puzzlement, and he buzzed a little.

“You do *want* to see the westwoods, right? We can always go ba-” Ven was cut off.

Tani shook his head.

“I'm ready, sir.” he said quietly, but with increasing vigor to his nods.

He. He had come all this way, hadn't he?

Ah, he couldn't let himself be overcome that easily. He'd been trapped for *years* for crying out loud.

Tani waited a few more seconds before speaking again, this time with strength.

“How do we do this?” Tani asked.

“Watch.” Ven said.

And grinned.

Tani remained close to Ven, but the older beetle had surprised him when he actually let go of his hand. The two were trekking through proper wilderness now, too. By this point the road was a distant sight one had to strain to see. At the very least it was behind them, so all they had to do was double back and they would eventually hit it, he thought. More important was keeping up with Ven's pace.

“You're going to want to keep an eye out around here.” the beetle made out as he wended beneath some branches. “There are lots of little brambles and roots that you can trip on. And of course, we want to snag some prizes when we're exploring. Herbs are a common one here; I'm sure your time with the apothecary taught you some of the useful ones.”

“Yessir.” Tani nodded, even though Ven couldn't see him. He was following the elder's lead, past a few bushes with flowering berries. He recognized none of them as the edible kind.

In the middle of his walk, Tani felt a strange twinge, and recognized the sensation a moment later. It was the same kind of twinge he had felt in the village square, he realized, and not a second later he felt a growing dampness in his diaper. It was a smaller amount admittedly, less than before, but he was still...peeing himself, he realized.

Tani stopped for only a moment before continuing. If the history of his incarnation had been altered, then this would be normal as far as all the other villagers knew, and especially Ven, if he was the one who helped change his diapers. Tani didn't particularly feel like repeating that at the moment, especially in a forest like this. And, well. It was somewhat strange to admit, but the sensation was not



as annoying as it had seemed before. It was like a warm moisture over his loins. The texture of his diaper had been rendered unusual, but the warmth was actually a comfort in this chilly forest. Tani focused on the sensation for a bit as the two continued their trek.

The journey went on for a few more minutes. As they continued, Tani could hear a certain panting. It was from Ven, obviously, but it was still audible. The beetle's pace began to slow down, and it was when the two hit a small clearing that the beetle began to sit down on a flat rock. Tani hadn't thought about it before, but he started to wonder about how much that shell and all that gear he had strapped upon him weighed.

“Ah...alright. It would be best for us to take a pause here...I'm guessing it's almost time for lunch anyhow.” Ven said.

How, how long *had* it been, actually? Tani silently wondered to himself, but his limbs felt rather weary regardless. It would probably be useful to take the time anyway.

Tani slid down his pack and felt an instant of amazing relief. The child began to rest up against another rock set apart from Ven. The weave of branches above was rather thin here, and more light drifted down to illuminate the pair and their surroundings. Here in the clearing, resting, things almost paradoxically began to seem more real. This was like making camp, in a way.

Sitting down, Tani took the opportunity to examine himself. He didn't seem to shabby, he realized. Just a few scrapes from branches, but he wasn't as banged up or dirty as he thought he might have been. The belt was still holding firm, thankfully enough. And, well, Tani supposed he should probably get to examining what was now his more permanent piece of equipment. Despite his wetting before, the diaper didn't seem to look that much more different. There was no discoloration, and it only seemed a little bit more clumped than usual on the front. Ven had been idly examining the clearing, and if he had noticed anything, he didn't mention it. Tani sighed quietly to himself, beginning to sit up straighter against the rock. At least he, well. At least he didn't feel as self-conscious as before about this. It was beginning to slip from the mind with ease in one way, even as it always remained on the mind in another way.

“So, Tani.” Ven began to speak up. Tani was drawn out of thought and looked back at the mentor.

“How've you found the trip so far?” the beetle asked. The voice was the same as always, but Tani thought there was a certain gleam to the eyes. As though in discernment. He considered his words with some care.

“It's been good.” Tani said, nodding his head lightly. “I, I think this part was better than the road part.”

“It would seem so.” Ven noted wryly.

“...Uhuh.” Tani briefly paused. “Honestly, I suppose the part I'm most concerned about now is skills. I mean, I'm not really sure I've really learned much about exploring. Y'know, profession-wise. Not sure if I'm doing things right or not.” Tani shrugged.

