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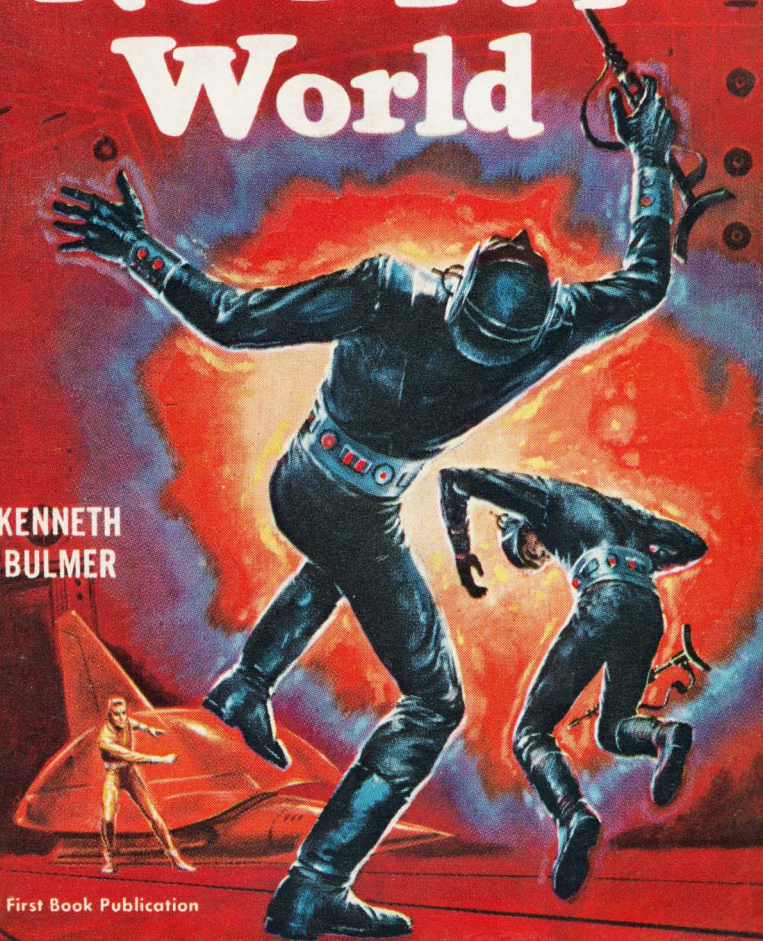
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Beyond the Star Curtain

F-104

No Man's World

**KENNETH
BULMER**



First Book Publication

VISA FOR AN ENIGMA

When John Carter came to the Horakah Cluster, it was in the guise of an interstellar salesman. If anyone there suspected he was more than that, it would mean his instant execution.

But Carter's unusual personality made it possible for him to put over the deception and even gain a visa to the forbidden central planet, an arsenal of space war factories. Of course, he had to make some special deals to do it, and those proved his undoing.

For he found himself caught there between two menaces: the tyrannical militaristic moguls and a fantastically greater threat from beyond the ends of space.

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second complete novel

CAST OF CHARACTERS

John Carter

His past was a child's myth; his future an impossible fantasy.

Harriet Lafonde

Her greatest deception was to show she was a little deceiving.

Carson Napier

He almost died of surprise when his galactic search ended.

Allura Koanga

Her world's intrigues were child's play in a tangled universe.

Hsien Koanga

A little man who played with the life of a planet.

The Moguls

They gobbled up star clusters until their world caved in.

NO MAN'S WORLD

by

KENNETH BULMER

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NO MAN'S WORLD

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I

DIRECTLY he dumped his single case on the customs bench, Dave Caradine began telling the old familiar lies. This far into the Galactic Hub, with stars and planets thicker than pips in a pomegranate, they took their customs inspections seriously. He wasn't telling his elaborately calculated lies to cover up smuggling—that was strictly for the small time.

He opened his case helpfully. The planet's name was Gamma-Horakah and Caradine hadn't wanted to make planetfall here at all. Out on the field a tractor with an off-key motor was hauling the starship off the pad. Other passengers were lining up, brightly dressed men and women from a hundred planets. Each individual person, Caradine knew with a sour little smile of amusement, figured that his or her own planet was the Golden Peak of civilization and culture—after Ragnar and the good ol' PLW, of course.

Those two groupings really were worth a visit.

The questions and the lies began.

"Name?"

"John Carter," Dave Caradine said. Using that name always did give him a kick.

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"Occupation?"

He was too polite, and far too cautious, to point out that all this was in the green plastic passport lying with his case on the bench. The customs man was short and running to fat, a little sweaty in the heat of Gamma-Horakah's high summer. He'd be reasonably polite, too, until Caradine told him where he was from.

"Oh," he said casually. "I'm a businessman. Hoping to prospect new markets here. Nice world you have . . ."

"Where you from?"

"Federation of Shanstar."

"Shanstar?" The customs man made a production out of his frown. He was a citizen of the powerful Horakah Cluster; he could afford to be patronizing to lesser breeds. He could afford to be, and he was.

Caradine had to take it. That was always the problem, knowing just how high to pitch the planetary cluster you claimed as home. He'd made the mistake, early on, of claiming a really grade A 1 Plus cluster. They'd unmasked him, tried him, fined him, tossed him in jail. The next time he'd swung too low—he snickered at the thought of the idiocy of claiming to be from a single planet of a single system—and he'd spent a frustratingly miserable three months cleaning out toilets. A man without the protection of a strong home was a man to be pushed around unhesitatingly.

But to get the balance just right, and to pitch it just so that no one would bother to check up . . .

"Shanstar?" The customs man shook his head wonderingly. It was a good act.

Caradine said, "Fifty planets, and growing every year,

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friend." He lowered his voice, confidentially. "There's talk that PLW will be sending a fact-finding mission preparatory to setting up a consulate."

"The PLW Embassy on Alpha Horakah," the customs man said off-handedly, "is one of the oldest establishments in this area of the galaxy."

It was a rebuke.

Caradine smiled.

"I've heard such a lot of Alpha-Horakah, that I'm figuring on paying the planet a call."

"You'll be lucky."

Caradine widened his smile.

The customs man activated his gazeteer and the screen lit up. The robot had no trouble remembering Shanstar.

"Fifty-two planets," the customs man said, slightly impressed despite the habitual might and glory of Horakah.

"Well, what do you know!" Caradine thumped the bench with his fist. "Another couple already!"

The rest of the data were read out.

"Quite a nice little grouping, Federation of Shanstar. I see you don't yet have much of a navy."

That had been one snag. Caradine had had to risk it.

"Well, you know how it goes. So far we've not bumped into any really hostile entities. But the yards are all there; the navy could grow overnight."

"Yeah, and babies grow under oleander trees. Save it. You skimp on defense and one day, pow! You'll wake up to find Shanstar a province of some other tougher grouping."

"You could be right, friend. Horakah ought to know about these things."

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At the customs man's quick, undecided glance, Caradine thanked his luck that he'd tacked the extra words on that clumsy sentence. He flicked his open case.

"Want to look?"

"Sure. Anything to declare?"

"Only this."

He slid the blued metal weapon from his shoulder holster and skidded it neatly across the bench so that it halted, shining and slick and oiled, directly before the customs man. The man of Horakah flinched back. The speed of draw had been entirely reflex and Caradine cursed himself. *Idiot! Take it easy. Relax. The old flannel is getting you into this dump, boy. Don't foul it up.*

"You kinda flash that thing, mister."

"It's nice of you to say. Just personal protection. Don't tell anyone, but I'm a lousy shot." He laughed.

The customs man laughed, too, as he picked the gun up. It made him stop laughing. He stared at Caradine.

"A Beatty one millimeter needle-beam, duration one-hundredth of a second." He spoke slowly, thoughtfully. "About a '56, I'd say."

"Fifty-eight."

"Yeah. And made on Ragnar."

"That's right," said Caradine brightly.

The gun was always a chance.

"How'd you get it?"

"No mystery. Bought it on Shanstar." He opened his wallet. "Look, here's the receipt." He pushed it across.

"Humph. Well, looks okay. Shouldn't be any trouble about a license for the Horakah Cluster."

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"Thanks." Caradine felt an elation; mild, but nonetheless positive. Here on Gamma-Horakah he was going to pick up a license for the gun which would be effective in all the other worlds of Horakah. He wanted to get to Alpha . . .

And then his mental alertness sagged. After the big smash, going anywhere with any purpose had become meaningless. He wanted to go to Alpha merely because that world was the capital of the cluster. And . . . Dammit all! He had to keep reminding himself, he was just a peaceful businessman. He was. That was all—now. And he had to do business in order to live. Going to Alpha was important; but not important enough to warrant the itchy expectation that, unaccountably, rode him now.

The customs man punched the necessary keys for the license, the robot burped the card out, and Caradine paid. The money was in Galaxos, which simplified things.

Now came the crucial moment. The passport in its green plastic cover was picked up, flipped open, photograph compared. There were fingerprints, retinal images, ear dimensions, sole prints, too. All those were quite in order. The high-class and fantastically expensive forgery lay in the name of the bearer, John Carter. If Caradine got through with that, he knew one little old half-blind man on Shanstar V who was in business. If he didn't . . .

Well, one prison was much like another in the human section of the galaxy.

The line waiting was growing restive. One or two children were playing with increasing violence. And it seemed as though the customs man had flexed his status-flaunting mental muscles enough. He flicked through the passport, cocked

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an eye at Caradine and the photograph, and then pushed the book into the franker. The robot selected the right page and firmly imprinted the official seal of the Horakah Cluster, sub-department of Gamma-Horakah.

The book hadn't been shot into the forgery detector. Caradine tried not to breathe a gusty sigh of relief. Even had it been subjected to that test, he had a certain faith in that little old half-blind man and his wizardry with chemicals, nucleonics and downright forging artistry.

The formalities were amicably concluded.

"Thank you, Mr. Carter."

Caradine began to repack his bag. "Good hotel?"

"We—ell. Shanstar, hmm? I'd recommend the Outworld Arms. Comfortable."

"Thanks." He'd give it a whirl, anyway. Have to, now, having asked.

As he walked off, the customs man called after him: "Hope you have a pleasant stay on Gamma-Horakah, Mr. Carter."

He turned, smiling. "Thanks."

The customs man watched the tall, lean, wide-shouldered figure silhouetted for an instant against the sunlight. That great mass of black hair gave a . . . a leonine look. Yes, that was it, leonine.

Dave Caradine walked out to the cab rank. Even he was beginning to believe that Earth didn't exist.

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II

DAVE CARADINE finished his meal. Feeling comfortable and at ease, he walked through into the hotel's smoking room, where he cut himself a yellow Krono and lit up. He'd have to ration the Kronos. They were not an item the worlds of Horakah imported. Well, there was an interesting lead there, already.

The man sitting in the low-slung spring chair watching the local station's evening TV program was smoking a short, scarlet, pudgy cigar that smelled, when Caradine deliberately caught a whiff, like boiled and shredded radiation-burn pads. The TV was running some information program on the latest increase in rates of pay in the armed forces, and tying it in with a recruiting campaign. There were dramatic color shots of battleships passing in various fighting formations before a suitably artistic planetary background. Caradine had always preferred to review the fleets right out in interstellar space, where the grim gray battlewagons belonged.

Hell! All that was dead and gone; dust, along with the Second CST.

He puffed a contemplative yellow cloud towards the scarlet cigar owner.

The perfume got through.

The man took the cigar from his lips and half-turned his head from the TV. He was medium-height, with a humorous twirl to his nostrils, and brown hair, thinning fractionally, neatly brushed into a cowlick over the forehead. He smiled.

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"Nice cigar you have there, friend."

Caradine puffed again. "Yes, I like 'em. Kronos. Ever tried 'em?"

"No. Never heard of them."

Well, it could be looked at in the line of an investment.

Caradine extended the transparent pack. "Help yourself."

"Thanks," There was no gawky shyness. The man reached out and took one of the slim yellow cigars. "Mind if I just finish this one? I'm a trifle addicted."

"Go right ahead."

"I'm Greg Rawson. You just get in today?"

"John Carter. That's right. In from Shanstar."

"Really? Nice little setup you people have there. I hear you're expanding fast."

Caradine put on the fatuous home-boy pride. "Sure are. Just heard another two planets elected to join up."

"Elected?"

"Yep. We're expanding through trade and economics."

Rawson chuckled. He lifted the Krono. "Like this?"

"Sort of."

"I'm from Ahansic. When I left on this trip we'd better than sixty planets in the Confederation. And—" the same lowered confidential tone Caradine had used on the customs man—"two smaller combines were dickering to join us."

"Sounds an interesting setup. Maybe we could get together. You on business, too?"

"Sure."

Was that a shade too fast, too pat?"

The difference in the social scale between a planetary grouping of fifty-plus worlds and better than sixty worlds

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was small but definite. Rawson could have been loftily condescending, had he wished. But he was acting like a human being, and Caradine wondered why.

The possible answer to that lay in the common bond between two outworlders on a planet. Then Caradine remembered that Ahansic was a stellar cluster not so very far away from the powerful Horakah group. Maybe the two smaller groupings wishing to join up were also being chased by Horakah? Could be friction there.

That could be why Greg Rawson was studying the Horakah Space Navy buildup on the TV with such interest.

Spy?

Well, and if so, so what? Dave Caradine was a businessman now, and as he'd never been a spy he didn't think he'd worry about the problem now. As a problem, it wasn't his.

That was the wonderful thing about the freedom after the great smashup. There were no real problems any more.

Only minor trivia like trying to sell goods, and trying to wangle visas to visit difficult planets. He'd never wind up on an alienist's couch now, thank God.

It might be an idea to see what Rawson knew about Alpha.

"Horakah seems a pretty big-time outfit," he said pleasantly.

"Thought I might try my luck on Alpha."

Rawson laughed moderately. "You'll be lucky."

"That's what the customs man said."

"I've been applying for a travel permit for a year, now. No go."

"What's the trouble?"

"Closed shop. Preferential treatment. They use their outlying planets, like this one, Gamma, to dicker with other

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stellar peoples. Then they ship the goods themselves. A mere matter of economics. Keeps the colonial worlds happy."

"Inefficient."

"Not necessarily. A starship line can trade in and out of the Horakah Cluster on a shoestring. We take the long haul shipping the goods in here."

"Yes, I suppose so."

He was getting no change out of Rawson. And bed called.

"Well, I'll be shoving off. See you in the morning?"

"Sure thing. Good night."

"Good night."

As he left the smoking room a strikingly attractive girl entered. She had a tumbled pile of silver-blonde hair that emphasized the slant of her cheekbones and the glint of mischief in her eyes. She was wearing a white slit-blouse, red toreador pants and black, gilt-finished slippers. She wore no jewelry. Caradine stood aside to let her pass. She flashed him a smile and went on.

She began to talk to Greg Rawson, but Caradine had had enough for one day and he crossed slowly to the elevator. After all, he didn't have to worry about a single thing or person on this planet.

Worry, he'd often surmised, grew into a habit.

And when he'd broken the habit the release had opened up a new world—new worlds, in fact. Worrying about finagling a trip to Alpha-Horakah and puzzling over upping his selling index were mere minor elements that had no power whatsoever to bother him.

But, still and all, he missed the great days, the thump and excitement and stirring wonder of it all . . .

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The following morning at breakfast Rawson introduced the girl as Sharon Ogilvie. She smiled warmly and shook hands.

"From Ahansic, too, Mr. Carter."

"Our meeting was quite by chance," Rawson said quickly. "We're not in business together or anything."

"I'm sure," said Caradine politely.

He wondered what the other two thought he thought was covered by the "or anything." Well, it seemed pretty open and shut and it certainly wasn't his business.

That refreshing feeling of power swept over him. Nothing that he didn't wish to be was his business, now. The days of sweating out the destinies of . . . Well, they were all over.

He finished his second cup of surprisingly good coffee, wiped his lips, tossed the napkin into the robotic disposal, and smiled at Rawson and Sharon.

"I think I'll take a stroll down to the travel office. Check up on a visa."

Sharon laughed and pulled a face. "No soap, Mr. Carter."

"Can but try."

He decided to walk. The city scarcely meant a thing to him, apart from his normal orienting interest in any new surroundings. It was a city, clean, bright, filled with traffic and pedestrians, with flashing traffic lights and well-filled shop fronts, the usual mixture of old and new buildings and facilities. He appreciated the sunshine, warm on his shoulders. Gamma-Horakah owned a rather nice sun. He wondered why Rawson had made such a thing out of denying any business or other relationship with Sharon Ogilvie.

A few blocks short of his destination as indicated to him by robotic street guides, he decided to drop into a restaurant

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for coffee. The walk had made him thirsty. His choice was purely random.

He settled on a discreet place with only four neon signs flashing out front and a glass swing door that reflected odd angles of the street and passing vehicles. He pushed the gilt bar and went round with the door.

The air-conditioning was well-balanced and caused no sudden shivery shock; civilized, the people of Horakah. But then they ought to be, considering their size and importance in the interstellar groupings and their distance from the final periphery of the Blight.

Checking the robot with a thousandth of a Galaxo—the little plastic coin was always called a Joey, no matter where you seemed to go in the galaxy—he crossed over to a side table and sat down. The delivery slot opened and his cup of coffee slid out. He stirred sugar, relaxing, feeling fine.

Well, maybe he wouldn't get to Alpha-Horakah, after all. Sitting quietly here with the blood running freely in his veins and arteries after the pleasant morning stroll, with a friendly sun shining in the windows, a good cup of coffee and—well why not?—a Krono to smoke contemplatively, he really couldn't see any reason for haste and bustle and the chasing after that tiny extra edge of business so beloved by the high-power salesman. The usual arrangement here seemed to be to sell your stuff to Gamma—any of the other satellite planets might have done—and then to take your commission and let the space lines of Horakah worry about shipping in to Alpha. His business friends and contacts back in Shanstar would be pleased with any business he could put their way.

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Maybe the Krono angle was a good one. He knew the smoke to be excellent, well up to his old Earth brands.

Yes, he was roughing it out, now. After the fluttery feeling in passing through customs, the rest of it all was mere routine. Not uninteresting; he still had contacts to make. Even so, he sometimes wondered why he bothered to go from stellar grouping to stellar grouping, doing business, when he could be back on Shanstar, seeing about setting up a new home in the ranch house he had bought last time through. Shanstar . . . Well, it wasn't Earth, but it was an acceptable substitute.

One or two other people had entered and left the restaurant. He took little notice. Pretty soon he'd finish up the coffee and walk the few blocks to the travel office. Loud laughter attracted his attention. Over by the counter a group of young men was horse-trading, swapping jokes, living it up. Clerks, probably, out for their midmorning break whilst the robots carried on unsupervised.

He rose to go. He had to pass the group and he was totally unprepared. A foot came from nowhere and he went sprawling. His automatic reflex caused a hand to flash out and grasp a chair leg. Then chair and all came crashing down. The *all* turned out to be a table, and the table had been loaded with cookies, plates, knives and forks, all set for a slap-up meal. That slap-up meal was now a gooey mess on the vinyl flooring.

"Say, mister. Why'n't you look where you're going?"

Still unprepared, Caradine said: "Sorry." He scrambled up.

"The man says he's sorry."

He bent to wipe away berry pie from his black trousers.

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The same voice, hectoring, patronizing, said: "He says he's sorry when this lady's food is all over the floor."

