

TimeScape

by

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They Ebb and Blow and the Mistakes Made in Time Continue On.
Because We Don't Learn from them, We Come to Celebrate those Mistakes.

* 1 *

Centered in the blackness of space was an angry knot of fire. Dangerous chunks of proto-matter hurtled outward from its center and tongues of pre-solar plasma licked at the darkness. Out of this nebula came the five alien warships. Slowly and steadily the distant tiny armada approached as the cruise director narrated.

"In Forty Four Eighty Two A.D., the New London Orbital Space Station registered the approach of a small fleet of unknown space craft emerging from the Lagoon Nebula in Sagittarius."

The projection switched to a view of a corridor in the interior of the space station. The walls and adjoining corridors flashed by as a crewman hurried toward the control room.

"Word went out to all sectors seeking information on the newcomers."

Rounding a corner, the crewman approached the space station control room. Three crew members stood at their stations. As the crewman entered, their eyes turned toward him, then returned to their controls. He approached the instrument panel where lights blinked and strange characters illuminated the screen.

"But, there was none."

The station hung in the blackness of space with the Earth and Moon suspended as mere pinpoints far behind in the distance as the alien warships silently bore down on it.

"Months passed as the ships drew nearer, but no contact was made. Until..."

As the ships neared the station, they fired, destroying it. Without pausing, they continued on past the wreckage.

"In the following months, more space craft emerged from the tiny source in the Alcaad Star System and by Forty Three Thirty Three, the Alien Wars had begun. The Golondian Outpost was ruthlessly attacked. This small scientific community managed to hold its own against the invasion. Deep within the planet they barricaded in their smooth PlaSteel lined caverns while the Alcaad prowled the perimeter of the entrance seeking entry."

"Meanwhile, high in the serene mountaintops above Leh, Thibet, the Adeva-Pleiades colony overlooked the vast plains of destruction. Cobalt skies covered the ancient spaceport. Although, seemingly only an ancient collection of ruined walls, the city was still inhabited and visited by the occasional spacecraft. This strange mixture of humans have adapted to the

severity of the climate and need not the cover of buildings as protection from its elements. They live among the long crumbled ruins as the wild creatures that roam the neighboring mountain tops."

"In the catacombs beneath the ancient city of Zagreb of the Dalamaconian Empire, the people hid from the invading forces. Deep caves, their stone walls decorated with old Gothic carvings, stretched far into the surrounding mountains."

"In sharp contrast, modern and well protected from battle, is the center of the Roman Restoration Empire located on the Athine Peninsula. Sleek PlaSteel buildings do not lack the ornate lustre of the first Roman Empire. Many of the ancient fashions have been revived and interwoven into the modern world. The Empirical Estate combines both government offices and palatial residence in convenient and lush surroundings. Conservatories add the freshness of gardens without the inconvenience of the often inclement weather."

"Finally, we come to the ruins of Kaalran's Palace in the Desert of Yon. Inside the palace, the ceiling has been destroyed and the desert sky burns down on the remains. Beyond blasted walls, through doorways and occasional broken sections are glimpsed the distant ruined cities."

The projection switched to the Desert of Yon in the late afternoon. Beyond a partially ruined wall spotted with burn marks lay a desert wasteland. The rich oranges of the approaching sunset flooded the sand contrasting it against the bleak sky. In the distance, the small mounds of destroyed cities dotted the horizon. Greasy smoke curled from some of their blackened structures.

"By the year, Fifty Ninety Eight, Central Eurasia had been almost completely claimed by the alien invasion force. No lines of communication had been set up. All attempts had been futile. Earth could barely just keep them contained."

The projection switched to the Roman Restoration Empire Council Chamber in the year Fifty One Thirteen A.D. Seated around the council chambers were diplomatic representatives attired in various regional costumes. They were quietly discussing the issues at hand. At one end of the chamber, a delegation of Alcaad proposed their treaty. The translators murmured as the delegates chattered in their native language.

"The war had raged for over six hundred years until the final breakthrough came."

From across the chamber, the tall Roman in his red-trimmed silvery uniform rose and strode to face the Alcaad.

"Lucius Ilias Coronus, Emperor of the Roman Restoration, in the year, Fifty One Thirteen, succeeded in penetrating the Alcaad defenses much as did his ancient ancestor during the overthrow of Caius Caligula in Forty One A.D."

