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A Locked-Planet Mystery

by Mike Resnick

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He looked exactly like a purple beachball with legs. I've seen stranger, but not many.

He waddled into my office and stood there, swaying slightly as if waiting for someone to come over and bounce him.

"Mr. Masters?" he said.

I did a double-take at the sound of his voice. Almost all alien races use a t-pack that translates their native language into a cold, emotionless Terran, but this beachball had evidently learned Terran, and even two words into it I could detect not only a thick accent but also a sense of urgency.

"Yes?" I said, leaning my elbows on my desk, interlacing my fingers, and trying to look confident and impressive.

"I require your help, Mr. Masters," he said.

"That's what I'm here for," I replied, trying to make it sound like I said it a dozen times a week. "What can I do for you?"

"A murder has been committed on Graydawn."

"Graydawn?" I repeated. "I don't believe I've heard of it."

"It's in the Alpha Gillespie system," said my visitor.

"That's forty light years from here," I noted.

"Forty-two, to be exact."

"Okay, a murder's been committed on Graydawn," I said. "What has that got to do with me?"

"I just told you: I need your help."

"I'm a private investigator working on Odysseus," I said. "You need to talk to the Graydawn police force."

"There isn't one."

"On the whole damned planet?" I said, frowning.

"May I sit down?" he said. "I can see that this will require an explanation."

"By my guest," I said, wondering how he was going to fit into one of my office chairs.

He lowered himself gently to the floor. I couldn't see him over the desk, so I walked around and perched on the front of it.

"I suppose I should introduce myself first," he said. "My name is Mxwensll."

"I think I'll just call you Max, if it's all the same to you."

"That is acceptable," said Max. He paused, as if trying to order his thoughts. "I live on Alpha Gillespie III."

"Graydawn?" I asked.

"No. Graydawn is the seventh planet in our system."

"Okay, you're from Alpha Gillespie III. I assume you have a catchier name for it?"

"Yes, but that's not important," said Max. "The important thing is that there's been a murder on Graydawn."

"So you said."

"And I'm in charge of it."

"Why?" I asked. "You already said you don't live there."

"No one does."

"Then how could there be a murder there?"

He made sort of a face and snorted little blue puffs of vapor. "I'm not saying this well."

"Just calm down and try to put your thoughts in order," I said. "I'm going to pour myself a drink while you do." I paused and stared at him. "I don't suppose you ... ah ... ?"

"No, thank you. My metabolism cannot handle human stimulants."

I poured a short one into a plastic cup, then sat back down on the edge of the desk. "It might work better if I could ask you a few questions, Max," I suggested.

"Please do," he said gratefully.

"Let me make sure I've got this straight. For starters, is Graydawn inhabited?"

"Not exactly."

"Max, either it is or it isn't."

"It depends."

"Okay, so much for me asking questions. Maybe you should go back to explaining."

"Graydawn is an uninhabited chlorine world, by which I mean it possesses no native life forms. But at the chairman's request, the Braaglmich Cartel built a domed corporate retreat there about ten years ago."

"For oxygen breathers?"

"Yes." He shifted uncomfortably, and I couldn't tell if it was caused because he was sitting on the floor or by what he was about to tell me. "The chairman was about to retire. He had chosen his successor, and he invited the cartel's five vice presidents to the Cartel's Graydawn retreat to meet and become acquainted with their new chairman. Evidently everything went well for the first two days. On the morning of their third and final day there, the retiring chairman took them out beyond the dome to see some unique rock formations. While they were out in the chlorine atmosphere, he collapsed, seemingly from a heart attack or stroke, and was dead before they could carry him back into the dome." He stared at me. "Have you any questions yet?"

"Not yet," I told him.

"His health had been deteriorating, so it was not a surprise to his companions. For the past few years he has always had a doctor in attendance, and it seemed a mere formality for the doctor to examine him and determine the cause of death."

"Let me guess," I said. "It wasn't his heart or a stroke."

"How did you know?" asked Max.

"You wouldn't be here if it was."

He sighed. "It was death by asphyxiation. We assumed that there was a mechanical malfunction to the

protective suit he was wearing outside the dome..."

"You said 'we'," I interrupted him. "Could you explain that, please?"

"My world is the only inhabited planet in the system," said Max. "At least when no one is at the retreat on Graydown, so we are responsible for all the planets."

"Okay," I said. "They reported an unusual death to you and you went there to investigate. Then what?"

"Then we asked the vice presidents and the newly-anointed president to remain on the planet until we could certify that the suit's malfunction was accidental."

"Which you couldn't do?"

"It had been tampered with."

"No question about it?" I said.

"None." He made another face. "My world doesn't even have a police force. I am one of the Order Keepers, but crime is very rare among my race and homicide is all but unknown. We have not had a murder in 189 years, Mr. Masters, and that one had mitigating circumstances. We simply have no experience in dealing with this type of situation."

"What about the muscle?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"You said the new chairman and the five veeps were on the planet. Now, even I have heard of the Braaglmich Cartel. It's huge. You can't tell me that each of those executives didn't come equipped with his own security force."

"At the request of the retiring chairman, they remained in orbit during the meeting," answered Max. "Only the six principles were allowed to land. A private shuttle transported each of them from their ship to the surface. Then, once I was informed of the murder, I knew I had to lock down the crime scene preparatory to bringing in an expert such as yourself, so I ordered them to remain in orbit and not to land."

"It sounds like you've got your hands full," I said, trying my best to sound sympathetic. "But why seek me out? Why not just go to the Odysseus cops? I guarantee they know a little something about murder."

"That was the first place I went," answered Max. "But Alpha Gillespie is a neutral system, and your Democracy is at war with the Thrale Coalition."

"So?" I said, wondering what his point was.

"We trade with both sides, and the Coalition has threatened military action against us if we have dealings with any branch of the Democracy's government -- and they define the police as such. I explained my plight to the police, and they recommended you." He looked at me hopefully. "They said you used to work in their homicide division before you became an independent contractor."

"Yeah, I worked homicide, and vice, and robbery," I replied.

"So will you help us?" asked Max. "We will put ourselves at your disposal and do whatever you tell us."

"Not interested," I said.

"Is there a reason?"

"Lots of them," I replied. "First, I hate chlorine worlds. Second, one of my specialties is finding missing persons, which occasionally takes me into the Thrale Coalition's territory; I don't need them mad at me for helping you. Third, you don't know it yet, but all you really need is a good forensics team. With the equipment they've got these days, they'll take a microscopic bit of DNA or the alien equivalent, or maybe some trace elements taken from the crime scene, and ninety-nine times out of a hundred they'll identify the killer before the day's over."

"They work for the government," said Max glumly.

"Not all of them," I replied. "I'll give you some names."

"_You're_ what we want!" insisted Max, looking like he half-thought I might take a swing at him for his outburst but determined to get what he came for.

"I'm sorry," I said, "but I'm still not interested."

Max stood up, looking for all the world like he was getting ready to run, or at least duck, if I lost my temper. "We checked you out after the police recommended you," he said in an unsteady voice. "You are 13,407 credits in debt. If you will accept the assignment, we'll pay off all your debts _and_ give you four thousand credits more." He studied my face. "Are you getting interested?"

I did some quick mental math to see how soon they'd be throwing me out of my office and canceling my vidphone ad.

"Make it five thousand and you pay my own forensics expert and it's a deal."

"Done!" said Max.

I reached out to shake on it. He stared at my hand as if it might bite him, and then he reached out his own three-fingered hand. It trembled when I grabbed it, but he didn't pull it away.

* * * *

Max had been so certain he was going to hire _some_ human that he'd retro-fitted his ship with a pair of very comfortable human chairs and programmed his various computer systems to speak Terran.

We'd just taken off from Odysseus when the navigational computer announced that the trip would take seven hours if we made use of the MacNaughton Wormhole, or 183 hours without. Max insisted that I was in charge of all aspects of the investigation, including captaining the ship, so I told it to enter the wormhole, and get us to Alpha Gillespie VII as fast as possible. (Well, first I told it to get us to Graydawn, but like most unofficial names, it wasn't in the data bank.)

"All right, Max," I said, swiveling my chair and turning to him. "Time to fill me in."

"I thought I did."

I shook my head. "All you did was tell me what happened. Now I need some details. Who's alive, did anyone show up much earlier than the others, are they all oxygen breathers, do they have names?"

"Oh," he said. "I guess you need to know all that, don't you?"

"Well, there's always a chance the killer won't run up to me and confess the second I get there."

"That is sarcasm, is it not?" asked Max. "I mean, killers are not inclined to run up to policemen and confess, are they?"

"Wrong time of year," I said.

"But you don't know what time of year it is on Graydawn."

"That was more sarcasm, Max," I told him. "Give me the details, please."

"Yes, Mr. Masters."

"And call me Jake."

"Isn't that too informal?"

"I'm an informal kind of guy," I replied. "Now how about some details, Max? For starters, what exactly does the Braaglmich Cartel do? I know they make spaceships, and I know they own about a quarter of the Democracy's pharmaceutical industry, and I've seen their name a bunch of other places."

"They also dominate a number of retail industries, dealing in basic human needs -- soap, foodstuffs, things like that."

"They must do pretty well," I offered. "Not everyone needs a spaceship, but two trillion men and women need to eat and wash. Now tell me about the suspects."

"The five vice presidents are each in charge of the Cartel's operations in major areas of the galaxy: the Rim, the Inner Frontier, the Outer Frontier, the Democracy, and the Thrale Coalition."

"So one of them is a human and one is a Thrale?" I asked.

"Yes, Jake."

"And the other three?"

"They, plus the new chairman, are all members of the Gaborian race, which is native to Beta Sanchez IV." I didn't say anything, and he stared at me for a moment. "Don't you find it unusual that four of the six executives are Gaborians?"

"Only if the late chairman wasn't a Gaborian. People -- beings, make that -- tend to associate with their own kind. And to hire their own kind as well."

"He was a Gaborian," Max confirmed.

"Figures," I said. "And I assume that Beta Sanchez IV is neutral?"

"Yes, Jake."

"Okay, so which one's the new head honcho?" I asked.

"I beg your pardon."

"A vice president got elevated to the chairmanship. Which territory was his and who replaced him?"

"She was elevated over all five vice presidents, Jake."

"Sleeping with the chairman?"

"The chairman is dead."

I sighed. "Was she having an affair with him?"

"An affair?" he asked, frowning. "You mean a public celebration?"

"I mean did they indulge in a sexual liaison?"

"I have no idea," answered Max. "But I do know some things about Gaborians. They are not as neurotic about sex as humans. A sexual liaison would hardly constitute a killing offense."

"Would it constitute a reason for promotion?" I asked. "In other words, if the new chairman achieved her position through sexual rather than business skills..."

"I hadn't thought of that, Jake," admitted Max. "But it is an invalid premise. Her rise through the corporation has been meteoric, and justified by her record wherever she has been. She has been innovative, creative, and above all, wildly successful."

"Okay, it was an idea," I said. "Have any of these executives got names?"

"Certainly."

"Are they an official secret?"

"I thought I would wait to introduce you, and that way you could associate the name with the being."

