

Part 21. Jeremiah



He didn't cry about it.

Tears itched behind his eyes, but he didn't let them fall. Crying was conditioned out of Jeremiah years ago.

Humiliation he decided. It burned inside him, entwined with anger.

Why can't things go back?

Life was easier before, when he emoted less. He remembered his steady hands, and the surety. He missed the knowing, and the acceptance that came with it. Now, he was lost, and the only thing accompanying him was anger.

Da entered his dorm a while later. "Let's discuss."

Discussions between men were private. Women needed hear of a man's business, nor should they hear of his folly.

Too late. They already saw it.

His offense, as Da explained, was large because he had obscured what was right. Women were severs. They enjoyed their jobs, and by trying to do Marme or Kilah's job, he had undermined the system. By default, he had disrespected the girls.

"Now, you can order women about, and in a few years, question everything she does." Da stood over Jeremiah, lined face solemn. "But you can't disrespect her. Treat her right, and uh," Da adjusted the cord holding up his pants, "she'll take care of you."

Jeremiah accepted the statements as ordinance. He nodded along, parroting yes sir no sir sorry sir when prompted. From the corner, the hum of Naltag's cloak comforted him. Then, he thought about the stranger's purpose, and humiliation hollowed him once more. Naltag had analyzed and recorded all. It was an incident Jeremiah would rather forget, but the stranger would wish to dissect it.

Da continued, "The Archiver has many life-changes."

A new bride. Soon, Da warned, the Archiver's life-change would fade. In the a er-glow, he would notice things he might have let slip.

"Like this." Da held up a tome.

Jeremiah's heart bottomed out. He recognized the jacket, and sure enough, the tome was A Modern Utopia. Though he saw it in Da's hands, he automatically checked his hiding spot to make sure the tome was really gone. The spot between the cot and frame was bare. Lucky had had thought (or Kilah had thought) to hide the new tomes in her special place. Otherwise, Da would have commandeered a stack of evidence against his son.

"Tomes belong in Archiver's enclave. Why take them?"

Jeremiah's conditioning prohibited lying, so he answered as honestly as possible. "To study."

He had taken the tomes to learn. And think. He was tempted to add, I think about them but bit the words back. Blood pooled under her tongue from where he had clamped down on it.

Da noticed his tightened jaw. "Open up."

He leaned in, eye-level with his son. Unable to deny parental commands, Jeremiah opened his mouth. Da poked a finger inside, swabbing against the inner cheek. When his fingertip came out tinged with blood, he sighed.

"Conditioning strengthens the weak." He wiped his finger with a rag from his pocket. "You weak, boy?"

"No, sir!"

If you define weak by one who thinks, but one who questions, I might be weak, sir.

The magnitude of his UnDesirable thoughts frightened him. It was like a renegade had taken residence in his head, creeping into every part of him. He feared he could lose himself.

Da finally let him to sleep, and he settled on his cot, turning on his side. Away from Naltag.

I am a good citizen. I listen to Da, respect Marme, and look after Kilah. One day, I'll be Enforcer.

First, he had to betray Naltag. Is it a betrayal to do my duty?

His duty seemed so far away now, like his dreams of Enforcer training. And why did he want to be an Enforcer again? To be mean, like Easton, or indifferent, like Drevin? An Enforcer was a dated position. There was little enforcing to do, besides escorting citizens to conditioning rooms. As an Archiver, he had access to real power in the tomes.

Is that what you want? Power?

This time, Naltag's voice rebounded in his head. He recognized the even tone, and responded honestly in his near-sleeping state.

I want to be happy.

Life as an Enforcer, so he had begun to suspect, would not make him happy. A life hiding valuable tomes from Quentin and Da would not make him happy either. A life where Kilah became like Marme (tired eyes), or conditioned (lifeless eyes), would be unbearable.

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