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Down Time, Ltd. - Book 4

Show Time!

by

Jonathan Edward Feinstein

Show Time!

Author's Foreword

I thought the second and third books of this series were too similar in nature so after finishing *Time Out* , I promised not to write another one until I could come up with something different. I think the following story definitely qualifies.

The strange thing about this series is that I often finish a story and wonder not what comes next for Aurelian Pflum and his crew, but for the people they leave behind. I doubt I'll ever write such a story since the worlds Pflum finds himself on are just too strange. In *Taking Time* , for example, Pflum and Jack were stranded on a flat Earth where the sun was replaced by a giant bird of fire – try not to stand under that thing when it feels the need to relieve itself – and the people were sentient anthropomorphic birds. It worked that time, but to have to explain that before starting a new story about the bird people would be too much, I think.

They went to several worlds in *Time Out*, including one that appeared to have been painted and another that had been bent into a Moebius strip and on which magic worked. Let's not even start to discuss species...

This time the world is inhabited by normal humans. The laws of physics are in no way out of the ordinary. Hey, even gravity works in the normal way, and yet, it's another hard to explain world outside the context of the *Down Time, Ltd.* series. How? That would be telling. Just relax and enjoy the trip.

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

Jonathan E. Feinstein
Westport, Mass.
January 1, 2007
Show Time!

O tempora, O mores! - O the times, O the customs! (Cicero)

We are in the same tent as the clowns and the freaks –

that's show business. (Edward R. Murrow)

Another Op'nin' Another Show

“It’s not the same,” Aurelian Pflum complained.

“Two and a half centuries later? Did you expect it to be?” Samantha di Medici asked.

“I was hoping, yes,” Pflum admitted. “When we were here in the Twentieth Century, Lesvos had its own unique character. Now in their zeal to be a tourist haven, the locals have made it an almost exact copy of what Hollywood thinks Greece was like back then.”

“Everything changes, Pflum,” Sam replied. “Are you sorry we came here?”

“No, I suppose not,” Pflum shook his head. “Just a bit disappointed. You would think by now I’d know better. You’re right; everything changes and as a time traveler I see that more than most. Still I had hoped something of 1930’s Lesvos had survived.”

“The ouzo is still good,” Sam pointed out, holding up a glass half-filled with a white translucent liquid.

“So it is,” Pflum smiled, “and you’re still here as well. Maybe it hasn’t changed all that much after all.”

They sat in the late afternoon sun quietly drinking their ouzo for another few minutes until Sam broke the silence again. “So, was she really your multi-great granddaughter?” She was referring to Pflum’s recent misadventure in which his Transit, a device via which people could visit other times and places, had done the theoretically impossible and traveled to the future.

“She said she was,” Pflum admitted. He didn’t like talking about that trip. It was better, he felt, to leave it in his own relative past rather than dwell on it. As Pflum considered it, he realized he didn’t much like talking about most of his time journeys. He used to like swapping time-travel tales, but some time during the last decade or so he had become content to keep his work apart from his social life. That was not easy as his girlfriend was a Transit pilot too although she was also an agent for the FBI. “She also said the Cubs would win the Series this fall, so I’m not sure how reliable anything she said was.”

Sam laughed, “If she knew anything about you at all, Pflum, she would have known what a baseball fan you are. And if she inherited anything from you, I think your sense of humor might be your most defining trait, sour though it is at times.”

“Terrific,” Pflum muttered, taking a large slug of ouzo. He immediately regretted that. The ouzo was too good to gulp; it was something to sip gently and savor. He listened to Sam’s gentle laugh at his acidic reply and immediately felt better.

“So tell me more of that trip,” Sam requested. “I’m sorry to have missed Moneworld.”

“That was something to see,” Pflum admitted. Moneworld, as he had dubbed the place, was an entire stretch of reality that looked as though it had been painted by an impressionist artist. “But the air was slow poison; we couldn’t stay there very long.”

“Maybe you should take a camera with you on your trips,” Sam suggested. “At least that way more people will believe your wild tales.”

“You believe them,” Pflum countered. “That’s good enough for me.”

“I was part of one of those wild tales,” Sam pointed out.

“Hardly the wildest,” Pflum countered. “Compared to Birdland or Moebiusworld, the Creston case was practically normal. But enough of my work. We came here to unwind and leave all that behind for a few days. Besides you never tell me about your missions.”

“You know I can’t,” Sam replied, “but really, they’re nowhere as exciting as yours are.”

Pflum was about to say something else, but as he opened his mouth, his telephone began playing a disgustingly cheerful tune. Telephones had grown increasingly smaller over the centuries until they had attained the size of a small coin. Some people had chosen to have them implanted, just behind their ears, but enough medical experts had warned against such a procedure that Pflum had chosen the “old-fashioned” expedient of wearing one that was also a wrist watch, a radio, and a television although, except to check the news, he rarely used it like that.

Extending his thumb and pinky finger in what would have seemed like a parody of a telephone handset to an earlier generation, he spoke into his small finger, “Hello?”

“Mister Pflum,” Persephone Vincouer’s lightly accented voice spoke through his thumb. Persi was Pflum’s current intern-assistant. A tall dark-skinned woman from Dominica in the eastern Carribean, she displayed more self-confidence and poise than most nineteen-year olds. “Ms. Lachado says you are needed back in Boston as soon as possible.”

“Aw heck!” Pflum exclaimed, “I was supposed to have all weekend.”

“I am sorry, Mister Pflum,” Persi replied, “but this really is an emergency.”

“And what is so flaming important it can’t wait another forty-eight hours?” Pflum demanded. Pflum had long since stopped trying to get Persi to stop calling him “Mister.” It was just the way she was, he had decided.

“Ms Manovich’s Transit has gone missing,” Persi replied softly, unruffled by the storm in Pflum’s voice.

“What do you mean, ‘missing?’” Pflum asked. “Did it disappear from its bay?”

“No, Mister Pflum,” she replied. “It is still there, sort of, but when we opened the door...”

“You opened the door?” Pflum asked, amazed. “While it was in the field? That’s suppose to be theoretically impossible.”

“Is it?” Persi asked. Unlike most of the interns Pflum had worked with, Persi’s field was anthropology, not temporal studies. “It appears someone needs a new set of theories then.”

“I suppose,” Pflum nodded thoughtfully, “but if you could open the door...”

“Mister Pflum,” Persi admonished him, “I am sure you know more about Transits and how they work than I do. The reason I called was that Mister Jackson and Ms. Lachado were too busy investigating Ms. Manovich’s Transit. And really, you do not have much time. There is a plane leaving in just over an hour. Your tickets are waiting at the baggage check counter for both you and Ms. di Medicci.”

“An hour?” Pflum demanded, “That doesn’t leave us much time.”

“No, it does not,” Persi replied with maddening calmness, “and if you do not hurry you will not have time

to buy a bottle of ouzo from the duty-free shop.”

“So much for getting the lemur waxed,” Pflum told Sam after assuring Persi he was on his way. “Duty calls and evidently Sharonne thinks you might want to take a professional interest.” He quickly finished his drink and got to his feet.

“As a Transit pilot, or an FBI agent?” Sam asked, finishing her own drink while Pflum left more than enough money on the table to cover their tab and a healthy tip for the waitress.

“Possibly both,” Pflum told her and went on to repeat his conversation with Persi as they rushed back to their hotel to collect their bags.

Persi met them at Logan International Airport a few hours later and rushed them into what turned out to be Sharonne Lachado’s car. Sharonne was the owner/president of Down Time, Ltd., the company for which Pflum worked and her car reflected the recent success Down Time, Ltd. had enjoyed. Pflum was surprised Sharonne had given the keys to Persi and decided it was an indication of just how dire the situation might be.

“Boston’s traffic situation hasn’t improved during our absence,” Pflum observed.

“We were only gone half a day if that, Pflum,” Sam reminded him. “And it is rush hour now.”

“Now there’s something I have never understood,” Pflum remarked. “According to the latest statistics, over seventy-five percent of the population works from home these days. Why do we still have a rush hour?”

“Because people still go shopping during the day,” Sam replied patiently, “and because nearly twenty-five percent still have to go into the office.”

“Did you enjoy your trip, Ms. di Medici?” Persi asked, obviously avoiding asking Pflum the same question.

“What little there was of it,” Sam replied, “and please call me Sam, Persi.”

“Yes, Ms. di Medicci,” Persi replied predictably.

“Persi?” Pflum asked as they entered the ancient Ted Williams tunnel, “do you ever address anyone by their first name?”

“My brother,” Persi remarked, “some friends.”

“Aren’t we friends?” Pflum asked.

“You are also my boss,” Persi reminded him.

“Sam isn’t,” Pflum countered.

“This is true,” Persi considered, “but she is my boss’s girlfriend. I will think about that, however.”

“Do that,” Pflum grumbled, still somewhat miffed for having been called back from what he had hoped would be a romantic weekend.

It took nearly an hour to reach the offices of Down Time, Ltd., but when they did, Persi drove the car directly into the empty garage-like bay beside the company's three Transits. Sharonne and Ken Jackson came out of Jeanette's Transit to greet them.

"You're going to miss this parking spot when the new Transit arrives," Pflum told Sharonne. She had commissioned a new Transit some months earlier, but it was still under construction.

"I'll just have to learn to live without it," Sharonne told him flatly.

"Hi, Pflum!" a familiar voice greeted him from inside Jeanette's Transit. Normally when a Transit was in the field, the back end of the "crate" seemed to fade out and disappear. An experienced observer could estimate just when a Transit was, by where the walls began to fade, in fact. The closer to the "Home" end of the Transit the walls started to disappear the further back they were. Jeanette's Transit, however, seemed to be entirely within its bay, even though Pflum knew that not to be the case.

"Jack?" Pflum asked. "What are you doing here?" Jack Laterus, a graduate student at the Case Institute of Technology, had been Pflum's previous intern.

"I hired him back for the duration, Pflum," Sharonne informed him. "Doctor Mackenzie and his daughter should be here soon as well. I feel we need all the help we can get."

"Why?" Pflum asked. "Jeanette, whenever she is, has tracers attuned to my Transit. It should be simple enough to go back and retrieve her."

"Assuming she is still on this time plane," Jack told him. "I know your Transit is the only one to exhibit significant slippage on the Z axis of Time, but a catastrophic failure might accomplish the same in any crate."

"Catastrophic?" Pflum asked. "If it was that bad, are we even sure Jeanette is still alive?"

"No, Aurelian, we're not," Sharonne told him tightly, "and thank you so much for reminding us of that."

"Sorry," Pflum apologized instantly. No one knew for certain what would happen if a Transit failed completely while in the field, but there were several theoretical scenarios. One such was that there would be a release of energy so great as to destroy a significant portion of the world along the temporal axis between the Transit's current position and its bay. Happily, that had not happened. Another more widely accepted possibility was that the entire Transit would contract temporally until it appeared on a world line somewhere roughly equidistant from its two terminus points. However, that too did not seem to have occurred. "So what do we have here?" Pflum asked at last.

Ken Jackson, Down Time's chief engineer, replied, "As you can see, the entire outside of Jeanette's crate rematerialized here, but if you'll step inside, you'll see that's all that is here – the outside of the box. It's just an empty box. Everything, even the inner walls and circuitry, is missing."

"So that's it?" Pflum asked. "No connection to her at all?"

"Maybe," Jack replied. "There's a small trickle of current draining out of the terminus circuitry. It might just be radiating into the air, but I think it's being conducted out along one or more temporal axes. If so, Jeanette's Transit is not entirely cut off from us."

“But it’s out there naked somewhere,” Pflum concluded. “That’s bound to be conspicuous. So why aren’t we loading up my crate right now?”

“We’re still waiting for Doctor Mackenzie,” Sharonne reminded him. “He thinks he may be able to ascertain whether or not Jeanette is still on this time plane. And if she isn’t, he feels he’ll know just how far off along the Z axis she is.”

“With an infinite number of planes to search otherwise, that could speed up the process incredibly, Pflum,” Jack added.

Yeah, no fooling, kid,” Pflum replied. “Well, what can I do while we’re waiting for Doctor Mac and his bag of tricks?”

“We’ll continue prepping your Transit,” Ken told him. “I was about halfway through the regular checkup when this happened, but I think we’ll have to take some shortcuts this time.”

“Uh,” Pflum hedged, “not a good idea. My crate hasn’t been the same since we got back from Moebiusworld. It’s been doing all sorts of distressing things. That’s why you were planning to take the next week to overhaul her. Remember?”

“Plans change, Aurelian,” Sharonne informed him. “Why don’t you and Persi start in your pre-trip checklist. You won’t be leaving before tomorrow anyway and this way, if you find a problem, we’ll have the time to fix it.”

Pflum bit back a remark about all the problems he had been reporting over the last few weeks and led Persi down to the last Transit bay. “Sam,” Sharonne continued, “I was hoping the FBI might take a personal interest in this case.”

“We don’t usually engage in search and rescue missions,” Sam replied. “That’s the Military’s job most of the time, but I’ll talk to my supervisor. If nothing else he may let me have a week or two off.”

Doctor Artemus Mackenzie and his daughter Misty arrived a few minutes later with several crates filled with arcane instruments. “Very interesting case,” Mackenzie opined as Sharonne showed him the empty shell of Jeanette’s Transit. “Yes, very interesting. Hmm, a slight prickling at the roots of my hair, what little is left, that is,” he added. “Olivia, dear, could you bring me the neutrino scanner?”

Misty opened one of the crates and after a moment of fumbling extracted what looked like a double loop of metal attached to long handle. “This doesn’t really scan for neutrinos,” Doctor Mac explained, “but it does emit a small stream of them which it uses to track other sorts of energy flows.” He spent another few minutes waving the odd device all around the empty room. “Well, you’re losing more energy into the temporal distance between here and now and whenever the Transit is than is actually getting there, but I do detect the signature pulse of a temporal regulator. The machine is still working for now at least, but I doubt it can get back here under its own power.” Meanwhile Misty Mackenzie was using another instrument and making notes about what she found.

“Will it be safe to turn off the regulator in the field in order to haul it back here?” Sharonne asked worriedly.

“Normally, I would say definitely not,” Misty replied when it became obvious her father was too engrossed with his readings to answer, “and if there is a choice I would recommend carefully dismantling as much of the Transit as possible before turning it off, but there is so little power actually reaching the

regulator and traveling back here, that more likely than not, nothing out of the ordinary will happen. Right, Dad?"

"Hmm?" Doctor Mac asked distractedly. "Oh yes, probably. Ms. Lachado, I would like to place sensors all around the outside walls of this bay and on those of Mister Pflum's Transit as well."

"You want what?" Pflum demanded as he reentered the room that had been Jeanette's Transit. "Not a chance!"

"Be reasonable, Aurelian," Sharonne encouraged him.

"I am being reasonable," Pflum maintained. "Every time someone places sensors on my Transit, I have trouble."

"These would be passive sensors, Mister Pflum," Doctor Mac explained, "not active ones like the Department of Temporal Transportation installed. They would not even interface with your instruments like the ones we used last time I was here."

"Passive sensors?" Pflum remarked. "Hey, Jack!" he called out behind him. "Doctor Mac wants to put passive sensors on my crate. What do you think?"

"What are you talking about, Pflum?" Jack asked, coming up behind him.

"Doc," Pflum turned to Doctor Mackenzie, "Jack here is a fairly sharp temporal scientist too. Tell him what you have in mind. He knows my crate nearly as well as I do. If he thinks it's safe, you can go ahead."

"Pflum," Sharonne told him dangerously, "you may be the pilot, but that Transit belongs to me."

"That's true," Pflum agreed readily, "but as the pilot, it's my job to make sure I can bring her back safely."

"Um, all right, Pflum," Sharonne nodded. "Have it your way."

"On another note, what are those new gizmos on the field door?" Pflum asked in a less challenging tone.

"The latest in digital locking mechanisms, Pflum," Ken Jackson told him. "According to the manual their biometric keys make them over one hundred times more secure than the old retina scanners."

"How do you jimmy a retina scan lock?" Pflum asked pointedly.

"You can force a person to open one at gun point," Ken replied.

"And these digital locks?" Pflum countered. "They sound like they have the same limitation. And look to be slower to use. But why bother with these? My old lock was the old-fashioned seven tumbler type."

"New DTT regulations," Ken admitted. "We're required to install them in all Transits. We didn't install a retina scanner because it was only required on new Transits. This time they've decided not to grandfather the older models. Your doing, perhaps, Pflum?"

"I don't see how," Pflum replied. "We didn't have any lock-related problems on Birdland or anywhere

else I chauffeured our buddies from the DTT. Any other new surprises?"

"Not that I can think of," Ken shrugged. "I couldn't find the source of any of those minor problems you reported the other day, but I replaced some of the older impeller circuitry just in case."

"Okay," Sam announced, returning to the Transit garage at last, "I've been assigned to the mission. My boss agreed that while the FBI does not normally conduct search and rescue ops, this would be good experience especially since I may have to conduct similar missions to track down tracer units."

"Are you piloting one of the Transits from which tracers have been distributed to the commercial travel agencies?" Jack asked curiously.

"Better," Sam replied. "My crate is scheduled to be fitted with some of the new tunable tracer trackers. We'll be able to follow any tracer unit so long as we know the radiation signature."

"I wasn't aware those devices had been perfected yet," Jack mused.

"They haven't," Doctor Mac told them. "I'm still working on them and not making a lot of progress."

"Is it a problem to get them to retune?" Pflum asked interestedly.

"No, that's easy enough," Doctor Mac shrugged. "The problem is, you can either lock down the signature they will trace, or you can make it changeable, but not both. They won't stay tuned where you want them to. I've decided to scrap the whole design and start over."

"So it may be a while," Sam shrugged. "That's okay. I have no shortage of other work."

Begin the Beguine

"What does the FBI need a Transit for anyway?" Jack asked after a long silence. Back in Jeanette's Transit, Ken Jackson and the Mackenzies were busily working with some of the doctor's arcane equipment.

"The Bureau wants to be able to pursue criminals like the Crestons with its own resources rather than have to rely on the talents of time pilots who are not agents," Sam replied, then hastily added, "Not that we had any complaints with you and Pflum, of course."

"You do realize just how infrequently cases like that of the Crestons come up, don't you?" Pflum asked. "I mean, that was the first and only time any criminal tried to escape into the past and, with all the publicity the Bureau got by finding them and dragging them back, I doubt many will try that again."

"Shh!" Sam retorted with a finger to her lips. "Just don't tell my boss that. He sees it as the next big problem, and as long as he does, I get a bonus for every trip into the past."

"Good point," Pflum admitted. "When and where did Jeanette go and why?"

“She and Barry Waczinsky,” Sharonne began.

“Who?” Pflum cut in.

“Jeanette’s current intern, Aurelian,” Sharonne replied, annoyed at the interruption. “They went to 1983 Boston to buy a video cassette recorder for a client who recently discovered an old cache of tapes in a helium-filled time capsule.”

“Are they even still good?” Pflum asked.

“Even kept in an inert atmosphere, that’s a long time for a piece of Twentieth Century video tape to hold up,” Jack added, “although there are some old movies that have been recaptured from old tapes.”

“Evidently the client thinks he can do that with these,” Sharonne told them.

“But hiring a Transit to go buy a VCR for which he’ll subsequently have to build a power converter, not to mention find a monitor screen that is compatible with the output, is a ridiculous expense,” Pflum maintained. “There are a dozen companies in Boston alone that specialize in converting old media to current formats.”

“None of them work with Betamax, Pflum,” Sharonne replied.

“That explains why they went to 1983,” Jack noted.

“Why’s that?” Samantha asked.

“Beta was at its height of popularity that year,” Jack informed her. “After that the format known as VHS began to gain popularity and drive Betamax out of the market. It’s the classic engineering versus marketing story that we got in Technological History 204.”

“Regardless,” Sharonne stopped the history lesson, “the client was willing to pay the price I quoted and Jeanette’s Transit was available for the trip. She left immediately on what should have been a very quick trip, but soon after what we think was her arrival in 1983, nearly all the telemetry circuits connected to her Transit went dead and the empty Transit walls reappeared here.”

“Any strange noises, vibrations?” Pflum asked, “Something vaguely akin to *The Ride of the Valkyries*?”

“What?” Sharonne asked.

“Nothing,” Pflum replied. “I was just wondering if my crate had just lost the title of ‘World’s Most Eccentric Transit.’”

“Happily, no,” Sharonne told him. “Look, I won’t claim I don’t want that Transit back. Retrieve it if you can, even if it is in pieces, but getting Jeanette and her crew back safely is paramount.”

“Her crew?” Pflum asked suspiciously. “Don’t tell me Jackson Kaden was on that crate.”

“No, just Barry,” Sharonne admitted. “Mister Kaden is traveling with Kyle and a party of tourists to Fifth Century Italy this week.” The fact that Sharonne failed to use Kaden’s first name revealed that she too had grown somewhat weary of the new pilot’s ego although that did not stop her from retaliating at

Pflum's smirk, "but he has been much better behaved since returning from that trip with you."

"He could hardly get worse," Pflum retorted. "I know he was better immediately after our return, but he was in shock. I figure he'll be back to his old habits, some of them at least, any time now."

"Well, Jeanette proved she could handle him and he seems to get along well enough with Kyle," Sharonne noted, "but it may be just as well the new Transit will be ready in another few weeks. Darned good thing too if it turns out that Jeanette's crate is scrap."

"You know, last time I had an opportunity to check, my crate was six years out of sync with Jeanette's," Pflum mused. "By the time we find her, she'll have been working on this problem herself for that long."

"Not necessarily," Jack told him. "That changes every time the temporal regulator is retuned, which, of course is between every trip."

"In theory," Pflum commented. "You know how many times we had to take off without the standard diagnostics."

"In theory," Jack agreed. "But by now both Transits will have been retuned numerous times so that six year figure is unlikely to be accurate."

"Oh good!" Pflum exclaimed, "so now she may have been waiting for thirty years? She's likely to have her grandkids working on the problem."

"Not very likely, Pflum," Jack retorted. "If anything your two crates should be more closely aligned. I did a paper on just that last semester. Most Transits tuned by the same engineer gradually get closer to each other over time." He didn't notice Ken and the Mackenzies quietly joining them in Pflum's Transit.

"Really?" Pflum asked somewhat skeptically.

"There's a lot of proof that says so," Jack pointed out.

"All in the form of probabilities, I'll bet," Pflum noted.

"Of course," Jack nodded.

"Which means that somewhere, there's an example in which it went entirely the other way, right?" Pflum pressed.

"Well, I did find a few such cases," Jack admitted reluctantly.

"Want to take any bets over where we'll find the most extreme such case?" Pflum asked him.

Doctor Mackenzie finally interrupted, "I don't see that should be a problem. It should be child's play to make a control to fine tune the regulator to put any two Transits more or less in synch."

"That could be handy," Pflum considered, then did an about face. "Oh no! A rescue mission is no time to start playing with new toys especially considering my crate's history with kludged circuitry and other untested devices."

"Pflum," Sam told him reasonably, "If the situation were reversed, you'd want Jeanette to use any means

available to get to you faster.”

“True,” Pflum nodded, “but I wouldn’t want her to risk not finding me at all. No new controls! Not this trip, maybe not ever!”

“Aurelian!” Sharonne admonished him.

“Sharonne!” he mimicked her tone. “No. I am not installing new equipment. It’s probably not needed anyway. You heard Jack. Transits get closer and closer in synch when tuned by the same technician and we have one of the best.”

“Somehow hearing that from you,” Ken replied dryly, “it sounds more like an indictment.”

“You never could take a compliment,” Pflum told him sourly.

“You don’t offer them up often enough for me to know what they sound like.” Ken shot back.

“I really don’t see how such a control would affect the rest of your Transit, Mister Pflum,” Doctor Mackenzie brought them back to the subject. “It would only...”

“Doc, do me a favor,” Pflum cut him off, “and promise me you won’t install any new gizmos in my Transit this time.”

“I’m sure Ms. Manovich would appreciate it if you could arrive within days of her breakdown,” Doctor Mac suggested.

“I’m sure she would appreciate it even more if we’re the same species,” Pflum countered. “You know what sorts of detours my crate likes to take. I like my rabbit counterpart well enough, but I really don’t want to meet him again any time soon.” Doctor Mac looked like he was about to say something else, but Pflum rolled right over him. “I’m equally opposed to meeting one of my descendants or one of the bunny’s descendants for that matter.”

“How about this,” Jack mediated. “Doctor, why don’t you cobble together that control you have in mind. Pflum, we won’t actually install it unless you actually give us permission.”

“Not going to happen,” Pflum predicted.

“Fine,” Jack agreed, “but we’ll have the control just in case. Doctor?”

“It can certainly be installed in the field,” Doctor Mac considered, “but I really do not understand why you’re so hesitant, Mister Pflum.”

“Have you forgotten what happened just over a month ago when we tried out your new accelerator thingy?” Pflum asked incredulously.

“That was an extraordinary circumstance,” Doctor Mac replied.

“Just my point,” Pflum argued. “It’s always an extraordinary circumstance with this crate. It doesn’t matter if it’s landing on a flat land where the ambient light is provided by a giant barbecued chicken or one in which the only hazards are large carnivorous holes in the ground. This Transit never does anything ordinary.”

“Carnivorous holes?” Doctor Mac asked, suddenly diverted.

“Don’t ask,” Pflum grumbled. “Look I’ll take the gadget along and I promise to try it if it turns out my Transit is too far out of sync with Jeanette’s. Okay?”

Pflum and Sam returned to his Transit the next morning to find the Mackenzies busily installing still more equipment in front of Pflum’s and Jeanette’s Transit bays. None of the equipment appeared to be touching Pflum’s Transit nor even coming close to the telemetry devices that connected to it, so he kept his mouth shut save to mumble a “Good morning,” at them.

Inside his Transit, Pflum ran some quick diagnostics from the console with Samantha. She had worked with him at that console once before and had shown more than normal aptitude with the ancient Transit controls, so much more complex than those found in newer machines. “Are you satisfied yet?” Sam asked finally.

“What are you talking about?” Pflum asked.

“Are you satisfied nobody has tinkered with your precious Transit, Pflum?” Sam amplified. “That’s what this is all about, isn’t it? You’re worried Doctor Mackenzie or Jack or even Ms. Lachado snuck in here while we were out and added something new and unwanted, at least by you.”

“They wouldn’t do that,” Pflum told her confidently.

“No, they wouldn’t,” Sam agreed, “but how certain of that were you before you ran through all those tests?”

Pflum looked at her for a few moments, considering his reply. After far too long he finally admitted, “Not at all, but I am relieved to see I was wrong. I have to travel with these people, you know, and that won’t be any time for doubts.”

“You owe everyone an apology, you know,” Sam told him.

“Yeah, well, I’ll find a way to make it up to them, I suppose,” Pflum told her quietly.

Sam nodded. She hadn’t really expected him to round everyone up for an “I’m sorry,” speech. She knew Pflum better than that, but she wanted to be sure he understood he had underestimated his friends. “I’ll go find out when catering is expected,” Sam decided.

“No anchovies!” Pflum called after her.

“Pflum,” she asked, “do you always eat pizza before a mission?”

“Only before the nasty ones,” he shot back.

“They might not be so nasty if you ate something else before leaving, Pflum,” Jack told him as he entered the Transit with Persi. “Morning, Pflum.” Jack continued inward and placed a box of doughnuts on the large table bolted to the floor in the center of the Transit.

“Morning, kid,” Pflum greeted him. “You remember the jelly-filled? Morning to you too, Persi.”

“Good morning, Mister Pflum,” she replied. “Will we be leaving soon?”

“Except for the food, I’m ready now,” Pflum replied, “but we need to wait for the Mackenzies, don’t we?”

“They’re not coming with us,” Jack informed him. “I thought you knew that.”

“No, I thought they were,” Pflum replied.

“Doctor Mackenzie is going to stay here and continue taking readings,” Jack explained. “Don’t worry, nothing that will affect this crate.”

“I’m not worried,” Pflum lied.

“The heck you’re not,” Jack shot back. “Anyway, he and his daughter have been working all night to try to speed up our departure. I was here until well after midnight too for that matter.”

“Sam just went to find out when catering is due,” Pflum told them.

“They will be here in about an hour, Mister Pflum,” Persi announced.

“When are you going to stop calling me ‘Mister,’ kid,” Pflum sighed, breaking his resolution of the day before.

“When are you going to stop calling me ‘kid,’ Mister Pflum,” Persi countered.

“When you manage to become older than he is!” Jack crowed.

“I think Persi has a very old soul,” Sam opined as she rejoined them. “In comparison, I suspect mine still has a few mold marks left on it.”

“Let me guess,” Pflum told her suddenly. “The food will be here in an hour?”

In reply, Jack and Persi just rolled their eyes, but Sam merely shook her head. “Actually, they just arrived. They’re early, but I didn’t think you would mind too much.”

The caterers made quick work of stocking the pantry although Pflum was worried there might not be enough food. “There’s only enough for one week tops,” he complained when Sharonne arrived to see them off.

“It shouldn’t take you more than a day or two,” she reminded him. “There’s no need to over buy. Besides if you run out of food, you can always come back for more.”

“There is that,” Pflum shrugged, “and we do have some money from the latter half of the Twentieth Century. We can always stop for a burger or a plate of fish and chips or something similar.”

“There you go,” Sharonne encouraged him. “Now go and find Jeanette and Barry.”

Why Can't You Behave?

Pflum stepped over to the console, typed in the activation code and waited for Sharonne to close the door behind her. As soon as he heard the latch click shut, he pressed the activator and the Transit began to hum. Once that was done, he set the controls on automatic and joined the others at the table. "It will be a couple hours or so," he commented, while reaching for a doughnut, "but then I guess you all know that."

"This is new," Jack commented. "The crate is almost behaving herself for a change."

"That is new," Pflum agreed. "Especially since she's been acting up ever since we got back from the last trip. Did I tell you about that one?"

"You hinted at it yesterday," Jack replied, "but I guess you saved all the juicy details for the trip."

"Had to have something to talk about," Pflum grinned. "Well, aside from ending on a world that made Birdland look like something a sane God might have designed, we also managed the impossible and landed in the far future."

"That's not impossible," Jack told him, "not mathematically anyway. The problem is that under current technology you need an infinite amount of energy to travel future of the home terminus. Wait. You were really in the future? How?"

"Doctor Mac invented a device that reduces temporal friction or whatever it is that keeps us at normal temporal velocities down to zero and we were shooting all over the continuum."

"Something like that could overcome the resistance at the home terminus," Jack nodded.

"Yeah," Pflum agreed dryly, "but it made it nearly impossible to get back again until we were so far out along the Z axis that two plus two equaled π or something equally ridiculous. Anyway I think we strained the temporal impellers and possibly most of the other circuitry because it's been making some of the strangest noises ever since."

"Sounds pretty normal to me," Jack opined.

"Then maybe you'll be our little good luck charm," Persi told him, "because this crate has been performing whole symphonies of creaks, moans and thumps all month."

"You should have heard some of the shrieks she emitted just before we crashed on Birdland," Jack laughed.

"These were worse, kid," Pflum told him

"Glad I missed them so far," Jack admitted. "Hey. Is that the same wrench you used to carry?"

"Hmm?" Pflum replied as he turned to follow Jack's stare. "Oh yeah. Some of the natives on Moebius World prettied it up as a way of saying thank you. It was always fairly heavy, but they added over a pound of solid gold to it."

“That’s some thank you,” Jack whistled.

“You ought to see Persi’s sword,” Pflum replied. “Did you bring it?” he asked.

“DTT regulations prohibits the carrying of weapons by a Transit crew member,” Persi replied calmly.

“Yeah, I know,” Pflum nodded, “but did you bring it?”

“No, Mister Pflum,” she replied coolly, “I did not.”

“Well, it’s one heck of a butterspreader, Jack,” Pflum told him.

“I may use it to cut the cake at my wedding,” Persi admitted.

“Oh? Sam asked interestedly. “Have you set a date?”

“I haven’t even set a husband,” Persi laughed briefly. “No hurries there. I have plenty of time, don’t you know.”

“Of course,” Sam agreed, “Marry in haste and all that, right?”

Persi nodded. “And I think I intimidate a lot of men,” she continued.

“Gee, I don’t know why,” Pflum chuckled.

“No one worth your while, I assure you,” Sam told her at the same time, then turned on Pflum, “and hush, you!”

They settled into various travel routines. Persi pulled out a sweater she was knitting from a large bag and went back to work, while Sam opened a book and started reading. Jack and Pflum played chess, but spent more time bantering back and forth than they did actually moving the pieces eventually causing Sam to observe, “Good thing you two don’t use timers. The clock would run out before your third move.”

“Games are for fun,” Pflum informed her with dignity. “Some might have fun putting themselves under pressure, but I don’t.”

“Besides,” Jack chuckled, “with Pflum and me Chess is just the excuse we use to play the real game.”

“Yes, I saw that,” Sam laughed, “but the name of that game is difficult to say in mixed company.”

Just then an alarm went off and Pflum got up to look at the Transit’s console. “We’re here,” he announced.

“What? You found Jeanette’s Transit so soon?” Sam asked.

“Hardly,” Pflum replied, “but we’re in the right general time vicinity to start scanning for her tracer unit.”

Pflum and Jack began the long, slow sweeps back and forth that were necessary to home in on a tracer unit in the field, but after eight hours of searching all they had found were the tracers left on the Creston time line, named after the only criminals ever to have attempted escaping into the past and another line to

which Pflum frequently ferried one of Down Time, Ltd's best customers on a theatre trip.

"No, that's Mrs. Callinger's line again," Pflum remarked. "I'm going to program the system not to sound an alarm when we pass this and the Creston Line."

"Good," Jack agreed. "I jump out of my skin every time that thing goes off anyway."

"Are you sure Jeanette isn't on one of those two lines?" Sam asked.

"It's highly unlikely," Pflum shook his head. "You're a pilot; you ought to have had the probabilities drummed into your head."

"The chance approaches infinity, I know," she agreed, "but aren't you the one who keeps telling me that a million-to-one chance comes up nine times out of ten?"

"Actually, I usually say a fifty-fifty chance is a million to one against," Pflum replied, "but I guess the principle is the same. Still, with an infinite number of lines..."

"She could be on a line so... well close isn't really the right term," Jack began. "The proximity of time lines is an illusion created by our Transit technology, so I guess by closeness we really mean lines that are so closely related in all aspects that they appear close to our sensors."

"Kid, uh Jack," Pflum corrected himself. At Persi's subtle and not-so-subtle cues, he had been trying to break himself of that habit with varying results. "You want to just spit it out?"

"Oh, sorry," Jack apologized. "I've been teaching elementary temporal theory this year. You really have to make sure freshmen get it right from the start. Anyway, our technology is capable of discerning some very subtle differences between time lines as you know. A normal working crate, like... well I was going to say Jeanette's, but..."

"Like almost anyone's but mine, you mean," Pflum supplied.

"Right," Jack nodded. "Anyway, a normal Transit can only land on one thousandth of one percent of all possible time lines. We call it the Five Nines restriction."

"Only those lines that are 99.99999 % or better compatible with our home line," Sam translated.

"Right," Jack nodded again, "and yet even then our possibilities are infinite."

"That's what infinity means, Jack," Pflum reminded him. "Even a small fraction of infinity is still infinite in scope."

"Of course," Jack agreed, "but my point is that our Transits are capable of discerning some very fine distinctions between time lines. Those distinctions are often even finer than we can notice as observers. We can generally use money from our home line without fear of being accused of counterfeiting, for example. Medicine from any of those lines will be as effective on us as they are on the natives because the natives are as human as we are and so forth. And yet still, even within the range of lines that are beyond our Transit's capability of distinguishing from others – those that are so similar that we cannot tell them apart – we still reach infinity. What if Jeanette is on one of those lines that is infinitesimally indistinguishable from the Creston or Callinger lines?"

“And the chance against that happening?” Pflum prompted.

“Um,” Jack hedged. “Infinite?”

“Saw that coming,” Pflum chuckled, “Still, if a million-to-one chance is nine for ten, an infinite improbability could be a sure thing. I’m a bit tired, but we can scan the two known lines at a finer rate and see if we pick up any unusual readings, but let’s get some sleep first.”

When Jack woke up five hours later, he heard Pflum already tinkering with the controls. “I couldn’t sleep more than a few hours either,” he told Pflum, noticing the coffee pot was still full. “Want a cup?”

“Thanks, kid, uh Jack,” Pflum corrected himself.

“I don’t mind you calling me ‘Kid’ as much as Persi does,” Jack admitted, reaching for a second cup. “I’ve kind of missed it actually.”

“It’s a bad habit,” Pflum remarked. “I probably ought to break myself of it.”