"Max, we're going to be stuck on this ship for six more hours. If you haven't got six hours of details to give me, let me have their names."

"The Thrale is Toblinda, the human is Malcolm Shea, the three Gaborian vice presidents are Kchang, Ktee, and Kmorn, and the new chairman is Ktamborit."

"She's got extra syllables," I noted.

"I gather she just added them," replied Max. "She was Ktam, but her new position allowed her to add to her name."

"Strange custom," I said, ignoring our own custom of sharing surnames names after marriage. "How about the victim?"

"It gets confusing," said Max. "He was Kdineka, but now that he's dead and no longer in a position of power he's once again Kdin."

"And that's everyone who's on the planet?"

"No, there's also Kdin's physician."

"Another Gaborian, I presume?"

"Yes. His name is Bdale."

"With a B, not a K?" I asked.

"He's a doctor," said Max, as if that explained it.

"All right," I said. "So we've got seven suspects."

"I thought we had five."

"You think a doctor has never committed a murder?"

"Doctors _save_ people," said Max sincerely.

"Doctors are subject to the same greed and fear and lust and out-and-out stupidity that affects non-doctors."

"I see," said Max, who sounded like he didn't see at all. "But surely Ktamborit is not a suspect."

"She was there. He was killed. She's a suspect."

I'd never seen a beachball shrug before. "Well, that's why we hired you. We know nothing about murder and the motivations that would lead someone to such a heinous crime."

"Of course you do," I said. "You just haven't been asked to apply what you know."

Another shrug. "Probably you are right."

"Now tell me about the crime scene. Have you cordoned it off?"

"The crime scene?" he repeated in puzzled tones.

"The place where Kdin was killed."

"It will be of no use to you, Jake," said Max.

I grimaced. "You've walked all over it."

"Certainly not. But he collapsed and died almost six hundred meters beyond the dome. Visibility on Graydawn is extremely limited, and the winds whip across the surface at an average of 40 kilometers per hour, often double that at night. And he has been dead for almost three days. There will be nothing to discover there, Jake," he concluded apologetically.

"All right," I said. "There's a second crime scene."

"There is?" he asked, surprised.

"If we can't learn anything from where Kdin died, maybe we can learn something from where his protective suit was tampered with -- or at least, at the most likely place for it to have been tampered with."

"Ah! The area where they keep the protective suits!"

"Why are you smiling?" I asked.

"I left a team of Order Keepers on Graydawn, and I instructed one of them to guard the suits and let no one near them. I did something right!"

"I'm sure you've done a lot of things right," I said. "Keeping the muscle in orbit was probably the most important of them."

"Really?" Max's alien smile got bigger.

"One of these seven is a killer. Six of the seven employ armed bodyguards whose loyalty is more likely to be to them than the law. We don't need them bucking for promotion once we make an arrest."

"I knew it was a reasonable thing to do!" said Max, looking as proud of himself as an animated beachball can look.

"You're not stupid, you're just inexperienced," I said.

"Yes," he agreed. "I acknowledge the truth of that."

"Sometimes the quickest way to solve a crime is with a pair of fresh eyes that don't know what to look for, that bring a new perspective to the problem," I said. "Any time you have an idea, don't be afraid to come to me with it. I can use all the help I can get."

"I will, Jake." He extended his hand, and this time when I took it it wasn't trembling. "I've never had a partner before. This is going to be most exciting."

"If we both live through it," I said.

The trembling started again.

* * * *

We emerged from the wormhole and reached Graydawn an hour after that. The whole planet was shrouded in a chlorine fog that looked more green than gray. I didn't want to chance an instrument landing with no spaceport helping us out with coordinates, so I radioed the retreat and told them to send up the shuttle.

While we were waiting for it, our sensors spotted the other ships in orbit, and a thought occurred to me.

"Max," I said, "there aren't too many places a legitimate executive is going to find his muscle. Check and see if any of them ever worked homicide or forensics."

"I thought you'd contacted your forensic expert," he said.

"I did. But he'll be another day, and he won't show up here first anyway. I sent him to your world, where they've stashed the body and the suit. Who knows? There might be something here your people have missed. The sooner we look for it, the better."

"I'll get right on it," said the rotund alien.

He began contacting the ships, while I had the computer transfer all the information we had on the Cartel and its veeps to a small glowing cube that I put in a pocket. I had it make a second one, and handed it to Max. He looked up after a few minutes. "There are three former police officers," he announced. "But none of them ever worked homicide."

"Any telepaths?"

"No."

"Too bad," I said. "We could have used a mind-reader."

"I suppose we could send for one," offered Max.

I considered it, then shook my head. "No. There are only a handful of telepathic races in the galaxy, and

everyone knows what they look like."

"What difference does that make?" asked Max. "I mean, if I was a telepath, I would be able to read your thoughts whether you knew what I was or not."

I couldn't repress a smile. "I can tell you haven't had much crime on your world."

"I don't understand, Jake."

"Unless we can get a telepath who works for the cops, whose loyalty is unquestioned, he could look into the killer's mind and see a silent offer of five million credits to finger someone else -- after all, five million is probably just pin money to these six. Or he could see an image of himself being dismembered by the killer's muscle the second he leaves the planet if he tells what he knows." I shook my head. "No, if his integrity isn't already established, we can't take the chance."

"I think I chose the right person to head the investigation," said Max admiringly. "You don't trust anyone, do you?"

"That's probably why I've lived so long in this goddamned business." I lit a smokeless cigarette. It tasted sour -- the first few drags always do -- and looked around the ship. "Is there anything else we have to do before the shuttle arrives?"

Max uttered the code for the armory in his native tongue. The door irised and he reached in, found a pair of burners and a pair of screechers. They were made for alien hands, but I decided I could use them, and I took one of each, while he appropriated the other two.

"How about a pulse gun?" I asked.

He looked. "There aren't any."

"Five'll get you ten they were sold on the black market by an underpaid civil servant."

"No member of my race would do that," he assured me.

"You'd be surprised what members of any race will do when they get the chance," I said.

"I don't imagine we'll need all this firepower anyway," said Max. "I ordered my assistants to confiscate all the weapons in the retreat."

I just stared at him.

"All right," he said uneasily. "What did I miss, Jake?"

"This didn't start out as a murder investigation," I explained. "Everyone but the killer thought it was a heart attack or something similar. Your people took the body away for a quick autopsy and kept the six execs on Graydawn just as simple routine. No one knew until a couple of hours later that it was murder."

"Of course!" he said suddenly. "The killer knew what the medical examination would show, and he had plenty of time to hide a weapon!"

I nodded approvingly. "You're learning."

What passed for his chest puffed out until I thought he might explode. "Thank you, Jake." He stared at me thoughtfully. "Is there any way to codify the basic rules of your trade, some list I can refer to?"

"There's nothing official, but I'll give you some rules, and if you always keep them in mind, you should do okay."

"Fine!" he said eagerly. "What are they?"

"Rule Number One is that everyone lies; guilty or innocent makes no difference. Rule Number Two is that nothing is ever as simple as it seems. And Rule Number Three is that the odds are always against the killer."

"Why?"

"Most killers are new to murder. They've never done it before, and they tend to make beginner's mistakes. Homicide cops deal with murder every day of the year. It's old hat to them. They've seen it all, and they know how to spot those mistakes."

"But I don't."

"You'll learn," I said. "In the meantime, that's why you've got me along."

Max stared at me with a typically inscrutable alien expression. Finally he said, "Did anyone ever take a shot at you, Jake?"

"From time to time."

"No one ever shot at me," he said. "I don't know what I'd do if someone did."

"Relax," I said. "It'll probably never happen."

"But it's happened to you," he said nervously.

"It goes with the territory when you're private," I explained, trying to ease his fears. "No one cares if you kill a private eye, but kill a cop and they'll turn the galaxy inside out hunting you down. People think twice before they shoot a cop."

Max sighed, and little blue puffs of vapor shot out of his nostrils. "When I listen to you, I feel so overmatched."

"If I didn't think you'd pull your weight, I'd leave you on the ship," I said.

"Thank you, Jake," he replied. "You just told me that everyone lies, but it is a lie that I appreciate."

I was about to reply when the shuttle arrived, reached a long arm out to our hatch, and gave us a protected walkway so we didn't have to get into our spacesuits.

"Wow!" I exclaimed as we entered the shuttle. "Kdin knew how to treat his guests, didn't he?"

"It's quite impressive," said Max, surveying the chairs that could change shape to accommodate almost any race, the plush carpet, and the gleaming bar.

"I'll bet you he's got gold fixtures in the head," I said. "This is some shuttle. I've had apartments that were smaller, and I've seen five-star hotel lobbies that weren't as well appointed."

"Smooth, too," added Max. "You can barely feel the G's as it enters the stratosphere."

"I'll bet it's got so much protection that its nose doesn't even glow when we hit the atmosphere," I said.

"Excuse me," said a mechanical voice. "May I offer you a drink?"

"Not for me," I said. I hate drinking when a ship is decelerating. "How about you, Max?"

"What have you got?" Max asked the ship.

"I cannot identify your race," replied the ship. "Therefore, I do not know what to offer you. What is your planet of origin?"

"Bramanos," answered Max.

"I have no such planet listed in my data bank."

"Official name, Alpha Gillespie III," responded Max.

"I have no record of a sentient race in the Alpha Gillespie system," said the ship.

"Some programming!" snorted Max contemptuously. "You're in the Alpha Gillespie system right now! You ply your trade here."

"May I have a blood or saliva sample, please? That will help me to classify you."

"Forget it," said Max disgustedly.

"Bad choice of words," I said in amusement.

He gave me a puzzled look.

"You just ordered it to forget that there's a sentient race in the system."

"Let the next member of my race worry about it."

The shuttle offered us a series of holographic entertainments, and by the time we'd said No to each of its offerings we had touched down.

"Please wait," announced the shuttle. "I am making sure my bond with the dome's airlock is fully sealed." A pause. "It is now safe to leave me and enter the retreat."

"Thanks," I said, walking to the hatch.

Max fell into step behind me, and a moment later we entered the dome, walked past a trio of small outbuildings, and came to imposing structure that made the governor's mansion on Odysseus look like a cave.

* * * *

"Isn't it impressive?" asked Max, surveying our surroundings as we entered the building.

"I don't even like art, and I'm impressed."

"You don't like art?" he asked, as if no one had ever said that before.

"Well, except for naked women," I qualified.

We were standing in a long corridor with high ceilings. It was lined with exquisitely-framed paintings and holos, any one of which probably cost ten times more than I'll make in a lifetime. The plush carpet

seemed to be in motion, anticipating our steps and thickening itself before we put our feet down. And somehow you knew that no germ would dare to show its face (or whatever it is germs show) anywhere inside the retreat or any of the outbuildings inside the dome.

"So where are they?" I asked.

"I told my agents to have them all assembled in one of the main rooms," said Max. "I know you'll want to question each one individually, but I thought you might like to meet them all first, put names with faces, see if anything about any of them strikes you as strange."

"Good thinking, Max," I said, mostly to encourage him. "I assume there's a private room where I can question each of them?"

