

## The Moon of Metal Leaves



*Kaede Quasar looked up from her screen as Dash walked into the office, none the worse for wear save for quite a few bandages all over his body. “Ready to give the report?” She asked nonchalantly, “How did the med-bot treat you?”*

*Settling into his favorite chair and sipping his favorite brew, Dash responds with his classic cheeky grin, “Fairly well, I’ve been through worse. Mission Control will be quite pleased with what I’ve found.”*

*“That you have, and that they will. Transcription, begin.” The ship’s computer begins to record at the order.*

I began this mission with all necessary equipment. I came with my Multitool, my comms, my scanner, my blaster, and a packed lunch. The estimated time for completion was one Earth day, actual time for completion was two Earth days. The mission's goal was to scout out Moon 2079 AKA The Metal Moon for mining operations, scientific research, as well as determine what hazards there are on said moon. Goal was achieved, very much so.

I landed my scouting craft in a flat area half a mile from the location of interest, later dubbed The Metal Forest. As I stepped out onto the planet I realized the nickname "Metal Moon" was an understatement. *Everything* was metallic in nature. Using my scanner I determined that even the soil, if you could call it that, was a fine powder of mixed common metals. While trekking to the location of interest, I continued to scan. Every last object, every rock I scanned, all metal of different types. I'll leave it to the nerds in Research—

***You have multiple PHDs, Dash.***

Hey, I'm giving my report here Kaede.

***Just saying.***

Fine, fine. Anyways, I'll leave it to my *fellow scientists* to explain how such a thing naturally occurs, but it was quite majestic to see. Unending landscapes glittering in the sunlight of this hitherto unexplored solar system, just waiting to be mined. Once I reached the Metal Forest, note that name is new and I made it, I found something extremely interesting. Plant life, though none anyone would have recognized. And an astounding variety of flora, I seemed to have made quite the discovery.

Entirely metallic in composition, scanning indicated that everything from the grass to the trees lived, if you could say that, on some source of energy drawn from the ground. I stood in awe at what I could only compare to an aspen grove, the trunks were not particularly thick, roughly the thickness of one's leg, and the leaves were small, light, and surprisingly sharp around the edges. These trees went on as far as the eye could see. I went to collecting some samples.

***The Research Team has determined that the trees were quite similar to aspens. One large organism, drawing on some sort of power from below the surface.***

Xenobotany is one of my PHDs, ma'am. Thank you very much.

Already the mission was appearing to be a success, an entire moon made of multiple types of metals, just ripe for the taking. No fauna was found, no signs of fauna was found, and preliminary scans from orbit showed no signs whatsoever of any intelligent or mobile life. With this moon's resources The

Intergalactic Union would have no shortages of construction or manufacturing materials for colonizing this new solar system. Absolutely perfect.

After taking samples, I broke for lunch and made camp in a small clearing. Nothing tastes better than an intergalactic picnic, especially when riding high on expectations of a job well done.

***Judging by you being wrapped up like a mummy, I'd assume something happened.***

You don't say?

After a fine lunch, thanks for that by the way Kaede, I noticed a cave beside the clearing. After packing up and checking my watch, I decided I had enough time to see what may be a bit deeper in this magnificent moon. This is around the time a breeze began to stir. A leaf brushed my forearm, cutting a shallow gash as easy as a scalpel. I made for the cave a bit quicker, starting to feel uneasy.

I hate feeling uneasy. I'm usually right to feel that way.

***Is this when the storm began?***

Yes, I should have made back to the ship. I already had the information we needed, but all's well that ends well.

***I wouldn't call this 'well'.***

I'm here, aren't I?

Once I made it to the cave I lit up my Multitool, it was surprisingly spacious and, according to my scanner, quite deep. Carefully I made my way deeper, using my 'tool to carve out a trail behind me just in case. It was narrow but manageable. Not even fifty yards in my scanner started to click. That's not a good sound, it was the radioactivity alert. Looking up, I noticed a vein of *something*. Turns out this *something* was all around me, and boy will the Union love it.

***Was this the-***

Yes it was, and let me have my moment. We still have not determined what exactly this metal *is*, but even with the basic tools I had I could determine a mere chunk the size of a fist would power this very ship for *half of an Earth year* even with all the lights on. Orbital scanning didn't pick it up, the metal of the surface hid it from view. But I had to leave soon, these Energy Stones would kill me within three hours if I didn't act quickly.

