

Tea Leaves

The door opened before my knuckles made contact. No one greeted me, but the silhouette of a woman was discernible in the ambient after-hours lighting.

"Ms. Marshall?" I offered, stepping inside the apartment and closing the door behind me without an invitation or confirmation.

The woman was unimposing, shrinking back further into the dark corner of the entry. "Paige, please," she said, extending a calloused hand. "And you—"

"I'm sorry, that's not— I can't— You understand, of course."

The woman stepped into the light cast from the window and nodded, beckoning toward the back of the home. I followed as she led me into a small kitchen with blistered wallpaper. "Is this alright? Sorry for the mess, it's been a long week, and if I'd had more time— well, I didn't. All I have is tea, would you like some?"

I waved my hand, dismissing the offer. The introduction was uncomfortable, as always. Most of the people I meet after hours aren't living much better than she is, and most are just as proud.

There was a small table in the corner of the room, with three mismatched chairs pulled around it. I chose the one nearest to the hallway and pulled a signal jammer from my pocket, setting it in the middle of the table with slow intention. Our eyes met, and Paige bowed her head in understanding. "We have at most an hour." I placed the file from my bag onto the table in front of us. "Are we alone?"

"Yes, Amelia is spending the night with a friend," she said. "I turned off all my devices—"

"They're still collecting when they're not on, but the jammer will block any surveillance, don't worry," I said, although I sensed I hadn't done much to put the woman at ease.

She fidgeted with her ring. "I'm sorry, this is uncomfortable for me," she admitted, glancing at the stove. "I'm going to make some tea for myself, if you don't mind."

I nodded, distracting myself with the paperwork I had brought with me. The file was thicker than most. Paige's and Amelia's case had been referred to me by a prior client, as most of my cases are. It's not the kind I take on, but I couldn't put it out of my mind after I'd read the request two weeks ago. And so, I found myself in a stranger's dark kitchen after midnight on a Tuesday.

I coughed to clear the silence as Paige sat down across from me with a cup of hot water, sprinkling in a few loose tea leaves. She caught my glance and smiled, "My mother was a fortune teller, as a hobby, and sometimes as a second job when money was extra tight. Her mother taught her, and her grandmother taught her mother, and so, of course, she taught me. It's become something of a nostalgic habit of mine. It's stupid, I know, especially given..." She gestured to the universe.

"I don't think it's stupid. My parents were both System architects, and my mother's grandmother was an Actuary, one of the last. She worked with one of the creators of the System, actually. She helped design the infrastructure it was based on, so my family legacy isn't quite as charming. Yours sounds much nicer." Paige winced, and I willed my words to reverse course. It was my turn to feel uncomfortable. "I'm sorry, I don't mean..."

"It's alright. It sounds like your path has worked out well for you," Paige said. She stared at me for a moment before adding, "That's why I need your help."

I pushed past the thick awkwardness in the room. "I've read your request. Before we take this conversation further, I need to know that you are aware of what you're agreeing to. What we're about to negotiate is not legal. It's risky, and there's no guarantee it will work. Your case is more complicated than most, given some of your history. Besides, there's always a chance Amelia could be Rectified. She has some very promising variables as well. You never know, it could work out organically."

She scoffed, "It's a chance in hell, you know that."

I knew probably better than anyone how correct her assertion was. I had spent the first twenty years of my career making sure it wouldn't work out for people like Amelia.

"And maybe she would get Rectified, what then?" she continued. "No one would believe she deserved her place; she might as well wear a scarlet R on her breast for the rest of her life. It's worse than whatever the System has in store for her."

I knew she wasn't wrong. The clock on the wall ticked away, chopping through the silence. "Tell me about Marcus. I read some in his file, but I want to hear more."

Paige's anger faded to a more somber hue. "Marcus was a rebel. He joined the Resistance when he was only fifteen, so it wasn't a surprise when he was assigned to manual labor."

"Yes, I saw in his file that he worked a few different construction and logging jobs, even though he tested in the top tenth of a percent on his placement exams and in the bottom quartile for physical aptitude."

