

Rexx sat on the control couch and activated the viewer while Sendi and Matu stood on either side. "First, I will play the overview recording so that Matu can get the general idea of what was happening." He said. "Then, we can search the library and see what else is there."

When the sequence ended, Rexx paused the recording.

"Wow!" Matu exclaimed. "Six hundred years of war...and all those spaceships...that's a lot for our Alcaad friends to prepare for."

"Yes, it is." Sendi acknowledged. "But, they seemed to think that they have enough time to prepare for it."

"Yes, about twenty seven hundred years...did I do the math right? That's a long time...still, though...and Earth's humans were also fighting the invaders?"

"Yeah...they believed they were defending Earth." Rexx said.

"Well, then, they were at least some help, even though they didn't know it." He paused. "They didn't, did they?"

"No. Or, at least, it wasn't common knowledge if any of them did."

"You know, thinking about it..." Sendi mused. "Maybe some of them did."

"Huh? What do you mean?" Rexx asked.

"Well, Matu's tribe are now friends with the Alcaad colony here...that's a lot of time to build a combined army. But, how much common knowledge would have been shared with humanity at large during that time...well, we just don't know...but, I'm sure some was."

"I'm pretty sure the Alcaad would want to keep their presence here a secret." Matu said. "Even before the invaders arrived, there might have...make that, must have been spies...scout ships seeking to locate them. Otherwise, all those ships wouldn't have arrived here as a group. And, destroying the space station, they must have thought the humans were protecting them. What I don't get is why they sent so many to eliminate so few."

"I guess that's a question for Lovra. We'll have to ask him." Sendi added. "But, let's see if there's anything of value in this library."

Rexx opened the library and started scanning through the listings. "Wow, Sendi, you were right about having a lot of material for avid historians...there's tons of stuff here. Though, it makes sense, I guess, with these being time travel tours. They'd have to know a lot of history to be able to pick out interesting stuff that people would want to spend credits on seeing."

Sendi peered at the screen. "You're right, there is a lot here. How do you suggest we go about sorting through it?"

"Well, I can tell it to sort geographically or chronologically...any preference?"

"I guess it wouldn't do us any good to look at anything before now or after the tour we were on in Fifty Ninety Eight. So, chronologically seems right." She turned to Matu. "This is still Twenty Fifty Three, isn't it? That's where, uh when, we're supposed to be."

"Yeah, more or less." She looked puzzled and he grinned. "Yes, it is. Just kidding...you know us primitives can't tell time."

She scowled at him, then returned to the adjusted readout on the screen. "I'm thinking, maybe look for unusual spacecraft sightings, or atmospheric anomalies, or strange radio activity, or...oh, I don't know...something that might suggest the appearance of a scout ship."

"Actually, you might want to adjust the upper limit to Forty Four Eighty Two when the fleet was first seen approaching the space station." Matu suggested. "Any scouts would have done their job by then."

"You primitives can't tell time, huh?" Sendi replied sarcastically.

"OK, I narrowed down the search parameters." Rexx said. "And, I restricted them to off-world locations, since scouts would be originating from the Alcaad home planet and out world activity would be noticed first. I also started the search with unusual radio activity hoping for some ship to base communications."

They quietly stared at the screen as the data lines scrolled past.

"Is this searching operation considered fast or slow?" Matu asked after a few minutes.

"I'm afraid it's normal...and, yes, it's slow." Rexx replied.

"Oh, good, I thought it was just me getting bored. The miner's school has some computers for the children to use for research and our young ones say that they are slow, too."

The computer made a soft beep and the screen froze on an entry. Rexx adjusted the setting and the item opened a passage describing the entry. Rexx read out the text. "The location is in a flat valley at the intersection of several canals in the Enia Delta on Mars. It was the site of a large city. Now, in Twenty Two Seventy Nine, only ruins remain. There are a couple of settlements. A small band of archaeologists probe the remains for historical data while a few prospectors search the surrounding hills with metal detectors for mining opportunities. Now, the dust covered ruins blend into the tawny red desert as the coal dark sky hangs in contrast above. In the distance purple mountains stand stark against the star studded black sky."

