



SANTIAGO

a myth of
the far future

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SANTIAGO: A MYTH OF THE FAR FUTURE

by

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Prologue

~~They say his father was a comet and his mother a cosmic wind, that he juggles planets as if they were feathers and wrestles with black holes just to work up an appetite. They say he never sleeps, and that his eyes burn brighter than a nova, and that his shout can level mountains.~~

They call him Santiago.

* * * *

Far out on the Galactic Rim, at the very edge of the Outer Frontier, there is a world called Silverblue. It is a water world, with just a handful of islands dotting the placid ocean that covers its surface. If you stand on the very largest island and look into the night sky, you can see almost all of the Milky Way, a huge twinkling river of stars that seems to flow through half the universe.

And if you stand on the western shore of the island during the daytime, with your back to the water, you will see a grass-covered knoll. Atop the knoll are seventeen white crosses, each bearing the name of a good man or woman who thought to colonize this gentle world.

And beneath each name is the same legend, repeated seventeen times:

Killed by Santiago.

* * * *

Toward the core of the galaxy, where the stars press together so closely that night is as bright as day, there is a world called Valkyrie. It is an outpost world, a place of ramshackle Tradertowns filled with dingy bars and hotels and brothels, where the explorers and miners and traders of the Inner Frontier congregate to eat and drink and embellish a few tall tales.

The largest of Valkyrie's Tradertowns, which isn't really very large, also has a postal station that stores subspace messages the way the postal stations of old used to store written mail. Sometimes the messages are held for as long as three or four years, and frequently they are routed even closer to the galactic core, but eventually most of them are picked up.

And in this postal station, there is a wall that is covered by the names and holographs of criminals who are currently thought to be on the Inner Frontier, which tends to make the station very popular with bounty hunters. There are always twenty outlaws displayed, never more, never less, and next to each name is a price. Some of these names remain in place for a week, some for a month, a handful for a year.

Only three names have ever been displayed for more than five years. Two of them are no longer there.

The third is Santiago, and there is no holograph of him.

* * * *

On the colony world of Saint Joan, there is a native humanoid race known as the Swale. There are no longer any colonists; they have all departed.

Near the equator of Saint Joan, very close to where the colony once lived, there is a blackened swath of land almost ten miles long and half a mile wide, on which nothing will ever grow again. No colonist ever reported it, or if any of them did, the report has long since been misplaced by one of the Democracy's thirty billion bureaucrats—but if you go to Saint Joan and ask the Swale what caused the blackened patch of ground, they will cross themselves (for the colonists were a religious lot, and very evangelical) and tell you that it is the Mark of Santiago.

* * * *

Even on the agricultural world of Rancho, where there has never been a crime, not even a petty robbery, his name is not unknown. He is thought to be eleven feet three inches tall, with wild, unruly orange hair and immense black fangs that have dug into his lips and now protrude through them. And

when youngsters misbehave, their parents have merely to hint at the number of naughty children
Santiago has eaten for breakfast, and order is immediately restored.

* * * *

Wandering minstrels sing songs about him on Minotaur and Theseus, the twin worlds that circle
Sigma Draconis, and always he is portrayed as being exactly 217 years old, taller than a belltower, and
broader than a barn, a hard-drinking, womanizing Prince of Thieves, who differs from Robin Hood
(another of their favorites) primarily in that he takes from rich and poor alike and gives only
himself. His adventures are legion, ranging from his epic hand-to-hand struggle with a chlorin
breathing Gorgon to the morning he went down to hell and spat full in Satan's burning eye, and rare
is there a day that does not witness the addition of a few new stanzas to the ever-evolving "Ballad
Santiago."

And on Deluros VIII, the huge capital world of the race of Man, the nerve center of the
Democracy, there are eleven governmental departments and 1,306 men and women charged with the
task of finding and terminating Santiago. They doubt that Santiago is his given name, they suspect that
some of the crimes attributed to him were committed by others, they are almost certain that
somewhere in their files they possess his photograph or holograph but have not yet matched it with its
proper identity—and that is the sum total of their knowledge of him.

Five hundred reports come to them daily, two thousand leads are followed up each year,
munificent rewards have been posted on half a million worlds, agents are sent out armed with money
and everything that money can buy, and still those eleven departments exist. They have outlived the
last three administrations; they will continue to survive until their function has been fulfilled.

* * * *

Silverblue, Valkyrie, Saint Joan, Ranchero, Minotaur, Theseus, Deluros VIII: interesting and
evocative worlds all.

But an even more interesting world in the strange tapestry of Santiago's life is the outpost world
Keepsake, at the heart of the Inner Frontier; for Keepsake is the home, at least temporarily, of
Sebastian Nightingale Cain, who dislikes his middle name, his profession, and his life—not
necessarily in that order. He has fought what he believes to have been the good fight many times over
and he has never won. Not much excites his imagination anymore, and even less surprises him. He has
no friends and few associates, nor does he seek any.

Sebastian Nightingale Cain is by almost every criterion a nondescript and unremarkable man, and
yet our story must begin with him, for he is destined to play a major role in the saga of the man known
only as Santiago....

1.

*Giles Sans Pitié is a spinning wheel,
With the eye of a hawk and a fist made of steel.
He'll drink a whole gallon while holding his breath,
And wherever he goes his companion is Death.*

* * * *

There never was a history written about the Inner Frontier, so Black Orpheus took it upon himself to set one to music. His name wasn't really Orpheus (though he *was* black). In fact, rumor had it that he had been an aquaculturist back in the Deluros system before he fell in love. The girl's name was Eurydice, and he followed her out to the stars, and since he had left all his property behind, he had nothing to give her but his music, so he took the name of Black Orpheus and spent most of his days composing love songs and sonnets to her. Then she died, and he decided to stay on the Inner Frontier and he began writing an epic ballad about the traders and hunters and outlaws and misfits that he came across. In fact, you didn't officially stop being a tenderfoot or a tourist until the day he added a stanza or two about you to the song.

Anyway, Giles Sans Pitié made quite an impression on him, because he appears in nine different verses, which is an awful lot when you're being the Homer for five hundred worlds. Probably it was the steel hand that did it. No one knew how he'd lost his real one, but he showed up on the Frontier one day with a polished steel fist at the end of his left arm, announced that he was the best bounty hunter ever born, foaled, whelped, or hatched, and proceeded to prove that he wasn't too far from wrong. Like most bounty hunters, he only touched down on outpost worlds when he wasn't working, and like most bounty hunters, he had a pretty regular route that he followed. Which was how he came to be at the Keepsake, in the Tradertown of Moritat, in Gentry's Emporium, pounding on the long wooden bar with his steel fist and demanding service.

Old Geronimo Gentry, who had spent thirty years prospecting the worlds of the Inner Frontier before he chucked it all and opened a tavern and whorehouse on Moritat, where he carefully sampled every product before offering it to the public, walked over with a fresh bottle of Altairian rum, the bottle held it back as Giles Sans Pitié reached for it.

