

Aaron woke up to golden beams gently resting over the top of his crib. The boy lightly rolled over beneath his sheets a few times before finally starting to sit up. The Sun *was* out, he knew, a golden orb beyond the window that illuminated mountains and city alike. He smiled a little at the thought. It made his heart very warm, so he called out with his voice next.

“Janiie!”

A few moments later, tender footsteps broke the silence of the nursery. A second after, the door opened.

“Why, yes Aaron? I see someone's up early this morning.” a robot responded, really only a few feet taller than the boy himself. Aaron's face brightened regardless. In any other world, the sight wouldn't have done so, for no-one would design a robot with a little screen for a face, the proportions of a toy, and a reasonably human-like soul. But this was not any other world. Aaron patiently waited in his blanket-pile while Janus strutted over, only beginning to speak when his caretaker began to unlatch the crib bars.

“Lookit! The sun is really bright today...” Aaron trailed off as he gazed back toward the window. Janus did the latter likewise.

“Well, would you look at that. It really is.” Janus said, face heading into some distant place for a moment. Aaron could kinda understand, though his tentative communion was interrupted when Janus' spirit returned.

“Well, I'd say that'd make today a great time to be out and about, wouldn't you say?” Janus quipped, giving Aaron one of those silly, nice faces that he loved.

“Ooh, uhuh!” Aaron hurriedly shook his head up and down, head leaves swaying. The boy easily complied as the robot began to scoop him up with their little arms. Soon enough, his head began to rest on the glowing, warm orb in the center of Janus' chest. He could hear its gentle thrum all the way to the changing table.

“Now then, time to get ready for such a trip!” Janus chirped.

The robot quickly got to work, setting Aaron on the changing table and waiting for a few of the drawers to open as they began to untape a diaper that Aaron was only now beginning to realize was soaked. The boy flinched a little when Janus brought the cold-wipes over, but the soothing tone that escaped their frame prevented the tremors in his chest from growing too much. It wasn't all that long before his nethers were spotless, the robot swiftly laying a new city-themed diaper beneath his bottom and powdering him properly. After that, it was just a matter of swinging the wings over and letting the tapes do their job. The robot lifted Aaron up, setting the little boy down on the floor with a butt pat right afterwards.

“Alright then! Now we just need to make sure the baby doesn't freeze...” the robot said as they started to jog towards the closet, leaving Aaron to lightly giggle behind them.

A little while after the rummaging, Janus returned with cloth folded over each of their arms. Of course, Aaron recognized his favorite clothes by their tones; a nice teal shirt that he knew also had a sparkly design on the the front, as well as a timeless set of brown shorts. Janus had to stop the excited sprout

from jumping up and down, at least enough to draw the shirt over his chest. After that, the robot helped him up into his shorts. Aaron's restlessness finally gave way to something approaching calm as Janus made sure it was buttoned properly, a stillness that held when the robot revealed a rather worn pair of sneakers for the child's feet. Aaron compliantly sat down on his bum while the robot got both on and tied them.

"Where we gonna go though? Park?" the boy quizzically turned his head while the robot finished the last touches.

"We're not just heading to one place, Aaron. The weather's far too fine for that." Janus' face-screen just gave a graphical beaming. "Don't worry, you'll get your turn in the park. I just wanted us to visit a few other places too. I think you'll find them fun. Now then, up you go!"

Janus helped Aaron to his feet, the little boy's smile growing. When Janus said something like that, it usually meant they'd be visiting something new in the City, and if he didn't love such surprises, he doubted he would be here. Aaron let a mist of imagination encompass his mind while Janus held his hand through the door and out into the rest of the pass. They passed by it all; the faux-rustic kitchen, platonically comfy living room, even the playroom and enigmatic computer room he visited on special days. After a brief passage through the nest, Janus opened a solemn oak door and stepped out with Aaron into the world.

The moment Aaron hit the porch, he could tell the Sun was bright. He had already felt the beams of course, but its presence was all the more palpable here, without the walls of home to shield him. Not that he minded it; in fact, his reaction was quite the opposite. Aaron took a more active approach to his walking now, almost leading Janus down the steps onto the cobblestone path of the frontyard. He had to slow down for Janus to open the big wooden gate that allowed entrance onto the sidewalk, obviously, but the strength of will that enveloped him was not leaving.

