

Pale yellow beams flickered in through synth windowshades. They landed on the indigo sheets of a rather small bed. Their angling kept changing with the movement of their progenitor outside. Surely, the glow crept up to the leaf-shadowed head of the bed's occupant. Finally, sunlight reached Dale's eyelids.

The boy woke after several seconds and smiled after a few. The young plantoid almost immediately slid out of bed, taking a few seconds to haphazardly "make" his bed before rushing to his dresser. He quickly slid off the light pajama top and pants. There was a distinct stain to his underwear.

A knot in the plan.

Dale fished through the dresser for his first garment. After finding one of his daytime diapers, the boy hurriedly acquired his wipes and cream before lying down on the ground. Within a minute, he had cleaned himself up and equipped his first piece of gear for the evening. Looking down at the plastic undergarment, Dale couldn't help but feel like it wasn't the most auspicious of items to begin with. But it was a start.

The plantoid got the rest of his things in short order. Some jeans and a grey, long-sleeved shirt was a no-brainer, of course. But the expedition would need more than that, which was why he took a while to fish his prepared backpack from beneath his bed. Unzipping the top, Dale grinned a little in assessment. A spare jacket would help if the weather service was right. His journal and a pencil, to chronicle the journey. A few wooden charms, gemstones, salt...accoutrements of esoteric arts. And, most importantly of all, his rod. Dale gingerly retrieved the lacquered brown stick from the bag. It was smooth where it hadn't been chipped by his own (Dad's) handiwork, a thin little length of wood carved with various emblems. Dale had picked out the symbols himself from one of the occult books at the school library. One for his kithringo, another for the Hermit in Red, yet another his own name transliterated in the old tongue. More than anything else he was bringing today, this was the one that reminded Dale of who he was. A magician.

Dale got so giddy at the thought that he remembered what he was supposed to be doing. The boy slid the rod back into his pack and swung it over his shoulder. He stood there in his room briefly. For a moment, it was just a typical boy's room, dresser and desk and bed and toy shelf, but in another it was a temple, before wood had given way to plasteel. He held there in that moment long enough to briefly align his lithri. By the time Urius had lit up, Dale had forgotten the rest of the ritual. It didn't stop him from intuiting the last part. For a moment, as time came to a standstill and outside perceptions ceased, Dale thought he had touched the nameless.

Then it was gone and Dale stood blinking. The disappointment mostly gave way to excitement while Dale theorized on the way out of his room. He could've scraped his own valen-iko, or maybe just a lower feeling, but it was still cool and he felt like he was getting somewhere. He stopped by the bathroom to brush his fangs for approximately four seconds, still thinking about the trip. By his wrist-bound watch it would be around 7:00 AM, and the babysitter wouldn't be around until 9:00 given commuting distances and the assumption that he'd be sleeping in. So they'd have around an hour and a half to check out the grounds.

Dale shivered for a moment as the recollection. He muttered a half-remembered exorcistic blessing, but he was no necromancer. They'd have to be careful.

Dale made his way out of the bathroom and wended past the low-lying table and chairs of the living

room, aiming for the door. The house's tabulator-mind briefly came on as he passed the viewscreen, but it was only able to tell him the temperature before he uttered the shutdown command. The little loci went silent.

Smirking, Dale went out the front door. He was greeted by the crisp air of the outside, the sun peeking out over the house's garden-wall. Dale followed the stone steps outward, towards the rest of the ideocommune. The boy just jogged past most of the other houses, heading down the road that passed by the forest's edge. It took him a couple of minutes worth of effort, but soon he saw a plantoid his own size waiting on the sidewalk.

“Only five minutes late.” Auryl straightened out his green jacket while he spoke, eyes flickering over Dale in assessment. The other boy's eyes narrowed in response.

“It does take some time to move after waking up, metamind. And, aren't you going to bring something? This is sort of a 'thing,' you know.” Dale said.

“Already have the possession I can't lose, though really everyone can say the same.” Auryl looked over towards the treeline, idly scratching his supple head leaves. “Frankly, I think hitting the Lot would be a lot more interesting with psi-mods anyways...but the powers that are leave us in this sorry state.” Auryl sighed.

“Dude, you got like, a decade 'till you're eligible. Plus I think we would have confirmation of ghosts if it only took telepathic training to talk to dead people.” Dale responded.

“I get what you're saying, but you're literally bringing little charms in your bag and magic spells in your brain, dude.” Auryl said, smiling this time.

“Fair enough.” Dale returned it.

The pair started to enter the deciduous woodlands, making their way past the outlying brush towards the deeper trees inside. There was something of a dirt trail already formed, which made Dale's brow furrow. Other kids had probably already scoped out the place.

“So, got any more info on it?” Auryl absentmindedly asked.

“Well, yeah. According to the records, the nursery ran out of business at an inopportune time, I think it was when living in cities got really popular. This was like, 30 years or so ago? Apparently the owners of the property were actually some corp instead of locals, so they didn't even bother to clean-up the place. Demolition fees more than salable property and increase in resale value and all.” Dale elaborated.

“Huh. Weird. And I'm guessing that there were no murders or anything?” Auryl asked.

“Nope. In hindsight, probably shouldn't have bought that part...” Dale mumbled.

“I dunno, something still gives me the creeps about this. If it was just a passing schoolyard rumor we wouldn't have been hearing it since juvengarten, plus the age.” Auryl said.

“True, true. Still hope it's haunted, or at least interesting.” Dale said, focusing more on the trail as the

surrounding trees formed a more opaque canopy.

“I could do with a little cash, I suppose.” Auryl shrugged.

The two made their further into the forest. Dale took some swigs from a packed water bottle on the way, something that Auryl grew to envy as the journey dragged on into the tens of minutes. Eventually, they found a small, vaguely artificial clearing. Further in the distance they could see a tiny parking lot and a small road that seemed to wind out of the forest towards some other country roads, clearly a remnant of a past era. Taking up most of the space was a set of adjoined buildings surrounded by traditional architecture; trellises, wooden walls, and more, all tending toward cutesey designs, albeit worn with age. Past some broken fence panels they could see hints of an overgrown garden and playground, though much was obscured.

“Well, I guess I can't blame them for not bringing in the bulldozers. At least no one will be seeing this eyesore, eh?” Auryl spoke, though Dale could tell it was intended to be idle talk. He began to curiously walk around the perimeters, Dale being brought out of his trance as he started to walk on the cobblestone pathway that led to the entrance.

“Yeah, just odd.” Dale said.

The two passed beneath a trellis with the brittle, dead vines of old years. Auryl maintained his position in the front with a measured pace, eyes quickly taking in all that came before him. The front door had a little patio with old toys, rings with hoops and a few plastic buckets. Most prominent was the door, however, which though weathered by time, still looked faintly impressive with its sanded wood and simple gilt designs. Auryl's right hand hovered over the handle for a moment before he paused. Dale's eyes quickly shifted to the boy's face.

“W-What?” Dale asked.

There was a pause for a few moments, and then Auryl spoke.

“How, how do these handles work?”

Dale's eyes briefly became saucers as he explained to Auryl the nuances of turning a handle.

“Glad it's not locked, at least...” the plantoid scratched his head as he opened the door.

The two were greeted mostly by darkness. Some shafts of light were coming in through glass windows in the back, apparently to the playground that had mostly been blocked from their vision. From this illumination, they could make out the outline of a little registrar's office to their right, as well as a table for kids to their left. The rest of the room led to some other hallways at either end, with a door to the outside being present toward the back.