Caradine remembered the foot. These people were living on Horakah. They belonged to the planet, and were members of a strong interstellar cluster. *Take it easy, boy.*

"That's all right." The girl was speaking in a scared voice. Caradine looked at her. Young, freckled, dressed in a simple frock of lime green that left her arms and knees showing. Brown eyes, brown hair. Nice, pleasant, home-loving type—on the surface.

She was trying to talk out of the bully-boy's racket. Of those there were four, and Caradine at once selected the leader, the hectoring one.

"Is this lady with you?"

"Wha-at? Say, what's that got to do with you, mister?"

"I was merely going to suggest that as it was your foot that tripped me up you should offer to pay for her meal."

The reply was unintelligible to Caradine, but the girl colored and looked embarrassed so it was probably currently obscene.

"You wanting to have your face pushed in, outworlder?"

"Who says I'm outworld?" Caradine said pugnaciously. It might work. He might get out of here without further trouble, but he doubted that. It all made him feel so weary.

"Look at your clothes."

Certainly the four youths were dressed rather remarkably. Each had a dirty brown-mustardy waistcoat, open down the front to show a three-inch gap of hairy—or almost hairy; they were quite young—chest. The pants puffed at the hips and were slashed to show scarlet tights beneath. The hose

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came up high and were yellow. Each boot was a different color.

Caradine had grown so used to odd clothes among the people of the galaxy that these he'd passed over as a retro-grade fashion step. He gave a quick glance at his own clothes, as though in obedience to the bully-boy's command.

A white shirt, short-sleeved, open at the throat and fastened with two magneclamps. Black trousers with a dark-blue cummerbund. A nice, quiet, sensible and conservative outfit. Evidently, it jarred upon these four more enlightened denizens of Horakah.

He only hoped that his shoulder holster wasn't showing.

The girl stood up and tried to say something about not bothering about the meal, but she was brutally cut off by the leader.

"Sit, Tisha, and do as you're told." Perhaps, Caradine wondered critically, he wasn't supposed to make anything out of that.

"All right, kids," he said. "You've had your fun. Now disappear, scam, flitter. I've an appointment."

"Outworlder poof." The leader put a hand into the pocket concealed in the puffed pants. Something came out that gleamed. The others followed the leader.

"Get him!" On the words the four thugs bore down on Caradine, their eyes hard and hating, their lips drawn back involuntarily in a rictus of unthinking alien hate.

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III

CARADINE felt immeasurably old, then. He could sense all the alien antagonisms, the feral undefined fury of one species for another, all the insane hatred that had flowed out from culture to culture through the bloody years of the past. These flashy kids were merely carrying to one logical extreme the current status theories: if my planetary grouping is more powerful and influential than yours, I can push you about, buster, and you just grin and like it.

The girl screamed.

Caradine's fleeting impression of age vanished. He was still mentally young, alert and vigorous, and the years before the smashup had maintained his body in perfect fighting trim. So these punks wanted to show how high and mighty their planet was? Well, his own experience and the regret he felt did not extend to letting himself be beaten up.

His extended left arm, bent at the elbow, stopped the downwards sweep of the sap. He pushed two fingers forward, hard, and that was the leader out of the fight.

The second and third youths swung wildly. Caradine stepped outside the arc of the blows, let them follow through, stepped in close and let two short blows rip out. Three down and one to go. No, the fourth had thought better of it. His parti-colored shoes clattered on the vinyl as he ran out.

The leader was writhing and screaming on the floor.

The restaurant's single human attendant rushed up, face distorted, shouting.

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Caradine said, "Shut up. These four hoodlums tried to beat me up in your restaurant. Call the police, will you."

The man, probably the manager, regained his senses fast. He made placating motions with his hands.

Other diners were standing up, craning to look. One or two more responsible looking men began to walk over.

"It was no responsibility of mine, mister." The manager was more scared even than the circumstances warranted. "The police don't have to be bothered. You're not hurt?"

"No. This lady's meal was ruined by these punks. Charge them." Carradine didn't want to push the affair. He'd made his point, now he wanted to have done with it.

He walked quickly to the exit. A man half-turned to let him go by. He had a dark, secretive face with thick but firm lips, and a deep cleft in his chin. Caradine gave him a brief glance and a short "Excuse me" as he went by.

Then he was out around the revolving doors and onto the sun-splashed sidewalk. *Young punks! Just because their planet was powerful, they thought—oh, the hell with it all.*

Throughout the quick flurry of blows he'd kept his cigar firmly clamped in his mouth. He smiled reflectively. That was just one of the tricks.

The travel office was surprisingly inconspicuous. A small, brown metal door let him through into a stone-flagged patio where extraordinarily pale green trees spread wide and flat leaves above an open-air counter. The few robots in attendance were inconclusively puttering about, pruning and trimming and shaving lawns. Water tinkled refreshingly from the middle-distance and exotic flowers bedazzled a mellow brick wall. It was all very soothing and very relaxing.

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So that made Carradine that much more wary. He had by this time accepted the fact that he would not secure a visa to visit Alpha. He was now merely going through the motions. At the same time he was making contacts, and for a businessman contacts were the life blood of his work.

He sat in the restful plastic chair indicated by the robot and waited. Presently a serene-looking, smiling, eminently comfortable woman walked across and sat down beside him. Her gray hair was piled artfully and she wore an emerald-green gown and discreet jewelry.

"Mr. Carter? Mr. John Carter?"

"That's right."

"I'm Harriet Lafonde." She pushed a button on the arm of her chair and a robot brought tall glasses, dewed, with an amber liquid tinkling with ice.

"Try a Pomcrush," she said, lifting a glass. "It's a Horakah speciality."

"Thanks, Mrs. Lafonde." Carradine sipped. "Mm. Very good."

"Glad you like it. Oh, and call me Harriet. I'm the travel permit official for Gamma."

He did not allow that to surprise him. He just sipped again at the drink and waited for the woman to speak again.

After a time, she said: "Why do you want to go to Alpha, Mr. Carter?"

"Business reasons. I sell goods wherever there is a good market and I believe that an exceptionally fine market exists on Alpha-Horakah. I'd like to go there and talk to a few of the importers, get their ideas, find out what they want, what goods they're most interested in."

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Even as he spoke he was aware of the commercial banality of it all, but the old alarm-signals were trilling in his mind. He sounded just like a textbook businessman covering up an interstellar espionage agent. Damn his own suspicious character, anyway. That set-to with the young thugs in the restaurant had started a lot of the old gray cells in his mind functioning again, bringing up thoughts and memories he had imagined dead and forgotten. He smiled at Harriet Lafonde, there in the sunny patio under the wide-spreading trees.

"I think Alpha-Horakah as well as Gamma will profit from a visit."

"And yourself, Mr. Carter?"

"Of course." This was very civilized and very intelligent and very man-of-the-galaxy. Underneath the sound of knives being sharpened reached Caradine very clearly.

Harriet Lafonde said lazily, "You'll pardon me if I say so, Mr. Carter, but you don't at all look like the sort of man a commercial traveler should be."

"Is there any type?"

"Oh, I think so. You're far too brutal, too tough, too edgy." Caradine for the moment didn't know what to say.

"We're not children any more," Harriet Lafonde said in her lazy, husky voice. "So you're a businessman. But you've been used to giving orders, to bossing men about."

"Please." He had to grimace to keep his anger from showing. "Maybe what you say is right, maybe not. I'm not flattered. At the moment, and as far as our relationship is in the balance, I'm merely a businessman. I assure you of that with every fiber of meaning in me." He stopped. Wrong. The wrong

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way. She'd pierced through with her damned womanly intuition and all the denials in the universe wouldn't alter her opinion now. Perhaps he ought to have had that facial, after all. Perhaps he should have turned himself into a faceless anonymous one among billions.

His own spark of individuality had rebelled at that. He was David Caradine, and damn the galaxy!

He stood up, bowing slightly. "Thank you for the drink, Mrs. Lafonde. It was most pleasant. And the chat here in this pleasant patio garden—very enjoyable. I think I'll stroll back to my hotel for lunch."

"Stop babbling and sit down."

Caradine sat.

"You want to go to Alpha. If I thought you were a spy I would not have sat out here with you and had this conversation which was deliberately slanted so that it would not be enjoyable. But you lied handsomely. Any woman likes a man who lies well."

"Do I take that as a compliment?" He was smiling now.

Maybe, just maybe, it might be all right.

"Take it how you like. I cannot guarantee a visa for our central world. It must be quite obvious to you that we have things going on there that we do not wish rumored about. But I think that under the circumstances—circumstances of which you do not have the slightest inkling—we might be able to help. I'd have to have your word as a gentleman that you'd abide by the bargain we might make."

"Could you explain that?"

"Simply that you carry on your business there. You make

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no attempt to pry into government affairs. You'd just be caught and executed, anyway."

Caradine laughed. He began to feel good again.

"You can have my word on that easily enough. As of now I'm what I told you, a plain businessman. I leave the spy stuff for those who like it." He stopped smiling for an instant. "Unless, that is, you were deliberately plotting against my home world. That might alter affairs."

It was Harriet Lafonde's turn to laugh.

"We plan nothing against Shanstar. Rest assured on that."

Almost, but not quite, he said: "I was not thinking of Shanstar." He didn't on two counts. And the first was that he had no wish to be incarcerated in a lunatic asylum, or whatever euphemistic word they called them here.

"I can't promise anything, remember. I'll ring you at your hotel tomorrow."

"Thank you, Mrs. Lafonde. I appreciate your help, anyway."

When he left he paused at the brown metal door and glanced back. The picture was nearly perfect: the dignified woman in her green dress, sitting under the pale green leaves of the trees, backed by masses of brilliant flowers, with the gentle sounds of birds and falling water and the hum of drowsy insects. It was all so peaceful and restful. It all aroused yearnings in him that now could never be fulfilled.

He shut the door carefully. When he walked away he wasn't seeing so clearly, and his hands were trembling very slightly.

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IV

THE WHIMSICAL-LOOKING man with the face that through years of labor had grown an indrawn, secretive look, was waiting for Caradine as he walked back to the Outworld Arms. Caradine remembered him from the fracas in the restaurant. The man lounged against the wall, idle in the sunshine. When Caradine was half a block along, the man pushed himself up with a shrugging motion from the wall, and sauntered after the outworlder.

So he was being tailed, then.

So he'd have felt naked if he wasn't.

Harriet Lafonde would no doubt sort that little problem out when she reported in to her superiors. If he could persuade them he had no ulterior motive in visiting Alpha, they might lay off. Only then did the startling and rather funny thought occur to him that he'd gone to see the visa official with the more or less resigned acceptance that he wouldn't get a permit. And that he'd rationalized that out. Oh, well. Times change and men have to change with them.

He made a good lunch at the hotel—a red, succulent fish not unlike salmon and heaps of fresh, crisp salad followed by a golden jelly and a generous pouring of rich double cream—and decided he'd better try one of the local cigars before he smoked through his stock of Kronos.

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He strolled out into the foyer and stopped by the tobacco robot. Now here was one instance where a robot wasn't in the same class as a human assistant. You could ask a robot what it recommended in the way of a smoke, and it would reply with great politeness and sauvity just as it had been programed by the concessionaires of the booth. Oh, well. Try one of those red blunderbusses Greg Rawson had been fuming.

He dialed his requirements and added his room number. Sliding open the transparent pack, he was about to light one when a voice from somewhere down by his stomach said: "If you're used to Kronos, friend, I'd strongly advise against those firecrackers you've just bought."

He looked down. The man was small and chirpy and wizened. He had crows' feet radiating from the corners of his eyes and his mouth slit his face in half like a melon-man. Caradine felt a sudden warmth of affection, stemming, he supposed, from the instinctive liking in him for the small and cheerful.

"I appreciate your advice, friend. But I've bought them now. So I'm stuck with them."

"Run out of Kronos?" The little fellow clucked his tongue. "Pity. Oh, well, try one of mine. they're Western Ocean Kronos, and they'll smoke differently from yours."

"True," Caradine said peaceably. "Mine are Southern Jubilee."

"Nice brand." The little fellow tiptoed up and extended a light. Caradine sucked. That was one nice thing about Kronos; they hadn't got around to fitting self-igniting tips yet. They hadn't destroyed the artistry in smoking so far.

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"Name's Hsien Koanga. From Four."

"John Carter. Five. Well, this calls for a little celebration. On business?"

"Surely." Koanga's monkey-wizened face never seemed to be without that wide, quizzical smile. There was shrewdness there, masked, but plain to Caradine's character-experienced eye. "Mind you," Koanga went rattling on. "Gamma-Horakah isn't so bad, compared with some planets I've horse-traded on. There was a dump out by the Barron Cluster—whew, boy, steer clear of there if you want your nostrils to function at all properly again."

Caradine laughed. "Primitive?"

They were walking through to the bar of the Outworld Arms.

"Primitive? They still used internal combustion engines in their vehicles. The place stank. Incidence of lung cancer was staggering." He shook his head. "I cut out smoking altogether whilst I was there. That would have been too much."

They reached the bar and sat in a booth, opposite each other. The conversation flowed on over cool drinks, Caradine finding pleasure in introducing Koanga to the Pomcrush recommended by Harriet Lafonde. It was a nice drink. They had a third and a fourth. By that time they'd dredged up two mutual acquaintances and were working over Shanstar Eight.

The sight and sound of a man from Shanstar reinvigorated Caradine. He'd been forgetting just how much Shanstar had meant to him in the rush and scurry of Horakah and all the incidents, meaningless in themselves, that had happened. He

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mentioned the fracas in the restaurant and Koanga's lined face frowned angrily.

"That's a damned shame! All these worlds think they have to be one up on all the others. Just because those kids' home worlds own a sizeable space fleet doesn't give them the right to insult and maltreat a citizen from a planet that maybe doesn't feel it necessary to maintain a gigantic space armada. It makes you sick."

"It's the way they think. I guess even we'd feel a little impatient with a man from a planet that was a single and owned perhaps only a couple hundred space battlewagons."

"Well." Koanga sipped his drink. "Perhaps I must own the truth of that. But anyway, a planet that is still a single with a space fleet as minuscule as that can't be much good, can it? And the men from such a world must be pretty slack bums."

Caradine thought wearily, *And that's the mentality all right, brother. You the same as all the rest.*

The conversation naturally worked around to their line of business and Caradine was told that Koanga was here on Gamma-Horakah selling spice-woods and precious-gem cabinets, one of Shanstar Four's specialities. So far he had filled a bulky order book. Caradine was told all this. He reserved judgement. That was his inherently suspicious nature, he supposed; but nothing was what it appeared on the surface and he was too wise a hand to be caught believing the first things he was told.

Oh, sure, Koanga probably was selling Shanstar Four's renowned spice-woods and he very likely did have a fat order book. But Caradine wondered cynically if that was all.

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Koanga stood up, smiling. He was looking over Caradine's shoulder. Caradine did not look around.

He smelled the perfume—heady, exciting, promising.

"Oh, Mr. Carter, this is my niece, Allura Koanga. Allura, this is Mr. John Carter. He's from Five."

Caradine rose, turning, and putting out his hand.

"How nice—" the girl smiled warmly "—to meet someone from home." She shook hands with a firm, cool clasp.

Caradine looked at her. He'd thought that Sharon Ogilvie, Greg Rawson's girlfriend from Ahansic, was a beauty. Now he notched up another credit to his choice of Shanstar as a home planetary system. Allura was nothing less than beautiful and yet, with that beauty, there was a warmness and an aliveness that sheer beauty so often lacked.

Her auburn hair was softly tumbled about a classically perfect face and her eyes sparkled in the bar's many concealed lights with a freshness and vivacity that charmed as well as excited. She wore a wide-sleeved blouse of some shimmering material that changed sheen as she moved, and tight black pants that on her looked good. A single pearl drop glowed milkily from her left ear.

Watch it! Caradine said to himself. *This woman is dangerous.*

She sat down with a graceful motion and the robot dispensed a third Pomcrush.

"Mm," she said. "Good. What is it?"

Caradine told her. "Recommended by Harriet Lafonde."

Both the Koangas' faces remained polite and smiling and friendly. But the expressions were frozen in those smiles.

Caradine perked up. Perhaps here might be the key . . . ?

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"She's the permit visa official for Gamma," he said casually. "There appears some chance, odd though it may be, that I may be allowed to visit Alpha."

"But no outworlder goes there," Allura said quickly. Too quickly.

"So I'm told." Caradine drank thoughtfully. "I'd more or less decided not to bother about Alpha. The usual system seems to be to sell to Gamma and let them worry after that. But, of course, if they really do let me visit Alpha, then I'll go."

"Of course." Koanga set his drink down carefully. His expression, so overlaid with fine wrinkles, was hard to read. "I think you are very privileged, Mr. Carter."

"Well, if I am I have no knowledge why."

"Perhaps Mr. Carter has connections of which we are completely unaware," Allura said gaily, with a toss of her head.

She didn't fool Caradine a single little bit.

"Sorry, Miss Koanga. I can't claim a single contact on this planet yet."

"You sound as though you and the Lafonde woman got on well?"

"Oh, yes, in a purely formal way. The people of Horakah are mighty proud of their stellar grouping. They talk to us out of charity, I'd say."

"One day—" Koanga started to say, in an ugly tone. His niece cut his words off with a light laugh.

"One day we'll also have better than a thousand suns, is that it, Uncle? Well, so maybe we will."

"No reason why we shouldn't," Caradine said. "One thing,

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you can't run too many solar systems efficiently. Sheer size eventually breaks down the best of modern administration."

Greg Rawson and Sharon Ogilvie walked into the bar and sat in a booth. They saw Caradine and waved across as the robot brought their order.

"You know them?" Koanga asked.

"Met them casually. That's Greg Rawson. I was introduced to the girl at breakfast. Sharon Ogilvie."

"Interesting people," Allura said, a trifle sharply.

Oh, well, Caradine chuckled to himself. One beautiful woman saw another and the sparks flew for a bit. They'd sort it out eventually. Might be interesting to see who came out on top. At the moment, on current performance, it would be Allura by a parsec.

The heat of the afternoon wore on. Allura suggested a swim and they set off in a cab for the pool, situated about six miles out of town. The day was perfect for swimming and for lazing about on the edge, under a striped umbrella, while the busy robots scurried with cooling drinks. The sun was throwing long shadows when at last Allura was persuaded to leave the water, dress and head back to town for dinner.

Caradine had spent a lazily instructive afternoon watching a perfect female form in a brief bathing costume, and he felt quite confident that the swim and briefness of the bathing costume and the warmth of her smile had all been laid on for his particular benefit.

Wondering why was amusing. Not very profitable, but amusing.

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V

THE ROBOT made no announcement. Caradine was sitting in his dressing gown before the window of his room, smoking a last contemplative cigar and admiring the lights of the night time city. Strange how the culture of a race could be derived from their use of light. Gamma-Horakah went in for gaudy displays and clumps of light where they could be seen for miles. He had heard from Koanga of the miles of badly lit streets sprawling and festering on the outskirts of town.

The robot must have been shorted out. The door opened silently and Allura Koanga walked swiftly in, shutting the door firmly behind her.

Caradine said, "Wrong room, Miss Koanga?"

"No. Very much the right room, Mr. Carter. Well, we might as well make it John and Allura. We have plenty of work to do together."

