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Bryce had climbed far—from Thieves Row to control of wide-flung UT—

THE MAN WHO STAKED THE STARS

A Novel of the Robber Barons of Space by CHARLES OYE

MASTER of the MOONDOG

A Rollicking Lunar Novellet by STANLEY MULLEN

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THE MAN WHO STAKED THE STARS

By CHARLES DYE

Bryce Carter could afford a smug smile. For hadn't he risen gloriously from Thieves Row to director of famed U.T.? Was not Earth, Moon, and all the Belt, at this very moment awaiting his command for the grand coup? And wasn't his cousin-from-Montehedo a star-sent help?

W

"What do I do for a living?" repeated the slim dark-skinned young man in the next seat of the Earth-Moon liner. "I'm a witch doctor," he answered with complete sincerity.

"What do you do? I mean, what do they hire you for?" asked Donahue with understandable confusion and a touch of nervousness.

"I'm registered as a psychotherapist," said the dark-skinned young man. He looked too young to be practicing a profession, barely nineteen, but that could be merely a sign of talent, Donahue reflected. The new teaching and testing methods graduated them young.

"I know I am a witch doctor because my grandfather and his father and his father's father were witch doctors and I learned a special technique from my uncles who are registered therapists with medical degrees like mine. But the technique is not the one you find in the books, it is ... unusual. They don't say where they learned it but it's not hard to guess." The dark youth shrugged cheerfully. "So—I'm a witch doctor."

"That's an interesting thought," said Donahue. It would be a long three day trip to the Moon and he had expected to be bored, but this conversation was not boring. "What do you do?" he again asked. "Specifically." Donahue had rugged features, a dark tan and attractively sun-bleached hair worn a little too long. He

exuded a sort of rough charm which branded him one of the class of politicians, and he knew how to draw people out, so now he settled himself more comfortably for an extended spell of listening. "Tell me more and join me in a drink." He signalled the hostess and continued with the right mixture of admiring interest and condescending scepticism. "You don't chant spells and hire ghosts, do you?"

"Not exactly." The dark innocent looking young face smiled with a cheerful flash of white teeth. "I'll tell you what I did to a man, a man named Bryce Carter."

A

group of men sat in a skyscraper at Cape Hatteras, with their table running parallel to a huge floor-to-ceiling window that overlooked the clouded sky and gray waves of the Atlantic. They were the respected directors of Union Transport, and, like most men of high position, they had a keen sense of self-preservation and a knowledge of ways and means that included little in the way of scruples.

The chairman rapped lightly. "Gentlemen, your attention please. I have an announcement to make."

The buzz of talk at the long table stopped and the fourteen men turned their faces. The meeting had been called a full week early, and they expected some emergency as an explanation. "A disturbing announcement, I am afraid. Someone is using this corporation for illegal purposes." The chairman's voice was mild and apologetic.

Bryce Carter, second from the opposite end, was brought to a shock of tense balanced alertness. How much did he know? He gave no sign of emotion, but reached for a cigarette to cover any change in his breathing, fumbling perhaps more than usual.

The men at the long table waited, showing a variety of bored expressions that never had any connection with their true reactions. The chairman was a small, inconspicuous, sandy-haired man whose ability they respected so deeply that they had elected him the chairman to have him where they could watch him. They knew he was not one to mention trifles, and there was a moment of silence.

"All right, John," said one, letting out his held breath and leaning back, "I'll bite. What kind of illegal purposes?"

"I don't know much," the small man apologized, "Only that the crime rate has risen forty percent in the average of the cities served by UT, and in Callastro City, Callastro, and Panama City, where we just put in a spaceport, it more than doubled."

"Funny coincidence," someone grunted.

"Very funny," said another. "If the police notice it, and the public hears of it—"

There was no man there who would willingly have parted with his place at that table, no one who was unaware that in fighting his way to a place at that table he had seized some part of control of the destiny of the solar system.

UT—Union Transport, spread the meshes of its transportation service through almost every city of Earth and the hamlets and roads and bus and railroad and airlines between—and even to the few far ports where mankind had found a toehold in space. But its existence was precariously balanced on public trust.

UT's unity from city to city and country to country, its spreading growth had saved the public much discomfort and expense of overlapping costs and transfers and confusion, and so the public, on the advice of economists, grudgingly allowed UT to grow ever bigger. There was a conservative movement to put all such outsize businesses under government ownership as had been the trend in the last generation but the economy was mushrooming too fast for the necessary neatness, and the public rightly would not trust politicians in any operation too confusing for them to be watched, and preferred to leave such businesses to private operation, accepting the danger for the profit of efficient and penurious operation, dividends and falling costs.

But all these advantages were barely enough to buy UT's life from year to year. It had grown too big.

Its directors held power to make or break any city and the prosperity of its inhabitants by mere small shifts in shipping fees, a decision to put in a line, or a terminal, or a crossroad. The power was indirectly recognized in the honors and higher offices, the free entertainment and lavish privileges available to them from any chamber of commerce and any political representative, lobbying discreetly for a slight bias of choice that would place an airport or spaceport in

their district rather than another.

Perhaps some of the directors used their position for personal pleasure and advantage, but power used for the sake of controlling the direction of growth of races and nations, power for its own sake was the game which was played at that table, its members playing the game of control against each other and the world for high stakes of greater control, nursing behind their untelling faces who knows what megalomaniac dreams of dominion.

Yet they used their control discreetly, serving the public welfare and keeping the public good-will. When it was possible.

As always Bryce Carter sat relaxed, lazily smiling, his expression not changing to his thoughts.

"Who knows of this besides us?" someone asked.

The chairman answered mildly. "It was a company statistician in the publicity department who noticed it. He was looking for favorable correlations, I believe." His pale blue eyes ranged across their faces, touching Bryce Carter's face expressionlessly in passing. "I requested that he tell no one else until I had investigated." He added apologetically, "Commitments for drug addiction correlate too."

That was worse news. "Narcotics investigators are no fools," someone said thoughtfully.



N

eiswanger, a thin orderly man near the head of the table, pressed his fingertips together, frowning slightly. "I take it then that our corporation is being used as a criminal means of large scale smuggling of drugs, transport of criminals on false identification and transport for resale of the goods resulting from their thefts. Is that correct?" Neiswanger always liked to have things neatly listed.

"I think so," said the chairman.

"And you would say that the organization responsible is centered in this corporation?"

"It would seem likely, yes."

The members of the board stirred uneasily, seeing a blast of sensational headlines, investigations which would spread to their private lives, themselves giving repetitive testimony to inquisitive politicians in a glare of television lights while the Federated Nations anti-cartel commission vivisected the UT giant into puny, separate squabbling midgets.

It was not an appealing prospect.

"We'll have to stop it, of course," said a lean, blond man whose name was Stout. He could be relied on to say the obvious and keep a discussion driving to the point. "I understand we have a good detective agency. If we put them on this with payment for speed and silence—"

"And when we know who is responsible," asked Neiswanger, "*Then* what do we do?"

There was silence as they came to another full stop in thinking. Turning culprits over to the police was out of the question, an admission that such crimes had happened, and could happen again. Firing the few detected could not impress the undetected and unfired ones enough to discourage them from their profitable criminality.

"Hire some killings," said the round faced Mr. Beldman, with simplicity.

The chairman laughed. "You are joking of course, Mr. Beldman."

"Of course," said Mr. Beldman, and laughed barkingly, being well aware of the permanent film record taken of all meetings. But he was not joking. Nobody there was joking.

The detective agency and the hired killers would be arranged for.

Bryce Carter leaned back with the slight cynical smile on his lean face that was his habitual expression. "Suppose the top man is high in the company?" he suggested softly. "What then?" He did not need to point out that the disappearance of such a man would be enough to start a police and stock-holders investigation of the company in itself. The implication was clear. Such a man could not be touched.

"A hypnotist," suggested Raal. "Someone to make our top man back track and

clean up his own mess."

"Illegal, dangerous and difficult, Mr. Raal," Irving said sourly. "There are extremely severe penalties against any complicity in the unsupervised use of hypnotism or hypnotic drugs, and their use against the will of the subject is a major crime."

"A circulating company psychologist would be legal," suggested the lean blond man whose name was Stout.

"We have over seventy-five of those on the company payrolls already and I fail to see what use—"

"One of the special high priced boys who iron out kinks in groups by joining them and working with them for a while, like that Conference Manager we had with us last year. Every member of the group that hires one has to sign an application for treatment, and a legal release. They are very quiet and don't broadcast what they do or who they talked with, but they have a good record of results. The groups who hire them report better work and easier work. We could use one as a trouble shooter."

"Are they a special organization?" someone asked. "I think I've heard of them."

"Yes, some sort of a union. I can't remember the name."

"What would you expect them to do for us?" asked Irving.

"I hear—" Stout said vaguely, his eyes wandering from face to face, "that they have a special tough technique for hard case trouble makers." For those who knew him, the vague look was a veil over some thought which pleased him. Presumably he was thinking the thing which had occurred to them all.

T

he culprit might be a member of the Board. There was a sudden cheerful interest visible among them as they wondered who was quarry for the "tough treatment."

"I've heard of that," said Wan Lun, remembering. "It has been said that they not only do not inform others of the fact of treatment but frequently do not inform

the man under treatment but seem to be only a new friend until—poof." He smiled. "I think the guild name is Manoba. The Manoba Group."

Stout said, "They'll probably charge enough for the skill."

Wan said, smiling, "I also heard some idle rumor that in a few such cases discord within a group was alleviated by sudden suicide. Presumably a psychologist can grow impatient and push a certain button in the mind—"

"Sounds like a good idea," Beldman said. "Do you think if we offered this Manoba the right kind of money—"

"You don't mean that, Mister Beldman," cut in the chairman reprovingly. "You're joking again."

"We're all great jokers," said Beldman, and laughed.

Everyone laughed.

"I move we vote a sum for the hiring of a Manoba psychologist."

"Seconded, how about five hundred thousand?"

"I don't know their fees," the chairman objected cautiously.

"You can turn back any surplus. We stand to lose more than that by several orders of magnitude. Spend it at your discretion."

"Make it seven hundred thousand. Give him a little more room."

"I so move."

"Seconded."

"Carry it to a vote."

They slipped their hands under the table edge before their respective seats, and each man ran his fingers over two buttons concealed there, before him, chose between the *yes* and the *no* button and pushed one, the choice of his fingers unseen by the others.

Two numbers lit up on the small divided panel before the chairman. He looked at them with his mild face expressionless. "Rejected by one vote."

Unanimity was the law on Board decisions, which by a natural law was probably

the reason why no love was lost among them, but this time irritation was curbed by interest. They sat watching each other's expressions with glances which seemed casual. Whose was the one vote?

"I move that the vote be repeated and made open," someone said.

"Seconded."

"All in favor of the appropriation for the psychologist raise your left hand," the chairman requested.

They complied and looked at each other. All hands were up.

"Carried on the second vote," the chairman said without apparent interest. "For my own curiosity will the gentleman who voted nay on the secret vote the first time speak up and explain his objections, and why he changed his mind on the open vote?"

There was silence a moment—Neiswanger looking at his neat fingernails, Bryce Carter smoking, and smiling slightly as he always smiled, Stout leaning back casually scanning his eyes from face to face. Beldman lit a cigar and released a cloud of blue smoke with a contented sigh. No one spoke.

"Gentlemen," said the chairman. "It is entirely likely that the culprit is among us."

"Never mind the melodrama, John." Irving tapped the table impatiently. "We've dealt with that. Let's get on to the next business."

II

I

n the exit lounge at floor five Bryce Carter stopped a moment and glanced at himself in the mirror. Thick neck, thick body—a physique so evenly and heavily muscled that it looked fat until he moved. Atop the thick body a lean face that he didn't like stared back at him. It was darkly tanned, with underlying freckles that were almost black. Years had passed since he had worked in space, but the space-tan remained indelible. It was not a bland or pretty face.

At the dinner, deep in discussion with Mr. Wan, he had been surprised to find himself smiling at intervals, irrepressibly. He hoped it had looked cordial, and not too much like a cat enjoying the company of mice.

They had no defense against him. The drugs organization could never be traced to him. The connection was too well concealed. Even the organization knew nothing about him.

The only evidence which could make the connection was in his own mind. The only witness against him was himself. He cast his mind back over the meeting and dinner but there had been no slips past the first shock of the chairman's announcement, and that had been unobserved by anyone. The psychologist they had hired might perhaps get a betraying flicker of expression from him in an interview, many well-trained observers of human reactions could read expressions that keenly, but the interviewing of all the Board by the psychologist was not likely. The Directors of the Board were even now climbing into trains and strato planes to scatter back to the far points of the earth. It would take many days for an investigating psychologist to follow to interview each one. He and Irving would be last on the list, for he went to Moonbase City, and Irving to Luna City.

He had weeks.

He smiled, fastening bands in his cuffs that folded them tightly on his wrists, zipping up his suitcoat and slipping on gloves. He looked at himself again. Where he had been wearing a conservative dark silk business suit with a short cape, he now seemed to be wearing a tailored ski-suit with an odd cowl, or a

pressure suit without boots or helmet, which was what it was. Carrying the zipper up further would have turned the cape to an airtight helmet bubble.

Employees and executives passing in and out of the UT building gave the clothes an approving and interested glance as they passed. The justification by utility was obvious. It had cost money to have a pressure suit designed light and flexible enough for comfortable wear, but long ago he had grown irked by the repetitious business of climbing in and out of clothes every time one stepped through a space lock, while overcapas and hoods were needed stepping outside of any temperate zone Earth building in winter.

A pressure suit was completely independent of weather and regulated its own internal heat. Since the suit had been designed the manufacturer had begun to receive an increasing number of orders for duplicates, and was now being put into mass production. Probably in these five minutes he had just made many more sales for the manufacturer.

He was setting a style, he thought in pleased surprise, stepping out of the building. The salt wind hit him with a blast of cold, and the automatic thermostatic wiring in the suit countered with a wave of warmth as he leaned into the wind and started to walk. The connection between the Union Hotel and the building he had just left was an arched sidewalk that curved between them, five stories above the sand and surf.

The hotel was an impressively towering building against the ragged sky, and as he walked a gleam broke through from the hidden sunset and spotlighted it and the low scudding clouds in a sudden glowing red. He stopped and leaned against the balustrade to watch the red gleams reflecting from the bay. Red and purple clouds fled by low overhead, their colors changing as they moved. This was something a man couldn't see in space or on the moon.

But after a moment he couldn't fully enjoy it, because he was being watched. The feeling was disturbing.

