



Last Call for Sector 9G

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Last Call for Sector 96

By Leigh Brackett

Out there in the green star system; far beyond the confining grip of the Federation, moved the feared Bitter Star, for a thousand frigid years the dark and sinister manipulator of war-weary planets.

Chapter I

Martie said monotonously, "There is someone at the door sir shall I answer? There is someone at the door sir shall I—"

Durham grunted. What he wanted to say was go away and let me alone. But he would only grunt, and Artie kept repeating the stupid question. Artie was a cheap off-brand make, and bought used and he lacked some cogs. Any first class servall would have seen that the master had passed out in his chair and was in no condition to receive guests. But Artie did not, and presently Durham got one eye open and then he began to hear the persistent knocking, the annunciator being naturally out of order. And he said quite clearly.

"If it's a creditor, I'm not in."

"—shall I answer?"

Durham made a series of noises. Artie took them for an affirmative and trundled off. Durham put his face in his hands and struggled with the pangs of returning consciousness. He could hear a mutter of voices in the hall. He thought suddenly that he recognized them, and he sprang, or rather stumbled up in alarm, hastily combing his hair with his fingers and trying to pull the wrinkles out of his tunic. Through a thick haze he saw the bottle on the table and he picked it up and hid it under a chair, ashamed not of its emptiness but of its label. A gentleman should not be drunk on stuff like that.

Paulsen and Burke came in.

Durham stood stiffly beside the table, hanging on. He looked at the two men. "Well," he said. "It's been quite a long time." He turned to Artie. "The gentlemen are leaving."

Burke stepped quickly behind the servall and pushed the main toggle to OFF, Artie stopped, with a sound ridiculously like a tired sigh. Paulsen went past him and locked the door. Then both of them turned in to face Durham.

Durham scowled. "What the devil do you think you're doing?"

Burke and Paulsen glanced at each other as though resolve had carried them this far but had now run out, leaving them irresolute in the face of some distasteful task. Both men wore black dominos, with the cowls thrown back.

"Were you afraid you'd be recognized coming here?" Durham said. A small pulse of fright began to beat in him, and this was idiotic. It made him angry. "What do you want?"

Paulsen said in a reluctant voice, not looking at him, "I don't want anything Durham, believe me." Durham had once been engaged to Paulsen's sister, a thing both of them preferred not to remember but couldn't quite forget. He went on, "We were sent here."

Durham tried to think who might sent them. Certainly not any of the girls; certainly not any one of the

people he owed money to. Two members of the Terran World Embassy corps, even young and still obscure members in the lower echelons, were above either of those missions.

"Who sent you?"

Burke said, "Hawtree."

"No," said Durham. "Oh no, you got the name wrong. Hawtree wouldn't send for me if I was the last man in the galaxy. Hawtree, indeed."

"Hawtree," said Paulsen. He drew a deep breath and threw aside his domino. "Come on, Burke."

Burke took off his domino. They came on together.

Durham drew back. His shoulders dropped and his fists came up. "Look out," he said. "What you going to do? Look out!"

"All right," said Burke, and they both jumped together and caught his arms, not because Durham was so big or so powerful that he frightened them, but because they disliked the idea of brawling with a drunken man. Paulsen said,

"Hawtree wants you tonight, and he wants you sober, and that, damn it, is the way he's going to get you."

An hour and seven minutes later Durham sat beside Paulsen in a 'copter with no insigne and watched the roof of his apartment tower fall away beneath him.

Burke had stayed behind, and Durham wore the Irishman's domino with the cowl up over his head. Under the domino was his good suit, the one he had not sent to the pawnbroker because he could not, as yet, quite endure being without one good suit. He was scrubbed and shaved and perfectly sober. Outside he did not look too bad. Inside he was a shambles.

The 'copter fitted itself into a north-south lane. Paulsen, muffled in his cowl, sat silent. Durham felt a similar reluctance to speak. He looked out over The Hub, and tried to keep from thinking. Don't run to meet it, don't get your hopes up. Whatever it is, let it happen, quietly.

The city was beautiful. Its official name was Galactic Center, but it was called The Hub because that was what it was, the hub and focus of a galaxy. It was the biggest city in the Milky Way. It covered almost the entire land area of the third planet of a Type G star that someone with a sense of humor had christened Pax. The planet was chosen originally because it was centrally located and had no inhabitants, and because it was within the limits of tolerance for the humanoid races. The others mostly needed special accommodations anyway.

And so from a sweet green any world with nothing on it but trees and grass and a few mild-natured animals The Hub had grown to have a population of something like ten billion people, spread horizontally and stacked up vertically and dug in underneath, and every one of them was engaged in some governmental function, or in espionage, or in both. Intrigue was as much a part of life in The Hub as corpuscles are a part of blood. The Hub boasted that it the only inhabited world in space where no single grain of wheat or saddle of mutton was grown, where nothing was manufactured and nobody

worked at a manual job.

Durham loved it passionately.

