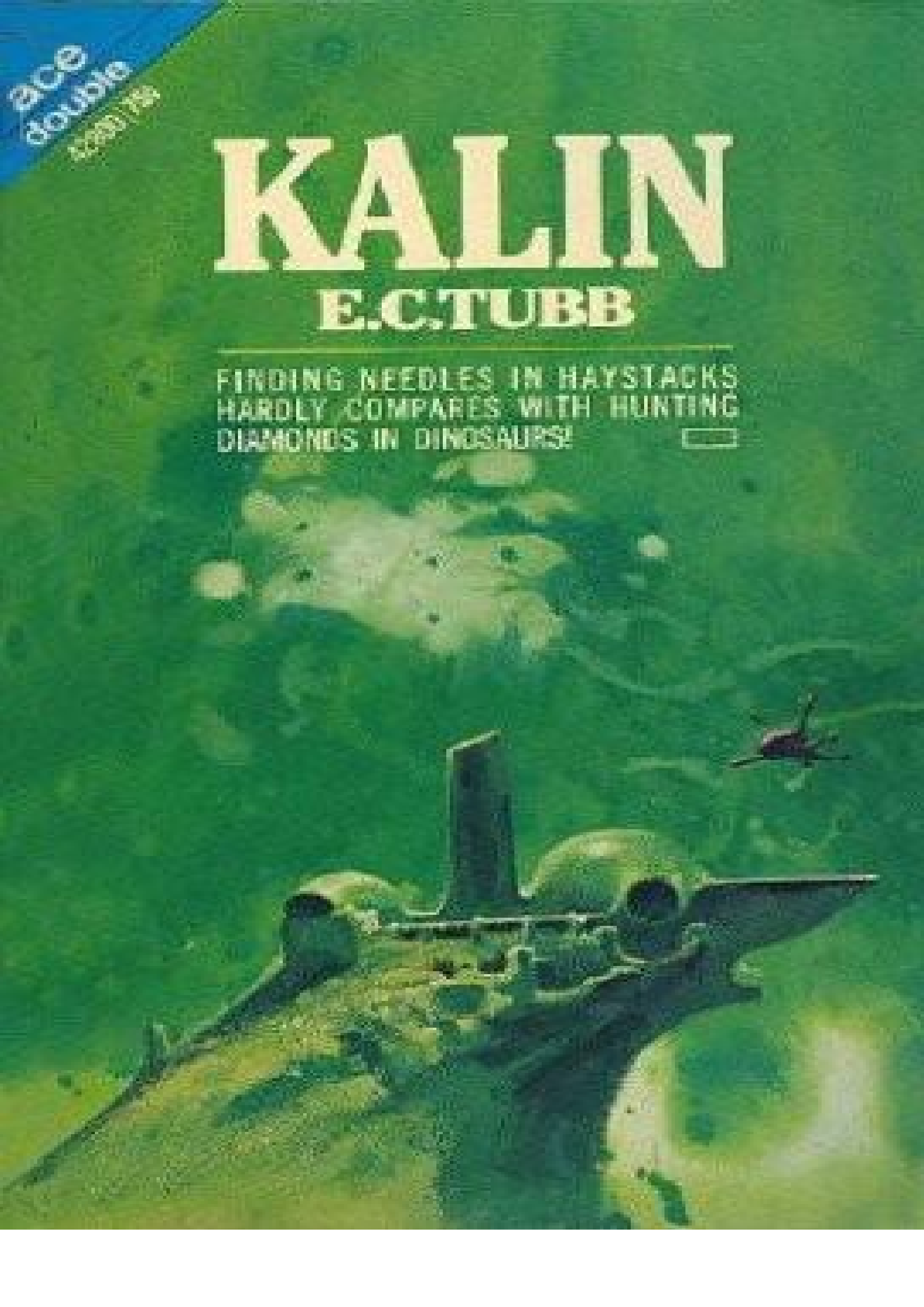


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KALIN

E.C.TUBB

FINDING NEEDLES IN HAYSTACKS
HARDLY COMPARES WITH HUNTING
DIAMONDS IN DINOSAURS!



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Kalin

#4 in the Dumarest series

Chapter One

IT WAS BLOODTIME on Logis and the captain was firm. "I am sorry," he said, "but I will take my chances. As passengers you are free to go or stay as you desire, but I must tell you this: if the perimeter fence should be penetrated I will seal the ship. And," he added significantly, "it will remain sealed until all danger is safely past."

"You would leave us outside?" The woman wore clothes too young for her raddled features, her cracked and aging voice. "Leave us to be killed?"

"If necessary, madam, yes."

"Incredible!" Gem-fire flashed from her hands as they moved in the cone of light streaming from above the open lock. "To treat your passengers so!"

Her companion, a scarred mercenary, growled deep in his throat. "The captain has no choice, my dear. His first duty must be for his ship." He looked at the officer. "Am I not right?"

"You are a man of understanding, sir," said the captain. "As you say, I would have no choice. Bloodtime on Logis is not a gentle period. Usually the field suffers no depredation, but beyond the fence anything can happen." His eyes, flat, dull, indifferent, glanced from one to the other. "Those who venture into town do so at their own risk. I would advise you all to restrain your curiosity."

A thin-faced vendor of symbiotes stared thoughtfully after the retreating figure. "He's exaggerating," he said. "Inflating the potential danger in order to keep us all nicely to heel."

"Maybe he is, but he wasn't joking about sealing the vessel." A plump trader fingered the charm hanging about his neck, a good luck symbol from one of the Magic worlds. He looked shrewdly at Dumarest. "You've traveled, Earl. You've seen a lot of the galaxy. What do you advise?"

Dumarest looked at the trader. "About what?"

"You heard what the captain said. Do you think he was exaggerating? Would it be safe for us to go and see the fun?"

Dumarest made no comment. From the vantage point at the head of the ramp on which they stood he had a good view of the city. It sprawled, an ill-lit shapeless conglomeration of buildings beyond the high wire mesh of the fence. It was barely night but already the red glow of fire painted the lowering clouds. The soft breeze carried the echoes of screams, shouts, the savage baying of a mob.

The woman shivered. "Horrible! Like animals. Dogs worrying a bone. Why?" she demanded. "Why in a so-called civilized community do they do it?"

Her companion shrugged. "It is their custom."

"Custom!" She wasn't satisfied. Her eyes met those of Dumarest, held, with dawning interest. "A word which explains nothing. Why do they throw aside all law, all restraint?"

"To cleanse themselves, my lady," said Dumarest. "At least, that is what they claim. Once, perhaps, the thing had purpose but now it has become a vicious habit. For three days the population of Logis will hunt and kill, hide and die." He looked at the flames. "Burn and be burned."

But not all of them. Only the weak and helpless, those without friends willing to lend their protection. The old days when harmful mutations, the insane, the crippled, the physically weak and morally vicious were culled from society were over. Now old scores would be settled, debts and grudges paid, revenge taken. A few politicians would be hunted down for their lying promises. Some cheating traders, businessmen, company heads would be sacrificed to appease the mob. But, when it was all over, those in power would still remain.

The woman shivered again at the echo of a scream. Her hand glittered as she touched the arm of her companion. "Let's go inside," she said.

"We can sit and talk and play cards, maybe. Listen to music, even. Anything but this. I have no love for the sounds of violence."

And, thought Dumarest watching, neither had the man. Not now. The mercenary was old and afraid of what the future could bring. A man who had too often seen the amniotic tanks, suffered the pain of wounds. Now he searched for a haven and the woman could provide it. She too had lived a hard life but, unlike the man, she had something to show for it. Jewels instead of scars. Together they could find comfort if not happiness.