Damn rubbernecks, he thought, and turned irritably, half hoping that at least it would be an acquaintance or some pretty girls.

But there was no one watching him.

A few pedestrians walked by hurriedly because it was growing dark and the view that they had come to enjoy was fading. The wind wrapped their enveloping

capas around them and made them all look abnormally tall and columnar.

It was darker. The sidewalk lights abruptly flicked on in a flood of amber light that thickened the twilight beyond their circle to an opaque purple curtain of darkness.

He noticed a pedestrian walking slowly towards him from the direction he had come. The figure approached more slowly than seemed natural, with his head bowed and his hands in his pockets as though lost in thought.

A

trailer from the detective agency? It was too soon for that. If it were arranged that every member of the Board be trailed, still it could not have been arranged and begun so soon.

Besides, there was something more deadly than that in the walking man's indifference.

A killer arranged by Beldman? It would be natural for Beldman or Stout to take a chance and fight back the direct way. But there was no evidence. How could either of them have decided who to blame or who to fight?

The few huge buildings that stood dark against the night sky were being brightened now by lights going on in hundreds of windows. In long slender spans between them stretched the aerial walks and the necklaces of amber lights that outlined them. The wind blew colder across the walks and the view of sea and sky that had been visible from them now was blotted out by night. The walkers were going in. There was small chance of sheltering himself in a crowd, or even of keeping only one or two walkers between himself and the one who followed him.

At the first sight of the approaching figure he had instinctively leaned back against the concrete railing and taken his gun from its pocket holster, holding it lightly in his gloved hand.

An aged couple and a vigorous middle-aged woman hurrying in the opposite direction glanced at him without interest or alarm. His pose was not menacing, and anyway most men with money enough to travel carried hand arms.

This was an indirect effect of a Federated Nations ruling that only hand arms of a regulated deadliness be manufactured as the armament of nations. The ruling had been carefully considered for other secondary effects, for any nation growing over-centralized and militaristic was likely to arm its citizens universally for greater military power by numbers, and then suffer the natural consequences of having armed their public opinion.

An armed man need not vote to be counted, and once having learned that lesson, the feeling that an armed man carried his bill of rights in his pocket made this the first clause of the written and unwritten constitutions of many suddenly democratic nations. "The right of the yeomanry to carry arms shall not be abridged." They kept their guns.

And with weapons instantly available to hot tempers, dueling came back into custom in most places.

All this had little effect on the large calm manufacturing countries who had run the UN and now ran the FN, but it made easy their decision that since, in space, policing is almost impossible, the citizens who venture there must be armed to protect themselves. Thus, in spite of the continued outcry of a minority of Christian moralists, a holster pocket was now built into all space suits.

Bryce had grown up in a famine country, an almost unpoliced area, and weapons had been as familiar to his hands as fingers since he had passed twelve. And when, as a steel-worker, he had been one of the first settlers in the foundry towns of the Asteroid Belt, he had found life no gentler there. But it was all right as far as he was concerned. He had heard of safer and duller ways to live but had never wanted them. Life as a moonbased transport manager had been a short interval of nonviolence, five years of startling calm which he had not yet grown accustomed to.

The gun fitted into his hand as comfortably as his thumb, or as the handshake of an old and trusted friend, but it was useless here. Reluctantly he slipped it back into his pocket and began walking again. A director of UT couldn't shoot people on intuition.

He had barely stopped for a count of ten, and there was still distance between them when he had turned, but the follower could be walking faster now, narrowing the distance between them.

If he had waited and fired, an inspection of the man's pockets could have

confirmed his judgment by the finding of an assassin's illegal needle gun. That alone might be enough to satisfy the police if he were still merely a spaceworker, but a Director of UT couldn't live that casually. It would be difficult to explain his certainty to the police, and still more difficult to explain to the newspapers. He could not afford that sort of publicity.

Bryce let out a soft curse and lengthened his stride.

He had to wait for proof of the follower's intentions. And the only proof would be to be attacked, and the first proof of that, since needle guns are soundless and inconspicuous, would probably be a curare-loaded needle in his back.

After that the follower could inconspicuously drop his weapon over the balustrade, its self-destructing mechanism set to melt it before it reached the sands far below.

However since the follower certainly would not openly run after him, the most logical thing to do, Bryce decided, was to run to the hotel as if he were in a hurry. The idea irritated him.

He walked on, slowing perversely. It was irrational to walk, and he knew it, but he walked, and the knowledge that it was irrational irritated him further. The skin between his shoulder blades itched meditatively in its own imaginative anticipation of an entering needle. What good did it do him to be proud of his brains when he put himself in a spot where he walked around like a target?

He controlled a rising rage but he walked.

The sky was totally dark now and there were only two or three couples ahead on the slender concrete span and one old couple he had just passed, so that they were between himself and the follower. But that was no adequate screen.

Far above soared the sky taxis. And now he wanted a taxi. He was approaching a place where there was a hack stand. Just ahead, at the midway point, where the upward curve of the sidewalk leveled off and began to curve down, a narrow catwalk jutted into space with a small landing platform at its end. "TAXI" a luminescent arrow glowed at him directly as he came abreast of it.



e walked rapidly out along the railed catwalk, making a perfect target he knew, silhouetted against the glow. He cursed under his breath, reaching the end of it. Here he made an even more perfect target, with the single bright light that poured down brilliance on the bench and landing platform spotlighting him against the darkness of the night. The bench was thin iron grillwork. It offered no cover.

He needed cover. He considered the white concrete pillar of the lamp, put his hand on the railing and jumped up to sit on the railing casually, a one hundred fifty foot fall behind him and the width of the lamp post between him and the follower, who now was an unmoving figure leaning against the railing of the sidewalk near where the catwalk began.

The sight of the insolently lounging figure did nothing to sooth his irritation. This escape was not the way he wanted to deal with a threat. There was an oddity in the man's waiting. The range was poor, and he probably was not firing, although he would look as if he were not in any case, but if he were not going to take this chance for his murder attempt, why did he openly exhibit himself, arousing suspicion and cutting off future chances? An innocent stroller or even a mere trailer from the detective agency would have strolled on.

Above came the nearing drone of a taxi which had spotted him in the bright pool of light at the hack stand.

There was something in the careless confidence of the follower's open interest in him that raised his neck hair as no direct threat could have, and filled the rumble of the night-hidden surf with obscure menace. The man acted as if his job was over, clinched.

Bryce reached the answer as the taxi floated down on hissing roter blades and settled to the platform. Sliding down from the railing he walked toward it, stiff-legged. The light was out inside it, and the cabby did not climb out or attempt to open the door for him. Bryce turned his head and looked back as if for a last glance at the watching figure, grasping the door handle with his right hand as if fumbling blindly. He was left handed. When the door was open a crack, it stopped opening, and those inside saw the muzzle of a magnamatic in his left hand looking through the crack at them.

It's easier to catch wolves if you're disguised as a rabbit, Pop Yak had told him once. He must have looked a complete sucker, starting to climb into a dark cab with his head turned backward!

"Don't move," Bryce said, some of his anger reaching his voice in a biting rasp. Inside, the driver was frozen with his head turned enough to see the glint of a muzzle behind his neck, and in the darkened far corner of the back seat where there should have been no one there was the pale blur of a face, and a hand holding something. Bryce knew that there was no way a shot could reach him except through the shielding steel door or the shatterproof window, and a man would hesitate before shooting through glass when he was looking down the throat of Bryce's gun. Bryce waited for him to think it over.

The hand of the man in the back seat came into focus as his eyes adjusted to the dark inside, and he could see that it was holding a gun. The gun was not pointing at anything in particular. It was frozen in mid-motion. The man had a half-smile frozen on his face, probably in the way he had been smiling just before Bryce spoke.

"Open your hand. Drop it." The glint of the gun disappeared, and there was a faint thud from the floor. Bryce opened the door and slid into the rear seat, watchful for motion, ready to shoot. "Face front!" They faced front like two puppets, perhaps the uncontrollable rasp in his voice was convincing. He still did not know whose men they were, or why they had been hired. It would be no use questioning them for they would not know either. He could guess who it was, a name came to mind, but there was no way of checking up. This kind of business did not fit well with the crucial balance of his plans for the next two weeks. "Be careful," he said perhaps unnecessarily, "I'm nervous. Union Hotel please."

The short ride to the hotel was made in dead silence, with the man in the opposite corner barely moving enough to blink his eyes. He was middle-aged, with the resigned sagging lines to his face of ambition disappointed, but he sat with a waiting stillness that Bryce recognized as something to watch. There was probably another gun within quick reach of that passive right hand.

The roter drifted down to a landing space on the floodlighted landing roof of the hotel and settled with a slight bump. "Don't move." The clumsy careful business of opening the door backward with his right hand and sliding out without taking his eyes from either of them was tediously slow.

Once out, he slammed the door briskly. "Take off." Not until the red and green lights had faded into the distance did he turn away, pocket his gun and walk into the wide doorway to the elevators. As he brushed past the hotel detective standing in the doorway the detective was reholstering a large size police

pacifier. Apparently he had been ready to impartially stun everyone concerned at the first sign of trouble, which probably explained why those in the aircab had not attempted any retaliation. The detective gave Bryce a cold stare as he went by, probably in disapproval of guests waving weapons on hotel premises.

III

I

n his luxurious hotel room Bryce checked his watch. Eight o'clock. A telephone call was scheduled for some time in the half hour. He filed the question of who was behind the night's attack and picked up the phone. The dial system was in automatic contact with any city in the world. He dialed.

Somewhere in a city, a phone rang. It rang unheard, for it was locked into a safe in a tiny rented office with some unusual mechanisms attached. The ringing was stopped abruptly and a recorded voice answered, "Yeah?"

Bryce took a dial phone from the night table where it had been sitting innocently like a toy he had bought for some child. "Hi Al," he said cheerfully to the automatic mechanism at the other end. "Listen, I think I've got a new phrase for that transition theme. How's this?" He put the receiver against the back of the toy and dialed the toy dial. It responded to each letter and number with a ringing note of different pitch that played a short unmelodious tune.

The pitch notes went over the line and entered the mechanism, making the contacts within it that dialed the number he had dialed on the toy phone.

"How's that?" Bryce said cheerfully.

The recorded voice said, "Sounds good. I'll see what I can do with it." Somewhere far away and unheard another phone had begun to ring. "Want to speak to George?"

"Sure."

A phone rang in a pay booth somewhere in a great city railroad station, and someone browsing at a magazine stand or sitting on a suitcase apparently waiting for a train strolled casually to answer it.

"Hello?" said a noncommittal voice, prepared to claim that he was merely a stranger answering the phone because it was ringing in public.

"Hello George, how's everything going?" Bryce asked. Those words were his

trade mark, the passwords that identified him to everyone as the Voice who gave Tips. Among the monster organization which had grown from the proven reliability of those tips, the voice was known as "Hello George." Hello George's tips were always good, so they had come to be followed as blindly as tips from God, even when they were not understood. Certainty was one thing men in the fencing and drug smuggling business most sorely lacked.

They communicated only by phone. They transmitted their wares by leaving them in public lockers and mailing the key. They never saw each other's faces or heard each other's names, but even the use of a key could be a trap that would bring a circle of narcotics agents of INC around the unfortunate who attempted to open the locker.

Far away over the bulge of the Earth between, a man sat in a phone booth waiting for his tip. "Pretty well. No complaints. How's with you, any news?"

"I think you'd better cut connections with Union Transport. They're getting pretty sloppy. I think they might spill something."

"Wadja say?" asked the man at the other end cautiously, "I didn't get you."

"Better stop using UT for shipping," Bryce repeated, wording his sentence carefully. "They aren't careful enough anymore. You don't want them to break an inc case wide open, do you?" INC was the International Narcotics Control agency of the F. N. But the conversation would have sounded like an innocent discussion of shipping difficulties to any chance listener on the telephone lines.

The flat tones were plaintive and aggrieved. "But we're expecting a load of stuff Friday. Our buyers are expecting it." Stuff was drug, and expecting was a mild word for the need of drug addicts! "And we've got a lotta loads of miscellaneous items to go out." The contact was a small man in the organization but he evidently knew just how "hot" fenced goods could be. "That can't wait!"

He had planned this. "Maybe they are all right for shipments this week. I'll chew them out to be careful, check up and call back Friday. Meanwhile break with them."

"Tell them a few things from me, the—" the distant voice added a surprising string of derogatory adjectives. "Friday when?"

"Friday about—about six." The double "about" confirmed the signal for a telephone appointment that was general for all contact numbers.

"Friday about six, Okay." There was a faint click that meant he had hung up and the phone in the safe was open for more dialings on his toy dial.

Bryce hung up, leaned back on his bed and pushed a button that turned on the radio to a semiclassical program. Soothing music came into the room and slow waves of colored light moved across the ceiling. He tuned to a book player, and chose a heavy economics study from the current seller list of titles which appeared on the ceiling. The daily moon ship was scheduled to blast off at five thirty, its optimum at this week's position of the Moon. By this time tomorrow night, he and all the other members of the Board would be out of reach of any easy observation or analysis by their hired psychological mind-hunter.

With a slight chilling of the skin he remembered the cop-psychos the gangs had warned him about in his scrambling and desperate childhood, and what they were supposed to do to you when they caught you in a third offense.

He had been born into an ex-European quarter in a Chinese city, a descendant of something prideful and forgotten called an Empire Builder, and grew with the mixed gangs of children of all colors who roamed the back streets at night, looting and stealing and breaking. Population control was almost impossible in a land where the only social security against starvation in old age was sons, and social security was impossible in a land so corrupted by the desperation of famines, so little able to spare the necessary taxes. The nation was too huge to be fed from outside, and so had been left by the FN to stew in its own misery until its people solved their basic problem.

So, in an enlightened clean and wealthy world, Bryce Carter had grown up in a slum whose swarming viciousness was a matter of take, steal, kill, climb or die. Perhaps under those special circumstances police penal compulsion had to be brutally strong, stronger than the drive for life itself, as brutal as the lurid tales he had heard. Perhaps in other countries the methods were different, a hypno-converted man not a horror to his friends, but he had had no time to study and investigate if it were so, and the horror and hatred remained.

But there was no need to think about the psycho-hunter the Board had put on him for by the time the hunter could reach him UT would have fallen as a legal entity, its corruption would be completely public, and the psychologist would be called off before discovering anything. Bryce thought of the slight nervousness he had let show at the first words of the chairman's announcement. The only witness against him was himself. His control wasn't perfect. No one's was. But

he was safe.

