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HE SOUGHT A NEEDLE  
IN A COSMIC HAYSTACK

# THE MILLION YEAR HUNT

KENNETH BULMER



First Book Publication



## PLANET HOPPER

. . . He heard a shout, distant and ringing, "No, Carson! Not that door!"

Something green writhed in through that door. Something gaseous, billowing, filling the chamber faster and faster, something that caught at his throat and gagged him, made him retch, brought streaming tears to his eyes.

Before his eyes stretched a nightmarish growth of vine and tree, of mushroom-headed stalks, of gyrating tentacles swaying from every branch and limb. He heard a shrill, triumphant chittering.

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

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

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KENNETH BULMER has been rated by *New Worlds* magazine as "Great Britain's hardest working science-fiction writer." A native of London, he has produced many novels and short stories, as well as non-fiction articles on scientific subjects.

Bulmer states that he has been reading and writing science-fiction for longer than he cares to remember, starting both while still at school in the early 1920's. During the war he served with the Royal Corps of Signals and published and edited a Service magazine in Africa, Sicily and Italy. It was while basking in the Italian sunshine that he first heard of an atomic bomb having been detonated over Japan—and thought it was just another hoax of his comrades.

He is an active member of London "fan" circles, but also includes among his hobbies model ship construction, motor racing and the study of the Napoleonic legend.

**THE MILLION  
YEAR HUNT  
KENNETH BULMER**

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SHIPS TO THE STARS

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## I

**T**HREE INCHES before Arthur Ross Carson's nose the armored leg and boot of the Galactic Guardsman towered up like an old single tube rocket. Carson, flat on his stomach in the dust and pressed against the mouldering stone wall of the Admin Center, carefully extended his hand from the shadows. The tiny stick glittered once in the sunshine, then it had been pressed into the hairfine crack encircling the guardsman's ankle where boot and greave meshed.

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

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

Cautiously he applied flame to the end of the fuse.

Then he stood up, his mobile mouth quivering against the deep laughter that welled up, and, stepping briskly, walked

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out and around the tower. He went straight on over the cracked tessellated paving, out of the noon-day strip of shadow from the ten-story Admin Center and into the sunshine of Starfarers Square. As though suddenly remembering an errand, he paused, ostentatiously searching the pockets of his threadbare and much-patched coat while his gray eyes slid to observe the guardsman standing hot and uncomfortable in his magnificent—and quite unfunctional—uniform and armor.

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

The silence was blasted—enormously.

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

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

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

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



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

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

Carson watched in fascination.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And the igniter sticks would condemn her.

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

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

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

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

The guard was still stamping his foot from time to time, cursing under his breath and watching the platoon of his comrades wheel back through the dust to the gates, fol-

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lowed by the armored car. Carson had no time to wonder about the fellow's feelings, or to surmise that he was probably considering with apprehension the forthcoming interview with his captain. The guard straightened and waved Carson aside.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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"Name?"

"Carson."

"Carson what?"

"Carson—sir."

"That's better."

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

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

"What proof can you offer?"

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

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

"But it was only a joke—"

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

"No, sir."

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

Carson said: "Will Lucy get fifty lashes—"

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

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

## II

THE CALM, mechanical, quite unemotional attitude of the guardsman was getting under Carson's skin. Had they threatened in a bullying way, had they blustered, had they struck him, he would not have been surprised, and his fear would

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have been of a kind with which he was familiar and could handle. But this cold scrutiny, this passionless statements of rules under which he could be punished by a certain number of strokes of the lash, this serene disregard of him as a human being at all carried far more chilling menace than he had bargained for or could adapt to handle. His stomach had tightened to a small aching ball.

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

Carson swallowed. "Yes."

"And do you so persist?"

"Yes."

The major leaned back.

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

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

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

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

"What else?" The major was abrupt. He cut a hand down to his rapier pommel, gripped it as though seeking life-giving sustenance to flow from that symbol and weapon of authority. "This makes the murder a successful assassination, the first on Ragnor for a century. They must be questioned."

"I'll see to it, sir."

"Right. If you want me I'll be in Communications. When Headquarters hear of this, heads may roll." He went to the

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door, an old man, worn down by years of overwork and then by years of underwork and stagnation, shouldering a responsibility he had not sought and would not be thanked for taking. "The whole Galaxy's running down," he said sombrely. "And there's nothing I can see to stop it." He went out.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What is a *razzee*?"

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

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

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

That brought Carson up. "Where's Lucy?" he said. He

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stepped forward, swallowing bile. "If you've hurt her, I'll—I'll—"

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

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

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

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

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

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

Carson refused to give the captain satisfaction.

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

Captain Jose stiffened.

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

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

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

"Just a little precaution, you see." Captain Jose took his finger off the stasis button and stood up. Carson slumped to



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the floor. Every muscle felt as though it had been separately and efficiently beaten. He tried to stand, and fell back, checking the groan of pain.

The corpulent guard stepped forward at a nod.

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

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

The very procedure of this place, the feeling of implacable violence thinly veneered by custom and order made for grisly imagining. Slowly, as he sat there, and then, finding inaction impossible, pacing the cell, he was losing his mind. Fears snarled and gibbered at him. What was happening to Lucy now? At this very instant? He hammered on the cell door until his hands bled; but no-one took the slightest notice of him. He had no idea of time. Events had happened, and would happen, all over the Galaxy, and he would stay cooped up in this narrow cell till the end of time.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The two guardsmen were looking at him, their craggy old faces softened by sympathy, their thought transparent upon their outward expressions. They were thinking, both of them, that this unhappy youngster could have been their son, a son to either of them had either one ever married a woman he could have respected. But they had been professional guardsmen, guardians of the galaxy, and the women they had met had been of a sort that were not interested in marriage. Out of his misery Carson saw all this, and strove to speak, to break through the hard professional shell and seek comfort and understanding from these men.

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

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

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

What happened then was for ever afterwards a blur to Carson. He recalled vaguely someone screaming. There were men—guardsmen—about him, holding his arms and one

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brought quickly forward a glittering hypodermic. The next memories were of a white-washed little room with sunshine dappling the plastic carpeted floor, an iron-framed bed and a lumpy mattress and white sheets that smelled of disinfectant.

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

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

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

The eye went dark.

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

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

"Feel better now, son?"

"Yes. Why do I?"

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

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

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

"All right."

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

"No and no."

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

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

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

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

"Why Arthur Ross?"

"You tell me—"

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

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

"We found that out."

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

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

"That's nothing to do with me."

"I wonder. As of now, we don't think it is. We had a look at your mind when you were under. We found out a few things that surprised us—and would surprise you. We know that your setting the hot foot and the murder were purely fortuitously coincidental; but you must admit that if you hadn't roused the alarm and turned out the guard the murderer wouldn't have found it so easy to break into the colonel's bedroom."

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

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"Exactly."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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impractical every year. And there are the forces which are deliberately trying to accelerate this breakdown for their own ends."

"And the Statque?"

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

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

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

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

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

"And Lucy's dead."

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

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

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

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

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

"Do you have to keep harping on that!"

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

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### III

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

Carson glanced down at the trolley as it slid by.

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

Lucy lay on the trolley.

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

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

A whimper rose inarticulately in Carson's throat.

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

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

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

He had said: "His name?"

Captain Jose had said: "Alex Bors."

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

A guard turned into the corridor, half-raised his gun. Carson swept into him, a single blow knocked the man full length. He plunged on. A door. Locked. Smash it in. Panting

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for breath, red before the eyes, throat congested; all hell breaking loose about him.

Two more guards were hammered from his frantic path; guards that had tried to stop him and did not attempt to shoot him down. He had a sane little flame in his mind, telling him that this was no way to find Bors; he must be cunning. He must find his way to the officers' quarters and there slowly, oh so slowly, take the life from the cringing body of Alex Bors.

He was pleased with his cunning. He would succeed.

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

He opened the door, stiffly, and plunged through.

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

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

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

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

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

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

His first rational thought when he opened his eyes was



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

He turned his head. The yellow wall encircled him. It was cup shaped, he was standing on a pappy mass of slime and small hard bits of unidentifiable material, and above his head the yellow horn-like substance curved over into a three-segmented lid. Each segment showed a long, muscular cluster of fibers joining it to the main body, for all the world like a long gate hinge.

Carson began to have an idea of where he was.

And he became mortally afraid.

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

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

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

Movement took his body; he began to sway slowly back

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

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

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

Carson was flung head over heels out into the jungle.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The emotions that shook him he could not explain. Out of fear he felt anger and then irritation and a dull, resigned despair that chilled him with a sense of age-old longing, never-

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fulfilled and never to be fulfilled. The feelings were alien to him, strange and unsettling.

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

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

One obvious solution was to cut off the flower head, up-end it, and, using it as a sort of diving bell, walk back to the Guard's base from which he had stumbled. Carson went on planning but every twist and turn of his frantic mind brought him back to this one solution. He did not know how far away from the door he had been taken although there had been no sign of it when he had been outside; but common-sense told him that it could not have been far. When the first flower-bell was exhausted of breathable air he would have to cut another and use that. He stared again at the trunk, writhing beneath him, and became aware of other, furtive movement beneath his feet.

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

In size it compared with an apple full bloomed on some safe tree back home. Intrigued, he bent down and picked it up. It had no appreciable temperature, which meant that it was at blood heat, and it felt smooth and comfortable, lying there on his palm. He felt nothing. But as he stared he thought that it was dwindling in size, melting. He watched,

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as, gradually, it melted away. On the palm of his hand was left only a slightly reddish patch, and an odd tingling, as though he had been fed a low-voltage electric current.

Whatever it had been, it was gone.

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

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

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

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

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

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

*"So clumsy of me. I apologize—Carson, I believe? Yes, well, Arthur Ross Carson, I observe that you have placed yourself in an unduly alarming predicament. Most regrettable. However"*—here, Carson, for all the terror and bewilderment sweeping through him, experienced from this alien mind in his brain the sensation of a small, dry, self-satisfied cough—*"However, I, Sandoz, am now with you."*

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

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

*"I am in you and part of you, indissolubly twinned with you until death do us part—then, with regret for the passing of a congenial host, I shall look for another."* Again that sense of a small, humorous, almost self-deprecatory cough. *"That*

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*unfortunate insect possessed a brain of infinitesimal capacity. Most cramped. Quite uncomfortable. Nearly as bad as the fish-hunter of Mirquar Seven—but you would not, I observe, be familiar with that noxious planet."*

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

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

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

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

*"I observed your predicament, as I informed you. Fear naught—strange phrases you have tucked away in the danker recesses of your brain!— I shall see that we leave here safely. Had you been with me when I shared the paper-tissue-winged flying creature's body on Huirona Twelve and we were forced down into the poison sea swarming with jaws and fangs—not to mention the soul-eaters—you would not prate to me of danger."* The alien voice whispering in Carson's brain sharpened with pride and arrogance, tinged with that mocking self-laughter that struck so incongruous a note. *"Remember, Carson—you are now bound up with Sandoz! And Sandoz knows how to protect his friends."*

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## IV

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

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

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

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

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

*“ . . . astonishing. I must have been out of circulation longer than I thought . . . the galaxy fairly has changed, if this Carson has it right . . . Aha! I observe—girl . . . oh, I see.”* And then Carson experienced the final emotion that set the seal on his relationship with Sandoz.

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

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And Carson believed him.

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sandoz' chuckle echoed eerily in Carson's brain.

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

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

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

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

*"Fret not, Carson, my young friend. A mere matter of molecule re-arrangement. We can exist quite comfortably until we find more oxygen for your relatively primitive metabolic system."*

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



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

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

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

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

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

*"Really?"*

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

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

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

*"Oh,"* was all that Carson could say.

*"And now I think it is time we left this infernal planet. I must confess that I share a liking for green fields, a blue sky and running rivers, with a dinky little stretch of coastline and a blue sea—likings, you will observe, that are identical with yours. This is inevitable. If I am to prove a good partner then*

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*I must share much of your inner life—and it would be foolish of me to hanker after arid steppes swept by sub-zero gasses if you would wither and die there—if I let you, of course.”*

*“Of course.”*

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

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

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

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

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

*“Rilla taking over the Galaxy?”*

*“A long time ago. You humans, you homo sapiens, are quite new, it seems. A mere matter of thousands of years—*

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*and you measure time in the old old way, revolutions of one particular planet around an insignificant primary—”*

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

*“Yes, young Carson, yes. I can do a lot with you Earthmen.”*

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

*“Day before yesterday,”* said Sandoz with his dry deprecating cough.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The satisfaction flowed richly from Sandoz.

Carson swooped down into another clearing, identical to the first, perhaps a hundred miles away; but with the difference that here squatted what Carson guessed to be a space vessel of unknown origin.

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

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

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

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

## V

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What about the owners of this ship?"

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

Carson had no reply to that.

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

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

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

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

"How pleasant!"

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

"I just want a chat with Alex Bors—"

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

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

The planet turned out to be small, uninteresting, in what

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

No answer.

The sun sank in the alien sky and the toad had long since

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Carson put forward a doubt he had been meditating.

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

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

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

*"So you imagine I am seeking someone?"*

"It's pretty obvious."

*"I suppose so. I suppose so."*

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

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

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

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



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

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

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

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

Carson took it without a second's hesitation.

After a time, Sandoz said: "*How my people originated even we do not fully understand. Our best theory is that we developed physically as independent beings until we could evolve no further along that path, and that then some upheaval, some catastrophe, forced us to be unable to continue living in our own bodies. The people who flew this spaceship could almost be said to have faced that. Their bodies were seized by malignant illness and they died—but their brains were unaffected!*"

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

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

"How many of you are there?"

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

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

"*Thank you. But, you see, we, also, understand the my-*

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*stery of sex. If I couldn't have done, how could I appreciate your feelings about Lucy? I seek my wife—*

*"Your wifel!"*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## VI

CARSON SAT in the padded seat of the turbine bus and watched interestedly as the countryside of neat fields, low trees, careful husbandry and a veneration for water manifest in every ditch and pump and spillway sped past outside. The farm people took no notice of him—his clothes and features were human, despite the alienness within him, and he came from a planet even more of a hick outworld than

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this world of Bahrein. He lay back in the seat, enjoying the sensation of being once again on-planet.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Sandoz sighed. *"If that is the sum of your knowledge of*

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*your own species—I pity you. That man's emanations were so crooked they'd bounce right around in ten yards—"*

*"Emanations?"*

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

*"All right—sorry—"*

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

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

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

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

*"I—I have something to sell—"*

*"Let me see."*

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

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

*"Where did you get these?"*

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

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

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

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

"You would take less than they are worth?"

"A little. If it is necessary."

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

"Perhaps."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Only when he was seated and the fat man was bringing the first cup, was the realization borne in on Carson that he had come into this cafe against the expressed desires of Sandoz.

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The shock halted the cup halfway to his lips.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He could not miss the occasional scarlet-coated figure of a Galactic Guardsman glimpsed in the happy throngs. He wondered why they had to patrol here. They probably enjoyed

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

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

Alex Bors.

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

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

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

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

Sandoz' calm, quieting thought rode in.

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

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

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

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

"You're Arthur Ross Carson?"

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

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

The captain's eyes were a brown and steady and his eyelids drooped a little with fatigue that all the pills in the gal-

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axy couldn't kill. His face was as lean and lined as had been Captain Jose's, and he shifted his rapier around as though unused to wearing the cumbersome thing.

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

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

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

"I can guess."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes, Carson," said the guard captain.

"Yes, Carson," said Sandoz.

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

"So she's not here, either?"

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

"Come along, Carson," said the captain.



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

### VII

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Narvik smoothed a hand across his lined forehead.

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

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

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

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

At this Captain Nicholls smiled. "Easy. You walked

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through a door on Admin Center on Ragnor. We knew we'd pick you up eventually."

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

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

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

"Well, you have. Why?"

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

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

And the door closed.

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

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

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

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

*"We shall assuredly do so. Tell me, what is all this about*

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*a prince and a frog? Your own ideas are confused—or distorted . . .”*

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

Sandoz’ dry chuckle reached Carson infuriatingly. “*You say that with such venom because you are afraid that you are more than you think. You are young, and you have withdrawn from the future—an odd attitude for a youngster. As to the change of material form, there is nothing alarming in that, a mere matter of molecular re-arrangement—*” And Sandoz went into a long spiel about races he had known who could change their bodily forms at will. Carson listened vaguely—frightened of the future, was he? Well, what was so stupid about that?