“As bad habits go, it’s not so bad,” Jack laughed.

“It depersonalizes people,” Pflum replied, “sort of lumps them together into one indistinguishable mass, much like these time lines we’re trying to scan.”

“From you, it’s practically a term of endearment,” Jack laughed. Then he thought about all the times Pflum had called him, “Kid.” “Um, one you use mostly when you’re annoyed,” he added. “so did you find anything yet?”

“I’ve only been at it a few minutes,” Pflum admitted. We’re going to have to cross both lines as slowly as possible – and don’t give me the explanation of how a line is only one point wide, the metaphor works, that’s all I care about – and see if our on-board brain can discern a second signal. I’m just starting the scan on the Creston line. We’ll scan back and forth at minimum progress for the next three hours. Give the computer an extra hour to analyze the data, then move on to Mrs. Callinger’s theatre line and give it the same treatment. After that, if we don’t find Jeanette... well, hopefully we’ll come up with another idea.” He met Jack at the table and started sipping the coffee.

“Of course, if we don’t find the tracer,” Jack theorized, “it probably means we used Doctor Mackenzie’s modification and picked her and Barry up, along with the tracer, on a position on their line we can’t currently synchronize with.”

“I was afraid you were going to say that,” Pflum told him sourly. “I want to be very certain of that before we start plugging his extra boards in. Got it?”

“I can wait,” Jack admitted.

Sam and Persi joined them an hour later and after breakfast returned to their reading and knitting respectively. “I must say, that’s a welcome change from the hobby you were practicing on our first trip together,” Pflum told Persi just after lunch.

“I don’t feel the need to have to frighten anyone into good behavior this time, Mister Pflum,” she replied.

“Frighten?” Jack asked. “Why? What were you doing?”

Persi fell silent and looked embarrassed, but Pflum answered for her, “Voodoo.”

“Voodoo?” Jack echoed.

“I know I do,” Pflum retorted, but Jack stopped him before he could continue the ancient line.

“You were practicing Voodoo?” Jack asked Persi.

“No, I was not,” she replied a bit more forcefully than she meant. Then she calmed a bit and continued. “Mister Kaden was annoying Misty and me. I imagine he would annoy anything in a skirt.”

“You aren’t wearing a skirt,” Jack pointed out. It was true. Both she and Sam were wearing khaki slacks and Down Time, Ltd. polo shirts.

“It’s just an expression,” she told him, annoyed again. “Anyway, I finally decided that if he were that foolish, he would probably believe I had the power as well, so I started fashioning a little doll as I sat at the table here. He was a bit oblivious to anything around him and eventually I had to get quite blatant about what I was doing, but once he caught sight of the doll, all I had to do to keep him in line was to either show or remind him of it.”

“You forget what you did with it on Moebius World,” Pflum reminded her.

“No I do not, but as we are no longer on a world on which magic appears to work for real, it hardly matters now, does it?” Persi challenged him.

“Not to me, I suppose,” Pflum admitted. “Okay, I’ll drop the matter.”

Another few hours later, Pflum was forced to admit defeat. “Well she’s not on any line we can detect.”

“So you agree we have to try Doctor Mackenzie’s modification?” Jack asked carefully.

“Yeah, okay!” he replied after a long pause. “Go ahead and do your surgery, just try not to lose the patient.”

Jack didn’t have time to do more than start moving toward the cabinet in which Doctor Mackenzie’s device had been stored before the overhead lights started flickering and the room felt like it had started spinning on a diagonal axis. Everyone was thrown about as the direction of down changed dramatically and an odd multi-toned humming noise filled the air with an ear-splitting ululation.

“What the heck?” Jack shouted at anyone who cared to hear him although he privately doubted anyone was paying him much attention or could even hear him over the noise.

All four started trying to dive at the console, hoping to hang on long enough to get the Transit to stop moving, but even though Pflum was closest, he kept missing the controls to find himself sailing toward one of the walls. That he never quite hit them before up and down slewed into each other’s places was no comfort whatsoever.

Finally, Persi managed to grab on to the console’s edge and hang on with her right hand while turning and pressing the emergency stop with her left. A great screech of tearing metal filled the Transit’s room, the lights went out completely and, for a moment, it seemed to come to rest on the point of one corner.

Then it slowly leaned back toward reestablishing the floor as down and suddenly the Transit fell with a hushed thump.

“It that what you meant by a symphony?” Jack asked Persi in the smoke-filled darkness.

“No,” Persi replied, sounding unusually shaken, “That was more like a rock concert.”

“I knew she was waiting for just the right moment,” Pflum remarked. “Ow! I managed to miss the walls and even the floor all throughout that ‘Tilt-a-Whirl’ ride. Then a chair fell on me just at the end.”

“Are you all right?” Samantha asked worriedly.

“No more bruised than usual after one of these romps,” Pflum replied. “How about you?”

“I fell flat on the floor and got winded is all,” Sam reported. “Persi? Jack?”

“I’m alright,” Persi replied. “I was still holding on to the console when we came to rest.”

“I doubt I’ll sleep comfortably tonight,” Jack told Sam, “but it sounds like Pflum got the worst of it. Again.”

“Yeah, well, with experience,” Pflum told him, “you learn how to avoid such injuries. I guess I’m still learning is all. The air in here is foul.”

“Smells like we burnt out the wires,” Jack told him before starting to cough. “That’s the smell of burning insulation.” He coughed again and soon Sam and Pflum joined him.

“Persi, can you find a light switch on the console?” Pflum asked just before joining the coughing chorus..

“I’ll try,” she replied. She heard the sounds of the others moving around the room, including the sounds of Pflum tripping over things and falling to the floor.

Finally, Pflum found a small door on the wall behind the console and on opening it, flipped a switch which turned the emergency light on. “That should have turned on automatically,” he noted between coughs. “Persi, check the air outside. We really need to get that door open.”

“Yes, Mister Pflum,” she agreed.

Sam joined Pflum at the console while Jack moved to assist Persi. “Let’s turn all the switches to their off positions,” Pflum told Sam, “then we’ll see what, if anything is still working.”

“At least the temporal regulator is still getting power,” Sam observed.

“If it wasn’t,” Pflum replied, “we might not be in any shape to discuss it. Okay, that seems to be that, let’s try the reset.” Pflum suggested and he flipped a switch. Several indicator lamps lit up on the console and the room was brightly lit once more although smoke and fumes were still making them all cough. “Bringing power for the air sampler on line,” Pflum announced, and then he waited.

“The air is normal,” Persi reported. “We can breathe it.”

“Good,” Jack replied. “Let’s get that airlock opened. Is there a trick to it?”

“You have to turn the wheel on the hatch,” Persi told him.

“I figured as much,” Jack replied and he spun the large wheel. “Where did this hatch come from? A salvaged submarine?”

“Could be,” Pflum admitted. “We can leave it open for the duration. Don’t worry, the outer door is the same as you remember except they fitted it with those new digital locks while I wasn’t looking. You got your key, didn’t you?”

“I did,” Jack replied, “And I was there when Ken told you about it. There, the door’s open, I’m going out there for a look around.”

“Stay by the door,” Pflum warned him.

“I’m just scouting the terrain, Pflum. Stop treating me like a tourist,” Jack snapped.

“Sorry, kid,” Pflum apologized. “It’s an old ingrained habit.”

“Uh, Pflum,” Jack called back.

“I said I was sorry, Jack,” Pflum told him. “What more do you want?”

“Not that, Pflum,” Jack told him. “We need to move a bit. We’re in the middle of a street. It’s dark out there right now, but come morning I expect we’ll be blocking traffic.”

It’s Just Like the Good Old Days

“Is there a way to move the Transit manually?” Sam asked. “I mean we can’t exactly pick it up and put it to the side, can we?”

“Not hardly,” Pflum shook his head as he emerged from the Transit. Along the way he had obviously grabbed his large, gold-encrusted wrench. “No. We’re going to have to try and power her up and hope for the best.”

“Pflum,” Jack disagreed, “I doubt we can get back to Down Time in our current condition.”

“You’re right,” Pflum nodded. “Nor do I intend to try just yet. I only want to move us a few yards and get out the way of oncoming traffic.”

“There is an alley over there,” Persi pointed.

“I’ll check it out,” Pflum decided, slinging the heavy wrench up and onto his shoulder. “Stay here.” Saying that, he jogged across the street and into the narrow gap between two brick buildings. Once inside he looked around. There were a few galvanized steel garbage cans just inside the mouth of the alley and it was obvious that no one had been too careful about whether or not the garbage had actually gone into the barrels, but there were no doors there. It seemed unlikely that anyone was in the habit of coming in here. He took an extra few minutes, wrench in one hand and a flashlight in the other to make sure the alley was empty of intelligent life. Confident they would have it to themselves, Pflum returned to

the Transit. "Let's go," he told the others. "We've already tempted the fates by staying in the middle of the boulevard this long. I figure there'll be a milk truck by here any moment."

"There weren't a lot of dairies still delivering door to door in the nineteen eighties," Sam pointed out.

"I don't know when we are," Pflum admitted as he herded everyone back on-board, "nor do I know if we're still within the five-nines or even still on our home time plane. Everything went a bit wacky there and the readings on the few dials I could see in all that were flying back and forth all over the place." He closed the door behind him and rushed back to the console.

"We could have waited outside," Persi pointed out.

"And you may have gotten stranded here," Pflum told her. "I don't intend to move along any temporal vector, but I don't know what's going to happen in a moment when I activate this crate. I think a lot of wires lost their insulation and if the wrong ones are crossed, almost anything could happen. Okay, here goes. Short and sweet... I hope."

He typed in the activation code and the temporal regulator came back online. "So far, so good," he muttered to himself as he made some minor adjustments and turned on the geographical impellers.

The working hum of the Transit was louder than normal, but there were no unnatural vibrations, no tendency to swing and sway. From inside the Transit they could not even feel it moving relative to the world outside, which was just as it should be.

Pflum carefully moved the Transit until the field door was neatly in place against the wall of one of the buildings between which the alley ran. Then, the humming grew louder and higher pitched until it was a scream for just a moment until Pflum cut the power and took the regulator off-line once more. There was a vast, deep hiss as clouds of acrid smoke billowed out of the walls near the console.

"That's done it," Pflum coughed. "Jack, get that door open and the fans circulating. The alley out there may not smell too sweet, but it's better than what we have at the moment."

"Phew!" Jack exclaimed. "Not by much."

"If we're here more than a few hours, we'll have to clean it up a bit," Sam noted.

"We'll be here more than a few hours," Pflum told her. "If we're lucky it will only be a few days. That all depends on the damage. Moving the Transit burned more insulation, so at the very least we're going to have to rewire everything we can."

"Then we also need to find out why they over-heated," Jack added. "Fresh wires will just burn all over again. I'm worried, though. Why didn't the breakers blow first?"

"Good question," Pflum admitted, shutting down the console. "We're going to have to find that out too, but not tonight. Let's close the door back up. It's better now and the filters should finish clearing out the air in an hour or less."

Pflum was up first some hours later and without bothering to look outside, he started opening up the panels that hid the on-board circuitry of his Transit. "What a mess," he told himself sadly. He continued opening the panels, mentally cataloging the damage as he went. "What the heck is this?" he asked out loud.

“What is it, Pflum?” Jack asked. “Oh, sorry, didn’t mean to startle you.”

“I didn’t know you were up yet,” Pflum replied. “Did I wake you?”

“Nah!” Jack laughed. “I had to get up anyway. There was this maniac making all sorts of noise out here.”

“Sorry,” Pflum apologized. “I was hoping to get an early start.”

Jack took a look inside the circuit panels. “How much wire do we have?”

“Nowhere near enough,” Pflum replied. “No one ever really designed a Transit to be field-repairable you know. All we carry is a bit of wire, some solder, a couple spare circuit boards for stuff that doesn’t appear to be damaged for some reason and an extra set of circuit breakers.”

Jack looked again, “What circuit breakers?”

“Yeah, that’s the problem. I’m going to kill Ken when we get back,” Pflum told Jack seriously.

“I’ll help,” Jack agreed. “What was he thinking? When did he do this and why didn’t you know?”

“Thinking?” Pflum shot back. “I don’t believe thinking was involved in the process. As to when, it could have been anytime in the past month. Once the Transit was repaired following the trip with the Mackenzies I haven’t thought I had to inspect Ken’s work. I won’t make that mistake again, I promise, but I thought he was just doing the usual recalibrations.”

“Recalibrating sounds like an understatement, but he can’t have taken them out altogether,” Jack pointed out. “He must have replaced them in some way. Oh wait, there was some new regulation that came down from the DTT last month. Maybe he retrofitted some of those new petatrinic switches. Yeah, see this small box down here? He rewired the circuits to run through this.”

“What the heck is a petatrinic switch?” Pflum asked.

“Kind of a computerized circuit breaker. They monitor energy flows and cut power or sometimes just reroute it depending on how they’re programmed to handle power surges,” Jack explained. “It’s pretty nifty stuff, really. They can do a lot more than simply handle power flows, of course.”

“Are they compatible with circuits of this age?” Pflum asked.

Jack thought a bit then decided, “They could be, I think. Though now you come to mention it, you have all this old nanotronic circuitry and most modern Transits are wired up, with pico-electronic components. It’s a whole order of magnitude of difference, you know. The new stuff uses higher power energy streams but they come in short bursts or packets, not the steady stream this Transit uses. A petatrinic switch can be programmed to work with this older stuff, but it would have come from the factory preset for newer circuits.”

“So instead of cutting power when the wires started to fry…” Pflum began.

“The switches actually increased it,” Jack finished for him. “And that’s why only about half the wires overheated. The switches were rerouting power from life support and other not immediately essential

systems to power the impellers, which they misunderstood to be needing more than they were actually getting.”

“Forget Ken,” Pflum growled, “I think it’s time to kill the DTT.”

“I’m with you there,” Jack replied. “I doubt you’ll find anyone who’s ever crewed aboard a Transit who would disagree, but I doubt I can hold enough of them down for you.”

“Ever hear the phrase, ‘Class action,’ kid,” Pflum smiled in a predatory manner. “Sharonne’s lawyer will have a field day. We’ll start the ball rolling with a suit filed against a regulation that forced us to use incompatible components and every one of our competitors will want to get into the act.”

“If we ever get back,” Jack told him. “Besides these switches were working fine for the first day and a half or so. Something else must have caused them to react like that.”

“Some other component may have been overheating and they chose to divert current from it to the rest of the circuits, maybe?” Pflum suggested.

“Possible, I suppose,” Jack shrugged. “Hey, I thought this crate had fuses.”

“She does on some of the circuits,” Pflum agreed. “And those idiot switches seem to have diverted current from those fuses. Oh that’s just classic.”

“What?” Jack asked.

“What if one of the fuses was getting ready to blow due to a current surge, so those stupid switches decided to protect that fuse from injury?” Pflum asked.

“That could happen,” Jack nodded. “Pico-electronics don’t use fuses at all and, without programming a petatrinic switch might not understand the purpose of a fuse. Since it was obviously not a circuit breaker, it must be a vital component... Oh heck!”

“Yeah,” Pflum agreed. “Now we know how, but what about why?”

“Why what?” Persi asked as she came out of the cubicle that served as her bedroom.

Jack and Pflum caught her up on what they had discovered, with Pflum finishing, “So now we need to figure out what caused the malfunction in the first place.”

“And replace the switches with conventional circuit breakers,” Jack added. “You know, Pflum, this seems just like the good old days when I was your intern. I don’t miss them at all.”

What a Charming Afternoon

Persi suggested as Jack and Pflum continued working with what they had for the second day, “Maybe this is where Jeanette’s Transit is?”

“The global and temporal positioning circuits are burned out,” Pflum noted, “so I suppose this could be 1980’s Boston . Maybe that park across the way is the Commons. But the chance of getting the exact

line she is on, especially after that temporal version of a Nantucket sleigh ride, is close to nil.”

“But what if this is some sort of analog of the Sargasso Sea,” Persi persisted, “where Transits break down and get stuck?”

Pflum considered the possibility. “I hope you’re wrong.”

“It doesn’t seem very likely,” Sam opined. “Wouldn’t we have discovered such a place previously? You know no Transit has ever been lost and unaccounted for.”

“There are an infinite number of time lines and only a finite number of Transits,” Pflum pointed out. “A stumbling block in Time, or whatever you want to call it, could well have been avoided until now. There’s really a lot we just don’t know.”

“The Blackfellow Equations do allow for black holes,” Jack noted. “They’d have to since Time is really just part of the same continuum that Space is part of. However, I seriously doubt we ran afoul of a black hole. There are no black holes on Earth, can’t be or there would probably be no Earth, and no Transit has enough power to escape Earth’s gravity well, no matter what the malfunction. This is just a normal breakdown. Well, normal for this crate, anyway.”

“No breakdown is ever normal, kid,” Pflum argued, “especially in this crate.”

“So do we have any idea of how long it will be before we can leave?” Sam asked.

“Jack and I discussed that earlier,” Pflum replied. “We can reconstruct some of the burnt-out circuits by cannibalizing chips and grains from the non-essential systems, but not enough. We still need some circuit breakers to replace the petatrinic switches.”

“We have some,” Jack pointed out. “Fortunately on that count, Ken never updated the spare parts inventory. I think we have enough for the essential systems and we can use old-fashioned fuses, even the sorts from the 1980’s for lights, recycling and such. After all, if we can get moving again, we can always hightail it home for a real repair job.”

“I’m more worried about these circuit boards,” Pflum told them, gesturing toward a pile of blackened components. “Most of this stuff is rubbish and without it, we don’t move. At least the console was left untouched, I’d really have hated to have to get up home by manually touching the right wires together.”

“Well, if that’s the case,” Sam replied, “we’re going to have to venture outside and try to find what we need. Wire, at least, should be available. And food. We’ll run out in a few days, you know. Besides, it’s time we started cleaning up this alley, especially if we’re going to be living here a while.”

“Be careful, but try to check out what the people look like out there,” Pflum suggested as he turned back to the dead circuits. “Man, I wish I had a circuit tester.”

Sam and Persi grabbed a handful of plastic garbage bags each and went to work in the alley. After a few false starts as they ran into various non-intelligent life forms living in the garbage there, Sam got an idea and went back into the Transit. “Pflum, dear?” she asked. “Is the component that was making that awful high-pitched buzz still working?”

“If working is the word for it,” Pflum replied. “It still shrieks in a range only dogs can hear according to the instruments. Why?”

“How about rats?” she asked.

“I don’t know, maybe,” Pflum replied only giving her half of his attention. “Why?”

“Just turn it on for a few minutes, would you please?” Sam requested.

Pflum shrugged and complied with the request. A moment later they could hear Persi’s surprised, “Eek!” as dozens of rats suddenly decided to vacate the alley.

“Thank you, dear,” Sam told him a few minutes later. “That should be enough, I think.”

It had been just past sunrise when Sam and Persi had started, but by the time the sun set once more, all the garbage in the alley had been bagged and the bags were piled up to one side of the alley’s mouth next to the steel barrels. “Better,” Sam remarked as they came back inside, “it’s starting to rain out there again.”

“Were you working in the rain?” Pflum asked.

“Once in a while,” Sam replied. “It was never very hard, at least not in the alley. We’re a bit sheltered in here. The people in the street hurried for cover a couple of times though.”

“Yeah? What did they look like?” Pflum asked.

“Just people, dear,” Sam replied. “They looked perfectly human though they may have been colorblind. Um, I’ll tell you all about it after Persi and I have had our showers.”

“Uh... okay,” Pflum nodded. “Jack, we need to turn the power back on for the water heater.”

“I’m on it,” Jack replied from inside one of the cabinets.

“Why do you think they may be colorblind?” Pflum asked an hour later over a dinner of canned stew and bread.

“Either that or they have the most horrid taste in color coordination,” Sam replied. “I don’t think we’re in the 1980’s or if we are, not within the five-nines.”

“It could be late 1960’s or early 70’s,” Persi suggested. “Those colors might be what they used to refer to as psychedelic, and that wouldn’t be too far off from where we were, would it?”

“Maybe not,” Pflum shrugged. “It’s hard to say without the positioning circuits on-line and we were getting whipped around for a long time before you cut the power, and none of us were in a position to see where we were at the time.”

“It’s probably safe to say the choices of colors are a cultural preference here, regardless,” Persi decided, her anthropological training coming to the fore. “The colors didn’t look entirely random to me, just far brighter and more garish than any of us are used to.”

“I’ll have to take a look for myself tomorrow,” Pflum decided.

The few peeks Pflum had taken so far of the outside world had revealed the same brightly dressed

people Sam and Persi had reported seeing. Aside from those colors that were made to seem all the brighter for being lit by the sun while he was standing in the shadowy alley, he failed to see anything particularly unusual. The end of an alley is hardly a representative lens through which to observe a society, but so far the people seemed to be of all ages, having fun together, discussing business or the weather or just be walking on by. This morning, however it appeared that a circus had organized a parade.

Elephants were being paraded down the street. There were lions and tigers in cages and floats on which acrobats did simple stunts on an uncertain trapeze suspended over a trampoline. Clowns rode by in improbably small automobiles and also walked along handing out flyers to the people on the sidewalk. There was also a truck that glided by, pulling a float with a calliope on it and the music from that instrument defined a generally festive atmosphere.

“Looks like we got here in time for the big show,” Pflum remarked to Sam and Persi.

“Actually it sort of looked like this yesterday,” Sam told him.

“Not the circus,” Persi clarified.

“Well, no,” Sam agreed, “but there was a strolling busker singing various tunes as he went by.”

“And there were a group of college-aged people in the park across the street who appeared to be reading to each other,” Persi remarked. “And after the singer moved along two street vendors followed. One was selling ice creams and the other sold what was probably this world’s equivalent of a hotdog. It was a sausage on a bun in any case.”

“Anyway,” Sam picked up the story, “even as they sold their foods, they were arguing back and forth. We thought they were fighting in earnest, but it turned out to be some sort of pre-rehearsed scene. The onlookers applauded when the two were done and both had far less food than before they’d started. Then they too moved on, both in location and to what sounded like act two.”

“Did we mention they do not appear to speak English?” Persi asked.

“No, I think you left that part out too,” Pflum remarked. “Dare I ask?”

“It kind of sounds like a cross between French and Spanish,” Sam remarked. “It took a few minutes to get our heads in gear, but after getting used to the odd mixture of pronunciations, it wasn’t too hard to understand.”

“That doesn’t sound too improbable,” Pflum opined. “I mean I doubt this place is necessarily a combination of French and Spanish, but they’re both Romance languages and so, obviously, is the one they speak here. We’re obviously somewhere beyond the five-nines so French pronounced as if it were Spanish or vice versa is fairly mild compared to some of the things we’ve found. It’s certainly more likely than finding English speakers on Moebiusworld.”

“If you say so,” Sam shrugged. “I’m just glad I was able to understand what they say around here. With a bit of luck our accents won’t seem so outlandish as to be impossible to understand.”

“Well, it’s nice to see the circus is in town, but I need to keep working on the Transit,” Pflum decided. “If you two are feeling confident enough that you really do understand the local lingo, why don’t you scout this town out and see what you can see?”

“Anything you want to know in specific?” Sam asked.

“The usual,” Pflum shrugged. “You know what we need.”

Sam and Persi were gone until well after dark. Pflum was just getting ready to go looking for them, in fact, when they finally came in the door. “Sorry we’re so late,” Sam apologized, sitting down at the large table.

“We sort of wandered farther afield than we realized, Mister Pflum,” Persi explained. She headed toward the kitchenette where she pulled two packages out of the Fresher and popped them in a small microwave oven. The Fresher was the Transit’s refrigerator, except instead of keeping food fresh and healthy by lowering the temperature, it did the same by simply keeping it from aging. The process was a side benefit of the Transit’s temporal regulator and worked best when the regulator was fully active, but Pflum had rigged the regulator to keep the fresher working especially since the conventional freezer worked on electricity and the Transit’s generator was working on diminished capacity.

“So what have you found?” Pflum asked as Persi brought two trays of dinner to the table and gave one to Sam.

“This city seems to have more street performers than any place I’ve ever been,” Sam replied, reaching for a fork. “If the street just outside isn’t representative, then it’s only because this is a slow part of town. Once we got more than a few blocks away, you couldn’t move without bumping into another busker. We saw the circus again twice, although Persi swears blind one of them was a different troupe.”

“The clowns were dressed differently,” Persi added between bites. “A different style, I suppose you might say, and the trucks were a different color.”

“Did they carry any signs announcing their name?” Jack asked.

“We didn’t see any, but we also never saw the start of either parade,” Sam replied. “There were even more street vendors and they were all singing or acting or both maybe as they worked. An interesting way to draw in customers, I suppose, but there you go.”

“I’m more interested in whether we’ll be able to buy parts for the Transit,” Pflum told them.

“Well, we didn’t find a used Transit store,” Sam retorted.

“I’ll settle for a Radio Shack,” Pflum returned fire. “We can cobble replacements for the fried circuitry using old fashioned transistors and the like.”

“Integrated circuits might be better,” Jack pointed out. “Assuming we can find the right type, that might leave us room to breathe in here when we’re done.”

“It’s not that bad,” Pflum laughed, “but the hand-built parts are likely to take up a lot of space.”

“I’m impressed you two think you can cobble together a Transit from Twentieth Century technology,” Sam remarked.

“Just the controller boards,” Pflum replied. “The really advanced stuff, like the impellers and the temporal regulator, was unharmed. Even the console is in working order, so we need to build a set of

interfaces with which to connect console to the parts that actually drive this crate.”

“The problem is, we don’t have much to work with,” Jack reported. “I can probably fix some of the original boards with components from others, but not enough to get us out of here, never mind get us back on Jeanette’s trail.”

“And as Jack said,” Pflum added, “The replacements will be huge. Parts the size of your thumb will be replaced by breadboard circuits dozens of times as large. I suspect they’re going to run hot as well so we’ll need to find a way to keep them cool.”

“We’ll put them in enclosures with cooling fans if we have to,” Jack told him.

“Wouldn’t it be better to keep it all open and just aim a floor fan at them?” Pflum asked.

“And if one of us slips or the Transit starts swinging around again, we could hit one or more and destroy them utterly,” Jack argued.

“This is going to get expensive,” Pflum sighed. “I wonder; is any of our coinage gold and silver worth much here.”

“That may be the other bad news,” Persi told him. “The people here use a form of paper money. We saw very few coins in fact, but when this flew out of one man’s hand he shrugged it off and pulled another out of his wallet. We retrieved it, but he was nowhere to be found when we looked for him.” She handed the piece of paper to Pflum.

He studied it for a moment. “It looks like money. It was obviously printed from finely engraved plates designed to keep counterfeiting down to a minimum,” he opined, “but why the heck is it called a voucher and what, pray tell, is a decibal?”

None of them knew.

Dance of the Ragamuffins

Pflum left Persephone to assist Jack the next morning while Pflum went out with Sam to see the city for himself. “I see the garbage was picked up this morning,” he observed as they walked toward the end of the alley.

“About time,” Sam remarked. The two galvanized barrels were still there, but sometime during the night someone had emptied them and hauled off the dozen or so plastic bags she and Persi had filled. “The alley smells better already.”

“Did you spray anything out here?” Pflum asked.

“You noticed?” Sam asked. “I noticed you had a can of a smoke deodorant in the Transit and figured it was worth a shot.”

“It seems to have worked,” he observed. “I keep it around the Transit for those times I’ve had to ferry smokers. Not too many of them left these days, but they do persist and since the Transit’s ventilation, when it’s working, can lift the smoke away from the passengers, Sharonne allows it. However, even the

best ventilation isn't perfect and I find a few sprays, once we have access to clean air keeps the place from smelling like an ash tray when tourists return. Well, this is different."

They had emerged to discover a group of five jugglers who recited poetry while tossing various objects up into the air and at each other. They watched for a few seconds before Sam tugged on Pflum's arm. "If we stop to watch everything we see, we'll never get off this block," she told him.

"Good point," he admitted, looking back over his shoulder. They passed a butcher's shop where, inside, several people were performing a line dance and a barbershop where, predictably, four men were singing as a quartet. "The folks here, sure seem to like their entertainment."

"You haven't seen anything yet," Sam told him confidently. "This is part of why Persi and I got back so late last night. Everywhere you turn, there's another act, another diversion, even in places you might expect were the entertainments by themselves. We found a video arcade with Pacman and Donkey Kong-like games with a rock band performing in the middle, complete with a light show."

"I'd get sensory overload that way," Pflum admitted, "but in this place I suppose people are used to it. Wait. Is that a one-man band? Wow! Haven't seen one of them in years."

"We saw several yesterday," Sam told him. "It can't be much of a novelty around here. I saw one put his instruments down and start doing a ventriloquism act. For that matter, while there's a lot of performances going on, a lot of them aren't very good."

"Not everyone is cut out to be a musician or an actor or whatever," Pflum remarked.

"That's just it," Sam told him as they passed a street-vending mime, trying to sell cheap watches. "Everyone here seems to think he or she is a performer. It's sort of like some of those old comedy acts in which they show you everyday life in the form of a musical. People with no discernable talent are out here performing."

"I haven't seen anyone completely hopeless yet," Pflum remarked, "but then I haven't seen anything stupendous yet either. Maybe the folks around here like schlock."

"I did see one or two acts I really enjoyed," Sam admitted. "There was a street-side sushi stand about a mile or two from here with a woman playing on a koto nearby. I'd have bought the sushi if I'd had any money to buy it with."

Just then they found themselves face-to-face with a trio of balalaika players who seemed to be attempting to pick out "Yankee Doodle" on the fly. Pflum and Sam sidestepped past them and stepped around the corner to encounter a band of bagpipers just starting up their performance.

"I prefer my bagpipes at a slightly safer distance," Pflum remarked. "especially when they're warming up like that."

"They do sound like someone is trying to herd a bunch of rather indignant cats," Sam admitted. "And I really like listening to the pipes."

"So do I," Pflum nodded, "but there is a time and a place. I suppose now is as good a time as any and the middle of a street is better than inside that bookstore across the street... Is that an organ playing in there?"

“No, the organ is in the pizza place next door,” Sam corrected him. “The bookstore seems to be doing karaoke.”

“In a bookstore?” Pflum mused. “I’d hate to see the distractions in a library. Anyway, while this is a good place for the pipers, it may not be equally as good for us,” he concluded in a shout to be heard over the bagpipes now that they were all playing at what Pflum could best describe as “full blast.”

Rather than reply vocally, Sam grabbed his arm again and they attempted to hurry away from the pipers. That took a while for no sooner had Sam and Pflum started walking again, the pipers started marching in the same direction. Two turns later they managed to lose the pipers, but had lost track of where they were and they stopped to take their bearings.

The street they found themselves on was a bit wider and definitely cleaner than the one their alley opened up on. The shops were larger, better lit and the music coming out of them was more refined and well-practiced. It turned out most of those shops were cafes, bars and restaurants, although there were also fancy clothing stores, jewelers, souvenir and news stands sprinkled among them and just beyond this first embankment of upper-class shops stood several palatial buildings that reached for the very sky.

“The business district?” Sam wondered.

“Judging from the marquees,” Pflum decided, “I think this may be the theatre district. No buskers ahead, I notice, but it sure looks like this is where the rich folk hang out, though. Hope we’re up to their dress code.”

“Some of those people ahead do seem to be dressed to the nines,” Sam agreed.

“Yeah, and I left my top hat and tails back home before we left,” Pflum replied dryly.

Sam let that stand for a moment until curiosity got the better of her. “Um, you don’t really have...”

“Hah! Not a chance,” Pflum laughed. “You’ve seen my closet. Heck, the other morning you were wearing one of my shirts.”

“You might have had a tuxedo in storage,” Sam replied.

“No,” Pflum shook his head. “I don’t need to wear one often enough to make the investment. If I need a tux, I rent one for the night. Well, let’s get a closer look. Spelling on the signs looks more like French than Spanish.”

“The pronunciation is more like Spanish than French, Pflum,” Sam warned him.

“Yeah, it sounded that way to me too,” he agreed. “Well, shall we brazen it out and stroll through the place where the elite meet and greet?”

“Let’s,” Sam laughed, slipping her arm in his.

A few eyes turned to look at them, but there were no obvious looks of scorn or disgust. There was nothing to indicate that their relatively drab clothing and less than upper-class style was in any way out of the ordinary. “Maybe we aren’t as outlandishly attired as we think,” Pflum remarked as they crossed a street.

Suddenly there was the blare of a horn and, turning to see what was making the noise, Pflum and Sam saw a large black limousine bearing down on them. The horn might have been warning them off, but the driver wasn't doing anything to avoid hitting them. Before either Pflum or Sam could react, a voice shouted, "Look out!"

A young man in his teens ran toward them from out of the crowd, and without pausing to slow down, knocked them down and out of the way of the speeding car. "Man!" he exclaimed in the local dialect, "What were you two thinking? You know the swells never stop for the likes of us!"

"They don't?" Sam asked as Pflum helped her to her feet.

"We're new in town," Pflum explained, brushing himself off. "I hope you'll excuse our ignorance. Quite a town you have here."

"Best place on Earth!" the teen proclaimed. "I'm Dancer, by the way. I get jobs in the chorus of some of the big productions."

"Some?" Sam asked curiously. She hadn't meant to sound as though doubting Dancer's claim, but he took it that way.

"Okay, once," he admitted, "but it's how I got my name. I go to the cattle calls, you know? When a troupe has more parts than they can fill from within. Sometimes you can get a break that way."

"So what happened?" Pflum asked.

"The play was a flop," Dancer shrugged. "It died within a week."

"Sorry," Pflum told him sincerely.

"It's okay," Dancer laughed, "it's not like I wrote that dog. Man, it was bad, but you take the jobs you can get, and sometimes a play is so bad that it's good, if you follow me."

"I've seen a few like that," Pflum admitted.

"Haven't we all?" Dancer laughed. "So, I told you my name..."

"Oh, yeah," Pflum started a bit. "Aurelian Pflum at your service. Most folks just call me Pflum, and this is Sam, Samantha di Medici when the taxman comes to call."

"A pleasure," Dancer replied politely, and in what turned out later to be an old-fashioned gesture, even on this world, he kissed Sam's hand. "So what's your act?"

"My act?" Pflum asked.

"Yeah, what do you do?" Dancer amplified. "Sing, dance, act?"

"None of the above, I'm afraid," Pflum admitted.

"Oh!" Dancer's eyes lit up. "You're an agent?"

"Not really," Pflum confessed.

“A producer then,” Dancer concluded.

“What? You don’t think I’m a critic, kid?” Pflum countered.

“Hah!” Dancer laughed. “Everyone’s a critic!”

“Anyway,” Sam cut in, “we really are new in town, Dancer. Maybe you could answer a few questions for us?”

“For you, my lady,” Dancer told her with a deep, theatrical bow, “anything. But a busy street corner is hardly the place. Why don’t we get something to eat and drink.”

“We don’t have much on us,” Sam admitted.

“A couple of decibals will cover coffee and pastry,” Dancer told her. “I’ll cover half.” He flashed a decibalc note.

“You’re on, kid,” Pflum told him, flashing the note Sam and Persi had found the day before.

Dancer’s idea of a pleasant café was only two blocks away on the theatre district’s periphery, but it existed in an entirely other world. At first Pflum wondered whether the owner could afford lights, but decided the dark little hole in the wall had been carefully planned to cater to the dark moods of hopeful performers. It turned out to be a clever choice as unlike most other businesses it proved unnecessary for the owner to entertain himself or to hire entertainers. Dancer was frankly admiring of that, in fact.

“Yeah, this is a good place to try out an act before taking it out on the street,” he told Pflum and Sam.

“That’s fine if you want to perform,” Sam agreed, “but what about the other folk?”

“What other folk?” Dancer asked.

“You know,” Sam told him, “people who don’t want to act, sing or dance.”

“Illusionists?” Dancer asked.

“People who don’t perform at all,” Sam clarified.

“There are people like that?” Dancer asked, honestly mystified by the concept.

“Obviously not,” Sam muttered to herself.

“Everyone is a performer,” Dancer told her, “or wants to be. Okay there are some who can’t cut it in show business so they do other things like wait on tables, or run a fish market or a bowling alley, but they do those things to pay for their food and rent and all. It also gives them a stage to perform on. Everyone is a performer. You go into the Quarters – that’s a really top scale restaurant a few blocks from here and everyone working there is performing as part of the resident orchestra. The music never stops while they’re open, but the pieces they play are designed and planned so they can do their jobs and still get back on stage in order not to miss their cues. You go to the pub, a normal one, I mean, and maybe the staff are doing stand-up comedy or magic. They might even be performing a play. Out on the streets you see them, chestnut sellers reciting poetry and policemen Morris dancing. I’ve even seen a fire brigade

playing mariachi music to drum up a bit of money for a new engine. Baggage handlers at the airport juggle and housepainters do performance art. Everyone is a performer!"