Both moons were in the sky now, One was small and low, like a white pearl hung just out of reach. The other was enormous. It had an atmosphere, and it served as warehouse and supply base for the planet city, handling the billions of tons of shipping that kept it going. The two of them made a glorious spectacle overhead, but Durham did not bother to see them. The vast glow of the city paled them, made them unimportant. He was remembering how he had seen it when he was fresh from Earth, for the first time—the supreme capital, beside which the world capitals were only toy cities, the heart and center of the galaxy where the decisions were made and the great men came and went. He was remembering how he had felt how he had been so sure of the future that he never gave it a second thought.

But something happened.

What?

Liquor, they said, and the accident.

No, not liquor, the hell with them. I could always carry my drinks.

The accident. Well, what of it? Didn't other people have accidents? And anyway, nobody really got hurt out of it. He didn't, and the girl didn't—what if she wasn't his fiancée?—and the confidential file he had in the 'copter hadn't fallen into anybody's hands. So there wasn't anything to that.

No. Not liquor and not the accident, no matter what they said. It was Hawtree, and a personal grudge because he, Durham, had had Hawtree's daughter out with him in the 'copter that night. And so what? He was only engaged to Willa Paulsen, not married to her, and anyway Susan Hawtree knew what she was doing. She knew darn well.

Hawtree, a grudge, and a little bad luck. That's what happened. And that's all.

The 'copter swerved and dropped onto a private landing stage attached to a penthouse. Durham knew well, though he hadn't seen it for over a year. He got out, aware of palpitations and a gone feeling in the knees. He needed a drink, but he knew that he would have to go inside first and he forced himself to stand up and walk beside Paulsen as though nothing had ever happened. The head high, the face proud and calm, just a touch of bitterness but not too much.

Hawtree was alone in the living room. He glanced at Durham as he came in through the long glass doors. There was a servall standing in the corner and Hawtree said to it, "A drink for the gentleman, straight and stiff."

A small anger stirred in Durham Hawtree might at least have given him the choice. He said sharply, "No thanks."

Hawtree said, "Don't be a fool." He looked tired, but then he always had. Tired and keyed up, full of the drive and the brittle excitement of one who has juried peoples and nations, expressed as black marks on sheets of varicolored paper for so long that it has become a habit as necessary and

destructive as hashish. To Paulsen he said, "I'll ring when I need you "

Paulsen went out. The servall placed the drink in Durham's hand. He did not refuse it.

"Sit down," said Hawtree, and Durham sat, Hawtree dismissed the servall. Durham drank part of his drink and felt better. Well, he said, "I'm listening".

"You were a great disappointment to me, Durham."

"What am I supposed to say to that?"

"Nothing. Go ahead, finish your drink, I want to talk to a man, not a zombie."

Durham finished it angrily. "If you brought me all the way here to shake your finger at me, I'm going home again." That was what he said aloud. Inside, he wanted to get down and embrace Hawtree's knees and beg him for another chance.

"I brought you here," said Hawtree, "to offer you a job. If you do it, it might mean that certain doors could be opened for you again.

Durham sat perfectly still. For a moment he did not trust himself to speak. Then he said, "I'll take it."

Certain doors. That's what I've waited for, living like a bum, dodging creditors, hocking my shoes, waiting for those doors to open again.

He tried not to show how he felt, sitting stiffly at ease in the chair, but a red flush began to burn in his cheeks and his hands moved. About time. About time, damn you, Hawtree, that you remembered me.

Damn you, oh damn you for making me sweat so long!

Hawtree said, "Did you ever hear of Nanta Dik?"

"No. What is it?"

"A planet. It belongs to a green star system, chart designation KL421, Sub-sector 9G, Sector 80, Quadrant 7. It's a very isolated system, the only inhabited one in 9G, as a matter of fact. 9G is a Terra quota sector, and since Nanta Dik is humanoid, it's become headquarters for our nationals who are engaged in business in that sub-sector."

Durham nodded. Unassimilated territory lying outside the Federation was divided among Federation members, allowing them to engage in trade only in their allotted sectors and subject to local law and license. This eliminated competitive friction between Federation worlds, threw open new areas to development, and eventually—usually under the sponsorship of the federated world—brought the quota sectors into the vast family of suns that had already spread over more than half the galaxy. There were abuses now and again, but on the whole as a system, it worked pretty well.

"I take it that Nanta Dik is where I'm going."

"Yes. Now listen. First thing in the morning, go and book a third-class passage to Earth on the ~~Sylvania Merchant~~, leaving on the day following. Let your friends know you're going home. They won't be surprised."

"Don't rub it in."

"Sorry. When you reach the spaceport walk across the main rotunda near the newsstand. Drop your ticket and your passport, folded together, go on to the newsstand and wait. They will be returned to you by a uniformed attendant, only your passport will be in a different name and your ticket will now be on a freighter outbound for Nanta Dik. You will then embark at once. Is that all clear?"

"Everything but the reason."

