

Late the next morning, Rexx, Sendi, and Matu stood beside the dome. Rexx held the translator in his hand. "I know we're really early, but I don't want to blow this by being late."

"My reckoning is that we have a good hour until the sun is directly overhead." Matu said as he scanned the sky. "Do you think that they understood the meeting time as today?"

"Couldn't really tell you." Sendi replied. "All I got was that the person acknowledged our message."

"Well, I guess...nothing to do but wait. Should we play with that translator a little more?"

"I don't know how much good that would do." Rexx said, turning it over in his hands. "I can't find any other controls on it. And, there's still the learning curve aspect. I'm only hoping that offering it for their consideration will mean something to them. I mean, even if they thought it was a weapon, offering it non-threateningly should count for something...I hope."

"Yeah." Sendi echoed. "I hope so, too."

"Three." Added Matu. "So, to pass the time...tell me something of your world. What's life like in the future?"

"Huh." Said Rexx. "Well, we have lots of gadgets that are supposed to make life easier. Though, I'm not sure they really do. A lot of them are cheaply made, so they have to be maintained or they break easily."

"Is that translator from your time?"

"No, I don't think so...I've never seen anything like it before. I'm guessing it's something the Time Police use...they seem to have a lot of these types of devices...well, you've seen the TimePod and the barrier that changes to look like something else as you approach it."

"Yeah. How does that work?"

"Don't know. We were told it was a Time Police trade secret."

"Oh." He remarked. "But, what about life? Is it any better?"

"You know, I don't think so."

"Actually..." Sendi added. "...I think the life you've got right here is a lot better. You may have to work a little harder without the gadgets of convenience, like automatic cookers and processing machines and such. But, what I've seen of your people, they are a lot kinder and gentler towards each other. In our time, strangers would have never treated us as nicely as your people have."

"I see." Matu sighed. "I guess it's not so much to look forward to."

"Well, our future is a long way off." She said. "Maybe, your immediate future will be a lot better."

"I hope so." He smiled, then added. "But, what about knowledge, things like science...is there any progress there?"

"Well, there is space travel. Humans have colonized most of the planets in our system and there are a lot of space stations that are actually cities in themselves. A lot of diseases have found cures." Rexx replied.

"But..." Sendi clarified. "...there is more pollution and that has caused the rise of other diseases."

"I guess there's a lot of give and take." Matu rationalized.

“But, here...” She continued. “...I haven’t seen anyone who is sick. Are your people free of disease?”

“Well, we do have occasional seasonal colds, especially among the elderly, and there are, of course, complications from injuries. But, these things are to be expected. I guess, in general, we are quite healthy...our food is good, our water and air are clean, and hunting and gathering gives us good exercise.” He shrugged. “I guess progress isn’t everything in life.”

“No, I don’t think it is. But, when you’re born into it, there’s not a lot of choice.”

A scraping noise caught their attention and they turned to look in that direction. A metal hatch slowly lifted from the desert floor.

“I guess this is it.” Sendi whispered.

The three faced the hatch as an arm gently laid the lid onto the ground. Rexx held the translator in front of him and they patiently waited.

Two figures climbed out, then slowly approached and stopped a short distance from them. They turned to each other and briefly nodded. One of them held out an object in his hand. He set it gently on the ground and he and his companion began to remove their armor, laying each piece on the ground. When they finally stood there wearing simple dark clothing, he picked up the object and held it forth.

Sendi gasped. “It’s a translator, just like the one we have.”

The Alcaad pointed to the translator in his hand and then to the one that Rexx held.

Rexx looked down at his, then back to the Alcaad, and involuntarily shrugged his shoulders.

The Alcaad smiled grimly. He reached over and took the translator that Rexx held. He passed his fingers over one face of the enclosure and a small door slid open. He handed it back to Rexx and then did the same to the translator he held. When the compartment was open, the Alcaad removed a small disk. He showed it to Rexx and then placed the disk against his temple. The disk stuck there as he removed his hand.

The Alcaad then pointed to Rexx and the open compartment to indicate that Rexx should do the same. As Rexx did this, the Alcaad pressed another button, and spoke. “This should be working now.”

“Wow!” Sendi exclaimed. “A neural network translator...those are still in development.” Rexx glared at her. “Sorry.” She apologized.

The Alcaad looked at her questioningly.