"Then where does the audience come from?" Sam asked.

Dancer gave Pflum a "Is she for real?" look, but answered anyway, "Everyone's an audience too. No one can perform every waking hour and you need the encouragement of others and inspiration too. You can't perform in a vacuum. Seeing what others are doing helps to develop the critical facility and improves your own performance. It also helps to come up with new ideas, you know?"

"Listen to me," Dancer laughed, "I do go on, though don't I? Everyone knows this stuff. Real public school education stuff. What do you really want to know?"

"Things are a bit different where we come from," Pflum explained. "Most actors aspire to work in a theatre, not a hardware store."

"Here too," Dancer shrugged. "Everyone wants to break in, but mere talent isn't enough, you got to have connections too. Why else would the theatres be so powerful?"

"Prestigious, I understand," Pflum noted, "but powerful?"

"Sure," Dancer nodded. "Where else did you think those vouchers that paid for the coffee came from?"

"The Mint?" Pflum guessed.

"Well, sure," Dancer laughed, "but they are issued by the theatres who commission to have them printed. Okay, look at this note." He pulled a pink and yellow printed slip of paper out of his wallet.

"Pretty," Pflum commented in a non-committal manner.

"I should hope so," Dancer replied. "It's worth half a mezz."

"A mezz?" Sam asked.

"Mezzanine," Dancer explained. "Two of these will buy a ticket in the mezzanine to any performance at the Mastoren Theatre. The Mastorens are the ones who issued this note. Actually any theatre will honor it, but depending on the popularity of the current plays, its value may go up or down relative to the other theatres. At the moment Mastoren vouchers are worth quite a bit, only the Toths and Gremalds are worth more. Most merchants will accept all ticket vouchers equally by face value unless a house has had a run of flops, but the theatres themselves are very picky about the relative value of their vouchers and the tickets they represent."

"And a balc?" Sam asked.

"A balcony seat," Dancer told her. "Some theatres don't have a balcony, of course, but they usually have a front and rear mezzanine. The vouchers still call them balcs, though. Nobody quibbles over the value of a balc, of course, not even the theatres. They're not worth much, and an orch, a seat in the orchestra, is the most valuable of all, except for seats in the boxes, but there are no set vouchers for them. You want a box, you have to negotiate with the theatre directly."

"How many balcs in an orch?" Pflum asked.

“Ah, now that’s the real question,” Dancer laughed. “The three denominations float in value relative to each other and it takes a real sharp guy to keep them all straight especially when you consider the relative value of different theatre issues. In general a balc is worth about a decimezz, one tenth of a mezz, and a mezz is one fifth of an orch at least if you’re trying to figure your worth in your head. There are investors who make big money investing in vouchers and converting them from bales to mezzes and orchs or the other way around simply by buying them when they’re low and selling when they’re high. There’s also good money to be made in trading different theatre vouchers, not that I have that sort of cash. It’s mostly the members of the Families who can do that.”

“Families?” Pflum asked. “Mafia?”

“No,” Dancer shook his head, “Theatah! What’s a mafia? Some sort of foreign troupe?”

“Something like that,” Pflum agreed, mentally kicking himself for using the term from his own home line. Fortunately, it was a word that didn’t sound completely alien to Dancer’s ears so Pflum didn’t have to explain it further, although Dancer’s answer prompted a mental image in Pflum’s mind of Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow trying to do a soft-shoe routine while robbing a bank. Their exit would obviously be to *Shuffle off to Buffalo*. Talk about a captive audience!

Pflum decided he and Sam had probably already asked too many question about this world, from this one, but they were still only halfway through their snack. “So, Dancer, doesn’t anyone mint coins in this town?” he asked.

“I’ve heard of those,” Dancer admitted. “Some of the old-timers talk about the days when vouchers were stamped on bronze, silver and gold disks, back in the days when people wanted vouchers that had intrinsic values of their own. Problem was, at least according to an old stage manager I learned this from, was that people were melting down the gold and silver and adding in cheaper metals, then recasting them into ticket tokens. The paper vouchers put a stop to that. Of course, that opened the Families up to a different sort of counterfeiting, but they found ways to make that difficult as well. No one but one of the Families can afford the sorts of presses that print these things, so while every once in a while an artist capable of drawing a copy comes along, they usually find they can make more money selling their art than counterfeiting vouchers,”

“You said you got your name when you worked in a chorus?” Sam asked. “You must have had a name before that.”

“Yeah, but I don’t use it anymore. Everyone on the street knows me. I’m Dancer. I’m the kid that got a job in a real theatre. There aren’t many non-Family members can say that. Some get adopted, of course, but that’s even more rare and I think I’m happier doing the cattle calls. I get to work with a lot of others that way and I see what they do and learn from them. You wait. One day I’ll found a real Family of my own.”

“Impressive, kid,” Pflum told him honestly. “Best of luck to you. Thanks for the info, but Sam and I need to get back now. We got friends waiting.”

“Sure,” Dancer nodded, smiling. “I understand. See you on the street!”

You’ve Got Something

Someone was shaking Pflum awake. "Mister Pflum, wake up!" Persi whispered urgently.

"Huh? What?" Pflum asked, still not entirely awake.

"Persi?" Sam asked from the other side of the bed. "What's wrong?"

"Someone is trying to break into the Transit," she told them.

"Let him try," Pflum laughed tiredly. "He can't get in without a digital key."

"He has one," Persi told Pflum. "He obvious does not know how to use it, but he may figure it out eventually."

"Who? Dancer! Where did he get it? Oh, the little street rat must have picked my pocket. Sam, you opened the door when we got back, didn't you?"

"I think so, yes," Sam replied, sitting up.

"Well it still won't work for him. Those keys are biometrically attuned to us. Remember?" Pflum told Persi.

"Perhaps," Persi agreed, "but it is the only key you have."

"There is that," Pflum admitted. "I guess I'd better get it back."

He got up and quickly pulled his shoes on over his feet before plodding over to the door. The inside door of the airlock had been left open following their arrival since there was no need for it on this line. Pflum briefly wondered about that. An airlock in a modern spaceship would never have allowed itself to be overridden this way, but he was just as glad this door had been made to work manually. Most Transits didn't have an airlock nor did they need one. When your vehicle stayed within the limits mandated by federal regulations you would never reach a place in which the air was not breathable. That all Transits were required to be fitted with a device that would test and analyze the air outside the Transit was one of the sillier federal regulations left over from a day when legislators didn't trust the new technology. However, as silly as it was in any other commercial Transit, Pflum knew his life had been saved several times by it.

The outside door was a different matter. It was a thick steel door with specially fabricated flexible seals on all four edges that made it an air-tight hatch. However, that protection was actually a side benefit of the fact that the Transit would actually go nowhen at all if the walls were not a perfectly conductive cage while moving. A hole in any one of them would destabilize the temporal field and leave the Transit in a shaky state at best.

A year and a half earlier, Pflum had escaped Nazi Germany with several bullet holes in the field wall and the resulting ride home was one he never wanted to repeat. "Come to think of it," he mused, "this crate's not been the same since."

"What?" Persi asked from just behind. Pflum turned to see Jack and Sam were there too.

"Hmm? Oh, nothing," Pflum replied as he reached for the large wrench on the wall next to the hatch. "Just thinking out loud. Now let's just teach Dancer to be careful what he wishes for."

Pflum pressed the button that would open the door from inside, quickly grabbed Dancer by his jacket as he fell into the airlock and dragged the young man bodily into the Transit. "Forget it, kid!" Pflum snapped at him. "That lock can't be picked even if you have the key." Still holding the wrench in a threatening manner, Pflum let go of Dancer's jacket and grabbed back the digital key. "Now what the heck do you think you're doing?"

"Well," Dancer replied uncertainly, "I have this script, you know... for a play?"

"Yeah?" Pflum asked in reply. "Pull the other one; it glows in the dark. And is breaking into a man's home the way you normally submit a script around here?"

"It's some pretty home you got here, mate," Dancer shot back challengingly. From the way he said it, Pflum could tell the word, "pretty" was a slang term meaning anything but in much the same way hot might mean cool or bad might be good. "One room for the four of you?"

"And what sort of palatial digs do you have, sport?" Pflum argued.

"Got more than one room," Dancer told him defensively, but admitted, "This one smells better though. Look, I really do have a script... uh... you really aren't a producer, are you?"

"Never said I was, kid," Pflum confirmed.

"They never do," Dancer commented. "They'd get mobbed, you know?"

"So everyone's got a script they're working on?" Jack guessed.

"Well, yeah, sure. There's all sorts of ways to break into the big time. You know?" Dancer replied. "It's good to be able to do it as a performer, but being a writer is almost as good and the big plays got to come from somewhere."

"That makes sense," Persi admitted, "or at least it makes sense in this cultural context where everything is based around the Theatre. Everyone's status depends on how and where they perform and how much they make at it or in activities that make it possible for others to do so. Any other form of income keeps the wolf from the door, but doesn't have the status. So, Dancer... Pflum, this is the Dancer you told us about?"

"For all I know he comes in case loads only," Pflum remarked, "but yeah this is the one we met."

"Be nice, Pflum," Sam told him. "Dancer did save our lives."

Pflum nodded and Persi continued, "Dancer, what did you hope to accomplish by breaking in here? Steal something to sell?"

"Uh, probably not," Dancer replied after too long a pause. "Yeah, okay, it was a chance, but not one I had a lot of hope for. You two are obviously new to town," he told Pflum and Sam.

"You mean we asked too many stupid questions," Pflum concluded.

"Pretty much," Dancer agreed, "although you kept your script close to your chest. It was Samantha who gave it away. Sorry, lady."

“So I talk too much,” Sam shrugged.

“However, it’s not unheard of for producers to come from overseas,” Dancer continued. “You guys talk funny...”

“Told you we’d have an accent,” Pflum interrupted.

“...so I thought that might be the case,” Dancer continued. “Like I said, producers have to be pretty cagey, especially out-of-towners. Want to cause a riot? Just stand on a street corner and yell, ‘I’m a producer! Anyone got a play?’ It’s almost as bad as yelling, ‘Fire!’ in a theatre.”

“That bad, huh?” Pflum asked, but Dancer took it as ignorance of theatre etiquette.

“Yeah,” Dancer replied, “That’s why theatre staff will refer to an on-going fire as ‘Mister Sands,’ rather than calling it fire.”

“But if everyone knows that,” Sam asked, “Doesn’t that sort of defeat the purpose. I mean everyone will know it means the place is on fire.”

“I never thought of that,” Dancer admitted. “Somehow it works out though.”

“Another cultural thing,” Persi inferred. “So long as you refer to it by the euphemistic name everyone assumes you have the situation under at least partial control so there’s no need to panic. But the moment you say, ‘We have a fire,’ people will assume that the situation is so bad that it’s everyone for himself, hence the panic. Or at least that’s my guess.”

“Sounds right to me,” Dancer admitted.

“Jack?” Pflum asked, “What did we ever do on this crate without a resident anthropologist?”

“Stumbled from one bad situation into another,” Jack replied immediately.

“So nothing’s changed,” Sam concluded dryly.

“You know,” Dancer cut in, looking around the Transit speculatively, “You got a lot of stuff in here that might be worth enough to finance my play...”

“Are you still on that, kid?” Pflum demanded. “Look, it’s all this stuff we’re trying to repair. That’s why we were wandering around the city yesterday. We were looking for places to find parts. It’s why we need money and why we were asking about the local currency, because it sounds like the stuff we brought with us isn’t going to cut it.”

“What did you bring with you?” Dancer asked. Pflum pulled out a handful of pocket change from the small cash box. He left the paper money inside, realizing it would be worthless here unless someone was interested in odd-looking art. “Hmmm, you’re right,” Dancer admitted sadly. “The bronze coins won’t be worth much. I don’t even know what these are made of...” he held up a five cent piece and a quarter dollar.

“Nickel,” Jack supplied. “The larger one has a layer of copper inside.”

“Why?” Dancer asked.

“So it would have similar electrical properties to silver and I guess it makes it harder to counterfeit,” Jack explained.

“Strange,” Dancer opined. “The silver and gold we may be able to sell as scrap metal, but if this is coinage metal like our old tokens were, it won’t be pure and we won’t get a lot for it. It might be seed money though.”

“What did you have in mind, kid?” Pflum asked.

“Well, this obviously isn’t enough to finance a play, even if we want to perform in the street,” Dancer replied, “but depending on how much you need for your repairs... if we can make enough over that to interest some friends of mine... Yeah, maybe we can use my script after all.”

“I want to see that script first,” Sam told him a heartbeat ahead of Pflum.

“No worry, lady,” Dancer replied, “I got it right here.” He pulled a thick, dog-eared bundle of paper out of his shoulder pack. As Sam accepted it, she realized that nearly everyone on the streets had worn a similar pack or bag. She had assumed the fashion was a sort of unisex purse, but now realized that Dancer had been right. Everyone had a script to tout, given the opportunity, and they carried those scripts around constantly just in case the opportunity came up.

“I’ll read it in the morning,” she decided, putting it down on the conference table.

“And we’ll go window shopping with you,” Pflum told Dancer, “and see just how expensive our eventual purchases are going to be.”

“So just what are you looking for?” Dancer asked.

“Electronic components,” Jack replied. “Integrated circuits, transistors, capacitors, diodes and that sort of stuff. We’ll also need relays, the smaller the better, and probably power converters, although I can probably build those if need be and it might be.”

“Expensive stuff,” Dancer whistled.

“No Radio Shack, huh?” Pflum asked, then translated. “No places that cater to hobbyists?”

“One or two,” Dancer admitted, “but most of the stuff you’re talking about is used by the big theatres for special effects. The Families actually like that stuff to be high priced because it keeps the rest of us from putting on a production that can compete with theirs on all levels, you know? Besides, they generally have cousins in the business so it’s all in the Family, get me?”

“Gotcha,” Pflum replied.

“Special effects, huh?” Jack asked. “You know, even with some of the dead boards here, I might be able to come up with something pretty neat.”

“Such as?” Pflum asked.

“Well, I’ll need to find something to make into a projector, but maybe some simple holograms?” Jack

suggested.

“What’s holograms?” Dancer asked.

“Kid,” Pflum laughed. “I’m really glad you asked that question, ‘cause if Jack is as good as I give him credit for, you’ll have a special effect the Families never heard of.”

No Wonder Taxes are High

“You weren’t kidding,” Pflum admitted to Dancer as they stepped out of the electronics shop. He thought he might be shouting, but it was hard to tell because his ears were still ringing from the on-going rock concert in the shop. Discussions with the clerks had been problematic because they had to be conducted in song so the clerks could both perform and serve at the same time. “The prices for this stuff are completely out of proportion compared to how much it costs to manufacture.”

“That depends, Pflum,” Jack disagreed. “The equipment used to produce chips, transistors and the like is very expensive. It’s only when those components are produced in large quantities that the price comes way down. I get the feeling no one here wants to produce them in that sort of quantity.”

“That’s what I told you last night,” Dancer reminded them.

“Yeah, kid,” Pflum confirmed. “That you did. We just thought... well, I’m not sure what we were thinking and the music was so loud in there it was difficult to think at all. It’s just that this stuff was cheaper last time we looked. We’re going to have to find a way to raise money.”

“A lot of money it looks like,” Jack added. “Thanks for fronting the cost of this book, Dancer. I couldn’t even start to plan on how to use those components without the diagrams in here.”

“Consider it part of my share of the seed money,” Dancer replied. “It was only a couple of balcs. Are you sure we’re going to need that other one you were looking at?”

“I’m afraid so,” Jack told him. “This is a beginners’ book. It will help me understand how the parts here work, but the other one details everything about every component made. Naturally, it’s bound to be more expensive.”

“But it’s worth a full orch, man!” Dancer protested. “Do you have any idea how many meals that would pay for?”

“I’m starting to get an idea,” Jack nodded, “but I’m also getting an idea of how much your play might net us if we do it right.”

“Do you really think you can come up with those holygrams you talked about last night?” Dancer asked.

“I’ve already worked out two different ways to manage it,” Jack responded, “assuming Pflum will let me dismantle the security cameras.”

“Sharonne will have a fit when she finds out, Jack,” Pflum told him seriously.

“She’ll have even more of a fit if we never get back at all. I don’t suppose Jeanette will enjoy walking

home either,” Jack responded, stealing one of Pflum’s favorite phrases.

“Oh sure, kid,” Pflum countered sarcastically. “Have fun with the phraseology. See what I care, but I’m the one who has to account for all the expenditures and fill out all the forms for the damaged parts.”

“You?” Jack laughed. “Funny, all that time I was your intern... I don’t recall that you filled out a single one of those damage forms. I doubt that’s changed a lot, especially since Persi’s so much more literate.”

“I’m still the one who has to justify what’s on those reports,” Pflum pointed out. Jack laughed humorlessly and said something that made Pflum sputter. Pflum, in response shot back a witty response and the two men proceeded to keep that up for over a quarter of an hour, heedless of the people around them who had stopped to watch. Eventually Pflum said something so ridiculous that Jack’s only response was to laugh and Pflum, realizing how foolish he was being started laughing as well.

“Good haul!” Dancer congratulated them, showing them his hat. Inside were many ticket vouchers worth one or two decibals each. While Pflum and Jack had been arguing, Dancer had been passing the hat and the passersby, thinking it part of a show, had donated freely. “I think we have over two orchs in here. I thought you said you couldn’t act,” he accused Pflum.

“Kid,” Pflum replied quietly, “we weren’t acting.”

“Shhh!” Dancer hushed him worriedly. “Don’t let the audience know that. They might want their money back. So do you want to go back and get that other book?” he asked Jack.

“Let me read this one first,” Jack told him.

“Good thinking,” Pflum agreed. “We’re going to need a lot of money and that book is the least of our expenses. Let’s see if we can use this and expand on it. If people give that freely, though, I can see why you want to do a formal production.”

“This was unusual,” Dancer admitted, “but you see, it sounded like you two were performing an original skit. It was pretty good, if a bit over the top, and folks always give a bit more when they see something entirely new. Of course in a day or two you’ll see a dozen pairs doing bantering sketches out here and folks will be tired of it in a week or two.”

“Hmm, so the trick is keeping it fresh, huh?” Pflum asked. “So that’s the sort of thing you do to make a living?”

“Well, not that exactly,” Dancer replied. “I’m not above working with a partner, but generally I work alone and I’ll do anything I think might attract a crowd. I’ll sing, dance, tell jokes, act, walk on my hands. You name it, I’ve at least tried my hand at it.”

“You sound like a versatile kind of guy, Dancer,” Pflum observed, making a mental note never to mention Santa’s reindeer to the kid.

“Yeah, that’s me,” Dancer nodded, “but what I want to do most of all is star on a real stage. I know that’s practically impossible for a one-time extra with no Family connections, but you never know. I keep going to the casting calls and maybe one day...”

“Like you told us,” Pflum recalled, “you’ve been in the chorus.”

“Once,” Dancer reminded him, “though I also had a call-back for a lead part once, you know?”

“A call-back?” Jack asked.

“Families usually give all the leads to their own members,” Dancer explained. “However, every so often a role comes up that isn’t quite right for anyone related, so they have an open call for auditions. We call that a cattle call and when they’re held hundreds of aspirants show up.

“Cattle calls are exhausting for everyone,” Dancer continued. “The director, producer and all have to watch each of the auditions in turn, while those of us turning out spend a heck of a lot of energy in stress value, you know? Sometimes you have to stand in the wings for hours waiting for your turn. That turn generally only lasts a few seconds and if you can’t grab them in those few seconds it’s, ‘Thank you!’ and you’re done. Sometimes, the director doesn’t find exactly what he wants right off so if you’re both very good and very lucky, you’ll see your name on a list telling you to return for a second audition. That’s a call back. You have to return and compete with the others who managed not to get dismissed in eight bars of music or less. And that’s when you really get put through your paces. Sometimes they just want to see more of your act and other times they may have you and a dozen others work with the choreographer for an hour or three. At the end of that you still might not even know how you did. Sometimes you do know immediately but it can be a week or two before you see your name on another list. It might be the final cast list, but just as often it’s a second call back.

“When that happened to me,” Dancer went on, “they thought I was good enough for the part, but so was the other guy. They wanted to see how I worked with the female lead. In that case they had two possible female leads both from the Valcini Family. They paired me with the younger one and had us read lines for an hour or so. Then they worked with the other guy and the older Valcini woman. Then we ran through a musical scene and then a dramatic scene. Finally, I had to wait another week to find out that I’d been cut because the actress I’d been paired with had been passed over for her older sister.”

“Tough break, kid,” Pflum sympathized.

“It’s a common enough story,” Dancer shrugged philosophically. “There are lots of guys with talent who could tell you one just like it. Oh, hey, I need an espresso, let’s duck in here for a bit.”

“Sure, kid,” Pflum replied. “I think we can all use a breather.”

The café Dancer had chosen was nothing like the one he had led Pflum and Sam into the day before and the prices were just part of the difference. This one was brightly lit inside with a number of umbrella-sheltered tables on the sidewalk out front. The sky was cloudy with a threat of rain in the air, so they sat just inside but at a table adjacent to a wide, open window. The staff members were performing a comic play about a young woman and two friends pretending to be men with all the expected plot twists that such situations engender. Pflum was impressed at how smoothly their waiter could take and deliver orders without missing a line, but realized that in such a theatre-driven society, this sort of thing must be something they cut their teeth on.

“Hey, Dancer,” Pflum asked, “what are the schools like here?”

“Brutal,” Dancer laughed. “Well, I thought some classes were anyway. Acting and music classes were fairly straight forward, you know, but the others were all performances too once I was in middle school. One semester I had social studies that doubled as stand-up comedy. Do you have any idea how hard it is to take politics seriously after that?”

“Sounds like a healthy attitude to me,” Pflum remarked.

“Maybe,” Dancer nodded, “but try trigonometry when you have to make all your answers rhyme. You sure you never had to go through that?”

“I had a hard enough time just getting the right answers when the classes were quiet,” Pflum replied.

“I think more kids in my school might have taken an interest in math if class had been like that,” Jack added.

“Your loss,” Dancer told them. “That’s why this city has the best performers. We start learning how from the moment we’re born. You know, if you’re done with your coffee, I’m ready to move on. We have a couple more shops to check out and I think Samantha mentioned picking up some groceries, didn’t she?”

“She did,” Pflum confirmed.

“First let’s find out if those coins of yours are worth more than I think they are,” Dancer suggested.

Pflum had not expected Dancer to take him into a bank, especially since all the banks in town were owned by and usually attached to the big Theatres, and in that he was not disappointed. Instead Dancer brought them to a pawn shop in a fairly seedy part of the city only three blocks north of the Theatre District. The pawn shop was filled with various musical instruments, jewelry, used clothing and, to Pflum’s surprise, manuscripts. At first it seemed as though the shop sported no live entertainment until it became obvious that the owner of the shop spoke entirely in improvisational poetry.

The pawn shop owner offered one orch for their entire cache of coins, but Pflum allowed Dancer to do the negotiating and by the time they left, they had Gremald vouchers of six full orchs and a ukulele. “Kid, what’s with the uke?” Pflum asked.

“I didn’t like the way he was trying to sucker us, you know?” Dancer replied. “So I added it in at the end more as a point of honor than anything else. Six orchs, though, we’re having a really good day! Here.” He gave the ukulele to Pflum.

“I’ve never actually played one of these,” Pflum remarked.

“It’s tuned like strings one through four on a guitar,” Jack told him. “Like a lot of instruments, it’s easy to play but can take years to master.”

“I could use a hobby,” Pflum considered, “or maybe I’ll just give it to Persi.”

“Not Sam?” Jack asked.

“Sam plays woodwinds, alto saxophone in particular,” Pflum informed him, “not strings. I don’t know that Persi has any musical talent at all, but I think she’d look good with a uke. What’s next, kid?”

“Your choice, Pflum,” Dancer replied. “We can check out the prices at another electronics shop, or get those groceries.”

“Will we find anything at the second electronics place that we might have missed at the first?” Pflum asked.

“Prices probably vary,” Dancer informed him, “but they change a lot anyway. If we’re not ready to buy, comparative shopping is probably a waste of time today.”

“Okay,” Pflum shrugged. “Groceries it is, then. Where is a good place for them?”

“Luckily, just around the corner from your place near the park,” Dancer told him. “You know, that was pretty lucky of you. New in town and you manage to get a place in the second nicest neighborhood in town after the Theatres. Your place is small, but just across from the park. Nice. How’d you manage it?”

“We just fell into it,” Pflum remarked.

“Some guys have all the luck,” Dancer shrugged.

Pflum was willing to give the grocery store full supermarket status. It was relatively large and while one could not buy greeting cards or lawn furniture there, it had a fair number of long and well-stocked aisles of food. Interestingly the entire operation seemed akin to a Gilbert and Sullivan operetta with shopping carts. The stock clerks, checkers, baggers and even the supervisors were all doing their jobs while singing their way through an amusing little story about a young foundling adopted into a house of bards who later learned his parents had been part of a polka band. Pflum wasn’t certain why that should be considered ironic and decide it must also be a cultural thing. Certainly Dancer seemed to find it amusing.

Pflum bought a few steaks and enough veggies for a few days worth of salads and a few other items before being checked out by the hero’s doting girlfriend just as she was discovering he was a born accordion player. Leaving the duo to resolve whatever problems that caused, they returned to the Transit.

I Wrote a Play

After dinner, Pflum looked at Dancer and requested, “So let’s see this play of yours.”

“Actually,” Samantha told Pflum, “Persi and I have already read through it.”

“And?” Dancer prompted her hopefully.

“I’m sorry, Dancer,” she replied. “It’s a highly convoluted plot, and I mean convoluted to the point at which I lost track of who did what, with over one hundred characters, most of whom only have one or two lines. There are several holes where songs are supposed to be but aren’t, and it doesn’t so much come to a finale as just stop. How do you expect this to work?”

“Well, sure it’s a bit rough,” Dancer replied confidently, “but we can smooth it out in production.”

“Perhaps we need to perform an old, crowd-pleasing favorite,” Persi suggested.

“Only losers produce old plays,” Dancer told her disdainfully.

“What about the retelling of a well-known story?” Persi asked. “Doesn’t anyone write new plays based on familiar stories?”

“Well,” Dancer paused, “Uh... sometimes, but... Is my play really that bad?”

“It’s a bit too grandiose for my tastes,” Sam told him, “and I can’t keep track of all the characters without taking a lot of notes.”

“But large ensemble casts are in these days,” Dancer protested.

“So you figured you’d make your ensemble larger than anyone else’s?” Sam countered. “Dancer, even *Cats* didn’t have this big a cast.”

“*Cats*?” he asked.

“Nevermind,” Pflum put in. “The costumes alone would bankrupt us.”

“Producing a play is bound to be an expensive proposition, Pflum,” Jack told him. “If we don’t have enough money for all the parts for the Transit we need, how are we supposed to raise the expenses for a play?”

“Even the Families have backers,” Dancer told them.

“So who do we have?” Pflum asked pointedly.

“Oh, yeah,” Dancer replied, slightly deflated.

“Oh, yeah,” Pflum agreed. “We’re our own backers. I think we have a good idea here, but we need to think this out. You’ve already shown us how something new and original can make good money fast around here, but sometimes new and original leads to bigger and better flops as well.”

“And anyone with the money for a production of any kind sinks it into his own,” Jack observed. “That’s why the electronics store was a rock concert and the supermarket an opera. The businesses provided the money for production costs.”

“Well, yeah,” Dancer nodded. “The point is to perform, you know?”

“Right,” Pflum agreed. “All other activity supports one’s performance.”

“So what do the less fortunate do?” Sam asked. “I assume there are no professional audiences.”

“No,” Dancer shook his head. “It’s like I told you. Everyone’s an audience member sometimes. Folks like me, guys without a Family to support him, have to perform on the street most of the time.”

“That’s going to make it hard to go on in the rain,” Pflum noted.

“We’ll just have to hope for clear weather, Pflum,” Sam told him practically, “unless Dancer knows of a theatre we can hire.”

“Are you kidding?” Dancer asked incredulously. “Only the Families can afford to own a real theatre and they would never rent it out. Not ever! Besides, they always have a production or two going on anyway.”

“Well, I suppose we don’t need an actual stage,” Pflum thought out loud. “We could perform in the round somewhere, maybe.”

“Spontaneous performances don’t net as much as well-publicized productions,” Dancer pointed out.

“Makes sense,” Pflum admitted. “But we don’t have a lot of places we can just set up a stage.”

“What about in the park?” Sam asked. “Persi and I went for a walk while you boys were out this afternoon and they have a very nice stage there. It didn’t seem to be in use either. Everyone else was performing in various places here and there, but the stage was left alone.”

“That stage gets a lot of use,” Dancer laughed. “It’s used mostly for evening performances and the curtains are kept shut to protect the sets that are usually left in place between performances.”

“I completely forgot about sets,” Pflum noted. “There’s another expense above and beyond the costumes and props.”

“And food for the cast and crew,” Sam added, “and printing costs for flyers and copies of the script...” she trailed off, then added, “and we’ll need costumes as well.”

“We can print our own flyers and scripts,” Jack pointed out. “The on-board computer is in good shape and the printer was off-line when... uh... we got here, so it’s fine too. I was going to see about using parts from them, but if we need them more intact, so be it.”

“I don’t want to think about getting home without the computer, Jack,” Pflum told him.

“The emergency home switch,” Jack suggested.

“We still need to find Jeanette,” Pflum replied, “so the emergency switch only gets used if there is no way out. It wouldn’t work right now anyway.”

“What are you all talking about?” Dancer asked, mystified.

“We travel in strange and unusual ways, kid,” Pflum told him. “Don’t worry about it. We’re here for the duration and even if I could leave now, we don’t run out on our friends, and so far you’ve proven yourself a friend.”

“Oh,” Dancer replied, looking relieved. “Thanks.”

“So what about that stage in the park?” Sam asked again.

“Oh that,” Dancer remarked. “Well, actually it’s a public venue that anyone can use, but it’s also a very popular one and that stage is generally booked weeks and weeks in advance. You can’t just set up on it one night and go.”

“I never thought you could or there would be riots over who got to use it,” Sam remarked, “but as to the wait, how long do you think it’s going to take us to write and produce a play?”

“Well, these things usually take weeks at least, usually months or even years depending on the production,” Dancer replied, then paused to review what he had just divulged. “Oh, yeah. I see what you mean. We’re going to be working on this a long time, aren’t we?”

“We’re not exactly ready to open, Dancer,” Persi told him, picking up the ukulele Pflum had given her

on his return. "I'm glad we have this, though. It should help work out some of the songs. Too bad we don't have a piano." She strummed a few chords experimentally.

"You can play that thing?" Jack asked.

"I have a guitar back home," Persi explained. "Though I have an overwhelming urge to play 'Aloha Oi' on this thing and I don't really know the words. It's a nice uke, though. It's not one of the cheap schlocky ones you sometimes find in tourist traps. You know, the ones with the palm trees painted on them or a hula dancer for the sound hole. This is a nice, no-nonsense instrument, meant for someone who wants to play good music."

"I never thought of the ukulele as a serious instrument," Jack observed.

"You have seen too many bad movies, Mister Laterus," Persi remarked. Pflum smiled. It seemed she had a tendency to get formal with everyone, not just him when disagreeing. Maybe that was why she kept calling him, "Mister." "The ukulele is as serious an instrument as the musician who plays it. They come in different sizes too. This one is an alto uke. It is slightly larger than the soprano instruments that are all too often parodied, and I like the deeper notes this instrument produces. I would love to see what the maker of this instrument would come up with in a baritone ukulele. It think it would be quite beautiful."

"Let's get back to the production," Pflum suggested. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a flicker of annoyance on Dancer's face, but whether it was because he was entranced by what Persi was saying about ukuleles or by Persi herself, he was not able to tell. "so we need to find out if and when we can book the stage in the park and for how many performances."

"Generally only one," Dancer told him, "at least newcomers who've never performed there at all only get one performance day. I've seen some troupes perform two or three times during their day, just to get some extra stage time."

"Does that bring in more money?" Pflum asked.

"A bit," Dancer replied, "since you'll get different crowds during an afternoon matinee and an evening performance. It all depends on the story you're telling, though. You gotta keep it clean when there may be kids there."

"The best plays keep it clean regardless," Sam told him. "There are ways to hint at spiciness without being raunchy. The kids will overlook it, but their parent will get it."

"What makes you think the kids don't get it too?" Dancer laughed, "but you're right about keeping it subtle and I've noticed the subtle ones seem to get the better reviews most of the time. Not everyone sees it that way, though."

"Well, I think we should write stuff we wouldn't be ashamed to have our mothers see," Sam told him.

"That varies from person to person too," Dancer pointed out.

"I suppose it does," Sam agreed.

"We really can't use my play?" Dancer asked yet again.

"We'll use it as a starting point," Sam promised, "but if we can't bring a lot of key points together in short order it may be best if we start over again from scratch. First of all you have too many plot lines going. None of them are being developed as much as they need to be before the next plot starts up. The best way to do that is to have one main plot. It's the story line that holds everything together, see?"

"Yeah, okay," Dancer agreed, "but I've seen plenty of plays that told more than one story."

"Sure, but how good were they?" Sam countered. "Also keep in mind the difference between the main plot and a subplot. You can tell a minor story or two that relate to the primary story, but it's usually best to keep just one plotline at the central core of your story."

"A play could be a collection of shorter stories," Persi disagreed. "An anthology."

"Yes, that's true," Sam admitted, "but there is usually a central theme to hold them together. Neil Simon did that in *Plaza Suite* and his other *Suite* plays and movies. However, there was still the central theme even if there were three or four different short stories that made up the entire piece. Dancer's play has three or four plot lines that are all more or less of equal importance, so we need to choose one of them, if we're going to choose any, and develop it and bring it to a conclusion."

"I'm more concerned with the characters," Persi remarked. "I just don't get what they're doing and why."

"Well, everything here is based on working as a performer," Sam remarked. "It's a different mindset."

"No," Persi disagreed. "I understand that. But you've studied sociology just as I've majored in anthropology. There are some differences between the two disciplines, but they both deal with collections of people. Cultures, societies; just a different focus, if you ask me. The thing is, unlike Pflum and Jack, we've studied different peoples in a disciplined matter."

"Whereas I've gone out and actually met them," Pflum cut in.

"Well, yes and that sort of experience is better in some ways than any book-learning," Persi allowed, "but what I'm saying is while you've gotten to see those different cultures, we've studied still more. You might say we managed to learn without doing it the hard way. I'm on a tangent, however."

"Even with the motivation to perform, this is still a functional society and therefore has certain important points of commonality with other functional societies," Persi continued. "When I said I didn't understand the characters' motivations, it wasn't because they wanted to be stars. Normally I'd have expected that to be developed more, but maybe in this society it's a given that everyone understands."

"Yeah!" Dancer agreed. "Everyone wants to be a star."

"Yes, Dancer," Persi nodded, "but your characters have other desires too. I suppose you did that to make them interesting, but you never do anything with them. You never explain why they do such things. Let's see, You have a young couple break up and go their separate ways for no discernable reason. You never explain why they split up."

"They had a fight?" Dancer replied uncertainly.

"You don't know?" Persi asked. "And you have another two men going into business together even though they hate each other, but you never actually use it as a plot point or even explore why they choose

to work together or show what happens when they do.”

“I’m more concerned with the fact that there’s no conflict in your story, Dancer,” Sam told him.

“What do you mean?” Dancer asked.

“The structure of any good story involves the building of some sort of conflict or tension which is then resolved at the climax of the piece. You have a lot of conflict potential, but nothing that ever develops beyond the initial exposition,” Sam explained. “If I didn’t know better, I’d say you cobbled this together with the highlights from every play you’ve ever liked.” The sheepish look on Dancer’s face told her she had scored close to the bull’s-eye if not exactly dead center. She decided to drop the critique and start a more constructive conversation, “So why don’t we pick one story and move forward with that. The young lovers might do well, although we should start with their meeting, not the day they split up. Love stories are almost always popular.”

Pflum allowed them to go on while he and Jack fumbled in the kitchenette working on something for dinner. They baked a few potatoes and broiled the steaks and served them up with a salad while Sam and Persi continued to brainstorm with Dancer on the play they would write and produce. In all, Pflum was impressed by how well Dancer had taken the harsh criticism of his play, but reminded himself that the young thespian had weathered a lot of rejection in his short life. The fact that Sam and Persi were actually working with him and some of his ideas had to be better than a flat rejection. This way he and his ideas were both garnering respect.

