

The Children of Centaura

There was a time, a very dangerous time, long ago, when there were playgrounds that rested on real grass on muggy summer days, with anthills and burrs strewn about. Hot metal slides that burned skin and resulted in scraped knees from falls. The world was such a scary place, but not anymore.

In Centaura, children needn't worry about faulty playground equipment, mud, sunburns, or inattentive parents; all that has been taken care of. The Dome that covers the sky provides exquisite temperature control and ideal weather year-round. Grass has been replaced by a soft-to-the-touch, manicured substance that perfectly matches the perfect shade of green. It doesn't cause stains. It requires no watering or cutting. Everything is tailored to the citizens' needs. There are even bots for every type of service, such as the H-42 Bot, which assists children by maintaining safety protocols. Centaura is a picturesque community that ensures each citizen will have a pleasurable and orderly life.

Arelli has never known any other life than this harmonious landscape, and neither does her son, Quin, who plays with the other kids on the playground. She sits on a bench, watching her son, but isn't exactly looking at him, just staring off into space, thinking about a history she is reading. Women usually don't read in Centaura, but it is permitted to the extent of histories. Arelli's husband, Tyce, allows her this eccentricity, though he frowns upon it.

Despite her upbringing, Arelli has a tendency to daydream and sometimes questions things, which is never encouraged, especially for women. She learns to keep her questions to herself and delve into histories when she can. The histories describe a terrifying past Earth, where there is war, famine, and disease. Everywhere is chaos and destruction. Centaurans are so lucky to have been born in this century, in this community, free from havoc and having everything provided for them.

Even reproduction is precisely planned and not left to chance, uncontrolled, and uncalculated. When women reach a certain age, after marrying a suitable male, they undergo tests to determine every aspect of their health and then plan their course of action. There are fertility centers where a couple's biological donations are used to create an embryo to be implanted into the new mother. Arelli only has a basic grasp of this concept, as she has never been taught anything about science. Women don't need to be confused by details on subjects meant for men, even though genetics was removed from all curricula in the education system. All she knows is that Quin is her beautiful boy with his wild patch of red hair, and it is her job to make sure he grows up to become the best Centauran he can be.

She watches Quin play, and he almost falls off a platform, but a bot catches him and sets him upright. Arelli sees that all the young children are uniformly the same, as they always have been. She is glad her son came out all right. Many women are losing their babies due to anomalies, and people are growing concerned, despite reassurances from the Council.

Arelli has good maternal instincts and has always wanted to be a mother. Not that she ever had the choice, since she was deemed healthy and fit at fifteen years of age. Centaura encourages feelings of contentment, but a measured level of happiness. A restrained joy, nothing out of hand.

She always had an inquisitive nature that often got her in trouble as a child, and Tyce would scold her about it. She learned to keep things to herself for the most part and had a rich inner life that people didn't catch on to. Still, she stands out next to the other mothers, and often keeps her distance, which is not customary in Centaura. Occasionally she catches one of the other mothers glancing at her from afar while talking amongst themselves, then quickly looks away when spotted.

"Hello, Arelli."

She is a tad startled. It was a man's voice, and men seldom came by the playgrounds. Trifles like taking a child to a park are typically beneath a man's station. The voice has a ring of familiarity, but she is caught off guard and can't place it immediately. Then the voice's owner stands in front of her. It is Councilman Helstern, a stout man of average height who appears to be around sixty years old (although Arelli has no idea what his actual age might be). The Council was formed when Centaura was created, and it still dictates how Centaura is run, down to the last detail.

Arelli is taken aback due to his status and shocked that he knows who she is. She is not outspoken in the community- that's frowned upon. Girls are taught that it is better to be seen, not heard.

"Hello, Councilman. How are you?"

He gives her a wide smile. "Very good. I have been preparing for the next town hall and feel confident in my weekly report. Our technicians have exceeded expectations in developing a new bot."

"That's wonderful. I am looking forward to hearing you speak, as always."

Helstern nods, then turns his gaze toward the playground. "You have a son, about four years old, correct?"

Again, Arelli is surprised. Not only is he aware of Quin, but he also knows his age and that he is her son. "Yes, he's the one with the red curly hair." She points at Quin, who is talking to another boy his age. "His name is Quin. He loves coming here and playing with his friends."

"Always glad to see young children fraternizing; it is a good sign of social stability. Important trait."

She feels happy that Helstern holds Quin in such high esteem. It never hurts to be praised by a member of the Council. "He loves to socialize."

"Tell me, is he good with numbers?"

Arelli doesn't know how Helstern is able to guess Quin's aptitude for numerical work just by looking at him. However, she is too flabbergasted to question it. It is strange, but councilmen are known for their sharp wit and observational skills.

She says, "Indeed, he is. He is farther along than his peers and enjoys the work."

Helstern slowly lowers himself onto the bench next to her. "He's a fine-looking young lad. I am sure he will grow up to be a model citizen who contributes to the community."

