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NELSON
SHERWOOD

JOHN BRUNNER

P. F. WOODS



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SCIENCE FICTION ADVENTURES

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The sole ambition of Arthur Ross Carson was to get a little fun out of a rather dull life on an out-world planet—preferably at the expense of the Galactic Guards. But one joke had far-reaching and grim consequences.

SCARLET DENIAL

by NELSON SHERWOOD

Chapter One

Three inches before Arthur Ross Carson's nose the armoured leg and boot of the Galactic Guardsman towered up like an old single tube rocket. Carson, flat on his stomach in the dust and pressed against the mouldering stone wall of the Admin Centre, carefully extended his hand from the shadows. The tiny stick glittered once in the sunshine, then it had been pressed into the hairfine crack encircling the guardsman's ankle where boot and greave meshed.

Carson was having difficulty in stopping himself from laughing—too soon.

Moving in complete silence and with deceptive slowness, he edged back, around the corner of the guard tower flanking the Admin Centre's main gate. His young, lithe body was relaxed, his nerves under perfect control and all the art of stealth and cunning he had learned as an urchin amongst the rubble of the city was in full, unconscious play.

Cautiously he applied flame to the end of the fuse.

Then he stood up, his mobile mouth quivering against the deep laughter that welled up, and, stepping briskly, walked out and around the tower. He went straight on over the cracked tessellated paving, out of the noon-day strip of shadow from the ten-story Admin Centre and into the sunshine of Starfarers Square. As though suddenly remembering an errand, he paused, ostentatiously searching the pockets of his threadbare and much-patched coat whilst his grey eyes slid to observe the guardsman standing hot and uncomfortable in his magnificent—and quite unfunctional—uniform and armour.

Townpeople were moving sluggishly about the square and the radiating streets that led in from the dormitory suburbs and manufacturing districts. The heat laid a pall of listlessness over everything. Dust bit acridly into every throat. No sounds came from the market, where vendors dozed beneath striped awnings. It was just another day on sleepy Ragnor, a backward planet on the Rim, where the arrival of an interstellar packet caused furore enough to last a whole month.

The silence was blasted—enormously.

The Galactic Guardsman leaped a clear three feet in the air, no mean performance considering the weight of his armour and equipment. He landed running. He was yelling blue murder and his face was that colour too—blue from cyanosis; he couldn't get enough oxygen into his lungs both to sustain his lunging muscles and to maintain his fearsome yells. From his foot a long plume of black smoke billowed in a highly satisfactory manner.

Arthur Ross Carson held his stomach and groaned in helpless hilarity. He was quite beyond the laughing stage.

It wasn't that he disliked the Galactic Guards—the geegee's—or that he bore them any personal ill-will. But when a man is reaching the sombre old-age of twenty and nothing—literally nothing—happens from one year's end to the next, unless he is to fossilise prematurely, then some outlet for abundant energy and an over-developed sense of fun must be found. Either that, or burst.

Carson peered through streaming eyes as the guardsman at last beat out the hot-foot and legged it back to his beat. Carson had no desire to see the man punished for leaving his post; his idea of fun did not include unpleasant consequences for anyone, including himself.

He thought of Lucy of the flame hair and soft mouth and relished the telling of this stupendous joke. He felt regret that she had not been there to witness it all; but her job monitoring automatic dish-washing machinery for Gunlum's one reasonable hotel allowed her small free time. Carson regretted this; Lucy was seventeen and he wanted her all to himself.

Not all Galactic Guardsmen were fools. Sharp eyes had spotted the geegee's involuntary flight and the greasy black smoke. Somewhere within Admin Centre a siren began to howl. From the police precinct the clatter of running feet came nearer; an armoured car rolled from the gates, its rocket launcher swivelling menacingly. A platoon of geegees broke from the gates in the wake of the car, spread and deployed and began to move on the square.

Carson watched in fascination.

He—a twenty year old full of fun—had started all this. It was most instructive.

"Hey! You!" The voice was angry, imperative.

Carson swung round. Other people were hurrying away from the gates, unwilling to be caught in the geegees' net.

"Grab him! That's right! All right, you monkey, let's see."

The guards had caught someone who must have been approaching on the blind side of the square; the same stretch of mouldering wall from whose cover Carson had set the hot foot. He watched now, moving uneasily, wanting to get away whilst the getting was good but reluctant to leave whilst another person was being roughed up. Some unfortunate had walked along the same track that he had used; the geegees had pounced and, for a moment, it looked black. But Carson had no doubt that the unknown would soon prove his innocence.

He was beginning to look conspicuous, loitering there where everyone else had hurriedly fled. A growing clamour by the market told of the news being spread; there would be long loud chuckles all over Gunlum this night.

Still Carson tarried. He had no feelings of pity for the man the guards had caught. It was just unfortunate, one of those things, one of those things that a hard life and plenty of knocks had taught Carson to accept with a shrug and a grim resolve to beat anyone down who stood in his way. He

might be young; but he had little to learn about the ways of the Galaxy. The man should have been ready to run for it as soon as the siren sounded. He must be some soft clerk or storeman, rotting in a monotonous job and all flabby flesh and panting for breath. Carson began to walk away.

He turned for one last look over his shoulder, and that last look changed the whole course of his life.

He caught a single glimpse of flame hair encompassed by the black leather and grey-blue steel of the guards.

The guards had Lucy! How she, of all the people in Gunlum, of all the people on Ragnor, should be here in the square at the time of his practical joke ready to be snapped up like a soft doe didn't matter. She was here. She had been taken. She was being hustled inside the Admin Centre, and Carson knew well enough to which section she would be taken.

Then the full horror hit him. Lucy would almost certainly—absolutely positively—be carrying a handful of igniter sticks with her. She would have the plastic wrapped bundle in her handbag, along with her lipstick and compact and embroidered handkerchief and all the other feminine knick-knacks that girls of seventeen carry about with them.

And the igniter sticks would condemn her.

Arthur Ross Carson stood there in the sunshine of Starfarers Square and the acid of self-condemnation, of self hate and self-loathing bit deeply into his mind. There was only one thing he could do.

Even then, there was no guarantee that the geegees would believe him. They'd scoff and write him off as a romantic loon telling lies in order to save his light-o'-love.

Of course, he would have; but he had to convince them that he was telling the truth. The decision had taken all of a hundredth part of a second; in the next he was walking directly towards the main gate guard.

His face felt stiff but he was not sweating; so far full fear had not struck.

The guard was still stamping his foot from time to time, cursing under his breath and watching the platoon of his comrades wheel back through the dust to the gates, followed by the armoured car. Carson had no time to wonder about the fellow's feelings, or to surmise that he was probably considering with apprehension the forthcoming interview with his captain. The guard straightened and waved Carson aside.

"Out of the way, kid, or you'll be run over."

"She didn't do it," Carson said. He was panting now. "She didn't do it. I did."

The guard's reactions were not quite typical, but Carson was to learn that nothing that is expected occurs in just the way it is anticipated.

The guard said: "So you did, hey? I don't care who did it—I just want to see someone strung—" and he went into anatomical details that left Carson quite unmoved. The platoon passed by with much clashing of armoured feet and clanging of accoutrements. The armoured car rolled past with a soft squishy sound from its vee-sixteen gas-electric engine.

The guard saluted his captain and rapidly told him what Carson had said. The captain, a grizzled veteran with radiation burns giving his face a mottled strawberry look, sized Carson up. His eyes were black beneath the helmet visor.

"You'd better come inside with us, son, and tell your story." He put a hand on Carson's shoulder. "You know the girl?"

Carson hesitated. Then, knowing that the guards would unearth anything they wanted, he said: "Yes." And left it at that.

They went inside, the captain and Carson, with a couple of guards for escort. In the big crumbling building, corridors echoed to the stamp of booted feet and the air was damp and musty. What lights there were were dim and blue with age.

"What have you done with Lucy?" Carson asked.

"Keep quiet, son, until we talk to you," the captain advised him. There was no discernable emotion in the man's voice. But Carson caught the hint of a great weariness. He had never before been inside Admin Centre and, like most of the townsfolk, he had always thought of the interior as a palace of light and beauty and precious gems. All he saw now was dusty flooring and stained walls with the paint peeling in ribbons from the desiccated plaster.

Then his fierce anger saw the answer to that. Of course, this was the section that the public might enter; the decadent luxury swarmed behind locked doors, in the other wings of the towering building.

They entered a large room with three tall windows set in its farther wall, a massive desk of ironwood, an armchair behind it, two chairs set before it and a row of benches along the near wall. A corpulent guardsman stood at attention by the door. The air smelt flat and unused.

"Wait here, son," the captain said, and strode away.

The waiting gnawed at Carson's nerves. He wondered what was happening to Lucy. If they've hurt her, he began to say to himself, and then slumped, realising his own futility and his utter helplessness. No-one had much time for the Galactic Guards; but at least they preserved the peace and kept off out-worlder robbers and pirates and claim-jumpers. Their job was unenviable, he could see that, but he refused to acknowledge that their braggart swagger was necessary to their task. They had too much power and the planetary government, duly elected, was virtually ruled by the Galactic Guard colonel in the capital. The door opened.

"Is this the lad?" asked a voice that growled with an impatient huskiness that tautened Carson's nerves.

"Yes, sir. Claims he set the hot foot, not the girl."

"Why we have to be plagued with these small fry—"

The captain stood beside Carson, who rose to his full height and waited, eyeing the newcomer. The man was a major. He wore the guard's undress uniform, a scarlet loose-fitting shirt of some silky synthetic, white breeches and soft artificial leather boots. Around his waist, lean and athletic, was wound the blue cummerbund of authority and over his shoulder he had hastily hung and was still adjusting his embroidered baldric, with the rapier thumping his left leg.

His face was brown and sere, with crows'-feet splaying from the corners of his eyes. He looked to be about fifty, past the age for promotion, and settled in a job that he could hold down until he reached retirement age—or was killed.

He sat with a grunt in the armchair, cocked both booted feet on to the desk and then, and only then, looked at the prisoner.

"Name?"

"Carson."

"Carson what?"

"Carson—sir."

"That's better."

The captain leaned forward and whispered. The major said firmly: "You claim that it was you who set the hot foot to Guardsman Hypman? That it was not the girl?"

"That is right, sir." Carson found amazement that he could speak so calmly.

"What proof can you offer?"

"Proof?" Carson was bewildered. "But I did it. Where is Lucy? What have you done with her?"

"The girl is being taken care of. Forget her. Do you know what the penalty is for your crime?"

"But it was only a joke—"

The major snorted. He began to flick his boots with a paper knife taken from the desk. "I don't think you quite understand the gravity of your position. We can deal with this under section forty, conduct, of a civilian, prejudicial and all the rest. You don't know it, of course. But you can be punished by fifty lashes. Fifty lashes." His eyes raised and his glance locked with Carson's. "Do you know what fifty lashes is like?"

"No, sir."

"Well—you will if you persist in your statement."

Carson said: "Will Lucy get fifty lashes—"

"That is not your affair. We have our own ways of taking care of female prisoners."

Wild alarm inundated Carson. He had heard the stories, of course, who hadn't? But their meaning had not impacted before. But now, when it was Lucy, held in this vast old building . . . He began to sweat.

Chapter Two

The calm, mechanical, quite unemotional attitude of the guardsman was getting under Carson's skin. Had they threatened in a bullying way, had they blustered, had they struck him, he would not have been surprised, and his fear would have been of a kind with which he was familiar and could handle. But this cold scrutiny, this passionless statements of rules under which he could be punished by a certain number of strokes of the lash, this serene disregard of him as a human being at all carried far more chilling menace than he had bargained for or could adapt to handle. His stomach had tightened to a small aching ball.

The major leaned forward. "Carson. You fully understand what is in store for you if you persist in your statement?"

Carson swallowed. "Yes."

"And you do so persist?"

"Yes."

The major leaned back.

A buzzer sounded in the room and from the ironwood desk a small intercom unit rose and a hush phone extended on a pseudopod towards the major's head. He fitted his mouth and right ear to the instrument. Carson could not hear what he said; but he saw the sudden irritable scowl that disfigured the tired old face. The major withdrew his head and the hush phone retracted into the intercom which in turn vanished into the desk. The room was very quiet—ominously quiet.

The major stood up. He passed one hand across his face. The veins stood out in wriggling blue lines across the back of his hand; the knuckles were big and bony. Then he drew a deep breath, stiffened himself and snapped the hand down.

"Captain Jose. I am now in command here."

The captain's reactions were interesting. Both guardsmen had forgotten Carson. The captain's face went grey, then blood flushed back under the skin, and seemed to fill his eyes so that for a moment a red devil stared out. He said: "Colonel Stacey's dead, then?"

"What else?" The major was abrupt. He cut a hand down to his rapier pommel, gripped it as though seeking life-giving sustenance to flow from that symbol and weapon of authority. "This makes the murder a successful assassination, the first on Ragnor for a century. I must be sure that the girl and this lout know nothing. They must be questioned."

"I'll see to it, sir."

"Right. If you want me I'll be in Communications. When Headquarters hear of this, heads may roll." He went to the door, an old man, worn down by years of overwork and then by years of underwork and stagnation, shouldering a responsibility he had not sought and would not be thanked for taking. "The whole Galaxy's running down," he said sombrely. "And there's nothing I can see to stop it." He went out.

Carson decided not to say anything. He was badly frightened now. All this talk, of a kind that was strange and new to him, had rattled him. What had the old major meant, that the Galaxy was running down?

Captain Jose turned to him, brisk and efficient, his age sloughing off him with work to do.

"All right, son. This looks like the end for you. You say you set the hot foot. Maybe you did and maybe you didn't. What we're interested in finding out is why you set it, or why you're saying you set it."

Carson had the vertiginous sensation that huge wheels were meshing all around him, bringing problems and situations with which he was totally unfamiliar and with which he could not cope. He was also shrewd enough to see that they could bring in their train his own unpleasant death.

Captain Jose sat in the chair lately vacated by the major. He unbuttoned his black leather belt and hitched his rapier forward on its baldrick. A subtle change came over him.

"Right, Carson. This is it. Today an assassination attempt was made on the life of Colonel Stacey. It was successful. The murderer unloosed a *razzee* in the colonel's bedroom—he'd been sleeping late. He died just now."

"What is a *razzee*?"

"Don't tell me you don't know?" Jose's tones were loaded with sarcasm. "One of those devilish flying snakes from Marjoram VI. The thing's only about a foot long, leathery wings, whiplash tail and poison fangs. It bit the colonel ten times. It was still in the room when his cries brought the guard. He shot it down. But enough was left to identify it. And you tell me you don't know what a *razzee* is."

"I don't! I've never heard of it—or of Marjoram."

"Well, that we can soon find out. It would not have been necessary for you to have known. Or the girl."

That brought Carson up. "Where's Lucy?" he said. He stepped forward, swallowing bile. "If you've hurt her, I'll—I'll—"

"Save it. Who are you? What do you do?"

Carson shook his head. He had to control himself. Crazy plans rushed through his mind like an avalanche. He licked his lips and then, surprisingly, began to tell the captain what he wanted to know.

"I'm an orphan, work out on the spaceport dismantling the wrecks. Old Stan Shulman's my boss. He makes a living at it, selling the bits and pieces, and I scrape along. I don't remember a home, only sleeping with Old Stan in one wreck after another. That's all." He could not help add bitterly: "Nothing happens on Ragnor—at least, not until today."

"So you're a spaceship wrecker," Captain Jose said. "A most suitable occupation. And this girl? Lucy?"

Carson took a fresh grip on himself. "She's my girl, if that's what you mean."

"You'd do anything for her? Lie for her? Die for her, perhaps?"

Carson refused to give the captain satisfaction.

"Perhaps," he said, making it as insolent as he could.

Captain Jose stiffened.

"I see." He moved his rapier, making the scabbard scrape along the ironwood desk. "So you'd willingly confess to setting this hot foot, in order to save your girl. Yes. I see. Perhaps it might be as well if the girl were questioned again." He smiled. "So far, I understand, she has been singularly unco-operative."

The sweat was running off Carson now. He could not stop his next actions. He jumped forward, his face tight and hating and his hands raking forward like the talons of a bird of prey. In his mind was the one desire to take and strangle the life out of this braggart captain.

Something caught and held him. He was transfixed. Standing like a frozen statue, leaning forward and yet still balanced, his face fixed rigidly into its mask of hate.

"Just a little precaution, you see." Captain Jose took his finger off the stasis button and stood up. Carson slumped to the floor. Every muscle felt as though it had been separately and efficiently beaten. He tried to stand, and fell back, checking the groan of pain.

The corpulent guard stepped forward at a nod.

"Take this stupid youngster to a cell, guardsman, and see he is not damaged. We need to know what he knows, or does not know."

When the cell door had clanged shut on him, Carson sat on the wooden bunk and put his hands to his head and tried not to think of what might be happening to Lucy just because he had found life dull and decided to liven it up a little.

The very procedure of this place, the feeling of implacable violence thinly veneered by custom and order made for grisly imagining. Slowly, as he sat there, and then, finding inaction impossible, pacing the cell, he was losing his mind. Fears snarled and gibbered at him. What was happening to Lucy now? At this very instant? He hammered on the cell door until his hands bled; but no-one took the slightest notice of

him. He had no idea of time. Events had happened, and would happen, all over the Galaxy, and he would stay cooped up in this narrow cell till the end of time.

They came for him at last, and served him a sour meal of gruel and a crust, and then led him back to the room of the three tall windows and the ironwood desk.

The captain and the major were both there, grim-faced, tired, unshaven, with the look about them of being men beaten down in a long fight against insuperable odds.

"The girl knows nothing," the major began at once. He paused, then, and Carson experienced the most profound sensation of shock as the major's wise old eyes refused to meet his own. In those eyes, in that face, as in the face of the captain, he saw guilt, remorse—and fear.

"What is it?" demanded Carson. He braced himself. "Tell me! Tell me, you hear?"

"Take it easy, youngster." The major looked at Captain Jose, and away, quickly. "The news is bad. But I want you to know that it was none of our doing. None, you understand?"

"Tell me!" Carson shouted. Panic and anger glared from his eyes.

"We are only the Galactic Guard," the major said. "We have no jurisdiction outside space and the planets allotted to our care. You have heard, perhaps, of the Statque?"

"Statque? No." Carson pleaded with them. "Tell me. What has happened? Lucy! Is she all right?"

"A Statque man came down—he was on tour in this area and decided this was a good opportunity to show just who is who around space these days." The major paused tiredly. "But you wouldn't understand about that. Our troubles are our own. This man, he questioned your girl. He was—not very gentle."

A strange thrilling began in Carson's brain and sent flickering liquid fire along his muscles until all his body seemed bathed in ice cold flame. He tried to speak but his tongue clove to the roof of his mouth and he made only splashy gargling sounds.

The two guardsmen were looking at him, their craggy old faces softened by sympathy, their thought transparent upon their outward expressions. They were thinking, both of them, that this unhappy youngster could have been their son, a son

to either of them had either one ever married a woman he could have respected. But they had been professional guardsmen, guardians of the galaxy, and the women they had met had been of a sort that were not interested in marriage. Out of his misery Carson saw all this, and strove to speak, to break through the hard professional shell and seek comfort and understanding from these men.

He managed to say: "Lucy's all right, isn't she? I mean—tell me, for God's sake! What did this man do to her?"

Captain Jose looked away. The major looked at his brown hand holding the rapier hilt, and then up, directly into Carson's grey eyes.

"The lot, son. You'll have to know. She's dead. She didn't die pleasantly; but she was glad to go at the end."

What happened then was for ever afterwards a blur to Carson. He recalled vaguely someone screaming. There were men—guardsmen—about him, holding his arms and one brought quickly forward a glittering hypodermic. The next memories were of a white-washed little room with sunshine dappling the plastic carpeted floor, an iron-framed bed and a lumpy mattress and white sheets that smelled of disinfectant.

He sat up. His head ached a little, a dismal buzz between the eyes; but he was not restrained and was able to step out of bed and dress himself in his own patched clothes that had been laid over a chair. He noticed that they had been cleaned and pressed, and the act made him ponder.

A panel slid aside over the door and a TV eye lit up.

"That's right, son," said an unfamiliar voice. "Go right through the door over there. You'll find toilet, necessities and food. Don't think."

The eye went dark.

Carson was in no shape for thinking. Too much thinking sapped the brain, or sent you mad. He had a fleeting impression of Lucy imprinted on his mind—then the thought went, blown away with her flame hair and her grave and laughing eyes and her soft mouth. He did not even feel amazement that he could think of her like that; knowing that she was dead—and still walk steadily through the indicated door and wash and shower and shave and then sit down to a good meal of expensive food.

He was just finishing the second cup of coffee when the door opened and Captain Jose walked in. He had spruced himself up; but his face was haggard and lined and he walked

as though his collar guard had become caught up in his bootzips.

"Feel better now, son?"

"Yes. Why do I?"

"Feel better? You were in a dangerous state. We had to apply sedation." He sighed. "We're a tough bunch of hard-cases in the Guard; but we can't stomach the Statque. What they did to your girl shouldn't have—but this is foolish and cruel. You know the score."

"Yes. I know the score. Can you tell me what this is all about?"

"That is why I came. First, though, I want to ask you a question. You'll have to think about it."

"All right."

"Do you know who your parents were? Can you remember them?"

"No and no."

"Too fast. That's a stock answer. Think—about them."

"Look, captain, I don't know. Oh, sure, I recall odd things, what kid doesn't; but nothing to put a finger on."

"You say your name is Carson—we checked. Arthur Ross Carson, right?"

"There's no argument over that, is there?"

"Why Arthur Ross?"

"You tell me—"

"I will. Your father's name was Arthur and your mother's maiden name was Ross."

"That's just an intelligent guess. I've thought the same thing myself. But there's no proof. I don't even know on what planet I was born, except that it wasn't Ragnor."

"We found that out."

Carson pushed the food tray away. He was puzzled. "What is your exact interest in me, captain? I told you I set the hot foot. My girl—" He swallowed, and went on evenly: "You've shot me full of dope so I don't react as I would about that. My girl was accused of it, she was questioned by this Statque man, she died. I don't owe you anything. What's your interest in me?"

"Aren't you forgetting that Colonel Stacey was murdered?"

"That's nothing to do with me."

"I wonder. As of now, we don't think it is. We had a look at your mind when you were under. We found out a few things that surprised us—and would surprise you. We know

that your setting the hot foot and the murder were purely fortuitously coincidental; but you must admit that if you hadn't roused the alarm and turned out the guard the murderer wouldn't have found it so easy to break into the colonel's bedroom."

"You mean I was a sort of false alarm?"

"Exactly."

"If I meant it I'd say I was sorry."

Captain Jose did not wince; but, to his own annoyed surprise, Carson felt a twinge of pity for the guardsman. The vaunted braggart swagger that the geegees habitually used to cower the local inhabitants was not much in evidence here within Admin Centre; it was as though they sloughed off that tough and brutal mask once they were away from the critical eyes of the populace. There seemed a chance that this captain and his major were ordinary men, with an ordinary man's emotions. As their colonel had been?

Carson said: "Why should your colonel be killed?"

"This is it, Carson. This is what I came to tell you." Captain Jose slowly pulled out a cigar and lit it, taking his time. When it was drawing to his satisfaction, he said: "You do not understand the situation in the Galaxy today, son. For that matter, very few people do. For we guardsmen the job is simple; we protect the frontiers against whoever and whatever is Outside. We have to put on a big front, so that we aren't troubled by pinpricks in our rear." He smiled. "Pinpricks like kids setting hot feet to the aching feet of guardsmen." The smile was not humorous; but neither was it menacing. It was rather the meaningless gesture of a very tired man.

For a moment Carson saw the whole affair in its true perspective. It didn't make sense. "You're trying to tell me that what I did was important to you, outside of the murder of your colonel? Why should a major question me? Small fry, he called me, didn't he? It doesn't make sense."

"I've given you the answer to that. Your foolish action provided the diversion that was all that was necessary for for the assassin to strike. I was trying to show you the picture of the Galaxy today. It is running down. Thousands of solar systems which once owed close allegiance to the Human Federation are breaking away, willing to pursue their own destinies. The physical difficulties of interstellar communication are breaking the ties; all manner of new planets are being opened up haphazardly, there is no unbiased

over-riding control and any control becomes more difficult and impractical every year. And there are the forces which are deliberately trying to accelerate this breakdown for their own ends."