Dumarest turned, breathing deep of the night air, suddenly conscious of his isolation and a little envious of those who did not travel alone. Behind him the trader shuffled, restless, his eyes reflecting the glow of mounting fires.

"Let's go down to the gate and take a closer look," he suggested. "That should be safe enough. We could take care and might see something interesting."

"We might," agreed the thin-faced vendor. He sucked in his cheeks. "It seems a pity to come all this way and see nothing. It won't happen again for another year and who knows where I'll be then?" He nodded, deciding. "All right. I'll come with you. How about you, Earl?"

Dumarest hesitated and then, slowly, followed the others down the ramp.

Guards stood by the gate, armed, armored and sullen. They were field personnel selected to remain stable during the three day period. They were carrying weapons which were rare on Logis— automatic rifles. These could fire a spray of shot as effective if not as lethal as lasers at short range. One of them glared as the three men approached.

"You going out or staying in?"

"Staying in," said the trader promptly. He squinted past the guards into the town. A wide road, apparently deserted, ran directly from the gate. "How bad is it?"

"Not bad at all," said the man. His face was hard, brutal beneath his helmet. "Those who asked for it are getting it." His face convulsed in sudden rage. "Damn it! I shouldn't be here at this lousy gate. I should be out there hunting down the bastard who stole my wife!"

"Take it easy," said one of his companions. He wore the insignia of an officer. "That's no way to talk. You got divorced, didn't you?"

"What's that got to do with it?"

"She got married again, didn't she?"

"So?"

"Forget it," said the officer. "I'm not looking for a quarrel. But you volunteered for gate-duty. You swore that you had no grudges to settle and that you could use the extra pay. So you're here and you're going to stay here for the duration. Get it?"

"Go to hell!"

"This is your last chance, Brad."

"—you!"

The officer reached out and snatched the rifle from the guard's hands. "All right," he said coldly. "That's enough. Now beat it."

"What?" The man blinked. "Now wait a minute!" he stormed. "I've got a right to—"

"You're relieved," snapped the officer. "I don't want you on this gate. Now get to hell out of here while you've still got the chance."

Dumarest looked at the officer as the man walked away mouthing threats. "He'll get you for this."

"No he won't," said the officer. "Brad's a coward and a bully and that's a poor survival combination. He's made too many enemies and won't last until dawn." He sucked thoughtfully at his teeth. "A little insurance wouldn't hurt though," he mused. "I know his ex-wife. She's a decent woman married to a trained fighter. I'll tip them off about what has happened. Just in case," he explained. "Some rats have a lot of luck and Brad might just about make it to their apartment."

"But that's as far as he'll get," said Dumarest.

"Sure," agreed the officer. "That's the whole idea." He walked to where a booth stood beside the gate, to a phone and his warning call.

Dumarest joined his companions where they stood looking down the road. There was little to see. Fires sent drifts of smoke billowing across the street. The sound of breaking glass came from the business section where shops which had economized on shutters were providing meat for the looters. A band of men appeared, lurched toward the gate and then disappeared into a tavern. Light shone from the open door but quickly vanished as the panel slammed. The trader licked his lips.

"A drink," he said. "I could do with something to wet the gullet." He licked his lips again. "How about it, Earl? Shall we walk down to that tavern and order a bottle? Hell," he added, "why not? No one can possibly have cause to hate us on this planet, so where's the danger?"

It was there: Dumarest could smell it, sense it riding like smoke on the air. The blood-craze of normally decent people suddenly relieved of all restraint. More. Proving themselves by being the first to accuse, the loudest to complain, the quickest to act.

Among such people, how long would a stranger last?

The thin-faced vendor moved restlessly. He was getting cold and bored and thought longingly of the comfort waiting in the ship. Also he should attend to his samples. That symbiote from Een: it was time he wore it. If he put it off too long the thing would encyst to sporofulate which, if not tragic, would be an inconvenient nuisance.

A shout came from down the road. A man lurched from between two buildings, a bottle in one hand, a long knife in the other. He crossed the street, stood swaying, then vanished down an alley. Another followed him, a woman with long, unkempt hair. She carried a crude club made of a stone lashed to a stick. Crude, but effective enough if swung against a skull. On Logis revenge wasn't forestalled by poverty.

"She's after him," said the trader. "Did you see that, Earl? She's tracking him down as if he were a beast. Waiting until she can sneak up on him and smash in his head." He chuckled. "Unless he sees her first," he qualified. "He wasn't carrying that knife for fun."

"Murderers," said the vendor. He sounded disgusted. "Let's get back to the ship and breathe some clean air."

The trader bristled. "Now wait a minute—"

"Murderers," repeated the vendor. "Not you, them. I enjoy a little excitement as much as the next man but what are we seeing? An even match? A regulated bout with ten-inch knives, first-blood

winner or to the death? An even melee? Listen," he emphasized. "I've got a couple of symbiotes in the ship which will give you all you could hope for. You ever seen leucocytes chase malignant bacteria? With one of my pets you can really join in. Mental affinity achieved on a sensory plane and, what's more, the thing takes care of you while you feed it. Really takes care." He winked. "Guess what I mean?"

"I can imagine." The trader hesitated. "These symbiotes come expensive, right?"

The vendor nodded. "Tell you what," he suggested. "I'll rent you one. I've got a thing from Een which would suit you right down to the ground." He read the other's expression. "You're wondering if they're safe. Would I be selling them if they weren't? They're symbiotes, man, not parasites. They give you something in return for what they take. Look," he urged. "Ask anyone. The captain, the medic, anyone. They'll tell you the same."

"All right," said the trader. "I'm convinced. Let's get back to the ship." He looked at Dumarest. "Coming, Earl?"

Dumarest didn't answer. He was staring down the wide street. A flicker of gold showed in the distance. It vanished, reappeared with a sudden burst of resplendency, vanished again as a leaping flame died. It shone again with reflected brilliance, coming nearer, closer, with the sound of racing feet. Beside him the trader sucked in his breath.

"By God," he whispered. "It's a girl!"

She came running down the road, long legs flashing beneath the hem of a golden tunic. It was cut away from her arms, her throat, falling to mid-thigh and cinctured with a crimson belt. Flame red hair was bound with a fillet of gold. Sandals of gold hugged her feet showing the scarlet of painted nails. Her face was deathly pale, the eyes enormous, the red lips parted as she fought for breath.

Behind her seethed a yammering, screaming mob.

"They'll get her," breathed the seller of symbiotes. He looked pale, sick. "They'll run her down for sure."

"Run her down and tear her apart," agreed the trader. He narrowed his eyes. "She's trying to reach the gate," he murmured. "With luck she might make it. Not that it'll do her any good but—" He broke off as she tripped and fell, naked flesh white against the gold, white and gold stark against the flame-bright cobbles of the street. "She's down!" he groaned. "They'll get her now for sure." He sensed movement, the shifting of the guards, the stir of displaced air. "Earl!" he yelled.

"Earl, you crazy fool! Come back here!"

Dumarest paid no attention. He ran, face hard as he estimated time and distance. He could reach the girl before the mob. He might just be able to reach her and return to the gate before they covered the distance. It was a thing he had to try.

She looked up at him, eyes pools of green fire in the translucent pallor of her face. Her hands lifted, white butterflies of defense. "No!" she said. "No!"

His words were quick, harsh. "I mean you no harm. Can you stand? Run?"

