

## Part 28. Jeremiah

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**The next morning**, Jeremiah was up before anyone else. He washed his body with the self moisturizing, self drying, and self-cleaning clothes Naltag had provided.

Cleaning himself took a long time. He couldn't get the dirt off. No matter how long he scrubbed, he was convinced a film still clung to him.

Eva

Just thinking about her name, his flesh stirred. Stop he told himself. She belongs to someone

And she would never belong to Jeremiah.

He ready the morning's rations of fativa. Kilah and Naltag woke, looking astonished to see Jeremiah completing complex tasks.

"All better?" Kilah peered up at his face.

"A fraction, yes."

He allowed her to hug him tightly. She wanted to know what did it been like, what he had seen and done. All he remembered were closed doors, warmth, and then cold. Naltag stayed quiet, perhaps worried about pushing him.

Jeremiah solve this by speaking first. Their predicament had been on his mind for days, only the words wouldn't come. Now the words came easily.

"Can't linger here."

It was the first thing he had said to his savior. From Naltag's face, it was their thought as well. He shared ideas as to where they could go.

"That's it?"

Jeremiah expected more, but Naltag confirmed the limited choices for a second time.

"Go forward or go back."

Jeremiah chewed on a piece of dried grass. Doing so helped him think. Or he thought it did. In plenty of tomes, when a character was thinking, they chewed on something pensively. Pensive was another word used by Naltag and politicians, but he could see the appeal.

However, appeal was missing from the choice he had to make. To go back would sentence him to a blank existence, full of blank smiles and blank stares. Reconditioned citizens were denied access to upper-tier assignments, like Archiver, or Enforcer. Jeremiah would be relegated to a shadow-job, like Washman, or Sewage-Mate. A er a fulfilling assignment like archiving, he would never be happy doing anything else.

Furthermore, marriage for a reconditioned citizen was frowned upon. Spreads bad seeds, da would say. Not only would Jeremiah spend his life doing menial work, but he would be alone.

Eva was gone, gone from reach. Being alone wouldn't have been so bad. He wouldn't want to force his seed on anyone anyway. His stomach tightened when he thought of how Da led Marme away every night, she not quite protesting and he not quite pulling her to their private dorm. Seeing what he had in the conditioning suite, he knew now why Da was insistent and why Marme was so resistant.

Why did they make me do those things to Eva? He wondered why conquering a crying woman need be part of the reconditioning curriculum, but it had been. He had visited cruel and unusual acts on Eva, and during, he had enjoyed all of them. A small, very small part of him wished to return to his curriculum.

But he couldn't ever go back.

At the same time, to go forward seemed as implausible as going back. He didn't know what was out there, and even if his savior did, his version of safe might be different than Jeremiah's. Kilah needed looking after; he wasn't about to lose one more thing. If sent back, she would be reconditioned, on a worse scale than Jeremiah. She would lose herself, and it would be comparable to death.

Worse than death.

With that in mind, he decided they had nothing to fear by going forward.

So they did.

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