



# Chapter 4: The Pavar Monastery



By the time they reached their destination high in the mountains, Kapoor Grey had achieved a kind of semi-conscious sleep. The mountain air above the tree line became frigid and cut through his fur that was otherwise naturally suited for winter weather. Chills now invaded the haunting images of his dying father. Kap clutched the particle lens tightly to his chest though it could provide no warmth. Sometime along their journey, Timeer had draped his cloak over Kap's shivering body, but even that could not keep out the mountain cold or the horrifying memory.

At last, Timeer brought the cart to a stop. "We are here," he announced with the soft voice he used to command his horse. "The Pavar Monastery."

Kap opened his eyes and sat up. In the blackness of the mountain night, he could make out the shadowy outline of a huge stone castle. They had stopped before a double-doored archway that was closed forbiddingly.

If it was possible, Kap shivered even more. "The others are here?" he asked timidly.

"They take orphans," Timeer answered, then jumped down from his seat. "Come with me."

Kap dismounted the cart and cautiously followed Timeer to the closed double doors. They stopped at a much smaller single door, inset into the larger gate. Timeer knocked once. The door opened immediately as if the person behind the door had been expecting them.

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That someone was an old and hunched panther. He had a patch covering his right eye and walked with a cane. His expression was severe. Kap instinctively shrunk back behind Timeer at the sight of the intimidating cat.

“A delivery,” Timeer said to the panther.

“We’ll take care of him,” the panther replied with a scratchy rough voice.

Timeer put a paw behind Kap’s back and guided him forward. “Go with him,” he stated.

Kap looked back at the dog with pleading eyes that begged him not to go.

Timeer turned away toward his cart. “Good luck,” he said in parting.

*Good Luck? Kap thought with alarm. Why would I need good luck?*

The panther guided Kap through the narrow door then closed it behind. Except for the light of a single phosphor stone lamp, the interior was pitch black. The panther lifted the lamp from its stand and passed its light over Kap. He made a sniffing sound. “Let’s get you cleaned up first. You stink. Then we will show you to your bed.” The panther turned and, leaning heavily on his cane, proceeded into the darkened hall.

Kap followed behind in halting steps. *Who is ‘we?’*, he wondered.

“My name is Ibrahim,” the panther spoke over his shoulder. “I am in charge of this monastery. I’m the priest,” he added with a hint of disgust. “And your name is?”

“K-Kap... Kapoor,” Kap stuttered.

The panther nodded as he proceeded into the gloom. “Well, Kapoor,” the monastery priest spoke in his scratchy voice, “you are safe here.”

Kap didn’t feel safe. Even in the relatively warmer inside air, Kap’s shivering intensified.

Ibrahim led Kap out of the entrance hall across the floor of a massive, high ceilinged atrium and into yet another darkened hallway. Kap had the feeling he was being led into an inescapable dungeon. Finally, the panther arrived at a closed door. He rapped on it with his cane. The door opened to reveal a ragged, bearded dog with drooping eyes and yellowed teeth.

“This is Kapoor,” Ibrahim said to the dog by way of introduction. “Kapoor, this is Koda. He will take care of you.” Ibrahim then turned back down the dark hallway toward the atrium.

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The dog, Koda, waved Kap through the door. "Come in. Let's get you cleaned up."

Yet another door closed behind Kap as he understood his entrapment to be complete. Kap scanned the room with dread. The small chamber was lit by two phosphor lamps. Carved into the stone floor was a three-foot-deep stone basin. Koda walked over to the wall and lifted a wooden lever that released a stream of ice-cold water that flowed across the floor into the basin. When the basin was nearly filled, he closed the lever.

"Go ahead," Koda directed. "Hop in."

Kap's fear, at last, reached its peak. The water-filled basin looked exactly like the kind of place he would be drowned. With a trembling voice, he sank to his knees and begged.

"Please don't. I promise I'll be good. I'll do whatever you want." Tears ran freely down his face. "Please don't drown me," he cried.

At that moment, Koda's entire expression softened. His face transformed into that of a caring grandfather.

"You poor frightened child. I can only imagine what you have been through." He walked over to Kap and gently lifted him onto his feet. "No harm will come to you here. We are an orphanage. We take care of children. This is only a bath, though a cold one I must apologize." He turned to a small wooden table and retrieved a bar of soap and a washrag. "It's only soap."

Keeping a wary eye on the old dog, Kap cautiously lowered himself into the water basin. Frigid needles of ice water stabbed through his fur and the numerous cuts in his skin. At least the cold numbed some of Kap's pain. By the time he emerged from the water (after being thoroughly scrubbed with the soap bar), Kap was shaking convulsively.

Koda partially dried Kap with a towel, then produced a large wool blanket and wrapped it around the young leopard's damp body. "You'll warm up soon. Now follow me and I'll show you to your bed."

Koda led Kap out of the washroom, back to the central atrium where there was a wide stone staircase leading to a second floor. Kap's shivering was beginning to subside under the wool blanket as he climbed the stairs. At the top, another short hallway opened into a large dorm room. In the darkness, Kap could make out numerous cots scattered around the room containing non-distinct

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lumps, presumably children sleeping under their own wool blankets. He could hear soft sounds of breathing coming from under them.

"You can have this cot," Koda whispered so as not to disturb the others.

Kap sat warily on his assigned bed not knowing exactly what he should do next. Koda reached under the mattress and produced another wool blanket. "You should try to get some sleep." He indicated for the frightened and exhausted leopard to lie down. "This extra blanket should keep you nice and warm. We'll have breakfast in the morning. That's only a few hours away."

Kap lay down as instructed and allowed the old dog to cover him with the second wool blanket. Koda then turned and padded silently away into the darkness. "You're safe now," he whispered one final time, then disappeared.

Under the two blankets, Kap quickly warmed, and his shivering finally ceased. As the tension left his body, so did the last bit of energy keeping him awake. The horrifying images of his dying father mercifully did not return. Instead, Kap fell into a dreamless empty void. He soon contributed his own soft breath sounds to those of the other sleeping orphans.



Kap awoke that morning to the face of a very young leopard boy peeking over the edge of his mattress. "Boo," the child said then ducked under the mattress giggling. Kap leaned over the mattress to find the child hiding there. The boy shrieked, then ran out from under the mattress laughing. It was then that Kap realized the child was merely a toddler clad in a sleep shirt and a cloth diaper.

Suddenly, another face popped up over the opposite side of Kap's mattress, another "Boo," followed by the running away of another toddler wearing a diaper. In the dim light of morning, Kap could now make out the entire dorm room. Every cot contained a young cub staring at him with great curiosity. Along one wall was a line of cribs containing even younger cubs, all of them with their faces pressed against their crib rails, intensely interested in their overnight guest.

"They put me in the nursery?" Kap scratched his ears. "That's a little strange." He wondered where the older kids were and why he hadn't been roomed there.

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Kap swung his feet to the floor and stood up from his bed. That's when the pain hit him. His cracked knee buckled under his weight, sending him tumbling to the ground. A few of his deeper cuts re-opened producing new streams of blood. Kap's entire body seemed to hurt.

The first toddler who had run away now returned to Kap cautiously. "Are you hurt?" the boy asked with an empathetic look of pain on his face. "Do you have ouch?"

"Yes," Kap replied as he raised himself from the floor onto his good leg. "I have a lot of ouch." He spotted the entrance to the nursery and hobbled his way toward it. "I need to find Koda. I think he put me in the wrong room."

"Don't go," the second toddler whined. "We want you to stay."

Kap continued to hobble away. "Sorry kid. This room is for babies."

In the hallway just outside the nursery, Kap ran into Koda who was making his own way toward the nursery. Koda observed Kap's limping gait along with the streaks of fresh blood on the leopard's fur.

"Oh," Koda raised his eyes in surprise. "I didn't get a good look at you last night. You are more injured than I thought." He offered an arm to support Kap's injured side. "Come. I'll take you to our doctor right away."

Kap leaned against Koda's arm and limped alongside the dog. Koda led him in the direction of the infirmary which was also on the second floor. "I think you put me in the wrong room," Kap said, wincing each time he put any pressure on his right knee. "You put me in the nursery."

Koda looked mildly surprised. "I'm afraid that's the only room we have."

Kap understood the dog to mean that the other rooms must be full. "So where are the other orphans, the older ones?"

Koda shook his head. "That's all of them. All of our orphans are in the nursery."

Kap paused mid-limp. "What? But that doesn't make any..."

"We're here," Koda interrupted. "Dr. Farhan's office. He can fix you up." The old dog opened the door to the infirmary and guided Kap inside with a reassuring paw. "Dr. Farhan. You have a new patient," he announced.

## The Regression Particle



A door along the back wall of the room opened and the presumed Dr. Farhan walked through it. Kap's muscles locked at the sight of the doctor. He froze in fear.

Dr. Adam Farhan, the physician and surgeon assigned to the Pavar Monastery, was an old, heavy-set tiger who had sagging, rheumy eyes and wore rectangular spectacles. His fur was significantly greyed, though the orange stripes of a tiger were still prominent. Like Ibrahim, Dr. Farhan's expression was severe—a look intensified by prominent fangs of his partially open mouth.

A tiger was the last person Kap expected to see at the monastery, and as its physician, the least welcome. He clung to Koda's arm, having no intention of being left alone with the imposing cat.

Koda could feel Kap's tension. He gently pulled Kap's paws off his arm.

"Remember, we take care of orphans. You are quite safe. Dr. Farhan will be kind to you."

Kap allowed himself to be guided to the doctor's exam table by Koda who then turned to leave the room. "Afterward you can come down for breakfast. Dr. Farhan will fix you up." Then he was gone.

The tiger physician began a methodical examination of Kap's injuries. Kap tried to project an attitude of defiance during the exam but instead began to tremble.

