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THREE-CORNERED KNIFE

*He had two assignments—to protect
and kill the same man—with death
as the penalty if he failed either!*

by KENNETH BULMER



Illustrated by BOWMAN

TELL ME I should have known better, brother, and I'll open a mouth in your throat to laugh with. I took the job in good faith and got stuck with it.

They'd just found an air gun on Stanton Purvis—the slipshod fool had simply hidden it in a double pocket in his cloak—and the police had his arms doubled up his back and were bludgeoning him into the waiting wagon. He might have been only a very young aspirant, but nobody should be that stupid.



I stopped coming out of Rafferty's, with my last soldar still comfortably wedged in the toe of my boot, and stood in the doorway to watch. If Purvis was green enough to carry and be found carrying an unlicensed and illegal weapon—well, they needed men on the penal asteroids. And it lessened competition in my profession by exactly a unit.

The flics weren't being gentle with Purvis, and a couple of Company Aristos, out slumming, stopped by to see the fun. The Pool crowd outside Rafferty's was quiet, but their mood was like strange dog smell. They shared my view that Purvis was an idiot, but they didn't like to see him beaten up by police lackeys with a couple of Employed Aristos looking on.

I ducked back into the bar and slid onto a stool. Bucking Company men and the police was no game for me—unless I was paid for it.

SHE MUST have been reading my thoughts.

I didn't see where she came from. When she spoke she could have risen from the plastifloor for all I knew.

"You're Raphe Bartram." The way she said it made me feel like a boy from the wrong side of the spaceport.

"Could be." I stuck up a fin-

ger before I remembered my financial situation, and Rafferty brought my usual. Bang went my last soldar.

"I'm Susan Weymouth," she said. "I've got a job for you."

"That's nice," I said. "You're this Weymouth dame like I'm Napoleon Bonaparte." I waved an arm. "But no matter. Proceed."

She flushed a trifle, enough so that the lights in her eyes did things to her face. She was a real looker, and the rest of her was even harder to look away from. Those violet eyes of hers were staring pointedly at my glass. I sighed in resignation and stuck up another finger. Rafferty obliged.

She said: "Mr. Bartram. I need your help very badly. I wish to engage your services, professionally, but . . ." She paused. Her slender fingers played with her glass.

In my profession you get used to that. Even today, with civilization blooming among the stars, with the great Monopolies and the Companies—and the Pool—, people hate to make the plunge when they want a case handled quietly. It's just human nature, I suppose. Typically, it never shows more markedly than when a traditionally Company Employed or an Aristo is forced to make a deal with one of the Pool. What she was, what

she represented, was something I could never have unless I wall-ed up my own personality in a Company job wearing a Company badge and using a Company mind.

That's why I tell folks I don't need an office. Truth, of course, is that I don't need one. The big boys in the business, like Granger, Shostache, and G. W., have palatial office suites to impress the peasants. Me, I stick to Rafferty's and a black-bordered insert in the Directory.

The muffled cough of the mid-day rocket drifted down, mingling with the clinking sounds in the bar. She roused herself, took a sip, stared at me. "Listen, Mr. Bartram. I need your services. I cannot pay much . . . That is—I am not a rich woman." She finished the drink without looking at me. "But this case must be handled by an expert."

In my profession you quickly learn not to let the peasants who employ you make you sick to your stomach. They pay. They want quick, clean jobs. No questions. Above all, none of the dirt. But this girl didn't look that sort—and then I cursed myself for a sentimental dodderer. You never can tell. The subconscious sprouts monstrosities.

"Who?" I asked quietly.

"My brother—" She put a hand to her mouth, then, with

the realization that her own identity could no longer be concealed. After the rocket it was very quiet in the bar.

"Your own brother," I said.

"I—that is—someone wants to kill him. I want you to be his bodyguard."

That threw me off balance.

"Hey, sister. Hold on. I don't handle bodyguard jobs. They take too long. Why don't you go to the professionals? Kramer, Tsiu Luin, Shield Bearers Inc.—they're all available."

"Mr. Bartram. Have you heard of George Wotan Caron III of Caron Spacecraft?" At my nod she went on: "He is my brother. Someone is out to kill him—legally or illegally. I cannot tell you any more unless you agree to work for me." I started to say something but she cut me off. "Wait a moment, please. I have my allowance, a few jewels. My fortune is tied up, tight. Ready money in sufficient quantity is hard to come by. It's often that way in wealthy families. I looked in the Directory, found your name and recommendations, and made a decision."

Her softly deceptive mouth was firm and unsmiling. "I realized that you were a man who could be hired within my resources. You looked to be the best I could hope for. If you don't take the job I cannot pay a professional bodyguard."

I felt injured. I kept my voice level and impersonal. I said: "So you come to the cheapjack, is that it? You think you can buy me cheap, so you come here slumming in the Pool, wearing an assumed name, and hope to drive me into working for you under the prod of a fluttering eyelash and a Fifth Avenue corset. Sorry, sister. No deal."

HER HAND came 'round quite slowly to my eyes. I even glimpsed the time by her finger-watch. 1325. Then her palm tried to go on through my cheekbone and I let out an indignant yell.

"Hey! You don't hit the hired help!"

Then she was dabbing at the gash on my face where the finger-watch had excavated; the slip of synthisilk got spotted with blood.

I smiled at her, wearily.

"Sorry. Guess I asked for that one, Miss Caron."

"It was my fault." She wadded the handkerchief away. "I told you the truth, but not very graciously." Her eyes met mine, fleetingly, then she became deadly serious again, her face clouding with the fear that pressed her.

"You must help me. Please."

I hesitated. "Why doesn't *he* hire pro bodyguards? It's a legitimate business expense."

She leaned forward, breathing a little harshly. "George—doesn't know, and mustn't know. But if he is killed, the family and the Company will be ruined. I can't tell you the details. But please, please help me."

I tried once more. "Doesn't he have personal guards on salary?"

"That's part of the problem. I don't trust them. You don't think I'd be asking your help if I thought they were capable of protecting him, do you?"

