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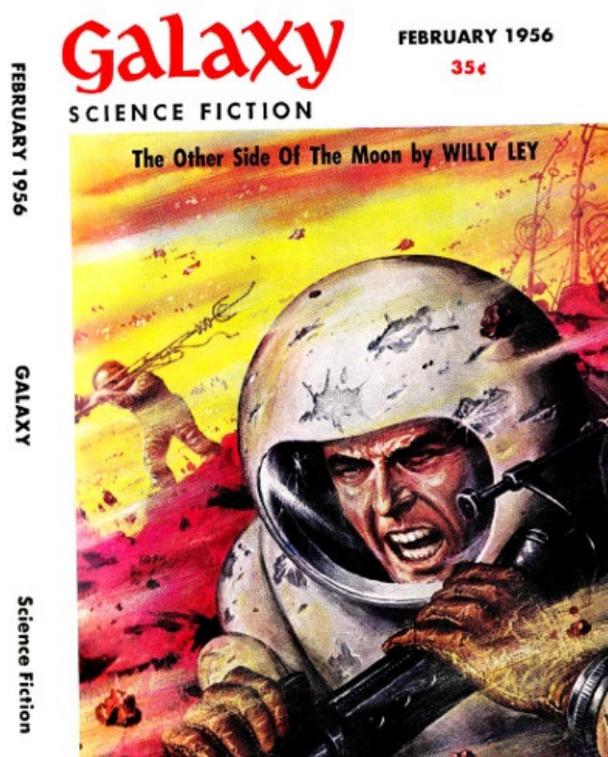
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK BODYGUARD ***



Bodyguard

By CHRISTOPHER GRIMM

Illustrated by CAVAT

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When overwhelming danger is constantly present, of course a man is entitled to have a bodyguard. The annoyance was that he had to do it himself ... and his body would not cooperate!

The man at the bar was exceptionally handsome, and he knew it. So did the light-haired girl at his side, and so did the nondescript man in the gray suit who was watching them from a booth in the corner.

Everyone in the room was aware of the big young man, and most of the humans present were resentful, for he handled himself consciously and arrogantly, as if his appearance alone were enough to make him superior to anyone. Even the girl with him was growing restless, for she was accustomed to adulation herself, and next to Gabriel Lockard she was almost ordinary-looking.

As for the extraterrestrials—it was a free bar—they were merely amused, since to them all men were pathetically and irredeemably hideous.

Gabe threw his arm wide in one of his expansive gestures. There was a short man standing next to the pair—young, as most men and women were in that time, thanks to the science which could stave off decay, though not death—but with no other apparent physical virtue, for plastic surgery had not fulfilled its bright promise of the twentieth century.

The drink he had been raising to his lips splashed all over his clothing; the glass shattered at his feet. Now he was not only a rather ugly little man, but also a rather ridiculous one—or at least he felt he was, which was what mattered.

"Sorry, colleague," Gabe said lazily. "All my fault. You must let me buy you a replacement." He gestured to the bartender. "Another of the same for my fellow-man here."

The ugly man dabbed futilely at his dripping trousers with a cloth hastily supplied by the management.

"You must allow me to pay your cleaning bill," Gabe said, taking out his wallet and extracting several credit notes without seeming to look at them. "Here, have yourself a new suit on me." *You could use one* was implied.

And that, coming on top of Gabriel Lockard's spectacular appearance, was too much. The ugly man picked up the drink the bartender had just set before him and started to hurl it, glass and all, into Lockard's handsome face.

Suddenly a restraining hand was laid upon his arm. "Don't do that," the nondescript man who had been sitting in the corner advised. He removed the glass from the little man's slackening grasp. "You wouldn't want to go to jail because of him."

The ugly man gave him a bewildered stare. Then, seeing the forces now ranged against him—including his own belated prudence—were too strong, he stumbled off. He hadn't really wanted to fight, only to smash back, and now it was too late for that.

Gabe studied the newcomer curiously. "So, it's you again?"

The man in the gray suit smiled. "Who else in any world would stand up for you?"

"I should think you'd have given up by now. Not that I mind having you around, of course," Gabriel added too quickly. "You do come in useful at times, you know."

"So you don't mind having me around?" The nondescript man smiled again. "Then what are you running from, if not me? You can't be running from yourself—you lost yourself a while back, remember?"

Gabe ran a hand through his thick blond hair. "Come on, have a drink with me, fellow-man, and let's let bygones be bygones. I owe you something—I admit that. Maybe we can even work this thing out."

"I drank with you once too often," the nondescript man said. "And things worked out fine, didn't they? For you." His eyes studied the other man's incredibly handsome young face, noted the suggestion of bags under the eyes, the beginning of slackness at the lips, and were not pleased with what they saw. "Watch yourself, colleague," he warned as he left. "Soon you might not be worth the saving."

"Who was that, Gabe?" the girl asked.

He shrugged. "I never saw him before in my life." Of course, knowing him, she assumed he was lying, but, as a matter of fact, just then he happened to have been telling the truth.

Once the illuminators were extinguished in Gabriel Lockard's hotel suite, it seemed reasonably certain to the man in the gray suit, as he watched from the street, that his quarry would not go out again that night. So he went to the nearest airstation. There he inserted a coin in a locker, into which he put most of his personal possessions, reserving only a sum of money. After setting the locker to respond to the letter combination *bodyguard*, he went out into the street.

If he had met with a fatal accident at that point, there would have been nothing on his body to identify him. As a matter of fact, no real identification was possible, for he was no one and had been no one for years.

The nondescript man hailed a cruising helicab. "Where to, fellow-man?" the driver asked.

"I'm new in the parish," the other man replied and let it hang there.

"Oh...? Females...? Narcophagi...? Thrill-mills?"

But to each of these questions the nondescript man shook his head.

"Games?" the driver finally asked, although he could guess what was wanted by then. "Dice...? Roulette...? Farjeen?"

"Is there a good zarquil game in town?"

The driver moved so he could see the face of the man behind him in the teleview. A very ordinary face. "Look, colleague, why don't you commit suicide? It's cleaner and quicker."

"I can't contact your attitude," the passenger said with a thin smile. "Bet you've never tried the game yourself. Each time it happens, there's a ... well, there's no experience to match it at a thrill-mill." He gave a sigh that was almost an audible shudder, and which the driver misinterpreted as an expression of ecstasy.

"Each time, eh? You're a dutchman then?" The driver spat out of the window. "If it wasn't for the nibble, I'd throw you right out of the cab. Without even bothering to take it down even. I hate dutchmen ... anybody with any legitimate feelings hates 'em."

"But it would be silly to let personal prejudice stand in the way of a commission, wouldn't it?" the other man asked coolly.

"Of course. You'll need plenty of foliage, though."

"I have sufficient funds. I also have a gun."

"You're the dictator," the driver agreed sullenly.

II

It was a dark and rainy night in early fall. Gabe Lockard was in no condition to drive the helicar. However, he was stubborn.

"Let me take the controls, honey," the light-haired girl urged, but he shook his handsome head.

"Show you I can do something 'sides look pretty," he said thickly, referring to an earlier and not amicable conversation they had held, and of which she still bore the reminder on one thickly made-up cheek.

Fortunately the car was flying low, contrary to regulations, so that when they smashed into the beacon tower on the outskirts of the little town, they didn't have far to fall. And hardly had their car crashed on the ground when the car that had been following them landed, and a short fat man was puffing toward them through the mist.

To the girl's indignation, the stranger not only hauled Gabe out onto the dripping grass first, but stopped and deliberately examined the young man by the light of his minilume, almost as if she weren't there at all. Only when she started to struggle out by herself did he seem to remember her existence. He pulled her away from the wreck just a moment before the fuel tank exploded and the 'copter went up in flames.

Gabe opened his eyes and saw the fat man gazing down at him speculatively. "My guardian angel," he mumbled—shock had sobered him a little, but not enough. He sat up. "Guess I'm not hurt or you'd have thrown me back in."

"And that's no joke," the fat man agreed.

The girl shivered and at that moment Gabriel suddenly seemed to recall that he had not been alone. "How about Helen? She on course?"

"Seems to be," the fat man said. "You all right, miss?" he asked, glancing toward the girl without, she thought, much apparent concern.

"Mrs.," Gabriel corrected. "Allow me to introduce you to Mrs. Gabriel Lockard," he said, bowing from his seated position toward the girl. "Pretty bauble, isn't she?"

"I'm delighted to meet you, Mrs. Gabriel Lockard," the fat man said, looking at her intently. His small eyes seemed to strip the make-up from her cheek and examine the livid bruise underneath. "I hope you'll be worthy of the name." The light given off by the flaming car flickered on his face and Gabriel's and, she supposed, hers too. Otherwise, darkness surrounded the three of them.

Playing the game was fabulously expensive; it had to be to make it profitable for the Vinzz to run it. Those odd creatures from Altair's seventh planet cared nothing for the welfare of the completely alien human beings; all they wanted was to feather their own pockets with interstellar credits, so that they could return to Vinau and buy many slaves. For, on Vinau, bodies were of little account, and so to them zarquil was the equivalent of the terrestrial game musical chairs. Which was why they came to Terra to make profits—there has never been big money in musical chairs as such.