“I guess they were going old school with the sprouts, but it looks like the staff rooms are still pretty modern.” Auryl spoke while he peeked his head into the office, finding a small desk and cabinet setup of synth, along with the chairs that one would use in meeting with parents. A digital readout rested above where the staff member would sit; inoperative, as he had expected.

“I can see that...” Dale belatedly replied as he walked further into the greater room. It looked like there

were shelves for toys and a polymer cubby setup further in, but his pace was slow. There was not as much dust as he had expected.

“So, like, should we be doing anything in particular? I mean, if there is something, er, someone supernatural here...would you know how to contact them?” Auryl hesitantly asked, walking out of the office.

“Well, I know how to talk to you and myself, so we have two supernatural beings covered...” Dale started to speak.

“Right...” Auryl stared a little.

“...but as for your question, kinda? I'm not really good at necromancy, but like, it shouldn't be too much harder than making offerings at your family's shrine and all. Though it'd be easier if we had a name.” Dale started to ponder.

“...My family's secular.” Auryl just blinked.

“Well you can get the idea. We just need to get a little prepared.” Dale spoke, starting to thread out the straps of his bag from beneath his arms. He rested it on the ground and unzipped the top, fishing out a thin plank of wood and some salt. He was halfway through setting up the altar when he felt something off. Something warm.

Dale briefly assessed his underwear through his pants. After being met with both a strong warmth and expanded outline, he started to reach back into his bag.

“Uh, sorry, I'll...be right back.” Dale spoke. Auryl cocked his head and was about to open his maw before he saw Dale pull out the diaper and associated supplies. The boy closed his mouth, placidly nodding while looking away awkwardly.

Dale took the opportunity to scurry into the hallway to the left. He wandered through while the dampness in his crotch became all the more evident to his now aware mind. His senses too heightened as the darkness became more prominent, only a few smaller, higher windows still providing light from outside. On one hand, he thought, he'd be sheltered from the embarrassment that changing in the same room as Auryl would invoke. On the other, he was now alone in the bowels of a potential haunted daycare that Definitely Never Saw a Murder. He muttered a brief prayer for his skill at browsing the web.

After a hesitant walk through the gloom, past rooms that looked to lead into kitchens, nap rooms, and the like, Dale finally found something appropriate enough. A pale blue door adorned with the emblem of a man. On hindsight, he thought, it literally made no difference as to whether or not he changed in there or in one of the other rooms. But now that he spied it, he figured there wasn't a point in rethinking his plans. Dale made his way for the staff bathroom and opened the door. The environs were small but contemporary. There was a small plasteel sink and toilet present, though he knew he couldn't trust the plumbing. Alas, he knew he'd do better to worry about the type of business that he actually couldn't control. Plopping down the supplies, Dale got to work lying down and undoing his pants. Once they were shimmed off he could spy his once discrete diaper now saturated from a hike's worth of urine. Sighing, Dale got to work untaping the garment and wiping himself down. He cleaned himself in decently short order, sliding out the old diaper before spreading out the new one beneath his bum. After

a little cream and careful tape job, Dale found himself set. Hopefully for the rest of the day.

Dale quickly got his pants back on before turning to the remains. There were still wipes and an old one to deal with, and though there would obviously be little actual consequence to just leaving them there, some sense of dignity prevented him from doing so. So, the youthful plantoid gingerly picked them up. There had to be a disposal bin or...well...diaper pail around somewhere. Dale walked out of the bathroom, trying not think about how he'd get his hands cleaned while he looked at some of the other rooms. He figured the nap room wouldn't be a bad place to sta-

Dale heard a door open. It was coming from behind him, which was why he immediately spun around. There, past the bathroom from which he had come and towards the end of the hall, light was spilling out from the outside. There was a person there, and Dale hoped with a kind of desperation he was not familiar with that the person was living. Their skin was glistening and green like that of anyone, and the somewhat tattered woodsman's apparel would have been less concerning to see if it was actually sized for an adult. Because as the confused expression of the person was replaced by a grin, Dale started to recognize Cyrin.

Dale muttered magical curses under his breath, regrets lessening as the familiar schoolyard tough spoke.

“Well well well. I was wondering when you'd show up. Still playing pretend with your...what're you holding?” Cyrin's eyes narrowed, still adjusting to the dimness.

“Myriad paths, man. Were you *really* eavesdropping on us at lunch? Don't you have things to be doing?” Dale's voice rose, arms immediately snapping behind his back with his cargo.

“I clearly have more to be doing than you, runehead.” Cyrin faintly chuckled, steadily approaching Dale even as the boy slowly walked backward. “Now, are you going to answer my question? The ghost might get you if I don't...” Cyrin made some of the most generic “spooky” sounds that Dale had heard in his life.

“Screw off. Auryl's right behind me.” Dale responded. Unfortunately, he was not hearing footsteps from the part of the hall that he actually desired.

“As if he'll make a difference. No wonder he wants to become a psychic so bad; those noodly arms of his are useless. Not that he'll make it into the League anyway. I heard his family's genetics don't qualify fo-”

“SCREW OFF.” Dale's voice approached a shout. Cyrin's grin grew wider. The boy's walk quickly turned into a lunge, and before he could know it, Dale found his arms pinned as the larger boy's own wrapped around his body.

“Now, are you going to get this show and tell over with or are you going to need splints?” Cyrin gleefully whispered into Dale's auditory membrane, his fingers starting to rest on something slick even as his view was blocked by Dale's desperate movements.

“This is...rather unbecoming of you. Though...I'm sure you are well aware of that.” Dale made out a couple of sentences in between his struggles. At their completion, Cyrin's face flared and he twisted Dale's right arm enough for the boy to yelp in pain and drop his hands' contents. Cyrin shoved Dale to

the wall while he gazed upon what fell.

“Bloody hell. I couldn't have even imagined the haul I'd be getting today...” Cyrin's laugh reached Dale even as he struggled to balance himself on the wall.

“What's even your problem...” Dale made out in a daze, gingerly caressing his pained limb while he turned back to look at the bully.

“My problem? What about *your* problem? A pissed diaper? Out here in the middle of nowhere? Are you some kind of pedo or something?” Cyrin stared at Dale. The exultation, the pride was still there, but now there was a coldness in his eyes that started to make Dale genuinely fearful. Dale haphazardly starting to walk back along the wall as Cyrin approached. Then the punk's eyes caught on some other part of Dale. The boy paused in confusion for a second, until he noticed how low the gaze was. And how Cyrin had then looked back toward the used article on the ground. Noticing the size...

“Wow. This just keeps getting better. You know, I don't think I even need to rough you up anymore, you might not survive past a certain point.” Cyrin just chuckled, kicking the diaper to the side of the wall as he began to walk further down the hall, back towards the entrance.

“Hope your piddle pants stay clean on your little excursion here. I'll be on my way after I find your friend, so if you don't want to give me a reason to stay, just stay put, baby boy.” Cyrin's footsteps grew fainter as he kept going down the hall. As another set of footsteps grew in the same direction, Dale's mind was filled with many regrets.

Dale was still caught in the daze by the time Auryl crested the corner. The paralyzed apprentice had been shouting in his mind, of course, telling him not to come, but he was here now regardless.

“Ah. There you are.” Cyrin stopped in his walk down the hall.

A shadow came over Auryl's face.

“Indeed.” he said.

“I must say, this is somewhat out of character for you. Did they prove survival, by any chance? Or is there a psychic hiding out somewhere around here? I must say that I haven't seen any thus far...”