I guess old Adam was no fool. When he took that bite of apple he had his eyes open to the main chance. Like me. Big, tough, blustery, Wing-Knife Raphe Bartram. Hell—she had me wound around her little finger.

"All right, Miss Caron. I'll bodyguard for your brother. It'll cost you two thousand soldars."

She began to laugh. Reaction and relief, I thought.

Then: "Two thousand! I had no idea your fees were so reasonable, Mr. Bartram."

I bit my tongue from keeping the retort in my head. Her "little allowance" was probably a thousand workers' yearly salaries per month. "Sketch the picture." I sighed.

"I do not intend to tell you the motives behind this. My brother is the mainstay of the family. There is a man—a man called Azo—who would take

over control of the Company if my brother were to die. George has just returned from Centauri. His life is in danger from the moment he left the starship until he can reach the plant in Cleveland and—and finish up some business there. After that, I feel sure the opposition will have failed.”

While she was talking I had absently signalled Rafferty for another. Now he stood just out of easy earshot glowering at me. I sighed again. I lifted up my right foot and began carefully to work off my boot. I had to wiggle a little to pull my foot out, because the steel support bar running from toe to heel made the sole rigid. There was a hole in the artificial-fiber sock—that showed how long since it had been I'd bought clothes. I pulled the soldar out and tossed it on the counter. Rafferty lifted his lips and let me see his molars.

“Mister Bartram!” She sounded offended. “Do you usually take your boots off in public, before a lady?”

“Only when I go to the bank,” I said.

She wrinkled her nose.

“What spaceport?” I asked, wiggling the boot back on.

“Prestwick. He had to use the regular starlines. His own starship was sabotaged.”

I considered this. “Prestwick. Cleveland. Oh, Miss Caron—

that two thousand was my fee. Expenses on top of that.”

She pouted. “All right, chiseler. But you won't have to go to Prestwick. George is on his way to Cleveland now, stopping over in New York. Here.” She drew a handful of soldars from her bag and threw them rattling across the counter. “I'll buy you that drink.”

I stopped doubling up my foot and took the boot off again. I scooped up some of the money, dropped it in, and shoved the boot back on. “Thanks. Now scram and let me get to work. New York ain't in the next block.”

She stood up with the grace of a column of wine.

I decided not to look too closely at her. They don't make them like that around the Pool.

“I'll see that your check is sent to the Guild.” She went out. I'd swear I heard silver trumpets sounding a fanfare.

Rafferty lounged over, leered and said: “In the big time now, hey, Wing-Knife?”

“Yeah.”

I picked up the soldars, let a few dribble through my fingers onto the wet counter. “This'll clear my bill. I ought to take a regular office. Why should I bring you customers?”

He gave me his snaggle-toothed guffaw. “Maybe some of your clients don't like too much

publicity, hey, Wing-Knife?"
"Could be." I stood up, wriggled my toes into a comfortable grip around the soldars, and went out. Overhead the sky was massing with clouds beyond the crisscrossing traffic ramps and a few skycars were beetling for cover before the scheduled 1340 rain shower. I slung my cape forward, pulled the cord tight, and began to walk.

JUST OUTSIDE the Pool area, where cracked concrete pavements stop and the strips begin and life jumps forward half-a-dozen centuries, Central Records throws a hundred-story chunk of unlovely architecture at the sky. I went in as the first drops of rain fell hissing, and dialed History. An hour later I knew quite a bit about the love-lives and deaths of the Caron family—and about how their personal fortunes had all been neatly tied up when the old man died, leaving the Company to be handled by George Wotan Caron III with his two sisters as sort of provided-for furniture. I wondered which of the two was the one who had hired me, Alicia or Helen. They didn't sound the sort of family anyone living in the Pool would want to own as relatives. But then, a steady income—either earned or inherited—did that to people.

Outside, the rain had stopped,

and I decided to take a quick drink before hitting the strat for New York. I could see the black bulks of the solar power stations ringing the city. Rather, I could feel their omnipresent majesty pressing almost personally upon my spirit—their hungering strength stark against a blue-washed sky, with the sun blinding off their serried upturned bowls like a field of flowers. Which beautiful thought reminded me that I could now afford to get my personal flier out of hock.

Standing at the top of the ornate steps, luxuriating in the thought of a smoke, I noticed a wide-eyed Pool arab, all fluid motion and fluttering rags, cower away with a black hating look across my shoulder. I put my hand under my cloak for my cigarette case before turning, and two policemen closed quietly and quickly upon me. I looked at them in silent disgust.

Deliberately, I took out the case, selected a selfig and drew in. I didn't quite dare let the smoke out towards them in a contemptuous puff. Not when I was on a case. One flic quartered me from the rear, hand near belt holster. The other spoke to me quite pleasantly.

"Identity card, peasant."

I took out the transparent plastic and showed them.

"Rape Bartram, hey?" He

flicked his thick fingers over my body, found my knife case. His face went stiff.

I took out my Assassin's license.

"Let's see." He wasn't gentle about taking the case. He would have bent the hinges if I hadn't released the clasp. The two of them stared down at my four knives, each with its long slender blade, winged quillons and straight, narrow haft. Their faces would have done duty for a pole-axed cow.

"What are you doing out of the Pool Area, peasant?"

"Visiting Central Records," I said. You don't bandy words with the police.

"Licensed to carry four knives." He sounded as though he were sniffing an open sewer. "I think we'll have a little better look at you, Bartram. Turn out your pockets."

"What, here, on the steps of—"

The other flic backhanded me casually across the face. His knuckles opened the scratch the Caron girl had carved. Blood ran down my chin. "Turn 'em out, quick!"

I began to lay my gear out on the stone steps.

They watched like boys eager to step on a spider, yet awaiting some inner signal to begin. First I put the cigarette case down, then a pack of tissues, my steel

folding footrule, my ball-point and pencil, notebooks—which were blank—and a dog-eared collection of visiting cards. The goons read through each one. They were all different. When my wallet went down they pounced on it. Inside was the usual government rubbish: driving license, medical history, certificate of non-employable status, birth certificate, the usual paper-chase that keeps a million zombies working and in funds.

