

## Honorable Enemies: A Jake Masters Mystery

Written by Mike Resnick

When I got to the office, I found the message waiting for me. I clicked it on, and the image of an animated beachball popped into existence right in front of me.

"Jake, I think I'm in a little over my head," said the beachball, who happened to be my partner. He sounded worried. Hell, he sounded more than worried; he sounded scared. "I'm heading back to the office. I'm going to need your help on this one."

That was it.

My ship had to avoid a meteor swarm once it braked to sublight speeds, so I arrived back home on Odysseus almost three hours late. I landed at the spaceport just outside Homer, and then it took me another twenty minutes to clear Customs and make it to the office. There was no sign of Max. (That isn't his name, but it's as close as I can come to pronouncing it.)

I checked my messages. The power company wanted to be paid. The landlord wanted to be paid. The laundry wanted to be paid. And then I found Max's first message.

"Hi, Jake," said his holograph. "I know you don't want me going out alone until I've had more experience, but there's a client who's in a hurry, and I have to come up with an immediate answer. And"—he tried not to look embarrassed—"I know we're a little short of money this week."

"And this month, and this year, and this decade," I muttered.

"It's a simple tail job," continued Max. "I just have to follow someone and report back. It seems pretty basic, so I've decided to take it. I should be back in the office well before you return to Odysseus."

Sure, I thought. There probably aren't four beachballs from Alpha Gillespie in the whole Iliad system, and you think you're going to tail someone without being spotted in the first ten seconds.

Max's image vanished, and I looked through all the dunning messages from creditors to see if he'd left any others. He hadn't.

I decided there was nothing to do but sit and wait for him, and hope whoever he was following didn't have much of a temper. It was a little past midnight, and according to the message machine he'd called in five and two hours ago. I took a hit from the office bottle (well, the office canister), spent another hour counting the cracks in the wall and waiting for Max to show up, and then started checking all the hospitals.

It was just before I tried to contact the fourth that the call came in from Lieutenant Selina Hernandez. Even the police uniform couldn't hide her curves. She didn't look happy.

"Hi, Jake," she said.

"Hi, Selina," I replied. "How are things down at headquarters?"

"About the same," she said. "Nothing much ever changes around here." She paused uncomfortably. "I've got to ask you, Jake: you've got a new partner, right?"

"Yeah," I answered. "I hired him after that mess on Graydawn.\* He's been with me about two months."

"Kind of blue, looks like a huge balloon?"

"Like a beachball with limbs, right. Why?" Useless question; I could see the answer on her face.

"I've got some bad news for you, Jake," she said slowly.

"Dead or wounded?"

"Dead."

"Damn!" I said. "He should never have gone out alone. He knew that!"

"Why did he?"

"He probably wanted to prove himself to me." And he knew I needed the money.

"Why didn't you stop him?" she asked.

"I was hunting down a runaway kid out in the Albion Cluster," I said. "I just got back an hour ago."

"I'm sorry, Jake," said Selina. "You want to come down and identify him? Not that there's any doubt. We've got his ID, and how many blue beachballs can there be on Odysseus? If you'd rather get some sleep, you can come by tomorrow."

"No, I'll do it now," I said. "Where've you got him?"

"He's in a holding area down in our basement," she replied.

"You don't take 'em to the morgue anymore?"

"They don't leave here until Forensics is done with them, and they were starting to pile up. We didn't want them where anyone walking into headquarters could stumble over them, so we took over half the basement." She paused. "The lab's done with him. We'll move him to the morgue after you make the identification. Do you know if he has any family on Alpha Gillespie, anyone who will want to take charge of the funeral once we ship him home?"

"Hell, I don't even know if beachballs have funerals," I said. "He never mentioned parents or siblings or a life partner. I'll need a couple of days to check that out."

"No problem," she said. "We can hold him indefinitely if need be. Forensics is going to have to do an autopsy before we release him anyway."

"All right," I said. "I'm on my way. I'll be there in five minutes."

"Thanks, Jake," she said. "I'm sorry this had to be waiting for you when you got back."

"Not as sorry as someone else is going to be," I promised.

\* \* \*

Police headquarters was a nondescript building, maybe twenty years old, all squares and rectangles where most of the newer buildings were curves and angles. It was stone and concrete where they were glass and glittering translucent alloys. The windows were just slits, but even so, a few had bars over them, and all of them were surrounded by crackling force fields.

Selina met me at the door and escorted me down to the basement.

"You want a coat?" she asked as we reached the holding room. "We keep it pretty chilly."

I shook my head. "I'm not going to be here that long."

She shrugged, uttered the proper code, and the door irised to let us through.

She was right. It was a damned cold room. There were six tables. Two held dead men, one held a dead woman with her throat slit, one held a dead Canphorite, one was empty—and Max was laid out on the sixth table. There was a spotlight over each table, but the room felt dark anyway.

I walked over to Max. He didn't look any more dignified in death than he had in life, but he'd put that life on the line for me back on Graydawn, and people who did that were few and far between.

I didn't need the light to know what had killed him. I could see that his skull had been crushed the second I entered the room.

"Did he die right away?" I asked.

"The pathologist says death was instantaneous," she said. "At least he didn't suffer."

"You got the killer in custody?"

She shook her head. "No."

"But at least you know who it is?" I persisted.

"No, Jake, we don't."

"Come on," I said irritably. "Ninety-nine out of a hundred cases, your forensics team identifies the killer within an hour. Then it's just a matter of tracking him down."

"Not this time, Jake. It was a professional job. This guy knew his stuff."

Professional jobs have changed over the millennia. Once it was simply the work of a hired gunman. Then it was a murder committed with an unregistered weapon, usually by a killer from out of the area—and still later, from out of the planetary system. But as forensic science got more and more precise, any weapon could be traced and identified.

"Blunt object?" I said.

"A rock," she replied. "It's in the lab, but they've come up empty. No DNA except for your partner's, no trace evidence, nothing."

"The killer wore chamicha gloves," I said. It wasn't a question: chamicha gloves cost a bundle, but they never left a trace, and were the choice of most professional hit men who worked in close with knives or blunt objects.

"Like I said, a professional job." Selina grimaced. "Kill someone with a club or a big rock. It's always been the hardest murder to solve." She turned away from Max's body and stared at me. "What was he working on, Jake?"

"I don't know," I said. "He left a message that he was hired to tail someone . . ."

"And he thought they wouldn't spot him?" she said disbelievingly.

"He was new to the business," I said. "He left a second message saying that he was in too deep, and was calling it off. That's the last I heard from him."

"Who was he working for?"

"I don't know."

"So you don't know who he was tailing either?" she said.

"Not yet," I said. "But I will. I'm the guy who talked him into quitting the force on Alpha Gillespie III and joining me in the detective business. I'm not going to say some damnfool thing like it's my fault he's dead—but I'm sure as hell going to make sure the guy whose fault it is pays the price for it."

"We'll be happy to work hand-in-glove with you, Jake," said Selina. "Any murder on Odysseus is bad for business—your business and ours."

"I have no problem with that," I told her. "You give me whatever you've got, and I'll keep you up to date on any progress I make."

"Why not work on it in tandem?" she said. "You still owe me a dinner from that mess by the stadium.\*\* If we work together, maybe I could finally get you to pay it off."

I shook my head. "The police department has got hundreds of cases. Until I nail Max's killer, I've got only one. Or were you thinking of putting a team on it full-time?"

"Come on, Jake," she said. "You know we're short-handed, and besides, he's an alien. This is a human world; human murders take precedence."

"Not with me," I said. "Not this time."

"We'll work on it," she promised. "Just not exclusively."

"I know. That's why we're going to do it the way I said."

"A full exchange of information, right?" she said.

"Right."

"I'll be the conduit for the department. How often should we talk?"

"Every two days for now. More or less often as the trail gets hotter or colder."

"Deal."

Suddenly I started shivering.

"Time to leave the room?" she asked.

"Yeah, I think so. I've ID'd him. I'm not going to learn anything else from staring at him."

We left the room. The basement didn't have much air circulation, and there was an occasional water stain where the composite wall joined the floor, but it was still considerably warmer than the room that held the corpses.

"Where did you find him?" I asked.

"You know a place called the Spacers' Rest, down on Pericles Street?"

"Yeah, I've been there once or twice. That's where he got it?"

She shook her head. "No. That's where we found him. But he was killed somewhere else and dumped there."

"How do you know?"

"Forensics puts the time of death at two hours before midnight," said Selina. "I asked what the margin of error was. They said four minutes either way."

"So?"

"So there was a street carnival in front of the Spacers' Rest until half an hour before midnight. If he'd been killed there, dozens of people would have seen him."

"Any shedding of skin cells, marks on the body, anything to show he'd been dragged?" I asked, but I knew it was a dumb question. You want to stand out like a sore thumb? Drag a dead beachball through the streets at night.

"No," said Selina. "And he wasn't carried, either. There'd be traces of skin, of fabric, of something, if he had been. It figures that he was killed, tossed in some kind of vehicle, and dumped." She frowned. "I wonder: why there?"

I thought I knew, but since it was just an educated guess it didn't qualify as information, so I kept it to myself.

"Did they find anything on Max?"

She shook her head. "Just his passport and some cash," she answered. "I think we're done with them. You can pick them up on the way out."

"So whoever killed him didn't even bother to make it look like a robbery," I said.

"Maybe he was in a hurry."

"Maybe," I said without much conviction.

"And he didn't give you any hint about who had hired him or who he was tailing?" she asked again.

"No."

"Did he say whether either of them was human?"

"Not a word."

"You've got your work cut out for you," said Selina.

I noticed that the less we knew about the case, the more it was my work rather than our work. It didn't even bother me. Max had been my partner, not theirs.

"There's nothing more for me to see here," I said. "I think I'll go back to the office. I'll check in tomorrow morning to see if the lab has come up with anything."

But I knew they wouldn't. Those guys don't miss a thing. If they haven't found it in the first hour or two, there's nothing to find.

"All right, Jake," she said. "Try to get some sleep."

"There'll be plenty of time for sleep after I catch the bastard who killed Max."

"I didn't know you were that fond of him."

"He was my partner," I said.

And he trusted me. He left everything he knew behind because I promised him a new life as a detective.

I never promised him it would be over in just two months.

I knew it wasn't my fault. But it would be a long time before I could convince my gut. I couldn't even start until I nailed his killer.

