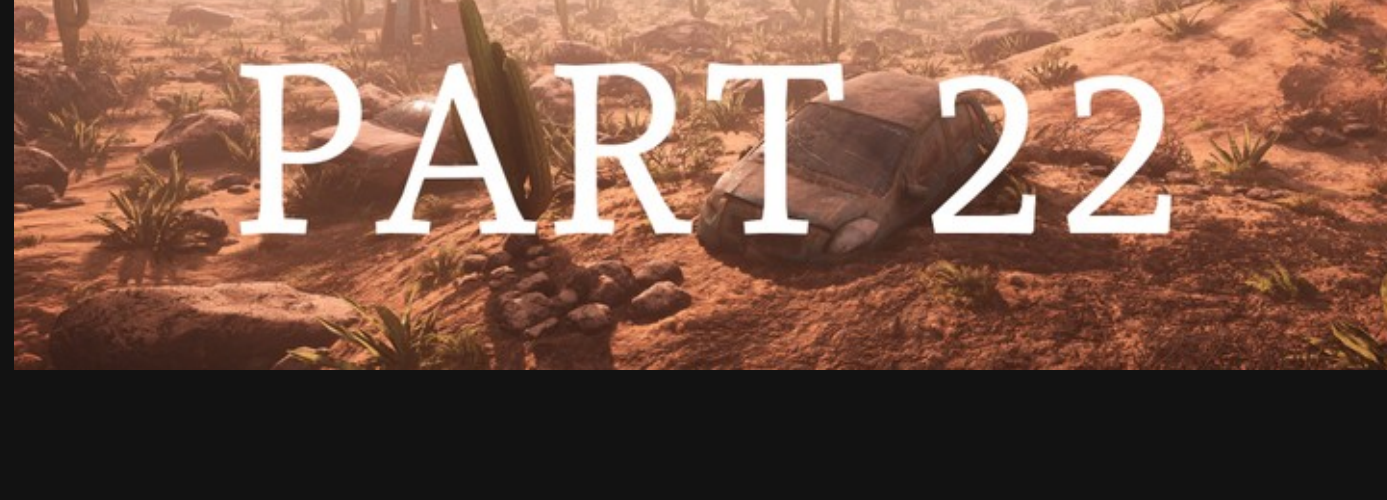


Part 22. Jeremiah



Da had him burn the tome.

As a show of loyalty, Da told him. A way to avoid conditioning and start on the right path.

Watching the edges of each page curl, fade to black, and then disappear forever did little to steady Jeremiah's state of mind.

The copy of *A Modern Utopia* was the last. Similar tomes existed, but he wanted all of them intact. The loss of one was equitable to that of a finger. Small, but a vital part of him, gone.

Jeremiah dragged himself along for the next few days. In that regard, he and Eva shared much in common. He hardly saw her, but when he did, she glided. She hurried everywhere, gracing him with a nod. He wondered if she was allowed to speak to him.

It was odd working at the Archiver's without Eva. For weeks, she had shown him the job, what to look for, how to handle himself. Now, there was no one. Quentin barely showed, as always. Jeremiah liked it that way, so he didn't have to face the potential questions about other missing tomes. He planned to return them, once he finished reading them.

Kilah read tomes he brought in, and it was hard to keep her from them when she hid them away in her special spot. One tome cited August Bebel, leading them to his work, *Women and Socialism*

Jeremiah could hardly put it down. A man, a man advocating for women. Russ's viewpoint was understandable, given the century of her blasphemy, but Bebel...the man penned his ramblings a century before Russ, and echoed her views of oppression. Men were never supposed to agree with a woman. Not in writing, that was for sure.

A man saw a woman as the wife, the daughter, the child-bearer. Lately, Jeremiah wondered if women abhorred their natural place as eternal caregivers. A small crack filtered in his brain. He felt it, like a crumble, or something old and stubborn falling o

Ordinance assured him women were happy in their place, and change would make them unhappy. As ordinance warned, change made everyone unhappy.

Jeremiah had read about it in several of the tomes. Change, political unrest, social upheaval, riots all led to unhappiness. Though, those things didn't seem any worse or more lasting than what was being overcome.

Shut up, shut up!

Bells rang in his head. Once again, his thoughts meandered into forbidden territory, and it was getting harder to stop.

Unhappy situations forced change, and brought pain, persisting even afterwards.

