

## Plumage From Pegasus: The Publishing House Always Wins

by Paul Di Filippo

“*Maxim*, the raucous men’s magazine, has never been shy about putting its name out there. But nothing compares to its latest brand extension, which will affix the *Maxim* name to a new hotel and casino on the Las Vegas Strip.”

—“Lad Mag and a Brand in Las Vegas,” by Lorne Manly, *The New York Times*, June 5, 2006.

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I was in a truly crappy mood that night. I had been demoted to the ranks of the third-tier showgirls in the “Hotties of Zenna Henderson’s *The People Revue*” just because I had shown up for rehearsal drunk three times in a row. And a pay cut just added to the sting. But even though I was so far back on the big stage that the rubes in the audience could barely make out my pasties, I still had to force an unending cheek-stretching smile. The thong of my spacesuit costume was riding up my butt and my feet hurt in my battered Capezios. But I kept up with the other girls anyhow, kicking and prancing to beat the band.

The last thing I wanted was to lose my job here at the *F&SF* Casino. Vegas was a cruel town, crueler than ever since the New York publishers had moved in, and I knew that if I blew off this position, after all my other notorious failures in this incestuous town, I could easily start falling and never stop.

The song-and-dance number seemed to stretch on forever. Some washed-up pop tart at the front of the stage, dressed like an Amish schoolgirl—if Amish schoolgirls wore fishnets and bustiers—was singing about Earth boys being major studs, and every sour note she shrieked made me wince. But finally all us dancers made our exit offstage and back to the dressing room in a fog of female sweat and perfume.

But even then I wasn’t free for the night. I started changing into the house’s standard cocktail waitress uniform. It was modeled along the lines of what some babe wore in a book called *Glory Road*.

Jeanie, who was the closest thing to a friend I had among the troupe, said, “What’s with the queen of the cosmos getup, Ava?”

“Aw, I took on a shift hustling drinks. Gotta make up the money I lost somehow.”

“Could be worse. Maybe you’ll get to meet some generous high-rollers.”

“Hunh! Not likely. This joint is strictly penny ante. Now if I was working at *The New Yorker* or the *Atlantic Monthly* or even *Granta*, then maybe I’d be brushing shoulders with some major players....”

Jeanie finished taking off her stage makeup. “Well, you never know who’s gonna show up at an offbeat joint like this. I heard somebody spotted Joyce Carol Oates on the floor last weekend. She dropped ten large at the craps table.”

Adjusting the fit of my strapless bra, I thought about Jeanie’s comments, and felt a little better. You never could tell who you’d meet in this life. Maybe tonight would bring me luck.

Little did I know then how right I was.

I exited the dressing room and made my way past the noisy flashing slot machines with their motifs from a bunch of weird stories I had never heard of before coming to work here. “A Canticle for Leibowitz.” “Hothouse.” “That Hellbound Train.” (Now that one was really appropriate to this place and my mood.) “A Rose for Ecclesiastes.” (They must’ve been aiming for the Bible Belt crowd with that one.) “The Deathbird.” (Another cheerful motif.) And so on and so on, with all the slot zombies shoving bills into the machines and pushing buttons like they were earning overtime at some misery factory, their faces lit up in Technicolor by the glowing screens like that astronaut’s helmet in *2001*.

I made my way across the broad busy floor to the Boucher Room bar, picked up a tray with a few of the more popular miscellaneous mixed drinks already on it, and began to circulate. I got the nod from various security guys I was friendly with. They were all dressed up like “Starship Troopers” and “Time Patrol” officers, so there was no secret about who they were. But this was the kind of rough and tumble house where discretion was less important than a visible show of force.

The next couple of hours, nothing out of the ordinary happened. I decided to visit the poker tables in the McComas Room.

I zeroed in right away on one particular game.

A big Texan sat behind an enormous pile of chips. He looked like something out of a Fritz Leiber story, tall and thin. (Okay, I been doing a little outside reading since I took this job. The stuff's kinda addictive.) He was sweating and grinning, smoking a big stogie. When he spotted me he bellowed out, "Howdy, little miss! Let's have another one of those 'Flowers for Algernons' over here, pronto!"

Luckily I had one of the tall frosty drinks on my tray. I set it down on the table in front of him and recited the drink's motto: "Every sip makes you smarter!"

He extinguished his cigar in an old glass, winked at me, then swilled a big draft of his new drink. "Sure thing—until you crash!"

Turning again to his fellow players, Tex said, "Okay, boys, let's get back to building up Daddy's retirement fund. This hand's gonna be 'Rogue Moon,' with the multiple sudden death option."

Everyone groaned, but resigned themselves to the Texan's choice as their only chance to win any of their money back.

For the next three hours I kept close to Tex, stoking him with drinks and letting him grope my butt. The way he was raking it in, I was counting on at least a thousand for a tip, maybe more. That would go a long way toward improving my finances.

But the longer he played and the more he drank without getting dumb as a lab rat, the more suspicious I got. There was just something plain unnatural about this guy.

Then it hit me, and without meaning to, I blurted it right out.

"Hey, this guy's Ferdinand Feghoot!"

Instantly a pile of security guys were on top of us, immobilizing Tex before he could escape. Acknowledging he was trapped, the guy shimmered, changing his very looks. In place of the tall skinny Texan was a burly, black-haired guy with plastic-frame glasses and plenty of chin spinach: the most common appearance of Ferdinand Feghoot, aka Randall Garrett, Mark Phillips, Robert Randall, and a dozen other crooked bylines, a notorious cardsharp with access to various unnatural powers and knowledge of the future, banned from every casino on the Strip.

Feghoot gave me a wry smile and said, "Well spotted, little miss. But you've just blown a very sizable tip."

The Starship Troopers hustled the con man away and I collapsed into his seat and began to cry.

I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was one of the Time Patrol.

"Miss Davidson, the Owner would like to see you in his offices."

I managed to pull myself together somehow, and followed the Time Patrolman.

The Owner's offices were a swank penthouse with a view of the whole damn sleazy city. I had never been in such luxurious digs. While I sipped a rum and Coke (the Time Patrolman had told me to take whatever I wanted from the private bar), I gawked at all the artwork on the walls: Freas, Emsch, Hunter, Walotsky.... Several portraits showed all the past Owners, right down to some guy named Ed Ferman. While I was admiring their happy faces, the current Owner walked in.

I had never seen his face before, not any pictures either, and I expected some freak like Howard Hughes. Instead, I got prime Russell Crowe!

Dressed in a tuxedo, his face charmingly stubbled, the Owner extended his hand, and I took it with a sweaty palm.

"Miss Davidson," he said in a voice that would melt ice on Pluto, "you've saved Spilogale Enterprises a considerable sum of money and much bad publicity tonight. I'd like to make it up to you somehow."

"Well, if you could set me up with a better job here—"

"Consider it done," he said, and the rest of the night is strictly off-limits to you.

So now I work in the Isaac Asimov Sweet Science Amphitheater, where all the big-money boxing matches go down. I'm a Ring Girl, carrying the information cards at the start of each match and between rounds. It's a lot easier on the old tootsies than hoofing it, pays twice as much, and the job has got me a new boyfriend too.

"Battlin'" Boff Hurkle, and he's got the body of a god!