"Tab's gettin' pretty high," he commented meaningfully.

The bounty hunter slapped a wad of bills down on the bar.

"Maria Theresa dollars," noted Gentry, examining them approvingly and relinquishing the bottle. "Wherever'd you pick 'em up?"

"The Corvus system."

"Took care of a little business there, did you?" said Gentry, amused.

Giles Sans Pitié smiled humorlessly. "A little."

He reached inside his shirt and withdrew three Wanted posters of the Suliman brothers, which until that morning had been on the post office wall. Each poster had a large red X scratched across it.

"All three of 'em?"

The bounty hunter nodded.

"You shoot 'em, or did you use *that*?" asked Gentry, pointing toward Giles Sans Pitié's steel fist.

"Yes."

"Yes *what?*"

Giles Sans Pitié held up his metal hand. "Yes, I shot them or I used this."

Gentry shrugged. "Goin' out again soon?"

"In the next few days."

"Where to this time?"

"That's nobody's business but mine," said the bounty hunter.

"Just thought I might offer some friendly advice," said Gentry.

"Such as?"

"If you're thinking of going to Praeteep Four, forget it. The Songbird just got back from there."

"You mean Cain?"

Gentry nodded. "Had a lot of money, so I'd have to guess that he found what he went looking for."

The bounty hunter frowned. "I'm going to have to have a little talk with him," he said. "The Praeteep system's got a Keep Out sign posted on it."

"Oh?" said Gentry. "Since when?"

"Since I put it up," said Giles Sans Pitié firmly. "And I won't have some rival headhunter doing h poaching there and picking it clean." He paused. "Where can I find him?"

"Right here."

Giles Sans Pitié looked around the room. A silver-haired gambler on a winning streak, decked out in bright new clothes made from some glittering metallic fabric, stood at the far end of the bar; a young woman with melancholy eyes sat alone at a table in the corner; and scattered around the large, dimly lit tavern were some two dozen other men and women, in pairs and groups, some conversing in low tones, others sitting in silence.

"I don't see him," announced the bounty hunter.

"It's early yet," replied Gentry. "He'll be along."

"What makes you think so?"

"I've got the only booze and the only sportin' ladies in Moritat. Where do *you* think he's gonna go?"

"There are a lot of worlds out there."

"True," admitted Gentry. "But people get tired of worlds after a while. Ask *me*—I know."

"Then what are you doing on the Frontier?"

"People get tired of people, too. There's a lot less of 'em out here—and I got me my fancy ladies cheer me up if ever I get to feelin' lonely." He paused. "'Course, if you want to hear the story of my life, you're gonna have to buy a couple of bottles of my best drinkin' stuff. Then you and me, we mosey on out to one of the back rooms and I'll start with chapter one."

The bounty hunter reached out for the bottle. "I think I can live without it," he said.

"You'll be missing out on one helluva good story," said Gentry. "I done a lot of interesting things. Seen sights even a killer like you ain't likely ever to see."

"Some other time."

"Your loss," said Gentry with a shrug. "You gonna want a glass with that?"

"Not necessary," said Giles Sans Pitié, lifting the bottle and taking a long swallow. When he was through, he wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. "How long before he gets here?"

"You got time for a quick one, if that's what you mean," said Gentry. "Just give me a minute to check and see which of my frail flowers ain't working this minute." Suddenly he turned to the doorway. "Whoops! Here he is now. Guess you'll have to go loveless a little longer." He waved his

hand. "How're you doin', Songbird?"

~~The tall, lean man, his face angular and almost gaunt, his eyes dark and world-weary, approached the bar. His jacket and pants were a nondescript brown, their many pockets filled with shapeless bulges that could mean almost anything on the Frontier. Only his boots stood out, not because they were new, but rather because they were so demonstrably old, obviously carefully tended yet unable to hold a polish.~~

"My name's Cain," said the newcomer. "You know that."

"Well, it ain't what they call you these days."

"It's what *you'll* call me if you want my business," replied Cain.

"But Black Orpheus, now, he's got you all written up as the Songbird," persisted Gentry.

"I don't sing, I'm not a bird, and I don't much care what some half-baked folksinger writes about me."

Gentry shrugged. "Have it your way—and while we're on the subject, what else'll you have?"

"He'll have Altairian rum, like me," interjected Giles Sans Pitié.

"I will?" asked Cain, turning to him.

"My treat." The bounty hunter held up his bottle. "Come on over to a table and join me, Sebastian Cain."

Cain watched him walk across the room for a moment, then shrugged and followed him.

"I hear you had pretty good luck on Praetep Four," said Giles Sans Pitié when both men had seated themselves.

"Luck had nothing to do with it," replied Cain, leaning back comfortably on his chair. "I understand you didn't do too badly yourself."

"Not so. I had to cheat."

"I don't think I follow you."

"I had to shoot the third one." Giles Sans Pitié held up his steel fist. "I like to take them with *this*." He paused. "Did your man give you much trouble?"

"Some," said Cain noncommittally.

"Have to chase him far?"

"A bit."

"You're sure not the most expansive raconteur I've ever run across," chuckled Giles Sans Pitié.

Cain shrugged. "Talk is cheap."

"Not always. Suliman Hari offered me thirty thousand credits to let him live."

"And?"

"I thanked him for his offer, explained that the price on his head was up to fifty thousand, and gave him a faceful of metal."

"And of course you didn't then take thirty thousand credits off his body without reporting it," said Cain sardonically.

Giles Sans Pitié frowned. "The son of a bitch only had two thousand on him," he growled righteously.

"I guess there's just no honor among thieves."

"None. I can't get over the bastard lying to me!" He paused. "So tell me, Cain—who will you be going out after next?"

Cain smiled. "Professional secret. You know better than to ask."

"True," agreed Giles Sans Pitié. "But everyone's allowed a breach of etiquette now and then. For example, you know better than to make a kill in the Praetep system, but you did it anyway."

"The man I was hunting went there," replied Cain calmly. "No disrespect intended, but I wasn't going to let four months' work go down the drain just because you think you own the deed to an entire solar system."

"I *opened* that system," said Giles Sans Pitié. "Named every planet in it." He paused. "Still, it's a perfectly acceptable answer. I forgive you your trespass."

"I don't recall asking for absolution," said Cain.

"Just the same, it's freely given. *This* time," he added ominously. "But it would be a good idea for you to remember that there are rules out here on the Frontier."

"Oh? I hadn't noticed any."

"Nevertheless, they exist—and they're made by the people who can enforce them."

"I'll keep it in mind."

"See that you do."

"Or you'll brain me with your metal hand?" asked Cain.

"It's a possibility."

Cain smiled.

"What's so funny?" demanded Giles Sans Pitié.

"You're a bounty hunter."

"So?"

"Bounty hunters don't kill people for free. Who's going to pay you to kill me?"

"I've got to protect what's mine," replied Giles Sans Pitié seriously. "I just want to be sure that we understand each other: if you go poaching on my territory again, we're going to come to blows." He slammed his metal hand down on the table, putting a large dent in it. "Mine are usually harder."