"And the Statque?"

Captain Jose nodded approvingly. "Smart lad. The Bureau of Status Quo Enforcement is trying to stem these movements. Their job—those hard men who comprise the Statque—is to maintain. Keep things as they are. Fight against the entropy that is closing down a chapter of Human history."

"Fine words," Carson said. "Not yours, though?"

"No. Not mine. Part of the creed of the Statque."

"But why," Carson said, no feeling of pain rising in him at the words, "Why should such a one torture and kill Lucy?"

"One of the Galactic Guardsmen had been assassinated. At the time we believed that your girl had been part of the murder plan. We needed to know. Now we do, and—"

"And Lucy's dead."

"Just so. I hope I've made it clear that the Statque is the most powerful and most feared body of legal and criminal jurisprudence, detection and punishment, in the Galaxy. We, the Galactic Guards, are regarded more as soldiers by the Statque personnel; our police duties are confined to routine matters. I'm trying to explain to you, son, that the Guards had no hand in the torture and murder of your girl." He wiped a hand wearily across his face, leaving a trail of blue cigar smoke in the air. "I don't think I'm succeeding very well."

"Why bother? I'm just one of the blues. That's what you call civilians, isn't it?"

"Yes. But we have a hunch about you, about your parents. You might be important to us—"

"Long lost Prince turned into a frog—in this case a space-ship wrecker's boy—is that it?" Carson spoke fiercely. "D'you think I'm a kid? I don't swallow guff like that."

"I told you we're not sure. We're holding you until we've made further investigations. Meanwhile I'm trying to explain about your girl—"

"Do you have to keep harping on that!"

"I'm sorry." Captain Jose stood up. "I'd like you to help us, run a few checks. If you'd come this way..."

Chapter Three

There was nothing else to do. Carson didn't know then if it had been arranged or was another mere coincidence. He had not seen Jose look at his watch; but any signal might have been used. As they left the door, a plain steel affair, and turned down a white corridor with hard white lighting, a trolley was being pushed towards them. Two hospital orderlies controlled the trolley's motor; it purred softly, like a contented cat. Jose and Carson stood aside to let them pass.

Carson glanced down at the trolley as it slid by.

Something happened to him then; something that all the drugs the guards might pump into him could not avert or change.

Lucy lay on the trolley.

She lay washed and white, the bloodstains removed, enshrouded in her hair. The flame of that regal covering glowed like living light under the pitiless white radiance.

She was Lucy—and yet she was . . . *not*.

A whimper rose inarticulately in Carson's throat.

He stood quite still, staring, his eyes following the twisted lines of Lucy's body as the trolley glided her past not three inches away. He saw everything. He saw her as he had never seen her before—and as no-one living had any right to see any other living soul.

The corridor was hard under his feet. He was running. Lights went by in a blur. Men were shouting. He heard an alarm bell shrilling.

In his mind were the four words just uttered, stark and limned like the searchlight on a condemned prisoner.

He had said: "His name?"

Captain Jose had said: "Alex Bors."

And now he was running, shouting crazily, drooling, seeking a man called Alex Bors.

A guard turned into the corridor, half-raised his gun. Carson swept into him, a single blow knocked the man full length. He plunged on. A door. Locked. Smash it in. Panting for breath, red before the eyes, throat congested; all hell breaking loose about him.

Two more guards were hammered from his frantic path; guards that had tried to stop him and did not attempt to shoot him down. He had a sane little flame in his mind,

telling him that this was no way to find Bors; he must be cunning. He must find his way to the officers' quarters and there slowly, oh so slowly, take the life from the cringing body of Alex Bors.

He was pleased with his cunning. He would succeed.

A guard sprang up before him, arms flung wide. Carson kicked him in the stomach and reached for the lock handle on the metal door the man had been guarding. He heard a shout, distant and ringing "No, Carson! Not that door!"

He opened the door, stiffly, and plunged through.

Directly ahead was another metal door, locked like the first. He crossed the little cubicle in four bounding strides, smashed the lever down. To his rear the first door closed with a sough of ram-air. The door ahead began to open, reluctantly, as though not yet ready for his frenzied onslaught on its train of gears.

Something green writhed in through that door. Something gaseous, billowing, filling the chamber faster and faster, something that caught at his throat and gagged him, made him retch, brought streaming tears to his eyes. A foul stench made him choke, brought his hand to his nostrils in futile attempt to cut off the nauseous gas.

He took a single, involuntary step forward, beyond the open door.

Before his eyes stretched a nightmarish growth of vine and tree, of mushroom-headed stalks, of gyrating tentacles swaying from every branch and limb. He heard a shrill, triumphant chittering. Behind him, the metal door began to close, gratingly, finally.

He turned to spring back. A vice closed over his foot and tripped him. He fell, sprawling, his mouth and nostrils filling with stinking mud.

He did not remember anything more for a very long time.

His first rational thought when he opened his eyes was that he could no longer be on Ragnor. Ragnor was a wild enough planet; but it had never suppurated as noisome a jungle hell as this. He stared about, wide eyed. Directly before him curved a yellowed transparent wall. It was hard and shiny and smooth. Through it he could see a veinous pattern of amber lines. The lines slowly, evilly, like arteries pumping blood.

He turned his head. The yellow wall encircled him. It was cup shaped, he was standing on a pappy mass of slime and

small hard bits of unidentifiable material, and above his head the yellow horn-like substance curved over into a three-segmented lid. Each segment showed a long, muscular cluster of fibres joining it to the main body, for all the world like a long gate hinge.

Carson began to have an idea of where he was.

And he became mortally afraid.

In his limited experience, he had found one sure way of overcoming fear. He had grown up running wild over the dumps and rubble of the city's wastelands and the gutted hulks of spaceships lying on the edge of the space field. Gangs of tough kids had fought there, mercilessly, battling over some trifle, some gewgaw, a hidden cache of food in an old ship's lazarette, a girl. Old Stan Shulman had given him an education of sorts, which had leaned heavily on the practical application of the brain and hands to tearing spaceships apart. Fripperies had formed no part of his life.

Now Carson summoned up all his resources and put into practice what he had learned. To overcome fear it was necessary to do something, no matter what. Action threw out panic—in Carson's experience.

He reached round for his knife. Thankfully, his hand closed over the plastic hilt. The Galactic Guards, then, hadn't robbed him. He began to work with the knife—a sliver of steel he had found aboard a scrapped geegee picket boat—on the hard membrane before him. At first, the knife made no impression. Anger came to supplant fear; or to complement it. He hacked at the horn and raised a long strip which he tore away in sadistic triumph.

Movement took his body; he began to sway slowly back and forth. He knew now just where he was. By looking at an angle down between his feet he could make out the ground, slimy and wet, some ten feet below. All around, as far as he could see, reared tall stalks and trunks, topped by broad fleshy leaves and by cup-shaped flowers, open to the sky. The few that were shut contained animals or insects that had been trapped by the plants, like himself, awaiting digestion.

He knew that only by the grace of his boots—solid space boots picked up in some wreck—was he still in possession of his feet and legs. Very soon now the digestive juices of the carnivorous plant would eat through, and then gradually he would be digested, melted down, reduced to a mid-morning snack.

The plant which had imprisoned him began to dislike the work he was doing on its hide. The cup-shaped trap swung more rapidly; Carson, still working with the knife, saw the sinuous stalk, as thick through as a slender birch but supple as an octopus' tentacle, undulating along the ground, the cup still upright. Then, before he was fully aware of what was happening, the cup dipped, the three-segmented lid sprang open and the flower—*flicked*.

Carson was flung head over heels out into the jungle.

The flower petals around the cup's lower body slowly opened as it regained its equilibrium and the stalk swept majestically upright. Already, the mindless plant was seeking its next meal.

Beneath him the ground was springy with moss. He lay, winded from his fall and wondering what new horrors were to break in on him from this mad world. The answer crashed in on him stunningly.

The green gas! Now that he was out in the open he smelt and tasted the stench clearly. His lungs began to hurt and his eyes ran tears. He couldn't breathe. He remembered plunging through the forbidden door, with the guard's shout in his ears, and of the green gas that had snaked in to overpower him. Now he was back again in that primeval hell, and rapidly losing consciousness.

He guessed that he would then be snapped up by some other plant, mindlessly seeking its food.

The first thing to do was to get himself back inside a carnivorous plant as soon as he could.

Outside lay certain and immediate death. Inside a plant lay a remote but no less certain death. There was no choice. The little time he had would at least give him space to think and to plan. Even if when he had thought and planned he merely crept out of the plant to die quickly.

Through streaming eyes he saw, buzzing haphazardly ten feet above his head, the spread wings a diaphanous blur, a gigantic flying creature. It was all of three feet from head to tail and, although it could not be a true insect, it had six legs and antennae and looked like a scaled-up dragon-fly. As Carson watched, the brooding stalks swooped. One cup-shaped carnivorous trap bundled down, brisking out of the way others that sought to snare the prize first. The buzzing keened up the scale as the insect strove to evade the onrushing menace.

Carson, seeing his opportunity, faint with held breath and hammering heart, leaped, clawed at smooth trunk, grasped fleshy petals, heaved himself up. Insect and man tumbled together and all asprawl into the amber yellow gloom of the trap.

The knife in Carson's hand glowed golden in the diffused light as he prepared to contest ownership of the cup with his fellow guest. The description was not apt in the insect's case. Pity filled Carson's eyes as he saw the limp gorgeous wings and the luminous eyes filmed and grey, the spasmodic struggles of the hard brittle legs. There was no need to use the knife.

The dissolving acids secreted by the plant burned quickly—frighteningly quickly—into the insect, making the animal's body run like treacle. It was composed mainly of light tissue, fragile membranes, an airy, delicate flying machine. As he watched it compacted into a ball of sodden material and fell to merge with the residue of previous meals at the base of the cup. He lifted his boots out of the way, sorry, angry, and very, very frightened.

The emotions that shook him he could not explain. Out of fear he felt anger and then irritation and a dull, resigned despair that chilled him with a sense of age-old longing, never-fulfilled and never to be fulfilled. The feelings were alien to him, strange and unsettling.

He wiped his eyes and blew his nose. The effects of the gas were wearing off. The dragonfly had completely vanished now and with its going went also those eerie other-worldly thoughts and emotions that had torn at his mind.

He had realised that the atmosphere of this planet contained the green gas—it might well have been chlorine for all he knew—alongside the more normal constituents of the air that he expected to find on Ragnor. The problem of how he had been brought here by the Galactic Guards must wait. The plants here carried on the same sort of breathing cycle as the plants with which he was familiar and the oxygen they gave off collected in the cups. It was very likely that the oxygen was a help in poisoning the trapped animals. For Carson, it meant life. What sort of life, and for how long, though, he did not care to think too closely. Yet he had to think. He had to figure a way out of this impossible situation.

One obvious solution was to cut off the flower head, up-end it, and, using it as a sort of diving bell, walk back to the Guard's base from which he had stumbled. Carson went on

planning but every twist and turn of his frantic mind brought him back to this one solution. He did not know how far away from the door he had been taken although there had been no sign of it when he had been outside; but common-sense told him that it could not have been far. When the first flower-bell was exhausted of breathable air he would have to cut another and use that. He stared again at the trunk, writhing beneath him, and became aware of other, furtive movement beneath his feet.

He looked down. From the mess of rotting flesh and acids there, biting into his boots as he stood, a small, round, flesh-coloured blob of material rolled free and began to pulsate slightly. Carson stared, fascinated.

In size it compared with an apple full bloomed on some safe tree back home. Intrigued, he bent down and picked it up. It had no appreciable temperature, which meant that it was at blood heat, and it felt smooth and comfortable, lying there on his palm. He felt nothing. But as he stared he thought that it was dwindling in size, melting. He watched, as, gradually, it melted away. On the palm of his hand was left only a slightly reddish patch, and an odd tingling, as though he had been fed a low-voltage electric current.

Whatever it had been, it was gone.

Arthur Ross Carson experienced a swift, vertiginous sense of dis-orientation. His vision blurred. He leaned against the side of the amber wall, faint and trembling.

A voice, inside his head, spoke with tremendous relief.

"I don't know how it happened; but intelligence again! Incredible! Who are you, intelligence?"

Carson opened his mouth. He felt as though the ground had opened up and all hell had been displayed before him. He swallowed, and felt sick, and tried to control himself and thought of the fleshy apple and his mind crawled with horror.

"I cannot harm you. I must apologise. I was a little clumsy in making myself known. But I have been starved of a mind for too long—for too long. Please calm yourself so that we may talk."

"What—what—" Carson was shaking all over.

"So clumsy of me. I apologise—Carson, I believe? Yes, well, Arthur Ross Carson, I observe that you have placed yourself in an unduly alarming predicament. Most regrettable. However" — here, Carson, for all the terror and

bewilderment sweeping through him, experienced from this alien mind in his brain the sensation of a small, dry, self-satisfied cough—"However, I, Sandoz, am now with you."

Mounting turmoil in Carson's overstrained mind burst and broke so that he felt again as he had felt after the Guards had pumped him full of analgesic dope. Calmness flowed from the stranger in his brain, calmness and a great sense of peace. Now, Carson knew, it was right that this being Sandoz should also occupy the body that had for twenty years belonged solely to the being called Carson.

"I can hear you," Carson whispered. "In my mind! But where are you? Are you . . . ?"

"I am in you and part of you, indissolubly twinned with you until death do us part—then, with regret for the passing of a congenial host, I shall look for another." Again that sense of a small, humorous, almost self-deprecatory cough. "That unfortunate insect possessed a brain of infinitesimal capacity. Most cramped. Quite uncomfortable. Nearly as bad as the fish-hunter of Mirquar Seven—but you would not, I observe, be familiar with that noxious planet."

Carson fumbled for an answer. He accepted that this—this person Sandoz now intended to live in the same body as himself. But acceptance brought its own problems.

Before he could form a coherent thought, Sandoz spoke ruminatively. "Somewhat churlish of me, I fear to mention Mirquar Seven. You could not possibly know of it for it perished seventy million Galactic years ago—and the name was only that given to it by its semi-intelligent inhabitants. An insanitary lot, I assure you."

The bewilderment in Carson turned to peevishness. This alien intruder had forced him to accept its—his?—hers? presence; but he could still feel resentment at the thing's complete preoccupation with self.

He said: "Look, Sandoz. You're in my mind. Right. I accept that. But this damned plant's acid is eating through my boots and outside there is only the green poison gas. It may only be transferring from one host to another for you—but it's the end for me."

"I observed your predicament, as I informed you. Fear naught—strange phrases you have tucked away in the darker recesses of your brain!—I shall see that we leave here safely. Had you been with me when I shared the paper-tissue-winged flying creature's body on Huirona Twelve and we were forced

down into the poison sea swarming with jaws and fangs—not to mention the soul-eaters—you would not prate to me of danger.” The alien voice whispering in Carson’s brain sharpened with pride and arrogance, tinged with that mocking self-laughter that struck so incongruous a note. “Remember, Carson—you are now bound up with Sandoz! And Sandoz knows how to protect his friends.”

Chapter Four

The pure stream of alien thought flowed on then. Carson slowly began to understand what had happened to him—fully understand. He had been taken over by some horrible alien intelligence; there existed in his own brain and controlling part of his mind, another entity, a separate id, another will and force, co-existing with him, with Arthur Ross Carson and calling itself Sandoz. The understanding despite the soothing touches that calmed and quietened him, was too greatly terrible for ordinary reactions to mean anything.

For a space of time as the plant acid ate into his boots, Carson just stood there, blankly, not even shaking, just standing, a pliant receptacle opening to the thrust of alien thoughts and alien concepts.

Fragments of Sandoz’ thoughts broke through, small pieces as though an encyclopedia had been torn up and single leaves drifted down haphazardly.

“ . . . homo sapiens . . . they all call themselves that . . . seem to think thinking is original with them . . . metabolisms . . . simple . . . oxygen . . . haemoglobin . . . useful . . . a quite remarkably barbarian brain, and yet, intelligent! Fascinating . . . phobias and fears enough to fill the Coal Sack . . . starkly primitive as a savage . . . no conception of the powers of the Universe . . . yet not native to this planet . . . ”

Carson sagged now against the curving amber wall, seeing the steady pulsations of the veins, feeling the slosh and suck of acid around his boots. Sandoz was taking his time . . .

“ . . . astonishing. I must have been out of circulation longer than I thought . . . the galaxy fairly has changed, if this Carson has it right . . . Aha! I observe—girl . . . oh, I see.”

And then Carson experienced the final emotion that set the seal on his relationship with Sandoz.

Quite simply, the alien voice in his brain said: *"I observe the episode of Lucy . . . I am sorry, Carson. Truly sorry. And my emotions run so much more deeply than yours that a river would seem small set against the trickle from your eyes."*

And Carson believed him.

"Alex Bors. Yes. Well we must do something about him. But first, Carson, we liberate your puny body from this voracious plant."

Sandoz sharpened his tones again, prodded Carson into action and the knife slashed at the fibrous plant muscles again. Again the plant bent its head, opened the valves and flicked Carson out.

"You'll get us both poisoned at this rate," said Carson; but without conviction. "We must up end a plant over our head, and pretty sharply, too."

"I observe your concern, Carson, and assure you that there is no need for alarm. I am quite able to operate your puny body on an anaerobic system for the time it will take us to leave this planet."

Of all this Carson, prodded, replied only to what he felt touched him most. "Puny body? I resent that, Sandoz!"

It was the first time he had called his guest by his name.

Sandoz' chuckle echoed eerily in Carson's brain.

"Puny I said, Carson, and puny I maintain! Had you been with me when I occupied one of the miniscule brains of the Goliath—your word!—people of Jjurill Three you would know what muscles and bone were! Enormous. Elephantine piled on mammoth—they could pull down and break in two trees ten feet in diameter. But their brains. Pitiful, young Carson, pitiful."

"All right, then. So I'm puny. But I still have to breathe . . ."

Only then did Carson realise that he was standing on the moss under the darting roof of carnivorous plants swathed in the poisonous green gas—and he was not breathing.

"Hey!" he said, startled, his mind screaming the questions. "How—?"

"Fret not, Carson, my young friend. A mere matter of molecule re-arrangement. We can exist quite comfortably

until we find more oxygen for your relatively primitive metabolic system."

"Go on, tell me about the time you converted a water breather to a methane-breather on Xprwzl!" flamed Carson, exasperated into savage sarcasm.

"No, young fellow. That was on Harun Nine — and, incidentally, was around fifty million Galyears ago."

Carson experienced an odd, abrupt feeling of loneliness, an unsettling sense of being stripped naked in a snowstorm. A gulf had opened in his mind. He said: *"What's wrong, Sandoz?"* and received no reply.

Inexplicably, sheer panic hit him. He had no thought that if Sandoz vanished then Carson would inevitably die in the green gas; rather, he felt as he had when Lucy faced danger and he was powerless to help.

The joy and relief when Sandoz' dry voice echoed in his mind warmed and comforted him, bringing him to a deeper understanding of the symbiosis now binding them.

"I was meditating, Carson. I must be allowed my privacy—a modicum of the same you would say in your quaint usage—and I admit I was in error." The dry cough was there again. *"That wasn't on Harun Nine, neither was it fifty million Galyears ago."*

"Really?"

"I observe by your manner that you do not consider this to be of importance. But it is. Of this you will later have indisputable proof. It was on Harun Eight and was forty-nine million Galyears ago. This merely shows that I haven't got hold of you properly yet."

"Got hold of me!" It was almost a mental yelp.

"An unfortunate phrase, Carson. My apologies. But you do appreciate that with the multi-million Galyear memories I possess, the storage of same would be difficult even with my sub-atomic imprinting process with the obviously limited number of molecules comprising me that you saw just before I was lucky enough to team up with you. No, my dear boy, I have to use parts of your untenanted brain to, as it were, store my filing system."

"Oh," was all that Carson could say.

"And now I think it is time we left this infernal planet. I must confess that I share a liking for green fields, a blue sky and running rivers, with a dinky little stretch of coastline and a blue blue sea—likings, you will observe, that are

identical with yours. This is inevitable. If I am to prove a good partner then I must share much of your inner life—and it would be foolish of me to hanker after arid steppes swept by sub-zero gasses if you would wither and die there—if I let you, of course."

"Of course."

"You plunged precipitately into this world through a door from Admin Centre on Ragnor. H'mn. That door was guarded, you will remember. You showed little discretion in using it; but I understand the reasons why you did. I'm not at all happy about these Galactic Guards—geegees, you call them. And the Statque appears to me to be a most moribund organisation. I can only know about events in the galaxy of recent date from what you know; consequently I feel deaf, blind and singularly cut-off. My sense of the passage of time still functions but, I cut it off when I am in a host such as that poor defunct insect."

Even Carson, young and impetuous for life as he was, could understand an apparent immortal cutting off his awareness of the passage of time.

Still, he said with some of his old fire returning: "Let's worry about the galaxy's state of health after we've seen to our own, shall we? How do you propose to get us off this confounded planet?"

"A pungent question. I do not think it would be wise to return through your door. Obviously some form of matter transmission—although why you oxygen-breathing humans would want to come here escapes me—so I think we must explore alternatives. H'mn. Yes." Again, shortly, there froze that feeling of vacuum in Carson's mind.

Then: *"Working with an intelligence again is rather stimulating. It liberates the ego, uplifts the spirit. Your brain is quite remarkable, Carson, quite. Although you are, without doubt, stupid, clottish and an oaf, the potential is truly amazing. I can do things I haven't been able to do since—oh, since the Rilla swarmed out from their overpopulated worlds to take over the Galaxy."*

"Rilla taking over the Galaxy?"

"A long time ago. You humans, you homo sapiens, are quite new, it seems. A mere matter of thousands of years—and you measure time in the old old way, revolutions of one particular planet around an insignificant primary—"

"Earth," said Carson. And, as always, when he said the magic name, a sheer thrill of excitement shot through him. Sandoz caught that tremor of passion, and responded.

"Yes, young Carson, yes. I can do a lot with you Earthmen."

"I've never been to Earth," said Carson. "And no one I've ever heard of ever has. Only a handful of people know where it is—but we all began there in the long ago."

"Day before yesterday," said Sandoz with his dry deprecating cough.

Above Carson's head the carnivorous flower heads, beautifully evil in an Earthman's eyes, darted and swayed and their amber cups closed and opened in a sybaritic dance. Beneath his feet the moss trod softly and all about, casting a slurring of harsh outlines and a blurring of fine detail, the green vapours swathed veils of emerald and lime and a thousand tints between.

Each individual flower head reached delicately forward towards Carson as he passed seeking this fresh delicacy, and each and every one recoiled as though striking a glass pane. Carson accepted this, knowing that Sandoz protected his own.

Presently they reached a clearing in the marching flower stalks. Carson had no knowledge of fatigue. His muscles responded with a joyous lightness and every organ in his body functioned without his awareness—the ultimately true test of health.

Halting at Sandoz' command he looked about. A testiness infused Sandoz' next thought: "*Confound it! Your human swear words are deplorably dull; but they will suffice. This is not the right clearing. We must go up!*"

On the thought Carson felt the astounding sensation of his feet leaving the moss and of his body floating light as thistledown into the atmosphere. He looked down. Beneath his trailing boots the flower heads reeled past like a long unrolling escalator, wind tore at his body and head but did not disturb a single hair. He gulped.

"Levitation, of course," snapped Sandoz. "*We have stumbled about on your gawky legs far too long. Ah!*"

The satisfaction flowed richly from Sandoz.

Carson swooped down into another clearing, indential to the first, perhaps a hundred miles away; but with the dif-

ference that here squatted what Carson guessed to be a space vessel of unknown origin.

"I've never seen one like that back on the spacefield on Ragnor," he said slowly.

"From your paucity of knowledge I can guess. This ship brought me here something like a hundred and eighty thousand years ago. I've been inhabiting mindless insects ever since—ugh!"

The intelligences crewing the ship had all died of a malignant disease, one by one, with Sandoz moving host time after time until, inevitably, he had left an intelligent host and joined an insect. The old story of tragedy moved Carson profoundly. He entered the ship, the controls strangely familiar to his hands under the promptings of Sandoz, checked those long-dead ones' handiwork, found the ship spaceworthy. And Sandoz provided the oxygen . . .