Dr. Farhan stopped when he came to Kap's injured knee. "Hmm... I don't think it's broken," he pronounced in a deep voice. "But you have a large contusion. I'll wrap the knee and you'll have to walk on crutches for a few days." He then turned his attention to Kap's bleeding cuts. "Some of the deeper ones will need sutures." He then walked to one of his medical cabinets to gather the needed supplies.

When Kap saw the needles and thread the doctor intended to use on his cuts, his trembling became more pronounced. Dr. Farhan held up a vial of brown liquid. "This will take the pain away, though it does sting when I apply it." Using a dropper, the tiger began applying the liquid to Kap's wounds.

Sure enough, it felt like drops of fire hitting his skin, followed immediately by a tingling numbness. Tears welled in Kap's eyes, but he refused to cry. Instead, he squeezed them closed tightly.

The tiger proceeded to clean the wounds with soapy water, followed by sewing them closed with a needle and thread. It was odd seeing the needle



plunging into his own flesh without sensation. Kap tried to look away but he couldn't help glancing at the tiger's surprisingly dexterous finger work from time to time.

"You've been in quite a scrap," the doctor said while sewing. "Were you in a fight?"

"No," Kap answered timidly. "My home was on fire. I had to crawl out." He chose not to say anything about his father.

"Some of these wounds are quite filthy," Dr. Farhan said while moving on to the next cut. "Ah, that's right. Timeer brought you in his cart."

*Yes, buried under piles of garbage,* Kap thought quietly.

Apparently, this was how Timeer commonly delivered orphans to the monastery. The thought of other orphans reminded Kap of the confusing fact about the nursery.

"Koda said all of the orphans are in the nursery. Where are the older kids? Do you only take cubs?"

Dr. Farhan nodded knowingly while sewing up a second wound. "As soon as they are out of diapers, the State takes them away. They are put to work in Tigris City. More like slavery if you ask me." The tiger tied a knot after his last stitch.

Kap simply couldn't understand how children so young would be put to work. "But don't they go to school first?"

Dr. Farhan made a disgusted expression as he moved on to Kap's next wound. "Not our orphans. They're all put to work. Consequently, toilet training is not something we push here. We try to keep them with us as long as possible."

The tiger finished sewing up the final wound. "There," he announced. "All done. I normally would prescribe antibiotics for a few days, but we don't have those here." He walked across the room to retrieve a single crutch. "You can use this to walk around. Try not to bear too much weight on your right foot. And let me know if any of your wounds become red or start to drain pus."

Kap had another pertinent question for the doctor. "What about me? Will I be allowed to stay? Will they take me away?"

Dr. Farhan thought a moment before answering. "We'll have to tell them you were sent to work for us. That you are our slave."



Kap looked somewhat alarmed.

Dr. Farhan's severe expression warmed into something of a smile. "Don't worry about the label. We all have to work at the monastery. Taking care of the orphans is everybody's job. I am afraid, however, it does mean you will have to assist with changing diapers. There's no shortage of those around here."

Kap hopped off the exam table using the crutch in place of his right leg. He took a few cautious steps. Being an only child, Kap had no experience caring for younger children, much less changing diapers. He wasn't thrilled about the prospect, but having arrived at the Pavar Monastery under piles of rotting garbage and lying in his own bloodied vomit, he could imagine worse. Kap hobbled toward the infirmary exit.

"Go downstairs and get some breakfast. Careful using your crutch on the stairs. Let the others know I'll be down shortly." The doctor turned to clean up the exam table. "We all have to pitch in around here, even us vicious tigers."

Dr. Farhan's last comment made Kap feel a little ashamed. He had instantly assumed, because the doctor was a tiger, that he could not be trusted. Yet, from what he could tell, the doctor's suturing had been done quite professionally. If he had wanted to cause pain, Dr. Farhan wouldn't have used the numbing medicine. Kap was ashamed how quickly he had forgotten that his good friend Bendar was a tiger, and of course, Paru.

"I'm sorry," he said to the doctor before opening the door.

"Go get some food. You need to eat," the tiger spoke with his back turned to Kap as he cleaned the table. "But you will have to assist in feeding the younger ones. We all have to do our part."

Kap hobbled on his crutch down the hall toward the stairs. He could hear the commotion of young children eating their breakfast downstairs. Maybe, just maybe, the people here did not intend to hurt him after all. Maybe, just maybe, a tiger could be a trusted physician.

Kap thought about his tiger friends.

*I'm sorry for even thinking this way. It didn't use to be like this. Of course, tigers can be trusted.*

Kap carefully navigated the stairs on his crutch to the ground level where breakfast was well underway.

# Chapter 5: Kapoor's Work.



"Play with us," a little boy leopard asked after breakfast. "Yes, play with us," asked another boy, followed by the same request from a little girl. Kap found himself surrounded by a chorus of toddlers begging him to play with them. He looked helplessly toward Ibrahim and Koda who were busy cleaning the tables after the morning meal.

"You can take them outside in the courtyard," Ibrahim said, holding an armful of bowls. "There is a fresh coat of snow this morning."

Kap shrugged his shoulders, knowing nothing about the whereabouts of this courtyard.

Koda set his own armful of dishes down. "Come. I'll show you."

Breakfast had been a noisy, messy affair. The children were hungry and eager to eat, though it seemed that half of their porridge ended up on their faces and hands. They also tended to wander away from their tables, distracted by any number of random impulses. Ibrahim and Koda had assisted in both the feeding and redirecting of wandering children. Kap had tried his best to assist the little boy sitting next to him, but the child kept insisting, "I do it!" Ironically, the massive Dr. Farhan had tended to the infants who were at least confined in highchairs.

Now that tummies were full, and faces and hands were mostly clean, the children swarmed around Kap wanting to play with the newest "big kid" to arrive

at the monastery. Koda led Kap and the eager cubs to the back of the dining hall where there was another set of double doors that opened onto the courtyard.

Kap stepped outside. He was met by a blast of cold, high-altitude air with a cloudless blue sky above. The effect was electrifying. Kap felt a surge of energy.

The courtyard was a rectangular space of gardens and fountains in the center of the monastery. Even though it was early in the Fall and far too early for snowfall in the city, snow was common in the mountains nearly year-round. Just half an inch of powdery-white snow covered everything in the courtyard. The cubs burst forth to play in it.

Being a snow leopard adapted for the cold, Kap was naturally inclined to do the same thing. He set down his crutch and found that if he got down on all four paws (well, minus the injured one) he could crawl and roll through the snow along with the little ones. Soon he was engaged in a game of chase followed by the throwing of snow. The toddlers shrieked with laughter. Koda even joined in the fun, though his stiff joints made him a bit less nimble. This left Ibrahim and Dr. Farhan behind to clean up after breakfast.

"I caught you," Koda yelled as he captured then released a little leopard boy who ran away giggling.

"I caught you," a young girl said as she latched onto Koda's leg. The old dog fell into the snow pretending to be tackled.

Kap was busy crawling on his three good limbs, chasing a pair of toddlers who were surprisingly fast. The two children suddenly turned and made chase of Kap, who was caught almost immediately as the three of them rolled and tumbled into the cold white powder.

Kap winced as his injured knee bumped against the hard ground but the pain didn't stop him from playing. He found that the cold snow against his sutured cuts actually provided some numbing pain relief, so on the whole, it was a tradeoff. Kap didn't have much time to think about it as he was soon being chased by another little girl. He scrambled to escape.

During all the chasing, Kap caught a glimpse of orange out of the corner of his eye. He looked around to see a little tiger girl running behind a fountain. All of the children Kap had seen at the monastery were either leopards or panthers. Other than Dr. Farhan, this child was the only tiger he had seen. Kap followed the little girl behind the fountain but was surprised to find that she had vanished.



Suddenly, something fell onto Kap's back causing him to roll to the ground. "Caught you," the little tiger girl laughed.

When Kap rolled over to look at his attacker, he was taken aback. The little tiger looked exactly like what he imagined Paru Burman would have looked like as a cub. She had the same bright amber eyes as Paru and the same mischievous smile.

"Uh, Hi," Kap said, showing confusion as if he had unexpectedly encountered Paru herself. "What's your name?"

"I'm Libni," the little girl said brightly, then jumped off Kap's back to run away. "Chase me."

Kap scrambled to catch the swift toddler. To his surprise, she disappeared again only to pounce on his back once more, sending Kap rolling into the snow. When Kap recovered, he stood and held the little girl in his two paws. He didn't think Paru had a sister, but a cousin perhaps?

"What's your family name," he asked the little tiger. "Do you know the Burmans?"

"I'm Libni," the child shook her head. "I'm good at pouncing."

"I noticed," Kap grinned. "But what's your last name?"

"Just Libni," the little girl answered. She started squirming to be let down. Kap lowered her to the ground where she ran off and promptly vanished behind a row of bushes.

Kap rubbed his shoulder where the little tiger had pounced on him.

*If only Paru were here. She might know who you are.*

Kap didn't have long to think about it before another toddler had latched onto his leg. He was surprised to see another species he had not yet encountered. The little boy trying to tackle him was a puppy. The child of barely two years tugged and pushed ineffectively at the 14-year-old leopard. Kap reached down and lifted the puppy into his arms.

"Hey there, little guy. What's your name?"

The puppy's tail wagged incessantly. "I'm Jinx." He held up two fingers on his paw. "I'm this many." Unlike the others, this child seemed content to be held, so Kap limped over to a stone bench and took a seat with the little puppy nestled in his arms.



"How long have you been here?" Kap asked the toddler, not really expecting him to know.

"Forever," Jinx said, then rested his head against Kap's chest.

Kap instinctively patted the puppy's diapered bottom, then rubbed the soft fur on his back. Having no experience with very young children, Kap was surprised by their lightness, how easy it was to hold them and how natural it was to snuggle them. Kap suddenly missed not having a baby sibling, a thing he had never noticed missing before.

It wasn't long before the other children noticed Jinx being held on the bench. A little leopard boy soon appeared at Kap's knee, holding up his arms. "Hold me, too."

