

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Christina Engela lives in the sunny seaside South African city of Port Elizabeth (known as the Windy City, where she enjoys watching birds fly backwards) – a tourist haven with an unhealthy preoccupation with apples and whose mascot symbol is a Jackass Penguin – which should give you some idea. She attributes her weird sense of humor to her strange family and friends and perhaps having too much time to herself as a child.

At school she was known for her quirky poetry and weird sense of humor, which came in handy while directing a school play (which involved, incidentally, 3 toilet rolls, a walkie-talkie and a hammer marked 'exhibit A').

After completing high school in 1991 at the tender age of 18 she enlisted in the Army (ordinary work being scarce at the time) - and spent the next fourteen years wondering what the hell it was all about anyway and why is that fat man with the red badges shouting at me?

In 1999 she qualified as a computer technician (A+) and moved into the network support environment, where she gathered a lot of experience in Conflict Resolution and Self Control - and using Solitaire to teach people How To Use The Mouse without inflicting self injury. Traveling 5km just to push a power cable back into a monitor became a genuinely fulfilling experience. Hiding bodies became a form of creative self-expression. No, really.

She has spent 14 years working for the Military, where she says she finds 90% of her inspiration and also a great deal of story material. She still works there as a multimedia specialist, making corporate videos and other interesting projects - sometimes even stranger than the things she writes. She has always enjoyed writing her stories (and re-writing them till she felt she got it right) until someone shoved a keyboard into her hands and suggested that she try typing them instead... (Which made editing a LOT easier for one thing.) She says she likes to write from personal experience, but doesn't think anyone believes her.

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Titles available from the same author:

White Picket Fences & Other Fairy Tales (poetry)

Blachart

Black Sunrise

The Time Saving Agency

Dead Man's Hammer

The Time Saving Agency

'In a controlled environment it is more difficult to lose your eyebrows.'

– Dr Gleichstein.

Imagine if you will:

It was neither dark nor light here, and yet at the same time it was both. There was no air, but there was a very definite chill of terror and despair in whatever passed for it. The eerie absence of sound was deafening. They say idle hands are the Devil's instruments. The *Limbo Practicale* had many idle hands. Idle minds too. Frantic souls drifted in their own private little Hells, living and re-living the same horrible nightmares ad-infinity. Their only hope of any variety would be when they experienced the same time-loop from another angle or dimension entirely or perhaps upside down and purple. If they had been fully conscious, they would be wide-eyed and screaming. After only a short while, most people's sanity would start unraveling just to pass the time. Seeing your own life from the inside repeatedly was like watching re-runs again. Most people, as has been noted before would be certifiably mad after just a few days in the *Limbo Practicale*. It was a prison for the mind and soul, where perpetrators of Time Crime would, well, do time. Like, forever.

Bodies were drifting in the confines of the chrono-spacial anomaly that was the *Limbo Practicale*, bodies that were for all intents and purposes, not dead at all. If anything were watching, they would be

seen to twitch occasionally. Dense smothering silence cocooned them, as though it were slowly draining the sound out of them. Yet on another level, detectable only by the psyche, there was the inaudibly faint sound of screams. And mindless gibbering.

There is one man of particular interest to us in this little bubble of Hell. Like the others he was drifting silent, still – unconscious in the depths of the anomaly. But against all known odds, *Brad Xyl* was smiling. He had just been through his life again, backwards, and was relishing the trail of destruction and chaos he had left ahead of him.

For this was a man who stood out from the crowd, a Time Terrorist extraordinaire. A man who took all the resources of the TSA to capture, well who knows when - years ago, or in a time still to come? A man who wrought chaos and devastation across three millennia simply for the fun of it. Just because he could. Rumor had it he was one of the first to invent time travel in the beginning and the irony of the whole thing was that this man was one of the founders of the TSA itself. How he'd ended up here was, needless to say, ironic - and naturally, well-deserved. But just because the TSA considered the *Limbo Practicale* to be a one-way trip, didn't mean that it *was*.

Time *did* exist here, in small amounts (well some of the time) – and there were eddies and currents of time here, things that were barely

tangible. Faint forces of the universe they were, nearly indiscernible from the nothingness like a warm breeze on a hot summer night. How long he had been here, he knew not – but he was slowly learning to master these barely tangible waves like a new surfer with one foot on the sandy beach and the other on a shiny new board of Hatred. Revenge splashed around his feet like the cold waves of the ocean of Time. Nearby, two other inmates collided with each other spread-eagled and spiraled off into the distance with infinite slowness. The Wetsuit of Insanity clung to his spiritual body, isolating him from the timelessness that seemed to exist here. A wind of Change blew at him from behind and he pushed off from the beach with an iron determination and a mental clarity hereto before unknown to him. Something in the microcosm that didn't even have a name went '*bling*' and against all the laws of probability, Brad Xyl opened his eyes.

Each day shapes the days that follow. Everything that makes up a day, every event that takes place everywhere - it all adds up. Everything, no matter how seemingly insignificant, plays a part. Sometimes their meanings are made clear only by their absence. Like a man and an apple. Imagine a bright summer day somewhere in England. The grass was green, the sky blue. Birds chirped in the trees. It was a really nice day. A funny little man sat snoozing under

a tree in an orchard. High up in the branches of the tree, a blurry shape seemed to shimmer slightly before solidifying into a male figure that muttered 'Oh, f**k!' before grabbing onto a branch and hanging on. The figure leaning against the trunk snored, blissfully unaware of the struggling figure above. His name was Newton, Isaac Newton. The man in the tree? His name was Scrooby, Johnathan Scrooby.

You see, certain things in the Anals of History happen at a certain time in a certain way, which in a sense, is what it's all about. If it didn't, then things would be completely different – for instance, the Russians would've invented the A-bomb first and blown up America and Germany (and probably everybody else too). Alexandre Dumas wrote 'The Three Picadors' and died a poor unknown writer. JFK left the US Navy and became a well-known used car salesman and faith healer instead of entering politics. Although a little noisy at first, electronic music became popular in France in the 1890's. The Beatles never existed and England invented popcorn and hamburgers in the 1840's. *Damn, that's what almost happened last time*, thought Scrooby tensely, while maneuvering himself onto a stronger looking branch. Details, everything was about details. Beaming into the thick of a tree without becoming a lifelong tree hugger was a tricky business. A precision job. His job at the Time Saving Agency was a tough one. Billions of lives depended on him not screwing up. Once,

he'd screwed up in only a *small* way and people wore those little yellow smiley faces on t-shirts for decades afterwards. And that was just a *small* screw up. He sighed. Here he sat, in the branches of an apple tree in an apple tree orchard and not a single apple in sight. Below him was Sir Isaac Newton – not quite *Sir* yet, waiting to get bonked on the noggin with an apple so he could toddle off and invent gravity and shape scientific and mathematical principles for generations to come. Only one problem - no apples. Some wise-ass bastard (the Agency preferred to call them Time Terrorists) had slipped back in time and infected the local trees with a short-lived disease and wiped out the entire crop of apples for this year. Enter the Time Saving Agency – and *him*. He felt the lump in his pocket and removed it while clinging to the branch with his other hand and knees. It was a bright shiny yellow apple. Not exactly what grew around these parts (or these times either) - but an apple nonetheless. Aiming carefully, he let it go and waited. *Bonk*, went the apple. It only occurred to Newton much later to wonder where the hell that bloody apple had come from in the first place.

And so it was that Agent Scrooby rematerialized on the time-jump platform at the TSA headquarters, satisfied with the thought of another job well done – and that he had just saved the continuum from more funny t-shirts.

“Did it work?” He asked expectantly.

“Gravity’s still here.” Said the voice of someone being a smart-ass from behind a console across the room.

“Nice job, Jimmy.” He complimented his operator at the controls of the Time Jump Motivator, or time machine if you will. “You’re still the ace!”

“Thanks, J.” Jim Rusche smiled back. “At least you didn’t fall out of the tree this time. Ha-ha.”

“Ha-ha. It’s lucky we were able to do it over again or the American War of Independence would’ve happened in Mexico.” He said, unstrapping the tracking module from his belt.

“Yeah, and the US became a province of Canada, eh?”

“Oh yes – I remember that one. A real tragedy.” He sighed, remembering the time before that when Napoleon managed to dig a tunnel across the English Channel and invaded London. They all ended up speaking French for a while. Sorting that out had been... well, challenging. *Mon dieu*. Thank God for the Buffer. It protected them from unforeseen time events, or UTE’s (in other words, screw ups) and gave them the chance to go back and Try Again Later. In this line of work, people who made the same mistake twice were the lucky ones who didn’t kill themselves doing it the first time. He’d had enough for one day.

The TSA liked having fresh agents on the job. Fresh agents with a clear mind and steady hand. Time travel wasn't for the faint of heart. The pay was good though, but as Scrooby had decided long ago, that even if he didn't get paid for it, the thrill alone was payment enough. Then again, the TSA realized they couldn't afford to have disgruntled employees with the power of God at their fingertips, so the pay was *very, very* good. Debriefing was routine. And how he hated routine! His supervisor was a senior agent called Guy Krummeck, a rather drab character who liked his shiny silver suits almost as much as he liked to go over every little detail at least three times. Minimum. This time everything went right, so it went quick. Twenty minutes later, tired, he clocked out and went home to his small apartment. Tomorrow after all, was another day, again.

The year was 2178 and in the grand scheme of things, Deanna was just a footnote in the *Annals of History*. (Some of you are thinking '*perhaps that should be annals*', but no.) It was a small planet, almost the size of good old Earth, but unlike Earth, Deanna had much more land than ocean. The central ocean was a lot like the Pacific, only landlocked, shallow, and fresh. *Braking dolphins* swam in shoals of hundreds in the warm shallow oceans. The funny little dolphin-like creatures were air breathers - and marsupials. (Their pouches tended

to cause a little too much hydrodynamic drag and slowed them down, hence their name. They had no natural predators, but could sometimes almost starve to death trying to catch faster prey.) They darted peacefully in and out of the beautiful coral reefs in the shallower parts of the *Greater Equatorial Fishbowl*, the larger part of the *Landlocked Ocean*.

Deanna, the planet which is the setting for our story, orbits a medium sized star called *Ramalama*. Deanna has two small moons in close orbit. Only twenty years earlier the first settlers to reach Deanna named them *Ding* and *Dong* in some misguided attempt at humor when they found there was very little at all to laugh at here. (*Crabbygrass* may seem funny, unless you're barefoot and standing on it.) *Dong* is just a lump of plain rock about a kilometer around. *Ding* on the other hand, is a sphere of solid titanium ore fifty feet in diameter. Two months ago, a Ruminarii warship (that just happened to be invading Deanna) accidentally struck the small moon and knocked it out of the sky. This wasn't the first time, nor would it be the last. Never-the-less, it took four big space tugs and some fancy language to get *Ding* back into orbit. The Tourism Office heaved a huge sigh of relief as the famous little moon formed part of the main attraction of the colony. It would be a crippling blow to the tourism economy if *Ding* stayed in its newest crater. It just wouldn't do at all.

The plains were dry and dusty, and there were few forests to take advantage of the excellent groundwater. A few native forests grew wild near the tropics, vast and almost totally unknown. Except to a handful of strange men in lab coats who insisted on looking for natural cures for strange and exotic diseases (often discovering a few new ones in the process).

Crabbygrass grew wild on the plains, terrorizing the population of imported livestock. *Crabbygrass* looked like ordinary grass and smelled like ordinary grass – except that it was *aware* that it was being looked at and smelled. It would mostly stay still, feeding on spores and little bugs and mites in the soil. In the cities, crabbygrass subsisted on a steady diet of pigeons, the winged vermin of the galaxy. The creatures preferred to move only at night, looking for – er, greener pastures. It generally objected to being stepped on, nibbled at or even being addressed in a harsh tone of voice. Many a rancher has been surprised to find his missing red-horned wildebeest trying to hide under a *cherebub* bush half its size - or on top of his Jeepo. Getting bitten *back* by its dinner was a novel idea to most herbivores and a cow in a state of shock can do amazing things – especially to milk.

The capital city on Deanna was a medium sized city by current standards, consisting mainly of smaller colony towns that had

sprawled into each other as the number of colonists increased over the years. Atro City had a character all its own. Lugaluru was one such town, right at the outskirts of Atro City, and still just as country as ever. Anybody who was anybody drove shiny new hydrogen powered SUV's and wore fancy suits and cowboy hats. Which is why Gary Beck wore jeans, sneakers and a blue khaki shirt. (The hat unfortunately, was a necessity.) It was a typically bright sunny morning outside his two bedroomed camper, which is why he was still indoors. The blown hover drive *technically* excluded it from being a *mobile* home, but anyway, that was probably the only reason he was able to afford it in the first place. As with most things these days it was cheaper to buy a new one than to fix it. The garage door whined open, letting the sunshine stream in through the gap. The municipal sand-droids had finally finished filling in the huge crater in his front yard yesterday morning (another story altogether), so he was able to park his electric Jeepo in the garage again. The vacant lots across the drive yawned openly at him. Old mister Krugher had claimed his insurance money and moved to an old folk's home in Texasville, on the other side of town. His four bedroomed supercruiser had vanished down the same crater, along with his wife and mother-in-law and several other surrounding campers only two short months ago.

Who'd have thought the Ruminarii were so adept at landscaping? All it took was a few well aimed bombs and voila.

Beck, aka *Beck the Badfeller* was actually a nice guy. He worked as a bounty hunter, collaring all manner of criminals and had developed a reputation for always getting his man. (Except for that *other* case two months ago, where his man turned out to be a woman. Or was it the other way round?) Anyway, Cindy-Mei Winter was something special, something that just made him feel good about getting out of bed in the mornings. She hadn't moved in with him yet, but he was working on it. She preferred having her own place and just spending time with him. She was afraid to ruin a good thing, she said. Otherwise, he thought, she was probably just too classy to live with him in a mobile home with a blown hover drive in a trailer park on the cheap side of town.

He reversed the Jeepo smoothly down the ramp, this time without disappearing into a crater, and drove off towards town. It seemed a pleasant enough morning. The sky was aqua marine, fluffy white clouds dotted the horizon and *StratoPenguins* were soaring high overhead in a 'c' formation, leaving a faint vapor trail as they migrated west again. (It was quite a long migration because any geographer worth his dolomite knows there is no east or west as long as you don't cut the globe open and spread it on a flat surface and play spin the

bottle.) People were walking the streets, going about their daily business as usual. The buildings in Lugaluru were mostly low, not more than three or four stories high, and modern in design. The city fathers had tried to make it as pleasant as possible, planting grass on the verges and indigenous *ploplar trees* to cast shade from the bright sun. The trees didn't grow well so far from the tropics and the grass just wandered off, leaving the streets and sidewalks as bare and dry and dusty as the plains. Well, at least there was plenty of parking space.

The *Salubrious Café* was a nice pleasant little street café with sidewalk tables and umbrellas. As street cafes went on Deanna, it was pretty good. Cindy-Mei was already waiting for him when he arrived.

"Morning, love." He greeted, giving her a good morning kiss.

She smiled at him as he sat down. She was a sight for sore eyes – which his were by the way. Too many cold ones at the '*Shock Diamond*' again last night.

"Sleep well?" He asked.

"Peacefully." She replied softly. His eyes wandered over her body. She was wearing a little black number today, a short sleeveless dress and shiny black stiletto court shoes. Her make-up was perfect as

usual, her blond hair tied back in a neat stylish fashion. Her beautiful hazel eyes radiated emotion at him. It was hard for even him to believe that she had ever been a man.

"Miss me?" she asked.

"Nope." He grinned. "Ammo is expensive." It was one of his little jokes. She smiled at him. "I can tell you're glad to see me." He said.

"Two days was long enough." She replied. He'd been on a case and only closed it yesterday. "I missed you."

He reached across the table and took her hand in his, gazing into her eyes.

"Move in with me?" He asked, trying his luck again.

"Why don't you rather come with me?" She countered playfully. "Let's leave this crazy planet and find somewhere nice to live. Somewhere sane. Let's go back to my home. Mars is a nice place. You'll like it there – no crabbygrass, no obsidian crows."

"Yeah, you were real happy there, weren't you?" He countered.

"People spat at you in the street. You want to go *back*?"

She shrugged, her smile fading only slightly.

"I have a job here. If I leave I'll be dependent on your good graces – and your bank account."

“Your point being?” She grinned, sliding her feet between his. “You don’t like admitting you’re an old fashioned kind of guy who believes a man should support a woman?”

“Sorry.” He smiled. “I’m just one or two bounties ahead of bankruptcy.”

“I like old fashioned guys.” She giggled, before getting more serious and adding: “I feel safe with you, Gary.”

“Well you should.” He said, leaning in to give her another tender kiss. Her lips were soft and so very kissable. He could keep it up all day. The waiter arrived to take their order, waiting politely as though his tip depended on it. The menu still looked interesting, even though it was the same one they’d seen almost every morning since they’d become involved. The menu was so interesting because as Man pushed back the boundaries of unexplored space and discovered new life, there were chefs behind the scenes figuring out new and interesting ways to eat it. Mei believed in trying something new everyday. She wanted to catch up on all the living she’d missed in her previous life as Agent Winter, man of interplanetary mystery and mayhem. She had left the Colonial Intelligence Agency two years previously, and after the gender-reassignment procedure eight months ago she’d come to Deanna as part of a holiday she gave to herself as a way to kick off her new life. It was time to start living. Mei was technically still on

holiday. She didn't have a job and was independent financially – thanks to some wise investments she made while she still worked for the Agency. Sometimes diplomacy has its advantages. She had no real time limit or deadline to return home and things were turning rather interesting between her and Gary, so she was in no rush to leave. She had come to the little Hawaiian themed resort and ended up chasing Ruminarii. Well, at least she got Gary out of the deal. She'd spent all her life alone, out of necessity, she supposed. Even after the hormones kicked in and she started living as Cindy-Mei two and a half years ago, she discovered what absolute jerks men could be. Lucky she was able to take care of herself. Quite a few of those jerks discovered that while they could dish it out, they weren't able to take it.

"I think I'll try some stewed *Kwarracks*." She said. "With coffee, white, one sugar."

"Yes, ma'm –" Said the waiter making a note on his order pad. "And for you, sir?"

"Toasted chicken and mayo – white bread." He said, before the waiter could still ask. Gary tended to stick with things he knew. Especially early in the morning, when choices required decisions, which in turn required actual effort. Some people were walking past, chatting on

their way to work. Shiny SUV's were humming silently by in the street. *If only it could always be like this*, they were thinking at the same time. Another ordinary day in their lives, another ordinary, uneventful, quiet day.

