

Gentleman Farmer

Jackorius Cortiginous Bezirious combed his giant antennae excitedly. He threw on his best carapace-cover and jumped into his spaceship. Goodbye! Goodbye to smoggy, crowded Lepidotropolis, capital of planet Entemon! Using super-light drive, he flew quickly to Earth and landed in the village of Arrearsville.

He burst into one of the primitive human structures, out of breath.

“Howdy!” he said, wriggling through the doorway. Three men and a dog looked up at him. “As this is my first rodeo, come to Jesus, could you please direct me to the Weaver farm?”

The men regarded him amiably. One of them scratched his nose.

“Weaver ain’t there,” said one man.

“That ain’t present no problems,” Jackorius said. “By the by, my name is Jackorius Cortiginous Bezirious, pleased to make your acknowledgement.” He clacked his middle legs against his chitinous shell, excited to finally be employing the local language, which he had laboriously mastered.

“What?” said the man.

“Cortiginous Bezirious, Jackorius Cortiginous Bezirious,” he said.

“It don’t speak English,” opined one of the other men.

“I heard it say Jack,” said the first man. He turned to Jackorius. “Is your name Jack?”

“Yes! English name Jack,” he said, remembering. “Regular old down-home name.”

One of the men extended a hand.

“My name’s Bill Hereford,” said the man. “And this here’s Mister Miller and Mister Rainey.”

“And this man?” said Jack, pointing at the hound dog on the floor.

“That’s Ben,” said Bill Hereford.

“Nice to have knowledge of you,” Jack told the dog. The dog looked away, uninterested.

“Are you here to eat our crops?” asked Mister Miller.

“No, sir! Though I realize that I do appear to be a larger version of your economically destructive insects called logrus--“

“Locusts,” said Bill Hereford, helpfully.

“Exactly!” said Jack. “But contradiction-wise, I am here to plant brand-spanking new crops like god-dang corn and tomatoes, right here in the Weaver farm ground!”

“Weaver ain’t there,” repeated Mister Rainey. “He moved away.”

“Known,” said Jack. “I purchased his plot, and I will move in with my wife next week!”

Bill Hereford stroked his chin and said, “Are you saying ... that you paid Mister Weaver hard Lepidopteran currency for that land he’s got there?”

“Yes, sir!” said Jack.

“Well, now. You wouldn’t, by any chance, be interested in buying some more prime farmland down this way? I happen to know of --”

“--and maybe,” interrupted Mister Rainey, “you have some insect friends who also want to buy up some other farms around here?”

Jack could see the men side-eyeing each other, which meant they were sending telepathic messages. He knew that from his study-mastery.

“Have not a worry, four gentlemen, well-met. I slap your backs heartedly,” said Jack. He tried to casually ease down into an empty chair, but one of his podomeres became enmeshed between two floorboards. He stood back up to his full three-meter height, and continued, “I assure you there will be no gentrification of your idyllic farm village. No more of us will come around offering top dollar to owners, pushing good folks out of their homes, forcing them off-planet to engage in low-renumerative activities.”

The men looked at him.

“What?” said Bill Hereford.

“You all retain your farms!” said Jack. The men looked disappointed. The hound dog laid its head on the floor. Jack continued, “And I stand with you, proud farmers who make crops that feed the economic vertebrae!”

For a long time, Jack had looked forward to living among these simple folk, away from the hectic legal-electronic-social-military nerve center of Lepidotropolis. To be frank, these men were even simpler than he anticipated, especially the hairy man lying on the floor. So refreshing, thought Jack. Now he was off to fix up the Weaver place, and then he would back fly to Lepidotropolis one last time to fetch his hoe-down wife, Evatrolina Partivoria Strassivula.

“Jackorius Cortiginous Bezirious,” said Evatrolina, sweetly but sternly.

“Do you mean me?”

“Of course I mean you!” said Evatrolina.

“Why, the name’s Jack, miss,” he said, inclining his head, inadvertently hitting her with one of his giant antennae.

“Jack,” she said, sitting them both down. “*Must* we go to Earth?”

“You will absolutely love it there,” said her husband.

Evatrolina Partivoria Strassivula tick-tacked down the main street of the Earth village. There wasn’t much to do at the farmhouse. She was bored. She went to the general store and squeezed her huge insect frame through the doorway.

“Hello, boys,” she said.

“Hello, Eva,” said Mister Miller.

“Hello,” said Mister Hereford.

The two men were playing cards.

“It’s a hot day,” she said.

“Tolerably so,” said Mister Miller, without looking up.

Evatrolina put her middle hands on her hips and shifted her weight.

“So *hot*,” she said.

“Mmm,” said Mister Hereford.

“I wonder if one of you gentlemen could offer me a hypothermic libation,” said Eva.

“Come again?” said Mister Miller.

“I mean a cold drink,” said Evatrolina. She leaned back slowly, allowing her carapace to click softly against the wall.

“You want a Coke?” said Mister Miller.

“Sure,” said Evatrolina.

“What kind? We got Coke, Pepsi, and Sprite.”

