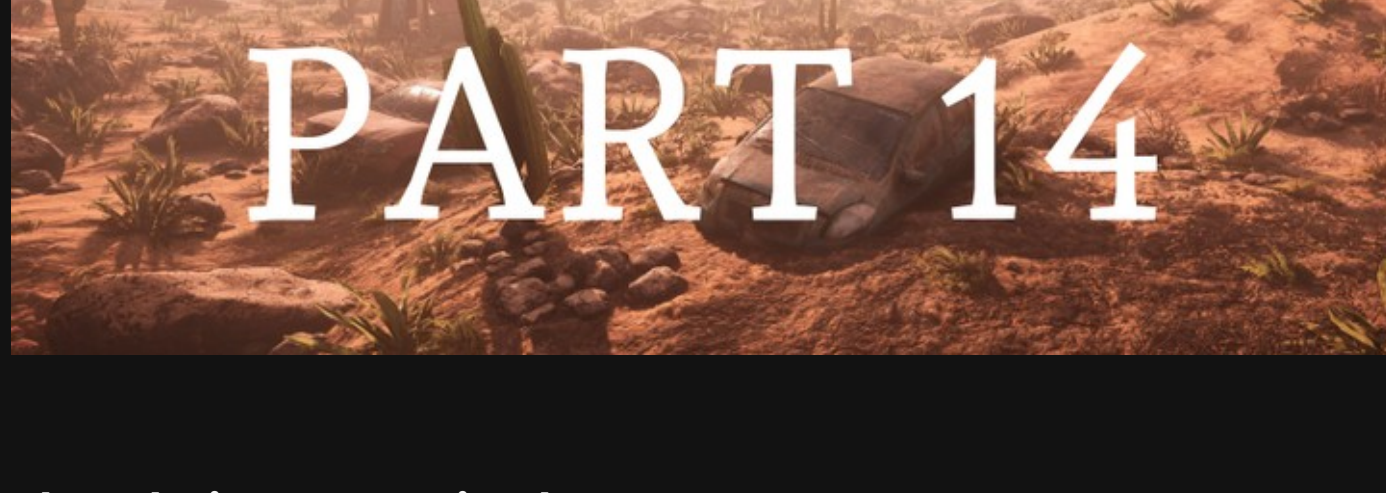


Part 14. Naltag



The solution was so simple.

Naltag's research had slowed of late. Jeremiah would be upset if he found out, but he ignored per during the day anyhow. It was useful to receive information from a second source, a younger source with a fresh outlook.

"This way," Kilah whispered.

"No need to whisper." Naltag kept the reminder gentle.

"Sorry."

Except for a few slight slips, Kilah had taken to Naltag's existence with much less reticence than Jeremiah. The child presented as friendly, even eager. Too eager. It was as if Kilah believed Naltag was a secret friend. Per didn't mind, and Kilah had become a friend.

At first, Naltag wasn't sure the five-year-old would grasp everything.

After explaining more than half of per's origin, per stopped to ask,

"Ya ken, child?"

"You a stranger, from the stars, here to learn us."

Naltag stepped back, stricken for the first time on this planet by the weight of underestimation.

"Let me show ya somethin'!"

Naltag smiled. Young children were so pleasant, unsullied by the rules for a few more years.

"Show me."

Kilah took Naltag on a tour of the compound per wouldn't have thought of. Jeremiah probably hadn't explored as much as his sister. Kilah was more adventurous.

She used a series of old air ducts to get around. Naltag had trouble navigating a bulky frame, but managed to squeeze along. Vents overlooked every room in the compound, and if Naltag peered through the slats, per could see what was happening inside.

One vent lead to a birthing room, and Naltag witnessed minutes of sweat-beaded work as a young girl pushed another human from her body. Coming from a society in which children were engineered and not born, the room was especially interesting to per.

Kilah was patient, and not only for her age, but for a human. She waited while Naltag played peeping Tom, recording notes. It was the same patience Naltag had found in Jeremiah, and it was one of the similarities between the two siblings.

In other vents, Naltag was privy to enforcer sessions, council sessions, and conditioning rooms.

The conditioning rooms were few, but cavernous. They held six people at a time, but usually the same people. The prisoners stayed for about weeks, or for however long their conditioning was necessary. The training consisted of clear screens covering their eyes, wrapping around their ears.

Given their compliant states, Naltag assumed they were drugged. The better to absorb the bombardment of suggestive pictures and interactive scenarios streaming through their screens. Tubes from their arms and extremities led away to several machines.

"Why are they here?" Naltag asked Kilah for the tenth time.

Per asked over and over because the idea of involuntary conditioning was a novel one on Naltag's planet. Per also repeated the question because Kilah's answers, like her personality, were mercurial.

This day, she said, "Their thoughts need cleanin'."

Naltag had observed some of the conditioned upon release. From their faces, it certainly seemed as though they had been cleaned out. The conditioning room itself was as sterile and environment as Naltag had laid eyes on: White walls, white beds, white robes, white-faced attendants and prisoners.

"Come on," Kilah urged.

Naltag didn't need to be told twice.

They had almost arrived at the best room in the compound. If the small opening at the end of the tunnels could be called a room. It was more like Naltag's favorite place. Per crawled forward, knowing the next movement would reveal the pink potted plant marking the entrance. Today, Kilah had left a purple flower inside. The child liked to surprise. Naltag had been happy the first time she had noticed the plants in Kilah's hideaway. There were even squares of sod. She questioned the child, but Kilah had only shrugged, saying it had been easy to sneak above-ground and grab small samples.

"How did you make them flourish?" Naltag asked.

"Readin', and a nourishment my Da made."

Not only was Kilah an amateur horticulturalist, but she also tinkered with discarded parts of tech from her father, and swiped books from the archiver's dormitory. One assignment the child was uninterested in was enforcement. Like all their conversations, Naltag recorded Kilah's views on enforcers.

"What's to enforce? Buncha wannabes flu in' each other up, enforcing rules already decided upon. Why be assigned? What's to do? Nothin'."

Her use of tech was as impressive as her words. In the middle of the small space, Kilah showcased inventions in-progress: a toy helicopter on the verge of flight, a broken sprinkler modified into a super-canteen delivery system, and finally, a haphazard grinder with jutting wires.

Naltag pointed at the cylinder.

"Conditioning cleans people." Kilah's chubby face grew serious.

"Well, this cleans too."

"Cleans what?"

Child's arm swept back and forth in an overwhelming arc. "Dunna ken. Cleans everything in the air."

"Like what?"

Kilah became quiet. The small arms, so lively seconds before, crossed over her chest, guarding her answer.

Naltag tried again, "What does it clean?"

Kilah bit her lip, black curls gleaming in the dim artificial light.

"Marme called dem devils. Da says it's radashun."

Ah

A picture began to form for Naltag.

"It's an air purifier?"

The child nodded.

"The compound is full of those."

Kilah's shyness vanished as she boasted, "Not outside, there ain't."

"You've taken it outside?" The girl nodded, and Naltag confirmed, "And it cleans the devils, er, radiation?"

"Yes, cleans radashun," Kilah repeated back.

"Wow," was all Naltag could think to say.

Kilah beamed.

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