She moved, winced. "My ankle—"

There was no time for more. He stooped, gripped her wrist and hauled upward. The impact of her body was light on his shoulder. He felt the smoothness of her naked thigh against the palm of his left hand, the warmth of her body against his cheek. He ran toward the gate, seeing the faces of the assembled guards, their lifted weapons, the watchful eyes of his two companions.

"Earl!" called the trader. "Behind you!"

Something struck his leg. Something else clawed at his arm. He spun, lashing out with his free hand, saw a snarling face fall away. A man, quicker than the rest, had reached him and had tried to tear

the girl from his shoulder. Dumarest set her on her feet and thrust her toward the gate.

"Move!" he ordered. "Hop if you have to, but move!"

"But you—"

"Damn it, girl, don't argue!"

He turned just in time to avoid an ax swinging at his skull. He stepped backward, caught the haft, tore it free and slammed the side of the blade into the wielder's mouth. He fell, spitting teeth and blood, screaming as feet trod him to the stone. A knife flashed in the firelight. Dumarest lifted an arm and blocked the blade. It slashed his tunic; the edge sliced through plastic and grated on the metal weave below. He struck out with the ax, felt it stick, released the haft as a thumb gouged at his eyes. He kicked and felt bone snap beneath his boot. With both hands stiffened he moved slowly back toward the gate: chopping, stabbing with his fingers, kicking, using elbows and head as a weapon. Lashing out, always on the move, always on the attack.

Abruptly he was standing alone, ringed by savage faces, the moans and whimpers of the injured rising above the soft rustle of advancing flames, the ragged sounds of breathing.

A man spat a mouthful of blood. "Listen," he said. "I don't know who you are but we want that girl. Do we have to kill you to get her?"

"You could try," said Dumarest.

"We can do more than that," said the man. "You're one against the lot of us. You're quick and you're fast but how long do you think you can hold out?"

"Be sensible," urged someone from the rear of the crowd. "What's the girl to you? Hell, man, why lose your life trying to protect someone you don't even know?"

"You've done enough," said a third. "Maybe you don't understand, so we'll let it go. But try to stop us again and you'll get taken apart."

Dumarest edged a little further from the ring of faces. They were talking, normally a good sign: men who talk rarely act. But these people were degenerate rabble taking advantage of the Bloodtime to slake their lust for violence. They were talking to summon up their courage, not to arrive at a compromise.

Dumarest glanced over his shoulder. The girl stood before the assembled guards, her eyes wide as she watched the mob. Why didn't she pass through the gate into the field?

The first speaker wiped blood from his mouth. "She can't escape," he said. "The guards won't let her through the gate. Only those with booked passage are permitted on the field at Bloodtime. There's no sanctuary in there."

Dumarest raised his voice and called to the trader. "Seegihm."

"Earl?"

"Get a message to the captain. Have him book a passage for the girl at my expense. Use the phone and pass her through when it's done."

A woman screamed from the rear of the mob. "Mister, you're crazy! You don't know what you're doing. That girl's a witch!"

"That's right!" roared a man. "A dirty, filthy, stinking witch! She hexed my daughter so that she aborted!"

Others took up the chorus. "She called up a wind to rip the roof off my barn!"

"I had a whole brewing ruined through her!"

"My boy lost an eye!"

"She dug a hole and my wife fell in it and broke a leg!"

"I bought stock and went broke. She did it!"

The shouts became an animal snarl.

~~"She did it! She did it! Witch! Stinking, lousy witch! Kill her! Burn her! Flay her alive! Kill! Kill Kill!"~~

Dumarest retreated as they began to advance, then heard the frenzied shout of the trader.

"Back, Earl! Back! It's all fixed!"

He turned and dived for the gate, seeing the girl pass through with a flash of red and gold and gleaming white. The guards closed in behind him, presenting a solid front to the screaming mob, their hands tight on their weapons, their eyes oddly red.

"Witch!" shrieked a voice. "Don't let her get away!"

The mob howled, indifferent to personal danger, hurling themselves against the guards, their guns the fence, smashing it beneath the pressure of their bodies, racing across the field to where Dumarest and the others ran up the ramp and into the open lock seconds before the captain sealed the ship.

Chapter Two

HER NAME WAS KALIN and she really was a witch.

She sat facing Dumarest at the table in the lounge of the ship, watching as he shuffled a deck of cards. They were alone. Seegihm, the trader, lay in his bunk, a purple symbiote wreathing his neck, his eyes closed in a sleepless dream. The vendor was busy with his stock. The woman and her companion stayed in her cabin. The crew, as always, took care not to mingle with the passengers.

"Now," said Dumarest. He cut the deck into three stacks. "You know this game?"

She nodded. "Highest, lowest, man-in-between. You want me to pick the winning card?"

"If you can."

"This one," she said after a moment's thought. The tip of one slender finger rested on the left-hand stack.

Dumarest turned over the cards. The others showed a ten and a three; hers a seven. As man-in-between she would have won the pot. Again he shuffled, taking special care not to see the cards, taking even more care that the pips were shielded from her view. Again she chose the winning stack. And again, again—ten times in all before he called a halt.

Thoughtfully he leaned back and looked at the girl. She had bathed and the terror and strain had left her face and eyes. They were still green pools of fire, still enormous in the translucent whiteness of her face, but now she looked what she was, an amazingly attractive woman instead of a hunted animal.

"Kalin," he said. "Kalin what?"

She shrugged. "Just Kalin."

"No Family? No House? No Guild?"

"There are people who live without such things," she said. "You, for example."

"You know?"

"I guessed," she admitted. "But it's pretty obvious. You have the look of a man who has learned to rely on no one but himself. A man who has lived hard and alone. The way you saved me shows that. Other men would have waited for someone to tell them what to do. You simply acted. If you had hesitated I would have been killed."

"Hunted down for being a witch," he said. "Are you?"

"Am I what? A witch?"

He waited, watching.

"I don't know," she confessed. "Just what is a witch supposed to be? I told people things," she explained. "I wanted to be friendly and tried to warn them: a woman who ate bread made of diseased grain, a boy who was chopping wood and lost an eye, about a substance in which a woman fell. I warned them," she said bleakly. "But they took no notice and then, when they had hurt themselves, they blamed me."

"Naturally," he said. "They would hardly blame themselves for ignoring your advice." He paused, and then abruptly asked: "What were you doing on Logis?"

"I was born—"

"No," he interrupted. "You were never born on that planet. Not with your color skin and hair. And why try to lie to me? What's the point?"

"None," she admitted, "but sometimes a lie can save a lot of explanation." She lifted her head, meeting his eyes. "I was born a long way from here on a planet close to the Rim. Since then I've traveled a lot. I joined up with a necromancer who took me to Logis. We worked there: telling fortunes, reading palms, astrology, all that stuff. I think he had a sideline in chemical analogues. I know for sure that he dealt in abortifacets and hallucinogens. He tried to sell me a few times but I wouldn't be sold." Her eyes were clear, direct. "You understand?"

Dumarest nodded. "And?"

"I slipped a knife into him at Bloodtime. That made it legal. They couldn't touch me for doing that. The rest you know."

"Tell me."

She bit her lower lip, teeth white against the bloom of redness. "They came for me. The ones I'd tried to help. They were like animals. If I hadn't moved fast they would have torn me to pieces." She reached out and touched the sleeve of his tunic. "You saved my life," she said. "I'm not going to forget that."

He felt the warmth of her nearness, caught the scent of her hair, the biological magic of her body. Her eyes were green wells into which a man could immerse his being. The translucent skin reflected the light as if made of living pearl.