Rexxford Abernathy, seated in the TimePod's control couch, was watching the MiniCam Viewer, held in his left hand. The scene on the viewer depicted the floor of the ancient Roman Senate. The cruise director entered and crossed to the center of this scene and addressed the recorder. "Come join us on a tour of these and other fascinating eras in Earth's history. Don't just watch history on the viewers, take an active part. Then-To-Now Time Tours invites you to live the events themselves as few have had the opportunity. Each tour will visit a different era and you will be spending five full days enjoying the unfolding of each historical event while residing in the comfort of your individual TimePod."

“Each caravan is fully equipped with a restaurant pod featuring fine quality foods from the era you are visiting, prepared by our highly trained excellent chefs. This gives you a chance to truly live the era, from a sampling of peasant fare to the gourmet delicacies of the royal elite, but in a modern clean environment. Each dining experience is enhanced with an ambiance of fine music representing the era.”

“There will be some evening entertainments depicting other cultural aspects of the time, theatre, concerts, dance recitals, and displays of other arts and crafts. Recording of all of these events is recommended so that you may share these experiences with your friends and family.”

“At the end of each event you will be momentarily returned to the present while we regroup and restock for the next tour. There you will have a few hours to meet with friends and relatives, giving you a chance to update them on your recent adventure and distribute your souvenir gifts. You may select as many different tours as you wish and you will embark on your next tour as soon as the pods are cleaned, outfitted and ready.”

“You will journey through dangerous adventures beyond wildest expectations. Although the SafeTime Corridors protect our tours from the events unfolding, some creatures can and might wander in, as their presence is insignificant to the event. As also is the atmosphere and other climatic factors. But, have no fear, our tour guides will equip each and every time traveler with the latest version of the Traveler’s Aid EnviroSuit, in the color of your choice, designed to monitor your bioforce and make any environment cool and comfortable while protecting the wearer against the toxins of noxious jungle insects, desert scorpions and hazardous snakes. And should something slightly larger interfere with your experience, a LaserAim StunGun is provided for your protection against any threatening wildlife. So, put aside your cautions, and come experience the thrill of real life adventure.”

He switched off the viewer as the TimePod landed with a soft thump.

A green light began flashing on the control panel as its computer announced “We have arrived in the Fifty Ninety Eight SafeTime Zone. All systems are cleared for departure from the TimePods. Please make sure that all your personal safety equipment is in place before opening the hatch. Wearing your helmet and gloves is optional and not required in this zone, as the atmosphere, though slightly acrid is not hazardous. Although, it is recommended to keep these articles close at hand. The lock will release momentarily and you may exit. Enjoy your adventure!”

Rexx switched off the viewer and placed it in a pouch in the vest of his EnviroSuit. He stood and crossed to the hatchway to fetch his helmet and gloves from their hook. As he turned to exit the TimePod, he placed the helmet and gloves on the carry hook and latched them to his suit.

Rexx stood outside the open hatch of his TimePod admiring the extents of the SafeTime Barricade which stretched beyond his sight in both directions. At its extents it was impossible to see through, but directly in front of him, it was much more transparent. It appeared to be composed of an electric violet shade of grayish white fog with stripes of simulated yellow and black Time Police barricade ribbon along its top and bottom edges. It sparkled as if some sort of electricity operated it. Here and there on it were multilingual signs warning against crossing the barricade.

Through the hazy barricade, Rexx could see a tall, partially ruined wall that disappeared off to either side, showing the wear of battle. A break in the wall revealed the distant ruined landscape. In the far distance, the bright flash of explosions peppered the

horizon and the blasts could be faintly heard through the barrier. Small aircraft could be seen arrowing away from the explosions. "Wow!" Rexx exclaimed to himself. "Wish it wasn't so far away. But, I guess it's for our safety."

A bing-bong signaled that a loudspeaker announcement was about to commence. "Tourists! Gather around! The shops have opened!"

As Rexx turned back toward the caravan of TimePods, several people clad in various colors of EnviroSuits were converging at the small collection of souvenir shops perched near the restaurant pod. The Time Tour Guides with their distinctive badges were busy completing documentation with a few members of the Time Police. No one seemed to be paying much attention to Rexx. He pulled out his MiniCam and checked the recording setting and turned back to view the wasteland again.

As he watched the burning fires, another fighter zoomed in toward the distant city, fired a laser beam, then turned and headed toward the barrier. Rexx instinctively ducked as the aircraft pulled up and veered off to the side.

