

Bertie-saurus

by MadeOfSpaces

Ever since his secret got out at school, Bertie's been bombarded with bullies. Luckily, Arthur and Bertie's mom have worked out a rather unique solution.

The Costume Box

2022

Chapter 1

Bertie-saurus - Chapter 1

Albert blinked awake, his eyes slowly adjusting to the light in his bedroom as he felt the soft, fuzzy feeling of felt brushing against his cheek. He looked down in confusion - there, snuggled comfortably in the crook of his arm, was the plush stegosaurus that Aunt Linda had bought him for Christmas last year. He grimaced. What was that doing there? Usually, he kept the toy at the end of his book shelf - far enough away from his bed that no one would be under any illusions that he actually used the thing. He would have kept it hidden firmly away in his closet, but the only time he'd done that his mother had told him off - saying Aunt Linda would think he was ungrateful. He supposed it was kind of a good present - he did want to be a palaeontologist after all - but he was fourteen years old, not four. Even if he was a little short for his age.

“Looks like the sleepy dinosaur’s finally awake.” A voice cooed, jolting Albert out of his daydream.

There looming above his bed was the neighbor boy. Arthur was only thirteen years old, but when it came to height the difference between the two boys could not be more pronounced. Where Albert was definitely in the 1st percentile for his age, Arthur must have been in the 99th.

“Wha’ ah you doin’ ere?” Albert mumbled, surprised by the unarticulated sound of his own voice. What was going on?

Arthur just laughed, gently taking hold of the smaller boy's hand and popping his thumb out of his mouth. Albert gave a start of surprise - regarding Arthur with a sheepish frown. Had he really just been caught sucking his thumb?

“Give that another go, buddy.” Arthur instructed.

Albert scowled, sitting up in bed as he practically spat out the same question “What are you doing here?”

“It’s alright, Albie. Don’t freak out. Your mom just had a work emergency. She had me come over to look after you for the morning.”

Arthur’s use of his nickname prompted a groan of displeasure. “It’s Albert.” he insisted “Only my mom calls me Albie.”

“Alright.” Arthur conceded “But Albert’s a bit of a mouthful. How about we just go with Bertie?”

The smaller boy bit his lip. That name was almost worse - but he decided to ignore it.

“You’re not looking after me.” the boy asserted. “I’m older than you. I don’t need looking after.” He tried to look as grown up as possible, but it was a hard task with a plushie dinosaur under his arm.

“Well...she actually said ‘keep company’, but she meant ‘look after,’” Arthur reasoned. “She just wanted me to help out with a few things while she’s away. You know, get you out of bed, get you dressed, get you some breakfast. That

kind of thing.”

“Like a babysitter.” Bertie observed bitterly.

Arthur smiled wryly “I guess - if that’s what you wanna call it.”

The smaller boy pouted, crossing his arms in displeasure “Like I said, I don’t need a babysitter. Why didn’t she just wake me up? I could have gone with her.”

In truth, Bertie knew the explanation before the sulky question had even left his lips. His mother made a point of never waking the boy up unless she had to - and Bertie was a deep sleeper. Last Thanksgiving when he had fallen asleep in the car on the journey home, she had even carried him inside and put him to bed! He had contested the issue with her multiple times, but she insisted - something about sleep helping him make up his huge deficit in the height department. Still, vocalizing the point made Bertie feel better. What business did Arthur have barging into his house? The boy may have been taller, but he was a full year younger!

“Guess she didn’t want to wake you.” Arthur confirmed, putting an intrusive hand against Bertie’s forehead to brush away a few stray blond-brown curls “You’re so cute when you’re sleeping.”

Arthur held up his phone, displaying a photo of the smaller boy curled up angelically in his bed. He was nursing enthusiastically on his thumb with one hand and affectionately squeezing his fluffy dinosaur toy with the other.

“Hey!” Bertie objected, jumping out from under his covers to make a grab for the phone. Arthur was too fast for him, however - stepping nimbly back and securing it in his pocket. Having jumped out from under the security of his bedsheets, it was now obvious that the boy was dressed only in a pair of colorful orange and yellow Brontosaurus themed briefs - complete with a lime green margin around the waistband. As soon as he saw the larger boy’s expression, Bertie turned bright red - ceasing his attempts to grab for the phone and instead hesitantly covering his exposed undies with his hands.

“Delete it...please.” the boy begged, suddenly feeling much less confident than he had a few moments ago.

Why had Aunt Linda bought him those stupid underpants in the first place? More importantly, why had he put them on instead of just doing another round of laundry? He supposed he hadn’t been expecting to be ambushed on a Saturday morning by the boy who lived next door.

“Calm down, Bertie. I’m not going to show anyone.” Arthur reassured. “That is, if you’re a good boy for me.”

“What?”

“A good little boy.” Arthur said, almost hypnotically. “Just be good and no one will ever know. If you plan on being naughty, on the other hand...”

“What?” Bertie repeated, his voice cracking with a strange mixture of anger and fear as he felt tears begin to well in the

corner of his eyes. He couldn't let anyone at school see that photo! He just couldn't! "No! I-"

"Shhhhh, Shhhh." Arthur hushed, striding confidently towards the agitated little boy and easily scooping him up in his arms. Bertie tried to resist, writhing and wriggling in his grasp, but Arthur was much stronger - hugging the boy against his chest and patting him comfortingly on his dinosaur-adorned bottom.

"Put me down..." Bertie begged, but Arthur didn't listen.

"That's the first rule, buddy." he lectured, grabbing hold of Bertie's little hand, molding it into a fist, and inserting the thumb into his mouth - silencing him. "Whenever you start getting grumpy, you need to have a nice little suck on your thumb to help you calm down, okay?"

Bertie immediately tried to resist, mumbling a few words of protest as he momentarily managed to unstick the digit from his mouth, but Arthur quickly reasserted his authority.

"Nuh-uh, baby. Keep your thumb in your mouth. No big boy words for now."

Bertie just whined, his wordless protest slightly muffled by his thumb, not daring to mount another resistance.

"That's right, buddy. That's a good boy." Arthur praised "Just make your little baby dinosaur grumbles until you feel all happy again."

He bounced him up and down in his arms, stroking the boy's

tangled mop of curls. “You’re just my little Bertie-saurus aren’t you?” he joked, ignoring Bertie's fervent shakes of his head to the contrary.

Arthur carried the boy briefly back over to the bed, grabbing up the Stegosaurus toy and pressing it into the boy’s grasp. Bertie tried to let it drop to the ground, but Arthur grabbed hold of it again - shifting the little boy to his hip so he could tickle the fuzzy material playfully against his bare belly. The boy tried very hard not to laugh at the horrible ticklish feeling, stoically maintaining a serious look of disapproval as his thumb still hung loosely from his mouth.

“Almost forgot your favorite toy there, didn’t we bud?” Arthur commented. “What’s his name?”

Bertie stayed silent, obediently keeping his thumb in his mouth until Arthur went to remove it. “What’s his name, buddy?” he repeated.

“Doesn’t have one.” Bertie muttered, sniffing back the final remnants of the tears that had just about formed in the corner of his eyes.

“Oh, well that won’t do.” Arthur asserted. “Tell you what, why don’t we think of one while we go get you a nice drink. I bet you’re a thirsty little dinosaur, huh?”

Bertie shook his head again, but Arthur paid him no attention - hugging the boy up against his chest as he made his way out of the bedroom and down the hall towards the staircase. Bertie wriggled restlessly, but didn’t make any serious

attempt to escape - just grateful that Arthur wasn't making him suck his thumb for the moment.

Bertie was getting restless by the time they made their way to the kitchen. He'd expected Arthur to let him down at the table, but instead the larger boy simply placed down the Stegosaurus toy while continuing to hold his self appointed little charge in his arms - simply shifting the boy on to his hip as he took a carton of milk out of the fridge and started to rummage through the cupboards. Bertie fidgeted - realizing that he needed to go to the toilet quite badly. How long was this going to take? As the need got more urgent, he considered complaining - but figured that would probably only lead to a further humiliation. He would just have to wait until Arthur let him down.

Eventually, Arthur managed to find what he was looking for - pulling out a practically ancient sippy cup from the back of the cupboard. Bertie was sure he hadn't used the thing since he was in kindergarten, but sure enough it was decorated with little cartoon illustrations of various dinosaurs. Afterall, they had been a long running obsession for the boy. As Arthur got to rinsing it out in the sink with Bertie still secured against his hip, the boy finally worked up the courage to speak up.

"I don't need a sippy cup." he stated simply, just a hint of anger in his voice. He was trying to stay calm, figuring that throwing a fit would only encourage Arthur- but containing his emotions was getting more and more difficult. He just needed to figure out a way to get his hands on that phone, but that was impossible in his current predicament. Besides, he

had more pressing concerns. He squeezed his legs uncomfortably against Arthur's waist, feeling another stab of urgency from his bladder.

"Sure you do, buddy." Arthur rebutted, bringing the cup and the boy back over towards the kitchen table "It's just perfect for your little hands. And what if you had a spill?"

"I'm fourteen."

"I know, I know - you're a big boy. But four's still too little to use the grown-up cups. Look it's even got a stegosaurus, just like your favorite toy."

"Four-TEEN, not four! I'm older than you!" Bertie yelled, trying in vain to escape Arthur's iron grasp as he felt his face begin to flush red in frustration. "Let me down!"

"Shhh shhh, inside voice, buddy." Arthur hushed "Do you need to suck on your thumb again?"

"No." Bertie seethed, trying very hard to contain himself.

"Good boy." Arthur praised, swapping the sippy cup for the stegosaurus and placing it in the smaller boy's grasp. "Don't drop him." he instructed "Just have a nice cuddle with your dino friend until you're feeling better, alright? Maybe you can even think of a name."

Bertie didn't respond, simply grasping limply onto the felt material.

"Alright?" Arthur repeated - his expression revealing just a hint of reproof.

Finally, Bertie gave a hesitant nod - prompting Arthur to pat him soothingly on his bottom. Bertie wriggled, still desperate for the toilet as Arthur continued to hover tantalizingly close to the table. Why wouldn't he just put him down?

"All better now, huh?" Arthur commented "Now, where does your mommy keep your booster seat?"

"I don't have a booster seat."

"Oh. Do you still use a high chair?"

"No!"

"Alright then, bud. You don't have to throw a tantrum. I'll let you sit in the grown up chair for now. But you have to promise to be a good boy. No fidgeting, and no getting up and running around, alright?"

Bertie nodded his assent, desperate to get free from Arthur's grasp.

"Do you promise?" Arthur persisted.

"Yes!" he relented "I promise!"

Finally, Arthur let him down - seating him in one of the chairs along with a requisite pat on the head before turning back towards the kitchen counter. Still desperate for the toilet, Bertie broke his promise almost immediately - abandoning the Stegosaurus toy and making a break for the door. His bid at freedom was short-lived, however, Arthur immediately grabbing him from behind and pulling him into a hug.

“What did I say, Bertie?” Arthur lectured, leaning down to his level “No getting up from the kitchen table. You can play later.”

“I have to go to the toilet!” Bertie finally admitted, unable to take the pressure any longer.

“Ohhh.” Arthur smiled, his stern expression softening “Is it a potty emergency?”

“What?” Bertie queried, unable to stop himself from fidgeting from one foot to the other.

“Does the little Bertie-saurus need to go pee-pee?” Arthur teased, tickling at his bare tummy and making the situation even worse. “Is he going to have a little accident in his little undies?”

Bertie didn’t respond, not wanting to dignify the childish language with a response. He instead redoubled his efforts to try and somehow wriggle his way out of Arthur’s grasp - but it was no use.

“Is it a potty emergency?” Arthur insisted.

“Yes!” Bertie finally conceded “Let me out! I really need to go!”

“You have to say the magic words...”

Bertie had no idea what the boy was talking about, but he knew for a certainty that for every moment the conversation went on, his chance of peeing his pants rose exponentially.

“It’s a potty emergency!” he finally exclaimed, desperately clutching at his underpants in a comical effort to somehow relieve the pressure.

“Well, I just meant ‘please.’” Arthur commented, flashing the boy a smug smile before finally releasing his grasp. “But that’ll do as well. Do you need my help?”

“No!” Bertie yelped, turning quickly on his heels and floundering haphazardly up the stairs towards the bathroom.

Bertie stood at the toilet, finishing up his business with a sigh of relief. He stared at the childish briefs resting around his ankles and frowned. This whole situation was ridiculous. Arthur actually seemed to be enjoying treating him like he was just some little kid. How old was he supposed to be in Arthur’s absurd fantasy? Four? The larger boy knew very well his actual age. The two of them had lived next door to each other for over three years now, and they even went to the same school.

It was all because of that stupid dinosaur toy and his stupid thumb. How had it even got under his arm? And why had he been sucking his thumb? He thought he’d broken that habit four years ago! Most importantly, why had his mom let Arthur see him like that? But he supposed she wasn’t entirely to blame. He’d been the one who had put on the dinosaur briefs. It was alright though. All he needed to do was somehow get his hands on Arthur’s phone when he wasn’t looking and he’d be in the clear. Until then, he just needed to make sure he didn’t end up on the larger boy’s bad

side. Yes, he just needed to make sure he wasn't "naughty", whatever the hell that meant.

He was just thinking about going to change out of the childish underwear, and stuffing everything he'd ever received from Aunt Linda to the back of the closet for good measure, when Arthur's voice took him by surprise.

"Did you make it to the potty in time, Bertie-saurus?"

The larger boy was standing in the doorway, smiling smugly with the sippy cup in his hand and the Stegosaurus toy cuddled snugly under his arm. Bertie cursed himself. How had he forgotten to lock the door!? He quickly pulled up his undies again, cringing as he felt the last tiniest dribble of liquid spurt onto the inside material of his briefs.

"Yes." he spat out dryly, refusing to make eye contact.

"That's good." Arthur commented. "I was worried you'd have an accident with all the fuss you were making! But big boy dinosaurs don't have accidents, do they?"

Bertie ignored the comment, closing the lid before flushing the toilet.

"Remember to wash your hands, buddy."

The boy didn't answer, stepping up on his footstool to reach the tap. Of course he was going to wash his hands! But he'd only just turned off the tap and was reaching for the hand towel when Arthur interjected once again.

"Oh, Bertie. Looks like you had an accident after all."

He looked down - remembering the tiny dribble that had escaped when he'd pulled up his underpants. To his horror, the little spurt had grown into quite a sizable stain.

"N..no. I didn't" He tried to deny, but his stumbling hesitation gave away the lie. "It's just water!"

"It's alright." Arthur re-assured, grabbing the boy by the hand and practically dragging him back to his bedroom. "It's only a little accident. At least you tried, huh?"

"I didn't!" Bertie tried to insist, but Arthur just lifted him into the air again - sitting him down on his bed before shoving the sippy cup and Stegosaurus toy into his hands.

"Don't worry, bud. Why don't you just drink down your milk and play with your stuffie while I take care of everything, alright?"

"I-"

"Nuh-uh, buddy. No more talking till that whole cup is empty okay?"

Bertie tried to speak again, but Arthur was quick to direct the straw of the sippy cup into his mouth, cutting him off. He tried to wriggle away, but Arthur held him firm. With no other plan of action - he started to drink.

"What a good boy! Alright, first thing's first let's get rid of these yucky undies." Arthur commented, moving to hook his thumbs around the waistband of Bertie's underpants.

Bertie let out a muffled moan of protest, but Arthur ignored

him - briefly pushing the boy back onto his back so he could pull the underwear off in one solid motion before pulling him back into a seated position.

“I know they’re your favorite, but you can’t wear undies with nasty pee pee on them.” he explained, getting up to discard the underwear in the laundry hamper. Feeling extremely exposed, Bertie moved to clamber under his bed sheets - but Arthur was quicker on the drawer, darting back over to grab the little boy up again, standing him up on the carpet, and directing him out towards his wardrobe, his sippy cup remaining firmly in his mouth and the stegosaurus toy under his arm throughout the whole charade.

“Now, what do you want to wear today?” Arthur chimed playfully, picking out the most childish underwear he could find. Bertie recognized them all from the pack his Aunt Linda had given him.

“T-Rex? Triceratops? Oh, I know - a Stegosaurus!”

