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The Impersonators

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The meal had been like most banquet meals, and the several men at the speakers' table on the platform looked — one of them excepted — ordinary. The exception was a tanned, blocky man of perhaps thirty-five, dressed in a dark blue suit, with a white shirt and a black string necktie. His cropped black hair stood up like a shoe brush, and his eyebrows (beetled now) were heavy, almost meeting above his nose. He had the kind of jowls that always looked as if they needed a shave. His wide mouth was clamped in a straight line. Not extraordinary? No — but there was a patch of adhesive tape on his forehead, scratches on both cheeks and a puffiness around one glaring eye. Make-up failed to hide bruises here and there.

The master-of-ceremonies was already warmed up:

“ — that the Interstellar Division always gets its man. Of course, that isn't invariably true. Space is a fairly big territory, ha ha, and now and then one does get away. But the man who is about to receive the year's Surprise Award is an officer who, so far, has never failed to get his man. Except, of course, when he was chasing — excuse me, I mean, ha ha, apprehending — women.” The mc paused to pick up a large plaque that lay on the table.

He took two steps and extended it toward the scowling, battered man. “And now, I take great pleasure in awarding —”

The blocky man's scowl deepened. Suddenly he was on his feet. He snarled something to the mc, turned, clumped to the edge of the platform and off it, and marched toward an exit. The mc looked startled, turned crimson and glanced involuntarily at the plaque as if he'd just been told to swallow it whole, or something.

After a few moments the mc collected himself a little and raised the mike to his lips. “Uh, friends. I'm, uh, sorry to have to report that Inspector Kruger has just had a sudden attack of, er, indigestion. But . . . well . . . anyway, there was this mature, respected accountant who got away with a million and a half credits, and we traced him to a planet called Phrodd. It's about eighty-two light-years away, and no Terran spaceline services it, so it has to be readied

by transferring twice on Alien lines. Well, uh. Inspector Kruger went to Phrodd and made the arrest. His official report has, er, not yet been released, but we understand there were grave difficulties of an unusual nature . .

It was Inspector Judson Kruger's first day on Phrodd. He turned, caught sight of something, hesitated, then bellowed in a stern voice tinged with hysteria, "Stand, in the name of the Government of Earth!

Agile despite his large feet, he hopped across a twelve-foot-long slug (which cried out in fright and jerked in its eyes talks) and seized the arm of a mature, courtly, very tall man with a broad forehead and a splendid crop of silvery hair. "Borogrove O'Larch," Kruger snapped, "I arrest you for the crime of embezzlement!"

The man turned innocent, mildly reproachful blue eyes upon him for a moment before beginning to melt to one of the native slugs — or Whugs, as they were called.

Kruger jerked his hand away from the rapidly indrawing arm. "Damn it," he said shakily, "you're the sixth one today!"

The Whug finished its metamorphosis, in careful stages so it didn't fall hard to the pavement, then extended its eyestalks toward Kruger and said, in a voice that undoubtedly matched O'Larch's fairly well, "I'm, wh, sorry, Earthman. I was paid to do this impersonation. Thank you for, wh, terminating it." The eyestalks swiveled, and the native crawled away.

Kruger strode down the sidewalk, muttering to himself, dodging or stepping over or ducking under a dozen different species of visitors to the planet, plus whatever Whugs had business here in Phrodd's Interstellar Settlement. Halfway to his hotel, he saw another O'Larch. He almost passed it up, but finally steeled himself to try again. "Stand, Borogrove O'Larch!"

The routine was the same. The Whug gratefully assumed its own shape and said, "My, wh, apologies, Earthman. I was, wh, paid — "

Kruger snarled, "Go to, wh, hell," and walked away.

He hadn't been able to get his standard communicator working right, so in his hotel room he lay prone on the floor and growled in to the Whug-level phone-grill, "English!"

There were various clicks and murmurs, then a voice said, "English, wh, spoken."

"Yeah. Get me Earth, please. The hookup has to go via Moog. I want the Terran Department of Justice, Interstellar Division, Commissioner Stanzlec."z."

"Commissioner, who, wh, sir?"

"Stanzlec! S, T — oh, hell; just put through the call. I'll talk to whoever answers."

The connection only took five minutes, there being very little timelag in the subether. A girlish voice lisped. "Interstellar Division!"

