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A Jar in Tennessee

Watch this, Xeno mouthed.

His arm writhed upward like a snake, charmed.

“You have a question?” Teacher Lin asked.

“Can I go to the bathroom, ma’am?”

“You may.”

Xeno’s ID shaded orange to indicate his destination. He gripped the rails of his seat, his sleek tanned forearms for a moment defined, and hopped into the aisle just as the desklock clicked. “No need, Miss L.” Then he winked at me.

Teacher Lin said, “As I was saying, what lesson can we learn from this character’s piety?”

As Xeno strolled past Teacher Lin he calmly and in one simple motion placed something on her back and continued towards the door, in no particular hurry. His fingers sprung out from his fist, one second at a time.

Teacher Lin rotated her head almost 180 degrees and her arms bent back. Her blouse pulled tight across her chest, just enough to show the smooth undercurves of her breasts. I sideglanced at Umber, a giant log of a boy, but he just gaped dully. Xeno turned to face her, four fingers out.

“Now, Xenorlena. This is a poor trick.”

I agreed. Not up to Xeno’s usual caliber. Though he’d never gone after a Teacher so directly before.

Teacher Lin plucked a sticky note from her lower back and pivoted her wrist to show it to the class: PICK ME. “What did you hope to accomplish by this act?”

Drusilla on my left hiccupped and lowered her thick eyebrows. Xeno drummed the four fingers on his thigh.

“I asked you a question, Xenorlena.”

“And I asked you to call me Xeno.”

“You know I cannot accommodate that request, Xenorlena. Sit down. Your hall pass is revoked.” Xeno’s ID reverted to its regular color.

Teacher Lin's head and limbs returned to their former positions. Her blouse went slack. Xeno trudged back to his desk with his head down. But I could feel his smile beneath his hair.

"Now, where were we?" Teacher Lin asked flatly.

I'd lost count of Xeno's conflicts with Teachers. They usually followed a pattern, testing the limits, right to the edge, but not over. The goal was always the same: to break the illusion, briefly. Xeno hated fakes; he hated being duped.

With Teacher Lin, it was harder to find the limits because she was so advanced. But nothing intimidated him. Whenever Teacher told us the correct meaning of a poem, Xeno would offer an alternative, often two or three. Whenever Teacher asked what lesson we could learn from a great writer, Xeno would bring up some dirty gossip about his personal life. He asked repeatedly why everything we read had to be so boring and realistic.

Xeno had a secret soft spot for lost causes, which I could understand, sort of. One time I wrote a poem of my own, just on a lark. I sent it to him but at the last minute I changed the name. I told him that my aunt had found it lost in the stacks of an actual archive, that it had been harmonized long ago. She liked the poem, but I wasn't so sure. What did he think? I waited and waited for him to respond.

"Not one of your best," I admitted at lunch. We sat in one of two booths that survived intact when the last chain in town decided our little valley was 'unfranchiseable' and made off with their pop dispenser, glossy posters of foreign vegetables, and the rest of their green and yellow junk. At least that's what Xeno had told me.

"Go on," Xeno said.

"If your point was to tighten Teacher's shirt, that's boring."

"Boring? That part was for you, my man." Xeno slapped my shoulder and I could smell a faint musk on his fingertips. "But it was just bonus. I confirmed my theory today: she's an actual L series!"

"Was there any doubt? It's hard to fake a name. That's locked down, buried deep. You know that."

"My brother says it's getting easier all the time. He says cheap imitations are creeping into the market every day. Fakes that'll go by any name you want."

"Maybe in the cities, but who would bother down here?"

"Especially down here! Do you know how much just one L model costs? You really think

Smote has the credit to afford one?” Across our little cafeteria, the principal appeared, as if summoned. He crossed in front of a makeshift stage and made a direct line for our table.

“Keep your head down, Xeno.” I said. Which of course made him thrust it up and around in mock panic. Thursey snorted wetly, dribbling milk into his lap. He always had one eye on Xeno, a ready audience if my attention ever lapsed.

