

Part 36. Naltag

Another might've tired a er so much time. So much sand lost in the hour glass. Naltag had read about them, having never seen one that survived the desolation.

Eleven cycles on the same planet.

Most research assignments lasted no longer than seven cycles, but this one was di erent. Naltag counted perself lucky concerning the assignation. Pers research vessel dri ed peacefully by the remote planet referred to as Kimur. The next rotation wouldn't pass Kimur for another twelve cycles. As far away and as quiet as the surface seemed, no one volunteered for direct observation. Through the echoing silence of the task hall, usually thriving with ideas from the dozen or so colleagues, Naltag raised a hand.

A few had raised eyebrows, but Naltag's superiors nodded their approval. Slim archives existed on Kimur's past and current state, and large rumors abounded. Naltag despised rumors, revering truth. Per was eager to discover how the archives and rumors aligned or misaligned.

Extravagance, violence, and oppression colored the archives. Rumor of first contact was common knowledge among Naltag's colleagues. Hundreds of cycles had passed since the initial (and rumored) contact with the League of Worlds. Since then, nothing. Waves of radiation rippled across the surface a er minor explosions were recorded all those cycles ago. It was assumed that the planet would be cataloged as "Dead," like its red cousin and neighbor, Crismun.

Many believed intelligent life could not have survived, not anything worth forming a connection with the League.

Kimur, the Tomb.

When Naltag first touched down on the surface, per questioned the choice. Blast sites littered the landscape, bloated craters of devastation. Where the craters ended the crumbling structures began, with greenery thriving. Vines, trees, moss, and flowers climbed and entwined themselves around the defunct cities. Naltag traversed the cracked pavements, roots breaking through the concrete remnants, trees snaking in gnarly patterns between old cars.

Nothing here a er all. Just fauna species to catalogue

There were minute rodents and thriving insect colonies to also study, but no complex lifeforms. However much Kimur repaired itself from the bombings, brown patches of infertile land pervaded the greenery, indicating more recovery time was needed. Per came to think of them as dead zones.

Naltag considered hailing the research vessel a er only a few rotations. If per waited too long, it would be another dozen cycles hence before it would return. Then, inspiration struck and per decided to remain.

Naltag had scanned a vast percentage of Kimur with the scoping gear on per's transport, except for the dead zones. Acknowledging the oversight, Naltag flew over several of these zones, commanding a new mapping and scan of the area. Scanning yielded nothing, but the mapping presented a puzzle: there were dips and voids underneath the zones.

Suddenly, per theorized on the remaining Kimurian population. Perhaps they had anticipated the oncoming and catastrophic radiation, and had planned accordingly. Naltag's excitement at illuminating the truth built, and with it, per built a plan.

Near the voids, per walked the dead zones with the mapping equipment, spying what looked like stairways. Vast stone walls, possibly doors, stood at the bottom of the stairways.

For weeks, per waited near these stairways, hoping for any sort of activity. For weeks, the only activity was when the wind carried the dirt, whistling through the rotting metal structures nearby.

Finally, a creaking hinge signaled possible signs of life. Following the noise, a head popped into view from the stairway. Eventually, a hairy and naked biped emerged, shielding its eyes and covering what appeared to be genitals. Two steps later, the biped collapsed. Hidden with cloaking technology, Naltag was safe to approach and check the condition of the creature.

It was dead.

Naltag's equipment informed per that a massive coronary failure was to blame, most likely the result of starvation and stress. The darkened entryway the dead thing had le open beckoned.

Maybe this trip isn't a waste a er all

Still cloaked, per walked over the threshold of the opening. The air hung heavy with a dank smell that made per gag. Per clicked a button, activating a facial covering meant for filtering air in the cold of space.

Through the dark, Naltag's scanner picked up figures sprawled across the hallways. Bodies of bipeds, dead or dying. A scan of their exterior revealed fever, legions, and crusty wounds. A disease had ravaged the compound, taking with it hundreds.

In the rooms, Naltag found remnants of brilliant tech, tatters of clothing, and dried up hydroponic gardens.

It was a great find, and yet, it had come too late.

The first Kimurians Naltag had found, and the entire compound died o within a few lunar rotations.

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