

Right on Cue

by MadeOfSpaces

Art always thought he was pretty tough, until a fight behind the bike shed with new kid Asher doesn't go quite as he'd planned. Six weeks later, Asher's back - and strangely persuasive. As the summer goes on, Art discovers that his new life under Asher's persuasive influence is far from ideal.

The Costume Box

2026

Chapter 1

Right on Cue : "Tough Guy"

Art pawed absent-mindedly through the shirts on the rack with his one good hand, grumbling in frustration at his useless right arm. It was still trapped in its awkward L-shaped blue cast. It had been six weeks since he broke it, and summer break was already half gone. In just a little over a month, he'd be starting high school. Which meant he had just a few short weeks to think of some way - anyway - to come back from what had happened on the last day of middle school.

He unhooked a black and white two-tone button-up, holding it up for examination. He guessed it was kinda cool. It definitely said more than the unremarkable moth-eaten burgundy t-shirt and baggy jeans he was currently sporting. It was different. Alternative. Perhaps he could pair it with some tastefully scuffed up Levis - maybe even a silver chain? But no. That was definitely trying too hard.

He dropped the hanger, leaving the shirt to drape over the frame. He'd never used to have to try at all. He'd never been the best dressed, or the funniest, and certainly not the tallest - but he was popular all the same. His position as the star pitcher on the baseball team had made sure of that, firmly ensconcing him amongst the school's aspiring 'jocks'.

It was a rare thing for a late bloomer like Art. It wasn't like he was a total runt, but his baby face paired with his single-

digit position on the percentile chart certainly would have made him a victim in any other circumstances. Instead, he'd made it his business to flip the script. Half the kids in his grade had probably been the victim of one of his cruel nicknames or baseless rumours at some point in the last three years - but middle school was a cruel place. It was hunt or be hunted; kill or be killed. Besides, he was doing a lot of those kids a favour. Most of them probably didn't even realise how stupid they looked..

For instance - how did a kid make it to the eighth grade, and still carry around a Pokémon backpack? Especially when your name was Ash! Well, technically it was Asher - but that hardly made a difference. The kid had only joined a couple of weeks before school let out, but he was totally clueless. Apparently he used to be homeschooled or something, but the way Art saw it that was hardly an excuse. One thing had led to another, and eventually Art's latest victim had spouted out some lame retort about his height. It wasn't like it had actually hurt Art's feelings or anything, but then the same kid had gone and brought up his hair. That had been two strikes - and Art never let anyone get to three. He had a reputation to maintain.

That's how he'd ended up in a circle of chanting kids behind the bike shed. He'd had a game plan, of course. It would have been an easy thing. Sure, Asher had a good ten inches on him, but dorks like him were all the same. He'd been standing there all gormless, lanky limbs hanging off him defenselessly like a flummoxed newborn foal. It would have been as easy

as a quick kick to the nuts to get him on the ground, and then a couple of quick stamps in the side. He'd have been crying for mommy. Well...if Art had ever got the chance.

The boy turned his gaze a couple of aisles down the way, glancing at a sign positioned above an array of bright primary colour outfits announcing 'YOUNGER BOYS'. He smirked, wondering if the aisle stocked anything big enough for Asher. Kids came in all shapes and sizes, after all. If they made regular shirts in extra small, why not kiddy stuff in extra large? Perhaps he could find a set of Pikachu pajamas big enough for that dweeb! He allowed himself to fantasise about Asher hopping down the high school's hallway in a big fluffy yellow onesie on the first day, firmly solidifying his reputation as nothing more than a lame baby dork. It would certainly be the talk of the canteen. It might even be enough to make kids forget about the incident behind the bike shed. He just had to figure out how to actually get him to wear it.

Art was just wondering if he had enough time left in the summer to teach himself hypnosis, when he felt a heavy hand fall on his shoulder.

"You know, that haircut makes you look like a little girl." An unfamiliar deep voice drawled confidently. Art spun around - instinctively going to ball up his right hand into a fist - before the feeling of hard plaster and a stabbing pain shooting up to his elbow reminded him it was in a cast. He'd had some wise retort ready, but without the viscous punch to back it up, it suddenly felt stupid.

“You-!” He accused in a helpless whine, trailing off as he found himself standing in Asher’s shadow. The kid had grown. He’d always been taller than Art, but where before he’d stood at a respectable fourteen-year-old average, he’d now very much hit his growth spurt. He was undoubtedly a teenager now: jaw squarer, Adam’s apple bulging, and shoulders filling out into a broad almost-adult frame.

“You....” Art repeated self-consciously, horribly aware of the way his voice squeaked with pre-pubescent meekness; his childish treble trilling a full octave and a half above Asher’s brand-new bossy brass tenor. He retreated a step, running his good left-hand defensively through his thick cascade of mousy brown straight hair. He’d always kept it long, but in the long summer weeks sitting around at home with nothing to do but play one-handed Call of Duty, he’d let it go even more - allowing it to cascade haphazardly all the way down to his shoulders. It was even longer at the back, a particularly shaggy outcrop flopping down even to the bottom of his shoulder blades.

“Got something to say?” Asher teased, crossing his arms with infuriating self-assured smugness.

“You - you know I’m a boy.” Art eventually coughed out, instantly regretting it. He’d have been better off saying nothing at all.

“A little tom-boy, then.” Asher allowed, quickly stepping forward and grabbing Art’s one good hand. He held on tight, boldly brushing Art’s hair out of his eyes with his other hand.

“How’s the arm?”

“You’re the one who broke it, asshole.” Art glowered.

“I didn’t touch you.” Asher laughed off the accusation, playfully poking Art in the tummy . “The way I remember it, you slipped on your own wee-wee.”

The smaller boy couldn’t help but blush. It was true, after all. He’d try to block out the precise details, but it wasn’t the kind of thing you could just forget. He’d just been about to charge Asher - run him down and kick him hard in the crotch - when suddenly he’d frozen up. He’d felt weirdly cold all over, like he’d just had a single large ice-cube slipped down the back of his shirt, and then the next thing he knew there was a warm feeling tingling in his crotch. Then it was running down his leg, then soaking through his pants, and before he knew it he was standing in a puddle of his own making. The whole gaggle of kids who’d come to watch - from 6th graders to 8th - had all burst into cackles of delighted laughter. He’d tried to run, and that’s when he’d slipped and fell - his arm breaking below him with a sickening crunch. It had been the most humiliating moment of his entire life. The only consolation was that he’d managed to keep from crying - at least until he got to the nurse’s office.

“Hey, buddy. I’m not judging!” Asher chortled. “It was just a teensy-weensy accident. Happens all the time to little kids like you.”

“You’re so dumb.” Art hissed back bitterly. “You know when we’re back at school, me and my friends are gonna make

your life hell.”

If Asher was even in the slightest bit worried, he didn’t show it. He tittered, keeping Art’s free hand imprisoned tight in his own as he continued to poke and prod him and stroke at his long brown hair like he was petting an adorable sulking puppy. “Sure you are, bud.”

“Geroff!” Art snapped, trying to stamp and twist and wiggle away, but his broken arm left him pretty much helpless. “I’m serious, you know.”

“I get it. You’re crabby.” Asher decreed, tracing his hand slowly down Art’s side and inching towards the back of his jeans “You got a wet diaper back here or something?”

“Huh?” Art managed to wheeze, before Asher seized the back waistband of his pants - effortlessly tugging them down so they sat slung just below his undies.

Asher could hardly seem to contain his amusement, laughter barely contained behind a tight delighted smirk. “Cool Minecraft undies, little dude!” he praised.

“What the fuck!?” Art yelped, earning him a swift chiding smack atop the fluorescent green underwear now poking up proudly above his mature denim jeans. He gave a cowed yip of frustration, making another vain effort to wiggle away from Asher’s grip - to no avail.

“Language.” Asher tutted, lowering his dark eyebrows in a mature reproachful glare. Art whimpered, some strange part of his subconscious somehow actually feeling guilty for the

swear. “Now, tell me about your little-boy-briefs. Is the Creeper your favourite?”

“They’re boxer-briefs.” Art whinged. “And it’s laundry day...”

“Sure, buddy.” Asher agreed. “But I think we can both agree that little boys who wear Minecraft undies aren’t big enough to wander around the mall by themselves.”

“What are you talking about?” Art groaned in frustration, still extremely aware of his sagging jeans and the fluorescent green underwear displayed above. He cursed his broken arm. If only it was free, he could give Asher a good sock in his dumb smirking mouth.

Asher took a moment to look around, as if making sure no one was watching before he bent down slightly, getting down to Art’s level. “Here’s the deal.” He proposed. “You’ve got two choices. Either you can play nice, and let me babysit you - or else I’ll take those jeans home with me, and you can explain to that nice shop assistant why you’re romping around the boys department in only your Minecraft undies. Oh, and I’ll be taking pictures. Lots of pictures.”

Art was ready to spit in Asher’s stupid dork face - consequences be damned. But then he felt that same icy cold feeling run down the back of his spine. Asher was serious. And right now, he had him exactly where he wanted.

“Whatever.” Art seethed, baby-faced chubby cheeks burning red in shame.

“Whatever, what?” Asher insisted, pulling the smaller boy in closer and seizing up the back of his jeans again. “Whatever, you wanna go pantsless...?”

“No!”

“Then say you want me to babysit.”

Art gulped, hating how powerless he felt. “What does that even mean?” He whined.

“Y’know. Babysitting. I’m looking after you, and you’re getting looked after.”

“So just...I do what you say?”

“Pretty much. Plus it’s all totally 100% anonymous. Unlike Option B....”

The feeling of Asher’s hand slowly creeping towards the back of Art’s waistband forced out a squeak of agreement. “Fine!” he hissed.

“You gotta say it.”

“Fine, you can be my babysitter.” Art mumbled as quickly as possible, staring down at the ground.

“Attaboy!” Asher praised, standing up fully again and starting to walk Art hand-in-hand away from the clothes rack he’d been looking at. Art barely registered where they were headed, his attention still entirely focussed on his bare-underwear. It was just so noticeable. His butt actually felt cold! Worse, with every step the jeans seemed to sway a little

lower, revealing more and more of the bright green Creeper-themed boxer briefs.

“Hey!” He whined, trying to tug Asher back towards the spot where they’d started.

“What is it now, Artie?” Asher sighed, affecting all the exhaustion of a real middle-aged dad traipsing a particularly whiny preschooler around the mall.

The nickname disarmed Art once again, leaving him red-faced and blushing. He stared slack-jawed for a moment, struggling to explain precisely what was wrong. Eventually, that evolved into an adorable bewildered pout - blue eyes blinking bashfully. How had this all gone wrong so fast? “You said...I mean, my jeans...”

“Ohhhh, you want me to pull-up your pants?” Art gave a single shy nod, but Asher just shrugged. “Well, I think you’re okay the way you are.”

“What?” Art whinged, left with no choice but to hobble along. “But you said...you wanted...Why?”

“Well, think of it this way.” Asher explained. “Your cute long hair kinda makes you look like a little girl, doesn’t it.”

Art’s red-cheeks puffed up indignantly. “I’m no-!”

“Don’t interrupt.” Asher scolded, giving the boy’s good arm a punishing extra-hard tug as he continued his lecture. “I guess your clothes make you look a bit more like a boy, but plenty of girls wear jeans and a t-shirt. But if people can see your

little boy undies, it doesn't really leave any doubt - does it?"

"That doesn't make any sense!"

"I'll prove it." Asher retorted at once, hailing down a passing shop assistant. "Excuse me..."

The assistant was a pretty red-haired girl probably just a couple of years older than them - but with his pants almost sagging to the back of his knees and his good hand imprisoned inside Asher's, Art felt about a quarter of his real age. He retreated shyly into Asher's shadow.

"How can I help?" The assistant recited with a vivacious bubbly smile, big green eyes already seeming to single out the smaller, shyer of the two boys like a lioness stalking a lone straggling gazelle. Her name tag read 'CASEY.'

"This little monkey needs some back to school clothes." Asher began to narrate, fully putting an arm around Art and all but dragging him in front so Casey could get a good look. Stupidly, Art failed to co-operate, letting her get an eyeful of his exposed underwear before he managed to twist around. "Could you help us pick out some outfits?"

Casey smiled a broad customer-service smile. "Of course!" She enthused. "How old is he?"

Asher didn't answer right away, instead taking the opportunity to affectionately ruffle Art's hair as if he were a sulking kitten. "See, buddy?" he stage-whispered "She can tell you're a boy."

Casey seemed delighted by the distraction. “Oh, for sure!” She humoured, her voice intermittently raising to a ridiculous baby-talk high-pitch. “You’re very handsome. I love your hair!”

