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Down Time, Ltd.

Book Two;

Taking Time

By

Jonathan Edward Feinstein

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Author's Foreword

It should come as no surprise to my readers that I actually do have a day-job. Recently, I got an interesting and fun tour of the plant of one of my clients, which eventually led to their demonstration room. What they make are collating and binding machines. You start with a printing press and hook it up to one of their collators. Then you take the collated books, pamphlets, etc. stick them on the feeding trays of the binding assembly and out the other end you get finished pamphlets or books; sewn, glued etc. in hard or soft cover. Pretty nifty stuff, I thought.

I also caught myself thinking it would be really neat if I could afford to buy such equipment and publish

hard copies of my books. It just as quickly occurred to me that if I could afford to buy that equipment I'd better be a publisher because it would be a colossal waste of money otherwise. Oh well.

I had some fun with this second story of the Down, Time Ltd. Series. In the first book I chose song titles that seemed appropriate to the contents of the chapter (On one I think I cheated and used the name of a play instead...) but otherwise there was no centralized theme to the titles. This time, however, I decided to use only the titles of songs by Tom Lehrer.

For those of you who may not have heard of Tom Lehrer (you're leading too sheltered a life!!!), he is a songwriter very much in the mold of the greats like Cole Porter. However unlike Porter, Lehrer turned his considerable talents toward parody and has produced some of the funniest songs to grace the English language. I highly recommend looking him up and buying his albums. They are still available even if he hasn't produced any new recordings of late.

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  
Westport, Mass.  
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Prologue (Introduction)

Every journey into the past is complicated by delusions, false memories, false namings of real events.

Adrienne Rich. *Of Woman Born*

Much has been written about the nature of time from the scientific to the metaphoric. Time is the fourth dimension that allows us to be; without it, being would have no meaning. Time is an old friend who accompanies us through life. Time is something you can fill; something you can kill. Time is a river; it flows in but one direction. Time is a child, playing with his toys until long after they are dust. Time is the

great architect never content to let anything go by unchanged.

Of course, all that is both right and wrong, which is only to be expected when you let philosophers play loose with the nature of time and space. Time has been equated with history, and that is most definitely wrong. Time is part of the realm of fact, no matter how many times we get those facts wrong, time is still a factual part of the Universe. History is what we make of it. It has been said that history is written by the winners, but this too is not particularly accurate. History is written by the survivors. It is what is remembered and since most people have selective memories, history changes from moment to moment. Time never changes, although our perception of it does.

The fact of the matter is that time is not any single thing, not even a single dimension of the so-called Time-Space continuum. Time, like space has three dimensions. There is the length of time from beginning to end of the Universe. Then there is the width of time encompassing all the might-haves and maybes of history. Finally we have the depth of time which involves all the possible physical rather than historical differences of the universe.

At first one might be comforted by the fact that somewhere in the breadth of time there are an infinite number of other versions of ourselves who have taken every other conceivable path, made every possible different decision so that when taken as a whole we will have experienced every possibility life has to offer. It is, perhaps less comforting to realize that the reason we have not chosen other than the ways we did were that often enough the other choices were mistakes and we were wise enough to realize that when the choice was on us. It is infinitely less comforting to realize that somewhere out there are versions of ourselves who have made every conceivable wrong choice and yet somehow continued to live to make still more.

It is also comforting at first to realize that in the depths of time there are an infinite number of other versions of ourselves who have made every single choice in the same manner we have. In fact they have lived on time lines on which history has preceded precisely as it has on our own. However, on closer inspection we might not be quite so happy about it on realizing that some of these other versions of ourselves are large colonies of slime mold or chlorine-breathing slugs...

### The Wiener Schnitzel Waltz

"When I get back... to school," Jack Laterus puffed as he ran pell-mell through the streets of 1993 Berlin, "I think I'll try out... for Track and Field."

"Why's that, kid?" Aurelian Pflum panted right back at him. Pflum looked back over his shoulder and quickly added, "Turn left... next alley!"

Jack turned left with Pflum close behind him before replying, "Because after ... several months with you... I'm becoming... one hell of a... long distance runner."

“You’re also,” Pflum added, “a fine sprinter.” He glanced back again and added, “Turn right.”

As they did so they noticed *abiergarten* a short way up the block. “In here, kid,” Pflum told him, “and try not to look like we just ran a four-minute mile.” Pflum guided Jack toward a table as far from the street as possible and signaled to a barmaid to bring them a pitcher of dark lager. The beer and glasses arrived just as two policemen appeared outside the *biergarten*. “Don’t look, kid,” Pflum advised. “Just drink your lager as though you haven’t a care in the world. There’s nothing out there that has anything to do with you. Get it?”

“I got it, dude,” Jack replied as he always did whenever he tired of Pflum calling him “kid.” He picked up his glass and took a long swig of the dark brown liquid within. “I wish you had ordered the pilsner, though.”

“Sorry, kid. I was ordering in a hurry. Figured this was the fastest way to get something on the table behind which we could hide our faces and look like we’d been here a while as well. Order a pilsner if you want. Heck, order schnapps! We could probably both use it.”

“I’m not really in a boilermaker mood, Pflum,” Jack replied. “Besides, we may need to keep our heads clear if Doctor Basshart and his aides were arrested. I wonder if he’ll try to blame this on us.”

“I don’t see how,” Pflum countered. “Neither of us were swearing in Yiddish.”

“I’m just surprised that after fifty years or so anyone here even knew the language well enough to recognize it,” Jack opined.

“You haven’t been going to this time line’s entertainments,” Pflum told him, “I don’t think there’s a play in all Europe without at least one stereotypical Jewish character thrown in for comic relief. It seems the Germans actually like Jews so long as they are fictional. I even caught a musical adaptation of *Tevya’s Daughters* last night. A complete waste of money. Trust me, kid, *Fiddler on the Roof* it was not!”

“I just don’t see how this timeline turned out so different, though,” Jack commented. “It’s only been fifty-six years of so since Donald Creston replaced Hitler, but we got him off the time line before he’d been in office for more than a few months. It shouldn’t have made this much of a difference, should it have?”

“Haven’t you read the local history books?” Pflum asked, pouring himself a second glass of beer.

“I haven’t had the time,” Jack admitted. “I’ve been spending every spare moment working on my thesis. I missed the fall semester of my senior year, but I’d like to have my master’s by Christmas break next year.”

“I know, kid, and I’m sure you’ll do it. Still, we’ve been spending a lot of time on this time line with Doctor Basshart these last six weeks. You really should have been paying better attention to what we were doing.”

“I’ve been stuck in the Transit most of the time, Pflum,” Jack pointed out. “So tell me how this time line got to be the way it is.”

“Okay, why not?” Pflum sighed. “I still see too many stormtroopers running up and down the street out there anyway.”

“They’re not stormtroopers,” Jack told him. “Not really.”

“They look like stormtroopers in those uniforms though. Anyway, you already know how Mae and Donald Creston traveled to 1927 Paris on Jeanette’s transit and then promptly got themselves lost in the crowd.”

“Uh huh,” Jack nodded, “And then they started on a string of con games that stretched all over Europe.”

“Right,” Pflum agreed, “and you also know that some time between 1927 and 1932, they joined the Nazi party and Mae Creston had Hitler bumped off so her son could become the party leader.”

“Of course, and I was there when we helped Miss di Medici arrest him. What happened after that?”

“Well, for a couple months no one in the German government would even admit publicly that anything at all had happened, although observers the world over noticed that *Der Fuhrer* had suddenly stopped appearing in public. It was already making headlines by the time we nearly caught up to his mom in South Africa.

“Around the time Mama Creston was arrested in Hawaii, however, the party leadership was forced to admit that Herr Schmidt, as Creston had been calling himself, was gone. They weren’t silly enough to tell the truth and say that a mysterious group of people suddenly materialized in the Chancellory and abducted him, so instead they spoke of a protracted illness, an illness that they would have the rest of the world believe lasted three years.

“While the memory of Creston continued to languish in an imaginary illness, the Nazi leadership fought among themselves to replace him. Finally in early 1941, Heinrich Himmler managed to weasel his way into the Chancellor’s office. He wasn’t as greedy as Hitler had been in most time lines we are allowed to access, though. Under his management the Third Reich didn’t expand to the point of war until 1945 and by then they had already swallowed up Austria-Hungary and much of Eastern Europe. Instead of invading Poland in *ablitzkrieg*, Himmler sent agents in to foment all manner of tensions. Between riots, rebellions and the chaos that had been brought about by a few well-chosen assassinations, the Poles welcomed the ‘benevolent’ German peace keepers who arrived just ahead of the Soviet Union. Stalin evidently got the same idea just a bit later than Himmler. So actual war didn’t break out until 1945 when Himmler decided to invade Belgium, the Netherlands and France.

“It only lasted a few months, however, until Germany agreed to an armistice with Britain and the U.S.S.R. That’s where Himmler stopped, holding nearly everything between Poland and France. A tense peace settled in, but it wasn’t broken. In this world Nazi Germany was as good as its word, treaty-wise anyway. That didn’t stop them from infiltrating countries all over the world with secret agents, of course, but they were hardly the only ones.

“Meanwhile, when Germany conquered France to the cheers of its allies, Japan started swallowing up coastal China and islands in the Pacific as well. There was no Pearl Harbor type of attack, however and while the United States and Japan did swap blows for a couple of years, Roosevelt never quite got the support of the American public to do more than defend the U.S. holdings in the Pacific. There never was an armistice in the Pacific, but after a while Japan settled back to consolidate what it now held. By 1967, relations between the States and Japan had warmed considerably and they became ‘Most Favored’ trading partners.

“There was and still is a Cold War on this time line, but it’s between the alliance of the United Kingdom,

the Soviet Union and the United States and German Europe. However now, in 1993, Germany is cheerfully welcoming the rest of the continent, except for the U.K., Ireland and the Soviets that is, into their 'new' European Union."

"That's starting to sound familiar," Jack noted.

"It should," Pflum agreed. "According to Basshart, in another century or three the history of this time line should more or less converge with our own."

"How does he figure that?" Jack asked.

"His theory, what little I understand of it, is that history is determined by the physical conditions of the universe unless acted on by an outside force. You are intimately acquainted with the term 'Five nines,' of course."

"Of course," Jack replied. "We are restricted, by law to keep our Transit destinations on time lines that are 99.99999 percent or better in similarity to our own. This current time line is a special exception since it diverged only because of the actions of Mae and Donald Creston. Is Doctor Basshart saying that lines within the five nines are similar because something forces them to be?"

"That's what he thinks," Pflum admitted.

"I don't buy it," Jack stated. "I may not have been keeping up with local history, but I know the physical side of this business very well."

"You do, indeed," Pflum agreed. Jack had taken an internship with Down Time, Ltd. the previous summer to get hands-on experience in the scientific field of his choice. During that time he had missed the start of the Fall semester, so had stayed on for a few months as an employee.

"I would have thought that if there was some strange force that predetermines history, we'd have found it by now," Jack continued. "But there is nothing physically different between any of the lines on our time plane. That's what makes it a time plane."

"Then why does history vary from line to line across the time plane?" Pflum prompted him.

"It's just probability, Pflum. You know that. Anything that can happen does happen somewhere on the plane."

"Right, but why are the similar lines all bunched up together? Shouldn't they be scattered at random across the plane?" Pflum countered.

"Maybe they are," Jack replied. "My advisor thinks the apparent bunching of similar time lines is an illusion created by the mechanics of the Transitory Time Transport."

"However, even Doctor Deshpande, who invented the Transit, admits we don't really know, doesn't he?" Pflum pressed.

"True enough," Jack admitted.

"Face it, kid. The Blackfellow Equations describe the nature of time and probability, but they're notoriously silent on the subject of temporal topology," Pflum continued.

“I suppose,” Jack nodded and took another sip of beer. “Wait a minute! Since when are you an expert on the Blackfellow Equations?”

“I can read,” Pflum replied, “and one of the few things I’ve had to read while in the field lately have been your textbooks. Fascinating subjects they cover, but they are poorly written. I’m thinking about writing temporal textbooks just so students like you might have something interesting to read. Some of them make the Sahara look like a rain forest in comparison. Anyway if Doc Basshart is right, this time line will gradually adjust until it is almost like its neighbors. We’re already seeing signs of such an adjustment with this European Union.”

“It isn’t very much like the one on our time line,” Jack commented.

“There are a lot of parallels, kid, but I think it’s safe to get back to the Transit. It’s dark and I haven’t seen any of those stormtroopers for a while now.”

“I keep telling you they aren’t stormtroopers, Pflum” Jack replied after finishing the last of his beer.

“The difference, had they caught us, would have been negligible.” Pflum left enough money on the table to cover their tab and tip the barmaid, then led the way out.

Pflum’s habit was to park his Transit at the ends of long dark alleys where its door would appear to be part of a building. This time the building he had chosen was a quarter of a mile away from the *biergarten* they had taken refuge in. The afternoon had been warm and comfortable but while they had been drinking beer and debating temporal theory, clouds had rolled in from the west and it had started to rain. After an initial sprinkle, the rain had turned into the sort of half fog, half mist that seems to hover in the air and stick to anyone that has the poor judgment to move through it. They were quite wet by the time they got into the Transit.

“Anyone home?” Pflum called out as he and Jack stepped out of the dark, wet alley and into the dry and comfortably warm common room of the Transit. “I guess we’re the first back,” he sighed a moment later.

“The others may have been caught,” Jack pointed out worriedly. “Maybe we should look for them.”

“We don’t know where to start,” Pflum retorted. “We can’t exactly walk into the police station and try to post bail now, can we? Relax, if you can. At the very least we need to wait until their arrests are in the news. Look. Go change into some dry clothes and I’ll rig up the radio so we can listen to the local news.”

Jack nodded and went to the small temporary cubicle that had been his room this trip. Pflum went to the Transit console and picked up a coil of wire. One end was already attached to a radio. He opened the transit door and tossed the other end outside, then closed the door once more. He was fiddling with the tuner dial by the time Jack returned.

“Kid, see if you can pick up a newscast while I dry off,” Pflum requested.

“It shouldn’t be too difficult,” Jack muttered. “This place has more news and less music on their radios than anywhere else we’ve ever been.”

“Mostly the State extolling its own virtues, kid,” Pflum laughed.

Soon enough Jack tuned in to a news broadcast. “Too bad we don’t have a working television,” he called out to Pflum.

“No thanks,” Pflum quickly replied. “I really can’t stand to look at those severe gray uniforms the state news agency’s people wear.” A moment later he reappeared, wearing a dark blue shirt and tan trousers. That this was Down Time Ltd.’s version of a uniform for this time and place didn’t bother Pflum in the least.

“I haven’t been listening long,” Jack reported, “but so far there haven’t been any reports of Jews being arrested in Berlin.”

“There may not be,” Pflum replied. “I’m not sure it’s the sort of thing the Nazi government would want to admit happened. Remember there is an Israel in this world and any Jews caught in Europe are likely to be taken for Israeli spies. Either way it’s a story the authorities are going to think hard about before releasing.”

Just then the Transit door opened and Doctor Basshart and one of his graduate students entered.

“I’m glad to see you, Doctor,” Jack told him.

“Thank you, Mister Laterus,” Basshart replied. “Unfortunately, the police caught Mister Olafsen.”

We Will All Go Together When We Go

“Olafsen?” Pflum asked. “He’s Swedish, isn’t he?”

“Norwegian, actually,” Basshart replied. “Well American, but of Norwegian descent. He is also the one who started using Yiddish so I suppose it was only natural for the police here to concentrate on arresting him.”

“He was the one?” Pflum asked incredulously. “He’s not Jewish, is he? Frankly I thought it was Benny here.” He nodded toward the other student.”

“No. Mister Olafsen is Lutheran, but there seems to be a current fashion on campus among the students for using certain Yiddish words.”

“The things kids come up with these days. Jack, how come you don’t speak Yiddish?” Pflum asked.

“I don’t attend Harvard,” Jack shrugged. “I go to Case Tech. Last I heard, Harvard didn’t have a campus in Cleveland.”

“And what language are the kids speaking at Case these days?” Pflum asked, one eyebrow raised.

“English, mostly,” Jack replied flatly.

“Gentlemen,” Doctor Basshart interrupted the banter. “How are we going to rescue Mister Olafsen?”



“Do you know where they have taken him?” Pflum asked.

“They took him to the local police station,” Basshart replied. “We kept an eye on the building, which is why it took so long to return here, but after two hours an armored wagon of the *Geheime Staatspolizei* showed up and he was transferred out somewhere.”

“Gestapo,” Pflum muttered. “That’s all we need. Normally I’d say you should have come right back here, but we haven’t been here all that long either. I suppose we ought to take a gander at Gestapo headquarters, it’s about a mile away. Do you have any idea whether they have holding cells there?”

“They might,” Basshart replied, “but they have been trying to reform their public image this past decade or so. It’s likely their headquarters is nothing more than an office building.”

“Well, let’s go find out,” Pflum decided. He opened the transit door and dragged the antenna wire back inside. “Next trip I’m going to see if Ken can rig a permanent antenna to the outside of this crate. Doc, why don’t you and Benny change into something drier? This is likely to be a long, slow process, no need to be any more uncomfortable than necessary.”

Doctor Basshart said something in reply, but Pflum was no longer paying much attention to him, but when Pflum looked up a few minutes later the two academics had disappeared.

“Kid, we’re going to need to take a peak into every room in Gestapo Headquarters and we may as well start in the basement. That seems to be the traditional place to keep a dungeon.”

“Right, dude,” Jack replied. Pflum winced, but let it pass. “Good thing Ken finally fitted the Transit with a digital window.”

“I would have preferred it was directly on the door itself, but beggars can’t be choosy, I suppose. I piloted this crate for years without one,” Pflum replied. “Okay, here goes.” He activated the Transit’s controls and started making adjustments while consulting a city map of 1993 Berlin. “If the Gestapo is such a secret organization, I can only wonder why it is so clearly marked on this map.”

“The Gestapo didn’t print the map, did they?” Jack asked.

“No, one of the local banks did, why?”

“A public service, then. This way everyone knows what building to avoid if they can,” Jack opined.

“Good point,” Pflum admitted. “Too bad we don’t have an accurate map of the inside of the building, though. However, we can make one as we go along.”

“How’s that?” Jack asked.

“We still have all the readouts and screens from before we had a window, kid. I’ll leave the Transit’s sensors on full width and record the session as we go. Hopefully we won’t have to map the full building.”

“Are you certain we cannot be detected this way, Mister Pflum?” Doctor Basshart asked as he returned to the common room.

“I’m certain we can be detected,” Pflum replied. “We emit a subsonic hum outside the crate and any person we pass through while not in phase with this time line will feel a momentary chill. Most people

would just dismiss it, saying it felt as though someone had walked over their grave. Since none of the people in this building, with the exception of Rick Olafsen, even know that time travel is possible; I doubt we'll raise an alarm. Okay, we're here, sort of. Wow! Eight basements. Think they may be hiding something?"

"What gives you that idea?" Jack asked dryly.

"Kid, you've been hanging around with me too long," Pflum shot back sourly. "Well, if our boy is down here somewhere this ought to be a heck of a lot simpler than the time we kidnapped the Fuhrer. All the rooms only have one door each."

"What's so good about that?" Doctor Basshart asked.

"I can materialize the transit across the door to whatever room he's being kept in. It will keep anyone from getting in from the corridor while we get Mister Olafsen out of durance vile."

"Good trick," Benny commented.

"Thanks," Pflum replied. "It was my own little contribution to temporal travel. I told Raj Deshpande about it a few years ago, but I don't think he approved. Using his invention to help law-breakers get out of jail wasn't on his mind when he invented the Transit."

"I don't think Doctor Deshpande has ever really traveled into the past," Jack added. "In fact he never actually built a Transit."

"Ridiculous!" Pflum exclaimed. "How could he patent it if he didn't have a working model to produce?"

"He only patented the temporal regulator. He built a number of those, but he never used them in an actual Transit."

"I see," Pflum nodded. "That makes sense. The regulator is the heart of the Transit. Without it the rest of this crate is just a big box with a lot of lights and dials. Okay, keep an eye on the digital window, I'm going to slide us by each of the rooms. Sing out when we find Olafsen."

It turned out not to be quite as easy as Pflum made it sound. Moving the Transit through Gestapo headquarters was a difficult and labor intensive trick even in the most modern of Transits. On the other hand, Pflum's Transit was an ancient relic of a machine and piloting it was more an art than a science. Fortunately, Pflum was a master of that art, so while it was slow going, two hours later they found Rick Olafsen in a small interrogation room.

The graduate student had been shackled to a plain, wooden chair at one end of the room while two Gestapo officers took turns asking him questions. As Pflum and Jack studied the situation, it appeared the Gestapo men were confused and not a little frustrated. Even more strangely, Rick Olafsen seemed to be in a good mood.

"Who are we rescuing, Pflum?" Jack asked. "Rick or the Gestapo?"

"It does look like he's getting the better of them," Pflum observed, "but I suspect our Mister Olafsen just doesn't realize how much trouble he's in. One of those Nazis looks like he's about to lose his temper, so we'd better not try waiting until they leave."

“Pflum, the Germans are armed and all we have are a pair of hyperthyroid wrenches.”

“We have surprise on our side, kid, and those sidearms are in holsters that are snapped shut. I figure it will take them at least half a second to unsnap them and draw the guns. So long as we don’t hesitate, we ought to be able to over-power them. Yo, Doc, your job is to open that door as fast as you can. Then close it again after us. If anything goes wrong, I’ll have the transit all primed to return you home. Just hit this big red button here. Got it?” Doctor Basshart said that he did. “Good. Get by the door. Jack, I’ll feel better if I go on point. You bring us back into phase, then follow me in as fast as you can.”

Jack nodded and they switched places. The actual assault was over in seconds. The Germans were so shocked to see a strange, new door replace the one that had been there a moment before, they never had a chance to draw their weapons before Pflum clubbed them down with his wrench.

“I think you killed them, Pflum,” Jack noted sickly.

“It’s possible,” Pflum admitted. “I was only trying to beat them into unconsciousness, but I didn’t have time to be gentle. Hmm, no. This one is still breathing, but I’ll bet he’ll wake up to a headache that will make his last hangover a fond memory. Now I wonder where the keys are.”

“Right there on the table,” Rick told him cheerfully.

“Clumsy of them,” Pflum noted. “Then again, maybe not, you weren’t about to reach them and unlock yourself. Let’s get you out of here before our Gestapo friends here wake up.”

Jack grabbed the keys and started opening the shackles that held Rick in the chair.

“You could have just waited for me to catch up to you,” Rick told them. “I’m sure they’d have let me go in the morning.”

“I doubt that, kid,” Pflum told him. “These guys would have eventually killed you, after a long bout of torture, I’m sure.”

“No, they wouldn’t,” Rick replied confidently. “They just thought I was an Israeli spy. The Geneva Convention wouldn’t have allowed them to mistreat me.”

“Kid, you live a charmed life. First of all the Geneva Convention applies only to prisoners of war, not spies. They kill spies. Second, with the possible exception of occasional groups of people with similar interests who wanted to get together in Switzerland there never was a Geneva Convention in this world. Finally, they thought you were Jewish and these bastards consider that a capital offense all by itself. The only thing I can think of that must have saved you was the fact that you were so darned cheerful in spite of all their threats. They aren’t used to that and it confused them. Most modern Germans on this time line do their best not to come to the attention of the Gestapo.”

“Really?” Rick asked as Jack finally finished freeing him.

“Really,” Jack confirmed flatly. “Ask your friend, Benny. I’m sure he’ll give you all the details. Pflum, if I was ever this naïve, I apologize. No wonder you keep calling me ‘Kid.’”

“I don’t think you were ever quite this oblivious,” Pflum admitted. “At least not as long as I’ve known you.” One of the Gestapo officers groaned. “Uh oh, they’re waking up. Time to fly, kids.”

They hurried to the Transit door which Benny opened for them, and had just closed it when several shots rang out behind them. Doctor Basshart and his students threw themselves flat on the floor, but Pflum just chuckled and said, "Good thing we had Ken bullet-proof the field wall last month."

"After our last trip to Berlin it was kind of necessary," Jack added dryly.

Then Pflum hit the activation button and they started their journey home.

"You know, Doc," Pflum suggested, "for all you learned this trip, why didn't you just have us go to the United States and buy a few books on modern history?"

Doctor Basshart gave him a dirty look before replying "We'll do that next trip during the Christmas break, Mister Pflum."

New Math

It was Albert Einstein via his General Theory of Relativity who demonstrated that the fabric of Space is not flat but, in fact is bent to varying degrees in the vicinity of objects depending on their gravitational fields. This has been demonstrated not only mathematically but in the real world by observing the lensing effect of intergalactic light around nearer objects and even by measuring the curvature of signals from various interplanetary probes.

Time is closely attached to Space. In fact Time and Space are merely two sets of dimensions that are both integral parts, along with several other dimensions, of the same thing that we often call "Space-Time." Time however, unlike Space, is not merely bent, but as Aurelian Pflum has often observed, "Utterly twisted."

This is true in both the figurative way that Pflum usually means it and literally as well. In fact if Time was flat, instead of twisted, a Transitory Time Transport would not work the way it does. Consider Time as a cylinder of infinite length. The cylinder is made up of all the alternative history lines in the universe. As a Transit travels through time, it travels around that cylinder passing through every alternate, even as it heads up or down the cylinder. It is only the intentional engineering of commercial Transits that keep them to time lines that are almost entirely identical to the ones they started from.

However, while the cylinder is a comforting metaphor and works well to describe the way most Transits work, Pflum's transit, it turns out, is even more twisted than Time itself.

Having sustained damage on a previous mission, Pflum's Transit travels not only along the length and breadth of Time but it also shudders its way through the previously only theoretical dimension of alternative physics. There is no easily understood metaphor to describe how this particular craft moves through the continuum. If one were to conveniently forget the cylindrical nature of Time, however, and envision it as a plane composed of an infinite number of time lines, then that same one might think of each plane of alternative physics forming a really big and thick piece of plywood or perhaps the proverbial Dagwood sandwich only much larger than any human could comfortably digest. The biggest problem is that the Transit, while making its way through the lunchmeat and lettuce layers, still slips uncontrollably on the cheese and stumbles over the random chunks of pickle, which of course manifests in other inconvenient ways.

“Damn, but that crate of yours is loud, Pflum,” Jeanette Manovich commented by way of greeting as Pflum opened the Transit’s home door for Doctor Basshart and the students.

“I love you too, J.,” Pflum shot back. “At least you can’t say I don’t give Ken and his boys adequate time to prepare for my return. Where are they anyway?”

“Calibrating the new Transit,” Jeanette replied as Basshart and his boys trudged by, towing several large boxes full of artifacts as well as their luggage.

“See you in December, Mister Pflum,” Basshart told him in parting.

“I’ll look forward to it, Doc,” Pflum replied. “How about we check out Las Vegas next time?”

“I’ll consider it,” Basshart said gruffly before leaving the area.

“Charming fellow,” Jeanette remarked acidly, “and you just spent two weeks with him?”

“He’s okay,” Pflum shrugged, “Better than some of the passengers we have to carry anyway. Why aren’t you on the new Transit with Ken?”

“I’m not getting the new crate,” Jeanette shrugged. “I decided to keep mine and let Kyle have the new model. I’ve had too many modifications made to mine to want to have to start over again. Sharonne wants you in her office soonest, by the way.”

“Good thing I worked on my mission report on the way back then,” Pflum commented. “It might have been nice had she waited until I had something to eat first though.”

“Don’t worry about that,” Jeanette told him. “She ordered your usual post-trip pizza.”

“Now I really am worried,” Pflum shivered dramatically. “Whenever she buys dinner I get the check with interest. Jack, with Ken and his boys out, maybe you should start the air recirculating in the crate. Then maybe you’d better sweep her out too.”

“Sharonne wants to see both of you,” Jeanette told him. “I’ll start the recirculators and we hired a new cleaning service last week. I’ll call them for you.”

