

Sendi motioned to Rexx to step away from the group. "What do you have in mind?" He asked.

"Since Paimu probably won't wake up until morning, let's get Matu and go somewhere where we can talk." She whispered. "I think I have an idea."

"OK" He caught Matu's attention and the three of them slipped away to the outer corridor.

"What's up?" Matu asked.

"Why don't we go down the tunnel, when it's a little later tonight, and see if we can learn any more about these aliens? We could see what their night time life is like and maybe that would give us some more info on their world view."

"How would that help?" He asked.

"Well, do they all sleep comfortably, do they post guards, these kinds of questions, how could it hurt?"

"Are you sure you're weren't in the military? Rexx asked.

"Huh?"

"Well, I was and you're beginning to sound like my commander."

"Well, OK, I was...brief sojourn...then transferred to catering corps, because of skills. But, I learned a lot and had good potential for intelligence." She paused, then.

"Well, I could have pursued that career, but it didn't seem too interesting...a pity I guess, could be handy now."

"I'm guessing it is, now."

"Huh? What do you mean?"

"I mean you're stepping in like you know what you are doing."

"Oh." She paused. "I guess I am." Another pause, then. "OK...considering the circumstances...yes, I was in intelligence. On our first day, we were taught a famous quote, 'If you feel you have to tell people that you work in intelligence, you are probably in the wrong profession.' I stayed with it way beyond the basics, but, let's keep the rest on 'need to know', OK?" She paused, smiled, then continued. "Besides sometimes you have to steal recipes."

"OK. We'll see what we can learn about these aliens. But, for now, I think we had better rejoin the group and see where things are at."

Back in the chamber, they joined Moicha who was quietly conversing with Doka and Misha. "We have discussed the issue, and we feel that it would be better to wait until Paimu has awakened in the morning and question him then about what he remembers. Right now, since he is sleeping peacefully, he is in his natural dream state and his thoughts would center around his normal dream activity. It would be of no benefit to us to intrude upon those dreams."

Misha sighed deeply and Doka tightened his arm around her shoulders. "Thank you, that is a great relief to us." He stated. "Though we do not doubt your skills...still, he is our young son."

"I completely understand, and be assured, we take no offense." Moicha then turned to address the rest of the assemblage. "As all is now in order, I think it best for everyone to return to your quarters, retire for the night and rest. Tomorrow, we will continue our discussions and see what can be learned then." He again addressed Doka and Misha. "As your children are so peacefully asleep, it seems a pity to move them. You may spend the night here with us and keep them company."

As Rexx, Sendi, and Matu followed the corridor away from the seer's chambers, Rexx asked, "Do you think we should let Autok know of our plan?"

"Hmm, not sure..." Sendi replied. "I'd kind of like to do this quietly. He might suggest we take extra personnel as back up and that might complicate things."

"I think you may be right." Matu agreed. "The quieter we can go the better."

"Well, I guess we should get our supplies together." Rexx added. "Matu, do you know where Autok put our devices from the TimePod? There's a couple of very long life flashlights that would probably be better than carrying lanterns."

"Yes, there's a general storage room...I'll show you the way."

In the storage room, Matu, pointed to the shelf that held the devices. "Do you think there's anything else that we might need?"

Rexx selected the flashlights and looked through the rest of the devices. "I don't know. It seems a lot of these devices sort of magically appeared when we were in the TimePod and I'm not even sure what some of them do."

"But, the Time Police wouldn't have left them for us if they didn't think we'd need them." Sendi interjected. "And, now, there are three flashlights, not just two...how convenient!"

Rexx glared at her, then, "I think we'd better travel light on this trip." He handed her and Matu each a flashlight. "And, no stunguns this time."

At the break in the wall, the light emanating from the Alcaad cavern was quite dim. Rexx peered cautiously through. "It seems pretty quiet." He whispered as he drew back. "I didn't see any suggestion of anyone moving about and it seems as if they have dimmed the light source to just a minimum safety level."

"So, that would seem to indicate that their artificial lighting mimics the sun." Sendi suggested.

"Well, that would make sense. It probably took them some time to construct their dome and create the colony's cavern. They would have adapted to the solar cycles during that time." Rexx replied. "So, where do we go from here?"

"Hmmm, I think I would like to follow this downward tunnel." Sendi suggested.

