

“Well, we’ve been here a week, and I still can’t make any sense out of this alphabet.” Sendi complained looking at the grocery receipt. “I’m just glad I can shop as long as I stick to the basic food types.” She turned to Rexx. “When you said the signs were bilingual you didn’t add that the second language was in yet another unfamiliar alphabet. Do we have to start taking language lessons?”

“Well, some of them were in English. But, I don’t know if we’re going to be in any one place long enough for that to be necessary or even possible. Languages take years to learn. Even a few catch phrases take a while to get fixed in your memory. Not to mention what that opens up for being asked questions about what you just said. At least, we do have translation abilities on the phones.”

“Yeah.” Matu added. “But the stone blocks that some of these buildings are made of are so dense that the radio waves don’t always penetrate. We had similar problems with our radio phones in the mountain where there were veins of really dense rock.”

“Well, there’s always point and nod and holding up fingers for ‘how many’.” Rexx smirked.

“Still, though, it’s nice that they’re giving us some time to acclimatize before we have to meet with the new clients.” Sendi continued. “I wonder why, though. I don’t think it’s just for us to rest after traveling.”

“Well, that could be.” Matu mused. “But, then again, the roads here aren’t in the greatest condition. Maybe they’re just allowing for possible travel delays.”

“Well OK, yeah, that makes sense.” She nodded. “Still though, it is nice to have the chance to rest up a bit with nothing much to do after those long drives.”

“I’m glad we fine tuned modifying the units. It speeds it up and really makes the sales go smoothly.” Rexx added.

“Yeah, but...” Matu shrugged.

“But, what?”

“Well, I don’t know about you, but it just gives me a lot more time to sit around doing nothing and getting bored.”

Sendi slumped into the chair next to him. “Yeah, I know what you mean. Cooking is about my only source of doing anything creative here. And, that’s really limited by what foods I can identify and what utensils I have to cook with. I feel like I’m down to just satisfying our need to eat with the most minimal ability to occasionally vary the flavors a bit.”

“Still, though...” Rexx said. “Everything you’ve been cooking is fine. We’re happy and it tastes really good.”

“Maybe it’s an exercise in adaptability?” Matu suggested.

“Huh? What do you mean?” Sendi asked.

“Well, the Time Police did say that we are in a disharmonious stage of the sun’s cycles and that there would be hard times ahead. Maybe not having all the right tools to cook with gives you the challenge to learn a different way while you can when things are easy...you, know, when there are not a lot of other life threatening things to deal with. And then, when those bigger problems are all around us, you will know what to do and have one less thing to worry about.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right. I hadn’t thought about it that way.” She nodded. “I guess I’ll have to take it as a challenge to master my skills.”

“I guess if it were too easy...” Matu chuckled.

“What do you mean?” She looked puzzled.

“Oh, I’m just picturing him saying something like ‘when we try to lighten someone’s burden, we inevitably take away their challenges and that lessens their chance for advancement’.”

Sendi shook her head and sighed. “I would say, that if I didn’t know better, he just put that thought into your head...but then again, maybe he did.”

“Maybe...I’ve often wondered where some thoughts come from. Maybe, that’s where.” He shrugged. “Maybe they are prompts or suggestions for us to ponder.”

“So, when do we start the next sales session?” Matu asked.

“Let me check...” Rexx grabbed his phone and searched the messages. “It looks like everything is arranged for the end of the week. But, oh look, there’s some sort of major regional holiday on the weekend just after. Do you think that will be a problem?”

“Could be.” Matu commented. “Sometimes these kinds of holidays need a lot of preparation and then they can drag on into the next work week. Maybe we should check in with the client to make sure that the meeting arrangements are good with them. We don’t want to inconvenience them if they have family plans.”

“So, how did it go?” Matu asked as Rexx got off the phone with the client.

Rexx dropped into the chair and laid the phone on the table. “I don’t know how to say this. They invited us to their celebration. They insisted. I had to accept.”

