

## STARMASTERS' GAMBIT

### CHAPTER I *The Recruiters*

He was thirty-two years old and his name was Jerg Algan. Most of his life had been spent on the Earth, where he'd roamed over the planet. He had glided across the seas on rickety hydrofoils, flown over whole continents in obsolete planes left over from the last century; he had sunbathed on the beaches of Australia; he had hunted the last lions in Africa before the desert plateau had tumbled into the ocean.

His achievements had been negligible. He had never left the Earth. He had traveled through the stratosphere. Between trips, he lived in Dark, supporting himself doing odd jobs as it was possible to do in large cities.

Dark was, in fact, the sole remaining city on the Earth. It had a population of thirty million and was the last resort in the entire galaxy for men of his sort. So long as they went quietly about their business, the Psychological Police left them alone. By virtue of its situation and antiquity, Dark, despite its small size, had become one of the most important ports of that section of the galaxy. Here, trafficking in all sorts of commodities was unrestricted. All the known species, and some unknown as well, could be bought; even forbidden imports, presumed to be dangerous, could be procured. All the drugs concocted for humans, as well as for other breeds, were obtainable in Dark. It was rumored that even slaves were available. Dark was the never-ending scandal of the galaxy.

Algan had had his ups and downs. He couldn't remember ever working more than three months at the same job, nor having sold the same commodity twice. He had never had any run-in with the Psychological Police, but that hadn't been entirely his doing.

He was now looking for something else to do: a chance to explore a corner of the Earth as yet unknown to him. There were still a few unexpected opportunities to be found in the section of the old stellar port which handled only the traffic for the near planets: perhaps he'd run into an old crank on his first visit to the Old Planet who wanted to visit ancient ruins; or get his clutches into an obsessive hunter consumed with the ambition of adding a Terrestrial rabbit to his trophies; or, best of all, find some lost member of a scientific expedition who, between a couple of drinks, would pay to find out what he knew about the customs of the inhabitants of the Earth.

Algan went into Orion's Sword, a tavern whose very name caused, quite unfairly, a shudder to run through the high-minded. He sat in the darkest corner and ordered a drink. He slouched at his ease, never taking his eyes off the door. Orion's Sword, which gave the place its name, swung over the entrance. It was a long shiny stem of steel, sharp as a needle, antenna-like, decorated with curious sparkling moldings. Had it really served as a weapon, millions of years ago, in another world? No one knew. It could have been just an artifact.

The bar was still almost deserted and surprisingly silent. Even the zotl presses seemed muffled.

Algan clinked some silver on the table.

"One zotl," he said.

The sight of the heavy pistons crushing the hard root as it slowly lost its color, while the juice foamed out, gave him almost as much pleasure as drinking the amber liquid. Zotl root was one of the few legal sources of drugs in certain sections of the galaxy. Its effect varied with the individual. Sometimes it produced sensations of power. Its effect was comparable to kinesthetic frenzy, the nervous mental state which is the result of the crossing of nerve ends that makes sounds visible and colors audible.

Algan slowly drained his glass. Every time he drank zotl he had the same vision: a gray desert under a low green sky spangled with the iridescent outlines of moving rocks, which regrouped themselves to the rhythm of the ages. Distant, invisible suns played strident music. It was a peaceful spectacle, outside of time.

When he opened his eyes again the bar was half-full. There were men from every corner of the universe: merchants from Rigel wearing their metal shirts; tremendously tall, thin navigators from Ultar moved clumsily, hampered by Terrestrial gravity; small Xiens with blond hair and speckled eyes; bald men from Aro with pupil-less eyes deep as wells, under bulging foreheads, their complexions livid, almost greenish.

Dress and colors varied: some were bright, some gaudy, some dull. Weapons had a nightmarish quality about them. Orion's Sword proffered a small cross section of the sort of carnival that undulated through Dark when a fleet of merchant ships sailed into the stellar port.

Accents ran the gamut from guttural to musical, but everyone there spoke the old space language, a bastard mixture of all the languages of the Earth.

Someone sat down next to Jerg: a sturdy Earthling with a deep tan and a paunch filled with the good food available in this galaxy.

