

//System

J. Browse

“When I am raised a System shall guide you”

Eli St Jon, Lùthian Founder

Chapter 1: Inspection

“A considerable list of qualities can easily be compiled that nearly everyone except "cranks" would take into account when picking out the best specimens of his class. It would include health, energy, ability, manliness, and courteous disposition”

Francis Galton, Ootlin Aislingiche, Eli Center required reading

The Inspection room was so cold my breath clouded the air. I perch on the high table, naked thighs tacky against the peeling plastic cover. The low-tier Lùthian, who had led me here thirty-four minutes ago, had mutely watched me undress, before leaving me alone. I wonder if this is another one of their tests. How long will I sit in a frigid room in my underwear? My hands curl around the edge of the table knuckles whitening but I force them to relax, fold them neatly in my lap, numb fingers intertwined.

Another eight minutes pass before the door swings open. The Inspector is a large man with thinning blonde hair capping a ruddy face. His white coat is greying at the seams. He carries a clipboard in one hand, a sleek metal toolbox in the other. Washed-out blue eyes appraise me from beneath swollen eyelids. I swiftly cover my left hand with my right feeling the seam of the silicon skin covering my index finger. From the information I had gathered at great cost, my hands should not be closely checked.

“How are we today?”

The words and tone are at odds with the calculation in his gaze. I nod, unsure how to answer. I had not expected small-talk, the Examiner had simply barked questions.

“Please stand against the scale”

He motions to the wall and I hop down from the table. My height is recorded, followed by my weight. The inspector hands me a tape measure from his toolbox and has me pull it tight around my waist, my thighs and my chest. Each measurement is noted in thick

black characters, illuminated by the clear blue light of the monitor on his wrist. I am slim enough to pass although my maternal characteristics will be marked low. There is little I could do to change that.

“Age?”

The question catches me unawares and I almost answer honestly before remembering my role.

“Around 40”

He nods, unsurprised at my ambiguity. Most applicants from the borders are hazy on their exact age.

“Maternal origin?”

Here I do answer truthfully.

“Mediterranean”

He writes MED in clumsy block letters; he probably can’t spell the whole word.

“Paternal origin”, he asks, pen poised.

“Unknown”, I lie.

“Well... that’s a shame”

I had considered a more specific falsehood, Northern European perhaps but unknown is more believable. The last applicant caught in a inheritance lie is still rotting at the base of the pillars. The inspector begins rummaging in his toolbox pulling out his colour cards and hair swatches.

“Please turn around”

I don’t want to turn my back to him but I must stay in character. Keeping my eyes to the floor, I feel him approach from behind, he smells of dog. Lùthians are fond of dogs, keeping large packs in some districts. The sharp edge of the colour card grazes my shoulder blade. He tries several, muttering beneath his breath, before finally deciding.

“Three-point-two”

Not bad. The months using the stinging lightener had been worth it. More scribbling from behind and then I feel his fingers in my hair. They rub the strands pulling at my scalp. I hold my breath, stare at the grey lino floor tiles. There is a brown stain at the corner of one, causing the edge to curl.

Stain. Anagram of saint. Anagram of at sin. Saints at sin, but saints are pure, unstained.

Finally, his hands retreat.

“You may sit”

He continues to write on the clipboard as I awkwardly lean against the metal table. I’m too far from him to see what he is writing but my hair, while dark, is fine and silky. It shouldn’t lower my purity score. Unless the hair samples I bought at an astronomical price were out of date. Finally, he looks up from his notations.

“Just the face dimensions left” he smiles.

Taking a pair of callipers from the toolbox, he once again approaches and I tense, fighting against the impulse to run. I can hide my tattoos, even lighten my skin but there is no way to alter the planes of my face. Prosthetics would be noticed this close. The tips of the metal instrument dance across my cheeks, my nose, my chin. He measures the height of my forehead, the curve of my lips, the depth of my eyelids. The callipers clip and snap as he writes number after number, muttering to himself, seemingly forgetting I am here.

“Good cheek to brow ratio but signs of orientalism in the brow line...”

His pupils are pinpricks in the harsh neon light.

“Slight deviation in the septum...”

I tune him out, close my eyes.

“Eyes open please”, he snaps.

I open my lids, he's inches away. The red of his cheeks is due to a network of broken capillaries that thread through his skin like a web. My eyes meet his and forgetting my character for a moment I hold his gaze, he flinches back first. Flicking my glare to the floor I school my features back to neutrality.

"Almost done" he coughs nervously.