"Poetic!" Remarked Matu. "So, what else does it say?"

"Here's more...the archaeologists picked up a faint signal from a point near the Lagoon Nebula. It appeared to be a communication between five distinct sources. They tracked it for several months until it faded as the Mars orbit moved out of range. They attempted to restore the link when they were back in position, but, by then it was no longer traceable."

"Well, that seems somewhat promising. It gives us a date. But, it doesn't give us any indication of where or how far away they were. If, those actually were scouts from the Alcaad home world." Sendi commented.

"No...but it's something." Matu said. "Possibilities shouldn't be discounted."

"Hey, hang on a minute...I just found a recording from the archaeologists' receiver." He set the volume higher, as it began to play. The audio was crackly.

"Well, I can't make anything out of that." Sendi said.

"But, you don't speak Alcaad, do you." Matu chided.

"Oh...the translator...where's my disk?" She dug through her carrybag and retrieved it. Sticking it to her temple, she continued. "Play it again from the beginning." She nodded as she listened to the crackled recording.

"Are you getting anything?" Rexx asked. "I can repeat it again, if you want."

"No, that's OK. There's a lot of static, but I think I did recognize one or two words. Which means..."

"...this could be important." Matu interrupted. "Can you copy that for Lovra?"

"Sure..." Rexx responded as he pulled a download cable out of it's compartment.

"Sendi, plug your MiniCam onto this and I will record this entire entry."

While it was downloading, Rexx pulled up the next entry and began reading.

"Protected under the Consolidation of Planets, Morrison Base on Jupiter is a domed retreat

frequented by heavy worlders from all over the Calconian Alliance. The native husked Jupitoniens with bodies like huge boulders become as gossamer tumbleweeds rolling along in the severe climate of multi colored dust storms fueled by gale force winds."

"Fun place." Matu commented. "What's the date, and the significance of the entry?"

"Thirty One Sixty Seven...and there seem to be several odd radio anomalies." He opened one of the files and adjusted the volume. They listened for a few minutes.

"Is it me?" Asked Matu. "Or does that sound like music?"

"Oh, that's what they call the 'Songs of Jupiter'. There's a continuous huge storm on the planet and the winds give the effect of music."

"Oh...nice."

"Sendi, are you getting any communications buried in all of this wind sound?"

"There seems to be a lot of stuff that's related only to the Base...tourism stuff, mostly. But, I am getting some bits of dialog. I can't make out much of it, but, whoever is sending the message is very angry. He keeps shouting, make that yelling, about someone's mistakes and incompetence. He won't accept any excuses and keeps going on about 'getting the job done'. Unfortunately, this translator doesn't seem to be Alcaad specific, so I'm not sure. I guess, we had better go ahead and record whatever that's been logged as unusual."

"Sound's good, I'll add all of these to the list. Lovra and his scientists will have plenty of time to decode it."

"What about the space station that was the first to be attacked? Did they receive anything before the attack?"

"Don't know, Matu. I'll do a search on it. Here's the first entry...The Sol System Interplanetary Shuttles Corporation, 'SSIS', runs continuously between the space stations orbiting each planet conveying passengers and cargo to the planets and to the New London Space Station, in orbit around Pluto, which serves as a deep space jump port for the planetary system."

"Wow, Pluto, that's pretty far out. No wonder they were hit first...but, that also implies they might have received early signals."

"It would seem so." Rexx agreed. "There's so much here. I don't know how much we can actually copy."

"Is there anything else here that we can copy data on to?"

"You mean did the Time Police leave us any spare hard drives...?" Rexx leaned over and opened a storage cupboard. "...and, yes, they did. Sigh. I wish I knew what this was all about." He plugged one of the drives in and started the copy.

"It's like whatever you need, they've put it here for you. That's really amazing."