“A cleaning service? My, my! We must be doing well!” Pflum commented as he and Jack made their way to Sharonne Lachado’s office. “Maybe it’s a good time to hit the boss up for a raise.”

“You just got a raise, Pflum,” Jack reminded him, “after the Creston case.”

“So I did,” Pflum agreed, “but if Sharonne is bothering to feed us instead of waiting until we’ve had dinner she may be desperate enough to throw in a bonus or two.”

“Maybe we’d better find out what she wants first,” Jack advised.

“Spoilsport,” Pflum grumbled.

Sharonne Lachado was the founder and sole proprietor of Down Time, Ltd. During what seemed like another lifetime while working for Time Tours, Inc. - another temporal tourism concern - she managed to

salvage her first Transit from a government dump. Using it, she went into business for herself. Eventually, she hired Pflum to run the Transit for her and soon after that she was able to buy a second. For a while sales began to slump, but business had been so good lately that a third transit had recently joined her fleet. Down Time, Ltd, had room in its facilities for one more transit after that, but Sharonne had already taken out options on the rest of the buildings on Down Time's block, just in case she needed to expand her facilities.

Pflum was surprised not to find Sharonne's administrative assistant, Rain Benedor, at her desk until he realized how late in the day it was. "Guess we just go right in. Right, kid?"

"You got it, dude," Jack snapped back at him and opened the door in front of them. "Hi, boss!" he called cheerfully.

"Maybe I should assign you to work with Kyle Romilard," Sharonne commented acidly from her desk. "You're starting to sound too much like Pflum. Trust me. That won't help you when you get back to school. Oh, come in both of you and have some pizza. How was the academic trip? Nice and quiet for a change, I hope."

Pflum and Jack traded quick looks at each other before Pflum replied, "Nothing we couldn't handle." He handed her the report calmly.

Sharonne wasn't fooled. "Maybe I should wait for the movie," she remarked after glancing at the first few pages. "Can't you two ever stay out of trouble? Oh, never mind. We have bigger problems than worrying about stray academics. You two want something to drink with that pizza? Aurelian? I have some good beer in the fridge."

"We really have a big problem, don't we?" Pflum asked nervously. The pizza and beer alone were enough to put Pflum on his guard, but Sharonne never called him by his given name unless there was genuine trouble afoot.

"Not really," Sharonne assured him. "You remember Mrs. Callinger, of course."

"The lady who had us secure tickets to *Cats* for her and her friends," Pflum replied confidently. "What's the problem? Does she want a refund? The show we got her isn't for months yet."

"Mrs. Callinger is evidently capable of planning long term. She would also like fifty tickets to *The Fantastics* at the Sullivan Theater in New York for some time in June."

"Our time or the play's?" Jack asked.

"The play's, of course," Sharonne replied. "No hurry, but just like with the *Cats* tickets, she is willing to pay a premium for us to make a special trip just for the tickets."

"Fifty tickets, eh?" Pflum mused. "No wonder that play ran nearly forty-two years. Tomorrow morning soon enough for you?"

"Perfect," Sharonne replied. "And when you get back I have a special assignment for you two involving the Department of Temporal Transportation."

"Ah ha! I knew we had a problem!" Pflum exclaimed. "What's the DTT want anyway?"

“They want to inspect your Transit. After all the modifications Ken made following the Creston, affair it was only a matter of time before they came to see for themselves if the old crate is still certifiable. At least, that’s why I think they are really coming.”

“What do you mean?” Pflum asked.

“Well, ostensibly they claim they want to map sectors of the ‘Z’ dimension of Time.”

“Map it? How do they propose to do something like that? I know Ken talked about doing that, but none of his ideas were within our budget.”

“No kidding. I’m not really sure what they have in mind,” Sharonne replied, “but we’ll all have a chance to find out in two days.”

“Terrific,” Pflum groaned. “Maybe we should put off buying those tickets until after they’ve recertified the Transit.”

“No,” Sharonne decided. “We have a better chance getting a variance, albeit temporary, if we can show we have contracts to honor. That’s why I’m so glad you returned a day early this trip. We’ll talk again late tomorrow afternoon when Ken is available. It will give him time to run his usual diagnostics on your crate before the DTT people arrive.”

“Are these DTT agents really as bad as you make them sound, Pflum?” Jack asked.

The trip back to Twentieth Century New York had been a breeze. Without passengers to take care of, Jack had several hours to quietly catch up on his thesis while Pflum worked his way through a paperback. Early on in their acquaintance Jack had asked Pflum why he almost always read physical books when even the smallest available termuter pad could hold over one hundred thousand books and still leave room for thousands of movies, songs, and games, and yet still functioned as a personal computer even when cut off from the additional content and shared computing power of the Terranet.

“In a few minutes, you can make up your own mind, kid,” Pflum replied as they walked down the stairs to the Transit “garage.”

Pflum had simply replied, “Kid, there’s nothing quite like actually turning the pages.” In fact, at times it seemed like Pflum was a latter day Luddite. Except for man-handling his Transit through Time and, to a lesser extent, Space, he rarely used what most people of the Twenty-second Century would call modern technology. His apartment had all the modern conveniences, but he used them only because there was no easy alternative. For example, by experience he was fully comfortable cooking over a wood or gas fire, but these were no longer options in any kitchen. Aside from hobbyists, very few people cooked any more for that matter, but Pflum did, even if it was over an induction stove. It did not stop him from buying the more popular self-cooking meals when he was in a hurry which was most of the time, but when he could he enjoyed throwing various ingredients together just to see what he might get. In an earlier era he might have been an alchemist. The only difference was that sometimes his concoctions really did produce something analogous to gold or even the epicurean version of the Philosophers Stone.

“What are all those boxes outside the Transit?” Jack asked as they reached the garage floor. Ahead of

them the large overhead door in front of their Transit was open and a dozen plasfoam crates were stacked up just outside the Transit's home door.

"Darned if I know," Pflum replied. "I wasn't aware the DTT guys were bringing any luggage."

Sharonne and Ken were already inside the Transit, seated at the long table with a woman in a medium gray suit that was wrong for her in nearly every way. However, it was the same bland color that every agent of the DTT wore in Pflum's experience. Pflum guessed she was about thirty-two years old although by current medical treatments she might have been anything between twenty and fifty. She kept her light brown hair short in an almost masculine style, but her green eyes, finely shaped face and athletically trim body left no doubt as to her gender.

"Aurelian, Jack," Sharonne performed the introductions, "this is Agent Lucinda Grasso." "

Everyone murmured the pleasantries one normally observes between predator and prey. Finally Pflum decided to break new ground by asking, "I see you aren't traveling light today; what's with all the crates?"

"Pflum," Sharonne started in a tone of voice that could only be admonitory then quickly softened it, "the DTT has developed a number of devices with which they intend to measure the properties of other time planes along the Z axis."

"Z axis?" Lucinda asked curiously. Her clothes might have been severe, but her voice was a clear and pleasant soprano.

"That is what we have come to call the third dimension of Time," Ken explained. "I have communicated with Doctor Deshpande on the matter and he has started using the term himself."

"I see. At the DTT we have been calling it theRangeofUniversal Properties ," Lucinda commented.

"That just rolls off the tongue, now doesn't it?" Pflum commented.

"Pflum!" Sharonne growled.

"Sorry," Pflum replied immediately. "That just slipped out."

"Doesn't bother me in the least," Lucinda shrugged, although it was obvious she was irritated by trying to hide it. "We call it the R.U.P. for short."

"Not much better, is it?" Pflum asked pointedly, but he took the sting out of it with a winning smile.

"Perhaps not," Lucinda admitted, "and if the foremost expert on Temporal Studies is calling it the Z axis, I suppose we will eventually do likewise."

"It's a good mathematical term," Jack offered. "And since Doctor Deshpande is a mathematician it would tend to fit well with his view of the Space-Time continuum."

"AndRangeofUniversal Properties sounds like something a bureaucrat might come up with," Pflum added. "It's not particularly accurate either. So what is the mission this time?"

Pflum had asked that of Sharonne, but it was Lucinda who answered, "We are going to start mapping



the Range... the Z axis.”

“Why?” Pflum asked.

“A number of reasons,” Lucinda replied. “First of all, it seems likely that just as Harvard’s Dr, Basshart has contracted you to aid in his research of the Creston Time Line...”

“Creston Time Line?” Pflum questioned. “Aren’t you giving those... uh... con artists more glory than they have coming to them?”

“We needed a label by which to distinguish it from other time lines that conform to the five-nines requirement, Mister Pflum,” Lucinda replied tightly. “If you would prefer, I’m sure we could come up with a long-winded, bureaucratic-sounding name.”

“Never mind,” Pflum shook his head. “Please continue.”

“Yes, well, it seems likely scholars will want to study this new aspect of Time you have suddenly gained access to. Since the DTT regulations were written before it was even possible to travel along the Z axis it behooves us to study it ourselves and get an idea of what we are dealing with.”

“Reasonable,” Pflum conceded. “I normally would have expected you to just condemn my crate.

“Thank you for the vote of confidence,” Lucinda retorted. “DTT regulations are not bureaucratic whims in spite of what you field operatives believe.”

“I didn’t say otherwise,” Pflum shrugged, biting back half a dozen sarcastic comments.

Lucinda stared at him as though trying to read his mind, then continued, “We have decided that rather than prohibiting all travel along the Z axis it might be best to see if we can quantify zones along the Z axis that are compatible to life as we know it. Second, no matter how foolish it may seem, you are likely to find tourists who want to visit these new time planes you have discovered.”

“We have not yet decided whether we would even want to honor such requests,” Sharonne told her.

“Ms Lachado, you are a businessperson,” Lucinda replied. “I don’t mean to be insulting, but in my experience businesspeople will provide almost any service if the price is right or are you the exception?”

“It’s true enough as it goes,” Sharonne agreed amiably, “but the profit has to outweigh the risk. For example, I would never book a trip to a timeline outside the five-nines no matter how much the client was willing to pay. The risk of getting caught is too great and the fines would ruin me and several generations of my descendants.”

“That was the reason we imposed those fines,” Lucinda replied a bit too smugly for Pflum’s comfort. “Finally, if your Transit can travel on the Z axis, it is only a matter of time before others are modified to do so as well.”

“Hah! I’d like to see someone try,” Ken Jackson laughed. “Preferably from a great distance, of course. Ms. Grassoff, the Transit’s amazing abilities are the result of having to use nonstandard replacement parts, emergency field repairs, and the random, and I must say unauthorized, manipulation of the controls by a certain FBI agent, who last I heard had been reassigned to study pilferage at a nonexistent weather station in Alaska.”

“All that doesn’t sound very safe,” Lucinda opined. “I wonder that the DTT ever approved any of it.”

“All my repairs have been DTT certified,” Ken shot back. “You may check our records.”

“I shall,” Lucinda replied. “You may rest assured on that count.”

“In any case,” Ken continued, “I know what parts were affected to make travel on the Z axis possible, but I’ll be damned if I can repeat the process. I tried and I’ll bet a lot of others will too, but I seriously doubt they’ll succeed. This Transit originally belonged to a government agency and was supposed to be experimental. I’m not sure what they were trying to do with it, but it didn’t work so we were able to acquire it for commercial use.”

“With some decidedly noncommercial aspects to it,” Lucinda replied.

“Are you referring to its ability to home on a tracer?” Ken asked. “There’s no regulation against it.”

“True enough although no commercial Transit has ever been allowed to be built with that ability,” Lucinda pointed out, “but there is no regulation against a commercial concern buying such a transport should it become available.” She paused for a moment then continued, “However, I’m not exactly telling tales out of school by admitting that the DTT is probably going to require that ability to be built into all new Transits and will recommend retrofitting the circuits into the older models. The Creston Case showed us the value in that.”

“Sounds like we’ll have competition for the theatre circuit before long,” Pflum commented dryly. Sharonne just glared at him.

“Anyway,” Lucinda tried to bring the conversation back to the subject, “we have decided that before we can draft a new regulation concerning the Z axis, we will have to study it thoroughly and the only way we can do that is with your Transit. Consequently, we will hire you, at twice your normal rates – consider that hazard pay – to assist us in our inquiries.”

“Have you completely thought this out?” Pflum asked.

“What do you mean, Mister Pflum?”

“The Z axis involves alternative physics,” Pflum replied. “Sapient colonies of coral who breathe fluorine the way we breathe oxygen will seem normal in comparison to some of what we will encounter. We’re going to need to make the Transit air tight.”

“Yes, we are aware of that, Mr Pflum. The DTT will be paying to completely seal your field wall and outfit your Transit with an airlock.”

“We also need to be able to sample the air without actually stepping outside,” Pflum pointed out.”

“Agreed,” Lucinda told him. “We will also need to measure the outside air pressure and gravity as well as take soil samples and detect as many sorts of health hazards, biological, chemical, and radioactive, as we are capable of detecting.”

“Some of the worlds,” Jack added then corrected himself, “no, some of the habitats we will encounter will be in planetary clouds that never congealed or maybe the universe will be nearly completely filled

with matter except for pockets of vacuum where the stars and planets are. In a lot of planes I suspect conditions may not even be compatible with matter as we know it and I don't even want to think about the explosion we'll be part of if we try to materialize on an anti-matter world."

"Our scientists have built a number of instruments that should indicate such environments without our needing to come into phase on such a plane," Lucinda told him. "They will also help us map the Z axis so we may formulate a definition of safe destinations among the time planes."

"Have any of these instruments actually been field tested?" Ken asked seriously.

"Not outside our own time plane," Lucinda replied, "but I am assured they will do the job for us."

"I would like to see the data collected in your tests before I start retrofitting all these devices into this Transit," Ken told her firmly.

"I don't have that information," Lucinda admitted.

"It's not classified, is it?" Sharonne asked.

"As a matter of fact it is," Lucinda replied, "accessible on a need-to-know basis only."

"It seems to me that we definitely need to know," Sharonne countered.

"Uh... I suppose you do," Lucinda agreed.

"I also see that none of your shiny new equipment came with installation instructions," Ken noted. "Is that also classified information?"

"The equipment itself is," Lucinda replied thoughtfully, "but I don't think anyone ever documented how to install it. Can't you just figure it out?"

"Possibly," Ken told her, "but if I'm wrong you all could wind up dead."

"Good point, Mister Jackson," Lucinda conceded. "I'll have to go back and talk to my superiors. At the very least we should have at least one of the designers helping you to install these devices. Can you start to install the airlock in the meantime?"

"That all depends," Ken told her. "How many of your devices are integrated with the airlock?"

"The air samplers are, of course, but I think the rest are to be attached through the field wall."

"Well, I can start sealing the walls and testing for leaks," Ken decided, "and try to figure out how I'm going to install the airlock."

"It might be best to extend the Transit a few feet," Jack suggested.

"We would have to recalibrate the regulator to account for the larger external size of the crate," Ken pointed out.

"You will anyway," Jack replied, "since there's no way you can install an airlock completely inside the transit as it is currently configured. We would have to move the console and that would take a couple

weeks to rewire, wouldn't it?"

"I will leave you to work that out," Lucinda told him, "and get back to you as soon as I can. I don't suppose I can get an estimate of how long it will take before we are ready to leave..." They all just stared at her. "I did not think so."

So Long, Mom

Modifications to Pflum's Transit took a full week. Lucinda returned the next day with the two DTT scientists who had designed the new instruments and would be making the actual map of the Z axis on the upcoming mission. They supervised Ken and his assistants as they did the actual installation.

"I don't envy you, Pflum," Ken told him one evening when he walked into the workshop. "Those two think they own us. If it were not for the fact that you and Jack are going to be on board, I'd find a way to arrange for a fuse to blow as soon as they were well away from here."

"Why, Ken," Pflum retorted. "I didn't know you cared."

"Well," Ken replied, "I like Jack. But I wouldn't wish those two on you either. Unfortunately my wishes don't come into play."

"I haven't met them yet," Pflum admitted. "Are they as bad as all that?"

"Worse," Ken replied. "Just wait and see for yourself. Anyway the Transit is now almost ten feet longer than it was to make room for the airlock and all the new instruments, not to mention the second console from which Doctors Neil and Noel will monitor those instruments."

"Doctors Neil and Noel?" Pflum echoed.

"Yeah, and they dress alike as well – the same gray uniform all DTT people wear. Is that some sort of departmental regulation of theirs?"

"I don't think so," Pflum told him. "Just a lack of imagination and a strong desire to conform."

"Well, there's still a lot of room left so unless they find a way to fill them, you have a couple new closets too. Where have you been the last few days anyway?" Ken asked. "Vacation?"

"What's a vacation?" Pflum countered. "I went out with Kyle on his first trip in the new Transit. Nice crate that is, isn't it? Anyway, we took a group of tourists, mostly lawyers and politicians back to ancientRome so they could observe the Republic first hand. Nearly got in a lot of trouble when they started trying to actually speak to the locals though.

"I've come to the conclusion that people should not be allowed to use Latin without a license," Pflum continued. "The way those lawyers mispronounce the language turned quite a few harmless statements into rather obscene insults."

"More jailbreaks?" Ken asked.

“No, they didn’t insult Julius Caesar or anyone else of Senatorial rank, thank God,” Pflum replied, “They just had to run for their lives a few times while Kyle and I tried to explain that they were ignorant barbarians who just couldn’t speak a civilized tongue. Only one of them, a congressman, actually got beaten up. So when will my Transit be able to play the piano again?”

“Tomorrow afternoon at the latest,” Ken replied.

“You can’t stall them?”

“Why? Do you really want a vacation?” Ken asked.

“No, but I really don’t want to fly with three DTT agents.”

“Talk to Sharonne,” Ken replied, “but I doubt that will do you any good.”

Pflum did talk to Sharonne Lachado, but she informed him that the DTT had increased its offer to triple their usual rates because Ken and Jack had been very efficient at pointing out potential dangers. With triple pay coming, there wasn’t much Pflum could do but accept his fate. “Consider yourself under orders to defer to the DTT scientists. The last thing we need is to have any of them looking for a reason to shut us down. And you ought to try being friendlier to Ms. Grasso, Pflum,” she told him.

“Just how friendly?” Pflum asked. “I do have a girl friend even if I haven’t managed to mesh schedules with Sam in weeks.”

“Try friendly enough to keep her from condemning your Transit when it starts acting up. It is due, you know.”

“That’s going to mean very friendly,” Pflum muttered sourly.

“Come on, Aurelian!” Sharonne urged him. “She’s at least as attractive as Jennifer Viking.”

“Then why don’t you date her?” Pflum snapped. “Contrary to what you might think, it takes more than a pretty face to attract me.”

“I’m aware of that,” Sharonne told him coldly. “It also takes a large...” but Pflum was already out of her office and on his way down to the Transit.

Rain Benedor was looking nervously through Sharonne’s door as Pflum came through. Pflum winked at her and advised. “Let her count to ten or so first, then go in.”

“She never loses her patience with anyone but you, Mr. Pflum,” Rain replied softly.

“Special talent,” Pflum chuckled and continued on his way.

The empty bay in the garage was not so empty this morning. There were about two dozen tourists waiting to board Kyle’s Transit. One was a regular customer of Down Time, Ltd.

“Oh, Captain Pflum!” she called, hopefully. “Will you be taking us to Disney World today?” Twentieth and Twenty-first Century Disney theme parks were always a favorite destination. They had declared bankruptcy midway through the Twenty-first Century, but Pflum figure that they could probably be quite

profitable in the present due to the nostalgia factor.

“Oh, hello, Miss Worren,” Pflum greeted her.

“Daphne, Captain,” she corrected him charmingly. She was still in her mid-thirties and attractive in a quiet, bookish way with shoulder-length brown hair and wire-rim glasses. Pflum was never certain if she wore glasses because she preferred them or if she was one of the few people left who were not candidates for corrective eye surgery.

“Daphne, then,” Pflum echoed warmly. “No, today you’ll be traveling in our newest Transit with Kyle Romilard. I still pilot the old clunker at the end.”

“Kyle?” Daphne asked, sounding worried. “Didn’t he use to intern with Miss Manovich?”

“He was her co-pilot,” Pflum replied, “but don’t worry, he’s fully qualified to handle this crate. As a matter of fact, I assisted him on its first mission, just the other day, not that he needed it. He handles this new crate better than I would, probably. More experience with the newer controls. Enjoy your vacation.”

“Thank you, Captain,” she replied, but there was a wistful note in her voice.

Pflum continued on down the line and glanced at Jeanette’s Transit. The field end was missing which meant she was out on a trip somewhere and when. By the amount of the Transit still showing he estimated she had gone back at least three thousand years. He tried to remember when that trip had been scheduled for, but couldn’t even guess. Too much of tourist interest was happening in the Second Millenium B.C.E.

Finally, he reached his own Transit, the door was open and voices could be heard from within. “If he doesn’t show up soon,” one male voice said sternly, “we will leave without him. I can pilot this Transit.”

“No you won’t and you cannot,” Pflum heard Jack’s retort. “Unless you think you know the access code, Doctor Neil.” There had been a time when Jack might have been intimidated by a government agent, but he had grown out of that after bouncing an FBI bully off the Transit’s ceiling.

“There are ways to bypass an access code,” Doctor Neil replied smugly.

“I’d like to see you try,” Pflum challenged him from the doorway. “We had to customize the BIOS of this crate’s navigational computer. There is no backdoor on her.”

“It is about time you arrived, Mister Pflum,” the other man in the room, who Pflum assumed was Doctor Noel, blamed him. Ken had been right, these two might as well have been fraternal twins. They were not identical, but looked enough alike that Pflum doubted he would ever be able to tell them apart. “You are late!”

“We are scheduled to leave at Nine A.M. sharp,” Pflum replied. “By my watch it is Eight Forty-five. What’s your problem?”

“You have not been briefed yet,” Doctor Noel told him.

“You mean the part where you tell me ‘These are our toys, keep your hands off?’ That shouldn’t take long.”

“Mister Pflum, we have very specific needs in order to get the optimum results,” Doctor Neil chimed in.

“Such as?” Pflum asked skeptically.

“They need to traverse the Z axis at a constant rate of planes per second,” Jack translated. “I already told them about Ken’s modifications of the control you built. It won’t be a challenge.”

“How well can you monitor that control manually?” Neil asked.

“Ha!” Pflum laughed. “That’s the only way I can control it. There are no automatic controls. I’m surprised no one mentioned that to you.”

“Gentlemen,” Lucinda Grassoфф interrupted them. “We are going to be living with one another for the next week or two, would it be too much to ask that we not begin this relationship with you lot trying to establish which is the alpha male?”

The two DTT scientists looked embarrassed but Pflum chuckled and replied, “You do realize you are asking us to fly in the face of a convention established millions of years ago, don’t you?”

“It’s my job,” she replied lightly.

“And you’re very good at it,” Pflum assured her with a wink. “Well, gentlemen, is there anything else I need to know besides ‘shut up and drive the cab?’”

There wasn’t, so he and Jack ran through their usual checklist. Evidently even that did not satisfy the DTT scientists.

“Must you continue to stall this way?” Doctor Noel asked.

“Are you, as a duly appointed agent of the Department of Temporal Transportation, ordering me to not conduct the federally mandated pre-mission checks?”

“Of course he isn’t,” Lucinda cut in immediately. “Doctor Noel, we will get moving sooner if you refrain from getting in Mister Pflum’s way, just as you will finish your investigation faster when Mister Pflum refrains from trying to tell you how to use your shiny new toys.”

Pflum bit back several comments at that point and continued through the checklist. A few minutes later he crossed the final item off and he started keying in the Transit’s activation code when he caught the two doctors watching him intently. “Excuse me, gentlemen, but I’ll have to ask you to turn away from the console while I key in this code.”

“Nonsense!” Doctor Neil scoffed. “What if you and Mister Laterus are incapacitated and I have to pilot this transit home?”

“If you don’t know the answer to that, Doctor,” Pflum replied coldly, “then it is obvious you are not a licensed Transit pilot.”

“Mister Pflum is correct,” Lucinda agreed. “Every Transit is equipped with an emergency return circuit. The activation code is not necessary.”

“Then which one is it?” Doctor Neil asked.

Lucinda gave him an appraising stare while Pflum held his breath. Then she spoke, “That big red one in the middle of the console. Press it three times and you’re on your way home.”

Pflum let himself start breathing again. For some reason Lucinda had lied through her teeth. The emergency home switch was actually under the console as every experienced Transit pilot knew. That the Doctor did not prove that he had no practical experience with Transits. Pflum decided the scientists had spent their careers in the lab. That did not mean they knew nothing of time travel. Doctor Raj Deshpande never piloted a Transit either, but he invented it.

Reluctantly the two scientists turned their backs and even Lucinda looked away while Pflum keyed in the current activation code, “DTT bites!” Suddenly the Transit’s regulator hummed to life.

“You may turn around now,” Pflum told them. “I assume you would like me to move us geographically and maybe a bit temporally as well.”

“That should not be necessary,” Doctor Noel replied huffily.

“Then humor me please,” Pflum replied. “The Z axis represents changes to basic physics of the universe, but not the history. If we don’t move away and the Transit suddenly breaks down, and this crate has been known to do that from time to time, we would materialize on the co-extant points of another line’s version of this Transit.”

“You mean another plane’s version,” Doctor Neil corrected him pedantically.

“Same thing,” Jack commented. “The Transit we would suddenly, and extremely briefly I might add, coexist with would only be from a single time line just as we are, even if it is from another plane.”

“On the other hand,” Pflum added, “it’s also true that it would be the only analog of our Transit on that plane so you’re both right. Our rapidly scattering atoms, however, would not be in any condition to appreciate it, though.”

“When and where do you propose we move to?” Lucinda asked.

“When? A week or two back should be more than sufficient. No need to travel decades or centuries, I’d just feel more comfortable if we stayed out of our present. Where? Somewhere we aren’t likely to land in the middle of a city, I think.”

“Where on the Y axis?” Noel asked.

“Does it matter?” Pflum asked.

“I suppose not,” the doctor agreed.

“Okay,” Pflum turned to Jack. “Shermanset the ‘Way Back Machine,’ to two weeks ago and about six hundred miles to the west.”

“Done,” Jack reported a few seconds later.

“Let’s check the window,” Pflum suggested. He turned around and looked outside. “Rolling hills, mostly



grassland with a few small copses of trees. Looks good to me. Doctors, are you ready to go to work?"

"We are," they both replied.

"Good," Pflum commented. "Let me land the transit first..."

"Why?" Neil asked.

"It will allow me to lock the Transit to our position in the X and Y axes of time. Once we have done that all travel will be along the Z." He brought the Transit into phase and locked the normal Transit controls. Then, after activating the regulator once more, he turned to the special controls Ken had built.

"Submitted for your approval," he intoned. "Five people about to embark on a voyage of scientific discovery. Like the great pioneers before them, the risks are great but the riches to be won inestimable. But unlike their predecessors, these pioneers are about to explore The Twilight Zone."

"Very funny, Pflum, Lucinda told him flatly.

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"We want a nice slow run up the Z axis," Doctor Noel requested.

"Shouldn't be a problem," Pflum commented. He reached over to the control and turned it ever so slightly. Just above it was a readout, just an oscilloscope-like display actually that under normal usage showed nothing more than a crisp, sharp line. Pflum never understood why that particular screen was federally required in every Transit since it reacted only to travel along the theoretical Z axis and until very recently no Transit, not even his, was capable of doing so. As soon as he turned the dial that instructed the Transit to start slipping through planes of alternative physics, however, the sharp line became slightly fuzzy. Slightly fuzzy and stable, however was much better than very fuzzy and rapidly changing, which is what it did before Pflum's and Ken's repairs. "How's that?" Pflum asked.

"Are we moving?" Doctor Neil asked.

"We are according to my instruments," Pflum replied.

"We never did know our exact rate of speed along the Z axis," Jack commented. "We just knew we were moving, sometimes fast, sometimes slowly."

"Ah!" Noel exclaimed. "We've just changed planes."

"Maybe we should name the Transit O'Hare," Pflum mused.