"Who's this?" Kruger demanded.

"Penny Uddersmith. I'm new here."

"Oh. Uh, Penny, this is Inspector Judson Kruger. What are you — I mean, put me through to the Chief, will you?"

A moment later Stanzlec's voice said querulously, "Yes? Is that you, Kruger? Whatever are you doing on Moog?"

"I'm not on Moog," Kruger told him, trying to keep his voice level, "the call just has to go through there. Chief, O'Larch is here on Phrodd, all right, but there's a complication. You see, the natives here — " Kruger rolled over to relieve a kink in his back, and banged his ear into a chair leg. "Ow, danm it! The Whugs, that's the dominant race, can take any shape they want to, and O'Larch has hired a bunch to impersonate him. Since I arrived he's increased the number, and I spend all my time trying to arrest them. He's got quite a bit of loot to work with, you know."

There was a silence, then, "Kruger, you promised me faithfully you wouldn't drink on the job any more!"

“I’M NOT DRUNK!” Kruger roared. He put his hand over the phone-grill and spoke to himself in monosyllables for a moment, then resumed the subether conversation. “You can look it up in the encyclopedias; they’re the best mimics ever found. Not too advanced in other ways, though. Although they’re intelligent enough. Anyway — ”

“Gracious,” Stanzlecz interrupted, “whatever in the world good does that do him?”

Kruger clamped his lips for a moment. “They keep walking about the Settlement, and while I’m busy trying to arrest them, O’Larch has an easy time staying out of my way. And of course inquiries do no good. Who knows whether he’s seen the real O’Larch or not? One thing, though. At least he’s confined to the Settlement. So are all other aliens — except me, of course; I have special privileges. The Moogs enforce that rule — this is a Moog protectorate, you know — and they’ve promised not to let O’Larch leave the planet until I find him.”

Stanzlecz said, “Won’t they help you apprehend him? Or how about the natives? Those, uh, Whugs”

“No, no, no. There are treaties, and protocols, and codes of honor, and every damned thing you ever heard of. What I called you about, is I need a bigger allowance for this job. I’ve got the idea of hiring some Whugs myself, to impersonate me. They can go around arresting O’larches, which will use them up a lot faster than I can do it alone. You see, the contract they make, as near as I can figure it out, is to maintain the impersonation until they’re arrested, or until a day and night have passed. They can’t hold it indefinitely. They have to resume their own shapes to eat or sleep. So if I can hire some help . . . Also, O’Larch won’t know which is the real me, and it’ll be hard for him to keep dodging all of us. I might get lucky and corner him. But, as I said, I need credits.”

There was a pause, then a sigh, and, “Oh, fiddlesticks. I’d hoped to keep the budget down on this one. Well, if you must, you must. I’ll allow you a hundred fifty thousand credits

total. Mind you, your passage and sustenance, and any of that fooling around you do, will have to come out of it.”

Kruger stared at the phone-grill in disbelief. “O’Larch has ten times that to work with!”

Stanziecz turned petulant. “Well, Earth has to show a profit on his apprehension, doesn’t we? I mean, don’t it? Uh — no, not another word of argument! That’s the limit, and that’s it. And one other thing. Earth has very good relations with Moog. Don’t you do anything — anything, do you hear? — to get the Moogs peeved at you!”

Kruger lay there, counting the pulse that throbbed inside his skull. Finally he said, “Yes, Chief,” and broke the connection.

Mummumnoonogog, the Moogan Governor of Phrodd, was biped and more or less humanoid — which body-shape might have something to do with the reasonably cooperative relations between Earth and the Moogan Empire — but he looked like a humanoid bred many generations for barehanded physical combat. He must have weighed twice what Kruger did, and he had vicious teeth, too.

However, his eyes were placidly shrewd and his manners civilized, and he wasn’t much hairier than Kruger, and he didn’t have any detectable odor. His neat uniform showed the rippling of his huge muscles as he closed the office door and walked to his own wide chair behind a big desk. “I’m happy to have this chance to meet you in person, Kruger. I happen to have been a cop, as the slang has it, myself, in my younger days. Sorry I can’t give you more direct help; I’ve little sympathy for criminals. However, treaties and such, you know. Well. You want to find an entrepreneur, eh, who’ll contract for a number of impersonators? Damned good mimics, these Whugs. Daren’t let any of them off the planet — you’ll have to be X-rayed yourself when you leave, to make sure you’re genuine. You think you want about fifty, who speak English? I’ll put you in touch with a reliable Whug businessman who can handle that.

