

Guardian Angel

by Mike Resnick

Her skin had cost her a bundle. It was smoother than silk, and at least thirty years younger than her eyes, which had a hard glitter to them that she couldn't quite hide. She had a hell of a figure, but there was no way to know how much of it was hers and how much was courtesy of the same guys who gave her that skin. She wore a ring that was brilliant enough to have given her the tan she sported, and another one that could have eaten the first one for breakfast.

She told me her name was Beatrice Vanderwycke. I didn't know if I believed her. You get used to being lied to in my line of work, and eventually you assume everything you're told is a lie until you know for a fact that it isn't. Still, she looked enough like a Beatrice Vanderwycke that I was willing to accept it for the moment.

Besides, I needed the work.

"And that was the last time I saw him," she was saying as she toyed with a bracelet that was worth more than I earn in a decade. "I'm terribly worried that something has happened to him, Mr. Masters."

"Call me Jake," I replied.

"Do you think you can help me?" She shifted her position and the chair instantly adjusted to accommodate her, then gently wrapped itself around her. I envied the chair.

"I can try," I said. "But I'll be honest with you: the police have far more resources than a private detective does. Have you spoken to them?"

"They sent me to you. I'm sure he's not on Odysseus, and that means he's beyond their jurisdiction. A very nice officer named Selina Hernandez recommended you."

Well, that's one way for Selina to make sure I take her out for that dinner I owe her.

"All right," I said. "Let me start making a record of this so I don't make too many mistakes." I activated my computer.

She almost laughed at it. "That machine must be a leftover from the last century. Does it still work?"

"Most of the time."

"Why don't you get a new one?"

"I've got a fondness for old broken-down machines," I said. "Can I have his name again?"

"Andy."

"Age?"

"Nineteen."

"He's legally of age on every world in the whole Albion Cluster," I pointed out. "Even if I find him, I can't make him come back with me if he doesn't want to."

She pulled out a wad of money that could choke damned near any animal I've ever seen. "You're a resourceful man. You'll find a way."

I stopped myself from leaping for the money and reached for it with some slight measure of restraint. It was mostly Democracy credits, but there were some Far London pounds, Maria Theresa dollars, and New Stalin rubles.

"I'm a resourceful man," I echoed, sliding the cash into a desk drawer. "I'll find a way." I paused. "Have you got a picture of him -- holo, portrait, whatever?"

She placed a small cube on my desk and activated it. The image of a nice-looking kid with blue eyes and wavy brown hair suddenly appeared, hovering in the air.

"Can I keep it?" I asked.

"Of course."

"Can you supply me with a list of his friends, and how to contact them?"

"He didn't have many," she said.

"How about a girlfriend?"

"Certainly not, Mr. Masters," she said firmly. "He's just a boy."

He's a boy who looks to be about two inches taller than I am, I thought, but decided to keep my mouth shut.

"Any alien friends?"

She gave me a haughty stare. "No."

"You've got to give me a little more to go on than just an image of him, Mrs. Vanderwycke," I said. "It's a big galaxy out there."

She produced another cube. "This contains the names and addresses of all of his friends that I know about, plus some of his teachers and a list of all the schools he's attended."

"Where is he presently going to school?"

"He quit last year."

"All right -- where does he work?"

"He doesn't."

"What does he do with his time?"

"He's been ill," she said. "That's why I'm so worried about him."

"He looks pretty healthy in the holo," I said.

"It's very difficult for me to discuss," she said uncomfortably. "He has ... _emotional_ problems."

"The kind that would make him wander off and forget who he is and where he lives?" I asked.

She shook her head. "No, Mr. Masters. But he needs to continue his treatment, and he's already missed three sessions with his therapist."

"I'll want the name and address of the therapist."

"It's on the cube."

"And you say he disappeared three days ago?"

"That's right. I had an appointment. He was in his room when I left, and gone when I returned." She stared at me with cold clear eyes that looked more like a predator than a distraught mother. "I'll pay your daily fee and cover all your expenses while you're looking for him. When you return him to me, there will be a substantial bonus."

"You already gave me one."

"That was an inducement, not a bonus," she said. "Will you find my son?"

"I'll give it my best shot," I promised.

"Good." She got to her feet, tall and elegant and reeking of money, a real knockout -- and with her money and her cosmetic surgeons, she'd look just as good at seventy, or even ninety. "I will expect frequent reports."

"You'll get them."

She stared at me. I used to stare at things I was about to dissect in biology class the same way. "Don't disappoint me, Mr. Masters."

I walked her to the door, it irised to let her pass through, and then I was alone with all that beautiful money and the promise of a lot more to come if I could just find one missing kid.

I fed the cube with the info to my computer. It spit it out. I put it in again, waiting to make sure the machine wasn't going to turn it into an appetizer, then sat back down at my desk and began sifting through the data she'd given me. There were four teenaged boys and a couple of teachers -- names, addresses, holos. I decided to put them off until I'd spoken to the therapist to find out what was wrong with the kid, but he wouldn't break doctor-patient confidentiality without Andy's permission. I told him I could get Beatrice Vanderwycke's permission, and he explained that since Andy was legally of age that wouldn't change anything.

So I began hunting up the names from school. One teacher had died, another was guiding tourists through the ruins of Archimedes II. Two of the boys were in offworld colleges, a third was in the Navy and posted half a galaxy away. That left Rashid Banerjee, a slightly-built young man with a thick shock of black hair. I managed to get him on the holophone, which saved me a trip out to his place, and introduced myself.

"I'm looking for Andy Vanderwycke," I explained.

"I didn't know he was missing," said Banerjee.

"He's been gone for three days," I said. "Is he the kind of kid who would go off on a lark?"

"I hardly knew him," said Banerjee. "He never struck me as irresponsible, but I don't know..."

"Is there anyone who would know?"

"Try his girlfriend."

"His mother told me he didn't have any girlfriends."

"He's got one. Or at least he did. His mother did her best to break it up."

"Any reason why?" I asked.

"Who knows?" he said. "She was a strange one, that lady. I don't think she liked him, even though he was her son."

"Can you give me the girl's name and tell me how to get in touch with her?"

"Melanie Grimes," answered Banerjee. He gave me her contact information. I thanked him, and went to the hospital where Melanie Grimes worked. They told me I'd have to wait in the cafeteria for her until she was on her break. It was a big, bustling room, with enough anti-grav sensors that any patient who found any kind of exertion difficult could simply float to a table. I found an empty table, and the moment I sat down a menu appeared a few inches above the table. Then a disembodied voice listed the day's specials.

"Just coffee," I said.

"Please press your thumb against the illuminated circle on the table," said the voice.

I did so.

"Your coffee will be billed to your account at the Odysseus branch of the Bank of Deluros."

I still don't know how the coffee got to the table. I turned away for a moment to watch a very proud, very stubborn old man insist on walking with crutches rather than let the room waft him to a chair, and when I turned back the coffee was already there.

I lit a smokeless cigar, and amused myself guessing the professions of every patient and visitor who walked by. Since there was no one to correct me, I gave myself a score of ninety percent.

Then a young woman began walking across the cafeteria toward me. She was very slender, almost thin, with short-cropped red hair and big brown eyes. While I was trying to guess whether she was a fourth level computer programmer or an apprentice pastry chef, she came to a halt.

"Jake Masters?" she said. "I'm Melanie Grimes."

I stood up. "I want to thank you for seeing me."

"I haven't got much time. We've already had eight deliveries today."

"So you're an obstetrics nurse?"

"No, I'm not."

"You're too young to be a doctor."

"I'm a lab technician," she explained. "Every time a baby is born, we take some umbilical stem cells so we can clone its various organs should they ever need replacement. It's not very exciting," she continued, then added defensively: "But it is important."

"I don't doubt it," I said, handing her a business card. She studied my name and seemed fascinated by the little animated figure stalking the bad guys. Finally she looked up at me.

"This is about Andy, isn't it?"

"Yeah. According to his mother he went missing three nights ago."

"He's not missing," she said. "He ran away."

"From you?"

She shook her head. "From her."

"Are you talking about his mother?"

"Yes. He was frightened."

"Of her?"

"Yes."

I drained the last of my coffee. "Can you think of any reason why he should be frightened of her?"

"You've met her. Wouldn't you be afraid of her?"

Not much scares me besides the prospect of poverty these days, but I saw her point.

"If you wanted to find him, where would you look?"

"I don't know." Then: "He had this friend..."

"His mother gave me a list of his friends. I've spoken to Rashid Banerjee, and none of the others are on the planet."

"His mother didn't think this one could possibly be a friend, so of course she wouldn't give you his name -- but he was the closest friend Andy had. Maybe his only real friend."

"Can you give me his name?"

"Crozchziim."

"Either you're choking or he's an alien," I said.

"He's a Gromite."

"What's a Gromite?"

"A native of Barsoti IV."

"Humanoid?"

"Yes."

"How long has he known Andy?"

"A long time," replied Melanie. "Andy's mother was too busy to bother with him, so he pretty much raised Andy. Over the years he was a nursemaid, a tutor, and a paid companion."

"Could Andy be staying with him?"

She shook her head. "He lived in an outbuilding on the Vanderwycke's estate. A little shack, really, hidden from sight in a grove of trees. She'd have looked there before she contacted a detective."

I showed her the list of friends I'd been given. "Can you add any names to this."

She studied the list. "Not really. I don't think Andy would have considered any of them friends. They were just classmates he knew."

"What about Andy's father?" I asked. "Dead?"

She smiled, the first smile I'd seen from her. "Didn't she tell you? But of course she wouldn't. It might ruin her social standing."

"You want to let me in on the joke?" I said.

"Andy's father is Ben Jeffries."

"Hatchet Ben Jeffries?" I said. "The kingpin of the Corvus system?"

"That's him."

"There's an outstanding murder warrant for him right here on Odysseus," I noted. "They've been trying to extradite him for years."

"That's why he never comes to the Iliad system," said Melanie.

"I assume he and Beatrice are divorced?"

"Andy says they were never married."

"Andy knows him?"

"Of course. He's been paying all Andy's expenses since he was born. He just can't visit him on Odysseus. He's flown Andy out to Corvus II a few times."

"Do they get along well?"

"I guess so."

"Could Andy be on Corvus now?" I asked.

She shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe."

I thanked her for her time, then went back to the office to check on Crozchziim's whereabouts. I had the computer access the alien registry. He'd reported once a week to the Department of Alien Affairs for close to fifteen years ... but he'd skipped his last check-in, and the Department had no idea where he was.

Which meant my next step was to talk to Hatchet Ben Jeffries. I'd much rather have spoken to him via computer or subspace radio, but he was my only remaining lead, and I figured I'd better have a face-to-face with him, so I contacted the spaceport and booked an economy ticket to Corvus II.

Corvus was seventeen light-years from Iliad. I don't know who or what Corvus was, or why they named a star for it, but I thought the guy who named the planets was pretty unimaginative. They were Corvus I through Corvus XIV. It made Iliad's planets -- Achilles, Odysseus, Ajax, Hektor and the rest -- look

pretty classy by comparison.