She was wearing a transparent negligee that showed most of the things a man might want to see. As Caradine had seen them all before, many times, he could ignore them—with a slight struggle—and concentrate on the reason for their flaunting.

"What can I do for you?"

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"First of all, listen."

Obligingly, he remained silent.

She walked with her graceful swaying motion over to the bed and sank down upon it. Caradine swiveled in his chair but remained by the windows. He blew a careful puff of smoke.

"We are from Shanstar," Allura Koanga said with an emphasis on the *from*. "We are here upon another planet, a planet that as a member of a thousand-strong confederation of worlds, considers itself so high and mighty that it denies to peaceful citizens of the galaxy free ingress to the central world. Well, enough of that. Harriet Lafonde will grant you that permit, John."

"What makes you so certain?"

Allura laughed, a little embarrassedly, a little unsteadily. Her large dark eyes fastened on Caradine, sitting there by the window, smiling across at her. His very poise in face of her intrusion and her negligee must, he thought with dry humor, have unsettled her a trifle. Her eyes told what she thought of his last remark.

"I'm certain. Women know about these things."

"All right, I'll accept that women know and therefore, that you know too. But what do you want? I'm tired. I need sleep."

The situation and the hour, he felt, had warranted excision of the word *bed*.

"Once you are on Alpha, there is much you can do for Shanstar, John. There are many things we need to know. I'm sure you understand."

Caradine said with heavy emphasis, "No. Sorry, Allura,

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but that sort of stupidity is not for me. I am a plain businessman. I know nothing of, and I care even less, if that is possible, for military matters now. You'll have to find someone else to do your spying for you."

She rose from the bed and crossed to him, the negligee pressing against her figure. She was intense, on fire, demanding.

"You are of Shanstar, John Carter. Surely that means something to you?"

"It does. I like Shanstar. I don't want to get myself caught and executed as a spy and put Shanstar in an embarrassing political situation. Oh, yes. I'd be caught."

"But—" she protested fiercely.

"I've said no; I mean no. I want to hear nothing more about it." He flicked ash into the disposal in the arm of the chair. "Have you thought that this room is almost certainly tapped?"

She laughed. "It was."

"I see. Well, then, the answer is still no."

She was kneeling by the chair now, clutching the arm. Her face was inches from his own. He wondered when she'd moved into phase two of the operation.

Well, it was a temptation all right. A hellish temptation. But as he had no intention of spying whilst on Alpha, assuming he reached there, he couldn't take the payment and default on delivering the goods.

My God! Even in this he was starting to think like a businessman!

She gave him a long, hard, calculating look. He endured it emotionlessly, knowing the crucial moment was here.

Then she sat back on her heels. Her face showed wear-

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ness and defeat. Slowly she stood up and put one hand through her auburn hair.

"Sorry to have troubled you, John. I see that I am wasting my time. I just thought that with Shanstar being lined up by Horakah as their next victim, their next conquest, you'd want to help fight back. Evidently I was wrong."

She went limply to the door.

"Allural"

She turned. "Yes?"

"I've given my word that I won't spy on Alpha."

"Oh."

"And I thought that there were smaller combines lying between Horakah and Ahansic next on the list of aggression."

She laughed, a hurting, bitter laugh. "So you've been fed the propaganda, too? No, John. Shanstar is the next."

"Give me proof.

"We'll speak to my uncle in the morning."

"Very well. Just remember that I promise nothing. I've given my word once. I don't toss that around lightly."

"No, John. No, I don't believe you do."

She went out and closed the door gently behind her. When Caradine tried it next the robot did the work so she must have cut him back into the circuit. He rubbed his chin and smiled. Quite a girl. . . .

The next morning Harriet Lafonde phoned. It was okay. He could drop by the office any time and pick up his permit.

Later, Sharon Ogilvie called to him as he was leaving the hotel's dining room after a pleasant lunch. Sunshine splashed across her silver hair and turned it into a spinning whirl of

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sparks. She was wearing diamond-patterned pants, tightly cut as usual, in red and green and screaming blue. Her yellow blouse was daringly cut.

Caradine stopped politely and took the cigar from his mouth.

"Oh, Mr. Carter, Greg and I are taking a run out to the Painted Caves this afternoon." She spoke in a low, confidential tone. "Perhaps you'd care to come along. It should be a lovely drive and the Caves are famous throughout almost all the galaxy."

Caradine had heard of them. He was interested.

"That is, if you have no other engagements," she added.

"No. I'd love to, Miss Ogilvie. I have certainly heard of the Caves. A previous civilization, aren't they? Before humanity set up house here?"

"Yes." They fell into step. "The beings who painted the Caves must have all died out many thousands of years ago." She laughed a burble of sound in the hot afternoon stillness. "And that's a long time ago by any of the years that men use to measure time."

"Yes."

Sharon Ogilvie, walking at his side with her tight pants and her silver hair, and Allura Koanga, with her auburn hair and transparent negligee—were they both after the same thing? And was that one thing what he thought, or was Horakah after neither Ahansic nor Shanstar? So many names to remember. Well, that part of it was easy. Any man who had to deal with dangerous men and dangerous women in his life remembered names. They were the stock in trade of the successful man.

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Rawson had the hired car ready. It was a no-nonsense runabout, dark-green with plenty of chrome trim, and the antigrav unit was probably five years old and good for another five before an overhaul. The drive tubes looked a little pitted, but they'd give the car a safe top speed of just under Mach One, which on this planet would probably be fairly high, especially at this time of year.

Caradine allowed Rawson to slide behind the wheel and with Sharon in the center of the four-seater front bench, he had plenty of space to stretch himself and lean his elbow on the armrest. Rawson took off with a nicely sedate swoop that took them into the east-bound traffic lanes smoothly. Caradine passed one of the red stogies across to Rawson and sat back to enjoy the ride.

Blue and purple hills passed beneath, then a river on which pleasure boats dotted the silvered current with scraps of color. Farther on they received a detour signal over the traffic radio and Rawson obediently angled the car onto a southeasterly swing. Away to the north, banks of black smoke crept up against the horizon.

"One of their industrial plants," Rawson said laconically.

"Mostly automated, though, I suppose?"

"Oh, sure. And turning out kettles and electric stoves and refrigerators. The plants turning out megaton warheads and destructor-ray projectors will all be on Alpha. Mostly, anyway."

"Do you think Horakah means business?"

Rawson was not shaken by the remark. He took it as Caradine had meant it. There had always been an out if Rawson didn't want to play. "Of course they do. Any and everybody is meat for their grinders."

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"Your folk on Ahansic getting worried?"

"What do you think? Same as Shanstar, I expect.

"Shanstar's a good way off."

"Yes," Sharon said with an edge to her voice. "And Ahansic has about three small groupings between us and the Horakah monster."

Caradine decided to needle a little. "You know," he said equably, "I'd kinda figure that those little groups would prefer to join up with the big boy. If they joined up with the little 'un they'd be swallowed up in their turn and receive no thanks. The other way they'd come in for some of the pickings."

Rawson laughed nastily. "We can't fight Horakah," he said. "Only Ragnar and the good ol' PLW could do that."

"True, maybe, but debatable. You could make it uncomfortable for them. Not a good proposition."

"We'd go down fighting. We'd mess up a lot of Horakah battleships and maybe a planet or so. But we'd go down. And Horakah would have the pickings. They'd recover. We wouldn't."

"Much the same for Shanstar." Caradine glanced idly over the side at the distant line of forest and hint of far-off mountains. "Pity Ahansic and Shanstar are so far away in the galaxy. We could get together."

"But are we so far away?" asked Sharon softly.

"Three months aboard a fast starship."

"There are other groupings. Around Horakah. If they all pooled their resources . . ."

"And who'd take orders from whom?" Caradine made it light. He laughed as he spoke. But it was the stumbling block.

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Anyone who'd tried to organize people, to run a stellar grouping, knew that.

The others said nothing to that. Caradine felt a flush of devilry, of scatter-brain couldn't-care-less stirring rise in him. Speaking quite casually, yet watching the others from shrewd eyes, he said, "According to the stories, look what happened along those lines back on Earth."

Sharon laughed. "Mr. Carter! Don't tell me you still believe in the fairy stories? Why, that's strictly for the kids!"

"Well . . ." began Caradine.

"I met a man once, who said he believed that a place called Earth really did exist," said Rawson, musingly. "He spoke quite rationally, too. Had a good job. Then he refused to use ball-point pens because he said they were symbols for spaceships and all spaceships were evil. He got worse. He ended up claiming that Earth had really existed—did still—somewhere beyond the Blight area. They had to dig so deep into his brain to cure him he never rose above moron grade again. Shame."

"Some folks have pretty convincing theories—"

"We're sane, grownup people, Mr. Carter," Sharon said positively. "Everybody knows that Earth is just a fairy story. Earth just doesn't exist."

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VI

THE CAR lurched and Rawson had to uncouple the robot and bring it back onto course manually. They were over open country and no traffic lanes operated.

"Damn!" Rawson said without heat. "Car's packed up on us. Control's shot to hell."

"Can you put it down?" asked Sharon. She half rose from her seat.

"Take it easy, Miss Ogilvie. Mr. Rawson can handle this car in his sleep." Caradine felt that to be true. It was true of most adults. The car banked and swept down, and the whisper of air on the hull penetrated as a distant drumming.

"No official landing space. Have to put down where we can."

"There's a promising-looking field over there." Caradine pointed. He felt no alarm. There were always the ejector capsules; personalized parachute packs with an enclosed seat and wind-breaks. He wondered at Sharon. She hadn't seemed the girl to panic.

Rawson brought the car round again, cautiously heading into the wind. He lowered the undercart and flaps and lined the car up on the rapidly growing field.

That told Caradine that his estimate of another five years active work from the antigrav unit had been out by four years, three hundred and sixty-four days and twenty-two and a half hours.

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Then he checked himself. A remark like that would bring up a casual, "Whose year's that, then?"

And some fumbling answer that might brand him as a single-planet man. And an unknown planet, at that. Shanstar—he had to remember the fiddling littlest things. Shanstar's year was four hundred and ten of Earth's days. You had to remember so much . . . And yet, he'd been quietly boasting to himself that he was in the business of remembering details.

Correction. Had been in the business.

Trees flickered past below. Rawson's grip on the controls was relaxed and confident. He lifted the nose of the car. Caradine took a firm grip on the armrest. Sharon, sitting in the middle, put one hand on the rail under the fascia. Caradine reached his right hand out, slid it about her waist and drew her to him. She responded at once, put her left arm around his waist. They waited, then, consciously relaxing.

"Coming up . . ."

The field was not as smooth as it had appeared from the air. The wheels hit, one burst, and the car slewed. Rawson applied the brakes frantically. The car rolled. It went over three times, finished up on its side.

Sharon said, quite distinctly, "Oaf."

Then Caradine had the door open and was hanging one-handed, hauling her out. She dropped with a kick of multi-colored tights, and jumped onto the grass. Caradine followed and reached back for Rawson, pulled him up the seating and over the canted side. The three of them stood in a row, their hands on their hips, surveying the wreck.

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"Well," Sharon said with a tight look on her face. "What now, Greg?"

She was very put out.

"That damn tire," Rawson said. "I didn't bargain for that."

Caradine said peacefully, "The radio should be okay. We'll have to call a cab."

Rawson shinned up the side without speaking. He bent down over the fascia, out of Caradine's view. He was some time. Sharon had wrinkled up her forehead. Caradine didn't speak to her, since it was evident she was in deep thought.

Caradine, too, began to have thoughts about this accident. Sharon had been upset only when a crash seemed imminent. He didn't believe her panicky start from the seat. People just didn't behave like that in an age of safe and rapid robotic transport. But, when the robots failed, a certain amount of flap might be justified. But Sharon had reacted as he would have expected her to do only after the tire burst.

So he was not at all surprised when Rawson reappeared and reported that the radio was out. That sort of fitted the pattern. And just what that pattern was, Caradine, although he had no idea whatsoever, just didn't like the whole sight and smell of it. He put his hands in his pockets and smiled around on them.

"Well, children, it seems we walk."

Sharon swung on Rawson. They began wrangling violently. Only semi-surprised at such infantile behaviour, Caradine leaned up against the wreck, soaking up the sunshine, letting them get it out of their system, and wondering how far they had to go before they found civilization. Gamma-Horakah was very much of a show, a garden, planet.

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A high, muted whine drifted down to them. Sharon and Rawson stopped slanging each other and stared up. Caradine cocked a lazy eyebrow.

The car was handled superbly. It swooped wide and low, swinging across them at an angle so that the occupant could give them a good long look. Then it veered up, flopped over on its back, fell vertically, turning as it did so, and its extended wheels touched the grass in the same instant as the car reached an upright position. The canopy flipped open.

Allura Koanga stepped out in a flurry of white petticoat and scarlet skirt.

Caradine sat back to enjoy what might come.

He was a gravely disappointed man.

The two girls were as sweet as processed honey to each other.

And just as synthetic.

"My dear, I'm *so* glad I was passing."

"Darling, so *sweet* of you to rescue us."

"You must have *itched* when the car went wrong."

"You drive so well, darling."

"And you don't look the *teeniest* bit upset."

Caradine killed his smile. Sweet as honey, yes. But the barbs were there all right, jabbing with remorseless female viciousness.

Two of a kind, he supposed, would always hurt each other most.

That was the trouble with the galaxy, and the planetary groupings that were so much alike. Men always fought best—or worst—when he fought other Men.

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That was the black tragedy that a million years hadn't managed to obliterate from his heritage.

He roused himself. "Well, Allura. Are you going to give us a lift back to town or do we begin to walk?"

"Please get in, Mr. Carter. I shall be happy to assist you."

Smiling to himself, Caradine entered the car. It was new, bright red, and a Mach One-plus job. He sat in the back seats. He particularly didn't want to sit between Sharon Ogilvie and Allura Koanga.

He valued his eardrums.

All the way back Greg Rawson sat in a tight-lipped silence that he broke in monosyllables that were barely this side of rudeness. Something had evidently gone wrong for him. Caradine suspected that it was not the crack-up of a hired car. Machinery was so much mankind's servant these days that any wreck could be written off, almost, without a second thought.

It would be nice, Caradine decided, very nice, to know just what was bothering Greg Rawson.

Allura was vivacious, full of the joys of living, and exuding a faint air of triumph that equally baffled Caradine.

Sharon rallied to that mood of gaiety, and was as hectic and scatter-brained in her jollity as Allura. Caradine was too wise a hand to think the outward facade meant anything, and he was equally sure that these three people knew that he must suspect all was not as it seemed. He wondered just how far they were prepared to push their hand.

And was it all merely because he had a visa to visit Alpha tucked away down at the office in the care of Harriet Lafonde?

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One thing—they'd have to do better than they had so far to persuade him to start spying.

The red car swooped in over the city and Allura put it down in the park of the Outworld Arms. They all got out and the robot trundled the car off to the garage.

Caradine spoke first.

"I need a drink. Anyone interested?"

They all were. They went through into the lounge and Caradine dialed four Pomcrushes, adding his room number.

Greg Rawson reached down to the personal TV control inset in the arm of each of the lounging chairs. The TV came on and he selected a channel showing a fifteen-piece dance band just rounding off a number. The music was barbaric stuff from some outworld planet with jerky and nerve-pounding overtones. Caradine was glad when it had finished and the band leader let the robot music dispenser take over and begin to pump out canned stuff that dripped like syrup through the consciousness. The screen rippled and cleared and a human announcer began to read the news.

Mostly, it was about the Horakah space navy buildup. Young men who craved excitement and adventure should rush down to their nearest recruiting depot and sign up for a man's life, out there in the deeps between the stars, etc, blah, blah, blah.

It made Caradine a little sick.

With a beautiful world like Gamma-Horakah, men were still anxious to go off into space shooting and killing like maniacs. He'd had his gutful a long time ago. So he supposed he couldn't blame the youngsters now. But it was all such a criminal and lunatic waste.

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Local news followed. A bond issue. Results of racing and other sports. A couple of gang fights. A couple of murders. A couple of new buildings going up. Caradine checked an involuntary start as news of one murder came over.

A young lad, one of the gang members who wore flashy clothes and carried himself proudly as a member of Harakah, had been shot in an alley. His corpse had been found by his friends going to their afternoon swim on their day off. It was all pathetic, unnecessary, and a sample of human passions tied up to the extent that murder seemed the only way out.

Greg Rawson devoured the item.

No shots of the body were shown. The boy's mother appeared briefly. She was a widow. Lack of parental control, surmised Caradine, had led her son to this.

The lad's name had been Tommy Gorse. They were already calling it the Gorse Murder.

Caradine stood up, excusing himself, and went to his room. He needed to freshen up before dinner. The afternoon hadn't been wasted. He'd had a pleasant drive out and although he hadn't seen the Painted Caves, he'd witnessed the edifying spectacle of two beautiful women clawing each other like cats.

His intercom beeped and he answered.

"Mr. John Carter? There are two gentlemen to see you. On the way up." The robot switched off before he could question it.

His door chime gonged. He reached a hand up and touched his white shirt. The Beatty was snugged down in the shoulder holster. He activated the door catch, the same one that Allura had shorted out the previous night, and the two men walked in.

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"Mr. John Carter?" One was grizzled, tough, dour and full of familiar confidence that at once put Caradine's nerve on a tingling alert. The other was younger, brash, and learning the tricks of the trade from the old hand.

"Yes?" he said courteously. "Come in. Sit down. What can I do for you?"

"We're police officers, Mr. Carter. We'd like to ask you a few routine questions."

"Please go ahead."

"You were in the Nebula Restaurant yesterday?"

"Is that the place—"

"You had a fight with four youths. You agree?"

"I remember. They tried to beat me up for no reason." Caradine was getting the picture now. And it stank. He was a member of a stellar grouping of about fifty-two planets. These policemen represented a grouping of a thousand or more worlds. They'd treat him with contemptuous severity. One of their citizens had been murdered. Caradine reckoned he knew who Tommy Gorse was.

"This afternoon, in an alley in the city, Tommy Gorse, the leader of the group with whom you fought, was brutally murdered. We'd like to hear your movements this afternoon, Mr. Carter."

"That's simple enough. I went with friends to visit the Painted Caves."

"Anyone vouch for that?"

"Well, we didn't actually reach the Caves. The car broke down and we had to force land. Mr. Greg Rawson and Miss Sharon Ogilvie were with me. They can corroborate that."

"Are they from Shanstar, too?"

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There it was. The savage minority-group hate.

"No. They're from Ahansic."

"Ahansic." The younger of the two policemen said it. He made it a spitting curse.

There was Allura Koanga, too. But she was from Shanstar. They just wouldn't believe her. But perhaps with the four of them all giving the same story, a story that, as it was true, would hold up under questioning, he might be believed.

"After we had to put down," he said, still in that polite, matter-of-fact voice, "we were picked up and given a ride back into town."

"Yes?"

"A Miss Allura Koanga picked us up."

"Koanga? She's with Hsien Koanga. Staying here?"

"Yes."

"I see. Well, that shouldn't bother us overmuch."

Caradine didn't like the way the policeman had picked that up so fast. Maybe the Koangas were down in the police records as spies. Maybe he'd only made his case worse.

"Well, Mr. Carter. We'll check with these people. But I'd advise you to stay in the city. You will be under surveillance. We'll call on you again." He turned to go and the younger cop went to the door. "You see, Mr. Carter, young Tommy Gorse was shot with a one millimeter needle-beam. A one millimeter needle-beam that was almost certainly a Beatty. Just like the one you have under your arm."

