

Diamonds Are For Never

by Michael P Calligaro

"Why you dirty rat fink. I outta--"

Slyra the Syrup King stopped suddenly. When every organic molecule in your body splits its bonds, you tend to shut up. An organiblaster will even quiet must Slurgs, though once in a while those guys will continue on for a second or two. The damn things are all mouth.

I returned my blaster to its holster beneath my desk and nodded to Sammy's Little Helper, "Get 'em, SLiH." Like an excited puppy, the egg-shaped 'bot rolled to his feet and hopped off the desk. Most Joes use destructoblaster, or even annihilablaster, but then you can't rifle through your victim's pockets searching for loose change.

A few seconds later SLiH hopped back onto my desk and deposited a few coins on the ink blotter. "Damn," I muttered to the thick air. "The pancake-condiment business just isn't what it used to be, is it Slyra?" Of course, when a private dick like me learns that you've been boffing your employees' wives and gets you axed from your own company, you tend to go light on the spending cash.

I noticed that SLiH was holding two of his four arms behind his back. After painting on a frown, I looked down my nose at the 'bot. "Now wait just a second there, Little Man. A birdie says you're holding out on me."

SLiH scowled, pulled a hand off, pointed the arm just over my shoulder, and fired. I looked back to see a bird falling from the sky. Grinning, I shook my head. "Not that one." SLiH whistled off key as he reattached his hand and looked up at the ceiling. Under his original programming he never even tried to steal stuff. Who designs these things? I held out a palm and commanded, "Hand it over."

His "I'm trying to look innocent" face became a depressed frown. After dejectedly kicking the electric ink blotter, he dropped something into my hand. Without looking at the object, I reached my other hand into my top drawer and drew out a battery. SLiH's eyes became big, and the frown turned into a wide grin. I tossed the battery in his general direction, causing him to leap into the air and catch it in his mouth. You didn't even have to bribe the original SLiH units. How can you trust a guy that does everything you ask him to? Everyone's got an agenda. I only worry about the perps that pretend not to.

I understand greed, lust, avarice, and greed. Every time I've encountered someone not driven by at least two of the above, I've packed up and moved to another universe. And I've only had to move four times so far.

A knock on the door made me hastily mutter to SLiH, "Quick, clean up that mess down there. We've got company." SLiH puffed out his chest, stood on his tiptoes, and saluted me. Then he did a back flip off my desk. While I gave him a second to collect Slyra's non-organic things, I glanced down at the object in my hand. It was a rare gem worth almost what the estate owed me for the snoop job. Sometimes you get paid even when the universe conspires against you.

I tossed the gem into a drawer and called out, "Yeah?"

In walked a real dame. She had legs that went all the way to the floor--six of them--and enough mammary glands to feed a whole litter of pups.

Of course, she wasn't my type. I prefer redheads.

But still, I could appreciate that she'd turn the heads of a male Cranie. She spoke in a low, husky voice. "Are you Sam Diamond?" If I'd closed my eyes and tried to pretend she was human, I'd have been in heaven. But clients tend to dislike your refusing to look at them, so I kept the peepers open.

I scrunched my face up in mock confusion. "From where I sit, the door says, 'dnomaiD maS.'"

She looked over her shoulder. "Yes, but on the other side of the glass it says, 'Sam Diamond, Inter-Universal Investigator.' If you stood on your head, you might be able to read it."

A sense of humor. I could like this one. "Then it must be me. What can I do for you, Miss?"

She rattled off a string of noises that bore an uncanny resemblance to the sound of a dog being held by its back toes over a vat of castor oil. And I'm not talking about a big dog here. She sounded like one of those annoying little yip-yip things.

"And it's Mrs., not Miss."

I fed a sound capture from my ear mikes to the computer in my abdomen. It relayed a list of images to my retinas. I then selected the image of the dame in my office. The hardest part was choosing the picture. The ones on file were from the local equivalent of the DMV and, trans-universally, those pictures are awful.

I'd taken less than a second; she couldn't have known that I'd run her. "Well, Mrs. Yippity Yap. How can I help you?"

She frowned. "You're not what one would call, 'friendly,' are you Mr. Diamond?"

