

MacLean Katherine

# The Man Who Staked the Stars



Katherine MacLean

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**MacLean K.**

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## The Man Who Staked the Stars

### I

*Bryce Carter could afford a smug smile. For hadn't he risen gloriously from Thieves Row to director of famed U.T.? Was not Earth, Moon, and all the Belt, at this very moment awaiting his command for the grand coup? And wasn't his cousin-from-Montehedo a star-sent help?*

"What do I do for a living?" repeated the slim dark-skinned young man in the next seat of the Earth-Moon liner. "I'm a witch doctor," he answered with complete sincerity.

"What do you do? I mean, what do they hire you for?" asked Donahue with understandable confusion and a touch of nervousness.

"I'm registered as a psychotherapist," said the dark-skinned young man. He looked too young to be practicing a profession, barely nineteen, but that could be merely a sign of talent, Donahue reflected. The new teaching and testing methods graduated them young.

"I know I am a witch doctor because my grandfather and his father and his father's father were witch doctors and I learned a special technique from my uncles who are registered therapists with medical degrees like mine. But the technique is not the one you find in the books, it is ... unusual. They don't say where they learned it but it's not hard to guess." The dark youth shrugged cheerfully. "So – I'm a witch doctor."

"That's an interesting thought," said Donahue. It would be a long three day trip to the Moon and he had expected to be bored, but this conversation was not boring. "What do you do?" he again asked. "Specifically." Donahue had rugged features, a dark tan and attractively sun-bleached hair worn a little too long. He exuded a sort of rough charm which branded him one of the class of politicians, and he knew how to draw people out, so now he settled himself more comfortably for an extended spell of listening. "Tell me more and join me in a drink." He signalled the hostess and continued with the right mixture of admiring interest and condescending scepticism. "You don't chant spells and hire ghosts, do you?"

"Not exactly." The dark innocent looking young face smiled with a cheerful flash of white teeth. "I'll tell you what I did to a man, a man named Bryce Carter."

A group of men sat in a skyscraper at Cape Hatteras, with their table running parallel to a huge floor-to-ceiling window that overlooked the clouded sky and gray waves of the Atlantic. They were the respected directors of Union Transport, and, like most men of high position, they had a keen sense of self-preservation and a knowledge of ways and means that included little in the way of scruples.

The chairman rapped lightly. "Gentlemen, your attention please. I have an announcement to make."

The buzz of talk at the long table stopped and the fourteen men turned their faces. The meeting had been called a full week early, and they expected some emergency as an explanation. "A disturbing announcement, I am afraid. Someone is using this corporation for illegal purposes." The chairman's voice was mild and apologetic.

Bryce Carter, second from the opposite end, was brought to a shock of tense balanced alertness. How much did he know? He gave no sign of emotion, but reached for a cigarette to cover any change in his breathing, fumbling perhaps more than usual.

The men at the long table waited, showing a variety of bored expressions that never had any connection with their true reactions. The chairman was a small, inconspicuous, sandy-haired man whose ability they respected so deeply that they had elected him the chairman to have him where they could watch him. They knew he was not one to mention trifles, and there was a moment of silence. "All right, John," said one, letting out his held breath and leaning back, "I'll bite. What kind of illegal purposes?"

"I don't know much," the small man apologized, "Only that the crime rate has risen forty percent in the average of the cities served by UT, and in Callastro City, Callastro, and Panama City, where we just put in a spaceport, it more than doubled."

"Funny coincidence," someone grunted.

"Very funny," said another. "If the police notice it, and the public hears of it – "

There was no man there who would willingly have parted with his place at that table, no one who was unaware that in fighting his way to a place at that table he had seized some part of control of the destiny of the solar system.

UT – Union Transport, spread the meshes of its transportation service through almost every city of Earth and the hamlets and roads and bus and railroad and airlines between – and even to the few far ports where mankind had found a toehold in space. But its existence was precariously balanced on public trust.