“That sounds *so* good,” said Evatrolina.

Mister Hereford interrupted. “Are we gonna play cards, Miller? Or talk sugar drinks with Miss bug?”

Mister Miller said, “Okay, okay.” He pointed Evatrolina towards the Coke machine and returned to the game. As she skittered toward the vending machine, Evatrolina suddenly began to worry. Had she overdone it with her overtures? These men were clearly drawn to her. They could barely resist her. If they talked, word might get back to her husband, and he would become angry with her.

Evatrolina smiled to herself. Maybe that wouldn’t be so bad.

Jackorius Cortiginous Bezirious saw his first farm while serving in the Lepidotropan Armed Forces. His unit was stationed on Alpha 2, protecting the agricultural planet from the Reptile forces of Poikilotherm. While most soldiers complained that there was nothing to do on Alpha 2, Jackorius relished the opportunity to study crop rotation, planting distances, and irrigation.

He regaled Mister Miller with stories of that time.

“Army or navy?” asked Mister Miller, distractedly.

“Space armada!” Jackorius said, proudly. “But my military discharge did not end as desired, as my pater forced me to run computer operations for his refrigeration business. On Lepidotropolis, subject races are volunteered to serve as sentient refrigerators, hanging from ceilings in vast caverns. We feed

them mouth-to-mouth, storing food inside their bellies. Sadly, I failed to write the correct computer program to track the feeding schedules.”

“What happened?” asked Mister Miller.

“Cavern revolt! They came spilling out, surface-wise, overrunning a suburb where lived the Legal Counsel for Sub-Minister for Financial Technologies, who was angrier than the proverbial snake that married the irrigation tube!”

“Garden hose,” said Mister Miller.

“Bless you,” said Jackorius, which he knew to be the customary response to nasal extrusion.

“So... anything you’d like to buy?” said Mister Miller, motioning around the general store.

“Aw, yeah. *Bid-ness*,” said Jackorius. “Fifty tons of tomato seeds, please.”

“We got them little packets over there,” said Mister Miller, pointing.

“Truth be told,” said Jackorius, glancing side to side, “never mind about the *bid-ness*. By the by, sweet Jesus, I declare I have actually arrived to discuss a confidential matter of some delectability.”

“I’ll forgive you for getting straight to the point,” said Mister Miller.

“It’s about Evatrolina Partivoria Strassivula.”

“Is that some Italian dish?” asked Mister Miller.

“A dish, yes,” said Jackorius. “But not from your Italian peninsula. I make reference to my attractive wife. Word has returned to me that several men in this village have been passing at her, making logical propositions, if you get my meaning, sir.” He paused. “By the disgusted look on your face, I see that you do.”

“Well,” said Mister Miller carefully, “there’s people around here who like to invent tall tales, so you might be skeptical of your source.”

Jackorius pulled up to his full, three-meter height. “My wife herself told me this! It came straight from her oral cavity!”

“Hmm, this puts me in an awkward position,” said Mister Miller, scratching his head. He either had to call the wife a liar, or agree that she’d been slutting around town.

Jackorius began clacking around the room, and a fearful look came to Mister Miller’s face.

“This is high noon, brother!” said Jackorius. “What is it likely to be?”

“Aw, fuck,” said Mister Miller.

With a quick swipe of his razor-sharp foreleg, Jackorius Cortiginous Bezirious neatly severed the head of Mister Miller. Licking the man’s blood off his own leg, Jackorius quietly celebrated his down-home conflict resolution skills. Back on Lepidotropolis, there would have been a dozen lawyers, each specialized in some arcane corner of harassment legislation. Satisfied, he headed home.

“The police are here,” said Evatrolina Partivoria Strassivula, peering out the farmhouse window.

“I will pass through the door to greet,” said Jackorius.

He wondered what this was all about. Perhaps the police were here to help him with the matter of the property line separating his farm from Mister Hereford’s. For some reason, Mister Hereford could not see that the creek-bed was a more logical delineator than the current fencing.

Jackorius click-clacked down the outside porch stairs. From his study-mastery, he knew that Earth police required obsequy.

“Officer!” said Jackorius. “It is my humble honor to participate as a member of this community of gentlemen-farmers, and by my presence bring notoriety and a certain *je ne se quoi* to this previously remote and unrecognized provincial sub-sector.”

The policeman, sweating, kept his distance.

“Yes, well,” said the policeman.

“Now, as I will not easily fit into your vehicle,” said Jackorius, “I recommend that we separately travel to the Hereford residence, where we can discuss the matter of the property line.” Jackorius turned to mount his horse, which promptly ran off.

“Actually,” said the policeman. “I’m here about the murder.”

“What murder?” asked Jackorius.

The policeman pretended to study his small notebook.

“A ... Mister Miller,” he said.

“Ah!” said Jackorius. “Yes, we settled our differences in the time-honored style. Now I see. There are perhaps laws regarding small bounties of restitution that must be paid to the relatives of the bereaved. Evatrolina!”

Jackorius turned around to find his wife already leaning provocatively against the front doorframe.