“There isn't much *to* learn, kid. There are skills certainly – especially for survival – but at the end of the day you're essentially just walking around.” Ven shook his head, but not with hostility.

Tani took in the words and sat quietly in the clearing. Ven went quiet for a few moments as well, before he reached into a satchel and brought out something in brown paper wrapping.

“You should get the meal from your pack as well. We'll be continuing soon enough.” Ven said.

Tani nodded and quickly followed in suit. While Ven started to munch on some vegetables, Tani collected a small loaf of bread from his pack and began to eat.

Around halfway through his bread roll, Tani paused. Out here in the woods, it had come to his mind again, and with strength this time. He had thought of this a passing few times over the years, but had never mustered up the courage to ask, out of fear of worsening his chances of getting outside the village. Having tasted of it now, Tani thought it couldn't hurt to ask.

“Ven?” Tani's voice was quiet.

“...Yes?” Ven responded after finishing a mouthful of lettuce.

“I know that you probably have a good reason for keeping us inside the village until we're older, or it wouldn't have been so hard to come out here in the first place...” Tani trailed off. “...But it never really made sense. With what you told us about the Three and the World Before, at least.”

Ven paused in his eating, and looked at Tani with intentfulness, but when the beetle did not raise his voice to speak, Tani thought he could continue.

“They made this world to be perfect as perfect could be for people like us. Which...I mean, I honestly don't know *how* much different it is from that other world, but everyone's always said it is practically paradise compared to what came before. Again, not sure how they know either if they were born after, but I will admit that the world has always seemed good. Which really makes me wonder...”

“...What's the point of keeping us in the village if the world's already Paradise?” Tani asked simply.

Ven kept staring at Tani for several seconds after the bug finished. When he finally began to speak, he did not change his gaze at all. And yet Tani found that he didn't mind that.

“Because we can afford to keep you there, Tani. That is part of what makes this world Paradise.” Ven said.

There were a few more seconds of silence, and now it was Tani who awaited words.

“There are practically no dangers for you to face out here, Tani. Even if you became lost, you could probably find enough berries to live with ease, and a traveler would likely point you the right way eventually.” Ven spoke, and Tani noticed the tone changing.

“It wasn't always like this, though. Back in the World Before, a child who became lost in the woods would probably never wander out. Frightful things were around in those days, Tani. Hungry things that would wander the wilderness, foul demons like 'War.' Even the way in which we live, we take for granted. There were countless inconveniences that used to plague men, things we only see shadows of now. I've heard dreadful stories of decrepitude that strikes before the deathbed, of foul air poisoning people, and of tiny, omnipresent aches that sap all luster from life. It is easy for us of these latter years

to live, Tani. We do not have to deal with real privation, or hardship, or struggle. And I will not pretend like those things were ever good or necessary. It used to be that children like you would have to work like us, or that the Black Angel would steal you away before your eighteenth year. I would never care to live in such a world, and I will never act like I live in such a world.”

Ven stopped speaking. Tani breathed shallowly, and felt small and tiny and afraid. Ven did not seem scary though, despite all the terrible words he had employed. Sitting there, solemn as he was, Ven was like an anchor. That was why Tani's attention held to him, even when his voice returned a moment later.

“We shelter you because we can, Tani. That is a gift I can only now appreciate.”

Ven was silent after. When the beetle began to finish his meal, Tani figured it would be lasting. The bug-child simply held there on the rock, unsure of what to think, let alone do. He. He supposed that he should have guessed something like that. But really, he hadn't even considered it. He'd always liked Ven, but he never thought. He realized he wasn't sure if he had ever appreciated Ven before.

Tani held still.

If he hadn't before, then he would now.

Mealtime passed by quickly. Ven had finished his lettuce soon after his speech, and Tani nibbled away at the last of the bread not long after. When they had finished, Ven got up from his position on the rock, seeming even starker and taller in his recovery. Tani didn't seem any less short, but at least he *felt* better, he thought. In more ways than one.

“There's just a little more area to clear up ahead. I think that will be good for today. Come along, Tani.” Ven spoke, looking back toward the smaller bug.

He followed right after.