Finally, after dinner, Pflum had to cut in and ask one of the tough questions. “Kid we still have a lot ahead of us. Money’s only one obstacle, although we need to find a way to raise a lot more than we did this afternoon. We’re also going to need a cast and a crew as well. Any idea where we’re going to find that?”

“Which?” Dancer asked. “The money or the cast and crew?”

“Both,” Pflum replied. “Or all three, I suppose.”

“It’s all related,” Dancer told him with more confidence than he had shown in hours. “Come on,” he gestured toward the door, “It’s not far and it’s still light outside.” They all followed him out of the Transit and several blocks uptown. Finally he stepped into a wide alley partially filled with large wooden crates and other jetsam of the city. He took a deep breath and shouted, “Hey, kids! Let’s put on a musical!”

We’re About to Start Big Rehearsin’

Over three dozen “kids” came spilling out of the woodwork of the alley. Pflum estimated the oldest among them might be all of twenty-two years old, but the rest were younger, some as young as thirteen, by Pflum’s estimate. Dancer’s call, he concluded was as effective in getting their attention as shooting a gun in their general direction, except that it drew them in, rather than chased them away.

One of the older boys was as suspicious as he was interested, however. “What is it this time, Dancer?” he asked belligerently.

“Got a play,” Dancer replied.

“You and everyone else in the world,” the skeptic replied, gesturing toward his own shoulder bag.

“Ah!” Dancer smiled, “but I also have a team behind me.”

“You got backers?” the skeptic demanded. “How does a street rat like you get backers?”

“The old-fashioned way, Tommy,” Dancer replied, “by negotiation. You might have done the same if you ever actually submitted your script, rather than just hauling it around and waiting for it to come up in conversation. Anyhow, we need a cast and crew. Anyone interested?”

Behind them, in the alley, Pflum and the others could hear the whispers, “Dancer’s got a backer,” and “Open casting?” but Tommy the skeptic had another reaction. “Show me the money, Dancer. Word is out you were part of an act this afternoon that took in an orch or two, but that won’t pay enough to raise the curtain.”

“We have a seed,” Dancer replied, still in his normal confident voice.

“A seed?” Tommy laughed. “And where you gonna plant it? You’re gonna need a full-grown money tree to put on a play, or is this just another street gig?”

“Nope,” Dancer chuckled. “We’re planning to book the park stage. No charge for that stage, you know.”

“Maybe not, but you don’t have a Family. You need props and costumes, not to mention copies of the script...”

“And special effects, Tommy,” Dancer prompted him. “Don’t forget the special effects. And we also need people to play the parts and others to work as stage crew...”

“And you need more than mere seed money, Dancer,” Tommy argued.

“We have enough to start with so long as everyone is willing to pitch in,” Sam interrupted them.

“Pitch in, lady?” Tommy laughed derisively. “You think we’re living in this alley because we’re renovating the Family Theatre?”

“Okay, punk,” Sam snapped back at him, “listen up! The way anyone makes cash around here is through performance. Anyone here who doesn’t want to be a star?” The “kids” were silent. “That’s what I thought. Now the idea is that we’re going to use seed to fund a large number of street acts, which we will write and help you develop. The income from those acts goes into the pot to fund the big production, the one on the stage. Capiche?”

For a moment Sam wondered if they had understood her last word. She’d had been filling in the details of their own nebulous plan on the fly and the slang term slipped out. It was close enough to a term the kids were familiar with, though.

“Yeah,” Tommy replied, “we get you. Producer! You sound like Family.”

“How do you know she isn’t, kid?” Pflum put in.

Tommy looked back and forth between them for a long moment then decided, “Nah! Couldn’t be.

Family might go slumming sometimes, but not this far down. And how are we supposed to feed ourselves while giving you everything we make?" Behind him, Pflum noticed, about half the kids had faded back into the alley, obviously no longer interested.

Sam had originally thought of devising an equitable split, but Tommy's question gave her a better idea. If they were more interested in getting fed, than saving up, "We'll feed you," she told him. "We use the money partly to fund the show, but also to support the troupe during planning and production."

"Think of these guys as the producers, directors and managers," Dancer told the kids who were still interested.

In spite of his belligerence, Dancer could see Tommy was hooked, and if he was convinced, they'd likely have enough of the kids to go on with. "Tell you what," Dancer told them. "We're having a meeting in the park tomorrow morning. Think about this tonight and come with your questions then."

"I think they're interested, kid," Pflum told Dancer on their way back to the Transit.

"Of course they're interested," Dancer replied. "This is a chance to perform on the same scope as the Families. How many of them do you think have ever been in a big production? None of them, but they all want to be. They know I did it once, so they're willing to talk at least. The real trick will be convincing them with the play tomorrow morning."

"A play that hasn't been written yet," Jack pointed out.

"It won't be the first all-nighter I have put in," Persi commented.

"We don't need the whole play," Sam pointed out, "Just enough scenes to convince them we have something worth the effort. I still think we should retell an old story."

"Some people would tell you there are no new stories," Pflum remarked, "just reworkings of the old classics."

"Only if you reduce the plot to high concept," Sam countered, "Like boy meets girl, boy loses girl, boy gets girl back."

"Unless the play was written by Shakespeare in which case it's boy gets girl back dead," Pflum remarked.

"Sounds more like Mario Puzo," Jack laughed. "If you throw in the head of a horse."

"You know, that might work," Sam considered.

"What? A dead horse?" Pflum asked.

"Silly! No. We can take Dancer's young couple and build a *Romeo and Juliet* story around them," Sam suggested. "A boy and a girl from a competing, no feuding theater Families meeting by chance in a market or a park or wherever. They fall in love in spite of their Families..."

"Never happen," Dancer told her. "The Families rule everyone within them. Sure there's intermarriage if the Families are on friendly terms or they want something from each other, but if they hated each other the couple would never have got together in the first place."

“What if they didn’t know they were in opposing Families?” Sam asked.

“They’d introduce themselves, wouldn’t they?” Dancer replied.

“By their family names?” Sam countered.

“Um... I would think so,” Dancer came back uncertainly. “I would.”

“Yeah, really?” Persi asked. “So what’s your whole real name, Dancer?”

“That’s different,” Dancer told her.

“Is it?” Sam pressed. “Your reasons may be different, but there are plenty of reasons why you might only introduce yourself by your first name. Maybe he thinks she already knows him on sight so he’s just making it official, sort of. Or perhaps she’s slumming and thinks he’s cute enough for a fling.”

“Maybe,” Dancer allowed.

“The thing is, they don’t learn each other’s true identities until it’s far too late. You can’t turn love on and off like a switch you know. Once they’re in love they have to choose between Family and each other. Our job is to make it believable that they feel torn between the two,” Sam explained. “Then, unless you’re addicted to happy endings...”

“Happy endings are crowd pleasers,” Dancer told her.

“But a good tragedy will grip the audience by its heart,” Sam told him.

“Can’t sing and dance in a tragedy,” Dancer replied.

“Sure you can,” Sam maintained. “You just can’t be frivolous about it. Operas do it all the time. You want a song and dance number? We put it in near the beginning of the play before our young couple realizes the trouble they’re in and then maybe a much darker one directly after they realize it.”

“Well, maybe,” Dancer allowed. “And the tragedy is that they eventually part to stay with their Families?”

“No, they kill themselves,” Sam replied off handedly.

“What?” Dancer piled a lot of emotion into that one word.

“Rather than be parted in life, they choose to be together in death,” Sam explained. “If we do it right, there won’t be a dry eye in the audience.”

“I’ve always preferred comedies,” Dancer remarked.

“But the dramatic actors win all the awards,” Jack pointed out. That gave Dancer enough to think about to make the rest of the walk back a quiet one.

Pflum and Jack conked out sometime past midnight while Dance and the women were still talking excitedly, taking notes and running bits of dialogue past each other. Pflum woke up several times during

the night to hear them still going on and was tempted to rejoin them, but in the end he just rolled over and went back to sleep. He was finally wakened after dawn when Sam finally crawled into bed, mumbling how she needed an hour or two before meeting the kids in the park. By then Pflum had slept himself out, so he got up and started making breakfast.

Dancer was sleeping on the sofa, but a quick inspection of the conference table showed that he and the ladies had enjoyed a very productive evening. Pflum mixed a batch of pancake batter and brewed a pot of coffee before sitting down to read some of what had been written.

It seemed they had eventually chosen to work round-robin, each writing a scene that was then rewritten in turn by the others. There was also a long plot outline detailing how the entire play was to go. Three scenes had been chosen from places within the plot outline. Pflum doubted the wisdom of that. He would have thought it would be better to write it in the sequence in which it would be presented. It was how he would have approached the task, but then, he had never written anything longer than a mission report. He changed his mind when he realized they were going to need something to use at auditions and an opening scene would not necessarily tell them what they needed to know about the prospective cast.

Caught up in reading the drafts in front of him, he failed to notice the coffee was ready until Dancer stirred on the couch. "Morning already?" Dancer groaned.

"Go back to sleep if you want, kid," Pflum told him quietly. "I doubt you've been out for more than an hour."

"Nah, I won't be able to sleep now that I smell the coffee," Dancer replied, sitting up.

"I'll start the pancakes then," Pflum decided. "How do you take your coffee?"

"Is it good coffee?" Dancer asked.

"Of course it is," Pflum shot back. "What kind of question is that?"

"The kind asked by someone who's had a lot of really bad coffee," Dancer replied easily. "If it's good coffee, I'll take it black. Have you read the new scenes?"

"Yeah," Pflum replied, pouring two cups of coffee and handing one to Dancer. "Looks pretty good so far."

"Oh good. I was worried you might not like it," Dancer admitted.

"Me?" Pflum asked. "What difference would that make?"

"You are the producer, you know," Dancer told him.

"I am?"

"You didn't know?" Dancer asked. "Samantha said you were."

"As long as she said it," Pflum shrugged, turning on the burner under a large griddle. "And do you really think Sam would listen if I told her I didn't like it?"

"She said..." Dancer began, but Pflum cut him off.

“She said, sure. I could give constructive criticism up to a point and she would pay attention, but there’s a very fine line between that and saying too much against it. Kid, Sam is a person who definitely has a mind of her own. That’s just one of the things I love about her. Anyway, yeah, I like it so far and the plot outline sounds good. I know the story and know where it’s going, but I don’t know if anyone in your audience will.”

“It’s a common theme,” Dancer admitted, “but Sam says it’s the way we present it that will make the show, you know?”

“She’s right,” Pflum agreed and ladled out six dollops of batter on to the heated griddle. “Sometimes it’s not the destination that counts, but how you get there.”

“Samantha and Persi know a lot about writing, don’t they?” Dancer remarked a minute later.

“I guess,” Pflum shrugged. “Persi’s still in school so she has to produce over half a dozen papers every term and Sam has to write more reports than I do, but I don’t know how much fiction either of them has written in the past. Why?” he started flipping the pancakes.

“They taught me so much about writing last night,” Dancer told him. “I didn’t really like it when they started taking my first play apart, but seeing what we wrote last night I have to agree. My play was garbage, you know? Why couldn’t I see that before?”

“Too close to it, probably,” Pflum told him. “And maybe you were a bit impressed by your own cleverness. But the thing is a writer doesn’t write just one thing, he keeps writing and looking for ways to improve. But be careful, the one thing a writer always does is write and he doesn’t write because he wants to write.”

“Then why?” Dancer asked.

“Because he has to,” Pflum replied.

“That doesn’t make any sense,” Dancer shook his head in disbelief.

“You’re young yet,” Pflum half-laughed. “I have a few friends who write either for a living or as a hobby. Keep writing and you’ll see what I mean. Everyone has one novel or play in him, but real writers have a lot more and each story spawns another and then another. And once you get into the habit, it’s almost impossible to stop. Of course, as habits go, it’s healthier than most, although it does tend one to be anti-social while writing, but if your friends understand, they’ll know enough to let you alone while you’re writing and then welcome you back when you emerge back into the sunlight a few weeks later.” Pflum flipped three pancakes on to a plate and handed it to Dancer before serving himself.

“You make it sound like an obsession,” Dancer told him.

“Sounds about right,” Pflum nodded. “We have butter and syrup for those cakes. Hold up a sec.” He turned back toward the Fresher and remembered it had been turned off for the duration.

“You do live high on the hog, don’t you?” Dancer asked.

“Don’t get too impressed, kid,” Pflum laughed. “The fridge is out of commission, so we have to keep it in the freezer.” He took out a stick of butter from the freezer and dropped it on a plate where it clattered

against the plastic surface.

"Maybe if you have enough left over for seconds," Dancer told him. "You said there was some syrup." Pflum reached into a small pantry cabinet and dragged out a small bottle of a thick brown liquid.

Dancer poured a generous helping over his pancakes and started eating. "What kind of syrup is this?" he asked.

"Maple," Pflum told him.

"Pure maple?" Dancer asked. "The real thing?" Pflum nodded and started eating as well. "Tastes funny," Dancer remarked.

"You probably aren't used to natural maple syrup," Pflum told him. "It tastes differently than the artificial flavor the cheaper syrups use. If you don't like it, I'll buy a bottle of the local stuff for next time."

"No, that's okay," Dancer replied. "I think I can get used to this."

After everyone had breakfast, they trooped out and into the park with copies of the plot outline and the scenes that had already been scripted. The "Kids" from the alley had taken them literally at their word and almost two dozen people in their teens and early twenties had shown up and had been waiting for Dancer and the others to arrive. Sam instantly noticed their clothing was threadbare at best, and added fresh clothes to the shopping list for things that would need for the production. People, she thought, would be more willing to tip a clean and prosperous-looking entertainer than a street urchin.

"About time you lot showed up," Tommy, the belligerent young man from the night before observed.

"We took a shortcut, kid," Pflum retorted instantly. "You have a problem with that?"

"Good move, Tommy," Dancer laughed. "Picking a fight with the producer on the first day."

"No problem, sir," Tommy replied in an abrupt about-face.

"Well, I see quite a few of you were interested enough to come here today and learn more," Pflum told them, looking around. "Well, I hope this is going to be a great experience for all of us. We have a really great play ahead of us, but it's going to be a lot of work. So, I'll let Samantha tell you about it."

"Good morning, uh... kids," Sam began, uncertain if she should call them that even if Dancer did as a matter of course. Then she decided to push on ahead. This wasn't all that different from the occasional classroom lectures she had given as a working FBI agent. She described the play, giving them a run-down on the storyline she had worked out with Persi and Dancer.

Once that was done she decided she may as well jump right into auditions, but Persi interrupted her. "Samantha, perhaps we should first describe what we expect of every member of this production."

"All right," Sam nodded. "Would you like to take that?"

Persi nodded. "If anyone here has failed to notice it, we're not one of the Families." The Kids all chuckled at that. "You heard yesterday we have some seed money and that's true, but we don't have enough to fund the entire production. Raising the rest of the money is going to take both work and ingenuity on all our parts."

“What sort of work?” Tommy demanded.

“Performing,” Persi told him flatly. “Are you up to that, or do you only play surly boors?” Tommy looked like he wanted to retort, but a confident glare from Persi kept him in his place even though it was obvious she was several years his junior. “Performing,” she repeated in a softer tone for the others. “We’re putting together an ensemble here and not just for the play Samantha just told you about. What we propose to do is write a host of new and exciting acts for you to perform out on the streets. We’ll take the money you earn that way and use it to defray production costs. We’ll also be keeping you fed and clothed and the amount of cash you bring in will determine how much of the profits you get as well, so not only are you the cast and crew, but you’re also our backers. Now we’re going to be up front about what’s in it for us. By us I mean Pflum, Sam, Jack and myself. We need certain electronic parts which we intend to buy out of the writers’ producers and director’s cuts. However any part of our share that is in excess of those needs will be split up by the rest of you in the same proportions as the rest of your shares. Sound fair?”

The Kids nodded and one young woman raised her hand. “Will there be higher pay for the stars?” she asked.

“Everyone in this troupe is a star,” Persi informed them. “Whether you get a part in the play or are part of the crew, each and every one of you will be performing on your own in the various acts we use to build up toward the performance itself, so nobody will get a bonus simply because they have a lead in the big play.”

“Then what do we get as stars in the final production?” Tommy asked angrily.

“The leads get billed as such in the program, Tommy,” Dancer snapped at him. “And what makes you think you’re a lead? None of the parts have been cast yet.”

“Oh, I’ll bet you have one lined up for yourself,” Tommy replied.

“Not really,” Dancer replied. “I’ve been too busy writing to worry about it.”

“We’re gonna have real programs?” another of the kids asked.

“Of course we are,” Pflum replied. “What kind of outfit do you take us for? We’re going to have programs, food concessions, souvenirs, you name it.”

“What’s souvenirs?” still another kid asked and was instantly echoed by the rest.

“Uh, you know,” Pflum replied a bit less certainly. “T-shirts, hats, posters maybe and other stuff with the name of our play and the artwork associated with it on them.”

“Why?” Dancer asked in spite of himself.

“Because people will buy it,” Pflum replied, “as a memento of the occasion or just because they think it’s cool or neat or whatever term you kids use to express delight.”

“Never heard of anyone doing that,” Dancer remarked. “Not even the Families.”

“Then we’ll start a new trend,” Pflum told him. “It’s called merchandizing and with a bit of luck the

proceeds from the souvenirs will bring in as much as the ticket sales.”

“It better do more than that,” Tommy laughed, although this time there was more glee than scorn in his voice.

“He’s right,” Dancer admitted. “We’re not allowed to charge admission to performances in the park here. We can pass around the hat though.”

“Then we need the merchandizing all the more,” Pflum replied. “Sam, were you going to start auditions this morning?” Every eye perked up at the thought of auditions.

“No need to waste time,” Sam agreed. “Now, kids, I know you’re probably used to just standing up and doing whatever act you think might catch a director’s eye until he dismisses you, but we’re going to do this a bit differently. Since everyone is going to get a part in one thing or another, today we’re all just going to read lines from some of the scenes in the play. I need to know what each of you can do so I can cast you, both in the big play and in the skits we’ll be writing for using to drum up production money. For now don’t worry about the parts themselves, I just want to hear and see how you read the lines. And also don’t worry about a great performance just yet. Get to know the lines here, because I’m probably going to ask you to read them more than once.”

“Weird way to do auditions,” Dancer whispered to Pflum and Jack.

“Every director does things his or her own way,” Jack replied. “This is Sam’s way. Now if you want a part in your own play, you probably better get in there and read when she asks you to.”

Sam kept them going until well after lunch, which Pflum supplied by hauling one of the local sausage vendors over and paying him for everything the kids ate. In the afternoon, Sam had each of them perform whatever act they did on the streets most often so she could evaluate their talents and preferences. In most cases, she stopped them midway, gave them a few suggestions and had them start over again. All of them improved with each correction and the ones whose turns came later learned from her instructions to the earlier kids as well.

By the middle of the afternoon Sam was exhausted, but the kids wanted to keep going, so she suggested, “Take your usual acts out into the streets and see how they do now that we’ve done some rehearsing.” She also told them all to come back to the Transit for dinner.

“But you already fed us today?” one girl noted.

“One meal a day is not enough to be getting on with,” Sam told her sternly. “You’re going to be working your hearts out for the next few weeks or even months and you are going to need fuel to keep you going. You may have to skip lunch more often than not, but we will be feeding you a breakfast every morning and a dinner every night. It might not be the shrimp and caviar the swells eat, but it will be good, nourishing food. Now, go show this town what you’ve got!”

I Shall Positively Pay You Next Monday

“We have a lot of writing to do again tonight,” Sam remarked to Persi as they returned to the Transit.

“Don’t worry, Samantha,” Persi replied. “I was taking notes. About half of them we send out as singers,

they seem to like that and it will just be a matter of teaching them some new songs. They do soak up new things very quickly, don't they?"

"You have that right," Sam replied. "Did you notice that after two readings of any given scene the rest of them had most of the lines memorized already?"

"I did," Persi agreed. "They still needed direction on how to present those lines, but I would have thought memorization was the hard part."

"Well, to tell the truth," Sam admitted, "I kept revising my instructions to see how some of those lines sounded with a different emphasis. I took a few notes of my own and I think we can use them to polish the script. What sort of songs did you have in mind?"

"Almost anything until we find out what's most popular here," Persi replied. "I'm a bit concerned about making translations scan with the music, however."

"Sometimes you have to rewrite a verse entirely," Jack told her, "but why translate? Or at least why translate all of them. I think the Kids will pick up the melodies pretty quickly and a lot of songs can be strictly instrumental. You'll notice almost all of them brought a musical instrument of some sort even if most were crude penny whistles."

"There is that," Persi admitted.

"I thought that young girl with the red hair had a perfect voice for singing, 'Love For Sale,'" Pflum opined.

"Pflum!" Sam turned on him faster than a tornado with a homing device. "That would make her sound like she was advertising."

"Not if you kept the words in English," Pflum replied. "We understand the local lingo because of our acquaintance with various Romance languages. They don't know from English, however. As far as I can tell, this world never had the combination of invasions that led to that language."

"Maybe," she considered. "I'll try the song out on Dancer this evening. If he doesn't understand the words, maybe I'll try it."

"Yeah," Pflum agreed. "That kid is pretty sharp. And any of them will soak up English if we speak it in their presence often enough. I wonder if most folks on this world are like that."

"Could be," Jack nodded. "Their lives pretty much depend on their ability to learn new acts, even if a preponderance of them seem to be mimes and jugglers and what not. Say, does anyone mind if I take an orch out of the till and go back to buy that advanced electronics book? I finished the basic one last night and want to start designing the new circuits."

"That's reasonable," Sam told him, "but we're not buying any of the parts we need until our shares from the production allow it. It's only fair to the kids that way."

"Fine by me," Pflum agreed, "so long as we're not here long enough to collect Social Security or worse, for the kids to collect. Hey! What's that on the Transit door? Is someone posting flyers?"

It turned out that would have been preferable to what the piece of paper actually said. "It's a demand

for rent,” Pflum told the others. “Somehow the landlord discovered there was a door down at this end of the alley and he’s demanding payment for our use of it. Darn! Maybe we shouldn’t have cleaned the place up.”

“We’re going to be here a while, Mister Pflum,” Persi pointed out. “It might be easiest just to pay him what he wants.”

“He wants five mezzes a week,” Pflum replied, “That’s roughly two orchs every month. The greedy bug must have a pretty high opinion of himself and his property if he think he can charge that much for a door into an area he’s never seen.”

“You heard Dancer,” Sam reminded him. “The area around the park is the second nicest neighborhood in town.”

“But he can’t even prove there’s anything behind this door,” Pflum argued, tearing down the rent notice and balling it up. He was about to throw it away, but instead carried it inside and tossed it into a waste basket. “We may have to tell the kids to be careful when approaching,” he commented, sitting down on the sofa.

“Or we may eventually have to pay this particular *danegeld*,” Persi noted.

“*Danegeld*?” Sam asked. “What’s that?”

“Skipped that class in history, did you?” Pflum blurted, earning a glare from Sam.

“I do wish I’d known you back when I was in school,” she told him sweetly. “Then I could claim I was distracted by you dipping my pigtails in the inkwell.”

“I seriously doubt your school desk had an inkwell,” Pflum chuckled.

“I didn’t have pigtails either, Pflum,” Sam shot back. “What’s *adanegeld*, Persi?”

“In the days of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of England, the Vikings - often ruled or led by a Danish king - used to invade on a fairly regular basis,” Persi explained. “However, the point was to make money. The killing, rape and what have you was just a by-product. Even the Vikings were more than susceptible to being paid off, so there were times when huge monetary payments were made to these ‘Danes’ not to attack, and much like any protection racket it kept the Vikings away for a while. Of course once the Vikings realized they could be paid not to fight, they were more than willing not to risk life and limb, literally. The term *danegeld* means ‘The Danes’ gold’ and they collected it not only from the English, but from anyone else they could extort like the Finns, the Baltic States and possibly from as far to the east as Moscow. The amount of money paid by England alone has been estimated at sixty thousand pence and more of those English pence from that period have been found archaeologically in Denmark than in England.

“However, the English eventually realized that paying off the Vikings was not a permanent solution and there was a saying that went, ‘The problem with paying the *danegeld* is that you never get rid of the Dane,’ Persi concluded.

“And yet you’re recommending we pay this guy rent?” Pflum asked.

“In this case a temporary solution is all we need,” Persi replied calmly..

“Let’s see if we can avoid him altogether,” Pflum decided. “We’re as temporary as far as this world is concerned as the problem is. Are you writing again, Sam?”

Sam had already pulled out the last two legal pads in the Transit and was feverishly scribbling on one of them even as Persi sat down to join her. “Oh, Jack?” Sam called as he was heading for the door. “Take some extra cash with you and bring back some more notepads and a ledger book for accounting, please.”

“I’ll go with you,” Pflum told him. “I ought to see about bringing in some food if we’re going to start feeding the kids.”

“Just see about bringing in pizza for tonight,” Sam suggested. “I’ll go shopping with you tomorrow.”

“What about breakfast?” Pflum asked.

“We have enough oatmeal to feed several times the number of mouths we have to feed,” Sam told him. “I’ll worry about variety when we go shopping together.”

“Sure you don’t want to join us?” Pflum asked.

“Can’t, dear,” she replied without looking up from the notepad. “I have to plan routines for the kids.”

“Wish I’d brought a copy of the complete works of Shakespeare this time around,” Pflum told Jack a while later as they headed for the electronics store.

“There’s probably a ‘Big Book of Plays’ for sale in a bookstore,” Jack replied.

“All well known on Showbiz World. You heard the kid. Only losers perform old plays,” Pflum reminded him,

“Showbiz World, Pflum?” Jack chuckled. “Did you ever stop to think some of these worlds you name might already have a name?”

“They all do, Jack,” Pflum replied. “Earth.”

“There is that,” Jack agreed. “Even in their local languages?”

“Well, here it’s Terre,” Pflum chuckled. “Means the same thing.”

“Okay,” Jack shrugged. “Point taken. But Showbiz World?”

“You have a better description?” Pflum asked.

“Unfortunately not,” Jack replied with a sigh. “But why name them at all?”

“It’s a way to keep track,” Pflum explained.

“Most of us use temporal coordinates, you know,” Jack told him.

“Oh, yeah, those just trip off the tongue, don’t they?” Pflum laughed. “What’s going on up ahead.”

“Looks like a riot,” Jack replied, “or a really good act.”

“I’ll hope for the latter,” Pflum remarked. “Let’s get a closer look.”

It took a while to nudge their way to the front of the crowd but when they did, they found Dancer with Persi’s ukulele in hand. Dancer spotted Jack and Pflum and winked in their general direction and gestured they should stick around a few minutes. He finally finished singing and thanked the crowd for their applause, holding his hat out for the tips they seemed anxious to press on him.

“Not bad, kid,” Pflum congratulated him. “When did you learn to sing *California Girls*?”

“Persi taught me last night during a break from all the writing along with a few other songs,” Dancer told him. “Never heard anything like them.”

“Looks like no one else around here has either,” Jack noted.

“Yeah, that’s why I asked you to wait up,” Dancer admitted as the crowd started to thin out. “Even before you got here, I’d already made more than I had in any two days of busking. I didn’t really want to walk around the city by myself with this much in my pockets.”

“Well, we have a couple stops to make,” Pflum admitted, “but we can use an extra pair of hands.” Pflum explained the errand they were on.

“Great!” Dancer enthused. “The best pizza in town’s not far from here.”

“How many do you think we’ll need to feed everyone?” Pflum asked.

“Three or four,” Dancer replied.

“You’re allowed more than one slice each, kid,” Pflum told him.

“One slice is generally all we get,” Dancer replied. “Believe me, no one will accuse you of being stingy.”

“Sam will,” Pflum told him.

“Is that what it’s like? Being married that is?” Dancer asked.

“What?” Pflum asked, so surprised at the change of subject he failed to correct Dancer’s notion of the relationship.

“I mean do you always have to defer to the wife?” Dancer asked. It didn’t sound like an accusation, just a curious question.

“Well, both members of a couple are part of a team,” Pflum replied, “or they’re supposed to be. So, ideally both need to accommodate each other in various matters. In something like how much pizza to buy, I see no reason to set myself up for an argument in which I’d be wrong anyway. Sam and I argue about more important things. No need to disagree about trivia.”

“I suppose,” Dancer nodded.

“Besides, kid,” Pflum continued. “I may not be an actor myself, but I’ve known a few and I’ve never met one who didn’t eat almost everything in site, given the chance, especially if it’s pizza.”

Brush Up Your Shakespeare

“Persephone!” Dancer greeted her as they walked through the Transit door. “Thanks for the songs and the loan of your uke. I just had my best day ever!”

“Fantastic!” Sam congratulated him.

Dancer dropped his earnings on the table before asking Sam, “Do you mind if I take some out to buy a guitar. I’d actually prefer that over a ukulele.”

“That’s not a problem, Dancer,” Sam told him. “Just hold back what you need. Looks like you brought in quite a lot.”

“Yeah,” Dancer admitted. “Persi’s music turned out to be very popular. I’m going out again after dinner, though and work the evening crowds as they go to the theatres.”

“Why?” Sam asked. “Seems to me you could take the evening off. Besides, we may need you for the new stuff we’re writing.”

“I’ll be back before too late,” Dancer promised, “but I want to get out there again before others start copying me. Once the novelty wears off, it will be just another bunch of songs.”

“By then we’ll have you singing other songs,” Sam told him. Just then there was a knock at the door. Pflum got up to check through the digital window but found it was still turned off. “Jack do me a favor and get this working again as soon as possible, please. Since that guy left that rent notice on the door I’d rather know who was on the other side.”

“I’ll do it tonight,” Jack promised.

Pflum took the chance and opened the door to find four of the kids waiting to come in. They nodded to him respectfully and started to dump a small handful of ticket vouchers next to the pile Dancer had already left.

“Hold up,” Sam told them. “I need to count these so I can give you the credit you deserve.” She counted each handful quickly and marked their names and the amounts that had brought in the ledger Jack had brought back. “You all brought in the same amount,” she noted. “Working as a quartet?”

“Yes, ma’am,” they told her. “We were playing our penny whistles.”

“Hmm, I’ll have to see about finding some music for you. Can you read sheet music?” she asked. They admitted they could not so Sam promised them lessons. Then she went back to writing with Persi, while Pflum started serving the pizza.

“Good pizza, huh kids?” Pflum asked. They nodded, but continued eating without pause. “Well, eat as much as you want and be back for breakfast.”

“Pflum,” I don’t think we should call our actors ‘kids,’” Sam told him, looking up from her notes.

“Why not?” Dancer asked. “That’s what we are. I was always the kid while I worked in the theatre. We’re always called that when among older actors.”

“I just don’t think it’s very respectful,” Sam explained.

“Well, I think it’s very respectful,” Dancer told her seriously. “If an adult doesn’t like you he’ll call you a street rat or worse. ‘Kid’ is a term of endearment in comparison. We’re proud to be kids. Maybe that should be the name of our troupe, in fact. ‘The Kids.’”

“Sounds good to me,” Pflum agreed, “and it will give our merry band a sense of identity.”

“Well, if that’s really what you want,” Sam agreed grudgingly, “so long as the whole troupe agrees.”

Over the next hour other kids arrived, checked in with Sam and ate two or three slices of pizza. Dancer stayed long enough to teach some of the California beach songs to some of the others and to Sam’s surprise nobody, not even Tommy, who had argued about nearly everything else, had any problem with calling the entire group simply, “The Kids.”

Finally Dancer went out to catch the evening theatre goers and let Persi coach the kids through a rendition of *Surfer Girl*. Unlike Dancer, they got curious about what the words meant, so Persi found herself trying to explain surfing and how it was done to a group of teens who had never even seen the ocean. They thought it sounded fun and exciting but had trouble understanding how it worked.

Once the Kids had left for the evening, Sam and Persi ran some of the skits they had been working on past Pflum and Jack. “I thought you were working on the play,” Pflum remarked. “Do you have a title for it yet?”

“Nothing I’m in love with,” Sam admitted. “Persi suggested *Two Families*, but is it about the Families?”

“Depends on how you write it,” Pflum replied. “It could be about the two Families and their differences.”

“The only difference between them,” Sam replied, “is each other. It could also be due to the fact our young lovers are from two Families who are at violent odds with each other, but the fact their relationship is outside their Families is not unusual in and of itself.”

“Name it after the characters, like Shakespeare did with *Romeo and Juliet*,” Pflum told her.

“I used those names,” Sam admitted. “Well it’s Julietta to more closely conform to the names here, but ... Oh, maybe. Or maybe we’ll get a better idea as we go along. Anyway, we moved to writing skits and planning other sorts of acts, heavily cribbed from our own history, of course, because that’s what the Kids need to raise money in the near term.”

Jack, reading nearby looked up and asked, “Where’s Persi?”

“She went out with some of the Kids to watch an evening performance, or maybe she was planning to perform with them,” Sam informed him.

“I never would have taken her for a Beach Boys fan,” Pflum remarked.

“Actually her taste in music varies widely, Pflum,” Sam told him. “It’s just for some reason she was humming *Surfing USA* last night and Dancer asked to hear the rest of it. She’s been writing out some songs, mostly ones she remembers, but I think she wrote a couple of her own in there and I’ve been writing out scripts.”

Pflum looked at some of her notes. “I wonder if they’ll get the Marx Brothers stuff here. Everyone sort of sounds like Chico to me and none of the Kids has a harp.”

“I plan to adapt, or rather let the Kids adapt this to fit into their own culture,” Sam replied, “but writing for small groups means less writing to make sure they all get something.”

“You’ll burn yourself out if you keep trying to write even that much,” Pflum warned her. “Why not give several groups of the Kids the same skits, but send them to different parts of town.”

“That might cut down the workload,” Sam admitted, “and give us more time for the play.”

“Yep,” Pflum agreed. “The play’s the thing.” As he was speaking Persi and Dancer came back inside the Transit.

“That’s the spirit!” Dancer agreed and dumped another hatful of vouchers in front of Sam. “What a day! Tomorrow, I’m definitely buying that guitar. So what else do we have to work with?”

Sam showed him some of the skits she had made notes about. Dancer loved the Marx Brothers routine and thought it would go over well, especially with some of the older Kids in the parts. “I don’t like Tommy much,” he admitted, “and it’s mutual, but I think he’d be good as this Groucho character. Pflum’s right about the harp, but why does it have to be a harp? It could be anything and all the Kids got a penny whistle. I think all you need is a bit of music there.”

“It should be something pleasant and beautiful,” Sam told Dancer. “Something you might not expect from the mute and whacky Harpo character.”

“I don’t get this Chico, though,” Dancer admitted. “What is he? The straight man?”

“That would be Zeppo,” Sam told him, “or Gummo, but I decided to leave them out. Chico is a sort of amoral scamp. Well, I guess they all are in their ways. He’s the one who seems to always have a questionable deal to make and is the only one who occasionally twists what Groucho says around. He often teams up with Harpo either against Groucho or anyone else.”

“But Groucho seems to get all the best lines, it seems,” Dancer remarked, “and this Harpo doesn’t even speak, you know?”

“Believe me,” Sam laughed. “That can steal the show if you do it right. It’s all broad gestures and horn honking and such.”

“We’ll try it,” Dancer agreed. Then he looked at another script. “I don’t get this.”

Sam looked at what she had written. “Who’s on first? Classic Abbot and Costello. You see they’re treating ordinary words as if they were proper names...”

“No, I understand that,” Dancer nodded. “That’s pretty funny in itself, but what’s this first, second and third base thing?”

“No baseball here, Sam,” Pflum remarked. “Everyone’s too busy acting, I guess. Besides, they’d probably never finish the game if the players had to stop every few minutes to perform *Macbeth* or something. Heh, heh... ‘Is this a bat which I see before me?’” he misquoted. “The handle toward my hand? Come, let me clutch thee.

I have thee not, and yet I see thee still.”

“Not bad,” Dancer told him. “Sounds like high theatre. What is it?”

“The opening of a famous soliloquy,” Sam told him. “Though it’s supposed to be a dagger, not a bat.”

“Do you remember anymore of it?” Dancer asked eagerly.

Pflum thought about it. “A few more lines, but not the whole thing. I told you, I’m not an actor.”

“I think I can remember most of it,” Persi announced, “Although if you want dramatic speeches taken out of context, try this.

“To be, or not to be: that is the question,” she declaimed.

“Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer
The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune,
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,
And by opposing end them? To die: to sleep;
No more; and by a sleep to say we end
The heart-ache and the thousand natural shocks
That flesh is heir to, 'tis a consummation
Devoutly to be wish'd. To die, to sleep;
To sleep: perchance to dream: ay, there's the rub;
For in that sleep of death what dreams may come
When we have shuffled off this mortal coil,
Must give us pause: there's the respect
That makes calamity of so long life;
For who would bear the whips and scorns of time,
The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,
The pangs of despised love, the law's delay,
The insolence of office and the spurns
That patient merit of the unworthy takes,
When he himself might his quietus make
With a bare bodkin? who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscover'd country from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards of us all;
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment
With this regard their currents turn awry,

And lose the name of action. - Soft you now!
The fair Ophelia! Nymph, in thy orisons
Be all my sins remember'd."

"Wow!" Dancer breathed. "That is high theatre! Sounds like old stuff, but..."

"It's very old," Persi told him. "Written by William Shakespeare. I thought you didn't want to do old stuff."

"It's new to me," Dancer replied. "Actually, by old I sort of meant doing stuff that everyone has seen in the last year or two. This sounds so old, it's new. Been a while since anyone spoke like that."

"It was a translation on the fly," Persi admitted.

"I understood most of it and the rest sounds ancient enough that I doubt anyone will ask," Dancer assured her. "Could you write it down for me?"

"Of course," Persi shrugged.

They spent another hour polishing up Sam's scripts and Persi's songs before moving back to the play itself. "I like *The Two Families*," Dancer decided. "It has a more solid ring than *Romeo and Julietta* and I think it will intrigue more people. I mean everyone wants to be a member of one of the Families deep down."

"They want to be rich, you mean?" Sam asked.

"No one wants to be poor," Dancer replied, "but it isn't the money alone. There are people with tons of orchs to their names who would give it all up just to be a regular member of the chorus. None of it is worth a thing without the chance to perform and the best place is on the stage of a real theatre."

"Good point," Sam agreed. "We'll go with *The Two Families* then. Now I've been thinking about the opening scene. How about an actual encounter between members of our two Families? It will set the situation right from the start. Now what sort of thing might happen if two Families really hate each other?"

"Now or in the past?" Dancer asked.

"How about ten years ago?" Sam suggested.

"Why?" Dancer was puzzled.

"Well, it would be something that's settled down by now," Sam replied, "but still recent enough to sound like it could happen today."

"Not a good time," Dancer decided. "The Families were getting along about as well as they ever have when I was a young kid, not that I was in a position to notice it at the time."

"Then let's make it happen right now," Persi suggested.. "So what would we be talking about? Would they be calling each other names? Drawing knives, guns, tactical nukes?"

“In a chance encounter,” Dancer considered, then paused to ask, “What’s a tactical nuke?”

“Big bomb, kid,” Pflum interrupted. “It goes boom and kills hundred or thousands of people instantaneously. Then after the dust settles the dust itself goes on killing for decades to come. I can’t tell you how glad I am you don’t know that.”

“Uh, me too, you know?” Dancer replied. Then he turned back to Sam and Persi, “In a chance encounter the most I’d expect would be knives. They’d start out with insults though and only be expecting a fist fight.”

“Anyone get killed?” Sam asked.

“Not in public where there would be witnesses,” Dancer replied, “but every so often a family member turns up in a dumpster. The papers never seem to find such occurrences newsworthy, but everyone knows it’s a planned assassination. The heads of the Families never go out without a dozen bodyguards at least and that doesn’t count the ones who go out to sweep any suspicious characters out of the way before the main entourage comes along. Actually more of the heads never leave their theatres at all. A well-planned attack would get them regardless of all those precautions.”

“Good,” Sam remarked. “So let’s start out with a chance encounter that goes a bit too far. Knives are drawn and a minor character is badly hurt.”

“If it’s that bad how do our couple ever meet?” Dancer asked.

“Another chance encounter,” Sam suggested.

“Dancer’s right,” Persi cut in. “If our two theatres are already killing each other, it’s not likely two young members would be out in the streets alone.”

“Besides,” Dancer told Sam. “Family members always wear the badge of their theatre and house colors as well. It’s sort of a uniform.”

“I wish you’d told me about that sooner,” Sam told him. “Well, heck, they must be slumming and intentionally went out in less conspicuous clothing.”

“That’s possible,” Dancer decided.

“Okay, so in the opening scene it doesn’t get beyond a fist fight,” Sam told them. It was about then that Pflum decided to get some sleep. Jack stayed up a bit longer reading his new book, but when he decided to go to his cot, the others were still hashing out various details about the opening scene. As he fell asleep they were back to discussing the possibility of setting the story back a century or more.

We Detest a Fiesta

The classic “Who’s on first?” skit may not have translated over well, but Dancer reworked the formula to more closely match life as he knew it and sent two kids out to try it. It went over fairly well and shortly the city was inundated with ersatz versions of Bud Abbot and Lou Costello as well as collections of

Marx Brothers, Monty Python and others. The acts were so successful that it was not long before they were being copied by all the other street performers and Sam and Persi were hard pressed to keep coming up with new skits and acts that would be seen as fresh and original until they discovered that many forms of popular music from their world line could be successfully incorporated into the Kids' street acts.

So Kids who could juggle would do so while singing Gilbert And Sullivan or Rolling Stones pieces. Kids would dance to penny whistle versions of Glenn Miller tunes, and two clever ones rigged up a puppet show in which the puppets sang everything from *Tiptoe Through the Tulips* to Alice Cooper's *School's Out*. All of this delighted the other people of the city so much that the mere sight of the Kids starting to set up would draw crowds in just to see what they may have come up with next.

The music, however, was almost all sung in English because neither Persi nor Samantha had time to work on translations that would scan. The audiences saw those songs as fascinatingly exotic, even after hearing them repetitively and it had the side effect that the Kids were starting to understand English. They weren't using it with grammatical precision, but by slipping many words and phrases into their speech, they had a code they could talk in to each other that no one else could follow.

Pflum jinxed them all, however, when he remarked how little ego trouble he was observing between the Kids. On the same day they heard complaints that Tommy, along with three cohorts, were pressuring other members of the troupe to give up their best performance locations so he could use them instead. When further investigation revealed that he had been extorting some of the younger and weaker Kids for a share of their vouchers Sam put her foot down.

"Tommy, you're fired!" she told him heatedly.

"What?" he asked surprised. "You can't do that!"

"I'm the director," she replied. "I sure as heck can. I've told all of you since day one, this troupe is a team and would not allow any bullying or even upstaging of each other. Everyone has a necessary part to play. But you're not part of this team. You're only in this to see what you can steal from the others. Well, bucko, not in my troupe you don't. Here's the money you've collected. Take it and get out. You're not one of the Kids anymore. And if I hear you've bothered any of the Kids, I'll send Pflum and Jack out. If you hurt one of us, I'll come after you myself."

Tommy wasn't certain what to make of that threat, but he did not stick around to ask further questions. His former cohorts came in filled with remorse, although Sam reminded herself all the Kids were fine actors, and claimed Tommy had been forcing them as well.

"I'll give you a second chance," Sam told them, "but you're on probation from now until the final curtain comes down on the play. One slip and you're out. Capiche?" She also split them up as much as she could and made them responsible for the protection of the younger Kids. To her satisfaction they appeared to tow the line for the rest of the Transit's stay on this world.

The next problem came up when Sam started handing out parts. The older Kids, she decided, should play Family heads and elders, although she kept such characters down so only a few of the troupe would be wearing gray wigs and long beards. Dancer pointed out that he had never seen a Family elder wearing a beard while not on stage.

"You all look so young, Dancer," Sam explained. "If I don't use the beards you'll look like little children playing dress-up with their parent's clothes."

Finally, with all the parts assigned and everyone also acting as an understudy to someone else, Sam started holding readings and rehearsals in the Transit. The kids loved the play and also had no complaints when during the heat of the day, they could enjoy the Transit's air conditioning while reciting their lines. They loved the play, so much, that when Sam and Persi had trouble coming up with new acts, the girl playing the female lead's best friend asked, "Why can't we perform some of these scenes to drum up more money?"

"No!" both Sam and Pflum told her as one. Sam shushed Pflum and continued, "if we do that, the whole town will be performing the play for us before we can open."

"Keep this one top secret, kids," Pflum added. "Let no one hear so much as a word from the play. Let's not even mention the play until we're ready to hand out flyers."

Just then there was a loud and angry-sounding knocking at the Transit door. Pflum strolled over to the electronic "window" and turned it on. Sam had allowed Jack to buy some of the local electronic components and the window and the Fresher unit were the first two regular systems he managed to bring back on line without unduly stressing the rest of the Transit's mechanism. Since then he had been building new circuits whenever Sam would allow him to take money out of the till, but they were still a long way from being able to leave.

The electronic window lit up to reveal a sour-looking old man that none of them had seen before. He continued banging on the door for another few minutes, before taping something to the door and walking away. "Must be the landlord," Pflum remarked. "I wish I could see down the alley and be certain he really did walk away just now." He waited another few minutes while Sam restarted the rehearsal before retrieving the landlord's second note to them, which turned out to be a repeat of the first one. "At least we know what he looks like now," Pflum remarked out loud to himself.

Jack returned a few minutes later and Pflum told him what had happened and why he would have liked to see something besides the blank wall in front of their door. "I should be able to rig something up for that," Jack told him. "The camera is really a nanodot attached to the outside of the field wall. It's programmable. It's just that normally all you need to do is see straight ahead." He went to work and by dinner, when Dancer returned, he was confident they would have a means of turning the camera around in a hemispheric set of directions, although Jack had been forced to sacrifice an expensive joystick he'd planned as part of the holographic special effects machinery,

"Well, we have a date!" Dancer announced ecstatically.

"When?" Sam asked.

"Three weeks from now," Dancer replied. "I went over to the park office like you asked, figuring to take the next opening in two or three months as we had planned, but someone had to drop a play date so I grabbed it. And best of all, it isn't just a single evening, like we expected, it's an entire weekend! We'll do Friday and Saturday nights and a Sunday afternoon matinee, just like the Theatre Families!"

The Kids started cheering, but Pflum had reservations. "We're not ready, kid."

"Not right now," Dancer laughed, "but we got three weeks! Oh and here's the best part. We have the stage for rehearsals for the five evenings before our opening night."

"We haven't any scenery yet," Sam reminded him, "or props."

“The play isn’t even finished yet, Dancer,” Persi added.

“So we’ll work a little harder,” Dancer told her confidently. “The other Kids can work on scenery and procuring props as needed.”

“No stealing” Sam warned him. “I don’t care what you call it, we’ll buy what we need. We have the money.”

“Sure, sure,” Dancer told her easily. “Anyway you can assign what they’ll work on and when. They can also do their acts a bit later in the evenings. Meanwhile I’ll stop playing in the streets and stay here and write with you.”

“And when do you propose we rehearse?” Sam asked him.

“At night,” Dancer replied.

“When do you plan to sleep, kid,” Pflum asked pointedly.

“After the show is over,” Dancer told him. “Besides it doesn’t pay to wake up before ten or eleven anyway. Haven’t you noticed how few acts there are in the mornings.”

“I seem to have missed that,” Pflum commented sourly.

“Well, it’s true. Everyone knows that,” Dancer told him. “The early bird might get the worm, but an early actor is playing to an empty house,”

“I don’t know, Dancer,” Sam commented uncertainly. “Three weeks is a very short time considering all we have to do.”

“Don’t worry,” Dancer laughed. “It will all come together. It always does.”

“I’m not sure we have enough money for all the production costs yet,” Sam continued. She didn’t say what was really on her mind, that all the Kids had developed healthier appetites since they had started being fed on a regular basis and the food was a higher expense than she had anticipated.

“We’ll work harder is all,” Dancer assured her. “Come on, Kids! Let’s eat up and hit the streets for the dinner theatre crowd!”

The kids cheered enthusiastically, bolted down their dinners, and most followed Dancer out into the city. One boy, whose name was Don, and a girl, Mera, stayed behind. “Persi,” Don asked, “do you have time to teach us another song?” Don’s only musical instrument was a somewhat battered tambourine, but Mera had a small banjo and they both held their instruments hopefully.

“If I can still think of something new,” Persi grinned at them. “Let’s see, Banjo and tambourine, huh. Does this city have a subway system? Trains that run under the streets?”

“No,” Mera told her. “Sounds strange. Why would they want to do that?”

“For the same reason you have buses, except the trains don’t get stuck in traffic,” Persi explained. Then she thought of parts of Boston’s ancient Green Line and added, “Well not as much, anyway. Well, I

guess it doesn't matter, since you'll be singing in English again."

"Works for me," Don replied in passable English. Both kids laughed as Persi did a comic double take. She knew the Kids had picked up a number of English words and phrases, but they did not generally use them when talking to Pflum, Sam, Jack and herself.

"Just how much English do you understand these days?" Persi asked, also in English.

"Enough to be getting on with," Mera replied. She had a pronounced accent not entirely unlike someone whose primary language was Spanish, although it was not as strong as Persi's own *Kwéyòl* accent from having grown up in Dominica.

"Quite remarkable," Persi replied. "Well, I don't suppose it matters much in this case. Listen to the words and I'll explain them afterwards." She reached for her ukulele, but changed her mind and borrowed Mera's banjo instead. "Let me tell you all a story of a man named Charley," she started. When she had sung it through once, she explained the story behind *Charley on the MTA* and then practiced it with them twice before sending them on their way.

"You do that very well," Pflum complimented her after the Kids had left. "Teach, that is."

"Thank you, Mister Pflum," Persi replied. "It is much more enjoyable when I don't have to worry about grades. I do not think I would be very good in a formal classroom, however. I do not like exams."

"Who does?" Pflum countered. "Hey, Jack, you haven't eaten yet. Take a break, I don't need that moveable camera for the window tonight."

"Well, you have it tonight anyway," Jack replied. "I even threw in infrared and night vision controls. Take a look."

"What? No sepiatone shots?" Pflum complained.

"No," Jack laughed, "but you can take snapshots and videos with it."

"I think Andy Warhol already made that movie," Pflum replied. "Well, come on, we still have a few hotdogs left."

"They don't really taste like hotdogs," Jack observed.

"No they're better," Pflum replied, "and they're good with mustard and relish. We have been serving them a lot lately, though. Sam, can we afford to serve pizza tomorrow?"

"It's been a while," Sam told him. "Yeah, I think the Kids deserve a treat."

"If we were really giving them a treat," Pflum told her, "We'd be grilling steaks."

"Now that's a bit beyond our means," Sam told him, "at least until after the play. But maybe some ice cream for desert."

After Jack had eaten he started working on the holographic effects machine with Pflum's help. "This is only a prototype. It's not very versatile and I'm not sure how many hours of use we could get out of it. I know how to build a larger and more reliable version, but we can program a stationary illusion right

now,” Jack told Sam an hour later.

“Okay,” Sam smiled. “Show me something. Jack flipped a switch and the rear half of the Transit looked as if it were at the edge of the Grand Canyon.”

“That’s pretty good,” Sam told him, “but they don’t have technology like that here. Can you make it look like a painted set?”

“Why not just paint a set?” Jack asked.

“This will make scene changes easier,” Sam told him. “Then again, maybe it would be best to use this for the sorts of effects they usually use mirrors and glass for. I’ll write in a ghost.”

“That’s a bit of a waste,” Pflum told her.

“Well, to tell the truth, we don’t really need holographic effects,” Sam admitted. “If we hadn’t promised them to Dancer, I would have dropped the idea altogether. There’s nothing in this particular story we can’t do with conventional materials,”

“Maybe we can make it look at though there are people looking out of the windows in the backdrops you were planning,” Pflum suggested. “For that matter what would we do with this device when we’re done with it?”

“I thought we could give it to the Kids,” Jack replied.

“You can’t do that,” Sam objected. “It represents technology far in advance of what the people of this time and line have.”

“What?” Jack laughed in return. “Are you trying to tell me it would violate the Prime Directive? Sam, this isn’t Star Trek. There is no Prime Directive.”

“He’s right there, Sam,” Pflum agreed. “We generally don’t introduce advanced technology to historical cultures out of common decency. In some cases they might be seen as magic, in which case there’s not a lot of harm done, but if the people are advanced enough they might figure out how the magic works and most experts believe it would cause more harm than good if the changes brought about were too drastic. But you’ll notice no one tried Ma Creston for killing Hitler on that line where she and her son tried to escape you and your fellow agents.”

“That was because we never had sufficient evidence against her,” Sam replied. “Well, that was one reason. Another was that the District Attorney was afraid if that became public knowledge and he actually brought her to trial on that particular murder charge, there would be a mob trying to give her a medal instead.”

“She was never tried for the con jobs she and her son committed on that line either,” Pflum pointed out.

“Again, that was the DA’s choice,” Sam told him, “not mine.”

“Maybe so, but there are no laws against giving this holo machine to the Kids when we leave,” Pflum told her.

“Will they be able to use it?” Sam asked.

“Those Kids are sharp,” Pflum observed. “Some of them will be able to pick it up. Jack be sure to instruct one or two stage hands on how to program.”

“I still think it’s wrong,” Sam disagreed.

“I am sorry, Samantha,” Persi told her, “but I really do not see the harm either.”

“I’m out-voted then,” Sam sighed. “I still think you all are wrong, but I know how to be a team member. We leave them the holo machine.”

Just then there was a knock on the door. The Kids were starting to arrive for the night time rehearsal. “How the he...” Dancer stopped himself and started over. “I mean, how did you do that? It isn’t real is it?” Pflum turned around to discover they had left the holo machine turned on and the Grand Canyon still filled the “home” end of the Transit.

“A real illusion,” Pflum told him. “Nothing but light. If you look carefully, you can see the back end of the room through the pretty picture.”

“We were thinking of using this for part of the scenery in *The Two Families*,” Sam explained.

“But that takes place in a city,” Dancer replied.

“Well, we wouldn’t use this particular scenery,” Sam answered. “I was thinking of something far more subtle, like the sky and maybe some distant buildings. We’ll still want a physical set or you could find yourself walking through objects that are supposed to be solid.”

“But we can change the weather to match the scenes,” Pflum added, “or make it dusk, dawn or night as appropriate. This is just a picture from an old photo album. Sam’s right. It would make a terrible set for a play, but it does catch the eye, doesn’t it.”

“I still have work to do on it,” Jack explained. “There are only rudimentary controls and it would probably take me a quarter of an hour to change the image right now, but I should have it all worked out in a day or two. Uh, Sam, I also have to get back to working on our problem.”

“I’ll give you an allowance,” Sam told him. “You can pick up some parts tomorrow when you go to buy what you need for the holo machine.”

Dancer and three other kids walked up to the edge of the illusion as though afraid of falling in. As they reached out to touch it, they discovered their hands cast long shadows that blocked out long streaks across the projected image. Then there was a click and a soft woofing sound and the picture abruptly vanished. “It blew a fuse,” Jack reported a moment later. “I’d better work that out too. Wouldn’t want it to happen while we were in the middle of a performance.”

“If it keeps doing that,” Sam told them, “we’ll have to stick to conventional sets.”

“Did that happen because we touched it?” one of the kids asked.

“No,” Jack laughed, “but you saw why we can’t use this for set dressing or anything you need to actually touch. This rig only has one projector lens and just like an ordinary light bulb, if you stand in the wrong place you’ll cast a shadow. There are such machines that use multiple projectors and they can maintain

the illusion even if you walk through them, but this is all I have to work with.”

“Still rather impressive,” Dancer admitted, “you know?”

It Pays to Advertise

Jack managed to resolve all the issues concerning the holo projector the next afternoon. He left it running for several days to make sure it was stable. However, instead of filling the back half of the Transit with panoramic views, he stuck to casting illusory murals on one of the walls, which they all estimated would be roughly the same as the use Sam had in mind.

While he continued to work on the Transit with Pflum, however, Sam and Persi were busy on the final preparations for the play. The kids spent all day busking on the streets to scrounge up any amount of cash they could. Sam and Persi had started to run dry on ideas for songs and skits, but several of the Kids turned out to have a talent for writing as well. When Persi learned they were illiterate, however, she promptly scheduled pre-breakfast lessons for them and any others from among the Kids who were interested. Most of them were. Reading and writing class cut still more into their waking hours, but Persi believe it was worth the loss of sleep for all of them.

When opening night was only two weeks away, Pflum managed to produce hundreds of colorful flyers from the recently repaired Transit systems. Jack had argued they needed to work on the impellor controls first, but Pflum knew they needed the printer and the computer circuits that drove it were also used by normal Transit operations so he pressed Jack to work on that first. It turned out Sam was more willing to release funds for those repairs than to the Transit’s drive, since the systems repaired could be directly used to benefit the production.

“You do realized we have to get on with our own mission, don’t you?” Pflum asked her privately.

“Of course I do,” she replied practically. “That’s what we’re doing. If I were a complete and total, uh... jerk, we could use the money and ditch the Kids, but I won’t do that. We made a deal and we’re sticking to it.”

“Well, yes, of course we are,” Pflum agreed, “but we’re going to want to get going as soon as we can after that. Jeanette is still waiting for us.”

“Yes, she is,” Sam agreed, “but for all we know, by waiting a few weeks, we’ll be able to pick her up sooner than if we went right away.”

“You mean if we’re almost thirty years out of sync with her crate?” Pflum asked. “Well, maybe. After everything that has happened to the circuitry, there’s no telling when we’ll show up on the line she’s stranded on.”

“I like the flyers, by the way,” Sam told him. “I like the way you headlined ‘The Kids’ and the name of the play with equal emphasis. If they stay together this will give them name recognition. Too bad your printer doesn’t do large posters.”

“When else would we ever need to?” Pflum asked. “We’ll need some, however. I was planning to go out and talk to a printer or two. God only knows what sort of act printers run.”

“Probably a percussion ensemble,” Sam conjectured. “They could work with the rhythm of their presses.”

“Always a possibility,” Pflum shrugged.

“If you can wait a bit, I’ll go with you,” Sam told him. “I just want to finish adding up these figures. Then we should have a few hours before the Kids come back in for dinner. Where’s Persi today, by the way?”

“She’s out with some of the Kids,” Pflum replied.

“Is she performing too?” Sam asked.

“She might be,” Pflum shrugged. “I ran into her with her ukulele the other day. Just as likely she’s helping to hand out flyers.”

“She didn’t turn in any ticket vouchers,” Sam remarked.

“She gives them to whatever kids need them the most,” Pflum told her. “I think it confuses them terribly, but they do appreciate the gesture and they’ve been emulating it. Quite a few of the kids have been sharing vouchers with each other before turning them into you.”

“I had noticed that,” Sam told him, “but didn’t know it was Persi who had started it. That’s nice, really. They’re all learning to pitch in, work together and help each other.”

“Yeah, they may not have realized it yet, but they’re becoming a family,” Pflum observed. “Quite a difference from when we first met them. Dancer tells me they only banded together to keep unwanted and nasty people out of their alley. Anything else; food, tickets, whatever, and they were on their own. Now they share everything and their competition is against all others, but not against other members of the Kids. I think we’ve had a really good overall effect on them, even if we weren’t trying to.”

“That’s good,” Sam nodded. “They’re nice kids, most of them. Well, I think we weeded the bad ones out fairly early on.”

“Just Tommy, but the others learned from that and seem to have come around,” Pflum noted. “I wonder what happened to Tommy, though.”

“Don’t the Kids know?” Sam asked.

“No one has seen him since the day you fired him,” Pflum replied. “He went back to their alley and cleaned out his stuff along with the stuff from one or two others, from what they say.”

“What a horrid little boy,” Sam wrinkled her nose.

“Not so little, and not really a boy anymore,” Pflum remarked. “He’s older than Persi, you know, but the kids he robbed think it was well worth the price to get rid of him. He was the bully of the gang and only Dancer and one or two others could stand up to him.”

“We got lucky running into Dancer, didn’t we?” Sam recalled.

“On a number of levels,” Pflum agreed. “He was a bit more mercenary himself though, when we first met. Remember how he tried to break in here? But he’s also grown up a bit these past few weeks and I

think the Kids are looking up to him now for more than just the fact he once got a part in a big-time show.”

“He’s matured considerably,” Sam agreed, “He’s gone from being a strong individual to a strong leader. Well, I’m ready. Let’s head out. What’s the weather like out there?”

“Cloudy and warm,” Pflum reported after checking. “Too bad we can’t get the local television or radio in here, we could get weather forecasts. Well, if we get caught in the rain, we’ll just buy an umbrella.”

Posters turned out to be only slightly more expensive than Samantha had expected, so she ordered one hundred of them to the printer’s surprise. She could have saved money, having them printed in only one color, but she wanted something special that would stand out from all the others.

“Why so many?” Pflum asked. “With all the flyers, I doubt we need more than a dozen or so.”

“Souvenirs,” Sam replied, “to go with the t-shirts we’re supposed to be getting in tomorrow. If this goes as well as I hope, maybe people will want copies of the posters to hang as artwork. Have you arranged the concessions for the shows, yet?”

“I spoke to Dancer about it,” Pflum told her. “He says some of the Kids can sell snacks if we want, but there will be quite a few other vendors in the park as always when the stage is in use. I told him to make sure they don’t try doing their own acts to take attention away from us and he just laughed.”

“Horning in on someone else’s act uninvited is probably a capital offense here,” Sam opined.

“I hadn’t thought of it that way, but you’re probably right,” Pflum admitted.

“Oh look, a radio station,” Sam pointed. “Let’s go find out how much an ad will cost us.”

The station’s price schedule was reasonable and they had a package that included ads at key times of day when people were most likely to be listening that Sam was particularly interested in. “So just what sort of product do you want to advertise?” the salesman asked after he put down his French Horn when the station’s woodwind quintet had finished their mid-day concert. In their place, a folksinger started his act.

“Not a product,” Sam replied. “A play.”

“On the radio?” the salesman asked, obviously surprised. “I mean, great idea!”

“Yeah,” Sam told him dryly. “I take it there aren’t a lot of plays being advertised on this station?”

“Or any other that I’m aware of,” the man replied sadly, “but we do welcome your business. It’s just that the Families rarely advertise on the air and on those few occasions they use television.”

“And television advertising cost more, doesn’t it?” Pflum asked.

“Considerably more,” the salesman admitted, “There aren’t many advertisements on at primetime that aren’t paid for by Family-owned businesses. I understand there are some bargain rates after midnight, but that’s because viewership is way down in the early morning hours. Most stations aren’t even on at that time, in fact, so most of the ads tend to be public service announcements and the like.”

“Well, we have some money,” Pflum told him, “but not the budget of a Family. I am, however, producing a play in Southside Park in a couple of weeks. Getting the word out is essential.”

“Of course,” the salesman nodded, “it’s just that no one has tried to advertise a play on the radio in decades.”

“Maybe we’ll start a fashion,” Sam remarked, “unless you’re really trying to talk us out of it?”

“Oh, sorry, yeah,” the salesman backpedaled. “Advertisements are a form of performance most people never think about but it is a truly creative experience. Tell me about your play and we’ll see what sort of ad might suit you best. Where have you been performing it so far?”

“Nowhere,” Sam replied. “We’ve been keeping it under wraps.”

“So we’re not likely to have any reviews to quote,” the salesman observed.

“No, but our cast has been raising money for the production with a number of original skits and songs,” Pflum informed him. “You may have seen some of them. They call themselves the Kids and they’ve been all over the city lately.”

“The Kids?” the salesman asked. “Is that what they’re calling themselves. I’ve seen a bunch of teenagers busking just outside over the last few weeks. A lot of their songs are in some strange foreign language, but they sing them well and they’re always new and original. I didn’t know they were building up toward a play though.”

“We are,” Sam replied with emphasis on “we.”

“That’s actually newsworthy, you know. Everyone in town has been talking about them, wondering who they are and where the new acts all came from. Lots of kids are buskers, you know, but they don’t generally perform new skits and music. Just the opposite. With no one to take them in hand, they generally perform time-honored acts and sing old favorites. This will make a really great ad,” the salesman enthused. “You’ve seen and heard them in the streets! Now come and see the Kids on stage! I love it.”

“Sounds like a good start,” Sam remarked. “By the way, could we put one of our posters in your window?” Pflum opened the large box he had been carrying and showed one of the posters.

“Very nice!” the salesman praised the poster, “and I’m sure the manager will be glad to put it up for you, but I can do even better than that. Along with the ads, would you and maybe some of the Kids be willing to appear on the air?”

“You’re serious?” Sam asked.

“Absolutely! Like I told you; this is news. Let’s go talk to a program manager right now. I’m sure she’ll want to schedule you for the morning drive-time show. That’s the one with the most listeners.”

The program manager was a middle-aged woman with short brown hair and wore a business suit that looked like it had been designed for a man and then taken in to hint vaguely at her gender. A sitar stood incongruously in the corner of her office, proving to Pflum, as if he needed the proof, that absolutely everyone performed on this world. She was intrigued by the story of two dozen street kids who were staking themselves to a real stage performance and wanted to have them appear on several shows

leading up to opening night.

“Will they be able to perform scenes and songs from the play?” she asked Sam.

“We would like to keep those to ourselves until the first performance, but we’ll be glad to perform other pieces,” Sam replied.

“Oh,” the woman sounded disappointed. “I had hoped for an exclusive sneak peak at your production.”

“How about a world premier of some new songs and skits?” Sam suggested instead.

“Tempting,” the manager smiled. “Yes, that would be wonderful.”

They set up a schedule of appearances and also signed an advertising contract with both parties thinking they got the best of the deal.

That’s the News I’m Waiting to Hear

The Kids were all thrilled to hear they would have a chance to perform on the radio and between those performances and interviews, the ads and the posters and flyers, a lot of interest was generated for the play. The idea that a bunch of street kids were attempting a weekend-long performance schedule was laughed at briefly until people found out that these were the same Kids who had been singing and playing all the new music .

As Sam predicted, there were a lot of advanced sales of the souvenir t-shirts and posters. And they sold so well, she sent Pflum out to order a second batch of both when their supplies got low. The advanced souvenir sales were more than enough to fix the Transit and cover all production costs with a fair percentage left over for the kids, so even though they would not be able to charge admission in the park, they had already turned a profit with still more to come.

There would be tips from the audience, there were even several places where attendees could leave them in the park’s open theatre. And while they would not be competing directly with the other concessionaires who worked the park, Persi had learned that popcorn was not widely known in this part of the world and while the supply on board the Transit was not large, there was a small ethnic neighborhood in the city where the correct sort of corn could be purchased although very few people outside that neighborhood were aware of that.

One of the local television stations took an interest after the Kids started appearing on radio and the newspapers started reviewing their street performances. Sam had considered taking out a newspaper ad or two, but with so many posters and t-shirts sold, she decided she had better advertising that way and they were actually getting paid for it. Instead, she decided to have another design printed up on black shirts that merely featured the Kids without the mention of any particular performance. She gave two each to every member of the troupe to use as performance costumes on the streets. “You all have name recognition now,” Samantha told them. “Wear these shirts and folks will know who you are right from the start and you’ll attract even bigger crowds.

It turned out there was a demand for the second design as well, but Sam didn’t want just anyone to wear those shirts so she had more with that design printed up but on red t-shirts instead of black. Only the Kids would be able to wear the black shirts.

The increased activity, however, made it far more difficult to avoid the owner of the building against which the Transit had been parked, and there were several near misses when he came snooping around and attempted once again to get rent for the space the Transit was using.

As the final week approached, the Transit began to look like an art gallery's storage room. Various props and bits of set dressing were stored along one wall and all the dividers the Transit's crew had been using for privacy around their cots had been recycled as painted flats for the set. Rehearsals were still being held inside the Transit, but there was barely any room to move around.

Finally the week before opening night arrived. While the stage was in use during the day, it was for a series of concerts, so the Kids were allowed to store their sets and props back stage in preparation for their own performance.

"Nice to have a little room to work again," Jack commented as the last of the props were being hauled across the street to the park. "Now we may be able to finish the repairs to the Transit."

"We still have to get the Kids ready for opening night," Sam reminded him.

"Pflum and I can work on this during the day, Sam," Jack replied. "The sets are finished amazingly early for any play I've heard about and the Kids will continue to busk during the day anyway."

"How are your holographic stage hands coming along?" Sam asked.

"They're starting to get a handle on how to program the projector," Jack replied. "I made it as simple as I could, of course. They can work it by scanning a picture in and adjusting it to the area on which they want it projected. Of course, I also included over one hundred pre-set scenes in the device's memory, so they may not have to do even that."

"All right," Sam agreed. "I still don't think we ought to be leaving that here, but if we are, we may as well leave them something of value."

Jack turned back to his makeshift circuits and Sam rushed out of the Transit to follow the Kids into the park. However, she ran headlong into the building's landlord as she exited the alley. "Hey, you," he growled at her. "Have you been living behind that locked door down there?"

"Uh," Sam searched for an answer, wishing Pflum were here. He always had a snappy answer prepared for surprises like this. "No. Who wants to live in an alley. I just heard there was a shop down there. New shoes, you know?" Sam replied. "But I guess I got lost again. Silly me." She gave the man her best giggle – not something she had much practice with during her life.

The man growled and stomped on past her and down the alley toward the Transit. Sam hoped Jack remembered to look before answering the door, but she had no time to wait and find out.

SouthsidePark was the city's largest public park. It had been set aside three hundred years earlier as a commons area where the people of the then fledgling town could graze their sheep and cattle at what was then beyond the edge of the town. Population growth and urban sprawl, however, had completely surrounded the zone within a century and the town fathers eventually decided that the space might best be used for recreation. There had, at one time, been three different stages there, but it turned out that even the wide open area could only support one large production and only the largest open theatre was left standing. However there were also two miles of meandering pathways along which anyone could

perform or stroll along to see the performances. The only stipulation being that no performance was allowed to infringe on the other performances unduly.

There were a number of park police whose job it was to enforce that law as well as keep peace in the park on the rare occasions that performers got into fights, usually concerning the temporary territory they had staked out for whatever act they had that day. The police, however, rarely had to worry about the former, since most children were brought up not to interfere with another's performance and, in fact, the only cases in which that did happen were either accidental when two acts were out of sight of each other, but still within earshot or, more often, when two old antagonists intentionally set up near each other.

The police, however, had a well-known record of clamping down on such infractions quickly and efficiently. And most performers knew better than to cross them too often as that would lead to permanent banishment from the park.

When Samantha arrived at the stage, two uniformed people, a man and a woman were supervising while Dancer directed the Kids as they stored the sets backstage. There didn't appear to be any problems, but the police approached Sam as she stepped up on to the stage. "Mrs. Pflum?" the woman asked.

"Ms. di Medicci," Sam corrected her.

The woman nodded her acknowledgement. "But you are the director of this production?"

"I am," Sam replied. "Is there a problem?"

"No, ma'am," the man shook his head. "We just have some forms to fill out with you and Mister Pflum. Will he be here soon?"

"He should be," Sam nodded. "He and some of the Kids are out picking up the new t-shirts. Oh, here they come now," she finished, spotting Pflum, Mera and two others approaching with large corrugated boxes.

"Oh yes, the shirts," the woman noted. "An interesting idea, selling souvenirs for a single event. I'm surprised no one has thought of it before."

"I'm sure it will become commonplace before long," Sam smiled.

"Probably," the policewoman agreed, "but my daughter has been begging me for one of them and they're painfully hard to find."

"I'll give you one before we finish," Sam promised her, privately wondering if the woman had been suggesting a bribe or innocently commenting on the fact that the shirts were so popular. Then she decided she had been with the Bureau far too long and had taken to suspecting everything and everyone. If the park police were looking for payola, they could extort far more than one or two cheap shirts.

The policewoman thanked her and they all sat down on the edge of the stage and filled out the necessary paperwork. Sam thought the park police were going beyond the necessary work to actually explain what each form and agreement entailed and how it affected the troupe and its members. In her own world she was certain that the forms would have been merely thrust at her with a demand they be signed before anything else could be done.

Once the various agreements had been signed and Park policy explained, the two cops backed off and

let the Kids get on with their preparations, only staying to make sure they were out of the way by the time the wind ensemble arrived to set up for the day's late morning concert. Pflum thanked them for their attention and pressed a t-shirt on the man as well as the woman before leaving with Sam and the Kids.

"Dancer," Pflum called as they left the park a few minutes later, "make sure everyone quits early today or even takes the day off if they like. We're going to have several long nights this week and except to build interest in the show, we don't need to saturate the city any longer."

"We still have the radio show tomorrow afternoon, don't we?" Dancer asked.

"We do," Sam replied, "and another on Friday morning. Keep handing out flyers, we can always print out more but make sure everyone understands that right now we're more concerned with getting an audience for the big show than earning pocket change on the streets."

"I got you," Dancer nodded. "I know where most of the kids usually perform, I'll make the rounds this morning and afternoon and clue them in if they don't already know. Will Persephone be out with us today as well?"

Persi had been acting as assistant director ever since rehearsals started as well as helping to coach the Kids in their street acts and occasionally joining in on the performances. Pflum privately worried she might have bitten off a bit too much, but as always the young woman had behaved with a grace and composure well beyond her or even Pflum's years.

