

Rexx and Sendi looked around the small, but comfortable bedroom. Two well worn suitcases stood on the floor next to one of the beds.

Sendi glanced upward and said quietly. "Twin beds...thanks."

Rexx picked up one of the suitcases and set it on the bed. "Looks like we travel a lot."

There was a soft knock on the door and Sendi went to open it.

"Hi, guys." Matu said as he entered the room and looked around. "Your room is just like mine. Did you check your passports? I am apparently actually from Australia. I'm guessing the opal mine."

"Passports?" Asked Sendi as she looked around and spied a small backpack next to one of the bags on the floor. She picked it up and rummaged through its pockets. "Here they are...they say we're from the United States of America."

"Greater Angelina used to be called Los Angeles...I think that's where it was." Rexx clarified.

"Oh." She replied. "So, where are we?"

"The stamp in my passport says South Africa." Matu replied.

"I wonder if we speak the local language?" She mused.

"Well, I can read the stamp, if that's any indication."

"Don't you know any current global history?"

"Yeah. But, it wasn't my best subject...I believe most of this area was largely colonized by both the Dutch and British over a hundred or so years ago, so the language should be a mix of those..."

"And, probably several other indigenous languages added in for spice." She added. "That should help make our life interesting...do either of you know any other languages? I'm pretty hopeless except for ethnic language cooking stuff...names of dishes and ingredients. Some foods have never changed over the ages."

"Yeah, pizza!" Voiced Rexx with enthusiasm.

"Yeah...pizza....pizza never dies." She said begrudgingly. "So, no linguists among us, huh?"

"Nope." Said Matu, shaking his head.

"Same here." Added Rexx. "But, I know the names of some rocks."

She glared at him. "Wonderful. Well, hopefully they can understand us."

"Any thing else interesting in that backpack you're holding?" Asked Rexx, changing the subject.

She looked down at the bag and shrugged. She then proceeded to dump its contents on the nearest bed.

Rexx started sorting through the bag's contents. Matu leaned forward and snatched an official looking envelope. "What's this?" He handed it to Rexx. "Here, it's addressed to you."

"Rexx took out the letter and began to read. "Dear Mr. Rexxford Abernathy, our council looks forward to meeting with you, your wife, and your associate, Mr. Matu Rikombu..." Rexx lowered the paper and stared at Matu. "Mr. Rikombu?"

"Yep. That's my name." He waived his passport in front of Rexx's face.

"Huh?" Sendi exclaimed. "All this time and all that we've been through and we've never known your last name." She paused at stared at Rexx. "For that matter, Rexx, I never knew your last name...funny, huh?" She picked up her passport and opened it.

"Hmm, I'm still Sendi Obermier. I guess we really are only recently married...and, it seems my passport is about five years old."

"Gee. I just realized I didn't know your last name either." Rexx admitted, as he returned to the letter. "...on the twenty fifth of March, here in Johannesburg. We have received favorable reviews of your ore slicer and welcome your demonstration." He put down the letter and looked at Matu "...'ore slicer?' Any clue?"

"Well, we've got until the twenty fifth to figure it out. What's the date on the letter?"

"Um, February third."

"What's today?" Asked Sendi.

"Good question."

"Well, the date on my passport stamp says March tenth. Do you think that might be today?"

Sendi pointed to the suitcases. "Well, it looks like we haven't unpacked yet."

Matu looked at the airline identity tags. "These agree...so, we've just arrived. And, I guess we prearranged this apartment instead of a hotel."

"At least, we gave us some time to figure out what we're doing here."

"We...or, him." She pointed upward.

"Oh, yeah...the Time Police. I almost forgot."

Sendi just glared at Rexx and shook her head.

"Hey, guys. I just realized...I'm hungry." Matu said.

"Yeah, come to think about it, me too." Rexx added. "When was the last time we ate?"

"I think it was sometime around when we were saying our goodbyes just before we left in the TimePod." Sendi said.

Matu stared at his passport. "Well, I'm going to guess that's about fifteen to twenty some odd years in the future from now."

They all looked at each other and broke out laughing.

Matu went quiet for a moment. "Oh my...I just realized I'm living in two times at the same time."

"Well, I guess that shouldn't be a problem...unless you run into yourself." Said Sendi. "But, you're just a little kid...right?"

"Yeah." Matu said, unconvincingly. "Right."

"Um, guys...food?" Prompted Rexx.

"I'm going to take a wild guess that there's nothing to eat in the kitchen. Do we have any money?"

Rexx felt his pockets and came up with a rectangular plastic card. "What's this?"

"Gimme that." Said Matu and he pulled a larger rectangular object out of his pocket.

"OK...what's that?" Asked Rexx.

"Gimme a sec..." As Matu punched several buttons on the object. "...there!"

"What was that all about?"

"Yeah...what?" Echoed Sendi.

"Huh?" Matu looked up from the device. "Oh...more technology that you don't know about." He laughed. "You don't know how good it feels good to be more knowledgeable that you guys at times."

"So...what is it?"

"This..." Matu held up the card. "Is a debit card. And, this..." He held up the object. "Is a cell phone. It's similar to the radio phones we had...uh, have...at the mine, though those are a more industrial model. These are average consumer stuff. And, I was checking the card account. We, apparently, have a very large expense account..."

They stared at him blankly.
"We have lots of money."
"Oh."
"So...let's go find something to eat."

Back at the apartment, Rexx said. "That was good, but I didn't realize it was so late. At least we found a good place to eat that was still open."

"Yeah." Sendi agreed. "I guess we should shop for some groceries in the morning." She sighed.

"What's wrong?" Asked Rexx.

"Oh, nothing against grocery shopping and cooking and stuff, but I just feel kind of left out. I mean, you guys are this company or whatever it is and I am just 'the wife'. I want to contribute to this adventure, not just tag along."