“Can you just lay it off for one moment ma-”

CRASH!

Dale's interruption was blown away by the sound of falling objects. All three spun around briefly until they identified the source; what seemed to be a small utility closet positioned by Cyrin.

“The hell? You guys brought another friend along?” Cyrin barked, now warily eyeing the two he was pinioned between.

Auryl shook his head almost automatically. Dale's feet began to carry him backwards, slowly. Both of their eyes were orbs.

Cyrin glanced between each of the two. His face began to crease in a strange way, but still he stepped forward. He didn't speak as he pressed his hand against the door's handle. It moved as expected, though Cyrin only realized a second later that his clammy hand wasn't applying pressure.

“W-What?!” Cyrin exclaimed, jumping back.

When the door rattled and opened itself to reveal a smattering of glowing orbs in the room, all became still. The faintest of movements remained, breathing and such. But even if the three had thought to move in their wonder, it would have ceased when the lights began to move. The hues shifted as if through a spectrum, violets becoming hotter and blues deeper. A few twisted in line-like patterns. Then, just as Dale's mind began to ground itself into familiar occult recollections, one of the lights exited the stygian depths.

It was suspended in the LCD screen of a robot frame's arm.

Dale noticed Cyrin's face going red with enough strength to swear up a storm, but before anyone could speak, a custodian bot's head wended out of the gloom.

“MOTION SENSOR TRIGGERED. PLEASE STANDBY AS MAINTENANCE CYCLE #234 COMPLETES.” an emotionless, alien voice tuned in from the contraption's audio unit. A second later, the fluctuating lights of the now-visibly bipedal robot stilled into a calm, steady blue. The head shifted down towards the three, cogitator audibly whirring.

“Damn disposable janitors...” Cyrin spoke, dusting himself off. He maintained a distance from the unveiled robot, but now kept his eyes on the two other organics present.

“There's your monster, fools! A tin can they didn't even bother to sell off. Man, this was a score.” Cyrin laughed to himself, pointing at the robot. A second later, their strip lights turned green.

“Hello kids!” the audio unit shifted to an androgynous yet almost familiar tone. Dale sighed lightly, while Auryl still just kept staring at the thing, almost as if on the verge of understanding something.

“Damnit, the-” Cyrin spoke, until the bot thrust a vaguely rubbery synth hand over his mouth. Oddly enough, it was warm.

“Shhh.” the robot hushed Cyrin. “You will forget such language.”

While Cyrin wrestled with the robot's tight grip, the bot kept speaking. Auryl's eyes narrowed when he noticed that the being's chest had a small, chipped sensor array.

“You are not in the registry for the the Sprout's Class. Are your parents here?” the bot spoke with elongated enunciations.

“Augh, no!” Cyrin shouted once the robot finally pulled its hand from his mouth. “Shutdown, Cancel, Power Off, ugh, does this thing even have a verbal killswitch?”

“Mmm. You can join the Sprouts until your parents arrive then. We'll work to find them, don't you worry!” the robot gently patted Cyrin's head, looking between the two other boys as they stared vacantly at the machine.

“I, what the...this place doesn't even have a staff anymore!” Dale shouted in exasperation.

The robot's colors shifted back to a cool blue.

“STAFF QUERY...1 STAFF MEMBER PRESENT. CUSTODIAL UNIT #01.” the bot spoke and shifted to green immediately after.

“Could we...you know...” Auryl muttered, drawing his right hand across his throat.

“I don't know if you can tell, but that thing can use force.” Dale quipped. Cyrin shot him a glare. “Probably in our best interest to pursue such things...discreetly.”

“Agh, whatever. I'll figure something out. Heh, might not even want to figure it out too much, if it means two wimps can stay booked in.” Cyrin grinned.

“That...isn't really a threat. I kind of fear a plasteel behemoth more than your barks.” Auryl shrugged.

The bot spoke before more dialogue could flare.

“Now then, my name i-” their speech was cut short.

“Velti.” Auryl's mouth moved before he could consciously think.

“Correct! Those are some nice alpha waves of yours, kiddo. I'll have to recommend that your parents get you tested once you're grown up...the fun kinds of tests, don't you worry dear...” the robot said, lights turning into a jubilant cascade of color. Auryl just stood, at first speechless, but soon shivering as a smile grew on his face.

“Holy...” Auryl spoke with the weight of a man in rapture. Dale nodded towards his friend with a similar grin, sticking his tongue out at Cyrin.

“Whatever...just tell me when you can precognize lotto numbers.” Cyrin huffed.

“Here, let's all gather up.” Velti spoke, catching Cyrin's hand as they moved toward the enraptured boy. He didn't really battle when Velti took his hand. The bot motioned with their head towards Dale as they started to lead the two down the hallway back to the entrance hall. With little room for argument, Dale followed along behind.

The trip took a little while as Velti effortlessly grappled with Cyrin's constant attempts to withdraw his hand. Dale's eyes lit up as the unlikely party entered the main hall, the boy running up ahead of the rest to quickly stow away his altar supplies and grab his bag. The robot's lights briefly quivered in vaguely bemused befuddlement, before the being stopped in the center of the room, scanning the surroundings.

“Hmm. The last maintenance routine was quite a while ago.” the bot said spoke idly, sensors taking in a thousand misaligned contours of cubbies and dust particulates.

“Yes. This abandoned daycare is clearly a health hazard to my feeble frame. Can I go now?” Cyrin rolled his eyes, but did almost expectantly glance at the front door.



“Ah, I apologize for not noticing that before!” Velti patted the top of Cyrin's head. “I can't seem to perform any medical scans at the moment...even us robots can have problems it seems! Don't worry child, I'll be sure to take your poor health into account.”

Cyrin stared at the pink lights of the robot in utter exasperation.

“Rinzi help me.” he prayed.

“He says *after* bothering to ruin a ghosthunting expedition...” Dale tsked, eyes clearly relishing the sight of someone taller than Cyrin towering over the tough.

“What are you guys talking about?” Auryl just sighed.

“Why would you think you would understand?” Cyrin shook his head. “Whatever. Let's just entertain our 'friend' here. Seeing who can escape will make a good contest.” Cyrin whispered the last part.

“Sounds like everyone's been having a lot of fun here!” Velti chirped. The whirring instruments that took up part of the bot's chest were now turned towards the three plantoids. After a few moments, the green lights of the robot shaded into yellow.

“Oh dear. Can't believe your parents didn't get you properly dressed, come along quickly, children.” the robot spoke quickly before grabbing the three's hands once more. Dale was somewhat glad that the bot had grabbed his and Auryl's hands with its left grasper rather than pairing him up Cyrin. It was still a bit too close for comfort, though, and there was still the fact that they were now heading headlong down the hall on the opposite side of the room, towards an unexplored part of the building.

“My shirt has layers y'know!” Cyrin struggled against the robot's grasp.

“Yeah, the thing's, err, Velti's sensors weren't looking too hot. I just hope these malfunctions don't turn deadly...” Auryl's voice drifted off.

“I mean, what could they even be searching for? Even if they want to put little kid's stuff on us, there's no way anything here could fit.” Dale mused as they were pulled along by the synthetic, eventually turning into another long and dim hallway, though they pulled up to a violet door on the right almost immediately after. Velti opened the door and pulled the reluctant trio into a small room with lacquered wood and embossed images of the natural world. Of course, artistry aside, their eyes were mostly focusing on the tiny plasteel table the robot was bringing them towards, a table that had a cushion built in.

