

CLASSICS TO GO
**THE MAN WHO
STAKED
THE STARS**
AND TWO MORE STORIES



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Content

1. [The Man Who Staked the Stars](#)
2. [Contagion](#)
3. [The Natives](#)

The Man Who Staked the Stars



Bracing themselves, Bryce and Pierce gave the body a combined strong shove toward Earth. Two gone.

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

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

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

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

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

"That's an interesting thought," said Donahue. It would be a long three day trip to the Moon and he had expected to be bored, but this conversation was not boring. "What do you do?" he again asked. "Specifically." Donahue had rugged features, a dark tan and attractively sun-bleached hair worn a little too long. He exuded a sort of rough charm which branded him one of the class of politicians, and he knew how to draw people out, so now he settled himself more

comfortably for an extended spell of listening. "Tell me more and join me in a drink." He signalled the hostess and continued with the right mixture of admiring interest and condescending scepticism. "You don't chant spells and hire ghosts, do you?"

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

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

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

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

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

The men at the long table waited, showing a variety of bored expressions that never had any connection with their true reactions. The chairman was a small, inconspicuous, sandy-haired man whose ability they respected so deeply

that they had elected him the chairman to have him where they could watch him. They knew he was not one to mention trifles, and there was a moment of silence. "All right, John," said one, letting out his held breath and leaning back, "I'll bite. What kind of illegal purposes?"

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

"Funny coincidence," someone grunted.

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

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

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

UT's unity from city to city and country to country, its spreading growth had saved the public much discomfort and expense of overlapping costs and transfers and confusion, and so the public, on the advice of economists, grudgingly allowed UT to grow ever bigger. There was a conservative movement to put all such outsize businesses under government ownership as had been the trend in the last generation but the economy was mushrooming too fast for the necessary neatness, and the public rightly would not

trust politicians in any operation too confusing for them to be watched, and preferred to leave such businesses to private operation, accepting the danger for the profit of efficient and penurious operation, dividends and falling costs.

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

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

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

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

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

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

The chairman answered mildly. "It was a company statistician in the publicity department who noticed it. He

was looking for favorable correlations, I believe." His pale blue eyes ranged across their faces, touching Bryce Carter's face expressionlessly in passing. "I requested that he tell no one else until I had investigated." He added apologetically, "Commitments for drug addiction correlate too."

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

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

"I think so," said the chairman.

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

"It would seem likely, yes."

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

It was not an appealing prospect.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I've heard of that," said Wan Lun, remembering. "It has been said that they not only do not inform others of the fact of treatment but frequently do not inform the man under treatment but seem to be only a new friend until—poof." He

smiled. "I think the guild name is Manoba. The Manoba Group."

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

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

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

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

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

Everyone laughed.

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

"Seconded, how about five hundred thousand?"

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

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

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

"I so move."

"Seconded."

"Carry it to a vote."

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

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

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

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

"Seconded."

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

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

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

There was silence a moment—Neiswanger looking at his neat fingernails, Bryce Carter smoking, and smiling slightly as he always smiled, Stout leaning back casually scanning his eyes from face to face. Beldman lit a cigar and released a cloud of blue smoke with a contented sigh. No one spoke.

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

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