"Right to the entrance of the lion's den, huh?" Matu observed.

Rexx and Sendi both glared at him.

"Well, if you want to put it that way, yes." She replied.

After a few turns, the downward tunnel began to flatten out. "Huh? I don't get this." Rexx commented. "I thought sure we'd be at the entrance to the cavern by now."

"Uh, Rexx, could you see the entrance to the cavern from that break in the wall?" Sendi asked.

"No. But, I just assumed that it was directly below."

Matu was using the direction finding device to chart their path. "According to this we're headed away from the cavern...towards...I'm not sure."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, see here..." Matu pointed to the display. "...all of the various paths that have been recorded on this individual device are stored in its memory and are displayed commonly here. You can select them individually, so, I've set this to display our path along with the extents of the mine tunnels and I've color coded them. This is us, here." He pointed. "There is a global database available, but linking to that would make this readout way too confusing...like looking at a map of the planet...so we only keep the path network

for this mine...see here...and, of course, our tribal areas...here...on this device. But, where we are here is uncharted territory. Our path is shown leading from the upper tunnel into...well, solid rock.”

“So, where do we go from here, since this obviously doesn’t lead to the cavern?” Rexx looked to Sendi.

She shone her light down the tunnel. “Well, this path continues on...so, maybe it does, and, maybe it doesn’t. How about we follow it a little further?”

Soon on, they came to a juncture where the tunnel divided. Rexx shone his light down the lesser path. “Any idea which direction this leads, Matu?”

Consulting the compass direction on the display, “This does appear to lead toward the cavern...assuming that it continues on more or less straight.”

“Well, shall we try it?” Rexx asked Sendi.

“Sure, let’s see where it goes.”

After several meters, the tunnel took a slight turn and dead ended in a large pile of rocks that filled the tunnel to its roof. Matu consulted the display. “This shows the cavern is still in this direction.”

Rexx surveyed the rock pile with his light. “This wasn’t a rock slide. See...these rocks are a different kind than the ones in the surrounding wall. This was intentionally filled in.”

Sendi added her light to the pile. “I wonder why. I guess they didn’t want this tunnel to be used...but, why...if they caused the deaths of that child and the others in the above tunnel...why seal this off here? It doesn’t make sense.”

“Maybe, they decided they weren’t going to kill any more?” Ventured Rexx.

“That doesn’t make sense. I mean, even if that were the case, why barricade the tunnel?” She turned to Matu. “And if your device is correct, no one from the mine or your tribe has ventured this far.” He nodded in agreement. “So, why?”

Rexx shook his head. “I don’t know.”

“Well, since this goes nowhere...” Sendi concluded. “...shall we go back and try the other tunnel?”

Back at the divergence, they turned down the larger tunnel. It gradually began to slope downward. “Are you getting any readings of what direction this is heading?” She asked.

“According to this, we are heading in the direction of the mine, but, beneath it.” Matu responded.

“Wow! So deep!”

“Yes, but we are not that far beneath the desert floor. Remember the mine is entirely within the mountain.”

“Still...” She mumbled.

“Hey!” Rexx exclaimed. “What’s that ahead?” He steadied the light on a small distant pile of what appeared to be some kind of rubble. “That’s not rocks. What is it?”

As they cautiously approached, suddenly Sendi gasped. “What is that?”

Rexx reached down and gingerly turned over what looked like a stained dark piece of shell. There were several more similar pieces in the pile. “I’m guessing that these are pieces of Alcaad armor.” He thumped it with his fingernail. “Seems like some kind of PlaSteel...fairly light weight, but, strong. Considering how much of this they wear, it could get pretty heavy.” He pointed to the inside. “See, there are fasteners inside.” He put down the piece of armor and paused. “And, it looks like it’s been here a while.”

"Is that blood?" Sendi asked.

"These stains? Yes, I believe so."

Matu turned his light on the pile. "Yes. And there is a lot more on the ground." He pushed a piece of the shell armor aside, revealing a glove. He picked it up and held it for them to see. "It's a glove, of some kind of fabric." He laid the glove against his own hand. "It's made for a human hand." He turned the glove over. "And it's torn...and also stained with blood." He moved some of the pieces of armor aside revealing part of a darkly stained skull and a few broken bones. "There's not much left of this poor guy."

"Then, they're not insects." Rexx surmised. "They just wear armor that makes them look like insects."

