

In the seer's residence, Rexx related the events of the meeting with the Alcaad representatives. "So you see we have little hope of destroying the entity in some sort of direct confrontation. We can only hope that it will become weakened through hunger to such an extent that it can either be removed or eliminated."

"I'm not sure if it can be eliminated." Autok stated. "Remember, the spirit of the mountain observed it regaining its strength by feeding on the desert creatures."

"Then, I think the best thing we can do is discourage our people from using the deeper tunnels and to try to keep our emotions positive." Moicha added. "At least we have made peace with our neighbors and that should cut down some of the negative emotions."

"Yes. To help keep up and hasten communications I let them have one of our radio telephones." Matu said. "That way we can avoid using any tunnels to knock on each other's doors."

"Good." Moicha said.

"Moicha?" Rexx started. "I feel like this is an imposition...but, is there any way that the mountain can monitor the entity's activity, so we can prepare if it decides to advance?"

He sighed. "I'm sure that it is constantly watching its actions. It was concerned at the beginning and has been equally desirous of its departure. But, we will inquire, now and then, of the status, so as to not become a pest ourselves."

"Good..." Rexx replied. "...and thanks." He paused and then continued. "From our talk with the Alcaad, they seem to believe that the future war will be between them and the oppressors that followed them from their home world. I'm guessing that Earth's humanity will have misunderstood and got caught in between. I feel it's our duty, well, Sendi and me..."

"And, me!" Matu interjected.

"...and, Matu...anyhow, our duty to help them prepare for this coming conflict. I don't know what we can do, but, at least, we can offer them the use of the devices we retrieved from the TimePod as well as our help in using them."

"As they are your devices, we have no objection." Moicha replied. "Also, we have no objection to helping them prepare as our descendants will be involved in this future crisis as well."

In the storeroom, they started gathering all of the devices into a carrybag. As Rexx passed them to Matu, Sendi reached in and snatched the two stunguns.

"Why are you keeping those out?" Rexx asked.

"I don't know...just a gut feeling, I guess. Anyhow, we're going to have them with us when we go back to the future to reenact...well, act...well, you know what I mean..." She trailed off.

"Yeah." Rexx sighed. "I do know what you mean."

"We're also going to have to have our MiniCams." She continued as she grabbed them out of Matu's hand and dropped them in her carrybag. "I think we should also hang onto those good flashlights." Rexx looked at her questioningly. She shrugged. "I don't know, just a hunch."

While they were talking, Matu was sullenly staring at the floor. "Matu, what's wrong?" She asked.

He sighed. "It's just that I'm really going to miss you guys. You've kind of become my best friends."

Sendi and Rexx exchanged glances. "Uh..." Rexx started. "...thanks! I guess, we're going to really miss you, too. But, hey, we're not gone yet, and I'm guessing we've got a lot of work to do before the Time Police will let us go."

"And, we'd better get these devices together quickly, Lovra will be waiting for us at the hatch." Matu said, changing the subject. "I phoned him just before we came here."

As they approached the dome, Lovra, standing next to the hatch, waved to them. "Greetings!" He called. Shaking their hands, he added. "I want to thank you for your offer of help. It is especially important to us that you have witnessed a part of this battle."

"Witnessed! Oh, wow, yes...the MiniCams!" Sendi remembered.

"Huh?" Rexx questioned, as she dug in her carrybag.

"The MiniCams." She said holding one up. "We recorded parts of the battle."

"Well, that will definitely be worth watching." Lovra commented. "But, first, I must welcome you to our home." He indicated the hatch. "There is a short ladder, then a downward spiraling stair. Please enter, and I will follow and seal the hatch."

At the bottom of the stairs, they paused to look around while Lovra caught up to them. "Wow, this is a lot bigger than I imagined." Rexx commented. "The dome only covers a small part of the cavern." Then to Lovra. "I am impressed with what you have accomplished here."

"Well, we have had quite a lot of time to work on it and not much else to do except establish our community. But, there is more...come, let me show you our workshop." He indicated the direction.

As they started walking, Rexx paused beside the entrance stair to the ship. "I assume this is the ship you came here in...how big is it?"

"Though, it is classed as a cargo vessel, it is one of the smaller categories meant for short trip deliveries. It houses a hundred crew, five small landers, each with a crew of four and a capacity of about...would you think for a moment in your unit of distance measurement and imagine a quantity of it?"

Rexx squeezed his eyes shut as Lovra adjusted a setting on his translator. "Ah, yes, thank you...as I was saying, about thirty cubic meters...give or take...the cargo capacity of the ship itself is unknown to me, I'm afraid I wasn't in the shipping industry. But, our community is currently a little over three hundred and fifty individuals and we all fit comfortably with plenty of room to spare. Though, we don't actually live in the ship. Individual families have constructed smaller dwellings which offer privacy and a better environment for their children to grow. We use the ship for general storage and as a sort of combination community center, school, and government center. But, now, let's continue on."

Lovra led them to a corridor between individual dwellings. They passed through a short tunnel and into a second large cavern.

"Wow!" Rexx exclaimed. "Are those the landers?"

"Yes, we removed them to here after we opened up this other cavern and created our workshop area."

"Opened?" Rexx asked. "You created this cavern?"

"Yes." Lovra pointed to the overhead ceiling. "And, added a second dome for the landers' access. You'll notice that we have begun to clean the debris from this dome. We saw no need to further conceal ourselves from you. And, it provides better light."

"The landers are functional?" Rexx continued.

"Oh yes, and so is the ship. We were fortunate that among our group we had several members of the industrial scientific community who had knowledge of finding the components and creating the necessary fuel for these crafts...but, again, not my profession."

They continued past the landers to an area where several work tables housed various projects. Lovra indicated an empty table. "Could you show me the devices you are offering?"

Matu put the carrybag on the table and emptied it of its contents. Sendi helped to spread them out. Rexx exclaimed. "Hey, Sendi didn't you keep the two MiniCams?"

She reached into her carrybag and pulled them out. "Yeah. Here they are." Showing them to Rexx.

"Then where did that come from?" He picked up a third recorder.

"I have no idea...hey! Wait a minute. Now that I think of it, how come we had the exact same translator as the one Lovra has?"

"The Time Police." Rexx said.

"Huh?"

"Remember, when we came out of the TimePod, you found the food and clothing they left for us...and the Time Barricade protecting the cave the TimePod is in. You said 'they were taking care of us'."

She took the third recorder from Rexx. "So, what's the third one for?" As she turned it over, a small door opened and a wire fell out. "Hey, it's attached and there's a connector on the end of it...I wonder..." She picked up her MiniCam and looked for the same door. "...here it is." She opened it and pulled out the wire. "Let's see..." She put the two connectors close to each other, they attracted and latched. Well, I'll be...I think we might be able to copy our recordings to this third recorder. That means we can leave the battle information with Lovra." She pressed the play button on her MiniCam and the record button on the third recorder. "...aaand, it seems to be working!"

"That is excellent news!" Lovra exclaimed as Sendi proceeded to disconnect her MiniCan and connect Rexx's.

"There! All done." She proclaimed. "Now, for a quick lesson." She showed Lovra the controls and how to use them.

"How long is the usage expectancy of the recorders before renewal? And how are they renewed? We do have a rather long time until this battle."

"Hmm, I don't know. On the Pod, there was a charging rack which also had a download dongle for transferal to other devices."

"What's this?" Matu held up a rack with a small solar panel.

Rexx sighed. "I would say it looks like a solar powered charging rack for a MiniCam." He turned to Sendi. "What are we doing here if the Time Police are providing the answers?"

"Well, maybe they're not providing all of the answers."

As they were walking back to the stair to the surface, Sendi asked. "Lovra, how come, in all of the time that you co-existed with Matu's people, did you never communicate with them?"

"Well, when we first arrived here, alone and afraid, we were consumed with the need our safety. It wasn't until quite some time after establishing our settlement, that the others arrived and by then we were used to being self-sufficient. We did not know who they were, nor if we could trust them. I guess we just felt it would be best to not draw their attention to us."

"But, how did you manage to stay out of sight for so long?"

"We arranged that most of our surface activity was performed either after dark or away from their vantage points. You may have noticed that most of their ledges face away from the mountain in the direction that is opposed to the location of our domes."

"What kind of surface activities?" Matu interrupted.

"Oh, hunting, gathering, scouting for various mineral and water sources...things like that."