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

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

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

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

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

The man from Ragnor turned out to be Captain Jose.

He regarded Carson mournfully.

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

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

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

"Makes a spaceship obsolete, though."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Broiled frog!" said Jose, and grimaced.

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

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

Jose shook his head. "No, son. That's just another unsolved crime. It was worked cunningly. How did the murderer acquire a *razzee*, anyway? Marjoram VI isn't so far from Ragnor, but it's a most unhealthy place." The strawberry radiation burns on Jose's face deepened. "We lost a fine officer; but we don't know why."

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

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

Carson remembered that first time he had been into the Admin Center on Ragnor and the way the Guards had treated him. Aloof, coldly impersonal, they had seemed to be ruled by laws which took up a miserable blue and ground him into acquiescent powder without disturbing the age-old

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dust of the building. Now, the Guards talked like the very human men he had guessed them to be.

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

There was a silence.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Carson maintained a hostile silence until the flier plunged down through traffic lanes that were as crowded as this all over Shyrane. Below an artificial lake with the pouting sails

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of yachts scudding to an artificial breeze scaled up to them. As they sank, the lake's confines broadened until, when they reached the surface alongside a majestic full-rigged ship under all plain sail, every horizon presented the barline of sea and sky.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The door opened, an orderly stood as though paralyzed,

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

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

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

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

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

"Thanks. Any luck?"

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

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

## VIII

THE GATHERING, having received fresh drinks, sat waiting for H.E. to speak.

"Your name is Arthur Ross Carson?"

"Yes."



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Any luck?"

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

"Yes, Sandoz. Good luck."

And Sandoz was gone. But this time Carson could live

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with and understand that black horror of emptiness within his being.

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

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

Carson would. All the others rose. Going up the companionway, Carson managed to keep an eye on Crow. The Statque man, alone, aboard this Guard ship, appeared unruffled and quite capable of looking after himself. The Colonel had an eye on Crow, too.

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

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

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

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

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

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"Those fliers. They seem headed this way—"

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

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

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

H.E. clattered down the treads. "That's precisely the score, Arthur! The Statque would like to sweep the Guard away, use their own police. Three-quarters of the planetary police forces of the galaxy are tools of the Statque. This is a luxury planet, full of money and vice. The Shyrane Security police are among the worst gang of cut-throats I've ever known. They'll use all the force they have to take you from us. When you're gone—they can break us, then . . ."

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

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

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

## IX

WHEN HE RETURNED on deck the Guard were disposed about the deck of the sailing ship, poised and waiting. Three of the S.S. fliers remained hovering; the other three descended

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level with the deck, skimming a parallel course over the waves. Carson stared at them with curiosity, feeling himself a spectator of these events now and not part of them; that feeling must stem from his passionate determination not to be involved.

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

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

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

Disdaining artificial amplification, Harding bellowed across: "Come on board, then!"

The S.S. flier dipped and closed. The first man to set foot on deck was tall, craggy, with a ravaged face and eyes bleaker than a polar winter. His uniform, a plain gray relieved by dramatic yellow flashes, proclaimed his work-hired mercenary, paid by the masters of Shyrane to keep the filth and unpleasantness of their world below the surface, beaten back into the festering underworld.

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

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

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

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

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

H.E. said: "The agent Crow made an unfortunate mistake. He assumed that private and internal Guard business

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was the concern of the Bureau Status Quo Enforcement. We shall be happy to release Crow into your custody. We shall look forward to receiving an abstract of his court martial."

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

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

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

What H.E. hadn't said, what was implicit in all that had gone before, was that H.E. was H.E. The Grand Commander of the Galactic Guards. However powerful the Statque, one agent of theirs could not outface H.E.

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

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

Then the memory of the things he had been told filtered through. How the Guard wished to cleanse the galaxy of corruption, how the Statque were dedicated—honestly, perhaps; mistakenly, certainly—to maintaining everything ex-



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actly as it was for all time. If he, Arthur Ross Carson, the princely frog, were really all that H.E. claimed for him, if he *could* re-animate the Galactic Guard, give it the power and authority that had been slipping from it over the years—why, then, the Statque would—must—step in to stop that change.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He gasped and recoiled, feeling the punch like a meaty fist

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thump him. The armor held; the scorching fire dripped to the deck smouldering.

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

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

Harding swivelled his head, massive in the helmet.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Rolling over twice, he scrambled to hands and knees, took a quick look across the deck. He heard H.E. call agonizedly after him, but he shut the sound from his ears, peered through the tumult. Colonel Drobny was just visible handing himself up into a flier. On the short metal ladder below, hid-

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den by the bulwarks from the Guards further back, the agent Crow was being hefted up by his Squeb comrade.

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

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

"Hold me, Alex! quick—"

Alex!

Alex Bors! It had to be.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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### *He wanted Alex Bors!*

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

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

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

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

*"Carson! I've found her!"*

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

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

Sandoz!

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

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

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

Desperately, Carson searched among those men below,

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striving to pierce the smoky gloom, striving to find the man he wanted above all else to kill.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A hand clamped suddenly on Carson's shoulder and he jumped like a jet that has had all power abruptly switched on. H.E.'s voice said in his ear: "Arthur! So I've found you! Come on, lad. Let us leave here now. Our flier is waiting on the blind side. Hurry, boy. The ship is on fire, she'll go down any moment."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then he fell straight into the sea.

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

He looked back as he flew undisturbed through the air.

The sailing ship flowered to the sky in tall blossoms of flame. Men flung themselves into the sea as the flames licked nearer. Alex Bors, the man who had murdered Lucy, was down there. But it seemed unlikely he would escape. So Bors

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had met a death not designed for him by Carson, and Carson felt no pity and no regret.

He swung up into the bright sky of Shyrane.

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

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

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

### X

JUST WHO the man was, his name, his occupation, if he had a wife, children, his state of health—all these things became dramatically unimportant the moment he snatched a woman's handbag at the spaceport and started to run.

The woman screamed as her auto alarm pricked her arm. Loungers and waiting passengers stared after the running man, a dark figure of purpose among the brilliant idlers. Under Shyrane's hot sunshine and in the perfumed decadent air of the pleasure planet this incident whetted jaded appetites.

What happened then surprised the most blase of pleasure seekers.

The running snatch-purse's body glowed. His arms and legs—skinny like twigs from undernourishment—twitched. Spreadeagled, he jerked and convulsed, held like a fly in amber in the merciless stasis beam. This stasis beam was a cruel one, a searcher out of tender nerves, a flayer of souls, a torturing imprisonment, a rough and ungentle gaoler.

In seconds a solid wall of bodies formed around the transfixed, shivering thief. The yellow and gray of the Shyrane Security police and the magnificent scarlet of the Galactic Guard swamped him in color.

*"The police are really on the jump today."* A paunchy man wearing too many jewels spoke with avid interest to Arthur Ross Carson. Carson stood just inside the three-story-

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high entrance doors flanked in steel and glass. He took in the scene at a glance.

"It's their job," he said with studied casualness, trying to ape the bored hedonist. "We have to be protected against the lower classes."

"You're so right." The fat man, breathing heavily, did not tear his eyes away from that pitiful scene. The thief lay on the floor now, and two colonels bent over him.

The picture did not have to be colored in, the story did not have to be spelled out for Carson. The snatch-thief had been unlucky. The poor devil was a thin bag of bones, and a vicious feeling of hatred for the fat rich blood-suckers of Shyrane—like this wheezing toad next to him now—almost, almost but not quite, engulfed Carson. The picture waited for him to walk in and complete the whole; the parts waited for him, waited with guns and flashers and stasis beams.

Sandoz said: "*We must hurry, Carson. Her signals are faint, faint and thin. The ship is being space-sealed now . . .*"

Carson heard the little alien's voice in his mind and fought to re-orient himself to this fresh problem. He spoke angrily: "*I can hurry, Sandoz, old friend. I can rush across there, buy a ticket, head for the ramp; but . . .*"

The little alien in his brain sighed that small, soft, self-deprecatory sigh. "*The word has been passed, Carson. I see. Anyone acting suspiciously will be stopped and questioned. That thief ran for it and was mercilessly hunted down. But, Carson—I must get aboard that ship! If she spaces out taking Lys—a thousand years, Carson, I might have to wait a thousand years!*"

"*That's the first time you've told me her name. Lys. I like it. Reminds me of a flower.*"

As he spoke to Sandoz, Carson had been walking slowly among the gaudy crowds, his head turned like all the rest to watch as the S.S. hoisted the thief to his feet and trundled him away on a luggage truck. That miserable one would stay in stasis for twenty-four hours at least.

Despite the urgency of the moment, the quivering eagerness possessing the both of them to board that departing ship,



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Carson and Sandoz could sense quite clearly the hate and bitterness churning between the Shyrane Security police and the Galactic Guardsmen. Word had got out, then, and fast.

*"If I had a false beard,"* Carson said and his mind recoiled at the blast of anger and self-reproach from Sandoz.

*"Quick! Find a secure place where you cannot be seen!"*

In the toilet Carson took the opportunity to brush down the suit of clothes he'd snatched from a tailor's dummy as Sandoz had levitated them towards the spaceport. There had been no time to come here by ordinary means. He wondered what the people were saying now, the swearers-off drink and drugs, the hysterics, as a man in the blackened and charred black steel and leather armor of the Galactic Guard had swooped over their heads with a gent's natty suiting draped over one arm. He wondered if his friends in the Guard would hear—and understand.

Then he glanced in the mirror and his mind congealed.

A perfect stranger stared out at him from horrified eyes.

The stranger put a hand to his mouth, a hand that trembled.

Carson blinked his eyes as his hand touched his mouth and the stranger blinked his eyes as a shaking hand traced unfamiliar contours.

*"What have you done?"*

*"Hurry up, my dear Carson! No one will recognize you now. I should have realized before that your face would be the feature of recognition. Changing that is a mere matter of routine for Sandoz—"*

The hollow return to Sandoz' normal jocularly was a pale shadow; the vital urgency, the fear of failure and loss underlying both their minds drained the humor away.

Back in the crowded foyer under the crystal sweep of roof Carson bought the ticket and crossed the gate threshold even as the gates clanged shut behind him.

His mind crawled. He walked with another man's face and his brain—and that of Sandoz—functioned behind the facade of another personality. What limits were there to the power of this little alien who sat spread out along his nervous system, who could see his every thought?

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Sandoz coughed his little cough and said: *"Now that we are actually—and at long last—boarding this confounded spaceship, Carson, I can allow myself to relax a trifle. Lys is aboard. That, I find hard to believe. A million years, Earth years, I have been searching for her. Even to me, and I know what time is, even to me that is a long long time."*

Carson started to say scathingly: *"Day before yesterday."* But he didn't. And because he hadn't consciously projected the thought Sandoz let it go, understanding the delicate reasons for Carson's decision for silence.

The cabin into which he was shown was small, cramped but very comfortable. He was, the human steward confided, lucky to find a single at all. Carson tipped the man and then went up to the waving deck. He was too late. The ship had lifted off. They were in space.

*"Y'know, Sandoz,"* Carson said ruminatively. *"This ship is not a pleasure cruiser, she's a regular passenger run taking returning holidaymakers home. First port of call Ley's planet. That's where I booked to. Yet the S.S. and the geegees were right on the ball back at the spaceport."*

*"Someone may have seen us levitating away from that burning sailing ship. You have a crude form of antigrav pack used in your culture."*

*"Yes. But who? I rather hope H.E. believed me when I said I'd be back."* Thinking of the old warrior, the Grand Commander of the Galactic Guard, Carson felt an inexplicable wrench at leaving him. He'd looked so crushed when his hopes of Arthur Ross Carson had been dashed. *"And I didn't want Harding to die for me! Dammit, all, I didn't want that sort of destiny."*

*"Although I was searching for Lys at the time, much of what went on spilled over, and I can scan your memories. The experiment with your father and mother succeeded; that explains the amazing potential I first discovered in you."*

*"Potential. They said I'd never amount to anything."*

*"Wrong, Carson, my impetuous young friend. You wouldn't have done had you no guidance. Breaking up abandoned*

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*spaceships was no fitting academic preparation for the tasks your father's friends wanted you for."*

*"Well, they're not getting me." Carson sounded petulant. "At least not yet. Not until we've got this business with your Lys straightened out."*

*"Thank you, Carson,"* said Sandoz.

And Carson felt that warm glow of friendship within him and was satisfied.

*"You seem to be taking your time. Why don't we find out where she is, go along—"*

*"I've waited a million years. Until I could be sure she wouldn't slip away again, I felt every second as an agony. But now, now every second bathes me in warmth and expectation—"*

*"I know what you mean."*

*"However . . . She is in the body of a child. The difficulties I experienced before on Shyrane of contacting her were, as I'm sure you don't understand, caused through her being forced rather suddenly to change hosts. And there is something I'm getting about the child . . . I can't read Lys at all clearly . . ."*

Sensibly, Carson didn't say anything.

*"Sometimes I wish . . . The thought from Sandoz lay almost below audible level; a mere mental whisper. "Sometimes I wish my people had not lost the use of their own bodies. Sometimes the price for immortality is too high . . ."*

Leaving his own mind a blank, Carson went in search of a drink. Having a little alien monster inside his head was bad enough; when the alien turned maudlin, why then, decided Arthur Ross Carson, then it was a bit too thick.

What he had tried not to think about too loudly, for the sake of the sarcasm it would bring forth, was that his friendship with the little alien monster in his head had become the most precious and rare experience, his most valuable possession, a thing he would fight and kill to keep.

Slipping some innocuous concoction of colored sugar water, he asked Sandoz: *"If you only leave a host when the poor fellow does pass out, and it isn't—well, convenient—to change over at the time. What do you do?"*

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The mental grimace of distaste soured clearly into Carson's mind.

*"We can live inside a dead host if we have to. Waiting for a convenient moment. Usually any culture has devised certain rites in their disposal of the dead. There is always a time."*

### XI

THE FIRSTCLASS restaurant was filling slowly as people wandered in for the first meal of the journey. Carson eyed each with interest, waiting for a flare of recognition from Sandoz. To Carson the hectic experiences of his recent life had brought no knowledge of handling waiters and stewards and roboservers in a spaceliner's first class restaurant. He felt a measure of gratitude that Sandoz had reshaped his face into that of an older man; a man who ought to know how to handle himself. But he still made mistakes. Sandoz, with a mind cluttered with the mores and customs of millions of Galyears, couldn't help, either, without running through countless parallel cultures.

When Carson caught quite clearly a titter of spiteful amusement from a group of waiters over by the door, he threw down his napkin, stood up, scraping back his chair, and strode out of the restaurant, feeling the color burning in his cheeks.

*"Good grief, boy!"* snapped Sandoz irritably. *"You are an impetuous calf."*

*"Why—were you about to make contact just as I was receiving the dirty end of that waiter's joke?"*

*"Simmer down, lad. You're young and untrained in the fancy ways of these people. Don't let that interfere with the functioning of your brain on matters quite unconnected with the measured ritual of eating and drinking. All cultures have their little phobias and petty rules. Yours is quite a mild affair, believe me."*

*"I do."*

*"That is good, then. I'm glad of that . . ."*

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Carson stopped stock still in the passageway so that a comfortably cushioned female diner emerging from the restaurant collided squashily with him. He ignored her and her indignant snort of outraged protest.

*"Are you laughing at me too, Sandoz?"*

The mental answer was bland and perfectly polite, a reply to which he could not take exception.

*"Laughing at you, my dear Carson? Why, of course not. And, I must say that you wound me a little by harboring so unchaste a thought."*

*"So you were damn well laughing at me, you little ball of goo!"*

*"Well, my dear boy, I've yet in all my experience to meet a culture where the bizarre conduct of a single member surrounded by conforming citizens does not result either in mirth or murder."*

*"Very profound, very. Come on, I need another drink."*

This time Carson ordered something a little stronger than colored sugar water. As he stood at the bar he could not stop himself from checking over everyone else there. Perhaps one of these men or women was the parent of the girl he sought?

