

Ven woke up to white and light, all of it bright. This was not unusual in the least for the boy, for his crib was located right next to a window which refracted light onto the synth environ of his nursery every morning. Ven admired the twinkling for a little bit, before he noticed his diaper was clammy and called out.

“Daddyyy! Am up!” Ven shouted rather significantly for his lungs.

Footsteps came after a few seconds and the door opened a few more after that.

“Now now, I wonder who could be making all of that ruckus...” a man said, shaking his head as he walked toward a child of his. To his coworkers he was Gil and known for his almost disconcertingly average fangs and head leaves. To Ven, however, he was better known as “Dad,” and visually identified by that same fact.

Gil walked over to the grey-white hardplastic crib and scooped up his son. He tickled him long enough for the toddler to be rendered sufficiently vulnerable, then settled him down on the changing table and began to undress him from his sleeper before the giggling fit wore off. To his benefit, he only had to fight back dangling legs by the time he had wiped the boy down and began to get the new diaper on.

“Alright then, can the little sapling guess what we're doing today?” Gil asked his son as he struggled with the second wing.

“Umm...daycare?” Ven asked.

“Nope.” Gil said simply. Ven's orbs widened and the man took the opportunity to finish taping up Ven's new diaper.

“Oooh, what we doin'!” Ven chirped as his father began to slide his daytime shorts over his legs.

“Well, it's more of a matter of what you're doing with *who*.” Gil said, a bit of his maw curved upward.

“Someone new?” Ven asked, accidentally interfering with his father's attempts to get his shirt on as he cocked his head.

“Nope.” Gil said again, and finally got the sprout dressed. As he let his son off the table and the boy jumped up and down excitedly asking who it was, the door opened again.

“Dad? Did you leave th-” a girl asked as she entered the room, only to be cut off.

“Speak of the Jani and they shall appear.” Gil smirked to himself, letting Ven's excited gaze fall upon his sister. “Leyl, I trust you remember our plans for this day off?”

“I...we'll come back to that later.” Leyl sighed briefly to herself, though her expression brightened soon after. “I do recall.”

“Then I trust Ven will be in good hands.” Gil spoke before looking toward his son. “You'll be out and about with your sister today, okay Ven? She has school off, so I'm sure you two will be able to get up to something substantial. It'd be good for the both of you.” Gil meandered on a bit before shooting a couple glances between Leyl and her little sibling. “...As long as it's not the kind of thing that will get

me a call, alright?"

"No need to worry about that, Dad!" Leyl just shook her head, smiling.

"Ooooh kay!" Ven quickly nodded, miniature maw grinning about as much as it could.

"That's about it, then. Now for you honey..." Gil spoke as he walked toward a loose panel in Ven's room and unslid the closet. "...give me a second."

As Leyl approached her father and the sound of rummaging and conversation in equal capacity began to fill the room, Ven just stood by himself alone and steeped in a variety of buzzy thoughts. He didn't get to do much with his big sister because she went to School, which to his understanding was something like Work, and both were in that vast great beyond known as the Wide World that was about as alien to him as men were to gods. But clearly neither were really truly alien to one another, as he was learning more about each one everyday, and that combined with the prospect of playing with his sister was getting the boy quite excited. The anticipation was such that he barely actually noticed when Gil and Leyl's conversation died down and his sister ended up with a bag by her waist, perception overridden by a variety of fantasies playing out in his head. But before he could thinking about getting more ice cream or going to a park, his sister took his hand and waved a little at their father as the two started to leave the room.

"Don't forget breakfast! Trial Period Ven begins now." Gil shouted a little behind his departing adolescent.

"I won't, Dad. And yes, I know where the bottle compartment is..." Leyl rolled her eyes a little, but smiled, in an angle from which no-one else could see. Gil followed on a little while, to the point where they had exited the nursery and were in the hall, until Leyl began to approach the front door of the living room and Gil started to wend off toward his study.

"Be good for her, alright Ven?" Gil asked, even as he walked off.

Ven nodded vigorously and yelled a multitude of normally barely coherent farewell phrases that were eminently understandable amongst those of the household.

It would be hard to *not* be good, he thought.

