

STAR SURGEON



ALAN E. NOURSE

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by

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STAR SURGEON

CHAPTER 1

THE INTRUDER

The shuttle plane from the port of Philadelphia to Hospital Seattle had already gone when Dal Timgar arrived at the loading platform, even though he had taken great pains to be at least thirty minutes early for the boarding.

"You'll just have to wait for the next one," the clerk at the dispatcher's desk told him unsympathetically. "There's nothing else you can do."

"But I *can't* wait," Dal said. "I have to be in Hospital Seattle by morning." He pulled out the flight schedule and held it under the clerk's nose. "Look there! The shuttle wasn't supposed to leave for another forty-five minutes!"

The clerk blinked at the schedule, and shrugged. "The seats were full, so it left," he said. "Graduation time, you know. Everybody has to be somewhere else, right away. The next shuttle goes in three hours."

"But I had a reservation on this one," Dal insisted.

"Don't be silly," the clerk said sharply. "Only graduates can get reservations this time of year—" He broke off to stare at Dal Timgar, a puzzled frown on his face. "Let me see that reservation."

Dal fumbled in his pants pocket for the yellow reservation slip. He was wishing now that he'd kept his mouth shut. He was acutely conscious of the clerk's suspicious stare, and suddenly he felt extremely awkward. The Earth-cut trousers had never really fit Dal very well; his legs were too long and spindly, and his hips too narrow to hold the pants up properly. The tailor in the Philadelphia shop had tried three times to make a jacket fit across Dal's narrow shoulders, and finally had given up in despair. Now, as he handed the reservation slip across the counter, Dal saw the clerk staring at the fine gray fur that coated the back of his hand and arm. "Here it is," he said angrily.

"See for yourself."

The clerk looked at the slip and handed it back indifferently. "It's a valid reservation, all right, but there won't be another shuttle to Hospital Seattle for three hours," he said, "unless you have a priority card, of course."

"No, I'm afraid I don't," Dal said. It was a ridiculous suggestion, and the clerk knew it. Only physicians in the Black Service of Pathology and a few Four-star Surgeons had the power to commandeer public aircraft whenever they wished. "Can I get on the next shuttle?"

"You can try," the clerk said, "but you'd better be ready when they start loading. You can wait up on the ramp if you want to."

Dal turned and started across the main concourse of the great airport. He felt a stir of motion at his side, and looked down at the small pink fuzz-ball sitting in the crook of his arm. "Looks like we're out of luck, pal," he said gloomily. "If we don't get on the next plane, we'll miss the hearing altogether. Not that it's going to do us much good to be there anyway."

The little pink fuzz-ball on his arm opened a pair of black shoe-button eyes and blinked up at him, and Dal absently stroked the tiny creature with a finger. The fuzz-ball quivered happily and clung closer to Dal's side as he started up the long ramp to the observation platform. Automatic doors swung open as he reached the top, and Dal shivered in the damp night air. He could feel the gray fur that coated his back and neck rising to protect him from the coldness and dampness that his body was never intended by nature to endure.

Below him the bright lights of the landing fields and terminal buildings of the port of Philadelphia spread out in panorama, and he thought with a sudden pang of the great space-port in his native city, so very different from this one and so unthinkably far away. The field below was teeming with activity, alive with men and vehicles. Moments before, one of Earth's great hospital ships had landed, returning from a cruise deep into the heart of the galaxy, bringing in the gravely ill from a dozen star systems for care in one of Earth's hospitals. Dal watched as the long line of stretchers poured from the ship's hold with white-clad orderlies in nervous attendance. Some of the stretchers were encased in special atmosphere tanks; a siren wailed across the field as an emergency truck raced up with fresh gas bottles for a chlorine-breather from the Betelgeuse system, and a derrick crew spent fifteen minutes lifting

down the special liquid ammonia tank housing a native of Aldebaran's massive sixteenth planet.

