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Down Time

by

Jonathan Edward Feinstein

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Author's Foreword

Starting a new story is always an adventure into the unknown. No matter how well I try to develop the characters in advance, no matter how tightly I try to plot, there are always surprises in store. I'll get to a planned situation and suddenly realize that the character is not going to react the way I had originally planned, or else I'll get part way through a story and either find I've gone off on an unplanned tangent or else Decide there are better ways to take the story. Changes in plot don't happen to me as often these days as when I first started writing, although I am often forced to stop and decide is a planned scene needs to take place at all, or if I need to insert an explanatory conversation; minor stuff really. It's been a long time since I had to actually stop everything for a week as I completely replot a story.

My characters, on the other hand, still have minds of their own. Realistically, what's happening is that I continue to develop them as I write so when I get to certain points I'll find they ought to react entirely differently than I had planned whiling plotting. It seems, however, as though they take a life of their own. When a story is really going well it feels as though I'm not writing so much as taking dictation.

A new series is like that, only more so, especially a new series like this one. In this first book I need to get to know these characters really well, especially since I'm planning to write an as yet undetermined number of them. This is my first attempt at an open-ended series and just as with every new sort of project, I find there are new rules to learn and abide by. The most important, of course, is to establish the central cast of characters. Unlike some sitcoms, the characters will accumulate experience as the stories go on; what happens in the first book will be remembered in the second and so on. And yet the characters have to remain fresh and interesting even as I continue to write them... Well, we'll see how I do.

This is also the first comedy piece I've attempted in years. It was odd to get back to that mode of writing, it is very different from how I write the Maiyim and Gaenor series and actually more difficult and slower going so that while the Time stories look like they will be relatively short, they actually take as long to write as my longer pieces.

Finally, it's the first science fiction story I've written in a while. Strangely that doesn't seem to matter and in some ways it is easier. The Maiyim series is set in a world roughly analogous to Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century and the world of Gaenor's Quest is a bit of a mishmash that averages about mid-Nineteenth Century. When writing them I need to avoid the use of modern idioms. When pressed for a bit of slang I either had to make it up or else borrow from Earth history, so I tried to avoid it most of the time. Down Time, Ltd. however is set in the Twenty-second Century and since it involves time-travel I have free reign to use any phrases and ideas I want to. So for the most part I wrote this story to help relax after writing two heavier pieces. It may have been slow going, but it was relaxing and fun. Hopefully as readers you too will find it that way.

As always, this book really is offered to you free. However, if after reading it you feel it was worth a dollar or two, rather than sending it to me, why not make a donation to the New Bedford Historical Society? The New Bedford Historical Society was organized in October 1996 as a non-profit Massachusetts corporation dedicated to documenting and celebrating the history, legacy and presence of African Americans, Cape Verdeans, Native Americans, West Indians and other people of color in New Bedford, Massachusetts. For more information contact the New Bedford Historical Society at: P.O. Box 40084 , New Bedford, MA 02744 (508) 979-8828 <http://www.nps.gov/nebe/nbhs.htm>

Jonathan E. Feinstein
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Prologue

There was a beginning. There was a time before that beginning. And there was a time before the time which was before that beginning. There was being. There was non-being. There was a time before that non-being. And there was a time before the time that was before that non-being. Suddenly there is being and there is non-being, but I don't know which of being and non-being is really being or really non-being. I have just said something, but I don't know if what I have said really says something or says nothing.

Chuang Tzu

The universe is more complex than it used to be. That's just the nature of universes. When young they are quite simple things: a cosmic egg, a point source of all that is, was and maybe yet will be, a great ocean or just a small pile of little pink rubbery bits left over after the previous universe was erased.

But as time passes, universes grow up and start collecting heavy elements, trying to get the entire set before they half-life out of existence. And they go through various states of existence. A steady state universe will metamorphose into one that began in a Big Bang. It will alternate between being open and closed and even occasionally pause to be entirely flat.

Young universes stridently adhere to the laws of conservation of matter and conservation of energy and E never equals MC^2 . But universes grow bored with the sameness and start trading matter in for energy and back again. They develop virtual particles, dark matter and vacuum energy, and not only do they continue to expand, they have the audacity to accelerate.

The secret, of course, is that a universe is what you make of it. If you truly believe the world is flat, you'll probably see the tortoise it's riding on if you lean far enough over the edge.

So the universe started out minding its own business, fusing hydrogen into helium with just a pinch of lithium and a soupçon of beryllium. Then after a while it made the second biggest mistake of its own history after becoming transparent; it started producing carbon, nitrogen, oxygen and roughly one hundred other interesting new elements. That may not sound so bad, until you realize that all that made life possible and with life you get perception. And if that perception is by intelligent life it's time for the universe itself to duck and cover!

Perception changes everything especially when coupled with imagination. It's perception that makes the universe what it is, and it is imagination that colors perception. So with the advent of intelligent life the universe evolved gradually from a "Flat Earth" to a flat universe and well beyond. Worse, each person lives in a totally unique universe of his or her own since no two people can ever perceive the infinite universe in exactly the same way. It's sort of like snowflakes, really; no two universes are alike.

And if each person's universe is different from all the rest, you ask, what is the truth? That depends on who you are, naturally. Maybe your universe is built in three dimensions; length, width and depth. Maybe you live in a four dimensional universe combining those classic three with time. Your universe may really have dozens of tiny little dimensions all rolled up into some sort of cosmic storage bin, although while that type of universe might be nice to visit you wouldn't really want to live there.

Dozens of dimensions, you ask? What are they? Length, width, depth, time, chocolate, vanilla, strawberry, faith, love, charity, and so on. Sadly, some of those dimensions are very small, indeed. God

knows we need more chocolate!

So a few short years ago, our universe was a nice comfy place. A bit simplistic, maybe, but a nice safe universe. The sort of place where you could leave the doors unlocked at night. Then this nice safe universe developed black holes and degenerate matter and monopoles. Well, you can't have those irritants without developing the whole rash, so along with black holes we got dark matter, vacuum energy, quintessence and a whole slew of things even scientists cannot adequately explain.

Why? Because we'll do anything not to live in an open universe, as if that mattered one whit. It's not as if any of us will still be around by the time all the black holes have evaporated and there's nothing left but a few stray infrared photons searching for something, anything, to collide with. Besides in another few decades all that will change again when we discover that dark matter is an illusion and that all the missing mass scientists keep looking for are hiding within the other two dimensions of time.

Time, you see, is three dimensional, just like space. It has length; it runs from the beginning to the end of the universe. It has width; alternative time lines. And it has depth; alternative physics.

And if there is a dimension in the universe, some clever bugger will find a way to travel along it. And if someone is traveling along it, there will be someone else who will get lost and refuse to ask for directions...

One

Bright Lights, Big City?

A light wind tickled the golden late summer grass on the low hills. The leaves on the few trees in sight barely moved and the sun beamed down between a few lazy cotton-candy clouds. There were birds singing in the trees and rabbits hopped about, grazing on anything that appealed. A mated pair of deer wandered among the trees, nibbling at stray leaves and blades of grass. All in all, it was quite a peaceful scene.

In the valley between two small hills a wall with a door in it silently appeared. For a few minutes nothing else happened. The birds kept singing, the rabbits and the deer kept grazing and wind continued to gently tease the grass and leaves. And then the door opened and a voice could be heard.

"Now we are about to step out into the hustle and bustle of New York City in the year 1996 C.E. Please stay together as it is easy for a first time visitor to get lost and I know I need not go into the dangers of what the locals call being mugged again. Let's go.

"Now to our right if you look down the street and way up, you will see the original World Trade Center with its famous twin towers and on our right will be the Empire State Building. Now watch your step as we carefully enter the busy sidewalk of the Avenue of the Am...

"Oh heck!" the voice finally croaked.

"Maybe this is Central Park, Pflum?" a much younger man suggested. His name was Jack Laterus. At the age of nineteen years he was serving an internship with Down Time, Ltd., a temporal tourism concern. He was of average height, had red hair and a crop of freckles that after all his time in the sun threatened to merge into a proximity of a tan and grayish green eyes.

“Not a chance, kid. This isn’t even Manhattan,” Pflum replied. Aurelian Pflum was twice Jack’s age, six feet tall with curly dark brown hair and hazel-colored eyes. Both men were wearing tan slacks and dark blue knit shirts with a logo made from the letters “D” and “T” embroidered on them in gold-colored thread. As casual as the outfit was supposed to look, it still looked like the uniform it was. At least it was in the time and place they had meant to arrive in. There were variants for every time and place they were likely to visit. For late Twentieth Century, this worked in most locations. “I can’t even swear it’s the right continent.”

“Mr. Pflum!” one of the tourists exclaimed as she pushed her way out of the doorway and into the grassy expanse. “This is most definitely not Broadway! If I am unable to see ‘Cats’ your employer will most certainly hear about it.”

“Mrs. Callinger,” Pflum attempted to calm her down. “We have twelve hours before the curtain rises, we have plenty of time to straighten out the problem, whatever it is, and get you to the theatre. I still don’t know how you intend to buy tickets to the hottest show of the Twentieth Century, though.”

“There are always scalpers,” Mrs. Callinger told him confidently.

“Sure, at several thousand quid per ticket,” Pflum replied.

“Dollars, Mr. Pflum,” she corrected him. “In the United State of the Twentieth Century, they use dollars. ‘Quid’ is British slang for ‘Pound Sterling.’”

“States, ma’am,” Jack corrected her in turn. “It’s the United States.”

She gave him a very sour look then turned on Pflum, “Just get us to New York!” she commanded him.

Pflum kept his reply to himself but said to the others, “Don’t go too far. We shouldn’t be here very long. Also we don’t know where or when we are so do keep in mind that as peaceful as it may look, anything might be lurking just out of sight. C’mon, kid. We have a job to do.”

“Mr. Pflum! What happened to the rest of the Transit?” One of the tourists asked, looking at one of the side walls. From the outside all that could be seen was the wall with a door. Behind that wall he could see the side of the Transit for only two feet. After that it rapidly faded out. When at rest at home, it looked like a plain painted box-like structure.

“It’s still there, sir, but this wall and that little bit is the only part that’s completely on this time line. The rest of it sort of stretches back to our present. If you were back home right now you’d only see the other part of the box.”

“But inside it’s all whole. If I went through the door on the other wall would I step out back home?”

“You can’t open that door while we’re in the field. It just won’t open unless we’re home.”

“I didn’t know that,” the tourist admitted. “Why not?”

“Strange as it sounds the other side of that door isn’t really there at the moment,” Pflum told him and went back into the Transit.

Jack and the tourist followed him through the doorway and into what looked like a large room painted

warm beige. In the center of the room was a conference table large enough for fifteen people to sit around. There were also chairs and smaller tables all around the perimeter of the room and a small kitchenette in one corner. Just inside the door and to the right there was a whole wall filled with more dials, lights, meters and other controls than needed to fly the average space ship. Not surprising since space ships only travel in three dimensions. The “Transitory Time Transport,” or “Transit” for short, traveled in at least five.

Traveling in so many dimensions at once is enough to make a merely human mind decide to take the week off for a skiing holiday while the rest of the body spends time in a heavy cloth jacket with arms so long they tie in the back. Fortunately, the nature of the Transit’s heart, the temporal regulator, simplifies the process in the same way a paved road simplifies driving. Geographical coordinates still need to be programmed in, but moving forward and backwards through time is along a predetermined route.

“That’s strange,” the tourist said after trying the home door for himself. “I still don’t get it. I also still don’t understand how we travel in time and still avoid temporal paradoxes,” Pflum opened a large panel on the wall.

“It’s not all that hard, sir,” Pflum replied absently. He was concentrating on a bank of circuit breakers. “Think of a very large cylinder with a long spiral groove like the sort Tesla used in his early phonograph experiments.”

“Um... I think you mean Edison,” Jack corrected him.

“Whoever,” Pflum shrugged. “Now in theory the circumference of that cylinder is infinite, but it turns out that infinity isn’t as big as we thought it was.”

“What? Infinity is infinite, uh, isn’t it?” Jack asked. Pflum was definitely older and much more experienced, but Jack was starting to wonder whether Pflum knew as much as he claimed to know. The tourist had grown bored and went back outside.

“Well, yeah,” Pflum agreed, “but in practice the regulator sort of zips us past all the alternative time lines. If we do so slowly, you can actually use the instruments to detect all those lines or groups of them, really. But at our normal transition rate it all blurs together. The regulator, however, ensures we can only land on lines that are within five nines of our own.”

“Five nines?” Jack asked.

“Kid, didn’t they teach you anything about the practical side of this business? It means that only a time line that is 99.99999 percent similar to our own can be landed on. It’s part of the harmonics of the temporal regulator. Well, there are some government-owned jobs that can land on any line of alternative history, but they don’t allow private concerns that sort of thing.”

“If that’s the case isn’t there a good chance we could land on our own time line and change our own history?”

“Nah! Every dimension of time is infinite, just like the dimensions of space, so even with 99.99999 percent of all the alternatives eliminated there are still an infinite number of lines to land on. Without a previously placed tracer unit, the only way we can land on a specific line is to return to the one we started on. We’re anchored to that one. So since the odds are infinitely large against landing on our own line, there is no real chance of a paradox either. Go back and kill your own great-grandfather before he sires your granddad and when you get back home it won’t make any difference at all.”

“Thank God!” Jack swore fervently. “And we always return to our home time line?”

“Yeah,” Pflum replied dryly. “That’s where all our power is coming from. If we ever lost that anchor we’d be stuck.”

“Has that ever happened?”

“I’ve never heard of it. It’s probably not even possible.”

“Wait a minute,” Jack said suddenly. “This line isn’t within five nines of ours. Why were we able to land here?”

“I forgot to mention this Transit’s temporal regulator is whacked.”

“Nice technical term that,” Jack noted.

“It may not be exact but it is appropriate, kid. This Transit was the one Down Time started with. And the boss didn’t buy it, she salvaged it.”

“I wasn’t aware they were available for salvage,” Jack responded.

“They won’t be ever again. I can tell you that. Ms. Lachado was working for Time Tours, Inc. when she heard that this one was being retired. She decided it was a good time to go into business for herself, so she paid the guy at the federal dump to look the other way while she rolled up in a truck and carted all the parts away.

“Took a few months but she managed to put it back together, bribed a DTT inspector to give her a certificate and Down Time, Ltd. was born.”

“She bribed an agent of the Department of Temporal Transportation? I’ve always heard they couldn’t be bribed.”

“Kid, with the right leverage, anyone can be bribed. In this case the leverage was a picture of the agent and his neighbor’s wife.”

“That sounds more like blackmail,” Jack noted.

“No kidding, but she did bribe him as well. The one thing you can count on is that Sharonne won’t rely on the carrot if she can use the stick at the same time. Anyway she knew this Transit wasn’t all that old and it seemed a waste to let it get scrapped, especially since it still supposedly worked, so she decided to put it to use making her rich. There were two problems. First of all this was supposed to be a government job, I forget which department was supposed to get it, it may have been the FBI. It was supposed to be one of those Transits that can stop on timelines outside the five nines limit, but the regulator wouldn’t do it, not on demand anyway. It just couldn’t do what they wanted, so they dumped it.”

“Why didn’t they just install a new regulator?”

“The regulator is ninety-five percent of the cost of one of these things. If that fries, you may as well buy a whole new one and start over.”

“What was the second problem?” Jack asked.

“Sometimes the regulator does allow us to land outside the five nines limit and if an inspector ever catches it doing that I doubt we could afford the bribe to keep him from junking this baby for the final time. In fact I’m fairly certain that’s what just happened.”

“Come on, Pflum. We could be anywhere in the world.”

“Kid, I’ve never known the geographical controls to go wrong, but I’ve had to wrestle the temporal ones lots of times. In spite of what I may have said out there, this is Manhattan, just not the one Peter Stuyvesant stole for a bunch of beads and trinkets.”

“Maybe we just went even farther back in time than we think?” Jack suggested uncertainly.

“It doesn’t work like that. Oh sure we’d only have had to go back an extra three or four centuries, but the trip would have taken half an hour longer. We’re in the right absolute year even if there aren’t any people on this time line to give it a number. Of course, this Transit does one thing no other commercial model can do. In this one, we can return to a specific time line if we need to.”

“How do we do that?”

“Through a tracer unit,” Pflum replied. “All we need to do is deposit a tracer attuned to the temporal regulator and the special circuits that came installed in this crate will find it on a return trip. Aha! I found the problem.”

“What was it?”

“A loose wire on one of the gauges. I told you this regulator sometimes works the way it was designed. The gauge acted like we were at the end of the trip so I cut power. Probably just a minute early so we’re on the wrong line. It’s an easy fix, why don’t you go herd our passengers back inside. I should have this fixed in a few seconds.”

“Okay, Pflum,” Jack agreed and went back outside. A minute later he was back with most of the tourists. “Pflum, we have a problem.”

“What is it, kid?” Pflum asked.

“Mr. Telemon and his niece decided to wander off.”

Two

The Hills are Alive

“Terrific!” Pflum sighed, closing up the access panel. “We’d better go find them. Folks,” he continued, turning to the tourists, “I assume I can trust you all to stay right here until we get back.”

“I guarantee it,” Mrs. Callinger told him emphatically. “No one is going to keep me from the theater tonight!”

“Good,” Pflum replied. “C’mon, kid.”

Pflum started walking toward the door, then stopped for a moment, turned and went back to a small closet next to the panel he’d been working on. He reached in and brought out a very large wrench. It was over two feet long and had been built to work on a very large nut. Then he led Jack out of the Transit.

“What do you carry a wrench that large for, Pflum? The Transit doesn’t have any nut or bolts that large. And why are you bringing it with you?” Jack asked.

“The DTT doesn’t allow us to carry weapons with us except by special permit, kid.”

“Weapons? But that’s not... Oh. I see what you mean. I don’t suppose there might be another one of those wrenches back in the Transit?”

“Sorry, kid. This one’s the only one in the box. You may want to buy one of your own though. They do come in handy.”

“Do we need to defend ourselves often?” Jack asked nervously.

“Not really, unless you make a habit of frequenting dark alleys, kid. Actually I use this beauty more often to fix the Transit.”

“But, the size...”

“Kid, sometimes that crate just needs a good knock in the right place.”

Just then they heard a distant scream. Wasting no time Pflum and Jack ran toward the sound. As they crested the next hill they looked down and skidded suddenly to a halt. Beneath them were the two tourists, desperately clinging to what looked like the edge of an immense mouth that seemed to have opened up in the turf beneath them. Mr. Telemon was an investment banker, in his mid-fifties and mostly bald. The woman with him, a pretty blond with enough assets to generate interest in anyone with a pulse, at twenty-one was certainly young enough to be his niece, but the fact that neither of them was more than half dressed cast serious doubt on the possibility. At the moment they were only halfway over the edge, but the hole was slowly growing wider and soon they would have nothing left to cling to. There was an odd sound that was halfway between that made when crushing Styrofoam and the rumble of an Earth tremor.

“What the hell is that?” Jack asked as they started to make their way carefully down the steep slope.

“Local carnivore,” Pflum replied tersely.

“Are you crazy? There’s nothing like that on Earth!”

“Not our Earth, no, but here that may be the dominant life form,” Pflum retorted, “Probably is. Now keep quiet about it. The tourists aren’t supposed to know we’re out beyond the five nines.”

“They’re going to be a tad suspicious after breathing the halitosis that thing is spewing out.”

“Trust me, kid. They have more important things on their minds at the moment. Okay, you see that bush

down there? I want you to grab it with one hand and then grab one of my feet with the other.”

“Right!” Jack replied. He did as ordered and Pflum lay down on the steep grassy slope, stretching out as far as he could.

“Grab the wrench!” Pflum shouted to Mr. Telemon. Telemon did so immediately and started pulling himself free. “No!” Pflum corrected him. “Let her climb over you and on up first.” Telemon didn’t pay attention and Pflum was tempted to let go of the wrench. Instead he shouted, “Let her go first or I’ll throw you in personally!”

Telemon listened that time and reached toward the woman next to him and helped her up. She climbed over him, then over Pflum and Jack. When she was able to start back upslope on her own Pflum helped Telemon up and finally he and Jack made their way away from the huge maw that had threatened to devour them. Both Telemon and his ‘niece’ tried to look back down the hill from the top, but Pflum continued to herd them firmly away from the sight of it.

“What the hell was that?” Telemon demanded when they were finally down the other side of the hill.

“Sink hole,” Pflum told him.

“A sink hole? Are you kidding? It was a great mouth that just opened up in the ground,” Telemon countered.

“Yeah, they look like that sometimes.”

“I’m telling you,” Telemon insisted, “It was some great beast trying to swallow us.”

“Nonsense,” Pflum scoffed. “A creature large enough to have a mouth that size would collapse under its own weight.”

“Don’t you tell me it’s nonsense,” Telemon continued. “I could feel its breath on me.”

“And it stank,” the supposed niece added.

“That happens,” Pflum commented. “Organic matter in the ground starts to rot. That produces methane and other noxious gasses. When a sink hole forms it gets out. There’s no mystery. Besides think about what you’re saying. We’d have to be on another planet and the Transit may be a lot of things but a spaceship is not one of them.”

“Well, maybe,” Telemon conceded after a long pause. “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely,” Pflum assured him. “We had better get back to the Transit before Mrs. Callinger decides to try hijacking it to make sure she doesn’t miss her date with the Rum Tum Tugger.”

“Like this?” Telemon protested. “We can’t walk back there naked.”

“Funny,” Pflum commented wryly, “It doesn’t look like your legs won’t work without clothing. What did you have in those pants? Servo motors?”

“Please, just find something we can cover ourselves with,” Telemon requested with a touch of panic in his voice. “If not for me, then take pity on Miss Forsyth.”

Pflum considered that before turning to Jack. “Kid,” he said, “Why don’t you run back to the Transit and grab a couple spare uniforms, will you?”

“I’ll be right back,” Jack replied and ran off.

Pflum paused to look Miss Forsyth up and down slowly and carefully. She didn’t seem to mind the inspection, but Telemon immediately made several objections.

Pflum looked at the man and replied with a raised eyebrow, “Your niece, huh?” Telemon wisely kept his mouth shut after that.

Three

Money Makes the World Go Round

Bells rang both in and outside of the Transit as it completed its time journey from the late Twentieth Century. It was the signal that relative to the normal flow of time and space the Transit had come to rest at last.

A few seconds later the entrance door, the one that couldn’t be opened when in the field, opened and Pflum told the exiting tourists, “Thank you for traveling with Down Time, Ltd. Please remember us for all your temporal excursions.”

“I still would have rather seen ‘Cats,’” Mrs. Callinger grumbled.

“Well, Ma’am, if you would consider booking with us at least a year in advance we can probably procure those tickets or any others for you.”

“A year?”

“More or less. Basically, we go back and purchase the next available tickets. Then when the time is right we return and you go to the show.”

“Why couldn’t I go right away?”

It’s a matter of temporal harmonics, ma’am. The only way to guarantee the right day on the right time line is to synchronize to our present, so if the tickets are for a year after we purchase them, we need to leave a year later too. If we try going at a different time, we’re likely to be on the wrong time line.”

“Oh,” she replied. Her eyes had started to glaze over, telling Pflum she really didn’t understand what he was telling her. “I’ll have to talk to Ms Lachado.” She walked off, following the rest of the tourists.

Pflum turned to Jack and muttered. “Why do I have the feeling she’s going to want those tickets for next weekend?”

“Want me to sweep out the Transit?” Jack offered.

“Thanks, kid. Also hit the button to start recycling the air in there. Next trip to the Twentieth Century I’m

gonna get a bunch of those air fresheners that look like little pine trees.”

“Like pine trees?” Jack asked as Pflum started walking away.

“Yeah, kid. They’re green and flat and fill the air with artificial pine scent.”

“Why?”

“Smells better than the Transit does at the moment, kid,” Pflum replied and turned away.

The “hanger” for the transit was not much more than a large garage with room for four Transits, although at present Down Time, Ltd. only owned two. Pflum glanced into the next bay and noted that Jainette Manovich’s Transit, the newer one of the two, was currently out. Most of the box was still there, but the field end faded out abruptly about half-way. From the amount that was still visible, Pflum estimated it was somewhere in the late Fifteenth Century or maybe the early Sixteenth.

He continued walking across the hanger floor, but instead of going out the same door the tourists had, he went through a door marked, “Authorized Personel Only.” In handwriting someone had added, “Trespassers will be eaten.”

The next room was Kenneth Jackson’s domain. Jackson, a tall man of African descent, was Down Time, Ltd.’s chief mechanic. Actually he was the only mechanic although, like Pflum, he occasionally had the assistance of an intern. The intern was nowhere in sight, but Jackson was hard at work, programming a milling machine to turn out a part he needed to fabricate.

“Back already, Pflum?” he grunted.

“Right on time, Ken,” Pflum replied a bit defensively.

“First time this year,” Jackson replied.

“Blame the guy who maintains her,” Pflum retorted.

Jackson glared for a moment then turned back to his work. “So what’s your complaint this time, Pflum?”

“Transit’s acting up again. She landed us on some time line with creatures with great cavernous mouths that live just below the surface.”

“Of the ocean?” Jackson asked.

“No, of the land.” Pflum went on to describe what had happened.

“Must have been a sink hole,” Jackson told him at last.

“Yeah,” Pflum agreed sarcastically. “That’s what I told the customer. Good thing he didn’t see the critter’s tongue, right?”

“You really saw something like that?”

“I really did. It was long, forked and purple,” Pflum replied.

“I meant the creature, not the tongue,” Jackson retorted.

“Yeah, me too. Seriously though, we were way out of the five nines this time.”

“How far out?” Jackson asked concernedly.

“Hard to tell, but I’m not sure we were within even one nine. The place had breathable air and the flora looked familiar, but that was the only megafauna we saw, but it didn’t look like anything I’ve ever seen and I’ve been out of the nines before, you know.”

“Did the tourists know what happened?”

“Nah, I told them we had landed a thousand miles off target. They didn’t know how unlikely that was so they believed me.”

“You’re too lucky for your own good sometimes, Pflum,” Jackson said at last. “I’ll have a look at the temporal regulator later. Maybe it’s something we can fix, or at least come up with a work-around. You done your report up yet?”

“Not yet,” Pflum replied. “I just got back.”

“Should have worked on it during the return trip.”

“I had a few distractions. One of my tourists had to settle for seeing, ‘Chicago.’”

“What did she want? ‘Cats?’”

“You got it,” Pflum replied. “God only knows why. At least ‘Chicago’ had a plot. Well, you’re right about one thing. I’d better work up that report. You’ll check the Transit?”

“I said I would,” Jackson told him.

“Check the calibration of the…” Pflum started.

“I know how to check a Transit, Pflum. It’s not like I’m a driver without a thing on my mind. The sooner you leave the sooner I’ll be clear to overhaul your taxicab.”

Pflum paused to fire back a witty remark and came up dry. Instead he shrugged and returned to the hanger. He went into the Transit to pick up his log book, but his bad mood was only made worse when Jack told him, “Ms. Lachado wants you in her office Pflum.”

“Already? We just got back. Even she doesn’t debrief us until we present our report. Tell me, kid, how angry did she seem?”

“Not angry. A bit anxious, maybe, or worried, but she didn’t seem angry,” Jack replied.

“Not angry?” Pflum repeated. “That might be worse. Did she say what she wanted to see me about?”

“No, just told me to tell you to get up to her office right away.”

“I’m off,” Pflum told him. “Morituri te salutant,” he muttered the ancient gladiatorial salute to himself.

Sharonne Lachado was the founder and sole proprietor of Down Time, Ltd. Five years earlier she salvaged her first transit, using junkyard scrap and a few parts stolen from her then employer, Time Tours, Inc. She used that Transit to build up a respectable business and was soon able to buy a second one. Since then business declined. She blamed the economy. In an economic decline fewer people were likely to book an expensive trip into the past and the current administration seemed to think that the best way to turn the economy around was by passing tax breaks for themselves and giving government contracts to their friends' companies. In short, nothing had changed in over a century.

Sharonne's hair color, highly variable, was currently light blond and her eyes, equally variable were currently a vivid blue-violet. Her office was tastefully decorated with various artifacts she had bought in the past, but cluttered with reams of paperwork that covered every horizontal surface in the room except for her own chair. Her desk hosted a pair of in-out baskets that instead had been labeled "In" and "Really In." Both were full. She was working on a form on top of several other layers of forms when Pflum stepped in to the office.

"Whoa, Sharrone! Just how many forests did you have to defoliate to get all this paper?" he asked.

"You don't make paper out of leaves, Pflum she replied testily."

"You can if you want to," Pflum replied. "I have notepads made from tobacco leaves."

"And you smoke them when you run out of cigars do you?" she asked acidly. "Sit."

"Where?" he asked. "I'd need a shovel to clear a space."

"Don't try to be funny, Pflum. I'm not in the mood and if I kill you, it'll only double the paperwork I need to fill out. Just knock the paper off one of the chairs."

"I wouldn't want to upset your filing system, Sharonne."

"Sit!" she shouted.

"Okay, okay!" he picked up a pile of paper from one chair and placed it precariously on top of another. The resultant pile looked like it was ready to fall over, but was actually fairly stable. "So, I imagine you didn't call me in just for my usual debriefing?"

"You used to have a better imagination, Pflum," she shot back at him. "Yes, that's part of why you're here. What's this Mrs. Callinger tells me about you scalping theater tickets for her?"

"That's not quite what I offered her. I just figured that if she really wanted to see "Cats," all we had to do is next time we make a trip to the late Twentieth, we can buy tickets for her, and then schedule her trip. My transit is able to home in on a tracer unit after all."

Sharonne thought about that for a moment then conceded, "That's not a bad idea, actually. She just took me by surprise when she asked how soon she could schedule her next theater trip. She made it sound like we were supposed to make two trips back for the price of one."

"What did you tell her?" Pflum asked.

"That I would get back to her. I think she was expecting to be able to book the trip before leaving

today.”

“Well, give her a call later and ask her what time of year she would like it to be in New York. If she’s going to have to wait, she may as well get the season of her choice.”

“I’ll do that, Aurelian. Thank you,” she added a moment later.

Pflum tensed up. She didn’t use his given name very often and usually only when she wanted something of him. But figuring she was about to ask him to do something he didn’t like, he figured he might as well get something for it. “Do you think you could convince Ken to give my Transit a complete overhaul? I know he patches her up pretty well, but the malfunctions are getting worse.” He told her about the latest incident. “Frankly I don’t think she will pass her next inspections if he doesn’t.”

“It,” Sharonne emphasized the word - to her the Transit was definitely neuter, not feminine, “has not passed its last five inspections.”

“Five? Why hasn’t it been condemned? Uh... not that I’m recommending that, of course.”

“Of course. And why not? Because inspectors can occasionally be convinced to turn a blind eye toward certain, non-dangerous defects.”

“You bribed them,” Pflum concluded. “That must have been expensive. Hope you can afford it.”

“What I cannot afford is to have one of my Transits shut down,” she snapped at him. “Still, I’ll ask Ken to give it an extra special going over. The living sink hole was pretty nasty and if you hadn’t convinced Mr. Telemon and his ‘love-in niece’ that it was just a normal sinkhole, we might have had real trouble. The DTT isn’t the only government agency that inspects us regularly.”

“Who else is interested in time travel?” Pflum asked.

“Everyone in one aspect or another. The Internal Revenue Service watches temporal travel agencies, and every other business in the country, closely to make sure we pay every penny of our taxes and a bit more besides. The FBI watches us because there are far too many ways time travel can be used dishonestly. And don’t get me started on the Bureau of Temporal Protection.”

“Who?” Pflum asked.

“A new agency, part of Health, Education and Welfare. One of the things they are concerned with is the importation of diseases from the past.”

“Gotta admit that is a concern,” Pflum allowed.

“Only when you don’t have to pay for the required equipment,” Sharonne replied sourly.

“Equipment? What happened to the fine old art of quarantine?”

“Apparently it’s a lost art as far as HEW is concerned. Seriously, however, given the incubation times of some diseases, quarantines would probably put us out of business.”

“We already require all passengers to prove they’ve had their shots,” Pflum pointed out.

“Not good enough anymore. Chronological Caravans got clumsy recently and let a whole family through with falsified inoculation documents. They came back infected with Spanish Flu, the one that killed twenty-one million people in the early Twentieth.”

“Interesting price to pay just for ducking a few shots,” Pflum commented.

“Now we’re required to have our own doctor on staff to administer all inoculations and to oversee decontamination procedures on return. We can charge for the shots and any other expenses we care to charge for, of course, but I’ve been calling around and none of our competitors are charging for anything but the inoculations themselves and no more than the hospitals do, which means they’re absorbing the doctors’ salaries for the most part.”

Pflum looked around the office. He’d known Sharonne since before she started Down Time, Ltd. and could judge her stress level from the condition of her office. At the moment her stress level was high and what stressed her out the most was money, or rather the lack of it.

“Can we afford that?” Pflum asked.

“It will be tight,” she replied. “We need to be able to book more tours. That’s why I like your idea about theater tours.”

“Thank Mrs. Callinger,” Pflum told her.

