

Next

By Renny Severance

“Next!”

I took a tentative step forward. A fog swirled around my feet. Looking up, I saw a tall, white desk. Looking down at me was a woman with long, white hair, flowing robes and rimless glasses perched partway down her nose.

“Name?” she said in an authoritative yet pleasant voice.

I looked enquiringly at the angel standing next to me. His wings were folded neatly down his back and his immaculate white robe disappeared into the fog around our feet.

“Say your name,” he said, *sotto voce*.

“Ahhh, Evan Beaufort Abbot,” I replied uncertainly.

“Hmmm — yes, here we are.” She peered at something on the desk, tracing a line with her finger.

“How do you plead?” she asked.

“PLEAD? What do you mean? What’s going on?”

“How do you plead,? she repeated.

“To what?” I cried.

“Your life,” she said.

I looked again at the angel. “Is life a crime?”

“For some it is,” he said. “It’s all in how you look at it.”

This wasn’t helping a whole lot. In desperation I shouted, “Innocent!”

“To all of it?”

“Well, gee — I don’t know. Sure, I’ve made a few mistakes — you know, a few regrets... But hey, I’ve done some good things too.

She peered down at the desk again. “Hmmm — so it would appear. Very well. One hyper-eon. — Next!”

“Hey...” I started.

“C’mon,” said the angel, taking my elbow gently. “It’s time to go.”

Without my realizing it, we were walking. “What just happened there?” I asked. “Is that all there is?”

“Oh no, this is just the beginning — you’ll see.”

“Well, who *was* that back there?”

“The Receptionist.”

“And who are you?”

“Pretty much whoever you want me to be — it’s flexible.”

“Huh?”

“Some see me as an angel, some as a devil. Sometimes just another person. It all depends on your point of view.”

“What about the Receptionist? What’s the story on her?”

“It’s about the same — it’s what you’re used to. To some she’s a tribal elder, to others a heavy guy in a loincloth sitting cross-legged on a pillow. Still others see something like a fire-breathing dragon.”

I tried to digest that. “What’s next?”

“Luggage,” he said crisply.

A baggage carousel emerged from the fog as we walked. It turned slowly. There was a small backpack, a large canvas duffle bag and some paper shopping bags with handles.

“These are yours,” said the angel. “Pick ’em up and let’s get going.”

I put on the backpack and found it a perfect fit. I slung the duffle bag over my shoulder and picked up the paper bags.

“What do I call you?” I asked.

“Oh, ’most anything you want — whatever you are comfortable with.”

“You mean like Gabriel or Michael?”

“If you like.”

“How about Fred?”

“Sure. That’s OK too.”

We moved on in a comfortable silence for a while. “What is all this stuff I’m carrying, anyway?”

“Your life.”

“And what do I do with it?”

“That’s up to you.”

I plodded on in silence. After a bit I stopped and put the duffle down. “Can I take a peek?”

“Yup, anytime you want.”

I peered into one of the paper bags. A party balloon started to grow and climb out of the bag. I watched in surprise as it rose, trailing its string and disappearing in the clouds overhead.

“What in the world was that?”

“That was one of your good deeds. Maybe a favor for a friend. If you can, it’s a good idea to grab the string when one appears and tie it on a bag before it gets away. It can help lighten the load.”

“Thanks for the tip, Fred. Wish I’d known that earlier.”

“You’re welcome.”

I picked up my stuff and we went on again. “Say, Fred — just what is a hyper-eon?”

“That’s one of those relative things. It’s a little like Einstein describing a distortion of the space/time continuum. Sometimes it’s bigger, sometimes it’s smaller. It’s really up to you. Basically, it’s how long it takes. You’ll see.”

“Are there limits? A minimum or a maximum?”

“For some it can be forever. For just a few it can be an hour or so. Mostly it’s somewhere in between.”

We walked on.

We came across a lone walker. He had two duffle bags, a backpack, a number of assorted suitcases and one paper shopping bag. He couldn’t carry it all at once so he

would push a couple of suitcases with his foot while carrying one. From time to time a suitcase would fall over. He had to stop, put the load down, right the bag and start again.

“Look at that poor guy,” I said. “Should we give him a hand?”

“No, it doesn’t work that way. Just leave him alone.”

“I had a feeling you might say that.”

“Let’s take a break,” said Fred. “Look, I’m not supposed to tell you this stuff, but I think an exception might be helpful. That fellow spent a lifetime accumulating things. That’s what he lived for — things. Getting them and keeping them. He didn’t have room for much else. Now he has to examine that.”

“I think I’m getting the idea.”

As we went on I spotted an old-fashioned leather trunk.

“Leave it alone,” said Fred. “The owner will be back for it. He or she hasn’t yet realized that you can’t just abandon the stuff you don’t deal with.”

“Not too surprising,” I muttered. “Quite a bit like real life.”

Fred peered at me intently. “This is real life — just different from before. Get used to it.”

More walking. We caught up with an elderly gentleman with only a small backpack. One foot was turned in toward the other and walking was difficult for him, even painful. The fellow with all the baggage was still in sight behind us. I had noticed a lovely antique cane with a carved eagle head handle poking out of one of the duffle bags. It was an exquisite piece and had probably cost a small fortune when he acquired it.

I put my bags down and said to Fred, “Excuse me just a minute.” I went over to the fellow with all the suitcases and pointed out the man with the limp. “I think you might be able to help that fellow if you wanted.”

He stopped and rested his load. “Man this stuff sure gets heavy,” he grumbled. “Maybe you’re right.” He pulled the cane out of the duffle bag and went over to the man with the limp. “Here, try this,” he said.

The man smiled, took the cane and didn't say a word. He tried it for a few steps, then turned back and smiled at the donor. Clearly walking less painfully, he went on his way, stopping occasionally to wave the cane over his head as he moved out of sight.

Baggage guy picked up his load again and started pushing a suitcase with his foot. He looked back at me and said, "You know, I think this duffle feels a little lighter now." He moved on and I returned to my own luggage. Fred smiled at me slightly and we went on our way.

"That was good," he said, "but it's usually not that simple. Normally you can't just give your stuff away."

"You know, Fred, I notice these other guys are alone. They don't have angels with them. What's the story with that?"

"You're new here," said Fred. "I won't be with you forever. I'll leave before you want me to, but I'll be here as long as necessary. I won't abandon you."

"Well, how soon?"

"It depends."

"Yeah, doesn't everything."

"Yes."

I changed direction — both literally and conversationally. "Where are we going? Do we have a particular destination?"

"That depends," said Fred.

"Of course."

"You see some people need to go in a straight line, heading resolutely down a defined path. Others will wander aimlessly, this way and that. Still others will explore. I suspect you fall into that last category."

"And how will I know when I get where I'm supposed to be?"

"You'll know. Don't worry."

"When this process, or whatever you call it, is done... what happens then?"

"Whatever you want," said Fred.

“Sounds like a variation on ‘It depends,’” I grumbled. “What if I don’t know what I want? What if I don’t want to do anything?”

“That shouldn’t be a problem,” said Fred. “You see, that’s one of the things in your backpack and that’s the last one to be emptied. Don’t worry — you’ll manage.”

Suddenly he turned and started away from me. As he went, he called over his shoulder, “It only takes one hyper-eon. You’ll be fine.”

And he was gone.