

## The Impresario

*By*

Hank Quense

Rhonda Minestra walked into the office, and after shutting the door, grinned and bounced on her toes. "Sid, you'll never guess what my tarot cards said last night."

Her uncle and boss, Sid Glower, looked up from a report. "You're only forty-five minutes late. What brings you into the office so early?"

"The cards predicted...Visitors!"

"I hate it when you talk in capitals."

"I bought this on the way to work." Rhonda pulled a small digital camera from her large purse. "I'll take pictures of these...Visitors. That way I'll have proof to back up my story. I also have a notebook and a pen in my purse, so I'm all set."

Sid walked to the coffee pot. He was shorter than Rhonda and plumpish to her slimness. Mostly bald, he wore a tan wash-and-wear suit that needed to be unwrinkled. His eyeglasses perched on the end of his nose.

Rhonda sat her desk. "I wonder who it'll be. Time-travelers? Aliens? I think aliens would make a better story."

"I wish they would all stay away." Sid returned to his desk with a mug of coffee. "Whenever they show up, Earth or our history is threatened. And they never pay for our services."

"Well, I'm gettin' paid this time. By a tabloid." She turned the camera on and scanned the small office through the LCD screen.

An air current sent a sheet of paper skidding across her uncle's desk.

Rhonda panned the office, looking for the source of the disturbance. Her camera halted when the LCD screen showed a stranger sitting by the desk. She took a picture and moved closer for a better look at the stranger. He was in his early twenties, medium build, dark eyes and hair. He wore sandals and a loose robe covered with travel patches from places she didn't recognize. He smiled at her, then turned to Sid. "Zyd Klozerr?"

Sid shrugged.

The visitor dug into the pouch belted at his waist and extracted a brown ring. He handed it to Sid, hesitated a moment, and handed a second one to Rhonda.

At least ten sizes too big, the ring had a cool, metallic feel to it. Rhonda slipped it on her thumb and started as the ring resized itself to her finger.

"Sid Glower?" the stranger asked.

"Ohmygawd!" Rhonda howled. "A translator ring. I always wanted one. When I was a kid, I used to dump the cereal outta the boxes hopin' to find a translator ring."

"And you are?" Sid ignored her.

"Ded Lazar." He grinned. His teeth gleamed unnaturally white, the sign of a

staggering dental bill. He turned to Rhonda. "You must be Rhonda Minestra."

"What kind of name is Ded Lazar?" Sid looked puzzled.

"It's my kind of name."

"When are you from?" Rhonda knew a time-traveler when she saw one.

"About fifteen hundred years in the future."

"About?" Sid asked. "You aren't sure?"

"We don't concern ourselves with exact dates because time travel makes them a bit vague." He cleared his throat. "I need your help."

"Why us?" Sid asked. "How did you find us?"

"I want to research early jazz music and I found your space/time coordinates in the Intergalactic Travelers Guide. Several references in it mentioned that you had been helpful to others. So here I am."

Rhonda frowned at the threat to her exclusive story. "Hey. Does this guide book list other people around here?" They could be potential competitors.

"Not for this when-site. Will you help me?"

"I run the best lifestyle consultancy in the city," Sid said. "My services have a substantial up-front fee."

"Money's not a problem." Ded waved a hand.

"What is your problem?" Rhonda asked. "You look like your lifestyle is okay."

"It's not my lifestyle. I'm a singer and an impresario wants me to sign a contract with him."

"A singer." Rhonda clasped her hands. What a great angle for her story – a struggling artist.

"We don't usually represent talent, but what's wrong with the impresario?"

"He's vicious and his contract terms amount to slavery."

"So don't sign," Sid said. "I don't see what the problem is."

"He'll kidnap me and my band, then he'll torture us until we sign."

"A band?" Rhonda slapped her palm on her knee. This got better and better.

"Yeah. I'm the lead singer in a group called Luke-Warm Fusion."

"If this impresario is vicious, and I represent you, I could be endangering the world."

"Don't be silly, Uncle Sid." It would be just like him to screw up her big chance because of some imagined threat. "Of course we'll help him."

Sid scowled.

"Great." Ded Lazar gave Rhonda a ravishing smile that made her stomach lurch. "I'll be right back." He disappeared then reappeared a few seconds later.

"What was that all about?" Sid asked.

"After you agreed to help, I went back to the future to organize things. I had a recording studio built adjacent to your office. They started construction a month ago in your time." He walked over to the window overlooking Eighth Avenue in Mid-town Manhattan. "It's out here."

Rhonda peeked through the window. "I don't see anythin' but traffic."

"It's suspended in mid-air in a parallel universe. We'll build a portal in this outer wall in a day or two. Once I get all my equipment moved in, I'll give you a tour. It's a super-zwark setup. By the way, where can I get recordings of old jazz music?"

"My father has a big collection," Rhonda said. "Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington,

Dave Brubeck, Dizzy Gillespie. I'll bring in a bunch of CDs tomorrow." Maybe she could swap the CDs for an interview.

The impresario showed up ten minutes after Ded left. Rhonda's euphoria popped like a burned-out bulb. Seven-foot tall and at least four hundred pounds of rubber-like material covered in hideous green-gray slime, it had two, rotating, six-inch eye stalks and a cruel-looking beak on a bulbous structure that sat atop a tentacled body. Its stench, like spoiled meat, overwhelmed the office air-conditioner. Rhonda ignored the unpleasantness while she surreptitiously maneuvered her camera and took a picture.

The creature examined the room. Its eyes paused on Rhonda sitting at her desk. Palpable antagonism oozed from the creature.

Anticipating trouble, she reached into her purse and took out a folding stiletto knife, a present from a nice old Sicilian who had hired her father to whack a troublesome politician. Her father had taught her many of the skills necessary to prosper in the business world, one of which was the ability to act nonchalantly despite possible danger.

The alien's eyestalks turned toward Sid. "Tell me what I need to know and I will not bite off the top of your skull, suck out your brains, and spit them on the floor."

Sid smiled and replied, "Your generosity overwhelms me." He removed his glasses and polished them with his handkerchief.

Rhonda admired her uncle's ability to act under pressure. Even terror.

Both of them had learned to meet a hostile alien with calm strength. That was the only way they'd ever build a relationship with this pile of rubber.

"In appreciation of your generosity," Sid continued, "I will instruct my assistant not to slice off a tentacle, wrap it around your neck – where ever it is – and strangle you to death."

The creature's eyestalks gyrated to Rhonda who grinned while she cleaned a fingernail with the knife. She detected a momentary hesitation on the part of the alien. "You have a name?"

"Zaftig the Magnificent."

"Pleased to meet you," Rhonda said. "You look like a candidate for life-improvement services. Would you like to see a brochure?"

"This conversation is inane. Where is Ded Lazar?"

"Who?" Sid looked baffled.

"Do not trifle with me. I followed his time-trace to this when-site."

"Are you sure you didn't make a wrong turn and end up in this universe by mistake?" Rhonda continued to fiddle with the lethal-looking knife.

"I made no mistake. Where is he?"

"This um, Ded something," Sid said, "what does he look like?"

"Irrelevant question. All you loathsome humans have a disgusting sameness."

"Not to us. Please describe this person." Sid raised an eyebrow.

Zaftig smashed a tentacle on the floor. Smoldering slime splattered in all directions.

"Listen," Rhonda said. "I sense you had an unhappy squidhood. We can help you overcome these troubling memories."

"Where is Ded Lazar? You two have only pico-seconds of life left to answer me."

“What’s with the demands and the threats?” Sid banged his fist on his desk. “You barge into our office, don’t even ask about the consultation fees, and insist we give out free information. You and I are both businessmen. How about we approach this as a business deal?”

“Listen to me. I control the most popular entertainers in seventeen universes. I have started an operation in this benighted galaxy and Ded Lazar is the most popular entertainer here. I have to add him to my collection. Where is he?”

“Who?” Sid stalled.

“Hey, Mister Zaftig.” Rhonda wagged the knife blade in his direction. “You said you were new here, so you have no idea of the human condition. We don’t like to be ‘collected’.”

“I have no concern about what humans like or don’t like.”

“See. This is the kind of behavior I was talkin’ about.” Rhonda rolled her eyes. “You need a lot of work, Mister Zaftig the Magnificent.”

Zaftig glared at her.

“I think a diet modification could change your slime to a more neutral color. An earth tone, maybe.”

“Bah. I waste my valuable time here.” Zaftig bunched up the end of a tentacle and waved it under Rhonda’s nose. The stench was almost unbearable.

She slashed at the tentacle.

Zaftig barely pulled it back in time. “I have other business to attend to. When we meet again, you better give me the information I seek. Or else!” He disappeared, leaving behind a dozen scorch marks on the rug, furniture, and walls.

The rest of the day was a bonanza for Rhonda. Three more aliens showed up, following Ded’s time traces. One, a toothy fish in a tank of grayish water, claimed to be a song writer. Another resembled a mechanical troll and wanted an audition with Ded Lazar. Finally, a yellow-furred creature with a face like a fox, tried to sell her and Sid a sound mixer. These last two decided to play tourist for a while.

Rhonda took pictures of all three and filled several pages of her notebook.

She spent a sleepless night testing various ideas for framing the story. With so many aliens, there were a number of ways to start the piece. She needed an opening that would catch everyone’s eye. Should she lead with Zaftig, the vile impresario, or Ded Lazar the handsome and selfless entertainer? And then there were the three parasites trying to cash in on Ded Lazar’s popularity. How did they fit into the story? She had camera shots of all of them so they had to have a role, if only to justify selling their pictures to the tabloid.

As long as she could remember, her mother never went out shopping without bringing back a tabloid sheet. Rhonda started reading them when she was in the second grade, mesmerized by the dirt they uncovered about Hollywood and television stars. And the stories on alien abductions! And actual monsters living in New Jersey! For the rest of grammar school, she daydreamed about writing such a story and seeing it in print. After graduation, when she was a sophisticated high school freshman, she put the dream aside, but now it had resurfaced. Her mother would be so proud if Rhonda had a story published.

Sid, naturally, had other concerns, but he was fifteen years older than she, and

the elderly always thought differently than the young. He believed that Zaftig was evil and dangerous to the world. Who knew, Sid argued, what weaponry he had access to? Certainly, Zaftig didn't respect the values of others. His only concern was his own success.

Sid also worried that they shouldn't have allowed the two aliens to roam around Manhattan. He may have been right on that point. Rhonda did hear hysterical screams from the elevator after the two aliens left the office.

Finally, in an attempt to get her mind organized, she wrote down a list of priorities in her notebook. First, protect Ded Lazar from Zaftig. Second, defuse Zaftig's hostility. Third, get submission guidelines for all the tabloids.

Rhonda arrived at the office an hour-and-a-half late to compensate for her earlier-than-usual arrival the previous day. She plopped a CD wallet on her desk, filled with a dozen of her father's jazz recordings.

Sid looked like he also had spent a sleepless night, probably worrying about Zaftig.

Rhonda called her mother on her cell phone while filing papers in a cabinet near Sid's desk.

A man in a rumpled, ill-fitting suit walked in and sat down. He flashed a wallet with a badge. "Immigration. Inspector Wadley."

Rhonda stopped listening to her mother's gossip to concentrate on the officer. She had an inkling this could be about the pair of tourist aliens. What if the government leaked the news to the media? It would damage the exclusivity of her story.

"I have a report that you hired foreigners. I want to see their immigration papers."

"I have no foreigners on my payroll." Sid pointed at Rhonda. "My only employee is my niece here."

"This is true," Rhonda said.

"What's true?" her mother asked.

"I can't accept your unsubstantiated word," Wadley said. "I'll have to audit your payroll."

"What is this?" Sid spoke through clenched teeth. "You don't accept the word of a business man?"

Wadley placed his briefcase on Sid's desk and pulled out a thick form. "You can begin your defense by filling out this form IA-39/DX explaining why you believe you are innocent." He grinned at Sid. "Or perhaps we should say, not guilty?"

"Do you have witnesses or some evidence for these charges?" Rhonda said.

"What charges?" Her mother's voice had a hint of panic in it.

"Really? Do you think I'd waste my time if you weren't guilty? Witnesses saw two very strange people leave your office yesterday, and I want to see their documents, whether they work for you or not."

A buzzing noise interrupted and the room filled with the smell of ozone. "Ohmygwad!" Rhonda shrieked as she dashed to her desk to grab her purse. A girl can't go traveling without her make up and other essentials.

"What's happening? Tell me! I'm your mother."

