



Wild Cards II: Aces High

By Wild Cards Trust

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Now in development for TV: Rights to develop *Wild Cards* for TV have been acquired by Universal Cable Productions, the team that brought you *The Magicians* and *Mr. Robot*, with the co-editor of *Wild Cards*, Melinda Snodgrass as executive producer.

After the alien virus struck humanity in the wake of World War II, a handful of the survivors found they possessed superhuman powers. The Wild Cards shared-world volumes tell their story. Here in book two, *Wild Cards II: Aces High*, we trace these heroes and villains through the tumultuous 1980s, in stories from SF and fantasy giants such as George R. R. Martin, Roger Zelazny, Pat Cadigan, Lewis Shiner, Walter Jon Williams, and others.

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Editorial Review

Review

“Delicious... Everything I'd hoped for in a new Wild Cards book. The character interactions and plot twists have exactly the complexity, surprise, and unsentimental realism I'd expect out of a George R. R. Martin project.” *?Austin Grossman, author of Soon I Will Be Invincible, on Inside Straight*

About the Author

George R.R. Martin is the author of the acclaimed, internationally bestselling fantasy series *A Song of Ice and Fire*, adapted into the hit HBO series *Game of Thrones*. He is also the editor and contributor to the Wild Cards series, including the novels *Suicide Kings* and *Fort Freak*, among other bestsellers. He has won multiple science fiction and fantasy awards, including four Hugos, two Nebulas, six Locus Awards, the Bram Stoker, the World Fantasy Award, the Daedelus, the Balrog, and the Daikon (the Japanese Hugo). Martin has been writing ever since he was a child, when he sold monster stories to neighborhood children for pennies, and then in high school he wrote fiction for comic fanzines. His first professional sale was to *Galaxy* magazine, when he was 21. He has been a full-time writer since 1979. Martin has bachelor's and master's degrees in journalism from Northwestern University. He lives in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

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Pennies from Hell

by Lewis Shiner

THERE WERE MAYBE A dozen of them. Fortunato couldn't be sure exactly because they kept moving, trying to circle behind him. Two or three had knives, the rest had sawed-off pool cues, car antennas, anything that would hurt. They were hard to tell apart. Jeans, black leather jackets, long, slicked-back hair. At least three of them matched the vague description Chrysalis had given him.

“I'm looking for somebody called Gizmo,” Fortunato said. They wanted to herd him away from the bridge, but they didn't want to physically push him yet. To his left the brick path led uphill into the Cloisters. The entire park was empty, had been empty for two weeks now, since the gangs had moved in.

“Hey, Gizmo,” one of them said. “What do you say to the man?”

That one, with the thin lips and bloodshot eyes. Fortunato locked eyes with the kid nearest to him. “Take off,” Fortunato said. The kid backed away, uncertain. Fortunato looked at the next one. “You too. Get out of here.” This one was weaker; he turned and ran.

That was all he had time for. A pool cue came slicing for his head. Fortunato slowed time and took the cue, used it to knock away the nearest knife. He breathed in and things sped up again.

Now they were all getting nervous. “Go,” he said, and three more ran, including the one called Gizmo. He sprinted downhill, toward the 193rd Street entrance. Fortunato threw the pool cue at another switchblade and ran after him.

They were running downhill. Fortunato felt himself getting tired, and let out a burst of energy that lifted him off the path and sent him sailing through the air. The kid fell under him and rolled, headfirst. Something crunched in the kid's spine and both his legs jerked at once. Then he was dead.

“Christ,” Fortunato breathed, brushing dead October leaves from his clothes. The cops had doubled patrols

around the park, though they were afraid to come in. They'd tried it once, and it had cost them two men to chase the kids away. The next day the kids were back again. But there were cops watching, and for something like this they'd be willing to run in and pick up a body.

He dumped the kid's pockets, and there it was—a copper coin the size of a fifty-cent piece, red as drying blood. For ten years he'd had Chrysalis and a few others watching for them, and last night she'd seen the kid drop one at the Crystal Palace.

There was no wallet, nothing else that had any meaning. Fortunato palmed the coin and sprinted for the subway entrance.

"Yes, I remember this," Hiram said, picking the coin up with a corner of his napkin. "It's been awhile."

"It was 1969," Fortunato said. "Ten years ago." Hiram nodded and cleared his throat. Fortunato didn't need magic to know that the fat man was uncomfortable. Fortunato's open black shirt and leather jacket weren't really up to the dress code here. Aces High looked out over the city from the observation deck of the Empire State Building, and the prices were as steep as the view.

Then there was the fact that he'd brought along his latest acquisition, a dark blonde named Caroline who went for five hundred a night. She was small, not quite delicate, with a childlike face and a body that invited speculation. She wore skintight jeans and a pink silk blouse with a couple of extra buttons undone. Whenever she moved, so did Hiram. She seemed to enjoy watching him sweat.

"The thing is, that's not the coin I showed you before. It's another one."

