

## Part 31. Naltag

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For days, they visited other compounds.

The day's spilled into weeks, and weeks ebbed into months.

They picked up a new friend. Naltag still thought herself lucky to have befriended Jeremiah, and by consequence, Kilah. By contrast, the addition of another Kimurian was both amusing and unexpected.

At the fourth compound, shadowed creatures advanced from surrounding hillsides, threatening Naltag and friend with a barrage of yellow fangs. Twisted cries tore from their crooked mouths, and matched the cries they'd heard sporadically in the wild.

Scabs line their thick bodies, from mutation or self-mutilation. Per didn't know which. They hunched about, resembling bears, or the tattered remnants thereof. Naltag observed a near derivative of the same species before meeting Jeremiah.

Per's theories on the mutant bears ran darker. On their haunches, sinews glistening with blood and sweat, their look struck a familiar chord. Hirsute faces, paws that might be mistaken for hands.

Not even an Earthly cycle had passed since befriending Jeremiah. Yet, an eternity of experience had evolved. Per's theoretical studies revolved around connections, solid relationships with foreign intelligence. Bursting out of the nearest compound, this fourth compound, came new intelligence in the form of a young Kimurian.

From the beginning, Naltag identified the newcomer as a woman, so cheeks, full lips, and flaring hips, but the shorn hair and broad shoulders did much to throw off the perception of woman.

Compound women kept their hair long, and their shoulders stooped. This whooping woman, or girl, Naltag realized looking closer, didn't stoop.

She whooped again, similar to the call of the creatures. At the noise, they hesitated. They seem to be deciding on pouncing or going against the approval of the newcomer. When they crept nearer, she raised her arm, and an energy beam burst from a folsom shaft.

Just two bursts, at the knees of the flankers. They immediately collapsed. Their screeches echoed from the trees into the sky. The others, not waiting for further energy bursts, fled.

Instead of their usual war cries, the down creatures went from screeching to mewling. Jaws flapped open and closed. Snap. Open. Snap.

Stuck as they were, Naltag felt it safe to examine them closer. Per's earlier suppositions strengthened in proximity to the creatures. Their eyes, though luminous and large, were almond-shaped. Their paws ended not in claws, but fingernails.

Yes, once, generations ago, the hunched creature might have told Naltag 'hello.'

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