

## CAVEAT EMPTOR

by J. E. Ellis

Seless adjusted the focus on the main viewscreen with one forelimb while the other cradled a Jellian smoke-stone, from which wafted a lazy tendril of pungent green smoke. The buyer, a Lugosian whose name the Broadband Language Transmuter translated as Hum-Click-Buzz-Buzz-Click, peered past the scaled salesman at the blue-green orb on the screen, his palpi twitching.

“Must you smoke?” The mechanical voice of the BLT did a fair job of translating the arthropod’s speech into Seless’s native tongue, and even got most of the inflection right.

“Oh. Sorry.” Seless brought the stone close to his short snout and inhaled deeply before putting it back in its case. “Well, what do you think?” he asked as he exhaled. The Jellian stimulant didn’t do a thing for Seless--the sauropods of Kroly had only a rudimentary olfactory sense--but it did not hurt to irritate the buyer just a little, break his concentration.

Hum-Click scuttled back a few steps on four legs, his front pair brushing out his feathery feelers.

“I’m not sure,” he replied, his eyestalks waving indecisively.

The Krolyan spun around on his stool. “Come, come, Mr. Hum-Click. Surely you can see what a great deal this is.” He ticked off salient points with his manicured claws. “Oxygen-nitrogen atmosphere. 70% water. Gravity within 5% of Lugosa norm. Mean temps within 3%. What else could you want?” He lowered his voice conspiratorially and hoped the

BLT got the effect right. "As far as previously owned planets are concerned, this one's a steal."

"That may well be," the Lugosian answered. His palpi cleaned, he settled into a solid six-legged stance, his eyestalks fixed determinedly on Seless. "But frankly, an indigent population isn't quite what I had in mind."

"Get rid of them," Seless offered. He rose ponderously from his stool and lumbered across the deck on thick hind legs.

He waved his arms and flicked his thin tail as he paced back and forth. "They're barely rated at Tech D, Early Nuclear, and it would be a snap to eradicate them. I have a genetic engineer I refer all my customers to. He'll whip up a couple of tailored biologicals--very reasonably priced, of course--as well as a delivery system, and presto! A nice, clean planet."

Hum-Click followed the movement of the sauropod closely; by the third pass he was swaying, his cranial chitin turning a bright blue. Lugosians were very susceptible to motion sickness.

"It's--it's kind of dirty, I mean--" Wheeze! "--The p-pollution levels are rather high--"

"Purely cosmetic, I assure you," the mottled brown salesman went on smoothly. "Remove the sources and the ecosystems will clear up in no time."

With a great effort, Hum-Click turned his eyestalks toward the viewscreen, concentrating on the motionless image of the planet below. His color began to clear, returning to its natural ochre.

Seless touched a button and the image shifted, resolving into a city street, damp and poorly-lit. It was a recording he had taken a few days ago, right after setting the appointment with Hum-Click. Two of the natives were apparently assaulting a third in a shadowed doorway. Seless turned up the volume and wet smacks and grunts could be heard.

The arthropod had regained his stability, and was staring intently at the scene. "What are they doing?" he asked, genuinely curious.

"The two are assaulting the other to steal his cash."

"Cash?"

"A way of measuring wealth."

The assailants abruptly ran off, leaving the victim a huddled dark shape on the ground. Seless replayed the recording, and Hum-Click was transfixed. That's got him, he thought. These creatures *were* intriguing, in a brutal sort of way. He set the hook that would close the deal.

"Now that's real value. This species is so self-destructive you may not even need to buy an outside agent. Give them a little time and they'll do the job for you." What he did not say was that the destruction would probably come in the form of those atomics they were so proud of, and end up destroying the planet as well. That would certainly limit the resale value.

He reached for a contract cube and slipped it into a certifier. "Now, Mr. Hum-Click, if you'll just give me your ID and authorization codes..."

"Who were the previous owners?" The arthropod swung his gaze to the sauropod.

Seless blinked. Then he coughed, a sound recognizable in any language, and tried to think of something to say.