Tani wasn't quite sure where they were heading in this part of trip, apart from the general “into the woods,” aspect that had become apparent earlier. But it was fine anyway. There were more trees and such, though they all generally looked the same. Probably most frustratingly, none of the herbs around here seemed to have any medicinal value. Tani couldn't quite recall if the westwoods were exactly home to many useful species, but he thought that the law of probability would have at least gotten him something by now. He didn't have too long to ruminate on that matter, however, before something else became much more apparent.

A sudden spike of pressure overtook Tani's innards and he realized what was happening almost in that very instant. He couldn't do anything to control it however, and Tani barely had the opportunity to pause in his walking before he incontinently messed himself. A small bulge began to form in the back of his diaper, and the smell started to become apparent a moment later. The bowel movement was complete soon after it had started, and Tani's walk continued without a true interruption, per se. It was still incredibly annoying for the bug to deal with, granted, but in tune with this strange alteration of reality, the child figured his best bet was to continue as though nothing unusual had happened, as disgusting as it may have been. Ven didn't *seem* to notice, though again, that was a fairly difficult thing to gauge. Tani could tell after a few more seconds of walking that the mound hadn't been that much; certainly not as much as it had been in the village square. It was a light messing, all things considered,

though that was for obvious reasons cold comfort to Tani. He could only hope that the smell would be proportionally less noticeable.

A wall of rock became apparent a while before Ven's movements ceased. The grey had been visible past tree cover, and Tani did have to admit that this was at least a new sight. It reminded him of mountainous surfaces that tended to house caves, from his recollection. To be honest, he wasn't really sure what to call it; whether a hill or a rock wall or a discontinuity or what have you. What was important was that it had been enough for Ven to stop at.

“Here we are. This should be more fruitful than some other parts of the forest, at least in terms of things to bring back home. Now, I trust you have your...Tani?” Ven looked toward the bug strangely toward the end.

“Err, yes sir?” Tani tilted his head. He wasn't quite sure why Ven had stopped. His mandibles were moving oddly and looked as though in examination. Tani's mind was just beginning to remember something, before it got an unmistakable reminder.

Without pause, Ven stepped toward Tani, crouched down, and began to pull on the back of his diaper. He looked inside, grunted, and let it snap back before he went back on to the rock wall as though nothing had happened. Tani scarcely had the time to react.

“Nevermind, I thought it was worse than it was. I'll change you when we get back.” Ven said with simple, subtle authority.

Tani just stood paralyzed for a few seconds. He wasn't quite sure what worse; the fact that his mentor had just *checked* his diaper like that, or the fact that it seemed like *he* was the one who decided when changes occurred. Tani was only just realizing it, but the one similarity between his original life and this altered reality was that in both of them, he didn't actually *want* to be the one to deal with his own dirty diapers...

“Well, Tani? I trust you have your picks? Ideally we come across something in our examination of this rock wall, and you'll need to mine some things out if you want to bring something back home.” Ven spoke and Tani was drawn out of thought.

“I, uh, right sir...” Tani nodded. To think that he would actually need those little things they had packed...

The search was surprisingly short. Halfway through the rock wall, the two stumbled across a small vein of amethyst-colored crystal. Its structure looked perfect, and the two recognized it almost immediately as being teryl, a mineral that was useful for a variety of occult purposes. The sorcerer back home could certainly use this. And, in his more immediate thoughts, Tani wondered if it could be of use in regards to his situation. In any case, a score was a score.

The two mined away what was available pretty quickly. Tani was not afraid to admit that Ven was more skilled at this, as that clearly made sense. The bug boy was still rather proud of the fact that he only crushed some of his vein into dust. While he was only able to get a few clean crystals out, he was still able to store some of the dust he had accidentally rendered. He stored away his goodies in a small cloth pouch, while Ven stowed his considerably larger score across a maze of satchels set across his body. All in all, Tani felt satisfied.

“Hmm. Not a bad capstone for your first visit to the westwoods, I'd say.” Ven spoke. He finished stowing away the last of his crystals and looked back down at Tani. “I'll be sure to inform some of the others of this vein when we get back. It's getting fairly late, so I've decided to cut the trip here. I must say, you've made me glad that I let you on.”

Tani managed one of his few genuine smiles of the day, and Ven ruffled his head a little as a reward.

“Come, let's get a move on.”