"Sure," Kap reached down for the child. "There's room."

Next, Kap was startled by a pounce onto his shoulders. He looked up to find little Libni clinging to his neck. "I caught you," the tiger girl said cheerfully.

Kap laughed and reached up to pat her head. "I guess there's room for you, too."

Then, another and another child appeared at the bench, climbing onto Kap's lap or squeezing themselves into his already full arms. One by one, the pile-up increased. Shortly, Kap was practically buried by cubs wanting to be held. Finally, Koda walked over to the bench to rescue Kap from literally being smothered by affection.

"I think I'm stuck," Kap looked up at the old dog, a little embarrassed.

"I think they approve of you," Koda replied smiling. "But I also think playtime is over." He reached down to pluck the first child off Kap's lap. "Let's go children. Time to go in. You're crushing your new friend."

One by one, Kap was freed from the affectionate crush of cubs, though Jinx remained in his arm. Kap was happy to carry the little puppy inside. Libni ran to retrieve Kap's crutch and dragged it across the snow-covered ground.

"This is for you," she said, dropping the crutch at Kap's feet.

"Thank you," Kap patted her head. As he walked back into the monastery, limping on his crutch, Libni held a paw on the wooden stick as if by touching it she could lend some support.



"You can help us with our next task," Koda said as Kap walked through the double door of the monastery.

"What is that?" Kap asked warily.

"Come with me. You'll see."



The children had all been gathered into the second-floor nursery. Ibrahim and Dr. Farhan were already in the room when Koda and Kap arrived. Kap immediately noticed that along the walls of the nursery were several tables, each set with a water basin and piles of cloth diapers. In the center of the room was an empty wheelbarrow.

"It's time to change the cubs," Koda informed the teen leopard. "It's much faster if we all lend a hand." Kap was still holding Jinx in one arm. "You can start with that one."

Kap clenched his jaw. He shook his head. "Uh, I don't think I can do this. I've never changed a diaper before."

Koda was mildly amused by Kap's fear of diapers. "It's easy. I'll show you. It's not as bad as you think." He led Kap with Jinx in arms to a changing table. Kap lay the toddler puppy on the table.

"You'll need a fresh diaper and two rags, one wet, one dry." He pointed to the pile of diapers and cloth rags next to the water basin. "The water is already soapy, and I've warmed it so it's not uncomfortable for the baby."

Kap dipped one of the rags into the warm, soapy water as instructed.

"Now, unclasp the metal pins." Koda stood away and gave Kap directions. "Be careful. They are sharp."

Kap unclasped the pins on Jinx's diaper as instructed. When he removed them, the cloth diaper began to fall away. Kap wrinkled his nose as he pulled down the diaper, expecting to be assaulted by some horrible smell. He was relieved to see the puppy was merely wet.

"Now, clean him with the wet rag, then dry with the other. Try to use only two rags if you can. Less laundry that way."



Kap cleaned little Jinx as directed, then slid a clean diaper under his bottom. One wing of the diaper contained a notch to accommodate the puppy's tail. Kap wrapped both wings around and joined them in the front.

"Now just pin the wings to the front like before, being careful not to stab yourself or the baby."

Kap fastened the diaper with two pins, trying to make it snug so as not to slide off. When he was done, little Jinx jumped up to give Kap a hug, his tail wagging as nonstop as ever.

"Congratulations," Koda said, giving Kap a pat on the back. "You've just changed your first diaper. Not too bad, I might add."

Kap lowered Jinx to the ground, who then ran off to play with the other cubs. Kap felt an unexpected sense of accomplishment. It truly had not been as bad as he imagined. What's more, Kap hadn't vomited.

"Now, move on to the next," Koda said in parting as he stepped over to another changing table.

Kap spotted one of the infants who had been too young to go outside and play in the snow. It was a little girl panther who had not quite mastered the skill of independent sitting. She frequently toppled over when she tried to push up. Kap gently lifted the baby girl to the table, then searched for one of the smaller size diapers. When he unclasped her pins and pulled down the front, Kap's nose was hit by the powerful smell he had feared. It was shocking that a child so small could make a smell so offensive.

Kap gasped and choked. He heard laughing sounds coming from somewhere. He looked around to see the sound was coming from Dr. Farhan. The always-serious tiger was actually grinning.

"You get used to it eventually," he rumbled. "It's okay if you need to use a third washrag."

Kap looked back at the mess he was expected to clean. He was determined to use just the two rags like the others. Holding his breath, he dipped one rag in the water basin and went to work. To his satisfaction, Kap was able to clean the little girl with just the two rags, then he wrapped her in a clean diaper. He lowered the little girl gently to the floor where the baby panther resumed her attempts at sitting upright.

Kap looked back over to Dr. Farhan. The tiger nodded silent approval. Kap's small sense of pride swelled larger.

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*I can do this. I can help these kids.* He turned to search for the next baby in need of a fresh diaper.

When all the children had been changed, Koda gathered all the soiled diapers and washrags into his wheelbarrow and pushed the stinking pile of cloth out of the nursery. Ibrahim and Dr. Farhan washed their paws in the remaining basin water. Kap did the same.

While drying his paws, Kap turned to see a boy panther standing behind him. The boy was taller than the other children, being one of the oldest at the monastery. The panther cub stood defiantly and announced proudly, "I don't need diapers. I'm big."

Kap couldn't help chuckling at the sight of a child obviously wearing a diaper while declaring he didn't need it. Kap kneeled down to the boy.

"Hi there. You are very big, that's true. What's your name?"

"I'm Pan," the boy said boldly and held up three fingers. "I'm this many, but I'm almost this many." He held up a fourth. "Big kids don't wear diapers."

Kap grinned and patted the boy's shoulder. "That's right. You are big and I'm sure you don't need them." Kap's encouragement lessened as he remembered Dr. Farhan's warning about what happened after the children were toilet trained. It was simply unimaginable that a cub as young as Pan could be sent to slave labor.

Kap shook his head. "You know, diapers are really okay. Some big kids wear them too."

Pan gave Kap a puzzled look. "But you don't wear diapers. I want to be like you."

Kap was at a loss for words. He couldn't believe he was actually trying to talk this kid into staying in diapers. "But I'm really big." He stood up to his full height. "You should probably stay in diapers until you are really big, too."

Pan approached Kap and stood on tiptoes, measuring just shy of Kap's waist. "But I want to be really big now."

Kap didn't know what to say. He figured distraction might be the better option. "Let's go find the others." He reached to take Pan's paw while reaching for his crutch with the other. "I'll come with you. We can all play together."

Kap's invitation seemed to satisfy the little panther. Pan skipped alongside the teen leopard as the two of them made their way out of the nursery.

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They were met by Libni who had been waiting in the hallway outside. She held on to Kap's crutch as she had done in the courtyard. Kap was pleased to see the tiger girl again.

"Yes, Libni. You can come along, too." The three of them made their way toward the sounds of playing children just down the hallway.



Lying alone in his cot that night, Kap listened to the wind that had picked up intensity after nightfall. The howling obscured the sounds of the sleeping children in their cots and cribs scattered around him. In the high mountains far from city lights, the world became pitch black shortly after sunset. Kap held up the particle lens from his father's study and ran his fingers over its smooth surface. Its black color blended into the darkness of the nursery so that it was practically invisible.

*This piece of glass is the only thing left from my past.*

Kap's entire life had been taken away from him. Now here he was, alone in an orphanage, far away in the mountains somewhere. Kap could feel new tears forming in his eyes.

"I want to go back," he whispered to the lens. "I want to go home."

Kap was startled out of his misery by the appearance of one of the toddlers who had approached his bedside in the darkness. Opening his eyes wide, Kap could just make out the small form of Libni.

"I'm scared," the little tiger whispered to Kap.

Kap tried to give some reassurance that he himself did not feel. "It's only the wind outside. There's nothing to be afraid of."

The little girl continued to look at Kap in the darkness. "But I'm scared," she repeated.

Alone in the darkness, Kap felt entirely the same. "Come on up. I'll hold you."

Libni climbed onto the cot and nestled under Kap's arm. He could feel the little tiger's breathing relax, becoming smooth and regular. "See, you are safe now," he whispered to the tiger cub who was soon asleep.

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Kap was startled again by another child who had approached in the darkness. "I'm scared, too." It was the puppy, Jinx. He climbed onto the cot without being asked.

"Okay then," Kap agreed. "You can stay, too." The little puppy decided Kap's chest was the most comfortable spot, so that is where he curled into a tiny ball of fur. Kap rested his other arm over the warm puppy. Kap had to admit, it was nice having company in this lonely place.

Before long, a third child was at Kap's bedside. Kap could make out the outline of Pan standing on the other side of his cot. The courageous three-year-old was not so brave at the moment. He stood silently sucking his thumb. Kap knew what the little boy wanted.

"There's room for you, too," Kap whispered to Pan. The little panther climbed onto the cot and snuggled against Kap's left side.

"I want to be big like you," Pan spoke around his thumb.

"You *are* big," Kap said reassuringly. "And very brave."

Before long Pan's breathing became slow and regular like the other two. Kap was now surrounded by the warmth of three sleeping children. The lonely darkness around him now seemed transformed into a kind of security. The cold wind outside seemed more like a song. For the moment Kap was able to forget the loss of his past life. He was at least temporarily safe.

*Maybe things won't be so bad here.* Libni stirred under his arm, then settled back to sleep. *Yes, things will be better,* he thought before drifting to sleep himself.

# Chapter 1 – First Trip

If you were to look at me today you would say I look about 30 years old or thereabouts and according to my birth certificate, you would not be wrong. That would tell you that I am 32 years and 7 months old. But while technically correct, it is not the real and complete truth. I have a very rare and special talent, so rare in fact that I've only ever heard of three other people with it and never met one of them.

Essentially, I am a 'worlds traveller'.