Bertie went to take his mouth away from the straw to spit out some pithy comment, but Arthur quickly reasserted his control - pushing it forcefully back into his mouth. He was powerless to do anything but hug the fuzzy toy for comfort and sip down his milk as Arthur instructed him to lift each one of his legs - pulling the babyish underwear high up around his waist.

“There we are, just like your stuffie. Does he have a name yet?”

There was a pregnant pause as Bertie finally finished up the drink before he pulled out the straw, giving a simple shake of his head.

“I was thinking you could call him Spike - because of all those scary looking spikes on his back!

“They’re plates, not spikes.” Bertie insisted, resisting the urge to roll his eyes. He had hoped that the correction would come off as mature and academic, but it ended up coming out as more of a pedantic whine.

“They’re spikey aren’t they? So Spike it is!”

Bertie didn’t have the energy to argue about it, simply staring straight ahead and hugging Spike as Arthur went searching through his drawers in search of the rest of his clothes for the day. Fortunately, most of his other clothes were reasonably mature, or at least lacked the garish prints and pictures featured on his underwear - leading Arthur to settle on a simple pair of khaki shorts and a green and white striped polo shirt. Bertie had to put Spike down as Arthur pulled the polo over his head, guiding first his arms and then his head through the holes.

“The striped green Bertie-saurus in its natural habitat.” he teased, holding out the khakis for Bertie to step into.

When he was all dressed, Arthur leaned down to Bertie’s level and picked up Spike - shaking the toy back and forth and putting on an exaggerated gruff voice as if to impersonate what a dinosaur might sound like “Can you give me a roar,

Bertie-saurus?”

Bertie shook his head, feeling very shy after everything that had happened.

“Come on Bertie, give me a roar!” Arthur repeated, still mimicking the toy.

“Roar.” he muttered, barely more than a whisper.

“You can do better than that. Roar!”

“Roar!” Bertie tried again, still rather unenthusiastically. He just hoped it would be good enough to make Arthur leave him alone.

“Maybe baby dinosaurs aren’t so good at roaring.” Arthur conceded “We’ll have to work on it.”

He handed back the toy before pulling the boy up into his arms again. Bertie let out a fussy hum of indignation, but there was nothing he could do to resist “Come on, Bertie-saurus.” Arthur said affectionately “It looks like it’s going to be a busy morning.”

Chapter 2

The Dino Den - Chapter 2

How had Bertie let it come to this? Two weeks ago, he'd barely known Arthur. Sure, they might have described themselves as acquaintances, but the two were no closer than any other two boys on the street. Today, the precocious thirteen year old was trundling Bertie down the street in a dinosaur themed stroller while he sat sucking on his thumb and cuddling Spike the Stegosaurus - all at the larger boy's instruction.

It could all be traced back to that fateful Saturday morning when his mother had asked Arthur to 'keep him company.' At the time, it had felt like he'd been stuck in an inescapable current with no choice but to obey the larger boy's increasingly strange whims, but now that he thought back he saw that he'd had plenty of chances to escape the situation. He could have told his mother about the photo Arthur had taken the moment she'd walked in the door. Instead, he'd let himself get distracted - and his mother had come home to him writhing around and giggling like an over-excitable toddler while Arthur doted over him like a favorite uncle.

If she'd arrived just five minutes earlier, she would have found him sat unhappily on Arthur's lap sporting an award winning pout as he was forced to watch those old 'Danny and the Dino Den' DVDs that he'd outgrown a good seven or eight years ago. Just as Arthur had spotted her walking up the driveway however, he'd commenced a coordinated tickle

attack on the exposed soles of Bertie's feet. He'd laughed so hard, he'd almost peed himself for the second time that day - but Arthur had finally relented as his mother made her way into the living room, leaving the boy lying breathless on the couch, grinning goofily like some dopey toddler while the cartoonish Dino Den theme song continued to blare in the background.

She'd been so happy that he'd finally seemed to make a new friend, especially one that seemed to share his enthusiasm for all things dinosaur, that she'd jumped at Arthur's offer to 'keep him company' more often. Now that Bertie thought of it, he could have escaped then as well. He could have just let Arthur do whatever he wanted with that photo and taken the consequences. At least then it would have been over and done with. But he hadn't. And now it was too late.

From that day on, there wasn't an evening that went by when Arthur hadn't found some excuse to hang around his house. Of course, he toned down the worst of the baby treatment when Bertie's mother was nearby, but that hadn't stopped him from finding more subtle ways to coddle the smaller boy - tousling his hair, giving him surprise hugs from behind, even lifting his shirt to tickle his exposed tummy on occasion. School was no escape from the relentless toddlerfication - where Arthur had referred to him as 'Bertie-saurus' so many times that even his teachers had started using the nickname.

From a certain perspective all of Arthur's behavior might have been explained as innocent rough and tumble, a mutual affection shared between friends; but even when he was being

discreet the larger boy seemed to know exactly how to communicate their true relationship. It was clear in even the finest details of how he spoke and acted with the boy, and in even the most abstract of assumptions between them. While Arthur was a fully fledged teenager, Bertie was still a very little boy. He might have been fourteen years old, but from Arthur's perspective the tiny teen had barely graduated from babyhood.

Arthur had become such a fixture in Bertie's family that one night he'd even convinced his mother to show him all her old photos of the boy.

"It'll be interesting! " he'd insisted "I've always wondered what Bertie was like back before we were buddies."

The reference to the pair's supposed budding friendship had been all that was required to win her over. Bertie had objected of course, but his mother had simply chalked it down to a typical teenage shyness - breaking out the old family photo albums without a moment's hesitation. Some of the photos dated back ten years or longer, but given the boy's minimal development in height it wasn't too much of a stretch to believe that they'd been taken just a year or two ago. The album was a veritable cornucopia of embarrassment. Bertie playing on the beach, Bertie in a stroller, Bertie on a potty chair - even Bertie pointing excitedly up at a display of dinosaur bones with the conspicuous papery waistband of a diaper poking out over his shorts. He'd almost died of embarrassment as Arthur had oohed and ahed in admiration, much to mother's delight.

Meanwhile, Bertie knew that Arthur had been developing a photo album of his own. Although the photos weren't quite as embarrassing as his mother's, and although he couldn't know for certain if Arthur ever intended to actually show them to anyone, he did know that they were easily accessed, easily shareable, and most importantly were dated over the course of just the last few days. Bertie drinking from his sippy cup, Bertie pouting in just his undies, Bertie cuddling up with Spike as he fell asleep in front of the TV.

Arthur had even gone to quite a bit of trouble in his attempts to recreate a few favorites from the family photo albums. One night, when Bertie's mom had been working late, he'd gone so far as to dig through the garage in search of the boy's long since discarded clothes, toys, and other babyish paraphernalia. He had been surprised at how much his mother had clung onto, but he supposed it was harder to justify throwing stuff out when the little boy hadn't physically outgrown any of it. The most valuable prize from that night had been a dark blue dinosaur print stroller, still in good working condition and simply folded up behind a few boxes of similarly childish clothes.

It was a full week later on the first Monday of Spring Break when the time was finally right to take the thing out for a spin. Bertie's mom was working that morning, and it had already been an emotional day as Arthur had negotiated the little boy first into his Brontosaurus undies, then into his favorite green and white polo, and finally into a pair of adorable dark green corduroy dungarees he'd picked out from

the boxes in the garage - complete with a fuzzy felt triceratops applique on the bib in dark blue. The light up T-rex themed trainers had been another battle, but Bertie hadn't really gone into full tantrum mode until he'd seen the stroller waiting in the corridor. As always however, the storm was soon calmed. Arthur bundled the little boy into the seat and secured the five point harness - giving him his thumb to nurse on and Spike to cuddle until he was "all tantrumed out" and "ready to behave like a big boy."

Bertie still hadn't quite calmed down when he popped his thumb out of his mouth upon the pair's arrival at the bus stop.

"Feeling better?" Arthur inquired, smiling affectionately down at the smaller boy.

"No!" Bertie snapped, kicking his legs uselessly against the straps.

"Oh, you're still an angry little Bertie-saurus, huh?" he chuckled. "Do you remember what I said about dealing with big feelings?"

Bertie stayed silent. Of course he remembered. Whenever he tried to object to Arthur's ridiculous treatment, he always said the same thing. That he needed to calm down, that he needed to use his words, that he had to explain what was upsetting him rather than "throwing his toys out of his pram." Of course, if he ever did try to explain himself, Arthur just retorted that all of his treatment was being perfectly reasonable. He was only supposed to be four years old afterall - and it was perfectly fine for a four year old to wear

dinosaur briefs, or have their food cut up for them, or need a reminder to get to the potty on time.

“Big boys don’t throw tantrums, do they?” Arthur continued
“Do you remember what a big boy does?”

Bertie grumbled. He hated conceding to Arthur’s way of doing things, but he figured it was better than going back to sucking his thumb. Besides, he was certain that this time he had found a hole in his logic.

“You said I was supposed to be four.” he reasoned, “Four’s too big for a stroller.”

Arthur looked entirely unphased by the observation “I suppose some little boys might be too big for a stroller at four - but you get so grumpy when you’re all tuckered out, don’t you? This way you can just have a nice rest instead of having to tire yourself out following me around on your tiny little legs.”

“I’m not tired.” Bertie pouted, crossing his arms.

“Oh, maybe not now - but you’ll definitely be a sleepy little dinosaur later, and you’re gonna need to save all your energy for The Dino Den!”

“The Dino Den?”

“Right buddy, that’s where we’re headed. It’s gonna be just like in your favorite show. There’ll be tonnes of other kids to play with and lots of stuff to run and jump around on, and then when you’re all tired out you can just sit back in your

stroller and have a nice little nap while I take you home.”

Bertie felt as if he'd just swallowed a paper weight. Other than it sharing a name and, he supposed, likely being themed around that old cartoon dinosaur show Arthur had been making him watch, Bertie had no idea what The Dino Den was supposed to be. Whatever it was however, it couldn't be good. Just the mention of other kids seeing him like this was enough to make Bertie feel sick - and from the way Arthur was describing it it sounded like he was going to be expected to actually play with them.

“I don't want to go.” Bertie fussed, kicking against his harness again as he felt another wave of tears forming in his eyes. “Let me out!”

“Don't throw a fit, buddy.” Arthur hushed, rolling the stroller back and forth soothingly “You can either sit still like a good boy or I'll have to carry you like a baby. Is that what you want?”

Bertie ignored him, still struggling breathlessly in an attempt to find a way out of the devious restraints. Eventually, Arthur stopped trying to soothe him and simply let out a disappointed sigh - easily unhooking the harness, scooping up Bertie and Spike in his arms, securing both boy and stuffie on his hip, before folding up the stroller with a click and tucking the bundle of fabric under his other arm.

Just at that moment, the bus arrived - Arthur heaving the boy and the stroller over the threshold and approaching the driver with an enthusiastic smile. Meanwhile, Bertie had begun to

sob, hiding his red eyes bashfully behind his stuffie.

“One standard single and one under-six, please.” he requested - juggling his two heavy loads as he handed over a small collection of coins.

“Looks like someone’s in a bad mood.” the bus driver remarked, offering Arthur a sympathetic smile.

“He just decided he didn’t like his stroller. Sure he’ll be right as rain in no time.”

The bus driver gave a knowing look before Arthur continued towards a seat at the front of the bus - laying the stroller down on the floor and sitting Bertie on his knee, gently bouncing him up and down.

“Alright, bud. Let it out.” he reassured, directing the smaller boy’s thumb towards his mouth “There’s your thumb. Doesn’t that feel better?”

Bertie didn’t even try to resist, beginning to nurse steadily as the bus got moving. It was a reasonably long journey, but his thumb remained firmly in his mouth the entire time - the steady sucking feeling beginning to feel strangely natural by the time they arrived. He could only manage a muffled moan as Arthur unfolded the stroller again, securing the boy in the straps and tickling Spike playfully against his face before wheeling him off the bus - exchanging a wave of thanks with the bus driver as he did so.

From there, it was only a short stroll to The Dino Den, which turned out to be a rather typical kids soft play area. Even the

dinosaur theme seemed to be rather tenuous, and as far as Bertie could tell the connection to the TV show was entirely coincidental. He supposed that should have been expected, given that the show had been off the air for a good ten years and had never been all too successful in the first place, but somehow Bertie felt a strange sense of disappointment. He let out a short grumble as he was wheeled through the door, but mostly contented himself with hiding his face behind Spike - not even daring to remove his thumb from his mouth.

“One to play, and one to watch.” Arthur announced cheerfully at the reception desk.

“Alrightie.” The reception enthused “And how old’s the little guy?”

“Oh - he’s over three.” Arthur confirmed “He can pay the big kid rate.”

The two exchanged a few more details before Arthur handed over the payment and Bertie was wheeled through a pair of large double doors - immediately entering into a cavernous room dominated by a large climbing frame filled with screaming kids and a number of slides. Near the doors were around a dozen or so picnic tables - a few of them occupied by small groups of bored looking adults. Arthur stopped the stroller in front of one of the unoccupied tables, leaning down to unstrap Bertie.

“Alright, bud. Are you feeling a little better now?”

Bertie shook his head obstinately, hoping that he might

somehow be allowed to stay hidden in the stroller if he acted like he was still in a mood.

Arthur smiled patiently, “Well you can’t very well play on the climbing frame with your thumb in your mouth.”

He went to force the thumb out of Bertie’s mouth, but as soon as he had done so Bertie immediately popped it back in. It wasn’t rational, but somehow Bertie clung to the hope that Arthur couldn’t possibly make him get up out of the stroller as long as he kept sucking on his thumb.

“Bertie.” Arthur said sternly “Come on. It’s time to go play.”

“Don’ Wanna.” he mumbled through his thumb, twisting around to hide his eyes in the fabric at the side of the stroller. He held Spike up by his face, using the plush dinosaur as a kind of shield in a feeble attempt to stop any more interference with his thumb sucking session.

He heard Arthur sigh and open up his backpack before he felt some kind of pressure around his right shoulder. Regardless, he continued to press his face against the stroller, committed to his strategy. The next thing he knew however, he was on his feet - Arthur having plucked him out of the stroller and stood him up on the spongy floor. His thumb was pulled forcefully out of his mouth again as he looked down to see a white pacifier featuring a lime green Triceratops hanging from his polo shirt - seemingly tied through one of the button holes with a colorful orange and blue ribbon.

“There you go, buddy. Now you can have something to suck

on and play all at the same time!”

As Bertie stared down at the babyish thing, his mouth hanging open in surprise, Arthur immediately seized it up and planted it between his lips. The boy gave it a few nervous sucks - more out of habit than anything else - before spitting it out, looking up at Arthur with a shocked but very much aggrieved scowl.

“Looks like you're feeling better after all.” Arthur commented, swatting Bertie on the bottom and grabbing his hand to pull him forwards towards the play area.

Straight away, Arthur made a beeline towards a pair of boys - one blond and one brown haired - laughing and joking with each other at the bottom of a large slide. The slide reached all the way to the top of the room and must have been around 30 feet tall, designed to undulate up and down and themed loosely around the idea of a Brontosaurus' back. The boys both looked to be around seven or eight, but despite their apparent age they each had a few good inches on Bertie.

“Hey guys” Arthur greeted them. They both stopped talking - looking at Arthur with the kind of rapt attention that could only be achieved when teenagers talked to younger boys as if they were equals “What are your names?”

“I'm Luke, and he's Sam.” the blond boy answered.

“I'm Arthur, and this little fella is Bertie.”

Bertie resisted the urge to hide behind Arthur like a frightened toddler, instead busying himself with trying to

untie the pacifier from his shirt; but it was a futile task. He had never been much good with knots, and it was practically impossible with just one hand - his other being occupied ensuring Spike didn't fall on the sticky play area floor.

"He's a little nervous." Arthur continued, "Do you mind keeping him occupied for a while?"

The boys didn't look particularly thrilled by the idea, but shrugged all the same - acquiescing to Arthur's natural teenage authority. "Sure."

"Great!" Arthur enthused, leaning down to give Bertie a final hug. He was about to stand back up when he noticed the flashing lights coming from Bertie's light up trainers. "Oops!" he exclaimed "Almost forget, no shoes in the play area buddy."

Bertie let out another little moan, but let Arthur pull his shoes off one by one - each trainer making another little flash as it left his foot. In the end, he was left with only his thin white socks between his feet and the horrible gummy floor.

