



**ALAN DEAN
FOSTER**

**THE MAN
WHO USED
THE UNIVERSE**

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The Man Who Used The Universe

by Alan Dean Foster

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Science Fiction

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INTO THE OUT OF

TO THE VANISHING POINT

_For Dick and Marge Green, _

who helped move the Lazy Unicorn, with love and thanks.

I

It's very old, the protection racket. So are murder, prostitution, graft, and a number of other sordid frailties that technology cannot seem to cure. These faults are not exclusively human. They're found in other intelligent races. But it's in mankind that technological advancement has outpaced the social to a degree unmatched by any other sentient species.

Longevity institutionalizes vice as well as virtue. Sex has been for sale longer than salvation; stealing money has always been more popular than working for it. It was inevitable that a maturing society unable to eliminate such ills would learn to cope with them. Government was agreeable. Anything, which can be coped with, can be formalized, and anything, which can be formalized, can be taxed.

So it was that Kees van Loo-Macklin found himself outside the simple shop front in commercial corridor B of the hundred-kilometer-long cylinder that was the city of Cluria and considered how to go about killing his first man.

There wasn't much of a crowd milling about the darkening street. It was late in the afternoon, almost evening, close to closing time for most shops and businesses. Feeble light fell through the transparent, arching roof of the city, dirty yellow after its fight with the pollutants trapped beneath the permanent inversion layer that covered most of the world.

Within the parallel enclosed tubes that comprised the cities the air was reasonably fresh. The builders of Evenwaith's great industries had long ago given up trying to prevent the poisoning of the atmosphere. It was simpler (and cheaper) to seal each city inside the long glass-and-steel worms the inhabitants called the tubes so that the factories could belch their sulfur dioxides and ozones and chemicals into the sky without harming the human population.

Unfortunately, the native flora and fauna of Evenwaith had no tubes to retreat to, no gas masks to don. Outside the tubes the surface was barren scrub and gravel desert, leaden skies dominating a land of weeds and weak animals. Even the insects choked.

None of which troubled the busy people of Cluria. Business was good and there was plenty of work. What did it matter that you couldn't go outside? There was enough to do inside.

None of the preoccupied pedestrians spared Loo-Macklin a glance. He was clad in a brown shirt that was puffed at the sleeves and V-necked, loose black coveralls with straps over his shoulders, and a black cap.

From a distance he was easy to overlook. He was less than average height. Up close, however, he became suddenly more impressive, particularly if he turned to face you and you received the full impact of his stare. You would also note that there was a hundred kilos of muscle on that squat frame, most of it concentrated in chest and unusually long, massive arms. He wore his blond hair cut short, for in his profession long hair could prove a fatal encumbrance. Sleepy blue eyes examined the world

from beneath a high forehead and there was about him an air of lounging insouciance.

It was only an air, however. Loo-Macklin absorbed everything that went on around him. He just didn't want the world to know it was being absorbed.

He had a very small mouth, a nose that had been broken many times, and those exceedingly odd blue eyes that never seemed to open more than halfway. They were certainly a striking color, almost turquoise, and all the more remarkable for the fact that there seemed to be nothing behind them.

A well-dressed man and woman, hand in hand, came strolling down his side of the street. They passed him as though he weren't there. It was a talent he'd refined, the ability to become part of the scenery.

He followed them as they passed, looked the other way up the street, then put his hands in his pockets and walked casually across the pavement. He was twenty-two years old and had been a registered illegal for five years.

There were a hundred classes of citizenship, both legal and illegal. Of course, you could hold both, depending on your profession and avocations. Loo-Macklin was an eighty-third-class illegal and had spent two years in that status. He was tired of it. Any twenty-two-year-old would have been. But Loo-Macklin was very patient, which the average citizen his age was not. Patience was a prerequisite in his chosen line of work.

He'd started making a name for himself in Volea, a small semiagricultural city to the south of Cluria. A recommendation by the gang leader he'd worked for there brought him to the attention of powerful underworld figures in the metropolis. For two years he'd worked for one of the city's dozen criminal syndicates.

He'd learned the methodology of operating a large illegal concern. Learned it well, despite warnings from associates not to study beyond reasonable aspirations. He'd ignored them. Thus far it hadn't caused him any trouble. He wanted to be ready when the inevitable suggestion of promotion came along.

He punched in the code on the plastic buttons set into the security door. The code had been provided for him by the syndicate's computer. It slid aside and he entered.

There was a single aisle running the narrow length of the store. Each wall was a long, flat video screen. On them were displayed, elegantly lit and arranged, the store's wares.

Despite its somewhat seedy location, the store's stock was quite impressive. Some of the best citizens of Cluria, or their representatives, made purchases here. The real jewelry was kept locked in a secureroom somewhere below street level and was brought up only when an actual purchase had been consummated and credit had cleared.

The system proved a very effective antitheft arrangement, though it was not perfect. Loo-Macklin could have cared less. He was not there to steal.

The owner came out of a back room. It was five minutes to sunset time and he was clearly

impatient to close up. He was quite tall, well-built and middle-aged. He'd chosen to let natural baldness develop.

As he watched Loo-Macklin, he removed the contact jeweler's loupe from his left eye and slipped the sliver of plastic into the cleansing case he wore as a ring on one finger. Loo-Macklin stopped opposite a floor-mounted screen which simulated a display case. He still had his hands jammed in his pockets. The owner was on the other side.

"Hello." Loo-Macklin spoke quietly. He always spoke quietly, never yet having encountered a situation, which required him to raise his voice. Nobody yet knew what he would sound like if he ever got really angry.

"Hello yourself, citizen." The owner's head nodded toward the doorway. "If you've come to make a selection today you'd better hurry. I'm closing in a couple of minutes." He eyed Loo-Macklin up and down, added, "The cheaper jewelry is in the third section, right-hand wall and in the middle of the screen."

"I'm not here to buy," Loo-Macklin informed him, "I'm here to collect."

The man's eyebrows rose and he appeared amused. He leaned forward, his hands resting on the top of the display screen.

"I'm not aware that I owe you anything. In fact, I don't even know you."

"That's not necessary. I'm here on behalf of someone you do know. Hiram Lal."

The man sighed and looked bored.