When the zarquil operators were apprehended, which was not frequent—as they had strange powers, which, not being definable, were beyond the law—they suffered their sentences with equanimity. No Earth court could give an effective prison sentence to a creature whose life spanned approximately two thousand terrestrial years. And capital punishment had become obsolete on Terra, which very possibly saved the terrestrials embarrassment, for it was not certain that their weapons could kill the Vinzz ... or whether, in fact, the Vinzz merely expired after a period of years out of sheer boredom. Fortunately, because trade was more profitable than war, there had always been peace between Vinau and Terra, and, for that reason, Terra could not bar the entrance of apparently respectable citizens of a friendly planet.

The taxi driver took the fat man to one of the rather seedy locales in which the zarquil games were usually found, for the Vinzz attempted to conduct their operations with as much unobtrusiveness as was possible. But the front door swung open on an interior that lacked the opulence of the usual Vinox set-up; it was down-right shabby, the dim olive light hinting of squalor rather than forbidden pleasures. That was the trouble in these smaller towns—you ran greater risks of getting involved in games where the players had not been carefully screened.

The Vinox games were usually clean, because that paid off better, but, when profits were lacking, the Vinzz were capable of sliding off into darkside practices. Naturally the small-town houses were more likely to have trouble in making ends meet, because everybody in the parish knew everybody else far too well.

The fat man wondered whether that had been his quarry's motive in coming to such desolate, off-trail places—hoping that eventually disaster would hit the one who pursued him. Somehow, such a plan seemed too logical for the man he was haunting.

However, beggars could not be choosers. The fat man paid off the heli-driver and entered the zarquil house. "One?" the small green creature in the slightly frayed robe asked.

"One," the fat man answered.

III

The would-be thief fled down the dark alley, with the hot bright rays from the stranger's gun lancing out after him in flamboyant but futile patterns. The stranger, a thin young man with delicate, angular features, made no attempt to follow. Instead, he bent over to examine Gabriel Lockard's form, appropriately outstretched in the gutter. "Only weighted out," he muttered, "he'll be all right. Whatever possessed you two to come out to a place like this?"

"I really think Gabriel *must* be possessed...." the girl said, mostly to herself. "I had no idea of the kind of place it was going to be until he brought me here. The others were bad, but this is even worse. It almost seems as if he went around looking for trouble, doesn't it?"

"It does indeed," the stranger agreed, coughing a little. It was growing colder and, on this world, the cities had no domes to protect them from the climate, because it was Earth and the air was breathable and it wasn't worth the trouble of fixing up.

The girl looked closely at him. "You look different, but you *are* the same man who pulled us out of that aircar crash, aren't you? And before that the man in the gray suit? And before that...?"

The young man's cheekbones protruded as he smiled. "Yes, I'm all of them."

"Then what they say about the zarquil games is true? There are people who go around changing their bodies like—like hats?" Automatically she reached to adjust the expensive bit of blue synthetic on her moon-pale hair, for she was always conscious of her appearance; if she had not been so before marriage, Gabriel would have taught her that.

He smiled again, but coughed instead of speaking.

"But why do you do it? *Why!* Do you like it? Or is it because of Gabriel?" She was growing a little frantic; there was menace here and she could not understand it nor determine whether or not she was included in its scope. "Do you want to keep him from recognizing you; is that it?"

"Ask him."

"He won't tell me; he never tells me anything. We just keep running. I didn't recognize it as running at first, but now I realize that's what we've been doing ever since we were married. And running from you, I think?"

There was no change of expression on the man's gaunt face, and she wondered how much control he had over a body that, though second- or third- or fourth-hand, must be new to him. How well could he make it respond? What was it like to step into another person's casing? But she must not let herself think that way or she would find herself looking for a zarquil game. It would be one way of escaping Gabriel, but not, she thought, the best way; her body was much too good a one to risk so casually.

It was beginning to snow. Light, feathery flakes drifted down on her husband's immobile body. She pulled her thick coat—of fur taken from some animal who had lived and died light-years away—more closely about herself. The thin young man began to cough again.

Overhead a tiny star seemed to detach itself from the pale flat disk of the Moon and hurl itself upward—one of the interstellar ships embarking on its long voyage to distant suns. She wished that somehow she could be on it, but she was here, on this solitary old world in a barren solar system, with her unconscious husband and a strange man who followed them, and it looked as if here she would stay ... all three of them would stay....

"If you're after Gabriel, planning to hurt him," she asked, "why then do you keep helping him?"

"I am not helping *him*. And he knows that."

"You'll change again tonight, won't you?" she babbled. "You always change after you ... meet us? I think I'm beginning to be able to identify you now, even when you're ... wearing a new body; there's something about you that doesn't change."

"Too bad he got married," the young man said. "I could have followed him for an eternity and he would never have been able to pick me out from the crowd. Too bad he got married anyway," he added, his voice less impersonal, "for your sake."

She had come to the same conclusion in her six months of marriage, but she would not admit that to an outsider. Though this man was hardly an outsider; he was part of their small family group—as long as she had known Gabriel, so long he must have known her. And she began to suspect that he was even more closely involved than that.

"Why must you change again?" she persisted, obliquely approaching the subject she feared. "You have a pretty good body there. Why run the risk of getting a bad one?"

"This isn't a good body," he said. "It's diseased. Sure, nobody's supposed to play the game who hasn't passed a thorough medical examination. But in the places to which your husband has been leading me, they're often not too particular, as long as the player has plenty of foliage."

"How—long will it last you?"

"Four or five months, if I'm careful." He smiled. "But don't worry, if that's what you're doing; I'll get it passed on before then. It'll be expensive—that's all. Bad landing for the guy who gets it, but then it was tough on me too, wasn't it?"

"But how did you get into this ... pursuit?" she asked again. "And why are you doing it?" People didn't have any traffic with Gabriel Lockard for fun, not after they got to know him. And this man certainly should know him better than most.

"Ask your husband."

The original Gabriel Lockard looked down at the prostrate, snow-powdered figure of the man who had stolen his body and his name, and stirred it with his toe. "I'd better call a cab—he might freeze to death."

He signaled and a cab came.

"Tell him, when he comes to," he said to the girl as he and the driver lifted the heavy form of her husband into the helicar, "that I'm getting pretty tired of this." He stopped for a long spell of coughing. "Tell him that sometimes I wonder whether cutting off my nose wouldn't, in the long run, be most beneficial for my face."

"Sorry," the Vinzz said impersonally, in English that was perfect except for the slight dampening of the sibilants, "but I'm afraid you cannot play."

"Why not?" The emaciated young man began to put on his clothes.

"You know why. Your body is worthless. And this is a reputable house."

"But I have plenty of money." The young man coughed. The Vinzz shrugged. "I'll pay you twice the regular fee."

The green one shook his head. "Regrettably, I do mean what I say. This game is really clean."

"In a town like this?"

"That is the reason we can afford to be honest." The Vinzz' tendrils quivered in what the man had come to recognize as amusement through long, but necessarily superficial acquaintance with the Vinzz. His heavy robe of what looked like moss-green velvet, but might have been velvet-green moss, encrusted with oddly faceted alien jewels, swung with him.

"We do a lot of business here," he said unnecessarily, for the whole set-up spelled wealth far beyond the dreams of the man, and he was by no means poor when it came to worldly goods. "Why don't you try another town where they're not so particular?"

The young man smiled wryly. Just his luck to stumble on a sunny game. He never liked to risk following his quarry in the same configuration. And even though only the girl had actually seen him this time, he wouldn't feel at ease until he had made the usual body-shift. Was he changing because of Gabriel, he wondered, or was he using his own discoverment and identification simply as an excuse to cover the fact that none of the bodies that fell to his lot ever seemed to fit him? Was he activated solely by revenge or as much by the hope that in the hazards of the game he might, impossible though it now seemed, some day win another body that approached perfection as nearly as his original casing had?

He didn't know. However, there seemed to be no help for it now; he would have to wait until they reached the next town, unless the girl, seeing him reappear in the same guise, would guess what had happened and tell her husband. He himself had been a fool to admit to her that the hulk he inhabited was a sick one; he still couldn't understand how he could so casually have entrusted her with so vital a piece of information.

The Vinzz had been locking antennae with another of his kind. Now they detached, and the first approached the man once more. "There is, as it happens, a body available for a private game," he lisped. "No questions to be asked or answered. All I can tell you is that it is in good health."

The man hesitated. "But unable to pass the screening?" he murmured aloud. "A criminal then."

The green one's face—if you could call it a face—remained impassive.

"Male?"

"Of course," the Vinzz said primly. His kind did have certain ultimate standards to which they adhered rigidly, and one of those was the curious tabu against mixed games, strictly enforced even though it kept them from tapping a vast source of potential players. There had also never been a recorded instance of humans and extraterrestrials exchanging identities, but whether that was the result of tabu or biological impossibility, no one could tell.

It might merely be prudence on the Vinzz' part—if it had ever been proved that an alien life-form had "desecrated" a human body, Earthmen would clamor for war ... for on this planet humanity held its self-bestowed purity of birthright dear—and the Vinzz, despite being unquestionably the stronger, were pragmatic pacifists. It had been undoubtedly some rabid member of the anti-alien groups active on Terra who had started the rumor that the planetary slogan of Vinau was, "Don't beat 'em; cheat 'em."

