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Down Time, Ltd. Book 3:

Time Out

By

Jonathan Edward Feinstein

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Time Out

Author's Foreword

I don't know who first said, "Dying is easy, comedy is hard." All my research says it's an old show business saying, but even if I can't attribute it correctly, it is true nonetheless.

Further, writing an open-ended series at the moment seems tougher than the ones for which I have definite beginnings and ends. I enjoy writing the Down Time Ltd. stories, but it would be far too easy for them to get into a rut. Comedy *is* hard! And while I can come up with a vast array of surrealistic situations, there is more to comedy than mere situation (unless you're a TV network in which case comedy is whatever the ratings say it is), at least I want my comedy to be.

In the following story, I broke a bit of new ground. I added a new character and pushed the series time line forward. However, after finishing it, I think I stumbled over that rut I was trying to avoid. I need to come up with something new for Pflum to handle and not just play variations on a theme.

That said, I still enjoyed writing the story. There are a lot of old jokes floating around the story that I've been meaning to play with for years. Most of them played well and I think the story holds its own. Hopefully you will like it too.

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 Edward Feinstein
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Prologue (Any Time at All)

The bad news is time flies. The good news is you're the pilot.
--Michael Althsuler

Time flies like the wind. Fruit flies like bananas.
--Groucho Marx

It is said that time and tide wait for no man and for darned few women as well. However it obviously waits for little children, sitting back and passing slowly through the golden days of youth, knowing full well that some day they'll grow up and discover how they wasted that most precious commodity. Of course some few will realize that wasting time was their job and they did it well. Then there are those whom Time ignores, and let's not even get started on the lands that Time forgets!

In truth, Time is very patient with us all and will wait for as long as necessary. Why shouldn't it? It has all of space to wait in. Of course Albert Einstein will tell you there is no Time and there is no Space, just one vast continuum of Space-time. Just try asking him!

Such definitions however are fine for physicists and mathematicians, but most of us live in a world bounded by our perceptions, and when you get right down to it, Time is what we perceive it to be. That's right. We have the power to make Time what it is, not the other way around. Once you realize that and truly believe it, Time is yours to command... At least for a little while.

I Want to Hold Your Hand

Every city has her season; Paris in the springtime, New York at night, Rio during *Carnevale*. For Boston it is the late spring and early summer, when the evenings are warm but the days are not yet hot enough to feel like the glass will melt from the windows of unsuspecting skyscrapers. At this time you can still find window boxes filled with pansies and other spring flowers and the ghosts of lilacs seem to linger in the air.

A fine place to take your date on a trip to 1989 is the Quincy Market where shops and restaurants abound to delight shoppers, diners and lovers of all ages, such as Aurelian Pflum and Samantha di Medici.

“The meal is wonderful, Pflum,” Sam commented between bites of baked scrod with lemon sauce. “When did you find this place? A previous trip?”

“Just this afternoon, actually,” Pflum admitted. “We’ve dined *al fresco* in dozens of restaurants, but this place has been remodeled so it’s almost as if we’re on a balcony overlooking Faneuil Hall. Actually, I don’t eat out all that much except when guiding tourists and even then I usually eat light and then have something back in the Transit on my return. I’m usually just too nervous to relax and enjoy a meal while I’m out in the field, I guess. Tourists don’t seem to be able to stay out of trouble.”

“Nervous? You?” Sam asked skeptically.

“Yeah, nervous. Me,” he replied. “I swear tourists leave their brains in a jar at home. The moment they get into a past world, there’s no telling what they will do. I had one trying to use a credit card to buy entry into the Globe Theatre to see the first presentation of one of Shakespeare’s plays, I forget which, one of the histories, just last month. At least no one did anything like that when we were stranded on Birdland, but then we were all professionals, even those morons from the DTT.”

“You still haven’t told me about that trip, you know,” Sam reminded him.

“I’m still trying to forget it,” Pflum replied.

“Doesn’t stop you from wondering out loud what I’d look like with bunny ears,” Sam retorted. “What was it, a world full of rabbits?”

“Hardly,” Pflum replied. “They were sapient, land-bound, humanoid birds actually. The world was flat, and some sort of magic worked there, and a giant flaming bird flew overhead to provide what passed for sunlight.”

“Sounds exciting,” Sam remarked.

“Especially if you’re underneath when it poops,” Pflum remarked.

“Then where do the bunny ears come in?” Sam asked curiously.

“Well, ours wasn’t the only Transit to land there, although in one sense I suppose it was.”

“Pflum, just tell it already,” Sam told him tiredly, as she finished her fish. The waitress came by and removed their plates.

“We hit the far end of the probability curve, or maybe it was dead center in the middle. Even Jack Laterus wasn’t sure about that, and the kid knew more about temporal theory than I ever will, not that I would admit it to him.”

“Don’t worry, Pflum,” Sam told him. “Jack’s a smart young man. I’m sure he figured it out for himself.”

“Hmm. Probably,” Pflum nodded. “Anyway, about an hour after we landed, or maybe the word is crashed, on Birdland another Transit arrived, it was as close to identical to my crate as is possible. Closer, I should say since no two transits are as much alike as that one was to mine. The people inside were the same people as inside our own Transit, in fact.”

“You actually met yourself in the field?” Sam asked. “I thought that was supposed to be impossible.”

“Not quite impossible,” Pflum corrected her, “but close enough that even my strange luck isn’t likely to swing that far a tilt. No, this was a party from another world line, well, actually from another time plane, really.”

“Time plane?” Sam asked. “You mean like the explanation you and Jack came up with for why we landed in an Antarctica covered in daisies?”

“They were daffodils as I recall,” Pflum corrected her, “but yeah, that’s the one. You’re already well versed in two-dimensional temporal theory, of course. The first dimension is linear, it’s the direction all our lives naturally flow in, and the second is represented by alternative history. Together they describe a plane, not unlike what early twenty-first century physicists referred to as a brane, except that was described by the standard four dimensions of space-time. You never heard of branes?” he asked seeing an odd expression on her face.

“Just the sort your tourists leave at home in jars,” she giggled as the dessert arrived.

“Different spelling. Brane was sort of short for membrane. They saw space-time as a sort of membrane, and hypothesized that other such branes, at least one or two must exist as well. Well, the brane theory answered a lot of questions but turned out to be close, but no cigar, when the second temporal dimension was discovered. Still, a lot of the features of the old brane models survived into modern physics. It’s just that the universe got much more complex. Then it turned out that the mathematics supported a third temporal dimension, that which seems to represent alternative physics.”

“But until your Transit came along,” Sam added, “there was no physical proof of its existence. I have heard most of this before, you know.”

“Right,” Pflum nodded with an apologetic grin. “So we started referring to linear time as being the x-temporal axis and alternative history as the y-axis, so naturally alternative physics became the z-axis. In retrospect I suppose we should have used some other letters, since those were already in use for the spatial coordinates, but Doctor Despande started using them as well so now physicists are debating whether to use a different set of letters – t , u and v are the most popular candidates – or the keep the x , y and z notations. Doctors Despande and Blackfellow have proposed a compromise using tx , ty and tz . They would still call them the temporal x , y and z axes for short. Give them a few months and we’ll see. Sure wish I had nothing better to do than worry about inventing mathematical notation. Well at least any of them is better than Range of Universal Properties, that’s what the DTT was trying to call the z -axis.

“Speaking of the Department of Temporal Transport, they decided they had to map the z -axis on the off chance that a maniac FBI agent just happened to bugger up yet another defective Transit’s controls.”

“Thom Barta is not a maniac, Pflum, and I don’t appreciate being put in a position where I have to defend that jerk,” Sam retorted hotly.

“Sorry, Sam,” Pflum replied contritely. “The DTT arrived in the form of one Agent Grassoﬀ...”

“Was she the one who looked like she was sucking a lemon?” Sam asked.

“Perpetually,” Pflum agreed. “She brought along a pair of DTT scientists I never could tell apart, call them Tweedledee and Tweedledum... no, that’s not fair to Lewis Carroll’s characters. They weren’t that smart. Anyway Bert and Ernie brought some special instruments to help them map the z-axis, but they failed to account for the way those instruments would interfere with the normal working of the transit. I don’t think that was what Heisenberg had in mind when he said that observing an object changes it, but that was the end effect. So off we went, spinning along the z-axis, totally out of control. We didn’t find out until much later, of course, that all we had to do was turn oﬀ the Joy Boys’ toys to get back under control and Lucinda Grassoﬀ insisted I allow her pet scientists to do their repairs. I didn’t know they were going to start by dismantling the Transit’s console, but I was under orders to defer to Grassoﬀ’s judgement.

“It was my biggest mistake to date, but I was being a good boy for a change. So while Spin and Marty were happily destroying our only way home, another Transit arrived.”

“So you already said,” Sam noted. “And you manage to meet yourselves.”

“Yes,” Pflum nodded, “and no. They were us, but they weren’t human.”

“They were anthropomorphic rabbits,” Sam concluded. “Pflum, I love you, but you are not a great story teller.”

“And that was not a great story,” Pflum concluded as they finished eating. He paid for the meal and they left the restaurant.

“So that explains why you were wondering what I’d look like as a bunny,” Sam commented. “You should have told me sooner. I was starting to wonder whether that trip had left you unhinged and with a rabbit fixation.” They walked back out into the market.

“No, the rabbit and I got along pretty well, though occasionally we’d find ourselves referring to each other as apeman and bunnyboy, although by the end there were hundreds or thousands of us in just about every combination you can imagine; each one from a diﬀerent time plane, but not completely identical time lines. As far as we could tell, our previous history was identical to the rabbit people, but they were running an hour behind us. The miniscule diﬀerences built up as the new arrivals continued, I never was able to talk to some of them.”

“I can imagine,” Sam agreed. “So where to next?”

“Next we stroll on down to the Esplanade and enjoy the Boston Pops,” Pflum replied. However just then there was a commotion at the far end of Quincy Market.

“Isn’t that one of Doctor Basshart’s students?” Sam asked. She was right. One of the graduate students they had transported was being arrested by a pair of Boston policemen. Doctor Basshart had brought him and several others to study the timeline on which Hitler had been killed and replaced by a time traveler

named Donald Creston before the ascent of the Nazi party. Creston, himself, had been arrested by Samantha di Medici some years after his arrival not long after having been elected Chancellor of Germany. In his sudden disappearance the Nazi Party was thrown into chaos until Heinrich Himmler eventually took control. By then, however, history had been changed irrevocably.

“Oh heck,” Pflum replied exhaustedly. “Can’t these guys ever stay out of trouble? You should have seen what happened when one of them started speaking Yiddish in Nazi Germany a few months ago. Oh well, we’d better get back to the Transit, and get ready to rescue him.”

“Let me handle this one,” Sam told him. She pulled her FBI badge out of her purse and without waiting for Pflum to agree, pushed her way to the front of the growing crowd. “FBI, let me through,” she shouted. “Good work, men,” she told the two cops, flashing her badge at them. The badge, she thought, should look authentic enough. Its design had not changed in centuries. “I’ve been tracking this one down for weeks. We’ll take over from here.” The two policemen weren’t quite that easy to fool, but Sam had evidently been through this scene before and cited several obscure-sounding laws and regulations, gave them a speech about national security and even back-handed the student, a young man from the Netherlands named Peter, when he foolishly tried to speak to her directly. Finally, after a long and persuasive speech that left Pflum desperately trying to remember all the mental notes he made, she managed to extract Peter from the gentle ministrations of the Boston Police Department. She had Pflum handcuff the young man and they hurried him away from the scene and back to the nearby Transit.

When I Get Home

“What the heck happened out there?” Pflum demanded, once they were safely back inside the Transit and Sam was unlocking the cuffs.

“I don’t know,” Peter admitted. “I was just trying to buy a bracelet for my girlfriend.”

“That doesn’t sound particularly suspicious,” Sam commented.

“That can’t be the whole story,” Pflum added. “Go on.”

“Well, I was having a bit of trouble making myself understood,” Peter explained.

“So you have an accent,” Pflum shrugged. “It’s not a particularly heavy one and your pronunciation of Twentieth Century English is pretty good. What happened?”

“Well, I kept using the wrong currency terms, I guess,” Peter told him.

“There were no Euros in 1989, kid, but I doubt that would have gotten you in trouble. Uh oh, on this time line Holland is just another part of Germany. There are plenty of European refugees in the States, so your accent shouldn’t have been a problem but if you said anything that sounded like Europe . . .”

“I, uh, tried explaining, but in my frustration I slipped in a few words in my native language,” Peter admitted contritely.

“And they couldn’t tell Dutch from Deutsch,” Pflum concluded.

“The two policemen were nearby and when they asked to see my passport, I panicked,” Peter

continued.

“You tried to run away?” Sam asked. “Wrong move. You should have just told them you’d left the passport locked up in your hotel safe.”

“Kid,” Pflum added, “You of all people should know the state of this world. A few thousand miles to the east is a Europe united under Nazi Germany. There are dozens of minor incidents in the Atlantic Ocean every year, so it’s understandable that the United States would be a bit nervous about any European making trouble here. Add that to the fact that every nation on Earth has spies in all the other nations and...”

“But I’m not a spy,” Peter protested.

“No, you aren’t and if those cops had been a bit more alert they would have realized that no German spy would have been as clumsy as you were, except you tried to run. Kid, running from the cops is not a smart move. The odds are they would have just tried to smooth out the transaction between you and that jeweler even if you couldn’t produce a passport. But when you tried to run, well, not only did it make you guilty of something in their eyes, it was likely futile in any case. They know the city better than you do and one of them would have probably called for backup in tracking you down.”

“But why did you hit me?” Peter asked Sam.

“You called me by name, you idiot,” she replied. “What was I supposed to do? Just be thankful neither of them noticed. I suppose it’s too late for that concert?” she asked Pflum.

“Oh, we could still catch the second half,” Pflum replied, “but if we ran into those two cops again, they’d wonder where we stashed the kid here and why we weren’t busy booking him.”

“Point,” Sam conceded. “Oh well, at least we had the last few days together.” Peter got up and glumly walked off to the small cubicle where he slept.

“Yeah,” Pflum agreed. “It was nice of Sharonne to let me take you on this trip as my supposed assistant. Good thing assistants don’t have to be fully licensed time pilots.”

“They don’t?” Sam asked. “I didn’t need to certify?”

“When did you do that?” Pflum asked.

“Well, I just got my license two weeks ago, but I’ve been working on it since we got back after arresting Mae Creston. I thought it meant we could travel together like this occasionally.”

“That’s not a bad idea, but Sharonne would have let you ride with me so long as we didn’t have a full load of passengers in any case. Still if you have a license it might be a good idea to start giving you some experience with this crate.”

“Are you sure, Pflum?” Sam inquired. “I really only did it because I thought it was necessary, although my boss has been talking about assigning me to one of the Bureau’s Transits.”

“That’s good, isn’t it?” Pflum asked.

“It’s a promotion,” Sam nodded, “with more pay and a team of agents working under me, although the

Creston case put me in line for a promotion in spite of Barta's attempts to take all the credit."

"Well good for you," Pflum told her. "We should have been out celebrating."

"I don't have that job yet, Pflum. Let's not jinx it," Sam told him.

Just then the Transit door opened and Doctor Basshart entered the room. He and two of his students were carrying in large armfuls of newspapers and magazines. They put them down on the Transit's large conference table while Pflum told the professor, "I hope you're about done with your research here in Boston, Doc."

"Is there a problem, Mister Pflum?" Doctor Basshart asked worriedly.

"Not like in Berlin," Pflum shrugged, "but one of your grad students nearly got arrested tonight. Sam and I got him away from the cops, but we had better not be seen by the local lawmen or there may be some embarrassing questions."

"How many saw you?" Basshart asked.

"Only the two arresting officers and a couple hundred civilians," Pflum told him, "but given the fact he was arrested as a suspected spy, and Sam had to flash her FBI credentials, so there will definitely be questions when Peter doesn't actually show up at the local FBI office."

"Ah well," Basshart sighed. "It couldn't be helped and we were going to return tomorrow in any case. Do we have time to visit another city, do you think?"

"You're the customer," Pflum assured the Harvard professor. "We can visit another city or you can have an extra day on the next trip."

"The extra day when we visit London, Cairo or Moscow next summer may come in handy. We can leave as soon as the others return," Basshart decided.

There were three other graduate student assistants, who were still out, but the two women in the party arrived an hour later and the final man turned up just after midnight with a few newspapers and a guilty expression on his face. Pflum took one look at him and decided he did not really want to know what the younger man was feeling guilty about. Instead, the Transit pilot, secured the field door and activated the controls to start them on their homeward journey.

There was no one awake in the Down Time, Ltd. building save the security guards when they arrived, so Sam helped the university people get their things out of the Transit while Pflum left a message for the maintenance people. Then, seeing Doctor Basshart and his students out of the building, Pflum and Sam retreated to her apartment to spend the rest of their last night together.

"I hope you had a nice vacation with Miss de Medici," Sharonne Lachado, owner of Down Time, Ltd. told Pflum the next morning as he handed her his expedition report. He was in an uncharacteristically bright and chipper mood as he entered the Down Time building and was determined to stay that way.

"It was a vacation for her," Pflum pointed out. "I was working."

"You were, Pflum," Sharonne agreed, "but you have to admit it was an easy assignment for a change."

“Except for keeping a grad student from being arrested as a German spy,” Pflum told her. “It’s in the report. You should know better by now, Sharonne. There are no easy trips, but I’ll agree that some are harder than others. And since you are calling me by my surname and not trying to ply me with pizza and beer, I’m going to assume Doctors Fric and Frac of the DTT haven’t been back yet with their next attempt on my life.”

“True enough, Pflum,” Sharonne sighed. “In fact I’ve found a new intern for you, she’ll be in this afternoon. She’ll be available all year while she works on her senior project.”

“Another temporal scientist, like Jack?” Pflum asked.

“Actually, no. Persi Vincouer is studying anthropology. She may not be able to second guess your repairs, but she probably knows more about the people and places we visit than we do,” Sharonne told him.

“Sounds like she may be an asset. Any idea how she’ll react in an emergency?”

“Can’t be sure until you get into trouble,” Sharonne shrugged, “but I have a good feeling about this one. She is one very self-assured young lady. Now, while you’re working with Ms. Vincouer, I also want you to break in our new Transit pilot.”

“You hired a spare?” Pflum asked. Down Time, Ltd, only had three Transits. As Sharonne had purchased the newest one just a few months earlier, Pflum did not think she was ready to buy a fourth. He was wrong.

“I just commissioned another new Transit,” she told him. “Your crate is too busy with specialty trips and I need to be able to fill the demand for the more conventional tours. It won’t be ready for six months, but certified Transit pilots aren’t all that easy to find. I managed to steal him from Chronologica.”

“Flashy name,” Pflum admitted, “but who are they when the sun rises?”

“They used to call themselves Chronological Caravans,” Sharonne explained, “but after that fiasco a while back they had to reorganize. Their new management decided to spiff up their name, but it’s still mostly the same old crew, except that I managed to hire their best pilot away,” she added smugly.

“Is he really that good?” Pflum asked. “And if he is, why did Chronologica let him go? What’s his name anyway?”

“Jackson Kaden,” Sharonne replied.

“Never heard of him,” Pflum replied, then decided he was sounding defensive, “but then I don’t know anyone there, so I guess that’s not all that unusual.”

“He’s definitely good, though,” Sharonne continued, “your old girlfriend, Jennifer Viking over at Time Tours, thought so too and nearly got him first. I got a rather nasty phone call over it from her, in fact.”

“The qualifications Jen was looking for aren’t necessarily yours,” Pflum retorted, obliquely reminding her that Jennifer Viking had tried to hire Pflum several times in the past.

“Say what you want, but she only hires the best,” Sharonne replied.

“Thank you,” Pflum told her with a slight bow.

“You’re so welcome,” she told him sourly. “Anyway, I want Mister Kaden to travel with you, Jainette and Kyle, in that order. He doesn’t need the Transit experience, but I do want him to be fully acquainted with the way we do things here at DownTime before he takes his first load of tourists out. I’ve heard too many tales of the sloppy work at Chronologica to want to just send him out, even if I could.”

“And is he in this morning?” Pflum asked.

“Unfortunately not,” Sharonne told him. “He doesn’t start until day after tomorrow. I’ve assigned him the office next to yours, so if you’ll take him in hand when he does arrive, I’ll appreciate it.”

“Sure,” Pflum muttered. “Where’s my office again?”

“Very funny, Pflum. I know full well you’ve used it at least twice this year.”

“I’m just as happy working in my crate,” he admitted.

“There’s no phone in your crate,” Sharonne pointed out.

“That’s part of it,” Pflum replied. “So what’s my next assignment?”

“Have you forgotten Mrs. Callinger? You’ll be taking her and her friends to see *Cats* this evening.”

“I had forgotten,” Pflum admitted. “Good thing Doc Basshart agreed to come back early. We would have had to land and take right off again without the usual maintenance if he had decided to stay in Boston another day. Oh well, it all worked out. I’m glad I left a message for maintenance before I left the building last night though.”

“The cleaning crew’s already been in and neatened the place up,” Sharonne told him. “Kenneth and his boys are running diagnostics on the console at the moment. Pflum, for once do me a favor and don’t bother them until they are done.”

“Aw gee, Maw,” Pflum drawled. “That’s the fun part!”

Ticket to Ride

Persephone Vincouer was everything Sharonne had described her as and more. Standing at five feet, seven inches tall, with dark brown skin and black hair, she did, indeed, emit more self confidence than one might expect from any nineteen year old student. She was never antagonistic, but she showed no hesitation in making her preferences known.

“Kid, Mister Pflum?” she replied in her mild but pleasant accent. “No. I am not a baby goat. You may call me Persi if you like.”

“Okay, k... Persi,” Pflum quickly corrected himself. “And there’s no need to call me ‘Mister.’ Everyone just calls me Pflum.”

“Yes, Mister Pflum,” Persi replied calmly. Pflum let it pass, unintentionally giving her the first victory.

Pflum spent the afternoon, giving her a tour of the Transit and showing her how to run field diagnostics. "Yes," she nodded about halfway through the introduction, "this is very much like the university's Transit. It is an old one also. I was never allowed to fly it, of course, but I did watch our pilot work at the console on one trip. What are all these other controls, though?"

"Persi, your university crate," Pflum began.

"Crate, Mister Pflum?" Persi asked, showing her first bit of confusion.

"Yes," Pflum explained. "That's what we pilots call our Transits. It's an affectionate term, although we don't allow anyone else except our assistants to do so."

"Crate," Persi considered the word. "It is not a respectful word, is it? Power such as this should always be respected, Mister Pflum."

"Oh, I respect it. Sometimes I respect it so much I want to take a hacksaw to the circuit boards," he replied.

Persi smiled slightly and Pflum realized she saw right through his bluster to the fact he actually was quite fond of the old crate. "An old transit such as this deserves a more respectful name," she continued, "like *Spirit of the Wind* or something. I shall consider the matter."

"Well please wait until you've been on a few trips before coming to any conclusions," Pflum advised. "*Hunk of Junk* may seem like a properly respectful name a subjective month from now. Now you were asking about the extra controls. You can ignore that other console. It used to house some special instruments the DTT, that's the Department of Temporal Transport, used recently. They took all their top secret toys with them when they left, and it's a good thing too. Darned playthings got us stranded on one of the strangest worlds you could ever imagine, although we landed on a few that were even stranger before the crash."

"I can imagine some very strange worlds, indeed, Mister Pflum," Persi assured him and for just a moment Pflum had a mental image of some strange Hoodoo rituals and traveling through spirit worlds. He didn't really believe in such and decided his imagination was getting the better of him.

"Well, one of the stranger ones we found I can only describe as a planet having been turned inside out," he told her.

"Inside out? she asked.

"I don't know how else to describe it. Imagine slicing up the Earth, or at least her surface into evenly-sized wedge-like pieces, without destroying everything on the planet, that is, sort of like one of those odd map projection used to show the world without distortion. Then put it all back together but with the surface inside the sphere. There was breathable air and light, though I couldn't see any definite source. The life forms were just plain scary. At first we thought the dominant life form was something that looked like living versions of Bugs Bunny although in a multitude of colors, but they turned out to just be curious animals. I didn't stay long enough to measure the intelligence of the large rubber ball that was eating them, however. At least I think it was eating them. Hard to say, but the ball's appearance sure threw them into a panic."

"Ah," Persi nodded at last. "So what about these controls on the main console?"

"The crate has always had a tendency to land on lines beyond the five nines limitation," Pflum began, but Persi stopped him again.

"The what, Mister Pflum?" she asked.

"For reasons of safety, the DTT has mandated that commercial Transits be constructed in such a way that they cannot land on any time line whose history does not agree with at least 99.99999 percent of our own. It's built into the regulator, but this one is different. There are some government-owned crates that can land on any time line and I think this was supposed to be one of them, but it cannot do it reliably. Most of the time it stays within the five-nines limitation. However, every so often we land on worlds where civilizations were developed by miniature purple wildebeests or something really amazing.

"A few trips ago," Pflum continued, "one of my passengers thought he knew what he was doing and managed to damage the regulator." He continued on, giving her the same explanation he had the evening before with Samantha. "So Ken Jackson, our engineer and I worked up these controls that allow us to control our progress along the z-axis. The idea was to keep us from traveling that way unless we want to."

"Yoo-hoo! Mister Pflum!" a cheery voice called from the Transit doorway. Pflum and Persi turned to see a middle-aged lady dressed appropriately for the theater in the late Twentieth Century.

"Good to see you again, Mrs. Callinger," Pflum greeted her politely. "May I present Ms. Persephone Vincouer? She will be joining us as my assistant."

"Pleased to meet you, dear," Mrs. Callinger told her. "Are you a fan of the theatre?"

"I am a fan of almost everything, Mrs. Callinger," Persi replied calmly.

Mrs. Callinger looked at her carefully, trying to see if the young woman was mocking her. Persi was unreadable, however, and eventually Mrs. Callinger decided. "Would you and Mister Pflum like to join us at the theater this evening? Jane and Richard Terence had to cancel at the last moment and I wouldn't want the tickets to go to waste."

"We would be delighted to join you, ma'am," Persi told her.

"Are you early or have I lost track of the time?" Pflum asked Mrs. Callinger.

"Early, of course," she giggled. "I wanted to talk to Ms Lachado about my club's next trip. We'd like to see *Thoroughly Modern Millie*, and I thought we might be able to buy the tickets while we're in New York this trip."

"The original or the revival?" Pflum asked. "and I thought your next trip was to see *The Fantasticks*."

"It is, but we understand we need to plan in advance," she replied. "Which do you recommend, Mister Pflum?"

"Well, purists will want to see the original cast, but I understand the revival was quite a lively show. I haven't seen either, though," Pflum admitted, "so I can't give you an informed opinion. I'm fairly sure, however, that neither show is open during the year we'll be traveling to. Still I'm sure we can make a detour on our way back and you can discuss which show to see with your club."

Mrs. Calliger nodded and rushed out to speak with Sharonne and Pflum continued acquainting Persi with the Transit. They ran through the standard pilot's pre-voyage checklist quickly enough to allow Pflum time to show Persi the Transit's schematics. It turned out she had no practical knowledge of electronics but she was able to read the circuit diagrams as though they were road maps and convinced Pflum that while she did not know what various circuits did, she did know how they should be connected. She was reading the schematic's annotations when Mrs. Calliger and the members of her theater club began arriving.

Hello Goodbye

"Not again!" Pflum complained. It was unusual for him to speak those words when not actually in his Transit, but on this occasion he was once more in Sharonne's office. The theater trip had been an uneventful milk run. Not only had the tourists all behaved themselves, but the Transit had done likewise. With no problems since his return from the world of the Ulualoo, Pflum was starting to believe that all the bugs might possibly have been worked out of the machine. But the moment he and Persi had entered the room and spotted the pizza boxes Pflum knew he was in for a world of trouble.

"Aurelian," Sharonne tried to calm him down, "it's not as bad as all that."

"Aurelian?" Pflum echoed. "Now I know I'm in trouble. What is it this time?"

"Have you ever heard of Doctor Artemus MacKenzie, Pflum?" Sharonne asked.