"That changes a lot of what we know...well, think we know." Sendi commented.

"And..." They turned to look at Matu. "...what we've been accusing them of."

Rexx looked down at the armor. "Unless, this was some sort of death sentence."

"Seems kind of brutal for that." Matu ventured. "This appears to be an orderly community. I think a death sentence would be carried out in a more humane manner. Besides, wouldn't a criminal be stripped of his armor?"

"I guess you're right...but, then a different culture...who knows." Rexx replied.

"I think you're right, Matu." Sendi took a deep breath. "Then, if it's not them...and we know it's not us...then, who, or what, is killing these people?"

Matu shook his head. "I don't know. But, I think it's time to dig further into the old legends."

"Yeah." Rexx agreed.

"Hey, I'm starting to feel kind of creepy. Can we get out of here?"

"Yeah, Sendi, I agree. It's almost like we're being watched."

"I agree, Rexx, I'm starting to feel goosebumps. Let's go." Matu added.

"Now, I think I know why they barricaded that tunnel." She added.

They paused at the break in the wall. Rexx peered down at the slumbering cavern. "Still quiet. I guess they are all asleep. And, I don't see any indication of any guards."

"So, they must feel secure here." Sendi scanned the extents of the cavern.

Matu squeezed between them and craned his head through the opening to look back at the overhead dome. "I see they didn't quite cover up that open patch on the dome, I guess they're not as paranoid as we thought, because, it doesn't seem to be bothering them that much. Maybe it's been quiet long enough that their concern for cover has become more of an old habit."

Rexx turned to Sendi. "Well, what now?"

"I donno. We've sort of determined that the Alcaad are probably not the enemy. And, that something else is. But, we've already alerted them through a...telepathic, for want of a better word...link. So, something will have to be resolved there. And..." She turned to stare out through the break in the wall.

Rexx interrupted. "...and?"

"And, what are they doing here? And, how does it relate to this upcoming future war? Well, and us, here, now?" She paused. "I wish we had a translation device."

"Do we?" Matu asked.

"Huh?" Rexx and Sendi chimed together as they both turned to stare at him.

"Well, you've got all these devices, and you, yourself, said you don't know what a lot of them do." Rexx and Sendi looked at each other. "Well...?"

"Well, I guess we should go poke at them and see what we've got." Sendi volunteered.

On the way back up the tunnel, Sendi paused at the small child's shrine. She stood very still looking at the skull. Rexx and Matu exchanged glances.

Matu asked softly. "Is something wrong?"

She jumped. "Uh, no, I guess." She sighed. "I was wondering about how we felt where we found that dead Alcaad's remains and why we don't feel like that here."

"You mean the feeling of being watched?" Matu asked.

"Yeah."

He sighed. "I'm guessing...only guessing...that it's because this site has been cleaned by loving hands, so that the fear has been removed. Whereas, the Alcaad..."

"...still has the fear clinging to it." Sendi finished.

"Right."

Rexx started picking some of the devices off the shelf and handing them to Matu who was placing them into a small basket.

"Any ideas?" Asked Sendi as Rexx stopped to examine a small rectangular object. He pushed a button and it emitted a fine laser beam which focused on the edge of a nearby box. A small curl of smoke began to rise from the point of impact.

"Um...Rexx?" Rexx looked up to see where Matu was pointing at the box.

"Oops! Sorry." Rexx said as he released the button.

"Maybe..." Sendi interjected. "...we'd better experiment with these in a safer environment...Matu? What do you think would be a better place?"

"Maybe, outside?"

"Uh, it's night." She reminded.

"Yeah, it is..." Rexx yawned. "...and I'm tired."

"Me, too." Agreed Matu. "What do you say we leave these until later and get some sleep? We can continue this tomorrow. We also have to rejoin the seers in the morning to see what they have learned after Paimu has awakened.

"Right!" Sendi acknowledged.

The next morning as Rexx and Sendi entered the kitchen, Matu looked up and signaled them to join him and indicated the large platter of sausages and rolls in front of him. "Did you two sleep well?"

"Yes." Replied Sendi as she poured a mug of coffee. "I never thought sleeping in a cave could be so comfortable."

"I imagine these thick rock walls really contribute to maintaining an even temperature." Added Rexx.

"Yes, they do." Matu agreed as he turned the roll he was holding over again and again.

