

Level One Boy

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Noah spends a little too much time on the tablet. After he throws a terrible fit, his step-Dad decides its time for a fresh start.

The Costume Box

2023

Chapter 1

Level One Boy - Chapter 1

“You failed P.E.?” Noah’s step-Dad exclaimed as he looked over the report card, his voice heavy with a scathing mixture of reproach and sincere disappointment. “Buddy...how could you fail P.E.?”

His tone made Noah’s tummy rumble with an uneasy regretful nausea, but he didn’t reply - choosing instead to keep staring stubbornly at his tablet.

“P.E’s easy!” Felix, Noah’s ten-year-old step-brother, interrupted with a snort. “All you do is play whatever game the teacher says. It’s just like recess.” he smirked smugly, looking up at his Dad for approval. “He basically failed recess.”

“I did not fail...” The thirteen-year-old went to spit back at his brother, but the sonorous toll of a bell emanating from his tablet cut him off - announcing that he had died. He let out a high pitched grunt of frustration, stabbing his finger repeatedly onto the touch screen to try to get his character to respawn more quickly.

“You’re such a dork.” Felix accused, watching gloatingly as his supposedly “big” brother sank into the couch behind the tablet again. How could anyone believe he was the older one, when he spent his whole day glued to the tablet screen like some drooling two-year-old?

“Whatever.” Noah groaned back, trying to act like he didn’t care. Felix was the one who’d introduced him to Epic of Embergaze after all, even if he barely ever played anymore. Of course Noah knew he should probably spend less time on it, but he was so close to leveling up! Just another hour or so, and he was sure he’d get his Halfling Artificer all the way to level 50 - a full 30 levels above Felix’s dumb Elf Ranger.

“Felix, don’t call your brother names.” Dad mediated. Noah usually thought of him as just Dad, even if he was technically his step-Dad. He was the only father he’d ever known after all. He just wished Felix hadn’t come in the package deal. “You’re not helping.”

“I’m not calling him names.” Felix retorted. “It’s just the truth. He must be the littlest, puniest, baby dork in the whole 7th grade if he failed P.E!”

“I said that’s enough, Felix.” Dad told him gruffly, showing him a stern look. “Apologize to your brother.”

Felix stuck out his bottom lip, letting out a dismissive huff. “Sorry...I guess.” he reported in a perfunctory tone, communicating all the sincerity of a skulking black cat. “But you know...P.E’s not that hard.”

Dad seemed to accept the begrudging apology, humming in agreement and starting on some dull lecture about trying harder at school, but Noah couldn’t care less - tapping his way through the dungeon level. He flexed his fingers in frustration, watching with cathartic delight as his halfling jumped into the air and brought down his mighty warhammer

to smush each goblin he tapped on into the dirt. His brother's self-satisfied words were resounding in his head, making him angrier and angrier. Maybe P.E. was easy at Felix's Elementary School, where everyone was normal sized, but Noah doubted his brother would still be captain of the soccer team if he had to play against a hoard of six-foot stinking middle school giants every week!

Despite the age gap, the two boys were around the same size. In fact, if Noah was honest, he was actually a couple of inches shorter than his younger brother. It just made their relationship all the more contentious. If only Noah were just a foot taller. Or, even better, if only Felix were a foot shorter! Then, whenever he was being a brat, Noah could just thump him square on the top of the head - just like he was thumping the goblins in the game with his hammer.

“Noah? Are you listening to me?” Dad demanded, his frustration rising.

“Whah?” Noah babbled, still staring at the tablet. “Err... yeah.” he lied.

“What did I just say?”

“Hmm?”

“What did I just say, Noah?”

“Oh...errr...I have to get better at P.E?”

Dad sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose between two meaty calloused fingers. “Give me the tablet, Noah.”.

Somehow, Noah was actually taken by surprise. “What? But I didn’t even do anything!” he whined, sounding like a little boy a quarter of his age.

“You did, Noah. Give me the tablet.”

The kid held the device with two hands, gripping onto it like a squirrel with a nut. “No!” he shouted defiantly.

Dad stepped forward, grabbing the top. “Let go, Noah.” He instructed much more severely, his fingers on the tablet interacting with the touch screen and making Noah’s halfling run straight forward directly into a pit of spikes.

The sonorous bell toll made Noah’s face scrunch up like a prune and go as red as a tomato - incandescent with rage. “You ruined it!” he screeched. “Let goooo!”

“No, Noah.” Dad scolded in a measured tone, yanking the tablet firmly towards him. “You need to calm down.”

“No!” Noah defied him. “No, no noooo!” he screeched, working himself up into a truly hysterical furor. Fighting like a rabid animal, he pulled with all his might and, to his great surprise, actually managed to break the device free from his step-Dad’s grip. He scrambled away across the couch, hiding in the corner, but of course Dad was soon bearing down on him again.

“Last chance, Noah.” Dad warned. “Give me the tablet.”

“NO!” The boy screamed with all his voice, his rage finally reaching the peak of its crescendo. Furious beyond any kind

of reason, he refused to surrender the tablet, instead holding it high above his head the same way his halfling holds his hammer and flinging it tomahawk style across the room.

It hit the wall, flopping onto the hardwood floor with a cringe-inducing CRACK.

“Jeez...” Felix remarked wide-eyed, looking across at the snotty-faced teary-eyed big brother with a mix of nose-wrinkled disdain and smirking-mouthed superiority. “Talk about a toddler tantrum.”

Dad, of course, was furious. His expression was contorted into a truly terrifying steely frown - huffing and grunting and clenching his fists like a bull kicking at the ground, ready to charge. Noah’s pointless toddler-esque hissy fit instantly dissolved, replaced instead with an equally infantile quivering bleary-eyed fear.

“I’m sorry!” Noah pleaded, his voice “I didn’t mean to! I’m sorry!”

“Noah...” Dad sighed, his tensed-up shoulders relaxing and his furious reaction slowly dissipating and moderating into raw frustrated disappointment. Somehow, that was even worse. He shook his head decisively, seeming to have come to an important conclusion. That’s it.” he announced, clapping his hands. “We’re starting from scratch.”

Noah sniffed, confused. He’d been expecting a punishment, or at least for Dad to shout or send him to his room, but this was something else entirely. “Wha...what do you mean?” he

asked.

“We’re starting from scratch.” Dad repeated opaquely, sitting down next to Noah and putting a tender hand on his shoulder. “Clearly we didn’t do a great job the first time.” he began to explain. “I mean, you’re thirteen now. But you don’t act anything like a boy your age should.”

The boy shifted away, wiping his face with the sleeve of his hoodie . “Yeah I do...” he protested in a weak voice. “I just got angry...I didn’t mean to!”

Dad shook his head. “It’s more than that. You don’t go out and see friends, you’re not in any clubs, you don’t play any sports...” he paused, knowing that what he was saying was quite hurtful, but nevertheless feeling that it had to be said - and pressing on. “All you do is sit around the house staring at screens. Honestly Noah, sometimes the only time I can tell you’re still alive is when you throw a hissy fit!”

Noah sniffed, bringing up the long sleeve of his hoodie again and hiding his eyes for a moment. Why was Dad being so mean? He just lost his temper. He couldn’t help it. He slid away from his touch, getting silently to his feet and plodding over to the corner where the tablet had landed. It was completely wrecked - hundreds of tiny white lines evidencing the smashed glass screen. He picked it up and pressed the on button, trying to revive it, but the screen remained black.

“It’s broken.” he reported, his thin little voice cracking in despair as he let the tablet slip from his hands again and fall back onto the floor with a thud.

Felix tutted condescendingly. “Of course it is.” he lectured. “You threw it across the room.”

Noah stared at his brother hatefully, wishing he’d just shut up. He knew he was right, but that just made the feeling worse.

“It’s alright, Noah.” Dad said in a gentle voice. “You don’t have to worry about that. We’re starting from scratch, remember?”

The boy frowned deeply, still confused. “What does that even mean?” he sulked, crossing his arms across his chest.

“I’ll teach you how to be a proper boy.” Dad smiled back broadly, coming over and putting a fatherly hand on his shoulder. “A big boy.”

“Instead of a little cry baby dork.” Felix interjected. Dad ignored him.

Noah felt his face get hot - flushing warm with shame. He wanted to say that he was already a “proper” boy, but Dad seemed so enthusiastic about the idea - and where Noah had thought he was being mean before, it now seemed like he genuinely wanted to help. Besides, it seemed like he was letting him off for smashing the tablet. So Noah stayed silent, just staring down at his feet.

“We can start with those clothes.” Dad began, gesturing disapprovingly at Noah’s faded grey Epic of Embergaze hoodie and his green cotton shorts patchworked with all sorts of mysterious marks and stains.

“What’s wrong with my clothes?” Noah, a little offended.

“They’re filthy!” Dad pointed out the obvious. “A boy your age should dress sharp.” he quipped, as if it were some ancient aphorism and not something he’d just made up. “Besides, you’re getting to the sort of age now where girls might start to pay attention.” .

“I dunno Dad.” Felix interjected with a giggle. “Most girls don’t want a boyfriend who still needs them to wipe his butt!”

“Shuddup.” Noah growled. “I can too wipe my own butt.”

“You can’t lie.” Felix shrugged. “I’ve seen your skidmarks.”

Noah blinked stupidly, struggling to come up with any kind of retort. “Shudupp...” he eventually muttered again, wishing he hadn’t said anything in the first place.

“Boys, leave off.” Dad sighed, as if they were both equally at fault. He leaned down to Noah’s level, tutting in disapproval as he inspected the fabric of his hoodie. “Noah, this thing stinks.” he scolded. “And your shorts are covered in ketchup stains. Why did you wear them?”

“Well...everything else was dirty too...” he admitted.

“You could have done a load.”

Noah blushed, very ashamed. “Usually Mom does my washing.”

Felix snorted in amusement. Mom had been away on a business trip for the last two weeks. She wouldn’t be back for

another two weeks, either. Noah, it seemed, was entirely incapable without her. Dad tutted, grabbing onto the boy's arms and pulling them up into the air as if he were no more than a ragdoll, starting to strip off his hoodie.

“I can do that myself.” Noah complained impotently, but didn't resist - letting Dad pull the material up over his head to reveal his smooth bare hairless chest. He hadn't bothered to put on a t-shirt.

“Hush.” Dad told him, balling up the stinking hoodie. “I'll put a load into the wash. In the meantime, you can borrow something from Felix.”

“What?” the younger boy protested. “No way! I don't want his baby-stink on all my clothes.”

Noah was just as opposed to the idea. The way he saw it, Felix still dressed like a little kid - all bright colors and stripes. His little brother's childish wardrobe was just about the only edge that Noah had in the maturity department. He'd rather wear nothing at all than be caught dead in some of Felix's outfits. “I'll just wear my underwear.” he declared.

“Fine.”

Before Dad could try and “help” again, Noah dropped his shorts to his ankles to reveal his lime green Epic of Embergaze boxers. He wasn't in the least bit embarrassed. Felix and his step-Dad had seen it all before after all. And he wasn't planning on going out.

“Is that...?” Dad asked, letting out a sigh of amazement as he

leant down to see that there was indeed, somehow, a bright orange splotchy stain on the crotch of Noah's boxers. "How on earth did you get a stain like that on your undies?"

"I dunno..." Noah shrugged. "It might have been pizza?"

"And all your other undies are in the hamper too, I suppose?"

"Uh-huh."

"Well then you'll have to borrow something from Felix after all." Dad instructed, abruptly turning on his heels and heading for the laundry room.

Both boys knew there was no point in arguing, promptly scrambling up the stairs towards their shared bedroom. Knowing his own dresser was empty, Noah stood awkwardly behind Felix, watching him sort methodically through his underwear drawer.

"Here ya go." his younger brother teased, using the elastic waistband like a slingshot to fling the chosen pair directly into Noah's face.

The older boy let out a squeak of surprise, peeling them off his forehead and examining them with a snotty sneer. They were briefs - mostly cream white, but with a thick pale yellow elastic waistband and piping in the same color that circled around the leg holes and continued up the front to form a little faux fly that didn't actually open. The theming on the back was even more humiliating - an excitable bright green image of Yoshi from the Mario games smiling goofily in the center with a radiating baby blue pattern behind him; stars,

coins and question boxes dotted haphazardly around the rest of the space.

“I’m not wearing these.” Noah objected haughtily. He wrinkled his nose. They really were shockingly infantile. “Why do you even have them?”

“Christmas like five years ago.” Felix shrugged. “Grandma, probably.”

“I haven’t worn briefs since I was four...”

Felix laughed. “Then they’re perfect, since you’re basically a toddler now.”

Noah wanted to smack him, but he knew he’d just get in more trouble. “Shuddup.” he repeated instead, his treble voice weak and whingy. “That’s not true.”