All about the field were physicians supervising the process of disembarkation, resplendent in the colors that signified their medical specialties. At the foot of the landing crane a Three-star Internist in the green cape of the Medical Service—obviously the commander of the ship—was talking with the welcoming dignitaries of Hospital Earth. Half a dozen doctors in the Blue Service of Diagnosis were checking new lab supplies ready to be loaded aboard. Three young Star Surgeons swung by just below Dal with their bright scarlet capes fluttering in the breeze, headed for customs and their first Earthside liberty in months. Dal watched them go by, and felt the sick, bitter feeling in the pit of his stomach that he had felt so often in recent months.

He had dreamed, once, of wearing the scarlet cape of the Red Service of Surgery too, with the silver star of the Star Surgeon on his collar. That had been a long time ago, over eight Earth years ago; the dream had faded slowly, but now the last vestige of hope was almost gone. He thought of the long years of intensive training he had just completed in the medical school of Hospital Philadelphia, the long nights of studying for exams, the long days spent in the laboratories and clinics in order to become a physician of Hospital Earth, and a wave of bitterness swept through his mind.

A dream, he thought hopelessly, a foolish idea and nothing more. They knew before I started that they would never let me finish. They had no intention of doing so, it just amused them to watch me beat my head on a stone wall for these eight years. But then he shook his head and felt a little ashamed of the thought. It wasn't quite true, and he knew it. He had known that it was a gamble from the very first. Black Doctor Arnquist had warned him the day he received his notice of admission to the medical school. "I can promise you nothing," the old man had said, "except a slender chance. There are those who will fight to the very end to prevent you from succeeding, and when it's all over, you may not win. But if you are willing to take that risk, at least you have a chance."

Dal had accepted the risk with his eyes wide open. He had done the best he could do, and now he had lost. True, he had not received the final,

irrevocable word that he had been expelled from the medical service of Hospital Earth, but he was certain now that it was waiting for him when he arrived at Hospital Seattle the following morning.

The loading ramp was beginning to fill up, and Dal saw half a dozen of his classmates from the medical school burst through the door from the station below, shifting their day packs from their shoulders and chattering among themselves. Several of them saw him, standing by himself against the guard rail. One or two nodded coolly and turned away; the others just ignored him. Nobody greeted him, nor even smiled. Dal turned away and stared down once again at the busy activity on the field below.

"Why so gloomy, friend?" a voice behind him said. "You look as though the ship left without you."

Dal looked up at the tall, dark-haired young man, towering at his side, and smiled ruefully. "Hello, Tiger! As a matter of fact, it *did* leave. I'm waiting for the next one."

"Where to?" Frank Martin frowned down at Dal. Known as "Tiger" to everyone but the professors, the young man's nickname fit him well. He was big, even for an Earthman, and his massive shoulders and stubborn jaw only served to emphasize his bigness. Like the other recent graduates on the platform, he was wearing the colored cuff and collar of the probationary physician, in the bright green of the Green Service of Medicine. He reached out a huge hand and gently rubbed the pink fuzz-ball sitting on Dal's arm. "What's the trouble, Dal? Even Fuzzy looks worried. Where's your cuff and collar?"

"I didn't get any cuff and collar," Dal said.

"Didn't you get an assignment?" Tiger stared at him. "Or are you just taking a leave first?"

Dal shook his head. "A permanent leave, I guess," he said bitterly. "There's not going to be any assignment for me. Let's face it, Tiger. I'm washed out."

"Oh, now look here—"

"I mean it. I've been booted, and that's all there is to it."

"But you've been in the top ten in the class right through!" Tiger protested.

"You know you passed your finals. What is this, anyway?"

Dal reached into his jacket and handed Tiger a blue paper envelope. "I should have expected it from the first. They sent me this instead of my cuff and collar."

Tiger opened the envelope. "From Doctor Tanner," he grunted. "The Black Plague himself. But what is it?"

