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The Fortunes of Temperance  
by Laura Resnick  
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Science Fiction

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It was a lovely morning in Tarotville as I strolled down Celestial Avenue the other day, heading towards the center of town. After buying a couple of cosmic reminders and a minor magic potion in Destiny Square, which was seething with shoppers, I spotted my old friend Strength in the distance and waved her down.

"How lovely to see you, Temperance!" Strength exclaimed when we embraced. "But how ever did you pick me out of this crowd?"

I warily eyed the animal which has been her constant companion for as long as I've known her. "How many other people go around town with their hands clamped over a bad-tempered lion's mouth?"

"Oh, yes, of course," she said absently, releasing me to regain control of the beast's jaws before he could maul a passing shaman.

Strength was looking as ... well, as strong as ever. She told me she's still seeing the Hierophant -- which means they've been together for nearly a year now! They're not talking marriage yet, but they're making plans to rent a citadel together, so it's a pretty serious relationship. Things are generally going well for her, though she got very animated at one point and nearly lost her grip on her frisky lion's mouth while complaining about the Devil, who's still involved in that property dispute with her over the Tower.

Just before we parted, she warned me to keep a low profile, since Death had recently been seen riding into town.

"Rumor has it that he's come for the ex-King of Pentacles, who just hasn't been himself since losing the last election. However," Strength pointed out, "it's never wise to be complacent about Death, so we should all watch our step today."

Keeping this good advice in mind, I hurried towards my destination: a modest purple-trimmed cottage in Zodiac Street, which is right next to the renovated castle where the Magicians Guild meets on the second night of every full moon. Madame Rabinowitz, my Tarot Reader, rents the cottage from the Hermit at a very good price, though after nearly twelve years in this location, she has yet to meet her landlord in the flesh.

The small waiting room was crowded, as usual. Some Tarot Readers have been losing business to the latest craze, psych-o-therapy, which has caught on even faster than most fads. Some Readers, I say; but not Madame Rabinowitz, whose calendar is usually filled weeks in advance.

Sure, I know that some Readers just go through the motions, tell seekers what they want to hear, and collect their fee. It's true that some

people without sufficient training or proper credentials call themselves Readers and try to make up for their deficiencies by charging lower fees. Me, I figure you get what you pay for, and I have no sympathy with someone who realizes too late, as did the Fool, that they made a tragic mistake in making major decisions based on such bogus Readings.

Madame Rabinowitz, on the other hand, graduated with honors from the Academy of Divination with specialties in Tarot and Palmistry. Upon completing her studies, she interned with the now-famous Intuitive Arts Institute. Five years after setting up her own practice, she became the first woman ever to be elected President of the International Society of Divinative Practitioners.

However, credentials alone don't make a Reader as successful as Madame Rabinowitz. It's a client-oriented business, after all. In addition to her academic achievements, Madame Rabinowitz possesses a sympathetic aura and ease of manner which almost always ensure that a client returns to her, rather than abandoning her for some newcomer offering brash guarantees or lower rates.

I first went to see Madame Rabinowitz when trying to decide whether or not to end my relationship with the Page of Cups. He was sweet, faithful, and usually brought good news, but he simply refused to grow up. I just didn't know what to do. Several Readings with Madame Rabinowitz, however, revealed how my own fears of loneliness kept me clinging to a dead-end relationship and castigating my partner for an immaturity which, to be fair, was an essential component of his nature. So I dumped my lover and have been consulting with Madame Rabinowitz ever since.

Oh, sure, loyal as I am, even I have occasionally been seduced away -- only temporarily! -- by intriguing new fads. In fact, I've even tried psych-o-therapy. I know what you're thinking: whacky, fringe-element, superstitious nonsense aimed strictly at the gullible. Now, while I must admit that I decided after only a few sessions that psych-o-therapy really wasn't for me, I have to point out that such narrow-minded opinions are unfair -- especially when voiced by those who've never tried it (which is invariably the case). After all, many sophisticated people believe there is some merit in psych-o-therapy, and there's no denying that some people seem to find genuine comfort in it. So who's to say that there's absolutely nothing of value there?

For my part, I found that the psych-o-therapist (that's what they call them) was much more interested in discussing my past than my future, and he seemed utterly fixated on my childhood and my relationship with my parents. I was briefly reassured by his interest in my dreams, but then I was shocked to discover he couldn't interpret them to predict the future. Indeed, it was his bizarre comments about my dreams and what he believed they revealed about my relationship with my father, of all things, that convinced me I should stop attending those sessions!

