



Star Surgeon

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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...

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