When the two had crested the front door and were greeted with the neat hedges of the front yard, Ven thought it'd be the start of a barely imaginable adventure. And in a way it was that yet, but he had not expected the first pit stop to be so early. Leyl immediately turned to the side and sat on a bench on the patio, pulling Ven up into her arms. The boy cocked his head at her for a moment, puzzled, before she pulled out his Bag and he saw the bottle she was retrieving.

"Well, we might as well get breakfast out of the way..." Leyl spoke, and Ven thought it to be more for her than for him. She did know how to get him comfy though, even though he was used to Daddy feeding him, and the solid five minutes he spent thirstily suckling down sweet milk were only partially dampened by his sister's inarticulateness. The value from new experience alone was substantial.

Once he had eaten, Leyl stood her brother back up on the ground, smiled, and began to approach the sideway. By the time they had gotten there Ven was the one leading the way more, though he did think

to ask one thing as the two began to head down the street.

“Where we going?” Ven looked up at Leyl oddly.

“To my school, of course!” Leyl looked down at Ven and ruffled his head leaves, which did make him giggle, though it didn't stop his next question.

“Daddy said no school today though. Why there?” Ven's head tilted.

“Good question.” Leyl's eyes narrowed a little enigmatically, and a certain grin formed. “It's more about what we can pick up there instead of what we can do there.”

Ven grew more confused for a moment, before he started to giggle and Leyl scooped him up to ease the inefficiency of his walking pace. Whatever it was, it sounded interesting.

The two crested the edge of the residential zone and reached Leyl's schoolgrounds after a decent walk. It was around the five minute mark that Leyl thought Ven's excited questions were beginning to drive her insane, but such pains were greatly alleviated when she saw the familiar glint of the main building's highspire and the gentle sprawling of the buildings around it. Leyl walked in through the parking lot, not really giving much time for Ven's increasingly stimulated perceptions and cognitions to catch up. He was about as primed as a powder keg by the time they stopped by a short outlying building. Leyl stopped by the open door, shushed Ven as much as she could, and looked into the lecture hall beyond. As expected, there was a professor droning on, and an attentive student writing.

“...as seen in the readings projected on the monitor, a sudden spike in high-energy particles such as elions will be seen immediately prior to the consummation of coitus that results in pregnancy. If you recall from last class, these are the same types of particles that are observed in states of advanced psychic activity. Though research has not supported the idea that these energetic elements are a causative agent for the noetic pattern, it is clear that the two are associated in some capacity. Thus this phenomenon serves as one of the few clear signs of the noetic pattern in a preliving state, which has made it the subject of furious study in regards to the survival hypothesis. Needless to say, it is difficult to ascertain the exact “composition” of the noetic pattern based upon this and all of the other explorations we have embarked upon thus far, precisely because the term mainly refers to the phenomenological experience of consciousness as well as said object's observed effects. It would be presumptuous given current data to assume that this 'pattern' has an energetic or quasi-material basis, just as much as it would be to assume that it is incorporeal, however much our experience of it lends itself to that mode-”

The rolling sound of an alarm bell cut off the lecture and led to the professor going through the traditional end-class rigmarole of reminders as all of the students packed up. Ven just stood behind his sister, clutching at her leg a little as a confusing tide of tall teenagers passed by the front door and Leyl waited patiently. Just as it was about to become too much, though, Leyl's face lit up at a passing figure.

“Ready to 'ditch' as planned, Cili? Brought-” Leyl's speech was interrupted.

“Your brother. His mind is very easy to ascertain.” a teenage boy emerged from the crowd, smirking a little bit.

“Wending, that's still creepy. You should make a horror vid sometime.” Leyl shook her head, before

looking up toward her classmate and friend with a smile. “Still can't believe you've been able to weasel out of the rest of your classes today. *All* of your projects are done and they *all* agreed to give you the packets up front?”

“Indeed. I would suggest you try convincing your own teachers, actually, but apparently you can get whole days off scot-free...” Cili spoke like a breeze.

“Oh shush. Private reasons are private reasons...” Leyl said.

“Fair enough” Cili shrugged, and started to look down. “So, he's...Ven, right?” the boy asked, squinting a little at the toddler who was emerging from behind his sister's legs.

“I thought you were the telepath here?” Leyl “asked.”

“Do you *want* me to go rooting around your minds for every last detail? People usually get pissy for anything more than pings...oh, sorry...” Cili spoke, and then mumbled a little.