"Come, come, sir. Surely you know I am within my rights to ask. Who were the previous owners?"

It was the Krolyan's turn to feel sick. He had hoped this issue would not come up. With a knot in his craw, he watched this sale slip away. "The Confederacy," he said simply.

"Indeed."

While Seless was not an expert on Lugosian body dynamics, he was pretty sure that

vibrating palpi was not a sign of abject terror. He puzzled over Hum-Click's seeming composure. Although he thought of the Fractar Confederacy as just another buyer, most others saw them as rapacious conquerors that wantonly inflicted their will with cruelty and indifference. In all, it was a fair assessment.

With continuing calm, Hum-Click asked, "So what happened?"

Hesitating, the Krolyan picked his words carefully. "Well, uh, there was a change in the governing House, precipitating a policy change. They decided that enslaving the inhabitants would not be advantageous to the Confederacy." He did not mention that the reversal came after they had acquired the planet, and seemed to be tied to the natives somehow.

Hum-Click sat back and again cleaned his antennae. "And knowing how the Fractar like to cut their losses, you probably picked this parcel up cheap."

Seless grinned suddenly, showing all ninety-six of his teeth. That is what this was all about: Hum-Click was trying to dicker. Suddenly back in the game, he sat down and took on a humble tone.

"Not as much of a bargain as you would think, sir. And then, add my costs, overhead and the like... I think seventy is a fair price."

"Seventy," the Lugosian quipped. "You probably didn't pay a dec over twenty. I'll give you thirty."

This guy was good. The sauropod covered his ear-holes with his forelimbs in seeming distress. "Mr. Hum-Click. That offer is almost insulting. Tell you what; I'll take a hit on some of my own expenses. Sixty."

"Thirty-five."

"Sir. If all my clients were as shrewd as you, I'd be out of business. Fifty-five."

Hum-Click's mandible clacked in derision. "Forty. And I want the mineral rights to the whole system."

"Mineral rights? There are over a hundred workable properties in that system; the potential gain is twenty times what I'm asking. Fifty, and the three inner planets."

Hum-click had planted all six legs again. "Forty and the whole system."

"Forty-five and four? Including the asteroid zone."

"Forty for all."

Seless smacked his snout in apparent frustration, but his eyes glinted. "Done," he said. "Now, your ID and authorization--please?"

The Lugosian brought out a small disk and handed it over. Seless noticed that his head armor had turned pink, a sign of extreme pleasure. Seless was pleased himself, but Krolyans don't give it away like that.

The certifier chirped and the deal was done.

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That transaction started a chain of events mammoth in proportion. Gargantuan energies were harnessed; powerful forces brought to bear. Those who lived on the third planet went on about their daily lives as they had for many generations, unaware that oblivion loomed.

Time passed, an eyeblink to a clockwork universe. To those who measure time more colloquially, the speckled planet turned a few times around its sun, lives began and ended, but life endured. Inexplicably, illogically, endured.

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Krolyans drool when they're mad. Seless was dripping great globs all across the deck when Hum-Click arrived. The arthropod had insisted on seeing him immediately, even when Seless explained he was in the middle of showing a property. Hum-Click was adamant. So the sauropod salesman installed his current client in the ample lounge below, and waited impatiently for the Lugosian to get there.

"This had better be good," he growled as Hum-Click came in. "This is a very inconvenient--" He stopped, noticing something coiled around the Lugosian's right middle leg. Black and serpent-like, it had a great diamond-shaped head with vestigial appendages sprouting from the neck. In one of the small hands was a tiny reader. Seless's tail drooped in despair, his anger evaporating like mist over Lake Theth. A Conritchie. And, by looks of his hide--marked with a very convoluted whorl--a lawyer. He realized now what this was all about. His sense of defeat made his forelimbs curl into claws.

The Conritchie unwound from Hum-Click's leg and slithered across the deck, to coil again in front of Seless. The lawyer's head barely came to the Krolyan's knees, but it spoke with a forcefulness that made Seless blink.