He concentrated on the opening pages of the Basic Principles of Economies.

I

n the darkened UT building which could be seen from his window a few lights still burned where the night shift dealt with emergencies.

In a small projection room on the fifty-fifth floor a man sat and looked at a film of the UT Board meeting of that day. He played only a certain small twenty minute interval, listening closely to the voices—"Gentlemen, your attention please—" Watching the faces—"Do the police know of this?" ... "Do you think if we offered this Manoba the right kind of money..." "Will the gentleman who voted nay on the secret vote the first time speak up and explain..." "It is entirely likely that the conspirator is among us." On the screen showed the apparently bored faces and relaxed poses of men accustomed to the power game, habitually masking their feelings from each other, shifting their positions slightly sometimes, some smoking. "We've dealt with that, let's get on to the next business."

The watcher stopped the film and silently reset it. It began again with the chairman on the screen rapping the table lightly. "Gentlemen, your attention..."

In the darkened projection room the chairman sat to one side smoking and thinking while the psychologist played the film through for the fourth time.

The chairman was wondering just how seriously the watcher was taking Mr. Beldman's proposals about what he should do to the culprit, and whether he would raise his fee.

T

he telephone rang.

"Four thirty, Mr. Carter," said the voice of the night clerk in the receiver.

It was time to catch the five thirty Moon ship. He splashed cold water on his face and the back of his neck until he was awake, took a hot shower, dressed rapidly, and gave up his key at the desk at 4:45.

"A letter for you, Mister Carter," she smiled, handing it to him. From the wall speakers a mild but penetrating voice began repeating, "Bus line for spaceport leaving in twelve minutes. All passengers for Luna City, Moon Base, Asteroid Belt and points out, please go to the landing deck. Bus line for spaceport leaving in twelve minutes—"

He opened the letter when he had settled down in a comfortable morris chair in the airbus. The letterhead said MANOBA Group Psychotherapeutic Research and Conference Management.

One sheet of it was a half page contract in fine print, apparently a standard form with the name of Union Transport Corporation typed in the appropriate blanks. Above it was printed in clear English and large type for the benefit of those readers unaccustomed to contracts. "WARNING. After you have signed this release you have no legal recourse or claim as an individual against any physical or mental injury or inconvenience you may claim to have sustained as a result of the activities of the contracted psychotherapist(s) in the course of group therapy. Your group is the responsible agent. It must make all claims and complaints as a unit, and may withdraw from the contract as a unit. Those who withdraw from the group withdraw from participation in the contract."

Bryce smiled. Or in other words, if you didn't like it, you could quit your job and get out!

The other sheet he glanced at casually. It seemed to be an explanatory page to the effect that the Manoba's work was strictly confidential and they were under no obligation to explain what they had done or were doing or give their identities to any member of the corporation who had hired them. There was nothing resembling a sales talk about results, and the only thing approaching it was a stiff last sentence referring anyone who was curious about the results of such treatment to the National Certified Analytical Statistics of Professional Standing in such and such bulletins of such and such years.

He signed the contract, smiling, and mailed it at a handy postal and telegraph window at the spaceport before boarding the spaceship.



T

he phone was ringing.

Bryce rolled over sleepily and picked it up. "Eight A.M. L.S. S.S. Sir," said the soft voice of the desk clerk.

"Okay," he grunted, glancing at his watch and hanging up. It was two minutes after eight, but he didn't check her up on it. If he placed the voice rightly, it belonged to an exceptionally pretty brunette. He had not tried to date her yet, but she looked accessible, and Mona was becoming tiresome.

He turned the dial in the headboard that reversed the polarization of the window and rose reluctantly, stretching as sunlight flooded the room. It was daylight on Moonbase City. It had been daylight for a week, and it would be daylight still for another week.

Through the softening filter of the airtight glass the view of distant crater walls and the airsealed towers of Moonbase City shone in etched magnificence, but he gave it only a glance. It was always the same. There was no weather on the Moon and no variety of view.

"Good morning," he smiled, passing a bellboy in the luxurious, deep colored halls.

"Good morning, Mister Carter," the boy answered rapidly with an eager nervous smile.

Bryce had caught the management up sharply on several small lapses, and they all knew him now. He strode on, pleased. Efficiency.... No one gave him a second glance or noticed him in the tube trains, but he was not irritated by it. Someday they would. Someday the whole world would know his face as well as they knew their own. He promised that to them silently and then settled down to concentrate on some constructive planning before reaching the office. He was not going to waste his time gawking at ads or listening to the music like the others.

"Mister Carter?" said a hesitant voice behind him as he was reaching for the handle of the office doors.

"What is it?" he asked crisply, turning, but as he saw who had spoken he knew exactly what it would be.

"Pardon me Mister Carter, but—" It was a spaceman, a skinny wreck of a man in clothes that hung on him. A junky, a drug addict. Bryce knew the signs. He had spent all his money and gone without food for his drug, and now he had remembered from Belt talk that Bryce Carter was a soft touch for a loan. "Never mind," Bryce snarled, reaching for the door again.

He assisted the smuggling of the stuff but that did not mean that he had to admire the fools who took it. The man was muttering something about a loan when the door shut and cut off his words. The loan would be spent on more junk. If he had wanted food he could have signed into a state hospital to take the Cure, and be imprisoned and fed until the hunger for his drug had passed and released him. The Cure was a brief hell, but it was fair payment for having had his fun, and if the addict had any guts he would face it. Any time he was ready to pay the price of exit he could go back to being a man.

Bryce strode through the offices irritably. It did not matter if Earthlings chose to waste their time in artificial ecstasy, but it was different to see a good Belt spaceman let himself go.

The receptionist looked up with fright in her eyes as he passed and gave him a special good-morning, with a smile that was tremulous and very eager to please. He still had her in the stage of new employment where she was kept afraid of losing her new job with a bad reference. It was best to put them all over the hurdles at first.

He gave her a condescending smile as he went through into the inner offices. "Good morning." She was shaky enough. A few well faked cold rages against minor errors had done well. From now on she would need only smiles to give the utmost in loyalty and hard work. What had Machiavelli said? "Make them fear your wrath, and they will be grateful for your forbearance."

He did not bother to speak to Kesby when he passed his open office door. Kesby didn't need smiles or praise, he worked loyally just for the rare curt acknowledgement that he had done well. Three years of managing had made him a good lieutenant, completely faithful. When Bryce quit Union Transport Kesby would follow him.

IV

H

e went into his luxurious inner office with its deep rugs and eye-relaxing colors and its comfortable wide desk with its speaker box and telephones that were like the nerve wires of power, and sat down comfortably like a king on a throne or a mule skinner in the driver's seat with ten pairs of reins in each hand. He never felt completely awake and up to his full size in the morning until he was here.

There was a good stack of letters and memos on the desk waiting for him. On top of the mail stack was a letter labeled PRIVATE in a beamed spacegram envelope. He did not recognize the name at the head of it but the return address was General Delivery, Reef Three, The Belt. It read:

Something urgent has come up. Must see you. Arrange when. Bob. Roberto Orillo, who had been his manager in the small line that UT had taken from him, now the owner of a tiny line of his own which carefully avoided competition with UT in the Belt.

"Arrange when." They could only meet in secret. What would Orillo want to discuss?

The theory he had held in the back of his mind for three days gave answer—Murder! It was Orillo who was behind the attempted attack on Earth. This meeting was another trap. Orillo wanted him dead.

Roberto Orillo had been his first helper with the shipping and delivery service Bryce had built up from the days when he had been merely an asteroid prospector with a ship overstocked with supplies and an obliging willingness to sell his surplus.

After he put his traveling stores on schedule he noticed that an increasing number of people began moving into the Belt to settle along his route without investing in the proper ship or supplies, depending on him, using his ship for a store and bus service, swelling his profits. He found that wherever he chose to extend a route and offer credit for a stake settlers would appear and a community begin to grow.

He absorbed that lesson and laid plans.

UT blocked them. Running his store ships on their regular rounds, making loans, mediating deals, taking half interests in ideas that looked profitable, selling fuel and power, subtly binding his customers to him with bonds of dependency deeper than peonage, Bryce found suddenly that UT, whose trade mark had never been seen in the Belt before, had slipped in five ships patterned precisely after his, but larger, more magnificent and expensive, and set them running on the same course as his but one day ahead. His customers told him. They were apologetic but they had bought at the ship which came earliest, enticed by the glitter and the bargain prices.

It was a killing blow, and was obviously meant to be so. The UT managers were wise in the ways of power, and with limitless money could bankrupt him.

That day Bryce saw that he could not fight UT from outside, and he saw a dream of empire greater than Alexander ever dreamed of being ripped from his hands. When a tactful and conciliating offer came from UT for a merger and an exchange of stock at double its value, he saw it was an indirect bribe for his silent submission without complaints to Spaceways or to the Anti-Cartel Commission of the FN, and he saw that the only way to compete with the gigantic corporation was to destroy it from within.

He held out for a seat on the Board of Directors. They gave it to him.

And in three years had done an efficient job of corrupting and undermining UT to the point where it was ready to fall. UT had a week more to live in respected public service before an outraged public tore it apart.

Bryce had left Orillo in the Belt to form a small delivery company servicing thinly settled outlying points where the profits were too small to disturb UT. It would be this company that would take over and buy out the UT equipment when Spaceways chopped up the monster corporation, and it was planned that Orillo offer Bryce full partnership when this event took place.

But perhaps Orillo objected to sharing his reign with a partner. And perhaps Orillo had always objected to the fact that Bryce was the only one who knew Orillo was a fugitive from justice. Bryce had never quite been able to tell what went on behind the handsome blond face and impassive blue eyes of his assistant.

Bryce had taken him in hand and given him a job after Orillo fled from a murder charge in South Africa. And Bryce had arranged the operations that gave Orillo a new face, new fingerprints and an unworried future. Only Bryce could now give the word to the police which could bring the examination that would show Orillo's retina tallied with that of a wanted man.

But if murder had always lain behind those impassive pale blue eyes, why had there been no attempts before? The answer to that was easy. Up to this time Bryce's activities had been profitable to Orillo. He had seen where Bryce's plans were leading and wanted them to succeed, so that he might step into Bryce's shoes and reap the results.

In three more months Bryce's death would be the death of a partner, and bring the unwanted spotlight of police investigation on Orillo himself, but now, at this point, the disappearance of Bryce Carter would bring police inquiry and suspicion only to the already shaky and undermined fabric of UT.

Bryce counted the profit and loss of his death to the man he had helped, and smiled ruefully. Yet the request for the meeting might be genuine and important. He had to take a chance on it and meet his ex-assistant and future partner somewhere far away from witnesses, recognition—or protection.

Taking a memo pad he printed, *I'll meet you Friday; 3:PM LM*, and wrote in the coordinates of a position in space not very far out from Earth, indicated the radar blink signals for its buoy and clipped the memo sheet to the envelope with its false name and return address. Ringing for his secretary, he handed it to her.

"See that that gets beamed back immediately. Friend of mine seems to be in some sort of a jam."

That was that. He turned to his work. After an hour or so the intercom box clicked and Kesby said unexpectedly, "Visitor to see you, boss. Can I send him in?"

"Yes." The receptionist had strict orders to keep out everyone except those scheduled for appointment, and to announce the names and businesses of dubious cases for his deciding, but Kesby must have overridden her decision. He sounded confident. Probably someone important.



K

esby opened the door with an expression half nervous, half mischievous, "Your visitor," and closed it hastily as the person stepped in.

He didn't belong in there. It was obvious to Bryce that whoever he was, he had gotten in through a lie.

The young man who stood inside his office watching him was no one connected with the business. He was too young for any position of importance. The slender frailty of childhood was still with him. Yet that impression soon faded under the impressiveness of his stance. It was more than just arrogance or poise, it was an unshakable confidence. As if no failure could be conceived.

He stood balanced to move either forward or back. His voice was again a surprise. Absolute total clarity, almost without inflection as if the words reached the mind without needing a voice. "If you're going to throw me out, this is the best time to do it." Dark brown skin of one of the dark races, jet black straight hair, a dark pair of eyes that were merry and watchful and had the impact of something dangerous. Colossal gall, Bryce characterized it to himself. He might be as good as he thinks he is. He was probably selling the Brooklyn Bridge, and he should never have gotten in, but the fact that he had somehow gotten past Kesby made him worth a few questions before being thrown out.

"What do you want?"

He came forward to the desk to answer. "I want to be your right arm." He took out a pack of cigarettes, shaking one free and offering it with courtesy. "Have one?" Bryce shook his head and the boy put one between his own lips and put the pack away. "My name is Pierce," he said, lighting the cigarette with the flame cupped in his hands as if he were used to smoking in the wind. He looked up with his eyes squinting against the smoke, shook the match out and dropped it in the desk ash tray. "Roy Pierce."

He was as much at home as an invading army. Bryce felt an impulse to laugh.

He knew this kid very well, but he couldn't place where, when, or how. "Am I supposed to know the name?"

"Do you remember Pop Yak?"

Bryce remembered Pop Yak. He gave in with a sigh, and ordered in the singsong

vernacular of his childhood. "Okay. Sitselfdel, speeltalk cutchop!"

Pop Yak was a grizzled man who had watched Bryce fighting with another kid. Afterward he had taken Bryce into his store and given him ice cream and some pointers on dirty fighting. Not much had penetrated the first time but Bryce went back for advice again, learning that that was the place to be told how to do things and get what he wanted. Pop was always patient with his teaching, and always right.

He had chosen Bryce as his agent to sell minor drugs to the other kids and acted as a fence for the things he stole, and he encouraged him to study in the compulsory school and loaned him books. And Pop was the first to give him the tip on legitimate business and how to pull money on the right side of the law and make a profit they couldn't kick about. Good old Pop. "Will-pay." The boy sat down and leaned forward with a slight intent motion of a hand that was Pop's favorite gesture, one Bryce had picked up from him himself.

"He told me you're on the way up." Roy Pierce held him with a steady dark gaze. "I want a slice of that, and I want it the easy way, hitching my wagon to your rocket. You can use me. A big man is too public. You need a new hand and a new voice, one that does what you want done, and can do it in the dark or the light, without your name—a stand-in for alibis, and a contriver of accidents so they break for you without your motion. A left arm that your enemies don't recognize as yours."

He was asking to be Bryce's substitute in the things that had to be done without connection to himself, and yet had to be done by Bryce himself, because no one could be trusted with the knowledge of them.