"Can't say that I have," Pflum commented, "Should I have?"

"You should and I'm certain Jack would have. Doctor MacKenzie was not the inventor of the temporal regulator, of course," she began.

"Of course," Pflum cut in. "That was Raj Deshpande, basing his work on the Blackfellow equations." He finally gave in and helped himself to a slice of pepperoni pizza. Persi checked the three boxes and, finding a pepper and onion pizza, chose a slice of that.

"True enough," Sharonne agreed, "but Mackenzie did invent most of the rest of the parts that the regulator plugs into. Think of him as the great unsung hero of temporal science."

"Sounds like," Pflum agreed. "So, now I've heard of him. What of it?"

"He's invented something new," Sharonne explained. "He calls it a transtemporal accelerator."

"Verbose and literate devil, isn't he?" Pflum remarked snidely before a look of dawning comprehension crossed his face. "Oh no! Just once why don't we have someone bugger up one of the other Transits?"

"He wants yours because of all the manual controls," Sharonne told him.

"But it's been working so well lately," Pflum complained.

"Then it's due," Sharonne replied mercilessly, "That's what you would usually say, isn't it?"

"I'm thinking of turning over a new leaf," Pflum grumbled, "besides I'm fairly sure I have a dentist

appointment that day.”

“I haven’t told you when he and his daughter are arriving,” Sharonne retorted.

“It doesn’t matter,” Pflum insisted. “I’ll get root canals in all my teeth if I have to.”

“Where would you find a dentist who would do a root canal in this day and age, Mister Pflum?” Persephone asked curiously.

“There must be someone who believes in doing things by the old school,” Pflum told her. He finished his slice and grabbed another while both women watched. When he finished that one, he finally broke the silence, “Oh, all right. So from the name of this new technological doodad, can I assume it is supposed to make us move backward through the continuum even faster than we are able to do now?”

“That’s correct and he’s not only offering to outfit your crate at his own expense, but to sell us accelerators for our other Transits at cost,” Sharonne replied.

“A generous offer if it works,” Pflum admitted, “Having that device first won’t hurt either.”

“I’m glad you see that,” Sharonne nodded.

“Does it really have to be mine?” Pflum asked.

“I told you he wants one with manual controls,” Sharonne reminded him. “Yours is probably the only commercial transit that still has them.”

“What about the universities that have their own, or the government?” Pflum asked.

“Only a handful of universities have their own Transits and most of the old manual ones have been rebuilt with automatic controls,” she replied. “None of the government jobs have manual controls these days. They junked all the manual ones long ago. Face it, Pflum, yours is an antique and a very valuable one.”

“I still prefer the old controls,” Pflum nodded. “So when will he be here?”

“In an hour or so,” Sharonne replied. “He says it shouldn’t take more than an hour or two to install the new components and then you can take off.”

“Take off?” Pflum asked. “Where and when are we going?”

“Wherever he wants,” Sharonne replied. “Think of it as a shakedown cruise. The destination doesn’t matter so much as the time it takes to get there.”

“Isn’t this is rather short notice, Ms. Lachado,” Persi asked suddenly.

“It is,” Pflum confirmed. “Just how long have you known this Doctor Mac was coming here?”

“Uh,” Sharonne stammered uncharacteristically, “not very long, and, uh, there were some negotiations to conclude before I could tell you about it.”

Pflum wasn’t fooled, “Right,” he drawled. “Well, this time I’m going to be there when these new super parts are installed and nothing is going in – not so much as an extra bolt – before I understand how it

works.” He picked up the remaining pizzas, gave Persi a follow me gesture and left the office.

“That could take years,” Sharonne sighed in her now empty office. She attempted to get back to work, but a few minutes later, her intercom buzzed.

“Excuse me, Ms. Lachado,” her administrative assistant said through the small speaker, “Doctor Mackenzie is here.”

“Send him in,” Sharonne replied. “I’d better brief him before he briefs Pflum.”

The hanger for the Transits was not much more than a large garage with room for four Transits, although at present Down Time, Ltd. only owned three. Pflum glanced into the other bays and noted that Kyle Romillard’s Transit, the newest one of the three, was currently out. Only a bit of the box was still there, and the field end faded out abruptly just a few inches back from the wall on which the “Home Door” was mounted.. From the small amount that was still visible, Pflum estimated it was somewhere in the late Cretaceous period. He wondered just who had actually paid for the grueling trip all the way back that far just to look at the over-grown lizards. It was a difficult journey and an expensive one. Most paleontologists waited for their turns at various university transits, but every so often one received enough grant money to hire a commercial one for the trip.

“From what I hear, ours are more comfortably appointed,” he commented to Persi.

“You have heard correctly, Mister Pflum,” she replied. “Ours did not have privacy shields for sleeping behind and instead of beds with mattresses; we had army cots and sleeping bags. Yes, Mister Pflum, your Transit is much more comfortable.”

“The other two have even more modern fixtures,” Pflum replied, “and just call me Pflum like everyone else.”

“Yes, Mister Pflum,” she replied calmly.

The Transit immediately next to Pflum’s was piloted by Jaiette Manovich, a woman whose expertise as a pilot was inversely proportional to her height. While Pflum was hard pressed to admit it to her, he thought she was one of the best pilots of a modern Transit he had met, and she was not half bad on his antique either. Her Transit’s side walls faded out about three quarters of the way back and the crate was gently humming. From the sound, Pflum guessed she was on her way back to the present and would probably return fairly shortly.

Finally they made their way into Pflum’s transit to discover someone was already there waiting for them. He was in his mid-twenties, stood six foot two with wavy light brown hair and was likely to be described as ruggedly handsome by some. He was sitting back with his feet on the conference table and had obviously helped himself to several of the doughnuts Pflum had brought in that morning. “Who the hell are you?” Pflum asked abruptly.

“Jackson Kaden,” the man introduced himself, getting up to offer a sugar-covered hand to Pflum. “You must be Aurelian Pflum. Oh man, the stories they tell about you over at Chronologica!”

“Do tell,” Pflum replied flatly. He reached for a large two and a half inch wrench that normally sat on top of the transit console. The Transit itself had no bolts that large, but Pflum had found an occasional use for the tool. He knew about those stories. His misadventures were the talk of the industry and they tended to grow in the telling. At one point there was a pool as to just how much longer he would survive before his Transit blew up on him or it came back empty; a latter day *Mary Celeste*, or worse, become a *Fliegende Hollander*, doomed to roam space-time forever. He wasn’t amused by any of that. As far as Pflum was concerned, his decisions were always the best he could come to under the circumstances. He would have loved to see what the kids who circulated those stories would have done in his place.

Kaden didn’t notice Pflum’s tone, however, and continued, “Oh yes. Say, Pflumer, did you really finance Down Time by finding a world of solid gold?”

“Yeah,” Pflum replied deadpan, keeping his eye on the mirrored surface of the working end of the wrench. “And now we’re all fabulously wealthy. We only work to stave off the boredom, and the name is Pflum.” He added, pointing the large wrench at Kaden’s chest. “Don’t be afraid of using it correctly.”

“Hey!” Kaden replied, smiling, but with his hands up as though Pflum was pointing a gun at him, “no need to get testy, old timer.” Pflum, at thirty-eight, was hardly an old man, but as Kaden was acting only half his twenty-six years, Pflum allowed as he might seem old to the younger man. Before he could reply, however, Kaden turned on Persi. “Well, well, well,” he practically drooled, “aren’t you a looker!”

“Yes, Mister Kaden,” she replied as calmly as she usually did. “I am a looker as you say. Right now I am looking for intelligent life. Not finding it though. Perhaps I should look somewhere else.”

“Kaden,” Pflum interrupted any retort the other man might have invented, “This isn’t the Twenty-first Century and sexist language like that is actionable. Now zip it, before I’m forced to take action.”

“Oh, I didn’t know it was that way with you two,” Kaden chuckled. Pflum’s face darkened even as his knuckles turned white as he gripped the wrench.

“No, Pflum,” Persi told him quietly. “I claim this one.” She looked calmly at Kaden, who flinched as she suddenly lifted an eyebrow.

Outside an alarm bell rang, signaling the return of Jainette’s Transit. Kaden was still trying to look Persi in the eye a few minutes later when Jainette appeared in the doorway of Pflum’s Transit. “Hey, Pflum!” she called as she entered, “wait until you hear what I’ve been through... Oh. What’s happening here?”

“The children are playing,” Pflum replied sourly. “Care to make a wager? I’ll put my next paycheck on Persephone there.”

Jainette sized up the situation and decided, “No contest; not even if you give me odds. He wouldn’t last five minutes.”

“Damn!” Pflum laughed. “Just when I’d found a sure thing.”

“I, uh, need to talk to Ms Lachado,” Kaden muttered as he started to retreat from the Transit. He stopped briefly to look Jainette up and down. “Hey, babe! I’d fly you any time.”

“You couldn’t handle the ride,” she shot back. “Who is that jerk, anyway?” she asked once he was gone.

“Our new colleague, it seems,” Pflum replied. “Two days late, not a good habit for a time pilot, I don’t think. This fine lady on the other hand is Persephone Vincouer, my new assistant. Persi, Jaiquette Manovich, captain of the Transit next door.”

“Pleased to meet you, Ms. Manovich,” Persi told her solemnly.

“Likewise, but call me Jaiquette, Persi. We’re all on a first name basis around here, except for Pflum who prefers being called by his family name.”

“So you had an interesting trip?” Pflum asked Jaiquette.

“Not half as interesting as your next is going to be,” Jaiquette retorted. “So that’s Jackson Kaden, is it? Sharonne told me she had hired him just before I left. What’s he really like?”

“We just met him, but he makes a lousy first impression,” Pflum replied. “Maybe he’ll get better after he’s been here a while.”

“I doubt it,” Jaiquette told him, “I have a friend over at Chronologica who tells me after they gave him a going away party, they had an even bigger party without him.”

“Terrific,” Pflum replied. “And Sharonne thinks she stole their best pilot.”

“She did,” Jaiquette informed him. “As a pilot he’s first rate. As a human though, he still has one or two hundred thousand years of evolving to go.”

“Well, they do say ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny,” Persi remarked, with a slight smile. “Perhaps he has not yet finished growing up.”

“None of them ever do, dear,” Jaiquette told her. “I need to drop my report off with Sharonne and it sounds like you two need some damage control. Do me a favor and beat some sense into Kaden before I have to travel with him.”

“If I can’t, I’ll loan you my wrench,” Pflum promised.

“Aw, Pflum,” Jaiquette laughed. “That’s the sweetest thing you ever said to me.”

“You know,” he commented to Persi, “she may be right about that.”

“Excuse me,” an elderly gentleman said from the doorway. He was of moderate height, bald with a fringe of gray hair and a long, but well-trimmed beard. Beside him stood a pretty woman in her early twenties. She had long and straight dark red hair and vivid green eyes that might have captivated Pflum instantly had he not already been involved with Samantha. “Are you Aurelian Pflum?”

“According to the tag in my shorts,” Pflum replied. “Doctor Mackenzie?” he guessed.

“Yes,” the doctor nodded, “and my daughter, Olivia.”

“Call me Misty,” she told them as the introductions proceeded.

“I have the necessary parts outside, but I’m going to need help installing them,” Doctor MacKenzie informed Pflum and Persi.

“I can help with that,” Pflum told him, “but it might be better if our engineer, Ken Jackson, and his boys do the real work. Persi, will you please inform Ken Doctor Mac is here.”

“Doctor Mac?” Mackenzie asked, with some amusement. “Well, I’ve been called worse.”

“Of course, Mister Pflum,” Persi replied and walked out of the Transit.

“I wonder how she does that,” Pflum commented to nobody in particular.

“What is that, Mister Pflum?” Doctor Mac asked.

“She wasn’t walking very quickly and yet it seemed like she was rushing,” Pflum explained. “I usually get accused of just the opposite. Actually I am quite interested in how your accelerator works and how it will react with the rest of the transit.”

“So Ms. Lachado led me to believe,” Doctor Mac chuckled. “Well it is not easy to describe, although the mathematics are fairly straight forward.”

“I’m afraid my grasp of the Blackfellow equations is rudimentary at best,” Pflum admitted with a candor he rarely displayed. “My last assistant probably would have had little trouble understanding your math, but I generally need clever metaphors.”

“Unfortunately the only such metaphor I have to describe the transtemporal accelerator is the gas pedal of an automobile,” Doctor Mac confessed. “It doesn’t do much to explain how it works, just that it does. I guess you could say that normal transits only move through the dimensions of time at a certain rate because there is a certain amount of resistance they must overcome, in much the same way a jet must overcome gravity and air resistance. The transtemporal accelerator does not push a Transit through time any faster. Instead it reduces temporal resistance so your impellers become many times more efficient.”

“So the accelerator interacts with the impellers?” Pflum asked.

“It shouldn’t,” Doctor Mac replied, “although the harmonics of the Transit circuitry may need some small adjustments in order to achieve optimal efficiency. You see it will actually augment the field generator, expanding the temporal nullification field which, as you know, is why the impellers work in the first place. The augmented field will reach farther through the x and y-axes of time, thus allowing the impellers to move us at magnified velocities in those directions.”

“What about along the z-axis of time?” Pflum asked.

“The z-axis, Mister Pflum?” Doctor Mac inquired. “Why do you ask?”

“My Transit has the currently unique ability to travel among the planes of alternate physics as well as those of linear and alternate history,” Pflum informed him.

“Really? Fascinating!” Doctor Mac replied with an excited gleam in his eyes. “It was always theoretically possible, of course. I said so in a paper about ten years ago.”

“Sixteen years ago, Daddy,” Misty corrected him.

“That long? My goodness! Well, the point of my paper was that all Transits wobble a bit along what we

have begun to call the z-axis, but the nullification field is ovoid, not spherical in shape. Well actually it is not an ovoid either, that is simply a three-dimensional representation of its true shape in the eleven dimensional universe we actually live in. Consequently we do not normally travel far enough along the z-axis to be able to measure any progress in that direction. Yes, I believe the accelerator will facilitate motion along the z-axis should you want to go that way.” Persi returned just then with Kenneth Jackson and his assistants, tools and parts in hand. “I would be most interested in hearing about how it came about that your Transit developed that ability,” Doctor Mac continued, “but it can wait until we are under way.”

Pflum spent the next hour and a half watching the installation of the accelerator, asking questions continuously. Doctor Mac answered as he and the others worked and occasionally gave Pflum something to do in the hopes of shutting him up for a few minutes, not realizing that Pflum was perfectly capable of talking and working at the same time.

Persi, on the other hand, made it her business to stay out of the way, which prompted Misty to keep dragging her back into the heart of the action. When this happened, Persi would mark her place in the voluminous schematic diagram book and allow Misty to get her involved in the installation process, and then when she had performed whatever task Misty had assigned her, she would then go back to the thick book and continue reading the annotations.

Finally, Doctor Mac proclaimed, “We’re done. It was handy having that second console. It was a good place to mount our monitoring instruments without getting in the way of the Pilot’s panel. Thank you, Mister Jackson. You and your men did excellent work.”

“Thank you, Doctor,” Ken replied as he and his helpers finished packing up their tools. “Good voyage, Pflum. Oh, isn’t Kaden supposed to be going with you this trip?”

“He is,” Pflum replied, “but I haven’t seen him since before Doctor Mac showed up.”

“Does he think he’s just a passenger? Well, you’re ready to leave right now, better send your assistant out to track him down,” Ken advised.

Pflum considered that and decided, “I’d better track him down myself.” They were outside the Transit before he added. “Besides if I send Persi out after him, he might not survive the encounter and Persi’s too good an assistant to lose to a murder trial.”

“She wouldn’t really,” Ken asked, “would she?”

“I don’t know her well enough yet,” Pflum shrugged, “but she can certainly take care of herself. I just want to make sure she doesn’t get caught.”

“Sounds reasonable to me,” Jainette commented as they passed her Transit. “Ken, I’m taking another load of tourists out tomorrow afternoon. Will you have time for a full diagnostic?”

“Should have,” Ken told her. “Any problems?”

“Nothing like what happens to Pflum’s crate from time to time, but I think the secondaries may be out of alignment,” she replied.

“I’ll check them out first thing,” Ken promised her, waving his assistants to follow him into Jainette’s transit.

“Thanks,” she nodded. “Pflum, Kaden’s hiding out in Sharonne’s waiting room, pestering her secretary. You can save a few steps by using the phone.”

“I’m tempted to leave without him,” Pflum commented sourly, “but I won’t inflict him on Rain.” There was a phone on the nearby wall. Pflum dialed Rain Benedor’s extension. “Hi, Rain. Pflum. Is Kaden still up there? Pity. Well, tell him to get himself back down here in one minute or I’m leaving without him. You’re very welcome, I’m sure.”

“You’ve just made a sweet young lady very happy, Pflum,” Jainette chuckled mercilessly.

“At the probable expense of two others,” Pflum replied looking back toward his own Transit.

“You said it yourself,” Jainette reminded him, “Persi can take care of herself. If the other girl can’t, Persi’s likely to help her.”

“Is that a woman thing?” Pflum asked.

“It’s a human thing,” Jainette replied. “We tend to side together against common enemies.”

“Right,” Pflum replied.

Day Tripper

“Hey, what’s all the big hurry?” Kaden asked as he finally entered the Transit and closed the door behind him.

“We’re leaving,” Pflum told him from the console. Persi had already punched in the activation code and the temporal impellers were ready to bring online. He let his hand fall softly on the big red button marked “start.” A low hum filled the Transit.

“Well, just let me go pack a bag,” Kaden requested.

“Too late,” Pflum told him flatly. “I know Sharonne told you we would be leaving as soon as Doctor Mac was ready, but instead you spent the last two hours chatting up her secretary. You should have been here helping us install the new equipment for that matter, but you couldn’t be bothered. Well, kid, there are no passengers this trip. Everyone here is a working member of the expedition.”

“You can be sure Ms. Lachado will be hearing about this,” Kaden blustered.

“Darned straight she will,” Pflum agreed. “It will all be in my report. Now while that silk shirt of yours is stylish, Down Time, Ltd. has a dress code while we’re in the field just like at Chronological Caravans.”

“That’s Chronologica,” Kaden corrected him.

“Them too,” Pflum shot back. “Fortunately for you, you will find an assortment of such uniforms in that locker over there. I recommend the general purpose style, like the one I’m wearing.” Pflum and Persi were both wearing tan slacks and dark blue polo shirts with the Down Time logo embroidered on them. The uniform fit best into the late Twentieth and early Twenty-first Centuries, but since so many of their

trips were to destinations within that period, Pflum and the other Down Time employees wore it more often than not. It was necessary however to always wear clothing that would fit in with whatever era they visited, so the uniform locker was stocked with a wide variety of styles. It was not large enough to encompass fashions for the entirety of human existence, and it was usually stocked with clothing from the specific periods they intended to visit, but during a nonspecific expedition, this was the best that could be done.

Kaden glared at Pflum, but did as he was told. Problems started manifesting, however, before he had finished changing.

“Mister Pflum,” Doctor Mac, “what is our temporal velocity?”

Pflum glanced at the console’s readouts. “Off the scale,” he reported. “we’re already back beyond the Tenth Century.”

“Perhaps we are moving too rapidly,” the doctor replied. “It will be best if you decrease our rate of progress, if that is the correct word, so that your instruments will be able to measure it.”

“I don’t know if it is the correct word,” Pflum replied even as he reached toward his controls, “but I know what you mean. Oh, this isn’t good.”

“What’s wrong?” Misty asked.

“Even our minimal temporal speed is too high,” Pflum reported. “Doc, this might be a great way to go back to visit the dinosaurs, but I doubt I can land on any particular date this way.”

“Interesting,” Doctor Mac commented. “Perhaps it will be necessary to modify your console’s controls. Heavier duty rheostats or something along those lines.”

“Unless you can disengage your doohickey,” Pflum replied.

“That would be dangerous,” Doctor Mac told him. “It would disrupt the temporal field and probably cause the entire system to crash.”

“I’ve been through that before,” Pflum remarked.

“I doubt that, Mister Pflum. By crash, I mean it could cause irreparable damage to the temporal regulator. You do know what would happen if the regulator ever shut down while we were in the field, don’t you?”

“There are two possible outcomes,” Pflum replied. “That either we would implode, possibly taking the world with us or that the field would shrink at an only slightly slower rate leaving us stranded out of our own time.

“The implosion would not be enough to destroy the world,” Doctor Mac corrected him, “but it would produce a fair-sized, five-dimensional crater all along the continuum between our home base and current location in space-time. The resulting earthquake would be felt for thousands of miles on all the infinite time lines. We, of course, would be killed instantly, which is probably better than being stranded hundreds or thousands of years out of our time.”

“It would be a long walk home,” Pflum agreed. “but what do we do now?”

“We have other tests of the system to perform in the meantime,” Doctor Mac replied happily. “The important thing is that the accelerator works. We shall move on to those other tests before returning to our time. Then, once we are back, we’ll see about revisions to your controls so we can measure our progress.”

“And slow us down to where I can at least pick out the right year,” Pflum added. “Doc, I don’t know how much experience you have with Transit travel, but most of the time it is essential to be able to pick out the right day, and generally I like to be able to fine tune that down to the hour, although my readouts are only accurate to within a few days.”

“Then how do you attain finer accuracy?” Persi asked.

“When I’m following a tracer unit, I usually know the time differential between home and destination. When I’m following a tracer unit, I need to find a specific time line, so except for initial landing, I know what the temporal offset will be. For example that theater trip the other night was to a line that had a five hour offset from our own. It took us five hours subjective time to get there so if it was five o’clock when we left, it was ten at home when we arrived, but local time was still five pm. Actually you can calculate what the offset will be based on the destination and the ability of one’s regulator to twist time. That ability can be expressed as a constant, although it varies from one machine to another.”

“This transit has tracer technology?” Doctor Mac asked.

“It does,” Pflum confirmed. “Is that a problem?” he asked seeing Doctor Mac frown.

“No, I should not think so,” the doctor finally concluded. “At least the ability to find a tracer will not affect the operation of the accelerator nor any other Transit functions. At the current speeds, I think you might have trouble finding a specific time line, however. I wasn’t aware that was commonly done in commercial Transits.”

“This crate’s unusual that way,” Pflum admitted. “Uh, we’re about twenty thousand years before present. Do you want to turn around and go back toward the present?”

“Can we do that, Mister Pflum?” Persi asked. “If we do not measurably slow down when you set your controls to minimum can we even go in reverse?”

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” Pflum assured her. “It’s like switching gears from forward to reverse.”

“More the other way, I should think,” Persi corrected him.

“Whatever,” Pflum shrugged it off. “My point is we can change directions. I’m pretty sure we can hover too, since it’s a matter of disengaging the impellers.”

“Can you disengage the primary impellers without turning the secondaries off?” Persi asked, half looking at him and half at the schematic diagrams.

“I could program them to stay off line, I suppose,” Pflum replied. “Why would I want to?”

“I was thinking it might slow our progress to the point at which we could measure it,” Persi told him.

“That might work,” Doctor Mac commented. “Yes, Mister Pflum, would you be so kind as to disengage

your primary impellers?”

“Worth a shot, I suppose,” Pflum shrugged. He fiddled with the controls for a few minutes, during which Kaden finally came out of his cubicle and sat down at the conference table next to Misty. “Okay,” Pflum said at last. “Shutting down the primaries.” The faintly audible hum that had filled the air suddenly vanished and the Transit became as quiet as it normally was when parked in its “garage.”

“Are we still moving?” Kaden asked.

“Very much so, Mister Kaden,” Doctor Mac replied.

“But still way too fast,” Pflum added. “We are on the scale again, but just barely and that’s with the secondaries, just barely pushing us along.”

“Absolutely marvelous!” Doctor Mac replied excitedly. “This is so much better than anything I expected from my accelerator.”

“I would wonder if there is a temporal equivalent of air friction,” Persi wondered out loud, “and if so, could these speeds be in some way erosive to the Transit.”

“An interesting question, Ms. Vincouer,” the doctor told her. “We have not detected any such erosive medium as we travel along the x and y-axes, but perhaps we were not moving fast enough to be able to detect such.”

“I doubt we’ll detect it now,” Pflum told him. “It seems to me your accelerator is pushing any such erosive media out of our way.”

“Hmm. Good point, Mister Pflum. A very good point. Well let’s see how finely we can control our progress. Misty, my dear, will you come help? I’ll need to fiddle with the accelerator’s tuning and your notes are ever so much more legible than mine. Mister Pflum, I’d like you to bring us in for a landing.”

“When and where?” Pflum asked.

“Whenever we are and I’d say anywhere in North America. We’re far enough back that there won’t be any humans around to see us. The actual coordinates do not matter much yet, since this will be our way of establishing a benchmark. I had not thought to use tracers, but since you have that technology, we will.”

“All right,” Pflum shrugged. “Shutting down the secondaries... now” he made his actions suit his words. There was a brief feeling of being all stretched out in a direction perpendicular to reality and then of snapping back.

“What the hell was that?” Kaden asked.

“One of the strangest things I’ve ever encountered,” Pflum replied. “Any ideas, Doc?”

“No, that was quite unexpected,” MacKenzie admitted. “I will consider it in detail if it happens again.”

“Right,” Pflum muttered. “I’ll bring us into phase with the external world now.” There was an odd scraping sort of noise, almost as if a piece of metal was being torn in two and then all was quiet once more.

“Are such sounds normal for this Transit?” Doctor Mac inquired curiously.

“Not really,” Pflum replied. “That was an entirely new and exciting noise for a Transit known for producing new and exciting noises.”

“What sort of hunk of junk is this crate?” Kaden demanded.

Pflum’s face grew dark with anger, but Persi cut him off with a gentle, “She’s an old crate, but a fine one, Mister Kaden. And if she chooses to groan occasionally then perhaps we should only hope that you too can function so well when you are her age.” She stood up and joined Pflum at the control panel.

Pflum walked to the Transit’s field door where he could take readings of the external conditions. “Temperature out there is about twenty degrees Fahrenheit and its snowing lightly,” he reported.

“We are roughly where we started out spatially, however,” Persi announced after checking the readouts.

“I didn’t move us in space at all,” Pflum admitted. “at the time it didn’t seem necessary.”

“Nor was it,” Doctor Mac agreed, “at least as long as we are working this far back in time. If you can toss a tracer unit outside, however, we will not need to stay in this time much longer. Misty and I already have all the readings we need.”

“When to next?” Pflum asked.

“Bring us back out of phase and move forward to the next time you can detect your tracer,” the doctor responded. “Try to land and retrieve the unit, please. We’ll do that several times while monitoring your progress.”

“Sounds like the jobs I got in the navy,” Pflum complained. “Pick up that pile and move it over there, then back again.”

“A universal constant, Mister Pflum,” MacKenzie replied. “In this case, however, we have good reasons to do so.”

Pflum shrugged and went to work. The tracer circuitry included a buzzer alarm that would ring as they passed over the timeline with the unit. Pflum activated the tracer circuitry and then set the Transit to cruise forward at minimal speed.

Even so, the buzzer sounded out several times in fast succession before Pflum could disengage the secondary impellers. “Much too fast,” he told Doctor Mac.

“Keep trying, Mister Pflum,” the doctor implored. “even if we do not retrieve the unit the information we are gathering is invaluable.”

“Whatever you want, Doc,” Pflum assured him. An hour later, MacKenzie had to admit that the Transit no longer had the fine control necessary to home in on a tracer unit. “No problem, Doc,” Pflum assured him. “We can always return either without your accelerator or after we’ve devised new controls.”

“Hell, I can home in on a tracer no matter how fast we’re moving through time,” Kaden sneered.

If looks could kill, the one Pflum gave Kaden would have left him bed-ridden for a month. However, after a moment Pflum smiled and told him, "Give it a try, Kaden. I hear you're supposed to be pretty good. Let's see how good you really are."

"What the hell kind of controls are these?" Kaden demanded, finally getting his first look at the console.

"Manual controls, Kaden," Pflum replied. "Fifteen years ago all Transit consoles looked like this one. What's the matter? Can't handle them?"

"I can," Kaden blustered, "but you'll have to tell me which are which."