***Energy Stones, Metal Forest, should I get you a thesaurus?***

Leave it to the nerds, Kaede, leave it to the nerds.

Anyways, making my way back to the surface, I heard it. A loud whistling sound, more like a scream, coming from outside the cave. Once I saw the mouth of the cave, my heart sank. It was a storm, a massive storm. No wonder there was no fauna, nothing could survive this.

Those leaves from earlier, those razor sharp leaves, were swirling and blowing in the wind.

***We could see it from up here, the storm was sudden with no way to predict it's oncoming.***

I'm not blaming anyone, things happen on missions. As it were, I had death before me and death behind me. I had to get back to the ship, and I couldn't wait for the storm to subside. Had we brought an energy shield this would be no problem, but as the scans showed no real danger this was classified as a low-risk mission.

As I looked around, thinking, I saw all the leaves blowing into the cave. *Metal* leaves. Now, I've done many stupid things, but this one is making the list. Putting on my gloves and taking out my 'tool, I got to work. It was time to weld.

Taking two and a half hours out of my three, I worked like a madman. I collected enough leaves to weld into a suit of armor, let's be honest it was a poncho, and with almost no time remaining I cut a strip of cloth off my uniform and wrapped myself in this metal tarp I had created. I held my arms to my chest, put my head down, and ran. I ran as fast as I could, through the razor wind.

The storm tore at me, I could hear leaves striking leaves as I ran the half mile back to my ship. The force of those leaves started to break through my poncho, slicing me up wherever I got hit. It burned, a lot, but I couldn't stop I just had to run. Blood was running down my back, down my arms, down my legs, and I had almost made it. Until my damaged suit of makeshift armor got torn off by the wind and the leaves, no more than fifteen yards from the ship.

I'm surprised I did make it. I was cut head to toe, bleeding everywhere, gritting my teeth trying to stay conscious in spite of the pain and the bloodloss. My scanner was going haywire, telling me I was losing too much blood like I couldn't tell. Ripping the door open, barely able to see straight, I made it inside the ship and nearly collapsed. Had one of those damn leaves hit a tendon or something...

***But you made it.***

I made it. I crawled to the med-pod, heaving myself in, and screamed in what came out as a whisper "major bloodloss, losing consciousness", and then the darkness took me.

When I awoke, the med-pod had done its job. The storm ended one day after it began, and it was time to go back up.

Final report. Mission successful with complications. Massive amounts of basic metal resources. Unknown but likely large amounts of extremely powerful energy source. No fauna found, flora should be further researched. Reconsider Danger Class of The Metal Moon.

End transcription.

*Dash looked up at Kaede with yet another grin. "I'm exhausted, Kaede, I'll be in my quarters. If Mission Control needs me, no they don't."*

*"Understood, Captain. I believe some medals may be in order when we get home, this system is very promising."*

*"Add them to the pile Kaede, add them to the pile." He said as he walked out the room, slower than usual but as confident as ever.*

*Kaede looked out the window of their vessel, out over the Metal Moon as eerie as it was beautiful, and thought to herself 'there has only ever been one man on that moon. On that moon of metal leaves...'*

### What Lays Under The Alien Sea



*“What the expletive is that?” Kaede asked with uncharacteristic bewilderment, assumedly talking about the bizarre, armor-plated sea creature the Space Ranger had drug into the storage room of the spaceship. “And why is it on my nice clean floor?”*

*Taking off his sea-helmet to reveal a handsome yet cheeky smile, Dash replied to her quandary, “That, Kaede, is the local wildlife.”*

*“Why is it on the floor?”*

*“I’ll send it to research, but when I tell you what else I found I’m sure you’ll forgive the mess.”*

*“It better be good,” the pilot said, wrinkling her nose. “It smells.”*

*A few hours later, after everyone and everything was cleaned up from the mission, with Kaede beside him Dash settled in his favorite chair, sipping his favorite brew. “Transcription begin.”*

I began this mission with all necessary equipment. I came with my Multitool, my comms, my subaquatic suit, my blaster, and my Vibroblade. In the course of the mission I lost my Vibroblade and blaster. The estimated time for completion was non-applicable. Time to completion was sixteen hours. The mission’s goal was to recover the black box of an unmanned submersible drone in order to retrieve data about the mysterious Ocean Planet CHAL-T1, AKA Planet Of The Jade Skirt. Goal was achieved.