UT's unity from city to city and country to country, its spreading growth had saved the public much discomfort and expense of overlapping costs and transfers and confusion, and so the public, on the advice of economists, grudgingly allowed UT to grow ever bigger. There was a conservative movement to put all such outsize businesses under government ownership as had been the trend in the last generation but the economy was mushrooming too fast for the necessary neatness, and the public rightly would not trust politicians in any operation too confusing for them to be watched, and preferred to leave such businesses to private operation, accepting the danger for the profit of efficient and penurious operation, dividends and falling costs.

But all these advantages were barely enough to buy UT's life from year to year. It had grown too big.

Its directors held power to make or break any city and the prosperity of its inhabitants by mere small shifts in shipping fees, a decision to put in a line, or a terminal, or a crossroad. The power was indirectly recognized in the honors and higher offices, the free entertainment and lavish privileges available to them from any chamber of commerce and any political representative, lobbying discreetly for a slight bias of choice that would place an airport or spaceport in their district rather than another.

Perhaps some of the directors used their position for personal pleasure and advantage, but power used for the sake of controlling the direction of growth of races and nations, power for its own sake was the game which was played at that table, its members playing the game of control against each other and the world for high stakes of greater control, nursing behind their untelling faces who knows what megalomaniac dreams of dominion.

Yet they used their control discreetly, serving the public welfare and keeping the public goodwill. When it was possible.

As always Bryce Carter sat relaxed, lazily smiling, his expression not changing to his thoughts.

"Who knows of this besides us?" someone asked.

The chairman answered mildly. "It was a company statistician in the publicity department who noticed it. He was looking for favorable correlations, I believe." His pale blue eyes ranged across their faces, touching Bryce Carter's face expressionlessly in passing. "I requested that he tell no one else until I had investigated." He added apologetically, "Commitments for drug addiction correlate too."

That was worse news. "Narcotics investigators are no fools," someone said thoughtfully.

Neiswanger, a thin orderly man near the head of the table, pressed his fingertips together, frowning slightly. "I take it then that our corporation is being used as a criminal means of large scale smuggling of drugs, transport of criminals on false identification and transport for resale of the goods resulting from their thefts. Is that correct?" Neiswanger always liked to have things neatly listed.

"I think so," said the chairman.

"And you would say that the organization responsible is centered in this corporation?"

"It would seem likely, yes."

The members of the board stirred uneasily, seeing a blast of sensational headlines, investigations which would spread to their private lives, themselves giving repetitive testimony to inquisitive politicians in a glare of television lights while the Federated Nations anti-cartel commission vivisected the UT giant into puny, separate squabbling midgets.

It was not an appealing prospect.

"We'll have to stop it, of course," said a lean, blond man whose name was Stout. He could be relied on to say the obvious and keep a discussion driving to the point. "I understand we have a good detective agency. If we put them on this with payment for speed and silence – "

"And when we know who is responsible," asked Neiswanger, "*Then* what do we do?"

There was silence as they came to another full stop in thinking. Turning culprits over to the police was out of the question, an admission that such crimes had happened, and could happen again. Firing the few detected could not impress the undetected and unfired ones enough to discourage them from their profitable criminality.

"Hire some killings," said the round faced Mr. Beldman, with simplicity.

The chairman laughed. "You are joking of course, Mr. Beldman."

"Of course," said Mr. Beldman, and laughed barkingly, being well aware of the permanent film record taken of all meetings. But he was not joking. Nobody there was joking.

The detective agency and the hired killers would be arranged for.

Bryce Carter leaned back with the slight cynical smile on his lean face that was his habitual expression. "Suppose the top man is high in the company?" he suggested softly. "What then?" He did not need to point out that the disappearance of such a man would be enough to start a police and stock-holders investigation of the company in itself. The implication was clear. Such a man could not be touched.

"A hypnotist," suggested Raal. "Someone to make our top man back track and clean up his own mess."

"Illegal, dangerous and difficult, Mr. Raal," Irving said sourly. "There are extremely severe penalties against any complicity in the unsupervised use of hypnotism or hypnotic drugs, and their use against the will of the subject is a major crime."

"A circulating company psychologist would be legal," suggested the lean blond man whose name was Stout.