"Janie! Can you do the readey thingy?" Aaron's asked while tapping his head, the boy looking up towards Janus' line-face with anticipation.

"Well, the moon isn't out yet..." Janus trailed off, beginning to look away briefly. Aaron's face began to darken, at least until Janus began to speak again.

"...but I could do a few." the robot smiled, more to themselves than anyone else.

Aaron excitedly giggled before his mind went to work, the robot still guiding him down the sidewalk. Houses flicked by as in a dream while he walked, as was usual.

"Mmm, red." Janus stated succinctly, to the explosive smiling of Aaron.

"Uhuh! Thas what I was thinking...again! Again!" the boy jumped up and down a bit. Janus just held his hand firmer, chuckling to themselves lightly.

"Alright, alright, let's have at it..." the bot steadied their expression and psyche once more, even as their unconscious kept the duo on the right path.

"Triangle. A yellow one, in fact. Pointed upwards." Janus said, smirking. They were rewarded with an even greater reaction from their charge than last time. A game with rewards for both, they thought to

themselves.

The telepathic entertainment continued while the pair passed by more nameless houses. At times Aaron would focus on them a little more, one time even wondering out loud about where their inhabitants were. Janus had responded that just because you couldn't see them, didn't mean that they weren't living there. They believed it themselves.

The hazy journey through the City progressed as the Sun continued to hang in the sky, a steady nostalgic heat beginning to overtake Aaron's form. Janus had started to hold the boy a little while ago, when his legs no longer had the strength to keep up. Resting there in Janus' arms, with a shifting view of residences, businesses, and the more esoteric constructions of the urban environment, Aaron remembered Earth for a little while. It wasn't terribly relevant, though, so thoughts of it slipped from his mind by the time he felt Janus stop moving.

“Ahah! Here we are.” Janus began to approach an ivy-covered wall. Aaron had started to enter lucidity again, fumbling with his arms over Janus' chest in order to get into a better position to see. He just saw a hard-to-read sign and a wire gate-door thing, though, so he really just waited for Janus to approach and reveal.

“Let's see...open on Sundays...” Janus' audio unit began to tune in.

Of course, it was Sunday. Anyone could tell that!

“...be careful in the deep end...”

Now that was weird, could it be...?

“...children under three years of age must wear a swim diaper...”

It was!

“Swimmy, swimming...swim!” Aaron chanted to himself, hopping up and down in the cradle of Janus' arms as much as possible. Janus deftly held the toddler as they opened the gate and began to walk into the pool area. The whole area was as wide as coziness would permit, with the standard panoply of features. An elongated central pool stood off towards the end like a mysterious monument, with an office to the right and circular hot tub to the left. Janus wasn't walking towards the one feature that Aaron wanted to visit though; the shallow, fun-tiled pool that was towards the other edge of the place, right by the sandy playground. Instead, they were heading towards some assortment of doors affixed to a cold, concrete building. Since the doors were white, Aaron instinctively felt the call of the changing room.

“Janieeee...I wanna swim...” Aaron drawled a little, reaching out with a single arm towards the pool of his dreams.

“I know, that's why I'm taking you to get ready first.” the robot looked down sympathetically.

While Aaron could feel the sentiment, it did not stop the trepidation he felt when he entered the changing room. The air felt almost like liquid, a humidity that clung to his form like a miasma. If he looked closely enough, he could even see mold in the spaces between old, cracked tiles. As soon as he

saw the ground, he was even more glad for Janus' presence. His caretaker's feet were the ones that were touching the slick ground.

“Okay, let's get this done quick.” Janus spoke as they walked up to a surprisingly dry bench, placing the child down carefully before approaching a small locker unit. Aaron kept there to himself bravely, as much as he could. The boy focused on Janus, the rest of the room fading into the periphery. It looked like Janus' synthetic fingers were fumbling with a lock of some sort, spinning little wheels no doubt emblazoned with numbers. Sort of like what spies did, Aaron figured. After a few moments, Janus must have finished inputting whatever sequence was necessary, because instead of playing with the lock they were taking it off, opening a flimsy metal door, and peeking inside. They only withdrew one item from the compartment. Some strange, thick blue garment. And as Janus approached with it, Aaron realized that the exterior had the texture of a rain jacket. And then the boy remembered what that meant...

