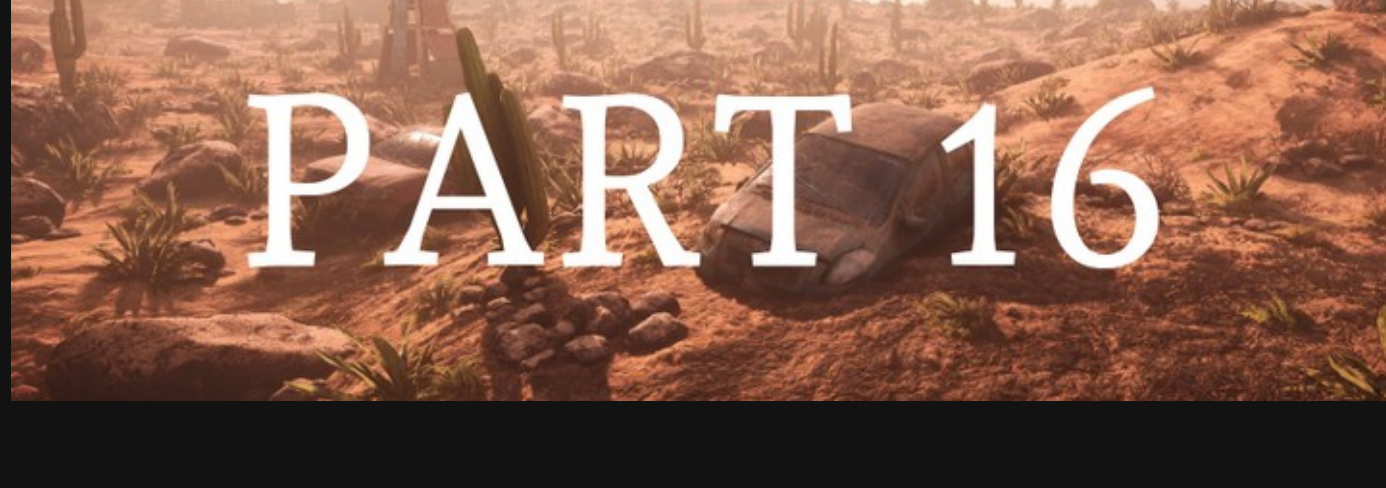


Part 16. Jeremiah



Hiding the tome wasn't hard.

It was hard navigating the effects of refusing ordinance. Once Jeremiah shoved the tome in a notch under his cot, his head began to buzz with a pinching pain. He battled dizzy spells and clammy skin. He tried to carry on in his sick state, and was mostly passable through dinner, until lights out.

His parents hadn't noticed a thing, but Kilah had. She bothered him before lights out, asking what he had done.

Everyone in the compound, adults especially, had been trained recognize the signs of ordinance-breakers. Jeremiah marveled at his sister's five-year-old perception in comparison with his parents.

He thought about lying to Kilah, but it would only worsen his condition. Instead of answering, he disguised the question by asking his own, like what strange thoughts, if any, had she had lately.

As Jeremiah had hoped, the question distracted her (she was calm out wise or not, 5 years old), and she told her brother her daydreams of becoming a groundskeeper like their father period he listened, his worry for her growing.

Once again, he reminded her of her place as a woman, and her role as a future Marme.

Her response was, "I need to be more."

Me too, he thought. More was a child's word, a fantasy.

Jeremiah hugged Kilah, who skipped on singing about a new friend she had met.

Head pounding, he met with the stranger in his room. He was the one person (if the stranger could be classified as a person) that Jeremiah could confide in to alleviate the effects of violating ordinance.

Before his outpour, Jeremiah asked, "What's your name?"

The so , grating voice was neither feminine or masculine. "Naltag."

Even the name was strange. Though, Jeremiah thought it best to know who he was confiding in. It was hard to trade intimate secrets with a stranger who knew his name, but not vice versa.

He repeated the name back, sure he had pronounced it wrong. When Naltag didn't correct him, he crouched near the edge of his bed.

Naltag waited as he reached in between the metal slats to reveal the tome.

The cover was blue and lined with age. Jeremiah thought all tomes unique, but this one was precious. He caressed the embossed letters. His fingers traced the title in lazy arcs. Finally, he spoke.

"Broke ordinance."

A culmination of sweat, anxiety, and pain rushed out with his words.

"Interesting." Naltag pulled a slim black rectangle from his strange clothes. "This will hear our words, and keep them," he said of the device.

His hair fell in front of his eyes, a honeyed curtain. Jeremiah had to remind himself he was looking at a man, and for brief flashes, lusting a er a man

A small red eye shone from the edge of the rectangle. To Jeremiah, the red light was saying I'm watching, I'm listening

Naltag asked questions about ordinance, and the effects of breaking it.

Jeremiah symptoms were fading, but he knew them by heart. The citizens of the compound had learned the mantra in childhood:

ordinance is holy
ordinance is to yield
break thy vows
and feel
the pain
fear
and shame
of thy disgrace

Naltag remained impassive as Jeremiah repeated the poem.

"When do ya ken ordinance? How many cycles?"

He pulled back to his youngest memories. "Six cycles."

"Kilah will ken soon?" The red eye on the rectangle blinked intermittently, a silent conspirator.

Yes," Jeremiah said.

Soon, Kilah would change. Her defiance would fade under the weight of ordinance. Her curiosity would flounder in the face of increased pre-marme chores.

This bothered Jeremiah, though it hadn't before. He was perfectly fine with his own Marme being sensible and little else. Imagining a creative, eclectic, passionate Marme was a scary thought, as he had never known her to be anything else other than steady.

A different Kilah would be devastating. Kilah was...Kilah.

Jeremiah tossed in his sleep that night, and for several nights a er. The conditions of ordinance had li ed with his confession to Naltag, but peace eluded him.

Even his goal of using Naltag to secure his place as enforcer wasn't placating him as it used to. Finding out the alien's true gender should have made it easier to turn him in, but it didn't. Naltag's sex barely mattered to him. It was Naltag's calming, kind demeanor that had him hesitating on how and when to leverage the alien's presence.

Maybe it was because Naltag reminded him of Eva, except she was playful in her kindness.

The next two days, she was far from playful. She shared no tome suggestions. Her gait, usually light, now dragged. When she passed with an armload of tomes in hand, she reminded him of all the conditioned upon release day: blank faced and bleak-eyed.

Several times, he approached, offering to carry her burdens, or tripping on purpose in front of her to watch her reaction. There was none.

Jeremiah nearly inquired outright what was wrong, but Quentin interrupted with fresh tomes for them to redact and file. He lingered, hungrily assessing Eva and ignoring Jeremiah. Interest lit his face, and confused Jeremiah. When he removed a tome from Eva's hand, allowing his skin to brush hers, Jeremiah understood even less.

In one last attempt, he offered a hello but she continued walking as if he hadn't spoken. Jeremiah knew he should be o ended, but she probably didn't hear him, or care. She seemed to have bigger worries. Behind him, the stranger's cloak thrummed on.

In a low voice, Jeremiah said, "Follow her. Find what ails."

In response, the leaflets in his grasp fluttered and the prickling sensation brought on by the cloak ceased.

Apparently, Naltag had heard him.

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