The thrill that shook Arthur Ross Carson as he took his first ship into space moved him with the vigour and wonder of it as though all that had gone before had been a dream.

Chapter Five

When two separate and alien minds occupy the same brain and body, conflicts are bound to arise.

"But why? That's all I want you to tell me. Why do we have to go to BJ Six Two Three?"

"Because, my dear young Carson, I wish to go there."

"But I don't! I want to go back to Ragnor. I have unfinished business there."

"Business that is unfinished can wait. You have been waiting a fortnight of your time. I have been waiting a million years. I think you would agree that I have some slight claim to priority."

Carson rose from the eight-sided padded chair before the control console, his eyes satiated for the time with the vista of space, and padded back to the dispenser for a drink of pure water. Sandoz provided these little things.

"So we agree you've priority—but if you've waited that long a few more weeks shouldn't hurt—"

"I have waited that long, yes; but much of it was spent in unintelligent hosts—"

"What about the owners of this ship?"

"We were going to BJ Six Two Three when the disease struck."

Carson had no reply to that.

"What's so special about the place, anyway?"

"About the planet — nothing outstanding. As to my reasons for going there, they are private—"

"Y'know, this traffic is a one-way street!" Carson burst out. *"Here you are, a little blob of tissue, squatting cannily inside me somewhere, prodding and prying into my brain and knowing everything I know. But what do I know about you? Nothing! It's a bit one-sided."*

Sandoz sighed. *"I'm not squatting in a lump, idiot. I'm spread out along your nervous system—"*

"How pleasant!"

"For you—yes!" Sandoz sent a cutting thought into Carson's mind. *"You have already seen what I can do, I, Sandoz, can make of you a great man in the galaxy—"*

"I just want a chat with Alex Bors—"

"As you shall, my poor tormented boy, as you shall."

Arthur Ross Carson acknowledged a grudging debt to Sandoz that the little alien had been trying to interfere as little as possible with his host's emotions; and where interference had been deftly touched—it had been necessary. Alex Bors. Carson could repeat the name calmly. He could think of Lucy as he had last seen her, twisted and white on the trolley, and his mind remained unclouded. And, finally, he could acquiesce, albeit grudgingly, in Sandoz decision to go to BJ Six Two Three before anything was done about Alex Bors and the Statque.

The planet turned out to be small, uninteresting, in what Sandoz told him was the tertiary phase of development. Life had oozed out of the seas and had spread greenly across the land and the atmosphere was gradually being stocked with oxygen. Occasionally a volcano blew up with spectacular fireworks making Carson think sourly of the hot foot he had set the geegee.

And yet the bubbling enthusiasm in him as he stepped from the alien spacecraft sent him leaping forward across a curve of beach beside a smooth sea, excited, eager, full of a strange and consuming hunger. Carson realised he was receiving an overspill of Sandoz' feelings; and he felt oddly touched that the alien should also experience these very human anticipations.

A small toad-like creature appeared at the edge of the fringe of low-growing greenery, hopped forward daintily, heading across the beach towards the sea. A fat sun struck glints from the water. A plop sounded and a series of ripples spread. The toad halted, its skin bunching and relaxing, beady eyes swivelling freely.

"Only one imperative operates here, Carson. Eating. Everything else—even sex—is subordinate to that."

"Something's out there waiting for the toad for dinner."

There was no answer ringing in Carson's head. That unsettling, distant, empty feeling of loneliness engulfed him. All his enthusiasm and joyous welcome of this new world had gone. He looked back at the ship where she stood lumpily on her alien fins, and he scuffed the sandy beach with a foot. He didn't know what to do. The blackness in his mind clung to his spirit like a leech. He felt lost and lonely and very miserable.

In that grim hiatus of awareness he wondered about Sandoz, who was off communing with himself, wondering where he had originated, how long he had lived, what his real feelings about life were. Immortal. Not too happy a state, despite its overt attractions, and yet one few people would lightly turn down . . .

"What are you doing, Sandoz?" he called fretfully.

No answer.

The sun sank in the alien sky and the toad had long since been eaten. Carson watched a volcano spouting into the sky, filling the new atmosphere with sulphurous fumes, then he went back to the ship and prepared himself food that had kept frozen for thousands of years.

He was just drinking the pure water that Sandoz had provided when that worthy erupted into his brain.

"Carson—we leave here at once. This planet is useless—"

No animation stirred Sandoz, none of that joy and lightness now flowed from him. His thoughts rode in like clods of mud from a tired horse's hooves. Carson felt the chill in his brain, and did not seek to argue with the little alien.

They left BJ Six Two Three in an enveloping cloud of silence. Sandoz was still there, within Carson—the boy had nothing of that black and empty feeling—but Sandoz did not speak and his aloofness saddened Carson, depressing him in a way he could not have explained.

He had much to learn of Sandoz and the ways of Sandoz.

The alien spacecraft was fast. Her supra-light drive operated on principles with which Carson was unfamiliar. This was to be expected; but he could not forget that he'd been a spaceship breaker's boy and he spent a considerable time examining the engines and listening as Sandoz explained. During this period he experienced many vacuities as Sandoz locked himself away in his own private awareness. Carson grew to accept this; but he disliked intensely the feeling that Sandoz wasn't around, in his brain, a comrade and mentor.

In a metal locker the size of a large refrigerator had been stored reels of microfilm. Through the projector they proved to be star charts. Carson sat for hours studying them, not really knowing why he was looking or for what; but receiving from Sandoz a quivering intentness of purpose that convinced him that *something* was brewing.

"Suppose," Sandoz said on the fifth ship-day, "*suppose you were on a touring holiday in space. What—*"

"I've never had a holiday in my life."

"Well, imagine it!" snapped Sandoz. The thought slapped starkly in Carson's brain. Sandoz was fraying. "*You've just left BJ Six Two Three. What sort of place would you head for?*"

"That's easy," Carson said off-handedly, still a little nettled at Sandoz' sharpness. "I'd go for the bright lights."

"Yes." The thought was a mere breath. "*Yes. I think you may be right . . .*"

Interestingly, the thought occurred to Carson to wonder what form Sandoz' bright lights would take. What were his relaxations, enjoyments? Did he have any, even?

"Of course! I share your pleasures and pastimes. One would have thought that to be obvious!"

Carson put forward a doubt he had been meditating.

"My life span ought to be around two hundred Earth years, if I keep my health and don't get myself killed off. You've been around for millions. Surely each host must just be a fragmentary blur, a second of your awareness?"

"Those without intelligence are, thankfully. But thinking beings—like yourself—no, Carson. If you take a pint of water and apply a certain amount of heat under controlled atmospheric conditions, you will need a certain amount of time to boil the water. Say ten minutes. Well, I sense those ten minutes as the water boils just as you do; I cannot speed up the natural laws of the galaxy—at least, not all. A year

of incident to you will be the same length of time to me. Satisfied?"

"On that, yes. What I would really like to know is who you are looking for."

"So you imagine I am seeking someone?"

"It's pretty obvious."

"I suppose so. I suppose so."

The sigh in his mind held no reminder for Carson of Sandoz' dry little cough of deprecation. A sorrow for the little alien welled in him; and he had the feeling that this was a genuine sorrow. He said: "Can I help?"

"Suppose you were looking for someone—not Alex Bors—and you arrived at a place where this someone had been. Could you tell?"

"Only if they'd left a message, or a sign—"

"A sign. There was a sign on BJ Six Two Three. The—the person I seek had been there. But this sign has limitations. I would know at once on planet. In space a few parsecs away . . . But I receive no sign now, no message at all . . ."

Thinking hard, Carson said: "D'you know who was hosting the person you seek?"

And Sandoz went away and there was blankness in his mind.

When Sandoz returned he said without preamble: "*Only a very few times in my life have I been the guest of an intelligence with whom I could allow myself any true emotional—ah—entanglement. It seems, my dear young Carson, that you intend to achieve that; whether you will it or not.*"

Outside the ship the stars shone in their multitudes as the galaxy spun in space; the spacecraft plunged on leaving light fumbling far behind, heading somewhere, anywhere—yet for Carson the meaning of the Universe was contained in the confines of his own brain, a brain he shared with another creature. All that had gone before must of necessity have led to this moment. He knew now that he had found more than a friend in Sandoz. With all his powers and accomplishments, Sandoz was offering the hand of true partnership.

Carson took it without a second's hesitation.

After a time, Sandoz said: "*How my people originated even we do not fully understand. Our best theory is that*

we developed physically as independent beings until we could evolve no further along that path, and that then some upheaval, some catastrophe, forced us to be unable to continue living in our own bodies. The people who flew this spaceship could almost be said to have faced that. Their bodies were seized by malignant illness and they died—but their brains were unaffected!"

"The spirit would go on; but the flesh succumbs . . ."

"Those people's minds perished because their bodies could not any longer support them. My people found a way to continue the life of the brain, in the form in which you first saw me. Our hosts since then have been innumerable."

"How many of you are there?"

"In this galaxy? I would guess at a hundred or so."

"I see. I can easily understand then why you are so anxious to meet another—Sandoz—I'll help all I can."

"Thank you. But, you see, we, also, understand the mystery of sex. If I couldn't have done, how could I appreciate your feelings about Lucy? I seek my wife—"

"Your wife!"

"Well, my wife-to-be. Engaged, fiancée, those are the terms you would use. With us, there are differences. But she is looking for me, as I her. And immortal we may be; but we suffer for every second we are apart."

"The bright lights," said Carson. "That would apply?"

"I think so. But, as you so rightly said, it all depends on what host she is inhabiting now . . ."

"If you like intelligence, then your best chance is humanity. Oh, I know there are alien intelligences who are not human in the galaxy; but we know so little of them that they must be ruled out. And even I, who have lived all my life on a dusty little hick planet, have heard of Shyrane—"

"Shyrane? Your thoughts are woefully confused . . ."

"I guess so. We don't know much about Shyrane, except that it is reputed to be the pleasure world, the vice spot, the hedonists' paradise, in this end of the galaxy. She'd have gone there. I'm sure."

"I'm not. But we'll go there—if we can find it."

Young Arthur Ross Carson shook his head in wonder. "Just think—me, actually going to Shyrane!" And then the banality of that line of thought struck him—he who had lost a girl for ever, had been invaded by a symbiotic alien, had driven an alien spacecraft into the galaxy—why should he, of all people, tremble at the thought of a mere Earthling's luxury world?

Chapter Six

Carson sat in the padded seat of the turbine bus and watched interestedly as the countryside of neat fields, low trees, careful husbandry and a veneration for water manifest in every ditch and pump and spillway sped past outside. The farm people took no notice of him—his clothes and features were human, despite the alienness within him, and he came from a planet even more of a hick outworld than this world of Bahrein. He lay back in the seat, enjoying the sensation of being once again on-planet.

He'd stowed the alien spacecraft neatly beneath a glacier near a pole and Sandoz, who had done the thinking, levitated them both to temperate regions. Now the bus rolled smoothly into Marsport, capital city of Bahrein, and vacuum brakes clamped smoothly down. The passengers alighted for market day. Carson stepped down, crinkling his eyes against the sun, feeling the memories of Ragnor sweep back.

Here in Marsport on Bahrein they had their Admin. Centre. A geegee puffed and pompous in his uniform stood before his sentry box. Carson stared for a long time.

"*Let's get going!*" Sandoz had been keeping quiet. He'd been soaking up these new impressions, Carson guessed.

"If your jewels are as phoney as you are—!" Carson strode off through the dust, nostrils picking up those familiar age-old odours of human-inhabited planets. He might never have left Ragnor—except that Bahrein was some fifty light years or so away.

"*That's one item this Statque has succeeded in,*" Sandoz remarked as Carson walked through to the street of jewelers. "*At least they have maintained the monetary system. And, of course, everyone speaks Galactic.*"

"Oh, sure," said Carson, eyes scanning each small shop, mentally weighing and discarding. "We call it Galactic; but historians claim there are so many other old languages in it—English, French, German, Italian, Russian—that it's a real lingua galactica. Maybe that's why it's lasted."

"*No, Carson — not this shop.*" Sandoz' sharp thought halted Carson. The jeweller he had selected looked up, smiling, wiping his lips, his face a leather mask of friendly jollity.

"And can I help you, my dear young sir? You wish to purchase a gold trinket for your girl? A golden chain, perhaps, with—"

"No." Carson backed off hurriedly. "No, thank you."

The jeweller moved his lips; but the sound went unheard by Carson.

"Well—what was wrong with him? He looked honest."

Sandoz sighed. *"If that is the sum of your knowledge of your own species—I pity you. That man's emanations were so crooked they'd bounce right around in ten yards—"*

"Emanations?"

"A mere minor matter for Sandoz," Sandoz said off-handedly. *"I can tell a phoney — which my jewels most certainly are not!"*

"All right—sorry—"

"That man with brown apron and the extraordinarily—so far as I have seen—long nose. Him."

Carson wouldn't have trusted the fellow with a used match; but obedient to Sandoz' bidding he went across the narrow strip of sunshine down the centre of the street and into the violet gloom of the man's shop. Here a few choice items of jewellery were on display. There was none of the garish over-lavishness of most shops. The air smelt faintly of cedar-wood.

"Can I help you? Will you sit down?"

Carson sat, self-consciously. The man did have a long nose; but at closer quarters his merry eyes made you forget that. His mouth curved in a smile that showed good teeth.

"I—I have something to sell—"

"Let me see."

Carson put the small plastic sack down on the glass counter and slipped the neck. The jewels that Sandoz had had him make from the fiery heart of the reactor aboard the ship winked back now with some of that nuclear fire, here in a violet-gloomed shop on sleepy Bahrein.

The man sucked in a breath. Then he stirred the jewels with one stiff forefinger, gently, as though probing a wound.

"Where did you get these?"

"Found a lode out in the hills—" The story, when at last he had been coaxed into saying it all, hung together. Sandoz had sworn that the jewels were all of a likeness; they could have been dug up in one lump.

The jeweller put one finger to that long nose and considered. He had used his glass a few times; but he knew his job.

"I cannot buy all these from you, young man. I do not have the capital. But, if you will let me have some—"

"What prices are you offering?" said Carson. "I'm in a hurry to sell and I don't want to see every jeweller in the street."

"You would take less than they are worth?"

"A little. If it is necessary."

"I understand." The jeweller smiled his gentle smile. "You can always go back for more."

"Perhaps."

The normal alarm that would have stabbed Carson at so flagrant a breach of safety precautions—and off his own planet, too!—remained quiet. Sandoz, he knew, would protect his own, even against a posse of armed jewellers hell-bent on taking his jewels and the knowledge of their source.

He realised afresh how much this junction with the alien had changed even his every-day thinking.

He sold a third of the jewels—and at that the man with the long nose reached right down his stocking. Sandoz was impatient. As they left the shop, with friendly goodbyes in their ears and a semi-humorous wail that the jeweller could not buy more of these superlative gems, Sandoz urged Carson to hurry.

"There was no sign on this planet—I had hoped; but hope against fact is a fool's game. Let us sell the rest and be off."

The second and third jeweller—hand-picked by Sandoz using Carson's hands—took the balance of the gems.

Feeling bloated with wealth, Carson walked back into the main square, headed for the bus stop. Another short ride out into the country, and then Sandoz could take over with his levitation.

He was passing at an angle across the pavement when the scent of hot coffee wafted from a small cafe. Even Sandoz exclaimed at the reaction in Carson.

"What is this coffee, then? A drug?"

"Perhaps," Carson said, heading purposefully towards the cafe where a fat and genial man in a striped apron carried a crystal tray set with steaming cups of coffee, "and again, perhaps not. But I need a cup of coffee—now!"

Only when he was seated and the fat man was bringing the first cup, was the realisation borne in on Carson that

he had come into this cafe against the expressed desires of Sandoz.

The shock halted the cup halfway to his lips.

"Sandoz," he said—and at once clamped his lips down. No-one had heard; but he had to remember not to speak his thoughts aloud. "Sandoz—I came in here and you didn't want me to. Explain that!"

"Simple." The sigh of self-deprecation sounded again. *"If you want to do anything with enough power and single-minded purpose—I cannot halt you. You would find that out in time. Strange that it took this liquid to do it—but I think you over-rate its fragrance. Now back on—"*

"Sure," said Carson, lost in the revelation. "Sure. Let's drink up and get back to our ship."

He made the necessary enquiries at the bus station—they knew; everyone, it seemed, in this part of the galaxy knew—and then he headed out to the arctic and the ship.

Shyrane turned out to be the sort of planet that Carson hadn't dreamed could exist. After he'd spent six hours there he felt it should not be allowed to exist.

Sandoz remained strangely quiet. He did not withdraw; and for that Carson was grateful; but the little alien squatted in Carson's brain like a little red squirrel at the mouth of a hole. Carson didn't care to wonder what lay in that hole—a hole that stretched back for millions of years.

Apart from its sporting parks where you could shoot big game in air-conditioned comfort, and the lakes where yachting took on the measured cadences of a minuet, all of Shyrane was one vast pleasure city, encircling the globe. Carson and Sandoz ignored all that. Carson sat lumpily in the first bar they came to, sipped an outlandish drink that tasted fine, and let Sandoz brood.

Painted men and women passed on the shining boulevards; pirouetting skycars danced above with pleasure-seekers leaning out to shout to others below. A heady sense of well-being stung the nostrils, and the lungs expanded. Lights glittered everywhere and music chorussed in every corner. Life could be fun here, Carson supposed sourly, for an evening. After that any normal man would want to atomise the place.

He could not miss the occasional scarlet-coated figure of a Galactic Guardsman glimpsed in the happy throngs. He wondered why they had to patrol here. They probably enjoyed it—and then he remembered Captain Jose and the

major. Tired, disillusioned men, living an isolated life on a hick world, hated by the populace and engrossed in doing a job for which they received no thanks—only kicks and stones—and hot feet set by space-breaker's boys.

Since he'd tied up with Sandoz and had become involved in an alien's worries and desires, the real galaxy — the galaxy of today and not a million years ago, had slipped significantly from its true position in reality.

Alex Bors.

He could still repeat the name without feeling any emotion. That he was going to kill the man, was a fixed and unalterable resolve. But there would be no joy in it.

A man and woman, giggling, half-stupified by methacol fumes, stood up and left the table to Carson. He signalled for another drink. Sandoz remained silent. There seemed to be more scarlet in the crowds passing the cafe table; a continual flicker that slowly took Carson's eyes and then his brain and then his full attention.

Geegees! Many of them—crowding in on the table, ringing him in with grim browned faces and set jaws and hands that hung just above holstered weapons.

"Wake up, Sandoz!" Carson slowly put his drink down. He tensed his muscles, ready to stand up, make a run for it.

Sandoz' calm, quietening thought rode in.

"Sit still, Carson, the impetuous. They wish you no harm—"

"No harm! Look at their faces—their weapons!"

"Sit still and listen to what they have to say!"

Of them all a captain at last sat down in the vacated chair. He flicked away a lipstick stained cigarette with the tired, fussy movement of a man living on pills.

"You're Arthur Ross Carson?"

"Who. Who'd you say? Carson? Never heard of the man."

Even as he spoke Carson heard the hollowness of his words.

The captain's eyes were a brown and steady and his eyelids drooped a little with fatigue that all the pills in the galaxy couldn't kill. His face was as lean and lined as had been Captain Jose's, and he shifted his rapier around as though unused to wearing the cumbersome thing.

"Look, son. We don't wish you any harm. But we have some questions to ask you."

"You brought plenty of strong-arm help along—" then Carson's voice faltered. Behind the captain's chair stood now only one robust and long-service geegee; of the others there was not the single flash of scarlet among the gay crowds passing on the boulevards.

The captain's tired voice went on. "I'd rather you didn't make a fuss. We're only the Galactic Guard. Shyrane has its own police force. I don't want you to get mixed up with them—and neither do you if you know anything at all about luxury worlds and their hoodlums in uniforms."

"I can guess."

"Well, come along then, son. You don't have to fear anything—"

"No? Who says I'm this Carson character you're looking for?"

Resignedly, the captain unzipped a pocket, slid a two-dimensional colour shot towards Carson. It was his own face—and his particulars stared back in bold type.

He stood up. "How come the geegees are so damned knowing about one poor ship-breaker's boy? How come they sent this from Ragnor, all the way to Shyrane?"

"All stations receive these—we have a library full of 'em. But you—for some reason I don't know—are a special case. I don't wonder they want to talk to you."

"Well," he said, belligerently, aloud. "Do I go?"

"Yes, Carson," said the guard captain.

"Yes, Carson," said Sandoz.

And Carson caught his breath at the weird similarity in the tones, the same sense of tiredness and disillusion.

"So she's not here, either?"

"It is difficult for me to pick up an old sign when many other intelligences abound. Shyrane is filled with people. It will take time."

"Come along, Carson," said the captain.

Dispiritedly, Carson walked off to the waiting guard flier. Within him, Sandoz patiently searched the planet, seeking a sign.

Chapter Seven

They took Carson into a small bare room that might have been in the Admin Centre back on Ragnor. He sat dejectedly in a wooden chair. Presently the captain, who had introduced himself as Captain Nicholls, returned with a major. Carson looked twice, then relaxed. It wasn't the same major; but they might have been twins.

"I'm Major Narvik, Carson. I've been talking to Ragnor about you. They're sending a man. Take time. You'll wait here; be looked after, until he arrives. Got it? "

"Tell me, Major Narvik. Why all the fuss about me? "

Narvik and Nicholls exchanged a glance. There lay in that swift meeting of eyes a wariness, an unease, a wondering fear that alarmed Carson. Then he thought of Sandoz and willed himself to relax; Sandoz looked after his own, didn't he?

"I can't tell you that. I can assure you that we know you didn't have a hand in the murder of Colonel Stacey. One word of warning, to emphasize what Captain Nicholls has told you. Don't get caught by the Shyrane Security men."

"You'll look after me," said Carson, wickedly.

Sandoz said: "*Ask them about Alex Bors.*"

Obediently, Carson said: "This character Alex Bors. Has he been around? "

Narvik smoothed a hand across his lined forehead.

"Forget Bors, Carson. He's a Statque man. Out of your orbit—"

"Out of my orbit hell! He tortured and murdered my girl! If that doesn't—"

"No, Carson. Leave him alone—" Then Major Narvik swallowed and said: "What am I saying? How can you possibly contact or harm Bors? "

Softly, Carson said: "You haven't asked me how I got here yet."

At this Captain Nicholls smiled. "Easy. You walked through a door on Admin Centre on Ragnor. We knew we'd pick you up eventually."

To Carson this was a revelation. The geeges had it all wrong; but they had known they'd find him—because they thought he'd gone into a different world through that door from the world he'd actually gone into. They didn't know he'd gone where amber carnivorous flower heads prowled in clouds of poisonous green gas. A point to remember.

Sandoz said: "*Ask them which world they expected you to go to . . .*"

Carson asked, mockingly. A cloud crossed Narvik's lined face. "We didn't know. The controls had been twisted at random—but it wasn't important. We'd find you."

"Well, you have. Why?"

"Wait until the man from Ragnor arrives." And Major Narvik and Captain Nicholls went out. As they closed the door, Carson heard Nicholls say: "He acts in a way you wouldn't expect a twenty year old from a backward planet to act, Bill. Sort of contained, in control . . ."

"Yes, Alec, I got that, too. Maybe he isn't just a hard case, a delinquent, maybe he really is . . ."

And the door closed.

"Maybe I really am the long lost prince turned into a frog—and ready to be eaten like that toad on BJ Six Two Three!"

Carson strode up and down the room fretfully. "Hey, Sandoz! Don't you want to get out of here, be about your search?"

"*I told you, picking up the sign is very difficult here. But, I think—I think maybe—but let it wait. I am growing quite interested in you and your affairs, Carson. It seems to me they are treating you with more state than you warrant—as a young boy from a dusty, half-forgotten planet—*"

"I remember the major—back on Ragnor—mentioned my name. Arthur Ross Carson—old Stan Shulman sometimes called me Arc . . . Arthur Ross . . . Well, when this man from Ragnor arrives we'll do some asking, hey, Sandoz?"

"*We shall assuredly do so. Tell me, what is all this about a prince and a frog? Your own ideas are confused — or distorted . . .*"

Carson explained wearily, telling Sandoz about fairy stories and the horrible transmogrifications that witches put on beautiful princesses and handsome princes. "But they're just fairy stories. I'm an orphan, a space-ship breaker's boy. Nothing else!"