"This creep stinks to me, Jock," said the first flic.

"Open him up," said Jock.

They did. They pried in every corner and seam of my clothes. They found my dark glasses which I'd forgotten. When they reached the steel supports in my shoes they made rude remarks but passed them over. I wasn't exactly worried, but I wasn't too happy, either. This was the normal sort of reception any non-employed received if he stuck his head outside the Pool, especially just outside. But it got up my nose, all the same.

Finally they shoved all my stuff over with their flat feet and sneered a little, did a spot of chest bulging, and strutted off. I kept a straight face and retrieved my possessions.

I was careful with the knife license. I didn't want to go the way Purvis had for carrying an unlicensed weapon — although

the blot never should have thought he could get away with it, and with an illegal projectile weapon, too. Only Employees and Aristos are allowed to carry real weapons—flame-guns, needle-squirts and suchlike. The seething mass of putrescence that lives and breeds in the Pool may be shot on sight if seen wearing a weapon. Without a license, that is.

Being an Assassin gave me the dubious privilege of being allowed to carry knives. It didn't make me exactly popular on either side of the economic fence.

ONCE you concede the notion that a pool of unemployed is necessary to the well-functioning of the economic system, then you're bound to end up with the traditionally employed and the festering mob of the traditionally unemployed.

Just a simple matter of finding a job in a keenly cut-throat economic society. But where automation makes jobs precious and trade unions struggle merely for existence—and when all industry has resolved itself around a few giant monopolies across the world and the little man is so little his squeak when he is squashed is inaudible—well, finding a job isn't so simple.

Not that I'd have wanted to wear the badge of any of the great Companies—Caron in-

cluded. I've always, perhaps fatuously, prided myself on being the independent sort. But then, I'd never had to try to land a job. If I had, I might feel differently.

I got my belongings back in place and wiped the blood from my cheek, with a silent curse at the departed flics. I ran down the steps and headed for the nearest bar. The urchin I'd noticed before scampered after me. Just as I realized he'd been waiting for me, and had faded on the arrival of the police, his piping voice caught my full attention.

"Hey—Wing-Knife! Wing-Knife—I gotta talk to you."

I swung round so fast he almost fell over his own rags pulling up. His thin face was all eyes and mouth. His hands and feet seemed enormous until you noticed the sticklike leanness of his limbs. "Well?"

"I'm Tommy Ardizzioni."

"Rudolf Ardizzioni's boy." Ardizzioni was in the same trade as I was. He was a good egg, a fine knife-fighter, and we often farmed out heavy assignments to each other. His mistake was getting married. "How's your mother?" I said.

"Ma's all right. It's my father. He's pretty bad. He wansta see you, Wing-Knife."

I cursed under my breath. I didn't hesitate, however. A Guild brother is a Guild brother no

matter how inconvenient it may be. Especially if it's inconvenient, in fact.

"Lead on, Tommy. I'm right with you."

"Gee, Wing-Knife!" Something was shining in his too-large eyes. "Ma said you'd come!" And he darted off confidently, not bothering to look round to see if I was following.

Walking back into the Pool was like walking into a mid-summer street from an air-conditioned lobby. We passed the outer fringe of broken shreds of humanity and penetrated into the secret, inner recesses where some of the chronically unemployed have little parks laid out, with flowers carefully tended, and where they luxuriate—if they're lucky—in thirty minutes' sunshine a day. The Ardizzionis lived on the seventieth floor of a building that should have been condemned at the end of the century. It probably had been, but no one cared. The pneumo-lift gave me the willies going up. I was stuck half a day in one once with a claustrophobic bearded lady.

Rudolf Ardizzioni was in a bad way. Someone—probably Greta, his wife—had cleaned the wound and spread neoflesh over it. The damage was deeper than that, though, and Ardizzioni's face was gray and drawn, each hair of his two-day beard a mi-

nute spear point. They were relieved to see me.

"I'm no doctor, Rudy," I said, sitting on the edge of the bed. The wall at my back was cracked and plaster flaked down every time a rocket passed. "How can I help?"

His pale lips moved tiredly. "I was on a job—a good one. Thought it was easier than it was."

"So you got carved. Plenty of brothers do."

"Yeah. Yeah, Wing-Knife, guess you're right."

He made a little grimace and moved awkwardly on the bed. Greta moved with a starchy rustle, smoothed out the clothes, held his hand for a brief contact.

"So you want me to take over the contract, hey, Rudy? Well, it's not exactly convenient right now; but if it can humanly be done, you know I'll do it."

His face tried to smile. His eyes glittered with the onset of fever. "Thanks, Wing-Knife. I knew I wouldn't have to ask. It's easy, all right—" then he stopped.

I laughed harshly. "It looks easy."

"Client told me the subject's guards weren't worth a busted drive-plate. They turned out plenty tough." He winced, either at memory or present pain. "I gotta have the money, for Greta and the kids, and the new one,

and you know what clients are like. . . . But the pay's pretty good and we'll split, natch."

"Sure." I glanced at Greta. She was staring at Ardizzioni with the world in her eyes. This would be her fifth—or was it sixth? "So you need the cash—who doesn't—and no client will pay until the subject he's paying for is all properly tied up and affidavit-ed. Righto, Rudy. I'll take the case. You've my word on it as a Guild brother. Shoot me the info fast."

There was an appreciable lightening of tension in the room. They'd been metaphorically holding their breath, and now, on my acceptance in such a way that I could not break my word, the suspense-held breaths whooshed out like spring rivers unfreezing. Ardizzioni began to speak.

And in no words flat the rosy atmosphere of friendship that had built up dissipated in clanging strokes of laughter that resounded in my head.

"They ain't a lot of work around the Guilds right now, as you probably know, Wing-Knife. I was plenty glad to get this job. Big Company business that they didn't want handied by the Company trade. Secrets get out there, you know, Guild silence and all. Fella wanted the business for George Wotan Caron III."