“Shoould be fine? His vocabulary isn't quite there yet...” Leyl spoke and then gave a shushing gesture to Cili. Ven just stood blinking until his mouth opened.

“You sissie's friend?” Ven asked, looking up to the bigger boy.

“As I am.” Cili inclined his head into something approaching a bow.

Ven's maw widened, and then he jumped up and down more.

“You knew I was behind sister, you psychic right? Can you do more cool stuff? Pleeese?!” Ven said, bouncing up and down a little before his sister started to rub his head leaves.

“Heh, 'tis natural enough that you'll probably see greater things by the day's end.” Cili waxed on for a bit, staring off, before he recalled something and spoke up again. “That's a, uh, sorta yes.”

“Uhuh! Yes yes yes...” Ven escaped Leyl's rubs to circle around Cili in increasing hyperactivity. The student just shrugged and chuckled to himself before Leyl took Ven's hand and started to control the wayward sapling.

“Kay, before his head explodes, we should probably go pick up Jela.” Leyl's brow furrowed.

“Duly noted.” Cili nodded.

Ven did notice when Leyl started to pull him along as she and Cili began to walk towards a taller building a little ways away, but for the most part he paid more attention to a growing warm sensation in his diaper. Thus, it had almost felt like no time at all before the three had reached a set of doors and loitered beneath the awning-tunnel that connected a variety of classrooms. It was then that Ven saw Cili stare at the air weirdly for a few seconds. Several moments later, a girl came running down the open hall.

“Holy, you know how to make those mind pagers trippy as all-” the girl spoke with a feverish gaze toward Cili briefly, before she saw another figure and squealed.

“You didn't say you were bringing your *brother*, Leyl! Holy holy holy...look at 'im!”

“I, didn't think I'd need to, but perhaps explication of that could have been in order, Jela...” Leyl stared a little awkwardly as Jela scratched the fine head leaves of Ven, who was still processing the scenario.

“Maybe? To be honest I'm not sure if knowing would have changed much.” Cili just stood with arms holding his head.

“Sister's other friend?” Ven asked, looking up with a vaguely creased brow at the newcomer. Jela's voice just reached another pitch.

“Geez, just look at the little guy! Sorry kiddo, you probably don't know about us but we know a lot about you!” Jela spoke excitedly, yet retreated a little bit from the sprout's presence, leaving him to stand a little placidly.

“Not all, trust me...” Leyl sighed.

“Never claimed that.” Jela winked at Leyl.

“So, uh, how exactly did you get out of class for today anyway, Jela?” Cili squinted a little at the girl.

“Oh, ditched.” she chirped.

“Just like that?” Cili squinted harder.

“Yup. I have it all calculated; I know when it can be done and for how long. Just as I keep tellin' ya, grease the right people and social dynamics work right in your favor...” Jela shot a confused Ven a wink.

“Not exactly setting a good example on impressionable minds here.” Cili sighed.

“Good thing there's only a singular one here then, unless you want to admit something, Cili.” Jela smiled enigmatically.

“Nice semantics play.” Cili nodded slowly.

“Well, at the very least I wouldn't judge others if I were doing essentially the exact same thing with a more academic teacher's pet route, but here we are.” Jela said. Cili raised a finger as though to speak, but then went silent as he noticed Leyl with her foot tapping.

“So, I think we're off then.” Leyl nodded.

Ven looked back up at his sister.

“Where?” he asked with a mouth curl.

Leyl and Jela responded.

“Shopping!”

The walk to the reconstructed commercial district was long, but Leyl was a master of distraction, and with friends the task of entertaining a sprout was much easier. The district itself was a rather simple affair all things considered, with some of the buildings even hiding the synth construction behind layers of smartpolymers designed to look antique. To the bills that had authorized the site's construction, it was a recognition of preserved lifeways, in much the same way as the old-fashioned school systems or living districts present in some parts of the world were. To the teenagers, it was a bit of commercial theatre show that was nonetheless more entertaining than just ordering whatever they needed for quick delivery. And for Ven, it was a dazzling perceptual experience.

Ven's awareness was caught from the spectacle when he heard something recognizable amidst the conversational stew that had long since gone over his head.

“So is he...natural or...” Cili asked vaguely as the group walked down a street towards a low building decorated with wood and gilding.

