The Comet

by andlat

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The Costume Box
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Chapter 1

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"Not if you ask me again." He said before adding. "It's not going to clear up tonight, but that comet will still be visible for a few more nights. You're the one who told me that."

"I know." Orion sighed.

"Forecast for tomorrow looks clear." Dad said. "Forecast for tonight’s go get ready for bed. Calum's already been in bed for half an hour and you haven't even started getting ready."

"Well, he's eight." Orion said.

"Even twelve year olds need their sleep. Scoot."

Orion took a quick shower, brushed his teeth, and managed to get his underwear on – even putting his dirty boxer briefs into the hamper – before he finally gave in to temptation and checked out his bedroom window. Nope, still cloudy. He groaned.

"Get out." He grunted as he heard his door open. Mom and Dad knocked. Only Calum barged in. "I just took a shower. What if I was naked?"

"You're not." Calum said. "Looking for that stinky comet?"

"AR slash 2012 S2."

"My teacher says it's Comet Stinky." Orion sighed and launched into what Dad called his well-rehearsed spiel.

"It was discovered by Eugene R Stinky in 2012, but serious astronomers call it AR slash 2012 S2." That wasn't actually true, but Calum snickering about it being a stinky comet wore on Orion's nerves.

"Whatever." Calum said.

"Aren't you supposed to be in bed?"

"Don't tattle on me."

"Go away. I'm getting ready for bed." He walked over to his dresser and grabbed a pair of sweatpants, far more mature than Calum's Sonic pajamas. His blue shorts seemed so childish.

"You're not hanging out in your boxers?" He made the last word sound snooty.

"They're boxer briefs. And they're a lot better than your tighty whities."

"They're blue."

"Like Sonic?"

"No, navy blue." Orion stepped into his sweatpants and then pushed his brother toward the door.

"Go away."

"You're grumpy and no fun. I'm going to bed." Orion watched him leave and then checked the window again. Still cloudy.

“Guess I'll just go to bed too.” Mom or Dad, if not both of them, would check to make sure he did actually go to bed, so he couldn't sit at the window and hope for a glimpse of the comet anyway. He pulled back the covers and got into bed. His dark blue bedsheets made him snort. "Shoulda pantsed Calum. Bet he is wearing tighty whities." He looked over at the window and, with a disappointed sigh, went to sleep.

Orion thought he dreamed about the comet, but it might just have been the sun coming in his window the next morning. He kicked off the blankets and tugged down his shirt, pausing as he tried to remember something about last night. Calum had come in, teased him about the comet, then he had gone to bed. Something felt off.

“Did I go to bed without a shirt last night?” He wondered aloud. That didn't seem right. He was wearing his moon pajamas, the ones with the distance from the earth to the moon – even if it was really an average and not always accurate. Grandpa had told him he was a very smart nine year old for knowing that. He beamed at the happy memory as he walked downstairs to breakfast.

“Calum! That's my favorite!” He yelled as Calum flaunted the empty box of Captain Crunch.

“Orion, you can have Cocoa Puffs.” Mom said.

“They're not as good.”

“Think of them as little planets.” Dad said. “Or asteroids.” Orion pouted as he poured himself a bowl. Why were little brothers so annoying? He wasn't anything like that when he was eight.

“What are your plans for the day, boys?” Mom asked. “It's nice out, so-”

“Supposed to rain this afternoon.” Dad remarked.

“Alright, then I definitely want you two to go outside until lunch.” Mom said. “Eat, get dressed, then out you go.”

“It's gonna be clear for the comet, right?”

“Comet Stinky.” Calum giggled.

“It's not funny.” Orion said.

“You were laughing about your fart book.” Mom said. “Nine's not that different from eight.” Orion sniffed dismissively. Mom laughed and kissed the top of his head. “Finish your breakfast.”

Orion stood in his bedroom, shirtless once again as he tried to find the t-shirt he wanted to wear. Calum probably stole it, he thought irritably, making due with a yellow t-shirt with a robot on it. He looked himself over and nodded.

“Clothes in the hamper.” Mom said, poking her head in.

“They're by the hamper.” He protested, shuffling over and scooping up his pajamas and a pair of blue and orange briefs from last night – maybe two days ago. He tossed them into

his hamper. He wanted to get outside!

Orion raced along on his bike, hoping that Austin and Chris would be at the park. He stood up on his pedals and pumped as fast as he could, his residual disappointment over not being able to see the comet last night shoved to the back of his mind over the excitement of seeing his friends. Austin had told a hilarious joke in Mrs. Hawkins's class yesterday, hilarious enough to make Orion laugh even if he couldn't remember just what it had been.