"Have fun, Bertie-saurus." Arthur commented, pinching the little boy on the cheek before heading off back towards the grown-up area - leaving Bertie alone with the two younger boys.

The two kids looked down at Bertie in the same way that they might have regarded an annoying little cousin they had been lumbered with. He cringed with embarrassment. There he was, dressed up like a toddler, with a pacifier on his chest,

being dumped on a couple of second graders in the hope that they might keep him entertained for a few hours purely out of pity.

“How old are you?” the blond boy, Luke, asked bluntly.

“Fourteen.” Bertie shot back - although he knew very well how implausible it must have sounded. All the same, he tried to put on his most menacing expression, hoping that the boys might decide to just leave him alone so he could find some solitary corner to sit in.

Sam just snorted. “No way. You’re just a toddler.”

“I am so.” Bertie insisted sourly, “I’m in the eighth grade.”

“You shouldn’t tell lies.” Luke lectured “The play area’s only for kids 12 and under anyway.”

“Yeah” Sam butted in “And what kind of teenager has a pacifier?”

“And carries around a stuffie.” Luke added.

Bertie felt just a little aggrieved by the last comment, hugging Spike a little closer - but he didn’t bother responding, not really having any kind of explanation.

“Whatever.” Sam shrugged, “I’m going down the slide again.”

The two boys began to walk off - blessedly leaving Bertie behind. The two of them were just about to turn the corner, when Luke looked back.

“Are you coming?”

“No.” Bertie answered simply.

“I told you.” Sam interjected “He’s just a baby. He’s probably scared or something.”

Bertie narrowed his eyes, resisting the urge to scoff “I’m not scared!”

“Oh yeah?” Sam retorted “Then come with us up the slides.”

“Fine!” Bertie exclaimed, easily folding to their weak taunts and marching haughtily up to join them as they climbed up the stairs that led to the slides. There might have been nothing he could do about Arthur pushing him around, but these kids were barely out of diapers themselves! There was no way he could let himself be shown up by a couple of elementary schoolers!

The assignment seemed easy enough once they got to the top. Sam went first, and then Luke - each boy launching himself confidently off the huge wobbly slide towards the big ball pit at the bottom. When it got to be Bertie’s turn, he did feel a little twist of fear in his stomach given how high up he seemed to be, but he slid nervously forwards all the same. His technique left a lot to be desired however, the big dips in the material accelerating him at an alarming rate until he lost control of his trajectory entirely and found himself slipping sideways at a terrifying angle - finally crashing into the ballpit. He thrashed around wildly for a few moments before a hand dragged him breathless and panting to the surface. He only barely managed to maintain his grip on Spike throughout the terrifying journey, and he hugged the toy

possessively at his side as he emerged.

“Is he alright?” Sam asked, watching passively as Luke helped him up onto one of the soft mats that surrounded the ballpit.

“I think he’s gonna cry.” Luke observed, looking discerningly at the exhausted, red-faced little boy.

“I’m not crying!” Bertie insisted.

“Yeah, but you were scared though, right?” Sam accused “He probably peed in his diaper!”

“I didn’t!” he denied - looking outraged.

Sam grinned maliciously, easily catching the boy in his trap “But you do still wear diapers, right?”

The boy looked from side to side, confused. “What?” he exclaimed “No I don’t!”

“Whatever.” Sam interrupted. “Let’s go again.”

Bertie followed the pair breathlessly back up to the top of the slides, huffing and puffing partly out of tiredness, but partly out of frustration. The two boys were whispering something to each other, but he couldn’t quite make out what they were saying. Eventually, they arrived - both boys standing aside so Bertie could make his way past them.

“It’s your turn to go first.” Sam explained. “Unless you’re too scared...”

“I’m not scared.” Bertie repeated. He approached the edge of

the slide nervously, looking down at the huge drop below. He was just about to step forward, when Luke approached his side - placing both hands on his shoulders as if to adjust his stance.

“Here, I’ll show you how you’re meant to stand - if you want to do it properly.” he offered.

The smaller boy nodded his acquiescence, but just at that moment Luke quickly undid the clasp of his dungarees, unhooking the straps from over his shoulders just in time for Sam to come up behind him and pull the whole garment down around his ankles. Bertie barely had time to register what was happening before Sam shoved him directly forwards, sending him tumbling down the slide. He let out a terrified shriek, Spike tumbling out of his grasp as he hurtled front first across the undulating material, the back of his Brontosaurus undies on clear display as he collided head first into the ballpit.

A cruel cacophony of laughter sounded from the top of the slide as Bertie crashed around in the ballpit, dragging his dungarees behind his ankles as he crawled his way out. Looking up, he saw around a dozen kids, not a single one younger than around ten, all staring at him as he fumbled to get to his feet. He felt tears start to well in his eyes, hopelessly straining to pull up his dungarees, but only managing to trip himself up again. He sobbed, feeling a deep instinctual need to hug Spike for comfort, but finding himself empty handed. He looked around desperately, urgently searching for the toy, but he couldn’t see it anywhere.

Just then, he heard the sound of Sam and Luke descending the slide - whooping and hollering as they went. When he reached the bottom, Sam dug around in the ballpit - eventually finding Spike before running off into the depths of the playground - holding the stolen stuffie high in the air for his ill-gotten prize. Finally, emotionally and physically exhausted, his dungarees still bunched hopelessly around his ankles, Bertie collapsed down bottom first onto the soft mat, letting out a single, long, piercing wail of despair.

Soon, but somehow not soon enough - a comforting voice accompanied the feeling of a familiar hand landing on his shoulder.

“Buddy? Are you okay?”

Bertie twisted around to see Arthur, his face a wreck of snot and tears.

“Nooo-oh-oh.” he sniveled, his exhausted voice quivering wildly up and down.

“Oh, Bertie. It’s alright. What happened?”

“Those b-boys pulled down my pants...and..and they took Spike...” Bertie sniffed out, trailing off before he could go into any more detail. He covered his face in shame. What was wrong with him? He was supposed to be fourteen years old, yet here he was crying like a baby to a boy a full year younger than him, and all because a pair of kids half his age had stolen his favorite stuffed animal. And yet, as Arthur pulled him into a hug, it somehow felt as if none of that

mattered.

“It’s alright. Its alright...” the larger boy repeated again and again, the calming mantra somehow soothing the boy's trembling body as Arthur carefully pulled his dungarees back up and secured them over his shoulders.

“Do you want your paci?” he offered. Bertie wanted to refuse it, but he couldn’t work up the energy to resist - instead choosing to stay silent as Arthur placed it tenderly between his lips. He started to suck, letting out a few more morouse sniffles as Arthur led him back to his stroller.

“Do you know which boys took your stuffie, Bertie?” Arthur inquired gently, helping the boy carefully into his seat.

The boy took a few more sucks for comfort before letting the pacifier drop on it’s ribbon, rubbing his eyes a little before sounding out the names, his voice still a little unsteady. “Luke...and Sam.”

Arthur looked surprised. “The same boys from before?”

Bertie nodded, just as the voice of a well-dressed woman on a nearby table butted in..

“I’m sorry, did he say Luke and Sam?” the woman inquired.

“Yeah.” Arthur confirmed.

The woman put down her styrofoam coffee cup, looking deeply embarrassed. “I am so sorry” she apologized, rising to her feet “Those are my two little terrors. I’ll go and find them for you.”

“No, it’s okay” Arthur re-assured, holding up his hands
“Probably easier for me to head in there and grab them. Can you just watch him for me?” he asked, indicating the still shell-shocked Bertie.

“Oh, well if you’re sure - I’m not sure how I’d handle that floor in heels!”

“It’s no problem!” Arthur insisted, kicking off his own shoes and jogging off towards the play area, leaving Bertie alone with the lady.

“What’s your name, honey?” she asked affectionately, looking down at the boy with a sugar sweet smile.

“Bertie.” the boy mumbled hesitantly, hardly happy to be conversing with a woman who viewed him as a certifiable, bonafide toddler.

“Well don’t worry Bertie. Those boys will be back with your stuffie any moment. And they’re going to be in quite a bit of trouble too!”

Bertie smiled weakly at the woman, but quickly stared back down at his shoeless feet - suddenly feeling very embarrassed about the whole scene he had made. Those two boys were definitely bad apples, but Bertie knew he hadn’t exactly reacted maturely. He bit his lip, slowly thinking the problem through.

It wasn’t long however before Arthur arrived back on the scene, Spike under his arm and the two boys following meekly behind. He delivered the dinosaur toy into Bertie’s

lap, leaving the two kids for their mother to deal with.

“What were you two thinking?” she scolded “Picking on a little boy like that. He can’t be more than half your age!”

Bertie shifted awkwardly in his stroller, all too aware that the truth was quite the opposite. He decided to simply stroke Spike, trying to distract himself from the whole mortifying situation.

“We were just messing around.” Sam offered “We thought he could handle it.”

“He said he was fourteen.” Luke commented wryly, clearly looking for any excuse.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” the mother snapped “Apologize.”

“Sorry Bertie...” the boys intoned, just a tad out of sync with each other.

“I’m so sorry - again.” she repeated - although Bertie noted that she was definitely addressing Arthur rather than himself.

“It’s no problem” Arthur reassured in a good natured sort of way. “All’s well that ends well.”

The woman looked grateful, marching her two boys out of the room before Arthur smiled affectionately down at Bertie.

“You doing okay, little guy?”

“Yeah.” Bertie replied honestly. “But I wanna go home...”

Arthur looked understanding.

“Maybe the Dino Den wasn’t such a good idea after all.” he conceded “Can you give me a roar?”

Bertie looked embarrassed, but co-operated all the same. “Roar!” he allowed himself to squeal, the silly noise even being accompanied by a little involuntary giggle. He had to admit it made him feel better.

“There’s my happy Bertie-saurus!” Arthur praised, starting to push away the stroller as Bertie laid back exhausted, hovering on the brink of sleep. He let Arthur push the pacifier back into his mouth, taking a few calming sucks as he drifted off into dreamland - a single thought echoing through his weary mind.

Maybe having Arthur around to look out for him wasn’t so bad afterall?

Chapter 3

Pancake Day - Chapter 3

With his brightly colored dinosaur-adorned pajama bottoms abandoned in a heap in the middle of the bathroom, Bertie was dressed only in his matching button-up top as he sat high atop the toilet - kicking his legs restlessly back and forth. He was elevated further by the childish plastic Dino Den themed potty seat that Arthur had made him use, despite his objections. He sighed, knowing that it was likely to be a permanent fixture.

“We wouldn’t want you to fall in.” Arthur had explained, “Besides, it’s either this or I’ll have to come and help you every time. What if I’m busy? I can’t drop everything for all your little potty emergencies!”

That morning, Bertie hadn’t even needed to go - but Arthur had insisted he give it a try anyway. In fact, he’d even pulled out an old little kids’ board book, Bertie had no idea where from, insisting that he shouldn’t get up until he had read the whole thing. He looked down scornfully at the front page of the sorry, beaten up old thing, cringing as he read the title Potty-saurus Rex!

“It’s okay to just look at the pictures if the words are too big for you, but still give it a try.” Arthur had said “Can you do that for my buddy?”

Bertie had given him a sarcastic glare “I’m in Pre-AP English.”

“Sounds like you’ll be done in no time, then!” Arthur had praised, ruffling the thicket of golden curls that bunched up behind his ears - what the larger boy affectionately called his ‘dino horns.’ Bertie had tried to shift away from the unwanted interference, but his perch atop the toilet left little room for maneuvering. “Try and go pee-pee, okay?” he had continued “Just like the big boy dinosaur in the book.”

Bertie had been planning to simply give up as soon as Arthur left the room, but the larger boy had promised him a “special treat” for breakfast if he was a good boy. Maybe it was the way Arthur had said it, maybe it was the mystery, or maybe it was simply the primal allure of something other than plain oatmeal for breakfast, but some strange instinct led him to obey.

Lately Bertie had been finding himself less and less resistant to Arthur’s infantile treatment. Lying in his bed that morning, staring past the removable toddler rails that the larger boy had insisted on reattaching ‘just to be safe’, Bertie had had a strange thought that he was starting to actually like Arthur - even if he definitely hated all the ridiculous things he made him do. Afterall, the boy was certainly nice to him. That was more than could be said for any of the other boys at school or in the neighborhood. He gave him gifts, toys, games, treats - even if they were more suitable for a boy ten years his junior; he’d rescued him from those bullies at the Dino Den; and he’d never even shown anyone else all of those photos that he’d taken.

Even two days ago when Bertie had had a total breakdown

and threatened to tell his mom that Arthur had been bullying him after a particularly emotional tantrum, the larger boy had simply pulled him into an affectionate cuddle on the couch - patting him gently on the back until he stopped shaking and letting him watch whatever he wanted on the TV until he had fully calmed down. They'd ended up watching three full episodes of Bertie's favorite dinosaur documentary series Dinosaur Planet, and by dinner time he'd been so happy that he didn't care that Arthur had kept him firmly in his lap and sucking his thumb for the whole event. Arthur had even given him full reign of the cookie jar for dessert, adding cheekily that he shouldn't tell his mom.

The more Bertie thought about it, the less it made sense that he'd ever thought of Arthur as a bully. Although he seemed to find Bertie's incessant pouting and protests vaguely cute, the boy certainly didn't seem to get any joy out of his suffering. In fact, he'd seemed genuinely furious with those kids who had reduced him to tears at the soft play area. No, the relationship was more like that between an older brother and his little sibling, or a babysitter and his charge - and although Bertie was sick to death with being treated like a three year old by a boy a full year his junior, he somehow had grown to like the boy himself, or at least learned to tolerate him. If he could just make him see somehow that he really was a teenager rather than the toddler that Arthur insisted he was, then maybe they could even be friends.

As it stood however, Arthur was more like a parent than a playmate. With his mother working though the school break,

it was Arthur who woke him every morning, who made him breakfast, washed his clothes, and cleaned up after him. Bertie had tried to take control, but it was a futile task. At best, Arthur might permit him to do some token baby task to placate him - to put his own toys away in their tub or pull his own brightly-colored t-shirts over his head; but most of the time Arthur just gave an adoring tut and took control automatically - securing him in his booster seat; holding up his shorts for him to step in; giving him a reassuring pat on his bottom and sending him to watch cartoons while he took care of everything. When any protest was liable to lead to tears, tantrums and a time out sucking on his binky or his thumb, it was nearly always easier to just be a good boy and go along with it all.

Eventually, Bertie got to the end of the potty book. It concluded with the baby dinosaur protagonist finally becoming 'King of the Potty' and getting to be a big boy, the last page depicting the vaguely t-rex shaped cartoon dinosaur wearing a crown, a baby blue sash and a pair of tighty whities. Meanwhile, having finally managed to go himself, Bertie struggled his way down from off of the potty seat, flushed the toilet, washed his hands, and retrieved his pajama bottoms - hopping around and expending some effort in the process of getting his legs into the holes before he pulled them up around his waist.

His task complete, Bertie went back into his room to retrieve Spike before making for the stairs. After the incident at the Dino Den, he'd been wary to ever part with his fuzzy

companion - but going potty had been one of two activities where Arthur had strictly banned the participation of the Stegosaurus, along with taking a bath. Bertie was just glad that he hadn't had to experience the second activity under Arthur's watch - at least so far. He was almost certain that the larger boy would appoint himself to supervise bathtime if he ever got the chance, but for now washing himself was one of the few things Bertie was able to reserve for the measly two hours between his mother returning from work and his new 8pm bedtime.

That reform had also been Arthur's work, achieved with a few well-placed comments to his mother about the smaller boy "looking tired" and "nodding off" in the middle of the day. Bertie supposed that those remarks had been true enough - but it was hard to stay alert when you spent your days lounging around in pajamas sipping on warm milk and watching dreamy little-kid TV shows, each with that same gentle intoxicating rhythm which practically rocked you to sleep. He was just glad that Arthur hadn't yet imposed an official nap time.

Arthur was sitting in the kitchen at the bottom of the stairs, sipping on what looked suspiciously like a mug of black coffee.

"Here comes the Bertie-saurus, stomping down the stairs!" he greeted enthusiastically "Did you manage to go pee-pee?"

Bertie gave a curt nod, traipsing silently towards the larger boy's chair.

“What a big boy!” Arthur praised, ruffling his curly locks again. “Can you give me a big boy dinosaur roar?”