"It would have to be something pretty nuclear for the other guy to take such a risk." The man rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "How much?"

"Thirty thousand credits."

"Why, that's three times the usual rate!"

"The other will pay five times the usual rate."

"Oh, all right," the delicate young man gave in. It was a terrific risk he was agreeing to take, because, if the other was a criminal, he himself would, upon assuming the body, assume responsibility for all the crimes it had committed. But there was nothing else he could do.

He looked at himself in the mirror and found he had a fine new body; tall and strikingly handsome in a dark, coarse-featured way. Nothing to match the one he had lost, in his opinion, but there were probably many people who might find this one preferable. No identification in the pockets, but it wasn't necessary; he recognized the face. Not that it was a very famous or even notorious one, but the dutchman was a careful student of the "wanted" fax that had decorated public buildings from time immemorial, for he was ever mindful of the possibility that he might one day find himself trapped unwittingly in the body of one of the men depicted there. And he knew that this particular man, though not an important criminal in any sense of the word, was one whom the police had been ordered to burn on sight. The abolishing of capital punishment could not abolish the necessity for self-defense, and the man in question was not one who would let himself be captured easily, nor whom the police intended to capture easily.

This might be a lucky break for me after all, the new tenant thought, as he tried to adjust himself to the body. It, too, despite its obvious rude health, was not a very comfortable fit. I can do a lot with a hulk like this. And maybe I'm cleverer than the original owner; maybe I'll be able to get away with it.

IV

"Look, Gabe," the girl said, "don't try to fool me! I know you too well. And I know you have that

man's—the real Gabriel Lockard's—body." She put unnecessary stardust on her nose as she watched her husband's reflection in the dressing table mirror.

Lockard—Lockard's body, at any rate—sat up and felt his unshaven chin. "That what he tell you?"

"No, he didn't tell me anything really—just suggested I ask you whatever I want to know. But why else should he guard somebody he obviously hates the way he hates you? Only because he doesn't want to see his body spoiled."

"It *is* a pretty good body, isn't it?" Gabe flexed softening muscles and made no attempt to deny her charge; very probably he was relieved at having someone with whom to share his secret.

"Not as good as it must have been," the girl said, turning and looking at him without admiration. "Not if you keep on the way you're coursing. Gabe, why don't you...?"

"Give it back to him, eh?" Lockard regarded his wife appraisingly. "You'd like that, wouldn't you? You'd be *his* wife then. That would be nice—a sound mind in a sound body. But don't you think that's a little more than you deserve?"

"I wasn't thinking about that, Gabe," she said truthfully enough, for she hadn't followed the idea to its logical conclusion. "Of course I'd go with you," she went on, now knowing she lied, "when you got your ... old body back."

Sure, she thought, *I'd keep going with you to farjeen houses and thrill-mills*. Actually she had accompanied him to a thrill-mill only once, and from then on, despite all his threats, she had refused to go with him again. But that once had been enough; nothing could ever wash that experience from her mind or her body.

"You wouldn't be able to get your old body back, though, would you?" she went on. "You don't know where it's gone, and neither, I suppose, does he?"

"I don't want to know!" he spat. "I wouldn't want it if I could get it back. Whoever it adhered to probably killed himself as soon as he looked in a mirror." He swung long legs over the side of his bed. "Christ, anything would be better than that! You can't imagine what a hulk I had!"

"Oh, yes, I can," she said incautiously. "You must have had a body to match your character. Pity you could only change one."

He rose from the bed and struck her right on the mouth. Although he hadn't used his full strength, the blow was painful nonetheless. She could feel the red of her lipstick become mixed with a warmer, liquid red that trickled slowly down her freshly powdered chin. She wouldn't cry, because he liked that, but crumpled to the ground and lay still. If, experience had taught her, she pretended to be hurt, he wouldn't hit her again. Only sometimes it was hard to remember that at the actual moment of hurt and indignity. He was too afraid of prison—a tangible prison. And perhaps, to do him credit, he didn't want to deface his own property.

He sat down on the edge of the bed again and lit a milgot stick. "Oh, get up, Helen. You know I didn't hit you that hard."

"Did you have to beat him up to get him to change bodies?" she asked from the floor.

"No." He laughed reminiscently. "I just got him drunk. We were friends, so it was a cinch. He was my only friend; everybody else hated me because of my appearance." His features contorted. "What made him think he was so damn much better than other people that he could afford to like me? Served him right for being so noble."

She stared at the ceiling—it was so old its very fabric was beginning to crack—and said nothing.

"He didn't even realize what he had here—" Lockard tapped his broad chest with complacency—"until it was too late. Took it for granted. Sickened me to see him taking the body for granted when I couldn't take mine that way. People used to shrink from me. Girls...."

She sat up. "Give me a milgot, Gabe."

He lighted one and handed it to her. "For Christ's sake, Helen, I gave him more than he had a right to expect. I was too god-damn noble myself. I was well-milled; I didn't have to leave half of my holdings in my own name—I could have transferred them all to his. If I had, then he wouldn't have had the folio to hound me all over this planet or to other planets, if I'd had the nerve to shut myself up on a spaceship, knowing he probably would be shut up on it with me." He smiled. "Of course he won't hurt me; that's the one compensation. Damage me, and he damages himself."

"But it's your life he saves, too," she reminded him.

"My life wouldn't ever have been in danger if it hadn't been for this continual persecution—it's driving me out of this dimension! I planned to start a new life with this body," he pleaded, anxious for belief and, as a matter of fact, she believed him; almost everybody has good intentions and there was no reason to except even such a one as Gabriel Lockard, or whatever he was originally named.

"It was my appearance that got me mixed up," he went on. "Given half a chance I could have straightened out—gone to Proxima Centauri, maybe, and then out to one of the frontier planets. Made something of myself up there. But nobody ever gave me a chance. Now, as long as he follows me, there's nothing I can do except run and try to hide and know all the time I can't

escape—I'm already in the trap."

"What can he do if you stay and face him?"

"I don't know—that's the hell of it. But he's smart. Somehow he'll lure me into another game. I don't know how, but that must be what he has in mind. What else could it be?"

"What else indeed?" Helen asked, smiling up at the ceiling.

The milgot vanished in his fingers and he took another. "It'd take time for him to arrange any kind of private game set-up, though, and as long as I keep on the move, he won't be able to create anything. Unless he runs into a floating zarquil game." He smiled mirthlessly. "And he couldn't. Too much machinery, I understand.... Lucky he doesn't seem to have connections, the way I have," Lockard boasted. "I have connections all over the god-damn planet. Transferred them when I transferred my holdings."

She got up, seated herself on the vanity bench, and took up a brush, which she ran absently over the pale hair that shimmered down to her paler shoulders. "So we keep running all over the planet.... What would you do if I left you, Gabriel?"

"Kill you," he said without hesitation. "Slowly. Even if I have to put this precious hulk of mine in jeopardy. And you wouldn't like that. Neither would your boy friend."

"Stop calling him my—"

"Wait a minute—maybe there is an escape hatch!" His blue eyes sharpened unbecomingly. "He can't kill me, but there's nothing to stop my killing him."

"How about the police?" She tried to speak calmly as she passed the brush up and down, sometimes not even touching her hair. "The body you have won't be any good to you with them looking for it. And you're not a professional exterminator, Gabe—you wouldn't be able to get away with it."

"I can hire somebody else to do the killing. Remember I still have plenty of foliage. Maybe I didn't leave him exactly half of my property, but, what the hell, I left him enough."

"How will you recognize him?" she asked, half-turning, fearfully. "He'll have a new body, you know."

"You'll recognize him, Helen—you said you could." At that moment she could have wrapped her own hair tightly around her white throat and strangled herself; she was so appalled by her own witless treachery.

He dragged her to her feet. "Aah, moonbeam, you know I didn't mean to hurt you. It's just that this whole crazy pattern's driving me out of this world. Once I get rid of that life-form, you'll see, I'll be a different man."

As his arms tightened around her, she wondered what it would be like, a different man in the same body.

V

"What makes you think *I* would do a thing like that?" the little lawyer asked apprehensively, not meeting the bland blue eyes of the man who faced him across the old-fashioned flat-top desk. It was an even more outmoded office than most, but that did not necessarily indicate a low professional status; lawyers were great ones for tradition expressed in terms of out-of-date furniture. As for the dust that lay all over despite the air-conditioning ... well, that was inescapable, for Earth was a dusty planet.

"Oh, not you yourself personally, of course," Gabriel Lockard—as the false one will continue to be called, since the dutchman had another name at the moment—said. "But you know how to put me in touch with someone who can."

"Nonsense. I don't know who gave you such libelous information, sir, but I must ask you to leave my office before I call—"

"It was Pat Ortiz who gave me the information," Lockard said softly. "He also told me a lot of other interesting things about you, Gorman."

Gorman paled. "I'm a respectable attorney."

"Maybe you are now; maybe not. This isn't the kind of town that breeds respectability. But you certainly weren't sunny side up when Ortiz knew you. And he knew you well."

The lawyer licked his lips. "Give me a chance, will you?"

Lockard flushed. "Chance! Everybody rates a chance but me. Can't you see, I am giving you a chance. Get me somebody to follow my pattern, and I promise you Ortiz won't talk."