“There they are!” He said, spying them across the green field. He rode his bike right across the grass, but nearly fell over as he stopped, wondering why he was biking toward two sixth graders. He was in third grade. But… hadn't he been in school with them yesterday? He stared at them, his head spinning so much, it was almost painful. Was this what Dad meant by a sugar rush?

“Hey! Kid!” Chris yelled, noticing him. “Whatcha staring at?” Orion realized he was staring and only a short distance from two big sixth graders: a surefire danger for any nine year old.

“Hey!” Austin said, starting toward him. In his sudden panic, Orion couldn't get his legs to pedal. He tried to jump off the bike and run for it. It was already too late.

“I asked you a question.” Chris said, pushing Orion over so that he landed in the grass. It was disorienting for a moment as he realized just how big they were. They're older than me, he reasoned. Sixth graders were practically adults.

“I was just thinking.”

“Thinking? About what?”

“The comet.” He pointed up at the sky as if it was visible during the day. The pair looked up and Orion took his chance to get to his feet. His gaze only came up to their chests and he moved his head up to look them in the eye just as their gazes came back down to him.

“Uh-huh.” Chris seemed unsure.

“What's your name?” Austin asked.

“Orion. You know me.”

“Why would we know a second grader?”

“I'm in third grade. My brother's in second” his voice trailed off. Why was he telling them that?

“Oh, what a big boy in his big boy third grader Pampers.” Chris mocked. Orion stared at him. Was that the best he could do?

“I… I… don't wear diapers.” He heard himself stammer. Why did he keep feeling like he knew them? Why had he thought they were his friends? Had they volunteered in his class or something? They didn't really seem smart enough.

“Maybe we should find out.” Austin said. “He's just standing there, staring again, Chris.”

Orion's survival instinct overrode his confusion, but it was already too late. Chris and Austin struck and struck fast. In no

time, he was down on the grass, held by Ausin as Chris tugged his shorts down.

“Tighty whities!” Chris announced.

“They're not tighty whities!” He protested pitifully. They were red with soccer balls on them. He thought they were cool, but sixth graders were so big and cool, they probably thought they were dumb little kid undies. He felt tears well up in his eyes.

“He's gonna cry, man.” Austin said.

“Whatever. Let's just… don't stare at us, kid.” They let him go, though still snickered as he struggled to get his shorts up and get back on his bike.

Orion rode straight home and ran inside, flopping facedown on the couch for a bit until he was sure his face wasn't red anymore from crying. He turned on the TV, expecting Mom to comment.ill She did not say anything, as if she could sense that he had had a bad time.

“Wait! You just watched TV?” Calum said accusingly when he came in just before the rain began. The rain soured Orion's mood more. He better get to see the comet! “Mom said we were supposed to play outside.”

“Shut up.” Orion muttered, not wanting to tell his little brother that he had been bullied. The last thing he needed was for Calum to try to fight two gargantuan sixth graders.

“What are you even watching?”

“It's what was on.” Orion replied, glad that he had switched away from the weather before Calum came in.

“It's a baby show.”

“You say that about everything.” Orion threw a pillow at his brother. That was why they were called throw pillows, right?

“Hey!” Calum lunged for Orion, whatever was on the television forgotten as they began to wrestle. They tumbled around the living room, almost miraculously avoiding the furniture as Orion got the upper hand, then Calum, then back to Orion. “You're wearing my shirt!” Calum accused.

“Nuh-uh! There's an O on the tag.”

‘It's a C!” The battle resumed.

“Hey, hey!” Mom rushed in and lifted Orion off of his brother. “It's barely even started raining and you're already at each other's throats!” She looked down at the squirming boy in her clutches. “And where are your pants?” Orion was still kicking, so he had not even noticed he was only half-dressed until he looked down and saw nothing but pale thighs and his Toy Story underoos.

“Dunno.” He said. Mom sighed and set him down.

“Calum, don't start. You need to be a responsible big brother.”

“I'm big too!”

“I know, Ry-Ry.”

“Orion.” He corrected. Something seemed wrong. Oh, right.

His pants were missing.

“He's watching a baby show.” Calum protested.

“He's five.”

“Five and a half!” Orion corrected again.

“Five and a half.” Mom agreed. Orion frowned. Was that right? “Alright, Orion. Lie down on the floor so Mommy can get your pants back on. Then you can help me make lunch.”

“But the comet.” He said.

