

Anessa Brown
Ridgedale Junior-Senior High School

Familiar. Every day, all the same. The cold, worn, wooden tiles hit his feet, as shoes were forbidden. The sickening quiet as he crept through. His own house felt more like a prison. The wooden walls, tile floors, nothing he wasn't familiar with. A slow feeling of *wrong* creeping in. Something wasn't right. He was sure of it. Nothing ever felt right after all, then he realized. Today was the ceremony, a day when his mother's cult would judge every bit of his soul, everything that was supposed to be his. Ceremonies were never fun, each one tearing a new wound in his already torn body. One that never felt like it was his. However, it was normal. This had been routine since he was born, the curse of being brought into the world though he hadn't asked. He felt worn, leathery hands grasp his shoulders gently.

"Jebediah, I knew you would be out here." His mother said, a sweet tone calming him just for a bit as if he could forget all the wrong she'd done to him. All mothers treat their sons like this, right? When they're as special as him, these precautions need to be taken after all.

"I hate to tell you, but you might have to skip breakfast, the ceremony is early today." She informed, turning him to face her. She gently took his cheeks into her hands, looking at him lovingly. Something akin to pride, the validation he craved. He looked to her, and his chest stirred. Uneasy. He didn't want to do this ceremony, they had been doing one ever since he was born. He could skip one time, right?

"Can't I skip it?" He asked a foolish question he had learned when his mother furrowed her brow. She looked almost scared, Jebediah had never disobeyed or questioned before, why now?

"Of course, you can't." She said sternly and Jebediah tensed. Hoping he hadn't made his mother too angry, blood pumping through his veins quicker than usual. Mother wasn't nice when she was angry. "There are people out there who want to see you, they came here to see you." A monologue Jebediah had heard thousands of times before, when he felt apprehensive he was told this. People wanted to see him. They always wanted to see him.

"I was just— can't I miss *once*? I don't like the cult, they're—" Before he could finish he felt the impact. Her cold hand stinging his cheek, he recoiled. He huffed, white-hot fury coursing through him. A trait inherited from the very woman who hated it.

"They're your biggest supporters! I can't believe you'd be so disrespectful as to suggest abandoning them." She shouts, calm caring demeanor gone in a second. Instead of fear like usual, something clicked. Anger.

"I don't care about the cult! I don't care about abandoning them, they deserve it! *I'm a child!* They're all adults, it's weird! You're weird, I *hate* you!" He shouted, sounding just as his mother did when she scolded him. He breathed heavily, body shaking. A looming feeling of the punishment to come.

His mother looked at him with hurt. Her perfect little puppet cutting his strings. Before he could react he felt rough hands grasp his coarse black curls, dragging him down the hallway. The incessant tugging and pulling gave him a headache. Thrashing. Hitting. Kicking. Crying. Anything to get her hands off of him, none of it worked, he felt helpless as he always had been. The simple notion of sticking up for himself brought a punishment that had never been given before. If he stayed as obedient as always it would've all been okay. His shaking body hit the wooden tile of his bedroom. His mother shouted something, most likely telling him to think about how horrid he's been. He hadn't paid much attention, the throbbing in his head and the shaking everywhere else occupying his thoughts more than anything. He glared at the door, hearing it lock shut. Utterly alone, which was fine with him. He stood on shaky legs, steadying himself on his small dingy dresser. He would be fine, this hadn't been the first time he was yelled at or even hit. However, the dragging was a new unwelcome addition to the torture. His head pounded, he wasn't feeling the usual fear or underlying feeling of being a disappointment.

He was angry, desperate to get out. He wanted out. He looked out his dirty, foggy window. A forest: no walls, no fences, no boundaries. Just freedom. The animals outside were free to do as they pleased as he was changed here as an attraction to all those who sought him out as savior. He stared at his small torn mattress, the blanket on top of it. He snatched it and placed his three outfits in it, tying a knot at the top and putting it over his shoulder like a bag. He would get out of it meant death. If it meant never seeing this place again. He looked at his window, his only way out. He grabbed his flimsy pillow case off his pillow and wrapped it around his hand. He was escaping no matter how much pain it caused. One hit. His hand ached from the impact, bruises surely forming in the future. Two hits. It burned this time, the impact setting fire in his hand. A third hit straight to the corner of the window. A loud crack, then a shatter. He looked to the door quickly as he heard the footsteps of his mother, running towards his location. He flung himself out of the window and headed deeper in the forest. Deeper and deeper. Dry dirt, sticks, rocks digging into his bare feet. He had only paused when he couldn't run anymore, legs aching. He huffed out breaths of exhaustion. Only then had it clicked. The tradition of obeying his mother was safety; the change she never assumed he could make was danger.