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VII

WELL, THEY hadn't arrested him.

Not that that meant a great deal. There would be no trouble picking him up. And all the nuclear artillery in this city wouldn't save him once they opened up. His own little pop-gun had been left him as a contemptuous matter of indifference.

He was condemned already and as good as executed. Or brain-cleared or whatever type of corrective punishment they favored here. As he was an outworlder they'd probably take the easiest and cheapest way out.

The door chimes went. With a resigned grunt he opened the door and Greg Rawson and Sharon Ogilvie came in. They were not smiling.

"Didn't waste much time, Mr. Carter, did they?"

"No. They'll be seeing you next."

"I expect they will. I understand they work fast here."

Sharon moved across and put a hand on Caradine's arm. The hand shook. She stared at him full in the face and her eyes flicked sideways. Caradine caught on. They knew this room was tapped. They wanted to talk and they didn't want eavesdroppers.

He said evenly, "I was about to go down to dinner."

"Yes." Rawson said meaningfully. "A day tramping around museums does make you peckish."

On the way out Caradine digested that.

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It was just one more smell to add to the rest.

And he'd walked right into it like a newborn babe!

They all went out into the open-air patio for a few moments before going in to dinner. Caradine paused by an arch where crimson flowers not unlike a rose bloomed gorgeously.

"You don't have to spell it out," he said harshly. "What's your price?"

"Now, Mr. Carter!" said Sharon, lifting her eyebrows in mock surprise.

Rawson said, "We discussed the designs Horakah have on both Ahansic and Shanstar. You have a visa to go to Alpha—"

"I doubt that that will stay in force now."

Sharon said, "I believe we can trust your word, Carter. If you promise to help us, we will go along purely on the strength of that."

"And suppose Allura Koanga also testifies?"

Rawson laughed. "Let her. She can't get you out of this, Carter. Only Sharon and I can. And even then it'll be touch and go. We can swing a few heavier weapons than you suspect. If we corroborate your story, then you'll go free. And to Alpha. If we merely say that we were in museums this afternoon, and can prove it, you'll burn."

"And the wrecked car out there in that field?"

Sharon flashed Rawson a nasty look. He said equably, "Hired in the name of Brown, by a robot agency. And it will be disposed of by this time, anyway. Of course, that cost plenty of Galaxos."

"So it seems you have me."

"Yes. You'll go along with us, Carter, or you'll burn."

"I've given my word already. You mentioned that just now.

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I've promised that I won't spy for anyone on Alpha. So where do we go from here?"

Rawson smiled his ugly smile again.

"You misunderstand me, Carter. We're not asking you to spy on Alpha for us. Oh, no."

"What then?"

"You will arrange for us to go with you to Alpha, Carter. Simply that."

After lunch Caradine had looked forward to an interesting afternoon excursion. Then he was going to pick up his visa and take the next ship out to Alpha.

After dinner he felt that the whole galaxy had fallen in on him.

He had to keep remembering that he had no rights on this world. If Rawson and Sharon denied his story, then he would be condemned out of hand. Oh, sure, there'd be a trial. But it would be robotic, open and shut. There would be no lie-detector tests. Why bother? He'd claim an alibi, and that alibi had been proved to be a clumsy lie.

He'd fry all right.

Unless by some miracle the Gamma police believed Allura's story.

He went to find her. How long he had before Rawson wanted his answer he wasn't sure. The police were bound to pick up the couple from Ahansic as soon as they could, and that perhaps explained why they hadn't gone in to dinner with Caradine. He had made a good meal. Danger never had bothered his appetite; which was useful. In his previous career had it done so he'd have starved.

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His previous career! Hell, that was a laugh. Here he'd thought himself finished with all this sort of nonsense and able to settle down to being an urbane businessman, and he was caught up in trouble to his neck again. Only this time he was on the receiving end. The sensation was most unpleasant.

Allura Koanga wasn't in the hotel and he didn't remember seeing her in the dining room. Hsien, her uncle, wasn't about, either. Caradine strolled out onto the terrace, looking in on the patio on his way. Empty. The patio reminded him vividly of Harriet Lafonde and of the visa that might or might not be awaiting him there.

He rather badly wanted to talk to her before Rawson returned for his answer. Allura might just be able to tip the scales. All these people were so much more than they seemed. Posing as businessmen with nieces and casual acquaintances tagging along, they might fool all but the important five percent of officialdom. At first, they'd certainly fooled him.

It seemed pretty clear that Rawson had fixed the murder. Then with Caradine out of the way on an alibi the key to which was firmly held in Rawson's hands, he had him just where he wanted him. With his nose in the dirt. Caradine forced his anger down. Temper wouldn't be the slightest use now.

Maybe Rawson could swing the alibi if he wanted. That he was an Outworlder from Ahansic would normally tell against him and his word; but maybe, just maybe, there were other factors at work. Caradine paced up and down the terrace, smoking a red stogie and trying to think a way through the mess.

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If Rawson had stagemanaged the murder, then he had others working for him on Gamma-Horakah. Caradine recalled the man with the dark secretive face and the cleft chin. He'd automatically assumed the man to be a secret policeman working for Gamma-Horakah. Now he wasn't so sure. It was possible for Rawson to have bribed a Horakah official. That way he'd know about the Beatty one millimeter. The pieces of the puzzle kept jumping about in Caradine's brain. But the pieces by themselves had only limited importance; the main picture held the threat.

The sky began to darken and a news bulletin broadcast a warning of the weather bureau's next ten-minute shower for cleansing purposes.

Control of the weather was kid's stuff compared with trying to control the emotions in men and women.

For a few extra planets, a little more prestige, men would fight and kill and destroy. It didn't really make sense. It added up to a black question mark against the name of *Homo sapiens* in the galaxy. Was Man fitted to live in an interstellar civilization? There were plenty of other races of non-humans who lived on their own planets, totally unfit for comfortable human habitation, who managed to live amicably. Fighting, it seemed, having been bred into humanity, took a darn sight longer to be bred out.

Colored lights were going on all along the terrace and were twinkling merrily over the city. The rain had begun to fall, straight glinting lances in the lamplight. Allura and her uncle returned. They stepped from a black car which drove off fast.

Allura's face was drawn and strained as she came face to face with Caradine.

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"So giving you a lift brings all this," she said bitterly.

"Police?"

Hsien Koanga said, "Of course. They took Allura in for questioning. I am surprised to see you still at large, Mr. Carter."

"They've seen me. I'm under surveillance. They know where to pick me up."

He waited for Allura to tell him. The police had got to her first. Well, that was to be expected.

"They say," she said, visibly bringing herself under control, "that you shot a boy in an alley this afternoon."

He inclined his head gravely.

"Well, we know you didn't. But they don't believe me." She was holding the anger, the humiliating, almost hysterical anger, in very well. "That, of course, is because we wouldn't lie to save one of our own people."

"And there," Hsien Koanga said with great bitterness, "lies the irony."

"Irony?"

"Why, yes, Mr. Carter. Or whatever your name is. I received intelligence from Shanstar today. You have bought a ranch on Five. You are well-known there, well-liked, too, I'm told."

Caradine kept that grave, polite smile on his face. But he was feeling that any more blows under the belt would put him down forever.

"The irony is, Mr. What's-your-name, that you're not one of us. You don't belong to Shanstar at all."

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VIII

STANDING there with the rain falling in pencil-thin streaks of color against the lights, Caradine took his chance.

"So I'm not one of you. So I wasn't born on Shanstar. But I come from Shanstar. I am a member of your planetary group. I *am* one of you!"

Slowly, Hsien Koanga shook his head. He stood back and stared up at Caradine and all the perkiness had gone from him.

"We asked you to do a job for Shanstar. Had you been one of us you would have complied. I should have wondered, then."

"So what are you going to do?"

"Do?" Allura swung a slender hand pettishly in the lamp-light. "What is there to do? I'll say my piece, I won't be believed, and if you are condemned then I'll suffer for perjury. A nice position you've worked me into, Mr. What's-your-name!"

"I'm sorry, Allura. But I didn't work you into it. I was rigged into this mess, too, remember. I was framed like **this** because I'm from Shanstar."

"No." Koanga spoke sharply. "That won't wash. Because you have a visa to visit Alpha. That's why."

Caradine couldn't argue. "Rawson framed me. He's putting

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pressure on me to get him and the girl onto Alpha on the strength of my visa. Just how he expects me to do that, I don't know. But if he can get me off the hook of this false charge, then I figure I'll go along with him. I value my skin."

"He could be taken care of."

"That would be rather stupid. He and Sharon are the only two people who can help. I'd appreciate it if you left them alone." Caradine mustered a smile. "Anyway, Allura, if I agree to their proposal and they say they were out in the car today, that let's you out. They can't charge you with perjury."

"That's true," said Allura. She didn't sound hopeful.

Koanga rocked back on his heels and cocked his head up, as though summing up Caradine for the first time. He moistened his lips. Then he said distinctly, "Tell me. Where are you from?"

Caradine had already made up his mind that when this inevitable question came he would tell the truth. But now it was here, he couldn't face the problem; it took more courage than he had at his disposal at that disillusioned moment. "What is truth?" he said. "I don't know. Truth is, I suppose, what a man wants to hear. I am from Shanstar. That is my home. What I was before, where I was born, they don't matter any more."

"You are wrong. They do matter."

"But only to intolerant people. Men and women who cannot accept the new, who shut their minds to anything outside their normal comfortable horizons. Your ancestry, Hsien Koanga, is told to me in your name. But you don't know that. You don't understand race relations at all. You only know a

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man is a man. You cannot conceive of there being men of different color, can you?"

He hadn't meant to say that. It had leaped out in the angry bitterness seething in him.

"Different-colored men?" Koanga stepped back. "Are you crazy, Carter?"

"No. Only that I have had access to older records than any of you know of. All men are the same beautiful golden tan now. All over the human sections of the galaxy men are all alike. Rapid transport has seen to that, despite the artificial barriers we erect. It was not always so."

Allura said softly, "You remember, Uncle, the stories you used to tell me when I was a baby? About lost and forgotten civilizations? About the strange discoveries of new planets where men had once tried to make a civilization and failed. And of how some had succeeded and when they were found again, living on worlds they thought of center of the universe, some peoples were . . ." she hesitated.

Koanga finished for her. "I remember the fairy stories. Some of the people were white and some yellow and some brown. The pigments in their skins had gone wrong. Something had happened to them. Something strange and eerie under alien suns."

Caradine shook his head. "No, Koanga. Nothing had happened to them. That was their tragedy. Nothing had happened to them. It is we who changed. This wonderful golden tan we all take for granted is an amalgam of all those old colored men and women."

"Impossible!" Koanga sat down abruptly.

Allura was staring at Caradine now with burning intensity.

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"My uncle also told me stories of old worlds and forgotten planets. Fairy-stories of make-believe. One planet was mentioned many times. One world where the legends say we all came from. A single tiny planet orbiting an insignificant sun, somewhere behind the Blight."

"Earth," said Caradine.

The way he said it made it a benediction.

Koanga looked up from where he was sitting. "All this talk—it is nonsense. What do old fairy stories matter now? We have to face the realities of the present, tempting though it is to slip away into the fantasies of childhood." He scowled at Caradine. "Well, Carter, since you won't tell us where you are from—and I must admit I expected nothing else—we must part company. Shanstar is in too great peril from Horakah to waste time on a shyster like you."

"Part company? How do you mean?"

"You're in serious trouble, with Rawson's help or without it. We are suspected here, already. Further contact with you would be inadvisable. To keep our records clean I shall inform the Horakah police that you are not from Shanstar. That way—"

"But you wouldn't do that!" Caradine was horrified. "Why, I'd be—I wouldn't stand a dog's chance."

"You mean the real world of your birth is some ramshackle little hole, broken-down and decadent, and you go out into the galaxy and try to gain prestige by claiming you are from Shanstar. Rather despicable, don't you think?"

"It isn't like that at all. A man is proud of his home—"

"Not if it is a stinkhole and he has seen what better worlds are like."

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"Mine isn't a stinkhole!" Caradine shouted, exasperated. If this little wizened Koanga denied him, he'd really be in trouble. When it had happened before he'd skipped planet with no reputation but with skin and wallet intact. This time he was under close surveillance from the local planetary police and just wouldn't get away. He began to feel closed-in, suffocated, imprisoned.

For the first time the hideous reality of his predicament sank in. Hell! Whichever way he turned he was sunk.

"Well," he said boldly, "what do you intend to do about it?"

"Allura and I want no part of it. You're too dangerous, Carter. You're carrying death about with you."

"Look, you don't have to inform on me. Just let it lie. If Rawson gets me off the hook, I'll simply go off and you can forget all about me."

"That won't be easy," Allura said, not looking at him.

Koanga said slowly, "As a citizen of the galaxy it is my duty to reveal deceptions of this kind. If any man is allowed to lie about his home planet and claim just where he wishes, the organization we have would break down. It is my duty to turn you in, Carter."

Caradine mentally sat back and let out a sigh of relief.

Koanga was offering a bargain. And that bargain seemed pretty obvious.

He said heavily, "I've given my word that I will not spy on Alpha. If I fall in with Rawson's wishes, and smuggle him and Sharon to Alpha, I shall not have broken my word. I also told Harriet Lafonde that I would consider my word invalidated if I found that my home world was being threatened by Horakah—"

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"Your home world!" The sneer was quite cutting.

"By that I meant Shanstar," Caradine said evenly. "If you can show me that Horakah is planning aggression against Shanstar, then I can operate for you as you wish, you need not reveal my secret, and we're all straight."

Koanga was not in the least perturbed that his offer had been presented before he himself had made it. It had been so obviously in his mind that his thoughts merely ran on in that groove.

"Shanstar needs a man on Alpha-Horakah," he said. The rain was ceasing now, the ten-minute period closing out. The world smelled fresh and wonderful, full of growing things. "Horakah means to take over this entire area of the galaxy. Ragnar and the good ol' PLW will not move yet. They are so big, so powerful, that until a grouping reaches ten thousand planets they just don't notice it. Horakah can swallow up Shanstar, Ahansic, Belmont, Delavue, a hundred smaller groups.

"On Alpha is their Central Agency. They have an entire planet working on one project and one alone: the manufacture of space fleets to smash with ease any opposition they may encounter. This is so. We have to know the composition of those fleets; the way in which they have organized scout ships, spotters, screens, heavies and battlewagons. If we knew that, we could so position our own smaller fleets that we might be able to—we would just have to—slip in and do enough damage to deter them."

"How do you deter a thousand starships with weapons enough to annihilate a planet, when you don't have a tenth of that strength, Koanga?"

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"By knowing how the enemy is organized. Everything depends on that. You will not be the first to land on Alpha for us. The others may still be there. They may be finished. But we must have that information before Horakah moves."

Fighting, war and sudden death amongst the sprawling stars of the galaxy. The old familiar pattern being repeated. Caradine had seen enough—too much—of interstellar politics to relish reentering the arena, especially at this low level. But he was held, caught, transfixed. He was strung up, raw and ready for the knife, on the carefully contrived hooks of Rawson and Sharon Ogilvie.

"Rawson arranged for that stupid kid Gorse to be killed. He and his girlfriend planned to have me out of the way, with only themselves as witnesses. They could then deny I was with them. No wonder Sharon was livid when you rescued us, Allura. But—" he gestured wearily "—it made no difference in the end to their plans. It could be even that the fight in the restaurant was a put-up-job. What would a girl be doing eating a big meal like that at midmorning break? Maybe they had this thing figured the moment I landed."

"They have some in with the local officials." Koanga nodded slowly. "They must have known about this famous weapon of yours, Carter. And they must be able to swing some weight in having their word taken against their Ahansic outworld origin."

Allura said, "But they have no power with Harriet Lafonde. Horakah is subdivided into so many self-important departments that a big fish in one is kicked around in another."

"I am familiar with that organizational setup, if organization it can be called," said Caradine. "Carry on calling me

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John Carter. It will serve. And I rather like the name. Now, what do we do?"

Both Allura and her uncle spoke at once. They stopped. Caradine said, "And, of course, don't forget that I'll be taking along Greg Rawson and Sharon Ogilvie."

Hsien Koanga said, "That must be your affair and theirs. What happens to them once they land on Alpha is no concern of ours. You, Carter, are working for the official but never-recognized espionage agency of Shanstar now. I will brief you at a more suitable time—after you know for certain that you are going to Alpha-Horakah. But don't let those two from Ahansic trip you up again." He paused and his wrinkles creased around his eyes. "It might be politic to allow them to be caught early on. That I leave with you and your honor."

"Fat lot of honor I've left now," Caradine said sourly.

"Oh, I don't know." Allura smiled at him. "I'd say you'd done a good job of retaining your manly virtue intact."

"If only—" Caradine burst out. "If only Shanstar and Ahansic and all the others could get together! Then, we'd be able to talk sense to Horakah."

"That'll be the day," grunted Koanga, rising from his chair. "Now find Rawson and his woman before the police do."

Rawson and Sharon found Caradine walking about in front of the garages. He had an idea they'd come that way. He kept it brief. Yes, he'd go along with their plans. They parted and the smile of triumph on the pair from Ahansic was so alike as to make Caradine begin to wonder.

Harriet Lafonde smiled too, as she looked up with the greeting lighting her face. She rose gracefully from the chair

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under the wide-spreading trees with the curiously flat pale-green leaves. The chair moved back silently on the stone patio flags.

"Well, Mr. Carter. So you have come to collect your visa."

He smiled unaffectedly at her. No doubt about it; she was charming. Her perfectly styled gray hair caught a vagrant beam of green-tinted sunshine and for a moment gleamed with a pure golden light. A trick, an optical illusion, but it transformed her into an exciting woman ten years younger.

"If it is still available. You know that I was for a time suspected of murder?"

"Yes, I know. So tiresome. But mistakes made by other departments do not affect me yet, I trust. As far as my travel department is involved, Mr. Carter, your visa is here, ready for you." She held out her hand.

The plastic-covered case was warm from her grasp, warm from the warmth of the blood running in her veins. Caradine took it, feeling that warmth. He smiled.

"Thank you . . . Harriet." He swallowed. "I'll probably be leaving tomorrow. May I . . . that is, would you care to do me the honor of dining with me tonight?"

She tilted back her head and looked at him through long eyelashes. Then she laughed, a mellow golden gong-note amid the tinkling sounds of falling water and bird song and insect hum. Her eyes were a soul-drowning gray.

"I would be delighted, John."

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IX

EMOTIONLESS robots handled the luggage with superhuman skill and expertise. Handbags, grips, suitcases, duffelbags, packing cases, crates, shining alloy cylinders—all were smoothly operated by the robotic team of loaders. The starship stood straddle-finned on the pad, the early sun sending a gleam to strike and bounce in reflected glory from her needle nose. The passengers rode upwards smoothly in elevators that dropped them off at the decks specified on their tickets.

Men and women from Ragnar and the good ol' PLW were last to leave the elevator, entering the ship through the first-class airlocks immediately in rear of the command sections.

Because this was a ship belonging to Horakah, nationals of that stellar grouping also traveled first-class.

Dave Caradine entered the starship through a narrow port situated just where the fins sprang from the hull.

He went straight to his cabin, a two-berth place with cramped accommodation for the week's run. Earth week, that was. Five days, Horakah standard. Have to remember that. Especially since that night of rain when Koanga had told him that he knew Shanstar was not the planet of his birth.