"We have over seventy-five of those on the company payrolls already and I fail to see what use – "

"One of the special high priced boys who iron out kinks in groups by joining them and working with them for a while, like that Conference Manager we had with us last year. Every member of the group that hires one has to sign an application for treatment, and a legal release. They are very quiet and don't broadcast what they do or who they talked with, but they have a good record of results. The groups who hire them report better work and easier work. We could use one as a trouble shooter."

"Are they a special organization?" someone asked. "I think I've heard of them."

"Yes, some sort of a union. I can't remember the name."

"What would you expect them to do for us?" asked Irving.

"I hear – " Stout said vaguely, his eyes wandering from face to face, "that they have a special tough technique for hard case trouble makers." For those who knew him, the vague look was a veil over some thought which pleased him. Presumably he was thinking the thing which had occurred to them all.

The culprit might be a member of the Board. There was a sudden cheerful interest visible among them as they wondered who was quarry for the "tough treatment."

"I've heard of that," said Wan Lun, remembering. "It has been said that they not only do not inform others of the fact of treatment but frequently do not inform the man under treatment but seem to be only a new friend until – poof." He smiled. "I think the guild name is Manoba. The Manoba Group."

Stout said, "They'll probably charge enough for the skill."

Wan said, smiling, "I also heard some idle rumor that in a few such cases discord within a group was alleviated by sudden suicide. Presumably a psychologist can grow impatient and push a certain button in the mind – "

"Sounds like a good idea," Beldman said. "Do you think if we offered this Manoba the right kind of money – "

"You don't mean that, Mister Beldman," cut in the chairman reprovingly. "You're joking again."

"We're all great jokers," said Beldman, and laughed.

Everyone laughed.

"I move we vote a sum for the hiring of a Manoba psychologist."

"Seconded, how about five hundred thousand?"

"I don't know their fees," the chairman objected cautiously.

"You can turn back any surplus. We stand to lose more than that by several orders of magnitude. Spend it at your discretion."

"Make it seven hundred thousand. Give him a little more room."

"I so move."

"Seconded."

"Carry it to a vote."

They slipped their hands under the table edge before their respective seats, and each man ran his fingers over two buttons concealed there, before him, chose between the *yes* and the *no* button and pushed one, the choice of his fingers unseen by the others.

Two numbers lit up on the small divided panel before the chairman. He looked at them with his mild face expressionless. "Rejected by one vote."

Unanimity was the law on Board decisions, which by a natural law was probably the reason why no love was lost among them, but this time irritation was curbed by interest. They sat watching each other's expressions with glances which seemed casual. Whose was the one vote?

"I move that the vote be repeated and made open," someone said.

"Seconded."

"All in favor of the appropriation for the psychologist raise your left hand," the chairman requested.

They complied and looked at each other. All hands were up.

"Carried on the second vote," the chairman said without apparent interest. "For my own curiosity will the gentleman who voted nay on the secret vote the first time speak up and explain his objections, and why he changed his mind on the open vote?"

There was silence a moment – Neiswanger looking at his neat fingernails, Bryce Carter smoking, and smiling slightly as he always smiled, Stout leaning back casually scanning his eyes



from face to face. Beldman lit a cigar and released a cloud of blue smoke with a contented sigh. No one spoke.

"Gentlemen," said the chairman. "It is entirely likely that the culprit is among us."

"Never mind the melodrama, John." Irving tapped the table impatiently. "We've dealt with that. Let's get on to the next business."

## II

In the exit lounge at floor five Bryce Carter stopped a moment and glanced at himself in the mirror. Thick neck, thick body – a physique so evenly and heavily muscled that it looked fat until he moved. Atop the thick body a lean face that he didn't like stared back at him. It was darkly tanned, with underlying freckles that were almost black. Years had passed since he had worked in space, but the space-tan remained indelible. It was not a bland or pretty face.

At the dinner, deep in discussion with Mr. Wan, he had been surprised to find himself smiling at intervals, irrepressibly. He hoped it had looked cordial, and not too much like a cat enjoying the company of mice.