Arelli notices that he is beaming as he looks at Quin. She doesn't understand why he has taken such an interest in her son. Centaura was a large community, and Quin hasn't done anything to receive praise on a local level. Still, she is pleased and proud that Helstern holds Quin in such high regard.

"Thank you. His father will be proud when he hears that, knowing it comes from you."

Helstern frowns. "It is best to be slow to pride. A proud man attracts excessive negative attention. Every success is attributed to the Council's handling of our community structures. For instance, the education and requirements of our young citizens. Your husband should know not to lean too much into the idea of being a father. It rings too much like a family unit. Do you know that word?"

Although Arelli has never heard the word "family" used, she has an idea of what it means from reading assorted histories. Helstern recommends a reading that Quin might like. "I'm sure he is quite literate, even at his age." He gives a small laugh.

Arelli's face drops. She recognizes that exact laugh and twinkle in his eyes. It is uncanny somehow. Even the upturn of his smile leans towards the right side of his lips.

"Anyway, I must be on my way. I am always busy working on providing the community with my expertise. Working hard, you know? Well, I guess you do not, really." He stands up, using his hand to propel himself off the bench. He is not a young or agile man.

"It's been a pleasure talking to you," she tells him. "I would wish you luck in your work."

"Very well. I will see you at the next town hall later this week."

Arelli gives him a forced smile as he walks away. When he turns away and walks a few paces, her face drops into a slight frown. Although there is much that Arelli doesn't know, she has never been allowed to know; she still has her maternal instinct. It isn't something that can be forced out of her. She has always been highly intuitive, and something just feels wrong, but she can't put her finger on it. She feels the sudden urge to go to her son.

She goes to the playground, grabs Quin's hand, and walks him away to talk to him alone. An H-42 bot reassures her that it can handle everything, and she thanks it while continuing to move away. She speaks to Quin for a bit, then notices Helstern looking at them from across the park, and he waves at them. This gives her pause.

She asks Quin to tell her his favorite joke again, and he gives that funny laugh of his. Such a charismatic boy. Why does she feel so...unsettled? She wishes she knew.

That night, Arelli sits down to have dinner with Tyce and Quin, as usual. Arelli's role at dinnertime doesn't involve much from her. Meal preparation, service, and cleaning are all done by their D-22 bot. She sits across from Quin, and Tyce takes the seat at the head of the table where he belongs.

In the first part of the twenty-second century, in the region that would later become the Great Society of Centaura, the traditional family structure began shifting toward being regarded as "household units" instead. There were still the roles of father and mother with their children, but now the emphasis is on being part of the community rather than a family. Still, it is Arelli's duty to ensure that her husband's needs are tended to and that he feels supported, and her son is raised to become a model Centauran. Although, in all honesty, being a wife and mother in Centaura is mostly a ceremonial role now.

Tyce says the customary speech of thanks to the Founders of Centaura for their wisdom and provisions before they begin to eat. Then Tyce puts down his fork, and there is a rare sight: his smile. "I have excellent news, but I have to forewarn you not to get too worked up just yet." Arelli and Quin look at him, then at each other, wondering what it could be. There is hardly ever any news. "I am being considered for a seat on the Junior Council."

"Really?" Quin is excited at the prospect of his father joining such an elite circle.

Arelli is surprised to hear this and gives a tentative smile. "That's wonderful. When will you know if you've been selected?"

"They said by tomorrow they will make their decision." His tone indicates that that is the end of the discussion.

Now they would just have to wait to see what the future holds.

While Arelli is downstairs reading a history, she hears a faint voice coming from down the hall in the home office. She isn't sure why a voice would be coming from there, given that Tyce is away, and only he was allowed inside the room, aside from the C-51 cleaner bot. It remains locked at all times, and it is forbidden for her even to open the door.

She goes to inspect what is happening in the office and is horrified to find Quin playing at his father's workstation. A hologram message is projected onto the screen on the wall, proving to be the source of the voice she heard. Councilman Tenor is delivering what seems to be a message specifically for Tyce. This must be regarding his potential position on the Junior Council! Arelli scolds Quin and orders him to go outside. She goes to turn off the message,

scared to get in trouble despite Tyce being away, but takes her time, curious to hear what Councilman Tenor has to say. She isn't prying, just being slow about getting to the workstation.

In the communication, Councilman Tenor looks as he always does, very formal and dignified with a most authoritative presence that makes one sit upright in their seat when spoken to. Tenor informs Tyce that he has been chosen to be on the Junior Council and imparts to him his congratulatory speech. Arelli's heart rate spikes at the news that her husband has been selected for the Junior Council, and she thinks of how excited Tyce will be. She can't wait for him to come home.