Sandoz' concerned thought rode in. *"You're drinking a lot more than you used, dear boy. If you are fretting about Alex Bors—"*

*"I'm not. I believe he burned with the ship. Now shut up and go on your woman hunt."*

*"Too late. The child is asleep in her cabin—"*

*"Well, if Lys can guide you, maybe we could find the cabin."*

*"Very well."*

The drink hadn't touched the edge of Carson's temper. Sandoz had told him that he could drink and drug as much as he liked; Sandoz would take the filthy muck out of his system as fast as he put it in. So there.

Lights burned dim this ship night along sumptuous corridors and stairways. So far the general animation of a space voyage hadn't brought everyone into that familiar and yet superficial bonhomie that would last until she made planetfall.

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People moved about with half smiles for strangers, almost furtively, waiting for deep space magic to begin.

*"This is the cabin,"* Sandoz said.

Carson stood outside the door. To left and right other doors studded the corridor wall. Discreet lighting burned pink and amber and emerald. The carpets sucked up sound. Number Ten Nine Six. The breathing heart of the ship lay ten decks down, down there where hungry engines tore the heart out of atomic nuclei, distorted space and time and hurled two hundred thousand tons of metal through space at speeds that left light crawling like a glowworm far behind. Up here the quietness carried reverence.

*"One Oh Nine Six."* Carson said to Sandoz and the silence was not broken. Here, in this silence, with a great ship all about them, Carson felt a strange twinge of fear at the thought that the alien in his mind was talking to another alien in the brain of a small child beyond that locked door.

Then the fear brushed away instantly as Sandoz said quietly: *"She is there. Lys. I shall go away from you now, Carson, for a spell. I know you understand."*

*"Of course, Sandoz. And—good luck."*

Then, once again, that aching gulf of blackness opened in Carson's mind as Sandoz shut himself away. As always, fretfulness, irritability, a deep sense of loss, almost a panic sensation hit Carson as Sandoz left.

He walked slowly back to his cabin. Before he dropped off to sleep he wondered just what this girl child would be like. He was not aware of Sandoz' return before he fell asleep.

When he awoke and yawned and reached out to press the robo-server button for tea and biscuits, Sandoz had still not returned. Munching and sipping, Carson felt that black void in his brain like a judge's black cap; he just didn't like it when Sandoz went off by himself.

He'd made up his mind to stroll down to the tailors and buy a fresh suit and a half dozen white shirts, freshen himself up—the feeling of freedom the money he still had from the sale of Sandoz' synthetic jewels on Bahrein remained a

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heady delight—and interest himself in the life of the ship, when Sandoz returned.

*"Night on the tiles, hey, Sandoz?"*

*"I find your remark incomprehensible, not having the inclination to dig for referents in your festering brain. But your inference is clear and insulting—and entirely suitable to a sexually reproducing mammalian animal."*

"Yoip," said Arthur Ross Carson. At once with the little alien's return, he felt good.

Then an aura of defeat, of sagging anti-climax, seeped over. Carson said quickly; *"What's the trouble, Sandoz?"*

*"It is ironical and yet amusing—at least, I am forced to blow hard on my millions of Galyears sense of humor to laugh this one off."*

Sandoz sounded as though to laugh hurt.

*"You recall I have experienced difficulty in contacting Lys? The reason for that at first was that she was changing hosts. The girl child, I thought, would or might explain the more recent cloudiness of contact."*

*"But that's not all?"*

*"No. The child is mentally crippled."*

*"She's an idiot?"*

*"Not quite. Parts of her brain are infected, Lys tells me. The poor little girl is a most unpleasant host. You can't imagine it—"*

*"I don't know, Sandoz. Would it be like me living in a house with wooden floors stinking with dryrot, with the roof leaking, with fungus growing along the walls—with the drains stopped up and the toilets overflowing?"*

*"That is a close parallel."*

Carson had surprised himself with the vehemence of his description. Spill-over from Sandoz? Probably; the two entities grew closer together every day in their symbiosis.

"Well—" Carson said slowly, carefully. *"I know something of your powers, Sandoz. Can't Lys heal the girl's brain? If I lived in that awful house I'd begin to mend the floors, unplug the drains . . ."*

*"Not if the damage was too widespread. Not if the house threatened to collapse at any moment—"*

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*"The girl's dying?"*

*"Lys says so. She is easing the pain—that is the least she can do. Let us go along there now. I want to see Lys' host."*

*"They might not let us in—"*

One Oh Nine Six remained shut. Carson knocked. A nurse in white cap and the uniform of the Saint Alison Sisterhood opened the door; but she stood four square in the portal, effectively preventing Carson from entering.

*"Yes?"*

*"Hey, Sandoz—what's the girl's name?"*

*"Yvette Duclos."*

*"Nurse, I'd like to see Miss Yvette Duclos, please."*

The nurse registered surprise. A colorless creature on the surface she might be, but Carson caught the reality of devoted nursing, of tenacious purpose, lying just beneath that placid exterior. He smiled charmingly with his new face and held up the box of chocolates and sheaf of flowers purchased on inspiration moments before from a robo-server in the foyer.

*"I thought she might—"*

*"Yvette is unconscious. She is very ill, very ill indeed. I don't think—who are you?"*

*"John Canning." Carson gave the name he'd used to buy the ticket. "I'm an old friend of the family—"*

*"Well, I'll see Mrs. Duclos."*

*"Thank you, nurse. You're very kind."*

The nurse shut the door in his face. There lay nothing of rudeness in the action; it was mere medical practice of taking no chances.

*"Listen to me, Carson. Lys can tell me from the girl's memories enough to scrape you by as a family friend. But don't talk too fast. Understood?"*

*"Check. If the situation wasn't so tragic and the stakes so high this would be fun."*

*"Carson!" Genuine astonishment, gratitude, warmth of affection tinged Sandoz' surprised thought stream. "Look, boy—don't build this up as a great tragic drama! I've waited a million years for Lys. As soon as this poor little girl dies Lys can transfer—your sympathy should be for Yvette Duclos, not Lys or me."*



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*"I know. But I'm not cynical enough or old enough to dragoon my emotions."*

The door opened to reveal a short, pleasant woman wearing a synthisilk kimono, very black hair and with a face that shone naked of makeup with swollen eyes and red nose and a pitiful resignation.

*"I'm Mrs. Duclos. I don't know a Mr. John Canning—"*

Reading from Sandoz quick thoughts, which the alien picked up from Lys, who in turn rifled the memories of Yvette Duclos, Carson put together a spacetight story of an old meeting with Yvette. Mrs. Duclos nodded.

*"My husband was alive then, of course. Please come in Mr. Canning."*

Yvette Duclos was eight years old. She lay in a spaceship berth, small and shrunken, doll-face and swollen eyelids, purplish blue, tight shut, puckered mouth thinned pathetically in so young a child. Her hands, paper-transparent, lay limply on the bedspread.

Seeing her, Carson's pity broke.

*"Can't you or Lys do anything, Sandoz?"*

*"I'm sorry, Carson."*

A monstrous suspicion blossomed in Carson's mind and, so strong was its impact, Sandoz caught it at the same time the vitriolic thoughts formed.

*"Carson! You cannot believe that of us! Don't you comprehend yet that, brief though the time may be to us that we spend in an individual host, we belong to that host, we sympathize with it—a state of empathy is reached that even now you and I, Carson, are only just beginning to explore. Lys couldn't allow her host to die if she could do anything at all to prevent it! We're not made that way! You're doing us both an injustice . . ."*

*"Sorry Sandoz. I believe you. It just seemed so—so convenient for you that Yvette should die so that Lys could transfer into a mature body."*

*"I know. But it isn't like that at all."*

Mrs. Duclos said sadly: "Now you have seen my daughter, Mr. Canning, you will understand. There is no hope. All our

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miracles of modern brain surgery can do nothing for her. The doctors give her a week. I—I don't know what to do . . ."

As soon as he could with decency leave, Carson said good-bye, promised to look in again, refrained from meaningless words of hope to Mrs. Duclos and went back to the spaceship's lounge. He felt the charnel breath of the sickroom clinging to him. An eight year old girl, dying, sliding out of this life and all the bright promise of the future—and all the wit and skill of mankind's medicine could do nothing for her.

He was aware of a delicate fumbling in Sandoz' thought.

*"The little girl is going to die, Carson. I don't know if they will bury her in space or take her back to her home planet. but—but Lys will have to transfer. I—ah—I am wondering if you have any—ah—preference in her choice of next host."*

"Do what?" Carson was astounded.

"I mean," Sandoz said patiently. "Lys and I want to have offspring of our own—"

*"That's fair enough—wait a minute! How can you? I mean—you're both just little balls of goo—"*

*"I told you we understood the mystery of sex. I am not at ease in a female body as Lys is not in a male. We have had to occupy this sort of transposition of sex from time to time, of course. But now—it is essential that Lys occupy a body capable of bearing children."*

"Well, I'll go to the Horse Head Nebula!" said Arthur Ross Carson. A passing passenger stared at him with a look that ought to have brought him to his senses. But his mouth just hung open in an imbecilic grimace of incredulous belief.

*"There are about a hundred of my people in this Galaxy. Our immortality is only relative. We must have children so that our race may live. You do not think I am being presumptuous in wanting that?"*

"N—No, of course not. But—well—I don't know what to say. I suppose when the Terran child is born a new one of you is born also?"

"Yes. Our seed germinates alongside yours."

"I see." The implications of this began to sink in. A curious

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revulsion built up in Carson. For the first time in many days he thought again of Lucy, his lost love, of the way her flame hair curled—and of the way he had seen her, broken and white on the trolley after Alex Bors, the Squeeb, had finished with her. He had wanted Lucy badly. He had been going to marry her. Afterwards—afterwards women hadn't bothered him. He'd made them not bother him. They would have been salt rubbed into the yawning wound.

But now. Now his friend Sandoz wanted children. But Sandoz did not have a body of his own. He occupied the body of Arthur Ross Carson and Carson was immeasurably happy that this should be so. And if Sandoz and Lys wanted a child then they could only have that child through the agency of their hosts' bodies.

It all made sense.

*"I'll have to think about it," Carson said at length. "It's not easy for me to adjust. After Lucy—nothing else mattered and then you came along to channel my revenge for Alex Bors. Now he's dead. So there is left only my friendship with you . . ."*

*"Yvette Duclos is not yet dead, Carson. Perhaps the next choice of hosts will again be beyond the jurisdiction of us, or of Lys."*

*"Don't feel too badly about it, Sandoz. I'll figure a way out. Only, with us and despite the ridiculous divorce rates, marriage is a solemn rite. And I wouldn't bring a child into the world outside the marriage contract. Not even now. Not even in our marvelous galactic civilization. You understand?"*

Sandoz said: *"I understand that you have been conditioned by the mores of your culture. I would not seek to destroy your peace of mind by forcing you to alter your beliefs to satisfy me. But the logical way will be found."* Sandoz gave his small dry mental cough. Then he said with a burst of frightening intensity: *"A way must be found!"*

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### XII

CARSON DECIDED to push all worries over his fouled up sex-life out of his head. Not for the first time he smiled—a little deprecatingly—at the thought that he could harbor thoughts and lines of reasoning connected with the guest in his brain without the slightest hint of self-consciousness. He was not embarrassed at thinking about Sandoz, knowing the alien could read every nuance of his host's thought processes.

The way of life he had glimpsed on Shyrane and which was in a minor way reflected aboard this luxury starship opened up new vistas of understanding how men and women lived. A spaceship breaker's boy could have no knowledge of the immense wealth and sybaritic comfort of the upper classes' lives. He might hear about it; he couldn't grasp it. Carson gave himself up to finding out just what he'd been missing.

The journey to Ley's planet took a week. Carson, already on friendly terms with the grief-stricken Mrs. Duclos, had booked on to her destination, of which all he knew was that it was called Jazzstar.

Yvette was still alive. She had not been to her home on Jazzstar since she was three years old and could therefore be of little help. Lys picked up some infantile memories that even the girl didn't know she held; but Carson through Sandoz could only feel his way warily. Telling Mrs. Duclos, whose husband had been a real estate tycoon, that he was a company director and then being vague about the activity of his company had been the only smoke screen he could think up. A real estate tycoon and a spaceship breaker's boy made strange company.

"Well," he said firmly to Sandoz. "*Tell Lys it's no go if it's Mrs. Duclos.*"

The ship made a one day stop-over on Ley's planet but Carson did not leave her. He stood near the entrance valve of the waving deck watching a bloated red sun cast distorted shadows from trees that drifted through porridgy air, dang-

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ling root tendrils that licked and twined hungrily for insectival prey. The natives called them Neo-Portugese Men of War. Carson didn't like the look of them and, for some reason, they reminded him that he'd never inquired about the *Razzee* from Marjoram VI that had killed Colonel Stacey.

Turning to walk over synthipersian carpeting to the ship's library his eye was arrested by a group of purposeful looking men ascending the ramp with quick energetic strides. Somehow, about them, clung none of the air of languid holiday-making, of routine business trips that made of all the other passengers a puddingy mass of nondescripts. They walked with a bounce. There were six of them, each with a brief case, and each was tall and wide and tough with a face that stood no nonsense and had forgotten what mercy was.

Sandoz said: "*Squebs.*"

Panic hit Carson. He remained standing there as the valves closed, the ramp slid down and away. Undercover agents of the Bureau of Status Quo Enforcement, the most powerful political body in the galaxy, that ran the government, that had sought his life—here? Well, then, they could only be here for one reason. To carry on where their agents Crow and Bors had failed.

*"Walk slowly to a toilet, Carson. I'll change your face again."*

*"What about the Duclos?"*

*"Lys will have to handle that. What interests me is how did the Statque get their information that you were aboard. Always assuming, naturally, that they are after you."*

*"They are. You can bet your immortal soul they are."*

*"I have a near immortal brain without a soul being necessary, dear boy; but I understand your meaning."*

In the cover of the toilet Carson's face changed again. He could not, at the last, bear watching the writhing movements of his flesh reflected in the mirror. When it was all over he saw with an appalled glance that an old man stared back at him.

*"You'll have to walk slowly, shuffle, bend over. I'll help. I don't want your body messed up—now that Lys is so near."*

*"You'd just transfer to another—"*

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*"Of course I would!" Sandoz flared the thought like a cutting edge. "But—for some stupid reason that I'm ashamed to own—I've grown fond of you, young Carson. I don't want to part from you before I have to. Now let's get on and make a fresh booking."*

Chuckling, his fears banished, Carson rebooked. The old codger had split a lot of emotional background then.

*"The most noticeable characteristic of Crow—and Bors too, to a lesser degree—was their very lack of noticeable characteristics. Why are these Squebs so full of bounce and energy? You can tell from a parsec away that they're not here on pleasure."*

Sandoz chuckled dryly. *"You tell me."*

*"If we knew that we might know how they'd got on to us."*

Again Sandoz chuckled. *"I might be able to do something about that."*

Hobbling along with the jerkily shuffling, dot and carry one gait of an old man, Carson found a chair at the next table to where the six Squebs sat drinking. The bar contained a comfortable clientele, smoking and drinking, talking with spurts of laughter rising. The Squebs glanced casually at Carson, looked away, talked quietly among themselves.

*"Are you getting anything, Sandoz?"*

*"Yes. We've been careless. Also I have learned that your forensic systems are remarkably well-developed. Reminds me of the Algipon culture—oh, about fifty million years ago—where half the men spent their time chasing the other half."*

*"What are you receiving?"*

*"Fingerprints, observation and clothes, my dear boy."*

*"Oh."*

*"We were seen levitating to the spaceport. The clothes were recorded and recognized. And fingerprints were obtained. The Squebs joined us at Ley's planet with a single order."*

Carson tried to remember he had the face of an old man. *"I can guess. Kill Arthur Ross Carson."*

*"Yes."*

*"Have the Guards discovered me, too?"*

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*"I don't think so. These six Squebs here radiate complete and utterly ruthless confidence. The Guards are not in the picture."*

*"Well, for the first time I feel sorry they're not breathing on my neck. Captain Jose and some of the others would be handy to have around now. They want me alive—and the Statque want me dead."*

*"I think, my dear boy, you had better walk away like an old man—but quickly. It may have escaped your attention; but at the moment you're wearing the clothes we took from Shyrane."*

Cold horror hit Carson then. His old man's face wouldn't fool the Statque men for an instant; they were used to clumsy disguises, they looked for the betraying signs of carriage, body, clothes—he stood up shakily and tottered off.