"Would you like to do some traveling, Mack?" the man asked, looking at Algan.

"It all depends where," replied Algan, guardedly.

"Take your pick; you can go where you like. A zotl?"

"I'll take the zotl anyway," said Algan.

They drank and remained silent for a bit.

"There are many beautiful worlds in space," said the fat Earthling dreamily.

"Are there?"

"Young man, when I was your age I had already been to about fifty planets. But maybe you have too...? You're between expeditions, aren't you? Space isn't an adventure anymore, is it? Another zotl?"

"I've never left the Earth," Algan said slowly, "and I don't want to. There's nothing like this green Earth; you can have all those worlds whirling about in space... Thank you for the zotl. But it takes more than a zotl to put out the sun, as the saying goes. Isn't that right?"

"Sure."

They were silent for a moment. Algan scanned the small weasel eyes deep-set in fleshy slits. There was a gleam in them that he did not like.

"I suppose you're a trader."

The Earthling gave a coarse laugh.

"You can call it that, young man. I'm a sort of trader. Business is a bit tight on Earth at this moment, isn't it?"

Politeness was absolutely essential in space and in ports. Jerg Algan understood the value of caution, so he had cultivated exquisite manners, and the better part of good manners consisted in the art of never baldly asking questions.

"Yes, rather. Goods are getting scarce."

The fat businessman again laughed coarsely. Jerg chose to join in. That made the fat Earthling laugh even more. His eyes kept disappearing behind fleshy folds of fat. Algan suddenly stopped laughing.

"Are you looking for something on Earth? I know it like my pocket. Perhaps I can help."

"Perhaps you can. A zotl, my boy?"

Algan disliked the familiarity of the fat man's tone, but the zotl excused it. Looking inwardly at his dream, soaring over a gray desert, he could hear his companion's clucking noises crashing down like a sudden darkness, smothering the song of aerial suns.

"Sure, you can help me, my boy. Just sign this and you'll see new places."

"Where are you going?" asked Algan thickly.

"Where duty calls," came from the depths of a fold of fat. He felt something damp on his fingertips, and then was aware that they were being crushed on a hard surface.

“Is he ever plastered!” said a strange voice. He opened his eyes. Someone placed between his fingers a cylinder made of something soft. He didn’t know what it was. He was flying between pearly cliffs under a low green sky.

“Write your name, chum,” said an affectionate voice which he could see being written in the clouds in a flowery script. “You want to travel, you’re dying to travel. Write your name.”

Large luminous stones were writhing to the rhythm of unstable millennia, like tentacles trying to put out the light of the whole universe.

“Sign, chum; one more try.”

He tried to pull himself together, to make his fingers hold the little cylinder. He began to write, but it was difficult because his half-shut eyes could perceive the colors only as sounds.

“One more try.”

He stuck out his tongue and began to drool. Someone took hold of his arm and said:

“OK.”

Algan dropped his hand; it was so heavy he thought his arm was going to come off. He felt himself falling between endless pearly cliffs, dragged down by the leaden weight of his right hand. Then he fell forward. His fingers drummed on the hard surface of the table. His eyes, riveted on the iridescent glass, perceived an increasingly intense and strident sound. He was plunging into a pearly well, down, down into green water under a green sky; it was like a pearly cylinder with a green floor and a green ceiling which were coming closer and closer. The pearly wall was now only a narrow strip between those green areas, nothing more than a thread. Then the well exploded.

He sat up suddenly, lights still flickering in his eyes. He instinctively touched his armpit with his right hand; then he snorted like someone coming out of the water.

There was no one next to him. The fat Earthling with the sausage-like fingers could well have been a dream.

He raised his hand and snapped his fingers.

“A drink.”

He emptied the glass in one gulp and felt better. He got up and tried to walk. His legs felt as though he’d been lying down for centuries. He had drunk too much zotl. He felt around in his pockets and left a handful of coins on the table, and then he went toward the door. Someone greeted him as he went by and he responded with a weary gesture. He was stumbling and as he was about to fall steadied himself by clutching the doorknob.

The thick damp air of Dark engulfed him as he went out. He blinked several times.

