

PanDimensional Life

(a lighthearted tribute to some old friends)

"I beg your pardon?" I asked.

Josie smiled. "I said PanDimensional Life will operate in multiple dimensions. We are still in the process..."

"I beg your pardon? Operate in multiple dimensions? What does that mean?"

She still smiled, although it was now a bit forced. "If you'll let me explain. Recently scientists have found that some - not all, they can't tell exactly how many - but some authors actually access different dimensions, and their novels are based on what actually happens in those dimensions, rather than being made from whole cloth."

I blinked, then said, "I'm sorry, I'm still not sure I understand. Are you saying that, well, that Lord Peter Wimsey of the Sayers books is real?"

"Exactly! It's a bit difficult to follow - I don't understand the science myself, since I'm in HR - but our scientists assure me that it is correct. *Jane Eyre* is not a story but a history; Thornfield Estate actually exists in a dimension which Charlotte Brontë visited. Sir Peter Wimsey and Harriet Vane are real persons in what may be called the Wimsey dimension."

I thought about what she had said. Was this some elaborate joke? No wonder they had required a non-disclosure agreement. And it would explain why they wanted an actuary who was familiar with English literature. But still...

"Assuming that this is correct - and I'm not, I'm reserving judgment - what does this have to do with insurance?"

"We intend to establish branches in selected dimensions. Among other things, we feel our technology will give us a competitive advantage." She stood up and I rose also. "Come with me, please."

"Where are we going?"

"To substitute facts for appearances and demonstrations for impressions. We're going to talk to Arvad, the head scientist in R&D."

Arvad had greeted Josie and confirmed what she had told me. "This is fantastic, and, forgive me, a little hard to believe," I told him as we sat in his office.

"Yes, I understand you may find it difficult to understand."

“How do you - I’m not sure what to call it - how do you access these different dimensions?”

He picked up an object that looked like a bracelet which had been lying on his desk. “This is our latest test version of a personnel transdimensional personal transport device.”

“It looks like a bracelet.”

“That is by design. It will be worn by an agent who travels to different dimensions. It is meant to look like an ordinary bracelet so as to be inconspicuous.” He handed it to me and I took it gingerly.

“How does it work?” I asked.

“The eight axial parameters of the target dimension are entered using the touch sensors and the transfer takes place when the initiator is activated.”

“Eight axes?”

He nodded. “At least eight, though we conjecture there may be more. Of course, most combinations of the axes do not appear to contain a continuum, though we have identified several hundred combinations that do have viable dimensions, with more added each day. The device will only allow the parameters for viable dimensions to be entered, so no one will pop into a null dimension by accident.”

“That’s interesting - and a bit odd. There’s *nothing* at these blank dimensions?”

He smiled condescendingly and said, “In layman’s terms, yes, that’s correct. The ‘stones’ contain microchips, and are designed to look like semi-precious stones as camouflage. The battery is powered by the movement of the wearer, so it doesn’t need to be recharged.”

I peered at the bracelet lying in my hand and touched it gingerly. “Why does it have nine stones instead of eight?”

Josie said, “The parameters are entered in the first eight and the ninth is used to initiate the dimensional transfer.” She pointed to the last stone as she said this.

The lights suddenly went out and I sprawled on the floor - no, not the floor, it felt like dirt - and I heard a scream. I could dimly see Josie sitting beside me in the near darkness. She took another deep breath and I clamped my hand over her mouth. “Be quiet!” I whispered. “Don’t say anything.” I removed my hand and she slapped me. “Don’t touch...” she began to say furiously, but I clamped my hand over her mouth again. “Be quiet, *please*,” I hissed. “It’s important. We may be in danger. Speak as softly as you can. Do you understand?”

I could feel her nod, and I cautiously removed my hand again. “What .. what happened?” she asked.

“I have a feeling,” I replied softly, “we’re not in Kansas anymore.”

"But we weren't in Kansas."

I sighed. "Never mind." Suddenly a thought struck me and I felt frantically around me in the dirt.