The first bullet struck the door by his head and only by grace of solid bullets aboard a spaceship was he saved. At once he ducked and dived through, his old man's posture instantly forgotten. He raced madly up the corridor. Doors flashed past him; but he dare not stop to try one. He only just made the corner. A fusillade rapped sharply against the far wall as he skidded around. He felt his face writhing again and guessed Sandoz was working another switch. But of what use was that now? Now what he wanted was armor plate, a gun—or a safe hidey hole.

Feet slapping soundlessly on the thick carpet he panted along, feeling the blood gushing around his body in the first exercise aboard ship. The devil of it was, he couldn't hear the Squebs on this deep pile carpet. He risked a glance back, saw the first Statque agent show, ducked and heard the evil snap of the bullet above his head. A spiral staircase showed ahead, manual reserve in case of elevator failure, leading to the boat deck.

He sprinted up in maniacal bounds, leaping like a springbok up the metal treads. Bullets clamored from steel railing and supports. The breath clogged in his throat. The boat deck lay before him, a long bare expanse walled with the valve locks to the lifeshells.

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*"No time for a lifeboat,"* he said to Sandoz.

Desperation tore at him. Those men were killers. They hadn't waited to talk, to give him a chance. As soon as they had recognized his clothes and been sure—they'd fired.

His lungs strained against his rib cage and his heart swelled in pulsating effort. The taste of bile thickened on his tongue. Sweat blurred his vision. He did not know where he was running; the single dominant thought hammered at him: "Run! Run! Escape!"

The blow on his leg stabbed like a numbing jolt of electricity. There was no pain. But he was lying on the metal decking, staring blankly upwards at ceiling lights, feeling that cold absence of sensation in his left leg as though he'd caught it in a fish trap, waiting for them to come for him.

A face swam into vision, held suspended over him like a satellite moon swinging over its primary. A large face, with wide thin brown lips, small very black eyes, an immaculate hair-styling. A face, this, that masked a mind that knew exactly where it was going and was indifferent to whoever might get in the way—for they would be the loser.

"A quick snapshot that," the mouth belonging to the face said, the voice low and polite and artificially modulated. "You always were handy with a gun, Mark."

Another face joining that hanging above his head. A sharp-featured face this time, thicker-lipped and with narrow rat's eyes and a bad complexion.

"Thank you, Simon, for those kind words. Now what do we do with him?"

"Are you questioning your orders, Mark?"

Fear flickered briefly in those narrow eyes. Then: "Always the needler, right, Simon? When the Statque order, no one—but no one—disobeys or questions. I merely meant which particular way did you want to dispose of him."

The smooth, almost flippant words, could not conceal the absence of humanity in these men. The Statque ordered and they obeyed. Thought existed merely for expert planning, not for questioning their orders.

Simon said: "We'll shut the captain's mouth easily enough; but we don't want too many passengers aroused by a star-



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ship shooting. That service airlock over there. Put him through that."

Carson tried to struggle, tried to ward off the groping hands. He called with desperate horror to Sandoz for help; but the little alien did not respond.

Sandoz—at this time of all times—had left him!

They picked him up with contemptuous ease, gripping his limbs rigidly, stilling his struggles, artfully grasping his body so that the slightest movement shot agony through his muscles.

"*Sandoz!* he called into the empty recesses of his brain. "*Sandoz! Help me!*"

The Squebs operated the service airlock valves; the inner slid aside. They tossed him in and he fell all spreadeagled. Hobbling on one leg, the other dragging uselessly, he clawed up at the closing door.

"No!" Carson screamed. "You don't have to kill me! You don't understand! I'm not going to join the Guard! No! No! No!"

But the airlock valve hissed shut on ramair and the red cycling light went on, shining eerily across oiled machinery and smooth plastic panelling.

Carson collapsed on to the decking, lay with his head raised, saliva trickling down his chin, his lips working horribly, gazing at the outer valve. The hiss and suck of air cycling back into the ship dwindled in pitch as the air thinned. He took a deep breath. His flesh crawled with the horror of the moment, his hands scabbled on the deck.

In seconds now the airlock would be exhausted, he would live fractionally in a vacuum—and then the outer valve would crack and he would be spewed out on the last of the air, tossed naked into the maw of space.

The last words of Simon echoed terrifyingly in his brain. "*Let him eat space!*"

This was the moment—it had to be, it must be—when rescue would arrive. In the next heartbeat the air would come miraculously gushing back into the airlock. He waited in fervent expectation of that moment on the opposite end of

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of the seesaw of terror that held on this end the specter of the opening airlock valve. Of course they'd come for him. Some of the crew would bustle up, annoyed that civilians were playing with ship equipment. *Something* must happen. *Someone* must fetch him back from nightmare. *He wasn't going to die!*"

The airlock valve heaved itself open and Carson spun helplessly out into the void.

He felt nothing.

Mouth open, eyes bulging, skin crawling, his body whirled out and away from the starship. Stars passed rotating before his eyes like sparks flying from a forge. His brain had congealed. This, then, was the final moment of his life . . .

*"You do manage to get yourself into interesting predicaments,"* Sandoz said conversationally. *"For a protoplasmic being you have a perverted penchant for poison-gas planets and the airlessness of space. What the blazes are you doing out here?"*

The relief weakened his last reserves of strength.

All he could say was: *"I like it here."*

Weak and unfunny; but a man dragged from the smoking caverns of hell by his heels is in no mood for cracking jokes.

*"You did not attain escape velocity relevant to the ship's mass, so we'll fall back presently. Carson—Yvette Duclos is dying. She has only the last few moments of life left to her. And—she is dying alone!"*

*"Alone! But—"*

*"Her mother is asleep, exhausted, and the nurse has been taken away by one of the Squebs. I am rather worried. Lys tells me there is no need, but—"*

His own problems, so dramatically solved, receded from Carson's mind. If Sandoz could keep him alive on a planet writhing with green poison gas, then he could equally keep him alive in the void of space. He said: *"Why would a Squeb take the nurse?"*

*"You'd been connected with the Duclos. That was reason enough for that gentry."*

*"They're ruthless, Sandoz. Cruel and merciless. We've got to do something about the nurse as well as finding Lys a new*

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*host.*" All his attempts to carry off this escape casually were breaking down as he remembered against his will that moment of terror in the airlock just before the valves cracked open. He had been on the brink of death. Any ordinary man would have been dead by now. He tried to throw off the shakes and realized dully that his wounded left leg did not hurt.

*"What about my leg, Sandoz?"*

*"There was a bullet in it—I didn't think you'd require that so I dissolved it and cleaned up the damaged tissue. Forget it."*

*"Thanks, Sandoz. I'll forget that—but not the Squebs Simon and Mark."*

### XIII

AROUND HIM all space burned brightly with stars. He recognized some of the unfamiliar constellations by reason of his long perusal of the starcharts aboard the alien ship he and Sandoz had used; and, strangely, he could find none of the weird and chilling dismay he expected he would have experienced whirling beneath alien constellations. An idea began to grow in him that from now on all of space was his home.

The ship lay brilliant and glowing from a thousand protected ports, a single diamond-hard point of light scintillating from her prow as the light from a distant sun struck and rebounded. She looked beautiful and sinister, filled with the power and pride of the human race, a metal bubble of air and light and warmth amid an ocean of hungry death. A responsive pride lifted Carson's heart as he looked at the starship, a thrilling sense of the destiny of the human race that held no arrogance, no false heroics; but a solemn knowledge that mankind must ever push on and out, for to stagnate was a death just as final as the emptiness all about.

They were falling back to the starship now as Sandoz said: *"You are a strange people, you Terrans. Like children—and yet possessed of the most wonderful gift that intelligence*

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*can ever possess. I'm glad that Lys and I met you when you Earthpeople were alive in the galaxy."*

And that effectively punctured the bubble of aspiration boasting away in Carson. For to Sandoz and Lys, near immortals, Earthmen must appear as just another race who exploded from their planet to strut the stage of the galaxy for a few spins of that astronomical lens, and then to disappear. Disappear? Why should they? Man's so-called manifold destiny among the stars need never end if he conquered first his own black gulfs. The Bureau of Status Quo Enforcement attempted to retain the old patterns unaltered and yet every sense screamed that this could only be the retrograde path Man must go on.

His feet struck the metal hull and Sandoz cushioned the shipfall.

*"Yvette Duclos is near her end, Carson."*

*"Let's find a damned airlock and go help."*

*"First I will change your face again, and we must pick up fresh clothes. Don't forget I don't want your body damaged irreparably. For a variety of reasons."*

*"Your concern touches me."*

*"Ah! You are regaining your usual hasty self. Good. Lys has seen a small animal—a pet of your people. She can transfer there if she must."*

*"That would be Mrs. Duclos' cat. An Arcturan Siamese cat. Horrid beast. Still . . ."*

*"Yvette is sinking. The cabin remains empty."*

*"Poor little kid. Some of the money wasted on pleasure on Shyrane spent on medical research might have saved her."*

*"Lys is becoming hard to read. Her radiations attenuate . . ." Sandoz' little sigh fluttered like a falling silken scarf into Carson's mind. "It is over. Yvette Duclos is dead."*

*"Miss Pepper,"* said Arthur Ross Carson derisively. *"Now what sort of name is that?"*

*"Equally, dear boy, what sort of animal is an Acturan Siamese Cat? It seems to be a burden determined to be borne by intelligent creatures that they feed, house, clothe where necessary, love and bully lesser animals. I've seen it in culture after culture. You people of Earth are no exceptions. Mind*

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*you*"—that little cough echoed cheerfully, tinged with gentle malice—"you've picked strange choices. And these cats, in particular, seem to get away with murder."

"An apt choice of phrase, if nothing else." Carson sat further back in the chair and glanced about the dimly lit tv lounge. Vagrant gleams glanced from contact lenses, white teeth, the glitter of a ring and the dull glow of a cigarette, scents of perfumed women titillated his nostrils and the giggling whispers of occupied couples reached him rustlingly. "If the Squebs penetrate your latest disguise, Sandoz, the next murder will be ours—no, mine, rather."

"Mortality shouldn't make you bitter, Carson."

"Maybe not. But compared with your immortality—relative or otherwise—it doesn't make me exactly delirious with anticipatory joy."

"I can do little to help you there. Even I, even Lys and I with all the Galyears to play with, desire children. Maybe you ephemerae have the same immortality as us in the long run."

To answer that in the same ironic vein would be a negation and denial of belief in humanity. Carson took refuge in a return to his complaint about Mrs. Duclos' ginger ball of fire, Miss Pepper.

"How's Lys getting along in there, Sandoz?"

"I imagine the expression you Earth people would use in her position would be: 'Could be worse.' There is a limitation on her powers imposed by the contraction of the cat's brain in comparison to a human beings. I remember the dragonfly creature in which I first met you, Carson. Intelligence cleaves to intelligence."

Carson said nastily: "If you think a blasted cat and I are going to have offspring, you'd better reorganize your genetic hopes, chum."

Sandoz' dry chuckle infuriated Carson.

"What you Earthlings mean by love is fully grasped by Lys and me. We can be patient a little longer. After all, a million years is a long time, even to near-immortals."

Carson concentrated his attention on the tv screen. They were advertising a new model interplanetary runabout and

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the sales gimmick incorporated a comic strip effect where the protagonist—the consumer image—rescued a glorious girl from a fiery death in the sun only because his interplanetary runabout was the very model being sold. Any other make, Carson gathered, would have melted from truck to keelson. He yawned and rubbed his eyes.

*"Planetfall in about eight hours. I could use some sleep."*

*"You no longer have a cabin, remember? I'll get you off the ship when she berths. At this moment the Squebs are relaxing and congratulating one another on another job smoothly carried out. But if you relax—" He finished: "Anyway, they released the nurse unharmed."*

Suddenly, Carson no longer felt tired.

*"Thanks, Sandoz. I suppose you just liquidated the toxins from my muscles and like that? Considerate."*

*"Something like that. I need an active body and brain for my host. Nothing second best will do—"*

*"I'm not going to lie down beside a big ginger tom cat and commit suicide. You've had that!"*

"A pity," Sandoz said, infuriatingly. *"That would be one interesting way of overcoming our present bodily incompatibility."*

"Pseuicide," Carson said, luxuriating in the wonderfully warm feeling of safety having Sandoz as a guest engendered.

*"And you'd be a victim and murderer, all rolled into one."* He knew, without Sandoz having to tell him, that he'd never commit suicide while the little alien extended along his nervous system, guiding, counselling, being the best friend a man could ever have. *"What do you know of Jazzstar?"* he finished quickly, covering that moment of emotional lift.

*"The planet is, as far as I can gather, a world once well known to me. The Rilla—you remember I mentioned them to you soon after we teamed up on the noxious world of green poisonous gas and carnivorous lantern flowers—came bursting out of their overpopulated worlds to over-run the Galaxy—or a major portion of it."*

The thought-stream in Carson's brain carried overtones of a memory that Sandoz, despite his awesome powers, still could not recall without a very human feeling of irritation.

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Carson knew enough now to understand that a human being would recall a like memory with horror and terror and a great repugnance.

*"The Rilla. So far I have not encountered any reference to them in your knowledge, or in the stored records of your human race so far available to me; although we shall, I do not doubt, my dear boy, spend some time perusing all the archives we can lay our hands on. Your hands, that is."*

*"What about the Rilla and Jazzstar?"*

*"In those days Jazzstar was called the Purple Planet of Most Pleasurable Desire by the people living there. They were humanoid—basing, as I must, all my descriptions of aliens on your referents—and a comfortable, happy folk, quite content with their level of culture. I'd gone there because, a few million Galyears before a martial and aggressive race had flourished there and I wanted to know what had happened to them."*

*"And?"*

*"They had been buried under the detritus of the years. The Happy Folk lived an idyllic life there. Odd, that. Most races call themselves the Thinking Men. These people put Happy before thought . . ."*

Carson notched up a trigger to remember to ask why Sandoz had been curious enough to return to a planet after a few million years to check on a warlike race. If Sandoz picked up the thought now he gave no indication of it; but went on with his rundown on the history of Jazzstar, the planet they were now approaching.

*"You can probably discern what happened. In their voracious forays, building gradually over the centuries into an interstellar conquest, the Rilla bumped into Jazzstar. The Rilla were in the midst of a campaign against a particularly tough and virile little race, and Jazzstar, whose Happy Folk had no space travel, spun in her orbit right on the perimeter of power."*

*"So the place became a battlefield?"*

*"Yes."*

*"This tough little race, whatever their name was, were wiped out, the Rilla triumphed, and Jazzstar, the Purple*

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*Planet of Most Pleasurable Desire, was left a blackened and seared mausoleum."*

*"More or less. But the Rilla did not obliterate the planet; instead they built it up, garrisoned it, turned it into a most impressive bastion fronting their new conquests. Seldom have I seen a more lavishly furnished fortress dedicated to interstellar warfare. As a rough estimate, it was said, the entire resources of ten planetary systems of the order of your Solterran ancestors would be necessary even to break through the outer defences."*

*"Some place."* But the word Solterra brought a sharp and penetrating image to Carson's mind. Of himself, listening as H.E. spoke and the barbed words flickered, hearing that he, Arthur Ross Carson, had been born on Earth, on the fabulous mother world of all humanity.

Sandoz thought rode in gently. *"One day, Carson, you will visit Earth again."*

*"Again!"* Carson said, and the ache in him sang with self-directed mockery.