“Yeah it is.” Felix rebutted. “You don’t know how to do anything. You can’t ride a bike, you can’t swim, you probably can’t even catch a ball. Dad thinks you’re a total baby.”

“He does not.” Noah harrumphed, though denying it only seemed to make him feel even more upset. “You’re a liar.” he accused in a mumble, rubbing his red eyes and sniffing sadly.

“Are you about to cry?” Felix snorted in amusement, grabbing his brother’s bare arm and trying to pull it away to get a look.

“No!” Noah yelped, trying to summon a defiant look. There might have been a little moisture clouding up his eyes, but he wasn’t crying - yet.

“Whatever.” Felix dismissed. He snatched the underwear from Noah’s loose grip, shaking them annoyingly in front of his face. “Just put on your baby dork briefs.”

“I don’t wanna.”

“Well you have to wear something.” Felix grinned like a hyena, darting forward and grabbing hold of Noah’s Embergaze boxers to pull them quickly down to his ankles. Noah let out a mortified yowl, quickly putting a hand in front of his crotch to cover himself and trying to reach down with his other to pull up the boxers again - but Felix had put a foot down on the fabric, pinning them to the floor.

“Move!” Noah demanded in a squeaky whine, trying to push his brother away with one hand while he kept himself covered with the other, but it was an impossible task.

“Just put on your baby briefs.” Felix taunted, still holding them within easy reach right in front of Noah’s face.

“No!”

Felix giggled to himself. “You know, if you’re trying to prove you’re a big boy, streaking probably won’t help.”

“I’m telling Dad!”

“Like that?”

Noah made one final attempt to push his brother away, but he was like an immovable rock. How was this so hard? Soccer didn’t make you that strong, did it? Giving up, Noah grunted in humiliation, grabbing the Yoshi briefs from Felix’s loose

grip and hopping out of the boxers still pinned to the floor - putting on the babyish underwear as fast as he could.

Felix grinned at the sight. “There.” he teased. “That wasn’t so bad, was it?”

Noah just growled. “Can I at least get some shorts?” he asked, pointing to a pair of gym shorts folded up neatly in the draw.

Felix shook his head. “Those are my soccer shorts. I’m not going to soccer practice smelling of baby dork.” He strode confidently across the room, collapsing back casually on his bed. “You should be grateful I’m letting you stink up those.”

The older boy wasn’t in the mood to argue. Letting out a final dismissive huff, he turned on his bare heels and marched from the room. He tried his best to look unbothered and dignified, but the effect was somewhat diminished by the picture of Yoshi hugging his butt. It was only when he’d got all the way downstairs and saw the smashed up tablet that he remembered he couldn’t play Embergaze any more. Frustrated, he flopped down on the couch, burying his face in the cushions and leaving Yoshi on full display.

“Hey buddy.” Dad greeted him after a few moments, returning from the laundry room. He sat down next to him on the couch, pulling him gently up into a seated position against his side and putting a strong arm around his tummy so he could get a look at his sulking red face. “Is someone being a grumpy monkey?” he teased.

Noah considered telling Dad about what Felix had said, but decided against it. It wasn't like he'd do anything about it. Instead, he just wiggled out from under his step-Dad's grip, crossing his arms over his stomach and pouting in displeasure. "I'm bored," he complained "There's nothing to do."

"Well, I was going to take care of some yard work today," Dad pointed out. "Maybe you could help with that?"

Noah bit his lip. "Like mowing the lawn?" he asked. He wasn't exactly thrilled with the idea of doing chores, but he actually felt pretty bad about what he'd done to the tablet - and it felt extra weird that Dad hadn't really punished him. It wouldn't kill him to help out around the house a little. At the very least it might take his mind off Felix.

"That might be a little too advanced for you," Dad dismissed the idea out of hand. "But maybe you could water the plants," he proposed. "Or you could just keep me company while I do the weeds. I think I have that old toy trowel and fork set that Felix used to like somewhere in the garage. Maybe you could play with those?"

Noah showed his step-Dad a bitter dead-eyed stare. "Forget it," he spat.

Just at that moment, Felix came bouncing down the stairs - smirking afresh at the sight of Noah in his undies before showing his Dad a big enthusiastic smile. "Hey, Dad - weren't we gonna work on the car today?" he asked.

“I suppose we could take care of a few things.” Dad agreed, getting to his feet.

Felix grinned even wider. “All right!”

“The car...?” Noah asked, a little lost.

Felix rolled his eyes. “Dad’s Mustang. We’ve been fixing it up for ages!”

“Oh...right.” Noah nodded, though he was still confused. He vaguely remembered that Dad had bought some cool old car a couple of months ago - though he never seemed to drive it. “It’s broken?”

“It’s always been broken, dumb-dumb.” Felix said with a sneer. “The whole point is we’re restoring it.”

“Why don’t you come and help us, Noah?” Dad suggested, headed to the door in the corner that led to the garage. “I can show you how it works.”

Felix’s face fell. “Dad, does he have to? He doesn’t know anything about cars!”

“Well maybe he can learn.” Dad retorted. “A boy should know these sorts of things.”

That seemed to shut Felix up, and Noah followed the two of them curiously into the garage - still in nothing but his bare feet and his Yoshi briefs. He told himself it was just because there was nothing better to do, but he also kind of wanted to prove Felix wrong - to show his Dad he could be just as good at all this ‘boy stuff’ as his brother was.

The Mustang was a suave burgundy red, its glossy coat glistening even under the dim yellow lights of the garage. “Wow.” Noah exclaimed, putting a curious hand against the polished silver door handle.

“Don’t touch it!” Felix growled, sounding genuinely angry. He jumped forward, hooking a hand onto the back waistband of Noah’s underpants and pulling him aggressively backwards.

“Hey!” Noah protested as he stumbled back towards the door - the grip on his pants causing a mildly painful wedgie. “That hurts!”

“You’re gonna mess it up.” Felix scolded.

Dad just chuckled, opening the door to the front seat of the car himself. “It’s the door handle, Felix. It’s meant to be touched.” He pressed a large red button on the wall, before sitting in the front seat and starting up the engine.

Suddenly, the garage door started to open up to reveal the drive way and the open street beyond - the piercing midday sun bursting into the dingy garage space. Noah was taken off guard, horribly aware that he was wearing nothing but a pair of impossibly infantile Yoshi briefs. He wanted desperately to dart back into the living room, but Felix still held him firm by the seat of his pants, leaving him powerless to do anything but squirm and fidget helplessly as he watched Dad trundle the Mustang slowly out onto the driveway.

“Let go!” he squealed to his brother, but this only alerted

Felix to his heightened humiliation, the younger boy's angry frown turning on a dime into a delighted smirk. The path now clear, he didn't let go, but instead began to frogmarch Noah steadily forward out onto the driveway - the waistband of his underpants held up high like a pistol held to a hostage's head. When they were fully outside, he finally let go, the elastic pinging painfully onto the small of Noah's back. "Owww!"

Dad slid out of the driver's seat, oblivious to Felix's shenanigans. He chuckled at Noah's somber frown, ruffling his hair. "It's just a little sun, buddy," he joked. "You're not gonna burst into flames."

Noah crossed his legs self-consciously, scanning the street desperately for any passing strangers - but no one was about. "I wanna go back inside," he moaned pathetically, tip-toeing on bare feet across the hot tarmac to hide bashfully in front of his step-Dad.

"You only just came out!" Dad laughed, putting a strong arm around his shoulders to leave him imprisoned on the spot, desperately trying to hide as much of him as possible as he clung shyly at his step-Dad's waist. Unfortunately however, Dad seemed to mistake his humiliation for affection. "Up you come, buddy!" he said cheerily, scooping Noah up and sitting him on his hip. Really, Noah was too big for such a maneuver - but Dad was pretty big, and Noah wasn't strong enough to resist.

The boy was so embarrassed he thought he might pass out. "Daaad!" he whined, whacking at his big meaty shoulder as

he wiggled his butt trying to get free.

Dad ignored Noah's whining, preoccupied with other things. He instead turned to his younger son. "Felix, bud. Can you go find me a torque wrench?"

The younger boy was a little annoyed by the request, much too delighted by the sight of his undies-clad older brother being held with his legs wrapped around Dad's torso like an overgrown toddler, but he nevertheless obeyed at once. "Sure, Dad." he answered and scampered back to the garage, resolving to fetch it as quickly as possible.

"Dad." Noah repeated, so upset he was almost crying. "Put me down. Pleeese."

"Alright, calm down buddy." Dad agreed, quickly popping the hood before he finally put Noah down in front of him looking over the mechanics inside the car. Still, he was sure to keep him on a short leash, instead keeping him in place with two hands on either of his bare shoulders. Noah took a few stabilizing breaths, all his other anxieties about the underwear and being outside seeming to fade into the background after the humiliating incident. "All better now?" Dad asked kindly.

"Yeah..." Noah nodded, pointing a stubby finger at the insides of the car. "What's wrong with it?" he asked, trying to change the topic. "Can I help?"

Dad chuckled. "Well it's quite simple really. The main problem is with the timing belt..." He went on talking for a little while, but Noah couldn't make any sense of it. He tried

to pay attention, but it was impossible. Why did there have to be so many weird words for everything? When Dad mentioned a “camshaft” and a “crankshaft”, he was almost certain he was just making fun of him. After what seemed like an eternity of nonsense, Dad finally shut up. “Got it?” he asked.

“Umm...yeah.” Noah lied, craning back his neck to look up at his step-Dad. “You um, need a new cramshank?” he gambled, hoping he’d got the right word.

Dad’s face fell, but he instantly summoned a more positive expression, patting Noah on the shoulders. “It’s okay.” he assured, turning the boy around on his heels and pointing at the curb between the driveway and the front yard. “I’ve got a better idea.” he declared. “Why don’t you go and wait on the curb there and I’ll get you a special something from the garage.”

Noah blushed, embarrassed that he’d got it wrong. He didn’t move from his spot, still very aware of his outfit - or lack thereof. “Um...Dad, maybe if you just explained it one more-”

“It’s okay.” Dad cut him off, patting Noah gently on the back of his Yoshi briefs and starting to walk him authoritatively over to the curb. “Just wait there.” he instructed, pushing the boy down into a seated position. “I’ll be right back.”

The boy groaned, watching his step-Dad walk back to the garage. He turned to look nervously out towards the street, bringing his knees protectively up to his chest. He couldn’t

help but catastrophize about what might happen if someone from school happened to come past and see him. What would they say? More importantly, what would they do when spring break ended and school started up again? He shook his head from side to side, trying to dismiss the bad thoughts. It was best not to dwell on stuff like that.

“Poor little baby dork, sitting all alone.” Felix’s voice teased, his younger brother coming up and standing smugly in front of him on the driveway - his arms folded with the torque wrench held out in one hand. “What ya thinking about?” he demanded, extending his arm to poke the metal tool annoyingly into Noah’s bare chest.

“Nothing.” Noah growled, scooting back onto the grass to escape his brother. “Leave me alone.”

“You maybe thinking about that girl you like across the street?” he teased “Worried she’s gonna see you in your cute little baby dork diaper?”

“I’m not wearing a diaper!” Noah growled back.

Felix shrugged. “It’s close enough.” he decided. “Maybe we should take off your diaper, and you can go running through the sprinklers in just your birthday suit.”

The absurd insult was too much for Noah. He was one second from jumping to his feet and whacking Felix around the face just like his level 50 halfling would have done when Dad came around the corner - his return accompanied by the sound of trundling little wheels.

Noah's eyes widened in horror to see he was rolling a bright red and yellow cozy coupe in front of him - the exact same kind a toddler might roll around on driveways.

"I'm not getting in that!" he blurted out at once, jumping angrily to his feet.

"You don't have to if you don't want to." Dad answered calmly. "You can just play mechanic." He brought the cozy coupe to a stop directly in front of Noah, coming around and producing a miniature sized tool belt complete with all sorts of bright yellow and gray plastic toy tools - including a hammer, a saw, a wrench, and a pair of pliers.

"What?" Noah squeaked, his indignant protest supplanted again by frustrated impotent confusion.

"You can pretend you're fixing your car." Dad explained, leaning down and starting to secure the tool belt around Noah's babyish underpants. "Just like your Daddy and your big brother working on the real car."

"No..." Noah muttered, too baffled by his step-Dad's strange words to even think of wiggling away as he helped him put on the infantile pretend accessory. He stared hatefully at Felix, standing smugly again with the real torque wrench stowed over his shoulder like some kind of strange mace. "He's not my big brother." he denied. "I'm older!"

"Maybe technically." Dad agreed, strapping the plastic clip over Noah's waist "But maybe you could think of it like that video game you boys liked to play."

Noah narrowed his eyebrows suspiciously. “Epic of Embergaze?”

“That’s right.” Dad nodded. “Felix was playing that game way before you were, but he’s only what - level six, seven?”