"There are 73 rooms," he answered. "Most of them will suit your needs." He shuffled his feet nervously, which made it look like he was about to fall over. "Could I ... may I observe while you question the suspects?"

"You're paying for it," I said. "You can do whatever you want."

"Thank you," he said gratefully. "I'm sure there is much I can learn from an experienced interrogator like yourself."

"Hell, we might even do a little good cop-bad cop," I added.

"That is not a term with which I am familiar," said Max.

I explained it to him, and if a beachball can look shocked, then that's what Max looked.

"Jake," he said, "we cannot intimidate the suspects. We are bound by ethical considerations and I am personally constrained by the tenets of my religion."

"What was the killer bound by?" I asked.

"We cannot pattern our behavior on that of a killer."

"You know why I quit the force and went private?" I said. "It's because I hated regulations and I hated regular hours and I hated having to salute my superiors, but mostly I quit because I hated treating criminals better than they treated their victims. If I have a credo, it's that showing any sympathy to a killer is an insult to his victim."

"Jake, five of the six people we will be questioning are not killers. We must treat them all with courtesy."

"You're making it harder to nail the Bad Guy," I said.

He was shaking like a leaf, but he wasn't going to back down. "Nevertheless," he said adamantly.

"Okay, it's your party," I said.

"Are you mad at me?"

"No," I said. "As a matter of fact, I envy you."

"You do?" said Max, surprised. "Why?"

"You haven't seen enough crimes to hate the criminals. Probably you never will." I figured I might as well be totally honest. "I also admire you."

It was unnerving to see a beachball do a double-take. "What for?"

"Because you're afraid of me, but even so you stick to your guns."

"My guns?"

"Figure of speech. Your principles. I admire that. Not many beings of any race are willing to meet their fears head-on and stare them down." I gave him a pat on what passed for his shoulder. "We're going to get along fine, Max."

He didn't say anything, but he positively glowed with pride. I got the distinct impression that either he'd never heard a compliment before, or else that his race was so damned polite that he heard them all the time and didn't believe any of them.

We soon reached the end of the corridor and found ourselves in a room that was probably smaller than a murderball field and may have had a few less windows than the Church of the Nine Worlds on Jefferson II. There was more artwork, of course; a stone fireplace wall some sixty feet wide that was a work of art in itself; furniture that read your race and size and instantly adjusted if you got within ten feet of it; and a dozen other luxuries that were beyond the experience of private eyes or almost anyone else. Five Gaborians, a Man and a Thrale were sitting in various chairs and couches. A dozen gleaming metallic robots were posted around the room, and I was sure there were robot chefs, robot maids, robot valets, and maybe even a robot bedmate or two; I assume that, like the ones I could see, they were all shaped like Gaborians.

Four members of Max's race, all armed, stood at the four corner of the room, probably at attention though with beachballs it's difficult to tell. A fifth approached us, held out a hand, palm up, Max waved his fist over it. I took it to be their equivalent of a salute, or maybe even a handshake.

"Have there been any problems?" asked Max.

"No." The voice came out dull and unaccented through a t-pack. "But they each keep asking when they can leave."

"I'll answer that," I said, stepping forward.

"Who are you?"

"Ask Max," I said, walking into the room. "May I have your attention, please?" I said, raising my voice.

All seven of the suspects turned to me.

"My name is Jake Masters. I am not an employee of any department of the Democracy. I am a free-lance investigator who has been hired to solve the murder of your late chairman. If you have any questions regarding my authority, check with my friend here," I said, gesturing to Max.

"Mr. Masters has been employed by the government of Alpha Gillespie to take charge of the investigation," he confirmed. "Jake, these are the executives of the Braaglmich Carter, and the late chairman's personal physician." He introduced each by name. The Thrale, tall, angular, and covered with brown fur, glared at me with open hostility, either because I was a man or because I was investigating a murder. Malcolm Shea was pudgy, nervous, and apprehensive. I couldn't tell the squat tripod Gaborians apart except for their clothing.

"I'm sure we'll all get to know each other better very shortly," I said when Max was finished. "I understand that some of you have asked how long your presence here will be required. The answer is simple enough: you will be free to leave when we have identified and arrested the killer."

The six executives leaped to their feet and began protesting, while the doctor sat where he was and looked bored. I was actually grateful that five of them wore t-packs; it cut down on the volume and the vitriol.

"Max," I said, "do I have the right to detain them?"

"For a reasonable period of time," he confirmed.

"Good," I said. I turned back to the executives. "How I define 'reasonable' will depend on the level of cooperation I receive. In the meantime, let me remind you that one of you is a murderer, and far from resenting our presence you should be grateful for it."

"What makes you think any of us are in any danger?" demanded Malcolm Shea, who was so overdressed and coiffed that he looked like he was planning to pose for a fashion holo.

"I can answer that," said Max. "Kdin had already named Ktamborit as his successor -- so we know this murder wasn't committed to create an opening at the top of the corporate ladder, an opening the killer might hope to fill. That was the most likely motive, and barring that, we not only do not know who the killer is, but why the murder was committed. And until we do know, you are all at risk."

"Nice answer," I whispered to him, then turned back to the execs. "I'll be questioning each of you individually. I see all of you except Mr. Shea are wearing t-packs. Even if you speak Terran, I want you to keep them on; I don't want anything anyone says or hears to be subject to misinterpretation. We'll start in a few minutes."

"Why not now?" demanded Ktamborit.

"Because there are other things I need to check first," I said. "Max, come back into the corridor with me. I need to consult with you." I turned to the agent who had approached us before. "Nobody leaves this room until I get back."

"But what if ... ?"

"If they have to answer a call of Nature, one of your people goes with them."

"Understood."

We left the room and walked down the corridor past dozens of priceless paintings, Max at my side, until I was sure we were out of earshot, then stopped.

"Where do they keep the protective suits?" I asked. "The ones you wear when you're going outside the dome?"

He described what sounded like a luxurious locker room -- actually a locker building -- right next to an airlock that led to the dome's exterior.

"Fine. Now, if the suit was tampered with, it wasn't done outside, in front of five witnesses, no matter how poor the visibility was. So it stands to reason it was rigged right where the suits are stored."

"I agree."

"A luxury retreat like this has got to have a state of the art security system."

"We checked, Jake," he said. "But the system -- "

"-- was disabled in the building that houses the protective suits," I concluded for him.

"How did you know?"

"If it hadn't been, you wouldn't have come all the way to the Iliad system looking for a homicide cop," I said with a smile. "Also, we're not dealing with a spur-of-the-moment killing here. Someone planned this very carefully, and if you're bright enough to be a vice president in charge of a fifth of the galaxy, you're bright enough to know you have to disable the security system while you're doing your dirty work."

"Would you like me to show you the building, Jake?"

I shook my head. "There won't be anything for me to see. But when my forensics guy shows up tomorrow, that's the first place I want you to send him."

He nodded his agreement -- as much as a beachball can nod, anyway. "Is there anything else?"

"No," I said. "We might as well go to work." I turned and headed back the way we'd come. "Let's start with the new boss."

"Ktamborit?"

"Whatever."

"Is there some reason you chose her?"

"Since she'd already been announced as the new chairman, she figures to be less likely than the others to be carrying a grudge," I answered. "Let's get her interview over with and concentrate on the others."

"All right," he said. "Where do you wish to conduct your interrogations?"

"How many floors in this palace?"

"There are three levels."

"Are all the executives housed on the second floor?"

"The first and the second, yes."

"The top level, then," I said, stopping at one of the half-dozen airlifts. "I'll find a room; you bring her along in a few minutes."

"Is there a reason why you wish to be so far from the others?" asked Max.

"There is."

"May I ask what it is?"

"Why don't you tell me?"

He lowered his head in thought, then looked up. "It will prevent the others from overhearing."

"Closing the door would do that. Come on, Max -- why would I want to get a suspect so far from his

comfort zone?"

He smiled. "You have just said it: you want the suspects to be on unfamiliar terrain, so to speak. If you question them down here, you are the intruder. On the third level, they are the intruders."

"Good for you," I said. "It's a tiny advantage, microscopic really, but we need any edge we can get. After all, the murderer knows who we are; we don't know who he is."

"It seems so simple when you explain it," said Max. "I suppose you will adjust the heat and light, too?"

"Not bad," I said approvingly. "Yeah, I noticed those big eyes on the Gaborians. We'll make the room a little too bright for them. Not blindingly so, just uncomfortable. The Man will be wise to that, and besides, human pupils adjust very fast, so we'll make him either too hot or too cold, so he becomes increasingly anxious to leave the room. I'm sure you've had more experience with Thrales than I have, so before I question our Thrale let me know what you think might put him on edge."

"On edge?"

"Make him uncomfortable."

"A very interesting term," opined Max. "Shall I get Ktamborit now?"

"Give me a minute to find an office," I said. Then: "Make it five minutes. I want to set it up to be as uncomfortable as possible."

Max smiled. I had a feeling he'd call me a devious son of a bitch if he wasn't afraid I'd get offended and take a poke at him.

I stepped into the airlift, rode a cushion of air up to the third level, stepped out, and found myself at the juncture of four corridors, with half a dozen robots standing by, waiting to cater to my needs. I'd have liked to take a room at the far end of the longest corridor, but I wasn't sure Max would be able to find me, so I picked one right next to the airlift. It was an elegant little parlor with a few chairs, a couch, and a phony fireplace.

"Hey, you!" I said.

"Yes, sir?" said the robots in unison, responding in the same language they'd been addressed in.

"Move all this furniture except for one chair into some other room," I said. "Then find me a desk and move it in here as fast as you can."

The robots fell to work instantly, and had the room set up the way I wanted it in less than three minutes, while I busied myself adjusting the light and the temperature.

"Thanks," I said. "Now go back to your stations."

They silently walked out of the room and returned to where I'd first encountered them. A moment later Max appeared in the doorway with Ktamborit in tow.

"Are you ready for us, Mr. Masters?" he asked politely.

"Yeah, come on in." I nodded to Ktamborit. "I'm sorry, but there was only this one chair in the room. I hope you won't be too uncomfortable."

She gave me a look that said it was beneath her dignity to respond to such a transparent lie. "I will stand."

"Fine," I said. "Max, if you want to sit down, go right ahead."

He lowered himself to the floor, as he had done in my office back on Odysseus, and I turned back to Ktamborit. "What can you tell me about Kdin's death?"

"You already know how he died," she said through her t-pack.

"That's true," I acknowledged. "But I don't know _why_ he died. I thought you might be able to help me out with that."

"You thought incorrectly. I have no idea why anyone would want to kill him."

"That's odd," I said. "I can think of four or five reasons, and I never even met him."

She stared at me and made no reply.

"Let's try again," I said. "Can you tell me why one of the vice presidents would want to kill him?"

"No. I had already been named chairman. The position was not open, so why should they kill him?"

"Anger," I suggested. "Bitterness. Hatred. I'm sure every one of them thinks he's more qualified to run the Cartel than you are."

"That is not so," she replied. "My record is unsurpassed. I was promoted over all the others for valid reasons."

"Let's get back to the morning Kdin died. All seven of you went outside the dome, right?"

"That is correct."

"He led you to a spot about three hundred meters away?"