"Huh...that's kind of how I felt back at the mountain...just tagging along." Remarked Matu.

"But, we're all a team, now...right?" Asked Rexx. "Aren't we?"

"I guess." Shrugged Sendi. "I don't know. We'll see."

"Wait a minute..." Matu interjected. "If we are the company, there's no reason Sendi can't be in it as well...is there?"

"Well, no. I just hadn't thought about it. I mean, we've only been a company since we read that letter." Rexx turned to her. "How about it? Do you want a job?"

"Sure. What do I do?"

"I have no clue. For that matter, I don't even know what we do."

"Well, I guess we'd better start figuring it out...what with that demonstration in a couple of weeks."

Sendi opened her eyes. "Do I smell coffee?" She said softly, then. "Where am...oh, yes." She looked across the room to where Rexx was still sleeping. "Right." As she got out of bed, she glanced down at her attire. "Thanks for the pajamas...you knew I didn't want a frilly nightgown, didn't you." She crossed to the walk-in closet to change her clothes. "And thanks for this bit of privacy, too." As she stood looking in the mirror. "And, I guess, you've given me a lesson on being grateful and learning to express gratitude for guidance." She softly closed the bedroom door and headed to the kitchen.

"Oh, hi!" Matu said. "I got up early and got some stuff for breakfast at the local market."

Sendi looked at the table spread with sausages and rolls with honey. "Matu, I've never told you, but should have, that you are a real treasure."

"Don't forget there's coffee." He smiled as he set the pot down.

"Do I smell food?" Rexx said as he entered the kitchen.

After breakfast, they sat around the table drinking coffee.

"So, what is our business...and what do we do? Any more clues?" Matu asked.

"No." Rexx said glumly.

"You know, I was so tired last night, I didn't really unpack my stuff." Sendi observed. "Maybe we should go through our suitcases and see if there's any hints about this job...like any more letters...or something."

"Well, I guess it's worth a look." Admitted Rexx.

"Now..." Began Matu. "If we're supposed to be giving a demonstration, shouldn't we have something to demonstrate? Like, where's the gadget?"

"Yeah." Added Sendi. "And maybe some advertising stuff...like documentation and, maybe, fliers...oh, yeah, and tools...shouldn't we?"

"Well..." Said Matu, putting down his cup. "I guess we should go look."

Just then, the doorbell rang.

"Now what?" Matu asked as he stood up. "I'll answer it." As he disappeared into the hall.

"Delivery for Abernathy...do you have the code?" A voice at the door said.

"Just a minute." Matu answered. "Here."

Matu reappeared a minute later carrying a large box.

"So, what's that?" Rexx asked.

"Don't know. It's addressed to you. Here." He handed the box over, setting it on the table.

Rexx grabbed a sharp knife from a kitchen drawer and proceeded to cut the packing tape. "Wonder what...?"

"What's the return address?" Sendi asked.

"Um...Ganofree Enterprises."

"Who? Who are they?"

"I don't know. Never heard of them." He opened the box. "What the...?"

What is it?"

Rexx pulled a padded object out of the box. "What?" He began to unwrap it.

"That looks familiar." Remarked Sendi.

"Yeah." Said Rexx. "OK,I'm confused. It's the tool that the Alcaad used to cut and fuse metals." He shrugged. "Well, we certainly can't use that. Can we?"

"Why not?"

"Well...one, we don't know how it works, or how to build it...or, really, how to use it." He scratched his head. "It's really of no use if we have to demonstrate it...wonder why the Time Police left it for us?"

Sendi picked up the shipping receipt. "So, who is Ganofree Enterprises, anyway?"

"I guess we're somehow connected to them, or why would they be sending us this?"

"True...but, how connected? Do we work for them?"

"What else is in that box...any letters, or instructions?" Matu asked.

Rexx rummaged around in the box, pulling out other wrapped packages.

Sendi picked up the Alcaad tool and turned it over and over in her hand. "You know...this is here for a reason...or it wouldn't be here." She looked at Rexx. "Any thoughts?"

"Why do you think that?"

"Well, you know how he operates. He leaves clues for us to chance upon...stuff to advance us."

"OK, so what do we do with it?"

She looked puzzled. "That, I don't know."

Matu reached into the bottom of the box and pulled out a large envelope. He opened it and removed some pamphlets, a manual and some loose papers.

"What's that?" Rexx asked.

"Don't know..." Matu shuffled the papers. "But, it kind of looks like some kind of instructions."

"Instructions...for what?"

Rexx looked at the pile of wrapped packages. "I guess we'd better unwrap these and find out."

Matu looked at the two of them. "So, when we didn't know anything of the...I was going to say, future...we weren't all that concerned of the outcome. We just played it along

as it came. But, now, we sort of have a direction as to where things are going and we are totally lost as to what to do...does that make any sense?"

"Should that be 'supposedly' going?" Sendi asked.

"OK, I acknowledge that. Make that, where we think we might be going."

"But, I understand, we had goals, desires, before, when we were just 'living', but remember...this is a brand new life. We don't know where it is going."

"OK, right again. Do we have a desire for where we're going?"

"I thought we did...well, back before...um, this. But, now, I don't know...do we?"

"Are you taking lessons from the Time Police?" Matu stared at her. "OK, I guess you are. Why are you so good at this?"

She sighed, slumping her shoulders. "I don't know...maybe, I'm just weird."

"Huh!" Rexx laughed. "Considering the circumstances, I think we all are."

"I wonder..." Mused Matu. "How many other people have found themselves in the same circumstances."

"Huh?" Sendi asked.

"I mean, we can't be the only people that the Time Police...well, that have fallen into the same..."