As Rexx slowly got to his feet, he remembered his MiniCam and checked the setting. "Did I get that? I hope so!" He hit the replay button and watched the playback. "Wow! Outstanding! The gang back home will really be impressed!"

Over the rest of the day, Rexx stood by the barricade recording the distant battle. Later at the restaurant, the tourists chatted over the food, showing each other their recordings and exchanging descriptions of their experiences and tales of other time travel adventures. All were impressed with Rexx's recording of the fighter and lamented that they had been too busy buying souvenirs to see it happen.

Early the next morning, Rexx emerged from his TimePod and headed toward the restaurant, hungry for food and more adventures. As he approached the entrance to the restaurant, he heard a shout behind him, "Hey! Rexx! Wait up!"

He turned to see one of his new acquaintances from the previous night's dinner hurrying to catch up with him. "Oh, hi, Sendi! You want to have breakfast with me?"

"Sure! Hey, that was a great recording you got of the fighter bearing down on you! Weren't you scared?"

"Man, I thought I was a goner for a minute there, until he veered off. Don't know what made him change course. Do you think they can see the barricade?"

"I don't know. I know it's hazy on this side, but, I guess we'd have to cross it to see if it's visible or not. But, I don't want to get into that kind of trouble." She glanced toward a group of tour guides talking with one of the Time Police. "Those cops are creepy!"

Rexx glanced at the group, "I agree...wonder what they are? I've never seen such strange looking guys...if, they are even human. And, those get-ups, they look like something out of a Sci-Fi movie." He glanced back to Sendi, "Hey let's get some food. I'm starved!"

The waiters were handing out plates to the various tables. Today's menu had said, "Typical Yon Desert Peasant Breakfast".

Rexx picked up and eyed the plate, "What is this stuff? Looks like some kind of rice or grain, and maybe vegetables. Is that cheese?" He lifted it to his nose, "Smells good, though...anyhow, I'm hungry!"

Sendi poked at the ingredients of the food separating them with her utensil so as to identify them and glanced at Rexx as he took a bite, "So, how is it? Looks spicy."

“Great!” He mumbled through a mouthful of food. “Go ahead, try some. It’s got a lot of flavor, but it’s not very hot.”

She raised the utensil to her mouth, smelled the food and then took a bite. “Mmm, you’re right, this is good! Not hot, but really flavorful. I wonder if they give out the recipes?”

She summoned a waiter and inquired. He informed her that the all the daily restaurant recipe recordings were available in the shops. She turned back to Rexx. “Figures, they wouldn’t miss an opportunity to collect more credits.”

After breakfast, Rexx and Sendi wandered out to the barricade. They stopped at the edge. Rexx stared at it for a moment. “You know, what you said about what this looks like from the other side...” He trailed off. He cautiously reached out to touch the barricade.

She grabbed his hand. “Hey! What are you doing? It might be electrified or something...sure looks like it. See those, um, sparks or whatever they are?” She pointed at the shimmering fog.

“Nah, they wouldn’t have those signs warning about crossing if you couldn’t touch it.” He replied. “I’m gonna see what it feels like.” He slowly reached out his hand and touched the fog with his fingertip. “Wow!”

“What?!”

“It’s kinda cool, like it really is made of fog. Go ahead, touch it.”

She slowly extended a finger to the fog and lightly touched it. “Oh my God, it does feel like fog...soft, you know, and slightly damp.” She looked at Rexx. “But, we’re in a desert...fog doesn’t do well in dry heat. How do they...um, keep it, uh, make it work?”

“I don’t know. It can’t be real fog...but, I don’t have a clue what it is.” He reached out his hand again and slid it further into the barricade. “Hey! I can feel the other side...it’s hot and dry, it’s gotta be the desert air. This thing can’t be more than few centimeters thick.”

“Yeah, I guess so, cause otherwise how would we be able to see through it?”

“Ahem!” They spun around to see a Tour Guide standing behind them. “What are you doing?” He queried.

“Oh, sorry,” Rexx started, “we were just curious what this thing is made out of and, you know, how it works.”

“I’m afraid that trade secret lies with the Time Police.”

“Oh.” Rexx replied. “Sorry, I hope we didn’t do anything wrong. We were just recording what it looked like for our friends and got curious.”

“Well, that’s OK, then. The Time Police have assured us that the barricade is not harmful. But, remember, it’s there for our protection. So, please, stay safe!” The Tour Guide turned and walked away.

Sendi turned to Rexx, “That was quick thinking! I thought sure we were going to be in trouble.”