“Cili! Why would you ask that?!” Jela shot her head toward him.

“I dunno?! Just seemed kind of pertinent to ask, y'know, her dad being a bachelor and all...” Cili shrugged.

“What're you even implying there? It'd take some serious cash for anything beyond surrogacy or adoption, anyway...” Jela lowly mumbled.

“I mean...he *was* in the Navy, I figured you guys could have guessed their retirees can come into some cash...” Leyl spoke for a bit.

Cili's attention focused more upon Leyl, then, and Jela's accusatory gaze only lingered on for a moment on the boy before it softened at Leyl's speech.

“Er, what exactly was his form of service?” Cili tilted his head.

“He was a technical specialist, mostly on transmission devices.” Leyl said.

“That explains all the meson beam communications business he's up to nowadays...” Jela said quietly.

“Yeah, picked what he knew.” Leyl nodded to herself, face briefly frozen in thought. It was brought to life soon after by Ven's partially revived awareness of his sibling and her friends, and the girl managed to smile at the face before her. She looked back up at her friends and continued a few moments later.

“Guess it's not really secret. You'd probably be able to find out eventually anyway. Dad decided to go with an offspring clone for his second child.” Leyl said.

“Really?” Jela looked on at Leyl rather quizzically. The girl simply nodded.

“Huh.” Jela said and began to look on at the path ahead for a little while as thoughts processed.

“I mean, yeah, Dad's kinda eccentric. That's sort of the interesting part, though.” Leyl shrugged.

“I, did he face any active duty or...something happen to him out there? Sorry if this is a little probing...” Cili meandered on.

“Nothing much that I know of, and I probably wouldn't even be allowed to tell you either way.” Leyl said, focusing more on the path to the increasingly close building ahead.

“Mmm.” Cili nodded to himself with a furrowed brow, but continued with the group regardless.

By the time Ven had reached the strange new building along with the rest of the group, he had emptied the contents of his bowels into his diaper. It was sudden enough to make the movements inconspicuous on the way, but as they approached the doors, certain other signs became apparent.

“Did, uh...” Cili spoke a little lowly, hanging around near the back of the group as Leyl hurried in opening the doors. The scent spoke enough, and so Cili and Jela just loitered in the entertainment hall's spotless front interior while Leyl picked up Ven and began to carry him. The prim attendant behind the desk did not have much time to get a traditional greeting out before Leyl's light jog carried her past them and towards the establishment's lavatories. Ven did not quite follow with what was going on, especially when they were passing by many new things so quickly, but he understood well enough once they were past the doors and he could see the strange shining stalls of changing places outside of the house.

“Sis-tor?” Ven began to speak up. “Why we here? Shouldn't we be doin' other stuff?” Ven asked while his sister depressed a button with the image of a quaint old cloth garment. A platform of synth with a prewarmed cushion came out right after.

“Well, we *are* here for stuff, but if I tell you what right now I won't be able to get you changed, so hold still, you little leaf.” Leyl chuckled as much as she was able to. Her reflexes when it came to such matters were far from those of her father.

“Ooh, like what!” Ven asked and wriggled lightly as he was placed on the changing platform.

“Probably shouldn't have even let on that much...” Leyl sighed.

After significant strength of nerve in the first half of cleaning, Leyl found her body fighting back less so once the old diaper was thrown into the disposal chute and her baby brother was fully wiped down. He fought less too once the new diaper began to be taped on, though Leyl considered this a belated mercy. Nevertheless, soon the sprout was diapered and redressed and shining again, so Leyl couldn't help but smile a little as she took him out to rendezvous with her friends. They had remained at the entrance more or less patiently, now sporting tickets.

“Guess that emergency is settled?” Cili asked, backing away from the counter a bit to make room.

“Geez, to imagine that your dad gave you that much to handle...” Jela snickered a little, though her expression was soft toward Ven. “...guessing that's one price of cute little baby brothers that may yet pass soon?”

“Eh, he's not quite at potty-training age.” Leyl partially shrugged, holding onto Ven's hand as he gazed

in astonishment at a variety of attractions on the floor just past the entrance. “Suppose it at least means we get to keep him at this cute stage for a while, unfortunately or fortunately.”

“Fortunately?” Cili's brow rose.