Sandoz' dry chuckle reached Carson infuriatingly. "*You say that with such venom because you are afraid that you are more than you think. You are young, and you have withdrawn from the future—an odd attitude for a youngster. As to the change of material form, there is nothing alarming in that, a mere matter of molecular re-arrangement—*" And Sandoz went into a long spiel about races he had known

who could change their bodily forms at will. Carson listened vaguely—frightened of the future, was he? Well, what was so stupid about that?

An orderly, a long-service geegee with pouched eyes and stripes on his sleeve clear up to his elbow, showed him to a small bedroom furnished with masculine simplicity.

"I'm Dreyfuss. If you want anything, ask me. And I've been told to tell you that a man is coming from Guard Headquarters, so you may have a longer wait than we thought." Dreyfuss looked back from the door, his baggy face wondering. "I dunno who you are, son; but you've fair stirred 'em up."

Dreyfuss went away, after locking the door, and Carson turned at once to Sandoz. "A long wait! Are you prepared to spend a long time shut up here, Sandoz?"

"I must search this planet. It matters little to me where we wait, so long as I can get on with my task . . ."

Carson lay down on the bed, feeling bitter, and when he slept he dreamed of Lucy.

The man from Ragnor turned out to be Captain Jose. He regarded Carson mournfully.

"You led us a dance, young feller. Dashing about like that. Lucky for you the Quicktrip door was tuned in to Shyrane. You might have found yourself anywhere unpleasant—"

"Quicktrip door," said Carson, deciding to clear up one point of the murky mess. "I've never heard of them. Can you—?"

"Why not? As soon as the man from Guard HQ arrives we can put our cards on the table. Still—the Guard have the use of a few of the great inventions and systems of the old order. I came through the Quicktrip door to Shyrane. But it takes power and there is always the chance you might not arrive — matter transportation is only relatively fool-proof, and we can't maintain the chain of doors from Guard post to Guard post as we would wish."

"Makes a spaceship obsolete, though."

"No. Quicktrip doors are for the few, and they go out of action every year, despite all that the Statque technicians can do. The galaxy is running down, son, burning out."

"Nonsense!" Sandoz exploded within Carson. *"Only the systems dreamed up by you humans are failing. The galaxy is good for a long line of galyears yet!"*

The Galactic Guards used no threats, no coercion; to Carson they appeared a bunch of tired, dispirited old men. There were young guardsmen—very new and scrubbed eager—but he saw these only rarely, when they came in from patrol and he happened to be exercising in the yard. They looked uniformly tough and uncompromising; maybe they did all the dirty work everyone prated about while the old ones like Jose and Narvik and Nicholls sat around and champed their gums.

Now Captain Jose was joined by Narvik and Nicholls and the three Guard officers stood looking down on Carson, sitting on the edge of his bed.

"He denies all knowledge of his parents," Jose said. "As he would anyway, of course. We had a quick look into his head; nothing definite. But all the signs are there. I, like you, have not allowed myself to hope—but . . ."

"But," said Narvik. "If true, we can at least hope for better things. But no one man is a panacea. Don't forget that."

Nicholls grunted as he bit off the end of a cigar. "I know that, Mike. But think what it would mean! The dream of years coming true—"

"Hold it, Alec!" Narvik, as senior officer present, knew how to hold the reins of command. "You're doing what we all must not do. Don't run away with things. If it's true, it's true. The man from HQ will know—and I wish he was coming by Quicktrip. His ship will take time."

They'd allowed Carson to keep the money he'd had from the sale of the jewels on Bahrein. They didn't ask questions. They were saving those until the man from HQ arrived.

Carson said: "You're talking about me as though I'm all neatly tied and trussed waiting for the spit and the broiler. Suppose I don't want to go along when you at last deign to tell me I'm no frog but a prince? What then?"

"Broiled frog!" said Jose, and grimaced.

Carson thought of the toad on that primeval beach on BJ Six Two Three; but said nothing. He'd come straight here from Ragnor, hadn't he, through a Quicktrip door?

"Did you ever find out who'd murdered Colonel Stacey?"

Jose shook his head. "No, son. That's just another unsolved crime. It was worked cunningly. How did the murderer acquire a *razzee*, anyway? Marjoram VI isn't so far

from Ragnor, but it's a most unhealthy place." The strawberry radiation burns on Jose's face deepened. "We lost a fine officer; but we don't know why."

Narvik plucked his blue cummerbund of authority. "Lots of people would like to rid the galaxy of the Guards. People on all sides of the political fences. We poor Guardians of law and order are right in the middle, shot at from all sides." He snapped an angry fist on to his rapier pommel. "And the great joke is that most of the laws we are supposed to enforce are out-dated, ridiculous or just plain stupid. But we can have no say in politics; lawmaking is not for us."

"*The old policeman's complaint,*" said Sandoz. "*I heard that fifty galyears ago, and it wasn't new then.*"

Carson remembered that first time he had been into the Admin Centre on Ragnor and the way the Guards had treated him. Aloof, coldly impersonal, they had seemed to be ruled by laws which took up a miserable blue and ground him into acquiescent powder without disturbing the age-old dust of the building. Now, the Guards talked like the very human men he had guessed them to be.

A thought struck him, and he said, softly: "Suppose I am the man you think. What happens about Alex Bors then?"

There was a silence.

The three Guard officers stared uneasily at one another. Finally, Narvik said: "If you are who we think—hope!—you are, why then Alex Bors will be in a different position. I will not say more. Just wait."

And, perforce, Carson waited. And Sandoz went patiently on with his search.

Dreyfuss with an old-soldier wink warned Carson to be ready. He walked into the bedroom with the scarlet tunic of a Guardsman draped over his arm, drab grey trousers and black calf-length boots, which he placed on a chair, in startling contrast to his own immaculate whites.

"What's this, then?" demanded Carson.

"You should ask me. I obeys orders and face front. Just put those duds on and report to the capt'n, muy pronto. And, me lad, you'd better jump!"

"I'm not wearing that fancy dress!" exclaimed Carson wrathfully. He was sleeping raw and his own clothes were not on the chair where he had left them.

"Now, now, lad—" began Dreyfuss placatingly.

Carson opened his mouth to let loose an opinion of the Guards and their uniform, when Sandoz said wearily: "*Don't argue, Carson, there's a good fellow. Just get dressed. I'm coming to the end of my search. Shyrane has such a lot of people . . .*"

Dressed in the unfamiliar uniform, Carson joined Captains Jose and Nicholls and Major Narvik. The group went across to the car parks and boarded a Guard flier.

"That's a Guard officer-cadet uniform, Carson," Narvik told him as the flier pulled out and soared up through the congested traffic lanes. "We don't want to attract attention by having a blue aboard."

Carson maintained a hostile silence until the flier plunged down through traffic lanes that were as crowded as this all over Shyrane. Below an artificial lake with the pouting sails of yachts scudding to an artificial breeze scaled up to them. As they sank, the lake's confines broadened until, when they reached the surface alongside a majestic full-rigged ship under all plain sail, every horizon presented the barline of sea and sky.

"*They really do the amateur sailors proud, don't they,*" remarked Sandoz. The thought matched Carson's.

The transfer from flier to sailing ship took little time. The crew, even to Carson's hostile eyes, were young and eager and quite obviously guardsmen. Down in the big stern cabin with sloping bay windows all across the stern, the party sat in luxurious foamplastic chairs and took the drinks handed to them by orderlies. The slap and scent of the sea against the hull soothed Carson and he felt he could understand why millionaires spent money on making believe at sailing as they did.

A colonel entered and waved the officers to keep their seats. His lean face turned on Carson and he stared openly. "No formality, please, gentlemen. If this young man is who you think he is, you will have done the Guards a great service. Colonel-General Harding and H.E. will be down at once. Oh—and a man from the Statque is here, of course."

"Of course," said Narvik sourly. The colonel smiled.

"Cheer up, Bill. This may be the break through!"

"I hope it is," said Narvik. "I've been talking to Captain Jose, here. He told me what that other Statque man on Ragnor did to Carson's girl friend, Lucy. Y'know, Brian, they aren't fit to run the galaxy!"

The colonel nodded sombrely. "We think that to be true, Bill. But *someone* has to do the job. We only carry out our orders and try to police the mess. If the Statque failed tomorrow—there'd be no government left, you know that."

"True," Narvik grunted heavily, and subsided. In the small silence the creak of canvas and rigging permeated the cabin with comforting sounds, to lay alongside the shafts of friendly, if alien, sunshine that slanted in from the wide windows across the deck.

The door opened, an orderly stood as though paralysed, and two gorgeous men entered, followed by two other men, less beautifully dressed but no less authoritative and overbearing. The leading figure—a Lieutenant-General—offered a seat to the man at his side. This man, big, grey-haired, beak-nosed and radiating toughness and confidence, must be Colonel-General Harding. He sat down and his eyes had not left Carson's face.

The third man, dressed simply in russet synthisilk, sat heavily next to Harding. His face, square and full of years of command, drooped a little, the heavy puffed eyelids obscured the watery grey stare; but Carson felt those eyes on him with more of a shock than the brilliant challenging stare of Harding. This man, he guessed, must be H.E.

The fourth man was already sitting when Carson shifted his attention. He looked small and foxy, the sort of man who might be expected to utter soft words of friendship as he plunged the dagger in your back. His hands, long and slender, stayed clasped together on the blotter before him. Carson disliked him on sight.

"Hey, Sandoz!" he thought, relishing his new inner friendship. "*Can you spare a moment? What do you make of these people?*"

Sandoz' words were preoccupied, distant. "*The small man is to be treated as you would a poisonous snake. The man called H.E. is strong, full of integrity, dedicated to a task that he believes impossible. Harding is a good soldier, as his assistant, also, is, ready to do as H.E. orders. Enough?*"

"Thanks. Any luck?"

"I have covered nearly all of Shyrane. I have been receiving vague and indistinct signs; but I think I may be on to something at last. It is too early to be positive."

"Good for you!" said Carson. And meant it.

Chapter Eight

The gathering, having received fresh drinks, sat waiting for H.E. to speak.

"Your name is Arthur Ross Carson?"

"Yes."

Instantly, the lieutenant-general said angrily: "You will address His Excellency as such, and you will be properly courteous!"

H.E. waved that down. "If he's Carson's boy he's beyond pomp and circumstance already."

A pang shot through Carson. What, really, did this old craggy man mean by Carson's boy? Was the frog a prince?

H.E. flicked one grey finger at a file before Captain Jose. "In there we have records taken when you were asleep on Ragnor, and others taken here on Shyrane. We know a lot about you, boy; but we must know more."

Colonel-General Harding said on a breath: "The likeness is amazing, H.E. . . ."

"Yes. Listen, Carson, I am going to tell you of a report that only a few people have read. When I have finished, talk. Not before." H.E. hunched around in his chair and an orderly pushed a lighted cigar into his hand. Puffing, he said: "I run the geegees. And I'm the only Guardsman who calls us that. Remember that. You damn blues think you're being funny; but it takes a *man* to be a geegee!"

Carson hadn't thought of it like that before. But he sat obediently listening. He was aware of Sandoz, listening, too, his search temporarily abandoned.

"I've run the Guards for twenty years. Before that they were run—and run better than I can—by a man called Carson. I was his chief assistant. We cooked up an idea with the help of geneticists. There was a girl—Helen Ross, the loveliest creature that ever walked God's Galaxy. The union of the two, with scientific help, would produce an infant who would combine everything that was best and desirable in a Guards officer. We believe you to be that experiment—"

H.E. held up a hand. "Wait. The boy was born on Earth and was taken to the Guards' base on Jerome V. The ship never reached there; afterwards we felt that a Quicktrip would have been worth the risk. Everything of the great experiment vanished. Dropped right out of the galaxy for twenty years. And then—and then Arthur Ross Carson set a hotfoot to a geegee sentry on Ragnor."

"A princely frog," said Carson. "Just a blasted princely frog."

The commander of the Galactic Guards picked that up without a second try. "Time for you to shed your froggy coat and assume the prince's clothes. Oh, you'll never be as brilliant as we'd hoped. You've lost twenty good years of training; but we can work on you. You represent the man who, as my successor, can turn the Galactic Guards into a real force for peace. You can order and arrange. You can understand the inner problems that are eating the heart out of Man's tithe of the galaxy! You, Carson, can bring the pendulum of progress back on to the upswing!"

Carson stood up. "But I don't want to!" he said, angry and frightened, at last, by his destiny. "I don't want to run the Guards. I want to stay as I am, just as I am. Leave me alone!"

"He's Carson's boy all right," said Harding. "It's no good pointing out the power you'd have, the luxury if you wanted it. But think of the fascination of the job—trying to put a galaxy back on its feet again—"

"Let the galaxy go to hell in its own bucket!" shouted Carson. "I've got mine!"

All the officers about the cabin shifted, and the sound of scabbarded rapiers beat a sigh into the air. The small, snake-like man rose. He looked about him, wetting his lips as though seeking to taste the emotions roiling here.

"We have no real proof that this—this space-ship breaker's boy is the man you claim him to be. Shulman says he picked him off a wreck that was about to crash on Ragnor. That is not the Guard base on Jerome V."

"I'm satisfied," grunted Colonel-General Harding.

H.E. nodded. "I don't think there is any doubt. We fully realise what attitude the Statque will take; but that cannot deflect us from our purpose. The Guards began an experiment twenty years ago—and, thinking they had lost their chance, they lost hope. But, today—that hope has been miraculously restored. We must not let this second chance slip away!"

Sandoz said: "*That Statque man's up to mischief, Carson. His emanations are so coiled he'd choke himself if he could touch 'em.*"

Tumultuous tempers, boiling just beneath the thin veneer of civilisation, began to break out.

Harding jumped the table and glared at the Statque man. H.E. leaned back in his chair, looking still at Carson as though at the Holy Grail. The Statque man's face had whitened around the edges, his chin was drawn in as though he'd taken up a defensive position.

"Damn you, Crow!" said Harding. "The Statque have got to understand that they cannot be allowed to interfere with the Guards. We are incorruptible. There are precious few organisations you can say that about these days!"

"Have I questioned your ethics, my dear Colonel-General? I merely point out that in a matter as grave as you tell me this is, the Statque must be informed and must give their ruling before you go ahead—"

"Opinion," H.E. said, softly. "Not ruling."

"Ruling," said Crow, and from the Statque man's face blazed a steady purpose that Carson, for one, recognised as a devotion to duty close to fanaticism.

As the men in the cabin stared tensely at one another and the ship rolled lazily to the wind, Sandoz chuckled deep in Carson's brain. "*An interesting point for them to discuss. Should the most virile of government departments, that maintains the government in being, have jurisdiction over the general police force, or should the police be free from political direction? Let them sort it out for themselves. The Glation Empire foundered on the same rock, twenty million or so years ago.*"

"I agree. I don't want to be a stuffed shirt running this lot of old men and boys!" Carson thought at Sandoz angrily. The thought of the power and prestige so subtly not-mentioned by Harding, moved him not at all. He just waited to find Alex Bors. And, just maybe, this Statque man, Crow, might be the answer.

A hushphone extended on its pseudopod from a desk by the door. The colonel who had first greeted them on their arrival had been quietly sitting here throughout the debate. Now he spoke briefly, listened, then turned to rise as the hushphone whipped back into the desk.

The colonel leant down and whispered in the Lieutenant-General's ear. The Lieutenant-General leaned across and spoke to Harding. The Colonel-General half rose, face suddenly filled with passion. He glared at Crow. Then he slumped, turned to H.E. and relayed the message.

H.E. raised his hooded eyes and looked curiously at Crow.

"We have a report that vhf stuff is emanating from here, Crow. Now that your superiors know the story, what, do you think, they will do?"

Crow was not discountenanced by the showing of his hand. He said, distinctly, insolently: "Did you think I would sit here and listen to high treason without making a report? Isn't that what I—what the Statque—are for?"

"And what do you expect to do, exactly? This is a matter purely within the local jurisdiction of the Guards. It is an internal matter." H.E. controlled the scorn well. "And, what force have you on Shyrane, if it comes to it?"

Crow smiled. "There is another Squeb on Shyrane. He will find a way."

The word Squeb was new to Carson; it was easy enough to decipher its origin. He thought it a singularly ugly word for a singularly ugly gang.

"Two of you," said Harding, edging the words with savage irony. "Statque or no Statque, you're not going to interfere with the Guards about their rightful business."

For a moment, in Carson's brain, that frightful blankness engulfed him; then it cleared and with real relief he welcomed Sandoz back.

"Any luck?"

"A sure sign at last, Carson!" The joy and wonder permeating Sandoz' thoughts made Carson react with genuine pleasure. He felt the same sense of heady delight and keen, almost painful, anticipation. "She was here a mere two thousand years ago! Now I must concentrate very fully, so you must keep track of what goes on here, if you are interested, and brief me later. I know you will understand."

"Yes, Sandoz. Good luck."

And Sandoz was gone. But this time Carson could live with and understand that black horror of emptiness within his being.

H.E. thrust back his chair. He rose to his full height, towering, dominating, craggy. "This cabin is rather stuffy"—he stared at Crow as he spoke—"I need some fresh air."

He walked across to Carson, hooked gnarled fingers under the boy's armpit. "You and me, Arthur. You and me are going to have a chat. I know you'd like to hear about your father and mother."

Carson would. All the others rose. Going up the companionway, Carson managed to keep an eye on Crow. The

Statque man, alone, aboard this Guard ship, appeared unruffled and quite capable of looking after himself. The Colonel had an eye on Crow, too.

On deck the waves ran chuckling under the counter and the sails pulled gently. The ship was making about five knots and a shoreline showed dead ahead. H.E. glanced aft. "Take her around again, Joe!" he bellowed.

"Aye, aye, sir!" answered a hail, wailing like a seabird. The man back there, a Guard acting as captain of the ship, began to give his orders. Canvas slatted and the booms swung majestically. Carson felt the swing of angle beneath his feet as the ship tacked.

High in the glittering sky half a dozen dots grew in size, dropping from the criss-crossing traffic lanes. Carson regarded them idly as H.E. said: "Your father was H.E. for forty years, Carson. A fine man; the best and cleanest man I've ever known. He brought the Guards out of chaos, made them into a body of men with hope and courage. He implanted our rules, supplementing the old ones, he made the geegees incorruptible. And, by God! I've kept 'em that way!"

"They look a sorry bunch to me," said Carson without rancour. "Old tired men, and boys anxious to swing a truncheon."

"No, Arthur. That's an easy impression. But it's wrong. The Statque are the agency most to be feared—they are dedicated to maintaining things as they are—that's the straight course to stagnation! You must go ahead. What are you staring at?"

"Those fliers. They seem headed this way—"

But H.E. had taken one look and was bellowing like an enraged bull. Men poured out on to deck, weapons glinted. Harding appeared, snatching up a flash-rifle, shouting.

"Colonel Lee has that damned Crow under arrest. They're S.S. up there, H.E.! Damned Shyrane Security men! Crow's Statque pal has dredged up the filthiest dregs he could find to hit us!"

Blank astonishment caught Carson. "Surely," he said to H.E. as they both ran back for the companionway. "Surely the Statque and the Guard won't actually fight each other? I mean—that's civil war!"

H.E. clattered down the treads. "That's precisely the score, Arthur! The Statque would like to sweep the Guard away, use their own police. Three-quarters of the planetary

police forces of the galaxy are tools of the Statque. This is a luxury planet, full of money and vice. The Shyrane Security police are among the worst gang of cut-throats I've ever known. They'll use all the force they have to take you from us. When you're gone—they can break us, then . . . ”

In the cabin H.E. hastily flung on the black leather and blue-steel armour so familiar to all those who had run into the Galactic Guard on duty. Carson picked up a small hand gun, feeling helplessly caught up in events he had no desire to share. But if the S.S. were after him, then a weapon might be useful.

“Get that damned scarlet popinjay's uniform off, Arthur, and put on decent black leathers!” shouted H.E.

Carson obeyed, taking the armour from deft-fingered orderlies. He'd be less conspicuous. And the thought of Bors rankled like a festering wound. He had the strongest feeling that he was entering the final stages of the tragedy that had begun when he'd set that hot-foot back in Gunlum on Ragnor.

Chapter Nine

When he returned on deck the Guard were disposed about the deck of the sailing ship, poised and waiting. Three of the S.S. fliers remained hovering; the other three descended level with the deck, skimming a parallel course over the waves. Carson stared at them with curiosity, feeling himself a spectator of these events now and not part of them; that feeling must stem from his passionate determination not to be involved.

“This is a Shyrane Security force patrol,” a voice slapped in flat magnification across the gap. “We are coming aboard for routine inspection.”

“Routine my eye!” growled Harding, tense beside H.E. “Shall we let 'em aboard, H.E.? Or tell 'em to clear off?”

“If you do that, they'll start shooting. They don't care if Arthur is killed!”

Disdaining artificial amplification, Harding bellowed across: “Come aboard, then!”

The S.S. flier dipped and closed. The first man to set foot on deck was tall, craggy, with a ravaged face and eyes bleaker than a polar winter. His uniform, a plain grey relieved by dramatic yellow flashes, proclaimed his work—hired mercenary, paid by the masters of Shyrane to keep the filth and

unpleasantness of their world below the surface, beaten back into the festering underworld.

He walked straight up to H.E. "I'm Colonel Drobny. The Statque asked me to call in on you. They want to talk to their agent Crow—"

"He is aboard, Drobny," said Harding, taking the speech deftly from H.E. H.E. stood graven, a half-smile lowering his pouchy eyelids still more. "Question is—where's the Statque man you have aboard?"

The man who had followed the martial figure of Drobny stepped forward, smiling, smooth, the perfect picture of a gentleman's gentleman. One could picture him folding trousers with gentle hands and polishing shoes and whistling cheerfully at his mundane tasks.

"I am here. I wish to speak to agent Crow. Then I shall have to ask you to hand over the boy Carson you have aboard."

"By thunder—!" broke out Harding; but H.E. quietened him with a single look.

H.E. said: "The agent Crow made an unfortunate mistake. He assumed that private and internal Guard business was the concern of the Bureau Status Quo Enforcement. We shall be happy to release Crow into your custody. We shall look forward to receiving an abstract of his court martial."

Slowly, the Statque man shook his head. His lips were thin, Carson noted, thin and shining with a filming of spittle. "That won't wash, H.E. We know what the Guard plan. The Statque cannot tolerate any subversive movements within the galaxy—especially when those movements originate within the very body dedicated to the maintenance of peace and order."

Other men in grey and yellow clambered aboard. The second flier dropped down level with the ship's rail. Harding fingered his flash-rifle and glowered. H.E. had remained a calm and immobile statue; but even Carson could see that the situation was slipping from his grasp.

"I shall overlook the impertinence of your remarks this time," said H.E. "But I warn you that there will be no more chances for you. You are an agent of the Statque. You are stepping out of bounds here. You can take Crow—and go! There is nothing more to be said."

What H.E. hadn't said, what was implicit in all that had gone before, was that H.E. was H.E. The Grand Commander

of the Galactic Guards. However powerful the Statque, one agent of theirs could not outface H.E.

The tension aboard the sailing ship, reaching forward under Shyrane's artificial breeze, stepped up in intensity. Hostile eyes glared on the S.S. men from all sides, and fingers stayed near triggers. But there were more S.S. than there were Guards already—and more of the corrupt police force hovered aloft in the three remaining fliers. Carson held himself ready to leap for the nearest cover.

Although—he still couldn't believe that it would come to fighting. Two agencies of the government—closing in battle, one with the other? It didn't make sense.

Then the memory of the things he had been told filtered through. How the Guard wished to cleanse the galaxy of corruption, how the Statque were dedicated—honestly, perhaps; mistakenly, certainly — to maintaining everything exactly as it was for all time. If he, Arthur Ross Carson, the princely frog, were really all that H.E. claimed for him, if he *could* re-animate the Galactic Guard, give it the power and authority that had been slipping from it over the years—why, then, the Statque would—must—step in to stop that change.

But he didn't care. The spirit of his father might move him powerfully; but he felt no loyalty to the Guard. Through them Lucy had been taken from him, even if she had been tortured and killed by a Statque man.

Colonel Brian Lee appeared on deck, stepping through the hatchway. Following him, Crow slouched out, smiling evilly with the triumph of his moment. Two Guards held weapons handy at Crow's back.