"I imagine they are," said Cain.

"Then you'll steer clear of Praeteep?"

"I'm not aware of any pressing business engagements there."

"That's not exactly the answer I was looking for."

"I'd suggest you settle for it," said Cain. "It's the best you're going to get."

Giles Sans Pitié stared at him for a moment, then shrugged. "It could be years before anyone hid there again, maybe even longer. I suppose there's no law that says we can't behave cordially in the meantime."

"I'm all for living in peace with my fellow man," said Cain agreeably.

Giles Sans Pitié looked amused. "You picked a mighty strange profession for a man who feels that way."

"Perhaps."

"Well, shall we talk?"

"What about?"

"What about?" repeated Giles Sans Pitié mockingly. "What do two bounty hunters *ever* talk about when they meet over a bottle of rum?"

And so they fell to discussing Santiago.

They spoke of the worlds where he was most recently thought to have been, and the crimes he was most recently thought to have committed. Both had heard the rumor that he had robbed a mining colony on Bemor VIII; both discounted it. Both also had heard that a caravan of unmanned cargo ships had been plundered in the Antares region; Cain thought it might well be the work of Santiago, while his companion felt he was far more likely to have been on Doradus IV at the time, masterminding a triple assassination. They exchanged information about the planets they themselves had been

without finding any trace of him, and of the other bounty hunters they had encountered who had added still more planets to the list.

"Who's after him now?" asked Giles Sans Pitié when their tallies had been completed.

"Everyone."

"I mean, who most recently?"

"I hear the Angel has moved into the area," answered Cain.

"What makes you think he's come for Santiago?"

Cain merely stared at him.

"Stupid remark," said Giles Sans Pitié. "Forget I made it." He paused. "The Angel's supposed to be just about the best."

"So they say."

"I thought he worked the Outer Frontier, somewhere way out on the Rim."

Cain nodded. "I guess he decided Santiago's not there."

"I can name you a million places Santiago *isn't*," said Giles Sans Pitié. "Why do you suppose he thinks he's on the Inner Frontier?"

Cain shrugged.

"Do you think he's got a source?" persisted Giles Sans Pitié.

"Anything's possible."

"It's more than possible," he said after a moment's consideration. "He wouldn't move his base operations halfway across the galaxy if he didn't have hard information. What planet is he working out of?"

"How many worlds are there out there?" replied Cain with a shrug. "Take your choice."

Giles Sans Pitié frowned. "Still, he might know something worth listening to."

"What makes you think he'll talk to you, even if you find him?"

"Because the one thing bounty hunters never lie about is Santiago; you know that. As long as he stays alive, he makes all of us look bad."

"Maybe the Angel does things differently where he comes from," suggested Cain.

"Then I'll just have to explain the ground rules to him," said Giles Sans Pitié.

"I wish you luck."

"Interested in throwing in with me until we catch up with the Angel?"

"I work alone," said Cain.

"Just as well," said Giles Sans Pitié, suddenly remembering his rum and taking a long swallow. "Where did you hear about him?"

"In the Meritonia system."

"I think I'll head out that way later this week," said Giles Sans Pitié, rising to his feet. "It's been an interesting conversation, Cain."

"Thanks for the rum," said Cain wryly, staring at the empty bottle.

"Any time," laughed his companion. "And you *will* make an effort to keep out of the Praeterea system from now on, won't you?" He flexed his steel fist. "I'd hate to have to give you an object lesson about trespassing."

"Would you?"

"Not really," was the frank answer.

Cain made no reply, and a moment later Giles Sans Pitié placed the empty bottle on the bar, leaving enough money to cover another one he ordered for Cain, promised Gentry he'd be back to sample some nonalcoholic wares later in the evening, and walked out into the hot, humid night air of Meritonia.

in search of some dinner.

~~Gentry finished serving the girl with the melancholy eyes, then brought the bottle over to Cain's table.~~

"What is it?" asked Cain, staring at the clear liquid.

"Something they brew out Altair way," replied the old man. "Tastes kind of like gin."

"I don't like gin."

"I know," replied Gentry with a chuckle. "That's why I'm just dead certain you're gonna invite me to sit down with you and help you drink it."

Cain sighed. "Have a seat, old man."

"Thank you. Don't mind if I do." He lowered himself carefully to a chair, uncorked the bottle, and took a swallow. "Good stuff, if I say so myself."

"You could save a hell of a lot of money by not supplying glasses," remarked Cain. "Nobody around here seems to use them."

"Savin' money ain't one of my problems," replied Gentry. "And from what I hear, makin' it ain't one of yours."

Cain said nothing, and the old man took another swallow and continued speaking.

"Did old Giles Without Pity warn you off the Praeteep system?" he asked.

Cain nodded.

"Gonna pay him any heed?"

"Until the next time I have business there," replied Cain.

The old man laughed. "Good for you, Songbird! Old Steelfist is gettin' a little big for his britches these days."

"I'm getting tired of telling you what my name is," said Cain irritably.

"If you didn't want to be a legend, you shouldn't have come out here. Two hundred years from now that's the only name people'll know you by."

"Two hundred years from now I won't have to listen to them."

"Besides," continued Gentry, "Songbird ain't on any Wanted posters. I seen Sebastian Cain on a flock of 'em."

"That was a long time ago."

"Don't go gettin' defensive about it," chuckled the old man. "I seen posters on just about all your bounty hunters at one time or another. Ain't no skin off my ass. Hell, if Santiago himself walked in the door and asked for one of my sportin' gals, I'd trot him out the prettiest one I've got."

"For all you know, he already has," remarked Cain.

"Not a chance," said Gentry. "He ain't that hard to spot."

"Eleven feet three inches, with orange hair?" asked Cain with an amused smile.

"You start huntin' for a man who looks like *that* and you're going to be out here a long, long time."

"What do *you* think he looks like?"

The old man took a small swallow from the bottle.

"Don't know," he admitted. "Do know one thing, though. Know he's got a scar shaped like this"—he traced a crooked S on the table—"on the back of his right hand."

"Sure he does."

"Truth!" said the old man vigorously. "I know a man who saw him."

"Nobody's seen him," replied Cain. "Or at least, nobody who's seen him knew it was him."

"That's all *you* know about it," said Gentry. "Man I used to run with spent a couple of weeks in jail with him."

Cain looked bored. "Santiago's never been arrested. If he had been, we'd *all* know what he looks like."

"They didn't know it was him."

"Then how come your friend knew?"

"Cause Santiago's gang broke him out, and one of 'em called him by name."

"Bunk."

"Here I am, offerin' to do you a favor, and you turn your nose up at it," said Gentry. "Damned good thing for you I'm an old man who ain't got the wherewithall to give you a thrashing for insulting me like that."

"What favor?"

"I thought maybe you might be interested in knowing who my friend is and where you can find him."

"There are half a dozen bounty hunters who frequent this place," said Cain. "Why give it to me?"

