

Part 6. Jeremiah



On his way back to his domicile, Jeremiah caught sight of Drevin and Easton. Their chests puffed out in the familiar padded uniforms associated with enforcers. Jeremiah worked hard to appear cheerful instead of envious. He hoped his nod hello conveyed just how casual he was.

Drevin nodded back, but Easton snorted at the air.

"Foul odor about ya, mate."

Jeremiah discreetly brought his arm to his nose. Ugh. Musty leaflet smell.

"What kind of assignation is archivin' if ya come out stinkin' of an Elder's domicile?" Easton laughed.

Drevin didn't laugh. If pity was a tangible companion, then Drevin might have touched him with it. It was a feeling he had received too often in one day, and he couldn't take any more of it. Rather than retort, Jeremiah did the safe thing by looking down at his quads. Physical confrontations weren't part of any ordinance, and it especially went against Da's private ordinance.

Easton had goaded him before, and two years prior, Jeremiah had given in with his fists. Unfortunately, he got a lot worse than he supplied. The bruises and bloody lips had been all the more humiliating when his father had expressed not pride, but disappointment.

"Did ya win?" Kilah had asked.

The compulsion to answer yes was strong, but ordinance was stronger.

Jeremiah shook his head.

Marme's lips had pressed together, and his father had remained silent as he applied ointments to his open wounds. Jeremiah had always been left thinking of the true source of his father's disappointment. Had he been disappointed because of the altercation, or because Jeremiah had failed at it?

All this weighed on him as Easton continued his derision, and he did nothing.

That night, Jeremiah tossed and turned in his cot. His thoughts bounced from Eva and Easton, and between them both, his head was near to bursting. An outward vibration nagged him, a pressure he couldn't name. It traveled from his toes, creeping to his head. A cold sensation traipsed about his skin, startling him. Jeremiah wanted to scream, but a hand covered his mouth, or he thought it was a hand. He felt a presence, but saw nothing. He leapt from the bed, and that's when the stranger materialized from the air.

He convinced himself he was dreaming. Even if she wanted to, the stranger couldn't enter the compound without triggering heat and motion sensors. She wasn't real.

Confident in his assertion, Jeremiah reached out, touched her. When his hand caught actual strands of hair, he screamed. The scream was muffled as her hand flew up to cover his mouth. Finally, he stopped screaming, and her hand came down. Again, she waited to speak, only casting a sidelong glance.

"How?" Jeremiah sputtered.

"What you call tech."

She tapped on a device strapped to her arm. In an instant, she was gone. The cold came rushing back, this time gnawing on his brain. He gritted his teeth.

"Come back."

She reappeared, as easily as if he had commanded her to pass the fativa.

"What tech is that?" He eyed her, uneasy.

He hadn't thought her dangerous before. Now, Jeremiah was awash in fear. He considered calling out for Marme or Da. First, he wanted to know the source of her tech.

"It borrows refractive elements in the air and bounces them back, rendering me invisible. Some creatures can sense the bend in reality, and the physical side effects can be unpleasant."

She spoke with words he didn't recognize. She seemed to catch her mistake, but he waved off her explanation. Jeremiah had understood enough of the context.

"You take the air, use it as a cloak. Sometimes the cloak hurts others, like it hurt me."

The stranger nodded. "You know more than most. That's why you were assigned archiver."

It sounded like a compliment, and it was the first positive association that had been made with his assignation.

"Not sure." He frowned, adding his stock phrase, "But I'm proud to be assigned."

The stranger studied him, and he feared she saw through his answer.

"You don't want to be archiver? Why?"

"Proud to be assigned," he insisted.

Why did she care? Obviously, the stranger was intent on distracting him. Jeremiah wanted to do his duty, and she wouldn't keep him from it.

"Marme! Da!" He had never yelled so loudly in his life.

They rushed to his room. Marme grabbed his face, checking his forehead. Da stood waiting for an explanation.

"No fever. What hurts?" Marme tossed the covers back.

"Come on boy, answer your Marme."

He wasn't listening. The world had ceased spinning. The stranger. She was wearing her cloak once more, an invisible stranger. If he told his parents about her, he would receive a strapping for lying. It has been years since his last strapping, and he didn't feel like ever receiving another.

Ordinance trapped him from creating another excuse. Jeremiah struggled to speak.

"I--it--saw someone." The words exhausted him.

Da swept his head about. "Don't see a one."

"Nightmare, then." Marme clicked her tongue.

"Sleep," Da commanded.

Ordinance bade him to listen, and Jeremiah slept.

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