Of

by Nariva

Summary

Four generations after its founding, the Republic of Gilead still stands strong.
Chapter 1

Chapter Summary

She knew they would hang her.

"-hallowed be Thy name," Ofjeb whispered, her hands clenched in her lap as she kept her head down, her eyes closed. "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on Earth, as it is in Heaven." She didn't want to go to the Wall! Please, Father, please, she didn't want to die! "Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us-" The door to her room creaked as it opened, and the woman froze as the Eye returned. Aunt Julia followed in his footsteps, her cattle prod in hand as they approached.

"Please," the Eye said, smiling as he sat down, "finish your prayer, we didn't mean to interrupt." A lie. The Eyes heard all, saw all. They had to. She'd never shared her mother's words with anyone else, but they'd still known.

"And..." Ofjeb swallowed, her eyes fixed on the cattle prod. The Aunts didn't like it when certain scriptures were quoted to them. Said in the wrong context, they could be taken as words of defiance. "And forgive us..." She trailed off again- this could certainly count as that in Aunt Julia's eyes.

"Aunt Julia?" the Eye turned to the older woman as he pointedly looked at her cattle prod. "Would you mind setting it down for a moment? I believe you're making Ofjeb nervous."

"Of course," the Aunt replied, looking to Ofjeb as she placed it on the table. "I would never interrupt your prayer, my dear." Ofjeb knew that, but what about after?

"Please," the light haired man said, sitting forward in his seat to draw her attention. "Continue."

"And forgive us our trespasses," the handmaid whispered, her eyes downcast, "as we... as we forgive those who have trespassed against us. Lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Yours is the Kingdom, the power, and the glory, forever. Amen."

"Amen," Aunt Julia said, reaching out to pluck her cattle prod up from the table. Ofjeb's shoulders hunched, the woman shifting in her seat as she hesitantly looked to the Eye.

"Amen," he murmured, straightening in his seat. "Ofjeb, do you know why you're here?"

"Yes," she said, giving a small nod.

"Why?" Aunt Julia asked, eyeing her.

"My mother," Ofjeb replied, "she told me of... of Before. And I," her gaze dropped back to the table. "I listened, and I never reported her." The Aunt clicked her tongue, shaking her head in disapproval.

"And what did your mother say to you, Ofjeb?" she asked, and the younger woman nervously licked her lips as she eyed the cattle prod.

"Ofjeb," the Eye spoke, and she looked back to him. "You won't be punished for telling us.
Under His Eye, I promise you." Under His Eye? He meant it? Ofjeb cleared her throat, her hands clenching tightly as she quietly spoke.

"She said... she said that her mother, and that her mother's mother, said that Before, women could have jobs," she recalled. "That they could hold property, and handle money, and even... even read," she said.

"Your mother, did she teach you how to read?" the Eye asked, and Ofjeb dug her nails into the palms of her hands. The Wall. They'd hang her, drape her body on the Wall. She'd be a doll on the Wall. "Ofjeb?"

"A- a little," the woman confessed, her twitching fingers drawing blood. "Not much, though, and she was transferred soon after."

"Then you've sinned more than I thought," the Aunt said, her face tightening with disapproval. Hanging would hurt, Ofjeb knew. It would be painful. Please, Heavenly Father... "But," the older woman continued, "the Lord has been merciful, and granted you a path to salvation." What? Ofjeb blinked, looking to the Aunt. Merciful? Salvation? What did she mean? "Come, dear," she said as the Eye stood. The man made his way to the door, holding it open as the Aunt exited. They looked back at her, expectant. "Come, Ofjeb," Aunt Julia insisted, and the handmaid slowly stood from her seat. Fidgeting with the long sleeves of her dress, the younger woman hesitantly followed after the two as they entered the hallway and walked down it. The Aunt and the Eye remained silent as they walked, Ofjeb chewing her lip as she eyed the white halls around them. Was this some new form of punishment? How would it be her salvation? The blond man reached the far door first, once again holding it open for them as they entered. "Stand there, dear," the Aunt told her, pointing to the back of a small cluster of women. The group was varied- several Marthas, a few Econowives, and another Handmaid. They all stood facing the front, their hands clasped behind their backs. The Eye pacing before them looked from them as Ofjeb obeyed, the woman joining the small group as he cleared his throat.

