

The Impresario

By
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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."