“Oh Rinzi I am *out!*” Cyrin spoke as if his memory of the sight had been instantly obliterated, attempting to wrest his arm free of the robot's grasper. Servos were stronger than meat, however.

“There there, no need to get jumpy. We just need to get you dressed, as you should have already been.” the bot's face turned as sour as was possible for a robotic being, though not directed towards him.

Auryl just stood paralyzed as Velti corralled Cyrin towards the table, the robot eventually managing to hoist him up onto the padded surface even as the boy fought like he was going to be butchered. Dale focused on the window to the world outside as he suffered from intensified second-hand embarrassment.

He could only hope the bot would recognize it needn't become first-hand.

Before he could become entranced by the birds chirping beyond the glass, Dale could hear a shelf opening and reluctantly turned back towards the table. Cyrin had gone as limp as an animal in the jaws of a predator, eyes pinpricks. Auryl, for his part, was starting to recover. His future was easier to handle when he realized an enemy was going first.

“Hmm...it appears like we're out of stock, nothing quite big enough here.” Velti commented, grasper audibly running over rusty plastic objects like a church bell announcing death.

“Thank you Rinzi.” Cyrin's maw moved even as his body remained immobile.

“Ah, wait a second!” Velti's lights turned into a colorful cascade briefly as they turned toward Dale. It took him a moment to process, but as the bot looked toward his bag, he started to do something he wouldn't have expected.

He started to smile.

The bot paused for a moment and Dale answered.

“Dale. My friends are Auryl and Cyrin.” Dale said, pointing to each of them in tandem. It earned a brief flicker upon the face of Cyrin.

“Ah, thank you Dale! I was about to ask, did your parents pack any spares for you today? I hate to be a bother, but it looks like someone forgot to order the right size! Please understand, we just can't be having any messes around the dayca-” Velti was cut off by a succinct reply.

“Uhuh. I understand.” Dale nodded with a sickening sweetness towards the robot, pulling out two of his crinkly undergarments and handing them both over.

“Such a nice boy!” Velti chirped, patting the magician's head. He let this happen, for something very interesting was now going to occur. He did now feel a bit of guilt for the poor soul on the table, who was now completely obscured from vision by an outline of machinery. Auryl and Dale could only make out some of the movements, like the pulling off of pants and the lifting of legs, but the bitter taste of revenge was only heightened by such drama. Cyrin was for the most part silent, presumably still in the midst of a nightmare come to life. The robot gently hummed, and as the change progressed, the other two's thoughts of paypack faded, replaced by vestigial instincts invoked by a matronly aura. There was scariness and then there was calmness, and because of that, mostly just weirdness.

“All done!”

The two broke out of their lulled state when they heard the robot speak again. By the time they had walked to the side, throwing a black pair of boxers into a surprisingly well-maintained diaper pail, the boys were able to see a re-pantsed Cyrin sitting with his legs over the edge of the changing table like a pediatrics patient waiting for the doctor to arrive. His gaze was void. Some of the pair's guilt returned. Especially when they saw the thin plastic hemming that peeked its way from under his pants.

“Alright then, down we go!” Velti spoke liltily, helping Cyrin down from the table though just a few minutes ago he could have done so himself. He hewed to their arm in a strangely close manner, at least

for a few seconds before the bot walked over and caught Auryl's arm.

“Err, uh, sir? I think your sensors are off...” Auryl kept still enough that Velti had to gently force him to walk.

“Silly boy, you can't get away with running around naked that easily.” Velti tsked, stopping at the changing table. Cyrin took the place of a paralyzed bystander.

“I, what?!” Auryl eked out.

“Glad that developmental data hasn't been lost over these maintenance runs...if I had thought they were ready for potty training, yikes.” the bot talked to themself. “Now, I'll just have to remind the teacher to make sure they move onto decimal points and proportions in the math department...”

“I, uh, think more than just their sensors are out of whack, Auryl.” Dale lightly commented, but mostly just turned away to spare his friend undue embarrassment.

The second change passed by with less anticipation than the first, albeit in around the same amount of time. Though Auryl's desire to leave this plane had decidedly increased, he did notice that the robot was decently good at their job. He even found himself legitimately distracted at a few points as they lightly played with him, at least enough for him to feel surprise when powder was sprinkled upon his loins and a...diaper...was taped around his waist. He was quickly reclothed by the machine soon after, but he still felt naked as ever upon being lowered to the ground.

“All right, everyone's set.” Velti turned back toward the group, resting their hands upon their hips and extending their chest out, vaguely proudly. “Now then, on to class!”

Cyrin hung around the back as Velti began to lead the group out of the room. Dale and Auryl found themselves reciprocating this in a manner by keeping close to the robot. A mutual barrier of silence hung in the air, preventing any sort of reaction. Behind the eyes of his friend and enemy, Dale could see their minds withdrawn but fast at work, resolving some impenetrable web of emotion. He figured, in his own lucidity, that now would probably be the best time to run, as they were right next to a robot-free corridor, one that would lead them to a shining world outside. But his own friend could not be unsnared in that amount of time. Even more frightful to Dale's mind, when it came to the idea of “friend,” he had almost thought of the plural variant.

“Where, where're we going?” Cyrin was the first to break the silence. Dale did not turn around to spare him the embarrassment, but Auryl's shadowed psyche looked and found listless orbs staring at Velti.

“To the pedagogical chamber.” Velti spoke without breaking stride. “Don't worry, you'll have time for drawing and play after we're done with reading time.” Velti shot Cyrin a rare kind of look. He took it in and didn't speak until they reached the destination.

Velti stopped at a doorless entranceway. They faux-bowed and directed the boys to enter. Dale hesitated for a moment before making a secret sign towards the entranceway and bot, finally stepping through after. Auryl followed behind his friend as fast as he could without rustling the undergarment he really did not want to think about. Cyrin, whose composure was starting to recover itself in the lack of movement, hesitantly entered last. He tried to ignore the pseudo-smile that Velti gave.

The room was, in a word, juvenile. What little wooden flooring peeked out of the islands of multicolored carpets was lacquered to the point of splinter-free overkill. The carpets themselves were almost fluffy enough for sleeping purposes. All along the walls were the standard panoply of childhood images; natural settings, school monorails, and enough cute animals for a lifetime. All were directly overlaid on plasteel walls that served as one of the few hints of contemporary architecture in the daycare. A large wall-window at the far left end of the room allowed sunlight to illuminate toy bins and chests, a long-since overgrown garden and play area lying beyond the glass. Hints of age remained; faded pictures taped upon a few walls and some plastic elements clearly losing their pigment, but all in all it seemed about as serviceable as it may have been in its heyday.

Velti walked over towards a small book rack on the opposite wall of the room's entrance, sitting down on a sturdy metallic "chair" that seemed to jut out of the wall itself. They gestured toward a circular purple carpet that covered the floor of the little area.

"Now that we're here, can everyone take a seat?" Velti spoke effortlessly in that soft tone of theirs. The implied plantoid features of their head were more alien and paradoxically endearing than any actual face could be.

"I, what?" Auryl tilted his head.

"It's story time, you silly little goose." Velti's synthetic form just seemed to smile all the more. "I'll need you to all gather up on the carpet before I can start reading. That'll be pretty important if you want to play outside later!"

"Out, outside...yeah." Auryl spoke to himself, finally nodding after a few moments. He shot glances towards the others. He could tell by their expressions that they already knew.