“Rawr...” Bertie yawned, allowing himself to be pulled into a loose cuddle.

“Sounds like someone’s still a little tired. That’s okay buddy. I’m proud of you. No more pee-pee pants from this big boy, right?”

“I don’t pee my pants.”

“That’s right bud - you’ve been doing so well! You go on the potty like a big boy, don’t you?”

Bertie just frowned. Why did Arthur always do this? Of course that hadn’t been what he meant!

“Don’t you?”

Eventually he nodded, just so Arthur would drop the point. “Where’s breakfast?”

Arthur smiled knowingly “Ahh, you want your special treat huh?”

He nodded again.

“Well I was thinking that since you’ve been such a good boy, I could take you out for breakfast. Doesn’t that sound nice?”

Bertie froze up. Out? Playing the baby at home was one thing, but he wasn’t sure he could manage going out again. The last thing he wanted was a repeat of the Dino Den incident. Arthur could clearly sense his anxiety.

“I know it’s scary buddy, but it’s been four days. You have to leave the house again at some point - and I promise I won’t let any big nasty mean second graders pick on you again.”

The reminder that Bertie’s tormentors had only been in the second grade made his cheeks flare up in embarrassment.

“I don’t wanna...” he objected feebly.

“It’ll be okay.” Arthur reassured confidently “You’ll be all bundled up safe in your stroller on the way there and on the way back, and I’ll be right there with you the whole time. No one’ll say anything mean, and if they do I’ll sock ‘em in the mouth!”

Bertie gave an involuntary giggle at the image, chewing on his lip as he mulled over the suggestion.

“What do you say buddy? Are you gonna be a big brave Bertiesaurus?”

“Do we have to take the stroller?”

Arthur looked genuinely surprised “I thought you loved your stroller!”

Bertie had no idea where Arthur had gotten that impression. Sure, he’d sat in it nicely enough on the long journey back from the Dino Den, but he’d been practically screaming his head off on the way there.

“No...it’s for babies.”

“No one thinks you’re a baby, bud. It’s just to keep you all

snug and secure. Besides, I need something to carry all your things. Spare clothes, baby wipes, sippy cups - a boy like you would need a whole suitcase!"

"You could put some stuff in your backpack..."

"Maybe - but that way I'd have to carry you and all if you started getting sleepy. This way you'll have a nice comfortable place to conk out."

Bertie looked skeptical.

"Plus," Arthur continued "this way I can clip your binky to the stroller instead of your shirt. I know you hate that nasty plastic clip on your collar.

The idea of the pacifier ending up on his shirt again made Bertie shudder "I don't wanna go outside..." he retreated, trying to put on his best puppy dog eyes.

Arthur sighed sympathetically "Alright. How about this? We'll take the stroller - but you can hold my hand and walk next to me. You only have to sit down if you get grumpy or sleepy, okay?"

The illusion of choice was enough to secure the boy's haltering support "Okay..."

From there it was easy enough for Arthur to get the boy all ready for the day: helping him brush his teeth, washing his face, and negotiating him into a pair of T-Rex themed briefs along with a similarly themed cartoon t-shirt and shorts set. Then it was just a matter of threading a pair of lime green

socks on his feet and putting on his light up trainers, which still hadn't seen any action since the fateful day at the Dino Den.

"You're looking pretty ferocious, buddy!" Arthur praised as he took up the smaller boy's left hand - his right being reserved for clutching onto Spike, of course "I bet any nasty kids will think twice before taking on a T-Rex!

"I'm not a T-Rex..." Bertie objected tiredly as they started to make their way down the street, Arthur pushing the empty stroller effortlessly forward with his other hand.

"Oh yeah, of course. You're a Bertie-saurus, right? The most ferocious dinosaur of them all! Give me a roar, Bertie-saurus!"

"Roar!" Bertie shouted, perhaps a little too loudly - the feeling of the sunlight on his face making him feel strangely energized and playful.

An old woman walking the other way looked at him adoringly, clearly amused by the sight of the bright-eyed little boy practically skipping down the street with his stuffie in hand. Bertie immediately felt extremely self-conscious. He looked deliberately away from her, a hot red tinge of embarrassment burning his chubby cheeks. Had his four days in isolation really brought out so many childish traits? There he was, dressed like a toddler and practically announcing out his participation in a silly pretend game he was playing with his thirteen year old babysitter. He supposed he was lucky that his hands were occupied with clinging onto Spike and

holding Arthur's hand - if he wasn't careful he might find himself absentmindedly sucking his thumb!

As they passed by the houses, Bertie also became horribly aware of how recognizable he must have been. When they'd gone this way four days previously, Bertie had been fairly well hidden inside his stroller - out of the view of any prying neighbors. But now he was well and truly out in the open. It wasn't as if he was even gaining much in the way of perceived maturity by walking either; the empty stroller that Arthur was rolling along by his side was clearly intended for him, even if it wasn't in immediate use - along with the pacifier swinging merrily from its canopy. He tried to speed up as they walked by Charlie Tanner's house, hoping against hope that his classmate wouldn't see him.

"Someone's excited!" Arthur commented at the sight of the smaller boy straining against his grip, but he nevertheless maintained a consistent pace.

Bertie let out a little moan as they passed the corner. Had that been Charlie in the window? Had he been looking at them? Had he recognized him? There was no way of knowing, but Bertie certainly didn't want to risk another incident like that.

"Can I sit down now?" he asked suddenly.

"Tired out already?" Arthur queried.

Bertie just gave a curt nod, not wanting to explain.

"Alright then." he agreed, helping the boy into the seat before carefully securing the harness. "Maybe you'll be back to your

old spritely self when we've got some brekkie in you, huh?"

The rest of the trip passed uneventfully until they reached a nearby diner. Bertie had been to the place a few times before with his mother, and as the familiar hostess approached he suddenly had a sickening thought that she might recognize him. It soon became clear however that his fears were unfounded, as she smiled down at him with the same sickly sweet smile that she might reserve for any other toddler.

As Arthur parked the stroller by the booth and started to unbuckle him, the hostess spoke up.

"Does he need a high chair?" she asked. A shiver went down Bertie's spine,

"Oh - I think he might be a bit too big for that." Arthur countered, giving some immediate reassurance. It seemed the debate was not quite yet over, however.

"We've got some boosters for kids three and up, but there's no buckles or anything to keep him in place if he's a wriggler."

"What do you think, Bertie?" Arthur smiled, "Can you manage a booster seat?"

Bertie nodded urgently, causing both Arthur and the hostess to share a knowing laugh.

"Alright - I'll be right back."

In the end, the booster wasn't really that embarrassing at all - consisting only of a small piece of ergonomically curved plastic. Bertie allowed Arthur to sit him down on it without

making a fuss, looking gratefully across the room to where a baby of around 18 months was sat in the alternative - an impossible to ignore hulking tall bulky high chair. On the off chance that they ran into someone he knew, the booster seat might plausibly be explained simply with reference to his height rather than his ongoing toddlerfication. The only reminder of that was the stroller parked directly beside him - that and his outfit.

Despite his fears, the meal passed peacefully. Arthur knew exactly what the smaller boy liked, and ordered a child's sized portion of pancakes for him along with a small plastic cup of chocolate milk. Arthur himself got a full portion of pancakes and a simple glass of water. Even the conversation was relatively mature, Arthur allowing the smaller boy to regale him with dinosaur facts while he listened with an adoring smile. The only slight humiliation came when Bertie got a little too enthusiastic talking about pterodactyls and smeared some syrup across his face - but Arthur quickly took care of it with some tactically deployed baby wipes.

Bertie was still raving on about some geological period or another when his tummy rumbled threateningly. He stopped mid-thought, realizing that he needed quite badly to take a different kind of trip to the bathroom. Damn. That had been the other thing he'd been trying to get done in his precious Arthur-less evenings, but with all the argument he'd had with his mother about the return of his bed rails (surprise surprise she thought they were safer, just like Arthur) he hadn't remembered to take care of it.

“You alright, buddy?” Arthur asked, studying his face.

“Yep.” Bertie squeaked. Maybe he could just hold it? “Just... lost my train of thought.”

“Come on bud, I know that face. Do you have to go pee-pee?”

“No.”

“Poo-poo?”

Bertie gulped, unable to hide the truth written across his expression.

“Come on. Let’s go sort you out.”

“I can hold it.” Bertie insisted as Arthur walked around the table, lifting him effortlessly up into his arms and leaving Spike abandoned on the bench.

“Don’t be silly. You’re doing so well. Let’s not risk a nasty accident.”

“But-”

Arthur put a silencing finger over the smaller boy’s lips, carrying him through the bathroom doors. Blessedly, they appeared to be otherwise unoccupied as Arthur ferried him towards the stools, depositing him down on the ground before he got to work lifting up the toilet seat.

“I can do it myself...” Bertie insisted.

“I know you can, buddy - but you don’t have your potty seat here. I just need to make sure you stay safe.”

Before he could protest any further, Arthur pulled down both his shorts and undies in one solid motion.

“Stop!” Bertie whined, and to his surprise he complied.

“Buddy?”

Bertie shifted awkwardly, not really knowing what to do about his sudden exposure “I wanna do it myself.” he repeated

Arthur looked sympathetic, leaning down to Bertie’s level “Alright, - but hold my hands okay? Just to be safe.”

The smaller boy nodded, letting Arthur grab hold of both of his hands and lower him down backwards. He looked away, trying not to think about the other boys’ presence as he did what he had to.

“What a good boy!” Arthur praised, helping him to his feet again. “Do you need any more help?” he asked, gesturing to the toilet roll.

Bertie awkwardly shook his head. “Can you actually...wait outside?” he mumbled shyly.

Arthur chuckled, getting to his feet “Sure thing, bud.” He left the cubicle, but Bertie noticed that he didn’t close the door all the way. Bertie didn’t bother to correct it, instead quickly getting cleaned up, pulling up his undies and shorts, and flushing the toilet. As he emerged, Arthur insisted on helping him wash his hands, showering him with praises as he did so.

“Good job buddy - you’re a real potty prince. Just like that dinosaur in the book, huh?”

“It was a king...” Bertie corrected, realizing too late the implication that he’d actually read the ridiculous potty book - and more, had paid attention to the story.

“Ohhh, someone’s a good little reader! But I think a prince is better for my little Bertie-saurus.”

“Can we go home now?” Bertie asked impatiently as they headed back out into the diner. To his relief, Spike was still sitting in his spot next to the booster seat.

Arthur smiled “Sure, buddy. Let me just pay. You can tell me all about that book of yours on the way home, alright?”

Bertie nodded curtly but rolled his eyes, grabbing Spike up in arms and shuffling awkwardly over to sit expectantly back down in his stroller - willing that Arthur might swiftly take him home where everything was cosy and safe and secure.

Chapter 4

Sleepover - Chapter 4

Bertie sat atop the soft felt play mat in his button up PJs with Spike in his lap, arranging his little plastic dinosaur toys in a semi-circle around his crossed legs. He picked up one - a Triceratops - and examined it closely, smiling in satisfaction as he noted its relative accuracy. So much of the dinosaur stuff that was made for kids - especially the really little kid stuff that Arthur tended to get him - was horribly unscientific, approaching more of a cartoonist's vague notion of a dinosaur than any real paleontological example. These were different however. They were more replicas than toys, or at least that was what Bertie liked to tell himself.

Of course, Bertie would have much rather have been watching television or playing on the computer than looking over his dinosaur toys for the dozenth time, but ever since Arthur had commented on him being grumpy when he spent too long playing video games, his mother had instituted a strict one hour daily limit on screen time. Bertie was trying to save his hour today, hoping to catch the newest episode of Dinosaur Planet on the nature channel that evening. It was on at 9pm, but he was pretty sure he could convince his mother to make an exception to his strict 8pm bedtime and let him stay up late. At the very least he wouldn't have Arthur to contend with.

Spring Break had finally come to an end, and although Bertie still had his work cut out avoiding Arthur on the playground,

his mother no longer felt the need to muster his self-appointed babysitter to “keep him company” while she was at work. Bertie had managed to sign up for an after school activity to fill the gap between the end of class and his mom picking him up every day of the week. Fridays was soccer, and though Bertie found it positively exhausting keeping up with his much larger classmates, it certainly beat being babied. He’d decided to change into his PJs as soon as he’d gotten home that day, slipping into the cozy articles immediately after stripping off his muddy sweat-stained soccer kit. Even without Arthur’s infantilizing influence, he still liked to wear his pajamas around the house. They were infinitely more comfortable than all of his other clothes, after all.

Bertie grumbled at the thought of the larger boy, still very conflicted as to how exactly he felt about the nosy neighbor boy who had changed his life in so very many ways. After spending nearly the whole Spring Break in Arthur’s care, he was definitely sick of all the baby stuff - but by the end he was finding the infantile treatment a lot more bearable than he had initially. He would never admit it to Arthur, but was almost nice to have someone wait on him hand and foot - as long as he didn’t have to leave the house and risk anyone else seeing.

There were certainly benefits to having Arthur around. Take the dinosaur replicas, for instance. Bertie had begged his mother for months to buy him that set, but she’d constantly balked at the price - telling him to wait for his next birthday.

Arthur on the other hand was constantly buying him little treats. Just last week, he'd announced that Bertie deserved a special reward for doing so well with the potty as of late. The boy had pouted at the childish implications at first, but when Arthur had told him he could have any toy he wanted, he'd directed the larger boy straight to the Natural History Museum website. The models had arrived the very next day, Bertie waking to find an enticing package in dinosaur-themed wrapping paper sitting at the end of his bed.

“Having fun?”

Bertie gave a start as he looked up from his toys, surprised to see the huge frame of Arthur occupying his doorway. “What’re you doing here?” he asked, his tone somewhere between surprise and petulant poutiness. Immediately concerned that the question had come off as too hostile, he offered a sweet smile in mitigation. Arthur didn’t look particularly bothered however, striding across the room to sit cross legged beside the tiny teen.

“Don’t you remember?” he inquired, stretching out a single finger to bop Bertie on his button nose.

The little boy maintained his dumbfounded stare. Remember what? He gave a shrug, trying to construct a faux-mature facade of adolescent disinterest.

“It’s our special sleepover!!” Arthur announced, turning up his lips into an electrifying smile and stretching out his hand to offer a high-five.

Bertie slapped the hand weakly, but his sheepish expression revealed his true feelings “A sleepover?” he repeated tiredly, already dreading all the embarrassing things that might go wrong.

“That’s right, buddy. Over at my house. You excited?”

“I guess...” he said tepidly, vaguely remembering Arthur suggesting something of that sort the last time he’d talked to his mom. He’d barely been paying attention at the time, eyes glued to the TV screen - but it seems that Arthur had actually gone ahead and set a date. He pursed his lips, remembering his own date with the TV that very night “Can we watch Dinosaur Planet?”

“Sure thing.”

Bertie nodded. A sleepover was the classic excuse to stay up past his absurdly early bedtime afterall. Besides, they weren’t going out - so no one would see, no matter how bad the baby treatment got. He gave a skeptical smile, “Alright...”

“Alright, buddy!” Arthur repeated a lot more enthusiastically. He stretched out his hands, enveloping the smaller boy in his grasp and heaving him into a hug with a grunt of excursion, Spike tumbling out of his arms and falling on the mat. Just as he was lowering him down into his lap however, Arthur took in a loud, comically exaggerated sniff. “Phew-ee, buddy! You stink!”

“I don’t...” Bertie protested weakly, but Arthur just smiled - bouncing him up and down a little as he cuddled him close.

“Did someone make a smelly poo-poo in his Pampers?” he asked with a mischievous smile, tickling around Bertie’s tummy and down to his pajama waistband as if to check for a non-existent diaper.

“I don’t wear pampers!” Bertie shouted out immediately, making his grave offense known with a murderous scowl. He couldn’t believe it! It had barely been 2 minutes, and already Arthur was laying it on thick. He balled up his fists in anger, reaching across the playmate to grasp at Spike with his pudgy cocktail sausage fingers.

“Ohh, your Huggies then?” Arthur continued to tease.

“No! I-”

“Your pull-ups?”

“NO! I wear underpants! Regular underpants...”

In truth, Bertie’s cutesy dino-themed briefs could hardly be described as ‘regular’ - but stil, it was the principle of the matter. They still certainly outpaced a baby’s diapers.

