

Everything was set, Snivy had decided.

True, he didn't exactly know what to expect from this little jaunt into the forest, or if it would be anything more than a fool's errand. And his friend still hadn't arrived. Still, everything was as ready as it would ever be.

The young snake assessed his belongings. Flint, waterskins, a knife, some rope, and other assorted survival tools all stowed away safely into the main pocket. Strictly speaking these would all be rather useless, and so he checked the sides more thoroughly. These too were in order, with ink, parchment, talismans, and various occult implements neatly arrayed. The real necessities for the trip to the Manor were prepared, though the snake would have preferred being able to take a cloak with more hemming...

“All right, we heading out?” a voice asked, one which the Snivy recognized immediately after coming down from a startled hop.

“Ah damn, Espurr! Almost felt my heart give way...when did you even come in?” Snivy shook his head before looking on at his friend with a firm gaze.

“Just a couple seconds ago?” the Espurr replied with a raised brow. “Anyway, you didn't answer my question. Is the trip still on? I hope I didn't get equipped for nothing.” he smirked, pulling on the straps of a cloth pack.

“Of course it is.” Snivy rolled his eyes. “I was just waiting for y-”

“Well then, now we can stop waiting! Come along!” Espurr said, grabbing Snivy's arm and jerking him along. The snake barely managed to grab his pack in time.

The two bickered and rambled along with one another as they wended through the halls of Snivy's familial estate. It wasn't very large, all things considered, but it was still maintained as assiduously as that of any vassal family. Espurr had already visited his friend's home many times over the years, so he didn't need much guiding as he dragged the grass snake along.

“Okay, damn, I'm already coming man...you don't need to yank so hard.” Snivy mumbled as the pair passed by rows of statues in a hall dedicated to the family's ancestral Numens. It was still surreal to think that they might actually meet them today.

“I don't need to, but it's fun.” Espurr grinned, and Snivy questioned his choice in friends for only two seconds.

“Okay, okay. In any case, we should really start thinking about this matter more seriously. Now, my folks always used to say that our ancestors spied the manor in the northeast section of the woods, but the common reports give it more to the south-” Snivy was cut off.

“Eh, doesn't matter. It's small enough that we can cover both locations. I assume you brought the compass.” Espurr quipped.

“On point, eh? Normally I might be impressed, but you're acting awfully nonchalant given what our plan is. You think you're up for gods?” Snivy asked with a smirk.

“Gods, ghosts, little difference at the end of the day, especially when I'm really the Absolute. Plus if your heritage isn't enough to win these guys over, I think my spellcraft will be more suited for defense than yours.” Espurr spoke crisply.

Snivy rolled his eyes a little, though he eventually nodded. He still thought that he would have better luck at interacting with, or even finding, the Numens of the woods, but *assuming* worst came to worst, he was probably right.

Good glory. To think that they were actually thinking these thoughts. Years ago the idea had just been a dream. For a while, on the walk to the outskirts of town, Snivy remembered.

The snake was young when the plan first came. Before he had even begun schooling. By that time of course he had already been very aware of his family's heritage, steeped in tales and legends of the forest gods who had wed with his bloodline long ago. And such things were demonstrably more than just tales, for the magic of the elements came instinctively to him, a mere child who at the time barely understood the most elementary aspects of occult theory. The powers that these divine ancestors had left in the family's blood were amazing, useful...and given how many other families could claim numinous parentage, relatively common. His was a vassal family, who had long since sworn fealty to a... more proper noble line, who made shrewd use of their talents. That part wasn't exactly glorious, Snivy thought, but as a child such things didn't matter. Especially when he began to hear rumors of a manor hidden in the woods. The stories had been around for ages, speaking of a strange structure in the forest that defied explication. Some stories would say that mysterious mist shrouded it, or that it only appeared on certain days, or under the moon, or that it never appeared in the same place twice. Needless to say, the manor was never easy to find, and often only discovered by accident. There was an unspoken assumption that the place was where the ancestral gods of the town's resident divine bloodline were found, and indeed family legends even spoke of it as the place where the family's mortal ancestors first made congress with the spirits of the wood.

No-one really cared about such stories enough to actually look for it in the woods, so Snivy was surprised when someone his age showed similar interest.

It was for different reasons, admittedly, but Snivy didn't care. Espurr too was involved with magic, but not by blood. He was somewhat strange even by Snivy's standards, as he didn't care much for the secrets of the elements or feel reverence for the Numens, instead focusing on the hidden powers of men that his homeland apparently paid a great deal of attention to. But to Snivy at that time, magic was magic, and soon after they had met up serendipitously, they were fast friends. Espurr came from a foreign merchant family, one that had decided to set up a branch in the town, and despite his non-noble status, his family's wealth easily allowed him to pursue his interest in the occult. They even allowed him to continue his studies when it became clear that he had no particular talent for practical magic, something Snivy was rather shocked by, for even his magically-endowed family usually didn't invest too many resources in training those who didn't inherit enough blood. But Espurr soldiered on in the mystical order he had been inducted into, and soon found that persistence was rewarded far more in his chosen discipline than talent. Though he was still in the “outer order,” for whatever that meant, the Espurr eventually became quite capable in number of powers removed from Snivy's own, like lifting objects or kenning distant locations.

And so, the two now stood on the edge of the woods that they had wondered about for so long. It was a mite childish, Snivy belatedly thought. But then again, they were both coming of age soon. It would be best to get it out of the system.

“You, uh, alright?” Espurr asked, cocking his head a little. Snivy noticed this a half-second later.

“Oh, yeah. Let's have at it, shall we?” Snivy recaptured himself and nodded.

“Very well.” Espurr smiled.

Most of the walking, was well, *walking*, Snivy deduced. Knowledge told him he shouldn't have expected more, but he still felt some disappointment. The pair crested the outskirts in short order, the trees beginning to cluster up tighter as they entered the forest proper.

“So...do you have any ideas for planar shenanigans or something? I mean, just as an adjunct to our location assessment plans.” Espurr spoke.

“Are you expecting something?” Snivy's brow furrowed. “I can't say that they've gone over much beyond the theory of the Worlds. If they had taught some sort of 'veil breach,' I would have brought it up way back.”

“Eh, was worth a shot. Just figured your family might have some sort of secret code or something...assuming that portion of the legend was true.” Espurr shrugged.

“W-Well, I don't really see how that would be any less likely than it existing in the first place.” Snivy felt his tone falter for a moment. “It'd be an awful waste of our time if they were just your everyday forest ghosts, anyway...”

“Hey, who said it'd be a waste of *my* time?” Espurr grinned. “You're better than most bluebloods, I'll admit, but you could work on those ego-assumptions.”

“Oh c'mon. Your folks aren't exactly starving for cash themselves, noble or not.” Snivy scoffed, turning his head away to focus on the path ahead.

“Well, true. At the very least I know it pays better to be aware of other minds. For example, I knew for a fact that you wouldn't take offense at my dig at your position.” Espurr shrugged a little on the walk, smiling.

“And you should be thankful for it.” Snivy smirked slyly.

Espurr could not come up with a retort, but he savored the “battle.”

The group arrived at the northeastern segment of the woods first. To Snivy's dismay, not the slightest hint of a structure could be made out from amid the shadow-laden plant growth. The trees had grown tall and thick, forming a canopy that spread out the sun's rays like a prism. Before Snivy could assuage his feelings by considering the Manor's potential astral presence, Espurr spoke up.

“Welp, looks like this place is a done deal. I'm going to scout out the east. Be careful!” Espurr said with a wink, beginning a confident walk to the south. The snake's gaze rapidly switched between the wild surroundings and the disappearing frame of his friend.

“Damnit Espurr...” Snivy muttered under his breath. These games were fun, but they did grow tiresome

at times.

Espurr didn't say anything after Snivy dashed over to regroup with his friend; the initial victory had been satisfying enough. The two travelled on together further south, the darkness of the woods somehow growing even more enveloping. Snivy found this particularly odd, as the growth didn't seem heavier than it had been in the northeast. In fact, the canopy was of about the same thickness. It was because of these factors that Snivy bothered to halt when Espurr raised a paw.

“Hold up.” Espurr said.

“What is it?” Snivy asked with narrowed eyes.

“Mist up ahead.” Espurr spoke, moving his head as if in scanning.

Snivy took a moment to look ahead. A thin fog held in the forest before them, albeit low to the ground. It clung to few objects.

“...It's not the season for that.” Snivy made out after a second.

“Indeed.” Espurr looked back to his friend. They both nodded.

The two's approach grew cautious. While they did eventually begin to step through the low fog themselves, it happened only after a good minute of observation, mundane in Espurr's case and astral in Snivy's. Nothing certainly *seemed* amiss, Snivy thought, though he couldn't help but consider the possibility that their perceptions wouldn't be sharp enough if something wasn't aright. Brow furrowing, he quickly neglected that line of thought.

“Ah, hold up...I think we got something!” Espurr exclaimed. Snivy swiftly came to and looked on at his friend.

“I, what exactly are you saying?” Snivy started to trudge toward his friend, faster when the Espurr began a jog.

“I think I saw a broad, brown, vertical plane of some sort through the foliage over...there!” Espurr pointed.

The snake looked on at the sight for a second, a distant point where tree branches swayed. Though it was almost too far to make out anything of significance, for just a moment the branches moved in a way that revealed what lay behind them.

The unmistakable kind of treated wood planks that his family's house consisted of.

“Blessed damned Death, let's have at it!” Snivy screeched and grabbed onto his friend's hand. The Espurr mewed a bit as he was jerked forward.

“H-Hey, what're you thinking!” Espurr shouted.