"Is something wrong? You seem distracted." Asked Sendi.

"It's just that I've been trying to figure out what kind of an enemy we really have here. The old legends aren't very specific...they just talk about fear of some unnamed evil. I dismiss the cave drawings of the Alcaad as just that, drawings of some of the aliens that were glimpsed by some early ancestor, possibly at that same break in the wall where we saw them. I'm almost tempted to explore a little further in that tunnel where we found the Alcaad's remains...almost..." He took a bite out of the roll and chewed thoughtfully.

"Maybe, not that tempted. I keep remembering that feeling of being watched."

"Yeah, that did feel pretty creepy." She shivered. "But, we didn't see anything. And, what could make us feel that way? I mean, it was all of us...not just one."

Just then, Misha entered carrying a couple of empty porridge bowls. Seeing the group, she crossed to them. "Good morning, Rexx, Sendi, Matu, the children are awake and have been fed. The seers say that others may join them to continue our discoveries."

"Thank you, Misha. We will come shortly." Matu replied as she departed to clean the bowls. He then turned back to Rexx and Sendi. "We should probably tell Autok what we discovered last night. But, I think we should be discrete and talk with him privately. I don't want anyone to be alarmed unnecessarily until we know more."

"I agree." Sendi replied, and Rexx nodded his affirmation.

In the observation cave, they related their findings to Autok.

"Hmm..." He observed. "This puts quite a few things in a different perspective."

"We thought that we should keep this quiet between us and you." Rexx added.

"Yes."

Sendi added. "And, there's the issue of the contact during the seers' journeying...the Alcaad, at least one, knows someone is out there. And, since at least one of them has been killed...we might be considered their enemy."

"Again, yes."

Matu commented. "Misha came into the kitchen while we were eating breakfast and told us the children were able to receive visitors. I think we should go and see what they have to say. And, perhaps talk quietly with the seers."

"I agree, lets go."

In the seers' residence, Misha and Doka were quietly talking with Paimu. Vala and Moicha were sitting in quiet observation. Reela was showing Mista around the cave away from their voices.

"Do you remember any more what you were doing yesterday?" Misha asked Paimu.

"A little." He mumbled.

"Do you remember eating breakfast?"

"Uh huh. There was porridge."

"Do you remember seeing anything strange?"

"You mean the bug?" He nodded vigorously. "Yeah, the big bug."

"And, it went away?"

"Yeah, I saw it and then it was gone."

"And, a little while later, you said you saw something else?"

"I think so."

"What did you see?"

"I'm not sure...I think I fell asleep...'cause then I woke up here. Maybe I dreamed I saw something else." He looked around. "Where is this? I don't think I've been here before."

"No, this is your first time in this room. This is where the visionaries live."

"Who are they?"

"We are, Paimu. I am Moicha, and this is Vala, and that..." He pointed to Reela, who was showing Mista a flower outside the window. "...is Reela." Paimu shook their hands. "It seems that we will be your teachers in a few years, once you have completed your lessons with the guides."

Paimu looked at his mother. "What are the guides? Where do they guide people to?"

Misha smiled. "You will learn soon enough. But, for now, we will stay with your regular lessons. There is plenty there to fill your little head. And, I think it's about time to

do some of those lessons.” She glanced at the seers, who nodded in response. Doka rose and went to get Mista.

After they departed, Autok and the others joined the seers and relayed the events of the previous night.

“Hmm.” Moicha murmured. “So, I think it’s best to leave the Alcaad alone for now and let the memory of our encounter fade. But, what is this other offense that has presented itself? Perhaps, that is another journey.” He turned to the other seers. “I think we should discuss this and see what should be done.”

Autok rose. “We will leave you to this.” He motioned to the others to depart.

As they rose, Rexx added. “We want to thank you for all your efforts and apologize for the distress that been caused.”

Moicha smiled. “It seems that distress is just another part of life. We will signal you when we have reached a decision.”

As they departed from Autok in the observation cave, Matu asked. “So, what now?”

“Well, I guess we could go experiment with those devices.”

“Yeah...outside.” Rexx added with a small laugh.

“Definitely, outside!” Matu agreed.

Matu set the basket of devices on a large flat stone. He picked one out of the pile. “So, where or how do we begin?” He turned the device over. “Any idea what this is?” He handed it to Rexx.