"Not again. Look," he said tiredly, "I've told Lal that I'm doing just fine on my own. There hasn't been an attempted break-in here or in my vault for nearly half a year. Maybe he can frighten some of the other merchants on the street into paying him protection money, but the police in this section of the tube are reasonably honest and efficient and I haven't had any trouble. I'd rather pay the police anyway." He smiled wickedly.

"No, that's not quite true, what I just said about trouble. I have had a few problems. About a month ago a couple of sickly looking ghits wandered in and threatened to smash my screens if I didn't succumb to your friend Lal's blandishments. It was really funny, like something out of a history tape. They brought alumin pipes and the first time they took a swing at one of my screens and intercepted the shieldfield I've got running over them they both lit up like a pair of mollywobbles. Took me an hour just to properly deodorize the store." His smile widened.

"I find it peculiar that Lal would send one ghit where two had failed."

Loo-Macklin gave a barely perceptible shrug. "I don't know about the two men you're talking about or anything else that's spizzed between you and Lal. I only know that I'm here to collect. One hundred credits for six months back insurance and another hundred for the rest of the year."

The man laughed, shook his head in disbelief. "That's another thing about your boss Lal; he's overpriced as well as stupid."

~~"He's not my boss," said Loo-Macklin quietly. "I work for him."~~

"Doesn't that make him your boss?"

"Not necessarily," Loo-Macklin replied. "It makes him my employer. 'Boss' has a different connotation."

"Connotation," murmured the smiling owner. "Oh, I get it. He sends along two idiots with aluminum bars to try and beat me into submission and when that doesn't work, he decides to send a semanticist to try and talk me into it." He leaned forward over the screen, his expression turning nasty.

"Well, I'm not interested in your spiel, I'm not afraid of your _boss_, and I'm not worried about however many ghits he decides to have visit me! He can send along fools to talk or strike and it won't make me pay him a half-credit.

"The security arrangements for this shop are very elaborate, the best available in Cluria and the equal of anything that can be brought in from Terra itself. So I'll run my business, thank you, without your boss's 'protection.' Tell him to fibble off and go bully someone else. He doesn't frighten me. I've got friends, too. Legals. They buy a lot of merchandise from me and they'd be damned upset if anything happened to their source of supply."

Loo-Macklin waited until the owner had finished, then said patiently, as if speaking to a child, "You owe Hiram Lal one hundred credits back insurance and another hundred for the remainder of this year."

The owner shook his head slowly. "A deaf semanticist he sends, no less."

Loo-Macklin extended his right hand. "You can pay in cash or by transfer, but please pay now. You are overdue."

The joke seemed to be wearing thin on the other man. "Oh, come on, I've got to lock up. Why don't you just leave while you're still in one piece and go tell the ghit you work for it will be a hell of a lot cheaper for him to just leave me alone."

"If you don't pay me right now," Loo-Macklin told him, "I'm going to have to kill you." This declaration was made in such a calm, utterly emotionless tone that the shop owner's expression twisted. He lost half his smile, replaced it with half a frown, and ended up only looking baffled.

"Really?" His hands tensed ever so slightly. "You killed many people?"

Loo-Macklin shook his head. "I've never killed anyone ... before now."

"Well, I have something to tell you, young man. Why I bother I don't know, except that you're obviously so unsuited to what you're here for I suppose I feel a smidgen of pity for you. You notice the position of my hands?"

Loo-Macklin's eyes didn't move from the other man's face. "I noticed them when I walked in. So?"

"So you cannot have a very large-caliber explosive weapon in either of the pockets where your hands have been since you came in. For the last couple of minutes, both of my hands have been resting on specially keyed portions of the fake display screen that stands between us.

"This keyed screen runs directly into the power control, which operates this store, which in turn is linked to Tube Power Central. If you're holding a ray weapon on me, it won't have sufficient power to knock me aside, either. Should I fall forward and my hands thereby come in contact with the lower portion of this screen, with any part of it, the metal meshing which underlies the entire aisle on which you are currently standing will instantly become electrified. Very strongly electrified, I might add." He peered downward.

"I see that you are not wearing insulated footwear." The nasty grin returned. "You may kill me, but you'll end up just another cinder on the floor, just like the other two your boss sent after me. Only you'll dance longer. So why don't you just leave?"

One hand edged slightly downward toward the activated portion of the display screen.

"Because if I slip, or if I get tired of this little conversation, you won't have the chance to leave."

"What makes you think," asked Loo-Macklin curiously, "that I don't have an explosive or projectile weapon of sufficient power in my pockets?"

"Amateurs," the owner snorted. "That's all I should expect of Lal, I suppose. Amateurs. You poor ghit, even I can see that your hands aren't clenched around anything. Even if one of them was, I don't think the pockets on that cut of trousers are large enough to hold a decent-sized weapon.

"To top it off, you're not directly facing me. You could turn quickly, I'm sure. Physical dexterity is usually present where mental agility is not. But I could fall forward faster. Want to put it to the test?"

"No," said Loo-Macklin with a half smile, "I don't think so. It wouldn't do me any good, because you're quite right. I don't have a projectile weapon in either pocket."

"I thought so," said the owner, exuding self-satisfaction. "More's the pity for you, though, you silly ignorant little ghit." His wrist tendons bulged against the skin as he prepared to slide his hands forward.

There was a small but sharp explosion. Everything happened very quickly.

The owner's hands never moved a centimeter downward. One moment he was standing there, leaning over the invisible proximity field emanating from the display screen and the next he was half imbedded in the fiberstone wall screen behind him, sandwiched in among projections of necklaces and tiaras. Smoke rose from the black cavity that had been his chest, where the twelve-centimeter-long rocket had blown up.

The rocket had come out of the hollow, thick sole of Loo-Macklin's right shoe, which had been pointing at the owner ever since his visitor had entered the shop. It was only natural for a shortish fellow to wear lifters on his footgear.

A very difficult shot, guessing the angle from the floor upward. Loo-Macklin was a very precise person and he practiced hard. He believed one should know the tools of his trade.

He walked around the display screen and examined the body of the jeweler. The man's eyes were wide open. Arms and legs were spread-eagled and the wall cupped the body indenting it like an expensive contour couch would.

Loo-Macklin checked out the hole in the man's chest. He knew there would be a large cavity on the other side, as well as a sizable gap in the wall. The little rocket was very powerful.

There was no need to pry the body out of the wall to check the rocket's progress beyond. There was no point in touching the dead man.