Could he be trusted? His coming could be another trap by the unidentified enemy. It was almost too providential, almost too well timed. "References and abilities?"

Roy Pierce reached into his wallet and handed out an aptitude profile card backed by the universal test score listings in training and skills on the other side. Bryce played with the card and studied the youth. The boy was well dressed in a dark tailored suit of the kind Bryce favored. He looked able, clean, cool and ruthless. "Armed?" Bryce asked.

A thing like a very thick cigar suddenly appeared in Pierce's hand. The end of it pointing at him was solid except for a very small hole. A needle gun, obviously,

loaded with two and a half inch grooved drug carrying needles.

"Sleep or death?" Bryce asked.

"Sleep," Pierce said, putting it away. "It's licensed." Bryce wondered what made him so sure he could trust this kid. He analyzed while he questioned. He did not bother to look at the card.

"Languages?"

"Basic coast pidgin, symbolic and glot." Basic English and Poliglot, the two universals.

"Detector proofed?" Lie detectors could be a nuisance, for they were used casually and universally without needing the legal warrants and deference to constitutional immunities and medical supervision of hypno-questioning.

Pierce smiled with a flash of white teeth. "First thing I ever saved my money for."

Though they spoke standard English, Bryce had placed his intonations almost to the block he grew up in. Almost to the half block! He was as familiar as Pop Yak, as familiar as his own face in the mirror, and as understandable. Bryce knew the inside of his mind as well as if it were a suddenly attached lobe of his own. It was like looking back through time at himself younger and less complex.

Pop Yak had turned out another on the same model, a younger simpler duplicate of himself. Pierce was doing exactly what he said, offering service to Bryce as he would offer him a sword, simply for the risk and delight of being an instrument in a power game with stakes as high as he had guessed Bryce's game to be. There was no danger of him being a plant, and no danger of him squealing under pressure: the risk of death or arrest was part of his pay.

O

kay," Bryce said. He gestured with his head to a corner of the room behind him. "Sit over there. You're my cousin from Montehedo, and I'm showing you the town." He turned to his appointment pad again and read. After Pierce had placed a chair in the indicated position, Bryce said without turning. "This week I can

use a bodyguard. Someone's hiring killers for me."

There was no sound of motion for a moment. Bryce got the idea that Pierce was more surprised than the fact warranted. But his question was gentle and deadly. "Any idea who?"

"The line forms to the left." Bryce said dryly, "Put away that needle gun and buy something legal that kills." He handed back a sheaf of letters, memos and graphs. "Read these and learn." For some reason he felt exhilarated.

He turned back to work, routing shipments, shifting rates to balance shifting costs, lowering rates for preliminary incentive on lines that could run at lower cost with a heavier load, occasionally using the Bell communication load analyzer and Kesby's formula analysis for a choice of ways of averting bottlenecks and overload slow-down points, sometimes consulting the solar system maps on the walls.

Good service built up customer demand and dependency on good service. Producers manufacturing now on Earth with the new materials shipped in from space could not be cut off from access to the new materials without ruin to the manufacturers. Earth was becoming dependent on space transport.

Once the customers were given it, they grew to need it. He smiled at the thought. It was another kind of drug traffic, and wielded the same kind of potentially infinite power over the customers.

One thing he had learned from the Economics tome he had struggled with four nights ago, a simple inexorable principle he had recognized dimly before—that since it was difficult and more expensive to ship out goods from Earth to space than it was to drop goods into Earth from space, eventually spacepeople might be independent of Earth, and Earth totally dependent on space products.

The potentialities of the business game were amazing past anything Pop Yak had ever hinted, but the funny thing was he had to find it out step by step for himself. That kind of excitement wasn't in stories. The adventures of explorers, research men, and detectives were written into stories, but not money men. The life and growth and death and blackmail of individuals were in the stories he had read, but not the murder of planets and cities, the control and blackmail of whole populations, in this odd legal game with the simple rules. Funny there hadn't been lurid stories about this in the magazines he read as a kid.

He grinned—Well, the kids would read about *him*. In fifteen years he'd have everyone under his thumb and they'd smile and bow and be frightened just speaking to him.

The work vanished rapidly, the pile of accumulated letters and reports dwindling, and the phone ringing at intervals.

Complaints he dealt with carefully, wording each letter in reply so as to give the impression that he, Bryce Carter, was personally breaking the corporation policy to satisfy the complainer, and adding a word of praise on the intelligence and lucidity of the complaining letter. So far he had made a total of some six hundred letter-writing allies that way. Complainants were usually loquacious, interfering types who expressed more than their share of public opinion, and many would glorify him to everyone whose ear they could hold, if only to have it known that they were on pally terms with a Director of the great UT.

Many of the letters were merely friendly and chatty, telling of money troubles, successes and family affairs. To these he recorded a few friendly remarks on wire spool, telling the same joke to each, and slipped each loop of wire into an envelope to be mailed.

Pierce, studying a transport routing map, looked over and grinned at the sixth repetition of the joke, and Bryce grinned back and continued on recording a letter to an address in the Ozarks. "Got a young cousin of mine in from Montehedo, Miss Furnald, he's sitting here watching to see how a big business office operates and he's grinning at me because it looks like I want to just sit and talk at my friends all day long. I have fifty-nine business letters here to answer—honest to God—fifty-nine, I just counted them, so I guess I'll cut off and show the young squirt how I can work. Send me that photo of your sister's new baby."

He hung up the record mouthpiece. One more voter and loyal friend to pull for him when he was a public figure and the going got rough.

He grinned. It was a strange life and a strange game.

V

W

hen he left the office with Pierce, someone stepped out of a corner of the corridor and clutched at his sleeve, speaking rapidly. Bryce brushed off the hand carelessly and walked on.

"A junky," he remarked to Pierce. There was a quick flash of motion behind them that sent them whirling to one side. Pierce stood aside with the small needle gun in his palm waiting to see if it would be needed, while Bryce finished the downstroke of his hand that sent the knife and the junky reeling to the rubbery corridor flooring.

"Shall I report him?" Pierce asked, making his needle gun vanish in the same smooth motion it had appeared, and indicating a phone sign.

"No. It doesn't matter," Bryce walked on thoughtfully. "Everyone wants to kill me at once."

Pierce said, "It's easy to sway a miserable man to the point of pinning all his troubles and hate on to one name, like Bryce Carter."

"I know," said Bryce. He saw that the smiling dark young man was alert, walking a little ahead of him and glancing quickly left and right as they approached corners and intersections and recessed doorways where a man could wait unseen, doing his job as a bodyguard efficiently and inconspicuously. "If it's the man I think it is," Bryce told him, falling into step again after they passed the turn into the tube trains, "he's working against a deadline. It's now or never. There won't be any more of this after next month."

Pierce answered after a glance at a passing mirror to see if they were followed, and a quick scan of the train platform. "Your usual haunts will be booby trapped. Better stay out of routine."

That night, in the spacehands end of the city, they ate the dinner that he usually had with Mona at a nightclub, or alone looking for a good pickup in an expensive cocktail lounge. It was in the shipping area around the docks, at the opposite end of the city from his usual haunts. The ceiling was low and the

glasses shivered and danced with the constant muted thunder of jets that shuddered through the floor from the nearby landing fields.

His new assistant and bodyguard was pleasantly deferential, lighting cigarettes for him, listening respectfully to his opinions, drawing him out with questions that showed he understood what he was listening to.

Bryce could not remember having had such a good time talking since he left the company of the meteorite miners at the Belt. Everything he said seemed right and even brilliant. As he talked and told anecdotes of his life and sketched some of his plans he saw his past life with peculiar vividness as if he were a stranger seeing it for the first time. In the reflected light of the interest and enthusiasm of his audience, events took on a new glow of entertainment and adventure and success where they had seemed to be just work and risk and routine at the time.

They had an evening to pass. Somehow Pierce got into conversation with a little Egyptian who could have stood for Cyrano and had the same merry impetuous way about him. Raz Anna was his name. He claimed to be the Caliph of Baghdad, still incognito, or perhaps a professional explorer disguised as a native. After a few drinks he enlisted them, somewhat confusedly, as the two missing musketeers and they found themselves wandering arm in arm from bar to bar and up and down dark alleys interviewing the heathen natives.

Bryce realized that he was laughing steadily and enjoying himself in a way that had nothing to do with the small number of drinks he had had.

He couldn't get any deference out of Raz. Raz wouldn't have deferred to God himself, and it was no use trying to impress him, for nothing impressed him. Apparently the hook-nosed, merry little man had no ambition and no envy of anyone, and wanted no better of life than he had at the moment.

It was a strange new world they led Bryce through—Not the ragged, starving, crowded viciousness of his childhood—not the fighting equality of spacemen and rock miners, many of them wanted by the law—not the simple barren hospitality of the settlers in the Belt who owed him money, and who invited him to their sparse dinners in gratitude—Those he had always managed to keep in their places and exact a certain measure of respect.

Even the smooth powerful men of wealth around him now accorded him a certain measure of deference that was an acknowledgement of strength. But the two musketeers he was with and the world they opened for him seemed to

respect neither distance nor politeness, nor hold any fear for strength. Friendly insults, and uncritical friendliness mingled oddly with the mock-solemn pretense of the fairy tale, and that part was genuine and spontaneous. It didn't seem to be a different kind of people he was meeting exactly: it was the same kind of people approached differently. He didn't know exactly how it was done, and he let the other two take the lead.

Perhaps he had drunk too much, he thought as he rode the hotel elevator. For in retrospect, the evening was a haze of pleasure that was hard to pin his attention to. Everything he had said, everything that had happened seemed profoundly right, an atmosphere which he had encountered rarely before and only then in the last stage of drunkenness. But he was sober. He had had only a few drinks, and his perceptions seemed sharpened rather than blurred. Yet, where there should have been critical thoughts and regrets for errors and restless plans in his mind, there was only a pleasant empty buzz.

"Too much talk," he thought, yawning as he walked down the luxurious hotel corridor to his room.



I

It was that night that he first noticed something wrong with the mirror.

He glanced into it casually while undressing, then not so casually, walking up to it and inspecting his face. A slight, unpleasant tingle coursed along his nerves.

A stranger—When he tried to focus on what was wrong he could find nothing that looked any different, yet the total effect was completely wrong. He decided that it must be the mirror, some subtle distortion of the reflection. The old one must have been broken in cleaning and a new one put in.

The chill passed and still the good blank feeling lasted. He went to bed reviewing the evening and smiling, and went to sleep without resorting to the mental arithmetic that he generally used to clear his mind of dissatisfactions.

The next morning the mirror still looked peculiar. There seemed to be nothing wrong with the reflected image of the room, but when he gave himself the usual inspection before stepping out into the corridor the feeling of strangeness

returned and his eyes felt as if they were blurring.

He put his hand up to his eyes instinctively and felt a distinct shock when the mirrored image did the same.

Odd.

A slender smiling young man joined him in the lobby, rising and falling into step with him as he passed, going through doors before him with the inconspicuous alertness and precaution. He did his duties as a bodyguard well, Bryce noted, but that was only to be expected. Efficiency is, and should be, unnoticeable.

One thing he discovered during the working morning at the office. There had been nothing wrong with the mirror in his hotel room. The washroom mirror was worse!

He stood for a while, frozen in midstep, while he looked at a lean tanned and freckled face which looked like a color movie of his, every feature in its proper place as he remembered it, but yet not his. It didn't belong to him. He made faces at it, and it made faces back as if it were his, while he tried to believe that he was looking out of the gray eyes which looked back at him, then he heard someone coming in and left suddenly and sheepishly.

That afternoon, after Pierce got into the swing of the work, he began to be useful, fitting himself into the work routine as though he had always been part of it, making the right calls and contacts and appointments on the barest hints, handing him the phone intuitively as he needed it, always at the right time with almost telepathic instinct. While checking over the decisions and plans of Kesby and the staff that needed his okay, and signing typed letters Bryce talked the thoughts and plans which came half formed to mind, almost thinking aloud. And when his remarks struck something that sounded like it would be good to do soon, he saw Pierce jotting them down, later detailing the preliminary steps for Bryce's use.

And too, all the small tasks were being taken from him with easy naturalness, saving him much time. His assistant was being what he had claimed he would be, a genuinely useful left hand. Bryce found himself proud of the kid's manifest efficiency, for he was a product of the same school that Bryce himself had climbed from.

On the way back to the hotel, after work, he caught Pierce glancing at him with a

thoughtful expression, and realized that he had been faltering and giving a second glance to every public mirror that he had passed. He was momentarily embarrassed, wondering if any strain had showed on his expression.

There was a party he had to go to that night so he changed to formal clothes and stepped off again for the home of the FN Administrative Governor of the Moon.

He did not want to attend. It would be another of those stiff, lonesome dinners he had suffered through before, but he had to learn to make friends on his own social level, and be easy and convivial with the kind of people he would be associating with the rest of his life.

After the first hour had given him a good test, Bryce decided that the evening was as bad as he had anticipated. He stood on the outskirts of a small group, holding a drink and watching resentfully as a startlingly beautiful woman laughed and talked with the others of the group and not with him. She had been introduced to him as Sheila Wesley. The jokes she had with the others were quick and subtle flashes of wit and insight, and seemed to be based on a mutual understanding that he could not share, even though some of the others had just been introduced and had been strangers to each other a few minutes back; it was something he grasped vaguely as a common background and approach to life that they shared, perhaps through education.

There were quick references to political situations they all seemed familiar with, or a name that could have been some character in a book they might all have read, or could have been somebody in history, each reference followed by a subdued laugh and an added witty statement from some other quarter. No one of them gave a word to him or noticed that he was there.

Why should they? He was dressed well and expensively, but so were they all. He was a person of prominence and power, but so were they all, and bored by it. He could not talk like the others. Then what could he do to make Sheila Wesley smile at him the way she smiled down at the ridiculous little fat man beside her as he excitably stuttered out his opinions.



heila Wesley was not like Mona, to be captured by money and clothes and

influence. Would she be impressed even by the power he would have later? He tried to picture her as tremulous and awed, hanging on his words and flattering him, but he couldn't believe it. She probably wouldn't notice him any more than now. There was nothing he could do to impress her. He had thought Mona had poise, but now he saw that her manner was just an inadequate carbon copy of a completely spontaneous original. The woman, Sheila, managed to be poised, aloof, and yet friendly to everyone, simultaneously warm and unattainable.

He desired to be bitingly rude. That, at least, would make her admit that he existed. She was smiling at that ridiculous little fat man again.

He drained his glass and, completely unnoticed, left the party. Nobody would miss him, he was sure.