Rexx laughed, “I’ve had practice.”

“Huh?”

“Never mind, I’ve had to get out of some tough spots before.”

She giggled, “I see. You know we both want to see the other side, don’t you?”

He looked at her and smiled. “Well, we are both here to have an adventure. We’ll just have to make sure we don’t get caught!”

“Yep!” She laughed. “Maybe, we should find a more secluded spot for our explorations? This barrier extends for a long way in both directions and on both sides of the caravan. And there’s not a lot of people to watch over us.”

"I like the way you think! Let's take a walk."

"You know, most of the action is in the front barricade where all of the battle is taking place..."

"And..."

"How about the back barricade? Let's go check it out. OK?"

"Yeah, sounds good."

They walked between a couple TimePods to the rear barricade.

"Oops! Another Tour Guide is over in back of that shop."

Quietly, "Yeah, I see him. Let's pretend we're just socializing and want to get away from the crowd."

"K...sounds good. Let's hold hands or something...I don't know."

"Sure...gimme your hand and look into my eyes, OK?" They stood there for a moment, then Rexx said, "How about we wander down toward the end of the barricade holding hands?"

"OK, sounds like a plan. Anyhow, I'd like to see where the edge of this goes and what's there. You know, can we get around it or what?"

They wandered down toward the end of the barricade and Rexx said, "Does it seem like it to you, or do the front and back sides of the barricade seem to be getting closer to each other?"

"Yeah, it does. What'ya think?"

"Maybe, they converge?"

"Could be, let's keep going."

As they approached the ends of the barricade, it appeared that they converged into one. "Hmm, what's beyond this convergence...maybe some sort of machine to create the fog thing?"

"Donno."

Rexx leaned forward and peered into the fog, his head almost touching the barricade.

"Can you see anything?" Sendi asked.

"No. I mean, I can see the desert floor and all, but there's nothing else here."

"Maybe the generator, or whatever it is, is at the other end?"

"Could be...you know, we've been gone a while. We should probably head back before someone comes looking for us."

"Yeah, you're probably right. You know, we could head down to the other end tomorrow and see what's there."

"Sounds like a plan. But, for now, let's get back to watching the battle."

"Yeah, maybe you'll get another lucky shot." Sendi giggled.

"As long as 'I'..." He emphasized. "...don't get shot!" as they headed back to the caravan.

They joined the rest of the tourists at the barricade. One of their new acquaintances from the previous night saw them as they approached. "Hi Sendi, hi Rexx! Where've you guys been? You're missing the action."

"Oh, we were just checking out some of the recordings in one of the shops." Rexx replied. "Sendi was interested in some of the recipes they were selling."

"Oh, yeah. The food here is pretty good." He commented.

Just then a huge explosion rocked the caravan. The barricade quivered brilliantly with sparks flying in resonance to it and everyone's attention was once again riveted to the battle

beyond. Two of the Time Police ran to the barricade and started testing it with the strange looking probes they carried.

Rexx quietly turned to Sendi, "Hmm, they look concerned. Maybe, we should keep an eye on what they're doing for a bit."

"Right!" she softly replied. "If we're planning to cross it, we'd better know if it's really that safe...or not. And, if not...well then, we'd better be prepared."

He looked at her, puzzled. "How?"

"Drat! I knew you were going to ask that. I don't know, but, these suits are supposed to protect us from almost anything...aren't they?" She looked at him hopefully. "You know, with the helmets and gloves...and, guns...?"

"I hope so, too."

Another smaller explosion brought their attention back to the battle. And Sendi added, "We'd better get some recordings before we miss all the action."

"Yeah." Rexx agreed.

They raised their MiniCams and trained them on the distant battle.

In the distance, two fighters converged over the city from opposite sides. They fired their shots and turned toward the caravan.

"Oh my God! They're coming this way!" Rexx exclaimed. "I hope..." He trailed off as the fighters approached the barricade.

"Ohhh!" breathed Sendi. "Record...record...record!"

The fighters nosed up slightly and flew over the caravan and continued off into the distance behind them.

Rexx turned to Sendi. "How could they not have seen us? I mean, we can see the sky and everything. Only the barricade seems misty. I need to find out." He looked around and spotted a Tour Guide. "Come on, let's ask."

He grabbed her arm and led her to the Tour Guide. "Hey! I've got a question! How come they didn't see us and fire on us?"

"Oh, well, um..." stammered the Guide. "You see, that's a trade secret...um..."