Rexx felt the surface for controls. Pointing it cautiously at the bare ground, he turned the small knob. With a soft beep, a small screen lit up. Numbers appeared along with dimension abbreviations. He moved it back and forth and the numbers changed. “It appears to read the distance to objects.”

“Is that useful?”

“It might tell us how big the Alcaad cavern actually is.” Sendi volunteered.

“True. Well, we don’t need that right now. We can save it for later.” Rexx surmised as he put it back in the basket.

“How would we know a translator when we found one?” Matu asked. “I mean I could say something in our old language, but how would it know a language that might not be in its sources? Do you see what I mean? How would a device from the TimePod know what language the Alcaad speak?”

Rexx and Sendi just looked at each other in blinking silence.

“In the tour recording, when the treaty was being proposed, the ambassador’s translator worked between their language and ours.” Sendi remembered. “How did it get that information, if this was the first meeting?”

“Maybe, it wasn’t.” Rexx answered.

“Wasn’t what?” Sendi asked.

“...the first meeting.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well...we’re here and so are the Alcaad. And the war is in the future.”

“And apparently we speak the same language...I mean you and our tribe.” Matu said.

“Well, what I mean is maybe, somehow, we find a device that knows how to learn Alcaadian and we find an Alcaad who’s willing to be patient and we learn to communicate.” Rexx explained. “So, maybe the first meeting will be here.”

“That’s a big ‘if’.” Sendi replied. “At that point, we’ve already become friendly with them.”

“Well, true...” Rexx agreed. “But, still...”

“Well...wait a minute.” Sendi turned to Matu. “Matu, you said, that if you find a common ground you can communicate with any other being.”

“Yes, that’s true.” He replied.

“Well...we’re here and so are the Alcaad. And, now we know that they aren’t big bugs, but they’re some kind of humanoids. And that they are being attacked by something that’s also attacking the tribe...probably.”

“Probably?”

“Well, I figure it’s probably the same thing killing both sides. I think it would be unlikely that there would be multiple hunters.”

“‘Hunter’...interesting choice of words.” Rexx interjected.

“Well, there seems to be a pattern of dismemberment and consumption of flesh and blood from what we’ve observed in the remains...and that would imply a hunter of some sort.”

“Your ‘intelligence’ is showing.” Rexx teased.

“Yeah, yeah, I know...humor me.” She paused. “Anyhow, I think we might be approaching some kind of common ground.”

“You may be right.” Matu observed.

“The question is...what is it? The common ground, I mean.” Rexx asked.

“Yeah, what? They don’t know about the future war, so the only thing we have is the ‘hunter’.” Matu finished.

“I would guess that the ‘hunter’ is the common ground. Now, we need to find out how to get there.” Sendi added.

“And, find a translator, or else, it’s going to take a lot longer.” Rexx added as he pulled another device out of the basket.

After several attempts at pushing buttons on various devices, Rexx held up a small device that had a belt clip. “This holds potential as it’s meant to be carried in the field, so to speak.” He pressed a button. It made a crackling sound. “Say something in your old tongue, Matu.”

“Sto viti.” Matu said. The device crackled again, but nothing else happened.

“I thought sure...” Rexx stared at the device.

“I’m guessing, it doesn’t know how to connect the two languages.” Matu suggested. “Shall we try teaching it?”

“Sure...let’s see if this is the record button. Say the phrase again.” He pressed the button and held the device in front of Matu.

“Sto viti.” Matu repeated.

Rexx let go of the button and pressed another. The device crackled and then repeated the phrase.

“Bingo!” Rexx exclaimed.

“Bingo?” Matu asked.

“Sorry...old phrase from a very old game...it sort of means ‘I won’.”

“Ah, I see.”

“So, what did you say?”

“It’s a greeting...it means that I wish you good health.”

“Would you repeat the translation while I record it? If I am pressing the correct buttons...wish this thing had some legend to indicate what is what.” He held up the device again.

“Good health to you.” Matu paraphrased.



“Good! I think that worked.” He pressed the other button and the device repeated Matu’s phrase. “Now, let’s see if it worked.” Rexx pressed another button and the device repeated one phrase and then translated it to the other phrase.

“Bingo!” Matu said.

Rexx laughed. “I think we have a winner!”

“So, now what?” Matu asked.