Painfully, he walked along the badly lit street. His feet slithered along pavements worn down by thousands of boots, but his well-trained eyes unconsciously searched the dark comers. Dark was a safe city but only up to a point, and it was better never to find out what that exact point was.

He had no place to go. He thought of spending the night in some section of the old town, a place where one could lean one’s back against a comer and doze, hand on pistol butt.

The lights of the Old Stellar Port guided him. He wove in and out of doorways, followed dark passages between houses that were older than the port itself, avoided openings that were too well-lit. He occasionally stumbled and made use of the brief lights from outgoing ships to pick his way along.

A sudden noise made him prick up his ears.

“Now,” a voice shouted.

Several men jumped him. He had not seen them approaching and tried to fight his way out of the fog clouding his mind. Just as they were about to grab him he slipped to the ground, then ran between their legs. It worked. He started to run, trying to see who had attacked him.

His boots echoed on the pavement. He couldn’t hope to shake off his pursuers. An open doorway in this section of town would be almost as dangerous as the street. His only real chance was to come upon a patrol of the Psychological Police. But the police seldom ventured out at night in the Old Stellar Port, not because they were concerned with their own safety but because there was actually no need for them. The inhabitants of the old town did not ask for the protection of the Psychological Police and the Psycho left

them pretty well alone. This was the result of an ancient tacit understanding which gave the people of the ten puritan planets a chance to criticize the vices of the Old Planet.

Algan's right hand went up to his armpit and he caressed the sheath of his radiant. Murder was a serious matter, not to be committed except under extreme provocation. Explanations to the Psycho about legitimate self-defense would fall on deaf ears.

He looked over his shoulder and saw that his attackers were very close. They ran almost noiselessly. He could see four shadows. Perhaps others followed. In any event, the struggle was over even before it had begun unless he used his weapon.

Swerving suddenly, he turned into an adjoining alley which led to the Stellar Port by an enormously wide staircase. But he knew he would never reach the bronze doors. He heard his pursuers laugh. Goaded, he went faster. For one second he thought he'd shaken them on the winding stone staircase, but there was no place to go. He could only leap from step to step, fleeing between those blind walls, under a thin ribbon of sky and stars, trying to figure out who they were, why they wanted him, and where they were now.

He was rapidly getting winded. His right hand touched the radiant in its sheath. Perhaps he ought to stop and fight. Or was he nearer the port than he thought? They didn't give him time to choose. They shot first. They didn't want to kill him, but a large sticky ball hit him in the nape of the neck while steely strips furled themselves around his legs. He fell forward, his hands groping for the ground. He tried to roll up in a ball, bouncing from step to step along the walls and at the same time reaching for his radiant. But the blow on his neck was paralyzing him and more strips fettered his arms. He managed to pull out his radiant and squeezed the trigger. Nothing happened. He squeezed the butt against the palm of his hand, but there was no shot. As he sank into darkness he felt the butt of his weapon. It had no loading clip.

He flung the weapon away and it bounced from step to step. Then hands ran over him.

"That's him."

"OK. Go to it."

A cupping glass was put against his right ear. The thin ribbon of sky and stars began to revolve and turn green while the dark walls became lighter and lighter, taking on a pearly gray hue.

"Good night," he mumbled and fell asleep.

He was drifting on a pearl-gray cloud and wondered what he was doing there. He woke up, and at once felt for his pistol; it was gone. Then he realized that he was lying naked on a cot in a windowless, white-walled room.

He pushed himself up on an elbow. He had to sort this out. Algan dimly remembered having been in a fight the night before. Perhaps the Psychological Police had picked him up. He did not like the idea. Unless he had been wounded and been brought to the port hospital for treatment. Yet he was feeling in splendid form.

As he thought the situation over, he realized that the room looked exactly like the ones in the Stellar Port which he had occasionally visited. There was nothing intrinsically worrisome about it, except that it seemed to have no aperture: no door, no window, and no trapdoor. He was not unduly concerned; since he had got in, he would certainly find a way out. On the other hand, the theft of his clothes was decidedly irritating. But was it really a theft?