“Oh my...” Sendi said. “Do we have any idea of how we...uh, participate in this celebration? What is it, anyway?”

“It’s a celebration of ending the old year and starting the new one.”

“Oh, that sounds big.”

“It is.”

“In some cultures, the new year’s celebrations can last for weeks.” Matu added.

“Oh, wonderful.” Rexx groaned. “Well, we are to do the talk on Friday morning and in the afternoon, the demo. We’re to go to their home right after that to begin the party. The decisions will wait until the next week. Oh, and we are to take a taxi.”

“A taxi?” Sendi asked. “Why?”

Matu just snickered.

“What?” She asked.

“Food, and drink...lots of drink.”

“And...” Rexx continued. “We’re to come back, on Saturday afternoon and again on Sunday evening, as well.”

“Oh.” She sighed. “So, is it fancy dress or casual?”

“It’s a big family, so it’s casual.”

“Well, that’s something.” She thought a moment. “I get the feeling we should arrive early and help with the food preparations. Do you think that’s possible?”

“That sounds like a good idea. Share in the work as well as the fun. That’s only fair and will help us make a better impression.” Rexx agreed. “I’ll check with them.”

“So, then there’s nothing to do until Friday.” Matu summarized. “We don’t have to do any preparation until we set up that morning, because everything’s ready to go. That gives us three days with nothing to do.”

“So, what do you want to do?” Asked Rexx.

“Is there anything around here that’s, you know, like, touristy to do?” Sendi asked.

“I could pull up some local maps.” Rexx said, holding up his phone.

Matu groaned.

Rexx looked at him. "What's wrong?"

"No." Matu shook his head. "No tourist stuff."

"Why? What?"

"It doesn't help. I don't need to be a tourist. I need to be...to do...something." He thought a moment. "To do something real. Maybe, I need to feel like I'm working, not taking a vacation."

"OK...so, what?"

"OK...so, I don't know. But, we came back into life to live it. But, what are we doing? Selling stuff with a lot of wasted time in between. Where's our living life?"

"So, what do you want to do?"

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe, take a walk...at least it gets us out of this apartment for a while."

"So, OK, which way?" Rexx asked as they reached the street.

"Well, there were a lot of shops near where we buy groceries. Is that of interest?" Sendi volunteered.

"Mmmm, not really." Matu answered. "Guys, I'm really sorry I'm so down about this. I guess I'm just really having a hard time adjusting to being 'back from the dead'. I need something to distract me."

"I think we all feel sort of the same way." Rexx agreed.

Sendi nodded. "I want to get that spark back...where everything is a new experience."

"So, how do we do it? How do we get involved in life?" Matu asked. "I just keep hoping that something...I don't know...something exciting will happen."

"I'm really beginning to understand why we have to forget everything when we start a new life."

"Yeah, it's really a challenge having a past that you don't have." Matu added, looking down the street. "Well, let's head in toward the center. It's not even evening yet, there should still be more people there. Maybe, we'll find someplace interesting."

Rexx stopped to stare at a sign. He held his phone up to translate it. "Hmm, this sounds good...'bar and grill, traditional food and wild game'. What do you think? It'll give us something different and save Sendi from cooking tonight."

"OK...the wild game intrigues me. Sendi?"

"Traditional', you said? Fine by me. I could use something different." She laughed. "Hey! I think maybe we're getting some of the spark back. I'm finding myself actually interested in trying something new."

As they stepped through the doorway, they were greeted by subdued hanging tapestries, cushioned benches, and low tables lit with oil lamps.

"Wow!" Sendi exclaimed. "This is beautiful!" She paused to inhale. "Mmmm, smells good, too. I think I'm getting hungry!"

A man in a traditional costume greeted them and escorted them to a table. He handed them menus. Rexx indicated with the phone translator.

"Ah, no problem." The waiter said. "English is a major language. We can help you with your order." He began to list the menu items.

"Everything sounds so good...can you recommend anything?" Sendi asked.

"We do have an assortment that offers a variety of traditional foods and a sampling of the grilled game. Does that interest you?"