\* \* \*

I figured the first order of business was to toss the office and see if Max had left any hint of who had hired him.

For some offices, that would have been an all-day job. For my little hole in the wall, it took about fifteen minutes. There was no trace of our client. I figured I could probably send a couple of the chairs down to forensics and have them go over them with all their high-powered equipment, but what the hell would I do when they told me our most recent visitor was wearing brown, or blue, or black? Besides, that presupposed he sat down, and Max had made it sound like such an urgent job that for all I knew he walked in, made his offer, and left thirty seconds later.

Max didn't have a desk of his own, because the chair hadn't been invented that could accommodate him. When he sat down, he sat on the floor and couldn't have been seen (or seen anyone) from behind a desk. I checked all my own desk drawers, but there was nothing to show who had hired him.

I was stymied. Finally I contacted Selina again.

"Yes, Jake?" she said as her image appeared before me. "I hadn't expected to hear from you before morning. Have you found anything?"

"Not a thing," I answered. "Can you check and see how many bludgeon murders have been committed in town this month?"

"I'm ahead of you," she said. "Three. But two of them were what I'd call amateur. A woman smashed her husband's head open with a lamp, and a couple of drunks got into it down by the spaceport and one of them opened the other's skull with a bottle of Cygnian cognac."

"Waste of good drinkin' stuff," I commented. "What about the third?"

"That was your partner."

"Okay, thanks," I said. "I shouldn't have bothered you. It's a little early to be grasping at straws."

I broke the connection, took a hit from the canister I keep in my desk drawer, and decided I might as well start gathering Max's effects so I could ship them back to Alpha Gillespie.

I had turned one drawer of the desk over to him. There wasn't much in it: a citation his department had awarded him a few years ago back on Alpha Gillespie, a laser pistol I'd given him that he never took out of the office, an alien tool he used to clip his fast-growing claws, a couple of other things.

I took them all out of the drawer and laid them neatly on the desktop. Then I pulled out his ID and the

cash I'd picked up at headquarters and placed them on the desk as well.

And then I saw it. I should have spotted it down at the station, but I'd been in a hurry to get back to the office.

Max had twenty Democracy credits, and a few Maria Theresa dollars, but stuck in there were five bills, each for one hundred New Warsaw drachmas. I hadn't seen any New Warsaw currency in maybe fifteen years. It was probably legal somewhere, maybe even here, but it was as rare as human currency got.

"Computer—activate," I said.

"Activated," replied my desktop machine.

"Give me a list of the currencies that are legal tender on Odysseus."

"Democracy credits. Far London pounds. Kilimanjaro shillings. Maria Theresa dollars. Rabolian quinxes. New Stalin rubles."

The computer fell silent.

"That's all?"

"That is all."

"What about New Warsaw drachmas?"

"They are not a legal currency on Odysseus."

"Are they legal in the Alpha Gillespie system?"

"Checking . . . no."

So he hadn't brought them with him from home.

"Will the currency exchange at the spaceport honor New Warsaw drachmas?"

"Checking . . . no."

"Thanks. Deactivate."

So now I had a lead. It wasn't much of one, but it was the only one I'd come up with. I contacted Selina Hernandez again.

"What's up, Jake?" she said.

"I've got some New Warsaw drachmas to spend," I said.

"Not on Odysseus, you don't," replied Selina.

"Yes, I do. Who's likely to accept them?"

"I have no idea, Jake."

"Can you find out?"

"Probably, but it'll take awhile," she said. "I'm a cop. I can't just walk up to the people who trade in them

and ask. We'll have to go through our usual unreliable sources."

"If you'd start right away, I'd appreciate it."

"Jake, it's the middle of the night."

"Who pushes illegal currency in the daylight?" I said with a smile.

"All right, all right," she said. "I'll pass the word to our people, and they can pass the word to theirs."

"Thanks, Selina."

"Thanks be damned. That'll cost you a dinner when we nail the killer." She paused. "Wait. You already owe me one. Okay, one dinner, two desserts."

"Sure," I said. "Your place or mine?"

She muttered an obscenity and broke the connection.

I knew I wasn't going to sit around the office until she contacted me with the information. It could take days, and since it would be coming from criminals who were cadging favor with the cops there was no reason to bank on its accuracy. I had my own sources, and I had a lot more faith in their information.

I started considering the problem as logically as I could. Obviously Max had been paid with New Warsaw drachmas. Max was an unsophisticated little alien who'd only been on three worlds in his life—and that included two months on Odysseus and three days on Graydawn. He had no idea what currency was legal and what wasn't, so he had no problem accepting it.

But the guy who passed the currency had to know. It may have been worthless on Odysseus, but it was worth something on any planet that traded in it, so he wasn't just paying Max with play money. Now, I could run a check and see how many worlds accepted New Warsaw drachmas, but it could be hundreds, maybe thousands, and that didn't even count the worlds of the Inner Frontier, which accepted damned near everything.

So since I couldn't work on its source, I'd work at the other end. Clearly he was willing to spend his drachmas here. Okay. Who besides a clueless little alien would accept them?

Men knew better. The very best that might happen if they were caught trading in illegal currency is that it would be confiscated. The worst is that they would be confiscated for a few years of hard time.

But the Alien Quarter was just beyond the spaceport. Most of the aliens on Odysseus lived and worked there, spent and earned their money there, and probably had no compunction about accepting New Warsaw drachmas. After all, it was a human currency, and they were paid in so many human currencies, what was one more?

Also, they were near the spaceport, so if they had to unload the money in a hurry, or if they were leaving themselves, they could get it off the planet before the authorities knew they had it.

Finally, Max was a beginner, but he was no fool. He had to figure the one place he might not be spotted was the Quarter.

It may have been thin, it may have been tenuous, but it felt right, and it was still the only lead I had. I pulled the New Warsaw drachmas out of the neat pile I'd made on the desk, stuck them in my pocket, activated the security system, told it that Max was no longer part of the company and to wipe his



retinagram and bonescan from its memory, and headed off to the Alien Quarter.

I arrived there ten minutes later, still with no idea what to do if someone took the cash when I offered it. Rough him up? What if it turned out that twenty aliens of different species would take the cash? Where would that leave me?

You can think about consequences and permutations just so long in my business. Then you either act, or you get acted upon.

I decided to act.

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Odysseus doesn't have any waterfront dives, because it doesn't have any shipping or fishing industry. But the Alien Quarter makes a pretty good substitute. The cops don't like to enter it, and the residents do what they can to encourage that attitude.

It's the only place on the whole damned planet that's open 24 hours a day (well, 22, actually; we don't have 24 hours on Odysseus). The only illumination on the streets comes from the interiors of the bars, drug dens, and alien whorehouses—and you don't want to get too far from them at night, because there are a lot of aliens lurking in the shadows, and most of them can see a hell of a lot better in the dark than a Man can.

The few legitimate stores probably spend half their profits on security—force fields, stun gates, shock windows, even the occasional alien watch-creature. Men can walk through most of the Alien Quarter with impunity by day, but they'd better have a damned good reason for being there after dark—and even then they'd better be pretty good at taking care of themselves.

The first thing I did was hunt up Baro the Grub. I don't know what planet he comes from, but his skin is smooth and oily like a worm, and his body is maybe eight feet tall and cylindrical, with a torso that takes up close to three-quarters of it. The Grub knew just about everything that went on in the Quarter, and he was happy to spill it if the price was right.

I don't know what motivated him. He never drank or drugged. There were a few lady grubs in the Quarter, but the word on the street was that he had nothing to do with them. I don't know; maybe he just felt a need to be part of the economic life of the city. Maybe he went home, wherever home was, and enjoyed stacking his money in neat piles. Made no difference. He was as good a source as I'd ever come across.

I found him at his business office—a little alleyway between two derelict buildings.

"Hi, Grub," I said.

"I've been expecting you, Jake," he hissed in his sibilant voice. "Ever since I heard your partner was killed."

"You knew about that already."

"I'm Baro the Grub," he said, as if that explained everything.

I pulled out a hundred-credit note and one of the New Warsaw bills. "This is for you to keep," I said, handing him the former. "And this is for you to look at."

He glanced at it briefly, then handed it back.

"Who trades in this currency?"

"You want The Purple God."

"Is that an alien or a location?" I asked.

"A bar, three blocks down this street, on the right."

"Thanks, Grub."

"Understand," he said, "I am not saying you will find the being who passed this money, merely that you yourself will find beings there who will accept it."

I thanked him again and headed off. I walked down the damp pavement—it hadn't rained, but for some reason the pavement was always damp in the Alien Quarter. I kept listening to the sound of my own footsteps and wondering how many others were listening to them too. It gets on your nerves after awhile – like, say, 30 seconds. You can see into all the tawdry joints that line the street, but when you look straight ahead or into an alley you can't see a damned thing.

I spotted two Lodinites approaching the spot where the Grub had said The Purple God was. I couldn't read the alien sign, but it was the only bar on the block. As I was walking toward it a huge 500-pound Torqual staggered out, covered with a foul-smelling mixture I took to be vomit and something even nastier, and collapsed not five feet from the entrance. A pair of three-legged Molarians, spinning down the street with that graceful walk of theirs, pivoted around the body and pirouetted into the bar.

I got there a moment later. I looked down at the Torqual, and couldn't tell if he was dead or alive. I made a mental note to call the cops if he was still there when I came out, then scratched the note out; the cops weren't going to come down here in the middle of the night, just to cart a dead alien off to the morgue.

Finally I got tired of staring at the Torqual and entered the joint. I won't say that everyone stopped talking and stared at me as I walked up to the bar, but it sure as hell felt like it. It was so rare to see a lone Man down here after dark that they were too startled to block my way.

The first thing I noticed was a table suspended from the ceiling where a couple of levitators were drinking. The walls had holos of alien scenes that made no sense to me, but right behind the bar there was one holo I recognized: a portrait of Conrad Bland, the greatest killer in the history of the human race.

Some of the customers were meticulously neat. Others littered the floor with drinks and containers. The drinks on the tables were of every color and odor imaginable. There was food on the tables; some vegetable, some animal, some alive and squealing in terror.

I made my way to the bar, and the bartender, a furry Lodinite, walked over and said something in gibberish.

"Put on your t-pack," I said, indicating the translating device I saw lying on a shelf next to half a dozen oddly-shaped containers of some smoky blue liquid.