Deliberately he picked up the cards, shuffled and began to deal, the pasteboards vanishing from his hands to instantly reappear on the surface of the table. The magic of quicktime did that. Not accelerating the cards but slowing his metabolism down so that he lived at one-fortieth the normal rate. He, the girl, the others who traveled on High passage. The drug was a convenient method to shorten the apparent time of the journey, to shrink the tedious hours.

He leaned back, looking at the lounge, seeing the duplicate of a hundred others he had known on a many similar ships. Soft padding, a table, chairs, an overhead light. The inevitable furnishings of a small ship catering to few passengers.

"That one." Her finger touched a stack of cards. Unconsciously he had dealt for highest, lowest, man-in-between. He turned it over. Again she had picked the winner.

He rose, crossed to the spigots, drew two cups of Basic, handed one to the girl as he returned. Sitting, he sipped the thick, warm liquid. It was sickly with glucose, heavy with protein, laced with vitamins; a cupful contained enough nourishment to supply a spaceman's basic needs for a day. A heating element in the base of the container kept the liquid warm during its long journey from wall to table, from table to mouth.

Dumarest put down his empty cup and looked at the girl. "The people of Logis were right," he said. "You are a witch."

Her eyes clouded. "You too?"

He shrugged. "What else can you call someone who can see the future?"

"A freak," she said bitterly, and then, "How did you know?"

Dumarest reached out and touched the cards. "You won too often. It couldn't have been telepathy because I took care not to see the pips. You couldn't have cheated because you didn't touch the cards. Teleportation would serve no purpose unless you knew which stack to move where. And it couldn't have been simple luck, not with such a high score. So," he ended quietly, "there can only be one explanation."

Kalin was a clairvoyant.

The mirror was made of a lustrous plastic, optically perfect, yet cunningly designed to flatter the user when seen in a special light. Sara Maretta had no time for such deceit. Irritably she snapped on the truglow tube and examined her face. Old, she thought, and getting older. Too old and stamped with time and experience for ordinary cosmetics to be of much use, no matter how thickly applied. A complete face transplant was what she needed.

The fair skin and smooth contours of a young girl to replace the sagging flesh and withered skin. complete face-transplant and more. The breasts and buttocks, the thighs and calves, the arms and hands. Especially the hands.

I need a new body, she thought looking at them. A complete new body and, if rumor were true, she might get one. The surgeons of Pane, so it was whispered, had finally solved the secret of a brain transplant. For money, a lot of money, they would take out her brain and seal it within the skull of a young and nubile girl. It was a rumor, nothing more, yet a rumor she desperately wanted to believe.

To be young again! To watch the fire kindle in a man's eyes as he looked at her. To thrill to the touch of his hands. To live!

Looking at her, Elmo Rasch read her thoughts as if her mind had been an open book. The mercenary leaned against the wall of the cabin, eyes hooded beneath his brows, mouth a thin, cruel line. Deliberately he reached out and snapped off the truglow tube. With the dying of the harsh light she lost ten years of apparent age.

"Elmo?"

"Why hurt yourself?" he said quietly. "Why twist the knife for no purpose. Is it so necessary to be young again?"

"For me, yes."

"Was youth such a happy time?" His voice held bitterness. "If so you were luckier than I. But perhaps you enjoyed the Houses where you were paraded for sale. The mansions of depravity."

She looked at him and smiled without humor. "Where men like you," she said softly, "lined up to pay for pleasure you would not otherwise obtain."

"True." He dropped to sit beside her on the bunk, his thigh hard against her own. Reflected in the mirror his face was a mass of crags and hollows, the thin line of scar tissue a web-like tracery.

"Soon," he said. "Very soon now."

He saw the faint tremble of her hands. On her fingers the gems flashed in living rainbows. Elmo reached out, touched them with a blunt finger.

"Pretty, aren't they?" he said mockingly. "Good enough to delude, but you and I and any jeweler know what they are really worth. Stained crystal with plated settings. The cost of a short High passage, perhaps, certainly no more."

"Are your scars worth as much?"

"Less," he admitted. "Which is why we are together. Why we must work as a team. My experience and knowledge; your money. What you had of it. And," he said meaningfully, "you have very little left."

And that was as true as the rest of it. A lifetime of work to end in what? Degradation and poverty. Of what use was a woman when she was ugly and old? Sara looked at her companion. Elmo left much to be desired but he, at least, understood. And yet, woman-like, she wished that he had been other than what he was.

A man like Dumarest, for example. She could trust a man like that. Trust him to drive a hard bargain, perhaps, but to keep it to the bitter end.

Had she been younger he would not be traveling alone. Even now she could dream, but long ago she had learned to live within her limitations. She could love Dumarest but he would never love her.

And now, with that girl from Logis—

~~Irritably she shook her head. Dreams, stupid dreams at a time like this!~~

Elmo reached into his pocket and produced a flat case. He opened it and the light winked from polished metal and unbreakable glass. The hypogun was a work of art, a multi-chambered model calibrated to a hair. It would air-blast any one of a half-dozen drugs in a measured dose through clothing, skin and directly into the bloodstream.

"I could only afford one," he said. "But it's loaded and ready to go."

"Are you sure?" She was practical. "Are the drugs as specified? You could have been cheated," she pointed out. "Transients are easy prey."

Elmo growled deep in his throat. A mannerism to add emphasis. "The last man who tried to cheat me lost an eye. The drugs are good. I checked them before handing over the money. Your money," he said flatly. "But, Sara, never was cash more wisely spent."

Gem-fire betrayed her agitation.

"A few minutes," he said. "That's all it will take. A brief flurry of action and our troubles are over. The ship and all it contains will be ours. Ours, Sara! Ours!"

His eyes glowed and she wished that she could share his supreme confidence. And yet the plan made sense. To attack the crew, drug them into insensibility, take over the vessel was, basically, simple enough. Piracy, as a crime, was not unknown, but to take over a vessel was not enough. The thing was to dispose of it. Spacemen were clannish and united against all who threatened their security. Even the cargo of a stolen ship would be almost impossible to sell.

And yet Elmo claimed to have solved the problem.

It was possible he had, but his vagueness at times irritated her to the point of rebellion. Then he would remind her of what wealth could bring, but never could she forget the penalty of failure.

"You know what will happen if they catch us," she said. "Eviction into space with a suit and ten hours' air. Doped so that a scratch will feel like the slash of a knife. Our senses sharpened so that we'll scream our throats raw." Her hands clenched as she thought about it, the brown spots on their backs standing ugly against the skin. "Elmo! If they should catch us!"

"We'll die," he said. "A little before our time, perhaps, but we'll die and that is all. A few years lost against what? But we won't fail," he insisted. "I've been over this a thousand times. First the steward and his hypogun. It'll be loaded with quicktime. You take it and use it on the lower deck crew. I'll tackle the officers, a shot of serpenhydrate and they will be marionettes, helpless to do other than obey. They will alter course, take the ship where we want it to go, land it as it needs to be landed."

"And then?" She liked this part, liked to hear him say it again and again as though, by repetition, hope could be turned into fact.

"Money," he said thickly. "Enough to buy the new body you desire. Enough for me to hire an army and win a principality, a planet, an empire! The galaxy, Sara! Ours for the taking!"

Simple, she thought. So very simple. Too simple. Surely, somewhere, there must be a catch?

Then she caught sight of her face in the mirror and longing overwhelmed her doubts.