"Yeah...?"

"They tell us that they can change the exterior look of the barricade to suit the circumstance...the fighters probably thought we were a sandstorm, or a rock formation...or something."

"But, we can look straight up and see the sky?"

"Yeah...sorry, they don't tell us a lot about how this all works. They are pretty much in charge of everything."

"Everything??? Doesn't that worry you a bit?"

The Tour Guide sighed, "It a job, and it makes money and...well, what can I say?"

"But, wouldn't the fighter's instruments have told them different?" Rexx pursued.

"I, I just don't know. Look, we're here and we just have to trust that everything will be OK. OK?"

"I'd just like to be sure I knew how things worked if my safety depended on it."

"Well, there's not much choice at this point. Look, just go back to recording your adventure and...trust that all will be fine. OK?"

"Sure...let's go, Sendi."

"He wasn't much help, was he?" She said as they wandered back to their spot at the barricade. "Well, guess we'll get in some more recording."

"Yeah...drat!" Rexx looked at his MiniCam gauge.

"What's up?"

"Oh, my batteries are getting low. I'm going to go change them out for fresh. Be right back." As Rexx dashed off to the supply pod.

"K." Mused Sendi, ignoring her recorder as she watched the distant battle.

Moments later, "I'm back." Rexx concentrated on adjusting the settings on his MiniCam.

"Rexx...?"

"Yeah?"

"How do we know which side is which?"

"Huh?"

"I mean...it's us versus them, right?"

"Yeah..."

"Well, I'm seeing fighters firing at the cities, and I'm seeing some kinds of weapons being fired at the fighters from the ground...and I'm also seeing some fighters firing at each other. But, I don't see any flags in the cities or any identifying insignia on any of the aircraft. So, who's who?"

Rexx watched for a few moments. "You're right, I don't see any insignia, or colors, or anything that would indicate sides."

"So, how do they know who to shoot at?"

"I donno, maybe the communications systems, or something, knows friend from foe...I'm just guessing." Rexx glanced around. "There's a Tour Guide over there. Should I ask?"

Sendi just gave him a blank stare.

"No, I guess you're right. He probably doesn't know either."

The next morning, after breakfast, they watched the rest of the group head off to the barricade to watch the battle. As the Tour Guides went off in a group to meet with the Time Police, Sendi said, "They don't seem concerned about us, so this is our chance to wander down to the other end."

"Yeah, let's go before they get wise."

Several minutes later, "Well, we made it to the other end and it looks about the same." Rexx observed as he peered into the foggy barricade. "All I see is more desert. And, it seems like all of the battle is taking place right in front of the caravan."

"Well, I guess that makes sense...you know, from the tour's point of view. Like, why make us trek a long way and waste time to get to our adventure...that would give them bad ratings."

"Yeah, I guess you're right about that."

"Hey, Rexx! What's that?" She pointed to a small shiny metal box sitting on the ground just inside the end of the barricade. It shone with tiny spark-like glints of light.

"I don't know..." as he reached to pick it up.

"Careful!! You don't know what it is!"

He paused. "But, remember, the Guide said it wouldn't harm us."

"Yeah, but that was back at the caravan and he was talking about the barricade there. Remember, we're not really supposed to be over here."

“OK, I’ll be careful.” He eased his hand toward the box. “Wow! That thing is really cold. Here, feel the air around it.”

She carefully reached toward the box stopping a couple of centimeters in front of it. “You’re right! Better not touch it, might freeze your hand. I guess that’s the generator thing.”

“Well, now we know how the barricade’s made...well, sort of, that is. But that still doesn’t help us figure out how to get through it.”

“Yeah...well, guess we’d better head back to the battle. We’ve gotta get some recordings or they’ll wonder why we didn’t.” She paused and looked back at the convergence. “Let’s chance it!”

“What?”

The barricade...just a quick step through and back. You game?”

“Uh, yeah!”

“Who first?”

“Together! Grab my hand...let’s go!”

They quickly stepped forward, but not completely. Just enough to feel the desert heat on their faces and smell the greasy air. They quickly stepped back.

“Wow!” Sendi commented. “The air’s a lot harder to breathe on the other side. Doable, but would be a lot better with a helmet...the filters in them are pretty good, I hear.”

“Yeah...but, the visibility on the outside is way much better! We’ve got to figure out a way we can get some recordings out there. Maybe, tomorrow. Let’s see if we can find a place to step through that’s closer to the action.”