Due to the nature of this planet being a singular ocean with no landmass, we landed our scouting vessel above the last known location of the submersible drone, near the equator. The water was warm, though of unknown depth, so extra tether was provided.

***You reached a depth of ten kilometers at your lowest, data retrieved indicates areas of the ocean could be much deeper.***

Yes, though my Union-issue suit had no problems whatsoever.

***They build them to last, don’t they?***

That’s for sure.

Upon touchdown, I scanned with the ship’s equipment for signs of life before jumping in. Nothing out of the ordinary for such a water planet, simple fish-like organisms and a few invertebrates. Nothing too worrisome. But I was slightly worried, after all *something* had to have taken out the submersible I was there to retrieve.

It was time to go, I put my blade and blaster on my belt, attached the magnetic end of the surface tether to the back of my watersuit, and jumped in. Using the thrusters on the suit’s backpack, I made my way down. Down, down,

down, deeper and deeper and deeper. Soon the water became black, the only illumination being from the lamps on my helmet. As far I could tell, I was all alone down there. But the ocean is vast, you can never allow yourself to be too comfortable when you're down there.

After a while, I picked up a faint signal with my scanner. It was what we came for, our submersible. The ocean floor was still out of sight, but the signal gave me hope that I was close. And close I was.

***This was about the time I lost your comms signal.***

Yes, I was roughly halfway down. Five kilometers under the water, with no way to know how much more to go. I kept following the sub's signal, and it was getting stronger. But then I saw something.

***What did you see?***

A lifeform, an *intelligent* lifeform.

***What?!***

That's what I thought. It swam up to me, until I could get a good look at whatever it was. We both stopped moving, and just looked at each other.

This creature had one large eye, dilating in response to my lights. Its head was conical like a squid, and its torso resembled that of a turtle's shell. And, much like a squid as well, instead of limbs it had tentacles. Six of them, to be precise. Two coming from near its 'shoulders' and four from its 'hips'. The two 'arms', if you could call them that, were holding strange objects that appeared to be weapons or tools, and one of the tentacles from its 'hips' held a net. Normally that would be worrisome, but it made no move towards me nor I towards it.

For a solid minute we just *looked* at one another, as one alien looks to another, until I spoke. The suit comes with an auto-translator, and if this thing spoke a recognized language maybe I could communicate.

***That seems like a long shot, we haven't discovered intelligent life on this planet. Until now, I suppose...***

Well, I won't spoil it but it didn't speak anything we could translate. I said, *Hello, friend, I am Daniel Comet of The Space Union. I mean you no harm and no trespass. Can you understand me?*

It could not understand me. But I could understand *it*.

***How is that possible?***

Telepathy is how that's possible. I nearly jumped out of my skin when I, well I didn't *hear* it so much as *feel* it ask me to follow. I froze, a rare occurrence, and decided whatever was happening was very important. It extended a tentacle

towards me, I felt it wanted me to grasp it. So, I did. And so it brought me to it's home.

***It's home?***

Yes, not just it's home but the home of many just like it. A whole city of them, on the ocean floor. It was far away from our mission, but a city supersedes a little drone.

***A city! You found a civilization!***

I'm just as excited as you, dear Kaede, and I guarantee it only gets better.

As this creature led me through the, well I guess you could say streets, it put thoughts in my head. Thoughts of a rich culture, of a species that made the resources of the ocean it's own. One that grew their homes from corals and hewed its tools from shell. That hunted large fish and farmed for algae, that knew no war for they could speak in a language of thought and knew no scarcity. I gazed upon this city, lit up by iridescent stones used as lamps, with buildings created by growing magnificently colored corals up scaffolding to create wondrous pieces of living architecture, upon the citizens of this underwater kingdom going about their lives, and I knew these beings were wise. Wise enough to join the Union. I would see to it that they did.

I thought to my guide, I asked him to bring me to their king, and so he did. I was whisked away, brought to a palace constructed of glowing white coral, where in the center floated a large one of these creatures, missing a tentacle yet holding a scepter with what appeared to be the gilded tooth of some large predator on the end. My guide and the kid looked at one another, likely in conversation, and thus the king thought unto me.

***He was wounded?***

The ocean is dangerous, and from what I gather those that can protect the kingdom from danger are of high esteem. I'd assume that king was a fine warrior, though he thought to me like a poet.