“He’s worried the kids will think he’s a girl.” Asher explained on his behalf. “But you’re all boy, aren’t you Artster?”

“Definitely.” Casey agreed with a melodramatic patronising nod. “I think it’s cool. Like a viking!” Art grimaced, the comment hitting a little too close to home. Casey had stumbled on the exact reason why he’d let the hair get so long in the first place - imitating the lead singer of a Norwegian heavy metal band he’d got into in the 7th grade. But there was no way he was going to tell Asher that. “I bet he broke his arm playing outside.”

“Yup. Baseball.” Asher lied. “Well, Tee-ball I guess.” Art spun around at that, glaring at Asher with hateful intensity. Tee-ball?!

“Aww, poor baby. A little bird with a broken wing.” Casey mused.

“He’s starting Kindergarten in the fall.”

Art rolled his eyes. Now he’d done it. Asher had had his fun, but now he’d taken it too far. It was ridiculous. There was no way she’d believe it. He might have been a little on the short side, but he still stood roughly at Asher’s chest height. This lady was never going to believe he was five years old!

Sure enough, Casey frowned - staring at Asher with a vacant

skeptical blink. But no. As quickly as it had dissipated, her happy, helpful smile re-materialised on her face, stretching extra wide for the adorable kindergartener she was tasked with dolling up for his first day of ‘big boy school’.

“Awesome!” Casey enthused, leading the way towards the ‘YOUNGER BOYS’ aisle. “I’m sure we’ve got the perfect thing...”

For the next ten minutes, Art couldn’t bring himself to do anything but stare straight forward in glassy-eyed horror. Tugged around by his one good arm like a pull-toy on a string, he retreated to bewildered paranoia. There was no way, absolutely no way, that this random woman actually thought he was a kindergartener. No, not even a kindergartener - yet. Asher had said he was starting this fall! The idea was just completely ridiculous. It had to be a set-up. Surely Casey was Asher’s sister, or her cousin, or just some random lady he’d paid to get along with this ridiculous charade.

All the while however, Casey piled her arms high with infantile outfit after infantile outfit - there were stripes and shapes, colourful miss-matched corduroy and kitschy cartoon characters, trains, and planes, and dinosaurs, and dump-trucks, and all manner of infantile little boy horrors - printed, stitched, appliqued, or sewn on everything from t-shirts, to trousers, to overalls, to underwear. There was a veritable hoard of underwear. Art was sure that Asher had chosen to dwell in that particular section for as long as possible, just to try and get a rise out of him. But Art wouldn’t let him have

the satisfaction. Even as he piled on a seventh set of skimpy cartoon briefs, adorned with Winnie the Pooh or Paw Patrol or about eight other pre-school shows, Art said nothing. Afterall, it's not like he'd ever actually have to wear them.

It was only when Asher had actually paid for the clothes, stuffing them in his huge oversized backpack, that Art finally spoke up. He was being frogmarched out the store into the forensic cold white marble of the mall proper when he sneered up at Asher, wanting the bigger kid to know exactly what he thought of the pointless spending spree.

"I can't believe you actually bought all that crap." He mocked, trying to sound suitably disgusted. "I mean. What are you even gonna do with it all."

Asher let out an adoring tut. "Duh. You're gonna wear it!"

"Yeah right. It won't even fit. I don't know what you gave that woman to act like I'm five, but I'm not actually a kindergartener."

"It's all exactly your size, bud." Asher insisted. "We checked. And Casey's a professional."

Art shook his head. "There's no way-"

"We can try some of it on, if you don't believe me." Asher interrupted. "And for the record, I didn't give her anything. Did you ever think that maybe you just give off five-year-old vibes?"

Art was well and truly over it. "This is so dumb." He

complained, staring out hatefully at the crowd of strangers writhing their way through the mall like so many gawking ants. He tried to wriggle his hand away from Asher again, but it was no use. The way he saw it, Asher had very much made his point. How long would he have to stomach parading around with his underwear showing like the dork's personal humiliated dress-up doll?

"I need the toilet." He suddenly declared, noticing a nearby bathroom sign. He wasn't really all that desperate, but Asher couldn't hold his hand forever. Maybe it would be the perfect opportunity to sneak away.

"Gotta go potty?" Asher repeated whimsically, giving Art's hand an encouraging squeeze.

"Dude, don't." Art complained.

"Say it properly, or I won't take you."

Art stayed staring up indignantly for a few more seconds before he reluctantly gave in. It seemed like his only chance, afterall. "I. Gotta. Go. Potty." He intoned emotionlessly. "There. Happy?"

"Good enough!" Asher relented, leading them towards the bathroom sign. Instead of heading towards the gents however, they made a detour - heading further down the hall towards a single occupancy family bathroom.

"What are you doooooing...." Art whined, inadvertently knocking his knees together like a real preschooler desperate to go pee-pee.

“Little kids like you need plenty of help.” Asher explained. “Besides, I’m not letting you loose in there by yourself.” Art could do nothing but grumble. Clearly, the bigger kid was wise to his plot.

The family bathroom was occupied, so they had to wait a little while. It wasn’t really that long of a delay, but in the intervening minutes the vague urge Art had felt before had turned into a real niggling annoyance tickling in his bladder. When the door finally opened, it was everything he could do to avoid seizing his crotch and jumping up and down.

A young mother exited, clutching the hand of a little girl - probably about three or so - not so very differently from the way Asher was holding Art’s. The boy immediately went to scuttle in behind them, not wanting to waste another second, but Asher was content to take his sweet time. He didn’t let him take another step, his grip on his good arm keeping him tethered to the spot like a dog on a rope.

“I’m sorry to bother you, Ma’am.” he suddenly asked the mother, smiling his best polite respectful smile. “But you wouldn’t happen to have a spare diaper, would you?”

Art blinked up at the two of them. What now?

The woman seemed equally taken off guard, surveying the two mismatched boys in front of her. She locked eyes with Asher, blinking in that same far-off skeptical way that Casey had worn when he’d told her Art was starting kindergarten.

“A diaper?” she repeated.

“Yes.” Asher insisted. “I’m really sorry to ask, but I’m all out. I guess I probably should have packed more. But this little stinker gets through them like they’re going out of style!”

The woman turned her glassy eyed stare toward Art, getting a good look at his Minecraft undies still peaking prominently up over his pants. All at once she seemed to understand, letting out a high-pitched sympathetic coo.

“Oh, I see. Poor little sweetie!” She said, starting to dig through the large leather handbag at her side. “Of course, let me see...are Pull-Ups alright for her?” She produced a small pastel pink square. “They won’t hold up like her regular diapers, but they’ll do in a pinch.”

Asher gave a humble smile. “That’s perfect. I can’t thank you enough.” He said, gratefully accepting the puffy pink training pants and quickly ushering Art into the privacy of the family bathroom. “And neither can she!” he added, quickly closing the door.

Art could hardly believe his ears. He shook his head, half in horrified befuddlement and half in furious outrage. “What the fuck!” He squeaked.

“Language!” Asher interrupted him with a small perfunctory swat on his bare undies - but Art had much bigger problems on his mind. He continued on unabated.

“Did she think I was wearing a diaper? Did she think...that I was like a little girl? A baby girl?”

“More like a toddler girl, I think. Maybe two or three.” Asher

shrugged. "But yeah, pretty much."

"What!?" Art exclaimed. "How? Why!?"

Asher couldn't help but relish Art's reaction, finally letting go of his hand. He walked to the other side of the room, crossing his arms and smugly leaning against the wall - pink Pull-Up still in hand. "Suggestion." He revealed, letting the vague explanation sit in the echoey silence of the bathroom for a few moments before he went on. "It's all really pretty simple. I just plant a few seeds, create a few expectations, and most people see what I want them to see."

Art felt his heartbeat rising, a fearful lump growing in his throat. "You mean...you're trying to say...I mean you just convinced that woman that I'm a frikkin toddler! A diaper wearing pants soaking toddler!?"

"Yeah, pretty much. Same way I convinced Casey you're a five-year-old. But really, it's a lot more complicated than that." He put the Pull-Up down on the nearby open changing table, examining his nails. "And a lot more powerful, too. For instance, I've been using it on you all day."

The boy felt a familiar shiver go down his spine. "What? No..."

"Yes." Asher confirmed with a self-satisfied grin. "You've been remarkably compliant, really. Barely took more than a few stern words to have you traipsing around behind me like a good little boy, undies out and all. Although, you can't really ever suggest something totally out of character. There's

gotta be a hook there somewhere, buried in the subconscious. So I guess you could say there's a part of you that wants to be a little boy."

"No...." Art repeated. "That's impossible. You're...you're lying!"

"If you want, I can prove it." Asher shrugged, ominously crossing the room again to stand just a few feet in front of the smaller boy. "Remember your little accident behind the bike shed? Well...in a way, it wasn't really an accident."

Some part of Art already knew what Asher was trying to say, but he couldn't help but hope otherwise. It couldn't be true, could it? Stuff like that was impossible! "You're lying..." he repeated again, impotently, but Asher just kept on talking.

"Did you feel a cold shiver down the back of your neck? Almost like someone had dropped an ice cube down your shirt? Did you feel like you couldn't move for a second? Like you had no choice but to just stand there and...let it all out?" Asher ran his hand through the smaller boy's hair again, petting him like a puppy dog. "Now I'm in there, I can make you do that whenever I want. It's simple, an easy little cue. Elementary really. Like snapping my fingers."

Art shook his head furiously from side to side. "No. That's impossible. You're talking about...hypnosis!"

"You could say that. I'd call it more...a physical response to overwhelming psychological pressure."

Art was terrified. He crossed his legs together, as if that might

possibly help. “Don’t!” he begged. It was ridiculous. It wasn’t true. It couldn’t possibly be. But if it was...

“I won’t.” Asher reassured. “Not today, at least. Since you’ve been such a good boy for me. You just have to do one little thing.”

“What?”

Asher grinned like a great white shark. “Show me your best potty dance.”

“Potty...dance?” Art repeated dumbly, although of course he knew precisely what Asher meant. It was precisely what he’d been fighting the urge to do just seconds before. The only thing holding him back had been his nagging big-boy pride, that blaring uncomfortable voice in the back of his head insisting he should know better.

Asher gave a frustrated tut. “Y’know. It’s easy! Just whatever feels natural when you really really gotta go, but you have to hold it in!”

Art scrunched up his face like he’d been forced to swallow a spoonful of mashed carrots. “I’m not going to...you can’t make me do a potty dance. I’m fourteen years old!”

Asher just shrugged, and pointed back over towards the changing table. “It’s up to you. If you prefer, I guess you could always not hold it in. That’s why I got you the Pull-Ups.”

Art hesitated. It couldn’t be true, could it? It was so

ridiculous. But Casey had been so quick to believe him, and that lady just now had actually seemed to think he was wearing a diaper! A faint, barely perceptible cold sensation shivering down the back of his neck sealed the deal as an even greater desperation in his bladder suddenly seized him. He couldn't pee himself again, he just couldn't! But by now he could have sworn a little bit of pee had already spurted out, making him stand-up straight in terrified attention. He had no choice.

He seized the front of his crotch with his one good hand, eyes opening wide in pleading and lips going dumb slack. He hopped up and down desperately on both feet, looking every bit like a panicked potty-training preschooler. "I gotta go pooooddy!" he heard himself whine in a sugar-sweet babble, eyes fixing needily on his tormenter turned babysitter.

Asher chuckled, satisfied. "Okay, baby boy. Good job for telling me." He praised, gently taking 'Artie' by the hand again and leading him swiftly over to the toilet. He calmly but swiftly pulled down his jeans and underpants in with a single strong tug, hitching up his freshly-minted, empty-headed, good little boy under his armpits to plop him down on the toilet seat and holding him steady there. Artie felt a wave of good feelings wash over him - a strange mix of relief, pride, and reluctant affection for the bigger boy holding him in place. He went pee-pee right on cue. "Oh wow, what a big boy!" Asher reassured, rubbing his arm in encouragement as the toddler-teen blinked stupidly into the middle distance.

It took a moment, but slowly, steadily, Art came to again. Still sat on the toilet, he hardened his gaze - staring accusingly at Asher. "Wh-what did you do to me?" He murmured in disbelief.

"I told you buddy. Power of suggestion." Asher shrugged, as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

His faculties swiftly returning, Art quickly sat up and hopped off the toilet seat. He scurried possessively towards the small pile where his jeans and boxer-briefs lay abandoned, but Asher stopped him in his tracks, grabbing him by his good arm as he passed. "Hang on. You gotta wash your hands first!" He intoned in an infuriating baby-talk sing-song.

"Get off me you freak!" Art yelped horrified, cheeks burning red as he covered himself with his one free hand.