THE ROOF and walls seemed, suddenly, to contract. It grew difficult to breathe. Someone was banging at my heart with a sledgehammer and stuffing up my nostrils with cottonwool. This should happen to me, Wing-Knife Bartram, the slickest in the business.

It should happen to a dog.

"But," I started. Then stopped. There was nothing to say.

They were looking inquiringly at me. I could guess at their thoughts. In my profession your word is your bond. Otherwise, how could you trust anybody?

A few centuries of concrete-encased corpses in the river and suchlike when people who did not keep their word—a workable, practical, scientific method soon evolves based entirely on word-of-mouth promise.

"Here's a drink, Raphe," Greta said, holding out a plastic goblet. "It's good stuff. A friend's father brews it in the basement. Health."

"May you be jobless," I responded automatically, and downed the stuff. It was no more burning than my thoughts.

"This character came into Prestwick," Ardizzioni went on talking through the interruption. "That's where I tried it, copped this wound and came on home. Only just made it. Now he's tak-

ing the strat to New York. Business there, before going on to Cleveland."

"Okay," I said. I was trying to force some life into my mind, to unscramble the thinking muscle. "Who's paying?"

"Guy who hired me tried to remain incognito. Aristo. Stunk of it. I did a spot of checking—fellow called Azo. Works for Caron. Knock off the boss—presto, he's in. Simple."

"That's how we earn our living," I said, thinking. "But it isn't as simple as that. All right." I stood up. "Forget about it. Look after yourself, and Greta. I'll call you sometime."

"Thanks, Wing-Knife," they were saying as I took that dangerous pneumo-lift contrivance down.

I'm not a vindictive man. In my profession you can't afford to be. And I wasn't thinking as much of what had been done to Ardizzioni as of my own peace of mind, when I stopped the pneumo-cage halfway and drove the contraption back up. They were still standing as I'd left them.

"Rudy," I called from the door. "Who were the guards? His own?"

"No. I was surprised. He'd hired Shield Bearers."

"Thanks. I'll remember."

Ardizzioni had said there was not much work around the Pool:

that was something I knew all too well, and a very strong reason for taking on the job of bodyguard. And Rudolf Ardizzioni was known as a good workman. Me—well, I claim to be the slickest in the business. So it wasn't too wild an improbability that our lines of occupation should cross and tangle. But it was damned inconvenient.

Coming out of the building I noticed a flier. They were rare in the Pool. Probably Aristos out getting a big charge from watching the scum below. It reminded me that not only could I get my flier out of hock, I could even get the batteries charged. That didn't cheer me up any.

Crossing the last choking alleyway and swinging wide past a blackened shell of a building that had exploded a year or so back, I headed across the weed-encrusted court. Kids were playing Venusian jungle games. A black flier was standing motionless by the curb. As I went on by the door opened.

A man got out. He had a gun in his fist.

He said: "Step inside, Mr. Bartram."

I didn't say anything. I stepped inside.

ALL I COULD see at first was the hole in the end of the gun. I didn't want my gravestone to fall on me from that tiny open-

ing. Then my eyes adjusted and I saw the man's padded shoulders under the gilding and the way his cloak was carelessly flung back, exposing a costly synthivelvet doublet. He also wore a brilliant reflecting domino. Aristo.

The girl had a black veil across her face and only her eyes, deep, penetrating blue, told me anything about her. But they told plenty. Here was one of the *femmes fatales* you see on the stereos. Her body was shapeless in some monochrome cloak.

The man said: "I'll make this short. You're Raphe Bartram. We hired Ardizzioni and he fell down. He tells us you're handling the contract for him. But you'll do this job right, just like it was a regular business deal."

"I didn't come here to be insulted," I said, ignoring just how I had got there. "What's in it for me?"

"What should be in it for you? You're taking over from another man. The fee we agreed on will be paid. Scared you won't make it this time?"

They'd heard of me all right. Probably they knew I was good. And they were desperate enough to pull off a stunt like this in daylight. But then—for Employeds and Aristos—it was no stunt.

"Bartram," the girl said. And that was where I heard her voice

for the first time. Husky, vibrant, alluring. The sort of voice you'd hear through the express rocket taking off for Mars. And I was sunk. Scuppered.

"We want him dealt with tidily," the big guy was saying. I surfaced and took in the conversation again. "We're rather particular about that. No mess. And—we'll pay you a bonus of a hundred soldars — which should satisfy you."

If I hadn't had to both kill and protect the same character, I'd have been chuckling. After all, this was the way I earned my living. And no unprofessional conduct would have been involved—I could have knocked off this second case and then gone on to meet Caron at New York. I could have breezed through it and still maintained my reputation as an honest businessman. But when both cases were the same man?

"Make it two hundred and it's a deal."

"Haggling," the girl said. Her voice made it a throbbing sound of pure beauty.

"Hundred and fifty," the Aristo said.

"Two hundred."

"Hundred and seventy-five and not a soldar more. This is a bonus, don't forget."

"All right. Hundred and seventy-five. A deal." I drew myself up in the confines of the

flier. A delicious scent was all about me. The girl seemed to be floating in a rosy cloud of perfume. I made the formal declaration. "The word of a member of the Guild of Assassins is his bond. I shall not fail you and remain alive and unwounded."

"So I should think," grumbled the man I had decided must be Azo. "We'll pay your check through the Guild offices with Ardizzioni's." He seemed to make up his mind and went on: "And remember, cheapskate, we're only using you because we're hard up. Don't get big ideas of opening up your own office and moving into the Company trade."

I didn't bother to reply. That last remark was in keeping with the rest. So they wanted a guy knocked off, just as many people did every day. And, like anyone else, they'd approached an accredited member of the Guild of Assassins. That meant that, if discovered, they would pay no penalty, run no risks. It was a purely routine business transaction. But this couple were Aristos; why hadn't they gone to one of the big Employed Assassin firms specializing in the Monopoly business? Why come to Ardizzioni and me, small time bums working out of a tavern on the fringe of the Pool? Money? It was the only excuse they'd offered, and it was a

feeble one by any standards.

I still hadn't dared think what I was going to do.