"Well, now, *give* ain't exactly the term I had in mind," answered Gentry with a grin. "Name like that, name of a man who actually spent some time with Santiago, it ought to be worth a little something now, shouldn't it?"

"Maybe."

There was a momentary silence.

"I didn't hear no cash offer yet."

"Let's get back to my question," said Cain. "Why *me*?"

"Oh, it ain't just you," said Gentry. "Sold it to Barnaby Wheeler a couple of months ago, but he heard on the grapevine that he got killed chasing down some fugitive or other. And I offered it to Peacemaker MacDougal just last week, but he didn't want to come up with no money. And I'll see if I can't tempt old Steelfist with it before he takes advantage of one of my poor innocents tonight." He smiled. "I got to be fair to *all* my customers."

"People have been after Santiago for thirty years or more," said Cain. "If you have any information worth selling, why did you wait until now to put it on the market?"

"I ain't got anything against Santiago," said the old man. "He ain't ever done me any harm. Besides, the longer he stays free, the longer you guys'll stay on the Frontier lookin' for him, and the longer you stay out here, the more money you'll spend at Gentry's Emporium."

"Then what caused this change of heart?"

"Hear tell the Angel has moved in. Wouldn't want no outsider picking up the bounty fee."

"What makes you think he will?" asked Cain.

"You know what they say about him," replied Gentry. "He's the best. I'll bet you Black Orpheus gives him a good twenty verses when he finally gets around to meetin' him. So," said the old man, taking yet another swig, "I'm hedging my bets as best I can. The Angel collects that money, he'll be back on the Rim before he has a chance to spend it. But if *you* get it, you'll spend a goodly chunk of it on Keepsake."

"If I don't retire."

"Oh, you won't retire," said Gentry with assurance. "Men like you and Sans Pitié and the Angel, you like killing too damned much to quit. It's in your blood, like wanderlust in a young buck."

"I don't like killing," replied Cain.

"Gonna give me that bounty hunter guff about how you only kill people for money?" said the old man with a sarcastic laugh.

"No."

"That makes you the first honest one I've met. How many men did you kill for free before you found out there was gold in it—two? Three?"

"More than I hope you can imagine," replied Cain.

"Soldier?"

Cain paused before answering. "I thought so once. I was wrong."

"What the hell does *that* mean?"

"Never mind, old man." Suddenly Cain sat erect in his chair. "All right—how much do you want for the name?"

"What kind of currency can you lay your hands on?"

"What kind do you want?"

"Credits'll do, I suppose," replied Gentry. "Though I'd be real interested in Bonaparte francs or Maria Theresa dollars if you got any."

"I haven't seen a Bonaparte franc in ten years," said Cain. "I don't think they're in circulation anymore."

"I hear tell they're still using 'em in the Binder system."

"Let's make it credits."

The old man did a quick mental calculation. "I think ten thousand would do me just fine."

"For the name of a man who might or might not have seen Santiago ten or twenty years ago?" Cain shook his head. "That's too much."

"Not for a man like you," said Gentry. "I saw the poster for the body you brought in. I know how much you got for it."

"And what if this man is dead, or if it turns out he didn't see Santiago after all?"

"Then you got a free pass to fertilize my flowers for a full month."

"I visited your garden last night," said Cain. "It needs weeding."

"What are you quibbling about?" demanded Gentry. "How long have you been on the Frontier, Cain?"

"Eleven years."

"In all that time, have you ever met anyone who's seen Santiago? Here I am offering you what you ain't never found before, for maybe a tenth of what you just picked up on Praeteep, and you're haggling like some Dabih fur trader! If you're gonna just sit there and insult the most beautiful blossoms on the Frontier and haggle with an old man who ain't got the stamina to haggle back, we ain't going to be able to do no business."

Cain stared at him for a moment, then spoke.

"I'll tell you what, old man. I'll give you twenty thousand."

"There's a catch," said Gentry suspiciously.

"There's a condition," replied Cain. "You don't supply the name to anyone else."

Gentry frowned. "Ever?"

"For six months."

"Make it four."

"Deal," said Cain. "And if you're lying, may God have more mercy on your soul than *I* will."

"Ain't got no reason to lie. Only two more of you fellers due in here in the next four months, which means one of 'em's probably dead, and there's only a fifty-fifty chance the other'd come up with the money. Not everyone makes out as well as you and Sans Pitié."

"All right. Where do I find this man?"

"I ain't seen no money yet."

Cain pulled out a sheaf of bills, peeled off the top twenty, and placed them on the table. Gentry picked them up one at a time, held each up to the light, and finally nodded his head and placed them in his pocket.

"Ever hear of a world named Port étrange?"

Cain shook his head. "Where is it?"

"It's the seventh planet in the Bellermaine system. That's where he'll be."

"And his name?"

"Stern."

"How do I locate him?"

"Just pass the word you're looking for him. *He'll find you.*"

"What's he like?" asked Cain.

"A real sweet feller, once you get used to a couple of his little peculiarities."

"Such as?"

"Well, he drinks too much and he cheats at cards, and he ain't real fond of people or animals or aliens, and he out-and-out hates priests and women, and he's been known to have an occasional disagreement with the constabularies. But taken all in all, he's no worse than most that you find out here, and probably better'n some."

"Should I use your name?"

"It ought to get him to sit up and take notice," said Gentry. "When are you planning on leaving?"

"Tonight," said Cain, getting to his feet.

"Damn!" said Gentry. "If I'd of known you were that anxious, I could've held out for thirty!"

"I'm not anxious. I just don't have any reason to stay here."

"I got seven absolutely splendid reasons, each and every one personally selected and trained by Moritat's very favorite son, namely me."

"Maybe next time around."

"You got something better to spend it on?"

"That depends on whether you told me the truth or not," said Cain, walking to the door. Suddenly he stopped and turned to Gentry. "By the way, I assume your friend Stern is going to want to be paid for this?"

"I imagine so. Man sells his soul to the devil, he spends the rest of his life trying to stockpile enough money to buy it back." Gentry chuckled with amusement. "Have fun, Songbird."

"That's not my name."

"Tell you what," said Gentry. "You bring in the head of Santiago, and I'll hold a gun to old Orpheus until he gets it right."

"You've got yourself a deal," promised Cain.

2.

*He's Jonathan Jeremy Jacobar Stern,
He's got lust in his heart, and money to burn;
He's too old to change, and too wild to learn,
Is Jonathan Jeremy Jacobar Stern.*

They say that Black Orpheus caught Stern on an off day, that in point of fact Stern never stopped changing and learning, until he'd changed so much that nobody knew him any longer. He began life as the son of a miner and a whore, and before he was done he'd set himself up as king of the Bellermain system. In between, he learned how to gamble and did a pretty fair job of it; he learned how to steal and became more than proficient; he learned how to kill and did a bit of bounty hunting on the side, and somewhere along the way he learned the most important lesson of all, which was that a king with no heirs had better never turn his back on anybody.