"I'll come to that. How good is your memory?"

"As good as it ever was."

"All right. When you reach Nanta Dik a man will meet you as you leave the ship. He will ask if you are the ornithologist. You will say yes. Then—pay close attention to this—you will say, The darkbirds will soon fly. Got that?"

"The darkbirds will soon fly. Simple enough. What's it mean?"

"9G is a rich sector, isolated, improperly policed, underpopulated. There has been a certain amount of trouble, poaching, claim jumping, outright piracy. The 'darkbirds' are a couple of suspected ships. We want to set a trap for them, and you know how things are on The Hub. If a man buys a pair of socks, the news is all across the galaxy in a week. That's the reason for all the secrecy."

"Is that all?"

"No." Hawtree got up, turning his eye on Durham. He said harshly, "Listen Lloyd." It was the first time he had used Durham's Christian name. "This is an important job. It may not seem like one, but it is. Do it. There's somebody else who invited you to have another chance."

Durham did not say anything. He waited for Hawtree to turn around and face him and say the name. But he didn't, and finally Durham said,

"Susan?"

"I don't know what she sees in you," said Hawtree, and pushed a button. Paulsen came in. Hawtree jerked a thumb at Durham. "Take him back. And tell Burke to give him the money."

Durham went out and got into the 'copter. He felt dizzy, and this time it was not from drinks or the lack of them. He sat, and Paulsen took the 'copter off.

Hawtree watched it from inside the glass doors until it was out of sight above the roof. And another man came from behind a door that led into Hawtree's private study, and watched it with him.

"Are you sure about him?" asked the man.

"I know him," Hawtree said. "He's a slob."

"But are you sure?"

"Don't worry, Morrison," Hawtree said. "I know him. He'll talk. Bet you a hundred he never even makes the spaceport."

"Blessed are the fools," said Morrison, "for they shall inherit nothing."

Chapter II

Baya sat on the bed and watched him pack. She was from one of the worlds of Mintaka, and as humanoid as they came, not very tall but very well shaped, and colored one beautiful shade of old bronze from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet, except for her mouth, which was a vivid red.

"It seems funny," she said, "to think of you not being here tomorrow."

"Will you die of missing me?"

"Probably, for a day or two. I was comfortable. I hate upheavals."

Durham reached across her for his small stack of underwear. She was wearing the yellow silk thing that made her skin glow-by contrast. He saw that it was dubiously clean about the neck, and when he paused to kiss her he noticed the tiny lines around her mouth and eyes, the indefinable look of wear and hardness that was more destructive to beauty than the mere passing of years. Yesterday they had been two of a kind, part of the vast backwash left behind by other people's successes. Today he was far above her. And he was glad.

"The least you could do," she said, "would be to make this a really big evening. But I suppose you couldn't run to that."

"I've got money." Burke had given him some, but that was for expenses and he would neither mention it nor touch it. "Artie brought a pretty good price, so did the furniture." There was nothing left in the apartment but the bed, and even that was sold. He had bought back a few of his better belongings, and he still had a wad of credits. He felt good. He felt joyous and expansive. He felt like a man again. He poured two drinks and handed one to Baya.

"All right," he said, "here's to a big last evening. The biggest."

They had cocktails in a bar called The Moonraker because it was the highest point in that hemisphere of the city. It was the hour between sunset and moonrise, when the towers stood sharply defined against a sky of incredible dark blueness, with the brighter stars pricked out in it, and the dim canyons at the feet of the towers were lost in the new night, spectral, soft and lovely. And the night deepened, and the lights came on.

They wandered for a while among the high flung walkways that spanned the upper levels of the towers so that people need not spend half their lives in elevators. They skirted the vast green concourse from which the halls of government rose up white and unadorned and splendid. They only skirted one corner of it, because this galactic Capitol Hill ran for miles, dominating the whole official complex, and one enormous building of it was fitted up so that the non-humanoid Members of Universal Parliament could "attend" the sessions in comfort, never leaving their especially pressurized and congenially poisonous suites. Between humanoid and non-humanoid there were many scientific gradations of form. But for governmental purposes it boiled down simply to oxygen-breather or non-oxygen-breather.

"Human or not," said Durham, standing on an upper span, with the good liquor burning bright inside him, "human or not, they're only men like me. What they've done, I can do."

"This is dull," said Baya.

"Dull," said Durham. He shook his head in wonderment, staring at her. She was beautiful. Tonight she wore white, and her hair curled softly on her neck, and her mouth was languorous, and her eyes—her eyes were hard. They were always hard, always making a liar out of that pliant, generous mouth.

"Doll, he said, "No wonder you never got anywhere."

She flared up at that, and said a few things about him. He knew they were no longer true, so he could afford to be amused by them. He smiled and said,

"Let's not quarrel, Baya. This is goodbye, remember. Come on, we'll have a drink at the Miran."