"Remarkable. It's hard to believe that you could come across two of them in this good a condition."

"I think you could put that a little stronger. That coin came off a kid from one of those gangs that's been trashing the Cloisters. He was carrying it loose in his pocket. The first one came off a kid that was messing with the occult."

It was still hard for him to talk about. The kid had murdered three of Fortunato's geishas, cut them up in a pentagram for some twisted reason that he still hadn't figured out. He'd gone on with his life, training his women, learning about the Tantric power the wild card virus had given him, but otherwise keeping to himself.

And, when it got to bothering him, he would spend a day or a week following one of the loose ends the killer had left behind. The coin. The last word he'd said, "TIAMAT." The residual energies from something else that had been in the dead boy's loft, a presence that Fortunato had never been able to trace.

"You're saying there's something supernatural about them," Hiram said. His eyes shifted to watch Caroline as she stretched languorously in her chair.

"I just want you to take another look."

"Well," Hiram said. Around them the luncheon crowd made small noises with their forks and glasses and talked so quietly they sounded like distant water. "As I'm sure I said before, it *appears* to be a mint 1794 American penny, stamped from a hand-cut die. They could have been stolen from a museum or a coin shop or a private..." His voice trailed off. "Mmmmm. Have a look at this."

He held the coin out and pointed with a fleshy little finger, not quite touching the surface. "See the bottom of this wreath, here? It should be a bow. But instead it's something sort of shapeless and awful looking."

Fortunato stared at the coin and for a half-second felt like he was falling. The leaves of the wreath turned into tentacles, the ends of the ribbon opened like a beak, the loops of the bow became shapeless flesh, full of too many eyes. Fortunato had seen it before, in a book on Sumerian mythology. The caption underneath had read "TIAMAT."

"You all right?" Caroline asked.

"I'll be okay. Go on," he said to Hiram.

"My instinct would be to say they're forgeries. But who would forge a penny? And why not take the trouble to age them, at least a little? They look like they'd been stamped out yesterday."

"They weren't, if that matters. The auras of both of them show a lot of use. I'd say they were at least a hundred years old, probably closer to two hundred."

Hiram pushed the ends of his fingers together. "All I can do is send you to somebody who might be more

help. Her name is Eileen Carter. She runs a small museum out on Long Island. We used to, um, correspond. Numismatics, you know. She's written a couple of books on occult history, local stuff." He wrote an address in a little notebook and tore out the page.

Fortunato took the paper and stood up. "I appreciate it."

"Listen, do you think..." He licked his lips. "Do you think it would be safe for a regular person to own one of those?"

"Like, say, a collector?" Caroline asked.

Hiram looked down. "When you're finished with them I'd pay."

"When this is over," Fortunato said, "if we're all still around, you're welcome to them."

Eileen Carter was in her late thirties, with flecks of gray in her brown hair. She looked up at Fortunato through squared off glasses, then glanced over at Caroline. She smiled.

Fortunato spent most of his time with women. Even as beautiful as she was, Caroline was insecure, jealous, prone to irrational dieting or makeup. Eileen was something different. She seemed no more than a little amused by Caroline's looks. And as for Fortunato—a half-Japanese black man in leather, his forehead swollen courtesy of the wild card virus—she didn't seem to find anything unusual about him at all.

"Have you got the coin with you?" she asked. She looked right into his eyes when she talked to him. He was tired of women who looked like models. This one had a crooked nose, freckles, and about a dozen extra pounds. Most of all he liked her eyes. They were incandescent green and had smile lines in the corners. He put the penny on the counter, tails up.

She bent over to look at it, touching the bridge of her glasses with one finger. She was wearing a green flannel shirt; the freckles ran down as far as Fortunato could see. Her hair smelled clean and sweet.

"Can I ask where you got this?"

"It's kind of a long story," Fortunato said. "I'm a friend of Hiram Worchester. He'll vouch for me if that'll help."

"It's good enough. What do you want to know?"

"Hiram said it was maybe a forgery."

"Just a second." She took a book off the wall behind her. She moved in sudden bursts of energy, giving herself completely to whatever she was doing. She opened the book on the counter and flipped through the pages. "Here," she said. She studied the back of the coin intently for a few seconds, biting on her lower lip. Her lips were small and strong and mobile. He found himself wondering what it would be like to kiss her. "That one," she said. "Yes, it's a forgery. It's called a Balsam penny. Named after 'Black John' Balsam, it says. He minted them up in the Catskills around the turn of the nineteenth century." She looked up at Fortunato. "The name rings a bell, but I can't say why."

"Black John'?"

She shrugged, smiled again. "Can I hang on to this? Just for a few days? I might be able to find something else for you."

"All right." Fortunato could hear the ocean from where they were and it made things seem a little less dire. He gave her his business card, the one with just his name and phone number on it. On their way out she sm...

Users Review

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Leticia Cantrell:

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Sally Staten:

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Edward Stewart:

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Rosalind Huffman:

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