“Well...” Sendi replied. “...I think we should go over these and see what we think we might keep out for now and what we can put back into storage. I think definitely the recording devices, flashlights, and maybe that distance reader might be useful, along with the translator, of course. Any other thoughts?”

“Not offhand.” Rexx concluded as he put the essential devices into his carry bag.

“We don’t need that laser or the stunguns, for sure, and there are still some of these things that I’m still not sure what they are for.”

Matu picked up the basket. “I guess we should put these back in the storage room, and maybe, check in on the seers.”

“Sounds good.” Sendi agreed and Rexx nodded.

In the observation cave, Autok was gazing out over the desert as they entered. He turned to greet them at the sound of their footsteps.

“Has there been any word from the seers?” Matu asked.

“Yes. They have decided to journey to the heart of the mountain and ask its spirit if it is troubled.”

Rexx and Sendi looked at each other in puzzlement. She mouthed, “the spirit...?”

“That is probably a good approach.” Matu nodded. “We will wait for their reply.” He turned to Rexx and Sendi. “It seems we have some time, shall we go to the kitchen? We can talk and get something to eat while we wait.”

As they sat around a low table, Sendi asked. “So, could you elaborate on this journey to the ‘heart of the mountain’?”

Matu smiled. “It’s like we were saying, you can communicate if you have a common ground.”

“But, what is it...the common ground between the seers and the mountain’s heart?”

“Well...” He paused. “You see, they live inside the top of the mountain, the most airy part, where rock fades into sky and where humans breathe air. This contact with air is their common ground. The heart of the mountain is where the rock is most dense, but that rock is still common ground with the upper part of the mountain.” Her eyes were starting to glaze over. “Am I losing you?”

“Uh...I’m not sure. Does this mean that almost anything can be common ground if you don’t restrict the...um...definition?”

“Well...yes.” He admitted. “All that is required is that each party accepts a relationship to the common.”

“But, like she said, that could be anything.” Rexx added.

“Yes, that’s very true. But, both parties have to agree. You see, the seers have spent a large part of their lives journeying in this mountain. They are physically very connected with the rock as a source of grounding. And, the rock knows them as a source of...let’s say, anti-grounding. Sometimes, when the seers are deep in their journeys, small pebbles float just above the ground in the tunnels near their cave.”

“Really??” Sendi exclaimed.

Matu laughed. “No, I was joking about the pebbles.”

“Oh.” Sendi muttered.

“But, they do have a strong connection.” Matu continued. “And we will see if the mountain has any, well, parasites, for want of a better word. Then we can help to heal its ills...and ours as well.”

“Do you think the seers can actually get that much information out of a piece of rock?” She asked.

“Yes, I do.” Matu responded seriously. “That piece of rock is an immensely old and powerful entity. It is our home, our mother, the source of our life. And we care deeply for her.”

“Sorry, I...I didn’t mean to offend.” She apologized quietly.

“I know.” He replied, equally quietly. “I know you didn’t. You are not of our culture and you do not understand.”

“Matu?” Rexx interjected.

Matu turned to him. “Yes?”

“How serious were you earlier about exploring that tunnel where we found the Alcaad’s remains?”

“Well...half yes and half no. Why?”

“Well, I thought that since we have our MiniCam recording devices, we could go back there and record the scene. Also, record some of the human shrines. These would be of help...evidence, lets say...when we eventually encounter the Alcaad, that we are on the same side against this common threat.”

“I see.” Matu nodded thoughtfully. “I just don’t relish the thought of the feeling of being watched by an unseen potentially dangerous being.”

“Well, neither do I.”

“Nor I.” added Sendi.

“But, I’m afraid that we are going to need some kind of proof if we are going to see this thing through.” Rexx continued.

“Yeah, I guess...OK.” Matu agreed. “When do you want to do this?”

“I would say soon, maybe now. What do you think?”

“But, it’s daytime. The Alcaad will be awake.” Sendi objected.

“Yeah, but we now know that tunnel doesn’t connect to their cavern, and if we’re careful to be really quiet...I mean they probably make enough noise with their daily routine to mask any noise we might make.”

“Short of screaming?” Sendi asked.

“I hope it doesn’t come to that.” Matu retorted.

“Nor I.” Rexx added, glumly. “Matu, how long do you think it will be before the seers will be able to meet with us?”

“Oh, I would imagine at least a couple of hours, maybe more. When they have completed their journeying they will want to compare their experiences and discuss them.”