"Farther than that," she said. "Perhaps five hundred."

"To look at rocks?"

"To look at a unique rock formation, towering some sixty meters high on an incredibly narrow base."

"All right, you all went there and looked. What happened then?"

"Then he died."

"Right away?"

"Within a few seconds of reaching the formation."

"He just keeled over?" I persisted.

"He collapsed and died."

"Did he say anything?"

"No."

"Did he try?"

"I have no idea," she said. "I was standing behind him."

"And then the six of you carried him back to the dome?"

"Malcolm Shea and Toblinda carried him," she replied. "They are larger and stronger than we Gaborians, and speed was of the essence. We were not sure he was dead, and even if he was, we felt if we got him back inside the dome quickly enough there might be a chance of reviving him." She paused. "It was too late."

"When did Kdin announce that he had chosen you as his successor?" I asked.

"Twenty-two ... no, twenty-three Standard days ago."

"And when did he ask you and the five vice presidents to come here to Graydawn?"

"Last week."

"I guess that'll be all for now," I said. "I'll want to speak to you again later, and if you should need any help or have anything to tell me, however trivial, please feel to come to me with it."

"I require no help," she said coldly. "I just want to get back to work."

She turned and left the room.

"Well?" I said to Max.

"She was remarkably uncommunicative."

"That's understandable," I said. "She's anxious to get out of here and start running her empire. Did you learn anything else?"

"You seem to think I should have," he said.

We were silent for long moment.

"It's not fair," I said at last. "You don't have the experience to see it."

"To see what?"

"Look," I said. "She told us that she was promoted three weeks ago."

"Twenty-three days," he corrected me.

"Three weeks, three months, it makes no difference. The important thing is that she was promoted before Kdin decided to invite everyone to Graydawn."

"But we already knew that."

"Think it through, Max," I said. "There are a lot of reasons for killing Kdin, but the likeliest is anger or resentment at being passed over for the top spot. Would you agree?"

"Yes, certainly."

"What does that imply to you?"

He was silent for a moment as he considered the question. "That sooner or later the killer will realize that getting rid of Kdin didn't solve his problem. If he wants to control the company, he'll have to kill her."

"That's right," I said. "Now, we've been told that she's brilliant, creative, innovative, imaginative, everything a successful and ruthless executive is supposed to be. If you and I can see that, don't you think she can?"

"And yet she doesn't seem worried or apprehensive!" he said excitedly.

"Okay, you've got it," I said. "Now try not to get too excited about it."

"But -- "

"You figured out what you were supposed to figure out," I said. "But that doesn't mean you should jump to conclusions. Consider: she could simply have total confidence in her ability to protect herself. She could have a pretty good notion about who killed Kdin, and will make sure she's never alone with him. She could know who killed Kdin, and told him he'll be exposed if he harms her. She could know that the motive had nothing to do with business. She could think we're not able to protect her; she wouldn't be the first. She -- "

"Enough," said Max. "I understand." Then: "What do we do now?"

"We interview the other five and hope we can catch one or more of them contradicting her or each other."

"She didn't tell us anything. How could anyone contradict her?"

"What if the Thrale says he cried out 'I can't breathe!'" I said. "What if Kbing says Kbang told her he wanted to kill him?"

"Kbing? Kbang?" he repeated, confused.

"I don't know their names," I said. "What if one contradicted her statement about not knowing why anyone would want to kill Kdin?"

"I see," said Max.

"Remember, no one's going to walk up to us and confess. We'll build a case one tiny brick at a time. No matter how trivial it is, if it's an inconsistency or a contradiction, it could lead to bigger ones."

"It's fascinating, Jake," said Max, his enthusiasm returning.

"It can be," I said. "Usually it isn't. Usually the forensic boys come in and an hour later they tell you who the killer is, and all you have to do is hunt him down. This kind of detective work was obsolete a few millennia ago." I grimaced. "Except when the corpse and all the suspects were wearing full-body protective suits, and the wind and the chlorine destroyed every clue that might have been left behind." I sighed deeply. "Oh, well, bring in the next one."

"Have you any preference?"

"Yeah. Let's have the human. Maybe I can sympathize with his being passed over for a Gaborian, and we can bond a bit."

"If he's the killer, are you sure you want to bond with him?" asked Max.

"He's probably not," I said. "Neither is the Thrale."

"Why do you say that?"

"They're aliens in a Gaborian-owned and dominated cartel. They've risen as high as they're going to. I can't imagine there's as much bitterness and jealousy there as among the Gaborians." I shrugged. "Still, I could be wrong. Let's see if I can get him talking, and then we'll know a little more."

"You want me to bring him up here now?"

I thought about it for a moment. "No," I said. "I'm a human, he's a human. Anything that makes him uncomfortable is going to make me uncomfortable too. And as long as I'm going to be uncomfortable, I might as well kill two birds with one stone."

"There are no birds on Graydawn," said Max.

"That must depress all the cats," I said.

"There are no cats on -- "

"Never mind," I cut him off. "Sooner or later I have to look at the murder scene, even if we both know it'll be useless. Have Shea meet me in the building that holds the protective gear."

"Do you want me to come along too?" he asked.

"I can't imagine it'll do any good," I said, and his face fell -- well, about as much as a beachball's face can fall. "What the hell," I added quickly. "Sure, come along. Maybe you'll spot something everyone else has been missing."

"Thank you, Jake."

He left to get Shea, and I snapped my fingers to get the robots' attention.

"Sir?" they said in unison, re-entering the room.

"This will be my room for as long as I'm on the planet," I said. "During that time, I don't want anyone making any changes in it without my permission. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," they all said. I thought for a minute that they were going to salute me, but they just went back outside the room and then stood motionless.

I took the airlift down to the main floor, then walked out of the retreat, crossed the lawn of alien grass that scrambled to get out of my way, and entered the outbuilding that held the protective suits. Max and Malcolm Shea were already there, getting into their gear.

"You're not going to learn much," announced Shea. "You'll be lucky if the wind doesn't blow you over. And the visibility is wretched."

I was surprised he didn't tell me I'd get warts, too.

"I just need a brief look at it," I said. "I can question you while we're walking there and back and get it over with."

"I hope you have a lot of questions saved up," he said. "It could take me hours to locate the formation."

"I thought it was just a quarter-mile away."

"It is -- but visibility's about five or six meters, tops. And I've only been there once."

"Max," I said, "find a robot that can lead us to the spot."

"Yes, Jake," he said, scurrying off.

"So who do you think did it?" I asked Shea.

He shrugged. "Beats me. Doesn't make much sense, does it? I mean, if I wanted to be chairman, I'd kill the current one, not the former one."

"I agree," I said. "So who had a grudge against Kdin?"

"Everybody except Ktamborit, I imagine," he said. "We were all passed over for the job."

"You never seriously expected to get it, did you?"

"No, not really. And while I hate to say anything to remove suspicion from a Thrale, Toblinda didn't expect it any more than I did."

"So why are you working for an organization where you can't rise to the top?"

"I'm the Cartel's top executive in the Democracy," said Shea, not without a touch of pride. "I have more power, more people under my command, than almost any governor, admiral or general. I couldn't spend my annual salary in a couple of lifetimes, and in fact I have so many perks that I don't spend much of it."

"Okay," I agreed with a smile. "Those are pretty good reasons."

"I have fourteen million good reasons a year, plus stock options," he said, returning my smile.

"So you think it was one of the Gaborians?"

"It seems likely. Except..."

"Except?"

"Except that I can't see what could be gained from it," he said, frowning. "Maybe we're all bitter that Kdin chose Ktamborit rather than one of us, but killing him doesn't change anything."

"Maybe it makes the killer feel better."

"On the one hand is the ability -- maybe -- to feel better for awhile," he said. "On the other is losing everything you've got if you're caught. It's a piss-poor business proposition, and we're all businessmen."

Max returned with a gleaming silver robot that was shaped exactly like a Gaborian. We finished getting into our gear. Then I walked out of the building and to a hatch about fifteen meters away, and stepped into the airlock, followed by Shea, Max and the robot. Once the hatch was secure, the outer door opened and we stepped out into the swirling chlorine fog.

"Lead the way," I said to the robot.

A glowing light indicated that he'd received my transmission, and he began walking very slowly to the northwest, calling out the hazards -- large rock, small depression, slippery rocks, sharp incline, whatever -- and it took us about eight minutes to cover the quarter mile. I was surprised that none of us tore our suits on the razor-sharp rock formations we had to pass.

"Why the hell would someone build a retreat _here_?" I mused.

"No visitors," said Shea.

"I suppose so," I agreed. "If there's a second reasonable answer, I can't come up with it." Then: "Max, you're from this system. Has Graydown got any natural resources worth anything on the open market?"

"No, Jake."

"Any native life forms?"

"No."

"I didn't think so. It's a pretty inhospitable place." I looked around. "Robot, where did Kdin fall?"

"I was not here, sir," answered the robot. "You asked me to take you to the spot where he often viewed his favorite rock formation. This is that spot."

I looked around. "I don't see any rock formation."

"It's there, all right," said Shea. "Wait until the wind stops blowing all this chlorine around."

And sure enough, no sooner had he spoken the words than the atmosphere stopped swirling and I could see a strange structure about ten yards ahead of me: a thin rock, maybe five inches around, extending straight up about fifty feet, with a huge circular slab of stone, maybe eight feet in diameter, balanced precariously atop it.

"Why doesn't the wind blow it over?" I asked.

"Beats me," said Shea. "From what Kdin told us, it's been like that ever since he built the place."

"Maybe the needle-like structure is piercing the circular one so it can't blow off," suggested Max.

"I suppose that's as good an answer as any," I said. "So you seven were looking at this thing, and Kdin fell over dead?"

"He clutched at his facemask first," said Shea. "Clawed at it like he was in a panic."

"Did he say anything?"

"Not that I recall."

"And you picked him up immediately and carried him back?"

"No," said Shea. "Two of the Gaborians knelt down next to him to see what had happened. There was a powerful wind, and it was possible he'd just been blown over. Then they announced that they couldn't see any signs of life, so the Thrale took one end, I took the other, and we carried him back to the dome."

I looked around. Visibility hadn't increased since we'd come out onto the surface. "How did you find the dome?" I asked. "I couldn't."

"Ktamborit and Ktee had been here a number of times before. They knew the way, or we might all still be out here."

"When you got him back, what then?"

"We called Bdale as soon as we reached the dome. He showed up a minute later and tried to revive Kdin, but he was past it." He paused. "Just as well. There hadn't been any oxygen to the brain for ten,

maybe eleven minutes. If Gaborians are anything like us, he'd have been a vegetable anyway."

"Then what?"

"We put his body in a refrigerator bag to keep it fresh, and loaded him and his suit in the shuttle, which we sent to Bramanos."

"And then?" I said.

He looked confused. "That's it."

"Did any of the executives want to leave?"

"We all did," said Shea. "But Ktamborit ordered us all to stay here until the authorities confirmed that it was death from natural causes."

I thought about his answers on the way back to the dome. Once we'd entered it I told him that I was through questioning him for the time being and sent him back to the retreat.

"Aren't we going inside, Jake?" asked Max.