“Yes!” Sendi nodded eagerly and looked to Matu and Rexx. “What about you guys?”

“I think you just sold us.” Rexx agreed and Matu nodded.

The waiter returned a few minutes later. “The people at that table...” He gestured. “Would like to know if you would care to join them. They have just ordered as well and plan to take a leisurely meal. They overheard some of your conversation and apologized that their English is not as good as native speakers, but would enjoy speaking with you and sharing stories of yours and their travels. What should I say?”

The three exchanged brief glances and nodded. Rexx volunteered. “Please tell them that we would be happy to join them. We are relatively new here and have made no acquaintances as yet.”

The waiter bowed and left to relay the message. He returned momentarily to usher them to the large table. “I will have your beverages brought here.” He said as he seated them.

Walking back from the restaurant, Sendi said. “That was really great. We learned a lot of cultural stuff about this area and saw from another’s point of view about the situations going on in the world.”

Rexx nodded. “I hope our explanations of being out of touch because of all this traveling covered our lack of knowledge about this war...” He snickered. “...and everything else going on in this world. I guess we really need to pay more attention to the news...maybe, on those long drives, I can look the news up on that laptop computer we bought...sure am glad Matu knew how to work these things.”

“Yeah, and that food was really good.” Sendi continued. “I’m glad they gave us some background on the traditional recipes...I’m hoping I can find some of those spices, I’d really like to try and recreate some of those dishes.”

“Even as a one pot meal?”

“Yep, even. It’s given me a new outlook as to how to cook in stages in the same pot, setting some ingredients aside, and then just recombining everything at the end.”

Rexx glanced at Matu, who was deep in thought. “Matu, you OK?”

He glanced up. “Yes.” After a pause. “I’ve been thinking about how getting immersed in material things relieves the angst that the spiritual realm puts upon you...this need to find purpose or meaning in everything. I’m getting the feeling that life is not only a learning experience, it’s also a distraction from reflecting. I really needed that. I’m beginning to feel more real, more connected...less insubstantial. I’m making decisions based on circumstance, not on hypothetical theory.”

“You know, me too.” Admitted Rexx.

“And I, as well!” She added. “I’m really glad you suggested that restaurant. It’s really nice that those people wanted to have dinner with us tomorrow night as well. Having these conversations has been good. We’re getting involved and may even be making some friends here.”

“Well, it’s finally Monday...that was a long weekend! I’m going to put some coffee on.” Matu said. “They should be here in about a half hour for our meeting.”

“Good idea. I’ll get some pastries from the shop next door to go with it.” Rexx added and disappeared out the door.

"I hope they liked our demo." Matu continued. "They didn't say much about it during the weekend."

"Well, they were busy with family and all." Sendi said.

"That was fast!" Matu said as Rexx handed him the package of pastries.

"Yeah, they had them ready to go."

"You know, that actually was a really fun weekend." Sendi commented. "We met a lot of great people and got into some good conversations...so, that really helped with the fear of talking. It's good that we managed to skip talk about where we were from...you know, being on the road so much, we hadn't been in touch. Instead we could concentrate on having a chance to learn a lot about their history and culture and I feel like we actually made some friends. I am glad we arrived early to help out. I think that showed that we cared."

"But, what do you think? Did they buy our presentation?" Rexx asked.

"I hope so, too, though, I don't know why they wouldn't. It does suit their needs." Matu said.

"I don't know what you guys are saying." Sendi shook her head. "They were treating us like family. They were so grateful..why? We didn't do anything special. They welcomed us to their holiday celebration and gave us food and drinks. Why?"

"We were helping them?" Rexx shrugged.

"Yeah, but, they don't really know that. They don't know that we enhanced the unit that we showed them. We didn't get a chance to explain it. How...why, should they be so happy with us? I mean, this is so much more than customer satisfaction for a product."

"Maybe it was our attitude?" Matu ventured.

"What do you mean?"

"Well, we cared about them whether we said so or not. It was our intention. We didn't necessarily have to actually say anything."