Gorman slipped the plastic shells from his face and rubbed the pale watery eyes underneath. "But how can I get you a man to do ... the thing you want done? I have no connections like that."

"I'm sure you can make the right connections. Take your time about it, though; I'm in no hurry. I'm planning to adhere to this locale for a while."

"How about this man you want ... put out of the way?" Gorman suggested hopefully. "How can you be sure he won't leave?"

Gabriel laughed. "He'll stay as long as I do."

The little lawyer took a deep breath. "Mr. Lockard, I'm sorry, but I'm afraid I really cannot do anything for you."

Gabe rose. "Okay," he said softly. "If that's your pattern, I'll just put a call through to Ortiz." He turned to go.

"Wait a minute!" the lawyer cried.

Lockard stopped.

"Well?"

Gorman swallowed. "Possibly I may be able to do something for you, after all.... I just happened to have heard Jed Carmody is in town."

Gabriel looked at him inquiringly.

"Oh ... I thought you might have heard the name. He's a killer, I understand, a professional exterminator ... on the run right now. But this is his head-quarters—I'm told—and he probably would come here. And he might be short on folio. Naturally, I've never had any dealings with him myself."

"Naturally," Gabe mocked.

"But I'll see what I can do." Gorman's voice was pleading. "You'll wait, Mr. Lockard, won't you? It may be a little while before I can find out where he is. This isn't—" his voice thinned—"at all my type of pattern, you know."

"I'll wait ... a reasonable length of time."

The door closed behind him. Descending pneumo tubes hissed outside. The little lawyer rose and went to the window—a flat expanse of transparent plastic set immovably into the wall of the building, an old building, an old town, an old planet. As he watched the street below, a faint half-smile curved his almost feminine mouth. He went back to the desk and punched a code on the vidiphone.

Gabriel crossed the street to the little cafe with the gold letters FOR HUMANS ONLY embedded in the one-way glass front; this was a town that adhered rigidly to the ancient privileges of the indigenous species. He entered as the shrillness of a vidiphone bell cut through the babble inside without in any way checking it. After a moment, his eyes grew accustomed to the dimness and he could see his wife waiting at a table near the entrance, daintily peeling a tigi fruit.

"Well," she asked as she put a plump pink section into her mouth, "did you hire your killer?"

"Shhh, not so loud!" He threw himself into the chair next to hers. "Do you want me to get into trouble...? And I wouldn't put it past you," he continued without waiting for an answer. "Remember, it's your boy friend's body that gets into trouble."

"He's not my boy friend."

A waiter beckoned from the vidiphone booth to someone sitting in the dark shadows at the rear of the restaurant.

"Where is he?" Gabriel exclaimed suddenly. "He must be here somewhere. Tell me which he is, Helen?"

His hand gripped her arm cruelly, as he swung her around on her chair to face each part of the room. "Is it that guy over there...? That one...? That one?"

She could not repress a start of surprise as her eyes met those of the thin-featured young man entering the vidiphone booth. He returned her gaze with somber interest.

Gabe relaxed. "So that's the one, eh? Not very formidable. Looks the way he always should have looked." He lit a milgot. "I'll get Gorman to tip off the zarquil boys—only one game in this parish, I'm told—that that life-form's not to be allowed to play; I'll make any loss good out of my own pocket. That'll keep him onstage for the nonce. He won't leave to get himself fixed up somewhere else as long as I stay. And I'm going to stay ... to the bitter end." He smiled lovingly to himself.

But it's not the right man, Helen thought gladly. He did manage to change, after all. Gabe has the wrong man. She felt a little sorry for the unknown and doomed individual who inhabited the delicate, angular body, but it was so close to death anyhow that the immediate threat didn't matter. And Gabriel—the real Gabriel—was safe.

The emaciated young man entered Gorman's office and locked the door behind him with an electroseal. "Disembodiment," he identified himself.

"So you did get a new body, Jed," the lawyer remarked affably. "Very good packaging. Makes you look like a poet or something."

"Good as a disguise, maybe, but one hell of a lousy hulk." The young man hurled himself into the chair by the desk. Even Gorman winced at the cruel treatment accorded such obvious fragility. "Gimme a milgot, Les. This thing—" he indicated his body with contempt—"is shot to Polaris. Won't last more than a few months. Some bargain I got."

Gorman lit a stick himself. "The guy who got your body didn't get such a bargain either," he murmured through a cloud of purple smoke.

"At least he'll live. If he's lucky. I wish he'd hurry and get himself picked up, though, so I could collect the folio and jet off. Can't go after it now. Hounds will be sniffing after anybody gravitating around the place where I've stashed it until they're sure they have me. They don't know where the money is exactly, of course, or they'd soak it up, but they've got an idea of the general sector."

"Want me to pick it up for you, Jed?" the lawyer asked, his pale, flickering eyes brushing across the young man's dark intense ones.

"Oh, sure. All I need is for you to know where it is and all I'd see would be your rocket trail." The young man leaned across the expanse of littered steel. "Or *do* you know where it is, Les?" he asked softly. "Do you know where it is and are you just hibernating until I'm safely out of the way?"

In spite of himself, Gorman could not help moving back. "Don't be a fool, Jed," he said in a voice that was several tones higher. "If I knew where it was ... well, you're not very frightening in your present embodiment, you know."

"Don't be too sure of that, Gorman. And you were always yellow; anybody could frighten you." He began to laugh shrilly. "Hey, that's good. Get it? Any body, see?"

The lawyer did not join in the mirth. "How are you fixed for cash?" he asked abruptly.

The young man's face split in a sardonic grin. "Why do you think I risked public communion with a darkside character like you, Les? I shot my wad making the shift. I could use a little loan. You know I have millions stashed away," the young man said angrily as Gorman remained silent. "I'll pay you as soon as the hounds take the chump who's leasing my hulk."

"Maybe you can earn some money." Gorman toyed with a paperweight. "Did you get a look at that big blond guy in the cafe—the one I told you about on the phone?"

"Yeah. Nice life-form he had with him. I wouldn't mind being in that body."

"Seems he wants somebody exterminated. And I told him I heard Jed Carmody was in the parish and might be interested."

The young man sprang to his feet, furious. "You *what*?"

"Turn your antigravs off. I told him Jed Carmody was in the parish. Are you Jed Carmody?"

The other sat down and exhaled heavily. "You're on course—I'm nobody just now."

"Any identification come with the package?"

"Naah, what'd you expect...? But why tell anyone that Jed Carmody's hitting the locality?"

"I thought you might be interested in picking up a little free-falling foliage."

The young man shook his head impatiently. "Risk having this hulk heated up for a half-credit crime? Don't be an alien, Gorman. I'm going to hit subsoil until this other life-form gets collected by the hounds."

"Thought you might like to do it to help me out," Gorman murmured.

The other man stared. "How do you fit into the pattern?" Gorman shrugged. "Oh, I get it: this guy's putting the barometer on you?"

Gorman nodded.

"Bad landing, counselor. But you don't seriously expect...? Hey!" The wide-set eyes glistened darkly. "I got it! Why don't you get this guy who's got my hulk to make the flight? Send somebody out to magnetize him like you thought he was the real Carmody, see?"

Gorman looked hopeful for a moment; then shook his thin-haired head. "No reason to think the man is an extralegal."

"Anyone who finds himself in my hulk damn well has to be if he wants to stay out of the sardine box.... Look, what's the first thing he's going to want to do when he finds out what he's been stuck with? Go to another parish and hop hulks, right? And he'll need plenty of foliage to do it."

"Maybe he has money," Gorman suggested wearily.

"No fuel lost finding out." The young man rubbed his hands together gleefully. "If he takes on the flight, though, see that he gets my flash, huh? Rosy up the picture."

"Maybe he can kill whoever this Lockard has in mind without getting picked up by the police. Such things have happened; otherwise you wouldn't have been able to run around loose so long, Jed."

"An amateur? Not a chance! Besides, just to make sure, little...." He stopped in the act of tapping his chest. "Say, I don't have a name, do I? What's a good epithet for me, Les? Something with class."

The lawyer studied the pale, bony face for a moment or two. "How about John Keats?" he suggested. "Simple and appropriate."

The other man thought. "Yeah, I like that. John Keats. Plain, but not like John Smith. Subtle. I'll buy it. Okay, so you think I'm going to take my view-finder off the fake Carmody? I'm going to adhere to that life-form closer than Mary's lamb. So when he knocks off whoever the other guy wants novaed, I can yell doggie. Then the hounds get him—with my flash on him and all, they'll never have the nebula of a notion that they don't have all of me.... I pick up the foliage and rock out to some place where I can buy me a new jewel case, no questions asked. Don't fret, Gorman—you'll get your nibble. I've never played the game with you, have I?"

Instead of answering, Gorman asked a question of his own. "Kind of hard on the other guy, isn't it?"

"He rates it for sticking me with a piece of statuary like this. Look at it this way, Les—in his own hulk he would've died; this way he's got a chance to live. Yeah, get him to make the flight, Les. You can charm the juice out of a lemon when you want to; it's your line of evil. And don't let on you know he's not the genuine article."

"I won't," Gorman sighed. "I only hope I can persuade him to take on the flight. Don't forget it's important to me too, Jed—uh, John."