"Take him and go," said H.E.

"We shall take him, H.E." the Statque agent said smoothly. "And we shall take, also, the boy Carson. *Where is he?*"

"No, by God, you don't!" flared Colonel-General Harding. His hands barely moved as he fought to control the deep temper in him; the flash-rifle's barrel quivered.

Colonel Drobny, a flash of grey and yellow, flung to one side, drawing the long pistol from its leather holster dramatically low on his thigh. "Give it to 'em!" he shouted. And the drama suddenly stirred to life, the play-acting becoming a reality, a pulsating fact under the alien sun, a matter of life—and death.

On the instant livid bolts of fire criss-crossed the deck. Men dived for cover. A section of the ship's bulwarks exploded outwards. Explosive bullets ripped yellow gouges from the deck planks. The sizzling plunk of flash rifles shattered the air, the screeching whine of their discharge seared eardrums and living flesh.

Carson went head first behind the hatchway coaming together with H.E. and Harding. The old men, their faces grim with the significance of this act of violence, hefted their weapons like the old soldiers they were. An explosive bullet screamed across the open hatchway, caroomed, exploded in mid-air and, showering a cascade of vitriolic fire, lashed full into Carson's chest armour.

He gasped and recoiled, feeling the punch like a meaty fist thump him. The armour held; the scorching fire dripped to the deck smouldering.

"All right, Arthur?" called H.E. "Keep your fool head down!"

Colonel Lee snaked in from the side, using his elbows, a flash-rifle in his hands. "Up there, sir!"

Harding swivelled his head, massive in the helmet.

"Those damn fliers are going to drop right on our heads. Where's Crow?"

A line of fire sliced neatly between them, burning up a section of hatchway, burning and cauterising as it flashed. Smoke and flame stained the air; the stink of burnt powder and the flat gritty taste of flasher discharges coated the tongue.

"He dashed for that other Squeb. They can kill us all off now!"

But the Galactic Guard were not rookies, here on this ancient sailing ship. Flat on the deck, head ringing, eyes watering, Carson saw Captain Jose lying out on his back and raising a flasher. The discharge ripped the whole keel section of a flier away and seconds later a hail of explosive bullets ripped the wreckage, tossed it yards away to fall, sizzling and bellowing, into the water.

"This is for keeps," H.E. said. "And this is no place to fight. We'll have to make it to our own flier."

Harding said at once: "You take the boy, H.E. I'll cover you."

Rebellion rose in Carson. He didn't owe the Guard anything. He didn't want to be their Grand Commander. But, also, he didn't want these old men so determinedly to lay down their lives for him. He knew now with a scathing sense of inferiority, that every Guard aboard would willingly die if he, Arthur Ross Carson, could be saved alive for his great destiny.

Rolling over twice, he scrambled to hands and knees, took a quick look across the deck. He heard H.E. call agonisedly after him, but he shut the sound from his ears, peered through the tumult. Colonel Droby was just visible handing himself up into a flier. On the short metal ladder below, hidden by the bulwarks from the Guards further back, the agent Crow was being hefted up by his Squeb comrade.

At that moment some trigger-quick Guard sighted on the flier, loosed off a sleeting rattle of shells. The flier dipped, great chunks of her plating ripping off. The metal ladder swayed down.

Through all the tumult, Carson heard Crow's sudden frightened squeal.

"Hold me, Alex! quick—"

Alex!

Alex Bors! It had to be.

All outside sounds and sights dimmed and blurred. Carson felt himself to be crouched at the end of a long, narrow tunnel, cloaked in darkness. And at the other end of that tunnel, limned by light, stood the figure of Statque agent Alex Bors, standing hoisting up a leg—the rest of the man Crow just didn't penetrate that lighted tunnel through darkness. That direct tunnel that stretched arrow-true between Carson and Alex Bors.

Something plucked at his leg. His armour rang again as a bullet ricocheted off. Slowly, he raised his gun.

A sensation of heat surrounded him. He was sweating. The drops ran down and stung his eyes; the scene blurred.

Another savage blow jerked his arm and the gun trembled. He snapped on the helmet sweat band as he had been instructed and he felt his brow cool; but sweat still clung to his eyes. He blinked fiercely.

Crow was down on the deck again, being dragged to safety as the flier tipped and plunged for the water. Colonel Droby spreadeagled out with a wail, struck the water in a spreading splash of whiteness.

The heat burned intolerably now and smoke drifted across, flat and stinking. A harsh, deadly crackling began to dominate the clattering sounds of war.

Carson brought the gun up again with ferocious concentration. He wanted Alex Bors. If it was the last thing he did—he was going to put that man away where he belonged, wipe out, if he could, the black memory of what had happened to Lucy.

He wanted Alex Bors!

Even as he looked, even as his hand grasped the gun butt and his finger constricted on the trigger, Bors pushed Crow ahead, disappeared beneath the overhang of the hull. Carson cursed. He leaped forward, feeling the heat breathe on him with flaming fangs, realising that the ship was on fire and welcoming that as a cover to his actions. He reached the rail, looked over.

Covered by the smoke, standing now like a wraith in a fog pall, he searched the narrow strip of decking below with eyes that were cold and merciless.

Men crouched down there, waiting for a flier to edge in and take them off. S.S. men. They turned and fired upwards at the poop at random, keeping the Guard back, steady still; corrupt though they might be, soldiers fighting a soldiers' battle.

In seconds now Carson would sight Bors. And then he would take deliberate aim, press the trigger, put a bullet dead in that black heart . . .

"Carson! I've found her!"

For a chaotic moment Carson thought he had gone mad to hear a voice within his brain calling to him.

"We must hurry! The reason I couldn't contact her easily was simple—she was changing hosts. Now she is in the body of a child, an undeveloped brain—her signals are weak and hard to read. But I've found her!"

Sandoz!

Sandoz—forgotten completely in the tide of black passion that had welled in Carson as he sought the life of Alex Bors.

"Her parents are leaving Shyrane now. At this minute they are going aboard a space ship and I shall lose contact. If she spaces out now—I may take thousands of years to find her again. Carson! Are you listening? We must leave at once."

Down below there, in the drifting smoke, garishly illumined fragmentarily by the flash of a rifle—was that Bors? Was that dark figure—then the livid scorch mark of a rifle threw everything into noonday brightness and the man wore the grey and yellow.

Desperately, Carson searched among those men below, striving to pierce the smoky gloom, striving to find the man he wanted above all else to kill.

"Carson! We must leave! What is going on? You seem to be in the middle of a battle—well—leave! We can levitate to the spaceport."

Fumes and smoke writhed about him so that he was shut away in a private world, a world where only the maddening voice of an alien within his skull spoke to him of leaving.

"Carson—please—I observe that you are trying to kill this man Alex Bors. But he can wait . . . He can wait, Carson!"

The smoke sucked suddenly sideways and in the rift outlined and stark, blazing with internal fires, the waiting flier plunged steeply into the water. A groan reached Carson from the men now trapped on that fiery deck.

"Bors can wait, Carson! But she—my wife-to-be, is going away! I have sought her for so long, Carson, so long. And now I have found her—but if we do not leave at once, the ship will go into the vast depths of the galaxy, go beyond my power to search. She is in the body of a small child, she cannot call to me, she must go where she is told—and the ship is leaving now! The last few passengers are climbing the ramps, power is being fed to the engines, the passengers are gathering in the lounges to wave goodbye to their friends! Carson, Carson, I beg you—let us go now!"

Angrily, still with his merciless eyes fixed below, Carson thought: *"We can check the ship's destination, follow—"*

"No, Carson, no! For I do not know the spaceport. I can home in on her thoughts; but once the ship has left I cannot tell from where it went, and there are so many ships leaving Shyrane . . ."

"But Bors is down there! I've sworn to kill him, Sandoz. And I will! You must wait another million years—"

A hand clamped suddenly on Carson's shoulder and he jumped like a jet that has had all power abruptly switched on. H.E.s voice said in his ear: *"Arthur! So I've found you! Come on, lad. Let us leave here now. Our flier is*

waiting on the blind side. Hurry, boy. The ship is on fire, she'll go down any moment."

Blindly, Carson swung to shake off that friendly, demanding hand.

"I'm not going with you!" he shouted. "I've other business, unfinished business . . ."

"To kill," said Sandoz, *"is very easy. To dedicate your life to killing one man is poor and mean and will destroy you in the end. But, I implore you, I have a future, a fresh chance—you know what going to her means to me . . ."*

"Bors," shouted Carson, the words ripped from him in anguish. "Oh, Bors, do not gloat—for I shall kill you. One day you will pay the reckoning!"

"You're coming then, Arthur? I knew you wouldn't let your father down . . ."

Smoke and flame engulfed them in a new wave of heat. H.E. scrambled back and tripped. Automatically, Carson put out a hand, helped the old man up. Then he saw what H.E. had tripped over.

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Colonel-General Harding lay on the deck, white and twisted, his side ripped away, the armour bent and blackened. His face, bloodless, stared up with enormous eyes.

"Carson—" Harding whispered. "Good lad. Go it son. Do your duty by the Guard . . ."

"I didn't want him to die for me!" Carson said, the anguish in him bursting in a flood of self-reproach and self-condemnation. "I'm sorry, H.E. Sorry . . . But I have business, unfinished business!"

He jumped to one side, turned on the rail for one last look back at that solitary, old, stricken figure. Just before he jumped over the side, he called back: "I'll remember that I'm Arthur Ross Carson, H.E.! I'll remember. Carry on with your work. One day I'll be back. Remember— *I'll be back!*"

Then he fell straight into the sea.

But, just before his body struck, Sandoz took over and spun him deftly out, under the smoke, hidden, levitated him up and away from that burning ship.

He looked back as he flew undisturbed through the air.

The sailing ship flowered to the sky in tall blossoms of flame. Men flung themselves into the sea as the flames licked nearer. Alex Bors, the man who had murdered Lucy, was down there. But it seemed unlikely he would escape. So Bors had met a death not designed for him by Carson, and Carson felt no pity and no regret.

He swung up into the bright sky of Shyrane.

"*Hurry, Sandoz,*" he said, feeling the weight slough off his soul. "*Hurry—for I think it is more important that you should find your girl—start something wonderful, than that I should try to avenge the death of mine.*"

And Sandoz said: "*You are a real man at last, Arthur Ross Carson. A true man.*"

"No," said Carson. "*More than a man. For I have you, Sandoz, for a friend.*"

Nelson Sherwood

Here is another Society of Time story, dealing with Don Miguel Navarro and the strange present-day world of Spanish-dominated England. If you missed the last issue (No. 25) containing "Spoil of Yesterday," copies are still available.

THE WORD NOT WRITTEN

by JOHN BRUNNER

Chapter One

The quatrocentennial year was dying in a blaze of glory. The weather had been kind, and New Year's Eve proved to be fine and mild, spiced with a wind whose nip was just enough to sharpen the step to briskness and put colour in the faces of the people. Bonfires had been lit at sunset in most of the main streets of Londres, and around them nut vendors, potato bakers and kebab men with their rapier-like skewers laden with alternate lumps of meat, kidney and onion cried their hot wares.

There had been a great mock battle on the Thames as dusk fell ; people had flocked in their thousands to witness the finest reconstruction ever presented of the battle between the all-conquering Armada and the gallant but pitiful English ships, four hundred years ago.

Even yet there were a few diehards in the crowd who cried insults at the display, shouting that it was shameful to them

and their ancestors. But most of the spectators answered with jeers, for they regarded themselves as subjects of the Empire regardless of what blood happened to flow in their veins. Soon enough the civil guards quieted the complaints, and the loyal shout that greeted the appearance of His Most Catholic Majesty Philip IX, *Rey y Imperador*, when his golden barge hove in sight, echoed across all Londres.

Smiling, bowing graciously from side to side, King Philip was rowed over the same water that shortly before had been full of the mock battle. Another barge followed, bearing the Prince Imperial, his Princess, and their children, and behind that again came the barge of the Prince of New Castile. The King's barge had sixteen oars aside; those of his sons had twelve, and at one of the oars sweated and cursed Don Miguel Navarro, Licentiate in Ordinary of the Society of Time.

Whoever the blazes had thought up this delicate tribute to the royal family, he muttered to himself, ought by simple justice to have been pulling on the oars too. But it was fairly certain that he wasn't. He was probably simpering and dancing attendance on the King or the Prince Imperial.

Even if they were going with the stream, it nonetheless called for real rowing to keep up with the King's barge, as it had eight more oars and was anyway less heavily laden. As a gesture of loyalty the idea was splendid; as a job of work it was abominable.

The notion had started innocently enough. As Commander of the Society of Time, the Prince of New Castile was going to play host this New Year's Eve to his father, elder brother, and a raft of foreign dignitaries, chief among them the Ambassador of the Confederacy of Europe. It was certainly a great and signal honour for the Society to be chosen as the focus for the climax of the quatercentennial year, but like a good many royal favours it had its drawbacks. Don Miguel was in no mood for merrymaking anyway, what with the aftermath of the recent revelations he had had from Father Ramon about the actual nature of his work in the Society, but at least among personal friends and at his own discretion he might have passed a pleasant enough New Year's Eve. As things stood, he was going to have to follow up this chore on the river with an evening of playing host to all kinds of noble idiots at the Commander's palace in Greenwich. He could tell that he was not alone among the younger Licentiates on the rowers' benches in thinking that this might prove unendurable.

Probably the crowds that watched the splendid water-procession from the embankments guessed nothing of all this. Probably, when the spectacle was over, they dispersed sighing, thinking of the magnificence of the royal occasion and envying those fortunate enough to be present. Conversely, Don Miguel and his companions sat scowling by their oars, envying the simple folk going off to spend New Year's Eve with their families or to join the revels which would make the streets noisy and bright until dawn.

"You'd think," he growled, selecting one of the many discomforts that plagued him, "that in a Prince's barge they'd at least pad the seats decently."

His opposite number on the other side of the boat, another Licentiate of about his own age whose name was Don Felipe Basso, curled his lip. "It's clear where you'd rather be tonight, Miguel !" he answered in a low tone.

"Macedonia was better than this," Don Miguel muttered. A surge of memory drew up the side of his face where his smile was permanently twisted by a Greek hoplite's sword-stroke ; it had been on that field-trip to the Macedonia of Alexander the Great that he had first made the acquaintance of Felipe.

"Don Miguel ! Keep the time !"

From his post in the stern Don Arturo Cortes rapped the order in his shrill, acid voice. Seated in his most magnificent plum-coloured cloak and snow-white velvet breeches on a velvet and gilt chair, he was making the most of his task as overseer of the amateur rowers. He was one of the senior Licentiates of the Society below General Officer rank, and widely tipped to succeed the Mohawk, Red Bear, as Director-in-Chief of Fieldwork. Somewhere he had acquired a General Officer's wand which he was using at the moment as a baton to beat time for the oars. It was typical of his overweening self-esteem to make such a presumptuous gesture.

Don Miguel bit back his answer—he was altogether too close alongside the tapestry pavilion in which the Prince was sitting to speak louder than a whisper without being overheard and perhaps ticked off—and leaned harder on his oar. But when Don Arturo's attention had wandered again, Felipe spoke softly.

"He doesn't seem to like you, Miguel."

"Who ? Don Arturo ? That makes us even. I don't like him either."

"A little faster still!" Don Arturo rasped now, rising to his feet with his wand conspicuous in his hand. "We're falling further behind!"

By the time the barge was gentled in to the wharf near the Commander's palace, Don Miguel's buttocks were bruised, his hands were rubbed sore by the oars, and his temper was close to flashpoint. Face like thunder, he sat on his bench and watched Don Arturo with his usual officiousness directing the disembarkation of the Prince. With part of his mind, however, he was wondering whether out of sheer self-interest he ought to try and couter the dislike to which Felipe had referred. It was obvious where it had its source—in the affair of the stolen Aztec mask in which he had recently got himself involved. Everyone seemed to think he had handled it rather well. Indeed, he was wearing tonight for the first time at any Society function the outward sign of the Commander's approval, the gem-encrusted collar and star of the Order of the Scythe and Hourglass which cynical old Borromeo had chosen as the Society's emblem.

It crossed his mind that if he had played his cards right he might have used this new honour as a way of escaping duty on the rower's bench. But it was not in his nature to think of things like that at times when they might be useful.

Don Arturo's reputation for being suspicious of any younger member of the Society who made himself too noticeable was being amply borne out by the way he had been treating Don Miguel lately. Simply for his own comfort, Don Miguel reasoned, he would be well advised to deal courteously with Don Arturo.

But he wasn't going to do it this evening. Not after the performance Don Arturo had given aboard the barge.

"Are you going to sit here all night, Miguel?" Don Felipe said, clapping him on the shoulder. "Have you suddenly found a liking for that badly padded seat?"

Don Miguel sighed and roused himself. "I suppose not," he said. He gave a rueful glance at his hands. "Why did I not bring leather-palmed gloves with me instead of my best white silk pair which the oar would have rubbed to shreds? Ah well—how long shall we have to wait before we find a drink here?"

The Prince was ashore now. The wharf had been carpeted with purple, and a pathway of the same material led up over the

rolling green lawn towards the main portico of the palace. Either side of the carpet, huge immobile Guinea-men stood with flaring torches to light the way ; candles in coloured glass balls had been hung like fairy fruit on the branches of the trees and glowed red, yellow, green, white among artificial leaves. Every window of the palace was ablaze with light except for the upper two floors where the servants and slaves had their quarters under the eaves, and the higher windows of the great central tower where the Commander's own time apparatus was lodged. Don Miguel had a sinking feeling that before the night was out someone at least would have been persuaded to take a royal or noble visitor up that tower and show off the gadgetry, involving the technicians in a day's frantic work tomorrow to re-adjust all the delicate settings.

The strains of a band playing the currently fashionable dance-music drifted down from the palace. There was a fad for the chanted melodic lines and intense drumming of the Mohawks, and as Prince of New Castile, of course, the Commander could have the finest of American musicians at call.

Distantly visible through the huge windows flanking the entrance door of the main hall Don Miguel made out the General Officers of the Society, waiting to greet the King, who by now was almost at the door. Red Bear himself, with his black braided hair, was instantly identifiable.

Surrounded by a gaggle of courtiers, the two royal brothers and the Princess Imperial went up towards the house. Their faces eloquent of their suspicion that these high-ranking amateurs might have done the valuable barges some harm, the Society's watermen were taking over the potbellied craft again, to paddle them back to the boathouses. Most of the temporary rowers had already started in the princes' wake.

"Move, you two !" Sharper than ever, Don Arturo came bustling across the wharf waving his wand. "Don't you see that the mooring must be cleared ? There on the river is the barge of the Ambassador of the Confederacy—we dare not keep him waiting !"

Don Miguel shrugged and might have answered back, but Don Felipe sensibly warned him against it by closing his fingers hard on his upper arm. Together they stepped ashore, and the watermen hastily shoved off to make room for the new arrivals.

"Come on up to the palace now, Miguel," Don Felipe urged. "We don't want to get fouled up in the Ambassador's train as it lands."

"I suppose not." Don Miguel tore his dull gaze away from the looming, lantern-outlined shape moving with splashing oars down the river towards them, and started to walk up the lawn. "Are you expecting to enjoy this evening, Felipe?"

"Me? I can enjoy myself anywhere. But you look as though the hand of doom had been laid on you."

"I know where it's been laid, too," Don Miguel said ruefully, rubbing the seat of his breeches. "Ah, to Hades with it all! Let's make the most of it, what say?"

Don Felipe laughed and linked arms with his old friend, and hurried him up the slope towards the lighted palace.

Chapter Two

There was a peculiar and unexpected air of confusion in the main hall of the palace, gorgeously decorated and remarkably warm—which had the minor advantage, from the point of view of most of the younger Licentiates, that the beautiful women present could show themselves off in their lightest and filmiest gowns. The confusion stemmed from the fact that guests were arriving from both sides: the river approach, and the roadway as well. Consequently every few moments a tall Guinea-man would lead a surge of notables one way or the other across the already crowded hall so that they could greet a newcomer as protocol demanded.

The sight of this swirl and bustle raised Don Miguel's low spirits a little. With such a shifting of people it was conceivable that he might be overlooked, and could slip away to some quiet anteroom and savour his mood of gloom in private with a jug of wine. He made a meaningless response to some comment of Don Felipe's on the quality of the women here, his eyes roving around for his best line of escape.

And then his name was called.

His spirits sank again as he turned and saw Red Bear making an imperious gesture to him on his way from the river entrance—where the Ambassador from the Confederacy had just come in—towards the opposite door. He could hardly ignore that. He moved in Red Bear's wake and Don Felipe came with him.

"I think we're going to be honoured," Don Felipe said softly as they hurried forward. "Do you see who that is who has just turned up?"

The majordomo at the land entrance had a fine voice, but the babble of conversation and the noise of the band made it hard to hear what names he called out. A group of three—a man and two girls—were pausing in the centre of the wide double doorway.

"I don't know them," Don Miguel was going to say, when Red Bear, greeting the trio, turned and made another imperious gesture at them. He and Don Felipe strode forward and bowed.

"Your Grace, I have the pleasure of presenting Don Felipe Basso, Licentiate in Ordinary of the Society"—you had the feeling that this formality and routine appealed to Red Bear, with his Mohawk background—"and Don Miguel Navarro, Licentiate in Ordinary, Companion of the Order of the Scythe and Hourglass. Don Miguel, Don Felipe : His Grace the Duke of Scania, Ambassador of the United Kingdoms of Sweden and Norrway. The Lady Ingeborg ; the Lady Kristina."

His daughters, presumably. Bowing again, Don Miguel took a second look at them. They were very much alike in most respects, and also very much like the Duke—tall, slender, with the shining fair hair which on their father's fine head was turning to snow-white. Their eyes were large and blue, and their complexions were like milk. Their gowns were clearly designed by a master ; without ornament or embroidery they managed to look dazzling and put the finery of most of the other women to shame.

"Honoured," Don Miguel said, and heard how much more enthusiasm Don Felipe was putting into the same word.

"Don Miguel, Don Felipe," Red Bear was saying, "I charge you with the duty which I'm sure you'll find a pleasant one of escorting these beautiful ladies for the evening."

There could be no doubt of Don Felipe's agreement. With a tremendous flourish he bowed again, grinning like a cat, and the Lady Ingeborg's eyes danced. Don Miguel, on the other hand, felt like a boor as he muttered some empty answer. It was not that the Lady Kristina, opposite whom he had happened to find himself, was not extremely lovely. It was simply that in his present mood the last kind of company he had been looking for was that of an emancipated girl. His near-disastrous brush with the Marquesa di Jorque had set him

against female emancipation for the time being, and all his friends who had trifled with girls from Norrøway had informed him that they liked—no, demanded !—to be treated as at home. He had never been in Sweden or Norrøway, which formed a curious private northern enclave where the people determinedly minded their own affairs and ignored the rivalries of the Empire and the Confederacy. But he did know that under their system women were even entitled to vote for the members of the Thing, and this was almost alarmingly different from the usual way of running public life.

And that this was not all talk was shown by the fact that no other girls of such rank would conceivably have arrived at an affair like this without at least a duenna apiece and probably half-a-dozen ladies in attendance.

"I'm sure you'll be well looked after, my dears," the Duke said in excellent Spanish, smiling at his daughters. "Go ahead and enjoy yourselves. I've already seen several people I promised to have a word with tonight, so there's no need for anyone to look after me." He nodded at Red Bear.

Well . . .

The first steps were automatic : provision of refreshment, a few comments about how mild the weather had turned out, and something about the mock battle of the afternoon. And there it ran dry. For some reason Don Miguel's mind wandered off on the subject of his sore hands and the hard rower's bench, and he found himself at the tail-end of a long and impolite silence. Don Felipe and Lady Ingeborg were chatting with immense animation on the other side of a large pillar where they all four seemed to have wound up. He was standing like a booby.

It was something of relief when with true northern emancipation Lady Kristina decided to make good his deficiencies for him, and pointed at the star hanging on his ruffled shirt.

"Navarro," she said thoughtfully. "Of course. Aren't you the Don Miguel Navarro who was responsible for setting to rights that matter of the Aztec gold mask which could have been so disastrous?" She spoke Spanish as well as her father.

Somewhat uncomfortably, Don Miguel nodded. He said, "As a matter of fact—but how on earth did you know? It's not—uh—a matter of public record, exactly."