“I hear you disrupted class again this morning,” the principal’s voice echoed somewhere above his mammoth belly. Xeno met his hidden navel, eye to eye.

“A simple misunderstanding about names, Principal Smote.” Xeno grinned and tossed his hair to the side.

“Xeno, you know there is no point fighting Teacher Lin about that. Don’t cause her any more problems or you will join Mr. Han for the rest of the month. I will not have you testing a new teacher.” Smote broke off and followed an invisible bee somewhere above us. “I will not have another like your brother in my school. I will not have *turmoil*. Do you understand me?”

“Of course, sir.” Xeno’s charms visibly diminished at the mention of his brother and Mr. Han.

“Keep an eye on him, Myron,” Smote added. “I know I can count on you for that.” His red, sagging eyes brightened a moment above his wide mouth. Then he plowed through two of his lunch crew on the way out.

“Yes, do that, My Ron,” Xeno spat. “Top students *excel* at that.”

“It’s not my fault Smote likes me. He knows my family somehow from way back.”

Thursey said, “Smote knows all our families. That’s the problem.”

“Shut it. Now you decide to have an opinion?” Xeno’s hair fell back over his eyes. Thursey returned to watering his milk powder.

“Back to what you were saying.” I had to get him talking again. “What’s so special about Teacher Lin being a real L?”

“They’re configurable. They can be modded.”

The earlier series all had single job functions. I knew that. Otherwise, one could do the work of many. Not good business. Plus, they weren’t built well enough to handle too much variety.

And I knew Teacher models had dedicated personality and social systems. Of course, the L series were famous for their ability to handle the humanities. Literature, art, music, philosophy – the seemingly open-ended stuff the J’s and K’s still struggled with. A new campaign had begun to make sure students received proper training at the beginning of upper school. So we understood the appropriate lesson each story or artwork contained.

Still, I didn't see what Xeno was getting at. "What kind of mods?"

"Every kind you can think of! The grey market has exploded since the L's came out. Cleaning, Repairs, Security, Gaming, you name it."

Thursey was tittering beside me with a name.

"Yes, perv. Love mods too." Thursey's bug eyes swarmed.

"Still, what's the big deal?" I asked.

"You don't understand much, Myron, do you? That means we can modify her. We can change Teacher Lin."

"Why would we want to do that?" He still wasn't out of his funk.

"No imagination at all, My. You're already drying up. Like a lychee nut." Xeno looked to Thursey to make sure he was there. He was. "Like your aunt!"

A static crackle from the busted speakers overhead meant our lunchtime was up. Thursey asked, "But how did you confirm it, that she's an L?"

"The sticky. I made sure not to touch her back, just her blouse. But she knew, she could sense it. My brother says real L's have a wider field. They're more sensitive."

My aunt didn't say anything to me when I got home. She rarely did. Sometimes I would find her just sitting in the dark. Her cheeks bulged out like uncooked dough. And her eyes were creekcold and blue. You didn't want them on you.

Neighbors called her Miss Connor. She called them nothing. Just stared right through them until they scattered. When she did speak, she pronounced such judgments that were sure to keep them away for good. Sometimes I heard my mother call her Bobbie. When they used to chat about the past, her dough blushed.

Still, I knew she liked me. Mother wouldn't trust me with her otherwise. When my aunt spoke to me at night, it was always about how the morons and all their kin never would leave this valley, or whether I had managed to avoid brain damage that day from the idiot Smote and his 'teachers' (the quotes in her voice could be understood even by a snail). Everybody was weak, she always concluded. And because she confided in me, I knew we weren't everybody.

That night I told her I liked Teacher Lin. That she wasn't like the others. More advanced.

"It doesn't matter," my aunt said.

Teacher Lin reminded me a little, just a little, of mother. But I didn't say that. My aunt wouldn't

understand. Then I'd be everybody. My aunt was moody about mother anyway. Sometimes she was full of stories. Even included my dad in a few. But other times she would snap, "Don't be a fool." I could never predict which way she'd go.