"What are you doing?" Josie asked. "Hey! Watch it!"

"Sorry, it's dark. I'm looking for the bracelet," I answered. She gasped, then joined me in groping in the dirt. "Got it!" she said after a few seconds.

"Thank God," I said shakily. "Whatever happens don't lose it. It's our only way back. It must have been activated somehow when you touched it and it sent us here, wherever 'here' is."

"I didn't do it," she snapped. "It must have been you."

This was not the time to debate culpability; I needed to find out more about the process. "Why did we get transported?" I asked softly. "Neither of us was wearing it."

"Whoever is touching it is transferred. And you don't have to touch the device, but even each other - if you are holding hands with a person using the device, you both go. And don't ask why," she added. "I don't know. I'm in HR, not R&D."

We clambered cautiously to our feet and I glanced around. We were in a dimly lit twisting alleyway. Scudding clouds filled the night sky.

"It stinks," Josie muttered. She was right; the area was redolent with strange exotic smells.

"Have you ever been to this dimension before?" I asked.

"I haven't been to any dimension," she said defensively. "I'm HR, not some explorer."

My heart sank. "Can you get us home?" I asked.

"I don't know. I don't know how to program the damned bracelet." She held up her arm with the bracelet on it and we both glared at it.

"Do you even know how to enter the parameters?" I asked.

"No, but how hard can it be?" She touched the bracelet, and I quickly grabbed her arm. "No offense," I stated, "but if you go somewhere I intend to go too." We looked closely at it, and found that when we squeezed one of the beads, it showed a glowing number that faded after a few seconds. I gently squeezed, then pressed, some of the beads, and the glowing numbers changed.

"OK - I think each time I press a bead it increments, but not necessarily by one - that must be what Arvad meant..." I was saying when Josie clapped her hand over my mouth. I stopped, then heard what she had heard - voices approaching. We waited in tense silence.

"...must be careful and quiet," one of the voices rasped hoarsely. "The king's guards will slay anyone they find trying to scale the wall."

"It is not the guards I fear," another voice replied, "but the dark sorcery of Toth-mu, the holder of the jewel of the ages, who wields the true power behind the throne."

The first voice added, "Still, no one must know. If any sees us ... kill ... must..." The voices dwindled as they followed a cross street, and we relaxed. "They were speaking English," I said in amazement.

"Not really," Josie said.

"Yes, they were," I insisted.

"No, listen to me. When you travel to a different dimension, you speak the dominant language - it's a feature of cross-dimension travel. We hear them speaking English, but they - and we, as long as we are here - are really speaking ... whatever. Otherwise," she concluded, "the authors who traveled across dimensions wouldn't have been able to understand what was going on."

"Interesting. But what do we do now? You said you don't know..."

"Well, well! What have we here?" Another voice broke in on our conversation, and I could see starlight glinting on a naked sword. We had been talking too loudly, and the men who had passed us had heard and silently returned.

"Uh, we were just passing by," I said hastily. "We mean no harm." I could barely make out the shapes of two men confronting us.

The second man muttered, "Don't waste time. Just kill them."

"No!" Josie said.

"By Crom!" the first man said. "A woman, here in the alleys of the Maze!"

"A whore," the other said. "And her buyer. No loss. Kill them."

"No! We haven't done anything," Josie said urgently. "We're strangers here, and have, have lost our way."

At that moment the scudding clouds cleared and the moon illumined the alleyway. One of the men was a squat fat man in dark robes. The other, holding the sword, was a young giant, broad of shoulder with a narrow waist, with black hair and piercing blue eyes, wearing billowy pants and sandals. He relaxed and sheathed his sword in its worn leather scabbard. He eyed Josie appreciatively. She opened her mouth, but with a quick pantherish move the young man leapt forward, putting his hand over her mouth. "Quiet!" he hissed, and we waited. Suddenly the fat man grunted and fell forward on his face, a dagger sticking out of his back. At both ends of the alley men in gaudy uniforms appeared.