"You can see in the dark?" He exclaimed.

Lovra laughed. "No, but we have night vision goggles which can see into the light spectrums that are beyond the range of normal sight. It's very helpful for fast and efficient hunting."

"Gee, and I had assumed that you were vegetarians." Observed Sendi.

"Oh? And why is that?"

"Oh, in an early telepathic experiment, I observed...or, at least, I think I did...one of your people eating a piece of fungus that was growing on the wall. So, I guess I just assumed from that." She shrugged.

"Fungus, hmm, I think I know which ones you mean...yes, those mushrooms are quite tasty. We use them for snacks and also make very delicious meat sauces from them."

"Hmm, I'll have to remember to try some." She considered.

"Here...let me get some for you." He crossed to the far wall and picked a few from a large damp area. Returning, he handed them to her.

"Uh, thanks...what do I do with them?"

"Oh, I know what those are." Matu observed. "We find them on the walls of the ledges when the dew has been heavy overnight. They are very good. Here, drop them in my carrybag and I'll have Doka show you how we prepare them."

"You know." Rexx began. "It looks like it's about time for both of your peoples to start to get to know each other better."

"I agree." Matu said. "I will speak to Autok..." With an aside to Lovra. "...he is our chief and the keeper of our medicine knowledge..." And back to Rexx. "...and arrange for a gathering of our peoples where we can exchange our cultures and enjoy good food and drink." Back to Lovra. "When the arrangements are completed, I will radio you."

"Thank you, I look forward to such an event. And, I am sure the rest of my community will as well. My people are already happy that we have found such good neighbors. Please, let us know if we can assist with the preparations."

The day of the great celebration arrived. During the previous days, an area was cleared of brush between the base of the mountain and the edge of the dome at a distance and angle away from the mine entrance such that it could not be observed by any of the mine community in case any from there were to venture near. Tables and benches were set in place for the many participants, fire pits were dug, and more tables were set nearby for food preparation and service. Autok proclaimed that it should be named "The Park of Friendship" and kept as a place of gathering and recreation. Hunters and gatherers from both communities provided game and other foods from the desert and their own supplies. Lovra provided several hundred translators and even more neural disks so that groups could engage in conversation during the festivities.

Shortly after dawn, people began to gather. Fires were built and the preparation of food began. Translators were engaged and conversations begun. Most of the younger

children needed no translators and begun to form groups to play, as child is a universal language. Musicians appeared and all settled in to have an enjoyable day.

Toward evening, Rexx, Sendi and Matu withdrew to the edges of the clearing and sat for some time watching the gathering.

After a while, Rexx commented. "Well, this seems to have been a success."

"Yes, it does." Sendi agreed.

Matu stood up and took a few steps stretching his legs. He paused, looking back toward the mountain. "That's odd."

"What?" Sendi asked, looking up at him.

"That." Matu pointed toward the mountain.

Rexx and Sendi stood up and looked to where he was pointing.

"What is it?" Rexx asked. "What do you see?"

"That...there, at the base of the mountain."

"Looks like fog." Said Rexx.

"Fog? It's been a hot dry day and it's not late enough to start cooling off yet."

"Mirage?" Suggested Rexx.

"No. Not wavy enough."

"Uh oh." Sendi said softly.

"What?" Rexx turned to her.

"I think it's the entity." She whispered.

They all focused on the distant haze.

"And, I think it's slowly drifting this way." She finished.

Rexx looked back to the gathering. "Should we warn every one?"

"I'm not sure I'd know what to say."

"No!" Matu said. "No warning! If it starts a panic, and if that really is the entity, it will attack. We can't risk that."

"Then, what can we do?" Rexx asked.

"Look...right now it's moving really slowly. Everybody at the gathering is having a good time. They're all happy. It won't be attracted to them. Maybe it's just investigating..." Matu said. "...maybe, it sensed it was too quiet in the mountain...maybe...oh, I don't know."

"No, I think you're on to something there..." Sendi began. "It's...it's a mist. It doesn't have eyes or ears. It senses negative emotions. So, maybe you're right. It's too quiet."

"But, what about the miners? They're still in the mountain. They've got to be having emotions." Rexx asked.

"There aren't that many of them, no more than a few dozen including their families, and, so far, they haven't been bothered." Matu replied. "I'm guessing they are too far away from the entity's home in this part of the mountain to be much noticed. Maybe there's too much rock in the way...insulates the noise."

"So..." Sendi mused. "...it's wandered out of its hole to find out what's going on."

"It would seem so." Matu agreed. "But, we do have an issue."

"What's that? I mean, besides the obvious?" She pointed to the distant mist.

"That." Matu pointed to the gathering where a group of very young children were playing some sort of game of tag. "If one of those little kids falls down and starts to cry, that..." He pointed back to the mist. "...is going to come after him."

"Oh! You're right!" She acknowledged.

"So, what can we do?" Rexx asked. "We can't alert the gathering. And, we certainly can't shove that thing back into its hole, can we? Can we?!"

"Hmm..." Sendi started. "Can we? Maybe, we can..."

"Well, continue." Prompted Rexx. "How can we?"

"Remember, Matu said communication is possible if we can find commonality. Maybe we can convince it."

"How are we going to convince it? What commonality?"

"Emotion...it feeds on negative emotions."

"So, what's your plan?" Matu asked. "I hope you're not going to invite it to eat you. Are you?!"

"No! I propose journeying to give it the message that there's nothing to eat out here and it should save its energy and go back to its home and go to sleep."

"But..." Rexx began. "We don't have Mana to monitor us and all we have is this bench to lie on...which I wouldn't call all that comfortable. Not to mention, it's only big enough for one."

"Well, maybe we don't need to lie down and be out of touch with our surroundings. Maybe we can just sit quietly and focus our intent." She replied. "What do you think, Matu?"

"Hmm, I've done some journeying in the past. Most of us as young adults give it a try out of curiosity, if nothing else. I don't see why it couldn't work...we may as well try. I don't know what else to do."

"Just as long as it doesn't give the entity the idea to come over and check us out." Rexx added.

"Well..." Said Sendi. "I guess we'll have to make sure our intended suggestion is strong and clear...'you're tired, go home and go to sleep, there's nothing of interest for you here'."

Matu sighed deeply. "You're very close to mind control here."

"Huh?"

"It is an entity and it is entitled to pursue its path."

"But..."

"I know...but."

She took a deep breath. "This is war."

"Still...not a command, but a suggestion, call it a warning shot...let it choose. If it agrees and leaves, then good. If not, and it decides to attack, we will stand before the gathering in their defense with positive thoughts to repel it. No fear."

"OK..." She replied. "I agree."

After several minutes of quiet concentration, Sendi leapt to her feet, clutching her forehead. "Ow! Ow! Ow!"

"Sendi!" Matu cried.

"Are you OK?" Rexx echoed, as he grabbed her by the shoulders.

"Oh!" She paused. "Yes...yes." She replied. "Yes, it's starting to go away, now."

"What happened?" Rexx asked.

"I don't know." She replied. "I was sending gentle thoughts of tiredness, when I started to feel like a headache was coming on. It gradually started to get worse, then, suddenly, it was like a knife through my brain."

While she was talking, Matu turned to watch the entity in the distance. "Guys, I think it's starting to move." They both turned to look where he was pointing. "See. It's gotten denser and it's kind of undulating."

"Oh, no." Whispered Sendi.

"Stop that!" Commanded Matu. "Remember, no fear! Don't attract any more of its attention. Your reaction to pain was probably enough for it to sense you."

"OK, OK...gentle...quiet...I'm calm."

"Rexx, how are you doing?"

"I'm good, Matu, I'm good."

"Good. Everybody stay calm. We'll just watch with nothing more than mild curiosity."

"I wish I could see it better." Rexx commented.

Sendi dug in her carrybag and pulled out a MiniCam. "Here, use the viewfinder."

"Thanks."

"What can you see?" Matu asked.

Sendi dug around in the bag and retrieved a second recorder. "Here." She handed it to him.

They stood still for a couple of minutes, just watching.

"So...?" Sendi prompted. "Fill me in."

"The movement has slowed down and it's a little less dense. But, other than that, not much change." Matu said, lowering the recorder. "Want a look?" He handed her the recorder. "I'm guessing it's lost track of you. Do you still feel any of the sensations you felt earlier?"

