

Rexx concentrated on the control panel. The panel began to emit a high frequency warble, which then settled into a low hum. The TimePod began to tremble slightly. "Maybe when we get to the other end, I can reset this thing. I hope I can figure it out."

As Rexx and Sendi watched, the instrument lights flickered through their sequences. A small yellowish green point of light began to glow alongside of the panel. It elongated into a bright vertical line extending from the floor to about one and a third meters in height.

"What is that!?" Rexx exclaimed.

"Uh...I...I don't know." Sendi stammered.

The line shimmered and unfolded to reveal the presence of one of the Time Police. It turned toward the control panel and began to adjust the settings.

Rexx shoved Sendi to her feet and unstrapping his safety harness, he stood and addressed the Time Police, "Wow! Are we glad to see you! Can you reset this thing? I couldn't get it to enter the location."

The Time Police turned to face Rexx. "There is no location. Time has mutated. Nothing is as it was before. You have transgressed the law and altered the flow of events. The cessation of the Alcaad representative has changed the course of this war and the future you originated in is no longer accessible."

"Wh...what's going to happen to us?"

"You must repair the damage."

"How?"

"Yeah, how?" Sendi echoed.

"Ontological. All are being. Change is the process of unfolding from one state to another. Each has its own form and ritual. Many have been displaced. You must learn and you must correct. The adjuster will bring the circles back to their beginning. We will control your direction. As you develop, you can repair. When the damage is undone, the SafeTime Zones will be reestablished. Until then, all is wild." The Time Police turned back to the controls, finished its adjustments and turned back to face Rexx and Sendi. It began to shimmer. It refolded into the bright line and diminished onto the point of light, which then faded.

"Wait!" Rexx reached out to try to grab the Time Police, but was too late. He turned to Sendi. "Now, what?"

"Rexx! She pointed. "Look at the settings."

He turned to the control panel. It now read, "2053 A.D., AUSTRALIAN NORTHERN TERRITORY, AYER'S ROCK OPAL MINE COMPLEX". The soft hum of the TimePod controls again raised to a high frequency warble as the Pod came to a rest with a gentle thump. The computer's voice announced, "Reemergence. Hatch seals release."

The hatch slowly opened revealing a dim exterior. Rexx crossed to the hatch with Sendi following. They peered cautiously out into the interior of a cave.

A bright flash on the control panel caught their attention and they returned to the main view screen. The Time Cruise recording of this era began to play.

The Cruise Director was standing in a cave setting. As she began to describe Ayer's Rock Opal Mine Complex, the cave setting dissolved to show a view of the bleak Australian outback behind her on the screen.

"The desert sun scorches the earth. Beyond the protection of this rock crust, the air can bake up to fifty four degrees. Man cannot easily live in that still world. Few beasts can, and even they seek day time shelter among the stone caves. In Twenty Forty One, the process of extracting energy from non-crystalline silica was perfected."

The outback dissolved to a view of an opal glowing in a small metallic chamber. The Cruise Director continued.

"The resultant resonance engine caused the demand for opals to grow. And by Twenty Fifty Three, requisition is at an all time high. Although automated mining is commonplace in many parts of the planet, it is sparse here. The remoteness of the mine and high overhead are not the only factors. Only the trained eye can discern the fiery glimmer amid the crude chalky ore and machines could too easily crush the precious stones. The mines must be manned."

The opal engine dissolved to a cavernous room filled with merchant stalls and small cubicles filled with goods. Several people are seen buying and selling merchandise.

"A large cafeteria occupies one end of this marketplace where regular meals are served to all of the inhabitants. But, occasional stalls serve various snack foods and beverages, and small cafes dot the open area where people have gathered to enjoy the evening with their friends. These small shops must supply the needs of the few hundred miners and their families, for true civilization is far distant from this place. Light in these chambers is electric fed via solar energy storage, as most of the activity here is in the evening and early night. Fans draw the hot air from outside into storage tanks deep in the rock for dispersal in the cooler evening. Likewise the cold night air is stored for dispersal during the heat of the day, creating a comfortable living environment. Closer to the surface, the heat is more intense."

The marketplace dissolved to a view deep within the mines showing small rooms branching off a long rough hewn tunnel.