"He was always so bright, entirely out of my league, and probably would have done well as a coder or even an architect," she gestured to me, "but one of his favorite phrases was that if the System had any intelligence at all, artificial or otherwise, it would have the common sense to keep him farther than arm's length, because he'd burn the whole damn thing to the ground." She paused, swatting at a tear. "He died in an accident five years ago, in a logging accident. I'm sure you read about that already. He shouldn't have been there. He wouldn't have been, if he'd had a say in his own path."

Instinctively, I responded, "I'm sorry to hear that, it must have been hard to deal with."

Paige shook her head. "He made his choices, and he made peace with his fate, ugly as it was. But Amelia shouldn't be forced to pay for those choices."

I reached for her hand, but she drew away. "What about you?" I asked. "What was your assignment? It wasn't in your request." I knew the answer already, but it helped tune out some of that awful silence.

She drew a few sips of her tea and avoided eye contact. "I was Rectified. I went to school to become a data tech, studied for about a year and a half, but I got demoted to manual before I finished."

"That's a big demotion. Custodian, according to your file. Was that around the time you met Marcus?" I flipped through the papers in front of me.

She shrugged. "Probably for the best. I wasn't cut out for it anyway."

"You were speaking from your own experience as a Rect, then."

Paige nodded. "I can't do that to Amelia. She's brilliant, I can see that in her, but I'm not the only one who does."

"Yes, she tests very well. Her teachers offered high praise, and her social scores are admirable." I was relieved to be moving onto the analytics of the conversation.

Paige continued, "She believes if she works hard in school, tests well and boosts her scores, the System will work in her favor. She doesn't have to carry the weight of knowing that she's playing a shell game, and I don't want her to have to know that. Someday she'll benefit from knowing it, but not today."

I jotted down some notes. "I understand."

Paige looked up at me and tilted her head. "Do you?"

I inhaled, recalling the monologue I'd learned to prepare after going through this a few dozen times before. "I do. I am here because I care. I've seen the System fail too many times to not try to help. I want to help make things fair. I—"

Paige leaned forward. "But you've also benefitted from the System your whole life, too. You were born into a family with great scores, rewarded with a lucrative career, sent to the best schools, and the System paved the way for all of it."

I bristled, uncomfortable with the direction the conversation was tilting. “I did benefit, and the System did reward me, but I also worked hard, too.”

“I’m sure you did,” Paige murmured. She traced the outline of a faded tea ring on the table with her finger. “Marcus’s great-great-grandparents were civil rights activists and made videos of many of their experiences. I’ve seen some of them at least a hundred times, more often lately when I’m missing him.”

I crossed my arms and leaned back in my seat. “They sound like very interesting people; I can see where Marcus got his passion.”

“A few times,” she said, “they quoted a man named Barry Switzer from that time period named ‘Some people are born on third base and go through life thinking they hit a triple.’”

I hoped this was turning into a conversation about baseball, but I got the feeling it wasn’t. “I’ve heard the quote before,” I admitted.

She continued, “You were born on third base. Amelia was born in the parking lot of a gas station across town from the stadium. You deserve to end up in the same place, at a minimum playing the same game, but it will be a harder path for her to get there.”

“I— I’m not sure how to—”

Paige interrupted, much to my relief, as I hadn’t determined an exit strategy from that sentence. “I’m thankful for your help. You don’t owe me anything, and I’m grateful you’re doing what you do, and thankful that you’re here. People like me need people like you. It’s hard to say it, but it’s true.”

I leaned forward. “Thank you, but I don’t need—”

She held up her hand. “But people like me wouldn’t be in this situation at all if it weren’t for people like you. So, forgive me for saying so, but you can’t understand what it’s like to be sitting across from you begging for help like this.”

I shuffled through my papers, now the one trying to avoid eye contact. “So, how does it work?” she asked.

It’s a question posed often to me. “It’s complicated. The System is always gathering data. I’m sure you know that, but most people don’t appreciate what that really means. It gathers data from your phone, your home devices, your car, your location, your heart rate, everything about you. It collects your test scores, what you buy at the grocery store, what you read, how much time you spend sleeping, a million other factors, and projects a million different scenarios for your future, statistically. It averages out those scenarios and comes up with a score.”

