

Part 19. Jeremiah



Somehow, Kilah knew all her letters.

Jeremiah expected to give her a fast-paced lesson of the alphabet, but as they slid through tomes, Kilah demonstrated it would be unnecessary. She lifted tomes and read letters aloud, sometimes whole titles.

"20,000 Leagues Under the Sea! She slid the words together, and said leagues more like leg-oos "What's a league? Is it like a decad?"

"Sure, measurement." Jeremiah held up another tome and pointed the title out to Kilah.

She read this one perfectly: "The Last Man"

Jeremiah's eyes flitted from his sister to the tome in his hands and back again. "How keen reading?"

Kilah's small hands deftly handled the leather tome. It seemed she was barely hearing him.

"Darden show me."

The mention of an Undesirable name went against Ordinance. His vision clouded. An alarm roared in his mind, and with great effort, he quieted it. He needed to hear more from Kilah, but avoid speaking his friend's name.

"When did you know?"

"Before he changed. When he was your friend. Told me, keep mouth sewn. So I did."

Jeremiah hadn't seen any of the forbidden lessons, and he supposed that had been the idea. For his trespass, Darden might have been excised. Gratefully, only Kilah and Jeremiah knew of his treason, and neither would condemn him. He thought of Darden's blank stare and shuffling feet. Once, he saw a line of dry spittle at the corner of Darden's mouth. In Jeremiah's estimation, his friend had suffered enough.

Teaching girls their letters two years early hardly seemed a crime, but crime it was. Only Compound-approved methods were allowed. It was agreed that girls needed to know their letters, same as boys. They needed to read recipes and compile chorelists.

Jeremiah silently thanked Darden for breaking ordinance. In this instance, it had saved time. Kilah was already flying through the "R" tomes, on the way to finding "Russ."

Her small hands became an asset, because she sorted three books for every one Jeremiah glanced at. Her excitement also drove her speed. As she often confided to him, Kilah longed to help, to be part of things. Her age and lack of a third leg hindered her natural development, same as other girls. Kilah was a strange girl, who liked to be included, needed, and sought traits any man could fill. His poor sister had been born into the wrong body.

Or wrong place

In A Modern Utopia Wells had insisted on women's...women's...the word was there, and gone again. Women's excision? Well, not that. Something with an "e"?

"Women's equality."

A tall stack of tomes hid Naltag. Quietly, as was his way, the stranger helped to sort the tomes.

Jeremiah took half the stack away, looking Naltag in the startlingly large eyes. Human eyes were not meant to be so large.

"You know mindspeak?"

Naltag nodded. "Hear ya like a radio broadcast."

More magic from the stranger. Mindspeak was a myth, mentioned in tomes and whispered of among Compound children. No one could really read thoughts. No one from Earth. A thrill of fascination and fear traveled along Jeremiah's spine.

"How?"

Kilah jumped up and down with excitement. "Nal can teach you!"

Nal?

His sister had a pet name for the stranger. Jeremiah assessed one and the other, an exuberant chubby face staring at a foreign entity with unnaturally large eyes. The adoration was his fault. He had allowed it into their domicile, and it had tainted his sister. A picture of Darden's marmite flashed in his head, and again, fear spiked inside him.

Kilah being conditioned, or worse, excised, punched a raw hole in his gut. Darden's blank eyes and drooling mouth...

Jeremiah's jumbled thoughts were forming ideas, but they held no pattern. Ordinances overrode many of his instinctual desires. He had trouble interpreting his feelings, and even more trouble pushing them away.

"Found it!" Kilah held up a slim tome, Joanna Russ inscribed on the spine.

"I found two." Naltag slid two more Russ tomes across the table.

Tomes in hand, he didn't miss Eva as much. She would be there, in the words, reading them to him, helping him understand their theoretical and historical context.

But Jeremiah was wrong.

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