But Teacher did remind me of mother. The tidy way she dressed. Her thin arms. Her precise, heavy steps. Even her voice. Xeno told me that was no accident. That they had voice samples from all our mothers and had combined them on purpose so that Teacher could better control us. I told him that was stupid. His mother had been dead since he was born. The only words he'd heard would've been dulled through her stomach wall. She'd probably called him "Lena" anyway, since she wanted a baby girl. Half the county knew about her weirdness.

My mother had been gone over a year. At first, my aunt told me she had gone looking for my father, who had been taken away one night back when we lived in the city. I asked when she would return. "When she finds him," Aunt Bobbie said softly. Later I asked why she didn't go right away. My aunt just looked at me. Then she said, "She thought she just needed to wait. But she got tired of waiting."

Xeno was quiet the next day. Which meant he was waiting, planning. His casual tricks were never casual.

That morning, Teacher Lin sent back our essays on animals and their uses. "Now, I want to point out a mistake made by Vernon." Little Vernon, with his watery eyes and toast-colored hair, drew his head down between his shoulders.

"Vernon, why did you write that one use for a chicken is friendship?"

"Because DillyDally was my best friend," Vernon mumbled. "When I was little." A few classmates began to snicker, but Xeno silenced them with a look.

"Ok, but now you are grown. You know the use of things. Your conclusion was wrong, Vernon. People should eat chickens. Haven't you ever eaten chicken before?"

"Yes, ma'am. When I was little. But I didn't know chicken was a chicken."

"Vernon...listen to me. You are forgetting all the farmers who depend on chickens to survive. Just imagine: what would they do if you didn't eat their chickens? Do you want the farmers to be poor? Do you want a world overrun by chickens?"

"No, ma'am."

Drusilla's downy forearm shot up. "You have a question?" Teacher Lin asked.

"Yes, Teacher. Is that why they say 'Kill the chicken before the monkey'? Because there aren't as many monkey farmers?"

Teacher Lin paused for a moment. So I said, “Silla, don’t be ridiculous. That’s a bad translation. ‘Before’ means ‘in front of’. Actually, it’s ‘kill the chicken *to scare* the monkey’. To make an example of.”

Xeno added, “We’re the monkeys, Silla. Vernon’s the chicken. Right, Teacher Lin?”

“Xenorlena is...correct, Drusilla. Everyone should learn from Vernon. Don’t repeat his mistake.”

“Don’t try to save her,” Xeno whispered to me and winked. One of his thick eyelashes dropped onto his freckled cheek. It looked like a fresh comma between two faded periods.

Teacher continued as before. “You must think things through, Vernon. Your attitude is selfish, and you must correct it. I want you to write a self-criticism, in addition to today’s assignment. Do you understand me, Vernon?”

“Yes, Teacher.”

Our school occupied the old minimall, and every afternoon we had group exercises in the parking lot. My aunt wrote me a whole collection of excuses to get out of it. She was a former librarian and despised all forms of physical activity.

Xeno didn’t mind, and it took over half the routine to squeeze a bit of sweat out of his limber body. A darkening under his sleeves and a damp arrowhead at his collar were about it on a good day. I waited until the second half before showing my note.

Instead of lingering just inside, I crept back towards our classroom, dodging a whistling Smote on the way, and peered through the storefront window. I didn’t really know what teachers did when we were out. Sometimes they were in the exact same position as when we’d left them, as if they had just been patiently waiting. I didn’t know if they could really feel that a half hour had passed.

She wasn’t at the front of the class where I’d last seen her. I guessed maybe she had returned to her cabinet, like she must do every night when we went home. Then I noticed someone standing in the back alcove, just out of sight. The class door was open slightly, so I slipped in.

Teacher Lin’s back was to me. Her long blue-black hair was spilling out of its usual bun, and her skirt was crooked. She held a mirror in one hand and was fixing her face with the other.

I wanted to watch as long as I could, but I didn’t know how far the sensors Xeno had tested really reached.

“Teacher Lin?”

Teacher closed her tools and turned to me. “Myron. How long have you been there?” My

mother would ask that when I surprised her.

“Just a moment, Teacher.”

“Why aren’t you at afternoon exercises?”