"She's already out with the ensemble," Sam replied. The ensemble had been made up of a dozen Kids who played a variety of instruments and who would make up the orchestra for the play. Several of them had joined the troupe in the last two weeks as word of the production began to get out. Deluged by requests to join the troupe, Sam had let the Kids themselves hold auditions and choose which new members they would accept so it was only after the Kids had sponsored a new member that Sam would find a part of some sort for them. In all, however, only a dozen new members had been allowed to join. Nobody thought the troupe should grow any larger as it was already as large as some of the big Families.

Persi had taken the Ensemble in hand, rehearsing music for the play at key times inside the Transit, but playing together all the time in the streets and even the park, when they could find a quiet corner out of earshot of any other vocal acts, although for some reason they seemed to attract a fair number of mimes wherever they played. They were forced to occasionally play incidental pieces from the play itself, but were careful to only rehearse the songs they expected people to remember when in private. Sam had decided the risk of having the incidental music copied was minimal, but even so made sure they never played any one of them in public more than once or twice before the play opened.

Pflum found himself running all over the city, handling those chores Sam insisted belonged to the producer, although he suspected they were just matters she didn't want to have to handle herself. However, he knew she was still working on the play even as they prepared for their first on-stage rehearsal even if now it was a matter of polishing the piece until it gleamed. When he could, he helped Jack work on Transit repairs mostly because he felt as the pilot that was his primary responsibility. However, as Monday progressed into the late afternoon, he realized that not only had he kept out of Jack's way most of the time since they had crashed here and now, but that Jack was one of the few people he actually trusted to work on his Transit without supervision. He didn't even accord that courtesy to Ken Jackson, Down Time Ltd's chief engineer, willingly.

Sam decided the Kids should eat dinner in the park during rehearsals, so Pflum's major evening job was to see to setting up dinner near the stage which he accomplished by using a disposable barbecue grill and

a folding table, both of which had been purchased in town that afternoon. Persi and some of the Kids had helped out by shopping on their way to rehearsal, so along with hamburgers and Showbiz World's version of a hotdog, they also had several salads and a lot of soda to drink. Sam allowed everyone to eat before starting and Pflum kept grilling more as the night progressed.

The first night on the stage was spent reading through the play and stopping frequently to work on blocking out each scene. The performance did not satisfy her, but she felt certain that was because of all the Kids only Dancer had ever worked on a real stage and they were still unused to keeping their relative positions in mind. With Dancer's help she taught them how to avoid upstaging each other, but that if someone found themselves accidentally blocked from the audience's view, how to move back into view without throwing the rest of the cast off.

"Samantha?" Dancer came up to her just as the rehearsal had finally come to an end in the early morning hours. "We had a meeting earlier today. The Kids, I mean. We appreciate all the careful book-keeping you've been doing so we'd all have a share proportional to the front money we earn, you know? But if you don't mind, we'd like to just split the profits evenly."

Sam smiled. "I don't mind at all, Dancer. It's your money after all. You may split it any way you all agree on. What about the newer members? They haven't put as much money in as you have."

"We discussed that too," Dancer told her. "We're all equal partners, you know? We've been pooling our vouchers to make sure we all had donated roughly the same anyway."

"I noticed," Sam replied.

"You did?" Dancer asked.

"I've been keeping the books," she replied. "It was fairly obvious."

"Oh," Dancer nodded, "I suppose it would be. Well as long as you don't mind."

"No, it's fine, Dancer," Sam assured him

"Okay," Dancer smiled as though the elephant he had been balancing on his shoulders had finally decided to hail a cab instead. "See you at breakfast!"

"Ready to get some sleep?" Pflum asked her.

Sam looked around and saw they were alone on the stage. "Oh, yes," she breathed. "Let's just close the curtains and douse the lights. Long day."

"And probably the shortest we'll have this week," Pflum told her. Together they shut the stage down and headed back for the Transit.

I Love You, Samantha

"A strange thing happened this morning," Sam told Pflum as they headed back. "Did you know the Kids think we're married?"

“That might be my fault,” Pflum explained, “at least partially. A few weeks ago Dancer made a comment that, after I thought about it, made it obvious he assumed we were married. I never corrected him on it, but answered his question directly instead. He may have mentioned it to the others.”

“Or they may have formed their own opinions,” Sam told him. “They told the Park police I was Mrs. Pflum.”

She laughed it off, but it was a strange sounding, tired little laugh.

“Yeah,” Pflum chuckled half-heartedly. “I’ve been thinking about that, though. I’ve always been the happy bachelor.”

“I know, dear,” Sam assured him.

“Until I met you,” Pflum finished his thought. “Sam, will you marry me?”

Sam stopped as though her feet had been suddenly glued to the sidewalk. “Pflum? Are you sure?”

“Oh yeah,” Pflum replied. “No doubts in the least. Let’s get married.”

Sam seemed to think about it for an eternity and then finally lifted him to Cloud Nine by replying, “Yeah, okay, but not until we get back to our own time and world. I have family who would never forgive me if I eloped on them.”

Pflum smiled, at a loss for words, so Sam just tugged on his arm to get them both headed on their way once more. Once his feet were moving again, he found a few words. “Um, I don’t have a ring to give you just yet. We could go shopping tomorrow.”

“Not here,” Sam told him. “I don’t want to spend the Kids’ money that way.”

“Actually I had Down Time, Ltd’s money in mind,” Pflum told her. “Remember the original seed we put together by selling the coins? I can reimburse Sharonne when we get back.”

“We used more than that seed to rebuild the Transit,” Sam reminded him. “It’s a legitimate expense of the mission. We’ll go ring shopping at home, dear. I wouldn’t feel right taking money from the Kids, you know.”

Of course not,” Pflum agreed. “I just thought we still had a bit of pocket change for ourselves.”

“Not this time, I’m afraid,” Sam told him. “We’re trading on the Kids’ generosity.”

“For once that sort of thing doesn’t make me nervous,” Pflum remarked. “Now why is that? We’re dealing with street kids, you know. On any other world I’ve visited where there were kids living in alleys, they were the most amoral and devious lot there ever was. Why do I trust this bunch?”

“Because they’ve accepted us as part of their troupe, Pflum,” Sam explained.

“They see each other as family and we’re their parent figures. Remember how Dancer tried to break into the Transit? We were just another pair of adults to him then, but we gave him a chance. I’m sure that at first he was still casing the Transit out for stuff he could sell, but as we started teaching him and the rest of the Kids new songs and writing skits for them, he saw us all in a different light. He became part of our team and we were part of his. I just wish we had enough room in the Transit for all the kids to sleep

there. I hate the idea of them sleeping in an alley.”

“Have you been in that alley?” Pflum asked. Sam shook her head. “I have,” he told her. “It smells like an alley, yeah, but they have shelters in there to keep them dry and they’ve been clever enough to use hot air vents from the surrounding buildings to keep them warm when it gets cold, not that it does much here. Did you know this city is somewhere in what we would call Mexico?”

“No,” Sam remarked. “When did you find that out?”

“This afternoon from Jack,” Pflum replied as they passed one of the Park police near the exit. He nodded to the man in uniform who nodded back. “He got the locator circuits working again. Now that you’re allowing him to buy the parts we need, the repairs aren’t going to take very long I don’t think.”

“Good,” Sam replied. “We’ll want to leave as soon as we comfortably can after the play, though I feel like we’ll be abandoning the Kids.”

“I could leave a tracer here,” Pflum suggested. “Most crates could never find this place, but mine could. Maybe.”

“We shouldn’t,” Sam told him.

“There aren’t any regulations against it,” Pflum reminded her, “and even with tracer technology that can be tuned like the one they’re installing on your crate, this line will be difficult to find. Still, I bet Mrs Callinger would love this world.”

“She’s the theatre fan you keep taking back to New York, right?” Sam asked as they reached the mouth of their alley.

“That’s right,” Pflum agreed. “Maybe I should try to talk her into a sort of theatrical mystery tour. I think this place would certainly fill the bill.”

“Only one problem,” Sam told him as he opened the Transit door.

“Just one?” Pflum asked.

“Yeah, but it’s a doozy,” she told him, closing the door behind her. “You can place a tracer here, but you’re not allowed to intentionally take tourists beyond the five-nines restriction.”

“Tourists?” Jack asked sleepily from where he was still working on one of the Transit’s systems.

“I thought Mrs. Callinger would love this world,” Pflum replied.

“She probably would at that,” Jack agreed.

“What are you still doing up?” Pflum asked.

“Oh,” Jack replied, “I just want to finish one more thing before I quit for the day.”

“The day already quit on you Jack,” Sam told him. “Get some sleep before you crosswire the primary impellers with the air conditioning.”

“You two are starting to sound alike,” Jack complained. “Maybe the Kids are right and you are married.”

“Not yet, but we’re working on it,” Pflum told him. “Where’s Persi? She should have been back minutes ago.”

“She was,” Jack explained, “but without dividers around our beds, she’s changing in the bathroom.”

“I hadn’t thought of that,” Pflum admitted.

“Wait a minute,” Jack stopped him. “Did you just say…”

“Yeah,” Pflum nodded. “Sam and I are engaged.”

“Mazeltov!” Persi told them as she exited the bathroom.

“Thank you,” Sam and Pflum told her in unison. Pflum continued, “Since when do you speak Hebrew?”

“Doesn’t everybody, Mister Pflum?” Persi replied inscrutably, although she could only hold that pose for a few seconds. “That and *shalom* may be the only words I know in Hebrew, but when you think of how many movies have used that word seriously and comically over the years…” she trailed off.

“Hmm, I suppose you’re right,” Pflum agreed, “and even if you weren’t I’m too tired to argue. Let’s get some sleep. It’s only a few hours until breakfast.”

The next day, the Kids showed up for breakfast an hour later than usual. “What happened?” Pflum asked. “Did daylight savings time kick in last night?”

“We thought you might want to sleep in a bit,” Dancer told him. “Oh, and breakfast tomorrow morning is on us.”

“It’s kind of been on you for weeks when you think about it,” Pflum replied.

“Maybe, but we’ll bring it in, okay?” Dancer asked.

“Sure, kid,” Pflum told him as the rest of the troupe flooded into the Transit. “You got it. Now, are you all hungry?” The Kids cheered and then started in on a rousing rendition of *Food, Glorious Food* that had the Transit crew laughing and applauding.

After breakfast, the Kids went out to advertise the show. As Sam had instructed them, they did their acts but for shorter amounts of time before stopping to hand out flyers and sell posters and t-shirts. However, they were back in the Transit by the middle of the afternoon for various reasons. Jack was continuing to show his stage hands how to program the holo projector, and Persi was conducting the ensemble. The rest of the Kids went with Pflum and Sam to the radio station for their latest appearance there.

By now the radio shows were something they could all do without pausing to blink. Each time they arrived they would perform a new act or song, then the host of the show would talk to either Sam or Pflum or both. Sometimes he would talk to one or more of the Kids too. Then they would perform again to close out the show. The Kids thought the whole thing was a lot of fun.

After the show they had two hours before the park stage was theirs again for the night. They kept up that routine until the next evening when Dancer failed to show up for rehearsal.

Naughty, Naughty

“Where’s Dancer?” Sam asked the Kids at the start of the penultimate rehearsal.

“We don’t know, Samantha,” Mera replied after all the Kids had paused to look at one another. “We haven’t seen him since this afternoon. Juan and Dottie are missing too. Juan and Dotty had been assigned to work as stage hands and as newer members of the troupe, Sam recalled that Dancer was helping them break into the Kids’ routines. Juan and Dottie, however, arrived some twenty minutes later, looking somewhat worse for wear.

“What happened to you two?” Sam asked worriedly.

“Family,” Dottie explained in tears. “They attacked us and took Dancer away.”

“Which Family?” Mera demanded fiercely before any of the adults could. Her hands were balled into fists and her face twisted into a scowl.

“It was the Gremalds,” Harry told them. “We followed them back to their theatre.”

“They took Dancer into their theatre?” Pflum asked unnecessarily. Juan and Dottie nodded. “I should have realized something like this would happen.”

“What?” Persi asked. “Kidnapping?”

“Some sort of interference,” Pflum explained. “We’re a threat to the Families, don’t you see? That’s why the radio station finds us newsworthy, the teevee and papers too. We may have just been putting on a play, but with our publicity blitz and the good reviews our street acts have received, they must think the Kids are a new and growing Family too and they don’t want the competition.”

“You have something there,” Sam admitted. “And we are like a Family of sorts. We’re providing high quality entertainment and we stick together. We get good reviews and a lot of free publicity. We’re a threat all right. In retrospect, I’m surprised we haven’t had problems with the Families before. Maybe the others are waiting until the curtain rises?”

“The Families often try to sabotage each other’s productions,” Mera noted. “They’ll kidnap each other’s stars or try to kill them outright. Sometimes they just hold them for ransom or until after a show flops.”

“Are you sure that isn’t just what you’ve seen in our play?” Sam asked.

“Why else do you think it’s so real?” Mera countered. “Hey! Maybe we really are a Family too!” She and the other Kids seemed torn between their worry for Dancer and the thrill of being seen as big time.

“But Dancer said that hasn’t happened much lately,” Sam replied.

“Times change, dear,” Pflum remarked. “Never mind that for now. Now we need to get Dancer back. I think it’s time to take in a show.”

“I hope the Gremalds have a good one on tonight,” Sam retorted.

“I would not count on it,” Persi shot back. “If they had a really good show on, they might not have felt threatened.”

They closed up the stage, retrieved Jack from the Transit and headed en mass to the Theatre Gremald. “We can’t all go in together,” Pflum remarked as he looked at the crowd of Kids that was following them. “Not until we know where he is. Let’s see, you four,” he chose the Kids who would be working the popcorn concession. “You come with us. Everyone else should go back to the park and rehearse.”

There followed a chorus of angry complaints, but Sam shut them off, “Pflum’s right. “The Gremalds want us to miss rehearsals. They want us to flop. Are you going to let them have their way?”

“No!” the Kids shouted in unison.

“Then get back to the stage and practice your lines and music. Renald, Sara, I especially need you to get comfortable with the love scenes. You two are our stars and you need to convince the audience you’re really in love with each other. So far you seem a bit embarrassed to be touching. Please work on getting used to it.”

“We could make out in the back seats of the theatre,” Renald suggested boldly, making Sara giggle nervously.

“I more had in mind that you two would hold hands and stare into each other’s eyes, but if some innocent kissing does it for you, give it a shot,” Sam sighed. “Ensemble, you’ve been sounding good, but the cast needs more practice with the big number in Act Two especially.”

“Also work on the music from Act Four,” Persi instructed them. “Mera, you’re first chair, so you conduct tonight.”

“Okay,” Pflum broke in, “Let’s go to the theatah!” They headed in one direction, while the rest of the Kids marched back to the park to the tune of Twisted Sister’s *We’re Not Gonna Take It*. “When the heck did you teach them that song?” he asked Persi, “and why?”

“A week ago,” she admitted, looking back toward the singers with a proud smile, “and probably because I couldn’t think of anything else at the time.”

Theatre Gremald was a tall tower of a building in the heart of the Theatre District. It had a red brick façade on the lower three floors which was, in turn, mostly covered by posters and a brightly lit marquee. There were glass doors on either side of a large ticket office, but in respect to centuries of inter-Family rivalry, those glass doors were also protected by heavy steel bars.

“Why does a theatre need fifty floors?” Pflum wondered out loud.

“The entire Family lives in there,” one of the Kids reminded him.

“And they have the offices of all their other businesses in there as well,” another informed him.

Unlike the ticket offices in front of the Toth and Holsen Theatres they had passed on the way here, there was no “Sold Out” sign in the window, so Pflum walked up and purchased eight seats in the upper

balcony. Inside the theatre, the ushers looked more like the bouncers at a bar catering to Japanese movie monsters. They were large and muscular and looked comical in their colorful monkey suits. There was nothing funny, however, about the stern expressions on their faces. Under their close scrutiny, Pflum and the others had no choice but to find their seats. They were mildly surprised to find their seats, while in what would have been called the nose-bleed section of a stadium, were right on the rail.

A tinny sounding wind ensemble played a brief overture even before the house lights had been completely dimmed. Their flautist hit several wrong notes along the way making Pflum wince even with his tin ear. As the first act began, the performance got even worse.

"No wonder there were so many seats left," Jack remarked. "I can't act to save my life, but I'm a Tony winner compared to these guys."

"Yeah," Pflum agreed. "No wonder we're a threat. Do you think these guys may have been interbreeding too long or maybe theatrical talent just isn't hereditary?"

"It could also be that with only other Families to truly compete with, they've been slacking off over the years," Sam suggested.

"This is not a representative sample," Persi reminded them. "It's only one Family's production and the only one from this Family we've seen for that matter. I suppose anyone can bomb sometimes."

"Please," Pflum shot back. "My junior high production of *The Pirates of Penzance* gobbled less frequently than this turkey."

"Shh!" one of the Kids hushed them. "This is my first time in here." A few minutes later, however, he agreed, "You're right. We're much better than this." The other Kids nodded.

"I think most of the mezzanine is asleep," another Kid remarked, looking below.

"Lucky them," the first one replied. "They're missing this."

The Kids discussed the play in that manner for the next few scenes before Pflum started giving them instructions. "We need to sneak around this theatre and try to find where they're holding Dancer, but we can't all go out at once. Pete, you have to go to the restroom."

"No, I don't," Pete replied honestly.

Pflum rolled his eyes and tried again. For a sharp-witted bunch of kids, they could be amazingly dense at the wrong times. "I need you to pretend, kid. Go to the men's room and see how closely the so-called ushers follow you about. Then come back here and report."

"Right," Pete agreed, and made his way down to the aisle and up the stairs. The Kids went back to making sarky comments about the acting abilities of the Gremald Family for a few minutes until Pete returned. "The ushers are just outside the doors," he told them all, "but they didn't follow me and the men's room is on the next level down. I think I could have gone anywhere."

"Good," Sam remarked. "Persi, you and I will take Lori and Fasha to the ladies. Women can go in a group without raising eyebrows. Pflum, wait about ten minutes before coming to look for us. Jack, stay here with Pete and Billy until intermission. If we haven't already returned, see if you can blend in with the crowd, assuming they wake up, and then find some new sights to see. If you run into a Family member,

claim to have gotten lost, if you're still in trouble, run for it and meet us back in the park."

"We may well already be there," Pflum added.

The women left the men to continue watching the play. "It was nice in the men's room," Pete opined.

"They keep the air circulating?" Pflum asked curiously.

"I wouldn't know," Pete replied, "but at least I couldn't hear the play from in there. How does this Family stay in business?"

"They're probably making their real money in other ways," Jack replied. "Remember the Families are also the bankers and what passes for a government around here. They also own a lot of businesses essential to the people of this city."

"Still, in a world dedicated to the performing arts, I would expect the Families, who are supposedly the professionals of professionals, to be able to produce something better than a grade school amateur performance," Pflum remarked. "The hero of this play keeps forgetting his lines. Maybe they should have done this one as a pantomime, then if he forgot the lines, he could shout, 'Oh, no you don't!' and the audience could join in with, 'Oh, yes we will!' and so forth."

"What good would that do?" Billy asked.

"It would at least distract us from the actual plot," Pflum replied.

"This fiasco has a plot?" Billy shot back.

"Sure, kid," Pflum replied, "They have to bury it somewhere. Well, I guess it's time for me to be the happy wanderer. Oh, hi, Sam," he greeted her as she and Fasha were escorted back to their seats. "You get lost? I was just going to come looking for you."

Sam rolled her eyes, but replied in as light a voice as she could muster, "Silly me, I took a wrong turn but these nice gentlemen showed me the way back."

"Uh... good," Pflum replied. "Thanks, guys."

Sam waited until the ushers had left the balcony before continuing. "We didn't get very far, but did manage to seemingly wander onto one of the private levels of the building. We were only two floors up when they found us and I guess audiences get lost in here a lot. I'm not surprised. Actually not all the stairways stop at every floor so if you take a wrong turn you can easily end up in the wrong place."

"Well, that's good, but did you manage to learn anything on your journey? Like where they hide the elevators?" Pflum asked.

"There are two small ones for the audience, but they don't go higher than the lower balcony. The private elevator starts on the first private level and if the lights are any indicator, it goes all the way up to the penthouse. I suspect there's a freight elevator that goes anywhere, but I never saw it," Sam admitted.

"Tell them what we did see, Sam," Fasha prompted her.

"Oh yeah," Sam nodded. "We saw an old friend. Fortunately, he didn't see us."

“Who?” Pflum asked.

“Ever wonder what happened to Tommy?” Sam asked.

“He’s here?” Jack asked.

“Yep,” Sam replied. “Looks like he bought into the Gremald Family or something.”

“Where the heck did he find enough money to do that? His share wasn’t all that much,” Pflum remarked.

“I doubt he bought in with ticket vouchers,” Sam told him.

“He sold us out!” Billy concluded.

“That’s my guess,” Sam agreed. “If it’s any consolation, it sounded like he didn’t get all that great a deal. He was grumbling about being set to janitorial duty.”

“Sure,” Billy nodded. “Everyone knows new adoptees get started out at the bottom of the heap. He’ll be doing menial stuff for a few years before being allowed to play as an extra and probably much longer before he can understudy a minor role. The Families do adopt, but not often and it’s never an easy ride. He’ll be slave labor for the Gremalds.”

“Not if he catches us in here,” Pete remarked. “That might be worth a promotion.”

“Not if I see him first,” Billy growled. “I’ll bet he was behind what happened to Dancer.”

“Could be,” Fasha agreed, “and if so he won’t be scrubbing floors for long if we don’t go on tomorrow. Hey!” she would have gone on but just then both doors to the balcony opened and the rest of the Kids filed in and sat down next to and behind the others.

“What are you all doing here?” Sam asked.

“Park rules,” Mera told her. “Minors aren’t allowed in after dark without adult supervision. We had to leave, so we decided to take in a show. Any good?”

“It stinks,” Fasha replied in a whisper. “We did better during our first read-through.”

Persi returned a few minutes later and reported that she had found Dancer up on the fortieth floor. “How did you get so high up without getting caught?” Sam asked her.

“Fire escape,” Persi replied. “I left Lori up there to keep an eye on him. Why is everyone here?”

“They wanted to see a real show,” Pflum remarked sourly. “That does give me an idea though. We’re going to need a distraction. Do one of you kids think you can sneak down into the mezzanine or orchestra and start yelling, ‘Fire?’”

“You mean you want us to say Mr. Sands is in the stairway or the lobby or something?” Renald asked.

“Or the restrooms or wherever,” Pflum replied. “Anything to cause as much of a distraction as we can. Then once all the security guys are occupied we’ll make an assault on the floor where Dancer’s being

held.”

“Gotcha!” Renald told him and ran out with half a dozen others, leaving the rest to wait for the commotion to break out.

“Persi,” Sam decided, “when we start moving I want you to take half a dozen of the Kids to where you left Lori. The rest of us will move out a minute or so after the action starts and then we’ll make our way up to Dancer’s floor by the stairs. Don’t take the elevators. They can be jammed all too easily trapping us in there.”

“Or we can jam them,” Mera suggested.

“Good idea,” Pflum told her. “Anyone who finds an elevator, open it up and push the emergency stop button, then get the heck out of there as fast as you can. We’ll meet on the Fortieth Floor, but be careful. Some of these guys may have guns and most of us aren’t armed.”

“We use our slingshots,” Juan assured him.

“Don’t be shy about arming yourselves with broomsticks and cudgels if you can find them along the way,” Pflum advised.

They didn’t have to wait long before the stage curtain closed and one of the actors announced, “Attention, there has been a minor problem in one of the restrooms, but for your safety we are going to have to ask you to file out of the theatre in a calm and efficient manner until we resolve the issue and can continue the performance.”

“What?” Jack asked, “Oh for the love of... Fire!” he finished at the top of his lungs. The shout echoed throughout the hall and engendered all the panic he had hoped for. “Now that’s the way to create a distraction. Kids, start moving.”

The Kids, along with Jack and Persi ran on ahead of Pflum and Sam, who paused to make sure the rest of the theatre appeared to be in a proper panic. Satisfied they had caused sufficient mayhem, they too left the balcony.

“The stairway is over this way,” Sam told Pflum.

“What’s that smell?” Pflum asked as they reached the stairs.

“Uh, I think it’s smoke,” Sam replied.

“Those crazy kids!” Pflum exclaimed. “I told them to yell fire, not actually start one.” Someone was coming down the stairs, so they ducked out of sight, back in the hallway.

“Mister Sands is in the mezzanine men’s lavatory,” one of the men told the others who were rushing downstairs. “A big fellow, I hear.” The other grumbled and were soon on the next floor down.

“Well, that confirms it,” Pflum remarked. “The Kids are crazy.”

“Not really,” Sam told him as they climbed the stairs. “Remember the culture they live in. Even street kids here know enough to never yell fire in a theatre, so instead they did the next best thing and started one.”

“It’s a great idea,” Pflum replied, “but not if we find ourselves heading in the wrong direction in a burning building.”

“I doubt the kids started something really dangerous,” Sam told him. “Probably just some small blaze in a wastebasket. The idea is to get security all in the same place and away from Dancer.”

“Well, we’re not running into a lot of opposition at the moment,” Pflum admitted, “but we still have about thirty floors to go. When we get home, remind me to start exercising again. I think I’m getting soft.”

“I think you’re getting tired,” Sam laughed. “Maybe you should have taken a nap during the play.”

“What? Miss a sterling performance by a Family that has one of the most highly rated ticket vouchers?” Pflum chuckled. “Either these guys are resting on their laurels, or the Families have stopped trying to actually put on a decent production.

Pflum and Sam had to step over several unconscious men and woman on their way upward, but it appeared the Kids were rapidly clearing the way for them. They finally caught up to the Kids on the thirty-ninth floor where they were busily fighting ten guards trying to keep them from going any further upward into the building. The Kids must have just started, because the guards had all been knocked out before Pflum could wade into the battle. At least he hoped they had only been knocked out. Stepping past them he spotted a couple of nightsticks similar in design to what he was used to seeing in use by police and security guards back home. He grabbed two and handed one to Sam.

“Thanks,” she told him as they hurried up the stairs. They arrived to see Persi and Lori helping Dancer walk toward the stairway.

“How you doing, kid?” Pflum asked him.

“I’m much better now,” Dancer smiled through all the bruises. His clothing was ripped and blood-stained and he was limping and favoring his right arm, but was obviously unwilling to admit it.

“What is going on here?” an elderly woman demanded of them as she opened a nearby door.

“No troubles, ma’am,” Pflum replied politely, “Just the eight o’clock tour coming through a little ahead of schedule.”

“Stop right there!” she demanded.

“Or what?” Sam demanded right back at her. In reply the woman disappeared behind the door again and they could hear her sliding a bolt to lock it behind her. Everyone laughed and started down the stairs.

Pflum shooed Persi and Lori aside and put his own shoulder under Dancer’s to help him along. “Sorry about this, kid,” he told Dancer, “but we’re going to have to take the scenic route back down to the ground floor.”

“Persephone warned me,” Dancer chuckled gamely. “I always thought elevators were highly overrated anyway.”

They managed to get back down to the lower balcony level before running into anyone else. However, that was where they ran into nearly every able-bodied Gremald Family member, including Tommy, who

was standing off to one side as the Kids approached.

“Stop right there!” a Gremald Family elder told them. “Stop or we’ll shoot you down where you stand.”

“Step aside and we’ll let you keep your theatre,” Sam replied.

There was no more time for blustering. A shot from the gun of a nervous Family member blasted out and the Kids swarmed forward angrily. Over the next half of a minute two more shots were fired harmlessly into the ceiling before the Gremalds were either on the floor groaning or running away. There was one more casualty, however. Mera was lying on the floor, whimpering, with her shirt becoming increasingly bloodied.

We Open In Venice

“Mera, child,” Persi breathed concernedly, keeling down beside her.
“Let me see.”

“It hurts, Persi,” Mera admitted, uncurling enough for Persi to examine her. Sam joined them immediately.

“I know, child,” Persi told her gently. Sam took a closer look at Mera’s injuries, however and smiled at her.

“Well, kid,” Sam told her gamely. “You got creased, but you got lucky too.”

“I did?” she asked Sam.

“Yeah, the bullet went right between the arm and your chest, leaving a gash in both of them. You’re going to need a few stitches, I fear, but you’re definitely going to live.”

“It still hurts,” Mera complained.

“Then let’s get you to a hospital,” Persi suggested. “I’m sure they’ll have something to deaden the pain.”

“They have that?” Mera asked. Both Sam and Persi smiled at her reassuringly.

“Everyone else okay?” Pflum asked. He received a chorus of affirmatives. “Let’s keep moving. The popularity of this place just went way down as far as I’m concerned. Unless some of you want to stick around to hand out flyers.” Everyone laughed.

They continued on downward until they reached the lobby. The lobby was filled with returning audience members, but they shied back from the Kids as they approached especially when the head of the Gremalds and his last dozen guards blocked the way to the street. He leaned heavily on a stout, carved cane and sneered at the Kids. Tommy was standing at his side, with one of the security clubs in his hand. “You won’t get away with this,” the head Gremald warned them.

“That’s your song, Gremald,” Dancer shot back defiantly, “and as usual it’s way off key. Your plays stink. They’re trite and derivative and if you think that’s what sells try limping over to our show tomorrow evening and see what real actors can do.”

Just then Mera groaned softly with pain once more. “Hold on, honey,” Persi told her compassionately.

“Oh yeah, Gremald,” Dancer told him belligerently. “Your goons hurt my little sister. From now on if you hurt one of us, we will hurt all of you. We’re the Kids and you oppose us at the risk of all you hold dear.”

“This is not over, Dancer,” Gremald growled at him.

Dancer laughed and told him proudly. “Not Dancer. Not anymore. My name’s Jamie Michaud, and I’m a star. Now get out of our way or this rat hole you call a theatre will be nothing but a smoking hole in the ground.”

Gremald held his ground for a tense fifteen seconds, but as the Kids started singing Queen’s *We Will Rock You*, he slowly moved to one side to let them pass, but Dancer wasn’t done yet. After the others had passed through the door, he, with Pflum’s assistance, poked his head back into the lobby and remarked happily, “Hey, Tommy! Good job! I owe you one.”

As the doors closed behind them, Pflum and Dancer heard Gremald demanding, “What?”

“He’s lying!” Tommy replied desperately before the doors finished closing and nothing else could be heard, especially over the Kids’ singing.

Persi and Lori rushed young Mera off to the hospital but Sam wanted everyone else back at the Transit where she was certain they would be safe.”

“No,” Dancer disagreed. “We must rehearse. This is our last chance to practice on stage, we need to get the entire set in place. We have permission to leave the set up tonight, you know?”

“And we can’t do it in the morning,” Sam agreed, “because we would get in the way of the noon concert setup. So it’s now or all afternoon. Yes. Are you sure you actually want to rehearse? We’re all tired and you’re not exactly looking your best, what with all those bruises and you’re obviously in pain.”

“Yeah,” Dancer laughed. “Good thing I’m not one of the leads this time, huh? But, Samantha, we really do need to rehearse tonight, even if only for a run through. After everything that happened today, we need to be able to get back to the play. It’s... I don’t know how to say it, but...”

“All the world’s a stage, And all the men and women merely players,” Pflum quoted. “They have their exits and their entrances, And one man in his time plays many parts, his acts being seven ages.”

“Not quite what I had in mind,” Dancer told them, “but I like that. Is it yours?”

“It’s from another of Shakespeare’s plays,” Pflum told him.

“The same playwright who wrote the play ours is based on?” Dancer asked.

“That’s the one,” Pflum agreed, “although the theme was ancient when he got his hands on it as well.”

“He wrote some pretty good stuff,” Dancer decided. “Better than ours?”

“Define ‘better,’” Pflum countered. “I think his stuff was more lyrical. It’s all very poetic. That’s the style that was used in his day and all the experts tell me he was one of the greatest. But for my money... I’ll

take our little bit of hack work over any of his masterpieces anyday.”

“You’re prejudiced, Pflum,” Dancer laughed.

“You’re right, Dancer,” Pflum agreed, “or should I be calling you Jamie now?”

“Aw, I’m still Dancer among the Kids,” Dancer replied, “but that’s not my stage name. The program will have me listed as Jamie “Dancer” Michaud, and I’ll keep it like that for a while so long as most people know me as Dancer, you know? But eventually only members of the Family will get to call me that. I just figured I’d start with Old Man Gremald since I took a special dislike to him for some reason.”

“Let me guess,” Pflum told him. “They were the ones who hired you for the chorus?”

“How’d you know that?” Dancer asked.

“Lucky guess,” Pflum shrugged. “What did you do? Sleep with the capo’s daughter?”

“Yeah!” Dancer laughed skeptically. “Like she would even notice someone off the streets. No, I was just an extra and they never missed an opportunity to remind me of it. That’s all.”

The late night rehearsal was the worst they had since starting, but it was still a form of triumph for the Kids. Dancer, all stiff and sore, managed to hobble through his part as the Family Elder of the Montegues, and then made his way into the amphitheatre’s seats to watch the rest of the Kids beside Pflum. Sam was beside herself, having to stop the play numerous times with bits of direction, when all she really wanted was to let the Kids have a good night’s sleep.

“Pretty miserable, aren’t we?” Dancer asked.

“This ain’t your best performance,” Pflum admitted, “but it’s still better than that theatrical depressant the Gremalds are presenting. Was the play of theirs you were in that bad?”

“Don’t know,” Dancer admitted, “I didn’t see tonight’s show, remember? But we did close in a week, so yeah, probably.”

“But you said Gremald vouchers are some of the most highly prized,” Pflum pointed out.

“Along with the Toth Family’s, yeah,” Dancer agreed, “but the Gremalds got lucky last year and had a boffo show that ran over three months.”

“That long, huh?” Pflum asked, not impressed. “Either the folks around here have a short attention span, or the big Families have forgotten how to put on a show. Back home I’ve seen shows so popular they run for years or even decades.”

“Really? That’s better than boffo,” Dancer remarked, “better than whammo, even. Where do they keep finding audiences who want to see them, though?”

“Kid, these shows are so good,” Pflum replied, “folks want to see them again and again.”

“Wow!” Dancer whistled. “Oh, hey! There’s our heroine!”

Pflum turned around and saw Mera returning with Persi. They must have stopped by the Transit, since

Mera was now wearing a fresh “Kids” t-shirt. “How ya doing, kid?” Pflum asked her.

“I’ll be fine,” Mera replied. “I don’t feel any pain now.”

“Well, you take it easy tonight,” Sam told her. “I suspect you’ll have a bad night after the painkillers wear off.”

“The doctor warned me of that,” Mera admitted. “He also told me to stay off my feet as much as I can for a few days. I’m sorry, Sam.”

“Nothing to be sorry for, kid,” Sam told her, putting her arms around her in a comforting hug. It had taken Sam a long while to be able to call any of the Kids, “kid” naturally, but among the troupe, the word had become a term of pride and endearment. Coming from the director, it was high praise, indeed.

“May I play with the ensemble, though?” Mera asked plaintively. “I want to do my share.”

Sam was about to say the girl had done far more than her share, but Persi spoke first, “Of course, dear. Kids always do their share.”

The sky was just beginning to lighten with the first traces of false dawn by the time the rehearsal was finally over, and no one thought they had done very well. As they arrived back at the Transit, the Kids seemed to be arguing over who had done the worst; each one claiming their own screw-up surpassed all others, but Pflum put a stop to that. “Cheer up, kids,” he told them. “The rehearsal was truly horrible, yes. But we weren’t out there tonight necessarily to be good, but because we had to show ourselves that we’re going to go on, no matter what. That rehearsal was an act of triumphant, stubborn pride and I’m proud of all of you. Besides, you know the old superstition; bad rehearsal – great performance.”

“I thought you said you weren’t a theatre person,” Dancer prodded Pflum.

“Kid,” Pflum told him confidently, “some things are universal.”

Pflum and Jack woke up earlier than most of the Kids the next morning and went out to buy the fixings for the biggest breakfast they had served to date. Until now they had given the kids toast, pancakes, or oatmeal, most mornings, but after the previous night, Pflum wanted to blow out all the stops for them. They returned with pounds of bacon and sausage, several dozen eggs, boxes of pastries and two pounds of freshly roasted and ground coffee. The Kids were still mostly sleeping and even Sam was still curled up on the couch she had shared with Pflum so that Mera and Dancer could sleep on their bed, but Persi was awake and instantly started helping Pflum and Jack with the breakfast. As the smells of frying food and brewing coffee married in the Transit’s atmosphere, the Kids woke up rapidly and started neatening up the large room and clearing various bits of paper and other debris from the table. By the end of breakfast everyone was well-fed and happy with the world. Even Mera was only feeling some residual soreness from her wound.