"Make planetfall, then," John Keats said. "So long, Les."

"Good-by, Johnny."

VII

Helen was brushing her long creamy hair at the dressing table when there came a tap at the door to the living room of the suite—a tap so light that it could have been someone accidentally brushing past in the corridor outside. Gabriel sprang up from the bed where he had been lolling, watching her and stood for a moment poised on the balls of his feet, until the knock was repeated more emphatically. He started toward the other room.

"But who could be knocking at the door at this hour?" she asked. "It's almost one.... Gabe, do be careful."

He halted and looked back at her suspiciously. "Why do you say that? You know you don't care what happens to me?" That last was a question rather than a statement and had a plaintive quaver which failed to touch her. Once she had still been able to feel some compassion; now, nothing he said or did could arouse more than fear and disgust.

"If somebody knocks you over the head when you open the door," she murmured, smiling at her own image, "then who will be there to protect me?"

A choked sound came from the back of the man's throat. He turned toward her, his fists clenched. She braced herself for the blow, but then the knock came for the third time and her husband reluctantly continued on into the living room, letting the door shut behind him. She rose and pushed it open a little. She had a pretty good idea of who might be expected, but was not especially perturbed, for she knew the real Gabriel Lockard, in whatever guise he might be now, was safe from her husband. And she was curious to see what the exterminator looked like.

The door to the corridor was out of her line of vision, but she could hear it as it opened. "Lockard?" a deep, husky voice whispered. "Gorman sent me."

"Come in, Mr. Carmody. You *are* Carmody?"

"Shhh," the husky voice warned. "If you get me into trouble, I'm not going to be able to complete your pattern for you, am I?"

"Sorry—I wasn't thinking. Come on in."

A heavy tread shook the ancient floorboards, and presently the man responsible for it came into the girl's sight. He was a huge creature, bigger even than Gabriel, with dark hair growing low to a point on his forehead, and a full-lipped sensual face. Then, as he spoke, as he moved, she knew who he was. She pressed close against the wall of the bedroom, her slender shoulders shaking, her handkerchief stuffed into her mouth, so that the sound of her wild, irrepressible laughter would not reach her husband's ears.

"Sit down, Carmody," Gabriel said cordially, as he handed the newcomer a glass, "and make yourself comfortable." There was a brief, rather awkward silence. "Well," Gabriel went on, with a

smile that would have been thoroughly ingratiating to anyone who hadn't known him, "I don't suppose I have to cruise around the asteroids with you?"

"No," Carmody replied, looking speculatively toward the bedroom door. "No, you don't."

Gabriel followed the direction of his gaze. "Worried about somebody overhearing? There's only my wife in there. She's listening, all right, but she won't talk. Come in, Helen."

Carmody rose automatically as she came in, his dark eyes following every line of her long, smooth body in its close-fitting, though opaque, negligee of smoke-gray silk—a fabric which, through extreme scarcity, had come into fashion again.

"Sit down," Gabriel ordered brusquely. "We're not formal here."

Carmody sat, trying not to stare at the girl. She began to mix herself a drink. "Moonbeam," her husband said, "you won't tell anybody about this little peace conference, will you?"

"No," she said, looking at Carmody. "I won't talk." She lifted her glass. "Here's to murder!"

"Helen," Gabriel insisted, unable to rationalize the vague uneasiness that was nagging at him, "you won't dare say anything to anybody? Because, if you do, you'll regret it!"

"I said I wouldn't talk. Have I ever broken my word?"

"You've never had the chance." But it would be incredible that she should have the temerity to betray him. After all, she was his wife. She should stick to him out of gratitude and self-interest, for he was rich, at least, and he wasn't exactly repulsive. And he'd been good to her. All men lost their tempers at times.

"Let's get down to business, huh?" Carmody said harshly. "Whom do you want knocked off?"

"I don't know his name," Gabriel replied, "but I can describe him."

After he had finished doing so, there was a small pause. Carmody was silent. Helen turned back to the bar; her face was concealed from the men. Her body shook a little. Lockard thought she was crying, and wondered again whether his confidence in her was entirely justified.

"I think maybe I know the guy," Carmody went on. "Only been around the—the parish a couple of days, if it's the life-form I mean."

"Must be the one," Lockard told him. "Think you can do it?"

"A cinch," Carmody assured him.

As Helen Lockard emerged from the door marked *Females; Human and Humanoid*, and rounded the turn in the corridor, a brawny arm reached out of a vidiphone booth and yanked her inside. The girl gave a startled cry, then relaxed. "Oh, it's you; you gave me a turn."

"You're not afraid? You know who I am, then?"

She nodded. "You're the real Gabriel Lockard." His big body was pressing hers in the close-fitting confines of the booth. In some ways it could be considered more attractive than her husband's. "Why are you hiding here?"

"I'm not hiding, I'm lurking," he explained. "Wouldn't do for me to appear too openly. The police—that is, the hounds—are on Carmody's trail. I don't want them to find me."

"Oh." She pulled away from him. She mustn't let her interest be aroused in a body so soon to be discarded.

"I've been looking for an opportunity to talk to you since last night," he growled, the only way he could gentle a voice as deep as the thick vocal cords of the body produced. "But your husband is always around.... You haven't told him who I was, have you?"

She shook her head slowly, reproachfully. "I wouldn't do that. I wouldn't have told him about the other one either, but I ... well, I guess I jumped or something when I caught sight of him and Gabe mistakenly picked it up."

There was a tense silence as they stood almost pressed against one another. "It's easy to see how you got into Carmody's body," she went on, speaking a little too rapidly, "but how did you happen to get into this particular line of evil?"

"Simple—that lawyer your husband went to see sent scouts out to have Carmody picked up. And they flushed me. Naturally I would have turned down the job if he hadn't happened to mention for whom it was...."

"That other man is the real Carmody now, isn't he?" She looked up at him. Her eyes were gray or green; he couldn't determine which. "So it doesn't matter even if he does get killed."

"But how can he get killed?" the big man reminded her with a gentleness completely out of keeping with the ferocity of his appearance. "I'm not a killer, please believe me—I have never killed anybody and I hope I never have to."

She had never thought about who he was—who he had been—before he started playing the game. Gabriel Lockard, of course. But what had Gabriel Lockard been? Surely not the narco-filled, fear-ridden dilettante the man—the body, at least—was now. He couldn't possibly have been or the hulk wouldn't have stood up so well under the treatment it was getting from its current tenant. But all that didn't seem to matter. All she wanted was the rightful man in his rightful body, and that seemed almost impossible of achievement.

"What do you intend to do?" she asked, almost sharply.

"I don't know," he said. "By agreeing to kill this—John Keats he calls himself—I felt I had the situation in hand. And I suppose I have, in a sense. But the end result is a stalemate. I've been following him around just to make everything look on course for your husband until I decide what to do. Sometimes, though, I get the curious feeling that Keats is following me."

"Maybe for the same reason you've been following Gabriel?" Helen touched his arm gingerly; it was more muscular than her husband's. "This isn't a bad body, you know—maybe he sets some store by it."

"But that doesn't make sense!" he said, impatiently shaking off her hand, not wanting her to like this criminal's body that, despite its superficial attractiveness, fitted him no more easily than any of the others. "Logically, it seems to me, he should try to get as far away from his own hulk as possible.... Duck! Here comes your husband!"

He blocked her with his wide body as Gabriel Lockard's swung past the booth, its perfect features marred by a frown. "Okay," he whispered, as Lockard rounded the corner, "rock back to your table and act angry because he's late."

He watched until Gabriel had retraced his steps and gone back to the hotel dining room; then sauntered in the same direction. From the next booth, John Keats stared sullenly after the departing figure. He had been straining his ears, but the booths were effectively soundproofed; all he could learn was that the stranger had developed some kind of quick understanding with Lockard's wife and, knowing the potentialities of his former packaging, this saddened rather than surprised the young man.

He punched Gorman's number without turning on the visual. "Disembodied," he said curtly. "Look here, Gorman, I've been wondering—just who is this life-form supposed to be sending to the joyful planetoids?"

"I haven't any idea," Gorman's voice said curiously. "Didn't seem any of my evil, so I didn't ask. And I don't suppose Lockard would have told me. Why do you want to know?"

"Because I don't see him taking a fix on anybody except Lockard's wife and I don't hold with exterminating females except maybe by accident. Besides, I kind of radiate for that tigi myself."

The lawyer's voice definitely showed interest. "Isn't there anybody else he could possibly be after?"

"Well—" John Keats gave a sick laugh—"there's only one other possible flight pattern. It's kind of extradimensional, but sometimes I think maybe he's after me."

There was a long pause. "Absurd," the little lawyer said thoughtfully. "Absurd. He doesn't even know who you are."

Pale blood surfaced under the young man's transparent skin. "I never thought of that, but you're wrong. He does. He's got to. It was a private game." His voice thickened and he had to stop for coughing. "When you told him he was Jed Carmody, naturally he could figure out who was squatting in his hulk."

"But magnetizing him was your own idea, Johnny," Gorman pointed out gently. "Besides, that's no reason he should be after you; what's the percentage in it? And, anyhow, where does Lockard fit into this?" He seemed to be asking the question of himself as much as of the other man.

"Yeah," John Keats muttered, "that's what I've got to find out."