No, that isn't a typo. I'm not a *world* traveller and in fact, have never travelled far from my hometown. I am a *worlds* traveller. I travel to other worlds.

Yes, other worlds. Not other worlds in our universe. They are far too far away, and I don't really like to travel that much anyhow. Rather, I travel to other parallel worlds to this one.

So, how do I do it, you ask?

Damned, if I know. It is also not something I typically have any control over, and it just happens at various times for no particular reason I can work out. A number of years ago I read a novel – *The Time Traveller's Wife* – and I smiled throughout the story because the main premise – that a man randomly travelled through time – was not that dissimilar to my own situation. I travelled to parallel worlds without any significant control although thankfully, I always arrived in the clothes I was wearing. No appearing naked for me!

I am actually 40 years old and a few months, having spent almost 8 years in a variety of alternate worlds and experiencing places that are in some cases similar to my original world and in other cases, wildly different. My shortest stay in a world was about 6 hours although I suspect I've been in a few others for mere minutes but can't tell the difference between them and vivid dreams. The longest stay was seven years.

An obvious question and one I've asked myself many times is exactly how the worlds I travel to seem to mirror aspects of my own personality to a degree that seems to preclude simple randomness.

You would imagine that I would appear in worlds with technological advances or ones that are still feudal and violent or with nation-states completely different to my normal world. That was partially true. Occasionally I 'travelled' for only a few minutes but often I thought they were just dreams because of how short and sometimes disturbing they were. But the places I stayed for weeks, months and even years were seemingly matched to aspects of myself that I keep very private. This led me to believe for a while that I was simply hallucinating and projecting my own secret desires, but you can't really have detailed memories of months of time – or even years – and then reappear in your living room and see that mere minutes had passed. And I also had objects and clothing from these other worlds, and hallucinations don't create things.

So, it is real. I truly do travel to parallel worlds that are sometimes awful, sometimes confusing and sometimes, a nirvana where I wished I could stay.

So let me tell you a bit about myself. Like I said, I am 32 years old with almost 41 years' worth of memories. I am also an adult baby, someone who prefers to dress up and live as an infant wearing diapers and baby clothes and all that goes with it. It is a little unusual and a bit rare and worse, is exceedingly private. And yet, wherever I go, it *usually (but not always)* seems to be a world where my inner identity is either accepted, tolerated or even... admired. So strange.

But there is more...

I am fully aware of what a penis is used for and on a few occasions have had the opportunity to join with another, but internally, I've always considered myself a girl. And naturally, a *baby* girl.

Oh, and there is one other thing I need to mention. I said that I have no control over when and where I travel. That is only *mostly* true. After my first trip, I realised there was always one aspect that was true. When I went to other worlds, I was *always* wearing a diaper and not just any diaper, but a classic, pinned cloth diaper that was soaking wet and covered in plastic pants. Not dry. Wet.

I travelled for the first time in my preteens and the diaper and plastic pants were no surprise because I was not only a bedwetter but was a slow potty trainer and my mother was old school and hence, cloth diapers and plastic pants were what I wore to bed and around the home. Diaper-less school days were

often interrupted by wet pants. It was not a lot of fun being wet at school when I knew that diapers were the obvious solution. No one else agreed.

Even then, I identified as a baby more than a preteen and I told my parents that, and in my innocence, I thought they understood. But they didn't and probably few parents would. However, I did get to keep wearing night diapers as my bedwetting never did end and still to this day, I wet the bed. In fact, my problematic toilet training has disappeared entirely and while some would be devastated by such an occurrence, for me it was a simple validation of who I truly am. I am a baby that is well shy of being toilet trained.

At eight years of age, I travelled first to a world that looked different to my own but not so different that I felt totally out of place. It simply looked like another town or village similar to my own. I initially thought it was a dream because I was not scared, merely confused. I suddenly appeared in a park with a small number of other children and adults playing catch and running around. I knew I was definitely somewhere else, particularly by the weather. My own world was cold and overcast that day, but this new place was warm, almost cloudless and with a bright sun that made everything look cheery.

I had been originally standing under a tree in our backyard, a tree that always looked huge to me but now as an adult, I realise was really quite a pathetic specimen. Then gradually, the world developed oddly shaped shadows where they shouldn't be and then suddenly, I was in a park on what I now know was another world. It was a sudden change without any other preamble.

And I was not scared. I was, however, still wearing my overnight cloth diaper and since I had drunk a lot the night before, it was already drenched and hanging low, supported only by two diaper pins and some white plastic pants which did not hide the state of the cloth underneath. I had a pyjama top but no bottoms because I never liked them. I know now that I hated pyjama bottoms because they were very 'boyish' and I never related to that gender.

I walked around the park staring at everything around me wearing just my wet diaper and plastic pants and PJ top. The other children were playing and yelling and were of similar age to me. All I wanted to do was join in. It felt like a dream and at the time, I felt no fear because inwardly I was assured that it was a dream.

One of the boys saw me and ran over to ask if I wanted to play with them. He was dressed in regular clothing from what I could gather and yet he took no notice of my obvious diapers.

## Worlds Traveller

"Hi," he exclaimed breathlessly. "Do you want to play with us? My name's Donja."

"Sure!" I replied, deciding to go with the flow of this wonderful 'dream' and I ran off to join in the fun.

The game was something like cricket but with a different bat and a larger ball so perhaps, not much like cricket at all, but it felt like it at the time. I had a turn at bat and discovered that my utter lack of athletic prowess in my own world hadn't changed and I was quickly caught out and replaced. But there was one other girl I noticed. When she ran to catch the ball and fell over, I saw that she was wearing a cloth diaper very similar to my own with pink plastic pants. At that stage, I'd never seen another preteen like me still in diapers and my eyes simply stared until I finally realised what a weirdo I must look like.

We played happily for about an hour and I was in my element. I had only a few friends normally and rarely was able to play with them and never a large group like this. I was – and remain – an introvert, in large measure because I always felt different. I was a baby in a big kid's body, and I was a girl in a boy's body. It was confusing at 8 years of age.

"Okay kids!" yelled a woman as she approached us. "It's time for lunch. And who is your friend?"

"His name is Martin," Donja replied. "His mum and dad aren't here yet so he's playing with us." To a child, that explanation made perfect sense.

"Well Martin, would you like to have lunch with the rest of us until your parents come and pick you up?"

"Yes, please," I replied. I was hungry from all the activity, and I had noticed that my diaper was hanging even lower.

"Well first of all let's change some diapers!" she said, clapping her hands together.

At first, I thought she was referencing my diaper but to my stunned amazement I watched not one but *four* of my new friends have their own clearly wet diapers changed while lying on the soft grass. Donja was also diapered although his baggy pants had hidden it from easy view.

I began to smile as for the first time in my life, I felt like I belonged. There were other kids in diapers, adults who accepted it as normal and even the weather was nice.

"Martin, I don't have a spare diaper for you, sorry," the woman apologised as she approached me and without asking, pulled out the back of my diaper and peered inside. "You'd not dirty yet so I think you can last a little longer. Your parents didn't give you a diaper change before you came here?"

"No," I stammered, not quite sure of what she was saying exactly. "These are my night diapers."

"I see," she replied, nodding her head. "Silja is like that, isn't she?"

A woman standing nearby added with a laugh. "Can't get that girl out of her night diapers without a fight. She wanted to wear them here today, but I changed her anyhow." She pointed to the girl I had first seen in diapers earlier on.

I was stunned and couldn't help smiling as I sat around with my newfound friends and ate the most delicious sandwiches I could ever recall. They were probably only particularly tasty because they were eaten in the presence of accepting friends – a sadly rare event for me.

"Who needs a pacifier?" asked yet another mother.

Three hands were lifted and driven by a mysterious force (aka my own secret desire) I lifted my hand.

"Here you go then," she added as she handed out three pacifiers to the other children and when she came to me, she asked, "Which one do you want, Martin?"

In her hand were three pacifiers, one blue, one pink and one white. Without a moment's hesitation, I grabbed the pink one and pushed it into my mouth and I was instantly... happier. It felt normal and natural, and it was larger than a baby's pacifier and seemed to fit my 8-year-old mouth very well.

A few minutes later we all ran off to play yet another ball game whose rules I didn't understand and yet, it didn't seem to matter. Four of us were in diapers and four of us were sucking pacifiers and no one thought any less of any of us.

The hours passed and by late afternoon, my new friends and their mothers were preparing to leave, and I was suddenly concerned about being left alone. Donja's mum came up to me just as they were leaving and once again checked the back of my diaper noting with surprise that I was still not dirty.

"Not dirty yet? Your parents will be here soon, Martin," she promised me, even though I knew my parents had no idea where I was. I had no idea where I was either.

It was getting late in the afternoon and the sun was clearly lower and it would be dark in a few hours when suddenly I felt pangs in my belly. I definitely needed to poo. But dirty diapers were very much *not* permitted even though occasionally there was one. But I let caution go and with a big push filled the back of my saturated diaper with a large load of mushy poo and then... I giggled.

It felt so good and it felt so... normal.

I sat down and felt it all move underneath me.

Then as I looked around, things began to change. Every tree, every path and even my own hands developed what I can only describe as... shadows. Shadows in three-dimensional space that were impossible and yet, I could see them.

And then I was suddenly back home again standing under the same tree and I wondered if somehow I had dreamed it all and for a moment, I was sad. And then as I sucked my pacifier hard I realised...

*My pacifier! It's all real!*

It was my first trip to another world and I had brought back something from it. My pink preteen-sized pacifier remained in my mouth for a few minutes before I decided that I had to hide it. I knew my parents would not let me have one even though I had only 'given up' one as a five-year-old. Truth be told, it was a fight I had lost and they took my beloved pacifiers away despite my tears and cries.