*"Well, now, my boy,"* Sandoz brisked. *"What else do you require to know about Jazzstar?"*

*"Huh,"* said Carson sarcastically. *"You've told me a romantic story of bygone battles; but you've told me nothing of what the Jazzstar we're making planetfall on in a few hours is like!"*

*"And 'huh!' to you, too. How do I know? You've had the benefit of the impressions Lys picked up from Yvette Duclos. A little girl's memories of a great house with many windows. Of more than one bright sun—that strikes me as odd; The Purple Planet of Most Pleasurable Desire orbited a single sun—G type—and of a nursery ten miles square covered with dolls. That enough? Or should I—?"*

*"Y'know,"* Carson said conversationally. *"Sometimes I regret I can't take a good poke at your nose. You need to be trimmed down, old codger!"*

*"Dear boy. So friendly—"*

*"What were the Rilla like? I'm beginning to get a few ideas how we might be able to cash in on all your cobwebby memories."*



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*"Cobwebby memories!"*

Suddenly and with shocking clarity, Carson understood why Sandoz persisted in his little anecdotes of places and planets long perished. Up until the time he had made contact with *Lys*, the little alien lived on his memories. They were all he had. Passing from one host to another, re-orientating himself life-span after life-span, sometimes in months, sometimes in years, sometimes living in congenial symbiosis with intelligence, sometimes merely existing in dull and miniscule brains that were all instinct and thalamus, Sandoz carried his satchel of memories with him to prove that he was himself, to reassure himself of his own identity.

To Carson then, in that dim tv lounge aboard a starship plunging down to planetfall on Jazzstar, came another link in the chain of empathy binding him to the little bodiless alien Sandoz.

*"I understand, Sandoz—now."*

*"The Rilla were a most uncomfortable race, even more barbed and touchy than you, Carson, ferocious and merciless and with a viable culture based purely on strength—might is right, as a rule-of-thumb procedure for government, can work."*

### XIV

SANDOZ, CARSON guessed, had rushed on with his tale of the long ago to cover his own feelings at this new stage in their symbiosis. All of life was a growing and a learning; stagnation was anti-life. Carson felt more strongly at each new turn in his relationship with Sandoz that life was a forward process, a stretching out timewards in a progress that had begun and might end but that now occupied fully every thinking member of the human race.

*"I remember you once told me that you could do things with me—me, that is, as a representative of a race—that you hadn't been able to do since the Rilla had stalked the Galaxy. Are we so much alike, then?"*

*"Yes—and very much no. You have the same thrust and*

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*drive and power complex; but also you have the saving gifts of humor, and love and appreciation of art—that is, of concepts, ideas and forms outside the touchable concrete of everyday life. The Rilla lived only for themselves, the moment, and the accumulation of galactic power, wealth and prestige.”*

*“What were they like? To look at I mean.”*

*“They were protoplasmic; they possessed a head, binocular eyes, a mouth with which to feed and ear-discs for hearing. They breathed oxygen through a chest filter and diaphragm movement with a carbon dioxide haemoglobin circulation similar to yours.”*

*“So they had no noses?”*

*“Two smelling slits. Sharing with your quadrupedal ancestors, they developed inevitably two limbs for locomotion and two for manipulation. I’d hardly define them as humanoid, in deference to your taste. But their features of physiological structure in fact had developed along not too dissimilar lines.”* Sandoz coughed his tiny tic of self-deprecation. *“I never enjoyed any Rilla as a host.”*

*“But, surely, they must have had some saving graces?”*

*“The single virtue they prized above all others was to die well. They lied, cheated, stole, murdered without a qualm. As everyone lived within the same framework, the culture, as I have said, was viable. They developed a strong class structure and that helped to hold their civilization together.”* Sandoz had now firmly bestridden the hobbyhorse of memory and Carson could not hold him back—if he had wanted to cut the flow of remembrance.

*“You humans have a covering of naked skin; the Rilla retained in many places a horny covering. Their eyes were long and narrow, slits from which intense black pupils glared with hatred, arrogance and contempt upon all whom they met.”*

*“Sounds nice company—”*

*“I tell you this, Carson, knowing you as I do, to any member of Homo Sapiens, the Rilla would appear monstrous, inhuman, frightening—coldly alien and unknowable. Your two races would never have mingled without bloody war.”*

*“Good job they lived so long ago, then.”*

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*"So long ago. Yes. Tell me, I can pick up traces of a plan beginning to ferment in your apology for a brain. I assume you have not been pumping me about the Rilla and Jazzstar for the pleasure of my anecdotal repertoire? This ties in with your present predicament?"*

*"I've not thought coherently yet. Is that why you can't see what I'm thinking?"*

*"Probably. There are layers deep within your brain where your mind lurks—dark recesses, I remember, I once used apropos them—and until you finally decide what you wish to think I, too, do not know. It seems obvious."*

*"So I can do a little private thinking every now and again? Well, that doesn't bother me. It should, I suppose; but having you spread out along my nervous system and prodding into my brain just means that my friend is nearer than any man's friend has ever been before."*

*"True—unless Lys or another of my people has made a friend of an Earthman."*

*"That's an intriguing thought . . ."*

The tv screen claimed Carson's attention as the drama running—cunningly Statque-slanted piece of propaganda wherein the hero, a frontier planet farmer, finally decided to stick with the soil and the nuclear tractor plough in preference to flitting starwards with the blonde—finally ground to a star-spangled finish. The news began. All was not well, the news reader said, within the higher echelons of the Galactic Guard.

On the screen flashed a jumpy telescopic foreshortened shot of Admin Center on Perivale, the local governmental planet, bustling with activity as the top brass of the Galactic Guard arrived for a hurried conference. Carson, watching, had all thought of the Rilla driven from his mind as he stared at that heavy figure, conservatively clad in russet synthinsilk, the square face with its puffy eyelids and lines grooved there by years of command, as the man stamped up the entrance steps.

*"H.E." Carson said, softly. "I still feel mean about running out on him. He's a fine man—the best man I've ever known."*

Other generals and high officials of the Guard entered

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Admin Center. Then Carson sat up. A grizzled veteran with radiation scars mottling his seamed face sprang lightly from a ground car, sprinted up the steps.

*"Captain Jose!"*

*"It seems then, dear boy, that the geegees are still concerned about you—"*

*" . . . if the proposed constitutional changes are pushed through the Galactic Guard will become virtually a minor element of the police system."* The announcer read with the flat voice of the professional. Carson wondered if the man realized the enormity of what he was saying. If the Galactic Guard were stripped of their peculiar powers, relegated to mundane police work as mere agents of the government, all policy dictated by non-Guards officers, then the Bureau of Status Quo Enforcement would have won. They would have succeeded in channeling all power in the human portion of the Galaxy into their hands. And that, it was frighteningly clear to Carson, now, would result in the collapse of all that was left to humanity of communication, co-operation, friendship. The Galaxy would fall apart.

*"The work of the Statque,"* the news reader droned on, *"to maintain, to keep things as they are, to fight against the entropy that is closing down a chapter of Human history, will be materially assisted if the Galactic Guard pass under control of the Statque."*

*"Rubbish!"* exploded Carson.

*"His excellency, the Grand Commander of the Guard, is known to resist this natural evolutionary trend. During talks with the Statque he emphasized the importance in his eyes of the Guard's separate existence. Since the last days of the Human Federation, governments have not been stable; only the Statque and the Guard have remained permanently in being. Now it seems that the Statque will at last be able to go ahead in full control, bringing to us all directly the many benefits of their work. But for them the Human Federations' mighty empire would long since have fractured into countless aimless planets and tiny groupings. The Statque maintain."*

*"And that, my boy, is what H.E. and the others in the*

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*Guard, wanted you for. You, Carson, could prevent that—"*

*"I'm not interested! At the moment we're out to find Lys a decent body, arrange it so that you and she have a fine bouncing nipper. Check?"*

*"Check, Carson," Sandoz said, a whisper of thought brushing Carson's mind. "And—thank you."*

*"You're pretty useless, Sandoz, aren't you, when it comes to the big one?" Carson loaded his thoughts with sarcasm. "When we're really up against it, you fade out."*

*"I fail to see why such remarks are brought into this not very edifying conversation, whipper-snapper. But you ask of me something that—"*

*"Why? That's all I want to know. Why won't you make me invisible?"*

From his vantage point in a scheduled angle of the waving deck with pushing, happy passengers passing through the opened airlock valves, Carson could look out on the city of Morton's spacefield here on Jazzstar. The spaceport looked like a million others. Impatiently, Carson turned his thoughts inwards again.

*"You said you could do it. Well, why not?"*

*"Are you questioning my veracity?"*

*"Yes."*

*"Well, you young ingratel I'll almost allow myself the pleasure of turning you invisible for a few seconds, only I have more concern for our body than you have. When I make you invisible the trick is done by molecular re-arrangement, the planes are aligned differently so that light is allowed through, as through glass. But it demands tremendous reserves of energy from the cells and they drain—by the time you return to visibility you feel like a whipped cur, to use your vivid phrase."*

*"What even for a few minutes? Just time enough to nip down the landing ramp?"*

*"We could do it, I suppose. But I want this body in good shape—"*

*"I'm just a host stud, you incubus!"*

*"Walk slowly, now. Your face is exactly that of a man who*

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*just went through. You felt the change? Right. Now take it slowly, my impetuous young hot-head."*

Carson walked steadily towards the exit valves. He knew that Sandoz had changed his face to that of a man who had recently entered the ship, and who was wearing clothes near enough his own to attract no attention. The man, he hoped, would be busy hunting up the friends he had come to meet. Carson walked on.

Because this spaceport was so dreadfully familiar—a twin to the one back home on Ragnar—Carson's first glance went towards the far edge of the field. There lay the rusting heaps of metal, the corroding piles of ancient ships that had made their last planetfall here. Somewhere over there, clambering with arc cutters and nimble fingers among pitiful remains of once-proud ships, would be a spaceship breaker's boy. Who he was made no difference to the nostalgia flowing through Carson. So short a time ago, he, too, had been just a degutter of wrecks. Working close to the field like this might bring in only the small wagons, not for them the deep-space liners sold off by the star-shipping lines, but it made for variety and experience and a skill with tools.

*"Cobwebby memories,"* Sandoz said.

And Carson laughed.

He headed straight for the post office. The place lay cool and shaded beneath a bright sun, glints striking cheerfully back from polished brass and aluminium, plastic windows gleaming and reflecting green and scarlet and yellow blossoms growing luxuriantly in painted window boxes. The clerk was a white-haired lady with a gentle face and clothes fifty years out of date, her fingers stained, her eyes a bird-bright blue.

*"Only one sun, I observe,"* Sandoz said.

*"Yvette's memories are not going to be much good."*

*"No. What do you want in the post office? We have to buy the clothes and belongings you need that we had to leave behind on the ship . . ."*

Carson answered by filling in a spacegram form. The lady

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smiled sweetly as she read it and franked the right amount. Carson paid.

The gram said: "Captain Mike Jose, GG HQ, Perivale. Having fine time. Saw you on tv. Keep the ball in the air."

The lady prodded with a finger. "Glad to know you're having a good time as soon as you land, son. But aren't you going to sign it?"

"No. Costs extra. Anyway, they'll know who it's from."

She smiled and slid the form into the mouth of the transmission robot. Carson smiled back, thanked her, and walked out.

"Now," he said firmly. *"We find a hotel after you've given me the face and figure we need, I have a good meal, then we go see Mrs. Duclos. And Miss Pepper."*

*"Yes. I don't want Lys to get too far away. She finds communication a little difficult with the cat's brain. Carson—I mustn't lose her again!"*

*"You won't, Sandoz. Not if I can help it!"*

## XV

THE SIGN, neat and unobtrusive in leaf green lettering set in translucent lime green plastic, read:

### DUCLOS AND NEHRING REAL ESTATE

Carson swivelled his head upwards. From the opaque door beside which the neat little sign proclaimed the business carried on here, a six foot diameter transparent tube rose two hundred feet into the warm air. The tube vanished into the central boss of a round platform something over a hundred yards in diameter. The metal base absorbed light and the round blackness seemed to Carson to squat against the sky like a hole in heaven. Although he could not see the sides of the structure from his position immediately beneath its center, by casting his eyes sideways along the rest of this street he saw other circular platforms all connected to the ground by their transparently shining umbilical cords. Some supported mere three story buildings, other platforms contained skyscrapers of twenty and thirty stories. He knew enough al-

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ready to know that the Duclos building would be the largest and most impressive in Brubeck.

Here on Jazzstar towns were merely centers for spaceports and services. No one lived or worked in a town. The whole population was migratory. A town consisted of a spaceport or airfield, essential services, and a forest of tall transparent tubes equipped with express lifts. That was all.

He'd left Morton by aircar the morning after his arrival on Jazzstar, following Mrs. Duclos and her cat, Miss Pepper. The Duclos building in Brubeck, a quasitown five hundred miles away across flat treeless country, had just engulfed Mrs. Duclos, Miss Pepper, the nurse and a robot attendant loaded with baggage.

*"Y'know, Carson, I feel sorry for that woman. Her husband is recently deceased and now she returns from a holiday on Shyrane—where no doubt she hoped to forget some of her sorrow—without her daughter. You mortals suffer in that respect."*

*"Shall we follow straight away? You've given me the face and figure we think proper, our story has been polished up—and there's no time like the present."*

*"Very well. If this man Nehring adheres to Jazzstar custom he'll up anchor soon and let the drifter go with the wind. The sun is almost down from here."*

Carson called the elevator. Riding up, he said: *"An odd custom. Living in giant platforms like floating cheese boxes, drifting with the winds around the planet, always in daylight. No wonder Yvette thought there were a lot of suns. She'd probably never seen night time from a planet until she hit Shyrane."*

*"What dark mysteries of psychology does this habit conceal?"*

*"You name it. They've probably got it. Ah, here we are."*

A profusion of luxury surrounded him, even here in the foyer, and he guessed that the higher in the building he progressed the greater the opulence would be. Already he was learning what possession of great wealth could mean. The robot receptionist ran trillingly through its paces and



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Carson found himself ushered respectfully into an inner office hung with rich draperies and lit by a ring of drifting fireflies endlessly circling the junction of ceiling and walls. The formfit adjusted snugly to his new body and he fingered secretly and with satisfaction the brand new and very expensive clothes he wore. The best part about money was spending it.

"Mr. Nehring is engaged at the moment, Doctor Waring." The man sat plumply and pompously behind his desk, steeping his hands, beautifully manicured. His moon face smiled blandly, his pomaded hair shone. "I am Alec Wolgast, vice-president. Can I help you?"

"I must confess," said Carson in what he hoped sounded like a deep and resonant professorial voice, full of years and authority, "that I am much impressed by your drifters. Jazzstar, as a planet, I did not anticipate finding of great interest; but I was wrong."

"Good of you to say so," burbled Alec Wolgast. He remained politely smiling, waiting.

"I have come to you because I was told that Duclos and Nehring owned most of Jazzstar—"

Wolgast moved his hands as though washing them. "Not owned, doctor! We have, shall we say, a greater interest in this planet than any other—"

"And anyone else," Carson said, perversely determined to raise some other reaction than bland courtesy from that face.

"That maybe. I understand you are an archaeologist, doctor. This puzzles me. Jazzstar is a virgin planet—"

Sandoz said: "*Good grief, as you might say, do they really believe that?*"

"Have any expert and detailed archaeological explorations and digs taken place?" Carson pointed a finger in a classroom mannerism. "Not one. Only a rapid and sketchy preliminary summation by a not-very-skilled branch of the Survey Corps."

Wolgast broadened his smile. "All this may be true, doctor. I'm afraid all this digging up the past goes right over my head. Now—just how can we help you?"

"Why—I'll need to rent a drifter and to have your per-

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mission to carry out a dig. The land is Duclos and Nehring property—”

“Ah! I see. I don’t anticipate great trouble there, doctor. Of course, Mr. Nehring will have to make the final decision. As to rents—”

“Anything within reason,” Carson said, trying not to sound like a man who has a friend who can production-line manufacture precious gems.

A hush phone extended on its pseudopod from a recess in the desk. Wolgast spoke briefly, nodded, and looked across as the hush phone disappeared.

“Mr. Nehring is free now. The business has had a rather trying time lately. Mr. Duclos . . . But I know Mr. Nehring will want to deal with this personally.” Wolgast stood up. “Will you come this way, please?”

Going across the lush carpet to the rear door, Carson was struck by the conviction that Wolgast only half believed his story. The smooth man would charge the limit for an archaeological dig and the drifter. The academic Doctor Waring must be backed by some wealthy and influential body prepared to pay heavily for the privilege of digging on Jazzstar, that was why Carson, as Doctor Waring, was receiving the red carpet treatment.

“Ah! said Sandoz with satisfaction. *“Lys is very near. Mrs. Duclos—”*

The door opened. Carson went through.