“Level 20.” Felix interjected helpfully.

“Right.” Dad nodded, putting a gentle hand on Noah’s shoulder and trying to defuse his pouty frown with a calm serene smile. “And you’ve only been playing it for a couple of weeks, but you’re already at a much higher level, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.” Noah agreed, baring his teeth aggressively. Where was Dad going with this? “So what?”

“Well it’s just like that.” Dad concluded. “Felix might be a bit younger, but he’s just that bit more advanced than you. Maybe he’s a Level 20 or so, and you’re still more like a Level One Boy - just getting started.”

Noah hissed in frustration, wiggling back a few paces onto the front lawn and grabbing the plastic hammer from out of the toy tool belt now strapped around his waist. “That’s so dumb!” he declared, holding the hammer up high and imagining he was his halfling - ready to smite any stupid goblins that dared to challenge him. He aimed it squarely at Felix’s forehead, still standing smugly with his torque wrench. He brought back his arm and let fly - but the hollow plastic meant he completely misjudged the weight. He missed by a mile, the toy clattering down uselessly onto the tarmac.

Dad just tutted. He came up, hoisted Noah up under his armpits, and plopped him down again on the driveway in front of the cozy coupe - paying no attention to his defeated puppy-like howls. “Just play with your toys, okay buddy?” he told him authoritatively “Who knows?” he joked “Maybe you’ll level up.”

Chapter 2

Level One Little Leaguer - Chapter 2

Felix pitched the ball so fast that Noah barely registered it had left his hand before he heard it whistle past his head, the netting at the back of the batting cage billowing out dramatically before it rolled down uselessly onto the grass. They'd been practicing for half an hour, and still the thirteen-year-old hadn't hit a single ball.

"How are you so bad at this?" his ten-year-old brother sneered cruelly. "A kindergartener could have hit that one."

Noah brought up the bat defiantly, determined to hit the next pitch directly at Felix's stupid gloating face - but of course he missed that too, swinging clumsily at the air and stumbling off balance. He just about managed to avoid falling flat on his face, barely catching himself using the lightweight bright orange aluminum bat like a baby flopping onto his walker.

The poor kid was totally exhausted, a pair of soggy dark stains already spreading from the armpits of his gray Tiger Cubs themed sweatshirt. Like nearly all Noah's clothes these days, it was a hand-me-down from Felix - Dad decreeing that the stropy teen's previous wardrobe of video game gear, anonymous black apparel, and splotchy soiled underwear were hardly helping to mold him into a 'proper boy'. Felix's old collection of pirate ships, construction vehicles, and jungle creatures was much more appropriate, the faded articles drugged out from taped up boxes in the attic long

since stowed away when Noah's younger brother had graduated first grade.

This particular sweatshirt hailed from Felix's tee-ball days, the playful orange paw print stamped on the front of Noah's chest an adorable contrast to the roaring sharp-toothed maw of the silver tiger displayed on the proper dark blue little league uniform the bigger boy was wearing.

Somehow however, Noah's pants were even worse. On his bottom half, the boy usually favored a pair of plain blue jeans made of a soft comfortable faux-denim featuring a thick elastic waistband. He knew they weren't the most mature, but compared to everything else in his dresser drawers they were all but grown-up. Despite his fussing and whining and snotty red-faced crying however, Dad had insisted he couldn't wear jeans to baseball practice. Thus, Noah had been forced to pair his tee-ball sweatshirt with some sickeningly babyish navy blue Paw Patrol sweatpants, the famous pups grinning goofily atop his right shin while two blocky serifed "P"s embossed with puppy paw prints and stamped on his left thigh in a cruel imitation of proper high school varsity letters.

Put the whole picture together - the childish outfit, the high-pitched whiny wheezes, the rosy red pouting cheeks, and the bedraggled sweat-drenched thicket of little boy's golden honey blond curls - and you would be forgiven for thinking the weary teen was no more than five or six.

"You're throwing it too hard!" Noah whinged, just about managing to pull himself into a full standing position again -

holding his bat up limply by his side.

“I’m pitching.” Felix countered impatiently. “This is so hard you pitch.”

He didn’t wait for his brother to recover, quickly shifting back into an expert pose and lobbing the ball furiously at the back of the cage. Noah squeaked in fright, scrunching his eyes closed and flinching at the rush of air lifting his damp hair as it thundered past his head. “Stop it!” he demanded limply, his voice cracking. “Just throw it under-arm.”

“That’s for little kids.” he dismissed, retrieving another ball and preparing to throw again.

Noah let out a final harrumph of displeasure, dropping his bat onto the grass and flopping down into a sulky crouch supporting his hot red cheeks in his hands. “I’m gonna tell Daddy.” he threatened, glaring at his brother.

Noah always said ‘Daddy’ now: “You’re a toddler now. You should talk like one.” Felix had decided one morning, threatening a pinch and a punch every time he heard him say a word ‘wrong’. There were a bunch of other words Felix wanted him to use too: ‘potty’, ‘wee-wee’, ‘bum-bum’ to name just a few - but ‘Daddy’ was the main one that had stuck. Noah was surprised to find the word tumbling out of his lips even when Felix was nowhere nearby. It was kinda like magic. Whenever Dad was mad at him, all Noah had to do was use that word and he’d soften in an instant. With Dad dangling the carrot and Felix the stick, it’d soon become second nature.

Felix snorted in amusement, dropping his glove and striding forward to stand over Noah with his arms crossed. “What are you gonna tell him?” he demanded. “That you’re such a scaredy baby dork you can’t even handle an overarm throw?”

“No.” Noah moaned. “I’ll tell him you were being mean again.”

“Don’t be such a wimp.” Felix growled in annoyance, kicking the bat back towards him. He stood there watching him for a little while, growing more and more frustrated by his little older brother’s babyish moping. “Come on.” he tried to coax “I’ll throw it under arm for you.”

“No.” Noah muttered. “Leave me alone...”

Running out of patience, Felix grabbed him by the wrist, yanking him roughly to his feet. “Get up!” he demanded. “You’re meant to be thirteen! How are you this much of a baby?”

“You’re hurting meee!” Noah wailed, trying to pull his slender wrist free - but it was no use. “I’m telling!”

“Go ahead.” Felix retorted confidently “You’re such a little crybaby liar, he won’t believe you anyway.”

Noah scowled, but he knew it was true. As far as Dad was concerned, Noah was a terrible little fibber. The boy would admit he’d twisted the truth quite a lot in the last week, but it wasn’t like he didn’t have good reasons! Ever since Dad had decided to “start from scratch”, he’d been treating him like a total baby! How could he possibly be expected to actually go

to sleep at his 7pm bedtime? It was only natural that he'd stay up under the covers and listen to his iPod for a little bit. And who cares if he skipped brushing his teeth once or twice? It was Felix's fault for making fun of that stupid musical toothbrush Dad had got him!

After Dad completely took over his bedtime regime, including responsibility for teeth-brushing, Noah might have been expected to figure out that lying wouldn't do him any favors - but in fact the problem had only gotten worse. As self-destructive as it was, Noah's defiant fibbing was just about the only way he could feel even marginally powerful nowadays. So what if when Dad found out the truth he started spoon feeding him his vegetables at dinner or helping him get dressed in the morning? For just one brief moment, Noah was in control.

Just at that moment, there was a series of musical chimes - an electronic tinny version of 'The Wheels on the Bus' starting to play from the chunky plastic device strapped to Noah's wrist. It was his potty watch - yet another consequence of his incessant fibbing. A couple of days after Dad had begun his new regime, Noah worked out that he could get out of just about anything by pretending he was desperate for the toilet. It didn't matter if Felix was tutoring him at math or if he being forced to sit in Dad's lap while they watched the football, all he had to do was squeeze one hand urgently atop his crotch, shoot the other into the air, and squeak pathetically that he had to go pee right now and Dad would let him scamper upstairs to 'take care of business.' He'd loiter there

ideally for a few seconds before he'd slink off to Dad's office to play Embergaze on his computer to his heart's content.

He'd been particularly proud of that scheme - until Felix had caught him red handed. Now he had scheduled potty time every hour. Every time he heard the tune play from his potty watch, he was supposed to go to the toilet and sit there for at least five minutes. That way, Dad said, there would be no more 'emergencies'.

Felix twisted his brother's wrist around, pressing the small button on the side to stop the music. "We've wasted enough time on this." he declared gruffly. "I guess you'll just have to keep hitting from a tee - like a baby." He yanked hard on Noah's arm, dragging him forward out of the cage. "Come on, you've gotta go sit on the toilet."

"I can go by myself." Noah insisted in a weak whimper, not even trying to get free of Felix's grip as he marched obediently behind him over towards the park's public toilets.

"Dad told me not to let you out of my sight." Felix informed him. He snorted to himself in amusement, looking over his shoulder to display a cruel smirk. "Don't you wanna show me how you go potty like a big boy?"

Noah shuddered at the thought. Surely he'd never actually follow him into the stall, would he? He pondered the question as they waited in line, moving at a snail's pace. When the alarm had first sounded, Noah hadn't felt like he needed to go in the slightest - but now just the slightest niggles of pressure was tickling his bladder. He got up on his tippy toes, trying to

see how many people were ahead of them, but he wasn't anywhere near tall enough.

Felix was starting to get impatient too. "Jeez." he sighed, an amusing thought making the corners of lips turn upwards. "You know, this would be a lot easier if Dad would get you one of those little plastic potties to carry around. Then you could go tinkle anywhere you like!"

"Shuddup." Noah grumbled. "That's not gonna happen."

Felix grinned like a hyena. "No?" he pursued. "Maybe you can just go straight back to diapers then." Noah let out a dissatisfied hum, crossing his arms and turning away - trying not to engage. Felix however, was not easily dissuaded. "What's the matter, Noah?" he teased. "Worried you might not make it? Gonna go pee-pee in your little baby dork briefs?"

"No!" the older boy finally snapped. He took a step away, just wanting Felix to leave him alone. "I don't even have to go." he lied.

The younger boy looked vaguely annoyed. "Why didn't you say so?" he accused. "We've been standing here for ages!"

Noah blushed. "I'm meant to try anyway..."

"Well I won't tell Dad if you don't." He started to walk away from the line, gesturing for Noah to follow. "Come on. It's almost time for practice." The older boy took a nervous look back at the public toilets before he followed his brother, padding quickly in his footsteps over to the baseball field.

Dad was holding court by the bleachers - a small platoon of little leaguers all around Felix's age gathered around in identical dark blue Tiger's uniforms. It seemed like a good turnout, the sunny weather and balmy temperate tempting all 15 members of the team out to practice at the park. Felix and Noah were last to arrive, the thirteen-year-old standing awkwardly close beside his brother. He was all too aware of his Tiger Cubs sweatshirt falsely marking him out as a much younger kid. The Tiger's were all ten like Felix, right? Or maybe eleven? So why were they all so much taller than him? He craned up to scan the crowd, glad that he only recognized a couple of the other kids. The fewer people who knew the truth, the better.

"Alright." Dad said authoritatively, getting things started. "I'm glad you all made it. It's a nice day, so I thought we'd do something special..."

"Who's the tee-ball kid?" A boy Noah didn't know interrupted abruptly, turning everyone's attention to him.

"Well, you all know Felix." Dad explained, smiling down happily at his two boys. "This is Noah, his little brother." He waved his hand at the smaller boy, gesturing for him to come over. As nervous as he was, Noah couldn't help but obey, traipsing reluctantly over and letting Dad put two possessive hands on either of his shoulders - displaying him to the group. "He's going to be joining us for a little practice game this afternoon."

There were a few skeptical murmurs, the ten-year-olds clearly

a little uneasy about permitting some anonymous little scamp to join their ranks, but eventually the chattering died down - the kids acquiescing to their coach.

“Let’s break into two teams of eight.” Dad announced, holding out a dividing hand. “If you’re on the right your fielders, if you’re on the left you’re batting.” As the kids all broke off into their respective team, Dad leaned down to give Noah his own special instructions. “Go on and sit with your big brother.” he whispered, pointing to Felix stretching his calves by the dug-out.

Noah wanted to complain for the millionth time that he was the one who was older, but Dad had already got up and was jogging over towards a mean-looking kid taking up position on the mound.

“Hey there No-No*.*” He heard a familiar voice coo out encouragingly from the dugout. It was Mason, a tall broad-shouldered friend of Felix’s who he regularly had round at the house. “Come and sit with us.” he patted the place on the bench beside us, a big smile on his face.

Noah nodded, and smiled back - happy to be included. Maybe this practice wouldn’t be so bad after all? Just as he was about to sit down however, someone grabbed him under the armpits from behind and hoisted him a few inches up into the air! It was Felix of course, his brother huffing with effort to heave him up onto the bench and sit him down snug on Mason’s knee like an oversized toddler.