Arthur chuckled at the sight of Bertie’s red faced outrage, giving him a reassuring peck on the cheek “I know, bud. I was only teasing. You’re a big boy.” Bertie maintained his hostile grimace, only relaxing and sinking into Arthur’s embrace when the larger boy negotiated a reassuring hand under his pajama top and laid it against his bare tummy. “You’ve been doing such a good job going potty like a big kid - that’s why I bought you your special dino toys, remember?”

The smaller boy gave a nod, still a little shaken by the joke. As much baby stuff as he'd been forced to endure, even the idea of wearing a diaper represented a hard barrier that elicited an unique kind of terror.

"I don't wear diapers." he spat out, attaching a special degree of scorn to the last word. He looked up at Arthur for reassurance, and to his relief the larger boy nodded in agreement.

"I know. You really do reek though, bud." he reasserted "Did your mommy not give you your bath yet?"

Bertie's heart sunk in realization. It was true, he hadn't washed up - and with all the running around he probably did stink to high heaven, even if he'd gotten used to his own stench. He had thought that he could save the time-consuming activity for the next morning, feeling assured that with his mother present he would be free of Arthur's interference. It would seem he had made a serious miscalculation.

"No..." he whispered, immediately regretting the admission as Arthur sprang to his feet, securing Bertie against his hip. He clung onto Spike for dear life, convinced that his grip on his fuzzy friend was the only thing preventing him from bursting into tears.

"Come on then, buddy. Let's get you cleaned up."

"No!" the boy objected "Put me down!" To his shame, his mewling protests were indistinguishable from those of any

other uncooperative little boy at bath time. Seeing the determination in Arthur's eyes however, he wasn't above turning to an even more babyish tactic - calling for his mother. "Mommy!" he wailed, sounding every bit as infantile as he appeared, hysterical and hyperventilating.

"Aww, buddy." Arthur sympathized, mistaking his attempt at tattling for an innocent little kid's demand for comfort. "Mommy's not here right now, she already went out to meet her friend. Don't worry though. I'm gonna take good care of you."

Bertie's heart sunk, the inevitability of his situation fully dawning on him. He adopted a pair of pleading puppy dog eyes, quivering as he entreated his babysitter for mercy. "Please...I don't wanna bath.."

"Don't be silly." Arthur chided "Don't you want to get all nice and squeaky clean?" He shuttled the boy over the room so that he was hovering over his bed. "Let go of Spike, buddy. Remember the rules about bathtime."

Bertie did as he was told, letting out a sigh of anguish as the comforting stuffed animal tumbled down past the bed rails onto the sheets. He felt his face burn hot red as Arthur carried him swiftly down the corridor towards the bathroom, his panic only intensified by the absence of the stuffed animal on which he relied so much.

"I c...can do it m...myself..." he stumbled to explain, but Arthur wasn't listening - shushing him soothingly as he patted him on his pajama-clad bottom.

The boy's assertion was true, not that it would have made any difference. Despite what Arthur had said, Bertie's mother never supervised his bath times any more - although she did insist that he take a bath instead of a shower. Bertie never had been very co-ordinated after all, and standing up in the slippery tub was just too much of a risk.

Bertie snuggled his face obstinately into Arthur's shoulder as he heard the water begin to cascade onto the ceramic, trying not to think about what he knew was coming. He was soon forcibly stripped of his sanctuary however as Arthur took hold of his pajama bottoms and slipped them down around his ankles, placing him gently down on the potty seat above the toilet.

"Try and go pee, buddy." he instructed, "We don't want any accidents in the tub, do we?"

"I don't have to go..." Bertie whined, but Arthur only smiled and tousled his hair - leaning down to preoccupy himself perfecting the temperature and adding a large squeeze of bubble bath.

Eventually, the water was ready. Satisfied that Bertie had managed to produce a tiny tinkling of wee, Arthur unbuttoned his pajama shirt and took him up into his arms again - carrying him over towards the tub. Bertie had been naked - or at least half naked - in front of Arthur on a dozen other occasions on account of the larger boy's insistence on supervising him 'go potty', but as his body made contact with the lukewarm water he felt that he was the most exposed that

it was even possible to be.

As the larger boy began to scrub his arms gently with a flannel, Bertie was at last overtaken by his emotions. A first tear finally emerged from the corner of his eye - running hotly down his flushed cheek.

“Alright, buddy. It’s alright.” Arthur cooed as he continued to scrub, but Bertie only sobbed harder as the flannel migrated across his smooth body to increasingly more private areas. Eventually, he was weeping inconsolably, finally prompting Arthur to let up. The larger boy gave him a sympathetic frown, searching in his pockets and producing a T-rex themed pacifier “You want your binky?”

Bertie was horribly ashamed, but he gave a series of impatient nods as he caught sight of the babyish implement. He started to nurse enthusiastically as soon as the teat made contact with his lips, happy for any consolation in the absence of Spike. Arthur hummed tunefully, lulling Bertie’s panicked breath into a slow stable rhythm again.

“Oh, buddy.” Arthur commented disapprovingly as the flannel finally arrived at his back side “I think we need to do a better job wiping, huh?” Bertie let out a guttural howl into his binky, but didn’t articulate any response to the humiliating comment - feeling entirely helpless “Don’t worry, bud. We can work on it some other time.”

After that, the only thing that remained was for Arthur to wash his hair. He used a small plastic cup to wet the long cascading locks before gently massaging the shampoo into

the boy's golden curls. Bertie cringed as some of the stinging gel got into his eyes, but he refused to let himself start crying again - sucking stoically in and out on his pacifier as the shampoo was washed away.

Although he was an emotional wreck, Bertie felt strangely renewed by the time Arthur helped him out of the tub. The taller boy produced a warm green hooded towel, wrapping it around Bertie's little form. When he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror, Bertie realized that the towel had a dinosaur theme, a number of little spikes poking out atop the hood. He vaguely remembered the article from his real toddlerhood, figuring it was yet another relic Arthur had recovered from storage.

"Feeling better, Bertie-saurus?" Arthur asked, sounding genuinely concerned. Bertie gave a curt nod, glad that the ordeal was finally over. Arthur lifted him into the air again, hugging him tightly "Awww. It's alright. Nothing a big cuddle can't fix huh? Do you wanna give me a roar?"

"Roar..." Bertie squealed softly, almost instinctively. The pacifier went tumbling from his mouth as he did so - Arthur quickly darting out his hand to catch it before it fell to the floor.

"Good boy." he praised, cupping one soft hand around his terrycloth-clad head and gently offering the pacifier again with the other. Bertie accepted the silicone teat gratefully, immediately starting to steadily nurse once more. "Now, let's go and pack a bag for our sleepover, okay?"

Arthur rocked the boy tenderly as he carried him back into his room, depositing him delicately down on to his bed. He cuddled up with Spike again, endlessly grateful to be reunited with his plated pal.

“Two dino buddies.” Arthur commented happily, prompting a grunt of agreement from Bertie around his pacifier. “Stay there for the moment, bud. I’ve got another present for you waiting downstairs.”

Bertie, still feeling a little down, perked up at the mention of presents. He reclined happily onto his cuddly warm bed sheets, hugging Spike under his arm and staring wistfully up at the ceiling as he imagined what Arthur might have bought him. Could it be a sugary treat? A DVD? A toy? It couldn’t possibly be something as good as his dinosaur replicas, but just the mystery was alluring enough. Bertie would be happy with anything, so long as it wasn’t something too babyish. He’d had quite enough of that sort of thing for one day.

Soon Arthur reappeared, a little clear plastic wrapped package containing several pairs of folded up dinosaur themed briefs in green, orange and purple. Bertie crooked his head curiously “Undah-pans?” he babbled, realizing too late that his binky was still bobbing between his lips. He popped it out, resting the soggy silicone nipple on his bed.

“That’s right, new undies!”

“I’ve already got underpants.”

That was true enough. Not only had he been making ample

use of Aunt Linda's original offending package, Arthur's excavation of the garage had made certain that his underwear drawer contained nothing but toothy t-rexes, vibrant velociraptors, and smiling stegosauri. What was so special about another dino-adorned set?

"Not like these." Arthur explained, fishing out a pair and holding them aloft "These are special."

Bertie cringed in embarrassment as he noticed the crucial difference - a thick package of absorbent cotton padding stitched into the front of the fabric, just under the applique image of a happy pair of smiling cartoon triceratopses.

The boy let out a little squeak of discontent, shuffling back shyly further onto the bed "I'm not wearing them." he stated obstinately, although he already knew at the back of his mind that he had little chance of resisting the bigger boy.

"Come on, bud." Arthur coaxed, sitting down casually where Bertie had been a moment before. With the wall blocking one side, and the bed rail and Arthur covering the other, the little boy was now trapped on the bed - cowering in the corner in just his dinosaur towel. "Just give them a try."

Bertie shook his head, clinging protectively onto Spike. He'd tolerated a lot of babyishness, but this was just one step too close to diapers. "They're for babies." he whined childishly "I wear regular briefs."

"Babies wear diapers, and you certainly don't wear those anymore. Look, you'll still be able to pull them on and off all

by yourself.” Arthur reasoned, demonstrating the cotton training pants’ stretchy waistband with a pair of strong fingers.

“I don’t wanna.” Bertie moaned “Why do I hafta”

“It’s not a big deal, but I’m not always gonna be around to help with your little potty emergencies. This way, if you end up making a little tinkle, it won’t cause such a big mess.”

“I’m not gonna tinkle.” the tiny boy scoffed “I don’t even have accidents. That’s such something you made up.”

Arthur laughed dismissively at the claim. “Come on, buddy. You’ve been doing really well lately, but you’re not quite there yet. You went wee-wee all over yourself the first day I was looking after you, and you would have gone poo poo in your pants at the diner if I hadn’t reminded you.”

“I wouldn’t....”

“It’s best if you have a little bit of back up.” Arthur pressed on unabated “Your mommy thinks so too.”

Bertie displayed a disbelieving gape “She does not!”

“She does so, buddy. She wanted to get the disposabal kind of pull ups when she heard about your potty accidents, but I told her you could handle just these.”

The boy shook his head in shocked dissatisfaction. He was certain that Arthur wasn’t telling the truth, or at least not the whole truth, but with mother gone there was no way of checking. “I won’t wear ‘em.” he insisted.

Sick of the circular debate, Arthur simply let out a disappointed sigh and bundled the boy up into his lap. Bertie tried to wriggle away, but he was soon immobilized by Arthur's strong grasp, the bigger boy keeping him pinned with one hand while he threaded the padded undies up his wriggling little legs with the other, pulling them up high beneath the skirt of his terry cloth poncho.

"There. No need to make a fuss, was there?"

Bertie groaned as he fidgeted around in Arthur's lap. He could definitely feel the thick padding pressing between his legs, the extra material making him feel every bit a baby.

"Go and take a look." He instructed, hooking him under his armpits to transport him a few meters across the room and stand him up in front of the mirror.

"I guess it's not so bad." Bertie admitted as he hitched up the terry cloth poncho and examined himself from different angles. Although the feeling of the briefs was wildly different to regular undies, you could barely make out the padding in the mirror at all unless you knew what you were looking for. The boy in the mirror was certainly very little, his moppet hair, pouty lips, and stuffed animal cuddled under his arm displaying all the hallmarks of a typical preschooler - but he was no baby. Despite the demotion, he wasn't back in diapers yet.

Nevertheless, Bertie was in a decidedly bad mood. He adopted a sour pout as he hovered by the mirror, watching Arthur unhook a little dinosaur themed backpack (another

relic from the garage) from the hook on the back of his door and start to pack away all the essentials for the night.

“Clothes for tomorrow...” he narrated, neatly folding a set of the new chunky briefs into the backpack along with a similarly babyish t-shirt and shorts set. “Spare undies just in case, spare t-shirts just in case, your nightlight of course...” he remarked, efficiently unplugging a tiny T-Rex shaped plastic box on the boy’s side table and depositing it within. He paused, turning an attentive smile on the little boy to request his input “Do you wanna bring any toys?”

“Um...my replicas.” Bertie requested in a quiet reedy voice, still feeling very self-conscious as he pointed a stubby finger towards the plastic toys arranged in a circle on the play mat.

“Of course! How could we forget the famous dino toys?”

The boy grumbled, feeling a vague urge to assert once again that they were replicas, not toys - but the feeling soon passed, Arthur taking Spike from his arms and packing the stuffie away with the other toys before leading him around the house on an energetic final sweep of all the babyish paraphernalia he would be needing for their sleepover. They grabbed his bright green dino toothbrush and bubblegum flavored toothpaste in the bathroom and a fresh pack of binkies Arthur had apparently kept stashed in the top kitchen cabinet, before finally snatching up his little light up sneakers from the rack in the hall. Satisfied, Arthur unlatched the front door, gesturing for Bertie to step out with a pat on his terry-cloth clad bum.

“Off we go, champ!”

Bertie’s knees knocked together nervously, his toes curling against the carpet. “Shouldn’t I get dressed, first?” he asked, very aware that he was still only wearing a chunky pair of toddler’s briefs and a skimpy hooded towel that barely reached the middle of his thighs.

“It’s alright.” Arthur reassured. “It’s only the other side of the road.” The boy let out a fearful yip, but there wasn’t much he could do as the larger boy boosted him effortlessly across the threshold, locking up the house with his spare key while Bertie hovered nervously behind, his bare feet tapping on the cold concrete drive and a cool breeze tickling against his legs seeming to taunt his state of undress. He watched jealousy as the bigger boy slid the key into his pocket. His mother still hadn’t given him his own key, but it seemed she trusted Arthur completely. “Come on, little dude.” Arthur enthused, keeping the boy on a tight leash as they walked painfully slowly towards the sidewalk - the babysitter indulgently looking both ways twice down the abandoned suburban road before he finally permitted them to cross.

Bertie let out a sigh of relief as Arthur finally opened the door to his own house, leading him into the living room. The little boy collapsed immediately onto the comfortable-looking brown coach in front of the hearth, exhausted just as much from all of Arthur’s emotional trials as he was from soccer practice. The larger boy tittered, regarding the exhausted tyke with amusement. “You can’t conk out yet, bud.” he chided “We haven’t even eaten.”

“Sorry.” Bertie yawned, sitting up and rubbing his eyes. “I had soccer practice today.”

“Ohhh.” Arthur indulged “I bet you’re quite the little Messi.”

“Not really.” Bertie admitted. In truth, he was entirely hopeless - his little legs much too slow to keep pace with the game. Somehow however, the coach didn’t really seem to mind. He was trying his best, after all.

“Why don’t I get you a drink?” Arthur offered. “You could set up your dino toys while you wait, alright?”

Bertie nodded as Arthur left the room, but he didn’t really have the energy to retrieve his replicas, instead opting to sit blearily on the edge of the couch. After a while however, a framed family picture on the mantelpiece caught his eye. He rose ponderously to his feet, shuffling over and reaching up to take the heavy frame in his hands to take a better look. The image displayed a man and a woman sitting in front of a grand mountainous vista, a little boy of around four or five squinting dopily with the sun in his eyes, sitting in the woman’s lap. Bertie gave an amused hum as he realized that the boy was Arthur, feeling strangely delighted by the sight of the big boy looking so infantile.

A creak from the door almost made him jump out of his skin. Arthur was standing there holding a small baby bottle filled with milk, a knowing smile on his face. “Watcha’ doin’ bud?”

“Uhh...nothing.” Bertie asserted, sounding like a toddler caught red handed with his hand in the cookie jar. He quickly

replaced the picture, bounding back over towards the couch.
“Just looking.”

Arthur didn't press the issue, shaking the baby bottle back and forth enticingly “I got you a nice warm bottle of milk.” he stated. “Doesn't that sound nice?”

Bertie wrinkled his nose. “I don't need a baby bottle.” he pouted sulkily, thoroughly humiliated by the demotion from sippy cups.

“Sorry, bud.” Arthur apologized, “But I can't have you making a mess on my parent's nice couch.”

“Then I don't want it.” Bertie sneered, stomping his bare foot on the carpet like a fussy ungrateful toddler. He sat down swiftly on the couch again, crossing his arms and turning up his nose. He wasn't left to pout for long however, Arthur quickly taking a seat beside him and bundling the boy effortlessly up into his lap. “Get off!” Bertie moaned, committed to his petulant protest, but Arthur was unrelenting - coaxing the rubber nipple around his lips as he writhed and wriggled to evade it. “Stop!”