"Me, too," Gorman half-whispered.

"What did you say?"

"I said tell me when you find out; I'm sort of curious myself."

VIII

"Look, Gorman," Carmody said, "I'm not working for you; I'm working for Lockard. What's the idea of sending for me this hour of the night?"

"Then why did you come this hour of the night when I asked you to?" the lawyer inquired, leaning back in his chair and smiling.

The big man hesitated and shrugged. "Can't say, myself. Curiosity, maybe.... But you can hardly expect me to violate my employer's confidence?"

Gorman laughed. "You get your ideas from the viddies, don't you? Only don't forget that you're the villain, not the hero, of this piece, fellow-man."

Carmody, completely taken aback, stared at him—the little alien couldn't know! And,

furthermore, he was mistaken—Carmody, Lockard, the dutchman, had done nothing wrong, committed no crime, violated no ethic. On the other hand, he had done nothing right either, nothing to help himself or any other. "What do you mean?" he finally temporized.

"Tell me this—Lockard hired you to kill the man who goes under the name of John Keats, didn't he?"

"Yes, but how did you know that?" He was beginning to have the same primitive fear of Gorman that he had of the Vinzz; only it was more natural for an extraterrestrial to have apparently supernatural powers.

"Keats told me—and Keats, of course, is the real Carmody."

"So you found out?"

"Found out!" Gorman laughed. "I knew it all along. Does a man keep any secrets from his lawyer?"

"If he's smart, he does." Carmody absently beat his hand on the desk. "This Keats isn't too smart, though, is he?"

"No ... he isn't a very bright guy. But it was his idea that this would be a fine method of getting you out of the way. And not too bad an idea, either.... You had to be disposed of, you know," he explained winningly. "And how nice to have hounds do it for us. Of course we had no idea of who your quarry was."

"I can see your point of view," Carmody said ironically. "But why tell me now?" And then he thought he saw the answer. "Are you afraid I'll really kill him?"

The lawyer shook his head and smiled back. "Afraid you really won't." He placed the tips of his fingers together. "I am prepared to double whatever Lockard is offering you to make sure that Keats, with Carmody inside him, is definitely put out of the way forever."

So even here there was no basis of trust—none of the reverse honor that legend commonly assigned to extralegals. Carmody got up. Even seated, he had towered above the lawyer. Standing, he was like a larger-than-life statue of doom—of doom, Gorman nervously hoped, pointing in the desired direction.

"And if I refuse?" Carmody asked.

Gorman moved his chair back uneasily. "I might persuade Keats that he could risk one murder in his present shape, if it was to insure his ultimate safety."

"Meaning it would be a good idea for him to kill me?"

"Meaning it would be an excellent idea for him to kill you."

"Look here, Gorman," Carmody said, in a low voice that gradually increased in volume. He could no longer restrain the anger that had been seething up in him for all the years of his wandering. "I've had enough of all this, hiding, running, shifting bodies and now hiring out as a killer. Because I'm an honest man. Maybe you've never seen one before, so take a good look at me. You may never have the chance again."

"I am looking and I see Jed Carmody. Not my idea of the prototype of honesty."

"But I don't feel like Jed Carmody."

"Tell that to the hounds." Gorman laughed uproariously. "By law, you're responsible for Carmody's crimes. Of course, if they put you away or—as they'd undoubtedly prefer—accidentally exterminate you in the line of duty, and *then* suspect Carmody hulk-hopped, they might look around some more. But there wouldn't be any percentage in that for you, especially if you were dead."

"I know, I know," Carmody retorted impatiently. "You can't tell me anything I haven't told myself." He paused for a moment. "This is a good body, though," he added. "Almost as good as my old one."

Gorman raised his eyebrows. "You can't be referring to the corpus currently going by the epithet of John Keats?"

"The name was your idea, I take it. No, that wasn't my original body."

"Oh, so you're a dutchman, eh? A thrill boy?" There was contempt, even from such as Gorman. "Getting a lot of free falls out of all this, are you?"

Carmody tried to ignore this, but he couldn't. It wasn't true, he told himself; he had suffered years of playing the game and derived no pleasure from those sufferings—no pleasure at all. But he would not stoop to argue with Gorman. "Maybe I can get away with this body to one of the frontier planets," he mused. "At least I can make a run for it; at least that would be a worthwhile kind of running."

"Brave words!" the lawyer sneered. "But rather risky to put into action. Don't you think the best thing to do would be just go ahead with the pattern as set? How much did Lockard offer you?"

"Half a million credits."

Gorman sucked in his breath. "You're lying, of course, but I'll match that. Carmody—Keats—has ten times that amount and maybe more hidden away where I can lay my hands on it as soon as I'm sure he's where he can't hurt me. It's worth half a million to me. And, in the remote instance that you're telling the truth, you can't turn down a million credits ... whoever you are, dutchman!"

"Oh, can't I?" Carmody went to the door; then turned. "It may interest you to know that I'm worth a hundred times that amount and maybe more."

The lawyer laughed skeptically. "If you have enough money to buy your way, then why are you doing this?"

Carmody frowned. "You wouldn't understand.... I'm not sure I understand myself." The door slammed behind him. Descending pneumos hissed.

"Just talking with his elbows," Gorman said comfortingly to himself. "He'll do it. He's got to do it." But he wasn't altogether convinced.

IX

As Carmody left the office building, John Keats' figure emerged from the shadows of a nearby doorway. He looked up at the golden rectangle of Gorman's window and then toward the direction in which Carmody had gone; and bit his lip irresolutely. After a moment's reflection, he chose to follow his old body. Somehow he didn't have much confidence in Gorman any more; not that he'd ever really trusted him. In their line of evil you couldn't afford to trust anybody. He had made a mistake. But it could still be rectified.

If the big man was aware of his tracker, he did not seem to care. He moved purposefully in the direction of the hotel, scorning the helicabs that swooped down to proffer their services, striding through the brilliantly lit avenues gay with music and the dark alleys mournful with the whine of the farjeen wires as if they were all the same.

The hotel was on one of the avenues, because the Lockards always had only the best of whatever there was to be had. Carmody crossed the almost deserted lobby in swift strides and took the pneumo to the seventh floor. Knowing that his body could have only one objective in that place, Keats took the stairs to the basement.

Carmody sprang out of the pneumo exit and ran down the corridor to bang lustily on the intricately embossed metal door of the Lockards' suite. After a moment, the girl, again in negligee, opened it. Her green-gray eyes widened when she saw who the late visitor was, and she put a finger to her lips. "Shh, Gabe's asleep; let's not wake him unless it's necessary." She closed the door softly behind him. "What is it ... Jed?"

He was so choked with excitement that he could hardly get the words out. "Helen; will you make a break with me for Proxima Centauri? They won't ask any questions there, if we can get there. And from Proxima we can go—"

"But your body?"

"The hell with my body." He gripped her arms with powerful hands. "You mean much more to me than that worthless hulk."

"But, Jed, Gabe'll never let us go...." Proxima Centauri—that had been Gabriel's dream, too....

His hands pressed so hard into her flesh, she knew there would be bruises on her skin; was she always doomed to fall in love with men who would leave marks on her? "Let him try to stop us. I'm bigger than he is, now."

She looked up at him. "You always were, darling. But he has influence, though he wouldn't need it; he could simply set the police on you."

"That's the chance we're going to have to take.... But perhaps I'm asking too much. I haven't the right to ask you to take such risks," he added bitterly. "I was thinking only of myself, I see, not of you."

"Oh, no, Jed!"

"Who're you talking to, Helen?" a drowsy voice asked from the bedroom. It was followed by the comely person of Gabriel himself, fastening his dressing gown. "Oh, hello, Carmody." His face lighted up avidly, all sleepiness vanishing like a spent milgot. "Did you do it already?"

"No, I didn't. And, what's more, I'm not going to do it!"

Lockard looked astonished. "But what's wrong? You said you would."

Carmody sighed. "Yes, I know I did. I was stalling. That's what I've always done—stalled, put things off, hesitated to make decisions. Well, I've made my decision now."

"You're not afraid of him?" Lockard said in a voice that was meant to be taunting and emerged as querulous. "A little pipsqueak like that Keats? Or maybe half a million credits isn't enough for you? Is that it?"

That was enough for the man whose emaciated body was torturedly cramped in the air-conditioning vent and further agonized by the strain of repressing the cough that sought to tear its way out of his chest. He had found out what he wanted to know and, as he inched his way back down to the basement, he was already making plans for getting even with all those he now knew to be enemies. It had been a conspiracy against him from the start; the hounds probably weren't even aware that he was in town. It was Gorman who had told him they knew of his general whereabouts—Gorman, the good friend who had suggested he change bodies, knowing that whatever hulk he wound up with was bound to be more vulnerable than his primal form. And Gorman would pay....

"More than enough," Carmody replied, as unaware of the fact that he had lost one-third of his audience as he had been that he was addressing three rather than two listeners. "Only I'm not a killer."

"But I understood you were supposed to be a professional exterminator?"

"Jed Carmody is a killer. Only I'm not Jed Carmody."

Lockard moved backward and stared at the still bigger man.

Lockard retreated still further. "You—you're him! You were all along!" He whirled on his wife. "And you knew, you double-crosser! Knew and didn't tell me! By God, I'll break every bone in your body!"