Sitting on a modest hilltop in the middle of approximately nowhere, a lone figure was slowly and thoughtfully dismembering a small yellow flower.

"Sshe hatess hme," the figure hissed deep in thought, "Sshe hatess hme hnot."

He put his hat back on and silence ruled supreme once more. Mark gazed out into the distance, allowing the silence to flow through him, to feel the negative energies of the universe strengthen him. Being the only known Ruminarii alive in the Terran Empire made him something of an endangered species. He was a wanted man – um, person. At least he would be if any outsiders got wind of him. That's why he was out in the wild, keeping a low profile while watching the herd for the Grauffis sisters. High above, a lone *stratopenguin* had misjudged its altitude and strayed too high. The thin little vapor trail ended abruptly in a small red silent explosion in the upper stratosphere. Mark used to be called Marsh'k Kluss'ta – the

commander of the Black Sunrise, the warship that had bombed Atro City and tried to invade Deanna. That was two months ago now, a long time it seemed. Due to a strange quirk of fate he found this place while fleeing from the spaceport that fateful morning. He met the ranch owner, Jenny Grauffis, who took pity on him and gave him some water. A little later he got the chance to repay the debt by saving her and her younger sibling Danielle from the clutches of some greedy mine representatives. (Who later turned up mysteriously dead and crispy in their melted SUV at the bottom of Beggars Canyon a hundred miles away.) It was a funny, frustrating and confusing time for them all. Nobody had tried to force the Grauffis sisters off their land since. Funny thing, that.

Mark was easier for the humans to pronounce, and anyway, he was glad to find a safe haven here. He didn't look human though, being your typical Ruminarii, a biped reptilian who could be called scaly without taking offense. His dark eyes had glazed over, as he plucked the last petals from the flower and twirled it thoughtfully. A funny rectangular furry llama-like creature bleated in the distance, taking a few awkward steps on its thin little legs. The red-horned wildebeest were strange animals, things that belonged in the lab they were created in. One had overbalanced and fallen over a few minutes ago and he'd just got it back on its feet again so he could sit down and

return to his ruminations. Another of his charges came close to him, lowering its funny furry little face, fluttering its long black eyelashes. The horns were small, short little sharp bumps on top of the creatures head, and yes, they were red. The cow blinked her big brown eyes at him as she gently took the depetalled flower from his cold fingers with her lips and munched it. Gentle creatures, he thought. So unRuminarii, so weak and vulnerable. So... *square*. Just like Jenny. Except that she didn't fall over so easily. No corners on her either. She was soft and warm – not cold and hard like Ruminarii females, who would arch their backs and hiss at him when aroused. Not violent things that would scratch and bite in the heat of passion, humans were softer, gentler in their approach to life. At least human females didn't draw blood. At least not much. Well, he didn't know for sure, but he was starting to get that idea. This was a weird planet, even by Ruminarii standards. One morning a few weeks ago a human-sized plant had walked past, carrying its own pot. It seemed to be heading across the ranch toward a hilly area over yonder. The fact that it was whistling and cheerfully said '*Good Morning*' to him hadn't helped improve his mood any.

From where he was sitting he could keep a bad eye on the herd. No, he corrected himself, *good* eye. The juxtaposition of Good and Evil in this culture was something he had been trying very hard to get to

grips with. Good meant bad, but Good was not Evil. So it was *good* to be here, not *bad*. So *good to see you*, he thought, practicing. *Bad* was something like when he ran over an *obsidian crow* last Wednesday and had to replace the tire on the Jeepo. The Ruminarii were the only known culture to adopt Evil as their primary deity. That they had survived this long without annihilating themselves was amazing in itself. He was rapidly beginning to question his upbringing. The fact that he no longer had an overeager First Officer lurking over his shoulder waiting for an opportune moment to remove him from the realm of the living was a bonus. (Ruminarii advanced themselves by means of assassination.) Out here he was at ease. He could *think* out here, really *think*, alone in the silence. He plucked another flower, one the grazing wildebeest had missed. There was a barely audible ‘*ouch*’ sound and a clump of *crabbygrass* separated itself from the other grass and marched away angrily waving its seedpods – and a little green stump at him. Good is bad, he reflected. Right, *that* concept he could handle but *some* things, he mused, would take some more getting used to.

A considerable distance away, Captain Horst van der Ku, commander of the Imperial Star Ship *Antares* was reviewing sensor logs for the morning. Nothing worth reporting had happened during the night – or

for the last two months for that matter. There was no sign of any impending Ruminarii invasion, nor any sign of an enemy fleet or movements whatever. Well, never mind, he consoled himself – at least he and the crew had got two months worth of visits to Deanna, and face it - a lot of free time goofing off. ISS Antares had been posted to watch the colony till further notice, while Command determined the extent of the potential threat in the sector. And so here they were, high in a parking orbit over the planet, doing nothing much, except watching and waiting.

He was a man who took pride in his achievements. He had devoted one wall in his office to military memorabilia, including framed certificates and military class photos which hung in perfect formation on the simulated wood paneling. Along one part was a set of chrome and glass shelves which he'd decorated with defunct old weapons and other items of interest. Among these was a heavy looking flintlock pistol. It lost pride of place after it cost him a fingernail. (Accidentally caught his left thumb under the hammer.) The current pride of his collection was a curiosity, a thing that reminded him simultaneously of both human ingenuity and stupidity. It was a dark gray oval, made of durastress alloy. It looked like it was shaped to be held by a human hand and had a small display and a control panel on top. The company that pitched the concept to the military a hundred years ago

believed it was a perfect compromise between functionality and economy. It was a blaster, a sensor and a com-link, all combined into one device. This allowed members of starship mission teams to always have one hand free. It seemed a sound idea, and would've worked as well – except for the fact that some inept crew members accidentally blew their heads off while answering incoming calls. (This led to funny jokes like '*your phazor is ringing*'). The proposed model was eventually dropped because of poor battery life and the company got sued into bankruptcy by relatives of the victims shortly afterwards. *Ah*, he sighed. *The human entrepreneurial spirit!* It just goes to show that no matter how good an idea may seem, there's always some schmuck who'll find a way to blow his head off with it just to make a quick buck.

Then there was an update to the list of misplaced technical stores, which had eventually been recovered. Sometimes sleep deprivation helped after all, he reflected with satisfaction. Can't afford to misplace or miscount things like the ones on the list before him.

#	Item Control Number	Item Description	Counted Qty
01	18 000 0400	Hyperdrive trigger module, Welles type with inverter coils	27

02	18 000 0460	Interface, multi-frequency, communications, simplex	149
03	18 000 1601	Emitter pod, gravity net, BTS (Bell Techno Systems) Type 8	281
04	18 000 2727	Bioscanner, medical, handheld, Norsk 3422i	18
05	18 020 7100	Body armor, Corbex 92, Grade A	98

You never knew when you might need to cross an ‘i’ or dot a ‘t’. He liked things to run smoothly, by the book. (Not like his predecessor, Captain Mykl d’Angelo – a man who had been Captain of this ship so long he had no home to go to when he finally retired a year ago. After almost thirty years in the center seat, he reflected, a man *ought* to have a back-up plan. His number one retired at the same time, being about the same age. Ripley Jones was a full Commander and had turned down offers of her own command so many times she wrote a new record. The records of the ship’s escapades under his command were the stuff of legend. Particularly the period known as the Corsair War, when d’Angelo and the *Antares* – then fondly referred to as the ‘*Ant-arse*’ – braved the hostile space pirates and played a key part in bringing about their downfall. Wild times. Battle and high adventure.

Then again, they were happy together. *This ship* was their home. Who was he to judge?)

Then he reviewed the week's mustering. There were three sick reports (must be the new chef), one awol (Cpl Glent, Starmarines, still missing) and otherwise all present and correct. Charges, awol: one (Cpl Glent); unfit for duty (i.e. drunk), one: (Cpl Glent yet again). Similar record for the previous two weeks. Cpl Glent was becoming too much of a problem, he decided. The man was a disciplinary menace. He'd got drunk on duty at the space port while on guard duty at the Main Tower and disappeared four days ago. And not for the first time either. Not a very pleasant thing to have to deal with, but he supposed it was easier than facing a fleet of Ruminarii hammerheads alone in battle. Something would have to be done about him. He reached over to the pc on his desktop and instructed the bridge com officer to connect him with the Planetary Governor's office.

Johnathan Scrooby had started the day's work in a good mood. Another day, another assignment. He'd boarded the time-jump platform in some ordinary nondescript clothes that could pass for anything between casual and formal (depending on what century you

were in), and materialized in a dark alley between two buildings somewhere on Deanna, late 2178. It was yet another Time Terrorist Strike (TTS) and unless he acted swiftly, it would happen and be permanent. He eased his way forward to the street, passing the trash cans stacked up against the one wall. Late 22nd century nostalgia flooded his senses. It was called the Time Rush, a delayed aftereffect of time travel, something that would catch up to you a few seconds after arriving. He felt euphoric and excited, like a kid on Christmas morning. It passed quickly, as he knew it would, but it was still enjoyable all the same. The street was quiet. It was early morning, around nine thirty. Across the street from him was a street café, something that vaguely reminded him of Paris around 1877. (Time Agents were some of the few people who could say things like that and actually *mean* it.) *Salubrius* didn't strike him as particularly appropriate though. A man arrived at one of the tables on the sidewalk and kissed the beautiful young woman waiting for him. Hmm, he remembered, Miss Winter. Not bad looking, even now, he added mentally. (Of course, they still used actual *surgery* back then. *Now*, he corrected himself.) The case study had been particularly thorough. The man sat down, reached across the table and held her hand in his. Very sweet, very lovey-dovey. Scrooby was keeping his mind on the assignment. He wasn't thinking about any of his past

relationships because he hadn't wasted his time on any, at least not since graduating his training class. He was also not thinking about it because an accident due to a lapse in concentration could leave a hole in Time the size of a bus. (Not to mention a hemorrhoid in the Anals of History.) Due to the curious nature of his work, he had no idea how long he'd worked for the Agency - or how old he really was - or how much time had passed in his own time since he'd left. After all, it varied every time he made a time-jump. One day he might just suddenly reappear in his own time a few seconds after leaving a few decades older. (If he was lucky he might arrive before he left and his older self might get the opportunity to try talk his younger self out of it.) There were no special awards for 25 or 30 years service at the TSA. There were no *'class of'* reunions, either. The Agency was protected by the Buffer and therefore normal time didn't exist there. There were no calendars and no watches either (which made scheduling *anything* rather complicated). Relationships? Birthdays? He just didn't have the time.

Beck got up from the table after finishing a sandwich and coffee and kissing Winter, and walked off towards the corner. So this was it. He started walking, crossing over to the other side and passing the tables. Winter was checking her lipstick in her compact mirror, performing finishing touches before leaving. Beck was ahead of him,

walking casually towards a quaint wheeled vehicle parked at the side of the road. A man of medium build and brown hair had just turned a corner and was walking towards Beck from the front. He had to move quickly. He reached Beck just as the other man did, passing Beck. In one smooth unobtrusive movement, he gave the man a sharp jab in the ribs just as they drew level.

"Hmmm!" The man went, doubling over. He'd managed to make it look like an accident, and Beck got into his Jeepo, shrugging off the whole incident as a wayward pedestrian collision. He quickly picked up the funny looking device the man had dropped on the pavement. *Hmm, late 30th century Life Ender*, he thought. Resisting the urge to try it out, he ejected the battery and put the thing in his pocket. As Beck drove off, he saw the guy in a plain looking suit helping the guy with the brown hair to sit down and catch his breath as he apologized profusely while going through the mans pockets. Let's see, a small knife, no identification, no wallet, some loose money appropriate for the era... *That was close*, he thought satisfied as Beck's vehicle vanished around the corner, *almost lost a key player there*.

"More funny t-shirts again." He muttered under his breath. Scrooby helped the seemingly winded, moaning man to his feet and thumped him into the wall behind him (making it look like he had overbalanced).

Some pedestrians walked past, staring. One or two of them looking vaguely familiar as people sometimes do in a crowd.

"Oh, I'm so terribly sorry!" He apologized, catching him just as he started falling over again and dusting the semi-conscious man off.

"So *very* clumsy of me. Here, let me help you to the hospital."

"*Hmm!?* No, it's okay -" The man objected struggling, trying to get away. Scooby just surreptitiously jabbed him in the ribs again - hard, winding him a second time.

"U-Hmm -!"

"Oops, sorry my hand slipped." He said in a friendly tone as he slung the mans' limp left arm over his shoulder and took the weight. They walked two slow steps before he whispered by the mans ear: "Better get you to that hospital - *before you open your mouth again*. I don't know if they know how to treat *acrydic solarium* poisoning in the 22nd century? Do you?"

"*Hmmfh.*" The sagging figure mumbled weakly, hanging from Scoobys neck.

"Well okay then." He said firmly as he helped the staggering figure around a corner into another alley. This was better than last time, he was thinking to himself with professional pride. At least this was one mission that went off without a hitch. That was rare. No repeats, no

doing it over – no UTE’s to spoil his day. The two figures rematerialized on the platform. He let go of the man’s arm, allowing the still groaning figure to fall to the deck plate with a limp thump. He tossed the high pressure injector to a lab assistant, who caught it and smiled. Gentle persuasion, it was called.

“Good one, J.” His operator called.

“Thanks Jimmy.” He sighed, realizing the two big burly men standing there were waiting for the stricken time terrorist he’d just apprehended. “Better get him treated for those *acrydic solarium* shots I gave him. I reckon he’s got about twenty minutes left on his clock.”

“Don’t worry,” said the bigger one with a shaved head and a crooked smile as he dragged the semi-conscious figure off the platform by one foot with a *thumpity-thumpity* noise. “We’ll clean it for you – and still probably make it in time.”

He didn’t laugh. No one did. Around here time jokes just weren’t funny anymore. After the hundredth pun you just wanted to strangle the perpetrator – at least once, before going back to undo it. (If Internal Affairs came knocking on your door.) The figure suspended between the burly agents in dark suits just groaned ruefully. After all, there was nothing for him to be cheerful about. After the stomach pump and a stiff regimen of antitoxins, he was facing a life term in the

Limbo Practicale. No, it wasn't a badly named Latin style dance, it was a chrono-spacial phenomenon where time ran in short loops and everything happened over and over again in different combinations of upside down, backwards and inside out. The TSA used it as a prison for time offenders. It was considered a just punishment and an ironically satisfactory one by TSA agents (who had to face the same risks on a daily basis). It was a one-way trip (which was just as well because anybody would be certifiably insane after a lengthy exposure to the *Limbo Practicale*) and would teach the bad guys to mess with Time in the first place. What the bad guys forgot was that the TSA could run through time like it was a b-grade movie on a VCR and find the mooks who messed with Time. (And if they could *find* them, they could *catch* them.) Another thing they forgot was that the TSA was protected by the Buffer – and it was practically immune to anything they could do to the time-stream. As he watched the two agents drag the limp figure away, he sighed happily at the thought of a job well done – and it was before teatime as well. (Well, figuratively speaking.) That would teach the assholes to scratch the Anals of History where they weren't itching. Guy Krummeck was there too, waiting for him at the door wearing an expression that would, with certainty, wipe the smile off the face of a kid on Christmas morning.

"Yes, I know." He muttered tiredly. "Debriefing again."

The Sheriffs Office in Lugaluru was normally not a very busy place. Today was no different. Sheriff Peggy-Ann Muller was busy booking a perp at the front desk when he arrived. The perp was giving her a wild-eyed look. She was looking a little run down. (I.e. there were black tire marks all over her light brown uniform and she was smeared with dirt and grime from head to toe. There were a few bruises and small cuts and scratches on her arms and face and she smelled a little like burned rubber.)

“Put him in cell seven when you’re done.” She was just telling the deputy as Gary Beck entered.

“Seven?” He asked seemingly taken aback.

“Yup.”

“But the toilet in seven is blocked, Sheriff.”

“Is it now?” She said innocently, half to herself while patting the dust and grime from her uniform. A deputy on the other side of the counter with a PDA was fingerprinting and genetically profiling the perp. He was eyeballing her in a way that suggested she wouldn’t be invited to his birthday party in a hurry. She returned his glare in a way that said ‘check the worry in my eye’, before noticing the new arrival.

“Oh, hi Gary.” She greeted tiredly.

"What happened to *you*?" He asked his old friend.

"Busted a shoplifter just now." She smiled, brushing a wisp of errant hair out of her face. "All by myself too, no back-up."

"A *shoplifter* did this to you?" He asked incredulously.

"No, that was the forklift." She admitted. "He wouldn't stop. Never thought this would be a hard-hat kind of job."

He gave her a perplexed look as a strange mental image flashed through his mind. *All righty then.*

"Made him put it back too." She added.

"The forklift?"

"No, the shop. *Albrecht's Takeaways* on Main Street – you know, the stand he set up in that old shipping container?"

"Oh yes, I know it." He admitted, "Good hotdogs. If you don't mind the occasional hair."

"Poor old Albrecht." She went on. "He was a little shaken up, lost his accent for a bit, but he's okay now."

"Good, good." He said, realizing they were talking around things a lot these days. '*Things*' being Cindy-Mei, of course. Until two months ago, Peggy-Ann had been the center of his attention, although nothing ever happened or came of it. Now things had become a little

uncomfortable between them, and they weren't really saying anything meaningful to each other anymore. He avoided asking *why* anyone would want to hijack a hotdog stand. He really didn't want to know. He was sure it wasn't for the coffee.

"You here for another bounty?" She asked him, as the deputy hauled the perp off to cell number seven.

"How'd you guess?" He smiled.

"You have that hungry kind of look." She said. "The one you get when you come to collect money."

"*What hungry look?*" He asked indignantly.

"That one. Anyway, as it happens, there is one particularly good bounty. Come on in."

She led the way to her office, which was a clichéd little wooden partition with windows and blinds and a door standing wide open. Straight out of an old TV cop show. This was the place where he'd first met Mei (who had been masquerading as a Colonial Intelligence agent at the time – and looking to enlist his help). It brought back memories. She reached into a stack-tray on her desk and handed him a sheet of freshly printed A4 plastic.

"*Star Fleet?*" He read in astonishment.

"They asked for the best, so I told them about you." She explained. "If this keeps up I'll have to start charging a finders' fee."

"*Two thousand* for a deserter?" He continued. "If this keeps up I'll be able to pay you one. What did he do – make a pass at the captain's daughter?"