"Gotta go, Ma." Rhonda disconnected the phone before her hand disappeared. She knew a transporter beam when she saw one.

They materialized in a room dominated by Zaftig's bulk. He looked even more belligerent. Wadley cried piteously when he saw the towering alien. Rhonda watched through hooded eyes. Transporting them to his ship meant Zaftig intended skullduggery. She fished around in her purse and put the translator ring on. Next, she found the brass knuckles, her father's gift for her twentieth birthday. She slipped them on her left hand, and held the switchblade in her right.

"So!" Zaftig rubbed several tentacles together and said in a villainous voice, "we meet again. This time you will tell me what I want to know."

"Pleeze!" Rhonda said. "Spare us your imitation of the bad guys from the old black-and-white detective movies."

Wadley tried to scratch his way through the ship's outer bulkhead.

"It's a violation of our laws to transport people without their permission." Sid wagged a finger at Zaftig. "I recommend that you return us immediately before you compound your troubles."

"Unless you tell me where Ded Lazar is, I will dismember this puny human." Zaftig stared at Wadley. "I'll start with his extremities and you will listen to his miserable wailing until you reveal what I want to know."

Wadley didn't have a translator ring, but he understood Zaftig's glare. "Save me," he pleaded to Sid. "I'll drop the investigation. I swear."

"I warn you Zaftig," Sid said. "Don't touch the man."

Zaftig wrapped a tentacle around Wadley's leg and looked at Sid. "What will you do, little human?"

"I'll turn you over to my assistant to do what she will."

Zaftig's eyestalks rotated to Rhonda. She smiled and tapped her brass knuckles against the metal bulkhead. She winked as the switchblade hissed open.

"So." Zaftig hesitated. "You insignificant humans have one thing in common with my vastly superior race, much to my surprise."

"And that is?" Sid asked.

"In both races, the females are assassins. Only an idiot would antagonize one of them." He pointed to the transporter platform. "Go. But this isn't over yet. No human will ever best me. If Ded Lazar doesn't quickly agree to my terms, I'll use your office as the target for a neutrino grenade."

Back in the office, Wadley quaked. He made several attempts to speak before stammering, "Who...who was that?"

"You are dealing with matters you don't understand, Inspector." Rhonda wanted to convince the guy to leave off his investigation before he blew her tabloid exclusive. "It's best to leave it to us experts."

Wadley nodded just as Ded Lazar walked through the Eighth Avenue wall. The inspector squawked and fled the office.

"C'mon." Ded Lazar beckoned. "It's finished. I'll give you a tour."

Rhonda handed the CD wallet to him. The smile he flashed weakened her knees. He led her through the wall.

She gawked at the size of the room. It extended half-way to Seventh Avenue and stretched from Thirty-Third to Thirty-Fourth Streets. At the far end, strange instruments

and three exotic, alien musicians filled a stage. She snapped a few pictures. The tabloids would throw offers at her! She also took one of Ded smiling at her, for her own use later.

Four black and brown objects occupied the entire Thirty-Third Street side of the room. They were trapezoidal in shape and crammed with three levels of variously sized, circular, metal devices.

Rhonda pointed to them. "What are they?"

"Planet Busters. I just got them. Each one has a dozen speakers and pumps out six hundred gigawatts of power."

"What are they for?" Sid asked.

"At concerts, we suspend them a mile in the air and five miles from the stage."

"Ohmygawd!" Rhonda took a picture of one. "Why in the air?"

"If they're on the ground, the base frequencies will cause earthquakes and landslides. You ought to hear the twangers on these things."

"Oh, please. Can I hear it?"

"Wait." Ded waved to the band. "Are the shields turned on?"

A bearded figure with four arms hit a few switches.

Ded turned back to Rhonda. "Got to have shielding on the instruments because the quantum frequencies generated by the speakers will bust up electronics that aren't hardened."

A muted hum filled the room and the floor vibrated. Rhonda felt her teeth pulsing.

At Ded's signal, a musician played a note.

Rhonda grimaced as pain stabbed her eyeballs, but it lessened when she covered her ears.

The music stopped.

"These speakers are banned on a lot of worlds." Ded smiled. "Too zwarky, aren't they?"

Sid cleared his throat. "About our fees. I don't think I can stand another meeting with Zaftig unless I have some monetary compensation to calm my nerves. The creature is about to do something nasty."

"Let's see. If I give you cash, you won't be able to spend it for a thousand years or so." Ded took a small bag from his pouch and handed to Sid. "This should do the trick."

Sid opened the bag's drawstring and poured a half-dozen, shiny, grayish-silver stones into his palm. "What are these?"

"Anti-diamonds. Very rare. They're made from anti-carbon."

Rhonda hiccupped and went into a spasm of coughing.

Ded pounded her back until she stopped.

She smirked at him. "Do anti-diamonds scratch anti-glass?"

Ded looked puzzled, but then spoke to Sid. "Perhaps you can negotiate with Zaftig."

Rhonda snickered. "Does one wear anti-diamonds to anti-social events?"

"Why the change?" Sid asked. "What are the terms?"

"I found out he can get me gigs in a whole bunch of universes that haven't heard of me. Agree to anything that doesn't amount to slavery."

Rhonda poked Sid in the ribs with her elbow. "Are anti-diamonds a girl's worst

friend?”

“I have to get back to work,” Ded said. “I want to transcribe the music from these CDs, then I’ll return them.”

Back in the office, Sid muttered, “How am I supposed to convert these rocks to cash?”

“My father can do it,” Rhonda said. “He charges forty percent.”

“Forty percent! That’s robbery.”

“Of course it’s robbery. My father is part of the criminal class, you know. You can’t sell this stuff yourself without gettin’ in trouble. Any legitimate gem dealer will wanna know where they came from and how you got them. My dad won’t have those problems. You have to pay for those kind of services. You’re family, so he’ll charge you thirty percent.”

“You can negotiate for your father?”

“Sure. He taught me how. Along with a lot of other stuff.”

Sid held up his hands. “I don’t want to know about the other stuff.”

The next day at noon, a beautiful April day filled with sunshine and mild breezes, Sid and Rhonda lunched at Antonio’s, his favorite hot dog chef. Antonio kept his cart on the corner of Thirty-Third and Seventh adjacent to Madison Square Garden. Sid liked the location because it was a prime girl-watching spot. Rhonda liked to watch the hunky guys stroll by.

Today, she had trouble concentrating on guy-watching. Sid was right – Zaftig was a public menace. His threat to launch a neutrino grenade, whatever that was, could upstage her story about Ded. Widespread destruction in the center of Manhattan would make her story disappear. She had to stop Zaftig.

A nauseating stench, even worse than the hot dogs, wafted passed her nose. Two old ladies screeched and fell to the sidewalk. The alien appeared in all his rubbery non-splendor a few feet away, his eyestalks taking in all the sights of the busy intersection.

Antonio fashioned a makeshift cross out of two hot dogs and held in front of him.

“Really Zaftig,” Rhonda said, “you have to work at making a better entrance.”

Zaftig’s eyestalks spun toward her. “How?”

“I think a neon-green bow tie would soften the impact of your slime.”

“What is this foolishness?” He turned to Sid. “I have news that concerns you.”

“Yes?” Sid said before consuming the last of his hot dog.

“I am no longer interested in Ded Lazar.”

Uh-oh, Rhonda thought. What was he up to now? She didn’t think the answer would bode well for her story.

“What’s that mean?” Sid asked.

Zaftig’s beak curved upward in what could only be a smile.

Pedestrians fled.

“I now have an exclusive contract with Moma Fandango. She’s a big entertainer in the galaxies near the center of the universe and the second most popular star around.”

“You’re settling for number two?” Rhonda tilted her head. “I thought you would work harder to get Ded. You’re fickle. How disappointing.”

"I know Ded Lazar is here somewhere and somewhen." Zaftig's body rumbled in laughter, like a cement truck stuck in the wrong gear. "Ded Lazar will be killed when I destroy this planet, then Moma will become number one."

Sid gagged on his hot dog. "Ded Lazar has authorized me to negotiate with you."

"I don't negotiate. I issue demands."

In her mind, Rhonda saw a tabloid front page with her byline on the lead story erupt in flames. She had to get her dreams back on track. "Zaftig, you aren't half as good a businessman as you pretend to be. You call yourself 'The Magnificent.' Obviously, that's an exaggeration."

"How dare you!" Zaftig roared.

"If you have Moma under contract, think how that'll play to your advantage once you sign up Ded Lazar. You can package the two of them in one show. It'll be a boffo hit everywhere. Eh," she waved him away, "why do I have to do the thinkin' for you? What am I gettin' out of it?"

Zaftig's tentacles writhed, three tying themselves into a knot that would make any boy scout proud. "I don't destroy your world?"

"Not good enough. I want a picture of Ded Lazar and you holdin' the signed contract."

"Let's go to my office and work out the details," Sid said.

Rhonda shuddered thinking about Zaftig walking down Thirty-Third Street to their office. She hoped a TV camera crew didn't pop out of Madison Square Garden. That would preempt any chance to sell her story.

By the time they reached the office, Sid and Zaftig were talking like old colleagues.

They walked in and stopped short. Wadley and four other suits were ransacking the place.

"Freeze!" Wadley shouted. "You are all under arrest."

"Treachery!" Zaftig roared. "I will destroy your world."

"Not now, Zaftig." Rhonda bit her lip. How was she supposed to get published if Immigration arrested and disappeared them all? She should run to save herself, but a real reporter would fight to save the story. So be it. She would have to save Ded *and* Zaftig.

A suit tried to handcuff one of Zaftig's tentacles. Zaftig hurled the man towards the Eighth Avenue wall through which he disappeared.

Rhonda had a desperate idea. She used her oversized purse like a club and bashed the closest agent. "Zaftig! Follow me. Ded Lazar will help us." She led the way to the portal.

In the studio, Ded Lazar and his band played a variation on Duke Ellington's "Take the A Train."

Sid, Zaftig, Wadley, and the others spilled in.

The music died as the musicians noticed the brawl.

Rhonda ran up to the stage. "Turn on a Planet Buster. Use more power than the last time. Quick!"

"Check the shields," Ded said. When the four-armed musician waved an arm, Ded aimed the remote and turned on a speaker.

“Sid get ready. Zaftig, cover your ears or whatever you hear with, but keep the Feds busy.” Rhonda turned to Ded. “Play a bass note.” She stuck her fingers in her ears.

Ded and the alien musicians put on industrial-sized ear muffs. He pressed a key on an instrument’s keyboard.

The room throbbed. Rhonda’s legs vibrated in time with the floor. Dizziness washed over her. She grabbed Ded’s arm to steady herself.

Wadley and his men moaned and tried to cover their ears, but Zaftig, with two tentacles wrapped around his head, kept tossing them around. Another note sounded and the agents collapsed to the floor twitching.

Sid screamed.

Rhonda almost keeled over. Only Ded’s strong arms around her waist kept her upright.

After three more notes, the agents were unconscious and bleeding from their ears.

“That’s enough.” Rhonda kissed Ded on the cheek. She lingered in his arms.

“Now what?” Zaftig said, interrupting her idyll.

“Let’s drag them into the office,” she said. “Sid, it’s time for you to put on an act. Tell them they’re walking on dangerous ground. You know what I mean?”

Sid nodded, grabbed Wadley’s jacket collar, and pulled him out of the studio. Zaftig collected the other four and followed.

On her way out, Ded handed Rhonda her CDs. She winked at him. “Sid and Zaftig have everything worked out.”

In their office, Sid and Rhonda were alone with the Feds. She couldn’t wait to write the story. It would be so fantastic, it might even become a movie. She would be rich and famous.

Wadley groaned and sat up. He looked around. “Where is he?”

Sid ignored the question, waiting for the other agents to stir.

“All right, Wadley, all of you, listen up.” Sid looked sternly at them, his arms crossed. “You’ve blown our cover and our masters will not be happy about that.”

“Who are your masters?” Wadley assumed the wary look of an experienced bureaucrat sensing a controversy.

“You don’t have the security clearance to know. And frankly, you never will.”

“What are you talking about?”

Sid stood behind his desk and increased his height by standing on his tiptoes. “You have intruded into sensitive negotiations with powerful warlords from other worlds. However,” his tone eased, “I’m sure all of you are looking forward to collecting your pensions. If any of you,” he pointed to each in turn, “ever mentions what you saw and heard, you can *all* kiss your pensions good-bye.”

“You’re bluffing.” Wadley grimaced.