“Remember? The comet's tonight. Daddy's gonna wake you and Calum up to see it.” Orion nodded. “But I know you're excited. How about you grab your space coloring book and we can find a comet to color?”

“Ok!”

“But I want you two to hug it out first.”

“Ok.” Calum sighed and walked over to his brother. There was something disorienting for Orion that his head only came up to Calum's chest, but he knew now wasn't the time to wonder about that. “I love my brother, yes, I do. I love my brother, he loves me too.” Calum and Orion recited dutifully.

“Very good.” Mommy said, sensing that that was about the best she could get. “Alright, Calum, you can watch TV quietly. Ry- Orion, let's go color!”

All of the comets had been colored, so Orion made due with a planet that Mommy told him he could color whatever color

he wanted. He knew the alphabet, so he knew this planet started with a J.

“Joo-pi- Joo-pi. Mommy, what's this say?”

“Jupiter, sweetie.” He nodded. He was almost certain he knew what colors Jupiter was supposed to be. His brow furrowed as he had an almost dreamlike memory of reading about Jupiter, but the words sounded so complicated. What was an atmusfear? Pushing the weird dream aside, he grabbed his red and orange crayons and set to work.

Orion gazed proudly at his work of art, so expertly colored that Mommy put it right on the fridge. He beamed with delight as Calum looked at it.

“Jupiter, huh?”

“Mhm!” Orion said before racing over to the table to eat lunch. Mommy had made macaroni and chicken nuggets! He frowned as he looked at his favorite cup, suddenly feeling like its smiling stars were for a little kid. I'm not little. He thought. I'm five and a half!

“All done?” Mommy asked, wiping his face so all he could do was mumble agreement. “Alright, you know what that means?”

“Playtime?” A rumble of thunder made him whimper.

“Not quite. It's nap-”

“Nooooo!” He bellowed. Mommy grabbed him before he could slip free from his booster seat.

“Do you want Mommy or Daddy to help you get ready to nap?”

“Daddy.” He decreed, not seeing Daddy around. As if on cue, Daddy walked into the room and grinned at Orion.

“Ready for your nap, Ry-Ry?”

“Orion!” He whined.

“Sorry, buddy. I keep forgetting” he picked him up with a melodramatic grunt. “How big you're getting, spaceman. Ready for liftoff?”

“I'm already in space!” Orion giggled.

“You sure are. Ground Control to Orion. Can you read me?”

“Uh-huh!” Orion smiled down at Daddy, feeling his face with his stubby fingers. Why did it feel like it had been forever since he had been picked up by Daddy? Daddy did it all the time. He felt a little strange as something washed over him. Something was very wrong. He was too big to be picked up, wasn't he? He wasn't five, he was… nine? Twelve? Those were big numbers, but they felt right. How could he be older than Calum though?

“Scary thunder, huh?” Daddy said, figuring that was why the kindergartner had become solemn. “It's just lightning making the air really hot.”

“Can I see the comet?” Orion asked.

“After naptime.” Daddy said.

“I'm not even-” Orion yawned and Daddy chuckled.

“Well, you just humor me, kiddo.” He set him down on his bed. Orion looked at the sheets through sleepy eyes. Hadn't his bedsheets been different before? He remembered them being just dark blue and now they were white with rocket ships on them. Of course they were rockets. He loved space.

“Did you- did you see my picture on the fridge?”

“You can show me after your nap, spaceman.” Daddy said, kissing his forehead.

“Where's… where's Bunbun?” Daddy smiled, handing him the beloved one eared rabbit. Orion hugged him to his chest as Daddy kissed him once more before pulling the blanket up to his chin. Dad's face morphed into Calum's, then into Orion's face, but he realized it couldn't be his face. That face was a big boy's and he was only five. Wasn't he? Five? Nine? Twelve? Whoever it was, they turned away and gazed up at the sky. Orion inherently knew that whoever that was, they were looking for the comet. The stinky comet. That was what big brother had called it. He had learned about it in school. I wish I could go to school, Orion thought. But I do go to school, he reminded himself.

“Hey, Ry-Ry.” A gentle voice cooed.

“Momma?” He mumbled, rubbing his eyes.

“Time to get up, buddy.” She whispered, pulling the blanket back. “Did you keep your Pull-ups dry?”

“My… my Pull-ups?” He looked down at his t-shirt with a cartoon rocket ship on it and his Buzz Lightyear Pull-ups.

“Looks like you had an oopsie.”

“I did?” Momma kissed the top of his head.