“If I do that, she’ll want a free trip,” Sharonne shot back, but she smiled as she said it. “I’ll tell you what. I’ll make sure Ken checks your Transit right down to the solder and replaces anything that might be iffy, but I need you to do something for me too.” Here it came. “I want you and your current sidekick... What’s his name? Mike?”

“The kid’s name is Jack,” Pflum corrected her.

“Jack then. I want you two to conduct a series of sales and marketing seminars.”

“Say that in English,” Pflum replied.

“I want you to talk to potential customers and get them to sign up for tours. Tell how wonderful it is to actually go back and see the Great Pyramid when it was new. Talk about some of your most exciting moments in the field.”

“Uh...” Pflum began to object.

“No, cancel that. Tell them about the most exciting moments that were within the legal five nines limit. Show them lots of slides. Describe how time travel works. Make them want to book a tour. We need the business.”

Four

Show Me

“And on our return to the present, our staff physician will briefly examine you and present you with a

certificate of health at no additional charge. Any questions?" Pflum asked at the conclusion of his lecture. After thirty-some lectures, he was getting quite proficient at public speaking. His halting explanation of the slides he showed had evolved into a smooth presentation in which the slides merely served to accentuate what he was saying.

Sharrone had put Jainette Manovich to the same task when she returned from her latest tour as well. Mostly Pflum and Jack worked by themselves. But for the larger presentations they worked together with Jainette and her assistant, Kyle Romilard. Sharonne was also making presentations but hers were more geared toward potential investors. To date she had not found anyone ready to buy shares of the company, but she told Pflum and Jainette she had several interested men and women lined up.

"Mr. Pflum," a middle aged woman asked, "how can you be so sure you won't land on our own time line? It seems to me that as small as the possibility may be, it is still a possibility."

"Ma'am, there are an infinite number of time lines. Even though we can only land on one thousandth of one percent of them, there are still an infinite number of them. They will seem exactly like this one, but the chance on landing on this one is infinitesimally small. Even if we tried we couldn't manage it."

"But," she persisted, "you said earlier you could go back in time to buy tickets to a play and then return later to the same line. If you can return to that line, why not this one?"

"We can only do that by the means of a tracer unit. Such a unit – a small capsule with just a bit of a radioactive isotope of uranium in it, can be used to bring a specially equipped Transit back to the same time line. We have such a Transit. Just one, mind you, but it is probably the only one in commercial usage."

"So the other Transit could never return to the same line?" she asked.

Pflum frowned. It was odd she was bothering to press the matter. No one else ever had. "That is true," he admitted. "That one is unable to find any time line twice. " He didn't mention that Down Time Ltd made it policy that both Transits carried tracer units. His Transit was synchronized to all the tracers and could track down any of them if dropped on a time line.

"Thank you," she said and finally sat down. She turned to a man in his twenties and whispered something. He nodded, then both turned back to pay attention to the next question.

"Mr. Pflum," an earnest-looking young man who had the look of a college student stood up, "we aren't polluting our own time line, I'll give you that, but are you not concerned with the disruption of history on these alternative lines your tours visit?"

"It's a matter of philosophy, k... uh... sir," Pflum replied. "A predeterminist would tell you that anything that happens has already happened and therefore we are a part of that line's history before we ever arrive."

"But..." the student tried to cut in.

Pflum kept going regardless. "However, I can easily admit I'm not a predeterminist. I don't think I'm already somewhere or somewhen for that matter before I get there. Other scholars are of the opinion that our little incursions have only a temporary effect on causality in those lines, sort of like the way a minor wound heals in a short amount of time. There appears to be some mathematics to support this view, although it's a bit beyond me. I'm just the cab driver," he concluded with a wink. Several in the audience

chuckled.

“I can explain the Blackfellow Equations, if you’d like, Pflum,” Jack offered.

“Or I can,” Jainette added.

Pflum frowned slightly and returned to the audience. “Anyone up for math class tonight?” he asked cheerfully. A few people laughed nervously, but nobody actually asked for a lecture on the mathematical basis of temporal theory. “Well, trust me, the math works, otherwise I’d probably be here trying to sell trips to the Moon.” The entire audience laughed at that one.

Lunar excursions had been quite popular two decades earlier, but they were even more expensive and time-consuming than time travel. Once there, there was not much to do in the cramped and narrow corridors of one of the dozen lunar stations. The scientists there were not particularly friendly toward the tourists because of the numerous accidents they caused. There were only a few recreational facilities; mostly gymnasiums for the local scientists only. And so after a few years the fad died out. Not too long after that, however, rumors began to spread that some multinational concern planned to build a large hotel near Tranquility Base National Monument. It would have high ceilings for tourists unused to walking safely in the light lunar gravity, and a large chamber for flying, which according to someone’s calculations would be possible with strap-on wings. Several travel agencies instantly appeared to book reservations to this, as yet, nonexistent hotel. Unfortunately the rumors were untrue and the agencies were all scams that dematerialized as quickly as they had appeared. Today, the idea of selling trips to the Moon was analogous to the Twentieth Century’s “Deed to the Brooklyn Bridge.”

“Still,” the student persisted. “none of those proofs are incontrovertible since they can not be confirmed by observation, can they?” He seemed rather smug about that, but his composure slipped when all four Down Time employees smiled.

“What makes you say that?” Pflum replied.

“You said a Transit can not choose the exact time line it lands on.”

“Most commercial Transits can’t, no, but some government agencies have models that can return to a line they have visited previously.” He went on to explain how a tracer unit worked.

Sharonne had decided they should not advertise the fact that Pflum’s Transit could home on a tracer. She wasn’t certain how the DTT would view a commercial enterprise with such a Transit and decided it would be best not to find out. The special ticket service would be one she only offered to very special clients, at least until her lawyers were able to come to a decision where the company stood.

“There have been several long term studies of such time lines by the Department of Temporal Transportation,” Jainette added. “To date there has been no proof that anything we have done on those lines has made a lasting difference. I’m not saying it is impossible to make a difference, but we are very careful about our actions while in the field. We take pains not to attract attention, we do not tolerate theft on the part of our clients and we make it a policy to hold our employees and clients to the letter of the law both as we know it here at home and in the times we visit.”

“But someone could change the history of a time line if they tried?” he shot at her in parting.

“And when you leave here tonight, you may be struck by lightning. The difference is that you have a better chance betting on the lightning strike.” Jainette privately wondered if that was true. She didn’t

know of any cases in which someone had tried changing history, but she was giving these potential clients the official line on the subject and managed not to let her doubts show.

“Is there any limit regarding where or when you can go?” a woman in the back of the room asked.

Pflum handled that question, “Anywhere on Earth and theoretically at anytime back to the Big Bang. In practice, however, we’ve never been back more than seventy million years.”

“Why not?” she asked.

“It takes roughly twenty-four hours to travel back ten million years, so to go back seventy million takes a week. The transit looks like a fair sized room from inside, but it’s only one room. Ever spend a whole week in a room without windows, no way to get out, no privacy, and no way to get away from any of the other people in the room with you? Not exactly a pleasant trip. I’ve done it twice. The dinosaurs are interesting, but you’ll see more of them and in a lot more comfort on the Tri-V. Still there are always people who want to go back so whenever we have enough, we make a run.”

“No privacy?” the woman asked. “What about when taking a bath or a shower?”

“The Transit doesn’t have those facilities, ma’am. Although we do have a lavatory and some folks have indulged in a sponge bath on the long trips, but only if necessary because no one likes to have to wait to use the head. We also have a few movable screens for changing room privacy, and carry a lot of movies and Tri-V games and music and any other form of entertainment. But no matter how much we do a week out and a week back is pretty much the limit, because that’s all the food, water and air we can carry with us. And as it is, the water and air needs to be replenished at the far end. It’s not a comfortable trip.

“It’s a shame, really,” Pflum continued. “I’d love to go back to the Permian era and see the synapsids in real life. Sure they’re big lizards like the dinosaurs, but they’re our ancestors while the dinos aren’t.”

“Can this technology be used for space travel?” a young woman asked.

“Not directly, no,” Pflum replied.

When it looked like he was about to leave it at that, Jack added, “Time is an ocean for a Transit. We sail fairly easily along the top of it, but changing our spatial coordinates is more difficult. The technology is sufficiently advanced for us to get to any spot on Earth, in much the same way an airplane can and with about the same expenditure of energy. But we are still constrained by Earth’s gravity well.”

“Look at it this way,” Pflum added, not to be upstaged. “The Earth is constantly in motion around the Sun, which is in orbit around the Milky Way. The Milky Way is in the process of trying to shake hands with the Andromeda Galaxy and the whole local group of galaxies is skittering off to meet the “Great Attractor,” whatever that turns out to be. So if we were not bound to the Earth by its gravity even a small trip in time could leave us hopelessly stranded in space. Not to mention the fact that Transits are not perfectly vacuum proof. If we were suddenly in space everyone inside the Transit would die of explosive decompression.”

“Transits are used in some space exploration,” Jainette said, putting her own two cents worth in, “but they are first carried to the planet they are to be used on by more conventional spaceships. They are never used in open space because without a gravity well to rest in, they would indeed move relative to the local planets, asteroids, comets and what have you. For the record, unless taken out beyond the Sun’s well they do stay within the Solar System and if still within the Milky Way would not be able to

leave this galaxy. However, because there are so many objects, large and small, in space, even within the Solar System, it would be extremely dangerous to try an in-space time trip because we could not predict a safe landing.”

There was only one further question that evening. “How could you stop someone from taking a time trip and then when in the past, just running off and disappearing in the crowd?” That came from the young man next to the woman who had asked the first question.

“Why would anyone want to do that?” countered Pflum. “In the past, especially on an alternate time line, you would have no proof of identity and very little money you could spend. Most cultures we travel to still use currency, whether metallic or paper. These days our entire economy is based on credit, only coin collectors have any currency and it is axiomatic,” Pflum was proud of that word, “that coins in a collection will be worth far more than they were in their own milieu. Down Time, Ltd. has carefully collected currency from the past to get us through emergencies and special purchases desired by our clients.” They also used bullion in times and places that accepted it, but Pflum didn’t bother to mention that. “And we do provide a money-conversion service for our clients, but only enough for specific purchases, which our Transit drivers approve and oversee. Trust me, you really don’t want to get stranded in the past with only enough pocket change to buy a meal or two. Any further questions? No? Well thank you all for coming tonight. We will be available for the next hour if anyone would like to book a tour.”

Five

April in Paris

The lecture tour was a success and more clients were booking tours than ever before. Sharonne started budgeting for a third and fourth Transit and, in an attempt to keep up with demand, turn around time for each Transit was only a few hours, just enough time to enjoy one good meal and catch a little sleep. So it was no little surprise that Pflum noticed Jainette’s Transit was parked a month later when he got back from a tour of the Battle of Gettysburg.

“Hey, Pflum!” Ken Jackson called to him the moment the tourists had left the hanger, “Sharonne wants to see you in her office pronto!”

“What’s the problem?” Pflum asked.

“She didn’t tell me. She just said to get you up there soonest.”

“All right. Damn I need a real meal. Kid,” he said turning to Jack, “Order a couple pizzas and have one sent up to the office.”

“You want me to sweep out the Transit, Pflum?” Jack asked.

“Just start the air recirculating,” Pflum told him. “Ken’s boys will do the rest.”

One of the first investments Sharonne had made was to hire two new assistant engineers. Even Pflum had to admit the Transit was running better since Ken had gotten some help.

Pflum made his way quickly up to Sharonne’s office. The corridors were looking better these days. They

had always been clean but new tiles on the floors and paper on the walls made the place sparkle. Sharonne had also hired a new assistant for herself, a young woman named Rain just out of school. She had a pretty face and long brown hair. Pflum would normally flirt with her, given a chance just to see her blush, but this time she interrupted him before he could think of an opening gambit.

“Ms. Lachado said to send you right in,” she told him without preamble.

“What’s up?” he asked her. Rain shrugged. He paused at the door and was about to knock when she repeated he was to go right in. Inside the office Sharonne and Jainette were deep in a hushed conversation and didn’t immediately notice Pflum entering. The office was amazingly neat. There were only a few sheets of paper and a single open file folder on Sharonne’s desk and none elsewhere in the room. Pflum wasn’t sure if this was Rain’s influence or whether it was a sign of the impending Day of Judgement. Whatever the case, the sudden change in the condition of Sharonne’s office left him feeling unaccountably uneasy.

“I really don’t know how it happened,” Jainette was saying. Even though it was the first time Pflum heard her say it, the sentence had the sound of one that had been repeated several times.

“Let’s go over it one more time,” Sharonne suggested. Then she noticed Pflum standing there. “Aurelian, you’re here. Good. Sit down. We have a situation here.”

English has been described as a result of Norman overlords trying to get their Anglo-Saxon servants to do the windows. They did this then even as people would today; by talking very loudly, clearly and slowly at them. Eventually the language evolved into the forms we know of in the writings of Chaucer and then of Shakespeare. Evolution, however, does not have a plan. It is a matter of random changes some of which are successful and others somewhat less so. So from the plays and sonnets of Shakespeare the language continued to evolve until in the early Twenty-first Century when the language nearly became extinct when politicians were allowed to replace plain boring words like “plan” with meaningless metaphors like “roadmap,” without anyone noticing the stupidity implicit in the act. The language was eventually saved ironically by part of the Internet known at the time as Usenet newsgroups where unvarnished truth and unrestrained rudeness joined forces and started a grassroots movement whose side effect was to cause politically created metaphors to be distrusted for generations thereafter. However, even in these latter days if you want the windows done, you are best advised to do them yourselves as the Normans eventually learned to do.

In the course of English language history, however, there have been a number of buzzwords, phrases and even whole sentences that have taken on meanings beyond their normal value. Some of these include “A Modest Proposal,” “The New Deal,” “Let’s do lunch,” “Trust me,” “Effete intellectual snob” and “Define sex.” But no collection of words in the English language is calculated to inspire more fear than, “We have a situation here.” Heroes who would unflinchingly run into a burning building to save a stray kitten quail at those words. Pflum, who did not count himself among the world’s heroes, looked over his shoulder and briefly considered running. Surely he could get another job somewhere doing something. Suddenly flipping burgers and washing dishes didn’t sound so bad.

“Uh,” he hesitated, “maybe I should see about painting the macaque.”

“Sit,” Sharonne repeated. “This is too serious to kid around about.”

“Who was kidding?” Pflum countered. “Okay! Okay! What’s happened?”

“Tell it from the start, Jainette,” Sharonne instructed her.

“It should have been a routine milk run sort of trip,” Jainette began. “I took a dozen tourists to Paris in 1927. We’ve both done that trip a dozen times or more, right?” Pflum nodded. “It’s usually a lot of fun for all of us. The height of the so-called Roaring Twenties in an exciting city. You have a few meals in pleasant bistros, take in the Louvre...”

“Remember the time we tried that combination Paris/Titanic tour in 1912?” Pflum interrupted. “Never did finish the trip because several of our tourists got picked up by the gendarmes in connection with the disappearance of the Mona Lisa half a year earlier.”

“Focus, Pflum!” Sharonne reprimanded him. “Let Jainette tell her story.”

Jainette continued, “Anyway the Mona Lisa was back in her usual place by 1927 and always a popular attraction, but that was just part of the trip. Everyone loves to go shopping in Paris and that’s part of the attraction as well. It was the last of the three day trip and I had an allergic attack. It was spring time, of course, so there was a lot of pollen in the air. Kyle offered to escort the party while I recovered in the Transit where the air was filtered. I meant to get a bit of work done on my tour report and run the usual pre-trip checklist on the Transit, but instead I went back to sleep. The next thing I knew, Kyle was shaking me awake because two of the tourists had slipped away from him.

“I asked him which two and I supposed I shouldn’t have been surprised. Do you remember that mother and son at that big session we did in Cleveland a bit over a month ago? The pair who asked questions about how we can’t pick the exact line we land on and whether someone could slip away in the crowd?”

“I wasn’t aware they were mother and son,” Pflum replied, “But, yes, I think I remember them. She was about five foot six, silver hair, looked like everyone’s grandmother and he was maybe an inch taller, light brown hair with a faint scar on his cheek. Right?”

“He’s grown a prissy little mustache since then,” Jainette informed him, “but yes, that’s the pair.”

“Here are their current photos taken as they left the Transit that day,” Sharonne said, handing a pair of glossy holograms across the desk.

“They posed for pictures?” Pflum commented. “How convenient.”

“Not really. Jainette’s Transit has always been rigged to take photos of anyone exiting to the field. It’s a security measure that’s been on the books for new Transits for five years now.”

“Mine can’t do that,” Pflum grumbled.

“Grandfather clause in the statute. I told Kenneth to fit it out for the next trip, however. From now on everyone’s going to be on Candid Camera. But we’re interrupting again. Jainette?”

“Naturally, I wasn’t particularly alarmed at first,” Jainette continued. “Tourists go missing all the time. Usually they wander back an hour or two later with some new purchase or else just smug expressions or some such.”

“Sure, it’s all a game for them. Like Mr. Telemon and his ‘niece’ a few weeks back,” Pflum added.

“His niece?” Jainette echoed. “Some men have absolutely no imagination.”

“Or all too much,” Sharonne muttered darkly. “But we’re more concerned with the Crestons.”

“Who?” Pflum asked.

“That’s their name,” Jainette replied. “Mae and Donald Creston, although I wouldn’t count on them to still be using it by the time we find them.”

“By the time we find them they’ll probably be begging us to take them back,” Pflum replied. “The past is a lovely place to visit but none of us would want to live there.”

“I’m not so sure of that. We stayed in Paris an extra three days and couldn’t find a trace of them. I dropped a tracer unit from your Transit and hightailed it back here. But you may be wrong about living in the past. 1920’s Paris isn’t such a bad time and place, you know.”

“Perhaps,” Pflum nodded, “but it won’t remain 1920’s Paris for long and France wasn’t any better during the Great Depression than anywhere else as I recall. Still there are a lot of places they could disappear to there. Wait a minute! Why are we stressing about this? They signed the usual waivers, didn’t they?”

“They did,” Sharonne confirmed, “but it appears there’s a warrant out for those two.”

“What have they done?” Pflum asked flatly.

Just then Sharonne’s vidphone beeped. “Yes?” she asked, picking up the handset for privacy. She briefly glanced at Pflum then replied, “Yes, pay the man and bring it in. Your pizza’s here, Pflum.”

“I didn’t expect you to pick up the tab,” he told her.

“No, that’s okay. I should have realized you’d be hungry having just come in from a trip.”

The door opened and Rain delivered the large pepperoni and onion. It was larger than Pflum might have normally ordered for himself. He figured Jack must either have been thinking he planned to share - not a bad thought, though it was not one he had considered himself – or else the kid was really hungry too. Pflum opened the box and gestured for Sharonne and Jainette to help themselves.

“So,” Pflum asked between mouthfuls, “what did they do? Or should that be ‘what did they allegedly do?’”

“Quite a bit if you listen to the news lately,” Sharonne replied.

“For me the news is that the Union won at Gettysberg,” Pflum replied. “I haven’t had time to hear about what’s been happening in the present in weeks.”

“I could hand you the news printouts,” Sharonne suggested.

“Give me the Readers’ Digest version.”

“The... Oh yeah, I remember seeing that back when I drove the transit. Okay. Well, at the very least they’re grifters. They run a variety of scams depending on where they are and who they spot as the mark. They’ve been big on the Pigeon Drop. You know the one in which they claim to have found a large amount of money and offer to share it with you, but first want some ‘good faith’ money.”

“They take the good faith money and move on to the next mark,” Pflum finished for her.” Yeah, I’ve heard of that one. It’s a variant on the old Nigerian letter fraud.”

“Right. They also like to play the Bank Examiner game.”

“In which they claim to be bank examiners trying to catch a dishonest bank employee,” Pflum replied.

“Yup,” Sharonne agreed. “And then have you make a withdrawal so they can check the money you get. They take the cash off to ‘inspect’ it and that’s the last you see of them. When stuck, they even run the Utility Inspector Scam.”

Jainette decided to join in. “They pretend to be Utility inspectors or Social Security agents or some other official person who arrive in a home to interview the victim. Once inside one proceeds to lead the victim through a lengthy questionnaire, while the other one excuses him or herself to search the joint for cash and jewelry.”

“But their real specialty is the McGuffin Fraud,” Sharrone concluded.

“I’m afraid I don’t know that one,” Pflum admitted.

“Really? It’s about as old as the Pigeon Drop. Okay, this is a bit more involved than the others and it takes two to run. It’s also called the Fiddle Game, because in its classic form the object of the scam, the ‘McGuffin, is a violin. It doesn’t need to be a musical instrument, it could be anything, but I’ll describe it as though the McGuffin is always a violin.

“Scammer number one is not dressed particularly well. Not too badly or the scheme won’t work, but he is obviously down on his luck. Well, he sets up as a street musician outside a restaurant owned by the mark.”

“It’s aimed at restaurateurs?” Pflum asked.

“In its classic form, but it doesn’t have to be. There are hundreds of variations of the McGuffin Fraud, but let me continue.”

“Sorry.”

“So the first grifter is playing for his supper for a couple hours or so. People come by and toss the occasional coin in the fiddle case. Finally he stops, takes the money out of the case and walks into the restaurant to buy a meal. That’s why he can’t be dressed too badly or the mark may not let him in.”

“He’d better be able to play the violin too,” Pflum added.

“Indeed,” Sharonne agreed. “So he makes a great show of counting the money up and doing the sums on the prices and finally orders dinner. Now while the first guy is eating dinner, his partner comes in. He is dressed very sharply and probably carrying several trade ‘zines about musical instruments or antiques under his arm. When the time comes to settle the bill, the first guy turns out to have miscalculated somehow; maybe he forgot the tax or transposed the digits on some item, but he is a bit short and can’t cover the cost of his dinner and he’s dreadfully embarrassed about it. He’s a proud man, won’t take charity, he insists on paying for his meal. So instead he offers to leave his violin as collateral while he goes out to get some more money that somebody supposedly owes him. If the restaurateur won’t take him

up on it one of the customers probably will.

“He tells the mark that it’s really a good instrument and that he originally paid a few hundred bucks for it. So the guy with the restaurant holds the fiddle for him while he goes off to get more cash. Probably figures he was willing to forget the difference so even if the guy never showed up again he’d still have the violin.

“Once the first scammer is out of sight the second one goes into his act. He gets a look at the violin and gets very excited. He makes noises like this is the one object that he has been searching for all his life. He asks to take a close look at it and sure enough he thinks it might actually be one of the instruments Stradivarius made as an apprentice. He makes a show of looking for some special identifying mark in the finish, which is there of course, having been put there by the scammers with a brown marker. Or maybe he asks the victim himself to look for it. When the mark on the finish is found, scammer number two breathes hard for a bit, then sits down looking stunned. “It’s got to be worth over one hundred thousand as an historic artifact alone; more if it’s still in playable condition. And did you say someone was actually playing it? A miracle!

“He starts getting all agitated and says he absolutely must buy this violin. The mark explains it doesn’t belong to him so the second guy pulls out a business card or hastily scribbles his number on a scrap of paper or something and begs the mark to pass it on to the owner because he absolutely must own this instrument! He may even wait around for the owner for a while just to impress the mark just how badly he wants it, but, of course he has to leave before the first guy returns, which happens just after he leaves.”

“Of course,” Pflum nodded. “Isn’t that always the way?”

“Exactly. So then, here comes the first guy with the money to pay for his meal. If the mark is truly honest at this point he’ll take the two bucks or whatever the guy owes him and give him the other one’s business card. In which case both scammers bought meals and paid for them. No harm done.”

“Does that happen often?” Pflum asked.

“More than a lot of people will believe, but let’s assume he’s as greedy as we think he is. If that’s the case he’ll try to buy the violin. He might lowball the price and only offer, oh say a hundred fifty. He might even offer more than the scammer said he paid for it. Either way the grifter is going to haggle. He can’t sell the fiddle, it’s how he makes a living. He’s had it for years and years and can’t bear to part with it. He likes it so much more than any other violin he’s ever played, or any of a thousand other arguments. This convinces the mark that first of all it’s a great violin – first quality – and it also drives the price way up. Eventually the scammer lets the mark buy the fiddle for anything from five to twenty grand depending on how the haggle went. But who cares? He has the violin and the number of someone who’s going to pay him in six figures.

“Of course the number on the card won’t get him in touch with the supposed music dealer and the violin, should he get it appraised, and eventually he probably will, will turn out to be the sort of cheap student violin you can buy from a mail-order catalog. And the scammers then head for the next town with a trunk-load of similar violins.”

“It seems to me,” Pflum said after a bit, “that the scam may also fail if the mark is so dishonest he just up and steals the instrument.”

“That is a risk, but the trick is to not leave too long a gap between the second scammer’s departure and the first one’s return. If he has too long to think he’s likely to take the violin and walk off the job. If he’s

only the manager, the scammer can complain to the owner and might get the original 'few hundred' he paid for it. Other customers in the joint may even be witnesses in his favor. But the ideal time between the two scammers should be just long enough for them to give each other the high sign about twenty yards from the restaurant.

"This game is still being run today, but of course the McGuffin is almost never a violin."

"What else could it be?" Jainette asked.

"Anything really," Pflum replied thoughtfully. "Could be securities, jewelry, cars, et cetera, depending on the venue in which it would be played out.

"Although during the Great Depression of the Twentieth Century," Sharonne told them, "and earlier, it was often a fiddle in a restaurant. Keep that in mind when you go looking for them."

"I'm going looking for them?" Pflum asked.

"Both of you are. Along with an agent of the FBI. He'll be here in the morning and then you'll be off."

"What about the kid?" Pflum asked, then amplified, "Jack?"

"He'll go with you. Kyle will take the next load or two in the other Transit, but while I think he's up to guiding tours solo he isn't yet ready to work with an intern. This shouldn't be dangerous. You'll work with the agent and let him make the arrests."

"Suits me," Pflum commented. "I'm not a cop. I don't have the training."

"Something he'll probably be sure to remind you of, so don't go trying to show off," Sharonne warned him.

"One more thing, Pflum," Jainette added. "Something our fearless leader here forgot to mention. The two are wanted for more than just running cons on unsuspecting marks. They're also wanted for murder."

Six

Come Fly with Me

"Tell me about that now," Pflum requested.

"That's all I know," Jainette admitted. "Sharrone?"

Sharonne didn't know either. "You can ask the agent," she suggested, helping herself to a second slice of pizza. "Maybe he'll tell you."

"Especially if he thinks it will keep us from trying to help," Pflum added. "No danger of that, though."

"Really?" Sharonne asked skeptically. "You usually get into exactly that sort of trouble. I always figured you had death wish issues."

“Amusing,” Pflum replied flatly. “It’s not like I go looking for trouble.”

“No need,” Jainette laughed. “It usually finds you.”

“Or else someone assigns it to me,” Pflum replied darkly. He looked in the pizza box and took the last piece. “Anything else I need to know?”

“Probably a lot,” Sharonne replied, “but I don’t know it either. You may have to help the agent, however, especially on legwork investigations, but that will be up to him.”

“We may be gone for a long time tracking down those two,” Pflum pointed out. “How can we afford to dedicate a transit and your two best drivers to this project?”

“We can’t afford not to. The IRS has been keeping all too close a watch on us lately. The DTT has been writing up increasingly stricter regulations we have to follow and the FBI pretty much hinted they’d shut us down if we didn’t cooperate but would also intercede on our behalf with the others if we did cooperate.”

“Both the carrot and the stick in the same operation,” Pflum noted. “How efficient of them.”

“Go home and get some sleep in a real bed,” Sharonne told them. “You’ll be leaving again at eight A.M.”

“Hope I can still sleep in a real bed,” Pflum grumbled.

Pflum forced himself into a good mood the next morning and picked up a box of doughnuts and a pound of Mocha Java on his way into work. Even so he got there early and neither Jack nor Jainette had arrived yet. He put the doughnuts on a shelf of the food cupboard, noticing Sharonne’s caterer had already been there. He looked over the selection and got an uneasy feeling. The cupboard was filled with all his favorites and not only his but those of Jack and a few other unusual items that he figured must have been on Jainette’s top ten list. Those goodies could only have been put there on Sharonne Lachado’s express orders and that meant she was feeling guilty about this mission and she shouldn’t be. If it was anyone’s fault it was Jainette’s and Pflum wasn’t blaming her. From what he could tell he would have made the same mistake, if a mistake it was.

The food may have been something special, but the coffee was the same old brand the caterer always supplied. It was a good blend of Colombian and Brazilian coffees, but he much preferred the Mocha Java blend. He had just started the brewer when Jainette entered the Transit.

“Morning,” she grunted. “How long before we have coffee?”

“Tough night, J?” Pflum asked.

“The worst, Pflum. I didn’t really sleep at all. Oh, I picked up some doughnuts on the way in. Thought they might be a nice treat with the morning coffee.”

“Good idea,” Pflum told her. He took the box and put it on top of the other in the cupboard.

“Good morning, folks,” Jack greeted them as he entered. “Anyone want a doughnut?” He placed a third box on the table. Pflum, by way of reply reached into the cupboard and pulled out Jainette’s box and put it next to Jack’s. Then he repeated the action with his own box. “We’re going to be sick of doughnuts by the end of the trip aren’t we?”

“I’ll put two of them in the freezer,” Pflum decided. “Anyone get anything they especially wanted? Okay, I’ll put them away after we take off.”

“When will that be, Pflum?” Jack asked.

“Whenever the FBI guy shows up,” Pflum responded, getting the now full coffee pot. “Help yourselves,” he told them as he poured the first cup. They were halfway through their first cups when a woman entered the Transit. She was nearly as tall as Pflum, had medium length brown hair and was wearing a pair of smoky-colored glasses.

“Aurelian Pflum?” she asked. “Jainette Manovich?”

“Here,” Pflum replied. “There,” he pointed at Jainette, “and that’s Jack Laterus.”

She nodded curtly at them and introduced herself, “Samantha di Medici, FBI.” She pulled out a badge and showed it to them.

“Odd, I was expecting a man,” Pflum mused.

“And that would be... why?” she asked challengingly.

“Probably because my boss told me to expect a man,” Pflum shrugged.

“True enough,” Jainette confirmed. “Ms Lachado did say the agent assigned to this case would be a man.”

“Doughnut?” Pflum offered, gesturing toward the boxes.

“Is this some sort of cop joke?” Samantha demanded beligerantly.

“No, just an amazing coincidence,” Pflum muttered. He took another look at Samantha and added, “Do you have any luggage?”

“I have a bag in the car,” she replied. “I’ll get it.”

“No, that’s okay. I’ll send the kid, Jack for it.”

“I can carry my own bags,” the agent replied stiffly.

“I don’t doubt it,” Pflum replied, “but there’s a matter of your pre-journey briefing to cover and we can start while Jack retrieves your bag.”

Samantha thought about that and decided to acquiesce. She gave a remote control to Jack and told him. “It’s a light blue hovercraft with government plates.” Jack nodded and left immediately.

“All right,” Pflum continued, “You probably know more than our average client, but it’s probably best to start with first principles.”

“Mr. Pflum, I have traveled in Transits before. The Bureau has several.”

“Okay, then I assume you have clothing suitable to the Twentieth Century?”

“I do.”

“Do you have outfits that will be in fashion for anytime from 1927 to 1947?”

“That’s a wide variety of styles,” she replied. “Do you really think this is going to take that long?”

“No, the problem is in drive harmonics between two Transits,” Pflum replied.

“Please explain.”

“You are already aware that there are an infinite number of time lines,” Pflum began. Samantha nodded impatiently. “Well, no two Transits are exactly alike. When the drive is properly tuned there is always a bit of difference in harmonics from one to the next. The Crestons traveled back in Jainette’s Transit, but that one isn’t capable of homing in on a tracer unit, but the tracer came from this Transit so we can still find that time line, but given differences in drive harmonics we don’t know when on that time line we’ll be able to land. It could be any time up to twenty years later.”

“That’s going to complicate this. Why didn’t your Ms. Lachado buy two Transits with homing capabilities.”

“Agent di Medici,” Pflum replied politely, “you are sitting in the only commercial Transit that can home on a tracer. Had the Crestons chosen to travel with any other company, they would be completely lost to you. Fortunately, Jainette here was calm enough under fire to think of dropping a tracer unit before heading for home with the rest of her clients.”

“If the other Transit cannot home,” Samantha asked, “why was it carrying a tracer unit?”

“That was Sharonne’s idea,” Jainette explained. “It was meant to be a sort of life preserver, a way to go back and get someone if we had to leave them behind for some reason.”

“Why would you need to do that?”

“Perhaps they had become gravely ill and were in a hospital. Maybe they were arrested and convicted of a crime. I don’t know. It’s never come up before. It just seemed like a good idea.”

“Actually it was a good idea,” the agent conceded. “One that should perhaps be encouraged among other time travel agencies, although perhaps the tracers should belong to government-owned Transits. I’ll have to put that in my report, but for now I should be grateful there’s even a chance to find those two.”

“Now may I ask a few questions?” Pflum asked.

“Shoot.”

“Why just one agent on this?”

“You don’t think this mere woman can handle it?” she asked tightly.

“No, it just seems to me that I would have expected a team of agents. However, I’m not an expert on FBI procedure, so I guess I was wrong. Sorry.”

“Oh. Well, I think normally we would have had a team working on this but my superior doesn’t really have much hope in this mission being a success, so I’m running solo this time.”