We took off bright and early the next morning. I watched a holo of a murderball game for a couple of hours, then took a nap until the robot host woke me and asked if I wanted something to eat. I always get nauseous when I eat at light speeds or traveling through wormholes in hyperspace, so I took a pass and went back to sleep until just before we touched down.

I'd sent a message that I wanted to see Jeffries about his son, but I'd left before there was any reply, and I hoped I hadn't wasted a trip. It's been my experience that criminal kingpins are often reluctant to speak to any kind of detective, even private ones. I cleared Customs, then rented an aircar, punched in the address of Jeffries' estate, and settled back to watch the countryside whiz past as we skimmed along a few inches above the ground.

When we got to our destination there was a stone wall around the entire place, all ten or twelve acres of it, and there were half a dozen robots patrolling the exterior. The aircar stopped at the gate, its sensors flashing, and a few seconds later a mechanical voice came through its speaker system:

"State your name and business. We will not be responsible for you or your vehicle if you attempt to enter the grounds without permission."

"I'm Jake Masters, and I'm expected. Tell your boss I need to talk to him."

"Please wait."

I waited a full two minutes. Then the gate vanished, and I realized I'd been looking at one hell of a hologram. I suspected that the entire wall was nothing but a carefully constructed image. For all I knew, so were the robots. The aircar began moving forward, and once we were inside the estate I ordered it to stop. Then, just to see if my guess about how the place was really protected was right, I picked up a titanium drinking mug that came with the vehicle and tossed it at the wall. It was instantly atomized, which is exactly what would happen to anyone who tried to enter without first being cleared.

We glided up to the front door of a mansion that would have been impressive on any world and especially out here on the edge of the Inner Frontier, and I found three men -- real men, not images or robots -- waiting for me. Nobody was displaying any weapons, but they each had a few telltale bulges under their tunics.

"Well?" said the smallest of them.

"He is carrying a laser pistol," replied the aircar.

"Anything else?"

"A wallet, a passport, 37 credits in change, two Maria Theresa dollars..."

"That's enough. Please hand me your burner, butt first, and step out of the vehicle, Mr. Masters."

I did as he said, and the two larger men frisked me about as thoroughly as I'd ever been frisked.

"What was that for?" I asked when they had finished.

"Mr. Jeffries has a lot of enemies," the small man explained. "And of course there are always bounty hunters."

"Yeah, but you've already scanned me and got my burner."

"You can't be too careful, Mr. Masters," he replied. "Last week a man tried to enter the house with a ceramic gun that got past every sensor. Step over here, please."

I walked over to a scanner that read my retina, my bone structure, and my fingerprints and checked them against my passport. Then they checked my passport against the registry office back on Odysseus. Finally they were satisfied that I was who I claimed to be, and that if I tried to kill their boss it wouldn't be with any weapons that had gotten past them.

"Please follow me," said the small man, turning and entering the mansion. We passed through a huge foyer with a floor made of marble with the distinctive blue tint that identified it as coming from far Antares, then down a corridor lined with alien artifacts on quartz shelves, and finally entered a luxurious study lined with books -- not disks or cubes, but real books made of paper. The carpet was very thick, and seemed to shape itself around my feet with each step I took.

A tall man was standing beside a desk made of half a dozen different alien hardwoods. He was a steel gray man -- hair, clothing, even his expression -- and I knew he had to be Ben Jeffries. I half-expected to see the hatchet that made his reputation and gave him his sobriquet displayed on a wall or in a glass case, but there was no sign of it.

"Mr. Masters?" he said, extending his hand.

I took it. The grip was as firm and steel gray as the rest of him.

"Call me Jake."

"Have a seat, Jake," he said, snapping his fingers, and a chair quickly floated over to me, as responsive as a well-trained dog. "Can I get you something to drink?"

"Whatever you're having," I said.

"Cygnian cognac, I think," he said, and before he could ask for it a robot had entered with two half-filled glasses. I took one, so did he, and as the robot exited, he nodded to the man who had brought me to the study, and he left too. Now it was just the two of us.

"I've checked you out thoroughly, Jake," he said. "A man in my position has to be very careful. After all, you're a detective and there are close to eighty warrants for my arrest all across the Cluster. You've been scanned, so I know you're not carrying any recording devices, but just the same we're going to need some ground rules. You said you wanted to talk to me about my son. Fine -- but that's the only subject that's open for discussion. Is that okay with you?"

I had a feeling that if it wasn't agreeable, I probably wouldn't live to make it back to the spaceport.

"That's fine," I said.

"I assume Andy's mother hired you?"

I nodded. "Mrs. Vanderwycke, right." I took a sip of the cognac. I'd heard of Cygnian cognac for years, but I could never afford it. I guess I'm used to cheap booze; I didn't like this stuff all. But since it was Hatchet Ben's cognac, I figured I'd better keep that observation to myself.

"Mrs. Vanderwycke," he repeated with an amused chuckle. "When I knew her she was just plain Betty Wickes. Well, maybe not so plain." He took a sip of his cognac. "All right, what do you need to know?"

"Your son has gone missing," I said, "and I've been hired to find him."

"Yeah, I gathered as much," said Jeffries.

"Has he been in contact with you? Asked for money or help?"

"No. He'd never show that much initiative."

"I take it you don't think too much of him?"

"He's a decent enough kid," said Jeffries. "But he's a weakling."

"He looked pretty sturdy in the holos I've seen."

"There are all kinds of weaklings," said Jeffries. "He's the kind I have no use for. If you push him, he won't push back. He never stands up to Betty, which is an open invitation to get walked all over. The kid's got no guts. He lets every little thing get to him. Hell, he was actually catatonic for a while back when he was five or six. You wouldn't believe how much I had to pay a team of shrinks to snap him out of it."

"Sounds like an unhappy kid," I said.

"I was an unhappy kid too," said Jeffries. "You learn to overcome it -- if you're tough enough. Andy isn't." He paused. "Maybe he'd have turned out better if I'd raised him. It's hard to develop toughness growing up around Betty."

"Tell me about her," I said.

"Watch your back around her," he said. "You know what I do for a living, I'm not going to lie about it. I deal with the scum of the galaxy every day -- killers and worse." He stared at me. "Believe me when I tell you she's more dangerous than any of them."

"If that's so, why did you hook up with her?"

"She was young and gorgeous, and I was young and foolish. It didn't last long. I was gone before Andy was born."

"When's the last time you saw her?"

"Maybe fifteen or sixteen years ago," he said. "No, wait a minute. I saw her a couple of years ago when Milos Arum was inaugurated as Governor of Beta Capanis III. I didn't talk to her, but I saw her across the room."

"Beta Capanis," I said. "That's way to hell and gone, out on the Rim. I take it Arum's a close friend?"

"That's not part of our ground rules, Jake," he said with a hint of steel beneath the friendly smile. "Stick to Andy."

"Sorry," I said. "What can you tell me about a Gromite called Crozchziim?"

"I never met him, but Andy talked about him a lot."

"Any idea where he might be?"

"He? You mean the alien? Isn't he back on Odysseus?"

"Not as far as I can tell," I said.

"So you think he's with Andy?"

"It makes sense," I said. "They're friends, and they're both missing."

"Interesting," said Jeffries. "All I know about him is that he used to be an entertainer, a juggler or tumbler or something. He broke an arm or a leg, I don't remember which. He was on Odysseus, and they let him go. Betty hired him to amuse the kid."

"He performed on stage?" If he worked for a theatre company that played human worlds, he had to belong to a union, and that would make him a little easier to trace.

"In a circus or a carnival, something like that." I must have looked my disappointment, because he added: "I'll have one of my men find out exactly where it was and get the information to you."

"Thanks," I said. "I guess that covers everything."

"Almost. Now I've got one for you."

"Fair is fair. Go ahead and ask."

"Twelve years ago you put three of my men away for a long time on Odysseus. You were a good cop. Why did you quit?"

"I wasn't corrupt enough," I said.

He chuckled. "Yeah, I heard about your problems when you arrested the wrong guys."

"Right guys, wrong administration," I replied. I wanted to ask if they were his, but I knew he wouldn't answer, so I got to my feet and he did the same.

"Have you got any idea where he might be?" he asked.

"Not yet," I said. "But I'll find him sooner or later -- unless Mrs. Vanderwycke gets tired of paying my expenses and per diems."

"I'll tell you what," said Jeffries, walking me to the door of the study. "If she stops paying you, I'll pick up the tab and you'll report to me."

I looked at him for a moment without saying anything.

"What are you staring at?" he said.

"I'm trying to picture you as a concerned father."

Suddenly he was all steel again. "Just find him."

Then I was being escorted back to the car by another of his men, and an hour later I was on a spaceliner bound for Odysseus. When the trip was a little less than half over, the robot host handed me the printout of a subspace message that had just arrived from the Corvus system:

_ "The show Crozchziim worked for is long defunct. There are presently 137 circuses and carnivals touring the Albion Cluster. For what it's worth, only one of them, the Benzagari Carnival and Sideshow, is owned by a Gromite, Crozchziim's former partner in a juggling act." _

It was as good a place as any to start, so before we landed I ran a check and learned that the carny had

been playing on Brutus II for eight days and was slated to be there for four more. I didn't even leave the Odysseus spaceport; half an hour after we touched down I was en route to the Alpha Pirias system, where I'd transfer to a local ship that hit all the inhabited worlds within a three system radius, including Brutus II.

When I got to Brutus I found that the carny had been kicked off the planet for running crooked games, which at least showed that the management had some respect for tradition, and was now on New Rhodesia. It took me another day to make connections. We touched down on nightside, and I got off with perhaps ten other passengers while the ship continued on toward its ultimate destination in the Roosevelt system.

I got in line to pass through Customs. When it was my turn I stepped up and handed over my passport disk to the robot Customs officer that was running the booth.

"Are you visiting New Rhodesia for business or pleasure?" it asked me.

"Business."

"The nature of your business?"

"I am a duly licensed private investigator," I replied. "I don't believe I'm required to tell you more than that."

"Will you require a copy of our constitution and penal code so that you may study what is and is not permitted in the pursuit of your business?"

"That won't be necessary."

"How long do you plan to stay on New Rhodesia?"

"One day, two at the most."

"I have given you a three-day visa," said the robot, handing me back my disk. "It will vanish from your passport at that time, and if you are still on New Rhodesia and have not filed for an extension, you will be in violation of our laws."

"I understand."

"Our standard currency is the New Rhodesia shilling, but Democracy credits and Maria Theresa dollars are also accepted. If you have other human currencies, you may exchange them at any of the three banks within the spaceport." It paused as if waiting for a question, but I didn't have any. "Our atmosphere is 21% oxygen, 77% nitrogen, and 2% inert gasses that are harmless to carbon-based life forms. Our gravity is 96% Standard, and our day is 27.23 Standard hours."

"Thanks," I said. "May I pass through now?"