I shrugged. "The very talented don't need to be friendly. People pay me to solve crimes. If you're looking for someone to take you out to dinner, there's a gigolo two doors down."

She smiled. "Actually, from what I hear, your skill is in question. A certain syrup family is not at all pleased with your recent performance."

News travels fast. "Then why are you here, Mrs. Bow Wow?"

"I'm here because you have a reputation for being a sexual deviant. You only copulate with your own species."

I brought up her file. She'd had a number of domestic disputes with her husband, implying jealousy. But that was very strange, considering that she was a prostitute. Of course, it was her husband who had the really dirty job. He was a writer.

"Jealous husband?"

"He can be, especially when he's in jail."

I jumped to his file. Plagiarism. "What's he in for?"

She sighed. "I'm a bit embarrassed to admit that my husband is a writer. He's been accused of stealing someone else's work."

The truth? How strange. No one ever tells me the truth. "And what would you like me to do?"

"My husband didn't steal that book. I want you to prove it."

I checked out the book *Zen and the Art of Floor Waxing* --a best seller with a hundred million downloads. I frowned. Writing may be a dirty job, but it *does* require at least one cranial cavity full of functioning gray matter. How many male Cranies could claim to have that? The average one needs a female's help to tie his shoes. And Cranie shoes tie themselves with the touch of a button. "Excuse me, Mrs." I perfectly reproduced her name, including the double pant between the fourth and the fifth syllables, "but I'm having trouble imagining your husband writing a best seller."

She leaned forward and said emphatically, "He *did not* steal that book. I am absolutely sure of it."

I nodded knowingly. It was clear that she wrote the book. She didn't want to admit to being a writer, so she was using the more respectable prostitution job as a cover. Clever, but it was an old trick.

Like I said, everybody lies. I'm comfortable with that. And I'm especially comfortable with it when they don't know that I've figured them out. "Well, I'm pleased to see such devotion. I'll take your case. However, recent events have made me more wary of payment strategies than I've been in the past."

She nodded. "If you check your account, you'll find that I've already deposited a retainer. I'll give you an extra four times that amount if you prove my husband's innocence."

I made a show of typing something on my desk. In reality, I used my internal system. I blinked once and whistled. It appeared that the floor-waxer training business was more profitable than the pancake-condiment one. "Well, in that case, I'll get right on it."

"Thank you, Mister Diamond." She turned around and strode out, butt wiggling as she went.

As soon as the door closed, I put my hand on my desk. "SLiH, shoulder."

SLiH looked up at me with a shocked expression on his face.

"Hey man. For the kind of money she's paying us, we can skip the morning crossword today."

SLiH hesitated and looked up at me expectantly.

"Don't hold out on me, Little Man. You'll get your cut. What are you up to now, an eighth of the take?"

SLiH crossed his top arms.

"Oh, that's right. It's a quarter now."

SLiH scratched at his chin with his lower right hand. After a moment, he frowned, looked up at me, and shook his head.

In an incredulous tone, I said, "Surely you don't think you're worth a third?"

The little robot's eyes became excited and he nodded by bobbing his entire body.

I imitated his contemplation expressions for a second or two before saying, "Okay, a third it is."

Don't worry. I lie to him about what we bring in.

He grinned and threw his top hands up in the air. He caught them in his lower hands, reattached them to his arms, and trundled up my arm to grab a seat on my shoulder. And, of course, when SLiH grabs a seat, he really grabs a seat. Until I added his lower arms he used to fall off.

As I headed out of the office, I looked up the author of the floor-waxing book. He was a Trivin janitor

named Quaxard. Strangely, though, while I had no difficulty getting his home address, I couldn't find his place of employment. So I sicked SLiH on the problem.

I'd removed SLiH's voice programming a long time ago. Who wants a helper that talks back? I replaced that code with every interface crack and backdoor technique I could get my hands on. There wasn't a computer system in any of the last five universes I've lived in that could keep him out for long.

While SLiH was doing his magic, I walked over to the freefall chute lobby and hit the call button. A fat woman walking a dogborg waddled in, but, on seeing me, quickly looked at the floor. Her dog tried to come over to sniff me, but she pulled tight on his leash. Her dogborg had robotic legs, robotic jaws, a robotic torso, and ... well, actually, everything but its brain was robotic. I once asked her why she didn't just have a fully robotic companion, and she looked at me like I was some sort of psychopath.