He tried to recall the last thing that had happened to him. As he unconsciously rubbed his head behind his right ear he suddenly remembered that he had been given the bell treatment. That in itself was more worrisome than the loss of his clothes. As far as he knew only the police used those instruments and they were so well-guarded that an ordinary gang of thieves would not have access to them. He undoubtedly was in the hands of the Psycho.

Algan was reassured with the thought that if they had wanted to kill him they could have done so much more easily when he was unconscious.

He lay back on the cot and waited. He needed more information to plan either defense or escape. And if the Psycho was out to get him, they had at least five charges against him; he did not even have to open his mouth.

The wall facing him lighted up and became transparent. He could see the Stellar Port now. In the back, among the high prows pointing skyward, at the very end of the huge cement plain, gleamed the great bronze doors which separated order and space from the chaos of the city.

The wall on his right opened up like a piece of cloth being torn.

“Get up and go down the hall,” a voice said.

He did so. The feebly lit corridor closed behind him. It was a one-way passage.

He reached a small, totally dark room. As he was trying to get his bearings he felt something warm winding around his arm. He put up no resistance. He felt the slight sting from the hypodermic needle. Then a gentle rain fell on him. Heat from invisible rays dried him off. The wall in front of him opened again and he went down a wide brilliantly lit corridor which led to a small room. There were clothes hanging on the wall. Algan noted that they were a navigator’s outfit.

“Get dressed,” said a voice.

He quickly donned the clothes, uttering not one word of useless protest, and set forth down another corridor. The building seemed to be made of some kind of malleable material which lent itself to partitioning into vacuums. Then, suddenly, the walls of the long winding corridor sprang open and Algan stopped, blinking; he seemed to be suspended over space, afloat, in broad daylight, three rocket-lengths above the port. Or so he thought. Actually he was in a large room one whole wall of which was an enormous window that opened on the working part of the port. As his eyes became accustomed to the light he looked around him. A man in a blue shirt was seated behind a huge white desk. He seemed to be waiting.

“Good morning,” he said. “Go ahead and admire the port. It’s as good a beginning as any.”

Algan did not immediately answer. He was, actually, fascinated by the port and the huge ships but he also did not know what to say. This was his first visit to the Stellar Port. People like him were ordinarily kept out.

“I’m ready to talk now,” he said quietly.

“I’m glad you’re taking it like that,” the man in blue replied. “Usually I have to do so much arguing with people who come here for the first time that my job becomes almost unpleasant. Please sit down.”

Algan settled into a large white chair.

“I’m listening.”

The man in blue looked somewhat embarrassed.

“I thought you’d have some questions.”

“Well, I’m hungry,” said Algan.

He was in no hurry for explanations. He was enjoying the chair, the rug with its complicated pattern, the magnificent white desk, and especially the view of the Stellar Port.

“Just as you like,” said the man in blue and he pushed a button.

He watched Algan eat, without a word. When Algan had finished, he got up and faced the bay.

“What’s your name?” asked Algan, “and why am I here?”

“One thing at a time,” replied the man in blue. His searching gray eyes scanned Algan’s face. “My name is Tial, Jor Tial. I don’t suppose that means much to you. You seem resigned to your fate.”

“What fate?” asked Algan coldly. He hoped his nervousness would not show through.

“A marvelous fate,” said Tial, with a sweeping gesture that encompassed the room, the port, and the rockets.

“The conquest of space.”

“You’re joking,” said Algan. “I’ll never leave the Earth.”

“Come, come,” said Tial, “don’t talk like that. Did you or did you not sign up?”

“Sign up?” echoed Algan.

He suddenly understood. He had been had by a recruiter. The fat Earthling of the night before had gotten him drunk to extort his signature and now he was committed to space, to any planet whatever, after an interminable cruise on a broken-down ship. Anger flooded him. He had heard stories of this, in the Old Port, but he had never paid any attention to them. When anyone disappeared from an old section of Dark,

no questions were asked; the missing person was just as likely to turn up a year later, rich enough to buy half a continent on the Old Planet, as he was to simply vanish into the thick air of Dark.

“I see that you follow me. Perhaps some of the details escape you? I can read you the contract. Usually the signatories accept it, hmm... let’s say, trustingly. They don’t even bother to read the provisions. But I can assure you they are worth it.”