They had no defense against him. The drugs organization could never be traced to him. The connection was too well concealed. Even the organization knew nothing about him.

The only evidence which could make the connection was in his own mind. The only witness against him was himself. He cast his mind back over the meeting and dinner but there had been no slips past the first shock of the chairman's announcement, and that had been unobserved by anyone. The psychologist they had hired might perhaps get a betraying flicker of expression from him in an interview, many well-trained observers of human reactions could read expressions that keenly, but the interviewing of all the Board by the psychologist was not likely. The Directors of the Board were even now climbing into trains and strato planes to scatter back to the far points of the earth. It would take many days for an investigating psychologist to follow to interview each one. He and Irving would be last on the list, for he went to Moonbase City, and Irving to Luna City.

He had weeks.

He smiled, fastening bands in his cuffs that folded them tightly on his wrists, zipping up his suitcoat and slipping on gloves. He looked at himself again. Where he had been wearing a conservative dark silk business suit with a short cape, he now seemed to be wearing a tailored ski-suit with an odd cowl, or a pressure suit without boots or helmet, which was what it was. Carrying the zipper up further would have turned the cape to an airtight helmet bubble.

Employees and executives passing in and out of the UT building gave the clothes an approving and interested glance as they passed. The justification by utility was obvious. It had cost money to have a pressure suit designed light and flexible enough for comfortable wear, but long ago he had grown irked by the repetitious business of climbing in and out of clothes every time one stepped through a space lock, while overcapas and hoods were needed stepping outside of any temperate zone Earth building in winter.

A pressure suit was completely independent of weather and regulated its own internal heat. Since the suit had been designed the manufacturer had begun to receive an increasing number of orders for duplicates, and was now being put into mass production. Probably in these five minutes he had just made many more sales for the manufacturer.

He was setting a style, he thought in pleased surprise, stepping out of the building. The salt wind hit him with a blast of cold, and the automatic thermostatic wiring in the suit countered with a wave of warmth as he leaned into the wind and started to walk. The connection between the Union Hotel and the building he had just left was an arched sidewalk that curved between them, five stories above the sand and surf.

The hotel was an impressively towering building against the ragged sky, and as he walked a gleam broke through from the hidden sunset and spotlighted it and the low scudding clouds in a sudden glowing red. He stopped and leaned against the balustrade to watch the red gleams reflecting from the bay. Red and purple clouds fled by low overhead, their colors changing as they moved. This was something a man couldn't see in space or on the moon.

But after a moment he couldn't fully enjoy it, because he was being watched. The feeling was disturbing.

Damn rubbernecks, he thought, and turned irritably, half hoping that at least it would be an acquaintance or some pretty girls.

But there was no one watching him.

A few pedestrians walked by hurriedly because it was growing dark and the view that they had come to enjoy was fading. The wind wrapped their enveloping capes around them and made them all look abnormally tall and columnar.

It was darker. The sidewalk lights abruptly flicked on in a flood of amber light that thickened the twilight beyond their circle to an opaque purple curtain of darkness.

He noticed a pedestrian walking slowly towards him from the direction he had come. The figure approached more slowly than seemed natural, with his head bowed and his hands in his pockets as though lost in thought.

A trailer from the detective agency? It was too soon for that. If it were arranged that every member of the Board be trailed, still it could not have been arranged and begun so soon.

Besides, there was something more deadly than that in the walking man's indifference.

A killer arranged by Beldman? It would be natural for Beldman or Stout to take a chance and fight back the direct way. But there was no evidence. How could either of them have decided who to blame or who to fight?

The few huge buildings that stood dark against the night sky were being brightened now by lights going on in hundreds of windows. In long slender spans between them stretched the aerial walks and the necklaces of amber lights that outlined them. The wind blew colder across the walks and the view of sea and sky that had been visible from them now was blotted out by night. The walkers were going in. There was small chance of sheltering himself in a crowd, or even of keeping only one or two walkers between himself and the one who followed him.

At the first sight of the approaching figure he had instinctively leaned back against the concrete railing and taken his gun from its pocket holster, holding it lightly in his gloved hand.