Finally, Arthur relented, putting the bottle down on the coffee table and squeezing the boy tight around his tummy under his terry cloth poncho. “Bertie.” he said sternly, directing the boy gaze up to meet his own with a sharp prod against the soft underside of his chin. “You have to drink your milk. How else are you going to grow up big and strong?”

Bertie let out a long, ferocious growl, sounding like a

boisterous baby dinosaur. “I don’t wanna.” he stated simply.

“Tell you what.” Arthur offered with a smile. “While you drink your milk, we can have a look at my old family photo albums.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t act dumb, silly.” the boy laughed “I saw you looking at that picture. And it’s only fair. I got to see all your old baby photos, didn’t I?”

Bertie went bright red, reminded at once of the way his mother had practically put on an exhibition for Arthur, relaying in detail all of his most embarrassing moments from toddlerhood. He considered the offer for a moment, thinking vindicately about how funny it would be to see the precocious thirteen year old in all the same shameful scenarios. “Hmmm...fine.” he grunted, earning himself a ruffle on his golden locks as Arthur immediately seized up the bottle - planting the teat between Bertie’s lips and depositing him on the couch as he began to sort through a collection of folders under the coffee table.

“Lets see...” he began “‘Artie’s 3rd birthday.’ How does that sound?”

The smaller boy gave an excited nod, sucking up a few big gulps of milk as Arthur came to join him again, placing him precariously on his knee and folding out the big binder atop the table. With Arthur holding his bottle in place, he was free to search through the album with both hands - flipping past

cheesy photos of a little boy grinning happily in front of a massive chocolate cake, jumping merrily on a bouncy castle, and laughing uncontrollably with his arms wrapped around two similarly tiny buddies. To Bertie's disappointment however, Arthur bore few markers of immaturity - even at age three. There he was drinking from a proper glass, not a sippy cup; feeding himself his own slice of chocolate cake; even leaning over to display the plaid cotton waistband of boxer shorts, not diapers, or pull-ups, or even briefs. As Bertie came to the end of the album, he felt a fresh wave of embarrassment, realizing that at fourteen he was still somehow less grown up than Arthur had been at three.

"I was cute, huh?" Arthur asked, pulling Bertie backwards to cradle him in his arms like an infant.

"Uh-huh." Bertie agreed, a few spurts of milk dribbling down his chin as he attempted to speak while still suckling hungrily on the bottle.

"Careful, buddy." the larger boy warned, producing a napkin from out of his pocket to wipe away the spittle. "Still not as cute as you." he adored, pinching dotingly at the boy's hot ruddy cheeks.

Just at that moment, there was a loud rapping on the front door. Arthur pulled the teat of the bottle out from between Bertie's lips with a pop, the boy scrambling out of his lap and sitting up to attention - slightly spooked by the harsh invasive noise. "Who's that?" he demanded, looking up at the larger boy for reassurance.

“I’ll go see.”

Bertie could only wait anxiously as Arthur left him alone once more. After a while however, he couldn’t help but totter uneasily towards the living room door - hearing the vague low hum of adolescent voices through the wall as he turned the handle and peeped his head curiously into the hall. To his horror, he was confronted immediately with the familiar face of Charlie Tanner, a boy from school who also lived on their street. He went to retreat back into the living room, but Charlie had already seen him - cocking his head in confusion.

“Bertie?” he asked curiously. “What’re you doing here?”

“Uhhh...” he droned dumbly, his mouth hanging open in shock. Luckily, Arthur came to his rescue.

“We’re having a sleepover.” he explained, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

“I didn’t know you guys were friends.” Charlie said suspiciously. Arthur just shrugged however, opening the door a little further.

“You wanna come in?”

Bertie’s eyes widened like two saucers, rushing immediately back into the living room and grabbing up the baby bottle still abandoned on the coach. He stumbled around desperately, not knowing where best to hide it in the unfamiliar room, before the door swung open to reveal the two larger boys. The tyke gave a piggish squeal, struck dumb as he was left standing completely exposed in just his undies and skimpy towel,

clutching a half-empty baby bottle in his mits. Charlie looked completely baffled, regarding the scantily dressed boy as if he were an alien life form. Arthur however, was entirely nonplussed - seemingly thinking nothing of Bertie's babyish habits being exposed.

"I'm pretty sure I left it upstairs." he remarked, clearly continuing whatever conversation he'd been having with Charlie on the porch "Make sure Bertie finishes his bottle, will you?"

"His bottle?"

"Yep. He's been kinda fussy about it lately. Be right back."

As the living room door fell shut again, Charlie drew closer to the paralyzed little boy like a cheetah stalking its prey. "No way..." he scoffed out loud, almost bubbling over with excitement "I'd heard the rumors, but I didn't think you were this much of a baby."

"Leave me alone." Bertie whined pathetically, clutching his bottle tight against his chest like a security blanket. He glanced over towards his backpack, suddenly feeling a deep burning need to cuddle with Spike - but he knew that would only make things worse.

"Chill out." Charlie smirked, but his tone was far from chill. He snatched the bottle clean out of the boy's hands, discarding it on the floor before pushing the boy aggressively backwards onto his bottom, pulling his poncho towel high over his head to blind him.

“Huh. Potty training pants.” he observed cruelly, tickling intermittently against the boy’s soft tummy to make him squirm pathetically “I’d heard diapers, but guess these are close enough.

“Sto-oh-ohp!” Bertie moaned, feeling hot tears start to burn down his cheek as he tried to wiggle his way out of the immobilizing towel. By the time he’d finally managed to negotiate the terry cloth from off over his head, he was fully bawling, and Charlie had him completely pinned, his knee pressed down heavily atop his chest.

“So what’s the deal?” he inquired aggressively “Arthur babysitting you or something?”

Bertie shook his head to the contrary, but the bully was far from convinced. He only laughed - reaching across the couch to retrieve the bottle again. “Open wide, baby Bertie.” he commanded, stopping the boy’s head from thrashing away with a firm hand planted on his forehead.

With no other choice, Bertie choked down the remainder of the hot milk, the usually delicious sweet liquid tasting like vinegar in his mouth. The teat was finally removed as he emptied the bottle, and Bertie felt a sudden flare of anger, wanting to scream and shout and swear at the bullying boy, but instead all that came out of his mouth was a long, piercing wail - the infantile display only making Charlie laugh even harder.

“What’re you doing?” Arthur’s voice commanded from across the room. He was standing in the doorway, clutching a

copy of Blood Wizard 3D. Charlie got up at once, smirking arrogantly and crossing his arms as he looked across at his friend for approval.

“Just giving baby his bottle.” he explained between snorts of amusement “He was fussy, like you said.”

Arthur frowned, looking sympathetically at the blubbering boy laying on the ground in just his underpants. “Bertie?” he asked “You okay?”

“Nooooh....” he wailed, completely overwhelmed. “He hit me, and he called me a baby...and he was making fun of me!” he complained, kicking his legs impotently against the floor.

Charlie only chortled at the whining accusations, but Arthur looked far from amused, rushing over to the boy’s backpack and retrieving Spike from within. He thought briefly about grabbing a pacifier as well, but thought better of it, shooting a withering look at his friend. “Just go.” he commanded “You upset him.”

“Who cares?” Charlie scoffed. “He’s just some baby. They cry at anything. I thought we were gonna play Blood Wizard?”

Arthur clenched his fists, pacing back aggressively towards Charlie “I said go, asshole.”

The boy gave a final huff of derision before turning around and storming out, the front door slamming shut. The threat dealt with, Arthur enveloped the blubbering little boy at once

in his arms, offering soothing hushes as he brushed the felt stuffed dinosaur against his bare skin.

“It’s alright, buddy.” he reassured. “He’s gone now.”

“H...he’s gonna tell everyone...” Bertie said sadly, but Arthur shook his head, pulling the boy into a hug and rubbing comfortingly against the small of his back.

“He wont.”

“How do you know?”

“Cause if he does, I’ll sock him in the mouth!” he offered, putting on a goofy smile.

Although his eyes were still overflowing with tears, Bertie couldn’t help but laugh at the silly comment, nodding along as Arthur lifted him up in his arms and sat down heavily on the couch. “Let’s watch Dinosaur Planet, alright?” he offered. “It’s just about to start.”

“Oh-kay.” Bertie agreed with a stifled yawn, but he was so exhausted he could barely keep his eyes open. As the familiar orchestral theme began to blare over the TV, he felt his thumb gravitating towards his half-open mouth, suckling contentedly on the digit as he drifted off into a deep defeated sleep.

Chapter 5

Bully Trouble - Chapter 5

Bertie sat cross legged on the edge of his bed like a meditating monk, the long drapes of his poncho towel pooling on the sheets. He had his eyes firmly shut and his thoughts were lingering peacefully in the heady space between dreams and reality; the distant roll of thunder, the ratatattat of rain on the windows; and the feel of warm soapy water sliding steadily off of his golden curls and dripping onto his bare shoulders all combing to lull him into an innocent aloof nirvana.

It was Friday morning, but he wouldn't be going to school. For the past week, the little boy had flatly refused to leave the house - bursting into hysterical hiccuping tears even at the thought. After the stunt Charlie Tanner had pulled on Monday, his mother couldn't blame him. She'd managed to take the week off work to look after him, and though she was clearly very concerned, she tried not to show it - thinking it best to maintain a sunny up-beat disposition as she took care of his every need. She'd bathed him, cuddled him, even spoon-fed him all his meals on Tuesday when he'd spent the whole day crying under the covers. Bertie hadn't objected. Afterall, the whole school seemed to think he was a baby - what use was it in pretending otherwise?

His eyes fluttered open, the creaking sound of his bedroom door interrupting his trance.

“Bertie, honey?” his mother’s voice cooed softly. “Someone’s here to see you...”

“Hi, Buddy.” Arthur greeted, hovering awkwardly beside her. “Mind if we talk for a moment?”

Bertie gave a curt nod, unfolding his legs as his mother padded silently away - leaving them alone. The bigger boy sat down heavily beside him on the bed, curling a strong arm around his narrow shoulders. “You holding up okay, Bertie-saurus?”

“I’m not going back to school.” he sulked, averting his eyes “Not ever.”

Arthur gently took a hold of his chin, tenderly redirecting the boy’s gaze so that their eyes were meeting. “It won’t happen again.” he asserted confidently. “Your mom spoke to the teachers and the administrators, and I talked to Charlie and the rest of them. It won’t happen again. They won’t get a chance.”

“How come?”

“We set up something special. Those bullies won’t be anywhere near you.”

The little boy gave a skeptical frown. He didn’t doubt Arthur’s sincerity, but the whole school must have heard the rumors by now! What difference did it make if they moved some of his classes around? “It doesn’t matter.” he whispered, shaking his head. “I’m not going back.”

“It’s just for the morning.” Arthur assured diplomatically. “Then, after lunch, we’ll come right home and spend the rest of the day here. How does that sound?”

“Well...”

“Mrs Hewitt already excused me from the afternoon periods. We could watch some Dinosaur Planet, or play with your toys, or anything you want. Just come and give it a try, bud. I know you can do it.”

Bertie lowered his head sadly, desperate to refuse the bigger boy, but somehow sensing that it was a done deal. He wasn’t stupid. He knew his mother couldn’t skip work and stay home caring for him like a baby forever. He’d have to bite the bullet some time. It was better to come quietly than be dragged back kicking and screaming. “Alright...” he agreed uneasily.

The words had barely left his lips before Arthur jumped triumphantly to his feet, hoisting Bertie up with him and kissing him lovingly on the forehead. “Attaboy!” he enthused, tickling his bare tummy. In no time flat, Arthur had all his clothes ready for the day - sliding a chunky pair of Stegosaurus themed cotton training briefs up his legs.

Bertie stared at them nervously, his teeth chattering at the memory of how Charlie had pulled down his shorts to reveal a very similar pair he had worn on Monday. “Can’t I wear my normal briefs?” he pouted, his lips plumped up in pleading.

“Fraid not, bud.” Arthur sympathized “No one will see this

time, I promise.”

“But what difference does it make?”

“It’ll be plenty obvious if you make a little tinkle in your undies again and there’s a big wet patch on your pants, won’t it?” Arthur explained “It’s safer this way.”

The little boy blushed, haunted by the memory of Charlie holding him down and tickling him on the Gym changing room floor until he’d soaked right through his training pants. It hadn’t been his fault. Charlie had known exactly what he was doing. But still, he had peed his pants. Maybe Arthur was right? “I’m not gonna tinkle…” he objected under his breath, crossing his arms.

“Sure, bud.” Arthur agreed with a sage nod. “But it won’t be such a big deal if you have just a little accident.” He held up a thoughtful finger, suddenly turning on his heels and digging around in his school bag abandoned by the door. “That reminds me.” He finally produced a small white bottle of talc, slightly pulling forward the elastic on the front of Bertie’s padded undies and tapping the bottom of the tub to sprinkle on a thick layer of the baby powder. Twisting the baffled boy around, he quickly repeated the action at the rear end, before happily placing the container next to the small stack of colorful underwear set out on Bertie’s dresser. “There, all fresh and clean.” he declared.

“What was that for?” Bertie inquired, completely bewildered.

“Just in case.” Arthur explained. “We don’t want any nasty

rashes if you end up sitting in damp undies all day.”

The boy just sighed, nodding his head in weary agreement and flopping down on the bed so Arthur could dress him up in the rest of his outfit. It wasn't like there was much choice in the boy's decidedly infantile wardrobe, but mercifully the bigger boy ended up picking something at least passably mature - a simple pair of orange chino pants paired with a striped white and green polo, only a subtle roaring t-rex motif on the breast and the repeating green stencils printed on his socks hinting at any childish dinosaur mania. Sadly, the same could not be said for his backpack - an anthropomorphic stegosaurus-themed nightmare with his name printed on the back in cartoon multicolored letters. There wasn't much to be done about that, however. It was a gift from Arthur, afterall.

“What do you think, Bertie? Is Spike coming along for the ride?”

The boy gave a curt nod. He knew it was scandalously immature to bring a stuffed toy along to school, but Spike didn't need to come out of the backpack. It was enough to simply know he was close by. As Arthur took out a pair of pacifiers from his draw however, Bertie let out a cry of anguish.

“I don't need those.” he whined, shaking his head forbiddingly.

“You sure, bud?” Arthur patronized “You know they help when you're upset.”

“I’m not gonna get upset.”

“Someone’s feeling like a brave boy!” The bigger boy praised
“Tell you what, we’ll only pack one just in case. If you don’t need it, maybe Spike can have a suck while you’re having your lessons.”

All packed up, the pair of them headed downstairs. It was still pouring with rain, so Arthur helped him into his bright green raincoat complete with scary dino spikes and googly eyes on the hood - the bigger boy parrying Bertie’s interfering fingers out of the way to fasten the fiddly zip. Then it was time for his rain boots. The boy at least managed those himself, wiggling his toes to make the fierce toothy dinosaur maws on the caps smile and frown intermittently. The plastic boots, a relic from his real childhood, also bore his name - “BERTIE” printed prominently in bright white letters across the sky blue heel.

“Have a good morning, boys.” Bertie’s mother grinned encouragingly, leaning down to enclose her little son in her arms. “You’ll do fine sweetie, I’m sure.”

“Bye mommy...” Bertie smiled back weakly, taking a final comforting glance at his mother before he splashed out into the street in Arthur’s footsteps.

Trudging through the howling wind and flooded streets, Bertie felt an impending sense of dread as they approached the middle school building. When they’d first started out, he’d been holding Arthur’s hand, but as soon as he’d spotted the imposing form of other students lumbering through the

relentless rain, he'd slithered away like an eel - preferring to follow just a few steps behind. His mind was racing as they reached the entrance, but to his surprise Arthur kept marching directly onwards - thundering down the street towards the Elementary Buildings.

"Where are you going?" Bertie squeaked, struggling to make his voice heard through the pounding rain. He huffed in frustration, sloshing hurriedly to catch up with the bigger boy and tugging at his arms. "You walked past it!"

Arthur just smiled, still striding inexorably forward as Bertie struggled to keep pace. "You're not going to middle school, silly." he explained.