The syndicate computer was well versed in the techniques of protection used by individuals and shopkeepers. Loo-Macklin had studied what was known of the store's system for days before deciding on the right weapon to counter it with.

He could have simply walked in and fired, of course, but he felt obligated to make one last try to obtain Lal's money. Lal hadn't insisted on that, wanting to make an example of the arrogant jeweler. "Good advertising," he'd called it. But Loo-Macklin was thorough, and it seemed to him he ought to try to collect just the same.

It hadn't worked. Now there were things to do, procedures to follow. He turned and left the store, careful to close the door behind him. A double glance showed a deserted street. It paid to be cautious. The store owner was right when he'd said that the police in this district were notoriously honest.

The thick walls of the store had muffled the brief explosion the rocket's charge had made. The street stayed empty.

Loo-Macklin strolled casually down the street, found an idling marcar, and eased into the back seat. No one appeared to challenge him as he slipped his credit card into the waiting slot and punched in the address of his apartment. It lay in tube twelve, some four kilometers distant, tube twelve of the forty that marched in orderly worm-rows across the smothered terrain of this part of the northern continent of Evenwaith.

As the car sped smoothly along the Center Street, guided by the sensors in its belly, he reflected on the murder he had committed. It was inevitable in the line of work that society had forced him into that someday he'd be compelled to kill.

He felt no different, nor had he expected to. He'd thoroughly researched the psychological aspects and decided that his own profile fell among those who would not be affected by such an act. He was mildly gratified that his research was now supported by fact.

It had simply been another job, this taking of a life. He had performed it with his customary efficiency. The accomplishment would be entered into and duly noted by the master underworld computer system on Terra and it, in turn, would probably direct that his status be raised at least ten levels. Perhaps he would even jump into the sixties, status-wise. A successful murder was a considerable achievement.

All he had to do now was get away with it, and that seemed to him no more complicated than calculating the angle at which to fire the foot rocket.

Another car came up alongside his. The single passenger was an Orischian, and the large, ungainly ornithorhynchus was obviously cramped by the modest dimensions of the marcicar. Its cab was not designed to accommodate the alien's two-and-a-half-meter height, nor the enormous splayed feet with their gaudy and elaborately tied multicolored ribbons.

A charming folk, the Orischians. They were very gregarious even across racial lines and had mixed easily with mankind since the first mutual encounter several hundred years ago. The one in the cab was male, easily identified by the bright red jowls which ran down the long neck, and by the crest of pomaded feathers running from forehead down its back. Various pouches were slung across the broad back and the long, feather-rimmed fingers were running through the contents of one.

The cab pulled away, accelerated down a main street. Loo-Macklin leaned back in his seat. He found the Orischians interesting, but then his appetite for knowledge had always been nonspecific. He was interested in everything.

Brrreeeeurrrrrppp ... the soft, insistent sound came from inside his left coverall pocket, from the device he'd been holding in the jewelry store, which the deceased owner had suspected was a weapon. He pulled it out.

The small, flat plate was about two centimeters square. Three LEDs pimped the top: red, yellow and purple. The purple light was blinking steadily now, in time to the beeping.

Loo-Macklin stared at it, then touched the control on its side. The beeping and flashing ceased. He thought rapidly for several minutes, then punched the STANDBY button on the marcicar's computer. It flashed READY at him and he entered a new destination.

He had to detour for one quick stop before returning home. He had an important pick-up to make. Of course, he might be overreacting, he knew. It might be nothing.

Considering the activities of the evening, however, all precautions could be very important. His brows drew together over slightly narrowed eyes. It wasn't that he hadn't been expecting some new threat, only that he'd hoped to hold it off for another year or two. He'd be a little better prepared to deal with it then.

Ah well, if his hand was being forced he would just have to handle it as best he could. Of course, there was always the chance it was a false alarm. If that was the case and his detour proved unnecessary, he could restore the past with little difficulty and only slight chance of being detected.

His apartment was situated on the skin of tube twelve, on the second of five residential levels. It was a cheap district, populated mostly by factory workers and minor-status service technicians. The gently curving outside wall gave him a view, however, though there was little more to see at night than during the smog-filled day.

A few stars were dimly visible through the lighter nighttime haze, surrounding one of Evenwaith's two moons. A grove of pollutant-resistant trees, a special variety imported from Terra, grew nearby.

They gave the otherwise barren landscape an illusion of vitality. At night they gleamed as they exuded water, washing the day's accumulation of pollutants from the leaves. Close to Cluria, the only plants that could survive were those that perspired.

He turned his gaze from the window and reached for the illumination control near the door.

"Forget the lights," said a harsh, low voice. "Come inside and put your hands on top of your head."

Loo-Macklin did as he was told and walked into the single room that served as living quarters. Sleeping and hygienic facilities lay in a separate, smaller room off to his left.

The lights came on. Immediately to his right stood a man Loo-Macklin didn't recognize. He was very large and not much older than Loo-Macklin himself. He appeared to be enjoying himself even though nothing had happened yet.

Seated across the carpeted floor on the single decent piece of furniture (the couch was made of real wood and animal skin and had cost Loo-Macklin a great deal) was a swarthy chap he did recognize. Gregor was pointing a very small needler at him. The taller, younger man moved away from the wall and exhibited a similar weapon.

Gregor gestured with the gun. Loo-Macklin obediently moved in the indicated direction until he was standing with his back to the wall.

"I don't understand," he said quietly. "Have I done something wrong?"

"Not my business to say, or to know," replied Gregor.

"I was instructed to kill the jeweler if he refused to pay. He refused to pay."

"Lal knows that," Gregor said.

"Then why are you here?"

"We've been told to get rid of you," said the taller man.

"Shut up, Vascolin."

The younger man looked hurt. "I was only..."

"I said, shut up. He doesn't need to know why."

"I think I do anyway," put in Loo-Macklin. He shifted his stance, careful not to move his hands from his head. "I worry Lal, don't I?" Gregor said nothing. "I've always worried him, since the day he picked me out of the public ward for his apprenticeship program six years ago."

"Like I said, I don't know anything about it," Gregor insisted. "I sure as hell don't know why he'd be afraid of you." There was disdain in his voice, the disdain of the experienced survivor for the neophyte.

"He's afraid of me," replied Loo-Macklin with assurance, "because he doesn't understand me. I don't fit his preconceived mold. He's spent the whole six years trying to get me riled or upset because he feels he can keep control over anybody whose emotions he can juggle. But he's never been able to do that with me.