They floated down on the bright spider web levels of the walkways, drifting east, stopping at the Miran and then going on to another drinking place, and then to another. The walks were thronged with other people, people from hundreds of stars, thousands of worlds. People of an infinite variety of sizes, shapes and colors, dressed in every imaginable and unimaginable fashion. Ambassadors, MP's, wives and mist couriers, calculator jockeys, topologists and graph men, office girls, hairdressers, janitors, pimps, you-name-it. Durham saw them through a golden haze, and loved them, because they were the city and he was a part of them again.

He was out of the backwash of not-being. Hawtree had had to give in, and this footling errand to some dust speck nobody ever heard of was simply a necessary device to save his own face. All right, Hawtree, fine. We will go along with the gag. And you may inform the haughty Miss Hawtree, who can, believe us, be also the naughty Miss Hawtree, that we don't know if we want her back or not. We'll see.

"--take me with you," Baya was saying. Durham shook his head. "Lone trip, honey. Can't possibly."

"Are you ashamed of me, Lloyd? That's it, you're ashamed to take me to Earth."

"No. No. Now, Baya—"

He looked at her. His vision was a bit blurred by now, he could see just enough background to wonder how the devil they'd got to this closed-in-looking drinking place. But Baya's face was clear enough. She was crying.

"Now, Baya, honey, it's not that—it's not that at all."

"Then why can't I go with you to Earth?"

"Because—listen, Baya, can you keep a secret?" He laughed, and his own laughter sounded blurred too. "Promise?"

"Promise."

"I—"

Dead stop. The words rattled on his tongue, but remained unspoken. Why? Was it because of Baya's eyes, that wept tears but had no sorrow in them? He could see them quite clearly, and they were not sorrowful at all, but avid.

"I promised, Lloyd. You can tell me." There was a table under his hands, with an exotically patterned cloth on it. He had no memory of having sat down at it. There was a wall of plasticoid cement covered with a crude mural in bright primaries. There was a low, vaulted ceiling, also painted. There were no windows.

"How did we get here?" Durham asked stupidly. "It's underground."

"It's just a place," Baya said impatiently. And then she said sharply, "What's the matter with you?"

Blood and fumes hammered together in his bulging temples, and his back felt cold. "Where's the men's room, Baya?"

Her mouth set in anger and disgust. She called, "Varnik!"

A tall powerful man with a very long neck and skin the color of a ripe plum came up to the table. He wore an apron.

Baya said, "Better take him there, Varnik."

The plum colored man took him and ran him to a door and put him through it. From there a servall took over. It was very efficient.

"Are you through, sir?"

"God, no. Not nearly."

One more word and you would have been through. Forever. Drunken blabbermouth Durham, smart aleck Durham, would-be big shot Durham, ready to babble out his secret and blow his last chance of comeback. But why did Baya have to be so insistently curious?

Why, indeed?

He began to feel both sick and scared.

After a time he made it to the row of basins and splashed cold water on his face and head. There was a mirror above the basin. He looked into it. "Hello, bum," he said.

Face it, Durham. You're a drunken bum. You are exactly what Willa Paulsen said you were, what Susan Hawtree said you were, what they all said you were. You get a second chance, and you go right out and get drunk and blow it or, almost. Another minute and you'd have blabbed everything you know to Baya.

Baya, who cried because he wouldn't tell her; who had brought him to this rathole. He took a clearer look at it when he went shakily out of the men's room. The place almost empty, and it had a close, smothery feeling. Durham had never liked these underground streets, this vaguely un-demi-world that

wound itself around the foundations of the city. It was considered smart to go slumming here, but this place was somehow wrong.

There were a man and woman at a table across the room, a young, pale green couple who pretended too carefully not to see him. There was Varnik, the plum colored proprietor, at a tall desk beside the main door. And there was Baya at their table.

She handed him a glass when he came over. "Feel better? I ordered you a sedative." Without sitting down he put the glass to his lips. It did not taste like any sedative he could remember, and he thought he had tried them all.

"I don't want it."

"Don't be a fool, Lloyd. Take it." Her eyes were cold now, and he was suddenly quite sure why he had been brought here.

Durham said softly, "Good night, tramp. Good night and good-bye." He ran around the table and made a rush for the entrance.

Varnik stepped from the tall desk to bar his way, holding out a piece of paper.

"Sir," he said. "Your check."

Durham heard three chairs scrape behind him. He did not pause. He bent and drove the point of his shoulder as hard as he could at a spot just above Varnik's wide belt. Varnik let go a gasping sigh and wheeled away. Durham went out the door.

The underground street was brightly lighted. It ran straight to right and left, under a low roof, and disappeared on either hand around a right angle turn. Durham went to the left for no particular reason. There were people on the street. He dodged among them, running. They stopped and stared at him, and there was an echo of other feet behind him, also running. He sped around the corner, and it occurred to him that he was completely lost, that he did not even know what part of the city lay above him, or how far. There were different levels to this under-city, following down the foundations, the conduits and tubes and sewers and pumping stations. For the first time he began to feel genuinely trapped, and genuinely afraid.