"One last thing, Bartram." The girl was speaking and I had to concentrate on her words through the distraction of listening to her voice. "We're paying you and registering this deal with Assassins' Guild Records. That puts us all in the clear." Her eyes flashed at me in the gloom of the flier. "But just remember—if you goof off on us we'll carve you methodically, efficiently—and very messily. Understood?"

I didn't bother to explain that you couldn't hire an assassin to take care of a Guild brother. That's where the Bodyguards' Lodge come in. I just looked at her. What I saw convinced me that they'd find a way to get me if they wanted to.

I said: "I understand."

The guy opened the door and I got out.

Which was the end of the first part of a beautiful friendship. I could see the dame spelled trouble. Like most of her sex, she'd been born to it. I began to wonder if Azo was the real brains of the outfit trying to oust Caron from his job. Women, incidentally, provide a great proportion of the work for my profession. I stood moodily kicking the flagstones, watching the flier climb out of the Pool





area and join the homeward bound procession skittering above the flying ramps, and thinking about it.

After all, the Assassins and the Bodyguards only grew up as it became more and more difficult to keep an organized rein on commerce. Geriatrics meant that one man could handle the affairs of a combine for fifty years or more, gathering more power into his hands each year. By the time the world ran out of easily available power, with coal worn as costly jewelry and nucleonics dying from strangulation, an iron-bound rigidity held the economic machinery in thrall. Either you were Employed and wore a Company badge; you were Unemployed and didn't, which meant you scraped a bare living around the Pool; or you were like me, and lived on your wits.

And my wits had led me into contracting, under a legally binding form, both to protect and kill the same man.

I went in for a drink.

A LITTLE business I had to complete in the Pool made me miss Caron in New York. Contacts I have there are able to turn out Company badges and uniforms at an hour's notice—hell, they could forge a G.M. share certificate—but even so I was late and had to trail up to Cleveland on the shuttle. It was

raining but no one seemed to know if it was Weather-controlled or just normal. No one seemed to care.

I barrelled into Caron's hotel with my Company badge stiff and sneering on my cloak. The lobby was full of the usual hotel lobbyites and I bee-lined through them to the bar and hid behind a double Scotch. I was safe there as long as I didn't try to use the private bar—I couldn't risk an identity check there.

Touching the Caron insignia made me wonder if I'd been a fool to chance it. But the feel of the gun against my belt comforted me. I don't believe in guns. They make too much noise and, if they're nucleonic, they're far too spectacular. But, assuming that I had to work through the protection racket first, this would prove useful.

What I was going to do about the situation was still part so far of an unpredictable future. I just wanted to grab this Caron guy away someplace quiet and think things out.

Presently a stir circulated in the hotel and what looked like a flying wedge of ball-players swept out of the elevators and went like a whisk broom through the lobbies and out onto the street. Talk about crew cuts and bull necks!

My man was a bouncy ball of nerves, balding, with a slim

brief case and baggy trousers. He had useful shoulders, accentuated by the Centaurian flare of his cape. He was easy to spot from my position above the flying wedge although to anyone on the same level he would have been invisible. I threw a soldar on the bar and took off.

I caught the gratuitous information from a lobbyite that Caron was on his usual evening constitutional. Being clever, I had to check that, and spent the next half hour tailing him as he marched briskly around and around the block. I planned on infiltrating that flying wedge on its inward leg. It wasn't too easy; but the Caron cloak and badge and my own outward appearance helped and we went up in the elevators in a chummy bunch. The guards assumed I had a message, and, by playing it carefully, I didn't get close enough to Caron to be able to deliver it.

We all went through to an anteroom. Here the guards began to peel off until three of the roughest and toughest were left. One turned to me as I kicked the door shut.

"What's on your mind, bub? You from the plant?"

"Sure, pal," I said, mimicking his speech. "Got a message for Mr. Caron."

Caron lifted his head, the bald spot shining. "Let's have it

then," he said, in a voice which oozed exec.

"Private," I said.

The guard who had been standing a little to one side now moved forward. I had a hazy idea I knew his face from somewhere; it wouldn't be surprising if these were men from Shield Bearers Inc. That this worked both ways hit me suddenly as he said: "Well, well, well. If it isn't Wing-Knife himself. Fancy meeting you here."

THAT was his mistake. No doubt he was trying to impress Caron with his personal toughness. Caron glanced up, startled. All the same, it was a mistake.

I kicked the smart guard in the groin. Immediately I dropped flat and the blackjack the other guard threw went over my head. I lashed back with my foot, caught an ankle, and dragged the guard over on top of me. The third Shield Bearer danced around, a blur in the corner of my eye. I jabbed a thumb in the bottom character's neck and twisted. He went limp. I jackknifed, swung from the floor as I came up, smeared the last guy's chin over his forehead. He fell on Caron. They all fell to the floor. I was the only one standing. I felt like a Sunday School kid in a tableau.

Hauling Caron to his feet I showed him the point of my

knife. Then his eyes tried to play billiards as I let the point lie against his throat, resting on the Adam's apple.

He gulped. "Assassin?" he asked. He had guts.

"Sure," I said. "Sure. But you're not booked yet." I prodded him to a chair and he sat as though in a dentist's extractor. "Know a fellow called Azo?" I asked.

"Yes."

"Friend of yours?"

"Yes."

"How dumb can you get, brother?"

"You don't mean—I don't believe it! I've made him everything he is today!" Caron's face went bleak. "He owes me everything."

"That's typical. Now don't get maudlin, and listen. Your sister—"

"My sisters—what have they got to do with it?"

"Shut up. Close the mouth and open the ears. Your sister hired me to wet-nurse you, more or less. She doesn't trust your guards. Oh, I know you hired Shield Bearers' little guardian angels—and now you've seen how useful they are."

He looked around at the littered floor. I'd swear a quirk pulled at his lips. "Very instructive."

"I checked with your sister. I'm not going into details, broth-

er, but you're in very hot water. I've been hired to dispose of you, as well as to look after you. You're causing me quite a bit of bother, one way and another. Personally, you don't mean a thing to me. It just happens I don't like to see dirty play, even among you Aristos. And I mean to collect, both ways, and retain my professional honor."