"No...wait." Sendi said. "I don't think it's quite like that. We don't find the stuff until we know we need it. And, it's like, we don't know what we need until the situation presents the need. And, it's not there until we recognize the need."

"I'm not sure I follow you."

"Well, the hard drives wouldn't have been of any use before you suggested that there may be some hint of what we are to do in this TimePod. When we found some possible data concerning the scouts which would help our friends, then the drives came to be of use."

"So...keep going." Matu encouraged.

"So...we're supposed to be learning something, and in doing so, 'undo' the 'old'.

"Yeah...?"

"So, to help the Alcaad free themselves of the old government and build a new life, we need to give them all of the knowledge that we can access, and we only find what we have, what is available to us, as a situation presents a problem that we have to solve."

"Try me on this...if I say that I want something, but there's no reason that I really want it or need that thing, then the situation of really needing the thing existing, won't...by the grace of your friends...happen."

"Yeah, something like that." She agreed.

"Blink?" Rexx said, then shook his head. "No, no, don't try to explain it again, that's OK, I do think I understand. We're getting what we need as we realize it's what we need. They're not making it easy, but they're making it real. It's a lesson, and because it's hard enough to do...so that we remember...and learn."

Sendi nodded and said. "Yeah...exactly."

"How is it that they know so much about you...even what you're thinking?" Matu asked.

Rexx and Sendi just looked at each other, she shrugged her shoulders, and Rexx said. "I think that we have no clue."

"So, what's next?" Matu asked.

Rexx checked the view screen. "It looks like it's going to take quite a while for all of this to download. I don't need to monitor it, so we can either wait for it here, or go do something else."

"We could go talk to Lovra about why his people are of such interest to the home world." Sendi suggested.

"Yeah, but, I think we should wait until we've got all this data to hand over to him. It might make the reasons for our asking more logical. I don't want our asking to seem like prying into something that might be sensitive to his people."

"OK. That is a point. I hadn't considered that might be the situation. He didn't seem to volunteer much about the 'why', only the 'how'."

"Would using the computer interfere with the download?" Matu asked.

"No, not really...it might slow it down a little...but, that's only adding a couple of minutes to each hour. Why?"

"I'm curious about these time travel tours. Was the overview of your trip accurate to your experience? I mean, other than your unfortunate incident?"

"Well, yes, I guess so. The description of the entertainment, food, souvenirs, stuff to do was all accurate...but, that's all the usual resort type stuff. I guess I didn't really pay a lot of attention to the advertising. I was more interested in experiencing the battle first hand."

"Yeah, I guess, that would be 'me, too'." Sendi echoed. "The battle was what we went there to see. Of course, we both wanted to see more than what they offered. That's what led to us getting into trouble."

"So, what other kinds of tours did they offer?"

"Why? Do you want to go on one?" Rexx asked.

"Well, yeah. I kind of do...but, not like I'd ever have a chance to do it."

"Well, you're on one right now."

""Huh?!"

"This mine...it was one of the tours they offered."

"It was? Why? What's so special about here?"

"The opal mine." Sendi offered. "The discovery of the opals as an energy source for the resonant engine was monumental."

"Of course, there were discrepancies between the tour description and what we found here...guessing because of the time issues." Rexx added, then he issued the command to load the sequence. "Here, I'll play the tour description for you."

When it ended, Matu commented. "Wow, I see what you mean. Not major differences, but, enough to be noticeable." He paused. "Do you think that when time is fixed, it will change to match this description?"

"That, I don't know." Rexx admitted.

"Well, I'm kind of hoping things stay the way they are, and that these discrepancies are just due to documentation errors. I'm used to things as they are."

"I understand." Sendi agreed. "People like things to stay the same. Change is hard. We know."

"Yes." Matu said solemnly. "You certainly do. I'm actually amazed you are taking this as well as you are."

"Frankly, so are we." She said.

"I think..." Rexx added. "Having something to do helps a lot."