It was like the spread fingers of a hand. Five pictures, sometimes more, but only five were of any real use. The others were too vague, too hopelessly indistinct.

"The strongest one is the future," Kalin explained. "I concentrate and there it is. Like cards," she said. "I wanted to win so I looked to see which pack would win and chose that one."

And because she chose it, it won; because it won, she chose it. A closed cycle to ensure that the

visualized future would be correct.

"The other pictures?" asked Dumarest. "Are they alternates?"

She frowned. "I think so. Like the cards again. Two showed different packs which lost. Two, very vague, showed no cards at all."

Alternate universes, thought Dumarest. Or rather alternate futures in which they had not played cards or had stopped playing them. Unless?

"The time element," he said. "Can you determine it? Can you select how far you will see into the future? An hour, a day, a year?"

She shook her head, frowning. "No, not with any great accuracy. Some things are big and stand out even though the details are vague. Others, smaller and closer, are very clear. I could see the cards without trouble. I can see other things," she said. "One of them is very strong. You are kissing me," she told him. "That and something else." Her hand reached out for his own. "We are going to become lovers," she said quietly. "I know it."

"Know it?"

"It is there," she insisted. "When I concentrate about us and look into the future it is there and it is very sharp and very strong." Her eyes searched his face. "Earl! Is something wrong?"

He shook his head.

"Is the prospect so distasteful?"

He looked at her and felt her attraction. The biochemical magic of her flesh transmitted through sight and sound and smell. She was beautiful! Beautiful!

Beautiful and the possessor of a wild and wanton talent which caused men to call her witch!

She moved and a trick of the light turned her hair into a cascade of shimmering silver, painted elfin contours on her face. *Derai!*

Dumarest felt his nails dig into his palms, the sweat bead his forehead.

"Earl!" She moved and the illusion was broken. Once again the hair was billowing flame, the face a rounded pearl. "Earl, what is it?"

"Nothing. You reminded me of someone, that is all."

Jealousy darkened her eyes. "A woman?"

"Yes." He opened his hands and stared at the indentations on his palms. "Someone I once knew very well. Someone who—" He took a deep breath. "Never mind. She's been gone a long time now."

"Dead?"

"You would call it that."

He leaned back, again calm, able to stare at her with detachment. A clairvoyant. Someone who could see into the future. There were others with similar talents and some with even more bizarre; among the scattered races of mankind mutation and inbreeding had done their work, but all had one thing in common. All seemed to have paid a physical price for their mental abilities.

What was wrong with Kalin?

Mentally he shrugged; time alone would tell. In the meanwhile he could speculate on her talent. It must be like a man at sea sailing through objects misted with uncertainty. In the distance, looming gigantic though unclear, the mountain of death could be seen across a lifetime. Closer, the hills of agony, misfortune, birth, illness, disaster—visible for years. Then the things which could be determined for perhaps months. Smaller events unclear beyond a day. Trifles which had a visible range of minutes or even seconds.

To Kalin her talent was merely an extension of her vision.

He felt the warmth of her hand resting on his own, the strength of her fingers as she squeezed.

"Earl," she said. "Come back to me."

"I'm here."

"You were thinking," she said. "Of what? Places you have seen? People and planets you have known?" The fingers tightened even more. "Where is your home, Earl? Which planet do you call your own?"

"Earth."

He waited for the inevitable derision but, to his surprise, it didn't come. He felt a momentary hope. The girl claimed to have traveled. It was barely possible that she might—

"Earth," she repeated, and shook her head. "An odd name. Dirt, soil, loam, but you don't mean that of course. Is there really a planet with such a name?"

"There is."

"Odd," she said again, frowning. "I seem to have heard of it somewhere, a long time ago. When I was a child."

A child?

Age was relative. For those traveling Low time it had no meaning. For those traveling High, using the magic of quicktime, an apparent year was two generations. But no matter how time was judged, the girl could not be older than twenty or twenty-five biological years.

Less when the real standard was used. The only measure that had true meaning. Experience.

"Try to remember," he urged. "What you know about Earth."

She smiled. "I'll try. Is it important?"

Was a reason for living important? Dumarest thought of all the journeys he had made, the ships he had ridden, sometimes traveling High, more often traveling Low. Doped, frozen and ninety percent dead, riding in the caskets meant for the transport of animals, risking the fifteen percent death rate for the sake of economy. Traveling, always traveling, always looking for Earth. For the planet which seemed to have become forgotten. The world no one knew.

Home!

He waited, watching her as she closed her eyes, frowning in concentration, doing what came hard to her—looking back instead of forward, fighting her natural inclination.

Was the price she paid for her talent the inability to recall the past?

She opened her eyes and saw the impatience registered on his face, the hope. "I'm sorry, Earl."

"You can't remember?"

"No. It was a long time ago. But I'm sure that I've heard the name somewhere. On a tape or in a book, perhaps. Earth." She repeated it softly to herself. "Earth."

"Or Terra."

She raised her eyebrows.

"Another name for Earth," he explained. So much, at least, had he learned. "Does it strike a chord?"

"I'm sorry, Earl, I wish that it did but—" She shrugged. "If I were back home I could have the library searched, the records. If it was there I would find it."

"Home," he said. "Where is that?"

"Where my love is," she said and then, "Forgive me, Earl, I didn't mean to joke. But you look so solemn." She narrowed her eyes as if just thinking of something. "Earl, if you come from this planet Earth, then surely you must know the way back. Can't you simply go back the way you came?"

Dumarest shook his head. "It isn't as simple as that. I left when I was a boy: young, scared, alone. Earth is a bleak place scarred by ancient wars, but ships arrive and leave. I stowed away on one. The

captain was old and kinder than I deserved. He should have evicted me but he allowed me to live." He paused. "I was ten years old. I have been traveling ever since: moving deeper and deeper into the inhabited worlds, into the very heart of the galaxy, becoming, somehow, completely lost." He smiled into her eyes. "You find it strange?"

"No," she said. "Not strange at all. Home," she mused. "The word holds a magic that is unique."

"And your home?" His voice was soft, gentle—picking up the trail of her thought so that she responded automatically, without thinking, without restraint.

"Solis."

"Solis," he repeated, "where the library is, the clue to Earth you mentioned." He reached out and pinched a tress of hair between finger and thumb. "I think," he said gently, "that I had better take you home."

Chapter Three

BROTHER JEROME, High Monk of the Church of Universal Brotherhood, tucked thin hands within the capacious sleeves of his robe and prepared to enjoy his single hour of daily recreation. As usual he chose to walk alone, sandals noiseless on the smooth plastic of floors, ramps and stairs. Again, as usual, he varied his route: taking in a little more of the vast building which, like the Church, was under his direct control and authority. A monk skilled in topography had worked out that, if Brother Jerome maintained the area covered by his daily perambulations, it would take well over a year for him to fully inspect the entire building. Today he chose to walk beside some of the chambers of indoctrination, conscious in his sedate pacing of the quiet hum of ceaseless activity. It was a comforting sound and one he liked to hear. It reassured him that the Church was thriving and strong and growing as it must: expanding so as to carry the message to people everywhere that the Universal teaching of complete Brotherhood held the answer to all pain, all hurt, all despair. No man is an island. All belong to the *corpus humanite*. The pain of one is the pain of all. And if all men could be taught to recognize the truth of the credo—*there, but for the grace of God, go I*—the millennium would have arrived.

He would never see it. Men bred too fast, traveled too far for any monk now alive to see the fruition of his work. But it was something for which to live, a purpose for their dedication. If a single person had been given ease of mind and comfort of spirit, then no monk had lived and worked in vain. The strength of the Church rested on the importance of the individual.