"So he's decided to use me once for this particular job and then get rid of me. Disposable killer, right? He'll report it to the authorities and gain points with them, so he benefits doubly by the jeweler's death."

Gregor frowned. Loo-Macklin was quite a student of facial expressions. He knew immediately that Gregor, who was, after all, Lal's number-one private assassin, knew that it was true.

But he shook his head and said again, "I told you, I don't know. I just do m'job."

"You're not a bad servant of Shiva, Gregor," Loo-Macklin told him, "but you're a lousy liar. Tell me, do I worry you, too?"

"Nah," said Gregor calmly, "you don't worry me. Nobody worries me, and in a minute you're not going to be able to worry anybody because you're going to be dead."

Loo-Macklin took a cautious step toward the door leading to the sleeping room and bathroom. Gregor's needler rose and he halted.

"Can I at least go to the zEEP first? I'd hate to be buried with crap in my pants."

"Tough," said Gregor. "D'you really think I'm going to let you get your hands on anything but dirt?" His fingers squeezed the trigger. His younger companion was a second behind.

Loo-Macklin didn't utter a sound as he pitched forward to the floor and lay there. His hands quivered from the effects of the needler for several seconds and then he was still.

Gregor rose from the couch and walked over to examine the body.

"Well, he wasn't much, was he?" murmured Vascolin, eyeing the corpse.

"No. I expected something more from him. However, he was only a kid. Bright, had a future with the syndicate, but if the boss says..."

Vascolin was frowning. "Ah, Gregor ...?"

"What now?" The assassin was holstering his pistol inside his shirt.

"There isn't any blood, sir."

Gregor had just enough time to realize this was so before his head disappeared. Vascolin whirled and raised his needler, but not fast enough. The gun went off as his hands tightened convulsively on the trigger and punched a tiny, blackened hole in the far wall. Then he crumpled like a rotten tree, nearly smothering the already decapitated form of Gregor beneath him.

Loo-Macklin came quietly into the room, inspected the two bodies. The silenced projectile weapon he'd used was placed carefully on a small table until he considered how best to proceed.

First he would have to see if the simulacrum was salvageable. The duplicate Loo-Macklin had cost a great deal. The firm, which had manufactured it for him, was curious as to how he planned to use it. Most of their product was purchased by producers of entertainment shows, since the government still frowned on showing actual murder, dismemberment, and other such real violence on the channels.

"I'm going to fool my friends," he'd told them, and they'd nodded knowingly. A simulacrum in bed, for example, was always good for a few laughs.

So he'd stood outside the apartment and manipulated the viewer and controls, seeing the action inside through crystal eyes, speaking through a remote larynx of remarkable precision.

Now there was no question as to who'd sent the assassin, and he'd always had a pretty good idea why Lal might want him killed. He sighed. He'd begun the day with nothing more serious on his history than a few broken faces. Now he'd slain not one man but three.

He still felt no different than he had at breakfast this morning. These last two were more troublesome than the jeweler had been, but only from a technical standpoint. Emotionally, they affected him not at all.

First he would have to dispose of the corpses and clean the room. Ordinarily, in such situations, you contacted the members of a rival syndicate who specialized in such janitorial specialities, but at the moment he wasn't prepared to trust anyone. The world of illegals was full of gruff competition, but Lal's equals were more allies than enemies. They'd be more inclined to help a powerful syndicate boss like Lal than a mistrusted and unpredictable youth.

It would take quite a while to properly and completely dispose of the bodies, since the apartment trashall couldn't handle any debris larger than a third of a meter square, but he would have to endure the odious task alone. No, he wouldn't trust any of Lal's counterparts. Loo-Macklin hadn't trusted a human being since he could remember....

II

His mother had been a voluntary whore, which is something quite different from an involuntary one. She enjoyed her work, or perhaps wallowed in it would be a better description. An intelligent woman who could have aspired to something more, she apparently savored the endless and inimitable varieties of degradation her clients subjected her to. It was an obvious case of a profession fully suited to a state of mind.

Loo-Macklin's father remained a permanent enigma, apparently by mutual choice of both parents. He had no brothers or sisters. When his mother had turned him over to the state for raising, at the age of six (just old enough to appreciate what was happening to him), she'd shrugged him off without a parting glance.

He had no idea where she was, if she was dead or alive, and he didn't much care. That day at the ward office was vivid in his memory, if for no other reason than that it was the first and last time he'd ever cried.

He had a very good memory and the conversation was clear in his mind.

"Are you sure, ma'am," the sallow-faced social clerk had asked her, "that you don't want to try and raise the boy yourself? You seem to have the capabilities, both mental and fiscal."

Loo-Macklin had been standing in a corner. That was his punishment for taking an expensive chronometer apart to see how it worked. The fact that he'd put it back together again in perfect working order hadn't mitigated his treatment. He could have turned his head to see his mother and the strange, tired little man talking, but that would result in another beating later on. So he kept his eyes averted and satisfied himself by listening closely, aware that something important relating to him personally was being decided.

"Look, I didn't want the little ghit," his mother was saying. "I don't know for sure why I've put up with him for this long. Anyway, I'm going off on a long trip and the gentleman friend I'm going to be traveling with doesn't want him along. Nor do I."

"But surely, ma'am, when you come back..."

"Yeah, sure, when I come back," she'd said in boredom, "then we'll see."

He remembered the perfume of her dopestick reaching him in his corner, rich and pungent and expensive.

"Besides, maybe somebody else can do something with him. I never was cut out to be no mother. When I found out I was past termination time I thought of suing the damn chemical company."

"If you were so against raising him why wait 'til now to hand him to the ward?"

"I think I was drunk at the time of decision-making," she said with a high laugh that Loo-Macklin could remember quite clearly. It was shrill and flutey, like an electronic tone but with less feeling.

"Doesn't matter anyway. He's here. I know I should've turned him over years ago, but I've been busy. Business, you know. Occupies most of my time. Anyway, I turned around one day and figured out he was always getting underfoot. Besides which I ... well, look at him, just look at him. He looks like a little orangutan without the long hair."

The loathing in her voice did not trouble Loo-Macklin as he remembered it. It had been different then, in the office. He'd begun sobbing softly, a peculiar sensation, the warm tears running down his face.