Outside in the corridor, Roy Pierce, his assistant, was engaged in conversation with two young men and two girls.

"There he is now," he heard Pierce say.

And one of the young men came toward him laughing.

"Is it true that this lunatic cannot go and make up with the lady of his heart because she has had him banned? If we all try to smuggle him in—"

And one of the girls, a really gorgeous blonde, called, "He was just telling us about that time you were in space with the pirates after you and they had stolen the big focusing mirror from the first Belt foundry furnace. I'm sure you can tell it better—you tell it."

He was surrounded by the five then. "Go ahead," they were urging, laughing, "Go ahead!" "It didn't really happen did it?"

This accusation was made by the pretty blonde. He looked at her half indignantly. "I don't know how he tells it but it happened." And he began to tell what had happened.

The two girls and the two young men listened, adding occasional startled interjections and admiring laughter.

Pierce inserted an occasional question and Bryce became aware that in answering them he was guided to stress and amplify points that made clearer the danger and comedy. Later he became aware that he was half consciously

following the clues of Pierce's expression for the right stress and mood of the telling, now off-hand and smiling in telling what he had done, now heavily dramatic mimicking and burlesquing the tones and threats of the outlaws, now ironic and bitterly indifferent in passing over damage and deaths—as a wryly lifted eyebrow in the dark young face listening, and a faint imperceptible shrug made him see what had happened from a different angle than he had seen it then. Pierce apparently had something he needed, a good story sense. Following him must be something he had learned unconsciously last night, but it worked. He could see how well it worked in the expressions of his audience.

Someone leaving the party had stopped to listen, standing behind his right shoulder. When he finished, amid the exclamations and sighs of his listeners a cool, familiar voice drawled.

"That's quite a story. I picked up something about that at the new foundry on reef five, but it was already an old yarn then." She stood before him, still smooth and poised and lovely, offering her hand. "I'm glad to hear it from the horse's mouth. Aren't you Bryce Carter? We were introduced in there, I think, but the name didn't click."

It was Sheila Wesley.

That evening was something to remember.

First they were a private party at a nightclub, then at a small restaurant. Tom, Betty, who was the pretty blonde, Ralph and the pretty brunette whose name was Marsha, Pierce, himself and Sheila. The talk ranged wildly over a multitude of subjects, breaking sometimes into collective fantasies of nonsense like a hat full of fireworks that left them laughing helplessly, sometimes shifting to philosophy and mutual confidences. Every so often Pierce brought the subject around to something that struck home to Bryce and he found himself holding forth with unexpected passion and eloquence, and he was surprised to see that the others were keenly interested.

Pierce rarely said more than an occasional cheerful remark, but in the more subtle plays of conversation Bryce found himself still half consciously consulting the cues of his expression to find what his own reaction should be, to find the right word and the right attitude that pleased the table and urged them all on to greater and more fantastic heights of talk. It was obvious that Pierce never had any difficulty understanding anyone. He had an instinct that Bryce lacked, and Bryce willingly surrendered to superior skill and followed his silent lead.

Sheila he discovered, besides being a member of one of the top diplomatic families, had worked for a short while as a consultant at the Belt plastic manufactory when it was being set up, and had taken to space life. She shared his enthusiasm about the future of the Asteroid Belts.

It was an unprecedented evening. At the close of it he had four new friends, and had discovered that "Tom" was Thomas Mayernick, one of the attorneys of the Spaceways Commission, and one of the men whom he had gone to the dinner to meet.

And Sheila, tall and slender and beautiful, pressed his hand as the group parted, and said in her wonderful voice, "I want to see you again Bryce," she smiled. "I eat at the technicians' end of town, you know. I'll be with a Group at Geiger's Counter, tomorrow lunch. If you bear the company of slide rule artists we'd be glad to see you any time."

He stood for a moment, oddly surprised.

"Say thank you to the lady." Pierce smiled. And to Sheila, "You shouldn't startle people like that, Ma'm. His heart's weak."

"I just dropped dead," Bryce said, finding words. "You aren't leading me on? You'll be there?"

"On my honor," she smiled. "Good night, Bryce." She was used to such tributes. Half mocking as they were, she knew how much they were basically sincere, and accepted their tribute to her beauty as a matter of course. What a wife to have and introduce as his wife to other men, and see the look in their eyes.

He remembered suddenly that he had not once mentioned that he was a Director of UT. Somehow the conversation had never been led to a subject where he could have said it. He made a mental note to tell her next time. It seemed strange that he had been with five people so many hours without informing them that he was a Director of UT. He had done the same thing last night, now he remembered. But they had seemed to like him without it.

He let himself into his hotel room and turned on the light, but the first sidewise glimpse of himself in the mirror was disturbing. He solved that problem by the remarkably simple expedient of turning the light out again, and undressed in the dark, grinning foolishly.

VI

A

pproaching the scientists' and technicians' row along the subsurface arcades, the expensive restaurants grew fewer and were replaced by German-type beer halls, schools with courses advertised in their posted schedules whose titles were completely unintelligible to him, and second hand bookstalls selling battered technical books and journals whose titles were undecipherable in any tongue Bryce could think of. The lunch hour crowds were beginning to pour out into the arcades from elevators and tube trains in a rush to get first place in their favorite eating places.

Pierce half turned as if his eyes caught on the expression of a face behind them.

"Carter! There you are, you bastard!" The voice came from behind him, thick with rage, but more than that was the insult. It meant challenge. This was nothing in which Pierce could defend him!

Bryce wheeled, left hand automatically plucking out his magnomatic, wondering if the attacker would be the honorable kind of duelist who would hold fire long enough for him to get his gun out.

Miraculously it seemed to be happening. He already had his sights halfway on to the speaker when he recognized him, a gross heavy figure he had seen a hundred times. Mr. Beldman of the Board of Directors. What was he doing on the Moon?

Beldman stood with his fists on his hips and his legs spraddled, sneering at Bryce. "That's right," he said, heavily sarcastic, "start shootin' when you're surrounded by innocent spectators; when you know I can't draw on you. That's the way of a crook." The husky base voice echoed from the walls. Behind him to the bend of the corridor people were scattering hastily out of the firing line.

Crook was the central word. Somehow Beldman had found out that Bryce was responsible for the corruption of UT, and he was dealing with the matter in the most direct way that it could be dealt with, for a death in a private duel would be laid to a quarrel and not investigated.

How had he found out? Bryce forced down the question as he stiffly reholstered

his magnomatic. There was no use thinking of that until the question of surviving the next five minutes was settled. He stood with his hands empty, feeling curiously empty inside, oddly missing the white rage and love of murder that usually carried him through such things.

It seemed too good a day to spoil. He would rather have continued his way to lunch with Sheila, and let the man live—or let himself live. This would be no duel for a little bloodletting. Beldman's purpose was to kill. And Beldman himself, knowing what he knew, had to die. "Do you understand what you have said, sir?" Bryce used the formal words of the dueling countries.

"You're damn well right I do!"

"Are you prepared to take the consequences, sir?"

"More ready than you are," Beldman said, his hands still on his hips. He amplified his remark with a few well chosen words that harked back to his truck driving days.

"How many shots?" Bryce asked more softly, beginning to want to kill.

"Until one of us is down with his gun out of his hand."

Bryce repeated the provision to the crowd that had drawn up discreetly along the side-lines. "We fire until one of us is both down and disarmed."

There was a murmur of surprise among the crowd for that was an unusual and deadly provision for a formal duel. As Bryce paced backward the required number of paces, counting aloud, two men volunteered as seconds. They came forward to compare the guns rapidly and show them to the duelists. It had to be done and finished rapidly, for lunch hour had begun with its flood of people into the corridors, and they were holding up traffic.

Bryce's gun was a .42 magnomatic, working on an electrical acceleration of the slug by electromagnetic rings in the thick barrel. It was soundless except for a legal built-in radio yep that announced its firing and number to the police emergency receivers. Beldman's gun was another maggy of the same make but heavier with a wide-mouthed barrel apparently throwing a much heavier caliber slug.

"Ready?" The second stepped back to the edge of the crowd and began counting off half a minute by seconds.

The faces of the crowd faded from his consciousness. Bryce stood with his hands empty at his sides as the seconds were counted. "Thirty, twenty-nine, twenty-eight, twenty-seven," came the voice, counting evenly and loudly. The world narrowed to a corridor of space with the blocky figure of Beldman at one end and himself at the other. Funny, Bryce thought, that he had never considered that bull-headed impatience and strength as dangerous. He was a massive block of a man; where Bryce was thick with muscle, J. H. Beldman was so wide in shoulder and barrel and so thick in arm that he looked almost round. Like Bryce he had worked up from the bottom, Bryce remembered, starting as a truck driver and labor organizer, and then owning his own line and giving UT a stiff battle before being bought out. Crude, but that didn't mean that there wasn't a lightning brain behind that round face.

"Twenty-six, twenty-five, twenty-four, twenty-three—"

He had underestimated the deadliness of the man. Beldman was obviously subject to rages, and in the grip of one now, and if he had survived all the duels and battles that his rages had brought long enough to grow as old as he was then his age was an indication not of weakness, but of the degree of his deadliness. The irritable thought came that he might well be killed by this ox.

"Twenty-two, twenty-one, twenty, nineteen—"

He flexed his fingers restlessly, and felt in his mind the speed and sureness of his draw and firing. That big blocky figure was just another obstacle standing in his way, to be blasted aside. A loud mouth to be shut.

"Ten, nine—" He concentrated on the counting, "—six, five, four—" sureness growing like a coiled spring in every muscle, "—three—" He crouched slightly. That blocky figure that was all the rest of the world was no more than a target. A big target.

"Two—one—*fire.*"

Something confusing happened. As the word came it seemed that a gigantic blow hit him somewhere on his left shoulder, twisting him around so he couldn't see his target. He spun back, willing himself to shoot again quickly, but his legs buckled oddly as he turned. He reeled, finding his balance with great effort.

Heavy slug, he thought, seeing as delayed memory the coiled spring speed with which Beldman had moved. Bryce's left arm did not seem to have any

connection with his mind. Glancing down briefly he saw that it dangled.



B

ut the maggy was still there, held in the numb, unfeeling hand, pointed limply at the ground.

He wondered if he had fired it yet.

"Drop it and fall down," advised Pierce's clear voice from somewhere.

There was a stirring and whisper from the blur of the crowd who stood watching to see that the rules were observed. Beldman was walking towards him.

"Do you end the duel?" asked someone, probably the second.

"No," the blur of Beldman answered and suddenly he came into focus, walking up, his wide mouthed gun unwavering in his hand. Bryce remembered the provisions of the duel. Fire until one is down and weaponless. There was nothing said about remaining at a fixed distance. Beldman intended to walk up close enough to shoot him between the eyes. It was too late to let himself fall and end the duel. Beldman would fire if he saw Bryce begin to fall now. He was already close enough for a sure head shot.

Feeling was returning to his left arm. It dangled abnormally far and probably looked broken and useless, but there was nothing actually wrong with it, only something in his shoulder was broken. After the first cold numbness of impact, sensation returned tingling in his fingers, and pain was beginning to burn in his shoulder. Bryce waited a few more seconds, feeling the control returning to his fingers, not changing the glazed off focus of his eyes. How many duels had Beldman won like this? The impact of one of those heavy slugs hitting bone was a dazing blow, enough to stun some men, and he probably counted on that effect.

The square figure lumbered closer, a lumpish clumsy caricature of the self-made man, brutally strong, unashamedly misfit to the society of the smooth-wise, smiling, easy mannered people that he and Bryce had joined; a model of everything that Bryce was trying to destroy in himself.

With a quick twist of the wrist Bryce swung his palm flat up flipping the magmatic muzzle into line with it and put a bullet into the round face.

In that position of his hand the back kick of the shot twisted his arm back in its broken shoulder and pulled the maggy from his hand, but it didn't matter. The duel was over.

The motionless crowd dissolved again into talking individuals going to lunch.

Pierce picked up the maggy and made the usual query of those who chose to remain.

"Which of you has any complaint of unfairness or advantage taken by either party of this duel?"

Most of them were leaving, anticipating the arrival of the police with their time-consuming questions, but twenty or so crowded close around Bryce and the corpse. "Press a thumb on your shoulder sub-clavian, man," someone advised Bryce. "You're bleeding like a faucet."

Pierce's clear voice said the standard words over the murmur and shuffle of feet. "No unfairness having been observed, when called to give testimony you can then say that he shot in self-defense and under duress."

A low wail of sirens was heard.

W

ho was that character?" Pierce asked later, sitting beside the table while a surgeon patiently pieced together the three or four shattered pieces of Bryce's collarbone and fastened them with ingenious plastic bolts.

Bryce absently watched the process in a large tilted mirror slung overhead. Medicine bored him. "J. H. Beldman, member of the Board of Directors," he explained, and for the benefit of the policeman standing beside the door he added, "Bad tempered as they come." He looked into the mirror uneasily, trying to focus on his face.

His clothes were being cleaned of blood and dried somewhere. When the doctor had finished sewing and patching Bryce showered and dressed in a small dressing room beside the emergency ward, where he found his clothes hanging neatly in a drying closet.

As he finished a man in plain clothes entered and dismissed the cop with a word, and handed Bryce a printed notice and his magnum; "You're clear," he said, leaving again with a friendly half salute. "No charges." The police had already

recorded the testimony of the witnesses and inspected the weapons used. It had been a fair duel and the survivor was clear with a standard case for self-defense. The printed notice called him to testify at the coroner's inquest into the death of J. H. Beldman during the next Saturday, but there would be no charges and no investigation.

There would be no trouble from Beldman, but who else knew what he had known, that Bryce Carter was responsible for the corruption of UT? How had he learned it? If someone else knew, there was going to be trouble.

Coming out of the emergency ward, he checked his watch.

One-fifteen. Too late to find Sheila Wesley still at Geiger's Counter. But he knew he could see her another day—and with a good story to explain why he had not turned up the first time.

They ate at the nearest stand and went back to work. Trying to write was almost impossible, and even using his left hand for minor tasks was difficult. In spite of quick healing of muscle and flesh from the amino and nucleic acid powders the doctor had packed in, the shoulder ached with a tightness that spoiled his coordination. He shifted to writing clumsily with his right hand.

After twenty minutes he abandoned the pretense of working and began thoughtfully doing practice draws with his right hand. It was stiff and clumsy, and there was no holster in his right pocket to make grasping easy. The second time the maggy caught on his pocket edge and slipped from his hand he left it on the rug where it had fallen, sitting looking at it thoughtfully for a moment. Today was the day he would meet Orillo.