Nobody knew why he hated priests; rumor had it that the first time he'd gone to jail it was a priest who turned him in. Another legend held that he'd once trusted a couple of priests to keep an eye on his holdings while he was fleeing from the authorities, and when he'd finally come back there'd been nothing waiting for him but a note telling him to repent.

It wasn't all that difficult to figure out why he hated women. He grew up in a whorehouse, and the women he met once he went out on his own weren't much different from the ones he'd known all his life. He was a man of enormous appetites who couldn't leave them alone and couldn't convince himself that their interest in him wasn't as cold and calculating as his interest in them.

A lot of people whispered that that was the real reason he'd set up shop on Port étrange, that since he couldn't control his passion for women he'd decided to do without them and had hunted up a world with a humanoid race that willingly allowed him to commit terrible crimes of pleasure for which nobody had yet created any words.

Port étrange itself had a long and varied history. Originally a mining world, it had since been a glittering vacation spa, then a low-security penal colony, and finally a deserted ghost world. The Stern had moved in, set up headquarters in a once luxurious hotel, and turned a small section of the human habitation into a Tradertown, while allowing the remainder to linger in a state of disrepair and decay. Despite reasonably fertile fields which sustained the native population, the citizens of the Tradertown imported all their food and drink from a pair of nearby agricultural colonies. When the men began outnumbering the women, they imported the latter, too, until Stern put a stop to it.

All this Cain learned during his first hour on Port étrange. He had landed his ship at the local spaceport—only huge worlds like Deluros VIII and Lodin XI possessed orbiting hangars and shuttle service for planetbound travelers—and rented a room at the larger of the two functioning hotels, then descended to the ground-floor tavern he'd spotted on the way in.

It was crowded, and despite the chrome tables and hand-crafted chairs—leftovers from the hotel's halcyon days of glory—it felt as dingy and seamy as any other Tradertown bar. The only chair available was at a small table that was occupied by a short, slender man who sported a shock of unruly red hair.

"Mind if I sit down?" asked Cain.

"Be my guest," said the man. He stared at Cain. "You new around here?"

"Yes. I just got in." Cain glanced around the room. "I'm looking for somebody. I wonder if you can point him out to me?"

"He's not here now."

"You don't know who I'm looking for," said Cain.

"Well, if it isn't Jonathan Stern, we've got a hell of a news story breaking here." said the man with a chuckle. "He's the only person anyone ever comes to Port étrange to see."

"It's Stern," said Cain.

"Well, I suppose I can pass the word. You got a name?"

"Cain. Tell him Geronimo Gentry sent me."

"Pleased to meet you, Cain," said the man, extending a lean white hand. "I'm Terwilliger Halfpenny Terwilliger," he added as if the name was expected to mean something. He watched Cain for a reaction, discerned none, and got up. "Back in a minute."

Terwilliger walked over to the bar, said something to the bartender, and then returned to the table.

"Okay," he said. "He knows you're here."

"When can I see him?"

"When he's ready."

"How soon will that be?"

Halfpenny Terwilliger laughed. "That all depends. Does he owe Gentry money?"

"I don't think so."

"Then it'll probably be sooner rather than later." He pulled out a deck of cards. "Care for a little game of chance while you're waiting?"

"I'd rather have a little information about Stern."

"I don't doubt it," said Terwilliger. "Tell you what. You bet with money, I'll bet with pieces of Stern's life. I'll match every credit with a story."

"Why don't I just pay you twenty credits for what I want to know and be done with it?" suggested Cain.

"Because I'm a gambler, not a salesman," came the answer.

"At a credit a bet, you're not likely to become a very rich one," observed Cain.

Terwilliger smiled. "I got into my first card game with one New Scotland halfpenny. I was worth two million pounds before it was over. That's how I got my name." He paused. "Of course, I lost it all the next week, but still, it was fun while it lasted, and no one else ever had a run of luck like that on. Been trying to do it again ever since."

"How long ago was that?"

"Oh, maybe a dozen years," said Terwilliger with another smile. "I still remember how it felt, though—like the first time I was ever with a woman, except that it lasted longer: six days and five nights. That's why I always start small—out of respect for times past. If you want to raise the stakes later, we can."

"If I raise the stakes, what can you bet to match it?"

Terwilliger scratched his head. "Well, I suppose I can start betting rumors instead of facts. They're a lot more interesting, anyway—especially if they're about the *fali*."

"What's a *fali*?" asked Cain.

"It's what the natives call themselves. I don't suppose it's the best-kept secret in the galaxy that our friend Stern's got a couple of tastes that are just a bit out of the ordinary."

"Let's stick to facts for the time being," said Cain. He nodded toward the cards. "It's your deal."

They played and talked for more than an hour, at the end of which Cain knew a little bit more about Stern, and Terwilliger was some forty credits richer.

"You know, you still haven't told me why you want to see him," remarked the gambler.

"I need some information."

"Who do you plan to kill?" asked Terwilliger pleasantly.

"What makes you think I want to kill anyone?"

"You've got that look about you. I'm a gambler, remember? My job is reading faces. Your face says you're a bounty hunter."

"What if I told you I was a journalist?" asked Cain.

"I'd tell you I believed you," replied Terwilliger. "I don't want no bounty hunter getting mad at me."

Cain laughed. "Can you tell anything from Stern's face?"

"Just that he's been with the *fali* too long. Not much human left in it."

"What do these *fali* look like?" asked Cain.

"Either pretty good or pretty strange, depending."

"Depending on what?"

"On how long you've been alone," answered Terwilliger.

"You still haven't told me what they look like."

Terwilliger grinned and ruffled the cards. "Shall we up the stakes a little?"

Cain shook his head. "They're not worth more to me than Stern is."

"They might be, when I tell you what they do."

"Hearsay?"

"Experience."

Cain cocked an eyebrow. "I thought you disapproved of them."

"Anybody's allowed to try something new once or twice, just to get the feel of it," explained Terwilliger. "What I object to is addiction, not experimentation."

"I don't plan to be here long enough to do either," said Cain. "You can put the cards away."

"Oh, we can always find a little something to wager about," said Terwilliger. "For fifty credits a hand, I could tell you where to find the Suliman brothers."

"You're too late. They were taken a week ago."

"All three?"

Cain nodded.

"Damn!" said Terwilliger. "Well, for a hundred, I might tell you about some competition that moved into the area."

"I know about the Angel."

"News sure travels fast," commented Terwilliger ruefully.

"Tell you what," said Cain. "I'll play for a thousand a hand if you have any information about Santiago."

"You and five hundred other guys." The gambler shook his head. "It beats me how he can still be free after all these years with so many people looking for him."

Just then the bartender walked across the room and came to a stop in front of their table.

"Are you Cain?" he asked.

"Yes."

"He wants you."

"Where do I find him?" asked Cain.

"I'll show you the way," offered Terwilliger.

The bartender nodded and returned to his duties.

"Follow me," said the gambler, getting to his feet.