"Well, there's still a little of the headache, but it's just at a mild nuisance level. Nothing emotionally bothersome." She raised the recorder to her eyes and started watching through the viewfinder. Slowly she started panning across the base of the mountain.

"What are you looking at?" Matu asked.

Rexx lowered his MiniCam and turned to them.

"Moicha said that the entity entered the mountain through an opening." Sendi replied. "I'm assuming that the opening might be very close to where the entity is currently hovering. I was wondering if I could see anything that might look like an opening."

Rexx raised his MiniCam and started to pan it across the mountain as well.

"So...anything?"

"Not really." She said. "It's hard to see through the entity except near its edges and I don't see anything on either side of it."

Matu sat down on the bench and stared off toward the mountain's base. After a while, he said. "Is it my imagination, or is it getting smaller?"

"Huh?" Sendi lowered her MiniCam. "You're right. With the viewfinder, I was only focusing on a small section of it."

Rexx lowered his MiniCam. "Yeah, it is getting smaller. But, it's not any denser."

They watched for a few minutes as the entity continued to grow smaller.

"Hand me one of those cams." Matu said as he stood up from the bench. He raised the viewfinder to his eyes and focused on a small trail of mist at the base of the entity. "I think I may have found the opening." He pointed as he handed the cam back to Sendi.

Rexx noted and trained his MiniCam viewfinder to the same location.

"See where that little trail of mist is going." Matu said. "It's funneling down into that dark area."

"We should go check it out." Sendi suggested, still staring through her viewfinder. Matu and Rexx just looked at each other with silent thoughts.

"How about later, when there's not so much entity around." Matu said.

Rexx snickered. "How about a lot later." He emphasized.

"Huh?" She said, lowering her MiniCam. Puzzled, she looked at both of them, then back at the entity. "Oh. Yeah. Later." She sat down on the bench and Rexx and Matu joined her. They watched in silence as the entity slowly disappeared from view.

After it had completed its passage into the mountain, Sendi mused. "I wonder if we could somehow seal that entrance and prevent it from coming out again."

"Don't forget there's still a tunnel that connects with our settlement. I wouldn't want it to start thinking it should use that corridor instead." Matu said.

"No." Rexx said. "I agree. Better it has access to the desert for food than endangering more humans."

"Besides, the mountain has voiced that it doesn't approve of the entity." Matu reminded. "And, I'm sure that it would prefer that the entity would leave rather than being sealed inside of it."

"Yes. True." Sendi nodded.

"And, I'm not sure we could actually seal it in." Matu added. "It's a mist. It could probably ooze between whatever rocks or dirt that we could try to seal that entrance with. I've sealed jars with a little water in them, only to find them dry later. Which also implies that the rock filled tunnel we found near the Alcaad's remains isn't that secure either."

"So, what can we do?" Rexx asked. His words hung in the resulting silence.

After a while, Matu said. "I think we should tell Autok what we witnessed."

"I think we should also consult with Moicha about the attempt of communication that we tried." Sendi added.

Rexx looked over toward the happy gathering. "But, maybe, later. We shouldn't interrupt their having a good time."

Matu and Sendi followed his gaze. "Right...later." She agreed.

Moicha sighed deeply, as Sendi finished her account of the attempted communication with the entity. "This implies that any further such attempt would be disastrous and must be avoided. We will have to be very cautious in our journeying so as to not accidentally touch the entity's mind. Did you get any sensation of what its thoughts are like?"

"Hmm, I'll have to give that some thought. When the sharp pain hit me, I sort of forgot about everything else." She stood. "I'm going to go off and think." She wandered over toward the window.

Autok leaned forward. "We should discuss what we can do on security."

Rexx's gaze followed Sendi to where she stopped at the window with her hands resting on the stone ledge. She moved her hand and a small piece of the rock came loose. It rolled to the floor. She bent down and picked it up. She stood there quietly looking at it. Rexx returned his gaze to the group as Matu was saying, "When we stopped the negative emotions and remained calm, the entity appeared to lose interest toward Sendi. And after time, it returned into the mountain. I'm guessing that the park is far enough away from the mountain that the entity did not sense the gathering, for surely there must have been at least one crying child during the day."



"So..." Autok began. "What you are suggesting is that our best defense is to avoid negative emotions...that will be a difficult assignment."

"Well, maybe not so. We haven't been attacked in a long time, and, Moicha, you said that killing and consuming a human satisfies the entity's hunger for a long time. So, I don't think that it came out to hunt...more out of curiosity in the change of emotional level inside the mountain...too quiet, in other words."

"So, for now, there is no problem?"

"I wouldn't say no problem. We do have to acknowledge that there is a potential danger. But, since we no longer fear, and I emphasize the word, our neighbors, and we have determined what has been killing people, our level of negative emotion...energy...has lessened. If we can maintain the current level, I think we have hope."

Sendi slowly wandered back to the group. She was still holding the small rock and studying it thoughtfully. She sat down and held it forward. "Matu, remember we were talking about talking to rocks?"

"Yeah, commonality."

"This rock...it came loose when I put my hand on the sill. I had a strong compulsion to pick it up when it fell on the floor."

"...and?"

"When I touched it, I felt an exchange of energy. I started thinking toward the rock, greeting it, sending small friendly thoughts. If I talk to it, then it takes some of me into it and can understand me."

"Continue."

"Then if it can understand me, then it can put some of it into me."

"Should be so, yes."

"Then we have a commonality."

"Yes."

"That's kind of like what I felt trying to connect to the entity, but, a whole lot less personal. I don't know what kind of mind is there, but I couldn't find real thoughts...just vague energies, like lightening flashes. I don't know how to describe it, but there was some kind of exchange, and I'm not sure if it actually attacked me, or did it just send a...greeting...thought...back? Not sure."

"So you felt no obvious aggression from the entity?" Moicha asked.

"No, I don't think so...but, I can't really say one way or the other. I mean, it was a painful experience, but was it an attack or just a strong reaction, I don't know."

"Do you feel that it would be better to avoid trying to make contact with the entity?"

"That's, I think, another 'I don't know'. It would be valuable if we could establish communication with it and, perhaps, an agreement of truce...but, then, we also don't want to antagonize it any further..." She trailed off.

"Matu, REXX..." Moicha began. "Did either of you experience any reaction from the entity during your communication experiment?"

REXX thought for a moment. "No, I don't think so. Sitting on the bench sort of distracted me, I guess...paying too much attention to comfort got in the way of my concentration."

Matu had been staring at the floor with his chin resting on his palms and elbows on knees. He looked up at the group. "You know...I kept getting this thought of curiosity. I wonder what kind of mind it has. On what level of intellect...not the right word, maybe

consciousness, but...on what level does curiosity exist? I mean, does a rock experience curiosity?"

Sendi held out her hand with the rock on it. "I think mine does."

Matu looked at her. "And...how?"

"Well, I think that's why I felt compelled to pick it up. It felt surprise at being removed from its place and wondered how, where, why...so, I was to answer those questions...you see what I mean?"

"Yeah, commonality, and somehow you picked up on its thoughts."

Moicha chuckled. "Sendi, I think you are becoming a mystic."

"Huh?"

"You are opening your perceptions...fine tuning your inner senses."

"Hmm...yeah, I guess you're right. Before these experiences, I would have never considered talking to a rock." She gently stroked the surface of the rock, then looked to Moicha. "Can I keep him?"

"I'd say that's between you and this rock."

"Yes, but, it's part of your residence."

He laughed. "We do not own the mountain, nor does the mountain own us. We are here by mutual agreement."

She smiled, looking fondly at the rock. "Well, little one, would you consider being my...um...pet?"

"Did you get an answer?" Rexx asked.

"It got very warm, pleasingly warm." She smiled. "So, I would say that it said 'yes'."

Matu smiled and shook his head in wonder. "Sendi, you amaze me."

She looked at him. "Why? In what way?"

"You make remarkable advances, and think them simple and ordinary."

"Oh, it's simpler than that." Moicha explained. "She is seeing her potential and moving it forward. Once, you realize you can walk, it's not too hard to see yourself running."

"So, coming back to the entity..." Matu began. "I guess if we agree that this rock can experience curiosity, then the entity could also experience it. We know from your journey to the mountain's heart, that it is capable of realizing cause and effect since it demonstrated that when it was learning how to acquire food. So, maybe, my constant feeling of curiosity while attempting to communicate with it, was my receiving what it was feeling. I didn't get any other feeling...I certainly did not feel aggression from it."

