

Part 24. Naltag

If it wasn't for Kilah, Naltag would've never found Jeremiah. The air vents were intricate, spidering out into pathways upon pathways.

Naltag waited a day, then bothered per's friend. Per overheard Kilah asking her parents questions about her brother, questions like:

"Where's Jeremiah?"

"When he re-arrive?"

"What is conditioning?"

To the last, Naltag paid particularly close attention.

As head of household, Da answered, "When head is muddled, conditioning clears."

Kilah propped her chin in hand. "But how?"

"Tech."

"But...,"

"Enough."

Kilah's additional inquiry died on her small tongue. The butpart was one Naltag also found curious.

Jeremiah's conditioning cast suspicion on the families capabilities as responsible members of the compound. To expunge the whispers and judgments, Kilah's training began years ahead of schedule. Her lessons included letters, knitting, cooking, and cleaning. The prospect of learning new things was a lure at first. But as the lessons increased, she became overwhelmed. The five-year-old fell into bed at the end of the first day without her brother.

"Marme."

They used mops to spread cleaner solution on the kitchen floor. It was a nightly ritual.

Marme continued mopping. "Yeah?"

"When we smile?"

Kilah had her mother's attention. Marme leaned her mop on the counter and wiped her hands on her apron.

"Only tomes for us have recipes. Fun don't enter. Leave out fun, or---," here, Marme paused.

"What?"

"Begin to wear disappointment. It becomes your smile." She shook her head. "Keep scrubbing. Nearin' sup time."

A er Kilah fell asleep, Naltag listened to her parents confer (a er Dae finished pivoting on a very quiet Marme).

Marme was distressed about her daughter mentioning tomes. She thought Jeremiah's sickness was catching, and that Kilah had open arms. Da a irmed Marme's fears, adding his own: Kilah was to be reconditioned as well, ensuring an end to the sickness. Marme did not protest, though as she perched on the side of the bed staring at the wall, one tear cut a path on her made-up face.

Per thought about it later, and decided her protest was her silence, and that one tear. If Marme didn't want her children reconditioned, Naltag had to interfere.

Per's directives explicitly forbade interference, but since per was about to lose both guides, action was required.

Naltag plan to take Kilah to Jeremiah, and the child, a citizen of this world, would know best how to proceed. Thus, Naltag wouldn't be interfering, much. Only presenting the child with a choice.

~*~

A er explaining the choice, Kilah tilted her head to one side.

"I'll help, no qualm about it. Jeremiah ain't sick."

No, Naltag agreed, he certainly wasn't sick.

That a ernoon, Kilah lead her through the vast network of air ducts. They bypassed the child's hideaway, still full of treasures like forbidden tomes, pictures, and plants from above ground. On and on they crawled (with knee pads fashioned by Kilah), rows of mesh vents displaying empty rooms. Finally, a room with patient appeared. It wasn't Jeremiah, so they moved on.

Some rooms featured citizens performing odd jobs, like slapping each other, or fondling genitals.

A er, an overhead electronic voice would ask, "Now don't you feel better?"

All involved would intone, "Yes, I do feel better."

"Good," the voice said. "Now you can move past your doubt, with the aid of these videos."

Holographic screens populated the walls, accompanied by disbursement of pills for each citizen. Those who didn't willingly accept their meds received a shock from a protracting robotic arm.

Like the first room, some had only one citizen inside, and their exercises were even more bizarre.

A girl sat in front of a screen, speaking when prompted. With each of her answers, she was electronically shocked via the touch screen.

"Initiating conversation is not in your nature. Stop speaking," the screen informed her.

The girl nodded. Her meds had probably numbed her, and the electronic shocks seemed more of a nuisance than a painful occurrence.

"My back hurts," came the voice from the screen.

"What happened to your back?"

An extended shock caused the girl to cry out.

"Only speak when prompted. Amir statement is not a prompt. And it is not a woman's nature to ask questions of a man."

Looking too scared to speak, the girl merely nodded.

Naltag had seen enough, and crawled forward, searching events ahead for per's young friend.

"Psst," Kilah whispered loudly, tapping Naltag's knee.

"He be here." She pointed at a vent beside per.

Naltag backed up, and recognized Jeremiah through the metal slats. Similar to the other patients, he seemed half-in, half-out. His exercises consisted of destroying tomes in di erent ways. A strange apparatus was attached to his groin.

For each tome he destroyed (either by ripping the pages, burning it, or holding it under a faucet), the apparatus hummed, producing a powerful suction. The suction was short-lived, and occurred only a er a tome was destroyed. Jeremiah's eyes were glazed over, and he was stroking the machine attached to his body.

"Medicine?" Kilah tilted her head, trying to figure the function of the tech.

"No, not medicine."

Naltag located the metal fasteners holding the vent in place. Once removed, per slid the vent o . The opening was too small for an adult, but Kilah would do just fine. In the event their break-in was discovered, it was best if the child was caught and not Naltag.

Per tied a fiber cable around the child, gave her a syringe, and detailed instructions. Though young, Kilah was cognizant of her mission, and of its import.

Just in case, Naltag said, "No mucking up."

Kilah grinned. "Muck. Like muck."

"Not today, scug-rat."

It was Jeremiah's pet name for her, and Naltag repeated it just as a ctionately.

The child scaled down the cable, with Naltag anchoring her.

"Jeremiah! Wake up," Kilah whispered.

He didn't stir.

The child shook his shoulder. A pinch on a leg accomplished nothing.

Kilah appealed to Naltag, "What next?"

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