"But then he wouldn't be real!" she said.

"But now he's just real stupid," was my response. She's avoided speaking with me since.

I caught a freefall chute down to the street. Most people in this city only go that low when they absolutely can't avoid it. But I like to muck it up with the under-denizens. Lots of people down there are desperate to move up, and there's no better lip loosener than desperation.

Halfway down, an address appeared on my retinas. "What?" I asked, "No company name?" SLiH just shrugged. Well, he'd gotten me enough to get started, at least. The chute's brakes kicked in two stories before the street, subjecting me to only a few extra g's. Then we hit the industrial-strength spring at the bottom and bounced up a story. A few seconds later, I was able to jump off the bouncing platform onto the thick bed of refuse that covered every square inch of the ground. Yeah, freefall chutes aren't for everyone, but they are cheap, and that's what really matters, isn't it?

I flagged a cab, one of those old methane burners with the aluminum side panels. The smell of trashweed permeated it, and the seats were worn bare. I love places with character.

"Where to?" the cabbie asked in a brusque, but not unfriendly, voice. I gave him the address SLiH had uncovered and we were off--at a blinding thirty kilos per hour. No, that's not kilograms. The cabbie had obviously done a lot of stuff in his time, but that much would even kill a Heurse. We chatted about this and that and I got a lot of good information that tied up some loose ends on another case. I also got a killer tip that would help me cheat at bridge. Hey, you want someone who plays fair, don't play with me.

But I didn't get anything to help with the current case. The cabbie didn't know squat about the address he was taking me to. Strange. Everyone throws their trash out their windows, and that trash always gives away something about what they're doing. Besides, to this day, people actually still want to read things printed on paper. I've made it quite clear to the under-denizens that I'd pay them well for appropriate information, so they tend to go through the trash. It's almost always helped out in the past. Oh well, sometimes a detective has to do good old-fashioned detective work.

When the cabbie pulled up next to the building, I paid the fare, the standard tip, and the miscellaneous fees. Then I slipped him a few extra credits. Always, always, always, make the little people happy. You make them happy today and they'll help you tomorrow. That's true in every universe.

There were a bunch of data moles digging around in the trash at the base of the building. I called out, "You guys find anything useful?"

One of them popped his head out of the meter high stack. "What address you looking for?"

I gave it to him.

The mole twitched his leathery nose and scratched behind his ears. After a few seconds, he said, "I've got a high-ranking official that twiddles Anserbarian uberlosks, the murder of a board member of a commission that secretly threatened to shut them down, and the cover up of an energy drain that caused block wide brownouts last month."

All pretty standard stuff. "How high up is the podophile?"

"High enough to be worth something."

I considered for a few seconds before shrugging. It'd have to wait. "No on that. Do you have any idea what these guys do?"

The mole scratched at his balls and shrugged. "What do you know? I don't. How strange. I guess you're out of luck."

I tossed him a coin and said, "Well, maybe next time."

I had to bribe the guard at the elevator to let me on. Yeah, he called it a "processing fee." But he pocketed ninety percent. Hey, it's a business expense. If the under-denizens could afford to bribe their way out, they wouldn't be down here.

The company in question occupied the entire five hundred and thirty fifth floor. So I rode up to the one above it. From there I entered the stairwell, where I found a good inch of dust covering everything. Perfect. They'd shut the elevator down at night, but it was clear that no one ever checked the stairwell. I sent SLiH down to scope out the surveillance cameras and took up a seat against the wall.

I passed the time online cheating at bridge. Won a hefty sum too. I should have tipped the cabbie better. But then I blew it all at poker. I've really got to work on my avatar's "no really, I'm not bluffing" expression. Closing time came, went, and another few hours followed after it. Finally I got up and walked down one flight of stairs. SLiH saw me coming and fritzed a camera. Of course, the door was locked. "Get it little man."