She sat down at her table and sighed. This job was going to make her old before her time. As it was she'd just had to buy her first tube of antiageing face cream last week. It was almost as embarrassing as the first time she had to get the Pill as a teenager. No, even more so.

"No, just drunk on duty and awol. Repeat offender. Apparently he's from the Antares - disappeared a few days ago while on guard at the spaceport."

Hmm, the P.I. in him wondered, *how did they know he was drunk if he disappeared?* *Never mind that*, the bounty hunter in him answered, *Anyway two thousand is two thousand. Besides, a drunk is easier to carry in than an axe murderer. Now, where to start?* The spaceport seemed a likely place. Thanking Peggy-Ann and wishing her a speedy recovery, he left her massaging her temples with her thumbs. A few minutes later, her com-link beeped. She touched the answer pad. It was a tinny voice, rather strangely distorted.

“What am I?” She asked the voice in frustration, “His freakin’ *agent*?”

Cpl Marius Glent, currently absent without leave, awoke just in time to avoid drowning in his own drool. He sat up instantly, coughing and spluttering. He tried to rub his eyes with one hand while trying to scratch his ass with the other, but for some reason this didn’t seem to be working. Opening his aching eyes at last, he discovered why. Handcuffs tended to prevent things like that from happening. Shocked and surprised, he looked round. A man was sitting there, grinning at him from behind a flashlight, a man with warm eyes and sandy brown hair. The grin was much friendlier than the pistol in his hand.

“*Wha - ?*” He began, wondering how Beck had discovered his cunning hideout. It was a dark crawl space in the ceiling above the space port bar. It seems Cpl Glent had climbed in there late one night while on duty and thinking himself rather clever, stayed there. Apparently the barmen had been having fights lately over the stock that seemed to be disappearing out from under their noses. This coupled with unexplained events like alarms being mysteriously triggered for no apparent reason made good sense to Beck. It seemed quite logical really. (So did the greasy fingerprints on the hatch cover in the ceiling

over the bar – and the dusty footprints *on* the bar top the cleaner had been moaning about.) Aside from all these astoundingly obvious clues, it took just one sweep with a borrowed military bioscanner to find his man. Mister Glent thought himself rather clever – a nice place to hide with easy clandestine access to the bar stock room through another hatch. Heaps of empty bottles went rolling across the ceiling as Glent scrambled to sit up again. One disappeared down the square of light that was the entry hatch with a *clonk* sound followed by a muffled cry and a crash from somewhere below. Someone swore in the distance.

“Mister Glent, I presume.” Gary taunted. “You’re a wanted man.”

“I – I am?” He asked squinting from the bad side of a three-alarm hangover and a bright torch.

“You’re my new meal ticket.” He explained. “Get your shoes on, mister. C’mon hurry. I can hear credits calling me – listen – all two thousand of them.”

“You’re a bounty hunter?”

Gary smiled. “Thanks to you, I’ll be waist deep in cold ones for the next few months.”

It had been an easy day for Gary Beck. After making his delivery at the Sheriff’s office and receiving his payment, he was going to skip

the cold ones at the 'Shock Diamond' and go straight to Mei's apartment. He was going to spend some quality time with the one he loved. Escorting the handcuffed, bedraggled and hung over Corporal Glent away from the staring customers at the spaceport bar was rather entertaining. A big barman called Frank – who was supposed to catch the squirming handcuffed figure as he dropped him out the ceiling hatch, missed, much to the amusement of the clientele. It seemed the barmen were holding a grudge for all the in-fighting the disappearing booze had caused over the last few days. Applause filled the bar. Frank took a bow. Glent groaned on the floor and rolled over, just as Gary Beck landed lightly beside him and holstered his sidearm.

"Now, now." He said reprimanding Frank. "Let's play nice. There was no call for that, was there?"

Frank just growled at him as he helped his prisoner to his feet and led him out from behind the bar.

"Three cheers for Beck the Badfeller, *hip-hip!*" Someone cried in the throng. As they left the lounge area, the cheers faded away. He bundled Glent into his Jeepo and settled in behind the wheel. A short drive later, he pulled into a parking space outside the Sheriffs Office in

Lugaluru. Setting his foot down on the ground, something squealed and tried to bite his foot. He shook it off.

“Freakin’ Crabbygrass!” He muttered, watching it slink off.

Ramsley Valcovar the second had graduated from the Puritan Secular School on Uripides with honors. Top of his class in '69. Born into a wealthy family, he always wanted the kind of posting where he could settle into a routine of comfort and class, where he would have three services every Sunday and be invited round for dinner by the well-to-do members of his congregation. Deanna had been all that. Weddings paid better than funerals (but at least he wasn't required to actually smile at funerals) and they were far more numerous. (Some people married more times than he cared to speculate about, whereas most people only died once. Anyway, funerals lasted longer than some marriages.) Then again, the divorce ceremonies were small private affairs and there were even more of those. (He could charge more for those.) Nobody attended the divorce ceremonies, but there was usually a small retinue normally consisting of two lawyers and a pair of big men and one or two trauma counselors who would hang around in case any brawls broke out. (Paramedics would wait outside.) The

mothers-in-law usually attended, looking rather pleased and self-satisfied and wearing smirky 'I told you so' expressions.

As a Puritan minister, he was expected to see to the spiritual needs of his congregation. This meant he spent much of his time visiting widows and orphans and otherwise engaging in unorthodox forms of ministry and evangelism (and Good Works at the local youth centers). Moderation was the key, he felt. Whether it was eating, drinking or – *other things* – it was okay as long as it was done in moderation – and there were no witnesses.

It was a Wednesday afternoon in Atro City and currently he was publicly blessing a new doorknob at his Church, the Chapel of St Lucienne the Prostrate. The old one had been broken off just recently and had mysteriously turned up in the collection tray at last Sunday's service. *This* in itself was a little daft, even for the Puritans. He felt a right twit, blessing a doorknob, but anyway the ceremony did make him look important, which was right up his alley. A young altar boy, obviously nervous, carried the shiny golden object towards him on a small scarlet pillow with golden tassels. Looking down at the assembled congregation from the podium, he felt really important. A choir called 'Virgin Snow' had assembled stage left and consisted of sniggering teenage girls dressed in white lace. It still was true for at

least three of them (which would account for his charity work at the local youth center lately).

'It's just a bloody doorknob, for crying out loud.' He thought privately as the altar boy, in his little velvet maroon frock and vestments came to stand before him. A proud parent was snapping photos that would be the cause of much teasing at school later. The badly named choir was crooning something about doors opening and closing. To one side a man was standing, dressed in a shiny black suit and wearing a somber expression. That was the janitor, or DIY man. His screwdriver and pliers were on another velvet cushion, all polished, awaiting another blessing (*'Lord, bless these tools'*). He was the part-time undertaker as well, and was used to looking somber and serious. Oh well, he supposed, everybody needs a hobby.

Candles and incense burned everywhere. Everything in Valcovar's life was ceremony and ritual. There was a ceremony for lighting candles, one for walking safely under a ladder and another for those possibly about to fall down stairs. It bordered on the ridiculous. There was even an absolution ritual for committing adultery (which he often secretly used himself) - except in the case of minors (when he would use *another* and most fervently).

He was about to say '*Lord, bless this knob*' when a faint humming noise just came into hearing range. The altar boy gave him a look that reminded him of the other night in the privy. He tapped the microphone on his collar, looking quizzically at the sound engineer who was sitting in the congregation, but no – the man shook his head – it wasn't the sound system. It was getting louder, coming from somewhere behind him. Looking round, he saw blue sparks starting to drip from the gilded light fittings on the wall. A faint motion in the air became noticeable and a sudden hush filled the tabernacle. Even 'Virgin Snow' fell silent. A rushing sound followed, like Strauss being played backwards very quickly. Then a bright flash and tendrils of blue lightning earthed on metal bits around the building with a loud sizzling noise. The congregation was being showered with little blue sparks. With a sudden '*whoof*', the big flower arrangement up front burst into flames. With awful suddenness and a distinct '*pop*' sound, Brad Xyl appeared on the stage, live and unplugged. He stared, wild-eyed and looking somewhat ruffled up. His legs were spread wide as he stood there, rocking from side to side as hate filled his eyes, his mouth distorted in a horrible grimace. His clawlike fingers were raised, clawing the air. His clothes were blackened and charred by compressed time. Wisps of smoke were rising from his black hair. It

was standing on end. His eyes turning upwards like the cherries in a slot machine, he screamed.

This was quite enough for the Rev. Ramsley Valcovar. Flinging his service book aside, he hitched up his robes and ran down the aisle – the choir, janitor and altar boys and *Virgin Snow* not far behind. This was way beyond his scope. He was a minister, a man of the cloth, *damn it!* Give him ceremonies and rituals and long hollow convoluted sermons and prayers any day – but the *supernatural* was another thing altogether! You needed actual *faith* for that sort of thing. *Yeah*, he thought, discarding his robes and paraphernalia as he ran – *fanatical* faith. With bombs and stuff. Faith that could move mountains and exorcise demons and make ends meet. ‘*Begone ye foul abominiminimination*’ and all that. Fire and brimstone (he was sure that was a kind of racing tire) and the like were way over his head. Using it as a tool to terrorize his congregation into tithing more was one thing, dodging lightning bolts in Church was quite another.

Brad Xyl stood at the front of the rapidly emptying building, trying to regain the full use of his faculties. Fingers, hands, arms – check. Feet, legs – check. Eyes, ears, mouth – check. Something at the back of his subconscious was saying ‘*Error, missing brain.exe*’. He needed something to help him wake up, something *strong* and - *Oh no, a church!* He watched the last of the people fleeing towards the

entrance, some of them looking back at him in terror. *Sheep*, he thought, both angry and elated. Where was he? *When* was he? It wasn't the *Limbo Practicale* anymore. That was about the only thing he was sure of. *Right, then*. Pulling himself together, he straightened up and began walking unsteadily down the aisle to the exit, leaving smoking black footprints in the plush red carpet as he went.

"*This has got to stop, Gary!*" Peggy-Ann shouted angrily as he entered the Sheriff's Department pushing the prisoner ahead of him. Letting Glent bounce off the counter as he stopped, he gave her a quizzical look. She'd never raised her voice at him before.

"Wha-?"

"I'm *not* your secretary, I'm *not* your agent and I'm *not* your bloody talent scout!" She fumed through clenched teeth. "Mike, *pay* the man!"

"Sure, Sheriff." Said Deputy Mike as he swaggered over to the counter. "Sign here, please." Pocketing the two thousand credits, Gary looked at Peggy-Ann, tilting his head in puzzlement.

"What're you talking about?"

"People keep coming here – looking for Beck the Badfeller – the great bounty hunter who is so good, he could find the missing day in a leap

year!" She continued, pointing out the small enclosure that was her office.

"?" Asked Gary.

"Someone wants to see you."

"Who?"

"I don't know, but it's a *guy* this time and if you fall for *him* as well... *I won't ever talk to you again!*"

Beck swallowed. Jealousy had reared its ugly head and bellowed. 'Moo', he thought. He realized she was referring to Mei, whom he met under similar circumstances – right over *there*, in Peggy-Anne's office as a matter of fact. A tall well-built man with brownish hair and brown eyes was sitting in a modest arm chair in the office when he entered. 'No thanks', he chuckled inwardly. He preferred girls – and anyway, he had Mei. The man smiled, looking up while trying to hide the fact that he'd been playing with the little ornaments on Peggy-Ann's desk. One of them had shiny little metal balls suspended on gut. They were going *tic-tac-tic-tac*. He was wearing pretty ordinary looking, if not formal clothes. Sort of a gray suit, but not *exactly* in the current style.

"Mister Beck?" He greeted, extending a hand as he rose.

"That's me." Said Gary, offering his. "What can I do for you, Mr -?"

“Scrooby.”

“*Hey!*” Said Gary, suddenly getting his back up. “You can just screw yourself, buddy!”

“No, that’s my name, Scrooby. Johnathan Scrooby.”

“Oh.” Said Gary, “Well, what can I do for you, *Mister* uh –Scrooby?”

“This is a bit of a delicate problem, Mr Beck.” Said Scrooby, reaching for his coat which was lying on the other chair. “Shall we go somewhere a bit more... suitable?”

“Sure.” He said. “What did you have in mind?”

Scrooby took something out of his pocket that looked a bit like a mobile phone. It blinked and flashed a bit and made a soft little beeping noise. He was still about to ask what it was when the room seemed to spin like crazy and dissolve around him. A few minutes later, when Peggy-Ann walked into her empty office, still fuming, she wondered how the hell they got out without her noticing.

Johannes Albrecht, of *Albrecht’s Takeaways* in Lupini Street in Atro City had had a rough day. Business had started to pick up again after that morning’s shoplifting incident. Tidying up a bit and reopening had cost him a few hours. Time is money the old idiom went, and Albrecht

believed in it. People in the downtown business area liked their hot-dogs and cold-cats to be done just right, the way he'd always made them, the way his *a'Mamma* showed him, back in the old country (New Excelsior Colony). In fact it was with misgivings that he saw a large crowd of his customers hastily leave the area as a strange looking fellow lurched over to his premises and forced his way through the queue to the serving hatch. Not surprisingly, he was a little nervous after the mornings events, but something about this character seemed just a little out of place. It wasn't the disjointed look in his eyes, or the funny hairstyle, or the stiff, lurching walk. It wasn't the faint blue sparks hanging in the air around him, nor the vague blue light that played across his teeth as he (ugh) grinned a cheery good morning to him (and his hastily departing clientele). No, it was the trail of black smoking footprints he was leaving behind him on the cobbles. Blue tendrils of lightning earthed on the counter with a faint crackling sound as he leaned on it.

"Coffee." Said Brad Xyl disjointedly, giving Albrecht a glassy stare, as if he were daring the man to say he didn't have any – or to even ask – "What flavor? We carry a' da best coffee in the city: a'Mexican Grind, Chinquinta Mix or a'maybe Espresso?"

“*Coffee!*” Said Xyl, sparks tingling noticeably on the ends of his fingertips.

“Ah. Hmm, well a’maybe for you I giva da’ Hot Stuff Blend, yes?”

Ignoring the glassy stare, Albrecht decided the best course of action would be to just give the man some coffee. *Hot Stuff Blend* was the strongest nonalcoholic concoction known to humankind. It contained well, coffee naturally, but the kind grown by a mad scientist who might’ve added various outlawed chemicals. (This could be likened to say, taking LSD for a headache.) It was excellent for fixing hangovers, if you didn’t mind losing your sense of taste or not sleeping for a week. It could prove fatal if taken on top of certain medication for heart conditions or chronic depression. (*For who exactly* was what currently occupied Albrecht’s thoughts as he poured some of the vile black liquid into a special Teflon lined cup.) The man looked... well, insane. More insane than his regular customers, anyway – who never seemed to notice the health warnings and disclaimers on his deli wall – and who happened to be watching events from a long way off. From his *competitor’s* deli across the street no less! *No more specials for you, Mr Garcia, or you, Miss Jelliman!* Milk? He thought. No, milk didn’t go with Hot Stuff Blend, it would probably just dissolve.

“Sugar, yes?” Xyl just glared at him. *Right*. “Three spoons, yes.” He said, quickly shoveling them in. Xyl didn’t stir. He just grabbed the cup two-handed, downed it in less than three seconds and stood there, dripping sugar and foam from his lips, his eyes tightly closed. Albrecht silently backed off and waited, staring at the teaspoon (which was now hanging from the man’s left nostril). *He should fall over any second now...* Xyl jerked and dropped the cup. It went *cling* as it shattered on the cobbles. There was an explosion of bright blue light as violent energy rocked his small shop. A pewter napkin holder melted, sizzling into the countertop and Albrecht got a shock from the handrail he was holding onto. The discharge over, Albrecht risked a look. His own hair was standing on end from the static electricity, which made it seem he had an Afro. This light show wasn’t normal, even for Hot Stuff Blend. People who drank Hot Stuff Blend like *that* were supposed to go stiff and fall over. *This* man was still standing, albeit rocking back and forth slightly. He was *still standing*! Eyes closed, he flexed his neck and shoulder muscles to the accompaniment of loud click-click sounds, his facial expression altering dramatically as he did so. The blue haze was gone. (So was most of the chrome plating on the teaspoon.) He was actually *smiling*. “You okay, Mister?” Albrecht ventured, forgetting his accent. “*Mister? You okay?*”

Xyl's eyes suddenly snapped open. He was *back*.

"Okay?" He grinned lop-sidedly. "That was the *worst* cuppa java I've had in my whole life! You call *that* coffee? Do you have anything *stronger*?"

"S-stronger?" Albrecht stammered, noting a definite dull pain in his chest. "N-no, Mister but..."

"Then I'll have another."

"A-a-" Albrecht began. Then thinking better of it, he just numbly reached for another Teflon lined cup and hands shaking, poured the vile liquid into it. Handing the cup over, he figured it was finally his day to see *everything*. Xyl downed it; eyes closed, swayed again a little etc. etc. A distracted ha-ha bird smacked into a signboard and stuck for a moment before sliding to the cobbles in a shower of orange and yellow feathers.

"*Mister*?" Asked Albrecht cautiously, his hair still standing on end. He'd never *seen* anyone down *two* cups of Hot Stuff Blend, let alone *heard* of anyone who did. And *lived*. (Which was why he offered a bottomless cup of the stuff for the price of one.) Idiot patrons, never reading his disclaimers. There seemed to be a little more life in his eyes this time when they snapped open. Someone just came home after a long holiday, turned the lights on and was checking the fuses.

"You okay, Mister?" Asked Albrecht, not entirely sure *he* was feeling so well anymore. Xyl grinned at him and focused. Steam and vapor were rising from his tongue and nostrils in a disconcerting way. Albrecht caught himself staring. It was the spoon. The remaining chrome residue was still bubbling. Ignoring him, Xyl went on.

"Why, yes. Better. Very much so. Now, what place is this, please?"

"Albrecht's Takeaways." Albrecht shrugged. "And that'll be a credit ninety, and uh – two fifty for the cup. And – can I have the spoon back, please? What's left of it?"

"No, what planet, what *year*?"

"Deanna, 2178. 24th of August." Said Albrecht, "You okay, Mister?"

"*Deanna*." Said Xyl pensively, things still slowly falling into place in the jigsaw puzzle that was his mind. "Of course."

"*Mister*?" Albrecht called, just as the weird, disheveled figure turned and started walking away looking considerably more normal than before. Except for the teaspoon, of course.

Just about falling over with dizziness and the shock and effects of the Time Rush, Gary Beck saw a wall, and leaned on it. His stomach felt like it was still spinning. He was sure about just one thing – he wasn't in Peggy-Ann's office anymore. Other than that, he was taking things one second at a time.