"Oh, God..." She cut him off. "You mean...some other people...oh, God."

"I mean, like why not? He said he was a talent scout. I'm sure that there are other people who..."

"Oh, don't say it." She sat there shaking her head.

"What if we run into some of them?" Rexx asked.

Sendi glared at him. "You really want to meet up with other people that are as messed up as us?"

"Oh, I don't know." Said Matu. "It might be fun to have somebody else to talk to that would understand...you know."

She considered for a moment. "Yeah...actually, I do. It suddenly feels kind of lonely out here."

Rexx watched Sendi still holding the Alcaad tool. "Give me that for a moment." He stood still for a moment looking at the tool in his hands. "Why, do we have this?"

"What do you mean?" She asked.

He looked at her. "We won't find this for another fifteen or twenty years." He glanced at Matu. "Right? Isn't that the time frame?"

Matu nodded.

"And, the Alcaad are already there and using this tool...is this the same tool that we found...uh, will find? Lovra said his comrade died about ten years before we returned this tool to him...about five to ten years from now."

"What are you getting at?" Matu asked.

"Do we need to go and put this back in the tunnel where we found it...or...somehow give it back to whoever had it before..." Rexx trailed off.

"Wait a minute." Matu said. "It may not be the same tool. It may just be a similar one."

"Which the Alcaad would be the only possessors of." Rexx surmised. "Wouldn't they miss it?"

"Are you suggesting that we go give it back to them? I'm not keen on the possibility of running into my younger self."

Sendi sat there slowly shaking her head. "That sounds like a crazy idea...we can't meet the Alcaad years before we met them...can we? I mean, they'd remember us, well, would have remembered us, wouldn't they?"

"Well, maybe, maybe not, remember Lovra pretended to not know us during the battle at Yon in order to set the timeline back. He could do that again, couldn't he?"

She shook her head. "I don't know, I really don't."

"Is this really our path?" Asked Matu. "I mean, what about this deal of demonstrating this ore slicer thing with these mining companies...what do we do about that?"

"I'm getting the feeling that the Alcaad tool has something to do with what we are doing here. If it, at some point, has to be returned, then so be it, but that's not now. I think now we need to find out what else is in this box and what we can make out of it."

Matu held up one of the papers from the stack. "This says it's an inventory of what's in the box." He started reading the list. He glanced at Rexx unwrapping packages, then back at the list. He started counting the packages.

"What is it?" Sendi asked.

"This..." He held up the Alcaad tool. "...is one too many."

"Then, that definitely means it's here for us to use...somehow." She said.

"Because, whoever sent us this stuff doesn't know about it. So, the Time Police snuck it in during transit."

"OK, that sounds right, I guess." Rexx said. "Considering what he's done in the past."

"You know, the Time Police talked a lot about our 'path', and we've all heard about 'following your path'...right? But, how is this path created? Who made it up...or wrote down the rules...directions?" Matu asked.

"Good question." Rexx said. "How do we know what our path is? Where's the road map?"

"And, how do we know when we're on it?"

"Or when we're not?" Added Rexx.

"I get the feeling that if we're on our path, or near enough to it, then things should go more smoothly. And, if we're not, then things should be harder and we would be more stressed." Sendi said.

"Unless, we've gotten stronger and are being challenged." Said Matu. "Then it would feel like we're not on our path, when we actually are."

"True." She conceded.

"So, who does decide what our path is?" Asked Rexx. "I mean who's running the show?"

"God?" Asked Matu.

"Well, I mean, other than that. I mean, at a lower level. The Time Police says he doesn't know the future, and it seems like our Higher Selves don't know either since they're experiencing reality along with us. So, who's in charge?"

"Maybe..." Said Sendi. "...it's us."

"What do you mean...how? We don't know where we're going. Do we?"

"Maybe, we don't...maybe, we do."

"And...?"

"Well, maybe, when we're not walking around on some planet...when we're just drifting off in the clouds, we make up this plan of how we're going to do something better the next time around, so when we are walking around on the next planet, this plan is somewhere in the back of our minds, and it nags at us each time we wander too far astray."

"OK, I'll buy that." Said Rexx.

"Yeah, it kind of makes sense to me, too." Agreed Matu.

"Yeah." She said staring at the pile of packages. "Path." She shook her head and looked at Matu. "So, what is all this stuff? You've got the list."

He looked at the paper. "General purpose tool kit with screwdriver set, wire cutter and wire nuts, electrical tape and other stuff...I'm guessing that should be a large package."

Rexx held up a possible package. "This, maybe?"

"Open it."

Rexx grabbed a knife, cut the tape, and unfolded the packing. He picked up a long thin metal rod and held it toward Matu.

He nodded. "Yep...screwdriver."

"What's a screwdriver?" Rexx asked.

"You don't know...?" He shook his head. "Oh yeah...future tools. I guess you don't know what screws are then?"

"Oh, we have screws."

"Then how do you turn them?"

"High frequency sonic pulses."

"Oh...well, OK."

Sendi flattened out the packing. "It's got bubbles in it."

"Yeah. That's to protect the contents from damage."

"Interesting. Oh, look, there's a number written on it. Does your list have item numbers?"

He checked the list. "Uh, yeah." He looked at the number. "Yep. That's the tool kit. Well, that'll help identify stuff...I hope."

Sendi looked over at Rexx who was fighting with the tape on a package.

"Problem?"

"Yeah. The adhesive seems to have melted into the packaging...it's really stuck and I can't get a knife in between the layers."

Matu watched for a moment. He dropped his papers on the table and slumped onto his chair.

Sendi looked at him. "What's wrong?"

"This just doesn't feel right."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, where's the adventure? I mean this is a product demo...we could be at a trade show or in a supermarket. This is just marketing...sales."