SLiH waddled over to the door, stood directly below the handle, and reached up. He was too short by about a meter. So he stood on his tiptoes. Then he tried jumping. Finally he turned around, looked up at me and tapped a foot. His expression turned into a wide grin when I grabbed him and held him near the door. He studied the locking mechanism carefully before pulling off one of his hands. A drawer in his belly popped open, and he tossed the hand in. While rummaging around in the drawer, he let the handleless arm move around. "Hey! Don't point that thing at me."

He looked up, then down at his hand. With an embarrassed frown, he pointed it at the door. Then he extracted a thin tool from his belly and attached it to the arm. He grabbed the handle with two hands and carefully inserted the tool into the locking mechanism. After a second of fiddling, he had the door open. He jumped up, held his hands aloft, and bowed toward me. I had to lurch to get my foot in the door before it closed and relocked. "Congratulations. Now put your hand back on."

I peeked through the crack in the door, which revealed a dark corridor. Great. I slid through and headed straight to the secretary pool. They're always in the same place. The secretaries do all the work, so, management always puts them farthest from the things they need to do their jobs. That meant that they had to be far from the printer rooms, the outer windows, and the coffee machines. So they were in the center of the floor.

The other thing about secretaries is that, without fail, one of them will either forget to log out or will leave her password on a note on her desk. Sure enough, the third desk I checked gave me access to all of the company's data. I set SLiH on the desk where he immediately started playing with the pictures. Me, I only had to do a tiny bit of digging before I uncovered something horrible.

This was a time travel company. I leaned back in the chair and exhaled sharply. "Damn it! We're not in a dynamic time model universe, are we? I hate DTM universes." SLiH cocked his body sideways and scratched at his head. I sighed. "We've been through this before, SLiH. In a DTM universe, you can go back in time and change the present. Our client could have written the floor-waxing book and our janitor could have read it on the job. Then he could have sent it back to himself a year before it was published, publish it himself, and send our client up the river for plagiarism. DTM universes suck. You go back and knock off your granddad and paradoxical anarchy breaks out. You know, the really bad kind--the four horsemen arrive, but they get mugged at the gate, leaving it open. That lets the universe's supply of chocolate leak out, which causes the majority of the female population to go into withdrawal, making them run around smashing all the robots."

SLiH's eyes became huge and he leaned forward. Then he rushed forward and tried to bury himself in the folds of my jumpsuit. I patted his back softly to comfort him. "Of course, what really sucks is that it's almost impossible to arrest someone in a DTM universe. I could get enough evidence to put this janitor guy away, only to have him go back in time and change what he did. STM universes are so much better."

SLiH looked up expectantly. I sighed. "In a static time model universe, you can't change the future because it's already happened. I know for sure that I'll never use a time machine to come back to right here and right now, because that future me didn't just appear. Paradoxes can't happen in an STM universe and criminals can't go back and change evidence. What you know now stays the same later. Everything is just much cleaner."

After thinking about it for a second, SLiH stood up straight, pointed at the ground, and then held up two fingers. I frowned at him, so he repeated the expression--this time emphatically. "You think this is a STM universe, do you?" He nodded enthusiastically, but there was a slight look of terror on his face.

I shouldn't have told him about the chocolate-crazed robot killers. Now he'd never sleep tonight. So I let him hold on to his hope that it was an STM universe. But I didn't believe it. I leaned back and weighed my options. Although I seriously considered just going home, I decided instead to do my job. I'd collect my evidence, cash my paycheck, and use the dough to throw a big party before it all disappeared. So I needed to get at the logs on the time travel apparatus.

I couldn't access those logs from the secretary's machine, but it did tell me where the machine was. I went there, had SLiH open the door, and then had him break into the machine's control system. At that point, the worst possible thing that could have happened, happened. This was much worse than realizing we were in a DTM universe. I'm talking much worse than Armageddon and a severe chocolate shortage. No, what I saw in the logs made me realize that *I wasn't going to get paid*.

I rubbed at my temples and contemplated taking up a different line of work. Maybe they needed gardeners in the universe next door. I don't know anything about gardening, but hey, it had to be better than this. SLiH looked up at me, then to the log, then back to me. He shrugged and held up his hands.