“Hey!” Noah objected, squirming around trying to get free

from Mason's firm grip. He was really much too big to sit there comfortably, but the taller kid didn't seem to mind - putting an arm down over Noah's tummy to stop him from wiggling away. "No fair. I wanna sit on the bench." the smaller boy complained, pointing at the empty space beside him.

"There's no room." Felix insisted, quickly spreading out his legs to make it so. "Just sit still. You're gonna fall off!"

Noah let out an unhappy grumble, but stopped fidgeting. "You guys are so weird..." he complained. They ignored him. He supposed it could be worse. He knew Mason pretty well, and even though he too seemed to take great pleasure in furthering Noah's second toddlerdom, he was nowhere near as nasty about it as Felix.

The larger boy pulled him up higher onto his knee, wrinkling his nose as he got a whiff of him. "Wow." he observed, just a tiny hint of concern in his voice. "He kinda stinks, Felix."

"Oh yeah." Felix laughed. "That's just his baby smell."

Mason looked confused. "His baby smell?"

Felix shrugged. "I dunno. He just smells like that a lot."

In reality, Noah's "baby smell" was nothing but a particularly pungent strain of body odor. Although it was just about the only remaining indicator of his brother's adolescence, Felix insisted it was nevertheless incontrovertible proof of his babyhood. Noah wondered if Dad might buy him some aerosol deodorant. Then, if Felix or Mason were ever being

bratty about his “baby smell”, he could spray it right in their faces!

“Maybe he needs a bath.” Mason suggested.

“Maybe.” Felix nodded. “Or he might have just pooped his diaper!”

The two ten-year-olds exchanged a few giggles while Noah pouted in red-faced silence, fantasizing about his revenge. They’d see who was laughing when he gassed them with the deodorant spray. They’d be choking! As Mason got another whiff of Noah’s clammy sweatshirt however, his laughter was interrupted by a disgusted gag. “He’s just so sweaty!”

“Yeah.” Felix nodded. “I guess he needs to cool down.”

“Definitely.”

They seemed to move exactly at the same time. Noah was still daydreaming, not even given a chance to process what was happening before he felt a strong arm constrict around his shoulders and pull him firmly down to lay supine between the two younger boys' laps.

“Wha-?” he babbled, but the next thing he knew his Tiger Cubs sweatshirt had been yanked and off and pulled out of his reach and his Paw Patrol sweatpants were pooled atop his sneakers around his ankles, leaving him in just his underwear - a skimpy white sleeveless undershirt and a contrasting bright red pair of briefs complete with a cute soccer ball print. “Stop! Give that back!” he demanded, trying to twist his torso around on his brother’s lap to grab for his sweatshirt

again.

“Stop fussing.” Felix scolded him, balling up the sweatshirt and throwing it out of reach behind the bench. “We’re tryna help you out.”

“No you’re not! You stole my clothes.”

“You were too hot.” Felix explained. “We’re cooling you down.”

“He’s still kinda stinky.” Mason chuckled, dancing some ticklish fingers across Noah’s bare legs. The smaller boy kicked back weakly, but Mason soon got him under control - locking the little boy’s feet together.

“I guess he must have left a present in his underpants after all.” Felix teased, flicking the elastic on his brother’s soccer ball briefs.

“It’d explain why he’s so cranky.” Mason observed, steadily undoing the velcro on Noah’s shoes before pulling off his sneakers, socks, and sweatpants in turn. He prodded lightly on the bare soles of his feet, the resulting shivering sensation going up Noah’s leg and forcing a few involuntary giggles from his lips reminding him of the ever-increasing tingle in his bladder. “Coochie coochie coo!”

“Noah! You’re next!” Dad shouted suddenly from the field. Mason pulled him up quickly to a sitting position on his knee, then slid him off to stand barefoot and bewildered in the dugout. He stood paralyzed, not knowing what to do. “Noah!” Dad shouted again, much more impatiently this time.

“Looks like you're up, baby dork.” Felix laughed.

Frightened into action, Noah stumbled out into the sun - the lazy breeze biting at his bare thighs reminding him he was dressed only in his underwear. All anyone in the park had to do was look his way and they'd all get a good view of his humiliating hand-me-down soccer briefs! Dad looked at him askance. “What happened to your clothes?” he asked incredulously.

Noah went to open his mouth to tattle, but he couldn't form a single word before his eyes darted across at all the younger kids set out across the field all staring, sniggering and smirking him shaking like a leaf as he tottered up to the plate. His lips were shaking too, so nervous and embarrassed he was only able to produce a stuttering whiny whisper. “Felix...” he began, but soon descended into breathless confused whimpering, not knowing how to explain.

“Nevermind.” Dad cut him off, busying himself hurriedly setting up a tee at the correct height on the plate. “Go get your bat. We only have the field for so long.”

“I don't wanna...” he complained, feeling like he was about to cry.

“Don't make a scene again, buddy.” Dad tutted, not even looking at him. “Please?”

Noah choked back his emotions, realizing he was only making himself look more pathetic. It was fine. All he had to do was hit one stupid ball off a tee and it would be over! He

turned back to the dugout to retrieve his bat, but Felix had already grabbed it.

“What do you say, baby Noah?” he teased, holding it up high out of reach.

“Please.” Noah spat unhappily. He wasn’t in the mood.

“Please, what?”

“Please may I have my bat.”

Felix still wasn’t satisfied. “Who are you talking to?”

“Please may I have my bat, big brother!”

“Good boy.” he praised, ruffling his hair before he finally gave it over - smirking back at Mason for approval.

Meanwhile, Dad was still preoccupied arguing with the mean-looking pitcher on the mound.

“It’s not fair.” The kid was complaining. “I can strike him out easy. Let me pitch.”

“That’s not the point, Lucas.” Dad explained, exasperated.

“We’re just trying to have some fun. He’s only little.”

The argument made Noah’s tummy grumble uneasily. He didn’t need special treatment. He was three years older than all of these kids, not some dumb toddler. “Daddy...” he tried his magic word in a barely audible whisper, hoping no one else would hear him use the babyish title - but he was so quiet that Dad didn’t seem to hear him either. He tiptoed through the hot sand on his bare feet, tugging at his step-Dad’s shirt.

“Maybe he could-”

“Alright, buddy.” Dad interrupted, hoisting him up under the bare hairless armpits and setting him down in the box, helping him get stanced up. “Just stand right there. Good boy. Legs apart - that’s right. Hold up that bat, and keep your eyes on the ball.” he concluded his spiel, readjusting Noah’s grip a little before he placed the ball on the tee. “Whenever you’re ready bud.” he whispered.

Noah’s heart was pounding so hard it felt like it had risen up into his neck. He clenched his bare toes against the hot sand, staring blankly at the ball on the tee. It was right there in front of him, a baby could have hit it, but still the boy was terrified he was going to miss. He imagined himself swinging over the top and falling off balance face first into the sand - his dumb baby-dork-undie-clad butt sticking comically up on display for the whole team to laugh at.

“What’s taking so long?” The mean pitcher, Lucas, complained. “Just hit it dumb-dumb!”

The insult finally spurred Noah into action. He wound the aluminum bat all the way back, hardened his lips into a stern scowl, swung it forward as hard as he could...and brought it clanging directly against the metal tee. Noah dropped the bat - watching with gulping open-mouthed anxiety as the ball teetered back and forth atop the tee before finally dropping forward into the sand.

“Go, go, go!” Dad shouted, slapping the motionless boy urgently on his rear and pointing authoritatively over to first

base. He did as he was told, hobbling clumsily forward like a baby horse - eyes fixed on the sand in front of him. He was just a few paces from safety, smiling stupidly to himself as first base grew ever closer with each stumbling step, when he felt a strange circular object punch hard against his bum. He tripped, falling down unharmed on his knees in the sand, looking over his shoulder in bewilderment to see what had happened.

“Out!” Lucas bragged, holding up the ball triumphantly. Noah let out a defeated whine. How had he been so slow? In all the time it had taken him to stumble from the plate to first, it seemed Lucas had sprinted over from the mound, scooped up the ball from where it had fallen limply from the tee, and caught up to Noah to tag him directly on the butt!

“No fair!” Noah complained on instinct, his voice a high-pitched petulant whine.

“Yes fair, little man.” Lucas bragged. “Welcome to the big leagues.”

Noah huffed, pulling himself to his feet and storming back grumpily to the dugout. Though he hardly relished the idea of milling around the bases in his underwear, it was the principal of the matter. He hadn’t been wearing any shoes! And he needed the toilet! How could he be expected to run fast?

He comforted himself with the thought that he could at least put his clothes back on. Back at the bench however, they were nowhere to be found.

“Where’re my sweatpants?” he demanded from Mason and Felix.

“Your sweatpants?” Felix teased, exchanging a melodramatic mocking imitation of a confused look with his friend.

“Yes!” Noah reaffirmed. “And my sweatshirt, and my shoes, and my socks!”

“Sorry lil’ guy. We haven’t seen anything like that over here.” Mason insisted through a tell-tale giggle.

“Yes you have. You took them!”

“Naw.” Felix denied. “I’m pretty sure you’ve always been wearing just your undershirt and your stinky diaper.”

Noah was going to tell Dad, but he was once again busy mediating some dispute out on the field. Giving up, the boy simply collapsed down on the concrete floor of the dug out, staring up at the sky.

As the game dragged on, he had nothing to do but listen to Felix and Mason’s cruel jokes, think about how much he needed to pee, and sulk. By the time they were ready to change sides, the thirteen year old was so desperate for the potty that he had to waddle in baby steps out to the left field where he’d been assigned - hoping and praying they could wrack up three outs as quickly as possible. There was no such luck however, the game progressing at an agonizingly slow pace as the opposing team hit single after single.

Trying to distract himself, Noah fell down into a crouch and

started to pick ideally at the grass. Bringing up his big leather glove to his face, he entertained himself for a little while peeking at Felix on the mound through the gaps in the bridge. His brother was getting more and more frustrated as he pitched no ball after no ball to Lucas on the plate, the younger boy shouting and cursing and stamping his foot. Noah giggled. Felix liked to pretend that he was oh-so mature, but he wasn't past having a bit of toddler tantrum of his own. Why wouldn't Dad make him "start from scratch"? He smiled, imagining Felix being made to crawl around the living room wearing nothing but a big poofy diaper and a baby bonnet.

Daydreaming about his brother could only entertain Noah for so long however, an ominous tug in his bladder reminding him of more immediate concerns. Surely it couldn't be that much longer until potty time? He checked his potty watch. It was still a whole 20 minutes!

An almighty crack echoed through the field, Noah looking up and blinking blearily over towards the plate. Lucas was sprinting furiously to first base, the rest of Noah's team scrambling around urgently staring up high in the sky. There was a thudding sound, the ball landing just a yard or so away from Noah and rolling steadily towards him across the grass to come to a stop against his bare foot. The boy didn't react for a moment, still processing what had just happened.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!" Felix screamed at him from the mound. "THROW IT YOU MORON!"

Finally getting his wits about him, Noah went to pick it up - but it fumbled uselessly out of his hand and rolled a little further away. His bladder straining with pressure, he crawled after it on his hands and knees, finally managing to pick it up securely and lobbing it weakly under arm in the general direction of Felix. It only got about half the way however, and although Mason stationed on third base was quick to sprint to meet it, Lucas was already home and clear. A cacophony of celebratory hoots sounded out from the opposing dugout, while Felix was so furious he was practically frothing at the mouth.

“Noah!” Dad shouted at him from across the field, sounding a little frustrated. “You’re not meant to be daydreaming, buddy. Pay attention!”

The boy grumbled, a stab of desperation making him wiggle his butt and squeeze at his crotch to try and relieve the intolerable pressure. There was no way he was gonna last 20 minutes. He had to go now - game or no game. “I have to um... “ he started to shout back at Dad, jumping up and down. “I have to go potty!” he concluded, a nervous glance at Felix on the mound making him settle on the more babyish term. If his brother decided to give him a pinch and a punch now, he was sure to wet his pants!

Dad shook his head. “I’m not falling for that again, Noah. Be a good sport and wait for potty time. And I better not see you trying to sneak away!”

As the game resumed, Noah’s problem wasn’t going away. In

fact, it was reaching full crisis point, the thirteen year old reduced to an infantile potty dance wiggling all of his extremities in a humiliating last-ditch attempt to relieve the pressure. He had no choice. He had to go, no matter what Dad said!

Still in the outfield, he ran just a couple of yards forward, getting a good view of the public toilets across the way. The line was still endless! To make matters worse, he was in full view of Dad - the coach standing observantly atop the bleachers surveying the whole field. He was sure to come after him if he even took one step off the outfield! Noah let out a horrified moan. There was no way out. He wasn't going to make it. He was trapped.

The boy started to hyperventilate, panic setting in. There he was: thirteen years old, running around a little league pitch in his underwear, and about to pee his pants! Maybe Dad really would put him back in diapers. He was such a baby. He probably deserved it. Unless...