In comparison to the trip through the woods, the trip back was practically routine. It must have been mostly psychological, Tani thought, but he still didn't mind it. Really, it was kind of funny that he *had* been so scared in the first place. This world really was good, and he wasn't sure how he had forgotten that.

It was the beginning of sundown by the time the pair made it back to the village. Far later than Tani had expected in even his most generous calculations, though the boy wasn't too perturbed, all things considered. He still had time to get to the sorcerer's dwelling, and there was always tomorrow, anyway. As the pair reached the center of the village square, however, Ven looked back at the little bug.

“Will you be visiting the hall tonight, Tani?” Ven asked.

Tani's eyes widened for a moment as he remembered. Right, today was the day of the monthly assembly up in the village's hall. Technically speaking he wasn't really *required* to attend those anymore, now that he was an older kid, but Ven always liked when he visited and sometimes it could actually get pretty fun up there. Plus it was at night, so he still had plenty of time to get this sorted out with the sorcerer. Tani nodded after only a moment.

“Ah, good to hear. In that case, I'll have to ask you to swing by my house for a change before heading up. We don't need a repeat of last month...” Ven stated with faint amusement, and began to walk off down the road. Tani paused for a moment before he quite processed what had been said.

Damnit, this magic hadn't changed Ven one bit, hadn't it...

Tani just sighed and rolled his eyes before he started on the path towards the sorcerer's house. He hadn't really had much cause to visit the man before, but he thought he'd be damned if he didn't have a good reason now. Much like with the morning, the sunset had brought many bugs inside, but Tani still sighted a few wandering about. Like all of the others, they didn't pay any special attention to Tani. A few glancing eyes did peer at his diaper a little, but that was probably only because his mess was slightly visible, and they hardly appeared shocked, in any case. Tani just continued in his walking, trying to push some thoughts out of his head. The bug's emotions were...peculiar, to say the least. On one hand, he still felt that almost instinctual embarrassment, even if it had been mitigated with repeated exposure. He knew that even if this altered reality was such that the villagers were used to what had been his natal incontinence, there still had to be some subtle awkwardness to the situation. Yet the strangest thing, Tani thought, was that the situation just *wasn't* as weird as how he thought it should feel. It had been vivid in the morning, perhaps, but now it was just...hard to work up the same sort of indignity as he had before? That was still present, granted, but now it almost seemed more intellectual. Even the sensation of a used diaper itself wasn't as...immediately gross as it had been earlier? Granted, he had absolutely filled the one before, so maybe it was more of a problem of quantity and extent. In a

way, it did make sense for cloth around the waist and warmth down below to be comforting. But Tani still couldn't shake off the feeling that he wasn't feeling nearly as bad about this whole thing as he should have been. He had to...ah, good heavens, he *really* had to get this fixed now, didn't he...

Tani continued in his travel down the well-trammeled dirt road, and more quickly at that. Towards the south side of the village, the sorcerer kept his estate, and soon enough, Tani turned around a corner onto the road where the wizard's house laid. It was around halfway towards the small wooden building that Tani felt a sensation that was becoming frighteningly familiar.

“Ugh...c'mon...”

Tani didn't get the chance to stop before his bowels released themselves once more. After the processing of his lunch, the load was much larger than before, and a distinct, heavy bulge pressed down on the back of Tani's diaper. At this same time, an afternoon's worth of waterskin drinking made its way out of his body, and Tani could do nothing about the steady stream of pee that began to color the front of his diaper. The whole thing began to sag, but remained surprisingly firm, holding in all of his waste without leaking in any capacity. The strangest part was, after the elimination was actually done, Tani didn't actually find it *too* annoying. It was really frustrating to have to deal with it mid-walk, of course, and having it happen in front of other people seemed a nightmare, but the actual physical sensation of wearing the full diaper itself? It, it wasn't really too terrible, now that he thought about it. Kind of comfortably warm, in fact. Tani inspected his diaper a little more, and for a moment almost felt grateful for Ven's attention to pinning detail.

After he was done, Tani just shook his head and began to continue towards the sorcerer's place. However he felt about this little situation, he still had to fix his life and set things right.