Lady Kristina gave a quicksilver laugh. "Oh, your Empire-bred modesty, Don Miguel! Even if it wasn't

explained in detail in all the newspapers, something which leads to the award of what you're wearing is bound to become a matter for gossip. And you must know that of all places an embassy is where gossip, particularly scandalous gossip, comes most quickly home to roost."

She gave a mischievous grin, and Don Miguel felt a corresponding smile come lopsided to his own face. He said, "In that case, my lady, I'm sure you have an absurdly exaggerated idea of what actually happened."

She shrugged the creamy bare shoulders that rose from her plain but exquisite gown. "Very probably. But I'm sure that if I were to ask you to tell me what actually did happen, you'd underplay your part in it grossly and persuade yourself that you were being honest."

The automatic, stiff, ridiculous words were already forming on Don Miguel's lips, triggered by the possibility that she was going to ask him to tell her about it, with the gushing flattery he would have expected from someone like—oh, Catalina di Jorque, for instance. He was going to say, "I'm afraid I can't talk about it. It's confidential to the Society of Time."

Barely in time he realised that she wasn't going to ask him to do anything of the sort, but was turning to find a place for the empty glass she held, and saying, "Well, if you're unwilling to converse with me, you might ask me to dance."

Somewhat disconcerted, he led her out on the floor. She was a very good dancer indeed. As they completed their first circle of the hall, they passed Don Felipe dancing with Lady Ingeborg, and over her beautiful shoulder Don Miguel saw his friend give a conspiratorial wink. Obviously Don Felipe had heard stories about northern girls—the so-called reformed religion of course had a lot to do with it, but it was probably mostly slanderous . . .

His mind made an abrupt jump. He stopped dead in mid-beat.

"What on earth—?" Lady Kristina began. She turned and followed Don Miguel's gaze. "Oh-oh!" she said under her breath. "Would you like to dodge out of sight?"

He did in fact want to dodge out of sight much too much to wonder why she should suggest it; automatically giving her his arm to lead her off the floor, he headed for one of the nearer side-passages leading away from the hall. It was not until they were safely around a corner that he completed his double-take and looked startled at her.

"Uh—I'm dreadfully sorry," he began.

"Why?"

"Well—to snatch you away like that. It was unforgivably rude. I must look an absolute boor."

She gave her quicksilver laugh again, this time throwing back her head and making the most of it. "My dear Don Miguel!" she exclaimed. "Let's work this out. Wasn't that just the Marquesa di Jorque that you saw arriving?"

He nodded.

"And exaggerated accounts or not," she pursued, "weren't you recently involved in something which showed to her detriment?"

He nodded again.

"And weren't you shaken to the core to find her suddenly appearing where you least anticipated her having been invited?"

He found his voice at last. "Yes my lady," he said ruefully. "I can only imagine that someone—some friend of hers—has wangled her an invitation to make up for the way the Society recently snubbed her."

"So you very naturally want to keep out of her way. Well, here we are. Shall we find somewhere to sit down? I presume these rooms are open for us. And by the way, stop calling me 'my lady'—nobody ever calls me that at home except peasants and artisans. My name's Kristina." She was opening the nearest door and peeping through it. "Yes, how about this? And let's have some drinks, too."

Don Miguel, slightly dazed, caught up with her at that point. He glanced around, spotted a Guinea-girl carrying a tray of wine past the end of the passage, and called after her. She came obediently and served them with a curtsy.

Kristina took six glasses off the tray and ranged them on a handy table, somewhat to the Guinea-girl's surprise. When the slave moved to go, she looked after her. As the door closed, she said, "I think they're beautiful. I wish I looked like her—so graceful. Don Miguel, I like you. You shock beautifully. It lights your face from inside like the candles in those glass globes they've put all over the trees."

She sat down on the end of a heavy-built padded sofa with gilt-tooled leather upholstery, and took the nearest glass of wine from the table. Don Miguel swallowed and tried to speak.

"Tell me," she went on, "you're plainly not enjoying yourself, and I hope that isn't my fault. If it is you only have to say so. But if it isn't, suppose you give me an idea—be honest, now—of what the rest of the evening will be like."

Don Miguel's defences suddenly crumbled. He sat down next to her. He couldn't help smiling, and the smile warmed his whole mind.

"To be completely honest," he said, "what will most likely happen is this. Red Bear, who has the Mohawk weakness for firewater, will probably decide at about nine or ten that he is a better drummer than the professional musicians. He will embarrass *everybody*. The Ambassador of the Confederacy will make slighting remarks about our celebrations, comparing them unfavourably with a winter carnival on the Neva. Everyone will drink furiously because the conversation keeps getting frozen in mid-run. Around midnight Father Ramon will arrive to celebrate Mass for the Society; those who are sober—and members of the Society had better at least *look* sober!—will heave a sigh of relief and go to chapel. And after midnight, when the King and the Prince Imperial can get down off their dignity, there might be some fun with the younger Licentiates and the Probationers who are here. Most of them aren't. They're out in the city enjoying themselves, except for whichever poor fellow is on duty at the Headquarters Office."

"I think I'd like to see some people who are enjoying themselves," Kristina said thoughtfully. "I suppose you have to be at this Mass at midnight, do you?"

Don Miguel nodded. "This is a great traditional occasion for the Society. All the members come. Even—" He bit the last word off short. That should never be mentioned to anyone, of course.

She took no notice. Rising with sudden determination to her feet, she said, "Miguel, let's go and be with people having fun, shall we? There's plenty of time to go into Londres and get back for your service at midnight, isn't there? How about seeing if you can find a carriage for us?"

Astonished almost beyond description, Don Miguel felt his jaw drop. Painfully raising it again, he said, "You know—that's an absolutely wonderful idea!"

Chapter Three

There was no doubt about it, Don Miguel thought contentedly—this was a far, far better way to spend New Year's Eve than in the Commander's palace. Wandering among the crowds of merrymakers with a beautiful girl on his arm, doing idiotic things for no particular purpose behind the customary anonymity of half-masks bought from a pedlar, and laughing more and more often than he could ever remember laughing in his life before. He was naturally a serious person. It occurred to him that perhaps he was habitually too serious.

They had left their carriage shortly after reaching the north side of the river. They had sampled hot chestnuts and hot spiced wine from stalls on wheels, paused to watch a tumbler and juggler for a while, looked in at a display of animals from Africa on Queen Isabela Avenue, joined in the rowdy singing of a troupe of street comedians. Now at last they had come to Empire Circle, where five ways met. Here a bonfire was spitting and snarling as people threw fireworks into it ; a band was playing raucous traditional tunes, and people danced in the roadway with an abandon that gladdened the eye.

It had turned much colder in the past hour or so, and Kristina, with only a light carriage-cloak covering her flimsy gown, ran forward to the fire to warm her hands at it. She tossed her hair back and looked laughing up at him, her eyes sparkling behind her black mask.

"Ah, Miguel ! I hadn't thought that the people of these damp and misty islands knew so well how to amuse themselves !"

"Oh, it's their native good sense," Don Miguel said, smiling. "No matter how much our priests and prelates inveigh against these festivities, they go on nonetheless. Is it like this in your country ?"

"It's colder in winter than it is here, but we do much the same things." She rubbed her hands together as they absorbed the radiant heat of the flames. "Why, Miguel, you look sad all of a sudden. What's wrong ?"

He shrugged. "Nothing. I was only thinking—" He hesitated. Normally he would not have spoken of what was in his mind to a young girl, but Kristina was considerably different from other girls of twenty he had met.

"I was thinking," he continued slowly, "of other festivals I've seen, at other places and times. The Aztec feast, for instance, in honour of Xipe the Flayed God, where the officiating priests were dressed in human skins, and there was ritual cannibalism after the victims had had their hearts torn out."

"You've seen that?"

"Yes, I've seen that. And the *Ludi* in the Circus Maximus in Rome, where men died by the hundreds to glut the blood-lust of the crowd . . . So I was thinking : although the prudish and prurient so roundly condemn this New Year merriment, it is at least more innocent than much of what has gone before. Surely in this respect at least the world is changing for the better."

"And it made you look sad to think that this is so?" Kristina probed mockingly.

"No. I was thinking of death coming to so many people for the entertainment of so many others." Don Miguel shrugged and looked around for something to distract him. It was out of keeping to voice such gloomy thoughts here and now.

"Ah, but I'm warm again !" Kristina said cheerfully after a moment, turning away from the blaze. "It's the dampness with the cold now which eats to the bones. How do you suppose she endures it, for example?" She shook one arm free of her cloak and raised it to point across the circle.

For a moment he did not see what she meant, but a couple of youths standing nearby also caught the movement and looked up, and one of them whistled. "Look !" he nudged his companion. "Look there, I say. What do you make of that?"

His friend's eyes bulged. "Drunk, or mad, to behave like that !" he exclaimed. "Probably mad !"

"An interesting kind of madness," the first youth said.

Indeed, the subject of their remarks did appear to be out of her mind. For one thing, her costume—even for a night given over to fancy dress—was ridiculous. It appeared to consist of blue feathers pasted directly on to her smooth skin, on her hips and buttocks and on her belly as high as her navel. There were low red shoes on her feet ; around her wrists there were bangles of various colours, and aside from that she wore only designs in yellow paint on her face, shoulders and breasts. She seemed to have emerged from the southward-leading avenue connecting

Empire Circle with the river embankment, and was standing now in the middle of the roadway staring about her. She seemed both dazzled by the sudden brightness of the illumination here and dazed by her surroundings, for she stared wildly from side to side like an animal trapped and seeking a way of escape.

Ribald yells went up from the crowd and the noise of singing died as people turned to stare. Not far from Kristina and Don Miguel were a pair of civil guards ; an indignant man of middle age, pointing furiously at the feathered girl, said something to one of them. Don Miguel did not catch the words, but the import was clear, for a grinning youth next to him bellowed, "Speak for yourself—some of us like to see 'em that way !"

It occurred to Don Miguel that the sight of someone so nearly unclothed was hardly fit for a duke's daughter, but the realisation was somewhat belated, for Kristina, her pretty face set in a frown of curiosity, was staring intently at the girl in the blue feathers. She said, "Do you know Miguel, I have never seen such a costume before ?"

Something clicked in Don Miguel's mind. The word premonition flickered through his thoughts.

A group of drunken workmen at the edge of the crowd nearest to where the feathered girl was standing had made up their minds now that if she came out in public half-naked she could expect what they had in mind. Leering, they moved up to her, about five or six of them together. Tiger-wise, she paused in her frightened staring about and half crouched to confront them.

"Kristina," Don Miguel said in a low voice, "I think I ought to get you away from here."

"You'd do much better," came the reply as tart as lemon juice, "to make these civil guards go and help that poor girl before those men rape her !"

She glared at him through her mask. Taken completely aback, he missed the next step in what was happening, but a sudden cry drew his attention back to the edge of the circle. He saw to his amazement that one of the workmen was lying on his back on the hard ground, and the girl was in the process of hurling another of her assailants over her shoulder in a perfect wrestling throw.

"Oh, lovely !" Kristina clapped her hands, then caught Don Miguel by the arm. "Come on, let's go and cheer her !"

But the ferment of Kristina's earlier remark was working in Don Miguel's mind now. Never seen such a costume before . . .

What was he doing standing here like a petrified dummy? He started to shoulder his way towards the feathered girl as violently and quickly as he dared.

Ignoring the many complaints from those he pushed aside, he made his way to within a few paces of the girl, Kristina keeping up with him somehow. By now two more men had joined the first, bruised and cursing on the ground, and the girl was spitting insults at them. Her voice was almost as deep and strong as a man's. Listening, Don Miguel felt the hairs on his nape prickle.

The girl was small and thin, but wiry. She had—he could see now that he was close enough—black hair dressed in stiff wings on either side of her square head. Her complexion was olive-sallow. And the words she had uttered had sounded like—*like*, not the same as—the language of Cathay.

Don Miguel was as well acquainted with the costumes, behaviour and languages of the major civilisations of history as any Licentiate of similar experience, and better than most. He could make himself understood in Attic Greek and Quechua, Phoenician and Latin, Persian and Aramaic. He could also recognise the characteristic vowel-consonant clusters of many other tongues which he did not speak fluently. And what the girl had hissed at her assailants did not fit any language he could call to mind.

There was a slim chance that she was a legitimate visitor to Londres, perhaps a member of the Cathayan ambassador's suite. But he doubted that. He was suddenly so doubtful of everything about this girl that he did not believe she had a right to exist.

The horrible possibilities implied by his suspicion—it could not be called more than a suspicion—made him for a moment completely forgetful of everything else. Leaving Kristina to take care of herself, he strode forward.

The feathered girl spun to face him, taking him in her panic for a new attacker, and before he could even utter a tentative phrase in the Cathayan language, she had sprung at him.

Barely in time he reacted. She was not merely a wrestler—she was a killing fighter, fantastic though that was in view of her sex. Her first move had been to launch a crippling kick at Don Miguel's crotch; her toe landed on his thigh

instead and caused him to lose his footing so that he had to go down on one knee, fending her off upwards, and she seized his right arm at wrist and elbow and attempted to bend the elbow-joint back so it would dislocate.

Pivoting on his prisoned arm and his knee, he swept his other leg through half a circle and kicked her feet from under her. Astonished, she lost her grip on his arm and fell sideways. He brought his leg back and laid its weight on her neck so as to hold her down for long enough to gather himself and throw himself on top of her. She made to sink her teeth into his calf.

Snatching his leg back from the pain, he managed to fall forward nonetheless, and pinned her wrists and one leg to the ground in an improvised but serviceable hold, half-sitting, half-kneeling. Then by main force he started to bring her wrists together.

She said nothing, but set her teeth and stared up at him, fighting to break his grip. During that long moment Don Miguel found time to hope grimly that there were no Probationers of the Society of Time in the crowd around, yelling crude approval at his success. If there was anything more undignified than a Licentiate could do than wrestle with a woman in the middle of Empire Circle, he couldn't imagine it.

All right, he was going to have to hurt her. There was no alternative, however much it went against his principles. He shifted his fingers on her wrists and stabbed down at the ganglia.

The shock went all the way through her. She forgot about resistance for long enough to allow him to seize both wrists in one hand and hold them, still applying the painful pressure. With the hand thus released, he sought the carotid arteries in her thin throat and scientifically began to strangle her.

In fifteen seconds she was limp ; he gave her ten seconds more to ensure that she would not recover too quickly, and then sat back wearily on his heels. He wiped sweat from his forehead. Mingled now with the egging-on cries of the crowd he detected voices of complaint, perhaps at his ruthless treatment of the feathered girl ; those people should have had to tackle her. But a nasty situation might develop unless it were checked at once. Where were those civil guards he had seen standing near the fire ? As the saying went, when you needed a guard you never could find one—

Ah, here they were, the crowd jeering at them as they made their way over. He got to his feet.

"Make these people stand back!" he ordered crisply. "Get a hackney-carriage and help me to get this girl into it!"

The civil guards, taken aback, exchanged glances. One of them with bristling mustachios said, "Who do you think *you* are?" His hand fell to his sabre-hilt.

Don Miguel drew a deep breath. "Will you do as I say? I'm Don Miguel Navarro of the Society of Time, and this is Society business! Jump to it!"

The scar across his face made him look savage and very much to be obeyed. But it was the talisman-like name of the Society which made the guards blanch, and many of those in the crowd as well. There was a startled hush followed by a ripple of comment. Then the guards moved.

Don Miguel took off his cloak and laid it over the girl on the ground; she was stirring a little but had not recovered consciousness. Maybe he ought to tie her hands and ankles; he found a handkerchief and knelt to attend to the task. As he was feeling for a second means of tying her, something was dangled before his eyes. He glanced up. Kristina had somehow eluded the civil guards and was offering him the girdle of her gown. He took it with a word of thanks.

"Who is she?" Kristina demanded. "Why did you knock her out?"

"I don't know who she is," Don Miguel said grimly. "But if she's what I suspect, there's going to be the devil to pay tonight."

Chapter Four

In the dark padded interior of the carriage they sat mostly in silence, staring at the cloak-shrouded form of the girl on the opposite seat as successive scythe-sweeps of light from roadside lanterns moved over her.

Suddenly Kristina shivered and pressed up against Don Miguel. She said, "Miguel, what did you mean when you said you thought there would be the devil to pay tonight? You spoke so fiercely it was frightening."

Already Don Miguel regretted that he had spoken. After all he had nothing to go on but guesswork. He said, "If you don't mind, Kristina, I'd rather say no more until I've found out the real facts."

She looked round at him, lips a little parted as though about to ask another question, but deciding not to. Don Miguel sweated and wished that the driver would hurry. Guesswork or not, this feathered girl scared him. That costume was none he recognised ; the words she had uttered were subtly wrong. Which could mean—which might mean . . . He choked off the thought.

The carriage wheeled with a grating of iron tyres on cobbles and came into the forecourt of the Society's Headquarters Office. Like the Commander's palace, it was set in its own grounds fronting the river, but unlike the palace it was all in darkness tonight except for a single yellow square of a window on the ground floor near the main door. Dropping from the step of the carriage as it halted, Don Miguel swore. Tonight, naturally, only the duty Probationer would be here—and just, just barely, possibly the man he needed to see more desperately than anyone in the world.

"Get the girl out !" he rapped to the driver. "I'll have the door opened."

The man nodded and climbed down from his high seat, while the horses shifted uneasily in the traces. Don Miguel started up the dark steps.

But the door opened before he reached it, and there stood a young man blinking diffidently in the light of a lantern in his hand. He was twenty or less, snub-nosed, blue-eyed, below Don Miguel in height but well enough built.

"Are you alone ?" Don Miguel flung at him.

"Ah—yes, Licentiate !" the young man said. "I'm Probationer Jones, sir, on duty tonight. I believe your honour is Don Miguel Navarro. What service can I do you ?"

"You are alone ?" Don Miguel pressed. "No one else here ?"

"Absolutely no one, sir," Jones asserted, wide-eyed. Don Miguel's heart turned over. He had expected—but no matter. It might or might not be true. He would have to see.

"There's a girl in my carriage," he said. "She ought not to be here—or anywhere, for that matter. I'm having her taken inside."

Jones gave a sigh. "Very well, sir. I presume you will require a suite in the quarters, and privacy—"

The look on Don Miguel's face made him break off, stuttering.

"Have you been required to do such services by members of the Society ?" Don Miguel demanded.

"Uh—" Jones's embarrassment was acute. "Not I myself, sir. But I believe other students have."

"If anyone ever tries it on you, report him to your Chief Instructor. It's no part of your duties to act as a pander. Understood?" Without waiting for an answer Don Miguel swung round and saw how the confusion might have arisen, for Kristina was standing by the door of the carriage while the driver was still half-hidden in shadow as he wrestled to lift out the cloak-enveloped form of the unconscious girl.

"Show the driver inside!" he rapped at Jones. "Find a couch or something where he can lay his burden!"

"At once, sir," Jones said, and hurried down the steps, his face fire-red, to lend a hand.

"Kristina," Don Miguel said in a low voice, moving close to her, "I must apologise for this. I think perhaps I should arrange for you to return to the company of your father now."

"In any case," Kristina said, "it's gone eleven and you'd have to make haste to return yourself. But what—?"

"It is indeed!" Don Miguel remembered with dismay. "So in fact I've wasted time, idiot that I am, to come here at all. See you, I wished to speak with Father Ramon, and not realising how late it had become thought to find him still in his study here— Oh, what a kettle of soup we have to stir!"

He passed a tired hand over his face. "Get you back in the carriage, then. We'll return to the palace as soon as I've done one necessary thing."

He spun on his heel and dashed into the building.

When he came back, instead of climbing into the carriage, he scrambled on the driver's box and seized the reins. The horses whinnied and leaned on the traces, and Kristina gave a cry of alarm.

"I'm sorry!" Don Miguel shouted down to her above the grind and clatter of the wheels. "But as you saw, that feathered girl is dangerous. I dared not leave Jones by himself to cope with her, so I've paid the driver for his service in remaining there."

"Was that all you went for?" she cried back.

Don Miguel did not answer, but lashed the horses into a gallop. It was not all. He had needed to find out for himself that the great doors guarding the time chambers in the building had not been tampered with tonight. And they had not; Jones had told the truth, and he was alone.

He had imagined that perhaps some drunken Probationers, or some corrupt Licentiate, had secured access to the time apparatus unlawfully. Yet it seemed his guess was wrong. And, the simple explanation having failed, he was left for the moment with no explanation at all.

A cold wind blew along the river now ; their road followed the embankment. He shivered, and damned his impatience in abandoning his cloak.

Driving like a fury, he brought the carriage swiftly to the broad straight Holy Cross Avenue—the last portion of their route on the north side of the river. At the next bridge they would have to swing right and cross over. And there, at the approach to the bridge, something was going on. At first he took it for the expected crowd of people coming across from the south to attend Mass at midnight in the cathedrals of the city ; it was not until the carriage was already among the pale-faced, terrified men, women and children that he heard the near-screams of the civil guards trying to keep order and realised that this was nothing so commonplace.

The whole roadway was flooded with people here ; the windows of nearby houses were illuminated and the air was full of a confused moaning.

From behind him Kristina looked out as the carriage perforce slowed to a crawl. "What's happening?" she called.

"I don't know," Don Miguel answered curtly. "Guard ! Guard !"

A civil guard on horseback breasting the flood of people as though it were a flood of water forged his way slowly in their direction, waving a gauntleted hand. When he came close enough, he called out, "You'll have to go around another way, your honour ! It's impossible to get past here !"

Don Miguel stared, cursing the murky darkness which the lanterns barely penetrated. Some commotion under the bridge there : water splashing—

"What's happened?" he bawled.

"We don't know, your honour ! Some say an invasion, some say rioting—but across the river there, it's total chaos !" He sounded frightened. "Men's bodies have been seen floating downstream, stuck full of arrows, they say ! And there are fires !"

Shriller and more piercing than the general tumult, there was suddenly a scream from near the bridge, and people began

incontinently trying to run. Ignoring the guard and Don Miguel, they surged past the carriage, making it rock.

The guard wheeled his horse and went off shouting, trying to restore some calm to the crowd. There was no hope of getting the carriage further forward, short of running down the people in the way of it, and Don Miguel jerked on the reins to bring the horses to the side of the road. Even to cover those few paces took a heartbreakingly long time. He set the brake and leapt down from the box.

Kristina was still peering pale-faced from the window. As he came close, she threw open the door and made to step down. He gestured her to stay where she was.

"I'll see if I can get one of the civil guards to escort you away," he said harshly. "This is inexplicable, but—"

"No, I'd rather not," she cut in. "I'm coming with you. The civil guards have all the work they can cope with, and I refuse to be abandoned in the carriage on my own."

Don Miguel bit his lip. What a time to be encumbered with a woman! But he shrugged and held the carriage door for her. With her leaning on his arm, he forced a way forward to the wide space at the approach to the bridge.

Here the confusion was fantastic. A small detachment of soldiers with horse-borne artillery had formed up at the side of the road; some of the men were assisting with crowd-control while the others looked after the horses. Men with spyglasses were staring across the river from the parapets of the bridge. On the other side blurs of red could be seen against the sky—the fires the guard had mentioned, presumably. Many of the fleeing thousands were half-clad, sick or aged and children among them.

In charge of the artillery troop was a young officer on a fine roan gelding. Kristina beside him, Don Miguel managed to get close to this officer.

"Miguel Navarro, Society of Time!" he introduced himself, cupping his hands to his mouth. "What's the chance of getting over the river to the Prince's palace?"

The officer stared down at him as though he were mad. He said explosively, "To the palace? You're lucky to be here, aren't you, rather than there?"

Don Miguel felt a cold hand touch his nape. He said, "I don't know anything about what's going on!"

"Nor do I, practically!" The officer's horse started at some alarm, and danced sideways three paces before he quieted. "But whatever's going on seems to have started at the palace. Haven't you looked across the river?"

He threw up his arm and pointed. Don Miguel turned, seeing for a moment only the same red smudge on the night as he had noticed already. Then landmarks fitted together in his mind. He said, "The palace is on fire!"

"That's right!" The officer laughed humourlessly. "One of my men reported a minute ago that the roof had fallen in."

"But the King's there, and the Prince Imperial, and the Commander of the Society, and the Ambassador of the Confederacy—"

The hand on his arm tightened. He glanced down at Kristina and saw that all the colour had gone from her face. Yes: her father and her sister, too . . .