“Does he expect you to send for backup if you find them?”

“He doesn’t actually expect me to find them, but if I do, I’ll assess the situation and either get backup or apprehend them myself.”

“Fair enough. We haven’t been told very much about the people you’re chasing, but I’ve been told they’re wanted for running scams and murder.”

“True. Taking the matter back in time technically made their offenses federal charges. Otherwise you’d probably be talking to a local cop right now.”

“More likely I’d be talking to a group of tourists and preparing to tour Eighth Century Byzantium or Chicago in 2015. We’ve been informed as to their preferences in bunko tactics, but we’d like to know about the situation that led them to commit murder.”

“Why do you need to know?” Samantha countered.

“Eventually, you’re going to bring them into my Transit. I’d like to know what kind of people they are. It’ll help to know in advance whether we need to keep them chained to the wall or chained and with a gun trained on them.”

Samantha let out a long breath and remained silent for a moment. While she was deciding what to say, Jack returned with her bag and put it in the corner. “Okay, I suppose you ought to know some of it anyway. From what I can tell it was a con that went wrong. They were running a version of the Fiddle Game. Do you know what that is?”

“Also called the McGuffin Fraud or some such.”

“That’s the one.”

“They weren’t actually using a fiddle were they?”

“No. Nobody’s done that for a century or two. They were using some cheap jewelry and passing it off as something just short of the Crown Jewels of the Romanovs. The mark caught on about midway through and tried to take it out on Don Creston who was playing the antiques expert. Mother Mae had been keeping her eye on the bar it was playing out in and came in with guns blazing. Well, it was only one gun, but the mark, the bartender, only had a club of some sort. She shot him and wounded a barmaid and a couple customers.”

“Such pleasant folks. J., we should invite them to dinner some time.”

“I’ll pass,” Jainette told him.

“So to answer the real question you had, We’ll chain them to the walls and still keep them under close guard,” Samantha concluded. “So, when do we take off?”

“You’ve answered my questions, do you have any others?”

“We can talk while we travel?”

“Of course.”

“One thing,” Jainette cut in. “You have period clothing. How about your glasses?”

“My glasses?” Samantha asked. “Won’t these pass?”

“Not sure,” Jainette replied, “Let’s check them against our indexes. I have a data screen over here.” She led Samantha over to a corner and whispered. “Agent di Medici...”

“Call me Sam.”

“Okay, Sam. You’ve been coming down a bit hard on Pflum. I’d like to say that’s my job, but frankly I don’t get along with him any better than you seem to, but you seem to be reacting to sexist slurs. Pflum has a lot of faults, but being a sexist is not one of them.”

“I was being a bit hyper sensitive,” Sam admitted, “and we do have to work together. Should I apologize?”

“Hell, no!” Jainette replied. “You don’t want to do that. He’s insufferable enough as it is. Just don’t take offense where it doesn’t exist. Don’t worry there will be plenty of legitimate reasons to take offense. Let’s get back over there and get this show on the road.”

“What about my glasses?” Sam asked.

“What? Oh, don’t worry about them. They’re fine. Really. Hey, Pflum, time to crank this crate up.”

“Right,” Pflum replied. “Kid, I haven’t had a chance to show you how to drive this baby yet, have I?”

“I get to drive?” Jack asked.

“No, but I’ll show you how. We’ll be a while homing in on the tracer, so by the time we land you’ll be able to handle it in an emergency at least. Maybe I’ll let you drive us home.

“Now the first thing we do is input the activation code.” He pushed a button on the wall and the control panel unfolded itself.

“Is it a code for security?” Jack asked.

“Sort of. At least it helps keep a tourist from taking the crate out for an additional spin. Okay, so we push the activation button. Care to guess which one that is?”

“Uh, the big red one marked ‘start?’”

“Right. You just passed your first test. Now input the following code; ‘Start up, stupid!’”

Jack looked at Pflum for a moment and decided he was serious. “With or without an exclamation point?”

“With.”

Jack input the code and the Transit hummed to life.

“Okay, kid. Now we set the ‘Way Back Machine’ to 1927 Paris, France and away we go.”

The ambient hum in the Transit went up in pitch and then became quiet except for occasional beeps from the control panel. Pflum led Jack back to the table.

“Is that really all there is to driving a transit?” Sam asked.

“No. That’s all there is to getting one started. We ran through our usual pre-journey checklist before you arrived. In a couple hours we’ll start looking for that tracer unit.”

“Couldn’t you start now? she asked.

“I could, but if all goes well we’ll be picking it up at the end of the mission so it wouldn’t be there for us to detect unless you fail to get your man and woman.”

“So if you detect it now we would know in advance this won’t work and save a lot of time.”

“Sam, I don’t know your boss,” Jainette cut in, “but somehow I think a report that said you didn’t bother to look because you knew in advance you wouldn’t succeed wouldn’t go over particularly well.”

“No, I guess it wouldn’t,” Sam agreed.

“Besides,” Plum added, “we don’t always recover a tracer. We can find the time line, but every so often the unit might be unreachable. It may have rolled over a cliff or someone might have found it.”

“But if someone finds I, wouldn’t that possibly change history on that line?”

“Only if the finder knows what it is. It doesn’t operate by itself. I lost one a couple of years ago. Someone found it and sold it to P.T. Barnum. It ended up in his museum, but nobody could figure out what it was.”

“I noticed you didn’t set an automatic stopping date,” Sam pointed out. “I know that’s a usual part of the process.”

“This is an old Transit, Sam,” Jainette told her. “Pflum flies it by the seat of his pants. You’ll also notice it doesn’t have a viewer through which we can see outside at our destination either.”

“Then how do you know you haven’t landed in an area where the transit will be noticed?”

“In some ways I have more control over the crate than Jainette does in her shiny new one,” Pflum replied. “We have a dozen instruments that check a wide variety of outside conditions. I can land us in

the middle of a city and all an on-looker could see is a new door where an alley or breezeway used to be.”

“You sound incredibly sure of yourself,” Sam remarked acidly.

“The voice of experience,” Pflum replied with just a touch of smugness. “You’ll see.”

Seven

I Love Paris (in the Springtime)

“All right,” Pflum said two hours later when a timer bell sounded, “time to find that time line. Come on, kid. Time for your next lesson. Bring a chair. This will probably take a while. The Transit’s control area had only one seat for an operator which Pflum normally left folded up into the floor. Now he pressed a button and it rose and unfolded itself.

Jack put down the textbook on Temporal Mechanics he had been studying and dragged a chair over to the controls. Pflum had long since given up on trying to get him to read something a bit more entertaining like a newspaper or a comic book. Jack was a serious student and was intent on spending every spare moment during his year of work-study learning about the theory and practice of time travel. Pflum had pointed out that he didn’t need to be able to prove why a Transit worked mathematically in order to drive one very early on, but finally realized that unlike him, the “kid” was probably going to go into graduate studies and do more with his life than just drive a Transit.

Pflum thought Jack probably should have interned with Ken Jackson. That would have given him far more experience with the mechanical end of temporal transposition, but evidently Jack had been more interested in seeing how the Transit worked in practice. He told Pflum that he’d worked on the university’s Transit in several laboratory sessions but hadn’t actually been out-time. Besides, he had added, what better way to combine work-study with several temporal vacations he would otherwise have been unable to afford.

“Okay,” Pflum said as much to himself as to Jack, “here goes. Now if all is well we may only find one instance of the tracer between our nominal present and the time Ms Manovich planted it, but as I was saying earlier, we may never actually recover it so we need to find the earliest instance of it.”

“I’ve been reading the theory behind temporal tracers,” Jack offered. “It sounds fairly straight forward. Don’t we just sail back to 1927 or maybe a bit earlier and then just slowly cruise forward until we find and home in on the first blip we find?”

“Essentially, yes,” Pflum replied, hiding his annoyance. He had found through experience that the textbooks only spoke of perfect cases. Perfect cases never happened in the field. He had told Jack that repeatedly, but so far the “kid” still relied more on a book than Pflum’s experience. “What your book didn’t tell you was that you can’t always pick up a tracer signal the first time you pass over the timeline it is on. If the tracer has been moved out of Paris, for example, the signal will be fainter. Also the Transit will be performing an active scan. Do you know what that is?”

“We’ll be sending a signal to the tracer unit and waiting for it to respond,” Jack answered.

“Right. But as slowly as we cruise the lines in this sector, we may drift beyond the right one several times before we pick up the return signal. Also once we find a signal we still have to make sure it is the earliest possible one for us to home in on, so we’ll be crossing back and forth for a while to make sure of it.”

“Excellent,” Sam said from just behind them, startling Pflum. She and Jainette were standing just behind a small counter in back of where Pflum was instructing Jack. “Sorry,” she said instantly. “Do you mind if we watch?”

“Not at all, just stay behind the bar there, and it will be just fine. I’ve had a few cases where overenthusiastic tourists have tried to handle the controls. That gets a bit hairy.”

“I can imagine,” Sam replied dryly.

“Don’t I know it!” agreed Jainette at the same time. Sam turned to look at her and she continued, “Five trips back I was taking a field trip from one of those private schools that specializes in training the children of the ultra-rich. We were on our way to study the Gold Rush of 1849 and two of the little monsters started playing with the controls the moment my back was turned. By the time I caught them at it and shooed them away with a bit of help from their teacher, the regulator needed a complete overhaul and recalibration. I couldn’t land with any more accuracy than three decades and fifteen hundred miles. Ended up making it a trip to view the Battle of New Orleans instead and it was sheer luck we landed there. The first five landings were over water. Fortunately my Transit can present an exterior view, so we didn’t step out into a hurricane. What a nasty trip that was!”

“Maybe the controls need to be in a locked cabinet,” Sam suggested.

“Ever since that mishap,” Pflum replied over his shoulder, “we’ve made a policy of keeping the control panel folded back into the wall when cruising with a tour group.”

“You left it open this trip,” Sam pointed out.

“I trusted you weren’t predisposed toward playing with dials and switches,” Pflum said flatly.” Just then a bell pinged. “That’s our signal. Kid what year are we cruising?”

“1933, Pflum”

“Six years out from the drop?” Pflum asked. “Not too bad, but I hope we can do better than that. Let’s keep going”

“But that would mean we don’t recover the tracer,” Sam pointed out.

“They’re expensive,” Pflum retorted, “but not that expensive. Recovering a tracer is gravy compared to bagging two murderers. Besides, just because I don’t recover it in an earlier year, it doesn’t mean I won’t in a later one. Don’t worry about the tracer, we charge by results, not equipment expended.”

It took two hours but finally Pflum had to admit that 1933 was the only shot they had at the same timeline the Crestons were hiding out on.

“Six years is plenty of time to get established. By now even their phony ID is probably legitimate,” Sam

grumbled.

“Cheer up,” Pflum told her. “They might be dead. For all we know they got themselves mugged their first night here.”

“I hope not,” Sam replied, earning looks of surprise from the others. She explained, “Well, going back without having found a trace of them would not be a successful mission, would it?”

“No, I guess it wouldn’t,” Jainette agreed.

“They could be dead,” Jack offered, “but we may find traces of them. You know, their graves or a story in the newspaper, or something...” He trailed off when he noticed they were all staring at him strangely.

“Never mind, kid,” Pflum told him. “Let me show you how to land this crate.”

“Don’t you just reverse the process that started us?” Jack asked. Jainette chuckled at the question.

“Only if you don’t care where we land, kid. In no case do we want to land willy nilly. For one thing we’d miss the target time line, for another we’d have a mysterious wall showing up in the most embarrassing places. Best not to be obvious.”

“But I’ve seen you materialize inside someone’s bedroom,” Jack protested.

“That was before Ken replaced that faulty circuit board in the spatial coordination unit, kid.”

“But...” Jack tried to correct him. If looks could kill, the one he got from Pflum would have left him limping for a month. “Oh, yeah,” he muttered a little too late.

There was minute of uncomfortable silence, then Pflum coughed and said, “Ready to come in for a landing. I’m going to bring us in at the end of a deep alley.” He input a set of coordinates and waited as the dials and meters settled down. A moment later he flipped a set of switches that locked them into 1933 Paris. “Okay, ready to hit the city?”

“Are you planning to get a hotel room?” Jack asked him.

“No, we only do that for the tourists. We can sleep here in the Transit, just like we do on long trips.”

“One room for four of us?” Sam asked.

“We have dividers and cots. Let’s go check out our landing site while Jack sets them up. Kid, give us four small rooms along that wall. Get the cots out of the storage locker, but I think we can each set up our own.”

“That wasn’t nice of you, Pflum,” Jainette commented acidly after they left the Transit. “We could have all pitched in to put up the walls.”

“Hey!” Pflum protested. “I didn’t tell him to make the beds for us.”

“Nice landing,” Sam admitted looking around. “It looks just like we’re just a doorway at the end of the alley.”

“That’s the idea,” Pflum said a bit smugly.

“Actually it almost looks like one of those little shops you read about in stories that appear mysteriously but when you return later aren’t there any longer.”

“I sometimes think some of our competitors are doing just that to make a little money under the counter,” Jainette replied.

“I can’t say there’s any law against making money that way,” Sam opined. “At least none I’ve ever heard of.”

“How about income tax fraud?”

“I suppose. Not my jurisdiction, though. Talk to the IRS.”

“No thanks,” Jainette told her. “We have enough problems with them already.”

“Doesn’t everyone?” Sam came back. “Oh my!” she exclaimed as they reached the end of the alley. “This really is 1930’s Paris, isn’t it?”

“You expected Poughkeepsie?” Pflum asked.

“There’s the Eiffel Tower!” Sam continued, ignoring Pflum. “It looks almost new, like you could still take the elevator to the top.”

“You can,” Pflum told her. “That is, you can if they’ve installed the elevator by now. Otherwise you can climb it by the stairs.”

“Pflum, there’s an elevator working there,” Jainette corrected him. “There always were elevators. They were replaced quite a few times with newer, more modern equipment, but elevators were an intended feature so visitors to the Universal Exposition of 1889 could ascend in the most modern manner.”

“Maybe I’ll have a chance to go to the top,” Sam said speculatively. “No one’s been allowed on it in over a century.”

“I just hope you don’t get the opportunity to do so at the end of a long chase,” Pflum muttered.

“Aren’t you a little Johnny Sunshine,” Sam commented sourly.

“Is there anything we can do to help you?” Jainette asked Sam.

“I thought we weren’t supposed to be anything but the taxi service,” Pflum interjected.

“Well, Bureau regulations prohibit me from using your assistance on the actual collar, but I imagine I’m in for a lot of leg work and research and I could certainly use help with that. The more of us that check the newspaper archives and city records, the sooner we’ll be able to wrap this up.”

“Besides,” Jainette added, “Pflum and I have actually seen the Crestons, that’s better than trying to recognize them from a holo.”

“Well, we’ll need to figure out exactly when we are before we get started,” Pflum pointed out.

“Paris, 1933,” Sam replied.

“Yeah? What month and day?” Pflum countered. “What time of day is it for that matter?”

“Uh, okay, you tell me.”

“Well, I know we’re roughly in mid-May, but exactly which day is beyond me,” Pflum replied.

“However, we should get the kid and get something to eat while we acclimate. There’s a café or a bistro or something just around the corner from here.”

“Are you sure, Pflum?” Jainette asked. “Have you been here in 1933 before?”

“Not exactly. It isn’t one of our usual tourist stops. Europe during the Great Depression is not overly popular.”

“Except for those interested in the rise of Nazi Germany,” Jainette pointed out. “Other than that, though, you’re right. This isn’t on everyone’s top ten list of times and places. Now a few years ago before the depression is another matter altogether.”

“Germany,” Pflum shuddered. “Now there’s a place we’ll want to avoid.”

“Right,” Jainette agreed. “Especially since January, when Hitler became chancellor.”

“Anyway, it’s been there every time I’ve been here. Almost always a different owner, and a different menu but it’s always there.”

“So why don’t we have some coffee and maybe a light meal,” Jainette suggested to Sam, “and you can give us a quick briefing on how you want us to go about looking for those two. I don’t suppose it’s too much to ask for that they still be in Paris?” she asked as Pflum went to get Jack.

“Actually, I’d say this is the one city in Europe we aren’t likely to find them, but it’s a place to start. Personally, I’d have relocated to the Riviera.”

“Or if they knew enough history to realize what was coming, maybe even another country,” Jainette suggested. “Spain perhaps or Switzerland.” Pflum returned with Jack and they started walking.

“Maybe. Ultimately they’ll be looking for some place out of the way, but they have some years yet before the world goes to war,” Sam pointed out, “and the economic conditions here and now are ideal to pull off their favorite scams.”

“So we’ll be looking for arrest reports of con-artists?”

“More likely of official complaints filed. They’re a slippery couple and will be hard to catch. Especially now when they have started off with no records of arrests.”

“I’m told a lot of victims never report their losses,” Jainette offered.

“It’s true. Many people are embarrassed or feel they shouldn’t have been so foolish,” Sam agreed. “Some figure they had it coming to them. It’s sad really, the way the human mind tries to justify such things. No one deserves to be victimized that way.”

“I wouldn’t mind turning the tables on the Crestons,” Jack commented. “You know, con the con artists?”

“That happens more often in the movies than real life, Jack,” Sam told him. “Even the ‘sting’ operations of the Twentieth Century mostly only netted more victims.”

“So where’s this bistro of yours, Pflum?” Jainette asked.

“It should have been right here,” Pflum replied, indicating a deserted storefront.

“Evidently they aren’t suffering from a surfeit of customers this week,” Jainette commented.

“Well, I haven’t been here in this decade,” Pflum said lamely. “It’s a fairly good place during the Vichy years.”

“I can’t wait that long for breakfast,” Jainette told him. “Let’s go back to the Transit. We’ll eat there while Sam briefs us on how to proceed. We can figure out what day of the week it is later.”

“I don’t think I want to ever read a newspaper ever again,” Pflum whispered to Jack a few days later. Sam had assigned the two men to working in a library, reading the archived newspapers. It was long slow work. They had to scan every paper for stories that sounded like the Crestons at work. At first it looked like the easy part of their job and there were plenty of leads to follow. It turned out there were too many leads, but so far all of them turned out to be locals at work. Also none of the incidents involved the McGuffin Fraud that was the Creston’s favorite game. Sam did not think they would have abandoned that staple of their livelihood.

“In fact,” she had said, “it’s probable they will have played it all the more often.”

They continued to search for some sign of the mother and son, but as time went on what had seemed like initial progress turned out to be just the opposite. The duo had apparently disappeared without a trace. Sam became more irritable as time passed without success, Jainette was getting depressed and Pflum bored. Of the four only Jack remained cheerful. Sometime during their second week in Paris, Pflum had found a small bar that served Alsatian beer, which was more to his taste than most of the French wines Samantha and Jainette insisted on buying. He and Jack started spending their late afternoons there and it was there four weeks after their arrival in Paris that they finally got their first real clue.

Pflum was explaining to Jack once more how the McGuffin Fraud worked when the bartender brought Plum his second glass of beer. The bartender listened closely as the explanation continued.

“A violin, you say?” he asked Pflum.

“It doesn’t have to be,” Pflum told him. “That is just the classic form of the con game. Could be almost anything; gems, stock certificates, paintings, you name it. The idea is to get the victim to think it’s something extremely valuable.”

“But it is sometimes done with a violin?” The bartender asked interestedly.

Pflum was about to tell him that these days the scam was so well known that almost no one used a fiddle as the McGuffin but stopped himself when he remembered when he was. People were using a violin for it here and now. “Sometimes,” he admitted. “Why? Have you heard of someone running this game?”

“My cousin in Marseille. He lost thousands of francs to someone who tricked him into buying a worthless violin.”

“When?” Pflum asked.

“Several years ago. A young man had been playing outside his café the way you describe. And the second person was an older woman who claimed to work for a museum in Cremona.”

“And this happened in Marseille?” Pflum asked. “Where in Marseille?”

“On the Rue Fortia,” he replied. That meant nothing to Pflum.

“And he is still there?”

“Oh yes. Yes. Times are tough but he still makes a living of it.”

“Sounds like just the man I need to talk to,” Pflum said, pulling out a stylus and notepad. “Where was that again and what is his name?”

“What is that?” the bartender asked, indicating the nano-electronic notepad Pflum had his stylus poised over.

“Hmm? This? Just a notepad. See?” he made a few marks on the surface of the device, then quickly erased them.

“Very strange. Where did you get it?”

Uh, New York. They’re the latest thing in America,” Pflum lied. “They should be on sale here anytime. They save a fortune in paper. Now where is this café again?”

Eight

I Get Around

“Marseille?” Sam asked a short time later in the Transit.

“That’s what the man said,” Pflum confirmed. “His cousin was flim-flammed by the classic ‘Fiddle Game.’”

“Violin and all?” Jainette asked.

“They probably saw this as their only chance to pull it off in the original form,” Pflum replied.

“At least we now know why we haven’t found any trace of them in Paris,” Jack concluded. “They probably headed south immediately.”

“The weather’s better down there, kid. And on off days they could relax on the beach.”

“I doubt they stayed in Marseille,” Sam told them, “too easy to run into an earlier mark, but maybe they did. And even if not, we’ll be that much closer to them there. That will put us a long way from the Transit though.”

“Not really,” Jainette corrected her. “The Transit is currently locked into both this time and place. We can leave it locked into this time while relocating to Marseille.”

“We may have to stay outside of town though,” Pflum commented. “I don’t know the city at all well so can’t guarantee I can put us in an unobtrusive alley.”

“Don’t worry, Pflum,” Jainette told him. “I’ve been there before. I know a few good places to land. Jack, why don’t you go retrieve the tracer unit?” They had found the unit early on and left it in the alley.

“Leave it where it is, kid,” Pflum countermanded the order. “We’d better leave it in the alley, J. It’s still our only way back to this time line.”

“But we won’t be leaving the time line, just this location.”

“Trust me on this one, J,” Pflum insisted. “This Transit has a tendency to wander when I least expect it. Ken recently worked this baby over, but there’s a chance if we try to take the tracer with us, we could end up on a line in which Earth is populated by a civilization of carnivorous, purple, land-dwelling Octopi.”

“That’s not possible,” Sam interjected. “Even I know that much.”

“Tell that to the Transit. I think she just gets bored with the same old timelines every so often.”

“So how soon can we leave?” Sam asked.

“Right now,” Pflum replied getting up from the table. “J., I’m going to need your help finding that alley of yours and, Jack, you ought to watch this because next time we move the Transit you’re going to be driving.”

“Really?” Jack asked excitedly.

“You bet, kid. I’ll be there to talk you through it, but you’ll be the one pushing the buttons and all that.” They walked the few steps to the control panel and Pflum went to work. “Now it is very important to leave the temporal controls locked. Now, as I said, it is possible the regulator may slip a gasket and send us off, so you’ll need to be prepared to home in on the tracer once again.”

“Gasket?” Jack asked. “The temporal regulator doesn’t have any gaskets.”

“Just an expression, kid. You know how this crate misbehaves just when we start getting comfortable with it. Okay, so all we have to do is release the spatial controls and input our desired new coordinates.

J., where are we going?” She gave him the approximate coordinates. “Can’t you be more specific?” he asked.

“That’s as specific as I usually need to be,” Jainette replied. “I have a view screen in mine, remember?”

“I wonder if Ken could retrofit one of those in this crate, because I know Sharonne will never let me take out the new one when she buys it.”

“Why not?” Jainette asked.

“Several reasons, really,” Pflum replied evasively, “not the least of which is that she isn’t likely to be able to hire any driver capable of operating a Transit entirely on instruments.”

“I wouldn’t be so sure. There must be a few Transits like this left in service,” Jainette speculated.

“A few, but most of the people who can drive them are at least fifteen years older than I am. All of them are getting ready for retirement. They certainly aren’t looking for jobs. It took me months to get the hang of it when I started. Unlike the newer jobs this one you sort of have to nurse its way through a transposition. You can’t just look outside and see if you need to move to line up the external interface. You have to read the dials and meters, learn to treat the entire machine like an extension of your arms and legs. And if you can drive this rig you can drive any transit in service.

“All right, we’re in Marseille. Um, we’re almost entirely within a building and about ten feet off the ground.”

“I said those coordinates were approximate,” Jainette replied defensively.

“Okay,” Pflum sighed. “Do I correct to the right or left?”

“Um, the right. No! Go to the left. The right side would have put us in the middle of the Rue des Trois Mages.”

“That would have been exciting,” Pflum said dryly. “In spite of how it might look at times Vaudeville is dead, even in 1933, and I would prefer not to be doing slapstick.”

“Sorry,” she replied.

“Okay, kid,” Pflum continued with Jack’s lesson. “All we need to do is get her into place and phase back into reality. Hmm...”

“What is it?” Jack asked.

“This is a fairly narrow alley, only about one half as wide as the Transit itself. I’ll have to make an adjustment, I’m glad this is happening now. You may need to do this sometime.” He opened a small panel cover Jack had never seen him use.

“What are those controls?” he asked.

“This controls just how much of our external interface actually materializes.”

“There are just two dials there.”

“Exactly. Horizontal and vertical. The horizontal controls how wide the interface is, starting from the door itself and the vertical controls how high the interface is. The bare minimum, of course is the size of the door. The alley is high enough, so we’ll just use the horizontal controls. Watch this display. See the alley walls there? Tell me when you think our interface is the same width.” Pflum made the adjustment and Jack stopped him at the right place. “Perfect,” Pflum commended him. “Sam, we’re here.”

“That was much faster than I expected,” Sam remarked. “We’re really in Marseille?”

“Unless Jainette’s having her little joke with us and landed us in Great Zimbabwe,” Pflum replied.

“What time is it here?”

“Same time as it was in Paris plus the time it took Pflum to get us here,” Jainette told her. The time controls are locked, remember. Besides, if we had traveled in time it would be years later before we could find this same time line and it would have taken longer to get there as well. So should we go find this Monsieur Montarde of Pflum’s tonight or wait until morning?

Henri Montarde was more than willing to talk about the people who took his savings from him in return for a cheap violin. The fiddle itself had been mounted over his bar as a lesson to never fall for scams like that again. It was also a conversation piece and after several years the word had gotten around and Henri had more than made his money back from the increased customers who had come to hear his tale of woe. As far as he was concerned, Samantha was just another interested customer, albeit somewhat prettier than most of them.

“Monsieur Montarde,” Sam began a question.

“Henri, my dear,” he corrected her.

“Henri, then. When did all this happen?”

“Hmm, that would have been in August of 1927.)

“And what did the violin player look like?”

“Look like? He was a young man in his twenties, I would say. Taller than me with light brown hair and greenish eyes.”

“Did he tell you his name?” Sam asked.

“Cressy,” Montarde replied. “Daniel Cressy. Why do you know him?”

“Never met him, but last time I heard of him his name was Donald Creston.”

“Daniel Cressy and Donald Creston,” Jainette mused. “Pretty close, don’t you think?”

“Too close,” Sam confirmed, “and the description is accurate. It has to be him. What did his partner

look like?”

“She was somewhat older. Gray hair and eyes, a bit overweight but very well dressed. He was a bit, shall we say, shabby. Yes, she gave me her name too; Doktor Mary Halberstadt.”

“Any idea of where they might have gone after you last saw them?” Sam asked.

“My dear, if I had known that, I would have chased them all over France, or anywhere else they might have gone,” Montarde replied. He looked around at his restaurant and added, “Just as well I didn’t know that eh?”

“Do you know anyone else who may have been robbed by those two?” Sam asked in parting.

Montarde said he did not.

The next day they returned to the same research patterns they had pursued in Paris. Sam told the other three this was not the same as starting all over from the start. The odds were that they had played their con game in one variant or another in the next town or city. Once they had a general direction to go in, there would be a trail to follow.

As it happens not every victim did report the crime and of those that did, not every report made it into newspapers and other reports that could be found in Marseille. Still, they didn’t need to stay in Marseille more than a few days before they moved on to Milan.

“Our luck appears to be holding so far,” Pflum reported, as they planned their first day in Milan.

“What do you mean?” Sam asked.

“Well, so far we haven’t managed to blunder into any of the nastiness that took place in the years leading up to the Second World War. Admittedly we seem to be slipping in between major events. For example in a year or so the King of Yugoslavia will be murdered in Marseille and in Paris this year someone managed to catch a photo of the Eiffel Tower being struck by lightning. It became a rather famous poster for the next century or so.”

“And what’s new in Milan?” Jainette asked.

“IBM is opening a data processing center here.”

“IBM? Really?” Jainette asked.

“Yes, although in Italy they call themselves the *Società Internazionale Macchine Commerciali* , but that’s good old ‘Big Blue’ anyway you say it.”

“That’s not too surprising,” Jainette pointed out. “This whole year is just the calm before the storm in all of Europe.”

“Not in Germany,” Pflum pointed out. “Hitler took over the Chancellery back in January and by now he is already arresting just about anyone who might stand up to him, filling concentration camps, and burning books. In a few months the Reichstag will burn, giving him a reason to blame the communists and about two and a half weeks later Germany will withdraw from the League of Nations and officially start rearming, not that they haven’t already started that. Il Duce’s Italy is paradise compared to that

madhouse.”

“Of course Mussolini hasn’t shown his dark side to the world yet,” Jainette.

“Sure he has,” Pflum disagreed, “but the world had other problems to occupy it. Also by now Il Duce has been in power for over a decade. He’s very comfortable with it and quite secure, but even he will make the mistake of underestimating Germany in the coming year or two.”

Well,” Sam put in to break up the historical debate, “none of that really concerns us, unless someone here wants to apply for work with IBM. I’m going to interview the next mark. Why don’t you start reading old newspapers and we’ll meet back here this afternoon.”

“Cremona?” Samantha asked.

“You got it,” Pflum replied. “It didn’t go very well for them there, however. I guess the Cremonans take the name Stradivarius very seriously and their mark wasn’t willing to believe that any Strad might have ended up in the hands of an itinerant fiddler. They had to run for it when their intended victim called for help.”

“Now there is someone I want to talk to,” Sam commented.

“We have a more recent incident in Venice,” Jainette pointed out. “They used the Pigeon Drop there, if I’m right about it being the Crestons.”

“Could be, but I’d still like to talk to the man in Cremona. He may give me an insight into the sorts of mistakes they make. It shouldn’t take long.”

“You’re the customer,” Pflum shrugged. An hour later she was talking to Gerardo Lombardo, the proprietor of a small restaurant at the edge of the center of Cremona.

“Signore Lombardo, may I ask what set off your suspicions about that violin?”

“It was too new, Signorina di Medici. I am not an expert on violins, of course, but I do play sometimes with friends. There is a certain sort of smell you only have with a fairly new instrument. This smell, it goes away very quickly, replaced with other, more mature aromas, but this violin, it smelled new. I did not like the sound of it either. Not enough timbre, body you might say in the upper notes. It was too thin a sound. Do you understand?”

“I think I do,” Sam told him.

“So when the woman who claimed to be on the faculty of *Accademia Strumentale Italiana* started going on about how this had to be made by the great Stradivarius... Ay! It was not to be believed! It was fortunate my cousin, he is a policeman, was here that evening. I called to him to arrest these people and he tried his best, but unfortunately they were able to escape.”

“Yes,” Sam agreed, “that was unfortunate. Oh well. We already knew they had moved on to Venice. Thank you, Signore Lombardo.”

“Good luck to you, Signorina di Medici.”

“Well,” Pflum said a few minutes later when they were back inside the Transit and heading for Venice, “Now we know. Never try the Fiddle Game with too new a fiddle.”

“That’s probably why they switched to the Pigeon Drop. By then the word was out about their game. It was time to try a different con,” Sam remarked.

“What are we going to do in Venice, Sam?” Jack asked. “We don’t have the name of the victim there.”

“We go back to library work,” she responded. “Also I’m going to try talking to the local police.”

“You’re not going to tell them you want to arrest those two, are you?” Jainette asked.

“No, I’ll claim they stole my mother’s savings and I’m looking to hunt them down. They’ll tell me I shouldn’t do that sort of thing. That it’s far too dangerous for a woman to do and all that, but it’s been several years since they were there, so it is likely someone will talk to me for a while.”

What they learned in Venice led them to Padua where they had once more used the McGuffin Fraud, this time using a necklace of synthetic star sapphires in gold-filled settings. Then for a week, they lost all trace of the Crestons, but a return to the library in Milan yielded a possible McGuffin case in Zagreb.

It was in Zagreb, they saw the first signs of the impending world war. The Kingdom of Yugoslavia was already starting to split at the seams and an attempt on King Alexander’s life had already been planned, although it was just one of a series of such attempts that he had experienced since the First World War. Still life was tense in Zagreb and they did not want to stay there any longer than necessary.

Sam did not interview the victim in Zagreb. He had died a few months earlier, but the police report yielded the information she needed and attached to that report was a news clipping from Munich. A bright young man had seen a connection and filed it accordingly. In all they were in Zagreb for only three hours.

It took two weeks to sort through all the information they learned in Munich. Pflum kept reminding the others that Munich was exactly where they did not want to be. In 1933 Heinrich Himmler was still Chief of Police although he was already highly placed in the Nazi Party and even now a mere ten miles away the accused enemies of the Third Reich, including everyone from communists and Social Democrats to Jews, homosexuals, Gypsies, Jehovah’s Witnesses, clergymen, political opponents, some trade union members, and others, were being shipped to the nearby concentration camp, Dachau.