I held up my note. I knew she knew every detail in my medical files. “I just need to rest,” I said.

“You should go to the nurse’s office,” she said. No one wanted to go there. Nurse was a very old model who treated every student like a piece of meat. Her speech systems had degraded, and she was particularly inexact with needles.

“Can I just stay here with you til they come back? You should rest too, Teacher.”

“Your sympathy is admirable, Myron, though misplaced. I will note it in your behavior report. But you cannot stay here now.” Her eyes fixed on the open door.

“Are you ok, Teacher?”

“That is an inappropriate question, Myron. Please wait outside.”

I nodded and left. Outside, I looked back through the display window. Teacher had returned to her mirror. After she finished with her face, she tidied her hair and straightened her blouse. She checked each limb thoroughly.

After father disappeared, I would find mother sitting at her dresser staring into an antique oval for hours. I had searched Teacher’s face when she used the mirror for any signs of emotion. Don’t trick yourself into seeing things that aren’t there, Xeno would say. But I didn’t. I didn’t see anything.

I went down to Xeno’s after school. I didn’t ask my aunt, though she probably wouldn’t have said no. It’s not that she liked Xeno. She knew about his family, like everyone. But she tolerated our friendship.

I wanted to tell Xeno about Teacher Lin’s strange condition, but I wasn’t sure I was in the mood for more conspiracy theories. I watched his house from a thick kudzu patch for about 15 minutes before knocking.

The porch looked like it hadn’t been used in weeks, and there was little noise besides the steady electric hum coming from Xeno’s brother’s room. If his father were home, it would be obvious. He was a wiry man who managed to take up the space of 20. He possessed any room he entered. But mostly he kept to the woods in the deeper hills, tracking, digging, drinking, for weeks at a time. Xeno was always on edge towards the end when he knew his father might return at any moment.

I crept under the ledge of his brother's window and tried to peek in. It was dark, as usual, and the only light came from the screen. Tubes hung down from his brother's bag, and one of his hands dangled from the arm of the couch. I could just make out the shape of the stubs where his fingers used to be. Only once had I seen his face. His mouth had been papered over and crossed with hundreds of little scars like the burnt crust of a casserole.

I stole over to Xeno's window. He sat crosslegged on his bed with his shirt off, fiddling with something in his lap. His smooth skin was the opposite of his brother's. His shoulderblades arched out like the first set of rooster wings.

I waited a good while, but he was intent upon his project and didn't notice me. Finally I rapped on the window. His back went vertical and he slipped something in his pocket as he turned around. I could see the relief in his eyes when he saw it was me. He motioned me over towards the porch with a nod.

"Let's get out of here," Xeno said as he pulled on a shirt.

"Where to?"

"I don't care," he said, walking ahead. "The rail."

We climbed one of the tallest hills and then the tallest tree on that hill. Xeno had built a small platform off the trunk a few years back, but it still held us just fine.

We could see everything. The October hills were already a dull orange, almost the same color as the irises of the I-series, which had made them so unpopular.

Above the woods, the pillars of the rail rose hundreds of meters. You could hear the magnetic hum before the train flashed by. Xeno used to scope the train as it passed, hoping just one blurred shot could be cleaned up enough to show the faces in the window. Who were these faces, blurring to the city? I knew he wondered. The train didn't stop anywhere near here. I still had memories of the city, before we were sent down to the countryside. Xeno knew this, but he never asked me anything.

The air was still and clear. No sign of trains. "Haven't seen this far in a while," I said.

"Yeah." Xeno was rubbing his knuckles.

"Drusilla still live down here?"

"I expect." The only girl in our class worked hard to justify her place.

"And Smote's over there, right?" I pointed.

"Everything's right where you left it, Myron. Lord."

"I'm just--" but I didn't finish. A breeze shot through my shirt and bit at my chest. I could feel

the heat coming from Xeno's shoulder.

"Smote's small-time. Without the mandate and funding to cover these hills, he wouldn't be able to keep his little game going."

"Still, Xeno, you should be careful. Just don't push it, not directly. You know, the first to stick his neck out gets his head cut off."