The street ran straight ahead until it ended against a buttressed foundation wall. There were doors and windows on either side of it. People lived here. There were joints, some fancy-exotic for the carriage trade, others just joints. A couple of smaller streets opened off it, darker and more winding. Durham plunged into one, pausing briefly to look back. Fleeting like deer around the corner were the young pale green couple who had sat at the other table in Varnik's. There was something about the purposeful way they ran that sent a quiver of pure terror through Durham's insides.

He ran again, as hard as he could, wondering who the devil they were and what they wanted with him.

What did anyone want with him, and the small bit of a secret he carried?

The narrow street wound and twined. Clearly echoing along the vault of the roof he could hear footsteps. One. Two. Coming fast. He saw an opening no wider than a crack in the wall. He turned into

it. It was quite dark in there and he knew he could not go much farther, and that fact added to his burden of shame. ~~There had been a time when this much of a sprint would hardly have breathed him.~~ He tottered on, looking for a place to hide in, and there wasn't any, and his heart banged and floundered against his ribs, and the muscles of his thighs were like wet strings.

There was a square opening with blank walls all around it and a great big manhole cover in the middle. There was the way he had come in, and there was another narrow way he might have come out, but Varnik was coming through it, running a little crooked and breathing hard. He stopped when he saw Durham. Baya, panting up behind, almost ran into him. Varnik grunted and sprang.

With feeble fierceness, Durham resisted. It got him nowhere. The plum colored man struck him several times out of pure pique, cursing Durham for making trouble, for bruising his gut, for making him run like this. Baya stood by and watched.

"Will you behave now?" Varnik demanded. He whacked Durham again, and Durham glared at him out of dazed eyes and felt the world tilt and slide away from him.

Suddenly there were new voices, footsteps, confusion. He fell, what seemed a long way but was really only to his hands and knees.

The young couple had come into the square space. They were small lithe people, muscled like ocelots, and their skin color was a pale green, very pretty, and characteristic of several different races, but not good for identification here. The girl's tunic had slipped aside over the breast, and the skin there was clear gold, like new country butter. They both had guns in their strong little fists, and they were speaking over Durham to Varnik and Baya.

"We will question this man alone." "Oh, no," said Varnik angrily. "You don't get away with that." Baya bent over Durham. "Come on, lover," she said. "Get up." Her voice was cooing. To the strangers she said, "That wasn't our deal at all." "You failed," said the girl with the two-colored skin, and she fired a beam with frightening accuracy, exactly between them. A piece of the wall behind them fused and flared. Varnik's eyes came wide open.

"Well," he said. "Well, if that's the way you feel about it."

He turned. Baya hesitated, and the muzzle of the gun began to move her way. She snarled something in her own language and decided to go after Varnik.

Durham got his hands and feet bunched under him. He didn't know what he was going to do, but he knew that once he was left alone with the two small fleet strangers he would eventually talk, and after that it would not matter much what happened to him.

He said to them, hopefully, "You have the wrong man. I don't know—"

There were the five of them in the small space. There were the two couples facing each other, and Durham on his knees between them. And then there was something else.

There was a spiky shadow, perfectly black, of undetermined size and nameless shape, except that it was spiky.

Baya did not quite scream. She pressed against Varnik, and they both recoiled into the alley mouth. ~~The young couple paled under their greenness, and they, too, drew back. Durham crouched on the ground.~~

The shadow bounded and rolled and leaped through the air and hung cloudlike over Durham's head. Suddenly it shrieked out, in a high, toneless voice like that of a deaf child, a clatter of gibberish in which one syllable stood clear, repeated several times.

"Jubb!" said the shadow. "Jubb! Jubb! Jubb!"

Chapter III

Jubb. It might have been a name, a curse, or a battle cry. Whatever it was, the young couple did not like it. Their faces twisted into slim masks of hate. They raised their guns at the shadow, and the shadow laughed. Abruptly it bunched up small and shot at them.

Durham heard them yell, in pain or fright or both, and he heard their running feet, but he did not see what happened to them. He was going away himself, down the narrow alley that Varnik and Baya were no longer interested in blocking. When he reached the end of the alley he came out onto a well lighted street with lots of people on it, but he still did not feel safe.

Varnik and Baya were not far away. Baya was leaning against a wall, with her mouth wide open. She was not used to running. Varnik was standing beside her looking sulky. He scowled at Durham when he came out of the alley. Durham stopped, bracing himself and ready to yell for help. But Varnik shook his head "Nyuh!" he said.

Baya panted. "What's the matter, you afraid?"

"Yes," said Varnik. "Those two little green ones, they are not playing for fun. And that black one—" He quivered all over. "I'm afraid. I see you again, Baya." He went away. Baya was close onto tears, partly from her own fright, partly from sheer fury and frustration. But she did not. She turned and looked at Durham. "What got into you?" she said. "It was all set, and then you had to louse it up." She cursed him. "It's just like you, Lloyd, to cost me a nice chunk of money."