The clerk had cleared his throat. "Naturally, this is your choice as a legal citizen, ma'am."

"Yeah, I know, and it is my choice. So let's get the forms together and let me imprint 'em. I've got a shuttle to catch and I'm damned if I'm going to be late."

They'd done so. Then she'd stood, said to the clerk, "He's all yours," and left.

Loo-Macklin blinked and studied the humming trashall. He was almost finished with the last of Gregor's body. Vascolin had gone first. There was only a leg left of the second assassin's body.

He used the tiny arcer, another instrument from his personal arsenal, to slice the leg in half below the knee. He fed the upper half into the efficient unit. There was a soft buzz as the meat was deboned and then the bone itself ground up and shoved into the city sewer system. The last piece followed, the fragments cascading down the ceramic opening in the kitchen chest.

There were dark spots on the counter nearby where Loo-Macklin's fingers had been gripping it. His hands were slightly numb. He forced himself to relax, regulated his breathing. Only rarely did he get so upset.

After concluding the gruesome job he cleaned both rooms and then allowed himself a leisurely hot shower. He put on a plain silver and blue checked jumpsuit with false epaulets and then opened a sealed cabinet by placing the five fingers of his right hand into the appropriate receptacles on it.

There was a click and the dual panels slid apart. Inside the cabinet, neatly stored and arranged, were the tools of his current trade. He'd been collecting them for several years now. They shone as brightly as any surgeon's instruments.

Choosing the one he thought most suitable to the task at hand, he closed and locked the cabinet. After spraying both rooms with deodorant he turned off the lights and exited. Loo-Macklin was as neat as he was thorough.

Lal was a small man, but relative physical size is important only to social primitives whose ignorance renders their opinions useless. The guaran lizard of Aelmos is only three inches long, but its bite can kill in two minutes.

The syndicate chief's hair was turning silver. It fit him, gave him a distinguished look, as did the electric velvet suit he wore, its shimmering black field rising a quarter centimeter above the surface of the charged material. The expensive electrostatic clothing bespoke wealth and position.

Lal was a twentieth-class illegal, quite high status for one from a world like Evenwaith. He couldn't expect to break into single number status in Cluria, but he had hopes.

His large private home consisted of many small domes connected to the tubes by security-monitored accessways. Gathered there that night were men and women of all statuses, from their sixties to their teens, legal and illegal alike.

Unlike some of his underworld colleagues, Lal affected a respectability he could not hope, as an illegal, to actually achieve. But appearances were important to him, and he'd long ago decided that if he couldn't have the real thing, he could at least possess the impression of it. Such grand parties were one way of doing so.

A hand was laid gently on his shoulder and he looked up and around into the face of Jenine, one of his current mistresses. She was a thirty-second-class illegal, a very sharp lady, but one of limited

ambition. She was quite pleased with her present role. Her investments in legal corporations were making her wealthy.

In a few years she would probably leave Lal and retire to a life of ease and gentility. That didn't bother him. He understood her desires as clearly as he did his own. There would be other women around. Power and money are ever handsome.

"Something wrong, my dear?"

"No." She leaned over and he felt the warmth of lightly clad breasts against his shoulder, always delightful sensation. "That elegant young gentleman over there..."

"The one with the mustache?"

"No, the one standing next to him."

"Ah, I believe that's Ao Tilyamet. His father is a twelve and President of the Coamalt Rare Metals Group, Cremgro. They operate out of Bourlt Terminus, down south. Want an introduction?"

A hand ran through his thinning hair. "I never have to tell you anything, do I, darling?"

"No, my dear. Because we understand each other."

"You don't mind, of course?"

"Of course not." He smiled up at her as they started toward the group of chatting young men. "I would if this were tomorrow night."

"Tomorrow night is yours, darling, and the night after, and so forth. But tonight, if you don't mind..."

"Enough said, lady." His voice dropped to a conspiratorial whisper as they neared the group. "I'll make you out to be the greatest discovery since the Morilio Screen."

"I am the greatest discovery since the Morilio Screen, darling," she said confidently.

"When you put your mind to it," he agreed.

"And other things." She smiled.

He performed the introduction and watched admiringly as she deftly drew the handsome young industrialist away from several other women. The legals had been fawning over young Tilyamet all evening, but they were badly outmatched against Jenine.

Clever girl, he mused. Has to be reminded of her true station from time to time, taken down a notch, but very good at what she does. Intelligent, too. He liked that, when he could relate to it.

As opposed to that insidious young fellow ... what the devil was his name? Oh yes, Kees vaan Loo-Mickmin ... no, Macklin, that was it. Too bad about him. Showed a lot of promise. But strange,

strange ... never got excited, never showed an ounce of emotion, nothing. Deadpanned as the land outside the tubes.

Couldn't tell for certain where a man's loyalty lay if he didn't grow a little impassioned once in a while. Whether he got angry at you or something else was irrelevant. Loo-Macklin never got angry at nothing, Lal thought. Never shouted, never got involved.

Robots acted like that, and at least they had the virtue of predictability. Lal found them more understandable than Loo-Macklin.

He checked his minichronometer, an exceedingly finely wrought instrument which he wore on his left pinky finger. It provided not only the time of day and related statistics but also the time on Terra and Restavon. Suitably instructed, it would also offer up computer readouts detailing the various workings of his syndicate.

He left his guests alone for a moment while he used the instrument to see how things were going with the expansion of his drug operations in the southern cities of Trey and Alesvale. Figures blinked at him: production up twenty-four percent, income up 132,000 credits for the first tenth of the year, south quadrant up five percent, north up six, western up sixty-three (have to see who was running western Trey/Alesvale, he thought) and so on, each sector reporting in via the tiny computer link.

Eastern quad up forty-five percent ... _that was Miles Unmaturpa,_ he remembered. _Good man. Production beginning locally was running a deficit of 42,000 credits for the first half year of operation ... only normal, start-up was expensive, he knew. Bribes, construction costs running to some 20,000 credits ... you're going to die, Hiram Lal ... expansion to southern Alesvale tubes

He stopped the flow of information, frowning at the tiny screen, and backed the last series of statistics up, then ran them forward again at half speed. The pinkylink was linked directly to the master syndicate computer located in securitysealed A Tube. Either one of his programmers was playing a most humorless joke on the boss (in which case he might find himself suddenly as full of holes as an irradiated programming card) or else

He gestured across the floor. Two very large gentlemen who'd been admitting the guests left their positions flanking the single entryway and made their way unobtrusively through the milling crowd of laughing, sophisticated citizens. While he waited for them to arrive, Lal played back the insolent section of material a third time.