“And this is just the start,” Pflum reminded them. “It’s going to get a hell of a lot worse, but at the moment they’re only blaming supposed enemies of the state.”

Munich, however, also yielded the most information on the Crestons. In short order it was learned that the Crestons had been running games in Lyon, Zurich, Prague, Leipzig and most recently in Dresden.

“They were hopping and skipping all over the place,” Jainette noted.

“To an extent,” Sam replied. “They were in Lyon before they got to Marseille and went to Prague and Zurich before entering Germany. So it wasn’t quite as bad as all that.”

“How recently were they in Dresden?” Pflum asked.

“May of 1929.”

“Over four years ago,” Pflum said, shaking his head. “They could be anywhere by now. In fact if they have a brain between them, they’ll have left Europe years ago.”

“Pflum,” Sam replied tartly, “if you can think of a better way to track them down, I’d be more than happy to try it your way. We’re just going to have to hope they didn’t suddenly pull up stakes and hop a tramp steamer to the States.”

“They wouldn’t do that,” Pflum replied. “They would be traveling first class on a Cunard liner or maybe a zeppelin.”

“I hope you’re right,” Sam told him. “There would be a paper trail to follow.”

“Maybe we should be checking out flight and cruise records,” Jainette suggested.

“Talk about a needle in a haystack,” Sam laughed. “Which line do you suggest we check first and at which port? Besides what justification can we use to see those businesses’ records? I don’t even dare confront the authorities while we’re in Germany.”

“I’m surprised you dared do it anywhere,” Pflum commented. “Well, let’s find what we can in Dresden and move on. I just hope they didn’t choose to move on to Berlin or Nuremberg next.”

It was in Dresden that Pflum and Jack overheard two Nazi officers talking in *abeirhall* late one afternoon. The subject of their conversation was nothing unusual and neither Pflum nor Jack was really listening to them anyway. They were just drinking their lager and trying to stay inconspicuous. However, when one got up to leave and suffixed their conversation with “*Heil, Schmidt!*” Pflum started and nearly sprayed his beer in Jack’s face. They quickly finished their drinks and got out of there.

“Heil, Schmidt?” Pflum asked softly as they walked quickly back to the Transit.

“What’s that, Pflum?”

“Those two officers said, ‘Heil Schmidt!’ There’s something going on here. I need to see that newspaper Jainette bought this morning. I think we’ve been overlooking something very important.”

“Such as?” Jack asked

“Wait a few minutes, kid. If I’m wrong, you’ll never know.” Two minutes later they walked through the Transit’s door. “J, you still have that paper you bought this morning?”

“It’s right here,” Jainette replied. “You didn’t want to read it this morning.”

“I don’t want to read it now, just look at the pictures.”

“It isn’t *Playboy*, Pflum,” she responded tartly.

“No, more’s the pity,” Pflum shot back. “This is the one with the announcement about the new law that permits forced sterilizations of anyone who doesn’t meet the new order’s ideal of a proper German, isn’t

it? Oh yeah, here's that article. You don't look at the pictures at all, do you?"

"Why?" Jainette asked.

"What do you have there, Pflum?" Sam asked.

"Here," he replied, putting the paper down on the table. See any familiar faces?"

Jainette, Sam and Jack all looked at the grainy black and white shot.

"Is that Donald Creston?" Sam asked.

"Yes," Jainette confirmed, shocked.

"What is he doing in a Nazi uniform?" Jack asked. "Hey! The caption says his name is Rolf Johann Schmidt."

"Kid, you didn't expect him to keep calling himself Creston, did you?"

"Pflum, according to this," Sam said, reading the rest of the caption, "that man is the Chancellor of Germany."

"That's wrong," Jainette replied. "Hitler was made Chancellor a few months ago."

"Evidently not, J." Pflum corrected her. "Somehow Creston has replaced Hitler." The others just stared at him silently. "Oh yeah," he continued, "That's just what we needed!"

Nine

With Catlike Tread

"How the hell did he manage that?" Jainette demanded.

"How should I know?" Pflum replied. "I didn't vote for him."

"Funny," she replied flatly.

"Look," Pflum tried reasonably, "all we have to do is pick him up and ask him."

"Pick him up?" Sam asked incredulously. "He's the *Reichschancellor* ! We aren't likely to find him alone in the local pub. He'll have bodyguards everywhere he goes."

"I doubt he sleeps with his bodyguards," Pflum replied, "although to tell the truth, he might, I suppose, but the odds are his guards will be stationed outside his office at the Chancellory, or whatever they call it."

“And you propose we just waltz in and arrest him? If anything he’s consolidating his power even faster than Hitler did. He’s already pushing the Führer Law through a year early.”

“Actually, that is what I’m suggesting,” Pflum told her, “although I don’t think we should go in by the front door.”

“Stop trying to be clever, Pflum,” Jainette told him acidly. “Sam, it’s very simple. What the boy-genius here wants to do is phase the Transit in across the Chancellor’s office door. Then we just step out and arrest the bastard.”

“But how will that stop him from calling his guards?” Sam asked.

“Why do you think we keep materializing against established walls?” Jainette countered. “if we materialize in front of a door, no one will be able to come in through that door. So with a little luck, we can catch him alone.”

“What about his mother?” Sam asked.

“We can pick her up after we find out where she is,” Pflum told her confidently.

“I’d prefer to know where she is before we move,” Sam countered stubbornly.

“Okay, so let’s look her up. We know where he is, so we can work backwards from the present. Maybe they are still together.”

It involved another few days of library work but in the end it appeared that Mae Creston had dropped off the map around three and a half years earlier. She and Donald, both using the name Schmidt, had been active in the Nazi Party that year but after that initial activity her name suddenly stopped cropping up about the same time Hitler dropped out of sight.

“Maybe they killed each other,” Jack suggested the evening they found that out.

“I’d like to know for certain,” Sam commented, “but I don’t think I have much choice. How soon can we make our move?”

“I think we need to relocate to Berlin,” Pflum replied. “We’re going to need to know his work habits. We also need to know which office he uses.”

“Isn’t that a matter of historical record?” Jack asked.

“It would be if we weren’t talking about Creston. But I doubt he’s stupid, and while he isn’t likely to think we’re after him, he still probably knew his history. He’ll want to avoid Hitler’s mistakes.”

“So far he hasn’t missed many of them,” Sam retorted. “If anything he’s pushing the historical schedule a bit.”

“And if I’m reading this correctly,” Jainette added, “he has embraced the Nazi Party line on Aryan supremacy, with all the oppression that’s going to mean for everyone else. We can expect the massacres to begin earlier too.”

“We’ll have the bastard by then,” Sam assured her.

Moving around Berlin was a nervous business, even more than it had been in Munich. Without proper identification they risked arrest and detention. But with careful planning they were able to keep the Chancellery under observation although from a distance. The real luck, however, occurred when “Herr Schmidt” granted an interview to *Der Angriff*, the Berlin newspaper that Goebbels had founded. In it, he spoke of his work habits, stressing how often he worked late into the night for the honor and glory of the “Fatherland.”

“We still don’t know which office he uses,” Pflum muttered after reading the article.

“No, but I’m willing to take a chance that he is using the same one Hitler used,” Sam countered. “We’ll be arresting him tonight.”

“This could go horribly wrong, you know,” he reminded her.

“I know, but if we wait until everything is perfect, General Eisenhower will be touring Berlin. We’ve been on this too long already. We go tonight,” she repeated. “Then we’ll get him to tell us where his mother’s hiding.”

“Ms di Medici,” Jack interrupted. “Have you seen these plans from the Transit’s encyclopedia? That office has five doors, it looks like. We aren’t going to be able to block more than two of them.”

“Let me see those,” she demanded. She looked at them carefully. “When did you find these?” she asked.

“About an hour ago,” Jack replied. “I was planning to show them to you when you got back, but you and Pflum were already deep in debate when you arrived. And Jainette has been sleeping since before I found it.”

“Ah,” she breathed. “I should have seen these earlier. I should have thought to look them up myself. Now these here are windows, aren’t they?”

“That’s correct.”

“Then we can take a look in from a way back and see what part of the room Creston is in, can’t we?”

“We can, but this is a security zone,” Pflum informed her, so we will need a long way away. I doubt we’ll find a building with just the right view.”

“My digital telescope can be used from a mile or more away. Can you make the Transit hover in mid-air?”

“I can, but we’ll be seen,” he warned her.

“From that far away I don’t care,” she shot back. “We’ll be arresting Donald Creston before the witnesses’ reports can reach the Chancellery. And when we know which side of the room he’s on, we can cut off three of the doors in any case. Now this grouping is his desk, correct? And this must be a conversation pit, a couch and chairs and a coffee table or some such for entertaining or relaxation. I’d like to catch him at the desk, there will be fewer people in the room then.”

“We can hope,” Pflum said uncertainly.

They had to wait until it was fully dark and then just a bit longer so it was already past ten o’clock when Pflum brought the Transit into place just over a building a mile and a quarter away from the Chancellery. They opened the door and quickly setup the small digital telescope Sam had brought as part of her equipment and focused it in on the Chancellor’s Office windows.

“What the hell!” Sam exclaimed. “Where is it?”

“Pflum, where did you drop us this time?” Janette asked acidly.

“We’re in the right place,” Jack confirmed, “but the Reich Chancellery isn’t there.”

“Not yet, anyway,” Pflum remarked.

“What?” the others all asked.

“What none of us considered,” Pflum replied, “was exactly when the new Reich Chancellery was built. It’s not there yet. It’s possible that Creston has other things on his mind and may never have it built.”

“So where was it before the new building was built?” Sam asked.

Jack did a quick search through the encyclopedia. “According to this, he told them, the new building incorporated the old one, which must be that white building over there.”

“Any idea which office we’re looking for?” Pflum asked.

“Not a clue.”

“And we’ll have to relocate,” Jainette pointed out, “I’m fairly sure we’re on the wrong side of the building, at least I can’t see him in the few offices with the lights still on.”

Pflum made a few adjustments and they were soon viewing the building from another direction.

“No,” Jainette said distractedly, “I don’t think he’s in any of those either. Pflum moved the Transit again. A few minutes later she remarked, “Have you ever noticed that whatever you’re looking for is always in the last possible place?”

“I don’t suppose he has an interior office,” Pflum suggested sourly.

“Not likely,” Sam advised him. “Important men usually have impressive offices or at least ones with a view. It will have an outside window. I guarantee it.”

“If you say so. I hope he’s in tonight. Kid, you want to make the next move? Go ahead.”

Jack sat down at the control panel and quickly phased the Transit out then made the adjustment to move them to their next and hopefully final location before making the move on Donald Creston. He didn’t do it as quickly as Pflum or Jainette might have, but he managed it on the first attempt.

“Well done, kid,” Pflum told him, reopening the door. Jainette and Sam set the telescope up and again started looking. There was a sound from beneath them. Pflum leaned out the door a bit and looked

down. "We've been spotted," he announced.

"It was bound to happen," Sam replied. "It'll probably be chalked up as a UFO. They were big in this century, weren't they?"

"Not for another sixteen years or so," Jainette replied. "Here we're likely to get shot at."

"Right," Pflum commented sarcastically, "keep up that optimism."

"I think I found him," Sam said a minute later. "Jainette, take a look, would you?"

"That's him," Jainette confirmed shortly. "How do we figure out the right coordinates?"

"There are laser distance and direction finders," Sam replied. She touched a control pad on the scope and a series of numbers appeared in the display. "We'll have to guess at the size of the office, but this is the distance to the window and this is the angle from here."

"I don't suppose it tells you which way north is?" Pflum asked.

"Is that important?" Sam asked.

"Only if you aren't planning to kidnap the wrong person, or cause still more UFO sightings. Never mind, I can figure it out from here. Our front door is facing ten degrees and two minutes east of true north. J, give me the coordinates, please." She did so while Sam closed the door. "Everyone ready?"

"Wait!" Jainette told him. "I haven't accounted for the depth of the office." She came over to the console and looked at Pflum's settings. "Do you mind?" she asked.

"Be my guest," Pflum replied dryly. Jainette frowned and then adjusted the settings. "You turned us completely around?" he asked.

"Well we need to be facing into the office and we're coming from the other way," she explained.

"I had already accounted for that," Pflum replied.

"Oh, sorry. Wait a minute. Sam? What do you want us to do when we get there?"

"I have the only stunner. Let me go first. I'll stun him and anyone else in the room if there is anyone there and then you can help drag Creston back into the transit."

"Kid," Pflum instructed Jack, "I want you to stay in here and get ready to phase us out the moment that door is closed."

"You got it, Pflum," Jack replied.

"Expecting trouble, Pflum?" Sam asked archly.

"Uh, yes. I think I am. In any case it doesn't hurt to be prepared."

"No, it doesn't," Sam agreed.

“Ready?” Pflum asked. “Open the door... now!”

Jainette pulled the door open and Sam jumped into the room. Creston just barely had time to shout for help before she stunned him. Pflum was on his way into the room and a small side door was opened to show a pair of guards. Sam spun and stunned the first one, but the other ducked out of the way and started running away down a hallway, shouting all the while.

“Damn!” Sam muttered. “Pflum, help me with Sleeping Beauty, won’t you?” Pflum did so, while Jainette cleared a pair of chairs out of the way. They almost had Creston in the Transit when the sound of approaching boots alerted them to the approaching soldiers. Sam let go of Creston and started shooting her stunner as they burst through the door. With a strength born of desperation, Pflum dragged Creston the rest of the way into the transit.

“Sam!” he shouted. “Get in here!”

Sam backed up firing all the way and Pflum slammed the door shut as soon as she was inside. Almost at once they heard automatic weapon’s fire from outside. Sam and Pflum threw themselves on the floor immediately, but Jainette remained standing until Sam twisted around and knocked her legs out from under her.

“Kid! Get us out of here already,” Pflum told him excitedly. Bullets were getting through the door and whistling over head to lodge themselves in the far wall. Finally Jack got the Transit’s drive engaged and suddenly the whole room shook violently.

“Pflum, something’s wrong!” Jack exclaimed.

“You’re telling me?” Pflum shot back. He managed to get to his feet and dragged himself to the console chair. Jainette started getting up too. “Stay down there, J. You might hurt yourself trying to get here. He worked at the controls and the vibrations smoothed out slightly, but the whole room was still shaking slightly.

“What happened?” Jainette asked as she started getting up again.

“Yeah,” Sam agreed. “Your transit never did that before.”

“I think some of those bullets got into the stabilizers,” Pflum told them. “We’d better head for home and let Ken have a good look at it.”

“What about Mae Creston?” Sam asked.

“Right now I have no chance of staying on that timeline. We’re bouncing all over the place the only timeline I can hit with any assurance is our home line and only in our present,” Pflum told her. “Even so I think we’re in for a rough landing, but I’ll try to keep it as smooth as I can. By the way shouldn’t you handcuff or tie up Creston or something? I don’t think he’s going to sleep all the way home.”

Ten

Get Back

Pflum made as slow an approach to the present as he could manage. Even so the Transit was shaking all over the place forcing the travelers to lie down on the floor, except for Pflum who had Jack tie him into the console seat. Finally they came to rest and let the blessed calm and silence roll over and through them.

Finally Pflum untied himself, helped the others up from the floor and opened the home door of the Transit and was greeted by Ken Jackson.

“What the hell was all that?” Ken demanded.

“Got a little job for you, Kenny,” Pflum replied. “I think the crate needs a new set of stabilizers.”

“A whole set?”

“Probably. It seems no one ever thought to protect them from gunfire. How silly of us, huh?”

“What the hell have you been up to? You’ve been out for weeks and... Are those bullet holes?” Ken asked at last.

“I said we’d taken some gunfire, Ken,” Pflum replied calmly.

Sam pushed her way past them saying, “I need to call for a pick-up for Creston. Oh, Pflum, you were wrong, he did stay unconscious all the way back. Must be unusually susceptible to stunners.” She walked off across the garage and found a vidphone on the wall. Ken was examining the holes in the wall of the Transit.

“Pflum, you want me to call catering for the next trip?” Jack asked.

“Um, hold up a bit, kid. Let’s find out how long we’re going to be grounded. Some of those holes have corresponding ones on the other side, Ken. This is the anchor side, you know.”

“They shot through both walls?” Ken asked. “I’m surprised you were able to get back at all.”

“I always was the lucky one,” Pflum replied smugly.

“And me too,” Ken whispered as he turned around. He pointed at the wall behind him where the slugs had finally been stopped. “Good thing nobody was standing here as you returned.”

“Wouldn’t the bullets have come through last night when they were shot?” asked Pflum.

“No, they would have been in limbo or stasis or whatever you want to call it until you rematerialized in the present. Then their conserved energy would have been released again and they would have finished their journey.”

“Exciting,” Pflum replied dryly. “As far as I know there’s not a lot of circuitry on this side of the crate though. We should both have a look at the other side.”

“Hi, Ken,” Jaiette greeted him as they walked through the Transit. She was holding Sam’s stunner, keeping it trained on Creston.

“Hello. Found one of them, did you?” Ken asked. “Why is he dressed like Hitler?”

“He thinks he is Hitler,” Jainette replied, “sort of. I’ll explain later. I hope you can repair Pflum’s Transit or Sam is going to have a fit.”

“I don’t think Sharonne will be very happy either. It’s bad enough Kyle’s had to take out back-to-back tours since you left. We’re losing business while this is going on.”

“You can say that again,” Sharonne Lachado said from the doorway. “What in the world was that horrible racket as you came in?” Pflum briefly repeated what he had told Ken. “Kenneth, will you be able to repair it?” she asked when Pflum was done.

“The temporal regulator is still working,” Ken replied uncertainly.

“Are you sure?” Pflum asked.

“You’re here aren’t you?” Ken countered.

“I probably shouldn’t ask,” Sharonne began, “but what would happen if the regulator died while the Transit was in the field?”

“Fortunately no one really knows,” Ken replied. “The prevailing theory is that the whole Transit would fold in on itself and form a small black hole.”

“Delightful,” Sharonne replied dryly.

“There are also a fair number of theorists that believe the Transit would shrink temporally. That is both ends - the past and present - would quickly move through time until they meet each other some time in the middle, so if the Transit was visiting, say, two centuries ago, it would suddenly find itself grounded roughly one hundred years in the past. I tend to like to think that’s what would happen. It fits my old-fashioned notions of the conservation of matter and energy much better. However, since that has never happened...”

“So at least we know this transit is still in working order,” Sharonne concluded.

“Actually we know it was still working when Pflum brought it in. As to whether it will work again, well I’ll let you know in a few hours.”

“I’ll be waiting,” Sharonne told him. “So, Jainette, Pflum, you got the Crestons?”

“Just one so far,” Jainette replied. “We had to come back when the Nazis tried turning the Transit into Swiss cheese. Look, let’s wait until Sam has the ersatz Adolph here carted off and until Pflum and I can shower and if you have a good meal waiting for us in your office we’ll tell you all about it.”

“That’s Donald Creston there? Good, but we have to find Mae too. I’ll see you two in one hour,” Sharonne told them and promptly returned to her office.

“I wonder what’s up,” Pflum said thoughtfully to Jainette. “Sharonne would normally prefer to get you back in your Transit and this one back to carting tourists about.”

“We have to find Mae Creston,” Sharonne told them an hour later.

“Why?” Pflum asked. “I mean, I know it’s doing us a lot of good to work with the FBI on this, but if the FBI is satisfied if we don’t find Mother Creston, why should we worry?”

“Because they aren’t the only government agencies we have to deal with,” Sharonne replied. “While you were gone Temporal Travelers, LLC got audited by the Revenue Service. Turns out they’ve been cooking the books to increase the value of their stock. Right after that Chronological Caravans admitted that their accountants had exaggerated their last year’s earnings. So now they’re taking a close look at all time travel agencies.”

“But this isn’t a publically traded company,” Jainette pointed out.

“You have been paying your taxes honestly, haven’t you?” Pflum added.

“Don’t talk dirty, Pflum. Of course I have,” Sharonne told him. “But that doesn’t stop their investigators from coming in and looking through my books to make sure I have. Then there’s the Department of Temporal Travel.”

“Our buddies!” Pflum noted sarcastically.

“Our buddies,” Sharonne repeated flatly, “have decided to start making spot inspections to make sure incidents like the Crestons don’t happen again. They are also demanding that we pay to have one of their agents travel with us on every trip. However, if we can produce Mae and Donald Creston, they’ll withdraw that requirement. It would be bad enough to have to carry a DTT agent on every trip but to have to pay for their salary would break us.”

“Can they charge us that way?” Jainette asked. “It doesn’t sound legal to me.”

“My attorney is looking at the matter even now, but evidently the laws pertaining to the regulation of time travel are complex and very different from those concerning most other businesses.”

“In what way?” Pflum asked.

“They’re using a clause about national security that until now has been pretty much ignored.”

“National security? That’s ridiculous!”

Sharonne shrugged. “It may be in reaction to the temporal ecologists.”

“Do I want to know?” Pflum asked suspiciously.

“I doubt it, Pflum, but it’s something you both need to know. You’ve been gone over a month. In that time the Nader Group has decided that temporal tourism is causing temporal pollution.”

“And their evidence for that is what?” Jainette asked.

“Mostly a lot of rhetoric until last week when they started bombarding the public with tons of incomprehensible mathematics. It seems they managed to hire a theorist to prove their point. A few others have admitted the math makes sense so of course the news organizations have been jumping on the band wagon.”

“What does Doctor Deshpande have to say on the subject?” Jainette asked. Doctor Raj Deshpande was the physicist who invented the Transitory Time Transport.

“He says it is utter nonsense,” Sharonne responded, “but since when does reasoned discourse make any difference to a reporter? Temporal pollution makes headlines. Headlines sell papers.”

“When was the last time you saw a newspaper when you weren’t in the field?” Pflum countered.

“Just an expression,” Sharonne told him irritably. “Anyway, the Naders have been at odds to find a popular and profitable cause ever since we actually cleaned up the environment. Without something like this they’d be on the endangered species list themselves.”

“And it’s a rather lonely list these days,” Pflum commented dryly.

“Lately I’m thinking it would be improved for that particular addition,” Sharonne told then sourly. “Anyway with their claims that we are ruining the time lines we visit merely by being there, our own business environment is getting a bit unviable. I have assurances from the DTT that this whole incident is going to be used as a basis for policy in the future. If we can come through with the goods our methodology will be the one they show to other time agencies. If we fail, we’ll be the bad example and to show how tough they are, they’ll make us the object lesson as well.”

“Nice folks we’re dealing with,” Pflum muttered.

“Typical government bureaucracy,” Sharonne replied. “I deal with that every day.”

“Remind me not to go into business for myself then.”

“There are times I wonder why I did myself,” she replied. “Now how soon can you and that FBI woman go back for Mae Creston?”

“As soon as Ken tells us we can,” Pflum answered. “Last time I saw him he was close to tears over the damage those Nazis did to the Transit. It’s the first time I didn’t hear him blame me for, well, anything.”

“I’m amazed that none of us were wounded when they opened fire,” Jainette admitted.

“Thank God for small favors,” Sharonne replied, meaning every word of it.

“I don’t think we have a chance of being time worthy again for a few days at least,” Pflum opined.

“Make that a week and a half at least,” Ken said from the doorway. They all turned to face him. “I’m going to need to install all new stabilizers, not just the circuitry, but the temporal impellers they connect to. I hate to admit it, but Pflum here did a masterful job getting everyone home. I would have been willing to bet that no one could do it.”

“What made it so difficult?” Sharonne asked. “The stabilizers were still working somewhat weren’t they?”

“Actually no,” Ken corrected her. “They were completely out of commission. I was taught that no one could survive a transit voyage without working stabilizers, but Pflum just proved that you can.”

“You’ll forgive me if I don’t try to do it twice,” Pflum remarked dryly.

“You should write an article about how you did it. *TheTime Trade Journal* would pay good money for a description of what you did,” Ken told him.

“And would give you something to do while waiting for the repairs,” Jainette added.

“It has been a while since I had a hobby,” Pflum considered, and I suppose we could use it for a basis of another publicity tour.”

“Good idea,” Sharonne agreed, “but let’s not publish until after we complete our contract with the FBI.”

“I wonder if Sam will have other agents with her this time to back her up,” Jainette said.

“She ought to have,” Pflum remarked. “We weren’t supposed to have done as much as we did, but if we hadn’t chipped in, we would have had to come back for help. Although I don’t know that additional agents would have been any better in the Chancellery.”

“More likely you would have had more people tripping over themselves and getting hurt,” Sharonne replied. “Ken, what do you need from me?”

“Approval for the new stabilizers. I can repair the exterior structure of the Transit from material in stock.”

“How much for new stailizers?”

“If they were new, they would cost half a million at least, but nobody makes stabilizers like these any more, so I’ll have buy them used from Tedeschi Equipment. Probably won’t run over fifty thousand dollars or so, if they have them.”

“And if they don’t?” Sharone asked.

“They have an extra set over at Time Tours, but they won’t be cheap. We’ll be lucky to get them for three hundred thousand.”

“For used stabilizers?” Sharonne asked incredulously.

“It’s a seller’s market,” Ken shrugged, “especially when the buyer is a competitor.”

“Let me know if Tedeschi is fresh out of our model, Ken,” Pflum told him. “I can probably negotiate a better price from Time Tours.”

“You have a friend over there?” Ken asked.

“No,” Pflum replied, “something better, but it’s only something I’ll be able to exploit once. Can’t talk about it, but let’s just say there’s someone over there who owes me big, but I’d rather not play that card just yet, if you know what I mean.

Pflum's office at Down Time, Ltd. was a plain, unadorned room with a steel desk and a few chairs and an old flat screen vidphone. The walls were the off white color of the original primer coat. Pflum had never bothered to have it painted. He rarely used the room for anything, not even to hang up his coat on a cold day. That's what the Transit was for. Anyone walking into this room the first time would think it was just a spare office waiting for an occupant. In a sense it was.

Pflum stepped into the room and noted that someone had put a blotter-calendar on his desk and that Sharonne had finally done as he suggested and moved the terminal out to another room where it might be of some use. He wondered just when she had finally done that. It had been nearly a year since he had last entered the office. The cleaning service, however, had been in since that last visit since the room was as clean and dust-free as ever.

He sat down behind the desk and stared at the vidphone for a few minutes. Finally he dragged its keyboard closer and typed in a call code.

"Time Tours, Good Afternoon!" a chirpy voice said even as the screen was just coming into focus. It eventually resolved into a picture of Time Tours, Inc.'s attractive blonde receptionist. "How may I direct your call?"

The almost aggressive cheerfulness set Pflum's teeth on edge, but he bit back several retorts and merely said in an almost emotionless tone, "Jennifer Viking, please. Tell her it's Pflum."

"Yes, Mister Pflum," the receptionist replied, smiling. "Please hold."

Pflum watched the cute video advertisement for Time Tours' services for less than a minute before the picture changed abruptly to a woman with brown hair that was pulled back from her face. She was just taking off her glasses and smiling for him. Pflum thought she shouldn't have bothered. She was one of those people who actually looked better with glasses, not that very many people still wore them, but he knew that Jennifer was not a candidate for corrective optical surgery.

"Aurelian!" she greeted him enthusiastically with a very warm smile. "What a delight to hear from you! Are you free for dinner?"

"Uh, maybe," he hedged. Saying "No" to Jennifer Viking would have been less than useless. Look, Jen, I need a big favor."

"Really?" she replied speculatively, her smile becoming even warmer. "That job offer is still open, you know."

"Not that, Jen," he told her quickly and her smile slipped a few notches so he plunged on ahead quickly. "My Transit took some damage last trip out and lost her stabilizers. I know you have a set of R-2100 based stabilizers with matching impellers, and..."

"And Jimmy Nolland told Kenny Jackson they would be a quarter of a million," Jennifer finished for him.

"Um, right," Pflum admitted.

“I might be able to give you a better price,” she told him after a long pause. “I’ll be more than happy to discuss it with you... over dinner.”

Pflum knew he wouldn’t be able to beg off from dinner so he just nodded. “When should I pick you up?” he asked.

“No need,” Jennifer told him. “I’ll pick you up. One hour. Be ready!”

“It’s not that I don’t appreciate the bargain you got us, Pflum,” Sharonne told him the next day as the new stabilizers arrived. “But it really isn’t nice of you to use Jen Viking that way.”

“Use her?” Pflum protested. “Funny, that’s not the way I remember it. Damn, but she is persistent!”

“Your animal magnetism must be out of control again,” Sharonne laughed again and returned to her office.

“I really don’t know why you’re complaining so, Pflum,” Jack told him. “Miss Viking is a very attractive woman.”

“Kid, it’s like dating a piranha. Dinner may have been the excuse, but she sees me as the dessert.”

“Fair turnaround then,” Ken laughed as he walked by.

“Funny,” Pflum grumbled. He noticed Jack was still watching him so he continued, “In spite of my reputation, I have never treated anyone that way.”

“Maybe it’s just her way of letting you know she likes you,” Jack suggested.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” Pflum told him.

“I still don’t understand why you could only ask her for a favor once, though.”

“Kid, if I have to ask another large favor like this one from her, it had better come attached to a diamond ring.

Eleven

Girls Just Want to Have Fun

It was another week before Ken deemed the Transit ready to travel again. It had taken two days to install the new components, but the real hold up was in tuning them properly. He also had the field wall completely rebuilt with a thick layer of Kevlar fibers as protection against similar damage on subsequent

trips to the past.

“I intend to do the same for the other Transit next time it’s between trips,” he told Jainette.

Kyle had returned with Jainette’s Transit while they were grounded and then went out again the next day with another load of tourists, but as Sharonne had predicted, he was handling the duties of a tour guide admirably. Jainette found herself worrying that he might chafe at the restrictions when he had to go back to being her assistant, but with luck Sharonne would be able to buy that third Transit before it became a problem.

One bit of good news, however, was that the Harvard University was interested in studying the time line on which Hitler had been killed, so Sharonne told Pflum they might want to leave the tracer there for subsequent trips.

Ken was still tuning the stabilizers when Sam returned to Down Time, Ltd. She greeted everyone in a friendly enough manner as she entered Down Time’s conference room, but Jainette noticed Sam was trying not to mention something.

“What’s the problem, Sam?” she asked.

“Several problems,” Sam replied. “First of all my boss wasn’t particularly pleased by the manner in which we apprehended Donald Creston.”

“We got him, didn’t we?” Pflum asked. “What more could he have wanted.”

“She, Pflum,” Sam corrected him. “My boss is a woman. Anyway, she feels we should have come back for a special squad to handle the actual arrest.”

“Does your boss have any idea of just how small a Transit door is?” Pflum countered. “Any more of us and we’d have either had trouble getting into the Chancellor’s office or been killed trying to get back out again. As it was, it was a very near thing.”

“She doesn’t feel I should have put you at risk at all,” Sam explained.

“I can’t argue with that,” Pflum agreed, “but without Jainette and me to bring the Transit into his office they would have had to wait until the Allies had arrived. Did you tell her that?”

“No, I didn’t,” Sam admitted.

“Why the heck not?” Pflum shouted.

“Because I like my job and would like to keep it!” Sam shouted right back at him.

Pflum thought about that and finally said in a much quieter and calmer tone, “Good point. So are we going to have more agents with us this time?”

“No,” Sam replied softly.

“Are we going to have a next time?” Jainette asked.

“Oh yes, of course. Only this time I am under orders only to find Mae Creston, not to arrest her myself.”

“Pretty much what your orders were last time, except you were left with some discretion,” Jainette pointed out.

“The difference is that this time, it’s being assumed my judgment is not to be trusted,” Sam told them bitterly.

“It can’t be that bad,” Pflum pointed out, “or they would have assigned someone else to the job. Is there any circumstance in which we can just arrest Mom Creston?”

“I suppose if she were to surrender, I wouldn’t be reprimanded,” Sam admitted.

“I don’t see that happening,” Pflum told her dryly.

“No?” Sam asked with a small laugh. “I suppose not. Well this is some good news, but not much.”

“Let me guess,” Pflum interrupted, “Sonny Creston is talking.”

“How did you know?” Sam asked.

“It was the only thing I could think of you might call good news at this point,” he admitted.

“You’re right, though. He is talking. Babbling like the proverbial brook, in fact. Unfortunately he doesn’t know where we can find his mother.”

“Or he isn’t saying,” Jainette interpreted.

“I think he really doesn’t know. If he’s telling the truth, he hasn’t seen her in over a year and that at least does not contradict what our own researches have told us. According to ‘Sonny’ as you call him, his mother left Germany shortly after he replaced Hitler as the leader of the Nazi party.”

“Moral differences?” Pflum asked.

“I doubt it. Evidently she set up the opportunity for him, by killing Hitler, or maybe she hired killers to do it for her.”

“The things some parents do for their children,” Pflum sighed.

“No kidding. Anyway once she had him set for life, she decided to retire to a more pleasant climate.”

“And where was that?” Jainette asked.

“A month later she sent him a letter from Lesvos. That was the last time he heard from her.”

“It’s a start,” Jainette commented.

“Wait a minute,” Pflum said. “Lesvos, isn’t that where Sappho and her lot were from?”