“It’s against the law,” said Algan. “I’m not going to knuckle under. There’s still some justice on the Earth.”

“Of course,” said Tial. “And there are judges who can determine whether or not a contract has been properly executed.”

“It was extortion,” said Algan. “I assume I’m not telling you anything you don’t know.”

“The judges would be very happy to hear about this. Extortion, you say. By the use of force? Are you quite sure?”

“There’s no question of force; I was drugged.”

“Against your will?”

“Not exactly. And anyway, you know better than I what happened. All I want is a fair trial; I’ll bring charges.”

“I should be delighted to give you some advice before you do anything,” said Tial.

He spoke coolly and evenly. Algan thought to himself that his case must be weak.

“I presume you admit you drugged yourself. You claim someone took advantage of your condition to make you sign this paper. Is that correct?”

“Not quite,” said Algan. “A man offered me several zotls. He seemed anxious to have me drink with him. I didn’t want to be unfriendly. Then the stinker took unfair advantage. I suppose he gets something out of this smalltime deal.”

“You willingly accepted this... drug, didn’t you?”

Algan agreed.

“You admit having taken more than enough to lose control.”

“I don’t see what you’re getting at.”

“Just this: drugs are illegal. Losing control is illegal. I’m willing to believe in the existence of this man. Can you bring him to me? I imagine that the Psychological Police might try to find him for you, but you know that its policy is not to interfere with the people in the Old Port. People like you. Within certain limits, of course. So, do you prefer to be arrested by the Psychological Police for drug abuse and be judged by a jury freshly recruited from the Puritan Planets or will you accept the terms of the contract? I imagine the jury would sentence you to a few years of hard labor on a new planet. There isn’t much sympathy, you know, for drug addiction among the inhabitants of the Puritan Planets. Wouldn’t you rather spend ten glorious years in space, at government expense, being handsomely paid? You like adventure, I think. Don’t look back, look forward.”

“Very clever,” said Algan. “I suppose everyone is in on this: the Psychological Police, the port authorities, the space program, and even the government itself. I just say ‘Good-bye,’ and leave.”

He got up, his eyes never wavering from the distant lights that shone on the prow of a ship. Beyond the bronze gates the city spread out on the hills, a teeming, disorderly city made up of multicolored cubes piled up haphazardly—the city which he would not see again for ten years. A now inaccessible city. Dozens of light-years of space and emptiness already lay between him and Dark— hundreds of suns, the possibility of shipwrecks, of unexpected dangers, of unknown, hostile and powerful beings.

And behind the city were the green oceans and the green plains of the Earth, the inscrutable ruins of its civilizations submerged by a tide of moss, invaded by the great northern glaciers, its cities dead and their secrets forever lost. There couldn’t, Algan said to himself, there couldn’t be in the universe two planets like the Earth. Something welled up inside him, a need for revenge; it was a seed that was to grow during the years spent in emptiness; it would explode one day and destroy this port, this cold inhumanity of the Galaxians. For a long time he had believed that the Galaxians were coldly unconcerned with the inhabitants of Earth. He would see to it that they paid when their time came. Only it was too early now, much too early.

“I’ve been kidnapped,” said Algan in a strangled voice. “I’ve been kidnapped. I did not come here of my own free will. You’ll admit that.”

“OK, if you want to quibble, you’ve been kidnapped. Officially you were picked up by a squad of the Psychological Police and it was only because of your contract that you were brought here. Under ordinary circumstances you’d have been tried. But the police officials generously agreed you were entitled to celebrate your departure and they were willing to look the other way. Of course, if you lodge a complaint, they will have to speak up. Believe me, they would rather not.”

“If the people of the galaxy knew how pioneers are recruited,” said Algan, “if only they knew!”

“Lots of people do know, but the word of an inhabitant of old Dark does not carry much weight in space. I’d bet they’d laugh at you if you told your story. Unless they beat you up when they learn where you come from. The people of the galaxy take a dim view of backward people like you.”

Algan leaned against the large window. He was consumed with fury. He wanted to hurl himself through the glass onto the porcelain ground a thousand feet below. He wanted to see the ships explode and bum and sailors run in every direction, to see the port in ruins while the city, in the shelter of the large bronze gates, looked on peacefully.