“Of course,” Sid smiled at Wadley, “you won’t need the pension because you’ll be pulling weeds at a secret government facility for the rest of your lives.”

The Feds stared.

After a pause Wadley said, “And if we play ball?”

“My masters don’t have to know about you folks.”

Wadley nodded and stood up. He and his suits left.

Ded walked through the wall. "Zaftig and I worked out all the details. He wants me to relocate my studio to another galaxy. So this is good-bye. Thanks for your help." He winked out of existence.

Rhonda's cell phone rang a few minutes later. She listened and disconnected. "That was my father. No one will give him a penny for those anti-diamonds. All the gem dealers say they never saw the likes of them and they think they're worthless."

"So we get screwed again." Sid slapped his forehead with the palm of his hand.

Rhonda sat down at her desk and took out her camera. She activated it to scan the pictures. A few seconds later, her caterwauling shook the office. "All the pictures are gone!" She threw the camera at a trash basket.

"It must have been the speakers," Sid said. "Your camera wasn't shielded."

"All my hopes and ambitions, gone. Without the pictures, all I have is a science fiction story. Who wants to write fiction?" She sighed and sat silently for a minute, then shook her fist at the ceiling. "The next time somebody shows up, I'll get the story and the proof."

## Cage

By

Charles Richard Laing

Catching God is the tough part. It takes more luck than skill. I'm embarrassed to tell you how I did it. Once you've got Him, however, it doesn't take a very big cage to contain Him.

Oh, I suppose you *could* keep Him in a big cage if you really wanted to. When the Emperor-Priest DeSaWhing of the Lesser Morades had Him for a month, he erected a cage around the Crab Nebula by stringing lengths of barbed wire between the black holes, leaving Him a number of choice worlds to graze upon.

The Emperor-Priest DeSaWhing was a big showoff. That's what most people remember him for these days. That, and the Purge of the Fathers....

Me?

I'm not looking to impress anyone. We keep God in a hamster cage. It's that plastic one over on the table in the corner. It cost fifty dollars, plus tax. My youngest daughter Kasey's beloved pet, Mister Nibbles, lived in it for about two months before he made an ill-advised break for it. We looked high and low for him, but we never saw him again. We were all heartbroken when he escaped, so we never looked for a replacement.

It's fortunate that we didn't get another one. Perhaps it was fate. When I trapped God, I had this nice clean cage waiting for Him.

That was a little over a year ago. Since then we've really come to love Him. Can you blame us? Just look at Him. He's cute. He's quiet. He's clean. He's amusing. And He loves His little wheel. Sometimes He'll run in it for hours without stopping. Getting nowhere, of course. He'll run and run until sparks start to fly and creation starts to warp. He seems to know His limits, though. He always stops before things go too far.

I know what you're thinking. It's the obvious question.

The hamster escaped. Why can't He?

I wish I had an answer to that question. Frankly, I don't. It's something I ask myself every day when I read the newspaper. Look at everything that's happening in West Africa. In Canada. In our own South. What about the Middle East before it was bombed back to the Stone Age? God's got some real issues to deal with. We could really use His help.

Instead, I watch Him as He stuffs his mouth with pellets. He'll take as many as he can fit, then He'll store them in His little house. I don't think He eats them, though.

We aren't terribly vigilant. He could be free with minimum effort. Right now, however, He just wants you to play with Him. He likes the attention.  
Go ahead. Don't be afraid. He doesn't bite anymore.

## The Ghosts of Malibar

By  
Robert Bee

Matirsutrus shone full on the waters of Malibar, his face mournful and pockmarked as he crept along the canals. Arundel Visigotti, the Mouth of Malibar, watched from the palace's upper gallery as guests arrived aboard barges poled by their servants.

Several green-finned heads of mermen and merwomen bobbed in the silvery water beyond the line of barges. When a retainer walked in their direction, the mers darted under the water.

The courtiers sported every fashionable style: from jewel-encrusted gowns to silk shirts to the purple vests worn by the duke's immediate family. The Baroness of Coal Vein wore a headdress of wire and gold coins so heavy that one of her servants supported her while she walked. The Lord of Marmsby, a philosophic old gentleman, wore a plain tunic and hose, an outfit cheaper than the attending servants, showing the court he considered himself above their frivolity.

"What fools these people are," said a woman's voice from the darkness behind him.

He turned; no one was there.

The woman spoke again. "The whole court is blind, but not you."

At first, he could make only her bare outline, but she gradually grew more distinct like a painting after removing the grime from the glass. She was in her early 30s, with the Malibarian aristocracy's high cheekbones, long nose, coal black eyes, and lovely dark complexion. Her evening gown was designed in the previous century's style with tiny jewels glittering in the bone-colored moonlight.

Arundel had seen her face in one of the ancient oil portraits downstairs, but could not place her. "Who are you?"

"Nay, I always keep men guessing." She tried to touch his hand, but her fingers passed through him. "You don't know how unfortunate it is, not being able to touch or feel. Whenever I wake and remember the old pleasures, I long to feel again." She smiled at him and ran her hands over the curves of her insubstantial body.

"You could always journey to the other side, to your rest and reward."

"True, if a reward awaited me, but the crossing is uncertain and final."

"What has stirred the dead tonight?"

She faded out of existence. He could not help but wonder which of Malibar's past chamber of horrors the ghost derived from. Was she a murderess? A whore? An opium eater? He had spent hours talking to the ghosts of the duke's palace, many of

whom were so attached to the court and its politics that they still sought to influence human events.

When he turned back to the window, Lord Almore of the much declined Salazor family stepped out of his barge. As usual, he committed a blunder, wearing red hoses with a striped tunic, an outfit much appreciated two or three years ago. That impropriety was typical of the toadish Lord Almore, a squat broad-bodied man in his early 40s, his head sprinkled with moles on the cheek and neck.

Almore offered his arm and a compliment to the Countess Yolanda of Frithmore Manor, who was a great beauty much sought after by the courtiers. She had her pick among the upper crust and reacted to his interest by tossing her head. Lord Almore's face darkened.

*Ah, the petty cruelties and arrogance of the wealthy,* Arundel thought.

A servant entered the gallery. "The duke wishes to see you on an urgent matter."

"I will follow you then, my good man," said Arundel. As they walked to the duke's private chamber, the old dukes and duchesses, their retainers, and their murdered mistresses wandered the palace confessing their adulteries and crimes. Arundel had never witnessed the ghosts so stirred. He halted at the hallway's royal portraits and stared at the painting of the ghost from upstairs. The century old depiction of Franchise Marquise of Dalmort, daughter of the seventh duke of Malibar, portrayed a beautiful woman with her hair curled high upon her head and a silver gown adorning her shoulders. She was a notorious necromancer, her name invoked to frighten children. According to legend, she had obsessed over death and aging. Wishing to avoid humanity's normal fate, she had studied the black arts, prolonging her youth until her late 50s, supposedly by bathing in the blood of virgins. Although it was rare for an aristocrat to be executed, the state of Malibar deemed the depths of her depravity sufficient to publicly drown her for sorcery.

The servant politely coughed into his hand, drawing Arundel from his reverie. "My Lord, the duke is waiting. We must go to him."

"Very well," he answered, leaving the marquise's intense, sultry eyes behind.

In his study, the duke paced, his forehead creased with concern and his hands clasped behind his back. His only attendant was the captain of the guards, who sat bolt upright in a red upholstered chair, smoked one of the seigneur's cigars and drank port from a wide glass.

When he saw Arundel, the duke rushed to him and grasped his hands. "My excellent Lord Arundel, we are so pleased you are here. We will get our satisfaction now."

"I hope so, my lord." Arundel was taken aback by the duke's earnestness.

"You have done miraculous work in the past. We need someone with your sensitivity toward the royal family's concerns to discretely handle an important matter. We cannot stay away from our guests and attend to it ourselves. The captain will explain." He released Arundel's hand and refilled his glass from the decanter on a sideboard.

The captain had watched the proceedings with a close eye, no doubt fascinated by the duke's reliance on the Mouth. Arundel suspected the man fumed, but he showed no visible emotion.

"I have a barge waiting, my Lord," the captain said, setting his port aside.

The captain reminded Arundel of a predatory rat, the large Eastern kind that crept onto ships in foreign ports. He possessed the same funnel-like face with the glint of the torturer in his eyes. But the man was useful. On more than one occasion, the captain had extracted a confession from a prisoner.

“What’s this about?” Arundel asked the captain.

“We’ll talk outside, my lord. The duke wishes us to leave at once. With your permission, your highness?” he said to the duke, who nodded in response.

The captain led to a hidden canal under the palace. They stepped into a narrow gondola. When they were seated, a servant poled them into the canal.

Arundel saw the ghost of a dead duke, its mouth open in dementia, float to the canal’s surface. That was Duke Frederico, who ruled for several years after senility made his decisions dangerous to the realm. Eventually, the nobility drowned him in these waters.

“Is it true that you see visions, my lord?” the captain asked.

“What?” The ghosts were normally not this clear. He often went weeks without seeing one.

“You sometimes have your eye on something I can’t make out. There are rumors that you see visions.”

“What is this all about, Captain?”

“Wait a moment, my lord.” He made a circular motion with his hands, meaning the walls have ears.

The servant poled their gondola to a gate, and two guards raised the barrier. They floated into the palace’s rear canal, where they had the waters to themselves. Lamps hung from poles lit the way along the water.

The city exhibited little order, being a hodgepodge of elements from occupying forces and indigent trends. Malibar traded with the world, and its architecture imitated the world: the slanting roofs and statuettes of the Eastern baroque, the balconies of the Florescini, the frescos of the peninsula’s other city states, and the raised platforms in the native Malibarian style.

“How do you feel about the fishermen, sir?” the captain asked.

“I am in no mood for riddles,” Arundel responded sourly.

“No riddles, my lord. A watchman found a murdered mer.”

“Murdered by another mer?” Arundel asked.

“That would be convenient,” he said dryly. “We don’t know who murdered him, but probably not another mer. The killer cut up the body like a Cheapside butcher and painted the walls with magic signs--all with its blood, you see.”

Arundel let the implications sink in: the public controversy, the possible destruction of the delicate balance between the races. If the trade arrangements between the mers and the people of Malibar broke down, the city’s economy would collapse. No wonder the duke was disturbed and secretive.

“But not to worry, aye, my lord? I’ve seen you work on several cases and somehow you always solved them. Don’t know how. What do you call your method?”

“Inspired deduction. It’s a matter of holding the clues in your head until your mind hits upon a solution.”

“Incredible. Inspired deduction. I’m not an educated man, just a watchman who worked up the ranks. I started walking my beat along that street over yonder in fact,

cracking skulls with my sword and club. But after all my years of walking my beat, I can't do what you do. I hope to see you work miracles again. Let me warn you; the murder scene is not pretty."

The captain did not lie. The mer's body was gagged and strung up from the ceiling in an old storage area under a bridge, hidden from the causeway running past. A knife had sawed through the scales on his chest and through the breast bone, and the ground was strewn with blood. His heart was removed and partially burned in a ceramic bowl.

A scrap of cloth from an old fashioned woman's gown lay near the body while a mass of necromantic symbols were scrawled across the walls. Apparently, the symbols were written by someone who knew their import. They were correctly drawn, part of a spell to invoke or call forth the dead, which explained the palace ghosts' agitation. The sorcerer likely awakened a spirit for information. But what information? Was something buried nearby? Was something valuable hidden in the canal? Was a mer sacrificed because the secret lay under the waves? Guesswork, all guesswork.

*Who did this to you?* Arundel thought, gazing upon the tortured body, the webbed hands and feet tied to brackets in the wall, the green scales on the legs stained with blood.

Generally, after a violent death, the ghost remained near its body for a time. So Arundel patiently awaited its appearance. Over the past few months, he had handled several sensitive problems for the duke: managing to find killers and plots with little effort, developing a reputation for being a seer and a genius, keeping his ability to speak with the dead secret. He built a mystique for himself, and the duke paid him handsomely.

Near the body lay a piece of paper with a spike driven through it. The necromantic symbols silenced the ghost and closed its pathway back to this world. The murderer was prepared for him. Someone had laid Arundel's secrets bare. It would not be hard for the murderer to figure out that the duke would ask Arundel, the Mouth of Malibar, to handle this sensitive matter, but how had he known about Arundel's ability to speak with ghosts?

Silencing the ghost meant the murderer was a real wizard, not some neophyte playing brutal parlor tricks.