*“Mrs. Duclos and Miss Pepper are still here. That’s a stroke of luck.”*

Wolgast introduced Carson to Nehring. The room was a replica in greater size and luxury of the other office. Through a screened-reeled window the sun lay as a red ball on the bar horizon. Gently, delicately, Carson felt a swaying motion tremble through the floor.

Wilfred Nehring was tall and gaunt, a thick shock of gray hair giving his face a precipitous look. His handclasp was firm and dry, skin rasping against Carson’s university skin. He had a slight stoop, and his mouth and chin, square and roughened, dug down into his tie.

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"Doctor Waring, this is a pleasure. Allow me to introduce you to Mrs. Duclos—"

"A pleasure," Carson said.

*"Say something about the cat, imbecile!"* Sandoz rasped.

"An Arcturan Siamese!" Carson knelt, touched the cat's fiery fur gingerly. The cat arched its back but Carson did not stroke it. That, to a Siamese, Arcturan or otherwise, was fatal, demanding instant retaliation.

Mrs. Duclos showed animation. "Fancy that now! Miss Pepper has taken a liking to you, doctor. For any other person to do that is impossible, except me and Yvette—Yvette—"

"Please, Mrs. Duclos!" said the nurse, urgency striking through her soft tones.

"Of course, Moira. But it is difficult not to remember and to pine. If anything happened to Miss Pepper, now . . ."

Sandoz said: *"You realize, I suppose, that this drifter has just left the lift? That we are now sailing before the breeze around the planet, following the sun?"*

*"Yes. The motion as we left was noticeable; but right now we're as steady as a rock."*

*"They've cut the motors and generated a stasis field around the buildings, stepped up the speed. Evidently waiting for Mrs. Duclos to arrive delayed them and they have to make up time."* Sandoz finished acidly: *"I wouldn't like to find them stranded in the dark."*

*"What do you make of Nehring and Wolgast?"*

*"Nehring seems a reasonable character; his emanations show only a fiercely competitive business man who tries to play the game straight. I get a reaction towards Mrs. Duclos—"*

*"I suppose he didn't put old Duclos out of the way?"*

*"Might have done. Doubtful on the strength of the personality I'm picking up. Wolgast is different. His emanations are as coiled as a Squeb's—"*

*"Could he be a Squeb?"*

*"Now how the blue blazes do I know?"*

*"Seems to me you're failing to understand a lot just lately. Lys?"*

*"I suppose so, Carson, I suppose so. Just having her near*

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*me is a delirious experience and I tend to push aside lesser matters. I know you'll understand that. But, wonderful thought this is, I want more!"*

*"Not with a flaming cat you won't chum."*

*"The problem would be solved by mere waiting. After a million years or so—one cat's lifetime is not so very long."*

Mrs. Duclos and the two men turned to Carson as though suddenly contrite with realization.

Nehring said: "I'm afraid the drifter has left Brubeck, Doctor Waring. We're on the fringe of daylight here and—although I know you outworlders find this difficult to comprehend—we find that uncomfortable."

"That is quite all right, provided you have accommodation for me. I anticipate problems with my workers over the dig. As soon as daylight begins to go they'll down tools and drift with the sunshine?"

"That's right, doctor, and I, for one, can't blame them. But, tell me, what do you hope to uncover on Jazzstar? The place was virgin when the first Earthmen landed."

Nehring ushered the party through into a lounge where Wolgast supervised the drinks dispenser. Carson sat down with a genuine grunt of relief. He noticed that the nurse, Moira, sat next to Mrs. Duclos. Presently the older woman took the nurse's hand, gripping it for comfort. Carson saw again the strong, well molded body beneath the uniform of the Saint Alison Sisterhood, the calm, smooth face, the soft brown wavy hair. But he still couldn't envisage an emotional entanglement with the girl. The image of Lucy kept sweeping away every present picture of any other girl.

He began to talk, carefully, building up the idea of a dedicated archaeologist working on his own, very idiosyncratic and partially discredited, theory.

"I am sure that I shall uncover finds of the greatest value to science. Jazzstar has been populated before mankind came here. I intend to prove that a great race of people extended from star to star in the galaxy—"

"But, surely, doctor," Wolgast interjected, lowering his

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drink, his smile unaltered by a millimeter," the human species is the first truly great interstellar culture?"

"Not so. However, when I have proved my point it will only emphasize mankind's present decline. The old Human Federation collapsed and at the present time we are fighting a desperate rearguard action against decay."

"The Statque are trying to stop that," Nehring said quietly.

Knowing he trod dangerous ground, Carson smiled and refused to comment. He turned the conversation to generalities and as the amiable chit chat flowed on and Sandoz left him in that frightful vacuum, tried to establish his image as the bumbling, not-altogether-with-us professor. How well he succeeded he didn't know; but when at last, he was shown to a comfortable room, pleading tiredness, he had arranged for the hire of a small drifter and the rental of the area he wished first to excavate.

Sandoz was still off and away. No doubt Miss Pepper was having a respite from the alien entity dominating her brain.

Only one untoward incident marred the pleasure of his stay on the Duclos and Nehring drifter. On the pseudo-night before he took a flier to the location of the dig and the hired drifter, his room was thoroughly turned over.

"Wolgast?"

"That's right, dear boy. His peculiar emanations still choke the place."

"Well, he will have precisely nothing to reward him for his night's work; but all the same it makes me mad. I've a good mind to poke him one—"

"Huh! Remember, Carson, you have at the moment the body of a middle-aged man in not particularly good physical trim—"

"And I don't know it! I'll be glad to resume my own shape. I'm sick of puffing and blowing."

The site they began to excavate, Sandoz assured Carson, had once been an arsenal fortress of the Rilla. "Under here, deep below the detritus of the years, lies a stupendous complex of armored fortresses. Geological upheavals have buried them; but I'll guarantee that the Rilla built well enough for everything within the armor to remain intact. From a genu-

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*ine archaeologist's point of view, young fellow, this is the dream of a life-time come true."*

Carson did not reply. From the hired drifter's downward angled windows he surveyed the ground below, where a rolling, dusty grassland and clumped, dispirited trees, echoed his own emptiness of feeling. He couldn't settle down. Sandoz' quiescent acceptance of the bizarre situation, the way in which the little alien calmly went about this puttering archaeological cover story, his willingness just to exist with Lys somewhere else on this planet, all combined to infuriate and depress Carson. He felt frustrated. Purpose suddenly had left his life. There was nothing now immediately to be striven and fought for, no plans to scheme, no enemies to overcome.

The mental craving for excitement fevered his spirit.

*"I suppose I am to blame for that."* Sandoz coughed dryly. *"If I hadn't wrenched you away from the geegees to follow Lys you'd be battling and swashbuckling away to your heart's desire."*

*"No, Sandoz! You, of all people, aren't to blame."*

*"Nice of you to say so, dear boy. But still—oh, I know you relinquished your claims to a special place in the geegees, turned down the chance H.E. offered you of becoming the Grand Commander in due course. But that was only a passing phase. I am convinced that had you remained with H.E. and been surrounded by Guard panoply—and very direct purpose in the lights of a human being, too—you'd have taken that course destiny had ordained for you until I came along."*

*"Right. So I'd now be a strutting popinjay in the scarlet panoply of the Guard, learning to salute and polish buttons—thank all the patron saints of space you did come along, Sandoz!"*

The wry amusement in Sandoz' thought brought relief and a saving humor to Carson, as the little alien said: *"You are going to live for a very long time—by human standards, that is; and all your lifetime will be a whole lifetime to me, also. There is time, my impetuous young swashbuckler, for Lys and me—and for you and the Guard."*

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Below their hovering drifter which, sustained by antigrav motors regarded with tolerant amusement by Sandoz, hung a hundred feet in the air stationary against the breeze, a work crew labored over the dusty ground. Already they had cut investigation trenches through the crumbly soil and Carson, putting to use his recently acquired book-learning, began to direct detailed efforts over the drifter's loud-hailers, Sandoz, of course, provided the brains and knowhow.

*"Last time I had an archaeologist as host was, let me see, about twenty-five million years ago. Big chap. Very gentle and a nice creature in his own culture—but you'd see him as large as a diplodocus, Carson, eating a whole plateful of new-born—well, they were not unlike sheep—for breakfast. He wasn't being cruel; that was the way of life on Szinkul. He was digging up remains of some folk who'd lived only about five hundred thousand years before. I couldn't help him, though. At that time I'd been away on another spiral arm of the galaxy."*

*"Methods changed much?"*

*"Not really. Except that they lifted as much earth in one go as your whole crew take an hour to shift."*

*"Well, you said we mustn't use machinery ad lib!"*

*"Quite right. I want to know everything that has happened on Jazzstar since the Rilla were here."*

*"Well, frankly, I'm past caring. I want some action."*

*"You young colts are all alike. You can't sit still and watch what goes on. Oh, no. You have to go out and do it yourselves. And get bloody noses in the process."*

*"You poor old codger! Too old and tired—"*

Sandoz' thought blasted through what Carson had been saying, ripping through his brain like liquid fire.

*"Carson! Blank off your thoughts! Quickly! Stop thinking!"*

Without question Carson tried to do the notoriously difficult task of unthinking. His mind iced up. He felt streamers of thought probing at him, questing, prodding, prying. His hands gripped into fists. His teeth clamped into his lip. How long he stood there looking down through the window he did not know.

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Then: "All right, Carson. Panic over."

"What the blazes was that all about?"

The answer sprang harshly and uncompromisingly from the alien mind. "You human beings are further along the road of technological psychiatry than I had imagined. Someone has been searching with a—well, I've known them termed mind-seekers. An instrument that can blank off nearly all static and overtones and pick up the electrical impulses from an intelligent brain, record and codify them."

"That sounds quite a trick—"

"They've fused the principles of an electro-encephalograph and a maser. I think you broadcast enough for them to pick you up. Somewhere on this planet there now exists an electrical recording of the signals from your brain."

"Statque or Guard?"

"Could be either, dear boy." Sandoz resumed his usual manner. "Whichever it may be, you're in for that action you craved just now." That dry, sardonic chuckle: "I hope you enjoy it."

"Yes, but—" Carson felt apprehension breeze over him, "won't they see something odd about my brain signals? Won't they find a double record? Won't they register you?"

"My dear young imbecile! You saw me, you picked me up. How do you think I could contrive the master-strokes of original thought and encompass my memories—even with those portions of your apology for a brain that I use as storage cabinets—and perform the prodigies of science that I do with such a small brain? I do not use your simple electrical cellular system—no, dear chap, the prying fingers of the mind seeker cannot pick me up."

"Egotist! Anyway, it's a good job they can't."

"Indubitably."

"Anyway, you're so all-fired clever, why can't you blank off my thought transmission for me?"

"I can, up to a point. A lot depends on just how strongly you are radiating and how near and powerful is the mind-seeker. I don't think we need worry too much at present. But—"

"We've got to stay near Lys. That's settled."



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*"Yes. But I don't want to get you killed to satisfy my love life, Carson."*

Carson made no flippant answer to that. It struck too deeply.

### XVI

LIFE DRIFTED along with all the excitement of a clerk totting up a column of figures. Days on Jazzstar lasted for ten of Ragnor's days and Ragnor's, Carson had often been told with the pride of the good citizen, were almost the same as those of the fabulous Earth.

Each night the workers, most of them on holiday and here only because digging with an archaeologist was a novelty, packed up, caught their fliers and headed for drifters following the sun around the planet. With the dawn—ten of Ragnor's nights later—they turned up from the opposite direction. Inevitably, personnel working changed as men and women grew bored with the task, their holidays closed, other commitments drew them.

Here on Jazzstar people lived a free and easy life, not bothering with formality, happy to go along with what the day might bring.

*"Probably,"* Sandoz said once to Carson, *"they began their sunny migrations because they couldn't stand such a long night. It works out."*

*"Yes, but,"* said Carson, *"forever drifting around the planet, never anchored in one place long enough even to know it. The conception of factories and foundries and offices forever drifting is acceptable, I suppose. But the inefficiency in mining, heavy engineering, industries which you just can't uproot, is fantastic. There are plenty of facets of this culture you can like and admire; but you have to shut your eyes to a great deal of business waste."*

*"As to that, dear boy, Duclos and Nehring own most of the planet. It's their worry, and they grow fat on it."*

Four times in the next two of Jazzstar's days the mind seeker groped for Carson's brain radiations.

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He studied each new group of workers to the site, wondering if one of those cheerful, laughing, skylarking sensation-seekers had been planted there in cold-blooded scheming by the Statque. So it was that he rebuffed attempts at comradeship. Some of the workers, unused to his rigorous discipline in the dig, packed up and left. Some left because he'd rubbed them up the wrong way.

Towards the close of that Jazzstar day he went down into the excavation. Earth lay heaped up on all sides revealing more earth below, with tractor and shovel men giving precise instructions to the robotic machinery, which carried it out even more precisely. Shadows lay long. Soon everyone would down tools and leave aboard their drifters.

"Hey, Doctor Waring! We've struck that metal—"

Instantly, Carson joined the group by the patient robot excavator, and stared down. Below his feet lay the corroded, battered, but still intact sheet of metal that the instruments had predicted would be there. What might exist beneath that sheet of armor plate the instruments could not say.

Incredibly to the jaded Carson, excitement flowed through him.

"Can you cut through?"

"Can but try . . ."

Six hours later, with the shadows now at their limit of tolerance the men gave up.

"Never cut through that before we have to move on."

Frustration tore through Carson. Bored he had been and, just when it seemed something out of the ordinary might occur, the damned night clamped down and work stopped. He did not entertain the idea of cutting through himself. He nodded and the men left.

Aboard his drifter he found a message waiting. It was from Mrs. Duclos.

"I'm so sorry, Doctor Waring, not to be able to accept your kind invitation to come out and see your work. But I have decided to take another trip. I must try to forget the pain of loss. I know you will forgive me." Then: "I'm sure Miss Pepper remembers you. She ran about in a very agitated

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way when we began to pack. I always say animals are just as intelligent as humans, don't you think?"

*"The course of true love never did run smooth,"* Carson said phlegmatically as their flier spun away from the spindling transparent tubes of Brubeck, heading after the Duclos entourage on its way to Morton. In this precipitate dash lay a ghastly reminder of their wild flight to catch the ship on Shyrane. This time Lys guested inside a cat instead of a mentally crippled child and if the images she received and relayed were more clear, they suffered from lack of comprehension and interpretation.

At the field the Duclos destination was easy enough to spot. A stubby, twenty-year old space liner reared from a side pad, the only ship currently on the field.

Inquiries elicited the dismaying fact that the ship had been fully booked for a star-gazing jaunt through the galaxy. She was licensed to carry a thousand tourists, her port of origin parsecs away and at this stop-over on Jazzstar Mrs. Duclos and Moira, her personal nurse, had completed a full booking. Sunshine beat down vertically on the heads of the returning tourists as they swung up in the ship's loading elevator. Carson stood by the open window of the booking office, fuming. *"Now what?"*

Sandoz said: *"We must resort to a little skullduggery. Interesting word, that. Applied to me it is hilarious—"*

*"Lys is going aboard that ship. We can't. And all you do is make nitwittish remarks about words—"*

*"Wait, my impetuous friend, and watch. And, remember, I am sorry about this."*

Carson saw a young couple waltz in from a hired flier, loaded with souvenirs, laughing, chattering, start to go through to the next group waiting for the loader. He felt an abrupt vertiginous sensation, a burning in his eyes, a dizziness and a weakness of his limbs. He rubbed his eyes; but before he could angrily question Sandoz he saw the young couple halt, stare about, their faces lose color. Then they crumpled to the ground. Attendants ran up. A sympathetic stir animated the waiting passengers.

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It was all over very quickly. An ambulance took the stricken pair to a drifter hospital. Carson returned to the window.

"You can book me in now," he said. "I'm sorry about those people; but they leave a vacant berth."

The robot ticket clerk re-acted on command and Carson paid and picked up the ticket folder. As he turned to go Sandoz said firmly: "*Blank, Carson!*"

Carson blanked; but his mind, whirling with the implications of what his alien agent had just done, would not still and his half-suppressed thought: "*You fixed that couple! You used my brain and you did something to them!*"

"*Quiet, Carson!*"

Desperately, knowing that a mind seeker groped remorselessly for the radiations from his brain, Carson tried to still his mind's activity.