I recognized several of the people in Madame Rabinowitz's waiting room today, including the Queen of Cups, who was looking as prosperous as ever (read: fat). I said hello and asked how her dragon is doing; she's an active member of BRIAR (Beast Rescue, Intervention, And Rehabilitation), saving abandoned, abused, or thoroughly misunderstood animals and eventually finding adoptive homes for them. I could tell by her puzzled expression that she had no idea who I was (well, these political wives do meet a lot of people), so I reminded her that we'd sat next to each other last year at one of the Hanged Man's notoriously unique dinner parties -- which was when she'd told me about the dragon she'd recently saved from execution over trumped-up arson charges.

It turns out the dragon is fine, but she has yet to find anyone to adopt him, since everyone still clearly remembers the publicity surrounding him last year. I suggested that changing his name, which is Blaze, might be advisable. Meanwhile, she asked me to sign a petition prohibiting the capture, transport, sale, and slaughter of sea monsters. I finished doing so just as she was called in for her Reading with Madame Rabinowitz.

The Knight of Swords had been just ahead of the Queen of Cups, so he exited the Reading room as she entered. I was surprised, pleased, and

chagrined all at once (the chagrin was because I was wearing an old gown and hadn't done anything with my hair). I had met the Knight briefly on All Souls Night and, in the course of our conversation, had suggested he come here for a Reading. Since he's more into entrail-interpretation and Rune stones, I had the impression he just wasn't taking me seriously. Evidently he'd been more moved by my arguments than I had realized, for here he was.

He smiled and kissed my hand. "Temperance! I was hoping I'd see you here."

"Really?" I blurted. "I mean ... Hello! I'm so glad you decided to give Madame Rabinowitz a chance."

He shrugged in that devil-may-care way which had first attracted me and said, "Well, why not?"

Okay, I admit it: I am dangerously drawn to the bad boy type. I mean ... the Knight of Swords! Everyone knows his reputation; but I just can't seem to help myself. Hoping he'd ask for my telewave number before leaving, I stammered, "And how did it go? I mean, do you think you'll be coming back?"

He stroked my hand lightly before finally releasing it. "Well, Tarot cards aren't sheep's entrails, that's for sure."

"You were disappointed?"

"Let's just say the experience didn't blow me out of the moat."

"Oh. I'm sorry. I hope you didn't find it a total waste of your lucre." Madame Rabinowitz isn't cheap, and knights, after all, don't make that much money.

He smiled slowly. "Not entirely," he murmured -- and then asked for my number!

Madame Rabinowitz was running late, as usual, so after the Knight of Swords left, I spent the next half hour silently examining the ramifications of getting involved with him. I knew that Strength would tell me to forget about the guy, that any relationship between us was bound to end in tears. However, I always believe that it's important to take a risk now and then, as long as it's a measured one and you don't go overboard or lose your head. After all, a life of caution and reserve is no better than a life of reckless abandon.

Now you might think I would consult Madame Rabinowitz about affairs of the heart today, especially after my encounter with the Knight, but I had come here with serious matters to divine, and I didn't intend to leave today without resolving these more pressing issues. Besides, until it was absolutely certain that the Knight would never return to Madame Rabinowitz's and therefore could not possibly be considered a client of hers, it would be inappropriate for me to intrude upon their confidential relationship by asking her to do a Reading about him for me.

Dressed in a conservative purple-and-red silk kaftan with discreet gold coins dangling from her ears, neck, and waist, Madame Rabinowitz greeted me warmly when I entered the Reading room. She apologized, as usual, for the delay.

"I had to lie down for a few minutes after that last appointment," she explained. "Doing a Reading of the Gypsy Spread always gives me psychic indigestion." (The Queen of Cups has a very complicated personal life.)

She was feeling clear-headed now and ready to begin my Reading. I explained that I was currently contemplating an important decision, but added nothing more; Madame Rabinowitz is not one of those undertrained charlatans who needs the client to lead the way. Merely knowing the general purpose of the client's visit is enough to help her choose the correct spread for the occasion and proceed from there.