"Aww, buddy. I thought you wanted to do this the easy way?" Asher sympathised. He easily held Art back, getting to the discarded clothes first, balling them up, and tossing them into an automatic wall-mounted trash can. The sensor on the trash activated, and plastic lip cantilevered down, sealing Art's pants away forever.

"No!" Art complained, bare feet padding over to the trash. He tried to yank the flimsy plastic top off the trash - but, half-naked and one handed, it was easy enough for Asher to divert him - pulling him clear away and holding him firmly in place beside the changing table.

"These are your undies here, see?" He encouraged, unzipping

his bag and starting to take one of the infantile sets of briefs they'd bought at the store. He laid it down on the changing table, still in its plastic packaging. "How's Thomas train?" Art suggested, showing off a blue and white pair with the toys iconic face staring out prominently from the butt. "You love Thomas train, don't you bud?"

"N-oh-oh..." Art denied, tears starting to well up as he shook his head ardently from side to side. He could do nothing but shiver helplessly, as Asher unpacked it - relishing the site of his increasingly dismayed expression.

Art couldn't help but catastrophise. Why was Asher going on about Thomas all of a sudden? If he really was capable of hypnosis, then that had to be one of the triggers, right? How could it not be? Surely now it would only be a matter of time before he really was an infantile empty-headed Thomas the Tank Engine obsessive, making train noises with his mouth and running wooden trains around on the floor, no more inhibited than an actual two-year-old.

"I don't know what you're so upset about." Asher tutted, guiding Art back to the toilet seat and sitting him down again so that he could more easily guide the infantile briefs up his legs. "If you weren't such a good boy for me, this could have gone a lot worse."

Art tried to pull himself together, wiping away the few stray tears gathering in the corner of his eye with his good hand as Asher stood him up again and finally brought the briefs fully up into place. The elastic waistband snapped tight and snug

around his butt. “What do you mean?” He sniffled weakly.

Asher didn’t answer at first, forcing Art to stay rooted on the cold tile floor for a few moments as he admired the fit of the toddler briefs. He gave his butt two firm pats, tracing the bubbly cartoon letters that would soon surely be peaking proudly above Art’s pants as he walked him back through the mall. “You’re such a smart boy going potty for me, and all by yourself!” He continued to reinforce. “Smarty Artie in his Artie Pants!”

“Stop it!” Art whined, the increasing panic choking up his voice and making him feel littler and littler. “Just tell me what you mean already.”

“Well, it’s all conditioning.” Asher finally explained. “Psychologically speaking, you’re pretty vulnerable right now. If you’d tried harder to resist, I’d have had to make you have an accident again - and well, I guess then the lovely warm feeling of going pee-pee in your pants probably would have been imprinted a lot more strongly in your psyche. As it is, you want to go potty for me instead! Isn’t that so much better?”

Art shook his head in bewilderment. “I don’t understand.”

“Let’s just say you would have needed a whole pack of these.” Asher explained, picking up the pink Pull-Up from the changing table and stowing it in his backpack. “But let’s not worry about that! This outcome is much better for both of us.”

“What outcome?” Art demanded, letting Asher guide him

over to the sink. He stood over him, taking his one free hand in both of his and scrubbing it clean with warm soap and water.

“Your potty dance!” Asher revealed. “From now on, when you do your potty dance, I’ll know right away if you need to go pee-pee. So there shouldn’t be any little accidents. That is, if you keep being a good boy.”

Art looked absolutely horrified. “You mean...from now on, every time I have to go pee...?” He trailed off. He couldn’t even bring himself to finish the sentence.

“Uh-huh. Isn’t that handy?”

The water still running, Art couldn’t do anything but stare at himself in the mirror. Between the briefs, his long brown hair framing his horrified red-cheeked baby face, and the infantile tears welling in the corner of his eyes, he wasn’t sure even he believed he was fourteen years old anymore. How could Asher have reduced him to this so quickly? Even worse, if he was capable of this, what else could he do?

Chapter 2

Right on Cue : "Little Guy"

"I can't believe this is actually how you're wasting your summer." Art sulked from the tub, pouting at Asher as he slowly poured another plastic beaker of luke-warm soapy water over his head. His right arm was still in the cast - at least for a few more hours - propped up over the lip of the bath to keep it nice and dry.

"Someone's a grumpy monkey." Asher tutted, gently running the soft baby-blue washcloth over his shoulders. The soapy water ran down his front and over his smooth bare tummy, dripping into the low pool of still all-too-clear bath water just below groin level. "You're just too cute, Artie. It would be a shame if a cutie-pattottie like you went back to being a grouchy grumpster meanie-weanie by the time school starts up again."

"You're talking like an idiot." Art hissed up defiantly, trying to look as threatening as it was possible to look while sat stark 'nakie' and 'criss-cross apple-sauce' - Asher's words - in a shallow brew of tepid water and Johnson and Johnson 'No More Tears' Shampoo. "You know you sound like an idiot, right?"

Asher ignored him, stroking the ticklish terry-cloth texture of the wash-cloth slowly down Art's back, then swiftly under his butt. The smaller boy let out a humiliated yelp, legs splashing about as he scooted away. "What the fuck!" He protested,

only earning him a swift slap to the thigh. “You’re so so so dead in September!”

“Hush up.” Asher dismissed. He’d heard it all before, afterall. He produced a small blue Thomas the Tank Engine toy from his side of the porcelain barrier between them, dropping it unceremoniously into Art’s naked lap. “Play with Thomas-Train while I take care of your head-lice.”

Art’s fictional ‘nit problem’ was just the latest in a relentless sequence of humiliations. After the incident at the mall, the boy had decided his best strategy was to stay far away from Asher. Not knowing where the bigger kid might be lurking, that had mostly meant locking himself indoors. Somehow however, Asher knew where he lived. Self-confined to his room whiling away the hours on Xbox, it seemed Asher had been practicing his ‘powers of suggestion’ on Art’s mom for days before Art had even known a thing about it.

It had all come to a head a week ago. Wandering down the stairs in sleepy, beheaded, two p.m haze hunting for potato chips, Art had been horrified to discover his mom and Asher politely chuckling over glasses of pink lemonade like two old friends. Worse, already piled up on the kitchen counter, was a veritable cornucopia of infantile implements - toys, teddy-bears, sippy-cups, and clothes, the very same sets Asher had bought at the mall. Art could only watch in open-mouthed dread as his mom cheerfully explained how their wonderful, mature, responsible ‘neighbour’ was generously gifting him his ‘hand-me-downs’.

Over the next seven days, Asher's sinister influence had slowly but steadily contaminated the house. While Art's Mom dragged his ancient miniature trampoline out of the garage and insisted on watching her little boy bounce up and down for hours on end, eagerly enthusing about the benefits of outdoor play, Asher had replaced his Xbox with a wooden train set; while they cuddled on the couch and she fed him cut-up apple slices, somehow certain that making him shout-back along to a "Go, Diego, Go!" marathon was invaluable prep for high school Spanish, Asher took the opportunity to replace his entire wardrobe; and when she unexpectedly had to go into the office for the day, she had no hesitation in giving good-old grown-up dependable Asher a call - charging him with keeping a careful eye on her rambunctious, late-blooming, very special fourteen-year-old, going on four.

To Art's great relief, Asher never seemed to be able to plant the same glassy-eyed unthinking convictions in Art's mom that he'd achieved on the grown-ups at the mall. If he could, Art was sure Asher would have banished him back to toddlerhood with a simple clap of his hands. As it stood however, Art's mom needed a little more convincing. It wasn't that the reasons needed to be good, they just had to be somewhat plausible. For instance - Art was sure his Mom would never have let Asher give him a bath in any other circumstances. Especially with the way he'd whined, and cried, and rolled around on the floor at the suggestion. But after their recent trip to the soft play centre, Asher had solemnly reported that Art's beautiful long hair was positively infested with nits. Besides, Mom really did need to

get that big email out before the end of the day. It just made sense that Asher helped out with the head-lice treatment. He was such a responsible boy, after all.

So, Art had once again found himself in Asher's clutches; and this time he was more vulnerable than ever. He tried not to wince as the bigger boy got to work - separating out his long hair into isolated sections, methodically applying the thick gloopy lotion, and running a fine jagged comb down the entire extent of his long straight shoulder-length locks.

"Yow!" Art howled like an injured puppy with a thorn in its paw, looking up at Asher with big, blue, betrayed eyes as the comb caught on a stray tangle of hair. "That hurt!"

"Aww, sorry Artie-pup." Asher sympathised. "I'll try and be more careful, kay?"

Art couldn't help but pout. "This is dumb." he complained. "I don't actually have nits. I didn't even touch anything. Those places are disgusting."

"I'm almost done. Just another minute or so..."

Art let out a dissatisfied huff, deciding to distract himself running the Thomas toy up and down his legs. He found himself surprisingly entertained by the way the six intricately spoked wheels all turned in tandem. Sure, the weird grey faces on the trains were creepy, but he guessed there were definitely worse preschooler obsessions that Asher could have foisted upon him. He guessed if he wanted to, Asher could have made him a Peppa Pig kid - or worse, a

Bunnydale obsessive. At least Thomas was for boys - the preschool character now routinely riding up over his shorts guaranteeing his gender.

His mind wandering merrily in the realm of preschool shows and toddler toys, of wandering around pants half down around playgrounds and doing the potty dance at soft-play centres, Art couldn't offer even a token resistance to the now-familiar unwelcome icy feeling creeping down the back of his neck. He could only brace himself.

"I gotta go poody!" Artie's high-pitched voice chimed out in a babyish begging treble, one free hand dropping the Thomas toy and splashing below the sudsy water level to grab at his crotch while his bare bottom bounced up and down needily in the shallow puddle. He felt his throat croak up in fear as an overwhelming urge spiked in his bladder - when just a few seconds before, he'd felt absolutely nothing. Despite everything, all he wanted right then, all he needed was for Asher to scoop him up and plop him on the potty so he could go pee-pee like a big boy.

"One second, baby boy." Asher tutted impatiently, still finishing up combing his hair. All Artie could do was let out a shy whinge of disappointment, continuing to shudder and fidget in desperation for another long agonising minute, sloshing water this way and that and letting out muffled increasingly pitiful cries the longer Asher made him wait. For all that time, the babyish brain fog wouldn't let up - and even as he remained horribly aware of how unbelievably infantile he must have looked, Artie could do nothing but sit there

whining, desperately wishing and hoping that Asher would help him go potty soon.

Eventually, Asher relented - taking just a few more seconds than he would have done otherwise just to see his little guy squirm. "All done!" he announced, purposefully placing down the comb and scooping two strong arms under both of Artie's armpits to stand him up in the bathtub. Now with only his feet still submerged in the water, the boy couldn't think of anything but the potty-prize now in view - all thoughts of adolescent shame or big-boy modesty disappearing into insignificance. "Pooody!" he heard himself repeat in a quavering fearful voice, good hand extended to point at the toilet, knees trembling and legs splashing up and down in anticipation. Suddenly he faltered, feet threatening to slip on the slick surface of the tub.

"Whoopsie daisy!" Asher sang playfully, saving him from falling at the last second and letting out a pained grunt of effort as he heaved him clear up into the air. He was only in Asher's arms for a moment however, the bigger boy quickly manoeuvring him around to sit him down firmly on the toilet. Instead of cold porcelain however, Artie was surprised to find his bare butt poof softly into a comfortable cushioned surface. Looking down, he saw he was sitting not on the toilet seat but on a baby blue soft padded Thomas the Tank Engine themed potty ring, a bright red plastic protruding pee-guard at the front doing a half-hearted job of protecting his modesty. He cringed at the strange clammy feeling of the cushions' plasticky waterproof lining against his skin, intense

embarrassment flooding back to the forefront of his mind as he started to pee, and the strange mental fog parted all at once.

“I don’t need this.” He whined, his butt un-sticking from the plastic lining as he wiggled on the cushion. Still, he couldn’t get fully-up - still going pee-pee. His cheeks burned in shame as he stared down at the childish print on the blue potty seat, realising that Asher must have already somehow convinced his Mom of the opposite. In fact, Asher had now so successfully adapted the house that anyone visiting would have instantly assumed a three-year-old lived there.

‘I think you do, bud.’ Asher contradicted. “Looks like you were desperate! You’d have soaked my pants if it wasn’t for that pee-pee guard.”

To Art’s intense annoyance, Asher was right. When he was like that, he didn’t even have the mental wherewithal to position things correctly. As soon as he’d sat down, he’d just started peeing. Was the hypnosis really so powerful? He felt a wave of helpless sadness, staring down at the floor in shame. His wet hair draped around his head like a curtain, water slowly dripping from the long strands.