"As we travel deeper into the mines, the humidity increases and the temperature again drops to a more comfortable level. We see the bare tunnel walls. Occasionally small amounts of water ooze from cracks and trickle off toward drains. Here are storerooms for tools and various mining apparel. There are machine shops with work benches, shelves of parts, and engines for making and repairing tools. Also, here are garages with dusty mechanized ore carts, and ore processing machines for grinding and polishing. These workrooms are the birthplace of some of the world's finest gemstones. Here the delicate grinding of the crude ore reveals the fiery glint of possible treasures held within. At the depths of man's intervention into these rocks, we find the veins of crude ore. Here are the mines proper, where ore is actually dug. There we see partially filled carts of crude ore and tools temporarily abandoned for the evening. Work is halted then as the fiber optic lamp system hung along the upper part of these walls is powered by the sun. In this siliceous substrate lies tomorrow's fortunes."

The cave dissolved to a view of the Aboriginal caves emphasizing an ancient cave painting. A proud Aborigine stands immobile with a spear tipped staff guarding the entrance.

"The adjoining sacred caves belong to the Aborigines that wander these deserts. They guard them well. The inhabitants of the complex are not allowed here, save for those few miners that descended from these mysterious people. Here in the caves the Aborigines create their cave paintings, chant to their spirits and leave offerings. But, danger lurks here as well. There are legends of spirit beings that haunt these deep caves. They date back to

the beginnings of time and horrible things are said to have happened to men who have dared to trespass there.”

The view screen dimmed to black.

“So, that’s where we are.”

“But, Rexx, we don’t know if any of this still exists anymore.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“We have no idea of what might be out there.”

“Yeah, I know.”

“Don’t keep saying that!”

“Well, I guess we’ll just have to go out and find out. We sure can’t stay in here. We’ve no food, for one thing, and we’ve got to go fix whatever’s wrong. Oh, and keep your gun handy...and fully charged.”

“That’s how we got into this.”

“Yeah, I know...but we’ve got to stay alive, too. There’s no SafeTime Zone here.” He sighed. “Come on. We’d better get going.”

They crossed to the hatchway and cautiously peered out at the cave’s interior. “Man, the light is really dim in here.” Rexx said as he stepped out first. “Wait a moment, I’ll see if there’s anything to worry about.” He took a few steps into the small cave. “OK, I think it’s safe.”

Sendi stepped into the cave, taking a look around as she joined Rexx. “This place is really tiny. The TimePod fits in here, but just barely.” As she walked the few steps toward the cave’s entrance, her foot brushed against a small soft package. “What’s this?” She reached down to pick it up.

“What is it?” Rexx asked.

“Well, look at this!” She held up a small bundle of local clothing, as described in the recording, a bottle of water, and a small packet of food. “And there!” In the dim light, something shimmered across the cave’s entrance. “A Time Barricade. It’s weak but it’s there!” She looked at Rexx. “They’re looking after us.”

A short while later, in the Pod, they had changed from their EnviroSuits into the local clothing. Rexx commented, “I sure hope we don’t need those suits. I feel kind of vulnerable without it.”

“Well, if the Time Police provided this clothing, I’m guessing we don’t really need the suits. Anyhow, it will help us to blend in with the locals.”

“I’m thinking we’d better keep the food and water with us. We don’t know when we will get back to the pod.” He held up a carry pouch that was with the clothing. “We can carry it in here.” He dropped the water bottle into the pouch and it landed with jingling sound. “What?” He took out the bottle and emptied the contents of the pouch onto the control couch.

“What is it?”

He picked up a few of the round pieces of metal and showed them to Sendi. “I think it’s money.”

“How nice...do we have any idea how to use it? I mean, wouldn’t that make us look like outsiders?”

“I think we’d better come up with a story...who we are and why we’re here.”

“OK, any ideas?”

"Yeah, let me think...OK, we're, maybe, new employees. We've just been transferred here, and the bosses provided us with these clothes and some cash for the marketplace."

"Where are we staying?"

"Um, we haven't been assigned quarters, yet, we just arrived, um, by ground transport, small vehicle. You wouldn't have seen it, they let us off at the perimeter. And, um, we really don't know our way around yet."

"Are we together?"

"I think that would be the best. We don't really want to get separated until we figure out what we are supposed to be doing."

