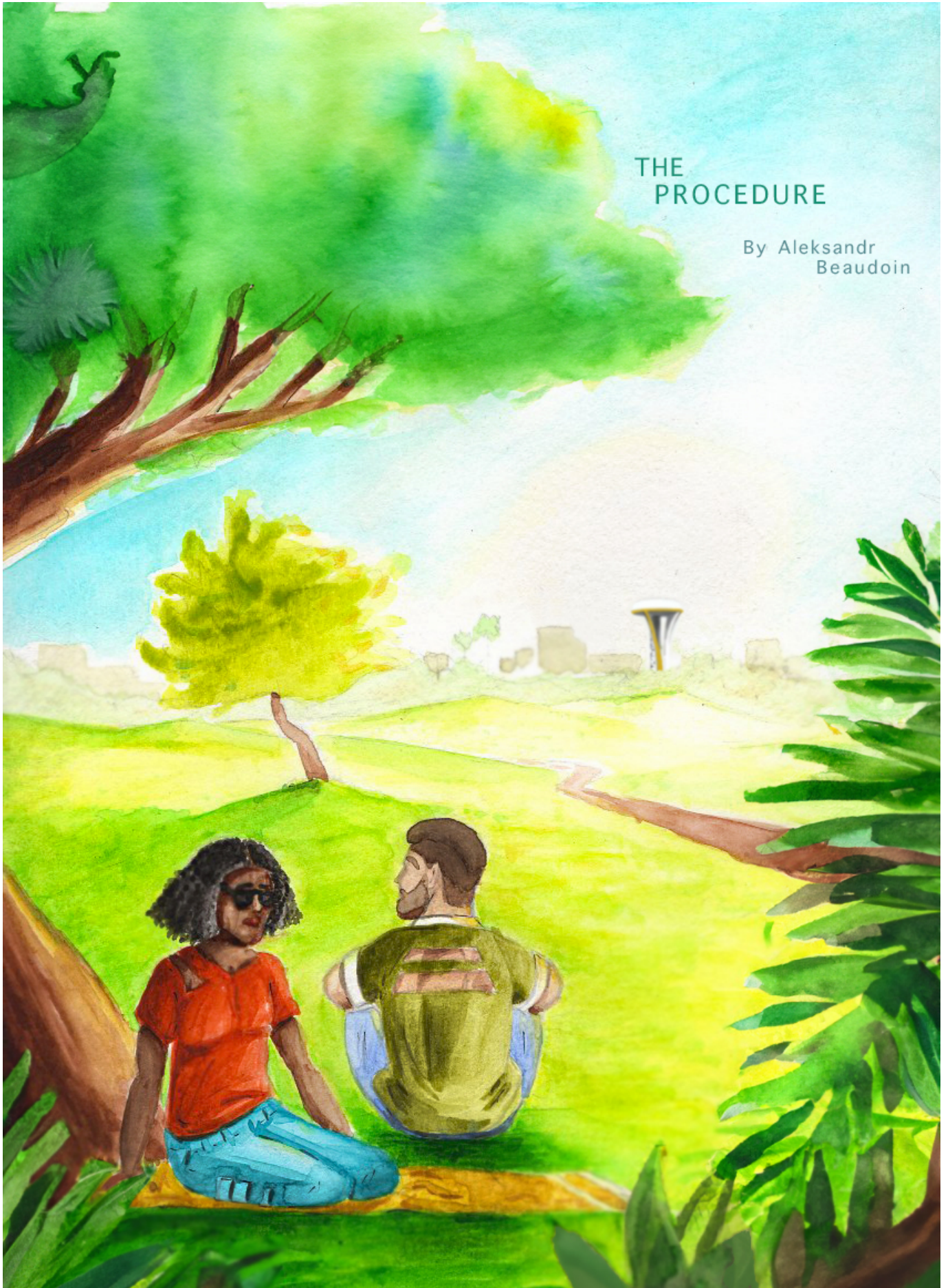


THE PROCEDURE

By Aleksandr
Beaudoin



The Procedure is a short work of speculative fiction.
All names and associated character traits are imaginary.

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THE PROCEDURE

A Novella in Speculative Fiction
by Aleksandr Beaudoin

PART I

Alessa thought of the kids on the block: Cillian had improved hand-eye coordination and exceptional linguistic abilities; Astoria had an efficient metabolism and significant memorization skills; Harlin was extremely athletic and great with numbers; Ilaria had heightened energy levels yet an ability to stay severely focused. They all had their unique skills and characteristics that Alessa had seen develop over time. She often wondered if they would switch their traits for another. Would they trade a gift in the sciences for one in the arts? Or having perfect vision for a toned body?

Questions of the sort had entered Alessa's mind more than usual. She anticipated them like the Los Angeles sun that grew hotter year by year. These reflections on youth flowed through Alessa's brain as she sat poolside awaiting the Procedure. Shortly, she would meet her husband at the Burbank clinic - finish in an hour and a half at most – and

they would return home and continue on with their life, routine as usual, the whole day another thing of the past.

History was a reverie to Alessa. Though she recognized the many privileges of her present life, she wasn't one to glorify modern technology. She wasn't constantly thinking about the future and she was by no definition an "early adopter;" far from the first to test a new device or witness the latest discovery. She was, in fact, deemed bizarre in most circles for her outdated personality. The majority of the population gave subtle strange looks when she engaged in vintage actions such as opening an elusive physical novel as opposed to using electronic reading glasses; or when she brought a bag to the grocery store instead of using the automated carts that could effortlessly follow her wherever she went. Truthfully, she had found the Technological Revolution a bit excessive and, at certain times, intrusive. But she knew better than to admit such a viewpoint, both for her sake and her husband's. If it weren't for Cassian, Alessa was certain her peers would disregard her entirely.

As she sat alone on her temperature-regulating pool chair, thinking on the point in history she had been born into, Alessa recalled watching old Blade Runner movies with Cassian. They had watched all six, starting with the 1982 original, up through the most modern adaptation. Cassian found pleasure in investigating the societal context surrounding his favorite films - imagining what events may have lead to the life on screen. While they weren't Alessa's preferred genre, she could still find partial interest in witnessing how past generations had envisioned the life she and Cassian now lived. They didn't have flying cars and Los Angeles wasn't shrouded in a somber darkness with only neon holographs as sources of light; most of the specific details actually proved to be inaccurate to the system they operated under. Still, Cassian was mesmerized by the series.

So, Alessa once travelled to San Francisco to retrieve original, and practically impossible to find, DVD copies for his birthday. She displayed them like books on a shelf next to their digital screening wall and thought it a bit romantic seeing the titles displayed, a comforting reminder of the past among the programmed present.

Cassian was always looking to the future. It was one of the ultimate reasons Alessa had fallen in love with him - his desire and ability to calculate where human life was headed, his need to examine current problems and uncover future solutions. What else could one expect from the man who had been instrumental in creating the remedy that was the closest to eradicating cancer.

The medicine identified cancerous cells early on, sometimes even as the very first ones appeared, and continued to halt their reproduction through effective targeting and heightened immunity. It involved an artificially intelligent and engineered microorganism that was injected into the body every few years and was now one of their required shots, among many. It was not perfect and was undergoing consistent testing (individuals under the age of 16 couldn't receive it), but it existed, helped save lives, and Cassian had been a major player in its discovery. He had solidified his place in the future, far beyond what their estimated 130 years of life would bring. His name would be in textbooks and his scientific trials sources of intense research, a framework to build upon. Many were jealous of his accomplishment, how he had secured long-term meaning for his name - *their name*. But Alessa was only thrilled Cassian was finally achieving things he had once dreamed of doing as a child, by his own devices or not.

"Alessa, this a reminder for your appointment at the Burbank Procedural Clinic at one o'clock PST - 13 hundred hours - this afternoon. Based on current traffic density and clear

weather patterns, if you depart in the next five minutes, you will arrive with exactly 15 minutes prior to your scheduled appointment time."

The humanoid voice of Alessa's virtual home assistant (VHA) protruded from their hidden outdoor speakers. She let the reminder sink in, gradually got up from the chair, clicked a switch to have the protective awning extend over the pool, and entered her home. She grabbed her purse and family tablet synched with their required documents - various health records and past visit summaries, personal identification, tax documents, etc.

"Alessa, you have one new voice message from Cassian Roy. Would you like to hear it now?" The house spoke again.

"Yes," Alessa double checked the contents of her purse.

The message began to play: "Hi A, I'm leaving the lab now. Car says I'll be there in 10 and a half minutes. See you then. Exciting stuff."

Alessa rushed out the front door in her usual manner, yelling to House to "lock it up." She briefly saw Cillian juggling a soccer ball across the street. He smiled at her with a single palm raised and she smiled back, the ball never at risk of hitting the ground. Car then turned on and calibrated itself. Alessa shared the desired coordinates from the center seat. The vehicle informed her about the day's weather patterns and the most efficient route they would be taking to limit Los Angeles traffic congestion. Soundlessly, Car backed out of the driveway and made for the clinic, its windows automatically switching to their darker, UV protecting, tint. Alessa stared at the three empty seats surrounding her, all situated around one center table.

"Car - have House set a reminder to look up the highest rated car seats."

"Certainly, Mrs. Roy...Done. Virtual Home Assistant will remind you tomorrow morning at 9:30am PST."

The car headed up through the Hills while Alessa's brain flooded with what could only be described as "motherly thoughts." She didn't think she was nervous, yet she felt the need to tell herself there wasn't cause for alarm, particularly over the Procedure. Millions of people went through it every day, on every continent. This was the moment they'd been waiting for: they were finally having a baby.

In synch, Alessa's car automatically parked next to Cassian's. She put on her black, government-issued sunglasses and stepped out. Cassian rapidly kissed her on the cheek, not the lips, which told Alessa his mind was in a jumbled state, undoubtedly half distracted with questions pertaining to his job. His dedication to said job - to the next generation - was one of many reasons she felt Cassian would make an excellent father. On most days. Standing in that prairie of a parking lot, she suddenly felt a bit different, a bit off.

"How are you feeling? Ready?" Cassian asked with a supportive grin.

"No time like the present." She didn't favor the expression, but felt it was relevant enough.

"I hope you're excited, A...I really want you to be," he assured her. "But we can wait if you'd like. I understand it can be a little...what's an accurate word - jarring?"

She valued her husband's reminder they were in harmony over the decision, but Alessa knew Cassian was fervent.

"Now or never," she said another despised expression of hers.

Cassian took Alessa by the hand and leisurely led them in the direction of the clinic. His phone rung numerous times, vibrating against his leg.

"Hectic day at the lab," he informed.

"When is it not," She stated. Rhetorically.

"Christmas and July 4th."

"What a time to be alive." She didn't know why she was uttering all of her least favorite expressions.

The sleek walls of the clinic towered over them as they approached. The perpetual sun beat down on everything so intensely it felt engineered itself, cranked to the highest setting. Its rays sharply reflected off the white and gold surface of the polished structure, causing significant glare to the human eye, even behind their required lenses. Though the building was constructed of a metallic material, the glossy shine reminded Alessa of the sample of plastic she'd seen in the Los Angeles history museum. Actually, it reminded her of the way the brutal sun naturally coated everything in a glossy sheen.

"Are you here for the Procedure?" a passing couple suddenly asked. Alessa turned away from the tower. The two women's smiles were aggressive.

"Certainly. You are as well?" Cassian responded.

"Oh yes. We're so thrilled. Seems like we've been waiting a lifetime," one of them exclaimed.

"Definitely an exciting time. Enjoy the process," Cassian smiled.

“You too,” the second woman spoke with lots of energy. “Good luck.”

Both women then hurried off like the giddy child they were about to have.

Mimicking the couple’s energy, Alessa put on a plastic smile. Then she heard Cassian whisper, “I think I’ve always wanted to be a father.”

Alessa had always thought about being a mother, whether by societal, familial, or biological pressure. Generally, the whole topic seemed to be a repetitive point of discussion these days, always surfacing at dinner parties, birthday parties, the occasional work event etc. On the whole, she found the idea pleasing and never had any major reservations. But now that the time was upon her, it felt fearfully momentous. Surely every soon-to-be parent encountered the threatening symptoms brought on by a drop in oxygen as they ascended to the peak of selflessness – raising a child? Should her body manage to reach a state of hypoxia and faint, at least she was in a hospital, even if the site was the source of some malaise. The cause and the remedy, much like a vaccine.

Finally, approaching the front doors, they stepped into some shade and Cassian instinctively underwent a quick retinal scan.

“*Good day, Mr. Roy,*” sounded a variation on the electronic voice heard throughout their lives. “*Please place your right hand into the scanner below.*”

After a quick beep, the metal security flap lifted and Cassian extended his entire hand into the in-wall cutout to the right of the doorway. They waited for it to scan the appendage, searching the database.

“*Scan successful. Our records indicate you are here for the Procedure. Please have Mrs. Roy insert her hand next.*” This voice was exceptionally humanistic, more than the others Alessa heard throughout her life. Were they developing new voices? There had been a law

implemented a while back that systems couldn't sound too humanistic, though she never knew what was being overturned or reexamined these days.

"We have these box scanners at the lab, for extra security," Cassian interjected. "Don't worry."

Alessa grinned at her husband's misunderstanding as to her second of hesitancy. She then did as instructed and waited.

"Scan successful...Welcome Mr. and Mrs. Roy. Please keep your family tablet securely on you at all times."

The sliding doors finally unlocked and swiftly separated, allowing the couple to step into the air-conditioned environment. The doors then clicked shut behind them and Alessa felt as if she had entered a vacuum, the rest of the world shut out, irrelevant.

"Are you excited to be parents, Mr. And Mrs. Roy?" their registered nurse abruptly asked, waiting by the door. She began guiding them down a populated hallway.

"As much as we can be," Cassian said, quickly checking his phone.

The brightly colored walls mixed with the harsh glow of the lights all felt a bit excessive. Even the minimal furnishings were intense in their color. Alessa couldn't tell the aesthetic they were going for and it felt increasingly odd the farther they travelled within the structure.

"It should take 60 minutes to complete the four stages, right?" Cassian asked.

"Correct, all four will take just around an hour total. The first two stages are relatively fast since most parents come in with an idea of what they want. Stage three has the longest allocated time for decision making," the nurse shared as they approached a

door. She pressed her palm to the same glass tablet outside all the interior doorways.

“Room 4B. You’re all set to go in.”

Alessa took a second to observe the tiny space. One thing the room couldn’t be described as was comforting. Along one side was a sleek machine in which she would eventually lay down. Additionally, there was a desk with a monitor implanted in the wall near it, a few uncomfortable looking chairs, and various advertisements plastered on the light grey walls. All design attention had clearly gone toward the public spaces.

The RN sat down by the desk while Cassian took a seat in the corner.

“You coming, A?” He asked.

Alessa finally stepped into the room and joined her husband. The chairs were, in fact, uncomfortable. After a moment, the nurse intently looked at Alessa and Cassian. “Are you ready for Stage One of The Procedure?”

Cassian looked his wife in the eyes.

“Yes,” Alessa said.

“We are,” Cassian added.

“Great. We assume they told you everything at the initial appointment, so I’ll breeze over the summary details. If you have any questions, don’t hesitate to ask, okay?” The RN gave them a look like a concerned mother.

They both nodded.