"We could stand to move a little faster," Neil told them. "At this rate we aren't likely to find any measurable differences for days."

Pflum gave the control another turn and the line became a bit fuzzier. "Now?" It took several minutes but they eventually found a speed that suited Doctors Neil and Noel. Eventually Pflum and Jack stepped

away from the console, but did not fold it shut as they normally would have on a commercial trip. Not only did they not have to worry about tourists trying their hands at the controls, but there was always the chance they might need to get back to them in a hurry.

“Too bad the cleaning crew knocked down the cabin walls from our last trip to Naziworld,” Pflum commented to Jack. “I suppose now would be a good time to set them back up.

“Cabin walls, Mister Pflum?” Lucinda asked, pulling her face up out of a magazine..

“Yes. We have a set of temporary walls we can set up around each of the cots. They afford us a bit of privacy for sleeping and the bedrooms are easier to change clothes in than what passes for the head.”

“I had wondered about that,” Lucinda commented.

“You could have asked,” Pflum replied.

“And get caught in the crossfire between you and Doctors Neil and Noel? I think not. Well, I will appreciate the privacy,” she told him, before turning back to her magazine.

Pflum and Jack spent the next half-hour setting up the walls. It was their usual arrangement along one side of the Transit’s common room, starting from the home wall so that with five small bedrooms they only ran about half the length of the Transit. They were actually a bit larger than necessary to actually sleep and change in, but they coincided with the frequency of the lighting panels so each person would have some control over how light or dark it was in his room although it was not perfect since the dividers did not reach the ceiling.

They were nearly done when one of the doctors suddenly started shouting, “Pflum! Your Transit is going too fast now! Slow us down!”

“Finish up, kid,” Pflum muttered before rushing to the console. The fuzzy line had expanded to fill half the display. He fiddled with the control and the line shook back down to the approximate size he had last seen it at.

“Better,” acknowledged Noel.

“No,” Neil commented a few moments later. “Now we’re barely moving at all. No! Too fast!” he added before Pflum could even touch the control.

“Which is it?” Pflum asked.

“Fast,” Noel replied. “Uh... no it seems to have settled down now.”

“And now it’s going too fast again,” Doctor Neil complained.

“I haven’t touched the controls for the last few changes,” Pflum replied.

“We’re barely moving at all now,” Doctor Noel noted sourly.

“I suspect our variable velocities may have something to do with the properties of the planes we are traveling through,” Jack opined.

“No, impossible,” both of the DTT scientists told him dismissively. “it must be due to a malfunctioning regulator.”

“The Blackfellow equations do allow for a certain variation of viscosity in Time,” Jack insisted.

“Nonsense,” Noel retorted. “There has never been any instance of time viscosity observed before.”

“Kid,” Pflum told him acidly, “Franny Blackfellow’s still your advisor, isn’t she?”

“You know she is,” Jack replied. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Doctors Noel and Neil look at each other in confusion.

“Well, be sure to let her know the DTT says she doesn’t know what she’s talking about. Tell you what,” Pflum suggested to the two scientists, “we’re not too far along so far, let’s just scoot back to when we started from and try again?”

They agreed and Pflum had them back in a few minutes. Then he started the Transit back through the planes at the same slow speed the doctors had originally specified. They maintained a stable velocity for just over half an hour and then once again their speed started varying erratically.

Pflum brought the Transit to rest and asked, “So, how do your readings compare to our first run?”

“I would refer to do it one more time just to be certain,” Doctor Noel requested.

“Have it your way,” Pflum replied. He fiddled with the controls and set the Transit up for one more run. Once more the Transit proceeded along for just over thirty minutes until its previously steady progress went haywire.

“There does seem to be a certain sort of similarity between the three runs,” Doctor Neil admitted reluctantly.

“Similarity or identity?” Lucinda asked pointedly.

“Well, it is hard to say exactly,” Noel replied. “I am not sure we can measure the phenomenon accurately with our current instrumentation.”

“But for all intents and purposes we appear to be reaching this zone of variable viscosity at pretty much the same point in the continuum,” Neil added.

“And what do you suggest we do? Go on or return home until we have better equipment?” Lucinda asked.

“Oh, we should continue on,” Doctor Noel replied immediately. “It is just that we may not be able to collect all the data we intended. It is a shame, though, that the Transit is not able to automatically adjust to the viscosity of the planes.”

“Up until now, the trick has been staying on our own plane,” Pflum told him coolly. “While we have occasionally speculated about taking tours out into new and interesting planes, those discussions were mostly the sort you have over a pitcher of beer. Charging off into the unknown sounds like a great deal of fun in the movies and all, but in real life we haven’t had the time or funds to engage in this sort of research and we could hardly take a group of tourists off into the great unknown, now could we?”

“Well, perhaps we should charge on at a greater velocity,” Lucinda suggested, “and see how far we have to go before we come back to our own plane or at least the sector it lies within.”

“Good idea, Miss Grasso,” Noel complimented her. A few minutes later they were underway again.

“It won’t happen,” Jack told Lucinda quietly.

“What won’t?” she asked.

“We won’t come back to our own plane unless we turn back. Oh, we’ll know if I’m wrong since there are a number of tracer units for this Transit sitting around Down Time’s facilities and if we pass through our own time plane the detection unit should ring out like Big Ben.”

“The clock in London?” Lucinda asked.

“Actually Big Ben is the name of the bell that tolls on the hour,” Jack told her. “I believe it is tuned to the note E. Anyway with as many tracers as we have sitting around, I doubt we could flash through our plane fast enough to miss them. Anyway, the z axis is not like the x-y combo. We’re not going to be orbiting around a metaphorical cylinder this trip. The longer we continue to travel along the z axis, the further from home we will get.”

“Are you certain?” she asked.

“Fairly. Unlike your friends over there, I’m not over-burdened with academic degrees. Not yet anyway, but I have been studying with some of the foremost theorists, so I think it is safe to say that I am not entirely ignorant when it comes to temporal theory. Also, as Pflum mentioned, Doctor Blackfellow is my advisor. We had several long discussions last month when this Transit started straying off the home plane and she also came to see it in action. Ms. Lachado allowed her to ride free with us on a couple of short trips. We didn’t have all the hardware to make the measurements your boys are doing, but she came away with a fair notion of what was happening especially after examining the controls Ken and Pflum installed. Doctor Blackfellow may have been the theorist who thought up the mathematics from which Doctor Deshpande invented the Transit, but she’s done a lot of hands-on work as well in the last fifty-odd years.”

“And she thinks the z axis is infinite?”

“All time axes are infinite,” Jack replied, “or long enough that we can treat them as infinite. I mean the Universe, so far as we know began with the single event called the Big Bang. Time began in that instant in the sense that what ever happened before that instant doesn’t count especially since the Universe didn’t exist before that instant. As for the end of the universe, well that all depends on whether you accept the flat universe which is currently the most widely accepted or if you think the universe is open or closed. Many physicists say that time will end either with the Big Crunch, which hardly anyone believes in anymore or at a time when no matter is left in the Universe. I’m not sure I think time would really end at that point, but there won’t be anything around to measure it either, so perhaps that’s as good as ended. It’s sort of like the old sophomore philosophy question, ‘If a tree falls in a forest and there’s no one around to hear it, did it really fall?’”

“Don’t you mean, ‘Did it make a sound?’” Lucinda asked.

“Either way. If you didn’t witness it, can you prove it happened?” Jack paused to let Lucinda reply, but

after a few seconds he continued, “Of course you can. Let’s use the sound you mentioned. Sound is made by vibrations, in this case through air mostly. Now we know that you can’t have a forest in a vacuum, so a falling tree is always going to make a sound.”

“But sound is something that is heard,” Lucinda maintained. “If there is no one around to hear it...”

“It’s a forest, Ms. Grasso. There is always something around to hear such sounds. Even if you remove all the animals, birds and insects, it has been repeatedly demonstrated that trees can detect sounds to an extent. If you take away the other trees you won’t have a forest anymore. It’s a meaningless argument in any case. The situation just doesn’t happen. Arguing over just when time will end is equally futile since no one will have been around to witness it for a very long time.”

“Either that or we’ll have long since retired to Mexico,” Pflum commented from the Transit’s console.

“This is terrible,” Doctor Noel commented a few hours later. “In some regions we travel so quickly it seems as though there is nothing there, but then we hit a spot where we may as well be moving through cold molasses.”

“Save that at the end of the trip I won’t have to hose down the outside of the crate,” Pflum told him sarcastically.

“It does appear that we are finding, for lack of a better term, bands of time planes that while out of phase appear to be compatible with matter and perhaps even life as we know it,” Neil added.

“Perhaps we should try landing on some of them and taking more accurate readings,” Neil suggested.

“Too soon I think,” Noel told him. “Let’s let the Transit continue on for another day and see if we can detect any pattern to the variations from plane to plane.”

“I wonder if maybe we are not traveling in a straight line,” Pflum mused.

“Mister Pflum?” Doctor Noel asked. “What do you mean?”

“Well we call this the z axis and assume that like a true axis it would be mathematically represented as a straight line, but maybe our path is not quite so straight forward. Maybe we’re sort of weaving our way through the time planes so that while we don’t quite return to our own plane, we keep coming back to the region in which it exists. Perhaps we’re following a path that meanders?”

“I suppose that could be,” Doctor Neil admitted, “but I doubt we could ever prove it. If your speculation is true our sensors and readings will still look like we are passing through regions that share certain physical properties with our home plane and others that are quite different.”

Regardless of which might have been the case they continued to take readings all the next day, then on the suggestion of one of the doctors – Pflum was still having trouble figuring out which was which – they started back toward home making similar measurements. Reaching the home plane they started out again, this time with regular stops where the outside air and soil were sampled and the magnetic field, light intensity and gravity were measured.

After another two days of such careful sampling, the doctors decided to start taking measurements on the more exotic planes. That turned out to be a big mistake.

## The Masochism Tango

“What the heck?” Pflum grumbled as he woke up in the middle of the Transit’s ‘night’ two days later.

He had grown accustomed to odd noises in his transit over the past few years; noises no other Transit manufactured ever made. He had even developed automatic reactions to those times during which the Transit shook so violently that the inertial dampers were incapable of completely smoothing out the ride. However, the Transit’s noises were usually low-pitched rumbles and clunks. This time the sound was a high-pitched, wavering, keening sound that filled the cabin like a liquid and was attempting to eat at his brain.

Pflum rolled out of his cot and bolted through the bedroom door, nearly knocking the wall itself down only to find Doctor Noel, or was it Neil, doing something at the Transit’s console. The other man was working at the DTT’s instrument console. Pflum shouted something that would have gotten him banned from any Twenty-first Century broadcast of the MTV Music Awards, but which translated as “What are you doing?”

Pflum’s anger was only made worse when the scientist looked at him calmly and replied, “Fixing your Transit.”

Pflum curled his hands into fists and then forced them to relax several times before trusting himself to look at the console. When he did, however, no amount of mental discipline was sufficient to keep him calm. Evidently Doctor Neil (or was it Noel?) had tried fiddling with every control on the console. Pflum feverishly started making corrections, not noticing that Jack and Lucinda had arrived.

From what Pflum could tell the Transit had been doing the temporal equivalent of tumbling end over end across the six dimensions of space and time. As he worked, the head-splitting sound gradually softened and lowered until it had disappeared completely. Finally, he brought the Transit to rest in what the readouts assured him was 1227 in Europe although he had no way of knowing on what time plane they were on and a quick look at another display revealed they were way beyond the regulation 99.99999% compatibility limit for acceptable time lines to visit. Far from differences in who won the World Series of 1978, in this range there was no telling what passed for intelligent life.

“Kid, get the checklist,” Pflum ordered. “We need to make sure the controls are back to normal before we even try moving on.” While Jack was digging out the mission checklist, Pflum turned on both scientists. “Last time a government agent touched these controls,” he hissed at them, “this Transit started slipping all over the Z axis. I don’t even want to think about the damage you’ll have done to the circuits this time. I’ll have to though, but if you like not sporting bruises the size of Australia, I advise you to steer clear of me while I do.”

“Mister Pflum,” Doctor Neil replied stiffly, “I was only making a few minor adjustments.”

“You had us doing cartwheels through eternity!” Pflum shouted back at him. “You played with every single control on this board that wasn’t behind lock and key and it’s a darned good thing some were or there would have been nothing left of us but smears of red organic jelly on what would have been left of

the walls. You obviously know nothing about piloting a Transit, especially not this one, and if I ever catch you near this console again, I'll..." Pflum had bunched his hands into fists again and started walking toward the two doctors before he caught himself. "I'll throw you out that airlock and let you walk home," he finished.

"You wouldn't dare," Doctor Noel replied thoughtlessly.

"If he doesn't," Jack told him, "I will. My God!" he added looking at the console. "How far did we come?"

"I haven't the faintest notion," Pflum replied. "The Y meter is pinned, meaning we're not only beyond the five-nines, but somewhere out of the 90% range as well. Even this crate has never gone that far out. I think we'll be able to get back into our usual range easily enough, but I haven't any way to know where we are on the z axis. About all we can do is head for home and start over again."

"Will that truly be necessary, Mister Pflum?" Lucinda asked.

"I'm afraid so. You can ask the Bobbsey twins over there, but I got the impression that knowing where and when we were was essential."

"Well, boys?" she asked acidly. Neither man answered her, but their failure to look her in the eyes was sufficiently eloquent. "Very well, Mister Pflum. Take us home and we'll start over and when you decide to push these idiots out the airlock, please call me. I'll want to help."

Pflum started the Transit in motion once again to discover he could not quite get rid of what was now an odd quavering tone. "We've been having little troubles ever since we tried sampling what passed for air on that world where everything seemed to be made of light," he commented. "I think the fields there did something to the circuitry."

"Ours too," Doctor Neil admitted, "That's what I was trying to adjust for."

"Why the hell didn't you tell us?" Pflum demanded. "There are easier ways to make such adjustments than playing with all the dials and switches. I still don't know how you got us to tumble. Yes, tumble! If we had suddenly come to a stop we might have landed on our heads. I didn't even know that was possible, but you geniuses did it."

"We're back in the ninety percent range, Pflum," Jack reported.

"Good," Pflum replied. "I just wish I knew where we were on the z axis. That fuzzy line has completely filled its screen and doesn't show any sign of sharpening. I don't suppose you two have any way of measuring our Z distance from home, do you?"

"That is part of why we have been trying to establish," Doctor Neil informed him, "a calibration of your instruments so we would know just where we were."

"And after several days you still can't even make a guess?" Pflum asked pointedly.

"Um..." Noel replied.

"Uh..." Neil continued, "we sort of lost track of where we were. There are several discontinuities in our data."

“Several?” Jack asked as Pflum slapped his palm to his forehead. “Then this did not just happen now?”

“Uh... no. It’s been happening off and on almost since we started. We have been hoping to match measurable sequences to get a fully continuous map of the z axis.”

“I doubt you’ll get one, not with your current instruments,” Jack commented. “This is more likely to be like navigation at sea before we learned to measure longitude. We’ll need to sight temporal landmarks and measure the time it takes to get between them and that sort of thing.”

“Sounds about right to me,” Pflum commented. “Too bad we didn’t take Franny along with us this trip. I’ll bet she could have figured this all out.”

“The excitement might have been a bit much for her,” Jack disagreed. “Doctor Blackfellow is not a young woman, you know.”

“I suppose,” Pflum admitted. “This crate is still trying to dance all over the continuum, or maybe it’s a discontinuum if Fric and Frac’s readings are correct. Never mind, we’re back to about ninety-five percent, close enough for government work,” he added with a glare at the doctors, now let’s try to slide back down the Z axis.” He unlocked the Z controls and all hell broke loose.

First they heard the screech of steel being torn in two rapidly followed by what sounded like a series of explosions. At any moment Pflum expected to see showers of electrical sparks fountaining from all the Transit’s equipment, but fortunately that never happened. What did happen next, even as Pflum attempted to stop the Transit once more, were three loud thumps that shook the Transit and everyone in her.

“Something out there wants in bad,” Pflum remarked as he finally stopped their progress on the Z axis.

“And they might just get their wish,” Jack retorted.

“Not so long as we stay out of phase,” Pflum told him.

“Uh, Pflum?” Jack replied uncertainly.

“What if there are creatures who are also out of phase whose life is along the Z axis?” Lucinda asked.

“Pflum?” Jack repeated.

“Merely being out of phase wouldn’t do it,” Pflum told Lucinda, “They would still have to be in phase with us. It’s a relative thing. Even if they are out of phase with the continuum that doesn’t mean they are out of phase in exactly the same way, on the same frequency you might say, that we are.”

“Pflum?” Jack tried once more.

“What is it, kid?” Pflum finally responded.

“We aren’t out of phase any more. We’ve materialized.”

“Have we?” Pflum asked. “Hmm, so we have. I’ll just restart the regulator. Some strange plane on the Z axis is no place to intentionally stop for repairs. At least we didn’t land in a pool of antimatter.” He typed



in a command and lights on the console started winking out. He tried again but finally every light had been extinguished except the power light which was the only indication they were still attached, however tenuously, to the rest of the Transit sitting in the garage of Down Time, Ltd. "Then again, any port in a storm. How's the weather out there? Any green clouds spitting out hydrochloric acid or worse?"

"Looks like a nice sunny day in a grassy area with a few scattered groups of trees," Jack noted. "Not too different from the starting point on our own plane."

"Sounds pleasant, but perhaps we ought to test the air, temperature, gravity and what-all out there," Pflum suggested.

"We've already started testing," Doctor Noel reported.

"Let me know when you find out if we can open the door and air this place out. It would be nice not to have to survive on canned air while we figure out what went wrong. We only have so much and may well have to find some more before we get back home."

"If we ever do," Lucinda added darkly.

"Aren't you a little Suzie Sunshine?" Pflum shot back. He turned back to his controls and started closing down most of the panels.

"What are you doing?" Lucinda asked.

"Shutting off as much as I can without actually turning the main power off," Pflum replied. "I need to do that if I'm going to start looking for what's wrong. The way our landing sounded, I hope I can find and fix everything that's wrong, but first I have to make sure I'm not going to flash fry myself."

"Air outside is a bit richer in oxygen than on the home plane," Doctor Neil announced, "but only by one percent. Nitrogen one percent lower and the rest is pretty much the same as home. Outside temperature is a pleasant thirty degrees Celsius and we are unable to detect any health hazards."

"Sounds good so far, I wonder what we may have missed. If this is the paradise it sounds like it will be the first time I've broken down on one," Pflum commented.

"What about that world where Antarctica was covered in daffodils?" Jack asked.

"We weren't stranded there, kid," Pflum replied, "even if we chose to land there to make repairs."

"When was this?" Lucinda asked interestedly.

"Last summer," Pflum replied. "It was just after the damage that caused us to start moving along the Z axis."

"I think we should take a quick look outside," Lucinda recommended, "to make certain we're safe in this location."

"We had better be," Pflum replied, "since we aren't likely to be moving until I finish repairs."

"I'm afraid we are going to have to outrank you, Mister Pflum," Doctor Neil told him, "but my colleague and I are much more experienced with Transit circuitry than you could possibly be."

“I find that hard to believe,” Pflum replied, “especially after years of field repairs, especially repairs that the manuals say can’t be done.”

“We read about those repairs, Mister Pflum,” Doctor Noel told him. “You were very lucky, but we do not care to rely on your luck this time. We will make the repairs. Why don’t you take a quick walk while we go to work.”

“The hell, I will!” Pflum snarled.

“Mister Pflum,” Lucinda cut in. “I really must insist that Doctors Noel and Neil handle the field repairs. I know you don’t like them, but they really are experts in Transit circuitry.

“Not this Transit,” Pflum insisted. “The wiring has been changed so many times, I doubt they have ever seen anything like it.”

“I know you have an annotated schematic diagram,” Lucinda replied. “Bring it out and they’ll know all about the quirks of your Transit.”

Pflum was about to tell her what to do with those schematics, but Jack suddenly whispered a reminder to him, “Sharonne told you to defer to them while we’re on this mission, remember?”

“I’ll be outside, riveting the local squirrels together,” Pflum grumbled.

“Fine, fine,” Neil told him distractedly.

Jack followed Pflum through the airlock. The world outside was as pleasant as it had appeared. The sun was warm but a cool and comfortable breeze wafted its way across the grass toward them. Some birds could be heard singing in the nearby trees and there was some sort of ground creature they could not quite see clearly scampering between the trees.

“We’re really stuck here, aren’t we Pflum?” Jack asked.

“So long as Tweedledee and Tweedledum in there are working on our engines? You bet,” Pflum replied. There was another series of bangs, screeches and thunks and Pflum was about to run back into the Transit to throttle the two doctors when another Transit suddenly materialized right next to his. “Well, there’s one for the books. I can’t think of any other time when two Transits ended up on the same line. I wonder whose it is. From what I can see it looks like the same model as our Transit, but there aren’t a lot of crates of our’s vintage still running around.”

“I have a sneaky suspicion of who that may be,” Jack commented.

“Oh yeah, kid? Who?”

“Um, let’s wait and see,” Jack told him. “It would be kind of embarrassing if I was wrong.”

“Hey, if it’s something I need to be ready for...”

“Oh, it’s not a matter of Life and Death, Pflum,” Jack replied. “A bit of a surprise, I would think, but nothing we should need to bring out the big wrenches for.” By DTT regulation Transit crews were not allowed to be armed when in the field. Pflum and Jack had gotten around that regulation by purchasing

the largest steel wrenches they could find. They may not have been adequate defense against a gun-wielding assailant, but in a pinch a heavy metal club could come in handy.

“If you say so,” Pflum replied. “Hey, get a look at the sun. Does it look strange to you?”

Jack squinted and tilted his head upward. “It’s got to be an illusion,” he replied at last, “but it looks like it’s moving a bit.”

“Why don’t you run inside and grab the binoculars?” Pflum suggested. “I’d do it myself, but I might catch the Katzenjammer Kids with their paws where I don’t want them and blood is so hard to get out of the circuitry.”

Jack paused a moment and then went inside for the binoculars. Unlike optics of a century earlier or more, the instrument Jack produced a few minutes later was not a collection of tubes and lenses. Instead it was an electronic marvel with photoreceptors at one end and tiny screens at the other. Using them it was entirely safe to look directly at the sun as they automatically kept the light emitted to the user at a safe and comfortable level.

“Did I miss anything?” Jack asked, handing the binoculars to Pflum.

“Just their soil-sampling widget. I was tempted to go over and knock on the door, but decided that it’s always possible they might not breathe the same air we do. Now let’s have a look at that sun.

“You’re not going to like this, kid,” Pflum commented a moment later as he stared at the sun. “Come to think about it, I don’t like it much either.” He handed the binoculars to Jack who immediately took a look for himself.

“That’s impossible!” Jack exclaimed a moment later. The large, bright object in the sky was obviously not any sort of sun either of them had ever seen before. Instead it seemed to be a giant bird with feathers of fire, flying slowly through the sky.

“Yeah,” Pflum agreed, “I’d hate to be underneath when that thing poops!”

“How do you think of such things?” Jack asked.

“How is that you don’t?” Pflum countered. “What are the dynamic duds in there doing?”

“So far they are just having a supposedly learned discussion on temporal physics and Transit circuitry. Frankly from what I heard I don’t think they really know much about repairing a Transit.”

“What was your first clue?” Pflum asked flatly, “The emergency switch?”

“No, although that clinched it,” Jack replied. “I started getting suspicious while they were installing all their instruments. They kept ignoring me so it was pretty easy to just listen in. I kept thinking I hadn’t been paying enough attention. They’d say something I knew just had to be wrong. The first time I asked them to repeat, but they ignored me. I’m just an undergrad after all. What do I know? Anyway, as long as I listened they made sense, but after a while I’d get back into my own work when all of a sudden I’d think I heard them say something wrong again.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Pflum asked.

“You were in the field with Kyle. Then once we started this trip when did I have the chance? I didn’t want to say anything in their hearing and they were always in ear-shot. The Transit just isn’t big enough.”

“Understandable,” Pflum agreed. “Well, no help for it now. We’ll just have to wait until they either give up or it’s been so long we can talk Lucinda into letting us do the repairs. However, if that’s the case we may as well make first contact. Let’s go knock on the neighbor’s door. Maybe we should bring them a Jello mold?”

“We don’t have any,” Jack commented. “How about a box of doughnuts? We still have a few in the box.” Pflum didn’t say anything so Jack concluded. “Good idea, kid. Do it.” He got up and re-entered the Transit, but was soon back with a box of doughnuts that had been kept from getting stale in the Fresher, Transit’s version of a refrigerator except that it worked by keeping objects inside from aging. It only worked while the regulator was active and there were several items inside that would soon start getting stale so giving away the doughnuts would hardly be a great sacrifice. Fortunately, the freezer was a more conventional unit and most of their food was stored in there.

“Here you go,” Jack told Pflum, handing him the box. “Let’s go.”

Uncharacteristically, Jack led the way to the other Transit. He lifted his hand and, using his class ring, rapped loudly on the door. To Pflum’s amazement, Jack smiled and waved at the video pickup that served as the outside of the digital window. “Hello in there!” he shouted.

A long moment later the outer door of the airlock opened inward. Jack stepped in and called in a loud voice, “Hey there! Can Pflum and Jack come out and play?”

## I Hold Your Hand in Mine

The inner door suddenly opened and Jack found himself facing a creature he had only seen in certain types of comic books. His post-cranial morphology was human enough, save for a fine covering of bright yellow fur over those parts of his body that were visible, but his head was definitely rabbit-like, complete with tall furry ears. He was wearing the same dark blue polo shirt and tan slacks that Pflum and Jack wore and the shirt even bore the same “DT” logo of Down Time, Ltd.

“How’d you know my name, kid?” he asked.

Jack smiled broadly and said, “Aurelian Pflum, meet Aurelian Pflum.” Saying that, he stepped aside to let the two Pflums stare at each other.

“So that’s what I would look like as a rabbit, huh?” the human Pflum commented. “Not too shabby.”

“A hominid, huh?” the rabbit Pflum replied. “Never knew they were capable of intelligence, but looks like I could do a lot worse.”

“Good to meet you,” they said in unison as they reached forward to shake each other’s hand.

“Jinx!” chorused Jack and his rabbit analogue. The Jack rabbit’s fur was blue. Pflum looked around and saw a pink female rabbit that had to be Lucinda and a pair of green leporids in gray suits who had to be the doctors.

“What?” the two Pflums asked. The Jacks ignored them.

“We’ve been here a bit longer than you have,” Pflum explained to his Leporid counterpart, “and Jack here figured out who you were before I did. But I figure I can save you a bit of time. Mutt and Jeff over there are about to claim that only they know how to repair Transits in the field. Hmm, they do look more intelligent with the long floppy ears... Anyway, Agent Grassoﬀ will side with her boyos and tell you to take a hike. Now you can argue it out for a while, but eventually Jack Rabbit here will remind you of Sharonne’s order and you’ll stomp out the airlock to get some fresh air. Now I could have just waited for you to show up, but I figure...”

“I’ll be in a better mood if I just go now?” Bunny Pflum finished for him. “You may be right. You’re really me?”

“No, I’m me,” Hominid Pflum replied. “You’re you, but if you’re here, we’ve probably had identical lives up until now at least. It might be nice to compare notes. It would definitely be nice to talk to someone who realizes how right I am for a change.”

“I hear you,” Leporid Pflum replied. “What’s that you got there?”

“Doughnuts. Want one?”

“Sure,” Bunny Pflum replied. “Hold on. I’ll grab a pot of coffee for us. Well?” he turned to the rabbit versions of Lucinda and the doctors, “What are you lot waiting for? You were about to tell me to let you all do the repairs. Let’s see how good you really are.”

“Mister Pflum,” the leporid Lucinda demanded, “are you refusing to repair this Transit yourself?”

“Not at all,” Pflum the Rabbit replied. “I’d be more than happy to do the work. But are the Joy Boys of Radio going to pull rank on me like their hairless ape versions did? If so I may as well relax until they give up.”

