

Galactic Undesirables No. 3,231: The Con Artist

By
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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 reproofing 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.