"That won't be necessary," he said in heavily-accented Terran. "I just wanted to see if you had bothered to learn my language."

"If I ever visit Lodin XI, I will," I said.

"I do not believe you."

I shrugged. "That's your privilege."

"What are you doing here?" demanded the bartender. "This is the Alien Quarter. Your metabolism cannot handle anything we serve."

"You'd be surprised what I can handle," I said. I pointed to the bottles with the blue fluid. "I'll have one of those."

Once the crowd saw that I was ordering a drink, and not here to slaughter one or more of them, they lost interest in me. The Lodinite stared expressionlessly at me for a long moment, then got a bottle and brought it over.

"How much?" I asked.

"Thirty credits," he said. "Or eighteen Maria Theresa dollars."

I shook my head. "All I've got is this," I said, pulling out one of the New Warsaw bills.

"Where did you get that?"

"I get around."

"It is illegal to possess New Warsaw drachmas," said the Lodinite.

"No," I corrected him. "It's illegal to exchange them."

"What's the difference?"

I pulled out a twenty-credit note. "This is the difference."

"I don't understand," he said.

"You tell me who spends or accepts New Warsaw drachmas, and you get to keep it."

"My life is worth more than twenty credits," he replied.

Which meant he knew someone who dealt in drachmas. Someone who was perfectly willing to kill him if he started naming names.

"Your loss," I said. I turned my back to the bar and faced the hundred or so aliens who had crowded into the tavern, trying to think of what to do next. If the bartender thought he was likely to get killed for telling me what I wanted to know, it didn't seem likely that anyone else was going to volunteer the information. Still, I hadn't come down here just to quit and go home.

I clapped my hands together. It wasn't a sound most of them could make, and it got their immediate attention.

"I need your help," I said, then waited for the hoots, growls and squawks of derision and laughter to die down.

"My name is Jake Masters," I said. "I'm a detective. My partner is a member of the Broskog race from Alpha Gillespie III." That at least got them to quiet down. They'd probably never encountered a Man who had an alien partner. "He was murdered earlier tonight. I'm after his killer."

"Why do you care?" demanded a Canphorite.

"Because he was my partner," I said. "And more than that—he was my friend."

"Men don't have alien friends!" yelled a burly Atrian.

"This man does," I said. "I'll tell you something else. I'm going to find his killer with or without your help, but it's in your best interest to help me."

"Ha!" said the Atrian.

"Why should we help you?" said a Mollute.

"Because the killer had no compunction about killing one alien. Are you content to wait around until he kills another?" I could see I had a few of them thinking, so I followed up on it. "You know and I know that the police aren't going to pay much attention to a dead alien, so if I don't do it and you don't help me, then my friend is just going to be one more statistic that no one pays any attention to."

A tall, well-muscled Patrukan pushed his way through the crowd and wound up standing just a couple of feet from me. Like all his race, he had slits for nostrils and ears, a massive chest, and was covered with coarse brown hair, not quite thick enough to be called fur. For a moment I thought he was going to take a punch at me, but then he turned to face the rest of the room.

"I believe him, and I will help him," he said.

"He is a Man," said a Canphorite. "That means he is lying."

"If he is lying, we will find it out and decide what to do," said the Patrukan. "But his argument makes sense."

"I will not help any Man!" thundered the Canphorite.

"No one says you have to," replied the Patrukan. "But I will."

"Thanks," I said. "Now that we've got through that, I hope you can help me." I pulled a bill out of my pocket. "This is a banknote for 100 New Warsaw drachmas. My partner was hired to follow someone—a man or an alien, I don't know which—while I was off-planet on another case. The only thing I know is that he was paid with this, which is not a negotiable currency in the Iliad system."

"Why did he accept it, then?" asked the Patrukan.

"He'd spent all but a couple of months of his life on Alpha Gillespie III. He wouldn't have known what currencies were legal or illegal on Odysseus."

"If he was such a brilliant detective that you took him on as a partner . . ."

"He wasn't any kind of detective," I said. "He was a very minor police officer on a planet that had almost no crime."

"Then why—?"

"Because he was willing to risk his life for mine," I said.

"That is the only reason?"

"Can you think of a better one?" I replied.

The Patrukan extended a hairy, seven-fingered hand. "I think we are going to become friends, Jake Masters."

I took his hand. "Good," I said. "I can use all the friends I can get."

"My name is Goriejyxsol," he said.

I tried pronouncing it a couple of times, and got hoots of derision from those who were close enough to hear me.

"How about if I just call you George?" I asked at last.

"I can answer to George," he replied.

"Good," I said. "Can you also tell me who deals in New Warsaw drachmas?"

"No, I have never encountered this currency before. But I can help you find out."

"I appreciate that," I said. "I can't afford to pay you much, but—"

"I have not asked for money."

"Then what do you want?"

"You seem an honorable being. I am an honorable being. There is a killer on the planet, a killer who has murdered a member of a race that is neither mine nor yours. Should not honorable beings join forces to bring such a killer to justice?"

"Makes sense to me," I said, "especially on a world where honorable beings of any race are in short supply."

George turned and faced the crowd. "From this moment forward, Jake Masters is under my protection. If you harm or hinder him, you have harmed or hindered me. Is that understood?"

There was a sullen muttering of acknowledgment and agreement.

"I think it is time to go looking for the being who gave your partner this currency," George said to me.

"Fine by me," I said. "Let's go."

He began walking toward the door, and the crowd, which was still clearly hostile to me, suddenly parted like the Red Sea before Moses.

Just who the hell are you, I thought, and what am I getting myself into?

\* \* \*

We walked down a couple of crazily-twisting streets, then stopped in front of a small, dimly-lit dive.

"We can talk in here," said George. "It's very quiet."

We entered the place. There were maybe a dozen tables, but the interesting thing was that the table-tops ranged in height from about two feet above the ground to maybe eight feet. A couple of the smaller chairs looked like they were for toys or dolls; the bigger ones could have accommodated creatures that dwarfed a Torqual. There were no patrons.

Two Patrukans were standing by the door. They came to attention when we walked in, and one of them indicated a table in the corner. We went over to it and sat down.

"Do you come here often?" I asked.

That seemed to amuse the Patrukan who had led us to the table, and he uttered a hoarse alien laugh.

"From time to time," answered George. "What will you be drinking?"

"This place doesn't look like it caters to Men," I said. "I don't think they'll have anything for me."

"I happen to know they've laid in a stock of Antarean brandy."

"Then I'll have some," I replied.

He caught one of the Patrukan's eye and made a quick gesture with his hand, and the Patrukan sealed the door.

"We won't be bothered now," he said.

"They locked the place?"

"Yes."

"Just on your say-so?"

"That's right."

"You own it," I said. It wasn't a question.

"Yes." He looked up as a robot came over, carrying two glasses on a tray. It gave me the brandy, and George got something green with smoke rising from it. He uttered a sentence or two in Patrukan and the robot replied in kind.

"What did you say?" I asked.

"I thanked it for bringing our drinks."

"It's just a robot."

"Good manners are good manners," replied George. "Now, tell me about your partner."

"Like I said at The Purple God, he's a Broskog from Alpha Gillespie III."

"I've only seen one Broskog."

"They're pretty rare in these parts," I said. "He'd only been here a couple of weeks. I told him not to accept any jobs while I was off-planet, but he thought this would be an easy one."

"And you have no idea who paid him?"

"No," I said. "My guess is that it was an alien. A Man would know how dangerous it was to pass that currency. I've got the police working on it."

"Five minutes a day, or ten?" asked George.

I smiled ruefully. "That's why I need all the help I can get."

"I assume you searched your office for any trace of your client?"

"Of course."

"Possibly I can help there."

"I was pretty thorough," I said. "You're welcome to take a look, but I don't think you'll find anything."

"I'm sure I won't. But I have a friend who might."

"Oh?"

"A Cabroni."

"Okay, I give up. What's a Cabroni?"

"A native of Sybrenius II. Cabronis have an extraordinarily well-developed sense of smell. He might be able to identify your client, at least by race and species."

"It couldn't hurt to try," I said. Then: "What's he going to cost me?"

"Nothing," said George. "He'll do it because I ask him to."

"Another honorable being?" I asked.

"A reasonable one, anyway."

"You know," I said, "if he's as good as you say, maybe he won't have to go to my office. Maybe he can get the scent right off the money. Max didn't have it very long."

"Let's find out." George uttered a command to one of the Patrukans. I want to say he barked it out, but he didn't; he never raised his voice, yet the two practically fell over each other getting to the door and unsealing it. One raced out into the night, the other re-sealed the door and took up his position next to it.

"I assume you just sent for the Cabroni?" I said.

"Yes. He should be here in a few minutes." He paused thoughtfully. "Was your partner intelligent?"

"Max?" I said. "Yeah, I'd say so. Inexperienced, but not dumb."

"Then we can assume he took the job primarily because he knew it would take him to the Alien Quarter, where he'd be less likely to draw attention."

"Probably," I said. "He didn't realize how much he'd stand out even down here. Like I said, inexperienced. He was new to Odysseus, and couldn't have known there were only three or four Broskogs on the whole planet." I paused. "Still, our client wasn't a lot brighter. He paid Max in illegal money. If Max died, we'd find it; and if he didn't die, sooner or later he'd spend it. So either way, there was a pretty fair chance that the money was going to get traced back to the source."

"What if the killer took it?"

"I wish he had," I said. "It would make him that much easier to find." I paused a moment. "The more I think about it, the more I keep coming back to the fact that Max knew something was wrong. He had time to leave me a message saying he was in over his head and was pulling out."

"You think the killer's still on the planet?"

"I hope so. It all depends on whether he got paid in drachmas or not. If he did, he's gone—but there aren't a lot of worlds in this sector where they're legal tender, so my guess is he got paid in credits or Maria Theresa dollars, and that means he has no reason to leave. He's loaded with money, he killed an alien no one except me cares about, and Forensics hasn't been able to come up with a damned thing. Why the hell would he go? He's safe right here."

There was a sudden high-pitched whine, and the remaining Patrukan unsealed the door. His partner entered with the first Cabroni I'd ever seen. He looked like a five-foot-tall rodent with palsy, every limb shaking, his long black nose twitching constantly. At first I thought he didn't have any eyes; then I saw that they were obscured by the long, thick hair on his face.