To hell with that now. And don't—particularly don't—worry about the silvery alloy crate that had made planetfall on Gamma-Horakah containing samples of Shanstar wares and was leaving that planet with a man and woman of Ahansic cocooned snugly within its innocent metal shell. He wond-

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ered how they'd stand out the journey. They were provisioned, had a good air supply, sanitary arrangements—a sort of miniature spaceship in which to ride within the larger compass of the starship.

They'd done it all in that hectic week since he had agreed and that last night when he'd spent an evening and night with Harriet Lafonde such as he had imagined denied to him forever.

She was no dignified, old and majestic lady. No, sir! Not when the Pomcrush had a sweetener added, and the lights had shone in her eyes and her gray hair had been rearranged to reveal the genuine golden strands hidden beneath. She'd said, laughing, that the gray camouflage made her feel more up to the job of travel official for an entire planet.

And, for the third particular thing in the thoughts thronging his brain, when she'd discarded that demurely severe green dress and sallied forth in a silver sheath that revealed maturity that both Sharon and Allura would not come by until they had experienced a great deal more of the galaxy.

Yes. A great girl Harriet Lafonde.

A pity that her planetary grouping and his might very soon be at war.

Of course, a girl could spray her hair any color she wished for a night's enjoyment, and foundation garments could turn a plug-ugly marine sergeant into a TV starlet at the tightening of a magneclamp. But Harriet had used those tricks to age and mature herself instead of the other way around. The girl with whom he'd lived it up along the great white way around the entertainment belt of Gamma had been the real

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Harriet. That, in due time, he'd found out. It had been real nice.

Yes, quite a girl.

The warning signal sounded and the starship was cleared of visitors. Caradine stepped out of his cabin and found his way to the observation lounge where he ordered a Pomcrush. Around him his fellow passengers for the journey, drifting into this automatic central point on the time of departure, were talking and laughing, all in subdued voices, waiting for the moment when the starship would lift jets and hoist for interstellar space. The robot bartender sounded brash, dispensing drinks, smokes and sedative pills.

The faintest of thrillings through the ship's fabric coincided with the last warning. Four minutes later the ship leaped from Gamma-Horakah and was outward bound.

Well, that was it. There was no going back now.

The sight of the planet, just before they made transition and went into interstellar drive, affected Caradine oddly.

If some of the people surrounding him had their way, their machinations came to fruition, then the next time he saw that planet might be its last—when it was disintegrating in a sleeting storm of ruptured atoms. He shuddered at the thought. Planetary destruction, although nowadays merely a part of the appurtenances of war, was still a horrible concept, no matter how it was rationalized out. It existed. That alone was enough to account for deviations from the norm, like those fantastically dressed kid gangs back there.

Tommy Gorse. Well, he wasn't sorry he'd knocked him down. But he felt pity for the stupid kid for getting mixed up in an affair that had resulted in his murder. They'd caught

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the murderer all right. Caradine had realized, then, the depths of ambition and devilry in Rawson.

On the TV the murderer, walking bowed to his trial, had only once lifted his face to the maliciously watching cameras.

A whimsical face, with a dark, secretive look and a strongly cleft chin . . .

Rawson had used his instrument and obtained what he wanted. The instrument, once used, could be tossed aside.

Well, Caradine had had to discard unwanted tools in the past. He thanked God that he'd never stooped to letting them hang or burn or be brain-probed on a charge that really should have been laid at his door. He finished his drink and went to his cabin.

His two-berth cabin had been allotted him as a matter of routine and he had considered himself fortunate that he had no roommate. He opened the door—robots were a luxury these low-down quarters did not extend to—and a hearty voice said:

“Welcome to our little palace, friend. Step right in.”

Caradine did so.

“Who the hell are you?” he said. Then he smiled. “Sorry. Reflex action. Take no notice. They told me I was having this cabin to myself.”

“Oh really? Sorry. I'll check, see if there's another. I only managed to get a booking at the last moment.”

Caradine looked at him. Medium height, broad, a toughly pugnacious face with two strong grooves running down from his nose to the corners of his mouth. Firm lips and uneven teeth. A quiet dark-green shirt and slacks. The suspicion of a

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bulge under the armpit, just by that easily unfastened magneclamp.

Just like his own magneclamp on his white shirt, in fact.

"I'm Carson Napier. From the Belmont group."

Caradine extended his hand. "John Carter. Shanstar."

Carson Napier's hand faltered, then he recovered, and when he shook hands Caradine felt the violent tremble in the man's hand. He had lost all the color from his face and great drops of sweat started out on his brow like rain dripping off the eaves of an old, slanted-roof house.

"John Carter? You did say John Carter?"

"Yes. Is anything the matter. Are you all right?" Caradine, still holding Napier's hand, turned him to sit on the edge of the bunk.

"I'm all right. It was just something unexpected, that's all." He looked up and Caradine released the trembling hand. "I suppose the name Carson Napier means nothing to you?"

Caradine laughed. "As a matter of fact, it does. But it's something that you can know nothing of. Just an amusing, far-away memory, shall we say."

Napier was recovering. He still sat hunched up, looking at Caradine. And there was something in that look, some familiar image that brought Caradine up, wondering, surmising, remembering. Once men had looked at him like that, in the long ago . . .

"You say I can know nothing of it—" Then Napier sat up straight, forced himself to laugh, and stood up. "And you're right, of course. I need a drink. Would you care to join me?"

"Thank you, but not right now. I've just come from the lounge. Before dinner?"

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"Delighted. Now, if you'll excuse me—" and Napier went out fast. The door slammed shut.

Caradine sat down and began to think hard. It wasn't impossible; just— Then he brushed the notion away as absurd. Just because two names had come from the same stable didn't mean a thing. Names were universal property, now that all men were equal. Only, of course, men from a larger stellar grouping were more equal than men from a smaller. Oh, well.

That was present-day life in this our galaxy.

Even so, if the fantastically impossible had become fact, then Carson Napier had acted much as Caradine might expect him to act. After all, John Carter was one of his favorite cover names. Hmm. Carson Napier would bear watching.

"The toughest job of being an interstellar businessman is finding out just what a particular stellar grouping does not have or produce. Then you shop around your own group, or an allied friendly cluster, and ship in the goods. But in almost any planetary group you can find almost any type of goods. You have to develop specialties."

Caradine wasn't talking. He was listening to the large, jovial, beefy-faced man with the alcohol breath and the wilting flower in his buttonhole. And he'd made a success of it. He knew what he was talking about. The others in the lounge, sitting about sipping drinks, smoking, sometimes lending half an ear to the music in the background, knew that he knew what he was talking about.

"But don't you find it a rat race, Mr. Lobengu?" asked

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Carson Napier. He and Caradine were sitting at the same table. There was a curious sort of prickly truce between them.

"If you let your nerves get you down, Napier, you're finished. You new to the fame?"

Napier laughed self-consciously. "More or less. I have a lot to learn."

"Well, I'm your man." Lobengu took the fat cigar from his mouth and used it to threaten Napier. "It took me just three weeks to secure a visa to Alpha. I'm told that's a pretty good record. But I'd had it figured from the other Horakah planets just what Horakah was missing. I have samples of it safely stowed away in the holds." He smiled quite charmingly. "Of course, you don't expect me to tell you what that something is? No, of course not. But that's the way to operate, young Napier. Find yourself a toe hold, and then go in punching."

A woman giggled and her husband nudged her. They were clerks, going home after a holiday on Gamma, too poor to afford the first-class travel to which they were entitled. But they'd had a good holiday. Caradine liked them both.

They had their kid with them, a girl about six or seven, with a bright crop of golden curls, and wearing a simple, pretty little white dress that fell in straight, charming lines. Caradine had won a shiplong friendship with a smile and a bar of local confectionary. Just how the conversation began, Caradine couldn't afterwards remember; he thought it must have been Jinny. But straight from the self-confident Lobengu they were talking about fairy stories and Jinny was perched on Carson Napier's knee, and a thin woman with overbright

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eyes and a bead necklace was telling the child about Father Christmas.

"Mummy's told me about him," Jinny said firmly. "I want to hear that other story about the man with the white face."

Jinny's mother and father laughed self-consciously, glancing at each other. Lobengu laughed heartily. Napier said, "Which story was that, Jinny?"

"You know. About the man who blew up the Earth."

Everyone chuckled, thinking back to the bedtime stories of their own childhood. Everyone, that is, except Caradine. Oh, sure, he chuckled. That was camouflage. But he wasn't thinking back over the billions of miles to a never-never land as were the others. As the others—except, perhaps, Napier?

"But how do you know he blew the Earth up?" asked Napier.

"Daddy said so. Everyone was very wicked. There was a war. That's nasty." She made a face and everyone smiled sympathetically. "All the worlds were blown up all over the place."

"Well," Lobengu said heavily. "That's true enough."

"Have you been there, Mr. Lobengu?" asked Caradine politely.

Lobengu faced him. "As a matter of fact, Mr. Carter, I have. I did a field trip out to the edge of the Blight only last year. A planet out there with the most amazing, well, trade secrets and all, y'know. But I looked through the scopes and I saw the area—black, sunless, dead." He wiped a hand across his forehead. "After the normal stars of home, it was upsetting. Most upsetting."

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"D'you think," Napier said carefully, "that anyone's ever ventured into the Blight?"

Lobengu snorted. Jinny's father, Harold Jiloa, said, "But why would anyone want to do that? There's nothing there, is there? It was all destroyed."

"It must have been terrible," said Rita Jiloa in a whisper.

Jinny pouted. "You said all the worlds were blown up. And you said you saw where they weren't," she looked at Lobengu. "So that part of it's true. But why isn't the part about Earth and the man with the white face true? Why is that a fairy story?"

Everyone looked about in surprise. "Well, Jinny," said her father slowly. "Just because there is the Blight doesn't mean that all the stories about it are true. There never was any planet called Earth. It's just a, well, a fable, a legend. A fairy story to make you laugh."

Caradine said, "How does one laugh over blowing up a million suns and their planets?"

"I think it's time for bed, young lady," said Rita Jiloa firmly. She stood up. Jinny put both arms around Napier's neck.

"Don't wanna go to bed. I want to hear about Earth."

"Well, five minutes, then." Her mother glanced at Harold Jiloa, sighed, and sat down. Jinny snuggled closer to Napier.

"Well, as I remember it," Napier said, "there were a lot of bad men in those days. And they were all different colors. They had this terrible and wicked war. And they were so blind to all the things that matter that they went about blowing up each other's worlds." He paused. A quietness had fallen in the lounge.

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"Like we're going to do to Ahansic if they don't behave?" chirped Jinny innocently.

"Lord, what these kids pick up off the TV," said her father, embarrassed.

"Well, I'm from Erinmore," said Lobengu puffily. "And we have better than seven hundred suns."

Oddly, the most burning topic in introductions hadn't come up before this. Napier said, "Belmont." Caradine said, "Shanstar." The thin woman with the eyes and beads said, "Delavue."

Napier went on with the old story of how the war had raged throughout the explored galaxy, and then had burnt itself out and men had broken through to this section, near the center, leaving behind the legacy of hate and broken suns, and leaving behind, too, their own home world called the Earth, which was still there, spinning around its little sun. Earth's sons and daughters had gone into fresh pastures, and the best had survived. But only the best, only those with a fresh golden tan. All the others, the wicked, depraved, the white and black and yellow and brown and red, had died out. And in the end, a man with a white face had blown up the Earth.

"Why?" asked Jinny.

"No one knows, my dear. But, as there never was an Earth, it doesn't really matter."

"Daddy said he did it out of a broken heart. And he had a funny name to go with his funny white face, too." She shut her eyes, trying to remember.

Napier said quickly, "No one wanted to bother about what was behind the Blight, Jinny. All that was cleaned away,

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and we all started off afresh. And no one ever goes into the Blight and nothing ever comes out of it."

Lobengu stirred. "Now there's a funny thing. When I was on the Blight perimeter last year there was a story current that a ship had come out of the Blight."

"No!" You're kidding!"

"Well," Lobengu said. "It takes some believing, I know. But the story was going the rounds. A ship had come in out of the Blight and disappeared in our portion of the galaxy."

"Last year?" Caradine said. "Whose year, Mr. Lobengu?"

"Why, Erinmore's of course. Let me see, about five hundred days of Horakah's, I'd say." Caradine did the sum.

Jinny was bouncing about, not interested in this. "That man who blew up the Earth a million years ago," she said. "That man with the funny white face. What was his name?"

Napier held the little girl close to him, so that Caradine couldn't see his face. But he heard what he said.

"His name, Jinny, was Caradine."

X

DAVE CARRADINE sat on the edge of his bunk. The Beatty one millimeter needle-beam, duration one-hundredth of a second, model of Fifty-eight, made on Ragnar, lay on an oiled

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piece of plastic cloth, in pieces. He methodically cleaned every part, with the sensitive-fingered touch that might have been better suited in playing some musical instrument than in making very sure that a weapon of destruction would not fail in time of need. He whistled soundlessly through his teeth as he worked.

He had excused himself from the little group in the lounge, retiring under cover of the almost-tearful operation of packing Jinny Jiloa off to bed. Now he was trying to sort out a few facts, to put alongside the mountain of speculation.

How far back into the mists of time the name Caradine went, he had no idea. He wasn't even sure that the Caradine who had spread the report that the Earth had been blown up was in reality an ancestor. It was a nice thought, no more.

One thing, though, would have pleased that long-dead holder of his name. The Earth, instead of being merely reported through the new empires of mankind in the galaxy as being destroyed, had achieved the status of a legend, a fable, a fairy story for children. No one believed that Earth had even existed.

Which, at the time, would have made that old Caradine chuckle with pleasure. His ploy had worked better than he could have imagined.

The trouble was that now, in the present time, the ghosts of that dead Earth were rising to haunt the modern Caradine. He finished putting the Beatty together, clicked the safety on and slid it under the white shirt. He did not fasten that convenient magneclamp.

When Carson Napier came in, Caradine said, "Were you

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the only one, Napier? Or did they send a David Innes and a Greystoke, too?"

Napier shut the door carefully. His broad, powerful figure moved in the little cabin like some caged animal. He sat down.

"Nope, Caradine. They sent me. You'll notice I call you merely that. Without the frills."

"So you found me. Now what?"

Napier leaned back. The man who had paled and sweated when he had been told that his search was over had gone; in his place was a cool, confident, calculating operative.

"I like you, Cara—"

"You've been listening to too many fairy stories, Napier. Caradine was the name of the man who blew up the Earth in the old legends of a million years ago. I'm plain Mr. John Carter. Don't forget that."

Napier understood. Tapping was probably well in his line, too.

"As I was saying. I like you, Carter. Sorry about the name. That little girl—mischievous, lovable little monster. She'll twist some man around her fingers one day."

"I dare say. I'm tired. You can curse your luck you weren't born thirty years later. Me, I'm for bed."

The hesitation was minuscule. Then Napier grunted and bent down, began to pull off his shoes.

"You're right. We can talk tomorrow. We're going to have our work cut out to amuse that kiddie for a week."

They both prepared for bed. Turning and plumping to make himself comfortable, Caradine snapped the photocell and turned off the cabin lights. Well, they could probably

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find someplace to talk, somewhere on this confounded Horakah ship that was tapped to the gills.

Unless Napier had been sent to kill him.

That made sense; too much sense.

A lot depended on the type of man Napier was. If he was the fanatical type, then he might kill Caradine here and now and to hell with the consequences. A brawl between passengers of different stellar groupings aboard a Horakah ship would arouse little interest in the breasts of the Horakah officials; they might boredly take the matter into their own hands and try and condemn the murderer in their own courts or they might send him back to his home group for their justice. Either way, justice being what it was, Napier wouldn't get away with it.

So he might wait until a better opportunity afforded itself on Alpha-Horakah.

Or, he might arrange it to look like murder by someone else, or an accident.

Caradine closed his eyes and went to sleep.

Napier was under orders. Somehow, Caradine thought those orders would include talking to the putative victim before the execution.

The situation did not improve. Two men, sharing a cramped cabin aboard a starship, one man believing that the other might kill him. The unknown obviously nervy and jumpy; probably he, too, had visions of being killed first. And the final frustrating tightening of the screw—they were unable to talk freely. They felt strongly, yet could not prove, that they were under surveillance. Every room, every cubbyhole was tapped. What they said in their cabin, in the lounge,

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along the corridors, was piped up to the control sections aloft, there to be mechanically and electronically taped down, ready for the intent perusal of the Horakah security officer. No, they couldn't talk. And that made them both bad-tempered.

Napier tried to short cut the tap in the toilet, bungled it somehow, and had to make a run for it. He burst into the cabin, flung himself on the bunk, and pretended to be reading a tape that had steadily been projecting onto the ceiling screen.

Everyone in this passenger flat was questioned. Napier got away with it. But the alert had been given, and now Caradine grimly knew that the security people would have proof that a spy or someone with a secret was aboard.

He made a fierce face at Napier, and then both men burst out laughing. The bond between them, this far from home, was strong.

But Caradine had seen a laughing man kill another.

Whatever Caradine had expected Alpha-Horakah to be like, when he at last made planetfall on the forbidden world he found that he had had no preconceptions. The name Alpha-Horakah had swollen grossly into a symbol. He'd just been thinking of the name, as a man thinks of an operation, and the name serves to cloak the actuality, the actuality of physical things.

First off, on landing, he might have been back on Gamma or on any other of the alphabetically-named Horakah planets. The spaceport was bright and fresh, with spring flowers everywhere and new paint glistening. The customs officials

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were charming and obliging. Caradine, his gun and his samples, were routed through with a minimum of fuss. He was recommended a hotel that would be used by all the outworld passengers from the starship.

He drove to the Blue Dragon in some expectancy.

The whole landing procedure had been too smooth, too pat, too entirely handsome and un-Horakah, to please him.

He could sense the spring-loaded trap behind all this delightful smelling cheese bait.

Once in his room, mellow and comfortable, he unpacked and then, ducking Carson Napier in the lounge, went to find his samples. They had been stored in the hotel's big box room and he looked with some awe upon the brilliant Horakah custom stamps branding them as cleared. Well, Rawson and Sharon had been right. He wondered, not without a grim sense of foreboding, if they had survived the journey.

How unpleasant to open the alloy cylinder and discover two corpses—their disposal would present problems.

His key snapped the lock and his fingers lifted the seals. Rawson and Sharon stared up at him.

"You fool!" Rawson said, cross and terrified. "I told you not to come near us until we were there! Shut the lid down, fast!"

"Simmer down, friend. We're there."

They took some time to convince themselves that their ordeal was over. When he checked the layout of the cylinder, Caradine found some understanding of that. As they'd told him, the canister had been fitted up like a miniature space ship. They could have lasted comfortably another week.

Caradine reached in and helped himself to a biscuit from

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an open locker. Munching thoughtfully, he stared at his two smuggled accomplices. Well, hell, that's what they were.

"Where are you two going now? No papers, no nothing."

Rawson flexed his muscles. "Bit cramped. Apart from that, I'm fine. You okay, Sharon?"

She stretched one elegantly clad leg. The tight scarlet pants were like a second skin.

"Fine, when I've had a permanent—"

"But you won't last an hour outside," protested Caradine.