...costs running to some 20,000 credits ... you're going to die, Hiram Lal ... expansion to southern tubes

No, he hadn't imagined it.

"Something wrong, sir?" said the dark man in the brown jumpsuit looming over him.

He held up his finger and showed them the screen, ran through the message for them. "What do you make of this, Tembya?" The two men exchanged a glance, shrugged.

"Beats me, sir. Some foul-up down in programming."

"Maybe something like that. Maybe a sick joke. I don't like sick jokes." He thought a moment, looked sharply at the other giant. "Olin, has Gregor reported back to you yet?"

"No, sir, not yet." The man checked his own information viewer, which was larger and not nearly as precise as Lal's. It blinked on his wrist.

"No. Nothing from him yet."

"That's your responsibility," said Lal. "Why haven't you notified me before now?"

The man shifted uncomfortably. "I didn't think the delay anything remarkable, sir. Gregor promised to notify me as soon as he'd finished the job."

"You think maybe he hasn't finished yet?"

"Excuse me, sir," said Tembya, "but the delay strikes me as excessive. It's hardly likely that this kid Loo-Macklin, if his habits are as predictable as I've heard, would suddenly up and vanish for a whole day. Still, I suppose it's possible. Especially on the day of his first kill.

"If that's the case then he's probably off somewhere collecting his guts. So maybe Gregor and his bullywot are still squatting there in the guy's apartment waiting for him to show his face. Loo-Macklin may be greenpussed somewhere after sizzling his veins."

"Not this guy, not this Loo-Macklin," murmured Lal. "He's not the type. Why d'you think I wanted him vaped?"

"I never thought about it," said Tembya dutifully. "That's not my job."

"I know, I know." Lal waved him off nervously. "I tell you, this kid's weird. Almost like he's not human, 'cept that I know for a fact that he is. I've been watching him for six years. Never saw him get involved in anything except himself. No drugs, no liquor, no stimulants of any kind. Keeps to himself. I think he's been with a woman once or twice. Straight current, no deviations, no aliens, but no involvements of any kind, either.

"He just gives me the shivers. He's too smart for his own good. Tries to hide that, but he can't. Not over six years he can't."

"If you say so, sir," said Olin quietly.

"Anyway," Lal told him, "you check up on Gregor. Find out where he is now, if he's stuck in the apartment or following this kid around the publicways. I want to know. Tell him no more subtlety. I'll worry about any consequences, witnesses, or stuff. But I want it done now."

"Right, sir."

Lal's attention shifted to the other man. "Tembya, I want you to take a full squad. Get ... let's see, Mendez, Marlstone, Hing-Mu, Sak, and Novronski. Get onto the search programs and find this guy. If Gregor's not finished with him, or tracking him, then something's gone wrong. I've never known Gregor to be this late on a simple vape before."

"Why don't I just wait until Olin," and the big man looked over at his counterpart, "checks in with Gregor? Like he said, they might just be stuck in this ghit's apartment, waiting for him to come home."

"I don't want to wait," Lal told him firmly, "and I've no intention of leaving the party. I owe it to my guests to stay visible, understand?"

Both men nodded affirmatively. "Yes, sir," they said and turned to leave.

Lal turned away from them, his eyes roving over the crowd. Just a small hitch, he assured himself. Nothing to spoil an evening over. Tembya and Olin would take care of things now. He could relax, enjoy himself.

Ah, there was Orvil Hane Pope ... "Oppie" to his friends. He was a member of Cluria's Board of Operators, the select group of men and women who ran the master city computer, which, in turn, followed the programming of Computer Central on Terra. They were the human part of the government.

Oppie was rumored to be absolutely incorruptible. It was said that he attended parties given by noted illegals for the pleasure of seeing what new methods of bribery they would try to invent to seduce him. His weakness and preference for young boys was a very tightly kept secret, an illegal affectation.

Well, Lal would toy with him for a while. No need to rush things. The corruption of Oppie was something he'd had in the works for years.

The presence of the Operator was the principal reason for the party. Oppie's nephew was getting married and Lal had generously offered to throw a preceremonial get-together. You never knew which approach might work best with a legal. Things were so much more straightforward in the underworld. He started toward the Operator.

The floor jumped up and hit him in the face.

A section of wall ten meters high and as wide caved in behind him. Beyond lay two other rooms, and beyond that the polluted night of Evenwaith.

The outside atmosphere immediately came rushing into the open room. Shaken guests, some of them badly injured and bleeding, picked themselves up and began scrambling for masks and shields. Initial cries of fear and pain gave way to gasping and racking coughs as the surge of pollution entered their lungs.

Lal lay pinned beneath a heavy section of steel table. Blood trickled down his forehead and into his eyes. Around him the sounds of wheezing and outrage echoed through the settling dust and smoke. He shouted for Tembya, for Olin, but it came out a croaking gasp.

None of his other people were in sight, not even a waiter. Suddenly a figure loomed shadowy before him, the smoke swirling around its stocky silhouette. It didn't move but stood still staring down at him, as inanimate as a piece of furniture.

Lal's eyes widened and he tried again to scream, but his throat refused to cooperate. The face of the figure was largely obscured by the now dense pollution and the still settling dust, but there was no mistaking that apelike build.

"Stupid, stupid," Lal whispered toward it. "What good will it do you?"

"Quite a lot, I think." The breathing membrane of Loo-Macklin's mask gave his deep voice an unusually hollow tone. "I didn't want to do this. I'd hoped to strike out on my own in a couple of years. You forced me into it."

Lal found he could lift his head slightly. He strained, saw other bodies scattered around the ruined ballroom, looked back toward Loo-Macklin.

"For somebody who hadn't killed a soul until yesterday, you're sure as hell making up for lost time, mollywobble."

"I'm not enjoying any of it," came the distant reply. "Just doing what I have to do."

"So I made a mistake. We all make mistakes." Lal tried to raise himself up, to pull free of the table's weight. Something creaked and the pressure on his hip redoubled. He remembered a time when he could lift twice the weight of anyone centimeters taller than him, but that was many years ago. As his physical strength had ebbed, he'd substituted guile, equally effective and far less strenuous. But he wished he had that thirty-year-old body now, for just a few minutes.