"Who are those people, Baya?"

"They didn't tell me. I didn't ask."

"Total strangers, eh?"

"Turned up this afternoon at my apartment. I should think you could tell. They're not the type I run with."

"No." He frowned, still breathing hard and wiping sweat from his face. "How did they know about us?"

She shrugged, and said maliciously, "Somebody must have told them. Well, so long, Lloyd. I wish you all the luck you deserve."

She walked off slowly, patting her hair into place, straightening the line of her white dress. She did not look back. Durham watched her for a second. Then he began to walk fast as he could in the opposite direction, keeping in the brightest lights. After a bit he found a stairwalk. He rode up on it through two levels, and all the while the roots of his hair were prickling and he was darting nervous glances over his shoulder and into the air over his head.

Jubb. Jubb. Jubb.

He envied Varnik who could go away and forget the whole thing.

It was still night when he reached the surface. The shadow did not seem to have followed him, but how could you tell? Even a city as brilliantly lighted as The Hub always has shadowy corners by night. He kept listening for that high, flat, hooting voice. It did not speak to him, and he hailed a skycab, appalled by how little time he had left to catch the pre-dawn ferry.

He made it with no minutes to spare. He found a place on the dark side and settled himself for the four-hour run, and then everything caught up to him at once and he began to shake. He sat there in the grip of a violent reaction, living over again Hawtree's instructions and the evening with Baya and the nightmare run through the underground streets, and the coming of the shadow. The dark birds will soon fly. Was that enough for people to kill for? It might be if they had an interest in those ships, but the young couple did not look the type. And the shadow?

He shivered and looked out the port. The long thin shadow of the ship extended itself indefinitely into space, but all around it there was light, and the curve of the planet below was a blaze of gold. Down there was Hawtree and a big part of his life. Above and ahead was the huge cool face of the moon, and that was the future, all unexplored. Durham clenched his cold hands together between his knees and thought, I've got to do this, stay sober and do it, a little for Hawtree but mostly for myself. A man can look at himself twice the way I did tonight. Once is all he can stand. And once ought to be enough.

The brightness blurred and swam. Presently he slept, and his dreams were thronged with shadows hooting "Jubb! Jubb! Jubb!"

Four hours later Durham walked across the vast main rotunda of the lunar spaceport, dropping his little bundle of passport and ticket as casually as he could. He continued on to the newsstand and made a pretense of looking over the half credit microbooks, waiting.

While he waited he wondered. He wondered how the young couple had known about Baya. He wondered what the shadow and where it came from, and why it had defended him from the young couple, and what was the meaning of the rather ridiculous word "Jubb." He wondered if he wasn't crazy not to pick up his ticket to Earth and use it.

He wanted a drink very badly.

A uniformed attendant came and said, "I think you dropped this, sir."

He held out a passport with a ticket folded in it. Durham examined them, put them in his pocket, and tipped the attendant, who went away. Durham bought three microbooks and moved on. He could not see anybody watching him, and he told himself it was only nerves that made the skin creep on his back as though eyes were boring into it.

The switch had been made all right on his papers. His name was now John Mills Watson and he had a passage to Nanta Dik aboard the freighter Margareta K. He still wanted a drink. He was determined that he would not go and get it, and he headed grimly for a stairwalk that led down to the port cab system. He had almost stepped onto it, and then from the loudspeakers all over the huge rotunda a

voice boomed out, saying, "Mr. Lloyd Durham, please come to the Information Desk."

Durham flinched as though somebody had struck him. He thought, Hawtree's sent word to recall me. Perhaps it was a trap.

He approached the desk cautiously, while his name continued to blare forth from the loudspeakers. Somebody was standing there. A woman, with her back to him. He had not seen that back for over a year, not since the night of the accident, but he had not forgotten it.

"Hello, Susan," he said.

She turned around, and he added bitterly, "He needn't have sent you." He was convinced now that she had come to call him back.

She seemed surprised. "Who?"

"Your father."

"Dad? Good heavens, Lloyd, you don't suppose he knows I'm here!" She was tall, as he remembered her, and handsome, and beautifully dressed, and very self-assured. She smiled, one of those brittle things with no humor in it, and then she asked, "How long have you before take-off?"

Durham said slowly, "Time enough."

"We can't talk here."

"No. Come on, I'll buy you a drink."

They walked in silence to the crowded, noisy spaceport bar. They found a place and sat down. Durham ordered. Susan Hawtree sat opening and closing her handbag as though the operation was of the most absorbing interest.

He asked, "Why did you come here?" "It seemed as though somebody ought to say good-bye."

"Who told you I was leaving?" "I have a friend in the travel office. She tells me if anybody I know books passage home."

"Convenient."

"Yes."

The drinks came. There was a clatter of voices, speaking in a thousand tongues < laughing, crying, saying hello and good-bye and till we meet again. Susan turned her glass round and round in her fingers, and Durham watched her.