The three slowly began to gather on top of the carpet. Dale just plopped himself down, but he could see Auryl right by him lowering himself down more slowly, clearly still getting used to the diaper. Cyrin had placed himself a little ways away from the two, closer to Velti, though given the small size of the carpet everyone was still relatively close together. Upon seeing them gathered, the light-streams of Velti's body briefly grew in intensity, before they reached over and began to comb through the book rack. The boys could almost recognize a few of the tomes, traditionalist ideocommunes being what they are, but Velti ended up picking out something they had not seen before in the increasingly small selection of physical children's literature.

"'Teni and the City of Gold' is what we'll be reading today, sprouts." Velti spoke softly, beginning to hold the book out to one side. The cover was a typical semi-abstract one, with a jungle foliage concealing hints of a shining orb.

The eyes which Cyrin had previously been using to stare at Velti flared. He grunted. Auryl more audibly sighed.

"Really?" he asked, but not really.

"Yup!" the bot gave their default dismissive smile.

"Now, once upon a time..."

The story was a thing, Dale supposed. Like the title suggested, it centered around a person named Teni who was on a quest to find a mystical city of untold wonder. The arc, if one could call it that, was as basic as any. Velti kept flicking through pages and reading off sentences, slowly describing a variety of tests and challenges that lay outside the comforting confines of their home city. One of the first trials was dealing with the bandits who dwelled in the forest just outside of the city. Predictably, Teni was able to outsmart them, though Dale thought that the detail that they were entirely dispersed through creating the illusion that the forest was haunted was clever. The story meandered along a similar formula, with the lively machine-inked illustrations saving the book's bacon at a few points. Some parts did get more interesting though, like when Teni broke an abandoned dam in order to read a map hidden on the interior of its wall. Going on page by page, with the lilting voice of Velti to guide the way, it really did start to sound familiar. Like when Teni traded away a meaningful but cheap family crest for a rusty key that would prove invaluable to unlocking one of the city's gates. Going beyond the realms of mortals, paying prices that wouldn't compare to what one would reap...

Dale started to get very tired at some point in the story. Perhaps not sleepy, but the sort of hypnotic haze that one enters when they are absorbed in the world. He could vaguely perceive that the others were entering that zone too, if Auryl's diminishing smart aleck comments and Cyrin's dull eyes were any indication. He wondered, briefly, why they were here. But it didn't matter because Teni was still traveling and he'd be finding the city soon.

At the final point of their map, Teni found themselves heading down a road that led to a shining place of unparalleled splendor. It was so wonderfully beyond any mortal craft that it was only when Teni reached the gates and was greeted as a hero that they realized that the city they were entering was the one of their birth. Dale's eyes widened at this part, and the pages kept flipping. All of the little conquests that the quester had accomplished had rippling effects. A lack of bandits allowed trade, the destruction of the dam allowed previously-stagnant waters to quench ancient cropland, the tribesman who purchased the crest would find fortune as a minor noble in the city, sharing miraculous cures honed from years in the wilderness. Even the key would find itself opening an old vault beneath the city's center, sharing treasures that would enrich all who dwelled within the town until the end of time...

The ending was so happy and shining and glorious that Dale felt rather perturbed when Velti finally closed the book, like seeing a whole new land beyond gates that you can never breach. He soon noticed, though, that his own reaction was nothing compared to what lay before him. Auryl was still seemingly engrossed mentally in the story, having barely registered the fact that Velti had just shut closed the literal children's book that had been read to him. Cyrin had started to turn away from the others, likely because of the tears that Dale glimpsed upon his cheek. Dale could see Velti pat the plantoid on the back, shushing him in the comforting sort of manner. He wished he could feel more pleasure at Cyrin's reduced estate, because now he was feeling like a strange voyeur.

"Alright..." Velti lessened their pats in a manner of weaning. Cyrin form stilled briefly, and from the flurry of arms Dale could tell that he was wiping his face. Auryl had snapped back to enough to grin at this.

"Okay then, we can go outside now?" Auryl looked up toward the robotic warden hopefully.

"Nice try, but it's not playtime at the moment. Maybe I'll reconsider that once you have something in your tummies." Velti just smilingly shook their head.

"...What could you even have that wouldn't have spoiled by this point? Ugh, multithreaded cores but

they still can't program in basic reasoning..." Auryl sighed.

"Now now everyone, stop looking so sour. I've got the favorite of little boys everywhere just waiting in the kitchen! Come along." Velti started to take the group's hands once more as they began to walk back into the twisting maze of corridors that characterized the place. Cyrin was now fully alert, and duly avoiding the others. Dale only looked back a few times, not caring to start anything, but that didn't stop Auryl.

"So. You've gone yet?" Auryl asked, smirking on the side that Cyrin couldn't see.

Cyrin's features began to tense into his familiar snarl, and for a moment Auryl wondered if not even the presence of a robot would protect him, but words hissed out of his mouth a moment later.

"No. I would ask the same of you, but it would be unbecoming to make light of our captivity to a deran-" Cyrin paused midway through a word. "...to a robot."

"As if that stopped you from...hell, did you actually get a hold of my family's genetics? Given my precognition, I'm rather doubtful of that." Auryl's voice grew more heated.

"It's common for the average person's extrasensory perception to spike a few times during their life. Doesn't mean they'll be good enough to be a viewer, let alone join the League." Cyrin spoke only partially venomous words.

"I'll trust the League's test more than your words." Auryl scoffed. He went silent for a while, before his voice tentatively came once more.

"How'd you know about that anyway?" Auryl cocked his head.

"I can read." Cyrin said, with rolled eyes. They weren't confrontatory.

Eventually the four passed into a dilapidated kitchen area. The boys were thankful when the robot passed up the solitary highchair in favor of a small polymer kid's table, though they had to reassess their priorities when they felt such gratitude. The robot began to look through forgotten shelves, eventually pulling out a few boxes of...

"Oatmeal's on the menu today! Keep yourselves calm, kiddos, it needs to be cooked before you can eat it." the robot blithely spoke before the narrowed eyes of three school-aged children. All of them thought of making some sort of comment, but as their eyes looked upon each other and the table, they submitted to a new plan.

While the robot prepared a few bowls and began to tinker with a rusted, solar-powered microwave, the three all sat as gloomy lords of the kid's table.

"Frankly, I hate to be equanimous at the moment, but we all need to get out here." Dale spoke, arms forming a pyramid to support his head.

"Eh, I wouldn't beat yourself over the back with it, Dale. It's not like mister killjoy made things easy for himself." Auryl said, staring at Cyrin.

“True.” Cyrin said quietly, nodding to himself. “In either case, it'd be best to have all hands prepared for whatever plan we could use to escape this thing.”

“Ugh, why are we even talking about 'plans'? Can't we just run?” Auryl threw his hands up in exasperation.

“Synthsteel will beat meat anyday. Even if you had a good position away from them in the building, they'd be able to find you in the woods with their sensors and outpace a full blown sprint. If adults have a hard time with synthetics, we're even more screwed.” Cyrin mused.

“Why should we even listen to you?” Auryl snarled. “Dale, he's probably trying to trap us here anyway, we shoul-”

“I doubt he has any goodwill towards us, but he's right. He needs more hands, and leaving us captive with a robot would escalate his bullying to the point of criminal activity. I'm guessing he doesn't want that.” Dale spoke more measuredly, but Cyrin felt a sting on the inside that he hadn't felt before.

“Ugh...whatever. Maybe there's a communicator somewhere around here? We can, y'know, get help?” Auryl suggested.

“It's unlikely that it'd still be functional.” Cyrin sighed.

“Indeed.” Dale said.

“Maybe cityfolk were onto something...having one in my pocket would be really handy right about now.” Auryl absentmindedly spoke.