"I must check to make sure you have sufficient funds to purchase passage away from New Rhodesia," it replied, as it transmitted my thumbprint to the Master Computer back on Deluros VIII. I tensed, because while I'd just deposited the money Mrs. Vanderwycke had given me, my credit history was what they call spotty. "Checking ... satisfactory. You may enter the main body of the spaceport, Jacob Masters."

I walked straight to an information computer and asked where the Benzagari Carnival and Sideshow was performing. It gave me an address than didn't mean a thing, so I took it to the Transport Depot and hired an aircar to take me there.

It was about ten miles out of town, a series of tents and torch-lit kiosks that were meticulous recreations of the ones that had plied their trade on Earth before Man had reached the stars, with the added advantage that they were climate-controlled and a cyclone couldn't blow them away. There were games of every variety, games for humans, games for aliens, even races for the ugly little six-legged creatures that passed for pets on New Rhodesia. The barkers and shills were everywhere -- Men, Canphorites, Lodinites, Mollutei, Atrians, even a couple of Belargans.

The din was deafening. There were grunts and growls, trills and shrill whistles, snorts and clicks, and here and there even some words I could understand. The standard language in the galaxy is Terran since Men are the dominant race, and usually the other races wear T-packs -- translating mechanisms that were programmed to work in Terran and their native tongues -- but someone had decided the carnival would have a more exotic flavor if the T-packs weren't used, and I have to admit they had a point: it certainly felt different from anything I'd ever encountered.

Except for the frigid, methane-breathing Atrians who had to wear protective suits, all the other aliens were warm-blooded oxygen breathers, and they were all more-or-less humanoid. There were half a dozen races I'd never seen before, ranging from a ten-foot-tall biped that looked like an animated tent pole to a short, burly, three-legged being covered with what seemed to be dull purple feathers.

Finally I walked up to one of the human barkers and asked him to point out a Gromite to me. He looked around for a moment, then turned back to me.

"I don't see any right now, but they're all over the place," he said.

"What do they look like?"

"Maybe a foot shorter than you, rich red skin, two arms, two legs, too damned many fingers and toes. They don't wear clothes. I know this is supposed to be a sexual galaxy, but if they've got genders, they keep it to themselves." Suddenly he pointed. "There's the boss, making his collections."

I looked, and decided I'd never mistake a Gromite for anything else. The legs had an extra joint, the elbows seemed to bend in both directions, there was no nose but just a narrow slit above a broad mouth, the eyes were orange and were faceted like an insect's, and if he had any genitals they sure as hell weren't external.

"Maybe he doesn't need pants," said the barker, "but he sure as hell could use a money belt. We're really raking it in tonight."

"Have you been with the show long?" I asked.

"A year, give or take."

"Do you know if there's a Gromite called Crozchziim working here?"

"Beats the hell out of me," he said. "It's not a name I'd remember." Then: "Who'd he kill?"

"Why do you think he killed anyone?"

"Why else would you be looking for him?"

"He no killer. I just need to talk to him. I'm told that he's a juggler, or some kind of entertainer."

"Well, there's your answer. He'd be in the big tent, and I work the Midway. We could both work the show for a year and never meet."

"This particular Gromite might be traveling with a young human."

"Bully for him," said the barker, losing interest. "You got any other questions, or do you mind if I go back to work?"

I left him and headed over to Benzagari. I flashed my credentials at him and he came to a stop.

"We're breaking no laws," he said. "If you have any complaints, please speak to Lieutenant James Ngoma."

"I'm not here to arrest you or shake you down," I said. "I just need some information." He didn't say anything, so I continued. "I'm looking for a young human named Andy Vanderwycke. He's probably traveling with a Gromite named Crozchziim."

"I have never heard of either of them."

Birds of a feather. I already knew that he'd been Crozchziim's partner in an act years ago, so he was obviously protecting a fellow Gromite. I considered explaining that I didn't want the damned Gromite, that I was after the Man, but he had no reason to believe me and aliens don't sell out their brothers to humans.

I left him and headed for the main tent. It was packed, split just about evenly between humans and everything else. New Rhodesia was a human world, but it was also a center of commerce, and it had a large Alien Quarter. The Men still outnumbered the aliens three or four to one, but Men had a lot of things to do with their evenings, and obviously the aliens didn't.

There were a trio of Lodinite tumblers in the center, and a couple of human clowns were walking the perimeter of the ring, entertaining some of the kids of all species who couldn't work up much enthusiasm for alien acrobats. They were just finishing up their act when I got there, and a minute later a human knife-thrower entered the ring. A pretty, scantily-clad girl was tied to a huge spinning wheel, the wheel was set in motion, and the man hurled his first knife. There was an audible gasp as the knife buried itself in the woman's stomach and she uttered a shrill scream. The man released four more knives in quick succession, and each one failed to miss the girl, whose screams grew weaker each time. Then, just before the audience could charge the ring to dismember the knife thrower, the wheel came to a stop, the shackles came loose, and the "dying" girl walked briskly to the center of the ring, pulled all five knives from her body, politely handed them back to the thrower, and bowed to the audience.

"Nice trick," I said to a human who was walking down the aisle, hawking candies and the wriggling little wormlike things that the Mollutei eat for snacks.

"That's no trick," he said. "Those are real knives. If he throws one into you, you die."

"Then why didn't she die?"

"Mutant. Her blood coagulates instantly, and her skin heals by the next morning -- and he really is a good aim. He always misses her vital organs."

"That doesn't explain why the shock and pain doesn't kill her."

"She had all her pain receptors surgically disconnected."

"Are you guessing, or do you know that for a fact?"

He smiled. "She's my sister."

I bought a candy bar from him to cement our friendship, then asked another question. "I'm looking for a Gromite who might be working here as a juggler. Have you seen one?"

"Sure. You want Crunchtime."

"Crunchtime?" I repeated.

"That's not his name, but it's as close as I can come to pronouncing it, and he answers to it. Most everyone calls him that now."

"Is he traveling with a human, a young man maybe 19 or 20 years old, kind of slender, maybe two or three inches over six feet?"

"Never saw him in the act, and I don't mix with aliens when I'm on my own time."

"When is Crunchtime due to appear?"

He glanced at the ring, where a Canphorite was putting some huge forty-ton creature through its paces, tossing it a ball, making it stand on its back four legs, climbing into its huge maw.

"Soon as this guy and his pet are done."

"Some pet," I remarked.

"Yeah, I know, it looks like it could eat half the audience for breakfast, but it's really a herbivore. Friendliest damned monster you ever saw. It loves everybody."

You live and learn. The deadliest killer I ever came across looked like a milquetoast who'd faint if you just frowned at him.

I waited until the Canphorite and his pet left the ring, and then a trio of jugglers entered -- one human, one Lodinite, and one Gromite. And since the Gromite I sought had been a juggler and a guy who had a difficult time with alien names had dubbed this Gromite Crunchtime, I was pretty sure I'd found Crozchziim.

I have to admit he was damned good as what he did. He kept six or seven objects of different shapes and weights going at once, then tossed them even higher and got an even dozen in motion. I'd assumed that sooner or later the three of them would start juggling things back and forth, but none of them even acknowledged the others' existence until they all took their bows a few minutes later.

When they left the ring I handed the candy bar to a little girl, then walked to the exit they'd used and was soon just a few steps behind the Gromite.

"Hey, Crunchtime!" I called.

He stopped and turned to face me.

"Do I know you?" he asked in perfect Terran.

"Not yet," I said. "My name's Jake Masters."

"Mine is Crozchziim."

"I know. Will you settle for Crunchtime? It's a hell of a lot easier for me to pronounce."

He nodded his head, which startled me. The way he was put together, it looked like it was about to fall off. "What do you want of me, Mr. Masters?"

"I just want to ask you a few questions," I said. "You used to work for Beatrice Vanderwycke, right?"

"That is correct."

"You left in kind of a hurry."

"She doesn't want me back," he said, "and she is not the type to send you all this way to present me with my vacation pay -- so why are you here?"

I pulled out my card. "Can you read Terran?" He nodded again, and I handed it to him. "I've been hired to find her son."

"And do what?"

"Bring him back."

"Why?"

"That's not my concern," I said.

"It should be," said Crunchtime.

"Why do you think so?"

"Before you disrupt an innocent young man's life, don't you think you should know why you're doing it?"

"She's his mother and she's worried about him," I said.

He stared at me, and when he was done I knew what a sneer of contempt and disbelief from a Gromite looked like.

Finally he spoke. "Tell Mrs. Vanderwycke he is safe and healthy and she has nothing to worry about. Now your job is done. Good-bye, Mr. Masters."

"Let him tell me," I said.

"He has no desire to see anyone connected with his mother," said the Gromite.

"His father's concerned too."

"His father had seen him a total of 27 days since he was born. It is difficult to believe that he is suddenly concerned about the boy's well-being."

"So nobody cares about him except you?"

"Melanie Grimes does," said Crunchtime. "But you already know that. Who else would have given you my name?"

"She trusted me enough to tell me that Andy was probably traveling with you. Why can't you trust me enough to tell me where he is?"

"I have my reasons, and Andy has his."

"Why not make things easy on both of us and cooperate with me?" I said reasonably. "You know I'm going to find him with or without your help."

"Without." He paused and stared at me for a long minute. "You may think you know what this is about, Mr. Masters, but I assure you that you have no idea whatsoever."

"Enlighten me."

"Keep out of matters that don't concern you," said Crunchtime. "If you find him and take him back before he's ready, you will be responsible for whatever happens."

"Before he's ready for what?" I demanded. "And what do you expect to happen?"

"I have said enough. I will speak no further. This interview is over."

He turned and walked away. I considered following him, but decided it was a waste of time. The kid had to know his mother would send someone after him; he probably had a prearranged set of signals with Crunchtime to warn him when anyone showed up.

I spent the rest of the night wandering through the sideshow, searching for Andy Vanderwycke. I had his holo with me, but I never had a chance to use it, because I never saw a young man of his height and build. As the crowds thinned out I began looking behind the kiosks. I turned up a couple half my age having sex behind a shooting gallery, three men and two aliens who were so zoned out on booze or drugs that nothing was going to wake them before morning, and ten or twelve hucksters of all races selling contraband items, some of which made no sense to me.

One bedraggled man approached me with some truly unique pornography -- an animated deck of cards with a queen of hearts I still dream about -- and another tried to sell me a pair of hallucinogenic alphanella seeds, which are illegal on just about every world in the Democracy. I asked each of them if they had seen anyone answering to Andy's description, but once they saw I wasn't about to buy their goods they muttered their negatives and went looking for some other sucker.

When a Andrican hooker who looked like a four-foot tall Tinker Bell, complete with wings and a voice that sounded like gentle chimes, hinted at what she would like to do for or to me, I pulled out a fifty-credit note and told her I wasn't interested in what she was selling but I'd give her the money if she could tell me where to find Andy Vanderwycke. She explained that she didn't know any human male called Andy, but if I was after male companionship her uncle was available.

Finally I stumbled upon Prospero the Living Encyclopedia, a humanoid alien. To this day I don't know what race he belonged to; from a distance he could pass for a man, but when you got close to him you noticed the lidless eyes with the slit pupils, the third nostril, and the hair that was constantly weaving itself into new patterns.