"What?" Bertie squealed, but Arthur was already meters ahead again. He took a series of deep breaths, half out of exhaustion from toddling around on his little legs and half out of a dreadful sense of fear. Getting himself together, he charged forward, meeting the bigger boy by the big oak tree in front of the low gate that led to the small secluded Kindergarten playground "Where are we going?"

"Here." Arthur said simply, finally grounding to a halt and pointing to the Kindergarten class just across the way. Bertie couldn't quite tell, the bigger boy's expression slightly masked by his vast yellow anorak, but Arthur seemed to look genuinely excited - as if he was watching his little friend unwrap a long awaited birthday present. "I didn't tell you before 'cause I wanted it to be a surprise, but this is what me and your mom sorted. Now you won't even have to be in the

same building as those boys!”

Bertie blinked, the rush of water steaming down his face making him look like he was mid-tantrum - but it was only the rain. In truth, the boy was so shocked that he could barely muster any rage, or sadness, or even embarrassment. Kindergarten? Him? He was fourteen! Why would the school ever agree to that? Starting to hyperventilate, he crouched down wordlessly on the path - staring intently at the river of rain water flowing past. It didn't make any sense!

“Bertie?” Arthur’s voice interrupted, strong hands prodding on his shoulders. “Buddy?” The boy remained motionless, simply shaking his head in disbelief, before eventually Arthur gave up and leaned down to bundle the raincoat-clad tot up in his arms. Their faces just inches away, the boys locked eyes, Arthur exuding a big grin of positivity “What’s wrong, buddy? You hear me?”

“Why...?” the smaller boy whined. “How?”

“You know why, bud. And don’t get all sulky on me again! It’ll be fun! There’ll be lots of cool activities, and toys just like you like, and boys and girls who like to play all the same games that you like to play!”

“But...” Bertie blubbed “I don’t want...I can’t...” he trailed off, resorting to contorting his cherubic features in an adorable unhappy pout of protest.

“It’s just for this morning, like I said.” Arthur assured. “Then we’re going back straight back home to play by ourselves.”

Just give it a chance, alright?”

The boy’s jaw hung open in shock, falling silent again as Arthur began to convey him over towards the classroom door. He simply couldn’t understand why Arthur was being so nonchalant! Give it a chance? It wasn’t a new game or an unfamiliar fruit or vegetable - it was going back to Kindergarten!

Arthur wrapped on the door, the little boy bundled against his side like a toddler with his dino themed rain-booted feet snuggled loosely against his hip. Soon enough, a young woman perhaps in her early 30s or late 20s appeared on the other side of the glass pane, pushing open the door to unleash the cacophonous sound of a couple dozen hyperactive five and six year olds.

“Ahh.” She smiled warmly “This must be Bertie. And Arthur...?”

“Yes Ma’am.” Arthur nodded, finally unhitching Bertie from his waist and letting the boy clamber down to stick to his leg like a limpet. “He’s a little bit nervous, I’m afraid.”

“Aww, that’s no problem. We’ll have him happy as a clam in no time!” the woman looked down, turning an unnaturally saccharine sweet expression towards the uneasy looking little boy “I’m Miss Bee. Just like a buzzy bumble bee! Isn’t that fun?”

Bertie’s eyes widened, stepping back and tugging needily on Arthur’s anorak to attract the bigger boy’s attention. Arthur

frowned, leaning down to his level and putting his ear a few inches to his mouth to indulge him.

“She thinks I’m a baby!” he hiss-whispered, flashing a furious outraged glare.

Arthur rolled his eyes “Chill out, bud. She’s only being nice.” He straightened out again, looking apologetically across at Miss Bee “Sorry about that. We were just wondering...I’ve got to head back to the middle school, but would it be okay if I swung by to see how he’s doing at recess? He’s kinda clingy this morning.”

“That’s fine, of course.” Miss Bee assured, holding out a coaxing hand to usher Bertie indoors. The boy cringed away, but with Arthur’s hand firmly patting him on the back, he soon had little choice but to step forward. “Good boy.” Miss Bee praised, taking him by the hand as she offered a final parting smile to Arthur. “We’ll take good care of him. And I’ve got his mommy’s number if there’s any emergency.”

“Great.” Arthur nodded “See you soon, bud!” And with that, the door swung shut.

“Right.” Miss Bee announced with an energetic twinkle in her eye. Taking his bag from his shoulders, she sat him down on a low bench below a series of coat pegs off to the side of the classroom, kneeling at his level as she lifted his leg high into the air and twisted off his muddy rain boot. “One little piggy, and then the other!” she cooed, tickling ever so slightly on his soles and forcing an involuntary squeal from the morose little boy.

“I can do that myself...” he whined in a low whisper, prompting a hum of delight from Miss Bee.

“Oh, you do talk then!” she teased, unzipping his bag and starting to rifle invasively through the contents. “Since you’re such a big boy, you can show me exactly how you put on your day shoes...oh, your mommy did pack you a pair of day shoes, didn’t she?” Bertie gave a slow shake of his head. Miss Bee shrugged “Not to worry, you can just wear your little dino socks for today. Up you get!”

Bertie did as he was told, the teacher once again taking charge of unzipping his waterproof and threading out his arms. Taking the boy by the hand again, she led him over to an empty peg, hooking up the coat and bag and sliding the boots neatly into a cubby below the bench. A little hand-drawn cartoon of a mouse was taped above the hook, his name written below in big bubbly lettering.

“This is your peg, sweetie.” Miss Bee explained. “It has your name written here, but if you can’t remember what that looks like, just think that it’s the one with the squeaky little mouse. Can you go squeak squeak like a baby mouse?” Bertie stayed silent, teetering back and forth nervously on the balls of his feet. The woman continued to stare at him however, eyes open unnaturally wide in cloying encouragement

“Squeak squeak.” the boy eventually peeped, more so she would leave him alone than anything else.

“Good boy.” Miss Bee praised, ruffling his hair as she took him by the hand again. She led him quickly out of the small

cloakroom space and into the classroom proper, clicking her free hand authoritatively to get the attention of the excitable group of kindergarteners chatting on the carpet in front of her desk. “Good morning boys and girls!” she declared, finally letting go of Bertie’s hand when he was standing at the very front of the class.

“Good moorning Miss Beeeel!” the class chanted back in unison.

“We’ve got a new visitor today. Bertie’s another one of our little guests, so I want you all to treat him very kindly. Can you say good morning to Bertie?”

“Good moorning Bertie!”

The boy gave a nervous whimper, feeling himself gravitating towards Miss Bee’s comforting shadow as he stared out at the sea of attentive wide-eyed students. His mind was suddenly arush with all sorts of terrifying possibilities, each one more humiliating than the last. Who did these kids think he was? A helpful big kid? A fellow kindergartener? An interloping pre-schooler? Miss Bee had called him a “little guest.” What on earth was that supposed to mean? He steadied his breathing, trying to exude maturity with the frigid frown of a procacious pensive teen - but he ended up looking more like a timid toddler.

“Do you want to say hello, Bertie?” Miss Bee prompted, tapping lightly on his tush to coax him back out into the spotlight. It had been almost an almost unconscious instinct, but he’d retreated so far that he’d practically been hiding

behind her leg!

“Hello...” the boy said breathily, the whole class leaning forward slightly to try and hear him better. His throat closing up, Bertie looked dejectedly down at the floor, fiddling uneasily with the ends of his pants strings.

“Good job, sweetie.” Miss Bee came to his rescue, sensing his unease. She placed a comforting hand atop his head, presenting him to the class like a prized lamb at auction. “Bertie’s mommy told me that he’s a big fan of dinosaurs! Isn’t that exciting?”

A hum of approval went up among the students, the gaggle of little kids all spontaneously starting to yip, yap and yell about the exhilarating topic. Miss Bee soon had them under control again however, punctuating the impromptu class discussion with three sharp claps of her hands. The sudden piercing sound took Bertie by surprise, the little boy jumping out of his skin and clasping his hands over his ears.

“Sorry about that, sweetie.” Miss Bee apologized, gently pulling his arms back down to his sides again. “But there’s no need to be scared.” She turned toward the class again, gesturing both hands swiftly up as a prompt for everyone to stand. “Right!” she declared with an electric energy. “Everyone find your partner! We’re going to have half an hour at our learning stations, and then we’ll be back on the rug for some math.” The students nodded their assent, all filing off in pairs towards different areas of the classroom. Bertie, not really knowing what to do, stuck close to the

teacher - Miss Bee soon intercepting a giggling blue eyed boy with a shaggy mop of brown hair as he passed by the desk. “Oh, Ewan. I don’t think Hugh’s here this morning. Could you partner up with Bertie instead?”

Ewan’s grin grew even larger, looking like an excitable puppy dog who’d just been thrown the world’s largest bone. “Oh-kay!” he agreed, immediately bounding up and grabbing Bertie by the hand. The little teen was dismayed to see that, despite his decidedly infantile demeanor, the kindergartener was rather large for his age - perhaps standing an inch or two above Bertie. “I’ll take care of him!” Ewan panted excitably, squeezing Bertie’s hand vice tight and displaying a proud toothy grin to the teacher.

“There’s a good boy.” Miss Bee praised. “Do you know what you’re doing this morning?”

“Yep!” Ewan nodded, pointing over towards a small nook in the corner where a large comfy-looking chair was set up next to a collection of brightly colored picture books “We’re gonna read a story!”

“Well, I’m sure Bertie will enjoy that.”

“Uh-huh! I’m a good reader.” Ewan bragged, basking for a moment in Miss Bee’ praising smile before he began to march off towards the reading area - dragging Bertie forcefully along behind him like a little dog struggling on its lead “Come on, Bertie!”

“Stop it!” Bertie mewled, his arm stretched out painfully.

“Let go!”

“Why?” Ewan queried, entirely oblivious to the smaller boy’s plight as he picked up his pace to an intolerable half-gallop careening towards the books.

“You’re hurting me!”

“Oh.” the kindergartener observed, finally letting go and twisting around to throw out his arms in a playful attempt at apology. “Sorry, Bertie! I’ll hug it better!”

Bertie let out a squeak of fright, his protests muffled as the slightly bigger boy enveloped him in a crushing cuddle. His face was pushed directly against the scratchy fabric of the boy’s white polo shirt, his nose mere millimeters away from a nondescript pale pink stain. Finally Ewan let him go, concluding the affectionate gesture with a surprise wet kiss on his cheek. Bertie retreated hurriedly away from the boy as soon as he was able, stumbling unexpectedly and falling back into the big comfy chair by the books.

“All better?” Ewan asked, leaping up onto the chair to sit uncomfortably close to his miniature peer. Bertie gave an uneasy nod, retreating back on to a padded armrest. Ewan soon followed suit, taking up the other. Fortunately, the chair was plenty big enough to accommodate the two of them perched on their respective armrests without having to touch at all. “You smell funny.” Ewan remarked. “Like my baby cousin Alfie! He’s only two, and he still wears a diaper - or sometimes pull-ups. But he always has accidents in those too...” The boy paused, cocking his head as if suddenly

struck by a thought “Are you still in diapers?”

Bertie gave a scowl, shaking his head furiously. “Of course not!” He glared deep into the boy’s milky blue eyes, trying to suss out if he was making fun of him, but to his annoyance the boy seemed entirely genuine.

“You smell like you do.” Ewan continued. “You smell like Alfie’s diapers. Last weekend, my Auntie Rachel let me help change him, and he went pee all over my hand!”

Bertie went bright red, suddenly recalling the distinctive smell of the baby power that Arthur had poured down the front of his underwear that morning. He hadn’t really questioned it at the time, and he’d grown accustomed to the smell, but the stuff was pretty pungent! He must have reeked like a nursery! “I don’t wear diapers.” he growled.

“Are you sure?”

“Yes!” The boy hissed. Desperate to change the subject, he hopped off the chair - tottering over towards the book shelf and pulling a title randomly from the selection. It looked pretty standard, the front cover displaying an illustrated picture of a group of golden retriever dogs sitting on their hind legs in front of a simple suburban house “I thought we were gonna read.” Bertie insisted, loosely holding the book by its spine.

“Oh, yeah!” Ewan nodded his approval, “That’s my favorite.”

“Great.” Bertie sighed, flopping down the book on the seat of the chair and going to clamber back up onto his secluded seat

on the armrest again. Just as he was getting comfy however, Ewan slid down from his own armrest to sit on the cushion - hooking a strong arm around Bertie's waist to pull him down into an affectionate snuggle. The chair was big, but not that big, the two boys practically sitting on top of each other with Bertie's legs cuddled up snugly atop Ewan's lap. "Let me go!" he demanded, but the kindergartener shushed him as if he were a fussy baby, opening up the first page of the book.

Bertie wiggled and fidgeted, but he simply couldn't get loose - soon left with no choice but to rest his head tiredly against Ewan's shoulder. "Are you ready for story time?" Ewan patronized, prodding presumptuously at the hem of Bertie's green stripey polo and tickling unwelcome pudgy fingers against his soft sensitive tummy.

"No." Bertie pouted, determined to sulk.

"Don't be fussy." Ewan scolded, taking up Bertie's hand and guiding a finger over to the first word on the page "Look, you can follow along while I read it out loud."

"I can read it myself."

"Some of the words are hard, and I'm the best reader."

A stubborn prideful part of Bertie wanted to point out that he read at a 10th grade level, but he thought better of it. Sure, Ewan seemed to barely think him more competent than his two-year-old cousin - but did he really want to risk the whole class finding out that he was an eighth grader so weak and weedy that he'd been packed off back to Kindergarten? It was

better to simply ride out the humiliation as he had done so often before. It was only a few hours. Then Arthur would return and he could retreat safely back to the comforting cocoon of his bedsheets.

Ewan started reading, guiding Bertie's limp finger across the page as he narrated the story in a loud confident voice - complete with distinct silly voices for each of the characters. The book was hardly classical literature, but it was entertaining enough - telling the simple story of a family of Golden Retriever Dogs who seemed to live exactly like a human family. There was a daddy dog who had a job at a bank, a mummy dog who was a teacher, and two puppies - one big puppy who went to the local Kindergarten, and another much smaller puppy illustrated wearing a cartoonish white cloth diaper. Ewan was subtle, but Bertie was sure he caught him glancing down curiously at the waist of his pants whenever the diapered puppy appeared in the story - as if trying to spy out a peaking papery waistband.

Eventually the story was finished, Ewan closing the book but still maintaining his tight grip around the smaller boy's waist. "That one's my favorite." he repeated. "Did you like it?"

"I guess..." Bertie shrugged.

Ewan let out a short shriek of delight, cuddling the boy even closer and planting three big kisses atop his downy crown of golden curls. "I like you." he declared "You're cute. Like a puppy, or a kitten, or a little brother."

Bertie produced a cringing moan, trying to squirm away

again, but it was no use - Ewan squeezing him eye-poppingly tight as if he were his own personal plush toy. After what seemed like an age, he heard three sharp claps from across the room, Ewan finally letting him go as he stood up to attention and looked reverently over to the teacher's desk.

“Okay boys and girls, it's time for math! Everyone finish what you're doing and clean up your stations!”

Ignoring the abandoned book on the chair, Bertie scrambled to his feet - trying to find a place on the carpet as far away from Ewan as possible.

“Very good Bertie!” Miss Bee lauded in a high-pitched baby talk “You're quite the little math whizz!” Bertie gave a swift acknowledging nod, feeling rather embarrassed to have answered such a simple addition question. Still, it was better than saying nothing and having everyone believe he couldn't even add two plus three. He'd been trying to keep a low profile, but Miss Bee had called on him - saving the most basic equation written out on the white board for her ‘little guest’.

“Well by my book that's recess.” Miss Bee observed, glancing at her wristwatch and dismissing the class with a wave of her hand “There's no use going out in this rain, so you can all have an extra fifteen minutes of free play.”

At once the class broke out into excited chattering, all the boys and girls scrambling to their feet in an effort to secure the best toys. Eventually the only one still sat on the carpet was Bertie, the little boy wearing a perturbed frown and

hugging his legs tight against his chest as he lingered by the teacher's seat.

"Don't you want to go play, sweetie?" Miss Bee asked, leaning down and placing a slender finger under his chin to coax him out of his solitude. The boy shook his head stubbornly, not saying a word. "Are you feeling okay? Does your tummy hurt? Your head?"

"No..." Bertie peeped "I just don't want to play."