"Well, well! What have we here?" asked their leader. "Three more thieves?" Suddenly he recognized the young giant and smiled nastily. "Not just common thieves. We'll get a bonus for tonight's work. The High One will be very pleased." He gestured to his men. "Take Amra alive, but kill the others," he ordered.

The young man drew his sword and we pressed together as the guards approached. "You dog, Zoravo!" the young man shouted. "Afraid to draw swords with me? I'll see you and your men in hell before this night is over!"

"The device," I told Josie as I grabbed her arm. "Activate it!"

"We're not supposed to transfer in the sight of the locals..." she began, but I told her furiously, "This is no time to go all Star Trek. Just do it!"

"But I don't know where we'll go!"

"It doesn't matter!"

A second later the alley, and the guards, vanished. We materialized in what appeared to be a large, round pit - and we weren't alone. The young giant had materialized with us. He whirled and grabbed Josie roughly. "What did you do? Where are we? Answer me, or, by Crom and Mitra, your magic won't save you."

"Look, Amra, we saved your life, or at least kept you from getting arrested," I told him, tugging at his arm. I might as well have tugged at the arm of a marble statue.

"Well?" he demanded.

"Please, You're hurting me," Josie said. To my amazement, he released her. "Thank you," Josie said. "Look, Amra, I swear that we're your friends. I'm not sure where we are exactly, but we had to get out of that fight. We're not even armed. I promise that we will return you to, to the place we met, but it may take some time. In the meantime, we have to depend on each other. Your sword, and our magic. OK?" He hesitated, and Josie smiled at him, put her hand on his arm, and said, "Please, Amra." He smiled back at her and nodded. Josie told him, "Thank you. Right now we need to find out where we are. It's cold," she added.

It was cold - very cold, and the air felt thin, as though we were at a high altitude. I looked around. There were circular ramps which ascended from the pit, following the shattered remains of walls which in places were two or three stories high. There were also several openings in the pit leading to dark subterranean passages. At our right I could see what appeared to be a sled with a load wrapped in a tarpaulin. The day was overcast, and snowflakes swirled in the cold wind. Josie and I were shivering, but Amra appeared to be unaffected by the chill.

We approached the sled cautiously. Amra pulled back the tarp, revealing the frozen bodies of a man and a dog. Josie shuddered, turned, and walked away. Amra and I examined the items packed with bodies - food, books, gas cans, and furs. Something about the scene was familiar.

Suddenly a raucous hooting broke the silence. I spun around to see a flock of huge, naked penguins waddling at a furious rate out of one of the passages, accompanied by a noxious stench. On their heels oozed a huge amorphous something.

A scream suddenly caught our attention. Josie's retreat from the sled had taken her in the path of the fleeing penguin creatures. With a roar Amra drew his sword and leapt to help her, and then suddenly she disappeared. Baffled, he stopped, and my heart dropped. Abandoned, with no way home!

The amoeba-like creature had stopped its pursuit of the penguins, which vanished into another dark opening, and somehow I could tell it was watching us. "Amra!" I called, and he ran back to join me. "Where is the woman?" he demanded.

"That can wait," I answered. "Right now we need to get away from that thing, or fight it somehow."

"How? You don't have a sword. Do you have magic too?"

"In a way. Can you make a fire?"

"Yes. Will it burn?"

"We'll find out," I told him. Suddenly the thing began to approach us. "Be ready to make a fire!" I told Amra. I removed the cap from the gas can and threw it into the path of the creature, and then another, and another, until I had thrown all but one. The smell of gasoline was strong in the air. The creature approached us, flowing over the cans and spilt gasoline. We retreated up the ramp. I poured the remaining gas and it flowed down the ramp to mingle with the other gas. "Now, ignite the liquid I spilled," I told Amra as the creature drew nearer. He knelt and struck a spark. With a loud *whoosh!* the gas burst into flame. We were seared by the vapors, but the creature was engulfed in flame. It roared, shaking the ground, writhing in the the fire. We retreated further up the ramp. The creature reached for us with some flaming appendages, but Amra severed them with his sword. Finally the creature collapsed into the flames. The smell was terrible. We both turned and walked up the ramp away from the fetor.