Not long after, my mum came to change me for the day and was stunned and angry to find that my diaper was beyond saturated and starting to leak and also, contained a large poo. After a quick bath, I scored a hand spanking for the dirty diaper, but it was light and short and I didn't really mind.

It was only my first travel to another world and as I write this, on my desk sits that pink pacifier, standing as a reminder of my discovery that not every world is as intolerant to baby girls as this one.

Naturally, I hoped I would visit that park and my friends again. Sadly, I never did. I wanted to know why Silja loved her overnight wet diapers. I wanted to understand why so many kids my age were in diapers at all and yet it was considered normal. I wanted to go back again.

# Chapter 2 – Planet Z

I suspect that my ramblings will never be published and I understand why. It is too ridiculous to believe and since I am not writing fiction but rather, a diary of events that have happened to me and the places – or rather, worlds – they have occurred in, it won't be very believable to most. But I will continue just the same because it is important that it is recorded, even if no one actually believes it.

It was to be four more years before I travelled again but this time, I had something akin to a warning. I had come home early in the afternoon from school that day because I had wet my pants rather badly and after a cursory complaint by my stay-at-home mother, I was back in pinned cloth diapers and plastic pants underneath tracksuit pants and a shirt. The tracksuit pants were a little too small and so the bulge of my diaper was exceedingly obvious but since I wasn't going anywhere it didn't matter and I certainly didn't mind. Personally, I thought the diaper bulge was 'pretty' and seemed to suit me. But I think I was alone in that opinion.

I have days where I don't pee much and even my night diaper is merely damp and then there are the other days when my body pees more fluid than I thought possible. That was one such day. I had already dampened my school uniform in the morning as I rushed off to the toilet in the hope of making it in time - only just but not before a large damp patch was visible on my school uniform. It was not the first time and the teasing was so common that I essentially filtered it out and it left me with only one real friend. And people wonder why I am a loner and introvert?

I was sitting on my bed reading comics when my eyes started to see three-dimensional impossible shadows around my hands and all the objects in the room. They were similar to what I had seen four years previously and I instantly wondered if 'something' was about to happen. But after a couple of minutes, the shadows shuddered and then disappeared again. I was still in my

bedroom, still wearing my dry diaper and reading comic books which suddenly didn't seem as interesting anymore.

With no warning whatsoever, my bladder suddenly opened up and emptied, flooding my previously dry diaper. I sighed as I was by now familiar with 'flood days' and despite asking my mother to stay home from school on such days, I was sent there only to be humiliated as I had expected. I simply waited for the flood to end and by the time the flow stopped, my diaper was as wet as any heavy night-time diaper was. A few minutes later, the shadows returned but this time they grew more defined and then suddenly, I was somewhere else.

One quick lesson I learned is that you travel in the same bodily position as you were in and so it was that I found myself sitting on a pavement and only my quick reactions stopped me from falling backwards since my pillow was no longer present to hold me up. Once again, I felt only surprise, not fear. There was something about this place that gave me no reason to be afraid. I stood up and looked around and saw a narrow street with houses along both sides. The houses looked to be well-kept but of a quite old style and so not knowing what to do, I began to walk.

Being outside of my home wearing a very obvious thick diaper under too-small tracksuit pants, I felt a little conspicuous, but I had no other choice. I rounded a corner and saw a much wider road with some houses and other buildings that looked similar to shops, but I could not read the writing on them. There were words for sure, but they made no sense to me. I turned around at the sound of what I thought was a motor car and sure enough, three motor vehicles drove along the street and eventually passed me. They didn't look like any cars I had ever seen. All I could describe them as was 'old-fashioned and yet, they appeared quite new and well-presented.

This was the first time that I thought I must have travelled back in time as well as gone 'somewhere else'. I hadn't really understood my first trip as an 8-year-old and so I had yet to realise I was travelling *worlds*, not time.

I continued to walk and it wasn't long before I came across an older couple. I had to find out where I was and so I asked them simply, "Where am I?"

They looked at me with a bemused smile, said some words I couldn't understand and then walked off. And so, I continued my walking, aware that my diaper was continuing to get wetter as my poor-functioning bladder kept leaking.

As I crossed another side road, there were suddenly more vehicles on the road and still, none of them looked familiar. They each had four wheels, doors and seats but that was about the only similarity to modern cars I had known. I

saw one that was probably a bus or some kind of public transport but as I started to come across more people, I was more and more aware of some of the sideways glances I was receiving. I began to feel conspicuous and aware of the obvious bulk of my rapidly soaking diaper. Trying to avoid the stares, I came upon what looked like a shop of some kind and pushed open the door to go inside. At least doors were the same in this world even if the words were unintelligible.

I quickly worked out that I was in a clothing store. In rack after rack hung old-fashioned clothing for men and boys and as I wandered further in, I found the women's and girl's section and it was then that I saw... them.

Standing up against one rack was a woman with two children I judged to be hers, a boy and a girl of roughly similar age to me. At that time in my life, I crudely assessed girls to be 'pre-boobs' and 'post-boobs'. If I had had any sexual education at all I would have known about puberty but at that stage, erections were merely annoying and 'girls grew boobs'. Pretty detailed, right? The girl was 'pre-boob'.

The mother was gabbing on in her language and I understood none of it but as I watched, I saw her grab a dress off the rack and hold it up to her daughter to assess its size and fit. Then in a surprising move, she turned to the girl and helped her lift her existing dress over her head. It seemed that Changing Rooms were not a thing here! But what rivetted my attention was not her skinny frame and white undergarment but rather, the thick cloth diaper pinned around her hips and the lacy white plastic pants that covered them.

She was in a diaper! Just like me!

I couldn't tell if she was wet - which for some reason seemed an important fact to know – but she stood without shame, openly displaying her diaper until her mother pulled the new dress over her head and fussed and tugged until satisfied that it was a good fit. The few words she said clearly indicated she was pleased.

And now it was time for the boy to get some new clothes and trying as best not to look like a stalker I followed them back to the front of the store where they began looking at trousers and shirts. Once again, when a suitable choice was made the boy undid his braces and slipped his trousers to the floor and to my growing surprise revealed another cloth diaper and plain plastic pants. I was shocked to see such an open display of diapers in a clothing store and remembered the utter humiliation of clothes shopping with my own mother looking for trousers to cover a thick diaper as well as non-diaper clothing. It was

never pleasant, but it certainly wasn't as public as this. Nor was it as unremarkable as the scene I was watching.

At a discreet distance – or what I thought was discreet – I watched them go to the sales counter and using what looked like paper money, pay for the two new outfits and soon left the store.

At this stage, I knew nothing about this world or its language, but the mum and two kids were at least a moderate connection. I had a mum and I wore diapers. The link was tenuous, but it was all I had.

I followed them out of the store and they walked some distance along the road before stopping and entering another store. Unlike our world, there didn't seem to be general stores that sold many things. Every type of product seemed to have its own store. I couldn't read the words on the outside of this shop, but as soon as I entered, I knew immediately what it was.

It was a diaper store!

Now, I'd been with my mum to chemist shops and bought plastic pants and to material stores where she made up my cloth diapers, but I'd never seen anything like this. I was overwhelmed by what was on offer. In keeping with the old-fashioned nature of this world, it was full of cloth diapers in different styles and most importantly, different sizes. There were mannequins dressed in diapers ranging from toddlers, to preteens, to teenagers and then on to adults in a variety of styles and sizes. I had never seen anything so amazing and so... wondrous.

I lost interest in the mum and two kids as I wandered the aisles of diapers and the massive array of plastic pants. Not just plain colours but patterns and even the babyish frilly styles all the way up to adult sizes. I suddenly wanted them. I wanted *all* of them! As I was enjoying the sight, I overheard the mum talking and I was surprised that I actually understood some of the words. I heard her say 'waterproofs', 'diapers' and 'for school'.

In a world full of intelligible rambling, these few words stood out and I followed the voice and from a short distance saw the mum picking up a half dozen or so plastic pants including one pair of the adorable frilly ones and a large bag of cloth diapers with the picture of a smiling teenager wearing a pinned diaper and nothing else printed on the front.

My attempt at being discreet was not particularly successful and the mum turned and stared at me and then began to talk rapidly in her language. Up until this point, I had not felt afraid or even upset but suddenly that all changed.

I began to cry.

# Chapter 8: The Nursery of Asco and Basid



Daryn woke the next morning still in the game, still in his baby form, and still in the crib he had dreamed about during the night. He saw the pacifier that had been placed in his mouth by the plant creature, laying a few inches from his face. Daryn lay in the crib staring curiously at the pacifier, still in a state of disorientation.

*I'm still here, he thought. I'm in a crib. The dream must have been real.*

Suddenly the full memory from the previous night returned. Daryn sat bolt upright in his crib.

*The plant creature! Is it still here?*

During his dream, the creature had seemed benign and gentle, but now that he was awake Daryn remembered the thing had looked like a hideous monster—a cross between a walking stick insect and a mushroom.

Daryn made a quick scan of the room that lay beyond his crib bars. The room was circular with an open front entrance, multiple open windows, and various wooden chairs and tables. There were also four additional cribs placed around the room, currently unoccupied. As in his dream, the room had no ceiling, just an open sky which was currently the color of brightening orange just moments before the dawn. Four of the world's moons were currently within view.

# *The Virtual Reality Regression*

*Becoming a baby in a virtual world*

When Daryn's gaze returned to the room, he was startled to see Tiff, the baby unicorn, smiling through the crib bars.

"Darry is awake!" Her voice was full of excitement. "Remember me?"

"Uh, yeah," Daryn said, surprised that she had snuck up unseen. "Where did you come from?"

"I was sleeping under your crib. I wanted to be here when you woke up." Tiff placed her front hooves on the crib mattress. "Can I come in with you?"

Daryn shook his head emphatically. "No, that won't be..." Before he could finish, Tiff took a leap into the air, and with her finch-sized wings providing lift, she cleared the crib bars. The puppy-sized unicorn landed with a bounce next to him. "...necessary," he finished.