The teacher gave an understanding smile. "All the noisy big kids are a little scary, huh?" Bertie didn't dignify that with a response, simply staring resentfully forward - looking like a muddle headed baby missing his mommy. "We can just talk if you like. Your mommy told me you got some new dino toys!"

"They're replicas." The boy asserted, but just at that moment there was a loud tap on the window pane of the door that led out to the playground - Arthur smiling broadly and offering a reassuring wave as he stood out in the rain. Miss Bee glided over at once to let him in, the bigger boy soon shucking off his coat and rainboots and striding over deep in conversation with the teacher.

"How's he doing?" he asked, putting a possessive hand atop Bertie's coronet of golden curls.

"Just wonderful. He's definitely feeling a little shy, but he was a real super star in math - weren't you sweetie?"

Bertie gave a curt nod, rising to his feet and letting Arthur take him by the hand. "Are we going home now?"

“Not quite buddy. At lunch, okay?” The bigger boy ruffled Bertie’s hair, giving a knowing look to the teacher “Did he make any new friends?”

“Oh, sure.” Miss Bee assured, gesturing broadly to where Ewan was jumping up and down madly with a small group of other boys - seemingly imitating a dog with his tongue lulling from his mouth and his hands curled up on his chest like paws “He and Ewan had great fun reading a picture book together.”

“Aww, that’s sweet.” Arthur cooed “What do you think, bud. Do you want to run off and play with Ewan some more?”

Bertie furiously shook his head to signal a definitive no, moving a few inches closer to Arthur’s side to hide his face bashfully in the bigger boy’s shirt.

“Like I said, he’s still a little shy.” Miss Bee explained.

“We’ll just go hang out somewhere quiet.” Arthur proposed “How does that sound?”

“Okay.” Bertie acquiesced, shuffling along at Arthur’s side as they retreated back over to the little reading nook. Some kids were clambering all over the big chair, so they sat down on the floor instead - Arthur lifting Bertie gently into the air and snuggling him comfortably in his lap.

“How you doin’ bud?” Arthur murmured into his ear, letting the boy rest his tired head against his chest.

“Bad.” Bertie sulked. “Everyone thinks I’m a baby.”

“That’s not true.” Arthur rebutted “Babies don’t go to Kindergarten, do they?”

“No.” the smaller boy admitted “But they still think I’m little. Like a preschooler or something. That Ewan kid said I was cute!”

Arthur chuckled “You can’t deny that, bud. Besides, it’s a lot better than all that nasty stuff kids were calling you in middle school, right?”

Bertie shrugged. Loath as he was to admit it, the tender easy-going pace of Kindergarten was about a million times less stressful than the veritable gauntlet of humiliation he’d been through on Monday. “Its just...what about my school work?” he reasoned, desperate for any excuse.

“Don’t worry about that for now.” Arthur insisted, rocking him in his arms. “Just focus on having fun, okay?”

Suddenly, Ewan came sprinting round the corner with a large plush puppy dog squeezed in the crook of his arm, chunky light up trainers pounding against the scratchy carpet. As he passed by, he trampled Bertie's stretched out sock-clad feet - making him yap in pain “Yowww!”

Ewan ground to a halt at once, blinking in bewildered concern at the sight of the blond-haired newcomer’s little features contorted in agony. “Are you okay?”

“No!” Bertie complained indignantly “You stepped on my toes!”

“Oh, sorry Bertie!” Ewan exclaimed, bouncing down on his bottom by Arthur’s side. “Let me kiss them better!” Bertie cringed away, but bundled up in Arthur’s lap there was nowhere to escape, only able to fidget and wriggle as Ewan seized up one of his feet and showered it with ticklish kisses - peels of involuntary laughter spilling from the unhappy little boy’s lips.

Eventually, blessedly, Arthur intervened - reclaiming Bertie’s foot from the overenthusiastic kindergartener and securing it safe in his lap again. “I think Bertie’s all better now, champ. But thanks.”

“Okay!” Ewan agreed, reclining back on his knees “Are you Bertie’s Daddy?”

Arthur gave a hearty laugh. “Not quite. I don’t look that old, do I?”

“Big brother, then?” the teen shook his head “Babysitter?”

“We’re more like special buddies.” Arthur explained, squeezing Bertie’s belly affectionately “Isn’t that right?”

“We’re friends.” The little boy mewled.

Ewan nodded thoughtfully, taking a moment to process the information. “What’s your name, champ?” Arthur asked, offering the kindergartener an avuncular grin.

“Ewan!”

“Ahh, Miss Bee told me you and Bertie did some reading together.”

“Uh-huh!”

“Well, I’m Arthur.” The teen smiled, nodding at the yellow stuffed puppy still bundled under Ewan’s armpit “What’s your plushy called?”

“Butterscotch!” Ewan enthused “He’s a golden retriever, and he’s my most favouritest toy ever! I brought him in for show and tell.”

“Cool! You know, Bertie has a special stuffy as well.”

Ewan’s eyes widened in excitement, turning his attention to Bertie “What’s his name?”

The little boy stayed silent, only prompted to speak when Arthur squeezed encouragingly against his tummy again. “Spike.” he said simply “He’s a stegosaurus.”

“He brought him into school today as well!” Arthur continued. “He’s just hanging out in your bag, isn’t he bud?”

“Imma go get it!” Ewan declared, jumping to his feet again and skipping away.

“It’s the bag with his name on it!” Arthur called after him helpfully

Bertie tried to get up, not exactly pleased with the idea of the kindergartener routing around in his things, but Arthur wouldn’t allow it - clamping his arm down tight like the safety bar on a rollercoaster ride. Before he knew it, Ewan had returned with the anthropomorphic blue dinosaur bag clutched in his hand - unzipping the top and pouring

everything out roughly onto the ground. Bertie's heart fell as if it had risen into his throat when he saw the pacifier tumble out in full view of everyone - starting to fidget and writhe desperately against Arthur's strong arm in an effort to reach out and conceal the thing beneath his fist.

"What's the matter, bud?" Arthur asked. "Oh, you want your paci?" He easily seized it up, twisting it around and popping the nipple into his mouth. Shocked, the boy took a few accidental sucks as Arthur held it gently against his lips before he spat it out on the floor - gagging in disgust as if he'd just been force fed poison.

"NO!" he practically screamed, his face burning ruddy red.

"Shh, shh inside voice buddy." Arthur reminded him, quickly packing the paci away. "Looks, it's safe in the bag again. No need to freak out."

Luckily, Ewan didn't seem particularly intrigued by the incident, already standing up Spike on the carpet next to his puppy plush. "They're going on an adventure!" he declared, starting to construct a complex pretend story about the two stuffed animals. Still grumbling in consternation, Bertie sat back in Arthur's arms, happy to be left alone as Ewan breathlessly narrated his made up tale. He wasn't really paying much attention, but from what he could tell the rambling story seemed to revolve around Spike and Butterscotch being brothers going on a magical quest to find their mommy and daddy. Bertie didn't say anything, but he did feel a little stab of resentment as it became clear that

Spike was definitely the little brother - Ewan taking great pleasure in acting out scenes where the stegosaurus got a boo-boo, or threw a tantrum, or got lost on his own. Whatever it was, Butterscotch would soon bound along to make things better again.

“Buddy?” Arthur whispered in Bertie’s ear after a while, quiet enough so that Ewan couldn’t hear. “Do you have to go potty?”

“Huh?” Bertie whispered back. “No!”

“You sure? You’re all fidgety.”

Bertie blushed, suddenly realizing that he could feel a weak tugging sensation tightening in his tummy. His mind had been elsewhere, but clearly he’d been wriggling so much that Arthur had known before he had. Letting out a frustrated huff, he gave a curt nod, crawling out of Arthur’s lap and standing up to let the bigger boy take him by the hand.

“We’ll be right back, champ.” Arthur reassured Ewan, accompanying Bertie the short distance over to the toilets at the back of the small cloakroom area.

“Look at that, buddy.” Arthur observed as he swung open the cubicle doors to reveal the low level kindergarten-friendly toilets “They’re Bertie-sized! Isn’t that great?”

“I guess.” Bertie growled, firmly closing the lock behind him. To his frustration however, the door was just as low as the toilet, a large gap at the top of the frame giving plenty of room for a grown up to keep a supervising eye on him.

“Need some help with those?” Arthur asked, watching as he fiddled to untie the cords on his chinos.

“Nope.” Bertie insisted, finally resorting to simply tugging the still fastened garment down to his ankles. Shimmying off the thick cotton training pants, he averted his eyes to the ceiling, retreating backwards onto the toilet seat and trying to ignore Arthur staring at him.

“No need for your training seat here either, huh?” the bigger boy continued. “Though you could probably still do with the splash guard...”

Bertie inhaled sharply in panic, glancing down briefly to make sure all of his pee was actually going in the potty - but there was nothing to worry about. Arthur was just talking nonsense, as usual.

“Remember to wipe!” the supervising big kid instructed as he finished up. Bertie just rolled his eyes, doing as he was told before yanking his pants back up and flushing the toilet. As he toddled out of the cubicle, Arthur leaned down behind him - briefly readjusting his chinos and underpants so that the training briefs weren't so bunched up around his butt. He led him over to the low sinks, prompting him to hold out his arms as he took charge of washing his hands. “There, just like a big boy!” Arthur praised, leaning down to offer a high five.

Letting a resentful tut, Bertie left him hanging, instantly turning on his heels and marching back over to the classroom. Free play seemed to have come to an end, Miss Bee already calling the class back to attention on the central carpet in

front of her desk.

“There you are, Bertie.” She called out. “Come and sit down next to Ewan. He’s still got your stuffy.”

The boy hummed in dissatisfaction, with no choice but to traipse over and sit cross legged next to the overbearing kindergartener - prying Spike from out of his interfering hands with an aggressive tug.

“Thanks, Miss Bee!” Arthur called out as he headed toward the door. “See you in a bit!”

“Thanks, Arthur!” the teacher replied, before immediately turning her focus back to the class. “Now, let's get started with our phonics...”

“Vroooooom!” Ewan imitated, guiding a little toy sports car speedily around the two stuffies sat together on the carpet. Bertie sighed, squeezing down hard on his own toy car as he retreated into his own thoughts again. He should have been happy. It was almost over, afterall. After phonics, Miss Bee had given them 30 minutes of free play to round out the morning. He only had to endure Kindergarten class for a little while longer, and then Arthur would be back to take him home where everything was safe and secure and quiet.

Still, Bertie couldn't help but feel an overwhelming sense of unease. Arthur had told him that he was only here for the morning, but the boy had an unshakeable feeling that this was going to be a much more permanent arrangement. He definitely wasn't going back to middle school - he'd been

quite clear about; and his mother couldn't be out of the office forever. He'd heard her mention something about moving to remote work, but there were still sure to be mornings, or afternoons, or full days when she'd need someone else to keep an eye on him. On days like that, Bertie supposed he'd been finding himself here again - a curiosity for the kindergarteners to poke and prod and play with, a permanent "little guest."

"Are you okay?" Ewan inquired, scooting up unbearably close to Bertie's side.

"Yeah." Bertie nodded, shying back.

"You need another diaper change?"

"What? No!" the little boy yelled, narrowing his eyebrows and clenching his fist "I already told you. I don't wear diapers!"

"But didn't you have an accident...?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Before, at recess. You got all grumbly and quiet, and then you were making a sad face. Then you whispered to your babysitter and he took you off to get your diaper changed!"

Bertie scoffed, half outraged and half plain baffled by Ewan's bizarre interpretation of events. "That's not what happened!" he insisted.

"That's what Alfie does whenever he goes in his diaper."

“I’m not-!” Bertie growled, pausing mid sentence and taking some time to compose himself. “Listen.” he began afresh. “I’m not a little kid. I don’t wear diapers. Arthur just took me to the toilet.”

“Oh!” Ewan remarked, entirely unperturbed. “Next time I can take you!” he boasted “I know all about potty training. Last week, when Alfie was trying to use the potty, I helped him pull down his pants and his pull-up, and I showed him how to flush and wash his hands and everything! He still had an accident, but he’s only two and-”

“I’m not a baby!” Bertie yelled, flinging down the toy car still clutched in his hand with furious energy. He went as red as a fire truck, teeth bared animalistically as he screamed directly in Ewan’s face. “I don’t wear diapers, I don’t need potty training, and I don’t need YOUR help!”

For just a moment, Ewan’s cheery upbeat energy flagged, the kindergartener raising a bemused eyebrow as he regarded the hyperventilating blond boy scowling inches from his face.

“Bertie!” Miss Bee’s voice called out from nearby, the teacher hooking a hand under his armpit to pull him authoritatively to his feet. She leaned down by his side, holding on firmly to the collar of his polo shirt and displaying a fierce admonishing frown “What do you think you’re doing, young man?”

Bertie blinked stupidly, taken off guard by Miss Bee’s instantous response time. He suddenly felt very immature, the teacher managing to elicit an overwhelming sense of shame

with just a single chiding wag of her finger. “But I was...” he began, pointing desperately back and forth between Ewan and Miss Bee as he felt tears start to well in the corners of his eyes “He said...”

“It doesn’t matter what he said, Bertie.” Miss Bee lectured. “Big boys in Kindergarten don’t yell.” The dam broke as a hot rush of tears began to pour forth relentlessly from Bertie’s eyes, clouding his vision. He took a big hiccupping breath, trying desperately to construct some kind of explanation, but only made himself cry even harder - all of his words dying on his tongue. “Now, usually you’d get a time out.” Miss Bee continued to scold, seemingly unmoved by his tears. “But since you’re only visiting, you can just tell Ewan that you’re sorry.”

The kindergartener bounced to his feet, offering the blubbering boy a broad forgiving grin as Miss Bee turned Bertie’s shoulders to face him. “Go ahead, honey.”

The little boy swallowed, taking a few big gulping stabilizing breaths as he tried to get his emotions under control. “I’m sorry for y..yelling Ewan...” he finally choked out, managing to focus his bleary eyes momentarily on the unbothered boy.

“That’s okay!” Ewan said cheerily, immediately throwing out his arms and engulfing Bertie in another bone-crushing cuddle. “It doesn’t matter.”

“That’s very mature of you, Ewan.” Miss Bee praised, looking on in approval.

“He’s just cranky.” Ewan shrugged, finally releasing the smaller boy from his grasp. “My cousin does the same thing. He’d feel better if he had a nap!”

Bertie moaned, drawing an arm swiftly across his face to wipe away as much snot and tears as he could, but it was still obvious from his wrecked red face that he’d been bawling. As Arthur once again appeared outside the classroom door, the boy collapsed down on the carpet again - seizing up Spike and holding the toy in front of his face to disguise the evidence of his shameful tantrum.

“He just got a little bit overwhelmed, but he had a good morning.” Miss Bee was explaining, leading Arthur across the room.

“Yep!” Ewan chipped in, shaking his toy car excitedly back and forth “We played race cars!”

“That’s great, champ!” Arthur agreed, offering a hand at Bertie’s level to coax him up from off the floor. The boy was happy to accept, still staring at the carpet and snuggling Spike against his face as he rose to his feet. “I’m sure Bertie would love to have you any time for a playdate.”

“Cool!” Ewan exclaimed, obviously elated by the invitation.

“Come on, Bertie-saurus!” Arthur sang, leading him slowly back towards the cloakroom area. “Let’s get ready to go.”

Bertie sat dejectedly on the bench while Arthur twisted on his rain boots. Eventually, with the two of them alone, the little boy finally managed to pull himself out of his sulk - working

up the courage to say something. “Why’d you invite him over?” he demanded, staring daggers.

“Who?”

“Ewan.” he spat.

Arthur looked genuinely surprised. “I thought you two got on.”

Bertie pursed his lips. “No.”

“Oh...” Arthur gave a concerned frown “Was he picking on you?”

Bertie sighed in frustration, not really knowing how best to explain it. Whatever he could say about Ewan, he certainly wasn’t a bully. Not like Charlie Tanner. “No.” he finally admitted.

“Then what?”

“He thinks I’m a baby!” Bertie complained “He thinks I wear diapers.”

Arthur chuckled. “Is that all?” Bertie glowered, unable to explain the problem any more succinctly “Tell you what - whenever you and Ewan have your playdate, we’ll make sure to show him exactly how good you are with the potty. Sound good?”

Bertie rolled his eyes, getting quickly to his feet to let Arthur help him into his raincoat. That was hardly the point!