“Then, why don’t we go ahead and do this? We can always make a hasty retreat if things get bad.”

“OK. I guess so.” Matu sighed.

“I’m thinking maybe we do want to take a stungun with us after all...you know, the less lethal kind...just in case.” Sendi added.

“Well, then, I guess we’d better go get it.” Rexx resigned. “But, I’ll let you carry it, this time.” He emphasized.

“I promise I won’t be too hasty.” She said with a smile.

As Rexx finished recording the Alcaad’s remains, he said. “Matu, hold up the glove so we can show it fits a human hand...thanks.”

Sendi stood quietly staring at the remains. Matu nodded to Rexx in her direction. Rexx paused a moment, then asked quietly. "Sendi? Is something bothering you?"

She looked up. "It's just sad. I mean, this poor guy...can't even give him a decent burial...you know? Wonder why the Alcaad didn't bury him?"

Matu sighed. "Maybe they were fleeing for their lives...maybe the walled up tunnel is his tomb."

"Maybe." She said.

Matu walked over to the side of the passageway and swept the dirt aside from the rock floor with his hand. He then went and gathered the bones in his hands and gently laid them on the rock floor. Sendi laid the glove across the pile and set the skull upon it. Rexx brought the pieces of armor and laid them as a small wall around the bones. They all paused briefly to lower their heads in prayer.

After a minute, Rexx looked around. "You know, when we first got here, I had that feeling of being watched. But, now it's gone."

"You're right." Sendi agreed.

Matu reached down to adjust one of the pieces of armor. "I think we cleansed the fear from this poor soul. May he rest now peacefully."

"Yes...peacefully." Rexx echoed.

Sendi pointed her flashlight further down the tunnel. "When we were down here before, we were trying to see if it lead to the Alcaad cavern. And, we figured it didn't because of the walled up tunnel. Any desire to follow this path further?"

"Why?" Asked Matu.

"Yes, why?" Seconded Rexx.

"Oh, I don't know...to see where it goes...maybe, to find some answers, I guess." She answered.

Rexx and Matu looked at each other and shrugged. Rexx said. "You game?"

"I guess." Matu replied. "But, I'm turning back if it starts to get creepy."

"OK, my brave soldiers." She teased with a smile.

"Hey, you didn't like it either." Matu retorted.

"I know. Well, let's go a little further...and I promise, we turn back at the slightest hint of danger."

After several minutes of cautious approach, something ahead glinted in the beam of Rexx's flashlight. "Hey, what's that?" He asked.

"Donno." Matu said as he bent over to pick up the object. He turned it over and then handed it to Rexx. "What do you think?"

Rexx turned it over. "Well, it's definitely some sort of device. See...it's got a hand grip, but it doesn't have much else. Where the handle ends it's just kind of blunt."

"Any buttons?" Sendi asked.

"Not that I can see." He held the grip in his hand lightly. He tightened his grip slightly. "Hey, it's starting to vibrate." He aimed his hand toward the side wall and tightened his grip a little more. A blast of light slammed into the wall. He immediately loosened his grip. Smoke was curling from a shallow cavity in the wall and a small amount of molten rock oozed from the cavity and began to harden against its bottom edge. "Well, I guess that answers that."

"Hmm." Sendi mused.

Rexx turned to her. "What?"

"Well, I'm guessing that this...weapon?...must have belonged that that Alcaad back there."

"Yeah...so?"

"If he had something that could do that..." She pointed to the melted rock. "What, in the world, did that..." She pointed back down the tunnel toward the Alcaad's remains. "...to him?"

"I see your point."

Matu was shining his flashlight a little further down the tunnel. He panned it back and forth until it lit up a shiny patch of wall. He walked over and touched it. "Um...I think he tried." Rexx and Sendi joined him. "This rock has been melted."

"It's like it's been coated with glass." Sendi observed as she ran her fingers over it.

Rexx looked back to where they found the weapon. "I'm guessing he dropped his gun while he was running away from...well, whatever it was."

"I'm not sure I want to meet...'whatever' it is." Matu said looking down the unexplored tunnel."

"Neither do I." Rexx added.

Sendi started slowly walking down the unexplored tunnel. Rexx and Matu looked at each other, sighed, and started following her.