"Read it," Dal said.

"You are hereby directed to appear before the medical training council in the council chambers in Hospital Seattle at 10:00 A.M., Friday, June 24, 2375, in order that your application for assignment to a General Practice Patrol ship may be reviewed. Insignia will not be worn. Signed, Hugo Tanner, Physician, Black Service of Pathology." Tiger blinked at the notice and handed it back to Dal. "I don't get it," he said finally. "You applied, you're as qualified as any of us—"

"Except in one way," Dal said, "and that's the way that counts. They don't want me, Tiger. They have never wanted me. They only let me go through school because Black Doctor Arnquist made an issue of it, and they didn't quite dare to veto him. But they never intended to let me finish, not for a minute."

For a moment the two were silent, staring down at the busy landing procedures below. A warning light was flickering across the field, signaling the landing of an incoming shuttle ship, and the supply cars broke from their positions in center of the field and fled like beetles for the security of the garages. A loudspeaker blared, announcing the incoming craft. Dal Timgar turned, lifting Fuzzy gently from his arm into a side jacket pocket and shouldering his day pack. "I guess this is my flight, Tiger. I'd better get in line."

Tiger Martin gripped Dal's slender four-fingered hand tightly. "Look," he said intensely, "this is some sort of mistake that the training council will straighten out. I'm sure of it. Lots of guys have their applications reviewed. It happens all the time, but they still get their assignments."

"Do you know of any others in this class? Or the last class?"

"Maybe not," Tiger said. "But if they were washing you out, why would the

council be reviewing it? Somebody must be fighting for you."

"But Black Doctor Tanner is on the council," Dal said.

"He's not the only one on the council. It's going to work out. You'll see."

"I hope so," Dal said without conviction. He started for the loading line, then turned. "But where are *you* going to be? What ship?"

Tiger hesitated. "Not assigned yet. I'm taking a leave. But you'll be hearing from me."

The loading call blared from the loudspeaker. The tall Earthman seemed about to say something more, but Dal turned away and headed across toward the line for the shuttle plane. Ten minutes later, he was aloft as the tiny plane speared up through the black night sky and turned its needle nose toward the west.

He tried to sleep, but couldn't. The shuttle trip from the Port of Philadelphia to Hospital Seattle was almost two hours long because of passenger stops at Hospital Cleveland, Eisenhower City, New Chicago, and Hospital Billings. In spite of the help of the pneumatic seats and a sleep-cap, Dal could not even doze. It was one of the perfect clear nights that often occurred in midsummer now that weather control could modify Earth's air currents so well; the stars glittered against the black velvet backdrop above, and the North American continent was free of clouds. Dal stared down at the patchwork of lights that flickered up at him from the ground below.

Passing below him were some of the great cities, the hospitals, the research and training centers, the residential zones and supply centers of Hospital Earth, medical center to the powerful Galactic Confederation, physician in charge of the health of a thousand intelligent races on a thousand planets of a thousand distant star systems. Here, he knew, was the ivory tower of galactic medicine, the hub from which the medical care of the confederation arose. From the huge hospitals, research centers, and medical schools here, the physicians of Hospital Earth went out to all corners of the galaxy. In the permanent outpost clinics, in the gigantic hospital ships that served great sectors of the galaxy, and in the General Practice Patrol ships that roved from star system to star system, they answered the calls for medical assistance from a multitude of planets and races, wherever and whenever they were

needed.

Dal Timgar had been on Hospital Earth for eight years, and still he was a stranger here. To him this was an alien planet, different in a thousand ways from the world where he was born and grew to manhood. For a moment now he thought of his native home, the second planet of a hot yellow star which Earthmen called "Garv" because they couldn't pronounce its full name in the Garvian tongue. Unthinkably distant, yet only days away with the power of the star-drive motors that its people had developed thousands of years before, Garv II was a warm planet, teeming with activity, the trading center of the galaxy and the governmental headquarters of the powerful Galactic Confederation of Worlds. Dal could remember the days before he had come to Hospital Earth, and the many times he had longed desperately to be home again.