Then: "*All right, son. It's gone. But they picked you up then, loud and clear.*"

"*That means they're near?*"

"*Yes.*"

Through the frame of the loading bay the stubby starship stood up, firm and patient, waiting to take men and woman back into space. The talk and laughter of happy holiday-makers echoed and tinkled all about him. He walked out into the sun-splashed air, stepped aboard the loader, was whisked up into the ship.

"*Who would have thought,*" he said fretfully, "*that sticking close to a blasted cat would be such a problem?*"

Standing just inside the tennis courts, Carson watched idly as Moira, Mrs. Duclos' nurse, fought out a tough set point against a wavy-haired, square-jawed, clean-cut young Apollo. Mrs. Duclos sat beside him, Miss Pepper curled at her feet.

"I like to see Moira enjoying herself," Mrs. Duclos said comfortably, taking another chocolate from the box on her ample lap. "I'm afraid I'm a burden."

"That's what she's paid for," Carson said unheedingly.

"I know, doctor; but she's been a good friend to me. I need someone older, really, though; someone to take the place of my poor husband."

"*Watch it, dear boy,*" said Sandoz gleefully. "*This routine*

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*extends back into the Galaxy's past far beyond my recollection."*

"Sadist!"

"And really," went on Mrs. Duclos, primping her hair with red-tipped fingers, "I'm not really old! It's just that I've, well, let myself go since my poor husband, and Yvette—but this holiday will make a difference, I'm sure."

Sandoz said: "*She's certainly changed since we first met her. New hair style, make-up, smart clothes, and a fresh construction of body-armor-plate to arrange her shape into that considered most pleasing to the male eye—and that means me, my dear boy, as you must realize.*"

"You're looking wonderful, Mrs. Duclos."

"Oh, Doctor! But why don't you call me Mimieux? So much less formal." She raised her good-natured, plump face to glance coyly at Carson. "After all, you did follow me on this trip, all the way from your precious dig."

"Yes," said Carson, and felt the howl of laughter from Sandoz ringing in his brain.

"*Poor woman,*" Carson said savagely. "*What would she say if she knew the man she thinks of as Doctor Waring had followed not her charms; but those of her cat!*"

Moira cut a vicious backhand chop into her opponent's forehand, catching him wrong-footed. He flung his racquet into the air and caught it. "You win!"

Carson let his mouth droop. He'd never played a game of tennis in his life. As Moira and her beaten Apollo walked across, laughing, flushed, racquets across shoulders, Carson rose and excused himself. He left the courts and headed for the ship's library. Sandoz huffed a little; but Carson said:

"*Unless Lys decides to kill Miss Pepper right now, and then gets into Mrs. Duclos or Moira, we're safe for a bit.*"

"Carson!" Sandoz said angrily. "*Neither Lys nor I will kill our hosts! Such a thought is an affront!*"

"I'm sorry. But waiting around a rich widow is a dangerous occupation."

He turned into the doorway leading to the library fast, needing quiet and solitude, a time to plan. With his mind churning over the problems that appeared without solution

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he scarcely saw where he was going. The lights glistened from flame hair. He felt his own body collide with a soft but firm form that bounced away with a gasp. He looked up, the apology rising quickly to his lips.

He looked at the girl. She had one hand out, supporting herself against the wall. The other hand brushed a tendril of glorious flame hair from her forehead. Carson looked. He saw her face. Red roaring madness choked down over him; all his surroundings whirled impossibly about him in that hammer of blood through his veins, everything but the face and figure of this girl looking so steadily back at him.

"Lucy!" he said, and the word tore at his throat, hurting him. "*Lucy!*"

He felt Sandoz pull him up with a jolt. He stared more closely at that lovely, white face with those enormous eyes, that soft mouth, that flame hair, seeking hungrily—then: "No! No—it's not Lucy. It can't be! Lucy's dead."

The girl smiled unsteadily.

"I'm sorry," she said with Lucy's voice. "I wasn't looking where I was going—"

"My fault," Carson said. "Please forgive me. But . . . But . . ."

"Yes?" Her face, open and sincere and unafraid, drew him hopelessly. "What is it?"

"Nothing. I thought—I thought I knew you."

Looking greedily at this girl he realized for the first time that Lucy's eyes had been set too close together. And there were other things, small, miniscule constructions of face and figure, that made him feel a traitor to the memory of his lost love. This girl far surpassed Lucy in the things in a woman that Carson wanted as Lucy had surpassed all others.

"You're sure you're all right?"

"Of course. Stupid of me. I apologize—"

Sandoz snapped testily: "*Carson! Stop acting like a love sick calf! She's the same age as you, or thereabout. I'd guess she's nineteen. She sees you as a poor middle-aged old codger, ready for the grave!*"

"*This damned body!*" flared Carson. "*I'd forgotten!*"

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The girl favored Carson with a smile that rocked him back on his heels. "My name's Sally King—you're Doctor Waring, aren't you? One of the men who came aboard at Jazzstar? You were lucky, I thought we'd taken all berths."

"That's right, Miss King. Have you been around space much? That is—I—" He hesitated, wanting to ask her if she'd ever been to Ragnor and yet shrinking from committing himself. Passengers gossiped, it was their consuming passion.

"Oh, yes. Quite a lot. My father's—ah—job takes him all over our part of the Galaxy."

"That must be interesting. Is he aboard?"

"Of course not!" She laughed and Carson's head swam. "But I expect I'll be meeting up with him. Now I must go for my daily swim." She moved away with the grace of a panther. Carson watched her. This was Lucy, come back from the grave—only better, finer, even, than Lucy had ever been.

"I gather you don't want a report on her, Carson?"

A stab of panic hit Carson. Perhaps there was a flaw in this gorgeous girl? "We-ell—" he said, doubtfully. And, then, indignantly: "You can report on her all you damn well please, you alien blob of gunk! I know she's perfect!"

"Oh, well," sighed Sandoz. "That settles the next host for Lys."

"What? But—but—" Carson babbled in his mind, now, overwhelmed by the vision conjured up by Sandoz' simple words. "But you can't arrange that! Suppose she's married, engaged—suppose she doesn't like me? You couldn't condemn a girl to that sort of fate! I won't have it, d'you hear?"

"All right. All right. You've plenty of time to get acquainted. A whole cat's lifetime."

"Listen to me, Sandoz. I'll only agree to Lys entering her and of the four of us having kids if she—Miss King—really wants me herself, without coercion. Got it?"

"You're the one who's got it, dear boy."

Carson knew that was right. No time at all had been needed for him to make up his mind. He felt that this girl and he had been made for each other.

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### XVII

SITTING DOWN in the library and setting up his instructions on the dial operating the ship's limited but adequate reference section, he wondered yet again at the startling similarity between Sally King and his lost Lucy. But Sally won out on every point. A warmth engulfed him at the idea, a feeling that he could never be a traitor to Lucy and that she, wherever she was now, would understand.

The desk reader lit up and a magnified page of an encyclopedia unrolled slowly.

*Razzee.* Carson read. The foot long flying snake found only on Marjoram VI was sudden death. There were not many of them. Work on them had been limited by difficulties (see Marjoram VI, Galactic Gazetteer) but it was known they could breath oxygen.

Carson dialled for the Galactic Gazetteer, Marjoram VI.

*Marjoram VI.* Carson read. Galactic co-ordinates, mass, albedo, magnetic poles, escape velocity, gravity, various dimensions, inclination. Atmosphere—a mixture of gases in proportions . . . chlorine . . . Central tropical belt dominated by lantern flowers, carnivorous bells on long stalks . . .

Carson stared unseeingly as all the information reeled past on the reader. He was back in that lantern plant with the slosh of acids beneath his spaceboots, waiting for death, death through slow assimilation by the plant or the poisonous green gas outside.

"So we met on Marjoram VI," said Sandoz.

*"The quicktrip door on Ragnor was set to Marjoram VI when I went through. Yet the Guards said it was thrown at random when they checked. This means—"*

*"This means that the murderer of Colonel Stacey unloosed his razzee from Marjoram VI, going and returning from the planet through the Quicktrip door."*

"This may be old history now," said Carson, the dull rage in him battling his warm memories of Sally King. "But I'd like to find out what really happened back there."



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*"So would I, son—but—Lys is calling! She's faint; but there's trouble there. Something's wrong!"*

Immediately Carson cancelled the reader, sending the information back to the ship's library, and rose, going out the door faster than he had entered. Around him the pulse of holidaymakers shipboard life carried on, people laughing and talking, having fun, relaxing. The tension built up in him fast. Sandoz smelt trouble—and that meant a real bonanza of grief.

*"Our aims are changed now, Carson," Sandoz said crisply as they hurried down the shining corridor to Mrs. Duclos' cabin, where Lys said trouble was brewing. "I recognize that, even if you don't."*

*"Why? We've got to help Lys out—"*

*"I don't mean this immediate problem; but the whole overall picture. Our task was to stay near enough to Mrs. Duclos and Miss Pepper so as to be on hand when the cat died and Lys passed on to another host. Now we have to consider Miss Sally King."*

*"Yes. Of course. You mean we have to arrange for her to be around when Miss Pepper does die? That could be years ahead. Sally might be anywhere in the Galaxy."*

*"It's our job to make sure the two are together!"*

Carson fully understood the reasons for Sandoz' concern for him. Those reasons stemmed from the same symbiotic root that bound them up together. But, all the same, he realized the warm feeling they gave him.

He slowed his quick walk as shadows moved outside Mrs. Duclos' door. Then he shrank back, feeling the revulsion and anger building in him.

*"Those two men—Squebs! Simon and Mark! The two who shoved me through the airlock!"*

*"We'll deal with those gentry if we have to. I can always make them sick like that unfortunate couple back on Jazzstar; but that, I'm sure, wouldn't hold such tough characters as these. Lys says that Mrs. Duclos has been taken away by a couple of men—but, dear boy, they cannot be these two here."*

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"On guard, I'd say. What about Moira?"

*"Lys says—now that is most interesting—"*

*"What does she say, dodderer?"*

*"She says, my gullible friend, that Moira appears to be on the terms of greatest amity with the Squebs."*

*"The swine got to her when they picked her up back on the spaceliner. She's working for them—but—but this means they must have suspected all along!"*

Sandoz' dry chuckle sounded eerily in the recesses of Carson's skull. "Evidently."

*"What's happening? Did they say where they were taking Mrs. Duclos? And—Sandoz—they must connect the intrusive Doctor Waring with Arthur Ross Carson. They must! Although how they imagine I escaped from their push into space I can't imagine."*

*"Just a minute. Yes—Lys is lying down by the table and Moira and this man are discussing plans. They know it's you, Carson! They're going to bring you to the cabin—"*

Over the loudhailers peppering the ship the announcer's modulated voice said politely: "Will Doctor Waring please go to the cabin of Mrs. Duclos? Doctor Waring to cabin Seven-Six-Three."

"Yeah," said Carson viciously. "Will the fly walk into the spider's web!"

Up ahead in the corridor the two Squebs, Simon and Mark, as though the announcement had been a signal, turned and entered Mrs. Duclos' cabin. The shutting door was the only sound.

*"Lys is going to try a diversion. She's—"*

*"What for? I'm not going through that door!"*

*"No. I don't think that would be wise. But if you don't, the position will be a stalemate, to use a quaint phrase from one of your quaint Earthly games."*

*"You don't seem bothered."*

*"No one's around—"*

Carson felt his face begin to writhe. Stiffly, he waited. Presently, Sandoz said: "You are now a handsome man of twenty-five or so, with features quite unlike your own or Waring's. The clothes—"

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A voice high and panting from the corridor behind them, swung Carson around.

"Doctor Waring! Don't go in that cabin! Quick, come with me!" Then, as Carson turned fully around: "What the—! I'm sorry—your clothes . . . I thought you were Doctor Waring."

"Shut up, Carson!" Sandoz blazed the warning.

Sally King gazed in bewilderment at the body and clothes of Doctor Waring and the face of a complete stranger—a man whose face even Carson didn't know.

"I beg your pardon—have you seen Doctor Waring?"

"You're Sally King," said Carson, exploring this new angle. "No—I haven't seen the doctor here." Sally must play a part in all this intrigue, then—well, he might have expected that.

"He mustn't go in that cabin! Listen—I don't know who you are; but you must help me. There is a gang of ruffians aboard and they mean to kill Doctor Waring . . ." Her voice trailed and she stepped closer. Then her face relaxed and she put a hand on Carson's sleeve.

"I don't know how you've done it," she whispered. "The disguise is amazing. But I recognize that small stain on your tie—I've been trained to spot details like that. Come with me. Your life depends on it!"

Feeling as he did about Sally, Carson couldn't hedge.

"What do you know of all this, Sally? They're Squebs in there. You know that meddling with them isn't healthy."

"Are you going to come away or do I have to use this?" She took a tiny needle gun from the baggy pocket of the ivory casual jacket she wore over her tennis kit. "I'll explain as we go. Oh—and don't think I won't use this. I will."

"*Now's no time to argue with force majeure,*" said Sandoz irritably. "*Go with her, Carson. I don't want you knocked out at this stage. I'm worried about Lys. She's going to do something damned stupid in a minute.*"

"*Swearing with earthly swear words at your age, Sandoz. Really.*" Carson smiled brightly at Sally King and went with her up the passage. The needle gun maintained a steady bead on the small of his back.

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"D'you mind telling me where you come into all this, Sally?" said Carson, turning his head.

"In time. Right now I want you at the airlocks to meet the ship I'm expecting in exactly one hour. The flaming squebs struck as soon as they were sure. They've been tinkering with their blasted radio-encephalograph until they were sure. And you had to come waltzing aboard at Jazzstar advertising to the world just who you were."

"Just who I am!" Carson said. "Well, Sally, who am I?"

Her reply shocked him as though she had struck him with five-fifty volts A.C.

"You? You're the poor fish I'm going to marry."

A deep welling spring of pure delight pulsed upwards in Arthur Ross Carson. A sensation as though all the daffodils in the universe had bloomed together, as though all the birds of Creation sang only for him—and Sally. A tremendous feeling grasped him and tinged everything with rose and silver and gold.

"As to that, Sally, I want to marry you with all my heart and soul. But—but—"

"You sound like an out-of-phase motor! Look, just button up until we're safe in a lifeboat, will you? Those Squebs play for keeps."

Alarm pricked Carson. "You want to wait in a lifeboat. A ship, you say, is coming to take you off. And you intend to take me with you? So we'll leave this ship and all aboard?"

"Of course. The Duclos mean nothing to you. Do they?" she added, suddenly sharp.

*"Say not a thing, Carson."*

"Not a thing."

"Very well, then. Come back to your friends."

"And how is H.E. these days?"

"He'll be a darned sight happier seeing you again—alive and well. You can wipe all that plastic and paint off as soon as we're in the boat. I want a good look at my intended."

Walking obediently with that paralyzing needle gun at his back Carson went through deserted corridors, up to the boat deck. Sally held the gun in her sagging pocket, smiled

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sweetly, as they passed couples fast-locked in armorous embraces in the shadowed spaces beneath the airlock valves.

"At least we won't have to go through all that," she said. "But you've led me a dance, I can tell you. I stuck to the darned Squebs and they led me to Jazzstar. I knew they had a radio-encephalograph on you and I must confess I was surprised you'd lasted so long. We were all sure they'd kill you in nothing flat."

"They tried."

"When they booked for this tourist's nightmare I booked, too. The Duclos seemed the only connecting link. Of course, your spacegram to Mike Jose helped too."

"I hope he's keeping well."

"He is. He'll be aboard the ship we're awaiting."

"And then we depart at high speed for other regions of the galaxy?"

"Too right."

Carson made up his mind. He loved this girl. He knew that, he knew that his love for her outshone his love for Lucy as the sun outshone a candle. But—but there were other values in the scale besides his own happiness.

"I can't go along with you—"

"You can forget all that. Don't you realize just who you are? The galaxy needs you. The whole crazy erection is tumbling into ruin, it needs a strong hand at the helm. The geegees are trying to underpin the structure and the Statque are trying to hold it where it is, which means that they're back-pedaling as fast as they can. We *need* you, Arthur Ross Carson. I need you. You and I were destined for this—"

"You and I?"