“Thinking? Hell to that, I'm *doing!*” Snivy quipped, tunnel vision forming as they raced through the undergrowth.

“Like I couldn't tell...” Espurr spoke louder so as to prevent his voice from being drowned out from the sound of their dashing. “I meant about throwing caution to the wind! Who knows i-”

“If this thing will disappear! Think about it; if it exists then it isn't going to be an easy fixture to find, and no-one's ever talked about some building in the woods made in our own style! Chances are this place can disappear at any second, so I'm not going to waste any time deliberating!” Snivy shouted. The snake and his friend crashed through countless bushes and narrowly avoided a variety of trees. With each set of obstacles passed they could make out the wood more clearly, a single plane quickly taking on multiple angles, the faint visage of a manor in the distance. It seemed so insubstantial, faint, shimmering like a mirage, and so Snivy didn't spare any effort in-

CRASH!

In an instant the two's vision was replaced with black and their sensations replaced by a nameless wave of pointy pain, bruising, and vertigo. Snivy grew accustomed to this quick enough to determine that it was the feeling of tumbling. In spite of the fact that he hadn't noticed any potential pitfalls during his run, the snake found that matter infinitely less surprising than what greeted him when he opened his eyes.

“The...hell?” Snivy's head went ajar.

Set in a significant depression in the woods was a courtyard. Not just any old courtyard, but the meditative sort of ones that used gardens of sand. Behind it loomed a manse, gargantuan by his family's standards, but not overly so. The whole building was an expert weave of wood and gilding, tasteful traceries hinting at the hallways and passages within, as well as the substantial rooms and domed towers that made up the bulk of the building. The wood itself was unpainted, but smooth and elegant, just as his family had always preferred. Snivy just looked on at it all in awe, the wonder dulling his pain for the most part. Espurr was less fortunate.

“Blistering devils, what the hell was that?! I told you we should be care...ful?” Espurr's voice dropped as he opened his eyes and slowly stood up.

“I told you! We, we made it! Holy, holy, holy!” Snivy squealed. “I mean, I suspect the transposition occurred on the last leg of the journey, hence our fall in a terrain that normally wouldn't support its occurrence, but we made it in ti-”

“Whatever you're on, I'd like it.” Espurr sighed, soothing some of his more battered limbs before he took a closer look at the site. His eyes hardened on it, poise recovering, before he smiled.

“Hmm. It would seem so. Granted, it could also be an illusory effect and still situated in the mortal world, perhaps your blood was the key for access...” the psychic mused.

“Well whatever it is, I doubt we're going to find the answer by standing around here. C'mon, the entrance is just up here.” Snivy said, gesturing towards a great wooden door that stood affixed to a low patio beyond the sand garden.

Though Espurr joined Snivy in the walk towards the doors, it was quickly interrupted by a sudden voice.

“And...welcome home cous'! Well, actually I'm not sure if that's the exact relation term, but blood doesn't really matter and yada yada...”

“Who's there?!” Espurr shouted as soon as the voice came. “I'd be careful with any tricks; you'll find we aren't the sort of men to be vulnerable to them.”

“Well I'd say 'men' is a pretty generous term, but of course age doesn't really exist, true.” the voice mused for a moment.

“I...are you...?” Snivy's voice escaped from his shock.

“Oh dear...I guess I can't really do the whole 'implicit confirmation of my identity' sort of thing. A shame, that part is always fun...ah, anyways, I'm one of your very own ancestor Numens!” the voice chirped.

“So, you're...we're...really here...I apologize sir, it's an incalculable honor to finally see you in the flesh.” Snivy nodded, attempting to suppress the grin that was invariably plastering itself on his face.

“Well you haven't seen me yet, silly boy! Let alone in the flesh! But we can get you there, once you pass the trials.” the voice reverberated.

“T-Trials?” Snivy's face suddenly went vacant. He didn't remember the family legends mentioning any trials.

“Guess it would be too much to expect anything less.” Espurr sighed.

“Of course! In order to get to me, you have to find where I am in the house! And I'm not exactly going to make it easy, but you can see what I mean by that for yourselves! Just a little...tradition.” the voice said.

“I...of course great Numen. I apologize, it's just a lot to digest.” Snivy couldn't help but let his brow furrow at this. “I, may we know what particular Numen gloriously shares their presence with us before we start? I have all the lineage-hymns memorized...”

“Nope! You'll have to find me to learn that. Now then, enough chit chat. The game starts now!” the voice proclaimed in a breezy crescendo.

The pair blinked to themselves for a few moments before realizing that it wasn't coming back.

“Wow. Well, that's exactly the reason why we don't tend to bother with extended families...” Espurr shrugged.

“Really Espurr?!” Snivy's voice reached a shout.

A faint wind picked up.

“Hey, play nice back there. I already heard your cuss from before, so if you keep that up, you might get your first penalty soon.” the voice said, disappearing as quick as it came.

Snivy gulped and began to speak more softly.

“You can at least show a *little* more respect to the supernatural being who...shares their presence with us.” Snivy quieted down toward the end. He was realizing that the minute cliff that formed the rim of the manor looked rather unscaleable. “Besides, I thought that you'd be excited to find something, at least. This is still going relatively according to plan.”

“Real respect is mutual and equal, not servile and worshipful.” Espurr yawned. “Any real Deity will recognize that, and my soul will always be safe even if my body is not.” he stated firmly. “Plus I usually don't like to show when I'm interested in things so that my cool factor doesn't go down.” he smirked toward the end.

Sighing, Snivy returned it.

“So, uh...what exactly are we supposed to do again?” Espurr asked to no-one in particular.

“Ah! Completely forgot about that part! Well better late than never, at least in most contexts.” the voice said as it returned.

In an instant between blinks, the large fields of unmarred sand that stood before the entrance to the manor suddenly became host to large, metallic poles. These stood in pairs at either end of what were quickly straying from sand gardens, connected by thin, smoothed poles of wood. Espurr cautiously approached one of the lines, and Snivy followed in suit to another one.

“For this test, you have to cross one of these lines to the other side!” the ancestor said.

“That's, that's it?” Espurr asked.

“Oh of course not, but you already guessed that. If you touch the sand, then you lose, and immediately receive a penalty. Afterwards you can just walk across the sand to the other side, though.” the voice elaborated.

“Penalty?” Snivy cocked his head.

“Ah ah ah, no spoilers! Now then, carry on. I'm sure such a simple test of endurance will be nothing compared to your maturation-rites.” the voice said. For some reason, Snivy didn't quite like the last sentence.

“O-kay.” Espurr said. The feline looked on across the field for a moment before shrugging. “I don't like the sound of any of this, but this task looks simple enough.”

“That's the spirit! Good luck you two!” the voice chirped.

Snivy paused for a moment after the conversation stilled, looking first to the poles and then his arms.

“Should be good, I suppose?” he said.

“I'd say so. Can't be sure until you start though.” Espurr briskly spoke, hopping up and latching onto

the pole.

“Al...right. Let's go.” the cat's voice died as he began to shimmy along the structure.

Carefully, Snivy jumped onto his own.

“Ah...damn, alright.” the snake said, gritting his teeth as he began the journey.

The trip was exceedingly simple at first, Espurr had to admit. So much so that he was almost certain that there had to be a complication. The psychic held back a curse when it revealed itself.

“What's, what?!” he shouted.

Before him, the length that it would take to reach the other end of the courtyard seemed, longer. Yet even that perturbing revelation wasn't so simple. Because everything beyond the sand garden seemed, normal? Eyes narrowing, Espurr spied a faint curvature to the surroundings, and a shimmer to the air beyond the playing field. Still focusing his attention primarily on grip maintenance, he called out.

“Alright fairy, what gives?”

“What gives what?” the ancestor's voice returned before his descendant could speak up.

“What's giving me a headache?! You clearly just made this thing longer...somehow. What's your plan here?” Espurr couldn't help but groan.

“Oh, I don't have any plan! I just manipulated space to reach a length that should be a proper test. I didn't want to mess with the rest of the house, so I just bent the fabric of the world to make the pole itself longer! Now it should match the endurance of a fit man.” the ancestor said.

“T-That's not fair! You never said you'd be doing that!” Espurr's voice faltered only slightly.

“But you said you were men, so this should be a fair match of your skill, right?” the voice said, and Espurr just knew that the voice was feigned. Almost too easily, in fact.

“Eugh, we'll make it anyway.” Espurr shook his head and resumed the journey.

Espurr's movements slowed as he moved further down the pole, the cat often taking breaks in between periods of shimmying. Snivy was still further back than his friend, and in what moments of attention Espurr could spare, he could notice his friend noticeably struggling. Sighing, he would always return his mind to the task soon after. Pity wouldn't help either of them.

“Hold on...Espurr.” Snivy managed to croak out. Espurr looked back to see the snake dangling, leaf arms limply holding on.

“C'mon Sniv. If you extend all the way out you won't have the strength to get in the pulling position again.” Espurr spoke, voice tinged with pain.

“I, just need a break. Maybe we can figure something ou-” Snivy was cut off.

“Not here.” Espurr managed a thin smile, turning away from his friend and continuing the journey along the pole. He thought himself about halfway through at this point.

“W-What the he-ck man?” Snivy spoke, speech moderating itself as he remembered his ancestor's surveillance. Surprising himself, the snake managed to pull himself upwards and swing his arms forward in rapid movements.

Espurr maintained the smile for a while after they each received their second wind. Competition always seemed to be able to trigger that revival. And they'd likely be needing it many more times today, he thought, if this first trial was anything to by. Narrowing his eyes, the cat focused on the thin patch of ground beyond the sand.