"How well can you handle a four tube cabin cruiser?"

"Line of sight only. I'm no navigator," Pierce responded.

Bryce said soberly, realizing what he had decided, "This is a good day to have a bodyguard who's a good shot. I have an appointment to meet a friend—and I'm not sure he's a friend."

"I shoot," Pierce said, writing at one of the letters he had been set to. "Happy to oblige. Shall I wear my bulletproof clothes?"

"You could do with something like that," Bryce said soberly.

Pierce looked up from the letters. "Would this be the man behind all these bullets, and you're meeting him in space?"

"Yes."

"In armor plated tanks with heavy artillery?"

"No."

"No light and heavy cruisers. No marines?"

"Just you." Bryce was smiling at Pierce's mock astonishment. He knew that the kid didn't care in the slightest where Bryce led him as long as there was a fight at the end of it, and he left it to Bryce to choose the odds.

The odds might be even enough. Orillo himself, if he came with murder as his intention, would bring no helpers for witnesses, and he would expect Bryce to bring none. Or if he had hired assassins, he would not come himself, and they would not know who had hired them, but they would have been told to expect one man only.



T

he secrecy of any meeting in space is practically absolute. If there is one thing which space has plenty of, it's distance—distance enough to lose things in, distance enough to hide in, distance enough so that even if you know where something is by all the figures of its coordinates, if it's smaller than a planet you can't find it even when you are there. To put it crudely, what space has is space. And finding something that doesn't want to be found in space is like looking for a missing germ in the Atlantic.

He had the coordinates of the beacon he had chosen for his appointment point and the robot pilot took him to that area with automatic precision. But once there he had to cruise manually back and forth three times through the perpendicular plane of Earth's equator before picking up the radar pip of the buoy, which was set to broadcast its presence by a circular sweep of radar pulses on a flat plane corresponding to the Earth equatorial average.

He found it no later than expected, which was over an hour early, on the

principle that he who arrives first finds no ambush.

He left Pierce with certain instructions and floated from the ship to the familiar globe that spun so placidly on the anchoring rod that attached it to the controlling buoy. The buoy was powered strongly enough to have controlled the orbits of fifty such globes without strain. Buoys of that type were just beginning to be popular in the Belt.

Once inside he opened his faceplate, looking around with the same pleasure he always felt on his visits here. It was like being back at the Belt for a time. After the raw harshness of the moon and the artificial luxuries of its cities, after the agoraphobic vastness of Earth's giant surface, to be within this little close-knit familiar world was soothing and relaxing. It was a green glade of leaves and branches, greenness underfoot and overhead, a brown metal cliff with vines and a door to his left, a larger brown metal cliff like the round head of a barrel with doors in it to his right, and a circular silver door in the center. Behind the small right hand cliff was the small amount of regulating machinery required, behind the doors of the larger cliff was a small kitchen, and convertible study-bedrooms. Behind the silver door was a corridor leading to the airlock and space. It was forty feet from cliff to cliff, and from the growing greenery underfoot to the growing greenery overhead, as spacious as a wide glade in the woods of Earth.

He picked his way among the vines and shrubs to a carpetlike patch of green moss and sat down comfortably to wait. Pierce had drawn the ship off beyond detector range by now, and it would seem to any ship approaching that he had not yet arrived.

It was peaceful there, no breeze stirred the leaves. Twenty feet above, fixed in the air on clear spokes of lucite, the crystal globe that was the sun for this small world gave forth its warming flood of light, sunlight borrowed from the sunlight outside and led in on the lucite spokes.

He had an interest in its manufacture, and had anchored his globe here as a commercial sample of a spaceglobe for the viewing of likely settlers. It was slightly better and more compact, since it was a newer model, contained in an ovoid hull that was only forty-six by sixty-six feet, but in essence it was like any of the farms and homes of the asteroid belt, and there was nothing like it on any planet in the universe.

VII

B

Behind the silver door a bell rang suddenly. A spaceship was approaching.

It was still early. They would see the globe alone and assume that Bryce had not yet arrived. The spaceship itself might be armed illegally, but those within would not blast the globe without checking its interior. Bryce glanced up at the silver door in the cliff and arranged his position so as to be lounging on one elbow, with his gun hand lying relaxed under a thin curtain of leaves. The magnomatic was pointing up towards the corridor door.

There were a few tall bushes between the base of the cliff and himself, but the silver central door was five feet up a flight of steps and in clear view.

Four flights of steps radiated away from the circular door to the hull, like spokes from an axle, all of them leading "down" to the inside surface of the globe. As he waited he heard the faint clang of magnetic soles hitting the metal of the airlock, and then the door chimes that announced that the airlock was being used. Someone was coming in.

He could follow their actions in his mind, timing them. Now they would be floating in the vestibule, facing a circular wall with a door, the wall spinning silently and rapidly, and the door in its center turning slowly end over end. The door marked the axis of rotation. There was a turning bar with handles running through the center of the airlock. They would float up to that and grip it to pick up spin, until the vestibule seemed to be rotating around them and only the circular wall and the central door seemed to be steady. Beyond it would be the corridor, and then the silver door.

The door in the cliff dilated silently. Two spacesuited men stood in it.

It was incredible that he had let them come in without seeing the door open. In the first split second he saw that neither of them was Orillo. In the second instant he saw that no weapons were visible, but that one stood slightly behind the other and his right arm was hidden.

They had happened to come to the entrance at an angle to his orientation, almost

at right angles, and they would be confused for a moment, before they identified his shape, for to their orientation if they used Earth-thought for it, he would seem to be leaning head downward on an almost vertical slope. He took advantage of the lag to move his gun under its curtain of leaves and get the sights lined on them.

They swung their eyes around the circle and saw him. "Mister Carter?" asked the foremost one. Their faceplates were still closed, and their voices slightly distorted by transmission through the helmet speaker, but he could hear a note of surprise. As the first one spoke the second one moved his hidden arm slightly, as if he were holding something.

Bryce did not tighten his finger on the trigger. These could be mere innocent sight-seers. The position of his head, almost upside down relative to theirs, was probably confusing them, though almost certainly they had studied trimensonal photographs of him. At any rate they probably were aware that they were standing like targets in the corridor doorway and would be in no mood to postpone action.

"Take off your helmets, gentlemen, make yourselves at home." It was a partial admission that he was the man they wanted, but not certain enough for a decision. He saw the shoulder-twitch that meant that the second one's hidden hand jerked in a moment of uncertainty, and he thought he saw something glitter under the first one's arm—the old trick of shooting from under a friend's screening arm....

"Mr. Bryce Carter?" the foremost one was asking again.

Bryce smiled. "No, Pierce," he said. He had turned on the two-way speaker and tuned it to the ship as he came in.

Immediately the voice came in the corridor behind them. "Stand still. You're covered."

There was no chance that anyone could genuinely be behind them, but the rear one whirled and snapped a startled shot into the darkened corridor, and the other leaped sidewise down from the doorway, drawing his gun with blurred speed, and leveling on Bryce as his feet left contact with the sill. He was falling slowly, almost floating, and it should have been an easy shot, except for something he had obviously forgotten, or he never would have leaped.

Bryce disregarded him as a danger, and threw three shots at the other, who still stood startled and off balance in the corridor, firing three with his inexperienced right hand to make sure of placing even one. The figure dropped out of sight in the corridor.

I

In the flick of time that Bryce's eyes had been away from the falling one, the path of the man's leap had begun to curve strangely, until now he seemed to be floating in a curve, flying sidewise and upward, faster and faster as he approached the hull. The rule of conservation of momentum was having its way. To the man's dizzied eyes, as he tried to keep Bryce within his sights long enough to fire, it must have seemed that the ground began inexplicably to turn and slide by, that suddenly the whole shell was turning around him like a big wheel, carrying his target up the wall and over his head.

He was almost to the sliding ground when a bush caught at his feet and yanked them from under him with a crackling of branches, and the bottom tread of a flight of stairs swung at his head like a gigantic club. Among the sudden splintering of branches and snapping of vines was a crunching thud which sounded final.

To anyone within a globe, it did not ordinarily appear to be spinning, the only sign it was, was the comfortable pseudo-gravity for anyone standing on hull level. But to those who approached the ground from the lighter G corridor, the stairs were necessary—stairs whose treads were oddly dipped in the middle in a shallow U. By bracing against one side of the U coming down, and on the other going up, one invisibly picked up enough speed to match the speed of the ground level. Jumping was the equivalent of jumping out of a moving car at forty feet a second, the sixteen feet a second, half of the corridor plus an extra thirty feet a second spin, the side slip speed of an eighteen foot drop where it had looked like five.

It was probably these added extra distances in the air, Bryce decided, that sometimes made the bird flights look so bewilderingly variable in speed and direction. He had not thought before how difficult it would be to plot a straight course from one side of the globe to the other.

He waited for a sign of motion, his magnomatic ready, looking up at the gunman lying overhead, forty feet away on the other side of the globe. The limp figure was unmoving, it looked badly tangled in vines, and its gun was gone. There was no need to shoot, but he wondered suddenly, if he had, what kind of a curve would the bullet have followed?

There was no sound from the other, but Bryce hesitated to climb the stairs and put his head above floor level of the corridor. A voice might give the other direction for a snap shot if that was what he was waiting for. Bryce chanced speaking.

"I've got this one, Pierce. How's the other?"

The televiewer in the entrance hall replied, "Lying on his back with his gun five feet away. You all right?"

"Yes." Bryce walked around the circumference of the globe and searched in the vines for the missing weapon of number one. The body in the spacesuit nearby was quite definitely a corpse. He saw the gun glittering a little further on and picked it up, wiping off leaf pulp on a clean patch of moss. It was a heavy duty police pacifier, a distance stunner, adjusted to a narrow beam.

He climbed to the corridor and collected the other weapon. It was a police pacifier too. They had not meant direct murder then, but only to stun him and deliver him to Orillo, C. O. D.

"How are you doing with their ship?" Bryce asked, "Is it armed?" Armament for spaceships was illegal, and careful official inspection made it rare.

"I didn't wait to see," Pierce's voice came apologetically after a pause in which some background noise sounding like a crash came over the televiewer speaker. "It started swinging around when I came in sight, so I just rammed it with that pretty ornamental nose spike. I'm backing off now with the forward braking jets."

"Then whoever's inside is probably either spacefrozen or cooked. Jockey that ship around on the spike and give her a four minute shove toward Earth, then push that button that collapses the ornamental vanes on the spike and let it pull loose when you start braking. I don't want any ship hulks floating around here."

"Aye-aye, Cap."

"Go slow on those braking jets when you pull loose. The back wash could touch your hull."

Pierce returned and came in to help Bryce drag the corpses through the airlock and into space.

They braced against the silver curve of the floating spaceship and gave the body a combined strong shove towards Earth. Spinning slowly end over end it dwindled into a dark speck against the glowing orb of Earth, destined to be a meteorite and make a small bright streak in the Earth sky several days later.

*When the tubes conk out, the fuel runs down,
The cold creeps in to where I lie.*

Pierce was reciting as they went back into the globe for the second corpse.

*I'll take the meteor's trail—go home to Earth
And make a Viking's funeral in the sky.*

"This is too easy," Bryce complained as they watched the second corpse fade from sight. "The trouble is, in space all corpses are delicti. It's an incentive. Launch your enemies."

"Gaucho country did all right under that system," Pierce said somberly, "and so did the American frontier." He floated motionless, a spacesuited figure turned toward the gray-green misted globe of Earth that shone against the black star-sprinkled sky as if he could have reached out and touched it. The sun caught the planet on its day hemisphere and reflected brilliantly from a shadowy blue glaze of water that was the Mediterranean, turning half of it to white fire.

Bryce's earphones picked up Pierce's voice again. "Frontier-born nations always look back and say that the first years were the best."

The words caught at something Bryce had felt before. He looked at Earth hanging splendidly in space. It was beautiful and he was fond of it, but—He said, "I don't think we'll ever go back." Nor would mankind itself. Never again—through all conquests from this point in time—would mankind go back down into the mesh of gravity to be a thin film over the surface of a planet.

"Give old Earth a smile, Bryce, we've hatched."

For a moment longer Bryce hung, watching Earth turning below. The

management of UT was down there. He'd be damned if he'd let them get away with thinking they could tell him what to do, or tell the Belt where a line should be extended and a colony planted. The belt was his country, not theirs. Space belonged to the people who lived in it.

"No taxation without representation," Pierce said irrelevantly, as if he had been reading Bryce's thoughts. They jetted back to the ship and into the spacelock.

"Frontier country—" Bryce said as he stepped into the cubical of the revolving door. Gently tightening elastic bands drew him into position within the man-shaped mold. "What's a frontier on your terms, Roy?" When he was in place the other half of the rubbery, air-excluding mold closed on him and the airtight cylinder rotated, delivering him into the interior of the ship. He pushed the button impatiently to have it revolve back for Pierce, but it remained obstinately open, its servo refusing to close on a mold full of air and rotate air back for release into space.

Bryce remembered then. This was something he didn't have to bother with when he flew alone, for when going in or out he was always in the door when it rotated; it never turned empty. Beside the door on a hook hung an inflated pressure suit, complete with gloves, boots, and helmet. Except for the absence of any sign of a head or face inside the dark translucence of the helmet it looked like a full-sized man. Bryce reached it down and placed it in the mold, and watched grinning as the mold closed and the door rotated, delivering the man-form to an equivalent hook in the spacelock. The doll was known by all spacemen as Hector Dimwitty, and every ship had one or two. There were a thousand yarns and jokes circulating about the adventures of the Hectors, most of them lewd, and a few of them true.

Pierce's answer was in his earphones, "A frontier is where people go when they are young, broke, or have the cops after them."

"Right. Suppose I stake the broke, and loan them transport, and offer the fugitives unregistered safety to receive mail and to buy supplies?"

"You do that?" Pierce stepped out of the door and they took off their helmets.

"Yes, when I am my own man, not working for UT."

"If you do that, you bring in ten times as many of the broke who wanted to settle there, and—" Pierce took a long jump in understanding, saying softly, "They're

dependent on you. Handcuffed to you and praying for your health and prosperity as long as you hold their loans and secrets, for with your death or bankruptcy, another man might come to your books to read the records of your loans, and demand payment, and give the secrets to the police or keep them for his blackmail. But to do it is to take a risk of murder or arrest, and a high cost in hard work and money. Why do you want to do this? What payment do you take?"

