

Part 30. Kilah and Jerimiah

"Here" didn't look much different than anywhere else. They were stopped a clearing, tall beasts surrounding but not overtaking them.

All the while, Kilah eyed the monsters, expecting them to bend their arms in greeting, at the very least. As she watched, two beasts rustled their hair, and the ripple of their greenery echoed, spreading throughout the crown, like a wave building to a quiet crash.

Aer, Kilah refrained from calling the creatures "tall beasts" ever again. Though, "trees" wasn't quite right either. She had read about trees, silent husks in the ground. They weren't living things like her, but a plant. Yet, these creatures were so much more.

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As Kilah was discovering a new kinship, Jeremiah was listening for another sign of the real beasts Naltag had mentioned. Unlike Kilah, he had seen tomes of the post-war era, and while some housed mere descriptions of the mutations to follow, others contained photographs. He remembered being grateful he lived in the compound, safe from mutations, which the tomes assured him wouldn't live past another few generations.

Whenever he tilled, the land was beast-free. He believed them part of the past, as dusty and forgotten as the oldest tomes. Hearing the howls tore down his assumptions of what existed.

"Out in the wild," he murmured.

Phrases from tomes always sprang to mind when he came up against the undefinable.

"Ken?" Kilah stared up at the tall beasts.

"Nothing," Jeremiah said.

Naltag held a finger to his lips. "Hush up, now. We're going in."

"In where?" Jeremiah asked, then saw stairs leading down to a door.

The entrance looked identical to the opening at Jeremiah's compound. The resemblance was so stark, that for a moment, he had the irrational thought that Naltag had taken them back.

He imagined walking back into his family's domicile, greeting Marme, receiving disappointed looks from Da. Enforcers would lead him back to the conditioning rooms, and his life would inexorably lead to Darden's: lifeless. He never could materialize the right term to categorize Darden (and now Eva), but "lifeless" fit just fine.

None of it would happen anyway, because his compound didn't have tall beasts, only tufts of green.

They were also far off from the other compound, at least ten paricles.

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Naltag flicked his hand, and they went in. Like the other compound, there was no lock on the outside. The lock was meant to keep citizens in, and other deterrents kept vagrants out, mainly the radiated areas which cut off each compound, like bodies of water around an island.

Jeremiah had noticed the island effect as they'd flown overhead, not understanding that within each green pocket of land, the potential for a compound greatly increased.

Conditions inside the compound were appalling. Cracks zig-zagged along the concrete walls, with mounds of dust waiting in the corners. While walking the hallways back home, Jeremiah would count the cracks on the walls, sometimes letting Kilah join the game, but their tally never ran very high. Here, he counted thirty cracks just to start.

Their groundskeeper must not be as adept as Da

Few citizens milled about the hall, and none seemed on their way to complete tasks of import. Their dress was as in need of repair as the walls. One child was bare-assed as the day he was born. Jeremiah cringed when he realized the dirt on his legs was probably human filth.

"They're all sad," Kilah whispered.

"Why are we here?" Jeremiah felt exposed, even with the safety of the cloaking device.

"For food, and to learn," Naltag said.

Jeremiah was reminded of the first thing Naltag had said to him:

I came to learn, to know you

Naltag's mission seemed knowledge-based. It was hard for him to understand the purpose of a mission which didn't involve violence, or power.

As they moved deeper into the compound, he decided knowledge was powerful. His home valued knowledge, of a sort, and in comparison to this twin compound, they had flourished. Naltag, the ultimate collector of knowledge, possessed endless truths, and this allowed him to travel freely.

Jeremiah recognized that Kilah was kindred to Naltag. A collector. He wanted to be a collector, as well. He remembered the thrill of collecting knowledge from the tomes, but it had been easier, safer.

The people in this compound seemed the opposite of safe. In total, he counted eight people, five of them younger than breeding age.

As if he could hear Jeremiah's thoughts, Naltag said, "They won't last another thirty rotations."

The term "rotations" was foreign to him, but he pieced the rest together. Essentially, these scavengers wouldn't survive for much longer.

They were deemed. No. That wasn't the right word. They were domed. No, still not right. Doomed.

Words brought everything together, at least in Jeremiah's opinion.

Words tied thoughts together in a neat bow. The world of exploring was full of the unnamable, unexplainable, but words named explained, and in the same form, words explored and conquered.

I'm an explorer, too

He held his shoulders a bit higher, but they slumped when his conditioning kicked in. Ample pride was against ordinance, and any outward display was equally banned.

No one noticed his arrogance. The citizens around him were too busy attending to their own misery. Naltag fanned out a piece of tech to scan through the walls. He shined the blue laser-shield across a surface, revealing what lay beyond. Finding food took minutes.

The paltry stash of hard nuts and rotting meat exemplified the sorry state of citizen life in the twin compound.

Kilah handled the meat with an upturned nose. She didn't say anything, nor did Jeremiah. They were in silent agreement that the food was untouchable, as well as inedible. Citizens needed it more than they did, and Jeremiah wondered if they knew better living conditions existed. From their dirty skin and stone-walled eyes, he doubted it.

If food, scarce as it was, could be found in the compound's crumbling rooms, it could be gathered outside as well.

The large, gaseous circle Naltag insisted was the sun threw ribbons of orange across the sky. A myriad of colors danced on the white flu in the sky, evolving into deeper hues as they stalked the woods in search of nuts and fruit. By the time the sky darkened, they had found enough food to last the next few rotations.

Feral cries echoed in the distance, sounding closer than before. Too close.

Jeremiah pictured the creatures that belonged to the cries, and none of his imaginings were benign. They featured endless teeth, glowing eyes, and a hunger for small children.

Kilah was bent picking up nuts, but Jeremiah pulled from the task. She protested, until another round of cries hit their ears. Naltag was ahead of them, a long length of tall beasts separating them. A biting cold took hold of Jeremiah, telling him to take his sister and slam shut to their protector. Once reunited, run on to the ship and slam shut the dissaperating barrier. That just what they two children did.

Though he couldn't confirm by looking back (he didn't want to see the creature) Jeremiah feared they were being chased. The shu ling of their feet became deafening, and their panting drowned out all else. Could there be another shu ling behind them, breathing as loudly?

Cease the irrationalities

Yet, he didn't truly control himself until back aboard the ship. Kilah looked unsure of why her brother was clammy and wild-eyed, but Naltag shared a knowing glance.

Most likely he had felt the creatures behind them, too.

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