The Cabroni left the Patrukans at the door and walked directly to the table. George greeted him in a tongue I'd never heard before, all grunts, coughs and clicks, and then the Cabroni activated his t-pack.

"Greetings, Friend Masters," he said, the words coming out in a mechanical monotone. "I am pleased to meet you. My name is Wyllgerix."

"May I call you Will?" I asked.

"If it pleases you," he replied. "May I examine the money, please?"

I pulled out all five bills and handed them over. He held them to his nose and inhaled, then stood motionless for almost half a minute.

"These bills have passed through many hands," announced Will. "Prior to you, they were briefly in the possession of a male Broskog. Prior to that, a female human. Prior to that . . ."

"Just a minute," I said. "You're sure that the person who touched the money prior to the Broskog was a human female?"

"Yes," said the Cabroni. "The money was in her possession for . . ." It paused, as if considering. "For between three and four Standard weeks."

"Thanks," I said, gently removing the money from his hand and stuffing it back into a pocket. "Can I buy you a drink?"

"I have no use for liquids," replied Will. "I am happy to have done a service for my friend Goriejyxsol."

"Will you need help getting home?" asked George as the Cabroni approached the door.

"Do I ever?" he replied. Then he deactivated his t-pack, waited for the door to let him through, and he was gone.

"Max never named our client's race or gender," I said. "That narrows it down."

"To half the planet."

"No, the Cabroni gave us more than that. The woman had been in possession of the money three to four weeks. I've got a friend down at headquarters who can check the spaceport's Customs and Immigration records for me. We'll start with the assumption that she was given the money off-planet and brought it with her. That means we'll check every woman who's arrived on Odysseus in the past four weeks."

"That could be thousands."



"Hundreds, more likely," I said. "We'll start with those who have criminal records. You and I can't access the records to check them all out, but the cops can."

"They won't," said George. "When did they ever care about a dead non-human, especially a rotund blue being that bears no resemblance to a Man?"

"Not often," I admitted. "But they'll care about a live human who's bringing illegal currency onto the planet."

"Yes," he said, nodding thoughtfully. "I suppose they will." Then: "What's your next step?"

"I suppose when it's daylight I should take a good look at the spot Max was killed."

"I thought his body was dumped far away from the scene of the murder."

"Yeah, but you can lead me to it."

"I beg your pardon."

"I thought you were an honorable being, George," I said. "You've been holding out on me."

"Why should you think so?"

"Come on, George," I said. "All you've been interested from the start is the identity of my client, the woman who paid Max with the drachmas. You haven't asked a single question about who Max was following. Not one." I smiled a tight smile. "That's because you don't have to. You already knew who he was following, George. It was you. So it figures you know where he was killed." He simply stared at me, and I continued: "When we sat down, you told me you'd only seen one Broskog in your life. But just a minute ago, you knew what Max looked like. He was the Broskog you'd seen."

George smiled that alien smile of his. "I'd heard you were good at your job, Jake. I wanted to see for myself."

"It was you," I repeated.

"Yes, it was me he was following," he confirmed. "But I didn't kill him."

"Why should I believe you?"

"Honorable beings do not lie to each other, Jake. I may not have told you that your partner was following me, but I have not lied to you."

"Big difference," I snorted. "How honorable can you be? Every thief and killer in the Quarter genuflects to you like you're a god, someone outside the Quarter hired my partner to follow you, you say one word and people jump to do your bidding. Who the hell are you, George?"

"I'm just an opportunist who tries to make the most of his opportunities," said George. "And I assure you that I want your partner's killer found as much as you do."

"If you mean it, then it's time to put your cards on the table."

"I don't understand."

"It's time to stop withholding information and tell me what you know."

"All right, Jake," he said. "But before I confided in you, I had to make sure you were as good as your reputation. I trust you to use what I tell you only in our efforts to find your partner's killer, and not to share it with the police."

"You talk, and I'll decide."

"I'm sure you are an honorable Man," said George. "I couldn't ask for any more."

"Forget the honorable crap and start talking," I said irritably.

He held up a hand, and I noticed that the two Patrukans at the door had taken a couple of menacing steps toward the table when they heard my tone, then froze when they saw his hand.

"Please moderate your language, Jake," said George. "Not everyone knows that we are good friends who are soon to become partners."

"Including me," I said.

"But you will."

"Not if you don't start telling me what I want to know."

"All right," he said. "As you have noticed, I am not without a certain cachet in the Quarter."

"An understatement," I said. "As far as I can tell, you run the damned place."

"Not without help," he said, not bothering to deny it. "I view myself as the guardian of the Quarter's economy."

"That means you take a rake-off on every transaction," I suggested.

"Please, Jake," he said. "I am explaining my position to you. There is no need for rude accusations." He paused. "Without me, without the organization I have put together, anarchy would reign in the Alien Quarter. There would be gang warfare, there would be wholesale slaughter almost every night, and we both know that the police force would do nothing to stop it."

"No, they probably wouldn't," I admitted.

"They would cheer all the murderers on, because each killing would mean one less unwanted alien to share Odysseus with," continued George. "And indeed that was the situation until five years ago. That was when I arrived here. The Quarter had been run by six criminal kingpins who were constantly at war with one another, chaos was endemic, and most of the money went into the pockets of Men who never even entered the Quarter. I decided to structure our economy along the lines of a multi-planetary conglomerate, and I think it is not unfair to say we have prospered ever since I began to apply my methods. There are no gang wars, and almost all of the money stays right here."

"How many Men and aliens did you have to kill along the way?" I said. "Or is that an indiscreet question?"

"Under other circumstances, it could even be a deadly one," answered George. "But I know that you would never use anything I told you to harm me." He paused and flashed me a humorless smile. "Still, I would like to hear you say so before I continue."

"George, all I want to do is nail the son of a bitch who killed my partner. I'm not a cop. I don't care what laws you've broken. No one's paying me to get the goods on you. As long as our interests coincide, I

have no problem working with you, and I promise you that anything you tell me while we're working together will go no farther."

"I accept that answer," he said. "I will put my trust in you."

And doubtless keep me under close watch day and night.

"Good," I said aloud. "Why don't you start by telling me who hired Max to follow you?"

"I don't know," answered George. "If I did, she'd be dead by now."

"Okay," I said, "you don't know who she was. Do you know why she had you tailed?"

"Certainly," said George. "She wanted to kill me."

"With Max?" I said disbelievingly. "The little bastard couldn't hurt a fly."

"Whatever a fly may be," said George. "No. She just wanted to know where I would be so she could have me assassinated."

"Why does she want you dead?"

"Jake, do you know the size of the underground economy I control?"

"I'm sure it's big. I don't play guessing games."

"We are, after the central government, the second largest financial entity on Odysseus."

"And you don't pay taxes, either," I said.

"Why should we? The government supplies no services to the Alien Quarter. But I am getting off the subject. In the past month, three of my corporate directors—you would call them my lieutenants, or perhaps my henchmen—have been murdered. One could be an act of anger or passion. Two could be a coincidence. But three? Someone is trying to take over my holding company, and the quickest way to do that is to eliminate the Board of Directors and especially the CEO."

"Are you sure you're not a Man in disguise?" I said. "You sure as hell sound like a corporate CEO."

"There are those who distrust businessmen," said George. "But I choose to accept that as a compliment."

"So you think this woman's planning to take over the Quarter's business, or at least your end of it?"

"I have no idea," answered George. "She could simply be a surrogate for the Man or alien who wants to supplant me."

"Makes sense," I agreed. "It could even be that the real brain behind what you would call a hostile takeover chose her because she was dumb enough to pass the drachmas he gave her a few weeks ago. Then if the cops actually bothered looking into the murder of an alien criminal kingpin, eventually the money would lead them to her—and if she's just a bag woman, you can bet her boss will get to her before the cops do."

"You've had more experience hunting down criminals than I have," began George. I doubted it like all hell, but kept my mouth shut. "What is our next step? My entire organization is at your disposal."

"That's comforting," I said. "Maybe in the next day or two I'll think of something for them to do."

"Think quickly," said George. "There is a powerful organization at work here, quite possibly as powerful as my own. Once they realize that you are looking into your partner's death, and that you have allied yourself with me, I will no longer be their primary target, Jake. You will be."

"The thought had crossed my mind," I said dryly.

"I am glad to have you on our side. It is a war we must win."

"I'm not fighting a war," I said. "I'm avenging a friend's death. Once it's done, I'm done."

"I thought we were going to be friends," said George.

"Perhaps someday we will be," I replied. "But for the moment, we are honorable enemies who have declared a truce."

\* \* \*

We waited until sunrise, and then George led me through winding streets to a filthy, cluttered alley, filled with alcoves and cubbyholes. We walked down it for about 50 feet, and then he stopped.

"This is where he got it?" I asked.

"I assume so."

"You assume so?"

"I didn't see him killed," said George. "This is where I found the body."

"Why did you come looking for it?"

"I had some of my bodyguards with me when I came back. I was curious to see why he wasn't still following me."

"Great," I said. "So the greatest criminal kingpin of Odysseus didn't see anything, didn't hear anything, and doesn't know anything."

"Don't be insulting, Jake," he said. "You now know where your partner was killed. That's something you didn't know one minute ago."

"All right, I apologize," I said. "I'm just a little tense right now." I looked around. "Hell, we'll need the Forensics team down here. The killer could have hidden in half a dozen places up and down this alley."

"At least," agreed George.

And then it hit me.

"Why was the killer hiding in the alley in the first place?" I asked.

"So that your partner wouldn't see him," said George.

I shook my head impatiently. "That's why he was hiding. But why here? Why not in the next alley or the next block?"

George stared at me for a long moment. "I don't know," he said in troubled tones.

"Yes you do," I said. "I can see it in your face. You just don't like what you know. If the killer was after

Max and nothing else, he couldn't know where Max would be—but he knew the route you would take if you knew you were being followed. That's why he was hiding in this alley and not someplace else. You've got someone on your team who knows you inside out, who knew that you'd be able to spot Max and knew exactly where you'd go to lose him or pounce on him."

"It doesn't make sense, Jake," said George. "If he's one of mine, why hasn't he come forward and told me what he did? He couldn't know I wasn't in any danger. He had to figure there'd be a handsome bonus for anyone who saved my life."

"That's what we have to figure out, isn't it?" I said.

"I'll say it again, it doesn't make any sense. If he works for me, why kill your partner and keep it a secret?"