He reached up with an open hand.

"You've proved your point. I underestimated you. So did Gregor, or you wouldn't be here now."

Loo-Macklin nodded.

"Well, I confess I didn't think much of you, kid, but I'm going to have to revise my opinion. I'm big enough to admit when I've been wrong. Give me a hand up out of this mess and we'll see about finding you a position more suitable to your abilities. How about Gregor's? You've sure earned it."

"I've earned more than that." Loo-Macklin walked over, reached down and took the proffered right hand. But he didn't move to extricate the syndicate boss from beneath the table.

"That's better," said the hopeful Lal, smiling but only on the outside. _Where the hell were Tembya and Olin?_ At the first hint of danger they should have rushed to his side. _Lousy ghits! Well they_'d suffer for it._ Lal had no room in his organization for those who lost either their wits or their guts when the unexpected showed itself.

In the background he could hear the rising whistle of approaching sirens. Rescue teams responding to the scene of the disaster. Good.

"I didn't know you knew a damn thing about explosives," he told Loo-Macklin admiringly.

"I know quite a lot about a number of things you don't know I know about." Loo-Macklin raised the tiny gun in his other hand and touched the muzzle to Lal's forehead.

At that instant the little warning from his pinkywink came back to Lal, together with sudden realization. There was astonishment in his voice.

"You put that death threat in the files. You got into the computer somehow."

Loo-Macklin nodded again.

"But that's impossible!"

"I've been planning that for years, too. I thought access might be helpful, not to mention necessary. I was right. As to your little job offer, sorry. See, I'm promoting myself."

"You can have any position in the syndicate you want." Lal's self-control was beginning to splinter. The plastic muzzle was cold against his forehead. "I'll make you second in line, reporting only to me. You'll be rich and your status will probably double."

Loo-Macklin sighed. "I played fair and honest with you for six years, Lal. I followed every one of your stinking, degrading orders and did everything you told me to, up to and including the murder yesterday. You respond by trying to have me killed. So I'm promoting myself."

"I don't understand." Lal's voice had sunk to a breathy whisper. "None of this was in your profile none of it. You're not the revenge-oriented type."

"Who said this has anything to do with revenge?"

Lal finally broke. "What then? What the hell are you trying to prove!"

"I am trying to prove something, I suppose," came the thoughtful reply. "Trying to prove something to myself, among the more practical considerations."

"What? What's that?"

"It wouldn't mean anything to you, even if I could explain it clearly. You wouldn't, couldn't understand, any more than a fly can understand why a spider spins its web circular, or spiral, or square, or just haphazardly. It doesn't really make any difference to the fly, of course, but sometimes wonder if the spider isn't equally curious."

"You're crazy," Lal husked. "I was right about you all along. I should've gotten rid of you years ago, you're completely insane."

"I'm not insane," said Loo-Macklin, "just curious. You're right about one thing, though."

"I ... anything, anything you want!" Lal was screaming now.

"You should have gotten rid of me."

He pulled the trigger

The basement of the city was very quiet. Loo-Macklin always relaxed there, away from the

swarms of citizens above. His shoulders barely squeezed past the entrance of the narrow ventilation duct. He knew they would because he'd crawled this way many times before.

His backpack scraped against the roof of the crawl tube and he tried to press his belly flatter against the floor. The components and other equipment carefully stowed in the pack were delicate. If they busted against the ceiling his trip would be wasted.

From far ahead came the soft hum of massive machines and the steady whir of powerful fans. The river of cooled air in which he'd been crawling for the past half hour threatened to chill him.

He turned the temperature control of his sweater up another notch and the thermosensitive threads immediately grew hotter. A light showed ahead, on his right. It took him only a few minutes to undo the seals. Then he was slipping out into the dim light of the basement.

He was careful to reseal the plate behind him. There were guards, but they were stationed at the entrances, outside the doors people normally used. Programmers did not come out of the walls, like mice.

He hefted the backpack higher on his shoulders and started across the polished alumin floor. The room wasn't very big -- barely half the size of an average warehouse. It was populated by long, homogenous rows of individual consoles set against information banks that rose from floor to ceiling.

There were usually two seats at each console station, sometimes more, rarely only one. Each station was enclosed in its own transparent plastic dome. The domes would turn away metal-cutting torches, most lasers, and anything else of a portable destructive nature.

A few of the domes were occupied. Their inhabitants were busy and paid no attention to the powerful young man who strode down the aisles. These smaller domes served as communal storage and record-keeping facilities for private citizens. The larger storage facilities, those holding the records of big companies and the government, were located elsewhere.

In addition to the domes owned by communal citizens' groups, there were a few owned entirely by single, wealthy citizens. Most served small businesses. Perhaps a dozen or so out of the several hundred were owned by fictitious companies that were fronts for the dozen syndicates, which dominated Cluria's underworld. The information they held could be read out from a number of remote stations, such as in-home consoles or marvels of miniaturization like Lal's pinkywink.

But information could only be entered from here, from the basement storage facilities. It made record-keeping safe. You couldn't rob a computer if you couldn't gain access to it.

Loo-Macklin turned down another aisle. No one challenged him. There was only one way into the basement and that was through the multiscreened, security-guarded entrance to the east. If you were in the basement then you had a right to be there, by definition.

He found the cubicle he wanted, number sixty-three, and inserted the code card. He'd spent months working on that card, just in case someday he might have to use it. He waited patiently for the internal sensors to pattern and process the code. Though he exhibited no outward signs of nervousness inwardly he was worried.

The card would probably fool the identification monitor, but not the far more sophisticated security sensors. ~~What they hopefully would not detect was the unique alarm suppressant instruction~~ built into the code. The machine would read the forgery and sound the alarm, but the security circuit would feed back according to the card's Moebius pattern, cycling over and over on itself. The alarm would go off, all right. It just wouldn't travel any farther than the boundary of the dome.

Only one person would be alerted by the security system to the fact that an intruder was inside: himself.

As he entered, the red warning light on the console came to life. His means of concealing this alert from any wandering guards involved far less than the months he'd spent supervising the design of the Moebius circuit for the admittance card. He put a handkerchief over the light.