He paused beside the door, shamelessly listening to the voice from within the chamber. Brother Armitage was giving a group of novitiates the initial address. They had passed the twin barriers of intelligence and physical ability; now he assailed their minds.

"... this. Why do you wish to become monks? That question must be answered with frankness, honesty and humility. Is it in order to help your fellow man? No other answer can be accepted. If you hope for personal reward, for gratitude, power or influence, you should not be here. A monk can expect none of these things. If you seek hardship, privation, the spectacle of pain and anguish, then the Church does not want you. These things you will find, but they are not things to be sought. Man is not born to suffer. There is no intrinsic virtue in pain."

True, thought Brother Jerome, grimly, Armitage was a good teacher: hard; tough; ruthless when it came to weeding out the unsuitables, the masochists, romantics, would-be martyrs and saints. Later he would show the class his scars and deformities, tell them in detail how the injuries had been inflicted and how, incredibly, he had managed to survive. Some would leave then. Others would follow, most after the hypnotic session in which they suffered a subjective month of degrading hardship. Simulated, naturally, but terrifyingly effective. Those remaining would progress to be taught useful skills, medicine, the arts of hypnosis and psychology, the danger of pride and, above all, the virtue of humility.

One class among many, all working continuously, all doing their best to meet the constant demand for Hope-trained monks. There were other schools on a host of planets, but always those trained in the heart and center of the Church were in greatest demand. They carried the pure teaching, they had been taught the most modern methods and techniques; what they knew they could pass on.

Like a continuous stream of healing antibiotics, thought Brother Jerome. The metaphor pleased

him. An endless series of ripples, he thought, spreading, cleansing, widening to impinge on every planet known to mankind. A great flood of love and tolerance and understanding which would finally wash away the contamination of the beast.

There was tension in the office. Brother Jerome sensed it as soon as he returned and he halted in the outer room, letting his eyes take in the scene. The wide desk with its normal office machinery. The waiting space with the seats for those who had appointments. The monks who acted as office staff and others—young, hard-bodied men born on high-gravity worlds, trained in physical skills and always found where there was need of care and protection. Brother Fran, of course, his personal secretary, and a man who stood with his back to a wall.

Curiously the High Monk looked at him, guessing that he must be the cause and center of the tension. He was tall, wearing a transparent helmet and a full, high-collared cloak which covered him from shoulder to heel. The fabric was of a peculiar golden bronze color and glinted as if made of metal. Above the high collar the face was scarred, aquiline; the nose a thrusting beak between smoldering, deeply set eyes. He glanced at Brother Jerome as he entered the room, then looked away as if he'd seen nothing of interest.

Fran came forward, his face calm above the cowl of his robe. "Brother," he said without preamble. "This man insists on seeing you. He has no appointment."

"I insist on seeing the High Monk," grated the stranger. "I will stand here until I do."

Brother Jerome smiled, appreciating the jest though it was obvious his secretary did not. He took two steps and faced the stranger. "Your name?"

"Centon Frenchi. I live on Sard."

"Is not that one of the vendetta worlds?"

"It is."

Jerome nodded, understanding. "If you wish you may discard your cloak," he said gently. "Such defensive clothing is unnecessary on Hope. Here men do not seek to kill each other for the sake of imagined insult."

"Be careful, monk," warned Centon harshly. "You go too far."

"I think not," said Brother Jerome evenly. He glanced to where two of the watchful attendants had stepped forward, and shook his head. He would not, he knew, have need of a bodyguard. "What is the nature of your business on Hope?"

"I will tell that to the High Monk."

"And if he does not wish to listen?" Jerome met the smoldering eyes. "You are stubborn," he said.

"And you are also unrealistic. Why should you be permitted to jump the line of those who have shown the courtesy to make an appointment? Who are you to dictate what shall and shall not be?"

"I am Centon Frenchi of Sard!"

"Others too have names and titles," said Jerome smoothly. "Can you not give me one good reason why you should be given preference?"

Centon glowered at the waiting monk. He glanced around the office, empty but for the watchful staff. "No one is waiting," he said. "How can I give preference over people who are not here?"

"This is not a day for interviews and audiences," explained Brother Fran from where he stood to one side. "The High Monk has many other duties and you are keeping him from them."

"Him?"

"You are speaking to Brother Jerome, the High Monk of the Universal Brotherhood."

Jerome saw the shock in the Sardinian's eyes, the flicker of disbelief. It was a familiar reaction and went with love of pomp and insistence on privilege. His age and frailty they could accept, for it took

time to mount the ladder of promotion. His sandals and rough, homespun robe, exactly the same as that worn by any other monk begging in the streets, were harder to swallow. The concept behind his lack of ornamentation was sometimes beyond their capacity to understand.

And yet, he thought wearily, it was so very simple. He was a man no better, and he hoped no worse, than any other monk of the Brotherhood. Why then should he set himself apart? And to wear costly garments and gems would be to make a mockery of that in which he believed. But how could a man like Centon Frenchi understand that? Realize that to any monk the cost of a jewel to wear on his finger was to rob others of food...? Such baubles came expensive when measured in the price of suffering and pain which would otherwise have been negated.

"I am waiting," he said patiently. "If you are unable to convince me, then I must ask you to leave. You can," he added, "make an appointment for a later time."

The watchful monks moved a little closer, tense and ready for action. Centon looked at them, stared at Jerome. Breath hissed through his nostrils as he inflated his lungs. "I have supported the Church," he said tightly. "At times I have been most generous."

"And now you want something in return," said Jerome. "It is a natural reaction. But what you want and what others are willing to give need not be the same. I suggest you make an appointment in the normal manner."

He turned, feeling deflated, empty. Pride, he thought bitterly. A man makes a prison in which to live and calls it his pride. Sometimes the prison is so strong that he can never break out. Again he heard the hiss of inhalation. Something caught at his garment.

"Brother!" Centon's voice was almost unrecognizable. "Help me, Brother! For the love of God, help me!"

Jerome turned, smiling, waving off the guarding monks. His hand fell to the one gripping his robe. Centon's hand: big, scarred, the knuckles white as he gripped the fabric. "Of course, brother!" said the High Monk. "Why else am I here?"

The inner office was a sanctuary in which Brother Jerome spent most of his waking hours. It was a comfortable place, a curious blend of the ultra-modern and near-primitive. Books lined the walls, old moldering volumes together with spools of visual tape, recording crystals, impressed plastic and molecularly-strained liquids which, when stimulated, resolved themselves into mobile representations in full, three-dimensional color.

There were other things. Little things for the most part, for a monk has to carry what he possesses and weight and size are limiting factors. A fragment of stone, a shell, a plaited length of plastic wire. A piece of curiously carved wood, a weathered scrap of marble and, oddly, a knife made of pressure-flaked glass. Centon looked at it, then at the placid face of the monk seated behind his wide desk. "An unusual object," he said. "Did you make it?"

"On Gelde," admitted Jerome. "A primitive, backward planet only recently rediscovered. The natives had forgotten much of what they knew and had developed a metal-worshiping religion. They confiscated my surgical instruments. I made that knife as a general purpose scalpel and used it during my stay." He dismissed the knife with a gesture. "And now, brother," he said gently, "you asked for my help. Tell me your problem."

Centon approached the desk and stood before it, the reflected light gleaming from his protective cloak. "I need to find my daughter."

Jerome remained silent.

"She left home many years ago," said Centon. "Now I need to find her."