“Perfect. If you hand me your tablet, I’ll have it synch with my computer here.” Alessa dug it out of her purse. The nurse pressed a button on the side and held the tablet in front of the in-wall monitor. Seconds later, she returned the tablet to Alessa and examined the information on screen. “As you may remember, this stage is purely to discuss any concerns

and collect a few more forms of DNA...Mr. Roy, It seems your semen sample from before proved sufficient and cleared all tests, so we won't have to collect any more."

"I don't mind if you have to," Cassian offered.

"We have plenty."

Alessa gave Cassian *the* eye.

"What? For science."

She faced forward as the nurse proceeded to examine charts and tables.

"So, to confirm, based on the data in your file, you're planning to conceive just one child?" The RN asked.

"Yes, that's correct," Alessa replied.

"Great," the RN tapped the monitor. "You'd like a boy?"

"That's what we decided," Cassian replied.

The RN continued to tap the monitor all over as if creating a pointillist painting. Alessa stared at the capsule of a machine just a foot away. Cassian glanced at his phone.

"This is your first time conceiving?" the RN questioned.

"Yes," Alessa answered.

"Based on previously recorded vitals, you both appear very healthy. Do you have any other concerns you've noticed since the first tests or anything that you'd like to mention?" The nurse turned to properly face them again.

"No, we don't," Alessa confirmed.

"Great. I'm going to take a few more DNA samples. I'll swab the inside of your mouth, grab a strand of hair, and then prick your fingers. I'll also have you spit into a cup. And Mrs. Roy, I'll have this machine do a scan to check your vitals and gather more data on your

ovulation cycles. We know you already had tests done, but this is all routine and for extra assurance.”

The nurse effortlessly grabbed their plastic cups full of saliva, their hair strands, mouth swabs, and blood, and momentarily exited the room.

Alessa and Cassian remained quiet. “*The Sound of Silence*,” came to Alessa’s mind. She appreciated the song - its tone and instrumentation a relic of the past.

“I’m happy to provide you with a semen sample later,” Cassian nudged Alessa.

“I’m going to smack you.”

“Save some of the fun for tonight.”

Why did she decide on having a boy?

The door shot open and the RN re-entered, now looking to Cassian with great respect and admiration.

“I *can’t* believe I didn’t say anything sooner, I’m so embarrassed. But thank you very much for your contribution to science, Mr. Roy.” She paused. “Your research into microbial treatments was a strong focus of study during my residency.”

“That’s very kind of you.”

She smiled as a “ding” went off from Cassian’s phone. He looked at his own device as the RN directed Alessa toward the larger one in the room. In a matter of 20 seconds, more specifics than she could have imagined about her ovulation cycles were recorded. The apparatus’s efficiency in delivering the results oddly didn’t comfort her and instead made her question its accuracy. Surely all the numbers and graphs on the RN’s screen were more accurate than her instincts.

At the desk, the nurse took a second to reevaluate her steps and then said, "That's everything. I'm going to send the samples to the doctor so she knows what we're dealing with. She'll then put the results into the system to show you your options in the upcoming stages."

"Our options?" Alessa asked.

"It's to examine our genetic makeup, see what's possible for our child," Cassian responded.

"Exactly," the nurse confirmed. "We need to map out the genetic code of the parents to allow us to be certain which proteins to code for. It's also to confirm there aren't any missed mutations or anything of that nature." She gave everyone (Alessa) a second to absorb the information. "Before I go, I want to ask one more time, are you comfortable moving ahead in the Procedure?"

"Yes," Alessa confirmed.

"The doctor will be in with you shortly to guide you to the Germination Studios." The RN eagerly sprung up from her chair. "We changed the name from Germination to Germination. Sounds less clinical and more fun, which this all is," she gleamed. "At least I hope you think so." The door then automatically slid open as she stood near its frame.

"Congratulations on your child. I hope you enjoy the process...And thank you again, Mr. Roy. Truly respectable work."

Then she was gone and the familiar sound of silence once again set in.

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To pass time, Alessa's eyes studied various posters and brochures for the Procedure, all with such phrases as: "99.99% *Success Rate*," "Never Doubt Again," "The Perfect Child Does Exist." She didn't know why they needed brochures when everyone accepted the Procedure for what it was.

"Shit," Cassian mumbled. "They need me back at the lab. Of all days." He sighed, looked to the ceiling in thought, and then turned to his wife. "Are you okay?"

"It's just a bit strange, the idea of it. Now that it's actually happening."

"I suppose so. Though I also find it exciting."

"Of course. But strange and exciting aren't mutually exclusive."

After a beat he set a hand on Alessa's thigh. "He's going to be amazing." Cassian then paused. "If it makes you feel any better, I'm nervous about the whole idea of being a parent myself. It's quite daunting. I just hate that there's no way to know if I'll be any good at it, no way to be certain."

Alessa briefly studied her husband's face. She enjoyed the fact he was nervous, his rare moment of vulnerability reassuring. She found herself reaching over and gently tracing her forefinger across the line of his knuckles. He smiled and she did too at their little motion. She didn't know when it began, but it had become their symbol to relax, to focus on one thing at a time; single joints as opposed to an entire body. In that moment, she felt the action was easier than explaining her growing nerves weren't over *just* being a parent, but also the process by which she was becoming one.

Alessa didn't have long to ruminate. There was a faint beeping noise and the door glided open. A tall, captivating woman stood in frame as a new robotic voice announced,

"Welcome Dr. Rhodes." As if appearing center stage at a world tour, light beamed in from the hallway behind, adding a halo effect to the stoic body before them. She stepped forward.

"Ten out of ten on the entrance," Cassian stated.

"I keep telling them I want personalized theme music to go with the voice. My request is...still processing." She grinned a handsome grin. "Mr. Roy, it's an honor to be assisting you today."

"It's Cassian. And you're in the lead here."

The two stood to shake hands. Alessa then rose, also shaking the Dr's hand. She appeared rather young, though her demeanor didn't indicate inexperienced by any means.

"How are you feeling today?" the doctor asked Alessa. *Was sick of hearing a question a diagnosis?* "You're probably tired of hearing that question."

"I'm feeling great," Alessa replied.

"That's what we like to hear. Now, are you ready to have a baby?"

"Show us the way," Cassian said. His phone then let off a ding. Dr. Rhodes smiled and waved them deeper through the building, now populated with glass desks, waterfalls, and ample vegetation; less medical and industrial, more therapeutic. Alessa reflected on this interior design shift as they all entered a frosted glass elevator. Rhodes casually smashed a button with a glowing logo of a baby's head. Now seemingly her backup dancers, Alessa and Cassian stood behind the doctor as they waited for the elevator to ascend.

"They've gone over the financials with you, correct?"

"Yes," Cassian confirmed.

"Since you are of a higher income, you'll be paying more due to the sliding scale model. You're of course okay with this?"

“Certainly,” Alessa responded. As she did, Cassian’s phone buzzed. Then another time. This undoubtedly prompted the doctor to check her own phone.

“I like to triple check,” Dr. Rhodes continued, swiping at her device. “There’s always room for human error.”

“Does that include with the fertilization process?” Alessa dared to question.

Cassian seemed subtly mortified, undeniably over Alessa’s doubts toward science rather than the doctor’s legitimacy. Alessa didn’t care and wanted to hear the facts from the professional, even though she only regurgitated one of the earlier posters:

“We have a practically 100% success rate and we’re working to get as humanly close to perfect every day. This is also one of the best clinics in the world. We’ll take care of you, not to worry, Mrs. Roy.”

As the elevator shot up to the highest floors of the clinic, Alessa’s nerves simultaneously heightened in the process. Her entire body vibrated from the fierce vertical flow while Cassian and the doctor remained planted. She watched the floor numbers climb along with them: 34, 35, 36, 37...

“How many procedures do you see a day?” she inquired.

“About a hundred or more. It depends. Although they’re developing new ways to streamline the process; building more Germination Studios and all that. Quite remarkable stuff.” The Dr. got lost in the wonder of it all. “It’s truly an amazing time to be alive, Mrs. Roy.”

Before anyone could respond, the doors ripped open. A sharp burst of pale light barreled in, causing Alessa to shield her eyes. She heard Cassian and the doctor’s dress shoes clack against the tile floor and followed, at first by sound, and then by vision.

Ahead of Alessa, the two doctors fell in step and murmured amongst themselves. They zigzagged through a labyrinth of hallways, all resembling the lobby to an esteemed record label; fancy plants and plaques impeccably placed throughout in repetition. They passed door after door, each with a linked monitor and associated number: 40-01A, 40-01B, 40-02A, 40-02B etc. Eventually, Dr. Rhodes halted.

“Here we are. Room 40-15B.”

Per usual she scanned her right palm and waited. Her associated voice then protruded from typical hidden speakers:

“Hello Doctor Rhodes. Welcome to the Germination Studio. Please recite your full name.”

She looked to the Roy couple over her shoulder. “Extra security up here. Virginia Rhodes.”

“Voice recognition accepted,” the door stated.

It then gave off a barely audible whoosh that Alessa hadn’t heard before. It was almost natural sounding, like a delicate breeze. It proved soothing until Alessa saw the overcasting shadow that filled the space just beyond the doorframe.

Everyone stepped into the cramped room. Dr. Rhodes immediately stood to the right of the doorway while Alessa and Cassian registered the space: it was mostly dark except for a dim strip of neon light exhibiting a bluish hue. In front of them stood a large digital screen for a wall. The only important physical objects in the black box were two angular chairs placed directly in the center, facing the screen. The whole design was far too minimal and, unlike the hallway, extremely lifeless, which Alessa considered ironic considering they were there to create the opposite.

Cassian was first to take a seat. He held out his hand to Alessa but she didn't react. She couldn't comprehend the unbelievable truth of what they were about to experience and truthfully, didn't know what to think. Still, she shared a small smile with Cassian and walked closer to her own seat.

The large screen became more alive with time, radiating a diffused grey light that gradually increased in brightness. Alessa was mesmerized by the monitor and was even more intrigued when a pair of multi-colored, digital eyes appeared, calmly blinking, staring down at her. She stared back.

"Before we start Stage Two of the Procedure, I need verbal confirmation you're both ready to proceed. I know you've been asked a thousand times, but, lawsuits; I'm sure you understand." Dr. Rhodes spoke from a seat in the back, unmoving.

"I'm ready to proceed," Cassian said.

In the sliver of silence that followed, Alessa felt as if an entire century had passed; that generations had gone by and humans had evolved as biological creatures - discoveries and achievements made across a span of decades, all before she blinked an eye.

"Ready," Alessa spoke. Did the electronic eyes wink at her?

"Okay then, we're all set to begin," Dr. Rhodes began. "A few disclaimers: these rooms are equipped with digital voice nurses, or DVN's as we call them, to help guide you through aspects of the Procedure. Your responses will be recorded and the audio file will be stored with all your other documents in our database for any future needs." She paused to think. "Oh yes, I'll be here during Stage Two for assistance, since it's the first time you'll be interacting with the technology. But I'll leave during Stage Three and Four for privacy." She stopped again. "I believe that's everything for now. So, if you'll face the screen please."

Alessa held tight onto her own hands as they rested in her lap. The polychromatic eyes faded away as random columns of the same four letters filled the screen like a standardized, multiple-choice test: A, T, C, G. They cycled through before her eyes, each letter a separate color of the rainbow.

From behind them, Virginia's voice filled the room. "The system is synching the DNA the nurse collected from you earlier. Cross-referencing it with every sample we have for accuracy. It's also comparing it to what we have on record from your parents and previous generations. Painting a biogenetic picture."

In that exact moment, Alessa was at once fascinated and horrified by the power of science. Not purely by how much that artificial system could know and predict about the future, but also just how much power it granted them as beings. She suddenly had the feeling they were entering deadly depths despite their place somewhere in the sky. She finally understood just how far science had come and, for a moment, could comprehend Cassian's intrigue at what it could do next. It could be addictive, she realized. To an extent, it already was.

"DNA results have been processed, Dr. Rhodes," the DVN spoke from within the walls, resounding throughout the cave-like space. *"Questions have been adjusted based on the data. Are Mr. and Mrs. Roy ready to move forward?"*

"Yes, they are," Rhodes declared.

"Preparing Stage Two...Roy Family, please look at the screen in front of you and follow along. We ask that you carefully listen to your choices and reflect on them before submitting any final answers. The next three stages will determine the outcome of your child. Remember to stay relaxed...and have fun!"

Regardless how much Alessa thought she knew about what would come next, she could never be fully prepared. In waiting for the screen to populate, Alessa quickly understood her recent thoughts had been misinformed. Despite something so precise, calculated, formulaic, it seemed odd anything apart from Science could be operating in that room. But Alessa didn't know how else to describe what she was witnessing - what she was feeling - except that it managed to have a touch of the unknown, of the Divine. Despite the prescriptive and researched mechanics, in that moment she realized the creation of a child was if anything, a truly sublime act. Everything they were about to do was, no matter what anyone might tell her.

The DVN powered through various questions as to the build and makeup of their boy. In typed out copy, each inquiry displayed itself on screen while also being read aloud. In between question and response - brief moments of extreme focus, reality felt fantastical, as if the three humans occupying the room were apparitions and it was all an obscure daydream or nightmare or some mixture of the both.

"What hair color would you like your boy to have?" An empowering voice of science and technology questioned.

"Brunette," Cassian replied. "Dark brunette."

It was a blend of Alessa's black hair and Cassian's darker chestnut shade. They had previously discussed most of the physical aspects per the clinic's recommendation to "help make the process more efficient." While the clinic would never openly publish a list of the questions, people talked and most had a solid idea what would be asked. All except for the final stage - Stage Four, which lingered in the back of Alessa's mind throughout the afternoon; the biggest question that still remained unanswered, and slightly ambiguous due to the ever-evolving nature of the Procedure.

"What colors eyes would you like your boy to have?"

Cassian peaked at his phone and then slipped it back into his pocket, thinking Alessa was too distracted to have noticed. He examined the choices on screen.

"I didn't think blue would be an option for us," Cassian was impressed. "How about blue?"

"Neither of us have blue eyes," Alessa pointed out. Cassian gave an inquisitive look. "Well, I'd like our child to resemble us a little bit. Naturally."

"Naturally?" He seemed slightly offended. "I don't think that's a fair thing for me to just assume."

"I don't mean '*obviously*,' I mean naturally in a biological sense," Alessa clarified. Cassian blinked at her, reprocessing her original statement. "And didn't we talk about brown?"

"Yes, but thinking on it, brown eyes are the majority. So why not give him something more unique?"

"How about green then?" Alessa didn't care to debate. Cassian still pondered. "Like yours; I do love your green eyes," she added a credible and influencing footnote.

Cassian looked to his wife, then back at the screen. "It *could* look nice against the dark hair."

"Green eyes," Alessa uttered to the dark void.

"I could not hear your response. Please repeat it at a louder volume."

"You have to speak up," Cassian regurgitated.

She gave him a side eye. "*Green*," she replied with more force.

The system recorded the decision.

"What vibrancy would you like for your boy's eyes?"

"Bright," Cassian stated. "That'll really make him stand out."

"What skin tone would you like your boy to have? These are your choices based on your familial DNA recorded in our database." Five options appeared on the screen, each with a letter and a sample swatch for reference. A, B, C, D, or E. *"Please say the associated letter as your response."*

Cassian intensely observed the choices as if taking an exam. "I think the third is nice. A tan pigment?"

"Okay," Alessa said, her only opinion being this shouldn't be a permitted question at all. However, after several past controversies, she wasn't surprised when the government still allowed it.