“It's okay, buddy. These things happen. Do you wanna sit on the potty?” She picked him up, nestling him against her shoulder as she walked to the bathroom. Down came his Pull-ups and he felt his potty seat under his butt. “Go pee, Ry-Ry.”

“Ok, momma.” He mumbled, trying his best to use the big boy potty and wake up the rest of the way. He had had a nice dream, he remembered that much. Coloring? Something like that.

Orion managed to pee, beaming proudly as Momma let him pick between Buzz and Mickey for his new Pull-ups. He liked Mickey Mouse Clubhouse, but Buzz was a real life astronaut, so it was an obvious choice, even if they were a little thicker.

He ran clumsily, bare feet slapping on the floor, into the living room where Calum sat. He snorted as he saw that Orion wore nothing but a shirt and his Pull-ups.

“Nice diaper, booger breath.” He said.

“It's not a diaper!” Orion yelled. “It's Pull-ups! I went pee pee on the potty!” Something deep inside him tried to cut through his insistent pride. Why did that sound wrong?

“Definitely a diaper.” Calum said.

Orion looked down at Buzz Lightyear's smiling face. It wasn't a diaper, was it? It was puffy like one, sure, but it didn't have those sticky thingies on the side. And he put them on himself, just like underwear. Eight year olds just didn't know what they were talking about. Orion's head started to spin. He wobbled and fell on his butt.

“Geez, you can't even walk.” Calum said.

“Calum, be nice.” Momma said, having heard the loud whumpf from Orion falling. “Are you okay, Ry-Ry?”

“Momma, how old am I?” Orion asked, suddenly struck by a feeling that he wasn't supposed to be a toddler proudly flaunting his Buzz Lightyear Pull-ups. Wasn't he…

“You're three!” Momma replied, holding up three fingers. “One. Two. Three!”

“But… I'm twelve.” Orion said.

“Can you even count to twelve?” Calum asked, snorting. “I'm eight and you are not older than me.”

“Calum.” Momma said. “You know you're bigger than Ry-Ry. Why does it matter what he says?”

“But he's not.” Orion whispered, terribly confused by a wave of memories. He was twelve, he was in sixth grade. He was not three, he didn't wear Pull-ups. He definitely didn't need Momma – no, mom! – to help him use the bathroom.

Mom left him to a small pile of toddler toys. Orion stared at them, unsure what to do. He felt silly playing with them, but

he also felt horribly embarrassed that he was only wearing a shirt and Pull-ups. I must have underwear in my room. I was twelve just yesterday. Wasn't I? He was especially confused about how it could be afternoon and he had only just now become aware of his situation. Science said there was a logical explanation, but what it could be confounded him.

Orion spent the afternoon trying to figure out what was going on and why he was, by all measures, a toddler of three. Calum was no help, pushing him away with his foot when Orion toddled over to try to recruit his help.

“Let me play my game.” He muttered. Orion considered trying to come up with some way to convince Calum that he was really his older brother, but what would that help? He'd probably tell Momma and Daddy, who would call the government and dissect him!

"Alright, Ry-Ry." Daddy said. "It'll be supper time soon, so let's go potty."

"Don't call me Ry-Ry."

"Oh. How about Spaceman?" He poked Orion's Pull-ups. "Huh. I kinda like that. Spaceman Ry-Ry!"

"Not Ry-Ry!"

"Well, just Spaceman then." Daddy said. "Let's go potty!" He picked him up, ignoring the former twelve year old's protests that he could do it himself, at least until they reached the bathroom.

"I'm not going while you're watching." Orion said as soon as they entered the bathroom, wishing more than anything he had a more authoritative voice than that of a squeaky toddler with a slight lisp.

"Someone's a little hangry, huh?"

"What?"

"Go pee and then we'll get you fed, spaceman."

"Daddy." He said. Why did no one else seem to realize he was a fourth his actual age?

"Rumbly, grumbly tummy tum!" Daddy said, lifting Orion's shirt and blowing a raspberry into his belly. Orion squealed and squirmed, all thoughts about talking to Daddy as if they were equals pushed away by a fit of the giggles. Just like that, his Pull-ups came down and it was back to his potty seat.

"I'm not going with you watching."

"Oh, ok." Daddy said with an amused smile. He made a production out turning his back. "Talk about being a threenager." He mumbled.

"I'm twelve." Orion said grumpily.

"Mhm."

Satisfied that Daddy wasn't looking, Orion relaxed his bladder. To his dismay, the second Daddy heard him peeing, he turned around, heaping the toddler with praise.