“I hear you!”

The next morning, Rexx and Sendi stood by the barricade a little further away from their usual spot. As one of their acquaintances wandered toward his usual spot, he asked, “How come you guys are so far away from the action?”

“Oh, well, we thought we’d see if this angle was any better.” Rexx replied. “You know, just a different perspective.”

“Well, suit yourself, good luck. Later!” As he wandered off.

“You know, Rexx,” Sendi began, “I think we’re going to have to get a bit further away to test this barricade, I mean, if we don’t want to be seen.”

“Yeah, you’re right. At least, I gave him a plausible answer...I hope.”

“Yeah, I think it’ll work, you know, amateur cinematographer, or something like that, if they ask us later. ‘...as seen, from a different perspective.’”

They moved a little further away from the main group.

“I think we might be far enough away, here. They don’t seem to be paying us any attention, anyway.” Sendi said. “And, the Tour Guides are down by the other end with the Time Police. Boy, they sure seem to spend a lot of time together, don’t they?”

“Well, from what that Tour Guide tried to explain, yesterday...it’s probably not a bad idea that they try to stay informed.” He shook his head. “If they are informed at all.”

She sighed, “Yeah...so, what’s our plan?”

“I’m thinking...when we briefly stepped through yesterday, we could handle it OK...a little hard to breathe, but not a problem. I’m gonna say, one of us stands guard watching the rest of the group, while the other steps through, and maybe, records what the barricade looks like from the other side...plus maybe a few other shots of the battle. Real quick like and then return...what do’ya think?”

"Sound's good...so who?"

"I'd volunteer, unless you'd rather..."

"Well, we both want to...so, let's take turns. You, me?"

"If it's OK, I'll go first."

"Keep your gun and helmet ready!"

"Will do!"

"And, if you're gone too long, I'm coming after!"

"Right! Keep a look out!" He stepped through the barricade as Sendi turned to watch the group.

On the other side, Rexx turned to record the barricade. It was, at first, just a foggy haze. But, as soon as he turned on the MiniCam, it altered to a distant sandstorm. He moved the MiniCam closer and it became solid rock. "Wow! The Guide was right! It does change." He turned toward the battle and got a few quick recordings of the distant blazing buildings. "It certainly is a lot clearer on this side...but, I'd better get back!" He stepped back through the barricade.

"Wow! I was just about to come look for you!"

"It's OK, it's OK. Sorry, I guess I got caught up in it. Anyhow, your turn. And that Guide was right it does change. It was just a foggy barricade, same as on this side, until I turned my MiniCam on it, then it changed to a sandstorm and when I held the cam on it longer, it turned to rock. Wonder how?"

"Maybe, it has some kind of sensor that increases it's, um, power, as it's being observed?"

"Your guess is as good as mine...anyhow, are you ready? Oh, you don't really need the helmet's air filter...the air's not too bad at the moment."

"Thanks. Here I go!"

Rexx turned toward the group to stand watch as she stepped through.

Almost a minute later, Rexx spun around as Sendi landed on her hands and knees with a thump and a cloud of dust just inside the barricade. "Ooof!" she exclaimed as she landed.

"What happened?!" Rexx took her hands and helped her to her feet.

"Aaaahh! Incoming!" As she pulled back her hand and pointed toward the barricade. Just then, another fighter screamed upward and over the caravan.

"Ooooh, that was close!"

"So!! What happened??"

"Gimme a sec." She paused to catch her breath. "After I stepped through, I got my cam ready and spun around to record the barricade. I caught it just as it was changing and it went through the same cycle that you recorded. Then, I heard a roar behind me, turned and saw a fighter baring down toward me. I'm sure he must have seen me, so I turned and dove back through the barricade."

"You OK?"

"Yeah, yeah...just glad I didn't get too far away."

"Let me see your recording. I'd like to see the change." She handed him the cam and he hit the play button. "Wow! Look at this!" He turned the cam so they both could watch and hit play. "See! Your cam caught the fighter coming toward you. That's a shot to show back home!"

"Yeah...lucky me."

"Well, you're not dead, are you?"

"Yeah, yeah, I know, you're right. It's just not something I want to repeat."

"Capsule countdown commencing, thirty minutes until coalescence." The loudspeaker blared as Rexx and Sendi looked about them one last time at the bleak destruction of the Alien Wars of the late Fifty First Century. They lingered. The urge to live history just a little longer was too strong to ignore.