“Clever trick, I'll admit.” Espurr heard. “My little boy back here certainly isn't the most athletic one, and I'm glad that he has such a good friend to spur him on.”

“Hmm.” Espurr stayed quiet for a little, half in thought and half in concentrating on his work. “Interesting use of auditory projections right by the ears. Bet you're using the winds for that right? Or perturbatory forces to get the necessary vibrations. Decent replacements for telepathy if need be.” he mused.

“Well, that is true, though I don't see how that's related to the situation at hand?” the voice said. Espurr could almost detect the shrugging.

“Not a good friend. His *best* friend.” Espurr spat between his swinging.

“Now *that's* what I like to hear!” the ancestor responded with a celestial lilt. They seemed to recede soon after.

Espurr sighed, smirked to himself, and continued the journey.

By around the 75% mark, Espurr was actually beginning to temper his efforts. It still hurt like hell to move, of course, but the cat finally permitted some leniency into his plans.

And then came the sound.

Behind him, Espurr heard a yelp and the unmistakable sound of splashing sand. Even though he didn't need to, his head swung back.

Snivy laid there in the sand.

“Uh...you alright?” Espurr put forward. He couldn't think of many other options.

“No.” Snivy barely enunciated. He was still mostly just moaning and rolling in the sand.

“Sorry man, I just...find it hard to focus.” Espurr replied, breathing.

“Understand. Hurting too much to be pissed.” Snivy made out.

“Glad to hear...I'll go back to completing this thing.” Espurr said and began moving again.

Snivy laughed before he groaned.

Espurr could see it. Because he was so close. It looked like it was 10 feet off but he couldn't tell or breathe and his arms were hurting. The cat attempted to focus his eyes more cleanly for the final stretch, a difficult endeavour given the lack of air in his lungs. With an arm, the cat swung forward to grab further onto the pole. As he copied the gesture with the other arm though, he found that the final grip of the other one hadn't been strong enough.

Falling drew Espurr back to cognizance.

“Hold.” Espurr said quietly, as though self-hypnotized.

Immediately, the psychic felt a force manifest beneath his feet, as though he were pushing on an invisible, inflated bladder. “Concentrating” in the not-thought, the cat breathed steady sighs.

“I should have thought of this earlier.”

“No. Kidding.” Snivy said from behind. Espurr noticed that the grass snake was stumbling forward slowly now.

Still in a strange trance, Espurr began to focus on adjusting the direction of his psychokinetic perturbations. He floated forward, slowly. The end was only five or so feet off now.

“NO CHEATING ALLOWED!” a sudden rapturous voice filled the courtyard. Snivy recognized his ancestor quickly.

Espurr felt the force buoying him pop like a balloon. The cat fell down and slumped forward onto the sand.

Snivy's pace quickened even in the half-limp. Espurr was up in a rage before the snake could reach him.

“You never said that was a part of the rules! What's up with you damn Numens?!” Espurr shouted with paws balled up and head tilted towards the heavens. He got a response soon after.

“I said you have to cross one of the poles to get to the other side, not just reach the other side.” the ancestor's voice said. “Really, I thought you of all people would have been big on the technicalities.

Espurr immediately perused his memory and quietly cursed to himself.

“Fine then. We both lost. What's your 'penalty,' anyway?” Espurr said.

“Esp, be careful with Nume-” Snivy was cut off.

“Nah, don't worry Snivy! This little guy's practically family anyway, it's so nice to see you with frie-” the ancestor was cut off this time.

“The penalty?” Espurr asked plainly.

“Oh, just take a look for yourselves.” the voice stated succinctly.

Espurr looked forth blankly for a moment until he became aware of a subtle tingling sensation. He examined his form, but didn't notice much different. Until he waited a few seconds, and found differences between the moments.

“Uh, Sniv... I think we're uh...” Espurr trailed off.

“Shrinking?!” Snivy shouted at a shortening leaf-arm.

“Well no need to get so overdramatic, you're not shrinking! You're just getting younger.” the ancestor chirped.

Somehow, both of the pair looked at the same spot of empty space simultaneously. The eyes were penetrating.

“Oh c'mon, no need for the long faces. Look on the bright side, at least the upcoming trials will be easier! The first one's always sort of a 'got ya,' moment anyway...”

“No no, you're not getting out of this that easily!” Espurr shouted, voice cracking rather abruptly.

“I, uh, hate to be like this, but he's kinda right, sir...” Snivy muttered, mostly still engrossed in examining his frame. From the lightening pigmentation he could guess his body was rolling back a few years. They'd probably both be completely before puberty by the time it was done.

“Aww...” the voice started to hit a low tone. “...but it's tradition to greet mortal family with the Trials, and I don't get too many visitors nowadays...”

“But...why do you have to greet us like this, I, I don't quite understand...” Espurr spoke, though his speech lacked a certain forcefulness that it usually carried. The cat himself was surprised that he was holding back.

“Oh but mortals are always so fun to play with! Especially when they haven't seen many years of phenomenal existence and still think themselves so wise and strong...even those who visited the Manor in pre-existence had often only been manifested away from their true soul for only a century or so...” the ancestor sighed. “But no matter, I can return you to your 'natural' ages and transport you to the material world in no time at all. Not everyone needs to face the Trials after al-”

“W-Wait! You can't just take us back there! We've come all this way and waited all this time to see you!” Snivy shouted, albeit at a higher tone than he would have preferred.

Espurr looked between his friend and the sky, suppressing a whine.

“Good glory, I do *not* like the kinds of situations you're putting us into, sir. I'm not going to give up meeting a god and I do not shirk from trials. Even if they are weird.” the cat's tone shifted toward the end.

A high wind began to blow, and the voice returned like whistling reeds.

“Thank you thank you thank you!” it said giddily. “Trust me, the coming Trials won't be nearly as hard as these ones were! In fact, I'd say they'll be even funner! But you can see that for yourselves. Now, the Manor itself awaits!”

An eldritch bolt briefly crackled above the highspire of the manse, though the environment was daylight.

“Hmm. Doesn't look quite as cool without a night storm. Ah whatever, see you boys inside! Again, thank you...” the voice trailed off into vanishment.

Both blinked for a while.

“I, uh, guess we should head inside then.” Snivy began to walk forward toward the wooden steps of the patio, numbly.

“I guess I got played again.” Espurr's brow furrowed.

When Snivy finally reached the great oaken double-doors, he absentmindedly grasped at the handles to open them. They didn't budge, though, and not wishing to bother his ancestor, the snake briefly concentrated. Slowly but inexorably, the metals within the lock began to dance to his will, and quickly all of the tumblers were raised. By the time Espurr had made his way up the steps, Snivy had unlocked the door.

“Hehe, nice to see you've kept the blood aflame for all these years. But I'm getting ahead of myself, whoopsss!” the voice briefly buzzed in both of their ears.

“...What?” Espurr asked blankly.

“No idea.” Snivy shrugged.

The interior was quite the sight, both had to admit. Before them was a wide nexus of a room, with banners and tapestries galore. At all ends beyond the entrance lay halls, the wide ones that often form the main thoroughfares of mansions. Snivy guessed that the staircase would lay at the far end of the one in front of them, but he wasn't sure if that was necessarily where they were supposed to go. Musing, he turned to his friend.

“So, got any clue of where to go?” Snivy asked.

“Well I'm not picking up too many magical traces, but I'm no good at that traditional 'arcane' stuff anyway.” the psychic said. “That being said, I get the feeling that, well.” Espurr briefly paused. “He might want us to 'play,' more literally. I'm not judging your Numen, mind you, but I'd say we keep an eye out for playrooms.”

Snivy raised a brow, but quickly lowered it.

“I believe you are correct in that regard. If it means meeting them...well...it wouldn't be the worst of things.” he supposed.

“Hmph.” Espurr crossed his arms briefly. “I must admit that you are correct.”

“Sooo...going to give me credit for finding this place?” Snivy's mouth began to curve upwards. The snake began to walk down the corridor to the left.

“Boundlessness, you're *really* going to make me give you that one?” Espurr scoffed.

“You said it yourself. Something about a 'blood key' earlier? Besides, I was the one who dragged you along here.” Snivy shrugged.

“That was only a theory.” Espurr rolled his eyes. “And who knows if this place would have disappeared anyway.”

Snivy just kept staring at his friend on the way down the sunlit hall. Every so often Espurr would look back at his friend, then awkwardly focus on the hallway, in a cycle that soon exploded.

“Okay fine, I'll give you that one...” Espurr groaned.

“Fair enough.” Snivy smirked.

While the two wandered down the smooth, well-carved hall, Espurr stopped by a door.

“...Did something happen?” Snivy looked back, asking.

Espurr's right ear twitched.

“This one. Got the feeling.” he said.

Snivy paused for a moment, examining the features of his friend. He soon spoke.

“Alright then. Let's head in.” Snivy nodded.

Opening the door, the two were greeted with what looked like a small parlor of some stripe. There were a few book shelves, but most of the space was taken up by couches and tables with board games on them. Perhaps a gaming room?

“Good job! To be frank I thought you'd be running around here for at least another half-hour or so...” the voice wandered off. “But nevermind! We'll be having a special set of games tonight. First...”

Snivy and Espurr felt their feet glide along the floor, though they didn't move their limbs. Before they could truly react, the pair now faced a little low table tucked away into the corner of the room. A kid's table...

“...you'll be facing off in a classic game of Jari!”

“...And?” Espurr was the first to speak, tapping a foot on the ground.

“Oh, the loser will be getting regressed extra!” the ancestor beamed.

“...I-Interesting design, my good Numen.” Snivy slightly cocked his head.