"If I have to do that, you won't be qualified to pilot this crate for weeks," Pflum shot back. "Any other tests you want to perform, Doctor?"

"No, Mister Pflum," MacKenzie replied quietly. "We've taken all the measurements we can for now. We'll need to redesign your console and make some adjustments to the accelerator as well. We detected some lateral slippage in our progress."

"What sort of lateral slippage?" Pflum asked worriedly.

"Along the z-axis, of course," Doctor Mac replied. "Not very much. I told you before that all Transits do it to one extent or another. It is just that most never do so enough to be detectable. Please take us home and we'll be able to begin the next phase."

"You got it, Doc," Pflum agreed. "we should be home in about two hours and..." The sound of tearing metal suddenly filled the room once again. "infinity minutes," Pflum concluded weakly.

"We appear to still be moving toward home time," Persi reported as the noise died down again.

"Perhaps there is some harmonic interference from the accelerator," Doctor Mac admitted. "It will be purely auditory, however. Annoying, but nothing to be concerned about."

"Doctor Mackenzie," Persi told him, "I think we may want to correct that particular interference. Tourists may not appreciate that such sounds are harmless."

"If they are," Misty added. "I agree, Dad, we need to eliminate that noise, whatever it is and there's always the possibility it might not be as harmless as we think."

"Hmm?" Doctor Mac replied. "Oh yes, of course. We will continue to monitor all functions and see if we can correlate any anomalies with those strange noises."

Norwegian Wood

"Are we there yet?" Kaden asked. It was the fourth time he had done so, taking obvious delight in Pflum's annoyance. Pflum, however, was not only too busy to wipe the smile off the other pilot's face, but held his temper because he caught what Persi had started doing after Kaden's second "Are we there yet?"

Using some elastic bands, scraps of cloth and other odds and ends she was quietly constructing a doll. It

was not much of a doll and she used various colored markers to mark out just enough details that from ten feet away it was obviously supposed to be a representation of Jackson Kaden. Pflum admired the manner in which she was preparing to handle the matter although he spotted several minor errors on her part. It didn't matter all that much. He was not the one she had to convince. Kaden, on the other hand, was being oblivious to her activities and that would spoil her entire ploy.

Persi, however, was quite observant and once she realized Kaden hadn't noticed her activity, she brought the doll up on to the table top to finish working on it. To make sure he noticed, she spent long moments staring at him intently before looking back at the doll to make some sort of adjustment to its shape or to work on its facial expression. Pflum chuckled quietly as she did so. The detail work she was putting into the figurine was hardly necessary, although in Kaden's case, perhaps it was.

Even Doctor Mac and his daughter, deeply ensconced in trying to interpret the data they were recording, noticed the activity before Kaden did. Finally Kaden noticed. "What's that you're doing, babe?" he asked.

"Hmm?" Persi asked by way of reply. "Do you like it, Mister Kaden?" She took another look at him and adjusted the drawn-on hair on the doll's head. "Hmm, better, don't you think?"

"That isn't what I think it is," Kaden told her nervously.

"Now that depends on what you think it is, doesn't it, Mister Kaden?" she replied calmly.

"You keep that away from me," he warned her. "You keep away from me."

"No fear, we will both stay well away from you, Mister Kaden," Persi replied in her usual calm and quiet voice. Then she looked at him and smiled; not an open, friendly smile, but one full of mystery and menace. Kaden flinched and the blood drained from his face. "Oh," she added, gently placing her hands about the doll's thin neck as though preparing to strangle it or worse, "please stop asking if we are there yet."

"Uh, yeah, sure," Kaden promised. "You bet."

"We will get there when we get there," she continued, "and if you have nothing to contribute, please be so kind as to not detract from the efforts of others."

"Right," Kaden nodded.

Then she stopped smiling and her voice hardened, "And do not ever call me 'babe.'"

A few minutes later the arrival alarm rang and Pflum started preparing to deactivate the impellers and shut down the regulator. Normally, he would decrease their temporal velocity as they got closer, but they were already running as slowly as possible. Even if he did not slowdown their velocity, the Transit would come to rest in its present, but coming in "hot" would put a strain on the Transit's regulator, eventually reducing its lifespan. This time he realized he would just have to take that risk.

He watched the dials and readouts as they flashed toward the home-time, but just as he was about to disengage the secondary impellers, he noticed that they were still moving rapidly through time. "This is impossible," he commented worriedly.

"What's wrong, Pflum?" Persi asked, leaving the doll on the table and rushing toward the console.

“We didn’t stop,” Pflum explained. “We’ve continued on beyond the home terminus. That’s supposed to be impossible.”

“It is quite unusual,” Doctor Mac admitted, “Still the chance to see the future...”

“Right now I just want to see the other side of that home door,” Pflum retorted. There were doors at either end of any Transit. One was the field door through which travelers went when they had reached their destination. The other was the home door. It was across the wide entrance they had all used to board the Transit at the start of their journey. While they could still see the door, the only time it could be physically opened was when the Transit was at rest within its “garage.” Once the temporal regulator was engaged, the other side of the door was literally somewhere and sometime else.

“This might make that a little more difficult,” Doctor Mac surmised.

“Oh?” Pflum asked sarcastically. “Do you really think so?”

“No need to panic, young man,” Doctor Mac chided him. “Let’s just land and take our bearings. When we know how far into the future we have come, perhaps we’ll be able to program a direct course back to our home time.”

“It’s worth a try, Pflum agreed reluctantly. He disengaged the remaining impellers to bring the transit to a halt along its temporal path, then he took readings of the external conditions while Persi looked out the digital display panel that acted as a window at the field end of the Transit.

“We appear to be in the middle of a forest,” she told Pflum.

“Good,” Pflum replied. “Maybe we can get in and out of here without disturbing the local population. The trees are a bit crowded, though; let me find a clearing or something.”

“What are you doing?” Kaden asked curiously, noticing that Pflum was not using the digital “window” to navigate his way through the forest.

“These old Transits didn’t used to come with windows on the field walls,” Pflum explained. “Finding a safe place to come to rest was done through various instruments and sensors. I’ve only had that ‘window’ a short while, in fact. Using the instruments is kind of like feeling your way around in the dark, but unlike looking out the window, I can get a general idea of what’s all around us out there. Both ways have good and bad points and it does take a lot longer to learn how to use the instruments, but I wouldn’t want to land in strange territory without them. All right,” he added, phasing the transit in to this time and place, “lets find out what awaits us.”

“Temperature is mild,” Persi reported. “Seventy-five degrees Fahrenheit, and it looks like a partly sunny day, at least from what can be seen through the trees.”

“Then let’s open the airlock and get a bit of fresh air in here,” Pflum suggested.

“Since when does a Transit need an airlock?” Kaden asked.

“Those double doors were gifts, as it were, from our buddies at the DTT,” Pflum explained while Persi operated the airlock mechanism. “They wanted to go exploring along the z-axis of time and I pointed out that meant all sorts of environments inimical to us mere humans. Their response was to install an airlock.

It's effective against atmospheres more fit to dry clean with than breathe, but I'm happy to say we never had to see what would happen had we landed on a world of anti-matter."

"Actually," Doctor Mac corrected him pedantically, "on such a world, we would have been the antimatter."

"Which would have comforted me not a bit while I was busily converting my own MC2 into scads of E," Pflum told him acidly.

"Actually I believe you would have survived the encounter so long as you had not attempted to exit the Transit," Doctor Mac told him. "Only the outer surface of the field wall actually exists in our destination time and place. There would have been some exciting fireworks, however."

"Possibly more than that, Doc," Pflum replied. "Do you know what happens when someone outside the Transit fires bullets through the field wall? Assuming enough force behind them, they come right through. With the entire surface of the transit interacting with antimatter I imagine all sorts of things would have come through so that even if the force of the released energy didn't crumple in the field wall as though made of rice paper, the radiation would have left us with more of a tan than the Surgeon General recommends for an entire generation."

"Possibly," Doctor Mac conceded as the outer door finally opened and they stepped outside.

"This is the forest primeval," intoned Pflum on getting his first look around.

"The murmuring pines and the hemlocks," Misty continued the quote, "Bearded with moss, and in garments green, indistinct in the twilight. Stand like Druids of old, with voices sad and prophetic. Stand like harpers hoar, with beards that rest on their bosoms.' Do you read Longfellow, Mister Pflum?"

"Once in a while. It's been a long time since I read *Evangeline* back in school, however," Pflum admitted. "I don't see any hemlocks around here, but there are a lot of pines, Eastern White Pines to be specific, although these are larger than any I've ever seen. Nice to know we're still on the right side of the continent at least. With the x-axis readout handing me negative numbers and the rest just blank, I didn't have a lot of confidence in that. Really tall pines, though. Must be one hundred feet tall. I thought White Pine only grew to about eighty feet."

"Genetic manipulation, maybe?" suggested Kaden.

"Not necessarily," Misty told them. "Before they were cut down for ship masts, it was not unusual for White Pine to grow to one hundred feet tall. We may just be far enough into the future that they have had time to grow that tall again."

"Or on a line where humans never came here at all," Pflum remarked. "Could be the only sentient species on the planet are dolphins, swimming around and speculating on whether australopithecines are actually intelligent enough to train to disarm mines left over from the last war."

"It's very peaceful here," Persi noted. "Pflum, did you park the transit like that on purpose?"

"I had wanted to make the field door look like it was built into a tree," he told her, "but the best I could do was place it between two trees like a sort of wall. I generally like to make it as inconspicuous as I can."

"Oh yeah," Kaden laughed harshly. "Nothing more subtle than a great metal door between a pair of pine trees. Nice work, bucko."

"Excuse me for a moment," Persi commented, "I left my doll inside."

"Okay, okay," Kaden told her hurriedly. "No need for that. I can take a hint. You don't need to hit me with a hammer."

"That reminds me," Pflum commented. "I left my wrench inside." Unlike Persi, he did go back inside and

returned a moment later with the large wrench.

"What the hell do you expect to do with that?" Kaden asked. "Why the hell do you even carry it on the Transit. There aren't any nuts or bolts that size."

"Kid, the DTT mandates that Transit pilots not carry weapons in the field," Pflum replied.

"That's not a weapon," Kaden pointed out. "Oh. I see. Use it much?"

"Occasionally," Pflum remarked. "Once I even tightened a bolt with it. Well we need to find out where we are."

"No problem," Kaden replied. "I have a GPS."

"What the heck are you carrying that around for?" Pflum asked.

"For just this sort of situation," Kaden told him confidently.

"Kid, that sort of device has only been in use for the last fifty years. There was another sort of GPS system in use before that, but even that one wouldn't function further back than the late twentieth century. On the other hand I'll grant that I'm glad you brought it, but if it works it will be the first time in all my experience that it would have been of use."

"Really?" Kaden asked. "I used it quite frequently with Chronologica."

"Weren't you certified for long trips?" Pflum blurted. "Well, you can carry it with you if you want, but at Down Time, Ltd. we just don't go to times and places where they work. That's why we rely on the gauges in the Transit. Too bad most of them don't appear to work in the future."

"Well, my GPS does seem to be working," Kaden told him smugly.

"So where are we?" Pflum asked.

"Boston," Kaden replied.

"The Commons is a bit overgrown this season, I think," Pflum remarked. "When the heck are we?"

"In the far future, Mister Pflum," Persi replied calmly. "Perhaps we should get back into the past where we will have all the resources of the Transit at our disposal."

"Good idea," Pflum agreed. "Where are Doctor Mac and his daughter?"

"We're over here!" Misty called. Pflum and Persi stepped around the side of the transit to see the MacKenzies setting up some sort of odd device.

"If you don't mind, Mister Pflum," Doctor Mac requested, "I'd like to stay here a few days and take some readings of the temporal conditions."

"What conditions?" Pflum asked. "We're outside the Transit. The conditions should be the same as at home, shouldn't they?"

"They should, yes," Doctor Mac nodded, "but are they? This is a unique opportunity to study the long term effects, if any, on the environment from the use of time travel."

"I'll give you twenty four hours," Pflum told him.

"Thank you, Mister Pflum."

"Judging by the sun," Pflum remarked to Persi, "it's around Noon. Want to go for a walk?"

"Okay," she replied. "Maybe we'll get a clue as to what happened to the city."

"It may never have been here," Pflum told her. "We could be way out of the five-nines right now. The Transit readouts didn't say, remember?"

"I'll tag along," Kaden told them.

Terrific! Pflum thought to himself but was careful not to let that thought show. Kaden was attempting to be both human and sociable, so Pflum figured he ought to give the man a chance.

They walked through the trees for almost an hour until they found themselves on the banks of the River Charles, although there was nothing about the Charles that Pflum recognized. There were no bridges linking Boston with Cambridge, nor were there buildings anywhere in sight. The trees appeared to stop just before the river's edge. On the north bank, where Cambridge should have been, they saw nothing but grasslands punctuated by occasional copses. Nowhere could they detect the touch of Man.

"We should probably start heading back," Pflum suggested. "Good thing you have that GPS," he told Kaden. "Without marked paths, we'll probably need it."

"Except it appears to have stopped working," Kaden replied.

Tomorrow Never Knows

An hour later, Pflum had to admit they were lost and he started marking trees in case it turned out they were walking in circles. "Should have thought of this on our way," he commented as he carved a small mark in the bark of a large pine.

Kaden's GPS was still not picking up a signal later when the sun neared the horizon. "We'd better collect some wood for a fire," Pflum decided.

"You don't think we have a chance of finding the Transit after dark?" Kaden asked.

"Not really, no," Pflum replied. "We didn't bring food or water with us. We didn't bring blankets. We didn't even bring flashlights. So if we try wandering around in the dark, we're as likely to end up in Rhode Island as back at the Transit. If we start now, at least we'll have enough wood to keep us warm when it starts getting cold."

"And how do you intend to start the fire?" Kaden asked, "by rubbing two sticks together?"

"Not hardly," Pflum replied. "I have a lighter in my pocket"

"What about kindling, Mister Pflum?" Persi asked.

"Small twigs or wood shavings. I do have my pocket knife too," Pflum replied. "Why? Haven't either of you ever made an campfire?"

They both shook their heads, but then went and collected as much wood as they could while they still had enough light by which to see. Pflum discovered he was a bit out of practice at making a fire without paper or straw to use as kindling and he was sure the damp pine needles would smoke too much. But by shaving chips of wood from one of the branches, he was able to manufacture suitable kindling to help the fire get started. It was full dark before the fire was established and the pine branches smoked and sizzled as they burned, but the fire was warm and they huddled around it as the nighttime temperatures began to drop.

Two hours before dawn, they were rudely awaked by a dozen men and women in khaki-green

"International Park Service" uniforms. "Gettupya!" one of the men shouted at them, poking Kaden with the muzzle of something that looked like a wax rifle that had been left out in the sun.

"So much for a world ruled by dolphins," Kaden groaned.

"I haven't ruled that out yet," Pflum remarked, earning himself a poke in the ribs. "Who the heck are you folks?"

"Park Service," the spokesman told him harshly. "Under arrestya!"

"Under arrest?" Pflum asked, even as he got to his feet as he thought he was being directed. "On what charges?"

"Trespasya an makinfire for starts," he replied. He said a few other things Pflum had trouble understanding.

"Lemme talk t'im," one of the women spoke up. "You speak early modern English?" she asked them.

"And there I thought it was postmodern English," Pflum replied.

"Postmodern. I always thought that was a particularly stupid and self-indulgent phrase," she remarked stiffly.

"No arguments from me," Pflum agreed with her. "It was coined by some particularly stupid and self-indulgent people. That was before my time, unfortunately, so I'm kind of stuck with the language the way I learned it in the cradle. Can't say I'm particularly impressed by your grasp of the King's English either though. Sounds like your grammarians gave up the ghost years ago."

The woman glared at him for a moment before replying, "And you sound like a bad Shakespearean parody."

If she expected Pflum to take offense, she was highly disappointed. "There are times I think my whole life is a bad Shakespearean parody," he sighed. "Even Shakespeare thought so when I met him. Didn't even use me to hack out a quick play when he was desperate for the money."

"The way you go on," she replied, "next you'll expect me to believe you're Aurelian Pflum."

"But I am Aurelian Pflum," he protested.

"Funny," she retorted flatly. "Well, Aurelian Pflum, you are under arrest for multiple crimes within an International Forest Reserve. Will you come along quietly, or are we going to have to zip you?"

"Zip us?" Kaden asked.

One of the guns went off with a loud, "Zzzziip!" and Kaden fell to the ground, unconscious.

"Oh man! I could have used one of those a dozen times in the last couple days," Pflum remarked. "It would have shut him up even faster than that ersatz voodoo doll of yours," he added to Persi.

"How do you know it wasn't real?" Persi asked archly.

"I know," Pflum told her flatly. He turned to the others and remarked, "No need to zip us. In fact, I'm sure the exercise will do us good."

They didn't have to walk far. Some sort of harness was strapped to Kaden and he floated, although he bumped into more than a few trees along the way. Pflum wasn't sure if that was intentional or accidental and decided he did not really care. They were no more than one hundred yards away from a small shack that was actually the entrance way to a fair-sized subterranean structure. Once inside they were directed into a holding cell where the MacKenzies were already sleeping on the two couches.

"Have a nice nap?" Pflum asked Doctor Mac. "We had to sleep on the ground."

"We have been here most of the night," the doctor replied, sitting up to make room. "I imagine you would have too, if you hadn't gone off for a walk."

"Has anyone bothered to explain what laws we have broken?" Pflum asked.

"Trespassing was the only explanation I understood," Mackenzie replied.

"What happened to Mister Kaden?" Misty asked.

"They zipped him," Pflum explained. "Shot him with one of those weird-looking guns and sent him off to lullaby land."

"Oh dear," she fretted. "How long do you think he'll be out?"

"Hopefully for the rest of this trip," Pflum remarked. "We're in the future, so maybe someone around here will know what our problem is and help us correct it before they send us on our way."

They were kept in that room for an hour. Kaden was just waking up when the one woman who sort of spoke "Early Modern English" opened the door and told them, "Follow me." It turned out she was not alone. There were several armed guards with her to walk behind the prisoners.

They walked down several hallways and ramps and then finally through a door that led them to a large and brightly lit room with a wall of glass overlooking a city built on hilly terrain. "Is that the Golden Gate Bridge?" Misty asked.

"How did we get to San Francisco?" Pflum added. "I know we didn't walk that far."

"Terraport," the woman told them simply. "That last doorway is linked to the continental court building, or at least it is at the moment."

"Slick!" Pflum complemented the technology. "We have only crude versions of such things in our time and they're invariably fatal to living organisms. Most non-living things end up with a healthy dose of vitamin R by the end of the trip as well, for that matter."

"Vitamin R?" the woman asked, confused.

"Radiation," Pflum explained. She nodded and continued leading them through the large foyer and to what turned out to be a courtroom. "Man, this place is straight out of Perry Mason. I guess some things never really change."

"Mister Pflum," Doctor Mackenzie admonished him. "I don't think you're showing the proper attitude given the seriousness of our predicament."

"It's not that bad, Doc," Pflum assured him. "They'll levy a fine and tell us to never darken their doorway again. Admittedly our money is on the Transit, but that just means they'll send some marshals or something with us to see that we pay. After all, what did we do that was all that bad?"

A few minutes later the court secretary answered that question. "Five counts of trespassing on a restricted area, five counts of remaining within that area after hours, five counts of illegal immigration, five counts of damages to the flora within an international forest reserve, three counts of illegal use of fire within same reserve, three counts of attempted arson..."

"What?" Pflum shouted. "We did not!"

"Silence," the judge demanded. "You will get your chance to plead."

The secretary continued listing charges, most of which were trivial extensions of those already listed concluding, "Five counts of operating a time machine."

"That's a crime?" Pflum asked.

"Mister Pflum," the judge addressed him via a translator, "making a campfire outside the designated zones is a misdemeanor so long as it is kept under control. And while you were trespassing, that too is a minor crime since permits are readily available for the asking, but time travel is strictly prohibited to this era. We do not allow Transits to land here and now, because those that attempt to land are only here to exploit our resources for the benefit of the depleted world of the future. Therefore the operation of any device that facilitates travel to this time is considered a capital offense. The only exceptions are the handful of government-owned Transits and even they don't land anywhere within three decades of this time.

"However, you are not yet on trial here," the judge continued. "We are not the ancient barbarians you might think we are. This is a hearing. Here we shall assess the charges and decide which, if any, there is adequate proof for to consider bringing you to trial on."

"Look," Pflum replied reasonably, "I'll admit we were in that reserve, although we did not know it was a reserved area, nor even where we were for that matter. And yes, when three of us got lost, we started a small and very carefully contained campfire which at the time seemed like a better alternative than suffering a bout of hypothermia." The translator had trouble with the term so Pflum added, "It was cold last night. However I would ask if your laws prohibiting time travel include Transits accidentally entering your time from the past?"

"I do not believe the Law specifies one way or the other," the judge replied.

"Too bad," Pflum remarked. "Aren't we supposed to have lawyers or is that something you've managed to do away with in however long it has been?"

"You're going to persist in claiming to be from the past?" the judge asked. "I assure you it really doesn't matter. You'll notice we've even stipulated your name, although if you were going to claim to be a legendary figure, I'm sure you could have chosen someone more impressive."

"I wasn't trying to be impressive," Pflum replied. "My name really is Aurellian Pflum. I can show you my driver's license if you like, but you'll probably say anyone could print a card with a full color, holographic photograph."

"Any decent print shop could cobble one together, I'm sure, and I can only assume the technology will improve in the future. Oh well, have it your way."

"Your honor," the woman from the Park Service who spoke Pflum's version of English, spoke up.

"Actually if he really is the Aurellian Pflum, it may be more dangerous to hold him than it would be to let him go."

"Sergeant Garbison," the judge replied, "Aurellian Pflum, as I am sure you know is a legendary figure who, according to many scholars, was never more than a fictional character in a series of books and movies. Even if he was a real time traveler, there is no proof that this man is the real Pflum."

"Regardless, your honor, if they truly are from the past we could easily be risking our own existence by holding them here," Garbison replied.

"That's hardly a..." Doctor Mac began, but Pflum kicked his leg under the table they were sitting at and he continued, "a possibility to be trifled with, your honor." Pflum breathed a sigh of relief and thanked any deity who might be bothering to listen for the fact that MacKenzie was capable of taking a hint.

"I am not certain that a paradox could be created, merely by holding you all here," the judge considered.

"I will request the services of a temporal expert to advise the court, however."

Pflum was still off-balance because of the lack of lawyers, but evidently here and now legal representatives were not a part of a preliminary hearing. If the judge decided a trial might be necessary, another pre-trial hearing would be convened in which the attorneys would argue the case all over again and only after that if a settlement had not been achieved would there be an actual trial as Pflum and the others thought of it. Alternatively, the judge might offer a deal; a set fine instead of the risk of going to trial. Of course, that could not happen in a capital case.

It seemed to Pflum that the process was even longer and more drawn out than what he was accustomed to, but the locals assured him that very few cases actually went to trial. "I'm not surprised," Pflum remarked while they were eating lunch in a secured room in the court building. "The defendants probably die of natural causes first."

The afternoon session did not begin until three hours after they had gone for the lunch break. "That part is just like at home," Kaden grumbled. When they did reconvene, a woman with bright blue eyes and long blonde hair that spilled out over her deep red uniform was present. She was, according to the judge, a Transit pilot and had just returned from the Boston Forest where she had inspected Pflum's Transit.

"And what did you find out, Ms. Denfirth?" the judge asked.

"Your honor," she replied. "We have always been taught that it is theoretically impossible for a Transit to travel forward beyond its home time terminus. The reasons are many- both mathematical and mechanical - but what they all come down to is that the volume encompassed by a temporal field can only be stretched in one direction and that is into the past. As impossible as it seems, however, their Transit is definitely from the past. It is an ancient and rather primitive model. In fact, it appears to have been patched up so many times I believe the people of its period might say it was held together with bailing wire and bubble gum."

"No, that would be at least two centuries earlier," Pflum corrected her.

"In any case," she concluded, "I believe it would be of inordinate risk to our own well being to keep these people in this era."

"Hmm," the judge considered the matter. "During the break I considered what I would do if that indeed was the case. Whoever you people are, it is not important. The very existence of all the people on Earth is at stake so while the letter of the law might say you have committed an offense, I also do not believe the people who made that law intended it to apply to travelers from the past. Therefore I believe it will be best for all concerned that you all leave this time immediately and never return."

"Yes, your honor," they all chorused.

Rita Denfirth escorted them briskly from the courtroom and back to the Boston Forest. As they made their way through the woods, Pflum thanked her, but added, "As a pilot you knew full well that the chances are infinitely against our being from this time line, so there wouldn't have been a paradox even if the judge had given us the death penalty and carried it out personally on the spot."

"True enough," she agreed.

"Then why did you tell the judge otherwise?" Pflum asked.

"My maiden name was Pflum," she replied with a wink, "and I couldn't let even the analogue of my distant ancestor be killed."

"So just what year is this?" Pflum asked.

"You know why I can't tell you that, revered ancestor," Rita replied.

"Revered ancestor? Has the family suddenly converted to some Asian religion?" Pflum asked.

"No," Rita laughed, "I was just being facetious. I'm told it runs in the family."

"It's the only family resemblance I can detect," Pflum commented sourly.

"At this many generations, only my geneticist knows for sure," Rita told him, "and I'm not telling you that either."

"But you know we aren't really from this time line," Pflum protested, "so it wouldn't harm a thing."

"There are stories Transit pilots still tell about you, Pflum," she explained. "If we had the time I'd love to find out how many are actually true. Certainly this little adventure is going to be added to the Pflum encyclopedia of cautionary tales, and that's just the point. They are all cautionary tales. It is said that you once managed against all the odds to change the history on a time line by allowing one of your passengers to kill and replace Hitler."

"Not guilty," Pflum told her. "Mae and Donald Creston escaped into 1927 Paris aboard Jainette's Transit. I was just the pilot of the Transit that went to bring them back."

Rita asked, "Why didn't you go back in the same Transit?"

"Mine's the only one with tracking capabilities at Down Time, Ltd. So we had to use it. Actually, getting Donald (the Fuehrer) Creston back was comparatively easy. It was his mother who gave us trouble," he

explained as they came within sight of the Transit.

"The point is," she told him firmly, "it would be unethical of me to intentionally give you information that could conceivably change your own future."

Pflum opened the door as Doctor Mac went to retrieve his equipment from the side. The others went inside. "Then you probably won't tell me who wins the World Series next season," Pflum commented from the doorway as the doctor carried his instruments back inside.

"You mean the Cubs?" Rita asked. "Oops! Hold on a second. She picked a small object off her belt and told him, "Smile for the camera. The only family portrait is so old it's hard to make out any of your features. Why didn't you ever pose for a digital image?"

"I did a few times," he replied. "The only old fashioned photos of me are from in the field. Ironical that one of them is the only one to survive."

"Typical if any of your stories are true, though," Rita told him. "Well, good trip, Pflum. As much as I enjoyed actually meeting you, I hope you don't return. You might get a judge who actually knows something about temporal theory."

"Right," Pflum nodded. "Uh, nothing I can give my multi-great granddaughter?"

"Not that I can think of. The picture was all I really wanted," she replied.

Pflum put his hand in a pocket and pulled out a small copper coin from Twentieth Century United States, change from his most recent trip. "Well here, take this," he told her, tossing the penny. "By now even this may be worth something."

Rita caught the coin deftly and smiled. "Thanks."

It was only a few minutes later, when they were once more underway that Pflum realized the joke she had played on him. "That tip about the Cubs," he told Persi quietly as they set their course back toward home, "she had to have been kidding."

"Of course she was," Persi agreed. "There was no way she could have known which year we had started out from and you never told her."

"Damn! And for just one shining moment I thought I had a sure thing to bet on," Pflum chuckled.

"There was no guarantee even if she thought she was telling the truth, you know," Persi reminded him.

"Even if we were within the five-nines, which is debatable, the outcome of a World Series, it seems to me, could be the one thing different between our lines."

"You're right, of course, Persi," he admitted, "I'm not even certain we were on our home time plane, nevermind the line, but if the Cubs do make it to the Series, maybe I will put some money down on them... just in case."