"But, how did they know?"

"Maybe, they didn't need to. It showed in our actions. Maybe, it was heart to heart...some sort of telepathy, I don't know...just speculating."

"That's the last of our stuff." Said Matu, as he closed the van door.

"Well, I'm glad they decided on the unit we showed them." Rexx commented. "The price was definitely fair and I'm glad we were able to help them out. They seemed like really nice people."

"Yeah." Sendi added. "The family insisted that we visit them whenever we're back this way again. Do you think we will be?"

"Hard to say. We're sort of on a one way trip towards the Northern Far East, and then, the itinerary runs out. I guess when we get to that point, they will let us know what's next."

"Never to step in the same stream twice." Matu mused.

Rexx and Sendi stared at him briefly, then exchanged glances. Rexx asked. "What do you mean?"

Matu just looked at him briefly. "The stream moves on. The moment when we stepped in the stream is history. Never to be repeated."

"As where we stepped is also history." Rexx replied.

They all went quiet, staring at each other.

"Yes." Matu nodded. "I never thought it would be so strange to be this far out of time."

"Me, either." Rexx said.

Sendi just laughed. "You were our anchor when we were in the mountain. You were real and made it feel real for us. Here, none of us are at home, so everything is unreal."

"So, when are we off to again?" Matu asked, as Rexx paged through the itinerary.

"Well, we have three days until we're supposed to leave. What do you want to do?"

"I say we leave early. I hate just sitting around. At least, driving is doing something and seeing new scenery."

"Yeah." Sendi commented, it has been interesting going through different climates...from hot, dry arid to wet jungle, and now it seems we're going into a sort of grass land semi desert. Maybe there will be something interesting along the way that we can pause at and explore."

As they pulled up to queue at the border checkpoint, Rexx commented. "Wow! Those border guards look serious. That's an awful lot of military hardware for a customs agent."

Just then a fighter jet flew low over the checkpoint area. "What was that?" Sendi exclaimed, looking up.

"You know..." Matu said. "I think we must be close to where the war is going on...you know, the one the Time Police was talking about...remember that guy who was trying to assassinate the one with the bullhorn?"

"Bullhorn?"

"Sorry, slang, megaphone."

"Oh. Yeah, right. Do you really think we're near that war? I thought he said it was somewhere in Europe."

"Oh, who knows...also, who knows how far that war extends...this could be some sort of ally to one side or the other."

"I guess we're still not paying enough attention to the news...you know, we've got to find out what's going on in the world." Rexx added. "After all, it's our world now, and we should be aware of this stuff."

"Still, though...that was a fighter jet just now."

"Yeah." He smirked. "Just like back on the time tour."

Sendi glared at him. "Thanks."

"Do I know what you're talking about?" Matu asked. "Or, do I even want to know?"

"Probably not." She said, settling back in her seat.

"It's just some of what we went through while we were finding our way to your world." Rexx explained.

"Hey guys...it looks like we're next." As Matu started the engine. "Got your passports and the rest of the paperwork ready?"

He pulled the van up to the checkpoint and handed the agent their papers. The guard thumbed through the documents. "According to this you are not due here for two more days."

"Is there a problem with that?" Matu asked. "We weren't sure of the road conditions and wanted to be sure to be on schedule."

The guard hemmed and walked back to the guard shack. He was seen speaking to someone on the phone. After several long minutes, he returned with the papers. "It's

somewhat irregular, but, my supervisor said to let it go this time. Try to keep closer to your permit dates...welcome to 'mumblestan'." As he waved them through.

"To where?" Sendi asked.

Rexx laughed. "I haven't a clue what he said. But, here it is on the map." He pointed to the itinerary chart.

Sendi looked and snickered. "Yet another alphabet I can't read." She looked again. "Though I think I have seen this one in some of our recent countries. Maybe, I'm also remembering it from my life in the future. I don't know...I never had a lot of language training...must be a major language, though, if I remember seeing it."