But I can tell you — this is off the record; I can't show open partiality — that O'Larch has a hundred impersonators going, and a hundred more English-speaking Whugs, at least, on retainers. Pretty well cornered most of the supply, I'm afraid. Of course, if you only want yours to speak one or two standard phrases, they can learn those in a matter of minutes. Damned fine linguists. I'd think you'd want as many impersonations as O'Larch has, if not more, to wear him down."

Kruger said, "Yeah, but I'm on a limited budget. Another thing I wanted to ask you about — why can't my impersonators, if I get them, make more than one arrest apiece? I've made a few inquiries, and it seems they insist they'll have to revert when they make one arrest."

Mum — as he'd graciously told Kruger to call him — spread his hands and smiled. "Union rules."

"Oh," Kruger said. "Well ... if it isn't against Moogan policy, could I maybe find some non-union Whugs who'd make more than one arrest apiece?"

Mum pursed his big lips. "N-no, I doubt it. Of course, there are the Grugs . . . But, no."

"Grugs?" Kruger asked hopefully.

"Forget them!" For a moment. Mum's eyes bored keenly into Kruger, then he relaxed. "The Grugs are just as good mimics as the Whugs, but they're barred from the Settlement. From this whole area, in fact. You see, the Whugs evolved the ability to imitate as a defensive thing. They're plant-eaters and not vicious by nature — though they can be tough, when they have to. The Grugs were predators, who used the imitation to ambush their prey. The two races are like — well, like cats and dogs, you might say, though the analogy isn't perfect. But as I said, Grugs are out of the question."

Kruger sighed. "Well, I guess I'll try it with what Whugs I can afford, then. By the way, how is it so many of them speak English? And you, too. Your whole staff speaks it like born Terrans!"

Mum said, “Actually, I doubt if you realize how far English has spread through the galaxy. Races who’ve never been within a hundred light-years of a human speak it. It has certain, shall I say, virtues? I myself speak over two hundred fifty languages fluently, and I can get along in several thousand. But frankly, I’ve never encountered a language that lent itself so aptly as English to — well, obfuscation, where obfuscation’s needed.”

“Oh,” Kruger said, “yeah. Well, may I have the name of that Whug businessman?”

Kruger saw the businessman and contracted for twenty-five impersonations to be made on a single day later in the week. He made no commitments about the additional twenty-five, except to get an assurance that they could be supplied if needed. He wanted to do a little thinking while he still had credits left.

He extracted a promise of secrecy (except within the union, of course) and made a date to return the next day, when the impersonators were gathered, so they could observe him. Then he went back to his hotel room, took off his shoes, and arranged himself on the bed with his feet elevated in a sling evidently provided for some odd-shaped alien species.

He’d already canvassed the hotels of the Settlement and found sixty-odd Borogrove O’Larches registered. The others were probably staying at rooming houses, or just wandering the streets. No doubt O’Larch had other Whugs, or aliens, hired to keep watch on Kruger. So there wasn’t much chance, singlehanded, of finding the embezzler even by blind luck. But with a whole company of Krugers suddenly on the scene, the watchers would be confused. And so would O’Larch.

The trouble was, the fake Krugers wouldn’t report O’Larch even if they found him. Union rules, and things, again. Which left the odds still heavily against Kruger. He’d just have to pick the most likely intersection, and watch as many arrests as possible.

What he really needed was impersonators who'd actually make arrests and keep — or at least trail — the real O'Larch if they found him. Also, he needed hirelings who wouldn't revert after a single attempt.

In short, he needed Grugs.

Did he dare? One thing would be on his side. Once in the Settlement, the Grugs wouldn't reveal themselves. The penalties they risked were too severe for that. But suppose one of them lost his wits, or got knocked unconscious, or something? Of course, there'd only be twenty-five of them, and they could be warned, and the O'Larches — even the real one — weren't likely to offer violence.

Still, did he dare?

