

## Part 4. Jeremiah



**Jeremiah had gone back on** his word. Next to lying, it was the worst offense he could commit, at least according to Da. Yet, if he kept his word to help the stranger, he would have to lie.

There was no straight arrow on the dilemma as Marme would put it.

"Talkin' to yerself?" Tillerman Zachary inquired.

Jeremiah was still picturing details about the stranger, like the confident, unwavering stare. He couldn't imagine a smile on the guy. He always had a serious face, always analyzing. He barely heard Zachary's question.

"Huh?"

"Outside, you was jabberin' at the metal skeleton."

His heart sped up. Had Zachary seen the stranger? Then he calmed a er further reasoning. No, he would've reported it.

"Just talkin' to myself. Ponderin' on what tech the skeleton coulda been."

Zachary shrugged. "No use ponderin'. Things past be dead. And dead can't tell ya nothin'."

But strangers can, Jeremiah thought.

Tillerman Zachary made him stay inside for the rest of his shift. As punishment for his idle behavior, Jeremiah was assigned to clean all of the tools. It was his last day as a tiller's apprentice, Zachary informed him. Tomorrow would be his first day as archiver.

Helping the stranger would have been impossible anyhow. Jeremiah's topside privileges were suspended until the next rotation in two months. Going outside without clearance was unthinkable. Those who attempted were either shunned, or planned on abandoning the compound all along.

Like Darden's Marme.

Though Jeremiah remembered the ordinance, he pushed her anguished face from his mind.

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After dinner rations, Kilah followed Jeremiah around the compound relentlessly.

"Excited about tomorrow?" Her babydoll dragged on the floor behind her with a soft scraping noise.

It was the tenth question she had posed pertaining to his assignment.

"I'm proud to be assigned," he told her.

Jeremiah patted himself internally. The answer was a proper one, and was what Da might've said. He was proud to be assigned, but he was anxious about his role as archiver. The assignment wouldn't be enough, he was sure of it. He would watch fellows like Malachi or Jacob play out their enforcer roles, and all he would have to look forward to was a pile of dusty books and transcription tech.

If Jeremiah thought on it too long, a slow chewing pain bit into his heart, spreading to his gut.

"Can I 'company you?"

Though the plaintive tone moved him, Jeremiah corrected her with a scowl. "Accompany." Then he considered the question, and followed with one of his own. "Accompany me where?"

"On your assignment!" she giggled.

He balked. "Of course not! You're just a girl!" Suddenly, the sight of Kilah dragging her doll annoyed him. "Pick that thing up! You're meant to practice, not slog it around. What kinda marme you aim to be, anyhow?"

Jeremiah figured Kilah would cry at his chastising, like most girls, but she observed him with clear eyes.

"Don't wanna be a darn marme!"

She kicked the doll, and it slid out of sight.

He didn't know how to respond. No one was around them, and he was relieved. If anyone else had overheard Kilah, she would've been taken for re-conditioning, and he knew it to be a trying experience. A erward, people returned with blank eyes and bland words.

Jeremiah wished for something better for Kilah, no matter how frustrating she was.

"Shhhh." He gathered her in his arms. "You can't say such things."

Kilah pouted, humming and purring. She was far from the whimpering mess he had still expected of her.

"Wanna be assigned. Why can't I?"

Is this how it started? he wondered. Did rebels know from a young age how different they were? Maybe Darden's marme had known as early as five-years-old.

### Ordinance.

Jeremiah sucked in a long breath.

"You ken why. Assignments are for men, and Marme-ing is for women. It's the way it is, the way God intends."

Kilah narrowed her eyes and stomped her foot. "God's stupid."

One horrific statement a er another was flying out of his sister's mouth, and he couldn't stop it. He checked around them, but there was still no one. Jeremiah knew he should be worried, but he was actually amused. Kilah was adorable in her childlike outrage.

He hugged her, kissing her small forehead. "Spose he can seem stupid sometimes."

Kilah pulled away from him to ask, "How you ken God's a man?"

Jeremiah ruled Kilah's fragile curls. "Easy. He tells people what to do, so must be a man."

She seemed unhappy with the logic. "Oh, right."

"One day you'll be assigned a husband to serve, and then you'll be a marme, and things will be great."

Finally, Kilah's chin trembled. Tears tracked down her cheeks.

"I don't wanna. Scared."

Bearing babies had to be scary, but despite the obvious, he asked, "Why?"

Kilah wound a curl around her finger. "Scared to lose me."

Her words reverberated through him. By becoming an archiver, he feared a loss of self, a life buried in words, to be forgotten by everyone in New Andover. Kilah was five-years-old, a girl, and yet, in this fear, they were equal.

"Tell ya a secret." Jeremiah's voice dropped to a whisper, "Don't wanna be archiver."

Saying it aloud startled him, even as it knew it to be true. The actual words, outside of him, in the air and in the ears of another person, meant something apart from him.

Kilah's eyebrows met in the middle. "For real, for real?"

"For real." Jeremiah nodded. "Still, it's my duty to serve, and I gotta follow ordinances, and same's you."

Kilah wouldn't look up, but she nodded.

He instructed her to fetch her doll, and a er much grumbling, she complied. He felt sorry for whatever man got saddled with her, as he'd be in for a sassy lassy.

However, the encounter left him feeling better than he had in days. One day, he would make a great Da.

The stranger had all but been forgotten.

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