"I'm sorry, Lloyd. Sorry everything could not have turned out better."

"Yes. So am I."

"I hope you'll have better luck at home."

"Thanks."

Another silence in which Durham tried hard to figure her angle.

He said, "I heard you tried to talk your father into giving me another chance. Thanks for that."

She stared at him blankly and shook her head. "You know how Dad feels about you. I've never dared mention your name." A cold feeling settled in the pit of Durham's stomach. There's somebody else, Lloyd, who wanted you to have another chance. Fatherly intuition?

Or a big fat lie?

Let's face it, Durham, why would Hawtree send you on a mission to the dog pound? There are ten billion people on The Hub. He could have found somebody else.

The whole business smells. It reeks. But wait. Suppose he sent Susan here to test me; to see if I'd talk. Not too believable, but a pleasanter belief than the alternative. Let's see.

"Susan. Look, I can say this now because I'm going home and that's the end of it. We won't see each other anymore. I should never have got engaged to Willa, I didn't love her. It was you all the time."

He caught the quick glint of tears in her eyes and was appalled. Tears for him? From Susan Hawtree?

"That's why I went with you that night," she whispered. "I thought I could take you from her. I thought I could make you be what you ought to be—oh, damn you, Lloyd, I should never have come here!"

She jumped up and walked rapidly a from the table. He followed her, with his eyes and his mouth both wide open and something very strange happening inside him.

One thing sure. She was no plant.

"Susan."

"Don't you have to get aboard or something?"

"Yes, but—Susan, ride down with me I want to talk to you."

"There's nothing to talk about. But she went to the stairwalk with him, and rode down, her face turned, her head held so high she seemed to tower over him.

"Susan," he said. "Do you think—could you give me—"

No, that's not the gambit. But what do you say—Susan, I'm a changed man. Susan, wait for me?

The stairwalk slid them gently off onto a very long platform. There was a crowd on it, sorting itself into the endless lines of purple monorail taxis that moved along both sides.

"Susan."

"Good-bye, Lloyd."

"No, wait a minute. Plea I don't know quite how—"

Suddenly they were not alone. A young couple had joined them. The color of their skin had changed from pale green to a n burnt orange, and their clothing was different, but Durham recognized them without difficulty. A hard object prodded him in the side, and the young man, smiling, said to him, "Get into that cab." The woman, also smiling, said to Susan Hawtree, "Don't scream. Keep perfectly quiet."

Susan's face went white. She looked at Durham, and Durham said to the young man, "Let her go, she has nothing to do with this!"

"Get in the cab," said the young man.

"Both of you."

"I think," said Susan, "we'd better do it."

They got in. The doors closed automatically behind them. The young man, with his free hand, took out a ticket and laid it in the scanner slot, with the code number of the ship's docking area uppermost. The taxi clicked, hummed, and took off smoothly.

Durham saw the ticket as the young man removed it from the scanner. It was a passage to Nanta Dik aboard the freighter Margareta K.

Chapter IV

The monorails came out onto the surface in bunches like very massive cables and then began to branch out, the separate "wires" of the cables eventually spreading into a network that covered the entire moon. The taxi picked up speed, clicking over points as it swerved and swung, feeling its way onto the one clear track that led where its scanner had told it to go. Durham was aware obliquely of other monorail taxis in uncountable numbers going like the devil in all directions, and of other types of machines moving below on the surface, and of mobile cranes that walked like buildings, and of an horizon filled with the upthrust noses of great ships like the towers of some fantastic city. Beside him Susan Hawtree sat, rigid and quivering, and before him on the opposite seat were the two young people with the guns.

Durham said, in a voice thick with anger and fright, "Why did you have to drag her into it?"

The man shrugged. "She is perhaps part of the conspiracy. In any case, she would have made an alarm."

"What do you mean, conspiracy? I'm going home to Earth. She came to say goodbye—" Durham leaned forward. "You're the same two bastards from last night. What do you—"

"Please," said the man, contemptuously. He gestured with the gun. "You will both sit still with your hands behind your heads. So. Wanbecq-ai will search you. If either one should attempt to interfere, the other will suffer for it."

The wiry young woman did her work swiftly and efficiently. "No weapons," she said. "Hai! Wanbecq look here!" She began to gabble in a strange tongue, pointing to Durham's passport and ticket, and then to Susan's ID card. Wanbecq's narrow eyes narrowed still further.

"So," he said to Durham. "Your name has changed since yesterday, Mr. Watson. And for one who returns to Sol III, you choose a long way around."

Susan stared hard at Durham. "What's he talking about?"

"Never mind. Listen, you—Wanbecq, is that your name? Miss Hawtree has nothing to do with any of this. Her father—"

"Is a part of the embassy which sent you out," said Wanbecq, flicking Susan's ID card with his finger. "Do not expect me to believe foolishness, Mr. Watson-Durham." He spoke rapidly to Wanbecq-ai. She nodded, and they both turned to Susan.

"Obviously you were sent with instructions for Mr. Durham, Will you tell us now what they were?"