“It’s okay, buddy. You made it!” Asher comforted, rubbing the boy’s good arm. “Do you need to go poo-poo, too?”

“No.” Art mumbled, not looking up.

“Are you sure? You haven’t gone all day...”

Art pushed his damp hair out of the way, staring accusingly at the bigger boy. “Shuddup. You don’t know that.”

“I do, buddy.” Asher continued. “Your mommy told me when I came in this morning. Maybe you’re feeling a little constipated...?” He paused. “That means when it hurts when you push. Does it hurt when you push?”

“I know what it means!” Art snapped, jumping to his feet - just so he didn’t have to sit on the strange-feeling potty seat any longer.

“Alright, well let's wash your hands.” Asher continued, offering Art a bright orange towel. The boy snatched it, attempting to wrap it around his lower half, but it was a tall order with only one free hand. Asher took over, much to Art’s chagrin, successfully securing it around his tummy and planting an affectionate kiss on his shoulder.

“You’re gross.” Art snapped, marching over to the sink. He sneered at the sight of the matching baby blue Thomas foot stall - but even he had to admit that he’d been struggling to see himself fully in the mirror lately. He hopped up, setting about running the taps and squeezing soap onto his open hands with fierce independence. That was when he saw it.

His hair - every strand of it, from the crown of his head to the shaggy tips, had turned blond! Light, downy, golden, baby blond! Freshly combed in, shimmering in the yellowy light of the bathroom and paired with his puffy red cheeks, he looked absolutely adorable - like an angelic portrait of a perfect genderless toddler in a 1950s advertisement. Art had the bizarre thought that the colour would pair flawlessly with the white and pale green of a fresh pair of pampers. He stared

slack-jawed for a few seconds, trying to work out what on earth had happened. When he put two and two together, he whirled around on Asher, teeth clenched in fury.

“You dyed my hair!?” he practically screamed.

Asher chuckled. ‘Sorry buddy. I would have told you, but I knew you’d make a fuss.’ He came closer, grabbing the boy’s free hand and anchoring him in place to ensure he didn’t do anything stupid - like try and run away across the slippery tiles. “But it’s cute, right? Looks just like you’re a natural blond. Well, I guess you were a natural blond. Your mommy showed me some adorable photos from when you were in preschool. She’s going to be so happy to have her little boy back.”

Art wanted to shout and stomp and pound his fist into Asher’s stupid chest, but instead he just found his lips trembling. He gulped, trying to stop himself from crying. “I look like a baby.” He complained.

“You look like you.” Asher insisted aphoristically.

Art could only blink, a strange cold feeling - pleasantly cathartic this time - spreading from the back of his neck. He supposed it was true. He slipped out of Asher’s grip, and got back up on the step-stool, flicking his hair back and forth. It was strange how much the boy in the mirror didn’t look very much like him at all. In fact, he could very well have believed it was a girl in the mirror. And yet all that had changed was the colour of his hair. The chubby cheeks, the button nose, the watery big blue eyes - all of those were still the same.

Had he really been so oblivious to his actual appearance? Had he really always looked so babyish? He thought about all the mean things he'd said to people, and all the kids he'd picked on over the years - while all the time he'd looked like this. It was really no wonder Asher treated him the way he did.

"Okay, Snow White. We all know you're the fairest of them all." Asher teased, gently taking him by the hand again and leading him away from the mirror. "You're very pretty. But now it's time to get dressed."

"I wasn't...I mean, that's not what I-" Art tried to explain, but he couldn't quite find the words. Meanwhile, Asher had taken a pair of briefs from the linen cupboard. "And anyway, Snow White isn't blond..."

"Step!" Asher commanded, and Art did as he was told, stepping into the little leg holes. The linen cupboard had a heater inside, and the cotton was lukewarm and cozy soft.

Looking down, Art noticed with mild fatigue that the undies were Thomas themed - again. Asher had dressed him in at least a dozen different pairs of briefs in the past week - having him romp around the garden singing his ABCs in nothing but Sesame Street, laze on the couch like a sleepy puppy in only Paw Patrol, or play pretend shooting webs sans-everything but Spiderman.

But whenever they were likely to leave the house and more than underpants was called for in the dress code, it was always Thomas. Asher seemed to like nothing better than the

site of the chunky red THOMAS & FRIENDS letters framed in a cheery blue bubble poking out from above Art's shorts like a name-tag. This particular pair were no different. Plain cream colour, the waistband, legbands, and a silly faux-fly were piped in classic Thomas blue, the train printed facing outwards on the butt - just underneath the lettering.

"Where are we going?" Art asked shyly. He hated going out of the house. It was bad enough traipsing around, underpants showing, in whatever ridiculous outfit Asher had in mind - but they almost invariably went somewhere populated mostly by little kids. He'd been lucky enough that he'd only had a 'potty emergency' - that's what Asher called it - twice in public. It was not an experience he was loath to repeat.

"We're going to the doctors." Asher explained. "You're going to get your cast off, remember?"

"Oh." Art intoned. "You're taking me?"

"That's right. Mommy's got lots of work, remember?"

"Oh."

Art supposed that wasn't so bad. How much damage could Asher really do in a doctor's office? Besides, once he got his cast off, he'd be able to pull up his pants whenever he wanted - even when Asher was holding his other hand.

Leaving the Thomas undies still pooled between Art's ankles, Asher took away the towel and neatly draped it around the boy's shoulders. Then, going over to the toilet, he started to unroll a good few feet of toilet paper - neatly folding it up

into a thick squidgy rectangle. Art watched him curiously, leaning down to pull up his underwear, but Asher stopped him in his tracks.

“Hold on, buddy.” He instructed, halting the undies just short of his thighs. “We’re going to try something new today.”

“What?” Art asked shyly, bracing himself for the worst. For all the humiliations, Asher was yet to try and use the ‘power of suggestion’ on him beyond the potty dance - at least as far as Art knew. What was he planning now?

“This is a special test.” Asher said vaguely, placing the toilet-paper down snugly in the gusset of the briefs. He secured them in place with a pair of safety pins - one on the front-end, and one at the back. Finally, he pulled up the undies. Art cringed at the strange feeling of the toilet-paper tickling against his skin. It crinkled as he fidgeted - the feeling of the flimsy disposable material combined with the rustling noise clearly intended to make him feel like he was in a diaper. Though he supposed it wouldn’t come close to doing one’s job

“This is so weird.” Art complained bitterly. “If you wanna diaper me, just diaper me.”

Asher smirked a threatening smirk. “You sure about that?”

Art’s eyes widened - he was serious. “I take it back!” He squeaked.

“Good. You go potty like a big boy, don’t you?” Art nodded. “And you do your special potty dance for me when you have

to go, don't you?"

Art gave another miniscule nod of his head. What was Asher planning? "It's weird..." he repeated, trying the same objection with a touch less adolescent snark.

"I saw some of your new undies had pee-pee stains." Asher revealed, his voice taking on an ominous tone.

Now Art understood. He had discovered that sometimes, if he really concentrated, he could hold off doing the potty dance and shouting out that he had to go for just a little bit. All he had to do was let out a teensy spurt of pee into his undies. It could just be a couple of drops - it wasn't like he would soak his pants or anything. After he peed, the baby brain-fog would clear up and he'd be able to hold it like normal for a bit. Ideally, he'd manage to hang on until Asher went home, but sometimes it only bought him a couple of minutes of respite before he was clutching at his crotch and hopping up and down again. At the very least, the advance warning had got him out of a few humiliating situations when they were out in public. If he was going to cry and hop and beg like a toddler, he at least wanted it to be at a time of his own choosing.

He really hadn't thought Asher would have noticed the stains, but who had been kidding? The previous week had demonstrated that the bigger kid was positively obsessed with his potty habits. Now he was busted.

"I'm not doing it on purpose." Art tried to lie. "Sometimes it just...comes out."

“I’m sure you’re not.” Asher allowed generously. “But if you can’t handle big boy undies and doing your potty dance, I’ll have to think up some other way to make you behave.”

Art knew what that meant. He gulped, thinking back to the pink Pull-Up from the mall bathroom. If he hadn’t let Asher ‘convince’ him to do the potty dance, would he already be back in toddler’s training pants? “I won’t do it anymore.” he promised. “I’ll tell you, and do the potty dance...”

“Good boy.” Asher praised. “But let’s do things my way for a while. The extra padding will make sure you don’t get anymore stains on your cute little undies.”

“Ok...”

That seemed to satisfy Asher. “Go play!” he encouraged, giving him a gentle swat on his now slightly-padded bum.

Art darted out of the room, eager to escape the groggy overbearing heat of the bathroom. Toilet-paper stuffed undies rustling as he scampered down the hall, he shut his bedroom door behind him and sat down on the city road themed rug Asher had recently dug out of storage. He pushed a train down the wooden track set up on the floor, watching the unfamiliar image of an oversized blond toddler playing in the mirror.

“Drink some water, Artie.” Asher commanded, holding his arm firm so that he didn’t wander too far off. The smaller boy was red-faced and panting, his pouty plump cheeks even pinker than usual.

He was dressed in a soft grey cotton tank-top, a huge, unmissable print of Thomas the Tank Engine on the front - the character facing directly outwards with the words 'THOMAS - FULL STEAM AHEAD!' printed above and below in huge red embossed letters.

"A tank top will go on nice and easy with your cast, plus it's easy access for tickling your super-soft, ticklish baby armpits!" Asher had explained as he'd dressed him, interrupting Art's afternoon play session after a few good hours drip-drying in just his Thomas undies.

As usual, Asher had made sure the pants were loose enough to adequately sag, choosing a cutesy set of navy blue gingham trousers made from cuddly soft corduroy. Now, after an hour walking across the park in the blazing sun, the pants had dropped almost to the back of Art's knees - revealing all but the lower-most curve of Art's toilet-paper packed briefs to the public at large.

"I'm not thirsty..." Art resisted, despite the heat. It had only been a few hours since his last trip to the potty, but he didn't want to take any chances during his appointment with Dr Jenkins. Unfortunately, Asher seemed to have had the exact opposite idea. The journey to the doctors office should have only taken twenty minutes on foot, but after stopping at the cafe for juice, running a circuit of the playground, and taking four separate hydration breaks, it had taken triple that time. At long last they'd made it - but Asher didn't seem to want to cross over the threshold without making Art polish off his bright blue Thomas water bottle.

“Come on, buddy. There’s just a few more sips.” Asher encouraged, keeping the kid rooted to the spot with one hand while pinching his nose with the other.

“No!” Art squeaked in a nasal voice, but all Asher needed was for him to open his mouth. He plopped the nipple of the water bottle between his open lips, holding him there until he’d glugged down the whole thing. Despite what Asher had said, there were at least half a pint still inside.

“Good boy.” Asher praised when they were done, despite Art’s pathetic wheezing coughs. He gave him a few slaps on the back to make sure he was okay - but as far as he was concerned, the most important thing was that his little guy stayed hydrated. “Ready to go inside?”

Art nodded, still a little out of it. The sooner he got this cast off, the sooner he could pull up his pants.

Asher pushed open the door and sauntered up to the reception desk, Art in tow.

“Got an appointment for Arthur O’Ryan.” He declared confidently, shooting his best attempt at a charming smile towards the receptionist. “Little guy’s having his cast off...”

To Art’s amusement, the lady behind the desk looked thoroughly uncharmed. She was older, with greying brown hair tied up in a neat bob that seemed so tight it stretched back her skin, and cracked dour lips permanently folded down in an unimpressed frown. She didn’t look up, tapping her spindly fingers across the keyboard. “Arthur O’Ryan, age

fourteen?” she recited from the screen.

“He goes by Artie - but um, no. That’s wrong.” Asher insisted at once, clearly struggling to make eye-contact with the uninterested woman. Frustrated, he tugged Art closer, then suddenly grabbed him under his bare armpits - heaving him up onto his hip!

Art let out a yip of surprised, pants sagging even lower as he was forced to wrap his legs around Asher’s waist like a baby monkey hugging a branch - clinging on for dear life. When did he get strong enough to do that?

“Hey!” he complained in a girlish squeak, the higher frequency finally seeming to attract the receptionist’s attention.

She regarded the two boys with the same weariness she’d shown her computer screen, finally turning her lazy disdainful eyes on Asher. “Oh?” she intoned.

Asher seized his opportunity, his own dark eyebrows furrowing with concentration as he stared purposefully at her - all the while gently patting Art’s bottom. “Artie here is uh... four.” He decided, seemingly picking a number from random. “Broke his arm playing tee-ball...”

The claim was absolutely ridiculous. Sure, Asher was attempting to carry him like one - but it was plainly obvious that Art wasn’t a toddler. Asher had certainly grown, but there was still barely a foot between them, maybe a foot and a half if he was generous. He’d had to heave so hard to pick

him up, he was clenching his teeth! Surely she could see that?