“We really are more knowledgeable in Transit mechanics than any mere pilot could be,” one of the doctors told Lucinda.

“Whoa there!” Bunny Pflum protested.

“And you have how many doctorates in temporal physics, Mister Pflum?” the other doctor asked with a sneer.

“What did I tell you?” Pflum asked his furry counterpart.

Pflum the Hare looked at Human Pflum then at Lucinda. “Your choice, Ms. Grassoﬀ. Do you want me to do the repairs or your boys?”

“Uh,” Lucinda stalled. She traded glances with the doctors then decided. “Why don’t we let them have a

shot first.”

“Right,” Human Pflum agreed, “and the good news is you can consult the Lucinda in my Transit and decide when to use the magic word. Hope your Sharonne supplied you with the same fine coffee mine did for me,” he added to the other Pflum.

“Mocha Java,” Leporid Pflum replied. “Finest kind.” He went and grabbed the fresh pot and poured it into a thermos. “Here, grab a few mugs,” he instructed the human Pflum.

“Where’s Jack?” Pflum asked as he grabbed four glass mugs, “both of him?”

“Outside,” Bunny Pflum replied. “And we’d better hurry before they eat all the doughnuts.”

“Heavens forbid!”

They went outside to find Human Jack showing the giant sunbird to Rabbit Jack. Rabbit Pflum took a look through the binoculars when it was his turn and commented, “Man! I’d hate to be underneath when it poops!”

“Two of them,” Human Jack muttered.

“Can there be room enough in this world for two Pflums?” Jack Rabbit quipped.

“Tell me,” the human Pflum asked the rabbit, “can you tell those two apart?”

“Which two?”

“Which two?” Human Pflum echoed. “Bob and Roy,” he continued pointing back at the rabbit’s Transit. “Who do you think?”

“Oh them,” the rabbit replied. “Not really. They even have the same fur pattern.”

“Oh good,” breathed the human. “I’d hate to catch myself thinking you guys all look alike, especially since I can tell the rest of you apart.”

“How about your DTT scientists? Can you tell them apart?” the rabbit asked.

“About as well as you can yours,” the human replied.

“Pflum,” Human Jack asked. “How long do you intend to let the doctors fool around at their repairs?”

“Given my druthers,” Rabbit Pflum replied, “I wouldn’t let them touch her at all, but as you evidently reminded my counterpart, Sharonne ordered me to go along with them. I’ll do that, but only for a few days. Maybe not even that long if they break something. I’d like to know why Lucinda lied about where the emergency switch is though.”

“She’s playing a game of her own maybe,” Human Pflum replied. “She knows those guys aren’t versed on transit repairs as well as they claim to be, but she’s also loyal to the DTT. She told them the wrong button for the emergency return, but she also feels she has to support them against us. Keep that in mind; her first loyalty is to the DTT, but not necessarily to Mike and Ike and certainly not to us. On any given question though, your guess is as good as mine as to how she will decide.

“At the moment, however,” he continued, “I’m more concerned on just what sort of world we landed on. That bird up there really bothers me.”

“I want to know why there are only two of us here,” the rabbit commented.

“Probability is my guess,” the hominid replied. “There must be an infinite number of us who all went on this mad dash into the Twilight Zone. If we all managed to materialize on the same planet, we would be the cause of the largest black Hole in the Universe, or is that Multiverse?”

“I prefer to think of all these planes as part of a single construct,” Jack Hominid told them.

“Agreed,” Jack Rabbit nodded. “Universe is the correct term.”

“Just as well,” Bunny Pflum replied, “but then why didn’t we materialize at the same time and place? Why were you first?”

“The Transit’s safety circuits won’t let you materialize inside another object,” Bunny Jack told him.

“I know that! That’s why we ended up side by side, I’m the one who landed her, remember? I could have landed directly in front of the hominids’ Transit and blocked off their doorway, but not having time to scope out the situation, it seemed best to slide over a few feet. Why were we a few minutes later, though?”

“Maybe our time planes are not exactly alike,” Human Jack speculated.

“We could be slightly out of synch by an hour or so,” Rabbit Jack agreed.

“Now there’s a horrible thought!” both Pflums groaned.

“Not just an infinite number of us from one line per plane, but an infinite number of us from each plane,” the human Pflum continued.

“What’s infinity squared?” the leporid Pflum mused.

“Infinity,” both Jacks replied flatly.

“So, maybe we’re not exactly alike,” Pflum the rabbit continued.

“Well, we could sit here all day comparing life-stories,” the human replied, “but the only difference could be how many hairs were on the back of the nextdoor kid’s dog.”

“Good point,” Rabbit conceded, “and we have already differentiated just that by showing up at different times, but as I see it, we have an infinite number of planes and lines we might have ended up on. Why did we both end up here, and why didn’t anybody else?”

“I know what you mean,” Human replied. “One is a good number. Of an infinite number of us crashlanding on an infinite number of time lines one per line kind of makes sense. Maybe less. Are we talking about greater and lesser orders of infinity? Oh never mind, that whole concept makes my teeth itch. It’s tangential anyway. But one of us showing up here is understandable. Two of us though? Two is a ridiculous number. It should either be zero, one or else one of those teeth-itching conceptual numbers.”

“Maybe not,” Human Jack disagreed. “We’re dealing with probability here. I don’t know what the odds are without access to the Terranet for computational power, but it seems likely that with matters dealing with infinities and what can only have been a semi-random spread at best, there are going to be some worlds on which none of us land, where one of us lands and where two or even more land.”

“Right,” Rabbit Jack nodded, “and when you factor in the likelihood of lines that are identical historically, but offset by various intervals of time, I don’t think we should be surprised if more and more of us arrive as time goes on.”

“How much time?” Human Pflum asked. “No, don’t answer that. I’ll bet that’s infinite as well. So why were we first?”

“Someone had to be,” Rabbit Pflum commented. “The Universe is not infinitely old.”

“Not according to current theory, anyway,” Human Pflum agreed. “If that’s the case, our analogs will eventually stop arriving here as well. That’s probably going to be in a few million years, but we will hopefully not be around to see it. Now, will our arrivals be random, do you think?”

“Maybe,” Jack Rabbit replied, “Or perhaps they will be evenly spaced out, we’ll just have to see for ourselves, assuming our respective DTT repairmen can accomplish the impossible.”

“Fat chance,” both Pflums replied.

“Pflum!” Lucinda called from the humans’ Transit. “Are you still sulking out here? Oh!” she finished seeing the leporid versions of Pflum and Jack.

“Ms. Grasso,” the human Pflum performed the introductions, “I present Aurelian Pflum and Jack Laterus.”

“What?” Lucinda asked.

“These fine gentlefolk are us from a different time plane,” Pflum told her.

“Impossible,” she scoffed.

“I thought you understood the implications of the Z axis,” Pflum replied. “It’s really not all that hard to understand. On each time plane there is a line on which history runs identically with our own. However, the physics differ from plane to plane. On their plane the physics favored evolutionary selection for what we might refer to as humanoid rabbits.”

“And on yours,” Bunny Pflum added, “what we would call leperoid hominids.”

“So you lot just decided that you were the same people in different shapes?” Lucinda asked incredulously. “I’ll just go see about that!”

“Where are you off to?” the human Pflum asked.

“To compare life stories with my supposed counterpart,” Lucinda replied. She walked briskly to the airlock door of the rabbits’ Transit.



“You know for a hairless ape,’ the rabbit Pflum commented in her wake, “she’s rather attractive.”

“Dating outside your species?” Human Pflum asked wryly.

“Hey! I’m a rabbit,” the other Pflum shrugged.

“You don’t know her like I do,” Human retorted.

“Actually,” Rabbit replied, “yes I do.”

“Hmm, I suppose you do. I have to admit your Lucinda is quite sexy too.”

“She’s definitely not my Lucinda,” Rabbit laughed, “anymore than, I suspect, the cute one is yours.”

“Still, she has a point,” human Pflum conceded. “We’ve been assuming identity merely because our names coincide.”

“Mindy Marnowitz,” Bunny Pflum replied.

“Oh yes,” Human replied with a broad smile. “I’m convinced.”

“Who?” both Jacks asked.

“First girlfriend,” Human Pflum replied, still with a gentle reminiscent smile on his face.

The Jacks looked at each other and silently mouthed a single name at each other.

“Okay, that takes care of that,” Human Pflum remarked. “Next I think we ought to find out just what sort of world this is.”

“One in which the sun is giant bird of fire,” Human Jack replied.

“At least it isn’t a chariot drawn by fiery horses,” Pflum replied. “One in which the Greek gods were real might turn out to be problematic.”

“And what makes you think this one won’t be?” the rabbit asked.

“I’m due,” Human replied, “Aren’t you?”

“After Naziworld? Aren’t we all,” Rabbit laughed. “But Einstein was wrong. Not only does God play dice with the Universe, but the dice are rigged. There are times I think I’m just here for his comic relief.” The human Pflum just nodded.

“Birds,” the human Pflum reported that evening when they had all returned to their respective Transits. “We spotted a few small critters that may have been mammalian, a host of insects and Jack spotted a

bullfrog in an oversized mudpuddle but most of the animals in sight were birds. Most of them were flightless, though some had working wings. Trust me, there is nothing quite like a bird evolved to look a little like a feathered squirrel or at least something that sort of fills the same ecological niche.”

“Birds, huh?” Lucinda repeated. “Well, it shouldn’t matter. Doctors Neil and Noel assure me they should have the Transit running again by tomorrow.”

“Oh yeah?” Pflum retorted. “So, Docs, what’s the problem?”

“We have not yet isolated the ultimate cause,” Doctor Noel began.

“But we have narrowed it down to a short list of possibilities,” Doctor Neil finished.

“In short, you haven’t got a clue, have you?” Pflum accused.

“Of course we do,” Noel replied indignantly. “But it’s a highly technical matter that a field operative is not likely to understand.”

“Try me,” Pflum replied.

The two scientists made impressive statements concerning guidance transducers, wave harmonics in temporal physics and several other phrases that had Jack surreptitiously signaling Pflum to discount.

“That’s a load of hogwash, guys,” Pflum told them flatly. “Where did you learn Transit mechanics? Out of a comic book? The basic problem is that either the primary impellers are down, possibly the secondaries as well or something else is inhibiting them from functioning properly. Have you even run diagnostics on them yet?”

“Now that just proves that a pilot is not qualified to repair a Transit,” Neil replied smugly.

“Right,” drawled Pflum. “God only knows how I managed to get back home the last dozen times she broke down in the field. But aside from that, do you have the faintest notion of what sort of training is required of a licensed Transit pilot? I didn’t think so. No pilot is allowed to traverse the time lines without a demonstrated understanding of Transit construction and how to repair it. I may not be able to explain how a specific circuit works, although I wouldn’t count on that if I was you, but I know what goes where and how to isolate and diagnose problems from the symptoms.” The two doctors were not convinced so Pflum added. “You’ve got one day then to prove you can fix this crate and then I’m pulling rank on you. You may be DTT, but I am the pilot of this Transit and while we’re in the field, that’s equivalent to the captain of a ship. Now my boss asked me to defer to your judgment, but I’m sure she didn’t intend for me to do so to the point of getting permanently stranded in Birdland.”

“Mister Pflum,” Lucinda protested, “I really think we should leave these repairs to the experts.”

“I agree,” Pflum nodded, looking at his watch. “You have one day. Twenty-four hours and then that is exactly what we will be doing. And that’s Captain Pflum.”

The next morning Pflum and Jack left the Transit early with a walking breakfast as well as notebooks and cameras and other equipment in order to document what they could of the world while they were there. It wasn’t something they were required to do but Jack had decided it would make for an interesting paper and Pflum thought it would be a good idea not to be around while “Calvin and Hobbs” were trying to fix the “time machine.”

It turned out that their leporid counterparts had a similar experience the night before and they too had decided to see the sights before exorcising the DTT imps from their Transit's circuitry.

There were some tall hills a few miles to the east of the Transits and they decided to hike toward them. It was slow going through the grasslands although the wild grass was only a little over knee high. However as they came over a low rise near the foot of the hills they has chosen as a destination they found a road running roughly north and south.

"Well, so much for landing on an uninhabited world," Human Pflum commented.

"Maybe they have parts we can buy for the Transits," Jack Rabbit pointed out.

"I wouldn't count on it, kid," Bunny Pflum told him. "It's a dirt road. Doesn't look built so much as worn into the landscape. Look at the ruts."

"We could be in this world's version of the Outback," Jack Hominid pointed out.

"And that could be the Autobahn," Human Pflum replied.

"So do we follow the road?"

"Let's climb this first hill and see if we can see more than half a mile around us," Rabbit Pflum suggested.

"There may not be many trees around, but we do seem to have enough to block the view, don't we?" the human Pflum asked.

The hill was hardly the tallest one in sight, but it did rise up three hundred feet from the grassy area to its west, and gave them a clear view for miles in every direction except to the east.

"Hmm, a veritable metropolis," Human Pflum commented acidly on getting his first sight of a city that turned out to be only a few miles from their Transits. The city appeared to be built mostly of half-timbered buildings. Mostly they were the sort with one main floor with a loft for storage. Here and there were slightly larger buildings that appeared to have as many as three floors. The largest buildings of all, however, were a large castle of stone and a similarly large cathedral-like building, both of which were part of a compound that boasted dozens of soaring towers all enclosed within a perimeter wall. "Strange to think we couldn't see that," Pflum commented.

"It does kind of stand out, doesn't it" Rabbit Pflum agreed. "Somehow, however, I don't think we are likely to find a shop with slightly used Transit parts. More likely the local alchemist is still trying to turn gold into lead."

"It's a seacoast town," Human Pflum pointed out. "I see a few boats in the harbor. Maybe around here they count as ships. This could be the most cosmopolitan place on the planet."

"Are you sure it's a planet as we would think of it?" Jack Human asked.

"What do you mean?" Pflum asked.

"Look at the horizon on the sea or ocean or whatever." Jack told him. "Notice anything unusual?"

“No,” both Pflums replied. The rabbit continued, “Looks like an ocean. Lots of water sloshing about in waves. What’s the big deal?”

“It looks different,” Rabbit Jack noted, “but I can’t figure out why.”

“This world is flat,” Human Jack told them. “Look through the binoculars at that ship way out at sea and at a similar one, not as far away. Normally the further one will appear to be lower in the water because of the curve of the earth. These look pretty much the same. The more distant vessel looks smaller, but it’s not apparently lower in the water.”

“A flat earth, huh?” Pflum Hominid commented. “Goes along with the sunbird. If we look over the edge will we be on the back of a turtle or an ostrich?”

“I’m wondering if there’s some analog of Atlas holding the sky up somewhere,” Pflum Leporid replied.

“Hey!” the leporid Jack exclaimed. “I can see the Transits from here.”

“No surprise, kid,” Human Pflum told him.

“Maybe not,” Hominid Jack told him, looking through the binoculars, “but we’ve got company. Two more Transits have arrived since we left this morning.”

“Any one want to bet on what species we are in those crates?” Human Pflum asked. “Maybe we had better head back anyway. The others will need to know how close we are to that city.”

“Agreed,” Pflum Bunny nodded. “Normally I’d say we ought to sneak a bit closer to that city and see what sort of people live there.”

“The usual sort, I suppose,” the human Pflum replied. “Some good, some bad. Some lazy, some industrious...”

“I meant what species,” Rabbit clarified.

“I know,” Human chuckled, “and we ought to know before unless we can get the Transits repaired quickly, especially if they turn out to be the same as one of us or our fellow castaways.”

“Without some sort of trade, we may have to resort to hunting by and by,” Rabbit Pflum, added. “Let’s start hiking back.”

The trip back took longer than expected. On their outbound leg they had obviously been up before what passed for heavy traffic on the trace they had encountered. Now, however, they could see a dozen or more wagons traveling along the road, evidently going to and from the city.

“Merchants, I’ll bet,” Pflum the Hare commented.

“No takers,” Pflum the Human replied. “There are too many to think we can cross the road without being seen. The question is, ‘Do we brazen out a first contact or wait here until the traffic dies down again?’”

“That may not be until after dark,” Hominid Jack pointed out.

“And we really ought to hurry back to the Transits,” Leporid Jack added.

“Okay,” Pflum Human decided. “It’s amazing what you can get away with if you just behave as though there is nothing unusual about what you are doing. Let’s go.”

They continued on and were spotted when they were still a dozen yards from the road. The wagon that was nearly in their path was nothing unusual; just the usual sort of wooden contraption with wheels that the Pflums had seen in thousands of time lines, but the creatures driving and pulling it were something new to both of them. The two beasts of burden were large flightless birds with dark green feathers and short stubby beaks. Instead of wings, however, they had four legs. They must have shared a common ancestry with the wagon driver, although that common ancestor probably had not lived in forty million years or so. The driver had a bright yellow, hooked beak, bright blue feathers, except for a brilliant red crest and arms instead of forelegs. He, if this was a male, also was wearing a vest and a short pair of trousers.

The dray birds were blinkered and paid no attention to the Pflums and Jacks, but the driver pulled them to a halt and stared at them.

“Hi there,” Human Pflum greeted the driver. “Nice weather we’re having.” The driver squawked loudly then urged his team to take off at high speed. “Could have gone worse, I suppose,” Pflum noted.

“That doesn’t really bode well,” Jack the Rabbit commented.

“No,” his human counterpart agreed. “He’ll go back into town and report that he saw monsters on the road.”

“By the time he finishes telling the tale,” Rabbit Jack continued, “we’ll have been a gang of fierce ogres or the local equivalent who tried to eat him and his team alive.”

“And, no doubt, we would have picked our teeth with the splinters of his wagon,” Human Jack concluded.

“No helping it now,” Rabbit Pflum told them. “Let’s hurry back. Who knows, maybe George and Gracie have managed to fix the Transits by now.”

“You really think so?” both Jacks asked.

“No,” the Pflums replied flatly.

The DTT doctors were not working on repairs when the Pflums and Jacks returned to the base. Instead they were conferring with their counterparts on the matter, while simian and lupine versions of Pflum and Jack kept arguing that their own DTT people were not to be allowed back inside their Transits until they had repaired them without the scientists’ assistance. All the while the Lucindas were shouting that they would see to it that Down Time, Ltd., would be grounded for years when they submitted their reports.

“All one big happy family,” Human Pflum commented sourly.

“Oh, it’s about time you lot got back here,” the bunny Lucinda told them. “How dare you leave us here to deal with new arrivals?”

“This wasn’t exactly a scheduled landing,” the humanoid but wolf-like Pflum commented.

“Oh shut up, you,” his Lucinda told him.

The arguments and accusations continued while the Human and rabbit Jacks poked their heads into their respective Transits. “Pflum,” they both called from the doorways a few moments later.

“What is it, kid,” all four Pflums replied automatically

“Better come take a look at this,” they suggested. Not only had the DTT scientists not managed to fix the Transits, but they had left most of the controls in pieces all over the floor.

“Now isn’t this a pretty picture,” Human Pflum grumbled.

“And the Brady Bunch are all having a picnic out there,” Rabbit commented.

“Now this is why Wolf and I don’t want our version of those guys even touching our transits,” the Simian Pflum added from the doorway. This Pflum had bright red hairy fur all over his body, similar to an orangutan, but was built more like a gorilla.

“Got to admit,” Hominid Pflum replied, “I’m sorry I gave them until tonight before firing them. How bad is it in your Transit?” he asked the rabbit.

They strolled over to discover the leporid DTT scientists were not any more successful, or any neater, than their human counterparts. Grimly the Pflums went outside to confront the others only to get an even bigger surprise.

There were two dozen of the bird people, dressed in steel armor and riding large and armor-clad versions of the wingless birds that had been pulling the carter’s wagon, arranged in a circle around the four parties. They were armed with long, sharpened lances and all the time travelers had at least one or two pointed at them.

### Poisoning Pigeons in the Park

“Hi, boys!” Human Pflum tried greeting the knightly warrior birds, “Anyone for bird-seed?”

One of the armored birds said something that might have been an angry squawk, but one mixed with otherwise intelligible language, although none any of them had ever heard before. A mixture of gestures and words made the Pflums and Jacks move against their wills over toward the DTT people. Human Pflum tried to move and found he could not. It felt as though he had been tied up although there were no visible bindings. Another bird dismounted and attempted to speak to the travelers, but without a common language he soon gave up and remounted. He said something to the obvious leader who said something back.

“Don’t know the tongue, but I’d recognize the tone of command anywhere,” Wolf Pflum muttered.

The commanding bird shouted something at him and pointed his lance for extra emphasis. The wolf put his hands up, but kept his mouth shut. Then through another series of gestures and shouts the group was forced to march into the city the human and rabbit Pflums and Jacks had seen earlier in the day.

From close up the city, which they learned later was called Rontola, was more impressive than through their binoculars. The distant view made it seem quaint, but the sheer size of the municipality made it obvious that this would be a major population center on almost any time line. It was still the middle of the afternoon when they arrived in Rontola and the streets were filled with bird people who to the Pflums' eyes may have been civilians by their dress. At least there did not seem to be anything uniform about their clothes. Also the fact that they rapidly scurried out of the way of the mounted knights made it seem as though they did not rank as highly as the warriors. They stood along the sides of the streets and watched the party pass by.

"All we're missing is a fife and drum corps," Hominid Pflum cracked. The captain of the knights shouted something at him that could only have meant, "Shut up!"

It took another half an hour, but they eventually reached the great castle & temple that stood at the heart of the city. They continued to march through a pair of black iron gates and diagonally across a courtyard. Then they were forced to climb a long circular staircase up one of the many towers until they reached in a fair-sized square room. The avian knights locked them into the room and whatever compulsion that kept them moving or standing in place left them and they were free to explore.

The room itself was more than large enough for the party of twenty. There were, in fact thirty straw-stuffed pallets with down-filled quilted comforters spaced around the walls of the room and there was a large central fireplace, although the weather at present was quite warm, making the fireplace unnecessary for warmth at least. There was also a ladder that went up to what turned out to be the flat roof of the tower. On that roof were a surprising number of tools as well as pieces of wood, nails and other building materials.

"Not particularly worried about an escape attempt, are they?" the lupine Pflum observed.

"Wait," advised the simian. "Let's scope the whole arrangement out. Look down there."

"They sure aren't skimping on the guards," Human Pflum noted. About two hundred feet below them and fifty feet from the base of their tower was the castle complex's perimeter wall. There were guards stationed every thirty feet or so on the wall as well as at least one hundred others patrolling the courtyard.

"Armed with crossbows, it looks like," Simian Jack commented.

"We could make a sort of rope from the quilts and climb down," Lupine Jack told them, "but I think we would be pin cushions before we reached the ground."

"Maybe we could use night's darkness as a cover," Human Pflum speculated.

"We'll see," Bunny Pflum retorted. "I wonder what's with all the tools and building supplies."

"Maybe the birdies will tell us," Human Pflum replied. "It may be their equivalent to having us break rocks."

When dinner was brought to them, they were visited by several armored birdmen that evening as well as one who was not armored. This one non-armed person was obviously brought in as an expert translator and language teacher for he immediately started to teach them words in the birdish tongue as well as learning English from the travelers. By the end of the long evening they could speak in simple sentences in each other's language. The Pflums were best at the bird-people's language, having more experience with

learning foreign languages than any of the others. Surprisingly, Lucinda was the next best, but the local translator was better than all of them and was already able to speak understandable, albeit halting, English by the end of the evening.

During that first session they learned that the bird people called themselves *Ulualoo*, which as Pflum predicted was simply the *Ulu* word for “People.” They also learned that the *Ulualoo* lived in a theocratic society and that the priesthood believed the travelers were demons from the nethermost parts of Hell, but that in all fairness the travelers would have a chance to defend themselves once they had learned to speak a civilized tongue. In fact it was only because they did not speak *Ulu* that the archpriest had doubts as to whether or not they had infernal origins.

The travelers were expecting all manner of insects to be residing in their bedding, but it turned out that while straw was not the most comfortable bedding, it was not their immediate fate to provide a square meal for the next generation of bedbugs. They continued to learn *Ulu* the next day until mid afternoon when two more parties of time travelers were ushered into the room.

The newcomers, still direct analogues of the human party, were humanoid lion-like cats and tall orange saurians.

“Welcome to the menagerie,” Bunny Pflum quipped.

“Teach them what I have taught you,” their language teacher, Looala’to, told them. “I will continue your lessons in the morning.” Then he left with his guards.

The prisoners talked together in groups divided by identities, so the Pflums spoke to each other, sometimes with the Jacks and sometimes on their own. The DTT people tended to clump together too, although the Lucindas displayed a tendency to sulk by themselves.

“So,” the leonine Pflum began, “a world filled with sapient birds. I suppose that’s as likely as intelligent lizards, no offense intended, friend,” he quickly added to the dinosaur-like Pflum.

“No worries, fellow,” the saurian replied easily. “On my line the idea of a sapient mammal is as unlikely as my kind is on yours. We do have a few mammals running around, but mostly small scavengers and insectivores.”

“I wouldn’t be surprised if your plane is a high-probability one,” Human Jack offered. “On ours, and I imagine on the others as well, the dinosaurs went extinct sixty-five million years ago.”

“On ours too,” Saurian Jack replied. “My people are descended from crocodilians. Our resemblance to the dinosaurs is believed to be a case of parallel evolution.”

“Fascinating!” marveled the simian Jack.

“Gentlemen,” Human Pflum cut into the conversation, “it might be best to postpone this evolutionary comparison, although frankly I hope we won’t find the time for it. We need to bring our new selves up to speed, hopefully before still more of us show up, then...”

“Actually,” Lion Pflum interrupted, “There are already two other parties here. One was composed of versions of ourselves that looked like Mickey Mouse, uh if you have that cartoon in your worlds, and the others had the heads of sheep. They were dragged in with us, but were put in another tower when we arrived. What was that compulsion they put us under? I don’t much believe in magic, but in that case I’d



be glad to make an exception.”

“We noticed it too,” Bunny Pflum told him. “All I know is that the leader of the knights who found us, shouted a few words, pointed his lance at us and, zap! we just started doing what they wanted.”

“Well, now that we’re learning the local lingo,” Simian Pflum told them, “maybe it will make more sense to us if they try it again.” Then they started teaching *Ulu* to the newcomers.

The next day they started asked Looala’to about his world and learned that the locals believed they live on a round, not flat world since the illusory curvature of the edge looked as though the world was shaped like a ball and they did not have telescope or binoculars that might help change their minds. They also asked about the tools and materials on the roof and were told they were there for “humanitarian” reasons, to give the prisoners something to occupy their time. “If you need anything else, within reason, you may ask for it,” Looala’to told them.

“Will we get it?” Lupine Pflum asked.

“That depends on what you request,” Looala’to told him. That they might try to make something to help themselves escape did not appear to occur to Looala’to.

“My big question,” Human Jack asked a while later, “is why are you keeping us on top of a tower? In our society, prisoners would be kept in a basement dungeon.”

“You might tunnel out of a basement,” Looala’to replied. “Most Ulualoo are afraid of heights. I am one of the few who can actually bear to even think about being this far off the ground. My apologies, but this dungeon is an excruciating punishment for most Ulualoo. That is why there are no windows in this room. However, it is fortunate that you are not uncomfortable living at this height, since I am beginning to believe you are good people and not demons after all.”

“So you can put in a good word for us?” Rabbit Pflum asked.

“You will have to do so for yourself. Having associated with you anything I say will be suspect. If proved demons, I and my entire family will have to undergo a long cleansing ritual. But there is no need to worry about that for now. Soon you will be able to speak for yourselves.”

Two days later Looala’to decided they were capable of speaking without offending the priesthood too much and the human party was taken out of their shared prison and brought to a small room on the ground floor of the large cathedral which they learned was the Temple of Great Toola’ti, the sunbird.

The room featured a long wooden table and doors at both ends. They were told to sit on seats that had never been designed for humans or anyone with a hominid postcranial morphology, and were told to wait and then the guards who had escorted them there left the room.