Tani opened the lacquered wooden door and stepped inside. The front of the building appeared close to a cross between a shop and a lounge, with a variety of strange implements and arcane tools lying scattered on shelves. Tani had to pass through beads to get past the minor entrance hall, and towards the back he could spy the wizard, currently shrouded in a cloud of smoke. The sorcerer suddenly came to from his position on the wooden chair, seeming as though he was coming out of a trance. There was a low counter that seemed to cordone him off from the front room, but it was still rather informal, and Tani knew from word around town that most of the interesting magical business happened in further rooms of the building. Tani simply walked up to the counter regardless, moving with speed. The wizard looked only slightly shocked at Tani's presence.

Once arrived at the counter, Tani gazed at the cloaked figure with intent. He only had to look up slightly to meet the wizard's gaze.

“I apologize, sir...Kai, is it not? This may seem a rush, but there is something dreadfully wrong going on, and I don't know how to even begin to understand. I was hoping you could explain things more, and hopefully fix...this.” Tani spoke hurriedly, gesturing widely toward the end.

“Perhaps, perhaps not, but the easiest way for that answer to be divined is if you tell me the problem, young one.” Kai spoke with ease that belied his previous state.

“It's...oh Three, I don't even know how to begin to explain this to you...” Tani sighed. The bug stared at the ceiling for a little bit, taking a moment to recollect his breath. He returned to speech soon after.

“You, due to the nature of the effect, this is probably going to sound very strange to you.” Tani started. “But you have to trust me on this.”

“If I were not accustomed to strangeness, I would not have chosen this line of work.” Kai began. “Speak, child, for I have good reason to believe I’ve seen far more stupefying things than what you are preparing to speak of.

“I...thanks, Kai...” for another rare time that day, Tani managed a smile. He shook himself back to awareness soon after.

“Okay, so the problem is like this. I-”

Tani spoke.

And then he didn't.

It took Tani a second to notice an absence of speech. Kai's visage began to take on a disquieted expression. Tani took a second to shake his head, blinking to himself, before he opened his mouth once more.

“I-”

And it happened again. This time, Tani couldn't doubt it. One moment, he had been formulating the sentence in his mind, the one that would explain his problem concisely to the sorcerer. And the next his vocal chords failed. His speech failed. It was peculiar, for while he thought of it in his head, it passed by finely and clearly. But when he tried to actualize his sentence into audible words, it was as though his mouth and mind went blank.

“Uh, testing, I can talk, this is bizarre...sorry about this...” Tani played around with his speech a little awkwardly. Kai's head tilted slightly.

Tani experimented with his speech some more, to no avail. The words would come out normally if spoke about anything *but* the issue, but the moment it was raised, his words failed him. He kept trying and trying, but no method seemed to be able to bypass the censor. Kai began to look ever more concerned, and Tani's eyes were starting to tear up. Finally, he began to address the sorcerer once more.

“I...I don't know how to say this, sir. I can't describe the problem. I think part of the magic is the prevention of its relation. This...you don't know how terrible this is, sir...”

Kai said nothing, but gently rested an arm on Tani's shoulder. The floodgates opened, and Tani couldn't help but cry. He cried there, in halls of the sorcerer's house as the sun finally set and darkness took its place outside. He just cried and cried until he couldn't cry anymore. When he could stand to look at the sorcerer, empty, he was not sure what to expect.

They both stood there quiet for a while. Kai knew when to speak.

“I wish I could truly say that I was sorry for you child. Alas, I cannot know your suffering, and thus cannot offer you even that. Were it in my power, I would fix whatever ails you right here and right now. Unfortunately, some things escape even my power. Were I able to solve whatever enchantment

ails you, it would have become visible by now to my magical sight. Throughout your presence with me, nothing has alighted to my astral vision, and I doubt it ever will.” Kai spoke measuredly, and with depthless eyes.

Tani just stood there in the quiet, constant shuddering that follows tears. He didn't know what to do, how to get help. He felt terrible, victimized in a way that no-one else would ever understand. Lonely. Afraid.

“Child, if I may speak more.” Kai asked quietly. He did not receive a response immediately. Tani held there for a long while, until in some unmeasured instinct, he nodded.

Kai inclined his head lightly at the gesture, before he began to speak.

“Tani, while it may not quench your sorrow, I hope to at least remind you of other faces to the world. Whatever doom has befallen you, we are still here. The village has seen you since your very incarnation, and its inhabitants will continue to see you until you pass away from this world. I've seen you grow from a whelp into one who has broken tradition today, venturing beyond the village before your own Molting. Setbacks haven't held you back before. No matter what you currently face, I doubt it will hold you back now.”