"Well, that is a very positive note." Moicha remarked. "Maybe, we can coexist with it by monitoring our emotional levels. And, hopefully, restricting its feeding routines to the small desert creatures."

"I would also suggest that we seal the tunnel that leads from our inhabited areas to that place where we found the Alcaad's remains...at least filling it in with rocks like the Alcaads did with their tunnel access. It won't keep the entity in, but it will keep anyone from our community from wandering into danger." Matu added.

Sendi was just standing still contemplating her rock as Rexx watched. "Sendi? Is everything OK?"

"Huh?" She looked up. "Yeah. I guess so." She paused. "I just keep going back to the entity...wondering what really happened. I think I might want to try another attempt at...maybe, communicating...not sure if that, but, at least, trying to see what's really there...what's in its mind."

"Are you sure?" Matu asked. "I mean, the last attempt seemed awfully painful for you. Do you really want to risk more pain, if not serious physical damage?"

"I...I know what you are saying...I do understand the danger. But, still, the curiosity is becoming really strong. I want to know what's inside of it...what it is...where did it come from...why is it here...that kind of stuff."

"Hmm." Moicha said. "I would advise extreme caution and serious monitoring if you choose to pursue this. Please, take some time, at least several hours, to consider your intent and when you have made your decision, we will prepare a session for you. I will assist Mana as your guide."

"Thank you." Sendi replied.

"I would like to journey with you." Rexx volunteered and added sheepishly. "I have a need to watch out for your safety."

"Thank you, too." She smiled as she looked at him.

"I would like to assist in the monitoring." Matu said and added. "I, also, have a need to watch out for these two."

"Accepted." Moicha nodded. "Now, off with you three and prepare yourselves."

"I have one more question about entities in general." Sendi said.

"Yes?"

"This rock, for example...it was physically a part of the mountain until it broke loose. Is it mentally a part of the mountain, or is it an independent being?"

"Well, consider an analogy. You, physically, came from the physical aspects of your parents, but, even while in the womb, you were an independent entity. Does that help?"

"Well, it definitely gives me something to think about."

"Good...now off with you. Get some food and rest and work on your intents."

As they left the seers' residence and were walking down the long corridor, Sendi paused. She crossed to the side wall and slowly ran her hand along the stone wall.

Rexx halted Matu and the two of them wandered over to where she stood. "What's up?" Rexx asked.

"Rocks."

"Huh?"

"Lots and lots of rocks...all glued together...all glued into one mountain. The mountain is an entity made up of lots and lots of smaller entities...it's a community of entities."

Rexx and Matu looked blankly at each other.

She turned to them. "How does that work? I mean, how do they all agree on anything?"

"I guess like any other community." Matu ventured. "They discuss things, share experiences, and the most rational or popular, though, sometimes the most outspoken opinion wins."

"But, when Moicha journeyed to the heart of the mountain, it sounded to me like it was just one person. Is there one really big rock that's in charge of everything?"

"I don't know. Maybe you could ask it."

"Maybe, I will."

Later, as they sat around a table in the kitchen, Matu asked. "Sendi, have you any more thoughts about your journeying intent?"

"Not really. I just keep thinking I want to know more about this entity...what it thinks...what it feels its purpose is...stuff like that."

"Do any of us know what our purpose is?" Rexx asked.

"Well, no, I guess not. But, you know, short term goals, like 'I want to go to school and study for a career' type of thing. Like, does it think beyond sleeping and eating? We know it's shown creativity in its learning how to coerce its prey, and, Matu, you said you sensed curiosity when you attempted communication. Well, creativity and curiosity show promise of a higher intellect or consciousness. Perhaps, there is something there that we can communicate with, at least, on some basic level."

"You mean like on an animal level?" Rexx asked.

"Yes...when dealing with an animal, you extend a feeling of openness...of trust. You extend your hand to a dog and let it sniff it, when you know there is a possibility of being bitten."

"That's true." Matu conceded. "But, I don't want to be bitten by that entity, when I know what it's capable of."

"Nor, do I." Rexx added.

"Well, neither do I." Sendi admitted. "But, I'm hoping there's, at least, some level where we can draw a line of truce."

The next morning, Rexx found Sendi and Matu deep in conversation in the kitchen. "You're up already! I was wondering where you got off to."

Sendi looked up. "Oh, hi, Rexx! I had trouble falling asleep last night. Thinking of my rock gave me a suggestion, so I got off my bed and laid down on the floor with just the blanket over me. Somehow, the contact with the stone floor was very soothing, my muscles relaxed and I fell asleep almost instantly. I only slept for a few hours, but it was very satisfying. I woke up feeling relaxed and refreshed. Anyhow, I didn't feel like going back to sleep, so I wandered out here to the kitchen."

"Yeah, I found her here a little while ago. We've been talking about contact with stone."

"We've all heard about crystal energy from various spiritual groups, and, of course, this mine is all about extracting energy from opals. Is it about communication, or resonance, or what?" She asked.

"Don't forget coal." Matu interjected.

"Huh?"

"Coal...we burn coal to extract energy."

"But, that's not the same thing." She countered.

"Is it, or isn't it? There's still a transfer of energy, just like the opals."

"OK...maybe the opals was a bad example. But, the crystal energy thing is about transferring energy without destroying the matter of the stone."

"There again, do we know if any of the matter is destroyed? If the crystal loses a tiny amount of its matter in offering its energy, would it be perceptible? And, perhaps it gains that amount of matter back when someone concentrates their energy on the crystal."

"You mean the transfer is going both ways? Hmm...that could be."

"I think I need some coffee." Rexx commented as he rose to go get some.

"Well, you talk to your rock." Matu continued. "The mountain comforted you in your sleep issue. There's obviously a back and forth of communication there even if it's only at a feelings level."

"Hmm...getting back to the entity, maybe that's the approach I should take...just a light touch at the feelings level. Send out a soft comfort message and see how it's received."

"That sounds like it should be a safe approach."

"What would?" Rexx asked as he rejoined them.

"Oh, Sendi's idea for her intent...to send a gentle touch and see how it's received."

"But, isn't that sort of like what you tried before?" Rexx commented.

"Well, yes, and no. I think I might have been a little more harsh the last time. I'm going to try a more soft approach kind of like how I originally greeted my rock and see how that goes."

"Did you want to leave it at that or do you want to add on a prepared response option?" Matu asked.

"You mean like if I get a positive response, then I should have the plan ready of how to respond?"

"Yes, and when to run."

"Well, I hope it doesn't come to that." She paused. "Though, you've just given me an idea. When I'm journeying, I'm not bound by matter...right?"

"I guess not. What do you mean?"

"I mean, I could be inside of a rock and still be able to pick up thoughts or sensations. Doesn't that seem possible? I mean, on our first contact with the Alcaads, I was inside of the guy I was experiencing."

"So, what do you have in mind?"

"I'm thinking of sort of hovering over the entity in the rock ceiling over where it floats above that lake. You know, like quietly observing it before making any contact."

"Well..." Rexx began. "That doesn't sound like a bad idea, but, I think you should really prepare that intent well. We should probably talk it over and try to cover as many possible points of view that we can come up with."

"I agree." Matu said.

Sendi suddenly jerked awake.

"Easy!" Mana advised. "Come back slowly. You don't want to shock your senses."

"Air! I need air!" Sendi gasped.

"Slowly...now breathe deeply...in and out...again."

After a few breaths, Sendi acknowledged. "Better...yes, I'm better."

"What happened?" Rexx asked. "A few minutes into the journeying, I lost touch with you. Suddenly, every thing went dark, so I returned, hoping to help from this side."

"Slow down, Rexx." Mana scolded. "Let her recover first."

"Sorry." Rexx sighed. "I'm just anxious."

"I know, but give her a little time."

"No. It's OK." Sendi said. "I'm fine...I..."

"Take your time, and compose your thoughts." Mana said. "It might be best to start from the beginning. Think it over. How did your journey start?"

"OK...yeah, OK...the beginning..." She sat up as Matu offered her a cup of tea. "When I first started, I sort of floated high up into the air. I kind of soared over the mountain and the desert, as if I was one of the eagles...searching, searching for something. This lasted for a seemingly long time. I wasn't aware of anything other than the need to keep searching."