Rexx cleared his throat and said. “She said, ‘wow’.”

The Alcaad laughed. “We hadn’t realized that you didn’t know how to work the translator. How did you come by possessing it?”

“Um...the Time Police gave it to us.”

“Who are the Time Police?”

“Oh, that’s kind of hard to explain...let’s just say they are an advance race that has many such things.”

“Are they friendly?”

“Yes, at least, they seem to be concerned for our well being.”

“Well, that’s acceptable. So, why have you requested this meeting? Oh, forgive me...I am Lovra. I am the spokesman and negotiator for our community. This is my assistant, Zakar.”

“We are very pleased to meet you. I am Rexx, and these are my friends, Sendi and Matu.” Rexx paused. “Our story is very long and complicated. We had hoped that through our telepathic link that we could have conveyed some of it to you.”

“We did get some understanding of what has plagued our people, and apparently, yours, as well. But, now, with language, perhaps, this can be clarified.” He opened a

small pouch and removed three more of the neural disks. He handed one to Zakar, who promptly fixed it to her temple. He handed the other two to Rexx. "Have your friends attach these to their temples so that they may join in the conversation." Lovra adjusted a setting on his translator and advised Rexx to do the same.

Once all was ready, Rexx proceeded to relate all that had transpired from his unfortunate incident to their decision to confront the Alcaad with prompts from Sendi and Matu.

Lovra sighed deeply. "That is an awful lot to digest. Especially the prospect of a war in about three thousand cycles around this star. This dismays me deeply as it is within our projected lifetimes."

"Wow!" Sendi whispered.

"How did it start?" He continued.

"According to our history, a space station was destroyed in the early Forty Four hundreds by a small fleet of spacecraft coming from the Lagoon Nebula in Sagittarius. Another group followed a few months later and attacked Earth. Then, more came, and so, war." Rexx stated.

Lovra turned to Zakar. "That means..."

"...they found us." She finished.

"Please, tell us..." Sendi started. "...how is it that you came to be here. We got some hints during our telepathic encounters, but not much detail."

"We came here as young children." Zakar began. "Our parents fought for freedom against a government that allowed none. This continued from their parents and before. Many, including entire families, were captured and imprisoned. We were among them. We were on a ship bound for a distant planet where dissidents were kept apart from the loyal citizens. Were this true, the separation would have not been so terrible. The truth, kept away from the masses, was that it was a death sentence. When the ship was sufficiently distant from our home world, the crew was to depart for their base in an escape vessel. At a safe distance, they were to trigger explosives that would destroy our ship."

"How did you escape?" Sendi asked.

"Lovra's father and some of his comrades intercepted communications during the early preparations before the ship departed. They managed to arrange to have certain tools smuggled on board by undisclosed agents that would enable them to escape their cells once the ship was on course. They were then able to overpower the crew and eliminate them. At that point, the ship was ours and we sped quickly away. We had no desired destination, only to put as much distance as we could between us and anyone that might follow us."

"And..." Lovra surmised. "Apparently, they eventually discovered that we had not been destroyed, and somehow were able to determine our path. But..." He added. "...at least, now we know, and have time to prepare."

"What will you do?" Rexx asked.

"Our ship is a standard interplanetary cargo vessel, and, as such, is equipped with several smaller space worthy craft which are capable of making landfall. We will have to convert these into fighters. Fortunately, we have knowledge of our home world's weaponry."

"But, won't they have improved their weapons by now...I mean...the future?" Sendi asked.

"Probably. But, we must do whatever we can."

Sendi, Rexx, and Matu exchanged quick glances. Then, Rexx volunteered. "We will help you. I don't know how, but whatever we can do, we will." Matu and Sendi nodded in agreement."

Lovra paused, then said. "Thank you."

Sendi nudged Rexx. She whispered. "The blast weapon..."

"Oh, yeah...when we found the remains of one of your people, there was a sort of blast weapon lying near him. We found out what it did by accidentally melting some rock. We put it in safe keeping and will return it to you."

Lovra nodded. "Yes, we know this tool. And, thank you again...for both the return and the dignity you bestowed on our fallen comrade. He was one of the group that made our original escape possible. When he fell, we fled the scene to save our lives."

"And you barricaded the tunnel...?" Sendi intervened.