"Gilead is God's gift to the world," he began, looking from woman to woman. "A righteous nation, through which all may know the path to salvation. It is a good thing, a kind thing; a necessary thing. However," the Eye continued, frowning, "all of you gathered here today have, in some way, expressed a desire to forsake this wonderful land and its people. You have looked upon our good deeds, our way of life, and decided that you know better." He sighed, shook his head. "If it were up to me, you'd all be hung. You are traitors to Gilead, and deserve only death." Ofjeb paled, a low murmur going through the group of women. "However," he said, "the Lord is merciful, and in accordance to the word of Commander Donovan, you shall be given what you desire." Ofjeb stared at the man, uncomprehending. "You desire to leave Gilead, so you will leave Gilead."
Chapter 2

The van had muddled along for some time now, the occasional bump jarring its passengers. Ofjeb was only dimly aware of the hushed conversations around her, gaze fixed on the floor as another shudder rocked her. Leave Gilead? The Eye couldn't have meant actually leave- no one left Gilead. She clasped her hands together, running her thumb along the side of her index finger as she considered his words.

"They have to be taking us to the Colonies," one the Martha's insisted.

"You heard what the Eye said," another one argued, shaking her head. "We're not going there!"

"He said we wouldn't hang, Rebecca!" the first Martha shot back, her hands clenching. "He never said anything about the Colonies!"

"Then what about the Handmaids, huh?" Rebecca asked, and Ofjeb turned her head slightly, catching the end of a gesture made at her. "They'd never send a Handmaid there!"

"I heard that they used to," the Martha said and Ofjeb's hands tightened. She flinched, opening her hands to look at them. Ah, she'd scraped the light scabbing off. The woman sighed, watching as thin trickles of blood pooled in the lines of her palms. Ofjeb pressed her hands against her thighs, letting the fabric staunch the flow. She hoped they had water wherever they were going. Dried blood was annoying to deal with, and she'd rather not have to lick her fingers to wipe it away. Ofjeb closed her eyes as she sat back, trying to tune out the low murmurs of the women. Even though I walk through the valley of shadow of death, she reminded herself, I will fear no evil, for You are with me- The van lurched again, slowing, and the woman opened her eyes. A stony silence descended on the small group, a rising sense of anticipation making Ofjeb shift in her seat. What lay beyond the doors? Where had the Eyes taken them? As if hearing her thoughts, the back doors creaked open, a Guardian waiting on each side.

"Come on, then," the black haired one said, waving them forward. The first Martha stood, her face pale as she approached the edge and sat down, pushing off to exit the van. The next woman exited in a similar fashion, the Guardians holding the doors open for them as the next Martha made her way out. Ofjeb stood, clasping her hands behind her back and assuming her position beside the other Handmaid as they waited. They stood at the back of the small line, but it emptied quickly and she soon found herself at the edge of the van. Ofjeb reached down, intending to gather the hem of her dress to guarantee her modesty as she slid out, but the dark haired Guardian stopped her.

"Handmaid," he greeted her, holding an arm out. She paused, turning her head slightly to watch as the other Guardian offered her fellow Handmaid the same curtesy.

