

Part 37. Naltag

The deaths perplexed Naltag, with a small mix-in of anger and frustration.

So close. Second contact with Kimurians, first-degree contact no less, washed away in their last tragic breaths.

Their archives would've redeemed the journey, and they not been corrupted. The sickness must have driven them to madness, compelling destruction of their histories.

Naltag remembered smiling in the archive room, and then the shock of disappointment that followed when the files wouldn't play on the interface screen.

With every file Naltag pressed, FILE NOT FOUND flashed in big red letters.

A lunar cycle passed, Naltag chewing frustration, deciding whether to phone home, or to stick it out. Dead zones were plentiful on Kimur, and Naltag reasoned more compounds could be found, with high chances of live Kimurians inside.

Naltag's inference held weight. Other Kimurians existed in the other compounds, but as with the the first compound, archives were corrupted. The compound populace couldn't be measured, most of them on their way to being the last generation. Every compound that was uncovered meant nothing but death, and no archives to settle the dispute between the rumors.

Hailing the research transport would be inevitable. Kimur, perhaps once full of life, was now a dying a rock. The next dozen years couldn't all be a wasteNaltag thought. Per could catalog the meager animal and plant life population.

Proper study of scadogs required one (no, two) cycles at least. Naltag recognized the genetic mutts, adapted though they were. Their adaptation was further proof of their sophisticated engineering. They were the last vestiges of intelligent Kimurians, long gone. Per's scadog study never formally commenced because finally, per came across a compound of immense complexity.

From the air, Naltag noticed distinct rows of greenery dispersed throughout a dead zone. At closer range, the rows revealed purpose. Plants grew irregularly on Kimur, pushing up through asphalt and snaking along cement walkways, but this pattern was intentional. Cultivation.

Cultivation meant intelligence, and intelligence meant possible connections with the League.

~*~

Upon landing and cloaking the transport, Naltag saw Jeremiah for the first time. Unlike the previous Kimurians Naltag had watched, Jeremiah seemed well-fed and well-clothed. The child also handled tools, like a tiller and hoe, though the dull veneer and rust indicated they were past their prime. Jeremiah toiled outside the compound for hours on end, occasionally talking to himself, grinning up at the purple and orange haze of the sky.

That morning from ten cycles ago shared similar ties to this morning; a purple sky with streaks of orange (an indication of falling carcinogens in the air), and Jeremiah nearby, staring at the sky through the transport bay barrier. Though, no smile this morning.

Jeremiah, an unusually somber and quiet child, had matured into an usually somber and quiet young person. The somber attitude had increased a cycle back, a er a mating initiation with Graylyn had failed. Graylyn had rejected the advances, but kept challenging Jeremiah with questions.

Kilah enjoyed the questions, and became Graylyn's confidant.

Kilah never minded the constant stream of questions launched by Graylyn, as she had plenty of her own. They bounced questions o one another, settling on answers together.

They invited Jeremiah and Naltag to debate them and only Naltag joined in. Jeremiah would leave them, and later, could be found si ing through the electronic archives.

"Why not stay, talk, with us?" Naltag had asked the same question more than once.

"Trying to learn the right answer."

Usually the conversation ended there, but Naltag pressed on. "There are di erent ways to learn."

Jeremiah never stopped swiping at the virtual images hovering in front of him. "By arguing with two girls?"

The question was devoid of malice. Rather, it was a le over result of his conditioning.

"And how many scadogs ya murder this cycle?"

Graylyn inquired from behind Naltag.

She stepped into view, arms folded and eyes flat.

Jeremiah remained impassive until Kilah stepped out too. Naltag noted the change in the young man's face, and could barely interpret it. Disappointment? Surprise? Even a er eleven cycles among Kimurian children, reading their emotions was as hard as it had ever been.

Kilah's face was easier to read, especially since the look exchanged daily between Jeremiah and Graylyn: she was mad.

"Not mad. I'm hurt," Kilah sni ed.

Naltag stared, amazed. Kilah had been trained in the arts of per's homeland, but she hadn't yet demonstrated the practiced use of mindspeak. The mental barrier Naltag erected at home hadn't been necessary on Kimur, and so per broadcasted thoughts without care. Now, Naltag realized at least one Kimurian could hear per.

Kilah wiped her face and walked away, not even acknowledging what she had done. The child's abilities were naturally cultivated, and she could poke around in anyone's head if she liked. Quickly, but with the education of failed practice, Naltag worked at re-creating a mental barrier.

[Continue reading next part](#) □