As she is about to close the message, she hears Tenor say, "Now that you will be a member of one of our Councils, it is time that you learned about the Breeding Program." Arelli knows the term "breeding," but has only heard it in reference to livestock. She doesn't understand why Tyce would need to know about animals as a Junior Councilman.

"Only our highest-ranking members are even aware of the program. Four generations ago, some of the greatest minds in Centaura introduced a novel idea to the Council, proposing a way to enhance the future of our great society. They theorized that the population, already managed via the fertilization centers, would benefit from using only the most elite donors to produce the next generation. Members of the Council would provide their DNA samples to the fertility centers, and those samples would be used to create the embryos for suitable couples. That way, only the best genetics would be passed down, creating a more progressive society."

Arelli's face loses its color and all expression. The shock of what she is hearing makes it difficult for her to form clear thoughts. He can't be saying what she thinks he is saying, can he?

"Of course, for the sake of order, the Breeding Program must remain secret from everyone but the members of the Council since we will be contributing to it. The community's reaction might not be...desirable."

Now she believes that she has heard correctly. Quin's features immediately come to mind, and once again she thinks how they are nothing like hers or his father's. She remembers the faces of all the children at the playground, how they looked so much like each other. Like they could all be brothers and sisters.

"Despite the success of the program, there has been one issue that has us concerned. Due to the relatively small number of councilmen and the nepotism within it, the gene pool needs to be diversified. Hence, we have recently started the Junior Council. Don't worry yourself with the details; we have everything under control."

Councilman Tenor continues to discuss the logistics of the Junior Council, including what Tyce should expect upon joining and what will be required of him. Arelli tunes out at this point in the message, her mind reeling from everything she has just discovered, trying to put the pieces together.

Beautiful Centaura, her home, seems tarnished now, for it is no longer the paradise she was raised to believe it to be. There is a dark underbelly to this society, manipulative and deceitful. Stealing people's freedom and autonomy. Dictating who and who shouldn't be able to pass on their family lines. Arelli is vaguely aware of something wet coursing off the side of her palm. Then a bot starts towards her from across the room. She looks down and sees a small droplet on the floor, something red. She looks down at her hands and sees that they are clenched into fists. She slowly opens them to see red liquid there and nail marks buried into her palms. Has she really drawn blood? How did she not feel it before? This terrifies her almost as much as the message. How is she able to feel so much? She didn't know that was even possible.

What will Tyce now think of Quin when he learns that he isn't his biological son? Will he treat Quin any differently than before? He has never been a warm father, but he could always be worse, colder, more distant, and judgmental. And after Tyce is inducted into the Junior Council, will he then be required to spread his DNA throughout Centaura?

She knows instinctively to keep this discovery from Tyce. Arelli realizes there is nothing she can do with this new revelation. She knows if she speaks out about this, she will be at risk, although she has no idea just how much. She is just a pawn of the system, a cog in the wheel. Arelli has always felt a bit lost in the community, despite being told how she fits into the grand scheme of things. She has always felt like she doesn't quite belong. And now what is her role? Giving birth to a stranger's child to raise, without ever having agreed to do so? What else in her life is a lie? Are they keeping anything else from her? She is sure they are and that she will probably never know the full extent of it.

Arelli closes the messaging program and steps out of the room as a different person. And for some reason, she thinks of Councilman Helstern's faded curly red hair and that familiar smile.

After pacing about the house, unable to calm her racing thoughts, Arelli makes up her mind to visit Quin in his room. He is learning vocabulary in his module, being watched over by a bot. She thinks about how many words he would never know, that she would never know, and can't teach him. Arelli dismisses the bot and sits with Quin.

"Take a second from your studies. I want to talk to you for a bit."

"Sure."

They sit together on his couch, and she runs her fingers through his hair. Something inside of her urges her to take a risk. "I want to tell you a story."

"You mean the story of the Founders?"

"No, a different kind of story. A made-up story."

Quin looks up at her inquisitively. He has never heard of a made-up story. “You mean a lie?”

She laughs gently and tells him that there are stories that are just made up; in fact, there were quite a few of them at one point in time. Fictional stories. He is slightly confused but eager to listen.

Arelli isn't sure just what to say, but she manages to find a way to come up with something of her very own, something she has never heard before. It is exciting to come up with something original and new from her own mind, and Quin is happy to listen. She thinks of some of the histories she has read, but instead of the dark retellings of the past that served as cautionary tales, she tells him of wondrous things. Even if they have never existed.

She knows she can't stand up to the system on her own, and if she did, she would be severely punished. Her hands are tied in that regard. Still, she can do her best to raise her son to be a free thinker, even if he has to keep that close to the chest. It might be a very good thing that his father will be serving on the Junior Council. Tyce will be occupied all the time, always busy, and he might show even less interest in Quin, allowing her the chance to teach him as much as she can. But she would have to tread carefully.

She thinks that perhaps her son could be the way to influence change in Centaura, that maybe she could make a difference. And someday he might be telling a story of his own.