“Well that's one of the nicest things anyone's said about me! Most people go with 'weird,' or, 'insane.’” the voice trailed off briefly. “But nevermind them! Now, I did kinda drop the ball on the second one. Just a basic game of Yammon against 'lil ol' me.”

Snivy's brow raised at this, and even Espurr tightened his gaze on the table. The ancestor spoke first, though.

“The winner will be able to stall at their current age. Normally I'd give you the option to heroically bestow it upon your friend if you wanted to, but I dunno. I guess you could always just lose if you wanted to do that.”

The two briefly looked at one another, and not quite liking the others' gazes, quickly turned back to the table.

“So, should we like, uh...” Espurr started to walk forward, towards the table. Snivy started likewise.

“Oh right, I forgot about the game! Gimme a moment, please.” the voice said.

In a single second, a Jari set flew from the top of one of the bookshelves and landed immaculately onto the kid's table. Reluctantly, Espurr started to sit down. To his shame, he felt that he fit a bit better than he should have.

“Damn, I don't think I've played Jari in years...” Snivy scratched the back of his head, beginning to sit down at the table.

“Eh, I've had games every once in a while.” Espurr shrugged.

“Just my luck.” Snivy sighed, shaking his head. “But let's have at it, shall we?” the snake raised his head, looking into his friend's eyes. There was enough of a smile.

“Indeed.” Espurr nodded.

“And so the game...begins!” the ancestor shouted.

Jari, Snivy remembered, was an old game developed by the ancients. It chronicled the journey of the soul on its way to birth, and because of this, had many elements of randomization. The other worlds, of course, were not known for their predictability. Truth be told, he had always liked that element of the game. His mind was not well-suited for strategy, and even fortune smiled on the lowest every once in a while.

“So, you like Jari?” Snivy asked. He had picked out his piece from the pile, a little prismatic emblem.

“Mixed feelings. The theme is cool, but it's hard to calculate your moves. Lots of room open for manipulating probabilities, though.” Espurr shrugged.

“You're not going t-” Snivy's eyes narrowed into slits.

“Relax. After seeing your ancestor's stunt back there, that's on the bottom of my list. As long as you

don't use yours.” Espurr said, having picked out a small square emblem with the silhouette-image of a soul. He looked awfully keen when he smiled with his teeth visible.

“Touche.” Snivy said simply.

Proper play started with little fanfare. Both started at the furthest corner of the board, a thin plane of treated wood with designated spaces that coiled inward in a rectangular fashion. Each one of them would toss the betting “bone” in the air – a thin copper wafer – and see how many spaces they moved. Each of the spaces had their own effects of course, outside of the empty ether spaces. Early into play Espurr got a head start, obtaining the aid of a Psychopomp in the “House of Incarnation.” The extra boosts to his rolled speed lasted only a short while though – the ancients figured that the unborn only got wayfarer's advice. Snivy, for his part, found the odds against him. Lulled into the “Hall of Reeds” by landing on a space with thin, semi-diagonal marks, his piece loitered for a while amid a cult that valued seclusion from the material world and purity of mind. Useful in practically any other case, of course, but not when you had the work of Life to do, he thought. The discrepancy in luck soon shifted, however. Espurr found his progress stymied when he landed on the “Prefiguration of Desolation.” His soul wouldn't be finding people having children in the right contexts, and so he was set back several spaces. Snivy on the other hand, simply got many lucky rolls. While he mostly landed on ether spaces, he at least avoided many of the more treacherous banes that crowded the center of the board.

“Hey, u-uh. Sniv. Would you mind pulling me a solid?” Espurr's voice tentatively rose.

“Sorry Espurr. My ancestors are watching.” Snivy said calmly as he moved his piece.

“Well, fair.” the cat mused. His expression recollected itself, and the cat cradled the betting bone carefully in his paw. Despite the fact that Snivy was close to the end now, he only shook slightly.

Espurr breathed in deeply and tossed the betting bone.

Both of the pair leaned in to look; Espurr eagerly and Snivy cautiously.

One of them shot up.

“AH YES! The spoils of man's soul come to treat him well once more.” Espurr shouted, wantonly moving his piece down the board. He was only slightly behind Snivy now.

“H-Hey wait, did, I thought yo-” Snivy was cut off before the accusation could be finalized.

“Sorry kiddo, but no-one can help natural luck. Your friend didn't cheat, be a good sport.” the ancestor encouraged.

“Whatever...” Snivy sighed.

Still, Snivy thought, he was in a good position to snag an easy win. He rolled the betting bone and...

...he moved a single space.

Snivy held back a curse and ignored Espurr even when the cat's expression taunted him.

“Your move, go.” the snake scoffed.

“Gladly.” Espurr grinned. The cat rolled the betting bone down the table.

“Oh, holy hells...” Espurr's eyes widened.

“I, I...” Espurr said lightly, examining the character on the wafer and calculating the number of moved spaces.

The psychic deliberately touched his token to each space as he passed over them. Snivy carefully assessed the betting bone and the movements.

“I...it...” Espurr said, tone heightening as he closed in on the exact center of the board.

Finally, the piece set down in Life.

“YES! Glittering glory I did it! I mean, shoot, I didn't even think I was too good at board games. Sorry about your upcoming regression, Sniv, bu-” Espurr's speech was shortened.

“Stop.” Snivy said.

Espurr looked on at his friend askance, first angry, then confused, and then vaguely frightened. The room was rather silent, and the ancestor was not speaking up.

“...I hit the end.” Espurr said, but the tone lacked a certain firmness.

“Look back at the betting bone.” Snivy shook his head.

Espurr did so.

“Yeah, it's like six spaces.” Espurr said.

“And you were here, remember?” Snivy looked on at his friend, pointing toward a spot on the board.

“I, yeah?” Espurr's head went askew.

“Then how did you get to a space seven spaces away?” Snivy asked simply.

“I, uh.” Espurr gulped. The cat looked back and forth between his previous and 'final' position.

“You miscounted. Sorry man.” Snivy shrugged.

“I. Alright. So, I guess that means I'd just move back t-” Espurr's speech halted as he moved his piece onto the space just before Life.

“The Soul-Churning Currents.”

“Huh. I think that's a reference to the astral winds that blow spirits off course. Especially disorienting for those who haven't lived yet. I'm pretty sure in the rules that means you go back to the first space...”

Snivy went on.

“...I'm aware.” Espurr said meekly.

Espurr held still as his piece returned to the beginning of the board. He didn't say anything as Snivy won in the next turn, still shell-shocked.

“Well, thanks for the game at least, Espurr. I know it probably doesn't sound genuine right now, but I did actually like it when we used to play like this.” Snivy nodded toward the cat.

“Same.” he slowly nodded, beginning to feel a gentle susurrus over his perceptions. He didn't like what the tingling portended, but in the sudden catharsis of loss, it did feel calming.

Snivy cleaned up the board a bit, gently aiming his head away from his friend. Espurr himself was snapped out of his trance a few moments later by the now-familiar voice of the ancestor.

“Aww! You never told me your friend was *sooo* cute when he was a kid, Snivy!” the voice lilted.

“It, never really came to mind.” Snivy looked askance at nowhere in particular for a second, head cocking. Out of the corner of his vision, he could make out the...reduced frame of his friend. Damn this was going to be awkward.

“Well, we can make up for lost years now at least! I wish I could hug the little guy-”

“I can hear you y'know!” Espurr growled in an even higher tone than before. The cat was studiously avoiding looking down.

“Right. Well, before we can really do anything, you have to find me. So keep on with those trials, sprouts!” the voice chirped.

“Wait, what about the Yammon game?” Espurr furrowed his brow.

“Oh, scratch that. Don't know what I was thinking there.” the voice succinctly responded.

Snivy suddenly heard a voice right up by his ear.

“And, uh, do be 'ready' for later, Snivy.”

“I, wha-” Snivy was cut off by the resounding voice of the ancestor back in the 'usual' spot.

“Aaaand....you're off!” the voice exclaimed.

The two didn't wait for silence before beginning to make their moves this time.

“Damn Numens...back home we don't let them trample all over us like this...” Espurr groaned. “Alright, how bad is it? Just give it to me straight.” Espurr looked up straight at his friend. That alone said a lot, he realized...

“Well, uh...” Snivy drawled out for a little while. It was kind of funny to see a small Espurr staring up

at him with wide, beady eyes, not quite little and not quite an almost-adolescent. It was also kind of cute, admittedly. But when your friend was involved, that emotion immediately felt like an insoluble puzzle. Still the snake had to stifle the giggle.

“...you look like you've been in proper schooling for a few years. You're not *little* little, I mean...” Snivy trailed off.

“Anima Mundi...” Espurr shook his head. “If I don't even look like a proper preteen, this is going to get even weirder. Look, just don't act, *weird*, alright? We can figure out these 'Trials,' and get this all sorted out quickly. Don't let your judgments be affected.” Espurr shook his head, tugging along his (similarly reduced) pack and beginning to walk out of the room.

“...I wasn't going to. Unless you were talking about me joking around or somethin-” Snivy was cut off.

“Just don't. Alright?” Espurr's voice came quick, impatient. Snivy found the 'commanding' stare the funniest though. It came out more cute than intimidating, but Snivy remembered to hold back his laughter. If Espurr felt slighted, the trip would probably become filled with more jabbering than he could handle.

The two started to wander further down the hall they had come from, finding a corner-room at the edge of the manse with gorgeous green glass windowing. Fragile, beautiful plants rested in glazed pots and racks on windowsills. Snivy's pace slowed here, though Espurr's walking stayed largely the same. He did seem distracted however.

“So, have you discerned anything of his location?” Snivy asked, looking down.

