

Prologue

Dr. Legardo

I was a geneticist, once. Patrician mothers and fathers (or lords and ladies, should I say?) contracted me to use their genetic samples to create “children” from them. It wouldn’t do for them to create children the typical way, the way we normal humans did. They wouldn’t stand to let *chance* dictate if their child was smart or stupid, red-haired or blonde, fat or skinny. Everything had to perfectly directed, dictated, eased gently in place by the geneticist. Deviations and unnecessary genetic clutter were to be cut, as a gardener prunes his bushes.

Only one company supplied children to patricians and it was this company I worked for. There were fifty of us, all trained and renowned geneticists, all with Coalition-granted science licenses. We worked in the “quad”, a section the company reserved just for growing patrician children. The quad was further sectioned into chambers—fifty of them, one for each of us, ten lining each of the building’s five floors. The chambers were cool, white, perfectly climate-controlled; silent except the gentle bubbling of the tanks. In each of these chambers a child was grown.

Day after day we bent, laboring over clear glass lab dishes, mingling the mother’s genome and the father’s genome not the natural, messy, and haphazard way; we worked with the precision of clockmakers, straining our eyes to tease each allele into its perfect, geneticist-assigned place. The parents usually always had requests for us—I want my child to be tall, please; give him an IQ of 150; make sure she’s immune to cancer. We kept the parents’ requests in tablets on our desks, occasionally glancing up from our work to make sure we were creating the children properly, the way the parents wanted them. Everything had to be perfect. If the parents themselves didn’t have the trait—there were few among them, even patricians, with IQ’s above 150—we had to create them ourselves. We kept a bank of genes deep in the center of the quad, and it was here we removed the little test tubes, frosted with cool and each containing a single strip of genetic code, and carried them gingerly to the growing chambers, where we inserted the necessary gene into the sequence. Bit by bit, piece by precise piece, we created children. We created life.

I remember Alistair Paress; not well, but enough. He was only one of scores of children who passed through my hands. I remember he was commissioned by Angela and Patrick Paress, influential people both, both holding important Senate positions. They wanted their little boy to be tall, and white-blond, like the mother, with bright blue eyes, like neither. Their parents had made them dark-eyed. I obliged. It was easy enough—both parents were recessive for blue eyes so I just had to pair their two blue-eye alleles. Height and blonde hair are two of the most-requested traits, so it wasn’t hard to insert those into the soon-to-be-boy’s genome. I could do it in my sleep. I still feel I can.

But somewhere along the way, I made a mistake.

I believe I am getting ahead of myself. Back then, I was unaware of what I’d done to Al Paress, and even now marvel at what happened to him, and what he’s done—and I have to wonder, what part did I have to do with it? But in those days, years ago, I was aware of nothing but the striating pattern of Al Paress’s genome, as I stooped over the microscope and manipulated every tiny gene to create the dream child for his parents. Blonde hair, check. Blue eyes, check. And subtler things, too, his parents had asked for on the extensive form—intelligence, an appreciation for art, sharp eyes, fondness for caviar.

Comment [ 1]: Question repetition.

Comment [ 2]: Absence of “be”.

Comment [ 3]: Question punctuation.

Comment [ 4]: Question grammar.

Comment [ 5]: Question relevance.

Comment [ 6]: Question grammar, punctuation.

Comment [ 7]: Question semantics.

Comment [ 8]: Question semantics.

Comment [ 9]: Consider quotations.

Comment [ 10]: Question semantics.

Comment [ 11]: Consider combining.

Comment [ 12]: Upon reading further, this statement is contradictory to the following paragraphs.

Comment [ 13]: Question grammar.

Comment [ 14]: Question grammar.

Comment [ 15]: Question punctuation.

Comment [ 16]: Question grammar.

Then I was finished with Al Paress's genome, and it was time to insert his genetic code—with infinite precision, obviously—into an egg cell. Not his mother's, but a prepared one, one of hundreds manufactured daily by our company. I took the egg, and implanted it in the tank occupying the far wall of the room. The tank was filled with a bubbling clear fluid, intended to mimic the amniotic fluid of the mother's womb—only much more stable, and efficient at delivering the nutrients to the developing egg. As the days stretched into weeks stretched into months, I monitored Al Paress closely. I saw him grow from a single cell to a tightly-packed ball of cells into a crooked little creature with a reptilian tail. I must say I found myself trembling in secret glee as I watched him mature, as the little stubs on his sides became recognizable limbs, and his head, barely distinguishable from his body at start, became rounder, larger, more recognizably human. True, I was not his parent. I was a scientist and shouldn't have felt anything towards him, except maybe a sort of detached, academic satisfaction at seeing my creation turn out perfect. Maybe that was part of my happiness. I think it was something more, though—the parents, they would never know the child. They would never understand the joy of having created *life*, in the same way I had. In that respect I was closer to the boy than even a commoner mother—because I was able to see his growth, his development from a near-invisible cell to a living, breathing, human being.

They say this is the greatest miracle and I'm inclined to agree. It's something that none of us who create children can lose—our awe at this miracle. The miracle of life.