I pointed to a log entry. "Look here. Most of the transfers only went back a short way, and a few went extremely far back. This is the only one that went back to the time frame of the book being published. But the controls were operated by a male Cranie. Our client's husband sent the book back. But, being that he's an imbecile, he must have done it wrong. And he still tried to publish his version, even though he hadn't changed the fact of the janitor publishing it. He's guilty."

I went back to rubbing my temples and leaned against the wall to slide down to the floor. Did I mention that dynamic time model universes suck? SLiH hopped off the control panel, waddled over to me, and pushed at my foot. I ignored him. He frowned and plopped down himself. He sat there scratching his chin and concentrating hard on something. Suddenly, he looked up at me with wide eyes. He smiled and jumped to his feet. I gave him a questioning stare, but he ignored me. Instead he made a deep bow and then pointed to his right.

Immediately, an identical looking SLiH unit appeared. I perked up and stared at them. The two SLiH units gave each other high fives and then the new one rushed over to me. He popped open his belly drawer, dug around, and pulled out a twenty-sided die. Don't ask. I stopped wondering why he carries the stuff he carries long ago. He handed the die to me and made rolling motions with one of his hands.

I accepted the die, shrugged, and rolled it. As soon as it left my hand, he held up his four hands with all but three fingers up. The die stopped on seventeen. I picked it up and rolled again. SLiH switched to having all but one of his fingers down. Sure enough the die stopped on one. He nodded to me and then rushed off to his slightly younger counterpart, who was staring intently at the die. While the new SLiH's back was to me, I tossed the die again. He didn't turn around, he just held up five fingers. The die came up five.

The two SLiHs did another high five and then rushed off to the control panel. The young one hoisted the other up on his shoulders, allowing the older one to just reach the seat. He pulled himself up, and then hopped from there to the control panel. The one on the ground then rushed over to the time travel apparatus. He stepped onto a pad in the center and waved. The one on the control panel scratched his head, looked over the buttons, and pressed one.

The lights dimmed, the machine hummed, and the SLiH on the pad disappeared. I jumped up. "Send me back to the time when there were two of you here."

SLiH looked to me, put two hands on his hips, and held a hand out expectantly. "What? Oh?" I dropped the die into his hand. He deposited it into his belly. Then he shrugged with two arms and pointed to a readout with two others. The readout said, "Charging: 0.2%." I wouldn't be going back any time soon.

The odds of SLiH guessing three twenty-sided die rolls in a row were one in eight thousand. It was much more likely that SLiH's going back in time hadn't changed the future. That meant we were in a static time model universe after all. "Damn, little guy. I don't pay you enough." SLiH stuck his chest out and beamed. I made a mental note to not catch him the next time he tried to embezzle from me.

Being in an STM universe changed things considerably. The Cranie had sent the book back, but he couldn't have changed anything, so the janitor must have received it, saw his name on it, and had it published. Suddenly I smiled. I was going to get paid after all. I grabbed the necessary data from the machine, threw SLiH on my shoulder, and got out of there before anyone came to investigate the operation of the machine.

* * *

Judge Waumpum Staumpum was wearing the kind of tired expression one could only get from repeated exposure to me. "Mr. Diamond, how exactly do you intend to prove that Mr.," he rattled off a string syllables that were similar to my client's name, but didn't quite get it right (what do you expect out of a judge?), "did*not* plagiarize that book? Everyone agrees that this is an open and shut case."

Yes, I had to talk directly to the judge. Long ago, this universe tripled its Gross Universal Product by hunting down and killing every last lawyer. Quite an endearing act, I must say. I might have to stick around even if I find a truly honest person here.

I glanced back at my client and winked. She was looking resplendent in her full prostitute gear, which is to say, just about nothing. Of course, that didn't affect me. I'm a deviant. And I still prefer redheads. I didn't bother to look at her husband, though. He wasn't the one paying the bills. I then turned back to the judge and smiled broadly. "Your Honor. If it please the court, I will show that my client's husband could not possibly have copied someone else's work. You see," I paused for emphasis and held up the floor-waxing manual, "*No one ever wrote this book.*"

The courtroom erupted into chaos. Not the Horsemen-mugging kind, but after the judge repeatedly pounded on his gavel to no avail, the bailiff had to shoot someone to quiet them down. Of course, he aimed for me, but I dove out of the way in time. While two deputies dragged the body out, the judge said, "Please continue, Mr. Diamond."