I hunch my shoulders and keep my head bowed as he finishes, feigning submission. The Inspector finalised his notes while I dress.

"Please wait here, you will be sent for final review presently"

I wait for one-hour and twenty-two minutes. I spend the time lying on my back reviewing each and every expression of the Inspector and Examiner. Had they detected any lie? Were they simply toying with me? Finally, the door of the room opens. It is the same silent Lùthian that brought me here. My breath settles. If they truly knew who I was they would send compliance officers. She is several years older than me with frizzy greying hair and a round bland face. The only colour in her is the glowing green light of her monitor. A Tier 6 worker.

We walk through miles of nondescript hallway before reaching the judgement room. I was expecting grandiosity but instead enter a windowless beige room, starkly illuminated by strip lighting. My guide stays outside. The review board, sit behind a long trestle table, covered with stacks of paper, facing a collapsible chair in the centre of the room. The blonde Inspector on the left. The Examiner, who had administered the intelligence and personality tests that morning, on the right. I did not recognize the person sitting between them but he could only be the Judge.

My arrival seems to have interrupted an argument. The Inspector is half out of his chair with a fistful of paper gesticulating at the Examiner whose hands are curled into fists. Only the Judge is calm, ankle crossed over his knee, long fingers tented beneath his clean-shaven chin.

“Please sit down Miss Aconse”

Miss Aconse, not Miss Andros, a good sign. The Judge waves at the lone chair. The gesture reveals his monitor glowing a clear bright white. It explains the length of the table. A Tier two citizen takes proximity very seriously. I lower myself onto the fragile looking chair not quite sure it will take my weight.

“As you can see your metrics have caused quite the debate”

Of course they have. I designed it that way. I turn my toes in, hunch my shoulders. It’s correct to look nervous. My research into previous applicants was not wasted. Do too well all round and they will assume deceit.

“Your examination scores are very impressive...”

They should be, given the number of bribes I had to employ to steal the questions. They had not revealed my final mark but it is in the 90th percentile. I need it to be high to balance the Inspectors report. I make sure to make brief eye contact with all three at the table. Avoiding eye contact reads as though you are hiding something.

“But your personality review suggests improvements are needed!?”

The Judge employs a condescending paternal tone, as though speaking with a child, with that annoying sing-song pitch so often employed by Lùthians. I should have scored high on submission, low on leadership with a introspective streak. The type of person who will not cause trouble but also can’t take much responsibility, malleable. A perfect Lùthian really.

“And of course there are some concerns around the oriental indications in your physiognomy...”

It seems my father's heritage was detected after all. Good I kept the lie simple. If I had specified a origin, I would already be at the pillars accused of inheritance deception.

"However, in Lùth we understand that all can be bettered and take their place..."

Lùthians really love to hear their own voice. I widen my eyes and raise my brows feigning sincere attention.

"...for under the System all will survive and the worthy thrive as the Founder intended!"

The Judge ends by slamming his palm on the table making the papers jump and scatter. I feel this last statement is more for the Inspector, who is glowering at me. He must have been a no vote.

"That said..."

The Judge's pitch falls several octaves.

"Given your unknown genetics and requirements for further adjustments we consider a tier 7 placement will best fulfil your betterment goals"

Tier 7? That would mean no housing. I had planned for Tier 6 but then this application was a long shot to begin with. As long as I am in, my plan will work. I scrub any signs of dissatisfaction from my face and try to look suitably humble. A few teardrops here would be a good reaction but I've never been able to do that on cue.

The Judge takes a small box from among the papers and in one quick motion throws it to the ground between my feet. It breaks open on impact and the silver object it contains rolls across the ground before landing with a clink several meters from me. I conceal my shock at such disregard for a monitor, but then they are almost indestructible. The Judge holds my gaze and nods at the floor; he wants me to retrieve it from the ground. For the first time he truly smiles, showing his straight white teeth.

For a moment my resolve wavers but there is nothing for me to go back to. I stand and walk towards the simple circular bracelet. Squatting to retrieve it, my fingers brush the smooth metal. At my touch it opens – for the first and last time. I straighten before snapping it around my right wrist. It begins to glow a sallow orange. No going back now.

The Judge stands and circles the table keeping a wide berth from the other men, stopping proximal distance from me. No Lùthian will ever touch me again.

“Congratulations Miss Aconse you are now a Lùthian, subject to the adjudication of the System and the code of the Compliance office”

I smile, sincerely this time. After so much careful planning Gyllyvasse Andros is finally back in Edinburgh.