“*Whoa.*” Gary Beck breathed, leaning on a wall he wasn’t entirely sure was there a second ago. “I’ve been beamed once before, only it never felt quite like *that.*”

His head was reeling. If his eyes had been open they would’ve been staring at each other, probably from opposite sides of the room.

“Anybody seen my stomach?” he groaned. The room he was in was not the one he remembered entering a few moments ago. It reminded him of a hospital, maybe a science lab. Then, remembering himself, he started to reach for his ten-mil. Scrooby was standing there beside him, still calm and friendly.

“Please don’t.” He said quietly, in the way someone addresses a man with a gun.

“What the hell just happened?” Gary asked, his hand not quite on the weapon yet. “Where are we?”

“Simply put,” he replied, “That was a chrono-spacial transport and you’re now at the headquarters of the TSA.”

“You’re speaking gibberish.” Gary countered. “Don’t do that. I hate gibberish. I got an ‘F’ for it at high school. Tell me that again, in plain Terran.”

"You're not on Deanna anymore, Mister Beck. This is the Time Saving Agency, and you're technically, a man out of Time. Actually we all are here. Except naturally, for those among us who are in fact, women. Um."

"*Time* travel?" He repeated, slowly. "I'm starting to hear Gibberish again."

"You're in no danger here, Mister Beck. In fact, I need your help."

"Well, okay – what are you offering?" Said Beck, instantly switching into Negotiator mode. He was getting tired of the 'Mister Beck' thing though. It made him feel like he was talking to his bank manager about another overdraft. Money he could use, though. Then maybe he wouldn't feel like such a deadbeat around Cindy-Mei. But Scrooby wasn't offering currency. It had no value here anyway, and from his point of view, what he was offering was far more valuable than mere currency.

"A chance to change the future, Mister Beck – your future. Yours and Miss Winters'. You see, certain events have been set in motion and only someone with the right *foreknowledge* will be able to prevent certain events from unfolding."

"Doesn't sound very profitable to me."

“That depends on what you value. Let’s see - how about a chance to save Miss Winter’s life? Would that be worth something to you?”

A chill ran down his spine and he forcibly suppressed an urge to reach for that weapon again.

“What do you mean?” He asked icily.

“Something bad has just arrived on your world, Mister Beck. Something... evil.”

“You know,” he said, squinting at him a little. “You look familiar. Weren’t you the guy who ran into that other guy this morning at the ‘Salubrius Café’?”

“That’s me, Mister Beck.” Scrooby answered. “Saved your life, you know. He was a Time Terrorist with orders to kill you.”

“Now why would he want to do that?”

“Because his bosses knew you were about to play a pivotal role in History. Changing History is what they do. Stopping them and undoing the damage is what we do. It’s a war Mister Beck, and at some point we all become soldiers.”

“Not me! I hate marching.” He said after a moment, eyeing Scrooby who was just standing there, trying to be as persuasive as he could.

“So one good turn deserves another, eh? Let’s say I believe you. Why would you do that, exactly? No gibberish this time, please.”

“That’s my job. I’m a Time Agent. It wasn’t supposed to happen. Will you let me explain?”

The chill in his spine was getting worse. He hated gibberish and he hated long complicated explanations. Something, if not Scooby and this ‘TSA’, was threatening his life and the life of someone he loved and he wasn’t having any of that.

“Okay, I’m listening.” He said.

“Let me get this straight,” said Gary Beck over a cup of frothy hot chocolate in the TSA canteen. “You want me to help you capture this criminal mastermind of yours, and bring him back here... wherever this place is?”

Scooby smiled in that annoying way again.

“No, I want you to help me to find him – then *I*’ll deal with him.”

“Hmm. This Brad X...X... um...”

“Xyl.”

“Xyl – must be a pretty bad piece of news.”

“The worst, Mister Beck. He helped build the TSA, the Buffer, everything. He knows how we operate, he practically wrote the book on all our procedures.”

“Then why –“

“- Did he turn bad? Well, nobody knows for sure. Maybe he was never actually *good*. We just know that somehow, he has escaped from the –“

“*Limbo Practicale*. Yes, what *is* that?”

“Lets’ just say it’s the New Alcatraz of your time.” Scrooby explained patiently. They were after all, in no danger of running out of time. Not *here*. He took a sip from his glass of *Melkovyn Nectar*. It was purple like meths and had a sweet scent. A green swizzle stick stuck out of the mass of bubbles on top. Gary resisted asking what time *this* was, really, because Scrooby had already explained the whole Buffer thing to him several, well – *nonminutes* ago, in a way the made him realize Scrooby must have got an A+ for gibberish at high school and was probably a professor in it by now. This was too much for him. He had a splitting headache.

“I’m having a hard time believing all this, Mr Scrooby. I really don’t have an imagination.”

"Imagine that you have an imagination." Said Scooby nonchalantly.

"And it'll all fall into place."

"*Imagine* that I have an imagination?"

"Uh-huh."

Hmm. That was a novel concept.

"Okay." Gary said, finishing the hot chocolate. He put the mug down and started gesturing slowly and expressively with his hands, his eyes at first closed and then open. "I'm imagining my imagination. Yeah, it's... it's... it's - *not working*." He sighed. "This all still sounds a lot like that gibberish you were talking earlier." Scooby opened his mouth to speak again, but he interrupted. "But the bit about Mei being in danger made perfect sense though. That part I'll take at face value. If it's all true."

"It is." Said Scooby. "Now, shall we go? We're —"

"*Running out of time?*" Gary suggested smugly, and then started laughing. Other TSA staff in the canteen area stared at them as if they were mad. Scooby gave him a look.

"Jokes like that could prove fatal around here, Mister Beck." He countered humorlessly. It took a few nonminutes to get Gary to stop laughing long enough to leave the canteen.

In the enlightened age that was the 22nd century, Atro City had few homeless people. Even snails carry their homes on their backs, but there were those who felt entitled to live on the streets, to wander them freely and expect charity from lesser mortals who actually worked for their food, drink and accommodation and the right to be miserable. Agnes Longbottom, or 'Saggy-Aggie' as she was known, wandered the streets of the city pushing an old shopping trolley that contained all her worldly possessions. Her history prior to arriving on Deanna was unknown because nobody had ever bothered to check. It was generally assumed that some tragedy in her life had caused her to lose touch with reality and her sense of hygiene. As well as some of her teeth.

The rhythmic squeak of the trolley wheels and the clinking of half empty liquor bottles marked her progress as she went on her rounds. Badgering the patrons of butcher shops, cafés and liquor stores had become a daily routine. Everybody knew about Saggy-Aggie, the clicking noise the crystals she sewed onto her clothes made when she squeaked past – and the funny look she gave people she met. It made their skin crawl and made them want to disappear. Kids spread rumors that she was some kind of witch. The way she caused people to vanish upon her arrival often made adults wonder about that as

well. She pushed her trolley up and down the center of town, in and around Lupini Square. People tried to cross the street or give her some money before she tried to hug them. The smellier she was the better it worked. It was an old tactic, but it worked well. If that failed there was always the trolley. The sight of her bearing down on them with that contraption was sufficient to weaken the resolve of even the hardest individuals.

A rather odd looking fellow lurched past her at the corner of Wilf and Harlow (funny enough right by the liquor store and pharmacy). The first thing that stood out about him was that he didn't try to cross the street or shout things like 'Sorry, no money' from a distance – he made right for her. He grinned at her, gave her a big old hug and wished her a pleasant day. He smelled like he was actually on fire and there was a metallic taste in the air. Shocked, she stood at the corner, her beady eyes bulging after him. She wanted to say something like: "Mister, your aura is all weird – it looks all f***ed up!" But she hesitated, transfixed by the intensity of the event. And the sight of the trail of black smoking footprints he left before turning a corner. Instead she shrugged, waved a large purple crystal after him and just muttered "Nice nose ring, Mister."

As was suggested before, Cindy-Mei Winter hadn't always been *Cindy-Mei*. She started life a little differently from most women - as a male. As her life progressed, she eventually came to the realization that she had been born in the wrong gender and, with great determination set out to rectify the problem. After having spent her life up to that point in abject misery while trying to please society, her new life was bliss by comparison. (For one thing, people didn't shoot at her quite as much.) To start with, she lost all of her old friends, every single one – and had just barely managed to hold onto some members of her family. At least with them she had found acceptance – which was especially important in the early stages of her transition when she felt she had been little more than an awkward looking man in a dress. Some of her uncles and aunts were approaching 80 years and they somehow accepted her with apparent ease, where her cousins her own age had rejected her out of hand. (Family do's and reunions were sometimes awkward. People on her home world, including her old friends and co-workers (who were rather narrow-minded to begin with) had ostracized her. A few even went so far as to spit at her in public. (Being forced to wipe off their spittle at blaster-point had a rather traumatic effect on them.) But things were rather different now. People who had initially sworn at her and cursed her (and ended up in the infirmary) now smiled and waved politely as she

passed them in the streets. She ended her CIA career two years earlier because her co-workers were rather short-sighted individuals with a propensity for homophobia. They made life very unpleasant for her – and she decided life was just too short to put up with stuff like that. Besides, there were far better things for her to do than chasing down the scum of the universe and getting dirt under her fingernails. Anyway, wiping blood off her new shoes was a rather dull and tedious affair best left to men.

Cindy-Mei was an attractive blonde, with an air of both awe and a hint of possible danger about her. Having worked for the Agency for so long had its effects on her. The extensive medical treatment had worked miracles on her and now she was living the life she always wanted, in the *body* she always wanted. Gary Beck was the next best thing that had ever happened to her. It was her firm belief that all the other men she'd ever been involved with had been assholes. Even before her change she followed a policy of honesty and always told her intended partners her little secret – and always ended up high and dry afterwards, wiping the dust and little pebbles out of her eyes. She'd only ever not told one date anything – because he'd been like an octopus and had found out for himself before she could tell him. She could still remember his look of shock at that embarrassing moment as he froze in mid-grope. His unforgettable words were

something in the line of: “*Oh my God, you’re a guy!*” (It’s kind of hard for a girl to forget something like that.) Then he got angry and physical and tried to force himself on her. He said he intended to make her his ‘one gay experience’ – the fact that she *wasn’t actually homosexual* never penetrating his thick Neanderthal skull. Lucky for her, diplomacy was one of her strong points (which meant she spent less time trying to hide bodies) and she managed to talk him down – literally.

Life after her change had been much different, like the sun coming out after a terrible storm. The nightmare of her old life was fading rapidly, a little more each day. Gary was different. He *wanted* to spend time with her. He did too. They did all sorts of nice things together – *couple* things. He was sweet. He didn’t use her, or just try to get at her money like some of the others did. She realized with some surprise a while ago that she had already fallen for him. Funny how things like that can sneak up on you. One day you’re just slightly interested in someone, waiting to see what will happen – and then suddenly you’re smitten, in love and looking at the universe through rose tinted sunsets. She could do a lot worse, she thought as she roamed the streets of Atro City’s upmarket shopping district. She loved shopping. It was her one weakness. Jewelry stores, shoe markets and clothing bazaars. She loved handbags too, and cute

little ornaments with wings. She loved pretty things. She'd only been here a few months and already she had a notable collection of crap and clutter in her apartment. Across the street, a shopping mall beckoned. She'd been there before, but things in the shops changed regularly, so there was always something new to see. Gary, typical male that he was, detested shopping. The mall was large and spacious and had a multilevel layout with shops overlooking the interior of the building with its walkways and green spaces. It was pleasant and cool and roomy. Noise dampers allowed people to have intimate conversations in public places without fear of being overheard too easily. Potted plants lined the picturesque walkways suspended along the elevated shop fronts, their green branches reaching for the filtered sunlight streaming down from the transparent dome at the top of the tapering courtyard. People roamed the walkways, wandering in and out of shops, carrying parcels. Some of the wealthier patrons were followed by more up market versions of her traveling trunk humming silently behind, carrying the shoppers' booty for the day. Nice looking friendly young men greeted her pleasantly as she moved through the crowd. There were enticing displays in the windows, soft music created an atmosphere of quiet serenity. Down below in the center of the courtyard small trees and shrubs grew on the manicured lawn. From somewhere in the middle

of the throng of shoppers, a woman screamed. A man came running toward the square, weaving his way through them clutching a handbag tightly under his arm. Mei paused to watch. Unless that was the latest in men's styles, he was a purse snatcher! Jumping over a park bench at the edge of the lawn below her, he dashed across the grass towards a clump of bushes. Beyond that was the ground level walkway and the exit. Outside lay the city and anonymity. He was just about home free... Just as he reached the clump of small trees he suddenly became airborne. There was a distinct *zooing* sound as he was hoisted into the air, arms and legs flailing. He came to rest hanging upside down from a low branch, bouncing lightly and swinging back and forth a few times, screaming like an animal caught in a trap. A security officer came running up, red-faced and puffing. Cindy-Mei made her way back down to that level, her curiosity peaked. The security guard was just catching his breath by the time she reached them.

"So?" The snatcher was just saying, folding his arms in attempt to look as serious as possible while still dangling upside down and clutching the purse, "Are you gonna let me down or do I have to chew my foot off?"

"Okay, Fred." The guard wheezed. "You can let him down now, I've got him."

“Fred?” Said Cindy-Mei. “Is that really you?”

A meter and a half tall bush in a brick red style pot turned some leaves towards her. Suddenly the whole bush was quivering with excitement. A few coins and a bunch of keys fell as they were shaken from the hapless captives’ pockets.

“Mei?” It said in a masculine voice.

“Yes!”

Fred moved forward and threw his arms – um, *branches* around her. Something indistinct went ‘*Whaaa -!*’ in the background, slightly distorted by the Doppler Effect and a distant crash. Fred was a plant. Arborians came in all shapes and sizes, usually potted, and used two or more lower branches to *wa* – move around in a way that would cause the sort of lapses in concentration during which peoples shoelaces could be tied together. It had been a while since she had last seen Fred, the only member of his species on Deanna. In fact the last time she’d seen the Arborian, he was on the rec-dec of the ship that brought her to Deanna as a passenger. That was about two months ago. Fred had been good company, preserving her sanity on the long boring voyage, a good companion – and then she’d ended up on this insane little planet!

"What are *you* doing here?" They both asked simultaneously. Then Mei laughed. A few people were watching the proceedings with interest, some of them wondering what was in their morning coffee and where they could get some more. Distraction wreaked chaos as a few minor pedestrian collisions livened things up on the first two levels overlooking the square. On the closest walkway above them, two paramedics were rushing to the aid of a man who was lying under the debris of a shattered table and four broken wooden chairs, moaning. One of them picked up a woman's purse lying among the splinters and passed it to a security guard who went looking for its owner. Someone in the gathering crowd was heard to mutter "*At least he missed the umbrella, lucky bugger.*"

"Nice one, Fred." Said the guard sarcastically, swinging his handcuffs and shaking his head as he walked off.

"Oh, damn." Said Fred, looking down at his empty branches and realizing. "Sorry Mike."

"So." Mei smiled at him. "You a security guard now?"

"Just helping out a bit." Said Fred. "Tried the outdoors a while, but it was a bit dull. So I ended up here. The music's not bad and there's enough quiet with the noise dampers and I get to see people without having to actually *listen* to most of them. The guards are nice, they let

me stay as long as I help them keep a look-out and help nab shoplifters.”

“Hmm. And purse snatchers!” Mei giggled.

“Most of them look *very* surprised. And you? I thought you’d left *months* ago – weren’t you on holiday?”

“I found a nice guy, been here ever since.” She said as they walked away together. “I’m still trying to get him to leave this crazy planet with me!”

“See?” Said Fred. “I told you you’d find one eventually. So who is he?”

“His name’s Gary Beck. He’s a bounty hunter.”

“*Beck the badfeller?*” Said Fred, clearly impressed. “He’s famous, you lucky fish! They say he’s so good he could find the missing day in a leap year! Is he any good?”

She gave him a bubbly giggle that told him all he wanted to know. The Arborian used some lower branches to walk, carrying his suspended pot with him as he did so. Mei was at ease with Fred and they were chatting away now, oblivious to the stares and puzzled looks they were receiving from the crowd. Just another day - another plain ordinary nice day.

A shabby looking bookshelf stood in the dilapidated lounge of a small house belonging to the only quantum physicist to ever come near Deanna. It was stacked with technical and scientific journals and books on chemistry, some of them slightly singed around the edges. One of them was the coveted "*Quantum Mechanics For Beginners*", highly sought after in certain circles. Dog-eared issues of *Popular Quantum Mechanics* were piled up on top. The uppermost magazine cover proclaimed its intention to show the reader how to '*Build Your Own Oscillating Transdimensional Invertor!*' There was a badly abused first aid box standing next to the pile. Furniture was arranged haphazardly around the stained walls of the room, in an attempt to balance harmony with space. Somebody had been reading up on *sheng fui* and had got it quite wrong. Beside the shelf stood a few empty fire extinguishers and a cardboard box filled with broken glassware and empty bottles. This was evidently a dangerous place to live - a definite hard-hat area. (If this *were* a cartoon, even the mouse-holes would've had blast-proof doors.) As it was, the Herr Doctors' ancient miniature Doberman cross practically lived in a flame-resistant doggie jacket (and the mice had given up and left long ago).

Heinrich Septimus Gleichstein was a single-minded and driven man, who didn't have much of a life. He was a mild mannered old

gentleman who preferred to spend his days in his laboratory, where he was oblivious to the passing of time and whether it was day or night outside. He was a singularly contented person, whose hobby happened to be his work. (For those people who actually have lives of their own, this can be a fascinating concept indeed.) This also meant that he was understandably pale and undernourished and looked ten years older than his true age. His graying hair had long ago given up the battle and retreated to the top of his cranium. His accent made the Gulf War sound like a major disagreement between German car manufacturers.

At the present moment the Herr Doctor was craning over a portable digital electron microscope (that probably wasn't obtained at the local '*Lab Rats R Us*'). He was studying the oscillation patterns of atomic particles and their reactions when exposed to measured doses of theta waves. Needless to say, he was squinting. A frequency monitor recorded the rates of the oscillations and beamed them to a computer across the room.