I can get lost in the history of the System, but with limited time, I avoid the details in these conversations. A little over a hundred years ago, data became the most valuable commodity. Companies treated it like currency, but most people still gave it away for free.

The insurance industry, among many others, recognized the value of data-driven decision making, and began mining it, studying it, and ultimately incorporating it into its ability to predict a person’s risk appetite, future decisions, life expectancy, health, practically everything.

Actuaries had been trying to avoid becoming obsolete for years, but ultimately found a way to automate themselves, and a good portion of the general workforce, out of a career. What they created ended up being their own demise. My great-grandmother’s greatest accomplishment was also the nail in her career’s coffin.

The system was used responsibly for a long time; the biases were hunted down, and attempts were made to eradicate them, but over time it became too big to control. As the government got involved, once it was no longer avoidable, the underlying problems became worse. Industries lobbied for favorable regulations, requiring less oversight of the System. A digital civil war was waged for years, but ultimately the System invaded every aspect of free will, an inch at a time.

Most people were not fully aware that it was happening, until they found themselves without the freedom to make decisions about their career, their finances, and even their own social lives. And still, many people were never forced into cognition of its impact, but the Marcuses of the world never knew a

life without the awareness of the lack of their options. Some were Rectified in a feeble attempt to correct the systemic bias, given opportunities not supported by their scores, but most were abandoned in the cyclical failure promoted by the System.

I continued, "Your daughter's life is only starting to be tracked, so she has less data collected. This sounds like a point in her favor, but it isn't. Her score is weighted about 50% by her aptitude, test, and social scores, and the rest is influenced by her parents' scores."

She rested her head in her hands. "How much will that impact her?"

We had passed the point of dishonesty for the sake of kindness. "Honestly, a lot. I pulled your record, and I see you've been arrested a few times, for illegal trading. Marcus spent time in prison."

Paige sighed. "I was arrested for a side job after Marcus died. We hadn't been able to get life insurance for him before he died, of course, and we struggled for a long time. I wasn't even charged with anything. And Marcus was only in prison because he protested the System."

"I know," I said, "but the System relies on the data, and that is biased. It always will be, because the information being collected is human nature, human decisions, and no one makes decisions in a vacuum. The System doesn't care about the *why* of it, only the *what*. And the *what* of it is that you're not a risk society is willing to bet on." I paused. "And unfortunately, your daughter is going to feel the impact of that."

She massaged her temple, staring at the papers in front of me.

I cleared my throat and continued, "You said I can't understand what it's like to be sitting across from someone like myself, asking for help. And, you're right, I can't. I spent two decades as an architect believing in the System, believing that any biases would be snuffed out through Rectification. Instead, I learned that the bias isn't a tiny flaw that can be resolved through course-correction from time to time, it's the load-bearing ugly truth of the entire infrastructure. Rectification is lip service, nothing more."

Dismayed, Paige asked, "But you can still help? This isn't giving me much hope."

"I can try. I can try to adjust some of the data, dilute what's already in there. It could take a few months. Amelia's only seventeen, she won't be assigned for another year at least, so I think there's enough time. It's worked before. It's also failed before. I can't promise anything."

She nodded. "That's all I can ask for." She paused, then asked, "You haven't mentioned how much this is going to cost, and—"

I shook my head, "I suppose I've benefitted from the System enough already. I don't need your money."

Paige looked uncomfortable. "Thank you."

I glanced at my watch. "The signal won't be interrupted for much longer." Paige finished her tea and stared into the empty cup, frowning.

"What do they say?" I asked, leaning forward.

She pushed the teacup to the side. "Nothing good, as usual."

I collected the paperwork from the table and folded it back into the file. "By the way, what does Amelia hope to be assigned?" I asked.

She half-smiled and said, "A System architect, funny enough."

"Maybe she'll end up working for me someday," I chuckled.

She laughed. "I hope you'll be working for her. She'll burn the whole damn thing to the ground."

My watch vibrated, and I held my finger to my lips. Paige gave a single nod and rose from her chair, extending her arm toward the dark hallway leading back to the door. As I stood to leave, my bag knocked the teacup onto the floor, scattering tea leaves across the linoleum. I offered an apologetic glance to Paige, who was too fixated on the leaves to notice.