

Part 13. Jeremiah



Jeremiah had little to say to the stranger for the rest of the day.

She (hē) tried talking to him at bedtime, but he answered curtly. Eventually, he laid his head on the cot, ignoring her (hi) last question.

Over the next few days, Jeremiah deliberately dismissed the stranger's presence. It was hard to switch o the cloak's noise, which crawled on his skin. A er awhile, the buzz faded into the background of his daily tasks.

Without the worry of the stranger, he fully concentrated on his archiver studies. A large part of that meant working with Evangeline, learning the trade from her well-intentioned shortcuts.

She opened a blue-bound tome at the top of a towering stack. It was one of the many tomes atop many a stack. Their days consisted of reading, organizing, and adding new stacks. Jeremiah measured time by how many stacks had accrued.

Only eight more and I'm done for the day.

"Archivin', as you may've gleaned, is naught but readin' and writin'." Evangeline grinned, and it squeezed at his heart.

The feeling passed as he squashed it down.

"Then of course," she went on, unaware of her womanly-e ect on him, "there's organizin'. To save time, scan but dunna fully read pages. Would take ages if so."

Reading is all Jeremiah had been doing all this time. In his head, he had balked at the mass of never-ending prose. Suddenly, relief crashed through him. Part of his burden had been li ed.

Eyes narrowed, Evangeline asked, "You been readin' every page, ain't it right?"

No

Ordinance kept the lie from his lips. In the end, Jeremiah chose not to answer. To do so would be to admit a mistake to a woman, which was a crime against nature, according to Da.

He walked away from her, trying to lose her among the rows and rows of stacks. Somewhere between the science and culinary tomes, she cornered him.

She was so close. Jeremiah lost himself in her eyes, green like grass, with gold flecks. Di erent irises fascinated him, as he had black ones, and his family, too. Black was boring, nothing like the clear emerald he stared into now. He wondered if she thought his eyes were ugly.

"When you see me, all ya see is a girl." Evangeline leaned against a bookshelf, careful not to push in the artifacts with her back. "But I'm more; I'm an archiver's assistant, and ya can talk to me."

"How ya get assigned?" Jeremiah's question was abrupt, rude. However, he didn't care how it sounded.

She seemed to choose her words with di iculty.

"My basket is all---empty. Dad, he's a councilman, needed to place me. No one cares for archiving, or asks about it."

He had heard of baskets before. It was a woman's womb, where her babies were stored. Evangeline's was empty, and from her tone, there was no filling it up.

Her explanation was mindful of her father's role in her assignation, but Jeremiah heard it another way: I failed in my purpose as a woman. In my father's embarrassment, he did the alternative to deferring me: he assigned me, but not to a noble assignation. Some people might forget my failure, forget me.

Evangeline's father had been humane in sparing her life. All the same, Jeremiah pitied the girl. She had no purpose.

"Sorry about your...basket." He didn't meet her gaze as he o ered sympathies.

Strangely, she smiled. Her responses excited and frustrated him. She seemed to contain knowledge he didn't have, knowledge beyond her place.

"I'm not sorry."

What could she have meant? Evangeline's green eyes and unnerving smile stayed with him through dinner, up until lights out. She was a girl with no remorse for losing her place in life. The point of her existence was to create, to nurture, but God had denied her.

Somehow, she was willing to accept and move past the humiliation.

Jeremiah watched her work every day. He enjoyed working beside her. The girl was happy in her role as an archiver's assistant, and seemingly not that ashamed at her empty basket. If he had to guess, Jeremiah would say that she had gained, and not lost, something.

But what?

"Do you wish to—" Naltag stopped and began again in compound-jargon. "Wanna gab?"

It was bedtime, and as always, the stranger hovered by his cot.

"No."

Even though he did wanna gab, he had yet to forgive the stranger his omission.

"Perhaps tomorrow."

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