Cain stood up and left a few bills on the table.

They walked out through a side door, across the dusty road that had once been a major thoroughfare, and into the smaller of Port étrange's two functioning hotels. Terwilliger led him through a lobby that had once been quite elegant but was now showing the signs of age and neglect. Sleek chrome pillars were now tarnished, the ever-changing choreopattern of colored lights was out

synch with the atonal music, the front door remained dilated for almost a full minute after they passed through it.

They approached a bank of elevators and walked to the last one in line. Terwilliger summoned with a low command.

"This'll take you right to him," he announced.

"Has he got a room number?"

"He's got the whole damned floor. Take one step out and you're in the middle of his parlor."

"Thanks," said Cain, stepping into the elevator as it arrived. As the doors closed behind him he realized that he didn't know the floor number, but then the elevator began ascending swiftly and he decided that it only went to one floor.

When it came to a stop, he emerged into a palatial pent-house. It was fully fifty feet by sixty, and filled to overflowing with objets d'art gathered—or plundered—from all across the galaxy. In the center of the room was a sunken circular tub with platinum fixtures, and sitting in the steaming water was an emaciated man with sunken cheeks and dark, watery eyes. His narrow arms were sprawled over the edges of the tub, and Cain noticed that his fingers were covered by truly magnificent rings. He smoked a large cigar that had somehow avoided becoming waterlogged.

Standing on each side of the tub were a pair of humanoid aliens, both obviously female. Their skins, covered with a slick secretion that may or may not have been natural, glistened under the light of the apartment. Their arms seemed supple and boneless, their legs slender and strangely jointed. Each had a round, expressive face, with a generous, very red triangular mouth and pink eyes that were little more than angular slits. Both were nude and were devoid of any body hair. They had no breasts, but their genitalia, thus exposed, seemed close to human. There was a supple, alien grace to their movements which Cain found fascinating and mildly repugnant. Neither of them seemed to notice him at all.

"You're staring, Mr. Cain," said the man in the tub.

"I'm sorry," said Cain. "I had heard about the *fali*, but I hadn't seen them before."

"Nice, useful pets," said the man, reaching up and giving a friendly pat to a bare *fali* buttock. "About as bright as a potted plant, but *very* pleasant in their way." He took a puff of his cigar. "I understand that you wish to see me."

"If you're Stern."

"Jonathan Jeremy Jacobar Stern, at your service," he said. "Is this going to take long?"

"I hope not."

"What a shame," he said with mock regret. "If it was, I'd invite you to join me. There is absolutely nothing like sitting in warm water to relax a man and help him shed the cares of the day. I'll be with you in just a moment." He turned to one of the *fali* and extended his arm. "Give me a boost up, make it pretty."

She reached down, grabbed his hand, and pulled him to his feet, while her companion walked to the closet and returned shortly with a robe.

"Thank you," he said, slipping the robe on. "Now I want both of you to stand over there and not bother us for a while." He pointed to a spot near the farthest wall, and both *fali* immediately walked over to it and stood motionless.

"They seem very obedient," remarked Cain as Stern led him to a grouping of chairs and couches.

"Obedient and docile," agreed Stern, sprawling on a couch and staring at them with unconcealed desire.

"That oil on their skins—is it normal?"

"Why should you suppose that it isn't?"

Cain shrugged. "It just seems rather unusual."

"It is," replied Stern, smiling at the *fali*. "It smells like the finest perfume." He turned to Cain. "Come over and experience it for yourself."

"I'll take your word for it."

"As you wish," said Stern with a shrug. "It *feels* exquisite, as well—soft and sensual. Actually, I'm convinced that it's a secondary sexual characteristic. It doesn't do much for Men, of course," he added with marked insincerity, "but I imagine it drives their boyfriends right out of their minds. Seductive odor, sensual feel." He stared admiringly at them again. "It makes them look like a pair of alien mermaids emerging from the water." Suddenly he tore his gaze away from them and turned back to Cain. "So Geronimo Gentry sent you here?"

"Yes."

"I thought he'd be dead by now."

"Not quite," said Cain, finally taking a seat.

"How is he getting along?"

"He's got a bar and whorehouse out on Keepsake," replied Cain. "I guess he's doing all right. Tall tales too much, though."

"He always did." Stern paused. "Why did he send you here?"

"He told me that you might have some information I need."

"Very likely I do. I know an inordinate number of things. Did he also tell you that I'm not a charitable institution?"

"If he hadn't, I would have figured it out after seeing some of your trinkets," said Cain, nodding toward a number of alien artifacts that were prominently displayed.

"I'm a collector," said Stern with a broad smile.

"So I gathered."

"You haven't yet told me what business you're in, Mr. Cain."

"I'm a collector, too," replied Cain.

"Really?" said Stern, suddenly more interested. "And what is it that you collect?"

"People."

"There's a good market for them," said Stern. "But unlike *my* collection, they don't increase in value."

"There's one who does."

"So you want to know about Santiago." It was not a question.

Cain nodded. "That's what I'm here for. You're the only person who's seen him."

Stern laughed in amusement. "His organization spans the entire galaxy. Don't you think any of *them* ever see him?"

"Then let me amend my statement," said Cain. "You're the only person *I* know who's seen him."

"That's probably true," agreed Stern pleasantly. His cigar went out and he snapped his fingers. One of the *fali* immediately came over with a lighter and relit it. "That's my girl," he said, giving her boneless hand an affectionate squeeze. She wriggled all over with delight like a puppy, then returned to her position across the room. "A wonderful pet," commented Stern. "Faithful, adoring, and totally unable to utter a sound—three qualities I never found in any woman of my acquaintance." He paused and stared fondly at her. "What a sweet, mindless little thing she is! But back to business, Mr. Cain. You wish to talk about Santiago."

"That's right."

"You are prepared to pay, of course?"

Cain nodded.

~~"There is an old saying, Mr. Cain, that talk is cheap. I hope you do not believe in it."~~

"I believe in paying for value received," replied Cain.

"Excellent! You're a man after my own heart."

"Really?" said Cain dryly. "I would have been willing to bet that not a single thing in the apartment had been paid for."

"They have *all* been paid for, Mr. Cain," said Stern with an amused smile. "Not with money, perhaps, but with human grief and suffering and even human life. A much higher price, wouldn't you say?"

"It depends on who was doing the paying," replied Cain.

"Nobody very important," said Stern with a shrug. "Oh, they probably all had wives and husbands and children, to be sure, but they were merely spear-carriers in my own saga, which is of course the only one that matters to me. Certainly you must share my point of view, since the taking of lives is your business."

"I value the lives I take a little more highly than you do," said Cain. "So does the government."

"And here we are, back to discussing value and money once more," said Stern. "I think I shall charge you fifteen thousand credits to continue our conversation, Mr. Cain."

"For that, I want more than a physical description of a man you haven't seen in fifteen or twenty years," replied Cain. "I want the name and location of the jail, I want to know when you were incarcerated, and I want the name Santiago was using at the time."