“I'm pretty sure the habbers would want your communicator implanted in your brain.” the magician said with a shaking head.

“Heh, true. If only they cut out the middleman and went with straight telepathy. Well, I guess genetics prevents that for most, but still.” Auryl sighed.

“Nah, I get that. Looking forward to universal psi too. I just hope you won't be messaging my mind nonstop when it finally comes around...” Dale started to smile.

“Hey, if I'm still *around* when it finally comes, I'll gladly take you psychically pinging me about your breakfast for crying out loud. Of course I'll be acing those tests and getting every gene-therapy in the world to ensure that I'll be able to spam you as soon as I'm graduated.” Auryl said with a solid smirk.

The two laughed with each other for a few seconds. It wasn't very long, yet Cyrin couldn't keep his eyes from it. There was something there. Strangely, it didn't even seem too alien to him, though he still longed for it. In fact, the feeling was awfully similar to when that robot...

Before Cyrin could complete his train of thought, he was glad to find himself interrupted by the descent of three steaming bowls of oatmeal upon the table. They were soon accompanied by a few sippy cups of juice and the lively expression of Velti.

“And here thou are.” Velti briefly affected a faux-butler's tone. “Hope you boys enjoy, because it looks

like we'll need to restock the pantry quite soon..." the bot looked away in contemplation for a moment. A second later, they traipsed over to the cabinets in assessment.

Dale blinked a little, soon turning to find similar expressions on the other plantoids' faces.

"We should probably get to work on this *really* soon." Dale whispered.

"I mean, this could be our way out though?" Auryl began to speak in a low tone. "I doubt they'll let us starve, so we could probably just wait this out and then let them take us out to find civilization. Deferred salvation." Auryl sat back in his chair.

"Their sentence was rather vague. I'd really prefer not to stay in this borderline nursery for any longer. If this wait turns into days, a certain *situation* is going to develop." Cyrin said the last part with gritted teeth.

"Geez, getting to hear that out of Cyrin's mouth...how the mighty are laid low." Auryl snickered to himself.

Dale sighed, taking the time to get to work on his meal.

"Do you really want me of all people to be the one to teach you empathy? You do realize that you're stuck in the same situation as well, right?" Cyrin's eyes narrowed, hands gripping tightly onto the table. Auryl had seen his friend's action and begun to peck at his food, albeit with less fervor.

"Yeah...but whatever. Literally all we need to do is take them off and pee in the bushes or...conduct business somewhere outside. Frankly, the annoyance of having to wear these is more than compensated by your indignancy." Auryl spoke confidently.

"How the hell did I end up the moral compass..." Cyrin threw his hands up in the air.

"I wouldn't give yourself that much credit." Dale's eyes narrowed as he finished taking a sip from his cup.

"Whatever. It's besides the point. The robot clearly thinks we need these damn things. If it finds us taking them off it'll just forcibly get us 'dressed' again. To them, we'd be like babies going naked. They're not going to believe we can actually use the toilet and will not let us remove the one thing keeping the floors clean." Cyrin spoke measuredly. The anger only skipped out in certain inflections, but the boy had long since learned when and with whom you could get away expressing rage with.

Auryl slowed down his consumption of oatmeal, briefly letting the oats rest in his mouth. He looked back toward his friend, who was still consuming at a normal pace, as well as Cyrin, who was staring at him with utterly attentive eyes. Finally, he swallowed.

"That's...correct..." Auryl made out.

"Did you have breakfast this morning?" Cyrin asked immediately.

"A little bit." Auryl talked softly.



"I rest my case." Cyrin rested back into his chair. He kept the expression still, so as not to spoil his victory, but inwardly still took pride in it, however minor.

"Shoot...well, yeah, we're screwed at least." Auryl sighed, looking at Cyrin with a more focused gaze.

"Auryl! I don't need to go...number two in these!" Dale flashed a flared face at his friend for once.

"Sorry! Forgot..." Auryl sank back a bit, awkwardly scratching his head's leaves.

"So. Now that *that's* out of the way, we can sta-" the beginnings of Cyrin's speech were cut off.

"Hmm. Well it looks like we're good for now. How about we...*Cyrin*." Velti spoke, returning from their search. At the last line, Cyrin's heart spiked briefly. It was an alien sensation, very difficult to describe. It sort of felt like he might be in trouble. The kind where someone might be disappointed in you, he slowly realized.

"You didn't even touch your food! You need to learn from Dale and Auryl...their bowls are practically spotless." Velti tutted, beginning to bend down towards the table. Looking at the bowls, Cyrin found the statement true for Dale's bowl, at least. He could tell that Auryl had just spread his mush around to make it appear so, though...

Before he could feel more victimized by his former victim, Cyrin yelped a little as he felt two strong synthetic arms beneath each of his armpits. He was incredibly confused for a few moments, perhaps more at his own reaction than anything else. The confusion gave way to terror once he realized to where the robot was walking.

"Here we are." Velti stopped at the high chair, plopping Cyrin down onto its smooth, rubbery polymer frame. The contour was rather comfortable, and Cyrin could tell from just a few seconds of feeling that the texture was designed to occupy a child's desire for sensory stimulation at just the right amounts. After having locked up the tray and cementing his position four or so feet off of the ground, Velti began to walk back to the table, soon picking up his bowl and sippy cup. Auryl was obviously stifling giggles, while Dale just sighed and tried to ignore the spectacle. Cyrin tried to take joy in the latter reaction for as long as he could until Velti arrived once more, placing what was intended to be his meal on the tray.

"Not trying to be mean to you, sweetie." Velti's audio unit started to sound, at a lower pitch, surprisingly. It took Cyrin a second to cognize, but the tone probably wouldn't be audible to those at the table.

"But if I can't be sure that you'll eat when by yourself, I'll need to help you. Okay?" the bot's tone continued. Cyrin, wasn't quite sure if it was a question, but he founded himself slowly letting his head go up and down regardless. It was sort of a nod, he realized.

"Alright." the bot's expression changed momentarily. "Smiled," in that strange way that the implied contours of bipedal bot faces did. Though alien, Cyrin felt it to be understandable. For the most part, at least.

"Now, open up!"

Cyrin found himself paralyzed when Velti's hand brought for a little plastic spoon topped with oatmeal. He knew that they must have been preparing it while he was entranced, but he was still surprised by both his own lack of preparedness and the speed of the being's limbs. He turned his face away briefly, before he remembered his entrapped state. And the eventuality that would come to pass if he didn't get out of this chair in time to find escape. With warm cheeks he started to open his mouth. The robot strange-smiled more and kept bringing the spoon in little passes, playing miniature games with the boy. It was, interesting, he could admit.

Holy.

Cyrin could actually admit that, but he most certainly could not dwell on it, particularly while his former targets sat less than ten feet away from him. While the self-consciousness afforded him a certain amount of defense, it did not stop Velti's expert reflexes. They were able to sneak in more oatmeal into the resistant boy's mouth, eventually transitioning the flyer game into a refueling one. Cyrin thought this part to be more painful, as Velti brought the sippy cup to his mouth and "helped" him to drink it, thus defeating its whole purpose. He did like to feel the anger at this, though. It helped distract him from other emotions.

"All done!" Velti's words rang in the air like a gong. To Cyrin, the sounds may as well have been from one. The robot was correct, he supposed, because the bowl was empty and the sippy cup completely drained. And he was left there sitting empty, like an ending to a movie that you can never take part in.