"What are you going to do?" He didn't sound afraid, just interested.

I told him what I was going to do, and what he had to do. It didn't take long, although my plan was somewhat tricky. There were a lot of ways in which it could go wrong, especially if he didn't cooperate. But even though it had come to me in a flash of inspiration, I knew that hours of thought would never produce anything better—and I didn't have hours, anyway.

This had to work.

Caron stared at me, wide-eyed. "I never heard of anything so cold-blooded," he protested. "I won't—"

I felt myself going stiff. I couldn't do anything about it. I slapped him hard across the face, twice, once forwards and once backhanded. I didn't move the knife a millimeter. "You have damned little choice! We're all in this business to earn a living. It's his turn today, mine tomorrow. These guards adorn-

ing your carpet wouldn't have stopped killing me because of sympathy."

"Just business," he said through puffy lips.

"All right." I took the knife away. "See to it. The showdown'll be at the plant. You'd better have some flics on hand, too."

"Isn't there some other way—" he began.

"Maybe there is," I cut him off rudely. "But we're playing it this way. I want Azo to pay up, for personal reasons. After that—he's all yours." How could I explain to this upper-crusty Aristo about Assassins' honor, and how Rudy Ardizzioni needed the cash for the new baby? He'd string along, or else.

They let me out through the anterooms easily enough on a casual say-so from Caron. Down in the lobby I dropped in for a quick drink. The glass was half-way to my lips when a hand reached over and caught my arm. I turned angrily to stare into the ugly face of Azo.

"What's the idea, Fatso?" I said sharply.

He *was* fat, too, without the mask. His lips moyed nastily. "I thought the idea was for you to take care of him. Looks to me as though you're fumbling."

"I'm handling this job. Suppose you let me do just that?"

"It's got to be done quick.

At the plant he'll be safe."

That brought me up quivering. But there might be things Azo didn't know, I reminded myself.

"I'm going to do it there, though."

"You'd better be right. He's got to be knocked off."

I was about to be rude to him when the flying wedge sireded through the lobby. He whispered fiercely: "Get him tonight—or you'll be carved." Then he turned on his heel and loped off after the Caron circus.

CHAPTER III

THEY WERE headed out to the plant by the lake, and from what I'd gathered, once inside that place you were in a separate kingdom. I trailed them by half an hour, and used the Caron cloak and forged credentials to ease past the gate guards. Inside, the place was like a labyrinth, with shops and furnaces and assembly plants scattered clear down to the Lake. I went straight towards the central administrative office and found a ball in progress. The noise of drinking and singing and canned music drowned out the distant clang of machines.

At the door a character with a belly stopped me.

"No one in here tonight below executive rank, bud," he

said, enjoying pushing people around. I didn't bother to argue with him. The little grooves around his nostrils told me he'd as soon bust me in the face as say another word. I turned away, seeing beyond him the bank of elevators and weirdly dressed people waiting. I had to get in—even if I didn't like the method.

I found a pay phone and called information. The robot said: "Which Miss Caron, sir?"

That stumped me. Which was the one who had hired me, Alicia or Helen?

I had to chance it, and guessed alphabetically.

The phone rang. Then a woman's voice: "Miss Alicia Caron's apartment. Who is this?"

"I'd like to speak to Miss Caron personally, please."

"I'm afraid that is not possible. She is dressing for the ball tonight. Who shall I tell her is calling?"

I sweated. If it was the wrong dame, I'd be thrown out of the plant—or worse.

"Tell her I'm doing a job, a personal job, for her. One with not much money in it," I said at last. "She'll understand."

"Very well." The maid sounded disapproving.

A few heartbeats and a lot of sweat later I heard a click. A voice said: "Bartram?"

My mind did a flop-over, fried

crisply and seasoned with salt and pepper. I swallowed. *That voice*—husky, controlled, putting an unscratchable itch just below the collarbone— Hell, what was *she* doing, wanting her brother knocked off?

"I need to get into the clam-bake tonight, honey," I said, working hard to keep my voice from shattering. "I want an in."

"How did you know I'd hired you?" She sounded worried.

"My job," I lied. "Do I get in?"

"All right." She thought. I could hear her breathing, softly and steadily against the mouth-piece. My hand holding the ear-piece trembled. "A pass will be waiting for you in the name of Krewson," she said finally. "And don't fall down on it tonight. Stay away from the liquor."

"If you're there I will," I leered.

She cut the connection. Giving her ten minutes, I went back to the gate. The Krewson gag got me in and I went upstairs. I had to check the gun in at the desk, though.

I'd heard of these chummy get-togethers before. When a man is supreme master of thousands of working people, running a system of factories covering square miles, handling millions of dollars daily—luxury is just a commodity. The government, moral practice, social cus-

tom—nothing is sacred. Anything—literally anything—is possible for him. When to get to speak to the man who wipes the tenth vice-president's nose takes three weeks and a dozen ante-rooms, meetings may be held in perfect safety, meetings that defy the bacchanalian imaginations of medieval romancers. I walked into the superb crystal room and, for the first time in a very long while, saw a sight that clogged the breath in my throat.

Science had been pressed into service, too. A Company that made auto and flier parts, radios and refrigerators on the side, as well as turning out its branded spaceships, had the pick of engineers and technicians leaving universities all over the system. That power had turned this great hall into a fairyland of wonder, of hidden fluorescents that called forth blends of color that the next moment were lost in the blaze of brilliant new compositions. Sound washed from concealed speakers in hi-fi amplification that allowed a whispered word to be clearly heard. Robot waiters scurried everywhere. Automatic servers scuttered to and fro bearing wine and liquor and fruits. I stood for a long moment, dazed by the sounds and sights, the heat and scents, the swirling chiaroscuro of naked shoulders and pirouetting feath-

ers and the gleam of gems.

Then I went quickly into the mad throng and found a drink.

ALMOST at once Alicia Caron was at my side, her body sheathed in some synthisilk thing that hid nothing. Her voice, resonant behind a gem-encrusted domino, was urgent with fear and desperation.