"I can think of half a dozen reasons for him to have done it."

"Let me hear them," said George.

"Okay," I said. "There've got to be big-money hits out on you. Given the size of your empire—"

"Corporation," he corrected me.

"Okay, given the size of your corporation, there are probably half a dozen hits out on you. Maybe the killer thought Max was a freelance shooter, and he didn't want to lose or share the fee."

"That's one."

"You want another? Okay. Maybe the woman who hired Max moved too soon, disobeyed an order, tried to steal a march on her boss. This could have been a warning to her."

"By one of my enforcers?" said George harshly. "My enforcers don't even step on an insect without my orders."

"It could be an enforcer, a secretary, an ambitious underling, even a mistress if Patrukans have them," I said. "The fact that he or she knows your habits and is on your payroll doesn't necessary mean he's yours. You're not in what I'd call an ethical business; there are quicker ways to make it to the top than waiting for promotions." I paused. "You want me to spell out the rest of the possibilities, or will you take my word for it?"

"No, I believe you," said George. "I'm not surprised that I have a traitor in my organization. I probably have quite a few. I was just mystified at the thought of one of them saving my life."

"Maybe he knew all the time that you weren't in any danger from Max," I said. "I'm sure you've had Men and aliens killed to send a message to others; that could be what happened to Max. Or maybe he was just in the way."

"In the way?" George repeated.

"Between the killer and his real target," I said, pointing at him. "We won't know until we find the killer."

"So now I have to decide who I can turn my back on."

"You want the truth?" I said. "I'm the only one you can trust, because I'm the only person you know who doesn't want what you have. Now, why did you come down this alley?"

"I've got it rigged with force fields and stun rays," he replied. "Whenever I think I'm in danger, I come here. All the devices are programmed to recognize me and let me pass. The first two will merely stun anyone who follows me, but no one else can reach the end of the alley alive. I figured he'd be more willing to talk to me after he'd been stunned."

"Okay, that explains another mystery," I said.

"What mystery?"

"The message Max left saying that he was in too deep," I said. "He couldn't have said it after spotting his killer. He'd have been too busy running for his life." I looked around, found a small stone, and tossed it far down the alley. It exploded when it hit one of the lethal force fields. "But if Max had seen some rodent go up in smoke like that, he'd have known he couldn't follow you any farther, and that the job was a lot more dangerous than he'd thought. The killer was watching him, and when he knew Max was quitting, he came out of the shadows and crushed his skull. Maybe he was being paid to kill Max. Or maybe he was after you, but was afraid Max had spotted him and decided not to leave any witnesses."

George looked troubled. "I've probably got 40 subordinates who know I've set up this route." His lips twisted almost into an S, which was a Patrukan's equivalent of a frown. "We're right back where we started, aren't we?"

"No," I said. "Two minutes ago we didn't know what scared Max off. Now we do. Five minutes ago the killer could have been anyone. Now at least we know he works for you. Or worked for you and knew your habits. Have you fired anyone who might hold a grudge?"

"In this business, no one gets fired and no one retires. They serve until their contracts are terminated."

He didn't leave any doubt that I could substitute "lives" for "contracts."

There was nothing more to see in the alley.

"Can you deactivate the force fields?"

"Of course."

"Do it." Then it was time to contact Selina again.

"What is it, Jake?" she said. "Night shift ended two hours ago, I've put in my three hours of overtime for you, and I'm going home to bed."

"I need a Forensics team down in the Alien Quarter. I've found the alley where Max was killed. I'll feed the coordinates into your computer."

"I'll send them as soon as we're through talking."

"Fine. How long will it take you to run a check on every human woman to land on Odysseus in the past 30 days?"

"Goddammit, Jake!" she said, "I've been here ten hours already!"

"How long?"

"I don't know."

"Half an hour?"

"Less."

"Ten minutes?"

"Oh, shut up!" she snapped. "Check back with me in five minutes."

"Thanks," I said. "Now I owe you three desserts."

She snarled at me and broke the connection.

"Will she do it?" asked George.

"Yeah," I said. "She'd rather be a glamorous actress or an emperor's kept woman, but she's a damned good cop."

"Good enough to cause me problems in the future?"

I stared at him for a long moment. "George, she's under my protection."

He stared back, then nodded. "Understood."

Neither of us knew what to say next, so we just stood there awkwardly for a couple of minutes, and then my communicator beeped and Selina's image popped into view. She'd looked sleepy and annoyed a few minutes ago; now she looked alert and excited.

"You found something," I said.

"You bet!" she said, unable to keep from smiling.

"You gonna tell me, or are you just gonna stand there looking smug?"

"Did you ever hear of a world called New Warsaw, Jake?" she said, grinning from ear to ear.

"We couldn't be that lucky," I said.

"Well, if you're sure we couldn't, I guess I won't tell you."

"Don't make me beg," I said. "What have you got?"

"I've got two women who came here from New Warsaw in the past month," she said. "Got your Capture on?"

"Yeah, go ahead."

"The first one is Heidi Rubinski, and I've just fed her holo, address and passport data into your computer. The other is Elana Mador, but you probably won't be interested in her."

"Why not?"

"First of all, she's a cop."

"You never heard of a dirty cop?" I said.

"And second, she's stationed in Ajax, 300 miles east of here. I checked, and she was on duty yesterday."

"What time did she get off?"

"1600 hours."

That's 4:00 PM on 24-hour worlds, but it was dinnertime on Odysseus. Still, she was one time zone ahead of us, so if she'd caught a flight or the underground zoomway right after she clocked out, she might have had time to get here when Max left the message.

"How's her record?" I asked.

"As a cop? Exemplary."

"Can you transmit everything you've got on both women to my computer?"

She nodded wearily. "Yes."

"Okay, and thanks, Selina," I said. "Go home and get your beauty sleep. I'll start with Heidi Rubinski. When you get back to work tonight, check and see if the Mador woman has any pressing debts."

"Will do. And Jake?"

"Yeah?"

"I like chocolate," she said. "Real chocolate. From Old Earth itself."

"You know what that costs?" I said.

"Don't you think what I just gave you was worth it?"

She broke the connection.

"Don't look distressed, Jake," said George, who had been listening intently while standing out of camera range. "I have two warehouses of human foodstuffs. I seem to remember that one of them has imported chocolate. It is yours."

"I appreciate that," I said. "The stuff costs a fortune, and not all of us are billionaire criminal kingpins."

"I offer you a gift, and you call me a criminal," he said chidingly.

"It's my manner," I said. "I really am grateful." I bit my lip before I could add that he really was a criminal kingpin. "We've seen everything there is to see here, and we'll just be in the Forensic team's way. We've got a couple of leads. I think it's time for us to split up and each follow one. You can start by trying to pinpoint the whereabouts of those forty underlings who know about the alley. I'll check on the ladies from New Warsaw."

"Agreed," said George. "One way or another, I will extract the truth from them."

Somehow the way he said the word "extract" made me very happy I was not one of the people he'd be questioning.

\* \* \*

I stopped by the office just long enough to check my messages—nothing from any potential clients, plenty from the landlord and the power company—and see what Selina had sent over from headquarters.



I decided I might as well interview the closer and more obvious suspect first. That was Heidi Rubinski. According to what Selina had given me, she was 37 years old, a retired schoolteacher, born on Spica II, raised on Roosevelt III, a current resident of New Warsaw.

Little bells started ringing inside my head. 37 and retired? Not on a schoolteacher's pay. And as far as Selina had been able to tell, she didn't have any friends or family here. It didn't take much mental work to turn that into the profile of an assassin.

Selina had also sent me her passport record. One trip to the McAllister system six months ago, nothing else in the past decade until she'd come here. Still, it didn't prove anything. There were half a dozen places just on Odysseus where I could get a passport claiming that I was Julius Caesar and lived in Rome, and each of them could stand up to almost any small spaceport's scrutiny.

I checked her Odysseus address. It looked familiar, but it wasn't until I rode the slidewalk there that I realized it was the local hospital. I walked up to the front desk, waited until a couple of other people were directed to their destinations, and then found myself face-to-face with a robot clerk.

"How may I help you, sir?" it asked.

"Have you got a patient here named Heidi Rubinski?"

"Yes, sir, we do."

"What's wrong with her?"

"You will have to confer with her physician, or the nursing station on her floor."

"When did she check in?"

"You will have to confer with her physician, or the nursing station on her floor."

"Fine. What floor is she on?"

"The seventh."

"I don't suppose you'd care to give me her room number?"

"You will have to confer with—"

"Forget it," I said.

I walked over to the nearest airlift and rode up to the seventh floor on a warm cushion of air. There was a nursing station a few feet away and I approached it.

"Yes, sir?" said a tripod Molarian nurse.

"I'm here to see Heidi Rubinski," I said. "I believe she's on this floor?"

"Yes she is, sir," said the nurse. "May I ask your relationship to her?"

"Is that required?"

"To see her? Yes, sir, it is."

"I'm her husband."

The Molarian glanced at a holo screen. "According to our records Heidi Rubinski is not married."

"It was a secret ceremony," I said. "Her parents don't like me."

"This is most irregular," said the Molarian. "I shall have to summon my superior."

He went off to find his boss, and I leaned over and looked at the screen. Nothing on it made any sense. Then, on a hunch, I said "Translate into Terran," and instantly everything became comprehensible . . . and disappointing.

Heidi Rubinski was suffering from eplasia, a disfiguring disease for which there was no known cure. The hospital at New Warsaw was pretty basic, and they'd transferred her here when they heard that one of the surgeons on Odysseus had been researching the disease for a few years.

"You are not allowed to read that screen!" said a harsh voice.

I turned and found myself facing the Molarian nurse and his boss, a toothpick-thin scaly-skinned Ramorian female.

"I just want some information."

"Are you related to the patient in question?"

I resisted the urge to take a swing at both of them, and instead pulled out my ID card. "I'm a licensed detective, working in concert with the Homer police force," I said. "A lingerie shop was robbed last night, and an eyewitness identified Heidi Rubinski. I'm checking on her whereabouts between sunset and midnight."

"That is the most ridiculous thing I've ever heard!" snapped the Ramorian. "Heidi Rubinski cannot even stand on her own power, and has not been out of her room in more than two weeks."

Which was all I needed to know.

"Thanks," I said. "But if any sexy black undergarments turn up here, even on the nursing staff, I'll be back."