"I like you," she beamed, then licked his cheek. "You're cute when you sleep."

"Ugh," Daryn moaned and wiped his cheek. "Don't do that. I'm not cute."

Tiff giggled. "Of course, you're cute. You're a baby. Babies are cute."

Daryn covered his face in shame. "I'm not really a baby. I just look like... *a baby*," he finished silently.

Daryn questioned whether it was worth enduring this humiliation just to get food. And to fix his broken ankle, he remembered.

*Maybe a little longer, he thought. I have to get out of this crib first.*

"Hey Tiff," Daryn uncovered his face. "Last night I had a dream. There was a giant plant monster, taller than this room. It picked me up and brought me here. Do you know what I'm talking about? Are there any monsters around?"

Tiff became serious for a moment then shook her head. "There aren't any monsters in Parvulis. But, there's Asco and Basid. They're very tall."

"What are they?" Daryn asked.

"We're Basid," a deep voice boomed from above.

Daryn looked up again at the open ceiling in terror. The stick-like plant monster was perched on the edge of the wall. Its face looked like a grotesquely deformed mushroom. Next, the creature lowered itself into the room and brought its deformed face within a foot of Daryn's crib.

# *The Virtual Reality Regression*

*Becoming a baby in a virtual world*

“You were saying?” it asked.

Daryn scrambled to the far end of the crib, clutching Tiff protectively in his arms. He was trapped. Both of them were sitting ducks in a cage.

“Go away!” he shrieked.

Tiff wiggled free from Daryn’s arms. “Don’t be frightened. It’s just Basid.” She went to the creature, reared up on her hind hooves, and licked its warty mushroom face.

Daryn did not feel reassured. This thing was clearly a monster by all video game standards and should be blasted, if only he had a gun. Daryn remained pinned against the bars of this trap called a crib.

The creature, Basid, reached into the crib with both of its jagged, stick-like arms and lifted Daryn into the air. “Don’t be afraid, little one. We’ll take good care of you.”

Daryn most certainly *was* afraid. He kicked and squirmed until the creature set him down on the floor. Tiff followed behind, clearing the crib bars again with a wing-assisted leap.

A strange, monster-ish smile formed on Basid’s face. “No, we’re not going to eat you.” It rumbled a kind of chuckle.

“W-who said anything about eating?” Daryn took a few cautious steps away from the creature.

“You were thinking it,” the monster rumbled again. Its crooked smile widened.

“Come with me.”

Tiff ran a quick circle around Daryn, then ran toward the open entrance. “I’m hungry. Let’s get breakfast.” She dashed away through the door.

“W-wait! Don’t go!” Daryn called after her, afraid to make any sudden moves himself.

“You go on, Tiff,” Basid called after her. “I need to clean this one up. Time to change that diaper.”

Daryn backed away until he ran into the next crib in the room. “Oh, hell no!” He held up his hands defensively. “Tiff come back here! Don’t touch me! I don’t want that! Tiff! I need you!” Daryn’s shouts for help were cut off by a

# *The Virtual Reality Regression*

*Becoming a baby in a virtual world*

pacifier being shoved into his mouth. The creature's hands had moved lightning fast.

"There, there," it said in a parental tone. "That should help."

A change almost immediately came over Daryn. Yes, the pacifier had a calming, "pacifying" effect, but not in the same way a drug would knock you out. The pacifier's effect was the opposite of a drug. It was quite simply knowledge, like inserting a USB drive into a computer. In that instant, Daryn understood that this creature, Basid, was merely a kind caregiver and that Daryn was an ordinary child needing an ordinary diaper change. There was nothing to fear, and everything was as it should be. Everything suddenly made sense.

Basid lifted him onto one of the tables in the room that Daryn now understood to be a changing table and laid him down gently onto his back. Daryn waited patiently while the creature gathered the necessary supplies. He regarded his own babyish hands with their smooth, short, toddler-sized fingers.

*This game isn't about hunting or shooting, he understood. It's about taking care of babies, and I'm one of them.* With the pacifier in place, he could calmly accept this fact.

Basid removed Daryn's soiled diaper and wiped him clean with a moss-like rag. Moss seemed to be the ingredient used for all cloth material in this world. Even his crib blanket was made of the stuff.

Next, Basid produced a clean diaper. The thing was hourglass-shaped like most baby diapers Daryn had ever seen, but there the similarity ended. It had no leak guards, tapes, or cartoon animal decorations—common features of diapers in Daryn's world. No, this thing was made of a pure white sponge-like material that adhered to itself when wrapped around Daryn's waist.

"All done," Basid announced, then lifted Daryn back to the ground. "Now run along. We're serving breakfast outside."

Daryn walked toward the open door that Tiff had run through. He could feel the thick diaper with every step, but it was warm and soft, like a security blanket wrapped around him.

*This is normal. This is how I'm supposed to feel, he thought, pacifier still in place.*

# *The Virtual Reality Regression*

*Becoming a baby in a virtual world*

At the door, Daryn found an archway of flowering vines just outside. He removed his pacifier and its effect faded rapidly. Doubt—though not fear—returned.

*I just had my diaper changed like a baby. His face flushed red. And this thing made it feel okay. He held up the pacifier. I wonder if it really is some kind of drug.*

Daryn tossed the pacifier to the ground. He was no longer afraid of being eaten by the creature Basid, but he wanted a clear mind as he encountered the next newest thing in this VR world.

*But, is it really VR? Is it really virtual reality?*

Daryn looked up at the flower-covered vines forming an arch just outside the open ceilinged nursery. He heard a buzzing hum made by dozens of insect or bird-like creatures flying around and between the flowers. At first, Daryn thought they might be hummingbirds, then one of them flitted down to land on his outstretched hand.

The animal was a two-inch-long miniature dragon.

“A baby dragon, of course,” he said, gently stroking the reptile’s head with his other hand. “Everything here is babies.”

The dragon extended its insect-like wings, then buzzed away just like a hummingbird to feed on the flowers. Daryn waddled through the archway, the diaper forcing his toddler-sized legs into a waddling gait.

A gently sloping brick path led to a clearing in the forest where there was a small crowd of more “baby” creatures gathered at a table—presumably the breakfast table. A second Basid-like creature was tending that table, preparing the food. Daryn spotted Tiff among the other creatures.

Daryn started down the path toward the breakfast table. As he walked, he could see to his left a clear view of a valley beyond. Daryn reasoned they must be in the mountains somewhere, likely the same mountains he always saw whenever he entered Aeviternity. Upon closer inspection, he could make out the familiar ancient tree.

*That’s where the Lumos headset is still lying in the grass, he hoped. My ticket out of here.*

Daryn made note of the direction in relation to his current location outside the nursery. He proceeded down the brick path and as he got closer to

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the gathered creatures, he was uncertain how he would introduce himself. There was no need. Tiff did it for him.

“Everybody,” she announced. “This is Darry. He’s new here. He’s a baby human, I think.” Tiff ran up to Daryn. “Are you a human?”

Daryn stuttered. “Uh...y-yes. I guess I’m a human. But I’m not really a baby.”

The other creatures let out a cheer followed by clapping. There were five of them. One by one they approached Daryn to introduce themselves.

The first to approach was a human-like creature with green skin. He was shorter than he was, coming only up to his chest, with pointed ears and slanted, elf-like eyes. Like Daryn, he was also wearing a diaper. “I’m Up. I’m an elf,” he said with bright confidence. “That one is a sprite and that one is a gnome.” He pointed to two other humanoid creatures with red and blue skin, respectively.

The red-skinned humanoid approached next, also diaper-clad. “I’m Charm. *I’m the elf*,” he said defiantly. “He’s the sprite, and that one’s a gnome.” Charm’s facial features were identical to Up’s except for his red skin.

Lastly, the blue-skinned, diaper-clad humanoid approached. “I’m Strange,” he said less confidently, looking at the ground. His voice was barely above a whisper. “I’m really the elf. The other two are gnomes and sprites.”

Daryn extended his hand to shake, though a bit confused about who was who. Strange turned away shyly to re-join his friends. Before Daryn could say anything, a fourth humanoid creature approached. This one was a foot taller than Daryn and was not wearing a diaper. In fact, it was wearing nothing at all. It was made entirely of large, moving stones, with a stone head and pebbles for its eyes and mouth.

“I’m Granit,” it said in a gruff rock-like voice. “I’m a rock daemon.”

He extended his large, rocky hand toward Daryn. The hand looked capable of crushing Daryn’s feeble human fingers. Daryn offered a fist bump instead.

Tiff bounced up to Granit’s face and gave it a lick. When she tried to do the same to Daryn, he pushed her away, annoyed.

“You know me. I’m Tiff,” she said cheerfully, despite Daryn’s grumpy attitude. “And this one is...”

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Next, a toad-like creature approached crawling on four legs. It looked exactly like a toad, though about ten times larger than any Daryn had ever seen. It was the size of a small dog. It lumbered up to Daryn's feet and let out a large "Burp!"

"Well," Daryn looked back at Tiff. "What's its name?"

"Burp," the toad sounded again.

"We don't know," Tiff replied. "He's too young to talk. He's a slythe. They're late talkers."

The unnamed slythe looked up at Daryn with puppy-like eyes as if waiting to be pet. Daryn obliged it, reaching down to stroke its head. To his surprise, its skin was warm like a mammal. The slythe began to purr.

"Well then, I'll call you Burp," Daryn said to the toad creature. "Since that's all you're able to say."

"Burp," Burp replied. He seemed to approve, then lumbered on his four legs toward the breakfast table, where the giant plant creature was finishing its preparations.

A few moments later, the plant creature called to the group. "Breakfast is ready." While the young ones moved to their respective places at the table, the plant creature turned and stepped behind a nearby tree. It brought out peculiar-looking chairs. Daryn couldn't help noticing that the chairs intended for himself and the Elves (or Gnomes or Sprites, whichever they were) looked a little like highchairs.