"But of course!" said Stern. "Do I strike you as a man who would withhold information, Mr. Cain?"

"I don't know," said Cain. "Are you?"

"Perish the thought," said Stern.

"How comforting to know that."

"I'm so glad that we understand each other, Mr. Cain. May I first see, as we say in the trade, the color of your money?"

Cain pulled out his wallet, counted off the appropriate amount, and handed it over.

"I realize that absolutely no one uses cash anymore in the heart of the Democracy," said Stern, "but it has such a nice feel to it that I'm glad we still indulge ourselves out here in the extremities." He quickly counted the bills, then signaled to a *fali*, who came over and took them from him.

"Hold these for me, my pretty," he said, then nodded his head and watched her as she walked back to her position with an inhuman grace. "Lovely things!" he murmured. "Absolutely lovely!"

"We were talking about Santiago..."

"Indeed we were," said Stern, turning reluctantly from the *fali* and facing Cain once again. "I promise to give it my full attention. For fifteen thousand credits, you deserve no less."

"My feelings precisely."

"Now, where shall I begin? At the beginning, of course. I was serving a certain amount of time in hard labor and hard endurance vile on the outpost world of Kalami Three for some imagined infringement of the local laws or customs."

"Robbery?" suggested Cain.

"Receiving stolen goods and attempted murder, in point of fact," replied Stern with no hint of regret. "At any rate, the only other prisoner at the time was a man who went under the name Gregory William Penn. He was between forty and fifty years of age, he stood about six feet four inches tall, he was heavysset without being fat, his hair was black and his eyes brown, his face was

clean-shaven. He spoke at least six alien languages—or so he informed me. I, myself, speak none nor"—he smiled at the *fati*—"have I ever had any need to. On the back of his right hand he bore an X-shaped scar some two inches long. He seemed, overall, a pleasant and intelligent man. He didn't speak about himself or his past at all, but he proved to be an excellent chess player with a set that was borrowed from our captors."

"How do you know it was Santiago?"

"We had shared the hospitality of the Kalami jail for eleven days when suddenly five armed men broke in, subdued and bound the individual charged with our care, and set my fellow prisoner free. They were very thorough about wiping the prison's computer clean, and I later found out they had done the same over in the courtroom. Then, just as they were leaving, one of them called his name Santiago."

"If that's your whole story, I want my money back," said Cain. "There's probably a thousand petty crooks on the Frontier who would like people to think they're Santiago—and if the prison records have been destroyed, you can't even prove that this one existed, let alone that he was who he said he was."

"Be patient, Mr. Cain," said Stern easily. "There's more."

"There'd damned well better be. How long ago did this little incident take place?"

"Seventeen Galactic Standard years. I bribed my way out about six months later."

"I understand that you've done some bounty hunting in your time," said Cain. "Why didn't you go after him?"

"We all have our obsessions, Mr. Cain," replied Stern. "Yours is obviously chasing criminals all across the galaxy. Mine, I soon discovered, lay in quite a different direction."

"All right. Go on."

"Shortly thereafter I noticed a sudden dramatic increase in my business."

"Which business was that?" interrupted Cain.

"I like to think of it as my wholesale redistribution network."

"Fencing."

"Fencing," agreed Stern. "By the time I reached Port étrange I had a pretty strong feeling that I was dealing with Santiago, but of course I was never so tactless as to ask."

"Who would you have asked?"

"I dealt primarily with a man named Duncan Black—a large man, who wore a patch over his left eye—but from time to time there were others."

"Nobody wears eyepatches," said Cain sharply.

"Black did."

"Why didn't he just get a new eye? I've got one: it sees better than the one I was born with."

"How should I know? Possibly he thought it made him look dashing and romantic." Stern paused. "At any rate, I continued to enjoy a very profitable arrangement. Then, seven years ago, I received a shipment of goods that eliminated any lingering doubts I may have had that I was indeed doing business with Santiago."

"And what was that?"

"Do you see that paperweight over there?" asked Stern, indicating what appeared to be a small gold bar on a nearby table.

"Yes."

"Why don't you examine it?"

Cain got up, walked over to the paperweight, and inspected it.

"It looks like gold bullion," he said.

"Pick it up and turn it over," suggested Stern.

~~It required both hands for Cain to lift it. When he did so, he noticed a nine-digit number burned into the bottom of it.~~

"That number corresponds to part of a gold shipment that Santiago stole from a navy convoy."

"The Epsilon Eridani robbery?" asked Cain.

Stern nodded. "I'm sure you can confirm the number through your various sources. The number had been eliminated from all the other bars, but somehow they missed that one—so I kept it for a souvenir, never knowing when it might be of some minor use to me." He smiled. "Anyway, it was the only one that I knew for sure that Black and the others were Santiago's agents."

"That still doesn't prove the man you saw in jail was Santiago," said Cain, putting the gold bar back down.

"I'm not finished," replied Stern. "About a year after I received the gold shipment, a smuggler named Kastartos, one of the agents I'd been dealing with, approached me with a fascinating proposition. Evidently he was displeased with his salary or his working conditions; at any rate, he had decided to turn Santiago in for the reward. Being a prudent man, he decided not to do so himself, but offered to split fifty-fifty with me if I would approach the authorities on his behalf. I questioned him further, and eventually he gave me a description of the man I had seen in the Kalami jail. There were a few discrepancies, as might be expected with the passage of eleven years, but it sounded like the same man, and when he described the scar on his right hand I was sure."

"And what did you do?"

"I was making a considerable amount of money from Santiago's trade, and I had no more desire to be the visible partner in this enterprise than Kastartos did. After all, not only would I have faced the threat of reprisal from Santiago's organization, but once word of such a betrayal got out, most of my other clients would have felt very uneasy about dealing with me as well," explained Stern. "So I followed the only reasonable course of action: I informed Duncan Black of his proposition, and let nature take its course." He shook his head. "Poor little man. I never saw him again."

"Did he tell you where to find Santiago?"

"I felt my longevity could best be served by not knowing the answer to that particular question."

"Do you still deal with him?"

"If I did, I wouldn't be parting with this information," said Stern. "But I haven't seen Duncan Black in almost three years now, and while it's always possible that Santiago is dealing with me through someone else, I very much doubt it."

"Where can I find Duncan Black?"

"If I knew that, this little chat would have cost you fifty thousand credits," replied Stern. "The only thing I can tell you is that during the time I did business with him, his ship bore a Bella Donna registry."

"Bella Donna?" repeated Cain. "I've never heard of it."

"It's an outpost world, the third planet of the Clovis system. I'm sure that it must be listed in your ship's computer." Stern paused. "Do you still want your money back, Mr. Cain?"

Cain stared at him. "Not unless I find out you've been lying."

"Why would I lie?" asked Stern. "I haven't been offworld for seven years now, and I have no intention of leaving in the foreseeable future. You would certainly have very little trouble finding me." He stood up. "Shall I assume that our conversation is over now?"