An aged couple and a vigorous middle-aged woman hurrying in the opposite direction glanced at him without interest or alarm. His pose was not menacing, and anyway most men with money enough to travel carried hand arms.

This was an indirect effect of a Federated Nations ruling that only hand arms of a regulated deadliness be manufactured as the armament of nations. The ruling had been carefully considered for other secondary effects, for any nation growing over-centralized and militaristic was likely to arm its citizens universally for greater military power by numbers, and then suffer the natural consequences of having armed their public opinion.

An armed man need not vote to be counted, and once having learned that lesson, the feeling that an armed man carried his bill of rights in his pocket made this the first clause of the written and unwritten constitutions of many suddenly democratic nations. "The right of the yeomanry to carry arms shall not be abridged." They kept their guns.

And with weapons instantly available to hot tempers, dueling came back into custom in most places.

All this had little effect on the large calm manufacturing countries who had run the UN and now ran the FN, but it made easy their decision that since, in space, policing is almost impossible, the citizens who venture there must be armed to protect themselves. Thus, in spite of the continued outcry of a minority of Christian moralists, a holster pocket was now built into all space suits.

Bryce had grown up in a famine country, an almost unpoliced area, and weapons had been as familiar to his hands as fingers since he had passed twelve. And when, as a steel-worker, he had been one of the first settlers in the foundry towns of the Asteroid Belt, he had found life no gentler there. But it was all right as far as he was concerned. He had heard of safer and duller ways to live

but had never wanted them. Life as a moonbased transport manager had been a short interval of nonviolence, five years of startling calm which he had not yet grown accustomed to.

The gun fitted into his hand as comfortably as his thumb, or as the handshake of an old and trusted friend, but it was useless here. Reluctantly he slipped it back into his pocket and began walking again. A director of UT couldn't shoot people on intuition.

He had barely stopped for a count of ten, and there was still distance between them when he had turned, but the follower could be walking faster now, narrowing the distance between them.

If he had waited and fired, an inspection of the man's pockets could have confirmed his judgment by the finding of an assassin's illegal needle gun. That alone might be enough to satisfy the police if he were still merely a spaceworker, but a Director of UT couldn't live that casually. It would be difficult to explain his certainty to the police, and still more difficult to explain to the newspapers. He could not afford that sort of publicity.

Bryce let out a soft curse and lengthened his stride.

He had to wait for proof of the follower's intentions. And the only proof would be to be attacked, and the first proof of that, since needle guns are soundless and inconspicuous, would probably be a curare-loaded needle in his back.

After that the follower could inconspicuously drop his weapon over the balustrade, its self-destroying mechanism set to melt it before it reached the sands far below.

However since the follower certainly would not openly run after him, the most logical thing to do, Bryce decided, was to run to the hotel as if he were in a hurry. The idea irritated him.

He walked on, slowing perversely. It was irrational to walk, and he knew it, but he walked, and the knowledge that it was irrational irritated him further. The skin between his shoulder blades itched meditatively in its own imaginative anticipation of an entering needle. What good did it do him to be proud of his brains when he put himself in a spot where he walked around like a target?

He controlled a rising rage but he walked.

The sky was totally dark now and there were only two or three couples ahead on the slender concrete span and one old couple he had just passed, so that they were between himself and the follower. But that was no adequate screen.

Far above soared the sky taxis. And now he wanted a taxi. He was approaching a place where there was a hack stand. Just ahead, at the midway point, where the upward curve of the sidewalk leveled off and began to curve down, a narrow catwalk jutted into space with a small landing platform at its end. "TAXI" a luminescent arrow glowed at him directly as he came abreast of it.

He walked rapidly out along the railed catwalk, making a perfect target he knew, silhouetted against the glow. He cursed under his breath, reaching the end of it. Here he made an even more perfect target, with the single bright light that poured down brilliance on the bench and landing platform spotlighting him against the darkness of the night. The bench was thin iron grillwork. It offered no cover.