They had stopped before the valve of a lifeboat now and Sally was operating the manuals with practiced hands. She turned to speak; but Sandoz' thought blasted into Carson's brain.

*"You think you're dealing with a tempermental female, Carson! Lys is a thousand times more headstrong than your Sally—I told her we were leaving and that I had to go with you otherwise you'd be killed. I promised to keep in touch*

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*with the ship, trace her through on the planet Mrs. Duclos eventually reached."*

*"Sandoz—but!"*

*"But she won't have that. Oh, no! She insists on coming with us. And—and—she is hard to read—there is confusion—she is attenuating—she has scratched the man—Moira is screaming—Lys—Miss Pepper—the man is going to shoot the cat—going to shoot—Lys! LYS!"*

### XVIII

PRESENTLY, Sandoz said with a thought-stream that sounded weak and fragile: "I read nothing from Lys. Nothing at all!"

*"But she can't be killed, can she, Sandoz?"*

*"It is very unlikely. But if one of my people is not prepared for a sudden flare of lethal energy, the life processes can be halted and, in extreme cases, death may result. I wish I knew what was going on back in that cabin . . ."*

*"Well, she'll probably try to get into Moira, won't she? We'll have to go back. We'll—"*

*"We will not go back, Carson. To do so would mean your death. Oh, I could climb into another body and find Lys; but I'm incapable of allowing my host to throw his life away for me." That dry cough. "Perhaps Lys will be forced to stay in Miss Pepper's lifeless body for a time. It may not be convenient to transfer . . ."*

"What," said Sally King crisply, "are you standing there with your mouth open and your eyes glazed for? Waiting for pay-day?"

*"Look, Sally, you won't understand this. But—"*

*"You—will—not—throw—your—life—away!"* Sandoz' command struck into Carson's brain. He shook his head savagely.

*"I'm in command of my own destiny!"* he said vehemently. He was aware of the pathetic stupidity of his actions, now; but for the little alien the bond of symbiotic friendship—more than friendship, a relationship closer than any he could establish with Sally—could find an outlet only in the way he wished now to act.

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"Inside," said Sally, the invitation underlined by a casual flick of the gun.

*"Go on, Carson!"*

The steel alloy of the rail bit into Carson's fingers. His face felt damp with sweat, his throat scraped raw dry and his hands slicked wetly on the metal. He felt like a man climbing out of the buoyancy of water into the trifling support of air. He knew without a doubt that Sally would shoot him, paralyze him with the drug in the needles in the gun's magazine, haul him aboard.

He put a foot on the first rung.

"H.E. would throw a dozen blue fits if he could see me now," Sally said, the triumph in her voice filling Carson strangely with pride and sorrow. "I was supposed to meet up with you and lure you away by vamping you. And you turn up disguised as a frusty old professor of archaeology. A good cover story that, I'll say that for you. But—" the gurgle of laughter in her throat hurt Carson. "How could a girl my age vamp an old codger like you?"

"You'd be surprised at these old 'uns," remarked Carson, stamping over the airlock rim, clanging down into the lifeboat's dark interior. "*Sandoz, what's happening to Lys?*"

*"I don't know. There is nothing. Just a blank."*

Sally prodded Carson gently but with firm purpose through the lifeboat's airlock, past rows of seat bunks, through the oval hatch leading on to the pilot's compartment.

"We wait here until I get the signal." Expertly she switched on the little ship's radio equipment. The frying-pan hiss of static echoed in the dim cabin. Only a few lights gleamed above instruments; Sally's profile showed, milky white, a little flushed against the shadowed darkness. "H.E. won't be long."

The waiting stretched. Carson sat, watching Sally, wondering about her, daring to dream of what might be.

She sensed his eyes on her, smiled and tapped the gun significantly.

"I said I'd use this, and I mean it. Why don't you clean

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all that gunk off your face. I want to see the man I'm expected to—well, enough of that when we're out of here."

Unhurriedly, Carson stood up, walked off into a dark corner. He stood there. "*Will you change me back to Arthur Ross Carson, please, Sandoz? I rather want to be myself again.*"

*"Of course, dear boy."*

The change, when it came, writhing his features, pulling at muscles, straightening his back, filling out his chest, brought a deep sense of well-being and comfort. The blood beat more strongly through his veins. He breathed more evenly, deeper, stronger. His vision cleared.

*"Hell! I'd forgotten what it was to be young!"*

*"Nothing from Lys—"*

Carson didn't answer that, didn't even think about it, wouldn't let it brush his consciousness.

He went back to Sally.

"There, Miss Sally King," he said. "Now you can see me for what I am."

Sally looked at him for a long time in the dimness of the cabin. Her eyes gleamed with glimmering moisture.

"You're you, all right. You—and more of you than I had imagined. You never knew your father and mother? Well, for that I feel sorrow; not to know one's parents is a sad, an almost irreparable loss."

"And yours?"

She smiled. As always, Carson felt as though someone had jolted him up the spine with a well-aimed boot. "I thought you'd have gathered that by now. How do you think I was able to keep on your track—why would I want to, anyway?"

"The Guard pay you for your work."

"Oh, sure, the geegees pay me—indirectly."

"I prefer—now—to call them the Guard."

She smiled and this time the mischievousness of her smile dimpled her cheeks and curved her lips so that she appeared a small girl planning monkey business.

"I have the privilege of calling them geegees."

"Really? I thought only blues called them that. The only



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man I know who has the privilege of calling the Guard geegees is the Grand Commander, H.E. himself."

"That's right. The only *man*."

"What? But—you mean—"

"Didn't you know what H.E.'s name was? I thought you'd have known he is Ross King—"

"Ross King!"

"He's your great uncle, once removed—and my father."

Carson began to see daylight now.

"And you were a part of this diabolical scheme?"

"Hardly diabolical. You wound me, deeply."

"What part was yours? Delilah?"

"Naturally. Although H.E. didn't just decide that as I looked reasonably vampish I would do to ensnare you. You were bred to take over the geegees, make them into an instrument to bring the human portion of the galaxy back on to the road of progress again. You could do it—by God, Arthur Ross Carson, you're *going* to do it!—but, any ruler must have a dynasty to follow. And he needs a mate fit to stand up to him in every possible way. So I was—well, frankly the idea disgusted me at one time—I was bred to be your partner."

"And—and our children—?"

"*They'd* be the great ones of the galaxy!"

Cynically, shaken by her calm acceptance, Carson said: "I'm surprised H.E. didn't throw you at me as a bribe when he tried—"

"You do him an injustice! This thing, between you and me, had to come on its own. If we hadn't got on—"

"Do we?"

"You make it hard, I admit. But you said—you said that—" And she could not go on, all her hardboiled toughness melting under the memory of Carson's hot words.

"If I was bred for this," Carson said in wondering understanding, "Poor Lucy! Of course I would be attracted to her—she—"

"She just happened to be like me, that's all."

"That's all."

Now Carson understood the gawky embarrassment that

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had roughened the contact of these two. No wonder—born to live and love and beget children in a grand design formed so that humanity might continue among the stars, only by a miracle untainted between them.

Slowly, he said: "I meant it, Sally. I do love you—I'd love you if your heredity was as black as the Coal Sack. If we live through this I'm going to marry you. And it won't be because the high brass in the geegees require it, nor for our children, big-brains though they may be. It'll be for us!"

She touched his shoulder with a different finger. Carson lifted his arms. She leaned forward, moist lips slightly parted, eyes misted with anticipation.

*"Carson! I'm reading Lys! She's garbled and faint—she's only using a part of her host's brain and he doesn't know she's in him—"*

Abruptly snatched back into the galaxy that contained death and destruction and the reality of an alien entity living in his brain, Carson snapped: "He?"

*"The Squeb thought Moira was double-crossing him. He shot her. Then Lys got into him—Carson, she's in a Squeb!"*

*"Holy cow!"*

"Hey! What the blazes is up? Aren't you going to kiss me?"

"Sally—Sandoz—Sally, my darling—you may never understand this; but—"

*"Carson! You must go with this girl! I insist! I must wait for Lys—"*

*"Another million years? No, Sandoz—think, man! With Lys in an agent of the Statque their power will be immense! We might not be able to beat them! Then of what use will be the old scheme with Sally and me? No, Sandoz—there is another way!"*

Without thinking of what he was going to do, trying to beat both Sandoz and his own fears, Carson flung the radio key over to internal. He yelled into the mike.

"Attention! Message for the Squeb in cabin Seven Six Three! The man you seek is in lifeboat—ugh!"

For Sally had put one strong arm around his neck and fairly dragged him from the set.

"You filthy traitorous swine!" she screamed. Her face

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twisted into a hateful grimace and her gun swung up, pointing directly at Carson's heart.

"Just a minute, Sally!" he managed to gasp. "Hold it! There's a reason—"

"There better had be! My God—do you want the Squebs to kill you?"

"*You utter imbecile, Carson!*" flared Sandoz. "*Now he'll come running and kill you and Sally—and what good will that do me?*"

"*I'm not going off without Lys,*" Carson said stubbornly. To Sally he said aloud: "When he gets here, put a needle into him, fast. You'll be under cover."

"But, you dear idiot," she said, frantic, gun wavering. "Don't you realize as soon as he gets here he'll blast you? There was no need—why, for God's sake, why?"

"I promise you, Sally, you will know that after the Squeb is dead!"

The man got there fast. The airlock cycled pompously and unnecessarily in air and the inner swung open. Carson, sitting in shadow at the controls, kept his eyes on the oval door, his hands braced down to spring him in a wild leap away from the blast he knew would come. Sally stood, graven, beside the door.

A dark shadow bulked in the oval door. A blue gleam struck back from the gun. An instrument light tossed a shard of radiance full into the Squeb's face. Carson stared and the cry wrung from him shattered the waiting tautness.

"Alex Bors!"

The first bullet smacked sickeningly into Carson's left shoulder. His upward lunge collapsed sideways and the second bullet snapped past his head. The third slammed the breath from his lungs. But he was moving forward, head down, seeing only the image of Alex Bors standing tauntingly before him. A great scar glowed on the agent's face. His face glowered with brittle savagery now, far removed from his old subservient mask.

"You thought I died in that burning ship, Carson—well, I'm still alive! And now I'm killing you!" The fourth bullet

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gouged deeply into Carson's stomach and he doubled over, retching, feeling no pain but only a great weakness.

Sally's needle took the squeeb high in his gun arm.

"About—blasted—time!" said Carson and fell forward with raking hands. One clutching hand gripped Bors' still struggling figure. The man's gun arm remained frozen, outstretched in paralysis. Carson clawed upwards, felt Bors' left fist strike him across the temple. Sally fired again and missed.

"I can't shoot again—I'll hit you!"

Both men toppled to the floor. Sally darted to the controls, stabbed the launch button. The lifeboat shot from the swelling flank of the starship, hurtled into space. Airlock doors slammed shut on automatics.

"They were outside—I had to get away!" she called from the controls.

Feeling the strength ebbing from him, Carson battled that one-armed figure, sought to clasp a strangling grasp around the Squeeb's throat.

*"Hold him, dear boy! I'm dissolving the bullets as fast as I can, patching tissue . . . But it will take time . . . Hold him!"*

The men threshed. Sally leaned forward, a hand striving to clutch at a part of Bors; but the Squeeb threshed and lunged, refusing to hold still so she could put another needle into a major nerve center.

*"I really messed this one up, Sandoz! If he gets the gun—"*

*"Fight him, Carson!"*

From the speaker above the control board a voice rasped out.

"This is Statque patrol ship *Maintain!* Are you in command of the lifeboat, Bors? We know the story. We have contacted the starship. Come in, Bors!"

On the screen the shark-like shape of a Statque patrol ship knifed across the stars. Close. Sally spoke frantically into the mike: "Come in, Guard cruiser *Alamein!* Come in, H.E. for God's sake!"

The screen rippled with color, coalesced into a ring of taut, hard faces staring out. Statque faces; men dedicated to keeping the Galaxy exactly as it was.

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One said: "Agent Bors is there; but so is the boy Arthur Ross Carson. If a Guard cruiser is nearby—we have only one course left."

Another face said; "What of Bors?"

"He must sacrifice his life in order to maintain! Open fire at once!"

"You're going to die, Bors!" Carson screamed. He pressed upwards with all his strength, felt a surging power wash over him as Sandoz repaired the damage within him, "You're going to be murdered by your own friends!"

"But you'll go with me!" Bors said.

Sally flung herself upon the bodies of the two men. She scabbled and fought trying in the dimness to find Bors from Carson.

Sandoz said with tremendous power: "*He must die at once, Carson, at once!*"

Carson tried. He knew that thermonuclear warheads were speeding across space, aimed from *Maintain* unerringly to seek out and destroy the little lifeboat. But, something deep in his stubborn pride made him fight on.

He clenched his hands with the last feverish strength in him. He heard a snap. Sally's soft body sprawled all across him.

"This is the end, Arthur!" Sally shouted, her warm lips pressed against his ear. "I love you! *I love you!*"

"And I love you," Carson said, all sensations washed out of him.

For fractional moments silence hung in the cabin. His arms were around her; their bodies clung together.

It seemed wrong to Carson that he couldn't tell Sally with more cogency and force that he loved her. They were both to die in minutes: he had to make her understand that he was sorry for what he had done. But he could not find the words. He could only hold her hard against him, breast to breast, feeling the deep breathing life of her that would so soon be cruelly wrenched away.

And Sandoz?

"*I'm sorry, Sandoz—*"

Then the eruption of dripping scarlet and black caught and

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drowned him; flung him in atomised particles down a well of night.

Night. A great darkness shot with all the stars of space. A body in his arms. A slow gyration with all the stars of the universe extending from his body and glowing through his soul.

If this was death then the peace and comfort of it all after the strife was most welcome.

*"As I have said before, my dear boy, you seem to have a penchant for falling into the most impossible situations for an air-breathing, strictly planetary protoplasmic being."*

*"Sandoz! But—but that means—"*

*"Oh, you're not dead, dear boy, far from it. And the Guard cruiser Alamein is coming up, as you would say, hell for leather. We'll have to think up a good story to explain your living through a thermonuclear explosion."*

*"You brought me through that! Incredible—"*

*"Oh, not really. Why, when I was guest in a member of the Starguild tribe we went right through a Rilla bombardment that tore the very fabric of the space time universe. That little thermonuclear pop of a moment ago was a mere nothing—"*

The terrible relief burning through Carson suddenly turned ice cold.

*"Sally!"* He held her in his arms. Her sweet face pressed against his chest, her limp form slack in free fall. *"Sally—oh, Sandoz! I don't want to live with Sally dead!"*

Sally moved, stirred in his arms, there in the cold hollowness of space.

*"Fancy bending over near a pernicketty horse at my age,"*

The words were Sally's; but Carson heard them in his own brain.

*"Sally!"* he screamed. *"Sally—you're alive—but—". . ."* Then he stopped shouting and quieted down. He smiled. *"Sandoz, you cunning old codger, you—and how is Lys?"*

*"She is in excellent form, thank you, dear boy. I am intrigued that communication is possible directly between you and Sally now that you both host one of us. Most interesting."*

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*"Hey—this lulu of a baby in my noodle has been telling me all about it. Fancy you having Sandoz with you all the time! No wonder you acted oddly."*

Carson knew that Sally could accept the guest within her far more easily than he had been able; she had the comforting assurance of direct communication with him, and the help and guidance of both Sandoz and Lys.

*"And we survived through a hydrogen wallop!"*

*"Here comes Alamein."*

*"We're getting married right now. By the captain of the ship."*

*"But he'll want to give away the bride . . ."*

*"Doesn't matter. Right now we're going into the parental business—"*

*"Give it some time . . ."*

*"Time—Sandoz and Lys have been waiting a million years. Why should we stop them? Why should we make them wait any longer?"*

As Alamein closed in, radar antennae picking up the remnants of the lifeboat explosion, the four of them hanging there in space burbled happily away. Communication opened easily between them. They felt right, a composite twosome that was really a twinned foursome.

Carson had the last word: *"I think between us we're going to sort the Galaxy out."*

They looked forward to that—all four of them.