What could we do now? Amra seemed unaffected by the chill, but I shivered in the frigid temperatures. Unfortunately, the sled and the furs it carried had been caught in the conflagration. The stench was too great to approach the still burning remnants for warmth. We kept walking.

At last we emerged from the pit. Around us stretched a vast ancient ruined city, partly covered in snow drifts piled up by the strong winds.

"Amra, about the woman ... " I began. He turned toward me. I started to speak, to explain that we were lost and trapped in this cold and barren wasteland, but we both started at the sound of a human voice back in the pit.

"Hello? Amra? Bob? Where are you?" It was Josie's voice.

"We're coming, Josie," I called to her, but before we could go back down the ramp she emerged, shielding her nose with her bunched-up blouse. Her clothes were damp, and she was shivering.

"What happened?" Josie and I asked at the same time. "You first," I said.

“Those things were after me! The only thing I could think to do was to get away using the bracelet.” At this, Amra gave a shrewd look at the bracelet. Great, I thought, what if Amra tries to steal it? He was armed, and much stronger than either of us. “I changed the last parameter and activated it.”

“Where did you go?” I asked.

“I don’t know! I ended up in the ocean, I guess - it was salty water. I could see land and swam toward it. Finally I got there. It was a lot warmer than here, it must have been the tropics because there was a jungle that began not far from the shore. I saw that there was a little log cabin in front of the jungle. I ran toward it to get help, but suddenly thought, ‘Take it easy, Josie, you don’t know who lives here.’ So anyway, I slowly went up to it. The door was closed, so I looked in at a barred window. I could tell it was deserted - there were leaves and stuff on the floor. Then I saw skeletons! I was scared, and suddenly I felt sure that something was watching me. I decided to come back to see what you guys were doing and if it was safe. What did you do? It smells terrible, and I’m freezing!” She was still wet from her plunge in the ocean and was shivering violently.

I started to explain. “We fought...” Then there was a thundering ululation from the pit that made us start, and Amra drew his sword in one fluid motion. I told them, “That must be another of those things we burned. Josie, let’s go back to that cabin. It *may* be dangerous, but this place definitely *is* dangerous, and it’s freezing. Get us out of here!”

We dragged ourselves onto the shore - that is, I dragged myself, and Josie was helped by Amra, who never seemed to tire. I appreciated the tropical climate after the cold of the last dimension.

We approached the cabin cautiously. No one responded to our hails. Peering in the window, I could see that the interior was a mess. I could also see the skeletons that had scared Josie. One lay in the middle of the floor, another on a bed, and a tiny skeleton lay in a hand-made crib. I could see weapons hanging on the walls.

We went to the door and tried to open it, but it refused to budge. “There’s no keyhole,” I said. “There must be some trick to opening it.”

Suddenly, with a roar, a huge ape leapt from an overhanging tree. It threw me aside and the world spun. When I came to my senses I saw that the beast held Josie with one massive hand and Amra with the other. It growled and strained to pull him toward its fangs. He held it off with one arm while with the other he plunged a dagger repeatedly into the animal’s body. With one final spasm, the animal threw both Josie and Amra aside before it rolled on the turf and lay still. I got haltingly to my feet. The fight with the fierce beast had taken its toll even on Amra, who limped over to the prostrate form of Josie. Her eyes fluttered as she awoke. “Amra,” she sighed, and then lay limp in his arms as he effortlessly picked her up. With consternation I saw that she was no longer wearing the bracelet. It must have come off in the struggle with the brute.

“Amra,” I cried, “we have to find that bracelet! We need it in order to travel between dimensions.” He carefully held Josie, who was slowly coming to, while helping me look

for the transfer device. Suddenly a racket from the forest alerted us to the arrival of more of the anthropoids. The sound swelled as the beasts rapidly came closer. Suddenly I saw the bracelet glinting in the grass. I grabbed it, randomly changed some of the bracelet's parameters, crossed my fingers, held Josie's arm, and activated it.