Persi gave her some aspirin and told her there was no need to be brave about the pain. “It’s really not that bad,” Mera told her. “I guess I just got lucky.”

“Yes, you did,” Persi agreed, “but you must still take it easy today. No running around the city like you usually do.”

“No busking today at all,” Sam told the rest of the Kids. “We’ll do the last radio show because we made that commitment, but we go as a group and take no chances. Not after last night.”

“But, Samantha,” Dancer complained, “We’ll still have a few hours to pass out flyers. How about we go out late this afternoon to catch folks on their way home? We’ll do a sort of parade and hopefully lead an audience into the Park.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Sam admitted, “but don’t you need a permit for a parade?”

“Well, not a real parade with closed streets and all,” Dancer replied. “We’ll just walk along the sidewalk, you know?”

“Better not, kid” Pflum told him.

“Why not?” Dancer asked.

“I’ve been looking down the alleyway and I keep seeing familiar faces down at the mouth of the alley,” Pflum replied.

“Who?” Sam asked.

“Well, our supposed landlord has walked past twice in the last half-hour,” Pflum reported, “but I’m not as worried about him as the muscular guys with the black eyes, who keep looking down this way. I’m pretty sure they were the bouncers... I mean ushers at the theatre last night. When we go out, we’d better all go together.”

“You’re right,” Sam agreed. “No need to take any chances. We go to the radio station then take in the noontime concert together, then we can make the final arrangements to the set. It should be safe enough to hand out flyers in the park. Just make sure the police are always in sight.”

“They usually are, Sam,” Mera reminded her.

“Pflum and I have some more work to do on the Transit,” Jack told her, “but we’ll be along directly after the concert.”

“How’s all that coming?” Sam asked.

“Nearly done,” Jack reported. “A few more days and most of that will be in the tuning.”

“Good,” Sam replied as she led the Kids out the Transit door.

Pflum and Jack were just about to leave as well, when a loud banging on the Transit door stopped them. “The landlord again,” Pflum observed. “How long before we can actually move this crate.”

“Theoretically we could bring the regulator on-line now,” Jack replied, “but we’re badly out of balance and might not even stay on this line, even with the impellers off.”

“That would be bad,” Pflum agreed. “But we’re going to have to bring the regulator on-line in order to tune. Maybe I’d better drop a tracer unit outside just in case. Too bad, the holo projector is already backstage.”

“We still have the prototype,” Jack reminded him. “What did you have in mind?”

“How about a brick wall to cover up the Transit door?” Pflum suggested.

“We’ll have to set it up outside and it’s not shielded,” Jack told him. “If it gets wet with dew, it will probably short out.”

“We’ll burn that bridge when we come to it,” Pflum decided. “I doubt the battery will last more than a few hours anyway. Go ahead and program it, okay?”

Jack agreed while Pflum opened a drawer and pulled out a short and fat cylinder. They waited while the landlord left again and then exited the Transit themselves. Pflum tossed the tracer into a corner, while Jack placed the projector. Then just for safety he reentered the Transit and grabbed the gold and silver inlayed wrench he always had in order to circumvent the regulations against carrying weapons on Transits. When they were satisfied the Transit door was well hidden, they continued on.

“Ah ha!” the landlord caught them as they stepped out on to the sidewalk. “Caught you at last, freeloaders!” He had two city policemen in their dark gray uniforms with him.

“What the heck are you talking about,” Pflum asked, feigning bewilderment.

“You’ve been living in my building for weeks,” the landlord told him. “Don’t you deny it!”

“But I do deny it,” Pflum insisted. “What part of your building do you think we were using?” He looked back into the alley to make sure the door was still hidden.

“That big metal door down at the end!” the landlord shouted.

“What door is that?” Pflum asked innocently, stepping aside to let the man storm on down the alley. At the cop’s gesture, he and Jack accompanied them back down the alley where they found the landlord staring incredulously at the apparently blank wall.

“What did you do with it?” the landlord demanded.

“With what?” Pflum replied. “Gentlemen, this is all very entertaining, but I’m due in the park. Come see our play tonight. The Kids are really good!”

“Oh?” one of the cops asked him. “You’re with them?”

“I’m the producer,” Pflum replied. “Catch you later.” As they left Pflum and Jack heard the two cops trying to reason with the landlord.

“But it was right there!” the landlord told them plaintively.

“Do you think that will be that?” Jack asked Pflum, once they were across the street.

“I hope so,” Pflum replied, “but I wouldn’t bank on it. That guy is as stubborn as...”

“As you are?” Jack asked.

“I hope not,” Pflum laughed humorlessly.

“Me too,” Jack agreed. “There’s not enough room in this world for two like you.”

“Funny,” Pflum replied acidly.

“Jack!” Sam called as they came within sight of the stage. “Where have you been? The holo projector isn’t working correctly and none of your apprentices can figure out what’s wrong.”

“I’m on it!” Jack told her and he ran backstage.

“What took you two so long?” Sam asked Pflum.

“We took a shortcut?” Pflum tried lamely, then went on to describe the encounter with the landlord.

“Maybe we should take a chance and move the Transit,” Sam considered.

“I thought of that,” Pflum told her, “but Jack can’t guarantee we’ll stay on this line just yet. Our diagnostics are still indicating a lot of instability between the various subsystems. I tossed a tracer unit into the alley just in case we’re forced to try anyway, but I’d rather not.”

“Not if it means abandoning the Kids during their performance,” Sam agreed. “That was quick thinking with the prototype holo projector.”

“It worked fairly well,” Pflum admitted, “but I was sweating bullets at the thought of his actually trying to touch the wall. Not only would he have felt a metal door, but he would have cast a long shadow through the hologram as well.” He went on to mention Jack’s worry about dew shorting the device out.

“We’ll just have to see,” Sam admitted. “Oh, good, he’s got the real holo machine working.” Jack stepped out on stage to admire his handiwork and Sam asked, “What was the problem, Jack?”

“Nothing much,” Jack laughed. “The batteries were in backwards. It didn’t matter while we were working off the Transit’s wall current, of course.”

“Why are we running on batteries?” Sam asked.

“I never got around to building a power converter,” Jack admitted. “I’d better do that though, or the Kids will never be able to recharge the batteries.”

“You didn’t use local batteries?” Sam asked.

“I did,” Jack replied, “but they don’t have rechargers for them here. “I built one into the machine.”

“How long would it take to build a power converter?” Pflum asked.

“An hour tops,” Jack replied.

“Let’s do that before the curtain goes up,” Pflum told him. “Give me a shopping list, and I’ll run out right now.”

“That’s not safe,” Sam warned him. “None of us should walk out there alone so long as the Gremalds are still looking for us. You saw them yourself this morning.”

“I’ll take Persi with me then,” Pflum decided.

“She’s conducting the ensemble,” Sam told him. “I’ll go with you.”

“No, Samantha,” Dancer stopped her. “You’re director and needed here. I’ll go with Pflum. My understudy knows the part as well as I do and I know the city better than either of you, should we get into trouble.”

“All right,” Sam agreed with trepidation. “Be careful, both of you.”

“Yes, Mommy,” Pflum replied under his breath.

“You like to live dangerously,” Dancer observed.

“I’m not really all that worried about the Gremalds, kid,” Pflum told him. “As long as we stay alert we can always outrun them.”

“I wasn’t talking about the Gremalds, Pflum,” Dancer retorted, “and I don’t think that shiny spanner of yours would do much to protect you if Samantha ever got really angry at you.”

“Sam has black belts in three different martial arts systems,” Pflum chuckled. “To be safe, I’d need a rifle with a telescopic site and at least a mile between us. Even then I’d give her an even chance of taking me out first, and I’m not exactly helpless either.”

“Then why?” Dancer started to ask.

“Because I know she won’t,” Pflum explained. “Oh she might punch me in the arm or stomach, but she’d never try to kill me. Just make my life a living hell.”

“Oh, is that all?” Dancer commented dryly

“Yeah, that’s all,” Pflum laughed. “That’s fairly normal and comfortable compared to some of the situations I’ve been in.”

They spotted Gremald “ushers” patrolling in pairs three times, but managed to avoid them each time, although on the third occasion they only managed to lose the pursuit by re-entering the park where the Gremalds decided not to follow.

“That was a little too easy,” Pflum remarked.

“They’ll be back,” Dancer prophesied. “They know where to find us. I expect they’ll just want some reinforcements.”

“Aren’t you a little Johnny Sunshine?” Pflum told him sourly.

“You think I want to be right about that?” Dancer shot back.

“No, kid,” Pflum sighed. “Neither of us do.” They gave Jack the parts he had asked for and he immediately went to work. “Ensemble sounds nice,” Pflum mentioned to Sam.

“Persi’s been letting Mera conduct this afternoon,” Sam replied. “You didn’t waste any time.”

“Who has it to waste this afternoon?” Pflum countered and mentioned the Gremald ushers they had seen. While he did so, the Kids were sitting in groups on stage and running through their lines as an unofficial last minute rehearsal. Every so often someone would stand up and join a different group, but the readings continued on. “Did you tell them to do that?” Pflum asked.

“No,” Sam shook her head. “They came up with it on their own after we had the set finalized.”

“Clever,” Pflum commented. “Looks like they’re running through the whole thing in parallel.”

“Pretty much,” Sam replied. “They’ll probably cover most of it two or three times by the time dinner comes around.”

“They won’t eat much tonight,” Pflum predicted, “not until afterwards. Good thing the Transit is stocked up with party foods. The Kids are going to need it.”

“Did you speak to the Park venders?” Sam asked.

“I did yesterday,” Pflum assured her. “They’ll be here for the Kids about an hour before the curtain goes up and the Juiceman is donating several gallons of something for backstage. He’s happy as a clam to have us here.”

“If advanced souvenir sales are any indication,” Sam replied, “They’ll all make a bundle this weekend.”

“I’m surprised we don’t have more people watching the rehearsal right now,” Pflum remarked. “There have only been a few watching us in the evenings for that matter and most of them were Park Police.”

“Professional courtesy, I think,” Sam replied. “No one likes to be on display before he or she is ready, so they’ve been waiting for the actual opening.”

“Well, they won’t have too much longer to wait,” Pflum remarked.

As the afternoon progressed, people came by to purchase t-shirts and posters and the few who had sat in to listen to the ensemble practice left donations before returning to the seats they had evidently staked out for the evening show.

“Too bad we never had the time for a full dress rehearsal,” Pflum remarked to no one in particular, but several of the Kids heard him.

“That’s okay, we can do that tonight,” Dancer told him confidently.

“Tonight’s the premier,” Pflum reminded him.

“Yeah, I know,” Dancer laughed and most of the Kids joined him.

Finally, Sam ordered the curtain closed and Pflum beckoned the venders to come around behind the stage so the Kids could have a light dinner. His prediction was correct. The Kids barely ate anything, although they did remember to drink the juice that had been donated. As they all settled in to collect their wits in the jittery pre-performance atmosphere, Pflum stuck his head out front to take a look around.

A moment later Dancer joined him and commented, “We seem to have gotten a bit more attention than I would have thought.”

“Really?” Pflum asked. “I spotted some Gremalds over to the right.”

“They’re badly outnumbered by the other Family representatives,” Dancer told him. “See over there, by the popcorn stand Lori’s working. The old guy is Miguel Valcini, the head of that family, surrounded by a bunch of his goons. And standing straight out around the center is Francesca Mastoren, with a similar number of bodyguards. She’s the youngest daughter of Georg Mastoren. I also spot key members of of Nardis, Bostos, Drenfordas and Toths. This could get nasty. Some of those families have sworn death oaths against others.

Well, Did You Evah?

“I wasn’t expecting quite that many of the elite this evening,” Pflum admitted, “but I did come up with a plan.”

“I knew you would, Pflum” Dancer told him admiringly.

“You did, huh, kid?” Pflum chuckled.

“You always seem to have a plan,” Dancer assured him.

“You probably won’t believe it,” Pflum told him, “but from this side it doesn’t always seem that way.”

“Hah!” Dancer retorted.

“Like I said,” Pflum muttered, then decided not to finish the thought. “Wait here and keep an eye on the crowd.

Pflum left the stage through the back door and used it as cover to climb the small hill it had been set scenically against. Reaching a path, he looked around, found a woman in a Park Police uniform and headed her way. “We may have a situation brewing at the stage,” he warned her after a polite greeting. “Several Families sent representatives. They may only be here for the show, but I understand there are a number of feuds represented among them as well.”

“I understand your concerns, sir,” she replied with a nod. “We have noticed more interest in your play than there has been in a park performance in years. I’ll call in for backup. Hmm, guess I get to watch the show tonight after all.” The prospect seemed to cheer her.

“Thanks,” Pflum told her and headed back.

“Strange time to go exploring,” Jack noted as Pflum stepped back inside.

“Just making sure security was in place,” Pflum remarked. “Part of my job, don’t you know. Hmm, one more touch, I think. Hey, Dancer, point out the Family heads and other higher ups to me again.” Dancer did so.

“What are you planning to do?” Sam asked worriedly. “Curtain time is minutes away.”

“I’m just going to thank them for coming, Sam,” Pflum replied. “It’ll be polite and with witnesses, but it

will also put them on notice that we know they're here. Besides, I ought to go see how the popcorn sales are going. I'll be back. Though I may watch from out there for a while, so don't hold the curtain for me.

Pflum jumped down from the stage and walked calmly up the far left aisle. "Ah, Maestro Valcini," he greeted that Family head. "So nice of you to take an interest in our little performance."

The *capo* was so distracted by the number of his competitors also in the "Standing Room Only" section of the theatre, that he barely remembered why he had come to the park. "Thank you, Mister..."

"Pflum, sir," Pflum replied cheerfully. "Aurelian Pflum. Just wanted to make sure you enjoyed the show. You know there are still a few seats up front, if you like."

"No need," Valcini told him. "I generally stand at the back of my theatre during performances."

"Whatever makes you comfortable," Pflum told him. "Do try the popcorn, by the way. It's excellent. Well, please excuse me, just starting my rounds and the show's about to start. Enjoy!"

He then went to the other notables and greeted them similarly. Francesca Mastoren had already taken a seat near the back and apparently really was there for the show. "Thank you, Mister Pflum. I must admit that curiosity got the better of me, although I did not realize so many of my... uh... colleagues were taking an interest as well." The thought seemed to make her nervous. Pflum assured her he had already arranged for security and pointed at the still arriving Park police.

The others he greeted unsobly feigned politeness, until he finally reached the Gremald. "Hey there, *capo*!" Pflum greeted him jovially. The elderly man flinched and scowled at Pflum, but Pflum continued on, "Enjoy the show."

The head of the Gremalds was about to say something when two Park Police were suddenly at his sides. "Gonna be a nice show tonight, Maestro," one of them said conversationally. "I've been watching the rehearsals all week."

"Sure would be a shame," his partner added, "were someone to start trouble in the park tonight. None of us want that, do we?"

"Seems to me some smart Family might want to hire these Kids on a more permanent basis," the first one noted. "Maybe adopt them, seems to me. Have a nice evening, sir. We'll be just a few yards away should you need us."

Pflum chuckled and looked around. It appeared the cops were having similar conversations all around the amphitheatre so he decided to head back to the stage. He got there just as Persi tapped the ensemble to attention. Pflum checked his watch; right on time! He stepped back stage and told everyone, "Break a leg!"

For the next two hours the Kids sang, danced and acted like the consummate professionals Pflum had come to know them to be. There were the usual one or two slip-ups, but the Kids were good. They covered for each other and improvised their way out of problems with the same imagination Pflum often needed just to make his Transit move.

Best of all, the audience laughed at all the jokes, applauded with gusto in all the appropriate places, cried freely at the end and cheered the Kids into taking the extra curtain calls only a triumph would merit.

The audience donated generously on their way out of the theatre, but Francesca Mastoren came backstage to press several orch vouchers into Pflum's hands personally. "You put my own Family to shame," she told the Kids, but with a smile on her face to let them know she was being complimentary, not threatening. "I have rarely seen such a magnificent performance. Thank you, my friends. I had grown bored with the Theatre of late, but now I feel renewed!" She stayed a little longer to talk to the Kids before her bodyguards informed her it was time to leave.

Pflum peaked out the curtain as the others cleaned the stage. The finale had been bloody and they didn't want the stains on the wooden surface to set. Outside, he saw the police politely escorting the last of the audience away from the amphitheatre and only then did Pflum breathe a sigh of relief.

"Let's get back to Pflum's place," Dancer suggested, "and wait for the reviews to come in." The suggestion was met with a happy cheer from the Kids and they closed and locked up the stage and headed out of the park.

The false wall hologram was still working when they got back so Jack retrieved the projector and brought it inside. "It got pretty hot," he told Pflum as he finally switched it off.

"Afraid it's going to burn out?" Pflum asked. "Well, what the heck, We got more out of it than we expected. Maybe it will last just long enough."

Lori and Fasha helped Persi pull food out of the fresher and finally the Kids made up for the light dinner they had eaten almost six hours earlier. The party continued through the rest of the night with some Kids falling asleep in the corners, but with the rest telling jokes, singing songs and some even writing new ones just for the fun of it. Pflum nodded off several times, but he kept waking up when the Kids laughed at someone's joke.

"When do the first papers come out, kid," Pflum asked Dancer sleepily around dawn.

"Just about now," Dancer replied. "Let's go over to the newsstand."

"Uh, uh," Sam stopped them. "My turn to risk life and limb. Come on, Persi."

"At this time of morning?" Dancer asked. "Who's awake?"

"We are," Sam snapped as she closed the Transit door behind her.

They returned a few minutes later with five different newspapers and dropped them on the table. "So?" Dancer asked excitedly.

"I haven't read them yet," Sam admitted.

"What?" Dancer asked disbelievingly. "How could you resist?"

"The words printed in there won't change because I waited to share them with you," Sam replied, but Dancer was already opening the top paper to the entertainment section.

"The sensational new street troupe that has been dazzling the city in recent weeks," he read, "had their stage debut last night in Southside Park."

"Sounds pretty good so far," Mera opined.

“Wait,” Billy told her. “That’s just the introduction.”

“While The Kids’s play *The Two Families*, relies on old and time-tested themes to build its plot from, The Kids themselves presented it with energy and vigor to achieve a performance that ranks among the best this writer has ever witnessed.”

The Kids all cheered at that. “Yeah,” Renald told the others, “now that’s a review!”

“It goes on,” Dancer tells them, “mentioning a lot of us by name and praising the set and our background effects – good going, Jack! And it concludes, ‘While The Kids played to an only moderate sized audience last night, I suggest getting to the Park early today and tomorrow or you’ll need binoculars to see them.’ Yeah, that was a good one. Let’s see what the rest have to say.”

“That was a moderate-sized audience?” Pete asked.

“The amphitheatre looked full, but the seats were really only about three quarters full,” Pflum remarked, “and there was still room in the SRO section.”

“Still, the take last night was almost as much as we made from the t-shirt pre-sales,” Sam announced, “so even if we play to an empty house in the next two performances, we’ve done well.”

“Listen up,” Mera told them, having found the next review, “Whammo! What a great night for the Theatre! Street troupe, The Kids, has once more presented the city with a new and original performance, this time on stage, possibly taking their first steps as a new Family!”

She tried to read more but the cheering drowned her out.

“Hah!” Dancer laughed at the next one, “Not too shoddy for an amateur production.”

“Who wrote that?” Sara asked.

“Emelinne Toth,” Dancer laughed. “She pans every production except her own Family’s. For her, this is high praise. She even admits to being moved to tears by the finale as, ‘Julietta played convincingly by the young heartbreaker, Sara Noralle, dies by her own hand.’ Good job, Sara!”

“This one likes you, Dancer!” Dottie remarked. “Jamie ‘Dancer’ Michaud played well beyond his years as the *capo* of the Montegue Family. One would never know the part was played by a mere teenager. While not a lead in this production, I believe we are looking at a rising new star.”

The Kids cheered for Dancer and several clapped him jubilantly on the back, before mining the reviews for mentions of others in the troupe.

“So everyone wrote positively except Emmy Toth,” Mera concluded as they started to settle down. “Can’t do better than that!”

“I think the Toth review is very favorable,” Todd, who had been cast as Mercutio, opined. “No one would ever expect her to actually say we were great, but even she couldn’t help but compliment Sara’s performance.” He turned toward her, “And she’s right, kid, you are a heartbreaker! But the thing is, Toth didn’t pan us. Everyone will know that means we must be great if she couldn’t actually find fault.”

“Anyone up for breakfast?” Pflum asked between yawns.

“I’m full,” Dancer replied. “I’m more ready to get some sleep.” The others echoed his sentiments.

“Good idea,” Sam approved. “We still have two performances ahead of us and we’ve been up all night.”

“Tonight we’ll have a full house,” Persi predicted. “Our biggest problem may be that not everyone who wants to see our play will get the chance. It’s not like we can be held over.”

“No, that’s very true,” Dancer agreed, “but we could produce it again in a new venue. Any number of businesses may be willing to accept a proven hit as the entertainment in their establishment.”

“We need to start planning another play,” Guilio, who had played opposite Dancer as the head of the Capulet family, told everyone. “We might be able to play this again after the first run, but we need to follow up or we’ll just be another troupe of one-hit wonders.”

“What about our street performances?” Mera argued. “We had more new acts out there than anyone ever.”

“Ever?” Guilio countered. “How do you know that? You’re right, though if you mean anyone else in this city. We’re more versatile than any troupe in town, yes, but buskers, no matter how good, are a decibale a dozen. We need to follow up with another play. A different one.”

“More than that,” Dancer agreed, “we need to prove we are consistent. I have some ideas for new plays. Sam will you help me with them?”

“While I’m still here, Dancer” she replied, “but that won’t be for more than another week at the outside, you know. Pflum, Jack, Persi and I have to move on when we can, we have a friend who’s been waiting for us.”

“I just want you to critique some stuff,” Dancer told her. “I’ve known all along that we’d have to be able to write our own plays from here on out. We’re already coming up with songs that are almost as good as the ones Persi taught us.”

“Many of them are better,” Persi assured him, “and you’ve improved as a playwright in the last few weeks. You co-wrote many of the scenes in *The Two Families*, you know.”

“But you and Sam rewrote most of it,” Dancer admitted.

“So we will do what we can, while we can,” Sam told him, “and we’ll work with anyone else who has ideas too.”

“And you will all have to help each other,” Pflum told them sleepily. “Read each other’s work, help with constructive criticism, help by revising passages for each other. Be the team you are on stage while creating new work as well.” The Kids started buzzing with new ideas and excitement, but Pflum stopped them. “However, right now we all need to sleep.”

With that he started to lay down on the couch, but Dancer stopped him, “I’m feeling a lot better already, Pflum. You and Samantha can have your own bed back. Mera can keep the spare cot and I’ll stretch out on the couch.”

“Thanks, kid,” Pflum told him sincerely. “I’m not as young as I used to be.”

“Dancer,” Jack told him. “Take my bed. I’m not as stiff and sore as I know you still are. I’ll sleep on the couch.”

“Uh, thanks, Jack,” Dancer sighed. “To tell the truth, I think the reason I played an old man so convincingly was that I really was feeling so stiff.”

Too Darn Hot

The Kids were all up by an hour past noon, although Pflum and Sam were still asleep. Mera and Lori started preparing breakfast from whatever they could find in the fresher, while Dancer and three others started sketching the plot of a new play, whispering quietly among themselves. Jack and Persi were awake soon after and while Jack went to work on the Transit, Persi sat down with the aspiring playwrights. When Sam sat up in bed sometime later, the others waved to her and turned back to what they were doing and Lori and Mera pointed the breakfast food out to Sam.

“Breakfast time, Pflum,” Sam told him.

“Oh good.” Pflum replied and sat up looking more alert that he had any right to be. “Good morning, all!”

“Good afternoon, Pflum,” Dancer corrected him.

“It’s still morning until I have a cup of coffee,” Pflum grumbled. Three cups were instantly offered. “Thanks, kids,” he replied, accepting the first one he could grab. “What time is it, anyhow?”

“Coming up on two-thirty,” Sam replied. “We need to start thinking about getting back to the park and making sure everything is all right for tonight’s show.”

“Right,” Dancer agreed. “We may want to hand out more flyers around the park too.”

It turned out flyers were far from necessary on the second day of their run. By the time they arrived in the amphitheatre, it was already half filled with people who had come to stake out their seats early. Food vendors were walking among them and doing a land office business. Applause broke out as the Kids climbed up on stage and slipped behind the curtain, but a few minutes later Mera, Lori and two others came out and performed a quick set of *capella* songs.

When they were done, Lori and Fasha started making popcorn, while Pete started selling souvenirs. As the afternoon progressed, the Kids came out in front of the curtain by themselves or in small groups to perform some of their street acts to the delight of the early attendees. Looking out at the audience, Pflum was mildly surprised that Francesca Mastoren had returned with another woman dressed in the Mastoren house colors and they were sitting in the front row without any of their usual body guards hovering around them. Taking a second look, Pflum noticed Mastoren guards orbiting in the SRO section, however.

Other Family representatives arrived as show time approached, but none of them deigned to sit among the crowd. Pflum got nervous again when it became clear that the Families seemed to be arguing with

each other, casting small insults back and forth. He slipped out the back once more to alert the Park Police, but discovered they were already on the scene and keeping the more antagonistic Families apart whenever they drifted too close to each other.

Then Pflum was recognized as the producer and several Family representatives clustered around him. "Mister Pflum," a Toth gentleman announced, "please let the Kids know we're here as scouts. We're very interested in hiring them as part of our troupe."

"Don't listen to him," a woman of the Bosto family advised. "The Bostos will best any offer they make."

The others made similar claims and asked to speak with the Kids before the show. Some had offers for him, Sam and Persi as well, but Pflum told them all as politely as he could, "Not before the show, folks. Everything is a bit hectic as you might imagine." He looked over his shoulder to see Dancer on stage singing a ballad while several kids accompanied him on various stringed instruments. "But enjoy the little extra shows, why don't you?" he added hastily.

On the way back, Pflum spotted Tommy on the far side of the SRO section. He was no longer wearing a Gremald shirt, and seemed to be talking animatedly with some of the Nardi Family. He sidled up to one of the Park Police and whispered, "Keep an eye on that one over there, please. He used to be one of the Kids, but we had to fire him as a troublemaker. I doubt that has changed much."

The cop agreed to watch Tommy and Pflum hurried back up to the stage even as Dancer finished his song and the ensemble began setting up in the pit. There it was Mera, not Persi, who was directing the players this time, although Persi was sitting in the first chair, ready to help, if needed.

If anything, the second performance made the first look like an early rehearsal. Having ferried tourists to some of the most famous plays ever performed had allowed Pflum to be able to appreciate just what it took to make a great performance and to develop an appropriately critical facility. The Kids, he thought, were as good as anyone he had seen on Broadway. Peeking out from the wings, both he and Sam could see that even those who had attended the previous performance were still visibly moved, even knowing what was going to happen. *So much for Dancer's assertions that no one wanted to see a play more than once*, Pflum thought to himself smugly.

After the curtain came down, many of the Family agents came backstage making offers of employment with an option to adopt to various individuals among the Kids, but if anyone of them were tempted, all temptation slipped away when Francesca Mastoren advised, "Don't listen to them. Option to adopt? How often do you hear that one? Everyone knows what a sham that is. If the offer isn't for adoption immediately it's not valid. Besides, the Kids are already a Family. What do any of you need these poseurs for?"

After that the mood got ugly and the agents shouted insults at Francesca and the woman who turned out to be her cousin, but while they gracefully ignored such barbs, the Kids did not and told the agents to go packing in fairly crude and impolite terms. "Thank you," Francesca's cousin told the Kids warmly. "Great performance tonight. You know, sometimes Families do perform together instead of in competition."

"We shall see you at the matinee!" Francesca promised as she and her cousin glided off stage. As they walked up the aisle, Pflum was fairly certain he heard one of them sigh and say, "Don't you wish we could join their troupe?"

While the agents might have been driven from the backstage area, however, they were waiting just beyond the amphitheatre's boundaries to have another go at recruiting, but the Kids were having none of

it and some of the agents started making what could only be veiled threats about how dangerous it was to be an independent in this city and how they would hate to see any of the Kids get hurt.

“Oh, yeah?” Mera confronted them. “We already know what happened when the Gremalds tried to hurt us. We hurt them more, so don’t even think of trying anything unless you’re planning to go out of the business!”

“Sorry, gentlemen,” Dancer told them, coming up to place his arms around little Mera protectively, “but the Kids are a unit. Even the Mastorens recognized us as a fellow Family, so let’s not talk of hirings or adoptions any more. If you come back, we might consider an alliance, if it is to our benefit, but we already know how to deal with threats. We see them as debts incurred by the one who makes the threat, and the Kids always collect on such debts with interest.”

“You’re open to alliance?” one of the agents called as the Kids walked past him.

“We’ll consider your offers,” Sam replied. “No promises, mind!”

As the kids walked away, there was a lot of angry muttering left in their wake. Looking over his shoulder, though, Pflum noticed that the agents were now arguing with each other.

“I’m not sure which makes me more nervous,” Pflum remarked. “Their threats against us or each other. Against us we can handle, but if what’s going on between them gets out of hand this city could be in a state of civil war.”

“You’re exaggerating,” Sam told him.

“It’s happened before,” Dancer remarked, “or so I learned in school.”

“You were in School, Dancer?” one of the Kids asked.

“Yeah,” Dancer replied, “until I was twelve.”

“Why’d you leave?”

“My mom died,” Dancer replied. “She worked hard and every decibalc she earned above room and board went to pay my tuition. Then she got sick one winter and what little money we had left went to pay for her medicine. She couldn’t work, so I did, for all the good I accomplished. Well I couldn’t both work and go to school and no one pays you to go to school, so...

“Hey, c’mon,” Dancer continued. “Every one of us has a similar story. We’re family to each other because otherwise we would have no family at all.”

“But I never got to go to school,” the Kid told him. “My folks had me out on the streets as far back as I recall. Then one day I went home and they weren’t there.”

“I never knew my parents,” Mera sighed. “I was in a foster home until a couple of years ago when I was told I was on my own now. They did teach me my letters, but I think I’ve learned more from Persi these last few weeks than I did all my time in the home.”

“Yeah,” Don agreed. “Persi’s the best teacher I ever met.”

“Thank you, guys,” Persi replied, “but now that you’ll have a bit of money I hope you’ll invest some of it in yourselves and your education. The more you know, the better your plays and songs will be. You can all read now and that’s the start, but I haven’t had time to teach you everything.”

“Yeah,” Dancer agreed, glad for the change of subject. “We especially need to learn more about the literature and entertainment of the past and history. We really need more history and that’s what I was getting at. Roughly a century ago the Families of the time had a major falling out – much worse than today. They eventually started allying with each other in attempts to eradicate mutual foes, but it’s never that simple. Over half the population of the city was caught in the crossfire and three quarters of the Family members were killed. The Mastorens, for example, were once four different Families, but by the time the war ended there were only twelve men, women and children left.”

“But they had the money of four whole Families among them, didn’t they?” Persi asked.

“Yeah,” Dancer nodded as they reached the alley, “I guess they must have, what didn’t get spent during the war, that is. Oh, hey! That’s what she meant.”

“What’s that, Dancer?” Dottie asked.

“My teacher, my last year in school,” Dancer replied, while Jack disabled the holographic wall that continued to hide the Transit door. “She told us that if it had not been for the war, the Families would never have gained the power they have today. It makes sense to me now. Suddenly the money of the Theatre owners was concentrated in far fewer hands than ever before. The survivors, once they got over the trauma of losing most of their loved ones, no, I doubt they ever got over that. Who does?”

“That always leaves scars,” Mera remarked sagely as she stepped into the Transit. The other Kids all made sounds of agreement and Pflum noticed tears were running down both Sam’s and Persi’s cheeks. He understood. Until now the Kids had always displayed a never-care, happy-go-lucky sort of attitude. None of the Transit crew, with the possible exception of Persi, Pflum decided, had thought to find out why the Kids had been living in that alley. It should have been obvious they had all been orphans or runaways or maybe just thrown out of their homes for reasons they may not have understood. They had seemed like such happy children that neither Pflum nor Sam had realized how much they must have suffered in this society devoted to the entertainment arts. They were really fantastic performers, but if it were true the greats always had to suffer for their art, the Kids had somehow survived more adversity than most people would see in their whole lifetimes.

It was a sobering and depressing thought on a night when the mood should be triumphant and Pflum felt guilty for having started them on down this somber path, However, he also did not think he could guide the mood of the party. It was something that would have to develop on its own. He was so lost in thought, however, that he failed to notice immediately that the Kids weren’t depressed by the conversation. Life was currently good to them and with all they had apparently been through, they could appreciate it. So much so that while it was not as wild an evening as the night before, tonight they were actually feeling quite mellow.

“Should we invite the Mastorens to the strike party tomorrow night?” Mera asked. “They seem to really like us.”

“We can ask,” Dancer shrugged. “I don’t know what sorts of parties the Mastorens are used to. They aren’t on good terms with the Gremalds but then the Gremalds keep their strike parties within the family and hired hands and there was an invisible line dividing the two at the one strike party I was at there. For all I know all Families are like that.”

“Yuck!” Fasha exclaimed. “That doesn’t sound like much fun. Let’s invite them anyway. Sam, may we use your printing press to print invitations.”

“Of course,” Sam replied. “Would you like to do that now?” She worked with Mera, Lori and Dottie on the printed invitations while Persi helped Dancer and several others who were working on ideas for the next play.

Pflum looked around and decided he liked the mellow atmosphere, but thought *What kind of party has no music?* So he looked through the catalogue of albums in the Transit’s memory banks and selected some of what in the latter half of the Twentieth Century had been called progressive jazz. Some of the Kids looked up and listened to the strange music and Pflum could see they were getting some new ideas for their own future performances. Then he joined Jack and helped attach the more recently built circuit boards. The didn’t need to work long before the Transit once more had enough power for all systems at once and they were confident that with a bit of tuning, the Transit could leave at any time, although there was still more work to be done and Jack was still arguing that they attach the modifications Doctor Mackenzie had given them before they left. Eventually Pflum agreed to use them, but stipulated that he and Jack had to fully tune the impellers, before retrofitting the modifications.

One by one, the Kids started falling asleep far earlier than the night before, although Pflum and Sam fell asleep even earlier.

Everyone was up in time for a not-too late breakfast. They ate hastily and Dancer and several others were out the door before the rest had finished. “We’ll start opening up,” Dancer promised Sam.

“Be very careful, Dancer,” Sam warned him. “The way those agents behaved last night...”

“I know, Sam,” Dancer agreed, “We’ll keep the Park Police nearby.” Sam nodded and Dancer took his advance unit out the door.

With that example to spur them on, the other Kids were soon finished, but paused long enough to help clean up after themselves and then they too were ready to leave. Pflum locked the door and Jack reset the holo projector and they started out.

“Ah ha!” the landlord surprised them at the mouth of the alley once more. “I have you this time!”

“What are you talking about?” Sam asked with feigned innocence.

“That door,” the man insisted.

“What door?” Pflum asked in the same way he had during their last encounter.

“I don’t know how you hid it,” the man told him, “but it’s down there and I’m going to find it.” However, rather than storming down the alley, the man turned around and walked quickly off in the opposite direction.

“You didn’t tell me he was so insistent,” Sam remarked.

“I just wish I knew why he’s going that way,” Pflum remarked. “Well, no help for that right now.”

“Why don’t you just pay him the rent he wants?” Mera asked. “We have the money, you know?”

“It’s your money, Mera,” Persi explained, side-stepping Pflum’s real objection against having to pay for space the landlord did not really own. “We don’t want to spend it that way.”

“It’s a legitimate expense,” Mera argued, “and the owner of the building deserves to be paid for our use of it.”

Pflum was about to argue that as they entered the park, but he was stopped when Dancer and two others came running at full blast from the stage area. “We’ve been robbed!” he told them while trying to catch his breath. “They took all the props and sets.”

What a Crazy Way to Spend Sunday

“They left the holo machine,” Jack observed.

“It was small and under a tarp,” Pflum noted. “That’s all they seem to have missed though. We can’t go on with an entirely holographic set though; not with a single projector.”

“I didn’t install enough memory slips in here to hold an entire set anyway,” Jack replied. “Except for the projector lens, I used local parts.”

“With only one lens, the Kids would cast shadows all through the holograms anyway,” Pflum added.

“They even took the park’s furniture that was stored backstage,” Sam was explaining to the Park Police.