He needed cover. He considered the white concrete pillar of the lamp, put his hand on the railing and jumped up to sit on the railing casually, a one hundred fifty foot fall behind him and the width of the lamp post between him and the follower, who now was an unmoving figure leaning against the railing of the sidewalk near where the catwalk began.

The sight of the insolently lounging figure did nothing to sooth his irritation. This escape was not the way he wanted to deal with a threat. There was an oddity in the man's waiting. The range was poor, and he probably was not firing, although he would look as if he were not in any case, but if he were not going to take this chance for his murder attempt, why did he openly exhibit himself, arousing suspicion and cutting off future chances? An innocent stroller or even a mere trailer from the detective agency would have strolled on.

Above came the nearing drone of a taxi which had spotted him in the bright pool of light at the hack stand.

There was something in the careless confidence of the follower's open interest in him that raised his neck hair as no direct threat could have, and filled the rumble of the night-hidden surf with obscure menace. The man acted as if his job was over, clinched.

Bryce reached the answer as the taxi floated down on hissing roter blades and settled to the platform. Sliding down from the railing he walked toward it, stiff-legged. The light was out inside it, and the cabby did not climb out or attempt to open the door for him. Bryce turned his head and looked back as if for a last glance at the watching figure, grasping the door handle with his right hand as if fumbling blindly. He was left handed. When the door was open a crack, it stopped opening, and those inside saw the muzzle of a magnamatic in his left hand looking through the crack at them.

It's easier to catch wolves if you're disguised as a rabbit, Pop Yak had told him once. He must have looked a complete sucker, starting to climb into a dark cab with his head turned backward!

"Don't move," Bryce said, some of his anger reaching his voice in a biting rasp. Inside, the driver was frozen with his head turned enough to see the glint of a muzzle behind his neck, and in the darkened far corner of the back seat where there should have been no one there was the pale blur of a face, and a hand holding something. Bryce knew that there was no way a shot could reach him except through the shielding steel door or the shatterproof window, and a man would hesitate before shooting through glass when he was looking down the throat of Bryce's gun. Bryce waited for him to think it over.

The hand of the man in the back seat came into focus as his eyes adjusted to the dark inside, and he could see that it was holding a gun. The gun was not pointing at anything in particular. It was frozen in mid-motion. The man had a half-smile frozen on his face, probably in the way he had been smiling just before Bryce spoke.

"Open your hand. Drop it." The glint of the gun disappeared, and there was a faint thud from the floor. Bryce opened the door and slid into the rear seat, watchful for motion, ready to shoot. "Face front!" They faced front like two puppets, perhaps the uncontrollable rasp in his voice was convincing. He still did not know whose men they were, or why they had been hired. It would be no use questioning them for they would not know either. He could guess who it was, a name came to mind, but there was no way of checking up. This kind of business did not fit well with the crucial balance of his plans for the next two weeks. "Be careful," he said perhaps unnecessarily, "I'm nervous. Union Hotel please."

The short ride to the hotel was made in dead silence, with the man in the opposite corner barely moving enough to blink his eyes. He was middle-aged, with the resigned sagging lines to his face of ambition disappointed, but he sat with a waiting stillness that Bryce recognized as something to watch. There was probably another gun within quick reach of that passive right hand.

The roter drifted down to a landing space on the floodlighted landing roof of the hotel and settled with a slight bump. "Don't move." The clumsy careful business of opening the door backward with his right hand and sliding out without taking his eyes from either of them was tediously slow.

Once out, he slammed the door briskly. "Take off." Not until the red and green lights had faded into the distance did he turn away, pocket his gun and walk into the wide doorway to the elevators. As he brushed past the hotel detective standing in the doorway the detective was reholstering a large size police pacifier. Apparently he had been ready to impartially stun everyone concerned at the first sign of trouble, which probably explained why those in the aircab had not attempted any retaliation. The detective gave Bryce a cold stare as he went by, probably in disapproval of guests waving weapons on hotel premises.

