

Science Fiction/Fantasy

# Settlement

By Edward M. Lerner



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Have you ever had a sense of *presque vu*, the feeling that a familiar place or situation isn't quite what it seems? The dream started like that.

My company integrates websites. We buy web servers, database management systems, e-commerce packages, and add customer-specific content. I'm not getting rich, but it's a living.

I was in my office—but it wasn't *my* office. My metal desk had been replaced by an expanse of mahogany; my plain carpet by a hand-knotted Persian over pegged oak planking; my souvenir trade-show posters by framed oils. The room dwarfed my real office. Across the table, a frowning *presque vu* customer leafed through paperwork, scribbling on a legal pad.

"Is there a problem, Mr. Gray?"

"How did the total get so high? It was only an upgrade to my DBMS."

Leather creaked as I leaned back in my chair. "Only? It's a complicated process, I assure you." Before he could formulate a response, I added, "I'm sure we discussed this."

Gray squirmed in his (cloth-covered) seat. "You mentioned the upgrade itself and an installation fee. Now these other charges appear."

"I'm sure we discussed it," I repeated soothingly. "These are all customary items."

He fidgeted with the handle of his briefcase. The ID tag held a business card for "Gray & Associates." He opened his mouth, then thought better of it.

We reviewed page after verbose page, mostly boilerplate. He questioned the need for most of it, and the associated charges; I responded glibly, in the most unctuous and condescending of voices. It was poor sport: my dream self had parried such queries many times before.

"Yes, an upgrade *is* \$200, per line 1022 of the Software Installation Reconciliation Form. Naturally, we also have the documentation fee of \$150 and notary fees of \$50." Of course, I couldn't *do* the work without completing the necessary papers, there was no benefit to notarizing them, and my receptionist was a notary. "You'll want a copy of the papers, hence the xerography charge." At a dollar a page.

More closely resembling his name with each passing second, Gray rallied to ask, "And these 'Items Payable In Connection With Transaction?'"

"Those are charges from SoftSell, the distributor providing the upgrade."

"But the database is already listed."

"SoftSell incurs expenses retrieving a package from inventory and ordering its replacement. They must confirm that you've licensed the Version 2 application before authorizing an upgrade to 2.1. Naturally they bill for preparing their papers, itemizing their charges, and so forth. You'll notice," I volunteered helpfully, tapping a \$30 item with my platinum pen, "the fee for couriering their papers to my office."

From his eponymous hue, Gray turned an equally unhealthy red. "A *courier*? What about mailing the papers? For \$30, *I'd* have dropped them off."

I smiled. "You're not bonded, Mr. Gray." Neither was my son, who'd delivered the package.

"Why *two* courier fees?"

"SoftSell receives a copy of the executed paperwork. It'll be couriered back." Bobby frequented the next-door music store; his share would buy a CD.

Steam appeared to issue from my customer's ears. "And this tax-service fee?"

In my dream, otic vapors seemed a normal occurrence. "SoftSell owes \$10 for sales tax on the transaction. The \$40 covers preparation of their tax filing."

The nightmare wouldn't end. My squirming customer heard, without enlightenment, about a pest-inspection fee (I ran a virus checker), a site survey fee (I ran a directory command—yes, an operating system *was* installed), and a credit report.

Total charges for the \$195 upgrade and my \$200 installation fee came to \$1106.95. Wearily, Gray took a checkbook from his briefcase.

"Ahem," interrupted my dream self, "For amounts over a thousand dollars, I *must* insist upon a cashier's check."

His pen stopped. "You ran a credit check on me—and billed me for it. Why do you need a cashier's check?"

"Company policy," I shrugged, although *I'm* the company for all intents and purposes. "Would stopping by tomorrow be an inconvenience?" I added a day's interest to the total as he stared.

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I woke up screaming into the night at the rapacious monster that I'd somehow become.

I'm proud of what I do, and strive to do it better every time. My *doppelganger* had taken a straightforward task, a process that I perform regularly, that I've streamlined and optimized, and somehow created an individualized abomination. My evil twin practically itemized each staple. I considered the petty venality of triple-spacing paperwork to maximize buck-a-page Xeroxing, and wanted to vomit.

SoftSell was a reputable vendor; they'd never take part in such a paper-shuffling conspiracy, pyramiding billable charges through the ludicrous exchange of standard forms. We *never* courier anything. It's 1999, for God's sake—we use the Internet.

Why would anyone tolerate this? A sneering echo of my dream self answered: had Gray not paid every extorted penny, I'd have slapped a lien on his business. Contesting my charges would have meant retaining the services of another systems integrator, whose services would come no less dearly than my own. My inner demon smirked: even then, what artificer questioned his fellow's fees?

So Gray told himself that software upgrades aren't done often—better to just pay, and put the unpleasantness behind him. Seething, he wrote the check.

That was always the way.

\* \* \* \*

I got up this morning with a bad taste in my mouth. The moo-shu pork at the back of the fridge might have been too old, but I don't think that was it.

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I think it was refinancing my mortgage yesterday, in the posh law offices of Gray & Associates.

As luck would have it, I'm supposed to upgrade their website soon. I'm looking forward to it.

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