"I am Solicitor Sharash. I represent Mr. Hum-Click in this matter. Under Penal Code section 2345.197, you are required to answer my questions in a truthful manner. This reader is equipped with a Projected Data Quantifier, so I will know if you are being honest or not." Narrow golden eyes looked down at the reader. "Did you, on the day of Senja 67, 4468 Standard, purchase from the Fractar Confederacy the property designated 345-w039-k, and did not that contract specifically state that the indigent creatures inhabiting that property were, and I quote: 'a

pestilence, a life-form that had withstood all known forms of eradication short of planetary obliteration and had, as a consequence, rendered said property nearly valueless.'?"

"Well, yes, I believe there was something said about the creatures being difficult to deal with," Seless managed.

The PDQ emitted a surprisingly loud klaxon.

"A half-truth," stated Sharash. "Which, in effect, is an agreement."

The BLT did a good job of conveying the Conritchie's formal tone. "Therefore, in accordance with the Universal Code of Ethics, as adopted by the one thousand seven hundred thirty-third Congress of Accepted Species, Section Three, Article Eleven, Paragraph Two: no person or business, or agent thereof, shall conspire to sell, to any other person or business, or agent thereof, any real or personal property, when said property is damaged, deficient, or in any other way substandard, unless such damage, deficiency or substandard feature is disclosed prior to certification of a contract. Should a damaged, deficient, or substandard feature be discovered within a reasonable time after a transaction is finalized, seller is liable to purchaser for the entire purchase price, plus any additional expenses the purchaser may have incurred as a result of said damaged, deficient, or substandard feature.

"Did you notify Mr. Hum-Click of the fact that the inhabitants of the property in question were seemingly inexpugnable?"

"Now, yes, I did say that the indigents were tough--"

The PDQ klaxon blared.

Sharash's immobile face managed to look smug. "I hereby demand a full refund of the purchase price of catalogue number 345-w039-k, as well as reimbursement for costs incurred." He looked to Hum-Click, who scuttled forward and handed Seless a full-sized reader, which

showed an itemized list of his expenses.

The Krolyan glanced down at the figures and felt a growing panic. "This bill is for over three thousand," he sputtered. "You can't have spent that much--"

"As you can see from the list," interjected the lawyer, "the biggest expenses were the four different bio-agents and their delivery systems. All guaranteed to work, I might add, and all miserable failures. Number Two did cause a global outbreak of scalp itching, but none of them eliminated so much as one percent of the indigenous life forms. After a more detailed study of a sample specimen, our techs came to the conclusion that this species was harder and more resistant than any other in the known galaxy."

Hum-Click clacked his mandibles and blurted, "The 'specimen' nearly destroyed my lab before my people could get him off the ship. Those items are listed under 'Equipment Losses'."

Seless sat down hard. He felt lost. This shyster had him dead to rights. Why did he ever buy that system?

Because it was a steal, that is why. He stood to make a tidy sum by unloading it on some unsuspecting customer. It was plain bad luck that he sold it to somebody who knew the law.

He numbly punched in his codes on the reader, which beeped happily as the payment was recorded. On the console behind him a tone sounded, signifying the return of all properties, in good condition.

"Thank you," Sharash said. "Because of your timely refund, I don't think there is a need to file criminal charges." He coiled himself up onto Hum-Click's leg once more. With another clack, the arthropod turned and marched out.

Now what? The good thing was, he was not going to jail. The bad thing was, it was obvious that the natives were ruining a perfectly good property--the only habitable one in the

system without extensive exoforming--and yet had proven themselves nearly impossible to get rid of. He could try to eliminate the pests himself, but that seemed like pouring good money after bad.

Trying to sell it again without disclosure was too risky, too. Word was probably already out; anybody looking to buy would know it was a loser and Seless was desperate. He would not get two decs for the whole thing, and his holding costs were more than that.

He could give up his claim on the system, quietly return it to the general domain, and leave those creatures to themselves--which they probably deserved.

But where was the percentage in that?