"Don't you want to investigate the crime scene, my lord?" the captain asked, watching him closely.

"Of course," Arundel responded and walked around the corpse, taking in the scattered blood, the hacked open chest, the bloody throat. He knelt next to the body. "The cause of death was a slashed throat, correct?"

"Is that inspired deduction, my lord? His throat was slashed, but he continued bleeding until the heart was removed. When the killer cut the throat he missed the arteries," the captain made a motion with his finger. "Perhaps he wanted to cut off his ability to speak."

Arundel felt the captain's contempt. He needed to rid himself of the man's poisonous presence. "I need a few minutes alone with the body. I can't concentrate."

"Very well, my lord." The captain left the room.

Arundel touched the body and tried to call the ghost back, but not even a thread connected the spirit and the body; not even a full séance would make it return. The necromancer had known his business.

The captain knew more about detective work than Arundel, but he could not trust him. Although they were both self-made men in an aristocratic society, the shortage of positions for men such as them made them rivals instead of friends.

He called the captain back in and ordered him to have his guards question the locals to see if anyone witnessed anything unusual. "But not a word of this to anyone," he instructed. "We don't want this to become common gossip."

"Aye, we don't want to stir up the mers, right sir?"

The next morning, the ghosts were utterly quiet as Arundel strode down the palace hallway. Although they were always less active during the day, their quiet demonstrated how powerful the necromancer's spell had been. They rested now, waiting for another pathway back.

Arundel had time to muse on these matters, for the duke kept him waiting in the antechamber for over an hour. His Lordship must be displeased.

A servant ushered him into the duke's private chambers, where the duke sat behind a massive ebony desk wearing a purple silk dressing gown, drinking tea and examining papers. Servants removed the documents he signed and brought him a new stack while Arundel stood patiently before his desk.

After meticulously poring through and signing two stacks of documents, he glanced up as if surprised at the Mouth's presence and said: "Oh, good morning, Lord Arundel. I hope you slept well." Arundel started to reply, but the duke cut him off: "We spoke to the captain of the guard this morning. Shortly after he left, a delegation of mers, led by their lord mayor, arrived here, irate and up in arms. Your plan to keep this matter out of the public eye has not succeeded, and we are most displeased. The mers had the temerity to threaten me, announcing no interactions between the races until this murder is resolved. They think this murder is another example of our disregard for their race, the slimy fish."

Seeing the pained expression on Arundel's face, he commented: "We're sorry, Lord Arundel. We forgot that you're one of their sympathizers. If you like them, if you love *us*, find the killer. Or at least arrest someone that will satisfy them without angering the aristocracy. Too much gold is at stake for the mers to stay beneath the waves."

After leaving the audience chamber, Arundel noticed the mers were missing from the city market. Normally, several would set up stalls selling what they had salvaged from sunken ships or pearls or seafood delicacies.

For all the city people's contempt for the mers, they depended on them. The mers used the coins they obtained from selling their wares to array themselves with ornaments, lavishly decorating themselves with glittering necklaces, armbands of gold and diamonds and bracelets of silver. This tendency seemed senseless when they lived beneath the waves, but on land they made a striking sight, covered with tribal tattoos and scars, with glittering jewelry all over their nude bodies, even sporting rings on their privates.

How did the mers find out about the murder? Arundel had little doubt that the captain released the information to undermine him. Since there was no other law force

in the city, Arundel had no choice but to rely on the city guard and place a contingent near the murder site. The murder site needed to be watched because if the necromancer's spell was not complete, a second ceremony would be held near the first before the full moon ended. Magic possessed its rules of symmetry; to violate them threatened the magician's life and soul.

Arundel stationed the guards in a circle, hidden in buildings near the murder site, each with a whistle in case he saw something suspicious.

Arundel waited on a rooftop ready to leap down at the sight of anything suspicious or at the sound of a whistle. An hour after the moon rose, a faint light emanated from an alcove facing the water. Arundel clambered down the roof, lowered himself into the water and swam to the other side. The light flickered against the alcove's inner wall only a short distance from the first murder scene.

Drawing his sword, he crept into the alcove. A short balding man draped in a necromancer's red robes chanted and raised his hands in supplication while clutching a bloody knife. Hieroglyphs painted in blood covered his robes and the wall. A dead man, his throat cut, lay on the ground before the necromancer, who chanted in ancient Malibarian. Arundel could not make out the words, something about the dead rising. Arundel's grasp of the older form of the language was imperfect, but he could tell the necromancer mangled the pronunciation and syntax.

*Wouldn't that destroy the efficacy of the spell?* he wondered.

The dead man's ghost hovered over the body, confused, still connected to this world. Soon, it would want revenge.

Arundel crept into the room. At the last moment, the necromancer jerked around and threatened Arundel with the bloody ritual knife.

The man's pudgy unshaven face was familiar to Arundel, but he could not place it. "It looks like you won't complete this ritual," he told him. "Drop the knife while you live."

Instead, the necromancer lunged at him. Arundel wounded him on the shoulder and retreated, not wanting to kill him unless he had to. If he captured the necromancer, the captain would elicit a public confession with his hooks and knives, and everyone would be satisfied with the course of justice. He blew the whistle.

The necromancer's eyes glared with fanaticism, and he moved in an odd jerky way.

*A sign of madness?* Arundel wondered.

He lunged at Arundel again with no regard for the sword's greater length, and Arundel ran the madman through, struggling against the strong man as he tried to drive the dagger into his chest. Finally, the necromancer gasped from the pain and fell to the ground, bleeding his life away. Arundel blew the whistle again.

Under the robes the man wore the uniform of a palace porter. That's why the face was familiar; he had seen the man waiting on guests at the palace. He recognized the victim also: a palace cook. Arundel would have the porter's room searched for evidence tonight.

The cook's ghost fled, satisfied that his murder had been revenged.

One of Malibar's traditions was the hanging and quartering of murderers, a punishment applied even if the murderer was already dead. The necromancer's execution occurred early evening the next day, a rapid ceremony the duke insisted upon to put this situation behind them.

Restored to his master's good graces, Arundel stood next to the duke in a place of honor, while around them the ceremony drew out Malibar's finest, who dressed for the occasion just as they had for the duke's ball.

A delegation of mers approached the duke: the lord mayor and several followers.

The duke brightened when they approached, "My good Lord Mayor. As always, we are happy to see you and pleased that our loyal follower found the killer. We want nothing to interfere with the love between our races."

The lord mayor smiled ironically. "We are glad that our lord has taken the murder of a humble mers so seriously. How convenient that a servant was responsible for the murder rather than someone higher ranking, which would have embarrassed the palace."

The duke did not lose a step. "Madness in the lower classes is a dreadful thing, but those lower born tend towards mental deficiency. That's the essential justice of our system."

The lord mayor's double eyelids fluttered. "Quite so, I'm sure, and Lord Arundel, as usual, has served you well."

"We believe the evidence undeniable, Lord Mayor. Arundel, please explain."

"I had some questions at first as well, my Lord. But not only did I see the porter conducting a sacrifice last night, this morning I searched his chamber and found manuscripts and books indicating extensive knowledge of necromancy."

"Where did he gain the knowledge?"

"That's still under investigation. Perhaps he's an autodidact. When I came upon him in the alcove, he mispronounced many Old Malibarian words, which suggests someone who has read extensively but with an imperfect education."

"But if he mispronounced the words, wouldn't that cause his spell to fail?"

"Maybe, but we don't know that all his spells worked. We only know that he sacrificed someone and then attempted to complete the ceremony." Arundel couldn't mention the silencing spell, which worked, without giving away his ability to detect and speak with the dead.

The execution began with a drum roll and the crowd's murmuring died down.

As the hangman trundled the body out on a cart, the crowd strained to view it. He placed a noose around the corpse's neck and jerked it into the air. After a few moments he cut it down, sliced its guts open and yanked out intestines by the slimy handfuls.

Much to his surprise, Arundel saw Yolanda of Frithmore leaning on the arm of Lord Almore. Although he found it difficult to keep up with the nobility's love interests, he did not expect to see one of the most eligible women of the court with Almore. Didn't she despise the man? He remembered her snubbing him.

The man was just as grotesque as ever, wearing all black, which was inappropriate for an execution. Malibarian fashion dictated bright colored clothing, celebrating the execution's justice.

*Where is the captain?* Arundel wondered. Surely, the captain would not miss the City's staging of justice. He finally saw him in his long, decorated, frock coat weaving through the crowd, halting next to an attractive woman and slipping her a purse. The woman smiled at him and brushed his hand before fading into the crowd.

Interesting. If the captain had a fancy mistress, he might need Arundel out of the way to move up. That would explain him providing information to the mers to undermine him.

Grunting and sweating, the executioner hacked through the corpse's limbs with an ax, which made a loud shattering noise as marrow splattered against his smock. He quartered it, hacking off the legs and arms with ten or so strokes. The crowd drifted away. Executions were less fascinating when the victim was already dead.

Arundel was troubled the remainder of the day. He knew what he had seen, but it was too convenient. The mer lord made him doubt himself. It bothered him that the spell was written perfectly on the wall, but the bumbling servant could not pronounce the words correctly. Furthermore, the silencing spell had worked. The necromancer knew what he was doing.

His doubts were foolhardy. The mers had returned to the marketplace and his position was once more secure. The duke had even invited him to a royal ball in two weeks. But the mers believed the duke was a liar and had failed their countryman; that troubled Arundel. The murdered mer had died alone and unrevenged.

That night, the last night of the full moon, Arundel hid across the causeway from scene of the first ceremony. He was not particularly surprised when he saw two hooded figures enter the alcove. Waiting until a light flickered against the alcove's inner walls, he followed them with drawn sword. The figures kneeled with their backs to him and their hoods pulled down, drawing symbols on the floor.

"Whatever it is you are trying to accomplish," Arundel said, "you have to finish the ceremony tonight, don't you?"

Both turned rapidly. The Lord Almore was surprised then angry, and the woman Yolanda of Frithmore seemed amused. Almore wore necromancer's robes under his cloak.

"You impress me. Lord Almore," said Arundel. "I would never have thought your knowledge of the arts to be so advanced. Even a mind control spell on a servant."

To his surprise Yolanda, whom he had underestimated as a flighty court flirt, did the talking. "I knew you were too clever to be so easily fooled, Lord Arundel. Sadly, it will only result in your death. Such a waste; you are a man I could have used."

Everything about her was wrong. Could the coy court tease be so monstrous?

Yolanda's posture, voice, and facial expressions had changed from the night Arundel saw her at the palace. He remembered the intense sultry gaze. "Are you happy you have a body once again?"

Yolanda smiled, her eyes glittering.

"Who are you?" Almore asked Yolanda.

"Don't you know? I am the Marquise of Dalmort."

The famous necromancer had found a way to return from the dead by possessing the young woman. The murder, the ceremony, everything was her plan to drive out the girl's soul and possess the body for herself. The mer's murder was

necessary because the marquise had drowned and resurrecting her was only possible with the sacrifice of an underwater creature.

"I know about you, the monster of Dalmort," said Arundel. "The court drowned you for blasphemy."

"I tend not to go by that epithet," she said dryly. "The court's superstitions stole my life. I experimented with lengthening life and resurrecting the dead, but my work was destroyed by ignorant fools. Now that I have escaped death I will not tolerate your interference. I bind you and I pin you, foot, head and spine to the ground; you are trapped against the ground like an insect."

Arundel tried to move but his limbs were stiff, his body pinned through the spine like a butterfly behind glass.

"Now kill him!" she ordered Almore.

"Do you really want to be seen with this fool?" Arundel asked her. "The woman whose body you stole would not have Almore, that's why he helped you return from the dead."

With a snarl Almore drew the ritual knife, a wicked curved elbow-length blade. "I'll enjoy skewering you. The duke will have to get a new shill."

The woman put her hand on his arm. "No, stay a moment. You intrigue me, Lord Arundel."

"Get rid of him," said Arundel. "He has no court status, and the duke will not speak with him. Marry me and we'll be the power behind the duke's throne. I can give you more influence in a week than he can in a lifetime."

"Intriguing. There are those that claim the Mouth is really the brain of Malibar."

She held Almore's arm, but he tried to push past her.

"You will stay and do as I say!" she snapped.

Almore blustered. "You are not listening to this are you?"

Laughing, enjoying her power over him, she said: "Why not, darling?" When she was alive, she was a legendary beauty, a woman men fought over, but she had been dead over a century and missed toying with men.

"You'll have to get rid of him eventually," said Arundel. "He's a joke in the court."