"Do you think you might have joined with one of the eagles?" Mana asked. "Did you feel that you retained your own thoughts, or were other thoughts being suggested by another presence?"

"I feel like I was still me, but there was a very strong suggestion."

"Did you feel that it was pressuring you with an intent that was against your desire?"

"No, not really. More, like it was in agreement, but taking command of the controls and reducing me to being the passenger."

"Sounds like maybe you did join with an eagle." Rexx ventured. "Did you have that intent?"

"No, I think it was just accidental." She commented. "If it was an eagle, I didn't notice any thoughts from it that would have made that fact obvious...it just felt like me. Anyhow, gradually, I started coming closer to the ground, and after a few more passes over the desert, I found that entrance into the mountain that we saw the entity disappear into. I left the eagle, I guess, because the need to search went away, and I entered into the mountain's entrance. I seemed to be traveling very fast as the rock walls all around me were blurred. I soon found myself at that lake. I saw the entity as a distant cloud and tried to approach it with an empty mind...not projecting any thing."

"Do you think it sensed your presence?" Rexx asked.

"No, I don't believe so." She paused. "I tried to be only receptive. And, I didn't see any indication of change...it just hovered above the water, hardly moving at all. I could see a few small flashes of light randomly here and there within it...small, like sparks. I'm guessing those might have been its thoughts...but, I'm not really sure about that."

"Any particular reason you associated the lights with thoughts?" Mana asked.

"Only that when I tried communicating with it that day we were out in the desert that I associated energy flashes within it as possible functions of its mind. When Lovra described how the entity killed his comrade they saw electrical flashes within the entity."

"Well, I could see how an energy exchange could relate to thought...brain activity, or at the very least a function of a nervous system." Matu added. "Did you get any other indication of thought?"

"No, not really." She replied, then continued. "I slowly moved closer to the entity and tried to move up and above it. I guess I figured it would be more likely to attack something below it, like it did with animals and people, than above it. I don't know how it would disguise itself to attract a bird as prey."

"The only thing I can think of would be to disguise itself as something that a bird would want to eat." Matu said. "Sorry, just musing...go on."

"As I got closer, I started to feel a little strange, kind of uneasy, but, not like that feeling of being watched that we had before. This was more disconcerting, kind of like a queasy stomach coming on. It almost made me want to stop and go back. But, I figured that since I had come this far, I'd better see it through."

"You seem to be really improving in your ability in maintaining your presence. Most people need years of practice to get this far." Mana observed. "It takes a lot of concentration to maintain one's intent when confronted with the myriad of images that can be observed while journeying. Consider how confusing dreams can be."

"Thanks." Sendi smiled. "I really didn't know how much closer I could get to the entity. The weird feelings were starting to cloud my ability to keep my mind clear of thoughts and stay only receptive."

"The spirit of the mountain did say that there was a feeling of discontent where the entity dwelt." Matu reminded.

"Yes, and a noxious odor." Rexx added.

"That was it!" Sendi exclaimed. "It stunk! That's what was disturbing me. There was a stench of decaying flesh. I got as close as I could. And then, I couldn't keep my mind clear and started to be repulsed by the odor. I think that's when it started to become aware of my presence...and, I fled...back here."

"That's why you said you needed air...to clear the stench." Rexx acknowledged.

"Yes." She agreed, then shook her head. "I don't know how emergency workers and those who clear battlefields to bury the dead can do it. It was overwhelming."

"Sendi, pause a minute." Mana advised. "Your reaction, just now, shows you've had a very traumatic experience. I think you should ground yourself with some food and drink. Rest a bit. And then, we can come back to reflecting on your experience. I feel there is a lot more here that we need to explore."

Sendi sat still, slowly sipping a cup of tea. Rexx set down his cup and asked. "Whatcha thinking?"

"I'm trying to figure how that thing thinks...I mean, it's demonstrated curiosity, ability to understand cause and effect...that would imply logic...it also must have some sort of sensory input, since it can process that information to enable it to manifest visual and auditory images. It doesn't seem to set any kind of trap for its prey. It seems to rely on chance encounters. I don't know...have I left out anything?"

"I don't think so. Matu, you?"

"Not offhand."

"So, why can't I sense its mind?"

"You don't think it's controlled by something outside of itself, do you?" Matu asked.

"I hadn't thought of that...but, if so, what? What else is around here that could control it?"

"I mean, you don't sense that it's a machine, or anything like that?"

"...a machine...?"

"Yeah, like some kind of a robot. When the miners first came here they had this big tunnel boring machine that was controlled by a remote handheld gadget. They gave up on it because it was damaging the ore. But, anyway, something like that."

"No. I don't get that impression. A machine wouldn't be consuming flesh and blood, would it?"

"I guess not, unless that was its source of fuel."

"Well, it is its fuel, but, not in that way. No, I really feel that it's alive in some way. I just don't know what." She paused. "I think I need to go back over the details of my journey and see if I'm missing something."

"OK." Rexx said. "So, starting from the beginning. You possibly joined with an eagle and flew with it and started searching. Do you remember any experiences while you were searching?"

"It was bright...harsh sunlight...with haze on the desert floor. The eagle must...well, should have been able to see well, but, my imagery wasn't good...like, it was too bright for my mind's eyes."

"That's good." Mana said. "Anything else...sound...smell...anything from any of the other senses?"

"Smell. Out in the desert, it was sharp, flinty, kind of sulfury. Matu, is there volcanic activity in this area?"

"I think there are some hot springs, but they aren't very near. I don't think you would sense any odor from them."

"Remember, you can pick up sensations that may, or may not, relate to the 'real' world, as in the physical world that we walk around in. You could be listening into other thoughts." Mana reminded.

"Wind." Sendi continued. "Wind and rock dust...against my eyes...dry. When I entered the mountain, it became cool. There was a soft sweet damp earth smell. The further I went the sweetness left and the smell of earth became less sweet and it turned to the smell of clay...dry clay." She looked at Mana. "What's it all mean?"

Mana laughed. "Sorry. But you're asking the wrong person. Look inside and ask again."

"Maybe not." Matu said. "Maybe we all need to think and see what resonates."

"How did all these sensations make you feel?" Rexx asked.

"Itchy." Sendi remarked absently. "I guess that's about the best word. Until I got to the damp earth smell...that was soothing. Then when it became clay, it went back to being itchy."

"Was it strong itch, like a bad rash?"

"No...mild, on the just mildly irritating level...enough to be noticeable, but not very distracting."

"When you were with the eagle, searching, were you projecting finding the entity?" Matu asked.

"Maybe, I guess probably, why?"

"Well, maybe you were connecting with it. And, maybe it was responding."

She thought a moment. "You could be right."

"I'm thinking." Matu continued. "That maybe you're communicating on a sensory level as opposed to a rational one. Can you think of any other sensations that you experienced. That feeling of nausea was certainly a strong reaction to its presence."

"You know, when I first saw it when we were by that underground lake, I didn't have any of those feelings."

"But, that was before you tried to communicate with it when we were out in the desert."

"You mean, it didn't know me then?"

"Precisely! Now, it, in some strange way, knows you and is communicating on a sensory level. It struck you with a very strong headache."

"Yeah, you're right. OK, so back to going over what I felt during the journey...not just what I was thinking about...sigh."

"Sendi." Mana interjected. "I think you need a rest before frustration clouds your thoughts. Maybe some food or a walk around might help."

"Yeah, I think maybe both. I'd like to go out and walk a bit."

"Want company?" Rexx asked.

"Sure." She smiled.

A short while later found them at the overlook. "Let's sit here a while." She suggested. They sat quietly overlooking the desert. Rexx asked. "Do you still feel like we're going to be stuck in some weird time zone for the rest of our lives?"

She laughed. "Gosh, I wish I knew. But, a lot has happened since I said that."



"Yeah. The Alcaad are no longer the 'enemy'. The entity has taken that place...or maybe, it hasn't...we still don't really know what its intentions are...if any."

"Yeah." She went quiet, then added. "I think that, if when I tried to communicate with it, it really thought I was a threat, then it would have tried to destroy me at that time. It's certainly capable of that. If it can send me sensory input, then it's not trying to kill me...well, not yet. Maybe it's still trying to figure out what I am, like I'm trying to figure out what it is...something like that."

Rexx sighed. "Yeah. Let's hope it stays at the curious level."