### III

In his luxurious hotel room Bryce checked his watch. Eight o'clock. A telephone call was scheduled for some time in the half hour. He filed the question of who was behind the night's attack and picked up the phone. The dial system was in automatic contact with any city in the world. He dialed.

Somewhere in a city, a phone rang. It rang unheard, for it was locked into a safe in a tiny rented office with some unusual mechanisms attached. The ringing was stopped abruptly and a recorded voice answered, "Yeah?"

Bryce took a dial phone from the night table where it had been sitting innocently like a toy he had bought for some child. "Hi Al," he said cheerfully to the automatic mechanism at the other end. "Listen, I think I've got a new phrase for that transition theme. How's this?" He put the receiver against the back of the toy and dialed the toy dial. It responded to each letter and number with a ringing note of different pitch that played a short unmelodious tune.

The pitch notes went over the line and entered the mechanism, making the contacts within it that dialed the number he had dialed on the toy phone.

"How's that?" Bryce said cheerfully.

The recorded voice said, "Sounds good. I'll see what I can do with it." Somewhere far away and unheard another phone had begun to ring. "Want to speak to George?"

"Sure."

A phone rang in a pay booth somewhere in a great city railroad station, and someone browsing at a magazine stand or sitting on a suitcase apparently waiting for a train strolled casually to answer it.

"Hello?" said a noncommittal voice, prepared to claim that he was merely a stranger answering the phone because it was ringing in public.

"Hello George, how's everything going?" Bryce asked. Those words were his trade mark, the passwords that identified him to everyone as the Voice who gave Tips. Among the monster organization which had grown from the proven reliability of those tips, the voice was known as "Hello George." Hello George's tips were always good, so they had come to be followed as blindly as tips from God, even when they were not understood. Certainty was one thing men in the fencing and drug smuggling business most sorely lacked.

They communicated only by phone. They transmitted their wares by leaving them in public lockers and mailing the key. They never saw each other's faces or heard each other's names, but even the use of a key could be a trap that would bring a circle of narcotics agents of INC around the unfortunate who attempted to open the locker.

Far away over the bulge of the Earth between, a man sat in a phone booth waiting for his tip. "Pretty well. No complaints. How's with you, any news?"

"I think you'd better cut connections with Union Transport. They're getting pretty sloppy. I think they might spill something."

"Wadja say?" asked the man at the other end cautiously, "I didn't get you."

"Better stop using UT for shipping," Bryce repeated, wording his sentence carefully. "They aren't careful enough anymore. You don't want them to break an inc case wide open, do you?" INC was the International Narcotics Control agency of the F. N. But the conversation would have sounded like an innocent discussion of shipping difficulties to any chance listener on the telephone lines.

The flat tones were plaintive and aggrieved. "But we're expecting a load of stuff Friday. Our buyers are expecting it." Stuff was drug, and expecting was a mild word for the need of drug addicts!

"And we've got a lotta loads of miscellaneous items to go out." The contact was a small man in the organization but he evidently knew just how "hot" fenced goods could be. "That can't wait!"

He had planned this. "Maybe they are all right for shipments this week. I'll chew them out to be careful, check up and call back Friday. Meanwhile break with them."

"Tell them a few things from me, the – " the distant voice added a surprising string of derogatory adjectives. "Friday when?"

"Friday about – about six." The double "about" confirmed the signal for a telephone appointment that was general for all contact numbers.

"Friday about six, Okay." There was a faint click that meant he had hung up and the phone in the safe was open for more dialings on his toy dial.

Bryce hung up, leaned back on his bed and pushed a button that turned on the radio to a semiclassical program. Soothing music came into the room and slow waves of colored light moved across the ceiling. He tuned to a book player, and chose a heavy economics study from the current seller list of titles which appeared on the ceiling. The daily moon ship was scheduled to blast off at five thirty, its optimum at this week's position of the Moon. By this time tomorrow night, he and all the other members of the Board would be out of reach of any easy observation or analysis by their hired psychological mind-hunter.

With a slight chilling of the skin he remembered the cop-psychos the gangs had warned him about in his scrambling and desperate childhood, and what they were supposed to do to you when they caught you in a third offense.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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