

Subpoenaed in Syracuse

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Tom Holt

“Da-da-da-dum,” sang Archimedes, reaching over his shoulder with the sponge to get at the awkward spot in the middle of his back. “Da — ”

Careless — a moment’s thoughtlessness, and there’s a big pool of water on the floor. Damn. Pause. Why is there a big pool of water on the floor? The philosopher frowned. An insight, nebulous as a cloud, began to condense in his mind.

“Hold it!” said a voice from behind.

Archimedes jumped, thereby increasing the size of the pool and, coincidentally, proving the hypothesis he’d been working on. “Who the hell are you?” he asked.

The stranger stepped out of a fold of shimmering blue light. “You don’t know me,” he said. “My name’s Calvin Dieb. I’m a lawyer.”

Archimedes stared at the blue light, the stranger’s outlandish clothes. “Are you a god?” he asked.

“Nah. Easy mistake to make, though,” the stranger reassured him.

“Actually, I’m from the future. Three thousand, one hundred and fifty years, to be exact. In my century, we’ve figured out how to travel backwards in time. Oh, forget I said that, by the way.” He chuckled. “Don’t want that outstandingly intuitive mind of yours getting on the job back here in the Dark Ages, could lead to serious doo-doo. So,” he went on, stepping clear of the blue fire and vanishing it with a click of his fingers, “this is it, then. The big moment. Congratulations.”

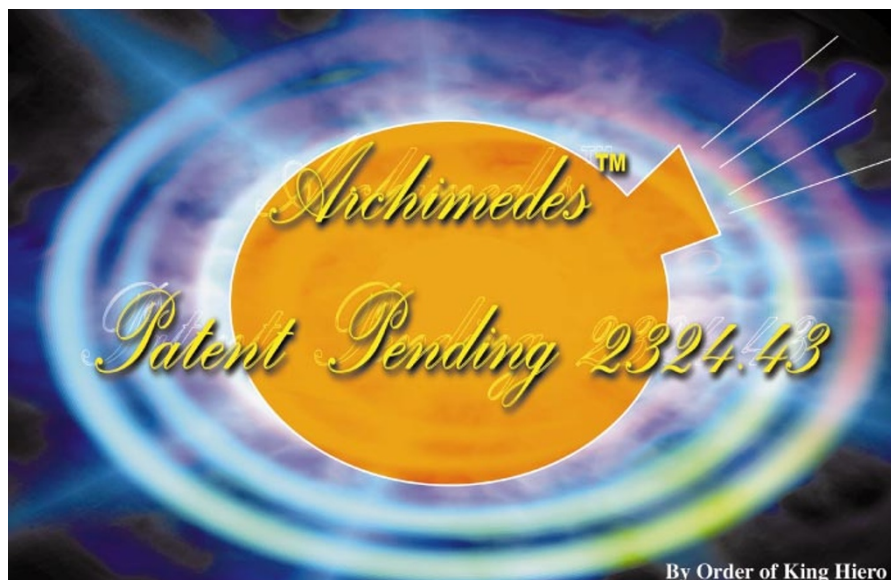
“Is it?”

“Sure.” The stranger grinned like an open wound. “Because of this, your name’s gonna be a household word for the rest of Time — believe me,” he added with a wink, “we checked. This discovery of yours, it’s gonna revolutionize the way mankind understands nature. It’s practically the birth of science. And you know what really burns me up about it?”

Archimedes thought for a moment. “Well, no,” he said.

“What really bugs me is,” said the stranger, “you don’t make so much as a wooden nickel out of the whole deal. Not a cent. Nada. One of the most seminal discoveries in human history, and the guy who made it has to go on washing his own tunics. Now I ask you, is that right?”

Archimedes thought some more. “Yes,” he said. “I mean, it’s interesting, I suppose, in a kind of bet-you-didn’t-know-that sort of



way, probably get me invited to a few parties, but it’s not as if it’s any good for anything —”

The stranger snorted. “That, my friend, that is where you’re — with the greatest respect — totally wrong. I can’t go into details for fear of screwing up the timelines, but trust me, this is gonna be huge. Multi-billion-drachma huge. And who’s gonna get all that money? Not you, friend. Not,” he added, leaning forward a little, “unless you listen to what I’ve got to say.”

Archimedes frowned. “I’m listening,” he said.

The stranger nodded. “Back where I — forward when I come from,” he said, “we got a thing called patents. Means that if someone wants to use your idea, they gotta pay you money.”

“Really? What a strange idea.”

“It’s cool,” the stranger said enthusiastically. “Now, what I’m proposing is, in return for a small piece of the action, say one third, I explain to you how it works. In the morning you go and see your friend King Hiero and explain to him how, if he passes a law here in Syracuse whereby inventors like yourself get paid a whole lot of money each time they invent something, pretty soon Syracuse’ll be the technological and economic capital of the world, and he’ll be the biggest king, bigger than Rome and Macedon and Carthage put together. Then we patent this new discovery of yours, and after that it’ll just be a matter of raking in the dough.”

After the stranger had finished explaining the theory and practice of patent law, the philosopher’s eyes were burning like stars. “That’s brilliant!” he exclaimed: “I’ll go and

see the king right this minute.” And he jumped out of the bath and headed for the door, pools of displaced water forming unheeded at his every step.

“Hey,” the stranger called after him, “aren’t you gonna get dressed first?”

Archimedes came home six hours later, in the king’s personal chariot, laden with gifts, and immediately signed all six copies of the contract that the stranger shoved under his nose.

“Great,” the stranger said, as he clicked his fingers to light the blue flames of the temporal interface. “You won’t regret this.” He snapped his fingers again. Nothing happened.

Archimedes’ invention of the patent in 221 BC revolutionized the scientific world. Instead of blurting out discoveries for anybody to hear, philosophers revealed them only to the rich merchants who had the wealth to develop them properly. Because they were merchants rather than scientists, they chose to finance the projects that looked to them as if they promised a good, quick return on capital. Mankind never did discover gravity, but the whoopee cushion was invented in 146 BC.

As for Calvin Dieb, he made the best of a bad job, eventually settling down in the small city of Acragas where he tried to interest the local goat-farmers in product liability litigation. Ironically, he was killed by an inventor, striving to patent the secret of flight, who fell on him after flying too close to the Sun and melting the wax that held his wings together. ■

Tom Holt used to be a lawyer, but he’s better now. His latest novel, Valhalla, is published by Orbit.