We were on a vast plain of sand under a scorching sun. I couldn't see any vegetation or shelter. The ground shuddered beneath our feet and a vast body erupted from the sand. This was getting tiresome. I changed a parameter and activated the bracelet again.

Darkness - profound darkness. "Where are we?" asked Josie.

"I don't know. I can't see anything. Amra - your senses are better than ours. Can you see anything?"

"No, Bob. But I have some tinder." I heard rustling noises, then a metallic clink, and a dim glow started. I could see Amra's face as he carefully blew on the smoldering tinder. "We need fuel," he said.

"What about the arms of my blouse?" Josie offered. "It's cotton - it should burn." I could see her tugging at the sleeves in the dim light. Amra reached out and effortlessly ripped the material, and in a few seconds we had a small fire. It cast enough light to see that we were apparently in a cavern that stretched before and behind us with no cross passages. The floors, walls, and ceiling were smooth.

"This is not a natural cave," Amra said. Then he held up a hand for silence. "Do you hear that?" he whispered. We strained our ears. Finally I could discern a far-off clamor, growing louder every second. "That sounds like a battle," he said. "I can hear the clash of arms and cries of the soldiers."

Suddenly the cavern resounded with a great rolling *Boom* that seemed to come from the depths far below. *Doom, doom, doom* resounded as if the cavern had been turned into a great drum. I could hear horns calling as if in answer to the drum beats.

Amra stamped the fire out. "No need to advertise our presence," he muttered. Meanwhile the drum beats and horn calls continued, and we could hear harsh voices. From far down the corridor I saw a small flash of light.

"I hear footsteps - many footsteps - coming closer," Amra told me. I could hear them as well. A number of people were hurrying in our direction, heading for the noise of battle. I heard Amra pick up Josie again. I groped for them and grabbed his arm. "Hold on, and I'll get us out of here," I said. I hastily changed some of the parameters on the bracelet, then activated it.

We found ourselves in an alleyway off a bustling street.

“Put me down, I can walk,” Josie told Amra. “And Amra, thank you.” He smiled at her as he put her on her feet but kept one massive arm around her shoulders.

I looked around as we emerged from the alley. By now our clothes were worse for the wear and I was afraid we would draw comments, but fortunately the inhabitants were all queerly dressed, with most in black robes. Small shops lined the street.

I stopped and looked around. “You’ve gotta be kidding me,” I muttered. I swung around to Josie. “Who,” I demanded, “chooses the books for which the parameters are calculated?”

She looked squarely at me and said, “Well, some are chosen by management, but most are selected by nerds like you in our R&D.”

I had no answer to that. “At least,” I told them, “I don’t think we are in imminent danger. So we will have time to think and relax, rather than just reacting. There should be - yes, there it is.” I led them to a small ice cream emporium, and soon we were seated at a table eating ice cream sundaes. This was a new experience for Amra, but he enjoyed it and soon had another. As we ate he told us some of his adventures, which sounded harrowing in the extreme.

“So how do we get back home?” Josie finally asked while we finished. “I don’t know the parameters.”

I stretched back in my seat and looked at the bracelet. “Let’s see...hmm.” Suddenly the answer came to me. I smiled and told my companions, “Any good actuary - or mathematician - knows how to get home.” I set all of the parameters to zero. “OK, let’s go.”

Josie glanced at the people around us and asked, “Shouldn’t we do this somewhere secluded, where we won’t attract attention when we vanish?”

“No,” I replied. “I don’t think we’ll cause any comment if we just vanish.” And I held Josie’s hand while she held Amra’s, and I activated the transfer device.

Things were still in a bit of an uproar when we returned to the PanDimensional Life building. I gather they had been trying to figure out how to locate us, and were glad to see us return. They were not glad, however, to see our companion, and told us so several times while we were being debriefed. Several people, including the CEO of PanD, Sheila Jackson, joined us.

“You are not supposed to even be seen entering or leaving a dimension,” Arvad scolded us. “And in addition, you have brought a traveling companion. This is not right!” Amra glowered at him.