"Um, as employees...what skills do we have? I mean, what's our job, or jobs?"

"Do you know anything about cutting gemstones?"

"Oh yeah, sure...I do it all the time. What do you think?!"

"No, huh?"

"No."

"OK...what was your job back home?"

"Well, I've had a few different jobs. I've worked in a food processing factory when I was in school, but once I graduated, I got a job as a cook's assistant. Now, I am a chef and I coordinate menus and recipes for a restaurant...but, I guess that was obvious from my interest in those recipes.

"Hey, you just said you were a chef..."

"Yeah, so...?"

"So, you must like trying new foods..."

"...and?"

"Why were you so reluctant to try what we had for breakfast the day after we met?"

Sendi laughed, "Oh, that...it's an old habit...I wait to see how the customer reacts to the taste, before I judge my own palate...I may love it, but it may not what the general patrons prefer, so it doesn't go on the menu."

"Oh."

"Anyhow, since there's a central cafeteria here, I could possibly work there, or maybe in one of the market food stalls. But, I'm not sure how that would help here. Especially if we don't want to get separated. What was your job?"

"Well, I just got out of the military and I haven't found a new job yet...thought I'd take a vacation to unwind first."

"Didn't work, huh?"

"No! Anyhow, my training was as a geological engineer."

"Well, that could actually come in handy here in a mine."

"True."

"Hey! You know...maybe, I'm not actually an employee. I'm your wife and I'm here to write a cookbook about the local cuisine or research for a documentary, something like that. Gives me the opportunity to ask questions while you look at...um, rocks?"

"Don't know much about your husband's occupation, do you?"

"Funny! Well, OK, we've got some sort of story that we can use to wander around. So, what now?"

"I guess, we start seeing where we are, and..." He trailed off.

"Yeah, I know." She shrugged. "No time like the present...of past, if you will."

They exited the Pod and headed toward the barricade. They halted just before it. Rexx peered through the barricade.

“Do you see anything?” Sendi asked.

“Well, there’s a tunnel that goes in two directions. I don’t see anybody, but I can’t really see around the corners. This entrance is set back a bit from the tunnel.”

“Rexx...?”

“Yeah?”

“I’m a bit scared.”

He looked at her. “Yeah, I am a bit scared, too. But, we don’t have a choice. We’ve got some job to do, if we want to get back home.”

“Yeah, I know...let’s go.”

They stepped through the barricade and cautiously approached the tunnel. Rexx peered around the corner.

“Do you see anything?”

“Just the bare stone tunnel wall. There seems to be a cable running along the ceiling to a small lamp fastened to the wall. It’s not very bright, just enough to see where you’re going, I guess. There’s another one a little further on.” He turned to look down the other end of the tunnel. “That way seems to be the same.”

“Which way should we go?”

“I have no idea. Hey, wait! Look over there...along the floor right at the base of the wall. There’s a small shiny dot, and another one about a meter further down. And, I think I see another one beyond that one.” He looked straight down. “And, here’s another one just in front of the barricade.”

“Are there any in the other direction?”

He peered down the tunnel. “No, I don’t see any.”

“What do you think it means?”

“Well, either it’s entirely coincidental...or, maybe it’s a trail for us to follow. It does lead from the barricade. What’s your gut feeling?”

“Well, I guess it’s as good as any...I sure don’t know what else to...”

A loud low pitched rumble echoed from the other end of the tunnel.

“What was that?!” She whispered.

“I don’t know.” He whispered back. “Maybe, something to do with the mining operation. Blasting, or something...maybe it’s best we follow the dots.”

“Lead on...but, let’s go as quietly as we can. Don’t want to surprise anybody by making a lot of noise.”

“Good idea.”

As they crept softly down the tunnel, Rexx stopped and motioned for Sendi to stop.

“What?” she whispered.

“I think I hear something ahead.” He whispered back. “Sounds kind of like voices. Should we keep going?”

“I guess, we’re going to run into someone sooner or later. And, there’s not too many options of where else to go, is there?”

The tunnel slowly curved around a corner and they spied a cross tunnel ahead. Further along, the light was a bit brighter and the sounds of several people talking and moving

about emanated from there. They cautiously approached. The tunnel widened into a huge brightly lit chamber. They could see a vast array of small shops set into the cave walls and several larger tunnels with well worn paths branching out from in between the groups of stalls. Most of the people seemed to be shop keepers along with food vendors readying their wares towards opening as very few other people were gathered there.