I took the airlift down to the main floor, walked out of the building, and headed to the underground zoomway. It had replaced the ground-level monorail that had once connected Odysseus's major cities, and as long as there weren't any earthquakes, it was fast, efficient, and safe. I always felt like I was going back into the womb when I rode the zoomway; it was dark and quiet, and I hardly felt the motion at all. There were six groups going to Ajax, maybe eight Men and ten aliens, and the six compartments we'd leased linked up, took off down the long straight tunnel, and came to a stop maybe half an hour later.

I took an airlift up to the surface, caught a slidewalk that was heading to the heart of the city, and rode it until I got off at the police station. Then I walked up to the front desk and asked to see Elana Mador.

"What's your business with her?" asked the human sergeant who was manning the desk.

"Private," I said, flashing my ID.

"You're a long way from home, Detective Masters."

"With a little luck I'll be home for dinner," I said.

He got the hint. "Second floor, fourth room on the right."

I followed his instructions, and a moment later was standing in front of Sergeant Elana Mador's door. It scanned my retina, couldn't match it, asked for my ID, scanned my detective's license, and finally irised to let me through.

Elana was a muscular-looking woman, nearing fifty. She didn't bother to dye the gray out of her hair or surgically smooth out the jowls that were starting to appear. Her desk was neat, her uniform was neat, her walls and floor and chair were neat. The only rumpled thing in the office was me.

"Good afternoon, Detective Masters," she said.

"Call me Jake," I replied, walking farther into the room. "I'm sorry to intrude on you, but I need to ask you a few questions."

"Have a seat," she said, indicating a chair made of some alien hardwood. "I have nothing to hide. Well, nothing that you'd be asking about," she added with an embarrassing attempt to be cute and coy.

"You recently returned from New Warsaw," I said. "May I ask why you were there?"

"I had an uncle who lived there," she said. "I was his only close relative. He died last month, and I had to go out there, arrange the funeral, and start putting his affairs in order. Why?"

"I'm just verifying what I'd already been told," I said.

"And that's all you want to know?" she said, frowning.

"Two more questions," I said. "Did you bring any New Warsaw currency back with you?"

"Yes."

"You know it's illegal?"

"It's not illegal to possess it, only to spend it," she replied.

"Then why bring it at all?"

"I didn't like the exchange rate on New Warsaw," said Elana. "I'll probably have to go back there in a few months to dispose of the last of his possessions—I was on a tight schedule last month, and I didn't get everything done—so I thought I'd keep the money and take it back with me. Why pay to convert credits into drachmas, and then pay to convert drachmas back into credits a few days later?" She frowned. "Although as it happens, it's a moot point."

"Could you explain that, please?" I said.

"I lost the money a few days after I got back home."

"You lost it?" I said. "Gambling?"

"I never gamble," she replied heatedly. Then she seemed to calm down. "No, I misplaced it, I guess. My roommate and I turned the apartment upside down, but it wasn't there. I'd say someone stole it, but let's be honest—who the hell would pick a uniformed cop's pocket?"

"Do you know how much it was?"

"Eight hundred drachmas," she said. "Let me guess: it turned up in Homer."

I nodded my head. "Yes, it did."

"And you're trying to trace it back."

"Right."

"You said you had two more questions," she said suddenly. "What was the other?"

"Where were you last night between sunset and midnight?"

"Pulling a drunk out of the river," she said. "And yes, I have witnesses."

"It took you that long?"

"It took a couple of hours to pull him out and take him to the hospital. Then I came back here to dictate my report, and then I went home. Today is my roommate's day off. You can check with her if you like."

"Well," I said with a shrug, "as long as I'm here."

"I'll let her know you're coming. You doubtless have my address already."

"Yes, I do."

"Then I think that concludes this interview," she said, getting to her feet and extending a hand. "Good luck finding whoever or whatever it is that you're looking for."

She had to be the least curious person I'd ever met. I thanked her and took her extended hand. It was even more powerful than it looked.

I left the police station and reached her apartment in five minutes. Her roommate, a mousy little woman named Violet (which they tell me is an Old Earth flower), let me in and showed me around. It wasn't much of an apartment—a bedroom for each of them, a cozy parlor (but neat as a pin, just like the office), and a kitchen with room for a small table. The bathrooms each had a chemshower, but the sinks boasted real water.

I looked around for a few minutes, but I knew it was useless. Elana was a cop; she knew how to toss a room. If she hadn't found her money, it wasn't there to be found.

"Can I make you some coffee or tea, Mr. Masters?" asked Violet when I'd finished giving the place the once-over.

"Yeah," I said. "Coffee would be nice. It's a long trip back to Homer."

"Oh, not that long," she said from the kitchen. "I made it in less than 30 minutes on the zoomway yesterday."

"You were in Homer yesterday?"

"My boss often sends me out of town on business," she answered. "We've got branches in Homer, in Achilles, in Hektor . . ."

"Did you get caught in the rain last night?" I had no idea if it had rained. I thought it might be interesting to see if she knew.

"It must have been while I in transit," she answered. "I didn't get back until about an hour before

midnight." Then: "Oh. Elana asked me to tell you: she was home and in bed about forty minutes before midnight."

"Thank you, Violet."

She brought the coffee, and we made small talk for the next ten minutes. Well, she made it; I grunted occasionally to prove I was listening.

She seemed pleasant enough. A little empty-headed perhaps, but hardly a hardened criminal. Still, the worst killer I ever ran across was a devout churchgoing mother of five, and I was running out of leads, so I figured it was now or never with her.

"I wonder if you can help me, Violet," I said, getting to my feet.

"I'll do my best," she said.

"I saw a present on the zoomway platform that I want to buy for my ladyfriend," I said, trying to sound embarrassed. "I tried to buy it when I arrived here, but it costs fifteen credits and all I have with me is a 200-credit note. The guy told me he couldn't break anything that big. Can you make change for me?"

"Probably," she said. "I'll have to look and see."

She walked over to a drawer and pulled out a dainty little embroidered pouch, scarcely noticing that I was right behind her. She opened it to see if she had enough small bills, and that's when I saw them—the rest of Elana's New Warsaw drachmas. "Ah! Here are some twenties!" she exclaimed, pulling them out and turning to me.

She jumped back when she found herself staring down the barrel of my burner.

"I offer to do you a favor and you point a laser pistol at me and rob me?" she said severely. "What kind of man are you?"

"The kind who wants to know what you did with the other 500 drachmas," I said.

She collapsed on a chair, as if all the air had gone out of her.

"I thought I could pass the money here, but no one in Ajax would take it, so I decided to see if I could get rid of it in Homer. I couldn't pretend to find it in the apartment after all this time. Elana would know I'd taken it." She stared at me the way a wild animal stares at a hunter. "Are you going to tell her?"

"That all depends," I said.

"On what?"

"On what you tell me. I don't want to insult you, Violet, but unless you're the best damned actress I've ever seen, you're not smart enough to pull off what happened in Homer."

"You keep a civil tongue in your head!" she snapped.

"Pay attention," I said. "You've already committed at least two felonies, one by stealing the drachmas, and another by passing them to my partner."

"Masters!" she said suddenly. I thought she was going to slap herself on the forehead. "Now I remember where I saw that name. It was on the office door!"

"Who told you to go there and hire my partner?" I asked.

"I hire lots of people," she shot back.

"You don't hire lots of beachballs, and you don't pay lots of people with New Warsaw drachmas. Who told you to do it?"

"You know, he did look like a beachball at that," said Violet.

"I'm running out of patience with you," I said irritably. "Who told you to hire him?"

"No one told me to hire him," she said sullenly. "It was my own idea."

"Come on, Violet, you haven't had an idea in years. Either you tell me, or I tell Elana who stole her money."

"No!" she yelled suddenly. "You can't tell her!"

"If she's your friend, I hate to think of what you do to your enemies," I said. "Now, I'm getting tired of asking you—who told you to hire Max?"

"No one told me to hire your partner," she said. "I was just told to hire a detective."

"And when you found out or guessed that he was new to the planet, you figured you could pass some of the drachmas off on him and keep what your boss had given you to pay him with?"

She nodded. "He was a trusting little thing." She glared at me. "Not like some people."

"Being a trusting little thing cost him his life," I said.

"He's dead?" she repeated, and her shock was real.

"He's dead," I said. "And that means along with being a thief, you're also complicit in a murder."

"He's really dead?"

"He's really dead."

"That's it," she said. "I'm not saying another word."

"Oh, you're going to say one more thing, Violet," I told her. "You're going to say who told you to hire my partner, because if you don't, I'm going to contact Elana before I leave this apartment and give her the privilege of arresting you."

"You can't do that!" she said desperately. "She's my only friend."

"The name, Violet."

She glared at me. If looks could kill, I'd have been dead meat. Finally she spoke. "James Bryson."

"And he's in town?"

"Yes."

"I think you'd better tell me where I can find him."

"You said I just had to tell you one thing," she protested.

"You think you're the only one who lies?" I shot back. "Now, where is he?"

She dummied up for a minute, we went through the whole rigamarole about my contacting Elana again, and finally she gave me an address.

"Thank you, Violet," I said, putting my burner away and walking to the door. "Don't think of leaving town. You're not bright enough to stay hidden."

"Promise you won't tell Bryson I gave you his name!" she said, suddenly panic-stricken. "It's the best job I ever had."

"I promise."

"Are you going to come back and arrest me?"

"I don't know. If things work out, the only thing you'll have to do is pay Elana back her money."

"But then she'll know I stole it!" she said plaintively. "Besides, half of it is gone."

I could have told her that she could buy some drachmas on the black market, but my partner was dead, at least in part because of her, and I was a little short on sympathy. I just walked out the door without another word, and headed to James Bryson's office.

\* \* \*

The building was big. The office was big. And James Bryson fit both. He stood six or seven inches above six feet, he was broad-jawed and broad-shouldered and broad-hipped, a door of a man. If he didn't have the most expensive tailor in Ajax, it was only because a more expensive one had opened shop since breakfast. His hair was too thick and too perfect to have been his own, not when he was clearly closing in on sixty. He had piercing blue eyes, and he almost never blinked.

"Come in, Mr. Masters, come in!" he said in a booming voice. "You said you had something of the utmost importance to discuss with me. What possible interest can a former police officer from Homer have in me?"

"You know I used to be a cop?"