“Dad doesn't mind taking his sweet time raising up sprouts.” Leyl said.

“...And thus the mystery of your father is maintained...quite the navyman.” Cili mused.

“Maybe we should give them more funding.” Jela spoke similarly.

Cili and Jela began to enter the greater hall while Leyl held her brother with her, approaching the cashier. The sprout whined a little, seeing them enter the wooden panelled grounds that seemed to hold an endless variety of...well...*stuff*. But soon enough his sister had talked boringly and paid and gave him a nice clearplastic wristband, and with a parting smile from the person behind the counter they were off.

When Ven and his sister arrived on the gaming floor, Cili and Jela were each busy playing their own separate games, respectively. Jela stood against an enclosure towards the back wall, with a targeted post in the center of the zone and a synth returndisk in her hand. Every so often the girl would release the object and let its predictable gravitic engine guide itself back to her hand, hopefully having scored a target. Cili kept beside her, though facing a separate attraction which was composed of a small stall. Beyond the stand rested an assortment of circular targets, and on it rested a steady stream of darts. The pressurised airgun that one would normally use to fire them lay on the counter, for Cili had resorted to psychokinesis. If she were to be frank, Leyl would have suggested that the boy switch to the gun instead of his mind, because the pushes seemed to be coming out rather weak. But it was a point of pride and being his friend, she could not fault him for that.

Before Ven could see the gun or some other (surprisingly dangerous) toy to get excited over, Leyl just smiled at her brother and guided him off towards the sprout's section. Here the tasteful wood and metallic styling present elsewhere in the facility gave way to colored synth, almost to a gaudy extent. But, she supposed, he wouldn't hate it nearly as much as those her age often did. Children's souls could be surprisingly impervious to the material when they weren't so given to it.

Leyl stopped walking when she heard Ven squeal and almost toddle off out of her grasp towards a game. It took her a little while to adjust her eyes past all the hues, but by the time they were there, she had recognized it as a little water one. She had remembered these at a few museums of the natural sciences on the coast, where the simple robots swimming in the water were styled after animals native to the area. But this was the standard model to which all others were compared.

Leyl thought it good for Ven to go for vanilla on his first scoop.

Leyl returned from her thoughts when she felt Ven tugging on her pants.

“Sissie! Can I drive the boat? It's stuck...” Ven spoke, accentuating his request by pressing on a few buttons on the artificial pool's exterior bars, the areas that doubled as console for the control of each aquatic contraption. Leyl smirked a little when she saw a panel that his eyes weren't paying attention to, one that calmly asked for cash.



“Oh, I think I can fix that...” Leyl said, swiping her chit over the payment panel. It went green a second later and Ven found the boat stirring as he absentmindedly ran his fingers over the controls.

“Woah...thanks Leylie!” Ven chirped.

Leyl nodded back and patted him on the head, though her mind was yet occupied. He had been even littler the last time he had used that name...

Ven's exploration of the entertainment theatre's ocean progressed swimmingly, Leyl eventually considered. To her own surprise Ven seemed absolutely engrossed in it, and by the time her shift with her brother had ended and Jela had come to watch and gush over the sapling, he was still hooked on driving the boat and interacting with all the various swimmers possible. Leyl counted her blessings that the motors of those robots proved efficient enough to keep her from paying more cash.

The rest of the visit wended well. Leyl and Cili played a more traditional game of ball in the gymnasium together, before the psychic found he had his own turn with Ven, Jela's drenched shirt upon return not being commented on by any present. Given that the Jela's spirits seemed fair enough when she did some competitive Doli matches with her, Leyl didn't really think to ask. Then it was lunchtime and all four journeyed to the snack bar, Ven getting a surprise snack of crushed nuts along with his bottle.

After thanking the cashier and leaving, Leyl and Jela concurrently remembered what they had actually planned to do in the commercial district, leaving Cili and Ven to follow along, though only the former did so vaguely begrudgingly. Of course, the girls had anticipated that fact, and so between the little artisan shops on the corners or bakeries that Ven could barely control himself in, they would spare some time for Cili to check a bookshop or small psychotronics joint. These little businesses were mostly a sideshow to the main prize, however.

“De, par, man. T. Store?” Ven puzzled out the letters on the long building in front of him. He did so with a creased brow, not only due to the difficulty but also because two of the older kids around him were looking upon it like a god.