Space was a prison and he knew it. He was going to roam for ten years in this prison. Rage and anxiety welled up inside him. He could see in his mind’s eye the shining gates of the old free city, hear the rumblings of the ancient and savage life on Earth.

“I know just how you feel,” said Tial, “I’ve seen others, but none quite like you. Most of them scream, shout, threaten, and beg. But at the end of three months they feel at home in space. I hope you will, too. Frankly, I’m not sure you will. I hope that somewhere else, on another world, you’ll find something similar to this city. I think this one will be very different when you come back in a thousand years.”

Algan turned slowly. His eyes shone. One thousand years. It was the fall, the flight into time that he dreaded most; he had never wanted to talk about it. Ten light- years there and one thousand years here. The port would be unchanged, but the city would have disappeared.

“I’ll be dead when you come back, that is, if you want to see the Earth. And everyone here will have forgotten me. I hope you will no longer hate me then. In any event, it will not matter in the least. There will be other men, and they will be doing the same simple and difficult things. Sometimes I say to myself that we are lost, not so much in space as in time. Two thousand five hundred years ago, when men first started their voyages of exploration on the Earth, in ships that were wind-propelled, the distance from one place to its antipode was almost as insurmountable to the explorers as the walls of a cell are to a prisoner. Yet now we roam amid the stars. But we are still prisoners of time, more than ever.”

“Stop it, stop it.”

The sound of those years going by was like the sound of grains of sand tapping against the sides of an hourglass. This was senseless. One thousand years. Glaciers could spread, oceans rise or dry up. The people he knew on Earth would be dead. In the new worlds, everyone lived alone, worked, traded within his own time span. Ships came in and left with the flow and ebb of the years. On the Puritan Planets marriage was forbidden by law because of its immoral consequences; one month of traveling made a son older than his father.

This was understandable. Men were thrown like grains of sand against the stars. They were so weak, so alone.

But he, Algan, was the product of the old Earth. This couldn’t be happening to him. He couldn’t accept it. His universe was a limited one along a curved horizon; it held lifelong friendships, an old family house, and the land of his forefathers.

“A backward, bestial point of view,” sneered the people on the Puritan Planets.

Maybe. Maybe they were right. Maybe man had to change, broaden his views to keep up with his new environment, the galaxy; much of it was still unexplored after five centuries of space history.

But this was the Future, and like all the inhabitants of ancient cities, like the inhabitants of the Earth who were universally despised, Algan felt himself to be a man of the Past.

“I don’t like all the methods of the government,” Tial said gently, “but in some ways I think they are good. I, too, am a man of the Past, in my way, which is different from yours, because I wasn’t born on this planet. I’m trying to understand you. I know that after me there will be other men who will deal more harshly with the people from the old cities; these men will no longer know anything of the glory of the Earth. I want you to realize this. People like you, Jerg, are condemned for at least one thousand years. One thousand years in this world. When you come back there will be no one who can understand you. But perhaps some of the new planets will have a history by then. A history that is different, slower-moving, more peaceful than the Earth’s, but a history nonetheless. As yet, there are so few of us in space. There are more inhabitable worlds in the galaxy than there are men. Our empire is so fragile. That’s why we are forced to send out, so far away, even those who don’t want to leave their world. We are spread awfully thin. Try to understand, Jerg.”

/ have one thousand years to destroy this, Algan thought. One thousand or ten; it comes to the same thing.

A long vibration shook the port. A spaceship was rocketing up from a fiery pad. The sky seemed to darken as the ship rose majestically into the atmosphere. When it reached a height of one thousand kilometers, in an almost total vacuum, its reactors would go out and its nuclear propeller would take over. It would speed up almost to the velocity of light—and time for its passengers would come to a stop—and then it would leap into lateral space and there, motionless, during its crew’s long sleep, it would drift, outside of time, carried along by one of the great currents of the universe toward its distant and perhaps still unexplored destination.

“A pleasant trip, Algan,” said Jor Tial.

“Thank you,” Algan replied coldly. But his eyes were not on Tial’s; they were searching the sky.