"I'm beginning to feel uneasy." Matu said to Rexx. "It's not the feeling of being watched...it's more, um, apprehension...you know what I mean?"

"Yeah...fear of the unknown, I guess. Me too."

"What makes her so brave?"

"Wish I knew...maybe it's some of that 'need to know' military training."

Matu glanced up at Sendi's flashlight in the distance. "Uh oh, she's getting ahead of us. We'd better catch up."

Rexx shined his light beam against the first side wall and then to the other. "Looks like this tunnel is getting wider...it's opening into a cavern. Hey, Sendi! Wait up!" He called ahead.

When they caught up to her, she was standing at the edge of a lake. The side walls of the cavern were visible in their lights. "Looks like the water goes right up to the edges." Rexx commented.

Matu bent down and cupped up a handful of the water. He sniffed it and then dipped a finger in to taste it. "Seems like this is pretty clean water." He paused to make an entry on the direction finder. "The tribe will want to know about this aquifer...it will give us a good reserve."

"Sendi...?" Rexx inquired as she was just standing there staring out across the water. "...what is it?"

"I thought I saw something move out there."

"What?" Asked Matu. "There's no motion on the water. It's perfectly still."

"No, above the water...near the roof of the cavern."

"A bat?" Suggested Rexx.

"Not possible." Matu reasoned. "This is far too deep for bats. There's no food source for them." He paused. "Unless, there's an exit to the surface close to the other side of this water."

Rexx cast his light into the distance. "I don't see anything that could be a continuation of this tunnel."

Sendi kept shining her light along the ceiling. "It was somewhere around here."

"What did it look like?" Matu asked.

"Dark."

"Dark?" Rexx exclaimed. "Everything in here is dark. What do you mean?"

"I meant dark in the beam of light...kind of roundish like a cloud or something...it didn't seem very solid...and it just sort of changed its shape and then I lost it. I don't know

if it moved out of the light, or if I had moved my light away from it. But, when I tried to move the light back, I couldn't find it again."

Rexx shined his light back and forth across the ceiling. "Well, I don't see anything."

"You said it didn't seem very solid, maybe it was a cloud of mist from the water."

Matu suggested. "It does that...mists form over bodies of water and then dissipate as they condense back down."

"Well, maybe." She said. "I just had a very weird feeling when I saw it."

"What kind of feeling?" Rexx asked. "Anything like when we were doing the journeying...you know...feelings associated with experiences?"

"I don't know...just kind of uneasy, I guess. I can't really associate it with anything."

"We were both feeling uneasy back where we saw the melted rock. Do you still feel that way?" Matu said.

"A little, I guess. I mean, it's dark in here. Seeing something move when there's the possibility of danger...and we know somewhere in here there's something dangerous that can't be neutralized by a very powerful weapon...well, all of that can lead to a feeling of uneasiness. Still..."

"...still?"

"Well, it wasn't just uneasiness...something else...a feeling like when you're looking at an animal and it suddenly turns and looks you right in the eye...you know...it's a shock and it makes you suddenly feel vulnerable."

"Ouch!" Observed Rexx. "Did the feeling go away after you lost sight of it?"

"No, not really."

"I think these feelings are starting to wear on me. Is anybody else getting tired?" Matu said.

"Now that you mention it, so am I." Rexx agreed. "How about you, Sendi?"

"Yes." She sighed. "It's probably a lot later than we think, and we should probably head back."

Matu checked the chronometer on his direction finder. "Yes, it is getting late. The seers might have some information by now."

"What should we do about this?" He held up the Alcaad's weapon. "I hate to leave it just laying around. I mean, I know there's no one wandering around down here, but..."

"Yeah...some one could get hurt." Sendi finished. "Matu, what do you think?"

"Well, I don't think it should be left in the storage room...though it could be a useful mining tool...but, then, I'm not keen on the miners knowing about such a tool. It could raise a lot of questions we would not like to answer. Unless you'd like to keep it on you for defense..."

"It doesn't seem to have proven to be too much of a defense against the 'whatever'." Sendi remarked.

"No. You're right about that." Matu paused. "I would suggest we leave it in your TimePod. Nobody would find it there."

"That sounds good to me." Rexx acknowledged. "Should we tell Autok about it?"

"I don't think there's a need at this time." Matu said. "We can always tell him later. But, if it's safely stored and only we know it even exists, then all should be fine."