“Well, still not much, but I get the feeling that the next Trial will be on the next floor; we can just head down this hallways and loop back around to the stairwell. Assuming that this place is built normally, which is very much in question...” Espurr explained.

“Right. Just sort of surprising, is all. Usually your clairvoyance is pretty good.” Snivy said.

“I know.” Espurr said, sighing almost mournfully. “I think they have protection of some sort against scrying, either conscious or unconscious. I'm guessing the former, as they probably wouldn't want any guests to skip their little 'Trials.’” Espurr rolled his eyes. “Whatever though, we can make do.”

Snivy silently nodded. The two continued down the hallway, passing by an assortment of other passages. He thought he could recognize some of the rooms by mere placement; a kitchen here, a galley there, a lounge beyond. Others seemed more esoteric, though he couldn't tell if it was because this place had the even more rarefied rooms of true nobility, or because of the strange whims of spirits. Eventually, though, the two reached another room that seemed to serve as an edge of the mansion's first floor, though this one was relatively more spartan, decorated less with plants and more with somber tapestries. Keyly, however, it had a staircase leading up.

“Looks like we've found our gateway.” Espurr started to jog toward the staircase, frantically making his way up the steps with hops. He paused about halfway before he'd be rendered invisible from Snivy's perspective.

“Well don't stand there! We don't have all day!” Espurr shouted down at his friend, quickly resuming

his ascent. Once out of sight, Snivy let his smile come out.

“Coming...”

The two regrouped once Snivy was able to chase his surprisingly energetic friend down. They ended up in a more maze-like environment, with hallways often branching out into other ones, a veritable floor of crossroads. Espurr seemed to have a good idea of where to go, though, and Snivy followed the regressed cat as he wended his way through the hallways. They passed by many doors, and Snivy guessed that many of the doors led to sleeping chambers and the miscellany assorted with such areas. Espurr hewed closely to his path all the while, like filings before a magnet, and the two eventually arrived at a faintly foreboding maple door.

“Alright, you ready?” Espurr looked back up at his friend. For once his expression wasn't rendered any less serious by his newfound age.

Snivy just nodded. There was no need to ask if this was the place.

Espurr grasped the bronze handle carefully. Ever so gently, he turned it, and Snivy helped in pushing the door open.

The inside was very familiar.

Before the rather dazed pair stood a very comprehensive yet plain magical laboratory. Stylistically and even in terms of object placement, the edifice stood as an almost one-to-one replica of the Arcanum that Snivy's own family utilized. Espurr held back in befuddlement, while Snivy was the first to walk in, jarred but feeling a bit safe due to the familiarity. Compared to the kind of expectations that the two had formed about the Trials, something as mundane as this was really more shocking in a way.

“Umm, it's, like your folk's workspace back at the estate...” Espurr mumbled. The little cat had wandered towards the small bookcase that stored reference works.

“Well, I guess they had to get its design from somewhere.” Snivy muttered. His gaze was transfixed by the stacks of alembics and powdered herbs in glass jars that stood in the physical alchemy section.

“Quite an astute mind! Let's just say, when your ancestors first arrived in the manse, they committed many things to memory. Now those were wild times...” the ancestor's voice returned.

Snivy just kept by the etched tables, almost unbelieving.

“So, what're we here for? Is there some task that you want us to accomplish?” Snivy asked.

“I must say, that'd be closer to the definition of a 'trial' I could get behind...” Espurr lightly mused.

“In a way. I just want to see what you can cook up. No overarching guidelines or defined end result. Just show me the magic you've shepherded all these years.” the voice tuned. “And well, I guess that sentence doesn't really work for Espurr, but he can show off his mind powers anyhow. Ah, you should see what becomes of that in the future, actually...”

“...What?” Espurr blinked.

“Nevermind! Anyway, both of you just use your abilities and see what supernatural marvels you can cook up! I’ll be checking on you later, so just be on your toes, y’here?” the ancestor spoke.

“Affirmed.” Snivy gave a solid nod.

Espurr shrugged and slowly began to nod.

“Got it.”

A simple, striking melody came from the ancestor.

“Splendid! I’ll be delighted to check on your performance...” their voice faded.

After the ancestor departed, Snivy made his way towards the alchemy section.

“Good luck, Espurr. Whatever you do, I suppose?” the snake shrugged.

“Eh, I’ll figure something out.” the cat returned it. “Fortune to you too.”

At the working table, Snivy lit up the athanor with what little knowledge of elemental Fire that he had. Frankly, the magician had nary a clue of what to do when he started, though that soon changed. Recalling some tricks from a bonafide presidigitator uncle of his, Snivy decided to create elemental flasks, with a twist. Instead of being in a stable form, ready to be used to augment a blade or other item, they’d be primed to explode when the seal was undone. He remembered firework shows like that when he was young, and he smiled a little at the thought of recreating them.

Snivy acquired the necessary reagents and carefully measured them out. Whenever the ingredients for any given flask were prepared, he’d carefully start to prep the bottle, adding in the substances a little bit at a time. Luckily the place had little crackcubes and the like, so he’d able to initiate the necessary reactions simply by swishing the bottle around if need be. A great deal of the snake’s time was also occupied by regular infusions of magic throughout the process, elevating it a step above simple chemistry. It tired the boy out, admittedly, but it was fun to have a project to work on nonetheless.

Espurr’s work began a fair while after Snivy had already started crafting. Strictly speaking, the kind of “workshop” thing that the god had going on did not lend itself well to his talents, centered around the mental as they were. Of course – and Espurr hated to admit this part – half of his annoyance was due to the fact that even in his ‘normal’ magical studies, his performance was below average in this area. Still, eventually the psychic remembered a little thing he could do. The Order taught simple recipes for the creation of psychical enhancement solutions relatively early on in the course, though rules against their use during exams meant that they were never particularly relevant beyond the intellectual training. Espurr himself pridefully refused to use them even outside of class, relying on his training and talent over artificial enhancement. But in this circumstance, it’d be better to turn out *something* rather than show up empty-handed. And so Espurr started to use another one of the alchemical workspaces to make the potion. He used herbs over the elemental substances that Snivy was utilizing, so the two’s workspaces were decently separated, each closer to the drawers of the most relevance to their own end. Not that it stopped the traditional faux-conflicts that the two engaged in. Neither would have wanted that.

After a good half-hour, each of the amateur thaumaturges finished up their work. This time the two could detect the invisible hum of the ancestor “enter” the room before they had even spoken.

“Huh. Well you certainly left something for me to clean up...I wonder what the two of you have for me today.” the ancestor said glowingly.

“Well it's an honor, ancestor, I-” Snivy began to move toward his flasks before he was cut off.

“Now now, Snivy, we have a guest with us today! And guests go first.” the ancestor shushed Snivy with a gust of wind before his mouth, and the snake acquiesced with a grumble.

“Oh, uh, right...” Espurr trailed off, trying to recall the script he formulated in his head. It was always so hard to recall when it was actually relevant.

“Oh, it's my, um, potion of clairvoyant cognition!” Espurr awkwardly walked closer to his bench, pointing towards its general direction on the table with his arms.

“Oooh! I haven't seen one of those in a while! This precocious little apprentice who'd just graduated from nursery school made such a nice one back in '36...” the ancestor rambled along to themselves.

“I, right.” Espurr's expression faltered briefly. “Anyway, uh...I'm just going to drink it and give you the real performance.” Espurr nodded along to himself.

The little cat stepped up on the stool to reach his vial. After acquiring it, the cat uncorked it with a certain trepidation. He soon remembered that others were in the room, though, and swiftly downed the whole vial.

His brain lit up a moment after.

“Ah, hah! Oh wow, it's, it's a-lot strong-er than I expected, hehe...” Espurr spoke to himself with a fairly evident giddiness. Snivy's brow furrowed.

“You, you've used those before, right?” Snivy asked.

“Nope!” Espurr exclaimed.

Caught in an alchemically-induced trance, Espurr began to play with his powers. Psychokinesis was one of the most evident; unconsciously, the cat had started to trail little objects behind him psychically. When he noticed how the objects were “following” him, he'd just laugh and start a “chase,” the effect simply compounding itself. Snivy kept an internal note to never let kid Espurr drink potions. Soon enough he was levitating himself around the room and mind-reading, though he only ever really penetrated Snivy's. Not that it was any consolation to the snake when Espurr revealed some things to the ancestor that he really wished had remained hidden. For their part, the ancestor laughed a lot at the antics. For some reason, though, Snivy didn't actually mind them this time.

“Well well well, I see the little kitty made good use of his time!” the ancestor said. Snivy could tell by Espurr's position and utterly contented expression that he was being psychokinetically petted by the god.

“Heh, uhuh...” Espurr absentmindedly spoke. Snivy smirked a little at this; half at the situation itself, and half at the mortification Espurr would undoubtedly feel when he came to his senses.

“Now then, I think we have another boy to assess?” the ancestor looked toward Snivy.

“Oh, uh, that would be true, honored ancestor.” Snivy inclined his head a little.

“Then let's begin! I'm looking forward to see what you cooked up!” the ancestor said.

“I, alright then, will do.” Snivy gave a little bow and jogged toward his workstation. Espurr noticed that he was no longer being pet and slowly came to awareness of what had just happened. He mostly stayed silent, though.

Snivy arrayed all four of the bottles in ascending order of the elements, though in deliberate move, he picked up the 'highest' one first, Fire.

“Now, for my performance, I have chosen to utilize elemental flasks, albeit of an alchemic nature and not utilizing bound spirits. For, well, obvious reasons...” Snivy rambled.

“Uhuh.” the ancestor said, and Snivy got a feeling that it was an indicator word to move on.