“These must be the most uncomfortable chairs in creation,” Doctor Noel complained.

“Well, they’re not exactly leaving bruises,” Pflum countered. Privately he was not so sure of that, but if the two scientists were complaining, he was determined to find a bright side. He tried to shift in his seat and found that while he could slide around a bit for comfort, he was unable to actually leave the seat. “On the other hand, it looks like they pulled that little compulsion trick on us again. I wonder how they do that.”

“By magic,” said a voice from the far doorway. They looked up to see several *Uluualoo* dressed in garments that appeared to be covered in brightly colored gemstones. They also wore ornate headgear that Pflum felt certain were marks of status even though to his eyes they were all worthy nominees for the “Silly Hats Club.” “How else would you restrain criminals and other suspect persons?”

“Ropes, chains, and nanoelectronic tracking devices,” Pflum replied.

“How barbaric,” the obvious leader said dismissively. “I am High Inquisitor Toolori’ta and it is my job to decide your fate. Where do you come from?” All the humans started speaking at once, but Toolori’ta held his hand up for silence and pointed at Pflum. “You are obviously a leader. You spoke first. Please speak for your people now.”

“All right...” Pflum paused. “Uh, is there a proper term of address for a High Inquisitor?”

“That depends on whether you are High Inquisitor,” the bird replied dryly.

Pflum nodded as though he understood that, then decided he had been had. “Excuse me?” he asked.

Toolori’ta chuckled. “I am generally addressed to my face as either Your Eminence or Lord High Inquisitor. Behind my back the epithets are far more colorful and less respectful.”

“That doesn’t bother you?” Pflum asked.

“I wasn’t particularly respectful of my predecessor when he and his spies were out of earshot,” Toolori’ta replied. “Now if my briefing was correct, you must be Pflum.”

“I suppose I must be,” Pflum replied lightly. Belatedly he added, “Your Eminence.”

“Looala’to speaks well of you and your counterparts. He was also quite impressed by your assistant, Mister Laterus.” Both Pflum and Jack noticed no mention was made of the DTT agents. “However, he was unable to understand what land you came from. Perhaps you might enlighten me?”

“Tell me, Eminence,” Pflum replied. “Does your culture and religion understand the concept of ‘What if?’”

“Do we ever wonder how our lives might have been different had we made different decisions?” the High Inquisitor asked in turn. “I suppose it is only natural to do so, especially if you could go back and correct mistakes you made in the past.”

“Something like that,” Pflum agreed. “In fact that answers what would have been my next question; ‘Have you ever thought of traveling through time?’ Well, we have learned to travel through time, to go back and visit the past. We cannot correct our own mistakes, however, since we have discovered that there are an infinite number of time lines and the means by which we travel crosses all of them so the odds are infinitely against our ever being able to land on our exact time line.”

“Sounds rather useless to me,” the High Inquisitor commented.

“For changing the mistakes you made, perhaps, but while we cannot actually visit our own past, we can visit worlds that are almost exactly identical to our own and thereby observe what life was like in the past. It’s amazing how often written history is either wrong about or just doesn’t mention certain details. In fact most expeditions, by our laws, must be to time lines almost identical to our own.”

“Most expeditions, you say?”

“Yes, Eminence,” Pflum nodded. “This time we were assigned to travel in a different direction.” Slowly and carefully, Pflum attempted to explain. He did not bother trying to describe the Z axis and universes with different basic rules. He was fairly certain the High Inquisitor would not understand. In fact a few minutes into the explanation he was fairly certain the Inquisitor was merely nodding politely as he went along.

“So you say that all these other strange people are actually you in different bodies?” Toolori’ta asked.

“I wouldn’t go quite that far,” Pflum replied, “but they come from worlds that are so close in history to my own, that they have had lives that seem to be identical to ours, until we arrived here, of course.”

“This is very disturbing, Pflum” Toolori’ta said at last. “It is the basic tenet of our religion that the one true God created this world for us, his most favored people. The only other worlds I recognize are God’s own Heaven, and the place where all that is wicked dwells.”

“Oh hell,” Lucinda muttered.

“Exactly,” Toolori’ta replied.

“Given my choice of those two,” Pflum assured him, “I’ll go with Heaven.”

“I am sure you would,” the High Inquisitor remarked. “Unfortunately you would say that whether you were an angel or a demon. Frankly, I can see you’re no angel and while you do not seem particularly demonic to me, the alternative you present is unthinkable. And even as we sit here discussing it, still more strange creatures, all of whom claim to be the five of you continue to arrive.”

“How many of us so far?” Pflum asked nervously.

“So far thirty-seven groups have arrived and more arrive each day. Finding places to keep you all is going to become difficult soon if I do not make a decision.”

“The problem is only going to get worse, Your Eminence,” Pflum told him. “According to what we have learned about the nature of Time, an infinite number of parties left their own time lines on this same expedition and it looks like they’re going to all end up here.” Pflum thought about that to himself and realized that while not everyone could possibly land on this same line, infinity meant that even if only a small fraction of them landed here they could be infinite in number.

“Then I suppose we could just simplify the matter by killing you all,” Toolori’ta commented emotionlessly.

“That would hardly solve your problem,” Jack cut in suddenly.

“Mister Laterus?” the Inquisitor asked, turning toward him.

“Do you understand what infinite really means, Eminence, sir?” Jack asked, then continued on quickly, “I’m sure you do. You can kill those of us who have already arrived easily enough - we’re mortal enough - but no matter what you do you still have to dispose of our bodies.”

“Cremation is neat and sanitary,” Toorali’ta remarked.

“And the remains don’t take up much space either,” Jack nodded.

“Kid,” Pflum whispered. “Stop helping us!”

“However,” Jack continued, “no matter how small our remains are, you are still going to end up with an infinite amount of our remains. Think about how much space that would take up.”

“There would be no room left for people,” the Inquisitor whistled, his feathers started fluffing up, a sign of fear, Pflum thought.

“And we would keep on arriving,” Jack told him. “Not only that, but I suspect those arrivals are accelerating. They are happening faster and faster, aren’t they?”

“They are,” the Inquisitor admitted. “You are describing the end of my world. What do you recommend I do?”

“Encourage and help us, of course,” Jack told him. “Allow us to repair our machines and leave. Our Transits, our time machines, are all broken in the same way. Once we know how to repair them, we can leave instructions for those who come after us, so they won’t have to stay here any longer than necessary.”

“But from what you say, you and your counterparts will continue to arrive forever,” Toorali’ta pointed out.

“It’s a strange thing to contemplate, Eminence,” Pflum cut back in, “but I think the arrivals will begin to slacken off as soon as we get the first Transits repaired and on their way. We may continue to arrive for a few years, but I seriously doubt it will continue forever. If it was forever, we would have been arriving since the dawn of time as well. No, nothing mortal is forever, although the next few years might feel that way. Still, so long as we can fix the Transits, this plague of our arrivals should end eventually.”

“Interesting,” The Inquisitor remarked. “Well, what you say is interesting, but very hard to accept. I will have to think about this and interview the others too of course.”

## The Elements

Three weeks later they were still stuck in their high-rise dungeon. Guards had brought in still more straw pallets and quilts and eventually there were over thirty versions of each of the prisoners in the room and they were forced to sleep in shifts. The Pflums and Jacks had started spending most of their time up on the roof at least when the weather permitted.

Bored out of their minds, the Pflums cooperated to build a shelter on the roof. They asked for and

received many yards of waterproof canvas and using the wood and tools, they made a great frame across which they stretched the canvas so that it covered the entire roof. The project was such a success, that other versions of them were encouraged to do the same and they soon saw other canvas roofs rising out over the other nearby towers.

Unfortunately with the roofs covered, their captors decided they could stick still more Pflums and companies in each tower.

"I don't want us trying to build another few stories just to make room for still more of us," Human Pflum grumbled one morning. "Kid, how long before we out-number these birdbrains?"

"At least a year, dude," a Jack, who looked vaguely like one of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, told him.

"Terrific," several Pflums muttered.

"We have to get out of here," Human Pflum said to the rabbit.

"I'm open to suggestions," Rabbit replied.

"Ever been hang gliding?" the hominid asked.

"You know I haven't," Rabbit replied. "None of us have. Jack, do you hang-glide?"

"Nobody hang-glides anymore," Elephant Jack retorted. "I tried bungee jumping several trips back though."

"I doubt it applies," Human Pflum told him. "Still, I have a sudden urge to take up a new hobby, I wonder if any of our pals downstairs knows how."

It turned out that while none of the DTT people had any experience with gliding, the scientists all had aeronautic advice for the Pflums. Human and Rabbit Pflum listened to all their advice very attentively and then went ahead with their plans, carefully avoiding following any of it. The wood available to them was light and strong although the canvas they had received was too heavy, so Rabbit Pflum asked for cloth that was both light and strong, "The lighter the better," he told Looala'to. Much to the surprise of any of them, Looala'to did not ask what they intended to do with it.

"You would almost think they are encouraging us to escape," Several of the Lucindas muttered.

"Maybe they are," some Jacks replied to them. "It would solve their problems with us without straining their religious beliefs."

"More like they want to shoot us trying to escape," Human Pflum muttered to Rabbit as they hauled the cloth up to the roof.

"I don't think so," Human Jack told them. "They honestly cannot imagine anyone trying to escape from this high up. You heard what Looala'to told us right after we arrived. Most Ulualoo are afraid of heights. They would probably be scared witless of this roof."

"Then why leave the tools and stuff up here on the roof?" Rabbit Pflum asked.

“Would you rather have them in the sleeping room?” Jack countered.

“I don’t know about your reasoning, kid,” a human version of Pflum with bright green skin told him as they passed, “There’s almost enough rope up here to rappel down the walls on.”

“Yeah, almost,” a panda-like Jack retorted.

“It’s not too late to try thinking of something else,” Rabbit Pflum commented.

“Nah,” laughed the human Pflum. “Ever since man cast his envious eyes on the birds, flying freely in the sky…”

“Yeah, yeah, I’ve heard that speech before,” Rabbit stopped him. “Let’s just cover these two frames and hope we made them large enough to actually fly. Otherwise it’s going to be a very fast trip to the ground.”

“These things are twice as wide as any glider I’ve seen,” Human replied. “Hmm, we still have some sewing to do, don’t we?”

“Looks like it,” Rabbit agreed. “We’re going to have to strike at least part of the roof in order to launch as well.”

“Don’t worry about that,” the leonine Pflum told them. “Some of us will help sew and the rest will start modifying the roof.”

“I’ve been thinking about that,” Turtle Pflum told them. “I think we can retrofit hinges on the vertical supports. It will allow us to take it down quickly and then put it back up after you launch.”

“It’ll come in handy later too,” the green human Pflum pointed out, “if we want to get a tan.”

“What’s a tan?” Jack the Lion asked. Nobody replied.

The two gliders were ready by the middle of the afternoon, but the modifications to the roof had not yet been finished. The DTT people were more than willing to give advice but none of them seemed to think it appropriate to lend a hand, so the Pflums eventually banished them from the roof.

“We’ll work in shifts all night,” Lion Pflum announced, “and ought to finish by tomorrow noon.”

“Doesn’t matter anyway,” Human Pflum decided. “We want to wait for a good updraft if we can get one. Right now we don’t even have a light breeze.”

“True, but tomorrow may dawn on high winds,” Lion replied.

“Not sure I want those either,” Human Pflum replied seriously. “We want a fairly stiff breeze, but if possible we also want it good and steady. Gusts can be dangerous, and if the wind is too heavy it could blow our wing out.”

“You’ve thought it through then,” Lion noted. “Good. Who will be attempting the flight? You and your Jack?”

“No, it’ll be Rabbit and me. I’d take our Jacks along if we could, but these are definitely one-man jobs.

Anyway Rabbit's and my Transits were the first two here and theoretically they'll be the closest to being fixed. I figure that if we can get back to the transits and fix two of them, we can start ferrying everyone out of here."

"And once you know how to fix your transit, the rest of us will be able to get the work done all the faster," Lion nodded approvingly.

The Pflums and Jacks continued working on the roof and managed to finish it up by midmorning the next day. Their timing was good because it turned out to be a very warm morning and by noon they enjoyed what Human and Rabbit Pflum decided were perfect conditions for gliding."

"We'll want to head over that way," Rabbit told Human decisively as they planned their flight.

"Toward that great central plaza? Good," Human agreed. "We should be able to catch a good updraft there. Then, if these things are as easy to steer as we hope we'll spiral upward and then head for the Transits."

"That was my plan, yes," Rabbit replied.

"Too bad none of us are birds," Human commented.

"Maybe some of us are, we have counterparts imprisoned all over the city, but why do you need a bird version of us?"

"I just thought they might have some basic flying instincts," Pflum Hominid replied.

"The natives here don't," Bunny replied.

"How do you know? Just because heights scare them, it doesn't mean if strapped to a glider they might not suddenly become aeronautic geniuses," Human replied.

"I wouldn't put any money on it," Rabbit replied dryly.

"Well, we're not going to accomplish anything from here," Human remarked. "Time to introduce the concept of manned flight to this world."

"And if these things don't work?" Rabbit asked pointedly.

"I imagine we'll crash," Human replied.

"I meant what's the next plan? We might survive, after all."

"A hot air balloon," Human said decisively. "Come to think about it, we probably should have tried that first. Too late now."

"We'll start working on a balloon after you launch," Mutant Turtle Pflum told them.

"Assuming they give you the materials for one," Human Pflum replied.

"Good point," Lion replied, "after you take off, the birdbrains may not be overly willing to give us anything anymore. Still no time to worry about that. Get those wings of yours ready. We'll open the roof

for you.”

They did not need to completely collapse the roof to allow Human and Rabbit to launch. Instead they had designed the modification to allow the roof to fold back until half of the area was open to the sky. Human and Rabbit lifted their gliders and dragged them to northern wall of tower. The roof was large, but the gliders barely had room to stand side by side.

“Maybe I had better go first,” Human suggested. “We could crash into each other if we go at the same time.” Rabbit nodded.

“Good luck, Pflum,” Human Jack told him.

“Thanks, Kid!” Pflum replied even as all the other Pflums and Jacks echoed the sentiments. Then finally it was time to finally take flight. “Up in the air, junior birdman,” Human Pflum said to himself and stepped up on to the top of the low wall that ringed in the rooftop area of the tower.

Down below, the activity had evidently caught the attention of the *Uluu* guards. All over the lower walls, they were standing around, crossbows in hand, looking up at Pflum and his glider. “Better not have to fly too low over those guys,” he called back to Rabbit. “Right now they’re utterly puzzled as to what’s happening up here, but I wouldn’t count on their confusion lasting very long.”

“I wasn’t planning to wait more than a second before jumping off,” Rabbit replied. “Would you prefer if I went first?”

“I’ll let you know after we land,” Hominid Pflum replied. Then he turned, let the glider fill with the wind and jumped off the roof. He had a bad moment as he suddenly dropped about thirty feet, but then he really caught the wind and the glider shot forward as though propelled by a catapult. Behind him, Human Pflum heard Rabbit’s wing catch the air as well, but there was no comfortable way to turn around and see what was happening back there. Then there was a loud round of cheers from the Jacks and Pflums on the roof, echoed to a lesser extent from the other tower roofs. He looked down and saw the guards all staring open-mouthed at him and he idly wondered if that was a sign of amazement among the *Uluu*, or something else. He decided there was some amazement in them anyway, since none even thought to try shooting him down with their crossbows.

Then, he was beyond the perimeter wall and flying over the rooftops of the considerably lower buildings of Rontola. He soon reached the large open area he and Rabbit had spotted from the Tower, but there wasn’t anywhere as much of a thermal over it as they had hoped. The gliders were also not as maneuverable as hoped either. He tried to circle the plaza and gain a little height, but the turning radius of the glider was so wide that he kept losing the feeble updraft so that the net effect was to barely hold the altitude he already had.

“We’re not going to do any better, I fear,” Rabbit called from behind and slightly above Human. “Let’s just go for it.”

“Right!” Human called back and on the next time around the plaza, he straightened out his course and headed directly for the Transits. It was then that he realized what was missing from the crowds in the busy plaza below them. There were no voices; no shouts from the merchants, no talking among the shoppers. He glanced downward before leaving the plaza area and saw that the *Uluu* below were all staring soundlessly up at the two gliders. “Here we are giving them the show of the century,” Pflum muttered to himself. “At least they might applaud. Tough crowd!”



They were nearly a mile outside of the city before finally reaching ground level near the top of a hill, but instead of coming to a halt, they both used their momentum to run a dozen steps up the hill and then off the summit to be able to sail an additional half a mile or so before finally coming back to earth near a large copse of trees about two miles from where they had left their Transits.

“Not bad for a pair of amateurs on their first flight,” Rabbit decided once they had stopped moving.

“Not bad for someone with a bit of experience either, I think,” Human replied. “We’d better get these out of sight – in these trees, I think – before someone finds them and us.”

“Why worry about hiding them?” Rabbit asked. “We’re not going to fly them again, are we?”

“No, but there’s no need to let the birdies know where we landed if we can avoid it, is there?”

“Good point,” Rabbit conceded.

They dragged the gliders into the trees and then, for good measure, cut off the fabric, which they hid beneath the previous winter’s fallen leaves. The end result was that nothing of the gliders could be seen from outside the copse. They rested for a few minutes then proceeded on their way.

“Clouds rolling in,” Hominid Pflum noted as they got clear of the trees. “Good thing we didn’t wait for better conditions.”

“Yeah,” Leporid Pflum agreed. “I think we’re going to be wishing we’d turned those gliders into umbrellas before long.”

“We’ll have dry and modern beds to sleep on tonight,” Human Pflum assured him.

Trekking on, they made their way to the top of one last hill and looked down on the flat grassy area they had originally landed in. Below them the strangest city they had ever seen had developed. “Looks like aHollywood set,” Rabbit commented.

A vast maze of Transit doors had formed as each Transit had touched down on the *Ulualoo* world. Long rows of Transit field walls had been set up end on end and their field walls all faded out three feet back from the field end. Instead of one very long line of walls, however, later Transits had landed in additional rows, but the rows were not all open ended. Here and there some Transits had materialized at right angles to the others, blocking off the aisles between the rows of walls and sometimes there was a gap of two or three feet between transits.

“Am I missing something or are all those transit field walls facing each other?” Human Pflum asked.

“I think you’re right,” Rabbit replied. “Strange. I would have thought we would have all oriented in the same direction.”

“No but I think it is even stranger that the only ones that are not parallel to our orientation differ by exactly ninety degrees. I wonder how that happened,” Human commented.

“Ask Jack when you get a chance,” Rabbit suggested. “If he can’t figure it out then I’m sure Gallagher and Shean will make something up. I wish I had one of Jack’s notebooks here though.”

“Why’s that?”

“I think we’re going to need a map to find our Transits,” Bunny replied. “There are hundreds of Transits out there.”

“No wonder Big Bird wants to start killing us. He must have thousands of our counterparts locked up by now. My guess is that our crates are somewhere near the middle,” Human conjectured. “I remember Lion and Simian landed on either side of us.”

“It’s a place to start,” Rabbit agreed. “We’ll need to avoid the patrols down there, though.” On the plane below, they could see more of the knights who had arrested them patrolling the perimeter of the Transit city. A ways off to the north they could see a group of at least fifty time travelers being herded back toward the city.

“Looks like all the newcomers are appearing around the edges of this formation,” Human observed.

“Just as well,” Rabbit shrugged. “If one materialized too close to our doors we would never get in.”

“Wish we still had the binoculars,” Human remarked a few minutes later, “I don’t see any patrols inside that great maze but it would be nice to know for certain.”

“Even with all those crates out there,” Rabbit observed, “we still have a good hundred yards to run out in the open before we’re inside. We’d better wait until after dark.”

“Agreed,” Human nodded. “Those patrols are too closely spaced to allow us to get in without being observed while the sun is still up, although it’s getting pretty dark right now.”

“Hmm, if it rains heavily enough, maybe we can get in before dark,” Rabbit conjectured.

Just at that moment it started to rain. There was no gradual build-up of the precipitation. It just started coming down full blast, soaking everything and everyone in sight and also reducing visibility to a bare minimum.

“Changed my mind,” Rabbit told Human suddenly, “Let’s try it now. In that armor and with those helmets their wearing I doubt they can see more than a few yards in front of them anyway.”

There was a sudden flash of lightning, followed by a long, loud roll of thunder. Human tried to say, “Let’s go,” but the words were swallowed up by nature’s roar, so he just got up and started running. Rabbit quickly followed and soon after they were inside the maze of Transits. They continued running until they were beyond any possible sight from the perimeter of the maze then came to rest. “Let’s go inside to catch our breath,” Human suggested.

“It’s not out Transit,” Rabbit pointed out.

“Probably not,” Human agreed, “but it’s dry and warm, hopefully, in there.” However, it turned out the inner door they chose was locked shut and their keys did not work on the lock. “Well, that might actually be good news,” Human remarked. “There are differences between our Transits.”

“Shouldn’t they be identical?” Rabbit wondered.

“I would have thought so,” Human replied. “Maybe the kid will have a explanation for this as well.”

“You plan to ask him?” Rabbit asked.

“Heck, no!” Human laughed. “It’s probably just another expression of probability along with the time offsets in our arrivals. You and I aren’t from exactly identical histories since we arrived about an hour apart, maybe a bit more, but our lines are more closely related than the ones represented by someone showing up about now. Differences are likely to be expected with this great a spread. Eventually the differences will be so great that the travelers will stop arriving here, which is pretty much what I said to the Inquisitor, although for different reasons.”

“Yeah,” Rabbit agreed, “I pretty much told him the same thing. So maybe we won’t have too much trouble being certain which are ours,” Rabbit concluded. “Let’s see your key.” Human handed his to Rabbit who placed it over his and studied the differences. “They look the same to me,” he said a moment later, handing Human’s key back to him.

“I wonder if the differences are growing greater as new Transits arrive,” Human replied.

“Hopefully, not too much greater,” Rabbit replied, “or our repairs may not apply to the more recent arrivals.”

“Out of our control,” Human shrugged, “but if the differences are gradual, each of us can learn from our neighbors.”

“But will we all be able to effect repairs before the birds batter down our doors?” Rabbit asked.

“Hmm, good point,” Human conceded. “Ken made the field walls bullet proof, but a battering ram can still do a lot of damage. Sounds like the rain is slackening off a bit; let’s move on.”

“This would be a lot quicker and easier,” Rabbit griped a few hours later, “if the doors weren’t all so nearly identical.” The rain ended shortly before sunset and by the time full dark was on them the skies were clear and the temperature was dropping rapidly.

“I found an open one,” Human announced. “It’s not one of ours; the consoles are still in one piece, but at least we can warm up and dry off in here.”

“Good,” Rabbit agreed. “We can continue our search in the morning. I don’t think we’re too far away from our own crates. At least our keys fit the lock on this one, even if they aren’t close enough to actually work.”

“I wonder if we can eat whatever is in the larder?” Human remarked.

Rabbit took a look. “Seems safe enough. Looks like the people from this crate are omnivorous like we both are. I see veggies and meat meals and nothing seems particularly exotic. Want a doughnut?”

“For a start, sure. You’re omnivorous? On my line rabbits are herbivores,” Human remarked.

“Well, I’m not really a rabbit as you might think of them. There’s probably about five or six million years of evolution between me and a modern rabbit just as there are between you and a...” Rabbit paused to think of a close relative to a hominid.

“An ape?” Human Pflum suggested. “Yeah, I should have realized. Gorillas are herbivorous. Chimps are our closest living relatives and they’re omnivorous too

“And my species has a near relative that is omnivorous too,” Rabbit explained as he helped himself to two prepared meals from the stasis box. “These look like Twentieth Century TV dinners.”

“They can’t be any worse than the prepared meals we brought with us,” Human shrugged.

“But they aren’t any better either,” Rabbit noted after a few bites.

“We’ve both had worse,” Human remarked. “What I want to get a handle on is this compulsion the birds use to make us do what they want.”

“They haven’t been particularly obnoxious about it,” Rabbit replied. “They just seem to use it the same way a cop might use handcuffs.”

“Yeah, but I asked the Inquisitor how they did it and you know what he said?”

“Yes, he said it was magic,” Rabbit replied. “I asked him the same question. I got the impression so did Lion and Gorilla before me. By now I would guess it’s his least favorite question.”

“Or else he’s managed to come up with a more convincing answer by now,” Pflum Human retorted.

“It was a bit lame,” Rabbit laughed. “Uh, unless...”

“Unless he was telling the truth?” Human finished the question. “Oh, come on. We’ve both made jokes about civilizations of flying, magic-using hyenas, but have you ever really seen one?”

“No, but this is the Twilight Zone. We’re dealing with alternative physics as well as alternative history,” Rabbit pointed out.

“We’re sure as heck out of the five-nines in both directions this time,” Human replied. “Still... magic? Really?”

“It makes more sense than some sort of micro-miniature device that somehow takes over our nervous systems,” Rabbit pointed out.

“Any sufficiently advanced magic will be indistinguishable from technology, huh?” Human shrugged.

“In this case at least, yes,” Rabbit agreed.

“It’s a point,” Human admitted. “We grew up with technology to accomplish everything we want it to do, though there’s still nothing worth watching on network TriVee. I guess it is only natural to assume anything someone else does that you cannot at first figure out was accomplished through a clever use of technology.” He paused a moment. “Real magic?”

“What is real anyway?” the rabbit replied.

Human Pflum looked at him sourly. “We need sophomore level philosophy like llamas need fire starters.”

“Sorry,” Rabbit laughed. “I couldn’t resist. You couldn’t have had the situation been reversed. I suppose we could stay here a few years and study what the natives call magic and come up with a technical

explanation for how it works, but you probably have other commitments. I know I do.”

“Samantha,” Human Pflum whispered.

“Yeah,” Rabbit agreed. “I missed her too. That all-night party onLesvos .”

“Yeah,” Human nodded, “and dinner inTahiti , not to mention all those other evenings we had. Now that was real magic.”

“Yeah,” Rabbit repeated. “Something to look forward to again, huh?”

“Right,” Human agreed. “So, for the sake of argument, let’s say old Tooralooraloor was right and they do it by magic. How? And what else can they do?”

“How?” Rabbit echoed. “How am I supposed to know? Or you for that matter? In our own worlds magic as practiced by primitives, at least, is a rational process with rules every bit as strict as what we call science.”

“I know,” Human replied. “There are carefully worded incantations, invocations, ingredients, rituals and what not. And they all have to come together just right. Is that how it works here? All I’ve heard are simple commands. They tell us to sit, we sit. They tell us to march into town and we form up ranks. Where was the ritual and incantation. I didn’t see so much as a voodoo doll.”

“Neither did I, but your comment about a voodoo doll reminds me of amulets. An amulet is a magic container. It can be made in various ways for different uses, but the thing to remember is they are artifacts. They are made in advance of being used. We weren’t looking for such a thing, but maybe the birds who gave us orders had some sort of talisman or amulet and we just didn’t notice.”

“Maybe it’s really the ability to cloud men’s minds too,” Human retorted. “Who knows?”

“The Shadow knows!” Rabbit intoned, but couldn’t hold a straight face for long and started laughing.

They were up early the next morning, ate a quick breakfast before heading out to find their own Transits and paused just long enough to write a thank you note to whichever Pflum normally piloted that Transit. Their search was not any easier in daylight. There had been minor differences in the doors and airlocks on the Transits around the periphery, but here within ten rows or so of the center there were no obvious visible differences and the area covered by transits was so large, they could only approximate where the center itself was. To further complicate their search it turned out they were not alone within the great maze.

“What the heck is that?” Rabbit asked suddenly.

“Sounds like one of those giant riding birds,” Human replied. “Oh hell, I thought they weren’t patrolling inside the maze.”

“They weren’t yesterday afternoon,” Rabbit replied. “Of course they weren’t looking for us yesterday afternoon.”