"Option C," Alessa and Cassian simultaneously declared. He gave an amused grin at the fact. Alessa didn't. Finally, the choices disappeared and three new ones replaced them.

"What physique would you like your boy to have? These are your choices based on your parental and familial DNA."

“The first seems nice,” Cassian whispered to his wife. He studied the images again.
“Sort of a gymnast style build; like a lot of the men in your family.”

A severe sense of shame abruptly rippled throughout Alessa’s body, the pain spreading from her heart at the center. But surprisingly, after mere seconds:

“Option A,” she said loudly and clearly.

“What would you like your boy’s height to be? Here is your available range based on your familial DNA. Please note the final height may vary by two inches. We also remind you to take into consideration the physique you previously selected.”

“More on the tall side,” Alessa instinctively stated. Being on the shorter side herself and more personally tied to the subject, she understood some of the struggles it entailed.

“Option E - around 5’10”,” Alessa spoke.

Cassian smiled. “I told you, once you get into it the process becomes enjoyable.” He turned down the brightness on his phone in hand and Alessa wondered if Cassian was feeling *any* of the awful among the awe, or at least any sense of mixed emotions.

Then, an electronic chime bounced throughout the room. Cassian returned his phone to his pocket as Alessa’s eyes investigated the monitor.

The DVN announced, *“Congratulations, you have just completed Stage Two and are halfway through the phenotypic portion of the Procedure. Stage Three will commence after your responses have been processed. While you wait, please listen to some words from our doctors.”*

All perfectly on cue, the screen automatically dimmed as if entering low-power mode and the floor lights brightened. Alessa and Cassian slowly faced Dr. Rhodes who now stood closer to them.

“You’re going to have a beautiful boy,” she reassured them.

“Thank you. We think so,” Cassian said.

Know so, Alessa thought.

“You are about to begin Stage Three...” Rhodes explained in her semi-casual, partly memorized, now slightly bored tone. “...The second half of the phenotypic portion – facial construction.” She got quiet. “Or, as we like to say around here, the ‘build a baby’ stage.” Rhodes and Cassian shared a grin at their scientific sense of humor. “When it begins, you’ll see an avatar of what your boy currently looks like based on your previous responses and the program’s most educated guess. Which we find is highly accurate,” she felt the need to add, likely for Alessa. “The system should be ready in just a moment and will explain the rest.” She flashed an automated smile. “You’re almost at the end.”

Alessa’s mind shivered at the reminder of the approaching Stage Four.

Simultaneously, several dings went off and Cassian yet again withdrew his cellular device.

“They can’t leave you alone for an hour?” Alessa had to ask.

Cassian let out a massive breath of irritancy, though Alessa knew he wasn’t annoyed by the fact he was needed at all. “I’m sorry.”

“They’ll survive,” Alessa stated. “This is important; they should respect it. And so should you.”

Cassian looked at her in silence but Alessa didn’t look at him because she wasn’t sorry for her comment.

“Busy day at the lab?” Dr. Rhodes tried to break the tension.

“We’re about to release quarter two’s genome results, so everyone needs all these approvals and data checked. They’re all running around with their heads severed.

Bureaucracy.”

“That’s right. The US release date is within the next few weeks,” Dr. Rhodes affirmed. “South America directly follows, am I correct?”

“You are. Which means we *also* have to be in communication with their continental lab, to make sure there aren’t any concerns we should be aware of - any mutations in the gene pool or such. Between us, it’s a giant mess right before release.”

“Shouldn’t your clinical department know all this?” Alessa asked Dr. Rhodes.

“Most of them do,” Rhodes replied, “but admittedly, I don’t typically work in germination. Now and then when the clinic is short staffed, like today, I volunteer to help facilitate the Procedure.” She turned to Cassian and finished by saying, “My specialty is infectious diseases - experimental epidemiology.” There was the subtlest hint of respect.

“Microorganisms are powerful fuckers,” Cassian supported the doctor’s speciality with the grin of a proud father. “For all the progress we’ve made, I swear it’s going to be something microscopic that threatens our livelihood.”

“I’d have to agree,” Dr. Rhodes said.

“Sorry if that comment was a bit dismal...” Cassian acknowledged. “Well, not a bit - it 100% was.”

They both gently snickered. As they did, the same chime from moments before rang, the floor lights dimmed, and the screen once again began to glow. Cassian and Alessa concurrently spun to see the words “STAGE III” pasted on screen. The heading faded like movie credits to reveal a 3D rendering of a boy. But not just any boy - *their* boy.

Alessa couldn't understand her profound longing to reach out and hold her half completed child. She felt it cruel, inhumane, to be provoked by the image. She imagined all the memories they would create together - her, Cassian, and the rendering: birthdays, ice cream on Malibu pier, afternoons in the park (of the few that remained), trips east to visit her younger brother in Georgia. She watched her child's body continue to rotate on screen, hovering with arms extended, parallel to the ground. The visual abruptly reminded her of Jesus on the cross, albeit a virtual one. She stared ahead and awaited further instructions.

"You are now beginning Stage Three of the Procedure. On the screen, you can see a predictive model of your child based on previous responses and generations of familial DNA in our database," The DVN guided them. *"You will see a series of symbols appear around the avatar's head. Click on the logo of the associated facial feature you wish to design and edit..."*

Alessa reflected on the system's word choice, cleverly avoiding "manipulate," "alter," "fix." She found their attempts at hiding the reality of the situation quite humorous and then watched as the logos appeared: eye, nose, lips, ear, jaw, eyebrow.

"...If at any time you decide to go back and alter any features, you may. Please note, slight alterations in one area may result in automatic changes in another, since many biological factors influence another. You will have a final view of your creation at the end with a chance for any final adjustments. Once you accept, there is no returning. Please listen to your doctor...and have fun!"

Once again, Dr. Rhodes stood directly behind them. She handed over a tablet for editing, any changes of which they would see reflected on the large screen.

"As I mentioned, I must leave for Stage Three," Rhodes began. "Everything will be kept confidential with whomever is in the room. If you have any questions, press that

button at the top,” she pointed. “You’re legally allowed thirty minutes for this portion. When you’re finished, tap the button beside the other one for me to return. Stage Three will not be final until I get verbal agreement upon completion.”

“Understood” Cassian was eager.

“And again, enjoy the process,” the doctor smiled. The door then made its relaxing sound as she stepped out. They were alone with the projection.

Alessa stared at the screen, continuously unsure how to feel; mixed between joy and love for her child and a crushing weight of responsibility. It was the first time in her life Alessa genuinely understood the impact of the decisions she made, how every micro-action could influence something or someone else in tremendous ways. Perhaps she owed the Procedure thanks? If it weren’t for her ability to alter her child’s exact bone structure with the flick of a finger, perhaps she never would have realized such a basic truth.

Alessa was thrown off as Cassian pulled the tablet from her loose hands and messed around with the various options and controls. She stared down at her palms, investigating the creases and folds, the faint topographical pattern of lines wrapped around every centimeter, a map of her own being. She questioned her geography’s authenticity, wondering what degree of bias had influenced its imagery and outcome, like an early world map denoting country size according to their perceived influence and power.

“Scientifically speaking,” Cassian began, “we should start with the more general features and then get more targeted; build a base to work from. Let’s start with the overall facial structure.”

His fingertips elegantly danced across the mini screen. On the larger one before them, Alessa saw as various options regarding bone structure appeared: angle, length, definition - each with a precise adjustable range.

“Okay, here’s a sample of what sharper features might look like,” Cassian said.

Alessa reviewed the avatar’s boxy head. “That’s too structured. I don’t want insanely jagged angles.”

“It looks like we can soften them here.” He went about making the adjustments. “At least we missed that whole origami trend. What a fucking nightmare.”

“*Couture Contour,*” Alessa recalled the headline.

“You saw how those kids turned out.” Cassian spoke while staring at the tablet. “I don’t know who thought that was a good look.”

“Looks are subjective.”

“Not all. Or not all *should* be, I would argue.”

“Well, I wouldn’t like to argue...If anything, you can thank the trend for making a more balanced look popular now.”

Cassian processed. “I suppose that’s one way of looking at it.”

“It is. Trends tend to work in opposition.”

It would explain both her parents’ extremely rigid features and her softer, balanced ones. It was also why most people couldn’t tell they were her parents; something becoming harder to distinguish with each passing generation.

“This seems to be a good start,” Cassian had her take a closer look. “Still some definition around the mandible, but with a subtle curve. Slight hollow in the cheeks. The shape seems appropriate with his body type.”

Alessa enjoyed sketching by hand when she could, particularly studying the human form and documenting it with her pencil. Generally, the thought of bringing an image to life was the most peaceful part of her day. It all felt natural to her. And because it did, she forced herself to connect their actions in that Germination Studio to the act of drawing. They were engaging in a craft like any other; a respectable art form with the screen as their canvas, devoting as much love and passion as Rembrandt, O'Keeffe, or Hopper, would. They were scientific artists, if such a paradox could exist.

"Let's move on," Alessa was content with the results.

Cassian selected the nose icon next. Again, more modifications filled the screen.

"There's the option to leave certain sections to chance," Alessa pointed out. "Even narrow it down to two choices and see what occurs when he's born."

"We talked about this," he said. "Either you leave the entire face to chance or not at all. Fixing some areas and not others can be dangerous; and it's harder for the germline engineers to be accurate. Scientifically, it can be a mess."

"I know, Cassian. *Procedurally*, I just wanted to remind you."

"We're almost done." His pocket buzzed. "Can you take this?" he passed the tablet to her.

She slowly dragged her fingers across the screen, testing some of the nasal options as if it were just another day and she was in her office designing a new graphic for a client.

"I don't want to rush us, but I have to head back soon," Cassian said, scanning his phone.

"That better be a joke," Alessa stated.

Pause. "It's not."

"I know. You're awful at them."

"Jokes are subjective." Alessa glared at him. "...based on the audience..." Her glare didn't stutter. "I apologize," he finally applied some of that world renowned intellect to the situation. "I'll stay as long as I can, I promise. Let's just continue."

In disbelief, Alessa turned her head to the monitor. She took over being the controller and, feature by feature, they molded their boy's face like Rodin with a slab of marble, chipping and chiseling away, section by section, until their vision was as complete as it could be.

Alessa had been a graphic designer for 25 years but this was her masterpiece. She led the rest of Stage Three until they tapped the button to call in Dr. Rhodes. Alessa didn't swivel as the doctor stepped into the room; she only assessed their chef d'oeuvre displayed on screen.

"Wow...he is extremely handsome."

Neither Cassian nor Alessa said a word. The doctor waited, letting her compliment hang in the air.

"Do you say that about all the children?" Alessa finally added.

"*Definitely* not," she admitted, a little too easily for Alessa's liking. "Anyway, congratulations. Take one more look at your boy. When you're ready, I need you both to say your name and the words, 'I accept my child as it has been created here.'"

Cassian expertly reviewed the image, centimeter by centimeter.

"Alessa Roy. I accept my child as *he* has been created here."

Cassian looked to her for a moment. Eventually, he cleared his throat and replied:

"Cassian Roy. I accept my child as it has been created here."

Dr. Rhodes let the moment sit, or gave the system time to register their pact, Alessa didn't care either way. "Excellent. You have completed Stage Three and are ready to move onto Stage Four, the final stage...You are about to see a list —"

A ringtone suddenly went off in Cassian's pants, interrupting the doctor's speech. "Un-fucking-believable," he breathed. If everyone in that building weren't so in love with Cassian, Alessa would've been extremely embarrassed. "I'm very sorry." Cassian looked at the number. "Shit, I have to take this. Can I step outside the door for a moment?"

"Of course." The doctor was clearly unsure. "I'll, um, have to stand nearby though."

Cassian nodded. Both he and the Doctor then left, the door suctioning shut behind them. The space fell mute again. Not even the murmurs from his conversation slipped through the doorway; nothing made it past the barrier. Even silence didn't have a sound then. Alessa sat in shock, a universe of one hovering in a dark void. Her eyes were fixated on the doorway she could now barely see, until the faint, high-pitch giggle of a boy reverberated in the darkness.

Alessa twisted around, her eyes intently scanning the desolate room. But there was no movement, not near the screen, not near the door, not in the shadowy corners; even the image of her boy was digitally frozen in place above her, just waiting. Alessa stood and tentatively moved closer to the screen. The dim light softly illuminated her own facial features. She glued her eyes to the pixelated human, searching for movement, signs of life. She then abruptly recoiled when light shot in and the door opened again.

"I have about 10 minutes, then I have to get back to the lab. I'm sorry. Let's just decide." Cassian returned to his seat, ready and attentive. Alessa remained standing, her heartbeat settling. She moved closer to her chair.

“Where were we?” Dr. Rhodes thought. “Yes - Stage Four. You are about to see a list of 123 options, roughly divided in half and split into two categories: mental and physical. As you probably already know, those represent the two types of biological enhancements – or ‘add-ons,’ as we call them – that your child will receive. You’ll pick one from each category that will then be engineered into the embryo during IVF and monitored through the early period of adolescence.” The Doctor paused to take a breath and looked them both in the eye. At least *she* recognized the importance of the moment.

“We’re excited to get started,” Cassian confirmed.

Alessa took the seat beside her husband and he took her hand.

“You’ll get a full list of the bylaws for the Procedure after completion, but there are a few we’re required to point out now,” Dr. Rhodes rushed on, recognizing Cassian’s hurry.

“Where did I put my tablet?”

Cassian turned to his wife. “Your hands are warm, hot,” he whispered.

“From frustration.”

The Doctor scrummaged in the dark.

“I’m sorry. Really,” Cassian said, speaking low.

“You knew this day was coming. You had weeks to prepare, find coverage at work.”

“You know it’s hard to find coverage for my position.”

“But not *impossible*, is it?” He let out a few small rapid breaths. “I accept you’re busy, Cassian, but...if you can’t give an hour to the *idea* of your child, how do I know you’ll give more once he’s born?”

“You’ll have to trust me, like I’m trusting *you* to make decisions when I can’t be there.”

“Ah - found the tablet!” Rhodes spat from the shadows.

“Well, it’s not a great look, Cassian; *objectively*.” She ended the debate as the Doctor returned with the tablet.

“Okay, we already went over a few bylaws earlier,” she scrolled through a large document. “First, the list of 123 biological enhancements will not be subject to change at any point before fertilization unless reviewed and voted upon by the International Sciences and Bioethics Committee. Attempting to add *more* than two enhancements, with or without the aid of a professional, is illegal and will result in extreme consequences.” Rhodes looked up. “That’s a bit of a buzzkill. Anyway,” she kept scrolling while talking to herself. “I’m assuming you know about the Finalizing process at age 14. Parents may *not* inform their children of their enhancements prior to their finalizing. That’s critical. And trust me,” she went off script, “kids *cannot* keep secrets. So just wait until they’re 14. 90% of the time most guess anyway. You *are* permitted to tell other adults, but do so at your own caution. I always say better not to, but no one listens to me.” She momentarily paused. “Wow, I always forget how long this is...Okay, finally - the hospital and the Procedure may not be held liable for any mishaps, as there are genetic mutations that can occur. If a major problem does arise, a group of specialized scientists and investigators will evaluate the situation.” Dr. Rhodes took a final breath. “Like the last two stages, whatever you say during this stage will be kept confidential with whomever is in the room. Are there any questions?”