"Bartram, you must finish him tonight! You've delayed and delayed—God, why didn't I go to a reputable firm?"

"You didn't have the money, sister, remember?"

"I should have pawned my jewelry."

It's nothing to an Assassin what the clients' motives are. But the idea that the two sisters were so diametrically opposed intrigued me. One wanted him killed. The other wanted him alive. The way I'd got this set up, Alicia was coming out with the sticky end. I wondered where Helen was. She'd be around, that was for sure.

"I'll do the job," I said. "Where is he?"

"In his private bar. He hates this sort of thing, the namby-pamby idiot! I'd suggest you—"

"Leave the suggestions to me, sister," I said, meaning more than that. "Where is this hidey hole?"

"You can't get in there. Guards stop everyone they don't

know personally. That's why I've been—"

"I see. Well, point me in that direction and push."

It wasn't a straight walk there. I had to dodge laughing girls and half-drunk men, avoid prancing lines of singing people, duck beneath wildly tossed showers of artificial blossoms. And all the time I could see Alicia's liquid eyes, hating me behind the mask. I staggered a little, to blend into the background—and then Helen, the first sister I'd met in this crazy family, caught my arm.

"Look after him, Bartram," she whispered. "I'm afraid—" She stopped, and then said: "What did my sister want?"

"Passing the time of day," I said affably.

"Watch him when he leaves his private rooms. . . ." Giggle gas balloons plopped and we walked away from the sweet scent. Seeing Helen, with her sister's white-hot image still burning my retinas, made me wonder what I'd seen in her at Rafferty's. She was pale, eclipsed, by the contrast. And yet—she was wonderfully, vibrantly alluring still.

"I'll look after him, honey," I said. I decided not to tell her about my plan. She just might make a slip and give it away. Sure, I liked the girl, and I liked Alicia: but my loyalty lay with

Rudy Ardizzioni and his wife, people like myself, from the Pool. They were the ones I was faking up this whole situation for. Aristos! Bah!

Maybe I *was* just the hired help, but I chucked Helen Caron under the chin, told her to cheer up, and watched as she was swept up by carousing Aristo youths from a giddy zambo line. She went, leaning voluptuously to the music.

Negotiating the party was a strenuous business. I was propositioned three times and had five drinks in me before I won through. But I made it. I came out onto a tiny balcony, vine shaded, projecting starkly from the sheer drop of a thousand-foot wall. Somewhere below, scattered lights flared and hooters sounded mournfully. Above, visible as a band terminating the building-buttressed slot, the night sky was clouded in gray cloaks of vapor.

DIRECTLY before me, in the slab of masonry and glass that formed the next building, I could see into the golden radiance of a room where men talked quietly, holding drinks, smoking cigars and pipes, relaxing away from the frenzy snowballing in the crystal ballroom. The distance was beyond knife throw.

I held my breath and squinted my eyes against the glare to

scan the scene in the room across the way, a scene camera sharp, like a film projection on the darkened wall.

Finding my man was difficult. Finally I spotted his bald head in the angle of a mirror. I stared closely.

Ever notice how a reflection emphasizes idiosyncrasies that are never noticed in the flesh? A slight muscular tic of the eyelid, lost in a person, can be picked out like an H-bomb cloud in a mirror. Little things like that show up. Enough showed up here to make me feel sure that Caron was going through with my plan.

I took a deep breath of the night wind, the artificial scents behind me crisped by flat oil smell it carried from below. I felt better than I had since hearing just who Rudy Ardizzioni had contracted to handle.

"Licia, honey," I said aloud, savoring the words. "This is where I earn your money—and yours, too, Helen."

With that I began to take off my boot.

They don't call me Wing-Knife for nothing, even if they don't know how I do it. I always get a kick out of the old routine. I laced the boot tight again once it was off—if it collapsed under my hand the effect would be ruined—and took one screw from the metal tip so that it

pivoted outwards easily. I pried loose the slot of rubber athwart the heel and felt for the collapsible foot-rule in my pocket.

Opened, the spring steel, gleaming blue and silver, fitted the slot snugly. The double-looped cord from my cloak, slipped over each end of the rule with a quick, practiced jerk, completed the cross bow. I slapped the boot leather softly. Neat, not gaudy, silent and incredibly efficient—the arbalest contains the quality of power denied to loud speaking guns.

Often, I'd toyed with the idea of using a flier window gear, the ratchet and toothed rod part, as a cranequin to give greater power to the bow. So far, I'd never got around to it. In my job, when you have a license to carry a knife—and no other weapon—things like a foot-rule and dark glasses need no explanation. But a window ratchet, now. Why would a man carry that?

I took out the dark glasses. One ear piece came off, was rehooked alongside its mate. The two curved ends fitted snugly against the boot sole and I slid the cord over the middle, hauled back at the top of the glasses and the cord came sweetly to rest under the metal toe tip. As a goat's-foot lever, the dark glasses worked out fine.

Putting them away, I took out the knife case.

Many people had marveled at the shape of the knives. Such a slender hilt, they'd said, surely a hand would find difficulty grasping—? I'd smiled, and argued, and in the end said nothing. Carefully, with a feeling for the fitness of the occasion, I selected a knife. Setting it in chase, with the short-winged quillons delicately free of obstruction, I knew no one could ever see it as the crossbow bolt it was. An arbalest quarrel, plain and simple and deadly. And yet—no one else ever had seen it, like that, just there, waiting to be sped by the power stored in the blue spring steel bow laid across the heel of my boot.

Ready, with the cross-bow held pointing forward, I waited. Beside the window I watched a second, dimmer, window shine into the night. The glass had been swung open at the top, allowing a partial view just about head level. Pretty soon, at the rate he'd been drinking, the man I'd been watching would visit that room.

Wind cannoned damp and gusty between the walls. A deflection shot, with plenty of allowance for windage. Life is a gray-silver, streaky sort of place. You start on a job, thinking you know exactly what the score is, and before you've got set for the throw all kinds of variables sneak in to

louse up the picture completely.