Often before, facing difficult decisions like this, he'd found it helpful to turn the problem around and look at it from the other end. He did so now. Did he dare not to?

No.

With that settled, he pondered how to make contact secretly with the Grugs. He glanced at his watch. There was a certain Whug bartender in the hotel's lounge, whom Kruger's practiced eye had observed from time to time in clandestine conversation with various kinds of aliens. The Whug wasn't due on duty for a while, but Kruger could kill the time over dinner.

He showered, shaved again, dressed leisurely, went down to the dining room, pored over the epicurean items on the menu and ordered.

Dinner finished he sauntered into the bar, located the bartender he wanted, pulled up a stool, got out his wallet, and placed two ten-credit notes on the bar. "I want," he said quietly, "to be put in touch with the most despicable, most unprincipled, most traitorous Whug within two hundred miles."

The bartender's eyestalks spread hastily right and left, making sure no one was watching or listening. Then they both bent toward one end of the bar, where three enlisted

Moogs were getting drunk and beginning to be disorderly, swiveled to scan a pair of giant centipedes twisting together and giggling in a booth, and finally returned to Kruger. One twitched briefly in the direction of Kruger's still-fat wallet. The bartender elongated himself a little closer. "Wh, Earthman," he whispered, 'I am that Whug.'

The country a hundred miles east of the Settlement was rougher, its rocky valleys choked with gnarled, vine-entangled trees. Kruger, stumbling on the path, steadied himself against a big boulder.

There was a smear of motion. Within seconds, the boulder had become a beast like an enormous scaley bulldog with a crocodile's head. "Watch it, you, gr, Terran slob," the creature growled.

"Oh," Kruger said, taking a hasty step backward, "sorry. My name's Kruger. I was looking for — "

The Grug snarled an obscenity. "You've found him. Put your, gr, money where your mouth is."

"Yeah," Kruger said, "right. I'll pay ten per cent over the Whug union scale. But your twenty-five impersonators have got to keep working the full night and day, if necessary. And they've got to be careful."

The Grug rumbled with scorn. "Only ten per cent over what a Whug gets? Know any other new, gr, jokes?"

"Twenty per cent," Kruger said firmly, "and that's all I can spend. Take it or leave it."

"Okay, I'll take it. What's the, gr, goddam job?"

Kruger explained. The Grug entrepreneur pondered. "Gr. Yeah, I see what you mean. I don't know; big, gr, risk, going into the Settlement. Those Moogs don't mess around. Still, I can probably find volunteers; it sounds like fun. Gr, yeah! We can sneak in imitating Whugs! Do you want me to draw up a contract, or shall we just, gr, shake hands on it?"

“Nuts,” Kruger said. “I’ve located a bond broker we can both rely on. I’ll put up the money with him. And you and I will work out details that are desirable for both of us. Not that I don’t trust you. Just a matter of principle, you understand.”

The crocodilian mouth gaped in an awful grin. “Earthman, I, gr, begin to like you!”

It was unnerving when the first Whug impersonators began scattrang about the settlement. One strode up to Kruger and snapped, almost in Kruger’s own voice, “Your, wh, necktie’s not quite right. The boss’ll dock you if he sees that!” Kruger scowled. “My tie’s right, damn it. Yours is too wide!”

The fake’s eyes widened. “Oh! You’re the real — ” His tie narrowed a trifle. (God, Kruger thought, even the fabric looks genuine) . “Wh, sorry, sir.” The impostor turned and clumped on. Halfway down the block it bellowed, “Stand, Borogrove O’Larch!” and seized the arm of a victim. Both of them began to melt into Whugs. When they’d finished, they crawled away side by side. Kruger winced.

He moved on back to the corner where he could watch the crossstreet. An O’Larch was moving leisurely toward a modest hotel. Kruger tensed. Was that, possibly, the real one going to cover? Should he follow?

A bellow of, “Stand!” from behind him made him turn. He watched an arrest and double reversion, the two Whugs again crawling off side-by-side in the direction of the union hall. From somewhere — in the next street, he thought — came a shout of, “Stand!” He raced in that direction, swerving around aliens who whistled or grunted and turned to stare after him. He also had to hurdle a lot of Whugs — there seemed to be an unusual number about today. He reached the far corner in time to see another arrest-and-double-reversion.