Noah made a split second decision. It was infantile, and it was humiliating, but so was peeing his pants! Perhaps if he was just quick about it no one would see. He turned his back to the rest of the players, fumbling looking around for the fly on his red soccer ball briefs before he remembered they didn't have one. He yanked them down instead, squeaking in dismay as the frayed elastic waistband dropped all the way down to his ankles to reveal his bare bottom. Stupid second-hand underwear! He tried to readjust to pull them up again, but it was too late. He was already peeing!

Another almighty crack thundering across the field made Noah flinch, a little pee splashing back onto his leg. He took a calming breath. It was alright. He was almost done. But then he heard a thud directly behind him. His whole body went cold as he felt the ball make contact with the underwear around his ankles, rolling steadily across the grass with just enough momentum to keep going through his legs and come to a stop in the middle of his stream. He was peeing on the ball!

Following the trajectory, Felix's eyes landed on his brother. Seeing that he hadn't caught it, his first instinct was rage, but that soon turned to a strange mixture of disgust, amusement, and baffled incredulity as he saw that the kid had his pants down! Was he...peeing? He abandoned the mound, running over to Noah as fast as he could and wrinkling his nose at the sight. "Oh my God. What are you doing?"

Hoping to secure the ball, Mason had run over too from third base, but came to a sudden stop when he saw it. "Gross!" he observed, "He peed on it!"

It took a few moments for everyone to work out what was happening, but then the game was well and truly abandoned - both teams breaking off what they were doing to giggle guffaw and gawk at Felix's babyish little brother going pee-pee slap bang in the middle of the left field.

Dad ran over too, his face hot red in anger and embarrassment. "Noah!" he shouted. "What on earth...how could you think...oh buddy..."

Although he had now finished peeing, the very public display was simply too much for him to handle. Noah started fully crying, tears and snot streaming down his face. He tried to reach down to pull up his underpants, but he stumbled and tripped backwards onto his bare bottom. Completely defeated; looking, sounding, and acting just like a real baby, there was nothing left to do but let out a long piercing wail. Dad intervened quickly, making gentle shushing noises as he hoisted up Noah's pants for him and pulled him up to his feet - embracing him in a hug.

"I'm sorry..." Noah tried to apologize through his streaming tears. "I was really desperate, and I was gonna pee my pants, and...and..."

"Punish him, Dad!" Felix interrupted with a cruel sneer, angrily kicking away the pee-drenched ball on the ground with a disgusted poke of his sneaker. "Give him a spanking or something."

"Nooo..." Noah sniffed, burying his face in his Dad's jersey. "Please...I'm sorry." He showed his step-Dad a set of big wet puppy dog eyes, trying his magic word. "Please don't daddy."

It worked like a charm. Dad glared at Felix, tutting at him dismissively. "That's enough, Felix." he scolded him. He rocked his littlest oldest son comfortingly, wiping back his sweat-drenched hair. "It's okay, Noah. I know you didn't mean to."

"But Dad!" Felix interrupted, outraged "He peed on the ball!"

“I said that’s enough.” Dad repeated. By now the whole team had gathered around, watching the ensuing scene in fascination. “I think we should call it there for this practice.” Dad told them all. “This little Tiger Cub needs to go home.”

Chapter 3

Level One Builder - Chapter 3

Capitolo davvero molto carino

Trovo un po' strano che la segretaria della scuola l'abbia fatto sedere sul tappeto invece che su una sedia od una panchina dove normalmente aspettano gli studenti mandato nel ufficio del preside.

Se la scuola comprendere le elementari e/o un asilo si spiegano i giocattoli che ha offerto a Noah cioè dubito che porti con se a lavoro suo nipote così spesso da dover tenere con se dei giocattoli per intrattenerlo e trovo quanto meno improbabile che li abbia portato apposta per Noah anzi mi sorprende che anche lei pur sapendo la sua vera età continui a trattarlo come un bambino quando è evidente che a Noah non piace. Cioè posso capirlo divertirsi a trattarlo come un bambino le prime 2 o 3 volte ma quanto ho capito sono un paio di settimane se non di mesi che si occupa di lui quindi perché continuare a trattarlo così se non per dispetto? (Soprattutto perché a quanto pare incontra regolarmente suo nipote quindi non ha bisogno d'usare Noah come sostituto del nipote).

Max è davvero prepotente per un bambino di 6 anni e Mason doveva sgridarlo già quando ha messo la sabbia nel pannolino di Noah obbligandolo a scusarsi per dargli il buon esempio (indipendentemente dal fatto che a Felix non importi del dispetto che a fatto a Noah) altrimenti Max rischia di

prendere delle cattive abitudini infatti ha fatto una grossa scenata davanti a tutti solo per essere stato battuto da quello che pensava essere un bambino più piccolo di lui.

Però non ho capito bene come funzionasse la caccia al tesoro con escavatori Ø>Ý

Per favore puoi rispiegarmelo?

In teoria il vasino che Noah ha utilizzato non andava svuotato dopo l'uso? Oppure ha un contenitore di raccolta pipì chiuso?

Sono quasi sorpreso che il padre di Noah non gli abbia messa una salopette da lavoro invece dei pantaloncini per questa gita a tema.

Sono anche sorpreso che Felix non abbia fatto nemmeno una foto a Noah che usava il vasino ma forse Noah non è riuscito a vederle prima che Max gli facesse un dispetto.

È strano anche il fatto il papà di Noah non abbia portato in bagno o controllato il pannolino prima della caccia al tesoro d'altronde se gli ha messo il pullup temendo si bagnasse per il lungo viaggio in macchina fino al parco perché non l'ha controllato dopo un ora che giocava? Avesse almeno chiesto a Felix se l'aveva portato di nuovo in bagno oppure no.

Un ultima domanda non ho capito bene il buono da 100 dollari da dove viene.

Era parte del primo premio?

Serviva a sostituire il gioco premio se danneggiato?

Era il premio per il secondo classificato requisito a Max per come si è comportato?

Era un extra che gli organizzatori gli hanno dato per scusarsi de l'umiliazione pubblica a cui è stato sottoposto a causa di Max e della loro disattenzione?

Chapter 4

Level One Cowboy - Chapter 4

Level One Cowboy

October

“Hey, doofus.” Felix sneered, trying to look as cool as it was possible to look in his dorky new school uniform polo shirt. Noah didn’t react, staring into his locker as if there was something extremely interesting inside.

Ever since his step brother had started sixth grade that September, the two of them had been at the same middle school. It was a nightmare. Even with Ms Mackie, school before had at least been semi-normal - but with Felix around Noah felt like he was always walking on eggshells. One wrong step, and he was certain the bigger boy would tell everyone about how Dad made him wear pull-ups to bed - or worse, show them the pictures from Dig Dig World.

“Hey, Baby Dork! I’m talking to you.” Felix insisted, going right ahead and grabbing his little big brother by the back belt loop of his grey school uniform shorts - threatening a pantsing.

Noah gave a frightened squeak. Despite what Dad described as Noah’s ‘potty problems’, he never wore pull-ups to school. The expensive private school’s administration could be very accommodating with pre-emptive accident check-ups or supervised tinkle time with the school nurse, but they were

quite clear that disposable underwear requiring any kind of changing during school hours belonged firmly in the preschool building. Still, that didn't mean Noah wanted the bright lime green Toy Story briefs he was wearing to be exposed in the middle of the school hallway.

"Let go!" he peeped in a tiny anxious voice, glancing around the hall. It was five minutes past the final bell already and it was Halloween, so nearly everyone had cleared out - but there were still a couple of sixth graders Noah didn't recognise milling around.

Felix tugged Noah's undies up just a little, making sure Woody's brown cowboy hat was just barely peeking out above his waistband, before he let go - satisfied he'd got his brother's attention. "Next time, listen to your big brother." he lectured.

"What do you want?"

"Dad says I've gotta walk you home." Felix informed him as he pulled out his smartphone. Sure enough, a GoHenry pop-up showed the chore Dad had issued along with the associated reward - 'Walk home with your little brother - \$5'.

Noah grunted. He hated that stupid app. Not only was Noah still reliant on whatever change Dad happened to have on hand for his own pocket money, but every single 'bonus' chore that Felix got through the app seemed to relate to his 'little brother'. If Dad was going to make them hang out, he at least wanted to get paid too.

“I’m meant to wait in Ms Mackie’s office.” Noah mumbled. In the circumstances, it was actually the preferable option.

“Dad says she had to leave early to pick up her grandson or something, so no play time with Ms Mackie.” Felix smirked. “Sorry!”

“Well...I don’t have anything to wear.” Noah pointed out, glancing up at the rain thwacking against the window above them. It had been raining heavily since noon, and he didn’t have any of his own gear. He’d been expecting Dad to pick him up, after all.

“Oh, that won’t be a problem.” Felix grinned.

Ten minutes later, Noah found himself dressed head to foot in Toy Story themed rain gear - complete with a hooded rain jacket featuring all the main characters that was so bright electric blue it hurt Noah’s eyes, a pair of rubber rain boots decorated with a cow-hide pattern and golden sheriff's badge to look like Woody’s cowboy boots, and a flimsy-looking plastic see-through umbrella themed after Buzz Lightyear.

The whole outfit was courtesy of the Kindergarten lost-and-found. According to Felix, the Kindergarten teacher Miss Gordon had been quite happy to part with it. Apparently, that particular set had been languishing in the store cupboard for the past three years - so there wasn’t much hope it would be recovered. And for Noah, it was a perfect fit.

“Shame she couldn’t lend us a diaper, too.” Felix had commented wryly as he had sat Noah down on the bench

outside the office, forcing his feet into the rubber boots with little regard for the smaller boy's comfort. "Oh, sorry - you wear super big boy pull-ups, don't you?"

"Kindergarteners don't wear diapers." Noah had contradicted, shooting his brother an unhappy sarcastic glare. "Or pull-ups."

"Oh, right." Felix nodded. "I guess you can always be the exception. You know, once the school finally figures out where you belong."

"Shuddup..." Noah muttered.

"What? It's true, isn't it? You're like...basically a toddler. Even Dad thinks so." Felix boasted, zipping up Noah's new waterproof jacket and grabbing him by the hand - tugging him aggressively out into the rain. "You better not piss yourself, by the way. There's no way I'm cleaning that up for five bucks."

Noah briefly considered what might happen if he actually did pee himself. It might make sure Felix was never assigned to walk him home again. On the other hand, however, the fact that Noah had never actually had an accident at school was about the only thing ensuring Dad's continued compliance with the school's potty training policy. Over the last few months, Noah's extra 'back-up' had become somewhat of a self-fulfilling prophecy - his occasional accidents only ever seeming to occur when he had some kind of absorbent padding between his legs. Having a deliberate 'oopsie' would certainly be tempting fate. The look on Felix's face would be priceless, but it wasn't worth getting shipped back to pre-

school in a pull-up.

After a few minutes, the two boys made a sudden turn into a parking lot. Noah narrowed his eyes suspiciously, seeing that they were approaching a convenience store.

“We’re meant to be going home.” Noah whined, trying unsuccessfully to extract his hand from Felix’s iron grip.

“Jeez, what’s the big hurry?” Felix tutted as he marched them through the automatic doors into the dry. “And don’t say ‘I hafta go poddy!’”

The bigger boy said the last part in a ridiculous high-pitched imitation of a toddler’s fussy whine, shooting his brother a cruel smirk. Noah pouted. He didn’t really sound like that, did he?

“No.” Noah replied confidently. At least, he didn’t think he had to go. He usually had at least ten or twenty minutes after he felt the urge. “But Daddy said-”

“Dad gave me another job to do.” Felix informed him, navigating his way through the aisles of the store. “See?” He took out his smartphone, pretending to read a notification. “Pick up diapers for your baby brother.”

“It does not say that!” Noah objected.

“Close enough.” Felix shrugged, lowering his phone to show his brother the real message. Rather than a standard chore on the app, it was an actual text from Dad this time.

“Just packing Noah’s bag for the sleep-over tonight and his

top dresser drawer is looking pretty empty. Can you swing by the Drug-Mart and pick him up some back-up? Money on your GoHenry.”

Noah felt a chill go down his spine as he noticed the racks of plastic packages stacked up around them, realising they were already standing in the middle of the baby aisle. He looked from side to side, suddenly terrified by the thought that someone from school might also be in the shop - but no-one seemed to be paying them any attention.

“Urgh...fine. L-let’s just grab them then.” Noah tried to say calmly, though he was stuttering over his words. If they needed to do this, it was best just to get it over with. Maybe they could even use the self check-out?