He drew his fuzzy pink friend out of his pocket and rested him on his shoulder, felt the tiny silent creature rub happily against his neck. It had been his own decision to come here, Dal knew; there was no one else to blame. His people were not physicians. Their instincts and interests lay in trading and politics, not in the life sciences, and plague after plague had swept across his home planet in the centuries before Hospital Earth had been admitted as a probationary member of the Galactic Confederation.

But as long as Dal could remember, he had wanted to be a doctor. From the first time he had seen a General Practice Patrol ship landing in his home city to fight the plague that was killing his people by the thousands, he had known that this was what he wanted more than anything else: to be a physician of Hospital Earth, to join the ranks of the doctors who were serving the galaxy.

Many on Earth had tried to stop him from the first. He was a Garvian, alien to Earth's climate and Earth's people. The physical differences between Earthmen and Garvians were small, but just enough to set him apart and make him easily identifiable as an alien. He had one too few digits on his hands; his body was small and spindly, weighing a bare ninety pounds, and the coating of fine gray fur that covered all but his face and palms annoyingly grew longer and thicker as soon as he came to the comparatively cold climate of Hospital Earth to live. The bone structure of his face gave his cheeks and nose a flattened appearance, and his pale gray eyes seemed abnormally large

and wistful. And even though it had long been known that Earthmen and Garvians were equal in range of intelligence, his classmates still assumed just from his appearance that he was either unusually clever or unusually stupid.

The gulf that lay between him and the men of Earth went beyond mere physical differences, however. Earthmen had differences of skin color, facial contour and physical size among them, yet made no sign of distinction. Dal's alienness went deeper. His classmates had been civil enough, yet with one or two exceptions, they had avoided him carefully. Clearly they resented his presence in their lecture rooms and laboratories. Clearly they felt that he did not belong there, studying medicine.

From the first they had let him know unmistakably that he was unwelcome, an intruder in their midst, the first member of an alien race ever to try to earn the insignia of a physician of Hospital Earth.

And now, Dal knew he had failed after all. He had been allowed to try only because a powerful physician in the Black Service of Pathology had befriended him. If it had not been for the friendship and support of another Earthman in the class, Tiger Martin, the eight years of study would have been unbearably lonely.

But now, he thought, it would have been far easier never to have started than to have his goal snatched away at the last minute. The notice of the council meeting left no doubt in his mind. He had failed. There would be lots of talk, some perfunctory debate for the sake of the record, and the medical council would wash their hands of him once and for all. The decision, he was certain, was already made. It was just a matter of going through the formal motions.

Dal felt the motors change in pitch, and the needle-nosed shuttle plane began to dip once more toward the horizon. Ahead he could see the sprawling lights of Hospital Seattle, stretching from the Cascade Mountains to the sea and beyond, north to Alaska and south toward the great California metropolitan centers. Somewhere down there was a council room where a dozen of the most powerful physicians on Hospital Earth, now sleeping soundly, would be meeting tomorrow for a trial that was already over, to pass a judgment that was already decided.

He slipped Fuzzy back into his pocket, shouldered his pack, and waited for the ship to come down for its landing. It would be nice, he thought wryly, if

his reservations for sleeping quarters in the students' barracks might at least be honored, but now he wasn't even sure of that.

In the port of Seattle he went through the customary baggage check. He saw the clerk frown at his ill-fitting clothes and not-quite-human face, and then read his passage permit carefully before brushing him on through. Then he joined the crowd of travelers heading for the city subways. He didn't hear the loudspeaker blaring until the announcer had stumbled over his name half a dozen times.

"Doctor Dal Timgar, please report to the information booth."

He hurried back to central information. "You were paging me. What is it?"

"Telephone message, sir," the announcer said, his voice surprisingly respectful. "A top priority call. Just a minute."