No, they were *exactly* like highchairs.

The plant creature placed the chairs around the table, then started lifting the babies into them. When it came to Up, the Elf - or whatever he was - lifted his arms, and the plant creature sat him in his highchair. Next in line was Charm, who lifted his arms and was lifted, and finally Strange, who did the same. The plant creature produced a small stone stepstool for Granit as apparently, he was too heavy for even the giant to lift. Burp and Tiff merely jumped onto the table and ate without chairs.

That left Daryn standing a few feet away, unwilling to be seated in a highchair like a baby. The plant creature came to him. Daryn shook his head, no. The creature shrugged its shoulders and moved on.

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The problem with this plan was that Daryn was hungry, desperately so. The melons from last night were long gone and he was starving.

Tiff saw Daryn standing alone without food. She scooped up a mouthful of nuts and berries from her own plate and hopped down to the ground. She spat the food at Daryn's feet. "You can have some of mine."

Daryn could see the little unicorn's intention was genuine, but that food had been in her mouth. He made a sour look on his face. "No, that's okay. I'm good."

"Good at what?" Tiff asked innocently.

Daryn sighed. "Nothing, it's just an expression."

Tiff nudged one of the berries in Daryn's direction. "Really, you can have it."

Daryn stepped over the berry and raised his hand to get the plant creature's attention. "Hey, you, giant plant thing. I think I'm ready to eat."

The giant lumbered over to Daryn and lifted him into his highchair. He looked long at the creature's mushroom face. "Um...are you related to Basid," he asked sheepishly.

"We are Asco," the creature answered.

"Are you a woman?" Daryn assumed that, given their motherly duties of caring for babies, Basid and Asco were probably women.

"We are a fungus giant," Asco said with no further explanation as if it were obvious.

This was not helpful. Daryn had no idea how to address a fungus—*Him?* *Her?* Daryn tried to remember from his Biology class if fungi were male, female, or neither. Daryn also found it odd that both Basid and Asco referred to themselves in the plural. He would ask about that some other time.

Seated in his highchair, Daryn once more felt confined as he had been in his crib. He looked at the food on his plate. It was mostly unrecognizable. There was a bread-like thing, a pudding-like thing, things that looked like berries or nuts, and something that looked like...moss?

Daryn picked up the bread-thing and took a tentative bite. It was warm, nutty, and delicious. His hunger took over from there, and he proceeded to eat everything eagerly regardless of its appearance. When he got to the pudding

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substance, he noticed they had not been given utensils. Taking a look at Up and Charm, he knew what to do.

*Eat it with your fingers like a baby.* Daryn rolled his eyes. *Who cares? I'm starving.*

He scooped the wonderful substance into his mouth which tasted like egg omelet. Daryn's fingers and face were soon a sticky mess, just like the others.

Asco made a second round, offering drinks. "Juice?" It handed Daryn a cup with a tapered spout on the top that reminded Daryn of...

*A Sippy cup! You've got to be kidding!*

He saw the others drinking from similar cups.

*I guess nobody cares.*

The substance tasted like a mixture of milk, lemon, and tea. Daryn guzzled it.

Asco made a third round with moist wipes made of moss, no less, wiping hands and faces clean. Daryn submitted to this last indignity followed by being lifted out of his highchair back to the ground.

His hunger sated for the moment and in the most embarrassing way, Daryn wondered when he might return to the tree where his Lumos headset was waiting. He had only come here for food after all. He was tired of the baby stuff. That opportunity, however, would come later. Tiff bounded over to him with even more energy - if that was possible - having eaten breakfast.

"Time to play." She gave him a nudge with her smooth, rounded horn.

"Oh, I don't think so. I don't play." *With babies*, he didn't add.

Of course, he liked shooting games, but Daryn didn't think it would be appropriate to mention that in this place.

"I think you'll like it." Up replied.

"We have a lot of fun," Charm said next.

"You should give it a try," Strange followed last.

Granit held out his stony, crushing hand. Daryn nervously took hold of it. To his surprise, Granit's grasp was gentle. The stones of his palm were smooth,

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almost like a human hand. Daryn resigned himself to staying a little longer. They had fed him, after all, and seemed eager to show him their playground.

“I guess so,” he nodded. “Lead the way.”

# Chapter 7: Elves, Sprites, and Gnomes



Granit led Daryn by the hand all the way to the playground where the others, being lighter and faster than the rock daemon, were already at play.

"Here we are," he announced, releasing Daryn's hand. "Go run and play."

"Give me a second," Daryn replied. He gazed in awe at the massive play area that stretched around him. It was like an enormous jungle gym of slides, tunnels, and ladders, winding overhead and through the trees—except everything was made of plant material instead of plastic. The slides and tunnels were formed by gigantic orchid-like flowers that bent and joined together to form continuous tubes. Vines and tree branches formed the climbing structures. At the base of each slide were giant "ball pits" made of—big surprise—moss.

Despite having long outgrown playgrounds - the last time he had played on one was with his sister Viola in first grade - Daryn felt a strong urge to play at that moment. He watched Tiff disappear into one of the slide tunnels that had a loop and a corkscrew, only to re-appear at the bottom, flipping upside down into a moss pit. The pits were thick enough and spongy enough that it didn't matter how you landed—head-first, butt-first, it made no difference, you couldn't be injured.

"Well, what do you think?" Granit asked.

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Daryn couldn't help smiling.

*I'm really going to do this, he thought. After all these years I'm going to play.*

"You go first," Daryn pointed to an orchid slide.

"I'm too heavy for the slides," Granit replied. He lumbered over to a moss pit and dropped into it. Despite his great weight, the moss supported him as if he were weightless. "I like the pits. It's the only place I can float." Granit swam through the moss-like water.

Daryn was about to climb the short ladder to the orchid slide when he noticed the blue elf, Strange, sitting alone away from the others. "One minute," he said to Granit. Daryn stepped off the ladder and walked over to the elf.

"Hey," Daryn said before taking a seat next to Strange. "Why aren't you playing with the others?"

"Oh, I will in a minute," Strange replied. "I like to watch sometimes." The elf's face took on a sullen appearance. "Sometimes I don't feel like the others."

Daryn regarded the smaller humanoid creature with its elvish ears and eyes. Except for the blue skin tone, he looked exactly like the other two, diaper and all. Daryn didn't know how to respond to the elf's complaint.

"I'll sit and watch with you." And so, they sat together in silence watching the others at play.

Then, Daryn thought of something. "All three of you say you're an elf and the others are a sprite or a gnome. Why is that? What's the difference?"

Strange considered the question. "Elves are the tallest when they grow up. And they have magical powers. They're the best." Strange held up his blue hand for Daryn to see. "Baby elves start out life either blue or green or red."

"Oh, I get it." Daryn didn't really. "So, all three of you are elves, then."

Strange shook his head. "But so do sprites and gnomes. They have the same color patterns as babies, too."

Daryn nodded as if he understood, though he was still confused. "I take it that sprites and gnomes aren't as good?"

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Strange put his hand down. "Sprites are shorter than elves and they don't have as much magic. The best they can do is simple charms. Sprites are the ones who make our pacifiers."

Daryn remembered how the pacifier had changed his feeling from fear to calm. So, the thing was in fact magical.

"Oh, that makes sense now."

Strange continued. "Gnomes are the shortest of the three and they have no magic at all when they grow up. Of course, none of us have magic as babies, but if you're a gnome, you never get it."

Daryn looked over to where Up and Charm were swimming in the same moss pit as Granit.

"So, nobody wants to be a gnome. I get it." Daryn considered this. "And since all of you start with the same color patterns, none of you know which one you are?"

Strange regarded his own small blue hands. He nodded, yes. Then, if possible, his face became even more sullen. "I think I might not be an Elf."

Daryn thought the answer to his dilemma was obvious. "Well, what are your parents?"

Now it was Strange who was confused. "What's that?"

"You know, your mom and dad," Daryn continued. "What were they?"

"A flower?" Strange responded with a question.

Daryn had to remind himself that he was in a game, a baby game no less. Of course, they were born from flowers. Storks would be too obvious.

*He's afraid he might be a Gnome.* Daryn understood.

He placed his arm on Strange's shoulder in an attempt to reassure. "But since none of you have magic as babies, you might be an Elf after all. You just have to wait."

Strange still looked doubtful.

Daryn wondered how long their babyhood lasted in this game world. "Come with me." Daryn stood and offered his hand. "I'll go down the slide with you. It looks like fun. You'll feel better."

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The elf - Daryn would think of them all as elves for simplicity - took Daryn's hand and followed him to the nearest orchid slide. Like most young children, the distraction worked and Strange was soon laughing by the time he flew into the moss pit.

Daryn followed behind and discovered quite a surprise. The slide formed of plants was not a passive tunnel. The living flowers actually moved and pushed their riders along as they went, giving them extra speed to get through the loops, and spitting them out with greater speed into the moss.

Daryn found the ride more thrilling than any slide he had ever imagined—more like a rollercoaster. When he stood to climb out of the moss, he was in for a further surprise, this one more shocking. One of the flowers leaned over, wrapped its long stamen around Daryn's waist, and launched him high into the air.

Daryn screamed, "Someone help me!"

Then, at the top of his arch through the air, Daryn encountered a swarm of a thousand hummingbird dragons. Several hundred of them latched onto his body and beat their wings like a thousand tiny helicopters. Daryn floated to the ground in slow motion like a balloon. The dragons dispersed the moment he touched down.

"Damn!" Daryn exclaimed when he was safe on the ground. His heart raced as fast as a dragon wing. "I want to do that again!"

And so Daryn's plan of leaving Aeviternity that morning was delayed as he spent the next few hours being launched into the air and caught by a thousand hummingbird dragons which he decided to call *humming-dragons*. The others joined him in play. Strange, especially, seemed to enjoy the dragon-assisted flight. Only Granit was too heavy to participate, however, he was happy enough swimming in the moss pits.