Everybody's Got Something to Hide Except Me and My Monkey

"Doc?" Pflum asked, "any idea why it's taking so long to get back into the past? We didn't overshoot for more than a few minutes on the way futureward, but now it's almost as if we were headed uphill."

"Perhaps we are, Mister Pflum," Doctor Mac replied. "The situation is unique and it is possible that it takes more energy to pass our home point from this direction than the other. We do not really know how Time is contoured forward of a Transit's home time."

"I wasn't aware it was shaped any differently," Pflum remarked.

"There's a lot of argument about it as a matter of fact," Doctor Mac explained. "Actually up until now I was of the camp that said Time was flat along the x-y plane, but evidently I was mistaken. I hope my instruments are keeping a log of this. Let me take a look." He walked over to the second console where his monitors had been installed. "Hmm, yes. I think we are detecting a difference in the time flow. We should be passing our home point in a minute or two. You know, the metaphor of time as being sloped may be inaccurate. Perhaps, instead, it is more viscous as you approach the home point. That would explain why most transits will not go forward of that point. The viscosity may approach infinity."

"Then why did we just shoot past home point on the way futureward?" Pflum asked.

"Perhaps the viscosity is unidirectional."

"Then why don't we always go future of the home point?" Pflum asked.

"I'll think about that," Doctor Mac promised. "We should be almost home."

Just then all the lights and readouts that had been dead on Pflum's console lit up and started flashing maniacally and the needle gauges oscillated rapidly across their entire range. Gravity within the Transit went crazy for a moment, as well, alternating between too heavy and too light as rapidly as the needles flicked back and forth and then the overhead lights got very bright and everyone was in free fall, floating off in whatever direction the odd gravity had thrown them. A high pitched squeal filled the air for a minute until everything went dark and silent save for the sounds of falling people and objects rapidly followed by groans and Kaden's demand, "What the hell just happened?"

"We fell down and went boom," Pflum retorted. "Was it too dark for you notice?" A small light came on, obviously handheld. "Persi, is that you with the flashlight?"

"It is," she admitted, briefly flashing it into her own face. "I had it in my purse."

"I'm glad you did," he told her. "Come over to the console. Is anyone hurt?"

"I may have twisted my ankle," Misty announced, "but I think I'm okay. Dad?"

"I held on to the couch," Doctor Mac responded, "and landed with it."

"Well, I'm bruised all over," Kaden complained, "and I still want to know what happened."

"So do we all," Pflum replied acidly as he went to join Persi at the console. "The line forms on the left. Everything is dead," he noted looking at the now dark console.

"This green light here is on," Persi pointed out.

"I should hope so," Pflum chuckled. "It's our main power light. If that went out the best we could hope for is an impossibly long walk home. Let's see if anything else is still on."

"I see some lights on the other console," Persi told him.

"So you do," Pflum nodded. "The auxiliary devices controlled from there and Doctor Mac's instruments are still active, which means we can use the external air sampler. Too bad the window is dark. We could get some light to work by in here if we open the door, though. Let me show you how to sample the air from outside."

Almost an hour later Pflum decided it was safe to open the airlock. "The air is a strange mix, but there's plenty of nitrogen and oxygen and I can't pick up anything that will kill us," he told the others.

On opening the door, however they encountered an alien vista. "It's an entirely crystal world," Misty remarked. "How beautiful!"

Small green crystals covered the ground, looking like a glass-worker's rendition of a lawn and nearby several taller brown crystals, stood up tree-like with crystalline branches and green crystal leaves. Here and there, they could also see flower-like multicolored crystals.

"Potentially deadly as well," Pflum warned. "Crystaledges can be incredibly sharp. Don't touch them."

"Pity," Misty replied. "But it should be safe to take pictures of them, right?"

"Relatively," Pflum remarked, "but let's keep a brush in the airlock. We don't want to track crystal shards into the Transit."

Another high-pitched squealing noise could be heard from just outside. It built up in frequency and volume for a minute and then suddenly stopped with slight popping sound.

"What was that?" Kaden asked.

"We have company," Pflum replied tiredly.

"What?"

"Unless I'm mistaken, another Transit just landed to our right," Pflum told him.

"How do you know that?" Kaden demanded.

"Experience," Pflum sighed. "Do you want to know who's inside?"

"Who?" Kaden asked.

"You are," Pflum replied. "All of us, actually. I hope you like yourself. Let's go greet the neighbors."

The other transit was visually identical to their own, Pflum walked over to its outer door, crunching crystals under his sturdy boots. He was not surprised to find the door locked but was certain his key would work. He opened the outer door then knocked on the inner one, shouting, "Come on out! The

weather's fine." He was about to open the inner door when a tall anthropomorphic rabbit-like being opened it up from inside.

"What?" Again?" Rabbit Pflum asked. "So is it another flat world lit up by a bird that poops fire?"

"I don't think so," Human Pflum replied. "And I think we can get out of here before the others start arriving this time." He looked around and was amused, once more, to see that their leporid counterparts' fur reflected the Human's skin and hair color. For example, Rabbit Persi had dark brown fur with longer black hairs on her head and Rabbit Misty was mostly white but with curly red fur on her head. The males, as when Human Pflum last encountered them, had short fur all over.

"Glad to hear it," Rabbit replied, taking a look out behind Human. "The trees are pretty enough, but I'd hate to have to try eating the fruit."

"Well, I can save you an hour," Human told him, "and assure you the air is just fine although a bit odd. We were about to start checking the circuitry. I have a feeling the problem is a basically simple one. The main power is still on..."

"Yeah, I had time to notice that much," Rabbit replied.

"Of course," Human nodded. "It's the first thing we check. Well, it's supposed to be the first thing we check"

"Yeah," Rabbit agreed, "good thing Persi noticed it though. So where do we start?"

"Why don't we take a look at mine," Human suggested. "I already have the panels off and once we get mine back, we'll do yours. Odds are we'll only have to open one panel once we know the solution."

They got to work and, as Human Pflum predicted, the problem turned out to be simple. Everything was still getting power except the console itself. "See, it was just the console's circuit breaker. When the console was shut down everything reverted into its default mode, forcing us to stop and come in for a sudden landing."

"Why is the lights' default mode off?" Rabbit Persi asked. "It sounds like that was poorly thought out."

"No arguments from me," Human Pflum told her. "I'll have Ken look into it when we get back."

"Don't you mean 'if we get back?'" Rabbit Kaden asked sourly.

"We'll get back," both Pflums replied firmly.

"Well," Human Pflum continued, "Why don't you bunnies step outside while we hairless apes try resetting the circuit-breaker?"

"Why do we have to step outside?" the leporid version of Misty asked.

"Because, when Pflum flips that switch, Miss MacKenzie" Human Persi replied calmly, "we do not know what is going to happen."

"Hopefully all that'll happen is that the lights will come on," Human Pflum told them. "But I don't know for certain that everything else will stay off, so unless you want to immigrate to a world populated by a world of sapient hominids..."

The rabbits left and Pflum reset the circuit-breaker. As predicted the lights and air conditioning came back on. The console came back to life, but nothing more exciting than that occurred. "Good!" Pflum commented. Then he turned toward the airlock and the waiting rabbits and told the other Pflum, "That seems to work. Let's reset yours and we can have dinner before going our separate ways. I owe you a drink anyway, I think. Persi, do me a favor and start buttoning up all those panels."

"Yes, Mister Pflum," she replied.

"I thought I owed you that drink," Rabbit Pflum replied as they headed for his Transit.

"It's the sort of debt that doesn't cancel out," Human Pflum laughed.

They made short work of the repair to the Rabbits' Transit and were soon dining together in the Humans' one, where the two Persephones had thoughtfully laid out a meal from the food locker.

"We're going to need a way to control our progress, you know," Hominid Pflum began after they had eaten.

"I've been considering that," Bunny Pflum replied.

"Me too," Human nodded. "Seems all we need are a trio of..."

"Rheostats," Rabbit finished the thought. "Right. So we can slow down as we approach home."

Human Pflum agreed, "but I'd like to get off this world first though."

“Why?” the Leporid asked. It was one of the rare occasions they did not think in synchronization.

“This whole world appears to be made of crystals,” Human pointed out. “If you haven’t noticed, when you break them you just get smaller crystals. Now I don’t know what these are made of, but I’d be surprised to learn they’re rock candy. There’s a lot of dust-sized pieces when you break them too, and it’s only a matter of time before we breathe them in.”

“We probably have already,” Rabbit Doctor Mac commented.

“Perhaps, but we’ve been fairly careful so far,” Human Pflum told him, “so not very many, although there may be a lot in the air and that’s what bothers me. I said before that the crystals are sharp and the dust particles are just miniature crystals, so if we breathe them into our lungs, how long will it take before they start cutting us up from the inside?”

“With a thought like that,” Rabbit Pflum noted, “I’m surprised you stuck around even this long.”

“Well, a chance to spend time with myself isn’t something that comes up every trip,” Human replied.

“It’s not something that comes up every life, Pflum,” both Kadens chorused.

“I’m flattered at least,” Leporid Pflum commented, “but we should move on before the Leonid and Simian versions of us show up. Maybe if we get out fast, this world won’t suffer the same plague of Transits the *Ulualoo* did. Should we leave a note telling them what’s wrong? Just in case?”

“I doubt it will be necessary,” Human Pflum replied. “We figured it out fairly quickly, so they should too.”

“We’ve already composed a message,” Human Persi informed them. Her bunny counterpart held up a piece of bright red, sheet plastic on which they had used a paint marker to write “Reset the main circuit-breaker” on it. “We were just trying to work out what it could be mounted on.”

“There’s a crystal boulder about twenty feet in front of us,” the human Doctor Mac informed them. “Why not just prop it up on that?”

“Good enough,” Rabbit Pflum decided. “I’ll take care of it on my way back. If I don’t see you lot again, have a safe journey.” They traded farewells and a few minutes later both transits were activated.

Once more the ride was an uncontrolled journey in which Pflum got the distinct impression they were tumbling through at least six dimensions of the continuum. This time, however, everyone was prepared and had grabbed on to something immobile before Pflum had activated the impellers.

“Persi,” he called in the darkness once they had crash landed again, “check the air while I bring the lights back up.” He started opening one of the panels on the console, muttering, “I should have left this panel off.”

“Why didn’t you?” Misty asked amid the sounds of the others straightening themselves up.

“I was hoping that whatever had caused that in the first place had been resolved now that we’re on the past side of our home point.”

“Home line, Mister Pflum,” Doctor Mac corrected him. “We appear to be dealing with a line along the temporal z-axis and we may not actually be in the past yet. It is quite possible we are just barely ahead of our home z-axis line; close enough for our instruments to register, but not quite back over the barrier. If we could find our home plane and line we could probably just get out and walk home, being only microseconds ahead of our formerly proper temporal locus.”

“That would render this Transit unusable though,” Pflum pointed out.

“Not really. It could be reassembled in its garage and then reset to its new home point,” Doctor Mac replied.

“I doubt she would ever be quite the same again,” Pflum replied. “Besides the chance of hitting our actual home is infinitely against us. The only way we could do that would be by homing in on a tracer unit. Now we do have such units on our home line, but I know from past experience that we only synchronize with any given line once each twenty and a fraction years. It’s all in the harmonics of the regulator, you know. So, if we could get our readouts to work in the future, which we cannot it seems, we would be twenty-some odd years ahead of ourselves. I’d rather not do that unless we’re desperate.”

“Then what good will your rheostats do?” Doctor Mac asked skeptically.

“If we can get definitively pastward, we can head for home,” Pflum replied, “and the rheostats will be able to slow our progress way down so when we do hit the home point. I’ll have time to deactivate our

impellers.”

“I’m not certain that will work,” Doctor Mac disagreed.

“If you have an alternative at the moment, I’m willing to listen,” Pflum replied reasonably.

“Sadly, I don’t” the doctor replied.

“Too bad,” Pflum replied. “Okay, here come the lights.” A moment later the interior of the Transit was once more illuminated. “I wish I knew why we’re tumbling all over the z-axis, though.”

“I think we’re having trouble piercing the home time barrier,” Doctor Mac replied. “I’ve been thinking about this and I think we may be dealing with a relativistic effect. As we head into the past, the closer we get to the home point or line or whatever, the more power it takes to move us in that direction. If the effect is truly relativistic the power required will approach infinity as we approach the home point.”

“Doc,” Pflum shot back, “my Transit’s powerful, but that power does not approach infinity.”

“No, of course not,” MacKenzie agreed.

“Are you saying we can’t get back?” Pflum asked.

“I hope not,” Doctor Mac admitted. “There may be a way to go around the home point, to sort of avoid it entirely, in order to get to the other side.”

“You want me to finesse Time itself?” Pflum asked incredulously.

“It’s our best chance,” MacKenzie replied. “That may be why we keep sliding along the z-axis. The Transit’s power isn’t enough to push us back on the x-y plane so it’s being applied to move us along the z. Since we are still attempting to push along the usual two-dimensions, we’re moving uncontrollably along the z-axis. However, that we can do that at all may be the only chance we have to get home. In fact, since we can do it, perhaps we should do so intentionally.”

“Well, I still want those rheostats for when we finally sneak around the barrier,” Pflum replied. “are you certain the barrier becomes easier to get through the farther along the z-axis we go?” Doctor Mac just shrugged. “Terrific,” Pflum muttered sourly.

“I have an air reading,” Persi announced.

“So soon?” Misty asked. “It took an hour on the last world.”

“That was unusually long,” Pflum explained. “That was probably because of the power outage. I think most of the inboard computer’s analytical nodes were sleeping, so only some of the nodes were available. So I suppose we should be happy it worked at all. It may have been having trouble identifying the silica and other unusual impurities in the air. This is how long it normally takes. So, Persi, how’s the air out there?”

“About the same as it looks, I suspect,” she replied, looking out the digital window. “The sample contained a fairly high concentration of hydrocarbons. Nothing immediately lethal, but some slow poisons. Some of us may develop a bad headache if we’re out too long, but nothing more than that unless we’re forced to breathe it for a few weeks. At least that what the readout told me. In any case, had I looked out the window, I would have guessed it would smell like paint and turpentine.”

The Fool on the Hill

“It looks like a Manet painting,” Misty remarked.

“Hmm, it is a bit impressionistic,” Pflum remarked. “Although to my eye it looks more like something by Monet. The subject matter is more his style. It’s possible we just landed directly in front of a large painting. Of course the painter is probably not too pleased with us.”

“If that’s painting,” Kaden commented, edging closer to the window, “it’s a technique I’ve never seen. The trees are moving out there, and I just saw a cat walk behind one of them.”

“Fascinating,” Doctor Mac commented. “Let’s go take a look.”

“In a slowly poisonous atmosphere?” Kaden asked incredulously.

“Hey, kid,” Pflum laughed, “what doesn’t kill us, leaves us gasping for breath. However, I think we’ll actually use the airlock as it was intended for a change. Come to think about it, I think this may be the

first time we've actually used it that way. It's a bother, but anything to keep paint fumes out of the Transit, especially since we don't have any place to ventilate them to. We can't get more than three of us in the airlock at a time though. Who wants to go breathe the fumes first?"

They decided that Doctor Mac would accompany Pflum and Persi on the first cycle through the airlock, leaving Kaden and Misty to go second.

"It's not all that bad," Pflum remarked after taking a few lungfuls. "No worse than if I had just painted the walls in my apartment."

"Perhaps, Mister Pflum," MacKenzie replied, "but the fumes in your apartment would dissipate soon enough and you could always open a window or go out for fresh air. I don't think we could ever acclimate to this."

"Of course not, Doctor," Persi told him. "It is a slow poison. It would take a while, but it would kill us in time. Very pretty, however."

"The people over there don't seem to think the same about us, however," Pflum commented, "I guess they just aren't into realism." Just down the painted hill were a dozen or so people who looked like they had been painted in sometime around 1885. They were keeping their distance for the time being, but the way they kept looking and pointing at the Transit and at Pflum and the others, Pflum suspected it was only a matter of time before they managed to screw up the courage to walk up the hill for a closer encounter. It was just at that moment that Pflum heard the high-pitched squeal of a second approaching Transit. "Now this should be interesting."

"Is that the Rabbits' Transit again?" Misty asked.

"I'll be very surprised if it isn't," Pflum remarked. He walked over in front of the camera that fed the signal to the digital window inside and struck a pose that mimed leaning on a walking stick.

"Oh very funny," Rabbit Pflum told him another few minutes later when he exited his Transit. "Phew! It stinks out here."

"I didn't think it was so bad," Human Pflum replied. "Your nose is obviously more sensitive than mine."

"Perhaps," Rabbit replied, wriggling that nose in bunny fashion. "It still doesn't like that smell."

"Welcome to Monetworld," Human told him. "What took you so long?"

"We had an argument about breaking the pattern of arriving on the same world as you lot," Rabbit told him.

"Twice is hardly a pattern," Human retorted. "and what's so wrong with landing on the same worlds I do?"

"Nothing really," Rabbit replied. "Well, this was a nice try, but unless we want to keep meeting on a thousand different worlds, it will probably be best to make those modifications right here."

"One more world, I think," Human shook his head. "It's only a matter of time before those fine folks down yonder decide to call the *gendarmes* or whatever passes for them here and now. Let's try for some place uninhabited."

"Suit yourself," Rabbit shrugged. "Just to make my passengers a bit happier, though, let's decide which controls we're modifying and how. My Doctor Mac wants our changes to be different from yours."

"Why?" Human asked.

"I was going to suggest the same thing," the Human MacKenzie spoke up. "We need to difference ourselves from each other, just in case the harmonics of our two transits have us locked together in some way."

"That's ridiculous," both Pflums retorted.

"Not really," Rabbit MacKenzie replied. "Since we first encountered each other, my instruments have been picking up some highly unusual readings, as though we were caught in your temporal wake."

"And our readings," his human counterpart added, "have similar discrepancies."

"You should have said something sooner," Human Pflum commented. "Okay, let's make our specifications while we're still here, although frankly I doubt our Transits are interfering with each other. They certainly did not on Birdland."

They worked out some agreed upon differences that satisfied the two Pflums, but not the MacKenzies, while the Misties and Kadens wandered closer to the Monetworld people. Finally when they were done,

Human Pflum asked his Persi, "Would you retrieve our tourists? Kaden, at least, ought to know better." "Should he, Mister Pflum?" the Leporid Persi asked. "It seems to me that of all Transit pilots only you have this sort of experience on alien time planes."

"Perhaps," he replied, "but I doubt either Jainette or Kyle would just wander off on strange and alien worlds."

"They have the benefit of your experience to draw from," Human Persi told him. "Don't worry, we'll round up the strays."

"Well, Bunnyboy," Human Pflum began, sticking his hand out toward Rabbit, "in case we don't see each other again on the next world, have a safe journey home."

"You too, Apeman," Rabbit replied. "Just thought of something. Do you happen to have that tracer unit I gave you on board?"

"No, I left it at home," Human replied. "Didn't you?"

"Well, yes, I did, but I just wondered if that might have been causing problems," Rabbit explained.

"Evidently not."

They returned to their respective Transits. Noticing the soft paint on his shoes, Pflum directed Persi and Doctor Mac to leave them in the airlock, but neither Misty nor Kaden thought to do so. "Hey! You're tracking paint across my floor."

"Oh, sorry," Misty replied, immediately removing her shoes.

Kaden just scowled, however and replied. "Maintenance will clean it up."

"You'll clean it up," Pflum told him. Kaden just laughed and kept walking. "One more step and I'll use your hide to scrub that paint off," Pflum warned him.

"Yeah, right," Kaden laughed derisively.

Pflum grabbed his oversized wrench, but Persi stopped him, turning toward Kaden with the small effigy she had made earlier. "No need, gentlemen," she told them in her usual calm and quiet voice, "I have a collection of rags right here. Let's see what happens when I use them."

Kaden blanched and immediately removed his shoes. He hurled them forcefully into the airlock and asked. "There. Are you happy now, Voodoo Queen?"

"There is still the matter of the paint stains, Mister Kaden," she replied.

Kaden had rubbed off most of the stains by the time Pflum was ready to engage the impellers once more.

"This should be a smooth trip," he predicted, "as I'm only going to head outward along the z-axis. We won't try to head closer to home until after I've rewired the console."

It was a short hop, but conditions changed drastically outside, and Persi reported an atmosphere that was seventy-five percent nitrogen and twenty-four percent chlorine. "The external temperature is also about one hundred degrees below zero Fahrenheit," she added. The digital windows showed an odd terrain of what seemed like rocks encrusted with some sort of greenish-yellow material. The sky was a sickly yellow with pale green clouds.

Pflum smiled and said, "Good enough!"

"So long as there aren't any chlorine breathers out there with giant can openers," Kaden snapped at him.

"I'll take my chances," Pflum replied and started opening panels on the console. A few minutes later they heard the arrival of the Rabbit's transit, but it was out of the field of vision of the digital window. "No visiting this time," Pflum remarked sadly.

"I am still not convinced your modifications will make any difference," Doctor Mac told Pflum. "Time lines are of infinitesimal width. That's why we call them lines. We're traveling far too fast to hit any one of them even with the use of your tracer and I doubt heavier duty controls as you propose will make any difference."

"Will they do any harm?" Pflum countered.

"No, I doubt they will do any harm," Doctor Mac allowed, "I just don't think they'll do any good."

"Then if they won't do any harm, I'll try it and if it turns out you're correct then at least I'll have tried it," Pflum replied. "Besides nobody has as much experience homing in on tracer units as I do. Heck I've done it while totally out of control on the z-axis."

"Not at these temporal velocities," MacKenzie insisted.

“No, but that’s what I’m trying to change, isn’t it?” Pflum pointed out. “If I can find our home plane I want to be able to lock down our slippage along the z-axis.

He went right to work, with Persi’s assistance, but they only had the first of the three new controls installed when something large and massive started banging on the field wall with such force everything inside was rattled.

“That’s supposed to be impossible,” Doctor Mac commented. “No external force should be able to move the Transit.”

“Whatever it is,” Pflum replied, standing up from where he was working to look to see what was banging on their wall, “it isn’t moving the Transit, it’s crushing in the field wall. Trust me, that’s not impossible. What the hell?”

The digital window was no longer showing any particular details, just a rippling mass of bright yellow-green. “To heck with the controls!” Pflum cried and dived under the console where the emergency switch was. The emergency switch was intended to bring a Transit home without a pilot to guide the way. Once activated the Transit would head for its home point at maximum speed. It was rarely used as the sudden start and stop was rough on the regulator and would reduce its lifespan, but on this occasion Pflum didn’t care. With the console in its current condition that emergency switch was their only way off the chlorine-rich world. He reached the switch and slammed it home.

The Transit woke up instantly, but it woke up exceedingly grouchy. Suddenly they all lost their balance and slid toward the walls. Pflum and Persi found themselves pressed against the field wall with the console just out of reach. Misty and her father were thrown against one of the side walls and Kaden, who had been just past the center point of the room slammed into the back right corner of the home wall of the Transit. Through it all a loud shrieking sound could be heard.

“I think we’re actually spinning through Space-time,” Pflum shouted to the others.

“I agree,” Doctor Mac replied loudly. “That would be why we’re being pressed against the walls.”

“It’s probably because I only had the one new control in place,” Pflum decided. “We have to stop and finish the job.” Identifying the problem and its solution, however, was the easy part. The new internal gravity was not quite enough to allow them to walk on the walls, but it was too strong to give them sure purchase on the floor. Pflum tried to reach the console several times, but it was like trying to walk up a very steep and slippery slope. After a step or two he would immediately slide back against the wall. Finally he got down on the floor with his feet against the wall and told Persi, “See if you can climb over me and hit the emergency stop.”

It took her several tries, but finally she reached the bright red button on the top of the console and the Transit slowed down and soon came to rest. Of them all, only Pflum did not fall to the floor, but just because he was already there.

“This is the most screwed up Transit I’ve ever seen,” Kaden told them as he picked himself back up. Pflum found he couldn’t argue with that. Instead he asked Persi to take another air reading. “It would be nice to be able to air out the crate while we work. Those paint fumes are starting to get to me.” He went back to work on the console, while she did that.

“Air normal,” she reported as he fitted the second new control into place.

“How’s it looking out there?” he asked, picking up the soldering iron.

“Freaky,” Misty told him.

Putting the soldering iron down on the first wire, he asked, “How so? Do I have at least a few minutes before we have to try doing the temporal jitterbug again?”

“Darned if I know,” Misty replied unhelpfully.

“It looks like someone cut a world up into three-dimensional jigsaw pieces and scattered all the pieces about,” Persi amplified. “The sky is bright red and I can see several clumps of what look like grassy hills or parts of them, anyway, and there’s one with trees and I think that one over there is water, part of a lake or ocean or...” she trailed off.

“Maybe we should open the airlock and get a better look around,” Doctor Mac suggested.

“Are you all nuts?” Kaden all but screamed. “You have a totally unknown environment out there and you just want to take a look around?”

"I have to agree with Kaden on this one," Pflum admitted. "If what we've landed on isn't even a unified planet, who knows what other odd laws of physics may be in place here."

"You were the one who wanted to air the place out," Misty told him. "We know the air is safe to breathe, so we should be able to open the doors."

"Very well," Pflum finally agreed, "but be very careful about stepping outside until we know the surface, such as it is, is solid. We're probably going to be here for a day at least while I retune the circuits."

They opened the door and sweet, grass and flower scented air flowed into the Transit. On looking outside, they discovered that they were apparently parked on a grassy hillside that attached to nothing else. While taking a break sometime later, Pflum wondered what sort of natural processes could have cut the pieces with potentially interlocking tabs and slots on the edges. "I hope we can get out of here before someone shows up to start putting all the pieces together."

He only worked on the console for another hour and finished installing the new controls before he realized he was too tired to do anything else. Everyone except Persi had gone to sleep anyway and quiet and not so quiet snores were coming from the sleeping areas. "I'm going to turn in," he told Persi. "You ought to do the same," he added as he put his tools away and headed back to his cubicle.

"Do you want me to put the panels back, Mister Pflum?" Persi asked politely.

Pflum turned around and considered the matter. That he had to think about it at all showed how tired he was. "No, let's stow them away in one of the lockers for now. The console may not look pretty, but at least it will still work and if we have to vamoose in the middle of the night, at least we won't have to worry about having one of them crash into someone." Together they put the panels away and finally went to bed.

Pflum woke up to discover Kaden fiddling with various dials on the Transit console. "What are you doing?" he asked tensely.

"Trying to tune the circuits," Kaden replied.

"Are you out of your tiny little mind?" Pflum shouted, rushing forward. "You couldn't even figure out the manual controls, but you think you can tune the circuits. Oh geeze! You can't tune anything without the impellers engaged."

"Wouldn't that push us through Time?" Kaden countered.

"Not without the regulator online," Pflum told him. "I'll handle that job. I'm the only one here qualified and in the future I'll thank you to keep your hands off the controls unless I tell you to use them. Speaking of which, you were supposed to be learning how we do things here at Down Time, not playing tourist. The way we do things is by acting as a team. Try it for a change. Now where is everyone?"

Kaden looked like he wasn't going to answer, but finally he started, "They're all ..."

"Oh, aren't they cute!" Misty squealed from the other side of the Transit's airlock.

"They're all outside," Pflum finished for Kaden. "So much for caution. Any idea what Misty is talking about?" Kaden shook his head. They both went out to take a look

All around the Transit were over two dozen baby-sized humanoid figures. They appeared to have cute, albeit grotesque parodies of baby faces. Pflum could not tell if they were wearing clothing or their skins just looked like they did, but half of them appeared to be in cute and fluffy dresses and the others were in shirts and short pants with suspenders and tiny baseball caps.

"Wonderful," Pflum muttered. "Cabbage Patch Kids. Are they intelligent?"

"I don't think so," Persi replied. "I cannot decipher a language if they have one. What sounds they make may be analogous to various primate verbal signals, meant to convey vague meanings, like delight, puzzlement, alarm and so forth. They just seem like curious and friendly animals."

"I'd better get back to work, then," Pflum told them. "If these aren't the most advanced life form in the neighborhood, I don't want to still be around here when Tickle-Me Elmo shows up."