Prospero's booth was at the far end of the midway, and he offered a prize of one hundred New Rhodesia shillings to anyone who asked him a question that he couldn't answer. He was really remarkable: he knew the time for the fastest mile ever run on Greenveldt, the gross planetary product of Far London, and the copyright date of the Canphorite poet Tanblix's first book.

Finally I stepped up and faced him.

"Greetings, my good sir," he said in sibilant Terran, and now that I was standing right in front of him I saw that his tongue was forked, not like a snake's but like a real fork, with four distinct tynes. "And what question do you wish the magnificent Prospero to answer?"

"I'm looking for a human named Andy Vanderwycke," I said. "Is he with the carnival?"

"Yes."

"Where can I find him?"

"Only one question to a customer, good sir," said Prospero with a very alien smile.

"I'll just get back in line and ask again," I told him.

"That is your privilege."

So I went to the back of the line, waited half an hour to reach the front again, and walked up to him.

"Remember me?" I said.

"The all-seeing and all-knowing Prospero remembers everything. What is your question, good sir?"

"Where can I find Andy Vanderwycke?"

"At the Benzagari Carnival and Sideshow."

"Where at the carnival?"

"I'm sorry, good sir, but each patron is limited to only one question."

"I can keep this up as long as you can," I said irritably. "And I can get a lot nastier about it. Why don't you make it easy on both of us?"

"Good sir, you are causing a disturbance," said Prospero. "Please do not force me to call for Security."

The line was shorter this time, and I was facing him again in another seven or eight minutes.

"Consider your question very carefully, good sir," he said when I confronted him. "The show will be shutting down in another five minutes."

"Okay, this is my question: No matter how often I ask or how I word it, you're not going to tell me what I want to know, are you?"

"No, good sir, I am not. Next?"

I stepped aside, considered waiting for him to leave his booth, and decided against it. Carnies always stuck together against outsiders. It was possible that I could beat the information out of him -- but if I couldn't, then by morning not a single member of the carnival would ever speak to me again, and that's assuming I wasn't arrested for assault.

Within half an hour the entire show was shut down. I was about to hunt up someplace to spend the night when I saw them starting to break down the tents.

"What's going on?" I asked the insectoid alien who seemed to be in charge of the work crew.

"We open on Aristides IV in two days, and it will take a day to set up there," he squeaked at me.

"But you've only been on New Rhodesia for two nights," I said.

"We're only here because we were thrown off of Brutus II," was his answer. "Our next scheduled

playdate is Aristides."

I considered trying to hitch a ride with the carny, but I knew Crunchtime would have alerted Benzagari about my snooping around, and there was no way I could go with them except as a stowaway. So, since all my expenses were being paid, I went back to the spaceport and booked passage to Aristides IV, then rented a room at the attached hotel. The ship didn't leave until midday, and when I showed up they told me that the carny's chartered ship left at dawn, so Andy Vanderwycke was going to have half a day to hide before I got there.

When the ship touched down and I'd cleared Customs, I asked an information computer where the carnival was setting up shop, and was informed that they'd be playing at the local indoor stadium.

I didn't like that at all. If they'd taken their tents out into the countryside, the crew would be staying with the show, and I'd at least know where to start looking. But if they hadn't unpacked the tents, that meant they'd be staying in hotels.

Aristides IV was like most Democracy worlds -- Men lived where they wanted, and all the other races were confined to the Alien Quarter. Maybe Andy was new at being on the run but most members of a carny have spent their entire lives avoiding spouses, bill collectors, or the police, and they'd have given him a quick education in laying low. And the first thing they'd have told him was not to stay where they stayed. They could misdirect me and protect him out in the countryside, but not in a hotel on a strange world. It would be too easy for me to bribe a desk clerk or bartender, too easy for an experienced detective to crack any computer lock on any door.

So if he had half a brain, he wouldn't be where I could pay a few credits or let myself into a few rooms to find him. If it was me and I was traveling with a Gromite, I'd be hiding with him in the Alien Quarter until I had to show up for work, and I granted the kid enough smarts or access to enough advice to do the same.

In one way, it made my job more difficult, because aliens stick together the way carnies do, and they don't like Men walking through the little piece of each city that's reserved for them. On the other hand, a six-foot three-inch human would be a lot easier to spot in the Alien Quarter than in a string of hotels and restaurants populated by nothing but Men.

I took the slidewalk out of the spaceport, moved over to the expresswalk, and found myself at the edge of the Quarter a few minutes later. A Lodinite patrolled the gate, and gave me the standard warning about how no one could be held responsible for anything that happened to me once I left the human section of the city and entered the Alien Quarter. He recited the usual liturgy about how aliens were justifiably resentful of their status on human worlds, and that even though I was doubtless in no way responsible I nonetheless represented the race of Man and they might be inclined to take out their frustration on me. When I answered that I knew all that and told him to cut the lecture short, he glared at me and then announced that the gate's sensors had detected a weapon that was hidden from sight.

I pulled my burner out and showed it to him.

"This is a Stern and Mason laser pistol, Model ZQ, purchased on Odysseus, registration number 362LV5413. If you'll check my passport, you'll see that I'm licensed to carry it."

He ran a micro-scanner across my passport disk, then deactivated it.

"I would recommend that you keep it concealed," he said stiffly. "No other race is allowed to own or carry weapons on Aristides, and displaying it would just create resentment, which is present already."

"I wasn't displaying it when your sensor spotted it," I pointed out.

He had no response to that, so he waited another minute just to annoy me and then let me pass through the gate.

I was a block into the Alien Quarter before the smell hit me. It was kind of a cross between rotting flesh and raw sewage, and it got stronger the farther I proceeded.

The squalor was almost unbelievable. Alien waste washed slowly along the street gutters, exposed to the air, going God knew where. Everything was in a state of decay, doors and windows were rotting or missing, dead animals and the occasional dead alien lay on the streets and sidewalks. Here and there undernourished alien children, most of them naked or nearly so, played incomprehensible games. When they saw me every last one of them rushed up, hand or paw or tentacle extended, begging for food or money.

I tried to ignore them, but they wouldn't go away and fell into step behind me. Finally I figured I might as well see if I could make some use of them, so I stopped, turned, and asked if any of them knew where the performers from the carnival were staying. I got nothing but blank looks, and I realized that none of them were wearing T-packs, so they couldn't understand me.

After another block I came upon an ancient Triskargi who had a tarnished T-pack hung around his neck. He looked like he wanted to hop away on his froglike legs as I approached him, but when he saw all the children he seemed reassured that I wasn't out to harm him and he stayed where he was.

"Hi," I said. "None of the kids can understand me."

"They have no T-packs," he said.

"I know. But there are a couple of Triskargi kids among them. You can speak to them, and most of them seem to understand each other, so they've probably developed some sort of lingua franca to communicate with each other. I want you to ask them if they know where the carnival performers are staying."

It took a few minutes, because the old Triskargi had no idea what a carnival was, but finally he understood and relayed the question. One of the Canphorite kids -- I never remember which ones come from Canphor VI and which from Canphor VII -- said he could lead me to some of them. He wanted seventeen trillion credits for his services. We negotiated, and I talked him down to twenty credits.

"Have him tell his friends not to follow us," I told the Triskargi. "If they hear us all coming, they'll have time to hide."

"They are entertainers," he said. "Why should they hide?"

"Just tell him."

He did as I asked, and the Canphorite child and I set out to the west. The planet's four moons were all out in midafternoon, casting strange flickering shadows across the Quarter. I was going to ask my guide for the names of the moons, but then I remembered he couldn't understand me, so I just followed him in silence.

Finally we stopped at a deep burrow, and the child turned and looked at me.

"Is this it?" I asked.

He couldn't understand my words, but he knew what I was asking. He pointed into the burrow.

I thanked him, tipped him another ten credits, watched him race back toward his playmates, and then I entered the burrow. The tunnels, which were about ten feet high and almost as wide, descended at about a twenty-degree angle, twisting and winding, occasionally broadening into what passed for a room. It was almost an underground city. A number of aliens saw me, but no one greeted me or tried to stop me. They simply stared in silence, as if this intrusion was just one more humiliation they were being forced to suffer.

At last the ground began to level out, and I came to a tall, heavily-muscled Sett who was wearing a T-pack.

"I'm looking for a Gromite and a Man," I said. "They would have arrived this morning."

He stared at me without speaking.

"They were traveling with a carnival." Silence. "Have you seen them?"

"They are not here."

"That wasn't my question. Have you seen them?"

"Yes."

"Where are they now?"

"I do not know."

"Who does?"

"No one in this burrow knows. When they heard that you had entered the Quarter, they left. We asked them not to tell us their destination, so that you cannot torture it out of us."

"I don't torture people."

"Then you are a most unusual Man." He paused. "Go back where you belong, Jake Masters."

They'd been there, all right. No one else in the Quarter knew my name. And if they had friends watching me, they were going to be able to stay one step ahead of me in the Alien Quarter. There was no sense wasting any more time there, so I retraced my steps, and an hour later I checked into the Regal Arms, which wasn't regal and didn't have any arms, but it was where the carnies' human contingent was staying.

I hung around the bar, and bought half a dozen of them drinks at various points in the evening. I didn't get the resentment here that I did when I spoke to the aliens, but I didn't get any information either. When money couldn't pry any answers loose, I tried invoking Hatchet Ben Jeffries' name. He was looking for his son, I explained, and he could get pretty deadly when he didn't get what he wanted. It didn't help. Maybe they knew where Andy was, maybe they didn't, but carnies have this code, and they don't break it.

I have a code, too. It has to do with earning my pay, and I wasn't going to let a wall of silence get in the way. I went up to my room a couple of hours after midnight, slept in until noon, and wandered down to the hotel's restaurant for some breakfast. The whole meal was composed of soya products, but they were well disguised and it wasn't too difficult to pretend I was eating eggs from Silverblue or Prateep VI and coffee imported from Earth itself.

I'd learned the night before that because of some city ordinance the carny's games couldn't open until dusk, and since there was no sense drawing a crowd if they couldn't be bilked, the entertainment wouldn't start for another hour or so after that.

I showed up while they were still setting up, and found out where the performers' dressing rooms were located. The aliens were segregated, so I figured I wouldn't find the kid there. I went to the human dressing rooms and checked out their occupants, but there was no one who matched the holo I was carrying around.

I walked up and down the games and booths, checking out the barkers, the shills, everyone who might be remotely connected to the carnival. No luck. I entered the main auditorium, studied all the ushers and candy butchers. Nothing.

I finally decided that my best bet was just to keep an eye on Crunchtime. Sooner or later he had to make contact with Andy Vanderwycke, had to let his guard down, and I planned to be there when he did.

I grabbed a seat in the front row and settled back to wait for the Gromite. As the crowd filed in, a trio of clowns, two human, one Lodinite, began doing some ancient routines and pratfalls to warm them up. The kids loved it; after all, it wasn't ancient to them.

Then came the wire walker, and the intricate flight patterns of the winged aliens from far Shibati, and the dinosaur trainer (or the whatever-the-hell-it-was trainer), and the magician, and some tumblers, and finally Crunchtime and the other two jugglers entered the ring. I waited until his performance was over, then followed him out.

A young woman approached him and handed him something, I couldn't see what. He studied it for a moment and gave it back to her, and then she walked away. I followed her, made a mental note of the office she entered, and then returned to Crunchtime.

"Feel like talking yet?" I asked.

"You came looking for me in the Alien Quarter," he said. "That was very unwise."

"I like sightseeing."

"You are wasting your time, Mr. Masters."

"I'm being paid for it," I told him. "And I plan to follow you night and day until I find Andy or you tell me where he is."

"That is your right," he replied. "And it is my right not to tell you."

"A Mexican standoff."

"What is a Mexican?"

"Beats me," I admitted. "It's an ancient expression."

"I am going into my dressing room now," he said. "Unless you have an insatiable curiosity to observe how a Gromite passes the food he has digested, you will not accompany me."

With that, he turned on what passed for his heel and entered the room, and I went over to the woman's office. The concrete floor could have used a carpet, the whitewashed walls could have used some paintings or holographs, and the coffee pot could have used some coffee. She was sitting in a chair that

was probably a decade older than she was, studying holos cast by her computer. I know she heard me come in, but she didn't bother to look up.

"Hi," I said. "My name is Jake Masters. I'd like to ask you a question."

"The answer is no."

"You haven't heard the question."

"I don't have to. You're Jake Masters, and you're harassing Crozchziim. Go away and leave him alone."

"Word gets around pretty fast."

"This is a carnival," she said as if that explained everything.

"I admire your loyalty, but I'm not here for the Gromite. I just need some information."

"Read an encyclopedia."

"I talked to one last night," I said wryly. "It didn't help."

"Life is full of disappointments."

"Just show me what you showed the Gromite."

"It's been atomized."

"I don't believe you. Let me take a look and I'm out of here."

She finally looked up at me. "Go, stay, what you do doesn't interest me."

I decided to take a different tack. "The games are crooked, and the carnies have broken maybe thirty laws already tonight," I said. "I could tell the authorities."

She actually smiled. "Go ahead. Do you think you can pay them more than we already did?"

I smiled back. "Okay, lady, you win this round. But I'm going to find the young man I'm looking for."

"Maybe you will, maybe you won't, but you're not going to do it with my help." She went back to staring at her computer's array of images, and I finally left the office.

I went up and down the rows of games and attractions again, trying to spot a tall nineteen-year-old who looked anything like the holo of Andy Vanderwycke, but with no luck. I went through the lighting booth, the prop room, the performers' cafeteria, all the backstage rooms, got a pleasant eyeful in the ladies' dressing room, but couldn't see any sign of the kid.

It was driving me crazy. He had to be there. Crunchtime had as much as admitted it. So had the alien in the burrow. So had the lady with the computer. It wasn't that damned big a carnival -- so why couldn't I spot him?

It was time for the next show, and I went back into the main auditorium, trying to figure out what I was overlooking. The crowd began getting restless, and the clowns came out to amuse them again -- and suddenly I knew where Andy Vanderwycke was hiding. I watched the whole damned show again, then walked out the performers' exit. Crunchtime went past me and seemed surprised that I didn't stop him to ask more questions. I stepped aside as the dinosaur lumbered past, smiled at a couple of good-looking

girls in tights, and finally the person I was waiting for appeared.

"Hi, Andy," I said.

He stopped cold and stared at me.

"Nice disguise," I said.

He took off his red bulbous nose and green fright wig. "I thought so until now."

"Really, it is," I said. "Who'd ever look twice at Bonzo the Clown?"

"How did you spot me?" he asked.

"Mostly it was a process of elimination."

I handed him my card.

"What happens now?" said Andy. "You're not going to kill me in front of all these people. And if I yell for help, my friends will tear you apart no matter what you do to me."

"I'm not here to kill you," I said, surprised. "I was hired to take you back to Odysseus."

"Same thing," he said.

"Your mother's very worried about you."

He smiled ruefully. "I'll just bet she is."

"One way or another you're coming back to Odysseus," I said, "so why not do it peacefully?"

"Oh, I'll go back to Odysseus," he replied. "But I'm not ready yet."

It was the same thing Crunchtime had said, and I offered the same response. "Ready for what?"

He stared long and hard at me, as if trying to make up his mind. Finally he shrugged. "What the hell. I might as well tell you. If you're lying and you're here to kill me, you're going to do it anyway. If you're telling the truth, maybe what I say will make a difference -- though my guess is that my mother paid you so much that it won't matter."

"You talk, I'll listen."

"Let's find Crozchziim first," said Andy.

"What do you need him for?"

"We're due to leave the planet in a couple of hours, and he knows the ticket codes."

So now I knew what the girl had shown Crunchtime -- the codes he'd need to get them aboard the ship.

"Forget it," I said. "Your pal can come or go as he pleases, but you're not running away."

"I'm not running away," he said. "I'm running to something."

"To what?"

"When we find Crozchziim." He paused. "He can corroborate everything I'm going to tell you."

We walked to Crunchtime's dressing room. Andy was about to enter it when I grabbed his arm.

"Have someone else tell him to come out," I said. "You're staying with me."

He spoke to a Canphorite who was walking by. The Canphorite entered the room, and a moment later Crunchtime emerged.

"So you found him," he said tonelessly.

"Yeah, I found him," I answered. "I told you I would."

"And this time you will kill him."

"This time?" I repeated, confused. "What are you talking about?"

"It is time to drop all the pretenses, Mr. Masters -- if that is your real name," said Crunchtime. "You have been stalking Andy for six days. You came close to killing him on Brookmandor II. Now you have changed your tactics and are impersonating a detective, trying to enlist the help of others, but you are still a killer."

"I'm a detective," I said firmly. "I work out of Odysseus, and I was hired five days ago by Beatrice Vanderwycke. The first time I ever saw you or Andy was when I arrived on Aristides yesterday. If someone's stalking the kid, it isn't me."

They exchanged looks, and finally Andy spoke up. "All right, Mr. Masters. I believe you. Now let's go somewhere private and see if you can return the favor."

"Lead the way," I said. "And don't run."

He led me to a deserted office. "Benzagari's working out of this room while we're here. He's checking the take on the midway, and then he's got to pay off the police, so he won't be back for at least half an hour."

I sat down on a sofa. "All right, I'm listening," I said. Andy sat on the edge of a desk, and Crunchtime, who wasn't built to fit in or on any human furniture, stood near Andy. "Start with why I shouldn't believe you bought passage off Aristides tonight expressly to get away from me."

"Because it's true," he said. "I have to go to Port Samarkand."

"Never heard of it."

"It's about seventy light-years from here."

"What's on Port Samarkand?"

"Duristan."

"What's Duristan?" I said.

"Duristan is a who, not a what ... and my life depends on my reaching him."

I looked from one to the other. "Keep talking."

"What, exactly, did my mother tell you about me?"

"That you ran away and she wants you back."

"What did she say about me?" he repeated. "You can tell me. I won't take offense."

"That you were emotionally unstable and had been in therapy. I saw your father too. He confirmed that you've been troubled since you were a child."

"He's right," said Andy. "Something happened when I was six, something that made me lose almost a whole year of my life. They tell me I was catatonic and it took them almost a year to snap me out of it. Did he tell you that?"

"Yes, he did."

He stared at me for a moment. "Did he tell you anything about my mother?"

"He doesn't think too much of her."

"You're being coy, Mr. Masters, and we have no time for that. My ship leaves in an hour, and I have to be on it. What did he tell you about her?"

"He said she was an extremely dangerous woman."

"He's right." He paused. "I'm legally of age, Mr. Masters. I've been living on Crozchziim's savings until I got my first paycheck two nights ago. I didn't take a single credit with me when I left, and I've asked nothing of her, indeed had no contact with her, since then. Why do you think she wants me back?"

"Why should I play guessing games when you're going to tell me?" I said.

"During the two months before I left home I had increasingly violent nightmares," said Andy. "Terrible images of blood and carnage."

"Lots of people do," I said, though most of my dreams were about ripe naked women I was never going to have and bill collectors I was never going to avoid.

"This was different. It was the same dream every night. I couldn't make out exactly what was happening, but it was terrifying." He paused. "Do you know what I think?"

"Probably, but why don't you tell me anyway?"

"I think she did something when I was six years old, something I wasn't supposed to see, something so terrible that after I saw it I couldn't face the truth of it and became catatonic for a year. When I came back to my senses, I couldn't remember anything. I still can't." He paused. "I don't know if this recurring nightmare is what I saw when I was six, trying to burst into my consciousness -- but she thinks it is. When I mentioned that I kept having this dream night after night, things began happening. I got what seemed like ptomaine poisoning from spoiled food -- but she ate the same meal and was fine. I found a pill that didn't belong among my prescriptions. And every day she would ask about my dreams. I knew if I stayed there she'd find a way to kill me, so I took off."

"I had remained in Mrs. Vanderwycke's service only because of Andy," added Crunchtime, "and when he explained the situation, I agreed that he could not remain on Odysseus. As it is, there has already been an attempt on his life on Brookmandor II, just before we joined the carnival."

"It's not that hard to spot a tall skinny kid and a Gromite traveling together," I said. "I came in cold, and it only took me two days, even with his make-up. What ever gave you the idea that you could hide out in a carnival? Hell, you didn't even change your name, and Hatchet Ben Jeffries knew you'd been a juggler."

"Benzagari is an old friend," replied Crunchtime. "And we had to perform here to get our _bona fides_ before traveling to Port Samarkand."

"You were making sense right up until now," I said.

"We must make contact with Duristan."

"This is where I came in," I said. "Who is Duristan?"

"He's a Rabolian," said Andy.

I frowned. "I know something about Rabolians, but I'll be damned if I can remember what it is."

"They're mentalists."

"That's right," I said, as it suddenly came back to me. "They're one of the few telepathic races."

"They're more than telepaths," said Andy. "A telepath can just read what I'm thinking. A true mentalist, a Rabolian, can dig out things I didn't even know were in my mind."

"And you think he's going to be able to tell you what you saw?"

"That's right."

"Then what?"

"It'll be my insurance policy. I'll write up the details, swear to it, store it in half a dozen locations, and let her know that if anything happens to me it'll be made public." He paused. "You look dubious, Mr. Masters."

"Call me Jake. And I _am_ dubious."

"You think I'm lying to you, Jake?"

"Nobody could think up a lie like that," I said. "No, I believe you."

"Well, then?"

"Maybe your mother had nothing to do with what you saw. Maybe you went a little haywire and dissected your pet puppy. Maybe you saw a couple of kids making whoopee and were scared by all the forbidden activity and noise. There are aliens whose appearance would give anyone nightmares; maybe you bumped into one. Or maybe it was something else."

"It was her!" he snapped. "Why else would she be trying to kill me?"

