

14. For The Stones They Are Speaking

The six-legged being was scrambling up the side of a hill, over the rubble and grey stones. In its right front limb, its articulated foot held a device, but the other five were efficiently powering its ascent. It had an iridescent carapace, broad and armoured, with a head containing six compound eyes in an array that provided near 360 vision. Its head was topped off with two remarkable, finely bristled antennae, waving and weaving in all directions, scanning the vicinity. The creature, which usually goes by a name of multiple clicks and hisses, but we'll call 'Fred', stopped and looked into the wraparound screen of the device, moving it in an arc at the remaining hillside. The rubble and stones had shed a significant amount of dust, much of it starting to deposit on Fred's carapace and antennae, which it preened before moving on to near the summit. And a cave entrance.

Fred was thinking over its mission parameters, it being one of six in the team, spread out over the vast continent evident from space as the most significant landmass. The other five of Fred's team members had landed separately across it, all exploring, capturing data and samples. Fred and they had not seen any evidence of current life on this continent and orbital scans from their ship had not detected any across this planet. The land was arid, mostly grey, covered in stone and rubble, and there may have been great oceans at one time, but they had long since evaporated. The atmosphere was dry, dust-filled, a mix of gases, mostly carbon dioxide, and variable winds blew at strength.

Looking up at the single, yellow sun, the sky with a reddish hue, Fred was closer to the lip of the cave. It stopped again, scanning with its device. The rest of its equipment was at the hill base, Fred didn't need much to reconnoitre. It mentally engaged with team member 4, the closest to it on this land mass, providing a quick overview of progress in images and pictograms. Team member four acknowledged and Fred then looked to the cave entrance. Taking another look at its device, which operated beyond Fred's considerable visual and sensory range, it started to enter the cave cautiously.

Within the cave entrance, it was darker towards the back, of course, and the whole chamber was not that large, perhaps twenty times Fred in width, and maybe one hundred times in depth, albeit it was less discernible at the darker end. A sudden light erupted from Fred's device, pushing back the shadows forcibly, and it could see interesting patterns on the walls, and a shape previously in darkness at the rear. Team member 2 interrupted Fred and all the others with a rapid sequence of images and pictograms, describing a clear demarcation line in the layers of the land, continuous, a concentrated band of stone, metal, and mostly a hydrocarbon derivative. Member 2 also noted high levels of long half-life radio-isotopes, concurring with the Team Leader's theories about this planet.

Fred looked closer at the walls, now illuminated by its device. There appeared, albeit dimly and very worn, to be some form of writing and imagery across most of the wall surface of the cave. The device attempted to decipher some of it across multiple databases, but nothing compared. Whatever had made these markings, it was long since dead, and prior to any significant expansion into the galaxy. Three of Fred's eyes continued to appraise the wall markings as it ventured further into the grotto. The shape at the rear solidifying in the growing light source, it seemed to be metallic in nature, box-shaped, but with an interior compartment. At each corner there was a metal circle shape, with the vestiges of some black organic matter. As Fred looked deeper into the shape it could see signs of degraded instrumentation, and places for whatever made this contraption to be carried? It considered the form and residual details as it preened its antennae again. Perhaps this was a primitive form of transportation, Fred thought.

It emerged onto the lip of the cave, noting the darkness of the sky now, and a solitary satellite bathed in gold from the single sun. They would possibly examine that after they left this planet. Fred communicated its findings to the Team, inclusive of the wall markings. The symbology on the possible transportation machine was the last image it sent, indecipherable to Fred's device, but it looked like:

