

They continued on in silence, slowly climbing upward. After a short while, the light in the tunnel gradually became brighter. The temperature also began to slowly rise. Rexx quietly commented. "We must be starting to get close to the surface. I'm beginning to smell the hot desert air."

Ahead, an opening appeared framing the deep blue desert sky. As Rexx took his next step, the rock his foot landed on skidded with a clattering sound.

An Aboriginal warrior stepped out from a niche and confronted them. He spoke. "Do you have business here?"

Rexx stammered a reply. "Um, we're new here...and, we kind of got lost in the tunnels. We're sorry if we are intruding where we're not meant to be."

The warrior bent down and picked up the last glowing opal on the path. He held it out to them. "Are you the travelers we are expecting? The ones from the time forward? The one who travels between told us to welcome you."

"Um...yes, I, uh...I guess we are."

"Good. Follow me. The lamps are not in this tunnel. Be careful how you step." He turned back into the niche and started down a tunnel in the back. Glancing backward, he added. "I'm glad you chose the right tunnel. The other way was a ruse, in case you were hostile invaders. It was a dead end, and rather unsafe for walking."

Rexx and Sendi exchanged glances and started after him.

Rexx asked. "How do you know we're not, um, hostile?"

"You made no offensive moves and didn't attack."

"But, if we'd gone down the other tunnel..."

The warrior laughed quietly. "I would have found you shortly and dealt with...whatever. You made a lot of noise on your approach."

Rexx sighed. "And we were trying to be quiet."

After a short walk, they entered a cave that opened onto a sheltered cliff edge.

An old man dressed in ceremonial beads stood looking out at the desert. He turned toward them as they approached. He nodded to the warrior, who turned and departed back to his guard post. "Welcome. We have need of your services."

"I'm not sure what we can do, but we will help however you think we can."

"The one who travels between told us a little of your unfortunate encounter."

"Yeah, um, we're really sorry about that."

"That is reassuring, but, of little consequence to us now. We have a larger problem."

"Please, explain." Sendi added.

"For many generations, deep within these caves, there has been an unrest. This began long before the miners came and began digging more tunnels. But, in recent history, it has begun to advance upon the people living here. Not so much, the miners, as their tunnels do not connect with the deep that is beneath this mountain. But, the unrest comes up though the old natural caverns and their interconnecting tunnels."

"What is it?"

"The tales handed down talk of restless spirits of the deep. They were only a danger to anyone that ventured too close to their domain. But, increasingly, they began to approach our dwellings and came seeking human blood. Bodies have been found in the deeper caves by those who sought missing members of our community. The remains had been slashed and drained of blood."

Rexx sighed. "Well, we have weapons that use advanced technology and can kill from a distance. But, will using them create more disturbance in time?"

"We do not know. You must be guided by your own conscience."

Sendi spoke up. "Rexx, maybe this means that we have to be more cautious...not act on first instinct, but let things play out until we know that there really is a danger."

"Sendi, I hope you are right."

"Rexx, Sendi. We have not formally introduced. I am Autok. I keep the medicine knowledge of the tribe that dwells in these caves. I welcome you."

"Thank you." Rexx answered. "We are at your service. Will you show us the way to the caves where the trouble lies."

Autok stepped out onto the ledge and summoned a guard that stood there. "Matu, come in. These visitors, Rexx and Sendi, have come to help our people against the restless spirits. Will you guide them to the troubled caves?"

Matu nodded. He approached the entrance to another tunnel in the back of the cave. There, he picked up a lit lantern and motioned for them to follow. "Please, come. The way is not lit, and we must be quiet."

They descended deep into the tunnel and the air began to cool. Matu stopped. He spoke quietly. "Here we are at the same depth as the upper mine shafts. So far, no spirit has come this high. We will continue going down."

After some time, Matu stopped them again and spoke quietly. "Now we are at the level of the deepest mine shaft. There have been some intrusions here. Look..." He held the lantern over scratches in the rock floor. "...these are marks left by the intruders. The floors were smooth before."

Rexx and Sendi bent to study the marks. "Doesn't look like footprints, maybe something was dragged through here and that made these scratches. What do you think, Sendi?"

"I don't know. Something looks vaguely familiar about them, but I can't place it."

Rexx turned to Matu. "If this is an inappropriate question, I apologize, but why do your people come so deep in this cave? It seems that living closer to the surface would be more convenient...you know, for food, water, other every day needs."

Matu paused for a moment and then spoke. "These are not things that are normally spoken about. But, since you are here to help us, I can speak of secrets to you. Though, these words must not be shared." He sighed deeply, then continued. "Our ancestors believed the spirits that lived in the depths should be worshiped so that their appetites would be appeased. Their presence here has been for many generations and we do not know how far back in time they first appeared here. We ventured deep because of a spiritual unrest felt closer to the surface by our people. Troubled dreams, frightened children, unusual ailments, and such, felt by our people when there was none before. So, we sought to find the source. The deeper we delved, the more unpleasant became our experience. It was as if our heads were filled with the buzzing of insects. Many built shrines and offered sacrifices in these lower tunnels, and they are still tended in these times. Though, with the recent deaths, it has not been of much avail. We will pass some of these as we go deeper."

They continued on, and at last, stopped at the last of several small shrines. A small human skull was placed on a stone altar. A small piece of woven grass mat covered the top of the skull. Matu paused and bowed his head in respect.

"What is it?" Sendi quietly ventured.

"Years ago, some children were playing in one of the upper tunnels...a sort of hiding game. When their game ended, they were missing a friend. They searched, but could not find him. They sought help from their parents, who gathered others and went deep and deeper to find the child. For a long time they searched and finally found the child here...what was left of him...this skull, and the beads he was wearing around his neck..." He pointed to a small string of beads surrounding the base of the skull. "...these. There was blood on the floor, but that has been cleaned away."

"How awful!"

"Yes, they built this altar as a sort of grave and remembrance."

After a pause, Rexx added. "I guess we should continue on."

A short while later, Matu again paused. He turned to them. "This is the deepest I have ever ventured. What is beyond is unknown. We must proceed very quietly and with the utmost caution...and, expect any danger."

"I would say, lead on, but there is only this one tunnel." Rexx added weakly.

They continued on and all seemed quiet. As they approached a turn in the tunnel, they began to hear a distant noise, constant and continuing as if from a large group. Cautiously, they continued. Ahead there was a small break in the wall and a light was seen through it. To one side, the tunnel continued on in a downward direction, but seemed to be curving toward the distant light. Matu motioned to them to be quiet. They approached the break.

Matu softly approached to look through. He abruptly broke away and motioned to Rexx to look.

He looked through, turned pale and turned away.

Sendi, wide eyed, whispered. "What did you see?"

Rexx, barely able to speak, whispered. "Alcaad. Hundreds of Alcaad."

"Oh, God!" She whispered back. "What are we going to do? Obviously, these are not friendly Alcaad."

"Well, we can't just start shooting. For one thing, there are way too many of them. Matu, do you know anything about those creatures?"

"There were some cave paintings, long ago, faded by time, that described these beings. What do you know of them?"

Rexx motioned them to retreat further up the tunnel where they could talk. "They are extra-terrestrial hostile invaders from a distant star system. In the future, they will come back to invade and conquer Earth. We encountered one of them, an ambassador, I guess, seeking to end the war that grew out of their invasion." Rexx paused and sighed. "Unfortunately, I killed him, and changed the unfolding of time. That prompted the Time Police, the one you call the one who travels between, to help us to restructure the events of time, and restore the future as it was meant to be. And so, we were sent here."

"That is much to understand." Matu paused for a long moment, then continued. "I believe what you are saying, though it is very difficult to comprehend."

"The question is 'what do we do now?' and how do we do it?" Rexx whispered.

Sendi sank to the floor and buried her face in her hands. "Oh, God!" She whispered. "Yes, now what?"

"Shh, I'm going to go back for another look."

"Rexx, be careful!"

He retraced his steps to the break and once again peered through the opening being careful to not reveal his presence. He watched for a few minutes and then returned to the others. "I took a good look around and I have a few questions."

Matu answered. "Please, whatever I can tell you."

"That cavern is large, but there don't seem to be other tunnels heading off from the room...tiny niches, small caves, but, no tunnels. At least, not that I could see. When we were descending in this tunnel, we seemed to be going more laterally, than downward. We started high up in the mountain, but are we still beneath the mountain?"

"No, I believe not. Though the mine is deep, it is actually all within the mountain. Here, we are not that far beneath the surface and I believe we should be beneath the open desert. Why?"

"I noticed that the roof of the cavern was very smooth, like a dome...no stalactites or other mineral formations. What do you think of that?"

"I agree, that is puzzling, though this climate is quite arid, even in this tunnel there is evidence of ancient water seepage and there are underground aquifers that provide water for our tribe and the miners. What is your assumption?"

"These are beings from another star system. I saw what seemed to be a metallic space faring vehicle that was probably their main dwelling, but additional attached huts and other structures have hidden the main body of the craft. I'm supposing that the overhead dome can be opened for the main craft to enter and exit. How long it has been closed and how easy it would be to open is unknown." Rexx paused. "I also noticed that there don't seem to be any guards on duty. Life goes on with these beings coming and going as if there is no sense or possibility of danger." Rexx added. "Also, it seems that they have an adequate food supply, since the raids on your people seem to be occasional as opposed to constant. Maybe, it's more for entertainment than sustenance...and we do not know what they eat, even in the future."

Matu considered a moment. "What do you propose?"

"I think if we could find a way to make it uncomfortable for them to stay here, they might leave."

"How?"

"Yes, Rexx, how?" Sendi added.

"We know, from the future, that they seem to be a hive civilization. Though very little else is actually known about them. The peace treaty that was agreed upon was mutual separation...they would depart and leave us alone. Though, many wondered if such an agreement would last." Rexx paused. "But now we need to somehow spread a rumor or affect some action that would imply that it is unsafe for them to remain here, so that the one in charge of the hive welfare will decide to leave."

"Yeah, Rexx...but how? We don't just walk up to one of them and say, 'hey guy, it's time to get out of here.'" Sendi asked.

"Yeah, I know. I'm working on that." To Matu. "Is there an aquifer in this area that is separate from the one that sustains the mountain?"

"There are many throughout the desert that sustain many tribes. Here, I don't know. I think we should return to Autok. He has much more knowledge than I do. What is your plan?"

"If there is a local small aquifer, maybe we could contaminate it enough so that some of them could become ill enough to warrant their exodus."

"I do not like the thought of contamination, when water is scarce. We don't know if there are interconnected sources and we do need the water as well."

"Yes, I see, and I agree, perhaps Autok may have another suggestion."

Back in the upper cavern, they explained the situation. Autok considered. "I agree that the water source is far too precious to risk endangering it. There could be the possibility of sealing off the tunnel to their cavern. But, I am afraid that the effort to

accomplish that would alert them to our presence. There would be too much noise in moving earth, plus the dust and debris created in the tunnel would be quite noticeable.

Rexx ventured, "There could also be the possibility of setting a brush fire in the tunnel near their cavern that could be quickly sealed on our end with a PlaSteel tarp, polluting their air source and thereby smoking them out. Assuming, of course that there isn't another entrance and their air source is from our tunnel."

"This, also could be very risky." Autok paused. "Do you know of any of their vulnerabilities?"

Rexx shook his head. "In the future, the war that resulted from their invasion lasted more than six hundred years. They fought hard, and we could barely maintain our ground against them. It was only when their ambassadors sought a treaty that the war ended. They are strong, well armored, and single minded."

"Then, we have a very large challenge. Do you think we could reason with them?"

"The Alcaad had translation devices. We saw that from a recording of their treaty negotiations. But, we did not know their language. And, we have the extra challenge, now, because the time flow is altered. Essentially, we know very little about them."

"Then we do have a very large problem. You said they are a hive society and that they resemble insects?"

"Yes, like large black beetles. I don't know if they wear armor, or if what appears to be armor is really an exoskeleton."

"So, if they are like insects, we can try treating them as if they are. A hive society is usually led by a queen who provides the reproduction of the species. In human terms, the analogy would be a dominant male that has many wives to insure the line. Though, this is usually a smaller group within the larger society that wields power over the rest of its members. So, the queen theory seems more probable."

Rexx sighed. "So how do we deal with huge powerful insects? I am really reluctant to engage them in any kind of battle...they are very powerful...and...I don't want to commit another mistake and spin time into any further chaos. I think whatever we do has to be in keeping with what would be natural to this time, culture, etc. How would you and the miners deal with a large insect infestation?"

Autok reflected. "Unfortunately, here in the desert, an insect infestation is not really a problem, unless they are invading the dried food storage...and that would probably be more of a concern to the miners, who store much more food than we do. We hunt and gather more than store...it is a desert after all. I believe the miners would resort to insecticides brought in with their other supplies. Perhaps, I should consult with them on the subject, of course, without telling them of the nature of the 'insects' that we have found invading our caves."

"Yes, that would probably be best to see what their reaction would be."

"Do you wish to remain here with our people or return to your time traveling machine?"

"You know about that?"

Autok smiled. "Of course. The one who travels between had us arrange an appropriate chamber for your machine to be stored, along with his barricade, as so he described it, and the trail of opals for you to follow...to here, with a side trail so you could acquaint yourself with the miner's marketplace. They, of course, do not know of your presence here...and will not, unless it is absolutely necessary...you were provided with local attire just in case you were discovered. That was a precaution, otherwise, they might make advantage of your advanced technology, and that would probably distort time even further."

Rexx and Sendi stared at him, open mouthed. Rexx stumbled. "If you know so much about all of this, why are we...um, here, with no clue about what to do?"

"I think that question is between you and the one who..."

"...travels between. Yeah, I get it. We have to learn...something. Wish I knew what."

"Me, too." Sendi sighed. "Hey, Rexx. You're the one who shot him."

"Did you try to stop me?"

She lowered her eyes and replied sullenly. "No."

"We're in this together." To Autok. "I think it would be best to stay here with your people. It would be safer, and, maybe, we could learn enough of your customs to come up with some idea of how to deal with this very big problem."

"Very well, I will go speak with the miners. Matu will see to your needs."

"Thank you. I hope your talks will go well."

"As do I...until I return." Autok departed.

Matu approached them. "Well, what do you want to do now?"

Rexx thought a moment. "Is there any way of determining the location of the Alcaad cavern? I would like to find its location on the desert surface."

"Well, yes. Since many of our people work in the mines, they have provided us with some of their navigation devices. The devices map the direction that they are moved in and then can read back the return path. They are very handy when tunnels diverge. It is very easy to lose your sense of direction in the tunnels. I will get one." Matu went to a storage cupboard and returned with the device. "With this turned on, we will return to the cavern...well, a short distance from it, and then use the map on the surface to find its location. There is also a function that can reduce the turns to a straight line, which will bring us to the cavern's surface location more efficiently. Shall we go? Or do you need any sustenance?"

"Sendi?" She shook her head. "OK, I guess we're good to go."

Some time later, they arrived at the break in the wall. Rexx looked through at the cavern for a long time. Then he returned to where Sendi and Matu were waiting. "I was trying to get a feeling for how large this cavern is. It could be almost a kilometer or so across, and it's definitely at least about fifty or more meters lower than our current location. That tunnel that continues downward must just spiral, as the cavern isn't very far from here laterally." He paused a moment. "Do we have all of the numbers recorded on the device?"

Matu nodded. "Yes, all is, as you said, good to go." He pushed the control button to reduce the path.

Back in Autok's cave, Matu announced. "The path has been greatly simplified. It is not actually very far from here, on the ground, that is." He showed them the readout. "But first, we have to get to the ground."

Sendi walked out of the cave and peered over the edge of the cliff. "How do we get down there?"

Matu chuckled. "Well there are hand and foot holds. We could just climb down."

Her eyes widened.

"Sorry, just trying to lighten the situation. There is, of course, a tunnel that will bring us out at an entrance just below this ledge. Shall we? Though it is approaching early evening and the temperature will be lower, still, outside is quite hot and dry. We should

take water." He crossed to the storage cupboard and gathering a few jars of water, he handed some of them to Rexx and Sendi."

"Thanks!" Rexx and Sendi responded simultaneously. Rexx added. "Thanks, again! I didn't know these carry bags would come in this handy."

"Never go anywhere without a tucker bag!" Matu smiled. "Old saying."

Rexx and Sendi looked at him questioningly.

"Tucker bag...what you tuck your game in to carry it home."

Rexx laughed. "I guess we really do need to learn your customs to do this right...no more mistakes. I hope."

A short time later, they arrived at the entrance beneath the cliff edge. Matu consulted the navigator. "That way...about two kilometers." He pointed. "Watch how you step. The ground is uneven, and some of the brush has needle thorns, and some others are only skin irritants. There are insects, but most are not poisonous, just more irritants. And, of course, there are snakes."

Sendi nudged Rexx. "And, our suits are in the pod."

Rexx responded. "I know...but we're supposed to put on a show of being tough."

"I don't feel very tough."

Matu asked. "Is there a problem?"

Rexx responded. "No. We're just travelers from a very comfortable future where there are no threats."

Matu cocked his head and stared at them briefly. "These aren't threats. Just letting you know, as outsiders, of cautions."

Rexx clarified. "We're wimps. Do you know that word?"

"Ah, ancient terminology from a previous century...not, 'tough'."

"Yeah. Not tough."

Matu nodded and with a smile continued. "A little desert will cure that 'illness'."

After quite a few minutes of carefully picking their way through the desert brush, Rexx asked. "How are we doing?"

Matu consulted the navigator. "We are getting closer. We are about two thirds of the way."

"Are we still on a straight line course?"

"Yes, though we may have to divert a bit. There is a ravine from an old water course ahead that we will have cross where it is shallower. Then we will return to the straight line path." He pointed toward a distant berm. "Over there, it is very steep. We will follow it downstream for several, maybe a hundred meters, cross and then backtrack."

After they crossed the watershed and hiked back up the opposite bank, Rexx pointed toward the distant desert. "Do we have to backtrack up the watershed, or can we cut the corner and go forward from here?"

"We can. Let me check the direction." He consulted the navigator and pointed. "The location appears to be that distant small hill."

"Hill? It's the cavern dome?"

"It could very well be."

"I want to check the edges of it. See if there are any indications of separation for an opening. And, then check above, in case it opens from the top."

"That hill has been there a very long time."

"And, so have the Alcaad."

Matu sighed. "Very true."

As they approached the hill, Matu commented. "It is certainly a very even hill. It's odd that we hadn't noticed its evenness before."

"Well, I would have assessed it as possibly a natural gas dome, if I hadn't seen the cavern below."

Matu looked at him questioningly. "Gas dome?"

"Yeah, sorry. I'm a geological engineer."

"Hmm, your skill might be useful...in another circumstance...perhaps some knowledge might be transferred to our tribe...but, I ramble. We have more important work at the moment." He paused and contemplated the hill. "How do you differentiate a natural hill from a possible artificial dome? Or, I mean to say, how do you...determine how it might open?"

"I want to look closely at the base of the hill...where it meets with the flat desert floor. If there is any sort of seal...something that would keep out any water, dirt, or even, dust that could affect its machinery or the colony below, it should show up as an enduring material, something like PlaSteel might be a possibility. I am inclined to believe that perhaps the dome separates in one, though, probably more than one sections which retreat into the edges of the dome."

"How many do you think there are?"

"Given the size of the hill, I would guess, every twenty to twenty five meters of its circumference would be one section. It would have to be able to slide into the cavern without causing too much damage to the surrounding walls. But, seeing the diameter of the hill, I'm guessing that the upper part of the hill opens and slides within the lower sections, compacting the overall effect and minimizing the inconvenience to the dwellings below. How often their spacecraft would enter and exit this dome is unknown...probably not too often in recent history given the expansion of huts and other structures around the main craft, but it must be available in time of need. I'm guessing that the first time they landed here, there were not very many human inhabitants in the area. They were able to scan the desert floor for a likely subterranean cavern and blasted an opening, settled the craft within and built the dome for regular and extraordinary excursions...probably seeing what advantages and disadvantage the local area had to offer. How long do you think this dome has been here?"

"I would guess a very long time. No one has ever suggested that it was anything other than a hill."

"In that case, their appearance here may have predated your ancestors dwellings."

"That is quite possibly true, since the legends about these creatures date far back."

They began to explore the slopes at the edges of the hill. "The incline is very gradual, so the dirt cover on the dome doesn't seem to be too deep...wish I had..." Rexx started.

"...a shovel?" Matu ended as he handed Rexx a small folding shovel.

Sendi snickered. "Are you psychic?! You seem to have thought of everything!"

"You can carry a lot in a tucker bag. I thought we might need this."

"And, we certainly do!" As Rexx accepted the shovel and began to dig away the earth covering at the very base of the incline. At about ten centimeters down, he paused, bent down, and brushed away the last few centimeters of dirt. "Aha! Look at this! There is definitely some sort of seal between the hard packed clay desert floor and the edge of the dome. And, look here." He pointed to the reddish rock at the very edge of the seal. "That dirt has been fused into solid rock. Probably by whatever they used to blast through

the top of the cavern...I'm assuming some sort of laser. We see this kind of rock formation where there has been a meteor impact. Well, that confirms my assumption!"

Matu looked at Rexx with expectation. "So, what now?"

Rexx thought for a moment. "Hmm, I don't know. I think we're back to how do we get them to leave. Since, obviously, we can't fight them." Rexx looked at Sendi, who shrugged, and then back to Matu. "Any suggestions?"

"Maybe we should go back to the mountain and see if Autok has learned anything. I am trying to think of any of the old legends that might give a clue as to how the 'ancient spirits of the deep' menaced the tribe. As you said, it doesn't seem to have been regular attacks for food, but more occasional strikes for entertainment, or possibly for defense. They might have considered us a threat when our ancestors, being a different species from them, first came to inhabit the caves. I don't know." He thought for a moment. "Could there be a religious motive. Like, are the attacks sacrifices to a god of theirs?"

"That is an interesting possibility...I don't know. But, it is something to consider. That may give us a different tactic to explore. Though, I agree we should return to the mountain. We have affirmed that this hill is an entry or exit dome and we don't need to uncover the whole thing..." He laughed. "...that would just alert them to our discovery."

As they trekked back toward the mountain, Rexx commented. "The religious concept that you mentioned has been playing on my mind. Could you add anything to your thought?"

Matu considered for a moment. "I don't know. Perhaps it is something that is more of my ancestral culture, but tribes do tend to act like a hive mentality. For every purpose, there is an individual most suited to the task. Those skilled at hunting are the hunters, and so on. The skills are not necessarily inborn as in a hive, but often learned from a good teacher, and those with the better desires and successes are likely to be appointed to those tasks." He paused. "Now with religion, our ancestors and many of our people today retain the belief that there are spirits that inhabit our surroundings. Everything is alive, and as such, everything is 'being'. One can communicate with any other being when one has found the common ground of that particular way of speech. Am I making sense?"

Rexx thought and replied. "Yes, I think so. Sendi, do you have any thoughts?"

She replied. "I'm not totally sure, but it sounds right, I think. How do you find this common ground?"

Matu thought for a moment. "Have you ever had an insight into what someone is about to say? And it has proved out as correct."

Rexx replied. "Yes, I think it is referred to as a premonition."

Matu continued. "It is more than that. Some would say it is telepathy, but it exists in the animal and plant realms and probably in others as well: minerals, ethers, and who knows what else." He points to a stone. "I could address this rock with a greeting, and if my receptive abilities were advanced or open enough, I could hear its reply."

Sendi remarked. "That is very interesting, and also, amazing."

Matu responded. "Well, maybe so, and maybe not so. We know this from a very early age. Young children are taught their closeness with the elements that share their life. This makes it possible to live with potentially dangerous insects, plants, reptiles, and animals...it is basically learning to respect each other's space. When one has achieved this aspect of knowledge, one has established a rapport."

Rexx jumped in. "Could this be a way to connect with the Alcaad?"

"I'm not sure. They are not 'potentially' dangerous. They have already confirmed their intents against us. They might be less inclined to 'listen' to our point of view."

"Is it worth a try?"

Matu smiled. "I guess anything is worth a try. Where should we begin?"

"I would leap in with some suggestions, but, I think we should talk with Autok first. I don't want to go against what he might feel is a better approach."

Matu nodded. "Agreed. He is much more knowledgeable than I. We should continue on to the upper cave."

As they entered the cave, Autok acknowledged their arrival with a nod.

Rexx ventured. "Have you learned anything? We discovered that the roof of their underground cavern is actually an escape hatch that can be opened to allow their spacecraft to come and go as it needs."

Autok bowed his head. "That is most interesting, indeed. I have talked with the miners and their approach is less than satisfactory...insecticides, gasses, electricity, freezing, etc."

"No..." Rexx agreed. "...those ways would probably just expose our intent and risk their attack." Rexx continued to relate Matu's thoughts on communication. "Do you think we could convince them to depart, or at least, to stop harming your people?"

Autok thought for a moment. "Possibly...if they recognized us as beings worthy of sharing space as opposed to reducing us to food or irritants. I shall have to consider a proper approach to 'contacting' them. Though, for now, your day has been very long. You should take sustenance and rest." To Matu. "Take them to food and a comfortable place to spend the night."

Matu nodded and bade Rexx and Sendi to follow.

A short while later, Matu, Rexx and Sendi entered another large cavern that opened to the desert. There was a cooking fire near the exposed edge and several good smells greeted them.

Sendi inhaled deeply. "Roasted meat, soup, and fresh baked bread...what more could you ask for? I didn't realize I was so hungry!"

"Me, too! Man, that smells good!"

Matu crossed to where the food was being prepared and picked up a couple of mugs. He handed them to Rexx and Sendi. "You might also enjoy this."

Rexx exclaimed as he and Sendi drank the cool beverage. "Beer! Wow, yes! That really goes down good after being out in the dry desert."

Sendi asked. "Thanks! But, how do you manage to have bread and beer out here in the desert?"

Matu answered. "Well, it's one of the benefits of the mine being here. These are imports and as many of our people work in the mines, the miners share their supplies with us. We also share some of our hunt with them." He chuckled. "Though, they are not as fond of reptile meat as we are. But, we sometimes share rabbit, birds, and other small game with them and that makes them happy."

Sendi pointed to the cooking fire. "Is that reptile?"

Matu glanced at the fire. "Some is, but, there is also small game. Have you a preference?"

"Surprise me! I'm a chef and I love to experience new flavors!"

Matu crossed to the cooking area and briefly spoke to one of the cooks. He picked up a couple of platters, the cook did also and followed Matu back to where Rexx and Sendi were sitting. Matu introduced him. "This is Doka, he oversees the preparation of most of the meals. He will let you know about some of the herbs that grow in the desert that we use for seasoning. It should provide you some interesting conversation for the evening."

As Doka and Sendi began to eat and discuss food preparation, Matu turned to Rexx. "Do you have any more thoughts on our 'problem'?"

"Well, I really want to wait to hear what Autok thinks...he is our best expert...unless there is someone else?"

"There are some." He paused in thought. "I don't know how to bring this up. In the language that is of the ancients, they would be called prophets or seers. They can see into another place and time. But, their descriptions or perceptions are not always understandable or relevant to us in the here and now. We could inquire, but..." He paused, again. "...I'm not sure we would or could understand their interpretations."

Rexx smiled. "Can I quote you? 'I guess anything is worth a try.'"

"Fair enough. In the morning, we will approach them and explain the 'problem' and our recent discoveries. Maybe they will have an insight that we have overlooked." He paused. "But, it has been a long day and you and Sendi will need rest. I will arrange sleeping quarters for you. Do you wish to be together or separated?"

Rexx blushed slightly. "We have only recently met, but have become good friends, or perhaps, comrades, in our plight." He paused, then continued. "When we first arrived here, we had no clue as to what to expect. We felt out of fear that we didn't want to be separated. I guess the feeling is 'strength in unity' or something like that. Even though your people have posed no threat to us and have been even more than helpful and hospitable, I think we would feel more comfortable being in the same proximity with each other. I hope I'm making sense."

Matu smiled. "Yes, I understand. I will arrange quarters that are suitably discrete. You will have private areas, but within the same room. I will also arrange it to be near the surface so that the morning light will adjust your need to awake with the rising sun. I hope that is acceptable."

"Yes." Rexx chuckled. "And, thanks!" And paused, briefly. "She's nice and we seem to have some interests in common...I like her. And when this is all over and everything has been put back in its proper time and place, I hope that maybe we can get to know each other a bit better, in a more normal environment...maybe, not with so much excitement, that is."

Matu nodded. "I understand...I hope we can move to a more peaceful environment as well." He glanced at Sendi and Doka, smiled, and nudged Rexx to look in their direction. "They seem to be getting along well. It looks like our tribe might be in for some new food experiences, soon."

Rexx laughed. "Yeah, and it looks like our home time might also be in for some new foods. I bet she's sorry she left her recorder in the TimePod."

"TimePod?"

"Yeah, that what the time travel tour group calls the time capsules that we tourists travel in...the thing that's parked in one of your caves."

"Ah, yes, I understand. Well, if she wishes her device to make notes, I can take you safely there and back tomorrow."

"That might not be a bad idea. Since, you know who and what we are, having some of our recorders and other small devices might be of help in our attempts to solve this problem."

"What kind of devices do you have?"

"Well, for one, our weapons...just a minute." Rexx set down his platter and dug in the carry bag. He pulled out his and Sendi's stunguns and showed them to Matu. "These are two different types of stunguns that are common in our era. Sendi's is a LaserAim StunGun." He held it out. "It can totally immobilize any large dangerous animal. It is a standard issue weapon for the time tourists to carry. Though, it is seldom necessary, it's

more there for confidence for the uneasy traveler." He held out the other weapon. "This, however, is a Westchester 9B PartoExel. It is a much older weapon, a handheld particle accelerator. On lower energy settings, it also stuns. But, on a higher setting, it can kill, depending on the target's ability to resist the force. The settings can be changed momentarily, but will drain the batteries a lot quicker on higher setting. In other words, the stun setting is good for several uses, but the kill level will drain the batteries after one shot." Rexx reflected for a moment. "This, unfortunately, is what I used on the higher setting that got us into this mess."

Matu sighed. "Yes, it is all very unfortunate. But, we must continue forward to undo the 'mess'. Though, the weapons do sound useful. What other devices do you have?"

"Well, we have EnviroSuits."

"What are they?"

"It's sort of a thin over suit that protects from environmental hazards. Sendi referred to them when I said we were wimps."

Matu chuckled. "Yes, and I said a little desert would cure that."

"Well, these suits also have boots, gloves and helmets that can filter toxic air and prevent burning or freezing or other skin sensitive attacks, like poisonous plants, insects, and such."

"Well, those do sound useful. But, I don't know if they are needed here. Also, it seems that it would make you very conspicuous as an outsider."

"Yes. That's why we left them in the pod. We also have distance viewers, recorders, devices for detecting various organic substances and minerals, and for viewing through solid substances, like rock or metal, also sonic emitters for manipulating mechanical devices."

"Oh, my! Do you need all of these things for traveling through time as tourists?"

Rexx sighed. "No. They are there mostly for amusement. Though some are for specific tours. The one for viewing through solid objects is for the tour that visits the ancient tombs of Egypt; the sonic emitters are for opening things like locks."

"Oh."

"Do you think any of them might be useful?"

"Quite possibly. Tomorrow, you will show me whichever of them you wish to and we will see what might be useful. Perhaps, we should assess them before we speak with the seers."

"Good idea." Rexx turned his attention back to Sendi and Doka and lingered in his gaze, with a somber expression.

"Is there some problem?" Matu inquired.

"No...I guess not." Rexx paused. "Do you think they are getting a little too friendly?"

Matu chuckled. "Don't worry about that. Doka has a mate that he is very attached to. She would be here, except that she is attending to other duties. She is a teacher and conducts some lessons in the evening for her older students. I am sure that she would be very happy to meet two such interesting out worlders."

Rexx turned back to Matu. "Oh? What does she teach?"

"Well, many things. Our teachers deal more in age groups, than subjects. They teach the old ways, our history, and the importance of that knowledge on our culture. Such things, as language, global history, geography, mathematics, sciences, and similar things are taught in the miners' school, which their children and ours attend as well."

"Doesn't that water your culture?"

"No. That's where our teachers come into value. They do not discredit what the miners' school teaches. These are, after all, the ways of the rest of the world, and the

children should be aware of the outside ways. Rather, our teachers add our ways and let the young people decide how to use the information to develop into the adults that they will eventually become."

"That is very interesting and very open minded."

"Well, we cannot change the fact that the outside world has made its mark on our society, and it's best for us to understand it as much as possible, without being dragged in by any propaganda...if you understand."

"As I said, very open minded."

"No...practical. Our history must not be overwritten by the business of the mine. It would be very easy for our people to be dragged into the culture of the company that runs the mine. As long as we retain our culture, we can stand as equals to the mine. We guard these caves and only allow entrance to those who have business here. If we surrender to their culture, it would reduce us to being their slaves. That must not happen."

Rexx paused a moment in thought. "I see. And, I agree. You have opened my eyes to things that I have never thought about before. In my home place and time, the world has become a more uniform existence. People and cultures are pretty much the same everywhere. There are some remote areas. There are small villages cut off by major geographical barriers that retain a lot of their historical culture. And outposts engaged in very long term scientific study, that have begun to meld into the old ways of the area. I assume there are some small cultural differences, but there is not the diversity that you have here. We have very advanced communication and travel abilities. I am impressed that you have been able to maintain a distance from an imposing culture for the last decade."

"Decade? It's been over, perhaps, a few hundred years since the mine opened."

"Isn't this Twenty Fifty Three? That's what the chronometer in the TimePod registered."

"It is. What is the source of your information?"

"A recording in the pod said that the opal energy extraction was perfected in Twenty Forty One." Rexx realized in dismay. "Oh, no. Time has changed...history has changed. I guess we can't believe the recordings...they must be stuck somewhere out of time. Perhaps the pod is independent of reality."

"I believe I'm becoming confused."

"Sorry, in the time tours, there are recordings of the era that we are about to visit. They show us what to expect when we arrive. I guess to prevent any culture shock. I forgot that time has been drastically altered and that what we were shown might not be very accurate."

"I see." Matu considered. "So, now, we, our tribe, are the source of history?"

"Yes. It would seem so. I will have to rethink this reality. How long do you think the Alcaad have been here?"

"It is hard to say, though there are the ancient legends that date back to our ancestors, they didn't really make themselves apparent until about the time the mine grew to most of the size that it is now. Maybe, that's what disturbed them."

"But, it seems that they haven't expanded beyond this settlement that we observed."

"Actually...how would we know they haven't?"

Rexx groaned. "I don't want to think about that."

Just then, there was a small commotion near the cave entrance as some people arrived and several went to greet them. There was a young woman who was obviously quite pregnant and some older children. Doka turned to look, put down his food and crossed to greet the woman with a warm hug.

Matu pointed. "That is Misha, Doka's wife. They are expecting their third child. Come, let's introduce you." He turned to Sendi. "Come with us."

They crossed to the entrance and Matu introduced them. After the pleasantries, Doka fetched a platter of food for Misha and they all returned to eating and talking.

Rexx inquired. "Misha, Matu said you are expecting your third child. Where are the others?"

She smiled. "They are very young and I am afraid they are asleep right now. My mother looks after them when I am teaching. We will introduce them to you tomorrow, when they are awake. Right now, they would only blink their eyes and mumble."

In the morning, Matu announced himself at the entrance to the cave he had assigned to Rexx and Sendi. He was carrying a large basket made of woven grasses. "I hope you rested well."

"Yes, thanks! These beds were very comfortable."

Sendi poked her head around the curtain separating their beds. "Something smells good!"

"Yes. I brought some breakfast for us." As he placed the basket on a table. He removed a large carafe and filled three mugs with a steaming liquid. "Careful, it's hot." As he handed the mugs around.

Sendi sniffed the steam rising from the mug. "Coffee?"

"Yes. There's a wild specie of coffee that grows in parts of the desert. We gather the berries when we are out hunting. It is a bit more bitter than commercial coffee, but we add some sweet herbs while it is brewing."

"Mmm, it's good." She said, sipping the hot brew.

"Yes, it is." Rexx added.

Matu emptied the rest of the basket, setting out a bowl of hot rolls accompanied with a plate of steaming roasted sausages and placed a jar of honey on the table. "These sausages are a mix of different types of wild game and desert herbs, and, of course, the honey is also wild."

"You just made me realize how hungry I am!" As Rexx reached for a roll.

"Me, too!" Added Sendi, drizzling another with some of the honey.

"Well, then let's eat before it gets cold. And, then after, we can go off to your TimePod and see what devices there might be of use in our quest."

After they finished eating, Matu led them out of the cave and down a tunnel. "We will take a different path to your capsule...a sort of back door, that is a lot shorter, less traveled and unlikely to encounter any of the miners. But, we must proceed quietly." He indicated a small lantern that he was carrying. "This will help light the way. It is powered by some of the opal dust left over from the polishing. A special liquid drips from this vial onto the stone fragments which causes it to flare. It will dim after time, but it will last long enough for our needs."

As they reached the end of the tunnel, they could see a distant tunnel that was powered by the fiber optic system. Matu removed the vial, extinguishing the lantern. "We need to save this for later...and we don't need to call attention to ourselves." He set the lantern down on the floor. "It will be safe here. We are only a short distance from the cave that houses your TimePod. Come, and quietly."

Moments later, they stood at the faint barricade. As Matu approached the fog, it began to change its appearance to resemble a flat stone wall. "That is amazing!" He whispered.

"Yes." Rexx replied. "We observed that on our previous trip. We don't know how it works, but it appears to have some sort of sensing device. You can penetrate it though, so it's only an optical illusion. Watch." Rexx stuck his hand through the wall. "Come on, we'd best get through before someone happens along."

The three entered the small cave. Matu eyed the pod and exclaimed. "Wow! I've never seen anything like this."

Rexx and Sendi stepped through the hatch and motioned him to follow. Rexx pulled the hatch shut. "I want to make sure that no one can hear us talking."

Matu asked. "Is it my imagination, or is this thing bigger on the inside?"

Rexx and Sendi looked around, and Rexx exclaimed. "Yes, I think you're right. I never noticed before. These things are supposed to be for only one passenger and their immediate belongings. But, Sendi and I didn't feel like it was too small when we were both in here. And, the three of us shouldn't be able to fit in here with this much spare room...that's really strange."

"Maybe, because, it's kind of, outside, of time?" Sendi suggested.

"Maybe...I don't know."

"Amazing!" Matu mumbled. "Who built these things."

"That's also something that I never thought about."

"The tour guide said that the barricade was a trade secret of the Time Police." Sendi added. "Maybe, these are another trade secret."

"Again, wow! So much knowledge!" Matu walked around in the capsule, eyeing the various screens and instruments. "Do you know how any of these things work?"

Rexx shook his head. "Sorry, we only know how to pull the right lever and flip the right switch. Everything else is automatic."

"Impressive...wonder if, when everything is fixed...maybe I could take a trip with you in this thing?"

"I guess that would be up to the Time Police. We didn't come here by our choice. He directed it to here."

"Hmmm...I see...still...it would be nice."

"Well, we could bring up the suggestion...when...that is."

"Yes." Matu nodded. "Well, I guess we should get to work. What devices are you willing to show me?"

Rexx opened a small cabinet and drew out several small items. "These are the ones I had described earlier. I don't know what, if any, of them might be useful. Should we just take all of them on the chance?"

Matu nodded. "Sounds like a good idea." He paused. "By the way, why exactly do you have all these sophisticated devices on a pleasure excursion?"

"You know, I don't know. I'm not even sure these were all here on our previous journey."

"Did they appear when the Time Police sent us here?" Sendi mused, then glanced at Rexx. "And, how did you know these things were here?"

Rexx just stared at her. "I...I didn't." He looked back at Matu. "What made me describe all these things that I didn't know existed?"

Matu just stared at him.

"Um...the Time Police...they seem to be able to control a lot of what happens. Like they're pushing us in certain directions...you know, like the opal dots and the tribe expecting us. Maybe, they can control our thoughts...maybe, they are feeding knowledge into our minds?"

Rexx and Matu just stared at her, and then, at each other. Matu spoke. "Is this so?"

Rexx answered. "Oh, my...I don't know...maybe. Maybe they are trying to direct us towards solving this problem?"

"Then, why don't 'they' just do it?"

Rexx sighed. "I think we need to learn a lesson...what it is, or why, I'm not exactly sure...but, I think we are being directed...to...oh, I don't know."

Sendi shook her head and sighed. "Somehow, I think you are right. But...urgh, what...where...when...why...I've run out of questions." She suddenly looked up. "No, who? Who are these intruders? Are they the same ones we encountered before...or not? I mean, are they the same specie? Or are they the same individuals?"

Rexx blinked. "Um...we only encountered one Alcaad. This is a whole colony."

"Are you forgetting the fighters that buzzed us? What side were they on? And, we may have inadvertently encountered more than we could possibly imagine through association. Remember, the Time Police said time was wild."

"Oh." Rexx sat on the control couch with his head in his hand. "My brain hurts."

Matu looked at them both. "Can you give me some clue as to what you are talking about? I mean, I understand about your unfortunate mistake, but, what is wild time?"

Rexx looked up at him. "Sorry. It's a bit hard for us to understand, too. Apparently, nothing in the flow of time can be trusted. Some is the real unfolding of events, and some is just haphazard events that somehow follow each other. Like, how long the mine has been here...we thought one thing, and you say another...and none of us really knows which is correct...if, any." Rexx paused a moment. "Something else just crossed my mind. The recording about this mine said that the outside temperature was really hot and few people or animals could survive the desert heat. But, when we went out to look for the dome, it was dry, but not all that hot. And you hunt for game and collect berries and herbs. These things should be scarce, shouldn't they? Why is that?"

"I think my brain hurts, too." Matu sighed. "No, the desert is not that hot, nor has been in our remembered history. This is difficult to understand."

Rexx chuckled. "Sorry. But, I guess we have to proceed as if your story is right, since your whole tribe is in that timeline...and, I guess, the Alcaad are also in that timeline."

"Well, I guess we should get started." Sendi remarked. "You said you wanted to talk with Autok, before we consulted the seers."

"Yes." Rexx gathered the TimePod's devices. "Let's go see him." To Matu. "Is it convenient for us to speak with him?"

Matu nodded. "Yes, let's go back upstairs."