"In a minute," I said, fascinated as the grass kept ducking away from my feet. "We want to think first."

"What are we thinking about?"

"We're not sure," I said. "But something is bothering us."

"What?"

"I don't know," I said. "Everything Ktamborit and Shea said makes sense, but there's something wrong, something I can't quite put my finger on."

Five minutes later I still hadn't spotted it, so I finally gave up teasing the grass and walked back into the retreat with Max.

The next one I questioned was Kchang. He seemed genuinely distressed over Kdin's death, and didn't like Ktamborit at all ... but in the next breath he admitted that she was the proper choice for the job, that her skills and intellect dwarfed everyone else's.

Ktee struck me as a good company man -- or a good company Gaborian, as the case may be. He'd been with the cartel for 34 Standard years, never made waves, and seemed animated only when describing the business and his role in it. Was he pissed off at being passed over? Not at all. He loved what he was doing, and as chairman he'd be doing too many things he didn't like as well. Or so he said.

Kmorn was the third of the Gaborian vice presidents. He seemed the dullest, but he had an advantage the other two lacked: he was family. He tried to explain Gaborian bloodlines to me; the closest I could figure was that he was the equivalent of Kdin's cousin. He was more upset over Kdin's death than the others, but then, if he was as slow as I suspected, he'd just lost his protector, and his days of power and luxury might be numbered. Of them all, he had the least reason to want to see Kdin dead.

I figured that as long as I was questioning Gaborians I might as well work my way through them. Besides, I had an innate dislike of Thrales after what they did to a few outlying worlds I used to visit, so I decided to put off talking to Toblinda a little longer and sent for Bdale, the doctor.

Max ushered him into the room a few minutes later. He walked up to me, made some kind of obsequious

that looked for all the world like a curtsy -- it was a gesture none of the high-powered executives had felt obligated to make -- and then waited patiently for me to start questioning him.

"I won't be long," I assured him. "How long were you Kdin's physician?"

"Just over ten Standard years," said Bdale.

"How was his health?"

"Not good. He suffered many of the problems of aging, exacerbated by the enormous pressure he worked under. His heart especially was not in good condition. That is why he decided to step down and turn the company over to Ktamborit."

"Did you feel any apprehension when he left the dome?"

"No, he did it almost every day, usually alone, though occasionally I or a visiting executive would accompany him. Exploring the area was physically taxing, but paradoxically it seemed to relax him. He had taken me to the structure a few times, so I knew he wasn't going far afield, and of course he was in the company of friends."

"Did you recommend that he take a robot along?"

Bdale smiled a Gaborian smile. "Kdin was the one who programmed the robots, Mr. Masters. He could find his way around the area as quickly and easily as they did."

"I assume his failing health was not a closely-kept secret?"

"No, he had given it as his reason for retiring."

"Since all the executives knew he was in poor health, did any of them suggest that a robot come along?"

"No," he said. "I don't suppose it occurred to any of them."

"What did you think when they brought his body back?"

"That he had finally overtaxed his heart," answered Bdale. "I gave him a perfunctory examination and pronounced him dead."

"Why was the body shipped to Bramanos as opposed to being buried or disposed of either here or on Kdin's home world?" I asked.

"When someone who wields that much power dies, even from what appear to be natural causes, it is essential to have an autopsy, just to ease everyone's mind," answered Bdale. "I don't have all the necessary equipment to perform one here, so his body was sent to Bramanos, with the stipulation that the autopsy be performed by a member of the Gaborian race, who would be conversant with his physiology."

"You had no reason to suspect foul play?" I persisted.

"None. As I said, the autopsy was routine."

"What was your initial diagnosis?"

"Heart failure. There were no discernable signs, and in such instances heart failure is usually the case."

"What are the signs of asphyxiation in a Gaborian?" I asked.

"They are all internal," replied Bdale. "If chlorine had somehow entered his protective suit, I would have spotted the signs instantly. But with simple asphyxiation, the Gaborian lungs collapse and the pulmonary artery often ruptures -- but it takes an autopsy to discover that."

"What was your reaction when the results of the autopsy came back from Bramanos?"

"I was shocked," said Bdale.

"One last question," I said. "Did anyone suggest that the body not be shipped Bramanos for a post mortem?"

"No."

"Thank you," I said. "I'll want to speak to you again later."

"I am at your disposal," he said, curtsying again and leaving the room.

I decided to take a break when I finished with Bdale. I wasn't tired; I just wasn't looking forward to even talking to a Thrale. And something was nagging at me; it was nothing I could put my finger on, but in this job you learn to trust your instincts, and my instincts told me I'd already heard some things that didn't add up.

Max was pretty sensitive to my mood. I could tell he wanted to talk, to discuss the various statements we'd heard, but he kept quiet and waited for me to work things out. It looked like it was going to be a long wait; the more I tried, the more things kept slipping away from me.

Finally I pulled a smokeless cigarette out of a pocket and lit it up.

"Well, what do you think, Max?" I said.

"Me?" he asked, surprised.

"You heard everything I heard."

"Everything seemed logical. I know it's early in your investigation, but I would say we could probably eliminate Kmorn from consideration."

"Kmorn," I repeated. "That's the cousin?"

"Yes."

"Every company's got a cousin or a brother or a nephew," I said. "Most of them have a lot in common with Kmorn."

"They do?"

I nodded. "Most of them would still be in the shipping department if they weren't related to someone who could get them out of there." I paused. "Yeah, if I were making book, he's the longshot."

"What about the physician?" asked Max.

"Bdale?" I said. "If he was going to kill his boss, he'd have enough brains to make sure it couldn't be spotted too easily in an autopsy. Still, it wouldn't hurt to find out if he's mentioned in Kdin's will, always

assuming Gaborians _have_ wills -- and if so, did he know about it? Also, will he become Ktamborit's physician now, and if so, is that part of the job description?"

"I don't understand."

"Was he Kdin's personal physician, or the chairman's official physician?"

"Ah," said Max. "I see. If he was hired by the cartel rather than Kdin, then he will probably retain his position with Ktamborit. And if he had a falling-out with Kdin, or if Kdin threatened to fire him for some reason, he had everything to gain by eliminating Kdin."

"Good for you, Max," I said. "Right on every count. Can I depend on you to find exactly who hired Bdale and what his duties were or are?"

"I shall do so before the day is over," Max promised. He paused uncomfortably. "I have a question, Jake."

"What is it?"

"You seemed lost in thought for a few minutes, and your expression was troubled. If you will confide in me, perhaps I can be of some help."

"I can't put my finger on it," I said.

"If you will give me some of the details..."

"I don't know them," I said. "I know it sounds like I'm ducking your question or hiding things from you, but I'm not." I tried to think of an example. "Did you ever go to the zoo world of Serengeti, over in the Albion Cluster?"

"No, though I've heard of it."

"It's a planet-wide game park," I said. "You drive through it and view animals from maybe two hundred worlds in their natural habitats. The first thing you learn is that animals are pretty good at concealment. You could be twenty yards away from a three-ton herbivore that's standing in the bush. His outline is broken up by trees and shrubs, and he's the same color as his surroundings, and you stare for two minutes, then three, and you'd swear there's nothing there. Then he flicks an ear or a tail, and suddenly you can see the whole beast, just because of that."

"So you know something's there, something wrong, and you're just waiting for the equivalent of an ear flick to bring it into focus," said Max.

"Exactly," I said.

"I heard the same things as you did, and I can't find anything wrong with them."

"That's because you're new to the game," I said. "If it was anything obvious, I'd have spotted it right away." I finished the cigarette, toyed with lighting another, and decided not to. "We'll just keep plugging away until something clicks. I'm going to question the Thrals now. The odds are he didn't do it for the same reason that Malcolm Shea doesn't figure to have done it. You can sit in on the interview if you want, but you'd be a lot more useful hunting up a computer or whatever else you need and finding out about Bdale."

"I'll send Toblinda up to you, and get busy learning what I can about the doctor," he said, walking to the

door.

"Thanks," I said. "And Max?"

"Yes."

"Find out when they eat in this place. I haven't had anything since a couple of hours before we left Odysseus."

"I will do that too, Jake," he said, and walked to the airlift.

Even before I spoke to him, I was pretty sure Toblinda wasn't the killer. He was in the same position as Shea; no matter who lived or died, he was as high up the corporate ladder as he was going to get. Not only did Kdin seem to have a predilection for his own kind, but for a cartel that traded with the Democracy _and_ the Coalition it made sense not to offend a sizeable portion of his market by elevating an enemy of one side or the other to the top position.

Toblinda showed up about ten minutes later. I'm sure Max approached him before he did anything else, and I'm sure the Thrale could have made it seven or eight minutes earlier, but our races were mortal enemies -- we'd been friends a century ago and we'd be friends a century in the future -- and he wasn't about to make my job any easier or any more pleasant.

He took one look at the room, stepped out into the corridor, and ordered a robot to bring him a chair. It didn't respond until I okayed the command. It was only then that I realized that no one else had thought of it. These were the top executives in one of the most powerful cartels in the galaxy. They should have been used to snapping their fingers and having flunkies fight for the privilege of catering to their needs and even their whims.

"That's better," said Toblinda when he finally sat down. I noticed he was using a t-pack, though most Thrales spoke Terran. In fact, the Thrale Coalition had been part of the Democracy before it became independent, and Terran is the Democracy's official language. I guessed it was his way of showing me that no trace of the Democracy remained to stain his person.

"I have some questions to ask you," I said.

"And if I choose not to answer them?"

"That's your privilege," I said. "Of course, I'll have to arrest you and incarcerate you until you decide to honor me with your answers, but as far as I'm concerned, I'll be just as happy if you take twenty years to get around to it."

He grinned an alien grin. "I'll bet you would, too."

"You'd win," I answered, returning his grin.

"All right, Mr. Masters," he said. "Ask away."

"Damn!" I said. "And here I'd gotten my hopes up."

He laughed, a throaty, guttural alien laugh. "I like you, Masters. It is a shame we're on opposite sides."

"Not in this instance, Toblinda," I said. "I want the crime solved and you want it solved."

"Why should I care?" he said. "We both know it wasn't committed by Shea or myself."

"We both think it's highly probable that it wasn't either of you," I agreed. "But the sooner we can solve it, the sooner the lot of you can go back to work, and the less chance there is that word will get out that your executives are killing each other. I don't think any of the financial markets would respond favorably to that."

"You have a point," he admitted. "We shall set our enmity aside until the killer is apprehended. Ask your questions. I will answer them completely and truthfully."

"Fine," I said. "I saw the spot where Kdin collapsed. What indication did you have that he was in distress?"

"Almost none," answered the Thrale. "He clutched at his neck, or maybe it was the tubes leading from his oxygen tank to his facemask. I think he tried to say something, but nothing came out. Then he fell to the ground. My guess is that he was dead less than a second after he hit it."

"That pretty much agrees with what the others said. Who was the first one to suit up before you all went out?"

He frowned, which didn't look quite as menacing as I'd thought it would. "I can't remember," he said. "I think we all changed into our protective gear at the same time."

"Are you sure?"

"No, I could be mistaken," he said. "Why don't you just check the security system?" Suddenly he grinned again. "It was disabled, wasn't it?"

