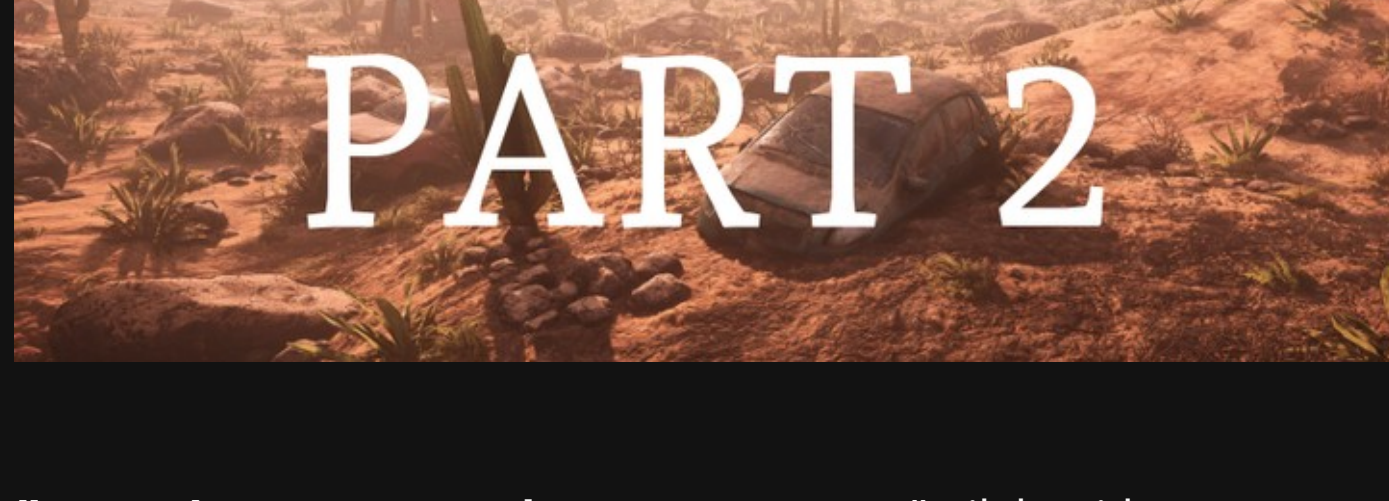


Part 2. Jeremiah



"Marme's upset you took an age to answer," Kilah said.

She was five, and still thought she could speak without being spoken to. Da allowed her misbehavior to slide for years, but neighbors had begun to whisper.

Marme emerged from the kitchen, glaring. "You answered naught. Why?"

"I did as Da asked. Was heavy."

Jeremiah tried looking Marme in the eye, staring her down, but she possessed a scary strength when mad. He decided to evaluate his quads instead.

"Go meet Da. He's waitin'. Then, q-time," Marme said.

"A'fore, can I wash?" His hands were covered in the red dust from above.

Marme nodded. "Be quick."

Jeremiah's clothes shook with dust from fulfilling his chores, but washing up was an excuse. What he really wanted was time alone. A stranger waited outside, and he hadn't told anyone yet.

It was the stillness he questioned the most. Why hadn't she moved? He had heard stories of strangers, and in all of them, the strangers were dangerous, quick to move, quick to hurt. The way she stood, and stared...Jeremiah hadn't known what to say.

He was allotted one minute for washing was up. Then, time to report to Da.

Jeremiah navigated the familiar concrete walls of the compound on the way to Da's office. His fingers ran over familiar cracks and water stains that boasted of age and ruin.

He greeted everyone he passed. Hardly anyone returned the favor, but he kept at it. Marme insisted upon what she called politeness. Other kids he knew had never heard of the word. Jeremiah wasn't sure of its full meaning either, but he hadn't the right to outright question Marme until the age of sixteen.

Finally, he reached Da's work quarters. He announced his presence to the wall com.

"Come." Da's voice sounded metallic through the com's speakers.

The door dissipated, allowing Jeremiah entrance. As head groundskeeper, Da was permitted the private space on a provisional basis. Over the years, he had been granted tools to keep. Half-built machines occupied the room, making it seem much smaller than it actually was. The lack of space made it nearly impossible to move around, much less get any tech fixed.

"Finish tillin', boy?" Da asked.

"Did my requirements, sir. Why summon before q-time?"

Da gritted his teeth. "Attitude is why. Gave Marme attitude, now me. I summon ya if I wish, ken?"

If Jeremiah gritted his teeth as he wanted, it'd mean punishment.

"Ken," he said.

Da glowered a minute before continuing, "Summon ya to assign your position."

He tensed up. "I got enforcer?"

"Nay."

"Groundskeeper?"

"Nay."

His world exploded. Not an enforcer, and not a groundskeeper. There was nothing else he wanted. Jeremiah thought ahead to other available positions: tillerman, councilman, and chapman. He had apprenticed with men from each sector, and had found the position of enforcer to be the best. Everyone respected enforcers, and the respect was earned, not like the fear or lies chapmen and councilmen used to coerce others.

To be assigned was an honor, but Jeremiah's light inside faded the moment Da denied his first two choices.

"You've been assigned archiver," Da said.

Archiving. Ah, he'd forgotten about such assignments. Life would be gray. He had read the phrase in an archived diary months ago, but it had stuck with him. Other phrases had stuck with him as well, but that didn't mean he wanted to archive for the rest of his life.

He had dismissed archivers, as he had only apprenticed with one for a few days. Cataloging papers, books, interviewing citizens, writing and recording events. The position was so painfully tedious he couldn't stand it. He had begged Da for a transfer to a more stimulating apprenticeship, and when his father had acquiesced, he assumed himself rid of the position for good. Wrong. All wrong.

"Did I falter? Being punished?" His cracking voice humiliated him, evidence of his youth, and of tears cresting within.

"Archiver is a legit position, to be served faithfully, as any other. You're not strong for enforcer, and not skilled for groundskeeper. What ya are is patient," Da's said, his one compliment ground up by the critical assertions.

Then Jeremiah remembered the stranger. He had held back knowledge of her existence, and the reason was leverage. Knowledge was power, as time with the councilmen had taught him, and power could get him what he wanted.

"What if I knew a thing or two, sir? Might change council's assignment."

"A thing or two like what?" Da sighed.

"Important things," he hedged.

"Council don't change for nothin'," Da scooped. "Anything ya say or do canna change men's minds."

Strangers have never been to New Andover. That might change their minds.

An unprecedented situation could sway the most rigid of minds. He had read about that, too. He was patient, as Da and the council had recognized. The stranger would be contacted, information would be gathered. Once he knew more, the information might yield a bigger reward.

"What ya ken? Spill." Da squinted, as if to see inside his son's head.

"Nothin'. Just jibberin'."

"Ya full of questions. It's why you were assigned archiver. One day, you'll ken that. Dismissed." Da went back to tinkering with the latest broken piece of tech brought to his office.

Jeremiah ate dinner, every motion automatic. His mind remained outside of the compound, envisioning the stranger.

If he hadn't seen her, the assignment would have hit him all the harder. Her existence kept his light burning. She had to be real.

He didn't know what he would do if he found out she had only been a shimmer of the heat reflecting off of the cloudy air.

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