"It's just peeing. We do it every day." Orion said. Daddy

chuckled, leaving Orion to wonder if he was actually saying what he thought he was and just sounded precocious or if whatever had made him three was also filtering his words.

Once Orion's Pull-ups were put back to rights and his hands were washed, he discovered that even supper wasn't without its embarrassing infantilization. He sat in a booster seat with a bib around his neck, the only one at the table whose spaghetti had been cut up so he could not twirl it around his fork. His only choice was to shovel it into his mouth, staining his face, bib, and even his fingers with red.

"Wasn't that yummy?" Momma asked as she wiped his face.

"Let me do it myself!" Orion whined. This was all so demeaning! To his astonishment, Momma relented. He took the napkin and dabbed at his face.

"Someone's gonna need to get to bed." Daddy remarked. "'Specially if he wants to get up for the comet."

"Comet?" Orion was intrigued enough to relinquish the napkin back to Momma. With all the confusion over the course of the day, he had nearly forgotten. "Is it clear outside?"

"It will be after dark." Daddy said. "But you still need to go to bed, spaceman."

"Ok."

"Do you want me or Daddy to put you to bed?" Momma asked. Orion shrugged.

"You, I guess." He hoped that somehow, he could sleep this off and things would be back to normal when he woke up for the comet. "Comet AR/2012 S2." He said to himself.

"Stinky comet!" Calum declared.

"You don't get to get up for it." Orion decreed, but Daddy took things in a goofier direction. He picked Orion up.

"Look out! Here comes a stinky comet!" He bounced Orion's Pull-ups on top of Calum's head.

"Quit!" Calum whined.

"What? Ry-Ry's dry-dry, aren't you, spaceman?"

"Of course I am." Orion said, blushing a bit.

"Off to bed we go, stinky comet!" Daddy said.

"Quit!" Orion whined. Comets were serious business!

"Oof, oh for two with the boys." Daddy chuckled. "Maybe you better handle bedtime." Orion was handed off to Momma.

Once again, he found himself on the potty seat with his Pull-ups around his ankles. Afterwards, he stayed there as Momma brushed his teeth. That wasn't so bad since he found it annoying having to brush his teeth every single night, even if Momma took longer than he would have. From there, she dressed him in soft yellow pajamas with a fluffy white lamb on them.

"These are baby pajamas!" He whined.

"And yet, they fit my big boy three year old!" Momma cooed, kissing his cheeks over and over again until he could only giggle and kiss her back. "Alright, here's Bun-Bun!" He took the stuffed rabbit from Momma, kissing him before swinging him by an ear as Momma had him walk out to the living room to give Calum and Daddy good night kisses.

"Can't I stay up for the comet?" He asked.

"No, but I promise to wake you up." Daddy said. "And don't swing Bun-Bun like that. His ear will come off!"

"It's fun though." Orion said, frowning for a moment as he tried to remember how many ears Bun-Bun had had before now. Did he still sleep with him at twelve? It seemed like nonsense to think he ever wouldn't, but...

"Let's go." Momma said.

"Good night, booger breath." Calum whispered, making a face as Orion kissed his cheek.

Back in his room, Orion's eyelids felt heavy almost the instant his head hit the pillow. He yawned.

"Can't I stay up for the-" his question faded into slow, steady breaths as he fell asleep the second the lights went out.

Orion thought he was dreaming as he felt the earth seem to fall away, but as his eyelids fluttered open, he saw Momma. He yawned and nuzzled into her shoulder as she set him against it. He loved Momma. she smelled good. She was warm.

"Shh." She cooed, patting his diapered bottom as she carried him out of his room. She wrapped a blanket around him so that only his head and a fist were exposed before stepping out under the night sky. "Calum was out like a light." She whispered, gently bouncing Orion. "Look, sweetie. The comet." Orion pulled his head off of Momma's shoulder and looked up at the red-orange streak. He gasped and felt his sleepiness slip away for one glorious moment as he saw the comet, what he had been waiting for all this time! He pointed up at it.

"Comet!"

"That's right!" Momma kissed his chubby cheek. Something about the majestic celestial event overhead, the soft tones of Momma and Daddy, the way he felt so warm, yet all of his limbs felt so heavy made Orion wonder if this was a dream. He settled his head back down on Momma's shoulder.

"Where's big brother?" He asked.

"He's asleep. This is just for you, sweetie." Momma kissed him again. He looked back up at the comet before yawning and returning to Momma's shoulder. "Alright, I guess we'll get you back to bed, baby boy." She cooed, patting his diapered bottom again.

"But the comet." Orion mumbled, already starting to doze as they went back inside.