“...however, these flasks are a little different from the traditional formula. It would not be wise to open one of these thinking you could enchant your sword, for example...” Snivy spoke, gesturing towards the flask of fire in his hands and slowly putting his hand over the cap. Even in his more sober state, Espurr looked on in anticipation.

“Fire is not slumbering in this flask, but fervently awake, desperately seeking to rejoin the dance of the elements. Something we can aid them in, if we but remove the cap and...” Snivy to carefully swirl the bottle, sparking erupting amid the amber liquid and glowing stones of the glass. Concurrently with this, the sorcerer quickly undid the cap. A jet of fire immediately erupted from the top of the bottle, singing the ceiling and spreading out into a well of flame. It was delicate, though, subtler and brighter than normal fire, threading out into countless filaments of unearthly splendour. Espurr looked on at the show in utter awe.

“Good glory.” the ancestor said. When he finally got out of his performance anxiety, Snivy realized that that was probably the most genuine reaction he'd gotten out of the god the whole day.

Slowly but surely, the snake redoubled his performance.

After he'd finished up the whole show of Fire, Snivy went on through the other elements. Each had at least as much detail and showmanship as his first performance, and by the time they got to the final one, Earth, it was clear that the snake was putting in far more effort. The last display was a careful one, utilizing both pure elemental Earth as well as its gentler manifestation of Verdancy. The rock spewing alone was impressive, and when coupled with the scintillating, hovering crystals and exotic elemental plants, the whole show stood as a work of art in and of itself. The snake was exhausted after the performance, true, but it was completely worth the astonishment of Espurr and the praise of his ancestor.

“You never told me you could do any of this!” Espurr exclaimed.

“Well, I think your friend put it best.” the ancestor's voice came quiet this time.

“An impressive show. Don't think I've seen anything quite like it.”

Though he could not see the Numen, Snivy got the impression of nodding. He nodded back.

“I, well thank you I suppose. Didn't know I had it in me until I had an audience I guess.” Snivy scratched the back of his head.

“A common refrain.” the ancestor said a bit more jovially.

“I guess I'm going to have to get you more audiences when we get back home...” Espurr laughed a little.

“Two words for that. Good luck.” Snivy smirked.

Espurr accepted it, though the cat soon developed a puzzled expression.

“Wait, what was the challenge here? We just...did stuff.” Espurr said.

“That...is a good point, actually. The other Trials had a clear goal and a penalty for failure. This one is an anomaly.” Snivy's forehead creased.

“Ah, heh, well...that's where it gets a bit complicated.” the ancestor spoke a bit guardedly.

“Whatever it is, I don't like the sound of it.” Espurr stated flatly.

“A bit blunt, but I agree with the sentiment. What's exactly, going on with this Trial?” Snivy asked.

“Well, I'm sure you've noticed that you've been having a lot of fun with this one, right?” the ancestor spoke.

“I mean, that is true...” Espurr rubbed his head a bit. “...but I don't see how that changes things.”

“It, was a really good time, I'll admit.” Snivy said after a bit of thought. He scratched an arm briefly, as it felt a little funny. “In any case, I'm assuming we passed, so this was more out of curiosity...”

“Well.” the ancestor briefly paused. “You did pass. With flying colors actually. It's just that the regression isn't always a penalty.”

Somehow, both of the pair spoke concurrently before they had even really processed the words.

“What.”

The effect was fast, fast enough to pass before the two had the chance to properly grapple with it. Snivy found his body youthening, far past adolescence and closer to the age that Espurr had previously occupied. Espurr, on the other hand, was reduced to an even shorter stature; within the span of a dozen seconds, he found himself in the body of a toddler. Unfortunately for him, that was not the only thing

that changed.

“Wha'd you do!” Espurr screamed with what little capacity his lungs had. In hindsight he realized he should have expected this, but it was a cold comfort when you were wearing a diaper.

“Well I thought it'd be pretty obvious, buuuut I turned you into a baby! Good glory, you're even *more* adorable now...” the ancestor rambled on.

“Why?!” Espurr cocked his head, eyes darting around the room.

“Sorry, it's just part of the Trials. If you *do* want to meet me, they have to be completed. So really, that just leaves one real question. Do you want to see me?” the ancestor asked.

“What you mean.” Espurr's eyes narrowed. “We came for you.”

“I...well, yeah...” Snivy talked slowly. In every other word he'd try to make his voice deeper, but it constantly came out off.

“No really. Do you actually want to see me?” the ancestor spoke. “Let's be honest, this is really, *really* odd. You're always free to just waltz out of here. The regressive effects will cancel and you'll be off on your merry way. To be honest, I expected you to leave here a lot sooner. It'd be pretty par the course...” The ancestor trailed off toward the end.

“NO!” Espurr suddenly shouted. Snivy looked toward his friend almost askance, and even the kitty himself seemed to be surprised at himself for a moment. He quickly recovered his posture, though.

“Not gonna leave. Want to see you.” Espurr said firmly.

“Espy...” Snivy winced when he reflexively used an old nickname. “...Espurr, you don't have to do this for my sake. I'm perfectly satisfied as it is, you don't have to stick out your neck for me. We can get you back home an-” Snivy was suddenly cut off.

“No. I want to see more stuff.” Espurr pouted, turning his face away.

“I, what?” Snivy cocked his head. Even by the day's standards, his confusion was reaching a decent height.

“I think you know the answer, descendant.” the ancestor's voice came.

“What do you mean?” Snivy asked. “I do not mean to disrespect you, but we are family, and you've put us through far more tha-”

“I didn't mean that in the confrontational way, and I think you know that. Just recall your own time here. Did the Trials really...annoy you? Well, apart from the first one, but that's always the weeding one...” the ancestor spoke.

Snivy just stared on into the emptiness for a while, before he started to recollect. The Jari game was fun, like how they used to play before the academy reared its head. Or before enjoyment had to be abstracted and intellectual in general. He remembered when magic was so exciting, something to fill

one with wonder, before it became as routinized and dreary as any other subject designed to maintain civilization. Back when they were performing, he thought he could remember it for a bit, what drove him to its pursuit in the first place. For Espurr the whole matter was probably even bigger. He was never automatically driven into it by blood, but had to love it enough to put up with endless study and practice, all to achieve a fraction of the power others could casually manifest by talent alone. Snivy remembered when Espurr first entered the Order, shining, bright, and excited. And the first two were still correct, at least. It just sometimes seemed that Espurr was happier before, even though he now had the power. Like the very process of its acquisition had snuffed out the thing that made it a marvel.

Well, damn it. The wonder didn't have to die like that.

A touch romantic these speculations were, true. But he was *not* going to let his friend suffer. Not when he had suffered so long to make his dream a reality.

“Okay, we're staying. We'll finish the Trials.” Snivy said simply.

“I-Wait, really?” the ancestor's voice came out with legitimate surprise. “If you're really feeling pressured, you shouldn-”

“No, really. Actually makes complete sense now.” Snivy said, looking down at his friend. Espurr was looking up at him, strangely, but there was a certain connection in the eyes.

“Hey Espy, can you levitate up onto my shoulders? It'll be easier to take you around the Manor if I'm carrying you.” Snivy said. There was not a smirk, but a smile.

“Oh, uhuh!” Espurr eagerly nodded.

Carefully, the little psychic lifted himself up with a levitating force. The psychokinetic field was off a little, enough to nip at Snivy's clothes, but the snake didn't mind. Soon enough, Espurr was resting on Snivy's shoulders, still giggling at his psychical flight.

“Well then.” the voice came back only slightly disassociated. “I guess you're off. Good luck.”

Snivy nodded.

Snivy's mind was occupied as he left the room, still caught by the unexpected and welcome realization. But there was one thing in the environment that was still very apparent to him.

“You're heavier than I thought you'd be, Espurr...” Snivy took in deeper breaths while his regressed friend giggled at the labor. The snake figured that at least some of the difficulty was due to his own reduced muscles, but the source of the trouble was pretty irrelevant to him at the moment.

“So...where we goin'?” Espurr asked.

“I don't really know. That's kinda your specialty.” Snivy responded.

“Hmmm...” Espurr looked off as though in thought, though Snivy didn't see. “I dunno.”

“Perfect.” Snivy's eyelids briefly shuttered. “Well whatever. It seems like we advance a floor at a time,

so maybe we can just head to the next on-”

“Checked. When looking for magic room.” Espurr said confidently. “Last floor.”

“...What do you mean? Those towers-” Snivy was cut off.

“Towers have different floors, silly! Have to go to bottom to get up them.” Espurr chirped.

“Again, great...” Snivy sighed, hoisting Espurr up a little more tightly. “Well, I guess we better settle in then.”

Together, the pair started to comb the floor for the next Trial. Mostly, this entailed opening doors and being disappointed by seemingly endless forms of bedrooms, as well as the occasional closet or utilities area to spruce things up. As they started to systematically “clear,” sections of the floor at a time, Snivy finally set Espurr down, allowing his own muscles to recover. The kitty was able to follow along pretty decently anyway. They were through with a good 75% of the floor before Snivy's legs finally gave way though, and the snake officially entered a break. Espurr's energy was not yet exhausted, though, so the snake found himself with the view of a scampering baby psychic to occupy himself. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was good entertainment.

Often Snivy would see Espurr enter a room, psychically turning handles and using other such maneuvers to make up for a lack of height or finesse. Usually Snivy would just hear sounds that indicated jumping on beds, and he would roll his eyes. The snake never got up, though. He was sure his ancestor was keeping a good eye on his friend.

There was one sight, though, that the snake could scarcely believe.