She smiled at her furious lover, enjoying her game.

"You traitorous bitch! You really will betray me," he snarled. "I brought you back from the dead."

"I taught you the spells. I'm not stupid enough to fall for his--" she began.

Almore raised the ritual knife and drove it toward her chest, but she stumbled backwards and hit his wrist, deflecting the blade so it grazed her shoulder.

Her spell faded with her concentration; Arundel could move. "Almore!" he shouted.

As the pathetic lord turned, Arundel ran him through, driving the sword until the hilt struck his gut.

Almore gasped, choked and clung to Arundel's forearm before sliding to his death down the wall.

The marquise was wounded: a trickle of blood ran down her shoulder. "I'm glad you killed him," she said. "He was easy to manipulate, but now I need a clever man." She grinned, showing her incisors. "Take me right here." She laid back, her legs

spread like a harlot and her eyes bright. "It's been a hundred years since I've been with a real man."

She had indeed chosen a beautiful body: nineteen, voluptuous, raven black hair, creamy white skin and almond eyes, one of the most beautiful women in court. But evil and beauty made a dangerous combination. Arundel might be a mercenary, but he was no one's fool.

Near Almore's body squatted a large clay jar covered with necromantic symbols.

"What are you thinking?" the woman asked, sitting up. "No you will not--"

He swung his sword and shattered the spirit jar, which had trapped the girl Yolanda's soul. They were to finish the ceremony tonight, trapping the girl in the jar permanently and giving the marquise control over the body for good.

"No!" the marquise screamed, kicking her legs frantically and groping at the broken pieces. Despair crossed her face as she ceased moving. Her head sank to the ground like a broken doll. The marquise's ghost would be back in the palace tomorrow, ready to work mischief, but Arundel would hire an exorcist to banish her to the afterworld.

Moments later, Lady Yolanda's eyes fluttered open, her face blank then clouding with confusion. "Where am I?" Touching her arm, she noticed the trickle of blood. "What happened?"

Arundel considered. She had no memory of her time in the jar. "You're fine now. You've been injured, but we'll dress the wound."

She glanced at the dead man next to her and her hand flew to her mouth. "Oh, that horrible man. I remember him kidnapping me."

"I rescued you after he kidnapped you and brought you here. He was going to sacrifice you." Telling her that was easier than explaining ghostly possession and her unwitting part in the escapade. The finicky girl was going to have enough problems understanding how she lost her virginity.

Arundel turned at the sound of footsteps. Two mers grinned at him: the Count and a large-armed hulking companion.

The Lord Mayor told Arundel, "You have more integrity than I realized. You found the killer rather than merely blaming it on a servant. That is better than your lord and master would have done. I'm glad you don't find our lives useless."

Arundel was startled and for a moment uncharacteristically caught without words. "I don't find your lives worthless. Do you find human life worthless? Instead of observing, you could have stopped them from trying to kill me."

The Lord Mayor replied in an even tone: "We do not interfere with one another's cultures. We keep to ourselves, except to trade and profit, which is best, you know. Besides, you didn't need my help, did you?" He grinned. "Nonetheless we will inform the duke that we are satisfied with your human justice this time."

Arundel spent the rest of the evening escorting the girl back to her villa and explaining the night's events to the watch and a weary duke, whose final comment was: "Are we to understand that you are through unmasking murders for the evening, so we can sleep?"

Arundel was once again protected from the vicissitudes of fate. He had satisfied everyone but the captain, who did not even get credit for the confession this time.

## The Autobiographer

By  
Leila Eadie

Edward thought he knew every part of the library, but he was perplexed to find he was wrong. He loved the library. Doing a research degree meant that he either spent his time with his head in a technical book, scribbling notes, or typing frantically in a stuffy office, so the calm and tranquillity of the library, especially the lower depths of the stacks, was a welcome relief.

He came to walk around, enjoying the smell of old paper hanging in the air and the dust motes whirling in the sunlight. Occasionally he took a book down from the tall wooden shelves, felt the velvety smoothness of the paper, ran his fingers over the inked hollows of the printing.

It was a good place to go to be quiet and at peace with oneself and the world.

Edward had almost finished his degree, and so had walked the aisles many a time. He knew the place like the back of his hand. Yet one day, as he roamed the stacks, he came upon an area he'd never noticed before. This was very strange, especially as he had *definitely* traced that same route many times.

It didn't look new, or even newly rearranged. The little cul-de-sac of shelves looked as if they'd been there forever, complete with dust and only enough books to fill about half of each shelf.

"Well!" he muttered to himself, feeling oddly affronted by this previously unknown area.

He walked in and pulled out a book. It was bound in strange leather, pale and slightly warm to the touch; he found the sensation rather unpleasant. There were no markings on the binding at all, bar a few discolorations, which he assumed were due to the damp conditions in which many of the older books in the library had been stored at one time or another. The leather was stiff, creaking as he opened it wide enough to read the title page.

"*Mr Timothy Queensbury*" it read, with a date: 1978. The book wasn't as old as he had thought. He sniffed at it. It didn't smell new. The pages didn't feel like the usual rough quality of recent times, more like the thin silky paper of centuries previous.

He turned another few pages.

"*I was born in the 1950s into a world simultaneously full of joy and disaster. My father was a doctor, a general practitioner--*"

An autobiography. Not his favourite reading matter. He preferred tales of adventure and far away worlds where the impossible was true.

He replaced the book, glad to release that strange leather, but curiosity prompted him to pick up another one. It was much the same: another autobiography, identical in

format to the first, similar binding, dated 1934. He turned impatiently to the last page and read.

*"I couldn't recall having been to this part of the library before, and it certainly did not resemble the Greek poets section that I was looking for. Strange books lined the shelves and I reached for one--"*

That seemed an odd way to end a book, even if it was an autobiography. He shrugged and replaced the book on the shelf.

They didn't seem to be arranged in any order. He found books from 1820 placed next to one from 1947. They must be a particular publisher's range of autobiographical works, he thought. While there had been obvious attempt to keep the bindings uniform, there were subtle variations in colouring. He turned over the one he held and stared at one of the tiny dark spots that he had seen on several of the books. He peered closer, and his primitive mind immediately knew what his higher intelligence would not consciously accept. It wasn't a damp spot.

*(That doesn't belong on the leather binding of a book!)*

His eyes flicked away desperately, seeking some distraction, but his gaze came to rest upon a very similar marking where his thumb branched out from the rest of his hand. His brain finally managed to send the appropriate signals to his hands, and he dropped the book.

The leather binding had a rich brown mole, the bump slightly raised from the surface.

*It's possible that other creatures have moles on their skin, he thought rationally.*

*(But I've never come across any – apart from humans!)*

He decided he must be mistaken, and reached down to pick up the book -

*(That's no way to treat books, dropping them on the dusty floor!)*

- and that was when the bookshelf jumped on him, crushing him to the hardwood floor. It grew heavier, the pressure building, the herringbone pattern of the floor etching itself into his face. His fingernails scraped the floor, desperately seeking a grip with which to pull himself free, but they accumulated only the dust of centuries before falling limp. Edward felt his bones break, ribs snapping, punching through his skin and as it became too much -

*(Too heavy! No room! I can't breathe-)*

- his vision filled with bright white sparks before narrowing from the edges inward.

The librarian heard the soft whoosh of something falling and, pushing back his chair, stood back from his desk and went to investigate. He slowly walked down the main aisle, listening for anything beyond the brief rustle of pages being turned and a cough or sneeze from the library's occupants. Nothing. He sighed, and silently stepped into the gap on his right. He contemplated the cul-de-sac of shelves. Nothing was amiss, not a page out of place. The ever-present dust lay unmarked. He started counting the pale bound books and took a step forward. One hundred and seventeen. One more than on his last count; he *had* heard something. He reached to the uppermost shelf and took the book that lay on top of the others.

*"Mr Edward Collins, 2006."*

He sighed once more, closing his eyes, and replaced the book on the shelf. He backed out of the dead end and returned to his desk to fill out a new reference card

which would join the others that had been kept in a small locked box since the library first welcomed in visitors.

## Pure Luck

By

Stephen L. Antczak

"Small people are tragic," Rain said.

Jule didn't know if Rain included him in that lot or what. He didn't really care. He nodded, thinking, *Yes, Rain, whatever you say*, and wished she would cut the breeze and sell him what he'd come to buy.

She stood at the window, looking down thirty stories.

"There are five million of them down there," Rain continued. "They all have their own small tragedies looming over them like dying suns."

*Dying suns?* Whatever. As long as she got to the point soon. His last bit of Luck had started to give out. He felt exceedingly uncomfortable in Rain's apartment. It was too clean; there was no detectable odor that he could remember each time he visited, nothing that would make her place seem even a tad familiar. The interior always changed, too. New furniture, new lighting (painfully bright right now), different pictures on the wall. Jule never bothered to look at the pictures other than to register that they were there. He watched Rain.

Even now, as he wished she would just do the deal so he could get the hell out of there, he was thinking, *God, she's beautiful*. He knew that her body had been bought and paid for in part with his money, but it didn't matter. Still beautiful.

She was long and cool, like Venus sculpted from the finest black statuary marble. But she moved with a fluidity that suggested she may have been born of the rain she had chosen to name herself after.

"Look at them," she said, but Jule didn't bother to join her at the window. He was almost hypnotized by the outlines of the body beneath her red silk kimono. He only half heard her words. "Flogging themselves with guilt, taking blame for all the things they can't control. They walk back and forth down there, and they think that all they really need is a little Luck."

Suddenly she had his attention by the balls.

"Luck," he repeated, smiling. His hand in his pocket, fingering a magnetized plastic chip of currency, ready to produce it in an instant.

"The price has risen, Jule," Rain told him, as she turned away from the window to look at him. Jule's heart sank. He didn't bother to ask how much the price had gone up because he'd brought exactly the amount it cost... *used to cost*. He tried to think of who else he could go to. There was Jaims Claybourne, but Jule still owed Jaims a lot of currency. Besides, Jaims cut his shit, and Jule was addicted to it pure.

*Addicted.* He didn't like to think of it that way. In the street they said an addict was lost at sea, drowned, and his body gone forever.

"For you, Jule, this one time, I'll sell it at the old price. This one time."

The chip was out so fast he almost dropped it. Even though Jule knew it was bad luck to flash currency before seeing the product, he couldn't help himself. He wanted to make the deal before she changed her mind.

Rain didn't even look at the chip, but she reached into her kimono pocket and produced a plastic baggie filled with little red capsules.

As was typical for Jule every time he saw a new supply for the first time, he thought it ironic that as a kid he'd regarded red as his unlucky color. Once, he refused to ride a bicycle his father had gotten him for his birthday because it had red stripes. His father wouldn't exchange the bike, and forced Jule to ride it. Jule immediately wrecked it, fractured his collarbone, and got into trouble because his father thought he'd wrecked it on purpose.

Now red was the color of the best Luck money could buy.

He exchanged the chip for the baggie, extracted one of the capsules. He immediately popped it into his mouth and swallowed it dry. (He had trouble swallowing pills as a kid, too. How things change.) Already he began to feel better, but he knew it was just his relief at having a new supply.

"Go, Jule," Rain said.

He felt his Luck kick in on the elevator going down. Suddenly it didn't matter that he didn't have any money left. Actually, it was a lucky thing he didn't, because if he did it would make him complacent, content with only a little, unwilling to lay it on the line for the jackpot. Now, though, he felt hungry for a challenge.

He knew that if he could make the right combination happen, connect the right dots, if he found a pattern somewhere, he'd be okay. That's all Luck was, and he didn't kid himself about it. It wasn't some supernatural force. It gave him the ability to lean into the wind at just the right angle and slip through without resistance.

Observe, analyze, act. No different than anything else, except sometimes it was just so subtle people didn't know what else to call it. Luck, Providence, Fate, Fortune. There were many forms, including a little red capsule you could swallow whenever you needed it.

He didn't have to go to Jaims. Now that was lucky. Jule was not on very good terms with Jaims. Besides the debt, their personalities clashed and they'd taken a disliking to each other from the beginning. Everybody knew.

Everybody knew that if you wanted the best Luck, you went to Rain. She was a goddess in the pantheon of users and dealers that populated Jule's life. If getting his fix meant that Jule had to prostrate himself before Rain and chant, he'd spend most of the rest of his life on bended knees growing hoarse. As things stood, he needed to go out into the world to obtain that most holy sacrament to exchange for Luck: currency.