“No,” Alessa confirmed. She couldn’t remember the first part of the clinical monologue, but wanted to get the stage over with.

“Again, press the button on the tablet to call me when you’re done. You have 15 minutes.”

She promptly exited and the screen automatically changed. The visual of their boy vanished and the list of 'add-ons' appeared after the title "STAGE IV" slid away. Cassian quickly ran through the options in his head, already having a general familiarity with the list. He then reached for his phone and it lit up.

"*Cassian*," Alessa ordered.

"I can't believe they...this is what happens when I'm not there - I have to leave," Cassian rose from his chair. "I'm really sorry, A."

"You can wait fifteen more minutes." He stood while sending a voice text. She couldn't make out what he was saying, but didn't care to. "Cassian, put the phone down and _"

"I promise, I'm fine with whatever you decide," he exclaimed, his brain already back at the lab. His eyes jumped from his cellular screen to Alessa and they smiled at her.

"This is a huge decision, Cassian. I am *not* making it alone." Her fury and terror skyrocketed. Her heart pulsated, vibrating against her ribs, silently screaming.

"I apologize Alessa, but it's my job. If it makes it any better," Cassian pointed to the list on screen, "I would do 'heightened immune system' and 'acute observational skills,' or something along those lines. But seriously, choose what you think is best." He moved toward the door and knocked.

"There are a ton to consider - will you *please* pay attention," Alessa now stood.

The door finally shot open and the doctor barely stepped in. "That was rather fast," she was confused, examining the situation.

"Apologies, but I must head out," Cassian stated. "I'm giving Alessa full rights to make the selection. If that's a necessary thing to say."

"It wouldn't be the first time a guardian has had to leave," Rhodes admitted.

"This is ridiculous," Alessa breathed. "This isn't just another dinner party you can leave me at."

Cassian carefully glanced toward Rhodes. "I trust you," he declared to Alessa. "You're going to be an amazing mother."

"That's the not the issue here." Alessa stared past Cassian's eyes and into his subconscious, pleading that all levels of his cognition decipher the meaning behind her gaze, to pick up on the stress that was choking her. *Please stay*, her eyes said. *Stay*.

A moment of silence followed. Even the Doctor didn't move a muscle.

"I really wish I could. But it's international matters. In a way, I'm doing this for him."

"How do you expect me to narrow it down to two options by myself?" Her bewilderment grew with every passing second.

"Don't get so in your head about it," he acknowledged her tendency. "I *know* this important, but so is my job. There will be times when - look, we've talked about this - I'm sorry, Doctor," he faced Rhodes, then back to Alessa. "You're fully capable —"

"I'm well aware," she sternly said. "My capabilities also aren't the issue here."

Cassian now stood in the hallway and looked back at his wife. "Surprise me. I trust you. Really."

And with those final words, he walked out of her field of vision, phone to his ear. Alessa barely registered Dr. Rhodes who was standing just beyond the doorway, looking toward her.

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Roy, but you have ten more minutes. I don't want to waste any more of your time." She quietly stepped out and reached a hand toward the wall. The door then wiped across her body like an old movie transition.

Alessa felt her fingers bouncing against her leg, eventually tightening into a fist. She did everything not to scream or attempt to throw the chairs that were so obviously bolted to the ground. She paced and paced until finally recognizing she was losing valuable time.

The list floated before her, ghosts of the same options fading in and out of focus in double vision: *'Increased speed,' 'acute focus,' 'improved physical strength,' 'perfect daytime vision,' 'increased life span,' 'improved nighttime vision,' 'improved imagination,' 'heightened levels of confidence,' 'decreased levels of anxiety,' 'linguistically advanced,' 'improved memorization,' 'improved hand-eye coordination,' 'increased stamina,' 'heightened organizational abilities,' 'improved ability with numbers,' 'heightened levels of independence...'* Alessa felt dizzy, but she didn't have time to look away.

The intense burden of singlehandedly deciding her child's fate caused severe anxiety, and now so did the immense fear of upsetting Cassian. She strangely felt as if there were wrong choices to be made. Cassian had repetitively emphasized he didn't care and trusted her, but Alessa knew that was a lie. He did care. *Everyone cared.* Not a single, soon-to-be parent didn't have preferences for their child. "I can't wait to take them to the movies," "we'll spend Sundays in the park," "I'll show them my office" etc. All phrases under the expectation - hope - the child wanted any of those things or had a fraction of an interest. Alessa had certainly been guilty of such thoughts. Sure, the Procedure took out some of the guess-work, but what did Cassian want? What did he truly want?

Alessa sharpened her focus and went through the list, examining both categories. She tried to plan which add-ons wouldn't be too closely related. The last thing she wanted was a "Boom Baby" with overpowering skills in a specific area. At least if she chose differing enhancements, it could make her child well rounded, contributing to their idea of a balanced baby. Then again, she *could* hyper-focus his abilities in one area, like creativity, improving both a physical and mental component. There were advantages to having targeted characteristics, potentially pushing him way ahead of others. He could forge an amazing career and not have to go through any doubts as to what he wanted to do or who he wanted to be in the world, not wondering about his place on earth like many more had in previous generations. Then again, he could also be competing against other creative Boom Babies, so perhaps it wouldn't make a difference?

Her brain jumped between every possibility, completely shifting stances one second to the next, swinging in divergent directions as if a hand to a metronome. When she would finally make a decision - a pairing - her brain would offer up alternative perspectives, reasons against her choice, and she would return to the beginning, doubting herself, making no progress. Every exhale echoed obnoxiously in the space, drawing attention to the life she herself was breathing into a baby, child, human. All that was left to do was choose the options she believed would give her boy the best life he could possibly live. Just two decisions to make. Two choices. Then Klaiton - Klay - would officially start to form.

"Surprise me," Cassian words were branded in the back of her mind. She truly felt the heat as her time ran out. "I trust you. Really..."

Finally, the DVN beamed for the last time that afternoon.

"Congratulations Roy Family. You just made a baby!"

Dr. Rhodes double confirmed with Alessa and then all was completed. After the congratulations had been passed and the final documents signed, Alessa dug herself out from that bizarre place in the sky and returned to Earth, 40 floors below. She had to catch her breath in the parking lot as Car found its way toward her. She was at once ecstatic and disturbed; fearful of any sort of regrets, yet also proud of her ability to make a lasting decision.

Alessa entered the vehicle and the hunk of sophisticated metals spoke at her.

"Alessa, you have one new voice message from Cassian Roy. Would you like to hear it now?"

"No, I wouldn't."

"Understood. Car will have VHA set a reminder upon your arrival home."

"No, don't," Alessa demanded, only wanting to leave the massive parking lot.

"Understood. VHA will remind you one hour after your arrival home."

"No - *don't* have VHA set a reminder. I'll listen when I want to listen and am fully capable of making that decision by myself. Thank you." She let out another breath, realizing how idiotic the scene was; her, yelling at a hunk of self-operating technology. She had to question which was the more sophisticated and simply started to laugh as the vehicle finally pulled out of the lot. The laughing helped distract from her desire to vomit.

"Car will not have VHA set any audible reminders. Thank you, Alessa."

"You're so welcome."

She kept laughing for a while, until the laughs eventually sputtered out like archival, gas driven vehicles. Surprisingly, she wiped a few tears from her eyes and looked at the

liquid on her fingers. She found the site oddly a relief, proving that her eyes did work and were capable of normal, human functions.

"Congratulations on completing the Procedure," Car finally added, almost in a quieter tone, as if aware of Alessa's mood. She didn't care to ponder if that was actually the case and simply watched as the pristine gilded tower eventually slid out of sight. All human thought escaped her then, except for one critical topic.

She recalled her earlier review of the kids on the block and her original question resurfaced: would the kids change their traits for another? But this time, the question was thick and unbreakable like wurtzite boron nitride, and with it came a newly developed follow-up question: if the child would indeed trade their gifts for another, how would the parent feel, knowing they had chosen differently for their offspring?

Aware there probably wasn't a correct answer, Alessa came to terms with her own choices, as much as she could. It was the first time she had faced the fact that her life as a parent would be full of blind decisions.

All that was left to do now was fourteen years of waiting; fourteen years of watching the outcome of her choices. She still secretly hoped they would be perfect for her unborn child. She prayed to something that Klaiton would prosper from the results. But of all things, she prayed Klaiton would be loved, perhaps most of all by Cassian. Time would tell. Or in her experience, time would ultimately run out and force a decision one way or another.

PART II

Klaiton awoke to a dark room, hearing the muffled sounds of his mother moving about downstairs. Slowly, he reached his hand out and tapped the small screen implanted in the wall by his bed frame. As he did, the double-windows transitioned from pitch-black to translucent, permitting the rich Los Angeles sun to beam in. He lifted his eyelids and peeked his head out from the covers, his retinas growing accustomed to the bright light piercing through the protective glass.

"Good morning Klaiton," the VHA spoke only to him. "Happy 13th birthday...A scan of your vitals show you are healthy and properly developing. Congratulations."

A variety of thoughts spun in Klaiton's head, concurrently jumbled and separate, muddy and clear like liquids in a centrifuge, the machine he'd witnessed at his father's lab during a rare visit on his last birthday. Of all the thoughts rotating in his mind, all with varying densities and importance, two stood out: he wondered what type of pie his dad

would surprise him with that evening and, more importantly, if his mother would finally give in and tell him what enhancements he had received.

The topic of enhancements was one of debate at school, even a game, guessing which traits each student had inherited. Klaiton heard of students betting on their assumptions, wagering real money on their certainties. Granted some teens were easier to guess than others, some impossible *not* to know. His friend Asher never ran out of breath or energy during physical exercise (surely he had increased endurance), while Jada could paint, draw, or photograph anything and make it look like an ancient Banksy, Degas, or Lebowitz (definitely heightened levels of creativity, similar to his mother). However, not everyone grew into their skills so quickly nor so forcefully and were left wondering: what made them special?

“No running in the house,” Alessa routinely called out as Klaiton sped down the stairway. “And happy birthday, Klay,” she added as he entered the spacious, open-plan kitchen. As usual, she planted a kiss on his head and as usual he didn’t react in the slightest. The joys of being a parent.

“Where’s Dad?”

“At work. Adults don’t get summer vacation, remember. He *should* be home earlier today though with your pie.”

On the hunt for his breakfast, Alessa watched her son scour through the refrigerator. He pulled out freshly made fruit salad and hopped onto his barstool at the computerized kitchen island. His reflection faintly mirrored itself on the slick black surface, similar to the water on Silver Lake where they would visit Cassian’s sister and Alessa would pray the day would never end.

Alessa found herself gazing upon Klaiton more than usual. It could be fleetingly as he ran out the door for school or more profoundly as they all gathered in South Weddington park, which they had once discovered on their way to Griffith. Regardless the time or place, as Alessa watched her son, she would frequently yearn for the world to stop advancing, to stop spinning on its axis and grant her some time to keep Klaiton exactly as he was. He could be moody or happy or confused or angry or all those at once and she would still wish for the same thing - for the universe to pause.

Alessa couldn't believe how fast Klaiton was growing, the realization truly dawning on her within the last year. Despite always being fearful to some extent, she felt extremely fortunate to engage in the act of parenting. Alessa felt lucky to have the opportunity to raise Klaiton and instill him with what she deemed important values, often through vague anecdotes that irritated him. The parental ride was complete with its own speeds and spirals, continuously whipping ahead as Alessa tried to gain a sense of direction. She was grateful for both the thrill and the chaos. It even allowed her to develop a small circle of peers she had been able to connect with if not purely due to the fact they were all mothers. It truly was the ride of a lifetime and Alessa felt proud to partake. Most of the time.

There still remained certain hours, days, weeks, when she found herself more excluded than ever, both at home and within society. In these times, Alessa would disengage and she would question if she were a bad person, a bad parent. *He's angelic, he's ours*, she would usually think. *Our boy, our creation*. But then, against her wishes, the mention of the "c word" would launch her into a mental frenzy. All the pride and glory associated with "creation" would suddenly drop out of existence as its more manipulative connotations surfaced: the act of forming, manipulating, *scheming*. In these times, she would look at her

boy, his eyes and their selected vibrant green agate tone and think back to the practically identical, simulated pair looking down at her from the screen in that tiny black room. She would then find herself questioning if his eyes were real, if *he* was real, if he was genuinely sitting, standing, laying there before her. It was strenuous, not knowing which emotion would surface in the brief moments she watched her son.

“Why does Dad look at me a lot? When I’m not looking at him.” Klaiton took a bite fruit, more interested in the taste than the presented question. It threw Alessa off guard, jolting her from her trance.

“Well, because we love you.” She played it off as a silly question.

“Sure,” Klaiton replied.

“It’s true,” she defended. “You’re our child, so of course we’ll look at you from time to time. It’s a parent thing. All of us do it.”

“But Dad does it *a lot*,” he emphasized. “A lot more than you. And it feels, like, different when he does.”

“You’re father’s just a curious man. You know that.”

“Well it feels like he’s studying me.”

Klaiton took another bite of fruit salad and quickly moved on from his comment. On the other side of the island however, Alessa’s heart malfunctioned, skipping beats like a vintage CD player.

“You’ll grow into your skills like everyone does, okay? Don’t worry about this stuff, especially on your birthday.” Alessa gave a smile and gently brushed his dark brown hair out of his green eyes. “You’re special too.”

Klaiton then rolled his green eyes and went quiet as he finished his final bite. He set the juicy bowl in the air washer and took a moment to look out the large kitchen window to some kids playing in the street. He saw a young girl testing a hover board, balancing mere inches above the ground, clearly skilled despite her adolescent age. Maybe she was gifted with advanced hand-eye coordination or balance.

"I wish I was good at sports," Klaiton admitted, finally pulling away from the sight. "I'm only good at spelling; and taking tests, which is stupid." He sounded subtly defeated despite acknowledging personal strengths, genuine strengths of his.

Alessa remained cemented in place as Klaiton headed back upstairs. With every step he took farther out of sight, unanticipated coolness spread throughout her body. It was such a basic remark that should carry little to no meaning. Every child wanted something they didn't have, adults did. Yet, Klaiton's comment threatened to burst one of Alessa's internal pipes. Because, as the words were so casually spoken, Alessa was forced to come to terms with the fact that the one thing she'd heard Klaiton wish for, she had not granted him.

And so, the question she asked herself 13 years prior was finally answered: if a child wished to be more accomplished in a differing area than selected, how would the parent feel? Hypothermic, as if they were developing an intense shiver in the dog days of summer; every limb, appendage, and joint prickling with a grim stinging pain as skin and tissue stiffened like pounds of ice over water, eventually leading to blood blisters and black crust over sections of skin. It was the worst known case of parental frostbite of the fourth degree. At least that's how Alessa felt in that precise moment: ashamed, regretful, frigid. And the worst part was that she didn't have Cassian to share in the emotion with because as she so often remembered, he hadn't been there.

It was an indisputable fact that exponentially ate away at Alessa as the years went on. Alessa had grown accustomed to feeling alone and accepted she partially always would, what with her prehistoric personality. However, on the afternoon of the Procedure, that loneliness had evolved into something much more profound and real, like the boy she still had doubts was.