It came and went rather quickly. Espurr was heading between rooms, jogging as fast as his little legs would allow. Midway through the corridor though, right in Snivy's sight, the cat developed a strange look on his face. He looked like he was struggling with something, something quite intense and with a fast onset. Perhaps Snivy had even known what was going on then, but if so, his mind had consciously effaced it from consideration. Once the next part came, though, all illusions vanished. The cat squatted down, spent a good few moments with his face scrunched up, looking like he was doing *something*, and then straightened back up. For a moment Snivy thought he looked perturbed, maybe even ashamed, but soon a look of relief took over and he continued his walk. As he finished the trip to the other room, Snivy noticed an unmistakable lump in the back of his diaper.

When the sight finally registered a few moments later, Snivy really hoped that the next Trial was not what he thought it may be.

Snivy stayed on the ground for a good minute afterwards, body falling into an even deeper lethargy than before. Soon enough, though, the snake forced himself to his feet. He half-wondered if he should even try to help here, or if his ancestor would somehow rectify the situation. He knew that refraining from it would probably look closer to disloyalty in the eyes of his ancestor, though. And either way, really, it would be good to help his friend. He just never anticipated he would be helping him like this.

“Hey, uh, Espy?” Snivy tentatively began to speak. The snake was inching along the floor, towards the room that Espurr had entered. His progress was interrupted by the sound of pattering on the floor.

“SNIVY!!!” Espurr shouted in the highest pitch Snivy had heard in his life. The kitten had suddenly rushed out of the room, pointing toward it and bouncing up and down. “The, the, the Trial's up there!”

“Up...there?” Snivy cocked his head.

“It is! Get in, get in...” the cat started to pull on one of Snivy's leaf-arms. The snake still found the situation utterly bizarre, but he wasn't humorous enough to deny him the seeming of a successful pull. Thusly, Espurr was able to “drag” Snivy into the room, madly gesturing toward the ceiling as soon as he had done so.

“Lookit! It's a hatch!” Espurr pointed to the structure.

Snivy gazed at the hatch in confirmation. It was akin to the kind that would traditionally lead to an attic, though the gilding around this one suggested a different location. Looking around the rest of the room, Snivy found what looked like a nursery of some stripe. There were faint emblems and carved designs on the wall, each depicting natural phenomena or legendary beings. There was even a crib set into the back, as well as the playthings and other paraphernalia common to the very young. Including one that would be very useful right about now.

“Well, quite a good find Espy!” Snivy said, gently picking up his friend's hand.

“Uhuh! My mind got all tingly, that's where the next Trial is, an' I even felt them up there!” Espurr elaborated on in excitement.

“I'll have to thank you for that then.” Snivy smiled down at him, slowly leading the cat toward a table-like structure jutting out from the wall by a window. In his speech, Espurr didn't pay much attention to the movement.

“Yup, you will.” Espurr said with a certain self-satisfied smile, eyes briefly closed. This left him even more unprepared when he was picked up.

“Wai, what're you doin'?” Espurr was just aware enough to notice that he been placed on some cushioned thing by a window. The sun was really bright, he realized.

“Just fixing something up before we head up there. Don't you want to look good for when you meet the Numen?” Snivy spoke swiftly. The tone was soft, and he didn't pay much attention to the wording. This was mostly for distraction, after all.

“Watchu mean?” Espurr's brow began to furrow. “I'm already all dressed...” Espurr was staring at Snivy now, intently. He began to notice that Snivy was looking at things below him, in the, table?

“Shh, just getting you cleaned up.” Snivy said in a low tone. The snake had gathered together a small assortment of what he thought were the necessary objects; a cleaning rag, a fresh bolt of cloth, pins, and a small crystal of talcum. Magic would cover the rest.

“Oh.” Espurr said as soon as the faintest sights of the objects became visible. A light blush formed, and an awkward smile involuntarily formed itself.

“Umm, there was, a thing, that...happened...” Espurr said almost inaudibly.

“Aye aye, I know.” Snivy nodded along, beginning to undo the cat's soiled diaper while the cat himself turned his face away. He squirmed a bit when he began to get wiped down, as Snivy had wetted the rag with elemental Water, but soon enough that part was over and the dirty diaper had been removed from underneath Espurr's bum. Snivy briefly wondered what to do with the thing, before he noticed a small copper cylinder filled with some fizzling alchemic solution. Wondering how it was already prepared but not questioning his luck, Snivy dropped the old diaper into the cleaning vat.

“I...couldn't hold it 'cause of body, you're not gonna tell anyone right...?” Espurr pushed his paws together a little.

“Of course not. That's not what friends do.” Snivy said simply, taking the time to look into Espurr's eyes for once.

His friend's smile came out, shyly.

The rest of the job was quick, really. Snivy was glad that his experience with the...mustier side of the Earth element rendered the smell not too bad to deal with, and the pinning affair was easy. If he were to be honest, he'd probably say that the folding for the new diaper was off, but the snake still thought it good for his first performed diaper change.

“...Thank yoo.” Espurr mumbled. Snivy just patted his back and set him onto the ground, smiling.

“Now then, I guess we should get to the finale. Shall we?” Snivy loitered beneath the hatch, looking up.

“Ooh, yup!” Espurr firmly nodded. “Stand back an' I can bring it down!”

“I...appreciate the enthusiasm, but I think I should handle this one...” Snivy looked down at his friend with more than a little fear.

“Aww bu-” Espurr was cut off.

“Trust me, this'll be quick.” Snivy said, bringing Espurr out to the side and moving out of the way of the hatch himself.

Concentrating, Snivy cast his senses out to what lay above. It was staid, yes, but there was Air. Carefully, and with precision, Snivy cast down a gust of wind onto what was a hatch on their end. Manipulating the Earth of the wood, he also vibrated it in tandem. Combined, both forces forced the hatch to open, and a ladder extended down. Espurr squeaked a little at the loud sounds, but Snivy held him tight.

“See? Quick. Now to make our way up.” Snivy grinned.

Espurr returned to his “traditional” spot on Snivy's back, now giddier than ever before. The snake himself carefully made his way up the steps; though Espurr's magical prowess was strong, he still didn't want to risk injury to either of them. Nothing ill came to pass, though, and quickly the two reached the top of the hatch. The chamber into which they had entered was dark, and the two could scarcely see a foot of what was in front of them. Still, though, Snivy's perception was enraptured. He could almost feel the blood in his veins being pulled to a direction in front of them, like a compass needle before a

lodestone.

“Well well well. It is good to see who has come” a voice rang out. It was undoubtedly the ancestor's, but it was not coming from all around. Rather, it was coming from the end of the room.

Snivy felt his limbs start to shake. Slowly and deliberately, the snake set Espurr down.

“I must say, it is nice to see individuals who have completed the Trials for once. Or, well, I suppose you have yet to engage in the last Trial, though that one itself will take quite a long while to complete. And you'll have to know my identity for it, so I suppose we'll have our little resolution here and now.” the ancestor said. There was a certain power to the voice that Snivy recognized, though he had only heard of it in tales. For all of their joking or tricky moves, this being was still divine. Belatedly, Snivy kneeled.

“I. Indeed, ancestor.” Snivy's head was pointed down.

“What happens now?” Espurr asked. He looked in the correct direction despite the darkness.

“You'll receive your final transformation. You, little Espurr, have already tasted it, but now your friend will see the same. Then you'll be ready for my visage.” the ancestor spoke with finality.

Snivy felt his heart quicken, though he didn't budge from his position.

It, they wouldn't. What were they going to *do*?

Snivy didn't have time to think. Soon a warmth encompassed his whole body, as it did with Espurr.

And it continued, continued, heating up until-

“Tada!” a voice rung out.

When Snivy worked up the courage to open his eyes, he did not see what he had expected. First off, before him at the end of what looked like a cross between a clubhouse and an attic rested Phantump – *the* Phantump - lit by sunlight streaming in through a window. Velvet curtains had recently been parted, and the darkness that had previously obscured the room was now pushed to the corners. Right by his side was an individual who looked even stranger than he had before, but not for the reasons he had been considering. Espurr was still in a diaper, true, but now he was back to his normal age. And when the snake could even begin to consider himself, he realized that the puffiness around his waist and increased height was a pretty good indicator of his fate.

“...W-What the hell?!” Snivy exclaimed without thought.

“Hah! Oh good glory you two should have seen the look on your faces, something to spend eternity waiting for...” Phantump somehow managed to shed a joyful tear. “You really get them there at the end, 'Oh noes, he's gonna turn me into a baby!' And then you subvert their expectations! Pure genius even by mercurial standards...”

“I, think you messed up your little reversal move then, sir.” Espurr spoke firmly, and with a hint of impatience. Snivy was a little shocked to hear Espurr's normal, matured voice. “We're still in

diapers...or rather Snivy has just entered them.” towards the end, Espurr had the barest hint of a smirk.

“Heh, working as intended then! For your last Trial will be spent at the Manor entire!” Phantump exclaimed, and somehow the sun shone brighter.

Snivy blinked. He supposed that of all of them, he should have expected Phantump.

“Now don't worry about mundane concerns, time is bent here! Once you've completed it properly, you'll be back to Earth. In the mean time though, this'll be a good way to reconnect with yourselves, maybe even your passions!” Phantump exclaimed, stretching little shade arms toward the ceiling.

“I think you're missing the point, sir.” Espurr spoke with a confidence that Snivy wished he had. “I don't see why we need to be in...these...to accomplish it.” Espurr stared down at his diaper briefly. “Or if we did for some reason, why we wouldn't do it as little kids...” Espurr blushed slightly.