Jule took the bullet to Underground, a tourist trap that still managed to maintain a little local color in some of its out-of-the-way sections. These were the sections upstanding locals warned tourists to stay away from. It was there that Jule could use his Luck to its fullest potential.

When the bullet stopped at the platform, the doors slid open and Jule stepped out. He noticed a penny - an actual copper penny - that he almost stepped on. He picked it up instead, and remembered a saying he'd heard as a kid.

*Find a penny, pick it up, and all day long you'll have good luck.*

Jule laughed. He didn't need a penny; he had the real thing. He let it drop back to the faux marble platform floor. Wasn't even good as currency anymore.

Jule noticed, as he walked by, women tucked their purses up under their arms, men felt back to pat their wallets. Jule didn't steal that way. He waited for opportunities, like the time he went to the bathroom, and walked out with a brand new pair of Spacewalkers, the latest fad in basketball sneakers. A careless shopper had set them too close to the edge of the stall, and got caught with his pants down, so to speak.

Had he not dropped out of Makata's Japanese Executive Discipline Camp, those Spacewalkers would've cost half a week's salary. A fine pair of kicks indeed, and they fit. Jule had actually considered not selling them, but before he could even make a decision, one of Jaims' boys, Cleaver, got to him.

It turned out okay. Luck came into play. The shoes just covered his debt to Jaims that time.

As he walked, Jule heard a familiar sound. *KUCHUNK*. He smiled. That had to be Sandy, stapling a flyer up over a movie poster. *KUCHUNK*. He rounded a corner and sure enough, all he could see of the movie poster was half the face of some beautiful actress. *KUCHUNK*.

The flyers, which were all the same, announced, "If the Lord asks you to resign, he means resign *all the way*." Jule had no idea what it meant. *KUCHUNK*.

"Hey, Sandy," he said, walking up behind her.

She whirled, gun ready to staple his eyes out if need be. Blonde hair tied back with a blue bandanna, tight blue jeans, white t-shirt knotted at the waist. It revealed her slightly round stomach (where Rain's was flat) and extra-wide hips that gave Sandy the appearance of a fertility goddess. When she saw it was him, she narrowed her green eyes but visibly relaxed. "Oh, it's you." She turned back to her work.

*KUCHUNK*.

"Got some more Faith," he observed. There was a stack of what had to be at least two reams of flyers on the floor against the wall.

*KUCHUNK*.

She turned back around. "What makes you say that?"

Jule shrugged.

*KUCHUNK*.

"As a matter of fact," she said, "I *did* get some Faith. But that's not why I'm doing... *this*..."

*KUCHUNK*.

When the movie poster was completely covered by flyers, Sandy hooked the staple gun onto her belt. Jule helped her scoop up the stack of flyers, and followed her. She seemed to be heading in his direction. It occurred to him that he shouldn't mind walking along with her no matter where she went. Sandy was his wife, after all.

"So how was your day?" he asked, trying to think of something domestic to say. *Day?* He hadn't seen her in at least a week.

"My day was just fine, thank you," she replied formally. She always acted that way when they hadn't seen each other for awhile.

It was his fault she was hooked on Faith. Jule accepted that. They'd been together early on, when he still had a future as a contestant in the rat race. Even then she used to say she had faith in him, when he'd come home weekends, worn out and broken from the intense Japanese-style training sessions. He'd cry, whine like a child that he couldn't take it anymore, that nothing was worth what they were putting him through, and she'd hold him close to her bosom and shush him gently and say she had faith in him, everything would work out.

That was why, when he did eventually drop out, she stayed with him. And when he fell in with the "wrong crowd" she stayed with him still, because she had faith.

It got to a point, though, where just having faith wasn't enough. She turned to the clergy, who gave her a first dose of Faith in capsule form, and that was that. Their Faith supposedly ensured a loyal flock for the Church, but Faith itself was nondenominational. By then Jule had already gotten hooked on Luck, so they decided that if they just had enough Faith and Luck, they'd be okay.

"Jaims came by the flat," Sandy said, as they walked. "Looking for you."

Even though Jule was riding high on Luck, a cold feeling entered his gut. "He didn't do anything to you, did he?"

Sandy was silent for a moment, then she sighed and said, "I had Faith. It doesn't matter what they did to me, because I had Faith."

So it had been pretty bad.

Jule discovered at that moment that it was possible to have Luck and still feel the burning of helplessness in the pit of his stomach, after-the-fact rage. He wanted to drop the flyers he carried, throw his arms around Sandy and protect her from what had already happened. At the same time, because of Luck, he knew that somehow... *somehow* this would work to their benefit in the end.

It had to. To look at it any other way would be too much, and would also mean that his Luck was bad. But if his Luck were bad, then he wouldn't feel so damn *lucky*.

"Anything I can do?" he asked, knowing there wasn't. On Faith, Sandy didn't need him, not in a physical way. "I love you, you know." He did, too; he just didn't know anymore what that meant. They stayed apart so much, yet they always had that bond of being married. That other part of himself always existed out there, somewhere... even without Luck he always felt truly lucky to have her.

Sandy stopped walking and looked at him, smiling. "I know you love me, Jule. I guess you're fortunate that I have Faith in *you*. I love you, too."

Jule felt uncomfortable again. This was one of those moments that felt too real, too honest. Jaims was real. What he had done to Sandy was real, and that it was Jule's fault was honest.

Jaims. It had never occurred to Jule until now that maybe he should clear himself with Jaims once and for all. Settle up accounts, pay off the debt. But the debt was so much. More than Jule had, even counting his Luck. Unless he could *use* the Luck to get what Jaims needed, to get him to leave Jule and Sandy alone.

"I'm gonna get us out this mess," Jule said, with as much conviction in his voice as had ever been there.

"I know you will, honey," Sandy said. "I know." She stopped at another board to staple flyers over the poster claiming, "*Hope-Cola, just one sip will give you a new outlook.*" Weak stuff, diluted from a Luck/Faith mixture. Jule had tried it once for a quick-fix but had been utterly disappointed.

*KUCHUNK.*

"I'm going down to the dog pits," Jule told her as they moved on to the next battery of advertisements. "I'll find you when I get back, okay?"

Sandy didn't look at him, but merely nodded in reply.

"Okay, then," Jule said, backing away awkwardly. "See you."

"Bye, Jule," Sandy said. She held another flyer in her hand, ready to staple, but she didn't. Her head was lowered, and Jule could tell that her eyes were closed, she was reaching inward for her Faith, for strength, even as he knew he would be relying on Luck to get him through the immediate future. He turned away from her and continued on his way.

A little while later, a woman he knew only as Martyr waved him over. Had he seen her first, he would have pretended not to and picked up his pace. She leaned against the wall of the corridor that led to the pits, dressed in a grey cloak and leather sandals, smoking a cigarette. As Jule approached she gestured down towards the pits.

"Don't go down there, Jule," she said. "Jaims and his goons are down there, and word is they lookin' for you. He gonna kill me for tellin' you... but I have to, even though you didn't come for the abortion ceremony or anything. You missed a party."

"You were pregnant?" Jule stared at her for a moment. "But you said you'd been *fixed.*"

I know."

Their liaison had been embarrassingly brief. Jule had felt lucky just to be getting some at the time, though. He'd been warned about her by a number of people. He should have realized there was a reason they called her Martyr. And she didn't have an excuse, no one made a drug for that... yet.

The thought of Martyr going through the abortion ceremony made him grin. Martyr being asked three times if she wanted the abortion, answering yes each time with the utmost gravity. Jule could see how Martyr might enjoy being subjected to that, with her disposition.

"Thanks for the information about Jaims," he said, "but I'm looking for him now."

He left her there, and walked to where he knew his Luck would be tested. En route he retrieved another hit from the baggie, and popped it. He considered taking a third, but after so many hits the effect couldn't be augmented anymore, and it became just a waste of Luck. Two would do.

Smoke, loud, thumping music, and the nightmare-inducing sounds of dogs killing each other polluted the pits. Not the kind of people Jule could imagine enlisting in a Japanese Executive Training Camp, but here he was one of them. He exchanged nods with several regulars, waved back at a few people who waved at him. He made his way toward the center of what had once been a gigantic nightclub. The floor he stood on was a terrace overlooking the pits, once a dance floor, where the dogs – genetically engineered monstrosities with alloy claws and fangs and shot up on pain-killing narcotics - tore each other apart for sport and profit.

The amount of currency from the pits lining the pockets of government officials ensured that they would remain untouched by the Law. The crowd surged as he got closer to the center, and through the music and the roar of the spectators, Jule heard the snarling, barking, and growling of a dogfight.

The bodies around him generated so much heat he started to sweat, but it felt good. Back in the game, in the action, a player again. He scouted for opportunity. If he could find someone to pawn off a little Luck to...

Ah, Lockjaw, who could never quite close his mouth after a run-in with Jaims' goons a while back. He always looked like he was about to say something, but he never did. Jule elbowed his way over to him and waved as he approached.

"Got somethin' for you," Jule said, raising his voice to be heard over the din of music, growling, yelping and cheering. He fished out a Luck capsule, holding it between his forefinger and thumb before Lockjaw's eyes. They widened.

"You got currency?" Jule asked.

Lockjaw nodded, produced a chip. Jule quickly calculated how much there was, figured what would be a fair profit, then fished out three more capsules and gave them to him, taking the chip.

Now he had something to bet with.

Things were going smoothly, better than he'd hoped so far. If his Luck held out, this could be his best night yet.

"Yo! Jule, my man!" a voice called. Deep, booming.

He recognized the voice and turned toward where it had come from. Muscled negro beneath a meter of dreadlocks. Flanked on either side by two more, bigger still.

"Hey, Jaims," Jule said. Without bothering to look around he knew there was nowhere to run. Too many people, no room to maneuver. Sardines jammed around the pits to catch a glimpse of the bloody canine spectacle.

Jaims and his goons waited for Jule to come to them, which he did because it was the only thing he could do. Besides, he wasn't really afraid that anything bad would happen. Jaims had already made his point with Sandy. Jule figured Jaims didn't like to re-state the obvious.

"Ah, Jule brother," Jaims said. Jule had heard that the island accent was faked, but if Jaims wanted to pretend he was a Rasta, let him. "I hear you've just come from Sister Rain."

"Good news travels fast," Jule commented.

"And you have good Luck, then?" Jaims asked rhetorically. "Perhaps if you handed it over, we could call it a goodwill down payment on your debt."

Jule's heart jumped. If Jaims was willing to take Luck and leave him alone, for now, then he would have to make the Luck he'd already taken work *now*, tonight, before it ran out. He rode the crest of two hits now, and guessed he had a good six hours left. Enough time? Of course! He stood now in his element; this was *his* life. Sandy had Faith in him, and that was more than enough.

He extracted the baggie of red capsules and handed it over to Jaims.

"I feel good about tonight, man," he said.

Jaims pocketed the baggie on the inside of his leather sport coat, and smiled.

A high-pitched yelp pierced the air, and the crowd cheered in a crescendo of blood lust.

"You say you feel good about tonight, eh, Jule?" Jaims asked, then laughed. "Aw, man, don't you know that's only the Luck talkin'. You don't *really* feel good, brother, not at all."

"What are you saying, Jaims?" Jule asked. He *did* feel good, he felt *GREAT* because he knew tonight was going to happen for him; it was *his* night and *he* knew it. He told Jaims as much.

"Yeah," Jaims said, after taking it all in silently. He scratched his chin with yellowed nails. "Now let me tell *you* something, Mistah Jule. There ain't no such thing as luck. I'm sick of hearin' about it, I'm sick of dealin' with you people who fool yourself and think you foolin' us, too. Time to teach you a lesson, time you see the way it really is! "

Then after a quick, barely noticeable nod from Jaims, his two goons grabbed Jule by the arms and dragged him backwards. Suddenly the sardine-packed people didn't present a problem to mobility, and Jule felt himself pressed up against the metal barrier that surrounded the pit. They lifted him up by his legs and held him over the railing.

The pit. Snarling ferocity of the mutant dogs. He looked back over his shoulder. The dogs – Rottweiler-sized pit bull terriers with hulking shoulders and massive wedge-shaped heads – had stopped fighting and looked up at him, expectant. Their short, coarse fur was splotted with bloody wounds, and thick gobs of saliva dripped from their mouths. Before Jule could say another word, Jaims' goons let him go.