Susan's face was such a blank of amazement that Durham would have laughed if the situation had not been so extremely unfunny.

"Nobody sent me with anything. Nobody even knows I came. Lloyd, are these people crazy? Are you

crazy? What's going on here?"

He said, "I'm not sure myself. But I think there are only two possibilities. One, your father is a scoundrel. Two, he's a fool being used by scoundrels. Take your pick. In either case, I'm the goat."

Her white cheeks turned absolutely crimson. She tried twice to say something to Durham. Then she turned and said to the Wanbecqs, "I've had enough of this. Let me out."

They merely glanced at her and went on talking.

"You might as well relax," said Durham to her, in colloquial English, hoping the

Wanbecqs could not understand it. "I'm sorry you got into this, and I'll try to get you out, but don't do anything silly."

She called him a name she had never learned in the Embassy drawing rooms. There was a manual switch recessed in the body of the taxi, high up and sealed in with a special plastic. It said EMERGENCY on it. Susan took off her shoe and swung. The plastic shattered. Susan dropped the shoe and grabbed for the switch. Wanbecq yelled. Wanbecq-ai leaped headlong for in and bore her back onto the seat. She was using her gun flatwise in her hand, solely as a club. Susan let out one furious wail.

And Durham, moving more by instinct than by conscious thought, grabbed Wanbecq-ai's uplifted arm and pulled her over squalling onto his lap. Wanbecq started forward from the opposite seat.

"Don't," said Durham. He had Wanbecq-ai's wrist in one hand and her neck in the other, and he was not being gentle. Wanbecq-ai covered him, and the two of them together covered Susan. Wanbecq stood with his knees bent for a spring, his gun flicking back and forth uncertainly. Wanbecq-ai had stopped squalling. Her face was turning dark. Susan huddled where she is, half stunned. Durham shifted his grip on Wanbecq-ai's arm and got the gun into his own hand.

"Now," he said to Wanbecq. "Drop it."

Wanbecq dropped it. Durham scrabbled it in with his heel until it was between his own feet. Then he heaved Wanbecq-ai forcibly at her husband. It was like heaving a rag doll, and while Wanbecq was dealing with her Durham managed to pick up the other gun.

Susan lifted her head. She looked around with glassy eyes and then, with single-minded persistence, she got up. Durham said sharply, "Sit down!"

Susan reached up for the emergency. Durham smacked her across the stomach with the back of his left hand, not daring to take his eyes off the Wanbecqs. She doubled over it and sat down again. Durham said, "All right now, damn it, all of you sit still!"

The taxi sped on it humming rail, farther and farther into the reaches of the spaceport. Below there were the wide clear spaces of the landing aprons, and great ships standing in them, their tails down and their noses high in the air, high above the monorail, towering over the freight belts and the multitude of machines that served them.

Ahead there was the on racing edge of twilight, and beyond it, coming swiftly, was the lunar night.

Durham said to Wanbecq, "What's this all about?"

Wanbecq sneered.

"You know," said Durham, "there's a law against changing the color of your skin for the purpose of committing criminal acts. That's so the wrong people won't get blamed. There's a law against carrying lethal weapons. There is even, humorously enough, a law against espionage on The Hub. You know I'm going to turn you over to the authorities?"

Again Wanbecq sneered. He was a hateful little man, but he looked so young and so proudly martyred that Durham almost felt sorry for him. Almost. Not quite.

"On second thought," he said, "I guess I'll save you both for Jubb."

That was a random shot, prompted by the memory of how their faces looked when the shadow-thing had squealed that word at them. It hit. Wanbecq's face became distorted with a fanatic hatred, and Wanbecq-ai, rubbing her throat, croaked, "Then you are in league with The Beast." She pronounced that name with unmistakable capitals.

"Who said I was?" asked Durham. "The darkbird came to help you. It told us Jubb had claimed you."

"It did," said Durham softly, "did it?" The dark birds will soon fly. The dark birds merely refer to a couple of ships engaged in poaching. That's what you say, Mr. Hawtree.

"What is a darkbird? You mean that shadow thing

"They are the servants, the familiars of The Beast," said Wanbecq. "The instruments by which he hopes to enslave all humanity. Do not pretend, Mr. Durham."

"I'm not. This Jubb—what is he beside The Beast?"

Wanbecq stared at and Durham made a menacing gesture. "Come on, I want to know."

"Jubb is the ruler of Senya Dik."

"And Senya Dik?"

"Our sister planet. A dark and evil sister, plotting our destruction. A demon sister, Mr. Durham. Have you ever heard of the Bitter Star?"

"I never heard of any of it but I find it interesting. Go on."

"Whoever controls the darkbirds controls the Star, and whoever controls the Star can do anything he wishes. This is Jubb." Wanbecq thrust out his hands. "You're human, Mr. Durham. If you have sold your soul, take it back again. Fight with us, not against us."

"I assume," said Durham, "that Jubb is not human."

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