He got up onto his tippy toes, reaching for a package of Small to Medium Goodnites featuring an intimidating illustration of The Incredible Hulk on the front. They were the same kind Dad had ordered the last time he needed a top up. It had taken Noah nearly a whole summer of family days out to work his way through the previous package of Cars themed bright baby blue pull-ups, and even then Dad wouldn’t order the plain dark blue Large sized Goodnites that Noah had actually wanted, but the boy had felt a lot better wearing something marketed for four to seven year olds than for actual toddlers.

“Yeah, I don’t think so.” Felix interrupted, swiping the dark blue package out of the smaller boy’s grip.

“Huh?”

Felix smirked, simultaneously returning the Goodnites to a high shelf out of Noah's reach and picking out a similar dark blue plastic package. Rather than the relatively grown-up picture of the Hulk however, this one featured an adorable dozing three-year-old in a red shirt - his legs slightly bowed outwards to accommodate the unusually thick overnight diaper he was wearing. Noah's nostrils flared in annoyance as he read the chunky bubble letters - 'HUGGIES OVERNITES'.

"These seem more your speed." his brother teased.

"Put those back." Noah mumbled, grumpily crossing his arms and averting his eyes - not even wanting to look at the horribly infantile things. "I don't wear diapers."

Felix scoffed. "I'm not kidding!" he informed him. "Dad only sent me 15 bucks. Your fancy schmancy diapers are 20. I'm not paying five dollars of my own money just so you can pretend you're not wearing a diaper."

"They're different!" Noah insisted, raising his voice. He sputtered helplessly, struggling to articulate himself as his eyes darted back and forth across the promotional images. They just looked so thick! "They...I'm... You can't!"

"Alright, alright." Felix relented, making a calming downward gesture with his hands. "Don't have a tantrum." He put the diapers to one side, reaching for a purple package of pull-ups featuring Toy Story designs. "I guess you could maybe wear these. But it says they're just for big kids. Are you a big kid?"

“What?”

“Ya know. Are you a big kid?” Felix repeated, smiling a broad maniacal smirk as a plan seemed to come together in his head. “Like the song.”

Noah clenched up his fists, he had a feeling he already knew what Felix wanted. “Yeah.” he whispered.

“Prove it.” Felix prompted.

The smaller boy hesitated for just a few seconds before he took a sharp intake of breath. “I’m a big kid now…” he exhaled very quietly indeed, barely more than a whisper and with no more than a semblance of a tune.

“Huh?” Felix insisted, feigning confusion. “I didn’t hear you.”

“I’m a big kid now!” Noah sang as loud as he dared this time, attracting a few curious stares from nearby grown-ups. They smiled in adoration, seemingly convinced that the interaction between the two young brothers was entirely innocent. Noah wished that the ground would swallow him up right there and then, his cheeks turning as red as two rosy apples.

Even worse however, it was all for nothing. “Naw.” Felix dismissed “I’m pretty sure you’re a baby dork.” He summarily returned the pull-ups to their proper place, pointing an instructive finger at the blond toddler jumping energetically on the front. “This is a big kid. See? His pull-up isn’t all yellow and leaking pee-pee.”

Noah had no choice but to follow swiftly behind Felix as he

conveyed the Huggies diapers confidently towards the check-out. He had to walk as quickly as he could to keep up with the taller boy's normal pace, his hot red cheeks fuming with anger. "You said you wouldn't!" Noah objected. "If you didn't say, I wouldn't have sang the stupid song!"

"Hmm, I'm pretty sure I just told you to prove it." Felix pointed out, his tone infuriatingly calm. "But I guess that's impossible for you - since you're a baby dork, not a big kid."

"Dad's gonna be so mad at you!" Noah threatened baselessly "You're gonna get in so much trouble!"

"A diaper's a diaper." Felix countered. "And these are in budget and more absorbent. I'm being thrifty." They finally arrived at the check-out. There wasn't any line, so Felix simply plopped them down in front of the register. "Just these please - for my baby brother." he announced self-assuredly.

Noah felt the urge to say something more, but the moment had passed. He puffed up his red cheeks, pouting up at the ceiling.

"No pull-ups for the big kid?" the cashier, a motherly older-looking woman pried as she scanned the bulky package of Huggies.

Noah froze up in humiliation. Felix, similarly caught off guard by the consequences of his cruel game, could only make a dumb grunt. "Huh?"

"Your little brother." The cashier clarified. "He just sang the song so sweetly - I thought you might be starting potty

training.”

“Oh no, well...that was just. I mean, my Dad said to get diapers and...” Felix flubbed, clearly at a loss for words.

“I wear real underwear!” Noah found himself interjecting boldly, despite the mortifying implication. Felix shot him a dirty look.

The cashier looked confused, setting down the diapers and putting a hesitant finger on a button on the register. “Did... you wanna swap these out for something else?”

“No!” Felix exclaimed. He took a sharp breath, getting it together before he seamlessly spun a fresh mesh of mistruths. “He’s usually just in diapers for bedtime.” he informed the cashier. “Right, buddy?”

His brother’s new-found confidence seemed to drain any of the same from Noah. He could only offer a tiny affirmatory squeak.

The cashier turned over the package of diapers, the word ‘Overnites’ printed in big bubble letters confirming Felix’s story. “Ah! I see...”

“Or like...long car journeys and days out and stuff.” Felix continued, a self-assured smile slowly growing on his face. “He wears big kid undies to school, obviously. Just started Kindergarten.” He lied.

The cashier nodded. “Oh, you’re a really big boy then aren’t you?” she cooed. “I did think he was a little tall for...”

“He prefers Goodnites, or Pull-ups or whatever he can put on himself - but Dad says he’s a heavy wetter, so I’m meant to get diapers.” Felix concluded, shooting a self-congratulatory smirk Noah’s way as if warning not to dare contradict him any further. The smaller boy got the message, averting his eyes to stare at the ground.

“Well, these are definitely the most heavy-duty ones we have.” The cashier agreed, going ahead and bagging up the package for them as Felix pressed his card against the machine. It gave a loud beep, confirming the purchase. “You boys have a good Halloween!”

“Thanks! You too!” Felix said hurriedly, quickly ushering Noah out of the building and back out into the rain.

Noah was still fuming as he plodded along the path that ran through the local park, heavily splashing his rain boots into the puddles - but now it seemed, so was Felix. As soon as they were out of sight of the store, he aggressively thumped him in the shoulder.

“Ow!” Noah complained, making a pitiful puppy dog expression.

“Who said you could talk, huh?” Felix growled. The look on Noah’s face only seemed to make him more angry. His face contorted in anger and he balled up his fists again, looking as if he was preparing to sock the smaller boy directly in the stomach. He stopped himself however, taking a step back and regarding him with disgust.

It hadn't even hurt that much, but for some reason Noah felt like he was on the verge of tears. "I'm telling Daddy."

Felix rolled his eyes. "No, you're not."

"I am!"

"You're not." Felix growled, putting an end to the conversation. There were a few moments where neither of them said anything, both boys listening silently to the sound of the rain pitter-pattering against their water proof jackets. Eventually however, Felix seemed to come to some kind of decision. He gave a heavy sigh. "Alright, sit on the grass." he instructed.

Noah twisted around, looking at the sodden lawn beside the path. "But it's muddy."

"That's the point!" Felix hissed. He snatched Noah's umbrella out of his grip, giving him a forceful shove "Sit down!"

Noah's rain boots slipped on the wet paving slab and he teetered off balance, momentarily wobbling back and forth before he plopped down butt-first on the mucky muddy perimeter of the lawn. Felix immediately pressed a dirty soccer boot into the crotch of his shorts, keeping him from getting up.

The little teen let out a high-pitched moan of displeasure, sounding like a deflating squeaky toy. "It's grooooooss." he whined.

Felix didn't let up. "Rub your butt in it." he demanded. When Noah didn't obey straight away, he pressed his boot more forcefully into his crotch - as if it threatening to swab him back and forth himself like a mop across a filthy floor. Noah winced in pain at the feeling of the soccer studs pinching into his thighs, reluctantly scooching his backside up and down in the mud. Eventually, Felix seemed satisfied. He removed his boot, allowing his brother to scramble back to his feet.

The boy twisted around, trying to get a look at the huge brown stain now present on the back of his shorts. "Why'd you make me do that?" he complained.

"Cause you're a toddler." Felix informed him in a disgusted tone. "A shorts-staining pants-pooing two-year-old toddler. So get used to it."

The boy blushed. Of course it wasn't a real accident, but it certainly looked like one. "I'm telling Daddy..." he whispered again, almost reflexively.

"If you say that one more time, we won't be going home until you've pooped yourself for real." Felix snapped. "And I'll take a video. And it'll be on YouTube tonight. And everything else too. So shut it."

Noah usually didn't take that kind of threat too seriously, but Felix wasn't being his usual smirking sarcastic self. He actually seemed really angry. It seemed he didn't like being shown up. Noah gave a tiny nod.

"We're telling Dad you were playing Cowboys in the rain and

you slipped, got it?”

He gave another miniscule nod of agreement. It wasn't like he had a better story - or at least one that didn't end with his soggy pull-up clad butt being the talk of the middle school hallway.

Dad gave an adoring tut as Noah stepped in from the front porch, already setting about unzipping his raincoat and helping him kick off his boots as he assessed the damage on the shorts.

Of course, Dad had accepted Felix's lie without question - assuming the conspicuous brown stain was the result of nothing more than a rambunctious little boy's excitement for the upcoming Cowboy-themed sleepover at the town museum. Dad went right ahead and unzipped Noah's shorts for him, discarding the soiled garment on a heap on the mat before he pulled him into an affectionate cuddle.

“You're such a mucky puppy!” he teased, getting a big whiff of his littler son's particularly pungent body odour as he rolled up his school polo up over his tummy and above his chest, raising his bare armpits to jettison that too. “Yuck! And a stinky one too.” Dad playfully tickled Noah's bare belly, making the boy give an energetic yip hardly consonant to his current mood. “I think it's bath time for yucky mucky puppies.”

Felix let out an amused snort, his mood clearly improved by his recent show of dominance.

“Can’t I have a shower instead?” Noah pleaded.

“Afraid not, bud. We’re gonna be out of the house all night, so we gotta make sure we take care of all the nooks and crannies.” Noah shot his brother a foul look, but he knew better than to argue with his step-Dad. He scampered quickly out of the room and up the stairs. “And sit on the potty too!” Dad shouted up from below.

Arriving in Dad’s ensuite where the bath was, Noah twisted open the stiff faucet before squeezing in a hefty dollop of gel from the Johnson’s baby bubble bath bottle. The first time Dad had given him a bath - the same tearful vulnerable afternoon he’d peed himself at Dig Dig World - Noah had refused to use any bubble bath at all, on account of the fact that it was clearly labelled for babies. That had been a mistake. Without any obfuscating bubbles, the water had been as clear as a beach in the Bahamas. After that, he could hardly say Dad was lying when he claimed to have “seen everything before”, and occasional Dad-assisted bath nights became just another part of Noah’s ever increasingly infantile routine.

The boy frowned as he took notice of himself standing in front of Dad’s full length mirror, dressed only in his lime green toy story briefs. How was it that he didn’t yet have a speck of hair on his whole body? He was thirteen! Wasn’t he meant to be like....developing by now? Everyone was constantly reminding him that he smelt like a teenager at least - hardly a day went by without Felix making some comment about his ‘baby stink’ - but Noah was starting to worry that

that was the only sign of adolescence that he was ever going to show. Maybe it wasn't puberty after all. Maybe he was just a dumb stinky toddler, just like Felix said.

The boy flexed and made a body builder pose, but that only made him look more like a little kid playing pretend. He glanced at the bright turquoise pack of Pampers baby wipes Dad had set out on the bathroom counter, remembering something stupid Felix had told him the other day.

“You don't have any hair down there 'cause Dad's always wiping you with those things.” he'd informed him, speaking with the same easy confidence he'd employed in the convenience store as the two of them got ready for bed. The two brothers still had to share a room, but Dad said that would be a thing of the past thanks to Mom's new job. Noah could hardly wait. “They've got like...special chemicals. For babies. Meant to make their skin all soft and smooth, but just works just the same on you.”

It was such a dumb thing to say, and of course Felix had just made it up to mess with him - but the more Noah stared at his smooth, soft, baby-wipeable body, the more he started to worry. Dad was all over him with those things. After every meal, he'd always wipe his face all-over. Sometimes, if he was particularly sweaty after running around in the garden or at the park, he'd have to take off his shirt and let Dad wipe down everywhere from under his armpits to inside his belly-button. And of course, whenever he wound up peeing a pull-up...

Noah narrowed his eyebrows with anxiety, turning his attention instead to his Dad's shaving stuff on the sink. Now that he thought about it, Dad was the opposite of smooth and soft. He was bristly all over - his face the texture of an old-boot even when clean-shaven. Acting without thinking, Noah grabbed a can of shaving cream and cautiously pressed down on the button. A much larger glob than he expected came shooting out of the can, making a foamy mess all over Noah's hands and tummy and dripping down onto the sink. Noah cursed under his breath, but kept going. He ran the hot water tap, leaving a smear of foam where his hand had been. Then, taking a fistful of the mess he haphazardly applied a thick layer to his face and reached for the gleaming razor.