—

Thankfully, the rest of her remote workday and preparation for Klaiton's birthday dinner proved a successful distraction for Alessa. Over the course of the afternoon, her body gradually reheated like a warm cup of tea, allowing her bloodstream to defrost and once again course through her. She was again able to continue on with her day and reflect on Klaiton's life, appreciative that all 13 years were free from any medical complications. Cassian eventually returned home with a tiny rhubarb pie, since Klaiton didn't favor a lot of sweets nor eat too much in general (which ruled out the possibility of him having a faster metabolism, at least in Cassian's mind).

Because Cassian had been absent during the final stage of the Procedure and also due to the nature of his personality, he decided to make it an investigation to uncover which two enhancements his wife had chosen. This fascination of his had only developed in recent

years and Alessa had originally been certain it was a passing fad. Instead, it proved sustained, bringing more stress and irritation to Alessa than she could have predicted.

Cassian would ask himself questions, conduct relevant research, form a hypothesis, occasionally test it in an inconspicuous manner (or so he thought), and finally consolidate and analyze all the data. It was more a process of elimination than outright discovery and Alessa was thankful it took him serious amounts of time to form a strong belief as to the traits his child had inherited. Only on three specific occasions had he given in and asked Alessa, to which her response had been, “if you couldn’t be bothered to stay in the first place, I won’t be bothered to tell you now.”

It was at once a cruel yet captivating game according to Cassian. Alessa could tell all three times had casually infuriated him, but also made him respect her even more and had ultimately led to heated sexual encounters. The subtle tension proved oddly arousing and Alessa enjoyed the heightened power, fully using it to her advantage for as long as she could. However, within the last year, she had felt a tectonic shift, a sort of evolution in her reaction, not just to Cassian’s inquiries, but the idea of the Finalizing altogether.

“What’s he been up to today?” Cassian asked, pulling out sirloin cubes from the fridge.

“I already marinated them how Klaiton likes,” Alessa flagged. “And he’s been in his room for most of the day. We talked for a bit while we ate breakfast, but then he went back to video games.”

“He plays too much of those.”

“It’s summer vacation. Plus they’re a creative outlet for him.”

“They don’t help with his shyness.”

"He's fine. He has enough friends," Alessa grabbed a knife from the automatic sharpener and chopped up fresh broccoli florets.

Cassian watched his wife flawlessly slice the mini trees. "What 13 year old likes broccoli? There wasn't a 'likes to eat vegetables' or 'listens to parents' add-on was there?" he joked.

"Maybe," Alessa said quite harshly.

"Okay," Cassian drew out the word.

He was only semi-surprised by Alessa's hesitancy toward the topic. The Procedure was still unbelievable to her and she was unique in that regard. She was unique among most individuals he came in contact with and it was one of the many things he appreciated about her. However, he did simultaneously wish she could comprehend the wonder of the time they were living in. For someone so creatively advanced, it was odd to Cassian she wasn't as intrigued by modern innovations. Maybe having the creative gene was a discreet curse?

"Vegetables are all cut," Alessa finally spoke, going through her mental checklist.

"Meat should be ready to cook in an hour. I'd like it to marinate longer." She paused.

"Potatoes are also prepped."

"And pie is in the pantry," Cassian finished.

"Is the temp-regulating function working again?"

"Yes. House had the engineers come when we were at work yesterday."

"Did you get the game I asked you to buy?"

"Yes. It's wrapped." Cassian momentarily stood in front of the open refrigerator, basking in the brisk air. "House - remind us to take the meat out in 30 minutes. And let us know when it's at optimum temperature to cook."

"Reminder set...Will alert when it is time to remove the meat and when it has reduced to an optimum searing temperature."

"Never gets old." Cassian smiled. "Should we open the wine now?"

"It's Klaiton's day. We should do something with him," Alessa offered.

"If he's a normal 13-year-old, he doesn't want anything to do with us."

Alessa despised when Cassian questioned Klaiton's biological legitimacy and was fully aware of the irony.

"He is normal," Alessa stated.

"So, Pinot or Chardonnay?" He reached for the wine refrigerator, which House automatically unlocked as the handle scanned his grip. "Both are from Oregon it looks like - Umpqua Valley." He studied two sleek bottles. "Shame Napa's growing too hot. All the wines are seem super sweet and unaffordable now."

"I'm fine with water."

A pause. "These are nice bottles."

Alessa still wasn't in the most celebratory mood. The day's ups and downs proved exhausting and while she was happy to honor Klaiton's 13 years of life, the day simultaneously forced her to acknowledge there remained one more year until the Finalizing. Questions she wished to avoid were thus made more prominent: was Klaiton maturing correctly and advancing as he should be? Would his unique traits become more apparent in time? Would Cassian accept Klaiton for the decisions she had made?

Alessa had shortly learned after Klaiton's birth that "worry" was the sturdy bar securing her in place on the parental rollercoaster; it was unavoidable and necessary. Yet, time and time again, she tried to convince herself there was no need to panic, no need for such worry. That evening proved no outlier. *Klaiton was excellent*, she reminded herself. *Klaiton was perfect*. Cassian would see. He had to.

As if any unmemorable night, Klaiton mindlessly ate his serving of vegetables, potatoes, and sirloin. They all briefly chewed in silence, during which Alessa noticed Cassian sneaking looks at Klaiton, looks that were far too diagnostic.

"Ow, what?" Cassian mumbled with a grunt, rubbing his leg. Alessa only smiled at her son.

"All I want for my birthday is to know what my skills are," Klay nonchalantly mentioned.

"Amazing. Then I can return the gift."

"*And* that," he corrected his father.

"You don't know what it is yet. What if it sucks?"

"Then you're a bad dad," Klaiton replied.

“That’s fair.”

“You know we can’t tell you that, Klay,” Alessa added in. “It’s just one more year. You can wait.”

It was interesting to Alessa how the same interval of 365 days could stretch out over a millennium or appear right around the corner.

“Only 8,760 more hours to go, kid,” Cassian gave a huge smile.

Klaiton’s jaw dropped. “Why can’t you tell me? I won’t tell anyone,” He begged. “I promise. Please.”

“It’s the law. You know that.” Alessa could sense herself growing irritated.

“But *why* is it the law?” Klaiton demanded.

“They don’t want kids worrying about it,” Cassian answered.

“Well we wouldn’t worry if we knew.”

Cassian paused. “That is a fair —”

“You don’t need to be comparing yourself to others,” she added. “You’ll find out in no time.” Her stomach turned. “How was your dinner?”

“Fine.”

“Fine?” Cassian checked. “We bought your love with that steak.”

“*Cassian.*”

“Eat more. We have plenty.”

“I’m full.” Klaiton put down his fork.

“Well, when you’re ready and not full of steak - *or attitude* - there’s rhubarb pie...

From the bakery you like,” Cassian reminded him.

Klay eventually looked up from his mostly empty plate and said, "Okay." He then rose from his end of the table. "I'm going to my room."

Alessa and Cassian watched him somberly place his dishes in the airwasher, an unanimated robot going through expected rhythms.

"Let us know when you want dessert. We can open your present afterward," Cassian called to him. "I think you'll like it." He watched his son walk farther away, hoping he wasn't as disappointed as he seemed.

"Thanks," Klaiton finally acknowledged, shuffling up the stairs.

Alessa and Cassian were left stranded at the table. Outside the windows, the sun was setting with its various yellow and orange hues split across the sky like a display of color swatches or various citrus fruits. It was one of the remaining earthly phenomenon's not yet touched by technology. Alessa cherished it, proud of its all-natural shine regardless of the threat it could now pose.

"I think it's hard for him, not knowing his gifts. Most of his friends' skills are more apparent. Like what's his name, Asher?" Cassian brought up. He pressed his mouth to his wine glass and let the deep crimson color paint the edges of his lips.

Alessa spoke while studying the light flooding in, more focused on its orange tint than the displeasing topic arising. "Plenty of kids don't show signs until later. Some even after puberty, you know that best of all." She faced Cassian. "I'm tired of it always coming up."

She then stood and entered the open kitchen, also placing her dish in the airwasher. Cassian remained seated, twisting his head to follow Alessa's ever-changing trajectory as she paced around the kitchen island.

"You can't fault Klay for being curious," He stated.

"I'm not faulting him. I don't care if he asks questions."

"Then what's the issue?"

Alessa paused, leaning against the island. Her heart rate was steady but the muscles in the apex of her cheeks were starting to warm up. "I'm just frustrated that people are so," she paused again. "That they're constantly comparing their kids, all the time. Kids do it enough to one another, but they don't necessarily know better. We do; or well, we *should*."

"Alessa, it's in our nature to compare. And parents have been concerned with their kid's development since the beginning of human time."

"Don't you see that we're *beyond* concerned, Cassian? It's one thing to be worried and another to dictate."

Cassian twirled the wine glass in his hand. "What do you mean?"

Alessa stood up straight and pushed through her grievance. "It's like we're trying to regulate fate, or destiny, or some uncontrollable thing, and that we're upset when we can't, that there's something wrong when the world wins." She took in some air and decided to wipe up the spotless countertop.

Cassian let the moment sit. He could recognize when one of Alessa's anti-technology rants was charging up. He didn't blame her for having such tirades or experiencing a sort of industrial burnout because he felt it too; strings of days where he would prefer humans were reduced to their original, less evolved state, communicating through basic sounds and living on pure instinct, no diseases to cure or micro-chips to improve or concerns of how offspring would develop; instead a time back when guardians defended their children because of a signal emitted from the depths of their being, a native cue from the brain and

heart meant to protect, safeguard their child regardless of who they were or what they looked like, no gossip or drama to be had.

Unfortunately, this wasn't the age they lived in. It had long been outdated and Cassian recognized this, much more often than his partner. In some ways, he enjoyed Alessa's more harsh statements, a reminder of just how rare humans like her were, almost a relic he got to consistently encounter, like her immaculately packaged copy of *Little Women* or her great great grandfather's DSLR. She was one of a kind, he reminded himself, she was excellent, particularly in these frustrating moments where their views collided, which unfortunately seemed to be happening more frequently these days.

"If you feel that way, let's teach Klaiton to appreciate the natural things in life. The ones that do remain. We still have that power," Cassian targeted her worries.

Alessa tried to gauge how serious he was, knowing she would hold him to the statement. She reached for the opened bottle of Pinot Noir and poured herself a glass. The sounds of the two rims tapping echoed in the silent room while any of their previous words seeped into the walls. Eventually she raised her glass and said, "Here's to the natural then." Not only a toast, but a promise.

With careful precision, Cassian's hand grasped the stem of his glass and took a sip, lagging behind his wife's. He hoped the wine would allow her hesitations to wash away as smoothly as it slid down their throats so they could avoid any more debates that evening. He found himself trying to calculate her emotional trajectory throughout the course of evening, as if she were as predictable as bacteria, a single-celled organism. He hated his inability to halt such thoughts, the prescriptive side of him. But he also believed someone needed to do it; to plan, to prepare. At least his parents had believed so.

All the while, staring into Cassian's vivid green eyes, Alessa guessed he was still wondering what enhancements she had given their son. If he wasn't actively posing the question, it was certainly in the back of his mind, the same way knowing one is prone to a certain disease lingers, every insignificant pain or soreness prompting fear and suspense. She knew by the way he attentively tasted his wine and tightly held her gaze that calculated thoughts of the future loitered around because that's who Cassian was. He was a visionary, an innovator, a theorist. For the first time, she started to acknowledge just how different their ideologies were, how they existed in stark contrast to one another.

Thus, as the fruity red fluid settled in her stomach, Alessa had the obscure feeling of something approaching. She couldn't describe it, but whatever it was it was picking up speed; a train in the night, silently sliding toward them somewhere along the tracks, stuck somewhere along its course. Yet Alessa would remain still. She knew that no movement or advanced medicine could eradicate the nearing threat, that feeling growing more real inside of her. Alessa accepted that what was ultimately darting toward them was the inevitable and that it would test them both. Not only as a couple, but as humans.

Once the final "happy birthday" of the evening had been said, Klaiton enthusiastically tested his new video game. Alessa and Cassian then retired to their room

and after a rapid change into his usual silky sleepwear, Cassian effortlessly laid in bed, staring at the ceiling through his digital reading glasses. To a passerby, the scrolling text would be invisible and it would appear that Cassian was daydreaming. It would appear that he was at peace. Unlike Alessa, who was standing close by in their dimly lit bathroom.

Fresh from their usual timed showers, she snuck a look at Cassian half nestled under the sheets. He seemed to not have a care in the world and Alessa found herself mesmerized, unable to look away. She wondered how his brain decided what was worthy of focus and what was worth disregarding. She questioned how he could he so easily read himself to sleep and ignore the moral conflicts of the world they lived in. She attempted to convince herself it was envy she felt toward his ignorance, though the longer she observed her husband the more she felt that growing sense of apprehension. It hurt to admit this feeling wasn't Cassian's fault and he couldn't possibly know Alessa's full stance as every relationship had their secrets; but it also hurt to know it was entirely Cassian's fault for ignoring the obvious signs, clues, evidence that Alessa wasn't okay and hadn't been for a while, mostly because of a situation he had put her in many years ago.

Thirteen years Alessa had been living with the choices she made, sitting in her stomach like yeast undergoing fermentation, slowly releasing more and more carbon dioxide, each new year testing the strength of her organs to withstand the increased straining within. Admittedly, she should have told Cassian the few times he'd questioned what enhancements Klaiton had received. Yet she didn't. Because Alessa was still afraid of exactly the same thing she had been when Cassian abruptly left the Procedure: of making the wrong choice, that constant and overwhelming parental burden of failing one's family, which she knew was a fabricated concept but still couldn't escape. Thirteen years Alessa

had been living with frustration; frustration that was now mutating into resentment toward the man she loved and chose to create life with. This gradually developing feeling scared Alessa so she desperately tried to exist in a space between indifference and acceptance for Cassian's ways. But a balance could only be maintained for so long.

Feeling heat in her cheeks again, Alessa splashed cool water on her face. She looked in the bathroom mirror, momentarily turned to her side when she heard Cassian chuckle, then looked back in the mirror, this time at herself. *Just one more year. One more year, then it's done.* She observed her reflection, then gazed upon it, then stared at it until she was unable to turn away.

Beep, beep. *"Caution - water conservation. Master bathroom faucet has been running for more than 1 minute. Caution - water conservation,"* the VHA warned.

Alessa looked down at the running water and tapped the faucet head to stop the water from flowing.

"Thank you for doing your part to be a great citizen," the VHA exclaimed.

Alessa rolled her eyes and patted her face dry. She rubbed some expensive moisturizer on her body and let the cool sensation soothe her muscles, convincing herself it cured mental aches in addition to epidermal ones. Once refreshed, she stood in the bathroom doorway, the light automatically turning off behind her. She stood in place until Cassian noticed. Except that he never did. So Alessa waited longer, standing there, watching her husband until she finally uttered:

"He said you look at him like one of your experiments." It wasn't aggressive nor harsh, just true. A matter of fact.

Cassian gingerly angled his head in her direction, his back still cushioned against his pillow stack. Delicately he tapped the side of his thick quartz frames, halting the movement of his novel's text. He examined his wife through the words, racking his mental focus so the letters were now blurry instead of Alessa.

"How exactly am I supposed to look at Klaiton? Like I'm *uninterested* by him?"

Cassian wanted to kill the conversation like a dangerous mutation, long before it developed into a slow burning debate. She couldn't possibly still be stuck on the topic?

"Like he's *not* a resource for R&D."

"To be accurate, isn't he?" Cassian pointed out. "Aren't we all?"