"Yeah."

"Do you have any more thoughts on your sensory experiences?"

"Actually, yes. When I went from the eagle to the entrance to the mountain and the itchiness was soothed by the damp earth...that's when I stopped searching because I imagine I had found what I was looking for. I guess that's when my thoughts turned away from the entity and came back to myself...I was no longer poking at it."

"So, you think that it stopped poking at you?"

"Yes, exactly. And, as I got closer to the lake, I started thinking about the entity again...unconsciously, I guess, projecting my thoughts toward it...and, in response, it started poking at me again."

"Wow...what a complex language!"

"I hadn't thought about it quite that way...but, yes."

"Do you think that when you got really close, the nausea you felt, was it showing you its real self."

"Huh? Why do you think that?"

"Because, you said it stunk. And, that was the same reaction that the spirit of the mountain had."

She thought for a minute, then replied. "I think you may be right. But, how do I interpret what it means?"

"Matu would probably say to get one of the Alcaad translators."

"But, how do we convince the entity to wear it?" She laughed. "Thanks! I needed that."

"Do you want to head back to the residence? I think we should relay these thoughts to Mana and the others."

"Yeah, I think you're probably right. Let's go. But, let's not tell Matu what you said about the translators."

Mana laughed. "You're quite right, that is a complex language. But, I think that is a very good analysis. What sensations you receive are all part of the knowledge that you are receiving...you can think of it like studying body language. And, it's through the use of language that we normally think of how we gain knowledge."

"So, how do I begin to unravel this new language?" Sendi asked. "Moicha, when you were in communication with the mountain, did you get any indication of how the mountain saw the entity? I mean 'saw' in the broad sense."

"I think that question will require some consideration. Other than the sensation of unpleasantness and odor, I don't recall the mountain relating much. Perhaps a brief journey to consult the mountain's impressions might be required. I will make preparations for such and alert you when I have something to share." He excused himself to his quarters.

Mana turned back to Sendi. "Have you any more thoughts about sensations from your journey?"

"Hmm, I think that when I became aware of the dryness and itchiness, I distracted myself from the intent of the journey. That would have probably interrupted the dialog with the entity...I'm thinking like when you're trying to tell something to someone, and you have to say a lot of background subject matter to set the stage for your story, and when, you get to the part about what you really wanted to say, you've forgotten what it was. That's when we have to say, 'sorry, I lost the train of my thought'."

Mana laughed. "Yes, I've had that happen more often than I like."

"So, being distracted, maybe the entity was becoming irritated with my not finishing the sentence and sent me another itch. They did seem to be getting worse, the closer I got to the lake. Which could be why, when I immersed myself in the pleasantness of the soothing damp earth, that it might have been saying, 'hey, aren't you going to finish that thought?'"

Just then, Moicha returned.

Mana looked up in surprise. "That was fast." She commented.

"Well, I didn't have to probe too deep to get an answer. I think the spirit of the mountain had monitored your journey, Sendi, and was anticipating my questions."

"Wow!" Sendi replied. "Suddenly, I feel like I understood the soothing damp earth feeling. Because, while I was passing through the entrance and down in the tunnel, I noticed that it was all bare rock. There was no damp earth. So, the mountain was comforting me." She paused and closed her eyes for a moment. "Thank you, Mountain!"

Mana turned to Moicha. "So, what have you learned?"

"Hmm, yes." Moicha began, then paused. "As I have said before, the mountain does not communicate in the same manner as we do, and the images may not be immediately understood, but may take some unraveling to grasp their full meaning."

"Yes, we understand." Mana remarked. "We do not share the same abilities where sensation is concerned."

"The mountain described the entity like a thunderstorm, and sometimes like a waterfall. It is a confusion of energies, building, raising up, tangling, then falling with enormous force. When it is in its cave, its home, its solitude, it takes comfort in the stillness of the lake. The water quiets its tension."

"Wow!" Rexx commented. "I guess, then, when it's there, and at peace, it's less likely to attack."

"Which is maybe why it didn't bother me when I first saw it at the lake...I would say it seemed like it was sleeping." Sendi added. "Then, when I moved my flashlight across and the beam hit it, it woke up and became invisible."

"Should we drain the lake?" Rexx asked.

"You mean, to make it leave the mountain?" Matu clarified.

"Yes."

"No, it's too valuable as a potential source of clean water for our communities, and second, how...how would you do it? We couldn't get close enough without alerting the entity and it would certainly strike to protect its home. Besides, where would you drain it off to? It's already deep in the mountain. There would have to be a cavern deeper than it. And, there's nothing like that that we know of."

"OK, I surrender. I agree. It was just an 'off the top of my head' type of thought." Rexx said.

"It's OK, sorry...just different priorities. I'm thinking of security and you're thinking of offense...not a problem."

"But, getting back to the situation with the entity..." Sendi began. "...it seems that the thought of trying to communicate with it is becoming a lot more complicated. I have no idea of how to talk to a thunderstorm or a waterfall, or, for that matter, how to relate to it."

"Native Americans danced to ask the clouds for rain." Matu said offhandedly.

"Well, true, but my experience with thunderstorms and waterfalls is more on the receiving end. I see, feel, hear, smell, maybe taste, but I am not sending a message to it."

"Maybe you are." Mana said.

"Huh?"

"You're reacting...sometimes, perhaps, with pleasure, maybe, with fear...you're reactions are feedback to the source."

"Oh."

"And that feedback is a reply to its statements...its questions. If I say something and you smile or frown, it alters how I next voice my opinions."

"But, does a thunderstorm or waterfall sense my reactions when there may be hundreds or thousands of others also reacting?"

"Probably...the voice of a group responding similarly merely reinforces the response. An audience applauding, or even just appearing to be contented tells the performer that what he is doing is approved of."

"What if my reaction is different than that of the crowd. Would it be acknowledged?"

"I would say that would depend on how, let's say, loud, or different, your reaction was."

"If I understand you correctly, say, a crowd of people are admiring a beautiful waterfall, and I jump into the pool at its base and start swimming...what then?"

"Well, I think that would be a very dramatic demonstration of your reaction. The crowd is distanced...distinct from the waterfall...air, perhaps, sound...the oohs and awes of the crowd deafened by the crashing of the water...these are barriers that separate. But, you, swimming, would be in direct physical contact with the water...much more intimate, if you understand me. So, I think the waterfall would be much more aware of your response and would be more likely to direct its attention to you."

"I see."

"Take another example...a musician performing before an audience, takes his bow to the audience who is clapping appreciatively, but, one audience member approaches the stage and lays a bouquet of flowers at his feet. That reaction over shadows all the rest."

"So, returning to the entity, other than responding in either the affirmative or negative, or for that matter, indifferent...how would I express an independent thought towards it? Like, how could I ask a question?"

"OK, let's keep with the waterfall and its pool, for the moment. And, let's see what kind of a question we could direct to it that isn't just some sort of reaction. Because, in a sense, we do have the entity in its sometime state as a waterfall and the still pool that it hovers above."

"Is the pool an entity?" Rexx interjected. "If it has a calming influence on the entity, might it also be alive?"

"That's a very good point." Mana acknowledged. "I guess we would have to probe it to find out."

"I feel like this is getting more complicated." Sendi replied. "I think we should just stick with the entity for now."

"You're probably right." Mana agreed. "The pool can wait, since it's not an active force in this situation. So, any thoughts on a question for the waterfall state of the entity, or for that matter, its thunderstorm state?"

Sendi paused to think. "All, I can come up with is 'how do I ask you a question?'. 'How do I approach you?'"

"Well, that's a valid question...either one of them. But, we'll start with how do you approach a waterfall...a thunderstorm? Analyze your feelings, your intent."

"Well, either one would, or maybe, should be approached with caution, as both are potentially dangerous, and we know the entity is dangerous."

"Caution can imply awe or fear. How do you want to approach?"

"Well, neither of those. But, caution can also imply that I am just walking on slippery ground and don't want to misstep."

"So, rephrase that as a question to the entity."

"Oh, wow...let's see...'Greetings, entity. I come in peace and would like to request a conversation with you.' Oh, gosh, that sounds so trite."

Mana laughed. "It's OK...we'll work on it. Remember, we have no idea what thought patterns exist in a thunderstorm that becomes a waterfall."

"I'm beginning to think I do." Matu said.