He smiled, displaying a mouthful of perfect teeth. "I know almost as much about you as you do, Mr. Masters," he said. "When you entered the building, our security system began checking you out. By the time you arrived on this floor, I knew that you were a private detective who used to work for the police, I knew your financial profile, I knew that you had visited a local cop named Elana Mador, and I knew you've been to her apartment." Another smile. "But I don't know what you drink."

"Just about anything that's wet," I said.

He snapped his fingers, and a robot came out of somewhere carrying a pair of glasses. "Neboolian whiskey," he announced. "I hope you like it, Jake." Then: "Is it all right if I call you Jake?"

"It's my name," I said, taking a glass from the robot. I took a sip. "Not bad."

"All right, Jake," said Bryson. "Now we've met, we've had a drink, and we're just Jake and Jim. What do you think you learned from that idiot?"

"From Violet?" I said.

"Have you had time to talk to any other idiots today?"

"No," I said. "But the day's young yet."

"Before we go any farther, I want you to know I had nothing to do with your partner's death," said Bryson.

"I'm sure you want me to know that," I replied. "But I don't know it yet."

"It's the truth. But there's a good chance that I'm going to be responsible for Violet Ashwing's, that I promise you."

"Let me ask you a question, Mr. Bryson," I said.

"Jim," he corrected me.

"Okay, Jim. Besides promising to kill people and denying that you kill people, what else do you do for a living?"

"Pretty much the same thing as your friend Goriejxsol."

"What do you know about George?" I said.

"Is that what you call him?" asked Bryson.

"I'm asking the questions."

"George considers himself a financier and an executive. I consider myself an entrepreneur. When all is said and done, they're the same."

"You're saying that he runs the Alien Quarter and you run Ajax."

"I run a part of Ajax," said Bryson, smiling again. "I'm only a small-time criminal megalomaniac."

"Why did you have my partner killed?"

"I already told you, Jake—I had nothing to do with it."

"You sent Violet to Homer, she hired my partner, and now he's dead. Tell me how you had nothing to do with it."

"Violet works for me," said Bryson. "She's got the brains of a potted plant, but she's reasonably harmless."

"She's also a thief."

"We can't all be perfect," he said. "She knows I've got security holos on her every minute she's in the building. I could care less if she steals from her girlfriend."

"I already know she works for you."

"I don't just have employees and competitors, Jake," he continued. "I've got a partner, and he's a lot smarter than Violet. I haven't been able to prove it, but I think he's made a deal, or is trying to make a deal, with your friend George."



"What kind of deal?"

"The likeliest is that he turns over our Alien Quarter to George and his agents if George helps him dump me and take over my organization." He paused while he finished off his drink. "He's in Homer right now. I've got a tail on him—hell, three tails, one who's obvious, and two he'll never spot while he's losing the first. But to play it safe, I wanted a tail on George too, just in case my partner lost all three of the men I put on him."

"And you sent Violet."

"I couldn't go myself," explained Bryson. "Hell, if I'm tailing my partner, he's probably tailing me. Why give him or one of George's hitters a free shot at me? So I sent the idiot."

"And she paid my partner off in New Warsaw drachmas."

He almost did a double-take. "You're kidding!"

"The hell I am," I said. "Why do you think I'm here? I followed the drachmas back to Violet."

"Well, I hope to hell you don't think I killed your partner so I could steal some money that would land me in jail the minute I tried to spend it."

"I don't know why you killed my partner," I said. "That's what I'm trying to find out."

"Look, Jake," he said earnestly. "I had nothing to gain from killing him. I even told her to call him off."

It was my turn to look surprised. "Explain."

"She checked in with me a few minutes after she hired him. The second she told me he was a Broskog, I realized that he'd be spotted in less than a minute. There can't be more than five or six of them within twenty lightyears of the Iliad system. I wanted to know if my partner was meeting George, not to alert the whole fucking Alien Quarter that I'd put a tail on their boss."

"Then what went wrong?" I asked.

"That's what we're going to find out." He touched a spot on his desk. "Bring in Violet Ashwing."

"Right now?" said a disembodied voice.

"Right now."

"You want her in your office?"

"No, take her down to the basement and hook her up to the Neverlie Machine."

"She's at her apartment?"

He looked questioningly at me.

"She was twenty minutes ago," I said.

"Yes," said Bryson. "Let me know when she gets here." He broke the connection. "This shouldn't take long, and then we'll solve the rest of the puzzle. Would you care for another drink, Jake?"

"Later."

"You act like you don't trust me," he said, trying unsuccessfully to sound hurt. "I've shared my liquor with you, I've admitted that I'm a racketeer, I'm pulling in someone who can provide some answers about your partner's murder. What more can I do to prove that I want to be your friend?"

I thought about it. "Not much," I admitted.

"Did you drink with George last night?"

"Yes."

"If you can drink with him, you can drink with me." He snapped his fingers and the robot reappeared with fresh glasses. I downed mine, and he looked approvingly at me. "Now we're friends."

"At least we're not shooting at each other," I said, handing the glass back to the robot.

"Another?"

I shook my head. "I'd like to be sober enough to understand what Violet says."

"In retrospect, I don't know why I keep her around."

"Probably because you had proof she was a thief, and you promised to turn it over to her roomie if she didn't do what you wanted."

"True," he said. "But I have the same hold over dozens of men and women, and more than a few aliens as well. This one wasn't pretty, wasn't sexy, sure as hell wasn't bright. I never gave her anything important to do." He sighed. "I don't know why I didn't just shove her off a rooftop."

"She'd probably have had to ask directions on the way down," I said.

He threw back his head and laughed uproariously. "By God, I like you, Jake! I hope we never find ourselves on opposite sides."

"Just keep out of Homer and maybe we won't."

"I don't know if that's possible," said Bryson. "It all depends on my partner."

"Your partner is your business," I said. "Someone's still going to pay for mine."

"I'm sure someone will," he replied.

We were silent for a couple of minutes, and then he got word that Violet was in what the voice at the other end called the Interrogation Room.

"You want to come along for this, Jake?" he asked.

"Have you really got a Neverlie Machine, or are you just going to beat the crap out of her?"

"We've got one," he said. "Latest model."

"Okay, I'm coming."

We got into his private airlift and descended to the lowest level in the building. There were five men and a huge Torqual waiting for us, and we followed them to the Interrogation Room. The door irised and we stepped through. It was a smallish room, maybe twelve feet on a side, and right in the middle of it sat Violet, hooked up to the machine, which was attached to her left arm, her rib cage, and both her temples.

Bryson signaled one man to stay and work the machine; the others all left.

"Hi, Violet," said Bryson pleasantly. "Thanks for coming in on your day off."

"Why is he here?" she demanded, jerking her head in my direction.

"He has some questions to ask you," said Bryson.

"I already answered all his questions!"

"He has some new ones. Just answer them truthfully and we'll take you right back home, with a nice cash bonus for your time."

She glared at me balefully.

"I thought you were going to keep it secret," she said accusingly.

"I said if you cooperated I'd keep it secret from Elana, and I will," I replied.

"You weren't going to tell Mr. Bryson I gave you his name!" she snapped.

"I didn't," I said. "He figured it out all by himself."

"Nobody's that smart," muttered Violet.

"Now, Violet, I want you to understand," said Bryson. "When you see that little light go on"—he pointed to the machine—"the Neverlie Machine will be activated. The first lie you tell will send an exceptionally painful jolt through your body. Each lie will give you a stronger jolt. I don't think you could survive four lies, certainly not five." Suddenly he smiled. "But why should you suffer at all? Just tell the truth, and you can be out of here in five minutes." He turned to me. "Jake?"

I stepped forward. "I want to make sure I've got this straight," I said. "You hired Max—that's my partner—to tail the Patrukan known as Goriejyxsol, is that correct?"

"You know it is."

"Then, after he'd left the office and gone out on the job, you contacted Mr. Bryson here and told him what you'd done."

"Yes."

"Including that you'd hired a Broskog?"

"Not right away. I just told him that I'd done what he asked, and he asked who the detective was, and I told him I couldn't pronounce his name. Then he asked me to describe him, and I did, and he told me to call him off."

"How did you call him off?"

"I couldn't contact him myself," she said. "He'd been gone fifteen or twenty minutes before I got through to Mr. Bryson, and I knew I'd never find him. But I knew he had to be in the Alien Quarter, because he was following this Patrukan who was supposed to be a big shot there."

"Okay, you couldn't contact him yourself," I said. "What did you do?"

"Well, I knew Mr. Perrin—that's Mr. Bryson's partner—was on Odysseus, so I contacted him and

asked him what I should do."

Bryson uttered a startled obscenity.

"And what did Mr. Perrin say?"

"He gave me the name of a Patrukan he said I could trust, and told me how to contact him, so I did."

"And what did you say to him?"

"I told him that he should stop the Broskog who was following Goriejyxsol, that Goriejyxsol was not to be followed any longer. He asked me who gave me his name and I told him, and that was all I said. I was home less than an hour later."

"Thank you, Violet," I said. "You did fine."

"Can I go now?"

"Just as soon as you tell me the Patrukan's name."

"I already told you—Goriejyxsol."

Can you really be this dumb? I thought. Then I decided that she wasn't that good an actress.

"No, Violet. I meant the name of the one you contacted."

"Oh, him—Djarabaxtol."

The machine didn't shock her, so I knew she had to be telling the truth.

"Djarabaxtol?" repeated Bryson. "And Herb Perrin told you to contact him?"

"Yes, Mr. Bryson."

"Okay," said Bryson to the man working the machine. "Unhook her, give her a couple of hundred credits, and take her back to her place."

He and I left the room and went back up to his office.

"All right, Jake. Now you know who killed your partner. You even know why: a stupid woman didn't explain herself fully and he misunderstood her." He frowned. "And I know my partner has been dealing with your friend George, or he'd never have a Patrukan from Homer's Alien Quarter working for him."

"And he has to be working for your friend Perrin," I said. "Otherwise he'd wouldn't have killed Max without an explicit order from George."

"I assume you're going back to Homer now?"

"As fast as I can."

He pulled a wad of bills out of his pocket and shoved them into my hand. "You helped me out, and Jim Bryson remembers his friends."

I put the money on his desk. "I already have a client."

"George?"

"My partner."