“So?” Sam countered. “It’s also the third largest island in the Greek Archipelago and a lovely tourist resort and usually much cheaper than the more frequented resorts. And the best ouzo is made there too. Anyway, she wrote from the village of Molyvos which even then wasn’t a bad place to get away from it

all. The best part is that while I don't know where the trail will lead us after Lesvos, at least we'll be away from trouble spots like Germany for a while. So when can we leave?"

"Okay, kid," Pflum instructed Jack, "bring her in for a landing."

Jack was showing far less hesitation at the controls than he had the first few times he had performed this operation. Pflum hovered silently behind him as he brought the Transit to rest geographically and temporally.

"Not bad, kid," Pflum complimented him. "Not bad at all. So, back to the library, Sam?"

"It's a bit late in the day local time," she replied. "Besides, my Greek is a bit rusty, how about you three?"

"Mine's non-existent," Pflum admitted.

"Then how did you plan to use the library?" Jainette asked pointedly. "The alphabet is different enough that you won't even be able to use the 'If only it was Latin' approach."

"I wasn't thinking. Guess I should have brought some learning cartridges, or maybe sleep learned the language before we left."

"How about you, Jainette?" Sam asked.

"It's been a while, but I've made several trips to Greece at various times. I'll cope. Jack?"

"Took a course last night after Pflum told me where we were headed."

"Good," Sam nodded. "Pflum, looks like you'll have to learn the language the hard way."

"No problem," he shrugged. "I can work with the kid and while I can't read Greek, there will probably be some locals who speak French, English, German or one of the other European languages I do speak, so I can still ask questions."

"All right," Sam agreed. "The last name Mae Creston was using was Mary Halberstadt, but we have no proof that's still the one she uses. Ask around using her description and remember we're probably still three years behind her. For now, however, I think it's time to eat and if we go to a local restaurant I can find out just how rusty my Greek is."

Dinner consisted of various forms of seafood from the first taverna they happened on. They started with steamed mussels and fried zucchini flowers stuffed with cheese with ouzo for appetizers. For dinner, Jainette decided on a plate of fresh deep fried sardines, Jack ordered the grilled octopus, Sam had the shrimp and Pflum ordered the *lakerda*.

"You haven't the faintest notion what *lakerda* is, do you?" Jainette asked, mischief in her eyes.

"Why?" Pflum asked. "Did I just order aged calf's brains or something like that?" Jainette laughed a bit

nastilly. "Because," he continued, "I thought I was ordering marinated tuna. Sort of like sashimi with lots of lemon."

"I thought you didn't know Greek," Jainette accused him.

"To speak, I don't," he told her. "What made you think I couldn't order food in a restaurant?" Jack laughed and Sam put her hand in front of her face to hide a smile.

"I should have known you could order food anywhere in the world," Jainette said sourly.

"Can't you?" Pflum asked pointedly.

"Never mind," she replied.

After dinner they walked around Molyvos for a while, but Jainette and Jack decided to turn in early, so Sam and Pflum wandered around until they found a group of folk musicians playing brass instruments at a small neighborhood gathering. They stayed and drank more ouzo and *atemezedes* while chatting with the locals until late into the night. At first Pflum was left out of the conversation, but when it turned out that several people in the crowd spoke French he was included easily and was able to start picking up more Greek words than just the ones for food.

In the morning, Pflum stumbled out of the Transit for a cup of strong Greek coffee before any of the others were up. He was stunned by his first daylight view of the city. It had been built on a mountain and topped off with a magnificent medieval Byzantine castle. He ended up with a two-cup *briki*- full that he hoped would keep him wired for the rest of the morning and was just starting his second *briki* when the others joined him.

"Why didn't you leave a note for us?" Jainette asked.

"Thought I'd be back before you missed me," Pflum replied.

"I'm surprised you managed to wake up this morning," Sam told him. "I know I had trouble getting up."

"That's why I came here for the coffee, Sam. I'm sure they think I'm an utter barbarian, drinking this coffee out of a normal sized cup rather than a demitasse, but this morning I need it."

"Good, because it's time to get back to work. Jainette, why don't you and Jack hit the library. Pflum and I can go talk to people. I want to start with some of the folks we were with last night."

"How do you know where to find them during the day?" Pflum asked.

"Because while you were just chatting, I was asking questions," she told him.

It turned out that Mae Creston's visit was remembered. They followed her travels over the island to other towns and cities, but evidently her sojourn on Lesbos really was a vacation and she had not engaged in her usual dishonest activity.

"I guess everyone needs a place where they can return and be welcomed," Pflum commented a week later in the transit.

"You think she's planning to return here?" Sam asked.

“Could be, or at least that might have been her intention. Maybe she planned to retire here. She could do a lot worse, though I doubt she’ll be back now.”

“Why not?”

“A month ago her son, the German Chancellor, disappeared mysteriously. It’s possible that she’ll merely think it’s factional in-fighting among the Nazis, but it’s also possible she’ll assume we’re out to arrest her. Either way she won’t return anywhere she’s already been.”

“That’s a good point,” Sam conceded. Just then Jainette and Jack walked in.

“We found out where she went next,” Jainette announced. “After a year of wandering around Lesvos, she took a plane to Cairo.”

In spite of the fact that the Nazis looked down on all non-Aryan people as inferior, they had many admirers in the Arab world and that admiration and emulation continued for generations all in the cause of Arab nationalism. All that was still in its infancy when Pflum’s Transit materialized in Cairo, but even then the Young Egypt organization was active and even this early there were Green Shirts in evidence in the city.

“It’s only going to get worse,” Jainette told Jack when he asked about it in the library. “Especially after Germany finds itself in opposition to England, although on this line, maybe it won’t go that way.”

“Those Green Shirts leave me as cold as the Hitler Youth,” Jack commented.

“Same mentality,” she told him.

“Oh, this is interesting!” Jack said suddenly.

“Found something?”

“Yes, just last year someone was collecting money to restore the Pyramid Complex across the river in Giza.”

“That doesn’t sound particularly incredible. Weren’t there all sorts of restoration projects there during this century and the next?” Jainette asked.

“You don’t understand. The supposed goal of this project was to restore the pyramids to the way they were when new, to re-encase them with white limestone blocks. The originals were used to build Cairo. So far as I know there never was a project of this sort.”

“Jack, even being on a time line that is similar to within five-nines, you are going to find differences on minor matters.”

“Humor me on this, Jainette,” Jack told her. “I know Pflum keeps calling me ‘Kid.’ It makes me sound like I’m still in middle school, so it’s easy to forget I already have a degree in history and am working on

one in temporal engineering, but I'm not as dumb as all that."

"Sorry, Jack," Jainette apologized. "So we'll play this your way. What do you want to do?"

"Let's flip through the papers and see if there's any further mention of this project," he suggested.

"There may be nothing," Jainette warned him.

"Then we'll be no worse off than we are now," he replied.

They started looking for more articles on the Pyramid Restoration Project and at first there were daily reports describing its progress. Then after a week's worth of papers there was nothing.

"Sounds like a scam," Jainette agreed, "but who's to say if it's Mae Creston?"

"Let's look a bit further," Jack urged. "Sometime within a month we'll find something." It only took a few minutes before Jack found what he was looking for. "See? Right here. A warning about the Pyramid Restoration Project and a description of the woman in charge."

"She called herself Nancy Reagan?" Jainette asked incredulously.

"It's late 1933," Jack replied. "Who would know?"

"Well, she'll be using a different name by now."

"I would hope so, but now we know she's still up to her old tricks. The question is where did she go when she skipped town?"

"Can't say just yet," Jainette admitted, "but she sure didn't retire on her haul here."

"How much is that in dollars?" Jack asked.

"Maybe four or five thousand," Jainette replied. "It's an okay gain, but she probably did better with the Fiddle Game."

They didn't find anything further that day, but when they returned to the Transit, Sam already had Pflum programming in their next port of call.

"That's good work," Sam commended them after they reported their findings. "It'll all go in the report and she'll eventually stand trial on those charges as well."

"Do crimes committed on other time lines count?" Jack asked. "I mean are they even in your jurisdiction and if so wouldn't the Statute of Limitations sort of expire after all this time?"

"Not the way the law reads these days," Sam told him. "A crime committed in the past by a time traveler is treated as though it happened in the present and the fact that it doesn't happen on our time line makes no difference."

"All right. So where to now?" Jack inquired.

"Nairobi," Sam told him. "I believe Earnest Hemmingway is there about now on his first safari."

“Anyone’s first safari, really,” Pflum added, “since he was probably the one who introduced that word to the English language. Before that they probably just called it a hunting trip. Actually, I’m looking forward to this leg of the trip. The biggest controversy at the moment is the proposed income tax.”

“You just got spoiled by the time we spent on Lesvos,” Jainette accused him.

“Too right!” Pflum agreed. “I think we need to start booking more trips there. Good food and drink, friendly people, beautiful scenery, great beaches. What more can you ask for?”

“Me? I just want to find this Mae Creston and get back to directing normal time tours,” Jainette snapped at him.

“Yeah, me too,” Pflum assured her.

“How do you know Mae Creston went to Nairobi?” Jack asked Sam.

“Talking to the local police is a great source of information sometimes,” Sam replied. “although in this case I wish they had told me about the Pyramid Restoration scam. One of the officers mentioned seeing a report from Kenya a few months ago about a woman who called herself Mary Kates. She was running the Pigeon Drop before the police caught on and put out a warrant for her.”

“She’s not still there then either,” Jainette pointed out.

“No,” Sam admitted, “but we’re gaining on her.”

What they learned in Nairobi led them to Entebbe in Uganda where they learned Mae Creston had also been active in Kampala. In Kampala they thought they might have lost the trail until Pflum found an entire trail that wound from town to town through Tanganyika to the coast of Mozambique.

They moved to Porto Amélia and soon learned that she had traveled south through Mozambique alternating between the Bank Examiner fraud and a variant on the Nigeria letter scheme.

“Nigeria letter scheme?” Jack wondered out loud when they learned that. “How is that supposed to work without the Internet to send bulk e-mail over?”

“Well, the scam is much older than the Internet, kid,” Pflum informed him. “From what I’ve learned it actually dates back to the American west of the Nineteenth Century. It’s really the same as the Pigeon Drop con she’s been running all this time. The only difference is that she’s been sending letters to potential marks, which sort of saves time in the long run.”

“Not only that, but she can work from a single location and move only when a pigeon presents him or herself,” Pflum added.

“Exactly,” Sam agreed. “Now it appears she was working out of Lorenzo Marques until about three months ago before moving on. I suspect she continued south into South Africa, but don’t know it for certain. So let’s see if we can find her. Odds are she’ll still be wherever that is.”

They moved the Transit to Lorenzo Marques and after two weeks of painstaking research they still didn’t know where Mae Creston had gone next, until Jainette noticed a crumpled piece of paper blowing down the street. Absently, she picked it up to throw it out, but when it appeared to be letterhead she

opened it up curiously.

Mrs. Regina S. Wellsdale

540 Vermeulen Street
Pretoria

ATTN, Senhor Carvalho:

URGENT BUSINESS RELATIONSHIP

First, embarrassing as this is to me to have to seek out the assistance of a stranger, I must solicit your confidence in this transaction, which will be of mutual benefit. This is by virtue of its nature of being utterly confidential. I am sure and have confidence of your ability, and reliability to prosecute a transaction of this great magnitude. I am the wife of the late Thomas Jersey Wellsdale, former chief assistant to the Governor of Uganda. No doubt you have heard of the recent unrest in the Protectorate of Uganda in which my beloved husband was killed and I was forced to flee for my life, leaving the bulk of our fortune from wise investments in the tin mining industry trapped in the Uganda Commercial Bank.

In order to commence this business, we need your assistance to enable us to transfer funds into your account. As I am unable to safely travel to Uganda to retrieve that money which is rightfully mine, I have determined to seek out a non-Ugandan partner into whose account the sum of £2,320,000.00 (Two Million Three Hundred and Twenty Thousand Pounds Sterling) could be transferred safely, hence I take the liberty to write you.

The money will be shared as follows:-

1. 25% for you the account owner
2. 65% for my estate
3. 10% to be used in settling taxation and all local and foreign expenses.

Please note that this whole process will take 7 to 10 working days from the date of receipt of the following information by the above post, Your individual/Company's signed and stamped letterhead with

a transcribed "Text" which we would send to you upon receipt of your reply with a letter of interest. The above information will enable us

To write a letter of claim, and job description by using your individual/Company name to apply for payment for the above stated amount. Please acknowledge the receipt of this letter using the above postal address. Detailed information of this pending business transaction will be sent to you as soon as I hear from you.

Yours faithfully,

Mrs. Regina S. Wellsdale

Transcribe this portion on your letter headed paper

The Group Managing Director,

Date:.....

Mwirasandu Mining Corporation

Kabaka Mutesa Office Complex

Entebbe

Attention: Engr. Eugene T. Johnston.

Re: contract no: nnpc/ped/9753/95/kadref

Supply & commissioning of turbine generators for Buganda Refinery

Optimization for plants "a" to "d" at Buganda Refinery.

With reference to your letter NNPC/9753/95 vol. 03225 dated 19th March, 1933 and article 35 we take the liberty to submit to you the attached Invoice no. 940253 for the amount of £2.320.000 (two million, three hundred twenty thousand Pounds Sterling only) being the final payment due to us on completion of the above mentioned contract.

In accordance with the aforementioned articles of Agreement and all other relevant amendments thereto, we wish to state that in arriving at this claim, we have taken cognizance of the mobilization fees already received from you.

Kindly remit the above stated amount in full to our undermentioned bank Account:

Bank name:.....

Bank address:.....

Bank fax/tel no:.....

Account no:.....

Bank telex no.:.....

Yours faithfully

Transcribe this portion on your invoice

MwirasanduMining Corporation

Kabaka Mutesa Office Complex

Entebbe

Quantity description amount

Item 1 supply, commissioning of turbine generators for Buganda Refinery £1,100,000.00

Item 2 rail line reconstruction and optimization for plants "a" to "d" at Buganda Refinery £1,220,000.00

Certified official invoice

This bill was quoted and is payable in pounds sterling only.

Contract site: Uganda

Contract type: Industrial

A/c dept. Code: b - 600 - 23

Corporate code: cog - 4211

Sub total: £ 2,320,000.00

Grand total £ 2,320,000.00

The invoice should be stamped and signed.

“So that’s how the scam works,” Pflum whistled an hour later.

“You knew that,” Jainette admonished him.

“Well, yes, but I never saw how anyone could fall for such a ploy, but this almost seems real. I can actually see why some people, greedy ones, admittedly, might be hooked by it. I take it the Mwirasandu Mining Corporation is just a fabrication.”

“Probably,” Sam told him. “The idea is that they will agree to pay the bill, but will demand a processing fee. It will be the ten percent you saw in the first part of the letter. It’s a large sum, over two hundred thousand but much less than the half million the mark will expect as his share. And if he balks he’ll be assured that he’ll be reimbursed after the money is secured.”

“I see that. And he’ll think there’s no risk, since the money will be in his account anyway.”

“Exactly,” Sam agreed.

“Wait a minute,” Jack piped up. “Is she in Pretoria or in Entebbe. Why would she want to be this far from the center of her scam?”

“She probably has a confederate in Entebbe,” Sam replied, “or else she has one in Pretoria, in case someone tries to contact her there.”

“Or else she’s planning to travel back and forth,” Pflum added, “except she hasn’t returned to previous places she’s run cons, so she must have set this one up while she was there. I’m surprised she trusts whoever she set up there.”

“The bank account that the mark’s money will be deposited in may only be withdrawn by her and she then pays off the confederate, assuming she doesn’t cheat him or her as well,” Sam replied. “Do keep in mind that this isn’t a nice person we’re chasing. She murdered one mark back home and had a hand in bumping off Hitler here. For all we know she’s planning to kill whoever is currently helping her.”

“So are we headed for Pretoria or Entebbe?” Pflum asked.

Samantha hesitated a bit then finally replied, “Pretoria. You’re right about her not returning to the scene of a previous con. At least not so far. Besides, we have an actual address, if it is real.”

“The address is real enough,” Jack reported from the Transit console. “It comes up on the maps. Say the word and I’ll have us there in minutes.”

“You’re getting pretty cocky at the controls there, kid,” Pflum commented. “Where are you planning on landing us?”

“Hey, I’ve actually been in Pretoria,” Jack replied. Then he realized he was sounding defensive and added, “Dude.”

“Dude?” Pflum asked incredulously. “Kid, did you just call me ‘Dude?’” The reaction was all Jack could have hoped for – pretty much the way he felt when Pflum called him “Kid.”

“Yeah, dude,” he repeated. “I did.”

“You sound like a bad late Twentieth Century surfer movie,” Pflum grumbled. “So tell me about Pretoria and Vermeulen Street, kid.”

“Well, if I remember correctly Vermeulen Street is in the Arcadia section of town, and in our present that address is a large swanky hotel. I couldn’t afford to stay there, but I went to an academic convention – International Historic Society – there a couple years ago. There are a few embassies that take up whole floors there. Do you think it may have been a hotel in 1933?”

“Could be, kid. Maybe,” Pflum allowed. “Although, maybe not. One and a half centuries is a long time, especially for a hotel. Could have been four or five hotels on that spot over the years.”

“You have a point, dude,” Jack told him. “We’ll wait until after dark, the way we made our last few moves, just in case we accidentally pick a place out in the open.”

Twelve

On the Road Again

Jack moved the Transit to 540 Vermeulen Street an hour later. The tall hotel Jack remembered wasn’t there but the Orange Court Lodge was. Faced with field stone, the Orange Court, situated in the heart of Pretoria’s historic Arcadia district, offered fully equipped private cottages. Perfect for small businesses, embassies and also travelers seeking comfortable home-like accommodations.

“I think we’re going to be noticeable by daylight,” Pflum said after stepping outside, “but maybe we won’t need to be here that long. Let’s see if we can find out what room she’s in.”

“I don’t think the desk clerk will tell us,” Jainette commented.

“Maybe not,” Sam agreed, “but he will take a message for her. Wait here, I’ll go find out.” Sam was gone about ten minutes, but when she re-entered the Transit, the look on her face told the entire tale.

“We missed her, didn’t we?” Pflum concluded.

“She just checked out this morning,” Sam replied flatly.

“We’re getting closer then, all we have to do is figure out where she is going and we can get there ahead of her.”

“Unfortunately she did not leave a forwarding address,” Sam replied.

“And the clerk had no idea of where she was headed, of course,” Jainette remarked.

Sam looked at her a moment. “I never even thought to ask,” she admitted dejectedly.

“Then you also didn’t think to bribe him either,” Pflum pointed out. “Let’s go back and make him an offer he won’t refuse.” Sam nodded and they walked back out of the Transit.

“We do not give out that sort of information,” the desk clerk told them stuffily when Pflum asked.

Pflum looked over his shoulder to make sure nobody was in hearing range, then replied softly, "Give? Who said anything about give?" He reached into his pocket and drew out a ten pound note. British currency was as welcome in this world as Mastercard would be fifty or sixty years hence. "What I had in mind was more along the lines of barter. I'll trade you this portrait of King George for... Well, they say a picture is worth a thousand words."

The clerk was sorely tempted but after a long pause he silently shook his head, so Pflum added a second note to the first. At that point the clerk was obviously experiencing a crisis of faith, so Pflum slipped a gold sovereign on top.

"I really don't know," the clerk admitted sadly, still eying the money on the counter.

"But perhaps you know someone who does," Sam suggested. "The doorman or one of the maids, perhaps."

The clerk's face registered a wide range of emotions over the next two seconds. "I'll be right back," he said suddenly and rushed away toward the front door.

"What do you think, Pflum?" Sam asked quietly. "Is he going to have us arrested?"

"I doubt it, in fact, here he's on his way back right now. Ten to one he has something for us."

"The doorman," the clerk told them confidentially, "heard her tell the cab driver to take her to the train station. That's all I have, really."

"Well," Pflum drawled, slipping the sovereign off the pile, "I don't know. I assume it's too late for the trains by now"

"The station opens at Seven A.M., sir."

"And at what time did she check out?"

The clerk checked his book. "Eleven fifteen, sir."

Then Pflum smiled and flipped the coin at the clerk saying, "Aw, what the heck. Thanks, buddy."

"You gave him far too much," Sam told him once they were outside. "He'd have told you that for half what you paid him."

"Doesn't matter," Pflum replied. "We're off to the train station."

"But it's closed until morning," Sam reminded him.

"Good," Pflum replied. "Because the people there aren't likely to tell us what we want to know either."

"Oh, I see what you mean."

"Good," Pflum nodded. "The way I see it is the first thing we do is see how many trains left Pretoria this afternoon, and then see if we can find records of her buying a ticket. Too bad they haven't invented credit cards yet."

“Mae Creston’s one weakness is that she likes to write checks rather than use cash,” Sam told him.

“I’ll bet most of them are rubber,” Pflum laughed.

“Very few, actually. They’re usually on an account that can just barely cover them. She’s not stupid enough to leave a trail of bouncing checks.”

“But she is foolish enough to leave a paper trail even with good ones,” Pflum concluded.

“Don’t complain,” Sam told him, “It’s our one chance to catch her before having to wait for her to con another mark.”

They moved the Transit to the train station, then made another small change of location to get them inside the ticket office. Then all four got to work. An hour later all they knew was that seven trains had left the city that afternoon.

“We’re not narrowing down the search very well, are we?” Jack asked at last.

“I doubt we’re going to find a check, Sam,” Jainette opined. “Even if she did write one, there’s no proof she used any name we’ve heard before.”

“You’re probably right,” Sam admitted, “but I’d like to check the vault. It should be open in another minute or two.” She looked at the odd device she had attached to the old safe. It wasn’t as fast as a professional safe cracker might have been, but neither did it take any training or practice to use. It was just a small computer with a microphone that attached to the safe’s door and cylinder that had been placed over the dial. Inside the cylinder a rotating mechanism spun the dial back and forth until the combination had been discovered. When it had, lights on the cylinder would indicate to the user that the safe was ready to open.

“They probably have already put it in the bank,” Pflum commented. “It seems to me, however, that we can narrow our search down to one of two trains; the 12:15 to Cape Town and the 12:45 to Durban. The next train after that wasn’t until 2:45 and she probably wouldn’t have come directly here from the hotel if she was planning to wait that long.”

“Cape Town or Durban,” Sam mused. “What are the estimated times of arrival?”

“Let’s see,” Pflum replied taking a look at the schedules. “The Durbin train got in two hours ago, but the Cape Town train doesn’t arrive until Five A.M.”

“So if she went to Durban, we’ve already missed her,” Sam noted. “Let me see how the safe is coming. Oh, it’s ready. Let’s see what we can see here.” A few minutes later she exclaimed, “Got it! Right here, it’s her check. Hah!”

“How much did she write it out for?” Jainette asked, checking the fee schedule as she asked. Sam read out the amount. Jainette looked a bit longer, then announced, “She’s headed for Cape Town.”

“Now the question is, will she settle in there for a while or is she just passing through?” Pflum asked.

Their luck held the next morning in Cape Town where even though they were unable to spot Mae Creston they were able to learn where she had gone on arrival. A mere five pounds and two shillings split between a porter and his brother, a cabbie, bought the information that she had gone directly from the train station to the local offices of the Ellerman and Bucknall Steamship Company. Extracting what her business with Ellerman and Bucknall had been the previous afternoon took four hours and three separate bribes totaling over seventy-four Pounds Sterling, but eventually they learned that she had left South Africa on the morning tide while they were still haggling over bribes and cutting through red tape. It didn't matter, however, because even though they were unable to catch her themselves, they now knew Mae Creston was aboard the *City of Canberra* bound for Perth, Sydney and New York.

"So now we move on to Perth?" Pflum asked Sam.

"No," she disagreed. "I'm under orders to just find her, then return home for a team who will do the actual arrest. We can't materialize aboard that ship, can we?"

"Not while it's moving," Pflum told her. "I mean it's theoretically possible, but we would need some special circuitry to allow us to materialize in motion, and I doubt any Transit has ever been built to do that."

"All right, then," Sam decided. "Back to the present. We have a few days at least before that ship docks in Perth."

"More like a week, I'd guess," Jainette corrected her. "Maybe longer. I'm not sure what her cruising speed is."

"Then we have plenty of time to get ready," Sam replied.

Pflum let Jack drive the Transit back to their present. This time he didn't hover quite as closely. The "kid" was getting pretty good at routine driving.

"This seems so unreal," Jack commented a few minutes later.

"What do you mean, kid?" Pflum asked.

"Well, for all we've seen of any of the cities in Africa, we might as well have still been in Cairo, or Omaha for that matter. All I saw of Pretoria was the inside of that ticket office and that was more than I really saw of Mozambique. Not that I'm complaining, mind you. I didn't really want to see the effects of Apartheid in South Africa."

"Apartheid hadn't been invented yet," Pflum informed him. "Not that life is all that wonderful for non-whites there even in 1933, but the first Apartheid laws weren't enacted until 1948, so while the non-white majority was still discriminated against, they weren't forced to hole up in homelands or give up citizenship rights and be forced to carry travel passbooks whenever they went outside their homelands, which I should mention were not assigned with any particular accuracy. In 1933, The Afrikaner Nationalist Party had not yet taken over. Instead governance of the country was still being split between the Dutch and English colonists, so that might explain the differences. But if you had the time to look you probably would have noticed that the society was far from an integrated one, it just wasn't being segregated by force of law."

"Africa was still very colonial in nature at the time then?" Jack asked.

“Much of it,” Pflum replied. “Huge tracts were claimed by the British, the French, the Belgians, the Portuguese, the Italians, the Dutch, pretty much any European country with imperial aspirations and the wherewithal to further them. You’d have thought some of them might have considered the fact that there were already native Africans living everywhere before colonizing, but then they didn’t worry about that in Australia nor the Americas either.”

The trip back to the garage was uneventful and they even managed to get a few hours of sleep while en route. Once again, Ken Jackson was waiting for them at the door.

“What did you break this time?” he asked by way of greeting.

“Oh, aren’t you a little Johnny Sunshine,” Jainette replied sourly.

“What?” Ken asked, bemused at the reaction.

Pflum said, “You’ve been hanging around Sam too much lately, J. Nothing’s wrong, Ken. We just came back for reinforcements.” Sam squeezed past them and made a beeline for the phone.

“Oh,” Ken replied. “Sorry, it just that Kyle came back needing a full overhaul last trip. I swear he must have done something wrong, but I’ll be damned if I can figure out what.”

“If he ruins my Transit,” Jainette grumbled, “I’ll drop him in the middle of an ice age.”

“You’re assuming Sharonne doesn’t get to him first,” Pflum laughed. “My guess is that we get to sleep in our own beds tonight. Maybe tomorrow night too.”

“Pflum!” they heard Sharonne shout across the garage floor. “I’m actually glad you’re back.”

“Things are looking up,” Pflum replied, “but I don’t know how long it will be before Sam’s backup is ready.”

“But you won’t be leaving until at least tomorrow, right?”

“Probably not,” Pflum replied nervously. “Why?”

“Mrs. Callinger just called. She wants thirty tickets to ‘Cats’ for a theater party she’s organizing. She willing to pay a premium for a special trip and your Transit is the only one that can get them for her.”

“I don’t know,” Pflum hedged. “We may need to leave within the hour.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Sam told him as she approached. “I just called my office we won’t be ready until noontime at least.”

“Terrific,” Pflum sighed. “C’mon, kid, we got another job.”

Thirteen

Detour Ahead (Take 1)

Pflum and Jack returned from New York City just as Sam returned to Down Time, Ltd the next day with Agent Thomas Barta, a tall man with dark skin, curly black hair and an easy smile. Pflum shook hands with him hurriedly before running up to Sharonne's office.

"Here are your tickets," he told Sharonne after blowing right past Rain Bendor's desk. Rain squeaked a protest, but by the time she did, Pflum was already in Sharonne's office.

Sharonne silently took the tickets and inspected them. "Not bad," she conceded. "All in the Orchestra, I see."

"Not bad? They'll be close enough to have to duck if one of the cats coughs up a hairball. And only a nine month wait. Face it those tickets are primo!" Pflum insisted.

"Primo?" she asked.

"Twentieth century slang, based on either Italian or Spanish, I think. I met Sam's new partner. How long before the rest arrive?"

"I don't know," Sharonne admitted. "I imagine they should be here shortly. Samantha tells me her boss wants it to be a small team."

"Well at least they won't be tripping over each other," Pflum commented. "At least I hope not."

"Oh. One more thing, Pflum."

"What do you want?" he asked. "A case of original formula Coke?"

"They stopped making that in 1927, Pflum. You're heading back to 1933 or is it 1934 by now?"

"Almost."

"Well, that doesn't matter, just get this job over already."

"I'll do my best, but you know I'm just the driver. My biggest responsibility is to retrieve the tracer when we're done."

"Don't do that," Sharonne told him. "I've heard from Harvard again. They definitely want to study that time line and are willing to guarantee at least a year of travel time there over the next ten years. Possibly much more."

"Much more and you'll have to get that third Transit just to keep up with the demand," Pflum told her.

"I'm still looking at the options," Sharonne said absently.

"Get one with an extra blonde for the drive, why don't you?" Pflum suggested.

"Back on your horse, cowboy!" she snapped.

“It’s so nice to be loved,” Pflum muttered on his way back to the Transit. He met Jainette when he was halfway back to the Transit. “What’s that you got there?” he asked, seeing she was carrying two plain brown boxes.

“Doughnuts,” she replied, “of course. I noticed that nobody got any last trip out.”

“We may have had enough for a while after the first three dozen. So, what kind did you get?”

“Hey, I brought two dozen here. Some of everything,” she replied, then added, “but I did get a full dozen of those jelly filled ones you like.”

“You’re so good to me,” Pflum laughed.

“Don’t worry,” she replied with a laugh of her own. “This pretty much uses up my quota of kindness for a while.”

“Oh good. I’m not sure I could have survived if you were all sweetness and light from now on.”

Jainette changed the subject, “How many extra agents are working with Sam this trip.”

“I don’t know,” Pflum admitted. “Jack and I just got back from New York and so far I’ve only met one guy. Damn! I’ve even forgotten his name already.”

“Then listen closely when Sam introduces him to me,” Jainette advised.

“Pflum!” Ken called as he crossed the garage, “are you sure there’s nothing wrong with the Transit?”

“It’s been behaving itself since your last tune up,” Pflum replied. “Why?”

“This will be the third trip in a row without another system check. You know we’re required to run through all the diagnostics between trips, but Ms Lachado was insistent on having you make that run for tickets last night.”

“So run them now,” Pflum told him.

“They take almost three hours,” Ken pointed out.

“I’m not in any hurry,” Pflum replied.

“Your passengers are,” Ken told him. “They just sent me packing.”

“They’re federal agents,” Jainette pointed out. “They ought to know better.”

“You tell them that,” Ken replied. “The woman seems nice enough but her partner wasn’t taking no for an answer. He tried to make Jack take them out. Call me if you can change their minds.”

Pflum and Jainette exchanged glances and Pflum said, “If he keeps that up, I’ll take him out permanently. Let’s find out how many of them there are.” They entered the Transit to discover that so far only Jack, Sam and Thom were there. “Where’s the rest of your team?” he asked Sam after she had introduced Jainette to Thom.

“This is it,” Thom told Pflum, “and I’m in charge of this op.”

“I see,” Pflum replied flatly. “Then you’re the one who needs to explain why you want to leave without the federally mandated safety checks.”

“As the agent in charge of this investigation,” he replied stiffly, “I am empowered to waive that requirement.”

“Remember that when we end up in the Twilight Zone,” Pflum grumbled. He turned to Jack. “Kid, let’s start the pre-trip checklist.”

“Don’t bother with that,” Thom told him. “Just start this crate up.”

“My ears must be going bad, Agent Barta” Pflum commented dryly. “I thought I heard you give me an order.”

“I did,” Thom replied humorlessly.

“Then perhaps you’ll need to bone up on the laws regarding Temporal Transportation. I am the driver of this crate and that position is legally equivalent to a ship’s captain. When you attempt to order a ship’s captain around it can be construed as attempted mutiny. Naturally, I know a nice, law-abiding man like yourself would never do such a thing, so I will assume you spoke from ignorance. As a customer of Down Time, Ltd. you may request that we leave with all due haste and as a federal official you may waive the need for a routine overhaul, but you may not give orders pertaining to the operation of this Transit.”

Thom Barta attempted to stare Pflum down, but soon gave up and said, “My apologies, captain, please proceed with all due haste, then.”

“Yes, sir,” Pflum replied and started toward the console. “Oh, one more thing. Calling the Transit a crate is the prerogative of driver and crew. If you do it one more time I’ll drop you off on top of the Würm ice sheet and let you walk home.”

To his credit, Pflum did not waste any time running through the checklist and ten minutes later he input the activation code and started up the Transit’s drive. Once they were underway, Thom became a bit friendlier and they were all chatting and drinking coffee an hour later when a strange sound filled the Transit. It was deep pitched noise that sounded louder than it was – a sort of muffled, wind-like roar.

“What the hell is that?” Thom asked, worriedly.

