



THE
CHAIN
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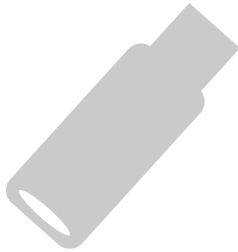
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for students who sense the glow in a
world sprinting through the dark





Chih-Ming

“You look rough, Hesch,” said Chih-ming, a fellow Observer from his dorm. “You sick or something?”

Heschel’s cheeks glowed red. His eyes were a bit watery. “No. I’m fine, Ming. The wind is brutally cold today. Besides, I just left the infirmary for a routine check-up. They say I’m healthy enough to dominate the Deplorables.”

“Oh yeah? I guess that’s why you’re a WAFE. They just tell me to stick to the approved regimen,” said Chih-ming, looking away with a ruffled brow. Heschel couldn’t tell if he was disappointed or disinterested in the lack of affirmation from the leadership. Chih was amiable but on the quieter side. A brilliant student, sure, but a bit of a gray

cloud compared to the vibrant personality of Charlie. The Anti-Libertas had eliminated words like melancholy and depression. Instead, they trained gray clouds like Chih to consider themselves privileged to be central cogs in the Anti-Libertas machine.

“Listen, Chih, they tell all the Wide Awakes what they tell me. You know, to keep us on our toes. You know what’s strange? I don’t remember earning the blue belt. Not sure I’m really qualified for the Fully Empowered designation as an Observer.” Heschel went to pat Chih-ming’s shoulder but caught himself halfway, faking a wide stretch instead. He wasn’t sure why he reached out to touch his friend. Touching wasn’t allowed. Still, it seemed a natural response to a fellow Observer.

They were standing outside the entrance to their first session when Chih-ming paused. Young Observers flooding into the room parted around him like a stone in a river. Hesch stood behind him, patiently waiting.

“Hesch, can I ask you something?” said Chih-ming in a hoarse whisper.

“Yeah, I suppose. And I’m sure that whisper’s not gonna attract any attention right here in the middle of the doorway.”

“Was that sarcasm?” Chih-ming had secretly read about this ancient form of communication, though he hadn’t actually participated in it. “So you just say the opposite

of what's true. Wouldn't that qualify as a lie? Or is it what they used to call humor? In which case you do think it's a bad idea to have a private conversation right here."

Heschel smiled, not realizing that he was being snarky. "Chih, what's on your mind? We can wait until after the session if you want. Take a walk or something—it's up to you."

"Well, you've been going to the infirmary a lot lately, you know, since the fall Sojourn. And...well..."

Heschel's eyes grew wide. His cheeks turned a deep cherry red, and his back stiffened. "Come over here, Ming," he said, grabbing the young Observer's elbow and pulling him out of the doorway and into the hall.

Chih-ming began to panic. His shoulders slumped, and his words trailed off into a mumble.

"What else have you noticed, Ming? Don't hold back. Something's up. You and I didn't connect before the Sojourn, we worked on projects together, sure, but we didn't spend time together until after my long stint in the re-edu...I mean...in the infirmary with Joanna. Are you keeping tabs on me too?"

"I...I...I didn't mean it like that, Heschel. I...I just thought that, well, you see, Charlie...." Chih-ming stopped mid-sentence. His body froze like he'd just been caught by monitors for illegally sneaking extra rations. It was clear he had struck a nerve.

“Charlie, what? Who’s Charlie, Ming? Why is that name familiar?” Heschel was still holding onto Chih-ming’s elbow, squeezing tighter and tighter when the session buzzer sounded. “Relax, Chih. I’m sorry. I’m fine, really. Let’s talk after your lunch. Maybe Joanna can help make sense of your ramblings.”

Heschel scurried into the room with Chih-ming tailing closely behind. His mind hadn’t been right these past few months since that long stint in The Adavis Center for Progress the previous fall. His thoughts were perpetually nebulous, like an endlessly dense fog, and he was unable to grab ahold of a clear thought for any length of time. But there was something else. He couldn’t quite remember that particular Sojourn. Neither could Joanna. Of course, images would flash through his mind now and again. Memories of events he didn’t remember partaking in and people he didn’t recognize—like Charlie—but it all seemed irrational and illegal. He would never sneak out of his flat at night, climb down cliffs, or search for hidden artifacts. After all, he was a Fully Empowered Wide Awake Observer—a model student at Compound 40.