"Well, Your Honor, you may not be aware of this, but we live in a static time model universe."

"Of course I'm aware of that. Everyone knows it."

I rolled my eyes. It would have been nice if someone had given me a flyer when I arrived. "I'm glad to hear that. Then this should be easy to follow. The being whose name appears on this book," I held it up again, "is a janitor at a time travel research institute."

The judge sighed. "Did another one of those spring up?" He called his bailiff over, whispered something in his ear, and sent him away. "You may continue."

A bit concerned, I watched the bailiff rush off. Then I said, "Er, well, my client's husband *did* make use of that facility. I have evidence to show that he sent this book back to just shortly before it was published. His intentions are unclear. Being that he's a male Cranie, his intentions were undoubtedly poorly thought through. They were definitely poorly executed, because it was the janitor, not my client's husband, who got a hold of the book. The janitor saw his name on it, and even though he didn't write it, had it published, much to the delight of millions of floor-waxing enthusiasts around the universe. Later, my client's husband tried to benefit from his part in the creation of this book, but being an idiot, botched that as well. However, being a stupid writer is considerably different from being a plagiarist. You can't go to jail for the former."

The judge leaned back and sighed. "And you can prove all of these allegations?"

I shook my head. "Nope. But I've got enough evidence to cast a shadow of a doubt."

* * *

SLiH was sitting on my desk, rolling his twenty-sided die, and trying to predict the outcome. He'd rolled it over four hundred times and hadn't yet gotten it right. "That's amazing. Are you *trying* to guess wrongly?" SLiH shrugged and rolled again.

The knock I'd been waiting for all day happened. "Come in," I called. My client, wearing way too much clothing for a prostitute, walked in.

"Thank you for getting my husband out of jail, Mr. Diamond. You will find your account has been credited."

I knew. I knew two milliseconds after it happened. And I'd immediately shuttled it out to another account. Of course, she'd given me just a quarter of what she'd promised. I hate it when my clients have a change of heart. I nodded, "Thank you."

"Aren't you going to check?"

I shrugged. "Naw. I trust you."

She arched her eyebrows, but nodded. "Well, thanks again then."

I waited until she was halfway out the door before I said, "I am curious about one thing though."

She stopped. "What's that?"

"Are you an immigrant to this universe?"

She stepped back into the office and closed the door. "Why would you think that?"

She'd put a look of surprise on her face, but it wasn't the correct look of surprise. I was right. "It's the only explanation I can think of for why you had your husband send the book back."

She frowned. "Are you accusing me of something, Mr. Diamond? I think my payment was quite fair."

I held up my hands. "Hey, I'm not in law enforcement. And I'm certainly not into blackmail." I love speaking ironically. After all, I was just about to blackmail her. "I'm just a curious snoop."

Cautiously, she said, "How would my being an trans-universal immigrant explain anything to you?"

"Judge Waumpum said that everyone knew this was a static time model universe--"

"But *you* didn't know that everyone knew."

I shrugged. "I'm an immigrant too. Didn't you know? Anyway, I figure you were trying to launch your writing career by taking a best seller and making it yours."

"My career? I'm not a filthy writer."

"You don't say that with the right kind of disdain. But fine, under your pseudonym, a husband too dumb to know better."

SLiH jumped up and did a little dance. He was holding up four fingers on each of his hands, and the die was showing sixteen. I smiled and patted his little head. Then I said to my guest, "Hey Lady, I got paid. So I don't care. See you around."

She nodded and turned around. I smiled at her retreating form. The best kind of blackmail is when you play dumb and let the perps decide to do the "right thing" on their own.

I had some time to kill, so I checked the news headlines. A certain, unnamed, company at a familiar address had been shut down for "health reasons." According to the report, they were storing toxic waste in their storerooms rather than doing the sensible thing and pouring it out the windows. I sighed and muttered, "Toxic waste, eh? Waumpum, Waumpum, Waumpum. If you'd wanted to shut down a time travel company, you should have asked me. At least I'd have come up with something original."

I then went back to online bridge. I'd made a hefty sum when, an hour later, the rest of the money appeared in my account.

The End

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