"They pay by being my men, grateful and ready to back me up when I want help later. They don't have to be grateful, for they know I can call any loan if the owner crosses me, and I've built a reputation for an occasional fit of irrational temper that is threat enough for anyone to avoid crossing me, without feeling that I have wanted to threaten or force them. As for the fugitives they pay enough by wanting the Belt to be organized as a nation independent of Earth, so that the hand of the law can't stretch out and drag them back, and they can become wealthy in open business, in the million chances for wealth that lie around them in the Belt. They don't know that they want this yet, but they will see it when it is told to them. I can't do any of this now—it's suspended for as long as I am part of UT and have to drag the dead weight of ten Earth-tied conservatives with me in every decision."

VIII

H

e stopped to set in the coordinates of the Moon for the robot pilot, but he found himself still wanting to talk. "Man has reached space—do you think he'll ever go back to the ground? In space he has gravity only when he wants it, and any weight of gravity he likes, depending on how fast he spins his house. And no gravity when he wants that. You see what that means to engineers in the advantage of building things? No weight in transportation, no weight in travel, limitless speed and almost no cost as long as he stays away from planet pulls. His house is in the sky, and when he steps out of it he can fly like a bird. And food. To grow food there is sunlight Earth never dreamed of. For heat and power there is sunlight to focus. Space is flooded with heat, irradiated with power—

"It's not child's play taming it, and those on the ground don't see it yet. But the next step of mankind is out into space, and it's never coming back."

Pierce, sitting in one of the shock tank armchairs, asked, "What part do you have in this?"

Bryce looked at him with a feeling almost of surprise, as if he had been called back from a long distance. "Me?" he laughed, a little awed by the immensity of the goal, and the ease of it.... "First President of the Belt and political boss for life. That's enough."

Enough to hold the solar system in the palm of his hand, if he chose. He who rules space, rules the planets. It was the first time he had ever mentioned his goal to anyone.

Roy Pierce asked, "What do I do about this 'friend' of yours who lays traps?"

The last attack had settled the question of who was behind the other attacks, and who had told Beldman, but Orillo would still be a useful pawn. All that was necessary was to evade his attempts at murder for a month or so until partnership tied them too close for murder.

Bryce explained some of that to Pierce, setting up a chess board to pass away the time until they arrived back at Moonbase City.

"What's my next assignment?" Pierce asked, when they were several moves into the game.

Bryce recalled a danger he had made no move to guard against. "The Board hired a psychologist, a mind hunter, to find out who's doing the undermining. He's one of the Manoba group. Remember the name, look it up and find out what their methods are, how to recognize them, and report back what to do about it."

"I'll take care of him," Roy Pierce said absently, moving his knight to threaten Bryce's bishop.

"No unnecessary trouble. Remember I have to keep my name clean." Bryce moved a pawn one step to cover the bishop and leave room for his other bishop to menace the knight.

"I'll be careful. There'll be no publicity. He won't get hurt," Pierce said, moving the knight into Bryce's second line where it threatened the king and a cornered castle. "Check." And he added, as if apologizing for having delayed his move, "I don't like to move until I'm sure what's going on."

The remark didn't seem to be suited to the game, as if he had referred to something else.



I

It was during dinner on the Moon that he and Pierce loosened up for the first time since the ambush. Pierce had been comparatively silent since the chess game on the trip back and Bryce too, whether in sympathy with him or in a naturally parallel mood, had little to say. But now the tension had diffused and, with the stimulus of aromatic food, they climbed out of their depression of emotional solemnity.

The decorations of the dining room were lush. While they ate, the materialism of their lives was reinforced. From silvered-and-tapestried wall to wall there was life here, low-keyed with excitement in the blend of subdued talk and the shifting artistry of lights and music. Their table was almost in the center of the islands of tables and potted trees, and around them were the diners, their voices washing up at them both, inviting them with gentle tugs to surrender their

resistance, beckoning them into the sea of simple pleasures.

"We owe ourselves some fun, Bryce."

At Pierce's words, Bryce sharpened his eyes on the face across the table. There was a touch of seriousness in those words; more like a statement than a suggestion.

Pierce smiled wryly and took a vial out of his pocket and poured it into his drink. He spun the empty bottle between thumb and fingers.

"We owe ourselves some fun," Pierce repeated. "We've nothing on the fire tonight, nothing to do that's crucial. It's a good night to experiment."

The warm voice waves lapping at Bryce's mind suddenly receded and left a chill. With instinctive wariness he thought of hypnotics and single-shot addicts.

Pierce couldn't have missed the emotionless freeze on the other's face. Still twirling the vial casually, he began to explain. It was a new drug, he said, found being used by a tribe in Central Africa. "I've heard of it for some time and what you mentioned a little while back reminded me of it."

Bryce caught the hidden reference. Central Africa—and the Manoba group. So Pierce had not dismissed the mind hunter from his thoughts as a problem to be easily dealt with.

"It's still in the testing stage," Pierce added. "But some of it is circulating among medical students. The tests have interesting effects. And, as I say, tonight's a good night to experiment, it's called B'nyab i'io."

The chill in Bryce's head and spine was thawing out. "You're not conning me?" He said it with a grin, but there was an edge to the question which demanded an answer.

Pierce gave it to him, for a brief moment deadly serious. "You couldn't get addicted if you swam in it."

Bryce believed him. He stared at the glass. "What does it do to the I.Q.? We've got to collect some information here and there this evening. I want to be able to read and talk." He smiled crookedly. "No worse than usual, that is."

"Either raises the I.Q. or leaves it alone."

"What's the effect?"

"It affects different people different ways. After hearing the reports I'd like to see how it hits us." Pierce pushed it towards him, grinning. "Leave half for me."

Bryce's wary thoughts touched poison and immunity and murder, but inwardly he began to scoff at his own habits of suspicion. However, before he could reach for the glass, Pierce had given a short snort as though in recognition of his presumptuousness and drank his own share first.

Then Bryce raised the cold glass to his lips.

As he put it down he could feel the change beginning to spread through his blood, warming and relaxing, bringing closer the memories of pleasure and good times. The restaurant was now completely seductive, with the surf of voices pleasant in his ears, calling to him to join the world and its offers of uncomplicated pleasures. He felt himself blending with the ethereal background mixture of light and sound.

"I like this," he decided.

"We should take notes." Pierce was smiling as he stuffed the empty vial back in his pocket.

T

he next day Bryce looked back on that evening with pleasure. Everyone had been remarkably pleasant, friendly and considerate, and Pierce had always had the right friendly word and gesture to reward them, speaking for Bryce, knowing his way around the cities of the Moon to the right places for the information they sought, always speaking for Bryce Carter, his employer, getting him the things he wanted, giving the orders he wanted to give before Bryce had even fully realized that he wanted them. Bryce had needed to say nothing the whole time except "Right. That's it," and everything went as he wanted it.

"A perfect left hand man," he smiled, stretching, and turned the polarization dial to let in the sunlight.

The telephone rang. He picked it up and the desk clerk said in a deferentially

hushed voice, "Eight o'clock, Mister Carter."

For some reason the hushed voice struck him as funny. "Thanks, I'm up." He hung up and stretched again. It was soothing to have someone solicitous that he arose on time, if only a hotel. The hotel had given him a lot of good service. He felt suddenly grateful for all the pleasures and luxuries and small services they surrounded him with. It was a good place. He was feeling good that morning. Maybe because the sun was so bright....

He liked the look of the people passing in the lobby as Pierce joined him, and he liked the look of the passengers in the tube trains on the way to the office. They all looked more friendly. And as he pushed through the second glass door into his offices he liked the clean shine of the glass and the rich blended colors and soft rugs and gray textured desks and the soft efficient hum of work in progress.

Bryce usually passed Kesby's office with a businesslike nod, but Pierce smiled in, stopping for an instant with Bryce. "Good morning, Kesby. We're glad to see you." It was true enough and expressed what he felt.

Bryce exchanged a grin with Kesby at the boy's insolence and then went on into his office.

It was a good day.

It was a good day for what he had to do.

In the luxury of his inner office he sank into the deepest, softest chair, letting his cousin-from-Montehedo sort the mail, agreeing with the boy's suggestions for action or sometimes issuing his own instructions, keeping only half his mind on the routine day's business, relying on Pierce, and concentrating the other half on the deed to be done. The plan was set in his mind but he had changes to make.

He was barely conscious of the time slipping by as he lay, rarely moving, in his chair, while Pierce worked at top speed.

By one o'clock the deck was cleared for action.

Bryce stood up, stretched, and checked his watch again. It was 1304 hours. A telephone call was scheduled in about another hour, and five more successively about a half hour apart.

"Order us some lunch, Pierce, before I lift the drawbridge."

The food came in as he was instructing his staff to leave them undisturbed for the rest of the afternoon.

By the time they had finished eating, their isolation was complete. The office was a command post now, with only the slender, unattended telephone wires connecting them with the outside worlds.

Bryce moved over behind his desk. He drew the telephone toward him and dialed a number. Somewhere, in the locked safe, the phone rang.

From the case he took a toy dial phone. Pierce's eyes were on it, his eyebrows lifted quizzically, but Bryce offered no explanation. The boy was due for a series of surprises. And when it was over, he would know everything without any explanations, and too late to interfere.

"Hi Al," Bryce said to the recorded "Yeah?" at the other end. He dialed a number on the toy dial, the one receiver against the other's back. After the usual ritual, Bryce said, "Hello George, how's everything going?"

This is it, Bryce thought. This was the first part of the final blow to UT. And the only instrument he needed in his delightfully simple method was a telephone. Originally he had planned six brief warning calls to the six key numbers of the ground organization. He would tell them to refuse to take anything from the hands of the UT branch, and break contact with them immediately after accepting cash for miscellaneous items. That would set the stage.

The police trap would close on all members of the UT branch of the organization while they were encumbered with a maximum of incriminating objects to dispose of in too little time. Then would come his anonymous tip to the police. He'd inform them that certain employees of UT in a few listed cities would be found to be smuggling in large quantities of drugs. The thing would be so simple. And the whole works would blow up with the efficiency of the calculated explosion of nuclear reaction.

That had been his original plan.

But things would be different now. The morning in the easy chair had changed his approach. The newer, more elaborate program, still remarkably simple, would bring down the whole structure within UT without the help of the police, but by himself alone, planning it, initiating it, executing it with no one's help. Not even Pierce's.

He heard himself saying:

"This is 'Hello George.' Listen to me and don't interrupt.

"Somebody has talked. I've been betrayed myself. Get that? Hello George is washed up. Right now the cops are tapping this line. It doesn't make any difference to me, now. But it does to you. This is an open warning from Hello George to you. Spread the word. I'll keep making calls until they break in on me and cut this line.

"Meanwhile, spread the word. Break connections with me and the whole organization. Get out of range before the trap closes. But pass on this warning first.

"I'll hold out against questioning a short time. The police will get me eventually, of course. And when they do they'll pump me dry. They'll get names and addresses. The whole works will get grabbed, unless you move fast. Spread the word."

Bryce paused and winked at Pierce who was standing at his elbow, "Any questions? Yes, I'm sure. Of course I'm sure. Any other questions? Good luck, Okay."

He hung up.

As Caesar once said, the dice were rolling.

Pierce, beside him through it all, simply stood there, his eyes wide and his face sharp with curiosity and incredulity, his body twitching now and then from the infection of the excitement which rippled over the room. That excitement had been there, though Bryce had not permitted himself to indulge in it in any visible way. He had showed Pierce a new facet to his operations, one which Pierce could not anticipate immediately, one in which only he, Bryce, could make the snap decisions and evaluate the immediate responses demanded of him.

That was with the first call.

With the second one Pierce began to contribute, rising to the occasion as he had so often and quickly done in the past. He began pacing up and down between calls, smoking furiously and laughing under his breath.

"Tell 'em the police are breaking down the door," he suggested during the third call. "Say you're hypnoed to hold out against questioning five days at the most, two hours more likely."

His suggestions were a howl. Bryce repeated them into the phone with counterfeit desperation and was rewarded by the sounds of panic at the other end. He and Pierce chortled over the frantic queries and exclamations from the victim. The whole thing, succinct and pointed and with the dramatic power of simplicity, was one super practical joke which would set the entire solar system scurrying around for the next few weeks.

The ramifications would be endless. Persons would vanish abruptly and take up new names and identities in the obscure countries, others would draw out their heavy savings and take the first rocket out from Earth. There would be a new influx of refugees to the Belt, new settlers to be honest farmers and factory workers and repair men.

Yes, the situation was dramatic.

The day was a good day.

But as Bryce hung up on the last call, a depressing sense of calamity, unsettlingly anti-climatic, began to press down on him. Pierce was talking about plans for the next week with an enthusiasm which should have been completely contagious.

But there was something wrong. There was something wrong.

What was it?

Bryce felt Pierce's enthusiasm catch at him and start to sweep him away. He savored the pleased glow produced by the shattering changes he had managed to cram into one day. With six telephone calls he had broken the drug ring completely and forever, broken it so completely that no member of it would ever have dealings with any member of it again. All of them were out of business, fleeing with the imaginary hounds of the law baying at their heels.

He smiled at the thought.

And then his smile faded for some strange reason and he ceased listening to Pierce for a moment, looked away and ceased listening, for hearing Pierce just then distracted oddly from the clarity of his thinking. He wanted to review what he had just done.

What was wrong?

What?

He struggled with a mounting confusion, the desk top and telephones blurring as he tried to concentrate with desperate effort.

Unexpectedly the question sprang into focus. It was as if the room turned inside out, the day turned upside down.

He had smashed himself—not UT!

Why?

Why had he made those calls—changed his plans—and made those calls?

With the most perfect and terrible clarity he saw the results of what he had done. The organization destroyed. The contacts he had made fifteen years ago as an anonymous young dock hand, contacts that as Bryce Carter he could never make again—vanishing—merging with the great mass of the public—becoming gray unknown figures. The building of years melting like a sugar castle melts into the tide—the invisible army that had obeyed his sourceless voice without being able to blackmail or rebel, the perfectly balanced tool in his hands that could be used for the bribing of venal politicians, with a limitless fund for the bribery, the growing secret control of the most venal of the political machines of Earth, that by the time he needed it it would have been an irresistible weapon in his hand for the single swift political blow that would rip the Belt from Earth control, and give it a seat on the Assembly of the Federated Nations, and mastery of the solar system—

But as he sat there the organization dissolved.

He grasped the phone, but there was nobody to call now, no one would answer. He could never reach them again.