"Wow, buddy!" Dad's voice interrupted, swooping in and easily plucking the dangerous implement from Noah's hand. "That's not for little boys."

"I'm not little." Noah whined, even as Dad heaved him up onto his hip and shimmied off his undies - plopping him naked in the bubble bath.

"I know you want to be just like Daddy." Dad smiled, shutting off the bath water and getting right down to business soaking a wash-cloth. "But that's a real razor. It can hurt you."

"I was gonna be careful..." Noah harrumphed. He crossed his legs together bashfully under the bubbles, annoyed at how casually Dad had stripped him down.

"I have just the thing." Dad told him, turning around and looking through the big cupboard under the sink where he

kept the bath toys. He soon produced a bright red and blue hunk of moulded plastic designed to look just like a regular safety razor - though of course, without the blade. "Felix used to love this thing. Why don't you see if you can shave off all that foam while I get you squeaky clean?"

Noah let out an unhappy groan, but did as he was told - tracing the toy across his chin as Dad got to work. At least this way he could try to ignore the ticklish feeling of the wash-cloth scouring and scrubbing against each and every part of him. As Dad guided it around under his arm-pits and down to his tummy, Noah's involuntary snorting and squirming left him feeling as if he'd been freshly stripped of any hint of adolescence in much the same way as with the baby-wipes, leaving him no more than a silly giggly two-year-old.

A plastic cup of warm soapy water poured over his head soon put an end to Noah's play time, leaving him with his thoughts. As Dad lathered up his hair with shampoo and rinsed it away again, tenderly untangling some mud that had somehow got caked in his hair earlier, he thought briefly of tattling. Maybe it wouldn't be as bad as Felix said? Maybe Dad would take away his phone, and his brother would never get the chance to post all those videos and pictures of him? But no. It was too risky. For everything that had happened at home, school was the one place that people still treated him as something approaching a teenager - but he knew that would all change if the other kids knew how often he ended up in pull-ups.

For just a moment, the boy wished he really was only two. At least then no one could make fun of him for all this stuff, and he could tattle all he liked. It's not like anything would really change that much. Felix was right. Dad really did treat him like a toddler.

“Alright bud, stand up. We're almost done.”

Thinking he might finally be able to escape, Noah did as he was told - but no sooner had he clambered shyly to his feet than Dad clamped a strong arm around his torso, clenching him immobile in place as started to wipe down his butt.

“Daddy-!” Noah exclaimed in shock, shuddering like a restrained baby elephant, but Dad only held him tighter - making sure he didn't trip on the slippery suds.

“Stand still, buddy.” Dad warned, continuing on unabated. “You really are a mucky pup.” he teased with a disapproving tut. “I think we're gonna have to work on wiping back here after you go potty. No wonder you've still got stains in your undies.”

Noah was at a loss for words. Going as loose as a ragdoll, it was easy for Dad to scoop him up again and wrap him from head to toe in a big white fluffy towel - carrying the oversized toddler into the adjoining bedroom like a floppy, awkward, long-limbed dalmatian puppy.

When Dad set him down on the bed again, lying him down flat with his towel spread out behind like a baby ready for a change, the sight of the neat bundle folded up beside him

snapped Noah back to reality. Just as expected, Dad had already set out his costume - but nestled neatly on top in a chillingly nonchalant fashion was one of the thick, cushiony, crisp diapers Felix had bought earlier that afternoon. The specially absorbent, overnight, heavy-wetter diapers. The tape up diapers.

“No!” Noah protested with uncharacteristic boldness, trying to sit up - but Dad just pushed him back flat again. “I can’t wear a diaper!”

“I know it’s not ideal, buddy. But these are the ones we have - and it’s not so different from pull-ups.”

Noah crossed his arms petulantly. “Felix bought the wrong ones on purpose. You should make him wear them.”

Dad rolled his eyes at the absurd suggestion. “I’m sure that’s not true. Besides, we’re going to be away from home until tomorrow morning. This might be safer in the end.”

“But what if I have to go potty?”

“I don’t want you to worry about that.”

“But everyone will see!”

“It’s just like your pull-ups, buddy. I promise.” Dad reassured, unfolding the crinkly thing. The heft of it was obvious - each side as thick as Dad’s palm. “No one will know unless you want to tell them.”

Noah let out a grumble. “They will...”

“Did anybody know on the 4th of July? Or on Labour Day?”
Dad prompted.

“I dunno...”

“Well nobody said anything, did they?” He continued “Did anybody know at Trunk or Treat last week?”

Noah hesitated, recalling another rainy day wandering around the Elementary school parking lot. It was kinda true. Under all the water-proof layers and the dumb dungarees Dad had made him wear, he’d almost forgotten he was in pull-ups himself.

“We even had a little oopsie then, and nobody was any the wiser.” Dad concluded. “Even Felix.”

Noah blushed at the reminder. All those layers had come with other problems, too. Luckily, Dad had been discreet. “I guess...but this is different!”

It didn’t really matter what Noah thought, however. Dad had already convinced himself, and that was all that mattered. “Hmmm, let me see if I can remember how to do this...” He considered, inspecting the dangling papery wings of the diaper.

“Hurry up!” Noah demanded, kicking his legs impatiently. Now that it was clear that resistance was futile, he would much rather than it was over and done with than have to lie around naked on Dad’s make-shift changing mat like a gurgling empty-headed toddler. He grabbed the hem of the towel he was laying on, trying to gather up enough material

to give himself some modesty.

Dad easily brushed his hand aside, wanting a clear view to work. “Don’t get all whiny on me now.” he tutted, finally seeming to remember what he was doing. He took both of Noah’s ankles in one ginormous calloused hand and cantilevered his bare butt into the air - sliding the diaper underneath. “Right...” he hummed, again halting to an excruciatingly slow pace as he tried to figure out what was next.

“Daaaaddddd!” Noah complained. By now, the boy was no stranger to the crinkly disposable material under his butt - but he could already tell this particular variety was much thicker and much more absorbent than he was used to. He fidgeted and flopped around onto his side, hating how exposed he felt, but with Dad holding him in place like a fish on a hook he only succeeded in making a series of conspicuous crinkling noises.

“I guess I should have known you’d be a wriggler. Your brother was the same way.” Dad chuckled, finally folding up the front part of the diaper and flattening out the wings so that Noah was covered. The boy relaxed a little after that, though his cheeks were still hot red with humiliation. “And done.” Dad concluded, securely affixing each tape tight on the Winnie the Pooh-themed landing zone. “Don’t you feel better now you’ve got some back-up on your tush?”

“No.” Noah spat back stubbornly, crossing his arms. He stretched out his legs as Dad let go, making the diaper

crinkle. The babyish protection felt much much thicker than his regular Goodnites - like he was wearing a whole pillow between his legs.

Dad didn't seem to require Noah's approval. In short order, he got him dressed in the rest of his now familiar Cowboy costume - buttoning up a bright blue western fringed shirt, plopping a cowboy hat on his still slightly damp golden curls, and even tying a red neckerchief around his neck. In his current state, Noah couldn't have felt more babyish if Dad had opted for an actual baby bib.

"What do you think buddy?" Dad offered, leaving Noah pantsless and with his diaper on display as he held up two potential options for his bottom half. "Dangerous Dungarees again? Or Cool Cowboy jeans?"

"Jeans." Noah decided quickly, eagerly pointing to the reasonably mature soft faux-denim pants, complete with a thick grey elastic waistband. Jeans were certainly more grown-up than dungarees. Last time, he'd looked more like a preschooler waddling around a petting zoo than a rough tough cowboy.

"Okie-dokie." Dad agreed, pushing Noah's legs into the air again to shimmy him into the pants. The finishing touches were a faded brown jacket complete with a golden sheriff's star and a pair of matching cowboy chaps with the crotch cut out - both of the felt garments ornamented with thematic leather tassels. He helped Noah to his feet, patting him twice encouragingly on his butt as he took his first hesitant steps.

The thickness of the diaper was even more noticeable as Noah toddled in circles around Dad's bedroom, as if he were testing a new pair of shoes. With each cringing step, the loud whoosh and rustle of the material and the poofy cushioning pushing his thighs apart reminded him that he was back in proper baby diapers, with a bow legged baby waddle to match. "I can't even walk properly!" Noah complained.

"Don't be silly - you can barely notice." Dad beamed, energetically scooping the boy up and heaving him up on his hip to spare him any further misery. He lifted up the boy's colourful shirt, prodding a playful finger just above where the diaper's waistband tickled at his belly button. "And if anyone says anything, you can just tell them it's your special cowboy walk."

Noah could only puff out his red cheeks. He wondered if it was possible to spend the whole night sitting on Dad's hip. Perhaps that way no one would even work out he was in a diaper.

The plan had actually worked - at least for a little while. Clinging to his Dad like a particularly stubborn barnacle, Noah had avoided taking even one crinkle-butt-swaying step for a good 30 minutes after their arrival at the town museum. Of course, the site of the bashful big kid being ferried around on his Daddy's hip had drawn some of its own ridicule - and not just from Felix. The eleven-year-old, dressed for the occasion in tastefully modest cowboy hat and bolo tie combo, had soon lost interest in pricking at his baby big brother. He slunk away to watch the "Spooky Movie" screening in the

media room with Mason before he could work out there was an extra inch of padding between Noah's thighs - at least, as far as the boy could tell.

Abdicating control of his legs to Dad had some other downsides though. Not least was Dad going right ahead and carrying him to the Old West Exhibit, a prominent sign informing them that this was the meeting spot for 'Overnight Camping Cowpokes Aged Four to Seven'. Noah could only wriggle helplessly as he watched Dad fill out the form to sign him in, an ambiguous smudge making up the last digit of his year of birth.

The meddling six-year-olds that soon began to circle were curious about the same thing.

"How old is he?" One with a yellow neckerchief inquired.

"Why are you holding him like a baby?" Another demanded.

Dad patted Noah's butt affectionately, hiking him up higher onto his hip with some effort. "Noah's just feeling a little shy," he explained. "You ready to get down now, buddy?"

Noah fervently shook his head, glad Dad hadn't answered the first question. He glanced around the room, spying the museum staff in their distinctive purple polo shirts. What would Dad even say if he had to give a precise answer? Five? Four? Younger? There was no doubt Dad had long since demoted him to little boy-hood, but his exact place in the hierarchy still remained an ever-changing mystery.

Eventually, one of the purple-shirted organisers blew a

whistle - cutting through the babbling gaggle of little cowboys. The lady explained that they would soon be starting a scavenger hunt, and that the kids were to be given full-reign of the Old West exhibits to search for special treasures hidden around the museum. She started to read out the first clue, apparently aware that some of the kids in this age bracket would probably struggle with a written worksheet, but Noah didn't really pay attention. It's not like he could search for much from his Dad's hip anyway.

"Alright, bud - down you come." Dad suddenly told him, giving barely a second's warning before he lowered him down onto his feet.

"Daddy, no!" Noah hissed, bending his legs awkwardly. He was too frightened to take a step. He tried to cling on to Dad's leg for support, but the big man had already moved away.

"I can't carry you around all night." Dad informed him. "My back's hurting. Besides, you have your games to play and I need to grab something from the car."

"But!" Noah interjected, not really sure what possible excuse he could have for Dad to pick him up again. A familiar tingle at the bottom of his tummy gave him an out. He bent his legs some more and squeezed at the padding over his crotch, making a sad puppy dog face. "You gotta take me to the potty..."

Dad rolled his eyes, momentarily coming within Noah's reach again to muss up his hair. Immediately, Noah wrapped

his arms around Dad's waist - begging to be picked up again. "How bad you gotta go?" Dad inquired.

"Bad." Noah lied.

"I'm not sure I know where the bathrooms are around here..." Dad said hesitantly, looking around. He gave a sigh. "If it's really that bad, I don't mind if you use your diaper." The word made Noah scrunch up his face. "Remember what that pamphlet the nurse gave you said? You're not supposed to hold it till it hurts."

Noah shot his Dad a sour glare, a mix of betrayal and scandalised horror. "I'm not a baby."

"I know you're not, buddy." Dad reassured, disentangling himself from Noah's hug and stepping towards the door. "I'll be right back. Just let me know then if you're... uncomfortable."

With Dad gone, Noah remained frozen to the spot as the other kids gathered into groups for the scavenger hunt. His eyes darted all around the room, hyper focused on how out of place he must have looked. Everyone was looking at him! Of course they were - he was standing alone in the middle of the room, eyes wide and squatting like a toddler filling their pants. It was no use. He decided he had to take a step, diaper or no diaper. If nothing else, he had to find a bathroom.