"God knows what's going on!" the officer said savagely. "But it's the biggest disaster in a hundred years, no question of that. And the night on the other side of the river is alive with murderous shadows, killing and looting and burning."

From near the water's edge came a loud exclamation. "Someone out there! Swimming! Get him ashore!"

The officer saluted Kristina and dug his heels into his horse's flanks to go down and investigate. If this was someone from across the river, he might have more coherent news. Don Miguel hurried after the officer.

They arrived as the man was being dragged on to the bank. He had spent his last strength swimming; he collapsed immediately. Don Miguel saw with horror that each of his shoulders was stuck with a short, vicious arrow, the barbs buried in the flesh. It was a miracle he had got across.

"Miguel!" Kristina whispered. "Isn't it your friend?"

Don Miguel strode forward. "God's name," he said. "God's name, but it is. Felipe!"

He dropped on his knees beside the stricken man, but the officer, dismounting, waved him back. "Leave him till we've drained the water from his lungs, you fool!" he snapped

Yes, that was sensible. Don Miguel moved aside and a medical orderly from the artillery troop came hurrying up with a case of medicines. Like a huge waddling white owl a Sister of Mercy came after him.

Aching, Don Miguel stared as they examined the arrows and made to extract them and dress the wounds. His sick preoccupation was suddenly broken by a rattle of carriage wheels from behind him, at the end of the bridge. A harsh voice called out to the driver, telling him to go around another way.

Then a dry, precise voice was heard, speaking from the carriage. "But I must cross here and now to go to the Prince's palace. I must be there before midnight."

Don Miguel's relief was so great that he almost swooned. He started forward, waving and shouting at the top of his voice.

"Father Ramon ! Father Ramon ! Praise heaven you're here !"

Chapter Five

The Jesuit master-theoretician of the Society of Time got down from his carriage, bird-like head cocked as he surveyed the fantastic scene. He said, "I fail to see, my son, why my arrival in the middle of this to-do should so excite you, but something tells me that I shall not enjoy learning the facts. Enlighten me."

Rapidly Don Miguel summed up the catastrophe as far as he knew of it—the mysterious attackers beyond the river, the burning of the palace, the unknown fate of the royal family, the refugees streaming north, his being in the company of the Lady Kristina of Scania, her concern about her father, then last of all the astonishing apparition of the girl in blue feathers.

Father Ramon started. "Describe this woman !" he said sharply. As well as he could, Don Miguel obeyed, and was appalled to see the expression that came to the older man's face. It was as though the words were blows from an enchanter's wand, each one ageing him by another year.

"Do you think you know what her origin is?" he demanded.

"Yes, my son. I fear I do," the Jesuit said heavily. "And to judge from your reaction, it seems that you do also."

Don Miguel did not know whether to be relieved that his guesswork had been so accurate, or horrified for the same reason. He said, "But then—"

"Let us not speculate too far," Father Ramon interrupted. "How can we find with some degree of accuracy what has transpired at the palace?"

"Ah—just as you arrived!" Don Miguel said. "My friend Don Felipe Basso had swum the river, pierced with strange arrows but living when he came ashore. They are ministering to him—see, there on the bank." He pointed.

Father Ramon headed towards the white outline of the Sister of Mercy like a shot from a gun. Don Miguel glanced at Kristina; it was clear from her paleness and her trembling lips that she was using her self-control to its uttermost. He put his arm comfortingly around her and led her to Don Felipe's side.

Father Ramon was already kneeling there, head turned to the medical orderly. "Will he live?" was the crisp question. If the answer was negative, Extreme Unction must precede any questioning, of course. But the medical orderly, tossing bloody dressings into the river, nodded.

"He's tough as oak, Father," he said. "He'll live."

Don Miguel heaved a sigh of relief and bent close to Father Ramon's thin lips as they formed the crucial words. Don Felipe opened his eyes and tried to smile.

"You were lucky not to be there, Father," he whispered. "And Miguel—I thought you were . . . No matter. God's name, what madness can have taken possession of them all?"

"Speak on!" Father Ramon commanded sternly. "Without fear or favour I charge you to speak unvarnished truth in the name of God and the Society!"

Don Felipe closed his eyes again, but his lips writhed and in halting whispers he outlined the dreadful truth.

Partly, it seemed, it was the fault of the Ambassador from the Confederacy, who—as Don Miguel had sardonically prophesied—had compared the entertainment offered unfavourably with what he could see at home. Partly it was the fault of the Prince Imperial who according to rumour was known to be tired of waiting to succeed his long-lived father, and who had learned to pass away the time in unprincely ways. And partly it was the fault of Red Bear, whose notorious Mohawk weakness for liquor had sometimes caused trouble before.

At some time in the evening, a word had passed which broke a royal temper. A quarrel flared; the Ambassador from the Confederacy threatened to leave the country. In between the rowing parties came two dangerous conciliatory figures: Catalina, Marquesa di Jorque, and Don Arturo Cortes.

"The Marquesa spoke of the glories of the past," Don Felipe whispered. "Perhaps she meant well; perhaps she was trying to distract the obstinate minds. But she started the arguments anew, as to who were the bloodiest and fiercest fighters of all time. The Ambassador claimed the Scythian Amazons—his army as you know has a regiment of women infantry—while the King declared that Amazons had never existed. Then I saw Don Arturo speaking with Red Bear and the Commander, who as host of the evening was greatly put out by the turn of affairs. Then—but I don't know what happened then. All I saw was the terrible women with their bows and spears, swarming down the stairway leading from the centre tower. I stood and fought with those who could fight, but they came on like devils, and at last I was compelled to . . ."

His voice trailed away.

"My father!" Kristina said in a high thin voice. "My sister! What happened to them?"

But there was no answer. The medical orderly dropped to feel Don Felipe's pulse; after a moment he looked at Father Ramon. "We must get him away and let him rest," he said. "He is weaker than he was."

Unseeing, Father Ramon rose to his feet. Don Miguel took a pace towards him. "Do you know who these terrible women are? Can you fill in the gaps of the story?"

"I think so," the Jesuit said in a dead voice. "Amazons—yes, it pieces together. It must have happened like this. They wished—the fools, the fools! God forgive me for calling them fools, but what else can I say? They wished to decide this difference about the most valiant and dreadful fighters, and they trespassed where they should not have trespassed, beyond the bounds of our reality. Women such as you described to me, my son, are female gladiators from the court of King Mahendra the White Elephant, in an age where a decadent Indian usurper sits the throne of a Mongolian empire governing all Asia and all Europe—a world further distant from ours than any which our researchers have ever explored."

It made sense to Don Miguel, thanks to his having been made privy to the best-kept secret of the Society of Time—the fact that its members had in fact deliberately altered key incidents of history to observe the consequences, then changed

them back. But he wished that what Father Ramon said could have been as meaningless to him as it was to Kristina, who merely repeated as she looked from one to other of her companions, "My father and sister! What happened to them?"

He could only give her a comforting squeeze with the arm he put around her. To Father Ramon he said, "But—who can be responsible? Who can have broached this secret to the company? Not the Commander, surely!"

Father Ramon shook his head. "Not the Commander, my son. For all that he is of royal birth, he understands the danger of ignoring the rule of natural law." Don Miguel thought he was going to add something more, but he shook his head again instead.

"Then—who?" Don Miguel persisted.

"Don Arturo Cortes led the expedition to investigate this distant stream of history," Father Ramon said, and on the last word his mouth shut like a steel trap. There was silence between them, but the noise of the fleeing people continued, and now was mingled with the pealing of bells as midnight approached, and with gunfire.

The orderly and two soldiers were raising Don Felipe now, to set him on a wheeled invalid trolley. The movement seemed to awaken him, for he gave a sudden cry.

"Father Ramon! Where are you?"

"Here, my son," the Jesuit said, striding towards him.

"Father, I did not tell you the worst!" Don Felipe babbled. "I saw them kill the King! I saw them shoot the Prince Imperial full of arrows, and they speared men and women as they tried to flee! I saw a woman hurled from the head of the stairway to break her head open on the floor beneath! I saw—oh God, Father! I saw such monstrous things!"

"What?" said one of the soldiers helping to lift him. And before Father Ramon could stop him, he had spun round to shout to his officer. "Sir! The King is dead!"

A hush fell for an instant over all those within earshot of the cry, and was followed by a sound like a rising storm. "The King is dead! The King! The King!" Dying away across the sea of people like an echo, the words ran swiftly.

"Father Ramon, what can we possibly do?" Don Miguel said.

For a long moment, his bird-like head bowed, Father Ramon did not answer. At last, however, he stirred and seemed to brisken. He said, "Whatever we can, my son. Find a civil guard—have criers sent out to call in any members of the Society who may not have been at the palace to the Headquarters Office now ; this should be easy, for they'll all be passing this way to attend our Society Mass. Then—have you a carriage?"

"By now I suspect it will have been commandeered by refugees," Don Miguel said. "In any case, it will be hard to make passage for a vehicle through this fear-crazed crowd."

"Then we'll take the horses from my carriage," Father Ramon said briskly. "It's many years since my aged bones spanned a horse's back, but needs must. To it, and quickly!"

Don Miguel had never before tried to ride at speed bare-back and controlling the horse with carriage-reins, at the same time trying to comfort a weeping girl seated ahead of him with her head buried in his shoulder. It was half nightmare, half farce, and about the only thing which could have made it worse would have been if Kristina had followed the Empire custom of riding sidesaddle instead of astride like a man. She would certainly have fallen off if she had.

One more window of the Headquarters building was lighted now, and the door stood ajar. As their horses stopped outside Jones came hurrying to meet them. One of his eyes was newly blacked.

"She got loose!" Don Miguel said in alarm, sliding to the ground and reaching up to help Kristina down.

"Yes, sir," Jones said unhappily. "And we had a terrible job tying her up again."

"But you managed it?"

"With the help of the man you left here, yes, sir. I'd never have done it on my own."

"Help Father Ramon dismount," Don Miguel ordered. It was some relief at least to know that the girl was still here. He helped Kristina up the steps and settled her in an arm-chair in the hallway, and saw as he was doing so that instead of turning through the door beyond which the driver could be seen keeping guard over the furious girl in blue feathers—tied now with good strong rope, he noticed—Father Ramon was heading into the interior of the building.

"Father! Don't you want to see the girl?" he called.

"Come with me, and be quick !" Father Ramon answered.

"Look after this lady," Don Miguel instructed Jones, and hurried after Father Ramon.

He caught up with him as he paused before the door of the vast library, hunting under his habit for the key. He found and inserted it, and marched forward among the high stacks of heavy, finely-bound volumes.

"What you are going to see, my son, you must not divulge to anyone, is that clear ?" Father Ramon said. "But for the rule that no single member of the Society—not even the Commander—shall consult these files without a witness beside him, I'd not burden you with the dangerous knowledge of them. You've been burdened enough for so young a man already. But here"—and he halted before a securely padlocked stack with blank metal doors, fumbling out another, smaller key—"is where I must confirm my guess."

He opened the padlock and reached into the case, bringing out a fat, bright red volume of manuscript notes. Interleaved with them were accurate watercolour drawings. As directly as though he were merely looking for something he had already seen—and presumably he was—Father Ramon turned to one such picture and held it out to Don Miguel.

"Does she look like that ?" he demanded.

Don Miguel nodded slowly. These feathers were green, and the painted designs were white instead of yellow, but the hair was the same, the complexion, the shoes and bangles.

"Then my worst fears are fulfilled," Father Ramon said. He slammed the book shut and thrust it back. "Then there is no doubt any longer. I must confess to you frankly, my son, that I am totally at a loss. This is without precedent !"

To hear Father Ramon, the expert of experts on his subject, say such a thing shook Don Miguel to the core. He said before he thought, "They must indeed have gone mad, all of them together ! Why, but for the madness we would now be at the Society's Mass, and—"

"The Mass !" Father Ramon said suddenly. "Of course ! My blessings on you, Don Miguel ! That I could have been so blind and not have seen it before !"

Blankly, Don Miguel stared at him. And then, little by little, light and hope began to dawn.

Chapter Six

Don Miguel gave a start so violent that he almost fell. He looked about him at his surroundings with astonishment. It was not that he failed to recognise where he was—he could never mistake the robing cells in the antesection to the chapel of the Society, or the sound of the high clear bell which was now tolling somewhere outside.

Only—here? Now? And everything apparently normal?

He had not asked Father Ramon what was going to be done. He could read in the Jesuit's eyes the certainty that that was knowledge a man was better off without. But he had thought he knew. Fresh in his mind was the memory of the panic displayed by those junior members of the Society whom the criers had haled off the streets setting to work in the time chamber of the Headquarters Office under Father Ramon's direction. While they worked feverishly on the apparatus, he himself had been directed to take pencil and paper and work a computation in factors which Father Ramon had scribbled down for him. He tried as he worked to assign real-world values to the symbols and thought that most likely he was dealing with labels for human lives, for one by one he saw them cancel out, cancel out . . .

The problem reduced to an unassigned variable and a factor k , and he showed this result to Father Ramon, who stared at it for a long time before he sighed, closed his eyes for a moment with a fierce expression, and then gestured for him to take his place between the iron and silver bars of the time apparatus. The air grew very hot—

—and he was here in a robing cell, and the bell of the Society's chapel was tolling for midnight as it had done each New Year's Eve since the Society acquired this palace as the official residence of its Commander.

What had that unassigned variable equated to, for pity's sake? Don Miguel's mind raced. He was virtually certain that the factor k represented a *key* individual: himself, who by sheer chance had been spared from the holocaust, or perhaps Don Felipe, who by managing to swim the river despite the arrows in his shoulder muscles had carried the terrible news to those who could act upon it.

It was patent, of course, that the thing which had been done must be undone. He had never questioned this; nor had Father Ramon, it seemed. For one thing, the conse-

quences of this night's madness would be a blot forever on the Society if left unrectified ; for another, the death of the King and all his nearest heirs, and with them the Commander of the Society, was an effect out of all proportion to the act.

And yet the results of setting up a closed causal loop in local time had never, never been investigated. This event was—as Father Ramon had said to himself—without precedent.

Don Miguel's mind swirled like water in a rotated cup. He put his hands to his head and struggled to think clearly. He had been trained to some extent in casuistry, and he could see the dim outlines of a logical sequence here. Postulate : the terrible women gladiators who wrought the harm originated in a non-actual world—a world brought about through the experimental interference of Society members with their own past history. Therefore the consequences of their acts were also non-actual, or potential. Therefore the rectification of these consequences must be *not* non-actual, if this was a safe case to exclude the middle . . .

It came to him with blinding, horrifying suddenness that in fact, in the fact where he must now have found himself, all the nightmare so vivid in his memory had already not happened.

For a moment he had a glimpse of what it must be like to be a man such as Father Ramon, all his mind lighted by a logic as piercing as sunlight, driven by a terrible, inexorable honesty to conceal nothing from himself. And he felt sweat prickle all over his body as he knew why he was here, now, in the rectified situation, with the knowledge of his personal unique past.

The tolling of the bell had stopped, and from beyond the door of his cell came the slow shuffling of many feet, irregular in rhythm. The Society going in to Mass, he thought. For the most awful of all its formal occasions.

He calmed himself deliberately with deep breathing. When finally he thought he could walk without swaying, he took his own concealing robe from the wall, slipped it on, and pulled the hood far forward over his face. Then he opened the door and joined his brothers.

These, tonight, now, were all faceless men. Only differences of height and girth could give the slightest clue to their identity; the hoods hid their features, the sleeves hid their hands, the robes fell to the ground and swished around their feet. For

a reason. For the reason which only members of the Society knew, and which made this the Mass it was.

Grey into the grey shadows of the chapel, lit only by the candles at the east end, whose thin beams played fitfully on the gilded coats of arms mounted over the stalls but were too faint to reveal faces at the distance of the nearest member. To the solemn music of the organ, the Society assembled.

Now, this year, there were three hundred and forty-six Licentiates and Officers of the Society. Accordingly there were, here in the stalls, three hundred and forty-six grey-robed men.

And one—or more—of these was not a present member of the Society, but a man who had died in its service.

Only the officiating priest, bringing the Host to the row of kneeling brothers, would be able to see by the light of the altar candles which of the worshippers was a stranger, and tell thus which of the present members was tonight—here words were lacking—celebrating the Mass with his brothers of an age yet to come.

And the priest was masked.

In his stall, Don Miguel thought of everything that was implied by that. He—after all, he himself—he here, now, as far as he could possibly tell, might not be at the Mass of the New Year's Eve he had so far been living through. For every year the organ played the same music; every year the dispensation was given that the service should be conducted in whispers, so that the stranger in their midst might not recognise an unfamiliar voice and thus be spared foreknowledge of approaching death. He might count the total of grey robes present to see if it differed from the number he expected—Don Miguel glanced round into the shadows, and shook his head.

No. No man would do that. No man would dare.

There was a shuffling. The grey robes rose, and the masked priest came forth before the altar.

When the service was over, it had come to him what he must now do. He filed out of the chapel with the rest of the Society and returned to the robing cells. It was of course here in the isolation of the cells that transference to the future would most conveniently take place in the event that he was selected to partake of another Mass on New Year's Eve. But he knew

now that he had not in fact been selected—it was a definite relief to recognise this—and he thought he knew who had been chosen.

After all, it was not absolutely necessary for the time-transference to be operated from a robing cell. Why should it be?

A kind of grim excitement took possession of him now, and he stripped off his robe. He barely spared time to place it tidily on its peg before leaving the cell—ahead of most of the other members, who were probably spending a few minutes in contemplation alone before emerging.

There was a cold stone-flagged side passage running past the chapel to the priest's offices at the other end. He hurried down this, his heels clicking on the hard floor, until he came to the vestry door.

There he halted. Cold shivers traced down his spine. Suppose—just suppose—he was wrong. Suppose when he knocked it was another voice than Father Ramon's that called him in.

There was only one way to find out. He knocked. And an answering pounding of his heart began as he recognised the dry voice which spoke to him.

It was Father Ramon, no mistake. He turned the handle and slipped inside.

The Jesuit was alone in the starkly furnished little room, standing close to a table with one thin hand laid on its bare wooden top, his eyes bright and sharp in his bird-like face. He smiled on recognising his visitor.

"A good new year to you, my son," he said. "Is it to wish me one that you come calling when the year is still so young? I'd have thought you would be eager to return to the company of your colleagues in age." He broke off, searching Don Miguel's face, and then resumed in a more serious tone.

"Forgive me that I jest!" he said. "For I see by your look that you're on no light errand."

Don Miguel nodded warily. He said, "What I have to say may seem strange, Father. Indeed, I'm not sure beyond a doubt that it should be said at all. But will you permit me to establish that point?"

"However you wish," Father Ramon consented, sounding puzzled.

Don Miguel drew a deep breath. He said, "Father—if you can in conscience tell me—which one of us was absent from the Mass tonight?"

Stiffly, Father Ramon drew himself up. "I cannot possibly answer that!" he snapped.

"It was, I think," Don Miguel said, "Don Arturo Cortes."

There was a long pause. Finally Father Ramon nodded to a chair. "Speak your mind, my son," he said. "I am sure you have a reason for your visit, and I'll hear you out."

Don Miguel sat down, weak with relief, and wiped his face. He said, "Father, I swear to you that I've not—in this world as it is—seen the records concerned. But I know, and you know, that at the court of King Mahendra the White Elephant they have female gladiators who fight like madwomen. Don Arturo Cortes was in charge of exploring this bywater of history. I have not spoken with him about it. As you know, there is little love lost between him and me."

Father Ramon blanched. He said incredulously, "How—?"

"You showed me, Father. You told me. You told me so that I could tell you now and convince you that the rest of what I have to relate is more than delusion." Don Miguel had to wipe his face again.

"I—" Father Ramon said thickly, and hesitated. Then he turned and took down from a shelf a thick black-bound volume on the front cover of which a cross was inlaid in gold leaf. He laid it on the table between them and sat down.

Don Miguel nodded and placed his right hand on the book, and Father Ramon continued wonderingly, "You speak of secret things, my son. For good and sufficient reasons the existence of this potential world has never been advertised—you can imagine why?"

"Possibly because in that world the true faith is suppressed," Don Miguel guessed.

"Precisely." Father Ramon's face gleamed like oiled parchment over the underlying bones. "Tell me what you have to say to me now."

Already his fantastic mind must have reached the kernel of the matter, Don Miguel realised. Already he must know that he was compelled to the worst of all human predicaments: to judge his own actions with no knowledge of them whatever. He had to swallow hard.

"First, Father, you must write a message to the future. To close a causal chain you must instruct that when the day comes that Don Arturo Cortes is called to celebrate Mass on New Year's Eve at another time than his own, they must fetch him from a moment earlier than usual. There is certain to be the opportunity, because this is what has happened—I think," he felt compelled to add. "He must not be permitted to speak with Red Bear or anyone else about the importation of female gladiators to entertain the Ambassador of the Confederacy."

Father Ramon looked stricken. He said, "I will do this. But tell me why."

So, by pieces and scraps, Don Miguel did so.

seven

When he had finished, Father Ramon sat for a long time in silence. At last he stirred, his face very white.

He said, "Yes. Yes, it could have happened. A venal and corrupt mind could operate so. And the result—the death of kings. You have performed a great service to the Society, my son. But you have been dreadfully burdened with a nightmare of knowledge."

Don Miguel nodded. His voice thick, he said, "I feel like a leaf tossed on the wind. Do I know what I have done—now, as things stand—this evening?"

"With caution and grace you'll discover that," Father Ramon said. "You need have no fear." He shot a keen glance at Don Miguel. "Do you wish to be free of your burden of knowledge? I could free you if you wish—what you remember is now clearly nonexistent, and I might lawfully absolve your mind of it."

Don Miguel hesitated. It would be quick and easy, he knew, using the humane drugs developed by the inquisitors for cases where a sincerely repentant heretic was prevented by memory of former errors and the attendant guilt-feelings from becoming a useful member of society. He was very tempted.

But suddenly a point occurred to him, and he said, amazed at himself, "No, Father. For you know it now. And I feel it would somehow be wrong for me to leave you in sole possession of the knowledge, sharing it with no one else."

"It is shared with God," the Jesuit reminded him gently. "But—I thank you, my son. It seems to me a brave thing to say." He drew back the black-bound book across the table and held it in both hands.

"I counsel you now, for your peace of mind, to return to the great hall. The longer you are still dominated by the memory of what did not happen, the longer you will be ill at ease. Go back, and see for yourself that the palace stands and does not burn, that the King lives, that your friend Don Felipe was not shot full of arrows. In the end, it will be like a dream."

"But—was it nothing more?" Don Miguel persisted. Father Ramon gave a skeletal smile.

"Tomorrow—later today, rather, if you wish, come to me and I will recommend you some texts in the library which treat of the powers of the Adversary and his limitations. It is possible for him to create convincing delusions, but not to create reality. And it is always possible for determined and upright men to penetrate those delusions." He rose to his feet. Don Miguel rose also, and then dropped to his knees and bowed his head. When the priest had blessed him, he looked up.

"And you, Father? What are you going to do?"

"Write the message to the future. Think again—you may know this but not speak of it—think again about Don Arturo Cortes, whose overweening vanity has come to our notice more than once, and possibly investigate a certain rumour about his conduct. And also, of course, I shall pray."

He walked past Don Miguel and opened the door for him to go out.

"Go with God, my son," he said.

His mind churning, Don Miguel walked slowly along the cold passage which led back towards the adjacent palace. He could hear the sound of the band performing again, and voices singing with it, and much laughter.

This was real.

Yet—how *much* of what had happened had not happened? Had he spent this evening in Londres with Kristina, mingling with the crowds? Clearly they had not encountered the blue-feathered girl at Empire Circle, but what had they done? Why could he not remember what had actually happened to him? It must be—his imagination boggled at this but it

must be accepted—that he had not existed for a period of time. In the world as it actually was, presumably he had to have lapsed out of existence so that he could remember the potential world on his return ; otherwise he would have dual memories for some hours of tonight . . . Wait a moment : he was going to have dual memories in any case, because after midnight in the potential world he had been with Father Ramon and Kristina at the Headquarters Office, and in the real world he had been with Father Ramon at the same time . . .