Still, Art grimaced. The week's experiences had hardly given him an abundance of hope, and he was expecting the old woman's eyes to glaze over just like Asher's other subjects at the mall. Afterall, that crazy woman with the baby had thought he was two! To his immense surprise though, the receptionist didn't seem to react one way or the other. She just blinked, returning uncaringly to her computer screen.

The smaller boy wiggled nervously against Asher's hip, feeling the toilet paper rustle in his underpants. He wondered. Was she somehow immune? If only someone would believe him, even a random receptionist at the doctor's office, then maybe - just maybe - he'd be able to reverse all this! Was this his chance?

"I'm not four!" He blurted out desperately, whacking a little fist against the top of the desk as if to wake the lady from a daydream. He pointed an accusing finger up Asher's face, almost poking his eye out. "He's lying!"

The woman sighed a long, exhausted sigh. If Art had been expecting her to rush to his rescue, it hardly seemed likely. His heart sank.

"Sir." She droned, half-glancing at Asher above her computer screen. "Are you this little boy's parent or guardian?"

The question took Asher off-guard. "What?" he spluttered, now very obviously struggling to hold up Art's weight. He shifted him around so that the kid was practically on his back,

one good hand hanging off him like a backpack holding on by a single worn strap. “No, of course not.” He explained, trying and failing to regain some of his prior confidence. “I’m fourteen. I’m his babysitter. I mean - his Mom knows I’m here.”

The receptionist spoke very slowly, as if reading from a script. “Okay. And do you have the parent or guardian’s authorization to speak to us about the child?”

Asher took a deep breath, back on solid ground. “Yes.”

“No!” Art interrupted, wiggling around like a badly behaved kitten. He kicked the desk in his efforts to shift free, making the cheap hollow wood echo. “I’m not four! He’s lyyyying.” he whined.

The receptionist slowly took off her glasses, letting the disappointed silence hang in the air as she slowly turned her gaze on the misbehaving brat scuffing up her nice desk. Art felt a shiver go down his back - immediately thinking better of his plan. “Sir.” The receptionist repeated. “Are you able to confirm the child’s age?”

“N-noo-oh-oh...” Art mewled, much quieter this time. He felt completely crushed. He’d felt so sure that would work!

“Yes, of course.” Asher nodded through gritted teeth. He re-adjusted Art again, the oversized toddler-teen hanging off him clearly starting to take its toll on his back. “I’m so sorry about him...”

“It’s quite alright.” The receptionist dismissed. “You just need

to fill out these forms...”

“Sorry. One second.” Asher interrupted, finally putting Art down on the ground again. “Young man, we need to have a little chat.” He announced performatively, making sure the receptionist heard every word, before he grabbed Art by the good arm and marched him over to a quiet corner of the waiting room.

“What are you doooing?” Art complained. “You can’t tell the doctor I’m four. He won’t believe you.”

“Hush. No more back talk.” Asher instructed. He grimaced down at the smaller boy, eyes hardened into black points as he slowly shook his head in disappointment. “You’re being a very bad boy right now. You’re embarrassing me, Artie.” he intoned.

Art pouted. He wanted to scream. He wanted to kick. He wanted to punch Asher in the chest over and over and over again. He was embarrassing him? Maybe Asher should try crawling around his own living room in nothing but a pair of Thomas the Tank Engine briefs - and then he could ask him how embarrassed he felt!

Still, there was something about the way Asher was staring at him that made Art shiver all over. He froze up, quickly glancing over at the mean receptionist - who’d gone back to tapping away diligently on her computer. It was pointless. If he wanted to, Asher could certainly make things a lot worse.

All the fight went out of him all at once. He hung his head in

shame, not wanting to look at Asher's eyes anymore. "Sorry..." he mumbled.

"That's okay." Asher said gently. He opened Art's palm, manipulating his hand so that the thumb was sticking out. "How about you suck on this, just to make sure you don't say anything else silly when grown-ups are talking."

"Wha-?" Art babbled, interrupted as his own thumb was planted in his lips with a soft wet plop. Without even thinking about it, he started steadily to suck - a pleasant icy chill spreading out from his mouth, to the back of his neck, and then massage-like all the way down to the tippy top of his toes. He sighed in relief, a little bit of drawl dripping out of his loose open lips and trickling down his chin.

Asher was ready to wipe it away, producing a napkin from his pocket. "There's my good boy." he praised. "You love sucking your thumb, don't you buddy?"

Art shook his head violently from side to side. He could still think straight - it wasn't like when he had to go potty - but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't seem to beat the urge to keep on sucking. "I do't..." he denied, garbling the words through his thumb.

"Go and play." Asher insisted, taking the opportunity to readjust the boy's pants so that the Thomas logo was fully showing again. Art wanted desperately to pull it up, but he just couldn't stop sucking!

Instead, he toddled over to a low table that was covered in

little kid's toys, leaving Asher to return to the receptionists desk. Straightaway, the two of them go to work on the form - but with their conversation out of earshot, Art's desperate urge to keep on sucking his thumb slowly subsided. Still, it felt fantastic. He kept it in for now, taking a few more slow indulgent sucks as he surveyed the table for something to do that wasn't completely infantile.

Settling on a toy race car, he was just about to take his good hand out of his mouth to grab it, when someone else's pudgy hand snatched it away.

"Heeey!" Art complained, finally popping his thumb out of his mouth. A slick trail of drawl drew out from his mouth to his thumb, breaking off and leaving a sticky wet mark on the front of his tank top. "I wanted..." he heard himself mumble pathetically, before he stopped himself. It was only a stupid toy. "Whatever..." he said, slouching down to sit his bottom on the carpet.

The hand belonged to a red-headed little boy, maybe five or six. The presence of another kid in the waiting room made the deception Asher was in the process of weaving at the reception desk sting even harder. It must have been obvious to anyone looking that Art was at least four or five years older than this kid. How could anyone believe he was four? He felt an anxious urge to pop his thumb back into his mouth and suck away all the bad feelings, but he just about managed to resist.

"Sorry!" The red-headed tyke spoke up, dropping the car

again. But Art didn't make any attempt to reclaim it. "Are you a big boy?" he asked abruptly.

"Huh?"

"Are you a big boy?" The kid repeated, staring at him curiously. "You're tall like my big cousin, but he doesn't like Thomas. And he doesn't suck his thumb."

Art was taken aback, but before he could answer, Asher was back. "Artie's four." He interrupted, indulging the red-head with a forced kid-friendly smile. He grabbed Art's hand and ushered him to his feet. "Come on buddy, the doctor's ready for us now."

"Are you sure?" The red-head insisted, confused. "I'm six. So I'd be bigger than him. But he's so tall!"

"Quite sure." Asher insisted, hurriedly marching Art away. Art could only manage a single glance at the other kid before they turned the corner, but the look on his face was nothing like the woman in the family bathroom, or the receptionist, or even his Mom. He didn't look the slightest bit convinced.

Asher sat in a nearby chair, nonchalantly scrolling on his phone. Meanwhile, sitting on the examination table, Art's socked feet - Thomas theme, of course - wiggled nervously in the air. The receptionist was one thing, but he'd had the same doctor ever since he was born. Surely it would take more than an amended form and swapping out numbers on a database to fool him?

"So, Artie!" Dr Jenkins enthused, finally entering the room -

clipboard in hand. "How's my favourite four year old?"

Art scrunched up his face in annoyance. How could Dr Jenkins be so easily bamboozled? He was a doctor! Art was pretty sure his Mom had told him he'd gone to Harvard! Besides, he had his chart right in front of him. Didn't it mention the time he'd had his appendix out when he was ten? Or when he'd fallen out of that tree? How could he have broken his arm in a high school fight if he was meant to be four years old!?

"Don't you remember me?" Art replied, sounding almost heart-broken.

Dr Jenkins paused, blinking at his chart for a moment. But in the end, all it took was a single line from Asher. He didn't have to try nearly so hard as he had with the receptionist.

"Artie O'Ryan." He instructed in a monotone from the corner, still staring at his phone. "The little boy who broke his arm playing tee-ball."

Dr Jenkins broke into a broad smile again, continuing on as if Asher hadn't said a word. "Of course I remember you! The little baseball star." He started to flip through his clipboard as he approached the examination table. "Let's see, four years old, no medications, four foot two inches tall..."

"Wait." Art interrupted. He wasn't so vain that he didn't know his height still started with a 'four', but he was absolutely certain he wasn't that short. "I'm taller than that."

"Well, that's what your grown-up put on your form Artie..."

Dr Jenkins observed, looking him up and down. “We can always get you measured properly, but it looks about right to me. Besides, you’re already plenty tall for a boy your age...” He started to scribble something on his clipboard, bushy white eyebrows furrowed in mild concern. “In fact, I suppose in percentile terms you must be in the ninety-ninth point nine nine...”

Asher rose from his chair. “We’re not really worried about Artie’s height. We just came about his broken arm.” He insisted, getting the now thoroughly-frazzled doctor back on track.

“Oh, yes. The arm!” he exclaimed, extending his own towards the interloping fourteen year old in a confused attempt at a handshake. “And you are...?”

“His babysitter. Art’s mommy told me everything I need to know.”

“Of course, of course.” The old doctor mumbled, as if nothing at all were amiss.

“Excuse me!” Art tried to involve himself, momentarily drawing Dr Jenkins’ attention - but it was a hopeless endeavour.

“Artie, grown-ups are talking now.” The bigger boy cued, and all at once Art was sucking his thumb again. His body shivered ecstatically, and his mind seemed to retreat. He could still hear the conversation between Asher and Dr Jenkins, but he could no longer bring himself to care -

listening with no more interest than he would an old black and white movie droning in the background while he gorged himself on a big bowl of delicious chocolate ice cream.

“And how has he coped over the last eight weeks?”

“Oh, so-so. He’s been a little frustrated, that’s all.”

“How so?”

“Just not really acting his age. Being needy. The thumb-sucking for instance, plus he’s had a couple of little potty accidents.”

Art gave a little grumble of annoyance, even as he kept on contentedly sucking his thumb. How could Asher be so hypocritical? He’d never sucked his thumb or peed his pants at all before that kid got involved.

“I wouldn’t be so concerned at Artie’s age. A thumb is certainly better than a pacifier. And I can see he’s out of Pull-Ups now...”

“Yep. Though he sometimes dribbles just a little. I’m honestly more concerned about number two. I think maybe he holds it too long because he wants to keep playing, and then he gets constipated...”

“There’s something I can give you for that...”

Art faded out, losing interest - choosing instead to focus on his thumb. He was amazed he’d never thought to try it before. Babies seemed to love it, afterall. Even if at the back of his mind he knew Asher was somehow making him do this, he

still couldn't resist. It just felt so good! He was so enraptured, that he barely even noticed when Dr Jenkins brought out what looked like a buzz saw - starting to cut away at the cast.

"There's no need to be afraid, Artie..." Dr Jenkins was saying somewhere far away. "This is a special saw that won't hurt your skin.

"Mmmm-hmmm..." Art nodded, taking a few more weaning sucks before he managed to pop his thumb out of his mouth. He blinked, wondering what else Asher had talked to the doctor about while he'd been distracted.

Dr Jenkins was only about halfway done however, when a different cold feeling inched its way down Art's spine - culminating with a desperate stinging feeling spiking in his bladder. He gasped. No! Not now! Not in front of the doctor! His legs twitched impatiently, and his toes flexed beneath the soft blue cotton of his socks. Inside his underpants, the toilet-paper-padding rustled as he involuntarily bounced his bum up and down on the squidgy surface of the examination table. He groaned, thinking of letting out just a little pee-pee to try and hold back the humiliating brain fog - but the thought of soaking the toilet paper in his pants was too humiliating to bear. He let go, giving in to the inevitable.

"I gotta go poooodly!" He heard his childish toddler-voice squeal, but there was no chance the doctor would stop for something as silly as that.

"Hold on, Artie. Just a couple more minutes."

The boy started to bounce even more desperately, letting out adorable kitten-like squeaks of discomfort as Asher held him in place - letting the doctor finish the job. With such a long delay between surrender and release, Artie's mind was completely overrun.

"That tickles!" He exclaimed with a playful screech as the cast saw cut through and buzzed against the skin at the top of his shoulder, finally fully releasing his arm.

"There we go champ, all done." Dr Jenkins smiled. "How about a high five?" Art gave a dopey smile, trying to raise his newly freed right-arm - only to let out an adorable yip of pain as he moved it out of its stiff position. "Easy, tiger!" Dr Jenkins instructed. "Let's remember to take it easy with that arm for a few more weeks, okay?"