I don't bother my head about the motives of those who hire me. Professionally, it is against the ethics of the Guild. But this situation was a honey. Although, very strictly speaking, I had interfered in other peoples' business, the important thing was to do my job, collect the cash, and then, perhaps, visit my kid sister on her farm on Venus.

My victim stood up, stretched, vanished from the mirror. He appeared a moment later in the second room. His bald head bobbed a moment, and light reflected from it dazzlingly. I waited for the angle to change, for his head to become a head again and not a damned searchlight, and lifted the cross-bow. My finger on the nut, the pivoting metal toe-tip, contracted almost without conscious effort.

The man stood a long heartbeat with the knife just under his ear, the quillons jammed hard against the flesh, then he fell from my view.

The sweet singing noise of the bow had been lost in the wind rushing between the buildings. Rain spattered stingingly as I dis-assembled the arbalest, until the weapon was once again a foot-rule, a cloak-cord and a boot. Bunching my foot to get the boot with its metal stiffener on was second nature. I straightened up and quietly, grimly,

professionally, choked back emotion until mentally I was just a hard, featureless steel ball.

Funny thing—I don't like killing one little bit.

WITH a last look at the room opposite, I opened the door and left the balcony, knowing that very quickly now the news of George Wotan Caron III's death would spread like thunderclouds on Venus throughout the Caron plant and into the intoxicated bedlam stampeding through the crystal room. I hoped that the deception would not be discovered until after Azo had sent his payment authorization through to the Guild bank. And that, of course, brought up the interview I was probably going to have to endure with the Guild. But I knew they'd have to accept my reasoning when they heard it.

Noise, confusion, odors, glitter and flash and sparkle battered at me as I went through the crystal room. Drinks showered on me. Semi-nude girls, trailing wisps of silk, tried to drag me into a prancing zamba line. I saw pretty well there the way Aristos have a good time.

I began to think that perhaps science hasn't made too good a job of gene selection. The people who, through the widespread use of electronics and plastics and nucleonics, have risen to vast power, economically and

politically, haven't always proven the best suited for their haughty positions. Perhaps a semi-scientific culture, where more people would be in the manufacturing business and power would not be so tightly bundled in a few huge corporations, might make for happier living for all. I couldn't decide for sure. All I knew was that I wanted my pay, and out.

Spreading like lava ripples on Jupiter, the news went the rounds. Alicia's eyes, as she approached me, glittered no less brilliantly than her gem-encrusted domino. Her red mouth was damp, inviting, like a Venusian fly-trap.

"You did it, Bartram! I don't know how, but you did it!"

Her figure burnt itself, line by line, into my mind. Shutting my eyes was no good—the voice followed.

Then Azo, big, bluff, burly—a tasty target for a hungry knife—was condescending to the hired help from the Pool. His check was on its way to the Guild bank. I breathed comfortably. Rudy Ardizzioni and Greta and the new one were all right now.

Without seeming to be rude, which would not have been clever until I was in the clear, I left them and eased towards the exit. Flics and other official vermin would be underfoot all too soon. I wanted out.

From a shadowed alcove a slender, white arm reached out. It beckoned. Like a stuffed dummy, I obeyed. I entered the alcove, my stomach curling with anticipation. The girl's other hand held a gun, pointed at my navel.

"He's dead, Bartram. Dead." Helen's eyes were wide and glittering, like her sister's; but these shone with unshed tears.

"Listen, honey," I said desperately. "Your brother is safe. Safe, you understand?" She tried to interrupt, and my voice beat her down. "You told me Azo was trying to get him; you didn't tell, maybe because you didn't know, that your sister Alicia is Azo's boyfriend and all for carving your brother as well!"

The look in her eyes made me feel just what I was, a hired heel from the Pool. But I plunged on.

"Those two have no obligations from me! You can't threaten an Assassin, and expect him to work for you. That's elementary Guild ethics. Maybe they weren't aware of it. Maybe you don't know that that gun you're prodding at me relieves me of any responsibility to you?"

She tried again to speak. This time something in her throat stopped her. She swallowed. Her face was like a pansy, raised to the sun, blinded, hurt, bewildered.

"Brother George is all right," I said harshly, trying to rouse her. "Don't you breath a word of this to a living soul, but I told George to send a double to take his place at the party. I knew he'd have one on his staff who could play the part well enough—and not question his boss' motives. It meant sacrificing a man—but it gave George all the proof he needs that Azo was gunning for him. Your brother will come charging in a moment with the flics. And at the same time, I've kept my promise to you. You hired me to do a job, and I've done it."

HER ANSWER, when I later came to think about it, was eminently satisfactory. The gun fell down somewhere behind the cushions. I was just making myself comfortable, when brother George made his entry into the crystal room, stilling the clamor and turning intoxicated faces sober with the shock of seeing a ghost. We disentangled ourselves, and went to look.

Helen moved towards the front of the growing crowd. I eased out the back, moved smoothly towards the door. Azo and I had no further business. If he wanted me, he could always contact me through the Guild, or read my advertisement in the Directory and come slumming down to Rafferty's. If

he lived long enough, that is.

Whatever Caron did about Azo was his own affair. But I couldn't see myself taking the business. Far better that Caron should go to a big Company firm. Too much bother had come my way already from Aristos with tied-up money trying to hire good Assassins cheap. And as for Azo—well, how would it have panned out with him in control?

I certainly wouldn't be sitting here now, on my kid sister's farm on Venus, savoring the high silver sky and the buoyancy your limbs take from the lessened gravity.

I've temporarily left the profession, for reasons of health. I think of Helen, sure; but I also still hear that damned husky voice of 'Licia Caron, and dream that the Pool no longer exists. . . . But that must wait until the economy has sorted out automation and the power shortage and eliminated the need for a Pool of Unemployed—and with it, I hope, the need for Assassins.

I still carry my foot-rule, and my cloak still has a double-looped cord, and my boot its metal stiffener. But I'm carrying a reel from a fishing rod now—I have high hopes it will make a fine cranequin to draw a more powerful bow.

And you don't need sunglasses on Venus. ∞ ∞