Matu was silent for a moment. "I wonder who told the supervisor to overlook the irregularity. Border regulations are usually pretty strict."

Rexx and Sendi exchanged a silent glance.

After a few minutes, Sendi commented. "I wonder...back before all of this...when we we just normal people living normal lives...did we put these kinds of things down to coincidence, luck, providence, karma...?" She shook her head. "I just don't know anymore. How much is really real?"

Rexx sighed. "I'm not sure if any of it is real."

"I'm pretty sure none of it is." Matu said. "That's why I'm having such a hard time trying 'to live' again."

After driving for about an hour, Matu exclaimed. "You know, we've just entered the country that has the largest land mass in the world. I've been noticing the difference profoundly ever since we crossed that border. Can you feel it?"

"Feel what?" Sendi asked.

"The difference. I had been noticing it ever so slightly as we traveled...oh, I don't know how to describe it...but, there's a difference in feel...it gradually got lighter as we approached the Equator, then almost a 'click' as we entered the Northern Hemisphere. It's somehow different. What do you think causes it?"

"Well, you mentioned land mass...in the Southern Hemisphere there's more water to land than in the Northern Hemisphere...I don't know, water vs. land mass ratio, maybe?" Rexx speculated. "Maybe water is somehow heavier than land."

"No...it's not just that. Not just the dirt. It's in the air, everywhere...a kind of lightness of being...a freshness. Oh, I don't know how to describe it. But, can you feel it?"

Rexx rolled down the side window and took a deep breath. "Yes, I think I can. It's somehow nicer...sweeter."

Sendi leaned forward to look out the window. "Yes, it's like the first days of Spring. Look! There's a park ahead. Let's stop and walk around."

"I've been noticing the statues here. They seem like memorials of people and events." Rexx said.

"Yeah, and...?" Matu asked.

"They seem nice...respectful. There's even flowers at the bases of some of the statues."

"Yeah...point." He thought a moment. "In the Southern Hemisphere, and a few here in the Northern Hemisphere as well, there were some strange statues...they looked more like angry animals...gave me uneasy feelings."

"You know, I noticed that, too. I wonder where the idea to make such things came from."

"I almost had the feeling that they represented demons." Sendi said. "Maybe as a warning against evil?"

"In any case, the feelings they inspired in me were definitely negative...might cause more evil than prevent it." Matu commented.

"Here is nice, though." She picked up a fallen flower and placed it with the others at the base of the statue.

Sendi came out of the building wiping the dust off of her hands. "Well, that's done."

Rexx followed her carrying the box of equipment. "Yeah, another successful demo."

"Do you really think so?" She asked. "I mean some of those guys didn't look all that convinced."

"Oh, I think they just have glum faces from the long cold winters here. In any case, we sold another enhanced unit."

"I guess they're happy then." She looked around. "Where's Matu? He left the demo about fifteen minutes ago. What was that about?"

"Oh, I think he was just putting some of the tools back in the van. He's probably organizing things to make space for this box."

As they approached the van Rexx called out. "Matu!"

"No answer...where is he?"

"I don't know." Rexx put the box in the back of the van. "He can't have gone far. He left the door open."

"We'd better go look for him." Sendi said as Rexx locked up the van. "He's been kind of moody lately...hope he's OK."

They walked around to the other side of the van. "There he is!" Sendi pointed to where Matu was sitting on a roadside bench several meters away.

They walked over to him and sat down on either side.

"Oh, hi guys. Sorry I bolted...don't know...it was getting too close in there. I guess I just needed a breath of fresh air."

"It's OK." Rexx said. "We were about done anyhow. But, are you OK?"

"Yeah...I guess...oh, I don't know."

"OK, breathe." Said Sendi. "Now, talk about it...slowly...gather your thoughts. We're here...friends...you know."

"Yeah, I know...more than friends...family." He took a deep breath. "I think it's...I'm getting tired of this adventure. I want to go home."

"Back to the mountain?" She asked.

"No. I don't fit in there."

"Then, where?"