I was tired of Arvad’s criticism. “Cool it,” I told him. “Without Amra, we would not have made it back. We probably wouldn’t be alive.”

“Well, he will have to go back. He cannot stay here.”

“Oh, please, can’t he stay?” pleaded Josie. “We could find a place for him.”

“For that barbarian?” asked Arvad contemptuously. “No, no, no.” Amra started to stand up, and Josie put her hand on his arm. “Please, Amra,” she said, “Let us work this out.” Amra snorted but sat back down. I decided to go on the offensive.

“How could you let untrained people handle one of those devices?” I demanded. “It’s like letting kids play with a loaded gun. You should never let anyone touch one of those things until they’ve been trained. We’re lucky to have gotten back!” Arvad had the grace to blush at this. I pressed the attack. “And even with training, you should only allow dimensional travelers the use of a device that can only go to the target dimension and return here. That way there would not be a chance of ending up in some strange and possibly hostile world.”

“He’s got a point, Arvad,” said Sheila. “From now on, I think we should use transfer devices that only go there and back again.”

I appreciated her support, and added, “Also, that way you would know exactly where to find your agents.”

Arvad was adamant that Amra would have to go back to his own dimension and Sheila backed him on that. “Arvad,” she told him, “give Josie and Bob a chance to say thank you and farewell to Amra. Then I want you to take him back.”

“Me?” Arvad asked incredulously. “But I’m head of R&D. I don’t go...”

“Then I think it’s time you did,” Sheila said. “Maybe it will make you appreciate what they’ve been through.” Arvad grudgingly agreed, and everyone left the conference room to allow us some farewell time with our new friend.

I took Amra’s massive hand in my own. “Thanks, Amra. We owe you our lives. And Amra,” I continued, “I think we’ve all learned a lot during our adventures, haven’t we?” I winked at him.

Josie looked baffled at my comment, but Amra grinned and winked back.

“Oh, Amra,” Josie sobbed, “I wish you could stay. Maybe - maybe I could come see you sometime.” Amra brightened at the thought, picked her up and kissed her resoundingly. They whispered to one another while I felt like the proverbial fifth wheel.

After a few minutes everyone tramped back in, and Arvad took the bracelet and beckoned peremptorily to Amra. “Follow me. We will go to my office so I can get the code for your dimension, and we’ll leave from there.” He turned and left and Amra followed meekly.

“So, Bob,” Sheila said, “are you interested in working here at PanD?”

“Absolutely,” I told her enthusiastically. “But only if my job includes dimension hopping. Unlike Arvad, I don’t want to sit behind a desk all the time while there are new dimensions to explore. I figure an actuary ‘on the ground,’ so to speak, would be able to assess risks and opportunities in a whole new way.”

Sheila shook my hand. "What you say has possibilities. I'm sure that we can work something out."

At that point we heard a yell from the next room, and Arvad came charging back in. "That ... that ... barbarian!" he shouted.

"What happened?" Josie asked.

"I had set the transfer device to go to his home dimension, and that... that..."

"Barbarian?" I offered. He scowled at me.

"Yes, that barbarian grabbed my arm before I activated the device, took the transfer device off my wrist, threw me aside, and vanished! Now we have an untrained hoodlum free to roam anywhere throughout the dimensions."

"If you had used a simple device that could only go to one dimension and return, you wouldn't have had that problem," I reminded him. He did not appreciate my comment.

Later Josie and I went to HR to fill out paperwork. "I can't wait," I told her as we started the process, "to get back home, go through my library, and decide where to go next."

"And who knows? You might run into Amra on one of your trips sometime," she answered.

"I think," I told her, "that you may receive some visits from our currently absent friend." She blushed, and said, "I wondered what you meant with that learning comment."

"I have no idea what you are talking about," I said and winked. "But I bet Amra keeps in touch."

"Actually," she said, "he told me that he'll come visit tomorrow night. He whispered it to me while he was hugging me."

"And that," I smiled, "should add a whole new dimension to your life."