"You're quick on the uptake, I'll give you that," I acknowledged. I was getting the feeling that this was one sharp sonuvabitch, maybe the only one who could have given Ktamborit a run for her money if he hadn't had the misfortune to be born a non-Gaborian. "Let me try another one. Who got to Graydawn first?"

"That's easy. Ktamborit was invited a few days earlier, so Kdin could acquaint her with the subtleties of her new position. He probably also gave her some highly classified information, so secret that even the vice presidents were not allowed to share it."

"Okay, so Kdin and Ktamborit were waiting for the five vice presidents. Who was the first to land?"

"Kchang."

"How do you know?"

He smiled again. "Because I was the second, and Kchang was already here. Malcolm Shea showed up next, and then the other two Gaborians."

"I gather you were all here for two full days, and then Kdin took you outside the dome on the morning of the third day."

"Yes, that's right."

"If his suit wasn't tampered with on the day of the murder, it had to be tampered with earlier. Did you notice anyone's absence during those two days?"

"That's a silly question, Mr. Masters," he said. "Gaborians, humans and Thrales all require some personal privacy. It's a huge house; we were often out of each other's sight. And of course, different executives

retired at different times."

"You're right, Toblinda," I acknowledged. "It _was_ a silly question. But I had to ask it anyway. Did anyone go outside the dome before that third morning?"

"No."

"So no one had a reason or an excuse to be in the building that holds the suits?"

"No."

"That figures," I said, as much to myself as to him. "We're not dealing with a stupid killer. It's obvious that no one was going to become chairman after Ktamborit was elevated to that position, so the killer probably had what he thought were sufficient reasons to murder Kdin even with no possibility that it would lead to the chairmanship. You know all of them. Who had a reason?"

He thought for a moment, then shook his head. "I know business relationships, and we both agree they're probably meaningless in this case. You want information on personal relationships, and of these -- except for my own, of course -- I know nothing."

"All right," I said. "Tell me about your own."

"I met Kdin -- it still feels strange not to call him Kdineka, the name by which we all knew him -- exactly four times. Until I came here I had probably spent less than six hours in his presence. To the best of my recollection, we were never alone together, and while we may have disagreed about certain aspects of company policy -- who doesn't? -- it was never acrimonious, and in fact he usually gave in to me."

I stared at him, trying to think of what to ask next, and finally decided the interrogation was over. "That's it," I said. "Thank you for your help. I'll probably want to speak to you again."

"I'd enjoy that," he said. "I could probably be arrested for saying this in the wrong venue, but I like you."

"I like you too," I said. "It's a dumb war."

"But even a dumb war does wonders for the economy," he said with a final smile. Then he was on his feet and out the door.

Max showed up about fifteen minutes later. "Dinner will be in half an hour," he announced. "Do you want to join the others in the dining room or have it brought to you here?"

"Here," I said. There was no sense letting the suspects know how little progress I'd made. "What about the doctor?"

"Bdale was Kdin's personal physician, and was paid from Kdin's personal account."

"Do Gaborians make wills, and is he in it?"

"They have extremely rigid inheritance customs. I have not spoken about it to a Gaborian lawyer, but from what I was able to glean from a brief search with my computer, the likelihood is that Bdale will not inherit a thing."

"Not even any severance pay?"

"I don't think so, but I'll still have to check and make certain."

"I assume Ktamborit has her own physician?"

He looked blank. "I have no idea."

"It wouldn't hurt to find out."

"I will, Jake."

"Has my forensics guy checked in yet?"

"Not personally, but one of my Order Keepers got a message from his office that he'll arrive at Bramanos sometime tomorrow morning, and then come here when he's done."

"Pity he's not going to find a goddamned thing," I said.

"Explain, please?" said Max.

"You saw the spot where Kdin died," I said. "Even if the killer left a clue, it's blown halfway around the world by now. And it didn't have to. If it blew thirty yards away, that'd be enough. We'd never find it."

"But perhaps in the building that houses the protective suits..." he suggested hopefully.

I shook my head. "The killer had enough brains to deactivate the security system, Max. He's got to be smart enough not to leave anything behind." I stopped and just stared ahead.

"What is it, Jake?" asked Max after a moment.

I sighed deeply. "I don't know. Something was on the edge of my mind, knocking to get in, but..." I shrugged. "Nothing."

"Shall I contact the forensics expert and cancel his visit?" asked Max.

"No," I said. "We might as well let him go through the motions. Maybe God will drop everything else and leave us a clue. But I'd bet everything you're paying me that my man doesn't turn anything up."

"Is there anything else we can do while we're waiting for him?"

"Yeah, I suppose so," I said. "It's a zillion-to-one shot, but at least it'll keep your agents busy. When everyone's having dinner, have a couple of them search every room in the retreat."

"What are they looking for?" asked Max.

"Someone with a grudge against Kdin who thought if he killed him this week we'd be up to our ears in suspects and never look past the obvious ones."

"You think someone might be hiding in an unused room?" asked Max excitedly.

"No. I just believe in being thorough. You might run a quick test or two on the robots and make sure they haven't been programmed to lie, and then..." I stopped to consider. "Then find out if they saw anyone sneak out to the suit building, or if they know of anyone who's been inside the dome the past few days besides Bdale, Ktamborit and the veeeps."

"That sounds promising, Jake," said Max.

"It's busywork, Max. It'll stop us from getting too bored, but it's not going to turn up a killer."

"If this won't, and your expert won't, then..." he began.

"Don't ask."

"Are you saying that we've been here just a few hours and you've decided we can't solve it?" he persisted.

"No. I'm just saying we're not going to solve it by the usual methods. But we might as well try them all, just so we can say we did." I paused. "Maybe you'd better get back down to the main level, so you can give your agents their instructions."

"All right, Jake." He walked to the door, then turned to me. "Don't get discouraged. I have faith in you."

"I can't tell you how comforting that is," I said. He never spotted the sardonic tone, and walked away with a happy smile on his face.

A robot showed up with my dinner a few minutes later. It looked and smelled exactly like a steak with mashed potatoes in gravy, but while the galley robots could make soya products look and smell like real food, they still tasted like soya products. Still, I hadn't eaten in maybe twenty hours, and it sure as hell wasn't the first soya meal I'd had -- or the hundredth, or the thousandth, for that matter -- and I decided I'd had worse. Plenty of them.

I spent the next hour going over all the interviews I'd conducted. There were some discrepancies -- one said Kdin collapsed like a stone, one said he banged his hand on his facemask, one said he tugged at the hoses leading to his helmet -- but that was absolutely standard. No two people ever saw or remembered an incident exactly the same. If one of them had said he collapsed and another had said he'd run fifty feet first, that would be worth another pair of interrogations, but that wasn't the case.

I suppose the biggest problem was that I just couldn't come up with a motive. Ktamborit had been publicly anointed as the new chairman. If someone had killed her I'd have something I could get my teeth into; but there just wasn't any sense killing Kdin once he'd named his successor. He was just a civilian again; why risk all the power and money each of them controlled to kill someone who was no longer a player?

Could the killer have thought he could talk Kdin into changing his mind about his successor? Out of the question. It was too late; Ktamborit was already the chairman. Could the killer have been promised the chairmanship, and killed Kdin for breaking his word? There were three problems with that. First, it wasn't worth the risk. Second, he couldn't know that Kdin was going to take them out on the surface. (Or could he? I made a mental note to find out.) Third, there were five Gaborians. How could he be sure he was rigging the right protective suit?

I thought about that last point for a minute, and starting getting excited. If the killer didn't know which suit was Kdin's, could he have been trying to kill Ktamborit? Now, that would be a murder with an obvious motive.

But if he couldn't tell one suit from another, he had to figure the odds were four-to-one he'll kill the wrong Gaborian. And if he was a Gaborian, as seemed likely, he also had a one in five chance of donning the rigged suit himself.

Well, there was an easy way to find out. I walked to the door and ordered the nearest robot to tell Bdale I wanted to speak to him right away.

The doctor entered the room a minute later and treated me to another curtsy.

"You sent for me?" he asked.

"Yeah," I said. "It won't take long. What was your first reaction when they brought the body into the dome?"

"That Kdin's heart had finally given out."

"You were summoned from the retreat, right, and they were coming in through the hatch that was closest to the rock structure?"

"That's right."

"So when you saw them you were, what, maybe forty meters away?"

"Thirty or forty."

"Could you see his face from that distance?"

"No, not the way they were carrying him."

"Okay, doctor, here's my question: how did you know it was Kdin?"

"The gold suit."

"Gold suit?" I repeated.

"He'd had his suit and helmet colored gold, so it would be easier for me or a guest to follow him in the low visibility of the planet's surface. I don't know if it actually worked, but he thought it did, and who would contradict him over such a trivial matter?"

"Thank you, doctor," I said.

"That's all?"

"That's all."

Suddenly he smiled. "You thought maybe the killer tampered with the wrong suit."

"It was a possibility." I grimaced. "It isn't any more."

He seemed about to say something else, changed his mind, curtsied, and left.

Well, I told myself, no one ever said it was going to be open and shut. Forensics labs identified killers in the early hours of a case. It took detectives a lot longer.

I was still pondering the situation when Max entered the room maybe an hour later.

"Well?" I said.

"It was as you predicted," he reported. "We went through the house with state of the art sensors and couldn't detect any life forms. I had one of my Order Keepers test all the robots, and they cannot lie. And finally, none of the robots saw anyone enter the building that holds the suits."

"Does your agent know enough about robotics to tell if they have been given false information without knowing it?"

"I don't understand."

"Can your agent tell if the robot saw someone enter the suit house and was later programmed to forget it, so when he says he never saw anything he checks out as being truthful?"

"That's very complex, Jake. I think we'll need a robotics expert for that."

"It's a longshot anyway," I said. "What are the odds that anyone in the retreat could pull off that kind of tampering? Still, if we're not making any progress in a few days, we'll call in a robotics expert. I assume your supply of money is endless?"

"We will spend whatever it takes to bring the killer to justice," he assured me.

"It may take awhile," I said.

"What makes this case so unusual?" he asked. "The lack of clues?"

"That's part of it."

"What else?" he asked. "I'm not trying to be pushy, Jake," he added apologetically. "I'm trying to learn."

"Okay, Max, no offense taken," I said. "The traditional way of solving a murder is to examine Motive, Means and Opportunity. That's where the problems begin. I can't find a motive for killing Kdin. A year ago, absolutely. But once he'd stepped down and named his successor, no. As for means and opportunity, everyone had the same: they all are capable of tampering with the suit, and they all had the same two days at the same location in which to do it."

"That's not exactly true, Jake," said Max. "Ktamborit was here for a few days before the others arrived."

"Yeah, but the security system was working then. If she'd tampered with the suit before the system was deactivated, we'd know it."

"Yes, that's true," he agreed.

"So I keep returning to motive, and I may never be able to come up with one."

"Surely you're not suggesting that it was a motiveless murder," said Max.

"No, of course not. But the only thing all the suspects have in common is that they work for a cartel that functions in a capitalistic system, so I keep assuming that money or power are the motives, because they would be the motives in my society. But except for Shea, these are aliens, and while they've been interacting with Men for years and know how to comport themselves, I don't know what makes them tick."