“Well, two-fold there! First, if you complete this Trial as little kids physically, you'll just compartmentalize the experience when you return to your normal age and not let it transform you. The regression is really just meant to break you into it, to prepare you in a way that'll be easier. Already, Espurr, you're noticing that your demeanour is returning largely to how you were before all of this happened.” Phantump elaborated in surprising detail.

“I, true.” Espurr scratched his head, nodding after a moment of thought.

“The diaper is really just the strongest symbol for getting into the proper mindset for the Trial. I didn't really understand its power when I first examined mortals and their various ages, but it has become quite apparent over the years. By donning that as a, well, *close-to* adult, you're able to enter that wonderful, strange world of toddlerhood and bring back the benefits to your normal self!” Phantump pontificated, making a small flourish with his shadow arms toward the end.

“And...you're sure this'll, work?” Espurr cocked his head. Snivy briefly thought that he was going along with this awfully easily given his lack of a realization earlier, though the snake soon recalled that he himself had been regressed the most heavily.

“Well...that's where the second part comes in!” Phantump winked. “It's also just fun and people tend to get a lot more embarrassed when they hang around in more grown-up forms. It even has its own form of cuteness in a way...” Phantump drifted off into thought.

Looking straight toward his ancestor, Snivy sighed.

“Look, ancestor...” Snivy started.

“You can just use Phantump.” the ghost nodded.

“...Phantump. I understand what you helped me to realize earlier, and I truly want to, well, achieve that state again.” Snivy spoke.

Phantump nodded, expression achieving a neutrality Snivy had not seen before.

“It's just...can you actually give us an answer for what's going on here? There's, more to this, I just

know it. I wouldn't expect a mortal to, well, *be* like you've been this whole time, let alone a god. I don't even care about your demeanour itself – hell, you're probably the most interesting personality I've met in my entire life. I just don't want to be dragged along anymore. Please, can you just talk to us for real for once?” Snivy said. He hadn't expected it to develop like it did, but the words simply came out like an ocean. By the end Snivy was breathing deeply. He hated to let Espurr see himself like this, but he was looking at his ancestor. He couldn't help the tears.

“...I apologize.” Phantump spoke. The voice was plain. It didn't sound like it was trying to be so, for once.

The ghost started to float more, pacing close to the end of the room, before the window. Just then, Snivy noticed something about it.

“Is, that...”

“Trevenant.” Phantump said. The window that illuminated the chamber was stained, depicting the image of that great god of the forest. Snivy had always heard legends of him growing up. He represented everything he wanted to be, and everything that was always so painfully far away. Mystery, glory, power, purity. Latent within every soul these were hidden, Espurr had told him, but though he knew in his heart it was true, it didn't stop the pain. A man always sought to be perfect, to be *real*, and nothing less than its attainment would truly satisfy him. Snivy always remembered that whenever he'd lie, or derive pleasure second-hand, or look at someone and feel jealousy for the genuine. He often hated himself, at least to a degree, but for Trevenant, such feelings never were.

Truthfully, he was always most jealous of him.

“...Indeed.” Snivy came back from his recollection. “Is this...his room then? Or is the image simply up there for a differen-”

“It's my room.” Phantump said. He didn't look up from his pacing. “And my former image.”

The last part didn't register in Snivy's mind for a good several seconds. When it finally did, Snivy couldn't muster words. He stood paralyzed.

Phantump took the opportunity to look back at Snivy. The eyes were unerring in their course, and unrelenting in how they bore into him.

“Once, when your family first came into our great hall, things were very different.” Phantump began. “We ruled in primal, unadulterated glory. The very Manor itself was a different thing back then, practically more frightful than the forest from which your people came. They were low in stature, at the time, with nothing to lose and something to gain – nothing less could drive a people to bargain with Numens.” Phantump elaborated. He returned to his pacing, though Snivy still didn't move.

“Of all of my kind – we who would become your ancestors, mind you – I was the one most against your inclusion into our kith. You had to have understood my position were you there, and indeed I bet you do understand. Your family were like creeping golems; disgusting, reeking masses of flesh and bone. Every moment of your lives raped your souls to such a degree that I wanted to kill all of you and end your suffering. And I could have gotten away with it, I think. I was one of the strongest in the pantheon at the time. They probably would have just exiled me afterward, and I wouldn't have cared.

But somehow they convinced me to attend a single meeting, to sit next to these pathetic peoples who would be called our kin. That was all it took, it turns out.” Phantump sighed.

Phantump turned toward the window, and for once the two could see his back.

“Most of them were relatively vigorous, able-bodied. Any younger, older, or disabled, and they didn't tend to survive too well. But one of them *was* young, incredibly so. Mind you, at the time I still didn't quite understand the “age” that appears due to the churning of physical manifestation, and so the fact that it even aroused my attention at all is saying something. Little Fomantis was so tiny, back then...”

Snivy's mind spun into a cacophany of thought despite the fact that Phantump's speech continued. Fomantis was the great elder of the mortal-born First...

“It may be difficult for you to understand, as a man. A living one. But looking upon that child was pure wonder.” Phantump turned away from the window, and back toward Snivy. Somehow, the eyes were even stronger than before.

“He had come here, to suffer birth and death in a meaningless world, for no reason at all.” Phantump said to himself, laughing a little bit. “He'd pulled off a greater magic in a single act than I'd accomplished in all eternity.”

Phantump just floated by himself for a little while, clearly lost in some other realm the pair could scarcely fathom.

“I don't have much else to say, really. You would have had to be in my position to really understand it. Words can't really convey these things. I'm sure the fact that I'm some weirdo and Phantump now says all you need to know.” Phantump shook his head to himself, smiling. “So, anywho, that's why everything's so strange, even by spectral standards. Sometimes I wonder if maybe I think I'll finagle some kind of ascension like he did, through this, but I don't know. I just know there was real beauty there.” Phantump shrugged.

“I...don't mean to ruin anything here...” Espurr slowly spoke up.

“Nah, by all means go ahead. A little irreverence is good for the soul.” Phantump said.

“...You're Trevenant?” Espurr asked.

“Was Trevenant.” Phantump nodded. “Reassessed things after that. On a more mundane level, found out 'Hey! I want to take care of kids!' Did a little rebranding – not that you'll understand that term, come to think of it. Got a new domain, images, performed a few miracles, and...voila! A new deity recognized in the pantheon. Tried to keep things quiet, admittedly. Luckily the legends pretty much got me covered there, I'm sure you've heard rumors of child ghosts and the like. Needless to say, since I've never lived or died, I've never been a kid to begin with!”

“...Indeed.” Snivy said, still largely flabbergasted. Somehow though, if the revelation did not ease the pain in his heart, it at least did not exacerbate it.

“So, uh, again sorry for the questions, but there's still one more part you didn't cover.” Espurr said.

“What might that be?” Phantump asked, curious.

Espurr coughed a little before beginning his question.

“So, when you joined bloodlines, did you ever, really, y'know...” Espurr made certain gestures with his paws.

“Hah.” Phantump laughed under his breath a little, shaking his head in a seemingly good-natured fashion.

“No. Don't push your luck.” Phantump's head spun towards Espurr, and the cat fell back a bit, apologizing profusely.

“I, must thank you for being straight about things, Phantump. I can scarcely find that normally, let alone from a god.” Snivy said.

“Well who isn't God?” Phantump shot a certain sharp smile to the two. “Nevertheless, we all have work to do. At least until the end. Speaking of which...I actually wanted to get around to our last Trial, I'm certain you'll find this one the most fun.”

Espurr couldn't help but find the edge of his mouth rise slightly from this. Half from the ridiculous nature of what was to come, and half from how he had kind of enjoyed it earlier...

“Now, if you look around you, you'll be finding what will be your quarters for a while, assuming you stick around.” Phantump spoke lowly towards the end.

Both nodded firmly, and Phantump managed a smile.

Towards the back of the room, the pair found more. Cushions, toy chests, cribs, one of those changing tables, and even stranger things. Towards the back was a normal staircase that seemed to lead down. Snivy looked toward Phantump only to find the Numen shrugging.

“Yeah, you missed the actual entrance, the hatch is more of a side thing.” Phantump shrugged.

Snivy looked back toward Espurr, who was only able to manage an awkward smile.

“In any case I'm sure we can begin. I'm, well, actually not too experienced with some of this, but I am prepared. You should find some new supplies in your pack that will be relevant here, diapers and the lik-” Phantump was cut off.

“Wait.” Espurr said. He briefly looked toward Snivy, and somehow the snake almost felt an intimation of some sort.

Espurr looked back toward Phantump.

“Are you sure everything's ready?” Espurr asked. The mouth was curving in a way that Phantump didn't quite recognize.

“I, yes?” Phantump cocked his head.

“I mean, I'm just kind of curious as to your body, or why you picked it.” Espurr spoke.

“Oh, uh, I dunno. Guess it just lended itself well to the theme, y'know.” Phantump said, though a certain nervousness was growing in the voice. Something off to the tone.

“I think Espurr's right, it does look kind of like a c-” Snivy was cut off.

“Oh c'mon! I already told you that I've never been a kid.” Phantump said before his eyes grew wide.

“Okay, wait, that's true, but it's with the additional clause that it was never intended to appear like one in the first place! It's just to appear, familiar, or unthreatening, y'know, keeping with the theme...” Phantump spoke with a weak voice.

“Interesting.” Espurr said. His hand had already went into his pack and found something. Looking back to his friend Snivy, he found that the snake had acquired other necessary items. Both kept the goods secure behind their backs. And started to walk closer.

“I'm, uh...” Phantump's protestations faded. He figured even they'd be able to tell something was wrong with his speech. It still didn't explain what they were...doing though.

“Wait...what's behind your backs?”