“I guess it was obvious we would be headed this way,” Human commented.

They looked around carefully until Rabbit spotted a small patrol two aisles away. “They’re that way,” he

whispered.

“They’ll be back though,” Human replied. “Hold on a sec.” He dug his foot in the turf next to a gap between two transits and removed a small bit of the turf. “There,” he said, kicking the rest of the dirt off his shoe. “That’s the best I can do to mark our place on this row.”

“If we can find that mark,” Rabbit replied, “we’ll be able to know where we left off. Good thinking.” They crossed into the next aisle and on seeing the way blocked by another Transit to the south, they turned north and started checking doors. Five doors later they ran headlong into an invisible wall.

“Well, that’s going to leave a mark,” Human commented dryly as he tried to sit up.

“I don’t want to go to school today, Mommy!” Rabbit slurred.

“Are you okay?” Human asked worriedly.

“That depends,” Rabbit told him uncertainly. “How many of you are there?”

“One per world at the most,” Human replied. “Seriously, are you all right?”

“I’ll live,” Rabbit replied. “Just got the wind knocked out of me. What the heck did we hit? Oh, of course. There’s another Transit here, isn’t there?”

“Yeah,” Human replied. “It’s just that from behind the field wall we can’t see it.”

“You know, I’ve seen that, or rather not seen it plenty of times,” Rabbit remarked, “but this is the first time I haven’t known it was there.”

“I know,” Human told him.

“I hope you won’t mind if it’s the last time as well.”

“I’ll allow that,” Human assured him. “Let’s work the next aisle over until we can find another way into the area on the other side of that.”

“I just hope we don’t have to climb over any transit walls to get in there,” Rabbit remarked.

“I doubt we will,” Human replied. “It would mean there’s a party or parties who haven’t been arrested yet and who have had a longer chance to fix their Transits without interruption and might even now be ready to tell us how they did it.”

“You think?” Rabbit asked.

“Not if I can help it,” Human replied automatically. “It won’t happen. It would make our job too easy and so far life hasn’t been like that, has it?”

“We’re due for a little luck.”

“I’ll settle for finding our Transits,” Human told him. “Hey, this looks familiar.”

“What?” asked Rabbit.

“This scuffed area. I think this is where you, the Jacks and I had coffee and doughnuts when we first met,” Human replied.

“Then this,” Rabbit concluded, turning around to face the next Transit door on his left, “should be my Transit.”

“And this one,” Human added, turning to the one next door, “is mine. Oh, hell, I hear those riding birds again!”

“Quick!” Rabbit told him, opening the door to his own Transit. “Get inside.” Human followed him inside to find a horrible sight. “Where are all the parts?” Rabbit screamed. When they had been arrested, the console and most of the removable circuitry had been lying on the floor of the Transit. In their absence someone had entered and removed all the loose pieces.

Silent E

“Shh!” Human admonished him. “They’ll hear you.”

“Hear me, hell!” Rabbit retorted. “He opened his special tool bin, found the big wrench and started for the door. ‘I’ll give them something to hear!’”

Human jumped forward and tackled Rabbit forcing him to the floor, “Calm down,” Human urge Rabbit quietly. “You go out there right now and all you’ll get is another five-mile hike to Birdland.”

“Sure, you can talk,” Rabbit told him bitterly. “They didn’t steal the parts from your Transit?”

“Says who?” Human replied. “As soon as it’s safe, we’ll go check mine out. I’ll bet you dinner, mine’s been raided too.”

“You think so?” Rabbit asked, whispering now.

“Probably. Neither of us had a chance to close the doors when we were arrested. They were wide open. I don’t know who closed them, but you can thank whoever did for the fact that everything else is still in here.”

Human got up and quietly closed the inner door. Then he turned out the digital window. A few moments later the armored birds rode up to the door and dismounted. One door at a time, they tried to enter the Transits in the vicinity, while Human and Rabbit sat quietly inside Rabbit’s Transit. It was another half an hour before the birds remounted and rode off.

“Give it another fifteen minutes,” Human suggested.

“At least,” Rabbit agreed. They gave it twice as long before venturing outside, not that they had any lack of things to do while waiting. On Human’s suggestion, they checked out the small cubicles they used as bedrooms to see if any personal belongings had disappeared. The first two cubicles, those Doctors Noel and Neil used had been emptied of everything but the cots themselves, but the others appeared untouched. “Well, I won’t worry over much if the birds took souvenirs from Spin and Marty,” Rabbit muttered. “They left Jack’s and my stuff alone.”

“I’d say we just figured out how far they had gotten before some oaf closed the door,” Human remarked. I just hope they were at least as clumsy in my Transit. We had better check out Lion’s and Ape’s while we’re here.”

“You think we could borrow some parts from their Transits?” Rabbit suggested.

“We would only strand them here in our steads. Our parts were probably put somewhere for further study. All we have to do is find out where and liberate them. If we have to, we’ll get one of the other Transits moving and use that.”

“Well, at least they didn’t try dismantling the parts that were still in place,” Rabbit sighed.

“Just as well,” Human replied. “I’m in no hurry to find out what happens to a Transit cut off from its power supply while in the field.” Theorists were split on what might happen in such a circumstance. Some said the Transit would implode, forming a small black hole that stretched however briefly across the time lines before it exploded. Others claimed the two ends would rapidly contract until they met each other on some time line between the home and whenever the field end had been. Either way the hapless voyagers in such a transit would have a long walk home if they survived the experience.

“Right,” Rabbit nodded fervently. “I think it’s been long enough. Let’s poke our heads outside and see how your Transit is.”

The human transit was almost as bad as Rabbit’s had been. A few loose parts had been left on the floor, but the entire toolbox had been emptied. “Well, they didn’t manage to get Bert and Ernie’s stuff from this one, Wonder if the birds would trade that for the Transit parts,” Human remarked.

“Leave it for your next to last resort,” Rabbit advised.

“You mean just before I try convincing them I’m their greatest saint?” Human asked.

“Or fight their entire army single handedly,” Rabbit replied.

“What? Can’t I even count on you to help?”

“Hey, I am you. Remember?” Rabbit laughed.

“Oh good, and there I thought you were planning to be a consultant only,” Human remarked.

“Ha! Let’s go check out Lion’s crate,” Rabbit suggested.

The Leonine Transit had never been dismantled nor had it been ransacked. The Simian crate had been left similarly untouched. “Seem like they only took parts that were loose,” Human observed.

“And only my versions of Bill and Ted got ripped off,” Rabbit added. “Lucky them.”

“I suspect someone stopped the looting just as it started but was too lazy to have the stuff put back after it was in whatever cart or wagon they hauled it out with,” Human told him. “This tears it, though. If I can, I’m leaving those two here.”

“Who?” Rabbit asked.



“Who? Abbot and Costello. Who do you think?” Human snarled.

“Better yet,” Rabbit advised a few minutes later, “Let’s take lots of pictures of the damage to our Transits...”

“And register a protest so loud...” Human continued.

“The DTT will be afraid to touch us or Down Time, Ltd for a century or more,” Rabbit concluded.

“Well, let’s see if we can activate Lion’s regulator so we can see what’s wrong.” Human tried inputting the activation code and nothing happened. “Wrong code,” he noted checking the display. “What the heck, we knew there would be differences. What’s your code?”

“DTT rots,” Rabbit replied. “Yours?”

“DTT bites,” Human shrugged. “Let’s try some close variants.”

They spent the rest of the day trying various possible activation codes in both Lion’s and Simian’s Transits. Most of them were variations on the two Human and Rabbit used and the rest were codes and similar variations they had used in the past. None of them, however, turned out to be the right one and neither Transit came to life.

“Maybe we ought to borrow parts,” Rabbit suggested when they finally stopped for the evening and were eating dinner.

“I don’t know,” Human replied. “if we all used different activation codes, who knows how out of whack their components are with ours. Our histories may have been identical or nearly so, but we know there are differences in our physics.”

“Could be right,” Rabbit admitted. “I’d have thought our passwords would have been closer than the fine differences in the Transit parts. We’d have to recalibrate the regulators and frankly I’m not up to that sort of job.”

“Maybe we could break some of the others out,” Human suggested.

“Got a plan?”

“What’s a plan?” Human shot back deadpan.

“No wonder Jack hates it when I do that,” Rabbit shook his head. “So what next?”

“Well, we could leave a tracer here and fly home and let Ken repair the console,” Human replied. “I’m fairly sure we could activate the regulator with what’s left of the console and then cross the wires of the emergency switch.”

“What if the replacement parts stop us from traveling on the Z axis?” Rabbit countered.

“They haven’t so far,” Human pointed out, but he did not sound particularly confident. “Still, you’re right. It’s too great a risk. We can’t take that chance. There are some diagnostics we can run even with the console half dismantled the way it is. Tomorrow, let’s see if we can at least figure out what went

wrong. If we can manage that much, it might save a lot of time when we do get those parts back.”

“Good idea,” Rabbit agreed. “We’ll start right after breakfast. “My crate or yours?”

“Doesn’t matter,” Human told him. “We’ll want to check both to verify our analysis of the problem anyway.”

They worked on the Transits for the next two days, often using tools from Lion’s and Simian’s Transits when missing meters were needed, but the problem eluded them.

“If I didn’t know any better,” Human Pflum started over lunch on the second day.

“I’d say there was nothing wrong with our crates,” Rabbit finished. “That’s getting really annoying, you know.”

“Starting and finishing each others thoughts?” Human nodded. “Yeah. Guess we’re spending too much time together. We already knew we thought alike...”

“But this is ridiculous,” Rabbit concluded. It wasn’t a consistent habit of theirs, but it came out whenever they relaxed. They ate in silence and then just sat there drinking coffee when Rabbit suddenly exclaimed, “No! It can’t be.”

“What?” Human asked, then he noticed that rabbit was looking in the corner where the DTT’s instrument console still stood. “Could be,” he admitted. “We left their instruments off and disconnected from the main circuitry the last two days. Okay, deactivate the regulator. We’ll take some more measurements with the circuits on standby then compare them to the ones in Lion and Ape, and maybe a few others if we can get in.”

“That’s disgusting!” Rabbit complained.

“What do you mean?” asked Human. “We’ve been using the others’ Transits since we got here.”

“Not that; it’s like getting a loan from your brother,” Rabbit replied. “What I meant was it’s disgusting that the only problem is in the DTT modifications. All we had to do was shut down their console and we could have just left.”

“I still want those parts back, though,” Human told him.

“No kidding,” Rabbit retorted, “getting back in this condition would be hairier than the time we had to short out the gap in the regulator fuse.”

“Now that’s odd,” Human noted. When Rabbit prompted him, he continued, “The way we just assume all our experiences have been identical.”

“Haven’t they?” Rabbit countered.

“I haven’t found any discernable differences,” Human conceded, “but we never really questioned it.”

“Well, we didn’t compare extensive life-story notes,” Rabbit agreed, “but does it really matter if Sharonne used an additional ‘Uh,’ during our most recent briefing?”

“I don’t think so,” Human replied, “but we could be wrong there. There are going to be differences, we were out of sync by about an hour.”

“True,” Rabbit nodded, “but that might have been the only difference. Look, tell you what, when this is over, maybe we’ll get together sometime and we can compare notes over a good meal and lots of good bottles. I owe you dinner anyway.”

“You’re on,” Human told him.

Outside there was a sudden flicker of light, followed by a long whistling sound and a distant rumble of an explosion.

“That wasn’t thunder,” Rabbit pointed out as they ran toward the door, “What are those birds up to now?”

Human was out the door first, looking eastward he saw a large fire on the distant hills. “Um, I think the sunbird just pooped.” They both looked up toward what passed for a sun on this world. “That bird is flying on as though nothing unusual has happened,” Human remarked. “Then again...”

“Maybe nothing unusual has happened,” Rabbit finished for him, looking toward the distant fire.

“Makes this world all the more exciting,” Human noted. “I wonder if this is predictable.”

“I wonder what the heck that bird eats and where?” Rabbit countered.

Human shrugged, “Maybe we ought not to let anyone back home know about this. There are always some idiots who would want to see this for themselves and Sharonne would smell the money from parsecs away.”

“Good point,” Rabbit agreed, “and even if this is a predictable occurrence we could still be directly underneath when it happens.”

“I’ll pass on that,” Human told him. “For now, however, we need to engineer a prison break that will make the “Great Escape” seem like a country outing.”

“Not to mention get our Transit parts back,” Rabbit added.

“That’s part of the plan,” Human responded.

“There is no way in the world we’re going to be able to walk around in the open in Rontola,” Rabbit pointed out.

“I didn’t think we could,” Human agreed. “We’re going to have to sneak back into town.”

“Too bad we can’t fly” Rabbit sighed.

“We could certainly build a better glider with materials at hand here in our Transits, but I think the

novelty value will have worn off by now. The first time we surprised the heck out of the Ulualoo,” Human told him.

“Try it twice and they’ll be ready to catch us as we land,” Rabbit concluded. “You’re right. So how do you propose to find out where our parts are.”

“Still more versions of us are still arriving, right?”

“I imagine so, by now our variations have probably used up all the normal combinations and are down to left-handed fire-eating zebras with pink stripes,” Rabbit replied.

“Well, we should follow the latest group as they get marched back to town,” Human explained.

“What will that accomplish?” Rabbit asked.

“First, it will get us back into the city undetected since the escorting knights will have their attention fixed on the new arrivals. With a bit of luck they’ll lead us to where the parts are,” Human told him.

“Uh... Are you forgetting the most powerful force in the universe?” Rabbit asked.

“The Strong Nuclear Force?” Human asked, confused.

“The famous Pflum luck,” Rabbit replied dryly.

“It always works against us,” Human nodded. “not only will the parts be in the last place we look, but they’ll be in the last place left on this entire flat world there is for us to look. No helping that, of course, but if we don’t start looking in the wrong places, we’ll never run out of places.”

“Point,” Rabbit told him, “and match. Let’s go play Follow the Leader.”

It had been over a day and a half since they last actually saw a patrol of Ulualoo knights. The priesthood may not have given up their search for the two escapees, but they had stopped looking for them inside the Transit maze.

It turned out that getting out of the maze was more difficult than getting in. From the outside it was easy to see where nearest patrols were and therefore not particularly difficult to avoid them. From inside the maze, however, it was difficult to see if the way was clear. Poking one’s head around a corner was an excellent way of getting caught, and the perimeter patrols were especially alert as they rode by each aisle to see if any new arrivals were in sight. Pflum and Pflum made their way nervously to the edge of the Transit city and found a narrow gap between transits just in from the very edge. There they waited until a group of time travelers were marched on by and only once they were well past did Human and Rabbit poke their heads out of the maze.

They were successful and made their way to the edge of the trees, which were considerably closer to the edge of the maze than they had been days earlier. “I give it two weeks before this entire area is filled with Transits,” Rabbit remarked.

“Then we had better make lots of room for them before then or they may start landing in the ocean,” Human replied.

“The Dolphin and Tuna versions of ourselves should like that,” Rabbit remarked lightly. “You know

we're only going to be able to hide in the trees for so long."

"We can trot from copse to copse," Human told him, "and then for the last mile or so, we'll just have to take our best shot. It should be nearly dark by then. We may not be seen. We'll just have to stick to the shadows when we can."

Rabbit looked ahead through a pair of binoculars he had borrowed from Simian Pflum's Transit. "Interesting," he murmured. "I expected really exotic species for our counterparts by now, but we seem to be repeating. I don't see any obvious hominids like you, but I swear there's a group of my own species or something not very far off, some horse-headed types like we had in our tower and a group of elephantoids. The rest are different – one bunch that looks like Egyptian gods with hawk, crocodile or jackal heads and a group of bright blue kitten-headed people, but they might easily be in groups we haven't seen."

"Kitten-headed?" Human asked, "Not cat-headed?"

"They look more like kittens to me," Rabbit replied.

"Maybe we are repeating," Human shrugged, "or maybe this bunch all speaks Farsi instead of English. There are all sorts of ways to vary, I suppose, and by now the worlds our counterparts are coming from must have all sorts of greater differences from ours that are far more than merely having different sapient species."

"I'd have thought that was a pretty basic difference," Rabbit remarked.

"What's a few chromosomes between friends?" Human laughed. "Time to make our way to the next mini-forest."

As they expected, it was close to dark by the time the column of prisoners reached Rontola. Human and Rabbit had no trouble following unseen since the city itself was not encased in a wall. So there was no need to risk passing through a gate. They merely entered one block over from where the knights were herding their charges and thereby avoided notice even from the general populace, all of whom in the area were one block away watching the procession.

"You would have thought that scene would have lost its novelty value by now," Human commented.

"Maybe they're required to watch?" Rabbit suggested.

"Or else the parade is just blocking traffic and they're waiting to go home," Human countered. "I won't complain, it's giving us the cover we need."

As planned, they stayed in the shadows and hunched over a little so their outlines in the dark would be a little more bird-like. Rabbit had a fair amount of control over his ears and was able to keep them tucked back against his head, although they normally stuck straight up. It was not long before the new arrivals were ushered into another of the large towers. This one was part of the main keep of the great castle at the center of Rontola instead of just inside the outer walls. There was a contingent of armored guards to either side of the entrance way, however.

"It's a lot larger than the tower we were in," Rabbit noted. "Maybe our stuff is in there."

"Could be and I don't see any way we're going to get into the Temple at the moment." There were a

large number of well-dressed Ulualoo leaving the Temple although most were just standing around talking outside the triple-arched doorway. “Maybe we can look there later. Let’s see if we can find a way in that doesn’t involve walking past those guards. They may not see us in the shadows,” Human commented.

“But we’re going to stand out a bit if we try to just walk in. Yes,” finished Rabbit.

They circled around, but the other doors either led into the other towers or the keep itself. However, only the tower doors were guarded. “There may be a way into that tower from inside the keep,” Rabbit commented, “and some of the keep doors appear to be unguarded.”

“There will be Ulualoo inside the keep,” Human pointed out.

“I’ll go first,” Rabbit told him. “Wait here until I signal you.”

“You got it,” Human replied.

Rabbit ran through the doorway nearest them while Human waited a short eternity. Finally rabbit reappeared and waved him in. “We’re clear to the next door and beyond,” Rabbit whispered.

“Okay,” Human replied. “My turn next.”

They traded turns scoping out the area ahead of them and after several close calls, were unable to find a way into any of the towers. After two hours they had been everywhere on the first floor of the keep, including through two locked door. There were several stairways headed up to the next floor and one into a lower level.

“Should we go up or down?” Human asked.

“We would put secret stuff in the basement. We sure haven’t seen anything of note on this floor.”

“There was the ballroom,” Human pointed out.

“I’m not dressed for a formal occasion,” Rabbit snapped.

“They might not know that,” Human pointed out. “Okay so, it’s spelunking we go.”

They made their way into the basement in the same cautious manner in which they had explored the ground floor. The basement was all storage, but mostly of furniture and clothing, certainly not ultra-technological Transit parts although it took two hours to verify that in the poorly lit rooms. Finally, they made their way up to the second floor of the keep. The corridors here were filled with light fixtures that the Pflums at first thought were electric in nature but on closer inspection appeared to be glowing spheres of light that had been set in iron rings that stood out from the plastered walls of the keep. These spheres were cool, light and very easy to remove. When picked up out of their iron rings they continued to glow even though there was no obvious power source nor were the spheres openable in any way they could detect.

“Another use of magic?” Human suggested.

“You believe in magic?” Rabbit countered.

“On this world?” Human replied. “It’ll do until we have a rational explanation. Let’s start poking about

again.”

However, the first door they came to turned out to be a bedroom for one of the castle’s inhabitants. “Who is there?” a voice called out in Ulu. The Pflums looked up and saw a female Ulualoo. She was of similar size to the males, but her feathers were duller, lighter and grayer and without the colorful crest on her head. The Pflums might have quietly backed out of the room, but she spotted them even as she finished speaking.

Rabbit was at a loss for words, but Human replied, “Excuse me, miss. Did you order a pizza?” The female Ulualoo’s only reply was a loud, piercing scream. The Pflums did an abrupt about face and started running pell-mell for the stairs.

### The Folk Song Army

“Pizza?” Rabbit asked disgustedly as they pelted down the stairs.

“No thanks,” Human replied. “I’m more in the mood for Chinese.”

There was a sharp whistle behind them and a voice commanded, “Halt!”

“Not on your life, Tweety!” Rabbit shot back as they bolted out the main door, past the surprised guards.

Several guards ran after them, but whether the Ulualoo were slower on their feet or the Pflums were reaping the benefit of an adrenaline rush, the guards soon fell behind in the darkness. More guards joined the chase and the Pflums just barely managed to avoid being blocked from escaping through the castle’s outer gate. More shouts of “Halt!” followed them along with the slowly receding guards.

The Pflums tried several random turns as they ran through the streets of Rontola. More of the glass spheres kept the streets illuminated although not as brightly as the Castle’s halls were. They were beginning to get short of breath as they were running through an alley when Human spotted a slightly open, painted black door beneath a bright yellow Romanesque-shaped arch. “In here,” he panted to Rabbit. Human couldn’t hear it, but Rabbit’s more sensitive ear detected the sounds of laughing and singing coming from the other side of that door. However, once Human jumped through, Rabbit didn’t feel he had much choice but to back his counterpart’s move. They burst through the door and found a room even darker than the alley had been. All the singing, talking and laughing stopped at once.

Their eyes were still adjusting to the dim light when a female voice calmly asked from the dark silence, “Who are you?”

“Uh,” Human Pflum hesitated, “strangers?”

“Strangers?” the Ulualoo woman echoed. “Strangers just to me or to each other as well?”

“Well, we did just meet a few weeks ago,” Rabbit hedged.

“But I think we know each other fairly well,” Human finished the thought, noticing for the first time that

there were over two dozen Ulualoo of both genders in the room. They were all looking at the Pflums with polite curiosity. "You don't seem particularly shocked to see us."

"We have seen people like you and some who are stranger still paraded through our streets for the last month or so," the spokeswoman told them. "It's a commonplace enough sight by now, even if I might not have expected two of you to visit my place here."

"What sort of place is this?" Human asked. "Your home?"

"I do live upstairs, but this is a public house," she told them. "Forgive my manners; however, I should introduce myself. Walala'li, Mistress of this establishment." She performed a maneuver that was half curtsy and half a head bob. The Pflums were forcefully reminded of the old bobbing, drinking bird toys.

"Aurelian Pflum," Rabbit introduced himself, "at your service."

"And Aurelian Pflum," Human added, "likewise."

"You each have the same name?" Walala'li asked. "Quite an amazing coincidence."

"You haven't heard the least of it," Human told her. "But that's a very long story."

"I'm not going anywhere," Walala'li told him. "I suspect we would all be interested in hearing what you have to say." There were murmurs of agreement from the other Ulualoo.

"First," Rabbit interrupted, "What is a public house. Do you mean this is a restaurant?"

Several Ulualoo chuckled. "In a sense," Walala'li replied. "I do serve food, but most of my guests are here for the drink. I serve beverages a little more interesting than the plain fruit juices and water favored by the priesthood."

"Oh!" Human and Rabbit nodded in unison. Human continued, "This is a tavern. Good! I knew this world had to have some redeeming features!"

"It is a shame the priests don't agree with your notions of redemption," Walala'li replied dryly. "Alcoholic drink is, shall we say, severely frowned on by Their Holinesses. Well, that is putting it mildly. Anything with alcohol in it is illegal except during certain religious ceremonies."

"I'm not certain I would agree with that lot if they told me the sun would rise in the morning," Human cracked.

"On this world," Rabbit added, "That might not be a certainty. What if the sunbird decided to take the day off?"

"Makes as much sense as having to dodge its flaming droppings," Human replied. "Anyway, if they're in favor of alcoholic prohibition, that just ruins any chance of their getting my respect. Okay. Walala'li, would you happen to serve, I don't know your word for it, but it's a bubbling, foaming alcoholic beverage made from grain?" He looked around and saw some of the other patrons drinking something that might have been beer. With their short, stubby beaks, they were able to drink from a mug in very much the same way he or Rabbit could.

"Lager, pilsner, ale, stout or porter?" she asked.



“Surprise me,” Human replied. “A pitcher or so for myself and my other self here and we’ll tell you all about it, or as much as you want to hear anyway.”

“Something to nibble on with it would be nice too,” Rabbit added.

Walala’li nodded and called for food and drink. Another Ulualoo brought them a pitcher of a dark brew along with bowls of something that tasted like chicken stew, a loaf of bread and a bowl of salted nuts. “So tell me how you both happened to have the same name,” she requested.

Between bites and sips, they did their best to explain the nature of space and time as they knew it. The Ulualoo were skeptical when they described their worlds as being spherical. “Seems to me you would all just slip and fall off,” one of their audience opined.

So the Pflums talked about gravity and mass for a while and then just shrugged it off saying, “We come from different worlds and the rules are different there as well. I’ll get to that in a bit.” Eventually they got around to alternative time lines and alternative laws of physics.

“So for every time plane,” Rabbit concluded, “there is one time line on which history runs exactly as it did here, even though the people on that time line might be violet with green stripes and live in giant trees.”

“Fascinating story,” Walala’li told them when they had finished, “So are you telling me our world is really a giant ball that circles Great Toolo’ti the Sunbird? There are those who doubt even that teaching of the Church.”

“From what I can see,” Human responded, “this world really is flat – different laws of physics, remember – but whether it orbits the bird or the bird orbits it I haven’t been in a position to see for certain. Doubt, however, is a good thing. You should always verify facts for yourself. It is the mark of our system of learning. Man! I’m starting to pontificate. This beer must be stronger than I thought.”

Two Ulualoo, male and female entered the tavern just then. “You two are later than usual,” Walala’li remarked casually.

“We weren’t sure we would be able to get here at all tonight, Madame Walala’li,” the male replied. “The Holy Guards are out in force tonight, even more so than the other day when those two strange birds were seen.”

“You two seem to have a following,” Walala’li told the Pflums dryly.

“It’s so nice to be wanted,” Human replied.

“What did you do that has the Church so excited anyway?” she asked.

“We wandered into the wrong room in the Palace,” Rabbit told her and went on to describe the details of their encounter.

“Sounds like the Princess Toonana’le,” Walala’li remarked. “That probably was not your wisest move this evening. Fortunately, you’re among friends. There is not a person here who isn’t risking excommunication and probably execution just by being here.”

“One heck of a price for a simple drink,” Human commented.

“You don’t know the half of it,” she replied. “If anyone were to turn me in, he would be executed too since he would have had to have been a customer in order to have the information to give the Church.”

“That keeps you somewhat safe, at least,” Rabbit noted.

“Except from my competitors, of course,” Walala’li told them. “This is hardly the only public house in Rontola. The only people who don’t drink are the royalty and members of the Church and I’m not sure about them. The priests might give themselves special dispensation. There are rumors.”

“That leaves only the royalty,” Human told her.

“Some of the princes have been known to go out for a drink from time to time.”

“So you have a prohibition that almost nobody actually respects,” Rabbit concluded.

“Sounds normal to me,” Human added. “I suppose Moms and Dads tell their kids to always obey the law on their way out to the local speakeasy.”

“Speakeasy?” Walala’li asked.

“Public house,” Rabbit translated. “You know ‘speakeasy’ sounded very strange translated into Ulu,” he added to Human.

“Slang terms are like that,” Human shrugged.

They stayed up until almost dawn that night answering questions of all sorts from the Ulualoo in the tavern. Very few were actually interested in alternative physics; most questions concerned what life was like on Human’s and Rabbit’s world. Finally, just as the eastern sky was starting to brighten, Walala’li’s patrons left, most of them promising to return the next evening.

“You’ll want to stay here,” Walala’li told the Pflums after most everyone else had left. Only her daughter and son and a few boarders were still there. “It’s not safe for you while the Holy Guardsmen are still looking for you. How did you manage to escape their dungeon, though?”

“We jumped off the tower and flew,” Human told her.