“This is no time for your shenanigans, Evatrolina!” he shouted in exasperation. “Fetch our checkbook, so that I may renumerate the good officer.”

Jackorius turned back and said to the policeman, “I’m so sorry. She’ll be the death of me.” He twisted his mandibles into the shape of a human smile. The policeman took an involuntary step backward. Jackorius wondered if he made the facial expression correctly. He made a mental note to practice in front of a mirror.

“Ahem,” said the policeman. “As to your differences with Mister Miller, would you care to come down to the station and give a statement?”

Jackorius checked the position of the sun. “Not to trouble you at all, better to give you my statement in the here and now. Mister Miller, you see, called my wife a scarlet woman. Or perhaps a liar. Either way, we were about to have a god-danged blood feud on our hands. So I settled it, Old West style, according to the customs of this locale.”

“This is North Carolina,” said the policeman.

“Exactly,” said Jackorius. He looked back and saw Evatrolina still leaning against the doorway. The woman was ungovernable. Turning back, Jackorius leaned his huge chitinous frame over the policeman and said, “Look at her. The sad truth is that I fear that my wife *is* a scarlet woman. Looking at her, wouldn’t you have to agree?”

Jackorius watched as the policeman struggled to give an answer.

What an idiot, thought Evatrolina Partivoria Strassivula.

Why had she agreed to come to Earth? Worse, to give it a full Lepidopteran year. At least if she didn’t like it after that, and she wouldn’t, then they would return home and forget the whole thing.

Tired of watching her husband argue with the policeman, Evatrolina went to the guest bedroom and laid several dozen eggs. Ugh. Then she fixed herself a drink and sat on the front porch.

Her mother had told her not to marry him. When Evatrolina was a university student in Lepidotropolis, she was cast in a production of *Our Great Empire*. Her acting career had just begun when her marriage put it on permanent pause. “Now, Eva, let’s be practical,” her husband had said. As if planting corn were practical.

The policeman took a step backwards and pulled his gun. Evatrolina Partivoria Strassivula stood up, drink in hand. Here we go, she thought. She felt dizzy.

Jackorius spit acid in the man’s face, which dissolved in seconds.

Eva fainted.

Jackorius ran to his wife and scooped her up with his forelegs.

“Oh, God,” she said, her eye-facets rolling around. Jackorius carried her to the police car. There was a small hairy man in the back seat, the same one he’d seen lying on the floor of the general store.

“Sir, we must get my wife to a doctor immediately!” said Jackorius.

The man looked the other way. Another frustrating local, thought Jackorius. He pulled the hairy man out of the car and stuffed his wife in. As he pressed her appendages into the vehicle, one of her antennae broke off. Never mind. It would grow back. Jackorius folded himself into the driver’s seat. From his study-mastery, he knew that there was a button to extrude police soundwaves, but he couldn’t find it. He hit the accelerator and headed to town.

Jackorius steered through his front wooden fence. Suddenly, the police car flew into the air. An improvised explosive device had exploded just under the surface of the driveway. The car rolled over as it hit the ground.

“Shit!” said Jackorius.

Using his chitinous head, he broke through the front windshield and scabbled out. Planting his hindlegs firmly, he flipped the car back over. He pulled Evatrolina out of the back seat, grabbing her midsection with his mandibles. He’d have to carry her into town. It was just as well. He could run almost as fast as a car.

After half an hour, Jackorius reached the doctor’s front porch. He laid his wife down, releasing his mandible grip.

“Oh, darling,” said Evatrolina Partivoria Strassivula.

Jackorius knocked feverishly on the door.

“Country doctor! Country doctor!” he shouted.

A man opened the door. Speaking into a cellphone, he held up an index finger. After a moment, he hung up and said, “Howdy, what can I do you for?”

“My wife,” panted Jackorius. “She had a spell.”

The man rubbed his chin and said, “Well, I don’t know much about bug biology, but this one seems to be missing an antenna.”

“Accidentally snapped off,” said Jackorius, still breathing hard. “When I compacted her into the law enforcement vehicle. But that’s neither here nor anywhere.”

“What?” drawled the doctor.

While Jackorius and the doctor were talking, Evatrolina Partivoria Strassivula died. Her chemical signature changed, and she began to release the enzymes of a decaying corpse. Jackorius prepared for colony members to come and remove the body to a random position at some fixed distance. He would argue with them, of course. He would insist that the body was not diseased, and thus it posed no immediate infection threat. But the workers would keep scabbaling around until they got a firm grip on the body.

Worse, Jackorius suddenly realized that no colony members would, in fact, be arriving. He was alone on Earth, in the middle of nowhere. Suddenly, Jackorius felt an autonomic response kick in. He picked up the body himself and set off to remove it to a random position outside the city limits.

“Crazy bugs,” said the country doctor, watching Jackorius go. A hundred years ago, it was the crazy reptiles, and then the crazy eels. Maybe we’re crazy too, thought the doctor.

Jackorius didn’t realize it, but he too was rapidly dying, mainly of old age, but also of heartbreak. He would die before he made it to the city limits. Back at the farm house, however, the eggs were hatching.

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