"How do you know so much about this?"

"I guess the subject never came up...during my education years, I studied away for a bit, a couple of years, in Sidney...got some exposure to the outside world. I learned stuff about how the world works."

"Oh, well that's good...since, you're our 'tour guide'."

"Yeah...some guide. I mean with this stuff..." He indicated the pile of packages.

"I'm just as clueless as you are. At least, when we were trying to find a translator among all your devices, we had a reason...a quest...you know, for an ultimate good. It had purpose. This...oh, I don't know."

"Yeah." She glanced at Rexx, who had put down the package.

He nodded.

She added. "I guess we both feel the same way. There's no urgency except satisfying these clients...and, maybe, well, who really cares?"

"Well..." Rexx started. "I guess the guys who pay us care. Beyond that, I don't know."

"Hey." Said Matu. "Let's take a break. Go out somewhere...maybe, get some lunch...I don't know...something...anything."

"Yeah." Agreed Sendi. "And we should probably get some groceries...you know some stuff to cook for later."

"I guess we really needed that break." Matu said as they were seated back at the table. "So, are we ready to go back to figuring this stuff out?"

"I guess." Said Sendi. "Let's go over your list and see if any of us recognize any of the things on it."

"OK." Matu picked up the list. "There's a few different kinds of analysis meters here...mostly electrical. That seems kind of odd if we're just cutting up rocks."

"Maybe for checking if our device is set correctly." Suggested Rexx. "Like, maybe denser rocks might need higher voltage or current...or something."

"Do we have any idea which package has our device in it?"

Matu read down the list. "Nope. Nothing here says 'ore slicer'."

"Maybe that's just a nickname for it. Like, maybe, there's a part number or some other code for it."

"I guess I should go back to unwrapping stuff." Rexx said.

"OK. That's all of them. Anything here that fits the description?"

"Nope. Nothing."

"So, where is this 'ore slicer'? Asked Sendi.

"No idea." Said Matu. "Maybe there's another shipment?" The doorbell rang. "You don't have to be right on cue, do you?"

"I guess he does." Laughed Sendi, as Matu walked down the hallway.

He returned a few minutes later empty handed.

"What?" Rexx asked. "No delivery?"

Matu reached into his pocket and retrieved a set of keys. He dropped them on the table. "Delivery alright...we have a van. All the rest of the stuff is in the back of it. It's parked in the downstairs garage."

"There's a garage?" Sendi asked.

"Yeah. The entrance is on the back alley."

"There's an alley?" Rexx echoed.

"Then, why did they send this box separately?" She asked, pointing at the table.

"I think he said it was drop shipped from a different warehouse."

"He?"

"Yeah, the guy that gave me the keys. I guess we should go down and see what's there."

As they stepped out of the elevator, a large van labeled with the Ganofree Enterprises logo stood in the nearly deserted garage. Matu approached with the keys in his hand.

Sendi stopped abruptly. "Can one of us drive?"

"I, apparently, can." Matu held up a commercial drivers license.

"But...have you ever...?"

"Well, no, not this large of a van. But, I have driven cars." He unlocked the back of the van. "Hope it's not too different."

"So, what have we got?" Rexx asked as Matu opened the doors.

"Boxes."

Rexx cut the tape on the closest box and opened it. "Rocks."

"Huh?" Said Sendi. She looked in the box. "Yep. Those are rocks." She looked at Matu. "Why?"

He picked out an envelope and opened it. "Hardness and density samples."

"OKaaaay." She said as Rexx opened the next box. "What's in that one?"

"I think we may have found our device."

"Let me see." Said Matu. "Wow...I think I've seen one of these...yeah, I'm sure I have."

"Where?" Asked Sendi.

"In the mine. I worked there for a while when I was studying science in the miners school...it was sort of an exchange deal of work for lessons. It wasn't hard work. It was actually kind of fun to be doing something different for a change. The miners used this machine to clear away the useless rock from the ore samples that they wanted...it's sort of a work horse type of machine, not meant for delicate work."

"So..." Rexx said. "That means that in the future it's a success."

"I guess you could say that. It was awfully expensive and used a lot of fuel for the generator to run it, but it did do the job."

"Does this give us the purpose that we were hoping for?" Sendi asked as she poked at the closest boxes. "I mean, it doesn't sound like there would be a lot of customers for it."

"I don't know." Matu sighed. "Granted, it's a useful tool, but it's not necessary. Miners picks and tiny explosive charges can accomplish the same results for a lot less expense...even weighing the labor expense."

"Then, why...?"

"I'm guessing it was sort of a prestige item."

"What do you mean?"

"Something you buy to convince your customers that you're doing well."

"And...?"

"Well, if you're doing well, that means you have happy customers and that encourages other potential customers to buy from you."

"Oh." She said.

"Though it doesn't always work that well. I've seen new companies rent large offices and buy lots of fancy furniture and then go broke because they spent all of their money on the superficial and didn't invest in perfecting their product or refining their services."

"So, where does that leave us with this?"

"Well..." Rexx began. "I guess we'd better make sure that this device holds up to its reputation in our demos."

"Yeah." Echoed Sendi as she climbed into the back of the van. "Wonder what else is in here that we should know about."

Rexx and Matu continued poking into the boxes as Sendi disappeared into the front. "Wow, guys! Come look at this!"

They looked at each other and then climbed into the back of the van.

"What have you got?" Asked Rexx as he arrived at the front compartment. "Wow, what's all this?"

"Look! Comfy seats! And they recline for sleeping. Oh, and what's this?" She pointed.

"That is a mini-fridge...oo! and a microwave. All the comforts." Said Matu.

"Fridge? Microwave?"

"One keeps food cold and the other heats or cooks it."