He extended a huge hand. "We did each other a good turn, Jake. You showed me my partner is trying to sell me out, and I showed you who killed Max. We should keep in touch. I'm sure we can do each other even more good in the future." Another one of his trademark smiles. "For example, I can tell you when and where the next shipment of alphanella seeds is arriving in Homer"—alphanella was the most sought-after drug in the Democracy—"and you can introduce me to George."

"I'll think about it," I said. "In the meantime, what's going to become of Violet?"

"Do you care?"

"Just curious."

"I thought I'd found a job even she couldn't fuck up," said Bryson. "I suppose I'll look for something even simpler, or maybe pension her off."

"And Perrin?"

"That's a very personal question, Jake," he said. "If you're really curious, check the Ajax newscubes for the next week or two."

I figured the conversation was ended, so I walked to the door.

"Remember, now—keep in touch," he said as I walked out into the corridor.

All the way down to the ground floor I kept thinking that I wouldn't want to be Perrin.

\* \* \*

All the way back to Homer I kept trying to decide what my next step was. If I turned Djarabaxtol over to the police, there was a good chance he'd beat the rap. There were no witnesses, and he probably had 50 friends who would swear he was nowhere near that alley all night. Besides, even if they found him guilty, he wouldn't serve much time. The sentence for killing an alien was a hell of a lot less than for killing a Man, at least on primarily human worlds like Odysseus.

On the other hand, if I took my vengeance myself, there was a very stupid woman in Ajax who could tie me to Djarabaxtol and had every reason to hope I'd take a fall before I could talk to her girlfriend again. And then there was another consideration: nobody killed anybody in the Alien Quarter without George's permission. What if he wouldn't grant it? And what if I killed Djarabaxtol anyway?

Usually I find the zoomway relaxing, but this time I got off it even more tense than when I'd boarded it in Ajax. I'd used my burner when I had to, when I had to defend myself, but I wasn't a cold-blooded executioner. Could I really walk up to a Patrukan who didn't even know who I was, stick the muzzle of my pistol in his ear, and fire? And if not, what then? Was I going to call him out like a gunfighter of Earth's Old West?

I didn't like any of the scenarios, and I knew I had to get straight in my head what I was and wasn't willing to do before I confronted Djarabaxtol.

Finally I realized that I'd been standing motionless on the zoomway platform, just staring blindly into space. I shook my head in an attempt to clear it, then took an airlift to the surface. Instead of going to my office or my apartment, I caught the slidewalk that took me to the Alien Quarter. I was going to ride it all the way to The Purple God when I saw Baro the Grub standing between a pair of buildings a block

before reaching my destination. I hopped off and walked over to him.

"Hello, Jake," he said. "How was Ajax?"

"You know I've been there?" I asked, surprised.

"Nothing escapes my watchful eye," said the Grub.

"I didn't know your watchful eye extended for 300 miles."

"It extends in all directions and dimensions, Jake," he replied. "It even tells me that a certain Mr. Perrin's life expectancy can be measured in days rather than weeks or years."

"Poor fellow," I said. "Whoever he is."

"You have sought me out, Jake. How may I help you?"

"I'm looking for Goriejyxsol," I said. "Is he at The Purple God or his own place?"

"He has seven places, Jake."

"I'm talking about the one he took me to last night. Don't pretend you don't know which one it was. You've got spies all the hell over the Quarter."

"You have not yet crossed my palm with silver."

"Read a different book, Grub," I said. "You don't have a palm, and they haven't used silver for a couple of thousand years."

"But it sounds evocative," said the Grub. "For 50 Far London pounds, all will be revealed."

"Come on, Grub," I said irritably. "I'll give you ten credits. Otherwise, I'm just going to walk into The Purple God, and if he's not there, I'll ask where he is."

"You are abusing our friendship, Jake," said the Grub. "Even an informer has to pay his bills."

"Twenty credits," I said. "Take it or leave it."

He grabbed the money and put it into, well, not a pocket, because the Grub doesn't wear clothes, but a slit in his skin, near the top of his rib cage, that functioned like a pocket.

"The Roost."

"Where's that?"

"You went there last night, after you left The Purple God."

"Easiest twenty credits you've made all month," I said, heading off for The Roost.

When I got to the door a pair of Patrukans—not the same ones I'd seen the night before—checked me out, frisked me, took my burner, and then let me in.

"Give him back his weapon," said George, who was sitting at the same table we'd been at maybe twelve hours earlier. "This is an honorable Man. He will not use it on his friends."

One of the Patrukans walked up to me, returned my burner without a word, and went back to his post

outside the door.

"So, Jake," said George. "Have you learned anything?"

I nodded my head. "Yeah," I said. "Are you going to deal with Perrin?"

"No," answered George, who didn't look even a little bit surprised at the question. "He is not an honorable Man."

"Just between you and me, he hasn't got much of a life expectancy either," I said.

"What did you think of his partner?"

"Bryson?" I said. "Don't take offense, but he reminds me a lot of you."

"If I enter into an arrangement with anyone, it will be with him."

"Have you met him?"

"No. But I am aware of his reputation, and if a Man of your qualities says that he reminds you of me, then he is certainly preferable to Mr. Perrin."

"I won't argue that."

"May I assume you learned more about Max's death?"

"I did."

"The killer works for me, doesn't he?"

"Yeah."

"It figured," said George. "What do you propose to do about it?"

"I'm not sure," I said. "That's what we have to talk about."

"I'm listening," said George.

"I'd have no compunction about gunning him down if he was in the act of killing Max," I began. "But I don't know how I'd feel about tracking him down and killing him in cold blood."

"That's because you are an ethical man, as well as an honorable one," said George. "Of course, I abhor bloodshed myself."

I must have looked my disbelief.

"Perhaps I should qualify that," continued George. "I find murder distasteful, though occasionally necessary. That is why I have hirelings to do it for me." He paused. "So what are you going to do?"

"I don't know," I admitted. "Another consideration is that he works for you. If he turns up dead, there's not going to be much doubt in your mind about who killed him."

"Ah!" said George with an alien smile. "Now we come to the crux of it. You still have not told me his name."

"I can barely pronounce it," I said.

"Try."

I nodded. "Djarabaxtol."

He was silent for a moment. "Jake," he said at last, "I think I shall give you another present. The chocolate was for your friend. Djarabaxtol is yours."

"I don't know if I want him," I said.

"I thought you wanted to avenge your partner's murder."

"I do."

"Well?"

"It's not that simple, George," I said. "If he tries to sneak into my house or my office, I'll blow him away. If he picks a fight with me, I'll do my best to kill him." I paused. "But I just don't think I can just walk up and shoot him, and I'll be damned if I'll turn him over to the police where a good lawyer can beat the rap or get him out in two years."

"I can see to it that he's in a district where the local police owe me some very large favors," offered George. "They won't present any problem."

"I wasn't worried about the police," I said. "I'm worried about living with me."

"Integrity can be such a nuisance," said George. "I assure you that Djarabaxtol wouldn't hesitate a single second to kill you if he thought he had a reason—and even fifty credits would be reason enough." He smiled that alien smile of his. "That is why I would never sell you out to him, while I have no compunction about turning him over to you."

"Thanks. I think."

"I am sure your problems will resolve themselves in the fullness of time," said George. "In the meantime, let us relax, share a drink, and talk of other things."

"What other things did you have in mind?"

"Tell me about James Bryson."

We spent the next couple of hours talking, and then all the tension and traveling caught up with me, and I decided it was time to go home and get some shut-eye.

I gave Selina the chocolate the next day. She began asking me about my trip to Ajax. I shouldn't have been surprised that she knew—after all, the cops monitor the zoomway stations—but while I told her about meeting Elana Mador, I clammed up when she asked me what else I'd done there.

It didn't take her long to figure out I'd learned who killed Max. Since I still hadn't decided what to do about it, I wouldn't tell her who the murderer was, and we had one of our monthly disagreements (well, she calls them disagreements; I call them screaming matches), that ended only when she looked around for something to throw at me, couldn't find anything but the chocolate, and decided to stalk off in outraged dignity rather than part with it.

When I got back to my office, there was a message from the bank, hidden among all the threats from the landlord and the power company. I checked it out, and found that there had been two different deposits made to my account, one for ten thousand credits, one for six thousand Far London pounds.



A minute later George's image popped into view just a few feet from my desk.

"Good afternoon, Jake," he said. "Are you feeling better today?"

"I felt fine yesterday," I said.

"I think what I have to tell you may make you feel even better," said George.

"I'm listening."

"Thanks to you, I have a new business associate," continued George. "I believe you know him."

"That sure as hell didn't take very long."

"You vouched for him. That was all the information I required."

"I didn't vouch for him," I replied. "I said he reminded me of you. That's not quite the same thing."

"I admire your sense of humor, Jake," he said with a guttural alien laugh. "Would you like to know the first piece of business we transacted?"

"Whatever makes you happy," I said with a shrug.

"I have sent Djarabaxtol to Ajax on business, and Mr. Bryson has told Mr. Perrin to remain in Homer for the foreseeable future."

Son of a bitch! I thought. You're trading executions! The local cops will never trace Perrin to you, and the Ajax cops will never connect Djarabaxtol to Bryson.

"Have you no comment at all, Jake?"

"I commend your organization for its resourcefulness," I said, aware that someone somewhere could access a record of our conversation.

"And you are no longer troubled by your recent problems?"

"What problems?" I said with a shrug.

"I am happy to have done you this small service, in exchange for the service you rendered to me yesterday," said George.

"Speaking of services, you wouldn't know who made the other deposit in my account, would you?" I asked.

"I would be very surprised if it wasn't my new friend from Ajax."

So would I, I thought.

"He'll be arriving here in less than an hour to cement our relationship," said George. "Why don't you come down and have a drink with us?"

"That might not be the best idea in the world," I said. "One of these weeks or months I may have to arrest the pair of you."

"And one of these weeks or months we may have to do to you what we will be doing to our two associates." He smiled. "But in the meantime, I've just laid in a stock of Cygnian cognac."

"Real Cygnian cognac?"

"Guaranteed."

"I'm on my way," I said.

You know, sooner or later friends break their promises, rob you blind, steal your women, and stick you with the tab.

But I'll say this for honorable enemies: they always tell the truth, and their checks never bounce.

\* \* \*

\* - "A Locked-Planet Mystery" (Alien Crimes, Science Fiction Book Club, 2007)

\*\* - "Guardian Angel" (Down These Dark Spaceways, Science Fiction Book Club, 2005)

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