She began by choosing a Significator card (the card representing me in the spread) for my Reading, selecting the same one she usually chooses: the Housekeeper. It represents good management, adaptation, coordination, and modification. Next she asked me to shuffle the deck of cards, reminding me that it was very important for me to shuffle thoroughly and, as I did so, to concentrate on the question I wanted answered today. As instructed, when I

finished shuffling, I cut the pack into three piles towards the left, with my left hand; then Madame Rabinowitz picked up the cards with her left hand and gathered the three piles back into one -- moving left, of course. (Neglecting such essential details is where many lesser Readers go wrong from the very beginning.)

This done, Madame Rabinowitz then closed her eyes and began meditating, abandoning her physical being in pursuit of her divine center, communing with the direct intuition which is the gateway to spiritual illumination. I waited and tried not to scratch.

She opened her eyes after about ten minutes, then turned up the first card in the spread. It was the Bungee Jumper.

"It seems that you're considering a risky venture. You're about to leap from a stable foundation into the void of the unknown, and you're afraid of what will happen if your safety measures fail you."

Didn't I tell you she was the best? She had just captured my concerns in a nutshell! I have the opportunity to invest my time, skills, and money in a new venture which could reap fabulous financial rewards. However, I'd have to quit my current job (managing the Dreamweavers Cooperative), which would mean losing all my benefits and living on my savings until the new business (Rent-A-Djinn) starts making a profit.

"This crosses her," Madame Rabinowitz murmured, turning over the second card: the Banker. "Your primary worries about this new venture seem to be the risk of financial ruin."

Precisely.

Turning over the third card, Madame Rabinowitz revealed the past source of my fears on this score: the Lawyer. I drew in a sharp breath, for an almost palpable air of evil and greed seemed to emanate from the card.

"There was a devastating loss of property, money, personal resources, and dignity somewhere in your past. Your well-being was completely destroyed by a totally unprincipled person who expressed utterly insincere good intentions. Ever since then, you've found it difficult to trust business associates."

Talk about hitting the nail on the head! When I was but a young maiden, my father's business partner was a fast-talker in three-piece vestments who eventually turned out to be a liar, embezzler, thief, and fraud. My parents lost everything: our castle, our chariot, our savings. I wouldn't have been able to attend Magicks College if I hadn't managed to get a full scholarship. Starting over from scratch, it was a long time before my father found the Wheel of Fortune once again turning favorably in his direction.

The fourth card, the Divorcee, represented the most immediate influences in my life. "You're growing discontented in your current situation, feeling ready to break away and make a fresh start, striking out independently on your own. You feel unappreciated and under-valued in your current position, and you want to free yourself for more exciting possibilities."

Yes, my growing dissatisfaction with my current job was precisely what attracted me to this opportunity to commit my professional skills and financial resources to this new opportunity. Not surprisingly, Madame Rabinowitz was going right to the heart of the matter.

"The fifth card," Madame Rabinowitz said. "The influences that may come into being." She turned over the Rock Star. "You will be dealing with a person or persons of exceptional talent, but you fear they will be difficult to work with: unreliable, temperamental, egocentric, unreasonable, vain, neurotic, demanding..."

Yes, djinns can be all of that, and more. I think the public would welcome the existence of an agency which would deal with the day-to-day hassles of coping with djinns, renting them out on a temporary need-a-wish-granted basis, satisfaction guaranteed or your money back. Indeed, when my potential partner in the deal came to me with the idea, I was thunderstruck by its simple genius and wondered why no one has thought of this before! Frankly, we'd be able to charge exorbitant prices, keeping a hefty

commission for ourselves; for all of their faults, djinns would definitely rather pay a big commission to an agent than simply be out of work.

However, while my partner would be in charge of the financial aspects of the business, I'd be in charge of the djinns, and I was alternately intrigued by the challenges and worried about the potential problems of managing them, dealing with their fragile egos, and also dealing with clients whom they might (in a fit of mischief) insult, torment, cheat, or cast a spell upon.

"The Nine of Whirligigs, the sixth card," said Madame Rabinowitz, "represents your own hopes in the matter. You would like to see this become a profitable venture, and you believe that it can be -- as long as you're not overwhelmed or sabotaged by opposing forces. The seventh card..." She paused as she turned it over, "reveals the forces working against your hopes. Hm... The Ace of Phalluses." She met my gaze. "You perceive the potential of conflict with a man."

Ah, yes, my partner in this potential deal: Pettifog Celestor. I didn't know the man well. He had sought me out, since I have a good reputation and the right qualifications for this opportunity. His credentials and references all seemed to be in order, and he seemed to have the necessary financial backing. Unfortunately, he was rather overbearing and, well, I just wasn't sure what to make of him.