“Yes,” the uniformed woman responded. “Our insurance covers theft and the door was definitely locked. The lock is still in place. Whoever did this kicked the door in.”

“Close,” Pflum nodded. “I think they used that log in the orchestra pit as a battering ram.”

“That would do it,” the woman agreed. “Unfortunately, our insurance does not cover your possessions.”

“I realize that,” Sam nodded. “It was clearly stated in the contract that our props were left here at our own risk. And even if we were to be compensated, it would not come in time for the matinee.”

“That’s a shame,” the woman sympathized. “And the Kids had been doing so well. There are already people in the seats an hour before curtain time. Too bad you’ll have to cancel.”

“Cancel?” Sam asked. “Why would we do that?”

“Well, it seems that with no set, no props...” the officer trailed off.

“Isn’t there an old saying?” Sam asked. “The show must go on?”

“Hmm?” the policewoman responded. She obviously thought Sam was being entirely too idealistic. “A fine sentiment, but... Oh well, I suppose you’re right, but it seems to me that what with all the fights and deaths last night...”

“What?” Pflum asked.

“You must have heard the sirens,” she told him. “They were going all night. Kept me up, that’s for sure.”

“My place is very well insulated,” Pflum replied. “What happened?”

“It’s all very confusing, but if the stories are true, the Nardi Family raided the Gremald Theatre while the Bostos were attacked at a Family-owned restaurant. No one knows which Family was behind that, but the Bostos went after the Tellinos and Valcinis both. And there were numerous incidents all over the city, I heard.”

“And someone used all that chaos to come here and steal us blind,” Pflum grumbled.

“How are we supposed to go on like this, Sam?” Sara asked plaintively. “even the costumes are either gone or ripped.”

“The costumes were nice,” Sam replied seriously. “But there’s no need to set the story in the past, especially not now. You all have much nicer clothes than you did a few weeks ago too. They’ll pass as costumes if we assume our star-crossed lovers are alive here and now.”

“But we haven’t any props,” Don pointed out. “No swords, or…”

“And swords are hopelessly outdated these days anyway,” Dancer noted. “Now we would probably want guns and maybe knives.”

“We bought those swords at a shop nearby, didn’t we?” Pflum asked.

“Sure, Pop’s Props,” Dancer replied.

“Does Pop have some fake guns?” Pflum asked.

“He should have,” Dancer replied. “Oh yeah, I see what you mean, Let’s run! We don’t have much time.”

Pflum and Dancer ran out of the amphitheatre while Sam continued to talk to the Kids, “So, we’re going to have to improvise a lot this afternoon. At least we’ll still have the holo backgrounds.”

“No, we don’t,” Jack reported. “The machine was damaged. Maybe that’s why it was left behind after all. I think I can fix it, but not without spare parts that we don’t have and time, which we really do not have.”

“So we’ll be performing on a barestage,” Sam observed, “with no costumes and only a few props. We can do it.”

“We can?” Guilio asked. “Without a set?”

“There was a time when sets were minimal at best,” Sam explained, “and yet some of the greatest plays of all time were written and performed under those conditions, because the actors were able to make their audiences imagine the scenery for themselves.”

“Kind of cuts down on the work for the stage hands, doesn’t it?” Fasha asked.

“Well, we still have lighting and sound to consider,” Sam told her, “but yes, the stage hands would have less to do, although I think during the actual performance, it will be about the same as before for you. We don’t have time to reblock this entire play with a setless stage, but let’s just do a scene or two now with the curtain down and hopefully that will be enough to get us through this.”

Together they worked out the opening scene as done without props or set dressing. At first the Kids were hesitant, but after a few minutes their fertile imaginations took over and Sam was convinced they’d be able to pull off a passable performance, at least. Dancer returned with Pflum by the time they were starting to block the second scene and fell right into the new mode of acting without missing a beat.

“We didn’t get much,” Pflum admitted. “Pop only had two knives left. I guess we cleaned him out last time we were there and I decided that two rubber guns should be enough the way the scenes were written.”

“That’s fine,” Sam told him. “We’ll only use them one or twice anyway. Too many guns and this would look like a Western. The time! We only have ten minutes left to curtain.”

“Is Ms. Mastoren in the audience again?” Mera asked.

“With at least half her Family,” Dancer informed her. “Lori handed out the invitations on her way to man the popcorn stand. And you ought to be getting down into the pit. You’re conducting today, aren’t you?”

“I am!” Mera squeaked and ran offstage.

Dancer chuckled, “She’s a good actress, but I think she’s going to be a great conductor.” He peaked out the curtain to see what was happening in the audience. “Another full house,” he reported. “Ah ha!”

“What is it, kid?” Pflum asked.

“The Nardis are back and seated in the back row,” Dancer replied. “Tommy’s still with them.”

“And they’re looking entirely too pleased with themselves,” Pflum observed, “I think we’ve found our thieves and they returned to see how we were going to cope.”

“Then we’ll show them!” Renald commented from behind them.

“Yeah,” Sara agreed. “We’ll put on a better play without the props and set than with. That’ll show them!” The Kids who were still behind the curtain cheered just as the ensemble began the overture.

The cast scrambled into their opening positions as Sam and Pflum joined Jack and the stagehands in the wings. “I wish we had a prompter’s box upstage,” Sam told Pflum.

“Can’t have everything,” he replied. “You’ve been working from the wings so far anyway.”

“I haven’t had to do much up until now, but this afternoon it’s half improvisation,” she fretted.

Then the overture ended, the curtain rose and the audience gasped at the bare stage. They had been expecting the rich set that had greeted audiences the previous two nights and it had been a very long time since a major production, such as this was now being thought of, had gone on with nothing but the stage itself.

For just a moment, the Kids froze, uncertain how to proceed, But Dancer startled them all with a boisterous laugh and then went into his first line. It woke them out of their daze and suddenly the play was all they knew and the true performance began.

The Two Families had already been the sensation of the year, but forced to dig deep within themselves, the Kids managed an exceptional performance. With no set, the audience also paid far more attention to the actors than they might have normally done and were able to appreciate the subtle nuances of their performance. Not just listening to the words, they needed their imaginations to see, feel and smell what was being portrayed in a more intimate manner than any of them had experienced at the theatre. It was new. It was fresh. It was powerful and engrossing. And the Kids, ever quick studies, saw what worked and what did not and were quick to modify their performances to capitalize on those bits that most captivated the audience.

As this final performance continued on, the spell-bound audience became increasingly silent and merely oohed and aahed when during the previous evenings they might have stopped the show with applause. Each of the Kids in turn wondered if they were losing the audience, but on glancing out into the seats, they realized that the silence was a form of applause far more profound than raucous cheers and the stamping of feet.

The most powerful moment of the play had always been when Julietta killed herself. Sam knew that even as she purloined the scene from Shakespeare although it was Dancer's modifications, she realized that boosted its impact in this world. Not only was she killing herself in despair for the supposed loss of her love, but willingly sacrificing her stardom in the act. In this Theatre-obsessed culture, it was a double whammy of emotional impact. With the additional enhancement of the bare-stage performance of the troupe, the audience was utterly overwhelmed.

Cries of despair could be heard across the amphitheatre as Julietta slit her wrists with Romeo's knife and then slowly sunk to the stage and died as her life's blood puddled around her body. In the previous performances, she had plunged the blade into her heart, but the change of time setting had necessitated the change, and yet her slower death became all the more poignant for the time it took and the prolonged reaction from the audience.

Then as Romeo awoke from his drugged stupor to discover Julietta's body and he took a gun to his head and pulled the trigger, many in the audience screamed hysterically even though the gun was a rubber prop and the bang had to be simulated with a single loud drumbeat. They only began to calm down as the survivors arrived to find the two and sang the concluding song of the play - a mournful dirge.

Finally the curtain was drawn closed and the audience exploded in the first true applause since the curtain had first opened. On and on the human-made thunder rolled, filling the bowl of the theatre as the cast made curtain call after curtain call. Even after Sam called an end to that ritual, the audience continued to stay in the amphitheatre in the hopes the Kids might make another performance and excitedly discussed what they had just seen.

You're Sensational

"Bravo and brava!" Francesca Mastoren greeted them as she sailed backstage. All the kids – cast crew, ensemble and concessionaires – had returned to the stage immediately following the play. "Your previous performances were marvelous, but this! How did you ever think of such a thing? Why hasn't anyone else? I've never seen anything so glorious! I... I... oh my! I don't think I've ever been beyond words."

“If you’re beyond words, cousin,” the other woman who’d accompanied her backstage told her dryly, “it might be best to stop talking.”

“Oh, Mai!” Francesca exclaimed exasperatedly. “You were as blown over as I was. Admit it.”

“Of course I was,” Mai laughed. “No one who can still draw breath would have been left unaffected. Well done, Kids. We came for the strike party, but it doesn’t look like there’s a set left to strike. That can’t be why you did it, is it?”

“More a case of the mother of invention,” Sam told them.

“Someone broke in last night and stole everything,” Dancer admitted.

“How horrible!” Mai gasped.

“Still,” Francesca admitted philosophically, “whoever it was might not have done it intentionally, but they did you a great favor. Everyone knew you were good, but now they know you are great!”

There was an ominous sound growing outside and when Pflum stuck his head outside the curtain, he saw members of the Bosto family shouting back and forth with the Gremalds and Tellinos. At the same time Tommy seemed to be getting slapped around by the Nardis. Other Family representatives seemed to be bunching up together and trying to sneak off quietly except for the Mastorens, who were waiting just outside the curtain.

“You’re Maestro Pflum, right?” An elderly man in Masteren colors asked.

“Yes, sir,” Pflum replied. “Would you like to come inside? Um, Maestro Masteren, I presume?”

“Georg,” The Mastorencapo introduced himself. And he stepped through the curtain. “It looks as though your troupe could use a bit of help getting home safely. I offer you the services of my house.”

“Thank you, sir,” Pflum replied. “We may want to wait until the Park police clear some of the loudmouths away.”

“Loudmouths, hey?” Georg chuckled. “Yes, a good description. They have no notion of how to emote properly. They just get louder and louder. Ever been to some of their plays?”

“I attended a Gremald performance the other night,” Pflum admitted. “Can’t say I enjoyed it.”

“I’ve never liked anything they came up with,” Georg confessed. “Until this afternoon you might have convinced me it was professional jealousy, but I can honestly say your play was better than anything I’ve ever produced. I did not really believe Franni when she came back the other night with her descriptions of *The Kids* and *The Two Families*, but I know better now.”

“Thanks,” Pflum replied, “but all I did were a few necessary errands. Sam and Perci and Dancer wrote it and the rest of the Kids did almost all the other work.”

“Hah,” Georg laughed. “You can’t fool me. Being a troupe is a team effort. Everyone plays an essential part.”

“There is that,” Pflum agreed.

They waited a half hour and when it seemed only half the former audience had left, Pflum decided it was time to try to get back to the Transit. The so-called strike party had been raucous backstage, with everyone singing and acting out favorite bits of almost anything but the play they had just put on. Even Francesca and Mai were persuaded to sing a duet and they chose a bawdy little number that had the older Kids blushing. However, apart from a little left-over popcorn and the tail ends of the vendors’ offerings, all the food for the planned party had been left in the Transit’s fresher.

The Mastoren Family escorted the Kids out of the Park and to the alley in which the Transit was still parked. “You’re staying for the rest of the party, aren’t you?” Dancer asked Francesca.

“I’d love to, but I probably should get back to the theatre,” Francesca demurred. “Half the Family is here and with all the chaos in the city last night, I wouldn’t be safe without an escort home and it would be foolhardy to leave the theatre undefended in case of trouble.”

“It’s really been that bad?” Pflum asked.

“You’ve been isolated out here,” Francesca told him. “Oh, no one has attacked the Mastoren Theatre, but we do have our enemies too, you know. When things get chaotic, such enemies will sometimes use the confusion to hurt others.”

“Oh please stay a little while, Frannie,” Mera begged. “It’s not even dark yet.”

“Dear,” Georg told his daughter, “if you and Mai wish to stay, I’ll send the boys back for you in a few hours if it’s safe to be on the streets.”

“And if it isn’t safe, Father?” she asked.

“We’ll make room for you on the couch or the spare cot,” Dancer offered.

“How can we refuse?” Francesca laughed.

“Yay!” Mai cheered with far less restraint.

They reached the back end of the alley to discover the prototype holo projector had failed and the landlord of the building had taped another note to the door. Pflum slipped it quietly into his pocket and opened the door.

Inside Pflum’s crate, they could not hear what was going on outside, but even if they could, the songs and skits they all performed for one another would have drowned out most thunderstorms. Food and drink flowed freely and Dancer and the other writers of the group fell back to their new pastime of planning the next play or three. Francesca, ended up spending most of her time with them, listening and reading what they had done and then making suggestions concerning alternative plot lines. She became so caught up in the activity that she grabbed a pad of her own and started sketching out a plot and discussing it with the Kids.

However, an hour after dark there was a loud banging on the door and on looking through the digital window, Persi discovered Tommy, now apparently allied with both the Gremalds and the Bostos, helping use a makeshift battering ram on the door.

“They would be causing real damage,” Persi considered,” if they had enough room to build up a bit of momentum.”

“Perhaps,” Jack nodded, “but they’ll get there eventually if we don’t stop them.”

“They’re slightly better armed than we are,” Persi noted.

“Not really,” Jack laughed. He went to the Transit console and twiddled a few of the dials, then typed in a series of commands on the keyboard. A moment later all three dozen men and women in the alley were unconscious.

“What did you do?” Persi asked.

“It’s not generally of much use,” Jack replied, “but I reversed the temporal field and projected it into the alley. That field sort of scrambled their brains and knocked them out. It will only last an hour or so, but that’s long enough for us to drag them out of the alley.”

“So an hour and then they’ll just come back again?” Persi asked.

“I doubt that,” Jack replied. “They’ll all have amnesia. It won’t be permanent but it will last throughout the rest of the night. When they wake up, they won’t remember why they were here, so if we dump them outside the alley, it’s probable they’ll wander off somewhere else.”

The Kids went out and dragged their erstwhile attackers out of the alley and deposited them on the sidewalk before returning to the party. Outside the air was filled with the sound of distant sirens and looking up the street toward the Theatre District it looked as though at least one building was on fire. The Mastoren guards never returned for Francesca and Mai that night so they had to wait until the next morning to learn what had been happening.

They’re Always Entertaining

“There are some swells standing around at the end of the alley,” Renald reported the next morning, while Sam and Persi prepared a light breakfast. “Are they yours, Frannie? They’re not wearing Mastoren clothing, but...”

“Neither am I,” Francesca replied. That was true enough, although she did wear a pendant with the Mastoren Family symbol on it. Pflum thought of it as the family arms, although this did not seem to be a feudal society with a monarch to bestow such arms. Mai, on the other hand, was still dressed, albeit with extra wrinkles, in an informal outfit of forest green and antique gold, the colors most people in the city associated with the Mastoren Theatre. Francesca took a look down the alley. “I don’t recognize them,” she reported, “but they don’t appear to be particularly threatening either. It’s more like they are waiting patiently. Frankly I’m more concerned by the fact our guards never returned last night.”

Pflum grabbed his glorified wrench and opened the Transit door, “May as well find out what’s going on. It could be the Landlord’s lawyers. Phew! The air out here must be half smoke.” There were also the sounds of sirens still screaming in the distance, but at Pflum’s emergence half a dozen well-dressed men and women proceeded into the alley to meet him.

“Maestro Pflum,” the man in the lead hailed him. “I am Durning Gray. I represent the Centre Merchants’

Association.”

“What’s the problem?” Pflum asked. “Haven’t we been buying enough?”

“No problem at all, sir,” Durning Gray assured him. “We own the Centre Arcade and we would like to hire The Kids as our resident troupe. Is there a place we might sit down?”

“Sure,” Pflum shrugged, “come on inside. We’re a bit cramped this morning, but you’re here in time for breakfast.”

Gray and his associates weren’t hungry, but they all accepted cups of coffee before explaining their offer. “You see, until now, our members have taken turns providing the entertainment in the Arcade’s mall, but we’ve been getting increasingly busy of late and it becomes harder and harder to take time off from business to attend to matters beyond one’s door. So we want to hire a professional troupe to perform during business hours, freeing our own members to stay in their shops.”

“And how much did you have in mind to pay this troupe of professionals?” Pflum asked.

“Well, I should think the tips alone would be sufficient,” Gray began.

“You haven’t dealt with many professional troupes, have you, Mister Gray?” Francesca cut in. “First of all, my friends here will need an annual stipend to cover production costs spent on your behalf. They will also need an annual base salary, plus whatever tips your customers care to donate. And living quarters, of course. If you want them on site at all times, that’s only fair. They’ll need a generously-sized storage area, of course. Props, sets, musical instruments and what have you, don’t exactly fold up to the size of a handkerchief, do they?”

“That is a lot to ask for,” Gray observed.

“See if you can find any professionals who will ask for less, and I’m just getting started,” Francesca assured him. “Stage time.”

“What?” Gray asked.

“The Kids should have a stage to perform on,” she replied. “I believe you have a moderate-sized theatre in the Arcade, do you not?”

“It hasn’t been used as such in years,” Gray replied. “We’ve been storing old files in there.”

“There are cheaper facilities for dead storage, you know,” Francesca informed him. “My Family owns one. Talk to my cousin, Nortio Mastoren. I’ll see that he gives you a discount. Your theatre should be rehabilitated and opened for the Kids to use for regularly scheduled performances.”

“But we wanted them to entertain along the Arcade promenade,” Gray objected.

“And so they shall,” Francesca nodded, “during business hours, but that theatre of yours has a door that opens to the street, right? Well, that means they can produce their plays in the evenings and you may find some of your merchant members want to stay open during performance hours. Think of it, sir. Not only will you have a resident troupe of performers wandering through the Arcade, but another member of your association filling a large space you thought unrentable. Face it. It’s more valuable as a draw to your Arcade than it is as a giant storeroom.”

“A member of the association?” Gray asked. This had already gone well beyond his original offer and had reached the limits of how far he had planned to go. His associates were looking similarly uncomfortable.

“Of course,” Francesca agreed. “They’ll be operating the equivalent of a storefront out of that theatre, will they not? It’s only fair you consider them part of the association. Otherwise why should they feel the need to stay there when a better deal comes along? And you know a better one will come along if you don’t deal fairly from the start.”

“Well, we would expect rent for such an expensive storefront,” Gray considered.

“They get the first six months free,” Francesca informed him. The argument went on and on, but eventually Francesca got Gray and his colleagues to agree with all her demands. They promised to have the agreements ready the next day.

“Thank you, Frannie,” Dancer told her. “You got stuff out of him I wouldn’t even have known to ask for.”

“What are friends for?” Francesca laughed. “Oh it will cost you a little. I plan to perform with you Kids from time to time, especially since I’ll be providing the lawyer to make sure their contract says everything we just agreed to.”

“Hey!” Mai cut in. “No fair if I’m not included.”

Dancer and the others laughed. “You’re both welcome to join us anytime,” he told them gallantly. “And perhaps we should venture out and see why your Family still hasn’t come back for you?”

They left Jack in the Transit to continue his repairs. Pflum was torn between staying to help and escorting the Mastoren women home, but when Jack pushed him out the door, Pflum took the hint and stayed out of the way.

The air of the city was still quite smoky although the sirens seemed to have quieted down. The Theatre District looked like a battle ground. Two theatres and the adjoining buildings had burned to the ground overnight and were now nothing more than smoking rubble.

“That one was the Theatre Bosto,” Mai noted with a touch of fear in her voice. “I never liked the family much, but it was a beautiful old building. What a waste.”

A little further on, they found the ruins of the Gremald Theatre. “Looks like they were both hit while their people were trying to break into the crate,” Pflum remarked.

“They went on the offense at the sacrifice of their defense,” Francesca remarked.

“The rubble is blocking our path though,” Sam noted. “We’ll have to go around.”

Elsewhere in the district, there were signs of damage; broken windows and some shops had been looted. Most theatres had obviously been attacked, but only the Bosto and Gremald establishments had been destroyed.

The Mastoren establishment stood on the northern edge of the Theatre District and like those of the

Valcini, Drenforda and Laurena Families had been left almost untouched, although someone had evidently been hurling rocks at the Laurena marquee and the ticket booth windows of all three theatres had been smashed.

“Frannie!” Georg Mastoren greeted his daughter as they approached the theatre door. “I was worried. Where are your guards?”

“Right here, father,” she indicated the Kids.

“I meant the boys I sent out to get you an hour ago,” Georg amplified.

“We must have missed them,” Francesca replied. “What’s been happening?”

“Last night was pretty horrendous,” Georg admitted. “I think a lot of old grudges got aired.”

“Did our play do that?” Mera wondered out loud.

“It might have been the spark that lit the fire,” the head of the Mastoren Family admitted, “but most of this has been smoldering underground for years. The rise of a potential new Family made them all nervous, especially after the reviews the other night. Entertainment is a powerful thing, but greed can be even more powerful and the Families that panicked did not feel they could bear the competition.”

“What about the Mastoren Family?” Dancer asked. “Aren’t we competitors too?”

“My father always told me there was room for another good man or Family. I was brought up to see other actors as colleagues, not competitors. We do better by being better; by honing our performances and polishing the plays we produce. If you’re good enough, you’ll excel in this business. If you rest on your past accomplishments, you get lazy. That’s what has happened to some of the Families,” Georg explained. “Is it true the Gremald and Bosto theatres are gone?”

“We saw the rubble,” Mai confirmed. “Will they rebuild, do you think?”

“They might,” Georg shrugged, “if they have the money. I doubt their credit is worth much at the moment.”

“Oh, Father,” Francesca told him, “I traded a bit on the Family name this morning.” She went on to describe the negotiation she undertook on the Kids’ behalf.

“Very good!” he commended her. “You always did have an eye for the opportunity. Yes, I’ll make sure cousin Hermion is there for the signing tomorrow. TheArcade is a publicly traded concern, isn’t it?”

“It is,” Francesca agreed. “They have a board of directors who think they’re in control and each of the members of their association holds a small percentage of ownership, but they still must defer to the stock holders.”

“I think I’ll see about quietly buying up as much stock of theirs as I can,” Georg considered. With The Kids in residence, I suspect everything about theArcade is going to get more valuable.”

“Ah!” Dancer laughed and pointed at Francesca. “So that’s why you promised to supply a lawyer.”

“I’d have done the same even if there hadn’t been an investment possibility,” Francesca replied. “Virtue

is its own reward, but it doesn't hurt when that reward is monetary. Don't worry. Your shares will go up along with everyone else's and if you reinvest some of your profits you may be able to buy the Arcade or something like it outright in a decade or two."

The Kids bid Francesca and Mai farewell, promising to see them the next morning at the Arcade and headed back toward the Transit. "You guys have anything left in the old alley you want to recover before moving into the Arcade?" Sam asked. "If so we should probably swing by there on the way back."

"No, there's nothing there," Dancer replied for all of them. "We took out everything we wanted the other night. Besides, by now half the cubbies have probably been claimed by others."

"You knew you might lose your homes when you put on the play?" Persi asked them.

"It seemed like a worthwhile gamble," Dancer shrugged. "Besides, none of us had been living there more than a year anyway. People come and go from the alleys. A gang might push you out, or maybe, if you're very lucky, you'll find a better place. You also learn not to leave anything behind you can't live without as you might have to fight your way back in come evening. Believe me, none of us want to go back there, especially not now."

"And even without the Arcade deal, you have enough money to actually pay rent and eat for a few months," Sam told him. "The tips were especially generous last evening. We'd have made more, but we ran out of souvenirs halfway through the afternoon."

"I hadn't asked," Dancer noticed. "That's not like me."

"It's 'cause you trust Samantha," Mera told him. "We all do."

They arrived back at the mouth of the alley to be accosted by the landlord who had two city policemen at his side. "How did you do it?" he demanded of Pflum.

"Do what?" Pflum asked, confused.

"How did you move your door from my building to the one next door?" the landlord demanded.

Pflum looked down the alley and saw that the Transit door had, indeed moved to the other side of the alley. "It's... uh... always been there," Pflum replied, trying to sound confident.

"It was not!" the landlord shouted. "It was on my building, now it's on Kravista's building. How did you do that?"

"It's impossible," Pflum told him. "Obviously it has been there all along. You must have gotten confused." The landlord followed Pflum and the Kids down the alley and watched as Pflum opened the door and they all walked inside the room. As Pflum shut the door behind him the landlord was excitedly trying to argue with the cops.

"We're functional?" Pflum asked Jack.

"Still tuning," Jack smiled, "but we're stable enough to stay here when the regulator is on-line. You liked my little joke?"

"You've worked with Mister Pflum too often," Persi informed him. "Is this my doom as well?" she

asked Sam plaintively. Sam looked at her for a few seconds before deciding Persi was joking and that it was safe to laugh.

“Good one, Jack!” Dancer congratulated him.

“You don’t seem to have any problem with a moving room,” Pflum observed.

“Well, I figured it had to be something like that,” Dancer shrugged, “you know?”

“Yeah,” Lori agreed, “All the electronic stuff in the walls, Pflum. We’re not stupid, you know?”

“Worst kept secret in the continuum, huh?” Pflum asked. “So now you all know why we have to leave soon.”

“Yes,” Dancer nodded. “We figured that out weeks ago.”

“Will you ever return?” Mera asked Persi.

“Maybe,” Persi replied, “but it isn’t very likely. The chance of finding this place again is almost impossible and that’s a shame, because I would truly like to see what you all come up with next in your new theatre.”

“Well, we’re not leaving for another few days,” Jack told them. “Plenty of time to see you in your new theatre.”

“I doubt that will be ready for weeks,” Dancer remarked. “They’ve been using it as a storeroom for who knows how long.”

“You’ve performed without sets and barely any props,” Jack retorted. “You’re not going to let a little dust stop you, are you?”

“Well, I don’t want my audience sneezing at me,” Dancer told him, “you know?”

Where Have You Been?

Pflum and crew stayed in the city for an additional week and since The Kids had already figured out the better part of their supposed secret, Pflum decided to move the Transit backstage in the Arcade Theatre. He parked it just beside the stage door. It had the extra benefit of locating them closer to the electronics shop should additional parts be needed, but the main reason was that it seemed to give The Kids, especially the younger ones, a bit of comfort as they adapted to their new living quarters.

It turned out the theatre was not in as bad shape as they had feared and, in fact, the Arcade owners had already called a cleaning crew in before the actual contract signing, so by the time they were done with the lawyers, the stage and the balcony seats had been cleaned out and the crew was busily working in the orchestra.

“Very nice,” Francesca approved as her cousin Mai sang a short line to test the acoustics. “Sometimes smaller theatres are best, and I like the shape of the stage. It bows out a bit more than usual into the audience.”

“The theatre,” Gray informed them, “has been used for a number of other functions, like fashion shows. You’ll find scaffolding and covers to extend the stage out onto a runway that goes halfway out into the orchestra.”

“Ah,” Francesca nodded, “That must be why the center aisle is so wide. Hmm, imagine sword fights that go deep into the audience like that!”

“And concerts as well,” Dancer added. “Sounds like fun, but we’d better not overuse the extension. It would become commonplace in no time at all. We’ll save it for something special.”

“So you will start performing in the Arcade promenade this afternoon?” Gray asked eagerly.

“We’ll start right now,” Dancer told him. “Hey, kids! Who wants first shift?”

Silly question. Half the kids ran for the door immediately and before the theatre doors had even shut, they were playing the overture from *The Two Families* on their penny whistles.

Dancer asked Sam and Persi to look at the beginnings of a new play, but both women assured him after reading the rough draft of the new scenes, his new ideas seemed pretty good to them and assured him the other members of The Kids writers’ group were giving him pretty much the same criticism they would. Sam did help Lori and Todd order more posters and t-shirts and also helped them design a souvenir hat as well. They arrived just in time to meet the demands for them when the Arcade advertised that The Kids were now artists in residence.

They had all expected *The Two Families* had run its course in Southside Park, but by the middle of the week, people were already inquiring about tickets. Francesca advised them to let the production run for the next month or two at least. “And be prepared to perform it far longer than that. It’s a great play and people will want to see it again, especially in your new theatre.”

“We also want to perform new plays as well, Frannie,” Dancer told her.

“Of course!” she laughed. “What true artist wouldn’t? And after attendance starts to wane, you’ll do those new plays, but every so often you’ll want to bring it back, because this is going to be one of the classics, you mark my word!”

So the Kids performed *The Two Families* their first weekend in residence to a sold-out crowd. Now that they could charge admission the profits were even higher than before, although for this first indoor performance the boxes could not be bought at any price. The left boxes were given to the Mastorens and the right boxes went to the crew from the Transit, who decided it was time for The Kids to perform without their guidance.

On exploring the storage closets back stage, the Kids found several flats ready for painting, so they were able to build a set, but because the final performance in the park had been so successful, they kept the set minimal, although they used Jack’s holo machine for the scenic backdrops.

Finally, it was time to leave. The Kids gave Pflum and crew a grand send-off party and insisted they each take the exclusive black “Kids” t-shirts and *The Two Family* shirts as well. So wearing their black t-shirts, Pflum, Sam, Persi and Jack escorted The Kids out of the Transit for the last time and shut the door behind them. Looking through the digital “window,” Sam and Persi saw The Kids smiling and waving “Goodbye” even as tears streaked their faces.

Meanwhile Pflum was standing by the Transit control console, typing in the activation code. “Time to continue our own road show,” he announced and brought the temporal regulator on-line. Next he carefully brought the Transit out of temporal phase relative to Showbiz World. The Transit shuddered and vibrated for a moment and then the digital window went gray. Persi sighed and switched the window off and then both she and Sam left the doorway and sat down at the table. The vibrations became more regular, but did not disappear altogether.

“I don’t like that vibration as we modulate our phase,” Pflum told Jack. “We’re still not flying smoothly for that matter.”

“Let me take some readings,” Jack told him.

“Take all the readings you like,” Pflum told him. “If that shudder is what I think it is, we’re going to have a hard time landing on the line Jeannette’s on.”

“Yes,” Jack agreed, “That’s what I thought too.”

“Yeah, well, all this vibrating is annoying,” Pflum replied.

“Feels more like you’ve turned this whole crate into a giant ‘Magic Fingers’ machine,” Sam smirked.

“Mister Pflum?” Persi asked suddenly. “Did you remember to retrieve that tracer unit you dropped in the alley?”

“Sure I did,” Pflum replied. “Why?”

“Well, there’s no need to leave two on the Kids’ line,” Persi remarked. When Pflum looked at her pointedly, she explained, “Well, I thought we might want to sneak out for a show sometime, so I hid one under the stage.”

“Well, one tracer used up on this isn’t too bad,” Pflum remarked. “we’ll have to report it, of course.”

“Actually there are two tracers there,” Sam admitted. “Uh... Dancer asked for a souvenir to remember us by and I figured, ‘Oh, what the heck!’”

“Two tracers...” Pflum remarked, then turned to stare pointedly at Jack.

“Don’t look at me,” he laughed, continuing to work. “I already knew about all three tracers, though I hadn’t realized you’d actually gone back to get the one out of the alley.”

It took over an hour but Jack finally tracked down the problem. “Interesting,” he murmured.

“Jack,” Pflum warned him, “I don’t like it when my doctor says that either.”

“Oh, sorry, Pflum,” Jack apologized. “We’re getting an odd interference pattern setup between the regulator and the impellers.”

“We were shaking all over the place even before I activated the impellers, Jack,” Pflum informed him.

“Well, yes, that’s the problem,” Jack nodded. “You see, you may not have used the impellor controls,

but they were working a bit even before you tried to bring them on line. It's all this new circuitry. I must have misjudged the capacitance or resistance of some of the components. I'm not really used to working with transistors and diodes and such, you know. Even integrated circuits are hopelessly old-fashioned."

"So now what?" Pflum asked. "Are we supposed to land again and hope the local technology is compatible?"

"That won't be necessary," Jack replied. "Well, landing will be, but, I have a few spare potentiometers and other parts. "I just need to clamp down on the power leaking into the impellers before we want it to."

"Okay," Pflum agreed. "Are you sure it isn't Doctor Mac's magical modifications doing all that?"

"Oh, right!" Jack exclaimed.

"Now what?" Pflum grumbled the question.

"I never installed Doctor Mackenzie's tuning circuit," Jack explained. "Remember how I promised not to do so until the Transit was as in tune as I could make it? Well, by the time I got to that point with my own modifications, I cleanly forgot about his. That's why we're having trouble."

"Oh?" Pflum asked, as he made a few adjustments at the console. "Is that how he designed the board? To cut down power to the impellers?"

"That's most of it," Jack confirmed. "Another part interfaces with the regulator, but the reason we're getting all shook up is that I rebuilt the impellor circuitry with Mackenzie's board in mind."

The Transit shuddered again as Pflum brought them into phase. Suddenly everything was quiet and stable once more. "We've landed," Pflum announced, unnecessarily. "Just let me check the external conditions." He turned the digital window back on and took some external readings. "Hmm, nothing but sand and rocks as far as I can see. Atmosphere... about as normal as it gets. External temperature... fifty-four Celsius. Balmy."

"Someone is, anyway," Sam remarked. "Where the heck are we? TheSeventh Circle ?"

"Can't be," Pflum chuckled, "I don't see any signs that say 'Dante was here.' No, we're just smack dab in the middle of theSahara desert. But given this crate's normal behavior I wanted to make sure it really was a desert and not a polar bear's paradise. Go ahead, Jack. Will this take long?"

But Jack was already at work. He finished opening one of the few panels in the wall that could still be closed and snapped Doctor Mac's card into a slot he had installed earlier. "All done," he reported, closing the panel again.

"All right," Pflum announced. "Maybe everyone should grab on to something sturdy." He brought the regulator back on line and then the impellers. Finally he worked the phase mechanism and the Transit did nothing more out of the ordinary than purr. "Are you sure you didn't just kill this crate?" he asked Jack. "She's never been this well-behaved." Jack stuck his tongue out at Pflum. "Well, let's go find Jeanette. I can see her tapping her foot impatiently already."

The search, now that all systems had stabilized, was anticlimactic and a mere half an hour later, Pflum found and homed in on the tracer unit they were looking for. They rematerialized in an alley, that was

strikingly similar to the one they had found on Showbiz World and after kicking about for a few minutes Persi managed to find the tracer unit. "Sure," Pflum grumbled. "Wrapping it in paper made it oh so easy to find. What's that?" he asked.

Persi held up a "Kids in the Park" flyer, and told him, "We apparently left ourselves a note."

"What's it say?" Pflum asked.

"Hard to say," she told him. "It's in your handwriting."

Pflum took the note and read, "Right line, wrong time. Try April 11, 1985."

"Roughly four and a half years ago," Sam noted, looking at the gauges on the console

"Well, supposedly we can do that now," Pflum replied.

"That's probably why you wrote the note yourself," Sam remarked.

"Yeah," Jack laughed. "You wouldn't have believed it if anyone else told you."

"Funny," Pflum told him flatly. "Actually the only reason I'm going to write that note is because I did write that note. It is probably just a stray superstition, but at this point I don't want to jinx us by intentionally experimenting with temporal change."

"On the other hand," Jack noted, "it would be the first known proof that one could change his own time line."

"Possibly not," Pflum disagreed, preparing for travel once more. "If someone else writes the note instead, the handwriting on that one will probably change retrospectively and we won't remember. And since memory is an essential ingredient to proof..." He snapped digital locks down on the "Y" and "Z" axes controls. "Now there's something none of us have ever tried," he remarked.

"On most Transits, it wouldn't work this way," Jack responded.

"Not until Doctor Mac's mystery mod gets marketed world-wide," Pflum nodded. "Okay, Sherman, the controls are on your side. Set the Wayback Machine to April 1985."

"You got it, Mister Peabody," Jack responded.

They slid back slowly along the time line with the tracer's alarm on the whole time. "That thing needs a volume control," Pflum remarked sourly.

"You could turn it off," Sam suggested.

"I want to make sure we don't slide off this line," Pflum replied. "Besides, we're here... or then if you would rather." He shut down the impellers and brought them back into phase in the same alley, where the digital window revealed Jeanette and her intern, Barry, were carefully piling up parts of her Transit.

Persi opened the door and called out to them. "Sorry if we're late," she told Jeanette cheerfully.

Jeanette merely shrugged at her and smiled, but Barry was less appreciative as Pflum and the others

exited his Transit to help carry the parts of Jeanette's inside. "Where have you all been?" he demanded. "We've been stranded here over three weeks."

Behind him, Jeanette merely rolled her eyes and Pflum concluded that none of her explanations concerning the relative tuning of two Transits had sunk in, so he simply replied, "We took an extra curtain call, Kid."

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About this Title

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