Cyrin's impromptu meditation on the void was broken by the sensation of Velti lifting him up out of the high chair. They had soon plopped him down onto the ground, his legs suddenly finding themselves unsteady. Predictably enough, Dale and Auryl had already anticipated this and began to stand up out of their chairs to join the two.

"Now then, I think you three have earned some time outdoors. How does that sound?" Velti spoke.

The three reunited plantoids looked at each other, eyes widening once they recalled. The beginnings of whispers came, before Dale spoke up.

"Sounds good!"

The walk out of the kitchen and down the hallway to a carved wooden door was fast. No one dared to speak, as if they were ghosts walking down a tunnel of light. The brightness seeping into the dim corridor from beneath the door was enough to give that impression, in their eager minds. By the time they had reached the hall's end and found themselves waiting by the door as Velti turned the handle, the three could hardly contain their excitement.

This faded once the glare of the sun wore off.

Outside was a playground and garden, but most importantly there was a fence. The fence was made up of many overlapping wooden panels, and though clearly worn by age, did not actually have as many gaps as Dale and Auryl thought it would have. The few that were present were small, and would likely take some time to fit in through. Not a good prospect unless Velti had decided to sit down and not do the one thing they were designed to do. When Velti closed the door behind them, not even the smell of fresh woodland air could stop hearts from breaking.

“Have fun, children! Please remember to play carefully, it looks like the gardeners haven't been trimming the hedge like they should have been doing...oh well!” Velti said, gently patting the three before leaving them to sit down on a nearby polymer bench. While Auryl and Cyrin held still in despair, for obvious reasons, Dale maintained enough cognizance to notice Velti just staring off at the distance. Were they looking towards the woods, or engaged in some sort of digital reflection that only a synthetic brain could accomplish?

“Man...I gotta pee...” Auryl whined, beginning to wander around the play area in exasperation.

“Saying stuff like that will only make you an easier target, y'know. Not that...there're any sharks around here... I guess.” Cyrin responded, eyes still looking around the place in minor panic. “Now you can see why I didn't touch those plates...”

“And just ended up having that robot feeding you!” Auryl scoffed a little, but mostly kept his mind attentive. “Ugh, whatever. Maybe we can wait for this thing to take us back inside. We should really just make a break for it at the front door...just have to wait.”

“It won't work dude! I told you, they can run. Even if we get there, it'll be no use.” Cyrin said.

“Then what're we supposed to do?! I'm tired of this stupid daycare, tired of you, tired of all of this!” Auryl whined to the point of a low shout.

“What am I supposed to tell you?! You keep complaining, but you kinds of people never make it easier for yourselves and expect the world t-” Cyrin's faced flushed with anger, but before he could actually shout, Dale started to speak.

“You can play. That is the one thing you can do.”

“Bu-” Auryl's speech was immediately interrupted by Dale.

“You're going to piss yourself. I know. I do that every day. It's not the end of the world.” Dale sighed, beginning to walk toward a sandbox close to the garden. Strangely, the two other plantoids found themselves following him.

“I...yes, but I have to g-” Cyrin spoke up, and found himself in turn shot down by Dale.

“Poop. I can easily tell that. Again, the only thing you can do is play. Once the bot realizes that we're out of diapers, they'll be forced to leave the daycare in search of supplies, taking us with them. They're already registered as the only staff member present and are well aware of that. This is actually our ticket out of here.” Dale elaborated. His voice was serene.

“Are you serious?! I, I can...fine, I'm sorry for making fun of your necessity earlier...” Cyrin spoke, at first in anger, but increasingly in a new emotion that he knew as regret. Dale was able to pick up on this and began to nod.

“Surprisingly, I am actually able to accept your apology.” the magician spoke. The world was alight with a strange fire, and so the words flowed as smoothly as quicksilver.

“...thank you.” the words came out more genuinely out of Cyrin's mouth than he had expected. After

getting over his own amazement, he continued. "But you can't seriously expect me to soil myself. I understand if you can't feel sympathy for my own plight, but please at least consider your friend." Cyrin said, gesturing toward Auryl.

Dale laughed. Not *at* anyone, all present knew. He just laughed.

"You're really making this out to be a bigger thing than it already is. You just need to use your diaper for its intended purpose to escape the worse scenario of being stuck with a malfunctioning robot." Dale shook his head, beginning to gaze at the environment. The garden had a beauty that he hadn't seen before, even in its fallen state. The plants' growth had patterns, in the wending of their stems and the coloration of their flowers. All of the playsets melded into their environment, as if there was nothing to distinguish artifice and nature. Nothing conquered each other; all was equal. The fence meant nothing if he was just going to be going out anyway. It was false, and the forest was all around them. When the world was without limits, why did they not play?

"We've all been so keen on escaping the childishness of this daycare. But the truly childish thing would be to ignore the one ticket out." Dale said.

The others blinked. They thought for a moment, before Auryl and Cyrin found each other's eyes. As they looked back at the environment, to find some semblance of the gnosis Dale was enraptured in, they realized that his words were true. The two looked at each other rather sheepishly, before turning toward the sandbox the group had just arrived at.

"Err..." Auryl mumbled, still rather befuddled. On the sand, he found a little plastic bucket colored purple, along with an accompanying shovel.

"Want to play?"

The two had started to make sandcastles. It took some adjustment, given the fact that they hadn't done so in many years and hadn't expected to ever make them again, but the little keeps were coming out quite well, all things considered. They did, of course, know what they ultimately had to do. But this made for a good distraction while they waited for that eventuality. Plus, it was just fun.

"We need to get twigs or something, my forest tribe can't be making stuff out of sand..." Cyrin mumbled.

"Just go get some from the garden, I'll make sure Auryl doesn't destroy your stuff in the meantime." Dale responded.

"Hey! I wouldn't do that...well, not yet..." Auryl stifled some giggles.

All three started to lightly smile while Cyrin went off to the garden. Auryl and Cyrin could feel each of their respective bladder and bowel pressures, but it was manageable for now. Eventually Cyrin returned with some twigs and recently-plucked leaves, soon giving a sylvan outline to his structures of sand.

"Hey, um, Dale..." Auryl started to speak up.

"Uhuh?" Dale responded, eyes still intent on his creation of a bailey for the flame tribe's land. The rigid smart-sand of the sandbox could handle such complexity and detail.

“Err, have you gone yet? 'Cause we could just sort of tell Velti you need a change if so, and then we could get home in time to use the toilet...” Auryl reluctantly spoke, mint cheeks reddening.

“I didn't eat breakfast, so I don't think my food will go down fast enough before... y'know.” Dale said. His shrug wasn't mean, just honest.

“That makes sense.” Auryl nodded. “It's fine.” he said quietly, but there was understanding.

The three returned to their play, waging little wars with words and the poking of sand castles. Dale thought, briefly, that this elemental parody must look absolutely absurd to the little gods of the garden. But he figured that that thought alone would draw one out of communion more, so he pushed it aside. Auryl and Cyrin, meanwhile, shouldered a more earthly burden. While they too enjoyed the playing as much as the mage, a vividly physical pressure was growing within each of their bodies. Auryl got even more engrossed in the building than before while he stealthily held his arms close to his crotch, beginning to ignore more of the societal discussions of Dale and Cyrin. Of course, those discussions too began to peter out, as Cyrin started hang back in the sandbox, mostly sitting down and trying not to move too much.

“Dale! I need more sand...” Auryl hyperactively began to shovel some more sand from the flame tribe's territory to the water clan's estate, beginning work on the fifth set of pasture fences in a row.