This was sanity now, but what had it been before when he was cheerfully destroying his future? It seemed to him that there were two halves to his brain,

each wanting different things. For a moment the one that had controlled the day was gone, and he was sane again, but how long would that moment last? What sign had there been when it took control? Would he know it when it came again?

He remembered that in the tube train that morning he and Pierce had had a half joking argument about the best short-and-merry life. One of the happy ones on the list had been the INC agent, because they spent so much of their lives working into smuggling gangs that they had all the pleasures and profits of being a crook and an honest man too. Was that where he had slipped his cog?

Looking back on the things he had done that day he saw that much of it had fitted an abstract pattern of justice, as if he had been thinking of himself as an INC man. Or as if—

He thought of the things he had seen in his childhood that they had called zombies, and jeered at and tormented without fear of any retaliation or vengeance from their gray-faced victims. Imprisoned men—they looked normal—but they had been mentally imprisoned. Law-zombies, memorizing and following laws and being honest with a simple and terrifying literalness.

He had not known that he had any capacity for terror.

Bryce Carter. He had his name, his identity and his memory, and they were his own. Sometimes he had had nothing else, only the pride and strength of knowing his identity, that it was his and stronger than others, just as his hands were stronger, a thing they couldn't take from him.

Could they? There was a nightmare he had had more than once, that he remembered suddenly for the first time, with all its atmosphere of childish strangeness. The cop psychos were after him. He was trapped in a big room with lights and they had his head open and were chasing him around inside his head somehow, trying to catch him, and kill him, the him that lived in his mind.

Would he know if it was gone?

The black sharp-edged shadows of the crater walls were drawing across the landing plain outside, bringing to a close the two weeks of daylight, and the reflected sunlight was dimming in the room. He could hear the rumble of a heavy ship of a cargo fleet lowering in to a landing.

His assistant was sitting quietly on the edge of the desk as he had been for some time, motionlessly watching the thin plume of smoke that rose from a cigarette

in his hand. He was as still as if he were listening for some subtle sound far away. Rocket jets flashed an orange glow through the venetian blinds and fell in stripes of orange light across the dark young face. The brief rumble of a rocket take-off came, transmitted through the ground and the building. Smoke curling up from the cigarette was the only motion.

"Roy, is Pierce your real name?"

The light flashed and faded in bars of orange across the young face he had thought was like his own, the boy he had thought had come from Pop Yak. The quick deep rumble of sound came and faded in the walls around them. A fleeting smile touched the face, and the dark eyes rested on his for a moment as Roy Pierce gave the information casually as if it were any other information, answering the question that had been meant. "It is my mother's name. We always take our mother's names. I am a Manoba—a Manoba of Jaracho."

I

Looking into Bryce's face he slid to his feet slowly, ground out the stub of his cigarette and stood before the desk.

Bryce took out his gun and held it where Pierce could see it. "Are Manobas ever shot?" It was a heavy little gun, his maggy, its barrel sleek and rounded, the heavy metal warm from being worn close to the skin.

"Sometimes. It's a natural enough reaction."

It was a spaceworthy gun with adjustable velocity for driving through padded suits and pressure suits. The velocity was set high, but it would be inartistic to blow a large hole through a psychotherapist. Bryce turned the dial down slowly, watching him.

"Do the professional ethics of privacy and non-publicity cover this kind of situation?"

Pierce was smiling slightly with a touch of bitter humor. "It's undiplomatic to tell you that, but yes, the contingency is covered. There is nothing to connect myself with you as a case in any records, nor anything to identify me as a member of the Manoba group contracted by your company. The ethic of privacy is allowed to have no exceptions for the family's record."

A cool curiosity held him. "Tell me—when you saw that I was beginning to think, why didn't you just needle me down for a short nap and leave?"

The smile remained. "I am supposed to control the shock of realization, and make sure that it is assimilated without damage to the subject." His dark expressionless eyes met Bryce's, and Bryce felt the impact of them, and realized for the first time that there was the same slight bitter off-hand smile on his own lips, and inwardly the quiet ironical mood with the still clarity of a deep pool. His own mood? He hefted the gun in his hand, feeling its weight and balance. "You could have done that over the televiewer," he pointed out dispassionately. "What is the average mortality, do you know?"

"Not high. It is only inexperience that is dangerous. If one can get through one's first three or four cases, it's safe enough."

Looking back over the past days it was quite clear that Pierce had control over his emotions. Any emotion Pierce chose him to feel he would feel. It remained to

be seen how much that could influence what he was going to do. The dark-skinned young man stood before the desk casually and answered questions with a slight restrained smile that set the wry irony of both their minds.

A man does what he wants. That is freedom, but what he wanted could be controlled apparently. A man *is* what he wants. But what he wanted could be changed. How easy had it been to change him. Bryce tried himself with a thought of the power and glory of rule, the reign and mastery of space—a goal that had warmed his thoughts for many years.

He didn't want it.

There was a numbness where there should have been emotion, and all he could feel for his loss was the resignation and the faint bitter humor permitted him by Pierce's smile. Watching that smile he shifted the heavy little gun in his hand, turning it over casually, feeling its familiar weight and the texture of its surfaces.

He spoke gently. "If you don't mind my asking, have you passed through your first three cases yet?"

"You are my first," said Roy Pierce, whom he had trusted. "I'm afraid I was clumsy."

"Oh—you did all right." Bryce shot him then, placing the bullet carefully in the pit of his stomach where it would hurt. That was for doing well. For justice. No man has the right to meddle in another man's mind.

Pierce had been starting to speak. He swayed back a half step with a flicker of change crossing his face then stood steady and smiling again. That brief grimace touched Bryce's nerves with a sensation that was like the jangle of something heavy dropped inside a piano, a sound he had heard once. But the numbness did not lift from his feelings. He was still smiling. The third bullet would be between the eyes.

The words were low and rapid but clear.

Bryce did not listen. "This is for doing a good job," he said, overriding the other voice with his own, and pulled the trigger again, placing the slug slightly lower this time, in the belly, where if it entangled in one of the spinal plexus it could hurt past belief. Pierce swayed slightly. His face went to the clay-blue color that comes to dark-skinned races when they pale. Bleeding inside somewhere, and already dead unless he were given help, Bryce figured.

For a moment Bryce saw something like effort in the dark unreadable eyes. Then suddenly Pierce smiled, his young face disarmingly innocent and merry. "Oh, come on, Bryce, it's not that serious. Be a good sport. You don't want to—"

Suddenly Bryce saw the situation as the sheerest humor, a sort of lunatic farce for the laughter of some cosmic joker. He swung the gunsights up towards the smiling face. Amusement bubbled in his blood and he heard himself laugh—heard it with a grim secondary amusement.

"The joke's on you," he said, and pulled the trigger, then laughed again. The joke was on him.

He had missed. He had missed at a distance of three feet. Yet his hand was rock-steady. Pierce's control had him. His laughter stopped as the humor in Pierce's attitude faded down again to the small wry smile that had been there from the beginning.

Bryce had not lost. He had only to wait a little and he had won. Unless Pierce could use his control to force him to call help. He set himself to resist and not to listen. There was not long to go. The expressionless dark eyes that held his were beginning to widen slightly in an effort of sight that meant that a private darkness was closing in on the psychotherapist. The rumble of distant rockets seemed louder, covering his fading voice. "It's your choice, Bryce. I give it to you. You won't want this later—Bryce—but don't—hunger to undo. It is payment enough for all—times like this—that you change—and do not—want—them any—again—" Pierce pulled in a strangling breath, swaying more visibly. "Gun," he whispered, reaching out in Bryce's direction, his eyes going sightless.

Bryce handed him the magmatic, and watched as Pierce fumbled his hands over it, putting his prints on it blindly, his knees bending.

When he fell, Bryce picked up the phone and called Emergency. The emergency squad would be cruising around in the halls somewhere nearby, looking for the source of the three radio notes that had told them that a gun was fired.

T

hat was the last I saw of him," the young man stopped talking and looked

pleased with himself.

Donahue drained his drink irritably and put it on the bar that had been set up on the ceiling when the Gs went off. It clung magnetically. "Make it the same, please." He turned to Roy Pierce, floating beside him. "Stop needling me, man, finish the story. The way you tell it, I don't know what you did, how you did it, or even whether you died or not."

"Oh, I died," said Roy Pierce. "But they revived me," he added.

"Good! I'm glad to hear that!" said Donahue more cheerfully, wondering suddenly just how extensively he was being kidded. "For a moment there you had me worried. Now explain about this treatment."

"It's called soul eating," explained the dark-skinned, straight-haired boy, "I don't think you could do it."

Donahue thought that information over carefully. "Maybe not. How's it done?"

"In the tribes of my people the soul is supposed to be an invisible double who walks at your side, protecting you and speaking silently to your mind. Its face is the face that looks out of mirrors and up from pools at you, and the shadow that walks on the ground beside you. Evildoers, after they had spoken to a Manoba, would say that their reflections were gone. Our family was called The Eaters of Souls, and all the tribes were afraid of us for nine hundred miles around."

"So am I," said Donahue compactly. "As my Yiddish grandmother on my mother's side would say, it sounds from werewolves."

"I can explain it."

"No magic?"

"Look," said the youth tersely, "Do I want to get kicked out of the FNMA? What if I had sat in a jungle circle loaded to the ears with herbs and spells, with the drums of my cousins throbbing around me, and learned the best and subtlest ways of my technique back in time looking through the eyes of my great grandfather, or conversing with his ghost. Do you think I would say so?"

"No," Donahue admitted. He edged away a little.

The youth spoke gloomily. "Rapport and intensified empathy is something you learn by exposing yourself to mirrors. The technique is published, known and

accepted among psychologists, but most of them just don't try. It backfires too easily, and it takes too high a level of skill. It originated with my family." The youth spoke even more gloomily. "What I do is obvious enough if I make it so. It's simply prior mimicry. I watch the trend of what goes on in his thoughts, and express approximately what he is feeling and thinking a little before he does. So that presently, subconsciously he is depending on me to tell him what he thinks and how he feels.

"I was his mirror, his prior mirror. I am a clear, expressive underplaying actor as an actor, and each shade of reaction is separate and unmistakable. The subconscious is not rational, but it generalizes from regularities that the conscious mind never has the subtlety to notice. It saw me consistently representing its own internal reactions, hour after hour in every situation more clearly than Bryce ever saw himself express anything in a mirror, and more steadily than he ever saw any mirror. The subconscious then associated the inside emotion with the corresponding outside image for each one. I became Bryce's subconscious self image. When he thinks of doing anything, the image in the imagination that does it is not himself, it is me. This can cause considerable mental confusion."

"It should!" Donahue agreed fervently.

"I put him in new places and situations where he was unsure and I was sure, so that when I diverged from mirroring him, he gave me the lead and mirrored me. One of us had to be the originator and the other the reflection, but now it was reversed. He did not fight it subconsciously because the results were pleasant. I kept the lead and led him a mental dance through thoughts and reactions he had never had before, in a personality pattern completely foreign to his own, one that I wanted him to have. I hadn't been hired for that, but I had time to pass before I could untangle that UT problem, and I wanted to do it for him. The mirror link was complete the first day, but I'm afraid the extra days made it indelible. He'll always be me in his mind, and mirrors will never look right to him."



I

t's so simple, it's obvious," said Donahue with disappointment. "It doesn't sound like magic to me."

The youth was thoughtful, frowning. "Sometimes it doesn't to me either. I wonder if the ghost of my grandfather was telling me the right—"

"Forget the ghost of your grandfather," Donahue interrupted hastily. On his few space trips he could never get used to this business of floating eerily around in the air, and it seemed a poor time to talk about ghosts. "What about Bryce Carter. What became of him? You know," he said defiantly, "I like his plans for organizing the Belt and breaking UT. And, come to think of it, if I had been there when you were interfering with *that*, I think I would have shot you myself."

"UT had only hired me to find the organizer of the smuggling ring and persuade him to disband his organization in UT. I had done that. So the third day, when I could walk, I left the hospital and went back to Earth, and collected my fee for a job done. Many people had vanished suddenly from their payrolls, and the crime statistics in some cities had shown a startling lull. They knew I had done it, and so they paid and were grateful." The dark youth shrugged. "I didn't feel I had to tell them about Orillo. He tipped the police and started a rumor, and there was evidence enough in the crime statistics of the months before, when they were correlated with the distribution of branches of Union Transport, though there was nothing to point at anyone in particular except the ones who had disappeared."

Donahue remembered. "Sure that's that investigation of transportation monopolies that raised such a stink last year. I saw part of it in Congress."

Pierce handed him a travel folder. Gaudily illustrated, it advertised the advantages of the C&O lines for space tourists. "Carter and Orillo."

Donahue looked up, puzzled, "But this is the next step in what he planned. I thought you changed him."

"Mahatma Gandhi would have followed out those plans," Pierce said with a touch of grimness. "As you pointed out, they are attractive. But I changed him. I won't give you personality dynamics, but if you want a list of changes—He's married to Sheila Wesley, that's one change. And instead of going home nights he roisters around in bars and restaurants, talking to everybody, listening to everybody, liking them all and enthusiastically making friends in carload lots. That's another change. He doesn't look into mirrors because they make him feel cross-eyed. That's because he unconsciously expects to see me in the mirror. And he will organize the Belt and be president as he planned. I won't stop him in that. The difference will be that he won't want the power he'll get." Pierce said grimly, "A power-lusting man can never be trusted with power: he goes megalomaniacal."

Carter was already halfway there. But he's safe from that now. He's going to be given plenty of power, and see it only as responsibility, and not want it. That's the only safe kind of man to have in a powerful position."

"That—" said Donahue with great earnestness, "—is like sending a poor damned soul to Kismet paradise as a eunuch. You psychologists are all complete sadists," he said lifting his drink. "I suppose you've put something in my drink?"

"Absolutely nothing," Roy Pierce assured him, grinning. "Funny thing was, when I got back to Earth that time, *I* kept feeling cross-eyed when I looked into a mirror. And my friends said I was not myself. If I was not myself, I knew I must still be Bryce Carter. Things had seemed different, and they had warned me that the technique sometimes backfired when I was learning. So I called my uncle Mordand on the televiewer—he's the head of the family, and he lives in an estate in the jungle—and he—"

Donahue was fascinated again.

There was a different approach for each case, Pierce had found. It was not ordinarily ethical to discuss any case history, but he knew with great surety that Donahue could be trusted not to repeat what he was being told. The only reason there wasn't something extra in his current drink was because there had been something in the last drink.

This was case five.

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