"I don't know that she is trying to kill you," I said. "But even if you're right, are you sure you want to go through with this? When we bury things so deep it takes a Rabolian to dig them out, they're probably better left alone."

"I've got to do it. It's the only way I'll ever get her to leave me alone. And..."

"And?"

"I've got to know."

"Okay, I've got another question. Why are you pretending to be carnies?"

"Duristan works for a carnival," explained Crunchtime. "Mrs. Vanderwycke is no fool. She knows Andy's best defense against her is the knowledge of what he saw all those years ago, and she knows that the most likely person to unlock that information is a Rabolian."

"All I've heard so far is that Duristan works for a carnival," I said. "Why not just walk up and pay him to do whatever it is that he does?"

"When someone tried to kill Andy on Brookmandor II, we decided that he couldn't continue to travel without a disguise, and I imposed upon an old friendship with a fellow Gromite to get us jobs here. Andy never takes off his clown make-up, not in public, not backstage. We felt that we would attract no undue attention if we went to Port Samarkand as performers."

I sighed deeply. One of the problems with novices in any line of work is that the ideas they think are new and unique are usually old enough to have long white whiskers.

"So where do you stand, Mr. Masters?" asked Andy. "Are you going to stop us?"

"Jake," I corrected him. "And I'm thinking about it."

"Think fast. We're running out of time."

"I'll make you a deal," I said at last.

"What kind of deal?" asked Andy suspiciously.

"I'll go with you to Port Samarkand," I said. "If this whole thing is a false alarm and you don't know anything that would make your mother want to kill you, you agree to come back to Odysseus with me. I don't give a damn if you just walk in the door, say 'Hi, Mom,' and walk right back out. I'm being paid to take you back, not to make sure that you stay."

"And if I do know something?"

"We'll play it by ear," I said. "No promises. That's my deal. Take it, or we go back to Odysseus on the next ship bound for Iliad system."

Andy looked at Crunchtime, as if expecting the Gromite to say something, but the alien kept his mouth shut, and finally the kid nodded his agreement.

"Okay, Jake, you've got a deal. Now let's get the hell out of here."

The three of us took an express aircar to the spaceport. Crunchtime had boarding codes for both of them, so they boarded immediately. I had to buy my passage, but the flight was half empty and since we were late, they let me board and pay the robot host once we'd taken off.

Crunchtime had to sit in the alien section, so Andy and I sat together toward the front of the ship. The kid was still in his clown make-up, which attracted some stares. One guy wasn't laughing, just staring, and I thought I'd seen him before.

I nudged Andy with an elbow.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Don't make a production of it, but take a look at the guy across the aisle, maybe three rows back. He's wearing a brown tunic, and he's got a scar on his chin. Tell me if you recognize him."

"Yes," he said a moment later. "He was at the carnival every night."

"Is he the guy who tried to kill you on Brookmandor II?"

"I don't know. It was dark, and he was too far away."

"But he was definitely hanging around the carry?"

"Yes." He looked nervous. "What do we do about him?"

"Nothing -- yet."

"Are you going to wait until he shoots me?" demanded Andy.

"He has every right to be on the ship," I said. "At least now I know what he looks like, so I can spot him on Port Samarkand."

"What if he shoots me right at the spaceport? I mean, you're carrying a gun, so why shouldn't he have one too?"

"My gun is sealed," I explained. "And it'll stay that way until they automatically deactivate the seal as we leave the Port Samarkand spaceport. That's the rules, kid. The only thing I can use it for is a club. If he's got one, it's in the same condition. Besides, no one's going to try to kill you at a spaceport. They've got more security there than anywhere else on the planet."

"I hope you're right," he said dubiously.

"I am," I said. And added silently: *_I hope._*

We braked to sub-light speeds four hours into the voyage, and touched down on Port Samarkand a few minutes later. Before we left the ship we got the usual information about atmospheric content, climate, gravity, time zones, the whole deal. Humans sit at the front and exit first, and once we got off we waited at Customs for Crunchtime to catch up with us.

"Maybe I'd better go wash this make-up off before I pass through Customs," suggested Andy.

"Why bother?" I asked. "Your passport says you're an entertainer. Nobody will stop you. If the clerk asks, just say you're late for a performance."

"It'll never work," he said, but of course it did. Nobody questioned him, and we passed through Customs without any problems.

We stopped at an information computer to find out where Duristan's carnival was playing, but even before I posed the question I saw the guy in the brown tunic head off for the men's room.

"You take care of this," I said to Andy. "I'll be back in a minute."

The guy was standing in front of a sink when I got there.

"Warm," he muttered, and warm water poured out. "Soap." When he was done he said "Dry," and a burst of warm air blew across his hands. He saw me in the mirror, but didn't even bother to turn and face me while he was drying his hands.

"I figured we'd talk sooner or later, Mr. Masters," he said.

"How do you know my name?"

"My employer told me you'd be traveling with the kid."

"So she's paying you to kill him while I take the fall?" I said.

"Be a little more discreet, Mr. Masters," he said easily. "There are security monitors everywhere." Suddenly he smiled. "And I work for him, not her."

"Him?" I repeated.

"The father," he said, making sure he didn't mention Ben Jeffries' name aloud. "I'm here to make sure nothing happens to his son."

"Then that wasn't you on Brookmandor?"

"Not the way you think."

"I don't follow you."

"I was on Brookmandor, but I didn't try to kill him. The only reason he made it to Aristides is because I -- he remembered the camera -- "_hindered_" the man who was after him."

My guess was that he hindered him right into the morgue.

"So the kid's father is paying you to be his guardian angel," I said. "He offered the same job to me." I frowned. "Why? He doesn't even like him."

"There's an outstanding warrant for my employer on Odysseus," said the man.

"Yeah, I know. For murder."

"That's right." He paused. "He's committed a lot of crimes, including his share of murders -- but that wasn't one of them. He wants to go back to Odysseus, but he can't set foot on the planet while that warrant's in effect. If this Rabolian can unlock information that the mother did it, they'll drop the warrant."

"What's on Odysseus that's so important?"

"I don't know and I don't care. Maybe it's loot he hid there twenty years ago, maybe it's something else. My job is just to make sure no harm comes to the kid until he reaches this Rabolian telepath." He paused again. "I'm glad we're on the same side. I wasn't sure when you showed up. I was afraid you were going to take him back, and then I'd have had to kill you." He didn't choose his words for the security monitors this time; they don't arrest you for what you might have done under other circumstances.

He could have sounded aggressive or arrogant, but he said it so matter-of-factly that I realized killing me would have been nothing personal. It was just business to him. He didn't care whether I lived or died, he didn't care what reason Jeffries had for wanting to return to Odysseus, he probably didn't care what was buried in Andy's memory. He just did his job and never got involved. Hard to like a guy like that, but equally hard to hate him. He was just another fact of Nature, like a refreshing breeze that might or might not turn into a hurricane. You may get out of its way, but there's no sense getting mad at it.

"Okay, we're allies, at least for the time being," I said. "You got a name?"

"Lots of 'em."

"None of which you want to share?"

"What purpose would it serve?"

And that way no one could beat it out of me.

"I've got to call you something. How's Boris?"

"As good as any other."

We had nothing further to say, so Boris went back into the main lobby of the spaceport. I waited another couple of minutes, then followed him. I didn't want anyone to see us together. I couldn't hide the fact that I was traveling with Andy, but if anyone was watching us, I didn't want them to know Boris was part of the team.

"We found Duristan," said Andy as I walked up to him and Crunchtime. "He's about ten minutes from here." He sneaked a look at Boris. "Did you find out who he is?"

"Don't worry about him," I said. "He's on our side."

"What!" It was more an exclamation than a question.

"He works for your father," I answered. "He's the guy who saved your ass back on Brookmandor."

I thought the kid was going to walk over and thank him, so I grabbed his arm. "Just ignore him," I said. "He'll be a lot more effective if it doesn't look like we all know each other."

The three of us walked to an aircar and told it to take us to the carnival where Duristan was working. As we glided a foot or two above the ground, I turned to Andy.

"I'm going to get out maybe 400 yards from the carny and walk the rest of the way," I told him.

"Why?"

"You're supposed to be a clown and a juggler, remember? What am I -- your agent?"

"I hadn't thought of that," he admitted. "We'll apply for the jobs, and then -- "

"Why bother?" I said. "You've seen how fast acts come and go at these shows. Just walk around like you belong. If anyone stops you, then play dumb and say you're looking for work."

"That makes sense," he agreed.

"All right," I said. "I'll find out where Duristan hangs out when he's not performing and meet you there."

"Okay," he said as the carnival came into view and I ordered the aircar to stop.

"Remember," I said as I climbed out. "If you see Boris -- that's your father's man -- don't stare at him or try to talk to him."

Then I was on the street and the aircar shot ahead. I walked up to the ticket booth, paid for my admission with cash in case my name had shown up on any computers, and entered the show.

Duristan didn't figure to be in the main arena -- everyone knew that Rabolians were telepaths, and most people didn't want Duristan or any other Rabolian having a little fun at their expense by revealing some of their more embarrassing secrets to the audience. He figured to set up shop as a fortune teller or

something similar, so I went to the rows of games and exhibits, looking for him.

He was there all right, sitting all alone in a glittering turban and a satin robe covered with the symbols of the zodiac. That outfit would have looked mildly silly on a human; it looked positively ludicrous on a tripod Rabolian that was as wide as he was tall.

There was no sign of Andy and Crunchtime, so I went to the next booth, picked up a toy pulse gun, and began shooting at images of alien predators that seemed to be leaping through the air at me. I hit the first two. When I missed the third the creature smiled and informed me in exquisite Terran that I was lunch, and once he digested me -- it would take about three seconds -- I could play again for another twenty credits. I decided not to.

I killed a little more time walking up and down the rows of games -- they looked exactly like the games I'd seen on Aristides and in every other carnival I'd ever been to -- and then headed back toward Duristan's booth. I saw Andy and Crunchtime approaching it, and then I heard Boris yell "Duck!"

The flare from a pulse gun nailed Andy in the right shoulder and spun him around. Boris jumped into sight, screecher in hand, and fired a blast of solid sound at the man with the pulse gun. He dropped like a rock, but then Boris fell backward, a black smoking hole in his belly. I spotted the guy who'd done it and downed him with my laser pistol. Then I raced up to Andy, who had dropped to one knee.

"Are you okay, kid?" I asked.

He nodded, and I went over to Boris. One look and I knew he wasn't going to make it to the hospital.

"Did I get him?" he whispered as I kneeled down beside him.

"You got one of them. I got another. How many were there?"

"Only two, I hope," he said with a weak grin. "I never saw the second one."

"I'll tell Jeffries what happened. If you have any family, does he know how to contact them?"

"No family," Boris grated. His hand reached up and clawed my shoulder. "You're his guardian angel now," he said, and died.

I walked back to Andy and helped him to his feet. "Can you stand on your own?" I asked.

He didn't answer. At first I thought he was too weak, or had lost too much blood. Then I saw him staring at something, and I followed his gaze.