He had just started the tuning, however, when a low-pitched humming sound could be heard in the distance. At first Pflum thought the sound was coming from the ever-flukey secondary impellers, but when he heard a series of high-pitch shrieks from outside, he decided to go take a look.

He arrived just in time to see the living Cabbage Patchers running confusedly in almost every direction.

They were leaving the piece of hill the transit was parked on by jumping to other nearby chunks of world.

“Whoa!” he chuckled. “For little guys, they sure can jump, can’t they? What are they running from?” Doctor Mac and Kaden rushed past him to get back inside the Transit even as Pflum look out in the one direction the Kids had not run toward. Two hill pieces away, he saw the cause of everyone’s panic as a large purple dinosaur bounded their way. “I’m with the Kids,” he commented, pushing Misty and Persi inside ahead of him. “We got to scram before Dino arrives!”

Magical Mystery Tour

The Transit was by no means ready for its next flight, as Big Purple started banging on the field door while humming dementedly. Pflum, however, did not feel they had a lot of choice. “Everyone, hang onto something,” he warned them. “I don’t know what’s going to happen next.”

He hit the activation control and the temporal regulator came online. The pounding stopped and the digital window turned the blank gray it always did when the Transit was out of phase with the universe around it. “Well,” he commented with a modicum of relief. “That’s not too bad at all, is it?”

“You haven’t engaged the impellers yet,” Doctor Mac observed.

“One thing at a time,” Pflum replied. “All systems appear to be nominal. Good. Of course my modifications shouldn’t have affected the regulator, but I have occasionally been known to make a mistake.”

“Hard to believe,” Kaden told him acidly.

“Yeah,” Pflum retorted. “I love you too, Bunky. Well, no need to keep treading temporal water. I just hope the impellor circuitry is tuned well enough to keep us from being spattered all over the walls.” He made a few adjustments then activated the impellers.

The trip was not as violent as the last one had been, but instead of spinning through time they were tumbling slightly. They were not being thrown around, but gravity within the Transit was varying between too light and too heavy with occasional pulls toward one wall or another.

“Ooh!” Misty moaned. “I think I’m going to be sick.”

“We need to stop and finish the calibration anyway,” Pflum noted. “I’ll bring us in.” Carefully, he deactivated the impellers and the nauseating motion ceased. Then he disengaged the regulator and gravity reversed, dropping everyone and everything not nailed down to the ceiling.

“Anyone hurt?” Pflum called out after all the crashing noises ended.

“You’ve been asking that question with alarming frequency,” Doctor Mac groaned. “Just more bruises for me. Misty, dear?”

“I’m okay, I was on the couch,” she added, crawling out from under the upturned furniture. “I got lucky and the couch’s arms kept it from squashing me.”

“Persi?” Pflum asked.

“I bumped my head, but it is not too bad,” she replied carefully. “I could use a painkiller of some sort.”

“There should be some aspirin and some more modern ones too in the medicine cabinet. But it looks to me like you’re bleeding. Better clean that up and see if we need to bandage it,” Pflum suggested. “You should be able to reach the medicine cabinet in the bathroom. Be careful though, when you use the sink. It’s going to be about as high as you can reach and the water is going to come right at you, so I’d recommend just turning it on a little and catch the water in a towel.”

“I’ll help you,” Misty offered and the two women went to the topsy-turvy bathroom.

“Doesn’t anyone want to know how I am?” Kaden asked.

“Sorry, I should have known something was wrong when you weren’t complaining,” Pflum shot back.

“Okay, are you all right?”

“I’ll survive,” Kaden told him sourly.

“Good,” Pflum remarked. “I just wish I could reach the console from here, but until I can, we’re stuck on the ceiling.”

“This is impossible,” Doctor Mac opined. “There are no conditions under which our internal gravity

should be reversed when the Transit has landed.”

“We were tumbling,” Pflum remarked. “We could have landed upside down.”

“Not even then,” Doctor Mac replied. “Our internal conditions are determined by those in their Transit’s garage, and I seriously doubt our world line has been turned inside out.”

“Then how do you explain our current design scheme?” Pflum shot back.

“I don’t,” the doctor replied. “This sort of thing can’t happen.”

“Then maybe we’re just imagining this,” Pflum replied.

“Don’t talk dirty, Mister Pflum,” MacKenzie replied. “I can’t speak for you, but I fully trust my own senses and as impossible as I know this to be according to all I understand about temporal theory, it is, indeed, happening. Why didn’t the conference table fall to the ceiling, by the way?”

“It’s bolted to the floor,” Pflum explained. “It can and does get removed when we carry large expeditions, but that doesn’t happen very often. Too bad it is fixed to that spot, though. If it were on the ceiling with us I could stand on it and reach the console. Of course having it fall on me when normal gravity was restored might not have been a good idea.”

“It wouldn’t have been healthy for the console either,” Kaden pointed out.

“I suppose it wouldn’t have,” Pflum agree reluctantly.

“You could stand on a chair,” Kaden suggested.

“I’ll try,” Pflum nodded. However, the chair was not tall enough and he could still not reach the console.

“Maybe two chairs?” He tried stacking a second chair on the first, but while they were stackable, the resulting construct wobbled too much for comfort and was still too short besides. “Bad idea,” Pflum decided at last. “And with more chairs it would wobble even more.”

Just then Persi and Misty returned. Their clothing was wet and they were drying themselves off with towels. “You were right about the water,” Misty told him on her way to rummage through the piles of their personal belongings. The men immediately rushed to help. The cots, temporary dividers and their entire luggage had fallen to the ceiling when they were turned upside down and was now a jumbled mess. Pflum and Kaden stacked up the dividers in one corner and started setting up the beds again while the two women grabbed some clothes and returned to the bathroom to change. By the time they came back again, Pflum was lying on top of his cot, looking down at the floor. “I never realized how tall the ceilings were in here,” he commented. “Hold on, I just had a thought.”

“I’ll get you the aspirin,” Kaden commented sarcastically.

“Funny,” Pflum told him flatly. “We can stack the cots on top of each other. They’re built for using as bunk beds, although we don’t have the leg extensions here. I figure three of them in a stack should be enough.”

“Three beds falling on your console is likely to be as destructive as the conference table,” Doctor Mac pointed out.

“We can stack them up just to the front of the console,” Pflum replied. “When they fall they’ll only hit the floor.”

“With you underneath,” Kaden observed. “Good plan.”

“I’ll try to kick off and land on the other side of the console,” Pflum replied.

They piled the cots up and Pflum started punching in the activation code. The appropriate lights on the console lit up and he warned everyone, “Try to fall on something soft.” Then he completed the sequence and brought the regulator back online.

Prepared for the reversal, he jumped off the bed and landed flat on his back, still on the ceiling. “Ow,” he complained.

“What happened?” Persi asked, helping him sit up.

“Obviously nothing,” Kaden snickered. “Nice to see someone else take the pratfall for a change.” Persi ignored him.

“I’m not sure,” Pflum admitted. “I thought that would bring us back to normal. Oh well, maybe when we land on the next world.” He climbed back onto the stack of cots and, continued, “Just in case, better be prepared for anything. I still have a lot of tuning to do.” He brought the impellers on line and the disconcerting, tumbling sensation started up again. Pflum adjusted the controls and it became more

pronounced than on the last leg of their journey, but the movement was much slower.

As they waited to see what would happen, the Transit slowly listed to one side and everything slid along the ceiling toward one of the side walls. A few minutes later it became apparent they were still rotating and as they waited the floor gradually resumed its downward orientation. As soon as it had, Pflum disengaged the impellers and brought them to rest on yet another world.

"How're you doing, Persi?" Pflum asked.

"I have a mild headache, but Misty tells me it's just a scrape, Mister Pflum," she replied. "I'll survive."

"Good," he nodded. "Do you feel up to checking the air outside?"

"Of course," she replied and immediately set to the analysis.

"The window is showing a fairly normal looking world out there," Pflum told the others, so if the air checks out you may open the airlock doors. I still smell traces of the paint from Monetworkd. In the meantime, I'm going to keep calibrating the impellers just in case we have to make a hasty retreat."

The air proved to be a healthy mix of everything they expected of an atmosphere. "Perhaps even healthier than at home," Persi noted. "The analysis shows very few of the trace pollutants we normally breathe as a matter of course. There's a bit of carbon monoxide and some sulfurous compounds, but no more than the use of coal as a heating fuel might account for and nothing compared to what was in the air in the early Twentieth Century."

"It is possibly an entirely agrarian world," Misty conjectured.

"Let's hope we didn't land in the middle of their crops then," Pflum commented from the console.

"Would it be all right to go outside?" Misty asked.

"With caution, please," Pflum replied. Don't go too far away."

"I'll go with you," Kaden offered. "I'm accustomed to safety procedures in the field." Pflum wasn't sure Kaden had the sense to keep himself out of trouble, but held his tongue and let them go outside.

"Is there anything I can do to help?" Persi asked him.

"Sure," Pflum replied. "You can monitor some of the gauges while I work. It will speed us up. Now watch this needle right here. I need it to read at precisely fifty-five point three. Tell me when it makes it there."

He fiddled with some of the adjustable components that did not normally show when the console's panels were on.

"Now!" Persi told him a few minutes later. "No, now you went a bit too far."

"All right, my fault. I should have had you call out the readings as they progressed," he told her. "Let's try again."

"Fifty-five point five," she counted down a few seconds later, "point four, point three."

"Good," Pflum commended her. "Did it hold that setting? Yes? I was a bit worried. That was a gross adjustment. We'll fine tune it on this gauge later, but we need to rough tune the third circuit now. As we do that, you'll notice the other two will change, but we'll get everything done soon enough."

They kept that up until after sunset when Pflum finally admitted, "That's as much as we can do today. We have all three controls roughly tuned, but we can do better."

"Then let's move on," Persi suggested.

"In the morning," Pflum told her. "We skipped lunch and it's late for dinner. Where are the others?"

"Mister Pflum," Doctor Mac called from outside. "You have to see this."

Pflum and Persi stepped outside the Transit to see something unlike anything they had ever experienced.

"Is it a ringworld?" Persi asked. "I read about that concept in some old story books."

"Not quite," Doctor Mac disagreed. "See where that ribbon of world suddenly gets thinner and then thicker again about thirty degrees above that horizon? I think the shape of this world is based on the Moebius strip. Technically while it loops, it's a one-sided object."

"That's ridiculous!" Pflum exclaimed.

"You didn't see what passes for the sunset here," Kaden told him, sounding shaken.

"On a Moebius strip-shaped world? What did it do?" Pflum asked, "Race around the surface of the world with a team of fiery winged horses? Or did we just twist away from it?"

"Neither," Doctor Mac informed him. "A giant hand came out and pulled the cord."

"I was afraid of that," Pflum replied.

"You were?" Persi asked. "You actually expected to find a world where giant hands turn out the lights?"

"Not that exactly, but if the laws of physics are that skewed, we're on another world where magic works," Pflum replied.

"That may well have been the case in the land of the Cabbage Patchers," Kaden pointed out.

"It may have been," Pflum agreed, "but we weren't there long enough to find out. Hopefully, we won't be here much longer. Let's get something to eat, and then I intend to go to sleep early so I can finish tuning the circuits in the morning."

Pflum was up early and hard at work with both Persi and Doctor Mac when Kaden and Misty bothered to wake up. They ate a hasty breakfast before Misty announced, "I'm going to spend the day outside."

Kaden added, "I'd better go with you. Just in case, you understand."

Pflum was too busy to do more than just wave them away. Several hours later, however, they had finished retuning the Transit and were ready to test the modifications. Leaving the temporal regulator offline, Pflum ran up the power into the impellers and got a nasty surprise. "Now they don't work at all!" he exclaimed.

I did not think it would work," Doctor Mac reminded him, "but I'll admit I didn't expect your changes to shut down the impellers' capabilities altogether."

"Why were they working before I had them tuned, though?" Pflum asked.

"I'm not entirely sure," MacKenzie admitted. "Perhaps when they were not in tune they were each pushing in their own odd directions, but not that you've aligned them they are canceling each other out. It's also possible your modifications are just canceling out all the temporal thrust and that before we were getting readings simply because you had not yet finished clamping down."

"Whatever the explanation," Pflum noted sadly, "we had better undo it all or we'll be stuck here and while the place looks peaceful enough at the moment, the dominant species could be barbarian, sword-slinging flamingoes."

It only took another two hours to remove Pflum's heavy resistors and to return the circuits to their original states. "The default settings are built in to the onboard computer," Pflum remarked for Persi's sake. "We could probably get by with them, I have often enough, but I'll be happier if we at least run through the fine tuning again. Where's Misty and Kaden?" he asked, looking around.

"They went out for a walk hours ago," Persi told him.

"Well, tell them to walk on back here. It's almost time to leave," Pflum replied. Persi nodded and went outside, but the pair were nowhere in sight. "I told them not to go very far," Pflum complained.

"That was yesterday," Persi replied. "I have noticed that Mister Kaden needs to be reminded more frequently than that until he has been adequately trained."

"You make him sound like a bad dog," Pflum chuckled.

"He is not that trainable," Persi remarked.

"He had better be," Doctor Mac growled. "He's with my daughter."

"When we find him I'll get you a rolled-up newspaper to spank him with," Pflum commented. "Oh, heck," he continued emotionlessly a few minutes later, "let's go find them. It must be nearly time for your giant hand to turn out the lights again. This really ticks me off. Kaden is supposed to be a veteran Time pilot. Tourists often don't understand the dangers inherent in wandering about in strange lands and times, but pilots ought to know better. Even Persi here knows better and this is only her second trip."

"Your faith in me is inspiring, Mister Pflum," she replied in a calm, yet tart manner.

"Don't misunderstand," he told her. "That was a compliment. It generally takes me a month to get new interns to understand the dangers inherent to fieldwork. Even Jack, my last intern, didn't catch on as quickly as you have and he's working on a degree in temporal science. Kaden, on the other hand, ought to know better because he's been out many times. He's probably seen all the ways a tourist can get into trouble."

"He also ought to know better than to date my daughter, and he had better not get her in trouble." Doctor Mac grumbled. Pflum kept his mouth shut, but Persi raised her eyebrows skeptically.

"Next time you have that doll on you, my dear," the doctor told her, "stab it through the heart for me."

"The magic does not work, Doctor," she replied as Pflum locked up the Transit, "The victim has to believe for it to work and doing something that drastic while he watches would probably only break the spell. Besides I am not the 'Voodoo Queen' Mister Kaden believes I am, but I do know that in his case the threat will only work so long as it remains a threat. If I actually try to scare him beyond that point and his own belief fails to make whatever reaction I try for, the threat will have been for naught. That is the true power of such things, you see."

"There is more to Voodoo, Hoodoo and the like," Doctor Mac told her. They started walking around the Transit. "I know that much."

"Oh, yes, you can learn that much in an anthropology class. I did, after all," she admitted. "But you see, the trances and other phenomena are performed by or induced upon those who truly believe in the power. Mister Kaden does not truly believe; he is more of an agnostic. He isn't sure whether it is real or not and afraid it might be. If he really believed in the power and that I controlled that power, I wouldn't have to keep reminding him to behave."

"Even so," Doctor Mac told her as they completed their orbit around the Transit, "you should bring that doll around with you. I want you to put the fear of God into that man when we find him."

"Or the fear of the goddess," Pflum remarked. "We're going to have to widen the search pattern. Did you want to get your plaything before we left?"

"It is in my purse," Persi assured him.

"You carry it around with you?" he asked.

"Mister Kaden needs a lot of reminding," she replied resignedly.

"You know," Pflum considered, looking back at the transit. "I think in the midst of getting on and off the upside down world, we managed to finally get to the past of our home point. We're probably way off on the y and z-axes, but our position on the x-axis almost has to be pastward of home."

"How do you figure that, Mister Pflum?" Doctor Mac asked.

Look at the side of the Transit," Pflum replied. "It disappears about three feet back from the field end on this side and a few inches less on the other."

"So?" Doctor Mac asked. "That's normal isn't it?"

"Well, yes, the fact that it fades out while we're in the field is normal. But the amount that shows before it fades out is dependant on how far we are from our home point. When we stay within the five-nines the sides are of nearly equal length. The greater the distance from the home line the greater the distance. Along the z-axis the top and bottoms of the side walls differ similarly. You'll note the edges of the side walls slant by about ten degrees, which is more than they did on Birdland. Anyway, by my experience I would guess we're at maybe eighty-five percent of compatibility along the y-axis, I can't even guess about the z-axis – not enough experience – but it may be about the same, and at least one thousand years in the past. We could be that far into the future, I suppose, but we've been pushing pastward since we left the Boston International Forest. But why am I explaining this to you? You've been taking measurements since we left and are acknowledged as one of the true experts of Temporal studies."

"I suppose I am," he acknowledged, "and I have been taking measurements, but I didn't know that about the walls. Very interesting. I can tell you why and how that happens theoretically, but until this moment I didn't know it happened. Isn't it amazing what sorts of things an expert doesn't know and yet an accomplished technician such as yourself does?"

"I think they went that way," Persi interrupted any reply Pflum might have made. "These footprints look fresh and they seem be headed toward that forested area over there."

"Makes sense if they wanted a bit of privacy," Pflum said without thinking.

"I'll kill him," Doctor Mackenzie growled.

"Hold it, Doc," Pflum told him. "Kaden's actions were unforgivable on the safety and prudence level, but your daughter is a big girl. If she wants to demonstrate her poor taste in men, that's her business."

"You don't have children, do you, Mister Pflum?" MacKenzie asked.

"Nope," Pflum replied easily. "I understand what you're trying to say, but the point is she's still an adult. Him, I'm not so sure about, but that's out of my control as well. Let's just get them back here and head

for home.”

Help!

The giant hand the others had told Pflum about made its twice-daily appearance just then, however, and they were forced to head back into the Transit. Even with flashlights, it was too dark outside to go stumbling around in unfamiliar terrain, so instead Pflum rigged some lights around the Transit to hopefully guide the two lovebirds back to the nest.

While waiting, they spent the evening fine tuning the circuits once more until even Pflum had to admit, “I doubt we can do a better job without Ken’s diagnostic tools. Frankly I doubt the crate’s been this well tuned in years.”

“At least the impellers work properly again,” Persi pointed out.

“What time is it?” Pflum asked.

“Just past midnight,” Doctor Mac replied worriedly. As the evening progressed his anger had been replaced by worry. “We should have gone to look for them in the dark.”

“It’s too late to start now,” Pflum pointed out, “and we’ll do nobody any good if we try looking for them without at least an hour or two of rest. Get some sleep, we’ll leave at first light.”

It was dark in the Transit what seemed like only minutes later when Persi shook Pflum awake. “Now what?” he asked grouchy.

“Time to wake up, Pflum,” she told him. “If the sun is lit at the same time as yesterday, it will be daylight in fifteen minutes.”

“I don’t suppose either of the kids showed up in the night?” Pflum asked.

“I checked,” she told him. “Now get dressed. I have coffee and toast ready. And Doctor MacKenzie is likely to leave without us if we aren’t ready when it is light.”

“Did he sleep at all?” Pflum asked, getting out of bed and slipping on his slacks, heedless of Persi’s presence.

“Not enough to matter,” the doctor told him from outside the cubicle. “Those dividers may afford visual privacy, but they don’t even block the sounds of your breathing.”

“Sorry if I’ve been breathing heavily,” Pflum replied as he pulled his shirt on. “Must have been a good dream.”

After a hasty breakfast, Pflum grabbed his favorite wrench and they all headed out. The hand may have turned the lights on, but it was too foggy that morning to see it. Fortunately they already knew which direction to start their search and they wasted no time in heading out that way

“Strictly speaking,” Pflum told Doctor Mac, “I should have left you back in the Transit. DDT regulations insist that only crew are supposed to go off on what may be a rescue mission.”

“Do you really think you could stop me?” Doctor Mac challenged.

“Do you see me trying?” Pflum countered. “I could argue you are not a passenger even if you’re not crew. Just remember if you try to kill Kaden before we get back to the Transit, I’ll have to stop you from that. Once we’re on our way, however, I couldn’t care less.”

“Don’t Down Time, Ltd’s rules say you have to protect your passengers while in the field?” MacKenzie asked.

“Kaden’s not a passenger,” Pflum replied grimly.

They reached the trees a few minutes later and for the next half hour lost the trail until Persi found the pink sweater Misty had been wearing the previous morning draped over a low tree branch.

“I’ll kill him,” Doctor Mac repeated. “Remember, Pflum, you promised not to stop me.”

“Actually I only said I didn’t care what happened to Kaden,” Pflum corrected him. “You, on the other hand, I like and I’d hate to have to testify against you in the murder trial, as justified as your actions may be. Still there are other reasons that sweater may be there. I don’t see any other articles of clothing and it did get fairly warm yesterday afternoon. These other footprints, however, bother me. They neither match Misty’s nor Kaden’s and there are a lot of them. Let’s look around. However, it’s possible the people

who left these prints never saw Misty and Kaden.”

That turned out to be unlikely as they found no prints left by either of them going off in their own direction. *However, Pflum thought to himself, at least the trail is easier to follow now.*

It was noontime by their watches when they reached the outskirts of a large town. Filled with half-timbered buildings, the town had a definitely medieval look to it. The castle on the hill that overlooked the area completed that portrait as well.

“Is it me or does that castle look decidedly evil?” Pflum asked.

“The point of a castle is to be intimidating,” Persi told him.

“Maybe,” Pflum agreed, “but that one just drips evil, or maybe it’s just the gargoyles.”

“What about them?” Doctor Mac asked.

“Well, for one thing, they’re moving,” Pflum remarked. “On the other hand, maybe they keep the pigeon population down.”

“I can’t help but think that may not be an improvement,” MacKenzie replied.

“I’m more concerned with the people of this town,” Persi told them.

“Why?” Pflum asked. “They look normal enough, even if they’re staring at us. Probably because of the way we’re dressed. No help for that now, however. We probably ought to start asking questions.”

“Greetings, strangers,” a tall stone-gray figure they had mistaken for a statue told them. “New in town?” The statue-like person had yellow-green glowing eyes, a bright red tongue and sharp yellow teeth that glistened when he smiled.

“Just got here,” Pflum replied, hiding his surprise. “We’re looking for a couple of friends.”

“Anyone in particular or just putting an expedition together?” the gray one asked. “Well, it doesn’t matter. The best place to start is always the tavern room at the local inn. Just on up the street a few blocks, it will be on your right.”

“Uh, thanks, big guy,” Pflum replied.

“He spoke English,” Persi marveled.

“So?” Pflum asked.

“We’re on a strange world, well out of our time in every possible direction, and the first person we run into, not only speaks English, but the same version we do and you don’t find that strange?” she asked. It was the first time Pflum had ever seen her lose her calm demeanor. Evidently, this bothered her deeply.

“That is highly unlikely,” Doctor Mac agreed.

“Just everyday happenstance for me,” Pflum told them. “Had we landed a line or two over he would probably have spoken French interlaced with a few choice words of Mongolian slang. No need to worry why something like that worked out in our favor.”

As they walked through the town it turned out the tall gray gentleman was not the only person who was not quite human, although most of the people were at least vaguely humanoid in shape. While most of the people did seem outwardly normal by Pflum’s standards, here and there were members of other species; tall ethereal-looking ones, short but muscular ones. There were giants and some people who appeared to be made of stone. There were several centaurs, one of the few exceptions to the humanoid rule, and various nonsentient creatures Pflum and the others found extraordinary.

“Now this is even stranger than having the locals speak English,” Persi noted. “It’s in direct contravention of the one-species theory.”

“One-species?” Doctor Mac asked, “What’s that?”

“Well, according to the classes I’ve taken,” Persi explained, “many paleoanthropologists consider it impossible for more than one intelligent species to evolve on a world at a time. There are others who will allow for multiple species in the case of isolated ecosystems and the most liberal of the theory’s supporters will say only one per ecological niche. However, so far I’ve counted what are obviously ten or more distinct species, all of whom appear to be sentient. That’s just too many for a single world. Hard to believe there can be that many isolated ecosystems that all hosted intelligent species on one world.”

“So we’re on a highly improbable world,” Pflum shrugged. “Maybe I was wrong about it being within eighty-five percent of our own, and maybe not. We know we’re way out on the z-axis so physics works

differently here and we're also obviously way off on the y-axis, but eighty-five percent is more different than it sounds. The difference is between this time line and our own starting with the big bang or whatever happened here that formed the universe. Fifteen percent difference over the course of that length of time is considerable. Come to think about it, I may have exaggerated."

As they entered the tavern, three dozen pairs of eyes turned to study them, but the people they were attached to very quickly lost interest and went back to their drinks. "I think the standard thing to do is go talk to the bartender," Pflum muttered. "At least that's what they all do in the movies."

They walked to the bar where a large bald man in a dirty tunic and an apron stood dispensing drinks.

"Can I help you?" he asked them.

"Got some rooms for the night?" Pflum asked.

"Two rooms," the man replied. "For a silver piece I'll throw in dinner for the three of you."

Pflum rummaged through his pocket and found a handful of silver and copper coins from the Middle of the Twentieth Century. "We just got into town and haven't had time to pick up any of the local currency," he explained. "Will this be enough?"

The bartender picked up the coin and inspected it closely and shrugged. Then he tossed it on a nearby balance scale and measured its weight. Pflum expected that it either was not enough or that the bartender would ask a lot of questions about the coin, but instead he merely said, "I owe you some change, sir," he replied. He tossed three small pieces of copper that were the size of a one cent piece back to Pflum.

Then he reached under the counter and pulled out a pair of keys. "Upstairs," he told them. "Third and fourth rooms on the left. Dinner will be served in an hour. Anything else?"

Pflum was about to decline, but he had an idea. "How much to buy a round of drinks for everyone in the house?" he asked. It turned out to cost him all of thirty-five cents in his 1950's vintage coins. The entire room instantly warmed up to them and he was able to ask a number of questions.

"A man and a woman dressed like you lot?" a tall thin woman with long blond hair, gold-flecked eyes, impossibly red lips that did not seem to have been rouged and long pointed ears. "Yes, I saw a pair like that. They were brought in yesterday by the baron's men at arms. Paraded through town, probably as an example to us all, the usual thing, then dragged up to his castle."

"Are they friends of yours?" a thin man dressed in shiny, dark brown leather clothing asked.

"Sort of," Pflum replied.

"The girl is my daughter," Doctor Mac told them.

"We're not as attached to the man," Pflum added.

"A pity," the exotic woman sighed.

"Why?" Persi asked. "What's wrong?"

"We see a lot of people taken up to the baron's castle, but aside from his men, no one ever comes back out," the man replied. "Still it might be worth putting an expedition together. I hear the old boy has a lot of treasure socked away in his vaults. One good haul from there could set someone up for life. Count me in if you want to try it."

"It's also rumored he has a very large dungeon beneath that castle as well," the woman told them. "The Gods only know what may be in it and what it's like down there. Still, for a share, I might be interested. It's been pretty boring around town lately.

"We're not going to be able to do it the usual way," Pflum commented to the others.

"What way is that?" Doctor Mac asked.

"Well, usually I just use the Transit and carefully materialize it wherever a member of the party is being held. It blocks anyone outside a cell from getting in and stopping us, while affording whoever I rescue an easy way out."

"You have real power there, sir," the woman told him, interest in her eyes.

"It's a tad more than your average party trick," Pflum admitted, "But it's just a cleverly used skill.

However, my Transit is in a strange state at the moment and not completely under my control. It would be dangerous to try it now."

"Yes, power you cannot control is best left alone," the woman agreed solemnly. "By the way, I'm Istrella of the Eastern Woods. I'm fairly handy with a spell if you're putting an expedition together."

"A spell?" Pflum asked, skeptical at first, then remembered the magic used against him on Birdland and admitted seriously. "That could come in handy. I'm called Pflum."

"Just Pflum?" Istrella asked. "Not Pflum the Wise? Not Sir Pflum the Mighty of the Flaming Sword or something like that?"

"Full name's Aurelian Pflum," he admitted, "but everyone just calls me Pflum."