“I still can't believe they actually built it...” Jela trailed off.

“I can.” Leyl grinned as she began to pull her brother along behind her.

“Shouldn't it, like, have a company name or something? I assume they'd want to go with realism for the immersion...”

And it was thus that the group entered the crowning jewel of the reconstructed commercial zone. Almost immediately they were surrounded by encompassing walls, as well as rows of shelves and stacks that obscured paths and made space seem larger. A lone cashier to the group's left gave a little wave, though only Cili was composed enough to give one back.

Ven paused in his movements for a little while past the doors, and felt like he was in another world.

“Ohmygodohmygodohmygod...” Jela jogged forward into some obscure aisle and was quickly lost to the maze. Leyl followed more calmly, but in the same direction, and looking back, Ven could see Cili walk over to the directory and carefully consider it. Not that he could see it for much long, though,

before his sister had pulled him away further into a realm he could almost call magical.

By the hour's end, he would be less inclined to think so, after all the boring furniture browsing and gardening supply visits that his sister made.

And by the end of another hour, his faith would be reconfirmed by the utter majesty of the kid's section.

If Ven's mind could properly process the visit, and not just perceive an indistinct mass of color and emotion, he might have recognized the sprawling toy section, or the place with candy, sweets, and other goodies forbidden due to his tiny, delicate fangs. Or the little theatre or play area or plush home and all the other wonders that were all, *all* his...

If it weren't for the fact that his sister had only ended up buying him a little stuffed elemental and a tiny pack of diapers.

But oh well, Ven thought. The gods that govern children must not have had quite the same blessings available as other ones.

Over the course of an afternoon and a diaper change, all four eventually regrouped back at the entrance. Jela had found a few imported spa products and an entire bag of even more obscure things. Cili had somehow found non-prescription psi-drugs in spray form, and looked around in a manner that almost betrayed fear of security. Leyl had found more reference material for her geoscaping studies, as well as gardening products that would be more immediately useful around the house.

All three agreed to stick to ordering online for at least a good year.

Ven smiled in his Tili-patterned diaper with a watery little friend in his arms.

Everyone walked outside, and having returned to the normal universe, breathed in cool air and looked on towards the sunset.

Halfway on the trip back to each of their respective homes, Leyl picked up her little brother and began to carry him. The sprout acquiesced to this rather easily, half-nodding off.

Along the way to Cili's house, Ven came to awareness enough to see a figure walking down the sidewalk towards them, eclipsing the red sky in his movements. He couldn't see much, but he saw enough to know that he was a he and that he had long cloth draped all over him. Ven hadn't seen that much before, so he opened his eyes more.

The man eventually arrived before the group, and paused. He looked towards Leyl's bags, and then pointed to his stomach. As Jela began to speak up, the man unveiled his hood more and pointed towards his neck, where stylized scars from a (reversible) surgery lay. All three understood immediately and Leyl quietly asked for Jela to search through her bag for a small packet of jerky she had bought earlier. Jela did so and handed the bag over to the monk. He smiled at them all, except for Ven, to whom he gave a strange gaze reminiscent of one the boy had seen before, in the Mystery. Ven looked back on at the man the longest, after he had had given some strange hand signs, walked away, and the rest of the group had stopped looking back at him.

“Why does he not talk?” Ven asked.

“He doesn't want to.” Leyl responded.

Satisfied, Ven slumped back into his sister's arms more.

By the time they had waved every last friend good-bye and arrived back at the house, Ven was barely conscious enough to notice Daddy talking about complicated stuff with some man in a strange suit, the kind that some action figures wore. But the conversation was over quickly and before he had known it, the man had entered into a sleek black car by the sidewalk and drove off. It was then that Leyl finally walked up past the hedges and brought Ven into the arms of his father.

Ven became a little more awake when he was brought inside, but he didn't care much for Daddy's and sister's chat, with hints of a Navy or dinner or school or something else that wasn't relevant to his mind. What was relevant was when his sister thanked him, smiling, and when his father had taken him into the nursery and laid him down into his crib.

He thought to be a little indignant then, because there was still some light out past the window. But he knew that the world was wide, and his dreams even wider.

Ven drifted off to sleep once the moon rose outside.