

Qezql is considering visiting his friend.

A friend who knows more about him than even his sort of-partner does. A friend that only exists in an environment secluded from the world—perfect for days where nothing more manages to carve itself space into his brain.

He remembers the day he met this friend. Waves of clouds slid across the sky, temporarily obscuring the landscape until the sun found gaps in the fluff, gaps too few to truly provide any sort of warmth. It was the kind of day that was too cold for most people to want to visit the beach, but it was the perfect day for his robot guardians to allow him to enjoy his natural element: the water.

Still, robots and water do not mix well; even for robots of Fanerian origin, as their magical energy doesn't travel well through liquid. The robots kept back from the shore, surveilling from a distance.

Qezql doesn't know why it took them so much time to realize he was gone. All he knows is he was swimming, saw some interesting rocks, a few tadpoles and toads and tiny fish, and he followed this trail of aquatic fauna and flora into the marsh where he found himself in much less shallow waters.

Qezql decided he wanted to get as close to the bottom as possible. He didn't need to poke his head out for air. Being a Vestigial had gifted him with feathery gills. His plan was to take the simplest path to the bottom—straight down.

He got to the bottom quickly. There, the water formed a shiny curtain, hiding an entrance into a deep cavern, dark and surprisingly dry.

Rushing inside to explore, unaware of how far the ground was, he fell. He fell down onto hard stone, and every nerve in his body felt *raw*.

He remembers screaming. He remembers crying. And he remembers all of that pain disappearing like a shadow in the corner of his eye.

And a voice, that didn't sound like a voice, but was still unmistakably shaped like one, rumbled near him.

“All is okay, child. Your pain has stopped.”

As Qezql looked up, he was greeted by a large and fuzzy sphere of energy.

It was hours later before his robot guardians found him.

A few days into his third foster placement and living closer than ever to the marsh, Qezql decides it's a good opportunity to visit his friend.

Qezql's shoes press leaves into dirt until the ground transitions into mud. He walks until the mud coexists with water, unable to take any more of it in. Then he removes his shoes.

Soon, he's in the water, kicking off forcefully into the depths and down to the cavern, speeding effortlessly by the rocks and aquatic flora.

Ever since that first day, the friend knows when to expect him and makes the water flow down with him into the cavern as he enters.

"Welcome back, my friend," it intones.

Qezql merely waves in response.

The friend continues, "I sense something is troubling you."

As perceptive as always.

Qezql sighs and sits down on the ground, using his arm and hand as a pillow under his cheek. "It's been... turbulent, recently. I haven't visited you in a while—thanks for not making a

big deal out of it,” he adds, before continuing. “The reason is...” He crosses his arms, looking down. “My house burnt down.”

Even though the friend does not truly qualify for the label of ‘person,’ it has always succeeded at showing sympathy. Sometimes empathy, even. The way its ‘body’ moves often speaks more than it says with words. It sort of droops in response to Qezql’s words, seeming to display sadness.

He remembers laying down on the lawn after getting out, exhausted, skin burning with pain, lungs raw from the smoke. He remembers pulling out his phone, dialing the emergency number, but he doesn’t remember what he told them.

“The fire marshals say it was probably an electrical fire.” He looks off to the side, searching for something interesting to look at while he speaks; as usual, nothing stands out from the mottled stone of the cavern walls. “My burns are still healing.”

The fuzzy cloud of energy that is his friend oscillates as though excited, the way it does when it has an idea. “I could heal the rest,” it says.

Qezql shakes his head. “No need. It will heal by itself, and well, I heal faster than most people.” He looks at the entity. “The few perks of being a Vestigial, I guess.”

The friend knows how Qezql feels about being a Vestigial—a natural variation in the Fanerian gene pool that produces traits dating from before Fanerians evolved to live on land. A natural variation, yet Fanerinsh—his own planet—refuses to provide alternative healthcare and therapeutic options for people like him. A natural variation that sent him to Earth, to be cared for by robots instead of actual living beings that can feel emotions.

So instead of speaking about this, Qezql talks about his hospital stay, his hospital-as-signed roommate, the two foster placements he was in before this one, and how his calm demeanour keeps fooling the people surrounding him into thinking he's doing fine. Under the surface, he feels anxious, on edge, like he's forced to find his footing on black ice.

When he talks about his second foster placement and his guardians' seemingly wilful but most likely ignorant mistreatment of him, his friend's energy cloud becomes more agitated than he's ever seen it.

“Someone should kill them,” it says.