Three gone, damn it! He wondered if there might have been others, inside hotels where he couldn’t hear them. He doubted it. He thought the real O’Larch — at least, in this first shock of confusion — would still be out in the streets, where he could move around. Scowling, he

trotted back to the main intersection. He needed about a dozen assistants scattered about the Settlement, that's what he needed. Muttering under his breath about the Chiefs stinginess, he turned this way and that, eyes busy.

An O'Larch emerged from a coffee shop and ambled in his direction. He started that way, but a Kruger burst from a dooiway and got there first. "Stand, Borogrove O'Larch, in the, gr, name of the Government of Earth!"

Kruger grunted with satisfaction. The Grugs were beginnmg to operate. He watched the O'Larch turn into a Whug, point his eyestalks at the steadfast fake Kruger, do a doubletake, hitch about uncertainly for a moment, say something, get no reply, shrug, and crawl away alone, looking thoughtful. The Grug-Kruger (whose voice had been a trifle harsher than necessary) caught sight of Kruger, took a quick step toward him, stopped, crouched for an instant in indecision, then turned away.

Kruger made sure there were no more O'Larches in sight, then hurried along the main street to the next intersection. There were two or three hotels in the side street he wanted to watch.

It was beginning to become clear to him that, before the Grugs had used up all the fake O'Larches, he, Kruger, was going to be a very tired and very distracted man. And there was one thing he hadn't thought about. The way he was acting, anyone interested could see he was the real policeman. He'd have to go more slowly, making arrests of his own.

He turned the corner and stopped, confronted with a new facet. Six — no less — O'Larches were emerging from what looked like a vacant store, and scattering in different directions. Reinforcements, damn it!

An alien like a squat, very broad Terran bull with delicate branched antennae in place of horns was standing across the street, staring at the dispersing O'Larches. Even an alien could hardly help noticing the identity, seeing them all together like this.

A Kruger darted around the far corner and hurled himself upon the nearest O'Larch, almost knocking him down. "Gr, stand!" He fairly dragged his victim toward the next O'Larch, who stood bewildered. "Stand!" The fake Kruger seized the second O'Larch with his other hand, giving him a little shake in the bargain.

"Hey," the victim remonstrated, "what the — I mean, I beg your pardon, officer, I do not — oh, hell!" He began to melt to a Whug, as the other arrestee was doing.

The fake Kruger snarled in a not very human way, let go of them, and galloped toward another victim, shoving, as he went by, a vicious stiff-arm into the bull-alien's face. "One side, tubby!" He grabbed an O'Larch. This time, the Whug, before reverting, swung an awkward fist and chirped something in Whug. The Kruger knocked him down. "Don't get funny with me, you slug! Stand!"

The remaining three O'Larches ran toward the spot, shouting, "Scab! Unfair!" and such things. The two who had reverted were now humping themselves back toward the ruckus, making astonishing speed. Kruger ran toward the spot, yelling, "Hey! You! Copper! You're not supposed to — "

Four more Krugers came around the corner, saw the disturbance, and galloped toward it, roaring. A Whug onlooker whipped his tail in front of them, tripping two, who went down bellowing obscenities. One started to waver out of shape, remembered where he was and hastily re-Kruger himself. But the Whug who'd tripped him had seen.

"Grugs!" he screamed, battering at the fake with his tail. Windows were going up in the hotels all along the street now, and a fantastic variety of heads popped out to look. Aliens began pouring from the lobbies, tripping over each other and shrieking and bellowing and adding to the bedlam. A Whug Kruger hadn't noticed tripped him.

"Damn it," Kruger yelled "I'm — Then he had to roll hastily to avoid the bludgeoning tail. He scrambled up, skinned hands and knees smarting, and darted out of reach. All the

Whugs were turning into O'Larches, now — they evidently thought it was a pretty good fighting shape. And now at least twenty more O'Larches burst from the vacant store, fists balled. Several ran toward Kruger, their movements sadly belying the serene courtly expressions of their faces.

Kruger dodged toward a hotel entrance, colliding with a huge ostrichlike alien and getting a ringing peck on the head before he got past. Inside the lobby, aliens were hopelessly tangled, fighting to get free of one another.