"Refreshing," Istrella admitted. "Our leather-clad friend here is Noel de Phillip. We've worked together before. He's a good man to have along if you need to pick locks or enter a keep undetected."

Noel nodded his head politely in acknowledgement adding, "And I have a lot of experience in dungeons like the baron's. Should come in handy."

"Spend a lot of time in them?" Pflum asked quickly.

"You could say that," Noel admitted. "So, who else do we need for an expedition?" he pondered aloud. Suddenly several others in the tavern came over interestedly.

With Istrella and Noel's help Pflum quickly chose two men who claimed to be fierce warriors, although it was hard to tell in their street clothes. One, who proudly proclaimed himself to be Fritz Wilhelm, stood only four feet tall, but wore a beard that nearly fell to the floor. Pflum privately wondered how often he tripped over it, but as Noel seemed so pleased to have him in the party, he decided not to fight the issue especially since it seemed so unlikely that these total strangers were so willing to help free Misty and Kaden at the drop of a hat. The other was a tall, well-built man who went by the name of Ril na Rolach. This one at least Pflum might have chosen on his own.

Pflum wasn't at all certain why they wanted to take the tavern's minstrel, who had been quietly playing a lute in the far corner of the room. The man, Findo, was obviously strong, clever enough and moved with a studied grace and confidence, but they seemed more interested by the fact he was a minstrel.

"Why?" Pflum asked. "Do these things need musical accompaniment on this world?" He realized he had slipped as soon as he said it, but the others barely even noticed that unintentional admission.

"No, of course not," Istrella told him, "but music has charms to soothe the savage breast and all that. It's a lucky expedition that has a singer along."

"If you say so," Pflum told her disbelievingly.

Just then another tall, pale man with light brown hair, ears similar to Istrella's and almost effeminate good looks came by and asked, "Did I hear you say you're organizing an expedition? Jolly good. Count me in."

"And your specialty?" Pflum asked tiredly.

"Killing things," he replied. "I'm frightfully good at it, been doing it for years. Actually, I'm on my way to the Eastern Realm. There's a big war coming up next month and the word is they're hiring mercenaries, but I could use a spot of pocket change to help me on my way. Might be nice to hire a carriage rather than walk all the way."

"You want to hire a carriage to take you to a war?" Doctor Mac asked.

"It's the only way to travel," the man assured him. "Name's Taniel, by the way. Taniel of Monavia."

"Hire him!" Istrella urged Pflum.

"Is he that good?" Pflum asked.

"Better!"

Pflum just shrugged and told Taniel, "Welcome to the mad house. Our keepers will be opening the door in the morning."

"If you young folks ask me," an elderly man in the next booth put in, "you'll recruit a priest to go with you as well."

"To lead us in our daily prayers?" Pflum asked sarcastically.

"No, you ignorant young whippersnapper!" the old man shouted at him. "Priests have the power to heal. Nothing like a good healer along on an expedition. But don't listen to me. What would an old man like me know, right? I used to be a king, I know these things."

"You used to be a king?" Noel asked skeptically. "Geeze! Every old barfly tells me that one."

"All right, go get yourselves killed. I won't weep in my beer over the likes of you. Young upstarts, think they know it all." He went on like that for a while until Persi, brought him a fresh tankard of ale and

talked quietly with him for the rest of the evening.

"He's not wrong, actually," Istrella admitted a few minutes later. "Having a healer in the expedition would help."

"Many more of us and we may as well take in a full brass band for all the stealth we'll be capable of," Pflum retorted.

"Nonsense," Istrella laughed gently. "I've been on much larger expeditions than this. One cleric in the crew won't hurt and it certainly might make the difference. Come on, let's you and me pop over to the temple and see who's feeling frisky tonight."

"Oh sure," Pflum shook his head in disbelief. "This should be something to see."

The temple was several blocks away through the early evening streets. "What's the name of this town, anyway?" he asked Istrella.

"Name?" Istrella countered. "Should it have one?"

"It would help to distinguish it from all the others," Pflum told her.

"Hardly necessary; you can only be in one town at a time," Istrella assured him.

"No matter where you go, there you are," Pflum quoted sourly.

"Exactly," Istrella agreed. "And now where we are is the temple."

"Does *it* have a name?" Pflum asked warily.

"Of course it has a name, silly," she replied. "It's the temple."

"Of course," Pflum sighed. "Lead the way."

The temple was the only building in town that was not half timbered. Instead it was made of large pink granite blocks with tall marble columns, and a green, copper-covered roof. "Lots of money here," Pflum observed, recalling the buying power of his pocket change.

"Yes," Istrella agreed, "the priests are all quite rich or would be if not for their vows of poverty."

"Would you like to explain that?" Pflum asked, trying to keep sarcasm out of his voice as they entered the antechamber of the temple.

"Everything they earn goes to the Temple of the Goddess Clariel," Istrella explained, slapping her forehead with the palm of her hand. To Pflum it looked as though she had suddenly forgotten something or was indicating some sort of stupidity or foolishness, but when everyone else in hearing range did the same, he decided it must be some sort of religious ritual, much like making a cross.

"And they live like paupers?" Pflum asked.

"Hardly," she replied, laughing. "They live like kings. They just don't actually own anything."

"May I help you, daughter, son?" asked an elderly priest in robes with dense gold embroidery all over them.

"Yes, father," Istrella replied. "We're on expedition and would like to donate a share of our expected earnings to the temple."

"Of course. And how many shares are you planning to donate?" the priest asked politely.

"Just the one," she told him. "There are only nine in the expedition. Do you have anyone who might assist us?"

"Of course, daughter," he replied smiling. Turning toward the back of the temple he called out, "Oh, Shlomo! I have an errand for you."

"Yes, Your Eminence," a portly figure who looked like Friar Tuck after a week on Jenny Craig. "Always willing to help."

"These fine people are going on expedition and are in grave need of your spiritual guidance. Daughter, son, this is Father Shlomo ben O'Riely..."

"You're kidding?" Pflum blurted, strangling back a laugh.

"Not at all, my son," the elderly priest replied. "Is there a problem? I assure you young Shlomo is most competent; been on a dozen expeditions or more."

"My apologies, Eminence. I come from very far away and his name reminded me of a joke in my native tongue," Pflum covered.

"I'd be most interested in hearing it," Father Shlomo told him.

"I doubt it would translate," Pflum told him. "So how do we figure the temple's share?" Pflum did not

really care. From what he had been told all shares were of whatever treasure was found while on expedition. If there was no money, that's just the way it would go. However, he also figured it would sound suspicious if he did not at least ask.

"Oh, the usual arrangement," Father Shlomo replied easily. "An equal share with everyone else in the expedition."

"Works for me," Pflum shrugged.

"So where are we headed?" the priest asked.

"The baron's dungeon," Istrella told him brightly. "We're on a rescue mission."

Shlomo thought about it and finally replied. "It's about time. The baron's been holed up there for ten years now. I was beginning to think we'd never get rid of him."

"We're not trying to get rid of him now," Pflum replied. "Just rescue a couple of friends of mine."

"All the same thing, my son," Shlomo replied. "All the same thing."

Maxwell's Silver Hammer

On their return to the tavern, Istrella and Pflum found they had to turn down the offers of several large creatures who wanted to join the expedition. "I'm sorry," Istrella apologized, "but I'm afraid you would have trouble fitting in dungeon passages." The giants took it in stride and went off to a far corner of the tavern to talk to someone else. There would be other expeditions. There always were.

"Where's the rest of our motley crew?" Pflum asked Persi once she had left the old man sleeping in his booth.

"They all went off to get some rest," she told him. "Doctor MacKenzie did as well. You know, Pflum, you have them tagged well. A motley crew. Fritz Wilhelm claims to be a dwarf, like one of Tolkien's people."

"They actually call themselves the Mountain People," Istrella corrected her, "to differentiate them from the plains dwarfs, I suppose."

"Where we come from they are called 'Little Persons,'" Persi replied.

"Oh, don't let Fritz hear you say that," Istrella warned her. "His people consider it a deadly insult. It implies his soul is small as well."

"Strange," Persi noted, "just the opposite in our homeland. Still, when in Rome, do as the Romans do. It was certainly not my intention to be insulting. Ril na Rolach tells me he is a dethroned prince attempting to build up his personal resources to the point that he might hire an army to retake his principality. Is there any truth to that?" she asked.

"It is a common story," Istrella admitted. "Sometimes it is true, sometimes not. It is of no import unless he attempts to hire you for that expedition. Come to think of it, even then it probably would not matter so long as you were willing to join his army."

"And Noel de Phillip? He says he used to be a royal governor but he seems nothing more than a common thief to me," Persi commented.

"Noel is not a common thief at all," Istrella corrected her. "He is very good at it."

"I see" Persi nodded, "and Findo?"

"Who?" Istrella asked.

"The singer," Persi amplified.

"Minstrel," Istrella replied. It was another correction, but not sternly delivered. "I do not know him personally, but the Minstrels Guild is powerful and does not let members out who have not been found worthy and are very good at tracking down and punishing anyone who claims to be a guild member."

"Punishing?" Pflum asked. "A permanent solution?"

"Sometimes," Istrella nodded. "It's a rare occurrence. Very few would even attempt to masquerade as a minstrel. Certainly I have never encountered a false minstrel in all my years."

"Begging your pardon," Persi began, "but you look even younger than me. How much experience do you have?"

Istrella laughed. "I am over one thousand years old. My people live until they choose to die. You will find I am a wizardess of puissant and subtle skill."

"And Tariel of Monavia?" Persi asked.

"I do not know him," Istrella admitted, "but members of his nation are well renowned for their skills as archers. Yes, they are elves as well, but they are dark elves. They do not live in the light of the True Celestial Fire."

"What does that mean?" Pflum asked.

"It is a religious matter. Mind it not," she told him. "The Fire brings obligation, not privilege. And tell me about yourselves. What skills do you bring to our expedition?"

"I swing a mean wrench," Pflum replied facetiously.

"The odd bar of cold iron you carry?" Istrella asked. "Yes, a puissant weapon. It will serve us well against many of the foul creatures we might encounter and you, Persephone?"

"How did you know my full name?" she asked.

"You carry it proudly like a crown," Istrella replied mysteriously, "No, as though it was a robe of state. It is written on you clearly for one with the vision."

"What about this priest you hired?" Persi asked, more to get the subject off herself.

"Father Shlomo ben O'Riely? He is a priest in the service of the Goddess Clariel," she replied slapping her hand to her forehead again. "He will give us moral and spiritual guidance while he fights by our sides."

"We can always use a chaplain, I suppose," Pflum commented dryly.

"More than mere chaplains," Istrella corrected him, "the priests and priestesses of Clariel," hand slapped to forehead once more as she continued without pause,

are healers of incredible power and warriors of some certain skill. You will see for yourselves in the morning, but perhaps you should get some sleep before then."

"You too," Persi told her.

"Not I," Istrella told her. "My people are called the sleepless ones. It is not an accurate description. I sleep for a week at a time every two or three months as I feel the need. I will spend the time in restful meditation, however."

Pflum and Persi went up the stairs to their rooms where Pflum discovered Doctor Mac had not only locked the door to the room they shared, but could not be wakened. After several threats from the neighbors, Persi looked at Pflum and told him seriously, "You will be a perfect gentleman."

Pflum noted she was handling the effigy of Kaden she had brought with her. "You don't need a voodoo doll to tell me that. It holds no fear for me in any case, but I wouldn't cheat on Samantha either."

"She must be a remarkable woman," Persi replied after a long pause. "I must meet her when we return. Come on, we both need the sleep."

Morning came all too soon for Pflum. He stumbled downstairs while it was still dark to the tavern to discover the locals thought diluted wine was the perfect morning pick-me-up. "Just once," he grumbled to Persi, "I'd like to find a medieval-like world where they drink coffee." Not that he did not try to get something a bit more like coffee to go with his breakfast, but sassafras tea, he discovered, was even less satisfying than the dilute wine and small beer. What was worse, his descriptions of coffee left his companions fearing for his sanity.

"You burn beans, friend Pflum?" Ril na Rolach asked, "then soak them in boiling water and then drink that water?" The fierce warrior shuddered in fear at the prospect.

"Something like that," Pflum admitted. "Honestly, it sounds worse the way you put it."

"Your people must be brave, indeed, if that's the way they start their mornings," Ril replied.

They also thought his choice of breakfast was odd. Neither Pflum, Persi, nor Doctor Mac had a taste for the porridge which was basically a loose oat and bean concoction in a meat broth, but they were more than willing to eat the eggs and cheese that were put out on the table.

"But that's peasant food!" exclaimed Noel. "I swear by Clariel," he too slapped his hand to his forehead, "the innkeeper just puts it out because it's so cheap."

"Sometimes the simplest foods are best," Pflum shrugged. "Besides I was never much enamored of

kippers and porridge. To each his own, don't you know." However the breakfast board also included ham, bacon and small beef steaks, to which Pflum and Doctor Mac help themselves. Persi satisfied herself with some slices of fresh bread, still hot from the oven, with butter.

Father Shlomo showed up about halfway through the meal and helped himself to some of everything. "Feeling a bit peckish?" Pflum asked.

"This is my notion of moderation in all things," Shlomo confided with a wink.

Finally it was time to be on their way, except none of the locals in the party thought Pflum and his companions were suitably attired for an expedition. The others were all wearing armor of some sort, although Noel and Istrella's armor was fairly light-looking leather. So on their way out of town, they made a quick stop at an armorer's shop where they forced Pflum into a coat of padding and draped a mail hauberk over him, and dressed Persi and Doctor Mac in leathers. Fritz Wilhelm thought Pflum should be wearing a suit of plate as he and Ril were, but Pflum would have none of it, although as a concession to local style he finally agreed to wear a breast plate when they warned him about arrows.

"I still can't believe you would have gone on expedition with just those normal clothes of yours," Ril told him as they left town.

"It's a difference in fighting style," Pflum told him. "You might prefer to stand and slug it out in a fight, but I like to move about and just not be there when my opponent throws a punch."

"As you like," Ril na Rolach shrugged.

They headed out of town in a direction away from the baron's castle. "Shouldn't we be headed the other way?" Pflum asked.

"Don't worry," Noel assured him. "I know of a secret way in."

The truth of that assertion became apparent an hour later when they reached the far side of the large hill on which the castle sat. There, built into the hillside, was a cavernous archway with a wide road leading right up to it. "That is a secret way in?" Pflum asked incredulously. "Why doesn't the baron simply put up signs that say, 'Secret Dungeon Entrance this way?' It wouldn't draw much more attention than this must."

"The road does not go very far," Noel shrugged, "and most of the common folk around these parts do not know of it."

"Maybe they just don't want to know," Pflum considered. "A four-lane highway is sort of hard to miss. Well, if we're going, let's go already."

"Not yet, my friend," Noel told him. "We need to be patient."

"What are we waiting for?" Pflum asked.

"That," Noel pointed.

A large group of men and women was walking down the road toward the entranceway. They appeared to be as motley an assortment as the adventurers Pflum had hooked himself up with. Here and there among the seeming humans were anthropoid creatures with horrific fangs and claws, or wings and the apparent ability to breathe fire, and small wisps of flame and smoke issued from their nostrils as they headed for the entrance. Most of them were armored in the same way Pflum's party was, but a sizable majority wore simple blue coveralls.

"Janitors," Noel explained when Pflum asked. "No need to worry about them, they don't fight, it would just give them a still bigger mess to clean up. No, stay here, we can't go just yet."

A few minutes later a similarly sized column of creatures exited the archway and trudged back on up the road. "Night shift," Noel told Pflum before he could ask. "We can go as soon as they're out of sight. I suppose we could go right now, since they aren't likely to attack while they're off the clock, but you never know. There's always one or two go-getters in a crowd trying for the fast track to management."

"Some things are universal," Pflum muttered.

"Now we can proceed," Istrella told them.

Noel led them as they passed into the subterranean passage which was finished with plaster for the first fifty feet until it reached a tall, wide wooden door. Noel then put his ear to the door and listened for a long while. Finally he nodded to Fritz and Ril who stepped forward and opened the tall door.

The door opened silently and the party slipped inside. Once in, Ril and Fritz closed the door behind them

and stepped quickly back to the front of the party. Once inside, the nature of the corridor that they were in became far less refined. To Pflum's eye it looked more like a rough-hewn mine with wooden supports every few feet. The door had opened into a passage that went to the left and right. Without speaking, Noel indicated they should walk quietly toward the left.

The passage way continued for fifty feet or so before they started finding doors every dozen yards or so. At each door they would pause while Noel listened before Fritz and Ril burst into the room beyond. Most of the rooms were empty, although in one room they found several silver coins on the floor in a far corner.

"Where did everybody go?" Pflum asked quietly while they were resting in one of those rooms. "We saw dozens of people enter this place. Where are they?"

"I would guess they are not on this level," Istrella told him. "Not a big surprise, really. This is the entrance level for the baron's prison guards. They wouldn't be too likely to keep anyone here if they had a choice. I would guess that they are either on a higher level or a lower one."

"Lower, if there is a lower level," Fritz opined. "I've seen two other dungeons like this one. Odds are there is only one level between here and the castle and probably used for long term storage. Prisoners would be kept beneath us."

"You could be right," Noel agreed, "but we need to make sure there's no one on this level first."

"No argument there," Fritz nodded. "We can't afford to leave any surprises behind us." The others agreed and a few minutes later they continued on.

It took another two hours during which they checked out the other rooms on the first level. However, it was not until they reached a curling stone stairway that led both upward to the keep and downward to the lower level that they encountered any of the guards they had seen entering the odd dungeon.

There were two large guards, humanoid creatures with blue-black fur all over their bodies or at least on those parts that stuck out through their clothing. Fritz, Ril, Pflum, Taniel and Shlomo charged forward and quickly killed the two guards. Ril, Fritz and Taniel checked their pockets for change and appraised their weapons before stuffing them into the closest empty room.

"Are you sure you want to keep using that odd club?" Fritz asked Pflum. "This sword is nothing special, I'll admit, but its workmanship is passable."

"I'll stick to what I know," Pflum replied.

"As you will," Fritz told him, "although for a club, I prefer my hammer." He waved his weapon, a brightly polished hammer-shaped mace head on the end of a four-foot long pole.

"That works too, Max," Pflum replied.

"Fritz," Fritz corrected him.

"Oh, right," Pflum said after a moment in which he considered explaining his private joke, then realized it was more trouble than it was worth. "Sorry."

"Did we really have to kill them?" Doctor Mac asked while the bodies were being dragged away.

"It was that or let them kill us," Father Shlomo remarked unconcernedly, wiping his sword off.

"I thought priests preferred maces so that they wouldn't spill blood," Pflum remarked.

"Where did you hear that one?" Father Shlomo asked pleasantly. "Have you ever seen someone killed by a mace for that matter? It's at least as ugly and messy as being killed by a sword. For that matter, that steel club of yours..."

"Yes, I know," Pflum chuckled. "It really leaves a mark. Are you sure we should be going down those stairs next, though?"

"We're more likely to find your friends down there," Noel reminded him.

"You're the experts," Pflum shrugged, and then he caught sight of Persi out of the corner of his eye.

"Now what are you doing?"

"I just thought of a trick my grandmother told me about once," she replied. She held her hand palm upward, with the Kaden effigy resting in it. She muttered a few words in what sounded like corrupted French to Pflum and while he watched the little doll spun a quarter turn to point toward the stairway down. "Kaden is down there," she told them.

"How the heck do you know that?" Pflum asked her.

"My sword agrees with her," Father Shlomo spoke before she could explain.

"Your sword agrees with her?" Pflum asked. "Oh sure, why not. Let's move on."

They walked carefully down the long, winding staircase until they reached a landing where they met another five guards. This time Fritz and Ril were wounded before their opponents were defeated. Shlomo treated their wounds by waving his hands over them and softly chanting in a language Pflum had never heard. He was about to ask what that was about when he saw the wounds miraculously close themselves up and heal. "Hail Clariel!" Shlomo said at last, with a handslap to his forehead.

"Hail Clariel!" the others responded, with a chorus of similar handslaps.

Yeah, no kidding! Pflum thought silently. He looked back at Persi and Doctor Mac. Persi was taking the magic in stride, but Doctor Mac was visibly shaken. Pflum didn't blame him. The sudden immersion into a world in which magic works could come as quite a surprise, he knew. *I still wish DTT let pilots carry weapons.*

Checking the guard's purses they found still more pocket change, but the act disgusted Pflum, Persi and the doctor. "Do you really need to do that?" Persi asked. She was able to tolerate the killing, but looting the bodies afterward bothered her deeply.

"Sometimes that's the only profit you can get from an expedition," Noel shrugged. "Trust me, if they had killed you, they'd have picked your pockets. Oh man, that can be inconvenient later!"

"What?" both Pflum and Persi asked. Before they could receive an answer, however, there was a low-pitched growl from just down the stairs.

Looking in the direction of the sound, they saw a pack of lion-like creatures with wings and almost saber-tooth-like fangs bounding up the stairs toward them. This time only Tariel was in a position to fight them, but before they got within his range, Findo stated strumming on his lute and the beasts slowed down. They still approached, but now only at a walk and could be heard purring. Istrella raise one graceful arm, muttered an incantation and a cone of soft darkness spread out from her palm toward the winged lions. A moment later the creatures curled up and went to sleep.

"They should be out for hours," Istrella commented.

"Aren't you going to check their pockets too?" Pflum asked sarcastically.

"Animals don't carry money," Noel laughed. "You must come from a very strange land if you don't know that."

"Yeah, you'll have to come for a visit some time," Pflum told him, recovering somewhat, but thinking, *I just need to remember to lock up the silver and other valuables.*

They continued on down the stairs until they reached a broad cavern with a high ceiling. Pflum did a mental calculation and decided they were approximately three hundred feet beneath the no-name town they had started out from. There were torches all around the perimeter of the cavern, marking the entrances to over a dozen passages.

"By all accounts we ought to have met an army in here," Fritz whispered, sounding strangely disappointed.

"Be careful what you wish for, Short Stuff," Pflum whispered back.

He immediately regretted the "Short Stuff" remark, but Fritz turned around and grinned at him and replied, "If we're only getting pocket change then the larger the force we meet, the better."

"And if they win?" Pflum asked.

"Why would they win?" Fritz countered, puzzled.

"Never mind," Pflum just shook his head. "My boss always says I am too negative."

They explored the passages in a clockwise manner. In the first passage, they found a dozen cells in which prisoners were being kept. Noel, skillfully picked the lock on each door to release those prisoners. They were in various states. Most were relatively fresh, looking a bit scuffed, but not showing signs of having been beaten or tortured or even starved. However, some were very thin and weak and four had broken arms that had obviously been allowed to heal all wrong. All of them were suitably grateful for their release, Pflum thought, but none offered to stay and help look for Misty and Kaden. Nor had any of them even seen the new prisoners arrive.

By the time they had reached the end of the first passage over two dozen prisoners had been released

and sent on their way. The last room, at the end of the passage appeared to be a closet, filled with buckets, mops and a broom that appeared to glow and sparkle with its own light. "Janitorial supplies," Noel shrugged, when Pflum asked. "Nothing of any real interest."

"What about that broom?" Pflum insisted.

"Were you planning to neaten up a bit before we left?" Noel asked.

The second passage, clockwise around the cavern, only led to a single large room, in which they encountered ten more guards, one of which stood eight feet tall and had blue glowing eyes, bright red hair and deep yellow fangs. Pflum suddenly found himself wishing he had snagged that sword earlier, but did not hesitate to jump into the fray with the others. He immediately found himself facing a pair of human fighters, but near-simultaneous blows from Ril and Fritz killed those two, opening a gap in front of Pflum. He jumped through the gap and found himself facing the strange-looking giant.

The giant held no weapon, but swung a massive arm at Pflum, who ducked under the arm and swung his wrench upward between the giant's legs. The giant bellowed and an enormous blast of flame came out of his mouth. There were shouts of pain from behind Pflum, but he did not turn to see who had been hurt. Instead he swung the wrench again, this time at the giant's left kneecap.

The blow was not effective, but the sudden blast of water that hit the giant in the face was. The giant fell back several steps, then finally fell over backwards, unconscious.

Pflum turned back to see the fire that had shot out of the giant's mouth had mostly hit the men on his own side. The sword wielders made quick work of their charred opposition. Once again Father Shlomo healed the party's wounds while Noel went through the pockets of the corpses. "What about this one?" Noel asked when he got to the giant. "He's still alive."

"He won't wake up for days," Istrella told him, "and when he doesn't he won't remember anything from the past year. These fire giants don't react well to water."

"I wasn't all that charmed by the way they react to a steel club in their privates," Fritz told her acidly.

"Sorry about that," Pflum apologized. "I didn't know he would do that."

"I see he's wearing a large gold ring," Noel observed. "I guess we should grab that as well."

"I wouldn't" Istrella told him.

"Why? Does it carry a curse?" Noel asked.

"Sort of," Istrella smiled. "It's his wedding ring. Even you're not low enough to steal that."

"The hell, I'm not," Noel chuckled, reaching for the ring anyway. A ball of fire shot just past his shoulder and splashed against the far wall.

"No," Istrella told him firmly. "Leave it there."

"Aw, Strella," Noel complained. "If we don't take it, someone else probably will."

"Leave it, Noel," she told him.

"I think I'll help myself to one of these swords," Doctor Mac decided.

"Do you know how to use one?" Taniel asked him.

"Not really," MacKenzie admitted, "but I know how to poke one in someone's general direction, and maybe I can parry an attack just long enough to save my life."

"Choose this one, Doctor," Istrella told him.

"Why?" Doctor Mac asked. The blade she pointed out looked somewhat battered and nicked.

"It will work better than the others," she replied without bothering to explain further. She turned to Persi and added, "Perhaps you should arm yourself too."

"I really don't know how to use a sword," Persi admitted. "I would probably be more dangerous to my allies than to my enemies."

"Even so," Istrella persisted. "Choose one and hang it from your belt as I do. My sword skills are merely passable, but having the weapon there frequently saves me from having to use more drastic means to defend myself."

"Well, if you think it is a good idea," Persi decided. "Which one should I use?"

"Try that light one with the gilded hilt," Istrella told her. "It's lighter than the others and a bit prettier."

The next passageway around the circle held more cells. This time the conditions within them were appalling. The prisoners in some rooms were barely alive and the rest in no condition to attempt to walk out of the dungeon. Father Shlomo had his work cut out for him. Istrella's skills at healing were minimal, "Not my specialty. No one can do everything, after all, and the priests of Clariel are among the best. However, I can ease their pain while we wait for the good father to get to them. It is a simple spell and I sense it may be within your abilities too."

"My abilities?" Persi asked. "I'm not a wizardess."

"No, that takes many years of serious and dedicated study," Istrella agreed, "But we are merely going to put these poor souls to sleep. It is a simple spell that most young magicians learn first. It is not a particularly effective spell as the more strength one has, the easier it is to resist, but these people have very little strength left and this will at least help until Shlomo can heal them."

She showed Persi how to cast the spell and to her amazement it worked. It took over an hour, and the stench of the cells did not improve, but the people within them were healthier.

However, there was only so much Shlomo could do. "They need food and we don't have all that much on us. I could have healed them all, Hail Clariel," handslap to forehead, "had they been better fed, but the power to heal has to have something to work with."

"At least they are capable of walking out of here on their own now," Findo told him. "That was hard work for you and the ladies as well. Perhaps we should rest a bit before moving on."

They did rest at the mouth of that third, foul passage, although after seeing the emaciated prisoners off, nobody felt much like eating. Finally they moved on to the next passage.

They were some thirty yards down that tunnel when they heard a low rumbling sound from ahead of them. "Anyone know what that is?" Pflum asked uneasily.

Istrella cast a spell and the entire tunnel lit up as though lined with fluorescent lights. As their eyes adjusted to the brighter illumination, they saw a large round boulder that filled the passage rolling rapidly toward them.

"Aw heck!" Pflum complained as they ran back toward the large cavern. "That isn't supposed to happen until after we steal the idol."

"What idol?" Fritz yelled back over his shoulder.