“You flew?” Walala’li asked in wonder. The Pflums were unable to fathom the expressions on Ulualoo faces very well, but there seemed to be hope mixing with disbelief in the landlady’s eyes.

“Sure,” Rabbit nodded. “Those strange birds you saw the other day? Those were us on hang gliders. We could tell you how to build one...”

“Leave that for tonight, when everyone returns,” she told them. “Some of my patrons are among the finest craftsmen and magicians in the realm. They will have a better chance of understanding what you say. In the meantime, we will look for the parts you are missing.”

“Is there any way to get word back to our friends in the tower,” Human asked. “They haven’t heard from us in days.”

“I don’t know,” Walala’li admitted. “I will ask around, but it probably is not possible.”

They spent the next few days in what the Pflums referred to as Walala’li’s public house of ill repute. Not that Walala’li actively engaged in prostitution herself, but her tavern served as a safe place for the prostitutes and their clients to meet and Walala’li collected a fee from both – even more if they used one of the upstairs rooms. The house, however, was mostly as Walala’li had presented it; a tavern in a world of many prohibitions. The Ulualoo lived in a repressive society, but as individuals they took what opportunity they could to let loose and each night at Walala’li’s was a party. Some evenings she had musicians in to provide dance music and on other evenings the patrons provided their own entertainment. Every night there were interested Ulualoo of all ages gathered around the Pflums eager to hear of their adventures whether they understood them or not.

The Pflums adapted easily to a nocturnal schedule, sleeping most of the day and then staying up all night. On their third night in Rontola, they left Walala’li’s house with two Ulualoo craftsmen and started building another glider. They had made a fair number of mistakes on the previous ones and they were determined to correct those errors in the Ulualoo’s first gliders.

“Our wings weren’t flexible enough,” Human explained. “We didn’t have anywhere as much ability to steer as we would have liked.”

“And this rig is not the most stable either,” Rabbit added. “We’ll give you a few further ideas to play with. Too bad your technology isn’t up to powered flight just yet, but when you have a chance we’ll discuss that too.”

“Seems to me,” Human noted, “That some of your magic may be adaptable to propulsion. The trick will be using it in a light and compact device so you’ll be able to do more than just glide on the available wind and go searching for available thermals.”

“You’ll need more than just a triangular wing to do that, however,” Rabbit told them. “The flexible wings help, but with a power craft you’ll need more complex controls, but don’t worry. Even if we were to leave in two minutes I think you know enough already to figure those out on your own.”

Still a lot of the questions posed regarding flying machines had to be answered, “I don’t know,” but as they explained, the cross-section of the wings was paramount even if all they wanted to do was glide.

They were usually back in Walala’li’s house by midnight, ready for another round of questions from the Ulualoo who patronized her business. The Pflums thought of them as the common Ulualoo, but their opinions were proven wrong a week later when Walala’li introduced two well-dressed birdmen to them as Princes Rolooa’to and Wontola’té.

“You gave our sister a fright,” Prince Rolooa’to told the Pflums after they had found an empty table and a full pitcher of beer, “though she’s been regretting her reaction ever since. Especially since it made her the envy of all her friends to have actually seen aliens in her room.”

“Please apologize to her for us, Your Highness,” Rabbit told him.

“Call me Roloo, all my friends do,” he responded, “and I would except that I’d be likely to be overheard in the castle. Damned priests are everywhere.”

“You can say that again,” Wontola’té who eventually asked them to call him Wonto agreed, “though it’s good to see them in the tizzy they’ve been in lately. First you lot start arriving and they claim they are

holding you to protect us. Seems to me if you were a danger it might be better to hold you in some place far away from the castle. Anyway, when the two of you flew out of their prison they got really excited and sent every available Holy Guardsman out to find you.”

“Imagine our surprise when we heard you were holing up in Madame Walala’li’s,” Roloo put in. “We knew then you had to be our kind of people. I think what upset the priests the most, though, was when, just after you escaped, Great Toola’ti let go on the hills to the north. They tried to claim Toola’ti was expressing his displeasure with your presence here, but up until now such occurrences are supposed to be a good omen.”

“So when the big bird poops, it’s a sign he likes us?” Human asked.

“Hmm,” the prince replied, “something like that. It is supposed to be very lucky to witness Toola’ti dropping nearby.”

“So long as you’re not directly underneath,” Rabbit remarked.

“The priests tell us that it is a special blessing,” Wonto replied, “but it’s a blessing I would gladly forego. Fortunately such things do not happen often and the last time Toola’ti was seen to, uh, poop, as you say, was over ten years ago and that was over one hundred miles away. It was in its way a blessing for you, however. When it happened most of the temple guardsmen were sent out to the scene of the fire to gather the holy flames.”

“How do they do that?” Rabbit asked. “With candles and torches?”

“Pretty much,” Wonto nodded. “Oil lamps too. The more directly the material was lit by the droppings of Great Toola’ti, the more sacred the resulting flame is.”

“So, do I gather the local royalty is in favor of ditching the Church?” Human asked.

“We’re not heretics, sir,” Roloo replied, slightly indignantly, then shrugged and continued, “but we would not mind if the Archpriest and his minions would allow us to rule in our own kingdom. We have heard parts of your story and we’re wondering if there might be something you can do to help us get out from under the priesthood’s yoke.”

“We’re currently on the run ourselves,” Rabbit replied, “And I’m convinced that anything we say to the priests would only make your lot worse.”

“Still, if we find ourselves in a position to help,” Human added, “we will.”

They spoke together for the rest of the night. The two princes did not know where the Transit parts were being stored, but they promised to join the search, though they admitted they would only have a slightly better chance of finding them than anyone else. They did think they could get a message to the rest of the parties in the tower from which the Pflums had escaped, however and promised to return in the next day or two with a reply.

The Princes did not return for three days actually, but the Pflums were too busy to notice. The Ulualoo craftsmen had reached a snag in building their first glider. They had constructed it entirely inside their workshop, but when completed the glider was far too large to fit out any of their doors. They were about to open out one wall of the workshop when they realized that it would probably not be practical to carry the device intact through the streets of Rontola, so they spent the next few nights working out a way to

make the rig collapsible so it could be carried under a tarpaulin on the back of a wagon. After three nights of redesign, they decided it might be best to start over again from scratch, so the Pflums sketched out plans for a bi-wing glider as close to the Wright glider of 1902 as they could recall.

“Be careful with this design,” Rabbit told them. “It’s got considerably more wing area than the first design, but I seem to recall it wasn’t as stable in flight.”

“It might be a good guide toward a start on powered flight, though,” Human told them. “However, you can construct the parts here and assemble them elsewhere.”

“We can do that with almost any design,” one of the craftsmen told him. In the end they decided to stick with the original triangular-shaped wing but this time designed for relatively easy assembly and disassembly.

The Pflums returned to Walala’li’s to find the princes waiting for them. “We were about to go looking for you,” Roloo told them. “The Holy Guards are out in force tonight.”

“Really?” Human asked. “We never saw them, but then we were only two streets away.”

“Great Toola’ti looks after fools and drunkards,” Wonto commented wryly.

“I’ll drink to that,” Rabbit laughed. The Ulualoo were unable to smile, but the Pflums had come to recognize a certain crinkling about the eyes as the birdie equivalent.

“Does he watch over us at night too?” Human wondered.

“Well, according to the teachings, he looks up to us at night. You may take that in anyway you like. It made for a lot of jokes when we were schoolboys.”

“I can imagine,” Human replied. “So, any news for us?”

“We managed to visit your friends and let them know you were okay and still at large,” Roloo told him. “At least I think we did. The Holy Guards sent a watcher with us, although ostensibly he was there to translate, so we had to speak indirectly. The ones called Jack seemed to understand what we told them. The others were not too interested in anything we had to say although the women kept making demands, mostly to be set free.”

“I not sure whether those demands were for all of you or just themselves,” Wonto laughed.

“Oh yeah,” Rabbit replied ruefully. “Lucinda’s quite a gem.”

“So she’s not your...?” Wonto was at a loss for the right word.

“She’s not our anything,” Human informed him, “except a major irritant. You have your Holy Guardsmen, we have her and the people she works for.”

“Ah!” Roloo exclaimed, “So these worlds of yours are not quite the paradises you make them sound like.”

“We never said they were perfect,” Rabbit replied. “That’s part of what you get with a government. We don’t have a Church that rules us, nor a king, but we do have a government, one far larger than yours is,

and they work for the part of it that regulates businesses like the ones we work for.”

“No King either?” Roloo wondered. “Then who’s in charge?” The Pflums tried to explain the working of a democratic republic but found that concept even harder for the Ulualoo to accept than alternative history or physics. They eventually admitted that their nation, the North American Union, was just one of many and that some countries were run in a manner the Ulualoo princes would find comprehensible.

“Anyway,” Wonto continued, “we asked how they were being treated and the women complained some more, but the Jacks told us their food seemed to have improved drastically since you flew off the tower although they were no longer being supplied with the usual crafts materials, so I suppose the priests don’t want them building any more gliders. It’s going to come as a great surprise, I think, when Ulualoo start using your gliders for the fun of it.”

“It’s going to absolutely ruin parts of their theology as well,” Roloo added. “They teach us that we were cursed by Great Toola’ti for daring to out-fly him and remade so that flight was impossible.”

“It’s hard to fly without wings,” Human noted, “and your arms don’t even look like vestigial wings. I suspect you evolved from something that might have been a common ancestor between you and the flying birds, but that had to have been millions of years ago, maybe tens of millions of year ago. Evolution takes some odd paths, but it doesn’t work instantaneously.”

“Evolution?” Wonto asked.

“That’s our word for it,” Rabbit explained. That explanation was hard going as well as the princes were unwilling to let go of their belief that Great Toola’ti had fashioned the Ulualoo as he pleased, but they did not argue when Rabbit concluded, “Unless this world is completely unlike any other, then evolution is how he created you. I don’t see your problem, you already believe you used to fly and that he changed you. Why can’t you accept that this might be how he did it?”

“You know the ways of the Great God?” Roloo whispered.

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Human put in, “but this explanation seems to account for the creatures we have seen on other worlds. On the other hand, we’ve never been on a flat world with a giant holy bird that doubles as its sun before, so maybe you’re right and the rules are different here. That will be for you and your descendants to find out, of course. Hopefully, we won’t be around long enough to study the matter.”

“Is there really any reason for you to rush off?” Wonto asked.

“That area our Transits are landing on is rapidly filling up,” Rabbit replied. When it is full, I imagine other counterparts of ours will start landing further and further away. If we don’t start leaving, your world will eventually fill up with our machines until there is no room for you to live. Our counterparts will outnumber you as well. You know what infinity means? Potentially that’s how many of us might land here.”

“So your people will be arriving forever?” Roloo asked.

“If we never leave,” Human told him, “then possibly. From what we can guess our arrivals will begin to taper off as we start to leave and probably should end about as long after we leave as we spent on this world, so about a month or so. I hope so, anyway.”

“Then it seems we must redouble our efforts to find the parts for you,” Roloo nodded.

“And a way to get everyone out of the dungeons too,” Human added. “We can use our machines to get them out, but it would be easier if the priests would just let them go. I don’t suppose you know any priest in a position to argue that case, do you?”

“The priests don’t listen to other people,” Wonto explained, “not even royalty. They command and expect us to obey.”

“Well, the Royal Confessor might be willing to listen,” Roloo added, “although we cannot admit to him we met you.”

“We could get Toona to ask a few questions to sort of feel him out,” Wonto suggested.

“Toona?” Rabbit asked.

“Our sister, Toonana’le. You met her in the castle.”

“Oh yes,” Rabbit nodded. “Is she still talking about us?”

“Off and on,” Wonto replied, “and it might just be believable that she would have a crisis of faith concerning the matter. We’ll talk to her.”

It was another two days before the missing transit parts were found.

The Vatican Rag

“They’re in the Temple?” Human Pflum asked. “Well, that’s going to make it difficult now, isn’t it?”

“Your parts are not under guard,” Prince Wonto assured him.

“Sure,” Rabbit chimed in, “but the Temple? Maybe there are no guards, but there almost have to be priests and correct me if I’m wrong, but we aren’t likely to pass for the usual congregants.”

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” Roloo insisted. “If you wait until after midnight there will only be one or two priests up and they’ll be in the main chapel only.”

“Oh, hell!” Human said at last. “We’re mucking up this time line enough by just being here. If we don’t at least try to get out of here, the situation will only get worse. Let’s go, Bunnyboy.”

“Bunnyboy?” Rabbit echoed with a chuckle. “You got it, Apeguy!”

“Not yet,” Wonto told them quickly, “and we’ll go with you when it is time. Our presence in the chapel ought to keep the priests on duty there to help guide our prayers.”

“Royal visitors to the Temple always seem to need more help than commoners for some reason,” Roloo added dryly.

“Must be your naturally irreverent attitudes shining through,” Human cracked.

“Could be,” Roloo laughed. “We see so much more to be irreverent about after all.”

“Well, if we’re going to be here another hour or two we may as well have another beer,” Human remarked, refilling his mug.

“If this is a total disaster, it could be our last,” Rabbit pointed out as he did likewise.

“*Morituri te salutant!*” Human toasted them all with the ancient gladiatorial salute. The graveyard comedy was ruined a bit by having to explain it to the princes, but they found it a delightfully heroic gesture and insisted on memorizing it for their own future use.

“You plan on putting your lives in mortal peril?” Rabbit asked.

“There are wars, you know,” Wonto remarked, “and not all Ulualoo get along. “We’re on good terms with our immediate neighbors, but with mutual aid pacts, we could easily be drawn into war should they be attacked.”

“I’m surprised the Church allows that,” Human remarked. “They seem to have such a firm control, after all.”

“Ah,” Roloo replied, “but there are politics within the Church. Didn’t you know?”

“That somehow escaped us,” Rabbit admitted.

“Well, you haven’t seen the entire world so it’s understandable,” Roloo told him. “The political center of the Church changes with the Archpriest. As it happens Rontola is the current center, but that has only been the case for the last ten years.”

“Yeah, we were only boys at the time, but we had three older brothers who all went off to war because Ritete’ti decided to make his bid for the archpriesthood. Ritete’ti won the title, but we lost our brothers. That’s the real reason royal families are usually so large. Somebody’s got to survive to inherit the crown.”

“An excellent argument for the separation of church and state,” Rabbit remarked and went on to describe one of the basic tenets of the North American Union.

“An interesting notion,” Wonto considered. “It might be a little difficult to institute here.”

“Only a few nations in our world consider it normal as well,” Human added. “I suppose that in theory church and state can make a powerful and benevolent team in governing a country. In practice they do as well, sometimes, but we have a saying. ‘Power corrupts. Absolute power corrupts absolutely.’”

“In our experience a system of checks and balances on the governors,” Rabbit added, “is a good way to insure the rights of the governees. Keep that in mind if you ever find yourselves in charge.”

“Of course,” Human put in, “either of you would probably be benevolent enough dictators or kings or whatever, but what about your successors?”

“Our sons would be brought up to respect the rights of their subjects,” Wonto replied.



“And their sons? And the sons of their sons?” Human countered. “Eventually you get a generation who takes their positions for granted. It generally happens faster than you think. Look, it’s none of our business how you run your country or your world. At the moment you don’t run it, the Church does, but if you ever manage to truly become the rulers of the land, keep any injustices your people have suffered in mind and try to set up systems to keep them from recurring. It’s not an easy thing to do, but getting it right might keep you too busy to become a despot.”

“I’ll keep that in mind,” Wonto remarked, taking a sip of beer.

They finished their beers while the princes sketched out a rough blueprint of the Temple. “Your parts are being studied in a room in the northeast corner,” Wonto explained as he drew the crude map.

“And you’re sure we can just walk in?” Rabbit asked.

“Last time we were there, there must have been over a hundred Ulualoo standing around outside the front door. Looked like there had been a wedding or something.”

“Would that have been early in the evening?” Roloo asked. The Pflums nodded. “Daily services let out about then. The nobility is expected to attend. We were probably in that crowd, although you wouldn’t have known us yet. Commoners are only expected to attend services on the Restday and many of them gather at smaller Temples scattered around Rontola, although the Great Temple can hold at least half the city and usually does on the holydays.”

“Late at night, however,” Wonto added, “it’s as deserted as we promised.”

“If the priests are still looking for us, though,” Human hedged, “some of them could still be up.”

“We thought of that,” Roloo assured him. “If a noble is unable to attend the evening service for some reason he is expected to show up and pray as soon as he is able regardless of the time. Last night I skipped the evening service so I would have an excuse to be there after midnight. Don’t worry, it was as empty as we described. Tonight Wonto skipped service so he’ll have a valid excuse to be there late.”

“What about you?” Human asked. “Won’t it look suspicious if you’re there late two nights in a row?”

“I doubt it,” Roloo shrugged. “I’m the older brother, see? I’m supposed to be the one who takes all the responsibility for keeping my siblings in line. When I appear with Wonto it will look as if I had to drag him there. Don’t worry though, I’ve had to do that before so nobody will question that.”

“Actually if one of us is actually more devout than the other,” Wonto put in, “it’s probably me, but we’ve always played it this way because it is expected of us. Poor Toona, she has to play at being both devout and obedient.”

Just then the door to Walala’li’s house opened and cloak-covered figure walked in. At first nobody took notice of this, since it was not unusual to keep one’s features hidden while approaching the public house. However, when after a few seconds the person did not lower the cape’s hood, almost everyone stopped to stare. The figure paused, looking around and jumped nervously when Walala’li asked, “May I help you?”

“No, no,” a soft, but frightened female voice said. “I’m fine. Really.”

“Toona?” Wonto called. “Is that you? What are you doing here?”

“What’s the matter,” she replied with a touch of anger. “It’s good enough for you, but not me?”

“No,” Wonto replied easily. “You’re a big girl. If you can slip away from your maids and want a good brew, this is the place to come. What I meant was, ‘Why are you here?’ Especially now?”

“I overheard you two this afternoon,” Princess Toonana’le told him. “You’re planning to help the aliens get into the Temple tonight.”

“And how is that your concern, little sister?” Roloo asked.

“There’s something strange happening there tonight,” she replied after glaring at him. “The place is all lit up like at the Winter Festival.”

“That doesn’t sound good,” Roloo commented. “I had better go find out what’s happening. You all stay here. Yes, Toona, you too.” With that he got up and left the house quickly.

Toonana’le looked at the two Pflums. “I’m sorry I screamed,” she told them contritely, “but you startled me.”

“No harm done, Princess,” Human assured her. “We might never have found Madame Walala’li’s house if you hadn’t.”

“Oh my!” Toonana’le quavered. “I’m really here, aren’t I?”

Rabbit looked at Human and sighed, “I have far too many responses to that.”

“And none of them are nice,” Human agreed. Wonto chuckled.

Toonana’le looked embarrassed, but was spared from any of the men’s comments by Walala’li’s return. She put a pot of tea on the table and a cup and said, “Here, dear. You looked like you were more in the mood for this tonight.”

“Thank you, Madame Walala’li,” the princess replied quietly. She reached for the pot, then stopped and asked, “Would you join us?”

“Are you certain you’re ready for that?” Walala’li asked. A crinkle in her eyes indicated a gentle smile.

“I can take it, if you can,” Toonana’le replied with more boldness than she had displayed so far. Walala’li laughed and sat in the chair Roloo had so recently vacated.

“So what else is going on out there tonight?” Human Pflum asked Toonana’le.

“A lot of Holy Guards have been running back and forth between the castle and the Temple,” she replied between sip of tea. “They wouldn’t tell me anything, just kept saying I should go back to my room.”

“Seems like a good place to meet unexpected aliens,” Rabbit remarked, earning a giggle from Toonana’le.

“This is better,” Toonana’le told him. “Everyone knows Madame Walala’li’s is the best.” She nodded to

the landlady.

“You may come back anytime, dear,” Walala’li told her indulgently.

Roloo returned suddenly, “I’m not sure if this is good or bad,” he told them after pouring and gulping down a mug full of beer.

“What’s happened?” Wonto asked concernedly.

“Archpriest Ritete’ti is ill,” Roloo replied, refilling his mug. “Old Melin’ta, the royal physician,” he added as an aside to the Pflums, “was summoned to his bedside. He was just leaving as I got there. Wouldn’t tell me anything straight out – he never does – but from the way he kept saying, ‘We’ll just have to wait now,’ told me the Church is about to have an opening at the top.”

“You say you have wars when that happens,” Human recalled.

“Sometimes,” Roloo hedged. “It happens when no single candidate can establish himself as more powerful than anyone else who wants the office.”

“And is there such a strong candidate now?” Rabbit asked.

“The High Inquisitor perhaps,” Roloo replied. “That would be my guess, but I don’t know if he wants to be Archpriest and I don’t really have a grasp of world-wide Church politics. There may be others, but Toolori’ta is the most powerful priest within a thousand miles.”

“If you ask me,” Wonto put in, “he’s been planning for this even before Ritete’ti killed off half of Rontola to get the holy mantle of archpriest. Cousin Bawa’ta told me he’s concluded agreements with the priest and kings of countries half across the world and those are just the ones he knew about.”

“I hope you’re right,” Roloo told him. “It might be nice not to die on a Gharnetine sword just so Toolori’ta can get a promotion.”

“Oh we won’t need to worry about the Gharnetians this time,” Wonto told him. “He’s got them sewn up too. The Wralentanians, though, might be something to worry about, but since they’re three thousand miles away...”

“I take it our midnight junket is off tonight?” Rabbit Pflum asked.

“Maybe not,” Rollo told him. “Let’s wait a bit and see how all this plays out. Sure there may be more priests up and about, but they’ll mostly be on the residential level of the Temple. Besides Wonto here still has to make his daily appearance anyway and too many late night observances will seem suspicious. Toona, I think it will be best if you come to Temple with us too.”

“Aw, do I have to? I was there this evening,” she protested.

“But you’ve been out of the castle long enough to have been missed. Going to Temple will be a good cover and quite in keeping with those questions we had you ask the other day. You’re still worried about having been contaminated by the demons.”

“But Yarome’ta said they aren’t demons,” the princess replied.

“Of course he did,” Roloo told her sagely, “but you’re still worried, see? So naturally you’d attend Temple once or twice extra, just to be sure. Cheer up. You’ll see a lot of your older friends there, they’ll just think you were out in public houses like this. Well,” he corrected himself with a nod toward Walala’li, “not quite like this. This house is so much better than the rest.” Walala’li rolled her eyes dramatically, but those eyes also crinkled into an Ulualoo smile. “Maybe you ought to have the beer or at least splash a bit on you. They might think it strange if they smell that flowered tea.” He was teasing his sister and she obviously knew it. “I’m going to go back and keep an eye on the place for a while. I’ll be back when things quiet down.”

“I think I’ll pass on the beer,” Toonana’le remarked after he had left. “It’s an acquired taste and like so many acquired tastes it leaves me wondering why one would ever care to acquire it.”

Walala’li held her hand up and signaled to her daughter who delivered a crystal decanter filled with an amber liquid and several very small glasses. “Perhaps this will appeal to you more,” she told Toonana’te. She filled each of the glasses and then passed them around the table. “Success in your ventures... and adventures,” she proclaimed raising her glass in toast. She then drained the small glass in a single long sip and the others followed suit.

The liquid turned out to be a sweet liqueur made with honey and something that might have been a distant relative of whiskey. “Oh!” Toonana’te exclaimed. “This is very nice!”

“It is a Wralentanian drink,” Walala’li told them. “Let’s hope we don’t have to go to war with them.

It was an hour past midnight before Roloo returned. When he did show up, he was out of breath. He sat down for a full minute before telling them, “Sorry, I had a time getting back that time, the guards kept spotting me and offering to escort me back to the castle. I finally decided to just run before they could recognize me.”

“That wasn’t your brightest idea, Roloo,” Walala’li informed him. “We could have waited a bit longer.”

“Five times of getting escorted home when I was only a block away just made me desperate,” Roloo admitted, “but you are right. I should have had more patience. We’d better make our move now, however. It’s starting to get a bit late even for late prayers, at least if we don’t want to have to answer any nosey questions.”

“Or have to explain to Father why we were all out late,” Wonto added.

“Oh, he knows, I’m sure,” Toonana’le told them. “He remembers what he was like when he was your age.”

“Perhaps, but he won’t approve of you picking up our bad habits, baby sister,” Roloo told her. “You’re supposed to be pure and innocent just yet.” Toonana’le made a rude noise. “Fortunately we all know you really are pure and innocent, and frankly I think you ought to stay that way a bit longer.”

“That’s no fun,” she replied.

“Don’t listen so closely to those friends of yours,” Wonto told her. “They talk a lot, but they are not as adventurous as they think they are.”

“Oh?” the princess challenged. “And how would you know?”

“The usual way, Sis,” he replied, getting to his feet. “The usual way.”

The made their way to the Temple cautiously and in two groups. Wonto and Roloo walked ahead of the Pflums and Princess Toonana’le, just in case the Holy Guards were still patrolling the area. However, they decided that Ronto’s encounters were just a matter of bad luck as they saw no one the entire way to the castle-Temple complex.

“At least the lights are mostly out now,” Wonto observed as the five of them stood in the courtyard.

“The castle is still fairly well lit,” Human Pflum noted. Nearly every windows in the castle showed there were lights on inside.

“Last time it was that lit up this late,” Roloo told them, “was when our father hosted a masked ball. I suppose the archpriest’s illness must have everyone stirred up. All the more reason for us to say our prayers since we’ll have been missed. At least this way we can honestly say we’ve been at Temple when Father wonders why we were not in our rooms.”

“Father is going to need us,” Toonana’le commented.

“Yes, he is,” Roloo agreed, “so we’ll keep our prayers as short as possible. Pflum, how long will you need to get your parts?”

“That depends on how they have been kept,” Rabbit Pflum replied. “Actually I was hoping we would have your help hauling them out. It will take at least four of us to get enough to fix one of our crates, after that we can come back on our own to get the rest.”

“If we get the right parts,” Human added. “We don’t know that our own parts are interchangeable, though my guess is they’ll probably look alike. I just hope they kept them in two groups to study them in something approaching a scientific manner, but somehow I suspect we’ll find a large pile.”

“I’ll settle for them not having been broken open to see what’s inside,” Rabbit told him. “You know, we don’t need to take the console housings, just the circuitry and controls. We probably could get all the essentials in one trip.”

“I wish we had thought to bring a large sack,” Human told him. “We’ll just have to improvise. Well, we know where to go. Let’s get this over with.”

This time the Ulualoo all walked in front and when they were able to enter the Temple unchallenged, the Pflums followed. Wonto turned to them and silently waved toward a door on the right. The Pflums nodded and stole off in that direction as their friends entered the Temple sanctuary.

The hallway they walked down was only dimly lit, but as their eyes adjusted they were able to make out the many frescoes, murals, statuary and smaller paintings that adorned the walls of the Temple. “Looks like the priests have been keeping the best for themselves,” Rabbit whispered. Human nodded but kept his thoughts to himself.

The corridor ran down the length of the Temple, past many doors on both sides, but according to Wonto’s map, they were to walk all the way to the end. When they got there, however, the door they went through led to another corridor that ran off at a right angle and that Wonto had not drawn. “Remind me not to hire Wonto as a cartographer,” Human whispered.

“Nor as a native guide,” Rabbit replied.

Quietly, they started opening doors, figuring that the room they wanted probably really was in that corner of the structure. On their third try they found a brightly lit room, which forced them to pause and let their eyes readjust to the light. There was nobody inside that room, so they stepped in to look around. From what they could tell it was a workshop where artisans had been working on various projects. Most of those were meticulous repair jobs of ancient tapestries and paintings, but there were also newer works still in progress such as a mostly finished statue, that the Pflums guessed might be the now dying archpriest. It had been carved from a great block of green marble with lines and swirls in it that the sculptor had used to accentuate the showing feathers. The eyes and talons however had been set with bright gemstones. The statue’s flowing robes were in the process of being fashioned from thin gold sheets

“Better get out of here,” Human decided.

“If it’s this well lit, the artisans are probably just on break,” Rabbit concluded.