Cain nodded his head.

"Then you'll forgive me if I immerse myself once again?"

He let his robe drop to the floor and walked over to the tub.

~~"Come, my lovelies," he crooned, and the two *fali* walked over and gently helped lower him into the water.~~

"I think I could do with a massage," he said. "Do you remember what I taught you?" *The fali* immediately entered the tub and began massaging his arms and torso with their long, sensitive, alien hands.

"Would you like to join us, Mr. Cain?" asked Stern, suddenly aware that Cain had not yet left the room. "It isn't an invitation I extend to many of my guests, and it certainly won't break my heart if you should decline, but I suppose it's the least I can do for a man who has just spent fifteen thousand credits for a useless tidbit of information."

"Useless?"

"The Angel is after Santiago now, or hadn't you heard?"

"I know."

"And yet you paid me anyway?" said Stern. "You must be a very efficient killer, Mr. Cain—or a very overconfident one." He moaned with pleasure as one of the *fali* began stroking his left thigh. "How many men have you actually killed?"

"Pay me fifteen thousand credits and I might just answer that question," said Cain.

Stern laughed hollowly in amusement.

"I'm afraid not, Mr. Cain. What you have done in the past may eventually find its way into Black Orpheus' songbook, as I myself have done, but you are simply another spear-carrier passing through my life—and an incredibly minor one at that."

"And them?" asked Cain, indicating the two *fali*.

"They represent my fall from Grace," said Stern with a smile. "Far more important than me and my supporting players, I assure you. Someday I suppose I shall even give them names." He turned to one of them. "Gently, my pretty—gently." He took her hand and began guiding it gingerly.

Cain stared at the three of them for another few seconds, then turned and summoned the elevator. The sound of Stern's voice, trembling with eagerness, came to him as the doors were closing:

"Here, my pet. Lie back and let me show you how."

Cain descended to the main floor, walked out across the dusty thoroughfare, entered his own hotel and shortly thereafter unlocked his room. He found Halfpenny Terwilliger sitting on his bed, playing solitaire.

"What the hell are you doing here?" he demanded as the door slid shut behind him.

"Waiting for you," replied the little gambler.

"How did you know this was my room?"

"I asked at the desk."

"And they gave you the combination to the lock?"

"In a manner of speaking," said Terwilliger. "Of course, they probably don't *know* they gave it to me."

"All right," said Cain. "Why are you waiting for me?"

"Because I know who you are now. You're the Songbird, right?"

"I'm Sebastian Cain."

"But people call you the Songbird?" persisted Terwilliger.

"Some people do."

"Good. Because if you're the Songbird, you ought to be leaving Port étrange pretty soon in search of better pickings."

"Get to the point," said Cain.

"I'd like a ride."

"I don't take passengers."

"Let me word that a bit more strongly," said Terwilliger. "I *need* a ride. My life depends on it."

"Why?"

"It's a long and rather embarrassing story."

"Give me the gist of it," said Cain.

Terwilliger stared at him for a moment, then shrugged. "When I was in the Spinos system about four months ago, I passed two hundred thousand credits' worth of bad notes to ManMountain Bates."

"He's a gambler, isn't he?"

"A very large, ill-tempered one," said Terwilliger devoutly.

"I'd say that was an unwise thing to do."

"I *intended* to make them good. I was just indulging in a little deficit spending. Hell, the Democracy does it all the time." He paused. "But I just got word a few minutes ago that he's due land on Port étrange the day after tomorrow—and truth to tell, I'm a little bit short of what I owe him."

"How short?"

"Oh, not much."

"*How* short?" repeated Cain.

"About two hundred thousand credits, give or take a few," said Terwilliger with a sickly smile.

"I certainly don't envy you," commented Cain.

"I don't want you to *envy* me," said Terwilliger with a note of desperation in his voice. "I want you to fly me the hell out of here!"

"I told you: I don't take passengers."

"I'll pay for my fare."

"I thought you didn't have any money," noted Cain.

"I'll work it off," said Terwilliger. "I'll cook, I'll load cargo, I'll—"

"The galley's fully automated, and the only cargo I handle doesn't need loading so much killing," interrupted Cain.

"If you don't take me, I'll die!"

"Everybody dies sometime," replied Cain. "Ask someone else."

"I already did. Nobody wants ManMountain Bates on their trail. But I figured a man like the Songbird, a man who's all written up in song and story, you wouldn't be bothered by a little thing like that."

"You figured wrong."

"You really won't take me?"

"I really won't take you."

"My death will be on your hands," said Terwilliger.

"Why?" asked Cain "I didn't pass bad notes to any-one."

Terwilliger scrutinized him for a moment, then forced himself to smile. "You're kidding, aren't you? You just want to see me squirm a little first."

"I'm not kidding."

"You *are*!" the little gambler half shouted. "You can't send me out to face ManMountain Bates! He breaks people's backs like they were toothpicks!"

"You know," remarked Cain with some amusement, "you seemed like a totally different man when I met you in the bar."

"I didn't have an eight-foot-tall disaster coming after me with blood in his eye when we were in the bar!" snapped Terwilliger.

"Are you all through yelling now?" asked Cain calmly.

"I arranged for you to meet with Stern," said Terwilliger desperately. "That ought to be worth something."

Cain reached into a pocket, withdrew a small silver coin, and flipped it across the room to Terwilliger. "Thanks," he said.

"Damn it, Songbird! What kind of man are you?"

"An unsympathetic one. Do you plan on leaving any time soon, or am I going to have to throw you out?"

Terwilliger emitted a sigh of defeat, gathered up the cards from the bed, and trudged to the door.

"Thanks a lot," he said sarcastically.

"Any time," replied Cain, stepping aside to let him pass out into the corridor.

The door slid shut again.

Cain stood absolutely still for a moment, then opened it.

"Hey, Terwilliger!" he yelled at the gambler's retreating figure.

"Yes?"

"What do you know about a man named Duncan Black?"

"The guy with the eyepatch?" said Terwilliger, turning and taking a tentative step in Cain's direction.

"That's the one."

"I used to play cards with him. What do you want to know?"

"Where am I likely to find him?" asked Cain.

Suddenly Terwilliger grinned broadly. "I do believe I just booked passage out of here," he said.

"You know where he is?"

"That I do."

"Where?"

"I'll tell you after we've taken off."

Cain nodded his agreement. "I'm leaving as soon as I have dinner. Get your gear together and meet me at the spaceport in two hours."

Terwilliger pulled out his deck of cards.

"I've got all the luggage I need right here," he said happily. "And now, if you'll excuse me, I think I'll go down and find a little game of chance to while away the lonely minutes before we leave."

With that, he turned on his heel and went off in search of the three or four newcomers to Poitiers who would still accept his marker.

3.

Halfpenny Terwilliger, the boldest gambler yet;

Halfpenny Terwilliger will cover any bet;

Halfpenny Terwilliger, a rowdy martinet;

Halfpenny Terwilliger is now one soul in debt.

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