"Tell you later," Pflum gasped out at him. The faster members of the party were pulling ahead of the slower ones and Doctor Mac was the slowest of the lot, so Pflum put his right arm around the doctor and helped propel him just a bit faster. They arrived at the cavern just in time to duck out of the way of the boulder, which continued rolling across the floor and into a passage directly across the flat cavern floor.

"Is that a regular occurrence, do you think?" Pflum asked, "or did we set off a trap?"

"I would normally say we set a trap off," Ril na Rolach considered, "but if I were setting up a trap like that, I would have placed the trigger closer to the boulder. The idea is to actually kill the victim, not give him a workout."

"But if that giant marble goes back and forth all the time," Pflum told him, "it's bound to come back while we investigate the passage."

"Not necessarily," Fritz told him. He walked back down the previous passage and a minute later they all heard the sound of Fritz's hammer crashing into the hinges of one of the cell doors. Finally, Fritz returned dragging the massive door and laid it across the opening of the passage way. "That ought to slow it down," he told them.

"If the boulder doesn't just go right through it," Pflum replied.

"Let us hasten down this passage, see what there is to see and then get back out again, just in case,"

Father Shlomo suggested.

They hurried down the passage, but it ended abruptly where a steep ramp led upward about fifty feet.

They hurried back out of the passage and managed to drag the door back away from the opening before the boulder returned to head back down the long tunnel.

The next corridor led to another series of cells in which the prisoners had obviously only been placed recently. It was in the tenth such room they opened that they found Misty curled up, whimpering in a corner. On seeing them, she ran into her father's arms, weeping uncontrollably.

"Good enough for me," Pflum remarked when she finally calmed down a bit. "Let's get out of here."

"We still need to find Mister Kaden, Pflum," Persi told him calmly.

"Uh? Oh, yeah, right. I keep forgetting him," Pflum commented unconvincingly. "Oops."

"We should also see to freeing all the other prisoners," Father Shlomo added. "The Goddess Clariel would want us to." He slapped his hand in a matter-of-fact manner to his forehead.

"Then we shall do just that," Ril na Rolach replied piously. Pflum rolled his eyes when he thought no one was looking, but reminded himself that they were each there for their own reasons.

They continued to open cells and finally found Kaden seated on the floor of his cell, but chained to the wall. "No one else was chained to a wall," Persi noted as Noel released him. "Why you?" Kaden said nothing but, instead just sat there, trying to ignore them. His clothing was ripped in a couple places and he had obviously been roughed up a bit, but Shlomo could find nothing wrong with him beyond a few contusions. Shlomo recited a brief prayer to his goddess and those bruises healed, but Kaden remained sitting on the floor and resisted their attempts to get him to his feet. "I do not understand," Persi admitted. "Even the prisoners that were near death were more responsive than he is."

"Evidently our boy really knows how to make friends and influence people," Pflum remarked. "So much so, they gave him special treatment."

"Let me examine him," Istrella requested. Without waiting for permission, she stepped forward and started casting a long incantation. After a few minutes she concluded. "There is nothing wrong with this one. He is just feeling sorry for himself."

"All right, Mister Kaden," Persi told him firmly in her usually calm voice. "Get up and start walking."

When Kaden did no such thing, she reached into her purse and pulled out the doll. "Up!" she commanded, jerking the effigy slightly upward.

Instantly, Kaden jumped to his feet. "Hey!" he protested.

"Start marching!" she told him and she used the doll to pantomime walking, "Left, right, left, right, left, right. You know the drill. Must have been doing it for at least a year or two by now," she added nastily.

"Okay!" Kaden complained, "I'm moving already. Knock it off!"

"Well done," Istrella commended Persi. "Nice use of sympathetic magic."

"I wasn't sure it would work," Persi quietly confessed.

"Why shouldn't it?" Istrella countered. "It was well thought out and executed."

They were just stepping back out into the cavern when a loud siren-like sound went off and the dim cave suddenly lit up as though the roof had been removed to let in the sunlight.

"What happened?" Pflum asked.

"Somebody set off an alarm, is my guess," Fritz told him. "Probably one of the prisoners went the wrong way. Time to start really earning our keep, I guess."

A few moments later, several dozen guards poured out of the other passages. "This should be fun," Talien remarked.

"It's a nice day for a battle," Fritz shot back, Ril laughed.

"These Romans are crazy!" Pflum muttered to Persi, but got ready to use his wrench again.

They backed up until they were just inside the passage they had just left, on the theory that at least this way they could not be flanked, and proceeded to fight. There was enough room for three to fight abreast in the passage and Pflum, Fritz and Ril stood side-by-side as they met their attackers who were as varied a lot of species as this world provided. Talien stood just behind them with his stout, recurved bow and whenever an opportunity arose he would shoot at one of the creatures. Findo, to Pflum's amazement, broke out his lute and started singing a song with a strong martial theme and even Pflum took heart when he heard it over the sounds of battle. The music seemed to provide both courage and strength. Istrella cast fierce offensive spells into the fray, often killing several with a single spell, but such spells were difficult to cast and could only be fired off every few minutes. Persi tried her new found ability to cast a sleeping spell and while Istrella had been right about it not being as effective when resisted, some of their

attackers succumbed to the magic anyway. Even Doctor Mac stood ready to fight although Misty and Kaden withdrew deeper into the tunnel.

When a sword blow struck Fritz down, Doctor Mac rushed forward to fill the hole in their defenses while Shlomo attempted to heal the dwarf. A few minutes later, however, a gray-furred creature stuck a spear through the doctor's chest, killing him instantly. Pflum and Ril spread out to try keeping up their front while Talien dropped his bow, drew a sword and stepped in between Pflum and Ril.

Next thing Pflum knew, Talien had fallen and when he took a split second to see what had happened, he saw blood flowing freely from Ril's left arm which now hung limply by his side. Persi pulled Talien's body out of the way, but Father Shlomo had no time to cast any blessings on him, whether the elf warrior was alive or not. He pulled his sword from its scabbard. Out of the corner of his eye, Pflum noted the blade glowed the green of springtime grass and that yellow green sparks shot off the point and edges every so often.

Shlomo waded into the thick of battle and killed an opponent with every swing of the blade, each swing cutting effortlessly through another attacker's neck even if other things like armor, weapons or still other opponents got in the way of the sword's path. The sight was so morbidly fascinating, that Pflum forgot to pay attention to the thin, rubbery warrior in front of him until that attacker's club smashed down on his head and the world exploded in a vivid burst of light.

Ooh! My Soul

Pflum found himself standing by a huge boulder at the edge of a vast desert. To his right a bright white light glowed in the distance, to his left a smoky grey light. Behind him stood an unassailable mountain and above him twinkled thousands of alien stars that he could swear were really just distant camp fires in the sky. He looked around thinking, *Too darned many theologies all mixed up together.* Out loud he remarked, "All I'm missing is the terminally anorexic fellow with pretensions of bringing in the crop. I wonder how many have opted to climb the mountain."

"**THE MOUNTAIN IS UNCLIMBABLE,**" a deep and hollow voice said from just behind and to the right of Pflum. "**YOU CANNOT CLIMB THE MOUNTAIN.**"

Pflum turned to see a Hollywood stereotype of a personified Death. Pflum gave him a long deliberate look up and down and finally chuckled, "What? No pale horse? Dude! You need to eat more. Send out for a pizza every now and then."

"**I HAVE HEARD SUCH BRAVADO BEFORE,**" the specter told Pflum, "**IT DOES NOTHING TO HIDE YOUR FEAR.**"

"I don't say things like that to hide my fear, Boneboy," Pflum shot back. "I say them because they help me handle my fear." Death, nodded His bony head in acknowledgement. Pflum continued, "So You claim this cliff can't be climbed, huh? It doesn't look so tough to me."

"**IN ALL OF TIME, NEITHER MAN NOR WOMAN HAS EVER CLIMBED THAT MOUNTAIN, AURELIAN PFLUM,**" Death informed him.

"Yeah," Pflum nodded, "but how many of them were rock-climbers? That cliff doesn't look so tough."

"**NONETHELESS, IT CANNOT BE CLIMBED,**" Death repeated, "**IT IS YOUR DUTY NOW, YOUR ONLY DUTY, TO CHOOSE YOUR NEXT PATH.**"

"Ah, so You want me to choose between heading across the desert or joining either the light or dark side of the Force?" Pflum asked.

"**IN ESSENCE, THAT IS CORRECT, ALTHOUGH THERE ARE OTHER PATHS AVAILABLE IF YOU HAVE THE EYES TO SEE THEM.**"

"Yeah, yeah, that's what I need," Pflum retorted, "a Death personification who never got past Philosophy 101."

"**PHILOSOPHY 101?**"

Pflum shook his head. "I thought immortals were supposed to have seen it all," he complained. "I expected a small modicum of wisdom or at least experience. So much for that idea. So You're Death,

huh? Does the job come with good benefits, 'cause I imagine the hours stink. I'm not impressed and it isn't bravado this time. So are you the actual agency that kills things on this cockeyed timeline or just the cosmic bus driver that gets souls from one side to the other?"

"I AM DEATH!" He replied. **"I AM THE INEVITABLE."**

"Uh huh!" Pflum nodded. "You and Your lovely bride, Taxes. Well, You can grab a camel and start shuffling across the desert if You like, but I'm more in the mood to try a bit of mountain climbing"

"I WILL NOT BE DENIED!" Death shouted, starting to exhibit signs of losing patience.

"And what are You going to do?" Pflum challenged him. "Kill me?" Death had no eyes, but the eye sockets of his skull gave the impression of staring incredulously. "Yeah, that's what I thought. You've already played Your hole card and saw me to this point. From this point on, it's all up to me."

"YOU CANNOT CLIMB THE MOUNTAIN" Death repeated. **"THERE ARE NOT ENOUGH HAND OR FOOTHOLDS."**

"That's what I have the giant spanner for, Bunky," Pflum replied. "I can chip out holds where I need them. Why do I still have the wrench, anyway?"

"IT WAS IN YOUR HANDS WHEN YOU DIED," Death explained.

"So you can take it with you," Pflum marveled. "Too bad I didn't die with a sexy blonde. Well, see ya. There's a mountain that is there, and I am going to climb it."

"YOU WILL NOT." Death continued to tell him.

"That's Your song," Pflum replied. "And I've heard it already. Are You actually going try to stop me?"

"WHY DO YOU WISH TO CLIMB THAT MOUNTAIN?" Death asked curiously.

"Because You said it couldn't be climbed," Pflum told Him. "What other reason could there be?" With that, Pflum slung the large wrench over his shoulder and started walking toward the cliff's face. When he started out, the cliff looked like it was only a hundred yards behind him, but as he approached, it seemed to recede. So by the time he thought he had walked one hundred yards, the cliff was still about fifty yards away. Another hundred paces later, it was still twenty-five yards away. "What's with the special effects?" he asked Death. "What is this? Xeno's power walk?"

"XENO?"

"Xeno," Pflum repeated. "He was an ancient Greek Philosopher, at least I think I got the tenses right. We're so far off the usual scale, from here and now it may be that he will one day have been an ancient Greek philosopher. Well, not your bailiwick, I suppose, although if I'd been in charge of building the Multiverse, you can be sure I wouldn't have arranged for an infinite number of Death personifications.

"Anyway," Pflum continued. "Xeno came up with a series of paradoxes, the first of which is the most famous. Well, obviously not so famous in these parts, but... He pointed out that in a journey from point A to point B, you first had to go half way and would have half the distance left to go. Then you had to go halfway again, but because this second half is also a starting point when you go half way, you still have half way to go again. Then again and again and so forth so that you could never really reach your destination"

"THAT IS NONSENSICAL," Death commented flatly. **"IT WOULD IMPLY THAT NOTHING TRULY ENDS. YOU MAY TAKE IT ON MY AUTHORITY THAT ALL THINGS EVENTUALLY COME TO AN END."**

"Exactly," Pflum nodded. "That's why it's a paradox. Obviously if you have a journey of one mile, all you need to do to complete it is walk a mile, whether in your own shoes or someone else's"

Now Death gave the impression of being very confused, **"WHY WOULD YOU WALK A MILE IN SOMEONE ELSE'S SHOES?"**

"To truly appreciate what he has to go through in life," Pflum replied.

"YOUR FEET WOULD GET VERY SORE."

"That's not the point," insisted Pflum.

"BUT UNLESS YOU WERE LUCKY AND THE SHOES FIT..."

"Look, forget the shoes!" Pflum told him. "We were discussing Xeno's first paradox. The thing is, he was not showing the world as it is, but as it is not. He was intentionally starting out with a false assumption, in

this case the concept of going half way, and showing how the assumption does not apply to the real world. I think he was trying to say you cannot change the world merely by looking at it in another way. Of course there have been many others since then who have said just the opposite."

"**A MORTAL CAME UP WITH THIS CONCEPT?**"

"Yep! Impressive, huh?" Pflum asked.

"**AN IMPRESSIVE WASTE OF TIME AND ENERGY IF YOU ASK ME,**" Death commented. "**DON'T YOU MORTALS HAVE ANYTHING BETTER TO DO WITH WHAT LITTLE TIME YOU HAVE?**"

"Evidently not," Pflum sighed. He turned and continued walking toward the cliff.

"**WAIT!**" Death called. "**WHERE ARE YOU GOING?**"

"To climb that mountain," Pflum shouted back. "Haven't You been listening?"

"**HAVEN'T YOU?**" Death countered.

However at just that moment, Pflum's progress toward the cliff changed in nature from asymptotic to direct and he reached the cliff face in just a few steps. He reached out to start climbing the steep rocky face and discovered that his hands slipped right through the rocks as though they weren't there. Losing his balance he fell directly into the illusory landscape. A moment later Death could hear Pflum's laugh, "Hah!" And then Death was alone once more.

"**TERMINALLY ANOREXIC FELLOW WITH PRETENSIONS OF BRINGING IN THE CROP, INDEED!**"

Mean Mister Mustard

Pflum opened his eyes to see both Persi and Father Shlomo kneeling over him, looking gravely concerned. "I just had the wierdest dream," he told them. Shlomo frowned slightly and Pflum asked, "Uh, what did I miss?"

"You were dead, Pflum," Persi told him.

"Yeah, right," Pflum retorted.

"You truly were dead, my son," Father Shlomo assured him, "but I was able to bring you and our other companions back through the grace and power of the Goddess. Hail Clariel!" He slapped his hand to his forehead.

"Hail Clariel!" the others echoed with a staccato of handslaps. Pflum privately wondered why none of them had either bruises or calluses there.

"Really?" Pflum asked. Persi nodded. "Hail Clariel then, I guess," he replied slapping his own forehead for good measure. "Why am I so hungry and thirsty?"

"Bringing you back to life takes even more out of you than mere healing," Shlomo told him. "After a good meal or two, you'll be as good as new."

"Been a while since I was good as new," Pflum replied, accepting a drink of water from Persi. "So that's what death is like? And I thought living was weird."

"What *was* death like?" Persi asked curiously.

"It was a nice place to visit," Pflum told her, "so long as you didn't actually believe you were there. I'll tell you about it some other time. Preferably after a bottle or two of Scotch. So, how long have I been

out of warranty?”

“Four hours,” Persi replied. “The others continued freeing all the prisoners and are waiting for us now in the cavern.”

“Did they find the treasure they wanted?” Pflum asked.

“They found a small store room with some interesting and possibly valuable objects,” Persi remarked, “but not the incredible treasury they were expecting.”

“Those things always improve in the telling,” Pflum told her as he got to his feet. “Well, let’s not keep them waiting. The least I can do is buy a few rounds of drinks for them back at the tavern. And I need something more substantial than goat jerky or whatever this dried meat is.”

Pflum was greeted warmly by the others, with the exception of Kaden, who kept grumbling that they ought to get out of the dungeon already.

“You were free to walk out on your own,” Istrella told him coldly. Pflum got the impression that over the previous four hours it had been an oft repeated conversation.

They were only halfway back up the winding staircase, when they encountered the returning night shift. “This is why I wanted to leave,” Kaden whined. The others, however, had no time to discuss the matter. The stairway was only wide enough for two fighters at a time, so Fritz and Ril took the lead with Taniel firing arrows through the gap between them. Father Shlomo chanted a long and involved prayer to his goddess, while Istrella cast fire spells and Persi used her sleep spell with a fair amount of success.

This time, however, the baron’s guards had the advantage and continued to press the party back down the staircase. Suddenly Istrella cast a spell unlike any other she had cast so far. It was as though a wave of white-hot fire formed just in front of Ril and Fritz and then rolled up the staircase and out of sight. The light was blinding and the brief screams from the guards in front of them were deafening, but when they could see again, the stairway was clear with no one else on it.

“Now that was a trick worth knowing,” Pflum commended Istrella. “Why haven’t you used that one before now?”

“It is a very difficult and exhausting piece of magic,” she explained tiredly. “I won’t be able to cast even the simplest spell for an hour or better. We had better get out of here before the baron finds something else to send against us.”

“She’s right,” Noel agreed, while Shlomo healed some minor wounds on Ril and Fritz. “We may have wiped out most of his dungeon guards, but he still has men-at-arms upstairs in the castle.”

“I don’t believe any of this,” Kaden muttered from behind the rest of them.

“Your belief is hardly necessary to the rest of us,” Findo told him coldly. Of them all, only Kaden had failed to at least try to contribute to the expedition. Even Misty had grabbed a short sword and kept it ready. She had not actually had to defend herself, but the native adventurers respected the fact that she was at least willing to fight if it came to that.

“Kaden,” Pflum suggested, “why don’t you grab a sword or something? You may need to defend yourself.” Kaden made no move to do so until Pflum added, “You’ll be totally exposed if something

decides to attack us from behind.”

They reached the landing at the level at which they had entered the dungeon and started heading toward the exit only to find their way blocked by an imposing man in gold robes trimmed in midnight blue. From the heavily encrusted gold band around his head, Pflum guessed this was the baron.

“How dare you invade my home and kill my servants?” the baron demanded.

“You talk big for a guy standing there all by himself against the small party that just put your personnel department to work overtime,” Pflum commented dryly.

“What makes you think I’m alone?” the baron asked him.

There was a loud crash from the landing behind them as the far wall broke open and a huge creature came through the resulting hole. It was ten feet tall in its glistening red skin. It had long, matted black hair, yellow eyes and huge bull-like horns protruding from its temples, but what caught Pflum’s attention were its goat-like hooves and seven-inch long metallic claws. It wore no true clothing, but seemed to garb itself in a form of blackness that could be felt more than seen and the stench of burning sulfur filled the air around it.

“A demon!” Noel screamed.

“You think?” Pflum asked even as Talien tried to shoot it. His arrow flew straight and bounced off the creature’s chest. “Try for a more sensitive target,” Pflum advised as Fritz and Ril frantically repositioned themselves.

“Demons do not have private parts,” Talien informed Pflum.

“I meant his eyes,” Pflum retorted.

Kaden was closest to the demon, however, and to his credit he attempted to attack it. The demon barely noticed the attack and casually back-handed Kaden, sending him flying down the long staircase.

Ril and Fritz, with more experience, stayed back and only attacked the demon as openings appeared. It was Father Shlomo, however, who knew best how to handle a demon. He began a long chant calling on the power of his goddess.

Persi tried her sleep spell on the demon, but it had no effect whatsoever. “Not on a creature that powerful,” Istrella told her.

The baron was not content to stand there and watch the battle. While their attention was on the demon, he drew a sword and cold-bloodedly stabbed Doctor Mac and Findo from behind. Misty dropped to her knees to see how her father was while Noel drew a long rapier from his belt and attacked the baron.

At the same time, Ril was slammed against the wall and Pflum jumped forward to attack the demon with his wrench, wondering anew why he had eschewed the sword Fritz had offered him earlier. Talien finally managed to hit one of the demon’s eyes with his last arrow. The demon screamed in pain and pointed a clawed finger at Talien. A bolt of lightning flashed out, hitting the elf warrior and killing him instantly.

Finally Father Shlomo finished his prayer to the Goddess Clariel and the demon was enveloped in a glowing nimbus of pure white light. The demon screamed once more then slowly faded away, leaving

only the echo of its scream in its wake.

Noel managed to skewer the baron's sword arm, but when he did, some kind of force traveled up the sword and threw the thief a dozen yards down the corridor. Istrella brought her sword to bear on the baron and they danced around each other for a minute or so until the baron reached into his robes and pulled out a rod of wood about fifteen inches long. He pointed it at Istrella and she collapsed immediately, although the rod itself burst into flame.

Pflum charged forward and swung his wrench at the baron. The baron parried the wrench and quickly thrust the sword through Pflum's chest. The next thing Pflum knew, he was back at the edge of the desert.

He looked around and saw Kaden, Findo, Taniel and Doctor Mac confronting Death. "Hey, handsome," Pflum called out to Death. "Did you miss me?"

"I WAS NOT EVEN AIMING AT YOU," Death replied, **"YET."**

"Cute," Pflum replied. "Funny I expected to see more of us here. I guess Istrella, Noel and Ril are still alive."

"So long as Father Shlomo does not join us here, there is hope," Findo pointed out. "I was just telling the others that, but you already know first hand."

"Yeah," Pflum nodded. "Although the Cryptkeeper here tried to get me to make a choice."

"It's His job," Taniel explained. "Can't blame Him for that."

"Fortunately," Kaden added, "Findo arrived just before Doctor MacKenzie and I started walking toward the light."

"Yes," Findo agreed. "Once you set off on that journey no power in the world can call you back." Just then Doctor Mac started fading away. "See? In a few minutes we'll all be alive again."

"How many times have you died?" Pflum asked curiously.

"Uh, five times," Findo replied, "uh, no. This makes it six times. Oops, here I go, See you on the other side."

Next it was Taniel's turn. "Hey!" Kaden complained. "What about me? I was here first."

"You fell down the stairs," Pflum told him. "My guess is that Father Shlomo hasn't found you yet." Then Pflum started fading out.

"Don't leave me here!" Kaden shouted at him.

Pflum woke up even hungrier and thirstier than before. "Kaden's somewhere down stairs," he told Father Shlomo.

"Fritz and Ril are retrieving his body," Shlomo informed him. "Better have something to eat and drink. You really need it."

“Yeah,” Pflum agreed. “I don’t die twice every day, thank God.” Father Shlomo raised an eyebrow at that. “I mean, Hail Clariel,” Pflum corrected himself. “What did I miss?”

“Not long after you died, Daughter MacKenzie killed the baron,” Shlomo informed him.

“Misty? You did that?” Pflum asked.

“He turned his back to me,” she replied. “Nothing to it.”

“Darned foolish of him,” Pflum remarked.

“The evil always make foolish mistakes,” Istrella told him. “That’s why Good always wins.”

“Not in my world,” Pflum replied, “but since it worked out in our favor, I won’t complain. What’s going on in there?” he asked looking toward the room behind the wall the demon had broken through.

“It turns out the demon was guarding the baron’s treasure room,” Istrella replied. “Noel is taking inventory. There’s more than we all can carry out, so he is determining what items are the most valuable.”

“I realize that half of us nearly died permanently and all,” Pflum commented, “but even so, considering the odds, don’t you think this all turned out far too convenient to be believed?”

“Oh, this was nothing,” Noel laughed as he rejoined them. “You should have been around the time six of us assaulted the Temple of the Green Liger last year. There were thousands of guards and acolytes to wade through, not to mention their evil priests, but in the end we prevailed and got away with thousands of gold pieces, magical amulets and other stuff including this sword of mine.”

“You made a haul like that just a year ago and now you need money again?” Pflum asked. “The buying power around here is incredibly good by my standards, so where did it all go?”

Noel shrugged, “Things happen, you know? Besides the money is just a way of keeping score.”

“If you say so,” Pflum shrugged. “For me it’s a way of paying the bills.”

Do You Want to Know a Secret

It was fully dark by the time they left the dungeon, loaded down with the treasure they had gleaned from the former baron’s fortune. However, they all agreed the vicinity near the dungeon entrance was no place to spend the night, so they made their way back to town and arrived at the tavern just before dawn. They did not divide the treasure up until the following afternoon.

Pflum was not particularly interested in his share of the gold, “The DTT doesn’t exactly encourage us to bring money in from other timelines,” he explained to Persi, “beyond certain limits, of course. It would destroy the economy, or so they say. It probably would if all time travelers did it.”

“It won’t stop me from bringing my share back,” Kaden told him.

“You don’t get a share, Mister Kaden,” Noel informed him.

“No? Why not?” Kaden asked.

“You were not a party to the expedition,” Noel explained. “You were the object of the expedition. We saved your life. Isn’t that enough?”

“Only when you put it that way,” Kaden grumbled.

“Well, you lot can have my share,” Pflum told them. “I’m not supposed to take it with me and besides I got what I came for.” He nodded at Kaden and Misty. “Kaden, you know that as well as I do. You can keep the sword though. Souvenirs are allowed within limits.”

“Oh, yeah,” Kaden nodded. “That’s pretty neat. Yeah, the sword’s good enough.”

“If you can’t take a share, Pflum,” Persi decided, “then neither can I. The employee manual specifically prohibits any Down Time employee from bringing back anything beyond souvenirs we intend to keep and we’re specifically prohibited from selling any of them for at least a decade.”

“Yes,” Pflum agreed, “and then only if our passengers don’t fill the quota with their own acquisitions. That’s actually a DTT law. Doc, you’re exempt, at least for part of it.”

“Like you, Mister Pflum,” Doctor Mac, “I got what I came for. I’ll admit that a scientist can always use more money, but if I went over the limit and got caught I could count on never getting another cent. Lady, gentlemen, you may split up my share as well.”

“It’s bad luck to take another person’s share from an expedition,” Noel replied. “We won’t either.”

“Then I’ll donate mine to the temple,” Pflum told them. “That’s allowed isn’t it?”

“Always,” Father Shlomo replied. “But you will have to deliver it yourselves. Besides, donors of a certain amount are usually graced with a prophecy direct from the goddess. It would be wrong of me to deprive you of that.”

“And you’ll have to wait until we’ve sold the artifacts we found just so we’ll know you got your fair share,” Fritz told him.

“I’m not all that anxious to know the future,” Pflum noted, “especially after our recent foray.” Father Shlomo gave him a look that brooked no argument, however and Pflum continued, “but if that’s the local custom...”

It turned out there was a set ritual by which people could make donations to the Temple of the Goddess Clariel. Halfway through it, Pflum decided he should have just taken the money and left it outside the Transit before leaving this world. Instead he, Persi and Doctor Mac had to walk with their donations to various stations before actually leaving the sacks filled with gold. At one station they were required to eat a small cookie and at another a single pistachio nut, leaving the shells on the table there for someone else to clean up. At the next station Pflum drank a single sip of something that tasted suspiciously like Scotch and finally a drop of pepper sauce that felt as though it would dissolve a neat hole in his tongue. At the final stop a priestess bade him to put the sack down on a table in front of her and then to sit down on a folding seat.

For a moment Pflum thought he was supposed to get into a staring contest with the priestess, but then the rest of the world disappeared and he was alone with the priestess. When he looked at her next, her blue-gray eyes were glowing.

“You have a long journey home, Aurelian Pflum” she told him.

“I wouldn’t care to try walking the distance,” Pflum replied wondering how she knew his name..

“Not in some directions,” she agreed. “In others you need not go far at all. You will never arrive home, however, if you do not travel along the path of the pendulum.”

“The path of the pendulum?” Pflum asked, but the glowing light in her eyes was extinguished and she looked normal once again and the rest of the temple could be seen around them.

“Excuse me, sir?” she asked in reply.

“What is the path of the pendulum?”

“I’m afraid I do not know, sir,” she replied calmly. “Should I?”

Of course you should, Pflum kept the thought to himself. *You said it.* Aloud, however, he told her, “No, I suppose not. Thank you.”

“Hail Clariel!” the priestess said, half in dismissal. Also neglectfully she slapped her hand to her forehead.

“Hail Clariel,” Pflum replied with a slap to his own forehead, thinking, *whoever She is...*

After Pflum was done he turned to watch as Persi approached the final station, wondering how the encounter would look from outside. As she sat down, however, both she and the priestess disappeared although they did not simply wink or fade out. Instead the area in which they sat became gradually darker until nothing within could be seen from outside. After a quarter of an hour they returned and the scene was repeated with Doctor Mac although he was only gone for a few minutes.

