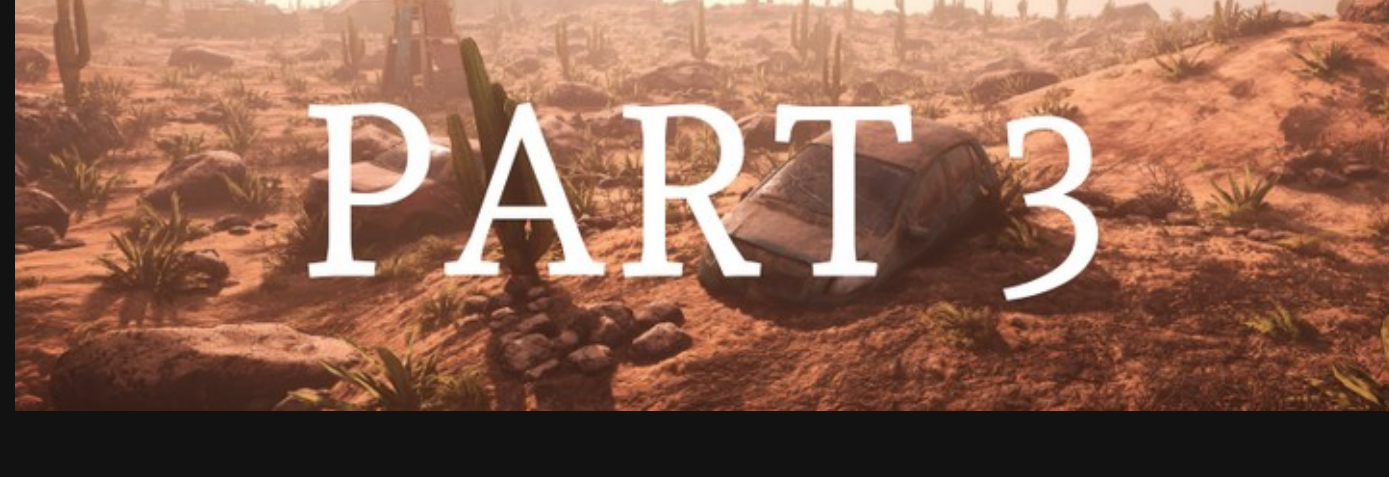


## Part 3. Naltag



**The child returned the next day.** Naltag expected the delay, having been aware of the Kimurian habit to come above ground in spurts, usually only for hours at a time.

When the child emerged, he came slowly, more cautious than the day before. Even before climbing the steps from his home out into the wilderness, he scoped out the surrounding area. Naltag saw what he must see: rows of sticks that had once been trees, west to the intermittent sprinkles of farmland the community had successfully grown, and finally south, to the numerous metal carcasses left over from the failed tech age.

Naltag wanted the child to find per. The process would be easier that way, and trust would be built faster. The child ventured to the spot where Naltag had revealed per-self last.

"Hello." His tone was measured.

Naltag rested inside the rotting skeleton of the machine, oblivious to the high temperature. Per sat up, deliberately displaying both hands.

Remaining seated was a conscious decision. Naltag didn't want per's height to influence the child's acceptance.

"You chance to hurt us?" he asked.

Naltag metered out a response. Kimurian speech came out plainly and strangely, and per was uncertain about slang pronunciations.

"No."

~\*~

Jerimiah's eyes widened.

Everyone spoke same speech, but the stranger was evidently uncomfortable using the dialect.

The way she pronounced nomirrored the way babies said nofor the first time.

"Where ya hail from?"

"Hail from Trenkor," the stranger said.

Jerimiah knew of no such place. When the councilman had taught him about other lands, he had called them continents. None of the continents bore the name Trenkor.

"Where's that?" he asked.

He considered bolting. Running away seemed the smartest option. The stranger was too new, too unknown. On impulse, he took swi steps back to the entrance of the compound. Meeting a stranger was a bad idea, and he had to end things while he still had all his limbs. He'd heard stories of lost limbs, among other things.

When he was almost to the stairs, the stranger spoke again.

~\*~

"Trenkor is far beyond the stars. I come long ways," per said.

Losing him. Naltag was on the verge of losing the child. A few feet from the stairs, and the child stopped fleeing.

"Stars?"

Of course, the child had never seen stars. He may have heard of them, but they were as strange a concept as foreigners.

The child's breathing stayed even, but Naltag perceived an increase in sweat and a quickened heartbeat. Per had to take things slowly, shi the focus from perself to the child.

"I come to learn, to know you."

Confusion wrinkled the young face. "Can't get a handle on your strange words."

Naltag searched for the translation in same speech.

"I want--."

"You want?"

Naltag was worried the situation might worsen more than anticipated.

"I wish to--"

"You wish?" the child asked.

Apparently, wanting and wishing weren't a part of same speech. Naltag was nearly out of words.

"I'd like to--," Naltag stopped, expecting another question.

When the child stayed silent, per began again.

"I'd like to be your apprentice."

Among many unexpected answers, it surprised the child.

"Recently assigned archiver. Not much to apprentice," the child said.

Naltag leaned forward, and the anxious move caused the child to take a step back. "All the same, I'm keen to learn."

He seemed to be deciding. He glanced from the compound steps back to Naltag, then back to the steps. The conversation had twisted too far, and the child was no longer curious, only cautious. Per thought of how to bring him back, keep him from running. Already, per had gotten farther with the child than with anyone else during the cycle-long sojourn.

"I'm alone. No one like me is coming, or will come here for a very long time," per said.

The knowledge stayed the child a few minutes longer. While he thought it over, he assessed Naltag, as if straining for the truth, or a familiarity in per's appearance. Naltag enjoyed quiet assessment, and was comfortable with it. For months, per had flown over the brown and black lands on this once lush planet. The one thing each patch of land had in common was the stillness. Nothing moved, nothing grew. Along the coastlines, the devastation was absolute.

At the center of the continents, the brown receded to yellow, with the rare green patch popping up now and again. It was in the middle of such promise Naltag had landed, and continued on good for signs of life. There had been other compounds, but no one had been willing to commune with Naltag. Either that, or they were unfit for study.

A er a week of observing the boy, Naltag was content that the long wait had been necessary.

Finally, Jerimiah began, "What would I had to-"

"Boy, you ain't tillin', naint cha? What ya doin'?"

An adult waited on the steps of the compound, waving for Jerimiah to come inside.

He returned the wave, and when he turned back again, Naltag slipped away. From the husk of an old car, per watched the boy. The boy scanned the horizon until finding Naltag. Then he shook his head.

"Kent help. They'll catch me. Won't work." His words were hurried, and his tripped on his dash to meet with the expert tillerman.

~\*~

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