"And you think that we can help you?"

"If you cannot, then no one can!" Centon strode the floor in his agitation, his stride oddly heavy. belong to a noted family on Sard," he said abruptly, then immediately corrected himself.

"Belonged." His voice was bitter. "Can one man claim to constitute a family? We held wide estate owned factories, farms, a fifth of the wealth of the planet was ours. And then my younger brother quarreled with the third son of the family of Borge. The quarrel was stupid, something over a girl, but there was a fight and the boy died." He paused. "The fight was unofficial," he said. "Need I tell you what that means?"

On the vendetta worlds it meant blood, murder, a wave of savage killing as family tore at family. "You could have admitted guilt," said the monk quietly. "Your younger brother would have paid the blood-price and ended the affair."

"With his death? With each Borge coming and striking their blow, abusing his body, killing him a dozen times over? You think I could have stood for that!" Again the floor quivered as Centon strode in agitation. "I tried," he said. "I offered reparation to the extent of one-third of our possessions. I offered myself as a surrogate in a death-duel. They wanted none of it. One of their number had died and they wanted revenge. Three weeks later they caught my younger brother. They tied his feet to a branch and lit a fire beneath his head. His wife found him that same evening. She must have gone a little mad because she took a flier and dropped fire on the Borge estates, destroying their crops and farms. They retaliated, of course, but by then we were ready." He paused, brooding. "That was five years ago," he said. "That is why I need my daughter."

"To fight and kill and perhaps to die in such a cause?" Brother Jerome shook his head. "No."

"You refuse to help me find her?"

"If she were in the next room I would refuse to tell you," said the monk sternly. "We of the Church do not interfere in the social system of any world, but we do not have to approve of what we see. The vendetta may be good from the viewpoint that it cuts down great families before they can establish a totalitarian dictatorship but, for those concerned, the primitive savagery is both degrading and cruel. He paused, shaking his head, annoyed with himself. Anger, he thought, and condemnation. Who am I judge and hate? Quietly he said, "If my words offend you I apologize."

"I take no offense, Brother."

"You are gracious. But is it essential that you find your daughter? Do you need her to end the vendetta?"

Centon was curt. "It is ended."

"Then—?"

"The family must be rebuilt. I am the last of my name on Sard. The name of Borge is but a memory."

Brother Jerome frowned. "But is your daughter necessary for that? You could remarry, take extra wives. You could even adopt others to bear your name."

"No!" Centon's feet slammed the floor as he paced the room. "It must be my seed," he said. "My line that is perpetuated. The immortality of my ancestors must be assured. It would be useless for me to take extra wives. I cannot father a child under any circumstances. Aside from my daughter I am the last of my clan and I am useless!"

Standing, facing the desk, he swept open his long cloak. Metal shone in the light: smooth, rounded, seeming to fill the protective material. Brother Jerome stared at half a man.

The head was there, the shoulders, the arms and upper torso but, from just below the ribs, the fles

of the body merged into and was cupped by a metal sheath. Like an egg, thought the monk wildly. The human part of the man cradled in a metal cup fitted with metal legs. He took a grip on himself. Too often had he seen the effects of violence to be squeamish now. The cup, of course, contained the surrogate stomach and other essential organs. The legs would contain their own power source. In many ways the prosthetic fitments would be better than the fleshy parts they replaced but nothing could replace the vital glands. It was obvious that Centon could never father a child.

"We miscounted," he explained dully. "I was to blame. I thought all the Borge were dead but I overlooked a girl. A child, barely fourteen, who had been off-planet when the vendetta had begun. She was clever and looked far older than her age. She gained employment as a maid to my nephew's wife. Mari was expecting a child, a son, and was two months from her time. We held a small dinner party to celebrate the coming birth—and the bitch took her chance!"

Brother Jerome pressed a button. A flap opened in his desk revealing a flask and glasses. He poured and handed a glass to his visitor. Centon swallowed the brandy at a gulp.

"Thank you, Brother." He touched his face and looked at the moisture on his finger. "I'm sorry, but each time I think about it—" His hands knotted into fists. "Why was I so stupid? How could I have been such a fool?"

"To regret the past is to destroy the present," said the High Monk evenly. "More brandy?"

Centon scooped up the replenished glass, drank, set it down empty. "The dinner party," he continued. "All of us around a table. All that were left of the Frenchi clan on Sard. Myself, Mari, her husband Kell, Leran who was eight and Jarl who was eleven. Five people left from almost a hundred. It had been a bitter five years."

Brother Jerome made no comment.

"The Borge bitch was waiting at table, in attendance in case Mari should need her aid. She dropped something, a napkin I think, and stooped beneath the table. The bomb had a short fuse. The fire spread and caught her as she was trying to escape. She stood there, burning, laughing despite her pain. I shall always remember that. Her laughing as my family died." Centon took a deep breath, shuddering. "They burned like candles. I too. The flame charred my legs, my loins, but I had risen and was leaning over the table pouring wine. The board saved me. Somehow I managed to reach the escape hatch. By the time help arrived the room was a furnace and I was more dead than alive."

He wiped a hand over his face, dried it on his sleeve. "Often, when in the amniotic tank and later when relearning to walk I wished that they had let me go with the others. Then some of the pain died little and I began to live again. Live to hope and plan and dream of the future."

He stepped close to the edge of the desk and leaned forward, arms supporting his weight, hands resting flat on the wood. "Now you know why I need my daughter," he said. "Need her. I do not lie to you, monk. I pretend no great or sudden love. But, without the girl the family is ended."

"Not so," corrected Jerome quickly. "She could be married with children of her own. The line will continue."

"But not on Sard! Not on the world we have won with our blood and pain!" Centon straightened, controlled himself. "And she may not have children yet," he pointed out. "She may never have them. She may die or be killed or rendered sterile. I want to find her. I must find her," he insisted. "I will pay anything to the man who can tell me where she is. The man," he added slowly, "or the organization."

Jerome was sharp. "Are you trying to hire the services of the Church?"

"I am a rich man," said Centon obliquely. "But I come to you as a beggar. Help me, Brother. Ask your monks to look for my daughter. Please."

The monks who were on every habitable world. Eyes and ears and sources of information. In the

slums and the palaces of those who ruled, the homes of the wealthy and the streets of the poor. Everywhere the message of tolerance needed to be sown, which was everywhere in the galaxy.

Thoughtfully the monk pursed his lips. "You have a likeness of the girl? Some means by which to identify her?"

Centon plunged his hand into an inner pocket and laid a wafer of plastic on the desk. Brother Jerome looked at the flame red hair, the pale, translucent skin, the green eyes and generous mouth. A panel gave details as to height, weight, measurements, vocal and chemical idiosyncrasies.

"Her name is Mallini, Brother. You will help me to find her?"

"I promise nothing," said the High Monk. "But we shall do our best."

Chapter Four

ELMO RASCH CHECKED the time and spoke to the woman. "Now."

She hesitated, trembling on the brink of irreversible action, then stiffened as she summoned her resolve. The reward was too great to be dismissed. Against renewed youth, death was a thing without terror. She rose and stepped toward the door of the cabin. Without glancing at the man she stepped outside into the passage. The steward sat in an open cubicle facing the lounge, a book open on his lap. It was of a type designed to educate and entertain those who were illiterate. The steward was not uneducated but, among spacemen, certain volumes held a special attraction. He looked up as Sara approached, and touched a corner of the page. The moving illustration of naked women faded, the whispering voice died. Casually he closed the book.

"Could I help you, my lady?"