He filled my head with thoughts of mutual benefit, I filled his with thoughts of unity. We conversed in such a manner for a while, he (they have two sexes it appears) desired resources of the dry land and I desired knowledge of their ocean planet. This being was a great hunter, he let me know that those waters were full of danger and turmoil, and through wisdom and strategy his people had become strong. Finally, I broached the question of trade.

***Did he accept?***

That he did. I have the coordinates of his city to send to our Union diplomats, we have made a powerful ally.

***That's amazing. And the submersible?***

After the discussion with the underwater king, I explained to my guide that I must go and complete my mission. He was a hunter, and had come across our sub though knew not what it was. He agreed to lead me to it, and so he did.

After a quick swim, my guide brought me to the original objective, and what I saw frightened me. It was bisected, laying there on the ocean floor. Some monster must have thought it was food...

***The monster you dumped on my nice clean floor?***

Yes, that monster.

Our sub was roughly the size of a car, and it was torn in half by some great force. It looked as if a great pair of shears had crushed through the metal, and not wanting to waste time I retrieved its black box. Placing it in my pack, I bid farewell to my guide and prepared to head back up. But then the monster attacked.

It came from our left, my brave guide suddenly pushed me out of the way and for that I am eternally grateful. This brave warrior was grasped by a pair of pinchers and I drew my blaster, unsure of what had attacked us. I aimed and saw what this sea creature was.

Much larger than the sub, the size of a bus, the best way to describe it was as a mix between an Anomalocaris and a lobe-finned fish. It looked like a creature that time forgot, with two orb-like black eyes, the pincers of a beetle, a red chitinous carapace, and a body with fins it used to propel itself along the ocean floor. Before I could fire, my guide was already dead, may his legend live on.

Blasting at this creature, I hit its large tail and it turned towards me, lunging in a thoughtless manner. Unlike my dear guide, this monster operated on instinct alone, one of the many underwater dangers I was warned about by the king. I dodged out of the way, but barely. My blaster was knocked from my hand, lost in the silt that was kicked up from our struggle. I could barely see a foot in front of me, I had to evacuate. Drawing my Vibroblade, I desperately began to hammer my tethers control. I started to ascend, but not fast enough. The monster wanted a meal.

As I arose, it lunged yet again. I stabbed at it with my blade, luckily sticking it between a chink in it's armor, but it turned and twisted my now stuck weapon out of my hand. I had only made it angry, that is if it could even feel anger. It circled back, intent on killing the intruder in its domain.

I was being pulled up by my tether, yet the beast was faster. As I saw it's pinchers open, ready to strike a final blow, I pushed the button on my tether to stop it's retraction, disconnected it, and held the end for dear life. The line now had slack, and in a last-ditch effort to save myself I grasped the cable and propelle myself to the side, grabbing hold of the blood red shell.

I looped my line around the great beast, tying it around its tail, and used my controls to retract it once again. I held onto the thrashing monster like my life depended on it because it very well did. Soon, I could see the light of the surface. I could see safety.

***I wouldn't call this 'safe', Dash.***

Neither would I.

Once I got to our floating vessel, I jumped aboard and looked for a weapon. Good for me, we packed some heavier duty equipment for the trip. Once I had what I needed, I pulled the beast up and began to whack it's head with an axe.

***An axe?! You said heavy duty!***

It was the heaviest-duty thing I could find on short notice. After a few solid blows the damn thing stopped moving, and I sat down to catch my breath. My friend was avenged, the danger was over, and I got the black box.

***After analysis, the data retrieved indicates an extremely deep ocean with a myriad of wildlife. It's quite likely the submersible was attacked once it got too close to a series of underwater caves.***

Given the way the monster moved along the ocean floor, I'd assume that's where it made its home.

Final report. Mission successful with complications. Data retrieved from submersible drone. Intelligent life found, relations established. Caution advised on future expeditions, predatory wildlife confirmed. Designate planet as populated by advanced civilization.

End transcription.

*"Well Kaede, that appears to be it. Another job well done."*

*Dash sat silently for a moment.*

*"I'll be in my quarters, please send the coordinates of the kingdom to the Union diplomats, and make sure they understand that they need more powerful weapons for the local wildlife." Dash said as he got up from his seat.*

*"Understood."*

*Once Dash has left the command room he lost his smile. He made to his quarters, lost in quiet contemplation.*

*'My friend, my guide,' he mused to himself, 'your sacrifice will bring prosperity to your people under that alien sea. I will make sure of it.'*