He'd always been a serious man who confined his opinions to that which could be or had been proved by Science. He'd avoided religion altogether because he felt the concept was far too complex for him and anyway, he couldn't get it to fit under the electron microscope. His lab was in what was supposed to be the lounge of his humble

(though neglected) home in one of the middle class suburbs of Atro City. The neighbors liked him mainly because he never borrowed tools or sugar from them, or had rowdy parties. In the time he'd lived there he'd only ever blown the garage up once while testing a new theory involving hydrogen fuel-cells and antimatter. He would normally just wave and smile on the rare occasions they would see him, arriving or leaving home. Sometimes he would mumble a 'good morning', before retreating inside to the relative safety of his lab. There was only one thing he ever really detested and that was the smell of smoke. (It usually meant something was about to boil over, melt, blow up or defy the rules of Quantum Physics.) And for some unknown reason, he smelled it now. His nose was twitching with irritation. Looking round, he saw no apparent source of the phenomenon. The lounge windows were closed (forgot to open them) and the front door too, was closed. It was said the smell of smoke could be an indication of an impending stroke. He felt fine. He decided it was time for a break, a stale biscuit and a cup of tea. The atomic particles would carry on vibrating by themselves without his supervision. He doddered off to the kitchen. Wincing as he remembered his eyebrows, he lit the Bunsen burner and swung the chemistry beaker of water over the red flame to boil. (Power kettle packed up a month ago, metal one melted in an experiment two

weeks ago.) He found a cleaner mug and gave it a smear with a suspect looking cloth reeking of benzene.

"Doctor Gleichstein." Said a voice from behind, just as the smell of smoke assailed his senses again. Gleichstein nearly dropped the teaspoon. He turned. A man was standing there, leaning casually against one of the kitchen cupboards, looking a little frazzled. His black hair was standing up straight like he'd swallowed too many batteries recently.

"C-can I help - you?" Asked the old man, hesitating at first to ask more pertinent questions like *'Who are you and more to the point, what the hell are you doing in my house?'*

"Why, yes." Said the man, smiling. "Tea would be nice thanks, and after that I think a bath would be rather welcome."

"Um – "said Gleichstein, taken aback. "Ze bath's no gut I'm avraid... it's vull off holes. Acid, er - an experiment... Ze shower still vorks though. Ah – mister -?"

"Xyl." Said Xyl, smiling. "Brad Xyl."

Gary Beck was concerned; Scrooby had dropped him in the deep end – or rather, in an alleyway three miles away from Peggy-Ann's office, with no wheels. It was apparently, noon. That would make it strangely

enough, two hours *before* he arrived at the Sheriff's Office that afternoon and had his Out-of-Time experience. (Up till then he'd thought that was what happened when you were writing an exam. Or trying to get to work in rush hour.) It seemed to have been by Scooby's design, because when he turned the corner, he was confronted by the sight which was now before him. The witnesses at the Chapel of St Lucienne the Prostrate were disoriented and suddenly very religious. At least fifty people of all ages and descriptions had sworn they had seen an apparition materialize behind the minister which shot lightning bolts and flames around the inside of the chapel. Several traumatized teenagers were being comforted by their families and some of the church elders were having their blood pressure and general health checked by a medic. Two old geezers were arguing by the gilded gate at the foot of the white marble stairs that led to the main entrance. 'Bet it was the Devil!' Said the one. 'You're not allowed to gamble in the Reformed Puritan Church!' Argued his companion. 'Wanna bet?' Challenged the first. One or two teenage boys were mimicking the lurching walk of the apparition and terrorizing some of the girls – one of whom screamed and threw a half-brick at them. A few other witnesses swore they had seen the spirit lurching east along Ralleighford Road. Foreknowledge was one thing, but he still had no idea where to start looking for this

Brad Xyl character. The Chapel seemed the most logical place. Blackened walls, partly melted gold plated fittings and fifty panicked parishioners didn't provide much in the way of clues to his whereabouts. There was one thing that might help, he considered - a trail of black footprints leading all the way down the red carpet in the aisle, down the 12 steps outside the church and down the road. He shrugged to himself. It still didn't seem much to go on but the odds were, he considered, he would most likely find Mr. Xyl on the other end of those footprints. A Sheriff's Office Deputy was on the scene and had stopped taking statements from witnesses because of a sudden attack of skepticism and Pad-finger syndrome. He was leaning against his police cruiser (with 'S.O.D.' in big black letters on the doors), talking to HQ on the horn. Worried onlookers stood close by, watching the lights on the roof as they flashed and rotated slowly.

"You got all that, Harry?" He was just asking as Gary walked past, following the general direction of the trail of footprints.

"Uh - yeah, I copy." Came the squawky reply. "This thing came out behind the *minister*?"

"Affirmative."

"*Reverend Valcovar*? Is he okay?"

“Uh- Negative, I got no idea – apparently he was last seen running down the street, half naked and screaming. I figure this is just some kind of hoax, over.”

The Herr Doctor had a pet dog. It was a rather thin looking, tired little dog for its ten years, but having had to develop a keen sense of danger had taken its toll. Sleeping at all was inviting trouble. Sleeping deep could be terminal. Turning its back on its master's experiments was courting disaster. Sitting on the rather frazzled and worn aubergine carpet, it licked its short whiskers, warily watching the uninvited guest as he emerged from the steamy bathroom. The dog, whose name happened to be Fluffy (or rather, *Vluffy*) thought the man was strange looking to begin with. What emerged from the bathroom, in clothes borrowed from the Herr Doctors wardrobe, was a lot more normal looking. Gone was the smoky pungent apparition. Gone were the blackened ragged clothes. (Gone also, was the teaspoon.) Even his black hair was neatly combed and gelled flat. His teeth glittered white and sparkling, like a toothpaste advert. He even smelled nice, for a human anyway. But dogs (especially dogs that had to be continually ready to run for cover at short notice) develop a keen sense of danger. (Unless of course they're the more stupid variety of dog - which is the kind the Herr Doctor sometimes had to sweep into a

dustpan). This was also true of *Vluffy*, who was the longest surviving pet the Herr Doctor had had to date. (Except for a hamster he had as a child that lived to 20 years, before being crushed by a falling tower of *Popular Quantum Mechanics*. His name was Lucky.) *Vluffy* happened to sense something rather unpleasant yet indefinable about our Mr Xyl. *There was something strange about his eyes for a start – and what was with that spoon anyway...?* *Vluffy's* keen senses also told him that barking at or biting Mr Xyl would be a Very Bad Move, like the time he cocked a leg and peed against a car battery. Ouch. So, without a sound, *Vluffy* got up, picked up a partly melted yellow rubber ball in his teeth and trotted off, his flameproof doggie jacket flapping as he went, and hid under a chair in the lounge.

Vluffy's master was equally worried about his new and highly unexpected houseguest. The experiment was still on the table, vibrating away to its own content, very much not in the Herr Doctors current thoughts. Being a Quantum Physicist, he was used to spending hours – even days in a lab, observing molecules (and devising interesting new uses for flame resistant materials). People weren't his field of interest. They never had been. (And unless they vibrated or spontaneously combusted they likely never would be.) But even so, he was decidedly uneasy about this whole scenario. The man had just... come into his home, nearly scared him half to death

and demanded all sorts of hospitality. And (shudder) conversation. Granted, he hadn't threatened him in any way – not tangibly, not yet. But – there was something about him – something he couldn't quite put a finger on. He shuddered. No, that wasn't the appropriate phrase, he thought. A moment later, the object of his dejection entered the lounge, smiled at him, and sat down on a well-worn sofa. The sofa made a loud *tooing* sound and Xyl unexpectedly sank down slowly, till he was up to his hips in old sofa.

"So sorry." Said Gleichstein, rather embarrassed. "Springs are a liddle vorn out – ze sofa is a bit old."

"Quite alright." Said Xyl, trying hard not to look ridiculous. It's hard to be taken seriously when you're looking at the world from within the depths of a decrepit old sofa. He struggled out, and chose a more solid-looking wooden dining chair this time. He tested it first, before risking it. "Nevermind. Now where were we?"

"Ah yes," said Gleichstein, clearing his throat. "Vot can I do for you, uh – Mr Zyl?"

"Xyl." Said Xyl, pronouncing the X with much care. "Hrrmmm. Brad Xyl."

"- Mr Xyl. Und vot are you doing in my house?"

Xyl smiled in a way that somehow made the Herr Doctors skin crawl. Under his chair, *Vluffy* growled menacingly.

“Doctor Gleichstein, it may be more a case of what can *I* do for *you*?”

Gary Beck had spent two hours diligently following the surprisingly clear trail of black footprints through the city. The fact that they went all the way up one side of a lamp post and down the other side hadn't improved his disposition much. The part of the trail that led across the Bay on the underside of Bottlenose Bridge didn't help much either. (He had to borrow a boat to follow that.) Neither did the handful of confused looking fishermen he encountered on the pebbly beach around the base of one of the giant pillars that supported the bridge. They were sitting in stunned silence in their fold-up chairs, staring glassy-eyed into the turquoise waves as they gently broke at their feet.

And then there was Albrecht, clearly traumatized by his encounter with Xyl, he kept babbling on about *two* cups of Hot Stuff Blend to a paramedic who was examining him. He didn't think they believed him. Wasn't that supposed to be impossible? He was sitting at one of the small round tables at the front of his shop, his hands trembling; looking like the planet was resting on his shoulders. The handrail at

the counter had lost its shine and had gone dark blue at the places where Xyl's hands had held it. A broken cappuccino cup lay smashed on the cobbles, a white chalk outline drawn around it by the cops who had afterwards decided this was some kind of stupid hoax and left only a few minutes before. The second the Deputy heard it was about the funny bloke who emitted blue sparks, he angrily asked Albrecht if he was anti Puritan and turned off the flashing lights before speeding off in his squad car. (The one with 'S.O.D' on the doors.) The LED ad-streamer above the serving hatch was still advertising '*Buggers and Chips – only 4.95!*' He winced every time the bit that read '*Ask about our flavored coffees!*' flashed around. First the shoplifting incident that morning, now this... unexplained event. If things really went around happening in threes, he was starting to worry about what would happen next. The paramedic was checking Albrechts blood pressure and heart rate. Just to be safe, he was checking his sanity levels as well. Poor old Albrecht. The shock had thrown his accent out altogether.

Anyone who has ever doubted the concept of the Writing Finger, should pay a visit to the offices of the Time Saving Agency. ('*The writing finger, which having writ, moves on.*') It is in fact not so much a *finger* as a focal point in Time. *The focal point, as it turns out, or if*

you prefer – the *now*. That instant which immediately precedes the future and replaces it with the past. The brief moment which precedes the instant which hasn't *quite* happened yet. Think of it as the laser of a CD-player, or if you will, the needle of a record player. In short, that which has taken place is past the needle, and that which has yet to happen is ahead of it. The only thing is, *this* LP of Time has more than *one* groove – and *that's* where the Agency comes into it. Although the Agency never allows any tour groups or sightseers, if it did, they would be subjected to a fascinating experience. Scrooby always had the idea that if there was a shop selling mementos, it would do rather well. (Just as long as it didn't sell those t-shirts with the yellow smiley faces.) At this present moment in Time, he found himself scanning the time stream. To cut to the point, he was currently skipping through the DVD of Life - or fast-forwarding the video machine. It wasn't quite a DVD player or video machine, but he felt that was a fitting description to use when trying to explain the idea to a Time Native. To people of the earlier 20th century it was a Flick or film projector. Natives of the 18 and 19th, having less developed understandings of technology found it more difficult to understand such complicated explanations. Sometimes these involved drawing little pictures. Any time period before that and he had to be *very*

careful how he explained it if he didn't want to get burned at the stake again.

The thing with time travel is - if you meddle with the time stream, it reacts immediately by jumping into a different track (or groove of the LP). This is why it was always considered wiser to meddle with the *past*. (Because a) you already knew what happened, b) you were far enough in the future to see how it all turned out in the end, and c) could decide if you liked that particular ending.) He smiled. It was a rather odd feeling, being able to mess about with Time. It was like having the power of God at his fingertips. Billions upon billions of lives, considering the entire time stream from end to end – depended on them managing it effectively and efficiently. Countless futures ended up on the cutting room floor, no matter which way he cut it. It was curious how, with time, he'd become immune to the awe he'd felt initially. As a rookie his first assignment was to prevent a passenger train from derailing in the American Northwest in the late 20th century. After getting run over by that same train four times out of five, it lost its impact somewhat. That was where he first started to dislike reruns (and trains). He supposed the whole experience could be seen like that, globally. Sooner or later *everything*, no matter how impressive, no matter how grand or complicated or stupendous, would eventually just fade away into a gray monotone commonplace nonevent. It was

just a job. A well paid job, with little – well, *time* for other things – but still *just a job*.

Little figures flashed by on the display of the Time Projector, living their ordinary daily lives as he scanned through the days' events on Deanna. Feeling a little like Apollo, the ancient Greek deity, it was almost as though he could reach out and touch Gary Beck, Cindy-Mei Winter, and an Arborian called Fred – all played out for him by the Projector. The bit with Xyl and the shopkeeper was mildly amusing though. It reminded Scooby of the book '*101 Uses For A Teaspoon*' he'd read as a boy. The interesting bit was where Xyl made contact with the second most dangerous being on Deanna – or possibly even the entire sector. He swallowed, and skipped a day ahead. There was a bright flash and suddenly Deanna vanished in what looked remarkably like a giant mushroom in space. The two little moons *Ding* and *Dong* were sent careening off into deep space by the blast wave, never to be seen again. There was a face, tangibly near. It was laughing at him, almost daring him to interfere, to stop him. It was the all too familiar face of Brad Xyl.

On the sidewalk outside the *Interplanetary Café* a man sat on a wooden stool playing the sax. He wore a stripy sweater and old jeans

and a funny little black beret. And the bewildered look on his face. A saxophone hung in one hand, dangling just above the ground. A girl walked past him a few minutes ago. She had a plant with her. The plant was carrying *itself*. Pot and all. He was sure pot had to come into the story somewhere. Well, pot of a sort anyway. It said 'Hello' and dropped a coin in his bowl. He shivered, knocking away the little bowl of coins at his feet with a clattering noise. A sound of quiet conversation droned from the doorway. It was a classy place, the funkiest place in the entire Mall, with the possible exception of the *Slipped Disk* (a nightclub in the basement beside the underground parking garage). Elmer Trundle sighed, wiped the glassy look off his face, giving a little nervous giggle. All poets are sensitive, even the bad ones. (Especially to sharp objects.) The disheartened composer paused to scribble something in his notebook before producing a few sad squeaks on his sax. It was his latest opus, #39. And now his mood was completely spoiled. Cursing, he gave up – tore out the page and threw it, crumpled, over the railing.

Most days for any waitrons are dull, tiring and tedious, but not on this particular day in the Interplanetary Cafe. A few minutes ago a couple of sorts entered and sat at a table overlooking the vista of the city from the fifth floor. Bottlenose Bridge reached across the Bay in the distance, artistically obscured by low clouds. A flock of

stratopenguins flew past in their typical 'C' formation, narrowly avoiding a high-speed collision with a bright yellow cargo airship that happened to be slowly cruising towards the spaceport. The waitrons at the Interplanetary Café were hand-picked and probably the elite waitrons in the city. Consequently, they were highly polished, professional and user-friendly. They didn't stare or gawk at patrons. They didn't bat an eyelid or drop a jaw or cock an ear. To their credit, nobody actually screamed or fainted. So far.

Right. *She came in here with a plant. And the plant came walking in by itself!* The girl in her early twenties stood by their table, clutching the order pad, white-knuckled. She caught herself staring. The manager usually kept a look out for misbehaving waiters, reprimanding them and sometimes imposing penalties. No tips for you tonight, Miss Merangue', et—*ceterah*. Glancing over her shoulder she could see the manager standing by the bar, a tray dangling from one hand, empty. At his feet were little fragments of glass and a spilled cocktail. '*Don't dew wot ah dew, Miss Merangue' – dew wot ah tell yew tew dew.*' Hmm. She could almost hear him say the words in his Deep South accent. She blinked and abruptly returned to reality. Fred was browsing the menu. It was a folded A3 sized full color plasma sheet. The outer display was flashing the café logo and a desert special. Interesting, that. It was also a solar power cell,

continually recharging itself. He turned a page with one of the branches he was using to hold the menu. A deeply buried formerly professional part of Mei's mind was wondering whether Fred actually left any *fin* – er, *leaf* prints (?) on whatever he touched. Fred seemed more interested in the cold drinks section.

"Mineral water for me, please." He decided.

"Hmm? Oh, ok – and you, m'am?"

Cindy-Mei paged through her menu. She felt bad that Fred couldn't actually *eat* anything, so she decided to just have something to drink instead.

"A tea for me please, Earl Grey."

"*Whiskey, double, rocks.*" The waitress murmured half to herself, keying the order numbly into the pad, her eyes straying to look at Fred, who was um, *sitting* with his pot on the chair, his leaves faintly reflecting the lights inside the establishment. It was time to do some catching up, Mei thought. She had a nice place to stay for now, a nice guy who was possibly Mr Right, and her life seemed to be going along just perfectly. And now she was reunited with probably her only other friend in the entire universe. What could be better? *Well, okay*, she thought – other than the funny look on the waitresses face as she started to walk away and tripped over a shoelace that had

mysteriously come undone. Shaking her head, she waddled off wondering just how that happened, exactly.

"That was naughty of me." Said Fred.

"Ah well, never mind." Sighed Cindy with a smile. "It was all in fun."

Before too long the waitress returned with a glass of mineral water and her cup of tea. She turned pale and seemed close to losing her grip as he extended a branch over the tray and gripped the glass in his prehensile leaves. She stared fascinated, mouth slightly open and breathing funny as she watched him pour it into his pot. He sighed as he felt the cool liquid trickle down past his roots. If Arborians could smile, then he would be smiling.

"Thank you." He said. She actually whimpered.

Mei enjoyed her tea more slowly, as they chatted about the happenings of the last few months and about altogether more pleasant things.