“Alright, kiddo, we'll be done before you know it!” Janus chirped.

Aaron found it really easy to follow directions when it meant he'd be getting out of an icky changing room faster. The bench was dry enough for him to lay down without issue, so mostly Aaron just thought about stuff while Janus was untaping his still-dry diaper and throwing it away. He did realize that they had skipped breakfast, but that was okay because he didn't really *need* food nowadays, and he certainly liked desserts more than breakfast. Well, most breakfasts, 'cause he really liked oatmeal and some cereals were good. And bacon, sometimes toast...perhaps he needed to rethink his opinions on the first meal of the day.

But before he could think much more, Janus just looked at him with triangles for eyes and a curve for a smile, and the boy realized he was dressed. His swim diaper did feel weird, not really crinkly and with the softness of cloth rather than whatever was in his usual underwear. But it meant he could swim so Aaron just leapt into his caretaker's arms once the bot had opened them.

Aaron became a lot more bouncy once the rays of the noon-time Sun began to hit him again. Janus took it all in stride, ferrying the boy to his reward. The approach to the kiddie pool was fast, and soon enough the robot had gently placed Aaron onto the sea-themed tiles that rimmed the pool. Aaron gingerly crawled over them, savoring the sensation before actually beginning to poke at the water proper. It wasn't as cold as he thought, perhaps due to the heat of the Sun or perhaps just due to the ways of this world, and so the boy eagerly plopped in.

Aaron held in the clear-blue water happily. It was shallow, but parts were still deep enough for him to hop in, as though he might be an astronaut on the moon of Earth. He could see his friend Janus sitting there on a classical pool-chair, keeping a watchful eye over him with cool shades. Weird that it had just suddenly appeared over their vaguely “cool” expression, but he liked such weirdness. So Aaron turned his attention back to the pool, “swimming” as much as he could and even poking his head underwater a few times. It was silly and fun, which must have been why Janus brought him here. Which did raise the question of what Janus had to do, but Aaron figured that whatever the answer, Janus must be enjoying themselves. They did an awful lot of things like this, after all.

“Having fun there, kiddo?” Janus asked from their position on the chair. Aaron only belatedly realized it, but since the last time he looked at them, they had gained a little reflective sunning sheet.

“Uhuh! I can do flips underwater...lookit!” Aaron screeched a little in response, tiny fangs peeking over his smiling maw. As swiftly as he had turned to face the robot, the boy had vanished beneath the deeps,

spinning a little in the weightlessness of the water. Janus chuckled to themselves, looking upon the boy with a deep expression.

“Glad to hear it. I'm afraid the Sun has been moving, though, so I'll think we'll need to call it quits for today if we want to see the other places. Perhaps we can come again later.” Janus remarked, expression beginning to go more neutral, or pensive.

“Aww...kay.” Aaron only responded once he had surfaced.

Janus helped Aaron out of the water and dried the sprout off with a nice towel covered with lots of fishes. Aaron had only peed a little into his swim diaper, so there wasn't much need for major clean-up as the robot helped Aaron into one of his disposable diapers. The waterlogged swim diaper was placed into some apparently waterproof compartment of a diaper bag that Janus had seemingly brought out of nowhere, but either way Aaron was clean and dressed back into his usual clothes. Janus took one of the toddler's hands with a smile. The boy gave one back.

“Now then, onward!”

Janus guided the little plant boy down a path out of the courtyard and back into the streets. The Sun was beating down now at full force, a pleasant tingling overtaking both of the pair's forms. Heat shimmers hovered over parked cars like the haze that was enveloping their minds. Aaron half-consciously watched as the environs changed throughout the trip, suburbs giving way to larger roads and gleaming university grounds. Aaron didn't really know where Janus was taking him, but it didn't make the journey any less fun. He had been on countless trips just like this before, after all, pure days that had stretched near-infinitely. In fact, the reality that the delights had never ceased was why he was less surprised than Janus when the two saw a figure standing beneath the blinking lights of an empty intersection.