Moments later he had handed Dal the yellow telephone message sheet, and Dal was studying the words with a puzzled frown:

CALL AT MY QUARTERS ON ARRIVAL REGARDLESS OF HOUR
STOP URGENT THAT I SEE YOU STOP REPEAT URGENT

The message was signed Thorvold Arnquist, Black Service and carried the priority seal of the Four-star Pathologist. Dal read it again, shifted his pack, and started once more for the subway ramp. He thrust the message into his pocket, and his step quickened as he heard the whistle of the pressure-tube trains up ahead.

Black Doctor Arnquist, the man who had first defended his right to study medicine on Hospital Earth, now wanted to see him before the council meeting took place.

For the first time in days, Dal Timgar felt a new flicker of hope.

CHAPTER 2

HOSPITAL SEATTLE

It was a long way from the students' barracks to the pathology sector where Black Doctor Arnquist lived. Dal Timgar decided not to try to go to the barracks first. It was after midnight, and even though the message had said "regardless of hour," Dal shrank from the thought of awakening a physician of the Black Service at two o'clock in the morning. He was already later arriving at Hospital Seattle than he had expected to be, and quite possibly Black Doctor Arnquist would be retiring. It seemed better to go there without delay.

But one thing took priority. He found a quiet spot in the waiting room near the subway entrance and dug into his day pack for the pressed biscuit and the canister of water he had there. He broke off a piece of the biscuit and held it up for Fuzzy to see.

Fuzzy wriggled down onto his hand, and a tiny mouth appeared just below the shoe-button eyes. Bit by bit Dal fed his friend the biscuit, with squirts of water in between bites. Finally, when the biscuit was gone, Dal squirted the rest of the water into Fuzzy's mouth and rubbed him between the eyes. "Feel better now?" he asked.

The creature seemed to understand; he wriggled in Dal's hand and blinked his eyes sleepily. "All right, then," Dal said. "Off to sleep."

Dal started to tuck him back into his jacket pocket, but Fuzzy abruptly sprouted a pair of forelegs and began struggling fiercely to get out again. Dal grinned and replaced the little creature in the crook of his arm. "Don't like that idea so well, eh? Okay, friend. If you want to watch, that suits me."

He found a map of the city at the subway entrance, and studied it carefully. Like other hospital cities on Earth, Seattle was primarily a center for patient care and treatment rather than a supply or administrative center. Here in Seattle special facilities existed for the care of the intelligent marine races

that required specialized hospital care. The depths of Puget Sound served as a vast aquatic ward system where creatures which normally lived in salt-water oceans on their native planets could be cared for, and the specialty physicians who worked with marine races had facilities here for research and teaching in their specialty. The dry-land sectors of the hospital were organized to support the aquatic wards; the surgeries, the laboratories, the pharmacies and living quarters all were arranged on the periphery of the salt-water basin, and rapid-transit tubes carried medical workers, orderlies, nurses and physicians to the widespread areas of the hospital city.

The pathology sector lay to the north of the city, and Black Doctor Arnquist was the chief pathologist of Hospital Seattle. Dal found a northbound express tube, climbed into an empty capsule, and pressed the buttons for the pathology sector. Presently the capsule was shifted automatically into the pressure tube that would carry him thirty miles north to his destination.

It was the first time Dal had ever visited a Black Doctor in his quarters, and the idea made him a little nervous. Of all the medical services on Hospital Earth, none had the power of the Black Service of Pathology. Traditionally in Earth medicine, the pathologists had always occupied a position of power and discipline. The autopsy rooms had always been the "Temples of Truth" where the final, inarguable answers in medicine were ultimately found, and for centuries pathologists had been the judges and inspectors of the profession of medicine.

And when Earth had become Hospital Earth, with status as a probationary member of the Galactic Confederation of Worlds, it was natural that the Black Service of Pathology had become the governors and policy-makers, regimenting every aspect of the medical services provided by Earth physicians.

