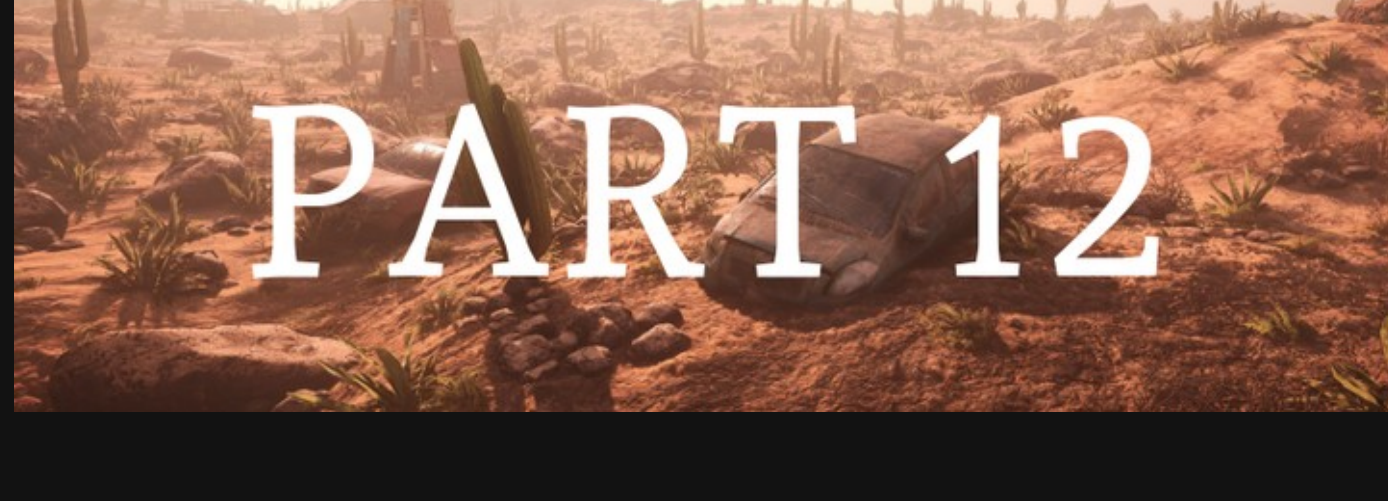


Part 12. Jeremiah



Jeremiah liked having a shadow. A living, moving, breathing shadow, much larger than he, and filled with knowledge of other worlds.

He had not forgotten the value of the stranger, or how he might use it to his advantage later, but it would be fun to let her see his shadow for a little while longer.

She wasn't quite beautiful, but not near ugly. That's what Jeremiah had decided. She was motherly, but without the large breasts. It was her hands. They were so coarse that when he stared at them, he expected to look up and see a man. But whenever he did, he was confronted with thick, straw-colored hair, hazel eyes, and a quiet smile. Her beauty reassured him. Jeremiah was sure he knew her, and could trust her. None of it bothered him, even as he was aware he would one day betray her.

Seeing the actual stranger only occurred at night. The rest of the day he didn't know she was there, couldn't know she was there, except for the thrum of her cloak. She had taught him how to tune out the major frequency, to make it bearable, but he still hurt and felt residual effects of the tech.

She questioned him about everything, from food, to Kilah's chores. All of the questions concerning women didn't seem relevant to Jeremiah, but he answered them like he answered all the others.

"Why do the women like Kilah and Marme attend to the household chores?"

"Because they're women."

The pitch in Naltag's voice heightened when she was excited, and she shifted around like she had to empty her women's sack.

"But why does their gender dictate their part in society?"

The answers were obvious to Jeremiah, but he kept his frustrations to a minimum.

"Everyone's work is assigned."

"Yes, and the men are assigned arduous careers and are allowed to attend school, while the women remain at home. Why?"

If Naltag thought her question was rooted in logic oh, she was wrong. Jeremiah reach down to the vault of Da's answers until he found one he liked.

"Women remain at home to take care of their children, and to remain pure in their role as creator."

Naltag stood to pace.

"By going outside of the home to participate in careers and education, women would become impure?"

Jeremiah anticipated the slight catch of a trap, but he nodded. A man committed to his words, even if he knew they were wrong. Da said it to him all the time.

"If education and careers have the ability to corrupt, why are men allowed to participate?"

She had him. Her foreign logic had crushed him. Why? Hell, Jeremiah didn't know anymore. Until her next question.

"What makes men less susceptible to corruption than women?"

He seized on the easiest answer: "We're wiser, stronger!"

Naltag seemed to consider what he said, pausing her paces for a moment.

"Strength? Does it not take strength to birth a child and care for them?"

Her tone carried no malice, but Jeremiah imagined the question stemming from an accusing mindset.

"Women are respected for their role as creator---"

"And nothing more?" She had interrupted him, something she had rarely done.

"What?"

Naltag spoke carefully, as though choosing every word for a purpose.

"Women of this compound are not viewed as human, merely as a subhuman dubbed 'creator'."

She was waiting for his answer to refute her.

"They're human!"

"Just less than men?"

"Well, yes." Of course

Naltag started pacing again.

Jeremiah was mad. He didn't want to be. Mad was strange emotion for him, one he experienced sporadically. Although, he recognized it easily enough. Anger could help, help him win.

"You're one of them. No wonder you're bent up about how they're treated!"

Naltag ceased any movement. Her excitement and passion for the debate seem to flood out of her. Jeremiah was afraid he had ended her. Then he remembered, she was just a woman. If her precious feelings were ended, it was likely her own fault.

That's when she told him, "I'm not a woman."

Suddenly, he assessed her chest as being flat, and not sloped. He likewise perceived her long hair as overgrown, and not flowing. Her features became harsh, and not plain.

"Not a woman?"

But he had thought her beautiful. Jeremiah had studied her face intently, confident in the sex of the specimen. His entire outlook on the stranger was a blank slate once more, and his trust in himself dissolved.

Not. A woman.

He should have known.

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