“Never heard anything like it,” Pflum replied as he rushed to the console where Jack was already seated, “but that’s why we’re suppose to check out a Transit between each use.” Before he could reach the console, however, the entire Transit shook once, causing Jainette to give an involuntary scream, and tossing Pflum face first to the floor then became utterly dark and silent. “I don’t like the sound of that!” he muttered in the darkness. Then the lights came back on and he picked himself up off the floor. “What do the readings say, Jack?”

“What readings?” Jack replied. “I mean nearly all the dials and meters have gone dark. The terminal screen isn’t getting a video signal either.”

“Terrific,” Pflum sighed as he walked around the console. Jainette was already rushing over as well and

the two agents were close behind her.

“Pflum, is the regulator still working?”

“It may be, we do have a few lights on, main power indicators. That’s a good sign. So long as we have power going to the regulator we’re not completely cut off from home. At least I don’t think we are. Let’s see if the home door opens.” Together they all walked to the door they had entered the Transit by back in Down Time’s garage. It wouldn’t open.

“Why can’t we open this door?” Thom asked.

“Because it’s not entirely there,” Jainette responded as she started following Pflum to the other door.

“Come again?”

“The other side of the door is back in the garage. We, on the other hand are not in the garage, so the door cannot be opened. There are some fairly complex mathematics that explain it all, but all those equations boil down to the fact that you just can’t open that door while we’re in the field. That’s why we call this one the ‘home door,’ and the other one is the ‘field door.’”

“And does it only open in the field?” Thom asked.

“No, it will open anytime we are not in motion.”

“We don’t know what’s out there,” Pflum told the others, “So everyone stay inside until I’ve had a look.”

“The last Transit I traveled in had a digital window,” Thom commented, “you should fit this model with one of those.”

“I put the order in years ago, but we’re a bit back-ordered at the moment,” Pflum replied sourly. “Wouldn’t do any good in this case, the look I want is of the outside of the Transit.”

“What do you expect to see?” Thom demanded.

“Tell him, J. I’ll be right back,” Pflum said and quickly opened the field door and stepped out into a blizzard. “Nice weather,” he said to himself. Against the howl of the snow-laden wind he couldn’t hear the words however. The snow was a foot deep outside, at least the flakes that had come to rest were stacked up to that depth. It seemed like there were far more still in the air, whipping by at fifty miles per hour, than there were on the ground. The air was an almost solid white in appearance for the visibility was less than one hundred yards and there wasn’t much to be seen at that range. Pflum didn’t even want to know how cold it was.

Realizing he could get lost just a few steps from the Transit in a storm like this, Pflum rested his left hand against the transit wall as he followed it around the corner. From this side the wind was coming right into his face with such force that he had to keep his eyes shut, but he walked a few more steps through the foot deep snow and felt the wall suddenly stop beneath his hand. Turning around, he took a quick look and saw that the visible wall did, indeed, fade out the way it should so long as the Transit still had its home end back in the Down Time garage.

The gusty wind knocked him down three times before he made it to lee of the field wall of the Transit

and he was horribly cold by the time he stumbled through the door. Sam caught him and helped him over to a nearby couch.

“Thanks,” he gasped. “It’s bloody cold out there!”

“That may prove to be a good thing,” Jainette pointed out. “If the weather’s that bad out there, it’s not likely there will be anyone out and about to see us.”

“My God, you’re so cold!” Sam fretted.

“And it’s starting to hurt a bit too,” Pflum admitted.

“I’m not surprised,” she commented. “It looks like you came within a hair of frostbite on your ears and your fingers wouldn’t have been too far behind.” She gently put her hands over his ears. They felt like fire, but Pflum let her keep them there for a minute before taking them in his own hands.

“What did you see out there?” Thom asked.

“Just what J. said I should see,” Pflum replied.

“She never answered my question,” Thom said angrily.

“The sight of that blizzard distracted me,” Jainette told him. “What Pflum saw was that the side wall fades out after a couple feet. Good news.”

“Why is that good news?”

“It means we still have a chance to go home. Pflum, you rest here for a bit. I’ll work with Jack to see if we can figure out what the problem is.”

“I’ll help,” Thom told her.

“Agent Barta, do you have any experience in Transit maintenance?”

“No, but I’m a quick study,” he told her sternly.

“Good,” she replied brightly. “Start by reading the manual, if we’re still stuck here when you finish I’ll listen to your suggestions.”

“Pflum,” Sam asked, “if the power went out, why do we still have lights?”

“The lights have their own backup power cells. When the main power went out they switched over to their batteries. The batteries will last a year so at least we’ll be able to see what we’re doing.”

Two days later they were, indeed, still stuck in what Pflum had started calling “Winter World.” The storm had blown itself out late that morning to reveal a mile-high glacial cliff to their north.

“Oh great,” Thom complained, “Your Transit got us stuck in the Pleistocene. No doubt we’ll find ourselves under siege by a band of Neanderthals next.”

“Can’t say about the Neanderthals,” Pflum replied acidly, “but this isn’t the Pleistocene, at least not the great Ice Age you learned about in school. We’re not back far enough.”

“How can you tell?” challenged Thom. “Bloody malfunctioning crate!”

“One,” Pflum began heatedly, “We didn’t travel long enough. I doubt we’re back further than 2020. And two, remember what I said about dropping you off on an ice sheet? That may not be the Würm over yonder, but it’s close enough.”

“You and what army?” Thom fell back on the old cliché. Pflum was a tall man but Thom was far more powerfully built.

“You have to sleep sometime, big guy,” Jainette told him sharply, “and if the Transit was working, we wouldn’t even have to wait that long. Try pushing your weight around when we’re operational and you’ll find out. Now if the two of you are done wasting time and energy, Jack and I need Pflum to help test the reverse polarizer.” She dragged him back inside.”

“Do you really think that’s the problem?” Pflum asked her.

“No, but it’s the only component we haven’t run diagnostics on. If they don’t prove bad, we’re going to have to trace all the wires.”

“I still think we need to look at the auxiliary power supply,” he replied.

“That’s dangerous,” Jainette pointed out. “If we blow that we’ll lose power to the regulator and then we’ll really be stuck here. We’d best leave that for our last hope.”

“I don’t agree,” Pflum insisted. “This whole problem feels like we lost half the power supply. It certainly won’t do any harm to test the power coming out of that unit.”

“Humor me for just this once, Pflum,” Jainette told him. “Check the secondaries.”

“Fine, but when they prove out, I’m working on the power supply. We’re either dealing with a break or short in the wiring or else one of the internal fuses has blown.”

“You’d better hope it isn’t a fuse,” she replied. “There’s no safe way to fix that in the field.”

Pflum shrugged and started running diagnostics on the reverse polarizer. When they proved functional after two hours of tests, Pflum, Jainette and Jack started looking for short circuits and broken wires. A week later Jainette finally admitted defeat.

“Only one place to check left,” Pflum told her.

“Then we’re stuck here.”

“Cheer up,” Pflum replied. “We may be at this time line’s vacation spot in the summer.”

“What if this is summer?” Sam asked nervously.

“Then by next year we can hitch a ride on the nearest glacier. Actually we won’t have a lot of choice. The field end of the Transit is already buried in snow. If it doesn’t melt we’ll be headed south any time now.”

“If the ice sheet doesn’t crush us,” Thom grumbled sourly.

“It can’t crush us,” Pflum informed him. “We’re not really here.”

“You want to explain that?”

“Only the outside of the field end is actually in this time and place. And only the outside of the home end is in the garage in our present. The rest of the Transit is somewhere in between, so there’s not enough of the Transit in Winter World to get crushed, although the field end might get horribly scratched. Seriously, though that’s the least of our worries. We only have about two weeks’ worth of food left and the second week will be mostly cheese and crackers.”

“Two weeks?” Sam asked.

“More or less, unless you want to go hunting. That herd of white mammoths we saw a few days ago may be real tasty. Certainly our ancestors must have found them so.”

“I still say they were albinos,” Jainette commented.

“No, their eyes were blue, not pink. They were natural platinum blonds, that’s all,” Pflum disagreed.

“I don’t recall every hearing of non-albino white mammoths during the Pleistocene,” Thom commented.

“I keep telling you,” Pflum retorted. “This isn’t the Pleistocene. It’s an alternate timeline outside the normal five-nines limitation. This is what happens when a Transit hasn’t been overhauled on its normal schedule. But hey, we’re only about an hour from home. All we need to do is figure out why we’re stuck. Now, if everyone will excuse me, I’d rather not get distracted while I’m poking around the auxiliary power supply.”

Everyone became silent as Pflum went to work, half climbing into the closet the power circuitry was housed in. The area was well-lighted with overhead lamps and two small spotlights on goosenecks. As he investigated, Pflum kept readjusting the spotlights to shine into areas he needed to examine more closely. The work was slow and pain-staking and the day ended when he was only half done.

“Kid,” he called to Jack, “I need to mark my place so I’ll know where to start tomorrow. Do we have anything colorful and nonconductive? Lacquer or a marker, maybe?”

“Here, Pflum,” Sam responded, “My nail polish should do the trick.”

“Thanks,” he replied reaching out without taking his eye off the circuits. He felt her put the small bottle in his hand and he started opening it. “I thought you went to sleep an hour ago.”

“No, I’ve been reading on the couch,” Sam told him. “Everyone else went to sleep however. You haven’t eaten all day. Can I get you something?”

“No, I’m done here. I can help myself. I think I’ll make a sandwich. Join me?”

“No thanks. I ate at dinner with everyone else. I’ll have some iced tea while you eat though.”

Pflum pulled a salami and the pitcher of iced tea out of the make shift ice box they had constructed when the power to the refrigerator failed. He poured glasses for them both then started slicing up the salami. A few minutes later they were sitting across the table from each other.

“We’re already too late to catch Mae Creston as she gets off the ship in Perth,” Sam noted.

“And we’ll probably be too late to see her land in Sydney too,” Pflum replied, “if she didn’t disembark in Perth. Not to worry, though, we know how to track her down and if it takes a little longer then it can’t be helped.”

“I took classes in archaeology and geology back in school,” Sam told him, “and one of the things I recall is that this close to an ice sheet the climate should be very cold but dry. There shouldn’t be this much snow here.”

“Maybe what we think is the glacier is just a snow-covered escarpment,” Pflum speculated. “Or maybe this storm came up from the south and brought the moisture with it. Just because the climate is dry in general, it doesn’t mean there won’t be the occasional snow storm here.”

“Pflum, do you really think you can fix the Transit?”

“I haven’t given up yet,” he replied. “We’ll know tomorrow sometime for certain if I’m right.”

“And if you aren’t?” she pressed.

“I’ll keep looking, of course.”

“I think this is it,” he told Jainette early the next afternoon. “See that dent in the fuse cover?”

“But it’s so small,” Jainette argued.

“That’s probably why Ken missed it. I’ll bet it got damaged when we took that gunfire.”

“The damage should be greater if a bullet did that.”

“I doubt a bullet actually hit the fuse. Instead, some small bit must have been chipped off by a bullet and that bit hit the fuse. It didn’t actually destroy it, just weakened it, so it didn’t die immediately, and a good thing too or we’d have been killed in Germany.”

“But we still can’t replace that fuse while in the field,” Jainette argued.

“We ought to,” Pflum argued right back at her. “Otherwise there’s no need for a fuse.”

“Okay, wise guy, where’s your replacement fuse and how do you propose to solder it in?”

“I’m still working on that,” he admitted.

“Fine,” she snapped. “Let me know when you have that figured out.”

Pflum continued to stare at the damaged fuse for a few minutes and then got up and paced around the Transit’s common room. Jack had a deck of cards and was playing Solitaire. The others just silently watched Pflum pacing. After a few minutes of that Pflum went to the Transit’s door and opened it. The snow had been cleared away from a small area in front of the door, not from any particular need to keep the door cleared, but this was where they had been getting snow and ice for their cooler.

Pflum stared out the open door for a bit looking out through the small cleared section that gave him a view of their surroundings. The wind must have been blowing since the last time he had looked out. There was about a foot of blown snow next to the door, but the snow around the Transit was not as high as it had been. He was able to see the distant glacier and some of the low hills that stood closer to their position. He estimated that the snow was only about two and a half feet deep in general. The large pile around the Transit’s door was just a drift. Then something in the distance caught his eye.

“There’s something flying way out in the distance,” he reported.

“Probably just a bird,” Jainette opined.

“I don’t think so,” Pflum replied. “Let me get the binoculars.” He came back in, leaving the door open and reached into his personal storage locker. He pulled out a pair of ancient binoculars; the sort that still used glass lenses, not digital imagery. Then he took another look. “Definitely not a bird. Looks like a dirigible or maybe a blimp. It’s hard to tell at this distance.”

“So we’re not alone on this world?” Sam asked.

“No, we’re not,” Pflum replied, “but I think we want to get out of here before they find us. Not that they’re actually looking. That dirigible is just cruising along, probably too far away to see us, thankfully.”

“Why do you say that?” Thom asked. “We could use some help.”

“What makes you think the people flying that airship are human?” Pflum countered.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Thom told him. “What else would they be?”

“I don’t know,” Pflum admitted, “and I don’t think we want to find out. Who knows whether their ancestors swung from trees, or just knocked them down for a good meal?”

“I don’t believe it,” Thom said flatly.

“Fine. Oh Hell! They’re turning this way. Well if you want, you can go try to meet them, but the rest of us are getting out of here.”

“How?” Thom challenged him.

“Watch,” Pflum told him. Pflum closed the door and sat down behind the console. He made sure everything was turned off, then got back up and went to his tool box and pulled out a large pair of insulated pliers and a heavy piece of copper wire. He bent the wire into a U shape and crawled back into the power closet. “J,” he called out, “Get ready to take us out of here.”

“What are you going to do?” she asked.

“Don’t ask, just get to the console and get us home when I tell you to.”

“If you say so,” she replied uncertainly.

“I say so,” he replied. He readjusted the bent copper wire to just the right size, clamped it in the pliers and then jammed it in to bypass the fuse. “Now!” he shouted.

“Hey!” Jainette replied. “The console just lit up.”

“No kidding,” Pflum replied dryly. “Now get us home!”

Jainette punched in the activation code and programmed the Transit to return to the Down Time garage. “Done!” she reported happily. “We’ll be home in an hour.”

“Assuming I don’t slip or lose my grip,” Pflum added.

“What did you do, Pflum?” Sam asked. Pflum told her. “Oh,” she said in an impressed tone. “Have you ever done that before?”

“No, and I hope I never have to again.”

Fourteen

Waltzing Matilda

This time Thom made no objections when Pflum asked Ken to take his time and give the Transit as complete an overhaul as he deemed necessary. When Ken reported that the transit was ready the next morning, Thom also failed to object when Pflum took an extra hour to inspect the Transit himself. Finally Pflum and Jack ran through the pre-journey checklist and once more they were off for the Australia of late 1933.

Perth, like most cities at the time was struggling to pick itself up and out of the Great Depression. Even so there were already signs of recovery, not the least of which was the new line of trolley buses which had been inaugurated less than two months earlier.

A late night visit to the local offices of Ellerman and Bucknall Steamship Company gave them no hints as to whether Mae Creston has disembarked in Perth or Sydney, but rather than take the risk of missing her altogether, they stayed in Perth for a few days while searching for any signs of recent scams and con games, but this time Pflum, Jainette and Jack were not allowed to assist in the search.

“Agency policy,” Thom explained. “That’s why I was placed in charge of this investigation. Agent di Medici should not have allowed you to assist last time.”

“You’re missing a good bet,” Jainette told him, but he just shrugged and left to continue his investigation.

She turned to Pflum and Jack, “So what will it be? A day-long game of Hearts or would you like to check out the Cricket tests? I don’t know who Australia is playing this week, but it’s a chance to see championship play.”

“I don’t know,” Pflum demurred. “I’ve always been a baseball fan myself.”

“There won’t be pro baseball in Australia for decades. If you want to see people hit balls with pieces of wood, this is your only choice, unless you want to scare up a game of Rounders.”

“No, Cricket should be interesting so long as you can explain the game as it goes along.”

“How about you, Jack?” Jainette offered. “Want to come along?”

“I really ought to stay in,” he replied. “My summer break will be over in a few days and I still haven’t written the paper on this work-study project that I’ll need to get a grade.”

“I hope we can get you back in time for the start of your semester, kid,” Pflum told him.

“I spoke to my advisor about that the other day when we were back home,” Jack explained. “She told me to stay with you until the end of this case, however long it takes. She said this was by far the most fascinating summer internship she’d ever heard about and it would be a shame to end it before I can experience the whole story. If I can get back before the semester is more than two weeks old, I can still take classes this semester, otherwise I’ll take the term off and work with you for a while longer. I spoke to Ms. Lachado about that and she’ll be happy to give me an assistant’s pay after my internship is over. Having a full term of field experience will look good on my *curriculum vitae* and a bit of money in my pocket when I start up again winter semester won’t hurt either.”

“I could be wrong,” Pflum replied, “but I suspect we have quite a few days ahead of us in which we’ll just be sitting around the Transit. Take my advice and use this opportunity to see the sights while you can.”

“Thanks, but I really do need to get started on that paper, Pflum”

“Then bring your notebook with you and you can start organizing it during the match. J. and I can help you get everything in order, or maybe remind you of stuff you might leave out.”

“Please come, Jack,” Jainette invited him. “You aren’t going to make me spend a whole day alone with Pflum, are you?”

“Hey!” Pflum protested. Jainette just laughed.

“Oh, all right,” Jack finally decided. “I’ve never seen a Cricket game before. Not in person anyway.”

“Not the most active game I’ve ever encountered,” Pflum commented after their first hour at the WACA grounds at Gloucester Park. “The beer’s better here than any I’ve had in a baseball park though.”

“Too right it is,” a man sitting in front of him turned around to say. “Is it true you Yanks filter your beer through a cat?”

“Nah,” Pflum laughed. “Only the really large breweries can afford that process. The rest have to actually brew the stuff.”

The man laughed and added, "Good thing none of our breweries are that big! I'll admit the game is much more interesting if you actually play it. It gives you a better appreciation for the players, but most children play at school anyway so most folks know the game."

"I'm still learning," Pflum admitted, "but except for a test lasting five days, it seems fairly interesting."

"It has its points," the man replied, "but if you want a more active game there's always Rugby or even Aerial Ping Pong. That's Australian Rules Football; similar to your American game but played on an oval."

"So you can use the cricket grounds during the off season?" Pflum asked.

"Too right." The man turned back to the game and didn't speak again until a friend joined him an hour later. "Hey, Jock, what kept you?"

"Family troubles, mate," Jock replied. "Had to wire a buncha quid home to me Mum in Brizzie."

"Really? Why?"

"Someone stole all hers," Jock replied.

"The bloody drongo!" the first man replied

"Too right."

"Mum's a trusting sort and when some other shiela came to her with a sob story, she just had to help out."

"Must have been a really good story," the first man commented.

Jock shrugged.

Pflum leaned forward, "Excuse me. Couldn't help over-hearing. I mean, sorry to hear about your Mum, but did you say she got taken by a female con artist. An older woman."

"Middle-aged, I'd guess, younger than Mum, yeah, but not a young shiela. Why?" Jock asked.

"If it's the woman I think she might be, we've been tracking her for months now, all the way from France and she's led us on a merry chase, I can tell you. Where did you say your mother lives?"

"Brizzie," Jock replied.

"That's Brisbane," his friend explained.

"Is it very far?" Pflum asked.

"Over twenty-seven hundred miles, Pflum," Jainette told him. "The other side of the continent in Queensland."

"Now we know, she definitely didn't disembark in Perth," Jack commented.

“It might not be her,” Pflum pointed out. He asked more questions, but Jock didn’t really have anymore to tell him. Further he was hesitant to tell these strangers how to find his mother. “No worries there, friend,” Pflum told him. If this woman conned your mom, she’ll have done it to others as well. We’ll find them instead, or talk to the local police. She did report this, didn’t she? Well then, that will tell us what we need to know.”

“What about Mum’s money?” Jock asked.

“Can’t say for certain,” Pflum told him honestly, “but if we can catch her, there’s always a possibility. No one should lose their life’s savings to crud like that.”

“Good on yer, mate!” Both the men told him. Pflum, Jainette and Jack excused themselves and hurried back to the transit. Both Thom and Sam were still out when they got there and they had to wait for another two hours before Sam returned. They quickly told her what they had learned and she became as excited as they were.

“How soon can we relocate?” she asked.

“You know the answer by now,” Pflum told her, “we can leave as soon as Thom gets back, though I’ll admit I wouldn’t mind leaving him behind. Anyway we have the Transit all programmed and we’ll be able to move in minutes. The longest part of the move will be finding a place to come to rest.”

Thom didn’t come back until nearly midnight, but when Sam told him what Pflum had found out, he grudgingly admitted that the Transit driver had been of assistance and approved a move to Brisbane.

“How long ago was she here?” he asked Pflum.

“Just a couple days, assuming it really was her,” Pflum replied. “I imagine Australia has one or two homegrown grifters.”

“Admittedly so,” Thom replied, “But I’ll have a word with the local police.”

“Just curious, but how are you going to get them to spill what they know?” Pflum asked.

“I’ll tell them I’m with Interpol,” Thom replied.

“You have ID that’ll prove that?” Thom was silent. “Even in 1933 cops are going to want to see credentials before they tell you that sort of thing,” Pflum continued. “I’m not sure if they’ll be all that cooperative even then. Interpol isn’t the organization it was later in this century and they would be as likely to see you as a competitor as an ally even if it was. This is their jurisdiction and they’re going to guard it zealously.”

“Do you have a better idea?” Thom demanded.

“Tell them you’re a reporter, a journalist,” Pflum suggested.

“Yeah,” Jack agreed. “Tell them you’ve been working on a story about this string of scams that stretches back to France. You’ll be able to tell them enough to get them to tell us what we need to know.”

“Hmm,” Thom pondered. “And they’ll not be as likely to think I’m trying to hog all the glory by making

the arrest myself. Yes. That might work.”

“They can even make the arrest for you, since we can always phase into her jail cell if we need to,” Jainette pointed out.

“So how soon can you get us to Brisbane?” Thom asked Pflum, looking around to see where the driver had gone.

Pflum was already at the console. “We’re there. Give me another minute or two and I’ll phase us in.”

In spite of their fortuitous discovery in Perth, Thom was hesitant to allow Pflum and Jainette out of the Transit until Pflum pointed out that unless Thom wanted to walk home, he would stop trying to throw his weight around, especially when he had no say in the matter.

“You may refuse our offers of help,” Pflum told him, “but we are not your servants and we are not here at your beck and call. So while you and Sam are out today we’ll be taking in the sights.”

“What sights?” Thom asked sneeringly. “It’s just another city.”

“Shows what you know,” Jainette chimed in. “Brisbane is one of the largest cities in Australia. Since we’re in the center of the city I, for one, intend to visit some of the older remaining buildings like the Old Government House and the Windmill-Observatory. After that there’s enough in the Queensland Cultural Centre to keep us occupied for far longer than we’re likely to be here. So have a nice day playing star reporter from whatever newspaper you’re pretending to be from and we’ll just be off.”

“That’s a good point,” Thom admitted. “What paper should I claim to be from.”

“I doubt it matters, although I’d pick a relatively small one, one that might conceivably have neglected to provide you with credentials. I wouldn’t choose the Times of London, if I were you. It sounds impressive, but they probably have a desk here in Australia and may even have one in Brisbane. If you really have to, make one up.”

“No, that wouldn’t be right,” Thom replied. “It should be one they might have heard of, or at least from a city they’ve heard of.”

“Fine, use ‘The Plain Dealer’ from Cleveland if you must. Just pick one. It really isn’t all that big a detail, you know.”

“Details count,” Thom insisted. “Wouldn’t ‘The Plain Dealer’ be large enough to give me credentials?”

“Frankly,” Jainette told him, “I can’t think of a newspaper too small to issue credentials. Sometimes the smaller the more particular they are, but you don’t have them and the local cops aren’t going to be as suspicious as they would have been if you came in claiming to be from Interpol. If you don’t like ‘The Plain Dealer’ use ‘The Sun Times,’ ‘The Wichita Telegraph’ or even the ‘Morning Mercury.’”

“I like the sound of that one. Where is that one published?”

“New Bedford,” she replied.

“Where?”

“In Massachusetts.”

“Really? I’ll use it. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Jainette replied. “Coming, Pflum?”

“Yeah, sure,” Pflum replied. “How ‘bout you, kid.”

“Sorry, dude,” Jack shot back. Pflum flinched. “I really do have some writing to do. Next time, maybe.”

“Okay, Jack,” Jainette responded. “We’ll see you later.”

As she led Pflum out of the Transit all he could say was, “Dude?” in a disbelieving voice. They spent the day wandering around Brisbane, happy to just play tourist on a warm and sunny day and so did not return to the alley in which the Transit had been parked until well after sunset.

“Jainette, Pflum!” Sam called to them from inside the alley. “Thank God you’re back!”

“Sam? What’s wrong?” Pflum asked.

“The Transit is gone. I thought you’d gone off without me.”

Fifteen

Tie Me Kangaroo Down, Sport

“What?” Jainette and Pflum reacted simultaneously.

Pflum continued, “How long ago did this happen?”

“I’ve been back here for two hours,” Sam replied.

“At least we didn’t miss the boat because of stopping for dinner,” Jainette commented.

“I don’t get it,” Pflum remarked. “The kid wouldn’t just go for a joy ride. He’s too darned serious to do that sort of thing.”

“No, he wouldn’t,” Samantha agreed. “But Thom would. More to the point he would bluster and threaten Jack until he took the Transit wherever Thom told him to. And Jack’s not like you, Pflum. He’s clever and intelligent, yes...”

“And I’m not?” Pflum demanded.

“Of course you are,” Sam laughed. “Let me finish. He not only has a lot more to lose than you do, but also doesn’t have your experience so he doesn’t know when he can tell bullies like Thom where to get off.”

“She’s right, Pflum,” Jainette agreed. “He probably just flashed his badge at Jack and threatened to arrest him as an accessory to Creston’s crimes or for obstructing him or some other charge. Sam, how well do you know Thom?”

“He was one of my instructors back in the academy. All the teachers had different ways of teaching. Some used the Socratic method and some taught by example. Others treated a class like an open seminar and still others pushed us to our limits physically and or mentally. Thom was one of that last sort. Most of them did so to make us better agents, but I think he just enjoyed pushing us around.”

“I can cure him of that,” Pflum growled.

“Be careful, Pflum. He’s a master of a dozen martial arts. He can take you apart and rearrange you like a balloon animal.”

“I’m not as helpless as you think, Sam, and even if I were, he still has to get within reach of me to do any harm. Trust me. But first we need to get that Transit back. Because little Thommy has a lot of explaining to do.”

“Sam,” Jainette asked, changing the subject, “have you eaten yet?”

“You have,” she replied.

“Not my question,” Jainette countered. “I suppose I could use a cup of tea, and maybe a light dessert, and if after you’ve eaten the Transit isn’t back here we’ll have to find a place to stay for the night.”

“There’s a restaurant just across the street,” Pflum suggested. “C’mon, I’ll buy you a meal.”

“And after that?” Sam asked.

“Maybe the Transit will be back by then. No need to panic yet.”

“What if it never comes back?”

“No worries, Sam,” Pflum laughed. “It may take years but someone is going to come to this time line and they’ll come repeatedly. Remember that Harvard professor who wants to examine this line? He’ll be here and we can leave a message for him to find.”

“We’ll have to leave a lot of messages and maybe he’ll find one,” Jainette corrected him.

“Actually what I had in mind is a little trip to France to retrieve that tracer unit,” Pflum told her. “If it moves more than a few dozen miles, whoever drives the Transit is going to know and he or she will come looking for it.”

“So in the meantime we need to settle in and find some way to make a living,” Sam concluded.

“Also not a problem,” Pflum laughed. “We can always invent something or write a book.”

“Invent something or write a book?” Sam asked. “That’s a lot of work and not particularly easy to do.”

“It is if we don’t have to actually invent or write it.”

“You want to steal someone else’s work?” Sam asked.

“Only if we have to. Frankly I doubt it will be necessary. The Transit will be back and in the meantime we can go looking for Mae Creston, because wherever she is, I’ll bet we’ll find the Transit.”

They sat in the restaurant for over three hours, nursing their coffee and tea, until Jainette pointed out that the place was almost empty and that the staff probably would want to go home that night. She added, “And it’s always possible the Transit may be back by now.”

“Plagiarizing and stealing inventions isn’t a good idea,” Sam said as they left the restaurant, returning to their earlier subject of conversation. “But we do have a general idea of how the stock market is going to behave for quite a while to come.”

“We know how it behaved in most worlds,” Jainette pointed out, “but this one is different. No Hitler and the guy who replaced him was Donald Creston who is now safely behind bars.”

“I haven’t heard so much as a peep out of Germany in the news lately,” Pflum commented.

“Have you been paying much attention?” Sam asked. “I haven’t. Who’s in charge there now?”

“In the absence of a Fuhrer, not that anyone but the Nazi Party members called him that on this line, they’re currently being ruled by some sort of governing committee, composed of the usual suspects; Goering, Goebbels, Hess, Himmler, and some guy named Ley.”

“I’ve heard of him,” Jainette commented. “He was an early party member and key in remaking the Nazi ideals into a pseudo-religious cult.”

“Nice guy,” Pflum commented sourly. “Anyway they evidently bumped off Roehm and his followers just after we picked up Creston, pushing the ‘Night of the Long Knives’ almost a year early.”

“I suspect that may have been on Creston’s mind to do that anyway,” Sam told them. “He did seem to know his history. So when he disappeared mysteriously, it would be only natural for Roehm to take the blame.”

“Anyway,” Pflum continued. “It’s been quiet over there for the past few months, but I’m sure they’re just regrouping.”

“More likely they’re all looking for a way to become the new Fuhrer,” Sam remarked. “That should keep them out of the rest of the world’s hair for a while. I can’t see that lot being able to work together in the long term. One or two of them will be gone within the year.”

“Probably,” Pflum agreed, “but at that point they’ll only pick up where they left off, and Nothing’s happened here that will change the Japanese or American plans. Pearl Harbor or something like it will still take place, I think.”

“I won’t argue that right now,” Sam said, “But if Europe doesn’t go to war, the Japanese may not attack either.”

“Remind me to get together with you to write all our predictions down before Harvard starts studying this line, it might be worth a small wager. Dinner perhaps?”

“You’re on,” Sam told him. “However, we know the stock market and where the richest minerals finds will be. We can put in claims before they are actually found and get rich without the work involved with your ideas.”

“Oh heck,” Jainette said emotionlessly.”

“What is it?” Pflum asked.

“The Transit’s not back,” she replied.

“Then let’s get a room,” Pflum suggested.

“Two rooms lover-boy. Two rooms,” Jainette snapped. Sam laughed.

Pflum checked the alley again at sunrise and found the Transit was still not there, but then he wasn’t really expecting it. They would have to find out where it had been moved. Pflum was basically an optimist, though, and didn’t even consider the possibility that Thom had taken the Transit home. He met the two ladies for breakfast in the hotel and gave them the bad news.

“Well, I think we all expected that,” Sam sighed, “and we have a plan. Pflum, Janette, why don’t you hit the library today while I try the local police. Maybe if I imply that Thom was an imposter, they’ll tell me at least some of what they must have told him yesterday.”

“I’d like to stop by a local newspaper,” Pflum commented, “and see if there’s any news coming in over the teletype that might give us a hint.”

“The library should have the morning edition, Pflum,” Jainette pointed out.

“Which means it will be several hours old at best.”

“What are you looking for?” Sam asked.

“Anything out of the ordinary. I know the kid pretty well and even if your buddy Thom has been bullying him, he’s going to find a way to rebel. You’ve noticed how he started calling me ‘dude,’ especially since he discovered how much I hate it? Well, he’ll find a way to quietly put a monkey wrench in Thom’s gears. I just wish I’d be able to show him some of the security measures every Transit has.”

“Such as?” Sam prompted.

“I’ll show you sometime,” Pflum promised. “For now let’s say there are some features that you won’t find in any of the brochures.”

They met again early that afternoon at the same restaurant where they had dinner the night before.

“Well, the police believed that Thom was an imposter but decided not to tell me anything in case I was too. Can’t say that I blame them really, but it was very disappointing.”

"I didn't do much better," Jainette admitted. "I found a case in Melbourne that might have been Mae Creston, but it was almost two weeks ago, earlier than her activity here in Brisbane."

"She's moving around a lot more between jobs than she did in Europe," Pflum commented. "I had luck in that the boys down at *The Courier Mail* were more than willing to talk and even let me watch the teletype as stuff came in. But I didn't spot anything that might have been the Transit. No amazing disappearing doors or mysterious flying devices, not even a deranged wallaby. I spent the day reading raw reports of various arrests, sports scores, and someone in President Roosevelt's administration predicts that the Great Depression has bottomed out."

"Great news," Jainette replied flatly. "Let's hope we aren't still here to see him proved correct."

"Hey, is that Jack across the street?" Sam asked suddenly.

"Yeah," Pflum replied excitedly looking out the window. "That's him." He got up and ran to the restaurant door. "Hey, kid! Over here!" he shouted. Jack turned and saw him, then waved and ran across the street.

"Hey, Pflum! I am really glad to see you. Where's Jainette and Sam?"

"Inside," Pflum replied, pointing over his shoulder. "Want something to eat?"