Then he took the right-hand chair, activated the console, and fiddled with programming for a while in case some hidden monitor he hadn't detected during his earlier excursions chanced to be focused on him. He learned nothing, since he knew none of the proper call-up codes, but to any casual observer he would have appeared appropriate.

It didn't matter that the information that was locked in the computer was sealed away from his gaze. He wasn't interested in stealing information, just as he wasn't interested in stealing the codes. Everyone thought that to gain access to computer storage you had to know the right call-up codes. But you didn't have to know the existing codes. They were hard to steal.

When he was certain he wasn't under surveillance he slid the backpack off his shoulders. It yielded tiny cartridges and long, thin cylinders that looked like black pencils. He touched a few contact switches. Tiny doors and panels obediently sprang open above the console.

He studied the exposed circuitry intently, then began removing components and replacing them with selected items from his pack. It took him over an hour, not because he was unsure of location or method but because he wanted to ensure no hidden alarms were built into the fabric of the storage bank itself.

In the event that he missed such an alarm and guards came running down the corridor with guns to see who had illegally entered dome sixty-three, he would use the last device in his pack. It was a small, rectangular blue gadget about the size of a peach pit. Flipped into one of the open panels, it would make an awful mess of the storage bank, not to mention the entire interior of the little dome.

It would also make an awful mess of himself, but that was a necessary risk.

However, no one bothered him, no anxious faces showed themselves at either end of the aisle. Five minutes after the hour he'd entered the dome he gathered up his clutch of substituted components and modules, slipped them into the backpack, and left. Once outside the dome he closed the door and removed the forged admit card. There was no alarm, of course, since the dome was now properly sealed and protected. With the removal of the card and its integrated Moebius circuit the alarm system was free to sound once again: only now there was no reason to. No intruder trespassed within range of the alarm.

Loo-Macklin retraced his steps. Two citizens appeared as he was unlatching the cover to the air

conditioning duct. They didn't spare him a glance. Why should they? People sometimes attempted to imitate famous people, or guards, or politicians, but no one had any reason to imitate a maintenance worker. There were always maintenance personnel in the basement, keeping it functioning smoothly.

It had been an enlightening if busy night, Loo-Macklin thought. He'd particularly enjoyed the session in the basement. He enjoyed working with computers.

Many a pleasant hour had passed in his apartment while he'd absorbed all the information the city university had to impart concerning his personal computer unit, others both large and small, even up to and including the massive, incredibly complex units which formed the basis of every city and planetary government.

He'd earned more than one master's certificate in both repair and programming -- talents, which Lal had not been aware of.

Perhaps someday he might even have the opportunity to make legal use of such abilities. That would be nice. Machines were easy to get along with. They were always reasonable, never subject to human foibles or emotions.

Not that Loo-Macklin wished that he was a machine; robot or computer. He enjoyed being human. It gave you a flexibility no mechanical could ever hope to possess. It was a silly thought, anyway. Might as well be content with the condition you're born into.

But it would have been much easier on Kees van Loo-Macklin if he'd been born a machine

III

They came for him late the next evening. There were twelve of them and they had trouble all fitting in his modest living room. One was sent to hunt him out while the others waited tensely. There were as many different types of weapons in the living room as there were people.

The plethora of devices was unnecessary, since he didn't intend to give them the slightest excuse to shoot him. He knew that wasn't their intent or instructions or they'd all have piled into his bedroom blazing away. The fact that eleven waited on one was proof they had other ideas.

He relaxed on his bed and changed the channel on the video monitor from the closed-circuit survey of the living room to an entertainment show. The antics of its performers left him puzzled, as usual.

The door whispered and he glanced to his right as the hunter entered. Huntress, he corrected himself. She was very young. He smiled unconsciously. Typical of the crew in the living room to send the youngest to see how he'd react.

She was attractive, in a hard sort of way, with flat cheeks and her hair done up in a short braid. She carried a spraygun in both hands and was sweating noticeably. A girl, he thought. Not all that much younger than himself, in years. Decades younger in other ways. He kept his attention on her trigger finger and thought how best to relax her. He was more worried about her nerves than abilities

~~"I've been expecting you," he told her pleasantly, "though not quite so many."~~

She stiffened slightly, wondering how he knew that. "Now you just shut up," she said bravely. "You just shut up and come along quietly. There's people wants to talk to you." She gestured with the gun.

Loo-Macklin swung his legs off the bed, continued smiling at her. "I expected that, too. I'm ready. You just take it easy with that vaper because I don't intend to cause you any trouble. I don't like to cause people trouble, especially people as pretty as you."

"That's not the way I hear it."

"Sometimes people cause me trouble, however. I won't try anything. I know why you're in here alone. I don't imagine you volunteered. It's the nature of the kind of organization we work for."

"I work for," she corrected him. "From what I'm told, you don't work for it anymore."

"I guess not. Please ease your finger off that trigger. Even if you tried to fire a warning shot with that sprayer, you couldn't aim anywhere in this room without hitting me. A sprayer's not a selective weapon, and it's messy. Your employers would be upset if I happened to get dead before they could talk with me. Besides, why should I try anything? You've got eleven overarmed backups behind you."

"Am I supposed to be surprised you know that?"

"No." He smiled wider. It was a very pleasant smile. He knew it was ... he'd practiced it often enough in front of the mirror and had critiqued its effectiveness as ruthlessly as he did the technique for quietly breaking a man's neck or programming a recalcitrant computer.

Some of the tension seemed to ebb out of her and her finger did ease off the trigger.

"There now," he told her, holding out both hands, "that's much better. Come on, why don't you put a binder on me? It's bound to get you a promotion. Maybe even raise your status a notch."

She took a step toward him, hesitated. "They told me you weren't to be trusted."

"That's one thing they've got wrong. I always keep my word. Always. I'm just careful not to give in situations where I know I won't be able to keep it. It's simpler than lying and makes for fewer complications later on." He gestured with his clenched hands at her. "Go on."

She considered a moment longer, then reached into a pocket while still keeping the muzzle of the sprayer pointed toward him and took out the thin strip of flexible glass. Carefully she wrapped it once around his wrists, pulling the figure eight tight. Then she flicked the tips off the open ends and touched them together. They fused instantly. A special cutting torch would be required now to free him. No human, not even Loo-Macklin, could break free of that transparent grip.

She stepped back. "There," he told her, "now, wasn't that easy?"

"You're awfully calm about this." She was holding the gun loosely, now that he was effectively

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