They backed out of the room and continued down the corridor, bumping into each other once as they got used to the dim light again. With their eyes still mostly night blind, they finally found the room they were looking for. There were no lights on in the room at all, so they had to leave the door open.

“Any idea of how to turn the lights on?” Human whispered.

“I never asked,” Rabbit replied. “I’ll go get one of those lights from the hall.” He returned a moment later with one of the large glass globes. It was not much, but it did suffice to show them the contents of the room. In the middle was a long table on which their parts had been piled up. Someone had evidently tried fitting some of them together, and the Pflums rapidly found all sorts of wrong tabs inserted into wrong slots, but the circuitry appeared to have been handled carefully, although only proper installation back at the Transits would show whether or not that was so.

“This stuff is all mixed up though,” Human noted.

“You were expecting a boring life?” Rabbit countered. “We still need a bag.”

“This should do,” Human decided, pulling on one set of drapes that covered a window. Together they pulled the cloth down and started making bundles of all the parts. They were nearly finished when the lights suddenly came on.

National Brotherhood Week

“You found the switch?” Human asked Rabbit hopefully.

“I thought you had,” Rabbit replied

“I really didn’t want to hear that,” Human sighed.

“You will please come with us,” a voice said from the doorway. Turning the Pflums saw six Holy Guardsmen. They were not dressed in steel armor, but the heavy leather they wore looked as though it

would be quite effective against anything the Pflums could muster.

“Sorry,” Human replied. “We have a previous engagement.”

He started lifting the rude sack of Transit parts, but when the lead warrior bird told him, “High Inquisitor Toolori’ta wishes to see you,” he set the sack back down on the table.

“He must have changed his mind and wants my gazpacho soup recipe after all,” Human commented ironically to Rabbit.

“Better you than me,” Rabbit replied. “Well since you’ll obviously be occupied, I’ll just get this stuff back home, shall I?”

“The High Inquisitor wishes to see both of you,” the guard leader told him implacably.

“It was worth a shot,” Rabbit sighed.

They were escorted by the guards back along the way they had. In the main gathering hall of the Temple they saw Princess Toonana’ti and her brothers just coming out of the sanctuary. The royal Ulualoo looked startled, then saddened, but the Pflums were alert enough to not make any sign of recognition to them.

As they walked past, however, the Pflums got a glimpse of the sanctuary beyond. From what they could see, there was enough gold on the walls to pay off the national debt back home with enough spare change left over for a six-pack of Third World nations. Their eyes were briefly drawn to a large sparkling mural that even from the distance they were viewing it at had obviously been made by setting thousands of gems together.

The guards brought them to a staircase leading upward to the residential level of the Temple and then back toward the rear of the structure to an ornately carved door with highlights of gold-leaf. “In there,” the leader of the guards told them and opened the door.

They walked though to find themselves in a fair-sized sitting room. High Inquisitor Toolori’ta was seated in a large padded version of the odd chairs the Ulualoo favored. He was drinking a cup of tea, but put it down immediately as the Pflums entered the room. “Thank you for coming so quickly,” Toolori’ta told them.

“I wasn’t aware I had a lot of choice,” Human Pflum replied, a bit taken aback by the friendly greeting. “May we sit?”

“Please do. Tea?” the Inquisitor offered.

“If that’s the strongest you have to offer,” Rabbit replied.

“The Church frowns on strong drink,” Toolori’ta told him sternly, but there seemed to be a note of uncertainty in his voice.

“You might want to rethink that,” Human told him. “I know I could use a double whiskey about now.”

“All right, I will,” Toolori’ta agreed after a pause, “but for now all I have to offer is the tea.”

Both Pflums accepted the tea and as the High Inquisitor poured they shot a glance at each other as though to ask each other what was wrong with this picture. Finally Toolori'ta handed them their cups and quietly allowed them to drink the tea.

"So," Rabbit Pflum said after he had taken a sip. "I imagine you're going to send us back to your dungeon, or is this some exquisite torture before having us killed for our audacity in trying to escape."

"Killed?" Toolori'ta echoed aghast. "Never!"

"Funny, that's not what you were saying last time we had a little chat," Human Pflum pointed out.

"I do hope you'll forgive me," Toolori'ta told him, "but your status had not yet been established."

"Our status?" both Pflums asked.

"You may recall there was a possibility that you were demons and, if so, it was my responsibility to protect the people from you. I never dreamed that you and your companions might be angels, however."

"You think we're angels?" Rabbit asked.

"It is a distinct possibility," Toolori'ta replied calmly.

"I'll probably regret this," Human told the old bird, "especially since playing along with this delusion would probably solve all my problems. We are not demons and we are most definitely not angels. We're people; no more and no less. Mortal people. Period. End, stop! What the heck made you reverse your opinion of us anyway?"

"You can fly, of course," Toolori'ta replied as though that explained it all. "Demons cannot fly, nor can people. Only the gods and their angels can fly. You are certainly not gods so it is obvious you are angels."

"There's a flaw in your logic," Rabbit told him. "You are assuming you are infallible. Tell me does the office of High Inquisitor come with infallibility?"

"Of course not," Toolori'ta replied, "I am only mortal. All mortals are flawed, even the Archpriest."

"Well, we're mortal too," Human insisted.

"Of course you would say so," Toolori'ta told him beatifically.

"Yes, because it is true," Human retorted.

"If that is what you want," Toolori'ta replied unconcernedly.

"I think I liked you better when you were accusing me of being a demon," Rabbit told him.

"If you think we're angels because we can fly," Human added, "you had better keep your mind open about your own people then, because some of them are building gliders just like, no... better than the ones we used and they'll be flying within the year."

"They will?" the inquisitor asked.



“Yes, they will. Look, you can decide to redefine your people as angels if you wish, but we both know that wouldn’t be true,” Human told him.

“I notice you haven’t released any of the others yet,” Rabbit cut in, “and you’re still arresting the new arrivals. So just what do you want from us?”

Toolori’ta paused for a very long, silent minute then replied, “I need your help. Archpriest Ritete’ti is dying. He is not expected to last the night.”

“We can’t do anything about that,” Rabbit told him.

“I did not think you could,” Toolori’ta replied. “But when he dies it will be the start of what could be a very bloody period of time until our next Archpriest is elected.”

“Haven’t you guys ever heard of a ballot box?” Human replied. “We’ve already heard about how you choose a new archpriest. Evidently, Ritete’ti’s campaign wiped out the best of part of an entire generation of Rontola’s men.”

“And a fair number of women as well,” Toolori’ta replied. “I would like to avoid that this time around.”

“We’ve already heard you control half the armies in the world,” Rabbit commented.

“Hardly,” Toolori’ta replied. “I think I have the strongest forces at my disposal, but I would like to avoid fighting all together. It seems to me that having angels demonstrably on my side could do that.”

“Ah ha!” both Pflums exclaimed. Human continued, “I knew you had to have some sort of motive. Why the hell should I help you support a system that has made your people so poor while you priests are living in luxury? I’ve met quite a few of the common folk since we flew out of your dungeon, nice people for the most part and nowhere nearly *asxenophobic*,” he said that last word in English then translated, “uh, afraid of strangers as you seem to be. They are also intelligent, clever and insightful, but your Church has been encouraging them not to think.”

“Not that you stopped them completely,” Rabbit added. “They have certainly found a way to enjoy the simple things in life even under your prohibitions. You’ve also taken over the local government, and from what I’ve heard all the others as well, leaving the royalty as mere figureheads.”

“The world was constantly at war before the Church intervened,” Toolori’ta explained.

“How long ago?” Rabbit countered. “Look, theocracy is not inherently a bad thing. I’ve seen countries run by clergymen and sometimes it works, but all governments have the potential for becoming oppressive if there are no checks and balances on them.”

“Even with checks and balances, any government that exists long enough will find a way to circumvent those inhibitors,” Human took up the argument. “However, you have almost absolute power over the people so there’s no one but yourselves who can question whether what you’re doing is right. Sounds to me like you have become all too certain you are always right, though no matter what you say about being flawed.”

“What do you suggest?” the High Inquisitor asked.

“You need to start delegating the power,” Human told him. “My people have a concept we call the separation of Church and State. The Church is supposed to keep itself to religious matters while the State, in whatever form it takes, governs the people. It’s not a perfect system either – just like people, no government is perfect – but it works for us. Maybe it won’t work for you in that same form, I don’t know. Like Pflum here said, we have seen that theocracies are not bad in and of themselves, but without a means to safely question the governing policies of a Church, such governments invariably become despotic.”

“You have no safe means for the people to question you,” Rabbit took up the argument again. “You have made governance a matter of divine law so by definition only a heretic would ever question your laws. You need to divide the sacred from the secular.”

“The Church in your world has no say in the government?” Toolori’ta asked.

“You weren’t listening,” Rabbit told him. “We have many nations on our worlds, some are ruled by the Church – we have more than one Church for that matter which only makes it a lot more complicated, but let that pass for now – and others have other forms of government. For that matter, just because the Church has no direct say in the government of our nation doesn’t mean it is silent on the matter either. It’s amazing how influential you can be to a devout person.”

Toolori’ta considered this for a while. Outside, the skies had brightened and dawn was only a few minutes away. “What sort of government do your people have?” he asked at last.

“We have what is called a democratic republic,” Human replied. “We choose our leaders through various electoral processes. It works for us, but it’s not the only way to run a country. It’s also not a system that can be imposed overnight.”

“Nor is it necessarily going to be right for your people,” Rabbit added. “No government can work in the long run without the belief of the people it serves.”

“They don’t have to like it or even approve of the way it works,” Human added, “but they do have to believe it works. The moment the people lose faith in that, a government’s days are numbered. There are other working forms of government though. Monarchies for example. You had them before the Church started making puppets of the kings. Then there’s a form of government called a constitutional monarchy in which you have a king or queen, but also have a group of lords in what is called a parliament. You may also have members of parliament who are elected by the populace. It’s a fairly complex system and you need to decide just who does what and then stick to it.”

“One of the best governmental forms is a benevolent dictatorship – one man at the top pretty much in charge of everything. The problem is that such a government doesn’t stay benevolent for long,” Rabbit remarked. “We said this to... someone else just recently; power corrupts.”

“Absolute power corrupts absolutely,” Human added.

“I have seen that within the Church,” Toolari’ta admitted.

“I’m not surprised,” Human commented dryly. “The Church has as close to absolute power as any government is likely to have.”

“So what sort of government do you suggest?” Toolori’ta asked.

“Uh uh! What we like has nothing to do with it,” Rabbit told him. “This has to be what’s best for the Ulualoo and would be best chosen by the Ulualoo as well.”

“Besides,” Human added, “I’ve always believed the government that governs best is that which governs least.”

“But the government that governs least is none at all,” Toolori’ta concluded.

“Exactly. Hmm, I don’t know that you’re ready for that yet, Come to think about it my people aren’t ready for it either.”

There was a knock on the door just then. A young priest stepped into Toolori’ta’s sitting room and announced shakily, “High Inquisitor, I have the sad duty to inform you that Archpriest Ritete’ti has joined Great Toola’ti.”

“Thank you,” Toolori’ta replied. The priest looked shocked, but quickly backed out of the room. “I don’t think he expected to see me taking tea with you two,” he commented. “Oh my, and so it begins again. I do wish you and your fellows had not appeared for another year or two. My power would have been consolidated by then and ...”

“And you might have been less inclined to consider our ideas,” Rabbit finished for him.

“Perhaps, but,” Toolori’ta started, but he was interrupted by shouts from outside the Temple . “What is that?” he wondered out loud. The shouts grew louder and started to become a unified chant.

“Either the word is out about the Archpriest,” Human replied, “or Rabbit and I have acquired a fan club. I wonder which would be worse.”

They all got up and walked to a door that led to a balcony, but it was facing in the wrong direction and they could only tell that the noise was coming from the front courtyard. “We had better go see what is happening,” Toolori’ta decided and led them from the room and back to the other end of the Temple . They went back down to the sanctuary level and to the large arched doorway.

The courtyard was filled with Ulualoo of every rank and station. Princes Rolooa’to and Wontola’tu and Princess Toonana’le stood at the forefront of the vast mob. Behind them nobles mixed with merchants, artisans, workmen, beggars, prostitutes and even Madame Walala’li. Overhead two gliders were circling the plaza in a moderate breeze. The crowd was chanting a single word, “Freedom!”

“The new models fly better than I expected,” Rabbit told Human in an aside.

“Where did they manage to launch from?” Human wondered softly.

“High Inquisitor!” Prince Roloo called the foot of the Temple stairs. “The time has come for change!”

“Indeed it has,” Toolori’tu replied. He held up his hands for silence, but the chanting only got louder until Roloo and Wonto also called for quiet. “As Prince Rolooa’to has just told me, the time has come for a change! It is with great sadness that I must announce that Archpriest Ritete’ti is no longer with us.” He paused to let that sink in. The people started talking among themselves, filling the air with a low buzz. “However, this tragic loss need not be an ending, but the beginning of a bright new future,” he continued. “Each new Archpriest brings changes to the Church so it is important that our next Archpriest be amenable to lifting the onerous restrictions we have all lived under. Prince Rolooa’to, Prince Wontola’tu,

you two appear to have shown a remarkable talent for leadership this day and that is very good. I foresee that you two will be very important to the future of Rontola and perhaps the rest of the world as well. Will you do me the honor of joining me in my apartment for breakfast? We can discuss everything you came here for today and start planning for the future as well."

"I'm coming too," Toonana'le announced firmly.

"You, Princess?" Toolori'ta asked.

"Me," she told him in no uncertain tones. "I know women have never had much say in the affairs of this city, but as you said, 'The time has come for a change.'"

"I believe I will join you as well," Walala'li decided. The High Inquisitor stared at her wordlessly. "Hello, Toolo," she greeted him familiarly. "It's been a few years, hasn't it?"

She's My Girl

"We really didn't have anything planned beyond getting the two of you out of there," Wonto confided to the Pflums later that morning in the castle. "We had hoped a major show of power would do the trick although we may well have stormed the Temple had it become necessary."

"Just as well you did not have to," Human Pflum told him. "Those Holy Guards are much better armed than you were and while you had them out-numbered a lot of you would have been killed had it come to a fight."

"I certainly did not expect to walk away not only unscathed but with some real responsibility for a change," Roloo put in. Toolori'ta had decided that Roloo ought to be First Speaker of the new parliament. The Pflums could not recall if there had ever been a parliament in which the members were called speakers, but decided that the Ulualoo had to figure out these details on their own. There were still a lot of details to work out too.

"Just keep an eye on him," Rabbit advised. "Right now he's all affability and concession, but once he's been installed as Archpriest all that can change."

"Right," Human agreed. "One of the reasons we pushed for a standing army controlled by the king was so that you could resist the Holy Guard if Toolori'ta decides to go back to the old ways. You'll want to make sure your neighbors understand that as well, otherwise if he does revert and you kick up a fuss, he'll just move an army in from a few kingdoms away. Better get the first session of your new parliament going as soon as possible. The sooner that gets established the better."

"How soon will you be leaving?" Wonto asked.

"Well, first we have to get our parts out to the Transits," Rabbit told him. "It might take as much as a week to sort them out properly and reassemble them. After that, however, it will be best if we get going. You're going to have more of our counterparts showing up for another few weeks yet and the longer we stay, the longer it is likely to continue."

“I don’t quite follow how your leaving will affect their arrivals,” Roloo told them, “but if you say it is so...”

“We could be wrong,” Human told him. “They may stop arriving the moment we leave or they could continue to show up for the next century or three. It’s also possible the influx of our counterparts might stop on their own or go on forever, but I don’t think either is the case. Either way we have responsibilities in our own worlds, including getting our passengers back home.”

“Our passengers,” Rabbit muttered. “I don’t suppose you could hold on to the DTT people for an extra few days while we repair our machines... No, I suppose not.”

“Before we start marching into the hills, I think we ought to talk to the other Pflums, however, and let them know what the problem is. Most of them will be able to leave within a few hours,” Human added.

“How will we tell the others how to make repairs?” Toonana’le asked. “You had to learn our language, but we don’t know yours.”

“And since there are ever growing differences between us and our counterparts,” Human replied, “the language some, if not all of the future arrivals speak, may be very different. We’ll document all our repairs and include lots of pictures for other Transit passengers to read. If we have all our counterparts do the same and include instructions for each new group to do the same, the changes should be gradual enough for others to translate.”

“Turn-around shouldn’t be more than a few hours,” Rabbit added.

They held a series of briefings in each of the tower dungeons that afternoon and evening, explaining to the assembled travelers just how the DTT equipment had caused the problems. The DTT scientists unanimously denied their equipment had any effect on the rest of the Transit at all, but by then the various Lucindas had become thoroughly disgusted with them and ordered them to allow Pflum and Jack to make the repairs their way. “If that works,” all the Lucindas had said in various languages and variants of phraseology, “you can reexamine your equipment so that future trips along the Z axis will not result in crash landings like this.”

The next morning all the travelers were allowed to return to their Transits. Some of the more recently arrived Pflums explained the situation to those who had arrived during the night. The vast field of Transits was nearly full when the first departures began, but the vast majority was gone by the end of that day. Human and Rabbit crews, however, had the more difficult task of sorting out whose parts were whose.

The Jacks’ knowledge of temporal physics turned out to be essential in the process. Pflum could read the schematic diagram well enough, but it was Jack who was able to discern the minute differences between components. Even with that knowledge it was a long, involved process and in the end several major components had to be chosen by lot.

The princes rode out to visit every afternoon. Sometimes Princess Toonana’le joined them. The day after most of the parties had left, Roloo had commanded that a cottage-like building be built on the transit landing area. “We need a place where arriving parties can get their repair instructions,” he explained to the Pflums.

“And having a Customs booth out here isn’t a bad idea either,” Rabbit Pflum agreed. “You’ll have it manned, of course.”

“Definitely,” Roloo replied. “We already have a long list of volunteers for the duty.”

As the days went on, they had further news concerning the changes in the Church. Toolari’ta after proclaiming himself Archpriest made a series of announcements in which he endorsed the formation of a secular government. Most of the ruling power was to be returned to the kings, although in Rontola at least where a parliament was being formed, he was trying to convince Roloo to seat the higher-ranked priests with the lords.

“I’m not too keen on that, although I don’t see why they couldn’t run for the elected seats,” Roloo told them. “If the people are silly enough to want them as representatives, they deserve what they get.”

“I don’t think that will be a problem in the short run,” Rabbit told him, “but watch out for the Church’s lobbying power. Local priests will give sermons to their congregations and those sermons may have a political subtext.”

“I’ll keep that in mind. You’ll be glad to know that as Toolari’ta continues to consolidate his claim to the Archpriesthood, we’ve been making alliances of our own,” Roloo continued

“Good,” Human told him. “Toolari’ta may be dealing honestly with you, but he’s too good an actor to be trusted completely. Keeping the other secular armies on your side will keep him honest.”

“We’ve also revived the old practice of exchanging ambassadors” Wonto added.

“Very good,” Rabbit commended him. “I hadn’t realized you had no ambassadors on this world.”

“The Church did not encourage the practice” Roloo commented. “They wouldn’t have wanted us to be too friendly with the people of other countries. It would have inhibited their ability to use our people as pawns in their Church politics.”

“How secure is Toolari’ta in the Archpriesthood?” Human asked.

“Depends on how you define secure,” Wonto commented. “We told you back in Madame Walala’li’s house that he had already made agreements across the world that made him the strongest candidate. Of course, at the time that was on the assumption that the priests would have control of the armies.”

“We put a spike in that,” Rollo added, “but Toolari’ta is smart enough to realize that he’ll get even more support so long as he honors the agreements he made with us in every other country as well.”

“Well, you have a start toward freedom,” Human told them. “Try not to make the same mistakes the Church made and you and your people may manage to keep it.”

Transits were still arriving around them the next day when Human and Rabbit Pflums and Jacks finished the repairs on their Transits. Now that the vast number of Pflums had taken their Transits home the new comers were arriving near the Humans’ original landing spot.

“They don’t look as strange to me as I might have expected,” Human Pflum observed to his leporid counterpart shortly before leaving the Ulualoo world.

“Maybe water and methane breathers landed on different but analogous worlds,” Rabbit suggested.

“Could be,” Human agreed. “I’m just glad we didn’t land in an uncongealed planetary nebula.”

“Land might not be the right word,” Rabbit pointed out.

“Maybe not. Are you about ready to leave?” Human asked.

“Pretty much,” Rabbit replied. “Just giving Jack a chance to say goodbye to himself. Have you heard about some of the stuff they came up with together?”

“A bit,” Human told him. “I couldn’t follow most of it but it sounded like all the Jacks made good use of their time in the hoosegow. Must have been quite a brain trust in there and we missed it.”

“Strangely, I think they’re jealous that we got to do all the ‘fun’ stuff this trip,” Rabbit pointed out.

“It didn’t seem all that much fun to me,” Human reflected. “Next time I’ll let him try the homemade hang glider.”

“Next time?” Rabbit laughed. “I notice Lucinda and the boys don’t seem anxious to have anything to do with their counterparts.”

“Maybe they really don’t like themselves,” Human commented, “or maybe running into counterparts at all violates some basic tenet of being a DTT agent.”

“Could be,” Rabbit nodded. “They’re the ones who keep telling us how impossible it is to land on the same time line as another Transit without a tracer unit to home in on. Speaking of which, is that one in your hand?” The tracer was a small black and silver cylinder about three inches long and an inch in diameter.

“Um, yeah. I was kind of thinking of leaving it here. It might be interesting to see what the Ulualoo make of their world in times to come. Oh, you have one too, huh?”

“Yeah,” Rabbit nodded. “Although as I think it through it might not be any favor to the Ulualoo if we were to return.”

“If we come back all our counterparts might too, you mean? I wonder how many of them left tracers here too.”

“Probably none of them,” Rabbit decided after thinking it through. “We were the only ones to actually get to know the people here, so we are the only ones to have any reason to return. Still I think we ought to let the Ulualoo go their own way.”

“Even if only you and I return, they may start depending on our advice,” Human added.

“And our track record isn’t exactly perfect, is it?” Rabbit finished.

“We did okay this time around,” Human laughed. Then he thought of something and held out his tracer. “Here, I’ll trade you. By now I must owe you dinner at least.”

“And there I was thinking I owed you dinner. Well, maybe we owe each other.” They exchanged tracers. The two units were identical to the eye. “Hmm, I’d better mark this one somehow or it might get mixed up with the others.”

“Good point,” Human agreed. “Well, the Council of Jacks appears to have broken up, Guess it’s time to leave.” He held out his hand and said, “Safe journey home, Pflum.”

Rabbit shook hands with him and replied, “You too, Pflum.”

“Okay, kid,” Pflum called to Jack as he entered the Transit. In the distance he could hear the leporid version of himself saying the same thing. “Want to take us out?” Without waiting for an answer, he closed the airlock doors behind him.

“You got it, dude!” Jack replied.

“Well, Ms. Grasso, are you and the boys ready to go home now?” Pflum asked.

Lucinda glared at him as though everything that had happened was his fault. “It’s not as though you’re giving me any choice.”

“On the contrary,” Pflum told her as Jack punched in the activation code, “you’re the customer. If you want me to allow Tom and Jerry to start up their instruments again, that’s exactly what I will do. I just don’t know where we’ll land next. It may not be on a world where we can breathe the air, assuming the world isn’t made of anti-matter or something even less compatible with us.”

“No, Mister Pflum,” Doctor Noel interrupted before Lucinda could respond. “You have convinced us our instruments were interfering with the proper functioning of this Transit.”

“We do have the readings we took before we landed on the Ulualoo world,” Doctor Neil added, “and it will take some time to analyze them, assuming they are valid data.”

“If our instruments were interfering with the regulator,” Doctor Noel continued to explain, “it is possible our data are flawed.”

“Take us home, Jack,” Pflum told him, “and don’t spare the horses.”

The trip home was a quiet one. The DTT scientists decided to sleep all the way home and Lucinda was busy composing her mission report. “Don’t worry,” she told Pflum when they were about halfway home. “I’m not going to ground your Transit. Seems to me it’s more reliable in its own way than some of the newer models. We will need to make more excursions along the Z axis, of course, but not until we can build sensors that will not interfere with the normal workings of this Transit. That’s what I am recommending, anyway.”

Pflum visibly relaxed after that. He and Jack worked on their own report; the one they would hand in to Sharonne Lachado. It did not take long to write since Jack had been keeping a journal and Pflum already had a copy of his Transit repair instructions. Their report needed only to detail the actual Transit operation. The real details of what happened on the strange flat world would be given verbally anyway.

“Pflum,” Jack asked after the report was finished, “you traded tracer units with the rabbit-like version of yourself, right?”



“Uh huh,” Pflum nodded. “Why?”

“Where did you plan to meet him?” Jack asked.

“On his own line, I guess, kid, or on ours,” Pflum replied.

“That won’t work, you know,” Jack told him.

“What do you mean?” Pflum asked, but then he suddenly realized what Jack was getting at, “Whenever I try to visit his world he’ll probably be trying to visit ours, right?”

“It’s rather likely,” Jack replied. “Of all the counterparts we met, the rabbits were the ones with the closest history to ours. I suppose the only ones closer to ours were ones without a time offset, but they must have landed on others of the infinite number of Ulualoo worlds.”

“And had pretty much the same experiences we did?” Pflum asked. Jack nodded. “Well, I suppose I can leave instructions with Sharonne to treat the Rabbits to a meal on me if they ever show up. I’ll do that, but I doubt they will, since I probably won’t go looking for their world either; not now that I realize Rabbit Pflum won’t be there.” Pflum was thoughtful for a few minutes, then after a long silence spoke. “Or, I could keep Rabbit’s tracer here in the Transit. After all, if I’m in the field it is likely he will be too.”

“You have a better chance of meeting that way,” Jack agreed with some hesitation, “but I wouldn’t count on doing so. The odds are too long.”

“Hey, kid, billion-to-one chances come up nine times out of ten,” Pflum laughed. “I’ll get this tracer mounted on a plaque, I think.”

The usual alarm bells went off as the Transit arrived back in its home time and place. The bells were a federally mandated feature but in Pflum’s case they were hardly necessary. Since Ken Jackson had repaired damage caused by Nazi gunfire the previous summer, the Transit remained blissfully quiet inside, but whenever it moved through time, it made a horrible racket back in the Down Time, Ltd. garage and this trip was no different.

“We’re coming in late, home-line time, folks,” Pflum told the others as the Transit made her final approach. “After Two AM, in fact, so we may not have the usual reception committee.”

He was mistaken, however. Sharonne was on hand along with several agents of the Department of Temporal Transportation. “DTT had me give them a call when we heard you coming back in. I take it this was a tough trip?” she asked.

“You could say that,” Pflum replied. “I’ve had worse though. Can this wait until morning, I have the written report finished.”

“Make it tomorrow afternoon, Aurelian. I imagine you’ll have other matters to occupy you until then. She’ll be angry she wasn’t here when you landed, but we all need to use the bath room now and then.”

“Who?” Pflum asked, but he was answered by a set of soft footsteps coming across the garage floor. Walking toward them was a tall woman with medium length brown hair and a smile on her face that made her the most beautiful woman on Earth. “Sam?” Pflum called.

“Hi, handsome,” Samantha di Medici replied as she threw her arms around Pflum. “What kept you so

long? I was starting to think you'd found another girlfriend."

"Well, there was one cute chick," Pflum replied with a chuckle, "but she really wasn't my type."

"What?" Sam asked suspiciously.

"Pflum," Jack told him warningly, "this is no time to kid around."

"Ha!" Pflum laughed again. "You hungry, Sam? I am. Let's go grab a late dinner or an early breakfast and I'll tell you all about it." She smiled her agreement and they started walking out of the garage, but Pflum stopped suddenly and just looked at Sam for a moment.

"What?" she asked.

"Oh, nothing," Pflum replied, still smiling, "I was just trying to imagine you with bunny ears."

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# About this Title

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