"I could stand something, yeah," Jack told him as they both walked inside. "And having a place to sit while I catch you up is a good idea too."

"Are you sure the Transit is safe from that Thom character?" Pflum asked as they reached the table.

"Very sure," Jack replied. "He's been arrested."

"I don't know how she did it," Jack told them, "but Thom walked into a trap."

"Well, she had to know we were here and following her," Sam commented.

"Not necessarily," Jainette replied. "Don's disappearance could have been internal politics too."

"I doubt she'd believe that," Sam disagreed.

"Anyway, after he forced me to take the Transit out," Jack tried to start again. He had been trying for fifteen minutes now, but the others kept interrupting.

"I want to hear about that," Pflum cut in. "How did he force you to drive the Transit?"

"At gunpoint," Jack responded. "That jerk pulled out his gun and threatened to blow my head off if I didn't take him where he wanted to go."

"And how many Bureau regulations did he ignore by doing that?" Jainette asked Sam.

“Quite a few,” Sam admitted. “It’s been a long time since an agent could commandeer a vehicle just by flashing his badge, but without proof it’s just Jack’s word against his.”

“I have a recording,” Jack told her with a grin. “Pflum’s taught me a few things besides how to drive the Transit.”

“Good for you, kid!” Pflum chortled. “I told you he’d find a way,” he said to the others.

“Anyway, not wanting to have my brains decorating the wall of the Transit...” Jack started again.

“I doubt he’d have gone through with it,” Sam told him.

“I wasn’t so sure at the time,” Jack replied. “He was almost foaming at the mouth.”

“One of his favorite tricks. He used it at the Academy all the time.”

“Very effective,” Jack said dryly. “It worked on me, anyway. Evidently the local cops told him everything he needed to know and more. There was already a warrant out for Mae Creston, although that wasn’t the name she was using here, I’m sure, and while he was at the station a complaint came in about a middle-aged woman posing as a bank examiner on the west side of town. He rushed back to the Transit and forced me to take it there.

“I brought it in, just like you showed me, Pflum, and put the field door just outside the hotel she was staying at. It was one of those sets of bungalows you see sometimes. We got there minutes ahead of the police. He charged in to the right place and there was a whole lot of shouting and screaming and loud noises like stuff was being thrown around. Then the cops showed up and the next thing I knew they were carting Thom off on a charge of attempted rape.”

“Well that explains why they had no trouble believing he wasn’t a reporter,” Sam commented.

“And why they wouldn’t talk to you,” Jainette added. “Once bitten and all that.”

“I’m all for letting him rot in jail,” Pflum growled.

“They’ll probably let him out when Creston isn’t there for the hearing,” Sam replied knowledgeably. “At least I doubt she will be. Probably on her way somewhere else by now.”

“Normally, they’d let him go,” Jainette pointed out, “but he’s obviously no Aussie, sounds like an American more than anything else, but he has no passport and no proof of being here legally.”

“So they’ll deport him, maybe,” Sam replied.

“Or throw away the key.”

“Kid, all that happened yesterday afternoon,” Pflum pointed out. “Where have you been all this time?”

“Trying to get back here. Before we left that moron decided to spin all the dials and flip all the switches on the Transit. I’d already shut it down or as down as it ever gets in the field so it didn’t go anywhere without the activation code, but I don’t have your experience driving that crate. It took me a while to straighten it all out. Frankly, I think it’s acting a little funny now.”

“Funny?” Pflum asked. “How?”

“Well, you know that gauge that isn’t supposed to move at all? Well, it moves all over the place now and the screen that sort of looks like an old fashioned oscilloscope with the sharp line indicating our movement through two dimensional time? It’s kind of fuzzy now. Well it fluctuates between being sharp and fuzzy.”

“I don’t like the sound of that,” Jainette commented.

“Maybe it’s just the readouts,” Pflum speculated. “A loose wire or something.”

“I doubt it. Those two displays’ wiring is totally unrelated,” Jainette pointed out.

“The alternative is unthinkable,” Pflum countered.

“Why?” Sam asked.

“It means the Transit is now capable of traveling through all three dimensions of time,” Pflum told her.

“Three dimensions? I thought time was only two dimensional.”

“Theoretically a third is possible,” Pflum explained. “You already know the first two. Length is going backwards and forwards in time and the width is represented by alternative history. The full theory also tells us that a third dimension is possible.”

“Okay, that would be the depth of time?”

“Kind of,” Pflum smiled. “Actually the whole length, width and depth thing is just a metaphor. The third dimension is alternative physics.” They reached the field door of the Transit. Pflum opened it and held it for the others. “Well, it still looks the same in here. That’s good.”

“What did you expect, Pflum?” Jainette shot at him. “Did you think Jack decided to repaint the walls on the way back?”

“Sorry. It just slipped out.”

“Alternative physics?” Sam prompted him.

“Yes. Just about anything you can imagine from variations in the fundamental forces to fundamental forces that don’t even exist in our universe. Even magic, or at least what we would think of as magic. The part that always interested me was that if you think of each set of alternative physics as a plane, then on each of those planes there is a history line that is exactly the same as our own. Somewhere in the whole continuum there is an Earth populated by sapient, carnivorous, magic-using koalas whose history has been exactly the same as ours.

“At least that’s the theory. Until now, maybe, there hasn’t been a way to travel through that third time dimension. Too bad the DTT will probably ground this Transit when they catch wind of it.”

“That doesn’t seem fair,” Sam told him. “Why would they ground it?”

“The statutes regarding the regulating of Transits require not only that they stay within the five-nines

limitation, but stay utterly stable in regards to that third dimension. That last has never been an issue, since no one's ever managed to slide along the third dimension, but it's mandated anyway."

"The justification is safety, of course," Jainette put in. "It is felt that the vast majority of alternate physics lines would be lethal to life from ours."

"That does make sense," Sam agreed. "Still there should be a way to regulate movement on that axis."

"I'll put Ken on the job when we get back," Pflum told her, "but now I know why Jack had so much trouble getting back here. We have controls that lock us into the history of this line. And we have controls that lock us into this place, but when we turn the drive on we're going to slip and slide all over reality on the physical axis."

"Can you handle it?" Jainette asked worriedly.

"If the kid was able to, then I should be too, but we'd better not plan any instantaneous transpositions."

"Will we be able to break Thom out of jail?" Sam asked.

"I'm not even going to try," Pflum retorted. "I warned him about having to walk home."

"Pflum," Jainette argued. "We can't just leave him there."

"Maybe you can't, but I have no trouble with the concept."

"Think about Sam then. How will it look on her record if Thom is left behind?"

Pflum was stubbornly silent, then he finally gave in, "Oh very well, but this will be so clumsy we're likely to get caught. We'd better not try until we're ready to leave Brisbane."

"I can live with that," Sam told them. "We need to find out where he is and I can't do it. The Brisbane police think I'm a reporter."

"None of us look like relatives either," Pflum added. "But you could still talk to the cops. His arrest was reported in the late edition of *The Courier Mail* today. You can walk in and ask about it as a reporter."

"I'd better go get a copy so I can read the article," Sam said. "I'll be back soon."

Sixteen

Detour Ahead (Take 2)

Pflum and Jack had gone back to the hotel in which Mae Creston had been staying and verified that she had, indeed checked out. A few pounds bought them permission to see the room she had stayed in, but it had already been cleaned. The maid who had cleaned it was no help either, being unable to remember what piece of scrap paper she had thrown out in the clean up. So, unable to accomplish anything, they returned to the Transit. Sam, however had better news.

“The cops were a bit more open with me today,” she told them. “and admitted that they had missed arresting Creston yesterday and that she managed to book passage on a steamer out of Brisbane just ahead of them.”

“I really hope she isn’t headed into the Japanese Mandate,” Pflum commented. “That could make her hard to follow.”

“No, she isn’t, at least not directly,” Sam replied. “This is a cruise ship headed to a number of islands. One of those tourist-type cruises. They’ll be stopping in Fiji, Samoa, and Tonga as well as a few other islands.”

“Then she can jump ship at any of them,” Jainette pointed out.

“That’s going to make this very difficult with the Transit acting up,” Pflum informed Sam.

“Plus we need to get Thom,” she replied.

“Must we?”

“Well, we won’t have to bust him out. The police did admit they were going to have to let him go now that Creston’s out of the country. They don’t seem to have bothered checking his passport and now they have no charges to level against him. So they’ll probably let him out in another day or three. They’re only keeping him this long to give me a head start. I guess they liked me,” she finished with a grin.

Thom arrived at the transit two mornings later and walked in as though he owned the place. Pflum was reading a newspaper, Jack was working on his paper, and the two women were playing chess.

“I’m back,” he said by way of greeting. The others looked in his general direction then went back to what they had been doing. “Well?” he demanded.

“Are you trying to blow this case?” Sam challenged him.

“Hey, it’s not my fault Mae Creston accused me of rape,” Thom replied.

“But it is your fault for falling into such an obvious trap. Also if you had waited for Pflum he could have materialized directly in her room. All you would have had to do is open the door and hit her with a stunner. But, no, you had to indulge some macho fantasy and go charging in like the agents in a B gangster movie.”

“Watch it, di Medici,” he snarled. “You’re talking to a superior agent.”

“No, just the guy in charge of this bungled operation. When we get back you can write your report and I’ll write mine. We’ll see which one is the best seller. You know we’ll be debriefed separately.”

“And I know which one of us will be believed too,” Thom told her.

“It’s a good thing for you I found out where she went,” Sam told him. He demanded to know where and Sam filled him in.

“You, Pflum,” Thom began.

“Yeah. Me Pflum. You big jerk,” Pflum snapped. “Feel free to report anything you like to my employer. I doubt you’ll tell Sharonne anything she doesn’t already know about me.”

“Just take us to Creston’s first port of call.”

“Okay,” Pflum replied with deceptive mildness. “Come on, kid,” he said to Jack. “Time for your next driving lesson.” Jack followed Pflum to the Console, but when he tried to sit down at the controls, Pflum stopped him. “No, let me show you this first. You can try it for yourself another time.”

Thom sat down on one of the reading chairs; one he had made a habit of sitting in most of the time. Sam and Jainette went back to their chess game, but kept their eyes surreptitiously on Thom and on Pflum.

“So the first thing we always do before taking off is?” Pflum prompted Jack.

“Enter the activation code,” Jack replied emotionlessly.

Pflum did so and then quietly removed a lid from over a set of controls Jack had never seen him use. “Very good, kid,” he said while fiddling with the new controls. A small screen lit up and after he typed in a few commands a plan of the Transit room was laid out on the screen. “And then what do we do?” he asked Jack, who was now staring at the display with his mouth open.

“Uh, we input the desired coordinates,” Jack answered belatedly.

“Yup,” Pflum remarked as he typed in a few more commands and five red blobs appeared on the screen; one in every location that matched up to where each of them were at the moment. Pflum then used a small joystick to center a circle around Thom’s indicator blob. “And once those coordinates are set?” he asked Jack as he closed the circle to neatly coincide with the size of Thom’s blob. Then he changed the orientation of the display to get Thom in profile and made a few adjustments. “Oh, never mind. It doesn’t matter,” he said as he moved his hand to a large blue button and pushed it.

Instantly Thom shot upward to fall “down” on the ceiling.

Thom grunted and shouted, “What the hell are you...?” But he never got the chance to finish the question because he then moved sideways to slam up against the wall.

“So, kid,” Pflum concluded, “that is why it is important to never play with the inertial dampers. Wouldn’t want to break them, would you?”

No, Pflum,” Jack replied happily. “They’re much too valuable to want to do that. You’ll show me how to do that?”

“I just did, but yes, first opportunity I’ll give you a chance to try them for yourself. You see this is why nobody in their right mind would ever try to hijack a Transit. In fact, unless you’re feeling particularly nasty, you need to be careful not to place the hijacker under too high an acceleration rate. Not only could you break every bone in his body, but could turn him into a rather messy red paste, and it’s, well, hard to get the stains off the ceiling. Hey, Thom, you still with us? Good. Now I want you to take that gun out of its holster and toss it away across the wall I have you pasted to.”

“No way,” Thom grunted. “I’m required to carry that weapon.”

“Not anymore,” Pflum told him. “We had this discussion early on, but evidently you’re too stupid to have remembered. As the driver of this Transit I am in the same position as a ship’s captain. You’re not the law here. I am. Now drop the gun or Jack here is going to have to literally mop you up off the floor.”

“You’re bluffing,” Thom said.

Pflum fiddled with the controls and Thom hit the floor with bruising force, then before he could react, hit the ceiling with just as much force. “You know me so well. Yeah. I’m bluffing all right. Actually I won’t let you off that easy. I’ll just keep bouncing you off the walls, floor and ceiling until you pass out, then I’ll just take the damned gun. Agent Barta, you are under arrest for hijacking this Transit. You are also charged with destruction of property, to wit your malicious attempted sabotage by your unauthorized manipulation of the Transit controls. And you can bet your bottom I intend to file charges and see them prosecuted on our return to the present, Bucky!”

Defeated, Thom slowly drew out his gun, removed the magazine and tossed it gently away from him. It skittered along the ceiling, then fell to the floor. Pflum retrieved it and locked it away in a closet. Then he went back to the controls and made a slight adjustment.

“Since you’re being a good kid,” he told Thom, “I’m reducing the gravity up there to one gee.”

“Pflum, how the heck does that work?” Sam asked.

“Consider the speed at which we move geographically. We’re talking some incredible speeds considering we can zap across the world in nearly an instant. Another incredible factor is the conservation of momentum and if it weren’t for the inertial dampers, we’d be vaporized on our first trip.”

“Normally they work automatically,” Jainette added, “but after one trip during which everyone felt a strong pull toward one of the walls, Ken Jackson decided that there might be times we had to adjust the dampers manually. It was Pflum’s idea to make the controls even finer so that a driver could handle an unruly passenger if necessary, but by now nearly every commercial Transit has controls like these. We rarely have to use them, so not very many people know about this, of course, making it our secret weapon.”

“Very clever,” Sam admitted. Meanwhile Thom continued to groan on the ceiling. “Um, what about Thom?” she asked. I suppose this artificial gravity trick comes to an end when we come to rest, doesn’t it?”

“Unfortunately, yes,” Pflum confirmed. He played with the controls and dropped Thom back into his chair. “Okay, Barta, we can’t go back home right now because you bugged our controls and we’ll lose Mae Creston again if we don’t keep after her. But if you ever try pushing your weight around this Transit again, I’ll break every bone in your body, and don’t try calling my bluff on that one or I won’t bother using the dampers to do the job for me. Do you understand?” Thom mumbled a few syllables. “What was that?”

“I understand,” Thom repeated only slightly clearer.

“Oh, Thom,” Jainette added sweetly, “Pflum is really much nicer than I am. If I had been at the controls just now I’d have crippled you. Make no mistake about this. You committed mutiny, so killing you outright for the crime is the driver’s prerogative, just like on a ship. Be thankful we didn’t leave you here or push you out the door while we hovered over the ocean. Oh, and you can thank Sam for the fact we were still here when the cops released you, because it was only at her insistence that we stayed.” Thom

glared at her but said nothing.

“J., could you come over here,” Pflum requested fifteen minutes later. “I think it’s going to take both of us to bring this crate in.” She came over and together they started working the controls but after another hour they were still unable to land.

“This is tough,” she commented. “we keep flashing through our time plane.”

“Time plane?” Pflum asked.

“Well, we’re moving through three dimensional time now,” she answered, “and you were the one who likened each set of alternative physics to a plane.”

“Okay, you’re right,” Pflum admitted easily. “Although we’re only traveling along one axis, I suppose we could call it the Z axis. We’re still locked on the same line the tracer is on, but we’re slipping through all the possible universes with that line. Kid, how the heck did you ever find us?”

“Why do you think it took me over a day, dude?” Jack replied. “You’ve only been at it a bit over an hour.”

“You’re right,” Pflum grumbled. “Looks like we’re all being right today.”

“If only we could control the speed at which we’re moving through the planes,” Jainette sighed.

“Wait a minute,” Pflum said excitedly. “Maybe we can. Let me check the schematics.” Three hours later, after he and Jack had poured through the thick stack of annotated schematic diagrams that described all the circuitry in the Transit he finally looked up and said, “Yeah we can do it. Where did this sandwich come from?” he added, seeing a plate next to the schematics.

“I put it there two hours ago,” Sam told him. “You said you’d get to it in a minute as I recall.”

“Really? The coffee looks cold too.”

“After two and a half hours? I would think so,” Sam laughed.

“What did you have in mind, Pflum?” Jainette asked.

“I think if we put a potentiometer right there,” he pointed at the diagram, “we can use it to slow-control our movement along the Z axis. What do you think, kid? You’ve had more training on the engineering level than I have.”

Jack considered it. “It won’t stabilize our movement along that axis,” he said at last, but it might slow us down enough to hit the plane of our choice. It will still be tight; less than half a second per plane and we’ll need to keep adjusting it manually, but yes, this should work as a jury rig. But we’ll have to find a resting place to do it. It’s going to take hours to wire this in and set the control on the console.”

“It doesn’t need to be pretty, kid,” Pflum told him. “It just has to work. Let’s find a place we can work in peace.”

“The Kalahari Desert?” Jack suggested.

“Some deserted island?” Jainette added.

“Antartica,” Pflum told them decisively. “There are places there that have never been seen by Man.”

“It will be cold,” Samantha pointed out.

“I’m not planning to go outside,” Pflum replied, “and since we’re dealing with the same history regardless of physics, we don’t have to worry about being attacked by thunderbolt-throwing penguins.”

“I don’t even want to know how you think up those things,” she told him.

“Experience,” he dead-panned. “I’m really not all that imaginative.”

“What a pity.”

Pflum walked to the console and brought them to Queen Maud Land in a spot where they would be hundreds of miles from any form of vertebrate life. He and Jack quickly went to work.

An hour later they heard Thom say, “I’m just going out for a bit of fresh air.”

“Don’t do that,” Pflum told him, looking up for the first time since they had started installing their new control. “We don’t know if the atmosphere is breathable.”

“Hah!” Jack added. “We don’t even know if there is an atmosphere out there.”

“But,” asked Sam, “if the history of this line is nearly identical to our own, there must be life. How can there be life without an atmosphere?”

“I don’t know,” Pflum replied, “and at the moment I don’t want to find out. The simple fact is we don’t know what is out there and the reason we landed where we did was so we wouldn’t have to.”

“That’s garbage,” Thom spat and opened the door.

“Don’t!” Pflum shouted too late.

Outside the transit was a field of golden daffodils with pleasant grassy hills in the distance. The air was sweet and fragrant and the temperature quite pleasant.

“A positively lethal environment,” Thom sneered. “We’re not even in Antarctica.”

“Of course we are,” Pflum replied. “I said we were on a world of alternative physics. For all we know the poles are warm here and the equatorial zone is locked in ice.”

“Ridiculous,” Thom replied.

“Feel free to start walking north then. But we’ll be ready to leave within the hour so you’d better walk fast. Oh, and be careful not to fall off the edge of the world.”

“What?”

“I don’t have any way of telling whether this world is round, flat, a torus, a Möbius strip or some shape

I'm incapable of imagining," Pflum commented before turning back to the job at hand.

"Have a nice walk, Thom," Jainette told him. "But be back before we're ready to leave, because while Pflum might be nice enough to wait for you, I won't let him." Thom growled and walked off.

"You do realize he isn't going to let the situation stay this way," Sam told her. "I've known Thom a long time and he is the classic example of an alpha male. He'll do everything he can to pay you and Pflum – probably Jack and me too – back for the indignities you've been piling on him."

"I'd like to see him try," Jainette told her confidently.

"Just wait," Sam shot back. "You will."

Thom returned a few minutes later and sat back down in his customary chair and started reading. Ten minutes later Pflum and Jack finished their jury-rigged control and the Transit was once more on the move. Now, next to the display that was supposed to show a sharp line, they had a slide switch."

"Okay, kid," Pflum told Jack, "keep an eye on that fuzzy line. When it gets sharp slow us down as much as you can on the Z axis. I'll do the rest."

It still wasn't an easy or rapid process, and they had to go through the cycle of probabilities several times before they could find a safe location to materialize in, but an hour later they were in Nouméa on New Caledonia.

Seventeen

Ukulele Lady

Pflum decided he would have to put Thom on parole since he wasn't about to keep him tied up in the Transit whenever they weren't traveling, but didn't trust him to keep that parole, so decided that either he or Jainette would be in the Transit at all times, even when Sam and Thom were working. So he stayed with the crate while Jainette and Jack strolled down the *Place des Cocotiers*, enjoying the view of the flame trees and the "Celeste" fountain. They sipped their coffee at a quaint café terrace in Orly Square overlooking an ornamental pond.

They only stayed on New Caledonia one day before confirming that Mae Creston had not disembarked at Nouméa, so they moved the Transit that evening to Fiji. In Suva it was Pflum's turn to enjoy some time on the town. During the day he and Jack took a tour of the harbor and bus trip to view the tropical beauty of the area just outside the capital city. Then at night, when it turned out they would be staying, he took Sam out to eat.

"Too bad we're not just touring," Pflum told Sam. "Fiji is a wonderful place to take a vacation. We could rent a boat and sail all around the archipelago, go snorkeling, surfing and maybe go picnic by a waterfall."

“New Caledonia was quite nice too,” Sam replied, “not that I saw much more of it than you did.”

“Well maybe someday we can come back here when we’re not working, or at least when you aren’t working,” Pflum suggested.

“That would be nice,” she agreed then changed the subject. “You seem to be taking Thom more seriously than Jainette is.”

“That’s why I won’t give him a chance to be in the Transit alone. I have a sneaky suspicion he’s going to try something before this is over.”

“I agree, but Jainette won’t listen to me.”

“Yeah, I noticed. That’s why I knocked him around a bit more than I normally would have the other day. I wanted the lesson to sink in.”

“I’m sure it did. I just hope the lesson he learned was the one you taught.”

“Why?” Pflum asked. “Do you have something particular in mind?”

“No,” she replied. “I don’t think that way, I just know that I’ve never seen him let anyone get the better of him.”

“Okay, I’ll keep an eye on him,” Pflum promise. After that they moved on to more pleasant subjects.

They were on Fiji for over a week, because a woman answering Mae Creston’s description had, indeed, disembarked from the ship. However, when they finally tracked her down, it turned out that the woman in question was just a normal tourist, enjoying a second honeymoon with her husband. They had met Mae Creston on board where she had been called Anne Tremaine, but so far as they knew, she was sailing all the way to Tahiti.

Their next stop was Tonga. The ship had not docked at the capital, Nukualofa, but instead paid a call in Neiafu on the island of Vavau. It was difficult finding a place to park the Transit in Neiafu and it took two days until Pflum was satisfied that their location was not likely to be noticed because he would only try to land at night when there were less people around who were likely to notice their sudden appearance. It turned out that no one had disembarked at Neiafu and that the ship was only in port a few hours in any case.

By the time they reached Papeete, the ship had been in port several hours and a quick discussion with the purser revealed that Mae Creston had already disembarked. Thom and Sam spent the next two days determining that she had not checked into any hotel in the city, while the others took turns enjoying the sights. Jainette bought a string of black pearls of which she was inordinately proud.

Another several days passed as the search for Mae Creston expanded to the various ship lines, but it seemed that Creston had not sailed out of Papeete either.

“I don’t get it,” Sam admitted to Pflum one evening while they ate dinner. Dining together had become a regular feature of alternate evenings when Pflum was not stuck watching the Transit. “She couldn’t have friends to stay with here and she didn’t ship right out again.”

“Perhaps she bought a boat and sailed to another island or took a ferry,” Pflum suggested.

“There’s no indication she knows how to sail, but we did check with the ferry services. We’re fairly certain she didn’t leave that way,” she responded.

“She could have hired a crew easily enough,” Pflum pointed out.

“I’ll look into that tomorrow,” she promised.

“Another thing to consider; this isn’t that small an island and Papeete is not the only town on it, though I think it’s the biggest. Also have you checked the airport?”

“The airport? Pflum, this is 1933. Air travel is not yet the major industry it will be in a decade or two.”

“The Dixie Clipper and her sisters are only a few years away, and even now you’ll find smaller planes island hopping. Check the airport. My bet is that she flew out of Papeete about the time we got here. Probably went to some other island in this archipelago.”

Pflum’s prediction turned out to be accurate. Sam found the pilot of a seaplane who admitted to flying a woman who looked like Mae Creston to Atuona in the Marquesas. It only took two hours to find the pilot in Atuona who flew her to Bora Bora and they were able to leave Bora Bora the next morning, following her trail to Moorea. There it took two days to discover that she had hired a driver to take her from Maharepa to Paopao from which she took a ferry back to Papeete just the day before.

“She’s trying to lose us,” Thom growled.

“Of course she is,” Sam agreed. “Even if she thinks she took care of you permanently, she knows for certain that we have a way to find her and that we’re doing our best to track her down, so she’s doing everything she can to avoid that.”

“Just keep hounding her the way you have done,” Jainette advised. “Eventually she’ll have to leave this area by ship and then we’ll have a few days at least to get to her destination ahead of her.”

From Papeete, Mae Creston hired the same pilot who flew her to the Marquesas to give her a ride to Huahine. She left Huahine early the next morning by a private boat bound for Raiatea where they lost her for four days before discovering she had left Raiatea by plane once more and landed in Papeete. On their return to Papeete they spent three days spinning their wheels before discovering she had left Papeete on the *Aranui* loaded with copra and bound for the Port of Honolulu six days earlier.

“It’s going to be tight,” Pflum warned them as he once more engaged the Transit’s drive. “If we don’t get there before her, she’ll likely start island hopping again. On the other hand after a week or so on a copra ship she is not going to be a happy camper.”

“I’ve heard that term before,” Jack noted. “Just what is copra?”

“Dried coconut meat, kid,” Pflum told him. “It’s where they get coconut oil products from. It’s used in the food industry and in cosmetics, or at least it was here and now. In the present we’ve pretty much stopped using the oil in foods, which is a shame as it tastes better than most of the replacements. It’s still used to make some pretty fancy soap, however.”

Honolulu was all dressed up and ready for Christmas when they arrived. Thom and Sam got down to the port to find the *Aranui* already docked. They hurried aboard and were directed to the First Mate.

“We carried no passengers this trip,” the man told them.

“That’s not what we were told in Papeete,” Thom replied.

“You were told wrong. Who’re you going to believe? Me or some land-bound clerk who gets seasick every time he looks out the window?”

“At the moment I’ll go with the clerk,” Thom growled.

“Sir, I suggest you get off this ship. Now!” the First Mate advised.

Thom was about to argue, but Sam tapped him on the shoulder and as he turned to snap at her he noticed they were surrounded by crewmen. “All right, so she’s not here and never was,” he replied. “I guess we’ll go now.”

“I guess you will,” the First Mate replied. He and the crewmen escorted them to the gangway and stayed there to watch them until they left the wharf.

“She’s still on that ship,” Sam said once they were out of earshot.

“Probably,” Thom replied.

“Stake out?”

“I think so. Keep an eye on the end of the wharf there while I scout around for better places to watch from.”

It was well after dark before Mae Creston attempted to leave the ship. A truck drove up and on to the wharf and stopped at the bottom of the gangway and waited. When Creston showed herself she was accompanied by a dozen bodyguards, crewmen from the *Aranui*. They all got on the truck, which then turned around and drove swiftly off the wharf and up into Honolulu.

Thom and Sam started running after the truck. Sam was closer to the direction in which the truck traveled but after a minute Thom caught up top and passed her, but it was still in vain.

“We should have rented a car,” Sam gasped out when Thom got back to her.

“Twenty-twenty hindsight,” Thom replied, just as winded. “She’s always walked ashore until now. What are you doing?” Sam had pulled out a pad of paper and a pencil from her purse.

“I got the tag numbers on that truck. More likely than not it won’t do us any good, but... You know, we really could use some help and Pflum, Jainette and Jack were of great assistance before.”

Thom thought about it then decided, “No. Against policy.”

“I’m not suggesting they be in on the actual collar,” Sam argued, “just to help find that truck.”

“And by the time they find it and report to us the information is likely to be useless,” Thom replied.

“We should have brought radios so we could communicate at a distance,” Sam commented.

“You know why we couldn’t do that. Our radios are beyond the tech level of this time and place.”

“An ear-fitted radio wouldn’t have been noticed,” Sam shot back, “but there’s no use crying over what we don’t have. How do you want to do this?”

They headed southeast. Let’s split up by a few blocks and go in that direction.”

“It’s a big city, Thom. We aren’t likely to find them on foot. They could easily have turned north and doubled back. For that matter, they may not have even stayed in Honolulu.”

“Just keep looking,” he snapped at her.

“Okay,” she replied. “How about that truck there.” She pointed at a pair of headlamps approaching them. “Getting out of the middle of the street might be a good idea, however.” And she suited her actions to her words.

“Funny,” Thom replied flatly. “You’ve been hanging around those Transit drivers too much, I think.” The truck drove past them and they both turned to check the license plate.

“That’s it,” Sam said quickly and started running after it again. A moment later Thom passed her.

The truck continued back up the street, then after a few blocks it turned right. Thom was in the middle of the block but Sam was just at an intersection two blocks behind so she turned right too. At the top of the block she saw the truck continuing on straight. She paralleled the truck for another two blocks then, when she looked down the street, there were two trucks headed away from her. She turned left again and met Thom at the next corner.

“Sorry,” she panted. “I can’t keep this up.”

“Which one of those trucks is the right one?” he asked, in only slightly better shape.

“Don’t know,” she panted. “They were both... already on this street... when I got here. Might not even... be same truck.”

“One is stopping,” Thom noticed. “C’mon!” He started running, Sam shrugged and tried to keep up.

“What... do you... expect to do?” she gasped. “pant at them... until they give up?” Thom didn’t hear that, he was already too far ahead. By the time she caught up, he was speaking to the driver.

“So, you just dropped them off there?” Thom was asking the man.

“Well I didn’t keep them in back, did I?” he replied, pointing at the open back of the truck.

“No, I suppose not,” Thom came back. He reached into his wallet and pulled out a twenty dollar gold certificate. “There you go. Thank you. Oh, are you here finally?” he asked Sam. “Come on, let’s go.”

“Where?” she asked.

“About a mile off that way,” he replied and started walking quickly. Sam turned and tried to keep up. “You still have your stunner, don’t you?” he asked.

“Of course. Don’t you?”

“Pflum only locked away my period-style pistol, you know that.”

Twenty minutes later they were outside a warehouse. It was a one-story affair but tall enough for two floors in a residential complex., and there were several doors on each side of the building.

“It’s like a scene out of an old movie,” Sam commented sourly. “Why would she be hiding in a warehouse now? She’s always stayed in nice hotels and houses.”

“She’s desperate now,” Thom told her confidently. “We have her cornered.”

“Being cornered makes her all the more dangerous

“We’ll start with the office,” Thom continued, disregarding her. “If she isn’t in there we can check the records and see who is officially using this space.”

“It looks like there is actually a collection of small warehouse spaces rather than one open area inside,” Sam opined.

“We’ll find out when we get inside.”

“This isn’t right, Thom. It’s a trap,” Sam warned him.

”Yes, a trap we’ll spring on them,” he retorted. “Now stop complaining and let’s go!”

Pflum spent the day running diagnostics on the Transit with Jack, while Jainette went out to see the sights. She returned a couple of hours later with cups of Kona coffee and some pastries for the two men.

Pflum thanked her but asked, “I thought you would be gone for the day.”

“I thought of sunbathing on Waikiki, but decided against it. I’ve been here before, although not at Christmas time, so it wasn’t much of a novelty. You can go out if you want.”

“Thanks, but no,” Pflum responded. “I started running a full series of field diagnostics and I ought to finish that. Jack, you can go out on the town if you want.”

“Thanks,” Jack responded. “I will.” And he got up and walked out of the Transit.

“I think the one problem with Transit travel,” Pflum remarked, sipping his coffee, “is that when we arrive in a place like Hawaii with tourists, there’s no one to greet us with leis.”

“Can’t exactly arrange that in advance, can we?” Jainette asked.

“I suppose not.”

“How far have you gotten?” Jainette asked, indicating the diagnostic checklist.

“I’m running the reverse redundancy checks on the impellers at the moment. Decided to skip the tests that require activating the regulator. I was afraid we might slip off this plane if I did.”

“Good thinking,” Jainette told him. “I think we would have. Well, let’s see what else needs doing around here. Perhaps it’s time to really air the place out. It’s starting to smell a bit.”

“We don’t normally run for so long without getting back for routine cleanings,” Pflum replied defensively.

“I wasn’t blaming you, but there’s no reason we can’t freshen up the air a bit.” And she opened the field door and started up the air circulators. Then she found a broom and started sweeping.

“Oh, is that what that thing is for?” Pflum joked.

“What did you think? That it was just some strange form of fly swatter?” Jainette joked back at him.

“It could have been.” Pflum laughed. After sweeping, Jainette helped with the diagnostics so that by the time Jack returned two hours later they were just finishing up.

“I saw Samantha out there,” he announced. “It looked like she was keeping an eye on that ship Creston was on.”

“What did she say?” Pflum asked.

“I didn’t ask,” Jack replied. “It seemed to me that I’d be of more help if I just stayed out of the way.”