"Yeah...distraction." Matu added absently. "Sorry, guys, just missing you in advance. I hadn't realized I was so lonely until I met you. Sure, there are plenty of people that I know here, but, I just didn't connect with them the way I do with you."

"Uh, thanks." Rexx mumbled.

"No, really, thank you." Sendi emphasized. "We sort of feel like you're one of us, too."

"So..." Hastily changing the subject, Matu continued. "Tours! What other kinds of tours did they have?"

Rexx thumbed through the library. "Here's a list of some of the popular ones." He read. "The Royal Wedding of Ramesses, the Second, Ozymandias when he marries Nefertari, daughter of Hattusilis-Nebuchadnezzar, in Luxor, Egypt, Thirteen Twenty Three B.C. The conquering of Britanicus by Tiberius Claudius Drusus Nero Germanicus, the Lion of the Roman Empire, Seven Ninety A.D. The Aftermath of the French Moroccan Biological Wars as humanity sought shelter from the virulent infestation in the deep caves of Lascaux Abri, Twenty Six Sixty A.D. SiVa, the fabled Silicon Valley Sub-Sea center of technology, sunk during the great earthquake of Twenty Nine Forty Two, rebuilt, and reigned as the leader in the Inter-Galactic Commerce Association, Thirty One Forty Two. New York 5, the continuing riots and mini-wars as the city rebuilt itself for the fifth time, Twenty Nine Thirty Three."

Matu gasped. "These are things people go on vacation for?"

"Yes. Apparently our modern world is just too boring. There's more, should I continue? Are you interested in watching any of the overviews?"

"No...enough...plenty." Matu shook his head.

"I was just thinking back on what prompted me to take this particular time tour." Sendi said.

"Was this the only one you did, or did you do others?" Matu asked.

"No, just this one."

"Hmm, this was the only one I did, too." Rexx added.

"Well, you both said you were in the military. Could that have prompted your interest?"

"Maybe, I guess, probably." Sendi mused. "I was never in any sort of battle, only training. So, maybe the desire to actually experience a battle was stronger than I imagined."

"You're probably right." Rexx agreed. "My military experience was also lacking in any battle experience, so I guess I was also itching to 'see some action'. I mean, when you're

trained to do something and then, never get to do it, there's a sense of a lack of completion to your education."

"I guess I understand." Matu nodded. "I was trained to be a guard and I actually worked as one. So, my training had some fulfillment. Though, I wasn't guarding against anything particularly dangerous...just some wild animals and the occasional snooping miner trespassing onto our territory."

"Yeah." Sendi continued. "We were both pretty 'gung ho' about getting into the action that we wanted to breach the boundary to get closer to the actual fighting."

"'Gung ho', 'breach'?" Matu interrupted.

"'Enthusiastic' and 'break through'...sorry, popular military terms." Rexx explained.

"Anyhow...but, wow, we really were pretty extreme."

"Yeah, and see where it got us."

"Well, you know, it's not all that bad."

"Huh!?"

"Well, we're learning a lot of new stuff and we've got lots of new friends...that's something. So, we've got a problem to solve...but, we're alive, we're together, and we're working it out, a little bit at a time."

"Suddenly, you're optimistic?"

"Yeah. I guess I just have to look on the positive side. It's better than being depressed over it."

Matu sighed. "You're right. So, Rexx, how's the download coming?"

"Wow! It's almost done. While we were talking, I found extra drive slots and plugged in all the drives that would fit."

"Then, I guess we're about ready to take them over to Lovra."

"I can't help but wondering if this will mess up time even more." Sendi said. "I mean, we're giving them information about the future."

"Well, I guess there is that possibility...but, we've been provided with the ability, and the information is obviously needed. We can only take the chance that it's the right thing to do."

"I guess you're right. Oh, can they read these drives OK?"

"Yeah, I checked. The MiniCam cable fits this plug on the drives." He pointed. "And, it reads OK."

