

## Part 29. Jeremiah

Naltag's transport ship was accommodating, if not intimidating.

Upon first glance, it appeared small, but once inside, the space expanded. Each corridor extended, and the rooms opened into spacious caverns, far larger than what he expected when viewing the hull. Jeremiah was certain his eyes were breaking, but Naltag ruffled his hair.

The contact made him jump. Naltag laughed, and he calmed somewhat.

"Space perceptions can spawn new tech, and one thing you see is really something else."

The words went round and round, and he caught some of what it meant as he continued staring at the cavernous room. Jeremiah was reminded of the compound. He saw it as one thing, but was beginning to see it as something else.

He ran his hands over the rough surfaces jutting out from the walls. Everything shimmered under his fingertips, seemingly constructed of a fluid substance he had never seen before. Like he had earlier with Naltag, the surfaces retracted from his touch.

"How big it get?"

"It grows to accommodate our needs."

Naltag dropped the jargon comment of Jeremiah's compound (not your home anymore he remembered). If not for the time spent studying tomes, he would not have understood much of what Naltag said.

Kyla didn't mind wearing her ignorance. When Naltag spouted new jargon, she asked many questions, loudly, excitedly.

"What that mean?"

When finding new tech, "What this do?"

It took a day for her to fully quell her excitement. Jeremiah welcomed her attitude, as it distracted from what he was leaving behind. The ship hummed, which Naltag called 'powering on,' then jolted up, up, and up even more. Jeremiah worried over the movement, known as 'hovering,' which Naltag assured him was a perfectly safe occurrence. The destabilization under his feet felt anything but safe.

"We move!" Kilah laughed, pointing out a window. "Bye, compound."

Separation for her seemed less final than it did for Jeremiah. Wherever they were going, his sister would acclimate. She was an explorer, and Jeremiah was the opposite. He loved to stay and explore the world around him, but feared new worlds.

Unfortunately for him, new worlds became a constant for the next few months.

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Rolling green.

He read the term in a tome, and thought of it often during their adventures. The land below went by in a blur, as alien to him as Naltag.

Jeremiah told Naltag he liked the art displayed in the window tech.

"Abstract art, right?"

He tried to display his limited knowledge of artistic terms gleaned from his archiving days.

"Art? You mean the landscape?"

Landscape. Jeremiah shook his head, feeling like Kilah, but not wishing to voice his ignorance.

"What's in the window is not art. It's the Earth. Brown for dirt. Green for trees." Naltag traced the azure line beyond the green blurs. "And blue for water."

Blue was rare, but the most beautiful. Sometimes white mixed with the blue, creating a marbled effect. Kilah and Jeremiah debated on what the white swirls were composed of. She surmised cotton, while he thought it to be fur.

Naltag let them debate, watching as Kilah insisted the swirls were birds flying together over the water.

Together, they learned new words and new lands. Being an explorer was daunting work, and Jeremiah's respect for his sister grew. Latrines were different on the ship, as Kilah noted. Waste didn't get swept away, not at first. If one watched (like Kilah certainly did), the stinking mass would combine with other liquids, what Naltag had called a "conversion of energy."

"Tech potion," Kilah said, with all the certainty of a young child.

That same certainty followed her notion of cotton swirls in the water, so Jeremiah took her assertion with mild doubt.

Much later, he learned she was right. Waste was liquefied, and quantified by the ship's fuel system. Tech potion.

"How she---," Jeremiah thought his words out and began again. "How did Kilah know about the waste?"

"An informed estimation."

Naltag's answer made no sense. The words were too large.

Naltag clarified, "A lucky guess."

"No, not like that."

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Jeremiah brooded the rest of the afternoon. He wouldn't talk, but ate when food was brought to him. Another coma? Naltag wasn't convinced. Per could guess as to why the child was upset.

"Is it because she was right?"

Naltag need not add a prerequisite to the question. Jeremiah knew what Per meant.

He shook his head. Anger, or a cousin to anger, rested on his brow.

"Is it because she's a girl, and she was right?" Naltag sat, daring to be close to the tense child. "She bested you, guessed, and guessed right when you had no idea."

Jeremiah looked like he wanted to deny it, but ordinance held his tongue. Even after leaving his old life behind, it would have a hand on his throat for months and probably years to come.

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They ran out of bread quickly. Since Naltag lacked a modulator, their only option was to land.

Outside the window, the green blur became clear. Tall beasts with green hair loomed everywhere. Their arms reached out, obscuring sunlight that peeked through in patches. Kilah chatted on about what the beasts were, and what food they could yield. Jeremiah let her talk without offering his opinion.

The door to the ship yawned open, and the children walked out, one cautiously, one excitedly. Jeremiah heard a crunching underneath his feet as he moved, and he worried on it, until he saw Naltag and Kilah were unbothered by the noise.

His stomach rumbled, and he was desperate for substantial food. Naltag's supplements kept him alive, but he was always left hungry. He wondered if the tall beasts might know where to find some food. Mayhap they might share their own reserves.

"Are we to hunt?" Kilah took an aggressive stance. "Can help."

"I'm sure you can." Jeremiah heard the amusement in Naltag's voice. "However, we're not hunting, at least we won't have to today." Per handed them the disappearing wristlets. "Put these on. There are other things in these woods, and you don't want to meet them."

"Fear the tall beasts?" Kilah whispered as though they were listening, as Jeremiah also assumed they were.

"These are trees." Naltag rubbed a nearby trunk. "They're alive like you and me, but they won't hurt us."

Emboldened, Kilah took a leaf in between her chubby fingers.

"Pretty hair."

When the leaf didn't harm her, she smiled.

A howling cackle sounded from the West. Another, and then a third cackle carried on the wind.

"Trees don't howl. Activate the tech now."

The children did as they were told. Obeying adults, especially male figures, was hardwired into them.

Jeremiah's heart slammed against his ribs, but he had faith in the tech. He was more concerned about where they were going than about what might jump out from behind a tall beast.

As they walked, he studied the beast in detail. Their legs spread along the ground, twisting and leading down to the dirt. Jeremiah realized tall beasts grew, like the green tufts that grew outside of his compound. He wanted to remove an infant beast and take it back.

"So you do want to go back?" Naltag wanted to know.

Jeremiah considered the question for a while before answering. "Not too soon, but someday, yes."

When I'm ready

Suddenly, Naltag held up a hand and froze.

"We're here."

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