“Ooh, is that a friend, Janie?” Aaron asked like he would on any other day. Janus just kept walking in the direction that Aaron was pointing towards for a few moments, face-screen entering one of its rare cycles of confusion.

“I, let us see, Aaron.” Janus audio unit finally tuned in. Aaron could feel his hand being clutched a little tighter, and just then began to furrow his brow.

Lucidity returned to the world as the two approached the person, almost unbearably so. The heat of the Sun now felt much like how it was on Earth, sweat-inducing and annoying. Peeking out from behind Janus, Aaron could spy some, grown-up, it seemed, standing in the middle of the crossroads. He looked to be wearing some weird old clothes, the kind that was white and complex and ruffly. The TV and memory told him the outfit might be from the...time right after medieval times, but he wasn't quite sure. Though confusion was mounting within, Aaron could tell that it must've been nothing compared to what the man was feeling, if his confused examinations of self and haunted expression was anything to go by. By now he was staring at those who were approaching him. Before he could quite react, though, Janus had reached the sidewalk corner of the intersection and began to speak.

“Hello stranger. What brings you here?” Janus gave their standard tone and smile.

“I, what the...” the man muttered briefly, contorted face and maw giving a strangely stupefied character to his visage. In a moment though, it was gone, replaced by some practiced vacant look.

The man stood by himself for a little while. He gave a few varying gestures; triangles made with his hands, a verdant finger before his fangs. He looked on at the two of them with each move, expression faltering ever so slightly each time. Finally, he released his grip on himself and looked upon them as a man of the world.

“What...who are you?” he asked.

“Well, my name is Janus, and my friend here is Aaron. Say hello, Aaron.” the robot responded, lightly nudging their charge.

“Oh, er, hello sir!” Aaron waved happily once Janus gave the go-ahead.

“That's, well and all, but I meant more in the manner of your nature. I will caution you that I have allies among these planes, and any ill-action you may harbor will have consequences.” the man responded guardedly, right hand idly spasming as though in the grip of an invisible dagger.

Aaron looked up towards Janus a little downcast, head tilted. The robot gave him a warm, glowing face and patted his head before turning toward the stranger.

“We mean no harm at all. If you mean to meet someone else, sir, I will let you know that they dwell in different folds, this City is all our own. Well, most of it, at least.” Janus spoke, smiling to themselves for once and rubbing Aaron's head leaves.

“Hmm. That explains the lack of usual astral riff-raff. What it does not explain is why everything is, sharper.” the man looked about himself for a while, expression vaguely pensive. He closed his eyes briefly. Aaron could almost swear he felt a great current, like when he had rode the rapids at the water park. But there was no water or breeze even. When this feeling subsided, the man's eyes had shot open, gaze wild.

“I...curses, the *cord*, visualization, pure will...augh, it should be child's play!” the man shouted, mostly to himself. It didn't stop Aaron from backing up behind Janus' right leg a bit.

“Please sir, remain calm. I am sure we can assist.” Janus' tone took on a certain technical aspect that Aaron rarely heard. “Now, I take it you're a Traveler.”

“Hmph. I figured that much was obvious, though you don't seem much of an angel. I hate to speak of you like this, but I always *did* wonder what the wildlife of the stars was. But that's besides the point. I assume you have a very good reason for why I cannot tread the paths right now, or return to my body. If not, I have a very good Banishing prepared just for you.” the man's tone was steady. Something about the way he held himself was different, transfigured. Aaron felt then the edges of the man's mind, tendrils flailing in discernment and numinous paranoia. But they were finding something, Aaron discovered.

“As a matter of fact, I do. Take a look above.” Janus just waited. After a few suffocating moments, the man did. He found a glorious golden Sun just past its zenith. The man's expression faltered for a moment, as if caught by gravity, before he recuperated his previous inner strength.

“Practically an anchor...I've never felt such a sun in my previous trips.” the man muttered to himself,

almost disbelieving.

“It can feel like that, I suppose. I don't think it is like this in many other planes. We're rather lucky that the Sun decides to pay us such special visits.” Janus said, beginning to hoist Aaron off of his tired feet. They gave the boy a few eskimo kisses off of their digital screen before turning back towards the man.