"Lay a hand on her and I'll break every bone in *my* body!" Lockard stopped where he was. "It doesn't mean anything to me any more, you see," Carmody explained. "I wanted it when I didn't have anything else. But now I have Helen. I could kill you, you know. As Carmody, an acknowledged exterminator, I have nothing to lose. But I'm letting you live, as a hostage for Helen.... And, besides, as I've been busy trying to convince everybody all evening, I am *not* a murderer." He turned to the girl. "*Will* you come with me to Proxima, Helen?"

"Y-yes, Jed," she said, looking apprehensively at her husband.

"Gather your packs. I'm going to the air office to make the arrangements." Carmody consulted his chronometer. "It's three o'clock. I should be back by eight or so. Get some sleep if you can."

Her wide frightened eyes turned again toward her husband.

"Here." Jed tossed her the gun Gorman had given him. "If he tries anything, use it."

"Yes, Jed. But...."

"Don't worry; I have another one."

The door slammed behind him. "Gimme that gun, you little tramp!" Lockard snarled, twisting it out of her flaccid hand.

X

Carmody marched out of the hotel and turned left in the direction of the airstation which stayed open all night. He had walked a short distance when suddenly a high voice came out of the darkness behind him, "Not so fast, Mr. ... Carmody," and a hard knob was pressed in his back.

"Mr. Keats, I believe," Carmody said, wondering why he wasn't frightened.

"Right." The other coughed at some length. "You thought you were pretty smart, didn't you, foisting me off with a hulk that wasn't only shopworn but hot?"

"Your intentions weren't exactly noble either, were they, Mr. Keats?"

"I want my frame back!"

Suddenly the idea came to Carmody, and so wonderful it was he could hardly throttle his voice down to calmness. "Shooting me won't help you get it back. In fact, it might make it rather difficult."

"You have your choice between going back to the zarquil house with me and switching or getting your current insides burned out."

Carmody exhaled a small hissing sigh that he hoped would not be recognized as obvious relief to the man behind him. "You'll have to pay. I haven't enough folio on me."

"I'll pay; I'll pay," the voice snarled. "I always pay. But you'll come peacefully?" he asked in some surprise.

"Yes. Matter of fact, I'll be glad to get out of this body. No matter how much I try, somehow I can never manage to keep it clean.... Gently, now, you don't want to muss up a body you're planning to occupy yourself, now do you?"

"This is too easy," Keats' voice murmured dubiously. "Maybe it's another trap...."

"You're always going to imagine traps, Mr. Exterminator, whether they're there or not. You and Lockard both—people who run must have something to run from, and half the time it's not there and half the time, of course, it is; only you never know which is which—"

"You talk too much," the man behind him snarled. "Shut up and keep moving."

"Back again?" the Vinzz at the door asked. The present Carmody was a little startled. Somehow he had thought of the Vinzz as too remote from humanity to be able to distinguish between individual members of the species. "I'm afraid neither of you is qualified to play."

"No reason why we shouldn't have a private game, is there?" John Keats demanded belligerently.

The Vinzz' tendrils quivered. "In that case, no, no reason at all. If you want to be so unsporting and can afford it. It will cost you a hundred thousand credits each."

"But that's twice what I had to pay last week!" Keats protested angrily.

The Vinzz shrugged an antenna. "You are, of course, at liberty to take your trade elsewhere, if you choose."

"Oh, hell," the temporarily poetic-looking killer snarled. "We're stuck and you know it. Let's get it over with!"

It was odd to come out of unconsciousness back into the thin young man's body again. More uncomfortable than usual, because the criminal's body had been in such splendid physical condition and this one so poor—now worse than before, because it had been worked far beyond its attenuated capabilities. The individuality that had originally been Gabriel Lockard's, formerly housed in Jed Carmody's body, now opened John Keats' eyes and looked at the Vinzz who stood above him.

"The other human has been told you awakened before him and have already departed," the Vinzz explained. "He has violence in his heart and we do not care for violence on our doorstep. Bad for business."

"Has he gone already?"

The Vinzz nodded.

"How long has he been gone?" He scrambled to his feet and investigated the clothing he wore. Carmody had been in too much of a hurry to clean himself out. There was some money left, a container of milgot sticks, and a set of electroseals.

"He has just left." The extra-terrestrial's eyes flickered in what might have been surprise. "Don't you wish to avoid him?"

"No, I must go where he goes."

The Vinzz shrugged. "Well, it's your funeral in the most literal sense of the word." He sighed as the young man plunged out into the darkness. "But, from the objective viewpoint, what a waste of money!"

The massive, broad-shouldered figure of Jed Carmody was still visible at the end of the street, so the thin man slowed down. He wanted to follow Carmody, to keep close watch on where he was going and, if necessary, guide him in the right direction, though he didn't think he'd have to do that. But he had no intention of overtaking him. Carmody might not want openly to use the gun the former tenant had so carefully left him, but with his physique he could break the fragile body of John Keats in two, if he so desired, and he probably did.

Meanwhile Carmody—the real Carmody—having been deprived of an immediate revenge, had begun to realize how much better the situation was as it now stood. If he killed Keats out of hand, he might miss out on half a million credits, because it was his custom to get cash in advance for all his flights, and this was his flight pattern now. He wouldn't trust that Lockard life-form to defoliate after the job was done.

Of course he himself had plenty of money stashed away, but every half million helped. It would be no trouble to find the sickly Keats later. And there was no reason the hounds should get him—Carmody—after all, the other had been rocketing around in his body and he hadn't been caught. Carmody had allowed himself to be stampeded into panic. He smiled. Gorman wouldn't ever be able to chart any pattern like that, or like anything, again. Fortunately there was no permanent harm done, and a half million credits to cover the zarquil losses, with a nice profit left over. Maybe he could even beat Lockard up to a million; that one was obviously a coward and a fool. A few threats should be enough to get him to hand over.

Carmody paused for a moment outside the hotel. It still took some nerve to walk boldly into the brightly lit lobby.

The automatic doors slid open as he entered. At the same time, the pneumo gates lifted and Gabe Lockard came out, dragging a heavily veiled Helen, their luggage floating behind them. Both stopped as they caught sight of the killer; Lockard paled—Helen gasped.

Too bad I have to leave her in the tentacles of this low life-form, Carmody thought with regret, but there was no help for it. He approached them with what he thought was an ingratiating smile. "Mr. Lockard, I've decided to give you another chance."

It was an unhappy choice of word. "Oh, you have, have you!" the big blond man yelled. "I thought I did have another chance. And now you've spoiled that, too!"

"What do you mean by that?" Carmody demanded, his thick dark brows almost meeting across his nose.

"I figured on getting away before you came back," Gabriel babbled in a frenzy, "but you'd have found me anyway. You always find me. I'm sick of this running. There's only one way to stop you, only one way to be sure that, whatever happens to me, you won't be around to enjoy it."

"Listen, Lockard, you're making a mistake. I—"

"The only mistake I made was in hiring somebody else to do the job I should have done myself."

He pulled out the gun—Carmody's own gun—and fired it. He wasn't a good shot, but that didn't matter. He had the flash on full blast and he pumped and pumped and pumped the trigger until the searing heat rays had whipped not only the killer's astonished body but all through the lobby. The few people still there rushed for cover as rug, chairs, potted palms were shriveled by the lancing holocaust. There was a penetrating odor of burning fabric and frond and flesh.



Helen let out a wail as Carmody, more ash than man, fell to the charred carpet. "Gabe, Gabe, what have you done!"

The gun dropped from his hand to rejoin its owner. His face crumpled. "I didn't really mean to kill ... only to scare him.... What'll I do now?"

"You'll run, Mr. Lockard," John Keats' body said as he entered the devastated lobby. "You'll run and run and run. He's dead, but you'll keep on running forever. No, not forever—I apologize—some day you'll get caught, because the hounds aren't amateurs like you and ... him...." He pointed to the crumbling, blackened corpse, keeping his hand steady with an effort for, God knew, he was the biggest amateur of them all.

Lockard licked his lips and gazed apprehensively around. Frightened faces were beginning to peer out from their places of concealment. "Look, Carmody," he said in a low, stiff voice, "let's talk this over. But let's get out of here first before somebody calls the hounds."

"All right," the thin man smiled. "I'm always willing to talk. We can go over to Gorman's office. They won't look for us there right away."

"How'll we get in?"

"I have a 'seal," Keats said. Surely one of the electroseals he carried must belong to Gorman's office. It was a chance he'd have to take.

XI

Keats had to try five different seals before he found the one that opened the lawyer's office. He was afraid his obvious lack of familiarity would arouse Lockard's suspicions, but the big man was too much preoccupied with his own emotions.

An unpleasantly haunting aroma of cooked meat seeped out from inside. "For Christ's sake, Carmody, hurry!" Lockard snarled, and gave a sigh of relief as the door swung open and the illuminators went on, lighting the shabby office. Gorman was there. His horribly seared body lay sprawled on the dusty rug—quite dead.

"You—you killed him?" Gabriel quavered. The sight of murder done by another hand seemed to

upset him more than the murder he himself had just committed.

The thin man gave a difficult smile. "Carmody killed him." Which was undoubtedly the truth. "The gun that did it is in his pocket. I had nothing to do with it." His eyes sought for the ones behind the veil. He wanted the girl who stood frozenly by the door to know that this, at least, was the truth.