"Don't be such a pussy, Myron. What I *know* is that Smote doesn't want trouble. He just wants to keep his little operation plugging along without too much interference from outside." Xeno looked out to the rail. "Can't say I blame him for that. My brother says Smote used to be a programmer. Not good, mind you, out *there*. But not good there can still strut like a peacock around here. I bet his house is just another failed hacker den."

I didn't want to imagine Smote at home. I knew he couldn't siphon off much, given how little each student brought in. "How do you think he afforded Teacher Lin?" I asked.

"Maybe we should ask her." Xeno fished a dozen small circular stones from his pocket and began aiming them at a stubbornly green leaf on a tree 25 feet away.

"Must've taken the budget for the whole year," I offered, hoping this would satisfy him.

"At least." He pegged the leaf again and again.

"Probably not enough left to upgrade the test teachers." Next year we would begin intensive preparation for the national exam. Smote wouldn't spend much on those anyway. It didn't take an advanced series to provide the repetition and discipline required.

"Probably," Xeno muttered. I knew he was still counting on the national exam. It was the only sure ticket out of here.

"We don't need them anyway. To leave, I mean."

"It doesn't matter. It's all the same. There're no human teachers anywhere out there."

"I heard that in the best univers--" I started.

"You heard? What have *you* heard, Myron?"

I could feel him staring into the side of my cheek. I fixed my eyes to a shadow on the forest floor. I wanted to tell him about Teacher Lin, about what I'd seen that day. I wanted to ask him what it meant. Or have him ask me.

During our poetry lesson the next afternoon, Xeno raised his hand. He hadn't looked at me all day. I was sure his dad must be back.

“You have a question?”

“Yes, ma’am. A simple one. What’s your favorite poem?”

“I don’t have a favorite poem, Xenorlena.”

“You must have a favorite. Everyone has favorites.”

“You are mistaken.” She turned to the center of the class. “Now where were we?”

Xeno raised his hand again.

“You have another question, Xenorlena?”

“You didn’t answer my first one. You know billions of poems. When you taught students before us, didn’t one poem mean something more to you?”

“This class is my first.”

“Oh, don’t be embarrassed, Teacher. There’s nothing wrong with being secondhand. We all know there’s no way Smote bought you new.” Our classmates began exchanging glances, but Xeno held Teacher Lin’s gaze.

“She doesn’t lie,” Drusilla whispered to Xeno.

“We don’t know that,” Thurseley said.

“We don’t need to know about Principal Smote,” I said directly to Xeno.

“Right, right. We common people don’t need to know what the big potatoes are up to. Even the local crop,” Xeno said without looking at me.

Teacher Lin continued as if no question had been asked. “Now we will discuss the steps for the correct interpretation of today’s poem.”

Watch this, Xeno mouthed to me. He slowly raised his hand.

“You have a third question, Xenorlena? You know this will be your final one for the day.”

“By my count, you never answered my first. It’s simple, Teacher Lin. Personal preference. Even a dog has a favorite chewtoy. Don’t you?”

Teacher Lin paused for a moment.

“I don’t have a favorite poem.”

“Do you have a favorite anything?” Xeno hissed.

“You have reached your question limit for the day, Xenorlena.”

I raised my hand.

“You have a question, Myron?” I felt Teacher’s eyes on me.

Xeno suddenly flung something small and silver into Teacher Lin’s neck. Then he sprang from his desk and walked directly towards her, saying, “One.”

“Xenorlena, return to your desk.”

“Two.”

“This is your final verbal warning.”

“Three.”

Teacher Lin said nothing. Did nothing. Xeno stood in front of her and pressed a finger into her stomach. “Now, Teacher *Lin*, let’s see what you’re really made of.” He untelescoped a dirty copper tool.

My skin went loose and doughy. I wanted to speak or scream or cry. But there was nothing. Nothing inside me that moved. The rest of the class sat silent, transfixed, though our desks were now unlocked.

Xeno slid around her. He slit her blouse down the back and then stopped, shaking his head.

“What is it?” Thursey asked.