"He is a boy, Cassian." Her tone was now severe, sharpened to a degree Cassian hadn't quite experienced before.

"Is everything okay at work? You're acting..." he paused, cautious of his words.

"Lately, it seems as if –"

"He is a fucking human being," Alessa assassinated his attempt at a diversion.

"Obviously, Alessa. But we did create him in a lab. Like our parents did and theirs before them. And *12 billion* other adults."

She was stunned. It was a fact, everything he was saying. But to use it as an excuse for alienating behavior was alarming to her. She moved toward the closet to change into her pajamas while Cassian squeezed the right temple of his eyewear, causing the book to fade away in the lenses. He carefully set them on the bedside table and carefully took a breath and carefully began to speak.

"I don't see any harm in admitting the facts, Alessa. It's not like we did this in a vacuum separate from the rest of the world. There's no condemnation in it. You don't need to be offended over it."

"It's less the Procedure that makes me uncomfortable Cassian. It's more so referring to our son as an 'experiment' that offends me."

"Children, by definition, *are* experiments," he pointed out, then paused. "That hasn't changed since the beginning of time. They are tests, every one of them, whether you look at it scientifically, emotionally, socially - it does not matter." He took a breath.

"Whether or not that's true, you don't have to make him *feel* like a test." Alessa walked out of the closet fully clothed and stood at the foot of the bed. "Sometimes you're so focused on the final outcome that you can't enjoy who he is in the moment. The progress he *has* made."

"What progress exactly?" A short breath left his lips. He saw Alessa's glare and momentarily held both palms up in peace. "Alessa, I understand you have an old soul or whatever you want to call it, it's one of the things I respect about you. But I'm tired of being chastised because I don't. And I'm honestly irritated at having guilt put on me for approaching the subject how *everyone else* does." He let the words percolate in the space between them. "I'm not saying you should change what you believe; just try to respect how I see things more...how the world sees them."

"Don't assume I'm the only outlier. I guarantee there are other people who feel the same way, they just don't want to speak up."

"Then why don't *you* speak up? Why don't you do something if it's all so offensive to you?"

Her esophagus suddenly tightened and her eye muscles strained. It took her a moment to be able to speak. "Your curiosity in everything new is one of the things I respect most about you." Then she quietly added, "At least it was. I'm not so sure anymore." The add-on left the room eerie and cold, like selecting the add-ons for her own son.

"I could say the same about your lack of curiosity...in everything new." There was silent tension until Cassian coolly said, "This is how we live now."

"Well why can't *we* be a little different? It's unpopular but it isn't a crime –"

"Neither is the way we conceived him." Cassian momentarily faced the ceiling and closed his eyes with a sustained inhale, which he then shot back out. "Scientifically, we're meant to advance forward, not regress." He began to prep his pillows for the night in the precise manner he always did. Three quick pats.

"I fully agree. I guess we just differ on the definition of 'progress.' On what the future should look like."

"Haven't we always?"

"Yeah. I guess it just matters more now."

"So this argument is about the future?"

Alessa grinned. "And the past, Cassian."

"It's just as dangerous to romanticize the past as it is the future, Alessa."

"I know it is...I know." She walked to the bedroom window overlooking the driveway. She could make out faint lines of the palm trees lining their perfect California street. Paradise.

"Would you rather we had left his health to chance? Risked diseases and infections? Or have him feel inadequate if he didn't have a certain body type or look? Do you realize

how much youth depression rates dropped since its advent?" Cassian briefly waited for a response. "There are reasons the Procedure was invented; *why* the entire population voted on it in the first place."

Alessa was quiet. Of course she didn't want any of those things for Klaiton. She also decided not to point out that even with perfect bodies or brains, humans could still feel inadequate and, as Klaiton had done earlier, yearn for other skills, regardless what the Depression rates were.

"What if we had given birth to him without labs, how would you have felt?"

There was a vast silence from Cassian as if she had posed the question to the abyss beyond the glass window pane she stared through. Alessa waited and waited. Eventually, she turned around to see Cassian laying on his side, facing away from her. A clear desire to no longer argue, she too eventually climbed onto her side of the bed.

Upright, she looked to her husband, and though they were mere inches from one another it felt like miles, entire interstates between them. He was in Malibu, she was downtown. They were each living in their own temporary worlds. Worlds that were threatening to become permanently disjointed with each passing second.

"Lights to nighttime mode. Set for 7:00am wake up." Alessa barely said the words.

"Morning alarm set for 7am PST. Goodnight, Mrs. Roy," the walls of their room spoke as it dipped into darkness.

Alessa thought of the old saying, "if these walls could talk," and how it had waned out of existence in her lifetime since now their walls could in fact talk. She hoped theirs would never share the secrets held within them, the blasphemy she spoke, challenging science's integrity. Would these walls protect them in the end, she wondered? Walls were meant to

guard, to keep dangers out. But she also understood they could force things to be kept in. Things that if kept hidden for long enough could develop into much more threatening ideas, actions, sentiments.

Unsurprisingly, Alessa found herself once again worried as she drifted off to sleep. However, in a slight change, her fear was now accompanied by a seed of grief. Did she truly not know the man she had married? Had she not once predicted this sort of dissonance due to their opposing philosophical views? Would Klaiton, through not fault of his own, be the thing that destroys them?

Cassian did have a point that children were tests. But not as to the science of it all or the Procedure. The true test they evoked was between the adults, assessing the highest achievable levels of tension before they snapped like rubber bands. It was a test of their elasticity, an examination of each other's ideals, what they valued most and were or were not willing to change. Children were a test of compromise, a test of character, and there was no way to prepare for the moment it was finally in front of you.

Alessa had never once been directly responsible for the outcome of another soul. But now that she was, she could confidently say every one of her actions weighed more on her than ever before. It proved debilitating. Every day she could feel her mind and body giving into the fatigue a little more. Things she may have once been able to let go of were now extreme nuisances in her life, pulling at her limbs until they tore, nagging at her until she couldn't stay quiet. With the birth of Klaiton, the future had indeed become much more real, more heavy, more worrisome. Because not only was her child her future, but the future was her child, and Alessa wanted nothing but the best for both of them. She hoped Cassian would one day understand that this had always been the case.

—

It started as a pleasant Friday night in Bel Air with the women gathered around Astra's pool for one of their intermittent weekend soirées. All the mothers enjoyed the golden fleece of light the sun draped around their bodies, awarding them a sleek shine for a tolerable second. Luna did some stretches while Camila spoke about her renewable energy non-profit and the struggle of sustaining not just the environment, but the funds to do so.

"I mean, we're required to wear fucking sunglasses at certain hours of the day. *Unflattering* ones, I will add."

"I'm sure they can take some money from education and put it toward better designs," Luna stretched her hands to her toes.

"Government never has their priorities straight," Astra added.

"The frames aside," Camila barreled on, "the fact we only have one type of sunscreen that's scientifically strong enough should be a big sign. Not to mention it comes at an extortionate price."

"It is quite expensive," Luna supported. "At least you don't need as much as the rest of us."

"It's just ironic that we're begging for funds for solar power, the one thing we have deadly amounts of."

“Doesn’t California lead the nation in solar power?” Luna questioned.

“I’m talking about the *entire* country. So many states could be doing better.” Camila let out a sharp breath and fanned herself with her hand.

“Renewable energy is vital,” Astra affirmed. “But it’s too nice an evening to be stressed about burning alive or work. Big buzzkill.” Astra grabbed her nearby Spritz Veneziano and raised the glass. “Here’s a toast to being toast, but *more so*, to the weekend.” They all took a refreshing sip of their drinks and let the golden afternoon wash over them along with the surrounding hills. “Deteriorating planet aside, it is insufferable today,” Astra shared. “I should extend the awning.”

“I’m burning alive,” Luna exclaimed. “Well, just a tad.”

“House, extend the western awning half way.”

“Yes, Astra. Extending the western protective awning to 50%.”

The striped awning gradually opened and so kindly offered the women shade. Astra sipped more of her cocktail as Camila checked her watch for any final emails while Luna finished up some basic yoga poses. Alessa, meanwhile, looked at her peers and then at the vibrant orange drink in her hand and then at the mostly dry desert hills stretching into the distance.

She had debated whether to show up that evening. Two days prior she’d had the argument with Cassian and despite being relatively mellow, it had cut deep and she simply wasn’t in a mood to socialize. Although, Alessa knew the displeasing feelings trailing her were too strong to organically fade away, so in the end she hoped the night might provide her with a distraction until she could re-approach any issues with Cassian in a respectable and well thought out manner. She would finally explain her thinking, step-by-step, in a clear

and concise format. At least that's what Alessa told herself, knowing she tended to go with her gut and was also aware she was in half a trance positioned under the afternoon shade.

Lying by the pool and knowing Klaiton was at a friend's house for the evening, Alessa found herself wanting to enter that drowsy state induced by the perfect amount of alcohol; those moments where despite the subtle waviness and confusion, the world was aligned and one's confidence soared. Awaiting that divine moment, they all sat and sipped in silence as the sun smoothly descended in the sky. They relaxed on vivid, temperature-regulating pool chairs with their required sleek black sunglasses, all looking like an advertisement for Los Angeles living. Occasionally, Alessa would peek at the palm trees piercing the sky and find harmony in their lush presence, until she remembered they too weren't originally native to the area, implanted by human interference. When these thoughts surfaced, she closed her eyes and told herself to relax. She despised how recent events had started to prod at her, leaving tiny markings, reminders of what had occurred and the things that were still left to say.

"Okay, I'm quite hot now," Astra blurted from the shade. "Shall we go to the sky room?"

"I wouldn't complain if we did," Luna sheepishly said. "If others don't mind of course." She looked to them all.

"Someone could have used a little UV resistance," Camila added, not having dropped a sweat. She examined her arms with elegance. "I know you wouldn't think so, but it's actually a blessing being bronze and beautiful." Her eyes suddenly lit up. "That would actually be a great title for my autobiography."

“Don’t you need to contribute something to society to have an autobiography?” Astra asked. “Like anything, in any way?”

“Speaking of *anyway*, that title’s a little too self-promotional for my tastes,” Camila admitted. “What else starts with a ‘b’?”

“I can think of a word.”

Alessa had to smile at Astra’s joke.

“You can call me whatever the fuck you want so long as it sells. All about the cash flow, ladies.”

“Don’t you head up one of the largest non-profits in the nation?” Luna checked.

Camila swatted her hand in the air. “There’s never enough money.”

“Here, here,” Astra confirmed.

Alessa then took a glance at Astra’s esteemed patio sprouting with greenery. A majority of the plants were indeed fake, incredibly crafted imitations people paid good money for these days. Nonetheless, the patio was beautifully green and one could ignore the trick of nature after some time (or a certain amount of drinks). Alessa was about to feel one of the synthetic leaves when Astra made the first signs of movement.

“Let’s go upstairs. I’ll prep more spritzes and have Renan start dinner.”

She stood up and the rest followed. Alessa dragged slightly behind, already missing her spot under the required shade beneath the real and unbearably hot sky.

“How are the spritzes?” Astra snuck behind to ask Alessa as they entered the gorgeous 21st century home. “I know you’ll tell me the truth,” she whispered.

The comment inflicted an odd pain inside Alessa. “They’re great. Maybe try adding some peach syrup? Not too much.” Cassian had originally taught Alessa that.

Astra's eyes lit up like stars themselves. "You're *so* right. See, I need you around. You must come more often - I mean it." She bounced away, peppy and polished as usual.

Alessa was closest to Astra and genuinely considered her a friend. Of everyone Alessa interacted with weekly, Astra was perhaps the most aligned in perspectives. It felt nice to know that someone else on the planet didn't consider Alessa totally alien. Alessa previously wondered if Astra's 'advanced interpersonal relationships' enhancement was the reason they were close and if Astra would truly like her had she not received the add-on. But with time, Alessa learned it was better not to question it and simply accept the fact she had a friend. Perhaps Astra's company was another reason Alessa joined them that evening; needing to be reminded that someone else saw the world how she did, even in the slightest.

Alessa knew that Camila wasn't extremely fond of her, despite her son being one of Klaiton's closest friends. So, Alessa and Camila were careful not to get too close and balanced their proximity for fear their clashing personalities would throw off the dominance hierarchy within their population. Camila and Luna both knew Astra enjoyed Alessa's company and because they congregated at Astra's house most, Camila and Luna wouldn't mess with the order of things, if only for fear of losing access to Astra's stunning patio and sky room. Alessa had both of a similar beauty and scale but chose to keep the fact private to all except Astra.

"Go on up," Astra instinctively pointed though the women knew their way. "I'll only be a moment."

"Tell Renan we say hi," Camila smiled.

"Always do," Astra grinned.

"Why doesn't he ever join us?" Luna offered.

“He gets anxious around groups. More shy than people assume.”

“Is it because he’s so attractive?” Camila teased.

“It’s probably hard for him to interact with normal people,” Luna added.

“Upstairs, now,” Astra pointed again as if in trouble. She then winked and disappeared around a corner as the rest of them hiked upstairs.

Astra’s sky room was a classic dome shape, the original format; though now they were becoming more customizable to fit varying structural shapes and sizes. The air was humid within and perfectly controlled for the authentic vibrant greens growing in all corners. Plants even sprouted behind the bar where Alessa, Camila, and Luna all took a stool and waited for Astra to return with refills.

“Renan takes care of all these plants by himself, can you believe that?” Camila observed the abundance of vegetation. Admittedly, it was one of the most beautiful greenhouse style rooms Alessa had seen and was always blown away by the sight.

“He doesn’t have the automatic irrigators?” Luna was shocked. “The VHA’s control them and everything.” She looked around, overwhelmed. “It seriously would save him time. We got them, and we have like two plants,” Luna revealed. “Although we’re going to get more. *Soon*,” Luna overstated. “Very soon.”

Plants were a sign of wealth and Alessa found humor in Luna’s attempt to cover up her mistake. “He might just enjoy watering them himself,” Alessa tenderly posed the opinion; an extremely unpopular one based on the women’s dramatic faces. Astra’s voice then echoed from downstairs:

“Set sky room transparency to 99%”

“*Confirmed, Astra. Setting transparency to 99% now*,” her VHA replied.

Gradually, the electronic dome above them transformed from its usual ceiling pattern into what appeared a thin glass panel barely separating them from the outside. Alessa knew the double-glass was similar to the style used in greenhouses to protect against harmful UV rays. It was the same glass Cassian installed throughout their own home and would soon be a federal requirement.

Astra then appeared with her full drink tray and gracefully set it on the bar-top. They all grabbed a glass like eager college students.

“Yum. Great call on adding the peach flavor,” Luna tasted.

Astra snuck Alessa a look of approval.

“These are fucking lethal,” Camila said between several quick sips.

“Not as lethal as you’ll be after one more,” Astra pointed out.

“Oh when was the last time I was messy?”

“April.”

Silence. Camila pulled the rim ever so slightly away from her lips “I don’t recall that.”

“Exactly,” Astra said.

“It was a long night,” Luna uttered, shell shocked.

“What are these nights for if not to let loose and get a little sloppy?” Camila had another sip.

“I thought they were about friends catching up,” Luna quietly mentioned.

“Well I’m clearly not getting that memo,” Camila set her glass down. “And you know, it’s not nice to make fun of an alcoholic. It can actually be an inciting factor.”

“Camila, you shouldn’t compare yourself to an alcoholic,” Astra seriously warned.

“They don’t deserve that. Not to mention, there’s still hope for them.”