"Huh? What?" Rexx asked.

"Well, one moment, I'm really tense, ready to fly into a rage, and the next, I'm calm and melting into relaxation. I don't get it. What's making me feel like this?"

"That's interesting, Matu." Mana observed. "How long have you been having this feeling?"

"Oh, I don't know...maybe since we started talking about the entity...but, it's been building slowly, and only recently has it been this noticeable."

"Do you think you are in contact with the entity?"

"I don't know...could be. How would I know?"

"Well, maybe, we should go over what you've been experiencing."

"Well, I guess starting with the tension...it comes on slow...I get this feeling of anticipation...irritable anticipation. It's like the feeling of there's something that I have to do...experience...that's unpleasant. I know it will be alright in the end, but I've got to do the thing that I don't want to in order to get there.

"Kind of like going to the dentist?" Rexx speculated.

"Dentist?"

"Yeah, the guy that cleans your teeth and repairs damage. They've always got sharp instruments to poke your gums with and they seem to forget you can feel how sharp they are."

"Oh, yeah...we've got something similar. Our healers use an herbal ointment to numb the pain, but sometimes it takes a while to take effect. But, yeah, it's something like that...the anticipation of pain that has to be endured...and, hoping, please, to let it all be over soon."

"Then, what happens?" Mana asked.

"Then, it starts getting more anxious and I start feeling little pin pricks of tensions...not on my skin, but deep inside my muscles. Like I want to scratch, but, I can't reach where the itch is."

"That's actually not too dissimilar of a description to the itchiness that I was feeling when I was getting near the entity." Sendi commented.

"Well." Mana began. "That sounds like an affirmation to me that you were both experiencing a sort of connection with the entity. Please continue, Matu."

"From there, it gets a little sharper. You know how sometimes you get a sharp stabbing pain from a pinched nerve...kind of like that...but, it's not just once, they're here and there...all over and it makes me feel angry. I want to shout out 'stop!'...'make it stop!'" He paused and sighed deeply. "Then...it's like something snaps...and I feel like a cool mist is falling lightly on my head, then, my arms...my legs...all over me. Then, there's a long pause and I'm refreshed...at peace again...and it's over, until...until...some part of me starts...starts to fear...starts to anticipate...wondering when it will start to build again." He shuddered and buried his face in his hands.

"Matu. Please be calm...relax and let go." Mana advised as she pulled Matu's hands from his face and placed a mug of tea in them. "Drink this. Sip it slowly and free your thoughts from this. Come, let's talk of other things for a while."

"Yes." Sendi added shakily. "I think we need to move away from these attempts to communicate for now. We are obviously drawing too much attention to ourselves."

"Hmmf." Rexx stifled a laugh. "It seems to me that this entity is a nervous wreck."

"Huh?" Sendi queried.

"I mean, if I was a psychiatrist, I'm sure there's some mumbo-jumbo brand illness that could describe what it's going through."

"Well, Rexx, that may be so." Mana said. "Or not, as this may be the normal mental state for this kind of being."

"If that's normal, I'm glad I don't belong to that specie."

"Nor, I." Matu sighed. "It was bad enough just eavesdropping on its brain. Or, having it eavesdrop on me...however that went."

"Matu..." Mana began. "How are you? Are you feeling alright? Are you experiencing any more of these tensions?"

Matu stretched his arms and neck and looked around. "No. I guess I'm alright. I think it's gone...whatever link that was there is broken. But, I agree that we should probably distance ourselves from trying to understand the internal workings of this entity. It seems that it is very easy for it to find its way into our minds...our thoughts...even our bodies."

"I wonder..." Sendi mused. "Is that how it learned to feed off of the desert creatures?"

"How do you mean?" Asked Rexx.

"I mean, does it actually manifest into something physical. Or, does it invade its victims' minds and kill by...suggestion...fear?"

"But, we saw the remains...bones...artifacts that were left behind from the attacks." Matu argued. "And, we have Lovra's description of how his comrade was killed."

"Artifacts, possessions, yes, those kinds of things would have been there regardless. But, could the actual attack have been something very powerful, though, less tangible?"

"What do you mean?"

"Hallucination...group hypnosis...oh, I don't know...maybe, some sort of electrical energy thing...for that matter, even magic."

"Seriously?"

"Yes. How much do we actually know of what kinds of energies exist in the Universe?"

"No." Mana added. "She has a very good point. We don't know. And, we don't know what these energies might be capable of doing."

"Yes." Sendi continued. "The concept of magical forces exists in almost all known cultures, and, how do we know how much of it is real or dismissed as just old superstitions passed down over the generations. But, regardless, there is a basis for it somewhere."

"We don't know." Mana said. "Until, we explore, and see for ourselves what's really out there."

"So. Where does that leave us? We know a little bit more about the entity. But, what we do know is putting us at a disadvantage in dealing with it."

"Yes. That does seem to be our situation. We don't seem to be strong enough to defend ourselves against it, so, for now, distancing is the best thing."

"I wonder how this fits in to what we are supposed to be doing here?" Rexx asked.

"Oh, yeah...fixing the wild time thing. Wow, I don't know. I feel like the relationship we established with the Alcaad would, somehow, have made that better. But, we're at a standstill with the entity...and, I don't know if that's even relevant to the time issue. So, I have no idea."

"So, do you think...oh, I hate to say this...do you think we're going to be stuck here forever?" Rexx suddenly froze, then glanced at Matu. "Oh, man!" He groaned. "I didn't mean that in a bad way. We like it here, but..."

"I know...it isn't home. Don't worry, I understand."

"No." Sendi interrupted, slowly shaking her head. "The Time Police kept the TimePod behind one of their barricades so the miners couldn't find it. It's there for us to use later. It's gotta be...it's just gotta be..."

"Sendi...?" Rexx hesitated.

"No. It's OK...just feeling lost and not knowing where to turn next."

"Yeah...I know." He muttered.

"But, we must have helped the time line situation with the Alcaad. I mean, now they know about the war and can prepare for it. And, we know that they are not the enemy...so, going back to the future, we know not to fire on that guy. So...?"

Rexx sighed. "I don't know. I just don't know."

"Is it because we transgressed the barricade? No, the Time Police said it was because the Alcaad died. So, we can't undo his death from here...what can we do, or, what do we have to do, now, here?"

"I wish I knew."

"Pray?" Suggested Matu.

"Huh?" Rexx and Sendi said in unison.

"Do you have a spiritual guide that you could ask for help?"

"Um...I don't know." She turned to Rexx. "Do you, Rexx?"

"I don't think so."

"Well, then, I guess we have some work to do."

Rexx and Sendi exchanged glances.

"OK, what do we have to do?" Rexx asked.

"Is there no one who has never come out of nowhere to help you when you were in need?"

"Well, yes." Sendi replied. "On occasion, help came that wasn't really requested. But, I never thought of it as being something that I was particularly asking for."

"But, did you actually ask?"

"Yes...I guess, in a way, I did. I needed something...I wanted it to happen, and, I hoped it would. I guess, in a way, I was asking...is that what you mean by praying?"

"Well, what is a prayer...isn't it just a putting out of a request to whoever is listening with a hope that they may respond in kindness."

"That seems to be a profound way of saying that." Rexx said.

"Is it? Doesn't seem that profound to me...just simple human nature."

"Well, I mean, who is the 'person' that might be listening...and, how are they listening?"

Matu just smiled and shook his head. "Rexx, haven't you been paying attention?"

"What do you mean?"

"Look at all we've been through recently...the Alcaad...the entity...even Sendi's rock...there are lots of minds out there. Some are listening...some are talking...and, some aren't paying any attention at all."

"I see...I guess."

"You just have to find the right one...the one that has the answer to your question or the solution to your predicament and has the desire to share that knowledge."

"And, how do we find this person?"

"By asking...and letting that thought flow out into the Universe. Sooner or later it may find the right receiver."

"And, if it doesn't?" Asked Sendi. "What then?"

"Then, it's time to rethink the question. Maybe, it wasn't phrased quite rightly. Maybe too much emphasis was put on the tea cup and not enough on the tea.

"A question, huh?" Rexx began. "Like what?"

"Well, you want to know what you have to do to fix the time problem. But, is that really what you want to ask?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, is it actually to fix the problem, or is it to go home, or is it something else?"

"Hmm, not sure...I guess I sort of lumped all of those together."