"We didn't come here without thought, friend. I've a gun and I've plenty of Galaxos. That is a pretty potent combination. And I have some knowledge—limited, I admit—of conditions on Alpha-Horakah. And those conditions, friend Carter, are totally unlike anything you may imagine."

Caradine said experimentally, "It all looks pretty much like Gamma so far."

Rawson laughed. "Sure. That's the setup for the suckers. They have a nice welcome mat. Beyond the mat lies—well, you'll find out. Sharon and I stand over a hundred percent better chance of survival than you, Carter. And I say over a hundred, because your chances are precisely nil."

Almost—almost but not quite—Caradine fell into the trap.

"You mean they'll catch up with me after you're caught. Is that it?"

Rawson looked annoyed.

"No. We won't be caught, Carter."

"Well, then. If you're not caught, why should I be in trouble?"

Sharon was applying makeup. The box room was quiet and empty save for themselves and the newly-arrived passen-

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gers' larger items of baggage. Caradine felt no great desire to rush off yet; he felt safe and he wanted to know as much as he could before these two flitted. Sharon lowered her mirror.

"Don't bandy about with meaningless trivia, Carter. We know you're here spying, too."

"You know nothing of the sort. And have you considered that this box room may be tapped?"

"We have and it isn't."

Both Sharon and Allura seemed to know a great deal about tapping devices. A great deal more than Carson Napier had. But then, he hadn't had their opportunities for studying the current models on the market.

"Well," Caradine said, warming up, "if this room isn't tapped, and I believe that from the way you're talking, I'd just like to say that I consider you two to be a couple of low-down, murdering, double-crossing bastards." He smiled genially.

Sharon colored and half-raised her hand. Because of that, Caradine supposed, Rawson had to show he was a hairy-chested he-man. He swung on Caradine.

People who did that to Caradine usually found out their mistake from a prone position on the floor, with a cracking headache and a lump on the jaw and, if they were exceptionally unlucky, a bruise on the back of the head.

Rawson was no exception.

He was unlucky, too.

Caradine watched him stand up, swaying, pulling his shirt straight. The man from Ahansic put a hand to the back of his head and the other to his jaw.

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"Now get out of here," Caradine said. "And don't let me run across you again."

As they moved to the door his right hand was held deceptively low. The magneclamp on his white shirt had come undone—that was his left hand—and Rawson knew enough not to try to outshoot him. Maybe that surly customs man on Gamma had talked, at that.

When they had gone, Caradine turned and kicked the alloy canister. "Bums," he said, and philosophically set about setting fire to the box room.

XI

"THEY CERTAINLY took their time getting here!"

"You'd think the fire helicopters would be garaged more conveniently."

"They're useless! Nothing but a load of inefficient bunglers!" Lobengu was livid. He strode up and down on the lawn, clad only in violent mauve pyjamas, his face as red through the tan as the bright spring flowers lining the plastic-gravel walks. The evening nip in the air wasn't pleasing him, either.

"Oh, I don't know," protested Carson Napier mildly. "They saved the kitchen quarters."

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"My samples! All my special lines! Gone! Vanished!"

"Well," Caradine said, feeling remorse, "that's one fallacy in dealing only in one particular line. My samples went up in smoke too. But I have others to offer."

Lobengu couldn't speak. He staggered off, almost frothing, swearing eternal damnation to the Horakah fire brigade and their slackness and bungling and sheer inefficiency and downright numbskull ineptness.

The incendiary capsule provided by Rawson as part of the bargain had done its duty only too well.

The hotel, the Blue Dragon, was no more. In its place smouldered a sagging heap of blackened beams and the charred remnants of the kitchen quarters.

Caradine felt quite unhappy about it. He hadn't intended to be so drastic.

However, the canister in which Rawson and Sharon had been smuggled onto this world had been destroyed, and the job done by the incendiary capsule insured that probing investigators would not piece together its existence or the true purpose of Caradine's sample case. At least, so he hoped.

Walking up and down with the others—they were all dressed as they had been except for Lobengu, who had retired early and disastrously—Caradine mulled over Rawson's cocky confidence. The tardy arrival of the fire brigade was a pointer to this tiny portion of Alpha being a showcase. They'd probably never envisaged any occurrence like this, and the fire helicopters had had to be brought in from outside. Caradine wondered what that outside was going to be like.

Carson Napier walked up across the grass, with the shadows stretching longer and longer, and they began to stroll up

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and down together, to all appearances just two evicted guests speculating on their night's accommodation.

"Well, Carter. We can talk now."

"I think it's safe. If a spy eye is on us—"

"I've a gadget to take care of those, and a bug if they use one." He didn't specify where the gadget was kept about his person.

"You called me Caradine. You said you were omitting the frills. All right. That's okay, the Second CST is no more and that means that the frills are now meaningless."

"I've come a long way to find you."

"You've stepped straight out of a fairy story if you asked these people." Jinny Jiloa had gone home with her parents. Caradine wondered briefly if he would ever see them again. "But I think I should make it quite clear to you that my home is now Shanstar. You mentioned Belmont. I assume you are using that only as a cover. I'm not using Shanstar. I belong to Shanstar. Oh, and if you want to kill me you'll have to shoot me in the back."

"Yes, I know of your prowess with a gun."

"I'm not proud of it. Well, come on then, what do you want?"

"That depends rather on whether you are still the David Caradine of ten years ago."

"Those were the days . . . Hell, you don't start the old tear ducts going. I washed my hands of the whole filthy business when the Second CST was sabotaged. I'd sweated blood to build that; I'd put everything I'd got into it. And then some lousy nit-ridden effeminate so-called mili-

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tarists stepped in and tried to take over." Caradine was getting mad.

"I know," Napier said sympathetically. "It was bad. I was a simple lieutenant of the Terran Space Navy then. I remember as though it was yesterday your final broadcast to the Commonwealth."

"And only four years ago—no, five, now—I lit out for space and went clear through the Blight. I guess you had a rugged trip, following me."

"Some. Your renunciation of supreme power rather took the thrust from the tubes of the gentry you so aptly described. They formed a Third Commonwealth Suns of Terra, you know!"

"Did they now?"

"It didn't last. When they were overthrown the Fourth and Fifth rose and fell. When I left they were trying to knock into shape the Third Republic. I guess their numbering in either Commonwealths or Republics is along into double figures by now."

"You don't appear to have a high regard for these new groupings."

"No."

"Aren't you forgetting that they are the governments of the whole family of suns centering on Earth? Over one million it was, last count. All outwards in the opposite directions from the Blight. Someone must exercise a sort of general direction to keep the harmony, otherwise you'll have the parochial bickerings they have here."

"You always did that well. Very well. The little men who try to run things now tremble when your name is mentioned."

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"And some did not. Some men have been known to acknowledge a liking for me . . ."

Caradine remembered Napier's early remark and the look on his face. He hadn't misjudged that look, then. And he very much cared for the youngster's direct and natural way of conversation, without a hint of a kowtow in parsecs. That was a good feeling to have.

"Those men who are now in command know that whilst you are not reported as dead, absolutely and finally, their authority is a mere shadow."

"Ahl"

Well, then, this might be it. Napier could have been sent to dispose of the wispy, far-off, but still potent threat that one day, one dreamlike day, David Caradine would return to Earth and her million suns and resume his old, voluntarily renounced cloak of power.

"You're in for a big disappointment, Napier. Either way, you lose. If you've come to ask me to return, sent by a caucus of my old government friends, I've finished with it all, as I said the day I resigned. If you come to kill me, you have a man-sized job. And even if you do kill me, I don't care. I'll have less problems when dead—"

"John Carter!" The imperious voice rang across the darkening lawn. Both men turned.

A man hurried towards them over the grass. Caradine gained an impression of haste, a mottled face with large dark eyes, a fleshy nose and a weak mouth. But his thoughts were still back on Earth, back when he was running the Second Commonwealth Suns of Terra. That position of supreme power had not come overnight; he'd had to use every

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artifice to weld those million suns into some semblance of law and order. He could scarcely claim, even, that he ruled them. Such a task with orders of that magnitude was well-nigh impossible, even with all the wonders of robotic speed and organization. But the CST formed a single unit; there were no wars within its boundaries, no tariffs, no barriers. Men moved freely within the Second CST, and united solidly to fight any hostile alien attacks from without.

"Mr. John Carter? My name's Baksi." He spoke confidentially so that Napier could not hear. "No doubt Hsien Koanga mentioned me to you?"

"Yes, he did." Baksi was one of the agents previously sent by Koanga. Caradine's mental hackles rose.

"Koanga sent me a gram. Coded, of course, under the guise of shipping instructions. I need to talk to you, privately."

"Of course." Caradine turned to Napier. "Will you excuse me? I must be about my business. It has been a pleasant chat."

Napier smiled. "I didn't come to kill you, and I have formed my opinions already. My mission is accomplished. I'll be seeing you around, Mr. John Carter."

"Please hurry, Carter," Baksi said nervously.

"Goodbye, Carson Napier. The Second CST is one with Atlantis, Pergamum and the Martian Empire."

Caradine moved away. What was so unsettling, so strange, about that smile on Napier's face?

A breeze frisked across the evening sky and Caradine changed direction to the pathetic pile of personal belongings

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of the dispossessed hotel guests. "Half a minute, Baksi. Think I'll put my coat on. That, at least, was saved."

"Hurry then."

Caradine found his coat, a black hip-length weatherproof, and supposed someone searching for their own belongings had tossed it down so casually. He put it on and it dragged. He allowed no expression on his face, but followed Baksi as the frightened man hurried towards a ground car parked in the lengthening shadows.

Right-hand pocket, a familiar shape. So familiar that it brought a pang of memory. Left-hand pocket, a round metal object with a strap. Wristwatch? Caradine pulled it out and casually slipped it onto his wrist, placing his own watch back in the pocket. No watch. This must be the gadget Napier had mentioned. Spy eyes and bugs, huh? Well, he wasn't so naked as before. It looked like a watch, though, which was useful.

They entered the ground car.

"I'm taking you outside, Carter. All this pretty-pretty set-up is strictly for the tourists and salesmen and others the moguls have to let onto Alpha. If the moguls had their way no one apart from their techs and work people would set foot on Alpha. The whole planet is one immense arsenal."

"So I'm learning. How have you been getting on?"

Baksi hunched over the wheel. They turned off the hotel driveway and began to ride, fast and silently, through lighted streets with imposing buildings flanking both sides. A light rain began to drift down and the pavements sheened in reflected color. Other ground traffic and air cars riding strict lanes above thickened.

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"Not so good. Horakah is a tough nut, Carter. I was detailed to uncover as many items as I could of their new *Falcon*-class battleships. So far I've seen the outside of the perimeter wall." He had a nervous tic that dragged down the side of his face from time to time. Caradine found the feeling of impotent waiting in him hurting.

Rain pelted the windscreen. There had been no warning that Caradine knew of, but now the skies were emptying of the held-up rain Weather Control had ordained for this spring evening. The tires began to sussurate on the macadam.

"A flier car would have been useless," Baksi said. His knuckles on the wheel gripped like knots.

He was peering ahead now, trying to penetrate the curtain of rain. "Ah . . ." The car slowed, stopped.

The rear door opened, and closed, the newcomer flopped back on the upholstery. "Rotten night. Caught me without a coat."

"Got the passes?" Baksi was looking into the rearview TV screen.

"Sure." A damp shirt-sleeved arm stretched forward between Baksi and Caradine. "Here."

"Take 'em, Carter. One each."

Caradine accepted the slips of flexible red plastic. A number was deeply stamped on each, and, from his own experience, he guessed that the cards were molecularly stressed. Any attempt by amateurs to alter a single dot on the card would cause its molecular lattices to collapse. Result, no card.

"These are to get outside, I suppose?"

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"Yes. Horakah keeps it close to the chest."

"Howd' you get 'em?"

"Channels. Our concern. Damn this rain!"

The car was going faster than Caradine cared for, considering the circumstances. Tires squealed loudly as Baksi took a corner. Now they were out in open country, with only darkness about, rushing wind, slanting shards of rain and a single distant red light, like a beckoning finger.

Caradine didn't like it that Hoe, the newcomer, sat in the back where there was room for him up front.

The car worked up a good speed. The lance of crimson light neared. Minutes later Baksi was pressing the brake. The car slowed its headlong rush. It stopped, bathed all in a crimson flood of light. Helmeted heads and uniforms crowded.

"Passes?"

"Here." The three passengers showed the red, heavily stamped cards. A wait. Then the passes came back through the rolled-down window.

"Okay. Scram."

Baksi's fumbling hand missed the starter twice, and Caradine bent over and pressed the button. The mill growled to life and the car moved forward. Baksi was shaking like a leaf in a storm—like a leaf on that tree above Harriet Lafonde's head, in the storm this would cause back on Gamma.

That, suddenly, Caradine saw and realized. He felt a severe pang of horror at what he had let Harriet in for. And then he tried to console himself that she, whatever her merits as a woman, represented a culture full of aggrandizement and war fever. It didn't work very well. Poor Harriet.

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He had a severe tussle, there in the darkness of the hurtling car in the rushing night, to prevent himself from turning around and going back.

These two wouldn't stop him, of course.

Those passes—tricky things to meddle with . . .

A ground car, straight out of the tourist trap and into the true Alpha-Horakah, filled with unnameable wonders and horrors.

Hmm. The feeling in him that Baksi wasn't what he should be. And would Hsien Koanga have sent a gram? Hadn't he said that he didn't know if his agents were still free?

"Much farther?" he asked, easing his shoulder in the seat upholstery.

"No. I don't know what particular mission you have been assigned by Koanga, but whatever it is you'll need a base outside. We're going there. People can walk about pretty freely outside providing they have the correct identifications."

"What do you do? Knock a man over for his?"

"Something like that. It's all manufacturing plants and spacefields and testing sites. I doubt there's a single blade of grass."

"Grass is tough stuff. Grows on a bald man's head."

"Yeah." Baksi tried to laugh. And Hoe, from the back seat, raised a guffaw.

Caradine made up his mind. Even if he was wrong, even if these two were still working in some bona fide fashion for Koanga, he wanted no truck with frightened men. They were ready for the chopper. That was only too evident. And those so-convenient passes . . .

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Trap. Caradine smelled it, sniffed around it, came to the same inescapable conclusion: *Trap*.

"Do you and your pal Hoe have much exercise?" he asked.

"Huh?" Baksi flashed him a glance spared from his continual manual driving. "Exercise?"

"That's what I said. Y'know, walking sets up a man's muscles like nothing else. Expands his chest. Gives him a bounce to his stride."

"I don't follow you."

"I don't want you to." The Beatty was in Caradine's hand. "I also don't care if you make me use this." He flicked the cut-switch and the engine died in a dwindling sigh of wind and tires. "Out. Both of you."

"You can't do this! Baksi was shaking and yelling.

Hoe had backed up in his seat. But the Beatty could cut him down before he moved three inches. He knew it.

"How did you find out?" Baksi was yelling. His weak face was contorted with the fear freezing his guts. "Did Koanga know? I had to do it! They forced me. They made me turn you over."

"Cut it, you idiot!" That was Hoe, lividly violent, cursing foully.

"Out," said Caradine.

The two doors opened and slammed. If they had guns they didn't dare use them under the threat of the Beatty.

"Now start walking. I'll drop you if you turn around."

The two walked off, into the darkness, back along the road. When the blackness had swallowed them up, Caradine started the car and left at more than a hundred miles an hour.

He was on the outside. He was on his own.

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XII

THERE HAD probably been a better way of dealing with them. But all that was now in the past. Ahead lay dangers that were all the more ominous because they were unknown. If all this planet, as rumored, was workshop and factory and spacefield, then how come this road, winding through the country darkness?

Dawn was not far off. A lot of miles and a lot of country separated Caradine from the point where he had turned Baksi and Hoe off, and he needed to find a hole for the car and himself to hide out during the day. Days here were about thirty Earth hours and, the spring solstice being at hand, were divided up pretty evenly between day and night.

Baksi had pretty clearly been taken by the authorities, forced to work with them, and had no doubt been testing and turning over all the agents Koanga had managed to smuggle into Alpha. Normally, there would have been no reason to suspect him; a fresh man, coming to this planet would welcome a friend and an outstretched hand. But those passes had been the tip-off. Baksi had overreached himself with those.

Caradine snapped to alertness. A car passed overhead in

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the darkness with a low grumble of power. It turned, angled down. A black shape momentarily flitted before the stars.

The reputed crack efficiency of Alpha-Horakah had broken down in the matter of the fire brigade; Caradine had fully expected to have been challenged before this. He wondered if they'd sent a boy to do a man's job.

The car landed, batlike, on the road ahead. Caradine kept his headlights on with the dome light off, pushed himself away from the wheel across the seat, and then since the car ahead lay fairly across the road, cut the engine and let the car roll. His nose bumped the fascia and his eyes just peered over it, through the dusty windscreen. The rain had died hours back, and the road had been lousy.

A hint of colossal buildings lay ahead. Perhaps they hadn't picked him up at all as a wanted man but were merely the final checkpoint to the last entry onto the true Alpha-Horakah. The countryside he had been traversing could well be a wide and camouflaging belt around the tourist center and spaceport.

The windscreen above his head shattered, melted, flowed down in molten puddles of white-hot glassite. The back of the car disappeared. Scorching heat battered at his head. His fumbling hand managed to reach the door. The next shot might rake down, onto the front seats, crisp him as he sprawled.

They'd said nothing. They hadn't challenged. They'd just stopped in front of him and burned right through where a driver would be sitting.

Caradine felt the anger burn in sympathy along his veins.

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There was no second shot.

The door was jammed, the intense heat must have convected along the frame and warped it. He was trapped inside. Heat was dying around him, now, and his eyes were readjusting after the intolerable brilliance of the flash.

Inexplicably, in the way of cars, his headlights were still burning. He cocked a cautious eye over the fascia and peered along the path of illumination. Pinned in that light the side of the air car glowed. The faces of two men looked out, one slightly echeloned behind the other as he lifted and turned to look over his comrade's shoulder.

The Beatty took them, one after the other, neatly, delicately, completely lacking the monstrous wash of fire that had destroyed his car.

Without emotion, Caradine put his foot against the door, bashed it open, jumped out and walked across to the air car.

Their identifications told him that they were special field operatives, counter-espionage. There was no secrecy; counter-espionage, that's what their smart black-covered ident wallets proclaimed. Well, then. Caradine went about the business methodically and quickly, conscious of the probable alarm the fire had caused and aware of the pressing shadows of those monstrous buildings.

By the time he had finished, the buildings had resolved in dawn light into tall towers, multi-windowed, patch-painted in miserly maintenance so that they looked scabrous. He was feeling very tired, with a soreness about his eyes.

The larger of the two dead men's clothing fitted well. The one millimeter aperture of the Beatty and its ravaging, destructive cauterizing power made no mess. The two bodies,

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together with one uniform, were placed in Baksi's ground car. Caradine sprayed the counter-espionage man's handgun over the car and the splurge of fire sloughed everything into an orange holocaust and final, collapsing gray embers.

Then he sent the air car up and away in a long slant, not caring what blip he was sending across watching radar screens.

The drunk was not a providential stroke of good fortune.

What was fortunate and beyond Caradine's calculations was the drunk's insistence on committing suicide. It was an odd combination and by the time Caradine reached the body the man was not only dead, he was past recognition.