Gabriel also stayed near the door, unable to take his eyes off the corpse. In death Carmody and Gorman, the big man and the small man, had looked the same; each was just a heap of charred meat and black ash. No blood, no germs—all very hygienic. "You're smart, Carmody," he said from taut lips. "Damn smart."

"I'm Keats, not Carmody! Remember that." He dropped into the chair behind the desk. "Sit down, both of you." Only Gabriel accepted the invitation. "Why don't you take that thing off your face, Mrs. Lockard? You aren't hiding from anybody, are you?"

Gabriel gave a short laugh. "She's hiding her face from everybody. I spoiled it a little for her. She was going to sell me out to ... the guy in your body."

Keats' hand tightened on the arm of his chair. Lose his temper now and he lost the whole game. "It was a good body," he said, not looking at the thing on the rug, trying not to remember the thing on the rug on the other side of town. "A very good body." Through the veil, Helen's shadowy eyes were fixed on his face. He wanted to see what Lockard had done to her, but he couldn't tear off the veil, as he longed to do; he was afraid of the expression that might be revealed on her face—triumph when there should have been anguish; anguish when there should have been triumph.

"Not as good as the one I have here." Lockard thumped his own chest, anxious to establish the value of the only ware he had left.

"Matter of opinion," Keats said. "And mine was in better shape."

"This one isn't in bad condition," Gabriel retorted defensively. "It could be brought back to peak in short order."

"You won't have much opportunity to do it, though. But maybe the government will do it for you; they don't pamper prisoners, I understand, especially lifers."

Gabriel whitened. "You're an extralegal, Carmody—Keats," he whined. "You know your course. You know how to hide from the hounds.... I'm a—a respectable citizen." He spread his hands wide in exaggerated helplessness. "Strictly an amateur, that's what I am—I admit I've been playing out of my league."

"So?"

"I'm worth a lot of money, Keats, a hell of a lot. And half of it can be yours, if you ... change bodies with me."

Keats' angular face remained expressionless, but there was a sharp cry from the girl—a cry that might have been misunderstood as one of pain, but wasn't.

Gabriel turned toward her, and his upper lip curled back over his teeth. "I'll throw her in to the bargain. You must have seen her when she wasn't banged up so you know she's not permanently disfigured. Isn't she worth taking a risk for?"

Keats shrugged. "If the hounds pull you down, she'll be a legal widow anyway."

"Yes, but you'd have no ... chance with her in the body you now have.... No chance," he repeated. His voice broke. "Never had a chance."

"Go ahead, feel sorry for yourself," the other man said. "Nobody else will."

Gabriel's face darkened, but he also had to control his temper to gain what he fancied were his own ends. "You won't deny that this hulk is better than the one you have now?"

"Except that there's one thing about the head that I don't like."

Gabriel stared in bewilderment. His body was beyond criticism. "What is it you don't like about the head?"

"There's a price on it now."

Gabriel pressed his spine against the back of the chair. "Don't play the innocent, Carmody. You've killed people, too."

"Well, sure, but not out in the open like that. You know how many people saw you blast him? Too many. If you're going to exterminate somebody, you do it from a dark doorway or an alley—not in a brilliantly lit hotel lobby, and you blast him in the back. But there's no use giving you lessons; it's not likely you'll ever be able to use them where you're going."

Gabriel suddenly sagged in his chair. He looked down at the floor. "So you won't do it?"

Keats grew apprehensive. He hadn't expected the big man to give in to despair so soon—it might spoil all his plans and leave him trapped in this sick unwanted body. He lit a milgot. "I didn't say that," he pointed out, trying to sound unconcerned. "Matter of fact, I might even consider your proposition, if...."

There was hope in Lockard's eyes again. It made Keats a little sick to think of the game he had to play with the other; then he thought of the game the other had played with him, the game the other had played with his wife, and the faint flickering of compassion died out in him. "What do you want?" Gabriel asked.

Keats took a moment before he answered. "I want *all* of what you've got."

Gabriel uttered an inarticulate sound.

"You can't take it with you, colleague. If we hulk-hop, it's got to be tonight, because the hounds will be baying on your trail any moment. You wouldn't have the chance to transfer the property to my name and, if you take my word that I'll hand over half afterward, you're just plain out of this dimension.... Think of it this way, Lockard—what's worth more to you, a couple of lousy billions or your freedom?"

"All right, Carmody," Lockard said dully, "you're the dictator."

XII

The Vinzz' eyes flickered in astonishment. "*Another* private game? However...." he shrugged eloquently. "It will cost you a hundred thousand credits each, gentlemen."

"No discount for a steady customer?" Keats inquired lightly, though he was trembling inside.

The Vinzz' tendrils quivered. "None. You ought to be glad I didn't raise the price again."

"Why didn't you?" he couldn't help asking.

The Vinzz looked steadily into the man's eyes. "I don't know," it answered at last. "Perhaps I have been so long on this planet that I have developed a sentimental streak.... In any case, I am going back to Vinau the day after tomorrow...."

"For God's sake," Lockard, his senses so confused with fear and apprehension that he was able to catch only fragments of their talk, screamed, "pay him what he asks and don't haggle!"

"All right," Keats agreed. "The lady will wait for me here," he told the Vinzz.

The extraterrestrial quivered indecisively. "Most irregular," it murmured. "However, I cannot refuse a slight favor for such an old customer. This way, madam."

Gabriel Lockard opened Gabriel Lockard's eyes.

"Well," the Vinzz who stood above him lisped, "how does it feel to be back in your own body again?"

Gabriel got up and stretched. He stretched again, and then an expression of wonderment came over his handsome features. "I feel ... exactly the way I felt in ... any of the others," he said haltingly. "I'm not comfortable in this one either. It's not right—it doesn't fit. My own body...."



"You've grown out of it," the green one told him, not unkindly. "But you will be able to adjust to it again, if you'll give it a chance...."

"There's that word again." Gabriel winced. "I'm beginning to respond to it the way my ... predecessor did. Do we ever really get another chance, I wonder?"

"Take my advice." The Vinzz' face became almost human. "This is costing my people money, but we've made enough out of you and your—shall we say?—friends. It is a shame," it murmured, "to prey upon unsophisticated life-forms, but one must live. However, I'll tell you this: The compulsion will come over you again and again to play the game—your body will torment you unbearably and you will long for relief from it, but you must conquer that desire or, I warn you, you will be lost to yourself forever. It's a pattern that's enormously difficult to break, but it can be broken."

Gabriel smiled down at the little green creature. "Thanks, colleague. I'll remember that advice. And I'll take it."

"The other is still asleep," the Vinzz told him. "This time I thought it best to let you awaken first. Good-by, and ... good luck."

"Thanks, fellow-man," Gabriel said. The Vinzz' tendrils quivered.

Helen awaited him in an anteroom, her veil flung back so that he could see her poor, marred face. Anger rose hotly in him, but he pushed it down. Her suffering had not been meaningless and revenge was already consummated.

"Gabriel!" Her voice was taut. "... Jed!"

"Gabriel," he smiled. "The genuine, original Gabriel—accept no substitutes."

"I'm so glad." Her lips formed the words, for she had no voice with which to make them.

"Come." He took her arm and led her out into the quiet street. It was almost daylight and the sky was a clear pearl gray. Again a star detached itself from the translucent disk of the Moon and sped out into the Galaxy.

Soon, he thought, we'll be on a starship like that one, leaving this played-out planet for the new worlds up in the sky.

"You're going to let Gabe—the other Gabriel—go?" she asked.

He bent his head to look at her swollen face. "You're free, Helen; I have my body back; why should we concern ourselves with what happens to him? He can't hurt us any more."

"I suppose you're right," she muttered. "It seems unfair...." She shivered. "Still, you have no idea of the things he did to me—the things he made me do...." She shivered again.

"You're cold. Let's get started."

"But where are we going?" She placed her hand on his arm and looked up at him.

"Back to the hotel to pick up your luggage. And then—I still think Proxima is a good idea, don't you? And then perhaps farther out still. I'm sick of this old world."

"But, Je—Gabriel, you must be mad! The police will be waiting for you at the hotel."

"Of course they'll be waiting, but with a citation, not handcuffs."

She looked at him as if he had gone extradimensional. He laughed. "What your ex-husband didn't know, my dear, was that there was a reward out for Jed Carmody, *dead or alive*."

Her face was blank for a moment. "A reward! Oh, G-G-G-Gabriel!" The girl erupted into hysterical laughter.

"Shhh, darling, control yourself." He put his arm around her, protectively, restrainingly. "We'll be conspicuous," for already the Sun's first feeble rays were beginning to wash the ancient tired streets with watery gold. "Think of the reward we're going to get—five thousand credits, just for us!"

She wiped her eyes and pulled down her veil. "Whatever will we do with all that money!"

"I think it would be nice if we turned it over to the hotel," he smiled. "I made rather a shambles of their lobby when, pursuant to my duty as a solar citizen, I exterminated the killer Carmody. Let's give it to them and leave only pleasant memories behind us on our journey to the stars." And he couldn't help wondering whether, if things got really tough, somewhere up in those stars he could find another zarquil game.

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