Dreams have a funny way of ruling people's hearts and lives, shaping them, changing them and in turn being shaped and changed themselves. Take the Herr Doctor, for instance. His career as a Quantum Physicist spanned forty years and he had yet to invent or discover anything worth submitting a White Paper about. Perhaps

that was his dream. Certainly the biggest, anyway. But as his life wore on, he had to adjust his dreams a little with each disappointment. Like growing big bushy eyebrows, for instance. He'd lost them so many times in his line of work, they hardly even featured on his list anymore - or on his face for that matter. His greatest dream had been to invent something so stupendous, so earth-shattering that his name would live forever in the um, *Annals of Science*. (This is like the *Annals of History*, only truer, slightly less volatile and of necessity, written in smudge-proof ink.) When he was a child he tested the limits of the home chemistry sets his parents warily bought him. They were sorry afterwards. The first time he lost his eyebrows he was only five. (Once his father had asked him from his hospital bed: "*Why couldn't you chust play viz silly puddy like ze ozzer kidz? Vhy? Vhy?*") Later as a student he experimented with *slow light*, a novel idea allowing a person to switch off the bedroom light and still make it to bed before it got dark. His Professor politely informed him that somebody had already invented the Clapper – about two hundred years ago, and it didn't involve complicated chronometric distortions either. Anyway, the Atomic Bomb and the Thermal Footbath were already taken, so it kind of made it harder for him to produce anything more noteworthy than the Luminous Paper clip, the Self-cleaning Mousetrap, or the Spring-loaded Toast Rack (surprise). There followed a dubious flirtation with

Astro-Science, Stellar BioChemistry, Quantum Physics and Typing. The University campus became deserted for quite some time afterwards. (The Dean was never seen again, but the strange mark left on the carpet in his office led to endless speculation among the students, the cleaning company, the FBI (Forensic Bureau of Investigations) and conspiracy theorists around the colonies.)

There was a gentle chewing noise from under the lounge table. He glanced at the source of his annoyance before returning his attention to his theorems. He despised distractions.

“Stop zat, *Vluffy*.” He murmured softly. “Or no doggie treats vor you tonight.”

Vluffy whined plaintively. What kind of a threat was that? There hadn't been any doggie treats for some time now because the old coot kept forgetting to buy any. Occasionally Vluffy had to actually bite him to remind him he needed food. Biting the hand that fed him did worry Vluffy a little, but sometimes it was necessary in order to get the hand to *actually* feed him. And anyway, he consoled himself, it wasn't a hand, exactly – it was an ankle.

Mister Xyl had been extremely helpful. Strangely, he knew quite a lot about him – but the things he knew somehow outweighed his need to know *how* he knew those things. It was compelling. Somehow the

man had opened his eyes to the vast untapped store of creative energy he still had inside. Xyl had awakened a sleeping genius. *Bugger the vibrating molecules and Luminous Paper clips!* He was feverishly at work now, doing calculations and computer simulations. His invention would be something *really* new, something previously unheard of. A *new* discovery! It was going to be amazing, stupendous – and actually useful. He was going to write *reams* of White Papers about it! That an old fool such as himself should stumble onto such a discovery! It would astound the Science Academy, that their collective talents had missed this one simple precept! In fact, it would blow their minds (among other things). Like gravity. I mean, until Newton discovered it, people assumed things only fell because they dropped them. And then suddenly everything changed. The world around them took on a new meaning. And where was the intrepid Mister Xyl? He said he'd gone shopping for supplies. Stuff to use in *their* experiment. Imagine! *Their* experiment! What a pair they would make, he thought – the mastermind and the maniac. Lucky for the world they weren't a couple of cartoon mice in a lab trying to take it over on a nightly basis. Zort. *Look out world*, he added mentally.

Gary had arrived, finally. He was standing outside number 16 Leafy Lane in the middleclass suburb called Placid Waters. He knew this was the place because the trail of black footprints ended outside the front door. By now he was starting to feel like he was in a cartoon - and a badly drawn one at that. The trail had led this way and that, meandering across the outer coastal rim of town - even across the Bay - and frankly he was getting a little tired. He'd followed it on foot, by boat and by taxi. He was beginning to feel like the Three Wise Men (one in taxi, one in car, one on scooter - blowing his hooter - following yonder st- um, footprints). Except that *they* at least had the good sense to travel long distances not on foot. Whoever this Xyl feller was, he had a talent for leaving his mark on the world, even if it was just funny footprints. All the same, he hoped that would be the extent of the damage, and no more. The trail led along the pavement of a peaceful looking neighborhood, along the nearly overgrown pathway that led through the neglected garden to the front door of a shabby looking house. It was a tired looking plain wood door. There was no sign of life. That's where it ended.

'Hm.' He thought. He couldn't see any footprints coming *out* - which meant his quarry *should* still be inside the dwelling. Unless of course Brad Xyl had a penchant for walking backwards. '*Why not?*' A little voice nagged him - '*after all, the bastard crossed the Bay walking*

upside down under the bridge, didn't he? And that trail, you gotta admit there's something weird about that trail. The fact that there is a trail at all is weird enough!" Considering the time he'd spent following the trail - that thought actually tensed him up. He adjusted his hat. Ramalama was getting lower in the sky already. Low and sharp. It was getting to late afternoon and he was supposed to meet Mei that evening. A little birdie told him it wasn't going to happen. Right then. *Man's inside, so that's where I'm going.* He unclipped his ten-mil so it was ready to draw and began walking towards the pathway. Suddenly a voice called out to him in a hushed whisper.

"Hey! Are you crazy?"

He turned. It was Scrooby, crouching beside a *cherebub* bush that grew in the neighbors' yard. He was waving at him to join him and, utilizing several highly specialized hand signals, was telling him to keep low, keep quiet and to hurry up. (Either that or he had just told Beck he was making a u-turn and to go away sexually.)

"What are *you* doing here?" He asked Scrooby in hushed tones while crouching beside him.

"Saving your ass." He replied. "Do you have any idea *who's* inside there?"

"Xyl, hopefully." Beck replied truthfully.

"Nope. He went out twenty minutes ago. And he'll be back."

"How do you -" He began, and then as it dawned on him, he just sighed. "You saw all this happening already, didn't you?"

"No," Scooby smiled back with disarming honesty. "I saw him leave - but he did lock the door."

"Why lock it if -"

"- He's not *coming back*?" Scooby finished. "*Bingo*."

Gary slumped. "*Wait-a-minute!*" He surmised, just as a penny dropped in his head. He wasn't happy with the epiphany he was having. "*If you're here, then that means you knew he was here all along?*"

"Uh-huh."

"You let me spend the whole freakin' day following this trail on foot and by boat and - *you knew he was here all along?*"

"Yuh."

"I even took a *taxi*! The driver thought I was a nut job! Why didn't you tell me? *You could've saved me three whole hours!*"

"Sorry." Said Scooby sincerely.

"Thanx a whole bundle, Scooby!"

“Well, I still have a responsibility to maintain the timeline, you know.”

Scrooby argued. “If I’d told you the address, you’d have –”

”I’d have got here *three hours* ago!”

“Precisely my point.”

“I still don’t get it.” Beck sighed. This whole time-travel thing was giving him another headache. He probably shouldn’t be surprised if he actually met himself coming around a corner someday, saying: ‘*Relax bud – Scrooby sent me.*’

“Look.” Said Scrooby explaining, thinking about drawing little pictures, but having to choose them very carefully. “I got here at exactly the *right time* – when...”

“When I got here. Oh.” Beck finished, seeing Scrooby’s screwed up reasoning at last. “*Never mind.*” He interjected, just as Scrooby opened his mouth again. “Before you start spouting gibberish about the timeline again, what are we going to do next?”

“Watch and wait.”

“Okay.”

They settled down to wait and watch. A stray dog on its late afternoon rounds visited the partially overgrown mailbox at the front gate. (It was mostly for show and was actually some kind of disused birdhouse

– nobody actually used mailboxes anymore. Sometimes *flatular canaries* would nest in it and make interesting sounds that would echo and make passers by give each other accusing stares.)

“Scrooby?”

“Yeah?”

“Who’s in the house?”

“A man who thinks he’s reinventing the wheel.” Replied the Time Agent in a somewhat cryptic fashion.

“What?”

“A backyard quantum physicist.” Said Scrooby, now losing Beck completely.

“Oh.”

They waited some more. The stillness of the early evening was broken here and there by the sound of life returning to the neighborhood. People were coming home from work, pulling up in their driveways with their shiny cars. High overhead, a flock of twenty or so *stratopenguins* flew past. Beck thought they must have been dyslexic because the ‘c’ was the wrong way round. Among other things.

“Scrooby?”

“Yeah?”

“Why are you wearing a dress?”

“It’s a surprise.”

“Oh.”

Well at least now Beck knew *why* they were hiding.

Meanwhile, inside the house, unaware of the deep and philosophical conversation taking place outside, the Herr Doctor was deeply involved in designing the schematics of his invention. Deep in thought, he still spared a second to wonder what was keeping his strange new companion. A day or so and he would be able to start testing the prototype. If they could build the thing properly and keep within all reasonable safety specifications and avoid breaking any municipal bylaws by *not* blowing anything up. *Vluffy* had noted the absence of any bubbling beakers or funny smelling substances, and decided it was safe enough to come out of hiding for a bit. He was lying dozing on his back in the middle of the carpet behind him. One thing that *Vluffy* really enjoyed about his life was the complete absence of fleas and other parasites. It was probably because of the latent radiation in the house. There was a downside though. Domestic pests had followed Man as he expanded into deep space.

A new strain of mutant cockroaches now roamed the kitchen. They were immune to sprays and poisons and wreaked havoc in the old bachelor's kitchen. (Even tinned food wasn't safe from them. In the beginning the Herr Doctor tried swatting them - but after a few fruitless attempts he found a hammer was far more effective. Later he switched to a high-powered stun gun because it didn't leave holes in the walls – or bodies to dispose of. He had to aim carefully because of all the flammable liquid around the house). They had two heads and went about waving their two sets of antennae at him. They never bothered to run, except when they were chasing *Vluffy* - who tried to avoid them where possible. (If the other dogs in the neighborhood saw that, he would never live it down.) There is something unsettling about a cockroach that can chase dogs.

Under a *cherebub* bush in the yard of the house next door to where a man was reinventing the wheel, two men were hiding. Right. One of them was wearing a low-cut floral dress and somehow reminded the other of Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*. Scrooby didn't have the cleavage for it (not even the socks stuffed into the bra looked convincing). Anyway, in all honesty Gary preferred to look at Cindy-Mei (who might well once have been a man - but at least *she* had the good taste to rectify that small detail *before* flouncing around like that.

And anyway, she had nicer legs.) Off to the left, a *ha-ha* bird landed on the lawn and promptly vanished up to its neck in the long grass. ‘Ha! Ha!’ It cried as it folded its bright orange wings into its bright yellow feathered body, eyeing them with its shiny blue eyes. The bird, all of two feet tall, began to pick through the long grass for worms and bugs with its long sharp beak, leaving a trench in its wake. What popped into Gary’s mind was the old joke about how the *ha-ha* bird got its name. Apparently it was the only bird known to be afraid of heights. (Which is why it was the only bird that could actually shit itself while in full flight. If it could, it would probably wear a helmet.) The joke attached to the question went something like: Cos it goes ‘Ha! Ha! – *F***, it’s high!*’

“Well, if you must know,” Scooby was just explaining, “I’m trying to look like Xyl’s ex-girlfriend.”

Gary nodded, pretending to understand.

“Okay. Now why would you do that? Why would you *want* to?”

“So I can catch him off guard and you can nail him with *this*.” He said, passing him a shiny cylindrical object that vibrated faintly in his hand. It had a small red button on it and nothing else. It was about the size of a small torch. Where the light should’ve been there was only a small pinhole.

“What am I supposed to do? Hit him on the head with it? Throw it? Jam it up his - ”

“Just stick this end into his side – or actually any part of his body, and push the red button.”

“Hmm.” He mused, turning it over again. “What does it do?”

“It’s called a Life Ender.” Said Scrooby. “It’s from the 30th century.”

Beck pondered the term ‘Life Ender’. It seemed pretty self-explanatory. Then a little doubt surfaced in his mind that timidly put up a finger and said ‘*Um, excuse me?*’

“You want me to *kill* him?”

“No, I want you to shake his hand, pat him on the back and congratulate him on escaping from the *Limbo Practicale*.” Said Scrooby sarcastically. “The man is a mass murderer. He escaped from a place that should be *escapeless*, never mind escape *proof*. It’s supposed to be impossible. It’s like he escaped through a window in a room without windows.”

“But even here, in my time, we catch people who escape and put them back in jail.” Beck reasoned. “We don’t just kill them because they’ll only try to escape again!”

“If he got out of the *Limbo Practicale*, there’s no putting him back in again. What else are we supposed to do with him? He’s probably even more insane now than before he was put in there. God only knows what he’s capable of now.” Scooby countered. “And if we don’t stop him, we’re dead. We all are. You, me, your girlfriend – everybody!”

“He’s really *that* bad?”

Scooby inhaled deeply. Explaining the lengths to which the Agency had gone to stop Xyl the first time would probably take an hour. What the Agency would do to stop him *this* time could probably be summed up in one phrase. Extreme prejudice.

“One time he set himself up as the President for Life on Nimbus two. By the time the Agency managed to undo the damage he’d done to the timeline, he’d managed to start three wars of ethnic cleansing and was responsible for the deaths of 89 million people on three worlds. That was just one instance. It took the Agency twenty-five years to bring him down and get him into the *Limbo Practicale* the first time and to go back and undo it all. If you think Hitler or Stalin were monsters, this man can strike at any time, any place – and do it all over again for an encore!”

Gary was thinking through all this. He didn't normally set out to kill any of his would-be 'meal tickets'. He preferred to get a good night's sleep while affording them the luxury of doing the same, even if it was behind bars. Killing someone just to get them off the streets wasn't up his alley. Killing in self-defense was a different matter, but still, this wasn't quite the same thing. Was it?

"Now do you understand the gravity of the situation?"

"I'd still feel better if you did it."

"Fine, so do you want to wear the dress then?" Scooby offered. Seeing the sudden look of naked terror in Becks eyes, he continued. "Thought so. Well, all right, then."

Gary Beck was an intelligent man, who was also moderately streetwise. He was not a mathematician or a genius by any stretch of the imagination (which he admitted to not having, incidentally). He disliked killing and violence, especially when it was directed at him - but also for the sake of his conscience. This time travel stuff was a little beyond his grasp. Especially since he'd all but had a crash course in understanding it.

"What's he trying to do, Scooby?" He asked quietly.

"He wants to destroy Deanna." The Time Agent replied quietly. "He's not sane, you see. Ever heard the expression 'wishing you'd never

been born'? He's ended up hating the universe, and somehow he's also ended up with such self loathing he wants to destroy himself too. Just killing himself now isn't enough – he wants to erase his entire existence altogether. He was born here – or at least he will be, sometime in the future."

"If the planet's gone, he won't be born?"

"If the world is destroyed, with his parents still on it, he can never be who he is now. *He* won't exist. Hopefully."

Gary sighed. He didn't want Deanna to be destroyed. As crazy and messed up as it was, it was his home. He actually liked it here. (Even *crabbygrass* had a certain charm, if you just left it alone and didn't try to step on it.) He had a life here. He was *somebody* – even if he was just a bounty hunter, he was good at it. He knew the territory. If he turned his back on this situation and walked away just to soothe his conscience, he could always try to find another home with Mei - but what would stop Xyl from moving on to destroying other worlds as well? And would he ever have a peaceful nights sleep again? This might be their only chance to stop him. If he was as bad as Scrooby said, then that was possible. Anything was. This was really deep stuff.

"Okay. So we kill him then?"

“Okay.” Scooby nodded. They sat in silence, wondering when Xyl would return. Hopefully it would be soon. He was starting to worry whether Cindy would be jealous. He shivered and put that little idea out of his mind. She had nothing at all to worry about there, he decided.

“So dressing like his ex-girlfriend will distract him, you think?”

“It will. He really, *really* hates her.”

He had a point. After all, it really, *really* distracted *him*.

“Just a question, then, um... Do you think you look anything like her at all?”

“I think from a distance there should be certain resemblance. Enough to grab his attention and piss him off.”

“Long enough for me to jump out and —“

“Yuh.”

The *ha-ha* bird had caught a worm and was currently engaged in a wrestling match with it. Watching the 8 kilogram bird rolling across the lawn, wings flailing - with the inch thick worm wrapped around its throat while making gagging noises was a welcome distraction.

“But if I miss or I’m too slow —“

“Then I’m history.” Said Scooby succinctly.

“So your life is in my hands.” Gary summed up, playing with a tuft of grass thoughtfully. He decided against adding ‘*That’s quite a risk*’, because he was sure Scooby already knew that. The *ha-ha* bird was in serious trouble, unless lying on its back and kicking its feet in the air was some misguided attempt to attract females.

“Scooby?”

“Hmm?”

“What’s this guy in the house got to do with all this?”

“He helps Xyl to build the bomb that destroys Deanna. In three days this whole planet, everything, is gone.”

He almost commented ‘That might be an improvement’ but resisted the urge to be funny. It wouldn’t really, in all seriousness.

“What kind of bomb?” He ventured. “Whatever it is, it would have to be something really big. Wouldn’t it?”

“Antimatter infusion bomb.” Scooby replied. “And it works, believe me – I’ve seen it.”

“Thanks. I think.”

“Don’t mention it.” Said Scooby just as a rather ordinary looking man walked past the houses on the other side of the street. He went past number 16. Not Xyl then. It occurred to Gary that they had no idea

how Xyl looked. Well, maybe one of them did. The *ha-ha* bird had finally subdued the worm and had begun the tedious business of swallowing it. There it stood, in the expanse of trampled, flattened long grass, looking like it was slurping thick spaghetti.

“Um. Scrooby?”

“Yes?”

“If Xyl is destroyed before he helps invent time travel and to set up the TSA, would it still exist?”

‘*Now that*’, thought Scrooby almost audibly, ‘*is the million credit question.*’

The Herr Doctor Gleichstein was not a bad man as such, but as a scientist he was just terribly bad at what was supposed to be his job. Blowing things up – now *that* he was good at. He was an unintentional pyromaniac – or at the very least, a *maniac*. He didn’t actually realize he was building an antimatter infusion bomb. Like the first person to put a lump of enriched uranium in a bench-vice and hit it with a hammer, he had no clue what would happen when he put the design together as a test model. (He loathed violence, having experienced several memorable explosions firsthand.) He was under the impression that he was developing a new and wonderful source of

energy, which entailed the slow controlled annihilation of matter and antimatter. Having studied Warp Theory in his second year of university, he realized that if he got it wrong, his lounge table would probably vanish into hyperspace and never be seen again. Either that or it would arrive smack in the middle of a parallel universe (where all the odd socks go). Neither of these was an acceptable outcome. He was fond of that particular table. It seemed rather simple in its design. (The device, not the table.) Matter in this universe is naturally positively charged. Negatively charged matter doesn't occur naturally anywhere in the known universe, so it has to be manufactured. (This is the same principle as used by politicians when telling The Truth.) When negatively charged matter (antimatter) is brought into contact with matter, an explosion occurs, which destroys or consumes both objects. His device was intended to use this principle to generate electrical energy from the reaction. It included an intake module which sucked in the most naturally freely available material on Deanna – air. Air is still matter, of a sort. Gas molecules, oxygen, nitrogen – naturally positively charged. An internal separator would equally divide the volume of air. One half would be negatively charged at an atomic level before the two volumes were *carefully* brought back into contact in a shielded detonation chamber. The reaction would drive a turbine and in turn, a small alternator which would hopefully,

power a few household light bulbs. Naturally the whole process would have to be carefully controlled from start to finish if he didn't want to file his patent claim posthumously. The whole test model would be powered from one of the ports at the back of his laptop computer, which would also control the process from *slurp* to *bang*. The test model he was going to build would probably put out enough power to run his house for a week in about five minutes – hopefully without any side effects - like impromptu landscaping.