"Somewhere...I don't know where...where there's a new home. Someplace fresh and clean...like it is here." He spread out his arm against the mountains in the distance. "I want to settle down...live off the land...find someone...raise a family. You know...like that."

Sendi went quiet for a moment. "Yes. I do. I understand. I've been feeling similar thoughts." She paused. "What about the upcoming disaster?"

"Well, let that come as it may. I will prepare the best I can. I'm sure I will have plenty of guidance. And I will enjoy the time between."

Rexx sighed. "Yes. I'm also getting tired of this endless road trip."

After several minutes, Sendi said. "I'm thinking, I'm not ready to join the Time Police and be a guide. I wouldn't know how."



"Yeah." Rexx nodded. "I want to live more life. Not just this business venture travel stuff...but, real basic life. I haven't learned enough...not yet."

"Do you think he'll let us?" Matu asked.

"I hope so." Sendi said. "All we can do is ask."

"Well, we have enough money." Rexx commented. "Should we just contact the company and tell them we're quitting? We could buy some land...a lot of land, start a farm, and build a house, maybe a couple of houses."

"You know how to farm?"

"No. But, I can learn. So, what do you think?"

"Fine by me." Matu agreed.

"Where? Here?" Asked Sendi.

"Donno...this is a big country...really big and really good, and we've only seen a small part of it and we weren't really paying attention to the important parts. Wish we've been able to get a bit better at learning the language. But, I guess that will come with time and practice. Maybe we just travel around for a while and see if we find some place that feels right."

"Yeah." Matu nodded. "I want to find some place where neighbors can live far enough apart that they actually have something of value to say to each other when they meet, not just idle chatter...where community has real value."

Sendi nodded also. "I want to find tradition, culture...and know what is it for... recognizing beauty, remembering it, and relating it to others. I never had that growing up. Our world was built around the current fashions. It never had any real substance."

After a pause. "Yeah...home." Said Matu.

Sendi smiled. "Yeah." She paused and turned to Rexx. "Rexx?"

He returned the smile. "Yes."

Matu glanced skyward. "So, Mr. Time Police, can we stop being salesmen and do something else?"

"You can." Said a voice behind them. They spun around to look. "After all, it is your adventure."

"Where'd you come from?"

"Well, actually, we've been here the whole time."

"I forgot about that part." Grumped Sendi. "You see everything we do."

He smiled. "Yes, we do. And, I must admit..."

"You didn't say 'we'." Remarked Rexx.

"True...to make a point. 'I' am the "me" in every lifetime. 'I' am the bond of all my experience. Each one of you is an individual no matter how many different personalities and physical forms you have been immersed in...'you' are, so to speak, the grand part of all of you."

"So...even though I am somebody else, I am still me?" Asked Sendi.

"Yes. And you always will be 'you'." He paused. "As I was about to say, knowing the three of you has brought new insight into my experience. I think I might be ready to have a go around at a new physical experience. I've been away too long and I think I need a new perspective...a refresher course in the grand school of life, you might say. I think I'd like to find a new 'home' too."

"You mean, you're no longer going to be our guide?"

"Oh, I've never been your guide...that's inside of you. Remember, I'm just the 'talent scout'."

"What exactly do you mean by that...'talent scout'?" She asked. "What is it that you do?"

"Why, a 'talent scout' looks for those that can advance and outperform others, of course...that's why you three were selected. You have great potential!"

"We do?"

"Oh, yes...and someday you will actually realize that."

"So, where will you go?" Matu asked.

"I don't know." He thought a moment. "Maybe I'll be somebody new in your lives. I kind of like hanging around with the three of you." He winked and then vanished.

They all looked at each other in disbelief.

"What do you think he meant by that?" Rexx asked.

"I don't know about you guys..." Matu said, after a brief pause. "But, when I find the right lady, I'm going to have to take parenting very seriously."

Rexx and Sendi looked at each other.

"I see what you mean." Rexx added.

"Yeah." Added Sendi. "We really don't know who our children will be, do we?"