Dal knew that the medical training council, which would be reviewing his application in just a few hours, was made up of physicians from all the services—the Green Service of Medicine, the Blue Service of Diagnosis, the Red Service of Surgery, as well as the Auxiliary Services—but the Black Doctors who sat on the council would have the final say, the final veto power.

He wondered now why Black Doctor Arnquist wanted to see him. At first he

had thought there might be special news for him, word perhaps that his assignment had come through after all, that the interview tomorrow would not be held. But on reflection, he realized that didn't make sense. If that were the case, Doctor Arnquist would have said so, and directed him to report to a ship. More likely, he thought, the Black Doctor wanted to see him only to soften the blow, to help him face the decision that seemed inevitable.

He left the pneumatic tube and climbed on the jitney that wound its way through the corridors of the pathology sector and into the quiet, austere quarters of the resident pathologists. He found the proper concourse, and moments later he was pressing his thumb against the identification plate outside the Black Doctor's personal quarters.

Black Doctor Thorvold Arnquist looked older now than when Dal had last seen him. His silvery gray hair was thinning, and there were tired lines around his eyes and mouth that Dal did not remember from before. The old man's body seemed more wispy and frail than ever, and the black cloak across his shoulders rustled as he led Dal back into a book-lined study.

The Black Doctor had not yet gone to bed. On a desk in the corner of the study several books lay open, and a roll of paper was inserted in the dictioner. "I knew you would get the message when you arrived," he said as he took Dal's pack, "and I thought you might be later than you planned. A good trip, I trust. And your friend here? He enjoys shuttle travel?" He smiled and stroked Fuzzy with a gnarled finger. "I suppose you wonder why I wanted to see you."

Dal Timgar nodded slowly. "About the interview tomorrow?"

"Ah, yes. The interview." The Black Doctor made a sour face and shook his head. "A bad business for you, that interview. How do you feel about it?"

Dal spread his hands helplessly. As always, the Black Doctor's questions cut through the trimming to the heart of things. They were always difficult questions to answer.

"I ... I suppose it's something that's necessary," he said finally.

"Oh?" the Black Doctor frowned. "But why necessary for you if not for the others? How many were there in your class, including all the services? Three

hundred? And out of the three hundred only one was refused assignment." He looked up sharply at Dal, his pale blue eyes very alert in his aged face. "Right?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you really feel it's just normal procedure that your application is being challenged?"

"No, sir."

"How *do* you feel about it, Dal? Angry, maybe?"

Dal squirmed. "Yes, sir. You might say that."

"Perhaps even bitter," the Black Doctor said.

"I did as good work as anyone else in my class," Dal said hotly. "I did my part as well as anyone could, I didn't let up once all the way through. Bitter! Wouldn't you feel bitter?"

The Black Doctor nodded slowly. "Yes, I imagine I would," he said, sinking down into the chair behind the desk with a sigh. "As a matter of fact, I do feel a little bitter about it, even though I was afraid that it might come to this in the end. I can't blame you for your feelings." He took a deep breath. "I wish I could promise you that everything would be all right tomorrow, but I'm afraid I can't. The council has a right to review your qualifications, and it holds the power to assign you to a patrol ship on the spot, if it sees fit. Conceivably, a Black Doctor might force the council's approval, if he were the only representative of the Black service there. But I will not be the only Black Doctor sitting on the council tomorrow."

"I know that," Dal said.

Doctor Arnquist looked up at Dal for a long moment. "Why do you want to be a doctor in the first place, Dal? This isn't the calling of your people. You must be the one Garvian out of millions with the patience and peculiar mental make-up to permit you to master the scientific disciplines involved in studying medicine. Either you are different from the rest of your people—which I doubt—or else you are driven to force yourself into a pattern foreign to your nature for very compelling reasons. What are they? Why do you want medicine?"