He pushed his way through, demanded of a screaming Whug clerk, "Where's the back way?" . . . got no attention, and found it himself. It opened into an alley. There was shouting to his left. He ran that way, reached the street, and found one whole end blocked by a struggling, screaming, bellowing mass of O'Larches and Krugers.

He stood there, mouth gaping. There must be hundreds of each! Then he understood. Those treacherous Grugs! He should never have trusted them. A lot of extra ones had come along for the fun!

He saw a knot of them burst from a jewelry store, bags of loot clutched in their hands, looking like Krugers but lashing about them viciously like Grugs. One stopped to bite at a Whug who ran from the store after them, did poorly with the manlike teeth, took a blow from a tail that sent him rolling, dodged, got up yelling curses at the Whug and ran off after his fellows.

Now Kruger heard a mob-sound from the other end of the street. He turned. A solid mass of O'Larches was coming. Some of the imitations were poor — hasty and third or fourth-hand, no doubt — but all had fists, and they served as a sort of uniform. All Whugdom must know by now what was up, and they'd evidently decided to fight it out along the initiated lines. The leaders saw Kruger and pressed toward him, yelling for his blood.

No use trying to prove he wasn't a Grug. He spun back into the alley. Smoke was pouring from a building halfway down it now, and he heard the wail of sirens. An alien like a boa-constrictor on twenty or thirty stilt-legs appeared suddenly from a closer building, saw him, shrieked, "Crazy, murdering Terrans!" and spat a big gob of brown liquid at him. He dodged that, threw himself against the nearest door, broke it in, and found himself amidst a huddled pack of blue skinned little bipeds with long ears that touched together above their pointed heads. He fought through them, ran down a corridor (deserted, fortunately) and came out in what must be the foyer of a rooming-house. The street outside looked empty, and he could hear the mob of O'Larches coming in the back way, so he jerked the door open and charged out, and —

Found himself between two converging mobs, one of Krugers, one of O'Larches. He whirled and tried the door, but it had locked itself.

The whole Settlement was one deafening chaos now, with the scream of sirens almost drowned out by alien, Grug, Whug and quasihuman voices. A mass of bodies plowed into him. Fists pummeled him. He struck out blindly, heard his own voice — nearly — yell, "Ouch, gr, damn you!" and took an elbow in the face. He went down beneath the trampling feet, and felt two or three hard kicks in the head.

The thought shot through his mind — what, in all this mess, would become of the real O'Larch? And that was the last thought he had for a while.

He realized from the smell that he was in a hospital, but it took him a while to get his eyes focused enough to see that the huge white blob beside his bed was a Moog in medico's clothing. The muscular alien peered at him for a moment, then turned and said into a wall grill, "One's come around enough to talk, I think."

There was a short wait while the blurry room swam a little, then a door opened and Governor Mummumnoonogog stepped in. He stood glowering from Kruger to something in the other bed. “Which one of you’s Kruger? You Terrans all look alike.”

Kruger managed to croak, “I am.” He struggled to arise, found he could sit on the edge of the bed, and let it go at that for the moment.

There was a muffled sound and a stir in the other bed. An O’Larch — more battered, if possible, than Kruger — raised a head painfully. “You are Inspector Kruger? The real one?”

“Yeah,” Kruger growled uninterestedly, “so what?”

The other hauled himself painfully off the bed and advanced step by unsteady step, until he stood looking down gravely at Kruger. Battered as he was, his dignity did not desert him, and he almost succeeded in keeping the quaver out of his voice. “Sir, I am the embezzler, Borogrove O’Larch. I want to go home. I surrender. Arrest me. Please!”

Mum interrupted harshly, “You’re both going back to Earth, the instant I can load you on a ship. I don’t want you around when I get to the bottom of this thing. If what I suspect is true, I couldn’t trust myself to stay civilized.” His glare coalesced upon Kruger. “As it is, you and your government will probably be hearing from us before long. And from a dozen other empires.” He turned and stalked out.

Kruger sat there for a minute, then, grunting with the effort, got slowly to his feet. Might as well get the formalities over with. “Stand, Borogrove O’Larch,” he said glumly, “in the name of the Government of Earth.” He placed hesitant fingers upon the taller man’s left arm. When, after a minute, it had not changed, he let go, sighed and lay down again on the bed.