Philosophically, Caradine removed all the items he required and pushed the twisted dead body further into the antigrav stilt. The awful power of a planetary mass crushed down on the body and removed it forever from the ken of humanity. Caradine headed for the first cheap lodging house patronized by the workers along the badly lit alleyway.

He'd dumped the official air car long since. With controls set on auto and engine let out at full speed, it rose into the sky heading out and up. It was a powerful model. It would brush the fringes of space before it failed and plunged back. Somewhere serious scientific men might record a new meteor.

Then he'd known well enough what sort of locality to head for. In the tangle of streets huddled outside the gates of the factory site—a hiving twenty-square-mile complex of machine shops, gantries, testing rigs and admin blocks—he'd found the local equivalents of the beer hall, the night club, the pub, the doss house. Horakah demanded work and more work from

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its all but slave work people; it could not, through sheer matter-of-fact psychological considerations, refuse to provide amusement. That amusement was of the lowest and rawest kind. Caradine didn't care. He'd waited for the drunk he knew to be inevitable, dodging with deceptive casualness the uniformed police who stalked always in pairs, and had followed him. He had intended only to steal the man's papers.

But the man had stubbornly in his drunken state wanted to argue with an antigrav stilt supporting a fifty-story air platform. The platform floated half a mile high and no doubt acted as a focal point for freights. The drunk had ignored the warning barriers, had clambered over and had of course had his head crushed by the antigrav stilt. The stilt supported the platform and pressed against the ground—in a very real sense it contained the weight of the planet balanced on its foot.

And now, armed with the name of Constantin Chad, freighter licensed to operate between factories, Caradine was heading dog-tired for the nearest flophouse.

His tired mind found an explicable tie-up between the occupation of the drunk on this machine world and his death. A man who pushed freight trains through the sky at better than Mach Three might very well wish to argue with an antigrav stilt supporting a freight platform. The deeper complexities of the human mind were just as contrary here on this planet, in a section of the galaxy teeming with suns and planets, as they were back beyond the Blight, where Earth itself was the focal point of a million solar systems.

The two secret service men he had shot had had plenty of Horakah money on them. The surly human attendant—the flophouse facilities did not extend to robots—took the

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money and showed him into a single. The room was clean and bare, but it had that indefinable sleazy air that made Caradine's skin crawl. He was too tired to worry over trifles. He checked the spy eye and bug detector, found it clear, and lay on the bed.

He trusted his own reflexes to wake him up swiftly and in deadly silence if anyone attempted to rob him. He went to sleep.

He did not sleep the clock around, but lay in bed, meditating, until the long Horakah night waned and he could decently go out to find breakfast. Caradine was a man who was used to dealing with the heart of a problem. Koanga had sent him here to spy, to find out the organization of the Horakah space fleets. The task might seem insuperable to a man without interstellar administration experience and in all truth it posed a nice problem to Caradine, who probably better than anyone else in this end of the galaxy, knew about interstellar admin and organization. After all, he'd handled or cajoled one million independently-minded solar systems; Horakah queened it over a bare thousand.

He washed up and made himself presentable and made for the door. The attendant stopped him.

"Papers?" Caradine said. He decided to probe a little. "Shouldn't you have asked for those last night?"

"Yeah. But I don't bother bums like you normally. The police have been sending out alerts, though." He picked at a hollow tooth. "Some excitement's stirred up those official layabouts."

Which was a lead, and an expected one. The ident papers of the two agents Caradine kept stowed in his wallet. He

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showed the Chad license. As he took it back after the bored scrutiny, he saw again the official's indecipherable signature and the robotically stamped name: "Horak."

"I suppose they do things differently over in Horak?" he said, studying the attendant.

The man creased his whiskery face into a smile. "Huh! Fine chance you or I'd have in Horak. Capital cities don't welcome bums like us."

"They sure don't," Caradine said in mutual self-pity.

"You've never pushed a freight there?"

"Nope. Hoping to, one day. Any tips?"

"Only one." The hollow tooth sucked ponderously. "Stay clear of anyone in uniform. But—" the guffaw exhaled bad breath—"they're all in uniform in Horak. Haw, haw."

Caradine laughed and went out. Horak it was, then. The scarcity of maps hadn't bothered him when he had a perfectly good one among the agents' papers. Transport might be a problem, but that would be solved by guile, bravado—or the gun.

He bought an inconspicuous suit of dark-gray synthetic twill and took a leisurely swing on public transport—huge, lumbering four-decked air omnibuses that ploughed ahead in the air lanes scattering lesser cars like fish before sharks—making a zig-zag journey into the jumping-off point for Horak. Everywhere he went the sprawling complexes of vast manufacturing plants covered the land and he saw the far-off glint of starship noses pointing to the sky.

Nearly every block had a scanning TV eye and a loud-speaker clump. Authority here kept a firm and square thumb harshly planted on private life. That, too, merely followed the

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pattern. Totalitarian worlds had been known to Caradine and before he'd cleaned them up he'd done an amount of field research. At the jumping-off point he felt confident of going right into the capital, a distant cluster of shining towers.

None of that confidence was shaken as two brown-uniformed policemen stopped him leaving the bus terminal and asked for his papers. Without hesitation he handed across the Chad license. Waiting for the ponderous official scrutiny, he looked about casually, without a care in the world—or the galaxy.

“Okay, Chad. Where're you goin'?”

“Oh, I expect to pick up some freight here. Dunno the details yet. You know how it is.”

“No, fellow, we don't. We're policemen. Not freight bums. See?”

“Oh. Oh, sure. Sorry.”

The licence was returned. The policemen stalked on, began to stop others and ask for papers.

The unfortunate early demise of Constantin Chad had been very, *very* fortunate.

Entering a restaurant of the class suitable to his present station, he had a satisfactory meal. About him people were moving chairs and craning heads to see the wall-size TV screen across the end of the room. This, too, fitted. On a world like this, dominated by moguls demanding the last effort from their workers, regular and fully attended news bulletins formed an essential part of the structure of control. Conforming, Caradine moved his chair and watched.

It was like Gamma, only worse. Sheer, blatant, raw and frenziedly sickening war propaganda. No wonder little Jinny

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Jiloa had talked about blowing Ahansic up; judged on the content of this TV news coverage, if Horakah did not quickly attack and subjugate most of her interstellar neighbors, she would be invaded, raped, decimated, enslaved and forced under the yoke. He kept a face that was as wooden as those about him. Propaganda as unprocessed as this must have been going out for a long, long time to be accepted without a murmur or a laugh.

Outside news followed. A gigantic swarm of alien spaceships had been spotted approaching from a direction in which, as far as astronomers knew, lay only thinly scattered suns. Therefore this enormous fleet was either a war maneuver of Ragnar or was a true alien force. No one seemed bothered. Caradine guessed they considered this just one more subterfuge in the game of nerves being played out there among the stars. Once propaganda goes beyond a certain limiting line of credibility, only the end of the galaxy has impact.

Figures quoted mentioned a hundred thousand starships. The moral was drawn. Horakah must speed up production! Even more battleships must be launched! Everyone must work twice as hard!

It was a relief to turn to the next item.

A shot came up on the screen of a starship and alighting passengers. The news reader said: "Direct from Gamma, this starship brings the latest in the long line of despicable spies to be caught by our brilliant security services. These underhanded and filthy vermin try to steal our secrets and to blow up the work of many patient hands. But never fear! They are all caught in the end."

The screen showed Hsien Koanga and Allura, pale-faced

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under their golden tan, handcuffed, stumbling down the ramp and pushed into a waiting black air car. Allura paused for a moment and brushed back her heavy auburn hair. She was viciously prodded on.

Caradine sat very still.

The news reader said: "Also on the starship coming here to answer unnamed charges was the travel official for Gamma, Harriet Lafonde."

Harriet walked down the ramp, smiling. But Caradine did not miss the men with her, hard-faced men with their hands in their pockets.

So Harriet too, was here on Alpha-Horakah, under arrest.

XIII

THIS CHANGED the degree, not the quality, of what Caradine had to do.

Long ago he had made up his mind that petty pilfering of interstellar secrets was not for him. Hsien Koanga had wanted the details of the Horakah space fleet build-up, and the probable way they would plan their tactics in the event of a space battle. All that was very fine, blood-stirring stuff, but Caradine had been used to dealing with the nerve-center of a stellar commonwealth, of himself arranging those details and of indicating the general line of mutual advancement.

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Once upon a time men had glibly and non-understandingly talked of empires of a million planets, and of their being a Queen Planet ruling all with a just but heavy hand. That was nonsense, of course. Men hadn't been able to rule themselves when compressed onto a single planet, onto a single continent, even. The complexities and magnitudes involved in interstellar groupings—empire was rather an outmoded term nowadays—meant inevitably that a cohesion based on more than mere big-fist obedience must operate. Caradine was well aware that the inevitable was only what you weren't quick-witted enough to avoid.

You might have on file and cybernetically indexed all the details on all the inhabitants of your stellar grouping. But that didn't stop one farmer on a planet fifty light years off from trading with a local produce firm. And if the produce firm dealt with another adjacent grouping that was in bad odor with the cybernetic index, then the index was going to have to do a lot of cog-whirring to do anything about it.

To run an interstellar commonwealth with any semblance of humanity and common sense you all had to feel friends. If graft and corruption crept in, then those responsible would be ditched fast. If you were of—well, dammit to hell—if you were of Earth, then your pride in belonging to the commonwealth with its advantages outweighed scruples of being the underdog and of being graft-ridden. Modern men had, at least, evolved from the dawn of civilization.

Caradine sat watching the rest of the TV news and he wondered. Horakah's days were numbered, but she didn't know that yet. Hsien Koanga was a very small cog in all the dit-

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ferent wheels, a cog along with the others of Rawson and Sharon. And now Harriet Lafonde had been dragged in.

He wondered how many of these people of this work-ridden planet, sitting around him in this restaurant now, would find their scruples vanish, and their desires to no longer be the underdogs strong enough to make them actually think. They weren't quite ready yet. They hadn't been brought all the way to the boil. Give them time, a few more whirls of their planet around their sun.

But Caradine didn't have that time.

Three of his friends—he counted them all his friends on the relationship twining between them—were being held here in Alpha-Horakah's central city of Horak. Cunning ploys, machinations, ferreting out of interstellar secrets—all those would have to wait. His direction of action had been subtly changed, and he didn't have much time.

He rose, paid the bill and left. As he walked leisurely away from the restaurant four black squad cars dropped down and brown-clad police belted in through the front doors. They smashed a lot of glass going in. Caradine chuckled. All that drama—and the bird had flown.

They were on to him.

All right. That meant that now he was technically on the run. His sphere of action had been widened.

His alarm detector strapped to his wrist remained dead. He went into another restaurant, this time choosing a high-class establishment with tablecloths over the slick plastic, and headed straight for the men's room. He made a pretense of washing his hands and drying them under the infrareds.

When the place was empty save for one other—one that

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Caradine had waited for as being most suitable—he walked across and cut the edge of his palm across the man's neck. He caught him under the armpits before he fell and dragged him into a cubicle. It was some crush.

The man wasn't dead, but he'd be unconscious for an hour. Caradine stripped him, slowing down when others used the washroom. The clothes fitted well. That's why Caradine had waited for the right victim. There was plenty of money, Galaxos as well as local currency. There was a tiny dartgun, loaded with poisonous darts that could puff silently for fifty feet. Nasty little thing. But it, too, was a pointer.

The ident papers showed that Caradine's new name was Jefferson Raoul Logan. He was a laboratory attendant, first-class. Caradine supposed that that meant he wiped up the mess when an experiment fouled up. He fastened the last magneclamp on his cherry-colored shirt, after having weakened it, propped Logan comfortably, bound and gagged with surplus items of clothing, and left. He dogged the door and shot the engaged-tab up. He went out whistling.

Logan's air car was parked in the lot and the robot brought it out at once as soon as Caradine presented the parking stub. He got in and sent the car up steeply, heading into the fast traffic lanes, heading straight into Horak.

He was not challenged. He had about forty minutes left, and as much time after that as it took Logan to attract attention.

He was not overly confident about the Horak controls. They'd been watchful. Somehow they knew he was near, and they'd be trigger-happy.

The towers ahead grew, rising into the sky until they

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overtopped the traffic lane he was following. They worried him a little. The moguls might live there, although rumor had it that they lived strictly isolated aboard a floating platform half a mile up, supported on an antigrav stilt. And rumor, circulating in this workers' warren, was relatively reliable on matters like that.

Now that he was embarked on the thick ear stuff he could find out where they lived all right; getting to them might not be so easy.

There was a floating check point up ahead, a round-bellied flier, all portholes and gun barrels and aerals. Air cars were hanging on their antigravs lined up waiting to be checked past. Brown-uniformed police with personal antigrav flier packs flitted from car to car. If he left the traffic lane now he'd be calling attention to himself. Brazen it through.

There were ten minutes of his estimated forty of free time left when the police checked the car. They glanced at him—he felt thankful that a haircut and a new way of combing his hair made a difference—glanced at his credentials, glanced inside the car, and waved him on. He left sedately.

Logan's home address was a rabbit-warren type of dormitory housing technicians and laboratory workers. It towered ninety stories and was as exciting as a slab of wormy cheese. Caradine put down near the block and sat in the car, waiting.

The ninety-story dormitory crouched in the shadow of those omnipresent towers, scintillating up there in the sunshine.

Caradine waited until a prowling policeman on a one-man antigrav flier pulled in and began the usual rigmarole.

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He put his head in the opened driving-side window. His broad face wore a scowl. Caradine brought the gun barrel down onto the man's forehead. Then he had opened the door against the sag of body, pulled the man in, closed the door and started up. Ten blocks away he pulled into a covered archway leading to a green-painted gate on a loading platform fifty stories above ground. He pulled into the side and the shadow, allowing other traffic to pass to and from the gate.

The policeman groaned and opened a bleary eye.

The question was: "Where is the head office, chum? Where do the moguls hang out?"

After a promise, made with a granite-set face, that he'd be killed unpleasantly if he didn't answer, the man told all.

At least, he told all that a man in his position would know.

There was a floating platform, anchored in the sky directly above that cluster of roseate towers. All approaches were guarded so that—and then he went off into obscenity.

Caradine hit him again and turned him off. He put the flier at full lift and went up. His time had run out, now, and he wondered if he could beat the deadline. If he didn't a bolt of that ferocious energy that had destroyed Baksi's car would scorch him out of thin air.

Keeping a cool head was becoming harder and harder.

So far he'd been dealing with civilians and the lower orders of the police hierarchy. As he rose into the sky he was rising, too, into a new level of authority and power. He kept the radar turned on a 360° sweep and was rewarded by a blip coming onto the screen from ahead and to his left. He carried on as though unaware. Below, the towers fell, dwind-

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ling with distance, until a drifting thread of cloud blotted them out altogether.

The approaching flier turned out to be a private job. Two more went past, some way off. Caradine switched on the small interflier radio.

"Can you help me?" he asked plaintively. "Something's wrong and I don't seem to get the robot's help. I think it's failed."

The occupant of the other flier when they matched courses and doors and he looked through the windows, was young, square-faced and wore that stamp of authority that is so much more than a mere physical impression.

"Sure. Just hold things as they are. I'm coming aboard."

Caradine smiled, and he was still wearing that smile as he brought the gun down. His new name, then, was Pearsall Adlai Korunna Swarhout. A Personal Assistant. That was all. The ident papers told nothing of what or who he was a Personal Assistant to. Caradine put the new clothes on, finding that they fitted tolerably well, turned the man—who was wearing Logan's clothes and carrying Logan's ident papers and riding in Logan's air car—adrift, and put his new vehicle steeply upwards. If the man was shot up before they questioned him, well, this was not a case of war is war, but of preventing a war. Caradine was growing more and more convinced that if he was to succeed he would have to forget the civilized decencies.

They must have a pretty fair description of him circulated by now plus photographs and all the other ident devices. Speed and deception were his two major weapons. They couldn't stop up every bolthole. The planetary setup

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was too big and overbalanced. Horakah was finding out that the hard way.

So far, apart from the policeman he had questioned, they had had no indication of his target. He would now be taking his biggest chance to date: approaching the moguls' flying platform. If he could once step aboard that floating palace to . . .

And there it was ahead.

The silver sheen dazzled. Tower after tower, pinnacle after spire and dome and raking many-windowed block. The whole vast edifice was contained in his field of vision like a flawless gem. As he approached, the size of it began to make itself felt; the edges crept away, the tips of the spires and the lowest landing stages lining the skirt, expanded out. This single enormous platform was a complete floating city, half a mile up in the sky.

He'd have to land aboard a stage and go through into some sort of lock; air problems had at this height cropped up. He put the car straight at a yellow-painted lock above which a green light cycled on one-second intervals. Two or three other cars were waiting. Caradine had studied the car controls and when the radio called harshly for his identification, he merely flipped the right switch and his robot broadcaster sent out his car registration and his name.

On his turn the radio said: "Come in, please, P.A. Swarth-out."

So they were polite to a Personal Assistant. Useful.

He was growing worried over the lack of confusion he had been creating. Slugging a few inoffensive civilians counted for

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nothing up here. He remembered the familiar package Napier had slipped into his jacket, and felt comforted.

The car touched down on the pad and robots seized it and drew it through the valves. Inside the vaulted lock brilliant lights blazed, white paint was everywhere, and noises boomed magnified as though in a drum. There was also a reception committee.

They were no surprise to Caradine. Good luck did not necessarily extend to his picking the right airlock for Swarthout's car out of all the locks available. The big question mark now hanging over his head was: Would they shoot first and not bother about the questions?

Up here he was dealing with a different order of authority from that sprawling on the planetary surface. There were uniformed men with guns everywhere. They merely waved his car to a lay-by and closed in on it. Caradine took Napier's little toy out, opened the door, and tossed one of the grenades. Then he fell flat on the floor of the car, shut his eyes and stuffed arms and hands over head and ears.

The fire, the concussion and the nerve-flash were excruciating.

Even with the protection afforded his nerves by Napier's pack, from which he had thrown one grenade, he felt that torturing jolt of agony. What those poor devils out there were going through—well, that was no business of his now.

He jumped briskly out of the car, ran through the swathes of unconscious bodies, all smartly uniformed, to the exit. Their nerves would be a jangling hell for twelve hours. After that they could report for duty perfectly fit. Caradine put a

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hand down to the nerve-protection pack and the remaining grenades. They would have to be used sparingly.

So far he hadn't run across the use of nerve-grenades since leaving Earth; but anything could be hidden away up here in a floating palace half a mile high. And in that stilt-supported wonderland he had to do just a little more damage and create just a little more mayhem, before the moguls would take notice of him as his merits deserved. Ahead stretched white-painted, brilliantly lit corridors. He ran fleetly down the first to hand.

At the end he debouched from an ornate archway into a wide phantasmagoric plaza. Broad cool lawns stretched on either hand, their borders banked and surrounded by immense tiers of exotic flowers. A single crystal sweep of dome covered everything and contained within its artificial environment air and light, water and heat. Caradine thought he could see the plants growing as he raced along.

Enormous statues of every age reared in clumps, lines and avenues. Bright birds flitted, and furry, long-legged animals with jeweled chains paced among the blooms. The scent of flowers was heady and betraying.

Perhaps, one of those weakening and betraying thoughts struck wickedly at Caradine's ego, perhaps he thought too much of himself? Was he putting too high a premium on his life and abilities? Would the moguls care at all?