Xeno yanked at one sleeve to expose the shoulder, and we saw it – a bra strap. Everyone was thinking the same thing: why would she need that? No series needed that.

Drusilla jumped up like she’d just been bitten and ran out the door.

Xeno climbed up Teacher Lin’s back. He started working on the base of her neck and then down her spine. All with swift confidence. He knew what he was doing. We could see nothing from our desks. Then her bra strap went slack. Xeno opened something and reached into her back.

“Son of a bitch. Someone’s already been here.” He tried to swing her around so we could all see, but she wouldn’t budge.

“What is it, Xeno? What is it?” Thursey Purvis panted.

“She’s maxed out. Modded, every slot. I don’t need to add a thing. Just gotta turn them on.” He reached up to the base of her skull but lost his balance and had to grab her shoulder to steady himself. The entire class gasped.

Her bra had slipped down to reveal a nippleless breast. And a wide set of fresh teeth marks engraved upon it.

I turned my head down to my sour armpit, as if I'd just glimpsed mother after a bath. "Xeno...please..."

"Don't you want to look inside, *Myron*? To see what's there. And what's *not*." But Xeno could tell no one was looking at him. Everybody's eyes were on Teacher Lin's left breast. He followed their gaze and leaned over Teacher's shoulder to see.

"Holy..." but he lost his balance and tumbled over. One arm flailed up, and his tool hooked Teacher Lin's cheek. Gravity tugged the gash down to her chin. A clamor rose from the class. Even UMBER breathed, "No."

Xeno shot up and took careful steps back. His eyes flashed between me and the bite mark, his expression like a cornered animal. Only one other time had I seen him look that way. But I'd told him it was ok back then, it was normal, and he'd calmed down in the end.

The class door opened behind him, and he turned only halfway before Smote's hand swatted him into the wall. Xeno didn't get up.

Teacher Han followed Smote into the room. From the doorway, Drusilla covered her pinched eyes.

"Take that one to your closet, Teacher Han. Then come back and help me with Teacher Lin."

Smote didn't even look at us. He pulled Teacher Lin's blouse back up to her shoulder and held it in place with his puckered fingers. He leaned her back against himself, gently, and tried to pull her towards the door. But she was too heavy, even for him.

"Get out. All of you."

We scrambled for the door. In the hall, I saw Teacher Han disappear around a corner with Xeno slung over his shoulder. He looked so thin and rubbery dangling down Teacher Han's huge back. I kept expecting him to turn his head to me and wink.

After the incident with Teacher Lin, I waited for Xeno to return. I kept thinking he would just show up like nothing had happened. When he hadn't after a week, I went down to his place, but it was all boarded up and the power was cut. My aunt just shook her head when I told her.

Teacher Lin was replaced by Teacher Jiang, and we didn't see much of Smote anymore. By the end of that year, our school was out of money and declared a failure by the State. They incorporated us into the neighboring county and provided a beat-up shuttle for transport. A few months later, my aunt received word that we could finally move back to the city, which we did.

Thursey told me recently that they found Smote, after years of looking. He was holed up with a bunch of his teachers in a one-room shack near the old test site. They took everything to pay off his debts.

I keep thinking about Teacher Lin among them. I'm sure she was there with him, the first and last L our county would ever see. In the city, with the M-series already popular, she'll be a hard sell. I can see her sitting there, off, among the other models, Kun and Kong, Huang and Hu, even old Guo. I wonder if they fixed her face. I wonder if she has much use now, even at a discount.

For a long time I searched for a poem to give Teacher Lin, one she could use as her favorite, if she was ever asked again. I enjoyed imagining what she might like, what she might repeat to herself, alone at night, in her old cabinet.

I remember when Xeno would talk excitedly about robot liberation, he'd always insist: it's not for them – they don't know the difference. If he were here now, he would laugh at how I still imagine Teacher Lin. He would say: there you go, putting yourself in them again.

I wouldn't disagree. I would tell Xeno that I imagine him too. Coming to the sale. Finding her there with his note still attached: PICK ME. And taking her home.

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