"Yes...to protect our home." He replied. "And, that brings us to this entity that you described. You said that one of your psychic people consulted this mountain for this information?"

"Yes." Matu confirmed.

"That is most amazing."

"We, as a people, are very much in touch with our surroundings."

"That would seem so...so you are not from the future?"

"No. I am a member of the tribe that lives here."

"And, these other people that work in this mine here...are they associated with your people?"

"No. We coexist with them in a loose social and business relationship, but they are of a different way of life than us, and they do not, nor wish to, understand our ways."

"Do they know of our existence?"

"No. I do not believe so. Their entire existence is centered in their work of extracting ore from these rocks."

"That is probably well, if they...their descendants...will be involved with this war."

"Did you see this entity when your comrade fell?" Sendi asked. "I ask, because, when we were exploring past his grave, we came to an impassable lake where I saw, what I think was the entity in its original unaltered form...that of a cloud of dark mist, as was described by the seer."

"Yes." He paused. "What I saw was not that. Though, at one point, it could have been described that way."

"Excuse me...?" She interrupted. "...at one point? What do you mean?"

"We were in the tunnel...a dark cloud clung to a part of the ceiling. It was in turmoil, like the beginning of an intense thunderstorm with electrical flashes. We watched in wonder...how could a storm be in a cave. As it began to move closer, it changed. It grew in size. The flashes elongated to swords of fire. In the center, an opening appeared, as if of a mouth. Then it began to change into a kind of large and dangerous carnivorous animal, such as we have observed in the more rugged hilly parts of this desert. Though, its size was three to four times greater than the desert animal. It came towards us at great speed. Our comrade raised his 'blast weapon', as you called it, and discharged it at the beast. It passed directly through the beast scorching the wall beyond and made no difference. The 'beast' advanced, his tool was dropped as we ran. He was torn with a great claw. The beast devoured him as he fell. It seemed content with its kill and did not pursue us. Reaching safety, we hastily sealed the tunnel."

"I see..." Rexx considered. "...and understand your haste." He paused. "What is this 'tool' that we called a 'blast weapon'?"

Lovra looked up from his thoughts. "Oh, it's for extracting metal from rock...also joining metal plates together. We use it in manufacturing things. We were searching for metal bearing rock for some repairs, when we encountered the beast."

"So..." Sendi began. "This means that we have a truly formidable opponent in this entity. The seer said that it could manifest as a physical being, though its physicality seems to have a porosity to its favor. This proves that it is indeed very powerful."

"The seer also did say that it fed off of dark energies." Rexx added. "When you ran from it, you were experiencing fear, weren't you?"

"Yes, obviously. So?" Lovra concurred.

"So, you were inadvertently feeding its strength toward overcoming you."

"I'm afraid it would be very hard to not show fear in that circumstance."

"Well, yes, I agree, but maybe that's a clue towards fighting it."

"So, what do we do?" Matu asked.

"That..." She replied shaking her head. "Is something I don't know?"

"Nor I." Concurred Lovra. "At the moment, I think the best we can do is to have our people avoid using tunnels to prevent another encounter."

"The seer did say that when the entity killed and ate a human, it was satisfied for a long time." Rexx volunteered. "If we can keep people away from it for long enough, maybe when it gets hungry, its hunger might make it weaker. How long has it been since your comrade was killed?"

"Years...perhaps ten. I did not really keep track."

"And, Matu, when was the last attack on your people?"

"It has been a while...maybe five years."

"Then, perhaps it is now becoming hungry. We shall have to make sure there are no new attacks and then it may weaken."

"Maybe...we can only hope." Said Sendi. "But, I have a question, Lovra."

"Yes, what is it?"

"Whenever we have observed your people, we've always only seen you clad in your armor, which led us to mistakenly think that you were not human. You seem to be a peaceful people and are living here without issues. Why do you wear armor all the time? And, why did you remove it when you greeted us?"

"Well..." He smiled. "I guess too many years of oppression and fear have weighed heavily on us and we tend to wear our heavy battle armor out of a sense of security. We do remove it in our homes, though. When we met you and realized that you were not armed, nor protected by any armor, we realized that diplomacy required us to meet you as equals, thus, we shed our armor."

Well..." She replied. "I guess it's our turn to say thank you."

"Yes, thank you." Echoed Rexx.

Matu nodded in agreement. "We hope that this will become a long friendship between our peoples."