"Something else'..." Sendi repeated. "I'm wondering about that. I'm also wondering about the time thing...like, is time still messed up? I mean if it was fixed, would we know?"

"How do you mean?" Rexx asked.

"Well, how would we know? Everything seems normal. Would it suddenly seem different if it changed, and how would it change if it did? I mean, would we suddenly go to an entirely different history and would it seem different...would we remember what we were just talking about? It seems kind of strange if it would be like that. It seems to me that if time got fixed, we might not know that anything changed."

"That sounds rather logical." Matu said. "I think it would be rather strange if we suddenly were doing and thinking different things. I don't know. Would we notice, or not?"

"That's a good question." Mana acknowledged. "That's something I hadn't thought about, before. Though, this whole concept is something I had not thought about before."

"Oh, and another thought...would we necessarily be going home, or back to the scene of the crime, when time was fixed, or is there something else we have to do?"

"Wow, I think the question has gotten a lot bigger." Rexx remarked.

"Yeah...I guess it did." Sendi agreed. "So, where do we begin?"

"Well, I guess we need to list our wants and needs and see what our priorities are."

"Wow, that could be huge."

"Oh, God, I hope not."

"So, we want to right our wrong. We want to go home. What else? I mean fixing the time thing, I'm sure, involves a lot of other motives that we can't even begin to understand, but, I still worry about changing the time line that we are currently experiencing. What will

happen to Matu's people...to Lovra's people...to their future? For that matter, to our future? It scares me."

"Well, OK...the future. If we fix whatever needs fixing, then the future for Lovra's people will be OK, wouldn't it? Because, they're there in the future, aren't they?"

"Are they?" Sendi asked. "Or, is it the invaders?"

"Oh, don't do that to me."

"No, seriously, the guy you killed...yeah, he shouldn't have died just then, or in that way, but we have no idea which side he was on. If there were still sides at that time. There's too many unknowns. We really didn't know anything about what was going on in that war...we were just caught up in the action...drama...romance...whatever you want to call it."

"Yeah, people do seem to get caught up in the emotion of war." Rexx turned to Matu. "Is it the same for you?"

Matu just blinked at Rexx. "Um, we really haven't been at war with anyone. Sure, in the past, neighboring tribes have had differences, but it's never come to a real war. So, I guess I can't say if we get caught up in emotions over it."

"Wow." Rexx commented, shaking his head. "We were born in the wrong universe."

"So, I'm guessing the simple form of our question is how to fix what we need to, to make everything right."

"I guess that about sums it up. So, how do we ask that, Matu?"

"I think you just did." He then added. "And, don't forget to thank the sender. As we do, they, too, need help along the way. The path is long, and the path is hard, and not many make it to the end...old saying."

"So..." Sendi began. "I guess the next question is what, exactly, is it that needs to be fixed? I'm trying to remember what the Time Police said...he said we changed the flow of events and our future didn't exist...so, why are we in our distant past? It seems to me that we should have only had to go back in time, maybe, only a few days. Maybe, back to when we decided to go out through the Time Barricade, because that would've been what led to us encountering the Alcaad."

"He also said that we had to learn and correct the damage." Rexx added. "But, what does that mean? Learn what?" Rexx turned to Matu. "I just had a thought...you knew who we were and why we were here, when we got here. Did 'he who travels between' say anything about what we were supposed to do?"

"You know, I only got instructions after the fact. I can go and ask Autok if he has any more information." Matu picked up the radio phone and headed towards the door. "I'll go call him."

After Matu left, Sendi turned to Mana. "This question thing...it seems to me that it's kind of the same thing as journeying...is it?"

"Well, yes, they are very similar. When you begin a journey, you set an intent, a particular destination: a place, a person, or some knowledge. Then, the part of you that knows the best path, guides you toward your destination, where you may explore and experience. With the question, you have also set an intent, finding a particular piece of knowledge, but you leave it to some part of Universe to guide you to your answer. It may come in a conversation, or in a dream, or even in finding an interesting rock."

"I see."

"So, there's no way of actually knowing when or where you could expect to get an answer to your question?" Rexx asked.



Mana shook her head in reply. "No. You can never expect an answer, because some questions just don't have answers...at least, what we could understand as an answer. Universe tends to communicate in graphic ways, in pictures, instead of words."

"Huh?" He remarked. "How does that work?"

"Think about your dreams. Most of what you experience is visual, yet you understand what is going on by how the context relates to you. Even in everyday life, you can enter a room and by the things in the room and by the actions of the people gathered there, you understand the function or purpose of the room."

"Oh." Sendi realized. "Like when we first looked in on the miner's marketplace, there were people tidying their stalls in anticipation of customers, and there was an area with tables and chairs and the smell of food, so we knew that it was to be used for eating."

"Exactly!" Mana agreed. "We understand by repetition of events throughout our lives and most of them are graphic."

The door opened and Matu returned. He dropped down onto the couch with a strange look on his face.

"So...?" Rexx asked. "What did you find out?"

Matu took a deep breath and began. "You were sent here to make the 'old' into the 'new'. And, in the 'course of it, understand the undoing'. Don't look at me...those were the words of 'he, who...'"

"...travels between'." Rexx finished. "Yeah, yeah, we get it. No easy answer here."

"No." Sendi began. "Maybe there is something here. The 'old'...maybe the legends, the deep unrest, that Autok described when we first got here. Well, we found the entity and it seems more or less manageable as long as we leave it alone. And, we discovered that the Alcaad were not an enemy...that could be a 'new'. But, understanding the 'undoing'?...I don't know what that means."

"I'm going to go with the Alcaad, but in a slightly different way." Rexx said. "When we were on the Time Tour, the Alcaad were the invaders and the enemy, which, I guess, is why I shot him without really thinking about it. But, since, we now understand that they aren't the enemy, and we are helping them to prepare for the war that's coming, well, I would say that's undoing the old and making it the new...wouldn't you?"

"Sounds good to me." Matu acknowledged.

"So...the understanding?" Sendi asked.

"Well, maybe, learning to not react in haste, but to pause and think things through."

"But, everything that we knew, when we were on the tour, about the Alcaad let us believe that they were ruthless killers. If you had paused, he might have killed you."

"That's true. And, I guess, if he did, he might be here instead of me, trying to fix time."

"That's a strange thought." Sendi commented. "Would I be here as well?"

"Sorry, guys, I just can't picture that." Matu shook his head in denial.

"But, getting back to it..." Rexx started. "We did pause when we found the Alcaad's remains. We stopped to consider that they were also victims of the entity, and were not necessarily an enemy to Matu's tribe. We contacted them, we undid the 'enemy', and made friends with them. So, why are we still here?"

"I don't know." Sendi threw her hands up into the air in despair and said. "Not enough 'understanding', I guess."

"The 'enemy'..." Matu echoed.

"Huh?" Rexx responded.

"The 'enemy' seems to float around a lot...first it's one group, and then it's the next group, where does it stop?"

"I guess it stops at the group that's doing the harm." Sendi said.

"And, who is that here?"

"Well, the entity...and, I guess, the invading Alcaad." Rexx said.

"But..." Sendi began. "The entity is sort of mindless...at least what I experienced. Do you agree, Matu?"

"Yes." He nodded.

"So, can something that's mindless be actually evil?"

"We didn't go to 'evil'. You said, causing 'harm'."

"OK, that's true, I did say 'harm'. And, a mindless being can cause harm."

"So can one with a mind." Matu added.

"And, the invaders were causing harm, from the very beginning." Rexx stated.

"Even before becoming the invaders, according to Lovra...their government was persecuting them." Sendi recounted.

"So, if the enemy, the 'old' enemy is the invaders, then we haven't undone them."

"No, we haven't." She paused. "But, actually, could we? Wouldn't that change the time we are in here? And, our future as well?"

"Yes. I guess it would. So, that's not an option for us." Rexx conceded.

"Hmm..." Matu began. "Is there anything in that magic time machine that could give us some hints about what we could be doing?"

"You know..." Sendi observed. "The recordings in the viewer seem to be outside of this time. They hadn't been altered to fit what's going on here. Maybe we should go see if there are any archives that would shed a little more light on what's behind this future war. I mean, I'm sure there are people who are avid historians that have taken these tours and they must have wanted more data than just the brief over view."

"Well, then, let's go see." Matu added. They rose and took their leave of Mana and Moicha.