A man resembling Brad Xyl came walking down the street, carrying a sports bag on his shoulder. He was quite obviously, not leaving any footprints. Scrooby tensed up and paid full attention, alerting Gary Beck in the process. The man wore a black t-shirt with '*I love me (but who wouldn't)*' on the front. He was the right height, had the right hair color - and he was headed for the front door of 16 Leafy Lane, Placid Waters, Atro City. Right then, Gary Beck realized this was *it*. He wasn't a soldier on any front line, nor a cop – or even in this case - a bounty hunter. He was an *executioner*. An assassin. The only thing that made up his mind was the thought of the consequences should they fail. He rolled the cool faintly vibrating cylinder between his fingers, feeling the smooth surface. Then Scrooby moved into action, moving out of cover. Scrooby, for all intents and purposes *in drag*,

was *not* a pretty sight even at close range. At a distance, he looked a little like Olive Oyl, right down to the black wig with the bun at the back. At least he'd shaved his legs for the part. (He *hoped* for the part.)

'*Time to move*', he thought as he took his first step. '*For Mei,*'

A part of him really missed her right now. His heart was pounding in his ears; his palms were wet and clammy. He visualized her face, her pretty features. He could remember the life in her eyes, even the tone of her eyelashes - the feel of her skin against his. He wished he was with her now, wherever she was, whatever she was doing. *Except shopping*. He swallowed nervously, as he sneaked along behind the hedge that grew wild along the line dividing the properties towards his target. *Okay, well, maybe even shopping*. He didn't think that - despite her checkered past, she would like anybody to be killed *in her name*. He realized with a surreal suddenness that he was prepared to die for her. He wouldn't kill *for* her. Not for *her*. For himself and for Peggy-Ann and the *crabbygrass* and those bloody awful *stratopenguins*, then.

Brad Xyl, now halfway up the garden path, was suddenly confronted with a sight that actually jarred him back to temporary sanity. He stopped dead in his tracks and stared, disbelievingly. The apparition

was waving at him. He dropped the backpack and rubbed his eyes. It looked like her, it really did. She was smiling and waving, emitting a slightly falsetto 'yoo-hoo'. With barely any notice whatever, Xyl screamed and charged. He leaped the hedge in a single bound - for the moment, terrifyingly, horribly, completely sane. He was going for Scrooby's throat with his bare hands. Seeing his chance (which was just a second after Scrooby went 'Urk'), he launched himself at Xyl from his crouching place, the Life Ender at the ready. Xyl was squeezing and seemed to be a good deal stronger than Scrooby, whose expression had changed a little. His face was turning purple and, feet dangling off the ground, he was kicking ineffectually at Xyl's shins. Gary grabbed Xyl's shoulder. Xyl turned his grimacing face to look at the origin of the attack. Just at the moment when he was about to jab the deadly device home, his free arm was suddenly gripped by a vice-like force. It was a hand, connected to – he turned – *Brad Xyl*? He looked back at the figure strangling Scrooby. That was *also* Brad Xyl. *Incredibly*, it was *another* Brad Xyl!

He grinned at Gary and said "*Surprise!*"

"*Ghhghh!*" Scrooby choked, hammering on the first Xyl's arms, just as the second one grinned and delivered a hammer blow that sent Gary tumbling into the bushes on the other side of the hedge. The startled *ha-ha* bird took off and kept a low altitude. The first Xyl grinned and

winked at the second, nodding approval and squeezed harder. Scooby's feet were working up and down as he frantically tried to get loose, making it look like he was flapping them like wings. By now Xyl had realized it wasn't his ex-girlfriend, but was having such a good time and saw no reason to stop. He was choking Scooby so hard the wig fell off.

Beck the Badfeller stumbled out of the bushes, cursing angrily. He'd lost his hat. And the Life Ender. Xyl number one was choking several different shades of shit out of Scooby. *Damn, and his jaw hurt like blazes!* Xyl number two was coming for him with a kind of look in his cold beady eyes he wouldn't even give his mother-in-law. If he *lived* long enough to have a mother-in-law.

"Sod it!" He cursed, and unholstered the ten-mil. Xyl wasn't fazed, and kept coming. He fired, practically from the hip. With a sudden whirl of motion, the second Xyl had become the first and was holding a gagging Scooby, who was quickly going limp. His eyes were glassy, motionless. The first Xyl grinned at him, dangling the body out in front of him like a rag doll. A neat round bullet wound had appeared right in the center of the hideous yellow dress, surrounded by a rapidly growing scarlet stain.

Boinggg.

The strange hollow sound echoed in his head and he felt a sharp sting in his kidneys. A warm feeling seeped through him and as he fell, he watched the second grinning Brad Xyl fade away where he stood behind him, the Life Ender dangling from his fingers.

Satisfied as the two bodies faded into nothingness, Brad Xyl winked at himself, tossed himself the Life Ender, and disappeared in a similar fashion as the diverged timelines merged again. It was truly amazing what you could do if you managed to get out of the *Limbo Practicale*. Time was never the same to you again, you saw it differently. It was like being able to see in another light spectrum while everybody else was still groping for the light switch and falling over coffee-tables. The original - and one and only Brad Xyl turned round and picked up his backpack. The TSA had tried and failed again, he mused walking up to the front door. He unlocked it and went inside. His old colleagues and partners at the TSA must really *hate* him. It was rather flattering, really.

"Heinrich, I'm home!" He called from the hallway, and chuckling, hung the keys on the hook by the quaint light switch. With the passage of time, smoke had made ancient looking swirl patterns on the beige walls. Well, *Time* was about to run out for the *Time Saving Agency*.

The Herr Doctor looked up from his graphic design project as he entered and dropped the bag heavily on the table. He opened it and spilled it out, annoying his new ally. An alternator and a roll of polythermal tubing tumbled out, followed by some small electronic force field generators of the type used in ordinary mousetraps (of the catch-and-release type). There were some other components too, including computer regulated valves, a 2000w hairdryer and a packet of hose clamps. An antistatic generator, room-temperature superconductors, light bulbs, rolls of wire and duct tape and a whole lot of other smaller things lay on the table before him, glittering like the booty in a mad scientists' treasure trove. *How* he'd paid for it all – or if he *had* paid for it, was something Xyl wasn't letting on. Gleichstein took quick mental stock of everything and looked up at him curiously.

"Vhat's ze mushrooms vor?" He asked.

"It's vor – I mean, it's *for* the stir-fry I'm making for supper." Xyl grinned back. He'd checked the kitchen and he was satisfied to find most of the basic ingredients for his favorite meal were present. It would make a pretty good last meal. The fact that the ingredients hadn't expired yet was a bonus. "You just get started on putting that thing together so long."

"You like to cook?" The Herr Doctor asked, surprised, finding he was unable to remember the last time he had a proper meal.

"Oh, you should see the things I can cook up." Grinned Brad Xyl innocently.

The Polymetric Life Ender was a rather intriguing device, even to agents of the TSA. This was mainly because it came from the 30th century and strictly speaking, hadn't been invented yet. It was, as its rather straightforward name suggests, an instrument of death. It has two distinct advantages, being both silent and virtually instantaneous. It applies compressed sound waves, which at close range (i.e. when pressed up against a human body), sends a single pulse of sound energy through the body cavity which instantly ruptures the internal organs. It is for this very reason that the Polymetric Corporation deemed it prudent to print '*Keep Out of Reach of Children*' in very small letters on the inside of the battery cover. It was the weapon of choice for most common or garden Time Terrorists, because aside from the previously mentioned reasons, it was also easy to conceal and made no visible mess.

When Gary Beck eventually opened his aching eyes, he wondered why he was still able to. The Life Ender was obviously not equipped

with a button marked '*Just Kidding*', so why was he still alive? Was he still alive? Or was the afterlife a bright white bleak room with a medical bench in the middle?

"Hello?" He ventured, lifting his head. Examining himself, he saw he was still wearing his jeans and check shirt. Wasn't he supposed to get a white robe and wings or something? A harp, even? Elevator music was playing softly in the background.

- Was this Hell?

A sliding door in one wall opened seamlessly and a man walked in. It was Scooby, who was grinning humorlessly. He was back in his regular clothes. Well that idea obviously went south.

"Shall we try again?" He smiled, helping Gary to his feet. He was surprised to find he felt fine. A little thirsty, but fine.

"Again?"

"We've got to go back. That's what we call a U.T.E – Unforeseen Time Event."

"Unforeseen Time Event?" Gary repeated.

"Screw up." Scooby explained. "Happens all the time. I just don't usually get killed though. Very unpleasant sensation."

"Yes, I know." Said Gary, dryly.

"A bit embarrassing, dying like that – in a hideous yellow dress."

"So I would think." Said Gary agreeing, looking around. "Where's my hat? Come to think of it, where's my gun?"

"Still back on the other side. Come on, let's have a coffee first."

"*Coffee?* How about a cold one? I just died – I don't want *coffee!*"

"No, you didn't." Scooby explained as they walked out into a slightly less bland gray corridor. "We were yanked out just in time. Jimmy's a wizard Operator! Really top rate! Remember the Buffer I told you about?"

"Oh yes." Gary said weakly. "Hooray for the Buffer."

Vluffy was a little confused. Well, okay – more confused than usual. The Herr Doctor was at it again, building strange looking contraptions on the lounge table. At some point something was bound to go '*woof*' again and there would be a lot of shouting and some insane laughter. And the Doc would wander round the house looking slightly stranger than usual without his eyebrows for a while. Well, it wouldn't be the first time, *Vluffy* consoled himself, nor would it be the last. The safest place in the lounge at this point, thought *Vluffy* in his doggy logic, was under the couch.

The strange man was in the kitchen making noises and smells, which he admitted to nobody specifically, smelled a *lot* nicer than anything that ever blew up in this house. The Doctor was working feverishly, and every few seconds or so his hands would become a blur of motion. If a human being had been watching, he would've suspected that something was definitely out of place. It was almost as though someone had recorded the man building the device and was fast-forwarding the playback. Brad Xyl was leaning in the kitchen doorway watching with a smug look on his face. From behind him there was the sound of carrots and potatoes being chopped and something else being stirred. Some very confused mutant cockroaches ran for cover. Time was a wonderful thing. Elastic, in a way all its own. People often say things like '*time flies when you're having fun*', don't they? And it dragged by at other times, when attending boring lectures for instance. Some people said things like '*yesterday this time it was four o'clock already.*' Well *this* is what they mean. The Herr Doctor must've been having loads of fun because he was working like a man possessed. After twenty short minutes at a rate of about an hour a minute (and a little high-speed swearing), there stood an impressive looking device of unknown function. To *Vluffy* (who had never seen so much go so wrong so quickly), it looked rather like something that would go '*woof*' in a minute. (*Vluffy* thought the only things that should

go ‘woof’ were dogs.) Suddenly, the elastic snapped back into place. The bubble of accelerated time burst. The Herr Doctor wiped his sweating brow with the sleeve of his lab coat. He turned to look at Xyl, who was still leaning against the doorpost, grinning at him with satisfaction. It looked just like he expected. Perfect.

“Is supper ready yet?” Asked Gleichstein tiredly. “I veel like I haf been vorking for hours now!”

“Oh yes,” Xyl replied, glancing over his shoulder at his other selves who winked at him and disappeared, a wok of carefully prepared chicken stir-fry simmering on the hot plate.

The canteen at the TSA building was called *Dinner Time*. Apparently the humor of the future (or whatever this was) wasn’t quite the same flavor as the one Gary Beck had become used to in his 30 or so years of life. Needless to say, it was lost on him. However, all this aside, he and Scooby were sitting at another table on the opposite side of the canteen from the one they occupied earlier. He was enjoying a hot chocolate, rather sullenly, as due to TSA regulations alcohol was not allowed while agents were on assignment. They were discussing the unfortunate events on Deanna which had resulted in their deaths.

The idea was to go back and make sure there was a different outcome.

“So how did he do that?” Gary asked, dunking the orange marshmallow under the froth with a long spoon. “How did he get to be two of him?”

“Well -” said Scrooby about to launch into an in-depth lecture of Chrono-Physics, which Gary called ‘gibberish’ and generally didn’t appreciate. Inspiration struck him. He made a slight adjustment on his little Remote. Gary recognized it as the same thing he’d used to bring him here the last time, from Peggy-Ann’s office.

“You taking a call or something?” He asked. Just then, two men came walking through the entrance and went to sit at the table they occupied the last time. He gestured with a nod in their direction.

“Take a look over there.”

Gary looked. Sitting at their old table was – *No!* He blinked, shook his head and stared. It was *him and Scrooby!* They were casually ordering drinks and chatting about Deanna and Brad Xyl and Scrooby was flaunting his knowledge of advanced gibberish.

“But- ” He began.

“It’s simple.” Said Scrooby. “We’re here *now*. But we were there *then*. “

"Yes, but that was then and this is now." Said Gary – who had thought that never the twain shall meet. "Isn't it?"

"Well, actually, right now, now is then." Said Scooby, messing with Gary's already shaky sense of reality. "I just slid us back a few hours."

He was feeling faint. Did his hair really look like *that* from the back? It made him miss his hat for one thing. He felt naked without it. It was on the table over by the *other* Gary and looked so inviting. He felt he could just walk over and take it back. But then, he realized; he couldn't do that because then – "Damn! This is weird!" He said, shaking his head.

"Do you get it?" Scooby asked.

"Yeah." Said Gary in deep thought. "I can't go over there and take *my* hat because then *h - I'd* hit me and I'd have a bruised jaw caused by me hitting myself. So we could interact like this? Without the universe imploding or something?"

"Yes, which is why it's never a good idea. Besides, the headaches are excruciating."

"It causes headaches?" Asked Gary, who thought a screw belonged in there somewhere.

"It does if you try to figure it out." Scooby grinned, as he slid the time alignment control back to '*now*'. The *other* them disappeared just as the waitress came to ask them if everything was all right. Gary didn't answer. Scooby just nodded and she left. This whole concept was – confusing. He'd never tried drugs, but he was sure the effects were something similar to how he felt now. He could remember a particularly bad concussion that came a close second a few years ago.

"You used that machine to do that." He concluded. "Then how did Xyl do it? I didn't see him using one of those."

"*Now* do you understand how dangerous he is?" He said, making his point. "He has found some new way to do that *without* any machinery. If we don't stop him, there's no telling what he will do next."

"So what's stopping him from just reproducing himself enough times to just –"

"You're missing the point." He went on. "All he did was summon his previous or future selves from different times - even if it's only seconds ahead or behind - into the same time and place. There's still just only one of him."

"No matter how many of him he sends against us, if we nailed any one of him, he still dies?"

Scrooby was suitably impressed. And he didn't even have to draw any pictures.

"*Bingo.*"

"So we try again?"

"Yes. And this time we try something different."

"So, no dresses this time, then?"

The stir-fry had made an excellent last meal. Brad Xyl was congratulating himself on a job well done. He'd achieved all his goals thus far. He'd found Gleichstein, a man remembered ironically for his adeptness for blowing things up by accident. Quite a fitting epitaph, he thought. Xyl befriended him in a very short time and convinced him of his latent talent as a scientist. It took a little work on the side of his newfound talents to unlock the man's creativity though. A little more help, and he had designed and built the device for him in a fraction of the time it would normally have taken.

"My thanks, Herr Doctor Gleichstein." Said Xyl, giving the slumbering figure a mock salute.

And the id – um, Doctor thought it would generate free power! Well, technically it would - without the help of certain modifications he was currently busy making to its inner workings. The anti-matter reactor would only be invented in another forty years time, by the rightful inventor (and so technically this was a breakthrough), but it wasn't going to be used to generate electricity. Oh no, Brad Xyl had other plans for it. Like an old fashioned nuclear power plant, this device was only one step away from a nuclear weapon. And he was busy taking that step right now.

"Stupid antiquated device!" He cursed, giving the laptop a smack. It beeped at him. (Figuring out the holographic mouse had been a challenge.) He hadn't seen one of those in a long, long time. All that was required was a slight modification to the control program, some alterations to the regulator subroutines. This was going to turn a constant level of power from a perfect balance between matter and antimatter into a runaway chain reaction that would consume the planet and very possibly the entire solar system as well. And where was the Herr Doctor? Fast asleep on the couch, totally oblivious to the changes he was making. Knock-out drops had their uses.

“Are you ready?” Asked Scooby. Gary looked round, licked his lips nervously and nodded. Jimmy was behind his control desk, in control of everything. The time jump platform disappeared and was replaced with an inside view of a very shabby lounge. Xyl was there, sitting with his back to them as they materialized silently a few feet behind him. Scooby had seen the part that came after this on the Projector. Xyl was about to start the machine and it would begin a chain reaction that would go way out of control and destroy the entire planet. (He remembered the two little moons as they were scattered by the blast, looking like balls on a pool table looking for the corner pocket.) Grim faced, he produced his Life Ender and lunged. He struck empty air. Suddenly Xyl was right beside him and delivered a powerful kick that blasted him into a wall. Gary stood in a knife fighting position, holding his Life Ender threateningly, albeit with a new respect for the device. Xyl smiled, while Scooby struggled back to his feet, looking for his weapon.

“Wait.” Said Xyl. “You look familiar. Oh – now I know, I killed both of you an hour ago!”