“Probably a good idea,” Jainette assured him. “Well, that may be good news. If they can arrest her today, we can get out of here, finally. Anyone up for dinner?”

“I had better stay in,” Pflum decided.

“Oh come on, Pflum. Take an hour off for a meal,” Jainette urged him. “Thom can’t steal the Transit, he doesn’t know the activation code.”

“I’ll say he doesn’t, I changed it again today.”

“To what now?” she asked.

“50m371n9” he replied, spelling it out.

“Oh, that’s easy to remember,” Jainette remarked.

“L33t!” Jack responded. He pronounced it “leet.” “It’s like the late Twentieth and early Twentyfirst century fad for using numbers and abbreviations as a sort of pseudo-code instead of spelling words out in plain English.”

“That’s right, kid.” Pflum told him. “Think of the word ‘something,’ and substitute similarly shaped numbers for everything but the ‘m’ and ‘n.’”

“Now that is useless trivia,” Jainette laughed. “Who ever thought of that?”

“Someone too lazy to type out all the words, probably,” Pflum responded. “Although when it started it was probably fairly clever. Problem is, like any fad, it got taken to extremes especially with the primitive messaging capabilities of the cell phones of that period. It was mostly a fad of the kids anyway.”

“It was big among the hacker culture as well,” Jack added.

“Not among the really best hackers,” Pflum disagreed. “L33t started out as something vaguely clever but soon turned to a lazy way of typing. The best in any field are never lazy.”

“So are you coming to dinner?” Jainette asked.

“Hmm? Oh what the heck! I’m getting cabin fever already,” Pflum replied. “I’ll take the chance this once.”

Neither Thom nor Sam had returned when they got back from dinner and Jainette suggested they go dancing. Pflum begged off, but Jack was interested. Pflum spent a quiet evening, reading one of the textbooks Jack had brought with him. He nearly put it down several times – it was on temporal theory well beyond his own understanding of the subject – but Pflum’s stubborn streak came out and he was still reading when Jainette and Jack returned after midnight.

“They’re still out?” Jainette asked.

“Oh, yeah. Must be close though or they’d have come back sooner. Well, I’m exhausted. I’m going to sleep.”

“Me too,” Jainette told him. “Jack you should too. Jack?”

“I think he’s already asleep,” Pflum whispered. “Hey, kid,” he said in an only slightly louder voice, “You want to check the regulator flux?”

“Huh? What?” Jack started, looked around then mumbled. “Oh, I guess I’ll go to bed.” He got up and stumbled off.

“Very clever, Pflum,” Jainette smiled. “Good night.”

“Night.”

Several hours later Thom knocked on Pflum’s door.

“Yeah?” Pflum called. “What is it?”

“Time to get moving, Pflum,” Thom replied. “I’ve got Creston, but her thugs are right behind me. Come on, get us out of here.”

“What?” Pflum asked automatically, then woke up fully and jumped out of bed. “No, don’t repeat that. I’m there.” He ran in his underwear to the console and keyed in the activation code, started the drive and sent the Transit home. That done he looked up to see Mae Creston handcuffed and sitting in one of the chairs, while Thom held a gun on her. Jainette and Jack poked their heads out to see what was happening. They took in the scene, but only Jack saw what was wrong.

“Where’s Sam?” he asked.

“She stayed behind,” Thom replied.

“What!” Pflum and Jainette shouted.

“She knows we’ll be back,” Thom said confidently.

“We sure will,” Pflum told him. “I’m taking us back right now.”

“No you won’t,” Thom told him, pointing the gun at Pflum’s chest. “Now move away from that console and don’t try anything or I’ll blow you away.”

Pflum briefly looked at the controls for the inertial damper then sighed and slowly walked away in the direction Thom indicated. “You bastard,” he said quietly.

“Sometimes an agent has to do things he’d rather not do,” Thom told him. “Besides, I’ve seen you manhandling this crate,” he said that last word with relish. Now that we’re under way, it will be faster to go home than to go back. We’ll return as soon as we get Mrs. Creston here in a cell.”

“Even jail will be better than the company of an agent who abandons his partner,” she spat. Thom drew a stunner from his belt and shot her with it, she immediately slumped to the floor. “Stay in the chair, Pflum,” he said quickly. Pflum didn’t reply, even he knew Thom’s eyes hadn’t been off him long enough for him to move. “You two,” he ordered Jainette and Jack. “Pick her up and put her on the couch.”

“Do it yourself,” Jainette sneered.

“Fine,” Thom laughed. “Leave her there then.” Jainette motioned to Jack and together they wrestled Mae Creston to the couch.

The next few hours were very tense as Thom kept the gun on Pflum and the stunner on Jack and Jainette. Eventually Mae Creston woke up but was still too woozy from the stun shot to make any trouble. When the arrival alarm went off, Pflum started getting up.

“Stay seated, Pflum,” Thom told him. “For some reason I just don’t trust you.”

“I have to bring us in and deactivate the drive,” Pflum pointed out.

“You’ll stay seated. Jack, you do it,” Thom ordered.

“I don’t have enough experience,” Jack told him.

“Bull!” Thom spat. “I’ve seen you land us before. Get over there and do it.”

“Don’t worry, kid,” Pflum encouraged him. “I have confidence in you. You can do it.”

“I’ll try,” Jack sighed. He walked behind the console and started fiddling with the controls.

“Don’t mind the kid,” Pflum said to Thom. “He knows more than he gives himself credit for. Go ahead, kid. Show him.”

“All right,” Jack sighed. “Here goes.” He slammed his hand down on the button and Thom slammed hard into the ceiling, then fell back to the floor just as hard for good measure. Then and only then did Jack deactivate the Transit’s drive.

“Well done, Jack,” Jainette applauded.

“Yes, well done,” Pflum agreed. “Kid you had me scared for a moment there. I thought you were going to actually bring us in first.”

“That wouldn’t have worked, Pflum. Even I know that. Thanks for distracting him, though, I thought he’d never take his eyes off me.”

“He couldn’t watch both of us at once, not the way he kept me seated so far from the console,” Pflum remarked. Thom groaned just then. “Hey, I think you broke a few of his bones.”

“I was trying to,” Jack responded in a strange voice.

“Good. He deserves it. I probably would have killed him, but the pain will last so much longer this way. That leg is at an unnatural angle though. J., let’s call the paramedics for him and his agency for Mrs. Creston.”

“Got it,” Jainette responded. Before she could open the home door, however, Ken opened it from inside.

Eighteen

Sunshine Superman

“What the hell happened?” he demanded. “That was the noisiest landing I’ve ever heard.” Jainette rushed out the door.

“Our FBI friend here,” Pflum replied, “made a few modifications to the drive when he hijacked it.”

“He what?”

“Ken, I don’t really have time to give you all the details, but the Transit now travels along three time axes.”

“That’s...”Ken trailed off.

“Impossible?” Pflum prompted.

“Um, no, not quite, but that’s going to ground this crate for a long time, if not permanently.”

“Can’t wait, Ken. This gentleman here left his partner back in 1933. That reminds me. Thom, I know you can hear me. Now tell me where you left Sam and the circumstances.” Thom responded with a remark that cast aspersions on Pflum and all his ancestors. “Possibly, I wouldn’t know,” Pflum replied,

“but if you don’t start talking I’ll reactivate the drive and throw you around a bit more until you do. Then if you’re still not talking I’ll let J. have a turn.”

“Oh, please, Pflum,” Jainette added from the doorway. “Let me go first. Oh, Thom, your superiors aren’t too pleased with you and they don’t even know about your hijacking and willful damage to the Transit yet.”

A few minutes later Pflum knew everything he needed to. They escorted Mae Creston to a room and locked her in and dragged Thom to the garage floor just outside the Transit.

“Pflum, you can’t just take the Transit out again,” Ken told him.

“I can’t leave Sam in the past, Ken. She might be in trouble. You heard that bastard. The last time he saw her, she was going off to create a diversion. She could be in real trouble right now.”

“She could also be dead, in which case she’ll still be dead when you get there.”

“Perhaps, but the point is we don’t know, so we need to get back as soon as possible.”

“Fine,” Ken told him. “Then I’m coming with you. I have to see this three-dimensional time travel for myself.”

“Good, I’m going to need an extra set of hands, Jainette needs to get back to her own Transit.”

“Hey, wait a minute,” Jainette protested.

“You know it’s true, J. Don’t worry, I’ll get Sam and bring her back.”

“You’d better, Pflum, or I’ll never forgive you.”

“I’m coming and you can’t stop me,” Jack said before Pflum could say otherwise.

“Of course you are, kid. I need you to help show Ken how we have to navigate the z axis. Okay everyone, get ready. We’re leaving now.”

“Good luck, Pflum,” Jainette told him, then closed the home door. A moment later Pflum activated the drive and started them back to Honolulu in late 1933.

As they traveled, Pflum and Jack brought Ken up-to-date on everything they’d been through since they had last left the present. He asked a lot of questions, but after the first half hour they were all about Pflum’s circuit modifications. Jack brought out the schematics and Ken and Pflum argued for hours over Pflum’s modifications.

They were almost ready to start trying to find the right Honolulu when Ken finally admitted, “well, it isn’t the way I’d have done it, but you did at least make it possible to find your line.”

“Thank you. Feel free to change anything you like when we get back,” Pflum told him.

“I will. I’m pretty sure I can add a control that will allow you to hit any plane you want. More to the point, you shouldn’t wobble all over probability that way.”

“Sounds good,” Pflum replied as he and Jack started to manipulate the controls. “Will the DTT approve?”

“I should think so. The whole point is control. So long as we can control the journey they shouldn’t have any complaints. For that matter I doubt they’ll even worry about it so long as that display keeps a sharp line when they test it. I know I don’t plan to point it out to them.”

“Good idea,” Pflum agreed. Then he and Jack got seriously down to the work of bringing the Transit in properly. Two hours later they came to rest back in the same Honolulu alley they had been in during their last visit.

“Pflum, were we on the other side of the alley last time?” Jack asked.

“What difference does it make?” Pflum countered. “Okay, we need to find Sam. If we’re lucky she’s just fine and having breakfast about now. She’ll know we’re coming back, since this has happened before, so she’s bound to be nearby if that’s the case. Ken, you might as well stay here. You don’t know what she looks like do you?”

“Only vaguely,” Ken agreed. “I saw her across the garage floor several times, but if I go looking I’ll be staring at every brunette in sight. I take it you want me to watch the Transit?”

“That’s pretty much it, yeah. If you can think of some improvements that you can accomplish while you wait without needing to completely strip the crate down, feel free.”

“Just diagnostics, Pflum,” Ken responded. “Anything else and I would need to do a complete shutdown. I still don’t know how you had the guts to short out that blown fuse while the power was running.”

“Desperation,” Pflum admitted. “Come on, kid. Let’s go find Sam.”

They spent the morning looking in the nearby restaurants and shops, but Sam was nowhere to be found. They also walked down to the harbor and saw that the *Aranui* was still docked, but now was loading cargo for her return trip. On a hunch Pflum went aboard to ask questions and found the First Mate.

“Yeah, we had a couple nosey cops looking for a passenger the other day,” he admitted after Pflum slipped him a ten dollar bill. “But we didn’t have no passengers this trip. I told them that.”

“Okay,” Pflum shrugged. “I’m not concerned with whether or not you had passengers. What about the two cops? Any idea where they went?”

“Nah! We gave ‘em the bums’ rush and last I saw they was leaving the wharf. Now if ya don’t mind I’m short-handed at the moment. Several hands got paid off yesterday and we ain’t replaced them yet.”

“Okay, thanks,” Pflum replied. “Well, kid, they’re not here,” he said clearly as they left the ship, mostly for the benefit of any crewmen that might be listening. “Actually,” he added in a much quieter voice, “I hope she isn’t here. I don’t relish trying to raid someone else’s ship. It would be a good way to get killed.”

“I think we ought to rent a car, Pflum,” Jack suggested. “We can’t move the Transit easily in its current condition, and we have a lot of territory to cover.”

“The problem there, kid, is that we don’t have valid driver’s licenses. Would you settle for bicycles?”

“If we have to carry Sam back to the Transit, that will be worse than useless,” Jack pointed out.

“Good point. Well, we can always hire a taxi cab. We may not have licenses, but our money is still good.”

“Is it?” Jack asked pointedly.

“Okay, technically I suppose it’s counterfeit, but it’s identical to this line’s currency coming from a nearly identical one. That’s why we generally don’t encourage really large shopping sprees, however.”

“Oh, I had wondered about that.” Jack commented.

“You should have asked, kid.”

“Where do we get all the period currency then?”

“One of the advantages we have is that we know what the stock market is going to do. For us it isn’t gambling. Too bad we’re limited on how much we can glean from the past. Only enough to change our clients’ money or we could be up on insider trading charges.”

“Now that I knew about,” Jack told him. “Too bad. We could all be rich.”

“One or two could get away with it, but if too many of us tried getting rich that way, it would only inflate the value of our own dollar, or devalue gold or whatever other medium you care to name. But a few things here and there are safe enough, and there are limits to how much any trip can import from the past. That’s probably why Jainette was so pleased to find that string of Tahitian pearls. As drivers we usually have to let our clients spend to the limits, so we don’t get to go shopping.”

“What’s the law concerning spending money in the past on services?” Jack asked.

“No one’s thought of regulating that yet, just what we import. Why? What did you have in mind?”

“We need to get a look at that warehouse, don’t we?” Jack asked.

“Oh, I see what you mean, but the manager will probably be happy to give a prospective customer a tour,” Pflum pointed out.

“Yeah, but we’ll need to be able to get back in at night and really take a look around.”

“I see it. Yeah,” Pflum told him. “If we rent a space we’ll have a key to enter the warehouse at night.”

“Is warehouse space expensive?” Jack asked.

“Just be thankful it’s not our money,” Pflum told him.

It turned out that renting a space in the warehouse was fairly easy to accomplish. As Pflum had

expected, the warehouse was divided up into various sized lockable rooms, but they were all accessible once one had gained entry to the building itself. Pflum took out a one month lease for much less than he expected.

“I would have thought that much space would have been worth two or three thousand a month. Guess I didn’t account for the inflationary value of the dollar, did I?”

“Damned lucky you got the room next to the one Creston had been in,” Jack noted.

“Why do you think I wanted the tour before talking about the size of room I wanted? My plan was to spot the closest open room and then claim that was just the size I needed. Too bad it was so large, though. It seems a shame to rent a thousand square feet when I’d have been satisfied with a broom closet.”

They returned to the Transit to find Ken rewiring the main console.

“Hey,” Pflum protested. “I thought you weren’t going to make any serious changes.”

“Changed my mind,” Ken replied far more lightly than he normally might have. “This will log our progress along the z axis. It will give me something to work with when I start the repairs back home.”

“I hope to get out of here tonight,” Pflum told him.

“Not to worry,” Ken replied. “I should be done in a few minutes and even if not, this won’t keep us from operating the Transit.”

“I’m going to need you with us tonight,” Pflum added. “We’re going to raid that warehouse and an extra stunner may be what we need to tip the balance our way.”

“I just hope I don’t shoot you and Jack by accident,” Ken said half seriously.

“If I didn’t know you were joking I’d let you be on point,” Pflum told him. “We’ll be leaving in an hour and a half.”

“Pflum, why are you sure Sam is in there?” Jack asked.

“I’m not,” Pflum admitted, “but the room was closed to us, so there’s a good chance she is and if she isn’t there, we’ll need to look elsewhere tomorrow, like the *Aranui*. Sure hope that doesn’t turn out to be necessary. You know, now that I think about it, The Mate told us he was short of hands, didn’t he?”

“Yeah,” Jack agreed. “Do you think they’re the ones who were working with Mae Creston?”

“I’m sure of that. I wonder when that ship is planning to leave again?”

“Want me to go down to the harbor and ask?” Jack offered.

“No, better not. If we have to sneak on board we don’t need to alert them by showing up to ask a nosey question.”

“What nosey question?” Jack asked. “They have people asking them where they’re going and how much for a room all the time. Sure they’re basically a copra ship but they have rooms for a few

passengers.”

“No, they’ll remember you were with me this morning,” Pflum told him.

“If anyone has to go,” Ken added, “it should be me. They haven’t seen me before.”

“Hopefully we won’t need to,” Pflum told both of them.

“Well, I’m finished here,” Ken told them. “Want me to go check out that ship of yours?”

“No,” Pflum told him. “It will be dark soon and that ship just docked the day before yesterday. I doubt they’ll be ready to leave for a while yet.”

“Wouldn’t that depend on what they need to unload here and pick up?” Ken asked.

“Uh, Pflum,” Jack interrupted. “They’ve already finished unloading whatever cargo they planned to unload.”

“What makes you say that, kid?”

“Because they were stowing new cargo when we were there this morning. I don’t know anything about the copra trade, but I imagine that Honolulu isn’t the only port it’s landed at.”

“Ken, maybe you ought to take a run down to the harbor. Jack and I will go with you. There’s a bar a block from the wharf, we can wait for you there and then go check out the warehouse in detail.

Pflum and Jack were on their second glasses of lager when Ken finally returned from the wharf. He walked in signaled to the barman for a glass of his own, then sat down at the same table.

“Bad news,” he told them, “The *Aranui* has already sailed. I saw her leaving the harbor.”

“Damn!” Pflum swore. “And we have no idea where she’s headed next.”

“That I do know. I asked about and one of the crewmen from another ship told me they’re headed to Naha.”

“Where’s that?” Jack asked.

“Okinawa, kid,” Pflum told him. “We’ve already been in pre-war Germany, all we need now to round this whole caper off is a trip to Japan.”

“We should check out the warehouse first,” Ken noted.

“True,” Pflum agreed. “Well, finish your beer, guys. It’s time to move out.”

They drained their glasses and hailed a taxi. When the driver dropped them off just outside the warehouse, Pflum passed him twenty dollars and told him, “Wait for us and I’ll see you get an even better tip.”

They walked up to the loading dock’s walk-in door and Pflum unlocked it and let them in

“Where’s this space you rented?” Ken asked.

“Down this way,” Pflum replied in just over a whisper, “but let’s keep the talking to a minimum. No need to let anyone know we’re here.”

They continued for over two hundred feet, passing numerous loading bay doors on their left and similarly wide doors to the various storage bays. Finally they reached the door to Bay # 29. The loading dock doors were overhead doors, but the bay doors were wide double doors that opened inward. Pflum unlocked his and slipped in. A moment later the lights in the room came on and Jack and Ken entered as well.

He whispered to the others, “They were in Bay Twenty-eight right next door. These two rooms share a ventilation shaft. It not big enough to crawl through, but I’m hoping we can scope out who or what’s in there before we try to bust our way in.” Then without saying anything else, he walked over to the common wall between the two bays and got down on the floor. Pulling an old Boy Scout knife out of his back pocket, he used the built-in screw driver to remove the vent panel from the return shaft. “There’s a light on over there,” he told them almost silently, but that’s all I can see. Kid, you’re smaller than I am, see if you can get a better angle.”

Jack got down on the floor and stuck his head carefully in the small ventilation hole. After a moment he reported, “I think there’s someone in there, but I can’t see anyone. I just hear some odd sounds.”

Pflum got down to take another look but as soon as he was on the floor they heard a muffled crash coming from the room and what sounded, like an agonized grunt. Pflum slipped, trying to get up and Jack and Ken had to help him up. Meanwhile there were more bumps and groans coming from the other room. They each drew a stunner from their pockets and hurried to the door, stumbling over each other and behaving more like a slapstick routine than heroes to the rescue.

Pflum reached the doors to the next bay first and attempted to kick the door in. The wide doors bowed inward and then sprang back, throwing Pflum back several feet. Finally all three men slammed their shoulders into the doors and caused them to burst open. Ken fell face first onto the warehouse floor, Jack stumbled in and rolled to the left and Pflum tripped clumsily over Ken just narrowly avoiding having his brains dashed out by a two-by-four that whistled within millimeters of his head.

He, rolled and came up with the stunner and aimed it directly at the assailant with the lumber to find himself staring directly at Samantha di Medici.

Sam, who was still wearing a gag was about to swing the two-by-four again until she got a good look a Pflum. She dropped the piece of wood and pulled the gag out of her mouth.

“Pflum! You rescued me! Took you long enough,” she added a moment later. Jack and Ken were picking themselves up.

“We sort of had to get here the long way around,” Pflum replied. “And it looks like you were about to rescue yourself.”

“Where’s Thom?”

“The kid put him in the hospital. Don’t worry, it’s nothing he didn’t deserve. I’ll tell you about it on the way back. For now we should get out of here before your erstwhile boyfriends get back.”

“I haven’t seen them in hours. They all left to catch their ship and just left me tied to that chair.” The chair in question was now kindling. “But it’s taken me this long to get free. I haven’t eaten in two days either.”

They made their way back to the cab and Pflum had the driver drop them off at the nearest restaurant to the Transit.

“At least no one decided to take you with them,” Pflum commented about the crewmen who had held her captive. “Their next stop is Okinawa. So unless you want revenge, it’s time we went home.”

“No I think I’ll settle for revenge on Thom. That bastard abandoned me! My only dilemma is how to pay him back for that.”

“I wouldn’t worry about that,” Pflum told her. “Just make a list of possibilities and go down the list doing each one. If you get to the bottom without feeling satisfied you can always start over at the top again.”

Nineteen

Hakuna Matata

They ate a leisurely dinner, waiting until Sam felt she’d had enough, then started the journey home in the Transit. Ken spent the trip staring at the diagnostic device he’d installed. Jack went back to his paper. And Pflum spent most of the time watching Sam pace back and forth.

“You’re going to wear yourself out,” Pflum told her.

“The Bureau frowns on agents killing each other,” Sam snapped.

“I don’t imagine they’re particularly keen on agents abandoning each other in the middle of an operation either.”

“I’m going to kill that bastard this time,” Sam continued as though he hadn’t spoken. It was the fourth time she’d said that.

“I could have been dead for all he knew,” Pflum said calmly and quietly.

“I could have been... I’ve been repeating myself, haven’t I?”

“Slightly. By the way, I don’t think you’re cute when you’re mad.”

“I’m not cute,” Sam told him flatly.

“Not when you’re mad, you aren’t,” he agreed. “However, you are gorgeous regardless of your mood. Look, Sam, your best revenge will be to just give an honest account during your debriefing.”

“It’s his word versus mine,” Sam pointed out, “and he has seniority.”

“He also needs to explain why he was in such a rush to get Mae Creston back to the present when he

already had her cuffed and stunned. There was nothing to stop him from going back for you.”

“There is that,” she considered.

“And instead he forced us to get back to the present at gunpoint,” Pflum continued.

“You didn’t mention that.”

“I doubt he will either, not until I level charges. That’s two counts of hijacking now.”

“Uh, Pflum,” Sam began, sitting down finally, “I didn’t want to say anything while you were bouncing him off the walls, but in spite of your claims of being equal to a ship’s captain, the laws on that matter are not all that clear.”

“They haven’t been tested, that’s true enough, but Sharonne’s lawyer is pretty sure he could win the case on that matter.”

“He would be up against some of the finest attorneys in the country,” Sam pointed out.

“He is one of the finest attorneys in the country,” Pflum replied. “He’s used to that sort of thing. Actually he told us we would lose the case at the lowest level of the legal system, but would win it handily during the appeals process. Since business is picking up I suspect Sharonne will be willing to take it to the Supreme Court if necessary.”

“I imagine the counter claim will be that he was in US territory when he forced you back to the present.”

“But we were in Australia during his first hijacking,” Pflum pointed out.

“Part of the Transit was still in its garage, though.”

“Not the part we were in,” Pflum countered.

“Still it’s a point the lawyers will have a field day with,” Sam told him.

“Oh! This is great!” Ken enthused, his eyes still locked on the console.

“What is?” Pflum asked.

“I’m absolutely certain I can keep us stable on the z axis. Actually, you could have too, had you soldered in that control of yours in a slightly different part of the circuit, but that’s not the good part. I can set up a display that tells us how far along the z axis we are and put some external sensors on the field end of the Transit to test the outside environment so we’ll know if we can survive before opening the door.”

“Give me a digital window like Jainette’s crate has too while your at it. The old-style controls are better for fitting into a space, but nothing beats being able to look outside before you open the door.”

“Yeah, I can do that. But don’t you see? We can map the z axis, not line-by-line – we can’t do that on the y axis or even all that accurately on the x, but we can map the sectors so eventually we can take tours out to them. Now there’s a service no one else can offer!”

“Yet,” Pflum told him. “As soon as we start doing that, the others will try it too.”

“Not if they don’t know how we did it. Hell, even I’m not exactly certain how it happened.”

“But you know what happened, don’t you?”

“Oh yes, of course, I can show you the parts of the circuitry that got stressed without actually getting fried, but I haven’t the foggiest notion how to duplicate the situation. I’ll have to though. We’ll need spare parts eventually. I’ll run some thorough diagnostics on those circuits when we get home, see if I can figure out what makes them so different.”

“It will probably turn out to be related to the reason this crate was on the scrap heap when Sharonne salvaged it,” Pflum predicted.

Ken looked at him strangely for a moment. “You could be right,” he admitted. “This was a government job, wasn’t it? And I’ve had to replace some of the custom components with standard commercial ones. That might be the key. Well, I think the ones that are left are still available, although they would be at auction usually.”

“They’ll be cheaper if we buy them before anyone else catches on,” Pflum pointed out.

“If the DTT lets us use this crate at all when they catch on,” Jack added.

“You had to say that, didn’t you kid?” Pflum grumbled. Jack shrugged.

There was a fair crowd waiting for them on their arrival back in the garage. Nearby the home door stood Sharonne, Jainette, Ken’s assistant and several others who turned out to include the man who was Sam’s and Thom’s supervisor. The rest were other Bureau agents. Milling around, behind a line of chain that had been strung between some hastily placed posts, were a group of anxious-looking men and women.

“This is quite a welcome,” Pflum remarked. “You all look like you’ve been waiting an hour or more, though.”

“Closer to two hours,” Sharonne told him. “We heard you coming in. Lord, that crate of yours was loud!”

“Still?” Ken asked. “I thought I fixed that.”

“Apparently not,” Sharonne replied.

Meanwhile Sam was talking to her boss. Pflum tried to hear what was being said, but Sharonne was talking to him.

“The FBI was being pressed for a press conference,” she explained. “and they called just after you began your return to see if there was any word about Miss di Medici. I told them your Transit was on its way home so they called the conference here.”

“They took one hell of a chance,” Pflum pointed out, “We might not have found her or worse, she might have been killed.”

“They considered that, I think, but you see waiting for your return would give them the latest to announce, whatever the case.”

“Why ever should the Press be interested? It was a relatively unimportant case, I thought.”

“Mr. Pflum,” Sam’s boss replied, “there are several points of interest in this case. First of all, this is the first time a criminal has attempted to flee justice by traveling to the past. Word of it got out when you retrieved Donald Creston. Then there was the manner in which Mae Creston was arrested and how Agent di Medici had been left behind. Agent Barta’s debriefing did not adequately explain why he had to come back without his partner.”

“I’m sure it didn’t. Did it happen to mention how he sabotaged my Transit or how he hijacked it twice?”

“He explained how he felt compelled to urge you and your crew to follow his instructions.”

“At gunpoint,” Pflum added. The man’s eyes widened a bit at that, but otherwise his expression remained calm.

“Let’s discuss that after the news conference, shall we?”

Pflum didn’t pay much attention to the news conference. Instead he went back into the transit where Ken and his assistant were already starting to overhaul the drive. “How’s it looking?” he asked them.

“Looking great, Pflum!” Ken responded with more enthusiasm than he normally displayed. “We’re going to be at this for a few weeks, I think, but when we’re done, this crate will dance through the continuum.”

“Sounds like fun,” Pflum replied. “What happened to the kid?”

“Jack? He’s out watching the briefing. All part of his paper, I suppose. Frankly, I think it’s going to turn into a thesis. He’s going to come back and work with me on the Transit modifications. He has some interesting notions and, of course he plans to document the trials we’ll have to put this crate through. If that’s not worth a master of sciences degree, I don’t know what would be.”

“Yeah, I can see it. He’ll start his senior year as a bachelor’s candidate a semester late and end up walking out with his master’s. Good for him.”

“Pflum,” Sharonne called from the Transit door. “Will you get out here already? The people of the Press have a lot of questions for you.”

“For me?”

It turned out that Sam had been portraying him as the hero of the entire trip and he found himself talking about the mechanics of driving a Transit and then explaining the rough ride after the “incidental damage” to the Transit’s drive and his jury rigged repairs.

“Don’t make too much of what I did,” Pflum joked, “My engineer tells me I did it all wrong. But however better I might have done the job, we did manage to get to where we had to be. Eventually.” He

left out a lot of details such as Thom's part in the problems the Transit had and the fact it was going places no Transit had gone before.

They all answered questions for fifteen minutes or so. Finally Sam's boss called the conference to an end. Sharonne herded them to her office while the reporters filed out to make their own reports.

"Thank you for not publicly accusing Agent Barta, Mr. Pflum," the supervising agent said stiffly. "We had not wanted that to be public without adequate preparation."

"So you led me to understand," Pflum remarked. "But please don't think I've forgotten what he did, or that it's even slightly forgivable."

"I never thought that and as it happens I agree with you completely. Agent Barta has broken several Bureau rules and probably a few Federal laws to boot, although that's a matter for the lawyers to argue over. The Bureau takes a very dim view of what he has done and while we might try to keep it out of the public eye, you may rest assured that he will not go undisciplined on any of the counts you have against him."

"He doesn't seem the sort to go quietly."

"No, he isn't, but I'm thinking of sending him to investigate pilferage at a weather observatory on Tigvariak Island."

"Never heard of it," Pflum admitted.

"Alaska, in the Beaufort Sea. There are points further north, but not enough to matter."

"And is there an observatory there?" Sharonne asked.

"Haven't the foggiest, but there will be. And after six months there this winter, I'll give him a similar assignment in Antarctica. Seems to me somebody should be assigned to tracking what's left of the Ross Ice Shelf.

"The penguins are stealing souvenirs, are they?" Pflum asked.

"Could be. It's a serious problem. Time the Bureau put someone on the case."

"Well, I suppose that might do a little to assuage my tender feelings," Pflum laughed, "but you know I wasn't the only victim. There was my intern, Mr. Laterus and Ms. Manovich, and of course you may not be yet be fully aware of the damage to Ms. di Medici. Not to mention the damages to equipment owned by Down Time Ltd."

"Pflum," Sharonne interrupted him. "The FBI has already settled with the company, very much to our favor and Jainette received a healthy check for her troubles. And I'm sure you'll approve of the amounts paid to you and Jack as well."

"I wasn't looking for a pay off," Pflum told her seriously.

"I believe you," Sam's boss told him, "but if you really don't want it, you can always donate the amount to the charity of your choice."

“Well,” Pflum smiled, “I always did say charity begins at home.”

The man shook Pflum’s hand and left with his agents, leaving Pflum and Sharonne in the office.

“I spoke to Ken while you were answering questions out there,” she told him. “He seems very excited about the new capabilities of your Transit.”

“I doubt the DTT will allow us to make use of them,” Pflum told her.

“Maybe not, but then we can keep to within five-nines historically on any time plane.”

“And if the people with that history are land-dwelling squids?”

“I’m not planning to mention that to the DTT, are you?”

“Their agents are petty-minded at times but they’re not that stupid,” Pflum pointed out. “They can figure it out for themselves.”

“Well, I’ll talk to our lawyers,” Sharonne replied. “Current regulations are still only based on the five-nines standard and that criterion is strictly historically based.”

“And how long do you think it would take to draft a regulation restricting us to our own physical plane?”

“In the DTT? Probably about six months between investigations and committees and the actual codification of the regulation. Then the legal case we’ll invoke will keep going for several years. I think we can get enough business for these new probability lines before a law is passed against us to be able to have public support on our side.”

“If you say so,” Pflum sighed.

“Pflum, you’re not thinking the implications through. Civilizations composed of giant talking squid notwithstanding, there are also planes on which Earth is in earlier phases of development right now. We can effectively visit the Permian or even the Precambrian eras without months or years of travel.”

“The Transit had better be air-tight,” Pflum pointed out. “I don’t know how much free oxygen was in the atmosphere in the Precambrian. And on a lot of planes there won’t even be an Earth. Are we vacuum proof? Or Earth, so to speak, might be part of a planetary nebula.”

“An air-lock might be in order,” Sharonne considered.

“There are also physical planes I can’t even imagine that won’t have physical laws we can predict. We’re going to have to be very careful out there,” Pflum warned.

“I have a lot of confidence in your paranoia, Pflum,” Sharonne replied smugly.

Before going home, Pflum stopped by the Transit again to see how Ken was doing. He was deep in frenetic activity with his assistant and Jack as well. They already had parts strewn all over the floor and Pflum was too tired to argue about that. As he left the Transit once more he ran into Samantha.

“Oh good,” she said as they disentangled themselves from each other. “I was hoping you’d still be here.”

“Oh? Did you leave anything behind?”

“A budding relationship, perhaps,” she replied with a smile. Then before Pflum could reply she spoke again. “That is, I’ve sort of gotten used to having dinner with you. Talking to you. And, well, how about I buy you dinner for a change?”

“You’re on,” Pflum grinned.

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About this Title

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