"OK, wow, again." She opened the door to a small closet. "There's even a tiny bathroom." She stopped and looked at Matu. "Why do we need this?"

He looked around at the rest of the cab. "I'm guessing we're going on a road trip?"

Sendi sat down in the front rider's seat and pulled out a thick binder from under the dash.

"What's that?" Rexx asked.

"Don't know." As she paged through the inserts. "Maps, addresses, dates...I think it's an itinerary." She paused. "I think it's a list of our demos."

"That many!" Rexx exclaimed. "That's huge!"

"Yes, it is." She continued to turn the pages. "This goes on for years."

"Oh, no."

"Ditto." Added Matu. "There went any possibility of having an adventure."

"Hey." Said Sendi. "That's not like you...to give up so easily."

He regarded her for a few moments. "No...it's not. You're right." He paused.

"Have we all lost it here...the desire to go out and do something positive?"

"Maybe." Said Rexx. "I don't know. Have we?"

"Back in the mountain, we had a goal, well, several, things we had to do...we had a mission...well, several. Why does that seem to be lacking here? It just feels so mundane...so unimportant...like whatever we are doing just isn't necessary."

"Like anyone else could be doing the same job and it wouldn't matter?"

"Yeah" Rexx agreed. "Like, why us? Why are we here doing...whatever it is that we are supposed to be doing?"

"You know." Sendi began. "When we first arrived at the mountain, we didn't know what we were supposed to be doing either. Then, sort of, the pieces began to come together. And, yes, it didn't end up anywhere where we thought it would but it did come to a conclusion of sorts. Well, what I'm trying to say is maybe we learned something in the process."

"So, you want to apply that here?" Asked Rexx.

"Yeah. Maybe. Oh, I don't know. Matu? Any thoughts?"

"When you came to the mountain you had the task of fixing time. We don't have anything like that here. We're salesmen...where's the impossible challenge?"

Sendi shook her head. "I don't know."

They fell silent.

"Rexx looked around. "It's starting to get late. Why don't we take all this stuff up to the apartment and sort it out later."

They gathered the boxes and headed up.

They sat around the kitchen table. Sendi was pouring over the itinerary. Matu was looking through the device's instruction manual. Rexx was staring at the Alcaad tool as he turned it over in his hands.

Sendi looked up at him. "What is it?"

"There's gotta be something here...something. Or else, why is it here?"

She glanced at Matu and watched him for a moment. "Have you noticed anything different between the device that we have and the one that you saw in the future?"

"Huh? Oh..." He glanced back at the manual. "Well, you've got to remember that I was young at the time and there's been a few...I was going to say years since then. Well, whatever, you know what I mean." He paused. "I don't know if there's a difference. Why?"

"Well, I was just wondering...did we do something to it?" She nodded at the Alcaad tool. "You know...change something?"

"Hmmpf." Matu leaned back in his chair staring at her. He looked at Rexx still staring at the tool. "Here... gimme that a moment." He reached for the tool and started looking it over closely.

"What're you thinking?" Rexx asked.

"Don't know yet..." Matu mumbled, turning the tool in his hands. "Trying to figure a way into this...how to open it."

"Why?"

"Find out how it works."

"But, it's alien technology...we have no idea how it works."

"So? We're smart...aren't we."

"Yeah, I guess so. But...?"

He shrugged. "What have we got to lose?"

Sendi was paging through the itinerary making notes. "I'm glad they arranged this schedule to optimize travel. We sure have a lot of countries to travel through."

"Well, that could add some adventure." Remarked Rexx.

"I didn't know there were so many mines in the world."

"Makes sense to me." Said Matu. "The earth is full of all kinds of ore. It's just concentrated in different places...gold here, uranium there...but, unobtainium is nowhere to be found." He chuckled.

Sendi glared at him, and went back to studying the itinerary. "Did you notice how most of these mining companies are foreign owned?" She remarked.

"Yeah, so?" Rexx replied.

"I get it." Matu said. "The mine in our mountain was owned by a big conglomerate, and we, the technical owners of the land...yes, it was registered to us...well, we got a pittance of their profits for the land's use. So, it's the same here. The local population gets nothing and the foreigners get rich."

"So, how does that make us feel? We work for this corporation that supplies tools to these foreign owners who deplete the local economies. Are we complacent in their greed?"

"Yes." Matu nodded.

"So, what do we do?"

They all fell quiet. After a bit, Rexx said. "I have an idea. It's not a perfect solution, but maybe it's a help."

"And...?"

"We do the best we can when we're demonstrating to a locally owned mine and show the pros and cons of the machine. Does it suit your needs or is it an unnecessary expense...that kind of approach. When we're demonstrating to a 'big cat' foreign company, maybe the machine doesn't work so well, but we oversell it. Maybe, they'll think it's worth the expense for the prestige. And, maybe it will be a help to the small guys." He paused. "Oh, I don't know."

"I think your idea has potential." Matu said. "But we'll have to work on it so it's a little more subtle and we don't get fired for bad public relations."

"Maybe..." Said Sendi. "We do it differently."

"What do you have in mind?"

"Matu, you've been working on the Alcaad tool...I'm sure we have it so we can use it for some advantage, otherwise, why do we have it? So, maybe we can use it to somehow make the device work better."

"And...? How does that help the little guy?"

"We contact the parent company and ask for a second demo device as a backup...you know, in case something goes wrong or breaks..."

"Or it falls into the mine pit?" Quipped Rexx.

"Yeah. That works, too. Anyhow we get one device working really well and leave the second one as it is. We use the unaltered device to demo to the big companies and if they like our pitch, they place an order with the company for scheduled delivery."

"Continue..."

