

AUTOKRATOR

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a novel by

EMILY A. WEEDON

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To my mother,
Liisa Kaarina Weedon

We know or should know that every decrease in power is an open invitation to violence — if only because those who hold power and feel it slipping from their hands ... have always found it difficult to resist the temptation to substitute violence for it.

HANNAH ARENDT

GLOSSARY

Autokrator: Supreme Ruler, head of the Triumvirate

Consort: Ruler in waiting, who ceremonially dresses in women's weeds; the child of the Autokrator

Domestic: Catchall name for female labourers who provide unpaid work and have no autonomy

Hedgerow Mams: Teachers who secretly pass knowledge onto Unmales

Kratorling: Consort in waiting; the child of the Consort

Mams: Honorific among Unmales/Domestics for older women

Orthodoxy: Coded beliefs that support the rule of men and the existence of the Triumvirate

Toolist: Mechanically inclined fabricators, inventors, scientists, and doctors whose areas of study and work overlap and intersect

The tendency with history is to write as though events move inexorably toward a foregone conclusion. The layering of details happens as if by an unwritten master plan that rewards those fittest to lead with their just deserts. It is, however, a grave mistake to assume that events are compelled to follow any one path. A bee sting, foul weather, a mislaid letter, a badly shod horse ... history turns on the smallest of events. The masters we serve today could just as easily have become our servants.

DR. NEREUS GENNADIUS, PROFESSOR OF HISTORICAL
POLITICS, HEAD OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HISTORICAL
STUDIES, POST-IMPERIAL STUDIES CENTRE
from "Introduction to Global Perspectives on Politics of the Autocracy"

Tiresius

I WRITE THIS in the 1692nd of the Autokracy, during the reign of Gentius, from a cell in the Imperial Prison.

I am instructed to write first: I am a gender criminal. I am Unmale, yet I write as though I am a person.

What are you, most likely a Male, to make of that?

My readers won't like what I have to write. Whatever is set down in this memoir is suspect. After all, I am about to be executed. Besides, it is very likely my readers will believe that I, an Unmale who writes, lie. My readers are invited to entertain whatever thoughts they wish upon the subject. But, please, withhold judgment to the end.

I am unmasked. This is a bracing freedom. It compels me to tell the truth, unbelievable as these events might be to a learned, thoughtful Male audience. My Male audience will be disgusted and outraged by my life. I admit, I revel in this fact. More than a little.

The heresy is deeply satisfying. At the time of the events I write about, it was simply the way things were. I sometimes allowed myself to feel it was natural and right that I should be a man of

power and prestige. I held office. I was held in esteem. Even if I had nothing between my legs.

So, call me a liar and feel safer from Unmales. Or believe the terrible truth and tremble that the order of things may yet change. I have played my part. I am past caring about the things of this world.

My Mam, the woman who bore me, is unimportant, as all Mams are. My reader might ask: how could a Mam, being Unmale, be important? Yet I came from somewhere. I was not grown in the earth, nor plucked from a tree. I was spawned inside the viscera of an Unmale, as all my readers were. I understand that it is uncomfortable to be reminded of such horrendous things. I do apologize. I'd bow were it not for these chains.

I imagine my Mam housed in the Imperial Consiliorum, the closest thing to being a queen that an Unmale can aspire to. An unpaid whore — no, make that a serving vessel — to the most important Males in the land.

Why do I give myself such a lofty compliment? Many of my readers may be well bred. Some may be incubos, those common brats conceived in the Public Consiliora. The random obligatory donation of a Male citizen. To refer to another man as an incubo in public was, in my day, the crudest possible slur.

I don't look common. My bone structure is very good. My faculties of reason and debate are sharper than most men. This leads me to believe that, at the very least, my Sire was someone of status. For all anyone knows, he could be the Autokrator Himself, or else the Consort. Unfortunately, having come into the world an Unmale, all I really have are my wits to base my theories on.

Orthodoxy, which comes from the mouths of the earliest Autokrators, has so much to teach us. The Orthodoxy is pored over by learned Males, who debate it in august circles. It is written in giant gold letters that line the Autokrator's library. Orthodoxy is the foundation of our nation's strength — its backbone and *raison d'être*. It tells us what is good and right in our world. It

provides us the comfortable cage we live and fight and earn and fuck and die in. Orthodoxy explains how we got here, why it is that Males are the pure form and Unmales are an abomination. This dichotomy is inculcated in every boy; Unmales come to understand it from the moment they start working.