"My thanks," she murmured, accepting his offer of aid. Ofjeb straightened upon exiting the van, the other Handmaid falling into step beside her as they followed after the line of women. A barbed fence stretched out before them, built high enough that Ofjeb had to tilt her head back to see the top. She eyed it, wondering what purpose it served. Ahead were two massive doors, and the women clustered before them as the Guardians and the Eye from before encircled the small group. The man silently looked them up and down, nodding to himself as he turned to face the wall. Ofjeb heard a faint click, and the doors slowly swung open. She stood on her tippy toes, trying to catch a glimpse of what lay beyond as quiet murmurs broke out amongst the group. Tilting her head to the left, she finally caught sight of the small group passing through the gates. There were four in all, men of varying heights and colors. One of them, a blond, broke off and walked directly towards the Eye.
"Eye," he stiffly greeted him, voice thick with disgust.

"Sir," the Eye returned the greeting, sounding equally disgusted. The stranger looked from the Eye to the women, his face softening as they watched him.

"Hello," he greeted them, smiling as he stepped away from the Eye to approach. "I'd first like to say that it's a true honor to meet all of you brave ladies, you're an inspiration to every man and woman here." Ofjeb's frowned, eyeing him in confusion. What was he talking about? "I know that you're scared, that this is all so new to you, but I swear that we'll do everything in our power to ensure your safety and happiness." He stepped back, clearly waiting for something.

"Go," the Eye snapped at them, pointing at the man. The blond turned when they hesitantly started after him, the small group of men rejoining him as they all walked through the massive doors. They didn't go far, stopping just on the other side as the man gave them each a wide smile. Ofjeb looked beyond them, staring wide eyed at the massive buildings that stretched out as far as her eye could see.

"Ladies, it's my honor to welcome you to your new life." He turned, gesturing to the sprawling city before them. "Welcome to Canada!"
Chapter 3

She couldn't understand it. Canada. She'd heard about the country in passing, Commander Jebediah had mentioned it occasionally, but it had always been a distant thing. Real, but... not. And now she was walking in it, following after the women in front of her as the sky above them darkened.

"Prime Minister Hannin would have loved to welcome you all here personally," the blond continued as they made their way up the broad sidewalk, "but your arrival was rather sudden. Gilead usually gives us a little bit of a heads up beforehand, but," he cleared his throat, "that didn't happen this time. Don't let that worry you, though," he quickly reassured them, "ever since that terrible Republic started we here have always been prepared to welcome its citizens." Ofjeb couldn't help it, her eyes flickered up from the pavement to eye the houses around him. Black vans, the pound of boots, the sign of the all seeing Eye. "Ah, here we are, ladies." He stopped, gesturing to the house of their right. It was two stories high, a massive thing painted dark grey. "The Bankole House for Displaced Women," he told them, crossing his arms as he gazed up at it. "It's one of several we have here near the border, and it'll be your new home until you're ready to make your own fresh start." The man made his way up the stairs, knocking on the large front door. It opened, an older woman peering through the front screen.

"Oh, Mr. Wells," she murmured, "you're here sooner than we expected." She opened the screen door and looked past him, waving to the women. "Come in, then," she called to them, "I don't want you waiting out in the cold."

"Thank you, Ms. Rutherford," Mr. Wells said, nodding to the woman as he turned.

"Where're you going, sir?" Rebecca spoke up as the man passed them by, and he paused.

"Duty calls, ladies," he told them, flashing another grin. "Don't worry, though, Ms. Rutherford has been working for the Bankole Organization for longer than I've been alive, you're in the best hands we have here." Giving them a wave, the man turned on his heel and set off down the sidewalk. Ofjeb watched him go, swallowing as the group of women made their way up the stairs. They entered the house two by two, the Handmaids coming in last as Ms. Rutherford shut the door behind them. Ofjeb looked around the massive entrance, awed by just how big everything was. Commander Jebediah had been in the lower ranks of the Commanders, but he had always been well off. This house? It dwarfed his; made her feel small.