Taking a deep breath of the acrid air, Rexx filled his lungs to savor its metallic flavor as he hefted the hand weapon. Still warm from recent firing, the batteries hummed as the Westchester 9B PartoExel recharged. He looked down at it fondly. As a boy he had seen the primitive handheld particle accelerator in the history museum, but this had been the first chance he had to actually handle and use one. He smiled, glad now that he had paid the extra credits that would allow him to use a period piece instead of the standard issue stungun that was required for personal protection on all of the Then To Now Time Tours excursions.

Sendi watched him admiring the weapon. "That really is a nice piece." She commented. "All I could afford was the standard issue." holding up her LaserAim StunGun.

Rexx looked at her weapon. "Don't feel bad. That's still a very nice gun, and, you're a very good shot!"

"Thanks. I wonder if I could buy it at the end of the trip?"

"Should be able to...there's no law against possessing one. I'd sure like to buy this one...hope it's not too pricey."

He looked back toward the target area, savoring the bulls eyes he had fired. "It was nice that they provided target practice for us. I just couldn't resist firing it just one more time. And, I'm glad we could record each other's target practice. It'll be a great thing to show back home."

"Twenty seven minutes until coalescence," reminded the loudspeaker. Startled, they looked about them again. They could see the other time tourists making their way back toward their individual TimePods. The Tour Guides were beginning their head counts assuring the Time Police that none of their charges had gone too far astray. They would be busy with their reports for at least fifteen of the remaining minutes until departure.

Although the experience had been remarkably exciting, Rexx and Sendi regretted the limitations that the Time Police inflicted upon the time tours. Restricted to narrow bands of time where none of the tourists adventures could have influence over the natural unfolding of events was the only assurance that their "present day" would still be there when all of the tourists returned home to good old Fifty Three Fifty Seven.

"Twenty six minutes until coalescence." Rexx knew they would have to hurry to get in just a little extra adventure before the TimePods were sealed for departure.

"Come on, Sendi. It's almost time to go. Let's just do one more step through and, this time, maybe we can get some more of the attacks on the city."

"Yeah, let's go...best we hurry, though."

Rexx grabbed her hand and they headed out toward the perimeter. The Tour Guide closest him shouted for them to return. Rexx held up his MiniCam and waving it in the air, called back, "I just want to get one more recording."

The guide nodded and hollered, "Hurry up!"

Turning his attention back toward the perimeter, Rexx could see the ghostly shimmer of the Time Police Barricade a few meters before him.

He and Sendi both knew, "If we could just step through it for a couple of minutes, we could get a great shot from the other side. And, wouldn't that really impress the guys back home!"

Glancing backward to the TimePod Caravan, Rexx could see that the Tour Guides were up to their necks in reports and that the Time Police were more interested in getting the paperwork completed than watching the perimeter. "This was their chance," he thought. "Come on!" he said, as he stepped through the barricade.

The ghostly gray shimmer momentarily enveloped them like a misty fog. Looking about, the landscape seemed slightly altered. The light was brighter and the metallic smell of the air was much stronger. Rexx turned to glance back to the Caravan to see if anyone had noticed their transgression, but the misty Barricade was too dense to see through, "Well, I guess they can't see us either. We'll just be a couple of minutes anyhow." He rationalized to Sendi.

Checking his chronometer, they still had a good twenty minutes to go. They could afford the time to go a few steps further into the desolate wasteland. The structure of a partially ruined wall lay before them. If they could just get beyond there and back, they could get recordings that no one else from their time had seen before. "This is our chance to get some great stuff!"

Filled with excitement, they jogged the few steps to the wall.

Rounding the corner of the break in the ruined wall, a vast desert spotted with the remains of cities stretched out before them. This side of the wall was heavily scorched and blackened from attack. Greasy smoke curled from the occasional distant urban structures.

Blinking his eyes in the glare, Rexx raised his MiniCam to get the shots. Focusing through the MagnaPhoto viewfinder, he held his breath as he watched the movements of the Alien invaders prowling the outskirts of the nearest city. They were huge in the viewfinder and the bleak sun glinted off their shiny black armor. This wasn't just a tourist attraction. This was real! He struggled to take his eyes off of them. "Sendi! Use your viewfinder! This is great!"

She raised the cam and looked through it. "Wow!! You're right! Those Aliens are huge!"

The subscript of the viewfinders read, "5098 A.D., ALIEN WARS, DESERT OF YON, KAARLRAN'S RUINED PALACE". They watched through their viewfinders as a few Alcaad invaders in their black metallic armor prowled the outskirts of the city.