Rexx laid the hard drives out on the Alcaad work table. "I hope you can get some useful information off of all of this. There's a lot that just relates to the tourism industry. But, there's also historical facts and scientific documentation. I didn't bother to try to categorize any of it and I don't know all of what's there. I assumed you would have plenty of time to go through all of it."

"Thanks." Said Lovra. "We deeply appreciate all of your efforts on our behalf."

"Really." Sendi added. "It was our pleasure. I hope it will be of help."

"Are you sure that giving us this information isn't in violation of the owner's rights?"

"No." Sendi admitted. "I honestly can't. But, since we were provided, rather bluntly, with the ability, I am assuming that it is all for the best. In any case, I seriously doubt that you will be in any trouble over it. How would they know where it came from or where it went?"

"I see. Well, in any case, we will try to be discreet in our use of this knowledge."

"Yes. You do seem to have the ability to maintain a high level of secrecy."

"Oh. Have you noticed?"

"I'm afraid so. I was trained in intelligence gathering in our version of the military, which brings me to my question. What are your people accused of that garners such major interest from your oppressors? With this length of time, it seems unlikely that they would pursue the point. I apologize if I am treading on sensitive areas. You don't have to reveal anything that you don't wish to. It's just our concern for your wellbeing that prompts our curiosity."

"I understand, and I thank you." He paused. "Well, I'm afraid it all comes down to politics."

"Doesn't that always seem to be the case." Rexx sighed.

"Yes, I am afraid so. But, you must consider that our lifespans differ from yours, and time is a different factor. But, beyond that...we represented a major threat to a dictatorship that would not tolerate any dissident opinion. We were illusive in our methods, thereby increasing the level of the threat. We were also a sizable number of...how should I put this...of breeding adults. So, the major threat was that...over generations...we would be a large enough number so as to return and overthrow the existing regime. When we left, there was, in force, a medical genocide...an attempt to limit reproduction through forced vaccinations against an engineered disease. Thus decreasing the threat of future generations coming to arms. This so-called vaccine also caused immune disorders and, eventually, death among the most susceptible."

"How horrible!" Sendi commented.

"Yes. It was." He nodded. "But, it didn't stop there. The controlling power restricted movement and speech to the extent that we were eventually found out...captured...and sentenced. We don't know how many others might have escaped our fate. We can only hope that enough did. But, as we have evidence that the controlling factors have pursued us, we fear the worst for our fellow members of the resistance."

"I see...and thank you for your frankness." Sendi said. "I think we better understand your desperation."

"I'm curious about the armor that you wore." Rexx said. "If you were hiding, how is it that you had armor?"

"Standard military issue...everyone was forced to serve in the army for a minimum period. It was a sign of loyalty to continue to wear the armor even after your term was up. For us it was a way to hide in plain sight. And after we got here, well, by then, it was just habit." He smiled. "Meeting you, freed us from that habit. And freed us from the heaviness of that habit."

"What do you mean...the heaviness?" Sendi asked.

Lovra laughed. "Even though our armor was designed for lightness and strength, there was so much of it, that it was heavy and often painful to wear. Not having to wear it, lightened our spirits...made us a lot happier."

On their way back to the mountain, Matu's radio phone beeped. "Yes?" After a pause, he continued. "OK." He closed the connection.

"What's up?" Rexx asked. "You look serious."

"I'm afraid, you are 'up'."

"Huh?"

"That was Autok. He said, the one who travels between told us to say it's time for you to leave. Your destination is unknown."

The three stood quietly at the hatch of the TimePod.

"Well, I guess this is goodbye." Rexx said.

Matu had been staring at the floor. He suddenly looked up and said. "Hey, no long tearful goodbyes. You've got places to be and, I'm sure, lots of things to do. So, get going!" He hugged them both and dashed off down the corridor.

Rexx and Sendi looked at each other. He shrugged his shoulders. "I guess this is it." They climbed into the TimePod and closed the hatch.