Art nodded, happily offering his left hand for the high five. If Dr Jenkins minded that his thumb was still slightly slick from sucking, he didn't show it.

"I have to go poddy!" Art repeated sweetly, now using both hands to grab at his crotch, legs rhythmically knocking together in longing.

"We hear you, buddy." Asher dismissed. "There's just a few more things the doctor and I need to talk about."

Artie was going to put his thumb back in his mouth, but Dr Jenkins presently offered a much more appealing solution - presenting a bright red strawberry flavoured sucker and applying a large green sticker showing a cartoon of a lion cub

with a broken arm to the front of his tank top. Eagerly grabbing the lollipop, Artie tried to focus on reading the bubbly letters written around the picture on the sticker, but he just couldn't concentrate - happily sucking and humming a silly tune to himself as he tried not to think about how desperately he needed to go pee-pee.

Finally, the grown-ups stopped talking. "...and remember what I said about keeping it moisturised." Dr Jenkins concluded as Asher scooped Artie off up the table under his armpits, standing him up on the ground still in only his Thomas socks. The boy hopped up and down as if the ground was made of hot lava, feet skipping this way and that in an improvised silent tap dance.

"Poddy!" He reminded the grown-ups once again, eliciting a round of adoring chuckles.

"Looks like you better hurry." Dr Jenkins sympathised. "There's one right through there."

"Thank you so much Doctor." Asher smiled, folding a small piece of paper away into his pocket before taking Artie by the hands and leading him through the door. "Come on, lil' monkey. Before you have an accident"

Finally getting to the potty, Artie perched up on the toilet seat while Asher held him in place. As he released his bladder, he felt like he was waking up from a dream. He stared straight forward as he finished up peeing, wave after wave of embarrassment hitting like waves battering against flimsy flood defences. Had he really just done that? Had that really

been him?

“Wow, good job Artie-pup!” Asher praised, examining the pad of toilet paper still fastened securely to the inside of his underpants. “Bone dry! And you were super brave for the Doctor too, just like it says on your sticker.”

Art blinked, hardly feeling able to match Asher’s excitement. He wondered why Asher kept talking to him like that, even after he’d gone pee. He must have known the brain fog always wore off by then. Maybe it was deliberate? Maybe he was slowly grinding him down, and someday soon he’d always be like that? He shuddered at the thought.

“Great.” he grunted stoically. “Please can I get up now?”

“Sure, bud.” Asher agreed, lifting him to his feet and pulling up his briefs for him. He waited until after they’d washed their hands together before he pulled up his pants - making sure they were sagging, as usual. Gently taking the boy’s right hand - the one that had been in the cast - he directed the other thumb directly into his mouth, leaving the Thomas logo peaking up in pride of place. “Bet you’re glad to be out of that cast.”

“I gueff...” Art lisped.

“You just love sucking your thumb - don’t you, lil’ monkey?”

Art grunted in annoyance, wanting to take out his thumb and pull up his pants just to prove that he could - but it was impossible. It was like being asked to spit out a delicious spoonful of chocolate pudding.

“And just think.” Asher continued, starting to lead them back out into the waiting room, and over to the reception desk. “In just a couple more weeks, you’ll be playing tee-ball again!”

The boy moaned in horror at the thought. He couldn’t make him, could he?

Chapter 3

Right on Cue : "Little Boy"

From a distance, all the kids in the Lion Cubs tee-ball team looked the same. Dressed in their honey-yellow jerseys featuring an adorable stencil of a lion cub mid-roar tucked neatly into white and black pin-striped pants, they were all identical - all except the little boy up to bat with the long golden hair flowing out from under his batting helmet, and the Thomas the Tank Engine briefs sticking out prominently above his sagging pants.

“Remember, Artie.” Asher encouraged, kneeling down beside the tee so that the smaller boy could get a good look at his baseball cap - the word ‘COACH’ plastered proudly on the front panel in clear white letters. “You need to hit the ball and then run. Not just one or the other.”

The boy narrowed his blue eyes in disdain. “I know how to play fu-” He stopped himself. Last time Asher had caught him cussing in front of the other Lion Cubs he’d taken him over his knee right there and given four firm swats to his cartoon-clad hiney - one for each year of his ‘age’, he’d said. Then, he’d had to sit on the bleachers watching the ‘big boys’ play for the rest of practice, with nothing but his thumb to suck for comfort. “I know how to play frikkin tee-ball...”

“I know you’re a big boy, Artie.” Asher sympathised, seeming to relish each patronising syllable. “But you’re the littlest in the team. So you need to listen to your coach.”

Art puffed out his cheeks, red from frustration. Asher had been making him practice with the Lion Cubs for two weeks now, though this was the first time he'd been dragged along to an official fixture. Despite actually starring in his middle school's baseball team three seasons in a row, Asher's 'power of suggestion' had all the grown-ups convinced that he was no more than an adorable four-year-old interloper, technically too little for the team of five to seven-year-olds but making up for his missing year in gumption and enthusiasm. It was about the most humiliating thing Art could imagine - which is, he supposed, exactly why Asher had orchestrated it.

"You don't know the first thing about baseball." Art grumbled, taking one hand off the ridiculously light-weight bat and going to tug at his underpants. He squinted as the glint from the sun reflected off his bat, surveying the much more formidably named Rapid Raptors fidgeting impatiently in their burgundy uniforms. Tee-ball didn't keep an official score, but by Art's estimation they were even five runs to five against these jokers - despite the Raptors' first basemen being pulled off the field after a random nosebleed, and their pitcher throwing a tantrum about a bee landing on his shoulder. The way Art saw it, that was all down to Asher's frankly abysmal strategy. "I'm easily your best hitter. " he complained "It doesn't make any sense for me to be last."

"Good thing we're playing tee-ball, then." Asher dismissed. "Besides, it only makes sense that the youngest kid goes last. You're still only four, Artie-pants."

The smaller boy rolled his eyes. Asher's powers might have

fooled the parents, but the kids weren't so suggestible. Afterall, it was obvious! Even if some of the seven-year-olds seemed freakishly tall for their age, he was still bigger than every single one of them. And what kind of four year old could play baseball like he could? They could tell. No matter how many times Asher asked him if he needed to go potty or swatted his bum and put him in a thumb-sucking time-out, those kids weren't convinced.

Still, Art decided to keep his mouth shut. The longer he'd observed, the more convinced he was that Asher's powers didn't work on little kids whatsoever. Even better, Asher somehow seemed not to have noticed - or at least seemed not to care. A bunch of little kids weren't much as far as allies went, but if there was any way out of the infantile prison that Asher had constructed over the last few weeks, he had to take it.

"Whatever." Art dismissed petulantly. "Can I hit the ball now?"

"Hold your horses. Do you need to go potty?" Asher insisted.

"No." Art was happy to confirm. He'd been extra careful to drink as little as possible before tee-ball, and he'd successfully avoided any 'potty emergencies' in the presence of the Lion Cubs so far. They might not have believed he was four, but a performance like that was still sure to destroy any semblance of his social standing.

"And you're still dry?" Asher continued, taking the opportunity to tug back Art's briefs to carefully examine the

folded wad of toilet paper pinned to the inside.

“Yes!” Art hissed, shivering in embarrassment at the weird papery feeling against his skin as the make-shift training pants snapped back into place again.

“Good boy. Alright. Give Rory a kiss.” Asher instructed, producing a cuddly stuffed lion cub that served as the team's mascot.

Asher had shown the stuffie to every member of the team, letting each kid stroke or squeeze it for good luck before they went up to the plate - but it seemed Art was the only one who was actually expected to kiss it! He blushed, turning his head and letting Asher briefly press the toy against his lips. He quickly turned away again, scrunching up his face like he'd been forced to bite a sour lemon.

“That's gross...” he mumbled to himself, somberly putting both hands on the bat again and turning towards the tee.

“Hang on! You can't run with your pants around your ankles, Artie!” Asher interrupted, hitching up Art's Thomas themed undies as high up as they would go and tucking the baby-blue cotton waistband over the back tail of his jersey. Art winced at the friction, feeling the toilet paper pad tugged coarsely between his legs. Then, Asher repositioned the baseball pants just a teensy bit higher than they'd been before, reaching around and securely re-fastening his belt to ensure the perfect view of the Thomas and Friends logo would remain as clear as his uniform number when the boy went toddling around the bases. “There. Now you won't trip.”

Asher smiled, smoothing out the back of his shirt and smiling up goofily as if he'd done him a huge favour.

"Thanks." Art spat, relieved to see Asher finally retreat to the 'dug-out' - really no more than a small cordoned off area near the bleachers where the other Cubs were watching.

"Aaaand now up to the plate, we've got Artie 'Thomas' O'Ryan!" A balding old man with white tufts of hair and a large red megaphone announced from the sidelines. Apparently, he was the grandpa of one of the Raptor kids, and came to all their games to 'announce' the players up to bat. The parents certainly seemed to get a kick out of it, but Art couldn't help but shoot the old codger a foul look.

"Little Artie is a rookie this season - just four years old. His coach tells me he's still recovering from a broken arm after taking a fall playing with his Little Tikes tee-ball set in the garden back in the spring. But he's going to give it his best go this afternoon!" A sympathetic coo went up from the bleachers, making Art cringe so hard his batting arm all but froze up. He took a deep breath and tried to shut out everything but the ball and the bat, remembering what his real coach had taught him about dealing with hecklers. "Artie also loves playing with his trainset, and all things Thomas the Tank Engine. Although I think we already knew that." Art squeezed the bat even tighter as a smattering of adoring chuckles went out, determined to hit the ball out of the park. "Let's all give a big hand for Artie O'Ryan!"

Art didn't wait for the applause to die down. He clenched his

teeth, imagining the ball was Asher's stupid grinning face as he brought the bat forward with all the strength he could muster. The bat and ball made contact with a crystal clear 'ding', flying clean up and out far away into the distant outfield. Art smiled with satisfaction at the empty tee, not able to resist shooting a boastful smirk back towards his team mates.

"Remember to run, Artie!" Asher shouted, spoiling the moment.

"I was going to remember!" Art retorted petulantly, brandishing the bat in his general direction.

"Then run!"

Art briefly looked over his shoulder, realising that a couple of the Raptors were already scrambling around in the outfield attempting to retrieve the ball. If that had been a proper pitch, it would have been out of the park no question - but he guessed that wasn't really possible hitting from a tee. "Shit." Art muttered to himself, hurriedly dropping the bat and scrambling as fast as he could towards first base, toilet-paper stuffed underpants rustling all the way.

The parents roared in adoration, clearly surprised. He thundered past the first base, and then the second, and then the third - the Raptors helpless to stop him as they all converged on the ball rolling along the field like bees to honey, clumsy six-year-old fingers failing to scoop it up. Just as Art was zooming towards home plate, one of the kids finally managed to grab it - and for a moment Art's heart was

in his throat - but the throw was outrageously wide. He made a point of stamping his foot extra hard onto the plate as he crossed, throwing his hands into the air in celebration. He only remembered that his Thomas briefs had been showing the whole way around when he felt his jersey untuck from underneath the elastic waistband - making it snap against his bare skin.

Art's teammates didn't seem to care. They all run out from the bleachers, jumping up and down with him in celebration. It was only when the old man on the megaphone joined in, vociferously congratulating the Lion Cubs' 'littlest Rookie' on his homerun, that Art remembered he was much too old for tee-ball - and much too old to care.

He calmed himself down, focussing on the score. The league the Lion Cubs played in was so lame that they didn't even record outs, instead letting every player in the lineup bat once before swapping over. They only played three innings, which meant that everything would come down to the bottom of the third.

"That puts us up six runs to five." He explained wisely to the gathered little kids. "So if we can get through the bottom of the third without conceding, we win."

"What's com-see-din?" Hudson, a dopey little five-year-old asked, very much bringing Art back to reality.

Art sighed. "It just means we don't let them score."

"You're not really four, are you?" Jonah, one of the seven-

year-olds, suddenly piped up. He was a serious looking kid with a short unkempt sprouting of black hair - and one of the very few outfielders Art could rely on not to get distracted picking grass.

“He is. Coach Asher said he is.” Cayden, a different seven-year-old with mean piercing green eyes and a shaggy caramel mane insisted. Despite standing barely an inch shorter than himself, Art thought he was pretty useless as a player. It seems the kid got by on confidence alone, however. Boasting the pitcher’s mound in the field (although he didn’t actually pitch, of course) he fancied himself the Lion Cub’s unofficial captain - and certainly didn’t like being outshone by the likes of Art. “Look at his undies. Only babies wear undies like that.”

“Four-year-olds aren’t babies.” Hudson corrected, but no-one really listened to him.