He surprised himself by not screaming when he fell, and when he landed, hitting the blood-slicked floor with bone-crunching force on his shoulder, he managed to sit up. The crowd noise hushed. Jule was face to face with two dogs who had forgotten their personal differences and were now focused on him. Rancid blood and saliva mixed with the earthen smell of the dogs, hitting Jule's senses full blast, almost knocking him back. The dogs growled and snarled in a low, menacing tone, baring those alloy fangs that gleamed like stainless steel, the saliva splattering onto the floor, their eyes black and devoid of intelligence. They cautiously, but steadily, approached him. Jule reached into his pocket, hoping against hope he had something in it he could use as a weapon. And there was something: a small capsule.

He pulled it out. Luck. He popped it instinctively as the dogs closed in. The first dog grabbed his right forearm in its powerful jaws, easily snapping the bone. Jule yelled in pain. Fear consumed him. The monster dog shook its head fiercely, dislocating his elbow and shoulder. Pain shot like a hot spike into his shoulder.

The other dog lunged at his throat. Jule turned his head, recoiling at the putrid, rotting meat smell of the dog's hot breath, and felt the jaws clamp down on the back of his neck. He cried out. When was the Luck going to kick in? He didn't want to die. He wanted to live, to see Sandy again and tell her he loved her, to see the sky again, to laugh like he had, once before, so long ago.

Lucky for him, Jule knew he would be dead before his fear could completely consume him. Lucky. His consciousness shrank down to the final pinprick of thought, and he knew, finally, the pain would disappear, the anguish, the sorrow, the struggle of life.

As the dogs ripped the flesh from his crushed bones, Jule's felt nothing. He was gone, save for the rapidly diminishing realization of how lucky he felt to be...gone.

## Galactic Undesirables No. 3,231: The Con Artist

By  
David Redd

Kyril Ague, the only Diplomat Class passenger aboard the starship, hefted his zipbag and stepped out early from the exit valve, hoping to see a standard local reception committee. To his relief, three assorted sentients of Desdemona's World awaited him atop the raised scissors-lift. Not a single Galactic Fraud Eliminator in sight.

"Hi, folks!" Kyril waved cheerily, hoping that nobody would query his slightly non-diplomatic, neon yellow vest and jockstrap.

Unlike Kyril, the sentients wore paraDNA ID badges and looked professional.

A Steel-Age security cyborg labelled "Zog" faced him squarely. It loomed a neck-stretching 250 cimms tall, its pincers carrying both a Z-scanner and a photon blaster the size of an import from Schwarzenegger's World.

Equally impressive was a long-limbed, short-skirted native Dekapus hostess, unfortunately budding profusely at this season.

Finally, Kyril lowered his gaze to the short, rotund figure of His Excellency the Desdemonid Plenipotentiary Potential, Mr. Fred Smith, a gratifyingly unthreatening terrestrial wearing dark pin-stripes. Smith's only local affectation was a triad of extra eyes grafted to his forehead. Smith followed the usual interstellar routine and bowed. "You being welcome, Your Imperial Highness!"

Now *that* was the way to say hello to a fellow terrestrial.

Desdemona's World must not have maintained its subscription to the GFE "Most Wanted" mailing list.

Smiling, Kyril said "hi" back.

Instantly, the cyborg guard growled, "Hold it, Bud, while I frisks youse!"

Kyril stood still, happy to oblige any border official bearing a recognisable blaster. The Z-scan ray produced the familiar tickling sensation. Luckily, Kyril had been too short on funds to acquire any glue cylinders from the starship's duty-free stall. So, he was clean of the off-planet adhesives currently corrupting Desdemonid youth.

The hostess giggled at him. The name on her ID was some Dekapus squiggle which Kyril couldn't read, damn it.

He recalled his precarious situation and eyed the surroundings while Zog de-rigged the scanner. The scissors-lift descender propped against the starship was clearly centuries old, rusting beneath its flaking, plastic laminate. Its handrails bore posters for 4-D sensoria games, dubious hospitality pods, and amazing Dekapus underwear. The spaceport tower and reception buildings around the landing pad were a dingy grey and looked well past their demolish-by date.

Kyril decided it was time he took over the place. “Nice to meet you all, but this transit operation stinks. Who’s in charge here?”

He addressed his remarks to the Plenipotentiary, whose attitude seemed the most promising. (The hostess seemed quite promising too, balanced on slim, shapely tentacles, but those buds *were* rather advanced.)

“In charge?” The Plenipotentiary seemed to find this an alien concept. He paused there on the descender landing to consider the matter, heedless of dozens of Standard Class star passengers piling up behind, clamouring to be let off.

“Just as I thought,” Kyril told him. “Your planet needs me.” He boomed the words, trying to sound just like an Imperial Highness, even though he wore only the minimal fluorescent stripe of a Garbage Disposal Operative Grade 5b. (He hadn’t made time to invest in a clothing upgrade during his final dash through the previous Departure Lounge.)

Fortunately, Kyril could breathe Desdemonid air with no more protection than his anti-microbial nose plugs. Desdemona’s World was a Class I planet, the only one in Obnoxion Cluster, which was why Kyril had used his last auction gift voucher to grab a flash sale Diplomat Class ticket without knowing much else about his destination or his new identity. On a Class II planet he would have needed a full face mask and earmuffs, while for a Class III planet the massive anal plug required would have psycho-allergised him against star travel for life.

Kyril was an optimist. In his profession, or lack of one, he had to be.

He ignored the shouts of the sentients behind him who had paid cash, bartered, or sold body parts for their tickets, and addressed Smith. “I did a quick Elgoog about your planet on the way over, and I found out you run everything by committee here, right? You never decide anything, so your whole social organisation is falling to pieces. You need help. I suggest you invite me down to the Chief Executive Lounge for a business discussion, okay?”

The hostess giggled again. Her buds were actually quite cute when they all rippled together like that.

The Plenipotentiary said, “I have learned enough for me to being assume full potential powers. Please being – pardon my tenses – please be accompanying me, Your Imperial Highness!”

Kyril was in. He and his three escorts descended followed by the rather noisy Standard Class passengers from Obnoxion-D, all here for a Manchester United match, who didn’t understand why some insignificant little Two-Eyes should be allowed to disembark before them. Luckily, most of their complaints were at supersonic frequencies which didn’t trouble Kyril except that the harmonic resonances made his teeth ache. He responded with a local gesture learned from Elgoog, directing all Many-Eyes to spawn off-planet.

He jogged across the spaceport runway just ahead of his Obnoxion-D pursuers, dived into a waiting medical tender, and collapsed flat out to recover his breath. The vehicle ferried him and his welcome committee to the terminal complex. Sitting up, he gazed with distaste at the tall, needle spire of the Control Tower and at the dated, shoebox buildings alongside it. The plastisteel walls were dulled to semi-transparency rather than the gleaming see-through brightness of other planetary reception areas he recalled fleeing through.

Clearly, the space transit organisation on Desdemona's World needed a good shake-up. The guy who reorganised this spaceport could cream off at least 20% of the landing taxes for half a planetary revolution or more. Who better than Kyril Ague to help out the Desdemonids? As long as he could state the name on his ticket in time to sign the contract.

Reclining comfortably on a support stretcher, Kyril accepted a prescription of medical alcohol, and tickled the hostess under her upper tentacles. He tried chatting her up in what he hoped was current local slang. "Prithee, chickadee, art thou on permanent assignment to Diplomat-Class starfolk?"

She nodded and winked several eyes at him.

Staying on this planet might be real fun, except that eventually the "Most Wanted" bulletins would start getting through.

The medical tender circled, looking for a reserved parking gap not already illegally occupied. Gap-napping was not a frying offence in this cluster yet, mainly because government officials generally had bud-hosts, or young female "relatives," who needed to park close to the highest quality stores. Finally, the driver carved past a returning fire hose vehicle to claim a wide space outside the main hospitality suites.

Kyril smiled appreciatively. It was great simply to be waved through everything. The ordinary passengers had to go through the usual inspection routine, losing their baggage, suffering bacterial activity checks, filling in immigration forms with questions like, *Are you smuggling illegal contact adhesives? or Do you intend to perform assassinations and/or sabotage during your vacation?* Tricky stuff.

Diplomats, however, bypassed all that, and were chauffeured to their destinations totally unchecked until such time as they were booted off-planet for being dirty little spies all along. All he had to do now was show the Plenipotentiary why Kyril Ague was the best thing to hit Desdemona's World since, oh, Desdemona herself.

Except that he still hadn't found his ticket.

He hadn't even managed to scrutinize his new identity, only having had time to flash the ticket briefly at Customs officials as he raced for the departure point ahead of the GFE heavies. Kyril surreptitiously felt around his zipbag, but his belongings were still zipped down to the size of tiny ball-bearings – mandatory for transit – and he couldn't tell them apart. No matter. When he had a moment, he'd open the catalogue tag and restore his ticket to its normal size and mass.

Meanwhile, he called for another surgical spirit.

A few minutes later, Kyril was in the Chief Executive Lounge under a holo of the First Contact between Desdemona and a native Dekapus giving her the local equivalent of a friendly handshake. The scene was familiar from porn sites everywhere.

Kyril sat at one of several round, plastisteel tables. Was plastisteel in everything? He'd better tax it out of existence and get some really neat modern biofarm materials here instead. How behind the times could you get, even in Obnoxion Cluster?

He glanced at the other tables, and was reassured to see noble Chief Executive Officers sipping exotic martinis, interviewing new secretaries, sniffing at No-More-Nails dispensers, and generally doing all the routine tasks that noble Chief Executive Officers did. Kyril sat back while the cyborg stood guard beside him, pleasingly like any other cyborg on duty beside some really important guy. The hostess slithered to the bar for drinks.

The décor was cool, simulated ice-floes in fact, enhanced by glass pots of newly de-merged Dekapus buds which aroused his latent paedophile tendencies. He hurriedly looked away.

When the drinks arrived, he refused an offer of sprinkle-on epoxy resin and confined himself to sipping a straight, Earth-type martini, aerated not flocculated.

“Right, Mister Plenipotentiary, I can see your spaceport needs a good boost into the thirty-fourth century! Can you set up meetings with all your relevant CEOs so’s I can offer you the deal?”

Smith wrinkled what remained of his forehead. “But the only CEOs we have are you Two-Eye – I mean – you off-planet guests. You are being aware that all our policies are shaped by committee, according to established routines. Each sphere of commercial or infrastructure activity being under a committee of 100 nominated area representatives.”

Kyril frowned back. This might be a three-martini problem.

“I’m new to your cherished local traditions. Meetings attended by that many folks would get quite cumbersome back home. Tell me, exactly how does a committee of 100 people make any progress?”

“The committee delegates to a sub-committee which carries out all the necessary research duties, meetings, planning exercises, public consultations, study visits, and weekend conferences in the tropics, expenses paid. The sub-committee has to identify the most appropriate neighbouring committee affected by the current activity and then works with them to instigate a Joint Standing Committee.”

At least Kyril understood the last few words. “A Joint Standing Committee? What does that do?”

“It delegates to a sub-committee.”

Kyril thought for a while. He could recognise the normal processes of galactic administration at work, but one obvious question needed asking. “How in heck does anyone in this dump actually make a decision?”

“Please, lower your voice, Your Imperial Highness, in case less broad-minded sentients hear your vocabulary. Let me assure you, all Desdemonid officials being fully trained in the best-practice governmental routines of Old Earth. Nobody here being, ah, nobody here has come to a deci...one of *those* since colonisation.”

“That explains a lot,” said Kyril.

Working the old spaceport scam on these guys might be trickier than he’d thought. Persuading people to believe him was the easy part; the title he’d bought seemed worthy of power. But, how could anyone on this planet decide about handing it to him?

Kyril looked at the security guard. “Hey, Zog, what way do you make a decision?”

“Don’t need no decisions. Anyone needs blastin’, like for talkin’ dirty, I just blast ‘em.”

“There’s a good cyborg. Stand at ease for a while, okay?”

He asked the hostess, little Miss Squiggle ID, how she made a decision.

Between giggles, she said she wasn’t that kind of girl. “Just being following routine. Customer being always right!” A great commercial policy, especially in a hot Desdemonid hostess, but it didn’t help him find out how to negotiate towards a result with anyone. He turned back to the Plenipotentiary, Mr. Fred Smith, whose top three

eyes had swivelled towards a nearby bud with a particularly delicate, light blue ectoderm. “Your Excellency!”

The little man in pin-stripes started guiltily, and received a reproving tentacle-flick from the hostess.

