

Part 8. Naltag



The overly sterile environment made Naltag squirm. Everything was constructed from rough-hewn concrete or bu ed metal. No welcoming colors or so colors. Then again, the compound had been built to withstand, not to welcome.

From per's observations, the citizens took their home for granted. The surroundings had influenced them, instilling like strength, and obstinance. However, there was little in the way of choice.

Surviving outside was unthinkable. Air quality was still questionable in most areas, though there pockets of livable space existed. The land above the compound was one of those spaces. Naltag hadn't seen many compounds capable of tilling their land. Even so, the food they were growing wouldn't be enough to sustain the population, not if relied upon exclusively. Their hydroponic gardens had to be the main source of food.

Naltag had studied up on pre-desolation tech, like 3-D printers: desktop devices capable of whipping up any creation in seconds. Their awesomeness had lasted a mere two years before supplies had run out. Compounds such as these had transitioned to hydroponics, realizing the limitations of tech.

Nevertheless, Naltag noted evidence of tech-reliance to complete even the most minute of tasks. Interface screens were integrated onto every doorway. No actual doors, merely dissipating screens. High-end air and water-filtration systems. Since it was di icult to manufacture such intricate tech on a small scale, new tech hadn't been welded in a century or more. Groundskeepers fixed up the ailing machines when necessary, stu ing rags in a sinking ship that wouldn't hold for long.

By Naltag's calculations, the citizens would be forced outside within ten years. The stockpiles and tech were meant to last thirty years, not six generations.

Naltag assessed the cracks in the ceiling, running in deep, jagged lines to the floor. The closer per got to Jeremiah's domicile, the less fragrant the cracks.

Per stood at the doorway, waiting for a member of the family to trigger it. Naltag's cloak disrupted the sensor. Small gusts of air li ed per's hair as citizens marched by.

Finally, the doorway briefly shimmered, and Kilah dashed into the hallway. Naltag observed near the wall, ready to slip inside before the barrier was erected. The day before, per hadn't anticipated being in the way, as it wasn't a concept per had been aware of, and Kilah had run straight into per.

The signal emitted from the cloak had disoriented the child. She had pushed away at Naltag, looking distressed at the invisible column she had come into contact with. Seeing nothing, but obviously sensing the buzz of the cloak, Kilah had shaken her head, and rushed o .

Today, per wasn't in danger of the child noticing per's presence. She was out of sight in the main corridor, and Naltag slid swi ly into the domicile, narrowly missing getting caught in the dissipating door as it materialized.

It was cooler in the domicile than it was in the rest of compound. Naltag's eyes adjusted to the dark interior. Jeremiah's Marme turn most of the electronics o while the men were away. A single light shown from her main workstation, the food prep arena dubbed "kitchen."

She was grinding up grain for the night's fativa rations. The work was hard, and sweat roiled over her face, a dark cloud. Naltag had sat at the kitchen table the day before, watching Marme prepare food, repair close, and move about with practiced skill, but little enthusiasm. Once her husband arrived home, Cloud disappeared, place with a mixture of determination and compliance. Though there were Marmes with black hair, blonde hair, brown hair, and even brown skin, a cloud lingered around all of them.

Kilah had no such cloud, and Naltag attributed the disparity to Marmehood.

Like each time before, Marme failed to notice Naltag's presence. The cloud was too thick, like a cloak of a di erent kind.

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