“But he’s too tall.” Jonah continued, sharply. “There’s definitely no four-year-olds who are that tall.”

“Coach Asher can pick him up!” Cayden pointed out - though given Asher’s ongoing growth spurt, he could probably pick up both Cayden and Jonah in each arm if he wanted to. “Asher told me he’s even his babysitter, and he picks him up all the time. He even gives him cuddles. Even kisses!”

The kids all oohed at that, egging Cayden on. He grinned, very pleased with himself. “Artie is definitely four. He might even be three! Or two! And he wears diapers! I bet Coach Asher changes his diapers!”

There were a few scattered titters, but the crowd of kids seemed generally unimpressed by Cayden's latest remark. Clearly, he'd gone too far. Artie saw his chance.

"You can't tell Asher I told you, but I'm not actually four." He told the kids in a low-hushed tone, taking a moment to think how best to explain to a bunch of little kids. "The truth is that I'm kinda like...a secret agent! And Asher is like a super villain. He's trying to turn me into a four-year-old because um...'cause I'm too good at baseball."

"That's dumb. You're lying." Cayden poo-pooed him straight away, waving a dismissive hand.

"It's true! I was in a really big league team. I was the pitcher." Art doubled down, adopting a low reverent tone. He supposed it was true, in a manner of speaking. "He already brainwashed all the grown-ups, and I've gotta escape soon or he'll send me back to preschool - and then I won't be allowed to play even for the Lion Cubs anymore." he elaborated randomly, figuring some stakes might help focus the kids' minds. Even as he said it however, his heart twitched in fear. What was Asher planning to do about the upcoming school year?

Cayden gave a dismissive raspberry, but to Art's delight the other kids all looked enraptured. "What do we do?" Jonah asked fearfully.

Art hesitated. What was his plan? Even with a whole army of six-year-olds, there was no getting around the fact that every grown-up Asher came into contact could be convinced that

Art was a four-year-old with no more than a few choice words. It seemed the only logical first step was to somehow get out of Asher's sight, and then as far away from him as humanly possible. He could make a better plan when he was over state lines.

"Um...I just need you to let me play right field." He decided, eyeing up the hole in the fence on the far right side of the diamond. "Then, after we win, just keep him talking for as long as possible."

Just then, a heavy hand echoed down on top of Art's batting helmet - before a strong grip popped it efficiently off the top of his head. "Congratulations, Artie!" Asher encouraged, grabbing the smaller boy around the waist and pulling him back to sit in pride of place on his right knee. Shit! How long had he been standing there? How much had he heard? "And congrats boys. That was a really strong inning!" He bounced Art gently up and down, keeping a hand placed firmly on his tummy to stop him from rising to his feet. "Let's talk strategy for the bottom of the third..."

"I wanna be pitcher!" Cayden interrupted, flinging his hand into the air like the needy kindergartener he was.

Art couldn't help but follow suit, already feeling his plan slipping through his fingertips. "I wanna be right field!" he mimicked in an identical tone.

"Artie, it's not nice to interrupt." Asher scolded him at once, bouncing him just a little more firmly on his knee. "Go on, Cayden."

Art scrunched up his face, feeling a flash of indignation. “But Cayden said-”

“Artie! What did I say?” Asher chided him much more firmly. He pulled him back so he was almost lying on Asher’s knee, looking him directly in the eye. “Big boys are talking now. So please hush up.” He instructed, leaving no more room for debate.

Cayden gave a superior smirk at his ‘four-year-old’ rival, continuing to babble on about where exactly he thought each of his team mates should be placed - but Art wasn’t listening. Everything else fading into the background, he felt a horrible anxious nausea rising up from his tummy, up into his throat, and then seeming to infect his whole brain. He opened his mouth, and the next thing he knew Asher had taken his hand and plopped his thumb in there. He started to suck, and all at once the nausea dissipated - replaced with a lovely, soothing, satisfying tingling cold feeling running down his spine, across either arm to the tips of his fingers, and then onwards and onwards into every nerve in his body. It was just so lovely!

“Artie can be out in the left field.” He heard Asher decree as the kids all started to wander out to their various places. Art was so distracted that Asher had to take the boy under the armpits and stand him up off his knee, flicking a finger around the back waistband of his undies to double check the pad in his briefs was still dry. After that, he wrestled a large leather baseball glove onto Art’s free hand as if dressing an uncooperative toddler, before he finally gave him an

encouraging pat on the bum and sent him wandering out thoughtlessly to his position.

As the game got going, Art felt a wave of shame and disappointment - looking over jealously at Hudson milling about picking at daffodils in the right field. Unlike the right, there was certainly no prospect of escape on the left - the fence on that side long since replaced with a tall sturdy brick wall. His plan had failed. Still, what did he expect? They were just a bunch of little kids, and he was no genius. Over the last few weeks, every vain plan he'd made to thwart Asher had crashed and burned before it had even got off the ground. He was hopeless. Maybe he deserved to be treated like a four year old? For all his harebrained schemes, he certainly seemed to think like one.

The game seemed to progress at record speed in the background - as if Art were fast-forwarding through a recording. It would be over soon, and he'd have to go home to play with wooden trains, or watch Paw Patrol, or splash about 'nakie' in the kiddie pool. Another nauseous round of bad feelings swelled up in his tummy, and he sucked more urgently on his thumb - managing to soothe himself back to a happy heady medium again. It was okay. He was going to be alright. There would be another opportunity. The Lion Cub kids seemed to love him after all - or at least most of them. They'd help him! He sat down cross-legged on the grass, staring up at the clouds as he kept on sucking without a care in the world.

He heard a distant metallic ding somewhere far away, but he

didn't pay it any attention. It wasn't his thumb, after all - and it couldn't make the bad feelings go away. Nothing could do that but his thumb. Then, something round rolled into his lap - but he ignored that too. His other hand was stuck in the big unwieldy glove, and he certainly wasn't going to take his thumb out of his mouth for something as silly as a ball.

"WHAT ARE YOU DOING!?" He heard Cayden's voice screaming in outrage from the mound, finally pulling his gaze away from the clouds and towards the game - though his thumb stayed firmly in his mouth, of course. "THROW THE BALL YOU STUPID BABY!"

Art blinked. Was he talking to him? He narrowed his eyes, watching as a little kid in a burgundy jersey sprinted past the home plate, then another, then another, and then another!

"And that's a grand slam!" The annoying voice of the old man on the megaphone breathlessly announced - a high-pitched cacophony of raucous little-kid cheering going up from the Raptors bench as they all started to jump up and down in victory.

Oh. Art thought, finally finding the will to pop his thumb out of his mouth. He got unsteadily to his feet, knocking the ball with the side of his velcro sneakers as he did so. He guessed he should have been paying attention.

"Does Baby Artie want some nuggies?" Cayden teased, grinning from ear to ear. If the seven-year-old had been at all upset by their loss to the Raptors, Art's subsequent cratering in the social estimations of the other Cubs had thoroughly

restored his morale. The boy's latest humiliation at the hands of Asher was the cherry on top.

Perched at the end of a big long table in McDonalds, Cayden to his right and Hudson to his left, Art was currently squeezed into a red moulded plastic booster seat - the added height making his flushed face tower conspicuously above his fellow tee-ball players like a blushing blond and red signal tower. Attempting to disguise the tight plastic straps keeping his butt attached to the uncomfortable plastic like a baby in a bouncer, he was keeping Rory the Lion clutched to his lap - though he guessed carrying around a stuffed toy was hardly very mature, either. The only consolation was that the plastic back was high enough to cover his underwear.

Rory was the supposed 'reward' for being named 'Man of the Match' (or 'Little Boy of the Match', as Asher had described it on this occasion). The award had nevertheless rubbed Cayden the wrong way, making him rant and rave about how many runs the 'baby' had cost them for the whole bus ride over. If he was being generous, Art might have thought Asher was trying to make him feel better - or at least get the team to lay off him for his mistake.

It wasn't like Asher was always horrible to him, after all. Sometimes, he was almost nice. Protective, even. But if Asher was being nice, he probably wouldn't have put him in a toddler's booster seat. He cautiously eyed Poppy, Cayden's two-year-old baby sister, who was in the process of mashing her french fries into the plastic tray of her highchair while her Mom wiped away ketchup that had somehow ended up on her

forehead. He supposed he was lucky Asher hadn't insisted on treating him the same.

"Hellooooo!? Baby Artie!" Hudson joined in, getting right in his face and yelling at the top of his lungs. Until then, Art had been doing his best to ignore Cayden's antics, hoping that the kid would eventually get bored or wander off to play in the play place. But Hudson was only five! Who did he think he was?

"Shut. Up!" He whined, trying his best to sound intimidating - but stuck in a booster seat, even a kid as big as Art wasn't capable of being very frightening.

Hudson just giggled.

"So he can talk." Cayden pounced, talking with his mouth full. Art grimaced at the disgusting sight.

"I'm not a baby. You're a baby."

"Nuh-uh." Cayden insisted. "You're soooooooo a baby. 'Cause you look like a baby, and you talk like a baby, and you suck your thumb like a baby..." Art interrupted by grabbing one of his leftover nuggets from inside his happy meal box, flinging it full force at Cayden's head. Despite his erstwhile pitching skills however, he was way off. The seven-year-old howled in amusement. "Naughty baby!" He scolded, grabbing another nugget and dunking it in ketchup. "These go in your mouth, not the on the floor." He proceeded to smear the ketchup all over Art's mouth as the older boy wiggled and squirmed, refusing to allow himself to be force-fed like a

fussy toddler.

“Artie, what have I told you about playing with your food?” Asher intervened. Straightaway, Cayden dropped the nugget he’d been holding, allowing it to plop down into the folds of Art’s shirt.

“He’s being super naughty.” Cayden reported to his coach. “He even threw one at me! Hudson saw!”

“It’s not nice to tattlet.” Asher said vaguely, kneeling down so he was at Art’s level. “But you’ve certainly made a mess!” He produced a wad of baby wipes, running them across every sensitive part of Art’s skin he could find - from his neck, to his nose, to behind his ears - making him snort and squiggle and squirm in his seat like a tickled baby piglet. “Who’s a mucky puppy? You are! You are!”

Cayden and Hudson exchanged delighted glances at the infantile sight. “He’s so ticklish!” Hudson remarked, sounding almost affectionate.

“Do you wipe his butt with those too?” Cayden added much more callously, making the two of them break down into hysterical scoffing laughter.

Asher just chuckled. “I think all of you boys need to let off some steam.” He decided, reaching down and unbuckling Art’s booster seat before grabbing him under the armpits - setting him down on the floor. He made sure to adjust the back of the kid’s pants, making sure his undies were showing, as always. “Why don’t you go and show Artie the slide?”

“Okay!” Cayden enthused, possessively snatching Art’s right arm - the same one he’d broken. He tugged it hard, yanking the other kid towards him.

“Ow! You’re hurting me!” Art complained, looking up at Asher for assistance.

“Play gentle, boys.” Asher tutted, retrieving Rory the Lion from where the toy had dropped on the sticky ground - but Cayden had already dragged Art a good ten yards away towards the play place.

“Race you to the top of the big slide!” He challenged, finally letting go. “If I get their first, you have to admit you’re a stupid, stinky, diaper-wearing baby!”

“What if I get their first?” Art disputed, but Cayden had already zoomed off - making a bee line for a ramp on the left of the big play structure.

Art knew the contest didn’t mean anything - he hadn’t even agreed to it - but something about the way the arrogant, bossy little kid stuck out his tongue at him as he clambered up the ramp rubbed him the wrong way. He could totally beat him to the top! He was only seven afterall, and Art was fourteen.

He ran over towards a climbing wall that seemed to lead directly to the top of the slide. He started to heave himself up, figuring he would get to the top before Cayden was even halfway. But as he climbed, he found legs didn’t stretch quite long enough to reach the grips he tried to reach - and his arms weren’t quite strong enough to hold him up in the places he’d

planned to hold. He got to the top eventually, panting and red-faced, but Cayden was already there. Worse, even Hudson had arrived - the two of them watching over the top of the wall wearing two matching smirks.

“Almost there, Baby Artie!” Cayden encouraged as he heaved himself over the top, flopping down on the soft padded floor.

“You did it!” Hudson praised.

“Wow, I bet it sure is hard climbing with that big stinky diaper on.” Cayden tittered.

After a climb like that, Art had all but run out of patience. “I don’t wear diapers!” he bellowed, scrambling to his knees. He didn’t know how he could get so incensed about it. It was a ridiculous lie. Everyone could see his Thomas the Tank Engine briefs, after all. But it was just so stupid, and he was just so tired, that he couldn’t help but be furious.