Kyril concentrated on making his pitch. “Now then, Mr. Smith, being an Imperial Highness I’d like to help you people on Desdemona’s World with your spaceport. It could do with a total revamp and a decent ad budget for a start. Spaceports are the number one key to trade and prosperity, you know, and I’m a galactic expert on spaceports.” He was certainly an expert on sleeping in their garbage facilities. “I understand, Mr. Smith, that this is the only spaceport on the planet, and it is run by a committee.”

“Actually, it being run by a sub-committee of the Joint Standing Committee appointed by twin working groups which being authorised by —”

“I get the picture, Your Excellency. I can offer you my renowned management rationalisation services later for only a nominal fee. Today, I simply wish to meet some representative delegates of the committee with direct control of the spaceport.”

Under the table, Kyril fingered the catalogue tag which gave him the file name of his ticket. He glanced down. At last! Quickly, he tapped an instruction to locate and unzip the ticket. When he got himself presented to the citizens in control, his name had better not be Kyril Ague. He heard a faint whirring sound within his zipbag as something expanded to normal size.

To cover all this hidden activity, particularly from the cyborg with the photon blaster, Kyril continued speaking to the Plenipotentiary. “The committee I need to meet should be that Joint Standing Sub-committee you just mentioned.”

“That being correct, Your Imperial Highness. If you will be so kind as to present your travel document for routine identity purposes, I will scan it across to the Sub-committee Secretary immediately.”

Kyril nearly whooped with joy. He’d pulled it off! Once he got to that committee, he could talk them into anything. They would be helpless, those sentients who only followed established routines, finding themselves faced with a smooth-talking Imperial Highness from Earth. Their spaceport was as good as his.

He’d found his travel ticket in the nick of time, he thought, as his fingers closed on the rectangle of plastic among all the ball-bearings. He fished it out. All he needed to do was read the name on the ticket as he handed it over.

*Squiggle*, he read.

The whole ticket was in Dekapus script.

He tried to get the hostess to read it out to him, but she giggled so much that he got nowhere. When the Plenipotentiary asked Kyril to read it out himself, he could only make up a name at random.

The hostess stopped giggling long enough to say loudly, “That not being name on ticket!”

Zog’s photon blaster persuaded Kyril not to run.

In the two-metre-high pot that was his prison cell, Kyril Ague thought things could have been worse. Because of his low age by native standards, he was serving his sentence in a Young Offenders’ institution, a mixed-sex establishment.

He was surrounded by glass pots full of the most delightfully blue pubescent buds. And with time off for good conduct, he might get out to meet his fellow prisoners in only twenty planetary revolutions.

The girls should have ripened nicely by then.

## Entanglements

By  
Lesley L. Smith

Ursula sported quite a shiner when she arrived at work bright and early the Monday after her vacation.

"Ursula! What happened?" Though in her forties, she was in perfect shape and very athletic.

"Hi, Ben." She touched the purple splotch around her eye gingerly with her fingertips. "Oh, this? It's just a bike accident. You know how it goes, my bike stopped suddenly and I didn't. I flew over the handlebars and landed on my face."

"Ouch. Are you okay?"

"No big deal." She laughed.

I loved the way her full red mouth puckered up when she laughed. It seemed to be begging to be kissed. Without Ursula around, last week had been the longest of my life.

She pointed at one of her spare office chairs. "Take a seat. Tell me what you've been up to while I've been gone."

"The good news is, the problem we were having wasn't with the particle entanglement. It was a software glitch. Someone," I glanced out the window, "made a typo in the code, which I finally found after hours of debugging."

Smiling, Ursula shook her head. "I thought it would turn out to be something like that. Don't worry about it."

I stood up. "Let me show you what I accomplished last week in the lab. Remind me where we were when you left."

"We were trying to create particles whose quantum properties were linked together or entangled. Why don't you tell me why?" she asked, ever the teacher.

"The linking or entangling means that if you change one group of particles, the other is also changed instantaneously. Potentially, it's a method of instantaneous communication. We want to do it because that's how quantum computers work."

"Good." She nodded and stood up. "Let's go down to the lab so you can show me the details."

I had fun showing her what I'd accomplished while she was gone.

After a couple hours she stood up and brushed a strand of hair behind her ear. "Sorry Ben, I have to go to a committee meeting."

I reluctantly turned my attention from the experiment. "Do you want to go for a welcome home beer after work?" I asked.

She started to say something and then stopped herself.

I quickly added. "We can invite Alex."

"Uh, I'll check with him and get back to you." Her gaze darted to the floor.

I grinned. "You could just order him to go; you're his boss, after all."

Ursula laughed weakly, her head lowered, as she started for the door.

Ursula and Alex ended up meeting me at our usual hangout, The Republic of Beer. I sat at the graffiti-carved wooden bar, sipping the lemonade/wheat-beer special of day when they arrived.

Ursula put her briefcase on the stool next to me. "That looks good, Ben. Order me one of those, please. I'll be right back. I'm going to the rest room."

"Sure thing, Boss." I grinned.

Alex, I mean Professor Hess, took the next stool over. He was tall and skinny with a beak-like nose. I could probably take him in a fight. "Barkeep. I'll take a Chocolate Stout," he barked.

I added, "And another Special here, please." I pointed next to me.

The bartender glanced at Alex, took in his dour expression, and quickly placed two coasters and two beers on the bar.

Alex took a sip and smacked his lips. "Mmm." He sat back in the stool.

"Professor Hess, did you guys have a fun vacation?" I asked.

He turned and looked at me. "Yeah. Except when Ursula fell down and got that black eye."

"Oh?" I raised my eyebrows. "Fell down?"

"Yeah. We were at the campsite, drinking around the campfire, and she fell down and hit her head on a rock."

I knew not to disagree with him. He never let anyone win an argument. "That's too bad."

Ursula came back, sat down, and took a big swig of her drink. "Ooh, this is good. I like this one. Thanks, Ben."

Alex got up. "My turn."

As soon as he was out of sight, I asked, "How did you get that shiner, again?"

She turned to me. "I told you. I fell off my bike."

"I knew Alex was lying! The jerk!" Under Ursula's gaze, I shifted uncomfortably on the stool. "Ursula, I know you're my boss and all, but if you ever need any help with anything, anything at all, you can call me day or night."

She put her arm around my shoulder. "You're really very sweet, Ben."

"I mean it, anything you need." I reached up and touched her hand for a second.

"In that case, I need you to play nice with Alex."

Slowly, I took a sip of beer. "For you, I'll try."

When Alex returned, I jumped up from my barstool. "I'll be back."

Ursula smiled.

A little while later, as I walked to my seat, I noticed the place was filling up with Happy Hour revelers. Twenty-somethings stood four deep around the bar. Ursula and Alex were engrossed in conversation when I came back, and didn't notice me as I tried to shove my way through the crowd.

Alex jabbed his finger in Ursula's face and then stood up. "Be home by seven."

Ursula said softly, "Yes, Sir." She sank down in her chair. "Of course, Sir, whatever you want." She shook her head and then rested her cheek on her hand, as Alex left without any further orders.

I sat down and took a sip of beer. "Is everything all right?"

Sighing, she straightened. "Yes, of course. Everything's fine. Good. Great. Everything's great."

"I have to say, it didn't sound totally great."

She turned to me, face flushed. "Were you eavesdropping on my conversation?"

I shifted my stool away from her. "Uh, not on purpose."

"Well, you just don't know what marriage is like. You've never been married. It's hard work."

"It shouldn't be that hard."

She snorted. "Divorce is horrible. My parents split up when I was five, and it practically killed my mom. I'm not going through that."

I jerked back. "Who said you would?" I said softly. Where in the world did that come from?

She took a deep breath. "No one."

We passed some time sipping our beers and studying the graffiti on the bar.

Finally, I said, "So, speaking of your parents, you don't talk about them much." Like never. "What do they do?"

"My mom is a retired school teacher. I don't know what my father does. I never heard from him after the divorce."

"Never? Not even birthdays and Christmas?"

"I can't believe you said that. You don't understand things at all."

"I, uh, apologize, if I said something wrong. I'd like to understand. Explain it to me." I said.

She stood up. "I have to go." She strode out.

I glanced from her retreating back to my watch: 6:45.

Unfortunately, things remained strained between Ursula and me for the next three weeks, although we continued to make progress in the entanglement experiment. We subjected two samples of cesium atoms, one millimeter apart, to a laser to orient their magnetic spin. Then, we sent a single laser beam through both samples to entangle them. Modifying one of the samples had an instantaneous effect on the other. Gradually, we moved the samples farther and farther apart, and with some tweaking, we were still able to have one affect the other instantaneously.

Thus, work was going great, but I was pretty worried about our relationship. I couldn't believe I'd hoped for more than friendship with her. We stopped shooting the breeze and going out for beers like we used to.

One warm May afternoon, when we were in the middle of an entanglement experiment, I resolved to broach the subject of our friendship. "So, I'm sorry about what I said the bar. I was out of line."

She sighed and looked at me from amongst the sample containers, lasers, computers, and other assorted equipment.

A bead of sweat rolled down my cheek. "I apologize." *It sure is hot in here, I thought. Being surrounded by all this electronic equipment probably doesn't help.*

She crossed her arms. "Well, you're right about that. This lab is like an oven." *I wish they'd turn on the AC.* She pushed the sleeves of her blouse up.

I nodded. "Yeah. We need AC." *Wait a minute....* My eyes were drawn to the four finger-shaped marks outlined in reddish-purple on her arm. *What's that on her arm?* My eyes moved up and met hers.

*Shit.* Ursula quickly pushed her sleeves back down. *He wouldn't understand.* "What's what?"

"Are those bruises? Wait, I wouldn't understand what?" *What's going on here?*

"I have to go." She bolted out of the lab.

I sank down on a lab stool. What the hell just happened? I shivered. Could I read Ursula's mind? I shivered again. I suddenly felt cool—which was odd. I trudged over to the lab thermometer, which registered over ninety degrees. I definitely didn't feel ninety degrees. What the hell was going on? Could it have something to do with Ursula? Were we somehow ...entangled? I had to find her and figure it out.

When I got up to her office, she was standing directly in front of the air-conditioner, staring out the window.

"Ursula, are you all right?" I asked.

"You startled me." She forced a smile. "I can't seem to cool off."

"Something weird is going on." I entered her office.

*I think so, too.*

"There!" I pointed at her. "Did you just think 'I think so too.'?"

She nodded.

*I knew it,* I thought.

"Did you just think 'I knew it.'?" she asked, her mouth dropping open.

"Wow. It goes both ways," I said, walking to her.

"What goes both ways?" A voice slammed into us from the doorway.

As one, we turned to face it.

It was Alex.

Ursula was the first to recover. "Alex. Hi." *Shit. He has a terrible temper. You should get out of here.*

*No.*

"What's going on in here?" Scowling, he looked us over. "Why are you so sweaty? Get out of here, kid. This is between me and my wife."

"No." I stuck out my chest.

"Don't get involved Ben," Ursula said. "He might hurt you." She approached me.

"Or I might hurt him!" I clenched my fists until my nails bit into my palms.

Alex took a step toward me. "I'd like to see you try, kid."

Before I knew what was happening, a fist was flying toward my face. I barely ducked in time. "Call the cops, Ursula!" But when I looked for her, she was standing right next to me and blood streamed from her nose. "Oh, my God! Ursula! Are you okay?" I grabbed a wad of tissues from her desk and handed them to her, clasping her hand for a moment. "I'm so sorry—I didn't mean for this to happen."

She nodded as she took the tissues. *It's not the first time he's hurt me.*

Alex, ten feet away now, snorted. "Ursula won't say anything."

"Well, then, I will!" I said stepping between them.

"I'm a professor and you're just a grad student. Who do you think they'll believe?" he said.

I resisted a strong and unfamiliar urge to take a step back. It wasn't like me to run from a fight. "I think they'll believe me and the esteemed Chair of the Physics Department." *Right, Ursula?*

*Ben, what's going on? I feel different, stronger. I'm not as afraid of him as I usually am.*

*I think it's from the experiment. We're all mixed together somehow.*

*Could it be?* She pinched her nose and glared at Alex.

Alex stared at us with narrowed eyes. "What's going on? Why are you so quiet?"

I focused on Ursula. *Forget about the experiment for now. You can stand up to him. You don't deserve to be treated this way.*

*You're right. This will be the last time he hurts me.* She slowly nodded. "I've had enough, Alex. We're through. I'm pressing charges this time."

He sneered. "Yeah, right."

And then she picked up the phone and dialed three numbers.