"The really good device we show to the little guys and emphasize the current delivery schedule is really long and we can offer a slight discount if they want to buy the demo and take it now. So, we sell them the good demo and we contact the company for a replacement, telling the company that they liked it so much they just couldn't wait for a delivery."

"I like it...there's only one problem."

"What?"

"This." Matu held up the Alcaad tool. "We haven't figured out how it works, yet, nor how it can enhance the device."

"Details." Muttered Rexx, shrugging his shoulders.

"Or, for that matter, how the device works." Matu pointed at the instruction manual. "Either of you want to have a go at it?"

Rexx picked up the booklet. "Ooooh! Ancient technology, huh?"

"I don't seem to remember that you had many problems with our technology back in the mountain."

"No. You're right. Sorry, I hadn't considered that."

"Don't forget that there were a few hundred years of dark ages between now and our future times." Sendi added.

"So, do you mean that we are more or less equal?"

"Maybe. I'm guessing that maybe there were some advances in one area and maybe not in others." She said. "We'll have to use trial and error to find out."

"OK." Rexx opened the manual and started reading. "'Adjustable frequency laser'...does this mean what I think it does?"

Matu smirked. "So, tell me."

"I can adjust the cutting depth and intensity by adjusting the beam frequency?"

"You've got it."

"Hmmm..." Rexx went back to reading.

"I wonder how much is different between what you know and what we learned in the future." Sendi said.

"I would imagine that the basics would be the same...mechanics, electrical, chemical, stuff like that, but like you said there could be some advances in different areas...like, I guess, maybe whatever was more needed."

"Yeah, like that big van. We had things like that, too. But, where we were, the population was more dense and most people used public transport instead of individual vehicles...less traffic congestion. But, it wasn't like that everywhere. Where there were fewer people, there were more vehicles."

"Yeah..." Matu mumbled as he worked on the cover of the Alcaad tool. "Got it!" He exclaimed as he popped the lid off. He looked at it thoughtfully. "How on earth was this fastened on? There's no screws or catches or anything."

"Glue?" Suggested Rexx.

"No!" Matu shot him a look, then considered. "Well, maybe. Hmmm. Let me look at that again." He ran his fingertip over the edge. "There seems to be some sort of dried

residue here." He carried the lid over to the sink and wet his finger. He wiped it along the edge. "Hmmm...doesn't seem to be water soluble."

"Do you really think it's some kind of glue?" He asked.

"I really don't know. It's not sticky. And why would you use a glue to enclose a tool? Sooner or later you have to open it to fix something...you know, everything breaks eventually."

"Maybe it's a kind of glue that can be softened and then re-hardened later."

"But, I got it open without damaging anything."

Sendi thought a moment. "Maybe you were meant to."

"Huh?" He looked at her, then shook his head. "Oh no, not that."

"Why not? I mean, why are we here? We wanted more life to live. I mean, these things happen all the time and we don't notice. We're not always aware of them. But now, we've had advance warning, so we notice. Well, we should be noticing, I mean."

"But, why?"

"So we have the opportunity to advance, you know, get better, improve ourselves."

"But, why does it feel like I'm being set up?"

"Well...you are. We all are...all the time. It's just that now we know we are."

"And, you're OK with that?"

"Yes, and, well, no. But, it is what it is. So, I'm trying to make the best of it."

"Well, I don't like it feeling like a big test."

"You know..." Rexx started. "When we were in the mountain, we knew it was a big test. We had to do something to reset time. And, yeah, we didn't know there would be all kinds of clues just set out for us to find. But, we knew we had a challenge to find the answer. Here we've got just a different kind of challenge while we're getting on with living more of life."

"About what the Time Police was saying about everything being real...what do you guys think?" Sendi asked. "I mean we're back on Earth. Does this feel real to you? I'm not sure if it does to me. I mean, there's food, drink, stuff to move around...but, it feels kind of divorced from reality, if you know what I mean."

"Yeah, I think I do." Rexx answered. "In the mountain, it felt real because we hadn't known what it was like to be outside of time, and now that we've had that experience, all of this..." He spread his hands across the table. "...seems kind of like a fantasy or dream or something."

"Even dreams, or journeying felt more real."

"I agree." Matu said. "But, how do we get that back? That feeling of things being more real?"

"Well." Rexx said. "You guys feel real to me. Is that a start?"

Matu was staring off into the distance. "Maybe..." He paused.

"What are you thinking?" Prompted Sendi.

"Maybe that's why we don't remember anything when we reincarnate."

"What do you mean?" She asked.

"Because otherwise stuff wouldn't feel real."

"You mean this..." She indicated the room. "...doesn't feel real because we remember the in-between real, or unreal, or whatever...this real, I mean, this physical stuff, feels like it's a theatrical prop or something."

"Yeah. I think that's what I mean."

"Well, I still say you guys feel real to me." Rexx insisted.

Sendi stared at him for a moment.

"What?" Rexx asked.

"What if we're not real to each other?"

"Huh?"

"What if you're imagining me, and I'm imagining you?"

"You mean...after all we've been through...I'm not real to you?"

"Well, yeah, you are, well...I mean...maybe...? Oh, gosh, I don't know how to say this."

"Guys!" Interrupted Matu. "For the sake of all of our sanity, I think we shouldn't pursue this train of thought too far."

They both turned to stare at him.

"I mean...at least, not for now. I'm starting to get creeped out."

"Huh?"

"Look! I want to believe that you guys are real, too. Please, don't make me start doubting all the stuff around me." He paused. "Because, otherwise, I've got nothing to hang onto."

Sendi looked sullen. "Yeah...sorry...I do understand. I was beginning to feel that way, too."

"Hey! Hey, it's OK. I understand what you're feeling. We're all in a very weird situation...if that's what it can be called. I just..." He paused. "I just don't want to feel like I'm all alone in the universe right now."