“Yuh-huh you do.” Cayden insisted, nodding knowingly to himself. “I got here first, which means that you yourself actually admitted that you’re a baby and you wear diapers. Hudson heard you say it!”

“I did not!”

“You did! I heard!” Hudson lied, looking up at the older boy for approval.

Something snapped. Art gritted his teeth, deciding once and for all that he had put up with quite enough shit from Cayden. If he wanted to act like a tough guy, he’d treat him like a

tough guy. He got to his feet, balling up his fists.

“See? Hudson heard you say it. Which means you’re totally a baby now, and everyone’s gonna think so.”

“Shut your stupid face.” Art threatened.

“Or what?”

“Or I’ll make you.”

It seemed to take a moment for the seven-year-old to process exactly what was happening. Art supposed a little kid like that had probably never been in a real fight - though he wouldn’t allow himself to feel bad. Eventually, the sight of Art’s balled up fists and grim determined eyes seemed to make something click - and he put two and two together.

“You’re just a baby.” Cayden dismissed with a laugh - the kid taking a step back and adopting what looked like a stereotypical martial arts stance. “I go to karate.”

“Sure you do.” Art shrugged, carefully examining the kid’s pose. Was it just his imagination, or did he look somehow taller than before? Still, it was obvious he was all talk - more cartoon network than karate. Art decided he could rely on his usual technique.

He was about to charge forward and take Cayden by surprise, when he felt a sharp tingling cold sensation at the back of his neck. No! Not now! He felt his lips part and his stanced legs start to tremble in anticipation, fists longing to unclench and instead grab for his crotch. He was seconds from giving in,

from jumping up and down and begging Cayden to take him potty while the brain fog rolled in like an all-enveloping storm - but he just barely managed to cling on from sheer furious determination. A big spurt of hot wet pee escaped into his underpants, quickly drenching the toilet-paper pad.

And then, all of a sudden, the urge was gone.

“ARGHHHHH!” he screamed, charging forward at full-pelt. He cringed, actually closing his eyes from embarrassment as he felt the soaked pad in his underpants squelch against his skin as he ran, but he didn’t let that stop him - delivering a brutal kick directly into Cayden’s nuts.

Despite his alleged karate skills, the seven-year-old bully seemed completely unprepared. He yowled in pain and collapsed like a house of cards, bawling like a baby and rolling around on the cushioned floor. Art saw his opportunity, pouncing on him like a lion mauling its prey.

“Who’s the baby now!?” He screamed into Cayden’s ear, pounding him in the stomach - but the little kid just cried. “Huh?” he insisted, hitting him again. “HUH!?”

“ARTHUR O’RYAN!” Asher’s booming voice demanded from below. Art paused, giving Cayden one last thump in his side for good measure before he rolled away - peaking out over the top of the play structure.

“I can see you!” Asher continued, standing at the bottom of the play place with his hands on his hips. “Stand up!”

Art cautiously did as he was told, innocently holding up his

hands. "I didn't even do anything!" he insisted.

Cayden let out a series of hiccuping helpless moans, clutching his tummy as he managed to sit up and cling to the netting - red-faced and wailing. "He h-h-hit me!" He accused.

The fourteen-year-old felt a pang of guilt in his own tummy, cringing at the sight of the blubbering little kid. Then, he felt a frigid damp feeling from his crotch. Looking down, he realised the flimsy toilet-paper pad had inevitably leaked, cold pee soaking out onto the front of his uniform pants and starting to drip onto the padded floor.

Asher shook his head in disappointment "Get down here, Artie." He commanded.

"But-"

"Now!"

Realising he was busted, Art had no choice but to comply. Cringing at the feeling of the now icy-cold slimy mush in his briefs, he went to turn around - planning to walk back down the same way Cayden and Hudson had come up. Just as he took his first step however, his foot slipped on the plasticky padding of the floor - now sleek with a puddle of his own pee. He fell back towards the slide, just barely managing to grab onto the flimsy netting on each side with a single finger. He was about to yank himself back up, but then he saw Cayden's green eyes peering hatefully through the other side of the netting. The boy's teary face contorted in fury, yanking the netting towards him - and cutting Art loose.

Art let out a blood-curdling scream as he fell backwards down the slide. At first, he was still upright, slick wet shoes slipping on the shiny surface as he helplessly tried to find a purchase again. It was no use, however. The next thing he knew, his butt banged down heavily on the hard plastic of the slide with an acoustic boom, his legs tucked underneath in an unnatural backwards 'Z' shape. There was a sickening crunch.

The pain was overwhelming. Of course, his bladder finally fully released - completely soaking his already damp baseball pants in a fresh deluge of hot shameful pee-pee. And of course, he immediately burst into big bawling tears.

“YOOWWWWWWW!”

Even in the privacy of the McDonalds bathroom, Art couldn't stop crying.

“Ow, ow, ow, owwww....!” He continued to whine as Asher carried him - soaked and sobbing - through the door, locking it behind them. His leg felt like it had been sat on by an elephant, but the way the other Cubs had looked at him when Asher scooped him up had been so much worse. They'd all been staring with scandalised wide eyes and disgusted wrinkled noses, fascinated and horrified by the site of their teammate reduced to a snivelling wailing cry-baby with pee-pee in his pants.

“Shhhh, it's alright baby boy.” Asher cooed, gently bouncing him up and down. He was holding the kid horizontally in both arms to keep from getting pee on himself, one nestled gently behind his back and the other under the crook of his

knees while Art clung needily his shoulders. Asher's strong grip was strangely comforting - the bigger boy carrying him as easily as if were a mewling kitten or a fussy baby - but the manoeuvre hadn't hidden his ruined pee-soaked pants at all, giving all the other kids a good look before he was whisked away. "You just need to be a brave little boy, okay?"

Asher folded down a large changing table, exhaling in relief as he deposited Art on the hard grey plastic. The hinges on the mechanism creaked slightly from the big kid's weight, but it just about held. Asher started to undo Art's belt.

"It huuuuurts...." Art complained, barely even registering that he now lay on a baby's changing table. A sudden rush of shooting pain stabbed up Art's leg as Asher tried to manipulate it up so he could start to shimmy off the soaked pants. "It hu-hu-huuuuurts!"

Asher stopped what he was doing, gently cantilevering his legs down again. "Alright, bud. I'm sorry." He apologised, starting again much more slowly. "Is this okay...?"

"OWWWWWWW!" Art interrupted.

"Awww, buddy." Asher sympathised, trying to sound calm, cool, and comforting even as his black eyebrows narrowed in concern. "I think I know something that will make you feel better..." he offered.

Art let out a little sob, deliberately twisting his head around to stare down at the grimy tile floor. He couldn't think straight, his mind a mix of blistering pain, self-loathing

disgust, but most of all hot-red humiliation. He could tell from the tone of Asher's voice that he was up to something - something involving his 'power of suggestion'. Art felt a rush of shame. How had he ever let things get this far? How had lying back on a baby's changing table in a public bathroom while Asher cooed at him ever become even close to normal? Worst of all, how was it actually helping?

He swallowed, feeling the need to say something - anything - to convince the bigger kid to leave him alone, but all he could manage was a tiny hoarse whisper. He gave into the pain. "It hurts..."

"I know, baby boy, but I can make you feel better." Asher comforted, putting a gentle finger under the smaller boy's chin to direct the boy's watery blue eyes to meet his own. "Look who's here!" He was holding up Rory the Lion, clutching the stuffed animal in front of his mouth and manipulating it by the scruff of its neck to make it wiggle its head from side to side as if it were talking "I wuv you Artie!" the toy enthused.

Art grunted and shook his head, trying to make himself frown even as he felt the corners of his lips tugging up involuntarily. "That's silly..." he protested.

"Maybe a little." Asher allowed, gently placing down the soft-toy on Art's tummy. "But Rory always makes you feel better, doesn't he?" Asher reminded him. Art felt a cold satisfying tingle go down the back of his neck, staring deep into Asher's eyes as the bigger boy kept on talking - his words

reverberating around in his mind as if they originated from the bottom of a deep, dank, echoey well. “Rory makes your boo-boos all better when you’re hurt, and gives you kisses when you’re sick...” Asher instructed him. “And he even gives you cuddles when you’re feeling a little down, or grumpy, or you just need a bit of help calming down before nap time.”

Art knew on the surface level that none of it was true - at least not yet - but still he couldn't resist the urge to grab the stuffie as if he'd been obsessed with it all his life, squeezing his fingers through the toy's soft felt fur. The satisfying cold tingle seemed to spread up afresh from his finger-tips, making all the pain go away in an instant like a magical healing elixir. “Rory...” he repeated mindlessly, lifting up the toy into the crook of his arm and rubbing the fur against his neck.

“Good boy.” Asher praised, managing to get Artie's soaked pants and undies off. There was a slight feeling of discomfort from his hurt leg, and a sudden rush of cold air tickling against his bare skin, but Artie couldn't resist the urge to keep cuddling Rory - squeezing the toy tight against his face and letting it soak up all of his tears even as Asher started to wipe him down with a fresh wad of baby wipes.

“That tickles!” He heard a childish voice squeak, muffled from behind Rory's thick fur, but he didn't wiggle or fuss. His leg still hurt a little, but he didn't fidget or cry. Rory helped him behave. He was a good boy, and Asher was only helping him get nice and clean again.

“There we are.” Asher narrated with satisfaction, sliding something soft and padded and papery-feeling under Artie’s bare bum-bum. He gently pulled Artie’s leg back down so that it was lying down flat on the changing table again, alleviating the pain. “Nice and clean and dry again.”

It was only when Art sat up, moving Rory away from his face and cuddling him against his chest instead, that he saw what had happened. Asher brushed aside the hem of his Lion Cubs jersey, securing the adhesive refastenable sides against his hips. Fastened snug and thick and bulging between his legs was a Pull-Up. A pink Minnie Mouse themed Pull-Up!

Art’s lips fell loose into a shocked pouty ‘O’ shape. He knew he should have been raising hell - he was fourteen for god’s sake! He didn’t belong in a diaper! But no. Something nagging at the back of his mind insisted that it just wasn’t worth it. He was in too much pain. He was much too sleepy. He shook his head in vague disapproval. “No...”

“Poppy and Cayden’s Mommy had one spare.” Asher explained, tugging the training pants up at the sides to make sure they were on properly. Then, he pulled Art up into his arms again - this time securing him with both hands under his puffy bottom and legs snuggled around either side of his torso like he was carrying a sleepy baby monkey. Rory was squeezed in between their two bodies, nuzzled comfortingly against Art’s skin “Isn’t that nice?”

“No...” Art repeated, even as he felt an irrepressible yawn rising in his chest and his eyelids start to droop from

exhaustion. "It's for girls...it's for babies..."

"Shhhhh..." Asher comforted, gently rocking him. He squeezed the boy closer, stroking the back of his long flowing golden hair. "Just try and relax, baby boy. Rory always helps you go beddy-byes, doesn't he?"

Art gave a few heavy blinks of his eyelids as Asher carried him out of the bathroom. "Yuh-huh..." he heard himself agree, finally allowing them to flutter shut.

For a long time, Art focussed only on the warm lovely feeling of Rory's fur against his cheeks and the steady comforting beat of Asher's heartbeats - floating dreamily in the hazy space between waking and unconsciousness.

"Is he okay?" a distant middle-aged woman's voice echoed from above, voice tinged with concern.

"I'm not really sure." Asher replied. "I gave him a little medicine, but I think he really hurt his leg."

"Does Artie always wear a diaper when he's sleeping?" An impish voice needled, making Art's eyebrows twinge down in indignation even as his eyes remained shut and his mouth hung half-open - letting out drowsy, kitten-like little snores. "I guess he is a baby..."

"That's not nice, Cayden." the woman's voice warned.

"I don't care. He's naughty. He hit me!"

"Well he might be really hurt, thanks to your antics." The woman chided with finality. "Want me to drive you to the

hospital?”

“Thanks - that’s probably a good idea.” Asher agreed. “I’ll call his Mom.”

“I think he’ll fit in Poppy’s car seat. Hopefully the drive won’t wake him...”

“He should be okay.” Asher explained. The feeling of cold wind lapping against Art’s bare skin let him know they’d gone out into the parking lot. “As long as he’s cuddling Rory, he’ll be as quiet as a mouse...”

“I’m notta mouse...” Art mumbled in protest, only vaguely understanding - but Asher just shushed him, stroking his hair and encouraging him to cuddle up closer into the toy pressed against his bare neck. “We’re going to the hospital...?”

“Yes, but don’t worry, Artie.” Asher instructed. “Just go back to sleep.”

“Kay...” Art replied, figuring it was no big deal. Afterall, if there was something really wrong, he’d be in a lot more pain, wouldn’t he?

And with that thought, he was out.