Why?

Why attempt change if all it did was lead to a different sort of unhappiness?

Jeremiah supposed he had touched on big questions, but frustration bit at him because he couldn't see beyond them. The why of it all acted as a splinter in his mind.

One his way to the Archiver's, he passed the Enforcer's enclave.

Usually, Eva was there to distract him, or he devised a way to avoid running into his old friends. Today, he forgot all of that.

Drevin made eye contact and waved. If Jeremiah ignored them, it would be unneighborly. Ordinance propelled Jeremiah to approach Drevin, with Easton appearing at his side.

Drevin was polite, but withdrawn. He looked tired. A sick smile was plastered on Easton's face, and Jeremiah wished to be rid of it.

"Eva is a respectable woman now."

The comment was meant as bait, he could tell. Jeremiah couldn't see a way around the confrontation, so he nodded, going with it.

"She's Quentin's now."

Easton tilted his head. "My Da says even respectable women enjoy a real man in their mouth. How good was she, Jer?"

"Respect, Easton!" Drevin cued his friend on the back of the head.

Easton put both hands in the air. "I only intend respect, even if it means forcing it from a woman. Though, Eva looks like she begs. Is that right, Jer?"

It wasn't the shortened form of his name. Not entirely. The words reminded him of q-time, with Da trying to use Kilah. Jeremiah was stuck in another situation he wanted to go differently. He never intended for anything to happen, certainly nothing like punching the sick smile from Easton's face. Though, it's just what he did.

Drevin half-carried Easton o, threatening Jeremiah along the way. The threats were for naught. While violence was frowned upon, it wasn't forbidden. Exerting physical force against another and besting them was considered honorable. As for the person on the receiving end, things went better if they remained silent.

The pretense had evolved into a tradition of sorts on both sides: the victor would brag about his win (without divulging the victim's name out of respect), and the victim would withhold complaints against the victor out of shame.

Though the victim went unnamed in physical conflicts, their bruises (or if required, their brief absences) indicated their involvement. The work-around was a tradition, and at the same time, a game.

An enforcer-in-training would never break tradition.

Easton's face and absence from class would be proof enough of what happened.

Jeremiah regretted using violence. Though not forbidden, too much violence was frowned upon, as it created instability, which could foster change.

The splinter embedded all the deeper.

At the Archiver's, Jeremiah encountered a second unusual occurrence. It started with the missing tomes. Quentin was aware of their absence, even as the Quentin from a few weeks before would have let it slide. The newly married Quentin missed nothing, and as soon as Jeremiah walked into the enclave, he was questioned about ten missing tomes, including the destroyed copy of *A Modern Utopia*.

He presented vid of the burning. For the others, he informed his mentor of his intentions to study.

Quentin rattled o the list of missing tomes from the digital record, a portable clear tablet which accompanied him everywhere.

"*Women and Socialism*, *The Female Man*, *Gender Trouble*, *Dancing at the Edge of the World*," he made a sound of disgust. "Must I go through the entire list? The titles alone indicate immediate destruction, like you did with *A Modern Utopia*. What exactly are you studying?"

"Not sure."

Jeremiah was unsure as they why one time spoke to him over another. Sometimes, an author would reference this or that tome, and a spark would itch under his skin. If he didn't find the referenced tome sooner, the spark spread until he thought his skin would explode. Other times, the title of a tome drew him in, like Eva's eyes.

Don't think of her! She's his now.

"Whatever it is, it ends. No more tomes leave the enclave, understood?" Quentin's voice reverberated with an uncharacteristic firmness.

Knowing a woman, bedding a wife, it had changed him. It's obvious that's what a wife did. She existed to transform a boy into a man.

Except, the logic was wrong. One of the tomes Jeremiah read spoke of men and women as being separate from their actions. Basically, a man didn't make a man and vice versa. The idea of gender sprang from social interactions and social expectations. Being a man, or a woman, was a performance.

Quentin seemed to be playing his part. Maybe he did what was expected of him, or that he gained power by wielding power over another. Eva.

That thought, more than the reprimand for the missing tomes, upset Jeremiah. Eva as a pawn, used up as a thing. One day, it would be Kilah's turn.

The splinter nestled further, and he was aware of something chipping oing and breaking away.

Jeremiah mumbled an excuse, and left the enclave early.

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