Alessa had to smile at Astra's retort.

"I don't really think we should joke about this anymore," Luna slid in. "It's a sensitive
_."

"Great, can't even do parenthood - I mean alcoholism - right," Camila retorted.

After Astra and Luna's giggles faded away, there was a moment where all that was heard was the ice clinking in their glasses, gently chiming with each tiny movement of their wrists, a twinkling almost. Having been raised in the South, it was a sound Alessa associated with summer. She thought of glasses of black iced tea on the veranda, sometimes sweet, her family all in their respective rattan chairs beside one another, smiling and relishing in the blanket of Georgia heat, back when it was less harmful to do so.

Alessa's mouth formed a tiny smile at the conglomerated memories playing in her head. She then took a large sip of her cocktail because she sensed the conversation was about to switch. For someone so in touch with her gut, Alessa was shocked she hadn't been given any sort of 'intuitive' enhancement.

"They really grow into their own, don't they?" Luna reflected while observing the developing foliage around them.

"They do," Alessa felt the need to contribute another word or two.

"I can't believe they'll be Finalized next year," Astra reminded them.

"Came faster than when I saw Renan in his apron."

"So that's what the shrieking noise was," Astra responded to Camila's banter.

In case anyone couldn't tell upon first meeting, Camila had enhanced humor. Alessa truly believed it should be taken off the approved list.

"Leave poor Renin alone," Luna jumped in. "He doesn't deserve this."

"Compliments?" Camila asked.

"Well...I guess they are. It just felt a little, I don't know, abusive? No, that's not right."

"Abuse is healthy for a chef of his caliber," Camila stated.

"Except he doesn't have an ego," Astra revealed. "Like at all. I honestly wished he would. He just cooks because he loves making meals for others."

"I genuinely don't know how you live with such a horrid man," Camila rested a palm on Astra's shoulder. "Blink thrice if you need help."

"As if the VHA's would allow any sort of abuse" Astra said. "They're always watching."

"We shouldn't joke about this," Luna cut in. "Such a serious topic that so many people suffer from. Let's talk about something more pleasing."

"More than abuse?" Camila asked.

Luna clearly had heightened levels of sympathy.

"How's Isla doing?" Astra changed the topic, addressing Luna.

"She's wonderful. So observant - we can't sneak anything by her. Didn't really think of that when we chose it though."

"It's impossible to know the long-term affect of every choice," Astra admitted. "Half your brain escapes just sitting in those rooms. Whole moment is a blur to me now."

"Her observant behavior will be very useful," Camila said. "Theo wanted Asher to be some super athlete."

"And that he is," Astra supported. "Look how many games the school has won because of his help. Longest winning streak in our school's history."

"Unfortunately, knowing how to kick soccer balls won't help Asher's prospects. Honestly, I'd like to kick Theo's fucking balls for the idea."

"We don't need to kick anyone's balls," Luna interjected.

"Remind me that when college applications are due," Camila downed the rest of her spritz. "Love the kid –"

"Asher is amazing, *really*."

"Thanks, Luna," Camila noted. "But I don't know what he's going to do later on. It worries me."

"He'll become a professional player of course. No doubt he will. He developed his enhancements much earlier than most, which only means more years of practice. Teams will be begging for him to be drafted by the time he's 18." Astra was big into sports, although she kept the lingo to a minimum around the rest of them.

"Didn't you also give him the add-on to work well in teams? I'm sure that can carry over to other careers," Luna noted.

"Well so far he hasn't learned how to apply it to an educational setting. Or any setting outside of screaming across a plot of grass."

"A field," Astra corrected.

"Yes. Yay sporting. Go sports," Camila enthused. Everyone had to smile.

"It'll all work out," Astra soothed all temperatures. "They're 13. They still have their own natural skills to develop. The ones we *didn't* choose, remember." She temporarily looked to the reddening sky. "Watch this," she prepared them. "Set sky room to 75% transparency and patchwork pattern."

"Confirmed, Astra. Patchwork pattern has been initiated."

Everyone watched as the dome shifted to a medley of tiny hexagons simulating a mosaic. At an increased opacity, the exterior sunset was now viewed as if through a frosted,

stained-glass window, the dome itself a piece of art above them, their own little Sistine Chapel. In that moment, Alessa appreciated the technology, especially for the momentary deviation from the conversation.

“How’s Stellan doing?” Luna now asked Astra.

Alessa wanted Klaiton to be friends with Stellan, but for the time being they remained only acquaintances.

“He’s well,” she said.

“I heard his skills just began to show,” Camila brought up.

Astra was a bit tentative. “Yes, about last month.”

“Were you worried? I’d be terrified,” Camila said.

“I’d be a little nervous too,” Luna admitted.

“Oh, no. I wouldn’t say we were scared. Many children are late bloomers. We found it a bit unique of course, but we knew he would develop just fine in the end.” Astra put on a smile. “It was a bit funny, over the course of a week or two he suddenly had an interest in learning Spanish and Mandarin. And he’s already doing quite well.”

“That’s a wonderful skill,” Alessa bolstered her friend’s choice.

“Renan wanted us to be able to go on food tours together some day, all around different regions of the world. So, why not give Stellan an ability to speak the languages too. I certainly wish I could.”

“Well I’m glad there are no more questions floating about,” Luna was thrilled. “I sort of wish we had made Isla a linguist.”

“I’m telling you, Stellan is going to be having sex constantly.”

“Camila,” Astra was embarrassed.

“What with all the love languages he’ll be speaking,” she continued.

“He’s never going to have sex. I won’t allow it,” Astra declared with only a hint of sarcasm in her statement.

“What a disservice to the human gene pool,” Camila responded. “You gave him the gift, that’s all I’m saying. Don’t blame him when he’s drowning in it.”

“Oh my god.” Astra could only *slightly* disbelieve Camila’s train of thought.

“And what about Klaiton?” Luna tossed the focus to Alessa.

She froze, not wanting to be the subject of jokes nor any sort of concerns, especially not that evening. Alessa set her empty glass on the bar and prepared.

“He’s great. We just celebrated his 13th birthday two days ago.”

“How fun. No class party?” Astra genuinely questioned.

“Klay wasn’t interested this year. But you know him, well all of us; we’re the calm ones.”

“Asher says he hasn’t shown any signs yet?” Camila raised the concern. “I hear it’s a hot topic at school.”

“It’s what?”

There was a moment of silence. Alessa was genuinely shocked. Even Camila noticed a change in pressure. “Apparently...kids are guessing which ones he has...Placing bets and such.”

“I wasn’t aware.” Alessa was ashamed at herself.

The space went still. Alessa almost felt offended, but she didn’t know toward whom exactly. *Did Klay know about this? Was that why he hadn’t wanted a party?*

“But those could totally be rumors,” Camila threw in.

“And it’s a little exciting too, right?” Luna desperately tried to lend some support. “Seeing what others are thinking. The little signs he might show now and then. Almost like a little game.”

Alessa was cognizant the women weren’t intending to elicit any hostile response. They were purely a few moms innocently discussing their children. It was to be expected. So forced herself to remain calm, just managing to say:

“I’ll ask Klay about it.”

“Don’t worry. There’s still time for his enhancements to kick in,” Luna said.

“I’m not worried.”

“No cues at all though?” Camila double checked.

Alessa had the desire to roll her eyes like an irritated teen. “He has perfect vision. But the mental component hasn’t kicked in yet, no.”

“It might be worth a checkup. Just in case,” Camila suggested.

She wanted the talk of her son’s development to be obliterated. In fact, Alessa wanted the whole matter itself to go extinct, never to be heard of nor seen again, forever exterminated with zero chance of survival. Klaiton shouldn’t have to worry about these superficial things nor have others placing him under a microscope for harsh review. He had enough of it from his father.

“I appreciate the concern,” Alessa was capable of saying, “but I don’t need advice on how to raise my son. I know him better than anyone —“

“Even Cassian? Isn’t he a world renowned scientist?” Camila posed it as a question though it was an affirmation.

“Camila,” Astra cautioned.

“Klaiton is a marvelous kid who’s very kind. No use fretting over the subject,” Luna intercepted.

“I know my kid,” Alessa affirmed in a sharper tone.

“Don’t we all though? Isn’t that the point of The Procedure?” Camila had her last word.

“Quit while you’re ahead, Camila,” Astra said as respectfully as she could, trying to remain neutral.

Above them, the sky had darkened and was reaching the latter end of its twilight blue gradient. Alessa was familiar with the color; not only from her years of painting and trying to perfect the blend, but also because it seemed to define her life throughout the last few months. She felt herself falling like the sun behind the Hills.

“Thank you for the drinks, Astra,” Alessa said. “But I do have to go.”

“Oh, please stay. Renan has such a tasty meal planned. You’ll love –“

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t stay too long anyway.”

Astra started to follow Alessa out. At the top of the stairs she turned to the bar to say, “The peach syrup was Alessa’s tip by the way.” Astra stared at the ladies, but mostly Camila. “I’ll be back,” she finished.

“You maybe didn’t have to push so much,” Alessa heard Luna say while she cascaded down the stairs. “But I get you’re worried for him.”

The front door automatically slid open for Alessa. She stopped to face Astra behind her.

“I wish you didn’t have to leave. But I apologize, Camila can be a bit aggressive sometimes.”

“You don’t need to apologize,” Alessa had the urge to cry, but held it together.

Astra reached out and gave her a hug. “Klay is a wonderful young boy. Don’t listen to others. I’ll be sure Stellan isn’t participating in any of those bets or whatever foolishness is going on.”

“Thank you. I just hate him feeling like,” Alessa had to stop. “Like an outsider or like he’s a failure when he hasn’t even done anything yet.” She felt her eyes dampening.

“We’ll do another night with just the two of us. I promise,” Astra was concerned. “And Klaiton is *not* a failure.”

“There’s a lot going on right now. I don’t mean to disturb –“

“I’ll let the ladies know. Don’t worry. Where’s your car?”

“It’s on the way.”

Astra eventually returned inside as Alessa walked down the inclined street. She ordered Car to pick her up a few houses down, to avoid standing in view of the other mothers who she caught peeking down from the sky room.

Tears eventually fell for her son. So much guilt and anguish and fury and bewilderment all compacted into minuscule droplets. This amount of emotion shouldn’t be capable of fitting into such tiny, ephemeral beads, Alessa thought. Rather, they should solidify and form a permanent necklace draped over her clavicles, an enduring symbol of the persistent pain she felt. At least she could find a hint of comfort in knowing just how real they were; that her love for her son was so true that her body developed physical representations of that love; biological responses in the form of salty tears, the intangible turned tangible.

Climbing into the lounge of her vehicle as it automatically navigated home, Alessa had too many thoughts entering her mind. She despised how much she thought about things, how she was always overthinking - imagining, creating utopian realities in her head. She was beginning to believe the creativity enhancement was a curse. Maybe she would be a better parent if she didn't question as much, if she just accepted things for how they were, if she simply moved on? At least there was one thing she didn't need to question: that Klaiton was pure. She was his mother after all and she knew the absolute truth.

The moment Alessa exited the vehicle, the walkway lights flicked on, illuminating the pathway. The light in the kitchen was on and the windows were half tinted, which meant Cassian was still up, roaming the lands. She scanned the street for signs of life but was faced with a quaint quietness that stretched far down the road in either direction. Not a single movement in the darkness, until her sneakers stomped against the tiles leading to the front door.

Aware of the extremely radioactive state she was in, Alessa knew it best to head directly to the bedroom and turn in for the night, avoiding any harmful contact with another soul, not wanting her nuclear instability to transmit to her nuclear family any more than it would by basic proximity. Within just a few weeks she had become a rapidly decaying substance, heading toward her first half-life, the first noticeable reduction of who she was. Taking a breath, Alessa finally entered as the front door whooshed open.

"Welcome back, Mrs. Roy. Did you have a good evening?" House asked.

Sneakers still on, she moved onward, accepting her mission to curtail all human interaction.

"Alessa," Cassian's voice snuck through the hallway, innocently finding its way toward her like a lost child.

After halting for a fraction of a second, Alessa continued toward the stairway.

"Alessa?" He repeated.

"I'm going to sleep," she called out, still moving swiftly despite her fragile and decomposed state. She heard footsteps approaching and her heart pounded in rhythm with each new one heard, deep and strong like a bass drum; a wartime cue. She picked up her pace and made it up a few of the stairs when the extra footsteps ceased behind her. Idle, she slowly twisted her head to see Cassian standing there, waiting.

"Were you at Astra's?"

"Yes." She took one step up.

"Camila was there, wasn't she?" The last person Alessa wanted to talk about. "You always have this distant mood after you see her."

"It was fine. She was fine. I'm tired."

She took two more steps. Cassian remained at the bottom of the stairway, gazing up at Alessa. He wanted to say something, but Alessa was aiming to reach the bedroom before he had the chance.

"We need to discuss things, Alessa," Cassian said.

"Cassian, I said I'm tired. Wait until tomorrow." She was most of the way up, most of the way to freedom.

“It can’t.”

She froze, only a few steps before the second floor landing. His tone was casually jagged, not too harsh to be condescending but severe enough to establish she wouldn’t escape the situation. She looked down at her husband from her elevated standpoint.

“This is not the best time.”

“Are you okay? What happened tonight?” he tried some gentle foreplay before diving into his real focus.

“What is so absolutely urgent, Cassian,” she demanded. “I’m exhausted.”

Alessa could already feel it was difficult to speak. Not necessarily out of residual sadness for Klaiton, but out of rage, confusion, shame.

“My colleagues and I were talking today and they brought up some valid points.” He withheld all the details, testing the waters, forming an initial hypothesis as to his wife’s condition.

“Talking about what, exactly?” Her gut clenched tight. Alessa wanted him to both spit it out and say nothing at all.

“Our kids. And their progress,” he carefully released the last word, mindful that it would elicit some undesired response. As it did.

She had the urge to shout as loudly as she possibly could. Not directly at Cassian, just at the world. She wanted nothing more than to tilt her head back and let out a piercing bellow that soared as high as the exosphere.

“Now *you’re* talking about him behind his back? That’s perfect.”

“What parent doesn’t talk about their kid? And who else is talking –”

“You’re discussing private information at work?” Her stare was fiery.

“They’re scientists – they can help,” he defended.

“*Help?*” Alessa descended some steps with absolute purpose. “He needs ‘*help*’ now? You know Stellan only started reacting to his enhancements last month. Speaking three languages now. *Three.*”

Cassian stood at the foot of the stairs and Alessa somewhere near the middle, elevated, reigning over him. She was queen of the house then and she would take any course of action to guard her son, especially if the threat came from within the walls. Her sense of ferocity and authority now rivaled that of historic monarchs. Cassian sensed this shift in power and tried to maintain control of it. “Alessa, I’m serious this time. You *need* to tell me what his two enhancements are.”

“That’s an opinion, not a fact. I don’t need to do anything.”

“For fuck’s sake, Alessa,” Cassian briefly hollered, composing himself immediately after. “Can’t you just understand I’m worried about him? It’s normal to be concerned about your child’s development.”