The eighth card, representing the opinions of my friends and relatives, was the Supernova. No big surprise. They all thought I was nuts to consider giving up a good job with great benefits (including full hex insurance) to invest both time and money in a new, independent, experimental venture -- and one dealing with djinns, at that!

"The tenth card, the final card," Madame Rabinowitz said, "represents the forces which will operate in the near future, influencing the outcome of events and working on your fears and hopes."

The tenth card in the spread, of course, would influence all of the others. I watched tensely as she slowly turned it over.

"Oh, no!" I cried upon seeing it.

Even Madame Rabinowitz gasped. "The Senator," she whispered in horror.

The cosmic warning couldn't possibly be any clearer. The Senator: a self-serving, insincere man of low morals and no principles; a liar, a trickster, an adulterer, and a thief; a despoiler of honest people and pillager of communities.

"Madame Rabinowitz!" I cried. "Thank heavens I came to you in time! Without your guidance, a terrible fate would have befallen me!"

Could there possibly be a more emphatic indication that I must on no account go into business with Pettifog Celestor? I was dreadfully disappointed that, without a suitable investor, I would now have to continue managing the Dreamweavers Guild for the time-being. Nonetheless, I was immensely relieved to benefit from this celestial intervention before I'd fallen into the clutches of a man deceitful, amoral, scheming, and wicked enough to be represented by the Senator in my Reading!

I gave Madame Rabinowitz a large tip, so grateful was I to her for snatching me from the jaws of karmic disaster before it was too late. Then, having learned just what kind of a man Pettifog Celestor really was, I did what any responsible person would do: I went out into the street and asked which way Death had last been seen riding. I went off in search of him, tracking him down without much trouble, since everyone's always alert when Death comes to town.

Hurrying down Harmony Lane, I rounded the corner onto Fortune Avenue and practically walked straight into the back end of Death's pale horse. Thrilled to have found him before he left town, I cried, "Excuse me, Death? I have a -- Ooops! I'm terribly sorry."

The ex-King of Pentacles was kneeling in the street, his hands clasped before him. Death had evidently been just on the verge of reaping.

"I didn't mean to interrupt," I apologized.

"No, no," said the ex-King of Pentacles, rising shakily to his feet.

"Think nothing of it! Did you have business with Death?"

Death turned his implacable eyeless gaze upon me. Staring at that grinning skull encased in shiny black armor, I found myself clasping my hands, too.

"Well, sir, it's just that, um..."

"Yes?" Death prodded, sounding a trifle impatient.

"It's just that so many people will miss the ex-King of Pentacles, and I think I know of a better candidate to return to the Undiscovered Country with you," I said in a rush. He took a step forward; I took three steps back. "If you want my suggestion, that is ... Sir."

"Go on." Death sounded a little bored. Well, I suppose it was all in a day's work to him.

I gave him a thorough description of Pettifog Celestor, his current address on Alchemy Avenue, and related what I had learned at Madame Rabinowitz's. Within moments, the ex-King of Pentacles added his not inconsiderable powers of persuasion to my arguments. Suddenly, in less time than it takes to cast Runes, Death was climbing back up on his horse to ride off in search of his new quarry, grinning ferociously.

"You're not going with him?" I asked the ex-King of Pentacles.

"There's only room for one, besides Death, on that horse," he replied. "Gosh, what a darn shame."

"So I ... I saved you?" I asked.

"This time, yes." He sighed as we watched Death ride away. "But it's never wise to be complacent about Death, you know."

"Yes, I've heard that before."

"However, I am in your debt. If there's anything I can ever do..."

"Now that you mention it," I said as we retreated from the site of his near-Death experience, "I'm looking for an investment partner. I've got this great idea for a temp agency for djinns..."

"Now that is a great idea!" he exclaimed, perking up. "Why hasn't anyone thought of that before? We could call it ... I know!" He snapped his fingers. "Rent-A-Djinn!"

I knew at once that it was destiny!

With more enthusiasm than he'd shown for anything in a very long time, the ex-King of Pentacles discussed the idea with me as we strolled down Fortune Avenue. I would, of course, have to consult Madame Rabinowitz about this surprising turn of events, but I had a feeling that she had already helped me find the true path to a happy and profitable future.

-- The End --

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