"I am an alien in your eyes, too," he said gently.

"Damn it, Max," I said irritably, "every last one of them is more alien to you than to me. At least I come from a world where murders get committed; you come from one where no one kills anyone no matter how many valid motives they have. If I can't understand them, neither can you."

"But we do understand them," he persisted. "I was there when you interrogated them. Their answers all made sense."

"Because I asked what I know about, Max," I said. "I see that they're all executives in the same

company, so I think that must have something to do with it. But for all I know, Kdin didn't laugh at one of Kchang's jokes thirty years ago, and to a Gaborian that's a perfect justification for murder. Maybe he accidentally brushed against Toblinda's uncle during a visit to his Thrale headquarters, and Toblinda thinks that's a killing offense. Maybe he didn't kill and eat a pet that Ktee gave him for his birthday. I could be ten lifetimes just figuring out what the Gaborians and Thrales think is a killing offense."

"Then are we defeated already?"

"No. We just have to be a little more creative than usual."

"How?"

I couldn't repress a chuckle. "Max, if I had a ready answer, it'd be routine and not creative. We'll just keep plugging away until we find a flaw and work from there."

"Do you want to question them again tonight?" he asked.

"Not really," I said. "I can't think of anything else to ask. Let me sleep on it."

"You are going to sleep now?"

"In another hour or two," I said. "I've been up a long time."

"Will you be sleeping here?"

"No, this is my interrogation room," I said.

"Well, wherever you choose to sleep, let me know, so we can monitor you on the security system. I know you feel you're not in any danger..."

"I'm not."

"Nevertheless, I think we should keep a watch on you."

"Forget it," I said. "I don't like being watched."

"But Jake -- "

"I'm not kidding," I said. "I want you to promise you won't spy on me while I'm sleeping, or I'm going to spend the night in the suit house, where you can't watch me."

"Of course we can. We got it working again."

"How?"

"I had my Order Keepers contact the manufacturer, and once he'd checked our credentials, he gave us the proper codes to activate it again."

There was a big mental click! as the pieces suddenly fell into place. I toyed with pulling out a cigarette, but this time I decided I deserved the one smokeless cigar I'd brought along.

"What is it, Jake?" said Max anxiously. "You've got the strangest expression on your face. Are you all right?"

"Never been better," I assured him.

"Then what -- "

"I know who did it," I said.

"Then let's make the arrest!" he said excitedly.

"It's not that easy," I replied. "I know who did it, sure as you're standing there -- but I don't have any proof that would stand up in a court of law."

"Who was it?"

"Ktamborit."

He frowned. "But she had less reason to kill him than anyone else."

"Like I said, she's an alien. I could be half a dozen lifetimes learning and understanding her motives. But a lot of little things didn't add up."

"I didn't notice anything untoward."

"Hang around the homicide bureau for a few years and you will," I said. "For example, she had to know Kdin's health was suspect. After all, that's why he was stepping down. So why didn't she insist that a robot accompany them outside the dome?"

"But they found their way back without one," said Max.

"Yeah ... and it took them ten minutes to cover a quarter mile, more than enough time to make sure he was dead when he got there. Maybe a robot could have led them back in four minutes; maybe Bdale could have revived him if he'd gotten to him soon enough."

"But by the same token, any one of them should have thought of having a robot accompany them," noted Max.

"That's why I didn't say anything at the time. But there was more. Why didn't she contact Bdale on her suit's radio when they were carrying Kdin back to the dome? Why wait until they got there?"

"I never thought of that," said Max. "But again, it applies to all of them."

"I agree. I knew something was wrong, but I still had six suspects." I paused, ordering my thoughts. "I also thought it was strange that she didn't insist that her security team come down to the dome. I mean, hell, she's the boss, no one could stop them, and there was no logical reason for anyone to kill Kdin once he'd retired. There was at least a chance that she was the target, but she didn't do anything about it."

"You're right, Jake," he said, his enthusiasm waning. "That will never hold up in a court of law. Even I am not convinced."

"Neither was I. I knew all that hours ago. And like I said, I knew something was wrong, but I didn't know what. I began homing in on her when Bdale told me that she insisted that all the executives stay on Graydawn until the autopsy was performed on Bramanos. Why? Kdin's own physician said he had died from natural causes. The only reason for the post mortem is that it's standard when someone worth billions dies. But the killer would know that if the executives left, they'd just be called back for questioning."

"Ah!" said Max, his eyes widening. "I see. And based on that..."

I shook my head. "Based on that, I thought she was the likeliest suspect, nothing more. I didn't know for sure until you gave me the information I needed."

"_I_ did?" he said, surprised.

"That's right."

"When?"

"Just now."

Max frowned, and I could see him trying to replay our conversation in his mind. Finally he gave me that beachball shrug I was getting used to. "I give up, Jake. What was it?"

"You told me you could monitor me even if I slept in the suit house."

"But we can."

"_Why_ can you?" I asked.

"Because we activated the security system," said Max.

"How?"

"We fed it the proper codes to get it up and running again."

I just smiled at him.

He stared back at me, and suddenly his eyes got wider and wider. "Of course!" he exclaimed excitedly. "This isn't Kdin's private house. It's a corporate retreat. He would know all the codes, and Ktamborit arrived a few days early so that he could instruct her and turn over classified material to her. The security system in the suit house wasn't broken; it was deactivated by someone who knew the code!"

"Give the boy a cigar," I said.

"No, thank you, Jake," said Max. "I do not smoke."

"It's just an expression," I said. "Anyway, Ktamborit's the killer, but we can't go into court with what we have. We'll say she knew the codes, she'll say Kdin never gave them to her, and we won't be able to prove otherwise. In fact, a good lawyer will put the blame on Bdale; he doesn't inherit, and he had ten years to spy on his boss and learn the code."

"_Could_ he have done it?" asked Max.

"No," I said. "If he did, he'd never have claimed Kdin died from natural causes. He'd have known the post mortem would prove otherwise. And he wouldn't kill him here on Graydawn, where he was one of seven suspects. He'd wait until Kdin was at a convention or a business meeting, surrounded by rivals. It'd be nothing to slip some poison in a drink, examine the corpse, announce that he'd been murdered, and let the police spend the next decade trying to sort out the two or three hundred people who had motive, means and opportunity. Take my word for it, it's Ktamborit."

"How can we prove it?"

"We'll need some help," I said.

"Whose?"

"Ktamborit's."

"I don't understand."

"You will," I promised.

I considered the Gaborians, but except for Bdale they hadn't made much of an impression on me, and if I could see what a lawyer could do with Bdale, he could too, and was probably too busy planning his own defense to be of any use to me. That left Malcolm Shea and Toblinda. Shea was a Man, but he wasn't a very impressive one, and I didn't know how he'd perform under pressure. Toblinda's race may have been this year's mortal enemy, but I thought he was worth more than the other five put together. I was only going to have one shot at this, and I decided he offered me my best chance of success.

"Max, have Toblinda come up here."

"Shall I tell him that -- ?"

"No," I cut him off. "We'll tell him in private, so that if there's any reaction, no one but you and I see it."

"And my Order Keepers?"

I shook my head. "Not a word. They're probably all trustworthy, but if they don't know, they can't inadvertently give it away."

"I'm confused, Jake," he said. "I thought the whole purpose of this investigation was to identify the killer."

"I've identified her," I told him. "Now the purpose is to come up with something that she won't be able to explain away in court."

He left to find Toblinda, and while he was gone I had the robots bring a couple of more chairs into the room. Then he was back, accompanied by the Thrale.

"Have a seat," I said. "You too, Max."

They sat down.

"Something's changed," said Toblinda.

"What makes you think so?" I asked.

"You don't mind my being comfortable this time," he said with an alien grin. "And your friend here seems a little less nervous than usual."

"Okay, something's changed," I said. "I have a proposition for you."

"I'm listening," said the Thrale.

"What would you say to declaring a temporary truce between Men and Thrales, and helping me nail a killer?"

"You know who it is?"

I nodded.

"Well?" he said expectantly.

"Do we have a deal?" I said.

"Of course we have a deal. Every member of the Democracy and half the neutral planets will be sure I did it if we don't catch the real killer." He grinned again. "And everyone else will think it was Malcolm Shea."

"It's neither of you," I said. "Ktamborit killed him." I gave him the same explanation I'd given Max, and as I did so his expression changed from disbelief to anger.

"I guess gratitude is not in the Gaborian lexicon," he said. "He made her one of the six or seven most powerful corporate heads in the entire galaxy, and this was how she thanked him."

"I don't know her motive, and neither do you," I said. "Maybe we never will. But that won't stop us from incarcerating her if we play our cards right."

"Cards?" interjected Max, puzzled.

"Another figure of speech," I said. "Since I can't come up with enough proof to please a court, we're going to have to make her incriminate herself."

"I love the devious human mind," said Toblinda. "How do you plan to do this?"

"I'm working on it. I'd be happy to consider suggestions from either of you. What we have to do is convince her that there's evidence that can convict her, something she overlooked. Then we sit back and wait for her to go looking for it, and we've got her."

"We could say that there was a secondary security system that she missed," offered Max.

"She'd know it's a lie," I said. "Remember, she couldn't have deactivated the system if Kdin hadn't shown her where it was and how to shut it off. Why would he do that and then not tell her about a second system?" I looked from one to the other. "Remember, we've only got one shot at this. Once she knows we're trying to trap her, she'll sit there like a statue and take her chances in court."

"Let's look at it logically," said Toblinda. "If she were to leave a clue, the most logical place for it is in the outbuilding that holds the suits. She knows the security system was off, so whatever she did isn't recorded, and she knows the Order Keepers came up with nothing when they searched the building. So there is probably no way she can be enticed back there to look for incriminating evidence. And she knows that no one will ever find a clue outside the dome."

"I agree."

"Then we're defeated and she goes on to run the cartel for the next thirty years," said Toblinda.

"Come on," I said. "If the Thrales gave up that easily, our war would have been over in a week."

He smiled. "I will take that as a compliment to my race, if not myself. But I still say that the only place to look for a clue is the outbuilding."

I shook my head. "No. You're right: it's not likely that we can trick her into going back there."

"Then what's left?"

"Only one thing," I said.

"The body?" he asked.

"No," I said. "She never touched the body."

"The suit!" shouted Max.

"The suit," I agreed.

"But they've examined it on Bramanos," said Toblinda.

"I know," I said. "They didn't find anything." I paused. "I've got my own expert arriving on Bramanos tomorrow morning. He won't find anything either -- but what if we say he landed a few hours ago, and what if we hint that he did find something?"

"Hint?" repeated Toblinda. "Why not just say it?"

"Because if we say what he found, she'll know we're lying," I answered. "Let's let her worry about it."

"All right. She's worried. Now what?"

"Now Max, who is the inexperienced member of the team, lets slip what it is that we're looking for. We'll have to dope out what it is, but Max will tell her that they found some microscopic trace elements on the suit where it had been tampered with. If she was a human, I'd say it could be something as tiny and easy to overlook as a flake of dandruff. But whatever it is, it'll be something that she'll believe will clearly identify her as the killer."