"Yeah."

"Yeah, me too." Echoed Rexx.

After a long pause.

"So..." Matu said. "We're all in this together?"

"Yeah." Sendi nodded.

"Me, too." Rexx seconded.

"And...we're all real."

"Yeah. We're all real." She echoed.

They all fell silent.

After a while Matu scratched his head and picked up the lid of the tool. "...I should get back to figuring this thing out."

"Yeah..." Said Rexx. "...yeah, and I should get back to reading this manual."

Sendi looked around. "Maybe I should think about making us something to eat while you guys work."

"Yeah...great." Mumbled Rexx.

Sendi started getting some stuff out of the refrigerator. "Any choices?"

"Whatever's fine." Said Matu, not really paying any attention.

"Yeah. Same here." Mumbled Rexx.

Rexx placed the box with the device on the chair and started removing its components onto the table. He started connecting the parts as Sendi and Matu watched.

"What are you doing?" She asked.

"Assembling...according to the instructions." He pointed at the manual as he attached a long flat bar to the front of the device.

"What's that?"

"Proximity gauge."

"What's it do?"

"Tells me at a given distance how efficient the device will be for penetration. Factoring in the density, of course."

"Into...?"

"Into the rock we're trying to cut."

"You sure learned that quickly." Matu complimented.

"Well, I was trained in geological engineering. I guess not a lot has changed over time, rocks being rocks."

"Do you actually know how it works?" Sendi asked. "Or you just following the directions on how to put it together?"

"It's a little of both. I'm kind of learning as I go. The directions do explain some of the functions."

"Well, you're doing better than me." Matu muttered.

"These things both cut rock...right?" Sendi asked.

"Well, yeah...sort of..." Matu held up the Alcaad tool. "We know this melts it. But, I don't know how it could be set to cut it." He held out the enclosure to Rexx. "Does any of this make any sense to you?"

Rexx took the case and peered into the assemblage of parts. "Wow." He whispered.

"Recognize anything?"

"Nope. No, wait a sec...maybe...uh, not sure...wonder what this...ow!...does?"

"Sharp?" Asked Sendi.

"No. I got a shock."

"Whoa! I hadn't even thought about it having power...duh! Of course it must...I wonder what the source is...must be some kind of battery. Let me see." Matu grabbed the box. "What is that?"

"Huh?"

Matu pushed a tall component slightly to one side. "See that?" He pointed to a small dark cylindrical object. "Look at the base. It's glowing."

Rexx picked up a knife and poked at the object. "It looks like it's covered with something soft and pliable...maybe a coating of some kind...like it was dipped in something...maybe to protect it?"

"Can you cut any of it off?"

"Let me see." Rexx tried for a moment. "Do we have anything sharper?"

Matu rummaged through the tool kit. "Try this. It's a small incisor. Careful, it seems pretty sharp. I almost cut myself just taking its cap off."

As Rexx started to cut the covering away from the cylinder the glow increased. "That is bright!" He exclaimed.

"Keep going." Urged Matu. "I want to see what's under there."

As Rexx cut through to the top of the coating and peeled away the coating they had to shield their eyes.

"I don't know how you can see anything." Matu said. "That thing is blinding."

"This must be the power source...it must be. But, what is it? I've never seen anything like it before."

"Well, it 'is' an alien tool." Rexx stated matter of factly.

Matu gave him a long cold glare. "Yes, it is." He sighed, holding a hand up against the glare. "But, what is it...how does it work...and what can we do with it? Too many questions." He shook his head.

"Guys..." Sendi suggested. "It's getting pretty late and I think we're all getting tired. What do you say we keep this til morning?"

The next morning, Rexx and Matu sat at the table staring at the Alcaad tool while Sendi washed dishes. Putting the last dish in the cupboard, she turned to look at them. "Still nothing, huh?"

They returned her look. Matu said. "No. I don't know where we should begin. This..." He pointed. "What I'm assuming to be the power source, is like nothing I've ever

seen. It's really bright, but, if I pass my hand over it, it's only slightly warm. So, if it is a power source, I have no idea how it's supplying...um, I was going to say electricity, but who know what the type of energy this really is supplying to the actual machinery of the tool." He paused, shaking his head. "I don't even know what I'm talking about anymore."

Rexx poked his finger at the glowing cylinder. "You know...this device..." He moved his hand to indicate the partially assembled mining tool sitting on the table. "Is basically a finely tuned laser...concentrated focused light. This thing..." He indicated the glowing cylinder. "I don't know. Do you think there is any connection?"

Matu looked at Rexx, then back to the tool. "OK, I'll buy that. But, what...and, how?"

"Rexx, have you gotten this thing assembled enough to turn it on?" Sendi asked.

"Um, yeah, more or less. I can energize it, but I don't know how to focus or fine tune it yet. Why?"

Well...no particular reason...but, what if you move the tool close to the laser part...OK, weird thought, but, because they are both bright things..." She shrugged. "Oh, I don't know."

"OK, but neither do we." Rexx slid the Alcaad tool over next to the laser and turned on the device's switch. At first the laser began to slowly glow in its lowest setting." Rexx consulted the manual. "OK, that seems to be the normal warm up period. It should take a minute or so to come up to it's working temperature."

"Uh...What's happening?" Asked Matu.

"Huh?" Said Rexx, looking up from the manual.

"Look!" He pointed at the laser's glow rapidly intensifying.

"Wow." Whispered Sendi. "What is happening?"

"I have no idea."

"Pull it away again."

"Why?"

"I don't know...just try it, OK?"

"No change." Said Rexx. "The laser is way above it's operating value. But, it's holding at a constant level. And, there seems to be no danger of over-heating or anything else dangerous at this setting."