"Yeah, we could have never gotten views this good from inside that barricade. I wonder if we can get any closer?"

"Well, we don't have a lot of time until the caravan departs...but maybe, a bit closer?"

A soft crunch in the gravel brought Rexx's attention to their immediate surroundings. "Sendi!" He said softly.

"What?" She whispered back.

"I heard something close by." He paused. "Had the Time Police noticed their absence and come looking for them?" He thought. Rexx looked around. "I don't see anything. Maybe, just wind or something."

Taking a couple of steps toward the break in the wall, he leaned forward and craned his neck to scan the area beyond the break. No one was searching for them and the misty barricade still obstructed the caravan beyond. "Whew! I thought sure it was a Tour Guide, or

worse yet, one of those Time Police. Those guys give me the creeps!" he continued. "Speaking of...what time is it?" He checked his chronometer again. "Twelve minutes left." They could afford to explore for two more minutes and then they would have to hurry back to get safely inside their TimePods before the hatches sealed. He turned back to his MiniCam and the landscape.

A moment later, again, the gravel shifted. This time it was a lot closer. Rexx shoved the cam into his vest pouch as he spun around to locate the source of the sound. His heart raced as he searched for movement.

"What!?" Sendi whispered.

"Something moved!" he whispered back. "Get your gun handy!" as he grabbed his from its belt clip.

He scanned the length of the wall. Suddenly a part of the wall moved. An Alcaad alien raised up from its crouched position, its armor no longer camouflaged against the burned wall and moved slowly in their direction. Rexx froze in his position. As it approached it raised a device that it held in its hand as if to fire a weapon.

Rexx suddenly came to life. He held out his gun and fired a long and steady blast at the advancing alien. Penetrating its armored shell, the accelerated particles found home and began to disrupt the body of the Alien. It crumpled into a heap, like the husk of an enormous dead beetle onto the dusty ground before him, its armored plates scattering like pieces of broken shell.

"Th...that was close!" Sendi whispered. "Are there any more?"

His eyes tearing the landscape, Rexx scanned for further threats. Finding none, he checked his chronometer again: five minutes. Their TimePod doors were due to seal momentarily. "Come on!! We've got to go...and fast, we're almost out of time!"

They leaped to round the corner of the wall and bolted for the Caravan.

Before them the misty Time Barricade was no longer there. The Caravan, the Tour Guides, even the Time Police were gone. All that remained was Rexx's sole TimePod; its metallic dome glinting in the sun. They rushed toward it.

"My TimePod's gone!" wailed Sendi.

"Get in mine...it's big enough for both of us!" Rexx assured her.

He reached the door and dragged Sendi in behind him. Rexx threw himself into the control couch just as the door began to close. He realized that he was still holding his weapon in his hand and hastily fastened it to his belt clip. He grabbed the strap of the safety harness and clipped it into its latch. "Better hang on! Don't know if this will be rough."

Sendi grabbed the chair arm and watched as Rexx checked the instrument panel. All seemed well at first glance. The ChronoGauge was timing down toward coalescence and the upcoming time shift.

"Two more minutes and we should be back safe and sound in Fifty Three Fifty Seven with, hopefully, not too many questions about our brief adventure." Rexx thought. "After all, her TimePod would have arrived empty, and surely a search team would be out looking for us. We'd have to come up with a really good reason why we got left behind. They wouldn't need to know about our stepping outside of the SafeTime Corridor. Maybe I could say I was

showing Sendi a souvenir I picked up and we lost track of the time and the hatch sealed before she could get back to her pod. Yeah, that might work."

Rexx scanned the panel again. The ChronoGauge setting read "5357 A.D.", but the location was blank. "What's going on here? That's not right! The Time Line Indicator is way out of whack. That's supposed to show a straight blue line, and where did this red line come from? And those lights are supposed to be green." He scanned the rest of the panel. "Where's the location setting? We're supposed to be going home."

Rexx started pushing buttons on the control panel. "Come on! FIVE, THREE, FIVE, SEVEN A.D., GREATER ANGELENA, SECTOR THREE!" The panel setting continues to read a blank location. "I can't get it to enter."

"Rexx! What are we going to do?"

The computer voice announced "Ten seconds to coalescence. Confirm safety harness engaged."

"Hang on, Sendi!" He grabbed her arm and pulled her onto his lap.

"Coalescence." The computer announced.