"So she'll have to get rid of it!" exclaimed Max.

"Right," I said. "But once she knows they found one trace of something, she can't be sure they won't find traces of something else tomorrow or next week or next month. So we're going to bet the farm -- no, Max, I don't own a farm; it's another figure of speech -- that she'll try to foist the incriminating evidence off on another executive rather than destroy it. Once we have a killer in custody, it stands to reason that we'll stop looking for another."

"Why are you looking at me with that expression on your face?" asked Toblinda.

"Max is going to blurt out to her that we think you're the killer, and we hope to be able to prove it before long. Then you're going to have a public blow-up with me and Shea -- you hate Men, remember? -- and stalk off to spend the night in the suit house. Max and his agents and I are all going to spend the night on the main floor, waiting to hear the latest news from my forensics expert."

"And sometime during the night she plants the evidence in my room?" said Toblinda.

"Right. You're the only one who could spend the night in an outbuilding and make it believable; my race isn't at war with anyone else. I'll have Max and at least two of his agents make a complete inventory of your room before we have our little scene, so they can testify that you didn't possess whatever it is that she's going to plant there."

"She'll just say someone else planted it."

"She can say anything she wants," I replied. "The house's security system isn't disabled."

"Yet," said the Thrale.

"Yet," I agreed. "But I'll post one of Max's agents by the computer that runs the house and the system,

and if she tries to disable it in front of a witness, that ought to be enough to convict her."

"If anything goes wrong, you'll testify that this was your scheme and I merely agreed to follow your orders?" demanded Toblinda.

"I'll put it in writing or state it for your personal computer, whichever you prefer," I said.

"Both," he answered.

"Agreed," I said. "Now all we have to do is figure out what she's got that could leave a microscopic trace, and yet wouldn't seem totally out of place in a Thrale's room."

"That requires us to enter her room and examine it," said Max.

"Why?" I said. "She's made use of the security system. Why shouldn't we? There has to be a control room for the computer that runs the retreat and the security system. Take Toblinda there and scan her room until he finds something that fits our needs."

"You'll stay here?" asked Max.

"No, I'm going down to socialize." They both looked at me like I'd lost my mind. "I've been cooped up here all day, questioning them one at a time. I just spoke to Toblinda a second time. If I go down to the main level now, it may lend to the impression that I've found what I'm looking for."

"You are as devious as a Thrale!" said Toblinda with a laugh. "And that is a high compliment."

"Thanks. I think."

We all left the room and took the airlift down to the main level. They turned one way and headed toward the control room, while I joined the five Gaborians and Malcolm Shea in the huge room where I'd first met them.

I hate small talk, but I made my share of it for the next few minutes. Once I awkwardly let slip that I didn't trust Toblinda any farther than I could spit with my mouth closed, and if things worked out the way I anticipated he was going to be sorry he'd ever met me.

Then Max and Toblinda joined us. I didn't know if they'd found what they were looking for, but after a few minutes the Thrale picked a fight with Shea and me and then stalked off in a fury, announcing that he wouldn't spend the night under the same roof as any Man, and he was going to the suit house.

I kept talking for another fifteen minutes while Max and a pair of his agents made their inventory of Toblinda's room. When he returned I announced that I was going into the pantry kitchen to find something to drink, and he knew enough to follow me.

"Okay," I said. "What was it?"

"We made an educated guess," answered Max. "The robots sterilize the rooms every day, and the residue of their chemicals causes some very minor discomfort, especially for the Gaborians. They have each been supplied with a small vial of powder that, when opened, eliminates the discomfort. Thrales do not suffer from the affliction, or perhaps it is a weakness. At any rate, Toblinda does not have such a vial. That seemed to be the only thing in her room that was not in his."

"I don't like it," I said. "This is our only shot at her, and it requires her to think this powder leaves some residue on her hands or gloves, whatever she was wearing, and she also has to think that it wouldn't be

out of place in a Thrale's room when Toblinda tells you it would."

"We don't have to tell her anything, Jake," said Max. "We can wait and try something else."

I shook my head. "How many times can Toblinda stalk off and sleep in another building?" I said. "Besides, I've already dropped a hint that I think he's the killer. No, we'll have to go with it, but I sure have bad vibes about it."

"Vibes?"

"Never mind. Just find a way to clumsily impart the information to her."

"Yes, Jake." Then: "I'm sorry if I've made it more difficult."

"It's not your fault," I said. "You found the only difference in the two rooms. You were just doing what I told you to do."

I poured myself a glass of water, then went back to the main room. After a few minutes Ktee and Kchang announced they were going to bed, and Malcolm Shea followed suit a minute later. Bdale was the next to leave. Then, when Kmorn went into the kitchen to hunt up a snack, I followed him and engaged him in some meaningless conversation, leaving Max alone with Ktamborit. I kept Kmorn in the kitchen for a good ten minutes. When I came back, Max actually winked at me to show me he'd dropped the info on Ktamborit.

I explained that Max, the Order Keepers and I were all staying by the subspace radio, waiting for definitive word from my expert on Bramanos, and that should any of us feel the need to sleep, we'd hunt up empty rooms on the main level so as not to disturb any of the executives, who were all housed on the second level.

Ktamborit went off to bed about five minutes later, and Kmorn followed suit a few minutes after that.

"All right, Max," I said. "All the groundwork has been laid. There's only one more thing for you to do."

"What is that?"

"At some point Ktamborit is going to come back down to this level, ostensibly to get something from the kitchen, or to retrieve something she left down here. And then she is going to very quietly sneak off to the computer room and deactivate the retreat's security system, with the intention of coming back down in another hour or two to reactivate it. I want you to keep all your agents in the main room and let her do it."

"And that's all?"

"Almost," I said, giving him his final instructions.

I waited until all the executives were in their rooms, then went to the computer room, made a quick adjustment, and took the airlift up to the second level. I tiptoed down the corridor to Toblinda's room, waited for the door to iris and let me pass through, then ordered the lights on just long enough to find a nice comfortable corner and sit down with my back propped against the wall. I pulled my burner out, laid it in my lap, ordered the lights out, and waited.

I was afraid I might fall asleep before anything happened. I'd been up a long time, and there aren't many things duller than sitting on a plush carpet in a dark room when it's been a day and a half since you had any sleep. In fact, I think I did nod off once or twice, but each time my body would start to relax I'd

wake up with a start.

And then, finally, the door irised again, and I saw the figure of a Gaborian silhouetted against the light in the corridor. It walked over to a small table. I couldn't see or hear what it was doing, but it didn't matter. My hand closed on the burner, and when I sensed the Gaborian started to walk back to the door, I said, in a loud, clear voice, "That's far enough, Ktamborit. Lights on."

It took both of us a few seconds to adjust to the flood of light. I'd expected her to panic, or at least look surprised, but nothing affected her calm.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded coldly.

"Waiting for you."

"It will do you no good," she said. "It is just your word against mine, and I am the Chairman of the Braaglmich Cartel."

"For another few weeks," I said. "Then you're just another inmate."

"I heard you moving around in here. I know that Toblinda is in one of the outbuildings, so I entered to see what was happening, and I came across a common thief."

"Sounds good," I said. "But I don't think it'll play in court."

"Oh?" she said with an expression that was as close to a smug smirk as a Gaborian can come. "Why not?"

"It's not your word against mine," I said. "It's your word against everything that was captured by the infrared holo camera."

"That camera is not working," she replied.

Suddenly Max's image appeared before us. "Oh yes it is," he said.

"Damn," I said apologetically. "I guess we forgot to tell you that we got the security system codes from the manufacturer."

"It makes no difference," she said, still cold as ice. "The record will show that I have transported nothing lethal or criminal to this room."

"It doesn't matter what you brought," I answered. "Your presence here is enough to incriminate you."

"Your case will never hold up," she said.

"Ready to bet your empire on it?" I asked.

A long pause. "Name your price," she said. "We can deal."

"Before or after we turn off the camera?"

She uttered some obscenity that the t-pack couldn't translate, as we both realized she'd blown it, that beneath the icy calm exterior she'd been caught so off guard that she forgot the security system was capturing everything.

I contacted Malcolm Shea's security team, which was orbiting the planet, deputized them -- it was

probably illegal, since I myself wasn't an officer -- and had them transport Ktamborit and a pair of Max's agents off to Bramanos for trial.

Then we brought Toblinda back to the retreat and told him what had transpired while the other executives and Bdale, all of whom has been awaked by the commotion, gathered around and listened.

"Did she really think that anyone would believe a Thrale would use that disgusting powder?" asked Toblinda.

"You know," I said, "I was so concerned about taking her into custody that I never even looked. Max, was she planting the powder?"

"No, Jake," he answered. "Actually, she planted a form of hand cleanser."

"You mean like a bar of soap?" I said, surprised.

"The equivalent. Evidently each room has its own distinctive cleanser -- different color, different scent -- "

"And of course different chemical make-up," added Toblinda.

"So she probably disabled the suit with her bare hands," I said, "or at least some bare flesh may have touched it, or she thought something may have touched it, and she figured that was what our expert had found or would find."

"She appropriated Toblinda's cleanser and replaced it with her own before you turned the lights on," said Max, "but of course we captured it all on infra-red holo."

"Well, when you get right down to it," I said, "I don't suppose a bar of soap is any dumber than a tube of powder. If she'd just sat still and not worried about it, we'd never have nailed her."

"She could have doubled the size of the company," said Kchang bitterly. "Kdin was on his way to the grave anyway." He glared at me. "Why did you have to ruin everything?"

"It's my nature," I said. "I can't stand rich executives."

I think my sarcasm was lost on the Gaborian, because he began calling me every obscene name the t-pack could translate and more than a few that had never been programmed into it.

I've been cussed out by experts, so I just let it roll off my back, and I could see Max getting more and more upset, and finally he took a swing and decked the executive.

"Don't you ever speak that way to my friend again!" he bellowed. In just a day and a half he'd come a long way from the nervous little alien who shook like a leaf at the mere thought of contradicting someone.

We stuck around another day, did some paperwork -- I don't know why we call it that, since no paper was involved -- and finally boarded Max's ship (but not before I'd made arrangements to meet Toblinda for drinks once a year on a neutral planet.)

Max was silent, even morose, for the first couple of hours. Finally, just after we entered the McNaughton Wormhole, I asked him what was bothering him.

"I should never have struck Kchang," he said.

"Feeling guilty?" I asked, amused at his discomfiture.

"Certainly not!" he replied heatedly. Then he seemed to collapse within himself. "But it was reported to my superiors, and I have been terminated."

"They sacked you for hitting the little sonuvabitch?" I demanded.

"Yes," he said with a heavy sigh. "I loved my work, and the past two days have been the most fascinating of my life. Now I shall have to learn another trade."

I stared at him for a moment. "Maybe not," I said.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"You didn't hit the Gaborian because of what he was saying about you," I said. "I could use a partner I can trust, one who isn't afraid to back me up."

His alien face lit up. "Do you mean it, Jake?"

"I only lie to the Bad Guys," I said, extending my hand.

He took it, and this time he didn't tremble a bit.

-end-

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