“Until night comes, I'm afraid you will have to remain here. You needn't worry; it should still feel like no time has passed at all once you get back to Earth.” Janus quipped. The man's head tilted for a moment in befuddlement, maw unable to open before Janus continued. “Now then, I must say that this is turning out to be quite the special day, and I almost want to say that fate has our paths crossed. Either way, I think both me and Aaron here would like to meet with another person for a while, and I'm guessing you have little to do in the meantime. Sooo...” Janus trailed off. The man almost opened his mouth before Aaron continued.

“Oooh, could we play!” Aaron chirped.

The man just stared vacantly at the two for a while. He was looking at a toy robot from a turn of the millenium fever dream and a little boy, both evidently dwelling in realms he had suffered years to visit. Pondering the purpose of mortals, spirits, mundanity, and magic, the man surprised himself when he answered.

“...Sure. I, yeah sure. Whatever.” the man sighed, hands on his hips.

“Yaaaay! We can go to wherever Janus is taking us, an' then we can go to the park, and th-” Aaron started to ramble on in the happy haze of toddlerhood before the man spoke up.

“Okay, okay, wait, child. My name is Simon Green and I'm a thirty-two year-old magician. I think we should have your chaperone direct our activities for the evening; I don't think I want to waste this surprisingly coherent astral trip on literal children's play. Gah, are you even a child? I'm not quite sure how the developmental stages of biology relate to the incorporeal essence of entities who are in fact the ultimate God-concept of your choice...” Simon began to ramble on in his usual occult considerations. Though, he did wonder if they were a bit too sophomoric.

“Now now, cut the boy some slack, he's just excitable. Besides, the mundane must exist for a reason, right? I'm sure we can satisfy all involved here...” Janus smiled enigmatically, albeit with a hint of weariness.

“It is not in my nature to be self-satisfied.” Simon remarked.

“Hmm. Your loss, I suppose.” the robot shrugged as much as was possible with Aaron in their arms.

“Are, we gonna play though?” Aaron blinked a little, maw edging into a frown.

“I was hoping to interact as fellow intelligences, frankly. I must admit that I do not quite understand what you mean by 'play,' and I am in fact rather concerned about another matter.” Simon spoke quickly, but ancient knowledge and faculties allowed Aaron to follow along. “Your speech is strange in its lack of strangeness, you talk with normalcy. Not like a god-child or archetype given flesh. And yet I'm not even quite sure if your words resemble, say, those of my niece. I get the feeling that you are a person much like me, and I must wonder what exactly keeps you here. You don't seem like much of a

Traveler, so ar-” Simon continued on, until he came to a sudden silence. Janus had started to gaze hard upon him then, a horizontal line forming the neutral expression that rested upon the being's face-screen. The robot's arms were solidly cradling Aaron now, whose expression was pensive, darkened. He avoided Simon's gaze, and the magician felt an unpleasant sense of alienness before Janus spoke up.

“We all already know of Aaron's nature. I trust you understand that this is not a matter to approach lightly.” the tone came out. It was cold, but beyond that. Biting, but truthful. Simon utterly hated the emotions this invoked, ones which were not solely his own, but shared by all three like a ring of brambles.

Aaron's face was shifting now. Not by much, but it was still noticeable to all. Strangely, it didn't look to be deepening, just changing. The boy looked off, away from the cocoon that Janus' arms had weaved. It was then that he began to speak.

“I want to play.”

The voice came out plain, and Simon wondered for a moment why. The forbearance did make sense given his confirmed suspicions, he supposed. But there wasn't guarded vitriol or guilt-tripping. In fact, it almost sounded like...

Shit.

Simon's memory of his magical will was intensified when he started to feel a light tingling all around his form. The sensation might not have been too rare on Earth, but the visible light distortions that were beginning to encase his limbs like heat shimmers certainly were. The voice, the look, the straight desire, all had combined in the simple sovereignty of the soul to envelop him now. Simon was almost a mite impressed, really, and undoubtedly would have been so if his physical body was the one suffering. Because now his vision-form was ebbing, wavering in the heady reality his mind occupied. Simon thought of perhaps apologizing, particularly when he noticed his height appreciably waning. But Aaron's pure occult grip was too strong, and the magician doubted that even the boy could release it. Within the span of several seconds, a disoriented Simon found the robot he once loomed over to be looming over him. In panic but not daring to show it, Simon ran his eyes over himself briefly. The effect was lessening now; he was a few feet tall and would likely remain several inches taller than Aaron by the time it had fully dissipated. Simon reminded himself that this didn't matter; that he could maintain his faculties and not have his agency suborned beneath this...elder. But it was still hard to do so, standing on the Moon.