“Did the priestess tell you anything of use?” Mackenzie asked Pflum and Persi as they left the temple.

“Not hardly,” Pflum laughed. “She told me that I had a long journey home, I already knew that.”

“Nothing more?” Doctor Mac pressed.

“Only that I must travel the path of the pendulum,” Pflum replied, “whatever that means. Typical fortune teller mumbo jumbo if you ask me. Why? What did she tell you?”

“That half of what I know is wrong,” the doctor replied.

“Given the state of the physical sciences and how much new is learned every day, that doesn’t mean a lot,” Pflum commented.

“She also said that those who do, still work, but those who merely watch will impede our progress,” Doctor Mac continued. “A reference to Mister Kaden, do you think?”

“I hope not,” Pflum replied. “He isn’t as useless as all that, at least I hope not. Sharonne wouldn’t have

hired him if he was.”

“You and Miss Vincouer do not get along with him,” Doctor Mac pointed out.

“He and I have a personality clash,” Pflum shrugged. “I know I’m Sharonne’s best pilot and he knows he was the best at Chronologica. Problem is, he wants to think he’s the best here too.”

“Are you so certain he isn’t?” MacKenzie asked.

“He’s already proven he’s not,” Pflum remarked. “I know it, and he knows it. He’s resentful of the fact, of course. To tell the truth, I’m not sure how gracious I would be if the situation were reversed. I’m sure he’ll learn to deal with it in time, though. If nothing else, he’s getting the newest transit and I’ll be stuck on my old crate until she dies.”

“You love that old crate, Pflum,” Persi told him warmly.

“I do,” he admitted. “Life would get boring without going off on a tangent once in a while, and you have to admit the crate provides the most interesting tangents.”

“What did the priestess tell you, Miss Vincouer?” Doctor Mac asked.

Persi hesitated and Pflum told her, “You don’t have to tell us, you know.”

“No, that’s okay,” she replied. “It wasn’t anything I did not know already either. She merely told me that I travel on a path of my own choosing and that I have the power to choose a new path should I want to.”

“Took her long enough to tell you that,” Pflum remarked. “You were with her longer than Doctor Mac and I together.”

“She was rather verbose,” Persi told him calmly, “but that’s all it came down to.”

They stopped back at the tavern where Kaden and Misty were waiting for them. The atmosphere between them had chilled noticeably since their arrival on this strange world and they were seated on opposite sides of the room and intentionally not paying attention to each other. “Okay, kiddies,” Pflum called to them. “Time to go home,” he paused and added, “I hope.”

“Before you leave, Pflum,” Istrella stopped him by the door. She was standing there with the rest of the expedition. “We all noticed that unlike your companions you did not keep a souvenir, so we all chipped in for this.” She handed him a cloth-wrapped bundle. He opened it up to discover his wrench, but with a gold and silver inlay in the handle. The inlay was in the form of panels on both sides of the shiny steel wrench. The silver lines formed an intricate knot-work pattern against the gold background.

“Very pretty,” Pflum remarked. “Thanks, guys. You shouldn’t have. Wow, it feels a bit heavier than I remember.”

“It ought to,” Fritz told him. “We had the goldsmith add over a pound of gold and silver.”

“I thought we ought to have it set with some of the gems we brought back too,” Findo added, “but Ril pointed out that they might not stay mounted if you had to use the club again.”

“And we did not want to compromise its strength and durability,” Talien told him.

“It’s beautiful, guys” Pflum told them, “and I like the design. I’ve always been partial to interwoven patterns. I’ll think of you all every time I use it.”

“Use it in good health, Pflum,” Istrella told him, planting a firm kiss on his lips.

They arrived back at the Transit just in time to see the giant hand reaching out to pull the cord and turn off the “sun.” “You know, with everything else going on,” Pflum remarked, “this is the first time I actually saw that. Now let’s get going, because honestly, I don’t ever want to see it again.”

Here, There, and Everywhere

Pflum brought all systems on line and, to his intense delight; they all stayed comfortably situated with the ceiling directly up and the floor firmly beneath their feet. He checked the Transit’s settings and locked down the controls that governed their progress along the x and y-axes. Then he guided the Transit down the z-axis toward their home time-plane.

“This isn’t good,” Pflum remarked several hours later.

“What’s wrong?” Persi asked.

“I can’t home us in on the right home plane,” Pflum replied. “We keep flashing right past it no matter which direction we travel in. If I can’t lock the right plane down, I haven’t got a chance on finding our home line.”

“Can’t you use the tracer circuitry as you proposed earlier?” Doctor Mac asked him.

“Sure, but first I have to be on the right time plane. As we get close to our own, we’ll be able to pick up the tracers of alternative lines that are extremely close to our own. I won’t be able to tell our plane apart from an infinite other almost identical ones.”

“Wouldn’t that also happen even within our own plane?” Kaden asked. Previously his questions had carried overtones of arrogance. This time he seemed genuinely interested in trying to help with the problem. Pflum wasn’t sure if it was self-interest or if he had somehow grown up a bit, but Pflum welcomed the change.

“It never has before,” Pflum replied.

“When was the last time you had to use it to find our home line?” Kaden countered.

“Good point,” Pflum conceded. “In the field the chances of picking up different lines’ tracers are infinitely against us, but when trying to find the home point the best we can hope for is a range of lines and planes.”

“So what can we do to get home?” Persi asked.

Pflum thought about it but came up dry. “Keep trying, I suppose. We should have bought food to go on Moebiusworld, though. We only have enough for another day or so. We’re going to have to stop and find something. Good thing we’re fairly close to our own time plane. The laws of physics should be

compatible.”

“Maybe you should attempt to bring us back into the five-nines,” Kaden suggested. “Then we’ll know the food is edible as well.”

“I doubt I can reach five-nines,” Pflum replied, “but I can fine-tune us to within ninety-nine percent similarity with our home line. We probably don’t want to get any closer than that anyway.”

“Why not?” Kaden and Persi both asked.

“I never moved the crate geographically,” Pflum replied. “By those coordinates we’re still in our garage and I, for one, don’t want to test the part of the Blackfellow equations that talk about mutual annihilation if two Transits materialize in the same space. Do you?”

Pflum went back to his controls and did his best to lock them onto the time plane they were currently on. It was not perfect because the temporal accelerator would not allow them to stabilize along the z-axis. “Doc, admit it,” Pflum told him an hour later. “You never considered travel along the z-axis when you designed your accelerator, did you?”

“Of course not,” Doctor Mac replied. “Yours is the only Transit capable of doing so, and I didn’t know that when I spoke to Ms. Lachado about using it as a test subject. I wanted it because it was one of the very few with manual controls.”

“I suspect it would have had a similar effect on other Transits,” Pflum told him, “and they don’t have z-axis controls.”

MacKenzie’s first instinct was to deny that, but when his daughter agreed with Pflum, he thought about it and eventually admitted that it was possible. “Then we are very lucky, indeed, that we used this Transit for the experiment,” the doctor told them.

“Only if we get home,” Pflum remarked. “First we had better find something to eat”

“I suppose we could knock over a supermarket,” Kaden suggested.

“I thought of that,” Pflum replied, “but I would prefer to buy what we need. We have almost two thousand United States dollars from approximately 1959 in the vault – the coins were still made of silver back then. I plan to aim us at sometime in the 1960’s. If the world we land on is compatible enough, we can just buy what we need.”

“What about paper money?” Persi asked. “Would that not be more convenient?”

“A credit card would be even more so,” Pflum told her, “but I’m guaranteed not to have one that will pass even the most basic test. We have the money we have because my last two trips were that theater group and before that I had a bunch of academics studying the Creston timeline.

“We’ve found, though, that paper money is more likely to vary from line to line than coinage,” Pflum continued. “I don’t know why that should be, but it is. We can only establish credit on time lines we visit on a regular basis, of course, since you have to pay your bills to keep a good rating. That doesn’t happen very often, although by now the DTT may have mandated tracer units in all commercial Transits within the next ten years. Of course, the techies will have to figure out how to retrofit those units. I understand that’s giving them conniptions. In any case Sharonne’s been considering establishing credit on the

Creston line since it looks like we're going to be there for a long time now. Of course that also means establishing a bank account with which to maintain that credit. Our lawyers are wrestling it out with the DTT's lawyers, so it may never happen."

"Paying for a hundred dollars' worth of groceries in quarters, is not going to be convenient," Misty pointed out.

"I have silver dollars and half dollars too," Pflum admitted, "although the old cartwheels weren't used much in the Sixties, at least on our time line. Still, ten rolls of quarters isn't all that hard to tote around and in the Sixties, we can likely get what we need for ten or twenty dollars, tops."

He brought the Transit in for a landing, adjusting their location geographically so that they were at the end of an alley – Pflum's favorite time-travel trick - but as soon as he brought them back into phase with the external world, they heard a large explosion outside the Transit, followed by what sounded like automatic weapons fire.

Pflum activated the digital window just in time to see the walls of the alley he had found start to collapse. "Brace yourselves!" he screamed as he dived under the console and hit the emergency switch just as something large and heavy hit the field wall, shaking the Transit violently. The vibrations calmed down almost immediately and Pflum crawled out from under the console.

"I think we were in a war zone," Pflum explained. "Either that or a case of over-enthusiastic urban renewal; the buildings on either side of us were collapsing." He typed in a code into the console and over-rode the emergency switch. "Let's try that again. When the heck are we?"

"The read-outs have gone crazy again," Doctor Mac reported from his console. "I think we're in the future again."

Pflum double-checked the console. "Right," he nodded, "but only by a few years and we're much closer to our time line than last stop, if we were right about how to read what few gauges still work here and now. I'm going to try to bring us in for a landing just outside Down Time, Ltd. It'll avoid landing on top of an analogue of this crate, but maybe this line is close enough to our own that we can stop in at the grocery store around the corner and buy some supplies on the company tab."

"And why is that better than just stealing the food?" Kaden asked. "All you've done is change the victim. Instead of the store's owner losing out, you're planning to rip off our own employer."

"Not really," Pflum replied. "You're not looking at the big picture. Remember the Bunny versions of ourselves? There are an infinite number of our analogues trying to get home. An infinite number of us are also running short on food and if even a small fraction of us are planning to buy food on the Down Time tab, that number is infinite too, so while we're borrowing from Down Time here, other analogues are borrowing from our Down Time, or will in a few years time. It all evens out."

"Your logic is flawed, Mister Pflum," Doctor Mac told him, "but I do agree with your plan. Finish bringing us in and we'll get our food quietly and move on."

The others agreed, and Pflum landed the Transit right next to Down Time's building. He locked down the controls and turned on the digital window, but the window remained black.

"It looks like we took a bit of damage on that last stop," Persi observed calmly. "Are you certain we aren't sitting in the middle of the street?"

Pflum smiled, “Kid,” he started only to get a raised eyebrow from her. “Uh, Persephone, until a few months ago I never had that digital window. There are tricks and techniques accomplished with this console that no modern transit can accomplish. In fact modern transits need their windows to make final adjustments at their landing sites. I only use the window to see what the outside world looks like, but I never have to make all the minor adjustments most pilots have to. Stick around and I’ll show you how to do it too.”

“Does this crate have extra controls?” Kaden asked, looking at the console and the wall filled with gauges and dials as if for the first time.

“You know it does,” Pflum told him. “For starters there’s this whole bank over here for controlling our progress along the z-axis, but I guess you mean the fine controls for landing. You’ll be acquainted with the double dials for fine tuning a landing site, but what’s different are the readouts on either side of each of them. They indicate where material objects are before we come into phase. Before the digital window was invented, all Transit pilots had to fly their crates by the seats of their pants.

“Newer jobs have controls by which you preset your destination,” Pflum continued. “This baby can’t do that. I have to guide her in all the way even in an emergency. The only destination preset I have is our home terminus, which at the moment is exhibiting a decided lack of termination.”

“So you weren’t being what they used to call a control freak,” Kaden noted. “I’d wondered. There was a guy at Chronologica who wouldn’t use the automatics. He thought he could do the job better.”

“You thought I was like him, huh?” Pflum returned, “Well, I can see that. Frankly if he learned on a crate like this, I can understand why he felt that way, though.”

“He didn’t,” Kaden replied, “just thought he should have. Look, Pflum, I’ve been a pain in the posterior since I got here. I just want to apologize for that. Why don’t you let me do the shopping?”

“If you insist,” Pflum replied as they headed for the airlock door, “but I’ll go along, we’re going to need more than one can carry and the store won’t let us take a carriage out of the lot.”

Before they could leave the Transit, however, they were stopped in the airlock door by a figure who was waiting just outside. “Sorry, Pflum, but I can’t let you actually leave the Transit,” he said.

“Jack?” Pflum asked, somewhat surprised. Jack Laterus was Pflum’s previous partner before going back to school to earn his masters degree in Temporal Science. “Why is there a wall blocking the way out of the alley behind you for that matter?”

“That was your idea,” Jack told him, “and I’m here because you asked me to be. The point is, I’m to stop you from learning anything about the future.”

“You mean like my multi-great granddaughter is going to be a Transit pilot too?” Pflum asked.

“Hypothetically,” Jack replied carefully, “yes. That’s the sort of stuff you don’t want me to tell you.”

“So what’s with the wall?” Pflum demanded.

“To keep you from seeing whether or not the neighborhood has changed, of course” Jack told him.

“That takes the fun out of visiting the future you know,” Kaden remarked.

“Sorry, Kaden,” Jack told him.

“You know me?” Kaden asked.

“Never heard of you,” Jack replied dead-pan. “It was just a lucky guess. You forget we’re in the future, I’ve had plenty of time to meet you.”

“How much time?” Pflum asked, “and why couldn’t I have met myself?”

“Three years two and a half weeks roughly,” Jack replied, “and I can’t tell you why.”

“But you can tell me how far ahead we are?” Pflum asked.

“Of course,” Jack laughed. “How else are you going to be able to tell me when to meet you here?” He handed Pflum a piece of paper, “That’s the exact time and locus of your arrival. You’ll need it to set up the other half of this time loop.”

“How soon do I need to do that?” Pflum asked.

“That’s up to you. Just remember that if you never do it at all some other version of you will have to do his own shopping too. I have your food right here.” He turned and started handing them grocery bags full of food which got handed back to the others inside the Transit. Finally he handed them three pizza boxes, “These were my idea. I don’t know how long it will be before you’ll figure out your problem’s solution, but maybe you’ll think better on pizza.”

“Thanks, Jack,” Pflum told him. “One more thing and please tell me this one. Did the Cubbies win the World Series two years ago?”

“You’re kidding, right?” Jack asked, laughing. “Not even on the Creston line. I shouldn’t have told you that either, but Pflum, really... The Cubs? They’re my favorite team, but...” He kept chuckling even as he started walking away.

“Oh yeah!” Pflum shouted at Jack’s receding back. “Wait until next year! Come on,” he told Kaden. “We’ve got what we came for. Darn! I knew Rita was lying.”

“Maybe on her line it was true,” Kaden suggested.

“Nah,” Pflum shook his head. “She let that bit slip out a little too easily. I guess my crooked sense of humor is inherited too.”

Once more Pflum tried driving directly for the home point, but just as during their last return from the future, the Transit did not appear to have enough power to cross from Future to Past until they had journeyed a long way along the z-axis. Then whenever they had managed that, Doctor Mac’s instruments told them they were experiencing an enormous temporal acceleration as they approached the home point. “When we reach that point we are, for an infinitesimal amount of time, traveling forward and at an infinite rate of speed,” MacKenzie reported three days later, “making it impossible to land at the home terminus.”

“I didn’t want to hear that, Doc,” Pflum told him sourly. But just then he thought of something. “Doc,

you said you cannot turn off your accelerator while we're in the field, is that correct?"

"Yes," Doctor Mac replied. "To do so would likely cause a surge that might burn out every circuit in the Transit, stranding us at random in the continuum."

"At random?" Kaden asked. "Do you mean we could suddenly be teleported back to one of those worlds we've visited this trip or worse?"

"It would not be teleportation," the doctor replied, "but we would be moving at an incredible rate of speed as the regulator and impellers attempted to absorb the temporary, but anomalous energy surge. We would go an unknown distance in any or all of the six space-time directions. The Transit could even end up out of Earth's gravity well."

"Wait a minute," Pflum shook his head. "Energy like that doesn't just appear like magic and the power Down Time buys from the city won't send us that far up, so where would it be coming from?"

"From us, I'm afraid," Doctor Mac replied. "The decay of the accelerator's effect on the temporal field would cause some of our matter to be converted directly into energy."

"Then what's this nonsense about suddenly finding ourselves back on Moebiusworld or Monetworld?" Pflum asked. "Sounds like we wouldn't be in any condition to appreciate the trip. Let's just say the experience would be lethal and move on?"

"Well, of course," Doctor Mac replied, abashed. "I thought that was obvious. I just wish I knew why this is happening. It doesn't occur in any of the equations. If it did, it would have looked like a black hole mathematically."

"Like a black hole?" Pflum mused.

"Well, yes," MacKenzie replied. "No matter how far we have come since the early Twentieth Century, when dealing with time travel we can forget much of what we know about Quantum Mechanics, the effects are almost purely Relativistic."

"No, I know that," Pflum told him, "but my mind went off on a tangent just then. Wasn't it Einstein who said that the very act of observation changes the object that is being observed?"

"No," Doctor Mac replied. "That was Heisenberg. It was part of the explanation for his Uncertainty Principal. You see in order to actually see something; you have to bounce a photon off..."

"Time out, Doc!" Pflum stopped him before he could get going into full lecture mode. "I was just thinking about the prophecies you and I got back in the land of the giant hand. Hmm, I like that one better than Moebiusworld. Sorry; back on subject. You were told that those who actually do something are doing their jobs, right? But those who merely watch are likely to get in the way."

"More accurately, she said 'those who do, still work, but those who merely watch will impede your progress,' but I believe what you said may be essentially correct."

"Possibly," Persi cut in. "If Moebiusworld prophecies are anything like those on our timeline, interpretation is critical. When you restate it, like Pflum just did, you run the risk of misinterpretation."

"On the other hand," Pflum countered, "If you don't, you're likely to never understand the prophet at

all.”

“Well, that too, is true,” Persi conceded. “Where are you going with this?”

“Doc?” Pflum turned back toward MacKenzie, “What effects are your monitors having on the rest of the equipment by their observations of us and our progress, and can we take the monitors off-line safely?”

“Well, we can certainly turn the monitors off,” Doctor Mac replied. “They are not integrated into the accelerator, although we ought to land before attempting that.”

“All due caution, Doc, I appreciate that,” Pflum assured him, “but are those monitors effecting our progress or as the prophecy would say, impeding it?”

Doctor MacKenzie thought about it a long time before finally replying, “Maybe. Yes, it is a distinct possibility. Mister Pflum, will you bring us in for a landing. We’ll try this without the monitors. Misty, my dear, it appears we have a bit of work to do.”

“We should just be able to cut the power to the monitors, shouldn’t we?” she asked her father.

“Yes,” he agreed, “but let’s not take any chances. We’ll remove those instruments from the housing entirely and pack them back up in their cases.”

Pflum landed the Transit in the middle of a pink and blue sand desert on a world on which the atmosphere kept changing composition while they tried to measure it. “It doesn’t matter, I suppose,” Pflum remarked finally. “We aren’t planning to stick around long enough for it to matter.”

Get Back

When the MacKenzies were finished with their work, Pflum started up the Transit again and headed for home and once more slipped past the home terminus. However, this time when he turned the Transit around and headed pastward, they slipped as easily into the past as they had into the future. “I don’t think we’re experiencing that acceleration boost any longer,” Pflum told Doctor Mac, “But even with my modified controls, we’re moving too fast to home in on the one point we need to hit.”

“Follow the path of the pendulum, Pflum,” Persi told him.

“Excuse me?” he asked. “Did I hear you right?”

“Wasn’t that the advice you got from the priestess,” she asked pointed.

“Well, yeah,” Pflum shrugged. “Any idea of what it means?”

“I’ve been reading the manuals, you know,” she reminded him.

“I’ve noticed,” Pflum chuckled. “You may even know more of what’s in them than I do, by now.”

“That would depend on whether or not you have read them,” she remarked dryly. “I have been rereading the section that discusses the emergency return switch and how it works. We will obviously sail right past the home terminus even using the emergency return, but do you know what will happen then?”

“Either we’ll just keep heading out into the future or we’ll start swinging back and forth,” he replied easily, then realized where she was headed and finished, “like a pendulum... Yeah, you might have something there.”

“I think it will be like a pendulum, Pflum,” she told him. “According to the manual, the emergency return circuit is constantly checking our position from the home terminus and readjusting. It may take a while, but I believe we’ll get home that way.”

“You may be right,” Pflum acknowledged. “Doc!” he called across the room, “What do you think of that idea?”

“Miss Vincouer is correct about how the ERS works,” Doctor Mac replied. “At least that is how it works normally. It is our best shot at this point however.”

“Okay,” Pflum breathed. “Let’s try it.”

“I think you should bring the Transit to a halt first,” Doctor Mac suggested.

“Why?” Pflum asked. “That’s the first I heard that was needed.”

“Our velocity at the moment is homebound,” Doctor Mac. “Pushing the button now will only accelerate that progress. If you come to a halt first, that won’t happen.”

“What if I turn us around and head toward the past first?” Pflum asked. “Won’t that slow us even more?”

“Velocity-wise, yes,” MacKenzie nodded, “but first we would have to decelerate pastward and turn around. Starting from a parked position will work best.”

“You got it,” Pflum told him. Pflum turned back to the console and brought the Transite to a halt. “I’m leaving us out of phase,” he told the others. “Here goes.” He crawled under the console and hit the emergency switch. They could hear the impellers revving up and soon the gauges and screens informed Pflum they were underway. “Now let’s see what happens,” he told the others.

For the first hour, they continued moving homeward, but instead of slowing down as they reached the home terminus point, they continued to accelerate until they had actually overshot their mark, then they decelerated for the next hour, came to a halt and then started heading pastward again. They continued back and forth for the rest of the day. Finally Pflum yawned and decided to get some sleep.

“If we arrive while I’m asleep, give me another fifteen minutes before waking me up,” Pflum told them.

When he woke up the next morning he did a few calculations based on the Transit’s computer log. “The length of our swing through the continuum has gotten a lot shorter,” he told Doctor Mac. “I think this may actually work if we don’t run out of food first.”

“I estimate we will come to rest in five days,” Doctor Mac replied.

“And we have just over three days worth of food left” Pflum noted. “That’s not too bad, we can afford to skip a few meals. Though you would have thought I’d have told Jack to bring more food.”

“Perhaps on that time line, we thought of this sooner,” MacKenzie replied.

“Or maybe we needed the impetus to come up with this when we did,” Pflum replied. Just then there was an exceedingly short beep from the console.

“What was that?” Doctor Mac asked.

Pflum looked at the instruments, fearing the worst, but was unable to determine what the sound had been. Two hours later, they heard it again and on the third repetition, Pflum started laughing at himself.

“What’s so funny?” Kaden asked.

“That beep is our home line,” Pflum told him. “I forgot I’d left the tracer circuits turned on and we’re finally passing through the home terminus slowly enough to actually hear the beep when it detects the tracer units stored there. From here on in we’ll be hearing that sound roughly once every other hour.”

“Every other hour?” Misty asked. “Won’t we hear it more often as the length of our swing gets shorter?”

“Aristotle would have thought so,” Pflum remarked, “but a pendulum’s swing is dependant on its length and center of gravity. The swing might get shorter but the time it takes to get from one end of the swing to the other remains the same. That’s why old-fashioned grandfather clocks worked; the sweep of the pendulum not only operates the mechanism, but also does so at a constant rate.”

“That’s a pendulum in space,” Misty pointed out, “Are you certain such things work the same when swinging through the dimensions of Time?”

“I don’t see why they shouldn’t,” Persi remarked. “Movement through Time when unfettered as well we are should obey the same laws that movement through Space does.

“In the vicinity of our home time plane in any case,” Pflum remarked. “That may change further out along the z-axis where such laws are supposed to change. It might have been interesting to check that while we were on Moneworld or the Land of the Giant Hand, but along our course, at least the laws of physics as we understand them should remain similar enough.”

“I imagine we’ll all be sick and tired of that sound in five days time,” Kaden remarked.

“On the contrary,” Pflum countered, “when that sound stays on long enough for me to bring us in for a landing, I guarantee you’ll love it. Come to think about it, that may cut the time it takes down a bit. We only need to be on our time line for a few seconds for me to bring us in. Hey, maybe I did order enough food after all.”

Three days later the sound was just over three seconds as they passed through the home point. “Is that enough time to bring us in, Pflum?” Persi asked worriedly. They had been practicing the actions they would have to perform to bring the Transit home.

“Should be,” Pflum told her. “I’ve been timing it all for days now. The next pass will last three point two four one seconds, I want to cut power as close to the middle of that as possible just to be on the safe side, so I have the computer set to countdown the final minute. That ought to do it.”

“And if we miss?” Persi asked nervously.

“We try again,” Pflum told her. “Don’t worry I’m confident we’ll make it.”

“Why are you so sure?” Kaden asked him.

“Because our other analogues made it,” Pflum replied. “Okay, I know that’s not a guarantee that we will, but the odds are in our favor. Now if you don’t mind, I think I’ll finish my trip report. It will probably cause Sharonne to have a heart attack when I actually hand it to her at the end of a trip instead of one or two days later, but that’s just a chance I’ll have to take.”

Two hours later, Pflum was back by the console with Persi prepared to cut power to the impellors and then bring them back into phase. The others watched anxiously as the computer counted down the seconds. One second after the beep started, Persi cut out the impellors, followed half a second later by Pflum as he brought the transit back into phase with their home world and cut power to the regulator. The next thing any of them knew, the arrival alarm could be heard ringing and they were all shouting in joy and relief.

Pflum, strolled over to the Home door and opened it up. Only then was he able to believe they were finally home. He saw Ken Jackson and an assistant running toward him. “Where have you all been?” Ken asked.

“You would never believe me,” Pflum told him, and Kaden stepped out of the Transit with his sword slung over his shoulder.

Ken stared at that for a moment then turned back to Pflum. “Sharonne’s been sick with worry, you know.”

“We got back as soon as we could,” Pflum replied “We had to come back the long way around this time and if we hadn’t figured out what the prophesy meant we might have still been out there.”

“Prophesy?” Ken asked. “Maybe I don’t want to know. I do want to know what caused all those really odd noises we’ve been hearing here the last few days especially.”

“Doctor Mac’s accelerator and some of the modifications I had to make, probably,” Pflum told him. “I made notes on those mods, I’m sure you can undo what I did, but please, whatever you do, make sure all his toys have been properly removed before my next trip.” Misty left the transit just then with her travel bag.

“Misty!” Kaden called her. “Want to get a cup of coffee?”

She looked at him as though he was leaving a slime trail. She had not been at all friendly toward him since the Moebiusworld. “Get lost!” she told him. Kaden stared at her as she stomped away.

“So much for young love,” Pflum remarked as Persi stepped out to make a call to the maintenance service.

“Is Kaden okay?” Ken asked softly.

“He’s improving,” Pflum shrugged. “He survived me anyway; he’ll probably be just fine. Come on; let’s get my crate detoxified before the cleaning crew shows up.”

An hour later, Ken and Doctor Mac left the transit and Pflum had just finished his report and was sitting

back with a book at the large conference table inside his Transit while waiting for the cleaners to arrived.

Persi, having just packed her duffle bag sat down opposite him. When Pflum looked up a moment later she told him calmly, “That was fun. Let’s do it again.”

“I’m glad you think so,” Sharonne told her from the Transit’s doorway, “because tomorrow I need you and Pflum to take a tour group back to opening day at the Coliseum.”

“I hope the tourists realize this is not some sort of toga party,” Pflum remarked.

“If they don’t, I’m sure you can handle it, Aurelian,” Sharonne told him.

Pflum was immediately on guard just as every time Sharonne used his given name, but then, glancing at his gold-encrusted spanner, he decided this time she was right. After this last trip, maybe he could handle anything. After the Land of the Giant Floating Hand, First Century Rome was a normal day in the park, wasn’t it?

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