He had to find people. Crowds were safety. The plaza was deserted.

His heart was thumping and his breath came faster by now. So near, so terribly near. He must keep cool. Keep his wits and courage steady, find a crowd, and everything could go

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on from there. He ran on, swerving to avoid a wandering herd of camels, almost collided with a solemnly pacing pair of elephants, and so came, hot and sticky, into a paved road and the miraculous sight of masses of men and women, all brightly clothed, passing and repassing tall-windowed white buildings lining a boulevard. He slipped in among the crowd, slowed down, and got his breath back.

Two scarlet-uniformed policemen closed in, one on each side. They were very polite, smooth, supercilious and yet perfectly civil. Caradine smiled.

"You do not appear dressed correctly for today," the taller said. "This is comedy day, as ordained by the high mogul. Will you please come with us, sir."

No asking for passes. No brandishing of guns. Just a couple of quiet men in uniform, the breaking of a law, and the polite request. Caradine went.

Word could not yet have been passed through. He still had to hurry, but he had the saving grace of five minutes.

At the first intersection Caradine stopped and said: "My comedy clothes are down here. I just didn't have time to change."

They looked. It was natural. Caradine casually began to walk down the intersection. After a slight pause, the two policemen followed. The nearest doorway just had to do. Caradine found it, turned in as though he owned the place, gave the large cool lobby a single swift glance—empty—turned and struck the leading policeman on the jaw. He caught the second as the riot-call button almost went down under a frantic finger. Whew! A near one.

The chance now was whether to don the scarlet uniform

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or to carry on in Swarthout's clothes—ordinary clothes on a day ordained as comedy day. Hmm. The uniform seemed to be the better bet. Caradine humped the likelier of the two men into the robotically controlled elevator and went back for the other. On the way up to a randomly selected floor, he changed. On the way down he dealt with the policemen, binding and gagging them and then pushing them into an air-conditioning room off the main passage. One good thing about comedy day: everybody was on the streets.

The next half hour was rather amusing.

No sooner had he stepped out onto the streets than a large scarlet car swooped down, an imperious voice ordered him aboard, and he was sitting with twenty other scarlet-clad policemen, going hell-for-leather to arrest himself.

He quite enjoyed following orders, going here, standing guard there, gruffly asking people for passes—the gloves were off now and the politeness gone—at last being called with very many others to report to a central point. The car took them there en masse. He guessed that by this time Horakah police administration was in a chaotic state, divisions and authorities hopelessly entangled so that he could pass as just another man from another section, mixed up with many other sections' detachments. The car landed on a covered roof and sliding doors closed.

Well, he'd managed it at last. He quickly found from the men around him that this was the kingpin building, the lair of the moguls. His opinion of them had been steadily sinking all during his smoke and dazzle operations. Even a badly organized planet should have caught him by now. That these

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people hadn't had caused him troubles, so that in this instance it seemed he had to go to them himself.

Harassed officials scuttered everywhere, shepherding men into guard positions. Caradine found himself one of a company of ten men detailed off to cordon the entrance to a long passageway leading deeper into the heart of the building. A tall window gave a glimpse of a courtyard. In that yard Caradine saw armored flying tanks taking off from an underground hangar, one after the other, their dark-green hulls sheening and grim with weapons. Fully armored soldiers poured from doors and raced away beyond his vision. He stilled the smile on his lips.

All this preparation, all this chaos, wasn't for him.

No wonder he hadn't been caught easily. Behind all the gaiety of comedy day and the exotic flowers and strange animals, lying darkly hidden under the facade of carefree life on this floating palace platform, the moguls were facing a threat to their existence. What that threat was, Caradine had an inkling. He had once thought impossible what had happened very soon afterwards. He no longer thought it amazing that he could contemplate the current impossibility and know it in sober truth very likely.

Damn young Carson Napier, anyway!

But, even so . . .

At the first opportunity afforded by a slight change of guard position in the continual fussing that went on, Caradine slipped away, assumed a very important face and bearing, and strode with firm and heavy footfalls down the corridors deep into the heart of the building. This was the final payoff. He was not challenged. All about him he could

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hear the murmur of machinery. Worried-looking officers passed him. He was meeting more and more soldiers and space navy men. Yet still, in the security of his scarlet uniform, he was not stopped. Of course not—he was carrying a private message, wasn't he? How long that story would last he didn't know.

When at last he was stopped by a posse of black-clad men, he found the story wouldn't stand up at all. It gave him just time to pull and toss a nerve-grenade.

This far in, the resultant shambles must draw attention. Whatever was happening in the galaxy couldn't distract all attention from this.

He started to run on. From somewhere a streak of light passed over his left shoulder making him wince from the heat of it, struck a far cornice and brought down in thundering destruction and melting ruin the whole wall and ceiling. Raw metal paneling showed beyond.

Hell! They were so jumpy they weren't acting as he had expected. The fear that he had been containing so well boiled in him now. He got a bad attack of the shakes, running with thumping heart and wheezing lungs away from that deadly gun. Hell and damnation! If he got out of this alive he'd say something to young Napier. By hell he would!

He was approaching a double-valved door whose leaves must have been a good fifty feet high. The men guarding them looked like midges in a frieze along the bottom. He flung a nerve-grenade with all his strength, and plunged on after it too fast so that he felt the searing scorch of its back blast.

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But he cleared the door, one leaf of which sagged from broken hinges after the blast.

He went through. Another nerve-grenade cleared the way.

Directly ahead, through a colossal archway soaring up for two hundred feet, he saw a blaze of illumination. When he went through the arch the size of the room beyond appalled him. On its tessellated floor men looked like ants. High above, chandeliers the size of two-story buildings hung from a roof swathed in convoluted groining. Not a single pillar in the entire expanse supported that ceiling. Along both sides stood rows of guards, motionless, at attention, reduced in size by distance to rows of dolls.

The room was so large it was indecent.

A man's insignificance in this room was thrown up in his face.

Caradine began the long journey across the marble floor to the group of men and women clustered around the screens at the far end. No one tried to stop him. The rows of immobile guards were merely adornment leaving all work of security to ubiquitous police and plain-clothes men. His footfalls echoed from the marble, died and were lost in the vastness in a whimper. Ostentatiously, he took his gun out and let it dangle, gripped by the barrel. He could sense and appreciate the subtle understanding that now existed between himself and the moguls; he had beaten their security network, and so now they were waiting to see what he wanted.

No other method would have brought him, a mere civilian from an insignificant stellar grouping, into the inmost sanctum of proud and mighty Horakah.

This he had understood from the beginning. This he had

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worked for, and for this he had nearly died. The fear was still in him, a black tide lapping at the borders of his sanity. But he had to suppress it now, he had to maintain a brain so calm and cool that he could meet and match these coldly waiting moguls.

Two gaudily attired officers approached him and he handed over the Beatty with an air of condescension. He did not stop walking forward.

On those sprawling screens covering one end of the chamber he saw star patterns, etched segments of the galaxy. The men and women looking at the screens turned as he approached.

They were much as he had expected. Big men, fleshy, with powerful, ruthless faces, men cast from the same mold of power. Men like this had been used by him in the old days, used as his tools.

The shock of seeing Hsien Koanga and Allura was only slight. The moguls would bring those two here with amusement, interested to see his reactions.

He noticed the guards near them. He looked for Harriet. She was there.

His blood gave an almighty thump through his veins as she stepped forward. She was looking perfect. A golden sheath covered her glorious body and her hair had been sprayed into a silver tumble of curls. Her red lips smiled.

"At last you arrive, John Carter. We have been waiting for you."

Caradine paused. A confusing welter of dismay, fear, black anger and pitiful self-reproach grew and died in him.

"I thought—" he began.

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"Before we kill you, John Carter," Harriet Lafonde said with stroking feline savagery, "we would like to know why you have done what you have done."

XIV

"WHAT I did I did partly because of you," Caradine said. "I had the crazy and moon-struck notion that you might be in trouble. You could say I was attempting to rescue you."

It sounded infantile.

Hsien Koanga started. Allura, standing beside him, looked ill and defeated, her auburn hair heavy about her shoulders, her face masklike in indifferent hurt. Looking at her, Caradine made the mental comparisons and thought to ask after the third of these women so disastrously injected into his life:

"Those?" The man who spoke was merely one of the moguls; a man habituated to running the destinies of solar systems. "Watch. It may amuse you."

Caradine had been gazing at a tall wall screen where stars showed against blackness. Thinly settled, then. The air of expectant waiting was strong and he knew that these moguls were toying with him as the greater drama out there in the galaxy unfolded. Now he had only to turn his head to see the indicated screen.

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Greg Rawson's face showed on the screen. He was shouting in horror. Then his head disappeared and left only a charred, blood crisped stump of neck. Caradine could not be moved by crudities like that.

The screen shifted focus and he saw Sharon Ogilvie. She was falling. Her mouth was open but no sound came from it. Her long silvery hair streamed in the wind of her fall.

"They had been clumsily trying to enter a starship yard."

Sharon fell past rows of dark windows, past the upraised jibs of cranes like solemnly transfixed storks. Caradine was not prepared. Sharon fell on and then, abruptly, she had struck the hook of a crane which ripped into her stomach and left her dangling.

Allura gave a choked scream. Harriet turned to Caradine. "Are you satisfied now, John Carter?"

"I was under duress," he said mildly. The fear was turning into anger. "I did not break my word to you. I have done no spying on this accursed planet."

"Koanga says differently."

Caradine felt sorry for the little man from Shanstar.

"Koanga is a citizen of a small planetary grouping. He does what he must. All decent people must stand together against things like you."

A man's voice rapped from a speaker. "Approaching direct now. Nothing stops them. They do not return our fire."

A mogul answered.

Harriet said, "Your petty little groupings will come running to us when the danger strikes them. Out there—" she waved a vehement hand at the screens—"is a tremendous

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space fleet. We have checked with Ragnar and the Paragon League of Worlds. The fleet is not theirs."

"So it was true then?"

"This is an alien threat to all humanity, Carter. As a transport expert, I have been recalled to my home planet. I, too, am a mogul. Please don't forget that."

"I'm not likely to. Do the aliens answer radio calls?"

"No. They are heading straight for Alpha-Horakah."

"And nothing you can do can stop them!" shouted Allura. Everyone looked at her in astonishment.

"What do you want with me, then?" Caradine asked.

"Before we kill you we have to know what you have done. Shanstar is not truly represented by Koanga and you, just as Ahansic wasn't by Rawson. There are other factions."

"You mean that in face of the alien threat, you'll combine with the other interstellar groupings?"

"Yes."

"Well, at least that's something."

Koanga said heavily, "I do speak for Shanstar, Mrs. Lafonde. This man, John Carter, is not of Shanstar at all—"

"Not of Shanstar?" Harriet looked at Caradine hard.

"Well? Where?"

The speaker rapped again. "Acceleration has taken them through our screening forces."

"They're coming in!" screamed Allura.

Caradine felt sympathy for her. It was the end of life for her so the end of this planet held some consolation.

"Take these people away!" The mogul who had spoken before snapped his fingers. Guards moved.

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"Just a minute." Harriet must carry weight here. "I want to know about this man Carter's antecedents."

"Of what use is all this?"

"We can't stop the aliens, can we? So we spend the remaining time before they land keeping sane." Harriet had this mogul wrapped around her little finger.

She turned sharply on Caradine. "Well? Who are you? Where do you come from?"

Caradine was tired. He was sick of it all. It hadn't worked out as he'd planned. He was likely to get himself killed, and Harriet had turned out to be a blasted Horakah mogul. Very well. To hell with them all.

"My name's David Caradine," he said. "And I come from Earth."

"The man's an idiot," said the mogul. "Harriet, we must do something about the aliens."

"Such as? They've struck clean through our fleets. They haven't fired a shot. So they're coming here. We'll talk to them." To Caradine she said, "Caradine may be your name, but from Earth—"

The mogul's scowl darkened. "What's your interest in this man, Harriet?" His voice lost its smoothness, showed the ruthlessness beneath. "Are you in—"

Harriet laughed with a scorn that Caradine felt overdone. "With a maniac who claims to be from Earth? A man from a fairy story? A man who—"

The speaker rapped. "Latest intelligence reports show a further alien space fleet following in the wake of the first. There are now five hundred thousand starships on the way in."

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Everyone was quiet. The gravity of the situation could not be exaggerated. Horakah—even Ragnar and the good of PLW—could between them about muster that number. Caradine guessed that Harriet and her mogul friends had been relying on eventual Ragnar and PLW help; the big combines would fight off aliens. But now? Now things were different.

Now half a million aliens were rampaging in.

Activity caught up the party by the screens down at the far end of the gigantic room as a last desperate effort was organized. Caradine, Koanga, and Allura were shepherded to one side. Frightened guards stood over them. Electric tensions in the air sparked bad tempers. Harriet and the moguls were arguing. Caradine heard one of them refer to her, and then turn to the man she had talked most to.

“Well, Lafonde, it seems we cannot stop them.”

So that explained that!

Caradine looked about the depths of the chamber, trying to compress into these few dwindling minutes the touch and sight and sensation of a lifetime, through the barbaric splendor and luxury of this hall to seize on a slice of life that he had lived through fully and could remember.

For he knew that he was to die very soon.

The loftiness of chamber drew a blue-tinted mist among the groinings, and the walls fell in silver and golden magnificence that caught and reflected the glittering girl-figure of Harriet Lafonde. Thick drapes of emerald and crimson and electric blue shrouding secret doorways tossed pools of contrasting color into the vast hollowness. Everyone was in uni-

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form. Gorgeous, outrageous, suffocating, splendid in color and pomp and ceremony.

"A single alien has landed an air boat on Alpha-Horakah. Approaching Horak and floating palace."

"We're ready for them," Lafonde said uglily.

His wife said, "We talk, remember?"

"You can't do anything else!" shouted Allura savagely.

At least, considered Caradine, this place should impress whoever the aliens were. He had lost all hope for himself, now. Whichever side won, he looked to come out on the sticky end. "Earth!" they'd said, and pushed him aside like a child or a lunatic.

The deflation, the sickness, the utter weariness with it all in him blunted his perceptions, made him physically and mentally exhausted. Yet Allura looked in worse shape. He moved slowly, so that he was standing beside her. The guards did not stop him; everyone else's attention was fixed on the screen which showed row after row and rank after rank of glittering dots of light, each one a starship and each one a dreadnought of space. He touched Allura on the arm.

"Seems I was wrong about you, Allura."

"And me, you. Oh, well: These pigs will be finished along with us all. But it's a pity. I wanted so much from life, there was so much to do and see. And, Carter, or Caradine, I wanted you, too. There was no trickery."

"I believe you now." He said. "Now it's too late."

Out of them all, then, it would have been this girl with the heavy auburn hair and the alive face and the darting mind that cared not where it stabbed. He looked at her. She

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was haggard, heavy-eyed, parchment of face and slack of limb. Yet she would have been the one.

The speaker rapped. "Air boat touching locks."

"Let them in," said Lafonde.

There was nothing left then for any of them to do but wait.

Throughout the barbaric magnificence of that palace chamber men and women in gorgeous uniforms stood frozen before their mutual terror. What would come stalking in arrogance and might through the corridors of this floating wonderland, to challenge them and dictate the terms of an agreement? What would their fate be? A thousand solar systems' fate hung on the events of the next moments; possibly the fates of thousands more when the aliens sat back to consider what they would do with the other solar groupings here in this portion of the galaxy. Men could await them only with pride, ready to fight to the end knowing that the fight was doomed.

Caradine felt sorry for Horakah and the prestige and barbaric pomp of this setting. Without a shot being fired the aliens had won. Now their emissary was stalking haughtily into the inmost secret place of this floating kingpin city of Horak to dictate his terms.

The volume of noise dropped until Caradine could feel and hear the incessant throb of machinery in the marble beneath his feet.

A fanfare rang out. Brilliant, coruscating notes that battered at all ears. Through that mammoth archway appeared the alien envoy.

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He was a tiny black figure, there at that enormous distance away down at the other end of the room.

"Humanoid, at least," said Harriet in a breath.

The tiny figure approached slowly, the focal point of every eye. He looked like a man. He wore black shoes and striped trousers of black and silver and gray, and a tight black coat fitted snugly, making him look like a beetle. In his left hand, cocked up, he carried a cylindrical black object with a round brim. His white shirt was fastened at the throat by a white butterfly-shaped strip of cloth. He walked very slowly because he was old and fragile and his face was brown and lined, with deep-set eyes of gray that pierced forth beneath tufty white eyebrows. His hair was immaculately silver.

A very small and very old and very dignified gentleman walked carefully all that enormous distance across the flamboyant marble floor, between the flanking rows of guardsmen, beneath the hanging crystal chandeliers.

Harriet and her husband and all the other moguls tensed up.

This was not what they had expected.

The old gentleman stopped at last before them. He bowed very slightly, looking about, the shadow of puzzlement on his face.

Lafonde, big and burly and domineering, stepped a pace forward. "Here we are, to await you," he said. "Can you understand me?"

"Yes." The envoy was looking about. Then he glanced at his wrist.

"We await your terms. All the might of our suns, and the

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power of our allies, will fight you to the bitter end if we find your terms unacceptable. You are alive and admitted here merely because—”

“Because there are half a million battleships out there, which are the forerunners of the main fleets.”

Lafonde, all of them, accepted that. Lafonde swallowed and tried to speak again.

“Please be quiet,” said the little old man. “I did not come to see you.” He glanced up from his wrist and made a half turn. “All these fancy uniforms,” he grumbled to himself. He walked forward.

He stopped directly before Caradine.

“Hi, Dave,” he said. “I’ve come for you.”

“Hi, Dick. I might have known you couldn’t get on without me.”

“Terrible mess. You shouldn’t have done it. Ready?”

“Yes.” Caradine felt a new man. “Oh, I’m taking a couple of friends back, if they’ll go. One, at least.” He smiled at Allura. “Care to go to Earth with me, Allura?”

She put one hand in his. Something else settled, then.

The moguls were staring. They could not speak. All their might, their pomp, their barbaric splendor—it had not even been noticed. Just that it was a long walk for a man from the door. That was all.

Harriet put a hand to her mouth. “You mean,” she whispered, “there *is* an Earth? An Earth that can put half a million battleships out as a scouting force? My God. My God!”

No one took much notice of her.

Walking back to the overpowering doorway with the rul-

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ers of Horakah ignored, Caradine said conversationally, "I suppose young Carson Napier saw through me, Dick? Figured that I was sick of this aimless wandering, and so he called you in?"

"Something like that. A commonwealth of Suns may not be run by one man; but having the right man directing overall policy is a—well, we just need you back, Dave. That's all there is to it."

"But why—?" said Allura holding to his arm.

"Earth went through a rough time way back. Man called Caradine—remote ancestor, they tell me—decided she needed to recover without being subjected to extraterrestrial pressures. So the word was spread that the Earth had been destroyed, and that developed into the fairy story everyone here believed implicitly. Now, the Commonwealth Suns of Terra consists of a million solar systems."

Dick looked apologetic. "Nearer one and a half, now, Dave."

"And that's where we're going. We may come back here beyond the Blight, one day, and clean up all these little groupings. I've seen the mess they're in. That sort of pecking-order pseudo-civilization is not for Earth."

They left the palace and the barbarians. The space-tender took them to the waiting armada. Ahead lay a commonwealth of over one million stars—and the legendary world of Earth.

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