Janus, on the other hand, just stood tutting.

“*Aaron.*” the robot inflected with a tone familiar to the boy and a forgotten memory to the former man. “You know you can't just do stuff like that to strangers...I thought I taught you better than that.”

Aaron snapped out of his mystical trance in a moment and looked back up at the face of his caretaker. His eyes widened and he looked at the sight of the regressed Simon, head soon flitting between the two figures.

“Err...sorry, just wanna play...he'll turn back I think?” the boy said legitimately, though his maw was also curling in a common routine.

Janus sighed, eyes beginning to appraise Simon more than Aaron now.

“Ugh...I think both of us need to review our ethics lessons.” the robot shook their head, still attempting to avoid the charm that had plastered itself on Aaron's face. “I can only hope for our friend here that the transmutation doesn't last too long.”

“I, uh, *about* that...” Simon's speech sputtered for a moment at the squeaking.

“Apologies for my charge's actions, sir, but if it's permanent harm that you fear, I wouldn't worry about it. Half of it is in the mind, after all; some portion of Aaron's will has merely overrode your own for the moment. It's not like your astral 'body' has been permanently ruined...just think of it as an overlay for what is probably the duration of your trip.” the robot spoke a little impatiently, though Simon could tell it was not directed towards him.

“Probably? Really?” Simon just stared at the robot. It was easier to ignore the damned voice when he could feel frustration at others.

“I'm sorry, I just can't really gauge what sort of strength Aaron packed into that impromptu youthening spell.” the robot tutted a little more. “Speaking of which, err, sorry, I just need to see how far this went...” the robot leaned in a little closer.

With conversation stilled, Simon reluctantly took the opportunity to assess the damage. He was sort of glad that his clothes had remained, albeit in suitably reduced form. He could still look like a wizard, maybe even just imagine his form as that of a gnome for a while. But...no, it couldn't cover everything. His limbs had lost the musculature that bare puberty would provide, replaced by suppleness and a certain lithe character. His tongue played around with what were now noticeably smaller fangs, points far duller than usual. Judging by the shift in Janus' face-screen to a more fawning aspect, Simon could even guess that his facial features were looking more cherubic than usual. All just...the definition of unusual.

“*Huh.*” the robot tuned a little liltingly. “I think you're only a year or so older than Aaron now...perhaps if I'm lucky, I'll only have to be changing one set of diapers!”

“Augh...so he *is* that little...” Simon cringed at multiple bizzarrities.

“Oh sorry...don't fear, Simon. I don't mind handling you if it turns out you need them at this age.” the robot gave a sickeningly happy smiley face.

“I never thought this would be the moment I understand why men turn to drink, but it's here nonetheless.” Simon sighed. “And no, that will *not* be necessary. Ugh, how does that even work in a spiritual plane...”

“The world has many mysteries. In any case, it would probably be best to make the most use of this time while we still have it. The Sun will not hang forever, after all, and before you know it we'll all be back to our usual routines.” the robot spoke. Simon could feel his attention snag on something then, away from the mundane patterns of confusion and disgust that had previously permeated his mind. The robot was looking out toward a city, after all. His eyes caught on that, too. It was all so expansive, ensouled with something, a wonder he had lived around all his life, but only viewed through gauze. It was really strange because the robot was just speaking mostly normally too. The minimal affectation in

their speech didn't even seem to revolve around this, this memory that was worming its way out of the archives of his psyche.

Really, he had just been rejuvenated beside strange beings in a contemporary dream-city. The situation was practically the spitting image of the primordial brain's idea of magic, if not occultism's.

“So, do you want to play?” Janus asked.

Simon only arose from his stupor enough to say two words.

“Err...yeah?”

“Splendid! Now, I was already taking Aaron out on a special trip today, so I think you'll find this quite interesting...” the robot set Aaron back down, and caught both of the boys' arms. The rambling continued as the group walked past the unlit lights of an empty intersection.