Then, some nine months after he first entered the growing tank, Al Paress left the tank and entered the real world. He was "born".

I still remember him. I remember perfectly, though I was not the one who "birthed" him. A medic was the one who disconnected the tank, let its whirring machinery wind down, and then plunk her gloved hands into the fluid and pull him, crying, red-faced, into the cold, harsh world of air and sound. Like I did for every "birth", I stood beside my lab table and watched the medic rest the wailing infant on the stretcher and cover him, with a brisk tenderness, with a blanket.

Was I already aware there was something wrong with him, something different? I don't think I did. I remember feeling that tight knot, that glow of satisfaction, tugging at my heart as I watched the technician wipe baby Al down, drying him—I had done it again. I'd created life. Out of a series of alternating dark and light bands, out of harvested genetic material, I had created the living, breathing, crying, human baby on the stretcher. Even though I had done it many times before, I could never banish this feeling. I had a right to. I thought triumphantly. This—this child—was the culmination of all my hard work, all my days of effort. It'd be odd if I *didn't* feel satisfied when he was finally born.

I did notice some things. I noticed his hair was not exactly blonde—even darkened as it was by the damp, pinning his hair to his pink forehead, I could already see that it wasn't blonde. It was white, the kind of white reminiscent of sun-bleached sands and starving prisoners. It was a vague thought that flitted into my brain like a capricious bird, and I filed it quietly in the back of my memory. It wouldn't do to interrupt my triumph.

The piercing song of the infant's cries continued—he was hungry. He needed nourishment, which his mother would provide with formula perfectly calibrated to maximize the delivery of nutrients to the baby. The medic obliged his demands and turned, her heels clacking, wheeling him out of the lab where he had been born.

Comment [ 17]: Question relevance.

Comment [ 18]: Question grammar.

Comment [ 19]: Question grammar.

Comment [ 20]: Irrational thought pattern; perfectly justified affection in such a circumstance.

Comment [ 21]: Example of contradiction; see Comment 12.

Comment [ 22]: Question grammar.

Comment [ 23]: Question relevance.

Comment [ 24]: Question punctuation.

Comment [ 25]: Example of contradiction; see Comment 20.

Comment [ 26]: Question punctuation.

Comment [ 27]: Question punctuation.

Comment [ 28]: Question semantics.

As she passed me, the infant suddenly opened his tightly-scrunched eyes—for the briefest, but most heart-stopping, moment. I took a step back, my heart jolting, startled by his gaze. Not by his eyes—they were exactly as I'd planned, brilliant blue—but by the...the *intention* I saw behind those eyes. They were not the eyes of an infant, but of a much, much older adult, one who was painfully wise to the ways of the world and was too tired to deal with it anymore...and wanted to warn *me*. For there was a warning shining in those eyes, a look of almost reproach...

Comment [ 29]: Question punctuation.

Comment [ 30]: Question semantics.

But even now, all these years later, I don't know what young Alistair Paress was trying to warn me against. Was he trying to warn me that he *wasn't* normal? Or was he rebuking me for feeling satisfied about him, warning me that I had much work to do? Or (most chillingly of all, because it might be *true*) *was* he warning me of my own future—that one day I would rise up against those who employed me, and try to bring an end to this entire madness?

Comment [ 31]: Question rationale; no relation to previous two statements.

I don't know. I was satisfied, back then, with the knowledge that I'd succeeded. On the outside I had created a perfect bouncing baby boy, the boy his parents had wanted exactly—well, minus the white hair. But soon, too soon, I'd realize that this was the farthest thing from the truth. Al Paress was the farthest thing from normal.

It's the funniest thing. We geneticists are human. I am not even a patrician, though many of my colleagues have enhanced themselves genetically. Even then, they—we—are expected to be perfect. To not make a single mistake. The patrician parents pin all their hopes and dreams on us, hoping that we will make them perfect children without a single flaw, anywhere. But we *do*. We do make mistakes. Some are minor—the child who liked carrots instead of broccoli, for example. But others are more serious. Sometimes, entirely by accident, we code children for rare genetic disorders. And then, even more rarely, we have children like Al.

Comment [ 32]: Question punctuation.

Comment [ 33]: Question relevance.

I think about Al because he was the most special of all the children I had created. I don't *want* to say this; I want to say they were all special. But that'd be a lie. Al is the most special of all of them. Not just because of the mistake I made on him, the mistake that would shape his entire *life*. For other reasons, too.

Comment [ 34]: Question punctuation.

Now that boy, the child I'd created for the patricians Paress all those years ago, has defied all of our hopes, all of our expectations. He's become something else entirely. I don't know whether to be proud—or fear him. Both, I suppose. Entirely on his own, with his own skills, that boy Paress, despite the obstacles standing in his ways (obstacles I, in many ways, am responsible for), has gathered a motley band of children, and has begun to challenge the entire Galactic order.

I can only watch Al now—not just him, but Leera, and Kelly, and Jona too. I can only watch them, dear children all, and hold my breath, and hope from my deepest heart that when this is all over, the Galaxy will be all the more better off for it.