Suddenly, a second Xyl shoved him forward hard and the first one grabbed him by the arm that held the weapon. A hard smack and the device went sailing across the room. Then he was pinned against a wall above the couch, trampling a man who was either asleep or

dead. Scooby recovered Gary's weapon and went for the second Xyl again with one in each hand. *All it needed was half a second and a full contact to the upper body...* With a terrible, unnatural suddenness, Xyl suddenly appeared a step or two closer and delivered a killing blow. Scooby was a blur as he streaked across the room backwards and bounced off the wall. Moments after the impact, the crumpled corpse faded away on the carpet, leaving a struggling Gary Beck fighting for his life. Xyl was clearly a lot stronger than any mortal being had a right to be. *'Stronger ... perhaps...* 'He thought, struggling to maintain consciousness as the terrible pressure around his throat squeezed the life out of him, *'But – what... about... smarter?'* His feet were off the ground now, as the first Xyl had dragged him around the room pressed firmly against the wall. A well placed kick changed Xyl's expression of anger and determination to one of shock and pain in an instant. He released Gary and fell to the floor rolling around and clutching the same weak spot men had always featured as part of their intrinsic design flaw. Gary fell to the floor, gasping for breath as the blood and oxygen began to return to his brain. Just as he was trying to rise again, the second Xyl, angered by the shame of the first, grabbed him by the collar and hurled him against another wall on the opposite side of the room. *'I'm gonna die again,'* he was thinking as he shook his aching head, crouching on all

fours. His limbs were aching with exhaustion. He couldn't see a Life Ender anywhere, except for the leering face of the Xyl who growled "That really hurt!" Before coming for him.

Scrooby awoke with a start. He was lying on the Time-jump platform, gasping. His head was reeling and he felt like he had motion sickness. *'Again!'* The thought pounded in his head. Beck wasn't there. The concerned faces of Jimmy and Guy Krummeck were leering over him. They helped him to his feet, saying things, asking questions like "*You okay, J?*" and "*Agent Scrooby, are you all right?*" But he was past caring what they had to say now. This whole thing was going too far. They had tried it by the book and they'd failed. Miserably. Brad Xyl had written it and now he was laughing at them. They tried to get him and it had got him killed twice already. His – (what could he call Gary Beck?) *friend* - had been killed once already and was probably about to get killed again, and he wasn't going to stand for it! This guy was wiping the floor with them. He was going to destroy Deanna and the TSA and it would take so many UTE's to stop him or undo it he would probably still be away on assignment someday when the needle hit the stop at the end of the track.

“Enough of this bullshit.” He growled angrily. Brushing them aside, he strode determinedly to Jimmy’s console and sat down behind it. There was only one realistic option left, he felt. ‘*You’re never going to work in this town again.*’ He growled.

“What’re you going to do, J?” Jimmy asked, as they gathered round to see. Johnathan Scrooby operated the console and zoomed in. The two Xyl’s were giving Gary a pounding. He wasn’t dead yet, but he would be soon. It was similar to a Projector, but had features the other device didn’t have. It was called an *Editor*, and as you can guess, it could make *changes* too. Someone was going to end up on the cutting room floor.

The two Xyls were too strong for Gary. Hell, even one was too strong for him, and he was lying on the floor, with them taking turns kicking him in the ribs. That he was still conscious was amazing in itself. But he had the painful feeling in his ribs that they were toying with him.

“You want to die now so you can come back and Try Again Later?” They taunted. He winced as one of them landed another hard kick in his right side. The other stomped on his abdomen, winding him badly. He twisted and rolled. He was no fool, he could see where this was going. He lay there, moaning, trying to get his wind back. His eyes

were streaming. They were enjoying themselves at his expense. One of them picked up a Life Ender and chuckled at the other, who winked at him. Then, with surprising suddenness one of the Xyls simply vanished. The Life Ender dropped onto the carpet spinning and rolled. The other, clearly surprised, started glancing round in puzzlement. This was obviously not according to plan.

“What the - ?” He said, just before he winked out of existence himself. For a microsecond he swore he saw the image of Brad Xyl engulfed in bright flames. He heard a short scream just before he vanished and a faint smell of burning rubber hung in the air. For the first time, as he lay there on the carpet he noticed a pair of eyes looking at him from under the couch. *Vluffy* tilted his head at him and gave a little growl. The figure on the couch began to snore softly. All seemed to be well with the world, except for his dented abdomen and scuffed and abused body.

“Oh, my aching ribs,” he groaned, sitting up. He spat a little blood from the cut on his bottom lip. He liked the new silence, except for the ringing in his ears. It was better than the thump of the kicks he’d been receiving. He eyed the cracked plaster on the wall where he’d last seen Scrooby, and sadly wondered whether he’d ever see him again. What had happened to Xyl? Was he coming back? Was it over? He

crawled across the room to where the two Life Enders lay. *A fat lot of good they were!*

"I'd better take those." Said a familiar voice from somewhere behind.

"Scooby?"

"That's my name, don't wear it out." Said Scooby, smiling. He was standing over by the table, looking tired, but unharmed.

"You okay?" He asked getting to his feet. "What happened?"

"It's all over – we got him."

"*How?* He was just about to finish kicking the *ack* out of me and then he just disappeared."

"I locked onto one of him and pulled him out with the Chrono-Spatial Transporter."

"You've got him at the TSA?"

Scooby smiled. "Heck, no. I let him go."

"You – what?" Gary stammered.

"Yeah - right in the *center* of *Ramalama*. I doubt we'll see any of him again. At least I hope not."

He reached out a hand to Gary and helped him to his feet.

"Thanks."

"Don't mention it, *partner*." Scooby smiled, patting the boot marks and dust off his shirt.

"Partner?"

"Well, we make a good team, don't we?"

"Yeah, sure." Gary agreed. He had to admit he sort of liked Johnathan Scooby. He was kind of handy to have around for the times when, say, you got killed and didn't like it.

"So I take it Xyl was destroyed after he helped build the TSA and not before?" Gary theorized. "And the TSA is still around, then?"

"Well, I'm still here, aren't -" Said Scooby, and suddenly faded into nothingness. Shocked, Gary looked frantically round the room. Scooby had vanished! Questions overwhelmed his tired mind. Where was Scooby? Had this whole fantastic Untieable Knot of the TSA and the Buffer come undone? So where did that leave *him*? Was *he* going to disappear *next*?

"Ha! Just kidding!" Said Scooby from the kitchen door, grinning. Gary relaxed. Scooby turned his attention to the device on the table. The owner was sound asleep on the couch, oblivious to anything that had taken place around him in at least an hour.

"Time to tie up some loose ends." He said to the unconscious figure, "Sorry, Herr Doctor Gleichstein."

"Is that the —" Gary began, as Scooby leaned over it and began to fiddle. He nodded.

"Yup." He replied, wrist deep in wires and things. There was a faint click as he presumably disconnected something.

"It looks like a vacuum cleaner, sort of. With lights on it." The alternator sticking out on the side puzzled him.

"There." Scooby said satisfied, withdrawing his hand.

"It's disabled now?" He asked. Scooby smiled at him. "But what will stop him from trying again? Or building another one?"

"Trust me." Scooby said, giving him a conspiratorial wink. *'Sometimes a little foreknowledge is a wonderful thing,'* thought Gary — sometimes it was even better than hindsight. When they left, there was only one other conscious being in the room. Under the couch, Vluffy was of the opinion that he was *still* in the safest place and that he was going to stay there until further notice. He settled down, listening contentedly to the regular deep breathing of his master, until he felt safe enough to drop into a deep sleep.

The sky was ablaze with stars. *Ding* and *Dong* were in their usual positions for the early evening. Walking down the path, Gary recovered his hat from the bush it had landed in and his pistol too. Sighing with inward satisfaction, he secured it in its holster and

allowed the hat to settle. Curious how naked he felt without it. Mei thought it was a silly thing to wear, but it did have its uses, like keeping the sun off him. *'But not at night!'* She would often chide him before snatching it away and hiding it somewhere. How he missed her, he thought. (Scrooby declined the wig when Gary offered it to him, saying his short career as a drag queen was long over.) They stood outside in the quiet, celebrating the right to life, liberty and to not getting blown up. The pursuit of happiness was right up there too, and right now, he knew where his happiness lay.

"Is it really over?" He asked Scrooby, who had been standing beside him with his eyes closed. He was nursing a headache.

"Yup." He smiled back. "All things end and some ends are stickier than others."

Scrooby was reasonably certain what was on Gary's mind. Or *who*. He smiled again, offering his hand. Gary reached out and they shook on it.

"A little more of this and you'd be Time Agent material." He smiled. "Thanks, Gary."

"Thanks for what you did." He replied simply in the way of one who realizes he just got his life back. *'No bloody chance.'* He added mentally. He had enough of getting killed lately, enough to avoid

experiencing it on a daily basis. Still, it had been one of the more interesting jobs of his life. "Don't suppose I'll ever see you again, will I?"

"Oh, I think I might drop in now and then." He grinned. Gary flexed his neck and rubbed his aching body as he turned and looked longingly in the direction of town. A cold one was somewhere near the top of his list of priorities, but not *right* at the top. That spot was already taken. He wanted to get home. To Mei. The funny footprints had disappeared as if they had never been; just like the painless body he remembered having a few days ago. He began to feel how he thought Peggy-Ann felt that morning, with sympathy. He wanted to sit on the grass verge, call a taxi on his mobile and settle back to wait. Scrooby produced his Remote and grinned at him, saying "Can I offer you a lift?"

The cityscape of Atro City stretched out around her as Cindy-Mei Winter sat relaxing in a plush armchair by the large picture window of her apartment lounge. Fred had taken up her invitation to stay for a few days and found a place to set his pot down for a bit, over by the little ornamental fountain near the balcony door. Her apartment was on the 10th floor of the Tower Gardens complex. She was sipping an

apple juice, enjoying the picturesque view. Much of the damage caused by the Ruminarii when they tried to invade Deanna those short few months ago had been repaired. In the distance she could just make out the suburb of Lugaluru, where Gary lived. With sunset well in progress, the light of Ramalama was getting very low in the sky, playing on the surrounding sea of rooftops, winking at her. Everything had been perfect for her this day, nothing had gone wrong and she'd even managed to find a nice pair of shoes at the mall for tomorrow. She would meet Gary for breakfast as usual. She knew he was a busy man and anyway, it wasn't as if he worked office hours. He had an unorthodox job, and sometimes a dangerous one and jobs like that didn't punch time cards at 4pm every afternoon. She didn't call him on his mobile either because the ring tone might draw attention to him at precisely the wrong moment while he was in the middle of a case and she might inadvertently get his head blown off. She liked his head where it was – on his shoulders, thank you very much. She missed him the whole day since breakfast and wondered what the future held for them. But oh well, tomorrow was Saturday and they would spend the whole day together. She hoped it would be as nice a day as this one was. If not better.

"What you thinking?" Fred asked from his spot by the fountain.

“Can’t you guess?” She smiled. Fred could. He would’ve smiled if he had a mouth. He was so happy for her. Fred knew that finding love or happiness in this universe was an incredibly rare thing, to be treasured if found and remembered with fondness if lost. A little fish splashed playfully in the small pond at the base of the fountain. The sun sank below the horizon and effectively, night time began. There was a faint sound from the front door of the automatic locks retracting. The door opened and she turned. It was Gary. He was the only other person who had a key card anyway. He was standing there looking like he’d had a really tiring day. He took a few steps inside and tossed a bunch of keys and his hat on the open plan kitchen counter as he stood beside it.

“I thought you were working tonight.” She smiled, getting up and going to him. “I wasn’t expecting you tonight.”

“Neither was I.” He breathed as they hugged. She could feel the passion and love for her within him. She couldn’t smell any alcohol, so he hadn’t been to the ‘*Shock Diamond*’ for his usual after-work cold one. His lower lip had been split and there was dried blood on his shirt too. Something must have happened. Something more serious than usual.

“What’s wrong?” She asked, “Rough day?”

"I love you." He said, looking her right in the eyes.

"I love you too." She said. "Now tell me what's wrong."

"Nothing, now that I'm here, with you." He smiled. Tears were welling up in his eyes and he was holding her shoulders like she might be ripped away from him at any moment. She put her arms around him and laid her head on his shoulder. They stood there for a long while in silence, absorbing each others warmth.

"So." She ventured at last. "How was your day?"

"Shit." He replied, smiling. "It was *shit*. It was the longest day of my entire life." He realized she probably didn't know it was the honest-to-God truth.

"So far." She added. He tilted his head to look at her as she looked up at him and wiped the corners of his eyes gently with her fingers.

"*Your life, so far.*" She said, with meaning. He understood.

"Yes. It's not over yet." He answered, managing a smile for her. For them, life was just beginning. The first of many years together.

"Did I tell you I love you?" He asked, smiling as they playfully twisted their hands and fingers in a bout of finger wrestling.

"No, never." She replied, smiling at him with a bright light in her eyes.

"Well, I love you, I love you, *I love you...*" he said as they kissed and held each other with everything they had within them. They were together now and though she didn't know all the obstacles he had overcome to actually be there with her, she did know *he was there* and it was because he really *wanted* to be. She knew that, and for her it was enough. It was a Dream Come True. A life's dream. And probably at more-or-less the same instant, they realized they were happy. And everything was perfect.

"Did I ever tell you how much I love you?" He asked again.

"No," she said, quite seriously, "But the night is young!"

At 16 Leafy Lane Placid Waters, the lounge had filled with feint blue wisps of smoke which rose from the tops of what looked like four large matchsticks. One by one they fell over onto the carpet with slightly muffled '*plop*' sounds. The Herr Doctor sighed tiredly, exhaling more blue smoke, and coughed just once. He was sitting there, red-faced again. Instead of achieving the anticipated brilliant success, he'd once again demonstrated his astounding affinity for failure. It seemed so full of *promise* in the beginning. His invention hummed with power, turned the alternator at first slowly, then very fast. It began to glow until it lit up the room - before the device (together with the table top)

disappeared into thin air with a sound not unlike a thunderclap. He'd lost his eyebrows again too.

Mister Xyl was nowhere to be found, funnily enough. He'd awoken with a start and, not finding his benefactor anywhere, decided it was time to test the prototype alone. He wondered if he hadn't perhaps been sabotaged. To try to think through the complexities of human subterfuge was just too much at the moment. The laptop with all his calculations on it was gone too, with the experiment - wherever that was now. He was stuck right back at the beginning, with no notes to start over with – unless he just started over completely from scratch. He pondered that point for a moment, thought 'Stuff it' and got up to treat his minor burns in the bathroom. At least Luminous Paperclips didn't blow up in your face. (Well, not often.) If that's the sort of thing that he had to invent to make ends meet from now on, then that's what he was going to do. *Back to the vibrating molecules.*

"Whmm-mmm?" Moaned *Vluffy*, who was still hiding under the couch and was deciding (using doggy logic) whether or not it was safe to come out now. The look on *Vluffy's* face seemed to be saying '*I told you so.*'

"Oh – *shut up!*" He wheezed.

The skyscrapers were tall and impressive in their stately yet vaguely gothic architectural style. They were all classical designs, which was to be expected from old Chicago, Earth, late 1937. Johnathan Scrooby was taking his time to appreciate the breathtaking view. It wasn't often he actually got time to sit and enjoy the experience of entering another time, when things were much simpler and far less stressful. (If you didn't have to actually live there.) Funny looking old cars were rumbling down the streets on ridiculously thin little wheels, filling the air with noxious gasses and noise. These were the days when convertibles were common and hard tops and window glass were considered a luxury. People milled around him, busy getting their daily lives over with. In his time these people were all long dead and forgotten, and even the city didn't remember them anymore. Still, *now* was their time, when they were living their lives, fighting their battles and making a difference in *their* world. He breathed in deeply, savoring the (cough, cough) fresh air. He was the outsider here, popping in for a brief moment to avert yet another Time Terrorist Strike. He was presently seated on a heavy looking park bench on a pavement – *sidewalks*, the locals called them - and he was, quite frankly taking a break. The last case had been murder. Pretty much *de facto*. He needed a rest from all the stress, the continual UTE's and screw-ups. Getting killed too. It was beginning to get to him, just

a bit. Sitting here on the bench was another UTE. He had to come back and do it again. The reason for this was the charming gentleman standing on the street corner a hundred meters down the road, who was wearing a police uniform. He had been apprehended for jaywalking and for dressing in a manner likely to disturb the peace. Although dressed in a suit of a perfectly appropriate cut for this (and several other) time period(s), the trench coat was a garish tangerine color. (He made a mental note to pay the head of the Wardrobe department a visit when he got back. Just to have a little chat. With props.) When he tried to explain to the Law that he was dressed in a perfectly acceptable manner for Ursa Minor, the cop just thumped him one on the head with a truncheon and handcuffed him to the bench while he went to a call box to send for the paddy-wagon. This did quite cheerfully, wearing the self-assured expression of someone who had been thinking "*Let's see you get out of that*". (He also added a reminder never to try to explain Ursa Minor to anyone wearing a uniform again.) It was made of concrete with wooden slats, so the cop was pretty sure that he wasn't going anywhere in a hurry. He sighed wearily. What a pity he couldn't afford to sit there a bit longer to enjoy the rest. He took out the Remote. What to do? What to do? Cut the handcuffs with the laser utility? Or perhaps he could just cut through the wooden backrest? He could just call Jimmy for an immediate

retrieval and come back twenty minutes earlier to Try Again Later.
Whatever.

“Jimmy?” He said to the device.

“Yes?”

“Bring me in.” He said quietly in a relaxed and casual voice. “But be sure to bring the bench I’m sitting on too.”

“The bench too?” Asked Jimmy, slightly puzzled. “*Why?*”

“Just do it. I’ll tell you later.”

“Okay, you’re the boss.”

The street scene around him suddenly faded and there was the familiar feeling of being sucked through a black hole as he suddenly reappeared on the Time Jump Platform, still sitting on the bench. Only, he was facing the wall. Details, details. Getting up tiredly, he quickly severed the handcuffs with a short burst from the laser cutter. They clattered onto the floor. Jimmy left the confines of his cubicle, and was standing at the step, looking expectant.

“You okay, J?” He asked as Scrooby stepped down and yawned.

“Me, I’m fine thanks. Let’s call it a day – I’ll go back tomorrow.”

“You sure you’re okay?”

He sighed. "Let's just say I feel like an afternoon off. Heck, maybe even a holiday."

Jimmy was examining the bench. Concrete and wood. There was a wad of chewing gum parked on the side. The handcuffs were lying on the floor. Nothing special there either.

"J?" He asked. "What's so special about the bench?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?" He repeated, perplexed. "Then why did you want it brought along?"

"I just thought it would be really funny when they came back for me. Wish I could see their faces – I mean, can you imagine?"

Scrooby certainly could. Somebody was going to look really *stupid* when the paddy-wagon showed up. No Scrooby and no bench either. Just a vacant spot on the *sidewalk* - and funny looks and interesting explanations all round. He giggled wearily as he brushed aside a very puzzled Guy Krummeck and left the chamber. It was just too precious. If ever there was such a thing as job satisfaction, then *this was it!* He would check the Projector later to see the outcome of his little prank. Maybe he'd send it back, just in case somebody missed it or it changed something significant. Somehow he doubted it.