As he felt the papery bulk rub against his inner leg, taking his first rustling step - a loud shout cut through the echoey hall. Noah cringed. He'd been found out!

“Oh, we don’t need him.” Max, dressed in a cool jean jacket and blue neckerchief, informed his fellow first graders. He had a self-assured smirk that looked all too much like the one Felix liked to wear. His loud voice cut through the chatter, naturally taking charge of a small group of wannabe cool cowboys. “He’s like...a total baby!”

Noah stopped moving again, shooting the annoying little kid a withering glare. He’d mostly managed to avoid the twerp after Dig Dig World - but it was hard to stay completely away from Mason’s little brother. At any Tiger’s event over the summer, the ‘little siblings’ in attendance had naturally had some contact. It helped that Dad knew they didn’t get on, though. If it wasn’t for him, Max would have made sure half the town saw his pull-ups on the jumbotron.

“One time, when we were watching my brother’s baseball game, a fly ball got kinda close to him and he was so scared that he cried!”

“It did so hit me!” Noah contradicted angrily, stamping his feet and making his diaper rustle. It was true. He’d got a little ketchup on his shirt, so Dad had made him take it off - but when a ball hit him in the shoulder it had left a bruise as big as his fist.

“And! And! And!” Max continued excitedly. “He’s not allowed in the tee-ball team anymore, ‘cause one time he went to practice, and diapers aren’t allowed at tee-ball, so he peed on the ball!”

Noah was getting red in the face he was so frustrated. It

wasn't a tee-ball practice! And he hadn't been banned from the team! And Max hadn't even been there!

“Stop LYING!” Noah screamed at the top of his lungs.

Max snorted. “See?” he smirked, arrogantly crossing his arms. “Total baby.”

The six-year-olds giggled in agreement, sauntering away with Max. As he passed the spot where the organiser had instructed everyone to set up their things for the night, the ring-leader took off his cowboy hat and coolly flung it like a frisbee to land at the foot of his sleeping bag.

Slowly, the room emptied out as the kids followed the organiser's directions towards the first clue. Still seething, Noah looked curiously towards Max's things - eyeing in particular his unzipped backpack. The diapered tyke shuffled hesitantly towards it, before crouching down to get a better look. Sure enough, the neatly folded cotton package tightly tucked into one of the internal pockets was a pair of boxer shorts. As if drawn by the allure of a rare mythical artefact, the boy couldn't help but pluck them out of their place - unfolding them to get a better look.

Red and navy blue, they were printed all-over with a soccer ball design, the words “EPIC SKILLZ” printed prominently on the waistband in a slanted sporty font. Noah grimaced. Despite being less than half his age, Max's underwear was about three rungs up on the maturity scale from any of the infantile hand-me-downs lingering in Noah's own undies drawer. And of course, they were in a whole different

universe to the crinkly diaper taped together under his jeans. The label on the inside waistband stated that they were Size 6 - a perfect fit. That sealed the deal.

The boy felt a tickling funny feeling in his tummy as he stuffed the boxers into his jeans pocket, briefly considering that stealing underwear from a six-year-old was hardly very moral - nor very mature. He soon pushed that feeling away, however. It didn't matter. Max was a bully, and Noah needed something to wear that wasn't designed to contain a toddler's 'oopsies'. As the boy rushed into a darkened neighbouring exhibit in search of somewhere to change, having no regard to his diaper noisily and obviously whooshing back and forth as he ran, he chuckled to himself as he imagined himself planting his soon-to-be-discarded 'back-up' in Max's back-pack - the humiliating things framing the obnoxious six-year-old 'cool kid' as just another dumb diaper baby.

In his excitement, Noah soon found himself well beyond the Old West Exhibit. The rooms he was walking through now had no lights on at all, and clearly weren't intended for exploration by attendees of the Halloween sleep-over. He slowed down as he came to a high walkway above the dinosaurs, trying to figure out exactly where he was and how he could get to a bathroom. He groaned, the continuous crinkling he produced with each tiny movement nagging at him like nails on a chalkboard. He decided to just go ahead and change. It wasn't like anyone was here. Besides, he wasn't anywhere near as desperate as he'd pretended to Dad. He could hold it. He would find a bathroom later.

Noah first stripped off his tasselled Cowboy chaps, and then set about unbuttoning his jeans. He retrieved the boxers from the pocket, then hung both over the top of the glass barrier which guarded the walk-way from the long drop below. The boy grimaced, putting his hands on his hips as he stared down at the thick layer of disposable material between his legs. He couldn't believe he'd been wearing a baby diaper for the whole night.

The kid was about to rip away the tabs, when a powerful force seized his arms - pinning them behind his back like a detained criminal.

“Stop right there, baby burglar!” he heard Max declare triumphantly, though he couldn't see him.

“Owww!” Noah cried out in pain, trying in vain to wiggle free - but that only made it hurt more. He gasped, a small hand hitting him firmly in the gut and causing another stabbing pain before that was replaced with a strangely soothing sensation of release. He was peeing. There was a hiss, and a little warm spot, and then a growing faint yellowing discoloration started to spread across the pristine white padding. The boy let out a defeated moan. He was peeing his diaper.

Max soon noticed what had happened. “Gross!” he complained, immediately letting go of Noah's arms and pushing him away in disgust. Even though his bladder was still mid-release, Noah was quick to act - grabbing his chaps from the bannister. Unfortunately, Max was just as quick,

simultaneously securing the jeans.

“GIVE ME MY PANTS BACK!” Noah yelled. At this point, just the look on Max’s face was enough to send the little teen into full toddler tantrum mode.

“No!” Max shouted, matching his energy. “You stole my underwear!” The kid wrinkled his nose at the thought. “You were probably gonna pee all over them.”

“GIVE THEM BACK!” Noah kept on yelling, making a lunge for the jeans - but he was distracted by the sensation of a now soggy warm mass between his thighs. To its credit, the diaper was holding up. Despite seeming to have expanded even further to an almost impossible bulk, it wasn’t sagging at all.

Unburdened by such considerations, Max could move quicker, skipping back and holding the jeans tantalisingly out of reach. “Aww, look at the widdle baby tryna walk.” he mocked. “Is this what you want?”

“Yes!”

“Go get it then.” Max declared, flinging them over the walkway.

“No!” Noah cried out in dismay, watching the jeans flutter down the large open space only to snag atop the spiked horn of a triceratops skeleton.

Max giggled triumphantly at the result. He retrieved his underpants from the place on the floor where Noah had

dropped them, “I don’t think you’re ready for these.” he teased, sticking out his tongue at the boy before rushing off back into the darkened museum.

Some time later, Noah’s diaper was starting to get cold. Thinking it better than wearing nothing at all on his bottom half, he’d slipped his cowboy chaps back on - but of course they did nothing to hide the obviously soiled diaper framed perfectly in the cut out section of the brown felt garment.

Deciding there was absolutely no way he could return to the sleeper in his current state, Noah was wandering aimlessly through the different exhibits. It was kinda spooky, only the dim yellow light of the tall glass cabinets illuminating dusty civil war uniforms and faded native american plumages in the otherwise pitch-black hall, but Noah tried to remain calm. He would find something to wear at some point - perhaps something left over at the coat check, or even a little kids dress up station - and then he could finally rip off his dumb soggy diaper.

“Oh. My. God.” A voice cut ominously through the darkness as he turned into the Ancient Egypt exhibit. Noah stiffened up, the hairs on the back of his neck standing up to attention as a figure emerged from behind one of the glass cabinets. The boy whimpered. Was it a mummy? Or a skeleton? Or a ghost? He let out the tiniest extra dribble of pee, warming up the cold damp material a little.

But no - it was only Felix. “Was that Dad’s idea?” he sneered, wrinkling his nose in disgust. “Or did you have to beg him to

put you in a diapee?”

“Leave me alone...” Noah mumbled. He shyly crossed his legs, doing nothing to hide the diaper. Despite his multiple accidents, it was still holding up fairly well - the robust material probably holding capacity for another full wetting, despite the discoloration. That was the tiniest of silver linings. If he'd been wearing a pull-up, it would have been long since expired, and he'd have nothing to cover himself at all.

“Aww, you look just like the baby on the package!” Felix continued to narrate. He slunk around behind him, giving Noah's padded butt a firm swat.

Noah swung around to face him again, balling up his fists threatening at his side. “What are you even doing here?” he grumbled. “I thought you were watching the movie.”

“I was, but Dad said you'd gone missing.” Felix informed him, briefly flashing his phone. “Why'd you sneak off? Too shy to pee yourself in public?”

“I was looking for a bathroom.” Noah grumbled. It wasn't the whole truth, but he was hardly going to tell Felix about Max's underwear.

That answer really made Felix laugh. “Bad luck.” he smirked, aggressively snatching on to Noah's hand and starting to frogmarch him swiftly through the exhibits.”Honestly, I don't know why you even try. Diapers suit you.”

Bursting through the doors to the Old West exhibit, Felix had

absolutely no regard for Noah's modesty. The cowboy campers had finished their games for the evening, and were all gathered cross-legged in front of one of the purple-shirted organisers in the middle of giving a talk.

"I found him!" Felix shouted out, practically dragging the smaller boy to the front of the gathered group before he finally let go of his hand. "Oh, and I think he's wet."

Dad, who had been sitting in a chair off to the side, got to his feet at once - letting Noah run desperately towards him and bury his face in his tummy. The group of little cowboys and cowgirls soon lost interest in the organiser's boring monotone, their attention instead turning to Noah's babyish attire. There was a cacophony of giggles, the words 'baby', 'diaper' and 'accident' pricking out from the chaotic din like needles in Noah's ears. He hugged his Dad as tight as he could, trying not to cry.

"Oh, Buddy. What happened?" Dad questioned, comfortingly rubbing his back. "Where did your pants get to, hmm?"

Noah just shook his head. There was no way he was telling Dad about that, either. He gathered the courage to peek out from behind Dad's shirt for just a second, momentarily spotting Max smirking at him from amongst the crowd. "Lost 'em..." he muttered vaguely.

"Alright, everybody!" The organiser interrupted, trying to gain control again. "I'm sure we're all very happy that Noah found his way back, but if we just get back to the story..."

The crowd soon hushed, and much to Noah's relief so did Dad - not bothering to ask any more humiliating questions. He escorted Noah out of view to the back of the crowd, sitting down cross-legged on the floor with the boy in his lap. Felix sat beside his Dad on the floor, seemingly much more interested in his baby brother's diapered antics than anything that could be happening on the silver screen in the next room.

Cuddling Noah tightly, Dad gently patted the front of his diaper. Meanwhile, the exhausted little teen let his droopy eye-lids close, letting the organiser's dull droning voice fade into the background as he listened to the comforting sound of his Dad's heart beat. He snuggled against his soft cotton shirt and smelled his familiar smell, managing to forget all about Felix, and Max, and the other mean kids.

He soon entered a dulcet dream world, fleeting visions of a brave adult version of himself charging across open plains on a mighty stallion intermingling with alternate scenes of a two-year-old Noah giggling and gurgling mindlessly as he saw-sawed excitedly back and forth on a rocking horse - jumping up and down atop his soggy saturated diaper. The second dream took over, pushing the first vision away. But Noah wasn't upset at all by the fantastical scene. In fact, he felt strangely happy - just like the baby-him in the dream. He let out a high-pitched purring snore, content just to be warm and safe and to have a Daddy who loved him.

A long time later, Noah awoke with a start. He was tucked up under a blanket on the floor, still dressed in the same half-complete costume he'd fallen asleep in. The room was

completely dark now, a sea of sleeping bags set out under the vast palatial museum dome.

“...he’s had a hard year, really.” Dad’s voice drifted through the air. He was maybe a few feet away, speaking in a serious tone to some unknown person. “What with his Mommy getting a new job halfway across the world, and the accidents, and well...the two of them don’t always get on as nice as I’d like...I don’t want to stress him out any more than I need to. I think it’s okay just to let him be little for a while, you know?”

“Stay at the tutorial level for a bit?” another voice joked.

“Exactly” Dad chuckled, then paused. “Well, at least he seems happy. Or happier than he was before.”

“That’s the most important thing.”

Noah furrowed his brow in confusion, trying to make sense of it all - but his brain was still stuck in a foggy, happy, toddler-dream haze. “Daddy?” he mumbled.

There was a clatter as Dad got up from his chair, putting a concerned hand on the boy’s head. “Everything okay, buddy?” he whispered.

The boy gave a vague moan, shifting his legs. His diaper crinkled, and he could feel that it was very wet now - but all that could wait.

“Uh-huh...” he confirmed, turning over and fluttering his eyes shut again. He felt a rough calloused hand gently stroke his hair, and he fell effortlessly back into dream world again -

sleeping like a baby.