"So, the device is more powerful, huh?"

"Yeah, it seems to be." Rexx nodded.

"Well, isn't that what we were looking for?" Matu asked.

"Yeah, I guess so. But, what about the tool?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we took what might be a protective covering off of a possibly dangerous component exposing, well, who knows what." Sendi posited.

"So, this device seems to be working better. What's your point?"

"What's it doing to us?"

Rexx and Matu looked at each other.

Rexx slipped the jacket of the coating back over the cylinder. "It's a good thing I only sliced the side of this. I think I can get it back where it covers the light...mostly."

Matu handed him a spool of opaque tape. "Here, cover the slit with this."

"OK, done."

They all sat quietly staring at each other for a few minutes. Finally Sendi broke the silence. "So, how does everybody feel?"

Rexx and Matu looked at each other. Rexx shrugged. "I don't know. How should we feel?"

She stared at the table top. "I don't know. I guess I'm asking if there are any noticeably ill effects from being exposed to the light."

"Well, so far, nothing. You, Matu?"

"Nope. Nothing, here."

"Sendi?"

"No. I guess I'm fine, too. I was just concerned that if something that energetic could change the power level on the laser, it could do some damage to us."

"Well..." Said REXX. "It still could." He shrugged. "Time will tell."

"Yeah. I guess you're right. Nothing we can do about it anyway."

"Who knows...maybe it might make us better." He shrugged.

"So." Said Matu, breaking the mood. "Since the device seems to have more power, shouldn't we test against the manual's specifications?"

"Yeah." Agreed REXX. "You're right...we should."

"What did you do with that box of density samples?"

"You mean the box of rocks?"

"Yeah, the box of rocks."

"Oh, I left it in the van. I didn't see much point to lugging it all the way up here. Besides, if we need to cut any of them, we really shouldn't do it indoors...at least, not in a small room like this one. There's not enough ventilation."

"Good point. So, let's take this down to the parking lot and see what we can do there. The lot seemed pretty empty, so we shouldn't be bothered by curious onlookers."

They gathered up the device, its manuals, and a handful of tools. REXX looked at Sendi who was staring off into space. "You coming?"

"Huh?" Breaking her concentration. "No. You guys go on ahead. I'm going to think about making something for us for lunch."

"Oh, OK, sounds good. Catch you later."

Matu set up three density samples at the recommended distance in the parking lot. "OK. This is the most dense though the least. Go ahead and focus on them in turn."

"OK. I'm ready. Stand back out of range."

REXX operated the device. After the smoke cleared. "How does that look?"

"Really nice and clean. How're the stats? Temperature OK, and what about battery power?"

"Everything looks good. Even better than good...almost on the edge of outstanding. But, we can't use this."

"What do you mean?"

"If we want to help the small corporations, we're in trouble because our first demos are for the big guys."

"Yeah. That is a problem." Matu thought for a moment. He picked up a hammer and approached the device.

"Hey! What're you doing?"

"Just a small cosmetic dent...no internal damage. But, now we can take a photo and let corporate know there was some shipping damage...connector got damaged...works, but, slight issue with the power supply, intermittent...can they send another unit as soon as possible? That gives us the backup we need for the other demos."

"Good thinking!" Remarked REXX. "Don't ever let me say that you were just the comic relief."

Back in the apartment, Rexx and Matu set down the device on the floor near the kitchen table. Sendi didn't notice as she was quietly staring out the window.

"Sendi? You OK?" Rexx asked quietly.

"Yeah." She replied, equally quietly. "Maybe...I guess. Oh, I don't know. I feel kind of lost. I know we have this itinerary and these things to do, but where are we, and when, for that matter? And just what are we doing here?"

"Living more?"

"Yeah, but what does that mean? We've got all these places to go. Do we speak the language...know the currency...understand the customs...these are trivial things that are easily overcome. No, what I'm talking about is the greater picture...like I said, where are we?"

"Well, we're..."

"No, you don't get it. Not here, location...here, life...like where we really know where things are." She thought for a moment. "When I was back at home, at our old life, I had friends, family, a job, things to do...I knew where things were. When we were on that time tour vacation, again, I knew where my stuff was. I knew where to eat and sleep...it felt real. Even at the mountain, we had Matu, who knew where stuff was and how to link with the local culture. Here, I don't know where I am. Yeah, I have a bed and a kitchen and stuff, but with what we've been through and what we now know, we could just wave a hand and walk back into the fog and no one would be any wiser...nothing would have changed."

"I see." A long pause. He nodded. "Well, we've changed."

"We have? Oh. Yes. You're right, we have. I don't know if we're still even human. I mean, like, compared to everybody else."

"OK, I guess you have a point. Yes, we don't think like we used to." Rexx agreed. "But, I think that being human doesn't stop at...well, I was going to say death, but we've gone outside of that concept...so, maybe, some sort of transitioning...OK, maybe I have no idea what or how to say what I'm trying to think."

Matu snickered softly. "Words out of my own mouth."

"That's OK." Sendi said. "I get where you're coming from. I think we both do." She thought for a moment. "OK, so, we all have these anchors, things we cast down to firmly hold us from drifting off in this endless sea of life. They keep us sane. They also keep us from seeing whatever else might be out there...because, well, it's scary."

"Yeah." Said Matu. "It is scary." He paused. "It's always been scary."

"But, we've been there."

"No." Matu said, shaking his head. "No, we haven't. They're a lot of places we haven't been."

"What do you mean?"

"When we were being taught about journeying, there were stories...people caught between...not knowing life continuing, not being freed by death...somewhere living and reliving the last thing they remembered..." He faded off.

"That sounds horrible."

"Yes. But, some are trapped where they cannot see a way out."

Sendi went quiet. "Are we?"

"I don't know."