The afternoon would delay Daryn's plans even longer. They were hungry again. Lunch would not be a formal sit-down meal as breakfast had been, but rather a hunting and foraging affair. Daryn was already familiar with the green and yellow striped melons so he found one right away. Strange showed him other foods that he had missed.

"This one is my favorite." The Elf plucked what appeared to be a closed flower from a vine. He unwrapped the petals to reveal an orange nut. "Here, try one." He handed one of the flowers to Daryn.

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Daryn peeled the flower as Strange had done. The inner nut tasted like chocolate! "This is terrific!" He devoured the nut, then went to the vine to pick more.

"You can also drink the nectar from these flowers." Strange demonstrated, plucking one of the flowers that the humming-dragons favored.

Daryn tried that next. The nectar was light and fizzy as if it were carbonated. It tickled his nose as he drank. "I see why the humming-dragons like this stuff. Makes you want to fly."

After lunch came nap time. One by one, Up then Charm, and finally Strange dropped randomly to the soft forest floor. Tiff lay stretched on a sun-soaked patch of grass like a dog. Even Granit sat down to take a nap. When he slept, the stones and pebbles that composed his body seemed to release, forming what appeared to be an ordinary pile of boulders and rocks.

With everyone asleep, Daryn thought this might be a good time to make his exit. Basid and Asco were nowhere in sight. He could just walk away unnoticed. He wasn't sure if time passed the same in the real world while he was in this one. If it did, then it would be Friday afternoon.

"I've already missed half a day of school." He reasoned that by the time he walked all the way to the ancient tree to retrieve his Lumos, then walked all the way to his school the long way, avoiding Savage territory, school would be over for the day. "There's no point. I've missed the whole day, then."

Daryn lay back on the warm grass. A nap *did* sound good. "Guess I'll stay until dinner." More food wouldn't hurt him.

As he lay on the grass, the toad-like Burp lumbered over to him.

"Hi Burp," Daryn greeted the slythe. "You want to take a nap, too?"

The toad wiggled its body under Daryn's head like a pillow.

*Sure, why not?* Daryn thought.

He was again surprised by the warmth that came from Burp's body, unlike an amphibian, more like a mammal. Then, the toad began to purr. He became Daryn's purring, warm pillow.

Before drifting to sleep, Daryn considered that he had spent the entire morning playing this baby game, *as a baby himself*, and that he would likely do

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the same that afternoon. He had to admit, it wasn't unpleasant. He also had to admit this world couldn't really be a game.

*The food is real. These creatures are real. The forest is real.* He held up his toddler-sized hand to inspect. *And this is really me, somehow.*

When they awoke from their naps, Tiff led Daryn and her playmates to a nearby pond to go swimming. Unlike most ponds, the water was as clear as a swimming pool. Daryn could see several species of tropical fish and turtles gliding playfully through the crystalline water.

“Jump in!” Tiff shouted. “The water is perfect.” She took a running leap and splashed into the pond, scattering the fish immediately below her.

Up and Charm followed next, diving head-first into the water. Strange stayed back waiting for Daryn to jump. Before either of them could go, however, Granit took a running jump into the water as fast as a ton of boulders could go. This created a gigantic splash and tidal wave before he immediately sank to the bottom. Daryn and Strange were soaking wet before they jumped in last.

Daryn noted Granit moving along the bottom of the pond, completely submerged. “I don’t think he can swim,” he said to Strange, worried. “How long can he hold his breath?”

The elf laughed. “Don’t worry. He’s a rock daemon. He doesn’t need to breathe.”

*Sure, why not,* Daryn shrugged. These were magical creatures after all.

Daryn discovered another interesting property to the water when he dove under its surface. Although he was unable to breathe it, when he opened his eyes, his vision was clear. It was like wearing a mask. “Cool,” he said making a stream of bubbles underwater.

Daryn waved at Granit who was walking along the bottom. He filled his lungs with as much air as he could, then dove down to swim around the rock daemon. With that much air in his lungs, he tended to float upward, so he reached for Granit’s hand to hold himself down.

Tiff appeared alongside them, swimming with her hooves as if galloping on dry land. She gave Daryn an underwater lick, then swam off.

*At least I don’t have to wash it off,* Daryn thought humorously.

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Walking back to the shore and dry land, Daryn encountered yet another embarrassing situation. All day long, until now, he had paid little attention to his diaper. He had quickly gotten used to the feel of the soft garment and simply ignored it while they played on the slides and when they ate lunch. Now, he discovered the function of diapers. They absorb water—lots of it—in his case a gallon of pond water. It looked like he was wearing a white balloon about to burst. A quick look around confirmed that Up, Charm, and Strange were in the same predicament.

“Uh...now what?” He could feel his face burning with shame.

As if they were perfect butlers standing aside unnoticed until needed, Basid and Asco emerged from the trees, each carrying two white bundled objects. “Better change those diapers,” Basid announced. He was at Daryn’s side in two giant strides.

Daryn objected vigorously. “Oh no! Not here! Not now!” He held up a hand. “Give it to me. I can do it myself...”

His objection was cut off instantly as Basid plopped a pacifier in Daryn’s mouth. The suddenness shocked him. The Sprite magic, however, took effect immediately. Daryn was, in fact, quite pacified. Again, he noted it did not feel like being drugged. He remained fully awake and fully aware. No, it was merely the acceptance of a simple fact—that he was a baby, that this was normal, and that everything would be okay.

Daryn allowed Basid to lay him down on the soft grass to be changed. It did not bother him that the others could see him being changed if they wished. He looked over to see Tiff and Burp still splashing in the shallow water. He looked over his other shoulder to see Charm lying on his back being changed while Up waited his turn. Strange stood a few feet away from Daryn waiting for Basid to finish. Daryn was so unselfconscious that he played with his fingers and toes while Basid did their work.

In just minutes it was over, and the four diaper wearers were dry and released for play. Basid removed Daryn’s pacifier. “Go play now, little human,” they said in a kindly voice.

With the Sprite magic gone, Daryn’s shame came flooding back. His stomach felt like flipping.

*I just had my diaper changed in front of everyone.*

He wanted to melt into the ground.

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Basid noticed Daryn's distress. "Want this back?" He offered to return the pacifier.

Daryn knew that if he put it back in his mouth, his uncomfortable feeling would go away. If he didn't, he would have to spend the day knowing what the others had seen.

*I was playing with my toes!*

Daryn took the pacifier.

The second half of the day was even better than the first. Daryn felt like he truly belonged in this world. He didn't care that he and his friends were babies. He cared that they were having fun, being fed and that he didn't have to worry about being shot by a complete stranger at night in the rain. He felt like he was home for the first time in a very long time.

It was in this semi-pacified state that Daryn passed the entire day without thinking about time. Before he realized it, the sun was setting, the moons were brightening overhead, and Daryn's gang of playmates were running out of steam. Daryn imagined naming his new gang the Waddlers (*so much nicer than Bullets and Savages*). With the pacifier effect, that name sounded pretty good—totally not embarrassing.

Basid and Asco gently herded the exhausted children back to the open ceilinged nursery to begin their bedtime routine. Once inside the circular room, Daryn finally removed his pacifier.

*Oh God, the Waddlers?* He smacked his forehead. *Never say that name again.*

If time passed the same in the real world as here, Daryn figured it was now Friday night. He had missed an entire day of school, not that anyone would really care. His dad wouldn't be home until very late, if at all, so there was no real need to return. He could spend another night here if he wanted. Without the aid of the pacifier, however, he could see where he would be sleeping. There were five empty cribs scattered around the room.

"I think I'll go home now," he announced.

"But we are home," Tiff replied as she rubbed against his leg like an affectionate pet.

"No, I mean my real home. Where I came from."

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“Won’t you stay for a bottle at least?” Basid asked. “You must be hungry after your busy day.” The fungus giant held up what was obviously a baby bottle with a feeding nipple on the top.

Daryn looked over at his blue elf friend, Strange, who was already being fed a bottle, nestled in the arms of Asco like an infant. Daryn tossed his pacifier to the ground.

“No way.” That was asking too much.

“But at least taste it,” Basid pressed. “They tell me it’s delicious.” The fungus giant turned the bottle over and squeezed a few drops onto Daryn’s hand.

Daryn licked the formula. He had to admit, it was quite good. Like the milk they had for breakfast, this also tasted like lemon, milk, and tea, but with something more.

*Bread!* It had such a rich, bread-like taste, Daryn wanted to chew it.

“Okay, hand me the bottle. I’ll drink some.” Daryn held out his hand. Instead, Basid scooped him off the ground, cradled him in its branch-like arms, and placed the bottle in Daryn’s mouth.

The nipple required no magic to calm Daryn. The formula was so rich and filling that after a few sucks, he resigned himself to finishing the whole thing—even being held like a baby.

*It’s food, he reasoned. What does it matter how I get it?*

Daryn looked over to see that Strange had fallen asleep and had been placed in his crib. The red elf, Charm, now nestled in Asco’s arms for a bottle feed.

*I wonder if that will happen to me?*

It was more a certainty than a question. Daryn could feel sleep spreading over his body as he neared the end of his bottle. He knew it would happen and he would probably end up back in a crib.

*I don’t need to go home tonight, anyway.*

He wondered if a sprite had charmed their formula. Whether it was by magic or just being fed, it felt good to fall asleep like this.

Daryn was not aware of being gently laid in his crib by Basid, nor of his pacifier being returned to his mouth, nor of Burp jumping in to nestle under his head like a pillow, nor of Tiff leaping into the crib to curl at his feet like a puppy.

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It was fully dark now, but there was no need for a night light. Several moons shone overhead amongst the sparkling stars, providing dim but ample light. Not that any of the sleeping children had anything to fear—the darkness in the nursery of Asco and Basid was as safe as the day.