Duristan had fallen out of his booth and lay sprawled on the ground, dead. A wild shot from the pulse gun had taken the top of his head off.

"Shit!" I muttered. "Come on, let's get you out of here."

But the local security team had shown up by then, and held us until we could be turned over to the police. The police surgeon treated Andy's wound and gave him something for the pain.

They kept us most of the night, but the few people who'd been on the scene verified our stories and they finally let us go about six hours later. They'd probably have kept me until the inquest, but there were so many warrants out for the two dead men that they figured I'd done them a favor.

"What now?" asked Andy as we walked out of the station. "Are you taking me back?"

"Eventually," I replied. "Let me get to a subspace radio first."

We found one in a local hotel, and I contacted Jeffries back on Corvus II. I told him what had happened and that Boris was dead, then waited about three minutes for him to receive the message and for his reply to get back to me.

"Where are you going next?" he asked.

"I'm being paid to return him to Odysseus, and that's what I plan to do," I said. "But if you'll pay our passage, we'll stop at Rabol on the way." I'd have paid it if he said no, but I didn't see any reason to tell him that.

"It's a deal. By the time you get to the spaceport the tickets will be waiting for you."

"There are three of us," I said. "Don't forget the Gromite."

"Right."

He broke the connection, I told Andy and Crunchtime what he'd said, and we had the hotel summon an aircar.

The spaceport wasn't crowded, but every face looked like a potential assassin. I went to the men's room with Andy while he removed his make-up -- there was no sense pretending to be a clown any longer -- and then we went to the waiting area. Crunchtime was already sitting in the aliens' section when we got there.

A pretty young redhead in a spaceport uniform walked up to the passengers, asking each if they wanted anything to drink while they waited to board the ship. Andy asked for a local fruit drink, and I requested a cup of coffee. She returned a few minutes later, passing out drinks and pocketing payments and tips. Finally she approached Andy and me.

"Your drinks," she announced, handing us each what we had ordered.

"Thank you," I said. I grabbed her wrist as she turned to go. "Andy, don't touch it."

I could see puzzlement in his eyes and fear in hers.

"Whatever they paid you for this, it wasn't enough," I told her. "Who hired you?"

"Please!" she said. "You're hurting me!"

"I'll do a lot more than hurt you if I don't get an answer."

"Security will be here any second!"

"Then Andy will give them his drink, they'll analyze it, and you'll be about 75 years old before you see the outside of a prison again," I said. "Now, who are you working for?"

"I don't know! It was a man I'd never seen before! He said it was a joke -- that it would get the young man drunk and acting silly! I swear it!"

"What was his name?"

"I don't know! I never saw him before! He gave me fifty credits. It was a joke!"

The speaker system announced that our ship was ready for boarding.

"I'm going to let you go," I said. "Just walk away like nothing's happened. We're taking the drink onboard with us. You say a word to anyone, we give the drink to the police and tell them where we got it. Do you understand me?"

She nodded her head and I let her go. She walked away as fast as she could without breaking into a run, and was soon out of sight.

"How did you know?" whispered Andy, his eyes wide.

"She collected money from every other customer before she gave them their drinks, but she was so anxious for you to down yours that she never asked us to pay her."

"That's an awfully little thing to go on," he said.

"Wait for big things in this business and you don't live too long." I stood up. "Let's get on the ship."

I took the drink from him as he stood up. We passed a row of potted plants on the way to the hatch, and I dumped the contents into the last of them.

"That was our evidence!" he said.

"Do you want to go to Rabol, or do you want to stick around and press charges?" I asked. "Besides, they won't let you take an opened drink onto a ship. The jump to light speeds does strange things to it, even in a pressurized cabin. If she really worked here, she'd have known I was bluffing."

As we took our seats, he still looked disturbed. "Maybe we should have stuck around long enough to see her put in jail."

"She's just a dupe," I said. "And don't forget -- there's still someone on Aristides who wants you dead."

"Maybe she lied," he persisted. "Maybe she knew it was poison. Maybe she poisoned it herself."

"I doubt it, but even if you're right we've seen the last of her. She knows we can identify her."

"But -- "

"Look, kid," I said firmly, "I'm not a cop anymore. I'm being paid to get you home in one piece, not to put all the bad guys in jail."

He finally shut up. The trip was uneventful -- almost all trips are uneventful these days -- and we touched down on Rabol sixteen hours later.

The air was thin, the sun was so far away that it seemed like twilight even though it was midday, and the gravity was 1.23 Standard, which meant that you felt like you were carrying a forty-pound back on your back.

There were a few humans in the spaceport, as well as some Mollutei and a tall, long-legged Domarian, but mostly there were hundreds of little round Rabolians scurrying all over the place.

As we approached the Customs booth, I pulled out my passport disk.

"Put it away, Jacob Masters," said the Rabolian working the booth. "Your passport is in order, but you have no business on Rabol. You will remain here while Andrew Vanderwycke is allowed to pass through

Customs. The Gromite Crozchziim will stay here with you."

"You got all that out of my mind in five seconds?" I said.

"Yes," he replied. "I apologize for not reading it faster, but I am being bombarded by thoughts from the Customs booths on each side of me."

"If you're that good, why don't you just tell Andy what he needs to know right now, and we'll get back on the ship before it can take off again."

"I would do irreparable harm to his mind if I were to probe as deeply as required," answered the Customs officer. "He must go to an expert who can extract the necessary information without damaging him."

"Who do I see?" asked Andy, who was standing behind me.

"I have already made the appointment," came the answer. "Please pass through, and you will find an escort waiting to take you there."

The kid did as he was told, and Crunchtime and I went to a waiting area. Since this wasn't a Democracy planet, humans and non-humans weren't segregated, and we sat down together.

"How long do you think this will take?" he asked.

"I don't know. But given how fast this guy read our minds, it could be just a few minutes." I looked back at the Customs official. "I'm surprised he was so polite."

"Why should that surprise you?"

"Because on a world of telepaths, why would anyone learn manners or white lies or any of the social graces when everyone knows exactly what you're really thinking?" I replied. "I'll bet it's probably just a courtesy for off-worlders. They probably insulted the first few, read their minds, and figured out what was required."

"Why would Duristan leave Rabol to take a job in a sideshow?" mused Crunchtime.

"Maybe Mrs. Duristan didn't like what he was thinking every time a pretty young Rabolian twitched by," I said. "Maybe he had an urge to cheat at poker. Maybe he just wondered what the rest of the galaxy looked like; after all, a traveling carnival sees an awful lot of it." I got to my feet. "Wait here."

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"To the subspace sending station."

When I got there I fed Beatrice Vanderwycke's code into the machine, and a couple of minutes later her holograph appeared before me. It kept trying to break up but somehow preserved its integrity.

"Mr. Masters," she said to my image. "You were supposed to report to me at regular intervals."

"Every fourth or fifth day," I said smoothly. "And here I am."

"I want a progress report."

"I've got him."

"Excellent. How soon can you have him here?"

"Five days, maybe four," I said. "It depends on what kind of connections I can make."

"Why so long?"

"It's very complicated. I'll explain when we get there."

"I'll see you then."

She broke the connection.

"He's in fine health," I said sardonically to the spot where her image had been. "I was sure you'd be concerned."

I returned to Crunchtime and sat down next to him.

"You'll be pleased to know that Mrs. Vanderwycke expressed no interest in you whatsoever," I said. "She never even mentioned your name."

"You contacted her?" he said, surprised.

"Just now."

"But she's been trying to have Andy killed!" he said. "Now she'll be prepared for him when he returns to Odysseus!"

"I told her we'd be there in four or five days," I explained. "After I checked the flight schedule. If Andy can get back here in the next hour, we can get on a ship to Pollux IV, transfer to one bound for the Iliad system, and be there in less than a day. If she's setting up a trap, she's going to be three days late."

"I see," he said, his eyes widening. "It's probably just as well that we remain isolated from the Rabolian population. If telepaths cannot lie, observing the way your brain works might drive them all mad."

"I assume that's a compliment," I said dryly.

He was silent for so long that I began wondering if it really was a compliment after all. Then he nudged me and pointed across the spaceport huge lobby. "Here he comes."

The kid was walking toward us, accompanied by a Rabolian, who left him at the entrance to the waiting area. Andy came over and sat down, his face an expressionless mask.

"How did it go?" I asked.

"It was an ... unusual ... experience," he said. "I hope I never undergo anything like it again."

"Did it hurt much?"

"Not the way you mean," he said. "I learned what I needed to learn." He shuddered. "I also learned things no one should have to know about themselves."

He refused to say any more about it, and we soon boarded the ship to the Pollux system. We had a four-hour layover there, and I realized I hadn't eaten since we'd left Aristides, so we stopped at a restaurant in the spaceport. They didn't mind that Crunchtime was with us, but the chairs couldn't accommodate him, so he waited outside. I wanted a big, thick steak, but when I saw the prices -- even

mutated cattle couldn't metabolize the stuff that passed for grass on Pollux IV, and all their beef was imported -- I settled for a soya substitute instead. I kept telling myself that it tasted just like grade-A prime beef, but my stomach knew I was lying. Andy just wanted water, and when they insisted that he had to order something if he was going to sit there, I told him to order a beer and I drank it when it arrived.

Then we waited for the boarding call, and finally clambered onto the ship that would take us back to Odysseus. After we'd been traveling for a couple of hours, I turned to Andy. A cartoon holo was running on his entertainment center, but he was staring through it, not at it.

"Are you going to be okay, kid?" I asked.

"Yes, I'm fine."

"We don't have to go right to your home," I continued. "We could go to the police first, maybe bring some of them along."

"We'll have all the back-up we need," said Andy. "You don't think my father is going to let anyone kill me before I prove he didn't commit that murder on Odysseus, do you?"

"No, I don't."

"I know he doesn't give a damn about me," he continued. "The only reason he wants me alive is to clear him so he can go back to Odysseus and pick up whatever he left behind from some robbery."

"How come he never asked you to get it and bring it to him?" I asked.

"He doesn't trust me," said the kid. "He doesn't trust anyone." He paused. "Before we touch down, I'll have my pocket computer prepare a cube proving that my father was innocent, that my mother committed the murder he's wanted for and a lot worse crimes as well. But -- "

"I know," I interrupted. "I won't turn it over to your dad until after you see your mother, or he won't have any reason to protect you."

He looked relieved that we were on the same page. "Right."

"How are you holding up, kid?" I asked him.

"I'm not afraid," he said calmly. "For the first time in my life, I'm not afraid of her. Besides," he added, "you saved my life at the carnival on Port Samarkand, and again at the spaceport. You'll save it on Odysseus if you have to."

I wanted to deny it, but I knew deep down he was right. Maybe I wasn't a cop any longer, but I still had an urge to see justice done. I'd do whatever I could to keep him alive, regardless of the risk. I began to really resent the guardian angel business.

He stopped talking, and I closed my eyes. I was just going to rest them for a moment, but the next thing I knew he was nudging me and telling me that we'd entered Odysseus' stratosphere.

"Here," he said, slipping a cube into my pocket. "I trust you to know when and how to use it."