Orthodoxy teaches that my looks and brains are from my Sire. He bred with a faceless, nameless Domestic, an Unmale whose lot in life is to tend to the needs of Males. That Domestic passed on nothing of herself to me. How do we know this? Orthodoxy teaches that Males create Males, and Unmales are the dumb vessels who carry them. Sometimes, due to a malfunction in the vessel, the pure fetus is malformed as an Unmale. The Founding Fathers decreed that Males are citizens, while a creature born Unmale has no autonomy and owes society their lifelong labour.

Orthodoxy is clear: no Male can possibly ungender his own material. Some Toolists — men learned in the technical arts, specialists in the human body — study the role of Unmales in the erratic processing of genetic substance. My own hand signed the Treasury approval granting these esteemed men funds for their experiments and papers. Their research cunningly explains how a Male's seed is corrupted by the Unmale's body, then tragically warped into Unmale form. The author of the paper took pains to bemoan the many possible lives lost in this process: so many promising young men whose lives never happened because filthy Unmales mutated fine and healthy Male seed into mistakes! So the Orthodoxy has it. So the scientific research sought to prove. The resulting work is a disaster of error and assumption — confusing, contradictory, the science warped to affirm Orthodoxy is good. Males are good. Unmales are abominations. I was given a medal for recognizing the study's importance. I allow myself these small moments of personal victory.

What I really believe is this: my Sire, no doubt a wealthy adviser, was probably a sot — doddering, overweight, intellectually

unremarkable. The product of hundreds of years of tradition. He survived because of what he had between his legs, not his ears.

My Mam, on the other hand, must have been beautiful. If you'd ever seen the inside of the Imperial Consiliorum, you'd know this. Of course, few people reading this tangle of lies will have ever seen the Imperial Consiliorum. Such a rarefied place is closed to all but the members of the Autocracy and the Unmales who serve them. Readers will have to take my word for it when I say that only the most beautiful women in all the Autocracy are chosen for the Imperial Consiliorum. And of the most beautiful, only the canniest survive to lie with one of the Triumvirate. For this reason, I believe all my attributes — looks, brains, tenacity, political acumen — come from my Mam. Does it matter if I say such treasonous things now? My body will be quartered regardless, and, I fear, I can die only once. So, I heretically state: all my strength comes from my Mam, and I claim nothing from the nameless bureaucrat who sired me.

As for the specifics: The moment my gender was revealed, I was hurried away from the Unmale who bore me. I was not given even a moment to lie on her warm breast. I was not nursed. I was not swaddled.

I'd like to think that being torn from my young mother broke her heart and that she longed for me over the years, wondering what became of me. But let's be frank: she would have likely have been put back into service at the Imperial Consiliorum as soon as possible. Maybe next time she would get it right and have a son. No doubt she was wracked with guilt over her inability to correctly reproduce. The stakes were high: if she fouled a fetus with Unmale material too many times, she would be retired as defective.

I was wiped off with no real tenderness, the way a prized Male baby would be treated. I was given my first tattoo, with the year and day I was born. It was inked inside the curved bow of my ear.

I was taken Below and given a wet nurse, one I shared with other future Domestic. In their wisdom, Males had determined that Unmales have low caloric needs. I was born hungry and remain that way to this day. I get more done when I am hungry and a little cold and tired. It keeps both the teeth and the wits sharp.

It was wet nurses who named the numbered girl babies: the name we would carry secretly, woman to woman. They called me Dekka.

The wet nurse passed me on to a caretaker until I could control my bowels and develop fine motor skills. This is the golden time of an Unmale's life. And from what I can glean from memory and observation, it was pleasant enough. We were held and cooed at. We were as yet wet clay, guilty only of being born what we were. And we had only one another in this world.

At perhaps the age of three, I was taken to a sort of training place. This was where I earned my next tattoo, on my wrist. Domestic carry their resumés there so their skillset is visible at a glance. Too many dots from too many work placements is a bad sign. It denotes insubordination, inflexibility, or perhaps rank stupidity.

Domestic are put to work the moment they show any sort of aptitude. The carpet makers come through frequently, looking for labour. The best workers are young ones with good eyes and tiny, nimble fingers. Young ones make good field labour too, since they are small, and squatting in the weeds doesn't hobble their backs and hold up the entire process. One learns quickly to aim for deftness and accuracy. That way, you get fed. In our slavery, there was a kind of meritocracy. If you showed some promise, you could at least aspire to work inside, out of the elements, away from the shit or unwieldy machinery or heavy loads. In my early childhood, I showed a great deal of promise.