Wrestling with the paradox was giving him a blinding headache. He snatched his attention away and found that he was now in a warm, brightly-lit, gaily-decorated corridor ; he had regained the interior of the palace. Any moment now he might emerge into a room full of guests, and find Kristina there, and be unable to account for his disappearance. Or—and the notion shook him again—he might find that she and he had not slipped away together into the city, but had spent a dull and miserable evening facing each other formally and making polite small-talk.

Or conceivably, in view of what had happened, he might find himself already here.

No, surely not. Father Ramon would never have committed a gross and dangerous error like that in any world, potential or actual !

Cautiously, he headed towards the great hall. Slaves were coming and going with the traditional New Year breakfast on trays and trolleys, and with bowls of steaming mulled wine giving off a spicy aroma.

The great hall was only half full now. There was no sign of the King ; but things seemed peaceful enough ; the Ambassador of the Confederacy wasn't in sight, nor was Red Bear who had probably had to be sobered up forcibly to take part in the Mass ; imagine a Licentiate trying to get away with that, but as a General Officer he managed it.

"Miguel !"

He glanced round. Coming towards him, smiling broadly, was Don Felipe.

"Miguel, where've *you* been all evening?" Don Felipe gave him a poke in the ribs and a knowing wink. "Don't tell me, let me guess. I'm sure you enjoyed yourself anyway. I've had the finest New Year's Eve I can remember !" He chortled.

"Quick!" Don Miguel seized his chance. "Put me in the picture about what's been going on since I—uh—"

Don Felipe's eyes grew round as O's. He said in a whisper, "Miguel, you don't mean you . . . *Really?* You lucky so-and-so! Ingeborg's fun, but she's a bit too young and bubbly, like sparkling wine—"

"Felipe!" Don Miguel interrupted sharply.

"All right, all right!" Don Felipe parodied repentance. "Speaking ill of a lady and so on . . . What do you want to know? I'm in a hurry to get rid of the drink I've had and go back to Ingeborg. Where did you lose touch?"

"Uh—" Don Miguel frowned. "There was some sort of disagreement between the Ambassador of the Confederacy and Red Bear, wasn't there?"

"Oh, that! Yes, it was pretty stormy for a while. And your old chum the Marquesa di Jorque didn't make things any easier. But the real fly in the ointment was Don Arturo. Luckily for the peace of everyone, he got mislaid at some point. Drank too much, I shouldn't wonder. Yes, look—he's over there, see? Looking as though the hand of doom had been laid on him."

Don Miguel followed the indicated direction. There indeed was Don Arturo, looking like death, pale as a ghost and trying as it were to restore his colour by drinking glass after glass of red wine.

"So what happened?" Don Miguel said slowly.

"Oh, the subject got changed to something more congenial and when the royals left at about half past eleven and the Ambassador too, there was laughing all round and hand-shaking and all kinds of friendliness. Perfectly calm and in order. Miguel, I *must* disappear!"

He vanished down the corridor, leaving Don Miguel to sigh with relief. It really was all right, then. For a moment he was puzzled by one point: if the other ambassadors and people had gone, why was Ingeborg still here—and presumably Kristina too? Then it struck him that they were of a heterodox faith, and of course had different observances. He didn't know whether to be glad or sorry as yet that he was going to see Kristina any moment, probably.

But before that, there was one thing he must attend to. He looked at the miserable face of Don Arturo.

That wasn't the result of too much drinking. That was the result of a very terrible experience. Don Arturo had lost—how long? Hours, perhaps, out of his New Year's Eve. He had gone to celebrate Mass at some other period of time, and he knew that he had not gone to the robing cell on his own two feet.

Oh, but that was an awful thing to have to endure! For what other conclusion could be drawn than that his death was on the way? He must be unique among members of the Society, past, present or future, in knowing what he had seen.

What justice was this punishment now that the effect of his disastrous actions had been swept into limbo?

Well, the casuists must be left to struggle with that problem, if they ever learned of it, as Father Ramon doubtless was struggling to find out whether his own actions in a world that never was had been justifiable or not. But there was one thing he, Don Miguel, could do.

He strode across the floor towards the unfortunate man and halted in front of him, his face set in a mask of pity. "Don Arturo!" he said. "Your hand, brother!"

For a moment Don Arturo's haunted eyes met his, not understanding. Then, in a convulsive movement, he let fall his wineglass with a crash and seized Don Miguel's hand in both his own. He said nothing, but his eyes were bright.

A prompt slave came to snatch up the fragments of glass and mop away the spilled wine. Don Miguel let go Don Arturo's grip, hearing his name called in a familiar voice.

"There you are, Miguel! Where've you been?"

Across the floor Kristina was standing between her sister and her father. She was waving to him. He could not ignore the command, but his heart turned over wildly. He walked up to them and bowed to the Duke.

"I'm sorry, Lady Kristina," he said. "I've been—uh—having a few words with Father Ramon in his vestry."

She looked slightly puzzled at his use of her title, and then seemed to find an explanation. "Oh! Oh, Papa doesn't mind people calling me Kristina, Miguel. He's just had to get used to it."

The Duke chuckled. "Indeed I have," he said. "I've even had to get used to her so-called progressive friends addressing me as Duke, pure and simple. Well, I'm not in favour of starchy behaviour anyway." He looked quizzically

at Don Miguel. "You and my daughter seem to have been getting on very well," he added. "At any rate, I've hardly seen either of you all evening."

Kristina bubbled mischievously. "Miguel's been wonderful, Papa. We got dreadfully bored, so he found a way for us to slip out, and we've been in the city mixing with the people and having a marvellous time. You'd never think it to look at him, but he's got quite a sense of humour under that grim scarred face. Of course, Miguel, I suppose because you're really very stern the reason you wanted to see Father Ramon was to confess how wicked you'd been to enjoy yourself this evening."

"Kristina!" the Duke said sharply. "You mustn't make jokes about other people's religious faith!"

A strange light-headedness was taking possession of Don Miguel. Already the writing of the gruesome events on his memory, which he had thought to be indelibly etched, was fading as chalk-marks fade under a wet sponge until the words are as though they have never been written. He said, "Regret having enjoyed an evening with you, Kristina? Don't be silly. Let's have another dance—our first one was rudely interrupted."

He bowed his leave of the Duke and led her out on the floor. Taking her hand, he murmured to himself, "Everything for the best in the best of all possible worlds."

"What was that, Miguel?"

"Nothing. Just a rather bitter anti-clerical joke. It doesn't matter."

"Oh, explain it!" she urged him.

A look of sadness passing over his face, he shook his head. "Believe me, Kristina, I couldn't. Nobody could. Forget it, and let's just dance."

John Brunner

In the next issue . . .

The Fullness of Time

by JOHN BRUNNER

The final adventure of Don Miguel Navarro and
The Society of Time.

Doubtless the ocean of space will have as many strange inhabitants as the seas of Earth. The problem will be recognising them.

FISHING TRIP

by P. F. WOODS

Rim is the kind of man who would poke his head into Hell just to see how hot it is there.

He's thickset, not very tall—but physical features like these don't count for much when you look at Rim these days. All you see is a dishevelled, bleary layabout who scratches himself all the time because we gave up bathing and washing years ago.

Rim and I have got a pretty cushy number. We're in this orbiting spaceship out beyond Neptune, and we're supposed to be researching into the incidence of high-energy particles and all that stuff. Or rather, Rim is, because I don't know anything about physics. I'm supposed to be his companion, to stop him from feeling lonely.

That's a laugh. But I'm an old pal of Rim's, and I never made out too well on Earth as far as jobs are concerned. When he told me about this easy-living deal, well, I was glad to get away from the nomadic life.

Actually, Rim is one of the system's best physicists, and could do much more valuable research, but this is the only job he can get since he punched the Director of Sub-Nuclear Research at London University. Still, I think I prefer it out here.

Actually, it's quite okay. Not like Hell—too cold—but we're snug and warm in our quarters. Occasionally Rim condescends to spend a few hours at his job of tracking down the little wiggly particles and whatnot, the rest of the time we spend lounging around, boozing, quarreling, sometimes leading to brawls—Rim always wins but I swear I'll beat the bones out of him before I'm done. We've got a lifetime's supply of brown ale. It takes us about a year to get through it, then we head back to Earth to restock, and make our way out here again.

Last time we were home Rim was told off about his meagre reports; but this period I haven't noticed him do any work at all.

You can't blame him. It's a bit routine for a man like Rim and he was meant for better things.

Sometimes we get tired of the inside of the research ship so we suit up and go and sit outside, squeezing brown ale through our suits' fluid intakes, and gazing at the universe. Space is a fine sight, especially out here where the sun is hardly more than a very bright star. It's very dark, but not dim, that is, you can see all right, but there's nothing nearby to see. It's cold, and lonely.

Still, Rim and I don't mind. We've both had our fill of human beings, and I hear they're talking about prohibition down on Earth now.

Anyway, it was as we were sitting out there one day that I suddenly noticed that I *could* see something.

I pointed it out to Rim. It was a dark object, too small and distant to have any features, but it occluded stars, and light reflected off it.

"Boy," Rim said wonderingly, "maybe it's an asteroid."

This idea pleased him. We'd never before found any asteroids out here, but there were some explosives in the storeroom for blowing them open if we did. Rim loves playing with explosives.

We scrambled through the airlock, took off our helmets, and went to the control room. Rim soon got the object on the viewscreen and took a few instrument sightings. "She's moving about thirty miles an hour," he told me as he started up the manoeuvring jets. "We'll go and have a look."

"Thirty miles an hour? That's not very fast, is it?"

"Relative to us." Through the matted hair and whiskers that all but covered his face, I discerned a slight frown. "I expect it's in orbit, same as us."

"Then why has it got a velocity difference of thirty miles per hour? It ought to have the same velocity."

Rim didn't answer. He had a bottle to his lips. But when we got closer to the asteroid, he started tapping the massometer impatiently. Finally he gave it a brutal kick.

"Hey, what's the matter?" I demanded.

"The massometer," he mumbled, "it's not working."

"What d'you mean? It must be working."

"Don't be a damn fool, that thing out there's got to have some mass! Anyway, we're close enough now, let's get outside and have a first hand view."

Well, it wasn't an asteroid.

I supposed it was about half a mile long, and about a seventh of that across the beam. Overlapping strips of a dull substance covered it, running lengthwise. To say there was something funny about it would be a polite underestimation.

For one thing, I couldn't seem to estimate its *shape*, except that it was longer than it was broad. Every time I cast my attention at it to make a visual assessment, it seemed to evade me by sliding away without moving. Slippery as a fish, as far as the mind goes.

Also, there was another funny thing. In space, you don't have any sense of up or down. There's only *here* and *there*. But dammit, every time I looked at that thing I felt I was looking up at it. I kept wanting to climb up it to see what was on top.

In fact, we both tried to. We coasted all round it on our suit jets, trying to work out what was wrong. But it was no good: from every angle it presented the same appearance, the same maddening impression that we were looking at it from below, that there was something else to see on the upper side.

Eventually we gave up and landed on the body itself. Flipping on my intercom, I heard Rim scratching himself inside his suit.

"Well," he ventured, "it isn't a natural object. It's an artifact."

"Oh, daddy," I sniggered, "I would never have known if you hadn't told me."

"All right, shut up." Sulkily he moved away, muttering to himself as he bent to examine the strange hull. A minute later his voice sounded again, loud and friendly now that he had found something else to divert him.

"Say, this material is queer stuff," he said. "I can't get any sound out of it."

"Well, what sort of sound do you expect in space?"

"I mean I can't get any conducted sound when I strike it with my glove. It doesn't even feel as though it offers resistance to my hand — yet my hand stops short, as it should, when I press against it. Do you know something? I think our massometer was working after all. This thing hasn't got any mass!"

"Big deal!" I offered sardonically.

He straightened up and came closer. "I'm out of beer," he told me. "Got a bottle?"

Silently I handed him one and listened to his unsavoury gurglings as he squeezed the ale into his headpiece and straight down his throat.

The excitement must have given him a thirst. He finished the pint in forty seconds, slung the bottle into the void, and blinked, peering with his weak beery gaze at our discovery. I could practically see the stuff oozing out of his eyeballs.

"It's a ship," he said. "It can't be anything else. If it's a ship it must be hollow. I'd like to take a look inside."

"I'd rather you stuck to nuclear particles."

"Aah . . ." Rim went limp inside his suit, which in the absence of gravity is the equivalent of flinging oneself into an armchair. He gets very depressed at times, and I could see he had a mood coming on.

"Stay here," he instructed after a while. "I'm going to get my tool kit."

He nearly blew me into space with a fountain of poorly controlled propellant, and rocketted over to the research ship. I imagined him thumping around inside, cursing and turning the place upside down. Since he hadn't entered the laboratory for six months he would have forgotten where everything was. However, he appeared twenty minutes later with a tool bag and auxiliary power pack swinging from his neck.

"Yippee, here I come!" he yelled as he came streaking across the ten-mile distance to the alien ship. By the time I got to where he landed he had clamped himself against the side and was fitting together a power drill.

"What are you going to do?" I queried.

"Drill a hole."

"Are you crazy—" I began. Then I lowered my voice. "Look, if whatever's inside there wanted to meet us he'd

have come out by now. Where's your tact? Besides, you can't just go drilling a hole in somebody else's ship! You might let all the air out."

"No, they'll be all right," he answered casually. "If they're smart enough for space travel they're smart enough to take care of a little puncture. Anyway, I'm only drilling to find out what the hull's made of."

With that he made a connection, and crouching over the drill, applied it to the side of the ship.

For a few moments I watched the tip slide into the plank-like structure, but then a queasy feeling came over me and I didn't feel like seeing any more.

I sauntered off and rounded the bend of the ship, idly contemplating its odd, belly-like curve. For some reason I kept looking for a keel—but of course there wasn't any keel. It was only that strange fancy, the same one that insisted the ship floated upright.

Floated? Well, yes, I thought. I suppose things can be said to float in space.

I was about to go back to see how Rim was getting on, when a movement caught my eye. Something bright and pointed was emerging through the planking . . .

"Rim!" I squealed in fright. "Your drill's coming through the other side!"

The drill-tip stopped moving. "How far away are you?"

"About fifty yards!"

Rim gave an unbelieving curse, and came zooming round to join me. His eyes bulged when he saw the drill-tip. "That drill's only eight inches long. How can it penetrate fifty yards? Go and see—no, stay here a minute!"

He put weight on his jets and galloped off round the bend. "I'm moving the drill now," his voice informed. "Is that tip wagging?"

"Y-Yes," I bleated, watching the tip move slowly in and out. "You've made two holes instead of one!"

"But it's impossible. Here — grab the tip and move it about a bit, we've got to make sure."

After hesitation, I firmly grasped the metal drill and pushed, then pulled, meeting a resistance I knew came from Rim. His voice yelped in my ears. "The handle! It's moving in my hand!"

"I'm scared," I admitted, by my tone of voice as well as by the statement.

"Then come round here with me, I'm scared too!"

I was surprised to hear that anything could frighten Rim, but the thought of that only urged me on the faster. However, when I came upon him he seemed to have regained his control, though, he still crouched over the drill and held it in a tetanus grip.

"Do you know what I think?" he whispered, staring up at me. "*There's no space inside here!*"

"What, you mean it's solid all the way through?"

"No, no." He shook his head with exasperation. "Listen, do you remember how much drill is protruding the other end?"

"About four inches."

"And do you know how much I inserted this end? Four inches! The tip goes in here and instantly reappears fifty yards away. There's no distance inside the ship. No distance means no space. The interior of this ship is *void of space*."

There was a long pause. "Let's go back to quarters," I said feebly.

Rim muttered to himself, shaking his head. But he pulled out the drill, disconnected it and made ready to leave.

And then the drill began to bend and waver, in a way no solid object could. That wasn't all. The arm and hand with which Rim held the tool began to bend and waver too, to *flow*, as if it were made of smoke and being distorted by air currents. Rim gave a wild yell when he saw the impossible contortions of his arm.

Now part of his space armour began to behave in the same way. It was as if Rim were being sucked—sucked towards the hole he had drilled.

"Get away, Rim!" I shouted, though I was too terrified to help him myself.

For a moment he stared wonderingly at his body as it elongated and streamed, then he started up his jets and before I knew what was happening we were both hurtling towards the research ship without thought of the other. Almost blind with haste, I scrambled through the airlock to find Rim already waiting for me in the living quarters.

"Rim," I gasped. "You made it quick. Are you all right?"

"Of course!" he snapped irritably. "Perfectly all right. It wasn't me that was being malformed, it was just the space I occupied."

I peered closely at his body but didn't find one trace of any deformation. He was his usual robust, unhealthy, disgusting self.

He chewed the lid off a beer bottle and commenced to gulp the contents, allowing some of it to dribble down his chest. I helped myself to one, too, and it tasted good enough to bathe in, not that I thought of bathing.

"Don't you see what happened?" Rim said between gargles, flopping on to a couch. "It was space—pouring through the hole. There wasn't any space inside. Well, now we know: space behaves like a fluid."

"I thought space was just nothing," I replied, also gargling.

"Space has structure," he asserted seriously. "Direction: North, South, East, West, Zenith, Nadir. It has distance. Good God!" His over-ripe brown eyes suddenly alive with emotion, Rim leaped from the couch and switched on all the outer view-screens "Look! All the sidereal universe is contained in space. Everything! Except . . ." His voice tailed off into mutterings again. He let the empty bottle fall from his fingers and took another from one of the crates we

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always have piled up all over the place. Slowly he dropped back on to the couch, sullenly thoughtful.

"What I can't understand," I remarked conversationally, "is why that thing out there makes me think of a Greek trireme."

I was glad to be back in our cosy living quarters. We keep the lights low and it's comfortable, if you don't mind the rotten food lying about the floor, and the smell. It would have suited me perfectly to forget we ever saw the alien body: all it had done was disturb our routine.

"Never mind," I said consolingly, "we've had a harrowing experience. Come on, drink up and have another."

But he wouldn't be cheered, and presently we lapsed into a silent drinking bout. We have had many of these in the course of our career out here beyond Neptune, particularly when we muse on our memories and our misfortunes among the society of our fellow-men back on Earth; but never before had I seen Rim guzzle so solidly, and with such an air of desperation.

Some hours later he struggled to a sitting position, breathing heavily. "Don't you see?" he uttered hoarsely, the words coming with scant coherence. "Don't you see what that ship is? It floats on space as an ocean ship floats on water! It's really right outside space—outside the dimensions. But it floats on them, and we see the part its weight causes to be projected below the water-line . . . the space-line."

"But it doesn't have any weight," I objected hazily. By this time we were both pretty far gone.

"*Their* kind of weight, not ours, fool. By God! If they use space for water, what do they use for air? And us, do you know what we are? Fishes in the sea. Never able to reach the surface."

He came towards me, groping blindly until his hand clapped my shoulder. "Listen. There'll never be another chance like this."

"Chance for what?"

"To see what it's like where there's no space. I'm going inside that ship."

"But you can't do that—"

"What do you mean, I can't? Are you telling me what I can do? Me, Rim, the Great Rim? Why, if it weren't for me you wouldn't have this job at all. You'd still be walking around the gutters on Earth."

Even in my befuddled state I could see he'd got to the maudlin stage, and that would quickly be followed by the self-pitying stage. I couldn't do anything to prevent it, and anyway it was a sort of entertainment. But as for any half-mad scheme he might dream up, well, that was different. It was dangerous.

"Look here," I coaxed, "there isn't any way you can get inside that ship. There are no openings. Now if you spent more time in the laboratory . . ."

"Yaah!" Big brownish tears trickled out of Rim's eyes. "Keeping me out of all the big research! Pushing me out here where they think I won't be able to achieve anything . . ."

"Genius is never tolerated," I consoled.

"But Rim will discover something to amaze them all! Rim will find out about space itself. You watch me."

"There's no way inside, old chap."

"No way? Hah! A few ounces of blasting powder will soon make a way. All I have to do is nip inside before all the space comes washing in, and observe . . . observe . . ."

Continued on page 110

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The voice faded into the familiar mutter. I rose to my feet, aghast. He was really drunk! "But what about the people inside?"

Rim looked at me with a mean look I had never seen on his face before. I never knew until that moment just how much he resented the way society had treated him, even though it was his own fault. Now he wanted to assert himself, against all the force of moral feeling which the society represented.

"People?" he roared. "A bit of space won't hurt them! This is for science!"

I shook my head with as much firmness as I could muster. "You're not going."

"You're telling Rim what to do?" Rim shook his head shaggily and landed his fist on my nose. I reeled, ignoring the pain and trying to sort out the scenery from the streaks of light flashing across my brain, and stumbled over a chair. Rim came after me. Rolling aside to evade him, I looked desperately around for something to hit him with. A bottle! There was one lying on the floor an arm's length away, and I grabbed it as I came to my feet.

Rim was in a half crouch, he also had a bottle in his hand. "So it's bottles, is it," he spat, and smashed his on the edge of the table. Neither of us had ever done that before.

"Rim!" I cried in amazement. "We've known each other all our lives!"

I backed against the wall, letting my own weapon fall in my surprise. Rim edged to me, displaying his jagged glass proudly and making thrusting motions. Then he threw it aside at the last moment and aimed one of his best hammer-blows at my jaw.

That was when I temporarily left the scene in the living quarters, for the happier climes of unconsciousness.

When I recovered he'd suited up and left. I didn't know how long it had been but I guessed it was five or ten minutes.

I felt too groggy to follow, though. I climbed to my feet, groaned a little, felt sorry for myself for a while, then became supine again, this time on the couch. My head felt really bad, and I don't think it was just the beer.

For the first time in my life I felt a twinge of remorse. Why that should be, I couldn't make out: Rim should be

the one going through all that conscience stuff, not me. Still, I staggered over to a mirror and gazed long, if unsteadily, at the horrifying sight I presented.

"You look wretched," I accused miserably. "You look as bad as him."

I took solace in the thought that perhaps I didn't look *quite* as bad as Rim, then turned my attention to what he was doing, switching on the main viewscreen to show the alien ship. Bringing up the magnification a few degrees, I saw my partner puttering at the vessel's lower aft part; soon he backed off, and a neat explosion blew a large chunk out of the fabric.

Rim darted forward immediately and slipped inside the hole. Even in those few seconds I saw him twist and waver as if he'd been caught in a swift current, but I lost interest in him in the course of the next minute, because I was so completely fascinated by what was happening to the ship.

When the space rushed in, she began to sink. That is, she took on greater, more meaningful proportions, became more majestic. As more of her bulk was submerged, the enigma of her appearance was resolved, and at last she reached the point where she revealed her real shape to us fishes. There *was* a keel, now, and a curving bulge of prow, sides and stern. Even a steering oar became visible.

Slowly, the true nature of the vessel heeled over into the sidereal universe as currents of space swirled in and around her. And then, when she was totally submerged, I saw it—the open deck, the drowned crewmen, the great expanse of square sail. Then I saw the nobles which the ship carried: the poet-faced youth, with a golden circlet about his neck, a short dagger of authority at his side, and his arm around a beautiful lady, dressed in a loose flowing robe, her hair gorgeously arrayed, but both their faces relaxed now in the repose of death by drowning. Of course, they were about thirty feet tall . . .

Within a few minutes the ship began to break up. I saw a tiny figure struggling through the disintegrating bilges, and automatically flicked on the intercom to hear his hoarse gasping breath. Nothing amiss there. He jettied a short distance away and looked up at the lord and lady, a blunt midjet against their gracious forms.

Immersed in space, their bodies dissipated, fading away in spinning particles, brief glimmers and spiracles. Even the ship itself had become water-logged—space-logged, and was shredding into fragments which dispersed into non-existence.

"Oh," quavered Rim, "I'm a murderer."

Ten minutes later there was only black, empty space on the viewscreen. Rim clumped through the airlock and grumpily told me he hadn't learned a thing about what it was like without space.

So we both returned to the bottle.

All that Rim put on his research report this year was: 'Found a sailing ship. Sank it.' I hope we don't lose our jobs because of that; we'd be pretty lucky to find another easy number like this one. Still, we've got beer enough for another three months, so we'll find out then.

Actually, I think we'll get through the beer in two months, or even one.

The other day Rim started laughing. "I just can't get over it," he said. "Creatures to whom space is a heavy liquid! I'd like to see their aeroplanes."

"Yeah," I answered. "What about when they get the idea of submarines?"

P. F. Woods

 * ***'Gone Away—No known address'*** *

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