“Sure, don't sweat it dude.” Dale smirked in an uncharacteristically amused way. “Y'know, you're already doing better than me...”

“Pleasenorereminder.” Auryl's speech zipped by like lightning. The green-skinned boy only got around halfway through his construction of the fence before his arms stopped moving. They had travelled onto his slightly puffy pants, beginning to crinkle the undergarment below as he applied pressure.

“Can't...gooo...” Auryl's speech edged into a whine. Dale and Cyrin spared him by looking away, though Auryl found that such a luxury was not helping the pressure any. His bladder was hurting; terribly so. And he thought he could hold on for just a little longer, into some future where this was no longer a problem. And in a way, it wouldn't be a problem, just like his feverish mind had thought. Because though his body had tensed up for as long as possible, fighting against a mode of excretion it had long since trained against, eventually the tension broke and certain muscles relaxed.

Somehow, it was surprising to Auryl when a growing warmth started to grow in his pants. Towards the end, it was really more like he had been fighting against his inability *to* pee his pants, an alien course of action that he had considered just to eliminate the terrible aching. But the aching *was* gone now. Because there was a warm liquid wicking into some synthetics that covered his crotch.

Because he had wet his diaper.

Auryl started to laugh. He didn't know why. It was pure incongruence.

“I...um...I'm done guys.” Auryl said, still fighting a pain in his cheeks that was forcing his face into a smile.

“You alright?” Dale asked, turning back. Cyrin wasn't exactly trying to look away anymore either, but

he didn't really bother to pay attention when a pressure was still brewing in his body.

"I, I don't know. Heh..." Auryl mumbled. There was a sloshy fabric over his crotch and bum now. His mind had not yet allocated any sort of value, positive or negative, to this sensation. It just forced his body to move in ways that would allow him to acquire more information on the subject. Auryl rocked back and forth a bit on the sand, enough to feel his wet diaper from more angles.

"I'll, take your word for it." Dale briefly cocked his head. "Well, I suppose you being in my shoes can help in the future. Though I don't know if the jokes will be cut back or made more..." the boy scratched his head leaves.

"Hehe..." Auryl lightly kept up his rolling motion. "I don't know either."

Cyrin, meanwhile, was in a world to himself. His bowels had become a monster within him, delivering spikes of pain that made coherent thought difficult. If the Ten Trials were real, he hoped that this experience would shave some time off of them. That his experiences in this daycare...with people he wished he could call friends...would have served as a miniature purgatory for him. He knew it to be rather grandiose, of course, almost too much so for his practical mind. But in the pain, such assaults of the mind against itself had greatly lessened. Cyrin held himself together tighter in his corner of the sandbox. It seemed to alleviate the pain a bit, being so compact. As he held there in the seed-like position, he belatedly realized something.

He was squatting.

A second after his mind cognized that fact, a few foreign spasms wracked his body. Cyrin's psyche became a foggy mess once more as the pain reached unbearable heights. He couldn't really tell what was going on and it was the bad feeling and it felt like something was going on near his bottom and...

...then the pain stopped. Cyrin's mind began to clear again. There was a strange calm, briefly, like the silence after a battle. The boy blinked. Still not fully cognizant, he began to reflexively sit back down.

He felt something mush when he did so.

Auryl and Dale's strange camaraderie was interrupted by a piercing scream. Before they could really identify the source of the noise, primal instincts kicked in and they held close to the ground for cover. A half-second later, the sound of servos on overdrive filled the air. Soon enough Velti had reached the boys, hovering over a corner of the sandbox that the two now realized was occupied by Cyrin.

"Cyrin! Are you alright? What happened, honey?" the bot's familiar voice returned. Cyrin babbled scarcely understandable sentences in response. His back was turned, and Velti seemed to pick up on something that was invisible to the other boys, picking up the child and holding him close to their chest. A faint glow appeared on the upper part of the robot's frame as an automatic heating protocol came online.

"There there...everything's alright." the robot gently rocked Cyrin, his cries gradually lessening. Auryl and Dale sort of just held there awkwardly. Transposed against the relatively towering outline of Velti, Cyrin really did look like a baby.

"Hmm. I wonder why the crying started so suddenly...I hope you haven't been in that too long." Velti

muttered sentences to themselves as their sensor array lit up. Dale was beginning to pick up the situation, but Auryl just squeaked when Velti bent down and pulled back the hem of his pants and diaper.

“As I expected, we need to get a couple little boys cleaned up.” Velti shook their head in a friendly sort of way, an enigmatic “smile” appearing on their face and in the shifting colors of their light strips.

“Come along, children. I'm afraid we have a little shopping to do.”

The two lucid children were able to quickly surmise the situation once Velti started to head towards the doors that led into the daycare. After some tense discussion and tactical use of cuteness, Dale was able to convince the robot to *not* go to the town's metastore, as they had planned when they learned of its existence. Instead, Dale said, they would find plenty of properly sized diapers at his house, as well as the fulfillment of the bot's initial parent search. In truth this little escapade alone would probably cost him more of his diapers than he could afford, and he for obvious reasons did not want the being anywhere near him when his parents did in fact arrive home. But he would cross that bridge when it came. The unlikely group wended their way through the thick forest, following a dusty trail that was becoming more and more clear. Cyrin was quiet now in the robot's arms, eyes closed as he listened to a steady hum conducted by Velti's plasteel chest plates. It was an intensely exotic sight for both of the other boys to see; the archetypal tough of the schoolyard being cradled like a toddler. But neither of their hearts could see an enemy anymore. Just a person. Auryl himself wasn't paying much attention to the sight, mostly just jogging along the trail as dreams flowed through his mind. When more years ticked over he could be back there again, where time didn't matter and his thoughts weren't limited to a little mass of gray matter that rested in his skull. And he wouldn't ever have to leave that wonderful space again. In the back of his mind, he did know about the chances of joining the League. Not really small, but not guaranteed either. Still, it didn't matter too much. He knew he'd be back there again, eventually. Dale, for his part, kept his thoughts relatively grounded. He'd seen fire in the forest, and didn't particularly feel the need to manufacture an echoed semblance of it. If he was dreaming before, his rapture in the garden was a mere turning in his sleep. But it was a step. Dale sighed as he crested the edge of the forest along with the rest of the group, sighting graceful edges of civilization close by. He'd need to get moving on his magical journey. More sights, experiences, modes of thought and the voids in between that gave them structure. All wizards throughout history must have dealt with this, he realized.

So, without pomp, Dale walked with his friends as they started down the road that led back to the neighborhood. He was exceptionally glad, on second thought, that the streets were clear of traffic. It looked like Auryl was too, if his adjusted walking style and constant attempts to cover the top of his pants with his shirt was anything to go by. The same could not be said of Cyrin, who was still caught in a happy haze with the robot who held him so dutifully. After a few more minutes of walking, the four finally reached Dale's house, passing through the hedge-garden that guarded his dwelling from sight and the world. Walking up to the door, Dale pressed his hands against the entrance-pane and let biometry do the work for him. The door unlocked a moment later. Dale paused there for a moment. Everyone did, in fact. They soaked in the ambiance, reflecting on events that no-one present could properly sort out. Dale saw Velti's eyes and they saw Cyrin's, and even that mentally fuzzy boy looked back on at Auryl. No one said anything.

Finally, Dale opened the door. He was greeted with a girl whose maw opened at the sight of her charge, another kid, a pseudo-baby, and the robot holding him. This robot was the first to enter.

“Ah, would you be Dale's babysitter, by any chance? I could use some help...”