"The Bankole Organization," the tall woman began, and Ofjeb focused back on her, "is a network of people and houses devoted to helping people from Gilead successfully integrate into society. Here," she continued, "we'll teach you the skills necessary to navigate life outside of that horrible Republic." The woman turned, looking up the staircase to the second floor. Ofjeb noticed them then, a small cluster of men and women waiting above. "You can come down now," Ms. Rutherford called up to them, and the Handmaid watched as they started down. "Let me introduce you all," she said, gesturing to the woman who reached the ground floor first. "This is Madison, a former Econowife, and her husband, Ethan," the man at her side smiled. "Lewis," the blond man waved. "Alyssa," the tall woman nodded. "And Michael," the thin man clasped his hands behind his back, watching them. Ms. Rutherford checked her watch, sighing. "I would have loved to go further tonight, but I know you'll be wanting to get your rest." She pointed back up the stairs. "Your bedrooms are down the hall to the left. They're individual, you'll each be getting your own room." She paused, her expression softening as they looked to her. "I know that this must feel very strange, ladies. You're in a foreign land with people you don't know, and you're not sure what to do.
But I assure you," she reached up, placing a hand over her heart, "that we're here to help you every step of the way. Over time, you'll adjust, and this will become normal."
Chapter 4

Ofjeb woke drenched in sweat, the woman shoving the light blanket off as she pushed herself into a sitting position. She’d slept in her dress, and she unwrinkled the bottom part before she stood. Faint sunlight shone through the blinds, and Ofjeb hurried to the door- she was late. Her walking partner would be waiting by the gates, and she’d be- Ofjeb froze at the unfamiliar surroundings, sucking a breath in as yesterday rushed back. Canada. She was in Canada, not Gilead. She heard the low clink of plates, quiet murmuring coming from below. Rubbing at the long sleeves of her dress, Ofjeb slowly started forward, walking as quietly as she could. Making her way down the stairs, she walked across the wood floor and stepped into the wide hallway. The light was on in the kitchen, and Ofjeb cautiously peered in. The Martha was working on kneading dough, giggling at something the other Martha—No, the former Martha had said.

“Hey!” Ofjeb startled, spinning around to look at the blond man with wide eyes. He blinked in surprise at her, his cheeks reddening in slight embarrassment. “Sorry,” he apologized as she looked at the floor, “I didn’t mean to scare you.”

“It’s fine,” she quietly told him, and he gave her a relieved smile as he leaned against the wall.

“So... I never actually caught your name last night,” the man admitted, “what was it, again?”

“Ofjeb,” the Handmaid told him, and he nodded.

“Well, I’m Lewis, just in case you forgot.”

“Hello, Lewis,” she murmured, and his smile widened.

“Hi, Ofjeb.”

“Now, now,” a woman’s voice came from behind, and Ofjeb turned to face the kitchen. The former Martha put her hands on her hips as she shook her head. “Don’t go encouraging bad habits, Lewis,” she lightly scolded him.

“She hasn’t picked out a name yet,” Lewis said, shrugging, “what else am I supposed to call her?” Ofjeb frowned- picked a name? What did they mean? The former Martha sighed, making shooing motions at the both of them.

“Go on,” she said, and the Handmaid turned back to the hallway as the man retreated up the stairs. “Go take a walk ‘round the house with that other Handmaid,” the woman suggested, and Ofjeb nodded to herself. Walks were familiar; good. She reached up to readjust her wings as she walked down the hallway, blushing in embarrassment. The man, Lewis, she’d looked at him. He’d seen her face, looked her right in the eye. Improper! What would Aunt Julia say?

“Hello,” a quiet voice greeted her, and Ofjeb stopped and looked up. The other Handmaid was partway down the stairs, and she was relieved to see that the other woman still wore her proper clothing.

“Blessed be the fruit,” Ofjeb said, and the other Handmaid paused on the next step.

“May the Lord open,” she replied, continuing down to the floor.

“The- the former Martha thought we could walk together,” the Handmaid hopefully told her, and other woman briefly thought about it before nodding.
“Of course,” she said, and Ofjeb smiled at her.

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