"I appreciate your trust, but weren't you going to make half a dozen copies and ship them to various lock boxes around the Democracy?" I asked.

"I've been thinking about it," he said. "The information the cube contains is my insurance only while it's a

threat, something to hold over her. If someone actually releases it, she'll go to jail, but she's vindictive enough to put a hit out on me. One cube's as good as twenty to make her leave me alone, and it's probably safer for me."

"That's some family you got yourself, kid," I said.

"My father's not so bad," he replied.

Hatchet Ben Jeffries, extortionist and bank robber and murderer, Hatchet Ben who considered his son a useless weakling worth keeping alive only until he could get his hands on whatever he'd left behind on Odysseus, wasn't so bad compared to his mother. It made me understand why he didn't have any friends, why the only thing he trusted was an alien with an unpronounceable name.

The ship touched down in a few more minutes, and I turned to the kid as we got off. "We're not going to your mother's house," I said. "It's too dangerous."

"Why?" he replied. "She's not going to do a thing until she finds out what I know and who I've told."

"Just the same, I want to meet her on neutral ground. She may have ways of extracting the information in private."

"A restaurant?" he suggested.

I considered it. "No, too easy for her to pay off the owner, or plant her men at every nearby table." I looked at the big Welcome to Odysseus screen that greeted newcomers with a list of the day's major events. "Okay," I said, "there's a murderball game going on right now in the stadium. That's about two miles from here. I'll tell her to meet us outside the box office in" -- I checked the starting time -- "about an hour. The game figures to be over by then, and there'll be thousands of people streaming out."

"You really think I need this kind of protection?" he asked.

"Kid, I don't even know if this will be adequate, but it's better than going to your home."

"All right," he consented. "You're the boss -- at least, until I see her face-to-face."

I went to a vidphone booth and called Beatrice Vanderwycke. When she recognized me her image registered surprise.

"Mr. Masters," she said. "I hadn't expected to hear from you for three more days. Where are you?"

"At the Odysseus spaceport."

"Excellent! How soon can I expect you here?"

"There's been a change of plans," I said. "We're not coming to the house."

"I am paying you to find my son and deliver him to me, Mr. Masters. That was our agreement."

"I found him, and I'm going to deliver him," I replied. "But there was nothing in our agreement that stipulated I had to return him to your home."

"Where will you deliver him?"

"The box office at the murderball stadium, one hour from now," I said. "And Mrs. Vanderwycke?"

"Yes?"

"I want to be paid in cash."

She gave me a look that said she'd rather pay me in red-hot pokers. "I'll be there," she said, and broke the connection.

Since we had an hour, we began walking to the stadium. I stopped when we were about a quarter-mile away from it.

"What now?" asked Andy.

"No crowd," I pointed out. "The game hasn't let out yet. We'd be sitting ducks if we went there now."

We ducked into a coffee shop. They wouldn't serve Crunchtime at our table, but there was an alien section, and he sat there.

"I don't see anyone," said Andy, staring at the stadium through a window.

"Neither do I."

"You look disappointed."

"I am. Not surprised, just disappointed."

"Why to both?"

"I assume any men your mother hired are too good to be spotted, and I know your dad's got nothing but professionals on his payroll. So I'm not surprised that I can't find them -- but I wish I knew where they were. Your mother's muscle may not be here yet -- after all, she just found out we were on the planet forty-five minutes ago -- but I have to assume your father has had some men tailing us since we came through Customs. I just want to know where everyone is so I know when and where to duck."

"Maybe being in a crowd will scare them off," he said.

"Kid, the safest place to kill someone is in the middle of a crowd," I told him. "They'll give the cops a hundred different descriptions of you, and that's if they don't start accusing each other first."

"I never thought of that."

"You never had to. And the best way to kill someone in a crowd or anywhere else is to crack his head open with a blunt instrument. Not much ballistics can do with a club or a hammer."

"So much for all those locked-room mysteries I used to watch," he said with a smile.

"They're good entertainment," I said. "But mighty few murders are committed by left-handed tightrope-walking midgets. They're committed by professionals who do it for a living and know all the angles."

Suddenly we could hear a huge roar, and then, about a minute later, the first people began leaving the stadium. Soon there were more and more, a veritable flood of Men and aliens.

"Okay," I said, getting to my feet. "Let me make a pit stop and then we'll go."

I entered the men's room, pulled Andy's cube out of my pocket, and hid it inside a ventilation shaft where

the wall joined the ceiling. If Beatrice Vanderwycke's men got the drop on me, they weren't going to find it when they frisked me.

I returned to the table, left some money on it, told Andy to get up, and signaled Crunchtime to join us. The three of us left the restaurant and approached the stadium. Making any progress against all those people who were in such a hurry to get home was like swimming upstream against a raging river, but we finally made it.

"I don't see her," said Andy as he stood in front of a ticket booth.

"She'll be here," I said with absolute certainty.

"Maybe she can't see us where we're standing," he said.

"Then she'll find us. Stay right where you are, with your back against the booth. If anything's going to happen, let's make sure it happens in front of us."

And then, suddenly, she was there. I never saw her approaching us, but she was standing maybe six feet away, staring coldly at the kid.

"You've put me to a lot of trouble, Andrew," she said.

"You put me to more," he answered. "Years and years of it." His voice quavered just a bit. He was still scared of her, but he wasn't going to back off. I was proud of him. "But it's over now," he continued. "My nightmares are gone" -- he forced a smile -- "and yours are about to begin."

"I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about, Andrew," she said. "You're back, and that's all that matters. Your room is ready for you. Let's go home."

The crowd was getting thicker. It was difficult to hear over the noise. A man in a gray outfit jostled against me and apologized.

"It won't work, Mother," he said. "I _know_."

"What do you think you know?" she asked, her face reflecting her contempt for him.

"I know who you killed, I know how you made it look like Father did it, I know where you hid the body, and I know that even after all these years there's enough DNA evidence to convict you."

"That's a very dangerous thing to say, even to a loving mother," replied Beatrice Vanderwycke.

"Are you threatening me, Mother?" said Andy. "Because if you are, you should know that if anything happens to me, Jake will turn everything over to the police."

She caught it instantly.

You damned fool! I thought. _You just told her that you and I are the only ones with the proof!_

She turned to the man in the gray outfit, who was still standing near us.

"Kill them," she said calmly.

He pulled a pulse gun, but before he could fire it a laser beam caught him in the chest and hurled him backward. I looked around. It was the small guy from Jeffries' house. Before I could nod a thanks he keeled over, and suddenly there was a small firefight going on between her men and Jeffries' men.

People in the crowd started screaming and running. A couple of kids got knocked down, and one got trampled pretty badly. So did an old man. There was confusion everywhere -- and suddenly there was a small screecher in her hand, and it was aimed at me.

"No!" cried Andy. He dove for the weapon, but she was already pushing the firing mechanism, and he got the full force of the solid sound on his left temple.

He dropped like a brick, and she turned to fire at me, but I had my burner out, and I put a black bubbling hole right between her cold hate-filled eyes.

The instant Andy and his mother fell to the ground the firefight stopped. No matter which side they were on, they seemed to know that everything was over. If they worked for Jeffries, they'd failed to save his son, and if they worked for Beatrice Vanderwycke, they hadn't been able to protect her.

Andy twitched feebly, and I knelt down next to him.

"Crunchtime, he's alive!" I yelled. "Get some help!"

There was no answer. I turned to look for him, and saw the Gromite lying on the ground in a pool of pink blood. He'd stopped a shot that was meant for mother or son, it no longer mattered which.

The police showed up a few minutes later. They raced Andy off to the hospital, and I spent the next four hours telling my story over and over again. Finally enough eyewitnesses testified that I'd shot Beatrice Vanderwycke in self-defense that they had to let me go.

I rushed to the hospital to see how the kid was doing. He was in surgery, and six hours later they guided the airsled out. It was two days before he woke up, and he wasn't the same Andy Vanderwycke I'd been traveling with. His eyes were dull, his face expressionless, and he didn't speak.

I asked his doctor how long it would be before he recovered.

"He took the full force of a sonic pistol in his head at a range of perhaps two feet," said the doctor. "It's burned out half his neural circuits."

"When will he be himself again?"

"Quite possibly never."

"He's just going to lie there and stare for the rest of his life?" I asked.

"In time he'll respond to his name, and be able to locomote and feed himself. Eventually he'll comprehend about thirty words. There's always a chance that he'll recover, of course, but the odds are not in favor of it. You have to understand, Mr. Masters -- he's lucky to be alive."

I stared at the kid. "I wouldn't call this luck," I said bitterly.

I had one last stop to make, one loose end to take care of. I went to the coffee shop by the stadium, waited until the men's room was empty, and made sure the cube was still there. I had every intention of turning it over to Ben Jeffies, but first I wanted to make sure Andy would be taken care of once he got his hands on it.

I caught the next ship to the Corvus system, and a few hours later they passed me through the security checkpoints on the Jeffries estate and ushered me into the mansion.

I cooled my heels for a few minutes in a library that was filled with unread books and unwatched cubes,

and then was summoned to the study. Jeffries, all steel and gray, was waiting for me.

"I heard you had some trouble on Odysseus," he said. "I lost three men there."

"Yeah, it got messy." I paused. "I'm afraid I've got some bad news for you."

"You don't have what I need?"

I blinked. "I'm talking about your son. He took a shot meant for me. There's every likelihood that he's going to be a vegetable for the rest of his life."

"I don't give a shit about that!" he snapped. "I need to get that murder warrant quashed so I can get to Odysseus! Do you have any idea what he learned on Rabol?"

Your son of a bitch, I thought. _Your kid has been turned into a potted plant getting the proof you need, and all you care about is picking up some loot you left on Odysseus twenty years ago._

It was time, I decided, for the guardian angel to perform one last duty.

"He said he could prove that you were innocent of the murder on Odysseus," I said. "But he was shot before he could tell me the details or make any record of them."

"So I'll talk to him and find out."

I shook my head. "He won't know you or understand you. His neural circuits are blown."

"Is there any chance he'll come out of it?"

I shrugged. "Who knows? There's always a chance."

"All right, Jake," he said, pulling out a wad of bills. "I told you I'd pay you if Betty didn't. This will cover your time and expenses. Our business is done."

His men escorted me back to the spaceport and stayed with me until the ship took off. By the time I'd reached Odysseus Andy Vanderwycke had already been transferred to the most expensive, most exclusive facility on Deluros VIII.

That was three years ago. I haven't seen or spoken to the kid since they took him away. I stop by the coffee shop every few months to make sure the cube is still there. If the medical team on Deluros VIII can fix Andy, I'll turn it over to his father. And if not ... well, one of these days I'll take the kid on a little trip to Rabol and see if they can straighten out all the crooked wiring and fuse some loose connections. I'll also remind them that there are a couple of areas that are better left alone.

Who knows? Maybe one team or the other can pull it off. After all, aren't angels the harbingers of miracles?

-end-

Visit www.Fictionwise.com for information on additional titles by this and other authors.