Once again, Alessa turned to go upstairs. “I’m done dealing with –”

“You can’t walk away from this –”

“Oh, like you did?” She whipped around. “If it wasn’t important enough for you to stay then, it can’t possibly be now. You’ll have to wait until next year like Klaiton.” Cassian began to pace. “Maybe if you cared as much about him as your work –”

“All my work is because of him!” Cassian cut in, his voice predatory. “I don’t spend my days overseeing the endless library of DNA – searching through never-ending letters for possible outliers or new viruses or immunodeficiency’s in the human genome - because it’s *fun.* It’s exhausting and mind-numbing most of the time. But I do it so that children – so

that *Klaiton* – can be born safely. So parents can go through the Procedure and have an advanced, disease-free child and know they'll most likely live a full life. My whole goddamn career is because of kids, for kids, for the fucking future. So don't say I don't care about him."

She wasn't in the headspace to feel moved by his monologue, though she did soften some of the edge in her tone. "You left me to make a life altering decision by myself, Cassian. When I was already hesitant and scared."

The added tenderness in her inflections only made Cassian angrier. He felt she was trying to manipulate him. "If I remember correctly, you took control before I left."

A second of hesitation. "We had a time limit. I had to speed through parts, you know that."

"But you never said a word. Not a single word to stop."

Silence now reigned over both of them. His words bore into her like elongated needles, at once stinging and crushing her muscles with its injection. Her limbs were suddenly burdensome, barely capable of movement.

"This conversation is over," she announced.

"Alessa, if you don't tell me I swear I will –"

"What will you do, Cassian? Tell me. I would love to hear your elaborate and thought out plan."

"I'm going to the hospital; to get answers."

He pivoted and moved away. Alessa's heart violently trembled as she managed to follow in pursuit. He wouldn't.

"It's kept confidential," she reminded him.

He spun around near the entryway, the nearby kitchen lights casting flame-like highlights and shadows all over his face. "I cured cancer. They'll give me exactly what I want."

"Almost," Alessa corrected him. His eyes bore through her the way they did when she was correct. The front door shot open as Cassian approached it.

"See you soon, Mr. –"

"Shut the fuck up," he silenced House while storming out.

Alessa sprinted to the exterior walkway, the automatic solar lights once again jumping to attention. The neighborhood was enjoying its tranquility, though Alessa sensed it was about to be rudely interrupted. She would hold steady and not retreat from her values. Not then. Something within her wouldn't allow it.

"Cassian, do not go to that clinic." Alessa was mostly confident the clinic would not and could not betray her confidentiality agreement.

"I have a right to know if my child is okay."

"You're concerned with his skills, not *him*."

"His skills are who he is," Cassian declared. "Jesus Christ, they are *literally* his DNA. You should know, you were there," His voice trailed down the street. Their walls no longer had to talk for everyone to uncover the true tension that was behind them.

Several of their close neighbors stepped out to investigate the sounds, the drama. Alessa always tried to steer clear of it, yet found herself at the eye of it.

"Alessa, have some reason. I can't know if he's developing correctly if I don't know what he's supposed to be developing. No wonder I assume there's something wrong with him."

“Perfect vision is one of them. There, are you happy now?”

“We both know you wouldn’t pick that. It’s a waste.”

“There’s nothing wrong with Klaiton because he isn’t an Olympian already or can’t solve transcendental functions or hasn’t started some fucking art movement at the age of 13. *Thirteen*. Do you not see how abnormal that should be?”

“Don’t you see how weird it is NOT to be able to?” he easily countered.

Alessa continued to burn up as her core disintegrated, emitting ionizing radiation. She was glowing with invisible fury, not helped by the fact their show had invited a decent audience that now stretched houses down. Everyone gathered on their doorsteps, afraid to say anything, staring like ridiculous testing proctors.

“Should Car direct Mr. and Mrs. Roy to the nearest couple’s therapist?” It spoke.

“Car should keep its mouth shut,” Cassian yelled at the object. He stepped away from the vehicle and paced toward the road, unsure where to direct his accruing anger. As he looked up, there wasn’t a star in the sky.

“I’m going back inside, Cassian. I’m finished making a scene.”

“You don’t believe me,” he let out a disparaging laugh. “Do you genuinely think I won’t find a way to get answers, right now?”

Alessa could feel a timer ticking inside of her. They were running out of energy and she was exhausting her resources. Air began to disband itself from Alessa no matter how much she pleaded for it to stay. With the oxygen that did remain, she wanted to scream at every person around her, yelling to watch the altercation from their windows like regular people. Alessa yearned to scream or cry or punch something but knew she couldn’t waste the fuel to do so, already running low off years of reserves.

"I'll call and say that I don't want the records shared. And I'll be sure to use your esteemed name. I'm sure they'll be very attentive to my wishes then." She gave a displeased grin.

"He's underdeveloped, isn't he?" Alessa's stomach twitched. Cassian seemed to have an epiphany before her eyes. He glared at her with an aura of pure disbelief. "You know he is and that's why you're not telling me. You're hiding that he's lagging—"

"Don't ever accuse me of such a thing," Alessa went on the offensive again. She felt the timer - tick tick tick.

"It explains everything. Your hesitancy. Your guilt." The clock counted down - *ten, nine, eight, seven...* "It's the only logical —"

"Cassian, stop talking *now*."

Six, five, four...

"He can't do sports. He's *okay* at school. He hasn't shown any great interests," he ran through the 123 options in his head.

Three...

"He is a regular kid, Cassian," she affirmed. "Stop this."

"*Advanced* is regular!" he belted. "I just want him to do well, to get ahead."

"Don't pull that crap. You want him to be a fucking trophy."

Two...

"I WANT HIM TO BE *SOMETHING*," he screamed out. All his internal rage, embarrassment, and honesty violently splattered all over the block. "Because from what I've seen so far, he can't do a single damn thing."

One.

“Because he has no enhancements!” Alessa imploded, matching his level of madness. Her voice carried all the way into the depths of the nearby valley, sitting in empty space, waiting. There were audible gasps from the crowd. A few people returned inside when Alessa threw daggers at their foreheads with her gaze, her head whipping about before placing her full attention back on Cassian. Cold sweats populated her body as she gradually regained her breath.

Cassian held his wife’s gaze. He felt like a lab animal being dissected before pronounced dead, still cognizant of pain, slit open to be examined and studied. The silent, still pain of which was shared among the remaining voyeurs and, quite possibly, the world. A single word barely fell from Cassian’s mouth:

“What.”

Not a question, but a statement of disbelief.

“He’s a normal child, Cassian.” Alessa held back tears of terror and joy at finally being able to admit the fact out loud. Klaiton was normal, just as she’d been saying all along.

“No,” he then replied, a single word as he evaluated the last 13 years. 409,968,000 seconds.

“He deserved to grow into his own. To feel authentic,” Alessa said.

“He deserved to fight with the rest,” Cassian’s voice felt weak until it suddenly dropped with menace. “He deserved the right to fulfill his potential. Do you realize what you’ve done?” More silence. “I didn’t even know that was an option. How did I not - *why* is that an option?” He thought out loud. “You actively chose to make him disadvantaged.” He was bewildered beyond description. He could feel his entire core threatening to collapse, his spine torn from his back. “You’ve screwed him over.”

"I gave him ownership over his body and his abilities," Alessa replied through her teeth. "A gift very few get anymore."

"The only 'gift' you gave him was inferiority. And who are you to make a decision like that alone?"

"I'm his mother."

"Mother of the fucking year."

The words were frigid and horrifying, like a cadaver, exactly how Alessa was certain Cassian saw Klaiton then, as a useless and tragic corpse.

"You're acting like it's the most immoral thing in the world," she tried to defend herself through the item lodged in her throat.

"It probably is." He was serious.

"Do *you* feel proud? Knowing your scientific achievements - your abilities - were given to you? The fact that all your life's work was chosen for you by someone else. You weren't given a choice in the matter."

"No. Because either way, it's who I am, so I don't waste time questioning it. And at the end of the day, I've done great things; things Klaiton will never get the chance to do. Not anymore."

"Again, that's an opinion, not a fact."

Cassian took a deep breath, restraining his malice. "Have fun telling Klaiton that he has no skills -"

"That we know of, yet."

"- That he has no enhancements. You get to tell him that. *Fact.*"

A pause snuck in. "He'll understand."

"I'm a hundred percent confident kids don't handle being different well."

"Then he'll understand one day."

"Maybe." The word along with Cassian's critical inflection stung Alessa. "Maybe not. You'll have to wait and hope so. Though if it were me," his voice faded away while still delivering his point with clarity.

Cassian paced in the street, looking in many directions. Alessa could get past his anger and overreactions, those didn't bother her. What did upset and scare her was the idea that Klaiton might never forgive her and that Cassian could be right. The thought now strangled her. Would he be bullied because of her actions? Could she protect him from her decision? Would - could - he ever truly understand? Her brain panicked at the idea of trying to explain her actions in a way a child might comprehend while her heart shivered at the coldness Klaiton might exhibit; at the thought of him never forgiving her despite a decision she believed best for his wellbeing.

"Car, set route for my parents house." Cassian's voice was stern, even to the vehicle.

There was a sudden whoosh and beep.

"Route set, Cassian. Based on current traffic density and mostly clear weather patterns, if you depart in the next five minutes, you will arrive within 25 minutes."

The side door's handle lit up in the dark, though Cassian's attention was fully on Alessa. She watched him watch her. Had she gone too far? The question surfaced. However, so did another; a more crucial inquiry and response that would dictate their future. She had to pose it now, knowing there may not be another opportunity.

Cassian swiftly moved past her and toward the vehicle when he heard Alessa ask, "Do you still love him?"

They both halted, the question suspended between them. Cassian stared at Car until slightly lifting his head to face her. After a brief pause she heard him say, "He's my son."

"That's not an answer."

"I took an oath to accept him as he was created, just like you."

"Acceptance is different than love."

More silence set in as Alessa awaited the response of her lifetime. How had so much changed between them? Between her and the man she loved; the nerdy guy who adored genes and sci-fi films; the man who's steadfastness and assurance she had always appreciated; traits that could typically help ground her, act as a counterbalance to her overthinking. How could their seemingly perfect life crumble over a single decision?

"Of course I love him," Cassian whispered, followed by a pause. "*He* didn't make the decision."

Car's door then shut and locked with Cassian in the vehicle. It flawlessly began to reverse out of the driveway and carry Cassian to his parents' home. As soon as it switched into drive and kicked into a forward motion, Alessa suddenly yelled:

"Car - stop! Wait, wait." She jogged the few steps toward it, already out of breath. "Set to full transparency mode."

"*Completed*," Car confirmed as all external noise cancellation functions ceased and all side doors became invisible. Alessa stared at Cassian staring at her from his usual middle seat. Neither said a word, until:

"Do you still love me?" It slipped out of her mouth and into the silence, into the vast world surrounding them.

There was a slight breeze coming from the West as they waited and waited and waited. They exchanged nothing but a neutral glance. Eyes on eyes. Yet after what felt like a century of a shared blank gaze, Alessa knew the answer and so did Cassian. She didn't even register his actual response as Car returned to its opaque state and drove off toward East L.A. As she watched the contraption disappear into the night, she knew more than a city rested between them, more than thick overpasses and brutal buildings.

Eventually, Alessa managed to enter the house, their house. While no external, physical change had occurred, something internal had, rendering the space all too different. Everything had shifted.

Instinctually, her legs and torso carried her limp heart and mind to the second floor. They took a quick right and a door automatically slid open. She paused in the doorway to Klaiton's empty bedroom. The lights gradually turned on and a recording spoke, "Mom, my room is already clean, you don't need to go in. Thanks."

The basic tone of his voice triggered soft tears in her eyes. She wiped most away, but they remained damp, perpetuated by the fear Klaiton wouldn't only be upset, but enraged to the point he hated her, despised her, was disgusted by her. She was terrified she may never get to hear his voice as he got older, that he would distance himself forever, as soon as he had the means to do so. How was she supposed to deal with such a possibility? She cursed modern technology most for sticking her in this situation, for meddling in forces of nature that ought not to be meddled in: biological, emotional, maternal.

While she still had the opportunity to be his mother, Alessa disregarded Klaiton's voicemail and mindlessly walked toward his dresser where the holographic photo album remained on. She stared at various personal photographs he'd taken along with family

photos as the machine cycled through each live memory playing out in increments. One after another, memory after memory. Until Alessa suddenly commanded, "Stop frame," and the device obeyed. Only the sound of a car passing on the street was heard. Alessa observed a photo of Klaiton with her late mother.

Alessa vividly remembered the summer trip to Georgia. It was the first time Klaiton had visited and it was one of the only times he would see his grandmother before her accident. Alessa dreamed Klaiton could have gotten to know her more. She was the most powerful woman Alessa knew. Stern, but fun and witty and confident and everything in between.

"I hate you for leaving us," Alessa found herself whispering. "But I wish you were here." She felt it unjust that Cassian had his parents to rely on, only a 25 minute ride away. They could keep making memories with each other, building an ever-expanding library. Cassian had a tangible source of wisdom whereas Alessa had to rely solely on the past. Typically this wasn't an issue for her, but that evening, feeling drained and unsure, she needed something else to guide her. Until abruptly, a memory of her mother played back in her head, but not one Alessa expected.

She was young at the time and had registered an argument between her parents from the same veranda. She sat at the bottom of the steps, overlooking the long grassy fields, aggressive mumblings coming from within the walls behind her. The front door eventually swung open and Alessa heard her mother take a seat, the rattan chairs doing some accommodating stretches. Assuming the argument over, Alessa popped her little body up the porch steps. The creaking of the wood had apparently shocked her mother who was unaware of Alessa's presence. Her mother had clearly not wanted to exhibit her current

emotions to her child, but it had been too late. That was the very first and only time Alessa had seen her mother cry.

She found it amusing how parents tried to hide all their sadness, their tears and fears from youth. Maybe they didn't want to tarnish their view of a perfect, unoffensive world; maybe they wanted to longer maintain that childlike innocence. However, as an adult and mother of her own, Alessa couldn't help but smile through her gentle tears. She found herself thankful to her mother for the sad memory. She surprisingly looked on it with comfort, pride, and love that evening. Because though technology had been less intrusive in the past, the times weren't any easier; they simply couldn't be to bring a woman as strong as her mother to tears. And so, as Alessa raised a single hand to attempt to hold the intangible photo floating before her, she wasn't quite as sad anymore. The holographic image of her mother now inspired a sort of subtle confidence within her.

In a strange way, the memory of her mother had made Alessa realize that she wasn't unique, that her problems weren't unique, not in the grand scheme of things. Surprisingly, unearthing such a fact uplifted a peace in her, a sense of fortitude. Because Alessa, like millions of women before her, had genetic compasses built in, fine tuned and crafted over generations, equipped with physical and emotional instincts to survive whatever complicated storm may arise, to find her way through the maze of it all, the maze of motherhood, parenthood.

Oh, what was it about bringing life into the world that had to complicate everything? To have one questioning morals, motives, and decisions like never before? To become deranged and doubt the absolute truths of one's self and those of the person they loved? Alessa had believed the past to be simpler, but her romanticizing had clouded the reality

that eras could be different, technology more evolved, circumstances entirely changed, and it didn't make parenthood any easier. Alessa and Cassian weren't the first couple to encounter tense predicaments and they certainly wouldn't be the last. No matter how much they all tried to perfect and simplify decision making, there would always come a parental Waterloo. And like Napoleon, Alessa couldn't know her family's fate, not then. She couldn't know who was truly in the right. But what she did know, was that both would continue on, steadfast in their respective convictions because despite any pain, the battle only meant they cared. This just was, and always would remain, the true Procedure of things.

THE END