"I feel ill," she said. "Sick. Have you something to reestablish my metabolism?"

She watched the movement of his eyes as, unconsciously, he glanced to where he kept his hypogun. It would be a common model loaded with quicktime for the benefit of those traveling High but it would serve her purpose.

"It would not be wise to travel Middle, my lady," protested the steward. "The journey is long and there will be complications."

Too many complications. More food and not the easily prepared Basic. The need for entertainment, books, tapes, films perhaps. The need for constant attendance and she had the look of real harridan. And, more important, the captain would be far from pleased. It was the steward's job to keep things simple. Complications would cost him an easy berth.

"Look, my lady," he suggested. "Why don't you—"

His voice died as her fingers closed around his throat in a grip learned from her third lover. Deliberately, she squeezed the carotids, cutting off the blood supply to the brain. A little would result in unconsciousness, too much in death. Unconscious men could wake, cause trouble. It was better to make certain he died.

The hypogun in her hand, she looked back at her victim. He sat slumped in his chair. Time was precious but little things were important. She opened his book and rested it on his lap.

Naked woman twined in sinuous embrace to the accompaniment of a whispering drone of carnal titivation.

Elmo looked at her face and nodded his satisfaction. "You did it. Good. You have the hypogun?"

She lifted it, put it into his hand. He lifted his own and shot her in the throat.

She felt nothing, not even the blast of air forcing the drug it carried into her bloodstream, but abruptly things changed. The lights dulled a little, small sounds became deeper pitched, surroundings took on a less rigid permanency. The latter was psychological.

Elmo stood facing her, the hypogun in his hand, motionless.

Motionless and utterly at her mercy.

He had made a mistake in neutralizing the quicktime in her blood before speeding his own metabolism. She could kill him now. She could do anything she wanted. She could do—nothing.

He had insisted that she kill the steward to prove herself, to blood her hands. He had treated her

first in order to show his trust or to point out her weakness. To kill him was now to double her fault.

Reaching out she took the hypogun from rigid fingers, maneuvering it with care to avoid broken bones and torn flesh. She aimed, triggered, watched as he jerked back to normal-time existence.

"Tough," he said, and shook his head as if to clear his senses. "I don't—" He broke off and concentrated on what had to be done. He ejected a vial from the steward's instrument and replaced it with one from his pocket. "Just to make sure." He handed Sara the hypogun. "Now get moving and inject everyone you meet with quicktime. As long as we stay normal we'll have the edge." He stood looking at her. "Well?"

"We'll be apart," she said. "Out of touch. What if something goes wrong?"

"Nothing can go wrong." He stole time to be patient despite the screaming need for haste. "We've been over this a dozen times. Now move!"

He watched as she vanished from the cabin and down the passage toward the lower region of the ship. The scars writhed on his face as he watched her go. He who had once commanded the lives and destinies of a hundred thousand men to now be dependent on one old woman. And yet her desperation made her the equal of any. He could have done far worse.

Turning, he ran from the cabin toward the upper regions of the ship where the officers guided the vessel through the tortuous rifts of space.

Dumarest opened his cabin door and looked at the girl standing outside. Her eyes were wide, anxious.

"Earl, something is wrong."

He stood back to let her enter. "Wrong with you? The ship?"

"The ship, I think; it isn't very clear. I was lying down thinking of us. I was looking ahead, trying—" She shook her head. "Never mind what I was looking for, but things were all hazy and dim almost as if there were no future at all. And that's ridiculous, isn't it, Earl? We're going to be together for always, aren't we?"

"For a while at least," he said. "All the way to Solis if nothing else."

"You promise that?" She gripped his hand and pressed, the knuckles gleaming white beneath the pearl of her skin. "You promise?"

He was startled by her intensity. "Look ahead," he suggested gently. "You don't have to take my word for anything. You are able to see the future. Scan it and satisfy yourself."

She swallowed, teeth hard against her lower lip. "Earl, I don't want to. Suppose I saw something bad. If I'm going to lose you I don't want to know about it. Not for certain. That way I'll always be able to hope. It isn't nice knowing just what is going to happen, Earl. That's why I'd rather not know."

"But you looked," he pointed out. "You tried."

"I know, but I couldn't help myself. I wanted to be sure but, at the same time, was frightened of knowing the worst. Does that make sense, Earl?"

Too much sense, he thought bleakly. That was the price she had to pay for her talent. The fear it could bring. The temptation to use it, to be sure, against the temptation not to use, to retain hope. And how long could the desire simply to hope last against the desire to know for certain?

"You said something about the ship," he said thoughtfully. "That you thought something might be wrong. Would be wrong," he corrected. "What did you see?"

"Nothing too clear," she said. "Faint images, a lot of them, stars and—"

"Stars? Are you sure?"

"Yes, Earl, but we're in space and surely that's natural."

~~Wrong, he thought bleakly. From a ship in space stars were the last thing anyone would expect to see. Not with the Erhaft field wrapping the cocoon of metal in its own private universe and allowing it to traverse the spaces between worlds at multi-light speeds. Stars could not be seen beyond that field. If she saw them it could only mean that, somehow, the field had collapsed. But when? When?~~

"Look," he said, suddenly worried. "Look now. Concentrate. Tell me what you see an hour from now."

"I can't, Earl. I told you. I don't know just how far I can visualize. Not with any degree of accuracy. A few seconds, even a few minutes, but after that I can't tell with any certainty. That's what frightened me. We aren't together and we should be. We should be!"

"Steady!" He gripped her shoulders, holding her close, trying to dampen her incipient hysteria. "The images were faint, weren't they?" He waited for her nod. "That means they showed an alternate future of a low degree of probability. Now be calm. We'll try an experiment. Think of this cabin. Concentrate. What do you see?"

She closed her eyes, frowned. "The cabin," she said. "Empty."

"Clear?"

"Yes, Earl."

"Try again. Aim further. Still the cabin?"

She nodded. "Still empty and very clear."

He looked around, frowning. This wasn't getting them very far. If only there had been a calendar clock hanging on the bulkhead instead of a mirror it might have helped. The mirror?

"Try again," he said. "Concentrate on the mirror. Can you see a reflection in it?"

"No."

"Not even the door? Is it open or closed?"

"Open."

So they had left the cabin and gone somewhere, leaving the door open. But when? She could be scanning a few minutes from now or even across the space of months to when the compartment waited for a new occupant.

"Earl," said Kalin suddenly. "Something's happening. There's a light in the corridor outside."

He turned, saw the closed door, realized that she was still looking ahead, telling of what was yet to come.

"A light," she continued. "It's getting brighter and—" She screamed, horribly, mouth gaping so that he could see her tongue, the warm redness of her throat. Her hands lifted, clamped to her eyes. "Earl, Earl, I'm blind! Blind!"

"No," he said. "You can't be."

She moaned from behind the shield of her hands.

"Kalin, look at me. Damn you, look at me!" Dumarest tore the hands from her face, stared into her eyes. "It hasn't happened yet," he said slowly, giving emphasis to each word. "Whatever it was is still to come. So it can't have affected your sight. You're not blind. Do you understand? You're not blind, Kalin. You can't be."

"Earl!"

"Look at me," he insisted. "What did you see? What happened. Tell, me. Damn you, girl, tell me!"

His harshness was a slap across the face. She looked at him, wonderingly, then shuddered.

"There was a burst of light," she said. "Hard, cold, greenish blue. It was terrible. It burned through my eyes and seared my brain. It wiped out the whole universe." She began to cry. "I mean that, Earl. I

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