Sendi grabbed Rexx's wrist and motioned him to follow her further back into the tunnel. "I think this must be the marketplace the recording described." she whispered.

"Yeah, but they don't seem very busy right now. I guess the miners are busy at work. It looked like they were cleaning up in the cafeteria. I guess a meal recently ended. I wonder what time it is."

"I got a lot of smells of pastry and some other meat smells, but nothing very heavy, like roasts or soups...maybe breakfast or lunch?" She shrugged. "Oh, I don't know...I don't even know what their foods or routines might be."

"Let's go back a bit." He suggested. "I don't want to be in a large group of people, even if we do have a back story."

"At least, from what we've heard, it sounds like we speak the same language as they do. But, still..." She trailed off as she looked around. "Rexx! The shiny dots...where are they?"

"You're right! I forgot to keep looking for them when we got to the cross tunnel. I was concentrating on the marketplace sounds. We'd better to go back and find them again."

They retraced their steps to the cross tunnel. Looking around, Sendi spied the last dot in the tunnel that led to their Pod. "You know, these tunnels don't seem very well used. The path isn't nearly as worn as those in the larger tunnels off the marketplace. Probably, just as well...keep us out of trouble." She giggled.

Rexx glared at her, then looked at their last dot. He reached down and picked it up. "What are these things, anyway?"

"Let me see." She grabbed it from him. "Oh, it's a fire opal! But, it's a very small one. You know, that makes sense, if anyone here found them, they would just think that someone dropped them...like, they had a hole in a sack of them. Though, they are so small, that I doubt they are worth anything...more like grinding dust."

"I thought you didn't know anything about 'rocks'!"

"Well, I do know something about jewelry...I am a girl after all."

"Humph, I've noticed."

"And, how come you don't know about 'rocks', Mr. Geologist?"

"Geological engineering is more about structural than individual stones."

"Huh?"

"Like building tunnels for roads and rail and undersea transport...things like that. And, knowing the kind of rock that will hold pressure and what will collapse under that same pressure."

"Oh."

She placed the opal back on the trail where they found it. "We better keep track of the path back to the Pod. So, where's the next dot?"

Rexx headed off to the side tunnel entrances. "This tunnel is a lot smaller and less used than the other one." He stepped a little way into the tunnel. "It's dimly lit, but adequate. Aaand, there's a dot! Come on, this seems to be the path."

Further along, again they came to another cross tunnel. Both ends were small, with one tunnel seeming to lead down and the other, upward. Both had dots leading inward, but none in the main tunnel ahead.

“What now?” Rexx looked at Sendi.

“Drat! I don’t know. What about you?”

“I’m guessing we’re supposed to take both. But, maybe, one first and the other later...but, which, and after what, or when?”

“Flip a coin? As the saying goes.” She suggested.

“No. I prefer to follow a gut instinct.”

“You mean...what falls into your mind, your instincts?”

“Yes, in so many words. You?”

“Well, the recording said the Aborigines inhabited caves above the surface. And, the mines held some kind of danger. Which do you think would get us to where we need to be?”

“Regular men, miners, or natives, perhaps visionaries...someone more in touch with the land and spirit?” He shrugged. “Wow, what a choice?”

“Yeah.”

“What would you do?”

“Up...I think...maybe. I think the odds might be better with someone we can reason with. I hope. I mean, they might be friendlier to time travelers than the average guy stuck in a steady job would.”

“OK, well let’s go up, then.”

They entered the tunnel that lead upward following the occasional dot.

“Wow, it’s starting to get warm...no EnviroSuits for air conditioning.” Sendi remarked.

“Nope, we gotta tough it out. But, that might work to our advantage.”

“Huh?”

“We’re like them, the natives, we can handle the heat. We’re not weak, like the miners. It might gain us some respect.”

“Yeah, I think you’re right...hope we’re up to it.”

“We’d better be. Sooner or later, we’ve got to get home, or...”

“Or?”

“I guess it’s, ‘die trying’.”

Sendi fell quiet. “I hope it doesn’t come to that.”

“Me, too. Come on and shush, we’d better go as quietly as we can.”