

Part 39. Kilah and Jeremiah

It took Jeremiah years to finally look Graylyn in the face.

It was years more before he ceased laughing outright at her ideas. Slowly, Jeremiah assessed Graylyn not a woman, or a competitor. He saw her as he saw himself.

Kilah reported all interaction with Jeremiah to Naltag, and this night was no different.

After Kilah's most recent summary, Naltag stood without a word. Kilah had acclimated to such responses. She assumed Naltag didn't reply because per was thinking, analyzing what could be learned.

She enjoyed imagining things from Naltag's varied perspective, and so she reached out to hear per's thoughts.

The transmission was blank. Silence on the outside and inside. Confused, Kilah reached out again, enacting the cloaked meditation technique Naltag had taught her. Though, she sensed a wall where one hadn't existed.

Before she could inquire about the oddity, Naltag spoke.

"A few more cycles, and we can return to your compound."

~*~

Another cycle passed.

Jeremiah grew a shadow of a beard. For the most part, he was quieter than usual.

Archives no longer satisfied him. When he did speak, he expressed a desire to master hunting skills.

Naturally, his desire compelled him to spend time with Graylyn. Past cycles, they had hunted separately, dividing up quadrants and splitting the kills. Graylyn's haul always outpaced Jeremiah's, and lately Kilah's numbers had ticked up. Before his little sister bested him entirely, Jeremiah wanted to learn all that Graylyn had to offer.

She shared all that she had already shared with Kilah. Much of what she relayed amounted to patience, a skill Jeremiah struggled to cultivate at first. Early on, he understood how the two women caught so much game; they tracked herds, waited, and worked together at picking off weaker prey in higher numbers.

Jeremiah's archives taught him how hunters worked alone, tracking one prey at a time. In watching Graylyn's model, the archive model seemed inadequate in comparison. Though he was annoyed at first, he found himself impressed of her skill as the weeks and months passed.

From this initial begrudging recognition grew respect, and then friendship. On some of the hunting trips, Graylyn and Jeremiah even discussed topics other than wind speed, distance, and proper gutting techniques. Ever curious, Graylyn had questions for all sorts of things. She seemed to have stored up several questions from as far as twelve cycles back, which she only now brought up.

"Where's your compound?"

"Why don't we go there?"

"What do people do there?"

Jeremiah hesitated, settling on answering the third question: "Men work hard, till what land can be tilled, repair what can be repaired, print food."

Remembering all that the men had accomplished before him, saying it aloud, he heard his own pride hung up on the words.

Graylyn nodded, as though this were to be expected. "But what do women do?"

"Huh?"

Jeremiah's concentration rested on remembering how good his life had been for a time, and the question took a moment to register with him.

She restated the question, and he answered haltingly, "Cook, clean, rear children."

She repeated the list back to him, as if she needed to be sure.

It was Jeremiah's turn to nod. The list sounded robust enough to him. It wasn't as if it were missing anything.

"Why don't women do the other things, tilling and repairing?"

The notion, offered innocently as it was, elicited a laugh from Jeremiah.

Politely, Graylyn held on pressing him until the laughter stopped.

"Well?"

She seemed to want an answer but he was blank on what the question really meant. So he shared what first sputtered into his mind.

"If the women did the other things, who would cook, clean, and rear the children?"

"Everyone."

The answer wasn't glib, though it was delivered in a deadpan kind of tone. Graylyn said 'everyone' like she knew it was the only answer.

Jeremiah asked her to explain, and she did.

Before her compound's epidemic, every citizen completed various jobs. Specific jobs were never delegated to one person, especially when citizens began to contract the virus. Graylyn's grandmother taught her how to hunt and cook, while her father taught her how to mend clothes and forge suitable weapons. When Jeremiah asked what her mother had taught her, she quieted. Finally, she admitted she had never met her mother.

"Died calving me."

No mother.

He tried imagining what it would have been like living without a mother. Without a caretaker. After so many cycles away from her, the face of Jeremiah's mother was a blur, but what she had taught him (be on time, listen to Da, steam up, mind Kilah) had stayed with him. And her hands. He still remembered her hands, how lined and dry they were, endlessly kneading.

Mothers, insofar as Jeremiah recalled, worked hard but it was a different sort of hard than fathers.

Graylyn appeared confused by this distinction. She shook her head.

"No. All citizens work as hard as their will allows: father, mother, brother, and sister."

Though the logic sounded fine to Jeremiah, it was mismatched against his own. Her song was not his song, as Ma used to tell him. As a boy, the saying sounded fun, but the meaning eluded him. No one sang in the compounds, and he only knew the word from reading about it in the tomes. Now, having witnessed the act of singing in Naltag's video archives, he better understood the saying. How his mother knew it intrigued him. Had she been repeating her own mother's phrasing, or had she known of singing?

Jeremiah assumed the rebellious to be contagious, a strain he'd caught from Darden. However, he suspected he (and Kilah) received their rebellious tendencies from their mother. Not for the first time, he hoped she was faring alright back at home.

"She could be."

Graylyn's mindspeak startled him. Naltag had trained both women, and apparently they had (again) picked up on the ability much better than Jeremiah.

Her range was nothing compared to Kilah's, Graylyn calmly explained. She only heard random thoughts, and she stumbled when trying to answer through thoughts alone.

"Better than my skills," Jeremiah said.

Though only four words long, the concession opened a large chasm inside of him. He choked on what he planned to say next, the silence between them waiting to be filled.

Graylyn swept a glance around them, probably checking for scadogs. It wouldn't do to be eaten because they were being careless.

She put a hand on his shoulder. It was the first touch from her he didn't shrug off.

"Better? No. Different? Yes."

In her tone, Jeremiah heard no pity, just a statement of fact.

In front of and behind them, the things Naltag called trees whispered. They loomed in the afternoon sun, so large and so calm. Had they always been so large?

In answer to Graylyn, Jeremiah nodded, grunted, and in a bold move acquired from the video archives, he slipped his hand in hers. She didn't act surprised, merely giving his hand a gentle squeeze.

"Are we friends?"

He took a deep breath. "I hope so."

"Sounds like we are, then." Graylyn's face glowed.

To be Continued...

In the Compound

Last updated: Jul 23