Tani listened, and looked back at Kai's face.

“Ven's still there for you. We all are.”

Tani took it in and then looked away from Kai's face again, not due to frustration this time, but rather due to the overwhelming weight of words.

They were true words, Tani knew. That was how they had overpowered him so easily.

The shuddering was gone now, and he hadn't forced them down, Tani realized. They had gone of their own accord.

Kai looked at Tani pensively for a few moments, but Tani could tell that it wasn't out of calculation. There was something else, and Tani knew that whoever he was, Kai was real.

“There is something else that has come to my mind, child. I understand that it may seem strange – even insulting – to you in your circumstance, but this discovery is not a concoction of the mind. I know enough to know that fact. I sense that whatever seems to ail you, does not ail you as you believe it does. The mind is hiding something from itself, though I know not which mind is doing the hiding. I cannot cure whatever condition troubles you, Tani, but I sense that whatever it is, it needs no cure at all.”

Kai finished, and Tani was left in the aftermath.

It felt like the day after a storm. There was the kind of emptiness that didn't exactly hurt. Catharsis. Tani had rarely ever grappled with these kinds of feelings, and so he mostly just hung with them for a while.

He. He'd never really thought about it all like that before, hadn't he?



Ven was there for him. Even since before he was his mentor, he had kept an eye on him back at the Nursery. Even in this transmogrified world, he kept close to him, despite the indignity of his incontinence. Everyone in the village had remained there for him. Even when they had tried to keep him inside the village, it hadn't been out of hostility, a way to lord power or whatever over him. They genuinely wanted to keep him safe. They wanted him to enjoy a safety that practically no other world could see. A matter he hadn't even thought to take into consideration.

Even this whole alteration of reality, for as much as it toyed with his life, it was only his life. His soul was ever the same, as it always had been and always would be. No one else in the village had changed either. The only things that truly mattered were indestructible, and that was the only thing that Tani cared for.

And, well. Tani supposed he could admit it to himself, now. This change of the world, this replacement of his life that had rendered him incontinent since birth. He didn't really mind it. And more than just that, he actually *liked* his incontinence. Not being able to control his bladder and bowels, having to wear thick cloth around his bottom and be tended to by Ven, having to walk around in warm, soiled diapers – all of it made him feel comfortable, protected, vulnerable, and small in a way that was indescribably wonderful to him. He had never thought he could ever want it before, but now that it was here, he did not want it to go.

When Tani's tears fell, now, they were for joy. He was silent throughout, but for what felt like an age Tani just held there in the feelings. When he finally returned to Earth, he just mumbled shy thanks to Kai, who gave a silent blessing and naught else. For Tani, that alone had been perfect. The bug exited the wizard's estate and rushed for the village's hall, having noticed the night resplendent with stars. When he made his way inside the grand wooden hall, he saw that the festivities were already underway. To the sides, villagers held middling conversations that were dying down, as the elders in the back began to recount the solemn tales of their people, and the Three who had brought them here. Ven spied Tani's entrance, and motioned for the child to approach as silently as possible. Tani approached the mass of people that was huddled before the central fire that separated the villagers from the storytellers. Tani squirmed his way through so many before he found Ven, who caught onto him as tight as possible and placed him down secure in his lap. As the elders continued their tale of the three archwizards who made a heaven for mortals, Ven whispered to his charge.

"I thought I told you to come for a change *before* the assembly, did I not?" Ven shook his head, but couldn't conceal the smile. "I didn't want you stinking up the place like last time."

"M'sorry." Tani whispered back. "Stuff happened. Everything was really pretty." he slurred slightly, not bothering to wipe away the tears that remained.

After a few seconds, he looked up straight at Ven.

"I love you, Ven." he sniffled a little.

"Did you think I would not?" the beetle whispered, smiling down at the boy. For a moment, he caught something in the gaze. He bundled up the child closer in his lap, and whispered once more.

"I love you too, Tani."

Tani only sniffled once more after that, before he managed a smile and looked back towards the

storytellers.

They were speaking of the blessings that the World bestowed.

Tani was glad that he had his.